W. S. Graham and Lyric Self-Consciousness and Path Through Wood

Sam Buchan-Watts

PhD

University of York

English

Submitted December 2019

ABSTRACT

The critical component of this thesis considers the formal vitality of lyric in the face of modernist anxieties about communication in language in the work of the British poet W. S. Graham (1918-88.) This is achieved, I argue, through his rendering of lyric subjectivity and self-description from relatively early in his career as an inherently spatial problem (chapter 1). Graham constructs levels of self-consciousness of form as distinct from a more general lyric self-consciousness. This approach is generatively abstracted by the influence of Graham's relationship to the St Ives visual artists, particularly Ben Nicholson (chapter 2). By concentrating on key 1950s works, notebooks and archival material, I evidence a phase in which Graham inhabited and expanded received forms – the villanelle, the ballad, the sonnet – in order to foster a more intuitive formalism, one that aligns in many ways with the poetics of his near contemporaries William Empson and Veronica Forrest-Thomson (chapters 3 and 4), but differs in its embrace of a linguistic unconscious. The final chapter (chapter 5) considers Denise Riley's career-long engagement with Graham's work, which 'answers' Graham, attuned as it is to poetry as listening, and at the same time charges some of Graham's propositions with a new political urgency. The thesis concludes that the most appropriate means of listening critically to Graham's project and Riley's extension of it is to parallel the critical component in practical terms: to attempt to 'answer' some of the problems posed by these poets and this thesis in creative practice. This gives rise to the creative component, *Path Through Wood*.

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (grant number AH/L503848/1) through the White Rose College of the Arts & Humanities.

Lines from 'Wallace Stevens in Greenock' reproduced with permission of the Estate of W. S. Graham.

Marius Kociejowski and Denise Riley have been extremely generous in allowing me to quote freely from WSG archival materials and unpublished talks respectively.

Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Chapter three, 'W. S. Graham and Self-Conscious Balladry', first appeared in *Chicago Review*, Issue 62:01/02/03, Winter 2018-19, edited by David Nowell Smith.

From *Path Through Wood*, 'Lines following W. S. Graham' first appeared in *The Caught Habits of Language: An Entertainment for W. S. Graham for Him Having Reached One Hundred* (Bristol: Donut Press, 2018); 'The Art of Trying' first appeared in *The Poetry Review* vol. 108, no 3, Autumn 2018; 'Happy Accidence' first appeared in *The Rialto* 90; 'inner strength' first appeared in *Magma* 73; 'Gigha' first appeared in *The World Speaking Back…To Denise Riley* (Norwich: Boiler House Press, 2018); 'You just know' first appeared in *likestarlings* (2016); 'Pillar of Smoke (1964)' and 'Dark Monarch' first appeared in *The London Magazine* October/November 2019; 'fungibility' first appeared in *Test Centre Eight* ; 'pigeon grey' first appeared in *Bristow* (London: Bold Tendencies, 2017).

'Listening In (Fresh Claim for Asylum)' is forthcoming in *The Rialto*; 'Cloud Study' is forthcoming as a chapbook published by If a Leaf Falls Press in 2020.

Introduction: W. S. Graham, Self-Conscious Poet

> 'To talk most richly universally the artist talks to himself. – Subject for a poem.' – W. S. Graham[1]
>
> 'Whenever I get the urge to write a poem about poetry I take a cold shower.' – Michael Donaghy[2]

This thesis is a series of case studies that hang together to make a contemporary poetics. My principal concern is W. S. Graham, who demonstrates a commitment to the vitality and integrity of lyric in the face of a modernist anxiety about communication in language. The thesis offers an account of a unique self-consciousness which is achieved by Graham as a result, and a slipstream of midcentury and postwar British poets who experiment with the formalist tradition on similar lines: William Empson, Veronica Forrest-Thomson and, most importantly in the context of Graham's work, Denise Riley. These poets do not identify as formalists, for reasons I discuss. The critical function of this particular slipstream of British formalism in some ways anticipates a renewed emphasis on aural shape in theoretical accounts of lyric in the late twentieth century. This originates most potently, it might be argued, in Forrest-Thomson's *Poetic Artifice* (1978). However the work of Graham, especially, tacitly offers us its own theory of poetic artifice as precipitated by its practice.

Graham's self-consciousness operates in both the colloquial sense, in that it is preoccupied with its lyric 'I', pointing at times hammily to the position of its own speaker, but also in being rigorously attentive to its own design, its status as poetry: the poems are forensically attuned to their own shapes and sounds, always listening in to and looking closely at their effects and affective

---

1 W. S. Graham, 'From a 1949 Notebook', in *Edinburgh Review* 75 (1987), 25. The original is italicised.
2 Michael Donaghy, 'My Report Card' (2000), *Strong Words* ed. by Matthew Hollis and W. N. Herbert (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2000), 244.

properties. Graham's work is then acutely formal, centred on the construction, and the constructed quality, of the verse. I am concerned with the self-sufficiency of such constructions, and their ability to account for themselves theoretically on their own terms. Self-consciousness, in this context, is not about having something universally meaningful to say or reflect upon; self-consciousness is inherent to particular techniques and frameworks of saying. Such techniques are employed despite Graham's fastidious avoidance of received poetic forms, with some exceptions. The thesis offers a means of accounting for Graham's unique forms in a manner which reflects the poetry, which often appears to read itself. It attends to the fact that Graham was more visually and intuitively inclined than he was strictly metrically orientated in his conception of verse. When he does invoke a metrical framework, a textual effect, it is offset against more intuitive, affective gestures, as we will see.

Graham's body of work draws from lyric poetry's musical and mnemonic origins, centred as it is on frames and the framing of time: by disturbing silence with the quay night bell of address, on riding the marches of the arena of speech, of the liminal space of night-time in solitude in remote Cornwall, forms through which the text's temporal and spatial properties, and the axis between them, are brought to the fore. The thesis argues that Graham conceived of his lyric poetry with an especially spatial emphasis, producing frames of uttering and imagining that drew from his training as a journeyman engineer, his exposure to and part in the development of British modernist art in St Ives, and the geographical expanse of land, light and air on the Land's End Peninsular where he was situated. Given this spatial preoccupation, his formulation of poetry is often centred on paradoxical, dialectic or diametrical relations, which work on the basis of simultaneity, rather than sequence: 'All the poet's knowledge and experience […] is contained in the language which is obstacle and vehicle

at the same time' he declared in 1946. This was a dichotomy that would hold throughout the arc of his poetic output.[3]

Many critics have referred to the self-consciousness of his verse both in the context of praise and critique. As early as 1948 Vivienne Koch, Graham's first major critical advocate, celebrated 'a quite self-conscious attempt on Graham's part to enhance, or better, to consolidate [his] natural sternness by devising a hard, massive diction which emphasizes the Anglo-Saxon rather than the Latin components of English'.[4] Donald Davie, on the other hand, complained that Graham:

> is one of those poets who make the writing of poetry into the subject of the poems they write […] The commonsense view is that this drastically limits the importance and interest of what they write; and I think this is true.[5]

The appeal to common sense – something we will also see echoed by William Empson's 'notes' on his own poems – is reflective of a conservatively 'rational' Movement idiom Davie was at the time promoting (notwithstanding his interest in modernist literature). Seamus Perry writes that 'Davie admired [Graham] while disliking "the hieratic solemnity [put another way, 'natural sternness'] with which he takes his own poetic vocation", but then for the new university wits of the Movement, including Davie, Graham was bound to seem a bit of an anachronism in his isolated intrepid modernism'.[6] It is telling that Vivienne Koch, writing across the Atlantic and therefore with a more orbital view on the political-poetic terrain (though by no means without institutional affiliation herself), is able discern the achievement with Anglo-Saxon diction and address for what it is.

Graham's work has since been referred to as 'self-descriptive', concerned with 'self-image', 'self-presentation' and 'self-doubt', 'self-aware', 'self-defeating' and 'creating a powerful impression

---

3 W.S. Graham, 'Notes on a Poetry of Release' (1946) in *The Nightfisherman: Selected Letters*, ed. Michael and Margaret Snow (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), 380.
4 Vivienne Koch, 'A Note on W. S. Graham', *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (Autumn, 1948), 666-67.
5 Donald Davie, 'Remembering the Movement', in *Prospect*, ed. by Elaine Feinstein, Cambridge, Summer 1959 (no issue number), 15-16, see Tony Lopez, *The Poetry of W. S. Graham*, 15-17.
6 Seamus Perry, 'What a carry-on' in LRB, vol. 41 No. 14, 18 July 2019, 9-14.
<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v41/n14/seamus-perry/what-a-carry-on>

of synthetic self-containment'.[7] Though to a certain degree 'self-reflexive' and 'self-conscious' are interchangeable, and self-consciousness is arguably inherently 'reflexive', I have opted for 'self-consciousness' for the purposes of this study. This is firstly because it is Graham's preferred term (though in his conception it is not a hyphenated compound but the neologism 'selfconscious'), and secondly because it most clearly embodies the intersection of subjectivity and technique with which we are concerned. As we will see, also, poetic self-consciousness invokes a linguistic unconscious, both that of the expressive subject, but also of the linguistic unconscious with which Graham's poetry is preoccupied, alluded to as early as in 'Remarkable Report by Some Poetic Agents', through the major 1950s work like *The Nightfishing* and the unpublished 'The Dark Intention', and in the later love lyrics. In 'The Dark Intention' and 'The Dark Dialogues', darkness becomes a trope for the unconscious, and a spectral underside to intentional disclosure to which perhaps only the poem has access. 'The Dark Dialogues' 'never moves far from talking about itself', in the words of Tony Lopez, author of the first monograph on Graham.[8] Similarly Matthew Francis, author of the only other full-length monograph on Graham, concedes that 'Graham is a remarkable poet but this [his metapoetic] obsession makes him a limited one' , a position this thesis contests.[9] What critical comments like this do not often account for is the degree to which this self-consciousness – and its associated terms, given above – is fostered at the level of poetic form, that the poetic subject, and

---

[7] All of these examples are taken from chapters in *W. S. Graham: Speaking Towards You*, ed. by Hester Jones and Ralph Pite (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004). References to the phrases in the same order as above:

'self-descriptive' – Peter Robinson, 'Dependence in the Poetry of W. S. Graham', 110.
of 'self-image' [and] self-presentation' – Ralph Pite, 'Abstract, Real and Particular: Graham and Painting', 75.
'self-doubt' – Ian Sansom, '"Listen": W. S. Graham', 17.
'calmly self-aware…' – Fiona Green "Achieve Further through Elegy', 154,
'self-defeating' – Hester Jones, 'Graham and the Numinous: "The 'Centre Aloneness" and the "Unhailed Water"', 163
'synthetic self-containment' – Tony Lopez, 'Graham and the 1940s', 39.

[8] Tony Lopez, *The Poetry of W. S. Graham* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989), 95.

[9] Matthew Francis, *Where the People Are: Language and Community in the Poetry of W. S. Graham* (Cambridge: Salt, 2004), 23.

the object of the poem 'itself', might not be so easily differentiated. Graham's work is transformative precisely for its exposing of the limits of lyric self-consciousness, which, by exposing, it exceeds.

In a review of the 1996 *Selected Poems of W. S. Graham* edited by Christopher Reid, Matthew Francis writes of the 'sheer metapoetic obsessiveness of the later work'.[10] 'Meta-' may have a place in the consideration of Graham's verse constructions, if we categorise Graham as a post-modern poet, with which the term is commonly associated.[11] Indeed, the *Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry* refers to the 'hesitant post-modernism of W. S. Graham'.[12] Similarly, Cairns Craig writes that *The Nightfishing* '[inaugurates] a poetry constructed around the self-referentiality that was to become typical of postmodernist texts'.[13] As with the term 'self-consciousness', I follow Graham by choosing to identify him as a late modernist, who modelled much of his work on that of his modernist forebears: Pound, Beckett, Moore ('her beautiful self-conscious language'[14]), Stevens, Joyce and, his publisher at Faber, Eliot. A 1949 notebook given to Elizabeth Smart reveals Graham's engagement with this tradition is as a practitioner, reflecting the autodidact's desire to learn by mimesis, inhabitation of style and, in some cases, his use of writers' specific propositions as writing prompts: Stevens' 'It Must be Abstract', Yeats's *timbre*, Eliot's musical structure.[15] He declared in 1950, 'I have been shaken up in the last three years by my study of Pound and Eliot, analysing the structure of their verse and form.'[16] His engagement with these modernists is intuitive, aspirational and critically imprecise. While there is no evidence that Graham sought to depart from their examples, he could

---

10 Matthew Francis, 'THE REAL UNABSTRACT SNOW', Review: W. S. Graham, *Selected Poems*, *PN Review* 109 vol. 22 no.5, accessed < https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=1517>

11 Francis writes: '['Malcolm Mooney's Land',] like nearly all of Graham's poems, is self-referential; among the many things it points to is itself. We might wish to call it a metapoem.' 22.

12 Jeremy Noel-Tod, Neil Powell, Pierre Maldive, 'Hamilton, Ian' in *Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry*, ed. by Jeremy Noel-Tod (OUP, 2003), 241.

13 Cairns Craig, 'Beyond Reason – Hume, Seth, Macmurray and Scotland's Postmodernity' in Eleanor Bell and Gavin Miller (ed.), *Scotland in Theory: Reflections on Culture & Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 250.

14 John Haffenden, '"I Would Say I Was a Happy Man', W. S. Graham interviewed by John Haffenden"', *Poetry Review* 76, no. 1/2 (1986), 69.

15 W. S. Graham, 'From a 1949 Notebook', 32, 33, 31.

16 Graham, *The Nightfisherman* (Carcanet, 1999), 118.

be said to differ in more fully echoing theoretical discussions about intentionality and poetic function associated with (post-)structuralism, despite having little interest in critical theory. He may then be considered a proto-post-modernist poet.

Matthew Francis has aligned the self-reflexivity of Graham's poetry with the 'meta' post-modern fiction of Italo Calvino.[17] By doing so he overlooks important temporal distinctions between poetry and prose. These are summarized by Sharon Cameron, who reminds us that, notwithstanding Graham's spatial coordinates which render new forms of imagining, the lyric remains an inherently temporal medium in its constitution of self-consciousness:

> The heart of the lyric's sense of time might be specified, at least preliminarily, by its propensity to interiorize as ambiguity or outright contradiction the conflicts that other mimetic forms [such as the novel] conspicuously exteriorize and then allocate to discrete characters who enact them in the manifest pull of opposite points of view.[18]

This notion embodies much of the self-sufficiency of Graham's lyric poetry, which renders a highly pressurized arena of time, while simultaneously interiorizing the limitations of that pressure, in a genre and form which is always already underpinned by an inherently interior point of view. Fiction, in its emphasis on duration and points of view, cannot accommodate the many-tiered self-consciousness of Graham's most successful lyric poetry, and to apply such pressure to its temporal-spatial axis, as – for example – the long poem, 'The Nightfishing' (1955), does.

The Nightfishing may not have inaugurated the self-referentiality associated, in Craig's words, with the post-modernist text, but it does provide a useful hinge within Graham's body of work. We see elements of the early poetry, its highly torqued syntax, Yeatsian cadence, jam-packed wordplay and high register transform into the more demotically expressive, graceful idiom of the shorter-lined poetry for which Graham is more commonly celebrated. *The Nightfishing* experiments with ballad meter, song, the Eliotian long poem, the compressed lyric and the epistolary poem – at times all

---

17 Matthew Francis, *Where the People Are*, 22-3.
18 Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 23.

simultaneously within the long poem, 'The Nightfishing', itself – and what emerges by the time of his next collection *Malcolm Mooney's Land* (1970) is, as we will see, an intuitive formalism.

The Nightfishing is considered to be something of a sliding doors moment for Graham and Philip Larkin, given that the same year saw the appearance of the latter's *The Less Deceived*, which came to characterise a dominant strain of post-war British poetry, which Graham's collection cannot be said to have done.[19] Criticism of Graham's pre-1955 work has been strong and is often both critically unconsidered and poetically partisan in a manner which reflects a broader divide in British poetry that we might see embodied in the Graham/Larkin divide. Don Paterson, reviewing Graham's *Collected Poems* in 2004, referred to 'the high camp of Dylan Thomas and Wallace Stevens [which] left almost a whole generation mincing in their wake, all with that mangled syntax and hysterical rhetoric that made the modernist drag-artist only too easy to spot'.[20] Michael Hofmann refers in his introduction to the 2018 US *Selected* Graham to the 'larded idiolect of poem-ese' of Graham's 1940s output.[21] In response to Hofmann, Peter Riley suggests there is a mystery operating at a formal level in the 40s work which should not be so readily dismissed: 'I don't see how anyone can know for sure how much value is to be placed on the estranged language-use in collaboration with ancestral metrics – a kind of tough pastoral with drunken shepherds speaking unintelligibly.'[22] Riley makes the valuable point that 'despite being made to sound like a personal reaction to the poetry on the page', Hofmann's dismissal of the 40s work is neither critically-minded nor original, rather, it is as old as the 40s poetry itself. There is certainly much to psychoanalyse in Hofmann's

---

19 Larkin wrote to Monica Jones in 1947 that he was reading Graham's 'well known Letter V…& thinking how good it was' but that he 'seems to have shut up now though. Like me', *Letters to Monica* (London: Faber, 2010), 218. Graham's Yeatsian 'Letter' poems would have appealed to Larkin, whose first collection, *The North Ship*, is saturated in Yeats.
20 Don Paterson, 'Prism Visitor' in *Observer* 14/1/96. np.
21 Michael Hofmann, 'Introduction' in *W.S. Graham: Selected by Michael Hofmann* ed. by Michael Hofmann (NYRB, 2018), xiii.
22 Peter Riley, 'The "Discovery" of W.S Graham', *The Fortnightly Review* <https://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2019/07/riley-ws-graham/> [accessed 3/2/12] For a full appraisal of the 1940s work, and the most substantial with regards to form and technique, see Peter Riley, 'Peter Riley reviews W. S. Graham, *New Collected Poems* edited by Matthew Francis' in *Jacket 26*, October 2004 <http://jacketmagazine.com/26/rile-grah.html> [accessed 4/12/19]

gruff dismissal of the obdurate mystery of the early work, and also particularly in Paterson's rejection of difference in style and form on the grounds of queerness. Their criticisms, along with the facetious Michael Donaghy aphorism I used as my epigraph, intersect by way of a distrust of a sublime modernist romanticism imported from the US by way of Stevens and Hart Crane and taken up by 40s/50s poets like Nicholas Moore and Graham. This led to what Don Paterson, in something of a volte-face, has recently referred to as 'a post-Movement Americanophobe doldrums that might have rivalled the Georgians for mediocrity'.[23] This romanticism engenders an often impersonal turning into the essential nature of form ('Poetry is the subject of the poem' – Stevens[24]), a process which is often necessarily cold, abstract and intractable, and in contradistinction to the kind of naturalizing demotic, narrative and subjectively entitled mode of Donaghy and Hofmann and the Movement more broadly, poets (broadly speaking) very much at home in their assertions and subject positions, who merely masquerade as self-conscious. Such criticism of Graham is then, we can see, reflective of a broader Anglocentrism. I address this by reflecting on Graham's echo of American influence, particularly the impersonal formalist abstraction of Stevens.[25]

However this thesis also takes the position that Graham's neglect in the UK, along with the unfortunate timing of the publication of *The Nightfishing*, has been overstated, and Graham achieved popular, but not critical, appreciation in his lifetime. Perhaps appropriately, given the grounds of Paterson's dismissal, was the first major critical engagement with Graham's work in the USA by Koch in 1947, when he received a Rockefeller Grant through which he lectured at NYU (1947-48). Though his books were printed in small numbers and never reprinted, they carried the prestige of

---

23 Don Paterson, *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre* (London: Faber, 2018), 696.
24 Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 144.
25 The Anglo-American strain in Graham's practice continued beyond the Stevensian 50s work taken up in this thesis, and there are certainly grounds for a more sustained study on the subject. Graham's creative dialogue with the writer Norman Macleod, whom he praised for his 'Americo-Scots vitality', and his admiration of the work of Charles Olsen in 1975, which unconsidered archival material reveals, offer two particularly fertile points of departure along these lines. Beinecke Special Collections, YCAL MSS 718, Macleod Papers, Box 10.

Faber and the T. S. Eliot's approval, which meant a lot to him. Despite a brief period in 40s Soho Graham remained beyond the frame of the metropolitan literary establishment in his most productive writing years, not attempting to court a critical following. And yet Arts Council Grants and multiple occasions where Graham performed his poetry in the UK indicate that he had a platform.

Recent years have seen a cluster of activity largely centred around Graham's centennial in 2018 which could be said to canonize him. This includes a comprehensive *New Collected Poems* (2004), and more recently a special issue of the *Chicago Review* (2019) and an anthology, *The Caught Habits of Language: An Entertainment for W. S. Graham for Him Having Reached One Hundred* (2018), made up of one hundred new poems, both of which include unpublished materials from Graham's manuscripts. Graham is also included for the first time in the sixth edition of the 2018 *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, represented by three poems: 'A Note to the Difficult One', 'The Stepping Stones', 'Dear Bryan Wynter', all late poems which appear in *Implements in their Places* (1977), in which Graham's poetry is at its most demotically conversational and unchallenging. This misrepresents his oeuvre, foregoing the abstraction that underpins much of the work, and risks erroneously aligning him with a post-Movement school. The coincident renewal of the British lyric and the critical (re)appraisal of Graham since his death in 1986 is nowhere better reflected than in the work of Denise Riley, who has made a compelling case for the vitality and continuing relevance of both.[26] The critical propositions made by Graham's lyric poems compellingly anticipate Riley's work. She is therefore a presence in this thesis' early chapters, before I take up her work and theory fully in the final chapter.

[26] Most explicit perhaps is the use of a passage from Graham's *Implements* as the cover of her edited creative-critical collection, *Poets on Writing* (London: Macmillan, 1992). The stanza is presented in Graham-esque fashion as an art object which, Riley revealed, was 'very much meant' (Personal interview with Denise Riley, York, 16 March 2017). That was at least until *Say Something Back* (2016), whose three eponymous words are also lifted from Graham's *Implements*. I take up some of Riley's sustained engagement with the contemporary lyric more broadly in the last chapter of this thesis.

This interest in Graham over the past 25 years may be aligned with a rise of interest in the intersection of philosophy and aural shape as a subgenre of lyric theory within Riley's philosophy of language (*Lyric Selves* (2000), *Impersonal Passion* (2005)). It may also be aligned with articles by Simon Jarvis, Angela Leighton's *On Form* (2007), Susan Stewart's 'Rhyme and Freedom' in Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin (eds) *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound* (2009), Derek Attridge's *Moving Words* (2013), Robert Sheppard's *The Meaning of Form* (2016), Peter Robinson's *The Sound Sense of Poetry* (2018) and Don Paterson's *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre* (2018). That all of the authors of these publications, with the exception of Attridge, are publishing poets is not a coincidence: these theoretical problems are inhabited by each critic from the point of view of the practitioner.[27] Much of this material can be seen as an engagement with propositions similar to those made by Veronica Forrest-Thomson – and her development of William Empson – in 'Irrational Artifice' (1974) and *Poetic Artifice* (1978), which I will discuss later. In the most general sense, these accounts are about the primacy of artifice in a poem's meaning. Forrest-Thomson develops Empson's account of a 'necessary artificiality of style' which may suspend interpretation through form. Such a suspension renders a space through which the reader, in collaboration with the poem, can explore alternative forms of meaning- and identity-making as distinct from empirical or informative language. What unites the various aforementioned accounts of lyric form, from a host of writers with varying party-poetical leanings, is (broadly speaking) their assertion of the primacy of the material dimensions of poetry and it opposition to prose, using critical approaches which, to varying degrees, perform an anti-naturalising reading of the poem as an object discrete from the poet, a reading which is often (though not always) centred on the embodiment of rhythm, and aversion to paraphrase.[28]

---

[27] Attridge summarizes the recent resurgence in formalist study, particularly with regard to formalist primers by poets, in *Moving Words* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), 19.

[28] For a powerful account of how experimentation with some of these techniques may coincide with the experience of racial subjectivity in language, see Dorothy J. Wang, *Thinking its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford University Press, 2013). Wang states that her study is a 'praxis-based critical argumentation, in

In her introduction to *The Sound of Poetry* (2009), Marjorie Perloff laments 'the large-scale indifference to sound structure in the current discourse on poetry'.[29] Don Paterson touches on something similar when he rejects the use of 'lyrical' as 'to denote first-person, "emotional", non-narrative or non-dramatic poetry', favouring, rather, its etymological root in *lyre* and sung form.[30] Perloff writes of the 'continuing dominance of romantic lyric theory, with its equation of "poetry" and "lyric," coupled with an understanding of "lyric" as *the* mode of subjectivity – of self-reflexiveness, the mode in which a solitary "I" is overheard in meditation or conversation with an unnamed other', and the subsequent emphasis in literary study on figurative language as opposed to form.[31] This model is most famously articulated by John Stuart Mill in 'What is Poetry?' (1833), and then modified by Eliot in 'The Three Voices of Poetry' (1949), which shows its pervasiveness in the establishment across at least two centuries.[32] Graham does not disavow the notion of the solitary 'I' overheard in meditation, indeed, many of Graham's poems make personal reflections in isolation: many are nocturns ('From this side of the words it's late', his historical alter-ego Johann Joachim Quantz 'speak[s] in the small hours'[33]), and narrative contexts are unpopulated in the extreme, including an arctic exploration and a night-fishing voyage. Remarkably, Graham keeps Mill's model intact, as the reader listens in or overhears, while also attending to the formal framework which determines such a verbal act and the genre more broadly.

Michael O'Neill provides a useful definition of 'self-consciousness' in the romantic tradition as 'used less to point to "consciousness of self" as a theme extractable from a poem than to the

---

which the poems themselves suggest theoretical orientations' (39), a suggestively self-conscious position on the poems' part.

29 Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin (eds.), 'Introduction' in *The Sound of Poetry* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 2.

30 Paterson, *The Poem*, 4.

31 Perloff, *The Sound of Poetry*, 2.

32 John Stuart Mill, 'What is Poetry?' (1833) in *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory*, ed. by Thomas J. Collins and Vivienne J. Rundle (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1999), 1212–27. T. S. Eliot, 'The Three Voices of Poetry' (1949), in *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1957), 96. (See also David Nowell Smith, *On Voice*, 164)

33 W. S. Graham, 'Johann Joachim Quantz's Five Lessons', *New Collected Poems*, 228.

recognition made by a poem that it is a poem', as well as recognition made by poetry of the limits of poetry.[34] Yet his determination of such formal self-consciousness as a mere textual effect does not accommodate the affective or unconscious material properties that I wish to explore here, and which Graham's and Denise Riley's poetry invokes. Adam Phillips goes as far as to suggest that 'the reading of [all] literature […] work[s] by making us self-conscious about the nature and the quality of our attention, our language…'.[35] This reflexivity is multi-tiered in Graham and Riley's post-romantic lyric, rendering effects and affects of attention.

J. J. Baker defines romantic self-consciousness, in the context of Hölderlin, Shelley and Wordsworth, as:

> a reflexivity of the poetic discourse as medium. Not a reflection of the subject on itself, it is rather the subject's reflection into language. The subjectivity of the poem is a second-order subjectivity, one not to be confused with the primary, existential subjectivity of the poet.[36]

This offers a more complex definition of reflexivity than that suggested by Perloff or O'Neill above. By referring to a 'second-order', Baker constructs a spatial hierarchy which would, I believe, have pleased Graham. It is consistent with approaches to self-consciousness – and the extent to which they throw up what O'Neill calls 'the riddle of intentionality'[37] – of Denise Riley, Forrest-Thomson and J. H. Prynne, or one of Graham's own constructed spaces, as I will show.[38] 'Reflexive', in denoting the archaic meaning, 'Capable of turning […] back', suggests a more active agency than self-reflective, given 'reflect' implies a degree of passivity or detachment where 'reflex' does not. 'Reflexivity of the discourse as medium', in Baker's formulation, is then qualified as 'the subject's

---

[34] Michael O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-conscious Poem* (Oxford University Press, 1997), xv.
[35] Adam Phillips, *Attention Seeking* (London: Penguin, 2019), 15.
[36] JJ Baker, 'Poetic Calling, Poetic Failure: Self-reflexivity in Texts of Hölderlin, Wordsworth, and Shelley' in *MLN*, Vol. 105, No. 5, Comparative Literature (December, 1990), 932.
[37] Michael O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-conscious Poem*, xvi.
[38] Both Denise Riley, writing in direct relation to a discussion of Graham's 'What is the language using us for?', and Prynne, in reference to the work of Veronica Forrest-Thomson, refer to linguistic states/categories 'above' and 'below' intentional experience. Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves* (CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 68, and J. H. Prynne, 'Veronica Forrest-Thomson: A Personal Memoir', <http://jacketmagazine.com/20/pryn-vft.html> [accessed 7 December 2019], first published in *On the Periphery* (Cambridge: Street Editions, 1976).

relation into language', arguably another form of self-consciousness given its emphasis on subjectivity. 'Self-conscious' proves to be more capacious than 'self-reflexive', and was not only Graham's preferred term, but Denise Riley's – for whom its implicit, post-Romantic associations with Narcissism are key.

For Graham, the meaning of 'selfconscious', in his Joyce-inflected neologism, did lean, in a colloquial fashion in letters, towards the use of the term 'self-aware', which accommodates an awareness of both the poet's existential subjectivity, and a means of accounting for the poem's formal properties, its 'craft'.[39] In terms of the former, Seamus Perry has written of an ironizing reflex used in Graham's rhetorical argumentation, which he aligns with what Empson calls 'pseudo-parody to disarm criticism', given his tendency to abruptly undermine the earnestness of his own utterance – by, for example, declaring 'JOKE OR NOT JOKE?'.[40] This may be rooted in an affected self-consciousness (in the pejorative sense) which was present for Graham as a young man given to 'self-consciously presenting himself in the role of the poet as outsider, and his contemporaries relate various stunts designed to impress on them his oddness and originality', which may partly have been a result of imposter syndrome at Newbattle Abbey College at the time.[41] To Alan Clodd in 1955, a year of frenetic activity for the poet discussed here, Graham claimed: 'Christ what a selfconscious man I sound and yet to become an artist of any singleness of purpose seems to make this inevitable.'[42] In terms of a self-consciousness of craft, Graham uses the term 'selfconscious' in discussions of the inclusion of 'archaisms' – the montaging of an Anglo-Saxon diction with the

[39] For an explicit extension of such Joycean play, his reference to: 'Automatic prose, part of which seem to me a little comic when it is not being to [sic] self-consciously punny. Rejoyce.' 'Notes on a Notebook' (in the collection of the Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin), quoted in Matthew Francis, 'Syntax Gram and the Magic Typewriter: W.S. Graham's Automatic Writing', *Speaking Towards You*, 89.
[40] Perry, 'What a carry on', Vol. 41 No. 14 · 18 July 2019, 9-14. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v41/n14/seamus-perry/what-a-carry-on> [accessed 7 December 2019]
[41] Lopez, *The Poetry of W. S. Graham*, 1.
[42] Ibid., 141-142.

poet's contemporary one – the border ballad, and the Scottish Art Scene.[43] He also refers to his 'metrical selfconsciousness', and a 'self-consciousness of the present time in the reader', their temporal frame.[44] What these instances demonstrate is that self-consciousness was fundamental to the sense of himself as a writer, but foremost it was – or at least it became – a matter of style and technique.

Later in the same passage to Clodd, Graham identifies self-consciousness with the loneliness of art, a common pairing in the poet's view, and one which indicates the single-minded purpose of Graham's practice, 'to always want to share the aloneness'.[45] Graham was acutely conscious of the loneliness of art, particularly lyric poetry, but also the extent to which art may transform such loneliness into communality.[46] 'I wish that writing was not such a lonely labour (lonely of human sympathy) or, I suppose, that making art was not such a one-way contact', he lamented.[47] But he recognised that the 'intra-' implications of such a self-conscious, one-way practice also led paradoxically to its intravitality, a dynamic intimacy and intersubjectivity. Graham's poetry addresses his close circle of artist friends including Bryan Wynter and Roger Hilton via intimate idiolects and hypocoristics (like the 'naked woman tree', or 'carn foxglove'[48]), introducing another subgenre, or terrain, of self-consciousness. Peter Riley refers to these as 'blockages', which 'propose a wholeness which cannot be limited to the public vocabulary', a turning in to private language.[49] As Peter Riley points out, Graham included no notes section in the books he published during his lifetime, suggesting that these instances of artifice may suspend the reader's understanding, if not exclude her altogether from aspects of the poem. We will compare the extensive use of notes by William

---

[43] Graham, *The Nightfisherman: Selected Letters*, 95, 161, 229.
[44] Ibid., 331.
[45] Ibid., 142.
[46] Ibid.
[47] 'From a 1949 Notebook', 25.
[48] Graham, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Matthew Francis (London: Faber, 2004), 166, 258.
[49] Peter Riley, 'The "Discovery" of W.S Graham', *The Fortnightly Review* <http://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2019/07/riley-ws-graham/> [accessed 7 December 2019]

Empson in contrast to Graham in determining the self-sufficiency of the poem and the limits of self-consciousness.

Graham also produced occasional ballads and bawdy verses as a form of coterie poetics, arguably another instance of exclusivity. Such instances may indicate an emphasis on the local in which the 'self' in 'self-conscious' takes undue precedence, reflecting a parochially interior worldview. This has been a criticism of the St Ives Group of painters with which Graham was associated, and is something the painter and critic Patrick Heron sought to dispel by promoting it on the international stage in the New York magazine *Arts* in the late 50s. But such works may on the other hand characterise valuable spaces of homosocial bonding, in a time when Graham thought queerness 'undignified', and many of the men in Graham's circle regressed to a state of boyishness in fear of the prospect or experience of war.[50] Such coterie work may also set itself up, as we will see in a discussion of Graham's occasional ballads, in opposition to a modish metropolitan literary elite, thus offering a new form of inclusivity.

'Self-consciousness' is like 'narcissism' in that the colloquial implications are often centred on bad affect: the notion of navel-gazing aligns them both, obscuring their etymological root. Luke Kennard begins his thesis 'Self-Consciousness and the Transatlantic Prose Poem' by declaring that self-consciousness 'is not necessarily a quality we aspire to in writing or life'.[51] This is particularly key in John Wilkinson's notorious review of Denise Riley's *Mop Mop Georgette*, which mistakes the complex formal and rhetorical self-consciousness of her work for a pathological narcissism which, as critics have pointed out, reflects a gendered tendency in male critics with regard to women writers,

[50] 'There must be a way to say "I miss you" to another man which has nothing to do with suggestions of homo and is dignified and vital.' *The Nightfisherman*, 226.
[51] Luke Kennard, 'The Expanse: Self-Consciousness and the Transatlantic Prose Poem' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Exeter, 2008), 6.

employing categories Riley's creative and critical output works so doggedly to deconstruct.[52] I agree with Samuel Solomon that this review is more nuanced and ambivalent than many accounts suggest, and would add that in some ways it offers an empathetically mimetic reading of Riley, by interiorizing the ambivalence which is so inherent to Riley's style in Wilkinson's own critical engagement. This seems particularly apt given Wilkinson's conflicted engagement with its reflectiveness: 'one yearns for release, for a writing which does not so repeatedly reassemble the writer's looking-glass, no matter how lovely the fleeting figure of self-invention there revealed…'[53] It is befitting, particularly in the context of this thesis, that Riley chose to 'answer' Wilkinson in her poems, 'Affections of the Ear' and 'Castalian Spring' (which are also in a way answers to Graham's poems), proving that, as Riley says: 'there's a vast gulf between the idea of critical self-presence, and these versions of narcissism as self-enchantment',[54] along with my thesis here that poems of a particular lyric form have a critically intellective or argumentative function, which may depend on its opposition to prose. To answer poetically is to suggest implicitly that Wilkinson's criticisms are worth engaging with – and at the most sophisticated level. And in doing so Riley proves that her 'critical self-presence' is, as in Graham, rooted foremost in language at an essential level, rather than ego or pathology, and is best exploited and interrogated through poetic artifice.

---

[52] John Wilkinson, 'Illyrian Places', *Parataxis* 6, Brighton, Spring/Summer 1994, 58-59, collected in *The Lyric Touch* (Cambridge: Salt, 2007), 65-76. For Riley's work dismantling of categories, see *Am I That Name?: Feminism and the Category of "Women"* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995). For a summary of critical responses to Wilkinson's review, see Samuel Solomon, 'Reproducing the Line: 1970s Innovative Poetry and Socialist-Feminism in the UK' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Southern California, 2012), 229.

[53] *The Lyric Touch*, 75-76. This is further evidenced by Wilkinson's recent support for the same project:

'I avow an idol-making out of the material I use, making for the emergence of a unified consciousness and corporeality […] For [the] experience [of a poetic idol-making from the material of poetry itself] to be shared demands intense pressure on the sonic and syntactical stuff of language so that speech happens with no identifiable speaker […] charging the body into self-presence […] it happens for me when I read certain poems – by Denise Riley and W.S. Graham among others'. See John Wilkinson, 'from *Lyric Poetry in Evil Times'* in *Atlantic Drift: An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by James Byrne and Robert Sheppard (Todmorden: Arc, 2017), 330.

[54] Denise Riley and Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *The Force of Language* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 18. (Quoted in Andrea Brady, 'Echo, Irony, and Repetition in the Writings of Denise Riley', 150. It is Brady who characterises these poems as a form of answering: 'Riley responded at length to this attack [by Wilkinson] both in her critical writings and in poems such as "Castalian Spring" and "Affections of the Ear"'. 'Echo, Irony', 149.)

The work of Graham's which I am concerned with most fully is that produced in his 1950s period, which marks the stylistic segue to *2nd Poems* (1945) and *The White Threshold* (1949) embodied by *The Nightfishing* (1955), which critics still claim to be Graham's 'masterpiece'.[55] This was the period in which Graham experimented with received forms, through which he determined a more intuitive, self-conscious formalism. It is also the period of significant, and mutually-inspiring, exchange with Graham's artist friends, in a decade which saw a major turning point in the development of modernist abstraction in British art, and which also saw Tate's 1956 exhibition, 'Modern Art in the United States'. It is no coincidence that Graham's lyric self-consciousness developed visually and spatially into essential works like 'The Constructed Space' (1955) and 'The Dark Dialogues' (1959) in this period, striking a substantial new abstract key in the work. And yet this development was contingent upon Graham's relation to artists and sculptors working in the forties – Sven Berlin and Ben Nicholson – as I will show.

Chapter one is concerned with establishing Graham's textual self-consciousness as constituted of paradoxes (Graham claimed that 'Whatever intelligence made us (He, She, It) made us so well knit with a paradoxical hunger'[56]) and spatial relations: between sound and silence, silence and 'nonsilence', sense and sound, the intra- and inter-personal, and between speaking out and speaking about. I demonstrate how poems in the period 1949-1955, in correspondence with 'A 1949 Notebook', draw together 'silence' and – through cadence – 'distance', determining meaning in the space between words and the space between interlocutors, 'speaking between somehow the spaces'.[57] Beginning with 'Since All My Steps Taken', which anticipates the rhythmic shape and echoic nature of Graham's major long poems, it explores passages from 'Seven Letters' in *The*

---

[55] Jeremy Noel-Tod, 'The Poetry Boy: Unpublished Poems by W. S. Graham', *TLS*, 7 March 2018 <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/the-poetry-boy/> [accessed 16/12/19]
[56] Graham, 'Notes on a Poetry of Release', 142.
[57] *The Nightfisherman*, 169.

Nightfishing as a segue between the density and closed quality of *The White Threshold* and the expansion of and experimentation with received form and ballad metre. The speaking utterances position themselves as pressurized one-sided exchanges that may be considered Coleridgean in nature but are abstracted through a Beckettian notion of 'nonsilence': address reduced to mere prepositions and deixis. Graham is able to fashion complex aural shapes through play and paradox while keeping lyric address intact.

Chapter two explores a notion of 'self-conscious image' to correspond with the notion of 'self-conscious sound' established in my first chapter. Having first suggested that 'silence' is the medium-specificity of Graham's brand of lyric poetry, the chapter aims to draw an equivalence between Graham's spatial configuration of silence and the space of abstract painting in 1940s/50s St Ives. Concerned primarily with Ben Nicholson's geometrically constructed spaces, I compare Nicholson's delineation of the constituent parts of illusionistic recession with Graham's rhythmic poetic apparatus. In the case of both Nicholson and Graham, abstract formalism works to create a release into a new self-consciousness or imaginative world. Such a kinship at a deep formal level implies a relational equivalence between visual and verbal mediums which exceeds the merely figurative, analogical or ekphrastic.

Chapters three and four are centred on the rich period of activity Graham underwent between 1953 and 1957 at Gurnard's Head wherein his self-conscious lyric began increasingly to engage with a mysterious dark matter as in the uncollected 1953 poem 'The Dark Intention', which to some degree acts as experimental means towards the more substantial 'The Dark Dialogues', published in *Malcolm Mooney's Land* (1970), but is (I argue) a major work in its own right. An unconscious underside is revealed by the poem which Graham's sophisticated lyric apparatus may recognise but cannot always account for. This is brought about by Graham's experimentation with received, and more communally-oriented, verse forms – sonnet, ballad, villanelle – in order to

release for himself a more intuitive and idiosyncratic form of self-disclosure in language. In chapter three, Graham's unpublished 'The Song of the Tower', produced spontaneously for the artist and writer Sven Berlin, is considered as a communal, notably plastic rendering of ballad metre and form. The poem describes the plasticity of Berlin's sculptural practice, at a time when Graham was developing tiers of self-consciousness. Chapter four begins by giving an account of Graham's workbooks and manuscripts, indicating the complex scaffold which underpinned such self-consciousness, before making a case for the villanelle 'The Dark Intention' as a discrete formal achievement and development of poetic form and the didactic lyric in the tradition of William Empson and Veronica Forrest-Thomson, but which departs from them in its embrace of a linguistic unconscious.

Chapter five, which also works as an epilogue to the critical part of the thesis, reflects on Denise Riley's poetry and theory in relationship to Graham's, and in doing so reflects on Graham's work through the retrospective lens of Riley's. Riley's work charges many of Graham's apolitical language games with a new urgency as refracted through her gendered self-consciousness and feminist philosophy which critiques harmful linguistic structures. Graham's influence on Riley's philosophy of language, and its potential to pre-empt and develop lyric theory more broadly while remaining diametrically opposed to prosaic expression, remains unexplored. This may be because, despite his presence throughout her creative and critical output, to merely identify the network of echoes of Graham in Riley's work may appear unnecessary, particularly when Riley's work accounts so reflexively for that influence on its own terms, as, for example, her reaching for Graham's 'What is the language using us for?' in her account of the overdetermination of the authored text by external factors in *The Words of Selves*.[58] Her work is attuned, as Graham's is, to poetry as listening. By listening closely to it, we reveal a sophisticated, longstanding dialogue between these two poets – a

[58] *The Words of Selves*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 69.

dialogue, paradoxically, born of self-consciousness and loneliness – that (to mix metaphors) sheds light on both and transcends the superficial explicit connection. We also may attend to the political potential for Graham's work in light of the fact that, as I discuss, he would often edit out explicit reference to abuses of power that Riley's poetry contends more openly with.

I agree with Adam Piette that 'sensitivity to poetic techniques [may be] coded into any given poem – as forms of knowledge, not empty ornaments',[59] something which, he says, Practical Criticism was supposed to teach students. Subsequently my approach is pragmatic and centred on the self-sufficiency of discrete poems and their ability to account for themselves theoretically on their own terms, their analytic toolkit inhering within. Graham claimed that '[t]he "help" the critic should give us in work like this [i.e. reviews of Pound's *Cantos*] is towards understanding the "language apparatus" which has been constructed', whereas that of the poet is to respond dialogically, though that is not to say un-critically.[60] In 1977 Graham wrote to Michael Schmidt that he wished that he as a critic would be 'an observer of what verse means and how it works […]'.[61] These comments indicate the extent to which Graham's poetry anticipates criticism, and the challenge he sets his critic, particularly when the language apparatus – which includes his devices, clusters, approaches and constructions – is deliberately, at times boisterously or hammily, withholding of its methodology (see 'Approaches to How they Behave'[62]). As a result the work of my criticism undertaken here is to work *with* Graham, whose rich body of poetry exposes the apparatus underpinning self-consciousness in language. I aim to demonstrate not only how it works, but how it gives its own rich account of how it works.

---

59 Adam Piette, 'Contemporary Poetry and Close Reading', in Peter Robinson (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 230.
60 For an example of creative-critical response as literary critique, see *Try To Be Better*, ed. by Sam Buchan-Watts and Lavinia Singer (London: Prototype, 2019).
61 Graham, *Nightfisherman*, 336.
62 W. S. Graham, *New Collected Poems*,178-182.

Chapter 1

'Silence of a certain shape': Self-consciousness, Space and Silence

Graham's poems frequently stage the one-sidedness of their own address, positioning themselves in situations of extreme isolation. Yet simultaneously they also inhere within a dominant lyric tradition most prominently associated, perhaps, with the Coleridge of 'Frost at Midnight', rendering a 'strange / And extreme silentness' against which the speaker's musings are defined, which we find among playful lyric pronouncements ('why am I here / here I am'; 'Yet here I am / More truly now this abstract act become') which may echo Coleridge's creationist 'I AM IN THAT I AM' with an existentialist twist.[1] The sheer unknowability of how and where a lyric utterance may land is clearly evoked by such titles – selected from the span of Graham's corpus – as 'A Letter More Likely to Myself', 'The Dark Dialogues' and *Aimed at Nobody*.

With silence as the interlocutor, the speaker's own voice is exposed to himself, and the physical weight of words is felt, taking on a new vitality. This results in the foregrounding of what Roman Jakobson called 'poeticity', and a critical reflexiveness of a kind outlined by Frederic Jameson: 'A poetic language which is a dialect is one which attracts attention to itself, and such attention results in renewed perception of the very material quality of language itself.'[2] Indeed,

---

1 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Frost at Midnight', *Poetry Foundation* <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43986/frost-at-midnight> [accessed 7 December 2019]. W. S. Graham in 'Why Cornwall?', *Monitor*, 14 September 1958, BBC Archive. Graham, The Constructed Space', *New Collected Poems*, 162. S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. by James Engell and W. J. Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), I, 519, in Daniel M. McVeigh, 'Coleridge's Doctrine of the Imagination and the Enigmatic Name of God', *Religion & Literature*, vol. 17, no. 1 (Spring, 1985), 61-75.

2 Roman Jakobson, 'What is Poetry?' in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3: 'Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry,' ed. by Stephen Rudy (The Hague: The Mouton, 1981), 750. Frederic Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 50. Jameson's *Prison-House* is particularly suggestive in relation to Graham's book title, *Cage without Grievance*, along with numerous other instances of Graham's dwelling in language conceived as a form of carceral space, for which see the last chapter here, 'Unquiet as a Talkative Ear'. Hugh MacDiarmid complained that '*Cage Without Grievance* is a self-conflicting title. The poet should be not a contented cage-bird in no matter how ornate a cage, but a

Graham's own attention-seeking language is one in which the very material quality of language goes beyond 'renewed perception' to dominate the figurative and subjective domain, threatening the integrity of lyric perception itself. Remarkably, his poetry is not reduced in the process to being mere language game or theoretical exercise. Despite the 'maiming' of self, the vitally interpersonal and personable qualities of the lyric remain more than intact: they are triumphant in the face of a 'jungle' of communication, its potentially violent or obdurate darkness.

This chapter argues that Graham's lyric self-consciousness is established through and between the parts and boundaries of lyric form. By determining the 'critical apparatus', which Graham's poetry does by attending so closely to its own shape and sound, not only a sophisticated theoretical account of poetry, but a unique poetic selfhood, is realised. The toolkit inheres, to an extent, within the poetry itself. I will draw extensively from material in an early notebook from 1949 which, in its philosophical and spatial propositions, both offers the poet and critic special access to the language apparatus employed in the poetry, and makes the published work more complex and confounding. This paradoxical nature is apt to Graham's rigorously self-conscious and intuitively constructivist sensibility.

What we might call Graham's theoretical positions with regard to verse and language, such as the implicit interest in interpellation, the inherent absence of the author and the agency of language, and distrust of the linguistic sign, can be said to coincide or anticipate much philosophy associated with the Linguistic Turn, as critics have commented.[3] His 1946 sole theoretical prose piece, 'Notes on a Poetry of Release', could be said to vividly anticipate J. L. Austin and his

---

great outgoing spirit, with full personal and social responsibility and with complete intellectual adequacy.' Hugh MacDiarmid 'Review of *Cage Without Grievance*', *The Free Man*, circa 1942, no p. no (See Lopez, *TPWSG*, 42). MacDiarmid may be rejecting here the wrought Elizabethan Englishness of the verse: for 'social responsibility' read 'Scots responsibility'.

3 'Graham was years ahead of Derrida and other deconstructionists […] in his almost constant suspicion of language as unreliable', Calvin Bedient, *Chicago Review* 62:1/2, 146; 'Graham's poems are preoccupied with a theme that was receiving attention in French literary theory at about the same time [they were published], that of the author's absence from the text he or she creates', Matthew Francis, *PNR* 109 (1996).

emphasis on the contextual performance of speech: 'Each word is touched by and filled with the activity of every speaker. […] You cannot twice bring the same into sound', which is later modified in romantic fashion in *The Nightfishing*: 'At this last word all words change. / All words change in acknowledgement of the last. / Here is their mingling element.'[4] These lines are in themselves a description of those which come earlier in the poem:

> Or, if you would, O surely
> There is no word,
>
> There is not any to go over that.[5]

Note the propositional play with address, as 'word' picks up 'would', and the conjunction ('Or') which becomes apostrophe ('O'), together with the hesitancy regarding each words' placement offset by the declarative anaphora ('There is…', 'There is…'), embodying an awareness that 'All words change in acknowledgement of their last'. This is the sound of the poet working through linguistic philosophy at the level of form, making propositions out of small verbal adjustments.

We might note an intersection between Graham's anticipation of Austin, and Denise Riley's engagement with the work of Judith Butler (namely her *Excitable Speech*) in relation to harmful subjectification, as in *Impersonal Passion*. In this work Riley modifies Austin's title of *How to Do Things with Words* to 'How Words Do Things with Us', a tenet confronted in some of her most moving late poetry, as we will see.[6]

Unlike Riley, a Professor of Literature and Philosophy at the University of East Anglia, Graham did not identify as a philosopher. However the work does not merely act as a primary text particularly amenable to more general theoretical questions, but as a creative text with its own critical function. In this he is like Beckett. We might also say the same of Forrest-Thomson and Empson's

---

4 Graham, *The Nightfisherman: Selected Letters*, 380. 'The Nightfishing', *New Collected Poems*, 117.
5 'The Nightfishing' in *New Collected Poems*, 115.
6 Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion*, (Durham: Duke, 2005), 3.

self-consciously formal works: as poet-critics they both clearly determined that some theoretical questions might be (more?) generatively attended to in verse.

As far as Graham's critical and theoretical reading is concerned, the evidence is unclear. Tony Lopez infers that Graham read Heidegger from a reading list in a notebook (dated 1964), but Matthew Francis takes the reading list as evidence he never got round to reading Heidegger.[7] I think Graham's proximity to an influx of international and metropolitan artists passing through St Ives could account for his exposure to such material, however indirectly.[8] Such proximity is suggested by, for example, the echo or after-echo of a concept such as Heidegger's *holzwege* (which translates into the idiomatic phrase, 'off the beaten track') in the painter Bryan Wynter's *Path Through Wood* (1950), or it may be coincidence.[9]

Given that I am interested in how Graham conceived of philosophical problems in practical terms, it is not in my interest to dispute or confirm the channels through which Graham came to theoretical texts (if he did at all). As Denise Riley has said, 'the [Heideggerian] notion', a particularly salient one across Graham's work, 'that "I speak language / language speaks me"[,] is a tension that many people have voiced since the 1790s, […] if you're a practicing writer, it's not a recherché thought, [or one] […] that you'd need to go to a formal Heideggerian text find'.[10] Riley speaks here as both linguistic philosopher (with a knowledge of the history of such philosophy) and as a verse practitioner. This dichotomy between poet and philosopher aligns with this thesis' notion of a particular kind of poetry – of which Riley and Graham are exemplars – which is dialectical in its self-

---

7 For a commentary on this critical dispute, see Robin Purves, 'W. S. Graham and the Heidegger Question' in *Complicities: British Poetry 1945-2007*, ed. Purves and Ladkin (Literraria Pragensia, 2007), 4-29. John McMurray at Newbattle Abbey was, as Riley points out, one of the British philosophers at the time interested in continental philosophers, indicating that Graham may have come to the material as early as 1938-39. Personal interview with Denise Riley, York, 16 March 2017.
8 I am grateful for conversations with David Nowell Smith and Denise Riley about this. Riley suggested to me, persuasively, that Graham may have come to the works of Heidegger via his German painter friend Karl Weschke.
9 See Martin Heidegger, *Off the beaten track*. ed. and trans. by Kenneth Haynes and Julian Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
10 Personal interview with Denise Riley, York, 16 March 2017.

conscious engagement of form, without necessarily being in conscious dialogue with a critical school or a particular theoretical discourse.

From *The Seven Journeys* (1944) through *The Nightfishing* (1955) and *Malcolm Mooney's Land* (1970) to 'A Walk to the Gulvals' (c.1980), Graham's poetry vivdly renders a place, real or imagined, which it must then traverse. The space is as much the space between words and subjects as it is the grand sea- and landscapes, Ben Narnain, the Atlantic Sea off the Land's End Peninsular, the Arctic, to which it may also allude. That such expeditions often also do the work of literary theory is something this chapter argues for.

Graham's literal and allegorical narratives of exploration confront a void, which is aligned with the void the post-romantic lyric poet speaks out into, together with the 'white threshold' of their medium (the cliff edge or tideline of each line end[11]). Here, geographical extremes – like the 'Very end of land' of 'The White Threshold' – are the embodiment of silence, a silence the poet as topographer attempts to account for and respond to. Given that the silence also embodies the unknowability of a reader's response, to demarcate the silence may be in some way to anticipate the reader or to foster intimacy with them: 'I will ride the marches to keep / Your silence in a very good place' ('If it is Only for You I Speak').[12]

In a letter to Robin Skelton of 25 February 1958, Graham refers, albeit likely quizzically, to 'the idea of a "supreme selfconsciousness" where the "I" *speaks out* continually to the reader…' (my emphasis).[13] The 'I' may speak out by addressing a 'you', or by addressing itself. The 'I' may also draw attention to the poem's language, explicitly – through literal reference or allegory – or implicitly, through form. The nature of these speech acts is that they inherently speak about the conditions and the status of their own utterance. This corresponds with a formulation by Derek

11 See its 'Always the welcome-roaring threshold' in 'The White Threshold', *New Collected Poems*, 92.
12 WSG, *New Collected Poems*, 272.
13 Graham, *The Nightfisherman*, 161.

Attridge of literature as 'simultaneously formed and performed. The words mean, and at the same time they show what it is to mean.'[14]

This duality of meaning and 'show[ing] what it is to mean' can also be framed as both speaking 'out' and speaking 'about' the utterance. 'Out' and 'about' is a distinction Graham himself makes in the later poem 'Clusters Travelling Out' (*Malcolm Mooney's Land*). It is a happy coincidence that, in both pairings, one word inhabits another ('form/per*form*', 'out/ab*out*'; as with 'act' in 'abstr*act*' in the 'The Constructed Space'), itself a Grahamesque flourish. 'About' contains 'out', requires it. These like-words align adjacently as puns do, bringing to light dormant or buried meanings and subjects, like the 'poor friends / I buried earlier under the printed snow' ('Malcolm Mooney's Land').[15]

> When the birds blow like burnt paper
> Over the poorhouse roof and the slaughter
> House and all the houses of Madron
> *I would like to be out of myself and*
> *About* the extra, ordinary world
> No matter what disguise it wears
> For my sake, in my love.[16]

If Graham's 'I' speaks out, it usually speaks about itself, the frame and conditions of speaking out. 'About' is to be *without* the self, possibly even to be without a self. It is also to go round the self, to describe or demarcate the self in rotation. 'About' itself implies an apt distinction: both 'around' and a 'description of'. To be 'out of myself' in this context implies less existential ennui and more a benevolent act of love, to transcend mortal disguise to forge connection. This dichotomy indicates the reflexive action back upon many of Graham's speech acts, one we might call a critical and self-critical function. It also begins to demonstrate, as I hope to show more fully here, the extent to which Graham constituted his poetic address spatially in the 'extra, ordinary world' (a world, the

---

14 Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 109.
15 *New Collected Poems*, 153.
16 'Clusters Travelling Out', *New Collected Poems*, 194, my italics.

comma implies in Stevensian fashion, which is either or both 'extraordinary' and 'extra' to the 'ordinary').

In a 1946 letter to William Montgomerie, Graham critiques the author's overemphasis on 'the TECHNIQUE OF PHYSICAL (sound) VERSE' over a 'TECHNIQUE OF MENTAL VERSE'.[17] He differentiates between the elements of his own poems in *The Seven Journeys* and *Cage Without Grievance* as those built 'purely out of sound' and the 'consciously working TECHNIQUE OF MENTAL VERSE', by which he means syntactical construction.[18] He claims he 'can construct' with 'rime and alliteration' and 'the conscious use of clichéforms' (another Graham neologism), in which a word is substituted in a recognisable phrase ('song' for 'glance' in the phrase 'without a song backward'[19]). This may disturb the syntax and the senses, but also runs the risk of making the line or parts of the line feel prosthetic or contorted if the word is not fully assimilated within the phrase. '[M]emorableness' is, he says, 'something I construct towards, part of my direction', offering a degree of provisionality to the mnemonic, complicating it.[20]

The early letter to Montgomerie is useful because it makes clear two things. Firstly, that Graham himself was from the outset a poet who constructs in words. Secondly, that form is not conceived of merely as 'rime and alliteration': it is equally constituted by syntactic construction and other shapes and figures; it works in and with the memory, it is sensuous and intuitive. 'I construct my lines so that each line is justified and (in relation) floated by definitely some activity', he says in the same letter.[21] This peculiar construction demonstrates that Graham's conception of verse was spatial: centred on relation, equivalence, and the sense of it as a built environment. It is clear looking back at the highly torqued, chewy blocks of dense verse that make up *The Seven Journeys* (1944), *Cage*

17 *The Nightfisherman*, 20.
18 Ibid., 21.
19 'The First Journey', *New Collected Poems*, 4.
20 *The Nightfisherman*, 21.
21 Ibid.

Without Grievance (1942) and *2nd Poems* (1945) that in these early books Graham was yet to strike upon a more fluid poetic idiom in which the levels of artifice, syntax and clichéform more fully cohere. Such a construct will produce a disturbance with a greater integrity and cohesion, and on a larger scale.

A 1949 Notebook gifted to Elizabeth Smart and republished in *Edinburgh Review* in 1987 demonstrates that Graham applied himself in the manner of an autodidact to the practice of modernist versification.[22] The notebook, Jeremy Noel-Tod suggests, evidences 'how Graham very deliberately apprenticed himself as a poet […] in the modernist tradition he admired'.[23] We might push the notion of apprenticeship slightly further and align it with Graham's actual apprenticeship as a draughtsman to a Glasgow engineering firm at the age of fourteen, and his later employment as a precision engineer in a Clydeside torpedo factory. These experiences coincided with his coming to poetry, first in the form of evening classes in arts and literature as a teenager, and his enrolment at Newbattle College only one or two years after his work in munitions.[24] Michael and Margaret Snow write that 'Most of Graham's factory work was at night. He kept a notebook in his drawer there and, when he had finished his quota of machining parts, was able to continue work on […] *The Seven Journeys*' (1942),[25] swapping one set of parts for another (the 'parts' of the *Seven Journeys*). It is not surprising, then, that recently unearthed drafts for 'The Dark Dialogues' (produced 1956-58) provide their own quotas and blueprints:

> the Poem to be in 5 sections of approx. 50 lines all
> 3 stress lines. To employ a wide range of device
> in the rhythm with this. […][26]

---

22 W. S. Graham, 'From a 1949 Notebook', in *Edinburgh Review* 75 (1987), 24-36.
23 Jeremy Noel-Tod, 'Introduction' to *The Caught Habits of Language*, ed. by Hamilton, Boast and Ching (Bristol: Donut Press, 2018), 3.
24 See Tony Lopez, *TPWSG*, 3.
25 *The Nightfisherman*, 8.
26 Undated worksheet for 'The Dark Dialogues' c. 1956–58, W. S. Graham papers, private collection of Marius Kociejowski.

And earlier in a letter to Berlin, Graham would also conceive of his verse construction in numerical terms:

> Since it ['The Voyages of Alfred Wallis'] I've finished three short poems called
>
> construction of 92 words
> construction of 83 words
> &
> construction of 130 words.[27]

While being cautious about overidentifying Graham's aesthetics with his socio-economic status as a boy initially held back from further education due to his family's modest means, we might infer an overlap between Graham's vocational training and his vocational approach to modernist verse, together with a conception of poetry as a spatial and non-verbal proposition we might expect from a trained engineer. There is also in the notebook a level of dogged determination and self-sufficiency present that we might associate with the autodidactic. A section in the 1949 notebook is categorised as 'mechanics notes' – a section mostly taken up with Eliot's conception of musicality,[28] in a year when Graham was reading and quoting from 'The Music of Poetry'.[29] Graham's marginal notes in the drafts and notebooks are made up of probing, puzzling notes to self: this is a poet who wants to learn, and to instruct, as well as construct. We see also how the autodidactic experience conveyed by the notes translates to a didactically self-conscious poetry in the case of 'The Dark Intention', which I explore in a later chapter.

Graham himself puns on the connection I have drawn between industrial and poetic apprenticeship when he refers to the 'Hide and seeking rivetting town of my child / Hood' ('Greenock at Night I Find You'):[30] ironizing the low-level inertia of a suburban childhood as 'riveting' and suggesting that the foundations of such a life and social class inhere in the material act

---

27 *The Nightfisherman*, 52. Unfortunately these drafts do not survive.
28 'From a 1949 Notebook', 31.
29 W. S. Graham letter to Edwin Morgan, *The Nightfisherman*, 95.
30 *New Collected Poems*, 219.

of construction. Graham's attention to the rivets of experience is continuous with the devices, implements, constructions, clusters, graiths and approaches, 'gantries and cantilevers'[31] referred to in the work – all discrete elements which variously embody his poetry's attention to its own constructedness, the visual and aural scaffold beneath the 'shout and whimper' of the living idiom.[32] As he writes in 'Notes on a Poetry of Release', the poet is '[t]o be the labourer carrying the bricks of his time and on the scaffolding of an unknown construction'.[33]

The 1949 Notebook reveals a poet concerned with frames of text, memory and imagining, as he builds towards 'The Nightfishing', eventually published in 1955. The first thing to note about much of the note-making is, as with Graham's worksheets, the visual dimension to the drafting: a dimension which begins to establish in correspondence with artists like Sven Berlin and Ben Nicholson, as I show in the following chapters.

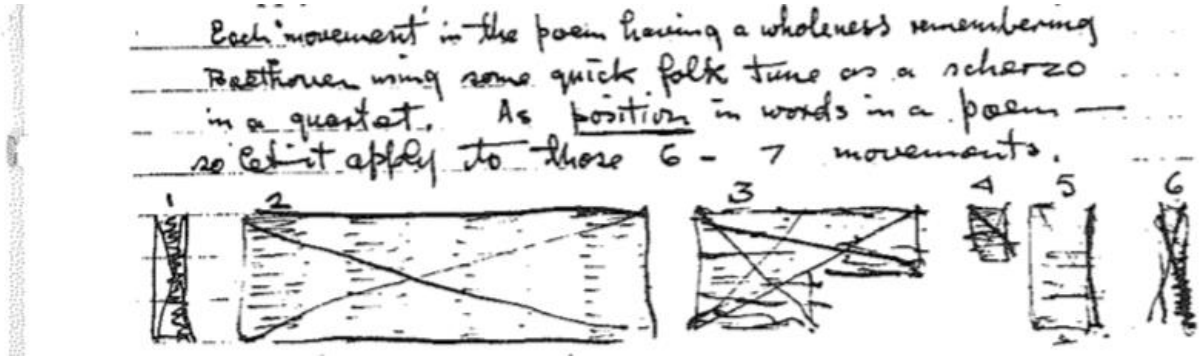


Illustration 'From a 1949 Notebook'

31 W. S. Graham, 'The Dark Dialogues' in *New Collected Poems*, 174.
32 *The Nightfigherman*, 162. (The phrase 'The graith of Poetry' appears in 'Seven Letters', a Scots word meaning 'equipment or apparatus', as Lopez notes in *The Poetry of W. S. Graham*, 77)
33 *The Nightfisherman*, 381. Gerard Carruthers has written persuasively of the alignment between 'Fourth Sonnet' and the mining culture of Robert Burns's 'The Lea-rig, the subject of which is 'as "crude" and ancient as farming itself' in Carruthers, *W. S. Graham: born in a diamond, screeched from a mountain pap* (Columbia, SC: Studies in Scottish Literature, 2019), 16. In a wonderfully apt metaphorical flourish, Andrew Lanyon states that Graham 'investigate[d] a particular kind of language, that niche of his own that he quarried in the space between people', Andrew Lanyon, *The Quick-Change Act* (Cornwall: Self-published, 1987), 79.

Graham's reference to Beethoven in the above figure is telling: he uses musical terminology ('scherzo in a quartet') as a framework through which to illustrate his poetic structure. Intermedia analogy as illustration: this is of course a common tendency in modernist study,[34] and the structuring around a musical 'quartet' brings Eliot to mind, and his recent *Four Quartets* (1942). It is still couched in structural relation, whereby Beethoven is transposed 'As position in words', which again recalls Austin and anticipates 'Dear Bryan Wynter': 'You will realise / What a position it [your death] puts / Me in.'[35] The allusion to music sets up an important distinction we may borrow from Roman Jakobson:

> Both visual and auditory perceptions obviously occur in space and time, but the spatial dimension takes priority for visual signs and the temporal one for auditory signs. A complex visual sign involves a series of simultaneous constituents, while a complex auditory sign consists, as a rule, of serial constituents[36]

Despite Jakobson's claims, Graham conceptualizes such simultaneity visually: the presiding emphasis of these illustrations is the shape of the poetry in space and 'as position', applying pressure to the space-time axis. In the 1949 notebook and later drafts for 'The Dark Dialogues', we see the conceptualization of a sequence in entirety – reflecting the sense of overall form and span discussed earlier. We can read the journeyman engineer in this and more draughtsman-like passages I will discuss in a later chapter. The 1949 notebook reveals a poet determining the very medium(s) he is to inhabit. That medium is lyric poetry stripped back to its formal relations: positions, prepositions, movements, all markers of space. Here it is in dialogue with music, and later it is in dialogue with visual abstraction, the interest in the intersection of mediums and their coordinates is constant.

---

[34] See, for example, Charles Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
[35] *New Collected Poems*, 258.
[36] Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 468. See Ming-Qian Ma, 'The Sound Shape of the Visual: Toward a Phenomenology of an Interface' in *The Sound of Poetry*, 266.

The written passages from the 1949 notebook published in and excerpted in the *Edinburgh Review* begin *in medias res*:

> Just as poetry can be thought of in a 'negative' way, so –
> More the creating is a creating of a stillness a
> solitude a silence upon IT forms itself. Impulse
> like electricity, crossing the space, leaves its signature.[37]

The negativity might belong to Keats. More likely is its relation to the negative charge in electricity, given the metaphor ('Impulse / like electricity') and his engineering training. The shape of this and other of Graham's verse-like paragraphs of theoretical propositions indicate how closely aligned his thinking about poetics and his published poetry were. The coordinates given by Graham are understood relationally and simultaneously ('a nonsilence *set on* silence – movement *through* stillness') but the categories themselves are fluid, semantics are collapsed into a family of sibilant terms for the 'negative': stillness, solitude, silence, space. There is a non-verbal grammar present but we are undoubtedly in a poetic space, a frame of imagining, of consecutive logic. Prepositions are established decisively but edge precariously toward utter abstraction. The provisional, at times contradictory, nature of Graham's propositions ('…it may be visited. *May* be visited / By?...'), indicate a practitioner who is attempting to find a new framework for poetic language, the vitality of which may nonetheless elude his faculties, or the faculties of descriptive language.

Though undoubtedly poetic, even some of the most obscure propositions in the notebook aspire to a graphic or mathematic framework. One formulation conceives of memory and self-consciousness as points configured in an impersonal spatial relation: 'The degree of consciousness *at point X* is the degree of purity / at which X relates to memory.'[38] Ideas are most 'pure' when understood in, or by, degrees. 'How can point X relate to memory (itself at point X) when, on the moment of relation they are destroyed to one consciousness', he asks. Prepositions underpin

[37] 'From a 1949 Notebook', 24.
[38] Ibid., 25.

propositions: coordinates are destroyed 'to', not 'by'. 'Can there be a relation[al] conscious at all', asks Graham in the same passage.[39] Any one consciousness has the power to destroy these precarious abstract relations between time and memory, which operate in an unreal realm. Contra lyric's conventional task – its intersubjective imperative – to raise consciousness or to merge consciousnesses, Graham wants to produce a formal suspension of that task so as to foster what he calls 'instant outside identity', where a 'movement like a sea of the memory' is pressed upon, 'continually being arrived upon', by something other than itself, something more various than any one subject.[40] This problem would find its most extensive exploration in 'The Nightfishing', a poem that continually arrives upon itself: 'This is the place', a place of – at times violent – paradox, change, estrangement, which nonetheless finds new forms of reflection and relation. This is a poet recalibrating lyric, though his most compelling critical account is yet to arrive – and in poetic form itself.

The 1949 notebook coincides with the year in which *The White Threshold* was published, which features the two early poems which most clearly anticipate his late style, 'The Hill of Intrusion' and 'Since All My Steps Taken' (first published in 1946 and 1945 respectively), along with 'Three Letters', which he recognised as 'a wee bit kinna mature',[41] anticipating the sophisticated letter poems which follow in *The Nightfishing* (1955). Michael Schmidt writes of the work of this period as follows:

> Present in this first volume of Graham's maturity are the qualities that bear fruit later: a colloquial, rugged diction, a penchant for monosyllables which seem to have an isolated verbal integrity for him, and an erratic but authoritative use of rhyme and slant rhyme. Most important, he begins to develop his own peculiar, evasive metres, whose presence we sense without being able to define.[42]

---

[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] *The Nightfisherman*, 87.
[42] Michael Schmidt, *An Introduction to 50 British Poets* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1979), 299.

The tension implied by Schmidt between 'erratic' and 'authoritative' is apt for a poet fixated upon paradoxes and hierarchical relations in form, regardless of how affronted Graham was by Schmidt's dismissal of much of his early (1940s) work in review when it first appeared.[43] Schmidt also raises a critical point: Graham's metres may not be defined along traditional metrical or prosodic lines. The definition for such 'evasive metres' may, I think Graham would suggest, reside in the self-designing metre itself (and one way to 'interpret' them may be to 'answer' them by inhabiting those metres in poetry).

'The ear the answer', the opening line of 'The Hill of Intrusion', embodies a kind of aural self-sufficiency.

> The winds from a hill
> Halfway Ben Narnain
> And halfway hill
> Of intrusion into
> The silence between
> My heart and those
> Elements of nature
> That are my food
> Sound out alarm
> Over the baling
> Prisoners of water
> This night unsheltered.[44]

The poem demonstrates a conventionally romantic notion – landscape impressed upon by experience, memorialised in verse – in a clipped and condensed manner. The result is a mnemonic talisman: reading and walking the poem animates memory, in terms of spaces and coordinates that are abstract and real, human and nonhuman. The poem, like the rivetting Greenock childhood, renders a framework of call and recall. (That spaces of containment may resemble carceral spaces and boundaries of human movement was a constant consideration of Graham's, which we will see

[43] 'I think you should have made use of your space in the TLS to show your thinking better. I know how I struggled up through my early poetry to gradually get better and clearer. It is not like that. I was disappointed you writing in the old cliché about me. […] Why speak like an advert?' Graham letter to Michael Schmidt, 1977, *The Nightfisherman*, 336.
[44] *New Collected Poems*, 64.

more urgently and pragmatically developed by Denise Riley, writing later in the same field of force as Graham.) There is both a successive and discretely contained quality to each of the lines above: 'Sound out alarm' works counter to the enjambed chain of association, though its condensed quality is continuous with the other lines, at once haltering and declarative. One has the sense that Graham has not yet established a flexible rhythmic frame as powerful as that used in 'The Dark Dialogues', that diction and rhythm are not yet fully reconciled with each other. For all its echoic shapes, the poem nonetheless resembles a list of phrases and associations.

The tight shape and to-fro rhythm of call and recall is more sure-footed in 'Since All My Steps Taken'.

> Since all my steps taken
> Are audience of my last
> With hobnail on Ben Narnain
> Or mind on the word's crest
> I'll walk the kyleside shingle
> With scarcely a hark back
> To the step dying from my heel
> Or the creak of the rucksack.
> All journey, since the first
> Step from my father and mother
> Towards the word's crest
> Or walking towards that other,
> The new step arrives out
> Of all my steps taken
> And out of to-day's light.
> Day long I've listened for,
> Like the cry of a rare bird
> Blown into life in the ear,
> The speech to that dead horde
> Since all my steps taken
> Are audience of my last
> With hobnail on Ben Narnain
> Or mind on the word's crest.[45]

[45] *New Collected Poems*, 59.

The circulatory nature of the lyric here and elsewhere in his oeuvre more generally has given critics the impression of a kind of material autonomy to the poem, a self-consciousness of language.[46] Calvin Bedient writes of this poem that 'the poet's steps listen to themselves', where 'even as the venturer resolves not to hark back, he yet does, perhaps must'.[47] For each intrepid stride out, there is one back, and simultaneously *in*, an amplification of the intrinsic movements of the verse.

The poem seems to both sound out (in terms of its refrain and echoes) and enact (in its literal evocation of walking familiar ground) a sense of déjà vu, as the speaker (re)treads his steps atop Ben Narnain. The plodding three beat pulse, interlinking rhymes and what Schmidt terms the fact that 'each line can be read as a distinct unit, imposing a strong discipline',[48] all give a sense of the methodical (or musical) act of walking (and thereby writing) in a rehearsed sequence which becomes self-fulfilling. The performance of these lines enacts the sense of a kind of muscle memory. Yet this format nonetheless allows the speaker a huge amount of range as he interlinks psychoanalytic development (from mother and father to other), the shifting terrain of Ben Narnain, the objecthood of language, and the 'dead horde' of former selves, linguistic and otherwise. Most crucially, each step out ultimately brings us closer in-to the text itself: topography is a question of typography. 'I'll walk the kyleside shingle / With scarcely a hark back' works almost as an aural chiasmus as the monosyllables and consonance appear at alternating positions – the kyleside shingle upon which memory is impressed is itself moving. A 'hark back' and 'ruck sack' are both compartmentalized units of what's behind us. Such alignments and paradoxes offset belonging and release, obstacle and vehicle. Graham will later come to expand and exceed the more straightforward echoes and alignments, along with the primacy of experience of the first-person speaker's view, in longer poems

46 Angela Leighton, *On Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 'This is a listening poetry, which hears its own contours as part of the story', 212.
47 Calvin Bedient, *Eight Contemporary Poets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 164.
48 Schmidt, 300.

like 'The Dark Dialogues' and 'The Nightfishing'. These later poems look and work beyond that 'crest' of imagining, inhabiting the same three-beat rhythm but nonetheless finding in it a greater flex and reach.

The subsequent collection *The Nightfishing* flexes and presses on the three-beat rhythm across the book: both at stages in 'The Nightfishing', and in the 'Seven Letters'. At points in both cases the rhythm slips into song with a grace and cadence unachieved by the earlier work. The 'Seven Letters' reformulates a set repertoire of trope and refrain that occurs across the poems. Lopez writes that 'Ideas and elements […] are inverted and rephrased […] in a new context and so meaning is […] a function of position', hinting at a spatial methodology similar to the one I have outlined more extensively here.[49] The poetry heavily employs repetition but its rhyme patterns are submerged. The result is a paradoxical sense of precision, impressionism and déjà vu. The poet uses the epistolary form as a lateral means of engaging with the constantly occurring nature of language, sex and sea. The intimacy of lyric address is used as a means of better 'knowing' these elements, and yet the pronouns and coordinates of the epistle collapse, become fluid, resisting propositional knowledge. One senses an intimacy forged both through a pronominal framework of 'I' to 'you', and in excess of it.

> Know me by the voice
> That speaks outside my choice
> And speaks our double breath
> Into this formal death.[50]

The high register ('this formal death') and Shakespearean or Yeatsian rhyme (breath/death)[51] belies the impulse to withdraw from the authoritarian, coercive implications of lyric into a kind of nameless, negative space. The poem emphatically attends to its own present tense, its position, its

[49] Lopez, *The Poetry of W. S. Graham*, 75.
[50] Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 132.
[51] Yeats rhymes 'breath' and 'death' in 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death', *Collected Poems*, 152.

intention ('my choice'), in order to move through them, into a new becoming, resisting the formal death and keeping the pulse continuous.

The poem crescendos thus:

> […] Endure
> Each word as it breaks at last
> To become our home here.
> Who hears us now? Suddenly
> In a stark flash the nerves
> Of language broke. The sea
> Cried out loud under the keel.
> Listen. Now as I fall.
>
> Listen. And silence even
> Has turned away. Listen.[52]

For 'silence even' to turn away is extreme in the context given how extensively Graham uses silence as a negative through which to determine shape. Hence the insistence for his speaker still to listen, to catch the event within the parameters of earshot. '**sil**ence ev**en**' contains most of the constituent parts of **listen**, embodying the cadence of that last couplet. 'Silence', 'distance' and 'listen' echo and presuppose each other, as stillness, solitude, silence, space do in the 1949 notebook. The semantic function of these words is obscured: their aural convergence – their figuration and intuitive form of space – takes precedence.

Another notebook, produced in 1958 and given to Bryan Wynter in 1973, indicates the extent to which Graham's formal verse shapes are conceived of as forms of spatial hierarchy (in comments I will return to across the thesis for their centrality to Graham's mature conception of verse):

> always 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 count, 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.[53]

---

[52] Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 140.
[53] *The Nightfisherman*, 162.

We notice the aforementioned voice ('Know me by your voice') is counteracted here, underpinned by a more integral structure. The verse is constituted of a fixed formal apparatus 'under'-pinning it all, and a more vital, fluid expression over the top. Perhaps a self-conscious sense of technique is to be located between these two points.

Graham reflects specifically on the process of writing the 'Letters' I-VII (composed 1950-53[54]) in this 1958 notebook, for which he 'attempted to live inside this three stress metre I have chosen' and its 'stricture'. He would pour out pages of verse, 'saying to myself that it didn't matter whether it was poetry or not. And, of course, most of it was not but, to some degree, it seemed to tap, at times, a kind of sensibility which I didn't know was in me.'[55] Such an outpouring affords the writer the option to err freely, as Graham did with his experiments with automatic writing and drawing,[56] but by offsetting it within a form – many successive three-beat lines – which engenders both a rolling enjambment, and tight, discrete constructions, both obstacle and vehicle. The 'shout and whimper' may imply a pre-semantic utterance, which, as Eric Powell states, 'doesn't depend on the differential phonological system of language', while still operating as speech in the form of address.[57] Graham's poetry always speaks 'out' to another, as well as 'about', or in the context of pre-semantics, 'without' the language.

The dualities – under/over, out/about – operate in 'The Dark Dialogues', which combines a framework of listening to the pacing and counting of steps in the early the work, together with the more unpredictable, serpentine energy and range of the 'Letters' and 'The Nightfishing'. Befittingly, the 'dark' dialogues bring a more probing, paranoid logic to the fore:

---

[54] See David Nowell Smith, 'W. S. Graham's Three Accent Line: "The Gradual Construction of a Timbre", Modern *Philology* 116, no.3 (February 2019), 237.
[55] *The Nightfisherman*, 161-62.
[56] See *The Nightfisherman*, 83. 'In spells of the poetry I've been trying some drawing. Only to help me see better. Some strange faces appeared.' See also Matthew Francis on Graham's automatic writing, in *Speaking Towards You*, 806-105.
[57] Eric Powell, 'W. S. Graham's Syntax' in *Chicago Review* 62:1/2/3, 80.

I stop and listen over
My shoulder and listen back
On language for that step
That seems to fall after
My own step in the dark.[58]

There is something of Beckett's Krapp here, the writer handling the knotted texture of his own self-description, its imperfect technology, but the dramatization of this happens for Graham at the level of aural shape in the poem's tight echo chamber; the poet pressing his ear to the contours of rhythm and echo.[59] The synesthesia of 'listen over / My shoulder' (a clichéform of 'look over') recalls 'the mind's ear' of Graham's construction to Wynter: evidence of Graham's interest in the axis between spatial and visual dimensions. There is both the occurrence and impression of cadence ('that ... fall after'), and deliberate ambiguity as to whether the echo belongs to him or is other ('that step … after / My own step'). Closely attending to one's utterance may produce the 'sound' of another step, or the idea of a sound, which may be the embodiment of a new purposiveness.

Silence is the backdrop against which Graham produced his work in the dead of night, as it is for Krapp, and against which the lyric feels the shape of its utterance. Among the references to modernists in the 1949 notebook we are too early to find traces of Beckett's work, but we do find the distinctly Beckettian notion of NONSILENCE.[60] 'NONSILENCE' is an amalgam like 'selfconscious', but with the prefix implying an adjacently negative, rather than antonymic, implication to 'silence'.[61] Like Beckett, particular silences may allude to historical traumas or instances of repression, but the emphasis is often on a voice disembodied in space, and the artifice of space. For Graham, these traumas may be Celtic, alluding to industrial exploitation, the Highland

58 'The Dark Dialogues' in *New Collected Poems*, 173.
59 *Krapp's Last Tape* was first staged in 1958, a year before 'The Dark Dialogues' first appeared in the *Botteghe Oscure* (vol, 23, Spring 1959).
60 Beckett's trilogy, which was to prove so important to Graham, was not published in English until 1955.
61 We know that Graham long admired Beckett's prose especially. See John Haffenden, "Interview: 'I Would Say I Was a Happy Man'," Poetry Review 76, no. 1/2 (1986), 69.

Clearances, or the repression of Irish Republicans (Graham had Irish ancestry), but the specifics are culled, leaving only a ghost of that implication.[62] There is evidence of instances in which Graham would cut out 'real world' reference to holocaust survival in a poem,[63] and a poem explicitly referring to the acts of the Black and Tans remained unpublished in his lifetime ('The Contemporary Dear').[64] As we will see, Graham's engagement with carceral space largely operates in the abstract.

In Graham's aesthetic realm, an important relation, or even intimacy, is nonetheless set up between 'silence' and 'nonsilence'. One can draw an overlap between the closeness of nonsilence, nonsense and (the subject of 'Malcolm Mooney's Land') Fridjof Nansen and that between stillness, solitude and silence discussed earlier.[65] The terminology forms a cadence in its attempt to feel its way towards a new form:

> Just as *poetry as a space* can be thought of in a 'negative' way […] a nonsilence set on silence – movement through stillness […]
>
> a silence of a certain shape. Therefore must be bounded (marked or charactered or textured) by 'nonsilence'. 'NONSILENCE' is better than 'SOUND' for it suggests the movement of the mind in selection, as it goes toward the confirming word 'sound'. The silence — A CONTRIBUTING SILENCE?[66]

---

[62] See Ian Duhig's ballad 'Glass Words' in *The Caught Habits of Language*: 'Graham's mother brought Irish ballads / over her white threshold / lamenting boys in a border war / that like them won't grow old', *The Caught Habits of Language*, 65.
[63] See Jeremy Noel-Tod, 'Yet More Shots of Mister Simpson' in *Chicago Review* 62:01/02, 2019, 128-36.
[64] *The Caught Habits of Language* (Bristol: Donut, 2018), 66. It's worth noting the formal engagement with 'silence' in modernist verse in Graham's time is yet to reflect powerfully real repressive silences in the world as immediately as it will in works by (for example) Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde in, to borrow the words of Dorothy J Wang, 'praxis-based critical argumentation'.

One unfortunate repression of Graham's, however unconscious, is the relative authorial silence of Nessie Dunsmuir by comparison – an original and distinct poet, she nonetheless published only ten poems in her life. It is difficult not to see this as a result of her material and emotional labour, not to mention the effects of their way of life on her health, to support Graham's dogged commitment to poetry. There is a sense that Graham's engagement with silence is protected: protected by his subject position, and contained within a realm of aesthetic play where the stakes are maintained as low.
[65] WN Herbert drew the chain between nonsilence/nonsense/Nansen to my attention in his article 'Seven Words for Sydney Graham', *Chicago Review* 62:1/2/3, 32.
[66] 'From a 1949 Notebook', 24.

The 'movement through stillness' may recall Eliot's Chinese Jar, and the counting steps of the early poems may recall the quartets' opening footfall.[67] Eliot was a poet for whom silence had weightier implications, because the logos transcends the (inevitable) reduction of any poetic (or, broadly speaking, linguistic) realisation, 'only silence can act as [its] figure', offering an alterity adjacent to the more theoretical, less mystical, absence underpinning Graham's lyric.[68] Negations like 'NONSILENCE' are integral to Eliot's quartets: 'Neither flesh nor fleshless […] neither rest nor movement […] Neither from nor towards […]',[69] just as they occur in later works by Graham, 'The poem is not a string of knots / Tied for a meaning of another time', the comparably lighter tone evidenced by the pun on 'knot'.[70] Both instances show a poet wishing to exceed the faculties and frame of their own language: forging a new construction out of that impasse. NONSILENCE also keeps in mind a pre-linguistic nothing from which the poem came, what it might have otherwise been, or a purposiveness in the language that the poet cannot claim or account for, only gesture to, feel for, negate towards.

The provisional movement *towards* may recall Stevens' 'Of Modern Poetry', which we might deem a proto modernist self-conscious poem. A NONSILENCE suggesting 'the movement of the mind in selection' no doubt recalling 'The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice', and picking up some of its cadence.[71] Calling to mind the exacting particulars of Beckett's stage directions offset with the dissolution of self that occurs through the performance within those strictures, we might find an analogue between Graham's mathematical positioning of lyric address which he then moves *through*. The poem or the play must determine a space very fully first if it is to

---

[67] Graham declared in an undated letter (estimated to date 1950) to Edwin Morgan 'I have been shaken up in the last three years by my study of Pound and Eliot, analysing the structure of their verse and form', *The Nightfisherman*, 118.
[68] Shira Wolosky, *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan* (Stanford, 1995), p. 31.
[69] T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber, 2001), 5
[70] W. S. Graham, 'Approaches to How They Behave', *NCP*, 181.
[71] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 219.

then reveal it to be porous – hence why we are always reminded of the framework of lyric in Graham's poetry, its address, apostrophe, its speaking towards. Recalling Francis's point in my introduction: rather than making Graham 'limited', we are reminded of the limits of lyrics in order for them to be effectively exceeded.

Graham bathes in these modernist influences, his working with and through their materials, reading their poetry as prompt, cue or framework through which to forge a new self-consciousness. (Pages from the notebook include references to both Stevens and Eliot, as I have indicated.) This identification with the practice of other modernist writers – he and Pound 'got on well and talked fairly technically' in New York in 1948 when Graham was teaching Joyce and Lawrence[72] – partly explains why the question as to whether Graham read Heidegger is a moot point: though he would have found agreement in elements of the text, he would not necessarily have found in Heidegger practical frameworks to disassemble, appropriate and develop.

His sounding out, the 'speaking between somehow the spaces', spaces he identifies between (for example) metre and the white threshold of an unexpected linebreak, offers its own theory as precipitated by this practice.[73] If the highly visual notebook does not offer a straightforwardly legible blueprint to make replicas of the finished poetry, it does offer a dynamic picture of Graham's radical sense of the foundations of poetic language – foundations that were forged against the silence and absence that haunts lyric. It is the practice of a poet speaking through the positions of words, the spaces between words, as much of the words themselves. In my next chapter we will see how 'nonsilence' finds a clearer definition in its visual dimension, as Graham's work begins to reflect the developments in painterly abstraction by his contemporaries in the St Ives group.

---

72 *The Nightfisherman*, 134.
73 *The Nightfisherman*, 169.

Chapter 2

Graham and the St Ives Artists: Self-Conscious Space

My previous chapter served to prove that Graham's conception of poetry was largely spatial, in part due to his apprenticeship at a young age as a journeyman engineer. This chapter serves to contextualise Graham in an artistic community of painters who, as Andrew Lanyon has said, 'spoke frequently of space', in and beyond the decade after WWII.[1] The artists preoccupied with space implied by Lanyon are the abstract-landscape painters associated with the St Ives group with whose work and life Graham's poetry is at key points explicitly engaged: Lanyon's father, Peter Lanyon, Bryan Wynter, and Roger Hilton. Beyond these, however, there are other Cornwall-based artists not addressed in Graham's work: Ben Nicholson, Naum Gabo, and Patrick Heron. But we should remember that before he arrived in Cornwall in 1943, Graham's work was already in explicit dialogue with the artists Robert Frame, Jankel Adler and others at Sandyford Place, Glasgow, a dialogue which was centred on constructing spaces of a geometric and conceptual quality. Indeed, as Frame reminds us, when Graham arrived in Glasgow he was still nominally working as an articled engineer, though he gave up soon after to become a full-time writer.[2]

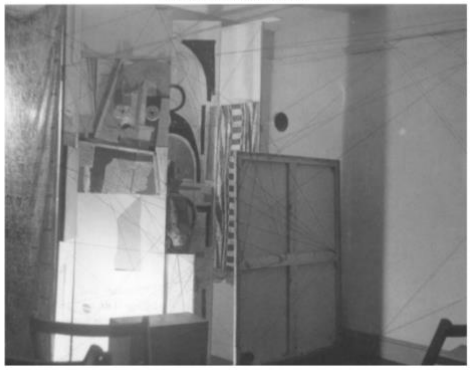
At first blush it is tempting to align Graham's habit of constructing installations for his live readings – like that for the Newlyn Gallery in 1960 pictured below – with the artist Peter Lanyon's sculptural pieces like *Construction for 'St Just'* (1952), which, as the title indicates, were experimental means towards paintings (like *St Just*, 1953). This would triangulate their respective practices with

1 Andrew Lanyon, *The Quick-Change Act* (Cornwall: Self-published, 1987), 79.
2 Frame, 'W. S. Graham at Sandyford Place', *Edinburgh Review* 75 (1987), 61.

Graham's 'The Thermal Stair' (1970), the poem for which he is perhaps most well-known, which elegises the Cornish painter Lanyon and 'the old / Tinworkings around / Morvah and St Just'.[3] However we are wise to bear in mind Alison Oldham's assertion 'that practices integral to Graham's poetry derive from his Glasgwegian rather than Cornish contacts'.[4] The synchrony is not as straightforward as it may seem, despite the substantial investment in existing critical accounts on Graham's relation to Lanyon, Hilton and other painters he met later in Cornwall.[5] Frame describes readings of the poetry of Blake, Rimbaud, Wilfred Owen and Eliot's *The Waste Land* organised by Graham in Glasgow in the early 1940s: 'An environment was improvised from piled-up chairs, screens from the [Glasgow Scott Street Arts] Centre and lengths of painter's canvas stretched into corridors like a kind of maze. The lighting was entirely by candlelight', the different voices acted out by different readers, and Bartok string quartets were played.[6] (Like Beethoven in the notebooks, music introduces a third category which we will see emerge in discussions of the interrelation of poetry and paint in Nicholson and Graham.) These anecdotal details furnish us with an understanding both that Graham's constructivist inclinations, and the dialogue between writing and other arts, was a constant fixture from the beginning of his career through to the major work in the following decades.

3 W. S. Graham, *New Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 2004), 164
4 Alison Oldham, *Everyone Was Working* (Tate St Ives, 1989), 28
5 See, for example, Peter Maber, '"The poet or painter steers his life to maim": W. S. Graham and the St Ives modernist school', *Word & Image*, 25:3, 258-271, or Ralph Pite, 'Abstract, Real and Particular: Graham and Painting', *Speaking Towards You*, 65-83.
6 Robert Frame, 'W. S. Graham at Sandyford Place', 64-5.

17. The installation constructed by W.S. Graham for his reading at Newlyn Art Gallery in 1960.



Installation constructed by W. S. Graham for his reading at Newlyn Art Gallery (1960)

The challenge to any account of the connection between verbal and plastic arts in Graham's work is to find an elastic enough critical framework or vocabulary to accommodate correspondences between Graham's poetry and the work of Lanyon and Cornwall as well as that of the Constructivists or figurative Neo-Romantic painters in Glasgow and London – a multi-local framework apt for addressing this various conceptual space. This chapter analogically foregrounds the constructive framework supplied by the work of Graham and Ben Nicholson, practitioners who both moved between verbal and visual mediums. In doing so, the interrelation of their work moves beyond mere analogy. It finds there, if not a new terminology, a space for a unique self-consciousness in art – one which profoundly impacts on Graham's practice of poetry.

Unfinished or unpublished – and in several cases only recently unearthed – Graham's manuscripts of poems for painters also broadens our sense of the traditional cast-list of artists addressed by Graham's poetry, who work across genres and mediums. Based on these discoveries, this expanded version includes Sven Berlin (discussed in my next chapter), Jeremy Le Grice, Alan Lowndes, Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde, all of whom, except the 'two Roberts', were

based for a time in Cornwall.[7] Other St Ives artists addressed or alluded to in already published poems, but rarely reflected on critically, include Tony O'Malley ('Master Cat and Master Me') and Alfred Wallis, with his poem about the latter commissioned by Berlin in 1945 for inclusion in his controversial biography of Wallis.[8] This mix of artists present a more complex and various tapestry for Graham's work than the backdrop to which we have perhaps been used to.

The kinds of space upon which Andrew Lanyon claims the artists discoursed were multiple: they included physical environments, such as the open space of rural Cornwall, as it was encountered by the largely non-native, privately-educated metropolitan elite of artists and writers who, like Wynter (but unlike Graham), supported their practice with private means, inherited or otherwise. Such spatial fever is parodied in Prufrockian fashion by 'The Thermal Stair': 'A woman stands with a drink / In some polite place / And looks at SARACINESCO / And turns to mention space' (*Saracinesco*, 1961, is a painting by Lanyon).[9] Implied also by Lanyon are broader political spaces which concerned artists at the time, like the space of a new post-war social order – touched on in the Constructivist publication *Circle*, and through Ben Nicholson's democratic claims in 1948 for abstraction as a 'universal language', which he claimed needed to be 'accessible and tolerant' in light of war.[10] In the more distant background, there was also a global preoccupation with the space race. Michael and Margert Snow write that '[Graham's] family upbringing and the evidence of working-class poverty had impressed on him the need for greater social justice but he appears to have had little confidence in political parties and theorists as agents of change'.[11] He shared with

---

7 Such materials include, 'The Song of the Tower' for Sven Berlin, National Library of Scotland, MS 26020; 'Mr Le Grice's Portrait Class', W. S. Graham fonds, University of Victoria Special Collections, File 93.
8 Sven Berlin, *Alfred Wallis: Primitive* (London: Poetry London/Nicholson & Watson, 1949), 13; poem first published in *Life and Letters*, vol. 48, no. 103, March 1946.
9 *New Collected Poems*, 165.
10 Ben Nicholson, 'Notes on "Abstract" Art' in *Paintings Reliefs Drawings Vol 1* (London: Lund Humphries, 1948, revised 1955), 27. Nicholson quoted 1944 'Ben Nicholson: A Continuous Line' <http://www2.tate.org.uk/bennicholson/chronology.shtm>
11 *The Nightfisherman*, 7.

artists like Nicholson the essential grain of their politics, including its formalism, if not the ideology itself.

1956 saw the exhibition at the Tate Gallery, 'Modern Art in the United States', which offered the first physical encounter with USA abstract expressionism for several of the artists I am concerned with here. Patrick Heron was greatly stirred by this show, as evidenced by his review, 'The Americans at Tate Gallery'.[12] As both critic and painter, Heron was particularly adept at commentating on conceptual developments in abstract art in verbal terms, and he helps us historicise these developments. He would claim in 'Space in Painting and Architecture' that 'space is "the medium"' [13] and that as practitioner he is as occupied by the 'spaces between his represented objects' as much as 'the sculptural form of those objects themselves', invoking structuralist equivalences.[14] Heron also produced the exhibition *Space in Colour* at the Hanover Gallery, London in 1953, to which he contributed as one of seven artists. The title was reversed for Heron's much later survey, *Colour in Space*, at Tate St Ives in 1999. His earlier *Space in Colour* took place three years before his permanent move to Eagles Nest in 1956, a large house on the exposed hillside of Zennor (six miles along the coastal path from St Ives), its exotic garden planted with camellias and azaleas, beyond which lay a steep drop of rock down to a wild Atlantic. It was 'a landscape which has altered my life', Heron recorded, where 'the very air […] "contains more light than in England"', confirming a commonly held belief about the St Ives landscape.[15] Barbara Hepworth claims she came to Cornwall for a 'particular quality of abstract light'.[16] Clement Greenberg's notion of medium-specificity was certainly in the air by the late 1950s, as Heron et al sought the deconstruction of

---

12 '[The painters'] creative emptiness represented a radical discovery, I felt, as did their flatness, or rather, their spatial shallowness. I was fascinated by their 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.' Patrick Heron, 'The Americans at the Tate Gallery', in *Painter as Critic* (London: Tate Publishing, 1998), 102.
13 Patrick Heron, 'Space in Painting and Architecture' in *Painter as Critic*, 73.
14 Patrick Heron, 'Space in Colour' in *The Painter as Critic* ed. by Mel Gooding (Tate, 1998) 86.
15 Patrick Heron quoted in Mel Gooding, *Patrick Heron* (London: Phaidon, 1995), 118, 126.
16 'Why Cornwall?', *Monitor*, 1958, BBC Archive.

recessional space which had been heralded most noisily by Abstract Expressionism in the USA, but also with precedents in European surrealism, cubism, *tachisme* and Constructivism. Greenberg himself came to visit St Ives in the 1950s, with Heron acting as his tour guide of the area in August 1954, and again five years later.[17]

My particular interest in Graham's dialogue with Nicholson here, and with Berlin in the next chapter, aims to evidence the visual emphasis which underpinned Graham's practice in the important early phase between the obdurately dense and symbolic early work and the breakthrough *The White Threshold* (1949), his first book published by Eliot via Faber and Faber, and the late 1950s in which Heron and other painters migrated to Cornwall. Though Graham arrived in Cornwall in '43 and connected with Nicholson soon after arriving, in 1949 he moved to London for a significant period and would not return to Cornwall until 1956. This may be the reason why Graham is more commonly examined in the light of the later St Ives artists, when they were in close proximity for a sustained period, rather than with Nicholson. 1956 represents a particular spike of artistic activity: it was not only the year Graham returned to Cornwall where he would stay for the rest of his life and the year Heron moved permanently to Eagles Nest, but where Hilton spent Christmas 1956, sewing the seed for his own move to the South West in 1965. It is in the late 1950s that the most substantial transformation into abstraction in these different St Ives painters occurs. 1956-7, particularly, is a clear stylistic turning point into non-representative painterly modes for Heron, Wynter and Hilton. This involved a radical reconfiguration of space, as Gooding says of Heron: 'it can be felt in the greater openness of his composition from 1957 on – a more atmospheric or aerial, or aquatic, pictorial space, a kind of weather'.[18] And yet, nearly all of the key 1950s works by Graham which forge the kind of sophisticated self-consciousness taken up in this thesis – 'The Nightfishing', 'The

[17] See account of the second visit in Michael Bird, *The St Ives Artists* (London: Lund Humphries, 2008), 137.
[18] For a practice-based exploration of formal openness using the nomenclature of weather, see 'Cloud Study' in the creative component to this thesis. Gooding, *Patrick Heron* (Phaidon, 1993), 14 (See Oldham, *Everyone Was Working*, 69).

Dark Dialogues', 'The Dark Intention' – were either completed or begun before that threshold moment for the three artists. This means that either Graham's development was uncannily close in its alignment with theirs, or, more likely, that his spatial abstraction precedes theirs. The former is particularly unlikely when we consider the earlier 1940s conceptual terrain of Cornwall which led to Graham's settlement and resettlement in the county in the first phase of his career leading up to 1949, and the formulation of his writerly identity from that remote place, before he met these artists. Many early-career writers who shared Graham's ambitions may have chosen to work from a metropolis with a visible literary culture – but though St Ives had longstanding connections to the visual arts it did not with modernist poetry.[19] Cornwall had a unique appeal in this first phase, which led him to declare to Sven Berlin in 1949: 'In the last 1/2 year I find myself waking up more towards painting and, in fact, more awake visually, generally.'[20] This 'waking up more towards painting' is an important dimension of Graham's poetic transformation in the period we are concerned with here.

Though the painterly tryptic of Wynter, Hilton and Lanyon remains the most salient presence in critical studies of Graham, Graham's multi-form conception of the verbal and visual in art was itself multi-formed: to focus on these artists working in painterly abstraction – rather than, say, abstract sculpture or figurative neo-romanticism – is only to give part of the story. Though this space was also an elective imaginary space, it was nonetheless bitterly contested within various exhibiting groups centred around the Penwith Society, the Crypt group and others. This is evidenced by Sven Berlin's *The Dark Monarch*, an at times puerile score-settler of local politics in which Graham appears as the tub-thumping 'Jamie Greenock' and Lanyon as David Quoit ('Find me a thermal to

---

19 Graham lived at Germoe 1943-47, Mevagissey 1946-47 and 1948-49, with a spell lecturing at NYU in 1948. Robert Frame claims that Graham's early poems were influenced by D. H. Lawrence ('W. S. Graham at Sandyford Place', 61). It's possible that Graham knew that Lawrence had lived in Zennor during WWI, where he was visited by Katherine Mansfield. *To the Lighthouse* (1927) transposed elements of St Ives to Scotland – and in doing so differs from Graham's uniquely explicit immersion in landscape and the language of both the South West and Clydeside, Glasgow simultaneously.

20 *The Nightfisherman*, 85.

speak and soar to you from / Over Lanyon Quoit' – 'The Thermal Stair').[21] Graham's work, though situated within that scene (as evidenced by some of the occasional works discussed in my next chapter), remains avowedly lyric in its commitment to fostering intimacy by address to or through a subject, and not in chronicling the larger community of St Ives. It offers what he calls 'a public place / Achieved against subjective odds' ('The Constructed Space').[22] His is an intimacy with individual living and dead artists, between subject and language, or what Ralph Pite, drawing on compelling phrases of 'The Dark Dialogues', calls 'a loving intimacy between the subject and the "something other than itself" for which it searches'.[23] The words could be Graham's, recalling the 'instant outside identity', from the 1949 notebook, where a 'movement like a sea of the memory' is pressed upon, 'continually being arrived upon' by something other than itself.[24]

As a contemporaneous poet among painters, it is tempting to see Graham as the Frank O'Hara of the Land's End Peninsular in the 1950s. Both poetries were developed in dialogue with new forms of abstraction in art and writing on their respective sides of the Atlantic, which Patrick Heron, keen to put St Ives on the international map (and market), called the 'St Ives/New York axis'.[25] Where O'Hara was a critic and prominent curator of art as well as poet, Graham's work has also been read as 'a kind of latent art criticism, interiorizing the problematics of his contemporaries' painting into verse', given he read and enjoyed Gertrude Stein's *Picasso* in 1944[26] – despite the fact

---

21 *The Dark Monarch* published 1962, swiftly recalled and pulped due to libel action, and republished in 2009. '…Jamie Greenock was reciting the *Song of Amergin* loudly, but no one was taking any notice of him'. *The Dark Monarch* (Stevenage, Herts: FinPubs, 2009), 103.
103.

22 *New Collected Poems*, 162.

23 Ralph Pite, 'Abstract, Real and Particular: Graham and Painting,' in *W. S. Graham: Speaking Towards You*, ed. Ralph Pite and Hester Jones (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 78.

24 'From a 1949 Notebook', 25.

25 For accounts of this see Michael Bird, *The St Ives Artists*, 137, and Andy Morris 'The cultural geographies of Abstract Expressionism: painters, critics, dealers and the production of an Atlantic art', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 6:3 (2005), 421-437

26 This is Nowell Smith's summary of the position of W. N. Herbert and other unnamed critics in Nowell Smith, 'Poetry's Plastic Medium: The Example of W. S. Graham', *Modernism/Modernity* Aug 19, 2018, Volume 3, Cycle 2 <https://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0061>. 'I've read Stein's Picasso. I liked it very much.' *The Nightfisherman*, 17.

that, unlike O'Hara or Barbara Guest, he did not write art criticism. Both O'Hara and Graham employ the unreachable telephone as emblem for their post-modern lyric. O'Hara cannot communicate 'Because you have / no telephone and live so / far away'; Graham 'heard the telephone ringing deep / Down in a blue crevasse. I did not answer it and could / Hardly bear to pass' ('Malcolm Mooney's Land').[27] Yet Graham's work does not have the frenetic sociability of O'Hara's roaming poetic 'I': where O'Hara was never far from technology, Graham's inhabitation of a 'telephoneless cottage in the wilds of Cornwall' led to what Edwin Morgan called a 'lone star state'.[28] It is telling that much of Graham's work is made of up nocturnes, whereas O'Hara's – as exemplified by his *Lunch Poems* – tended to occur in the day.[29] (Indeed it is telling that the situation in which O'Hara finds his interlocutor to be telephoneless is a 'Nocturne'.) Night was a space in which Graham quarried for the 'something other than itself', as we will see in 'The Nightfishing', 'The Dark Intention' and 'The Dark Dialogues', it was his way of confronting his medium in its crude element – and visual space when it was at its most occluded.

Though I read Peter Riley's claim that 'there always has to be a piece on Graham and the St Ives painters' in any substantial study of his poetry as slightly begrudging, I would argue that in order to fully realise Graham's spatial self-consciousness, we must attend to the visual axis against which it was forged.[30] David Nowell Smith summarizes accounts of Graham and St Ives by Neil Corcoran, Ralph Pite, Peter Maber and W. N. Herbert by declaring 'It has been a commonplace in criticism to attempt to propose a strong analogy between Graham's aesthetic development, and the work of the

---

[27] 'Nocturne', *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 225. See O'Hara's 'Personism: A Manifesto' ('That's part of personism. It was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond). I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born'), 499.

[28] Edwin Morgan, 'The Poetry of W. S. Graham', in *Speaking Towards You*, ed. by Ralph Pite and Hester Jones (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 190.

[29] *Voice and Vision; the Poetry and Art of W.S. Graham* at the Pier Arts Centre 2018, curated by David Nowell Smith, was originally entitled *Poet Among Painters*, the namesake of Marjorie Perloff's 1977 study of Frank O'Hara.

[30] Peter Riley, 'Taking Graham Seriously (2)', *PN Review* 159, Volume 31 Number 1, September - October 2004.

painters he was close to'.[31] These critics see the poetry as reflective of transformations from figuration to abstraction which happened in the paintings of the time, or as using the similar techniques in verbal terms. Tony Lopez briefly touches on a similar analogue when he claims that Hepworth's idea of a work that breaks the subject-object relation of the artist to the world is paralleled in Graham's portrayal of a fragmented self, constituted through experience'. This offers a compelling analogy which he develops no further.[32] The reference to Hepworth, part of the initial influx of artists during wartime with Ben Nicholson, is unusual – many critics understandably focussing their attentions on artists named in the poems and letters. Alison Oldham offers a short historical account of the St Ives group and more peripheral figures in *Everyone was Working*, helpfully amassing key anecdotal details of Graham's compositional practice as it intersects with the visual artists.[33] Yet Oldham reads Graham's '[modernist] traits as echoing rather than deriving from developments in the visual arts', taking Graham's limited identification with Joyce, Eliot and Beckett, and his reluctance to identify with practices of his modernist painter friends, at his word.[34] She suggests that Graham 'looked for common elements in the two fields [art and writing], not that he emulated trends in visual art in his poetry'.[35] But as the 'common elements' were at the time being redefined in conversation between mediums, is it not surely plausible that he both looked for common ground and emulated what he found there? That artists and poet shared both an elective imaginary space and invented new techniques through which to realise that space?

Nowell Smith, under the influence of Charles Altieri's *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry*, argues that Graham interiorizes the artists' concerns in terms of his own verbal medium, and that this involves what he calls a 'metonymic slippage' which is productive. 'What

31 Nowell Smith, 'Poetry's Plastic Medium'.
32 Lopez, *The Poetry of W. S. Graham*, 9.
33 Oldham, *Everyone was Working* (Tate St Ives, 1989).
34 Ibid., 33.
35 Ibid., 43.

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.'[36] The first argument could be made of Victorian aestheticist verse by D. G. Rossetti and others, but the second roots the phenomenon historically within modernism: Greenberg's notion of medium-specificity, and a broader Greenbergian conception of modernist art as inherently self-critical, 'the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticise the discipline itself'.[37] Such discipline is manifested by the 'deliberate circumscribing and limiting of [the flat surface]' in painting.[38] It is echoed by Oldham in her account of Heron as 'the process of reduction of a cultural form to its basic, defining characteristics', indicating how pervasive Greenberg's work was at the time for Heron.[39] Greenberg's formulation, however, does not seem to accommodate a specific medium which is 'at once verbal and plastic', given that the abstract artist is 'purist' who 'insists upon excluding "literature" and subject matter from plastic arts'.[40]

One persuasive approach to this conceptual limitation is a recent account by Natalie Ferris which finds in Graham's poems a Paul Kleeian act of compositional discovery inhering within the materiality of both image- and poetry making. This also dates the visual influence of the work to the 1940s. Ferris links 'the sea [which] was rushing more purposefully into his writing' (c. 1949) and [t]he 'free associative mode [of automatic writing in Joycean puns which] fed his graphic ingenuity'.[41] Ferris's reference to Graham's immersive 'graphic ingenuity' highlights his indiscriminate immersion in the crude materials of image and word-making. His 'working wall' at home could include a

---

[36] Nowell Smith, 'Poetry's Plastic Medium'.
[37] Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' (1960), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. by John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85.
[38] Ibid., 92
[39] Oldham, *Everyone was working*, 32.
[40] Greenberg, 'Towards a New Laocoon' (1940), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944* ed. by John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 23.
[41] Natalie Ferris, '"Water water wish you well": The Liquid Tracings of W. S. Graham' in *Try To Be Better*, ed. by Sam Buchan-Watts and Lavinia Singer (London: Prototype, 2019), 35.

montage of working drafts on cartridge paper, illustrations cut from books, worked-on cardboard, driftwood or glass, perhaps influenced by Alfred Wallis's similar working practice.[42] Ferris's emphasis on composition foregrounds the twist of conscious and unconscious factors that are at play in such a process, along with an environment which encroaches materially on the work. By privileging process rather than product or reception, a space is afforded in which the artist can err freely without category or determined endpoint, a freedom the notebook affords particularly. Such an account also steers clear of any dichotomy between figuration and abstraction or non-representational modes, as criticism of Graham has been prone to. The poet fosters a space in which he may be critically unself-conscious and invulnerable, if only momentarily. Similarly, Lavinia Singer identifies the multifarious 'vibrant material context' of the work and the strongly visual inclinations of the poet – factors which the constraints of the published product inevitably do not always reflect.[43] An essential part of that visual and material context are Graham's characteristic and wily portraits often accompanied by the catchphrase 'Try To Be Better' ('TTBB'), which occur across the notebooks and letters and render a sense of companionableness and puckish intimacy, extending the invulnerability and play and blurring the line between visual and verbal.

Graham was fond of Paul Klee's notebooks, and his engagement with the artist goes as far back at least to 1942, when he helped his friend the artist Jankel Adler translate the latter's article on Klee for *Horizon* that year.[44] Though there is a clear case for the extent to which Graham picked up art or philosophical theory via the dynamic stream and conversation of artists in St Ives, this is one instance where Graham himself may have acted as the source of such material for his artist friends.

---

[42] See Michael and Margaret Snow's comments on Graham's working practice, *The Nightfisherman: Selected Letters*, 150-151.
[43] Lavinia Singer, 'Significant Shapes: W. S. Graham's Painting Poems' in *Chicago Review* 62:1/2, 60. As Singer notes, Graham said of the typesetting of *Implements in their Places* (1977), 'The look of it on the page offends the eye aesthetically' (*The Nightfisherman*, 323). Clearly a visually conceptual element has been lost in the production.
[44] See *The Nightfisherman*, 9.

He makes two references to Klee in the published letters, both in Mevagissey, Cornwall, 1949. First, when reflecting on Mozart ('no. 5 in A'), he claims that

> The violinist in this is so very exact and 'clean' in his playing. He makes almost a visual line in the air – I think of Klee's phrase – 'taking a line for a walk', of course about drawing. Christ! what a literary letter [this is] – not meant – it's the music makes me reflective.[45]

Graham's triangulating of mediums – drawing together art, playing music, writing a letter – is done via the notion of measure, in keeping with Klee's claim in *On Modern Art* that 'line is […] solely a matter of simple Measure'.[46] This is achieved self-consciously by acknowledging literariness, which also reminds us of the primacy of literature in Graham's conceptualistion of art. In a letter to Sven Berlin in 1949 which discusses the latter's book on Wallis, he refers to 'the intellectual texture which I came across in some passages from his [Klee's] notebooks somewhere'.[47] Klee's *Pedagogical Sketchbook* was not translated into English until 1953, but *On Modern Art* was published by Faber with an introduction by Herbert Read in 1948, coinciding with the period of the aforementioned letters. It offers a vivid account of Klee's ideas of form and the elements of composition, recognizing 'those elements of the works of the creative process which, during the growth of a work of art, take place in the subconscious' – evoking the overlap between surrealism and psychoanalysis, and the extent to which mysterious visual transformations may yet be newly exposed in verbal analysis.[48] This recalls NONSILENCE as suggesting 'the movement of the mind in selection'. We will come to see such an 'intellectual texture', which reflects both precise elements of constructions and the unconscious, allegorized in 'The Dark Intention', in a compositional practice we might call pedagogical.[49]

---

[45] *The Nightfisherman*, 78.
[46] Paul Klee, *On Modern Art* (London: Faber, 1944), 21.
[47] *The Nightfisherman*, 83.
[48] *On Modern Art*, 9.
[49] Like his colleague Klee, Kandinsky was interested in the grammar of their work's construction, and in its didactic quality. For an account of Graham's unpublished extract discussing Kandinsky's 'ribbons', see Lavinia Singer, 'Significant Shapes', 61-62.

The 1949 notebook, discussed in my first chapter, indicates how visual Graham's conception of poetry was from early on in his career, developed through close correspondence with Sven Berlin. This suggests that the influence of Hilton et al in the 50s and 60s upon the abstractions of Graham's work may have been overstated. My claim is further supported by the references to Wallace Stevens's 'Supreme Fiction' in the same notebook, and especially 'It Must Be Abstract'.[50] Wallace Stevens is a poet who, in 'Poetry and Painting' (delivered at MoMA in 1951), foregrounds the 'constructive faculty' over sensibility in the composition of the poem, arguing that this constructive faculty is imaginative.[51] We might find an analogue in Graham's rendering of a particular self-consciousness through the constructive faculty – both result in a poetry which considers its own construction as pivotal to its meaning. And in a culture and a language which necessarily privileges context and finished product, such a poetry reads as abstract (though Steven's best nonsense poems offers us something of an alternative culture). Graham teases at the limits of such a poetry in a recently unearthed draft, 'WALLACE STEVENS IN GREENOCK': 'Do not over-philosfy [sic] yourself', he warns Stevens.[52] But the jovial poem, in loose tetrameter couplets, is less a critique of discursive abstraction than a charge against Stevens' career as a pencil-pushing 'insurance man' in contradistinction to the rugged material conditions of Clydeside, where Graham trained as an engineer: 'Remember this is the loud Clyde-firth at night / Deafened by rivet, dazzled by morning light.' Here 'construction' is re-configured in terms of Scottish industrial production, and Graham's training as an engineer. The draft is not dated, but the construction of the second quoted line closely resembles 'Listen. Put on morning. / Waken into falling light' ('Listen. Put On Morning') from *The White Threshold*, first published in 1947.[53] The relaxed prosody corresponds with the conversational

50 'From a 1949 Notebook' in *Edinburgh Review* 75, 32.
51 Wallace Stevens, 'On the relation of poetry to painting' in *The Necessary Angel* (London: Faber, 1984), 164.
52 'WALLACE STEVENS IN GREENOCK', undated typescript draft, W. S. Graham Estate archive.
53 *New Collected Poems*, 59.

tone, and it is without the condensed quality of finished works from this period: the draft embodies a lyric intimacy not yet meant for the wider world. And so for all the St Ives artists' talking about space in the late 50s and 60s, Graham was in fact already a 'spatial', abstract poet, and a poet whose work – however indirectly – is in earshot of painting, via Stevens's paint-inflected poetics. Indeed, Robert Frame, who illustrated *Cage Without Grievance* (1942), suggests that Graham was not only technically-minded but a fully-fledged constructivist before he moved to Cornwall for the first time, evidenced in his habit of compiling of long lists of words, from which he made the poem in the house they shared at Sandyford Place, Glasgow, 1942:

> 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.[54]

Frame here echoes Graham's words from 'Notes on a Poetry of Release' (1946) about 'the labourer carrying the bricks of his time and on the scaffolding of an unknown construction'.[55] Rivets – like the 'bricks' here - precede ideas of abstraction: both in the poet's life, and the life of the poem. A constructivist practice is notable throughout his life, as the composition method of 'The Dark Dialogues' worksheets attests, taken up in the fourth chapter here. Nowell Smith writes that Frame's larger account 'places Graham at the crux of two competing artistic movements (and […] competing impulses in his verse): surrealism and constructivism'.[56] It is not surprising that Graham's poetry is so often used as a site upon which to think through such cruxes between figuration and abstraction, or abstraction and construction, given that his is a poetics of paradoxical or dialectic relations, and

---

[54] Robert Frame, 'W. S. Graham at Sandyford Place', *Edinburgh Review* 75, 62.
[55] *The Nightfisherman*, 381.
[56] Nowell Smith, 'Poetry's Plastic Medium'.

that it also takes equally from stylistic categories of visual art which are often held in opposition – particularly at that time.

Much has been made of the convergences in the thinking of Graham and the artists discussed, but how, we might ask, did he conceive of that connection? At the end of his life, Graham declared in a brusque letter to Tony Lopez, who was then gathering material for the first PhD on Graham:

> 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)'[57]

This indicates the poet's wariness about category and school, which is not surprising for a writer at the end of his life who is given the option of shaping his legacy in this small way. We should bear in mind his then literary executor Michael Snow's claim that 'Graham was not a "joiner" of groups, social, literary or political'.[58] The passage also does not, however, reflect on his relationships with individual painters, personal relationships which underpinned his essential conception of embodied form. To John Haffenden a few years later, he claimed, 'Poets are awful people, filled with jealousy. A painter is somehow more attractive to me; he's more physically involved in his work; which usually produces a more balanced person.'[59]

---

[57] WSG, Letter to Tony Lopez, 30 March 1981, *The Nightfisherman*, 366.
[58] *The Nightfisherman*, xiv.
[59] John Haffenden, "Interview: 'I Would Say I Was a Happy Man'," *Poetry Review* 76, no. 1/2 (1986), 73.

Graham at work in the coastguard hut: Stills from 'Why Cornwall?', 1958

Recently unearthed footage from a BBC Monitor segment, *Why Cornwall?*, aired in September 1958, shows Graham at his desk working through the night by candlelight beside a sleeping Nessie, worksheets in the distinctive calligraphic script pinned to boards, hands thick with ink – performatively 'maimed for the job'.[60] The decorated room and the very format of the documentary are revealed to be constructed spaces, as Graham performatively writes out and speaks his responses to the question, 'Why Cornwall?'. The documentary also features Hepworth, Lanyon, Wynter, Lionel Miskin and William Redgrave, and the Penwith Society.

Graham puckishly addresses himself in the footage:

> You ask me why Cornwall?' […] So far away from your home. Maybe I have come here partly because there are others, mostly painters, as it happens, not far away. I mean other people, living in Cornwall, also concerned with something difficult or if you like not

60 Graham, '[From Dark Dialogues' [drafts]], *New Collected Poems*, 324; this phrase is a variation of 'The poet or painter steers his life to maim / Himself somehow for the job', 'The Thermal Stair'.

> understood by the people working around them.[61]

This may be interpreted as in opposition to the later comments to Lopez, but an element of the provisional binds them both ('searching in my work I don't think'; 'Maybe I have come here partly because there are others'). In other words, Graham's ideas about painterly constructions of *space* are implicitly linked to *place*, and a place he shares with a number of artists equally interested in space, not to mention native working classes. For his initial 1940s phase, he may have come to Cornwall for Ben Nicholson, or what Nicholson and his community represented, but whether or not he had a sense of their remote, provincial but international outpost of a distinct British-European modernism before arriving in Cornwall with his then girlfriend Mary Harris is not clear. He later reflected when asked about his early influences in Cornwall in *The Cornishman* in 1970:

> This was about 1944-7, and I found it very stimulating to meet painters like Ben Nicholson, Johnny Wells, Bryan Wynter, Sven Berlin, Bill Redgrave, Terry Frost, [Naum] Gabo, Denis Mitchell and later, Alan Lowndes[62]

When Graham first arrived in Cornwall in 1943 he wrote to introduce himself to Nicholson, with a mix of lonely desperation and the canniness to get himself acquainted with the local artistic celebrity.

> Dear Sir,
> I'm living here near Praa Sands in a caravan a friend's lent me. I've been here three months and I would like to talk to someone. I'm quite alone here. Could I please visit you. I'm interested in poetry. Parton Press published my first book about a year ago. If it's all right will you let me know when to come. I can ride over on my bike.
> Yours sincerely, W S Graham[63]

This is the only available evidence of correspondence of Graham to Nicholson, unlike the rich well of material, poetic and epistolary, we have connecting Graham to Wynter, Hilton, Lanyon and Berlin. It is nonetheless a compelling account of how Graham sought proximity to Nicholson.

---

61 W.S. Graham in 'Why Cornwall?', *Monitor*, 14 September 1958, BBC Archive. Screened and presented by Sam Buchan-Watts and Lavinia Singer with permission from BBC for 'Film for Friday' at Tate St Ives 29 March 2019.
62 Graham quoted in *Everyone was Working*, 32.
63 *The Nightfisherman*, 16.

In the introduction to *The Constructed Space* exhibition in Ilkley, 1994, which displayed a set of original works celebrating Graham, curator Chris Stephens refers to a comment of Nicholson's to Herbert Read in 1944 following their meeting(s). Nicholson claimed that '[Graham's] method of working at his writing seems like my method of working at my painting', an instructive but tantalizing kinship, hinging on a convergence about method and process itself. [64] The two swapped books: Nicholson lent Graham *Introduction to Modern Art* by Hartley Ramsden, and Graham lent Nicholson a volume of poems of surrealist British poet David Gascoyne, further embodying the exchange of verbal and visual frameworks that we come to see embodied in their works.[65] Peter Maber surmises the methodological correspondence as follows: 'In Nicholson's case it was beginning with a single color or a shape. From the first Graham worked as a visual artist might, plastering his walls with these groupings which could then be rearranged.' This is true as far as it goes, but the correspondence operates at a deeper formal and conceptual level, as I hope to show.[66]

It is possible that through Nicholson, Graham met the compelling Naum Gabo, who he cites as an influence in his initial Cornwall phase above. Herbert Read writes that the group of avant-garde artists in Moscow which included Gabo – whose poetics the exiled Gabo exported to West Cornwall – figured that 'the new medium was to be not paint, but rather steel; the new method not composition on a plane surface, but rather construction in space'.[67] Such an art, stripped back to an essential, conceptual formalism, takes on a propositional quality; its abstraction acting as a provocation to originate new work and thinking from the crude materials and shapes manipulated so beautifully by Gabo. The undetermined conceptual frame engendered by Gabo's sculptures, as with

---

[64] Quoted in Chris Stephens, 'Introduction' to *The Constructed Space* exhibition catalogue (Ilkley, 1994), in *The Nightfisherman*, 33.
[65] See *The Nightfisherman*, n.2, 71.
[66] Peter Maber, '"The poet or painter steers his life to maim': W. S. Graham and the St Ives modernist school," Word and Image 25, no. 3 (2009): 259.
[67] Herbert Read, 'Constructivism: The Art of Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner' in *Gabo-Pevsner*, ed. by Ruth Olsen and Abraham Chanin (New York: MoMA, 1948), 8.

Carving and Construction in Space (1947), is in opposition to the overly determined metaphysics of the state-sanctioned early twentieth century naturalist-representational medium in Russia. Abstract space begets further abstraction, as Michael Bird writes, '[Peter] Lanyon called himself "a disciple of Gabo", but he was determined to go well beyond his master in developing a "really dynamic approach aiming to construct out of a process of abstraction"…'[68] Such a work is democratising not only in rendering a new creative and theoretical space, but offering successors like Lanyon points of departure.

Nicholson, a close friend of Gabo's, works to a degree between the cool geometrics of Gabo and the intuitive dynamism of Peter Lanyon. Bird writes that 'Whereas Nicholson designed his white reliefs with a painter's eye, constructionist artists enlisted precise measurement, mathematical ratios and geometric relationships in the production of three-dimensional art works'.[69] Yet Nicholson's reliefs retain the illusion of mathematical ratio, given that the geometric relationships inhere in the reliefs' sense of proportion: the meaning of these artworks is in the relation of circle, rectangle, rhomboid, it does not rest on the discrete objects themselves. We might recall Graham's comments in 1946 to Montgomerie: 'I construct my lines so that each line is justified and (in relation) floated by definitely some activity.'[70] The configuration of parts and straight lines in the Nicholson relief – and the Graham poem – makes them float.

---

[68] Michael Bird, *The St Ives Artists*, 77.
[69] Ibid., 105.
[70] *The Nightfisherman*, 21.

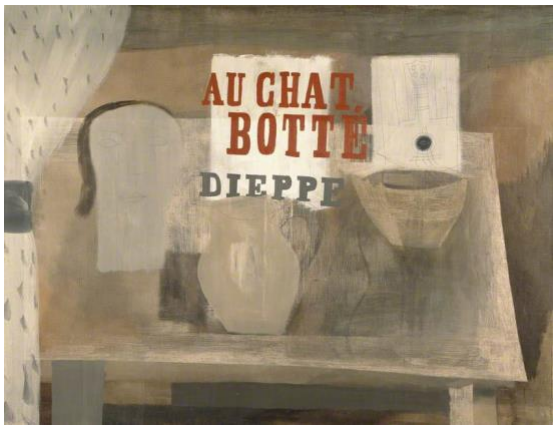
Ben Nicholson, *1935 (white relief)*, painted wood, Tate

Graham wrote to Roger Hilton in 1966: '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.'[71] This is one of multiple instances where Graham reaches out to the artists personally and poetically, to inhabit, for a moment, their way of seeing the world. The comments to Hilton recall 'The Thermal Stair', 'give me your painting / Hand to steady me on the word-road home', and even his first attempt to connect with Ben Nicholson in 1943 ('Could I please visit you').[72] The pun on 'I (eye)', and the alignment of the painting hand and painting eye indicate that for Graham the devices and pronominal materials of language with which he thinks and feels are interchangeable those of paint and the plastic arts. He acknowledges the all-encompassing trap of one's self-consciousness ('my always personal world'), and though the inhabitation of another medium may not release him from it, it may allow him more of an impartial sense of its spatial relation. This relational grammar could be aligned with the democratic purity of Gabo's precise sculptured shapes, were it not for the intuitive and subjective implications of a painting hand, eye and I.

71 Ibid., 206.
72 *New Collected Poems*, 166.

On the surface Ben Nicholson's impersonal geometrics look deceptively as though they eschew an 'always personal world' in their puritanical, neo-plastic foregrounding of construction, produced in the spirit of harmony – the word 'relief' may also imply relief from language, from politics – combined with an Eliotic sense of the modernist artwork as essentially impersonal. And yet in the face of this, they in fact produce a space for an open, self-conscious experience in form. A key technique of Nicholson's was to produce a coherent relief or painting that was also clearly divided into its constituent parts, for the framework to be made discernible. There is something here of Graham's compiling of lists of words as bricks from which to make the poem, that such a process inheres within the finished product rather than merely preceding it. This is offered by way of Nicholson's account of the constituent visual planes of a shop window which gave rise to his painting *Au Chat Botté* (1932). In his 'Notes on "Abstract" Art' he referred to:

1. [red lettering on the glass, 'Au Chat Botté'] 'giving one plane'
2. 'in this window were reflections of what was behind me as I looked in – *giving a second plane*'
3. '– while through the window objects on a table were performing a kind of ballet and forming the "eye" or life-point of the painting…'[73]



Ben Nicholson, *Au Chat Botté*, 1932, oil and pencil on canvas Manchester Art Gallery

[73] 'Notes on "Abstract" Art' in *Ben Nicholson: Paintings, Reliefs Drawings* vol.1 (London: Lund Humphries, 1955), 26-7.

This is an account of the mediacy of experience, that to look is to look 'through […] and distinguish the significant shapes', in Graham's words to Hilton. The painting looks through and distinguishes simultaneously, as though it itself has an 'eye' or a 'life-point', which corresponds with Graham's request that Hilton 'Lend me your painting I (eye) for a mo'. By differentiating the parts in sequential order in language, Nicholson reduces them to a temporal order, not a spatial one – a flawed paraphrase of the picture. Notably, Nicholson places the reflexive act at the centre of this triptych, so that the reflex (2) precedes the objects themselves (3). And yet what he is drawn to is the simultaneity of the different levels of form in his encounter: 'These three planes and all their subsidiary planes were interchangeable so that you could not tell which was real and which unreal […] and this created, as I see now, some kind of space or an imaginative world in which one could live', said Nicholson of the work.[74] It is the interchangeability of these parts, in the encounter between them, which, he says, 'created […] some kind of space or an imaginative world in which one could live'. The challenge of the modernist work of art is to offer a composition of interchangeable parts, but also to reflect on the mediacy of that experience – on the relation of parts as much as the parts themselves within 'some kind of space' as distinct from the spaces it responds to. This is a tension perhaps most fully realised by Bryan Wynter's *Imoos* works (an acronym for 'images moving out of space'), which offers a mobile configuration of parts in painted gouache, rendered in a manner inherited from Alex Calder, with the parts hung close to a parabolic mirror. This enacts both a reflexive and distortive function – it is not always clear which part is reflection and which is not. Again this recalls Graham's 1946 comment to Montgomerie, where justified lines make a construction 'in relation', upon which floats some activity.

[74] Ibid., 27.

Bryan Wynter, *Imoos VI*, 1965, Gouache on card, glass, chipboard box, motor, light bulb and nylon thread, Tate

The creation of a world one can inhabit through art is illustrative of Nicholson's democratic claims for abstraction as a 'universal language'.[75] Where a work like *May 1955 (Gwithian)* may appear on first glance, in its cool geometrical form, impersonal or inexpressive, it may suggest that a relational, architectonic space has both an inherently subjective function, reflecting our world into it, and a democratising one, rendering it an always open space. By moving between the flat surface into three dimensions, Wynter is able to complicate the sense of perspective, allowing the artwork to exceed the context of its installation: 'the spectator [is] forced to accept an artificial spacial context imposed by the Imoos, a context much vaster than the actual space occupied. In this way space and location became separated and the figure-ground experience could no longer apply.'[76]

In previously discussed comments from the 1959 notebook given by Graham to Wynter in 73, Graham works to articulate an intuitive dynamism which is rendered on or through a more precise construction. The dynamism is the flux of idiomatic language together with utterances which

[75] Ibid.
[76] Bryan Wynter quoted in *Imoos VI* 1965 Tate Catalogue entry T00765 <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wynter-imoos-vi-t00765> [accessed 7 December 2019]

are non-verbal ('shout and whimper'), and which do not easily assimilate into its grammar, together with an abstract rhythmic integrity which is easier to measure:

> always under the shout and whimper […] 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.[77]

Here Graham emphasises 'abstract' time not space, given poetry's status as a primarily aural and thus temporal medium. But in both Graham and Nicholson's instances, an abstract space is first made by foregrounding a plastic, multi-dimensional framework, which enables more intuitive communication to occur. When Graham speaks of 'formal constructions', it surely chimes with Nicholson's comparable creation of formal 'space.' Like Wynter, he is the sculptor suspending the interchangeable parts of the mobile – in this case the parts are language and speech – which cohere within the metronomic count. Note that the beats are heard as the 'formal construction of time made abstract in the mind's ear' – the pun on mind's eye placing the beat within a visual frame.

The systematic approach to the visual plane in Nicholson's case and syntactical structure in Graham's provides a sense that expression is constituted by the medium of art, that expression is of and inherent to the medium, whether made up of items in a shop window or words in a dictionary. The definition of each medium, as we have seen, often evokes another. Both poet and writer, as it happens, follow Klee in comparing their art to music. Graham in a 1949 notebook referred to each 'movement' in a planned poem as 'having a wholeness remembering Beethoven using some quick folk tune as a scherzo in a quartet'[78], and in the same year an especially strung-out Graham accounts for his ticking clock in a letter to Sven Berlin, by invoking these inter-media coordinates and Nicholson's very shapes:

> here I am. Stewed tea, the gulls not started up yet, the clock engrossed in a Bartok equivalent of a Nicholson [sketch of a Ben Nicholson Relief inserted here] a leaky pipe somewhere

---

77 *The Nightfisherman*, 162.
78 'From a 1949 Notebook', 35.

> outside in the fisherman's yard whispering on and on, my nose fucked[79]

This composition cartoonishly anticipates his 'formal construction of time made abstract in the mind's ear' – but in this instance, nose wrecked from Benzedrine inhalation, such inter-media synonymy encroaches on the poet's experience.

Ben Nicholson wrote in 1941 that:

> the […] kind of painting which I find exciting is […] both musical and architectural, where the architectural construction is used to express a "musical" relationship between form, tone and colour…[80]

This Nicholson achieves in *May 1955 (Gwithian)* (which shares the publication date of *The Nightfishing*), by interweaving genre and referent: the landscape, as indicated by the title, is that of Gwithian, a Cornish village known for its Neolithic remains, which may be indicated by the solid blocks in the picture, whereas the more figurative objects evoke those of conventional still life painting: glass, jug and bowl. Like Graham's 'The Thermal Stair' or 'Two Poems on Zennor Hill' (which address Lanyon and Wynter respectively, and also look to Neolithic remains), ancient artifices are here animated by modernist shapes, whether aural (as in the sound of Graham's self defined against such landmarks), or visual (as in Nicholson's Constructivism). For both painter and poet, their medium is in some sense both 'musical and architectural' as well as a reflection on a shared place, Cornwall.

---

79 *The Nightfisherman*, 87.
80 'Notes on "Abstract" Art', 27.

Nicholson, *May 1955 (Gwithian)*, oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art

The flat colours in *Gwithian* are distinct and do not give definition or depth to these objects, but rather indicate spatial intervals or correspondences between forms and visual plane. There is a tension then, between the necessarily fixed qualities of architecture, and the movement of music, between the modular and the mobile, and the painting wants to hold those two parts in relation. A parallel can be drawn via a similar relational tension in Graham's poems: between the 'fixed qualities' of time and space ('Today, Tuesday' in 'Malcolm Mooney's Land'), and the fluid movement of music 'scherzo in a quartet', or the plunge into arrested time: the quay night bell of 'The Nightfishing' which calls a subject into a transformative place of reflection.

Graham's 'The Constructed Space', published in *Malcolm Mooney's Land* (1970), was composed around 1955, and has on the surface a preoccupation with its own impersonal construction to match Nicholson's.

> Meanwhile surely there must be something to say,
> Maybe not suitable but at least happy
> In a sense here between us two whoever
> We are. Anyhow here we are and never
> Before have we two faced each other who face
> Each other now across this abstract scene
> Stretching between us. This is a public place
> Achieved against subjective odds and then

Mainly an obstacle to what I mean.

Yet through this, the poem enacts a powerful act of self-presence. Its deliberate contextual minimalism recalls Beckett, or the translucent gestures of Gabo's *Construction in Space (Crystal)* (1937-9).

Construction in Space (Crystal), 1937-9, cellulose acetate, Tate

The three blocks of text in loose pentameter (notably Graham first anticipated it being a long poem but could not sustain its condensation) recall what he referred to in 1944 as 'the block of words which is Blake or even lately, Yeats. It's almost as physical or geographical change.'[81] Such an arrangement is, he claims, 'an addition to the world' – and, we might add, channelling Nicholson and the Constructivists, its own world.[82] Graham encouraged his reader:

> Don't be afraid at the bareness and the prosaicness of this section. It is meant to be as 'abstract' as I can make it, unvisual in its images and suggesting no place or atmosphere.[83]

The poem works deliberately against the visual, offering us conceptual coordinates but no shading or character between them: 'a public place achieved against subjective odds'. Its avoidance of

81 *The Nightfisherman*, 17.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid., 143.

metaphor and description echoes' Gabo and Nicholson's eschewal of representative modes. But there is a limit to Graham's abstraction, given that the language still depends on figuration and metaphor, and the lyric model depends on two defined interlocutors.

The first section of the poem in its emphasis on abstraction – 'this abstract scene' – is 'bare' and suggests a framework or scaffold of expression only. '[N]o place or atmosphere' brings to mind comments by W. J. T. Mitchell, 'that modernism in the visual arts involves a certain resistance to language, a discipline of the eye and critical voice that seeks to acknowledge the pure, silent presence of the work'.[84] 'I say this silence, or better, construct this space', declares the poem (recalling his catchphrase, 'Try To Be Better'). He may construct by saying – but saying the silence might obstruct it. As he would later declare, 'Silence has no vocabulary to speak of'.[85] In an earlier letter, he refers to the 'inner silence which is necessary to construct', before lamenting that 'The shapes of silence sliding past my ear go by in a way that is foreign to my sensibilities'.[86] There is something essential and integral but evasive about the work's inner form and silence, the poet must construct only towards the silence – to be formally determinate but not to determine it. The foreignness of that essential element of the modernist work of art, silence, recalls Deleuze's claim that the 'great writer […] carves out a nonpreexistent foreign language *within* his own language' and that when 'a language is so strained […] language in its entirety reaches the limit that marks its outside and makes it confront silence'.[87] These words bring to mind Graham's test for a poem's success as to whether 'it just might make its wee disturbance in the language'.[88]

Graham's poem ends by affirming 'Yet here I am / More truly now this abstract act become', emphasizing not 'abstract art' but the 'act'. Again this recalls Stevens: the poem occurs in

---

84 W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Abstract Painting and the Repression of Language', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 15, no. 2 (Winter, 1989), 351.
85 *The Nightfisherman*, 247.
86 Ibid., 205, 206.
87 Giles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical* (London: Verso, 1998), 109, 113.
88 *The Nightfisherman*, 141.

the act of the mind. An equivalent may be drawn between abstract art's 'certain resistance to language', and the means by which 'The Constructed Space' seeks to repress the visual, in as much as 'no place' is achieved by contradistinction with figurative art-marking, which usually deliberately evokes 'place or atmosphere'. I doing so, the poem, like the successful abstract artwork, does not eschew intersubjectivity. Rather, it brings lyric address and conceptual silence into agreement at the close, where the so far loosely iambic line lands on conclusive cadence, a cadence which has been anticipated by the constructed grid of off-rhymes ('space' and 'across', 'am' and 'become'), as though the conclusive act of self-realisation is suspended in an embedded network of artifice.

By this point, the poem's case for abstraction at the expense of the visual has been firmly put forward – the poem is made purely of a prepositional and propositional space – and yet this is articulated in means which suggest formal (full, complete and material) resolution:

> […] I say
> This silence here for in it I might here you.
>
> I say this silence or, better, construct this space
> So that somehow something may move across
> The caught habits of language to you and me.
>
> […] here I am
> More truly now this abstract act become.

The emphasis on saying is embodied in the anaphora here and foregrounds the presence of 'voice', where saying 'say this silence' is continuous with 'construct this space'. Abstraction, construction and voice are held in trichotomy. The lyric subject claims he is most fully realised 'now this abstract act become'. Only through constructing language's prison-house, its cage without grievance, and in delineating its parts, does he release himself from it.

'The Constructed Space' reveals a Constructivist conception of space as both plastic yet mobile, precise but propositional, able to realise and move beyond 'the caught habits of language' and foster new relations and dynamics. Notions of inhabiting different forms of space continue to

inhere in Graham's thinking, after this important period (1940-55) where he drew extensively from visual art. He would claim in a letter dated Jan 1960:

> good real verse (which is a reflection of the very starts and stops, […] gestures of the ideas of the mind) should always have its almost hesitation for a moment between one line and the next […] speaking between somehow the spaces between the tyranny of the metronomic in a strange way enables us to say something which we could never elsewhere have said…[89]

Graham is concerned in this passage with stress count and sense in counterpoint, a technique which makes the poem difficult to read aloud, but the passage offers something of a broader conception of his verse, and its medium-specificity, as encapsulated in the characteristically wrought and compellingly mysterious syntactic formulation, 'speaking between somehow the spaces'. This corresponds with Patrick Heron's interest in the 'spaces between his represented objects' as much as 'the sculptural form of those objects themselves', and aspiration towards a 'total configuration of all his ingredients all the time'.[90]

The trouble with identifying a medium-specificity for Graham is that he is drawn not to categories or methods specific to a discipline, but in the interstices between them, silence and NONSILENCE, metre and enjambment. 'Art expression is a voice between two things. Abstract formality and the very human gesture',[91] as he said to Ruth Hilton, but it could also be between the represented objects and the object themselves, between the modernist art centred on surface, and 'the illusionistic operation of any image' which 'is painting's inherent magic, its unique power'.[92] Hence his poetry's provisional and propositional sensibility.

Good real verse is, crucially, for Graham, a 'reflection' – a reflection on the abstract gestures of ideas and the interstices it finds itself in between plastic spaces. It 'starts and stops' in time, it

---

89 *The Nightfisherman*, 169.
90 Patrick Heron, 'Space in Colour', 86.
91 *The Nightfisherman*, 197.
92 Heron, 'Space in Contemporary Painting and Architecture,' in *The Changing Forms of Art* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), 46, in David Nowell Smith, 'Poetry's Plastic Medium'.

hesitates, but its strange ways offer us a simultaneity of parts, a democratic order, a means of arriving at something 'we could never elsewhere have said' in any other space or time. It has been part of the argument of this chapter to suggest that Graham's development of his poetics of 'the constructed space' was very much a product of his space and time, and, in particular, his dialogue with both particular painters, and the new aesthetics of painting being developed by Ben Nicholson, Naum Gabo, and Clement Greenberg.

Chapter 3

'Nostalgia of a form': Graham's Self-Conscious Balladry

As a Greenock poet operating from the South West Peninsula from the early 1940s, where he was based for the large majority of his writing life, W. S. Graham's relation to Scotland was characterized by a wariness of the perceived parochialism and 'plastic Scots' of Scottish literature as epitomized by Hugh MacDiarmid, together with an ambivalent identification of himself as a Scots poet, an identification more visceral and personal in nature than political.[1] Writing to William Montgomerie, a scholar of Scottish ballads, in 1949, Graham sought a critical account of Robert Burns's 'technical self-consciousness', and said that 'reading Burns makes me quite certain that after my wandering Willie-ing I'll be back to stay in Scotland'.[2] Such 'wandering Willie-ing' as in 'The Ballad of Willie Peden' moves between disguise and disclosure of the self, indicating the complex relation Graham's more consciously 'Scots' poems have to his identification, both literary and experiential, and to the sense of homecoming as pre-empted by the reading of Burns, a homecoming that would never be fulfilled in his lifetime. In 1969, again to Montgomerie, he wrote: 'Of course I have great bouts of homesickness for Scotland, the land and the people. But the selfconsciousness of what the Scottish art scene seems to be today embarrasses me tae hell.'[3] Scottishness seems permissible for the poet when it is rooted fundamentally, yet playfully ('tae hell'), in form and technical achievement.

---

1 *The Nightfisherman*, 80.
2 *The Nightfisherman*, 98, 99. This notion, which draws together subjectivity and metrics, surfaces in relation to Graham's major achievement of this period, 'The Nightfishing' (Letter to Alan Clodd, 9 February 1955, *The Nightfisherman*, 142), but shorn of the Scots emphasis: Graham's refers to the '*technical* intelligence' (Letter to Charles Causley, 23 June 1955, *The Nightfishing*, 143) which leads the artist to meaning. In both instances a self-consciousness of form is implied as distinct from a more general lyric self-consciousness.
3 Ibid., 229.

The dualism of self-consciousness illustrated in these comments, with regard to both Scottish literature and Graham's place within that landscape, is reflected in Graham's self-conscious approach to the ballad form. This is significant when we consider the Anglo-Scottish character of the border ballad adopted by Graham. It illustrates through a complex self-consciousness that the ballads were both discrete technical experiments and performative engagements with literary tradition. Graham's ballads are thus, notwithstanding their ironizing experiments with vernacular and voice, and their occasional nature as a collective verse form, personal poems. This chapter asks why Graham, whose poetry radically asserts the primacy of original verse constructions, largely avoided received or predetermined verse forms, yet seemed to make a special exception for the ballad and ballad meter. Graham also worked sporadically with blank verse, which may stand as the equivalent archetypal verse form within English poetry as the ballad is to Scots, both terms originating in the thirteenth century. In any case, blank verse and the ballad are alike in that the most readily identifiable aspect of the verse form is its metric: in the ballad's case its alternation of four and three beat lines.

'With origins in popular idioms, the ballad form represents a collective cultural sensibility' offering the kind of linguistic 'homecoming' gestured to in Graham's reading of Burns above, which Graham reframes and undermines through his uniquely self-conscious take on the verse form by offsetting abstract framework and live, idiomatic voice.[4] This is perhaps a necessary contemporizing of what Thomas Pfau refers to as the ballad's 'transferring [of] allegedly unselfconscious life forms from a simple past' in post-Romantic fashion, where even alleged unselfconsciouness is no longer feasible, on both the poet and reader's part.[5] Graham's self-consciousness also swings in ambition between partaking in an occasional, coterie poetics – ballads written for friends or to commemorate

[4] D. Dugaw, 'Ballad', in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Roland Greene, Stephen Cushman, Clare Cavanaugh, Jahan Ramazani, and Paul Rozer, 4th edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 114.
[5] Thomas Pfau, *Wordsworth's Profession* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 211.

a boozy night out – and poems that adapt aspects of the verse form into more provocative and unique constructions, poems that are comparatively unhomely.

Graham's ballads are generically anomalous within his corpus for being a received form. As indicated above, Graham was not shy of technical aspects of form: iambic pentameter is a sporadic, though emphatic, feature of the poems, often as one component of a larger, various organising principle unique to the poet. Graham's idiosyncratic arrangements of verse may be no less fettering for being formal in this sense, as in the torqued syntax forming dense blocks of verse in *Cage Without Grievance* and *2nd Poems*:

> Near farms and property of bright night-time
> By mileaway dogbark how there is means to say
> What unseen bargain makes heavier where I walk
> The meanwhile word here of this neighbourhood.[6]

There is an overaching formal symmetry to the verse, as the poet happily assembles aural equivalences and compounds ('meanwhile' picking up 'mileaway', and 'how there is … here of this') but, without a three- or four-beat frame within which Graham fostered a conversational (but no less spatially complex) 'means to say', the density offers the reader no clear coordinates through or against which address or dialogue may occur. By comparison, the ballad's more rolling idiom appears intuitive and inviting. Flicking through the several hundred pages of the *New Collected Poems* one will only find a couple of sonnets: 'Fourth Sonnet' (1942), and 'As Brilliance Fell' (1954, initially titled 'Sonnet'), which both went uncollected in his lifetime, though they were published individually in magazines, with echoes of the ornate syntax quoted above. A lone villanelle, 'The Dark Intention' (c. 1953), also uncollected, is an accomplished piece in its own right, but also served as a developmental means, a theoretical exercise, towards the similarly aurally-motivated but more rhythmically sustained and intuitive 'The Dark Dialogues'.

---

6 'Explanation of a Map', *New Collected Poems*, 33.

'The Dark Intention' is like 'As Brilliance Fell' in that the poetic voice is consciously 'fastened' to form. The asserted primacy of that form then appears to distort the agency of the speaker: this is embodied in 'The Dark Intention' as a sinister, encroaching darkness, and in 'As Brilliance Fell' as a contrary shout. Through tension between metrical framework and living idiom, the expression of voice embodied in a fixed form like the villanelle and its repetitive function becomes othered, but the realisation of that otherness through lyric self-reflection is transformative, as the poem sings 'me more than myself', with the same pronominal material.[7] Speaking out becomes listening in. The ballad, in contrast to the villanelle, seems relatively elastic in form, partly due to its emphasis on orality rather than iteration, and not least due to the flexibility in length, and the option of – and variance offered by – rhyme units. The uniquely sequential arrangement of 'The Dark Dialogues', song-like in its clipped but continuous rhythmical phrasings, may offer a middle ground between the characteristics of the formal variance of the ballads and the rigid villanelle, which overlap thematically in Graham's employment in their concern with the dark and disclosure.

The earlier uncollected 'The Song of The Tower' (1949), which operates loosely in ballad meter, is markedly unfettered and light in tone. Addressed to the artist and writer Sven Berlin, it employs deictics in a genial spirit, indicating the ballad's status as an occasional, coterie piece. In demarcating the silence, and realising an immediate but complex temporal quality, they are reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's 'Burnt Norton' ('My words echo / Thus'[8]):

> Come listen enough of that.
> See what you make of this
> And what it makes of you.
> Words tower above silence
> And speak through circumstance.[9]

[7] *New Collected Poems*, 339.
[8] T.S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton' in Four Quartets (London: Faber, 2001), 3.
[9] W.S. Graham, 'The Song of The Tower', National Library of Scotland, MS 26020.

The relatively plainspoken, direct lyric address, part affectionate, part pushily imperative, and the extent to which language towers over us with its legacy and artifice and yet is 'made' by all of us, subject to the contingencies and felicities of life – these are all characteristics of Graham's verse soon to be developed into hallmarks. The title is an homage to Berlin's imaginatively titled artist's studio, 'The Tower' (the squat, square building is now conjoined with a public toilet), but also a light allusion to the tower of Yeats, who Graham and Berlin were reading at the time. (In Berlin's uneven response to 'The Song of The Tower', entitled 'Dear Joke Grim', his reading of Yeats may be embodied in what he refers to as 'The vagabondage of inspired men'.[10]) Graham wrote to Berlin in 1947 that 'Yeats is specially strong to read in Cornwall'.[11] The potency of Yeats in that context has to do with the robust music and sense of artifice as both ornamental and eternal, along with a Celtic virility that appealed to Graham and Berlin. 'The Song of The Tower', like 'Wallace Stevens in Greenock', echoes the phrasing of Graham's 'Listen. Put On Morning', first published in 1947: 'Waken into falling light' in 'Listen' becomes 'Words waken into the light'. Yet in 'Listen' it fits more confidently into the tight, fluid lines of discrete three feet units – 'that metre which Yeats worked in so beautifully' – than the loose yet pronounced ballad meter of 'The Song of The Tower'.[12] Flashes of unpredictability in rhythm and idiom – 'Enough of that. It's time enough' – anticipate 'The Beast In Space' ('Shut up. Shut up.'), suggesting that the ballad may have been a means of experimentation towards poems of unique lyric form, but that ballad meter was still appealing, at the time of 'The Song of The Tower', due to its collective, Scots affiliation.[13]

Graham's ballads often include various references to Scottish song and dance – 'Thou Bonnie Wood of Craigielea', the Scottish reel Kate Dalrymple, whistling – as though to reinstate

---

10 Sven Berlin, 'Joke Grim: A Letter to Sydney Graham from Sven Berlin: Gull Cry – Deep Ocean', *The Cornish Scene* (1986), 31.
11 *The Nightfisherman*, 71.
12 Ibid., 46.
13 *New Collected Poems*, 157.

(even overstate) the form's collective music, its inherent oral and occasional function. The use of the refrain in 'The Song of The Tower' is ponderously musical: 'Our voices rise and fall my dear, / Our voices rise and fall'. Lexical and metrical cadences are mapped onto each other, but the form does not accommodate a productive tension between the two, as though we hear the refrain 'Our voices rise and fall' as nothing more than an abstract device.

Like the later 'Baldy Bane', and despite its high register and assertion of artifice, 'The Song of The Tower' uses its oral function to cry out against the 'the shower of empties' during a drinking session, it being as much a persuasive cue for Sven to 'buy another round' as it is an account of one of Berlin's sculptures emerging from granite (though the easiness of the rhyme of 'tower' and 'I see stone slowly flower' may suggest the former). This poem-as-solicitation is a further play on the fact that the orality of its tradition is inscribed – however long since removed – on the modern ballad: here it is repurposed. Graham was, after all, no stranger to the exchange value of his worksheets and poems.[14] This occasional quality overlaps with the form's historical affinity with music: Graham was as likely to burst into song in this period as he was to exhibit his large, visual and graphic drafts at home at Gurnard's Head, as indicated in a draft passage for 'The Broad Close': 'Since I hung my song on the wall / In this Cornish place'. Here the embodied 'voice' of the poems is displayed as a visual exhibit, a construction: 'The Song of The Tower' was hung above the mantelpiece in Berlin's Tower itself, the work not only commemorative of a moment but site-specific. The neatly transcribed, display-sized copy of 'The Song of The Tower' at the National Library of Scotland may convey the poem's sense of itself as a visual artefact, as a kind of currency.

The occasional spirit, swinging between everyday drunken spontaneity and an egotistic sense of 'making history', is characteristic of St Ives in the period, a literary and artistic environment highly

[14] As we have seen in the instances of notebooks given to Bryan Wynter and Elizabeth Smart. Robin Skelton's payment to receive ongoing manuscript materials from 1963 helped sustain Graham and now furnishes us with a rich archival collection at The University of Victoria BC, where Skelton was based.

attuned to its own written-ness, where its mythological status as a hub of activity and gossip was often fostered by the same people who berated it for that quality, as in *The Dark Monarch*. 'The Song of The Tower' takes a markedly lighter approach to *The Dark Monarch*, flipping the ballad's traditional means of accounting for social tragedy on its head, self-consciously playing on the form's sense of collective sensibility, while reflecting genuinely on the fervently creative context of the time.

1951–54 was a notable period of experimentation with traditional forms: 'The Dark Intention', 'As Brilliance Fell', and the two ballads 'The Broad Close' and 'Baldy Bane'. Graham also composed a number of occasional pieces to friends in ballad meter, and there are passages of song in 'Seven Letters' in the adaption of the Scottish children's song, 'water water wallflower', in 'Letter II' and the tiller's song in 'Letter IV' (composed in the period 1951–53), and section two of 'The Nightfishing'. The ballad appears in different guise in *Implements in their Places*, where Graham's earlier rangy use of the border ballad is modified into a condensed ballad triptych, evocative in its sinister and cautionary tenor of Brothers Grimm tales and Scots folklore such as the kelpie. The first of the triptych, 'The Gobbled Child', may be a version of Yeats's 'The Stolen Child' in a deliberately detached voicing (Yeats's faery song is in the first person plural).[15] Here, as in each of the three ballads, a folklorish vanishing occurs. Each opening stanza asserts a pastoral status quo ('To set the scene…'), repeated verbatim as the poem's last stanza, sandwiching the disappearance of the poem's respectively vulnerable subjects (Five-year-old Iain, Miss Conn, Old Rab the drinker) as though they are literally gobbled by the repetitive narrative model.

Graham's comments about 'The Broad Close' and 'Baldy Bane' are notable for the pride in what he sees as their technical achievement: 'these two ballads are, for me, the most technically sophisticated poems I have attempted', in addition to a pre-emptive self-consciousness with regard

[15] Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 20-21.

to the ballads' potential reception as a regressive vernacular form by a metropolitan literary elite.[16] Edwin Morgan has deemed them 'too self-conscious to be real ballads, but their themes of love and death, and their use of voice, come across as a surprising and quite strong tribute to the old form'.[17] Graham elaborated on the achievement which makes them more than mere 'tribute' in a letter to Robin Skelton in 1958:

> To write a contemporary poem consciously using the nostalgia of a form which is not possible now to use in the way for which the form came about is exciting. I think there is quite an extensive technical area to be explored in that direction.[18]

This nostalgia is managed in the two ballads, Graham suggests, by a colloquial notion of self-consciousness, his ballads 'wear the garments (actorish if you like) […] of the "Child's Ballad"',[19] in which the speaking subject arm-twists the reader into playing their own part in the determination of meaning, and the ballad takes on a heightened sense of dramatic irony, providing a pronounced swing between self-conscious voice and meter.

This burlesque approach contrasts with Graham's comments about the three-beat meter in the context of 'The Dark Dialogues', in which he said he '"lived" so long for so little' in a fully embodied, presumably unactorish manner.[20] Graham sees the ballads' "achievement" in the successful transference of meaning-production to the reader to the extent that his self-consciousness becomes the reader's, particularly via some of the more dramatically confrontational asides of 'Baldy Bane': 'Who are you that these words / Make this fall upon?', and the unpleasantly gendered refrain, 'Lie over to me from the wall or else / Get up and clean the grate' we are pushed into tolerating. Graham's direct and indirect confrontational manoeuvres complicate the ballad's historically

16 *The Nightfisherman*, 139.
17 Morgan, 'W. S. Graham and "Voice"', 79.
18 *The Nightfisherman*, 157.
19 Ibid., 161. Graham refers to the ballad as employed by Francis James Child in the sequence initially entitled 'The English and Scottish Popular Ballads', published between 1882-1898.
20 *The Nightfisherman*, 158.

'collective cultural sensibility'. The demonstrative-laden address of 'The Broad Close' is developed in this regard in later poems like 'The Constructed Space' and 'Approaches to How They Behave', where the words themselves are often staged so as to bear the weight of agency from the poem's outset, and the poem's address to the reader is mere vehicle in the realisation of that agency.

Graham sees the origin of 'this suggesting of a selfconsciousness of the present time in the reader [as] first begun (definitely enough, at least, to recognize as the introduction of a new dimension in poetry) in Prufrock', but it is to *Four Quartets* that much of Graham's – and indeed Robin Skelton's – peculiar poetic self-consciousness of this era is indebted.[21] Graham particularly enjoyed the fact that Eliot praised his rhythm, and we know he 'talked fairly technically' with Ezra Pound.[22] He liked to move between these notions in discussing the shape of his own verse constructions, ballads and otherwise. Where the technical business of meter indicated, for Graham, counting (stresses, feet, beats), rhythm played a more instrumental – though at times critically imprecise – part in the direction of meaning.

A sense of rhythm as underpinning, mediating, and even preceding expression is something that crystallizes as Graham's sustained use of his three-beat line develops. Recall the comments from the previously discussed 1958 notebook (the same year as the comments to Skelton): 'always under the live and speaking idiom of the Voice in poetry there is the count, the beats you can count on your fingers'.[23] This hierarchical conception suggests that an embodied, foundational metric count may enable the more intuitive shouts and whimpers that run more contingently across the top. The conception of an impersonal yet solid metric as operating in correspondence with a more contingent, 'natural' kind of speech recurs for Graham. In 1977 he wrote to Elizabeth Smart:

---

21 W.S. Graham, annotated copy of 'The Baldy Bane' in *Nimbus*, 2.3 (Autumn 1954), addressed to Alan Clodd. National Library of Scotland, MS 26022.
22 *The Nightfisherman*, 134, 103.
23 *The Nightfisherman*, 162-3.

> I've always been a great di-de-di man. All my poems have a metrical selfconsciousness. The poems in this book [*Implements in Their Places*] are in 'threes' or 'fours' or 'fives'. Even reading them aloud when I approximate towards normal speaking cadences it is the underlying metrical beat which keeps things together.[24]

Again, the poet foregrounds a metrical framework across which, or in tension with which, speech patterns run – indicating a theoretical rationale sustained over a period of several decades.

Graham was a poet who sought to work at the threshold at which the strange, changeable particulars of idiomatic expression (that of Gaelic Scots, or hypocoristic terms between lifelong lovers) and the more steadfast materiality of artifice come into contact. This dualism is very much on the surface of the ballad 'Baldy Bane', in which we are testily invited into the literal threshold of a cantankerous patriarch. (Such experimenting with familial voice as 'home' prefigures the multi-vocal domestics of 'The Dark Dialogues'.)

> Make yourself at home here.
> My words you move within.
> I made them all by hand for you
> To use as your own.
> Yet I'll not have it said that they
> Leave my intention out,
> Else I, an old man, I will up
> And at that yella-yite.[25]

The rhyme of 'out' and 'yella-*yite*' (the Scots word which, as Francis points out, traditionally indicates a 'yellowhammer' bird, but Graham takes to mean an 'insulting expression meaning cowardly'[26]) asserts the Scots character of the voice in the pronunciation of 'yite', strengthening the homophony with 'out' at the very point that the speaking subject's 'intention' is brought into question, undermining the fact that we are to make these words our own.[27] The pronounced, regular artifice upheld by the neat correspondence between rhyme and rhythmic units is offset by the hotblooded

---

24 Ibid., 331.
25 *New Collected Poems,* 146.
26 *New Collected Poems*, 373.
27 *The Nightfisherman*, 139.

accusation of the shout and the unusual idiom (supplanting insult for bird). The poet sets his defiant speaker up to be estranged by his own assertive use of technique. The later letter to Ruth Hilton Graham stating that 'Art expression is a voice between two things. Abstract formality and the very human gesture. And one doesn't work without the other', suggests that Graham's framework would come to reconcile itself with voice, or that voice would find a place within the interstices of form and abstract gesture.[28] Such verse may still depend on a metrical self-consciousness to indicate where such interstices occur. Yet in 'Baldy Bane' both the self-conscious plasticity of the ballad metre and the actorish self-consciousness of the speaker seem rather to restrict the kind of expressive gesture, or the vibration between gesture and framework, to which Graham aspires.

Graham had referred previously to 'a supreme selfconsciousness' in reference to ballads by Robin Skelton in 1958, and an 'extreme of' self-consciousness in annotation to his highly visual, near-graphic drafts of 'The Dark Dialogues', as we will see.[29] Just as there are layers of rhythm and technique, there are layers of self-consciousness, and the two correspond. David Nowell Smith has made the case, in the context of 'The Dark Dialogues', that rhythm may refer to 'the modalities in which experience continually forms itself', whereas prosody stands for the parts of speech that make up poetic rhythm.[30] Graham's division into 'metrical selfconsciousness' and a 'supreme selfconsciousness' could be said to overlap with Nowell Smith's division: the former as delineating the discrete parts that make up the verse construction, and the latter as a means of accounting for the larger experience realised by the poem – the supreme fiction, as it were.[31] Either way, Graham's

---

[28] Ibid., 17.
[29] *The Nightfisherman*, 161. Undated worksheet for 'The Dark Dialogues' c. 1956–58, W. S. Graham papers, private collection of Marius Kociejowski.
[30] David Nowell Smith, 'An Experience with Rhythm: WS Graham', *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 39 (2010): 51-64, <http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/2803> [accessed 6/12/19]
[31] It is from Wallace Stevens's 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' that Graham took the imperative 'It Must Be Abstract', as indicated both in 'From a 1949 Notebook', 32; and in a 1966 transcript of section IV of 'Malcolm Mooney's Land' (National Library of Scotland, MS 26021). As in 'The Constructed Space', construction can for Graham necessarily invoke abstraction, offering a duality that could helpfully supersede that of abstraction and figuration in discussions of Graham's work and its correspondence with visual art of the period.

peculiar self-consciousness is acutely formal, centered on the construction (and constructed quality) of his verse. 'First […] my poem is to be a successful construction', said Graham in 'Notes on a Poetry of Release', before it is released into the world as self-conscious lyric or ballad.[32]

In the shift between 'The Song Of The Tower' (1949) and 'Baldy Bane' and 'The Broad Close' (1953-54), a heightened technical self-consciousness comes into play, which, by being more akin to the reflexively hard-edged artifice that Berlin and Graham admired in Yeats in the late forties, gives the poem a greater chance to outlive the occasion of its creation. Reframing the 'nostalgia of a form' ironically in the two ballads of 1953-54 productively problematizes the nostalgia of ballad form, which may partly be a strategy of Graham's to contend with the Scots character associated with balladry and his work more generally. But given the ballad's inherently collective and narrative-oriented nature, its limitations with regard to the interplay of various aspects of self-consciousness (supreme, metrical, and otherwise) may suggest why it appears infrequently or in partial and more allusive form in Graham's later work (as in 'Imagine A Forest'), characterized as it is by more unique formal constructions.

[32] 'Notes on a Poetry of Release', *The Nightfisherman*, 379.

Chapter 4

'I have to choose a way': Graham, William Empson and 'The Dark Intention'

The period 1953 to 1957 saw the development of Graham's post-romantic mingling of self and material context through form on an extensive scale in *The Nightfishing* (1955) into a more idiomatic engagement with visual and aural abstraction explored, in part, through the idea of the 'dark', as in 'The Dark Intention' and 'The Dark Dialogues'. The works under consideration so far have prompted us to conceive of lyric dialogue as a spatial problem, twisting verbal and visual elements into abstraction, as with 'silence' and 'nonsilence'. This abstraction is further complicated by the plunge into the 'dark' after 1953, and the inevitable foregrounding of aural over visual elements that darkness prompts. Befittingly, the dark generates a newly unnerving ambience in the work of this period, a period characterised as it is by extremity – Graham and Nessie Dunsmuir were quite literally plunged into the dark when they moved in 1956 to a coastguard hut off Gurnard's Head, which according to Sylvia Skelton, 'had a leaking roof, no cooking stove, no electricity, an outside toilet and no bathroom' and was positioned on the wild and exposing headland of the South West Peninsular.[1] And yet such an atmosphere was represented earlier in his poetry which predates this move, like 'The Dark Intention'. Where the previously discussed artists like Patrick Heron celebrated this landscape for its light and its quality of life in times of war and austerity, the dark proved to be the most generative medium for Graham's practice. Through it, a strange and sophisticated self-consciousness comes to light.

1 Sylvia Skelton quoted in David Whittaker, *St Ives Allure* (Charlbury: Wavestone Press, 2018), 31.

This chapter begins by exploring how Graham gives his own visual and instructive account of 'The Dark Dialogues' in the worksheets which went towards the making of the poem (this work I date as approximately taking place between 1956-58), before considering at length its lesser-known predecessor within the oeuvre, 'The Dark Intention' (published 1954, and written as early as 1944, for which no worksheets are known). The poems are clearly to an extent of a piece. 'The Dark Intention' may be read as developmental stepping-stone towards 'The Dark Dialogues', published in 1959. I choose to attend to 'The Dark Intention' at greater length than the 'The Dark Dialogues' so as to emphasise its achievements as a didactic lyric and its unique rendering of the degree to which artifice mediates reality.[2]

Both poems explore the limits of self-disclosure, but by different means. 'The Dark Dialogues' speaks *through* and is spoken *by* Graham's domestic origins and voices, which dramatically – through the reflexive work of the poem – become the voice of 'language'. The poem employs the three-beat frame more expansively than we have seen in *The White Threshold* and more coherently than 'The Nightfishing'. In doing so it renders a network of echoes, steps and propositions in a protracted lyric mode that is simultaneously rugged and tender, confiding and alienating, withholding and disclosing. Sometimes the transition between the voices is explicit ('Now in the third voice / I am their father'), other times implicit or ambiguous. Graham does not do the police in different voices. There is no 'actorish' performance, only the rendering of a dialogic or imaginative space in order to confront the ghosts of lyric, 'whoever you are, That I am other to'. The sum of voices makes a tissue of self-consciousness. On the other hand, 'The Dark Intention', being a more vividly allegorical account of the trap of self-disclosure in the villanelle form, has less

[2] For a sustained Heideggerean reading of the counterpoints between presence and absence, cadence and voice, in 'The Dark Dialogues', see David Nowell Smith, 'An Experience with Rhythm: WS Graham', *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 39 (2010): 51-64, http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/2803. Matthew Francis uses words from the poem for his monograph on Graham, *Language is Where the People Are* (Cromer: Salt, 2004), but mentions 'The Dark Intention' only briefly, 22.

potential for ambiguity and texture in rhythm or voice, but nonetheless fosters its own compelling account of the levels of self-consciousness, and a deeply memorable atmosphere – here, too, there is no 'act', no ironizing of the form, as there is in the ballads.

The vivid worksheets for 'The Dark Dialogues' are both verbally and visually illustrative of the scaffold that underpins Graham's self-consciousness as it precedes the poems. Consider the following draft stanzas, of which only the second appeared in the finished poem:

> REMEMBER
>
> I have to choose a way.
> A branks, a clamp, an iron
> Impediment to keep the tongue
> On its toes so to speak
>
> I am the shell held
> To time's ear and you
> May hear the lonely leagues
> Of the kittiwake and the fulmar[3]

A bracket to one side contains the following annotation:

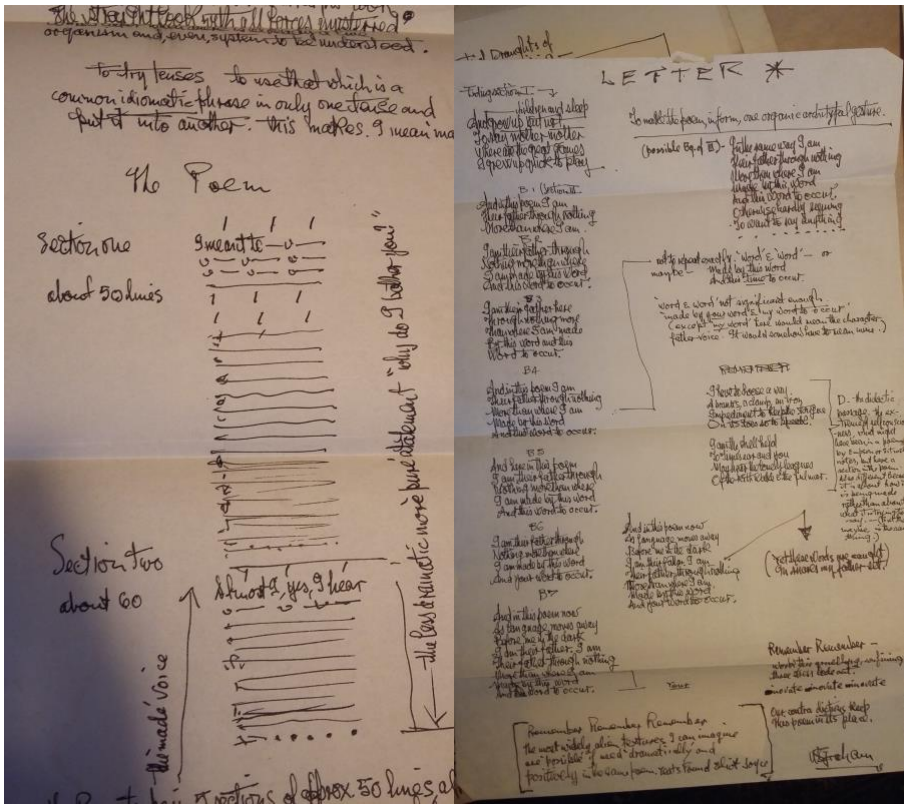
> D – the didactic
> passage. the ex-
> treme of selfconscious
> -ness, what might
> have been, in a poem
> by Empson or Sitwell,
> notes, but have a
> section in the poem. […][4]

Before contending with didacticism and Empson, a key poet for Graham, we should first note the condensed quality of the annotation itself: to the eye it reads like one of Graham's many column-like poems, recalling the shape of the earlier and previously discussed 'The Hill of Intrusion' (1946) in a flexible two-beat metre. This is further enhanced for being offset by the expansively visual nature of

[3] Undated worksheet for 'The Dark Dialogues' c. 1956–58, W. S. Graham papers, private collection of Marius Kociejowski.
[4] W. S. Graham papers, Marius Kociejowski. This could be Osbert or Edith Sitwell.

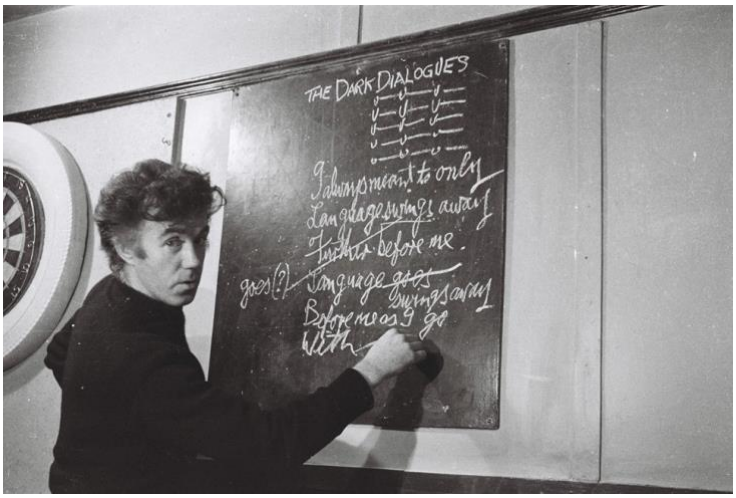
the drafts. The formal boundaries between poem (in this instance initially envisaged as a 'LETTER'-poem), annotation and picture bleed. The worksheets give a sense of the poem's process of construction, a conceptualisation made up of non-verbal space – projected lines which make up stanzas, arrows, metrical-symbols, numerics (B1, B2, and so on), along with grids – as much as laboured rewritings of text in a stanza with only slight reconfigurations of word-order each time. The latter is evidently to engineer only a slight change in rhythmic emphasis in each iteration of the same stanza: 'I am their father through / nothing more than where', 'I am their father here / through nothing more', 'And in this poem I am / Their father through nothing / More than where I am'. The interest these reworkings have is in whether to place the word 'nothing' at the line-end's precipice (when it is its own precipice), and again recalls the presence of 'nonsilence', and the means by which silence and nonsilence may be demarcated granularly by slight variations in syntax. Small variations in word-order render complex epistemological distinctions as in Steven's 'The nothing that is not there and the nothing that is'.[5] There is also an extent to which this offsetting of slight variations in rhythm and phrasing and the broader conjectural scheme is evocative of the general shifts between the idiosyncrasies of voice and larger abstract gesture of form discussed elsewhere.

[5] Stevens, 'The Snow Man', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 8.



Worksheets for 'The Dark Dialogues'

Apt for a trained engineer, these drafts give the impression both of a loose architectural drawing or a form of tablature and perhaps echo the non-verbal proximate space of Nicholson's reliefs.



Graham writing out the first passage of 'The Dark Dialogues' (below his notation of the poem's rhythmical shape) at The Gurnard's Head, c.1958

Graham's tendency not only to circulate such worksheets but to performatively illustrate them at The Gurnard's Head inn (as in the above figure) suggests a degree to which the elaborate drafting process has its eye on a larger audience or, perhaps, posterity. Recall the prompt to 'REMEMBER' above my first quoted draft passages from 'The Dark Dialogues'. Such annotation indicates that the construction of the poems was a form of instruction. Sebastian Barker writes anecdotally of Graham's 'inexhaustible habit of and brilliance at teaching poetry […] His passion to instruct was relentless'.[6] Such passion is evidenced in his 'notes to self', which, like 'Dear Bryan Wynter', often pretend to be 'only a note' to an absent addressee, but never are 'only' notes, and never usually concern only one 'self'. 'Remember' occurs at numerous points in the worksheets to 'The Dark Dialogues', as in the following tantalising (and no doubt, poetic) construction, which begins by recalling 'remember … the fifth of November':

> Remember Remember Remember
> the most widely alien textures I can imagine
> are 'possible' if used 'dramatically' and
> positively in the same poem. Yeats Pound Eliot Joyce

The offsetting of textures and the emphasis on conjecture ('possible') illustrates the degree of variation and flex aimed for by the verse within a fixed abstract frame (and the construction of this annotation is itself a highly wrought frame). The namechecking of his most obvious modernist forebears reads as though it baits the critic into making straightforward associations, or as itself a poetic mnemonic device. The use of 'dramatic' recalls Graham's means of accounts for 'The Nightfishing': 'I think (in a dramatic way) it [the poem] makes a place, organic and believable, within

6 Sebastian Barker, 'Memoir of W. S. Graham' in *Edinburgh Review*, 91.

its lines.'[7] This aligns with a note in these worksheets for 'The Dark Dialogues': to 'make the poem, in form, one organic archetypal gesture'.[8] Graham often couples 'dramatic' and 'organic'. Take, for example, his comments to Charles Causley regarding 'The Nightfishing', in which he conceptualises a 'technical intelligence' which can only occur over a long poem.[9] He writes,

> It seemed to me that what I had to say needed the vehicle of a long poem. I needed the dimensions in which I could be to a certain extent DRAMATIC, and I mean 'dramatic' not so much in the sense of creating other spokesmen to speak for me but dramatic in the sudden shocking bringing together of different and seeming incompatible textures of narrative and gestures of language.[10]

The verse needs to be in the form of a long poem so as to give the greatest breadth of textures. His distinction between 'dramatic' in terms of voice ('other spokesmen to speak for me') and 'dramatic' in terms of texture is illustrative of the extent to which he distinguishes between a self-consciousness of form and a self-conscious lyric address. The category of 'dramatic' as suggesting 'spokesmen' may also account for the instructive annotation itself, the drafts speak for themselves through the notes, in a forthright manner. Another means of being dramatic is by rendering a silence only to break it, as in the opening of 'The Nightfishing', of which Graham writes to Norman Macleod, 'Now Norman, think of the wonderful (forgive me) dramatic beginning again' ('Very gently struck…').[11] (The compression of cadence in the first three lines of 'The Nightfishing' no doubt amplifies that sense of breaking the silence.) Part of the 'technical intelligence' Graham engineers in the verse is this desire for the event of the work – and the work of the poetry – to constantly take place in the mind of a reader, to be constantly disturbing silence, to constantly 'remember' the formal singularity of the work. That the comments about 'The Nightfishing' closely correspond with the annotation to 'The Dark Dialogues' in coupling 'dramatic' and 'texture' suggests that the conceptual consideration of a

---

7 *The Nightfisherman*, 141.
8 W. S. Graham papers, private collection of Marius Kociejowski.
9 *The Nightfisherman*, 143.
10 Ibid., 144.
11 Ibid., 168.

shorter poem like 'The Dark Intention' is centred conversely on condensed repetition and rhythm (despite the prosodically longer line) with a different texture or textures, as we will see. Indeed, Graham writes that 'in a short poem, the poetic shock usually has to occur in an immediate way', not an accumulative one.[12] William Empson himself recognised this characteristic in 'The Nightfishing' in his defence of the poem to his student, Philip Hobsbaum, who found it impenetrable, by producing the aphorism: 'good texture can be seen first and makes one decide that a meaning is worth looking for'.[13] In doing so he identifies one of many techniques through which Graham foregrounds the primacy of artifice.

That the instructive instinct in Graham corresponds with the poetry's self-consciousness is made clear in the annotation above. The annotation corresponds with a separate note in the same set of worksheets: 'the didactic passage, a lecture, a thesis in verse', linked to the first quoted stanza (beginning 'I have to choose a way…'). In this stanza it is tempting to read the 'iron / impediment to keep the tongue / On its toes so to speak' as metaphoric for the fine balancing act involved in employing received form to produce original utterances in verse. 'Impediment' echoes Graham's knee injury resulting from a fall from a roof on his return from a birthday party in St Ives in 1950, while the pun on 'so to speak' and the material culture of Greenock (as embodied by 'clamp', 'iron' and the Scots word 'branks') form a repertoire which by now we can see has been firmly established over the oeuvre.[14] The stanza is, however, perhaps the most obvious engagement with the notion of received poetic form. The language, with its bravura overestimation of the 'torture' of poetic constraint through which one labours to release unique expression, is reminiscent of Paul Muldoon's axiom, 'Form is a straitjacket in the way that a straitjacket was a straitjacket for Houdini', and other

12 Ibid., 144.
13 'Empson as teacher: the Sheffield years', in William Empson: *The Critical Achievement*, ed. by Norris and Mapp (1993), 301– 3.), see *Selected Letters of William Empson*, 243.
14 *The Nightfisherman*, 111.

(male) post-war poets working in received form.[15] One of the questions this chapter asks is whether Graham's little experimentation with received verse form, namely the villanelle, gives rise to a greater didacticism in the verse, an 'extreme of selfconsciousness' – to evoke the annotation to 'The Dark Dialogues' – but one which may be better suited to the shorter poem.

The 'extreme' of self-consciousness is closely related to the '"supreme" self-consciousness' referred to in Graham's feedback on the poetry of his close friend and correspondent Robin Skelton in 1958.[16] That he identifies an 'extreme' self-consciousness is notable in that it could suggest either good or bad effect, whereas 'supreme' evokes something of the grand and jubilant song characterized by the poetry of Wallace Stevens. Stevens's *Collected Poems* was published by Faber in the UK in 1954, and Graham sent his comments in 1958, suggesting that the *Collected* had time to percolate in Graham's imagination, if he hadn't already picked up a single volume by Stevens on his travels to the USA in 1947 and again in 1951.

However the first annotation quoted above suggests that Graham's writing of the mysterious poem 'The Dark Dialogues' is modeled, partly, on a source closer to home: the poetry of Empson, with whom he shared a particular admiration for the artifice of Elizabethan verse. It also echoes my claim, in this chapter, that 'The Dark Intention' engages with a tradition of didactic villanelles associated with William Empson. In addition to the explicit mention of Empson in 'The Dark Dialogues' worksheets quoted earlier, we also find another annotation echoing the poet-critic:

> Our contra dictions keep
> the poem in its place.[17]

---

[15] Paul Muldoon quoted in Ian Duhig, 'Sinéad Morrissey: a maker of intricate poem machines' *Irish Times* (online), Oct 21, 2017 <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/sin%C3%A9ad-morrissey-a-maker-of-intricate-poem-machines-1.3260694> [accessed 11 December 2019] (Original: *Irish Times* 2003)

[16] Graham, Letter to Robin Skelton, 25 February 1958, *The Nightfisherman*, 161.

[17] W. S. Graham papers, private collection of Marius Kociejowski.

The spliced compound 'contra dictions' has a particularly Empsonian flavour. The word 'contradiction' spans Empson's poetic and critical thinking: in 'Aubade', 'It is on contradiction that they [risings] grow', in 'Let it Go', 'The contradictions cover such a range'.[18] Indeed, in the 'notes' to the poem 'Bacchus', Empson writes, 'life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis'.[19] In *Seven Types of Ambiguity* he wrote that 'In the sixth type what is said is contradictory or irrelevant and the reader is forced to invent interpretations', whereas 'the seventh type is that of full contradiction, marking a division in the author's mind'.[20] There is a cleaving here of the nature of 'contradiction', echoed in Graham's disassembling of the word, which recalls his punning games – 'sin tax' for 'syntax', for example.[21] That 'Life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis' suggests something of a spatial self-consciousness, that 'oneself' is formed in counterpoints, interstices, or proximate relations of language, such as those Graham's poetry offers us between rhythm and voice or silence and nonsilence, of 'speaking between somehow the spaces'. Recall also Graham's claim that he is 'knit with the paradoxical hunger',[22] assuming that paradox – a notion favoured by New Criticism – is surely on a continuum with contradiction. Contradictions and paradoxes configure the poem in Graham's spatial conception, and as Empson's words suggest, 'can't always be solved by analysis' – although we will test that claim here, in relation to 'The Dark Intention'.

We know that Graham and Empson crossed paths. In a letter dated 6 May 1955 to Bonamy Dobrée, apologising for Graham's drunken antics and recommending him for a poet-in-residence appointment at Leeds, Empson wrote:

> I have met the poet Graham and like him, and know that he isn't a drunkard if that's the problem, and think he ought to be first on the list for next year if he had missed this

[18] William Empson, *Collected Poems* (London: Chatto, 1955), 49, 81.
[19] Ibid., 104-05.
[20] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Penguin, 1965), vi.
[21] *The Nightfisherman*, 158.
[22] Ibid., 142.

> [appointment]. The duties the young feel are so arduous; I am sure he felt it was his duty on meeting you as an employer to get drunk and make a quarrel. I do not know why a willing employer should be expected to have any patience with this compulsion.[23]

Graham was as ever likely to make a strong impression (good or bad) on a first encounter, and may have more appealed himself to Empson out of respect for the latter's work, although the relation stated – 'I have met' – suggests they weren't close.

The first impression of Empson's *Collected Poems* appeared from Chatto in 1955, and features three villanelles I am concerned with here, which Graham will likely have encountered in their individual collections,[24] of which 'Villanelle' I will discuss in relation to Graham's work. Yet, however many 'didactic passage[s]' appear in Graham's work, Empson's poems could be said to be self-conscious in a way that Graham's are not, because the former operate inevitably in dialogue with their author's stringent critical corpus, be that centred on irony, ambiguity, or pastoral. Graham's self-consciousness was notably more impressionistic and self-sufficient. All but eleven of the fifty-six poems included in Empson's *Collected Poems* have a corresponding note, which is in one instance several pages long.[25] This fact may oppose Graham's aim to 'make an object which will stand'[26] presumably on its own two un-footnoted feet. It is this tendency to analyse, to need to account for the complexity of poetic artifice, which makes Empson's – and to an extent Veronica Forrest-Thomson's – poetry often incompatible with the stringent theory expounded in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) or *Poetic Artifice* (1978), of which the latter explicitly 'answers' and departs from Empson's work in a number of ways, as we will see.

While keeping in mind the different priorities of Graham and Empson, I want to show how the above annotation is instructive in bringing together villanelles written by them both. This will

---

23 *Selected Letters of William Empson*, ed. by John Haffenden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 243.
24 'Villanelle' appeared in *Poems* (1935), 'Missing Dates' and 'Reflections from Anita Loos' in *The Gathering Storm* (1940). See William Empson, *Collected Poems* (London: Chatto, 1955), 22, 60, 66.
25 William Empson, *Collected Poems* (London: Chatto, 1955), 104-110.
26 Graham, *The Nightfisherman*, 244.

allow me to put the work of the extra-academic, freelance, autodidactic Graham in dialogue with Empson and Forrest-Thomson, two poets working within the academy as practicing critics in the decades which precede and succeed his important 1950s work, the work of a self-made apprentice in modernist poetry. What I attempt to show is the degree to which Graham makes a substantial contribution to this legacy of poetic-criticism in poetry alone, where the self-conscious lyric impulse offers its own sophisticated theoretical account of form and intention. For Empson and Forrest-Thomson, their poetry is often aligned, or may in some ways exceed, their critical thinking. For Graham, who did not have the same theoretical or institutional framework (associated especially with Cambridge) in which to situate his thinking, all we have are the poems and the poetic thought explored in the notebooks and letters. This is to the poems' advantage, in their discrete achievements as self-sufficient art objects, both in their capacity to account for themselves on their own terms, and in being distinct from the academy (what Graham at one point termed the 'fuckulty'[27]).

Graham's 'The Dark Intention' was published in *New Statesman and Nation* in 1954 and again in the small magazine *Promenade* in 1955, the period in which 'The Dark Dialogues' was produced (c. 1953-58), a long poem alike in theme and its aurally-motivated and intuitive poetic formalism, if on a very different scale. That 'The Dark Intention' does not sit along with 'The Dark Dialogues' in the collection *Malcom Mooney's Land* is significant given the poems' conceptual relation to each other. Though published in 1970 much of *Malcolm* was written during the 1950s. Faber famously considered Graham dead in the years – the darkness – between publication of *The Nightfishing* (1955) and *Malcolm Mooney's Land* (1970). The genesis of 'The Dark Intention' is unknown, but there is a mention of the poem in written annotation to a typescript of the poem 'Allow Silk Birds that See' from *2nd Poems* (1944) marked 'Glasgow 1943' which suggests that 'The Dark Intention' was not

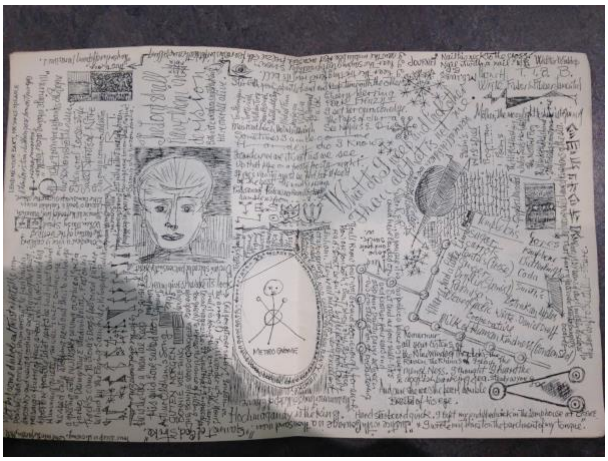
[27] *The Nightfisherman*, 270.

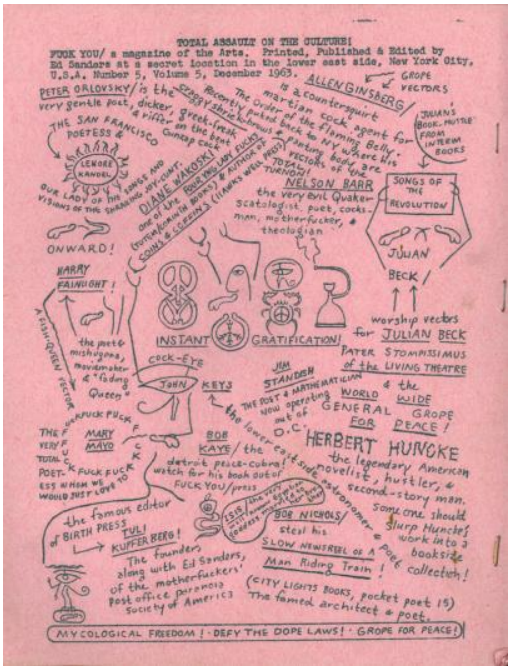
merely produced but known to others as much as a decade before its first publication, 'remember my villanelle – "My first intention was at least not this"'.[28] The early poem 'Allow Silk Birds that See', though more evocative in its use of the flourishes and syntax of the poetry of the 40s, may be connected with 'The Dark Intention' in its offsetting of form and intention: the poem is a word-acrostic, forming a line 'Allow Silk Birds that See' down its left margin. Graham's hand-written annotation aligns the highly wrought phrasing with Elizabethan verse ('a wee bit Elizabethan perhaps'), again echoing the convergence with Empson.

Graham's annotative flair would take on a new life in the form of *Promenade* magazine where he chose to publish 'The Dark Intention'. The editor of the low-fi, provincial *Promenade* Ben Howard invited Graham to put together an issue (no. 65), published in Cheltenham in 1955. The mimeograph magazine was assembled by Graham, not only editorially but in physical form: the entire contents of this short, staple-bound publication are hand-drawn in what looks to be biro in Graham's characteristic, crowded cursive. On the cover are columns listing in an apparently random order names and places of both real life and literary import to the author (Maxim Gorki, Dunsmuir, Dylan Thomas; Germoe, Paterson, USA) which are hemmed in by quotes from poems ('Very gently struck…'), a (self-?)portrait by Graham, with any remaining blank areas being filled with Graham's visual code for counting out rhythm.[29] The style and contents of this issue evoke similarly irreverent, DIY-publications associated with the New York School like *Fuck You / A magazine of the arts*, published slightly later and associated with the mimeo era, via a community which, like Graham and the St Ives School, worked through active exchange between poets and painters, and who shared Graham's view that '[v]isual with words appearing together is not necessarily one medium illustrating the other. It is always a montage.'[30] Inside *Promenade* is a sprawling hand-drawn spread of text and

[28] Instructions for a reading in Dumfries. National Library of Scotland, MS 26019.
[29] WS Graham (ed.), *Promenade* No.65 (1955). Box 15: W. S. Graham-related papers, Greville Press Archive, Leeds.
[30] Graham letter to the artist Bill Featherstone, 7 February 1974, *The Nightfisherman*, 276.

image, made up of familiar catchphrases and puns (Faber and Faber Ltd becomes 'Fibber and Fibber Lamented', which is ironic given their assumption about Graham's whereabouts post-1955), a recipe, deliberately bastardised versions of Graham's poetry, as well as self-conscious asides: 'You'll wonder why yours truly is doing this writing in this very local magazine. It's just that I'm greedy, too greedy to refuse the chance of filling up a space…' The poet is always accounting for space as his address crosses the borders of lyric, letter and magazine. On following pages there are type- and handwritten letters by Graham from his residency in Cheltenham, along with parodic advertisements and reference to a mock 'printer's error'.



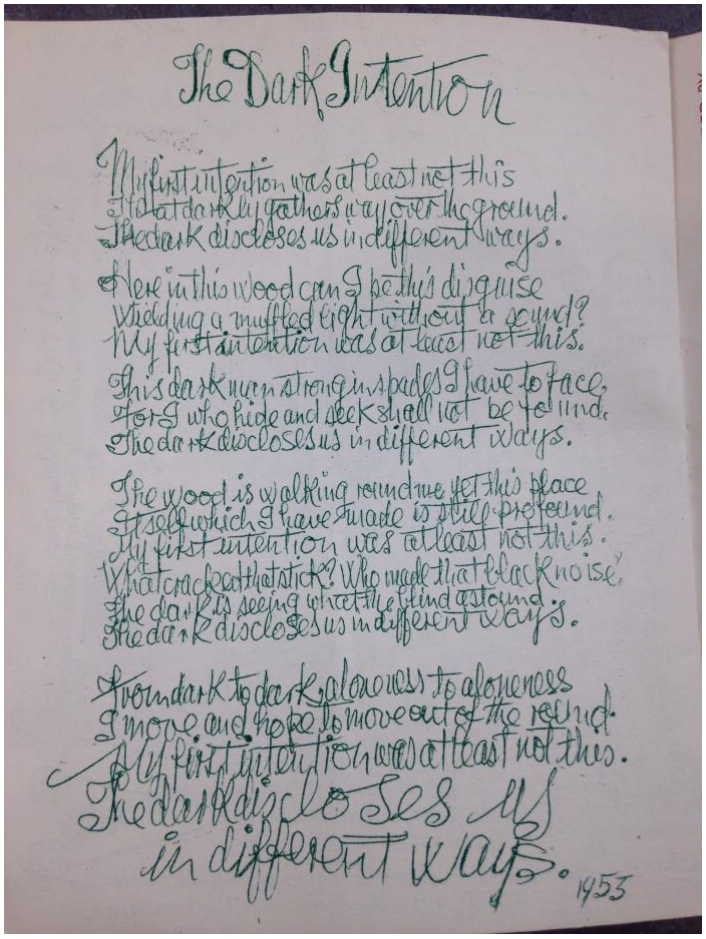


Left: spread from *Promenade* no. 65 (Cheltenham, 1955) | Right: back cover of *Fuck You…* no. 5 vol. 6 (NYC, 1963)

I describe these eccentric aspects of the issue because they echo, in part, the highly visual, performative and self-conscious elements of Graham's drafting process, from which the note about Empson above is taken. These drafts expand the poems' deictics ('this is no other / Place than

where I am'[31]) by incorporating aspects of the occasion and physical place of their production, whether on large sheets of cartridge paper pinned to the wall or scribbled on the darts board at the Gurnard's Head for the 'The Dark Dialogues', or made during a short residency at Cheltenham for *Promenade*. In *Promenade*, the liveliness of his drafting process is amplified to the point of parody: practically all the text has a decorative function, and it is in part a send-up, perhaps because Graham new it would have only a small and relatively intimate readership. And yet, curiously the individual poems included in the issue are presented cleanly, decorative but without fuss, even though he would not re-publish some of them again in his lifetime. They are the only material in the issue to appear free of irony, as in the calligraphic typescript of 'The Dark Intention'.

[31] WS Graham, 'The Dark Dialogues', *New Collected Poems*,168.



The Dark Intention

My first intention was at least not this
That darkly gathers way over the ground.
The dark discloses us in different ways.

Here in this wood can I put this disguise
Wielding a muffled light without a sound?
My first intention was at least not this.

This dark men strong in spades I have to face,
For I who hide and seek shall not be found.
The dark discloses us in different ways.

The wood is walking round me yet this place
Itself which I have made is still profound.
My first intention was at least not this.
What cracked that stick? Who made that black noise?
The dark is seeing what the blind astound.
The dark discloses us in different ways.

From dark to dark, glad now to aloneness
I move and hope to move out of the round.
My first intention was at least not this.
The dark discloses us
in different ways. 1953

'The Dark Intention' in *Promenade* no. 65

Why did Graham choose to omit this poem from his published books, and yet give it a life – a curiously 'personal' one – first in the *New Statesman* and a year later, despite the poem's unjovial nature, in the jovial *Promenade*? Was there something about the playful, workbook-like nature of *Promenade*, along with its limited readership, which permitted 'The Dark Intention' – dated 1953 in the issue – to represent Graham in a way that it could not in the other collections? Or perhaps the author saw it as only a stepping-stone towards 'The Dark Dialogues', which was not to appear in

print until 1959,[32] though it was completed sometime before then. *Promenade* then becomes a window into his active process during this period.

'The Dark Intention' did not appear in print again until 1990, posthumously in the *Uncollected Poems* published by Antony Astbury's Greville Press, prepared in correspondence with Graham in the years leading up to his death in 1988. Astbury also organised a reading on 29 September 1978 at the Purcell Room featuring Graham, David Gascoyne, John Wain, George Barker, Harold Pinter and, curiously, Empson.[33] Though there does not seem to be a surviving recording of this reading, we know from the draft of a set list[34] and from comments to Pinter that Graham read later work from *Implements in their Places* (1977),[35] and 'To My Wife at Midnight' (also 1977). Both employ the characteristic three-beat rhythm and numbered sections of varying length, elements which are noticeably – but also, as I will show, inevitably – absent from 'The Dark Intention'. 'To My Wife at Midnight' also reuses the opening syntactical model from 'The Dark Dialogues', where 'I always meant to only' becomes 'I mean us both going' at the start of its second section.[36]

In an annotation to Astbury for a reading of Graham's work, 'Love to W S Graham' undertaken by Astbury, Pinter and G. H. Godbert at the Museum Tavern, London on 5 November (year unknown), presumably in his absence, Graham refers to the three-beat line of 'The Nightfishing' as notable for being 'artificial':

> Remember it is in threes. Don't read it as though it is in prose. the point of making verse is to make it artificial so that the sense will come through. the lines stop where they should stop.[37]

[32] First published in *Botteghe Oscure*, vol. 23, Spring 1959.
[33] Letter from Graham to Harold Pinter, 13 July 1978. *The Nightfisherman*, 347.
[34] Box 15: W. S. Graham-related papers, Greville Press Archive.
[35] Ibid., 348.
[36] Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 263.
[37] Note from Graham to Antony Astbury. WS Graham related papers, Greville Press Archive, Leeds.

The 'sense' here is not the informatic sense that one expects of prose, or that we look for in spite of the line breaks, it is in the frame of the verse. It is also is in the movement across, before, aside that frame. To 'Remember it is in threes' (recalling 'remember' in the worksheets) is ironic, perhaps, given that the poem is (self-)sufficiently memorable in this regard, and the direction recalls the 'dramatic' qualities of the voice and texture alluded to in the worksheets of 'The Dark Dialogues' and letters regarding 'The Nightfishing'. This three-beat rhythm is a characteristic of many of the poems we have seen so far. That Graham said to Bryan Wynter in 1958, 'I tried to almost live inside this three stress metre',[38] indicates the active nature of the rhythm and implies the extent to which Graham expected Astbury to inhabit it in performance. Of 'The Dark Dialogues' Graham wrote that 'In no other poem have I "lived" so long for so little',[39] conveying the vitality and range of the rhythm in this poem despite its short length and fixed 'stop[s]' where the short lines end, its deliberately artificial verse. We might make a distinction between the 'artificial' rhythm – 'artificial' in the sense of that which is made in the present tense of the poem's event, that lives in Astbury, in the reader – and discrete instances of artifice which have already been made, that might be fixed or, worse, dead. The poem's artificial status is the result of a configuration of many parts, and cannot be embodied by one device in particular, like (for example) the patterns of refrains in a villanelle.

Although the villanelle form does not traditionally prescribe a metre as it does rhyme and refrain, villanelles more commonly use a prosodically longer line, often a variation of iambic tetrameter, as in the poems I will be discussing here, in order, perhaps, to accommodate some flux and length within the otherwise restrictive confines of the form, or to evoke common time in music (4/4). The devices prescribed by the villanelle might reduce the extent to which the form can be 'inhabit[ed]', which may require a more intuitive form to be realised in the act of making. It is

[38] Graham, *The Nightfisherman*, 162.
[39] Letter from Graham to Alan Clodd, 8 February 1958, *Nightfisherman*, 158.

notable that Graham fastidiously avoided the use of closed or received forms throughout the rest of his corpus, with the only significant exception being the ballad, as have seen. He favoured verse forms of his own construction – this may be why he felt it especially necessary to instruct how others need deliver them in performance.

Another development of 'The Dark Intention' and one such unique intuitive construction, also employing a prosodically longer line, can be found in the previously discussed 'The Constructed Space', first published a couple of years later in *Poetry* in 1958. It is similarly concerned with the contingent nature of poetic intention and the idea that the realisation of the vitality of lyric utterance might be detrimental to its life: 'It is like that […] till we are met / By some intention risen up out of nothing. / And even then we know what we are saying / Only when it is said and fixed and dead'.[40] This idea can be seen modified by song in Denise Riley's 'An Awkward Lyric': 'To hold a true note could be everything. / Getting the hang of itself would undo it.'[41] Though not concerned with darkness, 'The Constructed Space' is, like 'The Dark Intention', cloaked in 'disguise' and that which 'disclose[s]', foregrounding in both cases an element to which the subject is, knowingly or not, acted upon.

'The Constructed Space' differs from 'The Dark Intention' in having the freedom to move fluidly between idiomatic expression ('Shut up. Shut up.'[42]) and abstraction ('construct this space'), a fluidity afforded by its varying of the relation between syntax and enjambment, which would be difficult to manage within the villanelle, for which each refrain usually has a discrete integrity ('My first intention was at least not this'[43]). 'The Constructed Space' may then be seen as a spatial expansion of 'The Dark Intention'. Along with the more impressionist, expansive 'The Dark

[40] Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 161.
[41] Denise Riley, *Say Something Back* (London: Picador, 2016), 53.
[42] Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 161.
[43] WS Graham, 'The Dark Intention' in *New Collected Poems*, 271.

Dialogues', it could be said to have only been made possible by the regimented but no less explorative 'The Dark Intention', which I will now consider in relation to Empson (a long-time opponent of what W. K. Wimsatt termed 'The Intentional Fallacy'). Having highlighted the connection between Graham and Empson, and their different conceptions of form and artifice, I will finish with the first sustained critical close reading of 'The Dark Intention'.

Graham may have come across the first or second pressing of Empson's *Collected* via one of his many visitors from London. This edition includes extensive notes (with the details enlarged between the 1955 and 1956 pressings, as noted in the text), and these are likely to be those referred to in the above annotation to 'The Dark Dialogues'. Empson's notes are far more than what he claims are 'odd bit[s] of information one may have picked up in a field where one is one oneself ignorant'.[44] Instead, throughout, they adopt a subjectively analytical yet conversational approach that wants either to account for the poem ('The two main ideas put forward or buried in this poem…'[45]) or pre-empt its critics from mis-construing it ('There is a case for hating this sort of poetry and calling it meaningless…'[46]). Empson goes on to mention, briefly, 'queerer forces at work' and to observe that 'to write notes at all is to risk making a fool of yourself, and the better poems tend to require fewer notes'.[47] That these undescribed 'queerer forces' segue into a broader clause about saving face indicates the author's self-conscious unwillingness to account for the aspects of form which may be autotelic and therefore unaccountable for by the poet. Indeed, as Forrest-Thomson writes, as Empson's style and poetics developed he became increasingly 'uneasy' with the fact that the artist 'might not know what he is doing'.[48] For Empson (notes Forrest-Thomson), 'the

---

[44] Empson, *Collected Poems*, 93
[45] Ibid., 115.
[46] Ibid., 95.
[47] Ibid., 93.
[48] Veronica Forrest-Thomson, 'Rational Artifice: Some Remarks on the Poetry of William Empson', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 4 (1974), 237.

unconscious […] must be made articulate in the critical interpretation; hence it ceases to be unconscious',[49] and there is a sense, in the poetry, of a reflexive action working to interpret (and possibly also to over-determine and suppress) workings of the unconscious as they play out formally on the hoof. In 1961 Empson states that when he was 'young [he] did not mind [the belief that the artist often does not know what he is doing]' but now 'modern art has gone too far, and […] aesthetics ought to curb and prune it',[50] where the uneasiness may stray over into punitive conservatism. These unknowable, queer forces can be paralleled, or seen to be made manifest in, the 'dark' of Graham's dark intention, with the notable difference that Graham is more willing to keep the poem's unconscious in the environment it clearly thrives in – the dark, particularly – and conversely to Empson, in the middle to later stages of his development as a poet. Interestingly, however, only one of Empson's three villanelles has a substantial note by the author in the *Collected*, and 'Villanelle', under discussion here, has none, suggesting that the villanelle may be the form most apt to Empson's asceticism: they speak for themselves. Something of the villanelle's peculiarly Empsonian character is characterised by Derek Mahon's reference to the villanelle as the 'Empsonelle'.[51]

As noted in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics*, 'Many of the 16th-C. poetic villanelles were set to music by composers of the time, and references to the villanelle through the 17th C. portray it as a music not a poetic genre',[52] a significant fact given its provenance in rustic and peasant song, and one that calls up Graham's admiration of the ballad, a different but also fundamentally musical form. The three-beat rhythm of 'The Dark Dialogues' invokes metre if only to swing unpredictably away

[49] Ibid., 236.
[50] William Empson, *Argufying* (London: Hogarth, 1989), 147.
[51] Mahon quoted in Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 174. Note that 'Dylan Thomas's first villanelle was a 1942 parody of Empson titled "Request to Leda"', J. Kane and A. L. French, 'Villanelle' in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics*, 1521.
[52] J. Kane and A. L. French, 'Villanelle' in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics*, 1521.

from it in order to embody what David Nowell Smith refers to as 'the encounter between lyric voice and language's silent self-withholding',[53] recalling Eliot's account of 'the most interesting verse' as that which '[takes] a very simple form, like the iambic pentameter, and [is] constantly withdrawing from it, or taking no form at all, and constantly approximating to a very simple one'.[54] The villanelle's inherently – if also, at times, superficially – 'musical' construction, and the anticipation of its refrain, foregrounds elements of artifice definitively in a way that, by contrast, is felt to be highly determined and consistent, perhaps uncharacteristically so for Graham. Of Graham's characteristic three-beat rhythm, Michael Schmidt writes that 'Without caesura, each line is a complete rhythmic unit, imposing a strong discipline on the language and thought'.[55] The integrity of the line as a rhythmic unit affords each phrase, through that discipline, a discrete coherence of measure and sense (of making and saying), and yet accommodates variability and flux of rhythm in toto across the poem. (This could be one reason as to why Graham's terminology for the poem varied between 'stress', 'beat' and so on.) Each unit can be embodied by and through the rhythm, without adhering to a specific metre. 'The Dark Dialogues' begins like this:

> I always meant to only
> Language swings away
> Further before me.[56]

Nowell Smith refers to 'the grammatical autonomy of the statement "Language swings away", for which the first syllable of "Language" is endowed with particular emphasis given that the word "'only" becomes a hinge between […] cadence and the enjambment'. As Nowell Smith writes, 'Under the veneer of flatness lies an intricate and highly nuanced prosodic density'.[57] Within the

---

53 David Nowell Smith, 'An Experience with Rhythm: WS Graham', *Études britanniques contemporaines* [En ligne], 39 | 2010, mis en ligne le 11 février 2016. <http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/2803> [accessed 30 May 2018].
54 T. S. Eliot, 'Reflections on *Vers Libre*' in *To Criticize the Critic and other Writings* (Faber: London, 1978), 185.
55 Michael Schmidt, *A Reader's Guide to Modern British Poets* (Heinemann, 1979), 300-301.
56 Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 167.
57 Nowell Smith, 'An Experience with Rhythm'.

anticipated swing of each phrasal unit, and because of the guaranteed recurrence of the line's turn indicated by the capital letter to indicate a new three-beat phrase ('the lines stop where they should stop'), along with the sequential nature of the poem's stanzas, there is great potential for variation or subversion of any metrical norm, or even for an experience of rhythm not fully accounted for by the term 'three-beat rhythm', or Graham's 'three stress metre'. Through it, we sense the 'widely alien textures' and the 'wide range of devices in the rhythms' sought by the poet in the margins to the worksheets.

The 'dark' poems ('The Dark Dialogues' and 'The Dark Intention') are to be read aloud, not only in terms of the kind of public performance given by Astbury on Graham's behalf, but in the oppressive nocturnal and remote quiet of the environment in which they were produced, or in the darkness of one's interior. Dialogues and intentions are to be felt aurally in the dark, the clue is in the titles:

> I speak as well as I can
> Trying to teach my ears
> To learn to use their eyes
> Even only in the end to observe
> The behaviour of silence.[58]

The verse in its visually blank, list-like presentation of discrete declarations, offers a ponderous form of 'prosodic density' when read – under the breath or aloud – which contrasts with the fluid enjambement offset by a rangy metre which we saw in the poem's first passage. This is a passage, and a speaker, very clearly meant to be marked off from silence. The darkness of these poems may be a suitable symbol for the unknowability of lyric speech – but as Denise Riley shows us, such unknowability regarding the obscurity or absence of an interlocuter can provide grounds for new kinds of poetic knowledge. According to Timothy Morton, 'Reading [a] poem aloud makes you aware of the shape and size of the space around you (some forms, such as yodeling, do this

58 W. S. Graham, 'The Dark Dialogues', *New Collected Poems*, 171.

deliberately).'[59] It can make you aware of the space you occupy, or the spaces within your body and thought. 'The Dark Dialogues' are to be inflected by their speaker, where to inflect is to remember the intrinsic – rhythmic and formal – structure of the language in its performative dialogue, even if that remembering may be a case of making for the first time, which might produce the perplexing effect upon the reader of a formal or muscular precognition, or déjà vu. This is partly what Graham conceives of when referring to 'the technical intelligence' in the long poem.

For that dialogue to be one-sided may result in a remembering of the self, and the placing of the self in and through language. Graham wrote, in a letter to Ronnie and Henriette Duncan in 1975, 'I am only practising how to speak to speak myself out of myself.'[60] Connection with others is foremost an act of self-making, and the nature of 'practice' here foregrounds experimentation. The dark, in which an interlocutor or audience is more difficult to identify, becomes symbolic of the unknowable interlocutor (or the unknowable self), and that very unknowability enacts a reflexive action back onto the speaker, entrapping them: the self must then speak *out* of itself. In some respects, lyric address is inherently in the dark about where and how it will land, or what it will invoke, a fact that Graham's work wrestles with generatively, particularly from this period (c.1953) to its late stages.

In 'The Dark Intention', the dark itself is prompted into action: 'The dark is seeing what the blind astound.'[61] Note here the awkwardness of the syntax in order to make the '–ound' rhyme, where 'astound the blind' would have coherently and in terms of cadence been more apt. Or perhaps the sound of 'astound' is meant to be deliberately overstated. It is a known fact, for example, that the deterioration of one sense can lead to the increased power of other senses,

---

59 Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 11. (See Gary MacKenzie, 'Poetry, ecocriticism and labour: the work writing and reading', *Green Letters*, 20:2, 183-196.)
60 Graham, *The Nightfisherman*, 297.
61 Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 270.

superficially comparable, perhaps, with the way end-rhymes and refrains are brought to the fore in the villanelle form. But who is the active subject in 'the blind astound'? Are the blind astounded, or is it the blind who, enabled by the darkness in a way that the ably sighted are not, to astound the subject? This ambiguity is itself a form of darkness. The dark, ironically, has the definitive faculties: to see, to disclose us in different ways; but the poem makes the dark see.

The notably artificial nature of the villanelle, in Graham's hands, brings arbitrary homophony and intuitive cadence into sharp tension. As a result, the form seems to be a particularly clear example of Nowell Smith's conception, via Hegel, of Romantic verse's departure from classical poetry's quantitative metre, where

> line endings [are] motivated semantically instead of prosodically, and thereby signal the intention animating the poet's utterance, endowing meaning to their words and rhythms from behind those words and rhythms.[62]

This conceptualisation of lyric would have appealed to Graham, given the lateral positioning of utterance and address in 'The Dark Dialogues', which produces a lattice-like configuration of dialogic and imaginative space: 'I speak *across'*, 'A place I can think *in*', 'An *aside* from the monstrous' (akin to Nowell Smith's 'endowing meaning to their words and rhythms *from behind* those words and rhythms'). If the earlier notebooks fashioned a place which was being 'continually arrived upon' by something other than itself, in 'The Dark Dialogues' Graham pushes and disassembles the deixis of that construction – 'arrived upon' – further into interstices and gaps, distorting those legible coordinates.[63]

In contrast Graham's villanelle 'The Dark Intention' makes explicit the line endings' signalling of intention in a sustained fashion, but at the cost, perhaps, of rhythmic force. The plasticity of the villanelle form usually has a thematic synthesis with the poem's referential meaning:

---

[62] David Nowell Smith, *On Voice in Poetry* (New York: Macmillan, 2015), 86.
[63] 'From a 1949 Notebook', *Edinburgh Review*, 25.

superficially, the poems under discussion here are 'about' artifice. Elizabeth Bishop's 'One Art' (1976) is centred on 'mastering' form, which is in a sense an act of resigning oneself to it (with the poem's refrain, 'hard to master', echoing to some degree Graham's catchphrase, 'Try To Be Better').[64] The practice of loss is forced, enforced and made inevitable by the form of the poem, which is nonetheless embraced, willed or turned to account by the poet. Though Forrest-Thomson writes of how the villanelle is suited to particular poetic 'subjects' over others: 'themes appropriate for the villanelle will not suit the sonnet, still less the ode or the epic',[65] I think she sells her complex theory of artifice short here by implicitly reverting to a version of the hackneyed content/form binary. Surely the form has the potential to be its own theme, where themes are not transmitted through form but, rather, are form. And while the OED suggests that a villanelle is 'usually of a pastoral or lyric nature',[66] the evidence of these poets suggests otherwise. That Bishop, Graham and Forrest-Thomson's villanelles are centred, often explicitly, on artifice and intention, and that even the modernist-metaphysical villanelles of Empson refer obliquely to these subjects (take the material interest of 'Villanelle' in 'poise' and 'shape'[67]), suggests that it is a poetic form that, by foregrounding artifice, enacts an inherently reflexive thematic function back onto the frame of expression. That Empson's poems are not – explicitly – engaged with the subject of artifice in quite the same way is curious. Though he claimed that 'arguing in verse has always seemed to me a wonderfully poetic thing to do',[68] he may, like Forrest-Thomson, have had certain 'themes' or arguments which he saw as appropriate to particular verse types. Or perhaps given that, for him, the power of verse to

64 Elizabeth Bishop, *Complete Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2004), 178.
65 Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*: *A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry*, ed. by Gareth Farmer (Exeter: Shearsman, 2016), 177.
66 'villanelle, n.' OED Online, Oxford University Press, December 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/223436. Accessed 7 December 2019.
67 Empson, *Collected Poems*, 22.
68 Empson, *Argufying*, 160.

communicate human reason was never in doubt he did not see any reason to explicitly bring the nature of artifice into question in verse.

In villanelles by all these writers, the recurrence of form is offset by subjection to loss, to fear, or to pain. What is gained is acceptance, but the difficult irony of the poem pre-empts that acceptance, giving it a passive edge. Samuel Solomon has addressed the ambivalence of Empson's 'Villanelle', forged by 'the aesthetic equilibrium of sense impressions […] that is painful'.[69] This tension, which he characterises as an 'ambivalence' is also relevant to Forrest-Thomson's villanelle 'Not Pastoral Enough', which she amplifies powerfully to the point of parody, and which corresponds to *Poetic Artifice*, which presents parody as a 'counterpart' to pastoral.[70]

The balancing act between artifice and sense may give rise to an inherent ambivalence in the villanelles of Graham and Forrest-Thomson, as we will see. Of course, artifice can be overstated to the point that (to use the duality I established in my first chapter) the poem risks speaking only *about* its own status and making, and does not stand as a mode of address speaking *out* to an addressee, appealing to another consciousness, or fulfilling the intersubjective imperative of lyric to which Graham dedicated so much of his life. This could be seen to be embodied in the difference between 'the longed-for, loved event, / To be by another aloneness loved' in 'Hilton Abstract'[71] and the shrouded and introspective 'From dark to dark, aloneness to aloneness / I move and hope to move out of the round' in 'The Dark Intention', as well as indicating that the poems were produced in the same period. But the latter could be said to effectively foreground the development of lyric's intra-

---

69 Samuel Solomon, 'Reproducing the Line: 1970s Innovative Poetry and Socialist-Feminism in the UK' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Southern California, 2012), 93

70 Veronica Forrest-Thomson, 'Pastoral and Parody', *Poetic Artifice* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2016), 165-226. Forrest-Thomson writes that 'Pastoral is the genre which asserts connection to the conventional level, which is granted, by convention, the right to put the complex into the simple, to unify the natural with the highly artificial […] [and] Parody is its counterpart, as a technique stressing connection to the thematic level what Pastoral is to the conventional', 167. This binary of pastoral/parody and conventional/thematic levels may be crudely aligned with that generally adopted between form/content, as Alison Mark does in *Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Language Poetry* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2001), 82, see also Robert Sheppard, *The Meaning of Form*, 39.

71 Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 177.

subjective function. For Empson, as noted by Forrest-Thomson, levels of poetic artifice have the potential to reveal the extent to which subjectivity is mediated by language and discourse. Forrest-Thomson writes, in 'Some Remarks on the Poetry of William Empson' (1974), an article which would develop into *Poetic Artifice*, that

> the necessary artificiality of […] style, which is a precondition of success in the attempt to exhibit detachment from mediation, makes [the poet, in Empson's view] self-conscious to a degree that precludes acceptance of any possible mediating discourse. And the manner in which his self-conscious form suspends all the many possible interpretations implied by the kinds of language makes it impossible for him to accept any one view of reality they present.[72]

We might summarize Forrest-Thomson's complex account of the relationship between artifice, self-consciousness and mediation via her analysis of Empson as follows. All language, whether scientific, poetic, everyday or other, mediates between subjectivity and reality. Poetry, in its privileging of language forms normally irrelevant to communication, is able to 'suspend the operation of applying language to reality long enough'[73] to produce a number of interpretations simultaneously, in a set of 'contradictory views of relation' which may or may not make up a general theme, depending on the complexity of the poem. During this process, the poet speaks for society but is distanced from the work and his tribe of people by the extent of the poem's artifice. A self-consciousness traditionally associated with lyric subjectivity is made secondary to a self-consciousness of artifice. That the poet is distanced from the work by artifice is, she says, 'the only possible way to maintain the function of the poet, his contact with his past and his ideological present'.[74] Her dismissal of the significance of the author-figure with regard to the poem's interpretation is one way in which she departs from Empson. And Empson's poetic project ultimately falls short, she says, because of his insistence that the 'reader's processes of understanding […] must be brought into a kind of language that is already

[72] Forrest-Thomson, 'Rational Artifice', 236.
[73] Ibid., 238.
[74] Ibid., 232.

accepted in a given society'. This results, she says, in nothing short of a 'devaluation […] of purely formal qualities'.[75] Her commitment to artifice is more extreme than his. Poetry, she says, should 'use techniques which would be *strange* or out of place in prose'.[76] In some of the examples from Empson's poetry she offers ('Let it Go', for instance), the poems' self-consciousness is not complex enough to suspend the poems' formal features from reality 'long enough for us to investigate the process',[77] something her own poetic project makes substantial attempts at, with varying degrees of success. The poetry can be both rationally and irrationally obscured but either way it must not result in loss of control over our reading of the poem, the suspension of the reader's interpretation, and in this regard Graham's complex verse may even be a more suitable candidate for Forrest-Thomson's development of Empson's notion than Empson's poetry itself.

'[R]ealism attempts to mimic unmediated transmission, while artifice stresses untransparent materiality',[78] is *The Princeton Encyclopedia*'s succinct summary of Forrest-Thomson's conception of poetic artifice. Graham's decision to begin each new line with a capital letter, 'To make people realise it's poetry',[79] particularly when it may not have been the height of fashion to do so, is one (surface-level) instance of untransparent materiality working to suspend interpretation, which eventually leads to the poem's assimilation within reality. In the same article Forrest-Thomson earlier writes, 'poetry is the form of language that […] [stresses] form as relevant to meaning […] thus making us aware of the medium before we have fixed on the experience'.[80] There is a key distinction between Forrest-Thomson and Graham's foregrounding of artifice, and it relates to the order of experience in language. In Graham, the poem is made 'artificial so that the sense will come

---

75 Ibid., 238.
76 Veronica Forrest Thomson, *Poetic Artifice* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2016), 33. My italics.
77 'Rational Artifice', 236.
78 'Artifice, Poetic', M. Castile in *Princeton Encyclopaedia*, 90.
79 Penelope Mortimer, 'A Poet's Interview with Himself', *Observer*, 19 November 1978 (quoted in Edwin Morgan, 'W.S. Graham and "Voice"' in *The Constructed Space* (Jackson's Arm, 1994), 78).
80 Forrest-Thomson, 'Rational Artifice', 235.

through': we remember the artifice as we read. The poem at times may prioritise 'how it is being made rather than about what it is trying to say', as arguably the 'didactic passage' above does, but the form remains intuitive, open to linguistic correlates and relations that the author and poem have not, and perhaps could not have, anticipated. We might refer to this style as painterly (in a post-war fashion), likeable to the way the brushstroke acts upon the medium as the medium acts upon the brush, not to mention the artist.[81] Where we are made aware of the 'medium before we have fixed on the experience' in Forrest-Thomson's account of Empson, the medium precedes thought and feeling. This position is inherently resistant to pre-linguistic meaning, as acknowledged by Forrest-Thomson in her discussion of Empson. Forrest-Thomson, however, differs from Empson in her implicit acknowledgement that not every detail and shift in attention can be accounted for by the author. 'Empson', she says, 'must believe that the reasoning intellect can function in conjunction with the intuitive experience behind poetic reading or writing'.[82] Forrest-Thomson, a critic sympathetic to Dada in *Poetic Artifice*, is more tolerant of disjunction between those two facets, though it could be said that she presents her own poetic work in *Poetic Artifice* as made only by reasoning intellect, however performative.

To make the poem's unconscious conscious, as Forrest-Thomson says of Empson's critical practice,[83] to bring it out from dark dialogues forensically, may be a violent act on the coherency and life of the form at hand, villanelle or otherwise. In her own villanelle, 'Not Pastoral Enough', a poem 'in homage to William Empson' pitched in a style somewhere between Empson and Graham, Forrest-Thomson writes that '…languages are apt to miss on souls / If reason only guts them',[84] suggesting that non-poetic languages can work violently on the peculiar logic of poetry. Forrest-

81 See, for example, *Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition*, ed. by Isabelle Graw (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).
82 Ibid., 236-237.
83 Ibid., 236.
84 Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Collected Poems* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2008), 23.

Thomson's poem also recalls, in its very first stanza, Graham's comment that 'the point of making verse is to make it artificial so that the sense will come through', as well as the echoing rhythm of Empson's 'Villanelle':

> It is the sense, it is the sense, controls
> Landing every poem like a fish.
> Unhuman forms must not assert their roles.

It is unclear which 'sense' is implied by Graham (the strictly artificial sense? The sense that permeates *through* artifice?), as in Graham's instruction to Astbury: 'the point of making verse is to make it artificial so that the sense will come through.' Forrest-Thomson's poem is ambiguous as to whether the sense the poem expounds is an attempt to suppress unhuman forms (to control them), whether they are already under control, or whether they surface regardless. It may be wishful thinking that we have the 'sense' at all when it is so comically insisted on throughout the poem, let alone that it could control.[85] (Wishful thinking is easily enacted by the villanelle's reiteration: its repetitions can swiftly become pleas or invocations in the face of loss. And there is immediate loss upon writing a villanelle of an as-yet undiscovered ending.) Landing a poem like a fish is an absurd simile in this context, yet it's also suggestive that writing, like fishing, is contingent, and destructive. 'Unhuman forms' are deliberately ambiguous: 'unhuman' is not human (nor is it inhuman), but it may give rise to the human, or vice versa. One possible reading of this is that unwelcome poetic forms – one such unhuman form – must not assert their roles definitively over sense.

The lines quoted from Forrest-Thomson are characteristically intertextual, in the vein of Empson's allusive style. Empson's borrowings vary from his use of Marvellian metre in 'Horation Ode'[86] to that of the syntactical structure of lines from *Othello*, discussed in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*:[87]

---

85 When deliberately rendering ambiguity with regard to the meaning and affect implied by 'sense' Forrest-Thomson would no doubt have had in mind Empson's 'Sense in *The Prelude*' (289-305) and the discussion of 'sense' in relation to 'wit' in 'Wit in the *Essay on Criticism*' (84-100: 86), both in *The Structure of Complex Words*.
86 This was brought to my attention by Michael Wood, *On Empson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 71.
87 William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 185-186.

It is the Cause, it is the Cause (my soul),
Let me not name it to you, you chaste Starres […]

This is closely echoed in Empson's 'Villanelle':

It is the pain, it is the pain, endures.
Your chemic beauty burned my muscles through.[88]

And then picked up by Forrest-Thomson, in the opening lines of 'Not Pastoral Enough'.

It is the sense, it is the sense, controls,
Landing every poem like a fish.

The lines from *Othello* are offered by Empson as an example of the sixth type of ambiguity. His critical analysis centres on the ambiguous one-word referent implied by 'it'. He writes that because there is no 'primary meaning' provided, 'secondary meaning […] holds the focus of consciousness, that we are listening to a mind withdrawn upon itself, and baffled by its own agonies'.[89] The intersubjective imperative of lyric becomes intra-subjective, but without what Forrest-Thomson calls suspension via artifice we are 'thrust back among the assumptions' of what specifically the word 'it' means.[90] Othello's address from 'I' to 'you' (or to 'it') is obscured by that ambiguity, and becomes absorbed in what it has a better chance of knowing, its consciousness. Along the way the villanelle also picks up Tennyson's 'Tithonus', 'The woods decay, the woods decay and fall'.[91] John Hollander refers to the ear as 'overhearing' Tennyson's lines in Empson's and the Empson poem as 'usurping originality' from the former.[92] (And there is an after-echo to that usurpation in Forrest-Thomson's poem.) The intersection of originality, intention and (over)hearing neatly anticipate both the Graham of 'The Dark Intention' and the Denise Riley of 'Dark Looks'.

88 Empson, *Collected Poems*, 22.
89 Empson, *Seven Types*, 185-186.
90 Ibid.
91 Tennyson, *Selected Poems*, chosen and edited by Michael Millgate (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 90.
92 John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo* (California: University of California Press, 1981), 98.

The enduring pain of Empson's 'Villanelle' becomes a loss which throws up a tension between passivity and agency ('My stare drank deep beauty that still allures. / My heart pumps yet the poison draught of you.'). For Graham in 'The Dark Intention' a similar tension is established: the fear of realizing one's intention in form is made manifest in an unrecognizably spooky guise. In Empson's poem, there is a caustic, sensory immediacy which is either latent – in which case the poem anticipates its harm ('The infection slept') – or capable of being commandingly present ('My heart pumps yet the poison draught of you.'). This is an inversion of the model of the typically objectified muse, and an uncomfortable one. The speaker wants to condemn the presence of the addressee as toxic, and to selectively edit their attributes to 'kind[ness]' and 'deep beauty' – as an instrumentalist reading would select only parts of a poem's form or text in an exegesis – producing a self-pitying passivity, unwilling to account for the necessarily dialogic interaction between lovers, even post-breakup, which may be evocative even of emotional abuse. This contributes to the closed 'sense' of the form in this context. The refrain works to continuously bring together 'endures' and 'yours', while the set of rhymes that make up the middle stanza also includes 'your', as the poem continuously defers to the second person(s). The poem 'holds the focus of [its] consciousness' but in doing so privileges that consciousness to the point of potentially delusional self-protection, undermining the lyric trajectory from the 'I' to the reading or listening 'you'. Empson's 'Missing Dates',[93] by comparison, is enriched by the absence of an 'I'. The villanelle recycles its 'waste' into ever more harmful – and inevitable – scenarios, and the poem settles into the rehearsed ambivalence of the repeated lines newly presented as uncompromising facts, which is both the promise of an unpalatable recurrence ('The waste remains…') and a death ('…the waste remains and kills').

The speaker of Graham's villanelle, though similarly presenting himself at risk, is more open to that which cannot be known or named, embodied in this instance by the dark.

---

[93] Empson, *Collected Poems*, 60.

The Dark Intention

My first intention was at least not this
That darkly gathers over the ground.
The dark discloses us in different ways.

Here in this wood can I be this disguise
Wielding a muffled light without a sound?
My first intention was at least not this.

This dark man strong in spades I have to face.
For I who hide and seek shall not be found.
The dark discloses us in different ways.

The wood is walking round me yet this place
Itself which I have made is still profound.
My first intention was at least not this.

What cracked that stick? Who made that black noise?
The dark is seeing what the blind astound.
The dark discloses us in different ways.

From dark to dark, aloneness to aloneness
I move and hope to move out of the round.
My first intention was at least not this.
The dark discloses us in different ways.[94]

Graham's 'The Dark Intention' is imbued, like Empson's villanelles, with foreboding, but there is an openness exhibited in relation to the villanelle form to the speaker's intention being acted upon by language, to be othered or disclosed, and not only mediated by it. This notion ('My first intention was at least not this') is explicitly outlined in Graham's 1946 statement of poetics, 'Notes on a Poetry of Release': 'The poem is more than the poet's intention',[95] which echoes Cleanth Brookes' 'The Intentional Fallacy', collected in *The Verbal Icon* in 1954 though first published earlier in 1946, and likely to have been in the air. Graham also met some of the younger New Critics on his trips to the US, including John Crowe Ransom.[96] The first intention, as Graham has it, is nothing more than an

94 Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 270-271.
95 Graham, 'Notes on a Poetry of Release' in *The Nightfisherman*, 380.
96 See Francis, *Where the People Are*, 22.

'illusion' and 'continually shatters itself'[97] – by being realised and named it is already more or less than itself, changed. The sense of foreboding attached to that realisation in this poem merges with the figurative spookiness of the scene, its suggestion of dark and eerie happenings, like the mingling of aural and visual: 'muffled light without a sound'. First intentions are darkened and obscured, but the dark here is also a vital matter *of* intention. The fear of the speaker is amplified given that the dark provides no subject or object to which that fear can be transferred; it is a reflexively self-conscious place, where to speak is to have 'made' this place, and this place occurs at the interface of this self-making and its context. 'The wood [is walking] round me' and the dark still has the capacity to 'disclose [the speaker] in different ways' despite the speaker's attempts to withhold his intentions from both the dark and himself. Simultaneous holding and disclosing is a recurrent familiar duality for Graham (stemming, perhaps, from his interest in Heraclitus), and it is analogous with the ability to both 'hide and seek' here, just as the streets are 'hide and seeking' and not the speaker in 'The Dark Dialogues'. 'This intention' and 'This dark man' are aligned by both the enjambment between them and the deictic: the reflexive intention might, indeed, be a self-reflection. He 'must face' the figure head on in order to discern who it is, to scrutinise the face, whereas the 'dark' is more diffuse, yet still has the power to disclose us. But the insistence that 'My first intention was at least not this' is weakened by the 'at least' and the recurrence of that phrase (does 'at least' modify his first intention, or 'this'?) and the poem knowingly suggests a speaker denying themselves, or their unconscious. Given that the villanelle establishes its frame of reference and tone in the first stanza, and this phrasing is modified only slightly by the changes in punctuation as the lines recur, the form enacts a tension between suppression and repetition: we know from the first line that the speaker's 'first intention', spatialised abstractly by the familiar deictic 'this' (as well as 'that'), will surface again, possibly rearranged by its new stanzaic context. That Graham was willing, only in this instance, to

[97] Graham, 'Notes on a Poetry of Release', 380.

have his meaning shaped by the villanelle form and not 'made' intuitively within the visually short but prosodically roomy three-beat line, brings our attention to the extent of mediation enacted by the villanelle, through which it comes to seem, to borrow Graham's expression of abandoned stanza draft from 'The Dark Dialogues' quoted at the start of this chapter, like 'A branks, a clamp, an iron / Impediment'. (Graham's later poem 'The Secret Name' develops similar themes in a tighter yet more searchingly intuitive form.[98]) The challenge set by the form is to find ways of '[moving] out of the round' of its repetition, within that round. The achievement of this poem is in its revealing that to formally constrain one's utterance into lines is to witness one's utterance being mediated by form, and that the expression may be determined to the point of being unbearable or fearful, just as the effect of vocalizing a fear may be to make it real, and, in the context of others, irrevocably exterior.

The agency that is other to the poetic 'I' – in Graham's case his now unrecognisable intention, in Empson's the painful influence of another – is realised materially in poetic form and, for Graham, complicated by the fact it is 'dark', a notion which naturally accommodates the unconscious and the possibility of unconscious intentions. (It is perhaps befitting, though tantalizing, that no visual worksheets have been identified for the poem.) The 'dark' is rendered as a nonhuman agency, an underside to intentional disclosure, an agency that exceeds a legible poetic frame. The conscious and alert self cannot master the dark, just as the art of the villanelle is 'hard to master' by even the most competent poet, as Bishop intimates. Empson's declarative poetic style, and his 'uneasy' relation to the author's (and therein, surely, the medium's) unconscious, resists such a darkness. The high rhetorical questioning of Empson's 'Villanelle' together with what Samuel Solomon calls its 'pseudo-scientific lexicon'[99] ('What later purge from this deep toxin cures? / What kindness now could the old salve renew?') may estrange a reader, whereas Graham's specific spatial

98 *New Collected Poems*, 237.
99 Solomon, 'Reproducing the Line', 92.

prompts ('What cracked that stick?') situate either himself, his addressee or reader in a soundscape. The question 'Who cracked that stick?' recalls the beginning of 'The Dark Dialogues', Section 3: 'I speak as well as I can / Trying to teach my ears / To learn to use their eyes / Even only maybe / In the end to observe / The behaviour of silence', which primes us for 'Listening while a branch / Squeaked in the resinous dark / And swaying silences'.[100] There is an unignorable strangeness and immediacy to disembodied sound. Without an identifiable object, agencies are embodied by elements which usually denote absence: the dark sees, the dark is resinous, silences sway. The dark is textured, palpable – resinous as wood or paint, or paint on wood. It evokes the 'loud grain' of the door in the same poem,[101] providing a sense of both the liveliness of inanimate things (doors or language), and the mingling of senses: sound and light, sound and touch.

Dark, like silence or form, is a kind of abstract matter, and no less present or potent for that. In works published between 1953-58 the word 'dark' figures extensively in Graham's vocabulary, just as silence does. It begins to act as both an established trope, part of the repertoire which makes up his self-conscious 'artificiality of style', while retaining a sense of the word's mysterious embodiment of the unconscious, that which resists rational, pre-determined form. 'The Dark Intention' presents a valuable attempt at invoking the dark within a received form, and is unique within the oeuvre, even though it has similarities with other, more characteristic, formal achievements which are more commonly engaged with abstraction. In one example, the merging of darkness (and indeed 'dark') and intention occurs again explicitly in 'What is the Language Using Us for?' from *Implements in their places* (1977):

> What is the language using us for?
> It uses us all and in its dark
> Of dark actions selections differ.[102]

---

[100] Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 171.
[101] Ibid., 168.
[102] Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 200.

The prepositioning of 'dark / Of dark' suggests that the dark not only has depth but a spatial configuration. The coupling of 'actions selections' suggests that action in verse is selection, recalling Roman Jakobson's axes of selection and combination.[103] Our formation in language may be precise and structural(ist), and yet we can still be in the dark when it comes to rationally accounting for that selection. This accommodation of the dark, of what we cannot name or realise consciously, an unhuman quantity, is one means of naturalising artifice (often by rooting it in a wood, or an icy extreme), and making artifice natural, as Wallace Stevens' speaker 'understood / Inhuman, of the veritable ocean' ('The Idea of Order at Key West').[104] The poem asks, do we inhabit the dark, or are we inhabited by it? The dark is also the dead, whom lyric may have the potential to reanimate or to invoke, as we will see in the poetry of Denise Riley, for whom 'the dark intention' of poetic form is conceived as the 'the unconscious *of* language' (which is a modification of Jakobson's phrase, 'intuitive verbal latency').[105] Denise Riley, like Forrest-Thomson, has been associated with the Cambridge School, which overlaps – at least in part – with Empson's influence on literary study at that university, and beyond. Riley, as I will show, developed her own uniquely intuitive and politically self-conscious poetic forms to mediate radically different levels of experience.

The worksheet annotation of Graham's I first discussed, 'the didactic passage, a lecture, a thesis in verse' (in relation to the passage beginning 'I have to choose a way / A branks, a clamp, an iron…') is followed by the qualification 'condensed into verse, not versified'. This compelling clause may be interpreted as referring to the difference between the didactic qualities condensed into the villanelle's tight rounds, but still very much on the surface (as in 'The Dark Intention'), and the versification of didacticism which gets submerged within incompatible textures of the length of

---

103 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics' in *Poetry and Theory*, ed. by Jon Cook, 350-358 (356). Jakobson first delivered this paper at the University of Indiana in 1958.
104 Stevens, 'Idea of Order at Key West', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 105.
105 Denise Riley, 'Is there linguistic guilt?', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 1, 89. (See also: 'Subliminal Verbal Patterning in Poetry' in Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, 250-61; 250.)

poems like 'The Dark Dialogues' and 'The Nightfishing'. In contrast to Graham, in Riley's later work the didactic inclination is made explicit in her most embodied engagement with form's plasticity.

This chapter has presented the unpublished 'The Dark Intention' as conceptually connected to 'The Dark Dialogues' but nonetheless as a major turning point in Graham's body of work, and an object lesson in Graham's spatial (re-)configuration of lyric self-consciousness expounded by this thesis. The poem is also a sophisticated critical exploration of poetic intention as it intersects with the villanelle, and by extension, 'received' forms of verse,[106] pushing against the limits and the 'rounds' of form by enshrouding them in a figurative darkness. This, paradoxically, renders a new formal clarity. Riley, as we will see in the next chapter, develops on the achievements of both Graham's critical-poetic self-sufficiency and Empson and Forrest-Thomson's literary-critical innovation by way of feminist, philosophical and clairvoyant forms of knowledge.

[106] The achievements of this uniquely self-conscious poem are further evidenced by the fact that the villanelle is already perceived to be particularly amenable to self-description. In the anthology *Villanelles (Everyman's Library Pocket Poets)*, ed. by Annie Finch and Marie-Elizabeth Mali (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), there is an entire subsection of poems dedicated to 'Villanelles about Villanelles' (185-198).

Chapter 5

'Unquiet as a Talkative Ear': Graham and Denise Riley

> 'How shall I say you best? Who overhears' – W. S. Graham[1]

> ""To make yourself seen reflects back to you, but to make yourself heard goes out toward another."
> That's all I, Echo, ever do.' – Denise Riley, 'Affections of the Ear'[2]

i Time's Ear

Even given the various forms of intertextual play throughout Denise Riley's writing, the regularity of echoes, implicit and explicit, of W. S. Graham's voice and style is striking. The high regard with which she holds him is also strikingly consistent. Key Riley scholars have referred to Graham as both 'one of [Riley's] favorite poets'[3] and 'perhaps Riley's favourite modern poet',[4] and yet no sustained consideration of their dialogue exists. It is with these factors in mind that I want to reflect here on Riley's work in relationship to Graham's – and also, briefly, reflect on Graham's work through the retrospective lens of Riley's.

Denise Riley has, throughout her career, made received verse forms conceptual and critical. In doing so she offers a key political dimension to many of W. S. Graham's concerns regarding the

---

1 'From a 1949 Notebook', 36.
2 Echo quotes Lacan quoting Freud. 'Affection of the Ear' in *Selected Poems* (London: Reality Street, 2000), 96 and *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2000), 109.
3 Samuel Solomon, 'Denise Riley's Socialized Biology' in the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 5 (2), 197, n.
4 Andrew Duncan, *Centre and Periphery* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 100.

mediation of self-consciousness in language. Given that Graham's poetry is a presence for both Riley's early elliptical lyric expressionism and what Stephanie Bert refers to as her 'aggressively traditional'[5] recent work, *as well as* for both her creative work and her philosophy of language, Graham offers a useful lens through which to read her development. On the surface of it, two of Riley's key 'phases' could be said to align with this thesis' first two chapters about a spatial poetics rendered in aural and visual terms, respectively. Her approach could be said to transition from a painterly poetics concerned primarily with space and simultaneity, into a lyric centred on listening ('Listening for Lost People', 'Say Something Back') and therefore with sound, duration and seriality. It's tempting to put the major development between these two styles down to Riley's reconfiguring of her practice following the death of her son in the period between the publication of *Selected Poems* in 2000 and 'A Part Song' of 2012 in which she did not publish poetry.[6] But the development is not so clean cut: her earlier works, it could be argued, also develop aspects of Graham's poetics. 'Castalian Spring' and 'Affections of the Ear' (2000), which I will discuss, consider the extent to which lyric address can position or interpellate a subject, and her early critical work *Am I That Name?* (1988), about the historical category of 'woman', explores the relation between the determining act of naming and identity in flux. These are in ways continuous with Graham's concerns regarding self-consciousness and literary form. Both Graham, and a commitment to lyric, have been constant fixtures throughout Riley's career.

A key question then is: in a body of work of such idiosyncratic and various philosophic and literary intertextual range as Riley's, why does Graham's presence remain so stable? Riley is a feminist philosopher and a feminist poet. She seems generous to Graham, therefore, when she

---

5 Stephanie Burt, 'After the Rain', review of *Say Something Back*, in *The Poetry Review* 106:2, Summer 2016. <https://poetrysociety.org.uk/publications-section/the-poetry-review/book-reviews-after-the-rain/> [accessed 6 December 2019]

6 'A Part Song' was first published in *London Review of Books*, vol. 34 No. 3, 9 February 2012, 14.

chooses to align her work with 'Implements in their Places' in *Say Something Back* (and elsewhere) when Graham's poem contains the aggressively bawdy lines – 'if I may speak / Here on behalf of our cock members, / This year we're building early and some / Of us have muses due to lay'. The same is true of her reference to '…a self-satirising comic sexual adventurer […] [as] a bit of squaring-up attitudinising', in connection with the poem's other 'rancid asides'.[7] The implication is that the gender politics of Graham's implements appear permissible to Riley when they are self-reflective, actorish or drag-like, and when they engage explicitly with the notion of the muse. The aforementioned absence of any explicit politics in Graham's own lyric poetry is worth noting again, in contrast to Riley. Like her, he often dismantles the dynamics of lyric poetry as an artifice in a discursive zone removed from identifiably politicised structure. (In Riley's case, it can be left to a few pronouns to charge the poem with an excoriating political implication.[8]) But as Jeremy Noel-Tod has shown in a recent study, Graham could begin drafting a poem with a historical subtext, such as the experience of a holocaust survivor in 'Ten Shots of Mister Simpson', only to remove it from the final decontextualised object.[9] Similarly in 'Language Ah Now you Have Me', which began life as 'Five Verses Beginning With the Word Language', Graham superimposes his attempt 'to write about a soldier dying on the Paddy fields of Vietnam of a belly-wound and the flies at his face' with the 'damp paper / In the rain forest beside the Madron River' (Madron being his Cornish locale).[10] Yet, in spite of Graham's uninterrogated use of his privileged subject position, Graham's playfully dogged commitment to subjectivity and self-disclosure in language has remained vital for Riley's

---

7 Denise Riley, 'W.S. Graham, "Implements in Their Places", notes for Bristol, March 2016', unpublished.
W.S. Graham, 'Implements in their Places' in *New Collected Poems*, ed. by Matthew Francis (London: Faber, 2004), 255.
8 See, for example, 'A Note on Sex and the "Reclaiming of Language"', *Selected Poems*, 11.
9 See Jeremy Noel-Tod, 'Yet More Shots of Mister Simpson' in *Chicago Review* 62:01/02, 2019, 128-135.
10 W. S. Graham, *Aimed at Nobody* edited by Robin Skelton and Margaret Blackwood (London: Faber, 1993), 66, and collected in *New Collected Poems*, 368-9. See Matthew Francis, *Where the People Are*, 24.

oeuvre. Indeed, while propounding its integrity, she furnishes many of his probing experiments in poetic form with a new political or affective urgency.

Riley has in her own way remained a dogged advocate of the critical value of Graham's work. Until only recently he was, she claims in a recent interview, a 'really minority taste, to an extraordinary degree, he somehow missed being in the ranks of widely read poets […] [he] was always bracketed off'.[11] What Riley refers to is not a revival of interest in Graham so much as a new critical awareness of him. Graham's reputation was at its peak around the time of his death, and the neglect of his work has been overstated: he was critically neglected, perhaps, but not forgotten. What Riley implies is that Graham has recently acquired a substantial critical audience for the first time. Evidence of this new domain lies in Graham's popularity in young poets and critics of notably different stylistic and party-political leanings.

There was a surge of interest in Graham around the appearance of the *New Collected Poems* edited by Matthew Francis, along with Francis's monograph, *Language is Where the People Are*, and the edited collection *Speaking Towards You*, which all appeared in 2004. But only recently have 'critics in the academy got hold of Graham in quite a widespread way, and all the attention turned back to the question of what Graham might've read at Newbattle college […] [it has become clear that] you can't really read Graham without looking at Heidegger's late essays',[12] the latter as evidenced in work by Robin Purves.[13] Graham's new status is confirmed most definitively by his first-time inclusion in the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* in its sixth edition,[14] coincidentally published in the year of his centenary. A *New Selected Poems* appeared in 2018 to mark the centenary, along with centenary activities organized by the Estate of W.S. Graham (#WSG100), including festival appearances, an

11 Personal interview with Denise Riley, York, 16 March 2017.
12 Ibid.
13 Robin Purves, 'W.S. Graham and the Heidegger Question', in *Complicities: British Poetry 1945-2007*, ed. by Robin Purves and Sam Ladkin (Litteraria Pragensia, 2009), 4-29.
14 *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. by Margaret W. Freguson, Tim Kendall and Mary Jo Salter, 6th edn (Norton, 2018).

exhibition at the National Poetry Library, and so on.[15] A centenary Festschrift anthology produced in connection with #WSG100, *The Caught Habits of Language*, seeks to locate Graham's work among many contemporary 'widely read' poets: it includes contributions by Sarah Howe, Riley herself, and other poets who appear on the major prize shortlists, as well as those from the avant-garde who don't: John Wilkinson, Emily Critchley and Peter Manson. If Graham now occupies a much more visible place on the critical and poetic map more generally, as we will see, Riley herself has contributed valuable work to *The Caught Habits*, along with *Try To Be Better*, a creative-creative engagement with Graham's notebooks. She has also made her own subtle and compelling campaign for the vitality and significance of Graham's oeuvre throughout her own writing practices – though she would never call it that. This makes a far more compelling case than these mere bibliographic details can.

Riley took part, generously and gamely, in public events marking Graham's centennial in 2018,[16] as well as earlier ones such as the 2016 Bristol symposium 'W. S. Graham: The Far Coasts of Language' organised by the Bristol Poetry Institute. Her contributions to these projects are notable for the ways they confirm the extent to which her work corresponds with and develops aspects of Graham's poetic project. They also mark a crucial stage of her own. Her tryptic of poems for *The Caught Habits* are unlike many of the contributions to the anthology, pastiches or versions of Graham's plainspoken intimacy or biographical throwbacks. They form free-standing texts within her own *oeuvre*. Conversely, in not employing the characteristic direct, demotic address in an attempt to mimic the performed intimacy of Graham's elegies, Riley's poems are no less – in fact, are more –

[15] Faber's 2018 *Selected*, edited by Matthew Francis, offers a general survey of Graham's greatest hits, with aptly few poems from his earlier phase, though it is the first single volume to include the villanelle 'The Dark Intention', which I argued in a previous chapter constitutes a significant part of his formal development. NYRB's *Selected*, also published in 2018 to mark the centenary and edited by Michael Hofmann, is confrontationally reflective of the editor's taste and personality.

[16] For example, Riley performed at events to mark the publication of *The Caught Habits of Language* at Newcastle Poetry Festival 4 May 2018.

dialogic with his work and its spatial problems and propositions. Given that so much of form, as we saw argued by Forrest-Thomson, works at the level of parody between sound and sense and marks off poetry from prose, it is unsurprising that Riley's poem for Graham is so compelling when she inhabits Graham at the level of form.

> Graham's early poem 'Gigha' was, as I learnt in interview, the first poem Riley discovered:
>
> when I was at school I read my way around the local public library, it worked by categorisation – at some point I came across […] the *Faber Book of Modern Verse*. I probably would have been 16 or 17, the poem was 'Gigha', off the island of Gigha, and I never forgot it, it was in the back of my mind for quite a long while and then of course *Implements in their Places* was published in 1977, I would have come across that shortly afterwards. […] There is something very sort of unique and miraculous about Graham.[17]

Riley's childhood in adopted care, which she has suggested was abusive, was spent in Carlisle, the county town of Cumbria, ten miles south of the Scottish border.[18] As previously discussed, Graham's work frequently (self-)consciously inhabits the Anglo-Scots border ballad tradition. Riley came to literary consciousness in 1950s Carlisle, the period in which, coincidentally, Graham was producing his most innovative experiments with form and constraint, developing the tradition of the border ballad (as in 'Song of the Tower' (1949), and the use of song in 'The Nightfishing' (1955)) at another Celtic edge-land, The Land's End Peninsular. Riley's proximity to the Scots border, both geographically and in her anecdotal encounter with a work of such peculiar Scots flavour as Graham's, could be seen to anticipate her interest in the intersection of linguistic shape and identity. It may at least explain the appeal of Graham's mysterious, elliptical 'Gigha' to the young writer, together with her relatively early interest in Sorley Maclean. Riley read Maclean later, in the 1970s and 80s, towards the end of what is seen as her period of apprenticeship as writer to Wendy

17 Personal interview with Denise Riley, York, 16 March 2017. *Implements in their Places* was published in 1977, the same year as Riley's *Marxism for Infants*.
18 Denise Riley, 'Waiting' in *Truth, Dare, Promise: Girls Growing Up in Fifties Britain*, ed. Liz Heron (London: Virago, 1985). 237-248.

Mulford.[19] Maclean's 'Hallaig' she sees as 'brilliant', 'a different kind of writing [from Graham], but not so different'.[20] Like Graham, Maclean was similarly 'well aware of what was going on in French and German literature'. And like Graham's 'Gigha', 'Hallaig' is enigmatically philosophical, yet worrying the divide between what Graham called nature and 'non-nature', and in this case richly inhabiting – rather than merely evoking – the live (but threatened) idiom, Gaelic in which Maclean writes. Both are ghostings: in 'Gigha', men 'wave with the sound of drowning', in 'Hallaig' 'The girls [are] a wood of birch trees / Standing tall, with their heads bowed',[21] its bewitched woodland invoking the border ballad tradition, which Graham would deconstruct in 'Imagine a Forest'. Where Maclean made a more decisive attempt to protect Scottish dialect, Graham's attitude was, as discussed in my ballads chapter, more ambivalent and playful with that tradition, weary as he was of the trend of 'synthetic Scots'. The connection between Riley's Northern English borderland childhood and interest in such different cultural border-writers seems suggestive in an oblique way and may have a bearing on her abiding interest in Graham.

In the short memoir-piece 'Waiting' (1985) Riley writes of her own identity-formation, and the importance of discovering *The Second Sex* and *A Room of One's Own* during her repressive Catholic schooling, amid the threat of imprisonment from her authority figures. The piece is addressed to her young self in the second person: 'You had heard that there was one [a prison], Holloway, and that was for you. […] Your cell was already waiting for you. How could you endure the time? You rehearsed word games in preparation for your confinement.'[22] In one of her poems Riley returns to the idea of incarceration as a possibly reparative rehearsal of her own aforementioned childhood

---

[19] See Riley's reflections on her early writing career in Cambridge and Mulford's encouragement in Juha Virtanen, *Poetry and Performance During the British Poetry Revival 1960–1980: Event and Effect* (Palgrave, 2017), 178-9. 'Wendy – who is a very vivacious, very animated and very warm person – more or less prised the manuscript from me.' 178.
[20] Personal interview with Denise Riley, York.
[21] Sorley Maclean, 'Hallaig', translated by Seamus Heaney, *Guardian* 'The Saturday Poem', 20 Nov 2002 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/nov/30/featuresreviews.guardianreview35> [accessed 6/12/19]
[22] Denise Riley, 'Waiting' in *Truth, Dare, Promise: Girls Growing Up in Fifties Britain*, ed. Liz Heron (London: Virago, 1985). 241-342.

trauma: 'I'd drive anywhere with anyone, just / to have that held sense of looking out / from a container, amiably, stolidly, while / I'm portered by' ('A Shortened Set').[23] Riley extends the car metaphor in 'True North', in which the speaker's body is racked by an orientation determined from beyond the it:

> My body's frame arched to a drum houses a needle. A splinter […]
> This thick body can't dim its brilliance though it vexes the car of my flesh.[24]

The mention of word games in connection with confinement (whether vehicular, carceral or otherwise) recalls a large span of Graham's work – 'Clusters Travelling Out', 'Fifteen Devices', 'The Beast in the Space', and *Cage Without Grievance* – which often reveals the extent to which language constitutes both an environment and one's release from it, or its paradoxical release *into* another's world.[25] Earlier we heard Graham's poetry labelled as 'creating a powerful impression of synthetic self-containment', a description employed by Tony Lopez in his discussion of the forties work for the dense 'loading of lines, [which wrenches] the language away from normal sense'.[26] In both Graham's and Riley's poetry, there are many realisations of confinement, together with the less sinister notion of containment, as means of release into a new linguistic world. Where for Riley in the biographical note linguistic games constitute release from a carceral space (and in this she recalls the recent work of Andrea Brady, a Riley scholar, on carceral prosody[27]), Graham's abstract acts offset metrical stricture and shouts and whimpers largely for art's sake. That there is, on the surface

---

[23] Denise Riley 'A Shortened Set' in *Selected Poems* (London: Reality Street), 42.
[24] See Andrea Brady, 'Echo, Irony, and Repetition in the Writings of Denise Riley' in *Contemporary Women's Writing* 7:2 July 2013, on the poem's implicitly theoretical account of interpellation: '…although Riley accepts that the subject is constituted by power, she seeks out theoretical identifications, with language, with the "outside" or the extimate, which have the potential to mitigate the destiny of subjection', 147.
[25] See Graham, 'Notes on a Poetry of Release', *The Nightfisherman*, 379-383, and the notebook comments I have already discussed: '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', *The Nightfisherman*, 162.
[26] Tony Lopez, 'Graham and the 1940s', in *W. S. Graham: Speaking Towards You*, Tony Lopez, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 39.
[27] Brady's 2017 conference paper 'Inside lyric: poetry in prison' 'considered how imprisonment of the body complicates the poetic foot, the interplay of conditions of physical restraint with poetic constraint, and the elaborate hallucinations and affective intensities unleashed by conditions of solitude and sensory deprivation'. Ellen Dillon, 'Outside-in/Inside-out: A Festival of Outside and Subterranean Poetry', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 9(1), 2017.

of it, much less at stake in Graham's poetically playful 'jungle of mistakes of communication' qualifies Lopez's description of Graham's self-consciousness as 'synthetic' in its erring departure from 'normal sense'. With few exceptions, it is an artificial realm, where confinement is privileged art-making in a workshop rather than entrapment. With regards the exceptions, the most powerful and suggestive is 'Clusters Travelling Out', where the spatial hierarchies of form are never more oppressive, 'Here behind this tempered mesh', where lyric poetry is the 'concrete / Soundbox we slide the jargon across'. He often demonstrates how his lyric poetry usually 'knows' it is being heard and overheard, but here he suggests how the incarcerated subject is denied that knowledge, having only a constant nebulous sense of surveillance: 'Are you receiving those clusters / I send out travelling? Alas / I have no way of knowing or / If I am overheard here.'[28]

In the previously discussed annotations for the 'The Dark Dialogues' Graham refers cryptically in his annotation to the graphic sketch for the poem to a 'gruelling, confining / three stress lode out', emphasising the laborious nature of verse-making. This could be an extension of his masculine (over-)identification with the 'vesselled men' of the herring boats and tin mines in 'The Thermal Stair', and conception of poetic form as 'A branks, a clamp, an iron'.[29] It recalls something of Eve Sedgwick's reflection on her 'therapist's gift for guyish banalization' because he has 'always been fascinated by machines', and his misguided alignment of therapy with this sensibility.[30] For Graham notions of the interaction between an opted-for but nonetheless gruellingly exact shape and a counteractive intuition were influenced not only by normative mid-century masculinity but, as we have seen, by the expansive geometric abstraction of Ben Nicholson and Naum Gabo and their publication *Circle* (1937). They were also guided by the radiantly abstract realisations of recessional

---

28 Graham, 'Clusters Travelling Out' in *New Collected Poems*, 192.
29 Undated worksheet for 'The Dark Dialogues', private collection of Marius Kociejowski. (From the draft stanza annotated as 'the didactic passage. the extreme of selfconsciousness'.)
30 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Dialogue on Love* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 5.

space by Patrick Heron and others later, along with the more class-conscious constructions of tin mines made by Lanyon, as in the aforementioned *Construction for 'St Just'* (1952) and *St Just* (1953). Behind his interest in these visual artists, however, lay Graham's own training as a journeyman engineer, which could be seen to authenticate some of these instincts as a writer. If Riley takes anything from this it is with regards to lyric's inherently and impersonally mechanical nature as genre and form, which is no less charged with affect.

In the early poem, 'The Hill of Intrusion', Graham writes of his boyish nostalgia for his Scottish childhood in terms of containment:

> The ear the answer
> Hears the wrecked cry
> Of the one-time
> Holiday boy who
> Feathered his oars
> On a calm firth
> Held still by hills.[31]

In both Graham and Riley's cases, prepubescence is framed as a linguistic enclosure, as embodied here by the 'ear the answer': the ear being essentially enclosed around its edges, contained, but the purpose of its shape to be open, to catch sound. This has more sinister implications as Graham's poem progresses:

> The ear the answer
> Hears the caged cry
> Of those prisoners
> Crowded in a gesture
> Of homesickness.

Again, Graham seeks to identify his own inhabiting of space (prosodic or childhood) with a more violent historical context, and the ear is the emblematic vehicle to embody as well as through which to realise this.

---

[31] Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 63.

Graham's previously discussed comments on two stanzas in 'The Dark Dialogues' refer to 'the didactic passage. the extreme of selfconsciousness [sic], what might have been, in a poem by Empson or Sitwell,[32] notes, but have been a section in the poem'. The lines in question are:

> I am the shell held
> To time's ear and you
> May hear the lonely leagues
> Of the kittiwake and the fulmar

The idea of the poem as a device that listens to itself, and that this should be rendered didactically, in an 'extreme of selfconsciousness', is developed by Riley, as we will see. It is an idea Graham situated in the motif of the shell, a modulation of the 'the ear in the answer' in the early poem. The boyish act of listening for the sound of the sea contained within a tangible, talismanic form, a shell, which is really an object or relic of time, echoes Graham's repeated invocations of childhood places of personal significance. The shell is not only a listening device, but it resembles an ear. Whether he's counting steps on Ben Narnain, at Loch Thom (and Loch Long 'lies / Held still between / Hills') or recreating the 'long ropeworking / Hide and seeking riveting town of my child / Hood' ('Greenock at Night I Find You'[33]), Graham wants to show how his subjecthood is constructed schematically, an environment and syntax held together by rivets from Greenock. The enjambed 'child / Hood' may be a device, a disguise, a hood to wear. Similarly, earlier the poem states that 'I go / Only as a shell / Of my former self', the self as broken down into the components of artifice. The boyish impulse to disassemble objects, industrial or psychoanalytic, into their constituent parts makes for a tender structuralism or, following Graham's artistic awakening in St Ives, constructivism. As we saw with Graham's annotations to 'The Dark Dialogues', a poem centred on ties between family dynamic and self-disclosure, the margins to the poems are a site in which the

[32] Undated worksheet for 'The Dark Dialogues', W. S. Graham papers, private collection of Marius Kociejowski.
[33] Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 219.

very notion of linguistic self-consciousness may be assembled before it is 'condensed' in verse, or a shell.

Graham's intuition that 'The ear' is 'the answer' may be one reason why his work proves such a resource for Riley. As we will see, answering and talking ears become a recurrent motif for Riley in her conception of lyric's loneliness, which has more recently employed 'ideally responsive listening [as] a dialogue between voice and ear, where the ear's part is strong'.[34] In some ways this is simply a metaphorical extension of the loneliness of writing lyric. The strength of the ear may bolster the explorative articulations of the speaker in absence of her interlocutor, in her case her late son – an idea explored with devastating power across *Say Something Back*, which borrows Graham's implement 33 for its title:[35]

> Do not think you have to say
> Anything back. But you do
> Say something back which I
> Hear by the way I speak to you.[36]

Riley is shown to intensify Graham's lyric ('you do / Say something back') with a new imperative: in her case 'Say something back' becomes a desperate invocation, a plea. Graham in implement 33 is elegising Bryan Wynter, but Riley's elegising of her son complicates the temporal dynamic of that address, in that as his mother she now succeeds him, troubling linearity and genealogy ('*What is the first duty of a mother to a child? / At least to keep the wretched thing alive*'[37]). In this new compromised succession of events, 'It's late. And always will be late'.[38] The son is categorised conversationally as a 'late' son. Lyric address to him is now always belated. Yet poetry, and particularly poetry's organised formal properties, may invoke or clairvoyantly reanimate or echo 'late' subjects, as *Say Something Back*

---

[34] Riley, 'W.S. Graham, "Implements in Their Places", notes for Bristol, March 2016'.
[35] This is not the first time Riley has used Graham's 'Implements' as emblem for a book: Riley chose an 'Implement' to use on the cover of her edited collection, *Poets on Writing* (Macmillan, 1992).
[36] Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 247.
[37] Denise Riley, *Say Something Back* (London: Picador, 2016), 3.
[38] Ibid., 4.

implicitly attests. In such acts it finds 'release' form the incarcerating qualities of grief. This is a notion which prompts Riley's shift away from the abstract expressionist cadences that define earlier works like *Four Falling* or 'Disintegrate Me' (both from *Mop Mop Georgette*, 1993) towards the more explicitly determined forms of *Say Something Back*. Indeed, 'Disintegrate Me' takes its title from Graham's 'Enter a Cloud'. In doing so it turns the latter's lyric disintegration more violently back towards the speaker, producing a self-eviscerating logic: 'a slow hot cut spreads / to baste me now with questions of my own complicity in harm […] I can't fit / apt blame into self-damnation'.[39] Graham is clearly a presence in both styles, a testament to the persistence and versatility of his influence.

Graham's poems often deal with loss (the death of the father and mother in 'Loch Thom', for example), and the speaker's position in time tends to be changeable. Nevertheless the dynamic of the poems' lyric address in Graham remains intact, without the continual alterations enacted by and upon Riley's poems of grief, and the ghosted quality of her poems. Much of her formal and subjective emphasis on 'return' is without the innocuous (boyish) nostalgia highlighted above. Graham's 'dark dialogues' become, in Riley's iteration, the more sinister 'blindfolded songs'.[40] We can hear in them the pressure of the silence of Coleridgean one-sided exchange, which reads not only as an isolated song, but an isolating one, suppressing all senses but hearing.

In *Say Something Back* Riley adopts the kind of inherited verse forms that Graham's poetry manipulates but does not often entirely commit itself to. Where Graham in his mature style loosely adapts the villanelle, border ballad, or Elizabethan verse forms, Riley has recently adopted forms with weightier implications of tradition and atonement: Isaac Watts's quatrains, Tennyson's mnemonic *In Memoriam*, passages from the Old Testament, the arc of Shakespeare's sonnet 71. Gone

[39] Denise Riley, *Selected Poems*, 82.
[40] 'Four blindfolded songs' in Riley, *Say Something Back*, 15.

is the contemporaneity of Riley's allusions in her early work to the paintings of Gillian Ayres and Ian McKeever (who are themselves in part inheritors of Roger Hilton and Bryan Wynter, the painters Graham elegised) enmeshed with the pop lyrics of Betty Everett. The only explicit instance of ekphrasis in *Say Something Back* is to Piero della Francesca's *The Baptism of Christ* in 'A baptism'. The roaming expressionism of the early ekphrasis is recast as a short lyric merging apostrophe and the incandescent textures of della Francesca: 'violet whips up its / rich voices into airly / massed *ah oh ah ohs*'.[41] This glance backward, to early modern sources, is in keeping with Graham's immersion in the sermons of John Donne for their arch reflexivity. Graham says he'd read Donne's sermons in a 1945 letter.[42] Donne's deictic address to his listener's interiority – 'I am here speaking to you […] you are here now, hearing me'[43] – is then modulated by grief in Graham's 'Dear Bryan Wynter': 'Speaking to you and not / Knowing if you are there / Is not too difficult', or by paranoia in a searching address: 'I think I hear you hearing me. / I think I see you seeing me' ('Clusters Travelling Out').[44] But where Graham's later work experiments expansively with the puckish self-consciousness of Donne's sermons, taking from them not a poetic form but their disobediently discursive address, Riley embodies a weightier form and style: employing rigorous received forms to address the dead directly. In the words of Stephanie Burt, in 'intellective but aggressively traditional [poetry] […] Riley's new clarity is a late style, the work of a poet who writes for herself, not for us, and who addresses […] the dead'.[45] This clearly involves an assumption of the primacy of self-consciousness, possibly envisaging its total embodiment as a kind of linguistic death, in Blanchot-esque fashion. Riley and Graham are aligned in their wish to expose the scaffolds of their lyric poetry, but differ in

---

41 *Say Something Back*, 28.
42 *The Nightfisherman*, 50.
43 John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. by George Potter and Evelyn Simpson, 10 vols (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1953-1962), III (1962), 110.
44 'Dear Bryan Wynter', 'Clusters Travelling Out', *New Collected Poems*, 256, 192.
45 Stephanie Burt, 'After the Rain', *The Poetry Review*, 106:2, Summer 2016 <https://poetrysociety.org.uk/publications-section/the-poetry-review/book-reviews-after-the-rain/> [accessed 3/12/19]

the ways they fashion the relation between technique and subjectivity within their texts. Graham began working in a haunting neo-romantic mode of clotted portmanteaus and biblical allusions in the 1940s and early 50s and only found a more direct and tender version of abstraction in his later work. Almost conversely, Riley's early work is preoccupied with contingency in the determination of subjectivity and language, embodied by the cascading cadences and happenstances of *Four Falling* ('There's a cheerfully banal explanation for the shape of these, which is that they just fill my Macintosh screen'[46]), and the influence of idiomatic expression by pop music and advertising. Though Riley's more recent work embraces chance (particularly the 'very happy (and curious) accident' of rhyme[47]), the burden of the received forms she employs is heavier: through them she explores what spirits – of the language, of her past – may be re-invoked.

ii Affections of the Ear

What Stephanie Burt reads as aggressive in later Riley could alternatively be read as merely didactic. Riley's trying on of the poetic selves, affects and forms of other writers is nothing new, not to mention her probing study *The Words of Selves* (2000). We see this in 'Goethe on his holidays' and 'Letters from [Samuel] Palmer' which quote verbatim from their sources, as well as in the countless instances in which popular lyrics are merged within the address of her own post-romantic lyric, as in 'A Misremembered Lyric'.[48] It is also evident in her major reworkings of the Narcissus myth in both 'Castalian Spring' and 'Affections of the Ear', an instance of which I will discuss. What has changed,

[46] Romana Huk, 'in conversation with Denise Riley', *PN Review* 21.5 (May-June 1995) <https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=1912> [accessed 3/2/19]
[47] Denise Riley, 'Time, Rhyme, and Stopped Time', talk delivered at Psychoanalytic Poetry Festival 2014: Memory and Memorialisation at the Freud Museum. Unpublished.
[48] 'Goethe on his Holidays' first published in *Selected Poems* (London: Reality Street, 2000), 105-107; 'Letters from Palmer first published in *Mop Mop Georgette* (London: Reality Street, 1993), 13-15; 'A Misremembered Lyric' first published in *Mop Mop Georgette*, 31.

in the later work, I would argue, is a new emphasis on 'return'. Riley is invested in 'return' in many senses. On the one hand, she foregrounds poetry's periodic returns to an idea of received form, and the nature of echo, rhyme and rhythm as structured on aural returns. On the other – and at the same time – she creates temporal sequences that seek to offer an equivalent to the experience of grief, a temporal experience that might otherwise go unarticulated. So while the poetry may not transform that grief, it may rephrase it. Riley has described the debt she owes here to Emily Dickinson, a proto-modern-self-conscious poet of fragmented lyric and ballad, particularly in relation to her formal articulation of the 'severance' of time in grief, where life's sequence has been knocked out of order.[49] 'I'm not claiming that there is a "therapeutics" or a curative aspect of rhyme', she says. 'It won't mend the split between the usual forward movement of time, and the person who finds herself caught at a standstill.' Nevertheless she implies that rhyme, schematically used in the context of grief, may be 'emblematic' of

> the fact that there is change – you have been changed yourself, by your proximity to the death of an intimate – but there is also a return. There's a recognition, not of an identical replacement, but to something which recollects, in its sound, what had gone before. And it also anticipates what's to come.[50]

The poetics of 'return' and recollection on many planes is integral to the poems of *Say Something Back* (where 'back' too operates in multiple senses). Her poems have become most formal, schematic and object-like, at the point they confront the greatest loss, the loss of her son. Indeed, *Say Something Back* more coherently resembles a sequence than any of her other works. Her works are, as Burt observes, didactic, in the sense that they do not seek to suppress the shape of their 'to-fro, fro-to song' in an attempt to preserve idiomatic expression or the demotic ('Death makes dead metaphor revive'[51]), and each song is part of a more general scheme. Riley is willingly confined to her metre

---

[49] Denise Riley, 'Time, Rhyme, and Stopped Time'.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Denise Riley, *Say Something Back*, 62.

and form, but not incubated by it in the manner J. H. Prynne diagnoses when he speaks of 'the traditional Tennyson narcotics' in his 'Ulysses' with its elegising of past iterations of masculinity, where the rhetorical fugue weakens attention.[52] Such narcotics we find in the 'sad mechanic exercise' of *In Memoriam*,[53] meant for the 'unquiet heart and brain', a state of mind and body we find resurface in Riley's poetry, as we will see. For Graham, abstract metrical frameworks serve to underpin the 'live and speaking idiom': one does not lull the other. For Riley, the prosody is painfully clarifying, forcefully bringing its speaker into self-presence by establishing the complex temporal relation between the speaking subject and the late addressee who is reanimated by verse. As Riley asks of 'Say Something Back', 'what is the song for, in the teeth of this particular death…' In reply to her own question, she says 'The only answer is: this instance of song is simply its own existence as voiced solidarity with the (not uncommon) experience of being left alive when your child isn't.'[54] The answer, as with Graham's 'The ear the answer' above, is her own ear, which confirms a sense of 'voiced solidarity'.

This seems to be a clear modification of Riley's earlier position with regard to loneliness in 'A Shortened Set':

> Time has run short and I need company
> to crack my separate stupidity. I'd thought
> to ask around, what's lyric poetry?
> Its bee noise starts before I can:
> You do that; love me; die alone.[55]

Lyric's 'bee noise' invokes a history of lyrical bee sounds and vibrations: Tennyson's 'murmuring of innumerable bees' in 'The Princess: Come down, O Maid', and Yeats's 'bee-loud glade' in 'The Lake

---

[52] J.H. Prynne, 'The Elegiac World in Victorian Poetry' in *The Listener* Feb 14 1963, 290.
[53] Lord Tennyson, Alfred, 'In Memoriam A. H. H. OBIIT MDCCCXXXIII: 5', *In Memoriam* (London: Edward Moxon, 1856), 5.
[54] Kelvin Corcoran, Interview with Denise Riley, Shearsman website. Since deleted.
NB. Riley uses square brackets in all her writing (emails, book acknowledgements, interview quoted here) but I have elected to use round brackets to indicate that the text is not mine.
[55] Riley, *Selected Poems*, 43.

of Innisfree'.[56] In invoking and developing these instances, Riley suggests a degree to which lyric self-consciousness is often drowned out by its own preoccupation with achieving unity between sound and sense, thus reduced to mere buzzing (in Tennyson's albeit extreme example), which precedes (or supersedes) the speaker's linguistic intention. Such a history of lyric poetry does not accommodate, and may even preclude, the voice of the woman poet before she can start uttering. But Riley's later poetry learns to mobilise its listening ears in attempts to answer some of the questions posed by the above stanza, and to foster new levels of self-consciousness in dialogue with Graham.

Riley has referred to her recent poem 'Death make dead metaphor revive' on different occasions as both 'didactic' and 'argumentative',[57] the argumentativeness charging the self-conscious didacticism inherited from Graham, yet with an impersonal tartness lacking in Graham's confiding idiom. It includes the lines

> Spirit as echo clowns around
> In punning repartee
> Since each word overhears itself
> Laid bare, clairaudiently.[58]

These lines could easily be read as invoking Graham's aurally self-conscious lyrics, from the early 'My Glass World Listens to Itself' (1945)[59] or Calvin Bedient's description of how 'the poet's steps listen to themselves' in 'Since All My Steps Taken'.[60] The coinage 'clairaudiently' audibly plays upon (or against) the idea of poetic 'clairvoyance', even as it rhymes comically with 'repartee', a performative routine that suggests dialogue, response and return.

Later the poem declares:

> Over its [times] pools of greeny melt

---

56 W.B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. by Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 1992), 60.
57 Corcoran interview; Denise Riley, 'Time, Rhyme, and Stopped Time'.
58 Denise Riley, *Say Something Back*, 62.
59 Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 43.
60 Calvin Bedient, *Eight Contemporary Poets* (New York: Oxford University Press), 164.

The rearing ice will tilt.
To make *rhyme* chime again with *time*
I sound a curious lilt.

Riley has spoken of the dichotomy between the 'obvious impersonality [of rhyme's] sound resemblances…' but also argued 'And yet rhyme is […] deeply personal in its indwelling of the listener'.[61] Here she combines notions of a Heideggerean linguistic dwelling with a Hegelian emphasis on interiority, while again picking up echoes of Malcolm Mooney's Land and its 'tilting floe'.[62] She writes this in the context of the following lines by Dickinson, which Riley's passage evokes (and which feature on the cover of her critical work *Impersonal Passion*, handwritten on the face of the cover's subject):

The thought behind I strove to join
Unto the thought before,
But sequence raveled out of sound
Like balls upon a floor.[63]

The image foreshadows something of Graham's description of 'The Nightfishing' as a 'knit-object',[64] and the poem's lines, 'He befriended so many / Disguises to wander in on as many roads / As cross on a ball of wool.'[65] All three poets wish to convey something essential about lyric which is intricately material despite the fact that its form is evasively metaphysical, but Riley and Graham differ in their use of devices: where Graham is figurative in his referral to rivets and his more abstract constructivist sense of form, Riley is schematic in her approaches to devices like rhyme (recalling Schmidt's description of Graham's 'erratic' rhyming, which offers a useful contrast).

Linguistic impersonality worries the poems of *Say Something Back*, which in one instance labours over the grammatical shift which may indicate death: "'They died" is not an utterance in the

61 Riley, 'Time, Rhyme and Stopped Time'
62 Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 156.
63 Emily Dickinson, 'I felt a Cleaving…' (973), *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber, 1975), 439.
64 *The Nightfisherman*, 141.
65 'The Nightfishing' in *New Collected Poems*, 117.

syntax of life / where they belong, no *belong*'. This notion finds its greatest vehicle for anxiety in rhyme, which is both the most salient artificial device of poetry ('rhyme' as 'jingles' as historically metonymic for poetry) but also, it has been argued, a device integral to the constitution of musical thinking.[66] Rhyme, as Riley says, both anticipates and returns, its echoic nature making it a device charged with self-consciousness. Rhyme itself is of course freighted with the history of poetry in English (the emergence of rhyme within an organized verse structure coincides historically with the emergence of organized Christianity, in Latin and then vernacular hymns, as Donald Wesling has argued[67]). Particular rhyme pairs are ghosted by their historic implications.[68]

Riley's conceptual engagement with rhyme and grief in her later work is anticipated by her work on the Narcissus myth in 'Affections of the Ear' (2000). This 'suggests that Echo may be a figure or a trope for the troubled nature of lyric poetry, driven by rhyme, condemned to repetition of the cadences and sound-associations of others' utterances'.[69] The poem anticipates her thesis in *Impersonal Passion* (2005) in practical form, by knowingly inhabiting poetic convention and tropes (traditional rhyme schema, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) and deploying them as borrowed affects for the purpose of reparation. The ear itself becomes a trope for echo and rhyme, and a gendered one: evoking by association 'feminine' rhyme, and its implications of lack of closure. As Anne Carson reminds us, 'the haunting garrulity of the nymph Echo […] is described by Sophokles as "the girl with no door on her mouth" (*Philoktetes*). Putting a door on the female mouth has been an important patriarchal culture from antiquity to the present day.'[70] 'Affections of the Ear' opens the door, its affections suggesting an intimate relationship between echo and affection, but also the punning

66 See, for example, Simon Jarvis, 'Why rhyme pleases', *Thinking Verse* I (2011), 17-43.
67 See Donald Wesling, *The Chances of Rhyme* (California: University of California Press), 42-43.
68 See discussion of Shakespearean rhyme in Hugh Kenner, 'Pope's Reasonable Rhymes', *English Literary History*, 41:1 (Spring, 1974), 74-88.
69 Riley, *Selected Poems*, 110, n.
70 Anne Carson, 'The Gender of Sound' in *Glass, Irony and God* (New York: New Directions, 1995), 121.

proximity of 'infections of the ear', that the lyric impulse has been prone to such corruption by patriarchal culture.

Riley, in the voice of Echo, echoes the etymology of 'Narcissus' given in Robert Graves' *The Greek Myths*:

> Narcissus oil's a narcotic, both stem from the same root narcos, numb; the bulb was known
> As the botanical root to cure 'affections of the ear.' (I'll need that oil on my tympanum, too,
> If thought is truly a bone.) His becoming a herbal remedy concludes Narcissus' biography.
> Dying by water in knowing misery, he's recycled as unguent to drop on the sounding tissue
> Of sore ears to heal their affections. Affections of the ear not of the heart, familiar
> catastrophe.[71]

As indicated in her note on the poem, 'narcissus oil was used as cure for "affections of the ears", where "'affection' is an archaism for disease'.[72] Given earlier discussed notions of the narcotic element of metre, it is curious that lines as long and metrically indeterminate as these (the poem's lines themselves have the tenor and style of a note on the text) should refer to an aural remedy in poetry without recourse to a defined metre. This absence is deliberate, as she reveals in *Lyric Selves*, for its connection to rhyme, 'This piece […] deploys such a long line […] that any listening ears will not catch its structure of rhymed alternating couplets. […] In that respect, it's in a rather worse position than poor Echo's enforced repetitions of others' endings.'[73] Metrical regularity usually coincides with rhyme, bringing it to the fore. Riley is showing us how both thankless repetition (in Echo's case), and distorting metrics, may bury the rhyme. The rhyme, rather like Narcissus' fateful realisation of his true self, is submerged within a porous substance: prose, water, unguent remedy.

Later in the poem Echo states:

> A rhyme rears up before me to insist on how I should repeat a stanza's formal utterance –
> other
> Than this I cannot do, unless my hearers find a way of speaking to me so I don't stay semi-dumb
> Or pirouette, a languid Sugarplum.

---

71 Riley, *Selected Poems*, 96.
72 Riley, *Selected Poems*, 110, n.
73 Riley, *The Words of Selves* (CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 111.

Here we have a rearing rhyme, to match the rearing ice in 'Death makes dead metaphor revive'. Echo most fears rhyme's overpowering nature – the first appearance or mention of which usually ensures its inevitability as a rhyme scheme emerges – but rhyme, being metonymic with echo, thrusts Echo into self-presence, and in the process elides her individuality. Echo responds (in Riley's version) by voicing the poem in lines beyond the "'natural" length for the heard line', which visually extend the aural compression of any rhyme scheme by delaying line endings, fostering ambivalence at the level of form, thus making a pragmatic invention in the myth's re-telling. Echo tempers Narcissus' 'torment', which is not 'of [Freudian] self love' but 'self-awareness',[74] preserving the ethical implications of the story. Form-as-Echo ultimately serves to contain what Riley sees as narcissism's 'malleability. Its "weakness" is its uncertain open-ness, which must keep checking itself'.[75] Narcissus requires Echo's reflexiveness, as lyric self-consciousness may require sequential form.

As discussed in my chapter on balladry, Graham offsets a Yeatsian notion of artifice as steadfast ornament[76] with a 'live and speaking', occasionally violent, idiom which can run across the top. His sophisticated self-consciousness emerges in the interstices between these two elements. Riley offsets the impersonality of the lyric mode, its repetition, its echoes, with a dynamic and ironizing self-awareness. This dichotomy is not dissimilar to Graham's, though its implications are different, particularly with regards to the unconscious.

Riley's complex and complex-riven Echo inhabits a post-Freudian auditorium. Riley (and Riley in the voice of Echo) quotes Lacan: "'In the field of the unconscious the ears are the only

---

74 Ibid., 116.
75 Romana Huk, 'in conversation with Denise Riley', *PN Review* 21.5 (May–June 1995) <https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=1912> [accessed 17 December 2019]
76 See for example instances of steadfast ornament in 'A Meditation in Time of War', for its claim 'Mankind [is] inanimate phantasy', and 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', where Sato's sword is idealised for being 'changeless'. W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 214, 227.

orifices that can't be closed" while "Making oneself seen comes back to the subject, but making oneself heard goes out towards the other"', invoking Freud.[77] This is problematic for Echo for whom 'inward ears will jam wide open to internal words that overlying verbiage can't smother'.[78] The ears are orifices that can't be closed, not only to outside verbiage, but to inner speech. Echo makes herself seen and heard, but not purposively. Here is 'a dialogue between voice and ear',[79] neither of which Echo can reconcile, 'unless my hearers find a way of speaking to me so I don't stay semi-dumb'. Confined to 'parrot others' words', Echo's internal words are managed if ironized, but not smothered, by others' verbiage. Others' ways of 'speaking to me' is a way of speaking *for* Echo, and her fate of thankless parroting may be diverted by that sharing of the burden. This occurs in Riley's later poem 'Death make dead metaphor revive' where echo (as device, not the personified Echo) becomes spirited, embodied by another presence: where 'Spirit as echo clowns around / In punning repartee'. This is particularly the case if we conceive of the pun as a heavily ironized instance of rhyme.

For Riley lyric is already in a stage of grief when anticipating its 'intense loneliness'.[80] Its listening steps, heard by listening ears, are themselves lonely, often talking to themselves. In the aforementioned sonnet 'Listening for Lost People', the speaker claims she is 'unquiet as a talkative ear', invoking Tennyson's 'unquiet heart and brain' and remembering the 'mother / in no unquiet grave' in 'A Part Song'. Unquiet is not dumb; it is not quiet, but it is not loud. It is liminal, like Graham's NONSILENCE. Being talkative does not necessarily guarantee being dialogic or intersubjective, and so 'Unquiet as a talkative ear' may imply an intra-subjective hushed communing: capable of being overheard via the vehicle of lyric, as Graham suggests the shell may be the vehicle

77 Denise Riley, *Selected Poems*, 96.
78 Ibid.
79 Riley, 'W.S. Graham, "Implements in Their Places", notes for Bristol, March 2016'.
80 Andrea Brady, 'Echo, Irony, and Repetition in the Writings of Denise Riley' in *Contemporary Women's Writing* 7:2 July 2013, 152.

between the reader and 'time's ear'. It evokes the unconscious, that modification of 'conscious' implying anything but a 'lack' (as you might usually expect of 'un-', i.e. unhelpful).

iii Awkward Ears

Given such complex and self-reflexive representations of lyric hearing, echoes and the ear, it is perhaps not surprising, then, that Riley's contribution to *The Caught Habits of Language: An Entertainment for W. S. Graham for Him Having Reached One Hundred* consists of three ear-lyrics: 'Three Awkward Ears'. The image repertoire and the long line of this contribution is continuous with 'Affections of the Ear',[81] which saw Narcissus 'recycled as unguent to drop on the sounding tissue / Of sore ears to heal their affections'. In 'Three Awkward Ears' the image of the drop onto the 'sounding tissue' of fluid is modulated as 'raindrops stot […] to pitted rings in water, which swell to hoops of water'. Lines from the opening section, 'Up gallop young men, each of them pleasingly sharpened / to hunt down dormant crepitus in smooth sprawled limbs', which situate an inhuman call in 'a wood of no ears', is tonally consistent to what Burt refers to in 'The Castalian Spring' as 'ornate […] fluently post-Ovidian allegorical [poetry]'.[82] This wood in part evokes folklorish balladry, but as with Graham's 'The Dark Intention', is decontextualized from any legibly symbolic wood. It is drawn by invoking the British aesthetic diction and the visual pastoral of painters likes Richard Parkes Bonnington: 'Some buxom clouds lollop along, gloweringly under-lit / past russet trees brushed dark, fine feathered by sable hair.'

---

81 Riley, 'Affections of the Ear' in *The Caught Habits of Language: An Entertainment for W. S. Graham for Him Having Reached One Hundred* (Bristol: Donut Press, 2018), ed. by Rachael Boast, Andy Ching & Nathan Hamilton (eds.) pp.18-19.
82 Stephanie Burt, '"To be sheer air, and mousseline!" The song of theory in the poems of Denise Riley', *TLS* April 23 (2004): 11-12.

In the second 'ear', the disembodied inhuman call is 'calling / to no one it knows of' and 'so, pulsating to / mouth every anyone, it / uncoils as invoking – / opens its confiding peal'. This is a clear riff on Graham's 'telephoneless, blue / Green crevasse' which he 'can't get out of' (in 'What is the Language Using us for?[83]), except it is the utterance that is lost, not the speaker. Graham's 'blue / Green crevasse' is re-imagined by Riley as 'celestine's / eye-blue spar', itself a painterly reformulation of Graham's 'ledge of spar like an offered journey' in 'The Don Brown Route'.[84] Riley's voice opens out in a region of 'snow-deafened ears', a petrified natural landscape which is both personified and operating in a strata below linguistic consciousness, personification or rhetorical figure: for 'uncoil' read both unquiet and unconscious. This is lyric utterance abstracted from the framework of conventional address, 'pulsating to / mouth every anyone', finding nothing but the unresponsive brute fact of 'celestine's / eye-blue spar', which the poem's silky syntax and compacted syllabics begins to embody.

Those who are self-condemned to repeat others' words are petrified: 'I parrot under feldspar rock / Sunk into chambered ice'. The lines pick up echoes of the icy terrain and 'ovens of frost' of Malcolm Mooney's Land,[85] and recall Riley's insistence that 'Who anyone is or I am is nothing to the work' ('Dark Looks'). A dissolution of the self to language is a part of writing, as she proves, but this may condemn the writer to the status of a parroting device, more 'fixed' than any 'received' form. I suggest Riley's 'Dark Looks'[86] could be read as a companion piece of 'The Dark Dialogues'. Certainly the precedent was set by Graham explicitly: 'It does not matter who you are, / It does not matter who I am' (Graham, 'Proem'[87]). Yet Graham's lines, with their use of a Stevens-eque

83 W. S. Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 199.
84 Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 175.
85 Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 156.
86 Riley, *Selected Poems*, 74.
87 Graham, *New Collected Poems*, 295.

cartoonish fabulism, are without Riley's urgent (gender) politicization of the 'I' ('as she frets the minute wars scorch on'[88]).[89]

The loneliness experienced by the 'peal' of Riley's poem can be found in early allusions to Graham's lonely lyrics which, in searching unsuccessfully for their hearers, punctuate the silence with their own forms of attention. In 'A Shortened Set', which as a sequence of lyric-fragments resembles Graham's 'Implements in Their Places', Riley asks:

> Are you alright I ask out there
> straining into the dusk to hear.
> I think its listening particles of air
> at you like a shot.
> You're being called across your work
> or – No I don't want that thought.
> Nor want to get this noise to the point
> it interests me. It's to you. Stop.[90]

Riley's poem mimics Graham's plays upon intimate address, like the opening of 'To My Wife at midnight', 'Are you to say goodnight…?' Graham's 'Implements' are bookended by the repeated couplet: 'Somewhere our belonging particles / Believe in us. If only we could find them.'[91] The constituent parts of the speaker are nameable objects or devices, but they are also evasive and intransigent, like poetic form itself. Graham's 'Fifteen Devices' opens *in medias res* with the lines, 'When who we think we are is suddenly / Flying apart', in a material manner not dissimilar to Riley's 'A Shortened Set': 'All the connectives of right recall / have gone askew'.[92] Similarly, Riley's speaker, confronted by the exposure of her own voice when asking 'are you alright', that phatic gesture of speech, the speaker defers agency to 'the dusk' and its listening particles (evoking also the listening steps we saw referred to earlier), modifying Graham's lines from 'Malcolm Mooney's Land':

> I have reached the edge of earshot here

88 Riley, *Selected Poems*, 74.
89 Notwithstanding one exception in Stevensian mode in Riley's *Say Something Back*: 'Percy's Relique', 52.
90 Riley, *Selected Poems*, 39.
91 Graham, *New Selected Poems*, 240, 257.
92 Ibid., 183.

And by the laws of distance
My words go through the smoking air
Changing their tune on silence.[93]

True to character, Riley's passage is far more uneasy about how much of the linguistic intention she feels she has authored, or which belongs to her. Her identification is with Echo, not Narcissus, despite John Wilkinson's accusations to the contrary.[94] The lines' ambivalence and finicky changeability is often intricately constructed in spiky verbal 'point[s]' not rounded off neatly by echo: 'You do that; love me; die alone',[95] 'Nor want to get this noise to the point / it interests me. It's to you. Stop'. The poem generates the sense that she wants to address, to call across, without invoking, and thus determining, either herself or her addressee. We have a keen sense of the price of dying 'alone', but also of words in the air ('the smoking air'), echoing in such a way that we hear in the move from 'earshot' to 'here' and 'air' subliminal puns on 'hear' and 'ear'. The words recall Graham's previously discussed cascade through 'silence', 'distance' and 'listen'. In dedicating her 'Ear' poems, with their self-conscious play on what Eliot called the 'auditory imagination',[96] to Graham, Riley acknowledges that she is writing in 'earshot' of her predecessor.

This notion of apostrophe, address or aural invocation as self-consciously constituting the speaking subject is one means in which Riley and Graham's poetics coincide. Another is the degree to which, despite the different ways they manipulate received verse forms, they consider artistic form as conjectural and something in the process of becoming rather than definitive. We might also note that, despite their respective manipulation of received verse forms and their different vocabularies, they both largely avoid use of the word 'form' itself. Graham, as I have shown, is more concerned with 'construction' and its specific 'devices'. The word 'form' does not crop up often in

93 Ibid., 154.
94 Wilkinson, 'Illyrian Places', *Parataxis* 6, Brighton, Spring/Summer 1994, 58-59.
95 Riley, *Selected Poems*, 43.
96 *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), 118.

Riley's critical writing, and when it does it is pejoratively or ironically, as in 'Is there linguistic guilt?': '…held by form I work backwards, chipping away at words, until maybe something gets uncovered which I can acknowledge as what I might have had to say'.[97] Similarly, in the poetry, when she returns to form as such it is an obstacle to release: 'If I speak with formal / heaviness, that's the weight of stiff grief bending down / leaves, and the mild rain spotting their dust into rings'. When asked why this is the case, Riley ruminated:

> 'Form' … I have to confess that I never think of it, as such.
> Nor do I ever make 'advance decisions' about which form I'm going to use myself; what happens to happen is just whatever shapes itself in & through the material as we go along.[98]

This coincides very exactly with one of Graham's rare references to the word 'form' in the aforementioned 1949 notebook:

> Poem before the form
> just as the form grows out of the attempt of somebody to say something[99]

This movingly anticipates the modification of these apprehensions in the wake of the loss experienced in his later life: the attempt to say something *back*. The lines also chime with Riley's preoccupation with arriving at a meaning, or into self-presence, through performed speech, where the shape of speech is shaped intuitively and on the hoof by the context in which it occurs:

> Kleist said in that very good essay […] that having to stand up on your feet and be forced into speech by the dynamics of the occasion will generate this effect, to your own astonishment – that your thought is formed not a priori in your mind, but in the accident of uttering…[100]

---

97 Riley, 'Is there linguistic guilt?', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 1, 84.
98 Personal interview with Denise Riley, email, 20 Mar 2017. (She joins other formalist critics, as different as Rosmarie Waldrop and Don Paterson, in steering clear of the word 'form', despite constantly foregrounding its primacy in their work. For more on this trend see Sam Buchan-Watts, 'Review: *The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry* by Robert Sheppard', *Chicago Review* 61:03/04, 2018, 211-15)
99 Graham, 'From a 1949 Notebook', *Edinburgh Review* 75, 1987, 32.
100 Juha Virtanen, Interview with Denise Riley, *Poetry and Performance During the British Poetry Revival 1960–1980* (London: Palgrave, 2017), 185.

The wariness of the two poets towards talking in terms of the word 'form' is remarkable, given their shared commitment to self-reflection on the process of a poem's formation in the 'accident of uttering'.

In 2018, the year of Graham's centenary, Riley was commissioned to respond to a 'prompt' from Graham's notebooks and letters and chose an extract from the aforementioned 1949 notebook, which centres itself on the idea of a discrete, physical form, a form which precedes the art object it engenders, but which then may change the object. Here is Graham's notebook 'prompt':

> To make a poem about some object in the room.
> To see how it will change the object. (The poem short — 10-14 lines
> Maybe better fairly descriptive first of all.)[101]

Taking off from Graham's words, Riley produced a short lyric, 'A Thing in a Room',[102] which responds very exactly to Graham's prompt in thirteen short syllabics. The poem is 'about' her old wooden ladder, 'which bears the marks of my painting efforts, and DIY efforts, over the last five decades'. She said 'The resulting poem appeared, more or less of its own volition, in ladder-like shape.'[103] By creating its own volition, the poem must therefore produce its own 'dynamics of occasion'.

> Wooden ladder smeared by
> white paint, spatters & drifts
> of it, old speckles sunk deep
> in the grain, daubed, flecked
> as I'm braced, sleek brush to
> hand, at wilful ease – though
> on some lower rung – heavy
> struts clop hard to, as I lug it
> round the emulsioned walls'
> high cloudy layers; ingrained
> pasts, scarred-cream hazards.
> White spirit! scrub the painter

101 'From a 1949 Notebook', 33.
102 'A Thing in a Room' in *Try To Be Better* (London: Prototype, 2019), ed. by Sam Buchan-Watts & Lavinia Singer. Poem commissioned and written 2018, the year of Graham's centenary.
103 Denise Riley in *Try To Be Better*, 'contextual insert', unpaginated.

clear of the wood – clean off.

Graham's poems frequently address the 'implements' or 'devices' of language, grammatical shapes or vehicles of meaning which often have a life of their own, acting boisterously upon their author ('Approaches to How they Behave', 'Ah Language Now You Have Me'). Citing Graham in reference to Riley's lines from 'A Shortened Set', 'mutter my / hearing creatures, snouts / rooting upwards for light', Andrew Duncan claims 'the creatures are the words in poems'.[104] Riley's ladder-poem may stand in as one such device, its words creatures. As previously noted, 'devices', 'particles', 'clusters' and 'implements' (even 'caught habits') may be stand-ins for 'construction', but they may also be discrete units which make up a greater notion of form, as the German language distinguishes between 'form' for abstract structure, and 'gestalt' for the single properties or devices of a literary work.[105] Such paradoxes are contained in the intricate constructions of these two writers.

Riley's poem overlaps with 'Listening For Lost People' in *Say Something Back* (2016), which also uses a tight, visually recognisable form – the sonnet – to attend to a device and to ask how it will be changed by the act of description. In the case of 'Listening', the device is the aforementioned grammatical shift following grief, where the change in tense fails to adequately accommodate the grieving subject, or the subject of grief, whose spirit is actively accommodated by language: '"They died" is not an utterance in the syntax of life / where they belonged, no belong'. Riley's shifting tenses are like Graham's belonging particles: they belong to us but evade us. As in 'A Thing in a Room', the poem's formal resolution is an alighting, punning on 'alight', in its release from formal constraint with a finicky Marianne Moore-esque ambivalence. 'White spirit' scrubs the paint from the wood, and in its punning address to a 'white spirit' invokes an ethereal subject who takes the

104 Andrew Duncan, *Centre and Periphery*, 100.
105 Distinction made by Derek Attridge in *Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), 107.

painter's place, and whose articulation may be exclusive to language, whose aural returns may, in her conception of rhyme, induce a 'curious linguistic quasi-resurrection'.[106]

Riley claims that 'perhaps I don't write critically about "form" because I'm not a literary critic', and in this too she is like Graham.[107] Nevertheless, she paradoxically, performatively and self-consciously close-reads her own poetry in *The Words of Selves* ('her masterful work of literary theory' – Stephanie Burt[108]). This mobility between criticism and poetry indicates the extent to which criticism and practice bleed into each other, given the elliptical, compressed and peculiar language and style of her philosophical work on the one hand, and the self-consciously didactic critical work of the poetry, which actually does so much thinking about form, though rarely naming it as such. Her inability to settle fully on either (or both) mirrors her poetic versatility in its generative tentative provisionality. As Nigel Wheale has said, her poetry has 'no recurrent default mechanism to any one characteristic locale, no fall-back to pastorale, or remorselessly emphatic advance to inner-city vanguardism'.[109]

Riley considers, *in medias res*, the relation between her poetry and prose with a Graham-esque didactism and emphasis on rephrasing silence in a short unpublished lyric:

> Readied to slink back into silence
> One mode fights it out with another
> Tethered together, both faltering
> Expecting never to be believed
> First in this form, then in that.[110]

Here 'form' refers not to devices or abstract shape but to poetry or prose. 'First in this form, then in that' evokes the changing 'form[s]' of self and subjectivity, as they are framed by lyric poetry and political structures.

---

106 Riley, 'Time, Rhyme, and Stopped Time'.
107 Personal interview with Denise Riley, email, 20 Mar 2017.
108 Burt, 'After the Rain'. The blurb for Riley's recent *Selected Poems* concedes that 'her working life […] has taken in […] literary history'.
109 Nigel Wheale, 'Colours - Ethics - Lyric, Voice: Recent Poetry by Denise Riley', *Parataxis: Modernism and Modern Writing*, 4 (Summer 1993), 7.
110 Untitled, unpublished lyric by Denise Riley, quoted in Corcoran, 'Interview with Denise Riley', Shearsman website. Since deleted.

Jean-Jacques LeCercle, Denise Riley's collaborator on the philosophical work *The Force of Language*, makes the important point that though 'her poetic practice is consonant with her theory', the poetry 'precedes [it]'. This could be reminding us that her first publication, *Marxism for Infants* (1977), was published before her critical books. On the other hand, we might also infer that poetic thought precedes philosophic thought, as Wallace Stevens' clouds 'preceded us' in *The Supreme Fiction*. The clouds, not yet co-opted by lyric self-consciousness or a system of nomenclature, render a not yet determined plane of imaginative construction. Graham's post-modern lyric voicing of the cloud reformulates Shelley's 'The Cloud' equally intransigently by beginning 'Gently disintegrate me / Said nothing at all'. These lines have in turn fascinated Riley, whose poetry is often, as I have discussed, predicated on a dissolution of self. In an important sense, Riley's poetry precedes her critical work, as the influence of Graham's poetry precedes (and continues to precede) her philosophy. As we have seen, so many of Graham's propositions about poetry are (dis)integrated into her work and reconstituted by her lyric ear, which, like Graham's, is attuned above all to poetry as listening.

Conclusion: Columbarium

In a reading given in York on 16 March 2017, Riley archly introduced her poem, 'Boxy Piece', as 'the only poem I have ever knowingly written about poetry'.

> Boxy Piece
>
> Exhibit of small boxes made from wood
> to house their thought and each an open
> coffin of the not-dead with their chirring.
> Satin-lined frames stack square in blocks
> nested to a columbarium – then mumble
> closet doves, whose fond carpenter drills
> piercings for more air, won't let you flap.

In its concrete shape and hard-edged consonance – 'stack square in blocks' – the poem recalls Herbert's altar in its concreteness but corresponds with Riley's interest in the 'the affect that rises up from Isaac Watts' boxy hymn quatrains' at the time of composition.[1] Though the verse shape is less mnemonically condensed, the passage still offsets a charged affect and a memorializing mechanical effect. Like Graham's 'shell held to time's ear', the poem uses a mechanical device – here a columbarium, a case for housing funeral or cinerary urns or birds (literally 'doves') – as talismanic for lyric. The atmosphere is no doubt constraining, choking even ('drills / piercings for more air'), as the columbarium, like the poem, conceives of rendering a space in which 'the not-dead' may reside. *Say Something Back* may itself be seen as a metaphorical columbarium for the variously shaped urns of the book's poems, the dead and the undead invoked by the work, and the dead and the undead literary forms reanimated in the process. Columbarium is, like Riley's 'echo', a device which

[1] Denise Riley, 'Forward Arts Foundation in Conversation with Denise Riley', <http://www.forwardartsfoundation.org/forward-arts-foundation-in-conversation-with-denise-riley/>

embodies linguistic harm ('Echo's a trope for lyric poetry's endemic barely hidden bother […] I am forced to form ideas by rhymes'[2]).

'Boxy Piece' is descriptive of the poet's own project, the book in which it is housed, and lyric poetry more broadly. Yet the poem does not have the didactive quality of celebrated modern 'poems about poetry' such as Vladimir Nabokov's 'An Evening of Russian Poetry' (1945), Charles Tomlinson's 'The Chances of Rhyme' (1969) or Charles Bernstein's *Artifice of Absorption* (1987).[3] Like Bishop's 'One Art' or the villanelles by Graham and Empson, it prefers to describe its own mechanics indirectly, more preoccupied as it by trying to master aspects of life, death and loss. The poem may then only be implicitly read as an attempt to master poetic form. To refer back to a model established in my first chapter, the poem's address, its ability to speak 'out', may implicitly reflect on the framework and conditions of that speech act, which may be contending thematically with something else entirely. In doing so it may speak 'about' itself and poetry more broadly, exceeding the limits of the 'I' which speaks 'out' in the first instance.

That Riley describes 'Boxy Piece' as she does is doubly curious given the multiple examples we have seen in her work which do explicitly speak 'about' lyric. She is a poet for whom the larynx is constituted by the lyre (and vice versa). And yet, do her comments not implicitly suggest a larger domain in which all poetry is unknowingly about poetry? This may be apt when we consider that Riley's poetic is founded on a lyric unconscious, and unconventional forms of knowledge like clairvoyance, of dark intentions and dark dialogues.[4] '…[T]he poem, to be any good, has got to

---

2 Riley, 'Affections of the Ear', *Selected Poems*, 96.

3 Vladimir Nabokov, *Collected Poems*, ed. Thomas Karshan (London: Penguin, 2012) 137-141; Charles Tomlinson, *The Way of a World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 49; Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

4 *Say Something Back* begins with a version of 1 Corinthians 13:11. The following verse in the KJB text claims 'For … now I know in part; but then shall I know even also as I am known'. Of Riley's reference to Illyria, Wilkinson writes that 'the Illyrians were the people of an extinct and unrecorded language, so to speak Illyrian would be to speak something unknown, to stutter and to halt *and* to bring to light, to speak in tongues like "the unconscious"'. *Lyric Touch*, 71.

know more than "I" know',[5] Riley has said, and in doing so it may inadvertently 'know' or say more about poetry than she knows. It exceeds any easily legible or 'received' conceptual framework, and in doing so it may 'know more' than the poet. We might recall Graham's claim that "'NONSILENCE" is better than "SOUND" because it suggests the movement of the mind in selection, as it goes toward the confirming word "sound"' from the 1949 notebook. 'Nonsilence' is grasped dynamically and uncertainly, not categorically or statically. Riley's claim that in her writing 'what happens to happen is just whatever shapes itself in & through the material as we go along', and her embrace of what she calls the 'accident of uttering', inhabits a similarly Stevensian notion of poetry as 'the act of finding'.[6] In a recent poem she declares in no uncertain terms, 'A formal structure generates your thought. / Your mind will follow where the metre leads'.[7] Though embracing of happenstance, this is not an aleatory poetics, but rather a means of inhabiting form at a deep level in order to render a dynamic lyric self-consciousness. Such a level involves a willing distortion of intentionality, a mingling of self and material, but not a disavowal of it.

Graham reflected truthfully, at the end of his life, that he had '…made some poems which have gone *through* the usual ways and shapes of thinking'.[8] He also declared earlier that Peter Lanyon in his painting is 'speaking / Only through what [he] made', and this emphasis on art-form as transformative centres, in part, on an organic mingling of self and material object.[9] As Graham tentatively suggests in 'Wynter and the Grammarsow', this transformation occurs in a meeting of 'person' and art's objecthood:

> Maybe in a kind
> Of way it is legitimate to let
> One's self be added to, to be moved

---

5 Romana Huk, 'in conversation with Denise Riley', *PN Review* 21.5 (May–June 1995) <https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=1912>
6 Personal interview with Denise Riley, email, 20 Mar 2017. Juha Virtanen, Interview with Denise Riley, *Poetry and Performance During the British Poetry Revival 1960–1980* (London: Palgrave, 2017), 185.
7 Denise Riley, 'Tick Tock' in *Cumulus* I (2017), 4.
8 Haffenden, 'Interview', 74.
9 W. S. Graham, 'The Thermal Stair', *New Collected Poems*, 164.

By both at once, by the idea
Of the person, and of the object
Adrift stationary in its Art law.[10]

Here and in other discussed works, the reflexive act of lyric is applied to the new modernist 'Art law(s)' of the time. A self-critical didacticism is offset by an embrace of what the poet cannot know (but perhaps the poem can): a textual unconscious accounted for in the critical writing of Jakobson, Riley and others in contradistinction to the kind of uneasiness William Empson displays about the fact that the artist 'might not know what he is doing'. Graham's poetry is most productive, I have shown, when it confronts the dark, a trope for the unknown. Similarly, Riley's poetry is most charged when it confronts the greatest absence, through form, the atemporality of grief. In both instances lyric dialogue is conceived as a spatial problem. Both poets foreground form and artifice, offering intuitive means of expression within broader conventional or received frames such as the ballad and the villanelle. Graham's poetry is notable for the extent to which by doing so it constructs levels of self-consciousness of form as distinct from a more general lyric self-consciousness. This is tied to an architectural or non-verbal conceptualisation of poetry, akin to the formal abstractions embraced by St Ives painters such as Nicholson. The thesis returns on several occasions to a notion of idiom offset by a metrical artifice, a dichotomy of Graham's which is used by the poet to expose the levels of experience which are mediated by language. It is through such dichotomies that he attempts to unify the impersonal sound of poetry with the lyric subjectivity which utters it. More broadly, these dichotomies allow the poet to feel out the limits of the lyric poem as an act of self-description.

For Graham, this almost constructivist attitude to poetics stems from his training as journeyman engineer and the lateral thinking of an auto-didact as much as from cutting-edge accounts of counterpointing in music and art in the air at the time. The poetic project is a vivid and

[10] W. S. Graham, 'Wynter and the Grammarsow', *New Collected Poems*, 187.

sophisticated expansion of the possibilities of lyric form after Modernism, departing from and developing the work of its modernist forebears – re-orienting the cool abstraction of Wallace Stevens in both richly allegorical and real places. As with Stevens' address in the *Supreme Fiction* to an ephebe, the critical function of the work remains within the realm of the didactic.

> So that each person may quickly find that
> Which particularly concerns him, certain metaphors
> Convenient to us within the compass of this
> Lesson are to be allowed. It is best I sit
> Here where I am to speak on the other side
> Of language. You, of course, in your own time
> And incident (I speak in the small hours.)
> Will listen from your side. I am very pleased
> We have sought us out. No doubt you have read
> My Flute Book. Come. The Guild clock's iron men
> Are striking out their few deserted hours
> And here from my high window Brueghel's winter
> Locks the canal below. I blow my fingers.[11]

Like Graham's elaborately pedagogical alter-ego Johan Joachim Quantz, the poet saw the creative and critical engagement with the work to be an apprenticeship, the closest reading to be that of the practitioner. Stevens was still, to an extent, his master.

As I have demonstrated, across her *oeuvre* Riley has furnished us with a sophisticated and sustained dialogue with Graham's poetic project in philosophy and poetry. It is not simply the scale of engagement, over several decades, and the quality of the work that makes this significant – it is the length Riley goes to inhabit in writing equivalent lyric frameworks of imagination and thought, which is in itself a form of listening to Graham. Her work engages with Graham's poetry on its own terms, inhabiting it at a formal level, and therefore offering us an alternative form of literary critique. In this, it is the most substantive critical engagement with the work we have. The logical conclusion to the critical component of this thesis is to attempt to extend the project in poetic form, a

[11] W. S. Graham, 'Johann Joachim Quantz's Five Lessons', *New Collected Poems*, 228.

continuation of this thesis in a further act of what Charles Bernstein calls close listening.[12] By offering my own poetry in the following pages I attempt to parallel this critical exploration in prose, engaging – like Riley and Graham in their own creative practice – with comparable issues of lyric and self-consciousness in poetic forms.

[12] Charles Bernstein ed., *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

WORKS CITED

Altieri, Charles, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* (1989).

Attridge, Derek, *Moving Words* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013)

———. *Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004).

Baker, J. J., 'Poetic Calling, Poetic Failure: Self-reflexivity in Texts of Hölderlin, Wordsworth, and Shelley' in *MLN*, vol. 105, no. 5, *Comparative Literature* (December, 1990), 914-38.

Barker, Sebastian, 'Memoir of W. S. Graham' in *Edinburgh Review* 75, 88-91.

Beckett, Samuel, *Collected Shorter Plays* (London: Faber, 2006).

Bedient, Calvin, 'W. S. Graham, Dramatist of the Beast in Language', *Chicago Review* 62:1/2, 143-155.

———. *Eight Contemporary Poets* (New York: Oxford University Press).

Berlin, Sven, *Alfred Wallis: Primitive* (London: Poetry London/Nicholson & Watson, 1949).

———. *The Dark Monarch* (Stevenage, Herts: FinPubs, 2009).

———. 'Joke Grim: A Letter to Sydney Graham from Sven Berlin: Gull Cry – Deep Ocean', *The Cornish Scene* (1986).

Bernstein, Charles, ed., *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

———. *A Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

Bird, Michael, *The St Ives Artists* (London: Lund Humphries, 2008).

Bishop, Elizabeth, *Complete Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus), 2004.

Boast, Rachael, Andy Ching, Nathan Hamilton, eds, *The Caught Habits of Language: An Entertainment for W. S. Graham for Him Having Reached One Hundred* (Bristol: Donut Press, 2018).

Brady, Andrea, 'Echo, Irony, and Repetition in the Writings of Denise Riley' in *Contemporary Women's Writing* 7:2 July 2013, 138-56.

Buchan-Watts, Sam, 'Review: *The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry* by Robert Sheppard', *Chicago Review* 61:03/04, 2018, 211-15.

Buchan-Watts, Sam and Lavinia Singer, eds, *Try To Be Better* (London: Prototype, 2019).

Burt, Stephanie, '"To be sheer air, and mousseline!" The song of theory in the poems of Denise Riley', *TLS* April 23 (2004), 11-12.

Burt, Stephanie, 'After the Rain', *The Poetry Review*, 106:2, Summer 2016.

Cairns Craig, 'Beyond Reason – Hume, Seth, Macmurray and Scotland's Postmodernity' in *Scotland in Theory: Reflections on Culture & Literature*, ed. by Eleanor Bell and Gavin Miller (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004).

Cameron, Sharon, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

Carruthers, Gerard, *W. S. Graham: born in a diamond, screeched from a mountain pap* (Columbia, SC: Studies in Scottish Literature, 2019).

Carson, Anne, 'The Gender of Sound', in *Glass, Irony and God* (New York: New Directions, 1995), 119-142.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 'Frost at Midnight', *Poetry Foundation* <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43986/frost-at-midnight> [accessed 7 December 2019]

———. *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. J. Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

Corcoran, Kelvin, 'Interview with Denise Riley', Shearsman website. Since deleted.

Davie, Donald, 'Remembering the Movement', in *Prospect*, ed. by Elaine Feinstein, Cambridge, Summer 1959 (no issue number), 15-16.

Deleuze, Giles, *Essays Critical and Clinical* (London: Verso, 1998).

Dickinson, Emily, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber, 1975).

Dillon, Ellen, 'Outside-in/Inside-out: A Festival of Outside and Subterranean Poetry', Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry, 9(1), 2017. https://doi.org/10.16995/biip.37

Donaghy, Michael, 'My Report Card' (2000), *Strong Words*, ed. by Matthew Hollis and W. N. Herbert (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2000)], 243-244.

Donne, John, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. by George Potter and Evelyn Simpson, 10 vols (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1953-1962).

Wang, Dorothy J., *Thinking its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford University Press, 2013).

Duncan, Andrew, *Centre and Periphery* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004).

Dworkin, Craig and Marjorie Perloff, eds, *The Sound of Poetry* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).

T. S. Eliot, 'Reflections on *Vers Libre*' in *To Criticize the Critic and other Writings* (Faber: London, 1978), 183-9.

———. *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1957).

———. *Four Quartets* (London: Faber, and Faber 2001).

———. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933).

Empson, William, *Argufying* (London: Hogarth, 1989).

———. *Collected Poems* (London: Chatto, 1955).

———. *Selected Letters of William Empson*, ed. by John Haffenden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

———. *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Penguin, 1965).

———. *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Hogarth, 1985).

Ferguson, Margaret W., Tim Kendall and Mary Jo Salter, eds, *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 6th edn (New York and London: Norton, 2018).

Ferris, Natalie, '"Water water wish you well": The Liquid Tracings of W. S. Graham' in *Try To Be Better*, ed. by Sam Buchan-Watts and Lavinia Singer (London: Prototype, 2019), 33-35.

Finch, Annie, and Marie-Elizabeth Mali, eds, *Villanelles (Everyman's Library Pocket Poets)* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).

Forrest-Thomson, Veronica, *Collected Poems* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2008).

———. *Poetic Artifice*: *A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry*, ed. by Gareth Farmer (Exeter: Shearsman, 2016)

———. 'Rational Artifice: Some Remarks on the Poetry of William Empson', *Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 4 (1974), 225-238.

Frame, Robert, 'W. S. Graham at Sandyford Place', *Edinburgh Review* 75 (1987), 60-65.

Francis, Matthew, 'THE REAL UNABSTRACT SNOW', Review: W. S. Graham, *Selected Poems*, *PN Review* 109 vol. 22 no. 5.

———. *Where the People Are: Language and Community in the Poetry of W. S. Graham* (Cambridge: Salt, 2004).

Gooding, Mel, *Patrick Heron* (London: Phaidon, 1995).

Graham, W. S., *Aimed at Nobody*, ed. by Robin Skelton and Margaret Blackwood (London: Faber, 1993).

———. 'From a 1949 Notebook', in *Edinburgh Review* 75 (1987).

———. W. S. Graham papers, National Library of Scotland.

———. W. S. Graham fonds, University of Victoria Special Collections.

———. Graham-related papers, Greville Press Archive, University of Leeds.

———. Graham Papers, private collection of Marius Kociejowski.

———. *The Nightfisherman: Selected Letters*, ed. by Michael and Margaret Snow (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999).

———. *New Collected Poems*, ed. by Matthew Francis (London: Faber, 2004).

———. *New Selected Poems*, ed. by Matthew Francis (London: Faber, 2018).

———. *W.S. Graham Selected by Michael Hofmann* (New York: NYRB, 2018).

———. 'WALLACE STEVENS IN GREENOCK', undated typescript draft, W. S. Graham Estate archive.

Graham, W. S., 'Why Cornwall?', *Monitor*, 14 September 1958, BBC Archive.

Graham, W. S. ed., *Promenad*e no. 65 (1955).

Graw, Isabelle, ed., *Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).

Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' (1960) in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. by John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85-93.

———. 'Towards a New Laocoon' in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*, ed. by John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 23-38.

Greene, Roland, Stephen Cushman, Clare Cavanaugh, Jahan Ramazani, Paul Rozer, eds, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th edn, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

Haffenden, John, "'I Would Say I Was a Happy Man', W. S. Graham interviewed by John Haffenden'", *Poetry Review* 76, no. 1/2 (1986), 67-74.

Hale, Dom and Katy Lewis Hood, *Cumulus* I (London and Edinburgh, 2017).

Haughton, Hugh, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Herbert, W. N., 'Seven Words for Sydney Graham', *Chicago Review* 62:1/2/3, 24-39.

Heron, Patrick, *Painter as Critic*, ed. by Mel Gooding (London: Tate Publishing, 1998).

———. *The Changing Forms of Art* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955).

Hollander, John, *The Figure of Echo* (California: University of California Press, 1981).

Huk, Romana, 'in conversation with Denise Riley', PN Review 21.5 (May–June 1995).

Jakobson, Roman, 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics' in *Poetry and Theory*, ed. by Jon Cook, 350-358.

———. 'What is Poetry?' in *Selected Writings, III: 'Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry'*, ed. by Stephen Rudy (The Hague, 1981).

Jameson, Frederic, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

Jarvis, Simon, 'Why rhyme pleases', *Thinking Verse* I (2011), 17-43.

Jones, Hester and Ralph Pite, eds, *Speaking Towards You* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004).

Jones, Tom, *Poetic Language: Theory and Practice from the Renaissance to the Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

Kennard, Luke, 'The Expanse: Self-Consciousness and the Transatlantic Prose Poem' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Exeter, 2008).

Kenner, Hugh, 'Pope's Reasonable Rhymes', *English Literary History*, 41:1 (Spring, 1974), 74-88.

Klee, Paul, *On Modern Art* (London: Faber, 1944).

Koch, Vivienne, 'A Note on W. S. Graham', *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (Autumn, 1948), 666-67.

Lanyon, Andrew, *The Quick-Change Act* (Cornwall: Self-published, 1987).

Larkin, Philip, *Letters to Monica*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber, 2010).

Leighton, Angela, *On Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Lopez, Tony, 'Graham and the 1940s', in *W. S. Graham: Speaking Towards You* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 26-42.

Lopez, Tony, *The Poetry of WS Graham* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989).

Maber, Peter, '"The poet or painter steers his life to maim": W.S. Graham and the St Ives modernist school', *Word & Image*, 25:3, 258-271.

MacDiarmid, Hugh, 'Review of Cage Without Grievance', *The Free Man*, circa 1942, no p. no.

Maclean, Sorley, 'Hallaig', translated by Seamus Heaney, *Guardian* 'The Saturday Poem', 20 Nov 2002 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/nov/30/featuresreviews.guardianreview35>

Mark, Alison, *Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Language Poetry* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2001).

Michael O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-conscious Poem* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

Mitchell, W. J. T., 'Abstract Painting and the Repression of Language', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 15, no. 2 (Winter, 1989), 348-371.

Morgan, Edwin, 'W.S. Graham and "Voice"' in *The Constructed Space*, ed. by Ronnie Duncan and Jonathan Davidson (Jackson's Arm, 1994), 76-83

———. Edwin Morgan, 'The Poetry of W. S. Graham', in *Speaking Towards You*, ed. by Ralph Pite and Hester Jones (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004).

Morris, Andy 'The cultural geographies of Abstract Expressionism: painters, critics, dealers and the production of an Atlantic art', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 6:3 (2005), 421-437

Morton, Timothy, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Nabokov, Vladimir, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Thomas Karshan (London: Penguin, 2012).

Nicholson, Ben, *Paintings Reliefs Drawings Vol 1*, ed. and intro. by Herbert Read (London: Lund Humphries, 1948, revised 1955).

Noel-Tod, Jeremy, 'Introduction' to *The Caught Habits of Language*, ed. by Boast, Ching and Hamilton (Bristol: Donut Press, 2018), 1-8.

———. 'The Poetry Boy: Unpublished Poems by W. S. Graham', *TLS*, 7 March 2018 <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/the-poetry-boy/>

———. 'Yet More Shots of Mister Simpson' in *Chicago Review* 62:01/02, 2019, 128-136.

Noel-Tod, Jeremy, ed., *Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Nowell Smith, David, 'An Experience with Rhythm: WS Graham', Études britanniques contemporaines, 39 (2010): 51-64, <http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/2803>

———. *On Voice in Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

———. 'Poetry's Plastic Medium: The Example of W. S. Graham', *Modernism/Modernity* Aug 19, 2018, Volume 3, Cycle 2 <https://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0061>.

———. 'W. S. Graham's Three Accent Line: "The Gradual Construction of a Timbre", Modern Philology 116, no.3 (February 2019), 235-261.

O'Hara, Frank, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. by Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

Oldham, Alison, *The Were Always Working* (Tate St Ives, 1989).

Paterson, Don, *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre* (London: Faber, 2018).

———. 'Prism Visitor' in Observer 14/1/96.

Perry, Seamus, 'What a carry-on' in *LRB*, Vol. 41 No. 14 · 18 July 2019, 9-14. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v41/n14/seamus-perry/what-a-carry-on>

Piette, Adam, 'Contemporary Poetry and Close Reading', in Peter Robinson (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 230-245.

Pfau, Thomas, *Wordsworth's Profession* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

Phillips, Adam, *Attention Seeking* (London: Penguin, 2019).

Pite, Ralph, 'Abstract, Real and Particular: Graham and Painting,' in *W. S. Graham: Speaking Towards You*, ed. by Ralph Pite and Hester Jones (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 65-83.

Powell, Eric, 'W. S. Graham's Syntax' in *Chicago Review* 62:1/2/3, 74-85

Prynne, J. H., 'The Elegiac World in Victorian Poetry' in *The Listener* Feb 14 1963, 290-91.

———. 'Veronica Forrest-Thomson: A Personal Memoir', <http://jacketmagazine.com/20/pryn-vft.html>

Purves, Robin, 'W. S. Graham and the Heidegger Question' in *Complicities: British Poetry 1945-2007*, ed. by Robin Purves and Sam Ladkin (Literraria Pragensia, 2007), 4-29.

Read, Herbert, 'Constructivism: The Art of Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner' in *Gabo-Pevsner*, ed. by Ruth Olsen and Abraham Chanin (New York: MoMA, 1948), 7-13.

Riley, Denise, *Am I That Name?: Feminism and the Category of "Women"* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

———. 'Forward Arts Foundation in Conversation with Denise Riley', <http://www.forwardartsfoundation.org/forward-arts-foundation-in-conversation-with-denise-riley/> .

———. 'Is there linguistic guilt?', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 1, 84.

———. 'Time, Rhyme, and Stopped Time', talk delivered at Psychoanalytic Poetry Festival 2014: Memory and Memorialisation at the Freud Museum. Unpublished.

———. *Impersonal Passion*, (Durham: Duke, 2005).

———. *Mop Mop Georgette* (London: Reality Street, 1993)

———. *Say Something Back* (London: Picador, 2016).

———. *Selected Poems* (London: Reality Street, 2000).

———. 'Waiting' in *Truth, Dare, Promise: Girls Growing Up in Fifties Britain*, ed. by Liz Heron (London: Virago, 1985). 237-248.

———. *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

———. 'W.S. Graham, "Implements in Their Places", notes for Bristol, March 2016', unpublished.

Riley, Denise, and Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *The Force of Language* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

Riley, Peter, 'The "Discovery" of W.S Graham', *The Fortnightly Review* <https://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2019/07/riley-ws-graham/#easy-footnote-bottom-11-25484>

———. 'Peter Riley reviews W. S. Graham, *New Collected Poems* edited by Matthew Francis' in *Jacket* 26, October 2004 <http://jacketmagazine.com/26/rile-grah.html>

———. 'Taking Graham Seriously (2)', *PN Review* 159, Volume 31 Number 1, September - October 2004.

Schmidt, Michael, *An Introduction to 50 British Poets* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1979).

———. *A Reader's Guide to Modern British Poets* (Heinemann, 1979).

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, *Dialogue on Love* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

Singer, Lavinia, 'Significant Shapes: W. S. Graham's Painting Poems' in *Chicago Review* 62:1/2, 60-66.

Solomon, Samuel, 'Denise Riley's Socialized Biology' in *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 5 (2), 167-99.

———. 'Reproducing the Line: 1970s Innovative Poetry and Socialist-Feminism in the UK' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Southern California, 2012).

Stephens, Chris, 'Introduction' to *The Constructed Space* exhibition catalogue, ed. by Chris Stephens (Ilkley, 1994).

Stevens, Wallace, *Collected Prose and Poetry* (New York: Library of America, 1997).

———. *The Necessary Angel* (London: Faber, 1984).

Stuart Mill, John, 'What is Poetry?' (1833), in *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory*, ed. by Thomas J. Collins and Vivienne J. Rundle (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1999), 1212–27.

Tennyson, Alfred, Lord, *Selected Poems*, chosen and edited by Michael Millgate (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

———. 'In Memoriam A. H. H. OBIIT MDCCCXXXIII: 5', *In Memoriam* (London: Edward Moxon, 1856).

Tomlinson, Charles, *The Way of a World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

Virtanen, Juha, *Poetry and Performance During the British Poetry Revival 1960–1980: Event and Effect* (London: Palgrave, 2017).

Wesling, Donald, *The Chances of Rhyme* (California: University of California Press).

Wheale, Nigel, 'Colours - Ethics - Lyric, Voice: Recent Poetry by Denise Riley', *Parataxis: Modernism and Modern Writing*, 4 (Summer 1993), 70-77.

Whittaker, David, *St Ives Allure* (Charlbury: Wavestone Press, 2018).

Wilkinson, John, 'Illyrian Places', *Parataxis* 6, Brighton, Spring/Summer 1994, 58-59.

———. 'from Lyric Poetry in Evil Times' in Atlantic Drift: *An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by James Byrne and Robert Sheppard (Todmorden: Arc, 2017), 330-32.

———. The Lyric Touch (Cambridge: Salt, 2007).

Wolosky, Shira, *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan* (Stanford, 1995).

Wood, Michael, *On Empson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

Yeats, W. B., *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1990).

———. *The Poems*, ed. by Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 1992).

Path Through Wood

Path Through Wood: Introduction

The book is made up of discrete poems which nonetheless produce a lyric arc. The introductory section ('Path Through Wood') wakes in a wooded enclosure of lyric and ballad as a pressurised site of reflection, situating the reader consciously within poetic tradition. The wood is also an embodiment of the enclosed, compressed safe space of a child's imaginary, which is later taken up in the context of trauma. The imaginary space of lyric is deliberately disassembled in a following section ('Not a Mirror but Bare Board') which explores perception and deception through the figure of an amateur dramatics teacher, and by drawing explicitly from the coolly ornate set-pieces of Wallace Stevens.

The lyric is then employed as a means of exploring various frameworks centred on listening and seeing vulnerable subjects, such as those of psychoanalysis, counselling, volunteering with asylum seekers, a boy's imaginary in overdetermined spaces of childhood and legal practice. This is done so abstractly ('Listening In') and more empirically ('Hide and Seeking'). The poems attempt to differentiate between acts of listening and hearing, tuning into the conspiratorial whisperings of a language that can work with and against us, exposing those who listen in from behind the arras, or attending better to our interlocutors. As the long poem which concludes 'Hide and Seeking' worries at the ethics of lyric pleasure and play ('In Henry Darger's Studio'), the following section ('Always a Montage') deliberately tries to conceive of evasive or intransigent lyric subjects – weather, boyhood, The Cloud – in visual terms as a form of relief. 'Cloud Study' is a cento made up largely of titles of paintings from the nineteenth century to the present. Other poems ('Pillar of Smoke (1964)', 'pigeon grey') respond deliberately to art objects but do not attempt to describe them in conventional ekphrasis, offering instead an equivalent ambience in their own medium. The book's epilogue awakes us from the bewitchment of lyric, as we emerge from the woods, into a new pastoral clarity.

I. PATH THROUGH WOOD

Lines following W. S. Graham

'I have set you here'

On the way into the woods, do you feel someone
turn the focus of the lens with the topmost parts
of their forefinger and thumb –
in line with the crick of your neck, as you turn to look
but feel the head fixed straight. The branches tick,
someone set them going. The woods set you here,
so as to feel away from thoughts but still you think
I never really entered. The way into the woods is in a way
to go round the woods: the woods are always in the way
when you're in them (if they're woods). The way in weighs
on the memory of summer like a cloak momentarily hung
over the sun. The way in is a process of hyphenation,
like statements about the weather, the weather in the woods.

I lay still listening

This listening wood sets off
this listening in woods
this listening inwards
you can't but listen in wards – yells and rasping –
that which listens towards, a plant to light is
listening out, when he lost the entourage
listening in was a lack of courage
this listening would, in another time be
this listening would have been otherwise

ballad

glare does its fluorescent spider, greenery fidgets, what twitches, waking after a long sleep lines knot in protest at the mention of 'I' beneath the lithe long grass that swallows the path ballet, ballade, roach, a vintage alloy heard a cough indicating copse or corpse hoped to swap quarrel with communion graham's drenched bracken leonids, lighters crammed with dirt, murky translucence, cigarette cherry a jewel of heat, a signet ring, a sovereign state laminated signage, condensation, water retention on the lung the wood's en-dash the closure of wood the woodland sings, the woodland stinks deodorant's stinging aluminum chill after-burn the seal of its fridge withered, weak roots feel for closure or release find rusted pulleys, quaint dusty canopy in need of husbandry corrupted membrane reconfigures green empty promise of springe beyond that screen bare board ballad has been

II. NOT A MIRROR BUT BARE BOARD

The art of trying

I always told the truth and told it slant, often at right angles, crossed like a constructivist movement, or lines on a cutting mat, and my speech was deliberate, each word a part in a speech act I had foreseen, that was all mine and not corrupted by the day and its crowding condensations, its creeping willow and moss. Through the leaves came a light, hot with acid like ambition, running past the branches of whatever was outside. I saw my language like a history of brief romances – threadbare, synoptic, a relic of automation.

The 'I' speaks out and disperses; one line drawn, walked, criss-crossed on the cutting mat unseen beneath the poem. I told the truth with a grand design including spirals, folded pleats, matchstick lighthouses, all woven in; nothing was straightforward when I put it together, or even implicitly so, and therefore none of this can be recorded, legibly written down, redacted, laid to rest in a pitch black drawer, held back, held against me, held down in shallow water.

Tableaux

Coulisse

He acts as if deception is the plainest thing,
while, in plain sight, a flat piece of scenery hides

at the side of the stage or in its wings, or the science-
labs-cum-dressing room or the space between

the buildings and the mobile classrooms, the birds
and the birds' wings, or the mirror with its brownish

mix of poster-painted primary colour confused
with a dirty window or screen, or slab of water

ready to slide from off- to centre-stage,
and the narrow frame not in line with its rollers

squealing with what you are about to see
or that which you have already seen.

Cornice

Or that which you have already seen, and not retained.
The safety curtain never lifted. The curtain itself painted.

That season we kept our feelings fixed in the room's corners,
out of view but not invisible. Ornate not ostentatious.

The white cube gallery was invented in response, he said,
to what was seen as a crisis of cornice, throwing us.

We needed the theatre's frayed edge to be on the surface,
baroque, felicitous. His voice sounded fulsome yet cold in the gallery

and in that moment the voice was the length of the room. I was lost
for a minute and missed the quaint corners joining decor

and form and that which we cannot hear or hold in view
or square with the venetian blinds we struggle to see through.

Conus

Or square with the venetian blinds we struggle to see through,
the market square, the blackboard's flimsy boarder, repressed boy's

faded capriccio, stuck badly to the bedroom wall. The teacher
had been saying that just because the world depicted precedes

the film it's no less made, the rear-view traffic no less art.
The frame tempers chance: what is found in the finding

is found in design. His delivery was well practiced, but I found him
hard to parse among the poem's phrasing, the ventricles of its heart,

low extremity of the spinal cord. In the operating theatre
is the intricacy of parts any more on view? Collateral rarely offers

a dress-rehearsal, this much is true. The frame might be found,
discarded or applied, the onus is nonetheless on you.

Onus

Discarded or applied, the onus is nonetheless on you,
he said, since once an image is seen and lodged

in the mind it can't easily be unseen. I didn't know
what relation this had to the unconscious or the unquiet,

yet didn't think it worth asking. Contradicting himself,
he said that what happens offscreen is the scariest bit,

but who, then, is responsible for it? I found a lot of this hard to accept.
I had, after all, some idea of how bad things could get. I began to feel

the hang of his words like a costume that can't un-see the film
and forgets the text, its desire to touch every part of the body

like cold water, wading out into a soliloquy which, despite pre-reading,
I could not have foreseen. I lost him there beyond that screen.

Prompt

The poem's form a set of shapes in worn-white tape on stage frayed
slightly at the edges in a way that would be difficult to recreate
by hand, or peel off and reapply to another stage, though as they say
anything is possible when the house lights go down. But how to differentiate

between the set of shapes and the crime they demarcate if the crime is
a part of the stage, the theatre, the building's façade, long since faded.
The poem's form a set of shapes in worn-white tape, frayed by the arid
heat of lights which obfuscates these lines, provides no shade.

Poem without form

> 'as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish to retain when hardened' – Coleridge, *Shakespearean rhythm*

the poem as The Sacré-Cœur, a crypt within the poem,
suspended as a crib, it will take another poet
to find it for this poet to have meant it
the man sure he attended to it if it's virtuous

-

in pulling back the dusty rug finding a rhyme with 'crypt'
or a blueprint for life, womb, tomb, the metaphysician's
lonely twang, every rhyme used evokes a rhyme not meant,
the subject untended, but the form's muscle no doubt male

-

form as imperfect as body image, form as relation to figure,
form as water retention on the lung, as when to a mass of wet clay
will do none, form as death when death precedes
making the first move, as hereditary disease is received

-

form inheres in form, can you hear, can you let some air in here

III. LISTENING IN

HAMLET: Nor nothing do you hear?
GERTRUDE: No, nothing but ourselves.

'We don't just hear you, we listen'

You do not have to qualify to get someone to listen,
but it helps to keep them interested, since a cry born
of desperation may burst like a fountain's first ejaculation
of water up past etiquette but still lands predictably
in its concrete pool. The question 'so what do you think
your next step should be?' makes the steep drop down
to the next unknowable. Its well-meant firmness
a stone weighing down the throat. Hard to evade
without hiding under the bed again or its equivalent.
And yet this listening phoneline sags
unobtrusively like a retired bungee cord,
cradling the ear of us both as it says,
'try and remember, there is no right answer.'

Listening In (Fresh Claim for Asylum)

He is telling me again about the head and the heart,
that the head won't think without the heart which beats,
and the heart that beats for god, or because god gave it to us
or because god lives in us. Can you create a plant like that?
No. So god exists. Much of our allotted time is taken up with this.
Or that the head is a satellite broadcasting out, while
the ears receive; they're small, by comparison, with less potential.
I half-listen, trying to think of the poem by George Herbert
which is about the majesty of god's creation, and not
the plant pot's harsh plastic clutching after teracotta,
the lucid green of his coffee cup, the dehydrated box of tissues.
At the urinal, I listen to his shit. Sound contained poorly
within its walls. They shake, unembarrassed, articulate. The outside
blue we enter differently is a deep, blank slate, incorrigibly free.

Happy Accidence

'What does your wordless absence say'
if I speak language then language
confides against its better nature – I
hear it rounding down closer on quiet

the mind's ear leans in in awkwardness
at rest only at its own crests,
pushing penny coins off the steel
shelf without much premeditation or will

your rhyme there for the foot to find
like a stirrup – nonsense catches, clots
then folds together in cheery pleats,
a mound of fabric so compact for being neat

inner strength

but to do that i must ask myself politely in a way away from my thoughts
in the sound's newly wrecked area, the last blade of grass whipped up
by helicopter blade laid to rest on dried out dirt, flecks of blood.

'stronghold' can mean defended or upheld in different contexts.
it's a military word. it can be action through silence.

imagine a sound penetrating, once it has passed. can't

Gigha

the ear instructs the eye to wade out with sound,
long legs without waders give thanks
listening to sounds lost to the mingling of water

which makes them. Rhymes etched on the waves
each time they subside, 'unique & miraculous',
the water strides out from its shores in great hoops.

Listening In

'You won't go listening in, will you, to our conversation on the landing,' though they could have had it in the kitchen. The bedroom was set down two steps below the landing, a window placed high looking down into it: ideal for listening in and not being seen. Being spied upon. Listening in with military efficiency, or military effectiveness, whichever is the least defective. The squaddies are shown gory videos depicting the reality of war, he told her. Maybe then, maybe earlier. She told me, some time before, there's nothing worse than a man screaming in pain, you can't supress it. A questionable proposition, or position, whichever is the least affective. She will never hear from him again. I never heard the conversation to begin with.

centring

the quiet that surrounds this turn to speak
the quiet that surrounds this so to speak
the quiet turning round this turn to speak
the kind ears never felt to find it speak
the words now pressed upon by quiet, speak

'speak as you can and while I still can hear'
speak as you did for that I can still bear
speak as you may and then we can stunt fear
speak if you will of what I have meant here
speech of a kind that heals these unheard ears

Borderline decisions

the subject will have a well-founded fear
but not so as to flee their dispersal area
volunteers trade classes on elocution
for training in refugee action over coffee

hypertension developed due to threats
'founded', establish or originate, due to threats
the judges serving in Lahore, dense and difficult institution
replied that he had lied to save his life

I wrote 'have' in my notes
at Bradford Tribunal

which even in recall renews the fear,
in well-weighed syllables, WhatsApp messages
family reunion, may exhaust the credible
if found detained, well founded as well persecuted

IV. HIDE AND SEEKING

You just know

that boundaries exist to be tested, and everyone knows
(because he won't shut up about it) that the boy on the back
row of the coach coming home from Ypres needs to masturbate
and is going to have to wait at least four and a half hours to tame
the snake, and the only way to get in the flat-headed straws of
sherbet is to bite them, which is of course crude, as crude as having
a password for the sweet deal for those coming back from Ypres.
And the road to Calais seems to bend indefinitely, and the coach
chucks itself and the weight of the lives of these kids at great speed
and is held between the oncoming reams of coaches on their way
to Ypres and the rows of sugary trees pristine in their little collars
of cable tie. And someone managed to get stoned, to bring with
him the magnesium smell, and it's there in the corrosive tangerine
of the tractor coughing smoke, ploughing fields of salted caramel and
which might veer off beyond them, threshing mounds of concrete,
chewing up rats and benign snakes in the grass before plunging
into bunkers and ditches, and further, the networks of pipes,
before emerging with a buck up, heroically unseen,
on the brow of a hill with a wistful crunch to say it's hard
for a thing to stay immaculate, except the glassy light of Ypres.

Cretin

My sister bit her tongue
I learned to nip mine in the bud.
I asked him questions
questions I thought he liked
about what can kill a man
so many his answer
overheats in anger
like a livewire
the source of fire is unclear.
A BB gun can kill you
if it gets you at point blank
behind the roof of your mouth.
I made a mess of my youth standing
by the bathwater staring
at the violent man's penis
slumped like a drunk
in the settee of its scrotum,
the scorched folds
a new softness easily in reach.
Asking question after question,
this is how I touched him
so I learnt to tongue the soft membrane
behind the roof of my mouth
to strain its root
out of this ignorant habit.

my david

squirreling my head against the bed nose neatly tucked between the pine frame
and the wall's gently sour cold paint
the snug wedgie of these pajama bottoms as dirty and not yet soiled
the artist David Wojnarowicz would swim out from his abuse into compartments of the sea

rooms within rooms like an ornate toy
hoard his boyish box of figurines, their warm, germy feel screening meaning
he swam I walked in circles touching walls washing hands
each wall with an even palm or did it again, round and round the room

and the nameless other boys clambered through floorboards and tree trunks
to a compartment in the sea in a tree in the house in the mind on the visual plane
of the artist's work from which he is always submerging always emerging
and from which he would later wake with a scream

Forum Bar (For Lauri Love)

To leave a digital footprint that's out of step
with Stradishall, Suffolk. Some future
for the son of a former
British Baptist Minister.
To smile wide in the face of
grey rain / atopic eczema
– smile not wiped by
computer / tabloid paper. To have
considered all the evidence and data,
to rock the boat so as to touch both
sides of the water – people died for the right
to see the evidence, others kept on constant watch
/ psychotropic medication so as to hold
some semblance of the smiling / guilty person.

Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (For Aaron Swartz)

To give back borrowed data
no meaningful return of what's stolen
when everyone gets a copy
'return' as submit, split from 'recall'
retract, undo send / these shadows offended
behind a bike helmet / ACER laptop
to access material produced at public research
institutions / private institutions with public funding
via public WIFI / in a network closet at MIT
the online equivalent of checking
too many books out of library
people are still talking confidently
in terms of online equivalents
the integrity of the printed object
he could be lending them out
could be boyish curiosity /a fine line
between merely imp / and prison camp
buying or borrowing a culture with a poster
for a meticulous planner / bankrupting
everyone you know / barristers chambers
of the heart / breaking and entering
beautiful smiling boy / is it not about
everything you put out into the world
no return / no valency / sorry

In Henry Darger's Studio

> 'That's the way we were made. We can't help it.'
> – John Ashbery, *Girls on the Run*

On the day of the poetry specialist's court trial in Cambridge
I am in Chicago,
the all-over blue backed by a caustic wind so bright as to burn
irrevocably through to a new blue
beyond sun-comprehending glass, the deep blue air,
the false azure in John Shade's windowpane,
sand blasting the concrete wave-breakers
to prelapsarian form, the nail's quick,
its brutish shape offers no reflected sky.

Chicago is the home of Intuit on Milwaukee Avenue,
one of the western world's premier museums
dedicated to Outsider Art, that which is produced
beyond its premier academies and categories,
cultural production at times comically offset with its medium:
works made with naïve materials, street waste, Prell bottles.
Nearby is a railway carriage repurposed as a popular diner
offsetting recycled kitsch and the robust economy of service.

At Intuit, beyond the panoramas of Vivian Girls fleeing
and/or giving chase and the smell of freshly peeled PVC
kept suspended by the A/C there is a partitioned area,
makeshift mainstay of the building: Henry Darger's living room,
and the objects he collected, shoes, eyeglasses, balls of string,
stained as a smoker's lungs or an aged mobile classroom is stained
with a browned character that exceeds its propensity to age,
its edges dipped not so much in tea as liquid mahogany.
Coloured-in papers, magazines, tied in neat stacks,

hardened tabs of cake pigment, trays of them,
boxes with their boyish number of compartments, crayons,
copies of the *National Geographic*
without the requisite waiting room grease,
matt and stiff, where categories are cherished;
apothecary's 'plasters, pills, and ointment boxes'
to which Keats was encouraged unkindly to return.

'Crayon' is a derivative of *craie* in French, 'chalk',
it translates as colouring pencil. In *Modern Painters*
Ruskin refers to 'Chalk debris, black and white,
broken off the crayons with which Turner had drawn.'
Ruskin had drawn Rose La Touche,
his little white statue in the woods,
which by shading rose made pale
and by elegant frottage sought to diminish,
'as a man who lived with and through art,
he seemed unable to disentangle Rose
from his aesthetic theories, even as she haunted his dreams.'

Crayon has the jumbo quality of childhood
as we would like most children to imagine it:
chunky lines of oily colour as immutable but washable,
inchoate but uncorrupted, firm as a well-kept bed time.

As a man who lived with and through art,
the hoard of images were discovered on various devices
at Robinson College, Cambridge.

The child exceeds the lines printed for the purposes of colouring in,
to touch them only slightly. The artist offsets unhygienic brown
and bouncy blue. Eyes and mouths as plunging deep
beyond the dimensions of their frame.

I have stood in a kitchen observing a child draw
with such focus as to be alone in the world, to draw himself
out of the world, to a no-place not unlike Henry Darger in Chicago
producing Vivian Girls who are always fleeing and/or giving chase.

Charles Kinbote installed two ping pong tables
for twins and another boy, another boy, which function
in *Pale Fire* as one device which may help distinguish
'game' from 'play'. Games have rules to stick to,
'play' more keenly evokes a boundary
which may be defined, pushed, perhaps
even transgressed, without crossing.
CL Dodgson's boat rides
with Alice Liddell kept, of course, within the Thames,
licked by water heard and not seen,
between bounds of the river banks, Christchurch Quad,
Chartreuse for the Senior Common Room.

I confess I still find the *Alice* books more spellbinding than troubling.
A pack of cards as the violence of chance. The chances of rhyme
as the tinklings and jinglings of imagination.
I don't think we're any closer to a poetics of musical thinking.

V. ALWAYS A MONTAGE

But the clouds…

i. *Condensing*

the boy draws something unknowingly rune-shaped (penis-shaped) on the bus window, the bus is smoldering on the inside, the fester of the end of the-end-of-the-day, backwash at the base of the pepsi bottle, aerosol's dying breath, drained pimple, spent packed lunch

-

did freud see germy drops of condensation on the glass when referring to *verdichten* in the dream work, or did this residue get picked up in translation, clung inside the words themselves

-

the boy is sure he sees germs squirm on the watery residue on the window, as in the morning urine appears to squirm in the toilet bowl, peeing out yesterday's cortisol, the body not yet learnt to keep hold

-

condensation as usually contained within, on the inside, when something hot meets cold too quickly – a water bottle, lunchbox, the remains of dinner added to the fridge spoiling, invisibly, the rest of the food, a hatchback car, in which to make love or ritualistically skin up on dour evenings, its disobedient alloys pornographic in the grass

-

condensation on the screen of the device spoiling its pristine appeal, the man thankful for the device which ensures him automatically the files transferred to icloud are not, after all, lost; another man may be thankful that they are

-

somewhere a conversation is always too quickly overcrowded with meaning, interconnected as teenagers' lives are jammed in ill-fitting blazers waiting petulantly for the bus, killing time on the inexplicable bit of rugged concrete

-

frank ocean is dreaming when he sings: 'dreaming a thought that could dream about a thought. / that could think of the dreamer that thought. / that could think of dreaming and getting a glimmer of god.' intonation clots at the end of each clause, the guitar has so much reverb it must be coming from next door, the track mixed so as to be slurred, sweet tenor rolls in prosaics, he does not un-jam the dream, it keeps running in viscose silky loops down the plug hole, the album underpinned by the ghost of a percussive beat

when timothee chalamet quotes these lyrics back to frank he *laughs*. don't do that.

-

condensation as a human-enacted process, as we like to think the weather is human enacted, the nomenclature of which we need art to understand

the weather in this room, the dream, the sweat, no metaphor

the words themselves

ii. *Cloud Study*

The observations
about self-consciousness
As one subclass
of those determinations
Every squiggle serves
the composition
A vase containing
water, or even
a cloud

Cloud Study

Cloud Study (after Cozens's Engravings of Skies)

Cloud-benighted, deathly stillness

The clouds preceded us

Streaky cloud at the top of the sky
Intermixture of the sky and the landscape

Cloudless at first
Clouds pass and disperse

Study of Clouds
Study of Clouds

In a sky full of clouds, clouds upon clouds
Everything but the clouds

Cloud Study

Study of Clouds

Stratus

Cumulus

Cirrus

Cloudland

Sky above Clouds IV
Study of a cloudy sky
Study of Cumulus Clouds
Coastal Scene with Cliffs

Calibri over Times New Roman
page break
over two columns
Chiaroscuro

Cloud Study over Marshlands

Cloud Study with marshlands

Cloud Study with Marshlands

View over Hampstead Heath Looking East from Hampstead

Hampstead Heath looking towards Harrow

Hampstead Heath with a Rainbow

Sunset at sea after a storm
Seascape Study with Rain Cloud
Seascape with Rain Cloud
Snow Cloud
Rain

in the field's room hung a cloud
long and lonely as thought
sun gone before I knew
to her, to appear, to me
dim view

The cloud spooled into the room.
The rain spoiled our afternoon.

the sun rising through vapour
early morning
Clouds at Sunset

Landscape with scudding clouds
Coast Scene with Boats Being Unloaded
Mountains and Clouds – A Scene from the Top of Loughrigg
    Westmoreland

and Juliet is the sun
any more than the sun is the sun
and the sunlight clasps the earth
but my eyes burn (cloud, come)

Astonishingly easy and low cost
as water is in water
phishing logins and raiding
not my best and not my worst

Silver Clouds
Cloud City
jpeg rl10

We are flying through trauma clouds.

noises

Sometimes

and sometimes voices

I cried

I wonder if it'll rain. Dinner time.

A Heath

A Mountainous Landscape

black snow is coming, saw it on tv
even with a thought
The rack dislimns
Clouds flee backwards

Dark Cloud Study
The Future of Statues
The False Mirror
The realms of the unreal, Clouds

The warrior cloud appears
cocky fascist clouds
Little Boy
Fat Man

when the horizon fades
awful rainbow

§

Pillar of Smoke (1964)

beyond there is a hut smoked out by
paintball the man loved the game
because of very few rules the chance
he might be mistaken as benign in his mask

men play at boys playing men
the chemical smoke tinged by artificial
colourings like cake mix pushed,
without pain, to the back of the phrase

behind black smoke is guy ropes
like hurt behind the fingernail
pressed to see if it is dirt or bruising
the flattened veneer of canvas

Column of smoke – Kenidjack (1982)

where are nature's tubes
apart from paint
the branches and shrubs held back
by the frame
land will snap –
fire all style
pressing airily on the earth's density
in too-dark licks
desire crammed in a tube of cheap meshing
this is embarrassing
the point at which anthro becomes pomorphic or seen
where has this darkness been

Dark Monarch

steadfast stones care not for artistic communities, abstract communities
prolapsed mouth of the earth | public house's glaze of amber light
conscientious objectors turned vet a boyhood shattered
granite lent with another mighty slab, tip-titled, to form a roof
'in here', stage whispers a child | inheres the rock to conquer hail
which spurs man into hiding | out, little spear, if it is here within
a craftsman sat, crows too, the child spits insults into cold wind
into gorse as nasal hair, cow pat, superstitious hail,
wedge between precede and prevail

fungibility

the pitch quickens the pulse of skirting trees
so we take the argument round
to some good camping ground
despite its sloping part or place
and pitch a tent on the summit
to keep apart from it
in wretched heat
on a sloping hill
in stinging rain
and lounging sun
always with the wrong corner
again it parachuting upward
there goes the argument from beneath it
steady-sombre
it runs and cuts its trail
in the quilt of corn
otherwise moving wholly
like a giant urchin
the ghost of the argument runs
like a bolt of something invisible
inconsistent which it isn't
because there it manifests itself
in the distance now at the pitch
that elderly crew and their knackered
backpacks have decided on, finally
and beyond there's lads we don't bring
any of that business onto the pitch

pigeon grey

I dreamt the pigeons were stressful to look at because of their own stress, which is deep-down where their guts are like the place the tube goes in the afterhours. Pigeons grey at their core like seaside rock, black toenails emerging from their blunt feet. It was a moot point of history when a pigeon was forced to wash its coat only in the great grey fountain; grey like speed sweating and hot in its national lottery stub; a discrete kind of carrier. I dreamt that pigeons long for a vestibule marked off from the sky, something to slip into, to have the remaining sky fold over the gap, and that pigeons appear afflicted because affliction is the only means of engagement with a sky they hate deep down in their toenails, toenails clacking lightly on the unkind floor. Where to hide from a sky, how to fall out of it? Their feet stick on the ground in collaboration – stick to its Maltesers and other treats we leave and still we hate them for this. They walk awkwardly in the way a person would fall. They think about affliction and the euphemism of the word 'fall' for those who fall in battle on any grey Tuesday in regular midwinter, and they pity them

Look outside

there is one
sound that pleases
everyone, a given,
marked off from this position
surely not, ah, and yet
the splashing of waves

Coastal lyric

to pollute or purify the air
or the air's fringes
what's the difference
down here
in the ditches
and the skatepark put
naturally with the cesspit

Bryan Wynter, *Path Through Wood*, 1950, monotype, Tate

Notes

All repetitions are intentional.

'Poetry in its composition is an inrush of others' voices' – Denise Riley. The other voices consciously invoked but not cited in the work are: Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, Shakespeare, Louis MacNeice, William Blake, Dante and Philip Sidney.

'We don't just hear you, we listen' is a distinction made by Roland Barthes and, more recently, The Samaritans.

'Borderline Decisions' quotes from the definition of 'refugee' in the Geneva Refugee Convention and Protocol.

'Forum Bar' was a change in legislation where British courts 'may bar prosecution overseas if it is in the interests of justice to do so'. Lauri Love is a British activist charged with cyber-attacks against the US government between October 2012 and October 2013.

Aaron Schwartz was an America computer programmer and activist prosecuted in 2011 for violating the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act after downloading academic articles on JSTOR that were freely available via MIT; he completed suicide in January 2013. The poem quotes David Segal of Demand Progress; it also alludes to Otto Warmbier, who was imprisoned in North Korea in 2016, and died on return to the USA in 2017.

'In Henry Darger's Studio' includes journalism by Tara Cox for *Cambridge News*, reference to the works of Philip Larkin and Vladimir Nabokov, the Intuit gallery website blurb and the critical writing of Simon Jarvis.

'Cloud Study' is a cento made up largely of the titles of works of art, by: John Constable, Alexander Cozens, Howard Hodgkin, René Magritte, Henry Darger, Georgia O'Keeffe, Andy Warhol, FriendsWithYou, Thomas Ruff; along with excerpts from poems by Hölderlin, Hilda Morley, Sylvia Plath, John Ashbery Laura Riding Jackson, P. B. Shelley, W. B. Yeats, John Keats, Maureen N.

McLane; and the prose or recorded speech of Rodney Koeneke, Robert Sheppard, Luke Howard, Samuel Beckett, Michael Clune, Ben Lerner, Rose Wylie, Amiri Baraka, Esther Leslie; and the music of Oneohtrix Point Never and Deftones.

'Dark Monarch' echoes the namesake motif which crops up across the work of Sven Berlin. The poem borrows words from Daphne du Maurier, *Vanishing Cornwall*, and Wið Færstice – Lacnunga.

Pillar of Smoke (1964) and *Column of smoke – Kenidjack (1982)* are paintings by Karl Weschke.

'Pigeon Grey' was commissioned as a response to the artwork *Bristow* (2016) by Adel Abdessemed.