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"Strange to language": W.S Graham's Bryan Wynter and the Problematics of Verbal-Visual Communication

Addressing Bryan Wynter in the poem "Wynter and the Grammarsow", W.S. Graham becomes tongue-tied when he turns to Wynter's paintings:

> Confronted with what you do I can never
> Find anything (not unnaturally)
> To say.[1]

Yet rather than backing away from Wynter's work, his words hover before it, comprising a linguistic response even in saying that he cannot say; that parenthetical litotes, "(not unnaturally)", occupies an in-between space: it is not unnatural, perhaps, that language should fail him, or that word should fail image, but equally it is not exactly natural that the one art should have nothing at all to do with the other.

Graham lived his life in the company of painters as much as of poets, and Wynter was one of several painters who would comprise his closest circle of friends in West Penwith, after his move down to Cornwall in 1943. Graham and Wynter met after the end of the War, when Wynter was lured to the area by the promise of cheap studios, determined to pursue a career as a painter. They formed a life-long friendship, one of the very strongest in an artistic community where rivalries would often form, and relations sour.

Given Graham's contexts it might seem altogether natural to look for parallels between his poetry and the work of these painters, but a cursory glance at both will demonstrate the difficulties involved: comparisons of subject matter are immediately complicated by the fact that for the most part those with whom he associated were abstract or semi-abstract painters, and Graham never a poet of purely descriptive surfaces.

Graham himself seemed to play down any connection with the visual arts, when he told Tony Lopez that "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"; but he continued: "I have never come near being part of a movement or group", stressing his individuality and protesting against categorization of any kind.[2] It is a stance, in fact, analogous to that of so many of those artists he knew, who often protested against being labelled as part of a "St Ives school".[3] Wynter more than most had an intense dislike of labelling of any kind; both his professional and his personal life were devoted to exploring possible forms of individuality and freedom.

Graham indisputably interacts in his poetry with these painters, addressing poems to them, and engaging with many of their concerns, but he does so with delicacy, and with an eye for difference as much as for common ground. Rather than warding us off, lines such as the above should make us equally vigilant to the caution with which he approaches the possibility of sharing with other art forms; often what he shares most of all, indeed, is an investigation of artistic problems.

I have argued elsewhere, specifically with regard to Roger Hilton and Peter Lanyon, that the drawing of influence between Graham and his painter peers was many-sided, that the ideas and practice of one would stimulate and feed into the creative life of another.[4] Wynter, I would suggest, has a similarly complex artistic interrelation with Graham; their meeting places are numerous, as are their crossover points: Wynter wrote poetry, for example, while Graham painted and drew.[5] The boundaries between their creative and social lives were frequently blurred, as when they launched into spontaneous poetry-writing sessions, or when they collaborated on elaborate word games, seemingly trivial pastimes, but which would have wide-reaching effects for both their artistic conception and practice. Wynter's uniqueness among the St Ives painters was his openness to experimentation, which he strongly shared with Graham: both would experiment with creating interactive work in three dimensions; and both would take amphetamines, recreationally but also as a stimulus to the creative imagination, while Wynter experimented also with mescalin, inspired above all by Aldous Huxley.

They both sought means of liberating the unconscious mind, and their shared interest in Surrealism is embedded in Graham's description of Wynter in "Wynter and the Grammarsow" as "Black-rod of Ernst's/ Beaked politicians": here Wynter leads Max Ernst rather than the other way round; during the last years of the War Wynter had produced a series of drawings of imaginary birds, thought to have been inspired by Ernst's Surrealist bird forms; he continued to draw on images of birds in his early work, and critics compared his symbolism favourably with that of Ernst.[6] It is clear, then, that Graham's poem does find things to say about Wynter's art, beginning at the level of allusion; true to Ernst's definition of collage as "the coupling of two realities irreconcilable in appearance, upon a plane which apparently does not suit them", Graham brings together ideas about painting and writing, that sit together uneasily, yet dynamically, in the form of a poem.[7]

I want here to focus in particular on the artistic significance Wynter had for Graham, as it is revealed in this poem, which was first published in *Malcolm Mooney's Land* in 1970. Graham's later elegy for Wynter, "Dear Bryan Wynter", is well-known, and has been the subject of much productive critical scrutiny, above all in terms of its relation to the elegy form,

whereas "Wynter and the Grammarsow" has received very little critical attention beyond a select few lines from its final section.

One possible reason for its neglect is its humour: it is disarmingly offhand in its personal jokes, and its seemingly whimsical lists might be passed over as trite; its jaunty tone, furthermore, may even become rebarbative: referring to Wynter's traumatic experiences working in vivisection during WW2 by christening him "King Aggravator/ Of Monkeys", can have a very different effect on the page from passing oral banter.[8]

A further disincentive to engagement then arises which is in some ways at variance with the first: this is a 'difficult' poem in the sense that although it appears to take the form of a direct address, it continually problematizes notions of directness and of straightforward communication. We may, for example, feel we are kept on the outside looking in at a cosy relationship in which we cannot partake. The opening may be particularly off-putting: just what is being referenced in the "SOUND [...] CUT" cues, which punctuate three of its four sections? Some form of recording, whether a directing or editing process, or sound being replayed; to gather this much is to begin to enter into, or be deflected from, the poem's processes of mediation, and the experience can be disorientating. Yet confronting these problems, rather than negotiating around them, may prove the more rewarding approach; and I shall argue that the poem is as rich as its more 'serious' counterparts.

The first three parts of "Wynter and the Grammarsow", excluding the "SOUND [...] CUT" intrusions, take the form of a mock-heroic poem of praise, celebrating (or gently teasing) their subject in a blazon of attributes:

> Sir Longlegged Liker you
> Of the Royal Grammarsow
> Under its great slate,
> I bow in my disguise
> And give you your titles.

In taking the form of a list, the poem seems uncomplicated in its structure, allowing for a great deal of extemporisation around a fixed ground; the subject on one level therefore, might be said to be completely itself, always the point of address in the repetitious movement in series, approached from a variety of angles, but always the same at base. Moreover, in giving Wynter his "titles", the possibility is raised of an Adamic sense of the purity of language, in which name equates to nature. Yet the constant movement in series poses the problem, structural but linguistic also, of potential endlessness: as the catalogue threatens to become limitless, so the names become interchangeable rather than additional, so that Wynter starts to become an elusive rather than a perfectly-represented subject. And the language employed complicates in

its heterogeneous diction, quasi-medieval at one moment, contemporary the next. The "grammarsow" goes further still, introducing an idiolect (this is one spelling of the Cornish dialect word for a woodlouse) that suggests a yoking together of 'grammar' and 'sow' in the manner of the surrealist automatic coinages of the "Clusters", Graham's automatic compositions; the sense of creation through this word is enhanced when we later hear of the "Gram/ Marsow".[9] Language can no longer appear straightforwardly natural: rather, its conventional status is brought into focus in the act of being tested. "Syntax Gram", from these roughly contemporaneous automatic sketches, is another transgressor of conventional linguistic usage, who is clearly a figure for the poet; he lends support to the idea that the poet himself might be emblemised in this grammarsow, a persona which would also shed light on the reference to "my disguise". The 'slate' under which this linguistic creature sits, puns on the Scots and Irish dialect for a woodlouse – a 'slater', so the poet too can sit under its name in this house of language.[10] This at once real and mythical creature, then, carries with it the nagging possibility of metaphor; including, we shall later see, of Wynter himself *as* rather than *and* grammarsow, of substitution rather than contiguity.

In generating such thoughts about directness and indirectness, Graham's poem brings us close to concerns that greatly preoccupied Wynter, specifically the ways in which such qualities might affect both how the artwork is created and how it is viewed. In his 1957 "Statement" Wynter distinguished between vision and cognition, writing that "I find it helpful to think of the moment at which the eye looks out at the world it has not yet recognised, in which true seeing has not yet been translated into the useful concepts with which the mind immediately swamps it."[11] In terms of the process of creation, just as Graham would experiment with automatic writing Wynter would seek ways of accessing the unconscious mind, and expressed his desire to "fox the intention" at "every moment". Later on, in relation to the IMOOS, his mobile "Images Moving Out Onto Space", Wynter would delight in the effects of optical disorientation: "Habit & expectation are disarmed & the eye gives up trying to make sense of the situation & accepts it on a level of pure experience."[12] In one sense, then, Graham gave Wynter the response he sought in being left not knowing what to say.

The paradox shared by Wynter and Graham is that in the pursuit of clarity they are led down paths of complexity. For Wynter purity of vision cannot readily equate to known images, and so he produces "ambiguous and paradoxical paintings with no main 'theme', from which the spectator may, by participation, extract his own images."[13] Imagery remains in an always unstable state; by 1956 Wynter's painting had eschewed all explicit traces of representation, characterised by its all-over chains of brushstrokes with no specific focal point, so that the

viewing eye is left to wander; then, around 1960, landscape traces returned to his canvasses, but in abstracted, elemental states that can never be categorically pinned down.[14] Complexity and directness engage in an ongoing debate, one sometimes leading to the other, while at another moment seeming mutually exclusive terms.

These are precisely the polarities and convergences which Graham's poem, and even his poetry as a whole, negotiates. His early poetry often favoured sound over sense, and is characterised by the openness of its syntactic ambiguities and inventive kennings; such concerns carry over in muted forms into the mature poems, that remain open to multiple possibilities even in the semblance of direct address. The closeness of Graham's thought here to Wynter's is borne out by notes he sent the painter in 1958, in which he protests that literature is not "more literary than the other arts", and that though poetry is composed of words "we might use every day", we should not expect from it "a little nutshell truth" any more than a painting should "illustrate the behaviour of a molecule".[15] Art leads us in many directions, and is more inclined to transport us beyond the known world than to root us firmly in it; and for both Graham and Wynter the process of revitalising art involves sloughing off conventions in pursuit of its higher truths, and in having faith in the transformative abilities of its everyday materials. The leap of imagination that creates the "Gram/ Marsow", invites us to think what a natural (less literary?) language – a language unified with reality, that does not deal in conceptualisation – might look like; unable to escape wholly from the clutches of known words, and the mediated knowledge they encapsulate, we are nonetheless left with something at once clear and opaque, that can approximate an Adamic state in both its aptness and its strangeness.

Wynter concluded his "Statement" with the suggestion that his painting was "strange to language", a strange phrase that, as Michael Bird observes, might have been taken from a Graham poem.[16] Wynter's remark emerges from his interest in the initial, pre-conceptual moment of seeing, so it is in one sense natural that he should protest its difference from language; at another level the remark emerges from his own struggle to articulate what is going on in his own creative processes as well as in the eye of the viewer: he describes the "moment of seeing" as a "fragment of a continuous process which underlies and precedes recognition, a kind of 'substance' from which we construct our world of human experience"; suggests that he himself embodies this substance; and that all this is "strange to language". Such ambiguous and abstract, but nonetheless haunting thoughts, which elide the experience of painter and viewer, and which allude to his belief in a Jungian collective unconscious, suggest as much that Wynter's art might produce a strange language, as that to language it is completely unknown.

Wynter's remarks tap into the debate about the kinds of understanding that might be possible beyond language, and there is a struggle in the attempted expression of the inexpressible, in which Graham would have delighted (not merely Wynter's "'substance'" but the whole of his "Statement" might be placed within inverted commas, to signify a provisional terminology, always at one remove from its subject). Graham shares with Wynter an ambivalence about language's ability to communicate effectively, and a curiosity about what lies beyond its grasp; moreover, Graham is interested in the strangeness of language itself, and its elusive, constantly shifting relation to reality.

Wynter's attempted commentaries on his work make it clear that movement was a primary concern of his painting, and Graham's Wynter is characterised by kinds of motion. He is:

> Bryan the Spinner
> In endless eddies
> Above the weir
> Of rushing home.
>
> Fibre-glass swiveller
> Over the weaving
> Strands of water
> In an innocent pool.
>
> Scholar King
> Of rare meanders.
> Rider of Rivers
> Undiscovered.

On the surface we are hearing of Wynter the man, who loved nothing better than to actively engage with the land in fishing and canoeing, as well as walking ("Nightwalker"; "Perambulator/ Of the Christian fields") and diving ("Masked thinskinned diver"). But just as the land would increasingly stimulate Wynter's art, so Graham's lines grow to reflect on that painting, with its desire to capture pure, elemental states alluded to in the "innocent pool" and the "Rivers/ Undiscovered"; so too, the continual movement comes to reflect Wynter's aim of the roving eye.

The "endless eddies" and "weaving strands" are suggestive of the early abstract works, with their overlapping networks of brushstrokes: as Chris Stephens puts it, "The effect of the brushwork is one of movement: vertically, horizontally, diagonally or, most especially, as an apparent shimmering upon the surface".[17] The movement of water would come to have particular significance to Wynter, after his reading of Theodor Schwenk's pseudo-scientific study *Sensitive Chaos: The Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air*, in which he argued

that the natural flow of water follows "a meandering course", and that this is "an archetypal principal ... that wants to realise itself, regardless of the surrounding material".[18] The meander was one of the elements which Wynter would abstract from nature, and he produced a Meander series of paintings; in 1969 Wynter would paraphrase Schwenk in identifying his natural sources as the "archetypal movements" of water, including "the standing wave, the eddy, the meander".[19] The idea of spinning and swivelling, as well as the rotation and "Whirr" of the windmill, on the other hand, suggest the movements of the IMOOS, with their freely moving cut-out elements, suspended from wires before a parabolic mirror, and brought to life by a magnet above, rotated in the first experiments by a whirring motor, to produce what Patrick Heron would call "rhythms of allover fluidity".[20]

I suggested before that Graham is not a poet of surfaces, and these lines, it will become clear, strike deeper than mere description; but to some extent the poem's depth lies in the investigation of that surface itself. Graham is interested in interrogating what might exist behind language, or within it, as well as the extent to which language exists purely as a shifting facade. In their rolling descriptions of Wynter's pursuits, with glimpses into the surface of his art, these lines accord with Wynter's shifting surfaces, which as Stephens remarks, are in "a constant state of assertion and denial: pictorial space is made and then blocked off".[21]

It is clear, then, that the poem connects with both Wynter's life and his art, and at times his art through his life, a synthesis which offers provocation to one of the poem's stated aims:

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

These lines, from the fourth and final section, in fact follow on from the statement of never finding anything to say; and just as those lines are contradicted, so the aim of separation immediately wavers, giving way to a debate. The "Of course" seems to bow to the pressure of inherited, New Critical expectation of how to respond to an artwork; only to have tentative second thoughts in the "Maybe" and "kind of way".

This passage offers one of Graham's most explicit reflections on a subject that haunts so much of his verse: the extent to which an artist can remain present within an artwork, and communicate with its addressee, recipient, reader or viewer; and the extent to which the artwork remains detached, formal and impersonal. In "to be moved/ By both at once",

movement takes on emotional connotations, as well as suggesting a mutability of response, which can operate on different levels simultaneously; there is movement on the part of the spectator, "added to" the equation; movement of a paradoxical kind in the object itself "Adrift stationary"; and movement of the "idea/ Of the person" as it is carried through the artwork.

For there is another level at which the self and the artwork might come together, that manifests itself in different but related forms in Wynter and Graham's respective arts. Action painting, Harold Rosenberg's term for the gestural abstraction that became a dominant mode in the mid-1950s, typified by the work of Jackson Pollock, was characterised by its immediacy, and by its preservation of the processes that made the artwork rather than a refining or glossing over of those processes.[22] Action painting typically has a vigorous physicality, and forges an intimate connection with the painter's body which has produced the work: Wynter was well-known as someone who lived fully "inside his body", and who brought his own physicality to bear on his canvasses, which were often scaled to his body, and whose brushstrokes "reflect[ed] the movement and reach of his arm".[23] When Graham speaks of being "Confronted with what you do", the sense of action, which does not confine itself to his art, is in contradistinction to speech, doing versus saying:

> Confronted with what you do I can never
> Find anything (not unnaturally)
> To say.

Yet to what extent saying might in fact *be* doing is a question Graham asks repeatedly throughout his poetry, as it tests the possibility of speech acts, or performative utterances, through which the poet might in some measure be rendered present through the poem. "The Beast in Space" turns on the idea that the space occupied by the poem might be at once empty and inhabited; while in "The Constructed Space" the poem becomes a meeting place between poet and reader, who "face/ Each other now across this abstract scene"; again it is a space at once "fixed and dead" yet "public", into which "lonely meanings are read".

The coming together of opposing forces in "Adrift stationary" inculcates Graham's view of an art that at once stays the same and yet constantly changes: the words remain static on the printed page, and yet mean such different things to different people across time; the artwork is ultimately cut free from its creator, left to drift in the tides of reception. We find reference to this special place inhabited by art throughout Graham's poetry; it is compacted in the spatial-temporal ambiguities of the word 'still', for example, in *The Nightfisherman*: "This/ Is the place fastened still with movement". Like that early poem, "Wynter and the Grammarsow" is interested in movements beyond the linear journey, and "Adrift" carries us

back, fittingly, to "Bryan the Spinner". Taken together, these passages bring to the surface a sunken allusion to Yeats' "Long-legged Fly", an allusion that becomes clearer still when we return to "Longlegged" in the third line.

"*Like a long-legged fly upon the stream/ His mind moves upon silence*": Yeats' simile like Graham's figuration never fully reveals its relation to its referent, hovering ambiguously between physical entities (the fly, the stream) and abstract qualities (the mind, silence). Its representation of movement is similarly subtle and complex; it focusses on moments of silence and stillness that precede the completion of creative or destructive acts or events, yet there is movement by the subjects within those moments (Helen's dancing, Michael Angelo's hand), and above all the movement of the mind (typified in Caesar). The fly suggests a form of static movement, still in itself but being carried by the stream: it is "Adrift stationary", as the subjects are in Yeats' poem, frozen in history, yet reanimated by the poet, and living in our reading of the poem. These subjects, then, exist in a world apart (just as figuration inhabits another world), representing both the artist and the artwork, the special conditions under which art is created, and the special laws under which art can operate: what Graham's poem terms "Art law". So we return to Graham's abiding interest, in the creative act, the temporal moment of composition, living on through art's timelessness.

Graham elaborated on his notion of "Art law" in thoughts he sent to Wynter in 1958:

I remember that always somewhere under the live and speaking idiom of the Voice in poetry there is the count, the beats you can count on your fingers. Yes always under the shout and whimper of the quick and the slow of poetry there is the formal construction of time made abstract in the mind's ear. And the strange thing is that that very abstract dimension in the poem is what creates the reader's release into the human world of another.[24]

The striking impression of interplay between surfaces and levels in Graham's poetry is here borne out in his conceptualisation: immediacy co-exists with careful planning, and temporality with timelessness. Abstraction, a term as common to Graham's thinking as it is to Wynter's, ultimately becomes the means of connection, similar to the way in which the "abstract scene" is both divider and connector in "The Constructed Space"; its final line, in which the poet has "More truly now this abstract act become", similarly unites specificity and generality, in a way which recalls Wynter's embodiment of, or disappearance into, process that is "strange to language".

The "quick and the slow" here describes a varied surface, yet the phrase also occurs in "Hilton Abstract", where it corresponds more with the processes of composition: Roger Hilton was famous for his tortured pauses which preceded bouts of frantic composition; but true to

the notion of action painting, these processes live on in their effects on the canvas, and might be reactivated in the process of viewing. They are also terms highly pertinent to Wynter's processes, and his illusions of movement: "There are no rocks and streams in my paintings, but a comparable process of dynamic versus static elements has attended their development and brought about their final form" he told Alan Bowness in 1960.[25] Here too a conception of levels coincides with a form of abstraction; Wynter spoke of approaching nature from the other side, and the rocks and streams do not enter the work as subjects, but their processes inform those of Wynter, and as in Hilton's work might be detected in the final painting.

For despite seeking to capture an initial sensation of disorientation with his surfaces, Wynter also hoped it would be possible for the viewer to penetrate through to discover the underlying processes and structures:

> About 1956 I was trying to create a kind of visual flux, a surface on which the eye found it difficult to rest so that, if it were not rebuffed, it would be compelled to push deeper and come to terms with the forces underlying the painting. This demanded an act of imagination from the spectator.[26]

Once again the work of art cannot act alone, insisting upon the viewer's active participation. Wynter and Graham together harness their complex understanding of movement to a complex conception of time, in which the moments of composition, the moments represented in the canvasses or poems themselves, and the moments of reception, interweave in an ongoing state of animation.

The often-quoted stanza at the heart of the last section of "Wynter and the Grammarsow" is inseparable from the rest, summing up in abandoning the contents of the preceding three sections:

> The titles are finished
> It was a way
> Of speaking towards you.

The motion of the names, then, which has occupied so much of the poem, is taken to be towards their subject, with the suggestion that they in fact fall short, that they never reach their intended destination. "Speaking" here is at odds with the printed word: there is a sense of the printed word's limited ability to voice one person, and to reach one subject, as well as to conjure that subject within the poem. There is also the preceding admission that "I don't really mean to speak to you intimately", that seems most of all a comment on the intentions behind writing and publishing poetry, and the effects of the written word that carry far beyond the single speaking voice and the solitary addressee.

This suggested motion "towards" is complicated though by the parallel succession of names whose order seems for the most part interchangeable, suggesting most strongly a sideways motion that circles around Wynter without making progress. Graham also radically compounds the sense of the poem's direction in the preceding stanza, in a sudden syntactic rush with even a note of panic:

> Wince me your grip for O
> The times are calling us in and the little babes
> Are shouldering arms in the cause of the Future Past.
> Are we too old to walk around in the round?

Straining in its desire to connect with the subject, "Wince" wrenches itself from conventional usage, to latch on to "me"; the climactic "O", figure of the circle, now introduces a cyclical account of time, in which babes appear old, in which future and past seem to merge (the preceding reference to Greenock also takes us back to Graham's own past), and in which "we" are too old for never ending circles, "calling in" suggesting a motion more towards death than towards the elliptical centre. And this from within a section that begins with an ending, the sign-off "Yours Truly". When this departing motion comes full circle at the stanza's close, it now appears to be a fraught imperative: "Finish here of Yours Truly. Please please CUT", with the final plea's interruption fulfilling its request.

The unstable sense of movement continues, though, and of course the ending is proved false by the poem's very continuation, but with the possibility of both different voices and different spaces in the very different stanza forms, and in the differentiated indentation. The concern with ending remains, with the titles being "finished", followed by a very different response to ending, a renewal of the desire to communicate:

> Maybe we could have a word before I go,
> As I usually say. I mean there must be some
> Way to speak together straighter than this,
> As I usually say. There is not a long time
> To go between the banks of rubbish and nature
> Down to the old beginning of the real sea.

The tone is calmer, the register colloquial, but the renewed attempt at directness rapidly ties itself into knots; as Natalie Pollard has observed, the sense here of "easy companionability" is imperilled as the repetitions lapse into "inertia":[27] "As I usually say" becomes an indication of staleness in both its import and its phrasing; "I mean" struggles precisely to mean. The sense of direction again falters, searching for "some/ Way" across the line-break, "straighter" returning to the ideal of a direct line of communication. Time again complicates the issue, compounded by an ambiguous evocation of space, the dual dimensions bridged by "between".

The motion of "go" here can be both the movement of time elapsing and that of a human moving through space. The phrase "banks of rubbish and nature" itself exists in a liminal state, caught between image and abstraction, and between single and dual entities (do rubbish and nature co-exist or exist independently in space, or is the implication that rubbish will turn into nature over time? Is there a contradistinction being suggested here between human and natural worlds?).

In the context of a meditation on time and the reference to the sea, these "banks" recall Macbeth's "bank and shoal of time", and Macbeth's concern in his soliloquy with being and ending, the present and the future, and temporality and eternity, resonate strongly with Graham's poem at large. That the end point of this temporal-spatial sequence should be an "old beginning" is a fitting, again temporal-spatial, paradox, whilst the "real sea" focuses the attention again upon the pitting together of abstraction and reality. In what sense might this sea be "real"? The sea has been the site for reflection on the connections and distinctions between reality, figuration, and abstraction, previously in Graham's work, above all in "The Nightfishing"; when he writes in that poem of "The sea as metaphor for the sea", it is with an awareness that all language is metaphor in some degree, however much one wants words to be stable, to represent one thing alone.[28] The sea, as Rosalind Krauss proposes, is

> a special kind of medium for modernism, because of its perfect isolation, its detachment from the social, its sense of self-enclosure, and, above all, its opening onto a visual plenitude that is somehow heightened and pure, both a limitless expanse and a sameness, flattening into nothing, into the no-space of sensory deprivation. [29]

Graham brings into play such a sense of the sea's isolation, but opens it up at the same time to the world of human connectedness; in its sameness as well as its difference, and in its multiplicity of movement while remaining essentially the same, it becomes an equivalent for language itself.

Language, though, in the fourth section of "Wynter and the Grammarsow", sails a perilous course, leaving the calm waters of the first three sections far behind. The disintegration of language seems complete when, finally arriving at the artist's real name alone, that name breaks apart, as if it were the most ephemeral of words, the least stable of all: "The W of Wynter is blown is wisped is faltered/ Off to the rivers." Naming has been the poem's primary impulse, and has generated its essential structure; the process of naming is at the core of discussions of linguistic philosophy and the origins of language, from *Cratylus* to the bible, from Saussure to Wittgenstein to Derrida. Belief in the suitability of a name to a thing, in its original inherent aptness, gives way an understanding of its arbitrariness, which now seems to vex this poem.

What might initially have been whimsical is now revealed to be more anxious: the generative chain is unable to conjure the subject no matter how long it continues. And in this climax, in which the putative cipher is so effortlessly broken up, we have another, more rapid synonymic chain: "is blown is wisped is faltered", the last a self-illustrating mismatch, twisting the conventional usage, but into a neologism that stumbles, that only concedes defeat. The poet continues: "Applicable titles are endless." This is not simply a measure of his regard for Wynter, his diffidence in his abilities to do him justice; more pressingly it formulates a doubt in his ability to represent him, to make him present in language, at all. In acknowledging that these titles fall short, that they never reach Wynter, and in now stopping, there is a sense of failure in the endeavour. So too, the phrase stands as a general pronouncement on language, roughly coinciding with Derrida's conception of 'freeplay', in which signifiers function as an endless chain, with the signified in an elusive, constantly shifting state of deferral.[30] But despite his imputed absence, Wynter *is* the fitting subject here; even in the act of fragmentation, the connection is made with one of Wynter's greatest interests, as the disembodied W joins the unpredictable motions of water.

The leave-taking of the final stanza might again be read as an admission of failure in the appointed task of approaching Wynter; the poet now "retreats backwards", and a division in the second person is made more explicit:

> I leave you now retreating backwards from
> The cocked ear of Wynter the King standing
> Good-mannered up to let me go and turn
> Round in the other direction. I leave the Royal
> Grammarsow King under his great slate.

Previously the shift has been seamless: "I [...]give you your titles". The "you" being left is now distanced from this version of Wynter; moreover, the "I" is now explicitly distinguished from the grammarsow, who may or may not be the same as "Wynter the King". Buried within these relationships has been a pun on the idea of subject: Wynter as Graham's subject, Wynter as the King's subject before, and now as King himself, with Graham his subject. At the same time this relates to the problem of identifying subject matter in Wynter's work: his relation to the grammarsow typifies his relation to nature, as being subject to its processes in his reversal of the conventional relationship ("painting nature from the other side"), and at times seeming to merge with natural processes altogether (embodying that "substance" as he appears to merge with the grammarsow here as King). And now for Graham too the rendering of a subject through art is problematized, and the nominal instability is compounded here by directional ambiguities: who precisely retreats back, and who turns round? But there is also, in the return

to the ostensibly abandoned titles, and in their independence, a possibility of poetic triumph: it is as if the third-person titles have sprung a life of their own: "the titles are finished", but continue to live within the poem and in its performative interaction with the reader, while the "real" Wynter inhabits another world. Of course we as readers realise we are also the subject of Graham's address as we come to the end of the poem.

Graham's poetry can be every bit as complex and disorientating as Wynter's paintings, and encountering either can be like entering a hall of mirrors. In "Wynter and the Grammarsow" the initial impressions of immediacy and spontaneity give way to contradictions, heterogeneity, and multiple levels in which the reality of art is revealed to be constructed but essentially unstable; yet just as it is possible to push through Wynter's surfaces to bring into focus its complex processes, so it is possible gain perspective on the questions Graham raises, and to engage with problems encountered, though we should not seek resolutions, in either artist's work, to the endless spirit of play.

Graham and Wynter come closest in exploring both the possibilities and the limitations of their respective arts, in abandoning the aim of mimesis in favour of a more open dialogue with their environments that at times reveals and at others conceals the human and natural worlds. It is here that they communicate with each other, crossing the verbal-visual divide.

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[1] W.S. Graham, "Wynter and the Grammarsow", in *W.S. Graham: New Collected Poems*, ed. Matthew Francis (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 184-188. Subsequent references are to this edition.

[2] Michael and Margaret Snow, eds., *The Nightfisherman: Selected Letters of W.S. Graham* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), 259.

[3] See for example Michael Bird, *Bryan Wynter* (London: Lund Humphries, 2010), 43, 165.

[4] Peter Maber, "'The poet or painter steers his life to maim': W.S. Graham and the St Ives Modernist School," *Word & Image* 25:3 (2009): 258-71.

[5] For Graham's artwork see Maber, "The poet," 261, 266; for Wynter's poetry see Bird, *Bryan Wynter*, 38.

[6] See Bird, *Bryan Wynter*, 39-40.

[7] Max Ernst, *Beyond Painting* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1948), 13.

[8] Between 1943 and 1945 Wynter worked as a keeper in the laboratories of the Department of Anatomy at Oxford University, as part of his War work having registered as a Conscientious Objector. Though he loathed his time there, Wynter did himself approach this experience with humour: Bird describes his rebellion against the scientific staff, and his satiric cartoons. See Bird, *Bryan Wynter*, 32-33. In "Dear Bryan Wynter", Graham laments that fact that "nobody will laugh/ At my jokes like you."

[9] See Matthew Francis, "Syntax Gram and the magic typewriter: W.S. Graham's automatic writing," in *W.S. Graham: Speaking Towards You*, Hester Jones and Ralph Pite, eds., (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 86-105.

[10] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Slater, *n.* 2. A wood-louse. *Sc.* and *north. dial.*, *Austral.*, and *N.Z..*"

[11] Quoted in Chris Stephens, *Bryan Wynter* (London: Tate Gallery, 1999), 50.

[12] *Ibid.*, 65.

[13] "Statements," quoted in Bird, *Bryan Wynter*, 102.

[14] See Bird, *Bryan Wynter*, 134.

[15] See Snow, *The Nightfisherman*, 163.

[16] Quoted in Bird, *Bryan Wynter*, 101.

[17] Stephens, *Bryan Wynter*, 44.

[18] Theodor Schwenk, *Sensitive Chaos: The Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air*, trans. Olive Whicher and Johanna Wrigley (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1965), 19.

[19] *Ibid.*, 73.

[20] Quoted in Stephens, *Bryan Wynter*, 70.

[21] *Ibid.*, 42.

[22] Rosenberg coined the term in his essay of 1952, "The American Action Painters," *Art News* 51.8 (1952): 22.

[23] Stephens, *Bryan Wynter*, 59.

[24] Snow, *The Nightfisherman*, 162.

[25] See Bird, *Bryan Wynter*, 140.

[26] "Notes on My Painting," *Bryan Wynter* (Zurich: Galerie Charles Lienhard, 1962), n.p.

[27] Natalie Pollard, "'The pages are bugged': The Politics of Listening in the Poetry of W.S. Graham," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 39.1 (2010): 18.

[28] See Maber, "The poet," 262.

[29] Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993), 2.

[30] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 294.