

## **‘The poet or painter steers his life to maim’: W.S. Graham and the St Ives modernist school**

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The Scottish poet W.S. Graham spent most of his adult life in West Penwith, the sparsely populated western peninsula of Cornwall and the southernmost stretch of England. Its rugged moorland, prehistoric stone structures, dramatic cliffs and high seas, together with a temperate climate and unique qualities of light, have attracted artists for centuries, and by the late nineteenth century the fishing ports of St Ives, and Newlyn, near Penzance, were firmly established as art colonies. Turner, Sickert and Whistler all painted St Ives in the nineteenth century, while its international appeal continued in the twentieth, with Naum Gabo staying there in the 1930s, and Mark Rothko visiting in the late '50s.

The artists now bracketed under the label ‘St Ives School’ are primarily the British modernists, who began to settle in and around the town during the Second World War. St Ives had first become associated with modernism in 1928, when Christopher Wood visited with Ben Nicholson, and discovered the retired seaman Alfred Wallis, painting in his Back Road West cottage. Wallis was entirely untutored as a painter, and had begun to paint to relieve his loneliness after his wife had died. He painted memories of his seafaring days, in whatever he had to hand — ship’s paint, emulsion, pencil and crayon — on scraps of greengrocer’s board, old wood and cardboard. He brought to painting a unique outlook, free of the conventions of perspective, often encompassing many different views within a single picture. For Graham Wallis was ‘the most perfect primitive painter’, and Graham found distinctly Celtic qualities in his work.<sup>1</sup> For Wood and Nicholson Wallis epitomized the earthy qualities they were seeking and, above all, an alternative to conventional perspective that pointed towards abstraction.

Nicholson moved down to St Ives permanently with Barbara Hepworth in 1939, escaping the anticipated bombing in London; they encouraged Gabo to follow, and thus introduced the Constructivist influence, together with their experience of the Ecole de Paris, dual impulses that would run through many later St Ives artists’ oeuvres. The presence of these pioneering modernists and the seclusion West Penwith had to offer encouraged likeminded younger artists to follow suit. By 1946 the modernist presence was so strong that these so-called

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<sup>1</sup> See letter to Sven Berlin, 7 March 1949, *The Nightfisherman: Selected Letters of W.S. Graham*, ed. Michael and Margaret Snow (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), p. 82.

‘advanced’ artists, among them Graham’s close friends Peter Lanyon and Bryan Wynter, felt the need to exhibit apart from the more conservative St Ives Society of Artists, who had little time for abstraction.<sup>2</sup> In 1949 the tensions had mounted to such an extent that an irreparable rupture occurred, and the Penwith Society was formed, offering far greater freedom to abstract artists.

St Ives came to represent an extraordinary diversity of artistic approaches, with all the leading styles and movements being well represented: Wynter and John Minton, for example, both of whom stayed with Graham in the 1940s, brought Neo-Romanticism; and Patrick Heron, most prominently, would bring the American influence, forging a British version of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s. In terms of literary modernism, though, the ground was less fertile. During the First World War D.H. Lawrence had, to the suspicion of the locals, taken up lodgings at nearby Zennor, and Katherine Mansfield briefly visited him there; in the 1920s and ’30s Virginia Woolf drew on her childhood memories of holidays in St Ives, and continued to visit the town. But Graham was the only poet of note to settle, and he remained the major writer amid a plethora of painters.

Moving down from Scotland, he first arrived in Cornwall in 1943, living in a caravan at rural Germoe, about 10 km south of St Ives and east of Penzance, where he spent the next five years. He lost no time in seeking out the artists in the area, and wrote to Nicholson, lamenting his loneliness and longing ‘to talk to someone’.<sup>3</sup> Graham was able to borrow books from Nicholson, and to confide in him about the difficulties involved in publishing. Nicholson, for his part, was able to learn from Graham about his experience of the art world in Glasgow, in particular about Jankel Adler, the émigré Polish Surrealist painter. Nicholson was interested to discover that Graham’s ‘method of working at his writing seems like my method of working at my painting’.<sup>4</sup> That method, we might surmise, was Graham’s practice of beginning the creative process with groups of words, individual lines or just a single word; 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.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Tom Cross, *Painting the Warmth of the Sun: St Ives Artists, 1939–1975* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1995), p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> Letter dated 16 October 1943, *The Nightfisherman*, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Ben Nicholson to Herbert Read, May 1944, quoted by Chris Stephens, ‘Introduction’ to *The Constructed Space* exhibition catalogue (Ilkley, 1994), n.p.

<sup>5</sup> For more on Graham’s ‘working wall’ see *The Nightfisherman*, pp. 150–1.

Thus began a correspondence with the visual arts that would continue, both personally and artistically, throughout his life. In situating Graham within this artistic community I want to consider his relations with two of the most important St Ives modernists, Peter Lanyon and Roger Hilton, centering upon his poems dedicated to those artists. The question of the influence of painting on Graham's work is vast and vexed; it is surprising then that the topic has so readily been made to sound limited.<sup>6</sup> There is admittedly a danger that one lapses into superficial comparisons, with, for example, the landscape and the experience of being in a remote place beside the sea; or that one strains to find parallels which are not in fact particular to the artists in question. The search has been further hampered by a lack of close attention to the art, and by the impression that the drawing of influence is one-sided, with Graham as the active participant. It is my contention that the work of these artists and Graham's poetry respond to each other in very precise and profound ways, revealing common imaginations.

When Roger Hilton first visited Cornwall in 1956 it would be he who would seek out Graham, now living in an old Coastguard house on the cliffs just south-west of St Ives, at Gurnard's Head.<sup>7</sup> The pair began a tempestuous relationship, which reached its most intense when Hilton moved down to live in nearby Botallack, St Just, in 1965. If Graham could be a prickly personality, Hilton could turn raging tyrant (a 'dog' in Graham's phrasing); the pair would stimulate and frustrate each other as friends, as enemies even, and as artists, until the relationship became impossible to sustain in Hilton's final neuritic years. In his letters to Hilton's first wife Ruth, we hear Graham complain that Hilton wants to 'destroy' him, that he would 'say everything possible against me to everybody that mattered.'<sup>8</sup> Hilton is accused of 'destroy[ing] ... enthusiasm', of 'put[ting] out the light of [people's] soul.'<sup>9</sup> But does this ultimately tell us more about Hilton or about Graham? Perhaps these creators were in some respects just too similar to get along. Both had alcoholic tendencies, which in Hilton's case

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<sup>6</sup> Graham himself partly encouraged the downplaying of such influence 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' (*The Nightfisherman*, p. 259); it is important to notice though that Graham is speaking in the context of remarks on artistic labeling. He goes on: 'I have never come near being part of a movement or group.' Elsewhere he spoke of his poems to painters as 'painter poems' (*The Nightfisherman*, p. 374). Recent criticism relating to the subject includes Alison Oldham's brief survey, 'Everyone was working': Writers and Artists in Postwar St. Ives (London: Tate, 2002); and Ralph Pite's excellent essay (though narrower in subject than its title suggests, focusing specifically on how abstract and figurative elements interact), 'Abstract, real and particular: Graham and painting', in *Speaking towards you*, ed. Hester Jones and Ralph Pite (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), pp. 65–84.

<sup>7</sup> *The Nightfisherman*, p. 151.

<sup>8</sup> Letters to Ruth Hilton, 24 January 1966 and 29 August 1968, *ibid.*, pp. 196, 215.

<sup>9</sup> Letter to Roger Hilton, 23 September 1968, *ibid.*, p. 216.

became chronic. Graham's correspondence, though, proves him to be long-suffering in the face of Hilton's abuse. He encouraged his painting, corrected his misconceptions about poetry; and above all he showed great sympathy and support for Hilton when he was imprisoned for drink driving in 1966, and encouraged him to keep going when he felt he had exhausted his painterly imagination.

The balance sheet of giving and taking in the creative lives of these two artists is fairly evenly matched. Hilton sought Graham's advice on writing, which Graham was reluctant, or felt unable, to give; Graham was sceptical of the links Hilton was drawing between poetry and his painting, and, when Hilton felt his style had been influenced by his reading of *Four Quartets*, Graham declared it 'nonsense'.<sup>10</sup> Hilton, though, encouraged Graham to express himself visually, sending him paints with which Graham then decorated his letters. Though reluctant to speak superficially of influence, Graham nonetheless spoke stirringly of his relationship to Hilton upon the painter's death: 'Very rarely in our lives we come under an influence at once profound, usually violent and always so confusing that our whole view is shaken'.<sup>11</sup> For Hilton, there was no essential difference 'between painters and any other creative individuals. They are all conducting a life and death struggle with existence.'<sup>12</sup>

The coincidence of Graham with Hilton was, then, a coming-together of two strikingly similar sensibilities and temperaments. Hilton had trained for the most part in Paris, and his early work showed a great debt to the *Ecole de Paris*. Hilton was always more French than English in his cultural sensibilities, and it was a particular point of connection with Graham that Hilton had an informed love of French poetry, above all of Baudelaire and Rimbaud. Hilton himself wrote poetry, most notably in the late 1940s. His poetry served to complement and to inspire his drawing; it hinged upon striking juxtaposition of images, which he would then illustrate in the margins:

Tight-rope walkers

String out your pearls

For this multitude of swine

Curl their tails

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<sup>10</sup> Letter to Roger Hilton, 8 November 1968, *ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>11</sup> Letter to Rose Hilton, quoted in Adrian Lewis, *The Last Days of Hilton* (Bristol: Sansom & Company, 1996), p. 94, note 55.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted by Cross, *Painting the Warmth of the Sun*, p. 182.

The many headed monster  
Will snore on through the years  
And your twisted trunks  
Lie rotting in the breeze.<sup>13</sup>

The motivation is always visual, and the poem yields drawings of swine, a strange beast, a nude crossed by a tight-rope, which is also a lock of curled hair on a pearl-stringed lady's head. Conversely, drawing and painting supplemented Graham's writing. Like Hilton, Graham illustrated his writings, above all his letters, and took pride in his calligraphy. He drew on his artist connections from his Glasgow days for his first collection, *Cage Without Grievance* (1942), commissioning illustrations from Robert Frame and Benjamin Creme, whose style of drawing resembles a cross between Picasso and neo-Romanticism; Graham's own drawings, in particular his irregular, flattened renditions of the female head, are often in a similar style.<sup>14</sup>

In the early 1950s Hilton moved away from representational painting and began to experiment with abstraction. He turned violently against the representational image, finding it 'stultifying', contrary to 'Romantic passion', and deleterious to the spirit.<sup>15</sup> It was only through the rejection of figuration, he believed, that painting could truly encounter the 'two things which are of the greatest moment to us — space and time'.<sup>16</sup> It was in this spatial exploration that Hilton's art would ever after excel. He became one of the greatest explorers of space in modern painting, and this again would prove a vital point of connection with Graham's poetry. They shared here too a theatrical sense of the space which art inhabits: Hilton's most immediately dramatic spatial effect was to hang his paintings from the ceiling in his Huddersfield exhibition of 1955;<sup>17</sup> in a comparable move, Graham constructed an intricate three-dimensional installation for his poetry reading at the Newlyn Art Gallery in 1960, comprising collages, objets trouvés, and a web-like network of string connecting walls to ceiling and floor, in allusion to Gabo and Hepworth's constructivism.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Reproduced in *The Last Days of Hilton*, p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> See *The Nightfisherman*, p. 146 for an example of Graham's drawing of the female head.

<sup>15</sup> *The Last Days of Hilton*, p. 58.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> See Andrew Lambirth, 'Roger Hilton: the nearness of distance', in *Roger Hilton: Swinging Out Into the Void*, ed. Michael Harrison (Cambridge: Kettle's Yard, 2008), p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> A photograph of this installation is reproduced in *The Nightfisherman*, central insert, ill. 17.

In 1952 Hilton was introduced to the Dutch painter Constant, and the meeting had a powerful effect upon Hilton's work. Constant, together with his fellow CoBrA artists, stressed the importance of the intuitive elements in the creative process, and, after a brief exploration of neo-plasticism following his introduction to Mondrian through Constant, Constant's own more fluid approach is felt in Hilton's increasingly irregular, searching forms. Figures began to enter his canvasses, expressive of personal states of mind, 'exterioris[ing] one's sensations and feelings'. Dissatisfied with a pure abstraction, he spoke of 'reinvent[ing] figuration'.<sup>19</sup>

It was at this stage in his development that Hilton met Graham. 'September 1956', as seen in figure 1, is a fine example of the sort of painting Hilton was producing shortly after his first visit to Cornwall. The palette is earthy and the forms simplified, but rough-hewed, only approximately geometric. The forms are two-dimensional, yet the surface is full of tensions created by the overlaying of paint, and above all by the contrasting techniques of knife, brush and drawing. The charcoal lines, playing off the contours of the oil forms, impart a sense of wandering life.

Hilton described such paintings as the 'meeting place of opposing forces ... according to laws of strength'.<sup>20</sup> These early St Ives paintings often contain such drawn elements of improvisation around a given figure in oil, with the rapid splintering out of spindly lines making tentative bids for freedom away from the dominance of bulky, brooding masses. Terry Frost recalls Hilton in the late 1950s and early '60s making 'rapid decisive stroke[s] after hours of cogitation', and it was surely this balance that Graham alluded to when he described Hilton's art as 'the quick and the slow'.<sup>21</sup>

We can see how close together these artists already were when we find Graham in 1955 expressing his desire for 'the sudden shocking bringing together of different and seeming incompatible textures of narrative and gestures of language'.<sup>22</sup> He wrote of using Leonardo Da Vinci's drawings of poured water and its effects as a source for his depiction of the 'very physical phenomena' of the sea in 'The Nightfishing', and precisely such physicality enabled him, he saw, to confront 'experience ... which everybody is concerned with', in this case what is not only Graham's great subject, but also a great Hilton subject: 'the essential isolation of man and the difficulty of communication.'<sup>23</sup> What at first sounds like a

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<sup>19</sup> *The Last Days of Hilton*, p. 57.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 58.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 33.

<sup>22</sup> Letter to Charles Causley, 23 June 1955, *The Nightfisherman*, p. 144.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

representational sea turns into a figurative and even abstract handling of the sea, as the locus of certain principles of movement and momentum and of an essential loneliness that projects away from the sea itself. ‘The sea’, as the poem says, ‘as metaphor of the sea’. Hilton was likewise ultimately concerned, in Andrew Lambirth’s words, ‘with a generalized idea of the sea’, making ‘references both direct and oblique, to boats, particularly in the recurrent use of a hull shape.’<sup>24</sup> In 1954 Hilton himself articulated the process of transformation he sought, describing the meeting of paint with ideas, in which ‘particularities will be transfigured into universals’.

It was with knowledge of the liminal stage in Hilton’s development, poised between an impersonal abstraction and a highly expressive personal abstraction which would also engage with the qualities of the physical world, that Graham composed the poem ‘Hilton Abstract’. Graham decorated the manuscript copy which he sent to Hilton (as seen in figure 2) with geometric configurations, rectangular grids that, though doodles, are reminiscent of Hilton’s early period of neo-plasticism: such rigid abstraction is then countered by the poem’s questioning.<sup>25</sup>

It is a poem about both life and art. The title suggests initially one of Hilton’s paintings, but also hints at Hilton the man’s character, abstracted, perhaps, or abstract in the sense in which Graham elsewhere uses the word, of being impersonal. Hilton’s detachment, and his already notorious hostility, is suggested in the slightly sententious assertion, ‘It is the longed-for, loved event,/ To be by another aloneness loved’ (ll. 5–6).<sup>26</sup> We naturally think of the relationship between these two creative loners, and of course their disagreements: ‘We either touch or do not touch’ (l. 12). Graham clearly has art in mind too though. Such an ideal is valued by the speaker above aesthetic debate on the subject of representation:

Roger, whether the tree is made  
To speak or stand as a tree should  
Lifting its branches over lovers  
And moving as the wind moves,

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<sup>24</sup> Lambirth, ‘The nearness of distance’, p. 18.

<sup>25</sup> This manuscript copy is reproduced in *The Nightfisherman*, p. 154.

<sup>26</sup> W.S. Graham, *New Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 2004). All subsequent quotations of Graham’s poetry are from this edition.

It is the longed-for, loved event,

To be by another aloneness loved. (ll. 1–6)

This theoretical debate, which the stanza both dismisses and engages with, adds a new sense to the poem's 'abstract'. The elided syntax makes it unclear whether there is a conflict between the tree speaking and the tree standing; 'made to speak' sounds closer to Hilton's aim of inner expression, but it is perhaps most fitting if we take the tree example as a whole, against which is set an implied alternative, namely abstraction. As an address, the poem characteristically tries to make a connection which, through appearing printed on the page, cannot be made — must remain an address in the abstract, not in fact touching anything but the page.

The second stanza has been taken to be the voice of Hilton, lashing out, venting his frustration on anything that comes in his path, and alienating himself in the process.<sup>27</sup> This sense of aloneness also relates to Hilton's painting, indicating his dismissals of the physical world from his art: he spoke of the abstract artist as being 'like a man swinging out into the void'.<sup>28</sup> In particular Graham brings to mind the process of paring down that takes place in Hilton's paintings, that leaves exposed open spaces, bare canvas or board, and vulnerable pencil markings: 'This can go and that can go' (l. 9). Against such a powerful will is set the physical world of the third stanza, with its weather and its mouse. This does not necessarily contradict or chastise Hilton's approach, but points towards the contrasting influences from nature which were starting to enter his work once again, and which, Graham is suggesting, the artist cannot avoid. This sense of reality entering art is reinforced in the final stanza, where the phrases of the second and third stanzas meet, and the natural world and the personal state both 'go/ Through' the abstract markings of 'the quick and the slow'. The new line, 'All that's best is better not', sums up Hilton's new aesthetic of the imperfect; and this preference for incompleteness, or ruptures and 'graphic disturbances' (which Graham at this same time perceived to characterize Hilton's art), provides a link to the natural world of 'the great humilities' that 'Keep us always ill at ease' (ll. 13–14, 21–22).<sup>29</sup> In refusing to pursue the ideal, then, this art might be found to be closer to forces of nature, and indeed to human nature.

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<sup>27</sup> See Pite, 'Abstract, real and particular', p. 69.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted by Michael Harrison, 'Preface', *Swinging Out Into the Void*, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> *The Nightfisherman*, p. 154.



We might find a parallel between the poem's repeated lines and the repeated figures which recur time and again in Hilton's paintings of the period; such repetition might also be said to draw attention to the surface of the poem, to its physical reality on the page, and to its artificiality — providing still further points of connection with Hilton. The disturbances which both Hilton and Graham described as their aim are here to be found not only in the tension between the external world and the individual, but also in the conflicting rhythms of the different voices, and in the irregular placement of the rhymes. Just as Hilton's flat surfaces begin to recede and project, and his forms to soften and to move, so Graham's form melts and his textures vary.

Hilton continued to explore the possibilities of abstract space, seeking always in his works to 'bear witness of space', and to 'equalise external and internal pressures' so that 'the colour and forms of the painting penetrate the surrounding space imparting to it their vibrations'.<sup>30</sup> As Hilton was developing such theories of space, so Graham too was investigating what space meant to him. We have already touched upon the aloneness which Hilton and Graham found common to their purposes. In 'The Beast in the Space', the text is characterized as an empty space, and as silence, rather like one of Hilton's austere early abstracts, in which no one, and no possibility of any tangible form, exists. Yet the possibility of that space being inhabited grows ever stronger as we hear of 'The great creature that thumps its tail/ On silence on the other side' (ll. 5–6). The space, we discover, has dimensions, and the beast 'takes/ Its bite out of either side' (ll. 10–11) These sides emerge as the writerly and readerly sides of the poem, and the beast is able to cross in between, 'pad[ding] and sniff[ing] between' us, and being 'called' and 'sent across' the space, finally to be angrily banished (ll. 12–15). If the space is the lacuna that exists between writer and reader, between intention and reception, then the beast is, variously, language, inspiration, meaning and interpretation. We cannot forget too, even in the context of a volume that speaks often of mythological creatures, the beast that was Roger Hilton, or Graham's Roger Hilton.

This exploration of the space occupied by art is taken further still in 'The Constructed Space', despite its earlier date of composition; in its aim of being 'unvisual in its images and suggesting no real place or atmosphere', it represents the counterpart to 'The Nightfishing',

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted by Michael Canney in the 'Introduction' to *Roger Hilton: Night Letters and Selected Drawings* (Newlyn: Orion Galleries, 1980), p. 3.

attempting now the universal through antithetical means.<sup>31</sup> ‘Meanwhile’, the poem begins, indicating a parallel possibility that is spatial as much as it is temporal:

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. (ll. 1–9)

Again the space under scrutiny exists in between: ‘here between us two’, an ‘abstract scene’ which ‘stretch[es] between us.’ This poem is more explicitly about meaning and interpretation. The first stanza’s hesitations about definition continue through the rest of the poem: we are faced with several perspectives of this space itself, from both first and third persons, in which Graham appears to speak for himself as writer and for artists generally, for readers generally, and for the lonely reader. The space is ‘fixed and dead’, yet also a living, open space, ‘a public place’ into which ‘lonely meanings are read’ (ll. 14–17). Again something is moving across this space, but this time the movement is desired: a point of connection is sought. Extending his conception of space, Graham here further contemplates permanence and transience, and it is in the poem ultimately that he sees not a death, but his survival as he is ‘More truly now this abstract act become’ (l. 27).

Graham’s spatial inquiries are clearly distinct from Hilton’s; yet just as Hilton has always in mind the perception of his viewers in considering the possibility of a painting projecting out into space, so Graham is concerned with connection with readers — both the possibility through an implied reader, and the inevitable failure after a poem has travelled into printed space. Moreover, their works’ foregrounding of spatial inquiries springs from a shared modernist heritage that was indebted, among others, to Einstein’s reconfiguring of space and

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<sup>31</sup> *The Nightfisherman*, p. 143.

time through relativity, and to Henri Bergson's conception of space as presence rather than absence. Though Hilton and Graham may not explicitly engage with such philosophical and physical theories, the effects of such radical disturbance of the concepts of space and time are felt in the modernist works of both art and literature that were the immediate influences on both artists: most notably those of Joyce and Picasso.

In 1960 Hilton described his early painterly practice of the 1940s as an attempt to inculcate the ideal.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, his style ever after his encounter with Constant was dependent on elements of chance, of intuition and of spontaneity, of the irrational 'quick' meeting with the premeditated 'slow'. His work negotiates a precarious balance between chance and preconceived order: in his remarkable 'Letter' for *Studio International* he spoke of 'accepting' mistakes, even if they be food spilt on the artwork; such slips may then be 'tid[ied] up' with a 'few simple strokes'.<sup>33</sup> 'Never rub out or attempt to erase' becomes an abiding dictum.<sup>34</sup> 'Nothing can be corrected', Graham once wrote to Hilton.<sup>35</sup>

Increasingly in the 1960s figures appeared in Hilton's work, in particular human figures and symbols, often merged with landscape elements in a highly sexualized manner. When he felt he had exhausted both his energies and his subject matter, Graham was quick to encourage him to seek yet more forms of representation; yet their relationship could not ultimately survive the pressures induced by their mutual dependencies. In the last few years of his life, as Hilton's alcoholism continued, so his health substantially deteriorated, and he grew ever more isolationist. But despite being largely bedridden from the beginning of the 1970s, he began to paint with a set of poster paints which had been given to his daughter, and his work underwent a life-affirming rebirth that embraced people and the world again even in their absence. He started using his right hand, though left-handed, both for effect, and because of the problems of painting from the sickbed. The extraordinary series of gouaches which grew out of these conditions achieved a new form of spontaneity: they consciously strove for a childlike quality in both medium and style, yet as Graham remarked, 'they are not "simple" or "childish" but have in them the unexpected quick vision of a child put down through a super-sophisticated knowledge and mature selection.'<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *The Last Days of Hilton*, p. 57.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> Facsimile Letter, *Studio International* (March 1974), reproduced in *Night Letters*, pp. 8–9.

<sup>35</sup> Dated 7 November 1966, *The Nightfisherman*, p. 206.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in *The Last Days of Hilton*, p. 95, ff. 67.

Throughout his life Graham practised forms of spontaneous writing, and his inspiration came as much from modernist art as from modernist writing. He had encountered Surrealism through Jankel Adler, and in 1949 he was creating automatic drawings ‘to help [him] to see better’.<sup>37</sup> He had achieved, he felt, a truly automatic style: ‘fast, calligraphic and I didn’t seem to be thinking of anything.’ He was rapidly, if not already, translating these methods to the written word. Michael and Margaret Snow tell of the spontaneous writing games he would play in pubs with his artist friends during his early days in West Penwith.<sup>38</sup> The particular automatic writing which corresponds so closely with late Hilton is the ‘Clusters’, the spontaneous prose paragraphs which Graham composed between 1967 and 1973, and which offered up lines, ideas and associations to his poetry. ‘Her towers are deep. Her ups are furred with the softest down. Her beasts are bosom-slaps. Gnrirps si gnimoc’: the free-wheeling movement here between the litany of pronouns — the punning on up and down, together with the paronomastic beasts/breasts and the sense of an erotic unconscious — is typical of the way the clusters flow, while the final backwards spelling suggests Dylan Thomas or even e.e. cummings.<sup>39</sup> Matthew Francis has compared these dense extrusions with the tenets of Andre’ Breton;<sup>40</sup> the parallel with Hilton, though, is perhaps stronger still.

The particular image associations and symbolism which occur in the ‘Clusters’ strike a chord with Hilton’s constant symbolic play and rhyming of shapes and ideas. A comparable impulse is revealed too in Hilton’s literary output of his final years, his ‘Night Letters’: letters he would write to his wife Rose in the middle of the night from his sickbed, in the French decorative tradition, and recalling his early illustrated poems. These letters are frequently fine examples of automatic writing, misspelled, unpremeditated scrawl, which would yield up images for his work. Like Graham’s clusters they are often densely allusive, witty, punning, erotic, and disjunctive in their movements: ‘The Barbs are going to be rebarbative unless you go armed. I know you are on a pleasure trip but one can combine buseness and. Get me a new pen [sic]’.<sup>41</sup> In response to hearing that his wife is going to spend more time on her own painting, he explodes, alluding to King Lear: ‘Bugger you. Have fun in your hut. Dogs cats and even those forked creatures they call men.’ Thus, even after their split, the parallels

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<sup>37</sup> Letter to Sven Berlin, 7 March 1949, *The Nightfisherman*, pp. 83–4.

<sup>38</sup> *The Nightfisherman*, p. 152.

<sup>39</sup> Matthew Francis, ‘Syntax Gram and the magic typewriter: W.S. Graham’s automatic writing’, *Speaking Towards You*, p. 93.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 86–106.

<sup>41</sup> Reproduced in *Night Letters*, n.p.

between these two creators continue, still indicating their shared heritage, cultural sensibilities, and indeed modes of existence.

The other artist with the strongest points of connection with Graham is Peter Lanyon, the only one of the great St Ives modernists native to the region. Lanyon was a restless visionary who in the 1950s, out of earlier experiments with constructivism, developed his own language of gestural abstraction, which offered complex and ambiguous points of correspondence with the physical world. Lanyon once remarked that ‘I paint places but always the Placeness of them’, and the coining of that abstract noun is strikingly apt for the essences he brings together in his unique version of landscape painting: in embodying the *genius loci*, he wished his canvases to absorb not only the physical qualities of the landscape, but also the hidden qualities of its human inhabitants present and past, such as those of the tin miners, toiling beneath the ground, or those of fisherman off the coast.<sup>42</sup>

Though less connected on a personal level, Lanyon and Graham have much light to shed on each other’s work, and still more on the connections between painting and writing at this time and in this place. Above all, both Lanyon and Graham were greatly influenced by the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger; all three share an intense interest in the relationship between man and the world, and in the resultant questions about the nature of being, sharing too the belief that art can not only figure but also create the world.<sup>43</sup> As Heidegger defined place, it ‘places man in such a way that it reveals the external bonds of his existence at the same time as the depths of his freedom and reality’: such existential definition is crucial to Lanyon’s engagement with place, together with a constant testing of the boundaries, attempting always to extend the depths of man’s reach.<sup>44</sup>

Like Hilton Lanyon was fascinated by the possibilities of space, and in particular of movement in space. He continually experimented with methods for achieving multiple perspectives, creating ambiguous views which play on verticals and horizontals, often apparently looking both downwards and across within the same canvas, and creating impasted layerings which convey recessions and projections. There are many points of correspondence between Lanyon’s mature style and Graham’s earlier poetry, and Graham’s poem of 1948, ‘The White Threshold’, with its complex movements, dense ambiguous

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<sup>42</sup> Letter to Paul Feiler, June/July 1952, quoted in Chris Stephens, *Peter Lanyon: At the Edge of Landscape* (London: 21publishing, 2000), p. 103.

<sup>43</sup> See *ibid.* p. 17.

<sup>44</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘An ontological consideration of place’, trans. William Kluback and Jean Wilde, in Heidegger, *The Question of Being* (New York: Twayne, 1958), p. 19.

syntax, and multiple views of sea and shore, is particularly suggestive of the directions Lanyon's mature painting would take:

Always the welcome-roaring threshold

So ever bell worth my exile to

Speaks up to greet me into the hailing

Seabraes seabent with swimming crowds

All cast all mighty water dead away.

I rise up loving and you may not move away. (ll. 7–12)

Its driving, elemental flow prioritises sound over sense, this opening section turning on the word 'always' and its variant, 'all ways', to move literally in all ways, downward and up, towards and away, backwards and forwards, while 'the threshold sea' remains a constant, from which 'You may not move away' (ll. 38–9).

Lanyon time and again focused upon elemental contrasts and meetings: 'I like to paint places where solids and fluids come together, such as the meeting of sea and cliff, of wind and rock, of human body and water', he wrote in 1963.<sup>45</sup> The threshold between the land and the sea was the specific inspiration for several paintings, of which 'Beach Girl', from 1961, is one of the finest. Lanyon wrote of this painting that 'There is no specific reference to any part of the body but there is the sort of rolling over motion that one might expect to see on a beach.... I like using suggestions of human forms in my paintings — even in the landscape — because that's something you respond to and seem to take part in.'<sup>46</sup> This is strikingly similar to Graham's own declared intention in interview that he sought in his poetry as a whole not to 'describe something exactly', but rather to 'make a place at that time where you can feel more truly in'. As Graham's shoreline throws up sexual imagery, so Lanyon's throws up an erotic nude; he described a frequent treatment in his paintings of the sea as male and the shore as female.

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<sup>45</sup> From a recorded lecture made for the British Council in 1963, quoted in Andrew Lanyon, *Portreath: The Paintings of Peter Lanyon* (St Ives: St Ives Publishing, 1993), p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> Notes for the British Council lecture, quoted in James Hyman, *The Challenge of Post-War Painting: New Paths for Modernist Art in Britain* (London: James Hyman Fine Art, 2004), n.p.

For Heidegger the state of between-ness is essential to his definition of the world in terms of man's concrete contexts: it is the 'multifarious between', no less, according to his essay on the dialect poet Johann Peter Hebel, that man inhabits 'between earth and sky, between birth and death, between joy and pain, between work and word'.<sup>47</sup> And language, in which man also 'dwells', is what moves within that space, between the polarities. Language, furthermore, is itself conceived as a threshold: 'What we usually mean by language, namely a stock of words and syntactical rules, is only a threshold of language', Heidegger writes in his Hölderlin essay; for 'the being of men is founded in language',<sup>48</sup> and language is therefore capable of moments of '*phainesthai*', of transcendent epiphany that shows forth the true nature of being.

In 'Notes on a poetry of release', Graham's early account of his poetics, he speaks of language in such a way that it relates to Lanyon's approach to paint, as well as uncannily anticipating Heidegger's late work on language. In words, Graham writes, he is 'at once halfway the victim and halfway the successful traveller', and he speaks of 'the involuntary war between me and that environment flowing in on me from all sides' that finally produces 'the poetic outcome'.<sup>49</sup> Language negotiates the generic and the specific, the rule-bound and the free, and the poet steers a precarious course between all that language has done before, and what it can achieve here in the present act of creation. This is precisely the way Lanyon approaches the painting of people and of place, as an act that is at once historical and current, which creates allegory as well as the individual, and which frequently takes the form of a battle between man and his environment. Environment is understood as physical: at its most immediate, it is the words being written on the page, the paint being applied to the canvas.

Heidegger offers a bridge, to borrow one of his favourite metaphors, between the visual and the literary arts. In Heidegger's view poetry is inherently visual, generating images which 'let something be seen'; the genuine image is that which, moreover, 'lets the invisible be seen':<sup>50</sup> art, in his view, is far more than representation, making manifest the hidden 'thingness of a

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<sup>47</sup> 'Hebel der Hausfreund' (Pfullingen: G. Neske, 1957), p. 13.

<sup>48</sup> Hölderlin and the essence of poetry', *Essence and Being*, trans. Douglas Scott (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1965), p. 277.

<sup>49</sup> 'Notes on a poetry of release' [1946], reprinted in *The Nightfisherman*, p. 379. This example is considered in relation to

Heidegger by Adam Piette in "'Roaring between the lines": W.S. Graham and the white threshold of line-breaks', *Speaking*

*Towards You*, p. 48.

<sup>50</sup> *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 226.

thing', as his readings of the poetry of Trakl and the painting of van Gogh demonstrate.<sup>51</sup> In respect of these common visual means, Heidegger breaks down the distinctions set out, to follow back in the German tradition, by Lessing, who argued in *Laokoön* for the supremacy of space in the plastic arts, and of time in the written.<sup>52</sup> These 'Grenzen' of Lessing are of course precisely the boundaries being tested, subverted, and ultimately reinvented in both Graham's and Lanyon's work.

Though not speaking solely of abstraction, the abstracted element of art that not only shows us the world but that brings the world into being, to which Heidegger here points, supports the arguments such as Hilton's that abstraction represents a purer, truer form of art in dismissing immediate representational concerns; it is significant that when Hilton develops his version of figuration, his primary concern is that it should never be 'descriptive'.<sup>53</sup> For Lanyon the abstracting and transcending process takes the form of a Heideggerean 'gathering', in the aim of a totality of place. And while the poetry of the early Graham speaks to Heidegger's conception of language as visual, the later Graham not only enacts but reflects on a comparable, complex philosophy of the world's dependence on language, the supreme creator and Being.

In 1959 Lanyon took up gliding in order to experience wider perspectives, to encounter firsthand the forces of the air — 'forces beyond human scale' — and to engage still further with man's struggles with the elements.<sup>54</sup> Yet nature tragically won that battle, the end point of these investigations coming with Lanyon's death following a gliding accident in 1964; Graham's elegy, "The Thermal Stair", takes its title from one of Lanyon's finest air paintings: 'Thermal', from 1960, as seen in figure 3.

Lanyon wrote that 'The air is a very definite world of activity' as complex and demanding as the sea.... The thermal itself is a current of hot air rising and eventually condensing into a cloud. It is invisible and can only be apprehended by an instrument such as a glider.... The basic source of all soaring flight is the thermal.'<sup>55</sup> In this painting we see the rising spiralling column evoked on the left-hand side which then hits, we might imagine, a cold layer of air,

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<sup>51</sup> For more on these readings and the implications of Heidegger's arguments for non-representational images (specifically here in the medium of architecture) see Christian Norberg-Schulz, 'Heidegger's thinking on architecture', *Perspecta*, 20 (1983), pp. 64–8.

<sup>52</sup> G.E. Lessing, *Laokoön: oder über die Grenzen der Malerey und Poesie* (1766).

<sup>53</sup> See *The Last Days of Hilton*, p. 62.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Lanyon, 'English Landscape: lecture typescript' (26 January 1964), *At the Edge of Landscape*, p. 172.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted by Cross, *Painting the Warmth of the Sun*, p. 130.



and impacts. The right-hand side, Lanyon suggested, shows the air cooling and slowing into a tense stasis, ‘like a threatening thundercloud’.<sup>56</sup>

In his elegy Graham pays homage to Lanyon through the landscape that was the painter’s principal source and inspiration. In his paintings Lanyon synthesized his own self with the landscape, ‘speaking/...through what [he] made’ (ll. 13–14). Here, though, the lonely landscape of mysterious stones, ruined mines and windswept moors is the lonelier for Lanyon’s absence. The landscape’s history, so important in Lanyon’s evocations, is here emblematic of loss, a ‘ruin where/ Once the early beam/ Engine pounded and broke/ The air with industry’ (ll. 26–9). Graham alone now inhabits this landscape, and one of the chief ways in which he does so is through association with the tradition of pastoral elegy, expressing his sorrow in another meeting of past and present, generic and specific. As Lanyon flew above the land experiencing the forces of the air, so Graham seeks to rise, to transcend his grief, with the suggestion also of following Lanyon to the place to which he has gone—though this proves impossible as he never quite can grasp the painter’s hand, taking his own route — ‘the word-road’ — home. Thus the elegy achieves its poignancy in the double sense of being removed, both through loss and through medium: the remaining difference between their art forms gently proves an allegory of their final separation.

Graham’s elegy for Lanyon is a poem about absence, loss and difference, but it is also about what Graham shared and shares with Lanyon — about what the writer shares with the artist. The climax of that relationship comes early in the poem, when the speaker discovers that what gets in the way of the ideal is the human: ‘The poet or painter steers his life to maim/ / Himself somehow for the job’ (ll. 9–10). That job is ‘Love/ Imagined into words or paint to make/ An object that will stand and will not move’ (ll. 10–12). For Lanyon’s art is never static with its multiple perspectives and turbulent evocations of the elements; and indeed Graham’s entire oeuvre is a testament to the difficulty—the impossibility—of one’s work or one’s word standing still. Of course, Graham’s frustration is borne out of Lanyon’s death: the artist maimed — destroyed — his art and his very life through pushing himself too far, betrayed, perhaps, the love of his friends; and the art is, in grief, poor substitute for the man: it will not ‘stand’. This paradox of the artist is cause for distress, but it can also be a catalyst to greatness. An impaired art Lanyon’s may be in its refusal to be constrained, and in being cut off before its due development (at the time of his death Lanyon was just embarking on a

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<sup>56</sup> Quoted by Stephens in *At the Edge of Landscape*, p. 159.

new style of painting which showed great promise). But it is that very recklessness in Lanyon's life which produces in his work the extremity with which he revolutionized British landscape painting. If the ideal form of art remains elusive, and the mark of the human is the constant failing in this pursuit, these artists make an art form of that imperfection, considering process as important as finished product, and rendering the life lived integral to the creative form.

Graham and his artist friends were mutually inspirational, constantly engaging with and stimulating each other's lives and works; it is thus only by studying these relationships from both sides that we can begin to understand the cross-media nature of their dialogue and the wide-ranging importance of this artistic community. Graham's poetry gives voice to Hilton's and Lanyon's painting, just as their painting allows us to visualize Graham's words; their conversation remains very much alive, animating the void.