

Imaginative Journeys in the Verbal and Visual Arts

Walking in the Forests of W.S. Graham and Bryan Wynter

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Imagine a forest
A real forest.

You are walking in it and it sighs
Round you where you go in a deep
Ballad on the border of a time
You have seemed to walk in before.
It is nightfall and you go through
Trying to find between the twittering
Shades the early starlight edge
Of the open moor land you know.
I have set you here and it is not a dream
I put you through.

(Graham, "Imagine a Forest" l. 1–12)

The sudden intrusion of this direct address – “you” – startles a reader from the lulling, enjambed-line premise of walking in an imagined forest. This was the first poem by W. S. Graham I encountered, and it immediately commanded my attention. Unlike traditional dream vision poetry or balladic verse prefaced by a narrator falling to sleep under a witchy elm, this was my vision: “Imagine a forest”. Instead of following the exploits of a wandering knight in accordance with genre convention, here I was protagonist, “walking in it”. And yet, I’d been *invited* to play this personal part, coaxed with imperatives and pushed into an unidentifiable liminal place “on the border”, at “nightfall”, just outside of time and space. The voice of the poem speaks simply and directly, forging instant reader engagement while transparently articulating its use of artifice: “I have set you here and it is not a dream / I put you through.” It set me wondering: what does it mean to “imagine a forest”? How can an imagined one be “real”? In this imagining process, what is the role of and the relationship between the poet and reader, the “I” and “you” addressed here so explicitly?

As someone involving word and image in her creative practice, I am curious about the imagining process and what I describe as “visual language”: how writers can use language to describe experience through visual elements, including methods of image-making and a work’s material context. The more I read of Graham’s work, the more I could see these concerns as an integral part of his aesthetic enquiry. Here was a poet creating and employing a highly visual language, addressing the reader and inviting her involvement, all the while negotiating the problematic nature of language in attempting to communicate “from one aloneness to another”, as he gloomily phrased it in a letter to Norman MacLeod (Graham, *The Nightfisherman* 171). Furthermore, Graham’s method of working was highly visual. He fashioned mixed media workbooks, illustrated his letters, set up installations as backdrops for readings and devised a giant ‘working wall’ collaging drafts of poems with cardboard, paint and general ephemera. His biographical context adds another dimension, as a poet living among a community of artists, those known as the “Middle Generation” in St Ives in Cornwall including Roger Hilton, Peter Lanyon, Bryan Wynter and others (Bird, *The St Ives Artists* 135). Living in the same place (St Ives) at the same time (through the 1940s–1980s), they shared ideas, letters, conversations and yet, significantly, used different materials – Graham choosing words; the artists, paint. This St Ives community struck me as an ideal case study to investigate imaginative journeys in the verbal and visual arts.

Poetry and painting have historically been termed the ‘sister arts,’ best summarised by Horace’s famous dictum *ut pictura poesis* ‘as is painting, so is poetry.’ I wish to interrogate this simplistic conflation. By comparing a writer’s visual language to that of an artist, my research explores how the choice of material – poetry or paint – influences one’s process and the effect on the reader or viewer. As example, I’ve paired Graham’s poem with a painting by Bryan Wynter (one of the St Ives artists) to pick out key points of comparison and difference, followed by a poem of my own written in dialogue with these explorations.

Bryan Wynter (1915-1975) moved to Cornwall in 1945 and was “a main stay, a long-standing friend” of Graham (Graham, *The Night Fisherman* 264). His painting *Forest Journey* (1960) inhabits the same imaginative setting as Graham’s poem “Imagine a Forest” (1971). It too resists depicting a particular, recognisable Cornish forest, instead offering a calligraphic dance of markings in vertical layers – what Patrick Heron called “bead curtains” (Bird, *The St Ives Artists* 164). Being abstract, the viewer is ‘drawn away/from’ (*abs + trahere*) direct representation of concrete reality into another way of looking and seeing. In lieu of a representational role, the textured paint conveys its own energy, appreciable for its materiality. The speed of brush stroke is reflected in the dense, heavy poolings and the scraped textures, diaphanous and hasty. Paint is concentrated in knotted coils, sharp points or flamboyant stripes. In other words, the work makes manifest its process, the act of painting, in a self-reflexive gesture similar to Graham’s when he writes, “I have set you here”, or “Hang up the ballad / Behind the door”. However, as a unique piece of art worked directly upon by the artist, it records evidence of process that is lost in the standardising, reproducible print of Graham’s published poem. How might I be able to overcome this loss when eventually publishing my own work?

Michael Bird alludes to Wynter’s spontaneity, attributing it to the influence of American Abstract Expressionists, including Mark Rothko, Mark Tobey, and Bradley Walker Tomlin (the first full-scale exhibition, *Modern Art in the United States*, took place in January 1956 at the Tate): “Whatever else they did, the Americans at the Tate gave unequivocal permission to free up the movement of the painting arm and approach the canvas in a spirit of entirely open-ended exploration” (Bird, *Deep Current, High Country* 6). A viewer of Wynter’s painting, too, is given permission to approach in this “open-ended” spirit. As with Graham’s “glinted knight” at the centre of the poem who does not speak but “signs that he would like to speak”, these painted marks are also “signs”. Teasing towards letters

and half-formed shapes, the visual language is suggestive and playful. There is still freedom to “imagine” in the act of viewing.

And yet it is not total freedom. The title, *Forest Journey*, frames one’s experience by giving context to the work, directing the viewer’s imaginative journey. Graham’s poem employs the lexical clusters one might expect from a sylvan setting: “twittering”, “elephant bark”, “glade”, “bearded liveoaks and beeches”. Here are forest colours – the woody browns and greens, shadowy blacks – and crowding shapes reminiscent of spiky leaves and limber tree trunks. The concept of “journey” is fundamental too. Wynter spoke of: “trying to create a kind of visual flux on which the eye found it difficult to rest so that [...] it would be compelled to push deeper and come to terms with the forces underlying the painting” (Wynter, “Notes on My Painting”). Perceptive acts shift continuously: an eye considers the whole (distant view), focuses on detail (near view) or rests on the surface, acknowledging the fact of paint on canvas. The marks themselves appear to flicker, like light dappling through leaves. This “visual flux” is at odds with more conventional modes of regarding a static artwork or reading a poem line by line. The viewer participates, not only “com[ing] to terms with the forces”, but in actively discovering them. In Graham’s words, “you go through / Trying to find between the twittering / Shades the early starlight edge / Of the open moor land you know.”

What “forces” are discovered, and what effect do they have on the reader or viewer? Graham’s poem closes with an almost unbearably pessimistic stanza:

You are come home but you are about
To not fight hard enough and die
In a no less desolate dark wood
Where a stranger shall never enter.

The resounding plosives enhance the “desolate” message, a solipsistic loneliness embodied by the image of the knight in his visor, with “white, encased / Face”, failing to speak. The stanza too is encased, the only section of the poem that assumes the conventional balladic quatrain, emphatically set apart on the page. It makes sinister the imagined forest which is no longer a wildness “outside”, but infiltrates the “home” – our safe place – uncannily. And yet, the very final lines are the repeated refrain “Imagine a forest / A real forest.” Once more, the reader is moved on as the poem’s reach extends beyond the realm of the effable. It is

this capacity to imagine that enables the journey to continue, that makes it feel real.

A painting does not have an end equivalent to a poem's final lines. John Hollander writes of the epiphanic moment of "imaginative revelation" (90), or else it could be a particular image that "stains" the retina, the general lingering mood or the authoritative text of a wall caption that holds some conclusive function. *Forest Journey* certainly contains something "no less desolate": an encroaching darkness from the bottom left that threatens the glimpsed brightness of the centre's sparks. Are they falling away or coming out to meet the viewer? It is impossible to tell; it depends on one's way of looking. And that is the commonality of Graham and Wynter's visual languages in these two pieces. The indeterminacy, flux, open play, and self-reflexivity all combine to destabilise conventional artist/viewer, author/reader positioning and encourage individual response. As Wynter himself summarised, "I think of my paintings as a source of imagery, something that generates imagery rather than contains it" (Bird, *Deep Current, High Country* 6). The skilful handling of words and paint enables the creation of a unique visual language all of one's own – imagine that.

I wrote the poem "Revisioning" in response to my research on "Imagine a Forest" and *Forest Journey*. It portrays someone viewing Wynter's painting. While evoking the viewer's imaginative journey, the poem employs a visual language that encourages the reader to create one of her own simultaneously in the act of reading.

At first, external forces direct the protagonist's experience – specifically, the artist's choice of title. It acts like a "wall", or Graham's "visor", guiding and encasing her vision. This restrictiveness is reflected in the short clauses, end-stopped lines and hard consonants of the poem's first two stanzas. The viewer responds with resentment: "What flashed as living machinery [...] I'd never describe as – 'The Title.'" Yet the "loose shapes" of the painting's surface, its "visual flux", prompt her to "look again" continually. The act of viewing is a process of "revisioning" – and so, too, is the process of reading. Open-ended punctuation including question marks and dashes, and the use of homophones – "informed", "peeks", "wonder" – create indeterminacy, necessitating rereading. Alongside conventional forest imagery in the poem – "branches", "canopy", "dappling" – are the surreal and the metaphorical – "claw", "pain-strokes", "brewing storms" – which encourage imaginative leaps for connective sensemaking. Tenses shift from conclusive past to ongoing, inconclusive present. Enjambment propels the journey as the eyes wander and the 'I' wonders. The poem begins *in*

media res, with the absence of the object – what was imagined? It ends suggestively in the visual white space of the page, attempting to “generate imagery” and reach beyond the effable, as Graham and Wynter were able to do so well.

Revisioning

Not what I'd first imagined.
What flashed as living machinery,
wheeling fractures cleaving the canvas,
I'd never describe as – “The Title”.

You've translated the loose shapes
and, in-formed, they shift to resettle.
Let me look again, then,
now the colour's been caught.

So, branches claw, canopy burst
into open dappling, yes, textured
pain-strokes and peeks of sky far-
glimpsed through cornered

shadow, brewing storms.
Eyes wonder. Without your words,
Bryan, where are we? Speaking
out makes walls for the wild,

a visor that blinkers to focus –
and now the image comes

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