

EKPHRASIS AND THE ROLE OF VISUAL ART IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY

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Abstract.

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This thesis engages with three US poets – Jorie Graham, Charles Wright and Mark Doty – as well as using other writing, from the Modernists to the ekphrastic collection, to engage with the context of ekphrasis, '*the verbal representation of visual representation*', in the US.¹

After an introduction that evaluates previous work on ekphrasis and studies the forms of engagement between visual and verbal art, a section of three chapters is devoted to each poet. The first explores Jorie Graham's work on abstract painting, photography and film, analyzing how she uses the different temporal conventions of each genre to write about the past. The second section looks at the links between memory and present perception in the work of Charles Wright and his struggle with how to represent as he follows the path to abstraction before returning to the more simple desire to say what he sees, accepting the sleight of hand that is necessarily a part of this. The third section goes on to explore the work of Mark Doty, a poet who embraces illusion in representation, arguing that the process of creating and deconstructing illusions is a fundamental part of how we define our own identity as well as how we make space for ourselves within the community. Refuting accusations that ekphrastic writing often depends too heavily on the visual artwork for its credibility, this section considers how it can be used positively as a tool for legitimation by writers who come from a minority perspective, analysing the visual aspect of poems on cruising, drag and public sex performances. A final section uses the relatively new phenomenon of the ekphrastic collection – with work by Cole Swensen, Debora Greger and Claudia Rankine– to examine how ekphrasis deals with issues of gender and iconic cultural images.

¹ J.A.W Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993) p.3.

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List of Abbreviations

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Jorie Graham:

<i>EoB</i>	<i>The End of Beauty</i>
<i>Erosion</i>	<i>Erosion</i>
<i>Hybrids</i>	<i>Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>Materialism</i>
<i>N</i>	<i>Never</i>
<i>O</i>	<i>Overlord</i>
<i>Region</i>	<i>Region of Unlikeness</i>

Charles Wright:

<i>App</i>	<i>Appalachia</i>
<i>BY</i>	<i>Buffalo Yoga</i>
<i>CM</i>	<i>Country Music: Selected Early Poems</i>
<i>HL</i>	<i>Halflife: Improvisations and Interviews, 1977-87</i>
<i>NB</i>	<i>Negative Blue: Selected Later Poems</i>
<i>QN</i>	<i>Quarter Notes: Improvisations and Interviews</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Scar Tissue</i>
<i>SH</i>	<i>A Short History of the Shadow</i>
<i>WTT</i>	<i>The World of the Ten Thousand Things: Poems 1980-1990.</i>

Mark Doty:

<i>Atlantis</i>	<i>Atlantis</i>
<i>Firebird</i>	<i>Firebird: A Memoir</i>
<i>MA</i>	<i>My Alexandria</i>
<i>School</i>	<i>School of the Arts</i>
<i>SV</i>	<i>Seeing Venice: Bellotto's Grand Canal</i>
<i>Source</i>	<i>Source</i>
<i>SL</i>	<i>Still Life with Oysters and Lemon</i>
<i>SM</i>	<i>Sweet Machine</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Turtle, Swan & Bethlehem in Broad Daylight</i>

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INTRODUCTION

In his essay 'Souls on Ice' Mark Doty remarks on the special power images have to crystallise even those ideas that have not yet fully occurred to us. He describes being struck momentarily by the beauty of a display of fresh mackerel at the fish counter of the Stop 'n Shop in Orleans, Massachusetts. The same image comes back to him while driving home, and keeps resurfacing in his mind attached to words and lines of description he feels compelled to write down for a number of days. The resulting poem, 'A Display of Mackerel', was published in his fourth collection, *Atlantis* (1996). This experience of a poem growing organically from an image led him to reflect, as he has many times, on the germinal role of the image in his poetic. His engagements with visual images explore an unconscious or instinctive pull, an inexplicable attraction to something, whether for its aesthetic or metaphorical properties, that is experienced in the flash of a moment, then unravelled in the capacious space/time of poetry's interaction with memory. It is often only in this secondary stage of unpacking and analysing the image that the hook within it, the aspect with which the poet has unconsciously linked, is discovered. The poet sees this delay as a positive and fertile one:

And thank goodness for that, for if I were dependent on other ways of coming to knowledge I think I'd be a very slow study.¹

He is also aware that this connection has little to do with choice or preference for certain styles, but the images which draw him in unfailingly have something to say:

I can't choose what's going to serve as a compelling image for me. But I've learned to trust that part of my imagination that gropes forward, feeling its way toward what it needs [...] Sometimes it seems to me as if metaphor were the advance guard of the mind; something in us reaches out, into the landscape in front of us, looking for the right vessel, the right vehicle, for whatever will serve.²

¹ Mark Doty, 'Souls on Ice', in *Introspections: Contemporary American Poets on One of Their Own Poems*, ed. Robert Pack and Jay Parini (Hanover: Middlebury College Press, 1997). p.70.

² Ibid.

This is often the case when poets choose to write about a piece of visual art. What is chosen is often not the most famous, or iconic piece of art, but the art that has something to say about the poet's unexplored ideas. So it is that we can often look to depictions of art in the work of particular poets, as we look to the repeated images from which they form their metaphors, as harbingers of what is to come, tasters of the half-thoughts ripe for more general exploration in their poems. The impulse to look and to describe is important to the surface of a poem, but is equally indicative of the currents that run beneath it, and these images inevitably become a metaphor for a previously buried theme.

Writing about art, then, becomes a way of writing about poetry itself and the representational processes of the consciousness that produces it. Ekphrasis enables the poet to make forays into the most difficult and sensitive areas of thought without the pressure of direct expression; Doty notes that the final stanzas of the poem only came into being after he had fully explored the image and realised 'the poem's subject-beneath-the-subject': its role as an 'anti-elegy' celebrating the ongoingness of collective life in the face of the death of the individual.³ This idea did not come from the mackerel – it was already within the poet's mind when he saw them – but it took the image to bring the unconscious thought forward into a position from which it could be more consciously scrutinised.

Doty's epiphany about the role of the image in his work is far from unique, and the representation of visual art in literature is not a new phenomenon. Ekphrasis has featured in poetry since Homer, and its progress ever since has been documented from the perspectives of both literary criticism and art history. In the twentieth century, with modernist art's increased emphasis on abstract form and its rejection of representation, the made image has become increasingly important to poets as a reflection on their own image-

³ Ibid. p.73.

creating process – a sort of *ars poetica* – and as a mirror in which to study the self as image-maker.

In order to explore the capabilities of poetry about visual art, we must be aware that these poets work within a web of literary and art historical critical contexts as well as that they engage with the longstanding and still growing creative debate on the subject of ekphrasis, and therefore it is necessary to give some attention to different notions of what ekphrasis is. Ekphrasis has been around as long as literature itself. The components of the word *ek* and *phrasein* literally mean “out” and “to speak”: to speak out. As a rhetorical device it simply meant to describe any object, natural or created, and to recreate the seen image in words. Classical ideas about the relation between word and image reveal the simple fascination this debate continues to hold for critics and artists alike, principally the idea that the two media have similar aims and yet are fundamentally different. Horace’s famous phrase *ut pictura poesis* (which is perhaps most accurately translated “as for the image, so for the poem”), whilst suggesting the similarities between the two media, is used in the text to underline that they are not at all the same thing. Indeed in much criticism, both classical and modern, image and word are held apart in a succession of binary oppositions: silent and speaking, still and moving, spatial and temporal.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s famous essay on the subject, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), argues for the division between word and image as static and unbridgeable as, to some extent, does Murray Krieger in his 1967 essay ‘Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or *Laokoön* Revisited’. Here he argues that ekphrasis uses ‘a plastic object as a symbol of the frozen, stilled world of plastic relationships which must be superimposed upon literature’s turning world to “still” it’ and that the fundamental opposition at work is that between the spatial and the temporal medium.⁴ However much poetry tries to embrace the physical qualities of art and to place emphasis on the physical

⁴ Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). p.266.

form of words, Krieger finds it hard to rebut Lessing's original argument for their separateness. Despite conceding that poetry has 'special time-space powers' he ends his discussion with the thought that:

Time, in its unique empirical particularity, must always be celebrated in its flow even if we arrest it to make its movement a forever-now movement. Or else poetry is hardened into static, Platonic discourse that has lost touch with – indeed that disdains to touch – our existential motions. (287)

In his book, *Ekphrasis*, which springs from this essay, Krieger does not substantially revise his views on the separation of word and image into temporal and spatial media, describing ekphrasis as 'both a miracle and a mirage':

a miracle because a sequence of actions filled with befores and afters such as language alone can trace seems frozen into an instant's vision, but a mirage because only the illusion of such an impossible picture can be suggested by the poem's words.⁵

Any image-like properties that the written text can attain are a fleeting illusion, a sleight-of-hand trick that allows the verbal to hint at the visual.

James Heffernan in his *Museum of Words* (1994) takes this idea of difference and uses it to argue that the relationship between visual art and poetry is a paragonal one, in which each side strives for dominance, but he argues that Krieger's definition of ekphrasis, comprising as it does poems that centre around *objects*, 'stretches ekphrasis to the breaking point: to the point where it no longer serves to contain any particular body of literature and merely becomes a new name for formalism'.⁶ Krieger uses Keats's urn and Stevens' jar to make his point, but also the ball in Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* and chinaware in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*; objects that are not representations. Heffernan's point is that, in order for the term 'ekphrasis' to distinguish both a body of work stretching from Homer to Ashbery and beyond and at the same time to signify a technique, a mode of writing, it must

⁵ Ibid. p.xvii.

⁶ James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994). p.2.

be defined more selectively. He proposes this definition, which is now the most widely used description of ekphrasis:

ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation. (3)

The implications of this definition are great as it encompasses both a refining of Krieger's ideas and also a sense of the unexplored possibilities of ekphrasis. For the former it is important to note that Heffernan uses the words 'visual representation' rather than 'visual objects':

What ekphrasis represents in words, therefore, must itself be *representational*. The Brooklyn Bridge may be considered a work of art and construed as a symbol of many things, but since it was not created to represent anything, a poem such as Hart Crane's *The Bridge* is no more ekphrastic than Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow." (4)

Just as Krieger concentrates on sculpture and the object in his studies of ekphrasis, Heffernan, in the part of his book that looks at Auden, Williams and Ashbery, focuses on conventional acts of ekphrasis based on paintings. The terms of his definition, however, leave space for the much wider interpretation taken by the preceding generations of poets who work with visual representations from sculpture and painting to the photograph, cinema and beyond. One aspect that Heffernan does not foresee is what happens when poetry tries to represent non-representational or abstract artworks. Krieger anticipates this more fully with his analysis of the ekphrastic ambition as one which 'gives to language art the extraordinary assignment of seeking to represent the literally unrepresentable';⁷ attempts to represent abstract art are a logical extension of this ambition, the desire to go outside representation itself.

What each of these approaches has in common is the idea that, when language and visual art are put together, whether they share properties or not, they share the concern of what and how to represent; they are, therefore, most often used together to answer questions that go to the heart of representation itself. It cannot be denied that the desire to

⁷ Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*. p.9.

create images with words, or to visualise words with images as painters have been doing for centuries, exerts a strong pull on both visual and verbal artists of all kinds. One of the most influential writers in the word and image debate is W. J. T. Mitchell, who argues a very different point of view from those who would separate the two media and set them against one another in a struggle for dominance. Although *Iconology* (1987) sees the relationship between the two genres as inherently paragonal, *Picture Theory* (1994) moves on to a less simplified conception of it. For him the word/image division is a simplified one (as are the binary implications that go with it) that overlooks the complexity that exists in the relationship between them as well as their historical roots in the same impulse toward representation.

It is telling that poets concerned with representation such as Pound, and after him Charles Wright, have looked to the Chinese poets for inspiration and have been fascinated with the idea of a written language made of images. The pictorial origins of many written languages might suggest to us that word and image are not so entirely different from one another as is often thought: both can represent and both can function as vehicles for meaning. Controversially, in *Picture Theory* (1994), Mitchell argues that any division into opposite and separate qualities is an entirely false and imposed one:

all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no purely visual or verbal arts (5)

Not only does he argue the case for celebrating the implications of this statement in the artistic world, but also in the academic world that studies it:

The clear separation of “faculties” (corporeal and collegial) on the basis of sensory and semiotic divisions is becoming obsolete and is now being replaced with a notion of humanistic or liberal education as centrally concerned with the whole field of representations and representational activity. (6)

One of the stated aims of the book is ‘to make the segregations of the disciplines more difficult’ (7). Another of its achievements is to further widen previous definitions of

ekphrasis: art history, he argues, ‘is an elevation of ekphrasis to a disciplinary principle’ (157). His inclusiveness is symptomatic of where the ekphrastic urge takes many poets, which is towards a mixing of genres as well as media. Mark Doty juxtaposes art history with autobiography, and Claudia Rankine merges the long poem with the visual essay; their works are evidence, if any were needed, that ekphrasis acts as a catalyst for fusion.

Rather than proposing a phrase to define ekphrasis – he most often uses Heffernan’s definition – Mitchell breaks it down into three phases in which it can be seen to work. The first is ‘ekphrastic indifference’, the idea that ekphrasis is impossible: that words can refer to an image, encourage us to imagine it, but ‘can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do’ (152). The second is ‘ekphrastic hope’, which could be described as the ‘magic’ ekphrastic representations perform: it describes the moment at which ‘the impossibility of ekphrasis is overcome in imagination or metaphor’ and we see the visual image through the verbal form (152). The third phase is an ‘ekphrastic fear’: ‘the moment of resistance or counterdesire that occurs when we sense that the difference between verbal and visual might collapse and the figurative, imaginary desire of ekphrasis might be realized literally and actually’ (154). It is a fear, exemplified in Lessing’s *Laocoön*, that the image could limit the verbal medium in which it operates, leading to bastardisation and idolatry. In response to this fear, Lessing argues that each mode should know its place and not seek to step outside of its own boundaries. Free exchange between the two is seen as promiscuous and dangerous.

This unstable point at which it seems the balancing act of ekphrastic hope cannot hold is the point at which the poets represented in this thesis pitch their acts of representation. Not in the hope that the magic of creating the visual within the verbal can be indefinitely sustained, but in a determination to test the limits between image and text, to build up illusions and reveal how they seem real, rather than letting the reader believe in them unquestioningly. At the same time, ekphrasis is often more of a technique for

exploring other ideas than a central focus. Far from its subversive role in the classics as a distraction from narrative, a still moment at the heart of the epic, the ekphrastic moment in modern poetry more often occupies the whole poem – it is not a beautiful but momentary illusion embedded in the flow of narrative, but a small world in itself. This puts at the heart of modern ekphrastic poems the meeting of the verbal medium with what is most often perceived as ‘other’ to it, the still, spatial form, and in turn leads to studies of the encounter between additional ‘others’, addressing fundamental questions about the role of gender, sexuality and any kind of outsider status in the business of perception and representation. It could be argued that, in this way, ekphrasis does more than any deconstructionist approach to dismantle binaries and their implications.

Many modern ekphrastic poems also challenge the role of the image within the poem itself, the very form of writing about art. Recent critical writing on ekphrasis, reflecting ekphrastic poetry since the 1950s, has tended to look outside of the conventional ideal of a direct exchange between poet and painting to a conception of ekphrasis that includes a wider range of artworks as well as their contexts. Barbara Fischer in *Museum Mediations* (2007) continues James Heffernan’s emphasis on the museum context of poems from the modernists and New York School to consider contemporary American poetry that locates itself specifically and consciously within the museum, taking in the viewing experience and everything that surrounds the paintings as well as examining the effect of their site-specificity on their interactions. Again, like Heffernan’s thesis, this study especially explores the power of the gendered gaze.

A look at John Berger’s 1972 study of representation, *Ways of Seeing*, underlines the fact that, even as the area of site-specific ekphrasis has been increasingly explored by critics, it has become less important for many people. The museum or gallery experience is only as important as the many other interactions with art which take place in less traditional locations. Mark Doty and Charles Wright, for example, write about their museum-going,

but Doty also looks at street art, popular art and made domestic objects that would not be classed as art – he is as likely to be found at the auction or on the tourist-trail as in the museum – and Wright often prefers the postcard to the original artwork, putting it up in his own private museum on his study wall or musing on the image kept in the mind's eye while out in the back yard, the museum of nature. This reflects the experience of many postcolonial writers whose first meetings with art have been in postcards or art books. Derek Walcott in particular registers disappointment with the museum context as a location for viewing art. The reverential relationship of the poet to the work of art has been broken down and undermined by the artwork's exclusivity in the face of the modern ethos of accessibility and inclusion as well as the possibilities for reproduction; it is no longer treated as a sacred object.

This new openness has led to the representation of more artistic forms in poems. As well as looking at conventional ekphrastic interactions with paintings and sculpture, this thesis studies the ways in which poets use visual works from non-representational and abstract art to collage and graffiti. It also revises and adds to previous definitions of ekphrasis by arguing for representations of drag and public sex performances, as well as of media images, as forms of ekphrasis. Most of the poems explored here, however conventional or original the objects of their ekphrases, find innovative and unpredictable verbal forms through which to represent them, bringing into play all aspects of the reading and viewing consciousness to exploit modes of perception that are peripheral or intuitive rather than direct. They encourage the reader at all times to break out of habitual reading patterns by mixing genres and juxtaposing in fruitful ways what would once have been divided into 'high' and 'low' art.

These writers continue to break down divisions between critical and creative writing. Following in the steps of their artistic predecessors, most notably the New York poets, many contemporary US poets also write works of art criticism; their hybrid and

experimental works are often characterised by a refusal to adhere to the conventions of the genre. Doty's *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (2001), for example, is a prose work that contains biography and personal introspection as well as an imaginative structure and critical comment, not only of the artworks themselves but of their possibilities for transforming the lives of those who see them. It is part memoir, part essay, and delves into personal history as much as it reflects on art history.

It is important not to forget that these poets, writing into the 21st century, have a rich, complex and, most essentially, *dual* artistic heritage. They draw their references from the world of visual art but they also respond to the interpretations of artworks, and visual images in general, made by generations of American poets before them. From Whitman and Dickinson to the New York poets and the Deep Image movement, American poetry has been characterised by its experiments with representation and its ideas about the nature of the image. Modernism has proved a lasting source of inspiration: Stevens' jar in Tennessee and Williams' wheelbarrow are much more important to contemporary American poets writing on visual art than the shields and vases of classical ekphrastic tradition. Pound's imagism saw the image not as an ornament but rather as the key to the most important ideas within a poem as well as a guide to how to express them:

The image itself is the speech. The image is the word beyond formulated language.⁸

For Pound, the image served to make the intangible or abstract idea concrete; a development that has been fundamental to American poets' conceptions of the physical and visual world. The primary importance of the image as vehicle for conveying difficult ideas in Eliot and Stevens, as well as in Pound, has provided one of the most profound influences on the poets in this thesis. Each of them could be seen as an artistic descendent of one of these modernist forefathers, as will be seen in the investigations of their work.

⁸ Ezra Pound, 'Vorticism', *The Fortnightly Review*, September 1914. p.466.

But they also retain strong links with the generation of poets that turned away from modernism's ideals: Mark Doty and Charles Wright in particular take many of their ideas on the image from poetry after modernism, while Jorie Graham is the poet in whose work modernist impulses and ideas have found their continuation, as well as new forms of expression.

Certainly, each of these writers takes up the legacy of the New York poets in the variety of their interactions with the visual. As well as spending time in the company of visual artists, Graham has also produced her own visual works and has used both paint and film to express ideas contained in her poems alternatively. They have all at some point engaged in collaborations with artists or galleries to produce hybrid works of art containing ekphrasis and illustration. Doty's experiments show the widest range of interaction: he describes his participations in performance art as well as the experience of posing for a photograph for which he has to stand in a painting he has made, representing himself being represented as a stag. These different acts of engagement work to further his ideas on the effect of art on human subjectivity and its possibilities for breaking down stereotypical role boundaries.

Doty and Wright, in particular, are influenced by their readings of poets associated with the Deep Image movement such as James Wright. Their echo is especially discernible in the tendency of Charles Wright's work toward images 'whose aim is not to dismantle the reader's sense of self and world but to startle one into quiet, unwilling acts of recognition'.⁹ Perhaps Wright's greatest stylistic debt in his almost-gothic and at times surreal images is to his friend and teacher at Iowa, the new surrealist poet Mark Strand, whose images act as markers of absence.

In spite of their many differences, the writers addressed here, like previous generations of American poets, are united in giving the visual image a prominent place

⁹ Leslie Ullman, 'The 1960s' in Jack Myers and David Wojahn (eds) *A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991) p.203.

within their poetic. In their work, ekphrasis appears as a reflective act of self-consciousness in which they hold every aspect of their poetic under scrutiny. Their engagements with artworks at times provoke change but are equally symptomatic of the external changes they undergo. Ekphrasis, then, is used as a technique for defining and reassessing what is important to each poet who uses it, and how these poets utilise this technique is the subject this thesis will explore.

Why, then, focus particularly on the work of Jorie Graham, Charles Wright and Mark Doty in relation to this debate? On the simplest level, they represent different approaches to the idea of representation in American poetry at the end of the twentieth century. Although they set off from different points along the continuum from abstraction to realism and arrive in different places by very different routes, they have in common a commitment to representing visual representations verbally that has played an important role in the process and development of each of their poetic styles. When read together they show a movement away from modernist-inspired abstraction toward a realism that contains inscribed at its source the understanding that everything is abstract, as well as an acceptance of the fact that all representation is illusion.

We begin with Graham and her wish to build some kind of coherence out of the broken pieces of modern history through abstract representation; we then trace Wright's journey to the brink of abstraction and his subsequent retreat from its forms while still retaining an affinity with its aims; finally we set off again with Mark Doty from a point already beyond abstract ideals to trace how he uses the illusion of representation. There are other points of connection between the poets – Graham and Wright are both products of the Iowa MFA and have kept up a correspondence over many years. All three poets share concerns about the ethics of representation within different contexts: Graham's is the concern, shared also with the language poets, over the destruction of

authentic language through its use in politics, advertising and the media, while Wright's is over how to represent the spiritual without a God, and Doty's relates to the responsibility of speaking for a community. All share a preoccupation with how to represent the passing of time through history and memory at public or personal levels. I will investigate how they negotiate the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas involved in these engagements with representation, and how the act of writing ekphrastically leads them to re-examine the forms and the aims of their poetry.

The body of this thesis is divided into four parts, three of which examine the treatment and the significance of ekphrasis in the work of three contemporary American poets – Jorie Graham, Charles Wright and Mark Doty – while the fourth gives a more general view of the possibilities of ekphrasis in the work of a further three contemporary poets. The first section looks particularly at Jorie Graham, examining the influences, especially those of modernism and abstract expressionism, that have contributed to the forms of her poetry; then exploring how she uses images from films in her poems to manipulate time and represent personal history through memory; this leads to a consideration of how she uses ekphrasis to approach the ethics of representing public history. The second section focuses on the Appalachian poet Charles Wright, covering particularly his relationship with the work of four painters – Paul Cézanne, Piet Mondrian, Mark Rothko and Giorgio Morandi – and following the journey toward abstraction and the ensuing return to nature on which they lead him. The third section discusses Mark Doty and his poetic of illusion, returning to the subject of how and why time is manipulated in ekphrastic poems and what effects this can produce. It investigates how Doty defines his sense of communal and individual space through art and how he uses established works to gain legitimation for others. The thesis concludes with a fourth section which examines the work of three further contemporary poets – Cole Swensen, Debora Greger and Claudia

Rankine – who exploit the potential of the ekphrastic act in very different ways to explore their ideas on the capacity of language as a medium, the gender-implications of our interactions with images, and the role of the media images we see every day in defining a sense of self. This final section moves the discussion beyond representation of the artistic image into contemporary responses to the targeted images of media and advertising.

1. Abstraction, description and narrating nothing

Many critics have recently expressed their frustration with what Marjorie Perloff calls ‘the tired dichotomy that has governed our discussion of twentieth-century poetics for much too long: that between modernism and post-modernism’.¹ With contemporary poets continuing to take their inspiration from modernist sources, perhaps increasingly so as we move forward into the 21st century, some have even claimed that the tide of poetry may be turning once more towards the creative ideals of modernism. Whereas those poets closest to their modern predecessors sought to distance themselves from it with anti-modernist movements such as confessionalism, those at more than a generation’s remove seem increasingly fascinated by its techniques, achievements and failures. Perhaps there is something in Perloff’s suggestion that the true first wave of modernism was never over but was simply deferred by the events of the time – especially the uncertainty and instability of war – and subsequently overtaken by a new set of literary ideals. With the fall of the New Criticism, the literary movement of high modernism, with which it was so firmly linked, suffered a backlash against its anti-representational, decontextualised methods both in the written form and the painted.

Much current criticism sees the renewed modernist impulse not as a form of nostalgia or a regression, but as the continuation and revival of those first, interrupted impulses, arising from the same set of circumstances. Kevin Dettmar has argued that modernism is not only a way of writing but of reading, and that ‘the most enduring of

¹ Marjorie Perloff, *21st -Century Modernism: The 'New' Poetics, Blackwell Manifestos* (Malden, Massachusetts and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2002). p.1

those 'Modernist' texts, read in another spirit, in another age, look strikingly postmodern'.² If modernism, or post-modernism, rather than having a set list of defining qualities, are subject to our way of reading them in our own context, then the boundaries of modernism as a movement are not so fixed. In other words, contemporary poets not only look back to influential modernists for ideas and inspiration, but, through identifying with their particular set of circumstances, and seeing parallels with their own, are creating their own brand of modernist writing in what Marjorie Perloff calls a 'second wave of modernism'.³

Jorie Graham has often been named as a poet representative of the aims of postmodern American poetry, especially since the publication of her third collection, *The End of Beauty*, in 1987, and can certainly be seen as one of the most formally innovative poets of her generation. Her style has never settled; each of her nine collections represents a significant change from its predecessor, 'a critique of the previous', and we can see the restless impulse that drives these changes at work throughout her writing.⁴ The subject always at stake is how, rather than what, to represent. When asked about her perceived postmodern status, she admits that she sees in her work 'conflicting kinds of diction present in the same milieu of the poem, conflicting kinds of attitudes, which, I guess, is what we call postmodern'.⁵ But the fuel for this constant renewal, this continual search for a better way to represent, is something she associates with modernism, telling an interviewer:

If you were to ask me now what poems need to be doing in our era, I would be right there with Eliot insisting that fighting the dissociation of feeling from thinking is still our priority, as working artists. Especially as artists writing in America, in American, a language polluted to the brim with "political" or "economic" speech – by military fake-speech, sales-speech. How are we to

² Kevin J. H. Dettmar, ed., *Rereading the New: A Backward Glance at Modernism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992). p.14.

³ Perloff, *21st -Century Modernism*, p.5.

⁴ Thomas Gardner, 'An Interview with Jorie Graham', *Denver Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1992). p.82.

⁵ Thomas Gardner, 'Jorie Graham: The Art of Poetry LXXXV', *The Paris Review*, no. 165 (2003). p.90.

... speak, let alone sing, in the language of the culture that is terrifying the whole globe? ⁶

She sees American culture as a new kind of waste land, with its polluted language, deadened personal connections and lack of compassion. James Longenbach notes that Graham's problem with modernist figures such as Eliot, Frost or Stevens is not one of anxiety of influence, 'not that their achievements are overpowering, but that their presence in contemporary poetry is not powerful enough'.⁷ Their ambitions have been diluted by the generations since who have lost 'the big hunger' to be revisionary and revolutionary in their projects.⁸ Like the wave of European modernism of the first half of the twentieth century, American art at the beginning of the twenty-first is beginning to react against the presence of its own conflicts and the desensitising effects of contemporary culture. Her multiple influences, modernist and otherwise, both as a writer conscious of the history of writing and as one who writes about visual art and film, show the obsession with how to represent that drives this variety in her work.

In *Erosion* (1983) she focuses on fifteenth and early sixteenth century Italian religious painters: Piero della Francesca, Luca Signorelli and Massaccio, painters concerned with painting religious stories in action. From *The End of Beauty* (1987) onwards, as the collection's title suggests, she begins to look at non-representational artists or those who complicate the representational process, especially the abstract expressionist Pollock and the surrealist Magritte. She also cites Jasper Johns, Picasso and Bacon as influences.⁹ The different qualities of colour, movement and action in their paintings inform many of the changes in her poetry: the short, tightly formed lines and identically shaped stanzas that narrate Signorelli's search for the spiritual in the body in *Erosion* are very different from the page-wide uneven lines and the mixture of forms and shapes that make up 'Pollock and

⁶ Ibid. p.96.

⁷ James Longenbach, 'Jorie Graham's Big Hunger', *Denver Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1997). p.99.

⁸ Gardner, 'An Interview with Jorie Graham'. p.81.

⁹ Gardner, 'Jorie Graham: The Art of Poetry LXXXV'. pp.86-87.

Canvas' in *The End of Beauty*, which investigates how the spirit of the individual, or attention, is solidified into material form on the canvas or the page. The neatness and step-like narrative continuity of 'At Luca Signorelli's Resurrection of the Body' are something she resists in subsequent books, choosing to focus instead on abstraction and fragmentation. What she traces throughout these collections is a way of seeing and representing, so it is to be expected that the forms and techniques of these painters have a fundamental effect on her work, from its ideological to its grammatical structure. The lineation and the form of the words on the page change as dramatically as the tone of the poems from one book to the next.

It is to non-representational art, especially the abstract expressionists, that she looks increasingly to explore her obsession with how to represent; an art which forces her to redefine the conventional idea of an ekphrastic poem as the 'verbal representation of a visual representation'¹⁰ and so to start out with new preconceptions of what kind of poems she is trying to make. She returns repeatedly to the desire of these painters to paint nothing, and 'nothing' is not only the subject of much of her work, but an integral part of the material, or anti-matter, from which it is forged. What better challenge could there be to the limits of description than the attempt to describe nothing at all? She has a sense that there is always something behind what is seen, some intangible and unreachable abstract element that cannot be written down, that remains beyond the scope of her craft. Instead of trying to cover or fill this perceived gap, the sense of loss found in the slippage between perception and the capacity to represent it, she consciously opens it up, giving it a physical and metaphorical life in the material of her poems.

The image and figure of the gap is everywhere in her work: the thing we have missed out or cannot quite see, the idea we cannot comprehend, the spaces that exist

¹⁰ James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994). p.3.

between people, between the intention and the action, between the intellectual and the spiritual. The very form of her poems, especially from *The End of Beauty* onwards, is characterised by physical spaces and gaps as well as their metaphorical and symbolic presence. The puzzle-like spaces, ____'s, that she leaves to mark the place of an idea that cannot be fully expressed, have no correct solution, no single answer. Their function is to open up a gap in the material of the poem that will let in possibility, to delay the point at which a single word begins to harden round an idea and define it. By this way of proceeding, her poems become defined as much by what they leave out as by what they tell us directly. Rather like Mark Doty's definition of still life as an art form that 'points to the human by leaving the human out' and 'points to meaning through wordlessness'¹¹, what Graham's work is emphasising most strongly is often what she does not say – as with still life, her work tries to guide us towards a new way of seeing that is less direct, more intuitive and peripheral.

This is a necessary starting point for a poet with Graham's rejection of objectivity and her idea of a whole view that, as we will see through her ideas on representing history, is arrived at by repeated sorties into the world, St Augustine's unknowable 'region of unlikeness', constructed from fragments and layerings of constantly changing perspective. Graham takes the forms and techniques of her poems from these paintings by reanimating their movement in her writing – not by trying to represent what they look like, but rather what they do. Amidst all the more visible gaps, the main absence can seem to be that of the painting itself. Her ekphrastic poems often resist the temptation to describe the painting at all. By using non-figurative art she evades the pressure of description, because, apart from shapes and colours, there may be almost nothing that can be pinned down by words contained within the picture. She uses her poems on abstract art to show how the idea that an image can be contained in words through description is a false premise. Every

¹¹ Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001). p.66.

description is only one of an infinite number of possible ways to express something, and once one description is chosen every other possibility is excluded.

She demonstrates this endless possibility in 'For Mark Rothko' (1980), her first poem on an Abstract Expressionist painter. The colour field might be seen as a technique hard to implement in a verbal medium, but from her first collection this is a challenge Graham has attempted, using colour and shape to solidify abstract ideas. She comments in a recent interview on how Emily Dickinson uses colour in her 'poems of enactment' – not even a particular, specified colour, but the *idea* of colour – to make us imagine a poem 'physically' enact its ideas through the physical stimulus of visual memory rather than the workings of the intellect.¹² There are some ideas that must be *felt*, through a 'dramatic enactment of sensorial data', rather than understood; indeed we cannot understand them with the mind alone. Here, description reaches its limits and the job of words, though an image, is to stimulate something that, while our minds feel it to be abstract, our bodies know it to be concrete. She quotes Dickinson's poem 812:

A Color stands abroad
On Solitary Fields
That Science cannot overtake
But Human Nature Feels.¹³

The colour she is referring to is that of the light at a certain time of year 'When March is scarcely here'. She does not describe the sensation of seeing this light; science cannot comprehend it, but somehow we can imagine it without the aid of description. For Graham, this idea of colour, and the way we experience it, is central to our understanding of what is essentially a very abstract poem. The colour is anthropomorphised; it is 'a uniqueness, or concentration, of color which becomes almost like a ghost summoning

¹² Thomas Gardner, *A Door Ajar: Contemporary Writers and Emily Dickinson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). p.197.

¹³ Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975). p.395.

itself.¹⁴ It is active: it ‘almost speaks, it ‘stands’, occupying space, and ‘waits’, signifying its existence in time. It is tangible, even though it is only an effect of the light and cannot, in reality, occupy physical space. We believe in this colour because it is something we have *felt*, although we know, logically, that colour does not have any of these properties.

You don’t even get to the point of arguing (with your conceptual and critical intellect) about whether it has agency to “wait,” because your body has already made it happen.¹⁵

This function – our work of feeling – that we bring to the poem, and that the poet stimulates in us, awakens a kind of automatic, visceral understanding. Even though our intellect would dispute the properties attributed to this colour, our bodies have done the work of understanding what it means before reason has had a chance to disagree. Colour here, even just its idea, creates an immediacy of communication between us and the poet that description, or even a more complex image, cannot achieve:

There seems to be – I’d go as far as to say that there *is* – no gap between you and the writer. You don’t have to *agree* with the writer: you are doing the writer, if you will; the writer is doing you. It’s not about asking you to conceive it.¹⁶

The power of colour then, even in this simple incarnation, is in its physical immediacy; its status as something we feel intuitively and experience emotionally, without necessarily being able to comprehend its effect intellectually.

Jorie Graham plays with distinctions between looking, feeling and knowing, as well as using the connective qualities of colour and shape to help us link ideas visually. Rather than using colour, as we will see Mark Doty does, for the pure joy of naming its hues to evoke opulence and visual richness, for the pure sensuality of description, she uses it in a more functional way, to demonstrate and solidify – to make the abstract idea physical and visible. The very first poem, ‘The Way Things Work’, in her first collection, *Hybrids of Plants*

¹⁴ Gardner, *A Door Ajar: Contemporary Writers and Emily Dickinson*. p.200.

¹⁵ Ibid. p.201.

¹⁶ Ibid. p.201.

and of Ghosts (1980), acts as a kind of manifesto for how colour and form are used in her work. 'The way things work', according to Graham, is through a process of opening one idea up to another, of associativeness and connection:

This is the simplest form
of current: Blue
moving through blue;
blue through purple;¹⁷

The colours are seen as liquid, a 'solution' that fills gaps, that is undefined and pliable, fluid. The poem contains no description or explanation of its ideas, just a series of simple images to demonstrate them. And the main idea is that what we feel is what we believe, regardless of what we know.

The way things work
is that we finally believe
they are there,
common and able
to illustrate themselves. (3)

It is a statement of belief in the power of form, colour and movement to enact thought, in 'kinetic flow, / rising and falling water, / ingots, levers and keys', in 'cylinder lock, pulley, / lifting tackle and / crane' (3) – things that join and graft and connect – and most of all she believes in the image of the hook as a metaphor for vision, because

The way things work
is that eventually
something catches. (3)

These metaphors of connection abound in her work in images of stitching and seams, webs and nets, but most of all in fields of colour. What must be understood about these connections is that they cannot be permanent: they constantly resist the stasis of description and elude attempts to understand how they work. Our minds are engaged in a

¹⁷ Jorie Graham, *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). p.3. Abbreviated to *Hybrids* hereafter.

continual process of disconnection and reconnection, revisiting and reformulating the associative links we make between things.

In 'For Mark Rothko', the only information she gives us about the painting is that it is red, and she uses this red as a springboard to interpret what she sees out of her window, which happens to be a bird sitting on a brick barbeque:

Shall I say it is the constancy of persian red
that permits me to see
this persian red bird
come to sit now
on the brick barbeque
within my windowframe. (*Hybrids* 36)

The poem is framed not by the edges of the painting but by the window of the poet's vision. The striking red is not unique to the painting but can be seen in the world around it, something given, rather than made, that 'has always just slipped from/our field of vision' (37). Just as there is 'no way to understand/ the difference' between 'a moment of sunlight/ that fell off the sun's edge/ ten thousand years ago' and 'sunlight/ absolutely new', her sense of this colour is continued everywhere she looks and cannot be confined to the painting; it has infiltrated vision itself. In the same way, there is no limit to the images that can be used to describe the red bird, although none of them can be anything other than a momentary suggestion:

red extended flame,
I would say, or, *ribbon*
torn from a hat
rising once

before it catches on a twig,
or, *flying painted mouth*
but then how far
have we come? (*Hybrids* 36)

These are associations that slip into her mind and leave it just as quickly, more reflective of her own thought processes than of the bird itself. Most often any attempt she makes at a

finite description, sometimes italicised and disconnected from the words around it, only serves to underline its own inadequacy:

Graham's strong sense of there being myriad ways to see and represent things, resulting in her experimentation with a constant stream of words and images that can never fit, begins in 'I was taught three' (1980), a poem about her trilingualism, with the endless possibility of language, and leads to a sense of unfixedness and instability. Willard Spiegelman finds the rejection of description another feature that makes Jorie Graham's work more difficult to enjoy: 'increasingly she has come to resist the orient of color in favor of blankness, interstices, gaps and lacunae'.¹⁸ What she means to do by leaving out description as far as possible is not to remove the subject altogether but to attempt to take language itself back to a blank slate and to make it the subject of the poem, using these 'gaps and lacunae' as another way to represent the sensuality of the perceiving experience that leaves the conventional baggage of description behind it. Even a representation of 'nothing' is always about something, as Rothko, Gottlieb and Newman underlined in their famous 1943 letter to the New York Times:

There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial.¹⁹

Her conception of 'nothing' is one that denies the importance of limits and closure rather than the existence of the subject:

By nothing I guess I meant the alternative shape, something which perhaps is centrifugal, something which we don't identify primarily by its limits.²⁰

This is an idea comparable to Pollock's habit of working on all parts of his painting at once, expanding it in a multi-directional way. Although Jorie Graham begins to use physical spaces within the poems as a serious technique only in her third book *The End of Beauty*, her

¹⁸ Willard Spiegelman, 'Jorie Graham's 'New Way of Looking'', *Salmagundi* 120 (1998). p.252.

¹⁹ Miguel Lopez-Remiro, ed., *Mark Rothko: Writings on Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). p.36.

²⁰ Gardner, 'An Interview with Jorie Graham'. p.79.

first two collections are already permeated with ideas and images related to both temporal and spatial gaps, showing an early preoccupation with the point at which representation fails the artist. ‘Framing’ in *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* addresses this intangible sense of absence that she finds in everything and, while talking about a photograph of the poet as a child, also suggests the failure of more conceptual ideals of framing; the sense that in any attempt to capture a moment, whether it be a photograph or a history book, ‘[s]omething is left out, something left behind’ (35).

The best example of Graham’s dual modernist influence, both visual and verbal, and the image of the gap in her work, is her 1987 poem ‘Pollock and Canvas’ from *The End of Beauty*. It is a poem about Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings and the process by which he created them, never letting the brush touch the canvas but leaving a space in which chance could operate. In ‘Pollock and Canvas’, by using the delaying technique dramatised in the self-portrait poems and the idea of the gap that Jackson Pollock creates between the creative act and its finished product – between the brush in the artist’s hand and the canvas – she plays out the process involved in this moment of capture, making it continuous and trying to hold off the concluding gesture for as long as possible. From the first line of the poem she makes us conscious of the tension between closure and process with the image of the artist as a god-like figure hovering over the unfinished void of his creation, ready to ‘make it end somewhere, / to make it beautiful’.²¹ This limitation of beauty to an ideal of finished perfection is set up to be rejected later in the poem. The image of the divine artist is unfolded slowly over the first five stanzas, seeming suspended in time as well as in the space above his canvas, while simultaneously being interrupted by fragments of Lydgate’s poem ‘A Lover’s New Year’s Gift’. The urgency of Lydgate’s poem, its rush towards conclusion, acts as the ‘hurry’ to complicate Pollock’s delay. Graham uses these changes in

²¹ Jorie Graham, *The End of Beauty* (Hopewell, New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1987). p.81. Abbreviated to *EoB* hereafter.

speed and tone to disrupt the temporal flow of the poem and thus to reveal literal as well as figurative gaps. It is a disjointed anti-narrative, revolving always around the image of the gap: between brush and canvas, the fishing line in the moment the mythical Fisher King casts it out into the river (before it has landed), between Lydgate's speaker and the lover he is missing, between what can be seen and what can be said. It works by deferring the moment of description, the laying down of a form, and equates the moment of representation with boredom and eventually lifelessness and death:

The moment
a figure appears on the canvas, she said,
the story begins, the story begins the error sets in,
the error the boredom, she said, the story talking louder
than the paint (*EoB*, 89)

The forward urge of the unfinished fragments embedded in brackets within the seemingly endless and repetitive first sentence of the poem (which tails off inconclusively halfway through the fifth stanza) creates a sense of symbiosis, of a simultaneous push and pull, with the long lines holding the contradictions in the poem's meaning tautly in balance. While Lydgate is urging us to receive meaning as quickly as possible – to bridge the gap between the intention and the desired effect – with his song of attention's desire for closure, Graham, via Pollock, wants us to question this desire, to linger in the space of process and allow possibility to sway intention from its course.

To effect this change within the reader – from the ideal of 'frontal' objectivity towards embracing the more 'peripheral' vision of endlessly changing multiple viewpoints – Graham makes changes to the form of the poem at the fundamental level of its material structure. The poems in *The End of Beauty* are different because of their new aims, and this is reflected in their form, culminating in the fragmentation and seeming chaos of 'Pollock and Canvas'. When writing her previous collections, Graham recalls that she had a strong

urge to create a 'syntactical net', to build an argument step by step, to capture it.²² This is an urge that disintegrates in *The End of Beauty* with the realisation that even a net lets things slip through; nothing can be contained. The enormity of her subject, which is the unknowable itself, demands a more open ended approach:

[...]in *The End of Beauty* and *Region*, I tried to break down much of the logical reasoning. There's an attempt to link stories that seem disparate, so that the reader is looking for whatever may be holding these stories together – that being the secret subject of the poem.²³

The reader is forced into this investigatory method of reading in 'Pollock and Canvas', not only because of its superficial discontinuity, but also because of its dense allusiveness and referentiality. As well as Lydgate's poem, Jackson Pollock's paintings and the myth of the Fisher King, Graham incorporates into her poem snatches of Old Testament language and imagery, reworkings of passages from Eliot's 'The Waste Land', and excerpts from Pollock's interviews and notebooks. Sometimes these are so closely interwoven with her own writing that the two are barely distinguishable. It is only through an exploration of how Graham adapts her text to interact with the others she has chosen to incorporate, and an analysis of why she does this, that we can hope to find meaning in it.

At the most basic level of her interpretation of the gap in the poem, Graham seeks to portray the process of representation itself and how the artist must dismantle ideas and images in order to put them back together. This is inherent in her experiments with new lineation and her changing use of the white space around the lines. In *The End of Beauty* her previously short lines expand to the width of the page, occasionally alternated with short lines of just one or two words (a shape similar to Charles Wright's hemistich or what he calls his 'low-rider'), and progress in a repetitive circling around images and ideas, an associative and interconnective flow that can seem disjointed and jagged in comparison to

²² Gardner, 'Jorie Graham: The Art of Poetry LXXXV'. p.79.

²³ Ibid. p.80.

her earlier structures. She writes unfinished stanzas and lines that trail off into blankness with ellipsis points. With these methods and a new technique of splitting phrases into numbered lines spaced out down the page, Graham lets her subject – the idea of the void beyond knowledge – permeate the very fabric of her poems. This habit of calling our attention to poetry’s illusion, common to many contemporary poets, is a risky technique for a medium that relies on the shared act of imagining an image to sustain our interest. Letting ‘nothing’ into the poem is a brave step: Graham resists her urge for narrative completion by subverting it and purposefully leaving her lines unfinished, her ideas hanging in white space.

By posing an undefined, and essentially undefinable, question, and by pursuing it with such disruptions of form, Graham risks alienating the reader. She is asking us to engage with the suspension of disbelief she calls “the luminous what if?”,²⁴ or what Mark Doty calls the “So?” of poetry.²⁵ This question, this gap in the poem’s ideology, is what gives it life. In a 1993 interview Graham equates her ideas of the unsayable with the Spanish concept of *duende*, an idea in which, in Lorca’s famous lecture on it, the gap would seem to be integral:

[...] the duende wounds, and in healing this wound, which never closes, is the exceptional, the creative part of man’s work. [...] [T]he duende likes the edge, the wound, and approaches places where the forms unite in a yearning greater than their visible expressions.²⁶

This is close to Graham’s idea of the mind as ‘the heat that seeks the flaw in everything/ and loves the flaw’ (*Hybrids*, 8). This old wound reopens in Graham’s attempts to represent history and to escape the narrative preconceptions it brings as its baggage, as we will see in the next chapter. In embracing the image of the gap and resisting description, Graham’s poems can feel strangely devoid of location and topography, disconnected from any

²⁴ Ibid. p.65.

²⁵ Mark Doty, *Source* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003). p.1.

²⁶ Federico Garcia Lorca, *Selected Poems*, trans. Merryn Williams (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1992). p.228.

external geographical framework. Their microcosmos of hooks and fastenings, of fields of colour that signify and link ideas, gives them an internal structure, but it is often one that does not always attempt to connect with the world outside the poems. Graham resists description, enhancing the disordered and fragmented nature of perception in her poems at all times. This 'impatient observing', with the eye skipping from image to image without narrative to join them, ends up offering us 'swirling junkets of action, a mind and a world in perpetual motion';²⁷ Graham works to write these barriers into the poems, to make us feel them ourselves, putting up formal and structural difficulties between us and the meaning of the poems rather than smoothing the transition between the page and the mind's eye, so that each poem is an enactment of 'the ways the ineffable erodes the known, and the known makes inroads into the ineffable.'²⁸

Even her point of view often seems to be disembodied; it is sometimes supernaturally fluid, giving us a vantage that would be physically impossible, and sometimes impossibly disjointed. A startling example can be found in some of the only poems where she reveals herself physically: she uses the third person throughout 'Estuary' (2002) and it is only when she jolts the reader into the first-person that one realises that this is the poet herself. This also happens frequently in poems where our interpretation of an image is important:

We, for instance, may find ourselves just getting comfortable within a perspective determined by the speaker's position, when we're tossed into an aerial view. Or we may be nestling within an introspective voice and then abruptly wakened to a perspective that includes us.²⁹

Graham's training in film-editing and cinematography at New York University under Haig Manoogian and Martin Scorsese clearly influences the way she constructs these descriptions from a variety of perspectives that she cuts between. She compares the process of seeing and recording to 'all those hours of holding the celluloid sequence of

²⁷ Willard Spiegelman, 'Repetition and Singularity', *The Kenyon Review* 25, no. 2 (2003). p.9.

²⁸ Gardner, 'An Interview with Jorie Graham'. p.96.

²⁹ Anne Shifrer, 'Iconoclasm in the Poetry of Jorie Graham', *Colby Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (1995). p.143.

frames up to the light, and deciding where to cut the moving image off and splice it to the next image, itself the beginning of an altogether different point of view or place'.³⁰ The reader can easily feel that he is seeing independently of the poet, floating somewhere above all the action, rather than seeing it through her eyes. But she manages to keep us connected in other ways. Even though the poet-persona is not so visible, the process of making the poem is in no way concealed or smoothed over – her odd stage-directions, parentheses and self-interruptions remind us that we are led by a consciousness that refuses to simplify, refuses to let us think that the images we see can be objective.

Graham's interest in the qualities of hybridity and erosion helps her to forge a new kind of description from this altered vision. The impetus for this new description is something to which every tension and opposition in her poetry contributes. Far from prioritising the visual, she acknowledges that the senses feed off each other, that they meld fluidly and that the boundaries between them are indeterminate. She looks for the 'song that falls upon the listener's eye' but also tries to use the other senses.³¹ She negotiates constantly between 'individual perspective and vision of the whole', which is partly evidenced by her startling habit of shifting perspective within a poem, as referred to above. She also tries to capture this difference, like Doty, through a more general sense of the continuous nature of life in her poems about animals and nature like the tiny minnows in 'Prayer', 'each a miniscule muscle', that together make of themselves 'a/ visual current' (N, 3).³² This idea of description is more transformative than representational:

I don't *use* the paintings so much as spring off the scene in them which is strangely fixed and free from us and so makes especially evident our desire for transformation, our tiny imperialisms of the imagination. Paintings are "finished" and stilled in ways few things in nature are, and therefore resistant in ways that make my rage to change more visible to me.³³

³⁰ Gardner, 'Jorie Graham: The Art of Poetry LXXXV'. p.75.

³¹ Jorie Graham, *Never* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002). p.13. Abbreviated to N hereafter.

³² Shiffrer, 'Iconoclasm in the Poetry of Jorie Graham'. p.143.

³³ Ibid. p.143.

This results in a process of movement outward from the painting as her subject matter rather than an investigation into it - this kind of looking does not narrow itself towards a conclusion. Her 'impatient observing' with its base in abstract expressionism, bypasses the question of the representational altogether.³⁴ Pollock's drip paintings inspire her fascination with the peripheral and mobile viewpoint and turn the focus from what is represented to how to see and represent:

Because they are painted in such great detail, if you stand far back enough to "see" the whole painting – its *wings* as it were – you can't see the actual *painting*. But the minute you get close enough to see the painting, the dripwork, you can no longer see the whole canvas. Or not with *frontal* vision. But you *can* pick up the rest of the painting with peripheral vision – which is, of course, a more "intuitive" part of the seeing apparatus.³⁵

According to Graham, this layering of simultaneous or complementary viewpoints leads us to a territory between subjectivity and objectivity in which we are at once distanced and present. When we look in this way we see more completely, and her aim is to stimulate this simultaneity in her readers. She disrupts the surface of her poems, to create 'poems with resistant surfaces' that 'frustrate frontal vision long enough to compel the awakening of the rest of the reading sensibility – intuition, the body'.³⁶ This means the temporary destruction of conventional poetic ideals such as beauty, narrative, and even pleasure.

What she makes of all this fragmentation, this 'dismemberment of reality', is a new kind of whole view, one that, rather than excluding everything inconsistent with a single viewpoint, potentially includes everything:³⁷

The desire to find – (*via* all the accretions, layerings, partial views) – a *whole view*, a view which arrives at objectivity via all the failures, all the archaeology of multiple subjectivities – rather than the old (fake?) objectivity of simple representation – representation as a coded statement of beliefs (agendas really) (usually the dominant culture's) trying to pass for an objective picture of reality.³⁸

³⁴ Spiegelman, 'Repetition and Singularity'. p.9.

³⁵ Gardner, 'An Interview with Jorie Graham'. p.99.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Bonnie Costello, 'Jorie Graham: Art and Erosion', *Contemporary Literature* 33, no. 2 (1992). p.377.

³⁸ Gardner, 'An Interview with Jorie Graham'. p.90.

She sees this desire as ‘the crack in the sensibility that compels the act of the poem into being’.³⁹ This process of breaking an objectivity that is taken for granted and reassembling its fragments creates new form that widens to contain new experience. But this desire to dismember and recreate reaches deeply into the poetics of both Graham and Doty to create instability on all levels: nothing can now be taken for granted, everything must be seen in a new way. It reaches most deeply of all into the poets themselves, as Graham explains when she identifies another fuelling instability:

the terror: that there’s no voice with which to approach experience. There’s no whole self. And no governing self that straddles and negotiates the various selves – but, rather, a constant falling away of different selves into an increasingly relative sense of self.⁴⁰

This sense of an uncertain subjectivity is essential to Graham’s ideas on time and its representation, namely the need for a constant process of revision and the idea that no representation can ever be finished. Just as we change in each moment, she also demands of the paintings she writes about that they ‘move, change, and, most importantly, []submit to the preoccupations, perspectives and needs of our present moment’.⁴¹

Her particular fear is of closure, and she resists this by bringing the artwork into the endless process of the mind, where everything is subject to association, memory and constant reassessment, where there is never a final or all-encompassing viewpoint, only her ‘whole view’ which is a given accumulation of experiences as opposed to the manufactured construction of ‘objectivity’; holistic rather than totalising. She resists the ‘tiny imperialisms of the imagination’ that desire to shape the narrative and narrow it towards an ending, and states that these controlling acts *must* be resisted in art because of their reductive and, when their implications are investigated, rather terrifying consequences:⁴²

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Gardner, ‘An Interview with Jorie Graham’. p.95.

⁴¹ Shifrer, ‘Iconoclasm in the Poetry of Jorie Graham’. p.148.

⁴² Ibid. p.143.

when we start realizing that by our *historical* thinking we have created a situation whereby we are only able to know ourselves by a conclusion which would render *meaningful* the storyline along the way – it becomes frightening.⁴³

Historical thinking imposes false conclusions and therefore false judgements; as a result of this Graham sees it to be profoundly unethical. As with many of her ideas about the acts of perception and representation, this resistance of narrative ways of remembering and representing also has implications for how we forge identity and how we *know* ourselves collectively as well as individually.

The next two chapters investigate how Graham uses ekphrasis to develop her ideas on the individuation of the self, both as an individual and as part of a community, as well as the fundamental importance of this project for resisting narrative and end-weighted, historical forms of thinking that would impose false conclusions.

⁴³ Gardner, 'An Interview with Jorie Graham'. p.84.

2. Cinema and Narrating Experience

I. Forms and Techniques of Film before *Region of Unlikeness*

More than one critic has located the stylistic change in Graham's work that comes between *The End of Beauty* (1987) and *Region of Unlikeness* (1991) in a shift from the still image to the moving image as an influence on both form and content. Helen Vendler investigates the roots of this change in *The End of Beauty*, seeing in its form the 'rhythms of cinematography'¹ and in its longer line lengths the inspiration of 'the cinematic freeze-frame'.² Anne Shifrer sees it as part of a movement leaving behind the modernist influence on Graham's representations which have seen her focusing on past masterpieces of religious art, in order to situate herself 'within the postmodern maze of images' and enter into Baudrillard's *simulacra* by weaving a web of references from all media.³

Cinematic ekphrasis has increasingly become part of collections of American poetry from the 1980s and 1990s, at its best making poetry more accessible and interesting to an ever more media-addicted audience impatient with the exclusiveness of 'high' culture, but at its worst representing 'shameless attention-getting behaviour in a culture of narcissism', an attempt to partake in the glamour of the film industry.⁴ Whatever its merits or otherwise, film has become an essential and universal cultural reference point, and part of our 'language of images', usurping the role of painting in bringing us the iconic images to signify popular desires, and containing an even more effective – or addictive – quality to represent our 'reality' in their dangerously engaging mixture of image, movement and

¹ Helen Vendler, *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995). p.241.

² Helen Vendler, *The Breaking of Style: Hopkins, Heaney, Graham* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995).p.80.

³ Shifrer, 'Iconoclasm in the Poetry of Jorie Graham'. p.276.

⁴ Laurence Goldstein, *The American Poet at the Movies: A Critical History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994). p.243.

sound.⁵ Cinema, because of its multi-sensory nature, achieves a magnetism to which painting cannot aspire.

Poetry levels this fundamental inequality: the medium of words requires a certain amount of intellectual effort to decode the representation of either form, and the imagination of the poet can control movement and sound, or even how much of the image itself is available to us. It is true that *The End of Beauty* marks a point of change in Graham's work, even more than the differences between her other volumes which all involve a movement away from old styles and preoccupations, but it would be simplistic to attribute this entirely to a focus on the moving image. Graham has always taken a diverse range of images – from paintings, from memory, from film, the media and other sources – and used them as a basis for exploring her ideas, integrating and internalising them into her processes of thought and writing in much the same way as words are integral to language. There is less difference in the way she treats still and moving images than Vendler and Shiffrer seem to suggest: her still images are never still and in her descriptions of cinema she often focuses on the freeze-frame.

Luca Signorelli's *Resurrection of the Body*, represented in the poem entitled after it in *Erosion* (1983), is given both narrative and symbolic movement adding up to a sense of time pulling forwards throughout the poem and also a symbolic pull to explore inwards. The word most frequently used in the poem is 'hurry'. The waiting souls 'hurry / to enter / their bodies':

they hurry to congregate,
 they hurry
into speech.⁶

They hasten to reenter the narratives of the living, until the poem is quick with life, as if the painting is never a finished object but is recreating itself each time it is seen through this

⁵ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: The BBC and Penguin Books, 1972).

⁶ Jorie Graham, *Erosion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). p.84.

never ending impulse and urgency, its elements having to fall into place again with each viewing:

Soon
some are clothed, there is
distance, there is

perspective. (*Erosion*, 75)

The poem itself, with its short lines and breathless repetition, seems part of this perpetual arrival, the repeated birth into the moment of presence, narrating at the same time the slower inwards movement of the painter dissecting his own dead son's body, the exploration of death through which he will learn to represent the soul's entrance into the body. Filtered through the poet's imagination and delivered into narrative, this is no still image.

'Two Paintings by Gustav Klimt' (1983) shows the same impulse to deliver the moment of the painting into movement even in a painting that would appear to have no story to tell. The forest in Klimt's *Buchenwald*, with its rows of trees interspersed with leaves and light – empty – is populated with the memory of the people who died in the concentration camp of the same name. Their absence moves between the trees; they want to come into the light, to 'step again onto / the leafrot,' (*Erosion*, 61) but are unable to. Their presence is almost palpable, 'a sweet secret / even the air wishes / it could unlock' (61). Even Graham's poems on abstract paintings, in which there is no narrative to bring into action, show a similar impulse towards movement. In Pollock's drip paintings it is the sense of movement – the physical movements used in the creative process, and the temporal and spatial movements within the paintings – that fascinates Graham and compels her to explore their action in her own writing. She identifies with approaches that use the layering of paint, either by dripping over previous layers or by scraping layers away down to a base layer; approaches that connote the layering of time and the accumulative process in which moments are laid down not one after another but one on top of another,

changing what is underneath.⁷ Similar images of layering, or of unveiling, have often been used as a metaphor for the poetic process she goes through when writing her poems. She describes Salome as a 'governing figure' of *Region of Unlikeness* and her own way of writing as a way of revealing successive illusions of modern life until a 'more moral terrain' is reached.⁸ It is this impulse, here identified by Graham as a fundamental force in *The End of Beauty*, which leads to the cinematic layerings of time in *Region of Unlikeness*:

I would write until what suddenly felt opaque turned transparent, and each time it felt like (pause) pain because what we want, of course is to get to something which resists, which *won't* come off. I was trying with great caution and difficulty in that book to experience, as I was writing, the actual moment when the thing would go transparent on me.⁹

She sees it as a sort of fall into consciousness, a movement from illusion into awareness, embodied by Dickinson in her line 'and then a plank in reason broke'.¹⁰ Movement – not only that contained within the poem but how the forms used delay the passage of the reader's eye through the text – is fundamental if these illusions are to be revealed and the reader is to be made aware. Our reading must be slowed down to fit the pace of thought – and the more difficult or important the idea, the more we must be held back in order to experience it fully. The shorter lines and flowing continuity of the poems in *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* and *Erosion* carry the eye through the poem at a much greater speed than the long contrapuntal lines of *The End of Beauty* populated with their visual interruptions, blanks and dead ends. The attraction of cinema, for Graham, is that its images can be slowed down.

The cinematic movement of *The End of Beauty* is created with numbered freeze-frames, playing with the gap between 'hurry and delay' (48), one of the essential binary opposites which fuels Graham's creativity; rather than defining limits, this opposition

⁷ An example of this approach can be found in Gerhard Richter's abstract paintings, as we will see in the next chapter.

⁸ Gardner, 'An Interview with Jorie Graham'. p.83.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*. p.129.

creates a cyclical movement fuelled by tension, symbolised in ‘Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay’ (48) in the image of Penelope repeatedly weaving and unweaving her tapestry, the one movement leading inevitably to the other. If the still image is often freed into movement in Graham’s work, it follows, as a result of this lack-driven cycle, that the cinematic image will be consciously slowed and stilled, its narratives frustrated and delayed. This change of technique, from the still to the moving image, is a logical continuation of Graham’s ideas of what images are for and how they function – the insistence here is on the productive and fertile tensions produced by forms that compel us to change them, to make something new. When faced with stillness our imaginations create a narrative or at the very least a movement – the sensation of being ‘drawn into’ Rothko’s empty washes of colour for example; when faced with narrative we want to slow it down so that we can capture its images in memory, so that we don’t miss anything. Our urge here is to pause the action and hit the rewind button.

Graham had used the cinematic image before *The End of Beauty*. In ‘The Age of Reason’, from *Erosion*, she uses a scene from Werner Herzog’s *Woyzeck* (1979) to dramatise this impulse to control the image and how it is represented and to show us the impossibility of mastering the world on the page. Woyzeck, driven mad both by the brutal treatment he suffers and by his wife’s infidelity, throws the knife he has used to kill her into the lake. But, not satisfied that it has gone in deep enough to hide his crime, he goes in after it and we do not see him resurface. Graham relates this to our urge to replay every moment until we get it to our satisfaction, in order to contain and control everything within it. To this end, to help us ‘wade through’ the current of narrative we have ‘characters and the knife / of a plot’ (*Erosion*, 19), but Graham wants us to realise that, ultimately, we can never absorb the moment as fully as we desire to:

For what we want
to take
inside of us, whole orchard,

color,
name, scent, symbol, now
pale

blossoms, wet black
arms there is
no deep enough. (20)

We want to slow down the moving image, the narrative, so that nothing will escape us, but our reason for needing the freeze-frame is, ironically, that something always will. Thomas Gardner sees this poem as a moment of realisation and self-criticism, the root of the changes that begin in *The End of Beauty*:

As if suddenly realising that such attempts at mastery are not confined to madmen and lovers, Graham turns her appalled eye on her own activity as she writes.¹¹

He sees this as the point at which she identifies the impulse to control the image in herself and begins to look at its effects in her work. The freeze frame, which is a defining trope of *The End of Beauty*, is an experiment in the positive forces the poet's control over the shapes time takes in her work can unleash. The collection begins with a series of stilled moments in 'Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them' and introduces the technique of numbered frames:

1

The gesture like a fruit torn from a limb, torn swiftly.

2

The whole bough bending then springing back as if from sudden sight.

3

The rip in the fabric where the action begins, the opening of the narrow passage.

4

¹¹ Thomas Gardner, 'Jorie Graham's Incandescence', in *Jorie Graham: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Thomas Gardner (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005). p.119.

The passage along the arc of denouement once the plot has begun, like a limb, the buds in it cinched and numbered (*EoB*, 3)

It is evident from this bold beginning, telling the story of that first gesture of sin between Adam and Eve, that the manipulation of representational time and the ways it can be made to ‘hurry’ or ‘delay’, frozen or condensed into flow, will be what this collection explores. Already the sense of the plot ‘moving along day by day into the sweet appointment’ is set up to be resisted and the given and the made begin to come into collision in the process of representation (*EoB*, 3). Later in the collection, ‘Pollock and Canvas’ uses the same technique to slow down the action of the poem until we can see the gaps between each represented moment. The urgent fragments of Lydgate’s poem that Graham incorporates give us a taste of narrative hurry, serve to awaken our desire to rush towards the ending and find out what ‘happens’, but she frustrates this promise by delaying our moment of arrival with freeze frames and gaps and delivering us, when she eventually does, to an ending that tails off inconclusively.

The influence of Graham’s training in cinematic techniques is also visible in the often dislocated viewpoints in her poems, not tied to a character or narrative body but floating above the scene, and the abruptly changing angles from which things are seen; close-ups, slow motion and panorama shots. In ‘The Lovers’ (*EoB*) she gives directions in the style of an omnipresent director to control the actions of the poem – ‘hold still’, ‘don’t look away’ (65) – as well as narrating actions away from the main ‘scene’ of the poem in brackets which break the flow of the sentence to produce an effect of simultaneity:

(while out in the corridor they are taking down names)
(while out in the corridor the shoes purr for blacking) (*EoB*, 65)

This film-like way of seeing is used to see a statue of two lovers; the directions, the request to ‘hold still’, are directed at the gaze itself, not its object, and its self-conscious way of editing itself. The gazing consciousness has a voice in the poem, saying that the thing seen ‘will need us to shape it (won’t it?)’. The gaze is the protagonist, always on the move,

constantly reviewing and editing what is seen and questioning how we see it – it is repetitive and wants to look again. In a similar way, the quotations from Lydgate embedded into the beginning of ‘Pollock and Canvas’ are directions to the narrative, the gazer’s voice urging it to ‘go forthe / in hast’ (*EoB*, 81), imploring us to read quickly, to make a movement forward which we cannot, enthralled as we are by the frozen action of the poem and slowed down by its stuttering repetitions. The director, the poet, is master of our perception of time, hovering over the canvas of the film or poem, cutting, freezing, speeding up the action.

II: Cinema and Memory’s ‘*Region of Unlikeness*’.

The freeze frame is similar to the photograph, a medium that Graham used in *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* to explore the idea of how a moment of personal history can be framed in verbal or visual representation. It is to take this idea further that she uses film in her work. Even in the genre that can most achieve realism if it chooses, ‘[s]omething is left out, something left behind’ (*Hybrids*, 35). The split or double self-portraits of *The End of Beauty* were inspired by Graham’s experience of pregnancy and the fission of the self, and *Region of Unlikeness* follows on from this in its acknowledgement of the need to gather images from her past to prepare a history for the young child: ‘you become a bit of story that needs to be told’.¹² The issue then becomes one of how this story should be narrated – what are its defining moments and images. Graham attributes the emphasis on autobiography in *Region of Unlikeness* to the experience of motherhood:

once you’re a parent, you enter into a completely different relationship to time. History becomes dominant, and then, perhaps, personal history becomes dominant. You are suddenly at that point where *facts* – both the facts that your child is learning, and “the facts” “of your life” your child wants to know, needs to know – become important.¹³

¹² Ibid. p.87.

¹³ Ibid

The importance of these facts lies not only in creating a history for the child, but in the poet's need to look back and reassess her childhood memories for herself, and to compare them with the world in which her daughter is growing up. For Graham, these memories do not reassure, but reveal. The world of the 1960s, and especially its films, described in *Region of Unlikeness* may seem to be 'a historical period of more authenticity, more *credibility* – a period before theorizing about spectacle became a self-conscious tic that made everyone, including poets, sceptical analysts of their own spectatorial practice' – but Graham wants to tear off the veil of nostalgia to question the iconic images she grew up with and their effect on both her own adolescence and that of millions of other American women.¹⁴

She addresses this problem in 'Fission', the first poem of *Region of Unlikeness* and also her first use of the images of film to explore her own past. It is the first expression of a technique she uses increasingly in her later poetry, the merging of various narratives, personal, historical and representational, which uses each to explore the other, creating reactions between these previously unrelated threads and sparking off new ideas from their combination. 'Fission' has received, relative to Graham's other poems, a considerable amount of critical attention, but the ways in which it uses its film images, and its reasons for doing so, are worth going into in more depth for what they reveal of Graham's relationship with the conceptions of temporality inherent in memory and its representation in autobiography.

It describes the moment in Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita* (1962) when Humbert first sees his 'nymphet'. Graham zooms in on the image of Lolita's body stretched seductively on the grass and the moment in which she raises her eyes to meet Humbert's possessing gaze. Time seems caught in the crossfire of these two gazes, and we too are held in Lolita's gaze which pierces the barrier of the screen to look directly out at us as her eyes almost fill the

¹⁴ Goldstein, *The American Poet at the Movies: A Critical History*. p.227.

frame. Graham identifies Humbert's gaze as one of desire to capture: 'the birth of the mercantile / dream' and Lolita's as desire to be seen, to pull herself 'out of the possibility of never-having-been-seen'.¹⁵ These two gazes are both created and mirrored by the beam of the projector, a 'corridor of light / filled with dust' (*Region*, 3); the vehicle for the narrative movement on the screen ironically used as the symbol of time caught in stasis. The effect of these crossed beams is hypnotic, creating a feeling of 'immobilism' (7) in the young protagonist. Régis Debray describes this hypnotic magnetism, the special power of cinema, in his discussion of the different qualities of the cinematic, televisual, and cyber image:

Enfermé dans le noir anonymat d'une salle de cinéma, situation que Barthes qualifiait de pré-hypnotique, je viens me coller à l'écran-miroir. Il m'engloutit. Evasion impossible, leurre parfait, extase possible. Blocage moteur du corps. Je peux certes tourner la tête, fermer les yeux, mais ce geste de refus n'est pas ici naturel.

Shut into the anonymising darkness of the cinema, a situation that Barthes saw as pre-hypnotic, I come to stare at the screen/mirror. It swallows me up. Evasion impossible, perfect lure, possible ecstasy. It blocks the body's capacity for movement. Of course I can turn my head, shut my eyes, but this gesture of refusal is not a natural one here.¹⁶

It is private reverie enclosed in the public space, 'un somnambulisme volontaire mais extrême' (a voluntary but extreme form of sleepwalking) from which we do not wish to wake.¹⁷ Lulled by the cinema experience into the impression of a private, unmediated reality, the watching girl begins to identify with the 'greater-than-life-size girl' on the screen, which has become Debray's 'écran-miroir', acting as a reflection of the viewing consciousness. The screen simultaneously swallows up this consciousness and gives it back to itself changed, the ideal reflection of the ego defined by Lacan. Thus as the light of the projector beam devours Lolita's body, 'licking' and 'lap[ping] against the image 'aflame with

¹⁵ Jorie Graham, *Region of Unlikeness*, (New York : The Ecco Press, 1991) p.3. Abbreviated to *Region* hereafter.

¹⁶ Régis Debray, 'Vie et mort de l'image', *Esprit* 199 (1994). p.61-63. The English version is my own translation.

¹⁷ Ibid

being seen' (4), the young poet is also sexualized by the light of the image reflected back onto her:

the image licked my small body (6)

undressing something there where my
body is (7)

At this moment the point of no return has been reached for Lolita, her fate already sealed by Humbert's possessing gaze:

You can almost hear the click at the heart of
the silence
where the turnstile shuts and he's *in*. (4)

These lines are ambiguously placed, serving to describe at the same time a man's hurried movement into the cinema – which will interrupt the film – and Humbert's definitive entrance into Lolita's life. She is his '*new world*' (3) and her flowering sexuality, we realise, is already bought. Her thighs are 'like receipts slapped down on a / slim silver tray'. The desire which will lead to the loss of her youth has been awakened. By identifying her young self with this transaction, Graham seems to ask whether the same fate is contained for all adolescent girls in the male gaze.

Laura Mulvey uses Lacan's theory of the mirror phase to explore the desire for self-recognition in the film image and its implications for women when the director's gaze, which controls our own, has historically been predominantly male. Like Debray, she believes that we are especially vulnerable to the urge to suspend judgement in the cinema where the anonymising effects of darkness and the hypnotic 'shifting patters of light and shade' turn the viewer into voyeur and where spectators participate in 'repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer'.¹⁸ The young Graham takes part in this process of transference, but when the film is interrupted in the middle of this iconic image by a man bearing news of Kennedy's death, letting in daylight

¹⁸ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). p.588.

and waking the viewer from her voluntary somnambulism, she begins to reject it. Before the entrance of the man the only 'reality' has been that conveyed by the projector beam, but on his entrance the light begins to splinter into different layers of reality which demand integration into the experience of the moment: the 'electric lights', the 'unwavering houselights' and the 'long thin arm of day' (7) all diluting and breaking into the unity of the image on the screen. The lights each 'play on the field of [her] willingness', trying to subject her to their particular vision, but the increasing criticism of her metaphors makes clear that she is no Lolita.

The slowing down of time in the poem is the gesture of refusal that Debray sees as going against every natural urge. The poet is willing Lolita, and her younger self, not to get caught up in other people's narratives, in the plot laid down for a young girl in the early 60s as much as in Humbert's sordid narrative of possession. She wants them to stay in the time 'before the man's shadow laid itself down' (6) and this is expressed through delay:

there is a way to not yet be wanted,

there is a way to lie there at twenty-four frames
per second – no faster –
not at the speed of plot,
not at the speed of desire – (6)

It is ironic then that one of the devices used to delay the racing narrative is the representation of the image of Lolita's body, delay being an attribute as traditionally located in the female body as it is in the ekphrastic object from the shield of Achilles to Keats' urn and onwards:

her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation.¹⁹

The thing that makes Lolita vulnerable, her captivating beauty, also gives her this power: she is not merely an object to be looked at, she is '*to-be-looked-at-ness*' itself, something that transcends the male gaze to create a gap, a 'space-between' the desired object and its

¹⁹ Ibid. p.589.

apprehension.²⁰ Graham plays on the subversive potential of this beauty to extend the freeze frame and dramatise the tension between the desire for narrative and the desire for an extended look, as well as to symbolise the adolescent's desire both to grow up and to stay caught in time. Ultimately, of course, this power is limited: *Lolita* does not transcend her circumstances and this is the point at which the comparison between the young poet and her iconic screen double breaks down. The two girls represent the figure of the gap, but whereas *Lolita* is the gap of the stilled attention caught up in the desire to look and own, the young poet represents the girl as gap, the possibilities of an as yet undetermined future. She is similar to the figure of Maya or the girl as gap in 'Pollock and Canvas', representing the in-between space of the not-yet-developed; a form in process without an ending, constantly writing and rewriting itself, the blank canvas upon which narratives can be played out.

The gap, here, rather than reinforcing a stereotype of femininity, uses ideas on the nature of female identity to let in possibility. The free-floating nature of female identity creates vulnerability, but also possibility and with it choice: the young girl's birth into awareness of the choices that surround her. The announcement of Kennedy's death is something that fixes this knowledge in memory, gives it a defining moment, and creates a before and after. The poem then moves into dual time: the slowed down time of the image and the cataclysmic event as a contrast to the poet's awareness which begins to pick up speed at this point. The 'immobilism' of cinema creates a sense of 'the being-in-place more alive than // the being'(8), as does Kennedy's death, but the realisation that this is an historical moment counters this with an awareness of being in time:

If historical awareness had an originary moment for Graham's generation it would probably be John F. Kennedy's assassination.²¹

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Shifrer, 'Iconoclasm in the Poetry of Jorie Graham'. p.70.

It is the moment which causes reality, already stilled, to splinter in the poem, along with the light that represents unified vision, until it becomes a series of layers that the poet has to feel through.

By the time the interruption is over, Graham has freed herself from the cliché – both in Barthes’ sense of the moment caught in the frame of the image and in the sense of the stereotypical expectations of women at the beginning of the 1960s, the object of male longing that *Lolita* represents. The film has moved on already, almost impossibly fast, with the pace of the poet’s increasing awareness of what can rip into the stilled image: choice:

choice the thing that wrecks the sensuous here the glorious here –
that wrecks the beauty
choice the move that rips the wrappings of light, the
ever-tighter wrappings

of the layers of the
real (8)

Humbert is escaping with *Lolita*, the car speeding away, but this no longer seems to matter. The spell the image has woven is broken and the focus now is on the girl’s awareness, racing ahead like the car. In contrast to the metaphors of monetary value for *Lolita*’s body earlier in the poem, the young poet has the dollar bill firmly in her hand.

Graham’s cinematic tactics involving delay and the manipulation of time are particularly well suited to the intimacies of personal history as represented through memory, however their ethical aims are applicable also to the weightier and more complex subject of our perceptions and representations of shared history. Whereas Graham here uses the announcement of Kennedy’s death as a defining moment against which to examine her own memories of individuation and selfhood, in later poems she tips the balance the other way, using her own life as the point of reference from which to delve back into a more communal past and to explore the problems involved in representing public rather than private history. The recognition of the self as a fluctuating and inconsistent point of reference to which she comes in *The End of Beauty* and *Region of*

Unlikeness is essential to her investigations of history and her development of the idea that the longed for 'whole view' must be pursued communally, but nevertheless with a strong sense of personal accountability. Again she looks to forms that disrupt narrative and evade its push toward conclusion, a technique taken from her more personal poems and something Tim Woods sees as key to poetry's responsibility:

Memory is one key for the ethical representation of the past, and poetry, as a mechanism for collective memory and opening up the past to scrutiny, can act ethically by resisting dogmatic, fixed, closed forms and narratives.²²

The next chapter shows just how strong some of these narratives are and how Graham's writing on visual images, both as a repository for forms and for memories, strives to work against them and counterbalance some of their negative effects.

²² Tim Woods, 'Memory and Ethics in Contemporary Poetry', *English* 49 (2000). p.164.

3. Representing History

The takeover of literary language by modern consumer values – described by Bob Perelman with his “words / that died on / the way to / the mall, mad / that the world / hadn’t thought / to provide / anything more interesting / than ranked merchandise” – is a problem that, Jorie Graham argues, affects our ability to think about and write about certain things: most important among them, our own history.¹ If we shorten that attention span enough, she says, ‘there’s just no room for accountability’.² The idea of our accountability, political, social and ecological, is one that occurs increasingly in her more recent poems and is something we will come back to. The perceived lack of personal responsibility in modern culture, however, has changed her idea of who she is writing for and has given her a sense that the American reader, in this age of consumer glut and the ‘sexy, highly exportable’ shortened attention span, is ‘a reader who doesn’t trust language any more as a medium for truth – because of advertising, because of government, because of the atrocities language has carried in its marrow’.³ Consequently, one of the aims she sets herself is the attempt to recover the reader’s faith in words – not an unquestioning, blind faith, but at least a faith that they can be used to approach and share experience, that they can carry ideas disinterestedly. There is a sense in her poems that reappropriating the narratives of history is some of the serious work these words must do if they are to recapture the interest of the cynical and disillusioned reader. There is also a sense of nervousness about this project. This is partly because Graham sees herself as this reader – suspicious of any narrative, especially one that claims to represent history – as well as the writer that wants to win her back. The duality of this struggle is comparable to those acted out in her dual self-portrait poems of *The End of Beauty*. The poet’s own trust in the nature

¹ Bob Perelman, *The Future of Memory* (New York: Roof Books, 1998). p.78.

² Gardner, 'Jorie Graham: The Art of Poetry LXXXV'. p.93.

³ Gardner, 'An Interview with Jorie Graham'. p.98.

of words and the representational weight they can carry is also under question, especially ‘that great double-edged power in language, the power to define’ that has been used so devastatingly by colonisers and dictators alike.⁴ Her discomfort with the unquestioning use of ‘the language of the culture that is terrifying the whole globe’⁵ is one of the catalysts for the constant desire to change and rework the language of her poems, an integral part of her creativity depends in trying to discover, in each new book, ‘a more moral terrain – a terrain in which one is more accountable’.⁶

Many of her fellow American poets are also motivated by the same impulse to think about how we interpret the past and how it affects our view of the present, after experiencing the same difficulties representing history. Mark Doty sees it as a deeply-rooted cultural problem, something particularly American:

In America we tear down the old or polish it into unrecognizability; we make it “historic” and visitable, a replica of itself, metals replaced, colors restored. Make it new or cart it away.⁷

He wonders at the need to clean up the evidence of the painful collective trauma of 9/11 so quickly, “the jagged iron ribs of the World Trade Center”, to sanitise this powerful symbol of ruin, those “sharp, Gothic pieces” we see now only in photographs. Is it because, as he suggests, “[w]e like our evidence of time at a distance: quaint, pickled in resin or amber. We don’t want it near our own bodies”. Perhaps Graham would see this as having something to do with a particularly American conception of recorded time. In an interview with Thomas Gardner she describes a childhood game she played in Rome, sitting in her room imagining back through the layers of history and the scenes played out on that piece of ground:

⁴ Ibid. p.82.

⁵ Gardner, 'Jorie Graham: The Art of Poetry LXXXV'. p.96.

⁶ Gardner, 'An Interview with Jorie Graham'. p.83.

⁷ Mark Doty, *Seeing Venice: Bellotto's Grand Canal* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2002).

I sat above the “current humans” in the room below and loved to imagine the eighteenth-century house beneath “this” house and its people, the Renaissance house and its people, the Medieval house and its people – all the while trying to summon the whole city around the house.⁸

Her imagination leads her back to pre-roman settlements and beyond. When she tries the same game as an adult in Iowa City the experience is very different: after the Civil War town and the first settlements, after the native communities, she reaches a void. In Wyoming the game stops even more abruptly:

Strip away this nice enclosed room you’ve placed on this bedrock prairie and what do you have? Some homesteader, some roaming herds and their hunters – then silence, then some age when all you are sitting on, or looking out at, was ocean. (74)

Even more than the effect of her trilingualism on her syntax and vocabulary, the most important legacy of her childhood in Rome then Paris is a divided conception of history and a feeling of its weight on the great cities of Europe. This gives her ground for comparison with the freedom from the weight of history she perceives America as having; a gap that could, like others in her work, prove fertile.

This lack of a sense of history has led, ironically, to its commoditisation and the energy with which Americans go about making it new. She laments, with James Merrill, that “You would think the simple fact of having lasted / Threatened our cities like mysterious fires” (93). As Alan Bennett comments in *The History Boys*, the best way to ensure something is forgotten is to build a monument to it. This has not gone unnoticed by commentators on the Bush government’s handling of 9/11 and how the site of so much grief has become commoditised and aestheticised into a tourist attraction.⁹ The ground has been opened, leaving a hole for history to fill, and many writers, like Mark Doty, are not content that the government have chosen to fill it with cosy sentiment and reassuring words, absolving themselves in the process from learning lessons and being accountable.

⁸ Gardner, ‘Jorie Graham: The Art of Poetry LXXXV’, p.73.

⁹ Dana Heller, *The Selling of 9/11: How a National Tragedy Became a Commodity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

One of the reasons, then, that Graham refers back to Eliot so much is because she sees herself in a situation with increasing parallels with the era of high modernism and she identifies with many of its aims and dissatisfactions: especially the problem of a collective trauma that needs expression and a language that is perceived to be losing the power to express it because of a kind of socio-political erosion. T.J. Clark underlines modernism's dream 'of turning the sign back to a bedrock of World / Nature / Sensation / Subjectivity which the to and fro of capitalism had all but destroyed...an emptying and sanitizing of the imagination.'¹⁰ This desire to clear language of its political associations chimes with what Graham tries to achieve in the poem 'Disenchantment' from her tenth collection: *Overlord* (2005). She has referred to the Second World War and the holocaust in nearly all her collections, but *Overlord* focuses on these subjects most consistently. It is a collection whose dual themes are the failures of history and the poet's fears for the future in a nation that has lost its sense of compassion – a metaphorical Waste Land. The poems focus on the allied offensive in Europe, and the collection is named after Eisenhower's "Operation Overlord" which included the Omaha Beach landing on D-Day. Graham uses historical as well as personal accounts to re-construct some of the landings, interspersing these with more general poems relating the lives of soldiers or more contemporary concerns. One of her increasingly frequent forays into an experimentalism that most resembles language poetry, 'Disenchantment' deals with the problems of perspective, judgement and how to represent history, be it personal or cultural. She wants a language that can do justice to the atrocities of modern history and raise questions about the lessons that can be learned from it without lapsing into a narrative that privileges a certain view of itself or writes a certain kind of history to the neglect of other possibilities. At the same time, a view of history that embraces fiction and myth, blurring lines between reality and the imaginary, can entail certain dangers, the most extreme of them being denial that the atrocities ever happened at

¹⁰ T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1999). pp.9-10.

all. For this reason, versions of history have tended to close around themselves, being exclusive of possibility and seeing history and art or history and myth as incompatible. This is a problem Graham raises in *Erosion* (1983) with a poem called 'History'. Here she juxtaposes some modern reactions to the Second World War: the words of a holocaust denier and a photograph of a brutally murdered man which, in an artistic sense, can from this distance be perceived as beautiful. History brings with it judgement, subjectivity and emotional reaction. It is

...the opposite
of the eye
for whom, for instance, six million bodies in portions
of hundreds and
the flowerpots broken by a sudden wind stand as
equivalent. (*Erosion*, 64)

She is referring to the defamiliarising effect of the visual image; that its forms and patterns can have an immediate effect on us that could be seen as inappropriate to the context. What she emphasises is that, however we interpret them, the images of history come back to haunt us and even its most insignificant events echo out into the future. These difficult images cannot be avoided, nor can they be followed in a narrative sense like the fairy tales 'where simple / crumbs over the forest / floor endure / to help us home' (65). When a grenade lodged in the pulp of a young tree a man has cut for winter fuel many years later explodes, 'blinding the man, killing / his wife' (65), Graham asks how we can tell ourselves fairytales while the small facts of history repeat themselves with such random brutality, reminding us that there are ethical implications for how we re-write history and re-represent its images.

Despite this concern with the problems of defamiliarisation, it is in the techniques and ideas of visual artists that she finds forms that can take her closer to her aim. When writing about the holocaust she has often linked the event to an image: either a painting or a symbolic image from her own past. In 'Two Paintings by Gustav Klimt' (1983) the beech

forest she is describing takes on a different light when she gives it its German name: ‘this yellow beech forest, / this *buchen-wald*’ (*Erosion*, 62). Even though the painting was completed in 1890 when it is given its title, Buchenwald, the silent anonymity of these rows of thin white trees and the hollow ‘gaseous light’ seems to foreshadow the coming holocaust. Graham cannot unburden the painting of these more modern associations; it is changed forever. In ‘Annunciation with a Bullet in it’ (1993) a Jewish family’s six month imprisonment in Auschwitz, waiting for the inevitable and seeing it happen to those around them, is compared with an incident in Graham’s childhood: a dog that survived a few days after being shot with the bullet still in his head. This poem, and the collection as a whole, shows a development of her interest in using original voices, of letting other people’s speech and writing into her poems and sometimes changing details or words, a method of interpretation which has added some controversy to how critics have seen her writing about history.

‘Disenchantment’ deals with ‘history’ in a more general sense, its effects seen through the life and work of German expressionist Gerhard Richter whose painful images of German history have often caused controversy. On the surface, it is about Richter’s 15 painting cycle called “October 18, 1977” based on iconic images of members of the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group and their suicides taken from newspapers and magazines: of the group’s capture and their lifeless bodies, Andreas Baader’s prison cell and his girlfriend Gudrun Ensslin’s hanging. Even this most superficial layer of meaning in the poem needs to be dug for a little – Graham’s sources are not obvious and they are presented without context, in a state of textual confusion. As with many of her studies of representation, more important than the images in themselves is how they were created from their photographic sources, the process that led Richter to his finished product. Richter projected the photographs onto a canvas, traced every detail and reproduced them

with photographic accuracy, deliberately smudging and distorting them afterwards until the details are no longer visible, lost in the blur. He comments in an interview:

I was like a gravedigger while I painted these corpses. It was just work. If I felt one of them looked too theatrical, I painted over it.¹¹

They are distorted almost to the point of being non-representational – without knowledge of the originals, you would not know what they are.

Distortion and disruption are techniques Jorie Graham has used increasingly in her poems from her pivotal third collection, *The End of Beauty*, onwards. Her gaps and unfinished sentences, instances of speechlessness when faced with the past, seem to represent the ultimate inaccessibility of a unified perspective on history through language and the trauma and frustration of this cut link. This frustration of the lack of a point, or points, from which to see things, and also the distrust in our ‘polluted’ language’s capacity to express it, leads her to use words like a collage, culminating in the poem ‘Disenchantment’ which is created almost entirely of other writers’ words. She has the urge to lay words down on paper, to say something, even if she cannot find the language she wants to approach it with. She finds instead the fragments of history that can be shored against the ruins of the present: scattered and decontextualised points of view that can be collected as a movement towards the ‘whole view’ that takes into account each perspective. This is a ‘difficult whole’, of course, that can never be finished, but Graham is determined, even knowing this, for us to hear the real voices of history, in all their directness, speaking through her poems – each voice has a different perspective but each is seen as equally meaningful.¹² Many of the poems in *Overlord* are put together from original testimonies of soldiers who fought on D-Day, changed and worked into the body of the poems,

¹¹ Michael Kimmelman, 'Gerhard Richter: An Artist Beyond Isms', *New York Times Magazine*, January 27 2002. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9501EED8153BF934A15752C0A9649C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all>

¹² The idea of a ‘difficult whole’ was used by the architect Robert Venturi to describe “buildings that thrive on inner tension rather than trying to overcome it” (Lawrence E. Cahoon, ed., *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass; Oxford: Blackwells, 1996). p.403).

something that has been criticised in reviews of the collection. William Logan, in particular, amongst his numerous other criticisms of Graham's more recent work, finds her comparisons of the public and personal sides of history, her unwillingness to draw a line between the staggering tragedy of genocide and the domestic tragedies we experience everyday, reductive and belittling:

Graham's lack of any sense of proportion reduces the argument of *Overlord* to something like "On the one hand, my kitty has AIDS; on the other, a whole lot of guys died on Omaha Beach."¹³

This is an extreme example of criticism of a technique of juxtaposition that also has the positive revisionary effect of integrating history that may otherwise be forgotten. In previous collections, especially *Materialism*, the same treatment has been given to philosophers, poets and diarists, from Plato to Whitman, as well as to the narratives of ordinary people. Here, she freely quotes, paraphrases, cuts and changes her sources, including a caveat in the notes:

All passages referred to as "adaptations" are edited, rewritten in spots, or assembled out of fragments collected from the larger work named. This also applies, in small measure, to the epigraphs.¹⁴

This quotation and adaptation in her work shows a technique similar to ready-mades and collages, and a similar urge to Richter's – to repeat images even by mechanical reproduction, to distort them and try to remove their meaning or emphasise a different aspect of it. It is also a similar project to that of many language poets in recent years: reusing the words differently reenergises them, recalibrates their meaning. The dangers this mosaic of indiscriminating 'textualized remains' lets in is obvious, but Graham does not use them in an entirely uncontrolled way (which would, in any case, be impossible: as with Pollock's drip technique, there is always a guiding consciousness behind even the most

¹³ William Logan, 'The Great American Desert', *The New Criterion* 23 (2005). Accessed online at: <http://newcriterion.com:81/archive/23/jun05/pochron.htm>

¹⁴ Jorie Graham, *Materialism* (Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press, 1993). p.145.

automatic of gestures). She counterbalances the different voices – the holocaust victims with the holocaust deniers, those whose experience was real with those who would theorise it into an academic problem only to close the book on it and let the details be eroded by fading memory. A good example of this is the selection of phrases from Lyotard's *The Differend* that show the logical difficulty of proving the gas chamber deaths happened, strangely personified in the voice of an angel, used to create an irony that does not sit easily with the voice of the Jewish child in 'Annunciation with a Bullet in it'. Despite letting both voices in, the testaments from the past in her work are never synthesised; the difficulty of weighing them up is left to the reader. In the second section of 'Disenchantment' she paraphrases Richter's words:

I want this to be seen – listen to me – always – as a narrative –
even if it is a narrative of nothingness – nothing is something[...] ¹⁵

Both poet and artist attempt to create a sort of negative space in their work, full but at the same time empty, filled with something made deliberately incomprehensible and stripped of much of its capacity for meaning. It is a technique that calls on the reader to interpret; faced with these morbid canvases and this fragmentary poem it is not possible to be passive: even after you have worked out what they are, the meaning and the motivation remain occluded.

Again, it is the technique that is more interesting than the subject here – her choice of quotations, from which she constructs the poem, seems to be at the same time banal and highly symbolic. 'Disenchantment' is slightly different from her other poems that use quotation heavily in that the main component in its linguistic collage is a recent review article; like Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' it integrates critical work on the paintings within its frame of reference. Most of the poem is taken from a *New York Times Magazine* article by Michael Kimmelman called 'Gerhard Richter: An Artist Beyond Isms'

¹⁵ Jorie Graham, *Overlord*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005). p.43. Abbreviated to *O* hereafter.

(2002), the second source is Goethe's *Faust*, and there are also quotations from the Book of Genesis. The whole poem is structured, rather ironically given its utter deconstructiveness, into seven sections represented as the seven days of creation, although religious imagery is neither as full nor as evocative as that of 'Pollock and Canvas' (1987). The artist is not compared to a creator-God hovering over the fertile gap; instead the references are somewhat blank, an organisational imposition, and feel as though they fail to make a point (unless it is the point, again ironic, that the conventional 'creativity' of the poem happens on the seventh day when God is off-duty). The horrific and haunting images taken from the end of Goethe's play, Margaret's imprisonment and Faust's regret, mix strangely with Kimmelman's efficient, journalistic style. We expect a poem about Gerhard Richter from the dedication under the title but, instead of the conventional meditation on his paintings, we discover recycled biography and technical details of his painting process, his spotless studio and ordered rows of clean tools. The writing, like Richter's methods, can seem rather clinical and mechanical, the biographical detail very cold. Graham underlines the unimportance of the bare facts she is reproducing: 'the year x saw him joined, the year y saw him married', not even giving the dates (O, p48).

What interests her much more is the root impulse of these paintings – the desire to disrupt what Richter calls 'the terrifying power that an idea has'.¹⁶ His interest in Baader-Meinhof was focused not around a left or right-wing viewpoint of the group, but was instead focused on the effect of the 'beliefs that made them crazy' (a neutrality many of his left-wing friends thought made him unsuitable to paint them saying 'he steals Baader-Meinhof away from us').¹⁷ Richter blurs the photos because the details are not important – what comes across from his reproductions of these widely sensationalised photographs, is their sadness and drabness, the way these shadows of lives have lingered on in the German

¹⁶ Kimmelman, 'Gerhard Richter: An Artist Beyond Isms'.

¹⁷ Ibid.

collective memory. Having lived under the Third Reich with his father and uncle in the Nazi party, then under communism, escaping from East to West in 1961, he is someone with a deep hatred and distrust of all ideologies and collective belief systems. Although he works from photos to produce highly realist paintings, he also works simultaneously on abstracts and the structure of these also inspires Graham's poem. She sees them, again, as disruption and deferral. When meaning starts to form he builds up repeated layers of thick, brightly coloured paint and scrapes them off again with squeegees to reveal those beneath:

just there where the center was beginning to form –
no, there should not be a center – listen how it echoes –
you can blot it nicely with some abstraction –
something applied to the blank (O, 48)

In this way they submerge the story that is clamouring to be told, the narrative that will develop given half a chance, of Richter's painful past experiences, the history he has lived. Richter says we should look for random forms in his abstractions. As Kimmelman notes, his abstract art 'is inherently about the search – and about not finding anything'. The original meaning of the word trauma, as Cathy Caruth comments, is of a physical wound, which is what many of Richter's abstract canvases resemble, deep red wounds scraped back to the raw flesh.¹⁸ In Graham's work, the wound and the moment of chance are seen as the same thing – in 'Pollock and Canvas' it is the metaphor of the gap between Pollock's brush and his canvas, where he drips the paint freely instead of exercising control, that opens up ideas of fertility and plurality – re-sowing the American waste land with new ways of meaning. In mythology and many literary works such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* the wound often has the power of speech, forever repeating the hurt it has sustained. This idea of the gap or wound also characterises 'Disenchantment'. Graham is scraping back the layers of language and meaning in this poem – which is half ready-made, half abstract – in the hope

¹⁸ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

of relinquishing control, leaving a space for chance even in this most constructed and conscious of media, and thus, she hopes, a space for feeling.

The coldly journalistic biographical and historical detail in the poem enacts another point about the desensitising power of too much factual information given too quickly. In a 2003 interview she gives the example of the split news screen, giving us images of war with sport updates, stock reports and the weather, conflicting visual and textual information at the same time:

The “multitasking” asked of us by the CNN screen is precisely geared to dissociating our sensibilities. It forces us to “not feel” in the very act of “collecting information.” But what value does information unstained by emotive content have, except a fundamental genius for manipulating dissociated human souls. Why, you can frighten them to the point of inhumanity. You can get them to close their eyes and let you commit murder in their name.¹⁹

By defamiliarising the information in the poem and making us read it critically, presenting us with impediments to a superficial and unthinking reading and never presenting an image of completion in what she says, Graham hopes to awaken us out of our passivity, to make all possible readings critical ones. She hopes to make us reappropriate the past as something we can also read critically.

the past, the past is also yours to keep if you wish,
with its own last effort to outwit you,
with its silently projected map of the world. (O, 48)

Representation and repetition of the images of the past are very human urges, but we have to choose carefully the way in which we appropriate these images. The past’s last effort to outwit us is the idea that our understanding of these images can ever be more than a process of changing points of view projected through the blurred filter of memory read out of its linguistic and cultural context.

¹⁹ Gardner, 'Jorie Graham: The Art of Poetry LXXXV'. p.96.

The seventh and last section of the poem is in Graham's own words and strikes a much lighter tone than the rest of the poem. She sees us as 'a list of examples that keeps growing faster. / Embracing brutality and importance. Some joy. Some preliminary sketches' (O, 49). We are made of continually changing and often contradictory perspectives – we don't have to forget the examples of our past but we do have to find a way of moving on from them. This negative capability is perhaps finally what draws Graham to a painter like Richter and what people looking at his paintings have found difficult – his work is always reassessing itself and changing, he does not try to be consistent or paint a version of himself, a continuous narrative. Like Graham he swings between representation and abstraction, as if the only thing saving his work from the hand of history closing around it is to think of nothing and just keep painting. For Graham, then, the danger of history lies in its conception as a fixed narrative, a story to be told the same each time, and the only escape from this is in plurality of representation and continual revisions that embrace different viewpoints, both frontal and peripheral. Acts of remembering must be repeated and understood as always personal, never objective; they must be 'an attempt to fracture that artificial unity, breaking open the metaphysics of a single homogenous version of the past'.²⁰ They must involve the consciousness that each memory is another representation, another version, each time we remember it. Memory and history, for Graham, are something we ourselves construct, laying down 'counter-memories' against the reductive narratives that would claim to comprise a completed view of experience.²¹

²⁰ Woods, 'Memory and Ethics in Contemporary Poetry'. p.164.

²¹ Donald F. Bouchard, ed., *Michel Foucault, Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).

2: CHARLES WRIGHT

1. Paul Cézanne, Francis Bacon and the act of representation

A large number of the literary critics working on Jorie Graham also write about Charles Wright.¹ I would be content to attribute this coincidence solely to the pre-eminence of these two authors in the world of contemporary American poetry were it not for the direct comparisons so often made. Willard Spiegelman, for example, compares the penchant of both poets for creating poems by a process of ‘accretion but with plenty of detours along the path’² and identifies the same cautious resistance to the representation of beauty in both: he says of Wright that ‘[n]o poet has ever so clearly resisted his own enthusiasms’³ and of Graham that ‘increasingly she has come to resist the orient of color in favor of blanknesses, interstices, gaps and lacunae’.⁴ J. D. McClatchy goes so far as to ‘wonder if in fifty years, readers will think of Charles Wright [...] and Jorie Graham as nearly identical poets, each with a philosophical turn of mind, but a penchant for the illuminating detail and detached phrase, each a poet of a decided floridity’.⁵ It is clear that, as well as their years of correspondence and friendship, the two poets have nurtured many of the same aims and doubts. Both have a deep fascination with the processes of representation and the capabilities of the language used to achieve it. It is also clear that each poet has influenced the other, an influence born of a mutual admiration for poetic risk-taking. Wright has commented that ‘Jorie Graham tries a real reach, and I admire her for that’.⁶ In a letter to

¹ Among them: Bonnie Costello, Helen Vendler, Willard Spiegelman, Calvin Bedient, Thomas Gardner, and William Logan.

² Willard Spiegelman, ‘Charles Wright and ‘the Metaphysics of the Quotidian’, in *High Lonesome: On the Poetry of Charles Wright*, ed. Adam Giannelli (Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin College Press, 2006). p.347.

³ Ibid. p.358.

⁴ Willard Spiegelman, ‘Jorie Graham’s ‘New Way of Looking’, *Salmagundi* 120 (1998). p.252.

⁵ J. D. McClatchy, ‘Ars Longa’, in *High Lonesome: On the Poetry of Charles Wright*, ed. Adam Giannelli (Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin College Press, 2006). p.105.

⁶ Charles Wright, *Quarter Notes: Improvisations and Interviews* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995). p.102. Abbreviated to *QN* hereafter.

Wright, Graham says: ‘There’s a poem I wrote with you in mind in the current APR called “At Luca Signorelli’s Resurrection of the Body”. You will no doubt find it wrong-headed but interesting, or passionate but arbitrary....’⁷

One of Graham’s reasons for writing the poem with Wright in mind must be the fact that he had also seen Signorelli’s painting at first hand. Like Graham, Wright spent a significant amount of time in Italy at a formative period of his life, posted in Verona for three years during his time in the army then again as a Fulbright student, an era to which he refers as a Dionisian rebirth into openness to sensation: ‘From the flesh of Italy’s left thigh, I emerged one January / Into a different world.’⁸ It was in Italy that Wright was initiated into the world of poetry when a friend advised him to visit Sirmione on Lake Garda and gave him Ezra Pound’s early poem about Sirmione, ‘Blandula, Tenulla, Vagula’, to read there, an event which he cites as key to his development as a poet. The opening lines of the poem contain the question that has formed the seed of much of Wright’s work:

What hast thou, O my soul, with paradise?
Will we not rather, when our freedom’s won,
Get us to some clear place wherein the sun
Lets drift in on us through the olive leaves
A liquid glory? ⁹

The dominant idea is that the sublime and the spiritual are to be found in our natural surroundings. A taste of paradise is already condensed in the landscape. Wright’s early poetry resounds with the echoes of this poem as well as the Italian landscapes that became as familiar to him as the southern landscapes of his childhood. For both Graham and Wright, their Italian experience forms the basis of their ekphrastic work and their early poems focus on some of the same paintings and frescoes, seen at the Borgo San Sepolcro in Italy. In ‘Tattoos’, the twenty part sequence from Wright’s third collection, *Bloodlines* (1975), he uses one of these paintings: *The Resurrection* by Piero della Francesca. Coming

⁷ Letter from Graham to Wright postmarked 2 Oct 1981. Papers of Charles Wright, Accession # 11437, Special Collections Dept, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.

⁸ Charles Wright, *Scar Tissue* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006). p.11. Abbreviated to *ST* hereafter.

⁹ Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems 1908-1969* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975). p.25.

after a hallucinatory poem about a serious childhood episode of blood poisoning, it reads like the poet's own resurrection: the miraculous recovery in which he comes back from the dream-world of the imagination to the world of seeing, but with a renewed sense of the spiritual. He describes the effect that seeing the painting has on him, the strength of its magnetism:

Nameless, invisible, what spins out
From this wall comes breath by breath,
And pulls the vine, and the ringing tide,
The scorched syllable from the moon's mouth.
And what pulls them pulls me.¹⁰

Much of Wright's work deals with resurrection in one way or another and the pull the poet feels towards visions of transcendence is one of the fundamental tensions from which his poems are born. His upbringing was steeped in religion, both from his family, the Sky Valley church school and summer camps he attended, and the country music he listened to on the radio. Although Wright feels he had his fill of organised religion early on, and he had rejected it by his late teens, both the rhythm and subject matter of his poems are heavy with religious influences and allusions, and they display a sense of the world that could be described as religious if it were not for the one essential thing that is missing: belief in a God. Wright comments that 'it keeps coming back up on me. As though I had overindulged' (*QN*, 119) and refers to it as Blake's 'invisible worm' (120) that has burrowed its way into his subconscious. Its impact, however, is not seen as entirely negative or futile. A sense of the divine, of what is beyond our understanding, is fundamental to poetry, Wright argues, whether we are religious or not: the true purpose of poetry is 'a contemplation of the divine' (120) in the widest sense, and Wright sees his poems as prayers and hymns to the invisible. It is the evidence of the divine that he finds in Piero's *Resurrection* and in all beauty which has its roots in the sublime:

In all beauty there lies

¹⁰ Charles Wright, *Country Music: Selected Early Poems* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1991). p.62. Abbreviated to *CM* hereafter.

Something inhuman, something you can't know. (*CM*, 83)

This something, in the poem 'Skins', takes the form of a dark and overwhelming gulf, a negativity or emptiness born into the marrow of everything around us. Its threat of the annihilation of the self is inseparable from the beauty with which it tempts us to look upon it again and again:

in the blood-seam
of every rock; in the black lung of every cloud
The seed, the infinitesimal seed
That dooms you, that makes you nothing,
feeds on its self-containment and grows big. (*CM*, 83)

The inevitability of death weighs heavily on these poems, sometimes, as here, threatening, but more often taken with a melancholy sense of acceptance to which repetition gives a psalm-like feel:

Each tree I look at contains my coffin,
Each train brings it closer home.
Each flower I cut, I cut for a plastic vase
Askew on the red dirt. (*CM*, 104)

This is the irony of the visual. What is seen, even in the absence of death's shadow, contains death within it like nothing else can. The landscape, especially, and the sublime vastness of open sky, has been used to convey thoughts of mortality in poetry for centuries, foregrounding the transience of the individual. Death, for Wright, however, is by no means an end. In his visions of resurrection that mix Christian and Buddhist thought with a pantheistic sense of the spiritual in everything, the self is absorbed into the world around it:

If we, as we are, are dust, and dust, as it will, rises,
Then we will rise and recongregate
In the wind, in the cloud, and be their issue. (*CM*, 112)

Wright makes it clear, however, that he is not talking about reincarnation but a yet more intangible idea. Poetry is the essential link here, effecting our delivery into everything, both in life and in death:

Poetry is dear and difficult to come by. But it poles us across the river and puts a music in our ears. It moves us to contemplation. And what we contemplate, what we sing our hymns to and offer our prayers to, is what will reincarnate us in the natural world, and what will be our one hope for salvation in the What's-To-Come. (QN, 121)

Wright's most iconic ekphrastic poem, 'Homage to Paul Cézanne' takes this idea, already forming in his earlier poetry, further. It is the first poem of his 1980 collection *The Southern Cross*. It is also the first in the second part of his dantean 'trilogy of trilogies', *The World of the Ten Thousand Things* (1990), which has on its cover Cézanne's *Bend in the Road*, 1900-6. The road veering out of view leads us into the painting promising destination, only to force our gaze upwards into the trees as we reach the point our vision cannot pass, then further up to the horizon and the sky above it. This introduces and defines Wright's theme, that the key to understanding what we cannot see is to identify its evidence in what we can. The painting suggests beyondness in all its senses: what is out of our sight, beyond our reach, further than our reason can comprehend and, eventually, beyond the scale of our lives. The only evidence of this 'beyond' is what points to it, where we feel it most strongly: the landscape and the sky. The poem pays homage to Cézanne's way of seeing and applies it to what can be seen as well as what cannot. The germ of the poem, however, was not a painting but an everyday sight that caught the imagination of the poet. One night Wright was watching the television and happened to look outside, where he saw 'three white pieces of paper just catching the last light'.¹¹ He describes the experience to Sherod Santos in a 1981 interview:

I wrote down the line, "In the fading light the dead wear our white shirts to stay warm." Then I said, well, that's interesting. I put it down, I had supper, and then later on the moon came out, and I watched TV again, and by god those pieces of paper were so white that they were picking up the moonlight! And so I went back to that line and rewrote it, "At night, in the fishlight of the moon, the dead wear our white shirts to stay warm, and litter the fields." (HL, 101)

¹¹ Charles Wright, *Halflife: Improvisations and Interviews, 1977-87* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988). p.101. Abbreviated to HL hereafter.

At the same time, Wright had been reading about Cézanne and thinking about ways in which he could write ‘in tonal blocks’ (*HL*, 20) using painterly techniques. He wanted to make the line as integral a unit as the brushstroke, using sound patterns and images for his colours and the idea of death in the landscape for his subject. The ideas in the poem were not new to Wright – they are repeated throughout his previous collections – but the techniques used in their representation are condensed and refined in ‘Homage’. As in Pound’s ‘Blandula, Tenulla, Vagula’, death is blue:

Clear sapphire, cobalt, cyanine,
On triune azures, the impalpable
Mirrors unstill of the eternal change.¹²

The dead in Wright’s poem are ‘a cadmium blue’ that he spreads ‘with palette knives in broad blacks and planes’.¹³ They represent the wide blue spaces of possibility and the unknowable on which he so often reflects – the sea and the sky – rather than death as a black nothingness, an end to all knowledge. Wright represents the choice of the dead for the subject matter of his poem as an arbitrary one, the closest example of an idea that hovers between the familiar and the intangible:

that seemed the most tactile abstract thing I could think of, since everyone knows what they are physically, and if you read poems you know what they are metaphysically. (*HL*, 155)

The function they perform in the poem is to act as a bridge between what we can see and what we cannot, since they are both. In the terms of Cézanne’s painting, they symbolise both the road we are travelling and what we cannot see beyond the bend. ‘Homage’ is perhaps the closest Wright comes to abstraction, but its images always keep one foot planted in the world of things, so that the statements he draws from them feel in some ways like prior knowledge, something we might ourselves have intuited at one time or another in our lives. They approach an almost childlike, primitive condition at the same

¹² Pound, *Selected Poems 1908-1969*, p.25.

¹³ Charles Wright, *The World of the Ten Thousand Things: Poems 1980-1990* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), p.6. Abbreviated to *WTT* hereafter.

time as reaching for transcendence and so, ironically, operate both in a space created by words and one before or beyond them. The dead are messengers, but the language that once linked them to us has been cut. Language in the poem becomes like Cézanne's blocks of colour: objectified and immediate, but unable to convey narrative except through a process of layering. Its meanings are unstable and prone to erosion. 'Like us', the dead 'keep on saying the same thing, trying to get it right' (3). And the words they try to use are represented as organic and separate:

They point to their favourite words
 Growing around them, revealed as themselves for the first time:
 They stand close to the meanings and take them in. (4)

This sense of a detachment from language is something that surfaces repeatedly in Wright's work, and in 'Homage' it is mediated through repetition. Both we and the dead repeat ourselves in a language that does not quite connect with what we want it to say, just as the parts of the sequence say the same thing but from different perspectives and with slightly different imagery. Willard Spiegelman sees in this change of style, the longer lines and changed texture, the root of Wright's fascination with Cézanne:

Cézanne's revision of spatial form, paving the way for the Cubists, who were his most grateful beneficiaries, has its correspondence with Wright's decision, starting tentatively with *The Southern Cross*, to break away from his earlier, smaller stanzaic units and to find suppler ways of effecting transitions in longer poems.¹⁴

Like Jorie Graham's *The End of Beauty*, *The Southern Cross* and the volumes after it experiment with lineation, and especially long lines, in ways influenced by visual artists. But it would be wrong to claim that this is the strongest facet of the connection between Wright and Cézanne. Wright's own comments on the subject reveal his interest in Cézanne's processes as well as the forms at which he arrived, suggesting a more fundamental link than one solely of formal influence:

¹⁴ Spiegelman, 'Charles Wright and 'the Metaphysics of the Quotidian''. p.358.

Cézanne has a way of looking at a landscape that I find particularly innovative, revolutionary and pleasing to my spirit. He breaks down and reassembles the landscape the way I like to think, when I'm working at my desk, I break down and reassemble what I'm looking at and put it back into a poem to recreate it, to reconstruct it. (*QN*, 135)

Cezanne's balance between abstraction and realism brings Wright to the idea that everything is representation and, every representation is abstract – a momentary refraction of what is seen through the mind of the interpreter. As such, objects themselves in his poetry become abstract. Although the figure of the gap is not as evident in Wright's work as in Jorie Graham's – he does not, for example, replace words with blanks – it is every bit as present. Wright's gaps are subtler, in the form of the odd-syllable line, a gesture that leaves us listening for the echo of something we hardly realise has been left out, and the split line trailing its 'low-rider' or hemistich broken but appended, still complete. He compares these gaps to Cézanne's paintings that let patches of white canvas show through, and comments on what they can let into the work of art:

“...he regarded the colors as numinous essences, beyond which he ‘knew’ nothing, and the ‘diamond zones of God’ remained white...” (Cézanne). Change “colors” to “words” and “white” to “blank” and you have something I believe... (*HL*, 37)

The gaps in Wright's poems then are symptoms of an entire negative philosophy, whereby certain things can only be incorporated into a poem by leaving them out. By looking at his engagement with the Italian painter Giorgio Morandi in the third chapter of this section I will explore more fully Wright's process of experimentation with subtraction and leaving things out of his poems, but it is evident from the beginning that abstract ideas in his poems are defined by what he does not say about them rather than by what he does. Instead of trying to describe the abstract – the dead, for example, or the idea of God – in a way that would make it seem concrete, he works around these ideas, examining the evidence they leave behind, seeing them through objects that, at first glance, may seem unrelated, even a departure from what he is trying to express. Instead of attempting to

apprehend such abstract ideas head on – something which would be impossible as they are as evanescent as they are abstract whereas, in contrast, language works by fixing and defining – he listens for their echo and looks for their shadow in other things. There is always a sense in his poetry that full access to this shadowy other world could be possible although it is not easy to see how. He frequently reflects on images of the border or threshold between two states – the shore, the moments of twilight, the meditative state between dreams and reality – perhaps because at these points he sees us as being more receptive, more able to pass between the earthly and the transcendent, at least in the imagination. He admits a fascination with Emily Dickinson’s image of herself as someone returned from this line: “Therefore as One returned, I feel / Odd secrets of the line to tell”.¹⁵ Although he claims never to have fully understood the form this line would take, ‘a military line or a line of demarcation, the line of saints, the line of talk, as Jimmy Rogers would have it’, he sees its resonance in his own work as the line between the material and the ineffable:¹⁶

...this unspeakable, unspeaking connection with the great bundle of light.
Maybe that’s the line of demarcation you go over and come back. There are
plenty of odd secrets to be told, if you come back.¹⁷

It is the possibility of this crossing, the point from which this transition may be effected and our ultimate frustration at its unattainability that ‘Homage to Paul Cézanne’ invites us to explore. In the last section of the poem the perspective shifts and we are the subject, looking through the eyes of the dead back at ourselves and seeing ourselves as we saw them: lost, rootless and yearning for a sense of permanence with which we cannot connect.

We’re out here, our feet in the soil, our heads craned up at the sky,
The stars steaming and bursting behind the trees. (*WTT*, 10)

¹⁵ Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1970). p.75.

¹⁶ Thomas Gardner, *A Door Ajar: Contemporary Writers and Emily Dickinson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). p.99.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.100.

We are rooted in the world of things but, just as the dead yearn to re-enter the world of the living, we are homesick for what we were before our short stay in the material world, something we have forgotten. The creative act is seen as an attempt to condense this longing for what is both before and beyond us, to give it material form:

What we are given in dreams we write as blue paint,
Or messages to the clouds. (*WTT*, 10)

Not finding our reflection in the sky, we turn to the earth to give form to our sense of loss:

We sit out on the earth and stretch our limbs,
Hoarding the little mounds of sorrow laid up in our hearts. (10)

The landscape acts as evidence of the void between what is either side of the line. It contains the messages the dead have left for us, which ‘rise like rust on the stalks and the spidery leaves’ (3), but ultimately cannot pass them on in a language we understand. The dead, hovering ‘[c]lose to the surface of all things’ but unable to break through, try to communicate with us by ‘[r]ustle of hand to hand in the lemon trees’ (6). Their sighs are ‘gaps in the wind’ (7). Wright shows again and again that the visual image is our strongest connection to the invisible, something which is at once a frustration and a comfort in his work. The close look at the familiar image repeated is Wright’s strongest motivator and best inspiration, the key to the most meditative depths of his poetic.

Some critics, Mary Kinzie foremost among them, have ridiculed Wright’s dense use of associative imagery and metaphor in the poem:

...the dead are the collective nouns for lugubrious poetic feeling. Some of the personifications are quite funny: “Spring picks the locks of the wind”; “spaces / In black shoes, their hands clasped”; “the dead are constant in / The white lips of the sea.” Some of the stage props the dead must carry around are also awkwardly amusing: “We filigree and we baste. / But what do the dead care for the fringe of words, / Safe in their suits of milk?”¹⁸

She complains that the ‘mediumistic dramatizations’ of this ‘long failed sequence’ leave little room for Cézanne as its supposedly central character, nor for his paintings, accusing

¹⁸ Mary Kinzie, ‘Haunting’, *The American Poetry Review*, September/October (1982). p.40.

Wright of being a craftsman ‘without a built-in censor’ who admits any old metaphor into the poem without exercising choice or judgement. Her comment that the poem has nothing to do with Cézanne reveals an almost stubborn refusal to consider that the poem’s interaction with the artist’s work might aim to go further than the description-based techniques of conventional ekphrasis. Like Cézanne’s colours, Wright’s metaphors work through a process of layering, building up and linking all parts of the poem and giving an impression of simultaneity rather than narrative description. The sometimes unlikely juxtapositions of words, as well as going back to the Imagism of Wright’s earliest poems and of some of his strongest influences, are remarkably effective in this context, layering vocabulary that creates immediate impressions of colour and emotion in a close up view that will be reversed in the final section when we stand back from them and see not the dead but ourselves. Some of the metaphors to which Kinzie objects so strongly are revealed as uniquely suitable for the purpose Wright gives them if their implications are explored with more attention. The ‘suits of milk’ worn by the dead suggest an infantile innocence of and exclusion from the world of words, a primitive state re-entered.¹⁹ Wright’s ability to give us a glimpse of this wordlessness through the verbal medium of poetry depends on our capacity to let go of the old rules of language, to suspend our participation in the way it is used around us. What is evoked is an idea that would be hard to swallow in ‘realistic’ terms although it has always existed in religion and myth: the idea of all human life, and death, as somehow simultaneous, something I will look at more closely in the context of his explorations of memory.

The key to understanding what Wright wishes to achieve here seems to lie in one of the aspects of Cézanne’s paintings that most attracts him. In *Halflife*, he reproduces a quotation from art historian Lawrence Gowing’s book *Cézanne: The Early Years*:

¹⁹ The linking of the primitive and the transcendent becomes especially important in Wright’s later poetry.

The move toward a disintegration of the object in some of the most memorable works of a painter so passionately attached to objects is the attraction and the riddle of Cézanne's last phase. The element that has usurped its place, the patch of color in itself. (21)

Not only do these patches of colour point toward the blank space and the ineffable, but towards the absence of the object and themselves as a medium of replacement. Wright sees the importance of this idea to poetry in 'Jorie's fascination with the representation of the object and the object itself. It becomes representation', but also as being true of his own work: 'Most everything *is* representation, in any case, after it goes through the little grinder and hits the paper'.²⁰ The gap between the representation and what is represented is one of the fundamental themes of their poetry on art, leading to a reassessment of representation as a whole, as I have explored through Jorie Graham's ideas on describing history and personal history. The importance of this distinction in Wright's work is channelled through his ideas on memory and, like Graham, self-depiction.

Self Portraits

The sequence of self portrait poems that comes after 'Homage to Paul Cézanne' in *The Southern Cross* were the result of a creative impasse that came out of the writing of the earlier poem. Similar in structure to the 'Homage' and by virtue of their shared title, the 'Self Portrait' poems invite readings of themselves as a sequence even though they are broken up and interspersed with other poems rather than presented consecutively. The title itself is a lure, one of the first of Wright's many flirtations with ironic and contradictory titles. After the homage that some readers, Kinzie among them, found so disappointingly lacking in description or biography, it is obvious that Wright's titles are not always to be taken at face value as signifiers of the poem's meaning and intent. In comparison with the darkly wry humour of Wright's later 'titleism', however, these mid-career titles are only

²⁰ Gardner, *A Door Ajar: Contemporary Writers and Emily Dickinson*. p.100.

mildly subversive, requiring a slant-wise approach and metaphorical- rather than literal-mindedness as to the possibility of their meaning.²¹ Why would a poet who has incorporated the autobiographical in his work from the very first volumes, which boast several poems that have as much claim to the title ‘Self Portrait’ as these, suddenly decide to name what he is doing in such explicit terms?

One answer is certainly that the combination of an in-depth look at artistic technique and its possible applications in the poetic medium at the same time as the sustained meditation on death with which *The Southern Cross* begins, led Wright to create poems that would be more personal at the same time as questioning how his own ‘personhood’, his life as an individual, might be represented. Again, these are painterly poems. Although they are less abstract than ‘Homage’ they are built up by the same process of circling and layering, this time using memories and images from the poet’s life. But if these are self portraits, then they are unconventional ones, consistent with the aesthetic *modus operandi* the poems take from Cézanne and other artists. Instead of describing or narrating past events or memories, Wright presents us with a jumble of images, glimpses and associations comparable to Cézanne’s tonal juxtaposition of colours.

Even the first poem, the simplest of the sequence, pursues a mood rather than an image, and the face of the poet, although referred to, is strangely absent: ‘sketched with black ink in a slow drag through the sky, / Waiting to be filled in’ (*WTT*, 11). What he gives us is not a self portrait but an exploration of his reservations about trying to create one:

Someday they’ll find me out, and my lavish hands (11)

²¹ Wright’s playful manifesto ‘Titleism’ (*QN*, 28) claims that it ‘effectively combines the end result of both Zen meditation and Judeo-Christian transcendence’ and puts forward five tenets that, if followed, ‘will eliminate 99 percent of the useless welter of bad narrative that impedes the way’:

1. The proper title *is* the poem.
2. The less said the better.
3. Mum’s the word.
4. Silence speaks for itself.
5. Less is more, nothing is less.

He seems almost afraid of being outed as a fraud, of something in his work that will give him away and expose the whole creative project as a fantasy. Despite this, we cannot discover the physical poet in the poem; all we see is the landscape in which he purports to be hiding. In the last stanza this act of hiding is revealed as an enactment of what Wright claims to want: transcendence and an escape from the shackles of our language-bound world. The final stanza takes the form of a prayer or incantation to an absent god in the hope that he will do the impossible and absolve him of the burden of representation:

Hand that lifted me once, lift me again,
Sort me and flesh me out, fix my eyes.
From the mulch and the undergrowth, protect me and pass me on.
From my own words and my certainties,
From the rose and the easy cheek, deliver me, pass me on. (*WTT*, 11)

This is not a sure start for a sequence on self-representation through language: it seems the poet has doubts about both the subject and the medium. It is clear, then, that the poem's title is a statement of intent to break generic definitions – not only those of portraiture but of the limits of the self and the language in which it is portrayed – rather than to situate the poems comfortably within them. Genre for Wright, both in form and subject matter, is a fluid concept: just as 'Homage' lacked description of the paintings or the man who painted them, these self portraits seem to lack a coherent subject. Wright, instead of adhering to convention, seeks out its breaking point, exposing the degrees of separation between our expectations of selfhood and what we feel ourselves to be, and showing that memories strung onto a narrative cannot make a life, that there is no 'life story'. The self is revealed here as fluid and permeable, not something that can be pinned down into moments in which its essence can be defined and somehow made one with all other moments lived by the same consciousness.

Wright's way into the depiction of the self, as with so many other things, is through situating himself in a landscape. The attachment of identity to the landscapes in which it has been lived and in which the process of individuation has taken place seems to be a

particularly American quality, a link made by writers from Thoreau to Whitman and onward. Wright's memory takes him back to two places again and again: to the southern Appalachian landscapes of his childhood and to Italy, where he started writing poetry.

Charles on the Trevisan, night bridge
To the crystal, infinite alphabet of his past.
Charles on the San Trovaso, earmarked,
Holding the pages of a thrown-away book... (*WTT*, 13)

As he saw Pound in Venice, a mysterious figure in the distance, he now sees himself, and these images, snapshots, are the bridge to a past ever more shrouded in the inaccuracies of memory, slowly sifting away as time passes. The poet is earmarked at that moment in time, his image a reminder or a point of entry into his own past. But as Wright contemplates this past it brings up thoughts of the future and therefore of mortality, taking him from his memories to the death of all memory:

The wind will edit him soon enough,
And squander his broken chords
in tiny striations above the air. (13)

The 'broken chords' of language, and the connections it forges with a receding past, will fade, and the wind will carry away his pages. In the last stanza Wright compares himself to other disconnected images, asking why his own images should not become dissociated and forgotten, as all others eventually do, when the self that links them seems so disparate and disunified. These other images – reindeer filing through 'bronchial trees' and 'St. Jerome / And his creatures' (13) – random as they may seem, are part of Wright's collection of photographs, postcards and clippings that he keeps on his study walls, the private museum of images that populate his everyday life.

The third self portrait begins with a quotation from Emily Dickinson's letters on the transience of images: 'The pictures in the air have few visitors' (11). Again, this portrait is based on a photograph, not of Wright himself but of his brother on top of the

Matterhorn. The poet enters the image not as the self taking the photograph but the godlike, creator self hovering over the scene:

Like Munch, I languish, my left cheek in my left palm,
Omniscient above the bay... (*WTT*, 16)

He is the author figure, going back over the ‘evidence’ of his own life, ‘the postcards and the photographs’. Here, these pieces of evidence act to consolidate memories. As Barthes said, ‘[e]very photograph is a certificate of presence’.²² It validates what language cannot – an idea we will come back to in the context of another poem in the same volume, ‘Bar Giamaica, 1959-60’ – but also has the more dangerous effect of corroborating the stories we build for ourselves, the coherent narrative we would piece together from our memories.

In the fourth self portrait the poet addresses Walt Whitman, perhaps seeing himself similarly as a ‘Great Cataloguer’ of people and places and his character as defined by them. The poem is effectively a list of some of Wright’s influences as of the places that have stayed in his memory:

San Zeno and Caffè Dante. Catullus’ seat.
Lake Garda. The Adige at Ponte Piedra
– I still walk there, a shimmer across the bridge on hot days,
The dust, for a little while, lying lightly across my sleeve –
Piazza Erbe, the twelve Apostles... (19)

In all of the landscapes he remembers often, just as memory makes them ever present in him, the poet sees his act of remembering as resurrecting the ghost of a past self in now far-away places, still repeating the journeys he made. The same goes for the poets who have in some way lived on in the poems of others as well as in the rereading of their own; he sees them as ‘rising from the dead’ along with a memory of Cézanne’s paintings:

Dino Campana, Arthur Rimbaud.
Hart Crane and Emily Dickinson. The Black Château. (19)

This title that Cézanne used for a series of paintings, remembered here, is also used to darken the tone of the end of the poem, alluding subtly, again, to the idea that in the visual

²² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000). p.87

we are always chasing the shadow of our remembrance of what came before the conscious life and its people and places. The *château noir* of the paintings is mysterious and half hidden, even, in one of Cézanne's depictions of it, a menacing, stormy ruin. Despite its small role in the poem it acts as a brushstroke of black across its canvas, defining the other strokes, the words that have come before it, in relation to itself. It represents a foil to the dream landscapes of Italy and of the poet's nostalgia, as well as undermining the almost cosy view of death and the past that has been set up in the poem through its assertions that the mind of the poet can bring everything to life.

In the fifth and final self portrait, Wright seems to have become part of this darker, twilight world between what is 'really there' and what 'is but is not'. It is a portrait of himself at the point where the two worlds intersect, which is essentially where he locates the role of the poet as a medium who reveals, via what we know, what we do not or cannot know – he makes it his business to bring to us what we do not take the time to contemplate. Lying on a bed where two women have died, their presence seems almost as solid as that of the world around him in its nebulous indeterminacy. From this perspective the aims of his craft, solidifying the point at which thought and image meet on the page, seem questionable:

Self-traitor, I smuggle in
The spider love, undoer and rearranger of all things. (*WTT*, 21)

It is his very desire to keep things close, to repeat memory's images until they are in some way perfected – the impetus and foundation of poetry – that he criticises. Poetry is an act of holding-on that dissolves even as we comment on its permanence, a shadow-cast, the impression of something gone even before it can be apprehended in pencil or paint.

The aim of this series of self-proclaimed self portraits becomes clearer with the knowledge that they are based on Francis Bacon's gradually melting series of self portrait paintings, which start off by troubling the idea of representation and become increasingly

risky and abstract until only a gesture towards it seems to remain.²³ As a series of ekphrastic poems it is on even shakier ground than 'Homage to Paul Cézanne', containing no reference to the painter, nor to any of his paintings. It is, however, characteristic of Wright's later acts of ekphrasis which tread the thin line between ekphrasis, the literary depiction of art, and pictorialism, work that seeks to produce a painterly effect: he uses a painting or photograph as the basis for his own representations and also to build on a perceived emotion within the artwork and relate it to his own life and his own art. The more closely we look, the more these 'Self Portrait' poems seem to share with Bacon's paintings.

As Willard Spiegelman has noted, it is not only the image of the poet that becomes less clear as the poems progress, mirroring that of the painter, but the lines themselves are stretched to breaking point, giving us a poetic mind 'on the verge of breakup, *sparagmos*, and poetic reconstitution'.²⁴ The lines flicker back and forth between the deep past of memory, the present poet in the act of self-contemplation and a more eternal unknown past and future beyond consciousness, as if unable to settle on one timeline, one perspective on anything. In this chaos, what Wright perhaps hopes to reveal is another version of the stripping down to the essentials that fuelled *China Trave* (1977), a honing that he sees at work in Bacon:

As in Francis Bacon's self-portraits, the more distorted the image becomes, the more figurative it becomes. So in poetry the more abstract the poem becomes, the more formal it gets in execution. (*QN*, 85)

Instead, these poems bridge the gap between Wright's earlier, more crystalline and ordered work and its breakdown into the more expansive and contemplative journal form that begins with the volume's final poem, also its title poem, 'The Southern Cross'. Wright is

²³ Wright reveals this influence to Calvin Bedient: Calvin Bedient, 'Tracing Charles Wright', in *The Point Where All Things Meet: Essays on Charles Wright*, ed. Tom Andrews (Oberlin College P, Oberlin, OH, 1995). p.29. It is also referred to by Willard Spiegelman in Spiegelman, 'Charles Wright and 'the Metaphysics of the Quotidian'. p.350.

²⁴ Spiegelman, 'Charles Wright and 'the Metaphysics of the Quotidian'. p.347.

using the paintings, writing himself in as their subject, in order to break down his processes of perception and representation and rework them; what Bacon has done to himself and his art, Wright wants to recreate in his own context.

The two artists share some important ideas: both are fundamentally anti-narrative, seeing themselves, even, as incapable of creating it; both are to some extent against the idea of illustration although they work with representation; and both ultimately reject the results of abstract art whilst retaining an affinity with its aims. Their project is not to destroy representation altogether but, as Bacon puts it, to disrupt what they can do with ease; something Wright pursues in both word and image at the point where they join to become metaphor.²⁵ Although the images in the self portrait poems are not as abstract as those in 'Homage to Paul Cézanne', they are used in a way that is not only impressionistic but expressionistic and deeply intuitive: the greatest risk the poet takes here is in relinquishing some of his control and allowing accident into the process of image creation. Kinzie's accusation that the images do not add up and that the metaphors are comically mixed is irrelevant when we consider that Wright's representational project cannot be defined by a clear line linking object to image and image to word. Again, Bacon's words can help us to explain this more tortuous process that relies on trial and error, instinct and accident:

What I want to do is to distort the thing far beyond the appearance, but in the distortion to bring it back to a recording of the appearance.²⁶

The breakdown of the image, then, produces several effects, first among them a closer attention to reality that comes from the recognition of the fact that each time the image is seen it is recreated, and that this recreation cannot be separated from the context of the moment in which it happens. It is impossible to create an image, to get the process of seeing mixed with thinking down on paper, without also creating what Bacon calls a

²⁵ David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975). p.91.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p.40.

‘mood’.²⁷ In this way, it could be said that any form of representation follows a path similar to that of memory: as the remembered image is recreated in the context of the present, a new mood emerges which is neither a product uniquely of the original moment of perception nor of the moment in which it is remade. This process is the same for something just seen as for a childhood image, although the dislocation felt between the two moods is strengthened by time. The memory image is filtered through the mood of the present, which at the same time is affected by the remembered mood re-recognised from the past, giving rise to a cycle in which even the most familiar images are endlessly changing.

Change implies sequence, and both Bacon and Wright, like many artists before them, frequently work with series of repeated images, each characterised by subtle shifts of perspective or light. However, their sequences tend to reject and resist the laying down of narrative threads to link these images. Any such connection, to Wright’s mind, would be an imposition on the reader; so much is obvious from the second of the two quotations from Francis Bacon that he includes in his commonplace notebooks. When asked about his claim that his work does not illustrate anything, Bacon replies:

No. I always think that what painters and poets do for you is unlock the values of sensation and bring you nearer to a kind of reality. Much more than telling you anything. They just make you aware of it without it being a dictatorial awareness....I think of myself as an image maker. (*HL*, 31)

Here is a statement of aim that Wright has taken to the heart of his work, thinking of himself too as a maker of images that have the power to make us fully aware of things, not by telling us a story but by showing us something about his own journey to awareness. It is through his own process of seeing and its translation into image through the word, a kind of transubstantiation, that he can develop our awareness of both the illusory quality of the

²⁷ *Ibid.* p.26.

represented object and the real quality of the unseen, un-verbalised sensation that clings to it.

This involves an enlargement of the concept of self portraiture. Where we see most of the poet is in our intimate access to the image as it is filtered through his perception. The image studied here happens to be that of the self but it is a self conveyed largely through other images, through his perceptions of the external world, and the few glimpses of the physical poet we do get seem distant and otherworldly. In metaphor, Wright's fleeting images of himself in memory are more often linked with the evanescent and the spiritual rather than the fleshly world of sensation. They seem insubstantial when compared with the presence and closeness of the poet we perceive through his vision, the speaking poet. The self portrait becomes not about the image of the self as perceived, but about the self as perceiver and what happens in the gap between the two, especially when the self is split or distanced in order to effect self-representation.

If we look more closely at the other poems caught up in this loose sequence of self portraits, we see that no distinction can be made, that

The poem is a self-portrait
 always, no matter what mask
You take off and put back on. (*WTT*, 97)

The poet has made us aware of these poems' origins in art with the title 'Self Portrait' in order to make us question the idea of self portraiture. The in-between poems that form their context have titles that instead suggest landscape painting or local references: 'Mount Caribou at Night', 'Virginia Reel'. If anything, they ironically seem more painterly in their references and techniques than the self portraits. 'Virginia Reel', especially, is a more conventional and autobiographical portrait of the self than the poems that surround it, as it revisits the landscape of the poet's youth and sees the ghosts of his ancestors, now disappeared, in its emptinesses. Wright challenges the imaginative detail of the memories in which he has let himself indulge:

Who cares? Well I do. It's worth my sighs
To walk here, on the wrong road, tracking a picture back
To its bricks and its points of view. (17)

Essentially, what Wright is doing here with the landscape he does with 'the evidence, the postcards and the photographs' that attest to his past in the self portrait poems. The still image, the photograph, acts as both a point of access to the past and a piece of evidence to show how it happened. The past seems so estranged from the present self, as we see in the self portrait poems, that the poet is drawn to its evidence and to piece it together even without the desire to create a narrative. *The Southern Cross* is fundamentally a collection of poems about holding onto the past, the processes of memory and the contrast between the need to speak out and the desire to rest in silent absorption.

When Charles Wright intends to talk about memory he most often brings out the photographs. Many of the images he uses, however, are somehow estranging, bringing us closer to their subject in certain ways whilst leaving him still shrouded in mystery in others. Wright's wife is a photographer and she has taken photographs of him for the covers of recent volumes: repeated shots of his mouth for *Chickamauga* (1995) and a close-up of the palm of his hand for *Scar Tissue* (2007). The photograph operates not only as the object of description but as a powerful metaphor for the sense of self. The five line poem 'Reunion' centres on the idea of a photograph, which is used to explore both the poet's reason for writing and his relationship with his work:

Already one day has detached itself from all the rest up ahead.
It has my photograph in its soft pocket.
It wants to carry my breath into the past in its bag of wind.

I write poems to untie myself, to do penance and disappear
Through the upper right-hand corner of things, to say grace. (CM, 141)

Through words he is unburdened of the constant process of self-representation that goes hand in hand with perception and our interactions with others and, as a result of this, free to explore the self as perceiver alone. The photograph poems of *China Trace* and *The*

Southern Cross can be seen as an attempt to reappropriate areas of memory, something reflected by an increasing preoccupation with what is forgotten or left behind. Not only does Wright explore the sensation of loss that forgetting brings, but he imagines these forgotten things, like the dead, physically; he gives them a location which, again, creates the feeling that they are simultaneous, almost with us just the other side of some invisible divide:

It's what we forget that defines us, and stays in the same place,
And waits to be discovered. (*WTT*, 54)

If we pay close enough attention to what is around us there is always the possibility that we can rediscover what we have lost – an impossibility in which Wright places endless hope even in the depths of his resignation. The phrase that defines *The Southern Cross* is an outburst of frustration: ‘I can’t remember enough’ (52). In the volumes collected in *Country Music* Wright uses photographs of himself for self reflection, but in *The Southern Cross* his use of the photograph takes on more complexity: it becomes a way of revisioning and reinterpreting the past not only through his own images but through those of others. He uses artistic images to stimulate memories from his own life. The most striking example of this is ‘Bar Giamaica, 1959-60’, in which Wright projects onto a photograph by Italian photographer Ugo Mulas the image he wishes that he himself had recorded at the time. He explains this in an archived recording of a 1980 reading:

This is an imaginary photograph of a place that I used to go to in Milan, Italy, the Bar Giamaica, in 1959, 1960, at an age in my life when I was too cool to take pictures of things that I might like to look back on later on. [...] So since I didn’t have it, I had to make one up. There’s an Italian photographer named Ugo Mulas who published in a book of photographs one called “Bar Giamaica 1953-54” and I looked at it and said I know this place, I know all about that, but I don’t know any of these people. So I put my own people in his location.²⁸

²⁸ Charles Wright, Poetry Reading at the Poetry Centre, SFSU, April 16, 1980. Audiocassette 0017 no 4, in the Papers of Charles Wright, Accession # 11437, Special Collections Dept, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.

Not only is the poem an example of Wright's increasing tendency to use the artwork as the ground upon which to form layers of his own memories or ideas, often obscuring our view of the original work in the process, but also of memory as a creative process rather than something that can be brought up intact and in its original form from the depths of the past. Wright's poetic rendering focuses on space, describing where each person is situated and the action in which they are momentarily caught, giving the impression of a still image. But, ultimately, the 'punctum'²⁹ of the image Wright recreates lies in its objects and the fact that they may still be in the same place. After the people have left the scene Wright stays, closing in on the objects they have left behind them – the empty chairs and tables – and using the fact of their continuance in this space as a foil to the fact that all of the people he wishes he had photographed have moved on, that he has lost touch with some of them, that, eventually, no one will remember them. It is the space itself, here, that provides the key to the poet's real subject.

²⁹ What Barthes describes in *Camera Lucida* as 'that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)', something that pierces or wounds the perceiving consciousness. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. p.27.

2. Yard Work: Charles Wright and Piet Mondrian Looking at the Landscape

In 1983 Charles Wright moved from California back to his native south to take up a post at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. This return to the Appalachian landscapes of his nomadic childhood in East Tennessee and western North Carolina – the landscapes he had written about from his first volume onwards – provoked a desire to reroot himself in the land and write about it, not through dim excavations into an idealised memory, but by looking again at what was around him. He left behind the landscapes of the past in order to write from what he saw:

Instead of writing about the landscape as I remembered it, I was writing about the landscape of memory as I was looking at it. Nobody paid attention, really, but it was an attempt to write in a different kind of form.¹

From a poet known for his repetition, who circles constantly around the same subjects and themes, this is a somewhat surprising revelation. But Wright often deals in the unexpected, the kind of subtle surprise that is only realised after the fact, and an examination of his recent work shows that this change has played a fundamental role in defining his poetic over the last two decades. While he might be seen as solidifying and perfecting a very recognisable style he has made his own, Wright never lets his work settle into a pattern, constantly challenging what he writes and how and why he writes it. Outwardly, at least, his collections do not differ as much from one another as those of Jorie Graham, but subtle changes in perspective and in his way of representing what he sees are the source of the constant rejuvenation that makes his poetry so readable. We see the same thing each time, but it is always somehow different from the time before; a transformation whose roots it can be difficult to see, and a subtlety of change that he obviously feels is overlooked by those who write about his poetry.

¹ Gardner, *A Door Ajar: Contemporary Writers and Emily Dickinson*. p.104.

This would be understandable, as Wright's work often requires the reader to look for what is not there rather than what is. He agrees with Wallace Stevens that the poet's role should be that of 'priest of the invisible' (*HL*, 23), working at the limits of the unsayable to transcribe what is beyond sight. His repetition of the same subjects, landscape and the impossibility of finding God, is at times lulling, almost to the point of being predictable. What is clear is that Wright's reiteration is of the contemplative kind, inspired by the Chinese poets and the predominantly European painters from whom he takes many of his images. Repeated acts of meditative looking characterise his poems, especially from *Zone Journals* (1988) onwards. The poet is to be found in each poem, sitting in his back yard in a 'knockoff Brown Jordan plastic chair', looking at the landscape around him and writing it down, adhering to Monet's maxim that '[a] painter can say all he wants to with fruits or flowers, or even clouds' (*HL*, 22).² Indeed, this intimate gaze on the landscape is often mediated through the clouded mirror of art.

Wright's ekphrastic process is always much more complex than simply describing a work of art. The paintings he writes about are carried in his head, or in postcards and clippings tacked onto his study wall, not seen in a museum and described first hand but saved for a moment when they fit his vision or he is reminded of them by something he sees in the natural world. These artworks have become part of his way of seeing, embedded in his consciousness, and his vision is mediated through their forms and colours. The painters who stick in his mind and become part of the way he sees the world are those who he perceives as trying to do the same thing as he does, who have the burning need to get back to something beyond the seen, beyond the false surface of realism. This is evident especially in his engagement with Cézanne's work, in which he uses poetry for the 'reconstruction' rather than the reflection of nature, creating a new image rather than a mirror to the original. Willard Spiegelman identifies the fact that Wright's ekphrasis, and

² Charles Wright, *A Short History of the Shadow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002). p.7. Abbreviated to *SH* hereafter.

especially Cézanne's influence, has changed the structure of his work as a whole, and that we should attend to his poetry as 'a single landscape' characterised by geological strata and deep-welling synchronic pools of change.³ Wright also tries to work synchronically on a more local level within his poems. Using the landscape as a motif in 'Homage', he enacts variations on a theme of Cézanne's style in an eight part sequence, accumulating his vividly colourful images rather than using them to tell a story, making an image caught between Cézanne's imagination and his own in the process:

Rearrangement and reassembly. Painting knows this. *Ut pictura poesis*: new structures, new dependencies. (*HL*, 36)

The epilogue to *Country Music*, from T'ang poet T'u Lung, makes a similar point: that the inner landscape and the outer – what we feel and what we see – are part of the same thing and that we borrow from one to express the other.

being unable to find peace within myself I made use of the external surroundings to calm my spirit, and being unable to find delight within my heart, I borrowed a landscape to please it. (157)

Whether he borrows from nature or from the representations of other artists, he knows that all landscape is invented and reinvented through the emotions. He goes further still in his poetry, claiming that landscape is not the subject matter at all but a technique, a 'lever of transcendence' that jacks up the *trompe l'oeil* nature puts on, leading us to look beyond it for a glimpse of the absolute.⁴ It is '[a] method of measure' and 'a scaffold for structuring' (*ST*, 29). The real subject is representation itself: or, as Wright puts it, 'The big empty' and 'The missing word':⁵ how to use the elusive medium of language to represent what is unseen and intangible, through images of things we *can* see in the landscape, but only fleetingly, caught up, as they are, in a constant cycle of change. When this complex equation is added to Wright's study of how others have attempted to find an answer

³ Spiegelman, 'Charles Wright and 'the Metaphysics of the Quotidian'. p.347

⁴ Charles Wright, *Negative Blue: Selected Later Poems* (Exeter: Stride, 2000). p.77. This volume collects work from *Chickamunga* (1995), *Black Zodiac* (1997) and *Appalachia* (1998). Abbreviated to *NB* hereafter.

⁵ Charles Wright, *Appalachia* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998). p.23. Abbreviated to *App* hereafter.

through their own attempts at representation in words, music or paint, we have the foremost aim of his poems. At times Wright questions the wisdom of such an immense project, akin to shouting unanswerable questions into the void, but he also seems confident that he can fulfil at least his side of the bargain – to trace the invisible in the visible and write it down as he sees it each time – even if the ineffable is unlikely to reveal itself in return. In ‘Yard Work’, from *Chickamauga* he feels himself caught between ‘the edge of the landscape and the absolute’ (NB, 73), wondering whether the ground he has covered in his repetitions of what he sees can ultimately be of any use, partly from the poet’s anxiety about whether he will be read and partly from the logic that all is null when faced with death and the void. But he remains grounded enough to give himself some sound advice:

Meanwhile, let’s stick to business.
Everything else does, the landscape, the absolute, the invisible.
My job is yard work –
I take this inchworm, for instance, and move it from here to there. (73)

The advances may be small, but chipping away at the infinite, Wright feels, is all we can do. We look at the landscape and learn from what it has to teach us. Its lessons are in how to look behind what we see for signs of something deeper, something transformative. We live in two landscapes, according to Wright: one is ‘eternal and divine’ and the other is ‘just the backyard’ (*App*, 27). Vision is the key that unlocks the door between them:

If you don’t have vision, you ain’t got nothing. If your back yard is just your back yard, you may as well crack another Budweiser.⁶

What we choose to look at is irrelevant; the interior landscape is as important as the exterior, so we may as well look at the ordinary and everyday. The back yard is as good a place to start as any. Gaston Bachelard suggests that it may be one of the best places to start: for him, ‘immensity is the movement of motionless man’.⁷ If Wright is not in the back yard, he is at his study window, both places where the inside and the outside – what

⁶ This comment was made in an interview with Thomas Gardner: Gardner, *A Door Ajar: Contemporary Writers and Emily Dickinson*. p.99.

⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994). p.184.

we consider our private domain and the exterior world around it - symbolically overlap. Wright's acts of immobility and repeated looking across this border make his mind a point of receptiveness where external and internal stimuli meet and become inseparable. Bachelard's recipe for this exchange is solitude and the desire to look, and its result is the realisation that inside and outside are 'always ready to be reversed', that we must bring what is outside in if we are to see it fully.⁸ For Wright, the appeal of painters like Cézanne – and others who have influenced his work: Giorgio Morandi, Mark Rothko and Milton Avery – is centred on their knowledge of the meditative concentration one must obtain in order to pierce eternity, and the illusion of the external, with the gaze. They are all defined by repeated acts of looking, with a visionary obsession, that lead to stark reductiveness and often abstraction.

The painter whose metaphysical progression is closest to Wright's own, and one of his most overlooked influences, is Piet Mondrian. If Cézanne shows Wright the gaps in the landscape and the way to represent them in blocks and layers of tone, and Morandi, through his still lifes, teaches him the importance of subtraction, of representing the unseen in the seen, then Mondrian's lesson is the same as the landscape's: that everything, eventually, is abstract and that we cannot see the same thing twice. Mondrian may seem a strange source of inspiration for a poet grounded in the landscape. His most famous canvases are familiar to us, the grids and bold rectangles in primary colours of his later work, but less well known is the process by which he arrived at them, effecting one of the most dramatic transformations in twentieth-century art. His first subject was the landscape of his native Holland, a subject he pursued relentlessly and repeatedly and, like Wright, often at night. He painted tonally at first, in blocks of colour, influenced by Cézanne, and later he learned from Van Gogh's intense colours and smaller, more vibrant brushstrokes. Bridget Riley comments that he had 'a marked interest in visual phenomena bordering on

⁸ Ibid. p.218.

the apparitional', using twilight and dusk tones to fade his objects into disappearance, a suggestion that could also be applied to Wright.⁹ Mondrian painted the same trees over and over throughout his career, moving from a colourful impressionism influenced by Van Gogh in his *Red Tree* of 1908 to an eerie and skeletal *Grey Tree* in 1912, in which the spaces between the branches seem to have more substance than the tree itself, smudging off into white absence, and finally producing cubist-inspired trees, tree-like marks and squared movements on the page in drab colours familiarised only by their titles. The apparitional slowly became more solid than the real and the paintings themselves ever more spare, more preoccupied with form and abstraction. It is the sky itself that seems to become the focus of the paintings, its texture suggesting tangibility.

In *Chickamunga*, after the expansiveness of his journal poems which he described as an 'American sprawl' (QN, 116), Wright's work becomes simpler, seeming pared down to an essential core. Heavily influenced by his reading of the T'ang poets, each word here seems carefully chosen, and the tone is one of emptiness as he broaches a perceived failure to represent. The attempt to expand his vision has brought him back to where he began:

We who would see beyond seeing
see only language, that burning field. (NB, 28)

Weary pilgrim, he looks to the forms found in the landscape for advice on how to begin again:

Sit still and lengthen your lines,
Shorten your poems and listen to what the darkness says
With its mouthful of cold air. (32)

He also looks to the transformative power of art, basing 'Summer Storm' on Mondrian's *Composition in Red and Grey* (1935), and in the ordered geometry of its abstraction he reads the same advice: watch and repeat:

As Mondrian knew,
Art is the image of an image of an image,

⁹ Bridget Riley, 'Piet Mondrian', in *Modern Painters: Writers on Artists*, ed. Barbara Minton (London: Dorling Kindersley, 2001). p.184.

More vacant, more transparent
With each repeat and slough:
 one skin, two skins, it comes clear, (*NB*, 67)

Wright's usual exuberance of metaphor, described by Peter Stitt as 'baroque' is at points stripped bare.¹⁰ Distant thunder is 'like distant thunder' and the window through which he is looking is 'like clear weather'. Rather than a failure of imagination, this points to a renewed attention to the visual, honed on the simplicity of Chinese poetry and abstract art. The two extremes of the painter's work are described in the poem. *Composition in Red and Grey*, a late work using a grid with double lines and only two colours, is caught in the metaphor of the storm. Its pale grey rectangle hovers over a small rectangle of red, with a white expanse in between. At the same time the lightning-like form of one of Mondrian's trees – or maybe a tree in Wright's garden seen through its image – emerges superimposed on the 'window' of the painting, so that the poet seems to be looking out from realism 'onto ontology'. To what extent the real landscape here merges with that of the painting and of Wright's imagination is a question asked by Willard Spiegelman in a letter to the poet:

I'm trying to figure out your take on the Mondrian. Am I right in thinking the entire central section of the poem – with the auditory imagery of summer thunder resembling Howitzer shells, and the visual imagery of the maple like an African queen – a fantasy on your part, based on the actual scene during composition of a poem during a summer storm, rather than as an attempt to describe something beneath or within or above the abstract of the geometry of the painting. Or should we take the “scenery” (noise and nature) as an “interpretation” (if that is the right word) of the shapes and colors in the painting, or as a signal fact about the poem itself?¹¹

Wright has in the margins, rather cryptically, answered “yes” to both questions, which I take to mean that his approach is a mixture and a juxtaposition of all these things. There is evidence for the image of the maple like the head of an African queen in Mondrian’s symbolic early triptych of three women (*Evolution*, 1910-11), each haloed by her hair, which

¹⁰ Peter Stitt, 'Resurrecting the Baroque', in *High Lonesome: On the Poetry of Charles Wright*, ed. Adam Giannelli (Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin College Press, 2006).

¹¹ Letter from Willard Spiegelman. November 30th 1994. Papers of Charles Wright, Accession #11437, Special Collections Dept, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.

echoes the shapes of the trees he so often drew. But as Wright has often commented, once inside the transforming mind, these influences become indistinguishably merged with a fluid and all-encompassing consciousness. The final result is ‘much too intimate, much too private, to come from anywhere but deep within the writer himself. It comes out of all the time a writer wastes’, that is to say, from the act of looking itself.¹² What is certain is that this is the landscape reduced by looking to an abstract of pure being and its theory: ‘A dab of red, a dab of grey, white interstices’ (67). He is seeing *through* the landscape rather than simply seeing it. Bachelard says that in our meditations on the immense, ‘[t]he mind sees and continues to see objects, while the spirit finds the nest of immensity in an object’.¹³ Mondrian and Wright are representing here the fruit of this double vision, taking what the spirit sees and choosing to leave out what is seen by the mind. The tree itself is not important; the poet’s inspiration has been rather the space that is caught in its branches. The poem finishes with a simple statement, a reversal of how it began:

You can’t see the same thing twice,
As Mondrian knew. (67)

The point being made here is that the composition and the tree are one and the same thing but at different points in time. The tree has been reduced, over years of looking at it, to the spirit of how it is seen; something that not only is no longer recognisable as a tree but does not claim to be an attempt at representation. Mondrian’s work is an evolution of the act of seeing from which, for him at least, there was no turning back; he never painted representationally again, instead moving to New York and absorbing the rhythms of boogie woogie into abstracts driven by colour and movement. His art, as Golding notes, finally became a ‘substitute for religious belief’ rather than an exploration of it.¹⁴

¹² Charles Wright, *Uncollected Prose: Six Guys and a Supplement. The Jordan Lectures 1999-2000*, p.16. Papers of Charles Wright, Accession 11437, Special Collections Dept, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.

¹³ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. p.190.

¹⁴ John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000). p.9.

But Wright *does* keep turning back to description, grounding his metaphors for the absolute firmly in the landscape. In 'Black Zodiac' (1997) he quotes Stevens: '*Description's an element, like air or water*' (NB, 125). He realises that the abstract image needs to be made tactile, the vision of the solitary must be translated back into something solid. Whatever we can know is evidenced in the landscape and it's '[h]ard to imagine a paradise beyond what the hand breaks' (NB, 60). We can return from the brink of abstraction, but the knowledge to which the journey brings us is that we are trapped in an endlessly repeating present, with no way back to memory, except through this present moment, and no way of knowing what lies ahead. What Mondrian represents for Wright is a logical progression from his engagement with Cézanne in his theory of landscape and especially of the way memory is represented. Mondrian's work contains so little semblance of narrative progression, seen in the context of the gallery or museum, that his abstract paintings seem born from the void, unconnected with everything he has done before. Wright wants to show us that his vision, like Cézanne's, is layered, an accumulative process. Each painting adds a layer, but at the same time works to remove the successive veils that lie between us and what we really want to see in the object. Which is what? Mondrian's answer to this would be that the object itself, our act of repeated observing and our failure to hold it still, stimulates a need for something spiritual, something unknowable and unchanging:

the relativity, the mutability, of things creates in us a desire for the absolute
– the immutable.¹⁵

Wright equates this desire with the longing for an unknowable God, whose spirit is embedded in everything. Despite his rejection of organised religion, his views on nature approach Mondrian's theosophy at times, drawing from Taoist and Buddhist thought as well as the southern Evangelical Christianity drilled into him from an early age, compounded by bible school and the spiritual 'high lonesome' of country music. The idea

¹⁵ Cited in: Riley, 'Piet Mondrian'. p.192.

of God is one he often comes back to: when looking at trees and trying to define the quality of the night sky between their branches he imagines what might inhabit the void. In 'Homage to Paul Cézanne' these spaces are filled by the dead who, instead of disappearing into the ethereal, are absorbed into the landscape:

Their shadows rock in the back yard, so pure, so black,
Between the oak tree and the porch.
[...]
Their sighs are gaps in the wind. (7)

Their presence is almost comforting in the poem, their numbers filling out the emptiness, and populating the space around each object. The tree is also used as a metaphor for the living and their yearning for the infinite: bodies rooted but souls constantly straining upwards, ready to break away:

We're out here, our feet in the soil, our heads craned up at the sky,
The stars streaming and bursting behind the trees. (10)

Night, in later poems, is the time of dissolution when, like the dead, part of us evaporates into the landscape. Night air seems condensed enough to inhale 'in its shallow puddles, still liquid and loose in the trees' (*ST*, 14). At these moments rather than a comforting presence there is a terrifying absence, making us feel our smallness in the immensity of space: he describes the soul flapping loosely, a plastic bag caught in the branches, hung between us and the void. All absences point towards this elemental one, the 'homesickness' for something of which we have no memory and, ultimately, cannot know.

Black Zodiac continues the struggle to represent the intangible. 'Sitting at Dusk in the Back Yard after the Mondrian Retrospective' is a form of apologia for abstraction, beginning with the assertion that '[f]orm imposes, structure allows' (*NB*, 122), and that the aim of poetry is form's 'slow destruction' and the attempt to bring it back restructured into something new. For Wright, 'form is finite' but 'structure is infinite' (*HL*, 6) and rearranging the particulars of form into the wider vision of structure is an important process to which destruction is essential, even if this is to the detriment of beauty and the

conventional properties of representational poetry and art. As we accumulate our acts of seeing, they are also constantly eroding. Mondrian, Wright tells us, paraphrasing the painter's words, did not long to have them back and 'thought the destructive element in art / [m]uch too neglected (NB, 122). Landscape, too, has no hesitations here and 'pursues [destruction] savagely' (122), reminding us that, just as to make each new day the one before is dissolved into darkness, to make each image in our minds we destroy another. The same goes for memory; each memory destroys and reworks the one that came before it. We never experience the same sight or the same memory in exactly the same way again. Wright points out that '[y]ou can't reconstruct without the deconstruction being built in' (122). This principle, towards which the cyclical rush and renewal of nature itself points, acts as an appeal to awareness. Wright urges us to '[p]ray uninterruptedly' our prayer of attention, but to what? His answer to this is that 'all we have left to pray to is the landscape', which stands in for the great emptiness behind it.

The last lines of the poem have a lighter tone than 'Summer Storm'. This time, instead of returning to its starting point, it goes back to the business of looking, and leaves the hard-thinking behind in favour of immersion in the natural world:

Meanwhile, the swallows wheel, the bat wheels, the grackles begin their
business.
 It's August.
 The countryside
 Gathers itself for sacrifice, its slow
fadeout along the invisible,
 Leaving the land its architecture of withdrawal,
 Black lines and white spaces, an emptiness primed with reds and blues.
(112)

Here we are surprised by a simple description of Mondrian's painting, slotted in to this description of the landscape so that, without the metaphysical musing of the previous part of the poem, it may have gone altogether unnoticed. It takes us by surprise because we have tuned in, four lines earlier, to the familiar rhythms of Wright's listing of the processes of the world around him. We were primed for feeling, only realising, after the fact, that we

have *felt* something we should have been *thinking*. Reason has temporarily been circumvented, but now that we have arrived at the end of the poem, it seems natural, in this context, to merge two images that, before, would have seemed incomparable. The emphasis is on continuity: the landscape and the way of seeing are one and the same thing. Wright, in these two poems, has looked not at individual moments in Mondrian's career, but at the link between them, until the movement from representation to abstraction seems both logical and natural. The seeds of abstraction are seen already in the images with which he began. Thus, by juxtaposition, Wright claims the late abstracts as landscape paintings. All landscape is inevitably changed in the process of its representation, and the more it is repeated the more it tends towards abstraction, because the sight of the mind is abstract, and the longer we look the more of us there is in what we see. Through Mondrian's vision, and his own layered on top of it, Wright sees his two back yards simultaneously, both the eternal and the everyday.

This continuity is a principle that reaches through all aspects of Wright's poetic, based on the idea that 'what's inside us is what's outside us: / [t]hat what we see outside ourselves we'll soon see inside ourselves' (NB, 60). Bonnie Costello identifies Wright's work as 'transcendentalism mixed with a modern passion for the void', searching the landscape for traces of an 'inorganic ideal'.¹⁶ But, in his most recent work especially, he seems torn between the desire for transcendence and a deep rootedness in the seen world for its own sake; the idea that paradise is what we already have, and nostalgia for the past or yearning for the future only serve to distract us from the transient spirit that is the 'now'. I would disagree with Costello's statement that Wright does not show 'any enthusiasm for organic process'.¹⁷ He indentures himself to the landscape for its home comforts as well as in hope of revelation. Ultimately there is no salve for the feeling of loneliness with which

¹⁶ Bonnie Costello, 'Charles Wright, Giorgio Morandi, and the Metaphysics of the Line', in *High Lonesome: On the Poetry of Charles Wright*, ed. Adam Giannelli (Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin College Press, 2006). p.146.

¹⁷ Ibid.

its absences leave him, but its sadness, for Wright, becomes more often sweet than bitter. And of course there is the consolation of beauty, something he admits has grown on him with age.¹⁸ The tone of his recent books, *Buffalo Yoga* and *Scar Tissue*, is tempered with humility and often humour in the face of the absolute and its erosions, using landscape, as David Young identifies, ‘as a check to our self-infatuation as a species’¹⁹ by juxtaposing its sublime emptiness with what Mark Doty calls the ‘ordinary sublime’ of his back yard, our small attempts at knowing and understanding.²⁰ What could be more ordinary, more ‘heartbreakingly suburban’ (*App*, 8), than a solitary man in his back yard with a plastic chair and a big sky? Confronted with the enormity of being, Wright continues to advocate the yard work of contemplation and ‘nondoing’ (wu wei) as our only hope:²¹

We're Nature's nobodies,
and we'd do well
To put on the *wu wei* slippers and find a hard spot
To sit on,
sinking like nothing through the timed tides of ourselves. (*ST*, 56)

Wright has not written about Mondrian explicitly since *Black Zodiac*, returning instead to his lifelong focus on the still lifes of Giorgio Morandi to develop the theme of the unseen, but it could be argued that this in itself is a result of lessons learnt from Mondrian's way of seeing. Wright feels that the return from abstraction, from the absolute, is as important as the journey there. Like the Chinese poets, he can sit back in his chair and see the infinite in everything, moulding the landscape until it fits in a drop of water or dances on the palm of his hand (*SH*, 5). One insight Wright has gained is that he cannot

¹⁸ When I spoke to Wright on the 25th March 2005 in his office at the University of Virginia, he commented on his changing attitude to beauty: "...the older you get the more beautiful everything gets, because the less time there is to enjoy it! [...] it is true that I find myself more able to talk about it now. I'm easier in my skin talking about what's beautiful than I used to be. I'm not quite as evasive" (transcribed from a recorded interview, see appendix).

¹⁹ David Young, "From 'Looking for Landscapes'", in *High Lonesome: On the Poetry of Charles Wright*, ed. Adam Giannelli (Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin College Press, 2006). p.91.

²⁰ Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001). p.36.

²¹ Wright informs us in his note to the poem that *wu wei* means ‘[i]n Taoism and Zen Buddhism, unmotivated action; in Chinese, literally, ‘nondoing.’ (Robert Denham in *Northrop Frye Unbuttoned*, Gnomon Press, Frankfort, KY, 2004.)’ (ST, 73).

retrieve the landscapes of memory; these are gone forever. So he settles for the present in the absence of other possibilities, and the landscapes of the 'now' remind him occasionally of the 'then'. This results in a quieter intensity, less hungry for the void but still keeping an eye peeled.

Wordless abstraction: Mark Rothko

The idea of the landscape being both inside and outside at the same time, and the act of perceiving as a further way of breaking down the imaginary boundary between internal and external, is an important lesson of abstract expressionism. Bachelard argues that the idea of what is internal and external to us is separated by the most fragile of illusions, a glass palace that language has built to keep us within our comfort zone, and this would seem to be so in Wright's poetry. He uses language to foster the illusion and play with the idea of a landscape outside the self. Not only the vast expanse of nothingness he sees from his back yard, it can be something reduced, distilled, even portable. Thirty years of transformative looking, of taking the landscape inside, have eroded its appearance of irreducibility, and the secret role of perception in creating what appears to be outside, separate, can be used by the poet to manipulate it as he will:

For over 30 years I've looked at this meadow and mountain landscape
Till it's become iconic and small
And sits, like a medieval traveller's triptych,
radiant in its disregard. (*SH*, 11)

Reduction of the landscape into its essence – something malleable the poet can carry with him at all times – is not a matter of control, however, but a symptom of the complex dialogue in which he is constantly engaged: between acceptance and resistance of language itself. As Wright himself claims, landscape is a canvas primed for the exploration of his real subject matter: the capabilities of language. The prevailing sense is that although Wright,

with his constant and repetitive looking, appears to come ever nearer to ‘capturing’ the landscape in words, this is a project whose failure is already inscribed at its point of departure. The final word always goes to the landscape, and its word is silence – the resistance of language. Words seem deflected by its vast indifference. His triptych, though it may appear to be scaled down to the size of human perception, remains elemental and supremely uninterested, turned in on itself. It is not only the idea of the divine in the landscape that we cannot know, but the landscape itself that remains implacable however many poems are devoted to it. Wright suggests the scale of this indifference to us and our language in *Buffalo Yoga* (2004):

Landscape’s a local affliction that has no beginning and no end,
 Here when we come and here when we go.
 Like white clouds, our poems drift over it,
looking for somewhere to lie low.
 They neither hinder nor help.²²

The landscape is seen to be coded and indecipherable. The metaphor Wright uses most frequently to describe the shadows these cloud-poems make on the ground is that of script on a page. It is always ancient and occluded, made up of ‘[c]uneiform characters’ that symbolise the failure to translate what is around us; they are unreadable and gone with the next breath of wind. *A Short History of the Shadow* and *Buffalo Yoga* convey the inevitability of language’s failure and the mixture of struggle and resignation with which Wright tries to counter it. The resistance to language is not something he identifies only in the landscape but in abstract paintings like Mondrian’s. The further the act of seeing is condensed, the more it seems to resist language and to embody silence. Rosalind Krauss sees the grid as the ultimate manifestation of this resistance:

the grid announces, among other things, modern art’s will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse.²³

²² Charles Wright, *Buffalo Yoga* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004). p.4. Abbreviated as *BY* hereafter.

²³ Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985). p.9.

Wright seems at times sympathetic to this longing for silence but at the same time compelled to write what he sees.

One effect that a focus on abstract expressionist art has is a narrowing of the field of vision and thought. Such bareness, like the night sky, seems to encourage Wright to home in on some of the fundamental drives of his poetry, and most importantly on the necessity of leaving things out – something he attempts to perfect through his study of Giorgio Morandi's paintings, discussed in the next chapter. Destruction is a force common to all abstract painters, but one whose effects Wright sees most vitally in Mondrian's work and in that of Mark Rothko. Nietzsche describes its fundamental role in creation with reference to the forging of the landscape and human history:

the wildest forces break the way, destroying at first, but yet their activity was necessary, so that later a gentler civilisation might set up its house there. Frightful energies – that which is called evil – are the Cyclopean architects and pathmakers of humanity.²⁴

This can also be applied to the processes that shape our mental landscape and the works of art we create. It is through difficulty and destruction that we make way for a calmer, clearer vision, peeling back the layers of confusion to reveal the essence of what and how we see.

Rothko recognised this:

The progression of a painter's work, as it travels in time from point to point, will be toward clarity: toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea, and between the idea and the observer.²⁵

Rothko considered that the essence of human emotion could be captured and condensed through this process to such an extent that the experience of seeing his paintings would be a religious one, citing as his 'ingredients' for such a work of art that would make the public weep before it the necessity of a 'clear preoccupation with death' and 'a lustful relationship to things that exist'.²⁶ What he wished to provoke in the viewers of his paintings was not only a sense of their beauty, but a much deeper, more transformative feeling: the powerful

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (London: Penguin, 1994). p.151.

²⁵ Miguel Lopez-Remiro, ed., *Mark Rothko: Writings on Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). p.65.

²⁶ Ibid. p.125.

immediacy of the sublime. Something that describes a seemingly undescrivable feeling within us, that expresses for us what we cannot say and so connects with us at a fundamental level, pushing aside all obstacles. Wright's sublime, then, is mediated through nature, a connection that has its roots in Thoreau and Emerson for whom 'the noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God'.²⁷ What he sees in Rothko, however, is sadness and emptiness, rather than sublime vision; death and loneliness, but no redemption:

His last light crusted and weighted down,
holes within holes,
 This canvas filled with emptiness, this one half full... (*WTT*, 143)

Rothko taps into our sense of '[s]eparation from what heals us / beyond painting, beyond art' (*NB*, 79), something that cannot be expressed through words. It is ironic, then, that abstract expressionism unleashed a torrent of words from all directions. Its resistance to language provoked a vast amount of poetry and thought, couched in the very medium it wished to silence. W. J. T. Mitchell sees its aim to reverse 'the traditional dominance of literature over the visual arts'²⁸ as one that fails, the paintings only becoming meaningful comments on representation in the presence of 'the proper ventriloquist'.²⁹ Although Wright in the end agrees with this, he remains sympathetic to the idea of a silent representation, something so condensed and refined, negating the illusion of representation so efficiently, that it becomes a spiritual essence, leaving the object behind. Of course, the first illusion here is that illusion can be shattered, that we can strip down the layers to a point at which we reach something that can be called reality, a truth. Wright's sympathies with Rothko's pre-linguistic aim, and his consciousness of the continual rejection language suffers at the hands of the visual, lead him to attempt to integrate this state of a wordlessness before language into his poetry, however antithetical it may seem to the

²⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Signet Classic, 2003). p.215.

²⁸ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). p.228.

²⁹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). p.42.

fundamental assumptions of writing. Use of colour is one of the ways in which he tries to emulate the painter's work, but this already brings us to problems about how to represent colour through the medium of language and even the idea of colour as in some way pure, free of language, or elemental in the first place. Colour is a prime example of something that depends on our powers of perception for its very existence. It is not a property of light itself but our facility to perceive light as it is reflected off a surface – without us to see it, there *is* no colour. It highlights too the insufficiency of our language in this area: it is the poverty of descriptive vocabulary and its inability to convey exact colours that throws language into overdrive, stimulating a productive invention and surfeit of words. John Gage sees the root of this need and inability to describe colour:

This radical imbalance between sensation and language means that the experience of colour will be very largely associational.³⁰

We are, on the whole, unable to perceive or describe the pure experience of colour without mediating it through art or what we see around us: colour is always the colour of something. It provokes images and metaphors, and often an underlying emotional response that perhaps has something to do with them. Rothko's success in connecting with his viewers on a level that seems language-less lies partly in the fact that colour can condense our feelings powerfully and directly – it satisfies our desire, and one of the deepest desires of ekphrastic poetry, to get back to a moment before the fragmentation of self-expression into language, whose variations are baroque and endless. Wright plays with this idea of the subconscious effect of colour in his poems by subtly adjusting the colours with which we associate certain objects or ideas. Death in his poems, as I discussed in the first chapter with reference to 'Homage to Paul Cézanne', is blue. The conventional colour of death, black, is hardly referred to at all in this context. It is evident that part of the pleasure Wright takes in using the word blue, which he does repeatedly, is at least in part due to its

³⁰ John Gage, *Colour and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999). p.262.

The light falling in great sheets through the trees,
Sheets almost tangible.

We'd like to fly away ourselves, pushed
Or pulled, into or out of our own bodies,
into or out of the sky's mouth.
We'd like to disappear into a windfall of light' (NB, 50)

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For poems at a time, Wright lets us revel in the illusion that this is where his words are taking us, but he never lets us forget for too long that we are held to the world by the very quality that enables us to achieve these moments of transcendence: the material beauty of what we see. The illusion, he shows us we have known all along, is temporary: we can't escape ourselves. And, as he points out here, cutting into our dreams of the beyond with the blunt fact of the everyday as he so often does, why would we want to?

[...]the numbers just don't add up.
Besides, a piece of jar glass
 burns like a star at the street's edge,
The elbows and knuckled limb joints of winter trees,
Shellacked by the sunset, flash and fuse,
Windows blaze
 and the earthly splendour roots our names to the ground.

(NB, 50)

Wright goes further still than Wallace Stevens in his ‘Anecdote of the Jar’: a mere shard of jar glass is all that is needed to root us, rearranging the world around itself and focusing our vision to bring us back to our priorities: being and experiencing. It reminds the poet too of his job to write it all down, and of the fact that there is no negating the effect the material world has on us. The results of our vision are fickle, sometimes giving us the desire to pour ourselves ‘into the veins of the invisible’ (*NB*, 70), and other times breeding in us moods of intense watchfulness and connectedness with our physical surroundings. Wright equates Rothko’s swathes of colour with the sky, but most importantly with what lies behind it: the idea of something transcendent hovering just beyond what we can see. For Wright his canvases are giant twilit landscapes, inhabited by a sad weight that chimes with our desire to be part of the transcendent, to immerse ourselves in silent anonymity:

Two tone fields, horizon a line between abysses,
Generally white, always speechless.
Rothko could choose either one to disappear into. And did. (BY, 80)

Wright sees this dividing line as part of the human dilemma; we are torn between being grounded in earthly beauty and a yearning after an infinite transcendence we cannot

describe. Rothko's paintings are echoes of this unnameable spiritual essence, 'deep subtractions' that point to eternity. Wright touches the transcendent, but always comes back to the 'yard work' of describing the everyday – of looking at things rather than through them. Rothko, on the other hand, eventually felt that he had no choice, having painted himself into an impasse, but to disappear into the world to which his paintings referred. His paintings became darker and darker. Manlio Brusatin comments that 'colors are poisons', referring to how their mix always comes down to the hopelessness of grey to describe Kandinsky's suicide:

An abstract painter who had, for the sake of color, renounced the rest of painting, the day before his suicide painted one last picture, completely grey, with only a few small flames of yellow.³²

Our redemption from this bleakness, Wright suggests, must be found in the details of the natural world and, eventually, in language, which can point to the void without becoming it. Rothko's problem, as he identifies in 'Homage to Mark Rothko' from *Buffalo Yoga*, is that he propelled himself to a brink of emptiness from which he was unable to step back. On the cover of the collection is one of Rothko's late dark paintings, *Untitled*, 1968, composed entirely of two black rectangles on a background of greys and whites that seep into and brush across the blacks. These late paintings are '[e]choes, deep subtractions' (BY, 39) that seem to speak not of faith but of the all-effacing certainty of death.

³² Manlio Brusatin, *A History of Colors*, trans. Robert H. Hopcke and Paul Schwartz (Boston: Shambhala Publications inc., 1991). p.153.

3. Wherewithal for the unbecome:¹ Charles Wright and Giorgio Morandi

As well as providing the young poet with his formative experiences of reading Pound and with landscapes that would form the backdrop for many of his poems, Wright's time in the Army Intelligence Service in Verona between 1957 and 1961 led to the development of a deep and lifelong interest in Italian culture. Since leaving Italy, Wright has particularly drawn on the works of poet Eugenio Montale, of whose *La Bufera e altro* (1956) he published a translation (*The Storm and other poems*, 1978), and of the painter Giorgio Morandi.

Wright's fascination with the work of both of these men has its roots in their use of line and image, whether verbal or visual. Whilst many of his poems contain echoes of Montale's haunting images – especially those of death and shadow – Wright has more clearly taken inspiration from the painter's work, never seeming to tire of studying and repeating his images. Many of Wright's painterly influences, for example Paul Cézanne and Francis Bacon, reflect a certain period in his development as a poet and his considerations of them are more or less limited to this phase even if his appreciation of their work evidently goes beyond it. In light of this, Morandi could be considered Wright's most consistent artistic model, providing the images to which he has returned throughout his career, sometimes for reassurance of the value of aims fundamental to their work, but often with new ideas, fresh discoveries taken from looking at the same paintings.

Bonnie Costello's essay 'Charles Wright, Giorgio Morandi and the Metaphysics of the Line' (2002) charts this relationship, providing a thorough exploration of Wright's stylistic debt to Morandi and 'analyzing the role of free verse in Wright's understanding of his own and Morandi's artistic ambition'.² From *Hard Freight* (1973) to *Appalachia* (1998) Costello looks at Morandi's line as one that mediates between 'the visual reality of the page'

¹ Charles Wright, 'Night Journal', in *The World of the Ten Thousand Things*, p.201.

² Costello, 'Charles Wright, Giorgio Morandi, and the Metaphysics of the Line'. p.306.

(323) and the invisible world that hovers behind it, as well as the merging of form and subject matter until they are one and the same in both media. But there remains plenty to say about this immensely fruitful relationship, one that Wright has continued to explore in more recent volumes.

Wright's initial fascination with Morandi seems to be one that the poet himself found it hard to articulate. The repetitive still lifes of everyday objects in muted tones for which Morandi is known seem to suggest only the simplest language of listed names, a catalogue of what's there, although they go much beyond this, evoking feelings for which it is hard to find words. 'White' in *Hard Freight* begins with such a list:

Carafe, compotier, seashell, vase:
Blank spaces, white objects (*CM*, 21)

The painting is made from these things, but Wright has to go outside the painting to other images in order to identify the affinity he feels with its spareness. 'Luminous knots along the black rope' (21), these simple objects are markers of existence, standing between the world we know and oblivion, fragile symbols of what we can lose. The other images that follow it develop this idea of fragility and evanescence: swiftly moving clouds and their shadows that 'darken whomever they please' (21), white bones and angels, a pillow with its indentation, a name written on a misted window that vanishes yet remains. These images are at once fleeting and eternal, connoting both presence and absence and inhabiting two extremes of temporality – this moment and forever – that make a void of the middle ground between them. The poem's dominant colour, and its title, represents the foggy no-man's land between being and not being; a place where the two states can coexist as they somehow seem to in Morandi's objects and especially in his lines, which Costello sees as suggesting 'the form of an absence, the hollowed out quality of the substantial world and its disembodied outline'.³ The cover of *Country Music* is a Morandi landscape, lightly

³ Costello, 'Charles Wright, Giorgio Morandi, and the Metaphysics of the Line'. p.305.

pencilled, that embodies this description; it is the world we recognise, we are familiar with its shapes, yet a large part of this knowledge is left to be supplied by the imagination. Only a few faint lines make the image appear from the white page.

In *China Trace* (1977) Wright is more explicit about why Morandi's objects speak to his own preoccupations:

I'm talking about stillness, the hush
Of a porcelain center bowl, a tear vase, a jug.

I'm talking about space, which is one-sided,
Unanswered, and left to dry.

I'm talking about paint, about shape, about the void
These objects sentry for, and rise from. (CM, 114)

Again, the poem is list-like, but this time it is a summary of ideas and defining qualities, almost a manifesto, as if Morandi's objects had clarified for Wright certain properties that he would wish to be present in his own writing. The most important advance in his understanding of Morandi comes in the last lines of the poem:

I'm talking about bottles, and ruin,
And what we flash at the darkness, and what for... (114)

These objects not only stand in for the inevitable obliteration of the seen world, the moment at which the individual will cease to see it, but they are the fragments shored against this 'ruin', the 'dark undazzle' always threatening and eating at the edges of the present.

‘Chinese Journal’ marks a more meditative approach and is the first reference to the aspect of Morandi’s work that Wright goes on to explore further in the later poems: the idea that what is left out of a work of art, what remains unsaid, can be just as important as what is included. He makes this explicit in the first lines of the poem:

In 1935, the year I was born,
Giorgio Morandi
Pencilled these bottles in by leaving them out, letting
The presence of what surrounds them increase the presence
Of what is missing,

keeping its distance and measure. (CM, 199)

In the rest of the poem he develops the idea outwards into the natural world, which is where he sees its clearest example. In relating Morandi's bottles, vases and jars to the natural world, Wright touches on the way that they seem to be more than just still life – partly a reflected portrait of the artist and partly a little world in themselves with its own weather and horizons. David Sylvester reportedly said that the paintings are more akin to 'the cityscape of Bologna than to still life' with their stone colours and sky-like backdrops.⁴ Similarly to Mondrian, in Morandi's later work the space above the horizon of the tabletop grows both in size and consequentially in importance. Of all Morandi's lines, this indeterminate border between table and wall, ground and sky, seems to chime with what Wright is talking about. The same line fascinated him in Rothko's colour fields: he saw the thin dark or luminous space between two rectangles of colour as the line of demarcation between two worlds, one of which the artist must choose, one he must turn away from. The fact that Wright sees landscape in everything, a ghostly presence that underlies all other genres, has perhaps less to do with a conscious will to merge styles and subject matter than with the often quasi-religious impulse of his investigations into the visual world: he sees these lines as horizons not only because of their physical resemblance but because of the spiritual dimensions of the paintings in which they appear. Siri Hustvedt sees Morandi as tapping into 'the deep marks [Christian thought] has left on the Western soul', especially 'the feeling among many people that what we see is not everything'.⁵ Other signs of this sense of presence, one Wright identifies as the strongest motivator of Morandi's work, are the sometimes impossibly deep shadows between objects, the shadows of things outside the painting that fall across its space, and the way that his outlines seem as much composed of blank space as line, the objects themselves never entirely solid.

⁴ Siri Hustvedt, 'Giorgio Morandi', in *Modern Painters: Writers on Artists*, ed. Barbara Minton (London: Dorling Kindersley, 2001). p.266.

⁵ Ibid. p.271.

The reasons for Wright's attachment to Morandi's work may seem, on the surface, no different from his affinity with the works of Mondrian and Rothko. He identifies a core of '[l]onesomeness' in each of them. All three painters have contributed to his thoughts on individual identity, the idea of God, the role of the object and how to represent the subjects one chooses. It is this last point, however, that marks where the differences between Mondrian, Rothko and Morandi begin. Rothko and Mondrian's repetitions of shapes lead to an abstraction from which there seems to be no way back into the world of representation. Morandi has often been connected to these painters, as noted by Hustvedt, but whilst seeing similarities she rejects the idea that their aims lead them to the same place:

While it is easy to see these connections, particularly to Rothko's luminous canvases and to Mondrian's development from his architectural trees to his famous rhythms of primary grids, I think that the project Morandi undertook for himself is finally very different from that of painters who ended up in a thoroughly abstract space.⁶

Morandi seems to reach the cusp of this abstraction then draw back from it, but why? This question hovers behind the collections that make up *Negative Blue* as Wright juxtaposes Mondrian and Morandi and creates an indirect comparison of their work.

In *Chickamanga*, 'Summer Storm', the poem about Mondrian's abstract painting, comes directly after 'Still Life with Stick and Word' which clearly works on the remembered image of Morandi's paintings, reducing them to their components and their perceived message. In this instance, the juxtaposition of poems on the two painters creates a comparison that draws on their similarities rather than their points of divergence. In both poems, seeing is equated with peeling back the layers to reveal an abstraction beyond or within the object. Wright suggests in 'Still Life with Stick and Word', as in 'Summer Storm', that the way to the unseen is through the objects that lie between it and our gaze. The poem begins with a contemplation of the moon that leads to thoughts of mortality:

April is over. May moon.

⁶ Ibid. p.264.

How many more for my regard,
 hundreds, a handful?
Better not trouble the dark water due north of north.
Better to concentrate on something close, something small.
This stick, for instance. This word. (*NB*, 66)

Again, as with Wright's first Morandi poem, the word is 'white' and the juxtaposition of stick and word in a 'still life' emphasises both the physical quality of the word and the metaphysical quality of the object. When the poet says 'white' he thinks of Morandi's bottles, which he sees as 'entrances' into the unseen. He underlines the fact that our view of the ineffable consists only of metaphor, that what it inevitably comes down to is comparison – we identify the spiritual in the object and isolate the quality that appears to us to signify it. We return repeatedly to the object that has given us this insight to assess '[h]ow unlike it is. How like' (66). Like Morandi's paintings, this poem uses the domestic and the natural image to produce an effect of estrangement, but it does not approach abstraction. Quoting from Morandi, Wright touches the root of why he does not believe in abstract representation in 'Basic Dialogue':

Nothing's more abstract, more unreal,
than what we actually see.
The job is to make it otherwise. (*App*, 5)

Where Morandi and Wright differ from Mondrian is in their view of the role of abstraction and of how it is created. For Mondrian, the image is pulled towards abstraction by the repetition of human effort and, once the abstract quality within the object has been unlocked, the object itself can be discarded and the abstract principle kept separate from it. He disconnects the epiphanic moment of vision from the object that induced it. For Morandi and for Wright, on the other hand, abstraction is already inherent in the image and in how we perceive it; it is part of our own loneliness and inability to connect with the indifferent world of images that stands between us and some indefinable goal of sight that, despite the insufficiency of our words to describe it, is a fundamental part of our being. Just as Wright wants to see the two back yards – the one that is ‘eternal and divine’ and the

other that is 'just the back yard' (*App*, 27) – he also wants to perceive the object as a dual entity that contains the secrets of existence but at the same time can be appreciated for the miracle of its superficial beauty. With Mondrian he talks about the destruction of the image in order to see through it, to obtain a fresh vision; with Morandi he shows us that the originating image can never be destroyed. The objects are still there but even if we turn back from their destruction we still recognise it inscribed within them. Once seen it never disappears. This tension between the two ways of seeing the object lies behind many of the ideas of *Negative Blue*. Like Morandi, Wright moves away from abstraction at the same time as admiring the impulse that leads towards it; it sends him back to look at the same things as before but with a new clarity of vision and a form divested of all that is unnecessary. He makes his task the 'transformation of objects in space, / or objects in time, / To objects outside either, but tactile, still precise' (*App*, 5). In the process, he sees in the most familiar objects and sensations into signs of our estrangement and disconnection from everything around us.

'Giorgio Morandi and the Talking Eternity Blues' describes a photograph of Morandi looking at his objects, 'his gaze replaced and pitiless' (*App*, 33). Language and representation are depicted as miraculous and mysterious, a form of transubstantiation. Wright uses a natural fact – 'The dove, in summer, coos sixty times a minute, one book says' (33) – to underline the incomprehensible nature of what we experience, the daily miracle of being in the world. Morandi here, ever the master, does not 'blink an eye' at these mysteries of existence and their wondrous variety, even though his appearance in the photograph represented here almost defies belief. The way sunlight 'showers like sulphur grains across his face' (33) is a wry joke when, as Costello points out, '[s]unlight *is* sulphur grains when rendered in photography'.⁷ But the joke is quickly undermined by the statement that follows it: 'There is an end to language'. We can use it in this way to

⁷ Costello, 'Charles Wright, Giorgio Morandi, and the Metaphysics of the Line'. p.314.

juxtapose the small miracles with the eternal and unknowable one, but the structure eventually collapses. We can only go so far in our lust for naming and, in the end, the names we give, the divisions we make, are provisional and entirely transient – the unknowable eternal ignores the brief forms we impose on the small part of it we can perceive. Morandi, as Wright sees it, possesses something of this eternal vision which breaks through the flimsy demarcations erected by language. His description of Morandi as ‘starless, Madonnaless,’ (33) echoes Sylvia Plath’s description of her heaven as ‘[s]tarless and fatherless’ but, unlike Plath’s bleak vision of the loss of the self, Morandi seems ‘oddly comforted by the lack of comforting’:⁸

A proper thing in its proper place,
Landscape subsumed, language subsumed,
the shadow of God
Liquid and indistinguishable. (*App*, 33)

Wright identifies with this perceived ability to take comfort in the difficulty of the path he has chosen to walk, mirroring as it does his own conviction that the inability of language to broach the subjects most important to us is a consolation for their indefinable and indescribable nature. In ‘Poem Almost Wholly in My Own Manner’ he puts forward the view that our conscious life is lived out ‘in the cracks’ between what we understand and what we don’t:

Poetry’s what’s left between the lines –
a strange speech and a hard language,
It’s all in the unwritten, it’s all in the unsaid...
And that’s a comfort, I think,
for our lack and inarticulation. (*NB*, 96)

In the same way, the beauty of the natural world is a consolation for the infinite loneliness it both masks and points to. What we come to when we try to express this sublime nothingness is ‘[s]ome dead end – no one to tell it to, / nothing to say it with’ (*App*, 36). Wright has always rejected the idea that language can contain the world entirely and that all

⁸ Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001). p.5.

our perceptions are processed through it, that ‘the slip of phrase against phrase / Contains the real way our lives / Are graphed out and understood’ (*WTT*, 217). In his view, the music of what’s real is a music that goes on entirely without us. And our reaction to this must be couched, contradictorily, in more words, because language is all we have; we must ‘reconstruct, not deconstruct’ (217):

There is no secret contingency.
There’s only the rearrangement, the redescription
Of little and mortal things. (*NB*, 27)

We must persevere with the language we have, rather than going down the dead end of trying to express the inexpressible in its own terms, which leads us, as it led Rothko, to silence and despair. Wright, increasingly in his later work, turns us back to the description of nature. He acknowledges the impossibility of expressing the ineffable in its own terms, accepts it and moves on, focusing on what he wants to communicate to the reader via a different route:

That being the case, I’d like to point out this quince bush,
Quiescent and incommunicado in winter shutdown.
I’d like you to notice its long nails
And skeletal underglow. (*App*, 36)

Death may not be the ostensible subject here, but nevertheless we recognise it more clearly, hidden as it is in the moving shadows of the quince bush and inseparable from it, than a description purely of its own qualities would allow us to. Wright explains this technique of turning away from what he wants to see in order to see it better by paraphrasing Daniel Defoe:

It’s reasonable to represent anything that really exists
by that thing which doesn’t exist,
[...]
And that’s what we’re talking about, the difference between the
voice and the word
The voice continuing to come back in splendour,
the word still not forthcoming. (36)

The poet rejects the pursuit of a contrived abstraction whilst recognising that we can only apprehend some things through perceiving them obliquely via others. In the representation of an object, either accidentally as Francis Bacon would have it, or through years of repetition, as with Cézanne and Morandi, we come to represent something else entirely, often something intangible but perceptibly there. The only difference between these artists and Mondrian or Rothko is that the latter have proceeded further down the same path, creating an abstraction to mirror the one they perceive rather than continuing to represent its evidence in the objects or landscapes in which they first perceived it.

Wright acknowledges that the right word will never come, but the repeated approximations and attempts at description that we use in its absence create reverberations by which we can catch glimpses of what we wanted to apprehend. The quince bush to which he diverted our attention is ‘on fire’ with light, symbol of the familiar yet intangible, as any photographer knows, and at the same time aflame with the spiritual; it signifies presence and absence simultaneously. It is the poet’s burning bush, a revelation of God’s hidden presence. Unlike the verses of Exodus to which Jorie Graham repeatedly refers in *The End of Beauty* (1987) – in which God orders Moses to hide while he passes by – the beginning of the third chapter, which Wright refers to here, signifies the mediation of the spiritual through the natural world, a translation whose meaning inevitably remains partially veiled. The bush, in Wright’s poem, emits no voice, but we can still perceive in it what Moses did. It underlines that the struggle with representation and its layered processes is essentially one of faith.

Five pages on from ‘Giorgio Morandi and the Talking Eternity Blues’, Wright returns to Mondrian with ‘Back Yard Boogie Woogie’. Although the poem makes no explicit reference to the painter except in its choice of title, it furthers some of the ideas developed in ‘Summer Storm’ and ‘Sitting at Dusk in the Back Yard after the Mondrian

Retrospective'. Most importantly it tells us that the biggest barrier to abstract representation lies in the way that it negates the self:

I try to look at landscape as though I weren't there,
but know, wherever I am,
I disturb that place by breathing, by my heart's beating. (*App*, 39)

Abstraction in representation undermines the abstract subjectivity inherent in each individual perspective, each new look at the same back yard.

A Short History of the Shadow begins with the same image upon which 'Giorgio Morandi and the Talking Eternity Blues' is based. 'Looking Around' compares the poet, sitting where he always sits in his study, with the 'ur-photograph' of Morandi looking at his objects that he has up on the wall: 'Two olive oil tins, one wine bottle, one flower vase, / A universe of form and structure' (3). He has condensed his repeated vision of the world until it is 'scraped down / To paint on an easel stand, some in the frame, some not' (3). Like Bacon, Wright feels that his best work is in what has been scraped off, the paring away that reveals the luminous core. Bologna, rendered by Morandi in bottles and jars, is both 'world's bite and world's end', the point of intersection between beauty and mortality.

Wright's engagement with abstraction has been this above all, an exploration of the point to which things can be made clear and simplified, reduced to their essences, and a path towards what Mark Doty calls 'the *So?* of poetry'.⁹ The journey into the idea of abstract representation and the act of turning back from it has focused Wright's attention constantly on why he writes and what he wants to convey most urgently to the reader. The 'secret[] of the line' that he comes back to tell us is the importance of our attention and how we use it:

Proper attention is our refuge now, our perch and our praise. (*SH*, 5)

In order to remain open to what we see we need to keep a steady eye on the object as well as what's behind it. Once we start to look *through* the object only rather than at it, once we

⁹ Mark Doty, *Source* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003). p.1.

think we can define what we see, we close ourselves to the world and to other routes to enlightenment. The 'So?' of poetry, for Wright, is the need to stay engaged with the visible world, to keep looking afresh at its beauty at the same time as realising its illusion:

So? So. The moon has its rain-ring auraed around it –
The more that we think we understand, the less we see. (*SH*, 5)

The goal then is to write what he sees without defining it, to keep looking and rearranging, to keep searching for the right word even though he knows it cannot be found.

Forgetting is an essential part of this constant renewal of seeing; the flip side of the loss we experience through the failure of memory is the gaps it leaves for imagination. The word, as an object, in *Buffalo Yoga* takes on a concrete presence as symbol of what cannot be said: by giving the word its name, Wright ironically underlines the absence of the right word, the failure of language to make itself invisible, to convey meaning transparently. The word is unapprehendable, one of the many images symbolising presence in absence and vice versa in the collection:

It's out there, I guess,
Among the flowers and wind-hung and hovering birds,
And I have forgotten it (*BY*, 10)

The inability to describe, to say the word always on the tip of our tongues, creates a sense of estrangement, distances us from the world, but Wright also accepts it as something that, ultimately, brings us closer:

The way between half empty and half full
 begins where you begin forgetting the words,
And put down your pen.
The way to whatever matters begins after that. (70)

In *Buffalo Yoga* Wright continues his exploraton of what matters with a greater urgency.

‘Homage to Giorgio Morandi’ repeats again the importance of exclusion:

Until the form is given us out of what has been given,
And never imposed upon,
Scrape and erase, scrape and erase
until the object becomes clear. (60)

But the poem goes on to use the man, rather than his work, as a metaphor for the fluid and arbitrary divisions we make between presence and absence. The individual instances of looking in his work have become a principle in themselves and have grown even after the death of the painter. Wright voices his personal regrets at almost, but finally not, having met the painter, but juxtaposes this with the ‘iconic’ and ‘permanent’ status to which he has been elevated since his death:

The farther out of the picture you go, the greater it grows.
The farther out of our lives you go, *la stessa storia*. (BY, 60)

The less the painter himself is in view, Wright argues, the more his presence ‘[s]urrounds us, / and concentrates our tick-tock attention’ (60). He has entered the world of the eternal, the world he painted, while we are still caught up in the slip-stream of time. Wright’s greatest homage to Morandi is in the last line of the poem:

You looked as hard as anyone ever looked,
then left it out. (61)

Wright’s bottles and jars are the landscape around him, symbol of this world as well as vessel of the otherworldly.

We also see more of the poet himself. *Buffalo Yoga* is his most explicitly autobiographical collection and, reflecting this, contains more references to photographs than to paintings. Consciousness of old age and its tendency towards nostalgia also looms heavily over these poems. Wright reminds us often that ‘[a] minute of splendor is a minute of ash’ (6). The predominance of photographs in the collection signals the poet’s return to his preoccupation with the workings of memory, but there is an added anxiety here about the loss of the self as a perceiver and recorder of people, places and events. The names of friends populate this work.

Who will remember Christina Marsh and Bobby Step,
now that I’m gone?
Who will remember the frog famine,
Now that the nameless roads
have carried us all from town. (46)

The past is seen as a site of constant erosion: memory often acts as a healer, 'like bandages/ on all our imagined wounds' (47) but just as often Wright portrays her as a seductress, '[h]er full lips telling us just those things / she thinks we want to hear' (*ST*, 9).

Photographs are particularly tempting as a direct link to a point in the past. A photograph of Wright and his son on the porch of a holiday cabin provokes the 'Sun-Saddled, Coke-Copping, Bad-Boozing Blues' with which Wright remembers a friend who had spent time with him there. Ironically it is an object outside the photograph – a railing where he and Tim McIntire carved their initials together while working on verses for a song – that brings back this memory proving the idea that what is missing often has a stronger and more poignant effect than what is actually there: 'Both song and singer are gone now, and the railing too' (*BY*, 68). Wright also lists the names of all the other friends that participated in making '[s]uch joyful music, so long ago' (68). He indulges in nostalgia at the same time as recognising its treacherous nature. 'Portrait of the Artist in a Prospect of Stone' and 'Rosso Venexiano' form a miniature slideshow at the heart of the collection, and Wright uses the typical language associated with this to introduce his photographs and to begin each poem, connecting them to each other: 'Here is a photograph of George Mancini and me' (40), 'And here is a photograph of me taking a photograph / Of Holly and me' (43). In these poems it seems that he has revised his views on memory from '[n]othing is ever lost' to a more cynical and worldly-wise position:

I know now, the past a hiding place
Beyond recall or recovery, no matter our wants or our diligence.
Whatever is gone is gone. (41)

What is lost is a heavy presence in the poems, as are death and silence, both our future and our past. 'People, of course, and the future' are 'bereft in the camera's lens' (44) which cannot capture more than one view of the moment. In Wright's photograph of himself and his wife reflected in the 'ornate, Venetian mirror' (43) it is again the people who are missing who are most present. Their names are 'weighted with what is invisible' (45), clustering

around our everyday objects and waiting to be spoken of like the dead in ‘Homage to Paul Cézanne’. The gaps they leave are ‘small slices of silence’ (45) which, like ‘the word’, is a palpable and objectified presence which ‘breeds and recalibrates’ (27) in the landscape. Even language is portrayed as an ‘ultimate hush’, the ‘silence that turns the silence off’ (4). The presence that this silence makes way for and listens out for is that of death.

But instead of being condensed into a specific image, such as that of the dead in ‘Homage to Paul Cézanne’, death is in everything:

Under the low hum of the sweet bees,
 Under the hair-heavy hoof of the warrior ant,
 Under the towering shadows he must go through,
and surface from,
 Under the beetle’s breast and the grub’s,
 The future is setting its table,
its cutlery dark, its mirrors anxious and blank.
(31)

The ponderous, psalm-like tone and anaphora of ‘under’ with its heavy closed vowels suggest the weight mortality exerts on everything; the alliteration, with its hints of both the Anglo-Saxon and the biblical, slows our process through the images to meaning. Again, some of these images are as unlikely as they are unsettling, but they work in a pictorial way, like brushstrokes, to stimulate us into feeling the idea that the poet sees. Implicit in this is Wright’s criticism of and challenge to the fundamentally human quest to cling to a fixed representation of reality. Increasingly in his most recent work he takes issue with the view that poetic description is a flight of fancy. After the most unlikely images he seems to enter the reader’s thoughts and contests them directly: ‘This is no metaphor, this is just the way it is’ (57).

‘Dio Ed Io’ revisits the contradictions inherent in the idea of God and especially God’s relationship with man. Wright portrays himself midway between the weightlessness of youth, where ‘[n]othing is disappearing’ and ‘[a]rrival is all’ (BY, 50), and the unknowable void which casts its heavy shadow over his life. The contradiction of the existence of both

of these states is explored through a photograph: ‘a picture of Yves Klein leaping out of a window / Above a cobblestone Paris street’. Underneath this *saut dans le vide* caught in time, a ‘man on a bicycle pedals away toward the distance’ (50). Wright states that, for him, one of these men represents himself, the other God. At best this is a representation of man’s disconnectedness from God, the *saut dans le vide* of faith, but even the proximity that exists here is an illusion sustained by trickery. The two acts do not and cannot exist in the same frame and the picture is a fake:

Cut out of the doctored photograph, however, the mesh net
Right under the swan-diving body.
Cut out of the other print, the black-capped, ever distancing cyclist, as
well as the mesh net. (51)

Hmmm... And there you have it, two-fingered sleight-of-hand man. (50)

We cannot grasp both worlds at once and Wright realises that the attempt to do so in his poetry is an illusion, effected by ‘[s]nowfalling metaphors’ that link the two dimensions. The poem could be read as presenting memory, and its process of re-perception and therefore re-representation, as a *trompe l’oeil* of the same nature against death. The falling man is caught eternally mid-way between two unknowns: the past, accessible only by unreliable memory, and the future, unknowable but always hovering in the imagination. The still image, its stillness emphasised in this photograph by its extremes of frozen movement, liberates us from the flow of time, however artificially, in order that we might come to this realisation.

Wright’s two most recent collections – *Scar Tissue* (2006) and *Littlefoot* (2007) – are his least ekphrastic, containing few references to visual art or artists. However they are deeply engaged with problems of perception and representation, repeating and enlarging on themes from earlier collections. Wright continues his process of paring down, leaving out the visual artworks that have been his guide throughout his career in order to see the ideas

he has developed through them more clearly. This is not, however, a step down the road of abstraction after Mondrian and Rothko. Wright takes his images, as ever, from the natural world. Art is a mediator, not a subject; something to help the poet hone his technique, like landscape. He makes this clear in ‘The Minor Art of Self-Defense’, quoted here in its entirety:

Landscape was never a subject matter, it was a technique,
A method of measure,
a scaffold for structuring.
I stole its silences, I stepped to its hue and cry.

Language was always the subject matter, the idea of God
The ghost that over my little world
Hovered, my mouthpiece for meaning,
my claw and bright beak. (*ST*, 29)

Wright has said the same all along, building here on comments made in an interview with David Young (*HL*, 122), but this is the first time he has made it explicit in a poem. The visual image has been a major focus of his work, but it is the *verbal* image that is the claw with which he tears at the veil of appearances between this world and the next. The poems in *Scar Tissue* represent the perfection of Wright's command of this piercing visual/verbal image that wounds the surface in order to see beyond it. The poems are haunted by unseen presences that cross between the two worlds, caught in the no-man's land of metaphor. They show Wright's expertise in using the pen-mark as brushstroke, manipulating the whole tone of a poem with a few deft words. 'High Country Canticle', a poem about living in the moment and the benediction of immediate pleasures, is overshadowed by the description of spring moving 'through the late may heat / as though someone were poling it' (*ST*, 8). This almost-gothic twist on the 'high lonesome' is a current behind all the work collected here, joined with tighter rhythms and a dry, macabre sense of humour. Like landscape, ekphrasis has been a technique for Wright, and the lessons learned from his long apprenticeship to art remain present behind each of his poems.

MARK DOTY

1. Representing Time

We have seen so far that ekphrastic poetry has a tendency to draw together contradictions, the work of art acting as intermediary between points of opposition, tension and contrast. The presence of the ekphrastic object in a poem is ‘an acknowledgement of the unbridgeable hermeneutic gap between poetry and the real’, indeed it often acts as the marker that exposes this gap.¹ Not only does it serve as a mediator between the poem and the outside world, it is also often found in the space between paragonal discourses formed from binary oppositions such as art and nature, permanence and transience, stasis and movement. And within all of these discourses, the one force with which ekphrastic writing seems most consistently preoccupied and yet is most unable to explicate is that of time. Consequently, acts of ekphrasis often go hand in hand with attempts to subvert temporal influences: ekphrasis is known for its role in the disruption of linear narrative in many of the great epics both historical and modern, and it has strong links with less overtly temporal poetic forms that however focus strongly on personal conceptions of time, such as the lyric.

Also in a practical way, through both its critical and art-historical backgrounds, the practise of ekphrasis is located very firmly within arguments of a temporal nature; it is important to remember that paintings have a material history as well as a conceptual one, and that contemporary poetry is increasingly taking into account, and even seeking to replicate in some cases, the space of the museum itself as well as the paintings within it. The critical heritage reveals the same set of concerns; critics such as Murray Krieger have seen ekphrasis as a way of freezing the temporal medium in the spatial.

¹ Peter Barry, 'Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis', *The Cambridge Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2002). p.157.

Whatever the current critical thought on ekphrasis, it is unsurprising that it should deal in contradictions, being caught, as James Heffernan argues, between the ‘fixed forms’ of visual art and the ‘narrative thrust’ of words, and it is inevitable that time should be a central concern for whatever discourses operate between these oppositions of movement and stasis.² But Doty would, perhaps, disagree with Heffernan on two fundamental points: firstly that the visual arts are always fixed, or words necessarily narrative. Secondly he might take issue with the idea that ekphrasis subverts narrative temporality by being ‘the ornamental digression that refuses to be merely ornamental’.³ Doty, like Graham and Wright, uses it not as a digression at all, but as a central point on which the ekphrastic poem is focused. It is not a disruption, but rather the main action, acting as a structure for, and a material grounding of, thought itself. He engages with artworks in an unparagonal way, allowing them to spread through whole poems and using them relationally as a foundation to gain a purchase on his ideas. He involves himself with them, mixing personal memories with unabashedly subjective observations on the artworks, showing the impossibility and also the barrenness of an ‘objective’ stance by this fertile creative self-implication.

Doty avoids depicting the concept of time as something abstract; as with each of the forces that shapes his poetry it cannot be disimbursed of its subjectivity. He emphasises, in line with his focus on the material, that our sense of time comes to us primarily through *things*, that what we know of time is imparted to us through its effect on the material things around us – things that are cherished, inherited, tarnished through use, or lost only to remain in memory – and on our own bodies. Consequently, many of Doty’s ideas on time are formed through a close and continuous engagement with the world of made things – domestic objects and the house itself as an object – as well as the natural

² James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994). p.4.

³ Ibid. p.5.

world, and from these engagements spring his two major, seemingly contradictory, temporal preoccupations: transience and continuity, our lives as individuals and as one of a vast multitude. In a study of Elizabeth Bishop's study 'Croton' in *Source* (2002), he emphasises the impossibility of representing anything natural as a single object unencumbered by reference to its inherent multiplicity:

this lonesome leaf's a study
never finished, since
we aren't sure what *one*
of anything is. And therefore
we must begin the work again ⁴

This continuity, both in a temporal and a material sense, of the natural is explored through animals in many of his poems; they are at once 'themselves / and nothing but // an instance of some / more general rule' (*Source*, 2). The tension between the transience of the single life and the continuity of the multiple is often resolved linguistically in his poems. At the end of 'Croton' he returns to the first stanza, rearranging the words and trying them out in different orders to emphasise that there is no singular perspective on anything. Our understanding and interpretation of anything changes constantly, shifting with each moment.

Try: this elliptical isle's coral
and aglow, beautifully barred
with lesser islands' tropical sable.
Try: this lonesome leaf's islanded,
autobiographical. Or:

Enisled, this ellipse is coral and sable... (*Source*, 40)

⁴ Mark Doty, *Source* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003). p.40.

When we think we've finished seeing, another glance makes us begin again. In the third section of 'Where You Are' from *Sweet Machine* (1998), 'Van Gogh, *Flowering Rosebushes*: 1889', we see the same idea forming, but it is more explicitly concerned with temporality. All natural and living things are transient, but those Doty chooses to write about are made even more poignant in their transience by their brevity and vulnerability, and even more poignant in this brevity by the fact that they have been frozen into art and are therefore, to some extent, removed from time altogether. The contrasting emphasis in this poem, again, is on presence and movement. On the summer's 'continuous surface' this 'calm frenzy / of roses' is only a yearly interruption, but Doty is focused through Van Gogh on its arrival and newness, the way it is constantly self-replicating, always bursting into the moment, both 'various and singular':⁵

these waves
of arriving roses, the tumbling rose
of each arriving wave. (*SM*, 11)

Again, the chiasmus at the end of the poem takes its cue from nature in a defiant rejection of stasis, physically dramatising repetition and recurrence on the page. This is not the only example of Doty using a linguistic technique to give a tangible and physical representation of temporality and sequence. The essence of much of his ekphrasis is that it shows us as well as telling us; it strives to translate, to replicate an effect, rather than settle for a two dimensional description.

This interest in the cyclical patterns of the natural world underlies Doty's view of representations of nature and of their temporal implications, especially with regard to the genre of still life. In a recent interview Doty identifies his urge to write as stemming in part from 'the urge to make a form to resist the passage of time, and in part a desire to make a

⁵ Mark Doty, *Sweet Machine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998). p.11. Abbreviated to *SM* hereafter.

shape that will stand against the disorder of experience'.⁶ This statement highlights some of the fundamental needs addressed in ekphrastic writing: the desire to create something permanent, to control or transcend time in some way, to bring to life a sharper and more immediate reality on the page. It is interesting that he speaks not of telling a story, but of making a 'form' or 'shape'. This desire to make the written word material runs deep in Doty's poetry and by taking on the qualities of visual art he hopes to focus and condense them into a yet more solid manifestation though, unlike Jorie Graham's similar desire, this does not result in abstraction. When writing about painting especially, Doty often attempts to shape language into a spatial rather than a temporal construction, replacing sequence with juxtaposition and accumulation, trying to get away from the narrative meaning of words, using them rather for their immediate effects of sound and image. But he realises the difficulties inherent in striving to represent and recreate the immediacy of a purely visual form in words:

Zbigniew Herbert points out that language must go to great lengths to accomplish a mere replica of what painting does in an instant; arranging his sentences to describe a canvas, he writes, is like hauling heavy furniture around a room.⁷

The ekphrastic urge will be frustrating as it is located in the undefined and fluctuating space between words and pictures and their uncharted spatial and temporal possibilities. Krieger sees ekphrasis as 'our unattainable dream of a total verbal form, a tangible verbal space'.⁸

'Door to the River' engages with this fundamental contradiction between movement and stasis. De Kooning's painting refuses to be narrated, and Doty explains it in sentences that hesitate to move forward into completion, that seem to find a difficulty that

⁶ Jaclyn Friedman, *Mark Doty on America, Home and the Poet as Spokesperson* (2003) http://www.pw.org/mag/dq_doty1.htm.

⁷ Mark Doty, 'The Panorama Mesdag', in *Open House: Writers Redefine Home*, ed. Mark Doty (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2003). p.218.

⁸ Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*. p.xvii.

blocks progression. It resists the ‘obstetric’ quality of ekphrasis, the delivery of static pictures into words and time:⁹

He means, I think, there’s an out,

built of these fistfuls of yellows.
Means, I think, there’s a door,

in this passionate and hard-won
approximation, in this rough push

and lemon smear, this difficulty,

there’s – what? (*SM*, 77)

The poem carries a strong sense of opposing forces kept in balance by their resistance against each other embodied by the clash of fricative and plosive sounds in ‘rough push’; like the painting it is a ‘huge composition which invites / and resists at once’ (77). It promises a door, a way out of stasis, perhaps a way into meaning, but every attempt to push through is frustrated. And it feels as though Doty himself is trying to resist the narrative urge, trying not to give way to interpretation and explanation too easily, as if he wants to engage with the painting on its own terms:

can’t you just walk between the yellow

word *field* and the green word *door*
and not demand to penetrate

the primed and stubborn scrim
toward some clarity beyond forms? (78)

⁹ Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. p.5.

The tension that Doty struggles with here is explained by Krieger as the impossibility of stasis in any interaction between the two forms:

every tendency in the verbal sequence to freeze itself into a shape [...] is inevitably accompanied by a counter-tendency for that sequence to free itself from the limited enclosure of the frozen, sensible image into an unbounded temporal flow.¹⁰

The abstract nature of the painting, and the way in which the poem takes on and imitates its abstract qualities without itself becoming abstract, gives us a clue to the underlying realisation that time cannot be accurately or objectively represented. But it also highlights the fact that Doty is manipulating time in his attempt to represent it, working it as a pliable medium to mould and shape. He does this both in the way that he holds and releases the temporal flow of the poem, alternating effects of movement and stasis to create a non-linear representation of time as capricious and shifting as the brushstrokes he describes, and also in the way he links time and movement with colour, moulding a tangible sense of the tension between movement and stasis. The forward motion of the poem is an ‘emerald pull’, ‘the hurry// of intimately related and endlessly varied/ yellows’.

Our possession
is yellow and green, dialectic

occupying the meadows,

arranging for us this moment
and the next. (*SM*, 77)

This sense of movement begins not in the painting’s narrative delivery into the poem, but in the painting itself. Doty reads it as a text rather than a static object, something Michael Davidson identifies as typical of the ‘recent painterly poem’, and sees that its stillness is

¹⁰ Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*. p.10.

illusory, that '[t]hese trees only seem still' (78).¹¹ But the movement of the painting tells a feeling rather than a story; its temporal canvas is of one moment only, but a moment fixed in time, and again Doty uses repetition to solidify this in his poem, always coming back to the immovable fact and withheld promise of the image of the door. He creates a sense of a continual present moment in which movement and stasis co-exist, 'sparking the whole field into something // like a quivering although entirely still' (80). Doty further widens the temporal and spatial boundaries of the poem by inserting himself into it as a still presence passively observing its chaos whose eye draws him towards the door, making the field, the painting and the moment seem endless.

But the opposing tensions of this 'still movement' cannot be indefinitely continued in the poem, just as in life where everything progresses inevitably towards death which the poet sees in that moment as necessary relief from such unbearable continuity:

(I'm not afraid

to die, I'm afraid to continue
in this tumult of collisions

and vanishing) (*SM*, 78)

We are still searching for a way through the door, mentioned throughout the poem, the desire to push beyond 'the world's hung// surface' through to the 'bright core/ breathing' within (77-78). Even as Doty imagines himself going through this door, reaching an epiphanic moment of balance, he is aware that regardless of his sensation of stillness time has not stopped:

this moment of equipoise

¹¹ Michael Davidson, 'Ekphrasis and the Postmodern Painter Poem', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42, no. 1 (1983). p.72.

is one more movement of light

and flesh and grass passing through
the corridor, the world's wild maw

of dynamic motion (81)

The painting structures Doty's representation of this abstract feeling, his perception of the play of time on his mind, but the poem is ultimately one of acceptance, mirroring the tone on which it ends – he accepts the fundamental tension implicit in any form, whether the temporality of words or the visual space of the painting, and that time's flow as experienced is as impossible to represent as it is to evade.

Doty's question at the beginning of 'Four Cut Sunflowers' in *Atlantis* (1996) – 'What is any art but static flame?' – highlights the simultaneity of these contradictions held together in ekphrastic writing.¹² Many of them are temporal like those of fixity and flow, 'of an image at once grasped and yet slipping away through the crevices of language', and the gap between the arts of 'being' (pictures) and of 'becoming' (words) in which Doty sees us all as being located.¹³ This means that his poems are constantly working at the interface between past and present, and often bringing future, with its mingled feelings of hope and dread, into the equation as well. One of his preoccupations with the material world in his poetry takes the form of how time is held in owned objects, how they each carry their own personal histories and markers of time. Paintings, as objects, are even more strongly linked with the past because they both accumulate time's marks and memories like other objects as well as representing it in the way that they literally become a view of the past. Doty often uses paintings in his poetry effectively to fold time back upon itself, to have a direct

¹² Mark Doty, *Atlantis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996). p.4.

¹³ Kreiger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*. p.11.

connection with a moment in the past through art. This connection is glimpsed in the ‘*translated*’ retrievers in an Italian tapestry:

...his eyes meet ours dead on
with a shocked – and shocking – immediacy:
animal eyes staring five hundred years
but new as the surprise of yellow primroses. (*SM*, 71)

Their gaze ‘*is* fabric’ and yet instantly recognisable. This shock of the familiar in something so old engages Doty’s attention again and again. In *Seeing Venice* (2002) light is the carrier of shared experience, the blinding sun on a pale stone wall:

He [Bellotto] felt precisely that physical sensation, and when we look at this little patch of wall, we feel it too – our bodies and his conjoined, across a gap of time wider and deeper than any canal.¹⁴

Bellotto’s choice of subject, Venice, makes our connection all the more tangible as it is a known space, changed by the effects of time.

This means that Bellotto’s painting, in a particularly gripping way, has come to be about *time*. You can’t really look at it, especially if you have been to that spot, without layering the present atop the past, your perceptions against the painter’s. (*SV*)

With a representation of such a public space, we are also implicated; the painting becomes about our memories and perceptions, becomes subject to our imagination. These representations over time also have their practical uses as Doty points out, functioning as a backup of the communal memory: Bellotto’s paintings of Warsaw, for example, were used in its reconstruction after the Second World War.

Memory held in objects is used to suggest another, perhaps the most important, of the temporal contradictions in Doty’s work: the tension between permanence and transience. This is most clearly embodied in his writing on the genre of still life. As, by

¹⁴ Mark Doty, *Seeing Venice: Bellotto's Grand Canal* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2002). np. Abbreviated to *SV* hereafter.

definition, the most still (and Doty also identifies it as the most silent) form of art, still life is perhaps one of the most challenging artistic forms to represent in words: it has no voice, no face, and no presence. Still lifes can not generally be located in the public memory like Bellotto's landscapes, but Doty finds that their simple compositions and juxtapositions of everyday things provide a structure for his poetry and his thoughts on transience. 'The sunflowers' movement towards decay in 'Four Cut Sunflowers, One Upside Down' is arrested, they are on the brink of death, 'drying, the petals curling / into licks of fire' (*Atlantis*, 4), but they are caught forever in that moment. Doty's interest here lies not in life or death but in the boundary between it and the way these objects are fixed there by art:

...they burn

with the ferocity
of dying (which is to say, the luminosity

of what's living *hardest*). (5)

In 'The Ware Collection' from *My Alexandria* (1993) what he admires is not only the fragility of the medium, but the way the fruits seem to decay, seem to exist in time and yet are held outside it:

He's built a perfection out of hunger,
fused layer upon layer, swirled until
what can't be tasted, won't yield,

almost satisfies, an art
mouthed to the shape of how soft things are,
how good, before they disappear.¹⁵

¹⁵ Mark Doty, *My Alexandria* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993). p.37. Abbreviated to *MA* hereafter.

The still lifes Doty describes are mostly paintings of fruit and flowers, objects subject to natural cycles, and his fascination in particular with those that depict them on the cusp of decay could be seen as an ekphrastic fantasy, a poetry of resistance that pits shapes against time and intimacy against immensity. But they are more than this. In writing still lifes onto the page his words try again to take on some of their characteristics; he creates juxtapositions of colour and sound layered onto the page, a painting made out of image and metaphor:

Iridescent, watery

prismatics: think abalone,
the wildly rainbowed
mirror of a soapbubble sphere,

think sun on gasoline. (*Atlantis*, 12)

He describes texture and colour intricately, using the technical language of art, the names of oil colours (yellow is never simply yellow, but ‘Naples,/ chrome, cadmium’) and materials (‘camelbone and tin, cinnabar/ and verdigris, silver,/ black onyx, coral’), building them up into ‘a whole vocabulary/ of ornament’ (*Atlantis*, 2). Colour is never something simple and objective in Doty’s poetry but is implicitly connected with light, determined by natural processes, pigments and prismatics. His favourite colours seem to be those produced by the process of decay and tinted by time – rust, verdigris, tarnished metals and fogged glass:

bruised and mottled
rusts; acid, lichenous
greens: vitriolised,

encrusted, pearled. (*SM*, 53)

This love of imperfection and decay does not deny time but accepts it as essential to a fruitful engagement with reality and harnesses it as another raw material. The beauty of these objects is a result of their use, the fact that they are subject to time and show the 'evidence of time'.¹⁶ They are the 'ordinary sublime' (*SL*, 36), the everyday made extraordinary and beautiful by the action on them of everyday and ordinary forces such as time and light.

These objects are in use, in dialogue, a part of, implicated. They refuse perfection, or rather they assert that this *is* perfection, this state of being consumed, used up, enjoyed, existing in time. (*SL*, 40)

These vivid descriptions of physical qualities and these words loaded with imagery give a sense of the poem's language creating a space for itself by building a composition on the page and by using spatial juxtapositions instead of temporal sequences. Murray Krieger argues that this constitutes an ekphrastic activity in itself: that in making a pattern of thoughts and images on the page the poet is forming a representation of something material in his own imagination.

In all his writing about art, poetry or prose, Doty emphasises the material; he gives the words he uses a tangible sense, saturates them with imagery, sound and metaphor to the point of solidity, and he also emphasises the materiality of the paintings he describes. He writes about the materials the paints were made of, the substances used to create everything from an iridescent loop of lemon rind to the translucent 'amber inch of wine' in a glass Roemer, and about the fact that they will decay inevitably with time despite all attempts at restoration. The colours themselves, lead and tin oxides, are subject to further oxidation and decay. The golden-yellow pigment called orpiment, arsenic-sulphide, fascinates him especially because with time and exposure to light it clouds the surface of

¹⁶ Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001). p30. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SL*

the painting with the ‘powdery whiteness’ (*SL*, 22) seen in Nelli’s quinces, leading Doty to contemplate the lack of permanence even on this very physical level. The fruits immortalised here have not transcended time after all, merely deferred it:

...their depiction is now safe from the quick corrosions of local time and subject to the larger, slower depredations of history. (*SL*, 41)

In an inevitable process of ‘slow chemical transformation’ the paintings he describes are all fading, the colours becoming (in some cases such as Coorte’s *Still Life with Asparagus*) literally transparent enough to see through to the layer of paint beneath – the ‘schiet geel’ (shit yellow, made from buckthorn berries that were traditionally used as a laxative) used to paint the asparagus stalks is a natural pigment and ‘prone to fading’ (*SL*, 44). So even though time cannot be objectively represented its effects are everywhere; the objects depicted and the materials used to paint them are undeniably subject to it. The poem itself, ekphrastic in that its ideas are given form on a blank page, only transcends time through its multiplicity – through being printed, copied, displayed on the internet, held in memory – and the effect of time on it as a physical object can be deferred more easily than its effect on a painting which, in spite of the many ways of making copies, is defined always by its original, a point used by Derek Walcott to describe the democratic nature of the written word:

There is only one painting: anything else is a reproduction[...] whereas a novel or a poem can be held, and shared. There’s not a single object.¹⁷

The sense of immortality so ironically portrayed, for example, in Sappho’s fragments is conditional upon the poem being reproduced, signalling that the only way to permanence is through multiplicity. Just as the reproduction involved in ekphrasis strips art of its emphasis on the original artefact, thus facilitating access, the juxtaposition of verbal and

¹⁷ Quoted in: Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2001). p171.

visual in one form reveals the constructed and illusory nature of each, something Doty does both for sheer pleasure and, as we will see, with more serious aims in mind.

2: Representation and Illusion

As is only natural for a poet so preoccupied with uncovering the materials and mechanisms of representation, Doty is fascinated with the world of visual illusion. Some of his most interesting prose writing focuses on works of art that consciously create an illusory effect, such as the *Panorama Mesdag* or Hoogstraten's *Perspective Box with Views of a Dutch Interior*, works that push at the boundaries of representation in some way and attempt to stretch them, 'meditation[s] on limit, on what art might and might not achieve'.¹ What first catches Doty's eye about the perspective box in particular is the sense of possibility it contains, the fact that its rooms seem to stretch on unknowably; at every wall or barrier there is a glimpse, through a mirror or round a corner, of something just out of sight. Similarly with Bellotto's *View of the Grand Canal* (1740) he seems obsessed with following the lines of the painting into the impenetrable – shadows, side-streets, closed rooms and reflections. This faith in the world of the painting is what illusion thrives on, the imagination taking on a world created from simple materials – metal oxides, natural pigments – and bringing it to life inside the mind.

The box both entrances and confuses him with what seems to be the perversity of artifice for its own sake, the strangeness of painting something so exactly distorted that it can then be corrected perfectly by the lens. It seems to be 'inviting interpretation and resisting it at once', like de Kooning's *Door to the River* with its inherent contradictions, 'a physical embodiment of not one idea but of many':

Does he mean that even the most distorted form might come true? No matter how deep the trouble, how twisted the form, the rectifying lens of art could set it right? Or no – does he mean it this way, that art *must* distort, must bend the shapes of things?²

¹ Doty, 'The Panorama Mesdag'. p.217. Abbreviated to *OH* hereafter.

² Mark Doty, *Firebird: A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999). p.4. Abbreviated to *Firebird* hereafter.

In the *Panorama Mesdag* the poet can step inside the perspective box and experience being walled inside a painting that seems to have no edges and to ‘rise seamlessly out of the earth’, ‘unbroken, uninterrupted’ (*OH*, 219). He feels a ‘weird sense of being transported into an illusory space, like the dicey three-dimensionality of a stereopticon slide, or the fuzzy depths of a hologram’ (220). In an attempt to venture as close to reality as possible, with everything lifesize and in perspective, the artist has created something distinctly unreal, ‘inescapably false’. But it is not the effectiveness of the illusions that impresses Doty; in fact he finds the restored perfection of the panorama disappointing. It is too intent on perpetuating its illusion and he confesses that he would have liked to see it unrestored, to witness the human fallibility of such grandeur:

Then, in the face of time’s delicate ruination of human ambition, I would have been moved. (221)

He is more interested in how it was created from ordinary materials and turned into something visionary and surprising:

...he made his original sketch, then transferred it to a glass cylinder and shone a strong light through it to project the rough sketch onto the great suspended canvas. (221)

His interest in the way these illusions are crafted, and why the artists made them, is born out of a fascination with sight and vision, from the conscious illusions of the *trompe l’oeil* painting and anamorphosis (‘that peculiar form of painting which is unreadable till reflected in a curving mirror’(223)) to the lenses that correct his own astigmatism and allow him to see and interpret them. His emphasis on sight and on the eye as an instrument reminds us of its subjective and intimately personal nature – everyone sees something slightly different and these divergent impressions are recorded at a further remove in memory. Everyone at the Mesdag takes away a different shoreline, ‘some original, interiorized beach’ translated into the illusionary and elusive realm of memory. Perhaps this is why he uses the perspective box as the introduction to his memoir, *Firebird*, as an attempt to keep in the

reader's mind, from the very start, the inevitable subjectivity of any autobiographical account and the way past events are both confounded and revealed by memory. And perhaps also to explain that, even in the sphere of our lives and relationships, seeing is not necessarily the same as understanding. Outside the Mesdag, Doty can't stop seeing circles, the 'optical paradox' of the world shifting around him:

even in motion we seem to stand in the center of circle after circle. (224)

this is the circle in which I stood, [...] this is the world I arranged merely by standing in the center of my life. (223)

Similarly, it is only through standing back from them, seeing them with a more consciously distanced perspective, that Doty can give us a cohesive account of his family in *Firebird*; they cannot be seen directly, so he 'angles and skews them by artifice, and then tries to use artifice to set them right' (*Firebird*, 7). Only through the artificial method of dividing his early life into chapters, picking out the narrative thread of each relationship and recreating it for us through a series of moments held in memory, is he able to gain a clear perspective. And even then it is a continuing exploration rather than a decisive account of 'how things were'. He admits in his acknowledgements:

The allegiance of this book is to memory; this is a past colored, arranged, and choreographed entirely by that transforming, idiosyncratic light. (*Firebird*, 199)

It soon becomes evident that illusion is a much wider theme in Doty's poems than might at first be thought, not only in the representation of consciously visually deceptive artworks such as the *Panorama* and the *Perspective Box*, but as a feature of every painting and every description. Techniques such as perspective create an illusion, but so do the powders and pigments that represent our perception of the splintering of light along a spectrum, or colour for example. The works discussed above represent ideas made obvious that more subtly underlie all of the art Doty describes, especially the idea of the boundary between

the 'real' and the imagined. They cause us to question that boundary in both a literal and a metaphorical way:

We're used to art held in its place, contained, nailed to the wall, separated from the world by a useful golden boundary, which enhances and imprisons it. What if art refused to stop there, on the museum wall? Wouldn't the result be revolution? (*OH*, 220)

In a mirroring of these artworks that so attract him, Doty's poetry is full of surfaces that reflect, either to clarify or distort. Atlantis is saturated in metaphors and images of water; the sea, which is a constant presence in it and in *Heaven's Coast*, creates a sense that while it reflects our world it also conceals a whole other world. And the distorting power of fog, that ethereal and unstable compound of water and air, is used often in the collection both literally and as a metaphor for uncertainty and instability, the difficulty of having faith in an unknown future. In *Sweet Machine* the still waters of Venice's canals that give the city a subterranean double show reflection as something dangerously unstable. Mirrors are perhaps the most obvious reflective surface in Doty's poetry, though they often give back a distorted or limited reflection, from the antique Venetian looking glasses and the fogged 'Mirror in the Chelsea Hotel' (*Source*), to the clear mirror in 'Heaven' (*MA*) that creates the illusion of a 'rooftop Virgin's golden face / ringed by lightbulbs, looking up towards us'(4). Reflection is never straightforward in Doty's work, and these surfaces either distort or are distorted.

In taking reflection as his subject Doty sets foot on explosive metaphorical territory, loaded by literatures and theories of the past thousand years, from Plato's mirror held up to the universe, through Hamlet's mirror held up to nature, to Lacan and other postmodern theorists. It is not surprising then that the mirror is seen as 'the most powerful and enduring of all figures for both verbal and visual representation'.³ John Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', one of the most important ekphrastic poems of the twentieth

³ Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. p.176.

century, also sets a precedent that could not fail to influence all poetic ekphrasis since; it pushes the idea that realism *is* distortion, that even the mirror – seemingly the most innocent and accurate of all devices that represent – can deceive and distort:

Realism in this portrait
No longer produces an objective truth, but a *bizarrria*...⁴

Parmigiano's painting, a faithful representation of a convex mirror's distortion with the artist's giant hand in the foreground and his head shrunken and misshapen by perspective, also has a strange and uncanny effect on the viewer; it is so painstakingly rendered that for a moment it almost fools the poet into thinking the reflection is his own. Realising that it isn't makes him

feel then like one of those
Hoffman characters who have been deprived
of a reflection (86)

Such a strong sense of distortion, of betrayal by what by definition should be the most accurate form of reflection, leads to 'a startling critique of the notion that any kind of mirror – whether literal or metaphorical, pictorial or verbal – can represent the world as it is'.⁵

If the *Perspective Box* and the *Panorama* were about the nature of seeing, then Doty's poetry follows this up with the notion that seeing is always reflexive. If no mirror can provide objective truth, then anything can be a mirror held up to the world for subjective interpretation. Doty sees all art as a mirror, agreeing with Wallace Stevens in 'Prelude to Objects' that in a museum 'each picture is a glass, / That the walls are mirrors multiplied'.⁶ What a painting must strive to convey is 'not the thing itself but the way of seeing – the object infused with the subject' (*SL*, 56). What is mirrored is the moment of attention which joins both the artist and the viewer; the painting is a surface that reflects this moment of attention. Still life especially fascinates Doty with its capacity to reflect, because

⁴ Mark Ford, ed., *The New York Poets: An Anthology* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004). p.85.

⁵ Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. p.176.

⁶ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006). p.170.

it focuses entirely on the surface and does not detract from it with narrative – the still life is pure attention and emphasises its own status as a surface to reflect rather than to draw in:

they are the rendered aspect of the world, concerned not so much with the illusion with depth that perspective tries to create as with a scrupulous rendering of the optical surface, things as they are loved by the eye. (*SL*, 52)

He enjoys art that undermines its own illusion in this way, art that admits the most important thing is connection and the moment of attention, the impression however momentary. The stems of the ‘Lilies in New York’ are represented ‘realistically’, but the flowers themselves, the main part of the composition, are sketched in as the ‘merest suggestion’, barely there. Doty speculates on the artist’s reason for this:

Is it that
he wants us to think, *This is a drawing,*
not a flower and so he reminds us

that the power of illusion,
alive below the lily’s neck,
is trickery? (*SM*, 13)

Intentionally foregoing realism in this way allows the artist to create a sense of movement and also to foreground the picture as something created from the conjunction of his own interpretation and imagination; it is ‘quick and temporary as / any gesture made by desire’ (15). What he wants to convey with these unfinished lilies is openness and possibility – ‘[a]nd who could hope to draw that?’ (17) Like Ashbery, Doty seizes on these points of contact with the artist where questions are asked and an open end is left for reflection and interpretation, for a response to the painting, to set off a chain of associations, interspersing his writing on art with thoughts about writing and about the viewing experience. He often mentions the location and setting of paintings, takes us through the museum experience and the effect it has on his interpretation, right down to seemingly secondary factors such as the changing weather outside the Mesdag and the reactions of the other viewers. He writes about the critical heritage and history not only of the works themselves, but of the painters, their materials, their subjects. And even more than

Ashbery, especially in his ekphrastic prose, he relates personal memories and anecdotes, associations sparked off by small details of colour and light. He lays bare what the paintings he sees mean to him, how they help him interpret his own life, using their otherness as something against which to define himself, using their limits to ask himself ‘Where / Do I begin and end?’.⁷ This reflective quality he identifies works both ways: just as Doty can interpret the art he sees from the perspective of his own experiences, he uses his gaze to define his limits and stretch them, to constantly re-evaluate his identity not only in the light of what he sees and understands, but *how* he sees and comprehends it. This approach to viewing art makes no pretence of objectivity, and the fact that he uses it to highlight the subjective in his prose writing on art as well as his poetry pushes significantly at an important boundary: the division between literary ekphrasis and works of art-historical criticism or interpretation. From Doty’s point of view, these two fundamentally ekphrastic modes cannot be held apart – they are part of the same impulse to define that which is “other” in the light of our own perspectives and to define ourselves in the light of the otherness around us. Objectivity cannot come into this exchange.

In many ways in Doty’s poems, art perfects its revolution and *does* manage to escape the museum as he envisages in his essay on the Panorama Mesdag. He takes what he has learned from his fascination with the art of illusion and applies it to life outside the museum’s limited reach. In his own work he doesn’t aspire to construct a completed or finished trompe l’oeil, which would operate only within its own illusion and would therefore be confined to the page, although he plays constantly with artifice and the illusory. What he gives us instead are illusions with their workings laid bare; we can admire the artifice for how and why it was created as well as for the effectiveness of its deceit.

His drag poems are a particularly vivid demonstration of this technique and, as a representation of another representational art-form, they could certainly come under James

⁷ ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’ in *Ibid.* p.149.

Heffernan's definition of ekphrasis. They often have the feeling of giving voice to a secret, of being a public art that contradicts itself by being in many ways intensely private. The difference between this ekphrasis and Doty's work on painting is that, here, the person behind the art is much closer to us, both literally in terms of space and presence and also in time, and he acknowledges the risks that come with this immediacy: in 'Homo will not Inherit' (*Atlantis*) he shows that people perceived as 'other' still expose themselves to judgemental and unsympathetic attitudes despite society's growing tolerance. The dialogue between the art-form he uses and the one he explores also sets up an important contradiction in these poems: Murray Krieger sees drama in performance as the literary art-form closest to emulating the natural sign, and poetry is perhaps the furthest away from achieving that goal. Drama gives us real presences, lends our imagination whatever props it needs, where poetry gives us images and associations. Drama caters for the eye, where poetry is restricted to making an impression on the 'mind's eye'; words are arbitrary where performance seems natural, they are intangible and absent where drama is sensible and present. Ekphrasis and pictorialism are devices that have traditionally attempted to create the illusion of a natural sign in art as well as to represent one, and Doty fully uses this capacity to engage and delude the mind's eye, to create an impression of solid things such as form, space and colour. He is capable of weighting words down with the full ballast of sensory impression in his descriptions, expressing the writing process in the terms of craftsmanship as an attempt to 'hammer' and 'forge' a shape out of words. But at the same time he prizes the freedom of their arbitrary nature, the way in which they naturally resist our impulse to chain meaning down. In both *Atlantis* and *Sweet Machine* he uses fog as a metaphor for the indeterminacy of language:

What I am trying to do
is fix this impossible
shift and flux (*SM*, 19)

With both words and fog, their ‘defiant otherness’ is part of their beauty which ‘comes between us and things’ and ‘grants them their shine’ (20). The instability of words is worked into his writing, into the effect he is trying to create. So he is caught between the desire to create the ‘illusion of the natural sign’ and the impulse to undermine it. But the subject of Doty’s drag poems complicates this to begin with. What is being played out here implicitly rejects stasis and is narrative on many levels: drag is a dramatic narrative of identity born into a parallel time-scale of the imagination, but behind the costume and driving the disguise is the defiant instability and resistance of stasis that constitutes human identity played out in the real world.

Again, Doty sets up illusions only to undermine them. At the same time as his imagination wants to believe entirely in the performance and illusion, he also takes us behind it, seeking out the cracks in its façade:

She’s a man
you wouldn’t look twice at in street clothes,
two hundred pounds of hard living, the gap in her smile
sadly narrative. (*MA*, 18)

We are also twice distanced from the emulation of the natural sign – he’s conjuring this illusory presence from memory. And in some of these poems the tragedy of AIDS puts us at a further remove: the men are no longer present, *only* now present in the minds of the people who knew them. The poems create a sense of their presence through the memory of events they performed in or presided over. The benefit organised by Billy in ‘Lost in the Stars’ is an example of this – his presence is evoked through the memory of the event and the song of the drag artist there. We don’t realise fully until the post-script to the poem that Billy is dead. But it is not only the dead who are quickened into life by these poems, their illusion hovering before us: the living men who perform are given new depth, their outlines sharpened, our image of them heightened and coloured by the magical transformation provided by the simple act of changing clothes:

(He is unpossessed
of any special understanding

daytimes, off work, but she
was a contained storm,
her body's darkness opening,
as if one of the windows
had fallen open, startling us
with that continuous scrolling freefall.) (*Source*, 10)

The rite of stepping into something other – another character, another gender, another identity – gives a sense of fluidity. The drag bar is a place where meaning is uncertain and unstable, where signifier and signified do not fit neatly together. La fabulosa Lola of 'Esta Noche' shifts 'in and out of two languages like gowns / or genders' (18). Doty uses this freedom and fluidity to show us the liminal spaces and moments in which identity is thrown off, continually searching for forms but unfixed and malleable, a frightening but wonderful potential:

She was the no one we needed;
she sang the necessary
gleaming emptiness... (*Source*, 12)

...I've been no one
so many times... (*Atlantis*, 90)

These brave engagements with the possibility of losing the sense of self emphasise that identity is not, and cannot be, fixed. By creating an illusion of identity that can be performed – put on or stripped away like a costume – he shows that *all* identity is performative. The more specific implications of this are investigated by Judith Butler:

In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself.⁸

She argues that drag:

reflects the mundane impersonations by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed and naturalized and undermines their power by virtue of effecting that exposure.⁹

⁸Cited in Joanne Rendell, 'Drag Acts: Performativity, Subversion and the Aids Poetry of Rafael Campo and Mark Doty,' *Critical Survey* 14, no. 2 (2002). p.89.

⁹ Ibid.

Doty is aware of the capacity of the drag act to question gendered identity. He describes la fabulosa Lola as ‘a lesson, a criticism and colossus / of gender’ (19) – she shows us identity in terms of costume and disguise and how we can be liberated by consciously tapping into its mutability. For her, costume is both ‘licence // and calling’ (19).

In his analysis of Bellotto’s Grand Canal, Doty identifies clothes and fashion as ‘[o]ne of the oldest of urban pleasures’ (SV, np); he highlights our use of it to display an image of how we’d like to be perceived, to give others a sense of the identity we have created right down to the specifics of gender, sexual orientation and social status. His drag queens use their outward display to literally embody things that are abstract and internal. With sequins, silks and shimmer they condense the abstract notions of identity and gender into a ‘feature of bodily presence’.¹⁰ And this in itself is a dramatisation of aspects of Doty’s own style; he consistently changes concepts, even visual ones such as colour, into ‘material textures, mourning dove, moleskin, gaberdine’. This is very evident in ‘Crêpe de Chine’ where through metaphor he literally materialises description into costume: ‘the little parks and squares / circled by taxis’ hot jewels’, ‘silk boulevards, sleek avenues / of organza’:

I want to wear it,
I want to put the whole big thing
on my head... (*Atlantis*, 66)

Drag is also a way of condensing memory. He uses the performers in his poems to concentrate the mind on a particular aspect of the events he is remembering. Whether the emphasis is on imperfect beauty as in ‘Esta Noche’ or even memory itself as in ‘Chanteuse’ and ‘Lost in the Stars’, he uses them to find a form for it in memory, and they come to embody it.

I would say she *was* memory,
and we were restored by

the radiance of her illusion. (*My Alexandria*, 28)

¹⁰ Ellen Keck Stauder, 'Darkness Audible: Negative Capability and Mark Doty's Nocturne in Black and Gold' (University of Maryland, 2003) <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/poetics/index.html>.

These divas and queens already seem to exist outside time, so they are fixed in the timelessness of memory all the more easily. But again this stasis is illusory, only emphasising the way in which lived identity is always changing. Drag is a way of briefly inhabiting the certainty of an identity that is all performance within the more fluctuating and complicated reality of an identity that has to be lived everyday. What the performed and the lived identity have in common are imagination and memory; these have a central role in interpreting real events as well as producing artistic creations. Doty doesn't try to draw a line between what is art and what is 'reality' simply because this distinction does not exist, cannot be made to work. The fundamental part memory, interpretation and perspective play in both reality and art mean that the two cannot be separated. Each is in its own way illusory: an outward form created by the constant reworkings of imagination and memory.

This is what imagination
must do, isn't it, find a form? (*Source*, 12)

How we feel our way towards this form, both in the structure of poetry and in our own identities, raises the question of given versus made that is a major feature of both Doty's writing on creating art and his writing on identity. Just as the paintings in *Still Life* were created from the application of technical knowledge on found materials to produce paints, and imagination applied to these pigments to create representations of the world mediated through the artist's mind, this is also 'what the process of drafting a poem is, a conversation between what arises and what's willed, between the given and the made'.¹¹ The same can be applied to the formation of identity; the 'unstable gender positions' of the men in Doty's poetry expose 'the cultural rather than natural underpinnings of gender categories'.¹² Through metaphorical links between identity and the city he shows gendered identity especially as something on the move, always being reassessed and changed:

¹¹ Mark Doty, 'John Keats's 'Endymion': An Article Bibliography', *The Paris Review* 154 (2000). p.233.

¹² Keck Stauder, 'Darkness Audible: Negative Capability and Mark Doty's Nocturne in Black and Gold'.

look at my demolished silhouette,
my gone and reconstructed profile,
look at me built and rebuilt (*Atlantis*, 67)

He uses the city's vast and complex movement to materialise the abstract notion of identity, to trace its complicated fluctuations in a tangible, visible way. But this also embodies a negation of the solid body and its finite limits. He embraces the material whilst rejecting the idea of distinct identities that relate to each other through simple juxtapositions. In Doty's eyes, everything is porous:

we're only volatile essence,
permeable, leaking out,

pouring into any vessel bright enough
to lure us... (*Atlantis*, 88)

This sense of identity as malleable and absorbent is strongest in 'Nocturne in Black and Gold', a poem which freely mixes visual and musical references, about shadow and texture more than colour, focusing on the point where solid things melt into indeterminacy. He compares the harbour at night to Whistler's *Nocturnes*:

you can barely see
the objects of perception,
or rather there are no solids,

only fields of shimmer,
fitful integers of gleam,
traces of a rocket's shatter,

light troubling a shiver of light. (*Atlantis*, 87)

The whole composition hovers 'midway between form and void, / without edges, hypnagogic'. He feels at home in this 'huge// indefinition of fog', where the interface between the self and the other is blurred and indeterminate, quoting Keats's letter about the sparrow: '*I take part in its existence// and pick about the gravel*' (88). He imagines himself as a tiny flame cupped against the night, part of the Queen of the Night's 'lunar glissando' in act 2 of *Die Zauberflöte*; her voice soars so high it becomes 'no longer even human' but part of the night sky, 'a gilt thread ravelling / in the dark' (90). He tries on the boundlessness of

her voice like the ‘mutable, starry clothes’ of an imaginary drag act, only this act performs not the illusion of fixed identity but the exhilaration of its liberation.

Having been a thousand things

why not be endless? (88)

The voice is ‘at once evanescent/ and indelible’. Again there is a subtext of gendered identity roles being challenged in the song that he picks: the *königen* is head of a primitive matriarchal society, killing successive husbands to guarantee the succession of her daughter *Pamina*, until order and balance between male and female are restored by *Sarastro*’s rebellion. At the same time, the notion of fixed identity in general is being challenged. The poet addresses his dead partner, embracing the oblivion of death:

listen: I’ve been no one
so many times I’m not the least afraid. (90)

He immerses himself in the moment, and when the moment of death arrives he will be immersed in that also. He states boldly in ‘Door to the River’, ‘I’m not afraid /to die’:

permitted
entrance to the steep

core of things you think
of course this is what death

will be. Fine. (*SM*, 81)

Doty shares Keats’ capacity for negative capability, for being and thinking two contradictory things simultaneously, and ‘Nocturne’ has two wildly contradictory emotional states as its base. Ellen Keck-Stauder notes that it is both a poem of remembering, bringing the beloved into our presence through the illusion of the poem although physical death means his body is now literally nothing, and also a gesture of forgetting. Doty offers up his own identity to erosion in the poem, and ‘[f]reed of himself, the speaker can finally do what the poem from the outset has been about – take leave of his lover’ (21). The lover is both present and absent, the poet is both remembering and forgetting.

In the same way identity is both something given – ‘swimming up unbidden out of the dark’ from the working and reworking of memory – and something to be made, forged with artifice.¹³ Just as the queens in Doty’s poems act out an illusion of an identity that gives the impression of completeness, so too do we.

¹³ Doty, 'John Keats's 'Endymion': An Article Bibliography'. p.233.

3 Making Space: Mark Doty's Community Aesthetic

Mark Doty's poems have their source in a series of elusive and atmospheric landscapes, homage to the diversity of his native USA and also a reflection of his nomadic lifestyle. The titles of his collections point to the fact that the spaces, as well as the identities, we inhabit are largely constructions of our own imaginations. *My Alexandria* (1993), his third collection, refers both to the much mythologized Alexandria of ancient times as well as the living city evoked in Cavafy's poems of wandering and desire. His fourth, *Atlantis* (1996), compares his adopted home in Provincetown, haven for the off-beat and unconventional, to the legendary underwater city, reflecting the powerfully linked imagery of water and the unknown that is used throughout. The *Sweet Machine* (1998) of his fifth collection is a metaphor for the city, especially New York, and its implicit connection with the bodies of its inhabitants. Unlike Cavafy's city of desire there is no single backdrop to Doty's art; his Alexandria is anywhere he finds himself – from Provincetown to Texas, from New York to Venice and Amsterdam – and his Atlantis is the vast world of the unknown that hovers beyond the margins of our daily lives. This decenteredness, and its resulting attentiveness to the particular beauty of each place he temporarily inhabits, is a symptom of the poet's experience from childhood of being constantly on the move. He remarks that '[i]f someone were to build a monument to my family, the motto inscribed on the lintel would read: THEY MOVED' (*OH*, xiii).

Geography and images of place affect Doty's writing even at the level of form. He comments that the changing pace of his poems owes much to 'how you live in a particular place, and the speed of your days, the focus of your attention', and his poems bear this

out:¹ *Atlantis* is structured by the rhythm of the tides and what they bring, the salt alchemy of slow change and the liminality of the shore that points to what is beyond our knowledge. It is a contemplative book in which the poet's ideas are scoured by the sand and tides, as much as by the process of mourning his lover, down to their essential core. *Sweet Machine* (1998) and *Source* (2002) are written at a much faster pace, reflecting the constant change and movement of the cities in and about which they were written as well as a re-entry into the life of the world. The cities he describes seem to fuse in memory into a distillation of city life focused around what is seen – the crowds, communities, shops, monuments, markets, buildings and lights – until Doty's Alexandria seems more a composite city of the imagination than any definable place. An integral part of this vision is not geographical or architectural but human. While writing *Source*, he says:

I gained a sense of myself as not being from anywhere in particular, but rather a citizen of the country. And I want this to be a citizen's book – one that rises out of our crowded, uncertain social moment.²

We see the shadow of the poet travelling through his own poems, on foot and by train and bus, watching individuals appear out of the anonymous mass of the crowd, having encounters and exchanges, taking ideas and lasting images away from these brief connections with others. He submerges himself in the life of the city in which he is able to be simultaneously absorbent and absorbed, but he also has a strong sense of himself as an outsider in these scenes: as a child he defined himself as 'an observer and someone who figured out where he was in the world by looking', and as an adult, if as a poet he is removed from the mainstream, he sees his gayness as adding 'one more dimension of standing at odds to the collective'.³

Doty's reaction to this perceived distance, however, is not one of retreat but of a renewed commitment and engagement to the idea of community. If one word could come

¹ Christopher Hennessy, *Outside the Lines: Talking with Contemporary Gay Poets* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005). p.76.

² Ibid. p.76.

³ Ibid. p.78.

close to describing his poetic, it would be 'embrace'. Poems that have their beginnings in intimacy and in the particular widen out with a desire to hold close everyone and everything: Doty's embrace seems to become ever more capacious, enveloping not only the people and places dear to him as an individual, but opening up to a greater sense of community, a vision of democratic union whose motto is 'more world'. Essential to the capacity of this embrace is Doty's conception of an often hostile urban setting and the people with whom he inhabits it. The world of his poems centres around the visual, the search without a specific objective: shopping and cruising without always having the intention of sampling the abundance he finds laid out before him.

Like Whitman and Cavafy, the two great flâneur-poets on whose work he draws often, he is a people watcher and an advocate of 'adhesiveness' in both its true and hidden senses. His work shows an essentially Romantic movement from a focus on the particularities of the individual life to the importance of its place within the community. What he looks for, in everything, is connection with the unknowable world of others; an entrance into their intimacy. Cavafy, especially, is the figure whose presence haunts Doty's first three collections: *Turtle, Swan* (1987), *Bethlehem in Broad Daylight* (1991) and *My Alexandria*, providing the title for the latter. His images of upstairs rooms heavy with the presence of lost lovers and his wanderings through a dream-city of his own invention teach Doty to take comfort despite the constant loss that cruising, and indeed anything that involves looking, entails. The sleepless, endless movement of the city is a symbol of desire but also the stage on which time's erosion is performed, leaving us with spaces full of memory, half-recognised faces in the crowd, objects and the rooms that contain them. The emphasis here then is not on sexual satisfaction – so fleeting as to be almost worthless – but on its visual contexts, on what can be remembered from these brief encounters and on the act of looking. Doty says of Cavafy:

I don't know

If he ever wanted to touch anyone.
Oh, of course he did –
But that wasn't what mattered at all.⁴

Looking, and the memory of what is seen, is enough. Indeed it is the very act of looking and remembering, itself a form of intimacy, that shapes our daily reality; this is what Doty records. The childhood wonder at the suspense of the partially hidden is something he describes as part of his childhood memories of advent calendars. He explores the same sensation as an adult in '63rd Street Y', which is a 'voyeur's advent calendar' of men of all kinds: 'mostly not young / or strikingly Christian, though certainly associated' (*TS*, 90). His pleasure is in looking, not in an exclusively sexual way, but in the fact of bearing witness to and recording the evidence of others' acts of pleasure as if they were his own. None is framed explicitly by the windows, which hide as much as they reveal, but the evidence points towards the communality of desire, which leads Doty to make a point that resonates throughout his poems on gay sexuality:

Divinity includes desire
-- why else create a world
like this one? (92)

What the windows can offer to the lone viewer, as often happens in Doty's poetry, is framed not in the language of the body but that of the soul, of religion and spirituality: they show us 'the glad tidings / of union, comfort and joy' (93). The message held in this language is a daring one, addressed to those who would dismiss his visions of love and communion as something unnatural, ungodly or unclean – responses that feature in his poetry from the voices of the right-wing, the religious and those who make it their business to weed out what is not normal. The boundaries of these spaces where gay intimacy can happen, the cinemas, bathhouses, drag bars and other places of public meeting, are constantly threatened by aggressive policing, homophobic violence and strict zoning laws.

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner discuss the effect of these zoning laws in New York

⁴ Mark Doty, *Turtle, Swan and Bethlehem in Broad Daylight*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001). p.54. Abbreviated to *TS* hereafter.

that have forced the closure of most adult businesses that cater for gays and the practical extinction of safe spaces in which queer culture can flourish:

Now, gay men who want sexual materials or who want to meet other men for sex will have two choices: they can cathect the privatized virtual public of phone sex and the internet; or they can travel to small, inaccessible, little-trafficked, badly lit areas, remote from public transportation and from any residences, mostly on the waterfront, where heterosexual porn users will also be relocated and where the risk of violence will consequently be higher.⁵

Many of the locations Doty depicts in his poetry are vulnerable to such laws and thus to the violence that results from them. The political will to control urban space impacts hardest on those who have the least territory to begin with, forcing them to become yet more marginal and sending a clear message that there is no room in our culture for the expression of desires that are not seen as 'normal'. They are pushed out onto the fringes, where, hidden from view, they are targets for gay-bashers and vulnerable to all sorts of crime. Homophobic attacks, pursuit at the hands of the police and anti-gay propaganda all feature in Doty's poems about public sex, making for extremes of experience between the sublime and the dangerous, in places that are policed and controlled not only by the ignorant and uncaring but by those who would actively do harm. 'Charlie Howard's Descent', 'Paradise' and 'Homo will not Inherit' show the darker side of this after-hours underworld and the erosion of even this small and unsatisfactory space for desire.

Another defining, and confining, influence is that of AIDS: Doty charts the sorrow and displacement of men denied their place in the home and the family because of their disease, and the judgement they suffer. He writes about mothers who feed their sons off paper plates and won't let them cry in the house; sick men banished to unvisited hospital rooms or living on sofas and the charity of friends. Most chillingly of all, the overheard comment at a gay man's funeral: 'he asked for it'. In 'Homo will not Inherit' (*Atlantis*), Doty recounts how he himself has been the object of this discrimination. What he finds

⁵ Lauren and Warner Berlant, Michael, 'Sex in Public (Intimacy)', *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998). p.551.

particularly repugnant about the episode – going back to the room of a man met in the public baths only to find that he is not gay and wants to ‘punish’ him – is the idea that his desire is forbidden and must be policed or punished in some way. The poem also questions our own expectations of it, although it is directed more specifically at the religious zealots who ‘posted a xeroxed headshot / of Jesus’ on a downtown wall, inscribed with the statement: ‘HOMO WILL NOT INHERIT’. *Repent & be saved*:

And I’ll tell you,
you who can’t wait to abandon your body,
what you want me to, maybe something

like you’ve imagined, a dirty story: (*Atlantis*, 72)

The ‘dirty story’ he tells is that of his humiliation at the hands of the righteous. The poem’s anger, again, is expressed in the language of the system that would destroy it, showing that interpretation is everything and that the values of community, love and understanding are found in Doty’s own world as much as in the world that threatens it.

I’ve seen flame flicker around the edges of the body,
pentecostal, evidence of inhabitation.
And I have been possessed of the god myself,

I have been the temporary apparition
salving another, I have been his visitation, I say it
without arrogance, I have been an angel

for minutes at a time, and I have for hours
believed – without judgement, without condemnation –
that in each body, however obscured or recast,

is the divine body (71)

Here he explores the vast power of language to deny, but also to appropriate, space. Writing is a way of reappropriating the locations of possibility for same-sex intimacy as places of redemption and freedom, places that perform the necessary function of understanding and forgiving desires that transgress the normative ideologies dominant in society. In the ‘Playland’ drag bar, men of all kinds congregate because, here

there is no need to guard themselves,
no possibility of an aesthetic mistake,
and no one is too old, too poor
or mistaken. (*TS*, 99)

In another location for cruising, the Victory Gardens in ‘Paradise’, what Doty experiences in ‘the tentative equality of the dark’ is ‘the breathtaking fall from self’. Escaping personal identity and assuming the communal identity, acknowledging the common need, is represented here as relief or freedom:

I don’t want to glorify this; the truth is
I wouldn’t wish it on anyone,

though it is a blessing,
when all your life you’ve been told
you’re no-one, and you find a way
to be what you have been told,

and it’s all right. (119)

This may seem slight consolation for what has to be risked in order to obtain it, but Doty leaves us in no doubt of the life affirming value of cruising, and of these places in the absence of anything else. What he needs to be reminded, and reassured, is that identity is equally fluid and illusory for everyone. As he sees in the ‘Adonis Theater’, among the ranks of men watching or cruising, what the exposure of this illusion brings us closer to, finally, is one another, regardless of ‘whether we look to / or away from the screen’ (103).

The resistance to laying down boundaries between the public and the private comes from Doty’s knowledge that we are foolish to think our public and private lives are something separable, to imagine that our desires are really private at all. This is an illusion heterosexuals may find it easy to hide behind, although it is highlighted by some gay lifestyles, a reminder

of the way in which public matters are deeply implicated in private ones.
The state, the police, and the church have, after all, been presences in our

bedrooms and our nightmares all our lives. Such a condition reminds us that even the composition of, say, a love poem is not solely a private act.⁶

It is the extreme example of queer experience that reveals these incursions into our private space most clearly, but Doty makes it clear that this is something that applies to all of us, that the space-regulating power of public policy and big business constantly police the location, acceptability and availability of what we desire. They define, with advertising, how we construct our identities through what we consume and own. Here the objective is not that of the flâneur, absorption of the diversity on offer through purely visual stimulation, but the exchange of money. Doty does not sit easily with the uniform, climate-controlled ‘noplacement of suburban America’ (*OH*, xv) which he sees as causing us to lose our sense of connection with the people around us, which in turn compounds the problem of our consumerisation:

Thus separated, we are easier targets; we need to be told what to consume, and we’ll listen to the forces whispering in our ears about who we’re supposed to be and what it is we want. (*OH*, xv)

The effect of this is to normalise our desires until we all desire the same things, and to separate out the component parts of modern life – eating, working, sleeping, socialising, shopping – into different boxes that have no communal centre.

On a trip to Mexico, Doty reflects on the diversity of life lived out in the streets, and on the opportunities for community when all these acts are carried out in one space, around one square. The danger of zoning is that the marginalised are pushed yet further towards the margins, and this includes not only the sexually marginal but the homeless and dispossessed any city naturally produces. Doty’s flâneur poems often focus as much on contact with these people as on the search for sexual possibility; ultimately it is human contact in any form that drives the poet onto the streets, where the urge to reach out to those around us is revealed as a natural one. Here Doty also sees and rejoices in the

⁶ Hennessy, *Outside the Lines: Talking with Contemporary Gay Poets*. p.78.

everyday acts of defiance of what we are supposed to want: the man who has built a home from found things on the edge of the city, the musicians creating joyful music from scrap metal, proving that ‘anything dinged, busted or dumped / can be beaten till it sings’ (*Atlantis*, 64). The homeless girl in ‘Heaven’ is alive with attention, absorbing everything around her, reaching moments

when she wanted nothing, whole nights
without desire, since everything passing
was hers. (*MA*, 5)

The illusion of owning what can only be ours for a passage of time is something she resists, already having what she needs. It is through these citizens living on the margins that the city resists the limits imposed on it.

Even Houston, Doty’s home for part of the year, has its redeeming qualities, despite being typical of this zoned and ordered America where the geographical center is displaced in favour of a string of malls and chainstores, accessible only by car, indistinguishable from any other city. In spite of this decentered soullessness, the city finds coherence in its diversity, making space for anything and everything within its sprawling boundaries. Doty sees this as what the future holds:

if America has a ready example of life in the twenty-first century this is probably it: artificial, polluted, a little dangerous, and completely confusing, yes – but also interestingly polyglot, open ended, divergent, entirely unstuffy, and appealingly uncertain of itself. (*OH*, viii)

Doty’s own lack of rootedness, which he finds reflected in the city, is another gay stereotype that he wishes to challenge. He does this through the reinvention of the domestic space, first in an enormous and ramshackle house in Vermont, then at his current home for part of the year in Provincetown, which would seem to be the opposite to Houston in its cohesive, community focus. Having established that our private lives are by no means as private as we would like to think them, Doty then locates the roots of the community in our private space, implicit in our attitudes towards our own homes. How we

treat our private space and the objects within it has much wider implications. Will Fellows notes that sexuality affects our conception of space and what we do with it: the gay urge is to 'enclose' rather than 'displace' space, and this gives rise to activities conventionally associated with female home-makers such as decorating, collecting, displaying and restoring and to a zest for historical accuracy and a sensitivity to aesthetic concerns. He remarks that '[m]any gays are attracted to restoring broken, neglected things to states of wholeness'; this quality of wanting to remake or repair reaches much deeper than an interest in broken artefacts, and is to be found not only in the gay community but in all those excluded and marginalised.⁷

It seems that a difficulty with memory and a severed connection with the past are at the heart of this: postcolonial and women poets have often expressed the same need to restore. This interest in preservation hints at a conception of time as contained within the space of material things such as artefacts, clothes, and most of all, old houses. Doty often mentions the connection he feels with the previous inhabitants of the houses he inhabits and restored, with the people who have waxed the floorboards, built up the layers of paint and, after the death of his lover Wally, with the many who must have died before him in a house that is over 200 years old. Shared space, in these places as in Bellotto's paintings, becomes a connection as strong as that of shared time.

The desire to weave a new work of art from the shreds of the past and to rework the material of his life into a new object burnished into beauty is also part of Doty's memoirist impulse. His exploration of queer space does not stay within the walls of the house, but is extended into a wider community ethos which seeps back into the arena of public life – an interest in how we preserve our old buildings is inevitably part of an interest in how the evidence of our history as a whole is preserved.

⁷ Will Fellows, *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004). p.31.

historic preservation fosters community, enriching our sense of connectedness and identity as members of families, communities, nations. [...] These stable features of the landscape we inhabit help to orient us to the place and its history and so help us to define ourselves.⁸

Doty laments the way in which America deals with the evidence of its past, zoning it into museums where it is hidden from the view of the passer by and made 'visitable', dismantling it and sanitising it with monuments. This treatment of the past as something to be anaesthetised and isolated, its link with the present cut, in turn distances us from it; like the evidence of poverty or anything out of the mainstream, '[w]e don't want it near our own bodies'. The most striking example of this is to be found in the aftermath of 9/11:

The jagged iron ribs of the World Trade Center – the most painful, exacting evidence of ruin in 2001 – disappear by 2002. Where are they now, those sharp, Gothic pieces, photographed again and again in the long smoke rising from the rubble? (SV)

The public who are encouraged, for commercial purposes, to think that everything revolves around the fact of our individuality, do not accept the presence of such a vast and undeniable symbol of death in our midst. For Doty, paradoxically, it is precisely this stark evidence of death that has the power to remind us of our place as participants in the communal life around us. It is hard to think too highly of one's status as an individual in the face of this monument to individual lives cut short; we are forced to think of ourselves as one among many. This recognition is achieved through death itself – for Doty, the deaths of his partner, Wally, and many friends from AIDS – but also through its representation in art. The HIV epidemic has had an undeniable effect on creative production, including a surge of short forms such as the lyric poem, the short story and the essay. Judith Halberstam attributes this to an emphasis on mortality that is as fruitful as it is unfortunate:

The constantly diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and while the threat of no future hovers overhead like a

⁸ Will Fellows, *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture*. p.243.

storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands the potential of the moment.⁹

Time, for Doty, is most evident in how it is held in space and in objects – in the house no longer inhabited, in the clothes of the dead person, their possessions and even the artefacts of the unknown dead that can be purchased at yard sales and auctions every weekend. Doty's connection with Whitman, for example, is strongest when he visits the poet's house in Brooklyn, through the few objects with which he chose to surround himself, especially his parrot (now stuffed) and the space in which he lived. His 'Letter to Walt Whitman' in *Source* sets out to report back to the older poet on how things have changed, the greater openness and tolerance of modern society for his vision of 'adhesiveness'. It opens with a contemplation on the photobook *Whitman's Men*; the poems that once coded unnameable desires are now illustrated by the naked forms of the 'roughs' that inspired them. But Doty shows us that Whitman's wider vision of a democracy built on connection and the equality of flesh still has a long way to come. Whitman's old neighbourhood, Camden, is one of the places where it seems furthest off:

Jail, detox, welfare: Camden
accepts it all, Camden's the hole in which
we throw anything, neighbourhood so torched

it doesn't even have a restaurant. (*Source*, 21)

Whitman's vision may not have borne fruit here, but this does not stop Doty from looking to how others have conceived of the spaces around them, often in a more generalised sense, to gain ideas for his own vision. It is often a painting that makes way for Doty's attempts at revisioning and reappropriating the threatened and marginalised locations of queer desire. Only through the act of giving our attention and describing what we see can we hope to apprehend – in even a piecemeal and provisional way – the space around us and what it means to us. To challenge the idea that there is a correct version of

⁹ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York: New York University Press, 2005). p.2.

reality, a way to use space that is somehow morally better than others, Doty looks to the illusion of space as it is contained in advertising and in art.

The depiction of cruising in itself is visual in many ways: in the connections established through eye contact, in the body of the unknowable other displayed and objectified and the contact that is made with this other on a visual level. Often unconsummated, what this contact leads to is desire for the other. This visual stimulation that leads to desire is similar to advertising, which sells sex, using the human body to awaken our desire, not only for that perfect body itself but for our own version of and part in that perfection. For the brief moment in which we are captivated, this may seem achievable through the purchase of an item of clothing or a bottle of perfume. Our public space is filled with these images of perfect bodies to such an extent that we hardly notice them; they become usual for us. Through the representation of these advertising images and the false needs they provoke in us, Doty makes us aware of the risks that attend the commoditisation of our desires condensed in the saleable image. When we populate our space with unreal imaginings, images of the clean and desirable, we risk ignoring or shutting out real people who do not fit into the world created by those images. Doty catalogues our consumer lust and the play of desire across our minds as we wander the city. He depicts the bustle of the market, the enormous surfeit of things to want, but is also happy to browse

downtown after hours
when there's nothing left to buy

the dreaming shops turned in on themselves,
seamless, intent on the perfection of display. (*Atlantis*, 70)

He is equally ready to criticise the lush imagery he creates and turn it in on itself, to show its implicit instability and how it can be used to impose a shape as well as describe what is already there. In 'Sweet Machine', the vast image of a 'sleek boy' used to advertise

expensive underpants is compared to a 'young man on the subway platform', the beauty of whose shirtless torso Doty describes with lush and lavish praise:

Glisten fretting the indigo of a plum,
silvered chalk of moth-wing dust: (*SM*, 85)

The reality of the scene is that this 'shirtless kid' is scratching his body so uncontrollably that he is rubbing his own skin away. The series of poses he makes during this process of frenzied rubbing are described photographically as erotic 'flashes of the pornographic' or as statue-like 'classical attitudes, rough trade posing / as a captive slave for Michelangelo' (86). The language Doty uses is sexual; the resulting images connote pleasure, even ecstasy.

except he's miserable, I guess,
and it's two in the afternoon, 96th and Broadway,

and all of us waiting for the local
watch, how can we help it? (86)

Nor can Doty help comparing him with the 'sleek boy [...] posed in multiple shots' displayed so prominently throughout the city in 'huge, luminous emulsion'. The scratching boy has become unreal in his mind, an object – 'dark stone wearing the dust of the quarry' (87) – partly because of his similarity to the image of desire sold to us so many times we hardly notice it, and because of the detachment the city breeds:

nothing's
supposed to be real in the common nowhere

of the on-the-way-to, while we wait
for the 1 or the 9, strangers and witnesses (86)

By making us aware of his own desensitisation – '[m]oth, plum – hear / how the imagery aestheticises?' – he shows us how habitually we reduce the people we see to metaphor.

The antidote to this, surprisingly, is another kind of image. The kind of image that, instead of using the power of its illusion to encourage us to buy into an ideal, lays itself bare and reveals its own workings. We see it and enjoy it, but we also see through it. It seems a strange idea that the act of museum-going, an individual and introspective pastime,

could turn us outward toward the world. But Doty makes us aware that the most unlikely of paintings can prove a model for community and how we can exist together in our shared space. Treated as an artefact, a painting is much like an old house; instead of sharing the space of those who have previously worked to preserve it, we share the vision of its painter and those who have seen it. This vision may have been momentary for some, but there are sure to be others, those to whom the painting speaks, for whom its impression will be lasting. To look at a painting, then, can also be to experience ‘intimacy and connection’ (SL, 4). Once it has imprinted itself on the memory, it becomes part of our way of seeing and thus has the potential to change how we see the world around us. The light of the painting is extended, by our vision, out of the museum. Doty sees it as a revealing light:

This light is enough to reveal us as we are, bound together, in the warmth and good light of habitation, in the good and fleshly aliveness of us. (SL, 4)

The particular painting Doty has been looking at is Jan Davidsz van de Heem’s *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*. Its 350 year old vision has a lot to teach him about space and time: that pleasure, which is fleeting, ‘is to be honored’ (5); that in any representation space must be ‘transformed into feeling’ if it is to mean something, as our way of perceiving space *is* through feeling (6); that what we want is intimacy, ‘to be brought into relation, to be inside, within’ (6), but that this is hard to reconcile with our desire for individuation and personal space. Whilst acknowledging that memory is held in objects, it subverts our consumer perception of their value, creating a kind of democracy of things:

When both are made of paint, is a cabbage any less precious than a golden cup? (36)

The objects that carry most value are not the most expensive, but those made beautiful by time’s depredations, by use and the weight of memory. What we preserve through them is ‘something of collective memory’ (39). This is also what these paintings are to us: not a record of fruit and tableware, but of a way of seeing and representing that has much to teach us about how we see and represent. If Doty’s old things are a reminder of loss, they

are also a reminder of what we can hold onto: ‘a sense of home, of permanence, of the ground for ourselves we can make’ (43).

Enclosing space in the home is one thing – the domestic finds its validation in centuries of art and literature, in the myth of privacy – but making a space for gay desire in the outside world, in our shared and communal space, is entirely another. Here there are few narratives to inspire. As Doty reminds us, all we can expect is a ‘dirty story’. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner share the same view:

Heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture.¹⁰

Our ways of seeing are hard-wired into our culture through narrative, present in the language itself. To change this, new models must be created, and artists in all genres are increasingly devoting themselves to this task: Matthew Bourne’s all-male *corps de ballet* in *Swan Lake* is just one example of how these narratives are being appropriated and re-written. Doty takes up this challenge but eschews the role of narrative-maker: to him what is fundamental is timeless and outside the reach of narrative. The moment of attention, common to museum-going and cruising, is what connects us to each other and to the past, and this is the medium he uses. When we reach for the unsayable, often the only way to grasp it is through implication, metaphor, the sidelong glance. Still life paintings are about whatever we see in them and Doty finds unexpected pointers toward his world: ‘their sexual presence, their physicality, their bodiliness’ (*SL*, 54). What he finds here is a guide to intimacy:

This is the space of the body, the space of our arms’ reach. There is nothing before us here we could not touch, were these things not made of paint. (*SL*, 55)

¹⁰ Berlant, ‘Sex in Public (Intimacy)’. p.554.

This proximity erodes the boundaries between us and the painting, and reveals to us its final secret: that the objects represented ‘*are*, at last, human bodies, if bodies could flower out’ (*SL*, 56). What difference, then, between our desire for closeness with these objects and with our fellow beings? For Doty, everything we understand, we understand through others. History is contained in our lived space, what we do in it and our perceptions of it:

This is what history is: all those centuries of bodies, moving over these canals, twisting and blooming into life in these houses, these streets. (*SL*, 57)

This sense of connection through other people – in the light of the painting that escapes the walls of the museum – leads Doty from the museum to the sauna. Not for the possibility of a sexual encounter but ‘to be in relation to these beautiful physical presences, to all this skin, framed here – like works of art!’ (57). The painting awakens in him the desire to feel himself one of many, to be juxtaposed with others, the object of desire as well as its subject. The *memento mori* of the painting also has its effect: the knowledge that, although our community and our life as a species is ongoing, we and our particular way of seeing will at some point fade into memory. Doty’s poems repeat the age old message that all we have is the present, in which we are contained in our moment of attention – we are Whitman’s ‘flashes and specks’ – and so the pleasure we give and take in this moment is valuable. Feeling and its representation are what matter: ‘tenderness and style are still the best gestures we can make in the face of death’ (*SL*, 70).

This knowledge is what enables Doty to write his risky sequence on bondage and public sex in *School of the Arts* (2005). ‘The Vault’ charts territory unusual for poetry, even though it is repeating the same themes: pleasure, connection and the moment. These poems play their part in accumulating an art of gay desire, giving presence to its locations whilst revealing a side that is out of public view. Like Doty’s poems on drag, these poems speak of the beauty of our common imperfections and needs, and are not couched only in the language of sex but are lifted into the realm of art, with comparisons to Caravaggio

reminding us that all art was once a perception of life. Some of the poems are explicit about the nature of the connection that is taking place, revealing bodies in various states of ecstasy or concentration. Doty emphasises not only our beauty at these moments but our vulnerability as we are caught in the endless-but-fleeting moment of pleasure:

From a distance sex looks,
inevitably, awful:

what's less graceful
than transport? ¹¹

This is not the sex of advertising or Hollywood: moderate, appropriate and tasteful with its illusion of privacy. The people gathered in the gay bar are both watchers and watched, known and anonymous; they play out human relationships in all of their messy intimacy, acknowledging the roles of power and submission. Although even these are not finite terms: the act of the bootblack boy on his knees 'mouth[ing] clean' the man before him has, Doty shows us, '[n]ot much to do with degradation' (*School*, 45). The power is often in the hands of the giver of pleasure, and there is submission in the act of receiving, giving a stranger access to what is so intimate. Doty explores the fit of our bodies and what they can be to one another – 'completed, receptacle, / recipient, held, filled' – when we allow our boundaries to dissolve. This could seem mawkish and shocking; images such as the master and slave in their 'absurd, elaborate universe / of buckles and straps' (*School*, 51) may seem to be aimed primarily at the gay reader. Except that these poems are not just about sex.

it's not sex I want, if what sex *is*

is coming; more than that,
search and pleasure, reading,

divining signals, shifts of attention,
flare in my direction, pose,

tattooed arms gleaming, hips

¹¹ Mark Doty, *School of the Arts* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005). p.52. Abbreviated to *School* hereafter.

cocked in their particular invitation. (*School*, 48)

As with all of Doty's work on 'gay' themes there is a much wider resonance. He makes us question our assumptions and re-think the received set of social 'standards' that so often lead to prejudice. These scenes may seem particular, but their participants are 'local avatars // of a broader principle' (49), which is our urge to explore our limits and the desires we deny ourselves. This gay underworld is revealed as a broad church, with many possibilities for exploring desire in an unselfish way as well as for communing with others and accepting them as they are. It can provide release of a non-sexual kind. The last poem of the sequence, 'A Blessing', echoes James Wright's poem of the same title, which ends:

Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.¹²

What Doty gives us is a more optimistic and realistic vision of release: we may be bound within our frames of flesh, but what we can achieve within them is a constant source of wonder. It is the act of looking outside our limits, at the same time as being conscious for them, that brings the longed for moment of transcendence:

if he remained in his body

(constrained within
the bond of a perimeter
simultaneously fixed and permeable,

if he were stayed, if he held fast -)

then he would break into flower. (*School*, 55)

Within the fixity of our physical limits we have an endless capacity for looking and absorbing: the gaze. It is this, according to Doty, that contains our soul: the act of attention and the moment in which it pours out of us and is returned. He takes us to the places – the

¹² Margaret Ferguson, Salter, Mary Jo and Stallworthy, Jon, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, Fifth ed. (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005). p.1750.

edge of the city, the frame of the painting, the margins – from which this limitless outpouring can be explored.

‘Lilies in New York’ is perhaps the poem in *Sweet Machine* where ekphrasis works the hardest. It tries to be as close to multi-sensory as letters on the page can get, not only working the visual into its fabric with description, evocative use of language and visual metaphor, but also taking up more literal notions of ekphrasis and using sound as well as image to give the city a voice. Ostensibly an ekphrastic poem based on a sketch by Jim Dine, it becomes a metaphor for the city and an image of it written through the sketch, which is a depiction of a pot of lilies where the stems and leaves are ‘a work of attention all the way up to the merest suggestion of the three flowers’ which seem unfinished in comparison, ‘a few rough unmodulated lines’ and ‘barely represented’ (13). Pushing out its boundaries further with every line, it is a poem that mimics the blooms it describes not only with description but stylistically, opening out from a tight focus on the sketch to include the entire city in its frame. And like the drawing ‘[t]his page moves from deep, // pressured rendering’ towards the ‘slight gestures’ that can be made at describing the composition of the world around the poet in one moment of vision. The change is echoed again by the movement from the dense prose description of the first seven lines into brief, three-line stanzas that introduce the possibility and freedom of white space around the words. Illusion comes into play here again: Doty suggests the artist

wants us to think, *This is a drawing,*
not a flower and so reminds us

that the power of his illusion,
alive below the lily’s neck,
is trickery (*SM*, 13)

When ‘accurate’ or ‘objective’ representation of the lilies is impossible, then

what version

of their splendour would come any closer
than this wavering, errant line? (14)

Again, like the artist, Doty emphasises the artifice of what he himself is doing and of the poem he is writing. As with the drag queens of the previous section, he uncovers layers of illusion to reveal only more illusion underneath, to show that all is artifice and there is no final distillation of reality, no truth to be reached. This is ‘matter got up in costume as itself’ (15). The flowers Doty represents are not real but given the appearance of reality on the two-dimensional page using materials and techniques designed to lure the eye; the poem describes these illusory flowers in a medium that isn’t genuinely visual but is a form of sleight of hand, creating a picture in the ‘mind’s eye’; it also uses these flowers in a metaphorical way, pictorial rather than ekphrastic, to describe the city; the city is a ‘made thing’, both in its physical form and as recreated in the imagination, something that cannot be represented entirely, either verbally or visually, as it renews itself constantly and, like the mind of the artist or poet, is never the same from one moment to the next. The most that can be attempted is an approximation of what this combination of lilies, city and poet can be imagined, and imaged, as in one moment. Anything else would be a false coherence:

we understand, don’t we,
that stasis is always a lie? (15)

Doty does not hide this sense that his subjects are constantly trying to slide away from him down some long and unstable chain of reference and association, but revels in its uncapturable nature and lays his artifice bare. He is at all times conscious of what he is doing – creating a made thing (the poem) to represent other made things (the sketch and the city) in a medium that can only ever approximate the experience of these things as mediated through the imagination –and he ensures that we are conscious of this too at the same time as our mind’s eye is dazzled by the illusion.

And however much we know this is illusion, we *are* fooled. As well as naming materials (‘lead, black chalk, charred – coal?’) and techniques (‘smoothed or scribbled or crosshatched’), he makes us feel their movement and colour in more evocative ways:

the push
of areas of darkness, hustle

and dash of line, cacophony of pot
and stem, roiling swoops and scrawls
like clashing swathes of twilight (14)

This passage also hints metaphorically at the noise and bustle of the city that is made more explicit in the next stanza, '[a]s if the frame / were filled with colliding expanses / of noise', or 'charcoal / were a medium of solidified sound' (15). This hybrid effect encompassing movement, sound and tangible image produced using only words creates something very intense on the page; sound here becomes something solid represented by the effect of crosshatched pencil work, and the abstract 'grind and pull of this city' can be rendered into marks on a page that despite their stillness seem to come alive.

(traffic, sirens, some engine

hammering into the street below,
barking, air brakes expelling their huge
mechanical tribute to longing,

arc of a train's passage and descent
below the river) (15)

Mediated through the lilies, all these movements, sounds and emotions that form part of the city come together into something that can be given a momentary coherence and a form:

the instant in which the city
constellates itself

around this vertical stroke
risen from a blur of florist's paper (16)

In that moment the city is the voice of everything within it, and it reiterates what is hinted and spoken throughout all of Doty's city poems: the indelible force of longing and desire. But this momentary constellation of the city in which all these abstracts are condensed into image and sound is 'of the moment only' (15) and the rough approximation of this moment in words, which is the only representation that can be attempted, 'does not hobble

our apprehension / of the thing but honours it'. At the heart of this acceptance of a representation so unfinished and un-realist is the poet's understanding that anything else would be an illusion imposed on his impression of the moment, a false coherence.

And just like both sketch and poem, the city itself is unfinished: 'quick and temporary as / any gesture made by desire'. This series of still frames recreated and given movement by words can only pursue at the heels of the fleeing moment. In 'Mercy on Broadway' especially, the city is seen as a vast communal work in 'tribute to longing', layered and built by the people within it. Doty reads each building as 'both noun and verb':

where we live
and what we do: fill it with ourselves,

all the way to the walls,
proximity made bearable by separate,
commingling privacies,
that spill and meet at the edge

as clouds do, and together
comprise an atmosphere,
our place. (*Source*, 50)

Because it is built by this same very human process of creation and shaped by desire, the city is always new. It is a made thing to reflect the constant production of life, at once communal and full of the individual. And, more importantly, it is the interface at which the future becomes present, where life is created and shaped. Caught in one moment of this creative urgency, Broadway, like the lilies, attains a brief coherence, its forms structurally related as in a painting by the unity of the present moment. The turtles in their bowl on the pavement are 'inseparable / from the sudden constellation // of detail the avenue's become'; they are no longer distinct beings but 'live integers / of this streaming town's // lush life'. Even when this still resolves itself into movement, this sense of time chasing after the momentary and the new is retained:

Here's the new
hat, the silhouette of the hour. Here's

the new jewellery everybody's wearing,
the right haircut, the new dance, the new song,

the next step, the new way of walking, the world
that's on everyone's lips, the word that's on its way'. (*SM*, 98)

The music made by the scrap-metal instruments in 'Tunnel Music' is 'almost unrecognisable / so utterly of the coming world it is', and the sketchy 'smear / and chaos of lilies' achieves the same quality: it captures this moment of being on the cusp of the moment, the crest of the present continually rolling forward into the future.

Out of these negotiations

arises a sketchy, possible
bloom, about to, going to,
going to be, becoming

open. And who could hope to draw that? (*SM*, 17)

This, for Doty, is the cutting edge of culture on which art and identity are most sharply defined.

Perhaps the most noticeable aspect of Doty's engagements with art is just how fully the act of visual representation permeates his world. His collections have become more densely ekphrastic as his poetic has developed and recent poems, not yet collected, explore the poet's role as part of an artwork as well as ideas on beauty and the sublime.¹³ Doty features at different times as both painter and painted, participant and critic, the museum-goer and the consciousness which draws art out of the museum. He exalts in the made and the process of making, and his poetry is a collage of associations and influences that reflect the multiplicity of his creative engagements, celebrating every aspect of the visual world and the alchemy of its transformation into words on the page.

¹³ Mark Doty, 'Theory of the Sublime (Poem)', *The American Poetry Review* 35, no. 6 (2006). pp.16-17.

EKPHRASIS AT THE TURN OF THE 21ST CENTURY

It is clear from the research conducted in this thesis that ekphrasis has become not only a well known term amongst poets, for whom in any case the translation of images into words has always been a current concern, but a conscious pursuit in many cases. Special issues and entire journals are dedicated to the pursuit of the genre, as well as a yearly Ekphrasis Prize for the best poem based on a piece of visual art.¹ Learning to write about art, in both poetry and prose, has become an integral part of creative writing syllabuses, and an internet search reveals many academic courses in English departments, especially in the US, devoted to the study of ekphrasis both as a literary style and as a critical term. It is receiving an increasing amount of both critical and creative attention, appearing everywhere from magazines to weblogs. A google search for “ekphrasis” brought up about 189,000 results, including the expected books, articles and encyclopaedia entries but also exhibitions, projects, a rock band, weblog entries, conferences and poetry readings.² The ‘blogosphere’ provides many discussions on the perceived ethical and stylistic qualities or failings of the ekphrastic pursuit, with the consensus often leaning towards a view of ekphrasis as a workshop fad. These are interesting if only for an overview of current perceptions on what appears to be a revival of the ekphrastic tradition in contemporary poetry and also of reactions to the way that it is increasingly being theorised and taught as a subject in itself in universities.

In this chapter I will draw out further questions raised about the development of ekphrasis as a medium in the previous chapters by studying some of the newer contemporaries of Graham, Wright and Doty and analysing their continued development of certain ekphrastic ideas. My aim is to investigate why there seems to be a growing body of writing about art in recent American poetry, as well as a renewed intensity in this writing

¹ The *Ekphrasis* Journal has a webpage at: <http://hometown.aol.com/ekphrasis1/>

² Search performed on the 6th August 2007.

(why do the poets who *do* represent visual art seem to do it more frequently and to give it an ever more important place in their poetic?), and why and how it has increasingly become a vehicle for thought on the art of poetry itself, as well as for the political and social implications of the images with which it engages.

The study of the point at which the verbal and visual worlds meet is, as laid out in the introduction to this thesis, not a new phenomenon; it goes back to the very beginnings of literature itself. But what *could* be said to be relatively new is the exclusive focus on ekphrasis as both subject and technique that has emerged particularly strongly in the last two decades with the ekphrastic collection. I define this to mean collections of poetry that are mostly or wholly constructed through engagement with works of visual art or made objects and images. Along with Doty's *School of the Arts* (2005), based around images as diverse as x-rays, sculpture, erotic performances and of course paintings, recent examples include works by Cole Swensen, Mary Jo Bang, Sharon Dolin, Debora Greger, Claudia Rankine and others, some of whom will be discussed in this chapter. The work of these poets, like that of Graham, Wright and Doty, belies Michael Benton's statement that most recent ekphrasis is 'actual ekphrasis', based on a real image, by undermining and testing the limits of this definition.³ They work at the intersection between notional and actual ekphrasis, exposing the separation between these two ekphrastic states as an impossible, imposed and unreal one. Their emphasis is on the idea that there is no direct line from image to paper, whether in visual or verbal representation, and each image is necessarily reimagined before it can be reconveyed. It should be noted that parallel developments are emerging in the world of literary fiction, with many American novels of the last decade taking a work of art or the works of an artist as their starting point. This chapter argues that ekphrasis is becoming more popular with each successive generation of poets not only because of their affinity with previous generations who are influential in this respect, such

³ Michael Benton, 'Anyone for Ekphrasis? (Poetry on Visual Artworks)', *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 37, no. 4 (1997). p.367.

as the Modernists or the New York School, but also because they find in it the inspiration and the germ for their own entirely contemporary ideas. Being more fluid than a theory, ekphrasis seems to adapt to capture the cultural zeitgeist of each generation, working like memory in its constant process of looking again at the old and juxtaposing it with the new.

Cole Swensen and literary transparency

Cole Swensen is often accused by critics of writing ‘academic’ poetry, of prosiness, of self importance and a lack of focus on her actual subject. Jorie Graham is the other American poet who has perhaps most frequently suffered attacks on both her style and the ethics of her project (as well as frequent accusations relating to the nepotism rife in contemporary workshop culture, leading to the coining of a new term for openness in poetry competitions: the Jorie Graham rule).¹ She and Swensen share much common ground in their stylistic nods towards language poetry, an almost modernist impersonality that has sometimes been read as coldness or even arrogance, and of a gratuitous level of superficial difficulty that, far from containing hidden depths, in the eyes of some reveals itself ultimately to be meaningless. Anis Shivani, in his essay ‘American Poetry in an Age of Constriction’ comments that Graham is ‘the poetry world’s answer to American academics fascinated by outdated French deconstructionists, equal purveyors of false difficulty’.² William Logan, one of Graham’s most famously cutting critics, has called her work, among other things, ‘blindingly tedious’.³ It is clear that the first reaction of the reader to these poets can often be one of frustration, something acknowledged even by those who write most favourably about Graham’s work; where opinion differs is over whether this initial difficulty is a valid and valuable part of the reading experience or merely an empty challenge to the reader’s patience.

Many of Swensen’s collections have been largely or entirely inspired by either visual art or the intersection of the verbal and the visual. *Try* (1999) focuses on late mediaeval and early renaissance religious paintings as well as a handful of modern paintings and a piece of contemporary video-art. *Such Rich Hour* (2001) is based on the illuminated French

¹ John Sutherland, ‘American Foetry’, *The Guardian*, Monday 4th July 2005.

² Anis Shivani, ‘American Poetry in an Age of Constriction’, *The Cambridge Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2006). p.206.

³ William Logan, ‘Falls the Shadow’, *The New Criterion* 20, no. 10 (2002).
<http://newcriterion.com:81/archive/20/jun02/logan.htm>

manuscript *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, which is, as Swensen describes in her introduction, a fifteenth century book of hours. Swensen also sums up her approach to ekphrasis here; the poems

soon diverge from their source and simply wander the century...they are simply collections of words, each of which begins and ends on the page itself. (5)

Again, these poems seek out the points of transition between the mediaeval and the renaissance worlds. *Goest* (2004) is a meditation on the colour white and on the moments at which many of the things we take for granted in our everyday lives – the mirror, streetlights, the lightbulb, glass – were invented. Her most recent volume, *The Glass Age* (2007), continues this investigation of our urge to create, reflect and give passage to light in all its forms, especially through artists who have used glass (or its image in words) in their work: among them Bonnard, Apollinaire, Baudelaire, Wittgenstein, Hammershøi, Saki and the Lumière brothers.

Try, especially, is an important and iconic work, which has received extended treatment in Lynn Keller's essay 'Poems Living with Paintings: Cole Swensen's Ekphrastic *Try*'. Particularly noted in the essay are Swensen's 'nonparagonal' approach to painting (180) and its feminist implications in her writing. The former is laid out in Swensen's essay 'To Writewithize' (2001). Here she argues that previous critical discussions of ekphrasis, such as those by Heffernan and Krieger, are limited by their insistence on seeing a struggle for dominance between the two media brought together, a battle between word and image. Swensen sees this view as an imposition and one that immediately puts the writer in opposition against the work before her, locating her immovably 'on the side of' words, and essentially cutting her off from unhindered identification with the visual as she is, more often than not, placed 'standing across from it, in a kind of face-off, in a gallery or

museum'.⁴ This physical stance of opposition can lead to a psychological one: 'despite the apparent homage, there's frequently an element of opposition, a tinge of rivalry and/or challenge inherent in this mirroring'.⁵ This is not to say that a confrontational approach is inevitably invalid, but that it is not always the most adequate portrayal of the way art enters into our lives. It is also an approach that privileges the original artwork as different from the other images around us and entails an inherently traditional, white, masculine conception of ekphrasis that is increasingly coming under challenge from writers who do not fit this description.

The St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott, for example, describes how he often feels the urge to turn away from the conventional establishments of art finding that, in their attempt to preserve, museums render their objects lifeless, surrendering them to 'History with its whiff of formaldehyde'.⁶ To Walcott these institutions with their grandiose buildings and statues symbolise colonial power; they are monuments to the urge to capture and enclose objects of value, the idea of wealth itself, which he sees as inherently phallocentric:

We had no such erections
above our colonial wharves, our erogenous zones
were not drawn to power.⁷

It is no surprise then that, as identified by James Heffernan and Barbara Fischer, poets after modernism have often mused upon the museum-going experience itself and have also begun to look further afield for the materials of their ekphrastic poems, not limiting themselves to the world of workshop, museum and gallery. In postcolonial terms this widening of perspective has been particularly important. Walcott's access as a child to the world of art was through the books and postcards in his father's library and much of his poetry looks back to these first encounters and the deep love of art that flourished from

⁴ Cole Swensen, 'To Writewithise' *American Letters and Commentary* 13 (2001).
<http://www.du.edu/~cswensen/writewithize.html>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Derek Walcott, *Tiepolo's Hound* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001). p.182.

⁷ Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990). p.192.

them. This puts into question the importance of the artwork as original object. More and more writers are coming to see the painting itself as secondary to the experience of seeing it, in whatever form it may be accessed, tending, as Charles Wright does, to internalise it in memory and *see through* it rather than *look at* it, and certainly not to represent it framed and central as in a museum. Wright's collections of postcards and photographs on his study and office walls often take on a kind of coherence amongst themselves, entering into relation with both the other chosen images and the everyday objects and views that surround them. Some of the more confusing images in his poems – such as the 'reindeer' filing 'through the bronchial trees' in his 'Self-Portrait' based on photographs of the poet in Italy (*WTT*, 13) – have been revealed through questioning to be taken from postcards juxtaposed in his personal collection. They become part of a private 'language of images' in which

all the images belong to the same language and all are more or less equal within it, because they have been chosen in a highly personal way to match and express the experience of the room's inhabitant.⁸

John Berger goes on to say that, logically, these personal collections 'should replace museums' (30). In the age of reproduction, the original image will inevitably be deprivileged in favour of the accessible image; this takes nothing away from its power as an artefact, as an historical object, but it increases the reach and the power of its message and therefore the possibilities and diversity of interpretation. Swensen's essay 'To Writewithize' captures the fundamental effect that this shift has had on conceptions of ekphrasis. New works do not encounter the artwork in an all-important moment of seeing, a 'face-off' with the original object; they 'don't look at art so much as live with it'. Instead of a full-frontal stare-out there's a 'side-by-side, a walking-along-with, at their basis', and thus the paragonal opposition suggested by Heffernan and Krieger is undermined:

the operative relationship is not so much between a writer and a work of art as it is between verbal and visual modes of experience, both of which the writer lives.⁹

⁸ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: The BBC and Penguin Books, 1972). p.30.

⁹ Swensen, 'To Writewithize'.

This is not a new idea but reflects what Swensen and other poets have already been doing for some time. *Try* experiments with ways of ‘living with’ paintings: enacting them; inhabiting them imaginatively; encountering them in different contexts; and treating them as texts with myriad possibilities rather than still images fixed forever into the conceptual frameworks they were originally given. This approach lives out Jorie Graham’s idea of the peripheral and many-sided acts of perceiving that can be juxtaposed to create an ever-expanding and complex approximation of the elusive and unattainable ‘whole’ view; it does so not only by giving different views of the same painting but by exploring an idea through multiple paintings on the same theme which, in itself, questions conceptions of uniqueness and originality.

One theme is the moment of Christ’s appearance to Mary after she has found the empty tomb and his words: ‘*noli me tangere*’. This scene, captured through many different paintings and different ways of ‘living with’ them, allows Swensen to explore the symbolism of the unfulfilled desire to touch and its implications for the perception of female desire throughout history:

If you profane this is not flesh with your supple
seething (8)

Mary’s desire to touch Jesus is continually and eternally thwarted, the act gestured towards but never completed as its realisation would be seen to ‘profane’ the purity of the touched object or person. Her hands are ‘million-fingered’ (8) and, coupled with the description of her as ‘Mary Mary quite so many’ (9), this encourages us to read her as a symbol of all female desire and its subordination to the male command.

Mary’s repudiated urge ignites the same desire in the poet herself, who, in the next poem, hesitantly approaches the canvas in the traditional museum ‘face-off’ and, when the guard turns his back, reaches out to touch the figure who is ‘in the end a man’ (13).

Importantly, this split perspective creates a fluidity of subject positions that echoes Jorie Graham's detached and impossibly placed observer, giving a sense that the reader is surrounded, that the paintings look back. As the woman steps out of the museum, wearing a red coat similar to that depicted on the Madonna, she crosses the line between perceiver and perceived. This kind of reversal is fundamental to much recent ekphrastic poetry; the poet makes the reader aware of the crossfire of gazes that are involved in the simple act of looking at a painting – that of the painter (as Doty makes us conscious in *Seeing Venice*), the portrait subject (further complicated when the subject is the writer him- or herself as in Wright's self-portraits), and of course the viewer (are we the viewer? or the poet? or an amalgam of both?) – and emphasises that self-awareness of one's role as perceiver also contributes to one's awareness of how one is perceived. Both Swensen and Graham often switch pronouns throughout their poems, preventing the reader from settling into one perspective position. Swensen's idea of 'living with' paintings may suggest a degree of familiarity – the paintings are often depicted through memory or as reproductions, their images kept close and viewed repeatedly rather than visited in a museum – but, as Lynn Keller points out, this is not always the case. In fact, the repetition of perception entailed in this closeness to an image over a period of time can result in an intensely defamiliarising effect:

when syntax so insistently points in several directions at once, and when interpretive options are so foregrounded, instability becomes the most notable aspect of the reader's experience of the painting.¹⁰

This approach engenders in the reader a kind of negative capability, a feeling that we are at the same time brought closer to and distanced from the object under our gaze. By the end of *Try* the paintings that may have been familiar to us through visits to museums, reproductions or even television documentaries come to mean something utterly different to us and could, perhaps, be re-visited and seen with a new set of ideas, associations and

¹⁰ Lynn Keller, 'Poems Living with Paintings: Cole Swensen's Ekphrastic *Try*' *Contemporary Literature* 46, no. 2 (2005). p.188.

questions. As Wright points out, once we think we know what we are seeing we cease to see it; Swensen questions how we come to define and explain to ourselves what we see and therefore reinvests the paintings with the lack that is essential to seeing. In *Try* we see so many versions of the Noli me Tangere scene and the Flight to Egypt that we forge a new painting in our own minds that is a fluid and composite work of memory. This could be seen to reflect something fundamental about the modern tourist's experience of seeing paintings (something discussed by Debora Greger in *Western Art* (2004)).

Walcott deals with the same issue in *Tiepolo's Hound*. The title of this long poem is, in itself, misleading as the impetus of the poem is the poet's failure to fully remember or find a particular painting from which one detail – the stroke of light on a hound's thigh – has inscribed itself indelibly on his mind. He lets on early in the poem that the detail could equally well be from a Veronese, and the background he fills in around it from memory could be from multiple paintings. In the end, the poet's quest to find the original painting is revealed to be futile; the detail itself was important only for the recognition to which its captivating beauty has brought the poet and the journey into the self as perceiver on which it has led him. In this case the image initially blinds the poet, in its elusiveness, then subsequently reveals not only his excessive investment in Western European ideals of cultural *richesse* and beauty but also his neglect of the equal images, often rather based in poverty and suffering, with which his Caribbean home has furnished him.

As Doty reminds us, these details we pick up on often function as metaphors for something fundamental but unrecognised in our lives; when an image comes under the study of the imagination our investigation of our own perception often leads to self-knowledge. Certain poets, such as Walcott and Wright, use paintings to reflect upon and question their own values and ideas, and Doty extends this to using them to look at the values of society as a whole through our exposure and reactions to images in the public domain. In these instances especially, the multiplicity of images seen and depicted

challenges their coherence as individual objects. Wright, for example, forsakes the pull of individual paintings in order to distil an idea from a series of paintings, specifically those paintings that speak to his own life albeit via an unconscious and unstudied attraction. He uses these ideas, like Walcott, to test his poetic, turning a harsh light on himself and the implications of how he chooses to represent his perceptions.

Like Jorie Graham, Swensen's intention, and the ultimate effect of her poems, is to open up a 'space between', to show us that the continuity of what we perceive is an illusion and that in the gaps we overlook are spaces fertile with possibility. What we see as the lines of demarcation between two things are often interstices if we look closer. She makes us realise more fully, for example, the possibilities of interaction and interpretation in the space between the artwork and its viewer. The most important facet of this constant drawing out of the gaps between things and ideas is its potential for raising our awareness of how we unconsciously choose what to look *at* and what to look *through*. We tend to see, or to put it more accurately *not* to see, certain objects as transparent: the word itself is one of the greatest examples of our capacity to ignore the vehicles of our experience, the scaffolding behind the illusion. Before unpacking the importance of this emphasis on visualising these points of illusory invisibility, it would first be useful here to explore some of the effects it has on the relationship between the poem and the visual artwork.

The most obvious of these is that, as Graham also points out, it encourages us to see the poem itself as both a spatial and a narrative object. Both Graham and Swensen use the blank space around and within their poems in a profoundly transformative way as both silence and space. They want us to be aware simultaneously of the medium and of the idea in the face of which it becomes invisible, an awareness they bring to both media:

The space in paintings is not paint; it is space. (*Glass Age*, 15)

ALL white space in and around a poem is silence, not paper.¹¹

These statements work in a subversive way, as often we will have taken for granted the space we see in the painting and the silence we hear in the poem without thinking of the paint or the paper they are made of. The act of spelling out what the artwork *becomes* draws our attention to the overlooked process of how it got there, and the transparent medium that it palpably *is* and yet, somehow, is no longer perceived to be. When the presence of both things is acknowledged the veil of illusion is rent apart momentarily: our minds, predisposed as they are to seeing the represented image before the objects that represent it, soon revert to seeing space or hearing silence even though they are aware of the components that create it. We effect this translation so seamlessly that it is easier for us to see representational illusion than objective reality at times, something that has been studied from theoretical and psychological perspectives, by theorists from Richard Dawkins to Jean Baudrillard.

This questioning of the relationship between object and world, image and word, breaks down forever the idea of a binary and paragonal ekphrastic opposition in which each side struggles for dominance. It is perhaps no coincidence that this construct of duality has been undermined principally by women poets, given the discouraging reflections of femininity that Swensen shows us in the paintings represented in *Try*. Poets of the last decade, male and female, have been mapping out the grey areas where word and image meet and overlap rather than staging confrontations between them. The ‘space between’ they open up is not an unclaimed land waiting for one side or the other to conquer it, but rather it is populated with diverse and fertile acts of engagement, collaboration, appropriation and mutual inspiration. As has been shown in this thesis, it also opens the way for a more inclusive conception of ekphrasis, especially when poets are not consciously working within such a description or when they are trying to break free

¹¹ Jorie Graham, ‘Poets Q&A’, *Smartish Pace* (2004).
http://www.smartishpace.com/home/poetsqa/graham_answers.html

from it. I have argued for performance as a kind of ekphrasis as it is used in Doty's work; many other writers, both creative and critical, have defined ekphrasis as any image translated across the boundaries of a medium, writing about visual ekphrasis and musical ekphrasis. Within its widening limits, ekphrasis has begun to erode the boundaries between the creative and the critical, as we have seen with the inclusion of work from both sides of the divide in Jorie Graham's poetry in particular. Perhaps this is unsurprising, as ekphrasis involves close and critical contact with another artwork. W. J. T. Mitchell has made the case for art history to be considered a form of ekphrasis, encouraged by the way that American poets have frequently dabbled in both kinds of writing and brought aspects of the one to the other from Ashbery and O'Hara to Mark Strand and Swensen herself.¹² Most importantly, contemporary poets working on ekphrastic projects almost universally seek to erode as well as to define boundaries of all kinds rather than simply to reinforce tired dichotomies and unfair hierarchies.

Consciousness of what could happen in this endlessly fertile 'space between' also allows us to conceive of looser forms of ekphrastic poetry as we acknowledge the fundamental desire of the human psyche to link as well as to frame (which in turn leads us to see, as Graham has shown, that the two impulses are inseparable and indeed fuel each other in an endless cycle). This refers us to the idea that the relation between word and image is not a direct one; in putting the two together we make many associative detours, linking them to other words and other images, as in Graham's 'Pollock and Canvas', so that description can never simply be a matter of saying what we see.

This linking of objects or ideas that may not often be juxtaposed leads to a positive legitimising effect. It has been suggested that the omnipresence of the painting in the poetry workshop lends an 'aesthetic legitimacy' to some poems that they might otherwise

¹² W J T Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

not have.¹³ It provides framework and content for poets without a subject. Barbara Fischer writes that poems about art can only liberate themselves from this charge by being ‘fundamentally revisionary’.¹⁴ This is an aim towards which all good poetry aspires in any case. For the poets brought together in this thesis the object is a vehicle or technique through which to apprehend a less tangible subject and we have seen that the legitimacy of the artworks themselves do not go unquestioned even by the white, male ‘mainstream’, much less by the poets one would expect to be revisionary. But this is not to deny that art can have a legitimising effect even without trading on its beauty, narrative or pathos, especially in the juxtapositions formed by the associative techniques of recent poetry.

Most often, as we have seen in Mark Doty’s *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* and *School of the Arts*, this legitimising effect is exploited through a comparison of ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ art forms, or through the juxtaposition of something known and accessible to the majority with a more marginal pursuit which, the poet wants to show us, is still art. Doty makes the case for the art of pleasure – from Dutch still lifes to drag and bondage performances – as part of the same continuum, reserving his disapproval for the idealistic and unrealistic ‘art’ of the advertising billboards which encourage us to consume with our wallets rather than with our eyes and hearts. Swensen too uses art to reappropriate the ‘legitimacy’ of desires deemed inappropriate by a thousand years of patriarchal society, asking why we should condemn Mary’s impulse to touch the Christ-figure. The repression of the ‘female’ desire for connectivity and sensuality is revealed both as a point of tension in the paintings and as something deeply hypocritical; the connective impulse of the reader, whether male or female, exploited through the poems’ representational multiplicity, encourages us to examine our own guilt.

¹³ Barbara Fischer, ‘Object Relations’, *The Boston Review*, September/October 2005.
<http://bostonreview.net/BR30.5/fischer.html>

¹⁴ Ibid.

In this way, the study of how we represent becomes one also of how we perceive. The seemingly transparent acts of layering on paint or words, the generic divisions we take for granted, are held under closer scrutiny, especially in *The Glass Age*. Like Wright's study of Yves Klein's *saut dans le vide* in 'Dio ed Io', Swensen sees the act of perceiving and translating images as a balancing act; one that requires the constant production of illusion on our part:

the mental and physical worlds do not match; we're forced to undergo two different interpretive practices simultaneously, and their degree of off-set sets up a reverberation. Energy arcs over that gap, and it's practically audible. And it requires an adaptation if not of our senses at least of our perceptive capacity.¹⁵

She sees this gap and our role in bridging it as the way art works on us, the point at which it can become profoundly transformative. Like Wright's poem, she is saying that maintaining the illusion is part of our natural negative capability, but that the greatest dividends are to be reaped from making this maintenance a conscious process, appreciating, as Doty urges us to, both the illusion and the secret workings that perpetuate it.

Glass has special metaphorical properties for talking about language and consciousness. It is transparent yet solid; we can see it and see through it simultaneously. In a window, it acts as a frame to what we see, creating its own context. It acts both as enclosure and extension at the same time and therefore it is a fluid border, acting as both barrier and link to what is on the other side. It both divides us from the outside world and lets us inside.

In *The Glass Age* Swensen studies other artists' representations of glass and the window, both visual and verbal, asking 'what it is to see, and what it is to / look through' (7). Like Wright's backyard landscapes, the window leads us to analyse and question what we see by framing it and also by acting as a boundary which is visually porous. Windows

¹⁵ Swensen, 'To Writewithise'.

and eyes are freely linked throughout human thought, both metaphorically and linguistically, leading us to the idea that our own boundaries are equally porous and to Bachelard's idea that we take part in a continual process of internalising our surroundings as well as externalising what is inside us.¹⁶ Just as glass erodes the line of definition between inside and outside, so do our eyes. Swensen visualises this as an endless letting in and opening up of the external inside the physical mechanism of the body, and sees us taking in the visual as naturally as we breathe in air:

ceilings are vaulted

and windows are painted into air

which carries windows into your lungs, your blood, your brain. (6)

She sees windows as a fundamental and recurring theme in our imaginations. Our desire for them has been equated with freedom and immortality throughout poetry, as well as with memory and other psychological processes that involve the visual.

What child does not draw a house with windows on either side of a central front door and thereby discover the key to both repetitive dreams and the scaffold of the mind. (47)

We add extra windows. We look for a house with more windows. I ask the realtor, haven't you got something with a glassed-in porch. (47)

The window, in a sense, acts as a metaphor for everything we cannot see or define, a 'meeting of edges' (65). Swensen traces contradicting viewpoints on the mystical implications this brings, something resisted particularly by Pierre Bonnard, who wished to represent the window purely as an object. Swensen equates his view to 'the arguments for the materiality of language that have played such an important part in philosophy and poetry since the beginning of the 20th century':

Bonnard argued for a similar materiality of the window. There is nothing you can see through. You see (7)

¹⁶ Swensen informs us that the Middle English for window is 'wind eyes', and that this name suggests the absence of glass. (47)

Where Mallarmé envisioned windows as looking outward and Baudelaire as looking back – both, however ‘somehow part of the glance’ – ‘Bonnard managed, through adamant insistence, through window after window, through sheer repetition, to keep them from doing any such thing’ (65).

Swensen continues her investigation of our contradictory impulses to define things from one another and to link them, to frame and to look outside the frames we have made. The genre of landscape, she tells us, was inspired by the frame of the window:

Landscape was invented in 1435 when Robert Campin painted his home town and the fields beyond as seen through a window just behind the Madonna’s right shoulder. (15)

However, her study of the development of painting evidences our need to push beyond the frames we impose, giving landscape, for example, a more central role in canvases where people are dwarfed by nature, then removing people altogether and even, as Mondrian does, elevating nature to the realm of pure ideas. Jorie Graham describes the similar need of poets to push against the opaque parts, the boundaries, in their work until they manage to lift the veil through constant study and repetition, at which point they move on to the next limit. Swensen describes Bonnard’s objects, and the horizontal planes into which they are organised, as ‘pushing the world continually outward, a floodplain on which skates, fleet apothecary, the glance’ (28). Our glance is constantly skating outward to the limits of what we can see.

As a translator of contemporary French poetry, Swensen’s consciousness of other languages, as with Jorie Graham and Charles Wright, brings to her writing an awareness of language itself as a highly fluid and arbitrary medium of representation but also as a limit that defines how we think and is only permeable after a considerable effort of learning. This has obviously affected her perception of other such ‘unpassable’ limits. Graham writes about how her knowledge of three languages provides her with a sharpened and more conscious perception of the way words are used in her early poem ‘I was taught three’

(*Hybrids*, 4). We tend to associate the qualities of an object with the onomatopoeic and imagistic qualities of the word used to describe it. When we have more words for the object we come to question both the directness and the integrity of the link. In the poem, the tree outside Graham's childhood window – castagno, chassagne, and chestnut – is a tree in constant flux between the different images the child attributes to it via the different names she has for it; 'castagno' suggests its shadiness, 'chassagne' the sound of the wind through its leaves and 'chestnut' the 'inner reservoirs' of sap, and the work the tree does to sustain its life. She asserts that '[i]t was not the kind of tree // got at by default' and that she herself was 'the stem, holding within myself the whole / bouquet of three'. When she places herself as 'a name among them' at the end of the poem she suggests a strong sense of the arbitrariness of identity itself as carried in language. The poem speaks of a nascent sense of freedom in the realisation of how our thoughts are channelled and the secret knowledge that the child herself can break free of these channels.

The debate over 'just what constitutes realism' in *The Glass Age* (3) reflects Swensen's own struggle as a poet influenced by the language tradition over whether to use words for their opaque or transparent qualities: for their pure material effects of sound, shape and form or as mere pointers towards the ideas and objects they signify, their images and associations. With typical complexity, she chooses to attempt both. She strives towards a language that both is and is not transparent, never letting us attain a point of balance but rather leaving us see-sawing wildly between guided acts of imagining and their descent into non-sense, which brings with it a heightened perception of the material qualities of the words she uses. She does this precisely by employing some of the qualities of her work that have been most criticised: its hesitation on the borderline between poetry and prose, its use of critical arguments at some points and persuasive and beautiful images at others. The very first page of the collection provides a good example of this technique:

Pierre Bonnard, 1867-1947, painted next to a north-facing window. 'The battle over just what constitutes realism was at that moment particularly acute – an emotional thing, such as a cardinal out my window. Could streak away and shatter the composition of the world into a vivid wind in which the world goes astray. (3)

The factual, art-historical tone of the first sentence and a half, accentuated by the inclusion of dates, gives way to a more creative, image-heavy interpretation of the debate. The latter part of the paragraph bears strong parallels with Jorie Graham's undescrivable red bird in 'Homage to Mark Rothko' and also performs the same function, translating a complex theoretical idea into a simple image. Like any idea of realism, the composition of the world as seen from a window is a momentary thing, a display of components randomly brought together in one moment's perception, which will inevitably be broken as moment succeeds moment. Swensen shows us that a written text is just such a construct, a composition, and it is to make us aware of this and its reflection of life that she draws elements from as many kinds of text as possible. The entire collection functions equally as a piece of art criticism as well as a sequence of poems, undermining the conventional divisions drawn between genres as well as those we impose on modes of representation.

Debora Greger: Touring the Canon

Strong ties with Europe have meant that many American poets depict art from the European canon – Jorie Graham, Charles Wright, Derek Walcott and Sharon Dolin all write about Italy in particular and their perceptions of its cultural heritage from Graham's Rome to Wright's Garda and Walcott's and Doty's Venice. This emphasises the kind of connection that Americans feel with Europe and also exposes a lack of connectedness in some cases with the land on which they live: they go to Europe to look into their past.

Graham and Walcott have expressed this sense of disconnection particularly eloquently: Walcott in the dual pull between African roots and a European cultural education that he feels is equally his heritage, and Graham in her comparisons of the sense of history she feels layered around her in Rome with the primal emptiness she feels in the US. Walcott warns against succumbing to the pull of history – be it from roots or heritage – over the needs of the present in the tale of obsession he relates in *Tiepolo's Hound* and in Achille's hallucinated journey back to Africa in *Omeros*. It could be said, however, that classical European art still holds a much greater influence over American poetry than Native American cultural artefacts, something which is not so much the case, for example, in contemporary Latin American poetry.

Debora Greger broaches sceptically the weight of this influence with her parody of the Grand Tour in her seventh collection, *Western Art* (2004). Whereas Jorie Graham deals with the myths of classical antiquity in a revisionist way – creating new myths and images to counter the old ones as well as connecting new and old – Greger provides another way of looking at classical images that, with their echoes of classroom and canon, have often alienated women. In their essay 'Classical Tourism in Debora Greger's Poetry', which looks at travel in Greger's work up to 2001, Marsha Bryant and Mary Ann Eaverly assert that

feminist accounts of female encounters with the Classical world have too often privileged Graham's kind of literary revisionism and counter that '[i]f we are to understand fully women poets' engagements with the Classical tradition, we must take into account Classical tourists like Greger who explore alternatives to revisionist mythmaking'.¹ Barbara Fischer also sees her voice as a strong one, that of an 'exacting curator'.² Importantly, Greger engages with the classics on her own terms, picking out the images that interest her rather than the canonical or iconic ones, although many of these are included and she is not intimidated by them. Bryant and Eaverly use 'classical tourism' as the definition for a technique that opposes 'revisionist mythmaking', a term that includes scepticism and engagement with domestic and non-canonical objects as well as the dilution of ekphrastic depictions with musings on more personal subjects. But this is not a uniquely feminist technique, nor is it always so easily separated from revisionism. Mark Doty and Derek Walcott both use this technique with the aim of showing things from their own perspectives as outsiders looking in to certain kinds of culture.

One point that has frequently been made about Greger's poetry is her museum-consciousness. As Barbara Fischer has pointed out in *Museum Mediations: Reframing Ekphrasis in Contemporary American Poetry* (2005), most American poets from the 1950s onwards display in their poems their awareness of the artistic context within which they are writing, making a painting's physical situation, and more recently often its critical context, as much a part of their poems as any description of the painting itself. Greger's work is particularly noted for its absorption of the qualities of this museum-world. As well as Fischer's assessment of Greger as an 'exacting curator', Brian Phillips remarks *Western Art's*

¹ Marsha Bryant and Mary Ann Eaverly, 'Classical Tourism in Debora Greger's Poetry', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 37, no. 3 (2004). p.90.

² Barbara Fischer, 'Object Relations', *The Boston Review*, September/October 2005.
<http://bostonreview.net/BR30.5/fischer.html>

‘curatorial somnolence’³ and Maggie Dietz compares the experience of reading it with ‘the satisfied exhaustion of having spent the afternoon in a curious, well-curated museum’.⁴ There is a sense here of the collection as the poet’s own museum of memories, which she organises and curates with great care and attention to every detail. The museum-like qualities identified here are contained in the fabric of the collection itself and the way it ties together its representations: the poems most often step out of the museum context, so the impression of museum-like organisation comes not from the representation of works in museums, but rather from the comprehensiveness with which Greger narrates her travels, focusing on the poignant images and pertinent details that cling to the traveller’s consciousness amid the blur of new sights and experiences. This is not a series of museum-based ‘face-offs’ and, unlike in many cultural travel narratives, the images are not filtered through a value system which privileges art over life. Instead the two are jumbled together in an appreciation of the quotidian that holds all objects as potentially equal, from the paintings in San Marco to the alligator bride and groom in a shop in Florida.

The objects singled out for special treatment are those that resonate with the poet in a personal way. Mark Doty maintains that this is the case for every represented object, but in this case the personal interest is fully and openly acknowledged. Each of the images in the book is related to the poet’s musings on love, long-term partnership and loneliness as these are played out in her own life. In ‘Self-Portrait with Bittern’ based on Rembrandt’s painting, she sees her younger self and her memories of her first encounter with a bittern ‘reflected in the latest layer / of lacquer’ (13), and compares the living bird in her memory with the ‘fine vermiculation on wing and back’ (13) that can only be admired on the dead bird in the painting. London’s monuments are the backdrop for a bittersweet celebration of ‘[t]wenty years unmarried’.

³ Bryan Phillips, ‘Western Art (Book Review)’, *Poetry* 185, no. 5 (2005).

⁴ Maggie Dietz, ‘Western Art (Book Review)’, *Harvard Review* 28 (2005).

As well as her own thoughts and emotions, provoked by or reflected in the things she sees, the poet foregrounds the often humdrum nature of tourism and the inevitable presence of other tourists. A man in St Mark's, Venice, lifts his camera over a sign that repeats 'speaking in the tongues of tourists, / that photography was strictly forbidden' (32) and the poet reveals her own foreignness by asking 'for Band-Aids not "plasters"' (17) in a chemist's shop; everyday acts and small misunderstandings that are an essential part of the tourist's experience of her own strangeness as well as the unfamiliarity of what's around her. These details are given equal importance with the artworks she has travelled to see, because they also reveal her to herself in some way. The sights that are valued are those, like these, that in some way engage with her concerns. It is not what is seen but how it is seen and what it means to the perceiver that is important, and art is simply part of the immense world of sights that unfurl in front of the traveller. Just as the quotidian is raised to the level of art, art becomes part of the everyday context: when the poet bumps her head on a low ceiling, she claims to know how the Venus de Milo must have felt. Art is integrated into perception itself, rather than separated and accorded a superior value. Nor are the artworks and their subjects exclusively allowed to set the tone of the poems. Like any traveller, the poet brings her own moods into the museum and her personal highs and lows have perceptible effects on the way objects are seen. The objects themselves do not always have the rapturous, transformative power so often attributed to art. 'The Mosaic of Creation' in San Marco is described in sing-song couplets with a nursery-rhyme-like rhyme scheme and a tone that is far from respectful awe:

And on the third day God is stuck
with too much water, just his luck – (30)

This feels like the work of a slightly bored or cynical tourist who has, perhaps, seen one too many opulent creations. The poem seems to replicate the experience of unmoved contemplation, until, in the third section of the poem where Adam and Eve are introduced,

the tone becomes darker and the poet more personally engaged. The original couple are caught in the moments after their fall as God is looking for them in the garden; they are soon to be found out and the air around them is ‘rich with guilt’ (31) and its homophone. This is the point at which the poet often engages with an image, going back to the, perhaps unperceived and unidentified, moment at which everything changed in her own relationship. Her persona in the poems is a temporally fluid one, caught between memory, hopes for the future and a sense of lostness in an unstable present. She repeatedly places herself in the contexts of what she sees and re-evaluates her own life from the ever-changing chain of perspectives that travel, and the process of engagement with art, give her. In this way, history, even as depicted by others, becomes personal history.

In the two poems of ‘The Trompe L’Oeil of History’, written after Tiepolo, Greger places herself in the middle of this incomprehensible whirlpool of public and private time, the memory of time past and its representation. In the first painting, ‘The Meeting of Antony and Cleopatra’...

Because the painter knew that history,
when it happened, happened in Venice,
it’s on the steps of the Riva

that Cleopatra meets Antony’s ship. (38)

The poet describes herself in the Riva ballroom thinking about the painting, behind the scenes of its imaginary superimposition, as if waiting for what was represented ‘not so long ago, merely the Renaissance’ to happen. She is ‘waiting to have seen something’ (38), as if the action of the painting is continually present, still going on, linking our time with both that of the painter and that of the subjects themselves. The sense of the poet’s own loneliness – she is disconnected from the scene, ‘feeling underdressed’, but also not entirely in the present – is strong here.

The second of the two poems, ‘The Feast of Cleopatra’, reveals that she is focusing again on the revelatory moments of a relationship, frozen eternally in art, that stand out

against the banality of long-term coupledness. The action here is not endlessly replayed, but stalled at the moment when Cleopatra reaches to drop her pearl earring into the glass of vinegar. The poet does not let us move on from this moment, does not give way to the narrative impulse of letting the words carry the story away from the image. Cleopatra is about to prove ‘whatever it was she proved’ (39) – something, in this context at least, unremembered or unimportant – but, the poet insists, ‘not quite yet’ (39). The suspended pearl is made a symbol for the unattainable moment at which love is strongest, and the poet’s attitude towards this coveted pearl seems to be one almost of envy. At the same time she realises that such happily-ever-afters do not exist in the real world outside the painting:

The past is in the *next* room,
the painter would have us believe,
and the food’s better. (39)

The repetition of ‘not yet’, imploring us to hold off thoughts of anything beyond this happy scene, gives way to her own experience of what happens when time is allowed to go on, as it inevitably does. The painting is stalled in a fixed moment before the dull erosion of continuity can claim the lovers:

Nor yet does love begin at the beginning,
acidly, its slow dissolve. (39)

An essential part of how Greger views the world in these poems is filtered through her sense of herself as an American, a sense most often expressed in economic rather than cultural terms. Coming from the 24/7 consumer continuity of American society she is surprised to find on Good Friday that ‘[e]ven the money changers outside the church were closed. Even American Express’(35). At times she seems disapproving of the money lavished on tourist ideals of culture rather than projects of more academic value: while ‘American dollars hammer [...] a new Globe / into a rudely theatrical O’ (22) a more fulfilling experience, which better stimulates the poet’s imagination, is found in a look at the real, unreconstructed ‘ruins / of the Rose’, its outer wall buried in primitive state ‘[l]ike

a jawbone' (22). At other times she relishes the freedom that economic status brings, and emphasises this unabashedly:

Latest conqueror of the Ottoman empire,
I with the emerald-green dollar

to which the Turkish lira prostrated itself further –
I have seen three footprints in stone

of the prophet Mohammed, no two of which match. (60)

Although this is stated with humour, it is a serious reminder of the economic basis of tourism, as well as an undermining of the unique importance given to high-culture. Greger constantly reminds us that she has bought her own tickets and analyses unashamedly the effect of the money she, and other tourists like her, spend; an effect that extends to the tourists themselves as well as the places they visit. But this is no comfortable endorsement of American economic imperialism; whilst enjoying the culture of barter and free exchange, Greger looks seriously into the questions it raises about worth. High-culture is not above the level of the dirty money that passes from hand to hand on the street. There is the suggestion that all art, even religious art, is on sale to the tourists in the same way as sex is on sale:

There comes a point where you make us pay
to go any further, even in church.
So much to lift the skirt, so much to see

the Byzantine booty behind the high altar. (51)

The pun on the word 'booty', suggesting greed whilst drawing parallels with the sex trade, makes this link explicit, underlining the idea that no cultural experience is superior to any other or untainted by the modern world, and showing that the impersonal museum face-off between an awe-inspiring painting and an uncritical viewer is no longer – and never has been – a realistic or sufficient model for ekphrastic writing. The art on show, selling its beauty, can not be separated from the experience of the world around it.

Claudia Rankine and the Media Image

Claudia Rankine's 2004 long poem *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* is, in many ways, the most experimental text represented here, and certainly the text with the furthest reach politically and polemically. It is multi-layered and complex, a prose-poem sequence containing aspects of both the lyric and the essay, and representations of the images it describes – both those personal to the poet herself and widely recognised, iconic images – as well as a set of generously detailed, factual endnotes. Whilst being essential to an understanding of the poem, the latter almost comprise a text in themselves, providing both sources and explanations but also interesting details and background material. They seem as much designed to engage the reader as the main body of the text, necessitating a choice on the reader's part as to how to read them; they are both a useful aid and a frustrating distraction.

The poem itself is a patchwork of different registers of language and competing images, an attempt to acknowledge a 'total experience of being' and then to undermine the idea that such holism exists or can be represented; Rankine intended the notes and images as a challenge to the text: 'to take away the "literal truth" authority from the text', undercutting her own narrative from the beginning.¹ The essay format and the style of the book which, as Rankine comments in a radio interview, was intended to mimic the form of the newspaper column, and indeed uses a newspaper typeface, also challenge the relationship between truth and fiction in the text.² We intuit, therefore, that the speaking 'I', however coherent it may seem, is not the 'I' of the poet herself; it draws on her experiences and her sense of Americanness amongst other things to form a fictional 'I'

¹ Jennifer Flescher and Robert N. Caspar, 'An Interview with Claudia Rankine', *Jubilat* 12 (2006).
http://www.poems.com/special_features/prose/essay_rankine.php

² Claudia Rankine, interview by Leonard Lopate *WNYC* Oct 4, 2004:
www.wnyc.org/shows/lopate/episodes/2004/10/04

that explores 'the self in a social space'.³ It is an attempt at the formation of a communal 'I' somewhere between the 'I and I' of Rankine's Jamaican roots and her conception of 'I as an American'.

It is telling that each section of text is separated by the image of a TV screen displaying static, the shadow-image behind which, Rankine confirms, is that of George W. Bush.⁴ This text is a departure from the others represented in this thesis in that it takes as its source media rather than artistic representations. Where Jorie Graham explores images that counter those shown in the media, Rankine confronts them head on, integrating them into the body of her poem. Her examinations of these images form part of a warning against cultural passivity and a questioning of our roles as perceivers, something made clear by the introductory quotation from Aimé Césaire cautioning us to 'beware, even in thought, of assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator' as well as by questions asked within the text:

If I am present in a subject position what responsibility do I have to the content, to the truth value, of the words themselves? Is "I" even me or am "I" a gearshift to get from one sentence to the next? Should I say we? Is the voice not various if I take responsibility for it? (54)

Throughout, she interrogates our position and our responsibility as both perceivers and representers. The images she uses in this process are ones we see and interpret everyday; images which are so common they have almost attained the transparency of truths, facilitated by the assumption that pictures do not lie. Not only does she use 'fictional' images from films, but also TV news, logos, signs, personal photos and leaflets. These images are used to make us conscious of the fragile balance between public and private, an aim toward which the cover of the book – a vast roadside billboard displaying the intimate plea of the title – testifies. The text is based on the images contained within it but, however public they may seem, like Greger, Rankine shows that they are inseparable from the realm

³ Ibid.

⁴ Flescher, 'An Interview with Claudia Rankine'.

of the personal. Her work is symptomatic of the increasing focus on the incursion of media images into private life and the perceived need to write against this in contemporary American poetry.

The 'I' of the narrator seems to function as a vehicle for both private and public thoughts, its compass widening throughout the poem from grief over a friend's imminent death, to the pain shared with the mistreatment of African Americans shown on television, to identification with the South African struggle to obtain antiretroviral medicine, critiquing finally the common fear of terrorism after 9/11. Rankine insists that the personal events related in the poem are fictional. The images are analysed from a perspective, but it is a wide one even if a specifically black American one. As well as the public, mediated images that have an effect on our private lives, Rankine experiments with public and personal ways of using language, using, for example, the language of the call centre to describe a moment of suicidal depression, revealing it as a language emptied of meaning and feeling:

Your modifying process had happily or unhappily experienced a momentary pause. (7)

This incursion of evidently public language into the private sphere, more noticeable than the same intrusion effected in images, emphasises how little division there really is between private and public. Images of violence, war and terror are now not only in museums and history books, but in front rooms and bedrooms, in every room where there is a television. What we seem to forget is that these images are not direct; they do not speak for themselves. For Rankine this raises the question of who speaks for them and through them.

The title of the poem, however tangential it may seem, is a (literal) signpost to the poem's subject: in analysing the effect of this omnipresence of the image on us, it is really seeking to know what these images do to our ability to connect as human beings, how they affect our relationships with one another, and especially the trust within them. As well as a

poem, the text functions as a visual essay, each of its images inviting analysis of its historical and political context and the public reactions it has provoked as well as encouraging us to evaluate what part of the public consciousness, or the zeitgeist, it has tapped into in order to become an iconic image.

The first news images used are those of the investigation of the African American man James Byrd's murder on June 7th, 1998, when he was dragged behind the back of a truck by three white men who had stopped to offer him a lift. Onlooker's legs are reflected in pools of blood at the scene where 'a trail of blood, body parts and personal effects stretched for miles' (n.135), then we see the word 'head' painted on the road, then an image of Byrd from before the attack. These images are juxtaposed with commentary on the 2000 election of George W. Bush,

who can't remember if two or three people were convicted for dragging a black man to his death in his home state of Texas. (21)

The narrator finds her voice joining the remembered voice of her mother in condemning this failure to remember: '*You don't remember because you don't care*' (21), bringing her to the realisation of the harshest divide between the self as one and as part of the multitude: 'the recognition that a life can not matter' (23).

This act of not remembering is contrasted with the British public's reaction to the end of one individual life, that of Princess Diana, raising the question of how one tragedy can go ignored while another sparks a revolution in the public display of emotion. Beyond the current idea in some circles that to truly be an individual it is necessary to be famous, some public images seem to have a special power to tap into and to validate our own emotions, especially in cases where victims are seen to be innocent or beyond blame. Rankine does not comment on the possibility that the contrast between the two cases could be related to latent racism or our need for public idols, instead she argues that this goes beyond the cult of personality to something more intimate:

Weren't they simply grieving the random inevitability of their own deaths?
(39)

When such an emotional reaction is unique to a single person, however, as the narrator shows us through her friend's tears at the end of Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* in the same section, it is more likely to be interpreted as a sign of illness or instability. For the feeling to be validated, legitimated, it must be an image with which others can also connect, leading to a *communal* outpouring of grief, for example, or fear. Other images are used to explore different facets of the public reaction. A photograph of the gurney on which the Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh was executed leads to questions on the nature of forgiveness. Another of Amadou Diallo smiling before his death at the hands of the police explores the way that images keep repeating the pain, leading to indifference for some and sensitisation for others:

All the shots, all forty one never add up, never become plural, and will not stay in the past. (57)

Each of the images in this visual essay moves us forward in our understanding of the effect that the media world as a whole has on us and the qualities – both our personal ones and those exploited in the images – that mean we are so easily manipulated by the still or moving images captured on film. These images explore our desensitisation to violence, the way mass outpourings of emotion focus on images of the idealised rather than the everyday, our tendency to refer everything we see back to our own lives and our complicated relationship with time as contained in the media image. The narrator describes her anxiety over the childhood belief that the actors in television images must be dead in real life and contrasts this with her inability as an adult to let Amadou Diallo die – his death is present each time she sees his image.

This is what Barthes sees as the great contradiction of the photographic image: it leads us to feel anticipation for something that has already happened, thus arresting our emotions by holding us in repeated time before the moment it depicts, and yet, as the child

experiences, it makes us poignantly aware of the mortality of those whose death is yet to come. As Barthes puts it: '*This will be and this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake'.⁵ We intuitively see past this contradiction with the negative capability that has become transparent to us since the birth of the photograph, but Rankine's narrator retains, unusually, something of her childhood disbelief at the magic of this form of representation; she even wonders at one point whether she herself is dead, caught in the web of past and future that is compressed into representation's endless present.

There is a similar debate in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* about the truth of the image and indeed what can comprise a full representation of our experience of it in words. As more and more images of the world in which we live – often a world of which we have little or no experience – are fed into our homes each night through the news, as they become a commonplace part of our everyday lives barely worthy of note, as our power to look or look away increases with the growing number of channels and the remote control, we have essentially stopped questioning how these images are presented to us. We take them as fact, as if we are seeing them at first hand with our own eyes, unmediated. Jorie Graham has captured the dangerous territory onto which this kind of passive spectatorship can lead us:

The “multitasking” of the CNN screen is precisely geared to dissociating our sensibilities. It forces us to “not feel” in the very act of “collecting information.” But what value does information unstained by emotive content have, except a fundamental genius for manipulating dissociated human souls? Why, you can frighten them to the point of inhumanity. You can get them to close their eyes and let you commit murder in their name.⁶

The representations that strive to seem most impartial, most realistic, are precisely those that have most power over the human mind. Graham's answer to how poetry can oppose the forces that would engage and manipulate our passivity is that poetry should fight the

⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.96.

⁶ Thomas Gardner, 'Jorie Graham: The Art of Poetry LXXXV', *The Paris Review*, no. 165 (2003). p.96.

‘dissociation of thinking from feeling’ in every way it can. Rankine’s work also sees this as the challenge of contemporary poetry, and takes it up in a number of ways.

It could be argued that Graham’s poetry demands exactly the same “multitasking” for which she criticises CNN, and *Overlord* could be seen as an example of this merging of factual material with personal and creative material in a largely unreferenced muddle. But the essential difference is that it is presented as a creative work, and that each of its creative components is presented as one of many possible viewpoints, from the direct engagement with soldiers’ stories to the more peripheral and personal sections that still deal with the same themes. The parallelisms used here are self-exposing, the gaps wide open, and the viewpoint often challenges the medium of poetry itself. The many sources are not used to create an impression of coherence and self-sufficiency, or the aura of objective fact that CNN presents. In *Overlord* mistakes and omissions are a fundamental and acknowledged part of the poetic process, left inside the poems for us to see; on CNN they are an embarrassing hiatus in the narrative that often reveals that the grounding of the facts they present is every bit as arbitrary as it would be in a poem or story. Rankine’s criticism that we see the news only from our own national point of view is a valid one. In the French riots of 2005, for instance, the CNN coverage exposed both geographical and historical ignorance presented as fact; the failure to correct these mistakes perhaps testifies to the media perception that the American public would either not notice or not care.

Rankine’s poems take on the multiplicity of the media age in a more confident and conscious way, not only to criticise this way of representing but to use it for positive ends. She puts to use the connection between word and image to expose how the act of compartmentalising sensory information makes a dangerous nonsense of every part of it; she uses the text, the images and the notes to make sure that no one component has a monopoly on the representation of ‘truth’, that there is no one version, instead there are multiple perspectives that acknowledge that there is no way of representing that is not, to

some extent, manipulative. This forces us to let in the space for doubt that lies between these three skeins of representation that make up the text. This is where feelings come in and the emotional response, filling ‘the gaps created by the indirectness of experience’ (89). This fostering of self-consciousness in the observer is the difference between the creative image and the image used for media or advertising purposes: instead of analysing the role of our feelings in interpreting the image, the media and advertisers have worked to choreograph these gaps for us, encouraging us to leave out the analysis and be led by the directness of our emotions. If we do not analyse how we respond, we will not realise when our emotions are being manipulated. Publicity takes control of our responses to create desire out of inconsistency for commercial ends, but also has a more sinister effect:

Publicity turns consumption into a substitute for democracy. The choice of what one eats (or wears or drives) takes the place of significant political choice. Publicity helps to mask and compensate for all that is undemocratic within society. And it also masks what is happening in the rest of the world.⁷

As John Berger so clearly describes, publicity disables our faculties of critical interpretation and takes away our free choice, replacing them with corporate interpretations and consumer choices. In a similar way, Mark Doty sees the advert as usurping our capacity to connect with our fellow humans, shutting out all those who do not fit into its sanitised and sanitising vision, and Rankine sees it as hijacking our processes of self-identification and individuation.⁸ Our instinctive drive to participate in mass emotion, as she has shown us, works against us here: the shared nature of our responses, and their image fed back to us via the media, makes them self-validating. Rankine uses the widest possible field of reference both so as to encompass the diversity of experience and to make us think about the everyday images that play on our feelings of identity and self-validation – to show us how images and objects have begun to stand in for aspects of what we are. She demonstrates this in terms of her narrator’s individuation into American identity:

⁷ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972. p.149.

⁸ The title poem of Doty’s *Sweet Machine* is the best example of this.

My flushing toilet, my hot water, my air conditioner, my health insurance, my, my, my – all my my's were American made. This is how I was alive. Or I wasn't alive. I was a product, or I was like a product, a product of and like Walt Disney's cell animation. (93)

This confusion between being and being-like shows how deeply and inseparably the object has become both a symbol and a part of identity. However, this process of self-identification via the consumer image is not entirely represented as negative in the poem; rather it is just one of the things that makes the modern American so vulnerable.

The narrator expresses nostalgia for a 1990s consumer utopia before the events of 9/11 broke through the capitalist dream. This stanza, accompanied by the familiar image of the stars and stripes proudly displayed on a front porch, neatly hints at the sense of a fall from innocence, its references stretching from Hamlet to the Nike advertisement:

To have a new iMac or not to have it? To eTrade or not to eTrade? Again and again these were Kodak moments, full of individuation; we were all on our way to our personal best. America was seemingly a meritocracy. I, I, I am Tiger Woods. It was the nineties. Now it is the twenty-first century and either you are with us or against us. Where is your flag? (91)

The reduction of vision from a rainbow of multiplicity to the black and white of for or against shows how the possibilities for interpretation have been forced into a more narrow perspective. From this point onwards the poem focuses on images of life after the fall of the twin towers and how public emotion has been captured and used via images in the wake of 9/11. After 9/11 the bold consumer spirit of the nineties shrinks into a defensive corner, unified under attack. The individual moments of self-realisation and ambition, defined by the image of Tiger Woods in the Nike advertisement, are overwhelmed by the need to form a strong common identity through symbols such as the flag and the yellow ribbon. As in the days after Princess Diana's death, those who do not participate in the communal wave of grief and patriotism are seen as suspicious, as the quality of each person's response is analysed by those around them:

Nick, the super, tied a yellow ribbon but didn't do the flag thing. The distinction is not lost on anyone. The lawyer in 5B says the super should be careful he doesn't lose his job. (114)

The repeated images of the attacks ensure that they are always embedded in the present of the public consciousness, at the front of people's minds. When the narrator remarks to another woman at the bus stop 'It's hard to get a cab now' (113) – meaning at rush hour – the woman's response is more general: 'It's hard to live now'. This is a tone with which the narrator is familiar:

Hers is an Operation Iraqi Freedom answer. The war is on and the Department of Homeland Security has decided we have an elevated national threat level, a code-orange alert. (113)

Americans are portrayed as united under this cloud of fear, created by manipulative use of images and the media where:

Osama is Saddam and Saddam is "that man who tried to kill my father" and the weapons of mass destruction are, well, invisible and Afghanistan is Iraq and Iraq is Syria. (113)

Fear is depicted as an instrument of confusion and control, with the Hegelian idea that images of death are used by the government to keep citizens in a permanent state of fear for their own lives, thus granting emergency powers. Rankine's descriptions of airport security procedures, and her insertion into the text of a government leaflet warning of suspect packages, highlight the incursion of this fear-mongering into every aspect of the average American's public and domestic life.

Perhaps Rankine's most valuable contribution to raising consciousness is her challenge to the 'truth' of media images. These hyper-real, supposedly self-authenticating images, placed as they are in a constructed narrative of America-under-attack and further validated by evidence of their effects in the viewers' own lives – the leaflets, alerts and security checks – come to stand in for reality. They appear to *be* the reality of the situation, rather than representing it. This is what Baudrillard sees as the danger of the media image:

It is a 'recreating' illusion (as well as a recreational one), revivalistic, realistic, mimetic, hologrammic. It abolishes the game of illusion by the perfection of the reproduction, in the virtual rendition of the real. And so we witness the extermination of the real by its double.⁹

The representation is so realistic that it appears to be real, the unmediated product of our own vision rather than someone else's. Seen in this way it is no longer open to interpretation or analysis; in its completion it seems to speak for itself. This is the power of the 'real' in the media images that Rankine works to undermine with her parallel texts, using plurality of perspective to strip away their aura of coherence and self-completion.

Like Graham and Wright, one of Rankine's most important tools in exposing these images as representations as subjective as any other is the notion of absence – of gaps or incompleteness – and the acknowledgement of what is unknown or uncertain. The importance of revealing the gaps in the illusions we create is that this process naturally exposes totalising narratives and 'objective' impositions. In the same way that Cole Swensen argues that words have become transparent, Rankine shows us our tendency to naturalise media images, to unthinkingly see past the ways they work on us, and to seek the message without understanding the medium. Armed with insight gained through her representation of previous images, the coverage of the capture of Saddam Hussein – represented only in words and not reproduced visually in the text – seems at best absurd, even Orwellian:

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we got him." Saddam Hussein has been discovered in a hole in the ground. Someone with latex gloves has a tongue depressor in Hussein's mouth. The inside of his mouth looks very red. She pauses because this is meant to be important. It is supposed to mean something about peace. (123)

Rankine shows that although it is hard to separate the supplied narrative from the images we are shown to validate it, especially with the shortened attention span of the media age when we may be given only moments to consider them, it is possible and indeed vital to

⁹ Nicholas Zurbrugg (ed). *Jean Baudrillard, Art and Artefact*. London: Sage Publications, 1997. p.9.

identify and open up the gap between the two and to break down the twin role they are often given as logical signifier and signified in a narrative of truth.

The responsibility of the poem, then, is towards both disconnection and connection, encouraging us to unpick the links of the media narrative and re-tell it in our own ways as well as to assert our own sense of connection with our fellow human beings in the present. This means the ability to see images not only from a single perspective, that of the American fearful under attack, but from a multiplicity of perspectives, reanalysing them every time we come to them.

It is no coincidence that the last four stanzas of the poem, each on a separate page, begin with the word 'or' and that each is a meditation on a different idea of what presence can mean both culturally and poetically. On the penultimate page the cover image of the billboard is reproduced again, this time bearing the single word: 'HERE.' In the first two of these stanzas beginning with 'or', the narrator laments her passivity, the way in which, citing Fanny Howe, she has 'learned to renounce a sense of independence by degrees and finally felt defeated by the times [she] lived in' (128). This passivity makes her doubt her own presence: as a result of her disconnectedness with the people around her, a lack of reciprocity, she doubts her own live presence, saying with John Coetzee's character Costello that 'for instants at a time I know what it is like to be a corpse' (129).

The last two stanzas act as a manifesto for the role of poetry in fighting this disconnection both from the self as a perceiver and from the other perceiving consciousnesses that surround it. The narrator uses Paul Celan's comparison of the poem to the handshake to reveal the two main assertions any poem makes: 'I am here' and 'Here you are'; firstly an assertion of individual presence and then an offering up of this presence and its experiences for others to connect with. The importance of the word 'here' is that it 'both recognizes and demands recognition' (131) – it is inherently reciprocal and connective as well as maintaining the importance of each individual:

In order for something to be handed over a hand must be extended and a hand must receive. We must both be here in this world in this life in this place indicating the presence of. (131)

These final lines of the poem keep the emphasis on a maintaining of focus in the moment, the idea that in offering up an assertion of one's own being or receiving that assertion from another we are connected in a way that does not allow us to ignore or deny the humanity of the other. Poetry can provide these moments of individual connection as well as inviting reflection on and analysis of our process of interaction both with other humans and with the images they create and in which they appear.

Conclusion: The Possibilities of Representing Representation

Claudia Rankine's current projects follow on from the idea of how word and image can function when brought into creative engagement in unconventional ways. She works collaboratively with her partner, the photographer John Lucas, to create permutations of the imagetext that directly challenge representations put forward in the news media. The short film *Provenance*, for example, is formed from a layering of video and still images of people asleep on planes with Rankine's reading of a poem at the same time as we hear audio clips related with the fear and panic of 9/11.¹ The images of the human body at rest are juxtaposed with a poem that calls for calmness and a recognition of common humanity: these are intended to work against the many representations of 9/11 that feed public fear.

The most important idea that joins all of these poets is the need to reconnect images in different ways in order to work through the problem of representational transparency in their poems, in their reconstructions of their own lives, and in the media and publicity-centred images of the 21st century emerging around them. All, to some extent, warn against the dangers of passive disengagement and looking without thinking or feeling, as well as the representational acts that would seek to exploit this passivity.

In looking at the work of the final three poets in this thesis, it is evident that they are doing more consciously something that is done, albeit less obviously, by the first three: Graham, Wright and Doty also move toward the idea that a poem, contrary to what Auden believed, can have an effect outside of its own created world. If the poem, as revealed by these poets, is a way of seeing, then these multiple perspectives build up

¹ Claudia Rankine and John Lucas, *Provenance* (American Still) 5 min., 40 sec.
http://www.digifestival.net/2007/videos/video_festival_def.php?video=ZZI%5DJ%60JV%60IVQ%60W%5CMXZUmNeOVKKV%1A%2B%23%1A%19¤t=VPQO&id=142&table=video_movie&table_autore=movie&w=480&h=384

to form a resistance to other, more economically motivated, ways of presenting the world. There are obvious limitations to poetry's revisionary and revolutionary capabilities, not least of them the problem of its minority status as a cultural form. Despite this, these poets bravely tackle the various aspects of what poetry can be employed to do, from resensitising a language deadened by its use as a tool to promote consumption and inhibit thought, to making space for new conceptions of community and gender that work to overwrite old stereotypes. If poetry is an art that influences other art-forms, then the power of these revisions will, perhaps, be in their influence on artistic thought as a whole rather than its effect on a small direct readership.

These poets, then, are representative of an age in which the same cultural problems which informed modernism – political destabilisation, a lack of faith in the capacity of language as it is used, and the urge to see in new ways in response to these – have inspired artists to take a new look at its abstract forms. If we see modernism, as Marjorie Perloff does, as an underground current that resurfaces when the cultural conditions are right, then the post-9/11 world should be one ripe for its resurgence. But it is also largely true to say that these poets have moved on in their responses to these conditions, realising, as Charles Wright does, that abstraction leads to a dead end from which it is hard to turn back. Jorie Graham's writing has, until now, been limited by her inability to get past the abstract forms of representation she took up in *The End of Beauty*. It remains to see whether she will ultimately do justice to her aim of finding a more moral territory from which to write in ways that do not undermine or contradict this objective.

What is certain is that ekphrasis itself in the work of these poets functions not only as a stylistic trope or a form of interartistic mimesis, but as a technique for getting beneath the skin of the ideas that are most difficult to express: the idea of representing nothing, the

idea of non-being, of the spiritual without a god, of the almost seen and almost understood. Our unconscious openness to images goes out before us, adhesive and alive to their possibilities before we understand them consciously. As Doty puts it, images are ‘vessel[s] that can hold what’s too difficult or charged or slippery to touch’.² This simple quality the image has, of holding before us something we have not quite grasped, of staying in our minds until we come to understand why it has spoken to us, explains both the long history and the immense potential of ekphrasis in poetry. The process of our attraction to an image and what draws us to unpack its implications, the associations we make from it and the ideas to which it leads us, are worth our while to examine again and again as they reveal something fundamental about human behaviour and human interactions in and with the world.

Similarly, the power of language to juxtapose images that would or could not be seen together outside the realm of the imagination – Doty’s linking of the sights of the museum with those in the sauna, for example, or Greger’s hybrid mix of high and low art – has immense potential as a leveller of artistic and moral values. This power, as we have seen in Rankine’s poetry, is beginning to be used with political intent, particularly in feminist, gay and postcolonial writing as well as in re-evaluations of the power of media representation after 9/11. We have seen that ekphrasis is an effective tool for structuring poetic investigations of personal and public conceptions of history and time, and it has equal capacity for approaching questions of personal and national identity. In the complex cultural *mélange* to which the multiple heritage of the Americas has given rise, a lot can be read into where a poet looks for artefacts to think about her past. Ekphrasis has been used by immigrant writers, or those who look outside their own country for their sources of inspiration, for its inherent plurality: it brings things into relation, breaking down textual, stylistic and national boundaries. The art it represents is property of the mind and open to

² Mark Doty, ‘Souls on Ice’, in *Introspections: Contemporary American Poets on One of Their Own Poems*, ed. Robert Pack and Jay Parini (Hanover: Middlebury College Press, 1997). p.70.

all the associations and influences it contains within it, as well as undermining the importance of the original work, a prospect attractive to many writers from the ex-colonies or developing countries.

Finally, although each act of ekphrasis depends on the representational image or object for its very existence, in many cases the image itself is the least important thing about it. It is a decoy, distracting us from the real action of the poem. Even Mark Doty, the poet in this thesis who might seem most uncomplicated and least abstract in his attitudes to representation, bases the vividness of his descriptions on a deeper recognition that they are nothing more than markers of a moment in his own subjective process:

I am not a poet of fragmentation, obviously, and I think that stems less from a philosophical stance than from love, a deep love for the sentence, and the way it makes a gesture of coherence, a small stay against chaos—like a puppet's gesture.³

The images that tap into our consciousness in themselves 'explain nothing'; they 'serve as signposts for some incommunicable thing' that we must work out for ourselves.⁴ Ekphrasis provides the structure for the interaction and reflection that must take place if we are to follow these signposts and explore the endlessly self-renewing potential of where they are able to lead us.

³ Richard Francis, 'A Call for Response: Symposium on Subjectivity and Style', *Fence* 3, no. 2 (2000-2001).

⁴ Mark Doty, *Dog Years: A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007). p.2.

Appendix:

A Conversation with Charles Wright on the 25th March 2005 in his office at the University of Virginia.

EK: A lot of the recent criticism on your poetry focuses on ekphrasis. I was wondering whether you perceive yourself as an ekphrastic sort of poet and, if you do, in what way?

CW: I guess I'd have to know what you mean by an ekphrastic poet. One who writes about pictures? Or one who writes about what he looks at?

EK: Both really. Or one who writes under the influence of a knowledge of and engagement with pictures.

CW: Well I certainly am one who writes under the spell of and with an acknowledgement of what I see. And if I'm interested in a picture, in a painting, then I will be using as much of that probably as I possibly can. Now that doesn't mean that I'm going to be describing the painting or the photograph or whatever the fixed image is – I'll take from it what I need that fits into the overall arc of what I'm trying to say and use that. It usually is images from various parts of a painting or a photograph that will lead to what I always write about, you know, the here and the there, the now and the then. But I guess that I would have to admit that I had in the past been very influenced by looking at paintings and by trying to transcribe how paintings work into my own poems. And I have a kind of painterly obsession that I keep going over and over the same subjects, much in the way that a landscape painter will do, and will spend, you know, years, or a whole career, writing about the same things, in the same way that plein-air or landscape painters will take the same subject matter and keep trying to redo it and revamp it and reimagine it in different ways

but it's always the same subject matter. So, to that I plead guilty – plead guilty on purpose I mean. I have set a kind of writing aesthetic that's really a painterly aesthetic, if it is an aesthetic... a practice let's say. I've taken a painting practice and tried to turn it over into writing. Because most poets don't do that sort of thing, they move on, you know, but I'm like the obsessive painter who keeps on going over and over the same sort of subject matter, the same sort of space in the woods. Or cloud in the sky. So, yes, I am.

EK: Would you see that as a way of seeing as well as a way of writing? I mean, when you talk about landscape, which you do all the time, do you feel that it's mediated through your perception of art in a way, through the art in your mind, like it was mediated through Pound for you in Italy?

CW: I suppose, yes. I suppose I'd have to say that because landscape is malleable and is adjustable whereas nature isn't, of course, nature just *is*. And landscape is *there* but it also can be *not there* at the same time. Nature can never not be there. Landscape in a way is a perception of how things are. Nature is not. Nature just, as I say, *is*. So I guess I would say that my writing is mediated through the idea of painting, through the idea of constructing what's out there, or *re*constructing what's out there; deconstructing and then reconstructing what you look at. And I assume painters do that although, as I say, I never painted. I don't paint, I don't know anything about it. I just like to look at pictures, or used to when I was younger and was more obsessive about things. But I would say yes. I mean, I don't know if you want just a yes answer or more elaboration? And I've talked about this sort of thing before to a certain extent, you know.

EK: I've noticed that with a lot of the painters you've always engaged with, but particularly recently, there are two things that strike me. Firstly the idea of abstraction in your work and

representing the abstract, which also ties in with the way you take genres like still life and landscape, genres where you seem to be fascinated with the absence of something to say, you know, fascinated with what's left out rather than what's put in. What can you say about that?

CW: Well I've always been fascinated by what's not there, you know, and that's again one of the things about landscape or still life or painting, that what's left out is almost always, in the mind, stronger than what's there. Not always but most of the time. And of course people have said that about writing too. Hemmingway said what you leave out is more important than what you put in. He was talking about style, particularly, and I would be thinking beyond style on something like that. That what you can leave out, what's not there, is more profound in a way. The profundity of what's left out is deeper than what's left in, no matter how beautiful what's left in is, because what's there, always, to a certain extent, stands in for everything that's behind it. And everything that's behind it is always left out. That's why the great painters, really, and I suppose the great writers too, as they get older their work becomes more and more minimal and they leave out more and more. One because they're probably tired of talking about it or painting it, but two because they know that what they're going to say or what they're going to paint is not going to get at what they really want to portray, which is the unportrayable.

EK: When you were talking about beauty there, it's just occurred to me that earlier on in your work you had quite an ambiguous relationship with the idea of beauty, you seemed almost to reject it really, and now in your more recent work you seem more accepting, more at peace with the whole idea.

CW: (laughter) Well, yeah. I mean, the older you get the more beautiful everything gets! Because the less time there is to enjoy it. Also one is a part of one's generation, one's age, and for a long time there was this rejection of the beautiful in art. I mean we had art and we had all of the pop art, the ugly art... I can't remember all the names for it... but anything that was beautiful was suspect. I never went that far because I... I like to see the beauty in things. But it is true that I find myself more able to talk about it now. I'm easier in my skin talking about what's beautiful than I used to be. I'm not quite as evasive. I'm not sure that's a good thing, but that's the way it seems to have gone.

EK: I've noticed looking through your archives that you've done various collaborations with visual artists. The printmaker David Freed, for example, you mention having done some collaborations with when you first started writing, and also various woodcut artists and collage artists since. Can you tell me a bit about that?

CW: Well that's usually almost always early on from friendship. David Freed was someone I knew at the University of Iowa and he wanted to illustrate some of my poems so we did this little book together, six poems, and most of my early friends were painters. I almost married a painter, so that's kind of how I got interested in art really, was hanging out with painters. And particularly in Italy, a guy named George Schneeman who was in the army with me, whom I still see, is a painter down on the lower east side of New York and has been there for 40 years. And he mostly paints landscapes of Italy, which is interesting because we were both I guess imprinted about the same time with Italy and he was a painter and I wanted to be a writer so we kind of had the same subject matter. I don't know about the collage aspect. I don't know quite who you're talking about.

EK: It was a project called ‘The Moon as Text’ – I think he took one of your poems and illustrated it with a collage...

CW: That was something that happened several years ago when I was in Italy. I met this fellow and he wanted to... What the hell was his name? He had a wonderful name. Eugenio...[...] he was a young fellow from the Adriatic side of Italy. But yeah. Poetry and painting go hand in hand. Ut pictura poesis, you know.

EK: Have these been people who have been inspired by your work, or has it been more of a sort of...

CW: I don’t know whether they’ve been inspired but several people have asked to try to illustrate some of my poems. I’ve never tried to write a poem from one of my friends’ paintings. It was always some other painting, or some other master, that I was after trying to pick his brush, as it were... pick his brushes. But ever since I’ve been writing I’ve been looking at pictures. Of course it all started for me in Italy, when I was in the army, and that was the first place I ever even looked at a painting and that’s the first place I ever seriously started trying to write poems... which weren’t poems, although I was trying, you know, so I’ve never gotten out from under the spell of paintings and the idea. For a while they were also little goldmines you could steal images from, when I was younger, and this is in a different way than when I was talking earlier about the images when I would try to incorporate them into a poem. I would launder them as I got older. Earlier on I just took them and described them and put them in my poems. But anything visual attracts me and I’m – as I’ve said before too many times – I’m not a real intellectual poet, I’m not a thinky poet, the poems don’t originate in my head. They are outside and I bring them in, you know. It’s from what I *see* that is what causes me to write for the most part. At least it has

been for many years. As I get older and more garrulous and perhaps less careful I tend to ramble on a little bit more although I still try to, you know, stud the page with images that I look at.

EK: The form of your work, as well as obviously being very interesting in a ‘sound’ way has always seemed very visual to me. I mean, structures you use, and have used more, recently, actually, like chiasmus and things like that, those little reversals, they seem to me to be very visual as well as auditory effects.

CW: I think that’s true. Sight and sound. And I’ve always been drawn to the music of language. Since I can’t make music myself. As I’ve said often. I can’t carry a tune, I can’t do any of that. One always admires what one can’t do that others can, and since I can’t paint and I can’t make music, I try to take that deficiency and make it a positive in my own work and to work at it. And so the sound patterns are very important to me in my poems. Which isn’t to say that what I’m trying to say isn’t important too. But what I’m trying to say is always there, and I try to get different melodic ways of saying it and different ways of looking at it and recording it. You were talking about abstract. I’m talking pretty abstract right now, but you know, that’s sort of the way it goes. All great ideas are abstract, all great concepts are abstract... all great stuff is abstract. But you have to make it as tactile as possible. So I guess in addition to leaving out as one gets older, one also is seduced by the beauty of abstraction. Not the beauty of obfuscation or the beauty of unintelligibility, but the beauty of the purity and abstraction and the desire to make it tactile. So you tend to think in more abstract terms and you tend to try to flesh those abstract terms out in ways that, if they’re not new, at least they’re not old hat.

EK: You said you almost married a painter. You did marry a photographer, didn’t you?

CW: I did. I did. But she wasn't a photographer when I married her. But I did, and that of course has meant that the house has been full, for thirty years, of art books. Because she not only was a photographer but loves to look at paintings too. And she was an actress and her family were actors, and so all of that, the visual, the acting, was all part of her life, so ever since I left university I have been surrounded by works of art, by paintings, by looking at stuff, everywhere I went. Before that I lived in a non-visual world, except for what was outside. Because neither my mother nor my father were particularly visually oriented. My mother was very musical, her family was musical, so that was always around. But there were really no paintings on the wall or anything like that. So once I discovered that and discovered that other people liked that too, and that I liked being with people who liked that sort of thing, then my life changed forever. And so in that way, ekphrasis to the end! As I told you, Murry Krieger said: "Oh! Our ekphrastic poet!" and I said "what's that?"... and he told me! And there you have it.

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