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The Printed Snow: On W. S. Graham

W. S. Graham once struck out through Glencoe, thinking he could hitch a lift at some point. But heavy drifts of snow had made the road impassable. Eventually delirium set in and Graham passed out on Rannoch moor. Most people would retell such an experience as a semi-interesting anecdote, if at all, but it becomes an important part of Graham’s private mythology. This not only suggests that Graham led an outwardly uneventful life, but that, in his troubled dissection of his own relationship to poetry and to the poetry-reading public (such as it is), the episode is emblematic. How exactly?

It is an intensely lonely image, for one thing. Isolation, self-imposed or imposed by social failings (the same thing, often), is a strong feature of Graham’s life and work. But this isolation seems always on the verge of breaking through to authentic communication, either with another human being or with the best part of oneself. Delirium provides a sort of inner companionship, Eliot’s “third who walks always beside you”. It feels like company. Drink-induced delirium clearly helped Graham to experience this inner company too, as his wonderful letters (collected in The Nightfisherman, Carcanet, 1999) demonstrate. Alcohol oils the wheels, gets him into the right frame of mind — a ready-made camaraderie — for corresponding. Drink, of course, enlarges but eventually diminishes the capacity for intimacy, which may in part explain the co-existence of poignancy and emptiness in Graham’s poetry.

And then there is the snow. Involuntary, overwhelming, like true inspiration, engulfing the wilful little walker. Much has been made — following the poet’s own lead — of Graham the engineer, the constructor of poems. In an essay in W. S. Graham: Speaking Towards You, Peter Robinson writes: “Graham was trained as an engineer, and many of his poems have the separateness of made objects”. True, but so do many of the poems written by people who were not trained as engineers. The idea that a poem is a made object appealed to a man who had run away from Clydeside to spend his life in rural Cornwall making marks on blank pieces of paper (the snow again).

Not that there isn’t evidence of uninspired writing in Graham’s New Collected Poems, or indeed in any volume of his work. The previous Collected Poems was a much leaner affair, and still represents the best introduction to the writing of this important poet — one of the previous century’s best

W. S. Graham: New Collected Poems, ed. by Matthew Francis; Faber and Faber 2005,
isbn 0-571-21015-5, 387pp, £25, HBK.
W.S. Graham: Speaking Towards You, ed. by Ralph Pite and Hester Jones; Liverpool University Press 2004,
isbn 0-85323-369-4 (HBK), isbn 0-85323-379-4 (PBK), 205pp, NO PRICE.
‘neglected’ poets. But it’s a very good thing that Faber and Faber has now added to the main body of Graham’s work his posthumously published volumes, *Uncollected Poems* (1990) and *Aimed at Nobody* (1993), as well as the full contents of the early books and a selection of poems left out of previous ones. This is an incomplete Graham, but that (at this stage) is about right for a poet whose poetry reads, twenty years on from his death, like a continual work-in-progress.

The progress was towards clarity. Graham stubbornly refused to reject his early (Dylan) Thomasesque, ‘Apocalyptic’ work, angrily upbraiding the publisher Michael Schmidt when he praised the later work at the expense of the earlier. The windy rhetoric of the 1940s poets forming the movement known as the Apocalypse is almost universally derided now. Graham and Dylan Thomas can perhaps be viewed as special cases, however. That particular style was intrinsic to Thomas’s gifts as a poet, and in Graham the early work prefigures the later to such an extent that no one who values him as a poet would want to be without it. It must be admitted, though, that it’s hard to take a bellyful of the stuff. The idea seems to be that every line of a poem ought to be a great line of poetry. And so they pile up, the ‘great lines’, given momentum by Graham’s urgency and not by the always-forward-drawing impetus of immediately discernible meaning. But isolate a few lines almost at random and you have the essence of the later Graham. These are from 1944’s *The Seven Journeys*:

Still I pass fathom-voyaged in a volted thread  
Rigged with a stay of justice devised in fables  
Differently learning an avalanche of kin.

The sea imagery and accompanying mimetic flow of the lines, the coining of phrases like “fathom-voyaged”, the deployment of favourite words like “rigged”, the disorientating shift over a line break that comes with the adverb “Differently”... And then there is the overall sense of the lonely genius cast adrift, having to make an internal and external journey away from kith and kin, not in order to reject them but to learn differently, for himself, what such a connection might mean. It’s all there, but obscured by monotonous diction and syntax. Surrealist poems and automatic writing are heavily peppered with noun phrases like “a stay of justice” and “an avalanche of kin”. There seems to be a kind of default setting in the brain which churns them out. Nowadays, with a different sort of rubbish in the poetry magazines and slim volumes, it is tempting to be magnanimous towards the Apocalypse. But imagine having...
to wade through that mire every time. You’d probably go off and launch a
movement of your own.

A poet has to start somewhere, and Graham’s start was better than
most. There is a creative welter of confusion which most real poets go through,
until they learn to be patient and let meaning arrive when it will or until they
become less frightened by what it is they are saying – a stage which has its own
dangers, however. The young Graham’s strident tone can’t hide his bafflement.
But then, the gift of poetry is baffling.

Graham’s early manuscripts reveal that he listed words he wanted to get into
the poem. So much for spontaneity. But Graham shouldn’t be condemned out
of hand for this practice. The words he chose seem to have contained some sort
of magic for him, to have been inherently poetic, runes almost. In a fascinating
essay from Speaking Towards You, Matthew Francis writes:

Language...is a form of community that Graham strives to
turn into a home. The focus of a home for him is the mother, and
therefore to create a home in language is to discover a mother. Graham
found precedents for this maternal presence within language... in the
traditional concept of the Muse, particularly as expounded by Robert
Graves in The White Goddess.

Graham was, like Graves, absolute in his approach to poetry. In one
letter, he writes: “Who should I ever get my forces together to reply to but
GOD?” This statement is remarkable not only because it indicates that Graham
was one of those intensely self-communing writers who can be said to ‘write for
God’, but because of the use of the word “reply”. “What does not reply is the
answer to prayer,” wrote C.H. Sisson memorably. But Graham reverses this.
God has spoken; how should one reply?

But God is not the Goddess (or is she?). Francis is right to draw attention
to the feminine presence inhabiting Graham’s writing. Those favoured magical
words are like offerings to a feminine deity. It makes for an exciting tension
with Graham’s pronounced masculinity, that ‘Sauchiehall swagger’ identified
by Ronald Bottrall in an admiring poem. Like Hart Crane, Graham assembles
his industrially masculine imagery and tilts it at the sea. He knows he is going
to lose, but in poetry, to quote a line by Sisson, “loser takes all”.

Graham attracts young poets not because he is Keatsian but because
he is dissonant, awkward, ugly even. He had to be. He was capable of writing
so lyrically that, if he had gone on in this style, he might well have ended up at the dead-end of facility. This is the first of ‘Two Poems on Zennor Hill’:

Ancient of runes the stone-cut voice  
Stands invisible on Zennor Hill.  
I climbed here in a morning of mist  
Up over a fox’s or badger’s track  
And there is no sound but myself  
Breaking last year’s drenched bracken.

Who among his contemporaries could write so well? Even Larkin with his “Lost lanes of Queen Anne’s lace” and his beginning “afresh, afresh, afresh” could not. A poet this good has little to learn, but might have things to unlearn, might first have to, as Austin Clarke described his own method, load himself down with chains, then try to wriggle free. This tortuous process cannot really be called ‘thinking’. Graham wasn’t a thinker, despite the intellectual apparatus and the longish ‘philosophical’ poems. The guise of philosophical poet helped Graham to be taken up by Faber and Faber when Eliot was at the helm. Eliot, struggling towards his own vision of a successful long contemporary poem, liked the fact that Graham was ambitious in this direction too. Poets often do this — overrate the worst, least natural elements in themselves and others. Coleridge, even, misunderstood the nature of Wordsworth’s genius (but then Wordsworth was all too happy to sacrifice lyricism for length).

Graham has been called an unlucky poet in terms of literary fame, his masterpiece ‘The Nightfishing’ appearing in the same year that British poetry changed course with the publication of Larkin’s The Less Deceived. Graham fell into an even deeper neglect. He might have had the most prestigious of poetry publishers, but it seems that they did little to promote his work. In his autobiography, John Heath-Stubbs presents a picture of Graham in a state of penury so severe that he had to trawl the beach looking for shellfish to eat. It is as though he were one of the “loblolly-men” Larkin looks down on in ‘Toads’ — a kind of literary Rab C. Nesbitt.

There is truth but also exaggeration in this. Graham was, after all, living the life he had chosen, free to devote himself absolutely to his craft. He may be said to have been lucky in that, as he puts it in one poem, he “found Eliot and he said yes” — despite having written at this time only semi-accomplished poems. And, after all, what would fame have brought him? More ghastly poetry-reading tours of the sort described in the very last lines of this New Collected? What a difference from the lovely, moving ‘To My Wife at Midnight’ with which the previous edition ends.
And how good is the poem ‘The Nightfishing’ really? Even critics grudging in their praise of Graham leave it alone. Ronald Bottrall in the poem already quoted speaks of ‘the great height / Of his Nightfishing, / His eyes letting light / In on our darkness’. It is a poem of the sea (and of the writing of poems, naturally) in seven parts with a long third section of over 300 lines. Sacrilegious to ask, but doesn’t anyone else feel bored reading it? Or at least exhausted? Like Hart Crane’s ‘The Bridge’, it is an ambitious failure, not wholly redeemed by some very powerful lines. Maybe poets should give the sea a rest and concede that nobody is going to surpass Hopkins in evoking it. Even without Larkin’s inconvenient appearance on the scene, ‘The Nightfishing’ probably wouldn’t have gained Graham a wide readership. Larkin was bringing something freshly direct to British poetry; Graham was perfecting a private meditation. It is perhaps a greater shame that the quieter ‘Seven Letters’ in the same volume would have been missed by the poetry-reading public. Who could resist lines such as these ones from ‘Letter VI’?

I put my childhood out
Into a cocked hat
And you moving the myrtle
Walked slowly over.
A sweet clearness became.

At times it is very good. Graham was, perhaps above all, a great elegist, and Fiona Green’s essay ‘Achieve Further through Elegy’ is remarkably sensitive and astute. ‘Dear Bryan Wynter’, written for his dead friend, is one of Graham’s most moving poems, and I wouldn’t like to go near it with a critical barge pole. Too raw. But Green goes near, even teasing apart the linguistic
details of a letter written by Graham to a friend just after Wynter died. Green says much that is clever and right about the poem, but her last sentence on it is the best: “In its perfect control it is ungovernably sad”.

Not all of the contributors are always as perceptive. Peter Robinson analyses the lines ‘I leave this at your ear for when you wake, / A creature in its abstract cage asleep’, from what is perhaps Graham’s best love poem, as follows:

The second line, ‘A creature in its abstract cage asleep’, relates ambiguously to two possible antecedents: it could refer to ‘you’, who then are ‘A creature’; or it could refer to ‘this’, the poem.

One wants to say, “Have a bit of sense, man.” Sydney Graham is not calling Nessie Dunsmuir a “creature in its abstract cage asleep”; he is drawing an analogy between the tightly structured poem he is composing — meaning contained within the abstract structure of form — and his wife asleep in the structure commonly known as a bed. He is offering his wife something beautiful and meaningful (he knows this, and his bashfulness in the poem can’t hide the fact), because she is, especially in this moment, beautiful and meaningful to him.

Matthew Francis writes well on the reams of unpublished prose, Graham’s automatic writing, which the poet drew on for some lines and images. All the same, he goes way too far in claiming that “The late unpublished writing constitutes almost an alternative oeuvre to the poems of Malcolm Mooney’s Land and Implements in their Places, one whose creative energy and radical technique represents a remarkable avant-garde challenge to the institution of literature.” An important source of cash for Graham were the payments made by Robin Skelton for his private papers. If someone were paying me for my private papers, I would do a lot of automatic writing too. The passages quoted are interesting but not earth-shattering, not likely to challenge the institution of literature. Graham’s best poems mount a much stronger challenge. ‘Implements in their Places’ begins and ends with the following couplet:

Somewhere our belonging particles
Believe in us. If we could only find them.

Francis finds evidence which suggests that the word “particles” here was “constructed from a combination of “parts” and “testicles”... The poem is cut off from the poet like genitals cut off from the male body.” Well, perhaps, but the lines mean something, to both male and female readers, something — dare one say it? — a bit more spiritual than this.
The essays putting Graham into literary context are more disappointing. Tony Lopez in ‘Graham and the 1940s’ has much to say about Larkin, but Larkin and Graham are not really connected at all, not even as (say) sparring partners. Graham absorbed (or did not absorb) certain influences early on. Dylan Thomas and Rimbaud, certainly. But he made his own way after that. None of the book’s contributors mentions Sisson, for example, although the two poets had some limited correspondence, and Graham clearly respected Sisson as perhaps the only equally serious poet of the time. But even here, when Graham in two letters to that astringent and wholly different poet quotes approvingly lines from Sisson’s poem ‘The Corridor’, we can see that Graham really only had an ear for his own work. For there is nothing more Graham-like in all of C.H. Sisson’s poetry than those lines: “Nothing is what I have done / Where I have been / These long years”.


Graham, let’s not forget, was a Scottish poet. The Scottish literary establishment turned his back on him, although it now coories up to his memory. It is shocking to read, in the concluding essay of Speaking Towards You, even a sympathetic critic and friend of Graham’s, Edwin Morgan, write: “I thought that someone who came from Greenock and Glasgow ought not to have lived so long in a telephoneless cottage in the wilds of Cornwall... concentrating on essentials may become a bad thing.” (It is almost as if Morgan is indignant that Graham refused to make the usual compromises.)

Graham fell out with the Lallans lobby. Yet he chose wisely in refusing to waste his energies getting embroiled in nationalist polemics. Most young Scottish poets probably feel more at home with Graham’s contemporary ‘Scottish English’ than MacDiarmid’s Scots. Advocates of the use of Scots once held, or thought they held, the moral high ground, but their sand is sinking. Here in Ireland, one is used to northern politicians who played a prominent role in suppressing the civil rights of Catholics prating on about their ‘Ulster Scots’ heritage and language. Scots is no longer, if it ever was, the language of an oppressed minority. Given that language is other people, Graham simply could not have written with so contemporary a voice if he were merely an eccentric solitary, cut off from others. Or from his native land, to which he often returns in his work. That walk through the snow took place in Glencoe.

Having spent three days exposed to the cold, Graham was found by a shepherd who took him back to his croft and gave him some brandy. Not a bad anecdote for such a lyrically gifted poet after all.