

11-21-2019

## W.S. Graham: 'Born in a diamond screeched from a mountain pap'

Gerard Carruthers  
*University of Glasgow*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Carruthers, Gerard (2019) "W.S. Graham: 'Born in a diamond screeched from a mountain pap'," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 45: Iss. 1, 39–55.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol45/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

**W.S. GRAHAM:  
“BORN IN A DIAMOND  
SCREECHED FROM A MOUNTAIN PAP”<sup>1</sup>**

*Gerard Carruthers*

W.S. Graham (1918-1986) stands in a fairly small list of consistently fine twentieth century Scottish poets including Sorley MacLean, Iain Crichton Smith, Edwin Morgan, Norman MacCaig, Douglas Dunn and perhaps George Campbell Hay. In the twenty first century, Don Paterson is in Graham’s league, and sometimes so too are W.N. Herbert and Kathleen Jamie. More widely, in terms of post-1940s 20<sup>th</sup> century “British poetry,” Graham endures in way that arguably only Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney, Elizabeth Jennings and Geoffrey Hill do.

2018 marked the centenary of two superlative Scottish writers: Muriel Spark and W.S. Graham. Spark, born in Edinburgh, has been well celebrated, Graham, born in Greenock, not so much.<sup>2</sup> Both Spark and

---

<sup>1</sup> This is an edited version of the Hugh MacDiarmid Lecture, sponsored by the Poetry Association of Scotland, and given at the Scottish Poetry Library, March 7, 2018. All quotations from W. S. Graham’s poetry and letters are copyright, the Estate of W. S. Graham, 1999 and 2004, and are included here by permission of the Estate and Rosalind Mudaliar.

<sup>2</sup> For a list of Graham centenary events (as well as selected poems and other resources), see the useful website hosted by the Scottish Poetry Library on behalf of the W.S. Graham estate: <https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/language-where-people-are-ws-graham-100/>. Other recognition included a centenary assessment by Rachael Boast and Andy Ching (who had just inventoried the manuscripts in the Graham estate archive), “The Outward Journey,” *Poetry*, 212 (January 2018), at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/145162/the-outward-journey>; publication of new Graham poems, with an introductory biographical essay by Jeremy Noel-Tod, in *TLS* (March 7, 2018); a tribute volume, *The Caught Habits of Language: An Entertainment for W.S.Graham for Him Having Reached One Hundred*, ed. Rachael Boast, Andy Ching, and Nathan Hamilton (Bristol: Donut Press, 2018); Robert Selby’s review, *TLS* (April 26, 2019), 27; a *New Selected Poems*, ed. Matthew Francis (London: Faber and Faber, 2018); a Graham selection with an introduction by Michael Hofmann in the series *NYRB Poets* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2018); essays, poems and drawings in *Chicago Review*,

Graham have suffered from the structural nationalism of Scottish literary studies, where writers writing principally to, in, or about Scotland (preferably lamenting the national condition) have been a central focal point. For Scots, unlike the French or Russians, émigré status, has been unglamorous: witness the difficult Scottish canonicity of our most influential Scottish poet of all time—James Thomson (author of *The Seasons*), or of James Boswell, Thomas Carlyle, even Robert Louis Stevenson, of Muriel Spark too, and of W.S. Graham. More comfortably, Graham fits into a canon of “modern” British (and American) poetry, or maybe just “World Poetry in English.” For sheer linguistic exuberance, Graham is on a par also with the great Les Murray, or for thematic exuberance with Derek Walcott.

We should not scoff at the idea of a poet being born in Greenock, as it is a strong writerly place. Alan Sharp, author of *A Green Tree in Gedde* and one of the greatest of Hollywood’s screen writers was raised there, so too John Galt. Admittedly, John Wilson, poet and author of a rather fine work “The Clyde” (1764), was made to burn his literary manuscripts when taking up a position at Greenock Grammar School, but even this came out of the strongly Greenockian Calvinist imagination that saw works of art as profane, graven idols in the face of the Almighty. Go forward one hundred years and the great pre-Modernist poet, John Davidson, is in Greenock in his childhood, and his contemporary James (“B.V.”) Thomson spent his earliest years not far away, in Port Glasgow. In the early 1930s Wystan Hugh Auden would stare across at the Inverclyde metropolis from Larchfield Academy in Helensburgh and habitually refer to it as “the wicked city,” imagining it as a place of delights.<sup>3</sup> And, actually, as we’ll glimpse, Greenock, Inverclyde, is a place of delightful, imaginative, problematic possibility in the verse of W S Graham.

Some years after Auden’s wistful gazing, in the later 1930s, Graham completed an engineering apprenticeship in his home town, and went on to study literature and philosophy at Newbattle Abbey adult education college near Dalkeith. Graham was among the first intakes to the college established in 1937 by Philip Kerr, 11<sup>th</sup> Marquis of Lothian. In his early life, before his conversion to Christian Science, Kerr had been influenced by the Catholic

---

62:01/02/03 (Winter 2018/2019), guest-edited by David Nowell-Smith; a new anthology *Try to Be Better* (London: Prototype Publishing, *forthcoming*); and the exhibition *Constructing Spaces*, at the National Poetry Library, Southbank, London (October 2018-March 2019), on which see David Nowell Smith, *The Conversation* (November 28, 2018), at:

<https://theconversation.com/ws-graham-how-a-lost-vhs-tape-helped-unlock-a-forgotten-poets-creative-world-107546>.

<sup>3</sup> Polly Clark, “Auden, Helensburgh and The Orators” (25 September, 2017): <http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/connect/blog/thursday-post-auden-helensburgh-and-orators>.

movement for progressive social action, and, as Lloyd George's political ally, he was influenced even before the Depression by 20th century Liberal ideas about the Welfare state (liberal with a big L). The models for Newbattle Abbey included not only the WEA-linked Ruskin College, Oxford (founded in 1899), and the trade-union linked Coleg Harlech in Anglesey, founded by his government colleague Ton Jones in 1922, but Plater Hall, the Catholic adult education centre in Oxford, founded by progressive Jesuits in 1922.

Like Oxford English, Newbattle had a strong curriculum of Anglo-Saxon literature; unlike Oxbridge, or the Scottish universities of the time for that matter, it gave more or less equal place to modernity: James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and T.S. Eliot were included, as well as American Modernists such as Marianne Moore. Graham's delight in language owes a debt both to his reading of Anglo-Saxon and these "moderns." French literature and philosophy too featured in Graham's curriculum, including the most modern trends—the thinking of Martin Heidegger and others—in continental existentialism. Casual labourer in Ireland and munitions worker in Glasgow, travelling sometimes to London during the early 1940s, Graham closely associated with the likes of the Ayrshire painters, printmakers and expressionists such as Robert Colquhoun and Jankel Adler and the poet Dylan Thomas.

As hard-drinking as Hugh MacDiarmid could have wished but more bohemian than that greatest of Scottish cultural activists would probably have liked, Graham in this period shows himself to be part of a wider Modernist sensibility as opposed to the *Scottish* Modernist sensibility of MacDiarmid *et al.* Graham's closest "Scottish" poetic association in this period was with William Montgomerie, resident in 1944 in Dundee, who tried to include Graham in his "group" of regularly-meeting Tayside poets. Friendly with Montgomerie, Graham nonetheless wrote about too many Scottish poets forgetting that "poetry's made of words" and of how he wished "we could do something to waken things up and get the National bias down and more poetry in Scotland to be made of words instead of heather and homerule and freedom."<sup>4</sup> In the autumn of 1946, Graham became very annoyed by Maurice Lindsay's *Modern Scottish Poetry* for Faber, ostensibly by its dedication to Lindsay's fiancée.<sup>5</sup> One might infer, though, that it was Lindsay's anthology itself that annoyed Graham. Sycophantic to

---

<sup>4</sup> *The Nightfisherman: Selected Letters of W.S. Graham*, edited by Michael and Margaret Snow (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), 22.

<sup>5</sup> "What right had he at all to to dedicate the representative selection of contemporary Scotland to 'Joy'? ... Christ, the insensitive cheek of it": Graham to Montgomerie, 20 August 1944, in *Nightfisherman*, 68, but four months later: "I've been daft about the Maurice Lindsay business. I was wrong... I apologised to him" (*ibid.*, 69).

MacDiarmid in his introduction, Lindsay actually gave equal space to his own creative work alongside MacDiarmid's, and in a somewhat contradictory narrative he paid lip service to the structurally nationalist poetry project while also suggesting that poetry transcends this. Graham, a poet of massively greater ability, was given less space than the editor gave himself.

I agree with Graham's best critic, Tony Lopez, that a particularly fine example of Graham's linguistic capacity in the early verse is "O Gentle Queen of the Afternoon," published in *Poetry London* in 1942, and first collected in Graham's book *Cage Without Grievance* the same year:

O gentle queen of the afternoon  
Wave of the last orient of tears.  
No daylight comet ever breaks  
On so sweet an archipelago  
As love on love.

The fundamental negress built  
In a cloudy descant of the stars  
Surveys no sorrow, invents no limits  
Till laughter the watcher of accident  
Sways off to God.

O gentle queen of the afternoon  
The dawn is rescued dead and risen.  
Promise, O bush of blushing joy,  
No daylight comet ever breaks  
On so sweet an archipelago  
As love on love.<sup>6</sup>

Here we have a difficult abstract lyricism somewhat akin to the technique of Dylan Thomas, though like Thomas the difficulty is lessened to some extent by repetition. We have to know that the daylight comet, last seen in 1910, preceded by some months the appearance of Halley's Comet in the same year.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Poetry (London)*, no. 7 (October-November, 1942), 25; *Cage without Grievance* (Glasgow: Parton Press, 1942), 10; *New Collected Poems*, ed. Matthew Francis (London: Faber & Faber, 2004), 18-19, referenced below in-text as *NCP*. *New Collected Poems* gives priority to poems that Graham himself collected in book form, in his published text, grouping poems known only in periodical or manuscript form in an appendix. Graham's large corpus of manuscripts, in the National Library of Scotland and elsewhere, would repay attention towards a new edition of his collected poetry for the 21st century. A chronological list of Graham's periodical poetry is given in Tony Lopez's generally excellent critical book, *The Poetry of W. S. Graham* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989), 146-154; see also Lopez, "T. S. Eliot and W. S. Graham," *Scottish Literary Journal*, 19.1 (1992): 35-46.

What we also have in the text is the aubade form, the lover addressing his sleeping mistress, as in John Donne's "The Sunne Rising." By time Graham is writing, Donne's metaphysical poetry had been fashionable for more than a decade, largely under the influence of T.S. Eliot. The daylight comet had on its appearance outshone Venus, conventional planetary emblem of love, and here love itself outshines even this potential nouveau symbol of bright, burning love: "No daylight comet ever breaks/On so sweet an archipelago/As love on love." The archipelago—oddly—is the two lovers, each in bits together, broken down in their identities rather than joined together in their love-making, strings of islands, of emotions presumably. The dawn from the "orient," the morning moving away is being "waved" away, the waves of passion in the night; the "negress" associated with the Andromeda galaxy, predicted by astronomers eventually to collide with the Milky Way, is the poet's lover; in her "cloudy descant," her unorthodox melody is not to be associated in conventional poetic language with the usual, received tropes about loss or measurement.

The accidental, unexpected, absurd appearance of the Daylight comet produces here laughter, unexpected, rather absurd joy, rather than harmonious, heavenly form until it disappears again—"sways off to God" rather than "swaying" along with the rest of the universe to the divine plan, the divine music even (which in Graham's text, in the post-Jazz Age, is a big black, female singer with her "descant," her jazz improve riffing, "swaying" to her own beat, an off-beat perhaps. The "dawn," or life, is "rescued dead and risen" by this new star—like the star of the nativity impending an incarnate experience which is *very* carnal indeed: "Promise, O bush of blushing joy.")

Overall, this extremely sensual verse has as its driving conceit the lovers' love compared to the scene of the astronomical skies, referring to, ultimately resisting, or bending out of shape the conventional astronomical imagery of love. It is jazz, unrhymed, but refrain-ful, it is a bent, unfamiliar map of the skies, a Picasso abstract but still full of (especially female) form. Love, individual for all lovers, cannot be conventionally formed, though we might—all of us—grasp its universal excitement, even a kind of emotional (and physical) messiness. Its unrhymed momentariness cannot be easily encoded. "O Gentle Queen of the Afternoon" brings to bear the received courtliness of the aubade form, the morning love song, to which it actually stands in counterpoint. The lovers have awoken in the afternoon, out of sync, too late for an aubade. Time is unmanaged, the bed is messy and calmness, "emotion recollected in tranquillity," is not the point. Poetic abandon or riot (rather like the Metaphysical poets) instead of convention is the language of love.

In 1944, Graham's *The Seven Journeys* was published by William McLellan in his *Poetry Scotland* series, which ought to have placed Graham

as a mainstream and also phenomenal figure in his native country. But this didn't quite happen, perhaps not unrelated to the fact that in 1943 the poet had begun his relocation to Cornwall, that place which was to endure for him as home, albeit somewhat intermittently, until his death in 1986. With huge prosodic skill, colourful, declamatory but unargumentative, unpolemical (unlike so many other Scottish poets of the time), this relocation is the entire sequence of *The Seven Journeys*, but with strong autobiographical propulsion through Graham's physical and emotional experiences. "The First Journey" reflects on the poet being born in Scotland in lines that really ought to be memorialised or carved into a town space in Greenock:

Born in a diamond screeched from a mountain pap  
 My faith with a hoof in myrtle considers the jig  
 Of the rowans and brambles rocked in the beanstalked moon.  
 Amen to the dark medusa freezing in air  
 With the plough in sparstone like the eyes of idols.  
 Without a song backward since spring bleeds the peat at my shin  
 My balancing giant so strideful of farewell words  
 Leads the tenderly mimicing feet of my wormward heart  
 On a weaving hair path gouged by a roving seal  
 Through mauve seas tasselled and trellised in emerald.

(NCP, 4)..

There is here, and throughout Graham's *oeuvre*, an unpretentious virtuosity with words. One can become bogged down in unravelling Graham's exuberant semantics. This is a young man's poem: there is a welter of words, a bit like Graham's early exemplary heroes Dylan Thomas and Gerard Manley Hopkins. But there is also a witty recognition that the poet's words, his images come too fast, too immature. "A diamond screeched from a mountain pap": has there ever been a better, more surprising description of Greenock? It is "diamond," it is indestructible along its slender slither of land claimed from the dominating hills behind it. The "diamond" is also Graham's poetic sensibility, his stylus so to speak, an unstoppable thing coming from both the native flora (the rowans and the brambles, the peat), as well as from classical books, from the more exotic landscapes therein, with their myrtle and their Medusa. Our narrator is in the sky, not omnisciently but rather awkwardly climbing the beanstalk towards the giant (which might well be poetry itself), looking up to the sky and down to the sea, which is Rapunzel's hair—both his path and an exuberant image of the currents of the sea which are suddenly "gouged by a roving seal," "through mauve seas tasselled and trellised in emerald."

As so often in Graham's work we have chains of association, of memory or riotously coagulating metaphor and imagery. Here is not someone disadvantaged by his Scottishness, by being a Greenockian, the imagination

is as available to him as anyone else from his surroundings and from books. Like Hopkins, Graham feasts on simile, but unlike Hopkins it is not only the refined, gourmet variety of imagery that is deployed, but all of it crammed indiscriminately into and out of his mouth. It is a “first journey,” a poetic apprenticeship, and this includes self-mockery at his own over-exuberance. *The Seven Journeys* sequence deserves today, I believe, to be much better known in Scottish literary history. At a time when MacDiarmid had largely lost his earlier sensitive quality and Edwin Muir was producing both poetry and prose of impossible despair, here is a youthful voice, an already technically brilliant voice, demonstrating the Scottish ability to produce uncomplicated, complicated verse with a formal control, and also a musicality, which in the words of Graham’s fast admirer, Harold Pinter is “magical.” In terms of Graham’s British reputation, *The Seven Journeys* is easily overtaken by his later, greater work; but we’ve never quite grasped, I think, that in 1940s Scotland Graham’s work is at least as good as any other living Scot. Such excellent Scottish critics as Eddie Morgan, Rory Watson and Douglas Dunn are aware of Graham’s largeness.<sup>7</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid *et al.* never really were. And across Graham’s career it has been English- and Welsh-based critics, Lopez, Ralph Pite, Hester Jones, Matthew Francis, David Nowell Smith and others, who have led the true appreciation.<sup>8</sup>

Again on Graham’s hometown, but much later, indeed in work uncollected until the 1990s, we have seeming homesickness in “The Greenock Dialogues”:

O Greenock, Greenock, I never will  
Get back to you. But here I am,  
The boy made good into a ghost  
Which I will send along your streets

---

<sup>7</sup> See Edwin Morgan, “The Sea, the Desert, the City: Environment and Language in W. S. Graham, Hamish Henderson, and Tom Leonard,” *Yearbook Of English Studies* 17, (1987): 31-45; and, for instance, Roderick Watson, “Scottish Poetry 1979-1980,” *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 17 (1982): 218-224, available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol17/iss1/17>; see also Douglas Dunn’s very nice foreword to *New Collected Poems*, xiii-xix.

<sup>8</sup> Ralph Pite and Hester Jones, eds, *W.S. Graham: Speaking Towards You* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004); Matthew Francis, ed., *New Collected Poems*; the ongoing work of David Nowell Smith promises a step-change in Graham appreciation: see, e.g., his “An experience with rhythm: W.S. Graham,” *Études Britanniques Contemporaines*, 39 (2010), 51-64; “‘These words take place’: W.S. Graham’s ‘The Nightfishing,’” *Essays in Modern British and Irish Poetry*, 5 (2011): 229-244; and (both since this lecture was written), “Poetry’s plastic medium: the example of W.S. Graham,” *Modernism/modernity*, 3.2 (August 2018), at: <https://modernismmodernity.org/articles/poetrys-plastic-medium>; “W.S. Graham’s three-accent line,” *Modern Philology*, 116.3 (February 2019): 235-261.



Tonight as the busy nightshifts  
 Hammer and spark their welding lights.

I pull this skiff I made myself  
 Across the almost midnight firth  
 Between Greenock and Kilkreggan (*NCP*, 319).

As so frequently when writing of Greenock, we have Graham's nice touch that he (or his narrative persona) haunts the place rather than the more hubristic formulation of the town-haunts-the-poet. He will haunt it by continuing his poem of his own childhood when, at least in the poem, he built a small boat of some kind to go sailing on the Clyde with his (poetically-imagined) cousin Brigit Mooney. "The almost midnight firth" cannot be fully midnight because of the illuminating urban lights and the welding of shipyard nightshifts; in one sense, then, poetry cannot be king in this landscape.

Related to this idea, his own slight "skiff" is also his poetry, or his genuinely modest contribution to the culture of his hometown. His literary art and that of other Greenockians is seemingly slight, but robust, with a touch of defiance even. Graham meditates on other literary contributions of the "tail of the bank" (epithet for a maritime area of Greenock): art belongs here in this place as much as shipbuilding (an art itself perhaps, in Graham's refusal to be definitive about the value of all human endeavour):

On the dirty pebbles of my home  
 Town Greenock where somewhere Burns' Mary  
 Sleeps and John Galt's ghosts go  
 Still in the annals of their parish (*NCP*, 323).

As a scholar of eighteenth-century literature, one of the things I most admire about Graham is the compressed wit, the zeugma—here where that oxymoronic "still" signals stoppage, seemingly, but where, in fact, the overriding meaning of "still" is of "continuing": that culture of literary heritage is as engrained in Greenock as the physical, hard-graft and craft of shipbuilding.

In this late work, Graham aware of declining years knows that he is part of the huge bank of unremembered memories in the town (including his adventures with Brigit), but though he himself does not say so, he is also going to be part of his home town's literary heritage, clearly. "Greenock Dialogues," in one sense a dialogue between the two spheres, art and science, is ultimately the apprehension that everything in human creation, in human life, including activity no matter how seemingly tangible and practical, becomes inevitably, faded, ghost-like, consigned to the zone of communal remembrance, somehow even more poignant than actual personal remembrance. And, paradoxically, it is memory individual and collective

that provides an identity, which is never simply given, never simply there in a physically certain way. Identity is always selective, provisional: slight is the ambit of expressed human experience as passes beyond direct expression and experience into more mythical, communal terrain.

For more than a decade I've been rummaging around in Graham's *New Collected Poems*, very well edited by Matthew Francis. It allows rummaging because it includes work originally uncollected, or unpublished in Graham's lifetime.<sup>9</sup> This work, heaped up in the final sections of the book, is nicely accessible but still awaits fuller editing. I simply love Graham's "Fourth Sonnet," though I have no idea why it is so titled:

Sometimes the whisky-balanced miner sings  
 On Saturday's bus-stop swinging in the night  
 Brings through his pit-hoarse voice his lea-rig heart  
 And lifts from slag his fierce young poet's head.  
 Sometimes a tear starts from the evervoid  
 Threading from soul to time through time to soul.  
 And this love-kernel tear of Burns has forked  
 Out from the star-soul-splintering fields of time  
 And found this pit-shift-guarded centre prince.  
 Crumble the coal bent hours. The heart is here  
 Breaking in trees of song between the slags  
 Rearing through spectrum voids in grains of time.  
 Sometimes the whisky-balanced miner sings  
 And brings through his dark voice his lea-rig heart.

(NCP, 342).<sup>10</sup>

Sense is as delicately managed here as in any other more conventional, rhymed, rhythmized sonnet. This is a sonnet for the late twentieth-century: incorporating the syntax of free verse, though actually in mode largely in blank verse. It is about the communicative possibilities of art through ethereal time. Burns's song "The Lea-Rig" has become part of this miner's culture as much as his working-life, especially chosen by Graham not only as a canonical song for an Ayrshire miner but also as a symbol of farming, the lea-rig, which is as "crude" and ancient as mining itself. Both Graham's sonnet and its inter-text, the Burns song, are songs of possibility: of youthful

---

<sup>9</sup> Before *New Collected Poems*, many (but not all poems) that Graham had not himself published in book form or included in his misleadingly-titled *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), which omitted the title-sequence from *Seven Journeys* (1944), could be hunted down in *Uncollected Poems* (Warwick: Greville Press, 1990) or in *Aimed at Nobody: Poems from Notebooks*, ed. Margaret Blackwood and Robin Skelton ((London: Faber and Faber, 1993). *New Collected Poems* was the first time all Graham's uncollected poems had been brought together alongside the work that was more widely available.

<sup>10</sup> First published in *Poetry* (London), no. 7 (October -November, 1942), 23.

fecundity, of feeling and strength—and these things are largely couched in more immediately explicable, more everyday terms than is often the case with Graham. “Largely”: since we also have those “difficult” lines where the heart is: “Breaking in trees of song between the slags/Rearing through spectrum voids in grains of time.” Coal is fossilised organic matter, including trees. The miner in strenuous matter-of-fact way mines this material from the rubbish, or slag, even as his heart might momentarily break with his Burns songs and the like; he works through the “grains,” the layers of time both in his seemingly mundane employment and also back through songs and experience in a cultural tradition. In other words, he is as efficient in his singing as in his labour in travelling through time. Both the practical business of labour and the sentiment of the heart are part of human ritual, of enquiry, of the everyday which is always connected in human life with the past. Graham’s “Fourth Sonnet” is a compendium of sinuously joyful humanity.

*The White Threshold* (1949) was Graham’s fourth and break-through collection, much admired and published by Faber with T.S. Eliot as commissioning editor. A number of texts here make Graham, surely, one of our best poets of sea and river scapes, the firth of Clyde featuring on a number of occasions that could be almost directly translated into painting form.<sup>11</sup> In a poem “To My Brother” (part of a family “Three Letters” sequence that ends the collection):

The morning rises up.  
The sun’s enamoured step  
Crosses the ancient firth.  
Your breath crosses my breath.

The sun’s encouraged step,  
The released word’s escape,  
Enters the bright bright world  
Held in the helmet head (*NCP*, 99).

But the poem ends ambiguously, “These words make light of us.” This poem reveals but ultimately cannot say enough of the fraternal bond. The largeness of the sea in this text reveals the fragility, the smallness of words and of humans and their relationships; we are put into perspective by nature in a sense: but it is not just the sea doing this *naturally*, it is still *our* perspective. We—poets, artists, ordinary people—*create* this perspective. This takes us to the paradoxical centre of Graham’s art. Perspective throughout his work is often an existential act, we take control of the world

---

<sup>11</sup> On this general and important connection of Graham and the visual arts, see David Whittaker, *Give me your painting hand: W.S. Graham and Cornwall* (Charlbury, Oxfordshire: Wavestone Press, [2015]).

temporarily, even although majestically precisely because, in Heideggerian terms, we are aware of death, of mortality. The physical universe might endure but we are its interpreters, we are, if only for a limited time, its masters.

*The Nightfishing* (1955) is W.S. Graham's fifth and probably most enduringly famous collection of poetry, precisely because of how thoughtfully well executed are Graham's long enduring themes of poetic perception and perception in general. His editor Eliot said of the book, "some of these poems by their sustained power, their emotional depth and maturity and their superb technical skill, may well be among the more important poetical achievements of our time."<sup>12</sup> Part three of the title poem goes to the heart of what this collection essays:

I, in Time's grace, the grace of change, sail surely  
 Moved off the land and the skilled keel sails  
 The darkness burning under where I go.  
 Landvoices and the lights ebb away  
 Raising the night round us. Unwinding whitely,  
 My changing motive pays me slowly out.  
 The sea sails in. The quay opens wide its arms  
 And waves us loose (*NCP*, 107).

Here, in Graham's developed existential view, time or change is a kind of grace. And even although grace here is largely a matter of metaphor, it does take us into something like theological waters: time/change equals also the space in which we exercise our own agency, our own free will. Our life choices are made not in full possession of the facts (since uncertain temporality applies both to ourselves and to the world): "The darkness burning under where I go." This teasing appropriation of the idea of Hell resets it not as a place of punishment for our iniquity or as a teleological possibility, but as simply the unknown. The unknown, our eventual fate, the agnostic Graham believes, is not to be dreaded. We have Graham's light, ludic method (again a hallmark of his poetry): "The quay opens wide its arms/And waves us loose." This almost childish metaphorising, a five finger exercise in personification almost, is actually pointing out that there is no one waving us on, watching over us but ourselves. We are "waved loose": waves of life experience, which might often be not related, are "loose" and so are we. We are the agents and the subjects of change. The poem "The Nightfishing" is a riot of images of darkness and light, of fruition and decay, of circularity, of the animus of the sea.

In a wry way, completing lacking in megalomania, the narrator (perhaps the poet) is here the fisherman-apostle Peter. Graham's poem is underwritten by the account in Luke's gospel where Peter has had a fruitless night of

---

<sup>12</sup> *NCP*, xv, citing *The Nightfisherman*, ix.

fishing on the sea of Galilee and is ordered back out by Christ. Peter proves his faith by following the command and being rewarded with a prodigious, miraculous catch (Luke 5, 1-11). This overarching metaphor—the night-fishing—is (appropriately enough) loosely worked. The text is about the joys and sorrows of life, communicated through sheer exuberance of language, of imagery. It is unpretentiously portentous: at times his nightfishing seems to be an epic voyage, and so it is through life. We have epic language as the long poem ends:

The sea awakes its fires.  
 White water stares in  
 From the harbour-mouth.  
 And we run through well  
 Held off the black land  
 Out into the waving  
 Nerves of the open sea.

My dead in the crew  
 Have mixed all qualities  
 That I have been and,  
 Though ghosted behind  
 My sides spurred by the spray,  
 Endure by a further gaze  
 Pearled behind my eyes.  
 Far out faintly calls  
 The mingling sea.

Now again blindfold  
 With the hemisphere  
 Unprised and bright  
 Ancient overhead.

This present place is  
 Become made into  
 A breathless still place  
 Unrolled on a scroll  
 And turned to face this light.

So I spoke and died.  
 So within the dead  
 Of night and the dead  
 Of all my life those  
 Words died and awoke (*NCP*, 120).

Here is Graham the tease: “we run through well,” instead of “hell,” “within the dead”—enjambement—of night. We have here the bathetic, even as at first we think we are getting the big things but get the small. Graham is playing with our readerly apprehensions: we are primed from classical

Greece to modern Holywood to read big: the big story, the big ideas, the big theology, the big monster, the big God. Graham's big story is a democratic one, it is his, it is ours: pertaining, genuinely, to the everyman or woman. As so often in the way Graham uses culture, he takes our received ideas, our received reading and uses its expectations, or its apparatuses, perhaps: we are primed to know about darkness and light, about dramatic contours, about narrative structures, the gears of plot-change. This is the story of us all, we are told in "The Nightfishing," the same set of dramatic plot-turns. The text is repeatedly "tense," including the passage I have just read, where the "open sea" itself has "nerves": organs of course which communicate, which tell stories. We have not so much Peter by the end of the poem as Jason of Argonauts fame, his "dead" "crew"-members (dead through misadventure presumably) are actually metaphors for the speaker's/the rememberer's own past experience. The "ghosts" are memories, experiences rather than "real" revenants, but they do alarm and inform—as they should—as he goes on his way through life. He "endure(s) by a further gaze," by new experience, "pearled behind my eyes." That rather tired simile, "eyes like pearls" (though think Shakespeare's *Tempest*, Eliot's *Waste Land*), registers his reborn perspective, naïve, childlike but inevitable as he is lured on yet again by some fresh promise or another. "Now again blindfold," the inevitable transition to faulty vision. Cycles of hope and disappointment, as he 'turned' to face the light again (we might notice the playful transitions between present and past tense throughout the text which also represent the rising and falling of experience). The past does not bring wisdom, necessarily, but it brings experience, which might be valuable practically, existentially, but with no guarantee that this is the case. In some ways, Graham is a very late "Romantic": celebrating the momentary nature of life, and rejoicing in its retrospective description but vaunting a poetic output that resists strident epiphany even as it self-consciously revels in literary description.

"So I spoke and died." The narrator/Graham is the ghost in his own poem, his own machine:

the dead  
Of all my life those  
Words died and awoke (NCP, 120).

The dead are remembered in some sense by every generation: this is eternal life, the shared life that we recognise through portentous, never completely concretised, images and metaphor. There is a kind of endless resurrection through the human generations in our shared culture, our shared, hard-wired psychology: "Words died and awoke." There is no emptiness until the end of time, but a continuity, an existential tradition, or existential community that endures.

W.S. Graham is a rather *heavy* poet, albeit with an understated humour and he is accessible, but it takes something I wish my students understood better about poetry, about most things, in fact: re-reading. “The Beast in the Space” from Graham’s sixth collection, *Malcom Mooney’s Land* (1970), is perhaps Graham at his most accessible, like Ted Hughes’s “The Thought Fox,” the kind of thing one might do if you were a teacher with a decent senior high school class.

Shut up. Shut up. There’s nobody here.  
 If you think you hear somebody knocking  
 On the other side of the words, pay  
 No attention. It will be only  
 The great creature that thumps its tail  
 On silence on the other side.  
 If you do not even hear that  
 I’ll give the beast a quick skelp  
 And through Art you’ll hear it yelp.

The beast that lives on silence takes  
 Its bite out of either side.  
 It pads and sniffs between us. Now  
 It comes and laps my meaning up.  
 Call it over. Call it across  
 This curious necessary space.  
 Get off, you terrible inhabiter  
 Of silence. I’ll not have it. Get  
 Away to whoever it is will have you.

He’s gone and if he’s gone to you  
 That’s fair enough. For on this side  
 Of the words it’s late. The heavy moth  
 Bangs on the pane. The whole house  
 Is sleeping and I remember  
 I am not here, only the space  
 I sent the terrible beast across.  
 Watch. He bites. Listen gently  
 To any song he snorts or growls  
 And give him food. He means neither  
 Well or ill towards you. Above  
 All, shut up. Give him your love.

(*NCP*, 157-158).

This is what I call Graham’s mode of the “comical sinister.” The beast in the space is the bogeyman in the cupboard. Who is the narrator telling to “shut up,” the beast or the reader, or even himself? This is one of many Graham poems about the difficulty of communication. The narrator reminds us, “I am not here, only the space”: the space, or the gap obviously enough between the author (the authorial “I”) and the reader. But if so how can he

have sent “the beast” across the space? We readers are enjoined at the end to “shut up”—not to be silent but to “shut up” the beast: put the bogeyman back in the cupboard, which means be imaginative, “give him your love” even though he means “neither good nor ill” to us. “For on this side of the words it’s late./The heavy moth/Bangs on the pane.” In one sense then our poet keeps up his poetry, his imagery: he’s had his say, even as he doubts via his own metaphor if he’s getting through. The best he can do is puny akin to a childish imagination, with the beast and the obvious, clichéd, moth-eaten “moth.” The beast is “shut up,” the reader is to “shut up” and to “listen gently,” or tolerantly. The poet has *already* shut up, since the poem is completed. And we, the reader, are to give the beast even ‘love’ because we somehow need this “curious necessary space” of the imagination.

A playful, paradoxical, contradictory performance, “The Beast in the Space” is both strident about art—I am making a “beast” says Graham (which is also simultaneously self-deprecating in indicating imperfection); and it is also full of doubt—the beast, the noisy poem is in itself a “space.” We are commanded to love by Graham, however, not by the man who is the superior artist, but by the self-doubting, never complete spinner of meaning. Poetry, like everyday speech, like the seemingly clearest of fairy tales (where “well” or “ill” are obviously intended) is never fully burnished. Here, in “The Beast in the Space” is a deconstructed poem, an essay of sorts in poetry where the poet, the reader and the subject are all in doubt. Everything is taken apart, even as Graham simultaneously delivers a virtuoso performance in precise imprecision, thematically and also formally in the management of rhythm and run-on lines that throughout both advance and question the semantic coherence of the text. Marked also is that thing which happens especially in later Graham: an ever more conversational surface. Modern poetry by the late twentieth century becomes ever more colloquial in a sense, and it is the brilliance of poetic setting for this colloquial-ness that marks out the brilliant poet. In a sense, we might say, the urbanity of the eighteenth-century poet is replaced by the matiness of the late twentieth-century one.

I want to discuss one final Graham text. Because it makes a a superb companion piece to teach with “The Beast in the Space,” I was going to do “Imagine A Forest,” from *Implements in Their Places* (1977), his final book before *Collected Poems* (1979). But I’m going to look at “Loch Thom,” another poem from the same volume:

1.

Just for the sake of recovering  
 I walked backward from fifty-six  
 Quick years of age wanting to see,  
 And managed not to trip or stumble  
 To find Loch Thom and turned round



To see the stretch of my childhood  
 Before me. Here is the loch. The same  
 Long-beaked cry curls across  
 The heather-edges of the water held  
 Between the hills a boyhood's walk  
 Up from Greenock. It is the morning.

And I am here with my mammy's  
 Bramble jam scones in my pocket.  
 The Firth is miles and I have come  
 Back to find Loch Thom maybe  
 In this light does not recognise me.

This is a lonely freshwater loch.  
 No farms on the edge. Only  
 Heath grouse-moor stretching  
 Down to Greenock and One Hope  
 Street or stretching away across  
 Into the blue moors of Ayrshire.

## 2

And almost I am back again  
 Wading in the heather down to the edge  
 To sit. The minnows go by in shoals  
 Like iron-filings in the shallows.

My mother is dead. My father is dead  
 And all the trout I used to know  
 Leaping from their sad rings are dead.

## 3

I drop my crumbs into the shallow  
 Weed for the minnows and pinheads.  
 You see that I will have to rise  
 And turn round and get back where  
 My running age will slow for a moment  
 To let me on. It is a colder  
 Stretch of water than I remember.

The curlew's cry travelling still  
 Kills me fairly. In front of me  
 The grouse flurry and settle. GOBACK  
 GOBACK GOBACK FAREWELL LOCH THOM.

(*NCP*, 220-221)

“Just for the sake of recovering”: our poet may be recuperating from an illness, or he may be just “recovering” in the sense of allowing his gratuitous imagination to wander. From memory, without actually needing to go, Graham captures the more or less unchanged scene around Loch Thom. But

it does not matter if it is actually unchanged or not, because he is revisiting his own memory, brilliantly alive and intact. He drops his crumbs—of love for dead people and even dead trout—into the pool of his imagination. He too has changed, might not be remembered by the loch in a typical Graham manoeuvre where pathetic fallacy is dealt with humorously. The real world is celebrated and so too is the world of the imagination, even if both are transient, imperfect: indeed celebrated because they are these fragile, beautiful things. Out of transience, of imperfection comes love in Graham's oeuvre (who needs to love perfection?). The poem ends in capital letters, in unconcealed, deliberately clunky emotion:

GOBACK GOBACK FAREWELL LOCH THOM.

We cannot go back, we can only go forward to death through love, through human experience that incorporates a defiant, perhaps never to be extinguished imagination: that is the poetry of W.S. Graham.

*University of Glasgow*