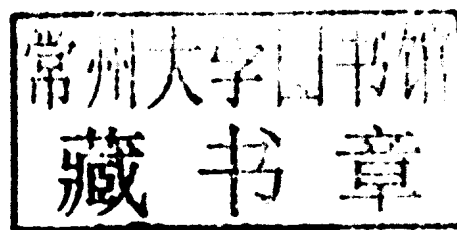# Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME
127

Poetry Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of the Most Significant and Widely Studied Poets of World Literature

Volume 127

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Preface

Poetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *PC* offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

Scope of the Series

PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, *PC* is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *PC* volume.

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Each *PC* entry consists of the following elements:

■ The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.

■ The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

■ The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.

■ Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

■ Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.

- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a bibliography set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style,* 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

Linkin, Harriet Kramer. "The Language of Speakers in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience.*" *Romanticism Past and Present* 10, no. 2 (summer 1986): 5-24. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism.* Edited by Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 79-88. Print.

Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience.*" In *Interpreting Blake,* edited by Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism.* Edited by Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Associate Product Manager:

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Contents

W. S. Graham
1918-1986

Scottish poet.

INTRODUCTION

A poet often compared to Dylan Thomas because of his unconventional imagery and syntax, Graham produced several volumes of poetry that were virtually ignored during his lifetime. In recent years, a number of critics have come to appreciate his work, which has now been included in some important anthologies.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Graham was born in Greenock, Scotland, on November 19, 1918, to a working class family. His parents were Margaret Macdiarmid Graham, and Alexander Graham, an engineer. He was raised in Clydeside, on the western coast of Scotland, where he attended school until the age of fourteen. At that time he was apprenticed to an engineering firm in Glasgow. He later studied engineering at Stow College and then took up the study of literature at Newbattle Abbey College. Graham worked in a variety of jobs before the publication of his first book of poetry in 1942, after which he moved to Cornwall. In 1947, Graham traveled to America, where he conducted a reading tour and taught briefly at New York University. The following year he moved to London, but eventually returned to Cornwall where he lived in a state of near poverty near the St. Ives artist colony. His financial situation improved greatly when he was awarded a Civil List pension in 1974. Graham was married to fellow poet Agnes Kilpatrick Dunsmuir. He died in Madron, Cornwall, on January 9, 1986.

MAJOR WORKS

Graham's first book of poetry, *Cage without Grievance,* was published in 1942; it contains fifteen poems as well as drawings by Robert Frame and Benjamin Crème. It was followed two years later by *The Seven Journeys,* a collection of narrative poems, also featuring drawings by Frame. Neither of these first two collections generated much critical response. In 1945, Graham produced *2nd Poems,* which attracted a bit of

attention, and three years later published *The Voyages of Alfred Wallis* in pamphlet form. It was later included in his last volume of the decade, *The White Threshold* (1949), usually considered Graham's first important book. It was the first of his works to gain serious notice by critics and reviewers. It contains thirty-one poems, many of which had been previously published in various periodicals in England and North America. *The Nightfishing* was published in 1955, and is considered by many scholars to be Graham's masterpiece. He produced no new poetry for the next fifteen years until 1970, when he published *Malcolm Mooney's Land,* which was followed seven years later by *Implements in Their Places,* containing twenty-six new poems. Graham's previously published work appeared in *Collected Poems, 1942-1977* (1979) and *Selected Poems* (1980). His last collection, *Aimed at Nobody* was published posthumously in 1993.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Early in his career, Graham was often called the Scottish Dylan Thomas, and like Thomas, he was often associated with the neo-Romantics. At that time, his poetry was considered obscure and inaccessible. Jascha Kessler (see Further Reading) contends that it was characterized by "that nearly impenetrable syntax, those agglutinating iambics marching, so many stressed monosyllables and new Teutonic compounds." By the time *The White Threshold* was published, Graham's style was changing—the influence of Thomas was fading and his work was becoming clearer and more precise. Although critics still complained that he was too preoccupied with the theme of language, they began to acknowledge his originality and intensity, and by the time his later volumes were published Graham was finally earning some degree of recognition.

The poet's relationship with language has been explored by Jeffrey Wainwright who reports that in Graham's poem "Approaches To How They Behave," language is not controlled by the writer and "words are not complaisant and pliable . . . but unruly, susceptible, willful." Wainwright contends that the poem is "self-satirical, adopting the manner of a plain man, well-meaning and persisting through the varieties of deviousness the words produce." David Punter

describes Graham's uneasy relationship with language, contending that "he has been turned into a monument to linguistic suffering." In his discussion of *Cage without Grievance,* Punter argues that not only are many of the volume's poems "syntactically strange," but they are also "crammed with too many connections, too many separate relations between words, complex, showy and pointless." John Haffendon reports that Graham himself identified one of his major themes as "the difficulty of communication," and Mark Andrew Silverberg addresses the "frustrated relationship" between Graham and his reader that characterizes so much of his work. "While his poems demand or beg a response," contends Silverberg, "they set up linguistic situations in which it is impossible for a response to be had." Ruth Grogan, however, calls the 1979 volume, *Collected Poems,* "an extraordinary exploration of human communication and dialogue" characterized by "a mercurial combination of light-heartedness, tenderness, linguistic inventiveness, and philosophical depth."

Several critics trace the evolution of Graham's work from the poetry he produced at the beginning of his career to his later work written after 1970. Damian Grant notes the differences between Graham's early work and his later, less challenging poetry beginning with *Malcolm Mooney's Land,* but maintains that there are also a number of thematic and linguistic continuities between the two phases of his career. John Redmond also addresses the changes in Graham's work over the several decades of his career, describing it as "deliriously lush at the beginning, ascetically spare at the end." However, he finds that one characteristic of Graham's work remained constant, that is, that "each poem is treated as what we might call an existential field . . . inseparable from life."

Graham's poetry is now praised by a number of scholars, although he still remains a fairly unknown poet. Wainwright notes that Graham's early style, similar to the "colored eloquence associated with Dylan Thomas," had a detrimental effect on his literary reputation. Grant, who contends that Graham's admirers consider him "one of the most rigorous and rewarding British poets," believes that the well-established difficulty of his work accounts for his obscurity, but it was exacerbated by bad timing. Grant cites as an example the appearance of the "demanding" volume *The Nightfishing* coinciding with the publication of a far more accessible collection by Philip Larkin. Since Graham's second to last volume, *Implements in Their Places,* contains his most accessible poetry, Grant advises new readers to approach his work backwards, working from the less difficult to the more difficult material written during the early years. Grogan expresses the hope that Graham's work will be

reevaluated within the context of studies on the nature of dialogue by such theorists as Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin. Redmond also contends Graham's poetry was ahead of its time and that its neglect is undeserved. "Anticipating a linguistic turn in postmodern poetry, his work sees language as an obstacle and a gift," according to Redmond.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Cage without Grievance [drawings by Benjamin Crème and Robert Frame] 1942
The Seven Journeys [drawings by Robert Frame] 1944
2nd Poems, 1945
The Voyages of Alfred Wallis 1948
The White Threshold 1949
The Nightfishing 1955
Malcolm Mooney's Land 1970
Implements in Their Places 1977
Collected Poems, 1942-1977 1979
Selected Poems 1980
Uncollected Poems 1990
Aimed at Nobody: Poems from Notebooks 1993
W. S. Graham: Selected Poems 1996

Other Major Works

The Night Fisherman: Selected Letters of W. S. Graham (letters) 1999

CRITICISM

Damian Grant (essay date 1980)

SOURCE: Grant, Damian. "Walls of Glass: The Poetry of W. S. Graham." In *British Poetry since 1970: A Critical Survey,* edited by Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt, pp. 22-38. New York: Persea Books, 1980.

[*In the following essay, Grant discusses the continuities as well as the evolution displayed by Graham's poetry throughout his career, describing* Implements in Their Places *as his most accessible work.*]

I

W. S. Graham has published seven books of poetry in over thirty years, and is unquestioningly acknowledged by his select audience as one of the most rigorous and rewarding British poets; but he has never been popular or even widely known. This may partly be due to the fact that he has been 'somewhat unlucky in his timing', in that (as Edward Lucie-Smith once noted) his demanding volume *The Nightfishing* appeared the same year as Philip Larkin's more accessible *The Less Deceived.* But the intrinsic reason lies in the difficulty of his poems, especially his early poems; a point which has always been conceded in the little criticism that has appeared of Graham's work. On the appearance of *The White Threshold* in 1949 Edwin Morgan remarked how Graham had 'moved into the front rank of those who are striving to light up the imaginative dialogue of poet and reader without resort to well-laid fuses of moral or social response', and applauded the integrity, the 'undeviating and dangerous singlemindedness' of his determination to 'remain undistracted and unwooed'. Reviewing *Malcolm Mooney's Land* twenty years later, Robin Skelton said that 'W. S. Graham resolutely avoids the public stance; his poems are directed to individual listeners and not to crowds'. Calvin Bedient contrasts Graham with the poet who would 'wear the common language like a consecrated robe': 'Graham wants to cut his own cloth, show by his style that he is *not* the public. His cultivated eccentricity argues the right to stand alone'.

And he has stood alone; the negative evidence is there to confirm these observations. Graham's poems have never been widely anthologized, imitated, or (mercifully) set for examinations. *Collected Poems 1942-1977* have now (1979) appeared from Faber, who have never before published a selection. The only representative selection from his work appeared in volume 17 of the Penguin Modern Poets in 1970 (a volume which also featured David Gascoyne and Kathleen Raine). His poems continue to make their rare appearances in magazines; but he is almost like the ghost of a poet, whose visitations are perceived by a few initiates but pass unnoticed by the majority—even the majority of the readers of poetry. One of Graham's finest poems, **'Johann Joachim Quantz's Five Lessons'**, concludes with this sober injunction from the musician to his pupil:

Do not be sentimental or in your Art.
I will miss you. Do not expect applause.

It would seem then that Graham has been prepared to do without applause for most of his career. The purpose of this essay is not to set the echoes ringing with combative assertions, but to offer an interpreta-

tive introduction to Graham's work for the reader who may well (and quite excusably) have missed one of the rarest talents in English poetry. The opportunity is provided by the fact that Graham's last two volumes, *Malcolm Mooney's Land* (1970) and *Implements in their Places* (1977), were both published in the 1970s.

II

W. S. Graham's first book of poems *Cage Without Grievance* was published by David Archer's Parton Press in Glasgow in 1942 when Graham was twenty-four. There followed *The Seven Journeys* two years later; *2nd Poems* in 1945. A pamphlet poem *The Voyages of Alfred Wallis* was published in 1948 by a small press in Cornwall, where Graham (who had left his native Scotland first for London and then for New York) was shortly to make his home, and where he still lives. These early poems show Graham drunk with words and prodigal of images; dazed with Dylan Thomas (whom he had met in London, among the poets who congregated in Soho) and blown about with the windy rhetoric of the New Apocalypse:

> This flying house where somewhere houses war
> World of the winding world hands me away
> Hauls at my tugging blood for words to wear
> Like rose of rising in the mercury counting sky
>
> ('Warning Not Prayer Enough', *2nd Poems*)

And so on. The excitement is purely verbal, the 'lonely energy' of the poetry (as Graham was later to call it) runs to earth without discharging its meaning. On the technical side, one notices especially the enfeebling fondness for what one might call the poetic participle: for the much-abused -ing (and also the agent -er) forms, which set up an easy rocking rhythm without making much demand on the syntax.

But nevertheless these poems do clearly initiate some of Graham's permanent themes (the drama of identity, in the multiplying of the self; the paradoxes of communication, with particular reference to the mystery of the poem; the metaphoric voyage; time) and also introduce us to his favourite contrastive images of land and sea, tree and wave, owl and gull, voice and silence. The successful poem **'My Glass World Tells of Itself'** (*2nd Poems*) presents us with the image of a ship in a bottle, which (as we shall see) is to recur throughout Graham's work as his personal symbol of the timeless and motionless world of art: his Grecian Urn.

Graham's first important book was *The White Threshold,* published by Faber in 1949. This is still disfigured by the influence of Dylan Thomas (indeed, the influence of Thomas on both the language and the imagery

of many of these poems is if anything more marked) but it was also now apparent that Graham had a voice of his own. In poems like **'Listen. Put on Morning'**, **'The White Threshold'**, and the **'Three Letters'** with which the volume concludes, one recognizes a poet of authority and rigour, the assurance of whose style and the finished beauty of whose poems could not fail to attract the reader—despite his frequent and uncompromising obscurity. One important technical advance in this volume was the development of a short, three-stressed line (Robin Skelton informs us that Graham 'studied the three-stress line over a long period by keeping a journal whose every entry was written in this form'), which certainly helped Graham to pare down his rhetorical excess and allowed for that verbal precision and rhythmical originality which have since become the hallmark of his mature style.

The Nightfishing appeared in 1955, when 'it became immediately apparent that we were in the presence of a master'; then, strangely, there was a gap of fifteen years before the publication of *Malcolm Mooney's Land* in 1970—a volume which reminded older readers of Graham's existence and as it were announced him as a new poet now in his fifties to others. *Implements in their Places* followed in 1977, confirming the fact that Graham had earned what John Berryman celebrates in his elegy for William Carlos Williams,

> the mysterious late excellence which is the crown
> of our trials & our last bride.

It is this 'late excellence' which must be the main subject of this essay; but it is essential I feel to spend a little time with *The Nightfishing* before proceeding. One is not surprised to learn that W. S. Graham doesn't like to think of himself as having 'improved' as a poet if this means that his early work should therefore be neglected, if not entirely forgotten. Many of the early poems, one must agree, do present more difficulty than many readers will be prepared to encounter without better assurance that the effort will be rewarded. But the title poem **'The Nightfishing'**, and the **'Seven Letters'** which relate to it, besides providing a basis for the understanding of Graham's later work, and clues to his subsequent development, are also important poems in themselves which will reward our attention.

'The Nightfishing' is an accomplished and beautiful poem, but even so one of formidable difficulty. Michael Schmidt has rightly remarked that Graham's poems resist prose paraphrase; but it is necessary at least to indicate the area of exploration of the poem, however inadequate an idea this may give of its final effect. At one level the poem is about a fishing trip. The central section describes how a fishing boat sets out from Greenock, trawls for herring, and returns to the port at dawn. And simply as description it works magnificently—illustrating how a debt to Hopkins has been repaid:

> Over the gunwale over into our deep lap
> The herring come in, staring from their scales,
> Fruitful as our deserts would have it out of
> The deep and shifting seams of water. . . .

But the outer sections of the poem confirm the fact that this description is densely metaphoric, and functions as part of a larger meaning. Calvin Bedient has written, rather portentously, that the poem 'is a profound experience; its nineteen pages put us amid Being'. However one chooses to express it, certainly the poem works at the deepest and dumbest levels of our selves, among our own 'deep and shifting seams'. Section I introduces the poet confronted with the mystery of being, hinging as it does on the determination of the self:

> Now within the dead
> Of night and the dead
> Of my life I hear
> My name called from far out.

He is called, uttered, born. The second section provides some vivid, surreal images of birth (still reminiscent of Thomas's obstetric imagery) and then we move into the third and longest section, where in fact the underlying metaphor frequently surfaces:

> The steep bow heaves, hung on these words, towards
> What words your lonely breath blows out to meet it.
> It is the skilled keel itself knowing its own
> Fathoms it further moves through, with us there
> Kept in its common timbers, yet each of us
> Unwound upon
>
> By a lonely behaviour of the all common ocean.

The boat is the physical vessel of the self, the body which is common to all humanity ('its common timbers') yet distinct in its own individual activity, its 'lonely behaviour'. The vessel is white-rigged with thought (like Keats's 'branched thoughts' in the 'Ode to Psyche'); the nets trailed in the sea are nerves. The sea itself is the great inclusive, inexhaustible image of all life, all time, all consciousness, on which and in which each individual must venture all he has and is. The caught herrings (possibly) are words, articulated moments rescued from the wash of time—but also killed. But to separate out the symbolism too thoroughly is also to kill or at least denature the poem. We notice that the sea itself is frequently described as a 'mingling element', mingling our own multiple selves, our separate selves (as it does in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*), mingling all the living and all the dead (as

does the falling snow in Joyce's story *The Dead*). The sea is also an agent of change; there is submerged reference to *The Tempest* ('Pearled behind my eyes') and the idea of a 'sea-change' remains strong.

The fourth section finds the poet returned to 'that loneliness' which was 'Bragged into a voyage', and which is not assuaged by the ambiguous phrase 'There we lay / Loved alone'. In the fifth the poet attempts to locate the self in a place, 'fastened with movement'. But the self is never stable; the consciousness which determines identity is itself a mingling element:

> This is myself (who but ill resembles me).
> He befriended so many
> Disguises to wander in on as many roads
> As cross on a ball of wool.

The self is in fact the first of our necessary fictions. The sixth section is crucial, presenting as it does man as poet and poem as object, both beyond change; through the image (once more) of the ship in a bottle:

> The rigged ship in its walls of glass
> Still further forms its perfect seas
> Locked in its past transparences.

Graham is a deftly allusive poet, and I would think there is a strong possibility that he means us to recall here the beautiful image of permanence invoked by Shakespeare in sonnet number 5:

> Then were not summer's distillation left
> A liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass . . .

The last section is valedictory; the restless self is committed (like Tennyson's Ulysses) to another journey, 'Out into the waving / Nerves of the open sea'; while the poem of the self comes to rest in its 'breathless still place'. The reader new to and curious about Graham would do well to go back to **'The Nightfishing'** and to the **'Seven Letters'** which accompany it. But meanwhile we must move on to consider the work which Graham has published during the present decade.

III

Despite the fifteen-year silence, there is a clear continuity between Graham's earlier and his later work. He takes up his themes and images in *Malcolm Mooney's Land* exactly where he left off:

> Language swings away
> Before me as I go
> With again the night rising
> Up to accompany me
> And that other fond
> Metaphor, the sea.
>
> ('The Dark Dialogues')

But it would be a mistake to conclude that nothing has changed, or that Graham is simply repeating himself. The whole process or pretence of communication has become more problematical, beset with more obstacles and even dangers than formerly. Instead of the fish-rich seas of the earlier work, the title poem introduces us to an Arctic world of ice and snow where words themselves have frozen, and from which he can look back almost nostalgically to 'old summers / When to speak was easy'. Now it is a glacier rather than a boat that drives its keel; now he is in a tent rather than a room, words are 'buried under the printed snow' (we note the characteristic pun) rather than swarming like herring in the sea. Language has become more resistant, more dubious as a means of communication:

> Out at the far off edge I hear
> Colliding voices . . .
> Tomorrow I'll try the rafted ice.
> Have I not been trying to use the obstacle
> Of language well? It freezes round us all.

The growing blizzard is 'filled with other voices' than Mooney's (which is itself a projection of the poet's own voice); he can no longer distinguish him, 'Becoming shapeless into / The shrill swerving snow'. And if contact with himself is threatened, the poet has also lost confidence in the connection between word and thing, which must hold as the hinge of all adequate communication. 'Sit / With me between this word / And this . . . Yet not mistake this / For the real thing'. Graham leaves us to resolve the paradox that his language is actually more than adequate to detain the 'real thing' in words:

> Tell him I came across
> An old sulphur bear
> Sawing his log of sleep
> Loud beneath the snow
> He puffed the powdered light
> Up on to this page
> And here his reek fell
> In splinters among
> These words

The effect is similar to that achieved in Ted Hughes's poem 'The Thought Fox', where the animal is persuaded to leave its prints on the page. Mastery of the language does not alter the fact—or the irony—that language mocks itself; like a recurring decimal, it can never be *exact*. And there is another sinister enemy. The poet is now almost morbidly conscious of the ultimate silence that overlooks and overhears all that we try to do and say.

> From wherever it is I urge these words
> To find their subtle vents, the northern dazzle
> Of silence cranes to watch.

Although the poet has tried to commune with himself and with others in the poem, writing a diary and tell-

ing stories, he ends with the inevitable admission of his loneliness:

> I have made myself alone now.
> Outside the tent endless
> Drifting hummock crests.
> Words drifting on words.
> The real unabstract snow.

It is typical of Graham's orientation towards reality—and also of the way his enclosing metaphor controls his material—that the poem actually alludes in many of its details to the voyage of the Norwegian explorer Nansen towards the North Pole in 1893-6. Nansen deliberately had his ship the Fram become locked in ice, on the theory—which proved correct—that ocean currents would carry it safely northwards. (Could this provide another appropriate meaning for Graham's 'walls of glass'?). I have suggested several parallels with other writers already in this essay, parallels which help I think to establish the scope as well as the seriousness of Graham's work. But this seems a good point to remark upon the most important and illuminating parallel, which is with Samuel Beckett. According to Michael Schmidt, Graham has acknowledged a debt to Beckett, but even without this the reader could not fail to be struck by the close correspondence between the ideas, themes, and literary technique of the poet and those of the prose writer and dramatist. The revolving obsession with identity, consciousness, and articulation; the telling of stories to create the fiction of the self, and the creation of voices and personae to evade the implosion of the self; the reliance on pun and allusion as a literary method; the deepening pessimism (which this implies) as to the possibility of communication with our kind, and the admission of loneliness as one's ultimate condition, are all themes of Beckett's Trilogy (especially of the last piece, *The Unnamable*); and it is these same themes which move Graham to his most memorable utterance. If Beckett has insisted that 'art is the apotheosis of solitude', Graham likewise once wrote that the poet

> is concerned with putting into words those sudden desolations and happiness that descend on us uninvited there where we each are within our lonely rooms never really entered by anybody else and from which we never emerge.

The obsessions of both writers converge in the relentless questioning of language itself, whose capacity to redeem us from this solitude turns out to be largely an illusion. Language is conceived now as a kind of double agent which both serves and betrays, revealing us to ourselves (and others) and at the same time disguising the fugitive self which can never be known. Robin Skelton has observed that Graham uses language 'as a metaphor for the human condition'; this is an es-

sential point to recognize if we are to respond to the passion of Graham's exhaustingly reflexive mode of expression:

> I stop and listen over
> My shoulder and listen back
> On language for that step
> That seems to fall after
> My own step in the dark

('The Dark Dialogues')

Beckett's Unnamable is unable to establish 'what I am, where I am, whether I am words among words or silence in the midst of silence' (392). He is 'made of words' but they are 'others' words' (390), he is 'made of silence' but the silence is continually invaded by voices and cries (417). Language diffuses his identity, he can never confidently say 'I'. Three things he says have conditioned his existence, three things which we can see are really one and the same, a kind of existential trinity: 'the inability to speak, the inability to be silent, and solitude' (400). Now the fifteen sections of Graham's poem **'Approaches to How They Behave'** (which clearly looks forward to the title poem of Graham's more recent volume) reflect very similar concerns. Speaking has the same ambiguous relation to silence:

> Having to construct the silence first
> To speak out on I realize
> The silence even itself floats
> At my ear-side with a character
> I have not met before.

(XV)

His words are not under his exclusive control; they derive a life of their own from the silence that surrounds them, and which is also inhabited by other people:

> What does it matter if the words
> I choose, in the order I choose them in,
> Go out into a silence I know
> Nothing about, there to be let
> In and entertained and charmed
> Out of their master's orders?

(I)

The words he sends out 'In roughly your direction' (III) may freeze, become hazardous 'floating bergs to sink a convoy' (IV). Because one is conscious all the time that 'Speaking is difficult', 'one tries / To be exact' (II); but despite our efforts, what we naively call communication can never be said to have occurred:

> The words are mine, the thoughts are all
> Yours as they occur behind
> The bat of your vast unseen eyes.

But despite the defensiveness of these assertions, the poem includes an interesting explicit metaphor which gives us a clue as to how Graham attempts to cope with an apparently insuperable problem.

> The inadequacy
> Of the living, animal language drives
> Us all to metaphor and an attempt
> To organize the spaces we think
> We have made occur between the words.
>
> (II)

The recalcitrant animal has to be exercised, the unreliable spaces organized in whatever ways we can discover. These may include direct confrontation, the method Graham prefers to metaphor in the searching poem **'The Dark Dialogues'**. Here he asks the direct question 'Who are you?', and confesses the need 'to say / Something and to hear / That someone has heard me', only to be driven back on himself by the language

> And whoever I meant
> To think I had met
> Turns away further
> Before me blinded by
> This word and this word.

Adapting Marvell's 'Dialogue of Self and Soul' (to which there may well be an implicit allusion here) Graham is blinded by a word, deaf with the drumming of a word: eye and ear enclose rather than liberate. Even the self he falls back on is indistinct, unutterable in words: 'There is no other place / Than where I am, between / This word and the next'; the voices and identities of his father and mother usurp his own, 'As I sit here becoming / Hardly who I know'. He can assert that 'always language / Is where the people are', but neither language nor people can be detained. I try (he says) 'To clench my words against / Time or the lack of time', but always 'Language swings away / Further before me'. In a minimal, reductive definition of his function, he is trying to teach his ears and eyes 'to observe / The behaviour of silence': a peculiarly Beckettian pastime.

In **'The Fifteen Devices'**, similarly, the experience of psychological decomposition ('When who we think we are is suddenly / Flying apart') is paralleled by 'the prised / Open spaces between the flying / Apart words'. The self is a place, nameless and unlocatable; the poem is a space, an arena where potential meanings are released and then left to themselves. This last idea is developed in the beautiful and lucid poem **'The Constructed Space'**, whose opening word 'Meanwhile' breaks in as it were on the continuous dark dialogue of one:

> Meanwhile surely there must be something to say,
> Maybe not suitable but at least happy

> In a sense here between us two whoever
> We are.

The poem he goes on to define as 'a public place / Achieved against subjective odds and then / Mainly an obstacle to what I mean'. The 'obstacle' lies in the fact that the meaning received need not be the same as that conveyed. The poem presents us with a sudden realization of this fact:

> Or maybe, surely, of course we never know
> What we have said, what lonely meanings are read
> Into the space we make.

After such a realization the meaning of the poem can only be described as an approximation:

> I say this silence or, better, construct this space
> So that somehow something may move across
> The caught habits of language to you and me.

'Habit is a great deadener' is another Beckettian axiom; Graham too recognizes the danger, and there is continuous evidence of his precautionary measures against the hardening of habitual phrases in the way he often indulges as a kind of exercise in puns and other word-games, subverting or reforging the conventional expression. Thus he describes himself with Joycean alertness as 'lying wordawake', and expresses the wish to 'be out of myself and / About the extra, ordinary world'. It is with such a punning phrase that Graham concludes this poem: 'Here in the present tense disguise is mortal'. Disguise is both human and deadly; we can avoid neither our humanity nor our sentence of death. And disguise in this sense, referring to the inevitable opacity of the self, the 'quick disguise' (another pun) which life condemns us to, is a theme to which Graham often returns.

'The Constructed Space' is a very explicit, almost literal statement of the theory that lies behind many of the poems. Elsewhere this theory is more richly caparisoned in metaphor. The beast in **'The Beast in the Space'** for example is a mythical monster that 'lives on silence' and 'laps my meaning up'; it is this beast that now possesses the arena of the poem.

> I am not here, only the space
> I sent the terrible beast across.

And the seven sections of the fine concluding poem **'Clusters Travelling Out'** develops very imaginatively the metaphor of the self as confined in a prison cell, trying to establish some kind of communication with his fellow-prisoners. He never knows if his message is being received:

> Are you receiving those clusters
> I send out travelling? Alas

I have no way of knowing or
If I am overheard here.

At the end of the poem (and the book) he is left 'waiting for / A message to come in now', much as Vladimir and Estragon wait hopelessly for Godot. We notice that here too the metaphor has more than one level. The tap on the wall is also the tap on the typewriter:

> I tap
> And tap to interrupt silence into
> Manmade durations making for this
> Moment a dialect for our purpose

—and also making the poem: 'It is our poetry such as it is'.

Another way in which Graham makes his theme more concrete is to consider the problem of communication with particular people. There are half a dozen poems in *Malcolm Mooney's Land* (and more in *Implements in their Places*) addressed to friends and to his wife which—although still oblique and difficult—are very moving. Here we have Graham's more personal expression of the need to find 'a way / Of speaking towards you' (in **'Wynter and the Grammarsow'**): 'I mean there must be some / Way to speak together straighter than this, / As I usually say': his need 'to be by another aloneness loved' (**'Hilton Abstract'**), which line speaks straight enough to anyone. The fine elegiac poem **'The Thermal Stair'**, for Peter Lanyon, is the most direct of all: 'Remember me wherever you listen from'. 'I leave this at your ear for when you wake' is the first and last line of the poem to his wife. But he is older, death is nearer (it has overtaken some already), and so there is due acknowledgement of the power of time. 'I stand in the ticking room' he says to his wife; 'The times are calling us in' he reminds Wynter, calling us towards 'the real sea' where the rest of the dead await our coming. But the consolation seized in these poems—perhaps surprisingly—is the traditional one that the poem can itself stand against time; we are back to the Shakespearean 'walls of glass'. From this perspective the artist's task may after all be simply expressed:

> His job is love
> Imagined into words or paint to make
> An object that will stand and will not move.
>
> ('The Thermal Stair')

IV

The first thing to remark about Graham's last collection, *Implements in their Places,* is that it is more accessible than any of his earlier work. (It is for this reason that the reader new to Graham might be well advised to begin with this last book, and read him backwards). Never before has Graham written as simply and directly as in the dozen or so personal poems included in this volume. The strenuous syntactical effort of the earlier poems is replaced here by a restrained authority, a certainty of utterance which is characteristic of that 'mysterious late excellence' wherever it is encountered. **'Loch Thom'** is a beautiful example. The poem describes a visit made by the poet to the watery 'stretch of my childhood':

> And almost I am back again
> Wading 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.

'It is a colder / Stretch of water than I remember': the poignancy of the experience is finely captured in the contrasted physical descriptions of past and present; there is no importunity on the part of the poet himself. In the poem addressed to his father (**'To Alexander Graham'**) the emotion is controlled by the use of the dream situation:

> Lying asleep walking
> Last night I met my father
> Who seemed pleased to see me.
> He wanted to speak. I saw
> His mouth saying something
> But the dream had no sound.

The visual images are sharp, the atmosphere of Greenock 'As real as life. I smelt / The quay's tar and the ropes'. Only in the last line of the poem is the feeling alluded to—tentatively, and in the perfect rather than the present tense: 'I think I must have loved him'. **'Lines on Roger Hilton's Watch'** ('Which I was given because / I loved him and we had / Terrible times together') and **'Dear Bryan Wynter'** ('This is only a note / To say how sorry I am / You died') are in the same direct idiom, moving elegies in Graham's most spare and essential style. 'Do not be sentimental or in your Art', said Johann Quantz to his pupil; and if Graham has avoided sentimentalism in these fine poems it must be largely due to his expert use of his characteristic three-stress line, on which we have commented earlier. The short line encourages a strict economy of word, breaks up familiar collocations of words into new groupings, and above all gives Graham the opportunity of setting up a tense rhythm, which is at the same time tightly controlled but fluent and expressive:

> Of course, here I am
> Thinking I want to say
> Something into the ghost