



A LIFETIME'S CATCH

by **John Lucas**

The Nightfisherman: Selected Letters of W. S. Graham

edited by **Michael** and **Margaret Snow**, Carcanet, 1999, **£12.95**

Praise where praise is due. There was a time when Carcanet publications were a virtual guarantee of poor production: cheap paper, ugly type-face, shoddy binding. No longer. In recent years they've been getting steadily better, and with *The Nightfisherman* they've excelled themselves. On the front cover is a painting by Alfred Wallis. I haven't seen the original, but there's not much reason to doubt the quality of this reproduction. In particular, the blues — always difficult to get right — look as close to the mark as even the most demanding critic has the right to expect. Open the book and you find that the text is set in Bembo, an unusually elegant type-face which I first became aware of when helping Ian Fletcher with a number of slim volumes he saw through Reading University's Press in the late 1950s.

More importantly, Graham would also surely have approved publisher's decisions and the scrupulousness with which they have been realised. A book's overall appearance was a matter of great importance to him. Of the New York Ecco Press's *Selected Poems* (1980) he wrote to his editor at Faber, Charles Monteith to say, "Isn't it a lovely looking book and to handle, the yellow and black." There's a barb lurking within this apparently innocent remark. Three years earlier he'd had a run-in with Monteith over Faber's proposed setting of *Implements In Their Places*. "The type is all right but the moustache between the title and the first line of the poem should surely be taken out. The title is part of the poem. And the space between the title and the first line is part of the poem. If I had wanted to put something in that space I would have." Monteith must have demurred because Graham writes again, at length, and insistent:

The ornament (or whatever name we give it) will have to come out
.... It is wrong on so many counts.

1— After the title the poem begins and the space between the title and the poem is the writer's. What if I had wanted to put a zodiac sign or an ideogram in that space?

2 — The look of it on the page offends the eye aesthetically and makes that small page slightly more difficult to deal with. In the poem in your 'rough tracing' IMAGINE A FOREST, I see the title in caps. and when my eye manages to scurry round the tache and begin 'Imagine a Forest' my eye is still conscious of the disturbance before.

3 — The ornament there is Victorian. Surely it is not conscious Victoriana. If I'm supposed to be sky-trekking new frontiers of language on the blurb, what will the reader think of that corny fancy-work?

4 — You have no right to put a mark between the title and the poem.

5 — It is in bad taste. It is vulgar. It is not worthy of Faber and Faber. Anyhow I did not write it.

Dear Charles, to shave the moustache off can't be too difficult. Anyway, off it must come. Love and from Nessie.

Yours unhirsutely, Sydney.

"It is not worthy of Faber and Faber." The rebuke is magisterial and without doubt true. Goodness only knows what Graham would have said about the slovenly way collections of poetry are for the most part now shoved out into the world. I haven't seen any of his early collections, but would guess that at all events *2nd Poems*, published by Poetry London in 1945, was worthy of both him and the publisher, Tambimuttu. Tambimuttu is usually recalled in histories of the period as an improbably absurd part of Fitzrovia, poseur, scrounger, louche drinking pal of Dylan Thomas and Thomas's hangers-on. "Tutti-Frutti", Geoffrey Grigson cruelly but memorably called him, and Graham himself, in a letter of 1949 to his friend, the poet David Wright, remarked of "poor Tambi" that "he was useful and did some good things at the beginning. Now I'm afraid he is, in his late position, a retarding force and I don't know if he ever had any critical standard of his own." Probably not. Yet Tambimuttu certainly worked hard to make the books he published aesthetically pleasing. There is, for example, the comparatively plain but clean-cut *Home Town Elegy* of G. S. Fraser (1944), there is Fletcher's 1947 collection, *Orisons Picaresque & Metaphysical* (in which different sections are introduced by decorated head-pieces and the acrostic "Aromatic Ballade: in lieu of three brandies and a

soda” has the initial letters of each line picked out in red). There is also, quite spectacularly, Nicholas Moore’s elaborate *The Glass Tower* (1944). Here, an unlettered black and yellow cover features a striking design of a spikily-leaved plant reminiscent of work by Graham Sutherland, although it’s in fact by the young Lucian Freud. Freud is further represented inside by a number of line drawings as well as several colour plates. In entrusting *2nd Poems* to Tambi’s Editions Poetry London, Graham must have felt he was in good hands.

He was by then, of course, in London, having chosen to escape the effects of what, in a letter of 1944, he calls “the National bias” that opts for a poetry “of heather and homerule and freedom” rather than “of words”. London meant Fitzrovia and Fitzrovia meant Dylan Thomas. There was and I think still is widespread agreement that while Graham may have escaped the lure of MacDiarmidry he fell into the sticky web of the Apocalyptic. Years ago I recall Charles Tomlinson saying that *The Nightfishing* was a good poem all but wrecked by Thomas’s malign influence, and Graham himself was sensitive to this charge, which began long before the publication of that poem in 1954. In a letter of 1945 to David Wright, he commented ruefully, “THE SEVEN JOURNEYS [his second collection, *Cage Without Grievance* had been published in 1942] is having a bad time. O the reviewers certainly go their mile. ‘It’s the forgery of the poetic currency and of Dylan Thomas.’ But I suppose it’s to be expected. But I expected maybe one or two favourable reviews.”

The question of Thomas’s influence is so important that it needs to be discussed here, however briefly. In his lengthy review of *The Nightfisherman*, (*PN Review* 135, vol. 27, no.1) James Keery takes Dennis O’Driscoll to task for saying that “*Cage Without Grievance* ... displayed some of the worse obfuscatory characteristics of the time. A Dylan Thomas accent was, no doubt, a licence to consume alcohol in the ‘sodality of Soho’ ... Graham ... was proud to display his early symptoms again and again.” For Keery, “the quality of Graham’s early poetry has been obscured by fifty years of anti-Apocalyptic orthodoxy”, and he quotes Graham’s letter to Michael Schmidt in 1977, in which Graham importantly says “I know how I struggled up through my early poetry to gradually get better and clearer ... I am getting better I hope. But it is not like a graph saying ‘he started out not knowing what he was doing and then he went through his Dylan Thomas phase (Which I got a great deal out of) and now he [is] refining himself ... Of course I think there is an advance, but if I put out ‘Here Next the Chair I was’ now, I would be proud ...”

The poem Graham refers to was first published in *Cage Without Grievance*. This collection was apparently made up of poems written later than *The Seven Journeys* although published two years earlier, when Graham was 24. In her prefatory note to the posthumously published *Aimed at Nobody: Poems from*

Notebooks (1993), Graham's widow, Nessie Dunsmuir, says that "time and time again he said that he did not disown any of his poems. When commenting on his work, he remarked that every poem was relevant; that it was integrated into the whole body of his writing." 'Here Next the Chair I Was When Winter Went' (to give it its full title, which is also its opening line), is undoubtedly a young man's poem, one that combines a certainty of poetic calling with a Romantic sense of apartness and of being chosen, perhaps cursed. The second stanza runs:

I was what the whinfire works on towns
 An orator from hill to kitchen dances.
 In booths below bridges that spanned the crowds
 Tinkers tricked glasses on lips and saw my eyes.

Tinkers, those Yeatsian outsiders with the gift of telling fortunes, can presumably see in the orator's eyes a knowledge withheld from the crowds and all those who attend kitchen dances. In a letter to *PN Review* about Keery's review, Matthew Francis notes that the collection's title comes from a poem to be found in *The Seven Journeys*. "The cage is the text itself", Francis says, "which [Graham] regularly depicts ... as a prison, cut off from community ... Any grievance, then, is Graham's own when confronted with the isolating properties of text." And, he adds, this was to provide him with a theme for the rest of his career. We might perhaps balk at that word "text", that ok word of current critical orthodoxy. Graham is after all writing *poems*, whose formal properties and requirements are not usually associated with the issues that preoccupy such orthodoxy. Nevertheless, Francis's remark can be linked to Keery's claim — and here I need to quote a little more fully — that

The influence of Dylan [Thomas], the *right* precursor for this poet, is profound (not least in mediating that of Mallarmé, Hopkins and Joyce), but so is Graham's originality. Thomas too insisted that his poems were 'hewn' and 'made' ('the last thing they do is flow') but they are nevertheless obsessed with 'process', 'The force that through the green fuse drives the flower'; Graham's obsession is with the construction of an 'abstract cage' ('I Leave This at Your Ear'.) Already in *Cage without Grievance* he is speaking of 'tilting planes' ('There Was When Morning Fell') and capable of an uncanny abstraction: 'We fell down darkness in a line of words' ('No, Listen for This I tell').

I wondered at first about the propriety of that word "obsession" but

concluded that Keery is justified in using it. The dictionary definition of “obsess”, “to preoccupy completely”, feels exactly right to account for Graham’s regard for poetry. Everything else came second and not much was allowed to rattle the bars of his cage. If between the years of 1939 and 1945 you’d asked him whether he knew there was a war on, you feel he’d have had to think before replying. True, in May 1945, at the time of V.E. Day, he wrote to the artist John Minton to say that “the only good thing about this victory is that the soldiers who were fighting will be saved.” He then adds: “It is an ominous peace and but conceals the germs of something worse than before.” But me no buts. The self-consciousness of that sentence suggests that war and war’s alarms aren’t really his concern. And sure enough he continues

But on such a highskyyed blue and green day what is there to greet about. It is hard enough to blow the time by the dandelion clocks and scare off the lesser emerald backed chariotbeetle. 3d of ham bones scraped makes a tidy wee breakfast and then boiled with split peas and you have soup.

My long poem is coming on well ...

Then, as always, it was the poetry that mattered.

O’Driscoll is nevertheless right to note a difference between early and later Graham. The Apocalyptic-like claim that “My tongue is a sick device” (in ‘Here Next the Chair’), surely comes dangerously near to the kind of toe-curling vaingloriousness which damns so much writing in the 1940s. “You’re a writer? Show me your wound.” Or, in the ineffable words of Wrey Gardiner (to be found in his autobiographical *The Dark Thorn*, in which the war is cursed as a personal affront to Gardiner’s sensibilities) “Too much work bows me down ... Too many hopes fly like blind swans into the sun We cannot know the massed inferno of our times without feeling close to us the imprint of the strange iron kiss of death. In the limited avenues of our cities we plunder the moment in the desperate ending of a diseased world.” There is all the difference in the world between that kind of vatic posturing and the question, “What is the language using us for?” And that Graham himself knew how in his earlier work he’d been lured towards the former is evident in a letter he writes to Edwin Morgan in 1949, when he says:

So many of those early poems are ‘difficult’ — but as well as ‘difficult’ they are often lazy offerings, with the ‘suggestive’ serving as that dazzling stroke of communication which they should be. There is obscure poetry and lazy poetry and, of course, often a poem is

both but is more often lazy than obscure. I am, I think, specially supplied with a facility for the lyrical and memorable phrase and I've exploited it, as a sole power in the poem, overmuch.

This is admirable in its unsparing honesty, and it explains why, a little earlier, he should have told another correspondent that "In spells of the poetry I've been trying some drawing. Only to help me to see better." (Interesting that he should use "spell as jazzmen and women do, to mean a period of rest: the *OED* — wrongly — says that this use is "chiefly Australian"). To see better, to get better and clearer: Graham is in endless pursuit of that lucidity which will enable him to understand what the language is using him for. And this means leaving "poetry" behind. Hence, in the same letter to Morgan — a letter which I'm tempted to say is for students of his poetry perhaps the most important he ever wrote — he remarks:

The only ones whose sympathy to my poetry I respect are those who write poetry also and in whose poems there is evidence of that relation to language as a dialogue taken part in, going on in the very centre of loneliness ... Art cannot be fake. It either unites with us to our advantage or doesn't unite with us at all. By 'to our advantage' I mean to our enlargement of spirit. So, more and more, I realise the aloneness is a joy to live in and talk there to the most marvellous listener which is within my imagination and the limitations of that listener are the limitations of my poetry. So certainly now I think — if I hadn't poetry — what would I do? Where would there be the least peace in my life?

In another letter of the same period he tells that he's been seeing something of T. S. Eliot and that

it is good to realise that, if one had been lazy or deceitful (though I am guilty enough and should try harder) in one's verse he would have known. We talked a lot about the structure of the long poem (I've just finished mine) and the 'purity of criticism' which I am almost a crank about. I mean that the criticism of poetry in Britain today is so bad and trite often through the 'critic' not bringing pure critical canons to bear on the subject, but bringing in outside values (which I admit have to do with values in the 'poem' but which are incidental) of morality, ethics or even politics. Or they write about everything but the object because they have no elementary

knowledge of what such an object is made of or how it works.

I'm not sure why, in the second parenthesis, Graham hedges the word *poem* about with quotation marks. Perhaps it's because he thinks a poem is only its true self when it is quite free of incidentals — those “outside values”. Everything else, everything which has designs on us, or is self-consciously aware of an audience beyond the “listener which is within my imagination”, is a “poem”.

Given this absolute concentration of imaginative energy — it is what I understand Lawrence to have meant when he called true thought “a man in his wholeness wholly attending” — it isn't surprising that Graham should have added that Eliot thought his (Graham's) poetry “would go slow because people just were lazy about thinking.” Nor is it surprising that he should have seemingly cared little about this. He not only never made a poorer song that he might have a heavier purse, he'd have been incapable of doing any such thing. And if the consequences included having to eat pancakes made of flour and water, seasoned with whatever herbs he and Nessie picked in the fields, then so be it.

He was, without doubt, blessed to have had her by him for most of his life. (They met in the 1940s, lived together and then apart, and finally married in 1954.) In one of many helpful interventions — and what good editors they are, how unfussy, how alert to what needs to be said and no more — the Snows point out that “Sydney Graham had a fortunate ability to endure and even derive great pleasure from very simple surroundings and was fairly indifferent to ordinary domestic comforts. Nessie was just able to support them both by seasonal work in St. Ives, and there were the widely separated cheques for his poems, but most of the time they were extremely poor.” And, they add, “His need for freedom of movement, association and experiment took precedence over any need for everyday security.” True enough, on one occasion, when they moved to a new cottage from the unheated, unlit coastguard's cottage at Gurnard's Head where they'd survived for several years, “Graham appears to have made the move ... by abandoning everything not immediately needed and walking out leaving the door open and clothes, books, papers behind.” Such behaviour is reminiscent of Lawrence or of Edgell Rickward, another who travelled light. But Rickward, a fine poet in his earlier years, was later preoccupied with political journalism and critical and editorial work. Graham was, in all senses of the word, and as these wonderful letters attest, purely a poet. (As undeflectable in his concern for his art as, in a different medium, Gwen John, with whom he shares certain characteristics.) Once he'd worked through his debt to Thomas it's difficult to think of him as other than an entirely original, *true* poet. Lyric and memorable phrases, though they don't disappear, are subsumed into the keener, more exact, sustained poems of *Malcolm Mooney's Land* (1971) and *Implements in Their*

Places (1977). These collections are like no-one else at all, although others — chief among them David Wright and C. H. Sisson — must have learned a good deal from them. But even Wright's best poems, clean and spare as they are, scrupulously though they are worked, lack the unremitting concentration of Graham's finest work.

As his passage-of-arms with Charles Monteith shows, Graham was intensely professional in pursuit of his calling. There was nothing of the dilettante about him. Writing to that fine poet, Matt Simpson, some time before Simpson's first book came out, Graham, having told him "you are to my measurement a very good poet", advised him to do "Everything you can think of to get your poems before magazine editors, publishers, any poetry platform. I can think of nothing but the long slog of sending poems out again even to magazines in America ... Try everything and keep writing and don't let yourself harden up with despair." Good, practical advice, as, in a different but related manner, is his telling David Wright that he should avoid the word "wisdom" because it is "so difficult a word. Almost like 'death or hate'. The best phrases, or lines, about say death or hate usually haven't the words in them."

The Collected Poems 1942-1977, run to over 250 pages. The fragments and fuller drafts of poems gathered in *Aimed at Nobody* add another 60. Given the hysterical, brawling, drunken community of artists among whom Graham and Nessie lived for so many years (late on he thought of returning to Scotland, but nothing came of this), it may seem surprising that he managed to produce so much and that the best is so good. But he had a steely will. Moreover there was poetry, its peremptory demands, its fathomless appeal. After days of frenzied, often violently competitive shenanigans with Bryan Winter, Terry Frost and the almost-certainly insane Roger Hilton, he had always the joy of aloneness to withdrawn into. From there came poems which "Through the lens of language" ('The Don Brown Route') make a body of work for which "essential" seems the most appropriate term. The same can be said of *The Nightfisherman*.