

## Editorial

The articles collected in this issue of the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* arise from a one-day symposium on W.S. Graham held at the Faculty of English, University of Cambridge in 2005.

That symposium, which posed the question ‘what is he like?’, grew out of a shared enthusiasm for Graham as a poet whose writing united a thoroughgoing modernism with linguistic vitality and tenderness. Graham’s literary marginalization and refusal of conventional respectability made him an appealing figurehead for a poetry capable of refusing not only the desiccated academic orthodoxies of late-modernism but also the consolatory appeal of ‘popular’ poetry. In many ways the symposium was an early response to the publication of Graham’s *New Collected Poems* (2004) edited by Matthew Francis: an accessible and scholarly collection, which reified Graham as a potential subject for academic study. Academic habilitation of Graham had steadily increased after Tony Lopez’s *The Poetry of W.S. Graham* (1989). The early 2000s saw a flurry of critical activity, with Francis’s monograph *Where the People Are: Language and Community in work of W.S. Graham* (2002) followed swiftly by Hester Jones and Ralph Pite’s *Speaking Towards You* (2004), a collection of critical essays alongside samples of Graham’s verse. For those engaged in debates on innovative poetics, whether online in the British and Irish Poetry lists or within the academy itself, there was an increasing awareness of Graham’s importance as an innovative poet. Yet his impact on, and indeed his place *within*, poetics in the British Isles remained difficult to assess or locate.

From that vantage point, a symposium devoted to new perspectives on Graham seemed timely. Several years on and work on Graham is still arguably an emergent field. Unlike many innovative poets, Graham cuts across divergent readerships, and his appeal cannot be contained by the purely academic. Graham’s inassimilability into any specific poetic school renders his poetry perhaps too anomalous for undergraduate curricula. His pursuit of the obstacles of communication seems also to limit his appeal as a popular poet; he is too abstract to sit comfortably with the

feel-good anthologies. However, as Peter Riley (2004) has argued, this is one of Graham's major strengths – he is 'a major counter to the dichotomisation of the field into right and left or mainstream and avant-garde factions'. The articles collected here attend to that singularity with a suitable variety of approaches.

Opening the edition, Matthew Francis's article examines the various pitfalls involved in the process of editing a writer as linguistically plural and idiosyncratic as Graham. In this account of the preparation of Graham's *New Collected Poems*, Francis explores the way in which the poet's 'textual indeterminacy' made his editorial task difficult. Graham's linguistic transgressions, his historical and mythic allusiveness and private or personal references highlight both the richness and the riskiness of his work: poetically innovative, imaginatively superabundant, his writing threatens at times to collapse into 'wearisome self-indulgence'. Francis's account reminds us of the *New Collected Poems*' achievement in maintaining the interpretive challenge of Graham's poetry while providing a field of references for new readerships to orient their own journey out.

Pursuing a droll comparison between Graham's line-breaks and those of *Private Eye*'s teenage elegist E.J. Thribb, Jeremy Noel-Tod looks at the ways in which Graham's use of the line-break effects a deliberate redistribution of energy within the poem. Moving on from Adam Piette's (2004) discussion of enjambment, Noel-Tod deftly combines literary and critical theory to produce a suggestive account of Graham's lyric practice. Rather than concentrating meaning in the concluding lines of the verse, Graham's poetry works from all 'edges' of the poem to create 'a public shape made between reader and writer'. This shape, hewn from the materiality of the poetic form itself, becomes individuated and plastic; a representation of 'a human being standing amidst flux'. In order to express the artfulness of Graham's lineation, Noel-Tod turns to the visual arts, comparing the emergence of poetic meaning to Giacometti's densely layered painting in which strokes, or lines, give a centripetal force to the image.

The vocabulary of the visual arts has often been used when writing on Graham due to his friendship with several Cornwall-based artists. In the article that follows, Peter Maber explores Graham's relationship with artist Bryan Wynter through the poem 'Wynter and the Grammarsow'. Maber's article stresses the reductiveness of looking for direct parallels between poem and painting, and argues that rather than explicit overlaps or a direct dialogue between Wynter and Graham they share instead 'an investigation of artistic problems'. Maintaining the integrity of the two art forms, Maber nonetheless provides a brilliant insight into the ways in which each artist was drawn to increasingly complex and multiple forms

in pursuit of clarity. In the process Graham and Wynter's work becomes 'strange to language', challenging and disorienting stable perceptions.

My article on epistolary form in Graham further develops the estrangement of the reader. Graham's interest in letters has received much notice, most recently in Angela Leighton's (2011) exploration of the links between his correspondence and his poetry. I examine the ways in which Graham's attention to the formal properties of the letter become a means of exploring the difficulties of communication, and situate Graham's epistolary poetics within the context of his fraught relationship with the painter Roger Hilton. This adversarial masculine relationship produces a more complex, abstract poetics as the poet strains to achieve intimacy against the constraints of language and despite the recalcitrance of the recipient. Gender criticism has scarcely featured in work on Graham and this article opens up an important new avenue of inquiry. I conclude by developing comments made by Robin Purves in his essay on Graham and Heidegger (2007), showing how close attention to epistolary form offers a way of assessing competing critical claims about the philosophical content of the poetry.

Intimacy and distance are again themes found in Alan Riach's article 'W.S. Graham and his Scottish Contemporaries'. The role of Graham's national identity has often been relegated to a biographical footnote, with his move from Scotland construed as a definitive rejection of its poetic traditions and of its modern poets. Showing that Graham was both known and praised by his Scottish contemporaries, Riach suggests that although the poet's move provided a necessary distance for the evolution of his distinctive voice he nonetheless maintained a sense of his distinct linguistic heritage. Allowing Graham to speak with his own 'accent', Riach's article draws attention to Graham's tantalizing desire to translate Scots verse and ends with a plangent evocation of Scotland's imaginative centrality for the poet. Even as his absence was necessary to evade the restrictions of Scottish national and literary affiliation, the agonized desire to return remained. The article does not stake an alternative 'claim' to Graham or attempt to assimilate him into tradition. Instead, Riach opens up the cultural context of Graham's work to demonstrate how close Graham's Scottish affinities are and yet how 'singular' his poetry remains.

Graham's relationship with other poets is developed from a different perspective in James Keery's essay. Arguing against the commonplace assertion that the overwhelming influence of Dylan Thomas damaged Graham's early poetry, Keery develops a theory of the 'elation of influence' in which Thomas is reconceived as a profoundly positive force for mid-twentieth-century poetry. This 'ecstatic response' to Thomas provides a starting point for tracing constellations of words and images in-

dicative of Graham's dynamic interaction with other poets. As academic criticism increasingly attends to the role of collaboration and community in poetic practice, tracing these cross-currents of influence expands the previously limited field of reference within which Graham's work has been discussed. Keery's essay suggests new ways of understanding his work as whole, and ways in which it might operate within the broader fabric of twentieth-century poetics.

The edition ends with Karina Dent's article on the Arctic chill of Graham's *Malcolm Mooney's Land*. Dent's article re-examines Graham's most abstract poetry through the prism of Fridtjof Nansen's *Farthest North* (1897). The explorer's account of his journey in the frozen Polar Regions becomes a metaphor for Graham's exploration of the 'solitary ontology' of the poet. Dent argues that the flux of language found in *The Nightfishing* (1955) metamorphoses into a sense of the treacherousness of language itself as maintaining a speaking self in adverse conditions becomes increasingly difficult. The 'white out' conditions of the blank page threaten to freeze around the poem and its speaker, arresting the creative process. At its close Dent's article uses Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to explore the unease of creation amidst an uncertain imaginative landscape. The collapse of linguistic and phenomenological certainty in *Malcolm Mooney's Land* suggests that Graham's celebrated 'textual indeterminacy' can become a crisis of communication.

In critical terms, Graham's sometimes willful obscurity, his marginal modernism and his sporadic publishing history has led to a limited field of references which, if not amounting to a critical orthodoxy, risks erasing his real impact on twenty-first century poetics. By scrutinizing contexts and formal issues in danger of becoming terminal points of inquiry these essays suggest new directions and new contexts for interpreting Graham. Yet further work is urgently needed on Graham's influence on contemporary poetry. As the editors of this journal have argued previously, innovative poetics tends to create a 'writership' rather than a readership. If this is so, we must ask and discover what effect, if any, W.S. Graham's work has upon, say, the Cambridge school or Scottish poetry. We must recover what impact his work might have had on Larkin, 'The Movement', or on North American poetry. We should query the apparent lack of historical or political engagement in his poetry. Graham's distinctive brand of humane experimentalism arguably offers a means of critiquing contemporary forms of poetry produced by practitioner-critics. The uniqueness of Graham's own social and literary position might offer a means of comparing and interrogating the material conditions for producing innovative poetry in the twenty-first century. What price (readership, subject matter, syntax, political affiliation) do contemporary

poets pay for engagement in the social and critical networks that sustain much of innovative poetry in the British Isles? How do we account for his poetry's ability to thrive both within and outside of the university (his work feted on Radio 3 in 2011 and analysed in journals such as this)? If Graham's poetry does indeed rupture the border between mainstream and intellectual poetry what does this imply about potential audiences for innovative poetry? This edition looks forward to future criticism and a yet wider readership for W.S. Graham's work.

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