Dependence in the Poetry
of W. S. Graham

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I

Reviewing *The Nightfishing* in 1956, James Dickey wrote that W. S. Graham was 'the most individual and important young poet now writing in English'.[1] Graham was then thirty-eight years old. His poetry, and his literary life, would seem to have been an expression of independence. In a review of *The White Threshold* from 1950, Edwin Morgan saw Graham as remaining 'undistracted and unwooed'[2], while Calvin Bedient in 1974 assumed that 'His cultivated eccentricity argues the right to stand alone.'[3] Others have seen his independence, at least up to *The Nightfishing* (1955), as only too dependent on the voice of Dylan Thomas. Kenneth Allott, on the basis of that volume, grudgingly accepts that 'W. S. Graham is probably a poet, although one who cherishes some bad poetic habits and is excessively literary'.[4] Edward Lucie-Smith was not much warmer, putting Graham's independence, which he implies is merely isolation, down to unfortunate coincidences of publishing: 'W. S. Graham is a poet who has been somewhat unlucky in his timing. His best-known volume was *The Nightfishing*, which appeared in the same year as Philip Larkin's *The Less Deceived*.'[5] Thus, when Morgan wrote of Graham's 'undeviating and dangerous singlemindedness'[6], was it challengingly 'dangerous' for the reader, or damagingly so for the poet and his poetry's reception?

The solitude of independence can be bracing, but also chilly. Damian Grant describes W. S. Graham as '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.'[7]   For Graham life is an imposed independence, from which release may be sought in poetry.   His brief manifesto, published in 1946, is called 'Notes on a Poetry of Release'.   In this aloneness and isolation of the self, Graham's poetry finds an irreducible condition, but the action of his poems, recognising and speaking from isolation, shapes communicating messages which are emblems of aloneness relieved.

There are weak and strong conditions of dependence.   The weak exists where bodily life is compelled by reliance upon something—drink, for example—whose effect on the desiring body when received can be largely predicted.   The word's second meaning in the OED is: 'the relation of having existence conditioned by the existence of something else'.   A baby has such a dependence on its mother's body; it is in 'The condition of being a dependent', which is the OED's third meaning and extends to 'subjection' or 'subordination'.   A prisoner is in an enforced dependence on his guards. If the word is used to express relations between adults in society, dependence will involve greater risk, for the effects of others upon whom we depend is less predictable than mother's milk, a prisoner's food or drinker's bottle.   Whether or not the provision of these needs can be relied on is another matter.   "You can depend on me" also expresses a feeling that the undependability of others is everpresent and must be fended off by a promise.

That life repeatedly involves depending and being dependent on someone implies that the word can describe relations where the effect or character of that upon which we depend is uncertain.   The OED's fifth meaning takes this condition of dependence within uncertainty to an extreme limit: 'the condition of resting in faith or expectation (upon something)' and cites Jowett: 'Living...in dependence on the will of God'. The ways of God are not revealed to us.   This fifth sense is crucial to W. S. Graham's poetry, for that lonely room 'never really entered by anybody else and from which we

never emerge' leaves relations with other people dependent on hope, trust, and varying degrees of confidence: depending upon them itself depends on faith within uncertainty.

In a Notebook of 1949, Graham wrote: 'To show you *need* something from another person destroys any chance of receiving it. People love him who does not *need* love.'[8] The first sentence acknowledges a need and gives advice about self-esteem and its relation to receiving what you need. The second suggests why many love a God who does not need their love. In the second sentence Graham is making 'need' into a sign of weak dependence. A strong dependence is implied in his first sentence.

There are three main related areas of dependence in Graham's work: dependence upon words; dependence upon an interlocutor; and dependence upon a reader. With Graham's poetry the direction of dependence may be reversed: language dependent upon its users; listeners dependent upon what they are in the process of hearing; readers dependent upon the poet. Dependence in his poetry is strong for two reasons: because it does not rely upon knowing or assuming the nature or effects of that on which it depends; and because, since the direction of dependence can be reversed, the interdependence of both on each presupposes not the subjection or subordination of the *OED*'s third meaning, but an equality of trust and reliance upon the other.

Graham's work also shows a ranging awareness of weak dependences: there are poems which include childhood and parental relations, more than one which inhabit or refer to prisons and asylums, while there are many which touch on drinking.[9] His poetry creates a strong dependence out of those weak relationships. W. S. Graham's explorations of mutual dependence subsume his 'right to stand alone', his independence which is an 'individual liberty of thought or action' (*OED*) into a poetic context strengthened by the acknowledgement of a primary human need for relationship all the more necessary and bracing because it occurs in poems attentive to the chill conditions which isolate us from each other. In maturity weak dependences

may be indications of damage; Graham's poems seek to transform the weak into the strong.

II

The poet's dependence on the sound of words can feel shameful and demeaning. In Tennyson's lines from *The Princess*, 'The moan of doves in immemorial elms, / And murmuring of innumerable bees',[10] readers are to imagine the bees humming and to cherish the skill with which the poet has collocated 'immemorial', 'murmuring' and 'innumerable'. These words have nothing in themselves to do with bees, and it is this gratuitousness in the sound patterns of poems which can feel demeaning. In his 'Conversation about Dante' (1933–34), Osip Mandelstam describes the sound of *Inferno* XXXII as having a 'deliberately shameless, intentionally infantile orchestration'.[11] It includes the line: 'né da lingua che chiami mamma e babbo'[12] [nor for a tongue that cries mamma and papa]. Mandelstam thinks the canto imitates the sound of a baby calling without shame, because it feels shameful for a grown man to make sounds like 'chiami mamma'. Rather than bees, Tennyson's lines might echo 'Seventeen-months-old Christine', as reported in Dorothy Burlingham and Anna Freud's *Young Children in Wartime* (1942), 'who said: 'Mum, mum, mum, mum, mum'...continually in a deep voice for at least three days.'[13] The extent of a poet's dependence on the sound of words (it is this which, to differing degrees, marks the poet out from all other writers) may express a preserved residuum of feeling related to the complete dependence on a mother for food and well-being.

Revulsion in some from Dylan Thomas's music may be explained by the poet's dependence on the sounds of words: Thomas's poetry reveals a weak subjection to them, a helplessness which relies on auditory power alone to restore the bliss of a satisfied baby. The more the poem appears to co-ordinate sounds for their own sake, at the expense, or in excess of purposeful conceptual speech, the worse embarrassment may become. Perhaps this is because overt verbal music depends so much upon the poet assuming the

compositional and affective efficacy of the sound of his or her own voice, or, at the receiving end, upon the reader succumbing to a music whose effect is believed to be certainly determined, can be depended on to work in the same way each time.

The experience of discussing a poem's auditory components, and attributing meaning to them, suggests rather that the fluidity of pronunciation, accent, stress and, not least, tone, makes it dangerous for poet and critic alike to depend too confidently upon how the poem will legitimately sound in another's ear. Michael Schmidt has noticed in Graham's work that 'From an early attitude of complete trust in words [...] he grew more cautious with them, introducing discipline and distance between them.'[14] Later work contains numerous poems which explore the poet's dependence on words, which assume that words are not to be relied on. Part eight of 'Approaches to How They Behave' from *Malcolm Mooney's Land* (1970) begins: 'And what are you supposed to say / I asked a new word but it kept mum.' (172) Dependence on words which live independently of the writer is an irreducible difficulty and condition of writing poetry. The temptation to retreat from this fact is mentioned in 'Notes on Poetry of Release', where, reminding himself of Mallarmé's advice to the painter and amateur sonneteer Edgar Degas ('"Mais, Degas, ce n'est point avec des idées que l'on fait des vers...*C'est avec des mots*."'[15]), Graham states:

> The most difficult thing for me to remember is that a poem is made of words and not of the expanding heart, the overflowing soul, or the sensitive observer. A poem is made of words.[16]

In the 1949 Notebook, Graham enters beside the heading 'words—' a close paraphrase of T. S. Eliot's remarks on allusiveness in his essay 'The Music of Poetry' (1942). Graham's version reads:

> rich connected and poor connected. The poet should dispose the richer among the poorer at the right points. He cannot afford to load a poem too heavily with the richer—for it is only at certain moments that a word can be made to insinuate the whole history of language and a civilization. This is an *ALLUSIVENESS*, the concern of every kind of poet.[17]

Graham was developing the mature style of his 1949 and 1955 volumes,
where richness of association is tempered by the interspersing of simple
words, the language of work and daily experience. The critical self-
consciousness, restraint and control implied in Eliot's remark may also be
detected in Graham's poems from this period.

Damian Grant wrote that the poet's early work shows 'Graham drunk
with words'.[18] Grant may have this from Schmidt who describes early
Graham as 'word-drunk' and 'in the thrall of Dylan Thomas'.[19] Graham is
like a prisoner and a drinker, going to words as to a bottle of whiskey and
to Thomas's poetry as to a plate of food pushed under a door, weakly de-
pendent on them. 'Explanation of a Map' is in *2nd Poems* (1945):

> My word
> Knows mister and missus, measure and live feature,
> So fume and jet of the floor and all its towns
> Wording the world awake and all its suns.

                                                                (29-30)

Graham was trained as an engineer and many of his poems have the separ-
ateness of made objects. Yet, it is the construction of these lines from 'Ex-
planation of a Map' that causes dissatisfaction. A large claim is voiced in
'My word / Knows' and it isn't substantiated by the analogical sound effects
standing in for the substance of the world, as in 'mister and missus, mea-
sure and live feature'; the alliteration and internal part rhyme feel like
words snatched at and settled for. Not 'Wording the world awake', they
lull to enchant with a gesture at wholeness: 'and all its towns', 'and all its
suns.'

The much-reiterated comparison with Dylan Thomas is partly mistaken.
Thomas's word music is frequently occasioned by a well-signalled, if vague,
theme: innocence, mortality, the continuum of nature and human life.
'Poem in October' enthrals with gestures —

> These were the woods the river and sea
>   Where a boy
>   In the listening

> Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy
> To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide.[20]

The last line of anapaests demonstrates a simple dependence on rhythmic predictability. Graham tends not to give readers the purchase of a general thematic concern, though the poet did once list his major themes:

> The difficulty of communication; the difficulty of speaking from a fluid identity; the lessons in physical phenomena; the mystery and adequacy of aesthetic experience; the elation of being alive in the language.[21]

Helpful about aesthetic concerns, his approaches to the art of poetry, this gives nothing away about the characters of particular poems.

'Here next the chair I was when winter went' is from *Cage Without Grievance* (1942), and touches love and death:

> So still going out in the morning of ash and air
> My shovel swings. My tongue is a sick device.
> Fear evening my boot says. The chair sees iceward
> In the bitter hour so visible to death.

(19)

Graham's best mature work has a similarly discrete movement in short sentences between particulars, as here from 'My shovel' to 'My tongue', 'my boot' and 'The chair'. These lines depend far less than 'Poem in October' on overt sound effects to give form; the things are not bound up into an incantatory unity which would rob them of their separate existences. The 'device'/'iceward' rhyme of a final and a penultimate syllable hints that every act of speech moves the speaker nearer to the grave. The poet speaks and walks towards the end of the day, the disappearance of light, a cold darkness in which death can still see to snatch at him. The movement of the poem announces a thread of being: quiet, undemonstrative, and with plenty of space for thought to live between the sentences, as between the words, allowing the reader's mind into a process of pondering, moving on and returning. This is one value in a poem's resistance to ready thematic absorption, as Graham wrote in 'Notes on a Poetry of Release':