Where the People Are: Language and Community in the Poetry of W.S. Graham

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Because always language
Is where the people are

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Introduction

William Sydney Graham was born in 1918 in Greenock, Scotland. His father was a journeyman engineer, and the young Graham was apprenticed ‘as a draughtsman to a Glasgow engineering firm’.[1] However, after attending evening classes at Glasgow University and spending a year studying literature and philosophy as a residential student at the Working Mens’ College at Newbattle Abbey, he committed himself to a career as a poet.[2] After various jobs in Ireland and Scotland, he met the publisher David Archer, who had established an Arts Centre in Glasgow. Archer, the first of Graham’s many patrons, allowed him to live in his flat in Sandyford Place, where several aspiring artists were already living rent-free. Archer’s Parton Press published his first collection of poems, *Cage Without Grievance,* in 1942.[3] Over the next few years, Graham lived mostly in London and Cornwall with two long visits to the US. After 1955, he was permanently resident in Cornwall. He married Nessie Dunsmuir in 1954. They had no children, though Graham had a daughter, Rosalind, from a previous relationship, whom he saw occasionally. He died of cancer in 1986 at the age of 67.[4]

Although Graham took paid employment for brief periods as a young man, for most of his life he worked only at his poetry. He was dependent on the small fees and grants he received for his writing and on the generosity of friends. Nancy Wynne-Jones, for example, allowed him and his wife to live rent-free in a cottage she owned in Madron, Cornwall, and Robin Skelton for some time gave him a regular allowance in return for manuscripts.[5] After *Cage Without Grievance*, Graham quickly published two more books, *The Seven Journeys* and *2ND Poems*. His next collection, *The White Threshold*, was accepted by T.S. Eliot for Faber and Faber, who remained his publishers for the rest of his life. He was to publish only three more original volumes, *The Nightfishing*, *Malcolm Mooney's Land* and *Implements in Their Places*. In 1979, Faber brought out a *Collected Poems* which, significantly, omits some of the poems from the first four volumes, and in the same year, the Ecco Press published a *Selected Poems* in the US.[6]

At the beginning and end of his career, Graham was a poet of some reputation. In the 1940s, he lectured at New York University, received an Atlantic Award and took part in a reading tour in the US with Kathleen Raine and David Gascoyne.[7] His editor T.S. Eliot praised his work, with the flattering proviso that it 'was "intellectual" poetry and would go slow because people were lazy about thinking'.[8] The last two collections and the *Collected Poems* were widely noticed: *Malcolm Mooney's Land* and *Implements* were Poetry Book Society Choices and the prepublicity for the *Collected Poems* included an *Observer Magazine* interview with Penelope Mortimer.[9] In 1974, he was awarded a Civil List Pension, thanks to the efforts of Robin Skelton.[10] Nevertheless, Eliot appears to have been right – Graham's work has still not received the attention its power and originality deserves. Since his death, though, a revival of interest has been slowly gathering momentum, culminating in the annotated *New Collected Poems*, which I have recently edited for Faber. [11]

My own first experience of Graham was through the poem 'Johann Joachim Quantz's Five Lessons', which I came across in an anthology when I was an undergraduate, and found exceptionally vivid and powerful. Who was this poet, and why had I never heard of him before? Undergraduates often assume they have heard of everyone important, but my reaction turns out to be fairly typical, and 'Quantz' probably remains Graham's most popular poem. Like many anthology pieces, it is in some ways uncharacteristic of its author: a Browningesque dramatic monologue full of historical and regional colour, quite unlike the more obviously allegorical 'Malcolm Mooney's Land', it is about music rather than language, and deals with a type of relationship which Graham had little experience of in his own life (at least in a formal sense), that between a teacher and a student. Rereading the present study, I notice I have mentioned it only once, in passing. It is a fine poem, but it will always stand a little apart from the main body of work; one might even argue that, in its concern with the social dimension of art (or Art), it transcends its author's usual obsessions – though loneliness and silence are still there, hauntingly evoked. Years later, I found the *Collected Poems* in a bookshop and, opening it at random, read 'Imagine a Forest', which confirmed my impression that I had 'discovered' a major poet. By the time I enrolled for a PhD at Southampton University, there was only one possible subject for my thesis. My starting-point was an attempt to understand some of the statements about language in the late poems and, in particular, how they related to apparently similar statements I was encountering at the time in literary theory. The work I began then forms the basis of this book.

I was not, of course, Graham's discoverer at all. I have been much helped by the work of his earlier critics, above all by Tony Lopez's important and pioneering study *The Poetry of W.S. Graham*. Many other people have generously given help and support to the project in the ten years since it started: my research supervisor Peter Middleton; my advisor Stephen Bygrave; the School of Research and Graduate Studies, University of Southampton; the late Nessie Dunsmuir Graham; the late Robin and the late Sylvia Skelton; Ronnie Duncan; Malcolm Mackintosh; the late Alastair Graham; Chris Stephens; Anthony Astbury; Geoffrey Godbert; Alison Hill; the University of Glamorgan and the University of Wales, Aberystwyth; Chris Hamilton-Emery, John Kinsella and Salt; Chris Petter and staff of the Special Collections Department, University of Victoria, British Columbia; and staff of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin, the Poetry / Rare Books Collection at the University Libraries of the State University of Buffalo, the National Library of Scotland, and the National Library of Canada. Part of Chapter 6 has appeared in slightly different form in *W.S. Graham: Speaking Towards You*, edited by Ralph Pite and Hester Jones (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2004). My thanks to all of the above, and particular thanks to Michael and Margaret Snow, Graham's friends and executors, whose wisdom and experience has been a constant support. Finally I should like to thank my wife Creina for acting as research assistant and social secretary, and listening to innumerable draft chapters. This study is dedicated to her.

List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in the text.

AAN	W.S. Graham, *Aimed at Nobody: Poems from Notebooks*, ed. by Margaret Blackwood and Robin Skelton (London: Faber and Faber, 1993).
'Clusters'	Notebook 4, Robin Skelton Collection, c/o University of Victoria, BC,Canada.
CS	Ronnie Duncan and Jonathan Davidson (eds.), *The Constructed Space: A Celebration of W.S. Graham* (Lincoln: Jackson's Arm, 1994).
ER	*Edinburgh Review*, no. 75 (February 1987).
NCP	W.S. Graham, *New Collected Poems*, ed. by Matthew Francis (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).
NFM	*The Nightfisherman: Selected Letters of W.S. Graham* ed. by Michael and Margaret Snow (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1999).
OED	*The Oxford English Dictionary*.
PWSG	Tony Lopez, *The Poetry of W.S. Graham* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989).
SJ	W.S. Graham, *The Seven Journeys* (Glasgow: William Maclellan, 1944).
TLS	*The Times Literary Supplement*.

CHAPTER 1

Poet of Language

Failed Conduits

W.S. Graham is a poet of language, as a glance at the *New Collected Poems* reveals. This preoccupation is most apparent in the later poems, where the words 'language', 'words' and 'voices' recur many times, often in a negative context. In 'Malcolm Mooney's Land', language is described as an 'obstacle', while other poems – entitled 'What Is the Language Using Us For?' and 'Language Ah Now You Have Me' – lament the opportunities it presents for 'mistakes of communication' (*NCP*, p. 155, p. 200, p. 207). Some poems are extended metaphors whose tenor appears, more or less clearly, to be language. In 'Malcolm Mooney's Land' language is an Arctic waste, in 'Clusters Travelling Out' a prison, while in 'Ten Shots of Mister Simpson' it is both camera and gun, destroying what it describes. Many of the poems are haunted by monsters, 'The Beast in the Space' that destroys meaning, or the 'monster muse' that enters the act of writing the poem in 'Five Visitors to Madron' bringing the threat of death (*NCP*, p. 188). Language is never neutral; it has a will of its own which may be hostile to the speaker.

Language is undoubtedly a concern of the late poems; is it also important in the earlier ones? In the poems of *The Nightfishing*, the key words I have noted are already present. The poet is 'trusted on the language'; he tells us 'these words said welcome' and 'I heard voices within / The empty lines and tenses' (*NCP*, p. 122, p. 133). 'The Nightfishing' itself is a poem about fishing for herring, but it is also, more importantly, about fishing for words, about its own writing. In this metaphor, the sea stands for language, which is where poets do their fishing. This suggests it may also have the same significance in the slightly earlier poems of

The White Threshold, where the sea is the dominant image but its symbolism is more obscure, and indeed, phrases like 'the signed sea' and 'the long shore printed / With arrow steps' suggest that this analogy is being made (*NCP*, p. 82, p. 81). So does 'the white threshold', the phrase that occurs in 'Three Poems of Drowning' as well as giving the title to a poem and to the collection as a whole (*NCP*, p. 85, pp. 92–98). The threshold in question is the foamy surface of the sea, through which sailors pass when they drown, but white is also the colour of the pages of a book, a fact that later provided the Arctic metaphor of 'Malcolm Mooney's Land', and the phrase 'the white language' in 'What Is the Language Using Us For?' (*NCP*, p. 199). If we go back to the poems of Graham's first published collection, we find, in such poems as 'Of the Resonant Rumour of Sun, Impulse of Summer', the vocabulary of 'sign', 'index' and 'writing', applied this time to landscape (*NCP*, p. 18).

In seeing language as a problem, and as one of overriding importance, Graham is participating in the linguistic turn which is such a feature of twentieth-century thought. From Saussure's founding of a synchronic linguistics to Chomsky's project of identifying the cognitive basis of grammar, from Nietzsche's insistence that truth is 'a movable host of metaphors, metonymies and anthropomorphisms' to Derrida's attempts to use writing as a lever to crack open the categories of Western metaphysics, from Sapir and Whorf's speculation that cognition may depend on the potential for it offered by the structure of a native language to Lacan's claim that 'the unconscious is structured in the most radical way like a language', this has been the issue to which modern and postmodern thinkers have obsessively returned.[1] I have not been able to discover a philosophical pedigree for Graham's own pursuit of this theme, though I began this study hoping to do so. Tony Lopez states that he studied philosophy as well as literature at Newbattle Abbey.[2] The titles of famous philosophical texts are mentioned in a number of his notebooks from different periods of his life, and some of his friends have told me that he used to speak at times of Heidegger and the pre-Socratic philosophers. On the other hand, the poems do not feel – to me, at any rate – like the products of a trained philosophical mind. Poets and artists are sometimes in mentioned in them – Section 50 of 'Implements in Their Places' lists David Jones, Kandinsky, Shelley, Crane, Melville and Eliot, for example – but there are no references to philosophers (*NCP*, p. 251). Graham's notes on philosophy are largely lists of texts and authors for future reading, and they seem to me like the fantasies of a man daydreaming about a systematic education he is never likely to get round to. There is a touchingly schoolboyish tone to such notes as:

> 'read Hume who at the age of 26 shocked all Christendom with his highly heretical TREATISE ON HUMAN NATURE – one of the classics and marvels of modern philosophy.'[3]

To be fair to Graham, the quotation marks in this passage are his, implying that he is quoting someone else. Nevertheless, seen in the context of his extensive notes on the correct use of the comma, his quotations from definitions of technical poetic terms from *Nelson's Encyclopaedia* and his explanation to himself of sonata form, they suggest an enthusiastic novice rather than a scholar.

I hope to show in the course of this study that Graham's ideas on the nature of language are both complex and – so far as I have been able to tell – remarkably original. They were not, of course, formed in a vacuum. Rather, they were put together from three main ingredients: the literary and critical commonplaces current when he was a young man, the psychodynamics of his personality and his own perception of the position of the writer. From an early age, Graham chose to be a poet. His understanding of this vocation was conditioned by the work and views of older writers, such as T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas. These were congenial to him because they offered an escape from, and at the same time, a return to, his family and social origins. (The explanation of this paradox should become clear in time.) His perception of the position of the writer is thus inevitably connected both with that of his predecessors and with his own psychological needs and desires. But it also gives an insight into the nature of text – or rather, since text is part of history like other cultural products, into the nature of text in the late twentieth century.

In this chapter, I shall be concentrating on the view of language implied in the late poems, because it is their explicit concern with this theme that first prompted me to undertake this study. (The late poems are also considered in Chapter 5.) However, the attitudes directly revealed here are present throughout his work, though often in a more cryptic form, as Chapters 3 and 4, which deal with the early and middle-period poems, will show. In the following discussion, I shall be exploring the implications of the metaphors Graham has used to illustrate his subject, some of which I have already listed. I shall suggest that he is deploying these as a critique of a commonsense view of language which is itself metaphorical, a view which Michael J. Reddy has called 'the conduit metaphor'.[4]

Reddy's argument has been well summed up by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson:

> Reddy observes that our language about language is structured roughly by the following complex metaphor:
>
> IDEAS (or MEANINGS) ARE OBJECTS.
>
> LINGUISTIC EXPRESSIONS ARE CONTAINERS.
>
> COMMUNICATION IS SENDING.
>
> The speaker puts ideas (objects) into words (containers) and sends them (along a conduit) to a hearer who takes the ideas/objects out of the word/containers.[5]

Reddy convincingly demonstrates the metaphor's pervasiveness by listing a large number of English expressions which imply that communication functions like a conduit.[6] But, as he points out, the idea is a strange one. Clearly words are not receptacles with an outside and an inside, even though we habitually speak of them as if they were. Nor are thoughts themselves passed across space, 'since these are locked within the skull and life process of each of us'.[7] His alternative account is that language allows one person to construct for another a set of instructions which can be used by the latter to generate thoughts. These thoughts will not be the same as those of the originator of the message, but they will be equally compatible with the instructions. The differences are due to the mental and circumstantial differences between sender and recipient and to the indeterminacy of language (a topic on which I shall have more to say later in this chapter).[8]

Reddy is far from being the only theorist to offer a critique of commonsense models of communication like the conduit metaphor. In structuralist and poststructuralist theory, particularly in the somewhat simplified accounts of these designed primarily for English-speaking university students, it is normally argued that common sense assumes a transparent language. This image is not quite the same as the conduit metaphor; it downplays the fact that common sense (if we take Reddy's examples from everyday speech as conclusive evidence) sees language as a thing, albeit one with the remarkable property of being able to transfer ideas or sense-impressions from one person to another. Of course, a pane of glass is a thing, too, but one whose thingness can be ignored, and it is this refusal to acknowledge thingness or materiality which is the great error of common sense according to writers like Catherine Belsey and Colin MacCabe. [9] On the other hand, Antony Easthope, in making the same point, more accurately depicts the popular view of language as a material entity successfully deployed for the transference of information when he ironically compares Roman Jakobson's account of communication with the carrying of coal by trucks.[10] It seems to me, however, that poststructuralist theory, though it rightly disputes the telepathic or magical features of such models, is actually a product of the same preconceptions. Language is, of course, as 'material' as every other aspect of this material universe, but this truism is easily confused with claims for its 'materiality' in another, more contentious sense of the word. I shall argue shortly that Graham's portrayal of language as a thing ultimately derives from the textual bias of twentieth-century Western culture, and this is a bias in which most literary theory participates.

Reddy's critique of the conduit metaphor, in contrast to poststructuralist theories, is a humanist one. For him, the fact that language does not physically convey ideas between people only serves to emphasize the human role in meaning creation. The conduit metaphor obscures this role, making meaning seem a property of language itself:

> In the simplest of terms, the conduit metaphor lets human ideas slip out of human brains, so that, once you have recording technologies, you do not need humans any more.[11]

He emphasizes the importance of education, insisting that communication depends, not on efficient technology and the volume of messages transmitted, but on the abilities of the human beings involved. We must put less trust in media and more in minds.

Nevertheless, in making this case he inadvertently undermines it. Our obsession with technology, he argues, is a result of the conduit metaphor: the language we use about language irrevocably influences the way we think about it. This view, which Reddy inherits from Whorf, makes language a powerful agent rather than a passive conduit. However it is inconsistent with his humanism since it takes away much of the responsibility for thought from human beings and gives it to an autonomous language instead. While it is not possible for people to put ideas into language, it would seem that language can put ideas into them. Reddy allows only the possibility of 'brief, isolated and fragmentary' evasions of the conditioning imposed on the mind by language.[12]

There is, however, an alternative approach which avoids the necessity of positing a dehumanized language. This is that of Lakoff, Johnson and Lakoff's more recent collaborator, Mark Turner, who see metaphor as a cognitive phenomenon rather than a merely linguistic one.[13] For them, the conduit metaphor is one of many metaphorical concepts by which members of a culture structure their lives. Such concepts are systematic and coherent; a basic metaphor like 'time is money' generates an indefinite number of phrases which are coherent with it but whose exact wording is not important.[14] Metaphors are not arbitrary, but are grounded in culture and experience.[15] The 'time is money' complex, for example, has its roots in the practice of Western industrial society, 'where work is typically associated with the time it takes and time is precisely quantified'.[16] No metaphor can be fully adequate to its object, or it would cease to be a metaphor at all; it follows, therefore, that metaphors highlight certain features of the concepts they describe while hiding others.[17] For example, the metaphorical view of labour as a resource, also a consequence of industrial capitalism, hides the difference between meaningful and meaningless labour.[18] This theory offers a more convincing answer than Reddy's to the question of how it is possible to offer a critique of language using language. Because metaphors are not complete, they do not wholly control our thought; because they are cognitive, there remains a base of human experience with which they can be compared and, on occasion, found inadequate, as when Lakoff and Johnson point to aspects of time and labour that are hidden by the 'time is money' and 'labour is a resource' metaphors.[19]

Lakoff, Johnson and Turner provide a theoretical position from which it is possible to criticize not only the conduit metaphor but also other metaphors which, though they seem to be opposed to it, share its portrayal of language as a thing or a place. Metaphors like this come into being because they highlight some aspect of an experience. In so doing, they hide others. When we encounter the metaphorical descriptions of language in Graham's poems, we must ask ourselves why he has chosen to emphasize some aspects of linguistic experience at the expense of others.

Such descriptions are to be found not only in Graham's work, but also, as I shall show in later chapters, in a wide range of writing in the broad modernist tradition which influenced him as a young man. Graham does not simply take over these metaphors from his predecessors; rather, he struggles to remake them in an attempt to satisfy his own complex sense of what language is. Lakoff and Turner argue that the metaphors of poets are often more powerful and intricate versions of those that are generally current in our culture.[20] Just as the common metaphor of death as departure gives rise both to clichés such as 'He passed away' and to poems such as Emily Dickinson's 'Because I could not stop for Death', so the images in Graham's poems are based on the metaphors from everyday speech listed by Reddy.[21] Graham is no more satisfied with these than Reddy is, but because he is a poet rather than a theorist his response is not to analyse their inadequacies but to try to rewrite them in a way that does satisfy him.

Some of the poems literally depict language as a form of conduit, the electric cable down which telephone signals are sent. In 'What Is the Language':

> I lean my back to the telegraph pole
>
> And the messages hum through my spine.
> The beaded wires with their birds
> Above me are contacting London.
>
> (*NCP*, p. 202)

In 'Dear Who I Mean', 'the five high singing wires', (which also suggest a musical stave) trap the kite of the poet's message (*NCP*, p. 160). In 'Implements', there is again an analogy between music and wires – the strings of the bazouki in a Cretan taverna are 'buzzing plucked wires' (*NCP*, p. 256). Graham is using the wire as a symbol of language but bringing it into juxtaposition with other images which complicate its function. (We shall see the significance of the birds shortly.) The telegraph wire, the most perfect model of a linguistic conduit that our technological society can provide, keeps turning into something else. Graham is hinting that language does not function like a conduit, but, like the Freudian unconscious, he negates imagistically, by adding negative symbols to his positive ones.[22] If the vibrations are music, this transformation of the message appears benign. But this is only one image of the failure of the conduit.

In what Graham refers to as the 'constructed space' of the poem, 'I' and 'you' – that is, the writer and reader – 'face / Each other now across this abstract scene / Stretching between us'. Any communication that takes place between them must be passed *across* the intervening space. The preposition is an important one. As Lakoff and Johnson convincingly demonstrate, prepositions often give vital clues to the topography of a metaphorical concept.[23] The word 'across' occurs in Reddy's example sentences:

> 'It's very hard to get that idea across in a hostile atmosphere.'
>
> [. . .]
>
> 'If you salesmen can't put this understanding across to the client more forcefully, our new product will fail.'[24]

In the conduit metaphor, ideas or understanding are passed across a space. In Graham's poem, the interlocutors attempt to see each other across such a space, so what is, or should be, passed is visual recognition. Later in the same poem, Graham states that it is language that must be moved across:

> 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.
>
> (*NCP*, p. 162)

The words in 'Approaches to How They Behave' are also sent across a space: 'to go across / In roughly your direction.' (*NCP*, p. 178.) There are similar movements 'across' in many of the poems. In 'Sgurr Na Gillean Macleod', the poet characterizes himself as 'a man who rows / This light skiff of words across Silence's far cry' (*NCP*, p. 224); in 'Enter a Cloud' it is the cloud itself which moves across a separating space to the poet's friends in Cornwall and London 'bearing changing / Messages' (*NCP*, p. 217). In 'What Is the Language', the King of Whales goes 'mushing across the blind / Ice-cap between us in his furs' (*NCP*, p. 202). If, as Tony Lopez claims, the voyage is Graham's most important image, then the attempt to portray this movement from writer to reader is a possible explanation.[25]

This movement is always problematized in one way or another. One impediment to it is the vastness of the distance involved. Graham constantly complains of the distance contained within the poem; Malcolm Mooney's Land is governed 'by the laws of distance', the reader is a 'Dear Pen / Pal in the distance' (the line break emphasizes the spacing between them), and the words contain 'a great greedy space / Ready to engulf the traveller' (*NCP*, p. 154, p. 159, p. 227).

The spacing that vitiates communication is symbolically identified with wildernesses of various kinds: the sea, the Arctic, the wood of poems such as 'The Secret Name' and 'Implements' and its exotic equivalent, the jungle of 'Language Ah Now You Have Me'. These are elaborations of the metaphor implicit in the preposition 'across'. They are not only vast spaces but also unexplored ones, spaces in which the writer and his message can get lost. Each offers its own concrete characteristics to enrich the metaphor. The sea has a massive and lethal energy of its own; the Arctic has the frozen immobility of words on a page; the wood is dark, so that those who meet there cannot see each other's faces; the jungle is teeming with colourful and possibly dangerous life. But they are all spaces, and as such represent a threat to any communication which might cross them.

It seems, though, that distance itself is not a sufficient symbol of this threat to communication. The intervening space may be inhabited. As I have mentioned, the jungle of 'Language Ah Now You Have Me' has an indigenous life of its own, 'pigmies', 'a pleasure / Monkey', 'great and small breathers', 'a creature with its eggs' (*NCP*, pp. 208). In another poem, a 'great creature' lives in the space, biting, padding, sniffing and lapping up the poem's meaning (*NCP*, p.p. 157–8). In 'Dear Who I Mean', the message is a crashed kite which is intercepted by a 'god' who bears a close resemblance to a dog, carrying the message in 'spittled jaws' and being vainly whistled by the poet (*NCP*, pp. 161). The orthographic inversion which turns a dog into a god is, as I shall show in Chapter 6, a typical device; here it represents an inversion of the master-servant relationship between language-user and language. But whether the inhabitant of the textual space is subhuman or superhuman hardly matters. The important thing is that it is alive – it represents a third agency in the intended dialogue of addresser and addressee. Space, that is, has become animated, space with an agenda, but whether it is friendly, hostile or indifferent remains obscure. For this reason, Graham prefers vague words for it, 'creature', 'breathers', and, above all, 'beast', a word which ambiguously suggests both juvenile mischief and mythical predation (*NCP*, p. 208, p. 157).

A third device used to problematize the crossing of the textual space is the placing of objects in the way. There may be a 'barrier', or an 'obstacle' that prevents communication from passing (*NCP*, p. 159, p. 155). The Arctic of 'Malcolm Mooney's Land' and other poems intimidates by its opacity as well as its distances; its mountain ranges, glaciers and crevasses block movement and vision. The same is true of the trees in the forest poems. Another way of depicting the textual space as obstructed is to use the image of a prison or cage, which gives its title to Graham's first published book *Cage Without Grievance*. The quintessential poem of confinement, however, is 'Clusters Travelling Out', in which the captive speaker has to signal by tapping on the pipes or waving his arms in semaphore from the prison roof (*NCP*, pp. 191–5).

Distance, intercepting animals and barriers are all ways of troubling the ‘across’ part of the conduit metaphor. They are not necessarily consistent. If the poem is a space, how can it also be an ‘obstacle’ – empty and full at the same time? If it is a lifeless waste, why is it so full of inhabitants? (Malcolm Mooney’s Land has so many voices, ghosts, hunters and explorers as to be positively overpopulated.) The contradictions are due to Graham’s reliance on a metaphor which he finds inadequate but which he is unwilling to abandon. He continually gestures towards what is going wrong by using the metaphor negatively – the message is not passed, the conduit is not working – but in doing so he continues to use it.

The conduit metaphor depicts the message as a receptacle into which thoughts are placed by the writer / speaker to be taken out again by the reader / listener. When Graham talks about a word that ‘said / Something it was never very likely / I could fit in to a poem in my life’, he is seeing the poem as a receptacle for meaning, just as in the example listed by Reddy: ‘That thought is in practically every phrase!’ (*NCP*, p. 180).[26] The receptacle may be language as a whole as in ‘certain experiences seem to not / Want to go in to language’ (*NCP*, p. 199). On a more detailed level, it may be the specific words that ‘try to come / The tin man with me’ (*NCP*, pp. 252). The allusion here is to the tin man in *The Wizard of Oz*, who had no heart, and the meaning is the same as Reddy’s example ‘Your words seem rather hollow’.[27] Alternatively, the words may be full, but their contents remain inaccessible. This is the origin of the image of hiding, as in ‘Each object hides in a metaphor’ (*NCP*, p. 201). Language is seen as having an outside and an inside, but at the same time its interior is made useless, either because meanings cannot get in or because they cannot get out. Again, this image satisfies Graham’s sense of the inadequacy of the conduit metaphor without actually abandoning the terms of that metaphor.

Just as the space the message was to pass across could be seen as inhabited or personified, could become an agency itself, so the receptacle can have ideas of independence:

> At times a rare metaphor’s
> Fortuitous agents sing
> Equally in their own right. (*NCP*, p. 246)

The singing here reminds us of the telegraph wires which may be singing the messages that are sent along them or humming a little tune of their own. It may even remind us of those other songsters, the birds the poet noticed sitting on the wire. Words and poems are depicted in Graham's poetry as birds, animals, or people. In 'The Fifteen Devices', and several other poems, words are equated with the rooks flying over the poet's roof , 'blown, black wobblers [. . .] from a better high flocking / Organization than mine' (*NCP*, p. 183–4). In 'Implements', the poem is a horned creature in a zoo as well as a 'great Art-Eater / Licking [its] tongue into the hill' where, no doubt, it dines on ant-like words (*NCP*, p. 248–9). In 'Approaches to How They Behave' and 'Implements', words, like impudent children, make faces at the poet (*NCP*, p. 178, p. 248). The same vague and ambiguous vocabulary which refers to animated space also applies to the animated utterance. Words are 'beasts', 'the very devil' or simply, as in 'Approaches to How They Behave', 'They' (*NCP*, p. 252, p. 246, p. 178–82).

In the conduit metaphor, as we have seen, there is a space that has to be crossed and an inner space within language. While the image of a conduit, pipeline or wire is the most obvious way of visualizing the relationship between these two spaces, there are times when the difference between the two is elided and language is seen as distance and interiority simultaneously. The phrase 'The Constructed Space' implies both the interiority of a 'constructed' receptacle and a separating distance, and indeed, the poem tells us that it stretches between writer and reader, and that 'lonely meanings' are read 'in' it (*NCP*, pp. 161–2). Similarly, prison and cage imagery simultaneously negates both elements of the metaphor, the crossing of distance and of the boundary between inside and outside.

The imagery we have looked at accepts the idea of a spatialized, reified language which is the basis of the conduit metaphor. That metaphor is a way of reconciling our sense of communication as the crossing of space with our sense that words are things or that language is a thing. If communication is the passing of things across space, then any information must be inside the things. This is a very optimistic view of language, one that allows room for the possibility of human interaction within its supposed substantiality. The conduit is passive and harmless, a medium through which messages are passed. Its role in communication is simply not to get in the way. It is this optimistic attitude that Graham's poems do not accept.

The attempt to reconcile a reified language with human participation is always likely to present practical problems. It is easy to demonstrate that words do not contain meanings, but that on the contrary meanings depend on context. Lakoff and Johnson give as an example the sentence ‘Please sit in the apple-juice seat’, which can only be explained by the context in which it was uttered, that of a hostess offering her guest the place with the glass of apple-juice at the breakfast table.[28] Another well-known example of a sentence whose meaning depends on context is Stanley Fish’s ‘Is there a text in this class?’[29] Again, there is J.L. Austin’s query as to whether or not France is hexagonal, to which the answer can only be that it depends what you mean by hexagonal.[30] Clearly in these cases the meanings are not conveyed by the words alone.

The conduit metaphor, then, is inadequate to these situations, and no doubt to many instances of language use that are more significant. This is the point made by Graham’s imagery; he is drawing attention to ‘communication’s // Mistakes in the magic medium’ (*NCP*, p. 200). The aspect of the formula whose existence he never questions, however, is the ‘medium’. His metaphors portray language as stretching between us, both space and object. If meaning is not getting through, it must be because of some property of the medium, its ‘magic’. Instead of being a traversible space, language is a wilderness; instead of an accessible container, it is a prison; instead of a passive receptacle, it is an active agent, a meaning-devouring monster. But why should he choose to see it as a space or a thing or an agent at all? The answer, I suggest, is that it is text that encourages us to see language in this way; both the conduit metaphor and Graham’s attempts to negate it are products of textuality.

Sydney Ought to Be Given Away

Metaphors, I have argued, are grounded in culture and experience – and, obviously, the culture to which one belongs shapes to a great extent the experience one has. We live in a literate culture, and much of our experience of language is textual. This inevitably influences the way we look at language in general. Indeed, members of nonliterate cultures cannot *look* at language at all; it is not, as Walter J. Ong has pointed out, an enduring physical presence to them.[31] Words come to be seen as things when they are written down or printed.[32] In societies where this technology does not exist, they are events, or rather actions, since they never exist separate from the person who utters them.[33] (The issue of ‘secondary orality’, the cultural developments made possible by new long-distance and / or permanent forms of oral communication such as radio, telephones and television, is by no means irrelevant to Graham, who broadcast on the radio and whose poem 'Wynter and the Grammarsow' mimics a tape-recording. However, it is not a major theme, and since its cultural implications are only gradually becoming apparent, I shall not be able to consider it here.)[34]

Ong shows that the implications of this textual bias are manifold, and that some of them are buried so deep in our culture that they are hard for us to detect. The oral universe is human-centered, since all knowledge is located in individuals. It is therefore inseparable from human needs, activities and priorities. 'Objective' knowledge is a meaningless concept in orally-based societies. But literacy has given us a sense that knowledge is in some way autonomous, that it can be detached from the human lifeworld. Writing may continue to exist long after the occasion that produced it is finished. It thus acquires an oracular status, seeming to utter itself and to generate meanings which transcend particular circumstances.[35] This sense of autonomy has been reinforced by the development of print, which presents text as an artefact.[36] Books may be seen as 'utterances', but their 'speakers' remain out of reach, and their 'listeners' are always eavesdroppers, since books are not directed at specific individuals.[37] Writing and print bring with them the sense that language exists in a separate domain from the human beings who use it. The idea of language as a closed, self-governing system is very powerful, reinforced, as Ong shows, by texts such as grammar books and dictionaries.[38]

The conduit metaphor, which depends on a reified language containing meaning, can only apply in a literate society, in which words – or the paper they are written on – can be given away, scrutinized, picked up, put down or left lying around. Furthermore, books, which are boxlike in shape and can be opened and closed, provide a concrete symbol of the interiority which is so important a part of the metaphor. As we have seen, this textually-derived sense of language as a physical entity with an outside and an inside persists even in accounts, such as Graham's, that ostensibly reject the conduit metaphor.

His view of language partakes, then, of this general textual bias. When he writes of 'language', he often seems to mean 'text' or even specifically poetry. To picture language as white, as he does in 'What Is the Language' is to picture it as a page. Confusingly, though, he does not ignore speech or dismiss it as inferior; instead, he regularly compares writing and speech in his work, to the detriment of the former. Writing must always fail in its attempt to emulate speech because:

> [. . .] we want to be telling
>
> Each other alive about each other
> Alive.
>
> (*NCP*, p. 200)

Sound is portrayed as natural and fulfilling while sight is artificial and alienating, yet in becoming a writer Graham has condemned himself to an endless attempt to bridge the unbridgeable gap between the two and suffer the resultant loneliness and silence:

> I speak as well as I can
> Trying to teach my ears
> To learn to use their eyes
> Even only maybe
> In the end to observe
> The behaviour of silence.
>
> (*NCP*, p. 171)

'Silence', that constantly reiterated word, is identified with the alienation he associates with writing. It is 'the northern dazzle' that watches Malcolm Mooney, the 'terrible shapes' of the invisible audience listening curiously to the flautist Karl, the food and residence of the beast in the space (*NCP*, p. 153, p. 229, p. 157). Writing is a kind of speech ('I speak as well as I can') which never quite manages to fulfil the role of speech, so that the silence it tries to break is ultimately unmarked by it (*NCP*, p. 182).

Graham's sense of what language is derives primarily from his experience of text, but when he tries to explain this experience, he does so by contrasting it with speech. He appears not to regard speech as language at all; to write, on the other hand, is to give oneself up to a world of pure language. He would no doubt have been surprised by Jacques Derrida's refusal to accept conventional distinctions between speech and writing:

> It is as if the Western concept of language [. . .] were revealed today as the guise or disguise of a primary writing: more fundamental than that which, before this conversion, passed for the simple 'supplement to the spoken word' (Rousseau). Either writing was never a simple 'supplement', or it is urgently necessary to construct a new logic of the 'supplement'.[39]

This approach seems directly opposed to that of Ong, who indeed attacks it for its 'historically unreflective, uncritical literacy'.[40] Nevertheless, the effects of Ong's investigation into the difference and Derrida's deconstruction of it are rather similar. What Derrida shows is that literacy has generated a mythology of speech; precisely because speech is displaced by writing to an inaccessible distance, it becomes a symbol of a perfect conjunction of meaning and being which is in fact nowhere to be found. This is Derrida's concept of presence.[41] *Physical* presence, in its common-sense meaning, is, of course a condition of speech (except where telecommunications or tape-recording are involved), and I shall not forget the adjective when I wish to refer to this fact. The Derridean or transcendent presence is what physical presence symbolizes in the logocentric myth. Graham never arrives at Derrida's deconstruction of the speech / writing opposition, even though in his preoccupation with the effects of writing he seems to inhabit a Derridean world. Time and again he returns to a logocentric position, in which speech is affirmed as not only primary, but almost sacred.

The conduit metaphor, I have claimed, is optimistic; it attempts to put the thing-like language at the service of human beings. People are still a part of the process it depicts, one to put the meaning in and one (the reader is usually imagined as singular) to take it out again. Furthermore, the 'across' part of the metaphor, the distance the message has to traverse, appears to be modelled on speech. In conversation, people have a physical sense of the distance between them. As this increases, they have to speak louder in order to be heard. As it grows still further, communication becomes impossible. Writing solves this problem – instead of trying to shout across the intervening space, I can put my message in a letter and send it. My words can be read by people on the other side of the world. It would be possible, then, to see writing as an enhanced form of speech, one with a long-distance capability.[42]

It is perhaps easiest to believe this of letters, which are typically written from one known individual to another and traverse a definable separating distance. Graham had a considerable investment in this form of communication. He was, unlike most people of a later generation, a prolific letter-writer, and enjoyed the sense of long-range intimacy which writing them gave him. In many of his letters, he evokes and requests signs of physical presence and love from his correspondents (just the sort of thing that cannot be sent through a conduit of this type), while at the same time reminding them of the distance across which these tokens must be miraculously sent: 'Here I am. Alone in this place and I write to you across the night shires of England. [. . .] Hold me in your four arms, you two.'[43] Many of his poems take the form of, or borrow some of the conventions of, letters, from '1st Letter' and '2nd Letter' (*NCP*, p. 20, p. 27) through the 'Seven Letters' of *The Nightfishing* (*NCP*, pp. 121–40) to 'Yours Truly' (*NCP*, p. 159), 'Dear Who I Mean' (*NCP*,

p. 160) and 'A Note to the Difficult One' (*NCP*, p. 206). Graham also takes full advantage of the literary convention whereby published poems may be addressed to individuals. The *New Collected Poems* contains addresses to his brother (*NCP*, p. 98), father (*NCP*, p. 99, p. 222), mother (*NCP*, p. 100) and wife (*NCP*, pp. 78, p. 166, p. 263), to Peter Lanyon (*NCP*, p. 163), Don Brown (*NCP*, p. 174), Roger Hilton (*NCP*, p. 177), Bryan Wynter (*NCP*, p. 184, p. 258), Norman Macleod (*NCP*, p. 223, p. 225) and Robin Skelton (*NCP*, p. 234).

If a text can be as personal as a letter, its ability to cross the shires or even the ocean is a simple asset. But at the same time as making distance traversible, text makes it meaningless. A printed text does not cross one particular distance separating two interlocutors; it exists simultaneously in many places, and the decisive factor separating readers from writer is not physical distance but their ignorance of each other's circumstances. As Ong and Derrida both point out, the writer may even be dead.[44] The physical distance which can impede speech is overcome by writing, but at the same time it is transformed into an eerie metaphorical distance (the mutual invisibility and inaudibility of the correspondents) which never changes. We have already seen that Graham uses images of vast distances to symbolize the threat to communication. A speech that carries its own distance around with it becomes a kind of despairing shout. The author has 'reached the edge of earshot', the brink of an abyss where his attempts to communicate receive only echoes in reply (*NCP*, p. 154, p. 227). At the end of one of his meditations on the nature of writing, he becomes so oppressed by its silence that he feels the urge to shout:

> [. . .] Hello
> Hello I shout but that silence
> Floats steady, will not be marked
> By an off-hand shout.
>
> (*NCP*, pp. 182)

Graham accepts that words cannot pass thoughts or emotions, though he certainly wishes they could. Indeed, for him, as we have seen, nothing less will do than the passing of physical presence itself, a four-armed hug, 'a moth-kiss [. . .] in the hollow under your left ear', 'a light kiss on the outside of the right buttock'.[45] The lack of physical presence threatens even the personal communication promised by the letter form:

> Because we are not physically seeing each other one believes by memory

> and hope that one still has some connection with another. That is true, that's how it works. WOW! What a mouthful. Are you there? Are you there?[46]

Writing and reading, as Ong notes, are solitary activities.[47] To choose the life of a writer is inevitably to choose to be alone for much of the time. Even when Graham writes to his friends, he is conscious of his solitude. In poems, he frequently complains of this loneliness. The page is a place with 'no love', and the poet asks only 'to be by another aloneness loved' (*NCP*, p. 205, p. 177). It is as if he has given up all the consolations of human society in return for a bodiless communication with someone of whose presence he can never be certain. In the case of a published poem, even a named addressee must share the text with an unknown audience of 'gentle and un / Gentle readers' (*NCP*, p. 227). The irony of this situation is painstakingly explained in 'Private Poem to Norman Macleod':

> The idea of me making
> Those words fly together
> In seemingly a private
> Letter is just me choosing
> An attitude to make a poem.
>
> (*NCP*, p. 227)

The poems struggle to be direct, personal communications but they must always accede to the absence that characterizes text. Most of the 'letter' poems do not have a named recipient, and many of those that do have one who is in no position to reply, since he or she is dead. The poems to his mother, father and Lanyon, and the second of each of those to Hilton and Wynter, are in fact elegies. The condition of textuality makes every poem an elegy, Graham claims, because the reader is never present. As he writes to his dead friend Wynter:

> Speaking to you and not
> Knowing if you are there
> Is not too difficult.
> My words are used to that.
>
> (*NCP*, p. 258)

If texts do not contain ideas, it is even more apparent that they do not contain people. But because Graham models communication on the face-to-face encounters characteristic of speech and, at the same time, insists on imagining text as space, the poem metaphorically becomes the scene of an uncanny meeting in which neither of the participants is physically present to the other. (The Freudian theme of the uncanny is discussed in Chapter 4.) One way of symbolizing this mutual absence is to have the meeting take place in darkness:

> And who are you and by
> What right do I waylay
> You where you go there
> Happy enough striking
> Your hobnail in the dark?
>
> (*NCP*, p. 167.)

It is largely for this reason that Graham is a poet of the dark, a specialist in nocturnes. He cannot hope to know the circumstances in which the poems might be read, or the identity of the generalized reader, the 'Dear Pen / Pal in the distance' or 'Dear Who I Mean' who can only be visualized as a monstrous figure with the 'vast unseen eyes' already referred to and a 'deadly face' (*NCP*, pp. 159, p. 160, p. 181, p. 213). As for his own circumstances, he tries his best to pass these on. He writes at an 'Untidy Dreadful Table', usually 'in the small hours' (*NCP*, p. 205, p. 188). He uses a typewriter, which provides him with images like the 'taps' of the Muse, 'the strike of the [. . .] key' and the typing exercise which generates the phrase 'quick brown [. . .] god' (*NCP*, p. 188, p. 256, p. 161).[48] He knows, however, that by the time the reader reads the poem, he may be somewhere else entirely. In 'Clusters Travelling Out', he asks 'Has it been a good Wednesday? Or is yours Tuesday?' (*NCP*, p. 194).

From the reader's point of view, it is the author who is absent. Graham, one feels, rejects the conduit metaphor primarily because he has found it impossible to send himself through the conduit – as his girlfriend Julian Orde said of him, 'Sydney ought to be given away with every copy of his book.'[49] To write is to imagine one's own absence, a process akin to imagining one's death; his poems remind us that 'I am not here,' (*NCP*, p. 158, p. 257).[50] Graham is now really dead, but his poems still exist, repeating their statements about thought, memory and desire long after their author has ceased to be capable of these functions. In a sense, this cessation begins as soon as the words are written. The poems have not changed since their author's death; they are as indifferent to him as they always were. Unlike Roland Barthes, for whom 'the death of the author' is the dissolution of an oppressive myth and the empowerment of the reader, Graham might be said to take the phrase personally, and to consider himself bereaved of himself:[51]

So I spoke and died.
So within the dead
Of night and the dead
Of all my life those
Words died and awoke.

(*NCP*, p. 120)

'Those / Words', which end Graham's longest poem, 'The Nightfishing', have a final ring about them. It would seem that once he had acknowledged so explicitly this painful truth about writing, there could not be much more to say. The choice is either to accept it or to give up. After the poem's publication in book form there was a long gap, in which his publishers apparently assumed he was literally dead. Yet when he returned to print, it was with poems that reiterated the same lament, that nagged away at the death of the author as though they hoped to resurrect him by sheer persistence:

[..]what is the good
Of me isolating my few words
In a certain order to send them
Out in a suicide torpedo to hit?
I ride it. I will never know.

(*NCP*, p. 248)

The meeting between writer and reader not only takes place in the dark, but also in a timeless zone because of the permanence of written language. Continuing to model his understanding of text on speech, Graham explains this permanence as a consequence of the freezing of real-time conversation in order to turn it into the space of text, another reason for the Arctic imagery of some of the poems. In 'Malcolm Mooney's Land', the passage of time has become a 'diary of a place', and each section of the poem represents a day (*NCP*, p. 156).

The world of things is a problem, too. The linguistic sign works by pointing to the absent, 'half of it always "not there" and the other half always "not that"' in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's neat phrase.[52] In speech situations, this absence can be supplemented by literal pointing, a method known to philosophers of language as 'ostensive definition'. (This is not, of course, a foolproof solution to problems of reference, as Wittgenstein noted.)[53] Spoken language typically takes place in a known and shared context and is provided with a number of connecting words called 'deictics' used by speakers to relate it to this context. These include the personal and demonstrative pronouns and adjectives, and act like hooks attaching language to the perceived and demonstrable world. In a conversation, we either know what our interlocutor means by 'this' or we can soon find out by asking a question. In text, however, 'this', like 'I' and 'you', becomes problematic; the deictics float on the page unconnected to any shared context.[54] Their use in a poem, therefore, involves a kind of trust. Poet and reader have to believe they are 'seeing' – that is, imagining – the same objects.

In one of Graham's late poems, he asks the reader to 'imagine a forest / A real forest', and proceeds to describe one:

> [. . .] Go on between
> The elephant bark of those beeches
> Into that lightening, almost glade.
>
> (*NCP*, p. 204)

The 'context' here has been created by the poet's effort of will. As if by magic he has created a world, instructing the reader by the use of imperatives ('imagine', 'go on') to participate in it. If the reader co-operates, he or she may seem to recognize the objects with which Graham has furnished this imaginary world, 'those beeches' and 'that [. . .] glade'. But this quasi-recognition demands an effort of will on the part of the reader also. It is no coincidence that the situation to be imagined is that of a traveller lost in a forest. The glade may be 'almost' because it is overgrown or because it is, after all, only the product of verbal illusionism. The deictics are a confidence trick – a trick, that is, to gain the reader's confidence – and in the next two lines this is apparently achieved:

> And he has taken
> My word and gone.

'Real' is a word Graham uses when he wants to draw attention to the failure of the poem to contain things or people (which, as we have seen, it cannot do because it is not a container). Reality is something we must all provide for ourselves; the poet must simply trust us to relate the words 'real' and 'forest' to our own experience of words and trees. Equally, when he says of a character in a poem, 'he is a real man', he cannot indicate the man concerned and so compel us to believe him (*NCP*, p. 219). In his poems there are statements about Bryan Wynter and others about Malcolm Mooney. It happens that Bryan Wynter was 'a real man', an artist and friend of Graham, while Malcolm Mooney is a fictional character, whose name Graham took from a chain of pubs run by Guinness.[55] The author cannot ultimately be responsible for the reader's knowledge of such distinctions.

Language's failure to provide vicarious experience is demonstrated in 'Imagine a Forest' by the example of death. The poet describes the body of a dead stranger to remind us of the death we will all have to face on our own, but no amount of telling us about this adds up to an experience of it. As Graham remarks to his dead friend Wynter in another poem:

> [. . .] I couldn't really
> Have died for you if so
> I were inclined.
>
> (*NCP*, p. 258)

The impossibility of transmitting an experience linguistically from one mind to another is a concept referred to as the indeterminacy of language.[56] Many people find the idea difficult to accept, but Reddy's essay shows that it is possible to apply it without making communication unviable.[57] Language is not a container for thoughts but a device by means of which people construct their own thoughts, referring the words as best they can to the world as they experience it.[58] Communication is not a simple process of sending and receiving messages; instead, sender and receiver work at achieving an approximate degree of understanding, one that will be suitable for the purposes they each have in mind. This understanding is never 'right' nor is it ever the same from one receiver to another. It is also subject to revision when circumstances require it. There is no objective standard by which the success of such a communication can be measured – it is part of the complex system of all our social relations. It is only the attempt to cut language off from these relations by insisting on its autonomy that makes indeterminacy a cause for despair.

'Imagine a Forest' brilliantly expounds this indeterminacy, a theme which Graham summarizes elsewhere in the phrase 'the words are mine [. . .] the thoughts are all / Yours' (*NCP*, pp. 181). And yet, as we have seen, he cannot be content with it. He is constantly having to remind himself that language does not contain the 'real'; instead, in another of his key words, it is 'abstract'. In 'Five Visitors to Madron' he depicts himself in the act of writing 'with my chair drawn / Up to the frightening abstract / Table of silence (*NCP*, p. 188). In 'The Constructed Space', writing is an 'abstract act' which the poet himself *becomes* (*NCP*, p. 162). He was fascinated by the phrase 'It Must Be Abstract', the title of the first section of Wallace Stevens's long poem 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'.[59]

The indeterminacy of language and the poet's failure to send himself through the conduit together make his original intention in writing the poem irrelevant. He does not know how the reader will interpret his words. Graham depicts this uncertainty, in the poem 'The Dark Intention', as a dark wood:

> My first intention was at least not this
> That darkly gathers over the ground.
> The dark discloses us in different ways.
>
> Here in this wood can I be this disguise
> Wielding a muffled light without a sound?
> My first intention was at least not this.
>
> (*NCP*, p. 270)

The critique of intentionality here reminds us that Graham was a younger contemporary of the New Critics, and indeed met some of them on his trips to the United States. 'The Alligator Girls' is dedicated to John Crowe Ransom (*NCP*, p. 277).[60] But he did not need to learn this theme from literary theory – it follows from all I have been saying about his experience and understanding of the isolation of text. It is not surprising that 'The Dark Dialogues' opens with the words:

> I always meant to only
> Language swings away
> Further before me.
>
> (*NCP*, p. 167)

The poet's intention cannot guide the poem, but must always vainly pursue a perversely independent language.

The only reality he can describe with the confidence of being understood is the physical reality of page and words. The last lines of 'Malcolm Mooney's Land' refer us to:

> Words drifting on words.
> The real unabstract snow.
>
> (*NCP*, p. 157)

The phrase is puzzling at first – the 'snow' is no more real than any other feature of the poem's landscape. But it is not snow that is unabstract but the snowlike drifting of words. The poem, like nearly all of Graham's poems, is self-referential; among the many things it points to is itself. We might wish to call it a metapoem.

A metapoem is a poem that takes itself as its own object of reference. It is the poetic equivalent of a metafictional novel, such as Italo

Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, which describes the efforts of a reader to read 'Italo Calvino's new novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*.'[61] Perhaps because fiction in the twentieth century has been the dominant literary genre and hence its role in the social construction of reality has been more significant than that of poetry, critics have paid more attention to metafiction than to metapoetry.[62] In studies by Robert Alter, Patricia Waugh and Linda Hutcheon, the consensus is that metafictional novels, by drawing attention to their textuality, dispel the illusion of reality which is the aim of more traditional fiction. They reveal, that is, the materiality of language. The process is ingenuous, an abandonment of artifice. [63]

Seen in relation to Graham's desire to capture in words the physical presence that is a condition of speech, to send and receive hugs and kisses down the conduit of text, an alternative explanation of his metapoems suggests itself. Far from being a demystification of the materiality of language, they are an attempt to master its indeterminacy, the last stand of intentionality. You must know what I mean, he says: I mean *these words, here*. In 'The Nightfishing', he interrupts his narrative to tell us 'These words take place' (*NCP*, p. 110). In 'Enter a Cloud', 'the real ones' he thanks for their contribution to the text include the 'good words' that have helped him write it (*NCP*, p. 219). And in 'The Dark Dialogues', he shows an exasperated awareness of his failure to escape more than momentarily from self-reference:

> This is no other place
> Than where I am, between
> This word and the next.
> Maybe I should expect
> To find myself only
> Saying that again
> Here now at the end.
>
> (*NCP*, p. 174)

It is as if metapoetry is a vortex that inevitably sucks him in sooner or later. The consolation of words that suddenly seem to have lost their duplicity, their refusal to be tied to the poet's intention, is achieved at a price. The repetition entailed by his self-referential compulsion seems to have frustrated even him. 'Is where you listen from becoming / Numb by the strike of the same key?' he asks in 'Implements', and it is sometimes tempting to answer 'yes' (*NCP*, p. 256).

Graham is a remarkable poet but this obsession makes him a limited one. In 'Five Verses Beginning With the Word Language', for example, his attempt to deal with the Vietnam War by writing a poem about the death of a North Vietnamese soldier proves unable to balance its linguistic and political concerns, so that eventually 'the jungle metaphor' becomes irritating in its artificiality (*NCP*, pp. 331–3). In its final version, 'Language Ah Now You Have Me', (*NCP*, pp. 207–9) the setting is no longer Vietnam but 'damp paper / In the rain forest beside the Madron River' (that is, in the author's Cornish home). Contrasting this with the original plan, as quoted by Robin Skelton and Margaret Blackwood in their notes to *Aimed at Nobody*, one can only feel disappointed:

> . . . the very beginning of this poem sprung from me trying to write about a soldier dying on the Paddy fields of Vietnam of a belly-wound and the flies at his face and wanting his mother and not knowing what he was fighting for.
>
> (*AAN*, p. 66, quoted in *NCP*, pp. 368–9.)

Coming as the culmination of such a project, 'Language Ah Now You Have Me' is a cry of defeat.

Graham's poems are about language, but they take text as the epitome of language. To summarize, his claim about text is that it substitutes for the real-time, personal, meaningful encounter between living human beings, an impersonal, timeless space. In such a space, communication can never really take place because the text is indeterminate: the interlocutors see neither each other nor the same objects. This condition is contrasted with speech where language does not have to do all the work on its own; meaning can be ascertained by reference to a shared context. Even more important, in such face-to-face encounters physical signs can be used, especially those which convey love, such as a hug or a kiss. The only physical world writer and reader have in common is that of the page itself, and Graham's texts endlessly refer to this in an attempt to defeat the indeterminacy of language. But in so doing, he is aware of the realities, political and otherwise, he leaves untackled. As he is forced back yet again to statements about 'these words', he cannot help feeling that language is calling the tune. It has him in its power.

The Playground of the Text

Throughout this discussion, I have insisted that certain views of language are only metaphors. The conduit metaphor is an easy target; as we have seen, it has been subjected to a searching critique not only by

Reddy but also by Graham's poems. But I have gone further, arguing that all views of language as object or space, closed or autonomous, are metaphors which, like those considered by Lakoff, Johnson and Turner, highlight some aspects of linguistic experience while hiding others. They are grounded in the experience of reading and writing. Is not Graham right, therefore, to contrast the features of text I discussed in the last section with the condition of speech? What aspects of the textual experience are his metaphors hiding?

He is in a sense quite accurate in seeing text as impersonal and frozen – but it is impersonal and frozen not by its essential nature but by the conventions of our culture. 'The author cannot be reached in any book,' Ong tells us, but the idea that a book is a protected space is not universally acknowledged.[64] Salman Rushdie was held to account for *The Satanic Verses* by an Islamic community which refused to accept, and perhaps could not understand, the Western convention whereby books are considered to some extent independent of their authors. For them, a book was to be understood primarily as the act of an individual as, according to Ong, oral cultures regard utterances primarily as acts.[65] Again, we assume that texts are static, but poems like 'Clusters Travelling Out' and 'The Thermal Stair' in fact went through a great many drafts. It is only by convention that we see these as imperfect and abortive prototypes of a final text. Why should not the entire portfolio be read as a text which constructs itself before our eyes? The answer, of course, is to do with the conventions that govern the publishing industry in our society. The book is a complete product which exists independently of both its author and the processes of writing and manufacturing by which it was produced. Even the margin round a poem, the snowy space which Graham takes to be one of his few reliable objects of reference, is contingent, an artificial rather than a natural and inevitable symbol of the text's separation from the world. The text as place or thing, rather than act or process, is one of the metaphors we live by.

What Graham sought in writing was control. If text is, as our culture tells us it is, a bounded, protected place, then the writer can play freely there without interference from anybody else. He can turn it into 'a place I can think in / And think anything in' (*NCP*, p. 168). But the price he pays for this control is loneliness: the playground of the text appears to be an extension of his own mind. And so in his writing he dreams of speech, and of the intimacy that can take place between people who are physically present to each other. This, of course, is easy enough to obtain in everyday life. That intimacy, though, is not always blissfully unencumbered; it carries with it responsibilities and dangers. To love is to give up part of one's will to the loved one. Graham, hiding in what he regards as the safety of the text, tries to achieve intimacy through it, to make contact with others, while at the same time retaining control. The only way he can do this is through self-reference, because this is the only literary trope in which the writer's intention wholly governs the meaning. This limits his field of play even more severely – 'these words' may be material, but they are a poor substitute for hugs and kisses.

Reddy's solution to the problem of the indeterminacy of language is reciprocity. As the original sender and receiver continue to exchange messages, they become aware of the difference in each other's circumstances and their mental images approximate more and more closely. Interestingly, his model of this exchange is a textual one, in which the correspondents leave written messages at an agreed point.[66] Our conventional model of text, on the other hand, does not permit reciprocity:

> I am always very aware that my poem is not a telephone call. The poet only speaks one way. He hears nothing back. His words as he utters them are not conditioned by a real ear replying from the other side.[67]

It is the objectifying margins of the poem and covers of the book that allow poets to believe that a text is a totally isolated utterance whose author 'hears nothing back'. The same man who complained that no one replied to his texts also said of his reviews: 'My verse seems to rile reviewers into almost personal spite or result in a whole-hearted acclaiming'.[68] The text is part of a constant exchange of messages in which the author is only one participant. The social nature of all language, including text, together with its indeterminacy means that meaning is always subject to negotiation.[69] Control by one individual, even an author, is as impossible in a poem as it is in a face-to-face, 'real life' encounter with other people. Following the publication of the *New Collected Poems*, the meaning of Graham's work, far from being limited by his original intention, continues to be renegotiated in the public arena years after his death. The present study is an attempt at making a useful contribution to this negotiation.

In the chapters that follow, I shall persist in ascribing thoughts and feelings to Graham, in defiance of the post-New-Critical tradition which reminds us (as does Reddy) that we cannot see the inside of his head. This limitation, after all, affects not just our relationship to the author of a text but every relationship we have. If a poem is a social act, as I believe it is, we are entitled to treat it as one, and the fact is that we are all happy to continue our social interactions with an assortment of opaque individuals on the basis of nothing more than our speculative insights into their motives; if these insights seem debatable, our response is to debate them rather than to condemn such speculation as epistemologically inadmissible. I am not insisting on my determinate knowledge of Graham's intentions, but I *am* insisting on my right to propose a provisional account of them just as one would for any human act. The poems are not a conduit conveying thoughts from his brain to ours, but they may be the smoking gun or, to use a less incriminating image, the smouldering ashtray, from which, like detectives, we can retrospectively construct a story. My approach is similar to Reddy's description of the process by which his hypothetical correspondents arrive at a picture of each other's circumstances.[70]

Graham was seeking control but he was also seeking love. Throughout his work, as I shall show in the next chapter, he states his desire to surrender to the will of others – but he does so from a safe distance. Just as he uses writing to praise speech, so he spent a life of comparative isolation celebrating community. He travelled as far from his original home as it was possible for him to get without leaving the country, and then wrote poems full of yearning for home. He attempts to reconcile these discrepancies by displacing his feelings about home and other people on to language. In an ingenious trope which is, in my view, central to his oeuvre, he turns language itself into a community.

CHAPTER 2

Poet of Community

An Indeterminate Love

Graham is a poet of language but he is also a poet of community. This word will require further definition; for now, though, it is enough to point out that his poems constantly affirm the value of relationships with other people. As in the case of language, this is easily demonstrated by even a cursory reading of the *New Collected Poems*. I have already noted that many of the poems are addressed to individuals, living or dead: to his wife, his brother, parents and friends. In effect, they are love poems, offerings from one individual to another, like 'I Leave This At Your Ear', which was presumably left by Nessie Dunsmuir's bedside while she slept (*NCP*, p. 166). (Graham was in the habit of sending poems as presents to his friends, and the poem-addresses in the *New Collected* represent only a small part of the writing he produced in this vein.) Some of the poems stress the poet's affection by means of endearments; Nessie Dunsmuir is 'my dear', while Norman Macleod is 'my dear Norman' and 'my boy' and the dead Roger Hilton is also 'dear' (*NCP*, p. 166, p. 225; p. 227, p. 237). Gestures of love are also important, in the poems as in the letters: he takes 'a moth kiss' from his sleeping wife and asks the dead Lanyon for his hand (*NCP*, p. 165). But, as I have remarked, the perpetual frustration of language is that such physical contact cannot be made through it; explaining abstraction to Hilton, he contrasts it with the intimacy that signifies love: 'We either touch or do not touch' (*NCP*, p. 177). The most direct of his protestations of love are reserved for situations where contact is ruled out. The loved person may be dead, like his father ('I