

Samples of Air

W.S. Graham, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Matthew Francis.

Faber & Faber, £25.00

Don Paterson, *Landing Light*. Faber & Faber, £12.99

The poetry of W.S. Graham and Don Paterson shows its quality by resisting ready-made categories. For instance, Scottish critics, like Irish critics, tend to highlight the nativeness of X, the internationalism of Y. Robert Crawford's formulation of "modernism as provincialism" does not really dissolve this misconceived antithesis because he fuses the international and the national without allowing each to complicate the other, or allowing æsthetic dialectics since the 1920s to complicate "modernism". Every genuine poem "alters the past" (to quote T.S. Eliot) by virtue of its multiple bearings, eclectic sources and unpredictable currency. And that is precisely the no man's land or "Malcolm Mooney's Land" where Graham's best poetry comes in: his effort to "construct this space/ So that somehow something may move across/ The caught habits of language to you and me", as he has it in "The Constructed Space". In similar spirit, but different manner, Paterson's subtly allusive poems convey the poet making it new amid the flux of traditions.

National canons still distrust the expatriate poet unless his/her imagery meets its ethnic quota. In less globalised times, Graham (compare MacNeice) was certainly a victim of such distrust. Vice versa, although friendly with Hugh MacDiarmid, he attacked those who "go to town on the Scottish wagon"—an angry comment on Maurice Lindsay's *Faber Anthology of the Scottish Renaissance* (1946). Thus it's understandable that Tony Lopez, in *The Poetry of W.S. Graham* (1989), should stress Graham's links with cosmopolitan visual art and with poets allegedly sidelined by the Movement's hegemony: Eliot, Pound, Dylan Thomas and Thomas's neo-Romantic imitators. Even now, some paranoid critical narratives anachronistically conflate the Movement and the

evil “mainstream”. So if we make allowances for Graham’s reflexive fascination with language, we have a poet who, despite his not particularly free verse, must appeal to the current régime at *Poetry Review*. Except that, as Lopez recognises: Graham’s “continuing interest in the difficulty of communication, and in language as the subject of his later poetry [is] by no means the theoretical matter it is in academic literary studies”—or in what one might now, by dispiriting analogy with conceptual art, call “conceptual poetry”. If (as in “The Constructed Space”) Graham’s shifting “I” and “you” are always poet and reader, they may also be a son and his dead father, a husband and “My Wife at Midnight”, a loner and his imagined community of St Ives painters, the poet’s Cornish present and Greenock past:

and almost I am back again
wading the heather down to the edge
to sit. The minnows go by in shoals
like iron filings in the shadows.

Yet it will not do, at this point, to invoke parallels with Wordsworth or Heaney as if suddenly on surer ground. For Graham, memory is process rather than product. Landscapes of memory (see Paterson too) construct space in diverse ways, and comparison can be another procrustean response to unusual talents. Paterson’s poem “A Talking Book”, a pre-emptive strike against reviewers of *Landing Light*, satirises the comparative reflex:

and a big hi! to those holders, old and new
of the critic’s one-day travel-pass (I too
have known that sudden quickening of the pulse
when something looks a bit like something else;
but if all you ever listen to is Hindemith
the very larksong seems to give you wind of it...)

But when two poets are under review, comparisons will out. And “the something” that “looks a bit like something else”, if Graham and Paterson are juxtaposed, connects with the “something” that “may move across/ The caught habits of language”. Any likeness, perhaps their Scottishness, comes across as the metaphysical and moral seriousness they bring to æsthetic questions, however differently framed.

Graham's poems about poetry centre on language. Indeed, because he invests all communication in the poetic act, there are few poems whose reflexive dimension does not rise to the surface. He said of *Malcolm Mooney's Land* (1970): "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. That is why he has to make the poem stand stationary as an art object." Like Emily Dickinson, Graham writes letters, love-letters, to the world. Many poems are vocative in address, epistolary in structure. The epistolary elegy becomes a signature-genre since, as "Dear Bryan Wynter" points out: "Speaking to you and not/ Knowing if you are there/ Is not too difficult./ My words are used to that." If *Malcolm Mooney's Land* and *Implements in their Places* (1977) are Graham's most successful collections (the critical consensus here seems just), it's largely because he discovered dramatic and symbolic structures that gave substance to ideas about poetry-in-process which had obsessed him since 1946:

The first intention begins me but of course continually
shatters itself and is replaced by the child of the new collision.
I try to have the courage to let the last intention be
now a dead step and to allow myself to be taken in hand.
Yet I must not lose my responsibility, being that explorer
who shoots the sun, brings samples of air back to civilisation...

But Graham's early work, saturated in Dylan Thomas, brought back little more than wordiness: "My toe displays its blizzard to curious accordions". Although *The Nightfishing* (1955) was certainly an artistic advance, the slightly portentous title-poem may have received kudos more deserved by the seven "Letters" that follow. Even if these also seem over-extended, their vocal gestures across time and distance encode later developments:

The Clyde sleeved in its firth
Reached and dazzled me.
I moved and caught the sweet
Courtesy of your mouth.
My breath to your breath.

In "The Nightfishing" Graham cannot always hold fishing and writing (as exploration/ voyage) in tandem, or eliminate muted remnants of Dylanesque rhetoric: "the sucked and slackening

water", "My need reads in light more specially gendered and/
Ambitioned by all eyes that wide have been/ Me once", "Here in
this intricate death,/ He goes as fixed on silence as ever he'll be",
"We/ Moved under the soaring land sheathed in fair water/ In
that time's morning grace. I uttered that place/ And left each
word I was". Somehow, in *Malcolm Mooney's Land*, Nansen's
Arctic memoirs provide a more persuasive correlative for the min-
gled problematics of selfhood and leaving a mark on silence: "I
have reached the edge of earshot here", "Have I not been trying
to use the obstacle of language well?/ It freezes round us all",
"Outside the tent endless/ Drifting hummock crests./ Words
drifting on words./ The real unabstrack snow". Perhaps this conceit
works because, as contrasted with the more buoyant
"Nightfishing", it admits the pain, the sense of being outside life,
associated with the impulse to break silence, to make art.
Similarly, the powerful dramatic monologue and *ars poetica*
"Johann Joachim Quantz's Five Lessons" is written in the voice of
a needy maestro who yet instructs his apprentice ("a lout from the
canal/ With big ears but an angel's tread on the flute"): "Do not
intrude too much/ Into the message you carry and put out".

The notion of the non-intrusive tread, successive fresh steps,
the physical move which is also metaphysical, recurs in Graham's
definitions and enactments of poetry's intercourse with silence.
"To Alexander Graham" begins "Lying asleep walking/ Last night
I met my father". The superb present-tense lyric "The Stepping
Stones", almost the quintessential Graham poem, begins: "I have
my yellow boots on to walk/ Across the shires where I hide/ Away
from my true people and all/ I can't put easily into my life". Here
personal pain precipitates the step of poetry: "So you will see I am
stepping on/ The stones between the runnels getting/ Nowhere
nowhere". But of course the poem we are invited to watch in
progress carries its pain, and gets somewhere—partly by implicat-
ing the reader in the attempt:

Take my hand and pull me over from
The last stone on to the moss and
The three celandines. Now my dear
Let us go home across the shires.

As Douglas Dunn says in his introduction to the *New Collected Poems*, Graham's "repetition of 'language' and communication as obsessive, unfinished subjects can at times feel overdone". But

the obsession is vindicated by those poems that uncannily suggest the cognitive means whereby words become entangled with objects, landscapes and people. Dunn nicely terms Graham “a nocturnal poet, a poet of ‘the small hours’”, conjuring memories, “speaking into a haunted and haunting void”. “Haunting” also covers Graham’s conversation with Scotland: its belatedness, the infiltration of Scots words, Scottish places, family ghosts, the mingling of Madron and Greenock as constructed space. Among Matthew Francis’s editorial merits is that he supplies glossaries (of words, places and people) that pinpoint the peculiar axis of the Graham world. Perhaps, as regards his Scottish past, Graham needed not only the mediation of time and distance but their translation into new perceptual and rhythmic modes. Edwin Morgan speculates that his obsession with communication was simply that of an exiled “isolated man living in a cottage on the Cornish coast”. Yet what Dennis O’Driscoll, in a fine essay, terms Graham’s “heartbreak quality” knows this and incorporates it as poetic structure. He is the curlew “flying/ Crookedly over lonely Loch Thom”; the heron that in another life might have stayed and “devote[d]/ Himself to writing verse with his long/ Beak in the shallows of the long loch-side”. Graham’s imaginative returns to Scotland, from “The Greenock Dialogues” onwards, “express some part of me which I have always wanted to”. They redefine “home” (as does “The Stepping Stones”) by conceiving and observing sensitive protocols: “I’ll put my blades/ Easily with all my sleight into/ My home waters not to distort/ The surface from its natural sound”. But this also exemplifies the quasi-supernatural finesse which is Graham’s distinctive æsthetic achievement. Even poems addressed to Nessie Dunsmuir, his living wife, break the heart because they seem suffused with ghostliness, a delicate looking or speaking from “outside the tent”: “I leave this at your ear for when you wake”. “Don’t breathe/ Or frighten me waiting to meet/ My dear from the sleeping house coming/ Over the shingle with her bare feet”.

Dunn calls W.S. Graham “a poet determined to be proseless”. There is indeed a ferocious purity in Graham’s epitaph for Hugh MacDiarmid:

MacDiarmid’s deid under a mound
O literature making no sound.

And Mars is brow in cramasie.

Graham's refusal to dilute his poetic impulse (a refusal rare today) has more to do with inspiration, keeping an eye on Mars, than with form. In some ways, his notions about poetry-in-process reconnect with D.H. Lawrence. But regular rhythm, often a three-beat line, is crucial to that inspiration: "I need to know where I am, counting out my line inside myself—as though a metronome were going". If his later work deploys more varied and concentrated structures, as in the aphoristic title-sequence of *Implements in Their Places*, form and overall shape never quite take precedence over language, line and voice. The reverse is true of Don Paterson. The shapes of *Landing Light* (NB Paterson is bad at book-titles) spring to the eye: variations on quatrain and sonnet; the short chunky poem; the short streeley poem ("Her sleek/ thigh/ on my/ cheek"); a poem shaped like a guitar; a poem shaped like birds in flight; a prose poem; couplets; *terza rima*; discursive excursions in freeish pentameters. What Paterson says of the sonnet, in his introduction to *101 Sonnets*, illuminates his dedication to form: "a miraculous little form in which our human need for unity and discontinuity, repetition and variation, tension and resolution, symmetry and asymmetry, lyric inspiration and argumentative rigour, are all held in near-perfect oppositional balance".

If that might seem too neat, Paterson's poems about poetry often imply some kind of violence at the poetic root, at the point where form is won from existential chaos. His poem "Form" turns on the shape made by dead willow-roots in a sleeve of ice: "a pure sang/ o sauch-roots". But pure sang (here the Scots word for "song" may pun on "blood") involves a cost: the last two lines are the oxymoron "shocked/ commemorit". In "The Rat", a poem which must have Ted Hughes in mind, "the best poem ever written about a rat" fiercely accuses lesser poets: "*For all the craft and clever-clever/ you did not write me, fool. Nor will you ever.*" The punning title of Paterson's guitar-shaped poem "The Box" intertwines art, a "wired and tense" instrument, with death. The speaker anticipates that "this one/ will see/ me out", and his conclusion assigns guitar and poem further emblematic meaning: "I contemplate it/ like a skull". Similarly, the bird-shaped stanzas of "St Brides: Sea-Mail" actually mimic dead birds. The poem tells a grisly story of how islanders first exploit the "scentless oil" of sea-birds, then dry their carcasses to make a kind of dart launched competitively from the cliffs: "Whatever our luck,/ by sunset,

they'd fill the bay/ like burnt moths". The final desolate image is of a bird-cleared sky which forebodes a world cleared of people and poetry: "I post this more in testament/ than hope or warning". Here the effect "looks a bit like" Derek Mahon in that bleak mode or mood where poetry is just one more human blot on the earth. Paterson has referred to himself as a victim of "negative theology". In his prose poem "Colophon" the speaker suffers from "my old dependable Calvinist *tristesse*", and sees his experience of "the opposite of epiphany" (a hoped-for dolphin fin proves to be another dead bird) as punishment for desiring "perfection". Yet the guilt of not aiming at perfection, of not immersing in the creative-destructive element, appears just as acute. "Incunabula" is a group-portrait of artists for whom everything depends on the exact stroke:

knowing how little will make the difference,
 that a single letter lost or doubled ruins
 not just the manuscript but the whole school.

Paterson has absorbed many precursors including, it seems to me, the variegated formal achievement of recent Northern Irish poetry. His stringency, at times almost too "wired and tense", is salutary in Scottish poetry whose besetting sin has been talkativeness—here Graham is not wholly innocent—allied with poets' tendency to settle into a distinctive style without pushing it far enough. (The besetting sin of Irish poetry is ...?) Paterson puts the poem, not poetry, at the centre of his enterprise. But formal intensity follows function: typically, a complex model of psychic conflicts. These may (as in 1930s poetry) have social resonance. "The Twins" is a sexual-political poem spoken by the father of Romulus and Remus, in which the human and animal disturbingly interpenetrate. In "The Bandaged Shoulder" love, like form, comes with violence. The poem's slightly elasticated sonnet-form makes room for the speaker's oddly psychotic repetition of the word "blood": "A little blood ran", "I liked looking at the blood", "his blood on my lips, O my love, my love's blood". Besides poems from points on the spectrum between "lyric inspiration and argumentative rigour", Paterson writes ballad-like parables with overtones of myth. Here he moves on rapidly from where Edwin Muir left off. The sinewy quatrains of "The Hunt" dramatise the self's pursuit of its hidden other, the ego's of the id: "the nights of circling alone/ in corridors of earth/ the days like paler nights, my

lodestone/ dying to the north". This hunt has overtones of Theseus and the Minotaur. "The Landing" represents an Orpheus-figure emerging from Hades as (in a brilliant simile) the sun "drew the dark back up/ like blood in a syringe". Paterson often portrays the unconscious, poetry's source, as an underworld. His translation "The Forest of the Suicides" boldly connects the thirteenth canto of the *Inferno* with the fate and art of Sylvia Plath. The female suicide defines a poetics when she explains how "the furious soul" "drives up through the clay// to grow into the shape of its own anguish".

Paterson knows how to be playful and metafictional as in "The Talking Book" or his continuing autobiographical sequence "The Alexandrian Library". But he is too full of Calvinist *tristesse*, too obsessed with dark interior journeys, too interested in the shapes of anguish, too ironical and oxymoronic, to be claimed for "post-modernism". "Luig", the first poem in *Landing Light*, wonderfully equates the quest for psychic healing, and perhaps the Muse, with a trip to

our unsung
innermost isle: Kilda's antithesis,
yet still with its own tiny stubborn anthem,
its yellow milkwort and its stunted kye.

Indeed, Paterson's gaiety can seem slightly forced as can some of his discursive-narrative poetry. The best moments of "The Alexandrian Library" are its intense moments. "The Last Waltz" proves the music-tour poem to be as much a no-no as the poetry-reading tour poem. Like (I insist) Mahon, Paterson is a poet of hissing chemicals inside well-wrought urns. He is also a dialectical poet of "oppositional balances". And while these encompass epiphany as well as its opposite, he appears less at home with transcendence. Thus the Heaneyesque "Sliding on Loch Ogil", with its "dream of the disintricated life", does not quite internalise its influence. Paterson's dualities, lent additional grit by his being the father of twins, work best where he maintains their dialectical shimmer. The beautiful emblematic poem "Twinfloorer" presents its subject as "hauf-jyned, hauf-rift:/ thir heids doverin/ unner the licht/ yock/ o the lift". It is owing to his formal artistry that Paterson's poetry remains so open to death and beauty under the sky's yoke. Like (once again) Graham, he is an "explorer who shoots the sun, [who] brings samples of air back to civilisation".