

Notebooks, Canons and Damp Dustbins

W. S. Graham's *Aimed at Nobody* and
Basil Bunting's *Uncollected Poems*

This summer when I was looking in a bookshop for work by W. S. Graham, all I could find were several copies of the newly-published *Aimed at Nobody*. There's an irony here, in that Graham, who died in 1986, was a rigorous editor of his own work, as evinced by the selection he made for his *Collected Poems 1942-1977*; but the new volume consists entirely of poems and drafts Graham had chosen not to publish during his lifetime. It's an odd way for the reader of 1993 to have to approach the work. In the same bookshop I also came across the *Uncollected Poems* of Basil Bunting. Bunting died just a year before Graham, having himself edited his *Collected Poems* in 1968, and revising this collection (by adding four poems to it) nine years later. In his case, a single *Uncollected Poems* was outnumbered by several copies of the *Collected Poems*.

While the poetry of Graham and Bunting differs hugely, they share the situation of having selected their own canon during their lifetime, which is now, within years of their deaths, being supplemented. What I want to do here is look at the two new collections related to the published canons, to examine issues surrounding such posthumous publishing—not so much questioning the right of academics or literary executors to publish such work but to look at the sort of contextualising necessary to make such exercises worthwhile in literary, rather than publishing (ie financial) terms. (Cynically, one could accuse the publishers—Faber and OUP respectively—of cashing in on successful, dead poets on their lists, though the fact that these two undervalued poets might enjoy such clout would hardly be a suitable case for cynicism.)

Aimed at Nobody is edited by Margaret Blackwood and Robin Skelton, from papers Graham sent to Skelton once he considered

he had finished with them. (In return, Skelton sent Graham a monthly cheque of £25, which constituted over half of Graham's monthly income at the time.) The papers, we're told, include straightforward notebooks, typescripts and manuscripts, as well as two books "defaced" by Graham's notes, sketches and glued-in worksheets. Other than a drawing which provides the cover illustration, none of the material is produced in facsimile here. This is a pity: one manuscript page, of typed and handwritten poetry and notes, is reproduced in *Edinburgh Review* no. 75 (1987), and has great visual as well as literary appeal. Curiously, two of the notebooks listed under "Sources" contribute no material at all to this collection. Almost half the poems are taken from worksheets of unpublished poems, while the bulk of the rest are taken from "Notebook 4," a defaced copy of *Towards the Well-Being of Mankind: Fifty Years of the Rockefeller Foundation*. Perhaps there are copyright problems, but facsimiles of this would surely be of great interest.

Everything printed here is a "finished" poem, the last draft as far as it went; none have been previously published. Some are unfinished, like the opening poem "The Ballad of Willie Peden" (conceived to accompany the "Two Ballads" published in *The Nightfishing* of 1955). There are two "outtakes" from published poems like "The Dark Dialogues" and "Ten Shots of Mister Simpson," fragments essentially superfluous to the canonical version. And there are completed poems which Graham chose not to publish. One he dismisses as simply "an attempt at something."

Most of the work was written in the decade from 1965 to 1975, when Graham was working on the collections *Malcolm Mooney's Land* and *Implements in their Places*, published in 1970 and 1977 respectively, though odd pieces date from the '50s. The poems are not presented in chronological order or explicitly related to Graham's published collections; indeed, it's hard to perceive any editorial policy, other than an instinctive ordering of the poems. Graham's own comments on a few of the poems are included. Particularly revealing are those on one of his "Surrealgraphs":

I know I know. In know I know I will not want to do anything with this. I know why. It is because it is too filled with objects and activities which could never go into verse in that way. Because I had no real edge on my imagination, I had to crowd

the space with lines of remembered happenings which once moved me. There is no tension or silences. O please forgive me. It can be rewarding to confront an artist's weaker moments, in order better to comprehend the detail of their true achievements, but in many ways Graham's comments here are more useful than the poem, emphasising his passionate concern with "tension and silences," the fact that these are to some extent the "content" of his poetry, a way of establishing meaning. Early in his poetic career, he apparently first established "the stanza-form, rhyme-scheme, metre, number and placing of accented syllables and beats to the line . . . before a word of the poem was written." The semantic content of words thus became secondary, and indeed, many of the early poems can be bafflingly obscure, while retaining an odd coherence due to the "structural" conception above. The shape of the later poems, however, relies more on "imagination" than such a rigid pre-determining of the final outcome.

As well as the facsimile page mentioned above, the *Edinburgh Review* also publishes extracts from a notebook kept by Graham in 1949. There are comments on poetry in general, quotes, ideas for and drafts of poems, a jumble which nonetheless offers many points of access to the work. It also offers a view of the progress of Graham's thinking, the way disparate ideas, words and quotes from other writers coalesce into poetic form. Looking at these, I was reminded of a passage from Gide's novel *The Counterfeiters*, spoken by the character of the novelist, Edouard:

If only we had the notebooks of *L'Education Sentimentale* or *The Brothers Karamazov*! the work's history, its gestation! It would be fascinating . . . more interesting than even the work itself. . . .

Edouard never finishes his novel, as he's too concerned with the idea of it to ever commit himself to it adequately. But there's a moment where such fascination is justified, when the finished, printed product is seen and thereby comprehended as the tensions, contradictions and coincidences of its making. And the concerns of Graham's poetry lend themselves particularly to such an exploration. He is obsessed with the way communication develops because of and in spite of language. His best poems have a tremendous intimacy, simplicity and power; like the Ballads which inspired him, you feel as if your own past has come back to whisper in your ear. The emphasis on communication, on language and the

way it operates within the mind gives his writing qualities of curiosity and honesty. In the least complete poems in *Aimed at Nobody*, there are ideas, attempts at conversation, which are worth listening to, even if there's too much interference to get a clear signal.

Basil Bunting's editor, Richard Cadell, who runs the Basil Bunting Poetry Archive at the University of Durham, has in many respects an easier editorial task than Skelton and Blackwood. All the material he includes has been previously published: and when Bunting prepared his *Collected Poems*, he ordered his poems according to type into sections—sonatas, odes and "overdrafts"—his humorously apt name for his translations-cum-adaptations of earlier poets' work. In his arrangement of the work, Cadell sticks to Bunting's arrangement, which allows immediately the work to be seen in the context of the established canon.

Cadell, bravely or foolishly, prefaces his collection with one of the odes Bunting includes in his *Collected Poems*. It is dedicated "to a poet who advised me to preserve / my fragments and false starts," and this is it complete:

Narciss, my numerous cancellations prefer
slow limpness in the damp dustbins amongst the peel
tobacco-ash and ends spittoon lickings litter
of labels dry corks breakages and a great deal
of miscellaneous garbage picked over by
covetous dustmen and Salvation Army sneaks
to one review-rid month's printed ignominy,
the public detection of your decay, that reeks.

Cadell, in his introduction, justifies his collection on the grounds that "all the work herein is easy to trace in one way or another, if not readily accessible . . . the need therefore arises to collect the work simply to define it, and distinguish it from work in *Collected Poems*." It's good to have these poems, mixed though they are: the "overdrafts," from Sa'di, Hafiz, Firdosi, Manucheri and Horace, make up probably the strongest section, but the late (1972) ode which begins, "Such syllables flicker out of grass . . ." is full of the musicality that characterises "Briggflatts," indeed all his best work, at once dense and lightfooted. Where Graham is a poet of

ideas, Bunting is a poet of sound. His art springs from the spoken weight and value of words, out of which he composes musical phrases. He's essentially a lyricist, albeit a modernist one, rediscovering or creating anew forms to usurp petrified conventions. The lack of lyrical intensity of his weaker works is not compensated for, other than in an academic sense, by elements of their content, whether intellectual or narrative.

Given the above, it perhaps appears bloodyminded to conclude that, on the whole, *Aimed at Nobody* is the more satisfying of the two books. Bunting's poems, good though the best are, conform to the existing canon, adding highlights here and there but proposing nothing startlingly new as to Bunting's thought processes or methods of composition. Graham's book, for all that many of the poems come to dead ends and that there's a lack of context to the collection as a whole, does offer new, if fragmentary and scattered, perspectives on his work. It needs to be read alongside the *Collected Poems*—Faber, take note and reprint forthwith—and further extracts, or facsimiles, from the notebooks.

W. S. Graham: *Aimed at Nobody*, edited by Margaret Blackwood and Robin Skelton, with a foreword by Nessie Graham, Faber and Faber, 1993.

Basil Bunting: *Uncollected Poems*, edited by Richard Cadell, OUP, 1991.

Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? Each life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable.

—ITALO CALVINO: *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*