Facing Tables with W. S. Graham

By Samuel Martin

Across the many fragmented chapters of *This Little Art*, Kate Briggs compiles a playful and affectionate portrait of the literary translator as 'would-be writer' – in other words, a reader so powerfully swayed by a given text that they feel impelled to write it all over again, only this time in a different language. Briggs embraces this identity on her own account, having devoted great care to the translation from French to English of two of Roland Barthes's late lecture courses at the Collège de France, *How to Live Together* and *The Preparation of the Novel*. More surprising, perhaps, though no less persuasive, is her case for Barthes as a would-be writer in turn, caught up in translation almost despite himself. Barthes (Briggs reminds us) admitted struggling to recognise the humanity of translated poetry, except when it came to the Japanese haiku he dearly loved. Ostensibly for the benefit of his students, but also, one suspects, for his own private delectation, he went so far as to produce his own French versions of a handful of haiku based on existing English versions by R. H. Blyth. 'His claim on them: *my* haiku. This assertion: ohwowwowwow *it touches me*, and is – therefore? – *human*.'[1]

Lately I've found myself wondering if Briggs's 'ohwowwowwow', as well as ventriloquising Barthes, might be a kind of *clin d'œil* in the direction of W. S. Graham. Not that the Greenock man has a monopoly on *wow*, of course – but the more one has seen it splashed exuberantly throughout his letters and even occasional poems, the trickier it becomes not to imagine it in his voice. Two things, at least, we can affirm with confidence: *wow* is more of a Grahamatical than a Barthesian word, and Kate Briggs has read Graham.[2] In a letter to Fraser Steel from March 1977 (when Barthes's course on *How to Live Together* was in full flow), Graham provided his friend from the BBC with a helpful gloss on his use of the expression: 'WOW WOW is only to signify I feel I've said too little in too many words.'[3] This distillation of language's inadequacy into a repeated monosyllable mirrors the awestruck 'That, that' of the seventeenth-century haikuist Teishitsu as he gazed at the flowers on Mount Yoshino, which Barthes, in Kate Briggs's translation, quotes approvingly: 'Saying that you can't say: the

whole haiku tends toward this – toward "*that*".'[4] Whether or not Briggs has ever actually had this nexus in mind – and to be honest, I'm not sure it really matters – it's pleasing to think of 'That, that' and 'WOW WOW' as dots on a map tracing a transhistorical poetic route from Mount Yoshino in Japan to Zennor Hill in Cornwall (via the Rue des Écoles in Paris), and to hear 'ohwowwowwow' as the result of Briggs channelling W. S. Graham, deliberately or otherwise, in order to translate Roland Barthes's haiku-inspired emotion, what (s)he calls 'the "That's it" (the bell) of haiku'.[5]

Yet whereas what stirred Barthes when he read translated haiku was their humanity, Graham's *wow wow* could also carry canine echoes. Another 1977 letter, this one to the Canadian writer Elizabeth Smart, contains a verse (perhaps I should say a pack) of companionable doggerel:

> *Wow wow, wow wow across the dark*
> *Shires and hills and lake and fen.*
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> *The Barkers are at the Poetry again.*[6]

The all-too-human Barkers in question included Elizabeth's partner George and the couple's son Sebastian, to whom Graham had written a separate letter that same day to congratulate him on his first book of poems. Within a decade of that chorus of *wows*, the Barkers were at the Poetry once more: in 1986, Sebastian edited the anthology *Portraits of Poets*, featuring his older brother Christopher's photographs of English-language poets born before the Second World War, among them both of their parents – and, indeed, W. S. Graham, who, along with Elizabeth Smart, died in the early weeks of the year. Sebastian Barker's preface to the volume announces its goal of 'present[ing] the human face of an art sometimes obscured from general enjoyment and even intelligent appreciation by wilful mystification and academic tariff-barriers'; accordingly, there are no dogs to be seen, although Michael Hamburger's photograph and accompanying poem focus on his cat.[7]

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backwards covered / With words backwards from the other side'), could likewise be said to traffic in a form of translation.[11] David Nowell Smith characterises a series of Graham's manuscripts inspired by the paintings of Kandinsky as 'translation across media' and 'ekphrastic translation'; in *Portraits of Poets*, the two-page layout of 'Untidy Dreadful Table' allows us to visualise the ekphrastic relationship backwards, as if the portrait of Graham had 'jumped through all surprises' to become just such a transmedial version of the original poem.[12]

We oughtn't to forget, though, that the 'original' poem is already a translation of Graham's 'real' untidy dreadful table that we can see in Christopher Barker's photograph. These two pages are not just faces; they are tables, too, or maybe the leaves of a fold-up ping-pong table between which the reader is sent endlessly bouncing back and forth. 'If a translation is like a table,' writes Kate Briggs, 'then it is either, or can be alternately, the thing itself and the configuration of persons and relations around it.'[13] This particular configuration finds us peering back at Graham across the table(s) he has set before us, making faces, drawn into the translation game.

W. S. Graham and the Faces of Translation would make for a fascinating monograph, so much so that I rather suspect it's already in preparation somewhere. If not, let this be a call for a detailed study of Graham as a reader and interpreter of translated works from Nansen to Rimbaud, as a poet whose own work continues to find its way into other languages, and as an extraordinarily suggestive *imaginer* of translation in various guises.[14] One such guise pops up early in *Implements in Their Places*, when the 'other side of the paper' onto which the poet of 'Untidy Dreadful Table' hammers himself turns out, intriguingly, to feature the poem 'A Note to the Difficult One':

> *I stand in my vocabulary looking out*
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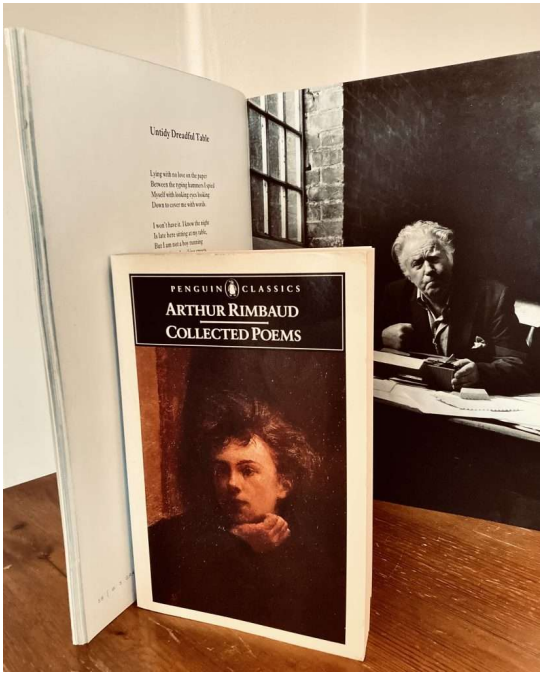

Christopher Barker's portrait of W. S. Graham and the cover of the Penguin edition of Rimbaud

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> *I must tackle my dreadful table*
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> *And go on the hide and seeking hill.*[20]

'Hide and seeking' is devilishly tricky to translate. The French for 'hide-and-seek' is 'cache-cache', a double-barrelled 'hide' with no mention of seeking; besides,

Graham's second stanza finishes similarly with 'hide and seeking streets', and even if one were to find a cache-all translation of the pun, it would be a shame to plonk the repetition at the end of the line.

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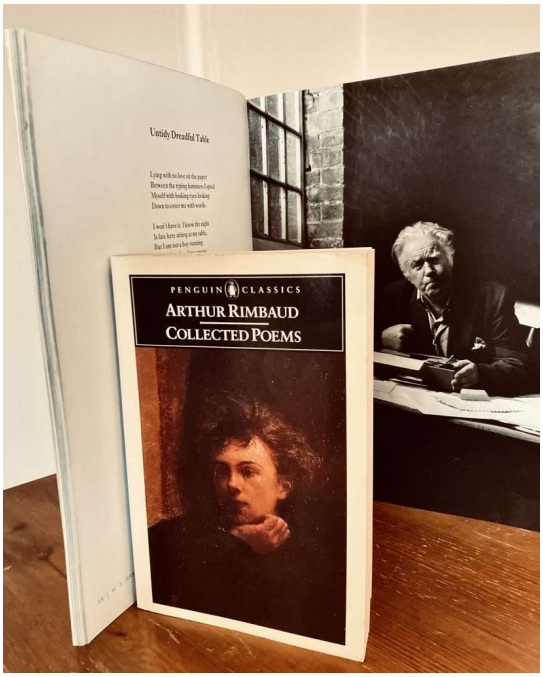

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(c) The Bottle Imp