

# ∞ READING ROUND ∞

## Life-Changing Literature

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AS A YOUNG STUDENT, when I first read W. S. Graham's iconic poem 'The Constructed Space' I didn't get it. It was dense, beautiful, spiralling out of meaning. I couldn't grasp what he was driving at. Significance hovered around and above it very strongly for me, but somehow I couldn't get it to land in my brain. I thought it impressive, grand, world-changing even. But beyond me.

Some poems give themselves up easily. In one reading, you can enjoy their delights, savour them momentarily, then move on. You might come back for another sip at the same poem later, to re-experience its straightforward pleasure. Sometimes these poems stay with you for a lifetime. Sometimes they slip away into memory and the past as easily as old socks.

But Graham's poem bothered me. It continued to bother me when I wasn't reading it. There was something essential there that he was saying that was just outside my current field of thought. I needed to stretch my mind towards it. I resented that at first, dismissing him as 'difficult', you know — one of *those* poets, *those* poems which have nothing to say to us normal people. And yet...hadn't I been told that one purpose of poems is 'to make the ordinary extraordinary'? Here I was, experiencing the discomfort of having things I took for granted overturned, questioned, interrogated in thought and through language that unsettled me.

I went back to the poem. I reread it. I read it aloud repeatedly. I discussed it with friends — those who wrote poems and those who didn't. I opened

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it out on the page and studied the poem for rhymes, sentence structure, pacing, inversions. It was like looking at an impossible staircase or a mobius strip that winds around itself on one unfeasible plane. The philosophical thinking that underpins Graham's poem is so deeply wrought it somehow manages to drive language open and apart, *in language*.

Now, it's one of my favourite poems of all time. Because it changed how I experience the world. The invisible entity that exists *between* people as they speak, that language attempts to cross, had never been something I'd appreciated before. The 'constructed space' of the poem mirrors the created space that occurs every time two people (attempt to) speak to each other. It's now present in my psyche in a way it never would have been without Graham's incredible architecture of thought.

It was a great lesson for me. Not only in eventually coming to appreciate Graham's masterful poem, but also in reading texts I might initially resist. Now I gravitate towards literature I *don't* like as much as texts I love. It sounds perverse. But both teach me enormous amounts about the constraints of my own thinking and help overturn a small portion of my received truths. Graham's poem stays with me because of its innovative meaning, skilful poetics, and also because it taught me to read beyond my comfort zone. Most importantly, it expanded everything I've read since.