

A comparative reading of the Ward Lock 1947 and Bodley Head 1965 editions of Winston Graham's *Take My Life*

Winston Graham:

A man is born with certain talents and realising those talents is a very exacting job (to William G. Smith, *Books and Bookmen*, 1959)

Any novel can be read after ten years with a much more detached view and improved a little (to Arthur Pottersman, *Argosy*, 1967)

I revise enormously (to Philippa Toomey, *The Times*, 1975)

One has to be harsh with oneself (Pottersman, 1967, as above)

Parts of a novel will come pretty nearly right from the start – and parts will be all wrong. So the wrong parts have to be re-written, once or twice or nine times (WG, *Report to Writers*, RIC, undated)

I must have written the first half of [The Tumbled House] about five times (Smith, 1959, as above)

Some chapters [of Ross Poldark] I wrote nine times (WG: *Memoirs*)

After finishing [the first four Poldark novels] ... the techniques of suspense came to interest me more [than historical fiction] (WG: author's preface, *The Black Moon*)

* * * * *

Winston Graham went to great lengths to render the text of his novels as satisfying to himself as possible, not only when first published but also (see second quote above) upon republication. He went on to tell Mr Pottersman that he revised “not much – just where necessary.” But a comparative reading of two editions (separated by eighteen years) of *Take My Life* tells a different story, showing that the mature author made more than 200 revisions to his younger self's original text, to significantly recast the re-presentation of his tale.

Below, with examples, are some possible reasons why he chose to make the revisions he did. The bracketed numbers accompanying each quote refer to the Ward Lock 1947 edition page and line numbers; greyed out text is present in the 1947 edition but not the 1965; text IN CAPITALS appears in the 1965 edition but not the 1947.

(1) To remove words or references, made anachronistic by the passage of years, that might perplex younger or non-British readers; the end result to make the whole slightly less time-bound:

Reference at (11.11) to standing for “the King” (i.e. the playing of the National Anthem) before the performance of an opera is removed (a) because its playing at this point is a tradition long since dead and (b) perhaps also because although the National Anthem all through WG’s life up to 1947 had been God Save The King, it became in 1952 and remains, at the time of writing, God Save *The Queen*.

The utility fur coat (14.4) becomes *the imitation beaver*.

“Yes, pure silk, my dear, and without coupons. Of course, one had to pay extra.” (14.16) becomes “Yes, pure silk damask, my dear. They’re absolute bliss. But I’m terrified they may fade.”

A *maid* (14.28) becomes an *au pair*.

Scrambled (dried) eggs (38.26) become simply *scrambled eggs*.

Following the stitching of a cut in a local hospital (and bearing in mind that the NHS would not be launched for another year), Nick asks “Who can I pay for this job?” “Oh, thanks, we’re a free hospital,” the nurse replies, “but there’s a box at the door as you go out ...” (40.3-7) This becomes: “Can I pay for this job?” “No, thanks, it’s on the house ... but there’s a box for the Waifs and Strays at the door as you go out ...”

A *news-boy* (59.13) becomes a *paper-man on the corner*.

A *cad* (84.8) becomes a *heel*.

References to the need to be well-connected in order to secure air passage to America at short notice are removed at (86.28), (87.4) and (90.28).

Eight lines (93.11-18) are cut to delete reference to the rationing of newsprint.

[Radio programme] *the Second News* (136.10) becomes *the Nine O’clock News*.

The manageress *marking off ration books* (142.22) becomes one *adding up her books*.

A meal *satisfying despite all the rationing* (149.17) becomes [in contrast to this woolly revision] *fairly satisfying*.

One cap and raincoat (151.17) hanging on a hook become *one scarf and raincoat*.

"Pardon me, is this the queue for tea?" "Yes, ... It looks like a long wait." (182.3-6) is recast as the less austere *"Pardon me, are they serving tea yet?" "Yes, but the tables are all full. We'll have to wait a few minutes."*

"Bit of ham. Off the ration too." (185.28) becomes *"Bit of ham. Not too fat."*

Elevenpence change (190.19) from a shilling proffered for a newspaper becomes *some pennies change*.

(2) Greater precision of description, narration, characterisation or speech:

In a dozen places throughout the text, the words *phone* (13.21 et al), *phoned* (47.28 et al) and *phoning* (163.18 et al) become *telephone*, *telephoned* and *telephoning*, with the revision in each case more appropriate to the context.

with ANGRY tears welling into her eyes (28.4)

in the shutting BANGING of the door as he left (28.35)

a minor ingredient, a symbol in the formula (43.13) becomes *a numeral, a letter, a symbol in the formula*

"... and we [the police] picked him up late last night." (46.7) becomes *"... and we think he may be able to help us."*

In several places, speech, rendered to denote hesitancy as *I-I thought* (47.11), *after-after you left* (53.31), *on-on bail* (54.33), *I thought ... I thought perhaps the-the way* (62.6), *a-a rock* (129.25), is made more naturalistic simply by removing the repeated words.

and the colour flushing COMING to her face again (53.25)

He made a face GRIMACE (53.27)

"I was darned INSUFFERABLY irritable and-and stuffy ..." (55.21)

She GOT UP QUICKLY AND pushed past somebody (64.1)

Frobisher [barrister addressing solicitor] (78.6 + 25) becomes *Mr. Frobisher*

face this thing together (56.1) BORING INTERLUDE

her IRON determination (60.12)

[re opera singers as popularly perceived] *Great chests* BREASTS *on them.* (65.13)

She was very much in love with Talbot, THIS CHAP, *he* ONE *could see that.* (65.22)

a cold BONE-CHILLING *wind* (72.17)

of ALTOGETHER *withholding one's defence* (77.31)

The place terrified her (79.27) becomes *It took quite a lot to frighten Philippa, but this place did.*

confident that nothing MUCH *stood in her way* (81.11)

... through shyness or a mistaken sense of delicacy (82.10) becomes *... through a mistaken sense of their not wanting to re-open a subject which had been the cause of their quarrel ...*

"... I realised I didn't REALLY love her. It made THE LAST PART OF our three weeks a dismal failure to me." (83.32)

"... she was charming FUN ..." (83.36)

Nicholas Talbot's record was clean (95.6) SEEMED CLEAN ENOUGH

"Nobody's been an angel ... and it's sure to be put as much to his disadvantage as possible." (95.11)

"Tyler gives me the impression of having an exceptionally tough disposition ... but even if he were not it would be worth the risk." (95.15) becomes *"... of being a pretty tough customer ... but likeable. A man who should make a good showing in the box. But in any case it should be worth the risk."*

"... one morning Mr. Talbot pays his THE bill and leaves." (96.18)

Without pause BUT WITHOUT HASTE *Tyler plunged* WENT *on ... pulling to pieces* CALLING IN QUESTION *each part of his testimony* (105.13-15)

the big DUSTY *class-rooms* (108.20)

the set-up OPENING *of the trial* (109.23)

the sordid TRIVIAL *tag-ends of things* (129.3)

"I couldn't. I couldn't. I feel as if THINK I've lost my voice altogether." (131.1)

to sway INFLUENCE the jury (132.9)

"We do so hope Benjamin's information WHAT BENJAMIN HAS TOLD YOU will be of real value ..."(137.34)

to strengthen her *determination* (138.19) INTENT

"I've an idea there'll be a caretaker or a bursar or some such person about." (141.22) becomes *"I've no idea whether the boys are back yet."*

"Is there anyone in charge of the school, do you know?" (142.7) becomes *"Is the school open yet?"* *"No, the new term begins next Friday."* *"Well, will there be someone in charge?"*

"except the school's broken up for the Easter THAT SHE IS STILL ON holiday." (142.31)

A good-looking woman ... very dark, RATHER SALLOW with large eyes (150.4)

He led her straight across to the main school (151.1) BUILDING

She really knew nothing about prep. schools (153.32) HESITATED A MOMENT

"Do you know who wrote it?" (157.13) becomes *"It's original, isn't it? I wonder who wrote it."*

Nick was not sure of the UNDERSTOOD ITS effect on the jury. (167.17)

Tyler was at that moment *declaring* (169.23) SAYING

After a few *moments* SECONDS he said in a clear voice (176.30)

"I've been to inquire what time they serve teas," he *observed benevolently* (176.16) VOLUNTEERED

The man ... began to *examine* READ the Stock Exchange closing prices (177.1)

not MERELY to her but to himself *alone* (178.1)

She was somehow driven to say (178.11) REPLIED

That brought his gaze back to her (179.28) INTO FOCUS

Oh, God, she *prayed* (180.14) THOUGHT

“the BLASTED chimneys” (181.31)

In this somehow his reason (183.10) LOGICAL MIND

had seemed to rouse ROUSED *Fleming* (187.37)

But something in the gaze AGAIN *lacked personal focus.* (188.8)

Nick had IN FACT *only been given the benefit of the doubt* (191.11)

(3) Correction:

“If that’s the truth, then I am just as anxious to establish it (51.17) AS YOU ARE”

“Never in my life ... have I felt so much like a liar as I did ... when I started telling them the trouble TRUTH *about our quarrel.”* (54.23)

breathing exercise (70.15) is revised to *breathing exercises*

the reformation (73.20) becomes the *Reformation*

the central criminal court (96.3) becomes the *Central Criminal Court*

“Who WHOM *would the police have been most likely to suspect?”* (168.24) [Though characters may legitimately speak ungrammatically, this change to his barrister’s words is more probably the correction of a minor lapse on the author’s part than the reversal of a premeditated choice of pronoun.]

(4) Artistic improvement or embellishment:

the chatter of the violins, the reedy bass of the cellos (9.33) becomes *the tenor squeak of the violins, the reedy baritone of the cellos*

Lofton Street, a “miserable neighbourhood” moves from *Not far from Oxford Street* (20.37) to *Not far from Euston Road*, succinctly rendering it more miserable still.

There was no explanation (43.1) becomes *It was a paradox of life.*

while the thin sharp man licked the end of his THIN SHARP *pencil* (45.1)

He turned in STOPPED *at a grey slate house ... turning its sash windows towards the land for shelter.* (72.19)

at the Old Bailey spring was very far away (96.3) EXISTED ON HEARSAY EVIDENCE.

a tattered shabby dawn with specks of rain on the windows (140.5) becomes a tattered dawn like an unwashed shirt.

That had struck him, had struck him hard (181.1) JUST LIKE A PHYSICAL BLOW IN RETURN.

There was a long pause (183.22) becomes A goods train screamed past them on its way north. When the vibration and the noise were past ...

... put off by something ALMOST WAXWORK in the attitude of the people within (187.35)

Tears were in her eyes again, but now they were tears of happiness (191.21) becomes Her sight was still blurred, and the rain and tears made a sort of kaleidoscope of the moving traffic.

Down the long, shining dwindling DISTORTED vista of the wet street (191.26)

(5) Removal of superfluous information, stage directions, etc:

The severely tailored black suit she was wearing brought out the fine clear pallor of her skin. On the lapel of the coat was the diamond clip he had given her for Christmas (115.29) becomes On the lapel of the severely tailored black suit she was wearing was the diamond clip he had given her for Christmas.

What fools they'd both been ... (40.1)

Philippa glanced briefly from one to the other (62.16) [The two lines of dialogue that follow are also cut.]

"Even!" said Philippa. (64.37)

"I am writing myself tomorrow," said Fleming evenly. (73.24)

He had been looking at her. (84.27)

It happened that he was the sort of man to whom publicity came unasked, as a natural outcome of his temperament. (112.8)

Philippa felt her cheeks flushing. Poor Nick. (121.18)

"You're looking on the black side," she told him with desperate conviction (128.25)

Nick stared at the letter and two pink spots showed in his cheeks. (123.7)

Wells smiled. (123.25)

“That, Mr. Talbot, we will leave to the jury to decide.” (125.1)

“No,” said Nick, looking at her. “Not everything.” (129.14)

Already part of the case against him was shaken. (130.31)

She could not sing; her voice would stick in her throat. (131.5)

said John (139.8)

Philippa bit her lip. (140.29)

“Eight,” she guessed. (153.33)

She hadn’t the strength herself. (156.27)

It was not fear but dangerous nervous resolve (175.12)

“Why?” she asked, trying deliberately to steer him back to the murder – to that murder.
(177.15)

(6) The elimination of adjectives, adverbs and qualifying phrases to give cleaner, brisker prose:

In Italy, in a queer way, I was a stranger (7.29)

“Looks count, Philippa. Perhaps they shouldn’t, but they do, especially with a modern audience.” (8.14)

temporary ease and a new confidence (8.34)

Silently and with a side glance at Marie (9.1)

distinguished-looking theatre-goers (9.16)

sensitive nostrils (12.19)

applause burst in a great wave (15.10)

a slight fullness of the contours round it [her mouth] (19.22) becomes *the fullness of the contours round it.*

feeling irritated (23.4)

faint innuendos (23.6)

it was she who was inclined to be edgy after a concert, following the nervous strain.
(23.18)

starting forward, appalled, her anger quite gone (28.10)

He deliberately turned his back on her (28.14)

as if she were a tout (28.23)

her lovely intelligent face (28.31) EXPRESSION

a little over twelve months (45.18)

she ended indignantly (47.25)

her quick mind (45.30)

he said angrily (55.23)

the Opera House was besieged with a crowd worthy of a Gigli appearance (60.3)

blinked them surreptitiously away (62.1)

I sometimes fancy (62.34)

His eyes went over her straight dark-clad figure (65.8)

a little grimace (67.11)

Things would straighten themselves somehow (71.3) OUT

the other man (73.1)

his grey eyes (73.13)

his rather handsome prominent eyes (78.9)

he was always bright enough on the surface (80.26)

a curious consolation (81.18)

His brown eyes were embarrassed (83.21)

with a certain degree of discomfort in his keen dark eyes (86.29)

The feelings in her heart (93.26) becomes *Her feelings*

George Eliot's Middlemarch (94.13)

that this could be turned to immense advantage (95.7)

At least she was glad of that (96.15)

Tyler demanded (105.4)

his shabby old gown (107.16)

the remarkable suggestions (107.17)

ugly and tawdry and vulgar (129.11)

"No," said Nick, looking at her. "Not everything." (129.14)

at the piano (131.9)

there may be a chance of a seat (139.2)

the beginning of a sick headache somewhere within her (140.8)

Somehow she felt it was not (150.10)

It was darker than ever (153.25)

that big empty building (158.4)

he wanted her presence so badly today (167.13)

Somehow she was glad she had done so (169.1)

Inexplicably she felt that much of what he was claiming (178.26)

He checked himself a moment, AND glanced at the deaf man. (179.5)

(7) Reducing the expression of characters' thoughts, allowing words and actions to better speak for themselves:

"I think we'd all feel better for something to eat." (61.23)

"And stockbroker's wives," said Joan. "It taught me a sort of lesson." "I think you're both very sweet," said Philippa, blowing her nose. (63.6-9)

... and for a moment she thought she was going to faint (63.32) COULD NOT MOVE.

There was something more important in her life than singing. (69.37)

Career and all the natural interests of the opera singer were forgotten in the need for helping him. (81.22)

She tried for a little to disguise it from herself and then gave way and stared at herself in the mirror and confessed to a bitter burning jealousy. What else could it be? What, she thought, could she expect? (93.29-32)

She realised that if she had had to stand in the big square dock where Nick would presently appear she would have been frightened out of her life. (96.31)

In the last half-hour the whole atmosphere of the court-room had changed. (105.18)

And Philippa thought, please God, let Nick come through this all right. So far they say ... (119.26)

We turned Heaven into Hell of our own free will. (119.30)

(Good, Nick. Good, Nick, thought Philippa.) (122.28)

She was afraid Philippa was going to jump up and join in the fight. (127.4)

Nick mustn't feel any doubt. (128.15)

"... and if everything else fails, I'm so proud of that." (129.22)

She realised for the first time how much these weeks of search and anxiety had taken out of her. (140.10)

Anyway, she felt her career was finished if anything happened to Nick. (140.15)

She was prepared for this. (151.27)

Every instinct told her not. (158.10)

... that she'd never felt in her life before (183.30)

* * * * *

And is the novel better for its make-over? By and large, yes: “techniques of suspense” applied, diligently though silently buffed, the result is a taut, coherent, thoroughly accomplished and wholly persuasive piece of work. Except ... The loss of those idiosyncratic references recalling the particular post-war milieu of late-forties austerity Britain – the rationing, coupons, queues, powdered egg, the stoic making do – *is* a real loss. But the earlier book can, of course, still be found and read. You can even see the film, also co-scripted by WG*, so what’s not to like? Work well done.



* Valerie Taylor (1917-1998), whose part in the inception and development of the original film (and, therefore, subsequent novel) should not be forgotten.

JRD, 7 April 2017