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“I ain’t anyone but you”: On Bill Griffiths

Bill Griffiths was found dead in bed, aged 59, on September 13, 2007. He had discharged himself from hospital a few days earlier after arguing with his doctors.

I knew Griffiths from about 1997 to around 2002, a period where I was trying to write a dissertation on his poetry. I spent a lot of time with him then, corresponding and talking to him at length, always keen and pushing to get him to tell me what his poems were about. Of course, he never did. Don’t think I ever got to know him, really. All this seems a lifetime ago. I’m now a family physician (a general practitioner in the UK) in a coastal town in England. I’ve taken a few days off from the COVID calamity and have some time to review the three-volume collection of his work published by Reality Street a few years ago. Volume 1 covers the early years, Volume 2 the 80s, and Volume 3 the period from his move to Seaham, County Durham in northeast England until his death.

Here I should attempt do his work some justice, and give an idea, for an American readership, of its worth. Working up to this, I reread much of his poetry, works I hadn’t properly touched in fifteen years. Going through it again after all that time, I was gobsmacked by its beauty, complexity, and how it continued to burn through a complacent and sequestered English poetry scene. Griffiths’s poetry stands against the iron smugness and disassociation of much of English letters. One can’t move around a poetry room without falling over poets who are very eager on the radical stuff. The poor, the poor, the poor—but never a poor person and look them in the eye. That was not the case with Griffiths.

I found Griffiths’s work to have an absolute veracity, which is as germane now as it was the day he died. He wasn’t mealymouthed. Griffiths wrote about how stupid, pointless, and venal poor people’s lives could be. He could be provocative—in a quite posh, reserved, and bookish manner. He could call the reader out and drive at a sympathy

and an engagement with brutish people you and I would never meet. To do this, he kept himself at arm's length from the academy. Even if he ever tried to get in, half-heartedly, Griffiths was just too awkward, indistinct in affect, and mulish. They never got him and treated him for the most part with incomprehension and condescension. The big gigs passed him by. Griffiths died in poverty.

Separating Griffiths's poetic life into discrete narratives is something that my limited skills as an essayist are going to struggle with. There are no fundamental shifts of perspective in his poetry, he's not working toward any sort of big finish. What upset Griffiths as a youth continued to upset him to the end; likewise, what fascinated him in his early work he sort of always loved. Griffiths adapted and developed his ideas, but at heart he didn't change his mind. He was incorruptible.

That said, there are four areas I would like to cover to give a sense of the range of his poetry and where I feel Griffiths exceeded his contemporaries: his early biker work, his take on the little press, his nature writings, and, finally, his prison poetry. But these are arbitrary distinctions and in Griffiths, they all tend to fold into one.

Solidly middle class, posh even, with his parents not "being very critical, of anything," Griffiths associated with the Hells Angels as a youth. As well as the material situation of the underclasses, this informed much of his work, Griffiths writing about both with a characteristic intensity. The kind of works you just don't get to read in England. One gets a lot of revolutionary statements—"see a fascist, kill them" sort of thing. Everyone applauds, no one leaves the house. Griffiths could do high; he could do low. Though he was sketchy at best about the details, there had been some violence in these days, which he lived with. That said, as much as he ever recanted anything, as an older man Griffiths distanced himself from his Hells Angels days. But he was never particularly a man of peace. There is no healing, and things are not going to be OK. Griffiths didn't know his way around forgiveness.

Reading his poems, I am struck by Griffiths's sense of human beings doing badly under pressure. Of course, there is nobility and humanity—but I suspect one sees them just because one hopes they are there, or should be there. From the Angels and the lumpenproletariat in his early work to the later burned-out pit types, people

in his poetry don't have a "point" that you can see rolling towards you. They are hopelessly lost in a world that hasn't done them any good—nor ever intended to. For example, in *Paracycle*—written at a particularly perilous period in Griffiths's life, when he lived in some despair with a struggling family in the deprived Whitechapel area of London—he describes the stress, the unremitting pressure of their collective stuporous condition, the beatings:

Not back at turned parts again, paraffin.
Not gardening
with police pulling up to watch.

And

No way to printing on,
Or marrying,
Or banish vanishing.

The diction is caustic, the syntax limited. These people are no good and are cracking up. But perhaps against that, there is a pathos and a love of language in some form, perhaps beauty and fragility of a culture that is made from nothing and is about nothing. But Griffiths never lets you have it cheap because you, gentle reader, are part of the problem. The hit-about goes on:

Turn into any line of words
Don't know,
What I can reckon up, so much darkness for anyone.
And gritted against their Dad.

Unbuckle jeans for bed
Unbuild the clothing, com-
pounding mind (is it)
again
Against

Where's the scalding cold
at my arm my lung
lamp to the whip-tricks
of Air / August

Griffiths is a great moral poet with a boiling sense of social injustice, but he never talks over his subjects' heads. He's in there, basically as thick as them. He shares the lives and privations of the people he writes about. To Griffiths evil isn't an abstract "Untruth or Injustice"; it has a physical and personal reality, demonstrated in the relentless and cruel police, councillors, prison officers who are in these people's faces without a break (and let's not forget the doctors, their stooges).

Griffiths's poems about his experiences as a biker and a delinquent got him some attention, a bit of rough on the London poetry scene. In the early 70s he became associated, along with other poets such as Barry MacSweeney, Allen Fisher, and Maggie O'Sullivan, with the British Poetry Revival. Griffiths got some things in the *Poetry Review* when the sympathetic Eric Mottram was editor. However, his period in the sun ended when conservative elements restored order. Mottram was fired, and Griffiths disappeared from view in Whitechapel.

The poetry in Volume 1 is based on Griffiths's association with motorcycle gangs. This tends to be the work of his that people are most familiar with. To an extent, these poems are conventional, often based around the trope of the outsider. But even within these conventions, pieces such as the *Cycles* and *War W/Windsor* sequences, as well as works such as "Five Poems" and "Sixteen Poems for Vic the Gypsy, Bob and Others," demonstrate Griffiths's ecstasy. One is struck by their mosaic quality, the many dissonant notes running against this trope, their sensitive poetic composition, the bursts of often arcane but pointed erudition.

Griffiths's early Geezer work contains substantial uncertainty about the unity of the poetic ego. The pointless, limitless oppression of other people in the controlling, organizing mind, bleeds in. Griffiths hated this big poetic guy Guy and would often take great pains to distance himself from the Romantics, whom he disliked.

Possibly the most brilliant exposition of the complexities of his early work are the *Cycles*, a sprawling sequence of great variation under tight artistic control. The title probably refers to Griffiths's association with the Nomads Hells Angels chapter. When he writes about being an Angel, the first thing you pick out is the visceral joy of physically riding a motorcycle. These moments hang in haunted loops, such as in "Cycle Two (Dover Borstal)":

where's no laws for you,
no complaints, out of jes'
rejects

Like where's a little kid
making
motorbikes out of sand.

A paradise lost, or removed, but from whom it is never quite clear—it doesn't seem to be him. The *Cycles* are a composite piece—one cannot pin the narrative Griffiths down. The text is filled with voices, interlocutors, bits of found writing. These voices can be lyric, demotic, ironic—the switches are unclear and not signposted. But usually they are voices under restraint. The passages can be open, rhythmic, but are usually a cry for freedom or of incomprehension at misfortunes imposed by authority off-screen. They leap back and forth between the voice and a fragmented, vivid nature. For example, a stanza in “Cycle One: On Dover Borstal”:

You're you
and I ain't anyone but you

The bright crazy rings in agate
Spring is.

The flower was forced open by the sun
is yellow of bad brass
like I beat it golden-black

Many of Griffiths's poems in this period relate to the psychological anguish of custody. Prison is a constant, nightmarish reification of evil in his work. There was one important episode during his association with the Angels when Griffiths was arrested with what he described as a penknife in his possession. There had been some sort of fight, and he had been hit on the head. Always a taciturn man, Griffiths appeared to have suffered some sort of concussion. Unfortunately, perhaps because of this probable concussion, he was not able to talk when interviewed by the police. Assumed to be insubordinate, Griffiths was transferred to prison for a short period. He found this

experience indescribably frightening, and it seems to have been the basis of his recurrent theme of the individual lost in the institution. No way out, no revolutionary apotheosis.

In Griffiths's work one sees the functionaries associated with prisons or involved in the active expression of state control to be as faceless as they are malign. To him the individual is very much the product of their environment and conditioning. Thus, when the gentlemen of the state hit you on the head, they also alter your mind. Griffiths did not believe in an individual soul or a facile loved-by-God goodness that intrinsically resists this conditioning. Talk like that made him nervous and irritable. To him the soul was a murky thing—very small, local, and contingent—surrounded by parasites.

What comes across is his distrust of all large organizations, bodies of thought, and establishment art. What, inevitably and unfortunately, can't be conveyed in the Reality Street collection—where everything is gathered in one place to look the same—is Griffiths's key ethos as an artist, almost to the exclusion of everything else: the little press.

When I was doing a PhD on his work, I would schedule time to talk to him about his poems, to get the heart of them, their meanings, etc. This was usually a nightmare. Griffiths was unbelievably interesting. He knew about a lot of things and would throw out bones, observations, maybe a reference here and there. But the man was stringing me along. Asked directly what was going on in a certain passage, Griffiths would sigh and, with a wheeze, start to talk about something else, admittedly with a bearish intensity. The man was impenetrable.

However, none of this applied when you talked to him about how he actually made the books: their physical production, how they were laid out and printed. Then, you couldn't get him to shut up. The book as an object was of extreme importance. That he was spurned by the artistic establishment and therefore had to self-publish is only part of the truth. What was also the case was that the "book" produced by the little press had an almost spiritual importance for him. It was an object, much more than just the words on the page. It was a curse; it was a charm. Almost all the poems in Volume 1, written when Griffiths was tremendously poor, were hand-lettered, illustrated, typeset, and printed by him, inevitably in small numbers. This dedication to the book is something that he never abandoned, and many of his later,

exceptional small publications (for example the masterpiece *Durham*, not included in these volumes) continue this practice.

A wonderful example of Griffiths's love of "the book" from his middle period is *The Book of the Boat*. This is a work of hand-colored line drawings, lettered by Griffiths, around a series of poems relating to his experience on a houseboat, moving around London, then out into the Thames estuary, eventually into the danger of the shipping lanes. The work relates these adventures as well as the relationships between Griffiths and his crewmates along the way. Though some of the pictures from his original chapbook are included in the collected text, many others, along with the vivid and charming color of the original, are omitted. His ideation of the complexity and unity of small elements, reinforced by the physical appearance of the self-produced text, is lost. That being said, the poems of *The Book of the Boat* remain, even in their reduced form, peerless.

The sequence is funny, as Griffiths could be, in a very dry way. It demonstrates a light allusiveness voiced in bitter tones and an ongoing control of material. Never has his playoff between the small group and the contradictions therein, stultifying and controlling relationships, been so well articulated. In one of the most memorable sections Griffiths and a couple members of the crew, wasters all, decide to try and supplement their meager rations by hunting rabbits with an air rifle. They are completely unsuccessful and return humiliated to the boat to continue their journey in ugly spirits, the authorities vaguely circling. They head on through the English countryside swarming with rabbits who beard them almost by magic:

Keeping it secure. except from Stuart, that is. growling from lock to lock.
threatening at the dogs: goading. at the humans, in pursuit. of the hull
And past the knocked & blocked bank. into the higher, coarser.
Countryside. the veritable: Lap of Pan.
With a flick of our ears. with a thump of the foot. we come thru. into the
last straight—I will disembark.
Why would I want to stay? Till my chest furs? And my trousers rib like a
goat's? The surly hunters. carry on: never dreaming of it.
Never reckoning. how much more we are looked at. than we think.
noted, posted, sighted, aligned—
So it blurs. even the slight lip of joy. that lines & outlines & overlights.
the being we send out. (that passes forth by day)

The Book of the Boat articulates the contradictions in Griffiths's work and life. The magical return of nature, Pan, and a human species too angry and exhausted to notice. I never really heard him propound a unified vision of humans as a political entity. The universe is incalculable, vast, and strange, but Griffiths's political as well as artistic thinking are directed toward the local and specific: the small group—the boat.

Griffiths's nature poems in the Reality Street volumes are a series of masterpieces of composition to which nothing in English in the second half of the twentieth century comes close. When Griffiths writes about nature he revivifies a moribund hack of English poetic letters that nature is something to which the poet returns to confirm eternal verities, to feel and feed back into their comfortable *guy* *Guy sinecure*. His humans are consequential to the world around them and so too is nature. It is particular, based around the interplay between small and large elements, addressing and eschewing an overarching organizing form. "Steve's Garden," a piece written in/about the garden of a friend, Steve Clews, forms the centerpiece of one of his most realized sequences on the complexities of nature, *Darwin's Dialogues*. Griffiths says on the interrelation of nature and people:

No more than surmises...
As tho there was everywhere
gaps in the air

and the dust, the deck
of the block of the Moon
a waterline glittering with bronze
or white-painted human
capped
with a spine-pack
of hoe-black boxes

A black calendar
at last,
all made of full-stops
with everything hidden.

Nature is vast, fragmentary, but there is also the suggestion of a laborer who has been worked, "a spine pack/of hoe-black boxes." "Steve's Garden" displays a responsive pantheism that is also sensitive to an

often-compromised individual element: the oppressive families of the *Book of the Boat*, or the Whitechapel poems, or the noble but sclerosed mining communities in his later poems.

Griffiths, an accomplished Old English scholar (his translation of *The Battle of Maldon* is exquisite), had something of Saxon sensibilities and ambiguities about him which feed into his nature writing. The shifting sense of the local and the eternal seems quite Saxon, moving forward and back along a continuum, passing through people, their work and their things—not settling.

A piece that articulates the interplay between the pantheistic and the human is the lengthy poem, “The Haswell Change-Over.” Griffiths visits a car boot sale in a shabby County Durham mining town (a flea market where secondhand goods are sold ad hoc by locals from the boots of their cars) to man a stall trying to shift his little press publications. Business appears to be slow and Griffiths watches the miners, dressed in a sort of cod-Country-and-Western-cowboy style, as they move around the market. He was never sure why the miners dressed in that fashion, but imagined they liked bright colors as a counterpoint to the darkness of their working lives. His description of the miners suggests a loose wildness. He meditates on their actions:

Or is it just dream?
Or a tree-plant?
Change-over into goat.
To be a farm

My urban crowd,
this carol
sells aliveness.
(At much much less
than a penny a word!)

Celebrate!
Purchase as an ocean!
A sea of grass,
a main of waving green,
a little oat-acre
for a goat
to put four magic feet
on.

The miners' allotments are referenced, eliding the underworld with the love, relentless return of light, life, that is personal to the miners—travellers between both worlds. In the passage, he also works in, again, his soft spot for goats, who perhaps suggest the god Pan, a human animal amalgam, which even the elderly Griffiths, riven by respiratory disease, always revered. There's a lot of big blokes dancing in his poems. Griffiths told a great story about how in a 70s Angels free festival, he or someone thought it would be a good idea to sacrifice a goat in a pagan ritual thing. They got the goat, but no one could bring themselves to kill it. He recalled how the goat seemed to enjoy the festival and was taken home at first light along a railway line.

When you hung around Griffiths, he was always active at stuff—not signing petitions or waving his hands around; his perpetual employment came from some deeper monkish center. He made it clear that the poet should work for their community in an active, intercessional way. In his later Seaham home, he was highly active in support of the people around him. For example, when council sleazy types were forcing the long-standing ex-mining population out to gentrify the area as a commuter dorm for nearby Newcastle, Griffiths threw himself at the task as a practical expression of a moral dilemma. He wrote pamphlets articulating an active local anarchism, but also badgered the council relentlessly. I'm not sure why, but the council's plans were abandoned.

He could have an edge and wasn't nice, like you and me are nice. He hated, with a quite terrifying intensity, the ministers of local government. I remember a meal with him at a curry house near where I lived where he convinced himself that the two loud and arrogant individuals at a neighboring table were management councillor types. I never really saw him lose it, but convulsions of rage accelerated up and down his body. We left.

Griffiths took his work for his community incredibly seriously. Visiting him, one wouldn't be introduced to artists, poets, etc., but rather go around the houses of the families who lived near him and to whom he appeared to act as an advocate/scrivener. His passion for his community was also articulated in his embrace of the language, current and historical, of the people. Apart from the dictionaries and histories toward the end of his life, Griffiths would write a dense, lyrical verse thick in local words. For example, "On Vane Tempest

Provisionally Shut, 23 October, in the Afternoon, 1992” is a poem about the closure of Seaham’s principal coal mine, upon which his community’s economic and social cohesion depended. In allusive, complex poetry taken from the rhythms and talk of the individuals he heard around him, Griffiths writes with a clear-eyed anger, a wry humour:

While the bishop that tawks to the pollis that bray’d the miners
woz marchin’,
wiv a thrang, weel-hair-comb’d mob
tiv address a petishun
til their Lord
who lives mony a sunny mile frev here,
Satan, wiv a singular bat
o’ his grisly neeve
tew’d Vane Tempest sarely,
aal but drav it
clean below ti the sea.

Griffiths was methodical in his practices. He took his research very seriously and brought a vivifying energy to it. As *The Battle of Maldon* is a driving key of assonance, his Pitmatic work is full of life, human stuff—people speech. He loved talking about the nuances of dialect and the apparent byways of local history, which informed a highly significant overriding narrative. He would talk of local cultures’ fragility but also their vibrancy: Sunderland pottery, cooking ovens in history, the geography of the countryside around Seaham. Lots of these things. And that interest, that joy of life, is there in the poems.

I want to finish by talking about *Star Fish Jail*, his imagining of his friend Delvin McIntosh’s period on remand in Wandsworth prison, which is a work of coruscating genius. It has a clarity and a hallucinated, visionary horror that astounds me and astounded me again when I reread it recently. The work was written, in a very characteristic fashion, for practical reasons, to raise money for McIntosh’s appeal. Long, written in an intense driving line, Griffiths, in the person of McIntosh, recounts his assault by warders, his transfer to solitary confinement, and forced administration of strong antipsychotic drugs as a sedative to quieten his refractory behavior. In extremis, McIntosh/Griffiths speculates about his state and the nature of the world that has left him thus:

What I thought was roughly this : as best as I can create it again –
Like the churning of cliff : like the flush of gears :
 the pulsing, eating into world;
wanted who would put a gold ring on a finger? : Give me clothes?
Watch me the stone-fall of a city : zero's on zero's
And what I was seeing then (what appeared around) :
 was a series of suns;
some all-seeing eyes : yellow suns in a circle,
lamps theirs rotation around, in my eye : light that haunts and harries;
I saw them going orbit, lonely, cool and gold :
 and higher, linked and silent
like I was into thin windless air : up where the sky indigo
and all the snakes and the sea is tamed : everything tends out to us
its gleam-soul shone to me mirror :
 turned sand-kind slow, availed, was some help.

This is poetry of the most extraordinary engagement which, takes the brutalized unit in his cell and considers him in terms of interstellar consequence as well as absolute vulnerability. Ghost-like in his physicality, sentience—English poetry just does not do this stuff. Read it and be judged, judge, because it turns out you were there and in on it. You said one hundred times you weren't—but you were. But there is a compassion, an enraged vitality—you, reader, should go off and really try to attempt something better. In the extraordinary beauty of the world, Bill Griffiths!