**Introduction**

This special issue originates from a Symposium on the work of Bill Griffiths that took place on January 27 2012 in Northumbria University, Newcastle, where Griffiths worked for some years.[[1]](#footnote-1) The aim of the symposium was to bring together academics and poets in order to try to bridge some of those gaps between a poetry that originated from London, and an extensive body of work that was written in the northeast. It is a life’s work that is bewildering in its variety. There were others present at the symposium who knew Griffiths and his work well, and had worked with him, and I’m thinking of Geraldine Monk and Clive Fencott in particular, who made significant contributions to the conversations and to the reading afterwards. Others, Sean Bonney, Mendoza and Luke Roberts, gave papers but chose not to write them up for this issue. This is no reflection on their contribution to the event and I thank all who attended and contributed to its success. It’s conclusions were provisional, but there was a general recognition that much more needed to be done on Griffiths’ work, and particularly in bringing together his poetry and his, for want of a better description, non-poetic work, in order to more fully recognise his contribution to twentieth-century literature and culture.

Some poets become well known for being neglected, or because their work was not sufficiently well published. In many ways Griffiths suffered from neither of these; his work was published extensively not only through his own Pirate press and Amra Imprint, but also through a number of major publishers of experimental and avant-garde work. Reality Street has just published the second volume of his collected poems. If this is neglect then it is a neglect that many poets would be pleased to get. Nor did he suffer from invisibility. He was present at many major poetry events, easily recognisable, and a frequent and very fine reader and performer who reached out to his audience in a way that sought its attention. He was a public intellectual in the broadest sense, and never elitist; if his poetry was never easy he still embraced an audience, albeit in a way that proves the old saying that if you hug the bear, the bear hugs back. Being in the grip of Griffiths’ work is not always a comfortable place.

Yet Will Rowe, a contributor to this volume, in his review of Griffiths *Collected Earlier Poems* in the journal *Radical Philosophy*, talks of a ‘shameful neglect.’[[2]](#footnote-2) And that shameful neglect arises from the fact that Griffiths was no ordinary poet, and as Bill Lancaster describes in his article on Griffiths in the north-east of England, he was not only a poet. His publications included essays on Anglo Saxon, dialect dictionaries, local history, ghost tales, journal articles and others. He was an archivist and a musician who collected pianos. The reason why his neglect is shameful is that he was, in the belief of many, one of the most important writers in the UK in the twentieth-century, and received no support for this during his lifetime. And the reason for his importance might also be the reason for his financial and critical neglect, that his output was prodigious but uneven, that it was poorly distributed and that he operated in many different spheres.

Griffiths didn’t always make it easy for those who wanted to support his work. He challenged notions of the poet, of the literary figure, the academic and the public intellectual. He was all of those things but didn’t look or necessarily behave like any of them. He also challenged notions of the literary text, and his earliest publications used the space of the page to develop poetry that had shifting and unstable meanings, and was reproduced in editions that were loosely stapled together. He took this a stage further, producing versions of texts that seemed to mock any notion of literary authority – you could never become expert in a Griffiths text, because another version might be just around the corner. Similarly his work was never polished, providing the reader the reader with the comforting feeling that they are reading ‘good’ poetry. You couldn’t see yourself or your own cleverness reflected back in it, but rather became absorbed in the reading process, twisted around in the attempt to follow the movements between words and lines and between the sections of sequences.

He also wrote about things that other poets didn’t, about motorcycle gangs, about living in squats and about prison. These are usually the materials of bad writing, and an over romanticised, sub-Kerouac and Bukowski sentimentalism or the stuff of pulp fiction. In Griffiths work however, they became deeply historicised and politicized, where any search for freedom was always in the context of a personal and state repression and a conformist society that he not only disagreed with, but didn’t really understand.

Griffiths died in mid-flow. He was not only publishing poetry, but dialect dictionaries of the north-east that attracted national interest. He had recently published a history of the Northern Sinfonia, was writing pamphlets of ghost stories, and local history and had been editing a journal with Bill Lancaster. His work as an Anglo-Saxon scholar continued, as did his archival work and, of course, the poetry. His overall contribution to the intellectual life of the twentieth- century has not even begun to be evaluated, and it is my hope that this special issue might add to the important work in the *Salt Reader* edited by Rowe and published in 2011 to provide ways into his work for future generations of readers and scholars. It will appear in the same year as the second volume of his collected poems, creating a critical mass of easily accessible material for readers and scholars.

Problems remain. There is no single authoritative source for the range of Griffiths’ work, and while the first two volumes of the collected poems go some way towards this for the poetry, much of the other work remains elusive. Archival material is scattered between the British Library as part of the Cobbing archive and Kings College in London, with other material held in private collections. There has been little work that links Griffiths’ poetry and his extensive interests in dialect, to the folk traditions of the north-east, although both John Seed and Mendoza have begun to develop some links. The sense of British radical history that runs through his work informs his writing as much as any link to contemporary poetic experimentalism. Griffiths was of the British Isles, but never in a sense that limited the possibilities of the form or content of his work.

The papers in this special issue of the journal go some way towards expanding the field of study for Griffiths’ work. Bill Lancaster’s paper, ‘Northern Days’ describes the range of activities that Griffiths was engaged in after he moved to the north east of England. Lancaster’s deep knowledge of the region, and his commitment, provide a perfect context within which Griffiths could work. Lancaster’s vision as an academic, initiator of the Centre for Northern Studies in Northumbria University, and fundraiser, combined with a breadth of understanding that could realise the ways Griffiths could contribute to the work of the centre, resulted in a massive body of writing that has yet to be fully evaluated. He not only facilitated Griffiths writing of the dialect dictionaries, but also his work with the Northern Sinfonia Orchestra archiving their records and writing their history. When Griffiths’ biography is written then Lancaster’s role in it should be writ large in the later years. Griffiths was never an easy person to introduce to corporate academia, and Lancaster’s professional and personal support meant that he had palatable work that could sustain him as an independent writer and scholar. When Lancaster turns to look at Griffiths’ poetry it is no surprise that he gives a detailed and perceptive account of *Tyne Txts*, a volume co-written with Tom Pickard which is based in Newcastle. I am grateful to Bill Lancaster for taking the time to attend the symposium and write this piece. It is information and understanding that could not be gained in any other way, and that it is now available to those working on Griffiths is of paramount importance.

Like Griffiths, John Muckle is deeply embedded in the study of British culture, whilst never wavering in his commitment to internationalism. Muckle’s own work in his novels and his poetry is set amongst those excluded from mainstream society, whether in the marginal community of Jaywick, the care homes of Surrey or the mental hospitals of Colchester. He too has moved in and out of academia, but worked most of his life as an independent writer and scholar, and his essay contains details of his friendship with Griffiths and the ways that high and low culture formed an important part of Griffiths’ world view. His essay locates Griffiths work deep in British mythology, in the belief in giants, figures that could over step any marks laid down by a petty bureaucracy. This emphasis on mythology does not, however, detract from Muckle’s intellectual and personal understanding of the historical, cultural and material conditions of the production of Griffiths’ work, and this cultural background is reinforced by an insightful comparison with Wallace Stevens.

Alan Halsey’s knowledge of Griffith’s poetry is encyclopedic, and he is the leading authority on his work. This is amply demonstrated in his essay, which describes the process of editing the *Early Collected Poems*, and is reinforced by his commitment to experimental performance based poetics, which give him an understanding of Griffiths processes and practices of producing and distributing his work. He explains, in detail, the variations of the work between different publications, where those acts of publication take on some of the qualities of a performance. Poems change because of the historical context, the place of performance, through aesthetic decisions and through chance and accident. Through his essay we get an insight into the ways Griffiths’ texts reach their various versions, and the way an editor might arrive at a ‘final’ version without any notion of revision.

Allen Fisher was a peer of Griffiths in the experimental London poetry scene of the 1970s. A painter as well as a poet, his own output is prolific and his major sequences include *Place* and *Gravity as a Consequence of Shape*. His artistic production continues, and his recent book *Proposals* combines paintings and poems in ways that challenge assumed conversations between the textual and the visual. His own practice and his writings on aesthetics combine to produce an essay on the idea of sequence in Griffiths’ work, carefully unpacking the relationship between different aspects of the work. In doing so he produces an exemplar of the relationship between research and practice as he explores one of the key processes of experimental poetry and the ways that it can produce a poetry that can simultaneously engage with the voices of the poet and varieties of information.

Jeff Hilson is a poet and critic from a younger generation who also shares a background with Griffiths in the London ‘Writers Forum’ workshops that were so important and influential in the formation of alternative poetries. Hilson draws on his groundbreaking editorial and academic work on the sonnet, captured in the *Reality Street Book of Sonnets*, to locate Griffiths in the trajectory of English language poetry. The sonnet form, famously described by Griffiths as a ‘disguise for evil’, is used as a way of exploring the functions of poetic form through deeply textual analyses, and the radical ways that Griffiths uses the sonnet against itself, to challenge writing conventions.

Juha Virtanen is an academic and poet, and one of a new generation to come to Griffiths’ work. His essay deftly combines ideas of cooking and everyday life to demonstrate the ways that structures of political power and influence can be discovered. Within the context of Vaneigem’s important work on everyday life, he asks whether these apparently domestic poems by Griffiths can be ‘revolutionary’. As is the case with Halsey and others, he combines his reading experience with the transient nature of a text only ever published in its complete form as a pamphlet through Griffiths’ own Amra imprint, and then appearing partially in other collections.

The issue concludes with an essay by Will Rowe, who traces the relationship between oppression and the imposition of order through physical confinement and the uses of poetic form in Griffiths’ work. Through a sustained engagement with *Cycles* he explores the ways that the poetry offers a critique of the legal system and its inherent violence and ‘the beat of systemic violence is turned around to become composition.’ Griffiths work engages with a search for freedom, and a rebellion that might involve violence, and where the prison is not ‘a recognizable place in a given order, but a place where order is cancelled and understanding can begin.’

That these essays should, in very different ways, engage with the politics of Griffiths’ work is unsurprising. Tom Raworth said, on the death of the American poet Edward Dorn, that ‘fools can sleep easier’.[[3]](#footnote-3) While to some extent the same can be said of Griffiths, the work that remains to be done means that his work will, for some time, continue to provide new and devastating critiques of a culture that, in many material ways didn’t acknowledge him in life. Giorgio Agamben talks about the way that:

Death transports the deceased from the sphere of the living – where diachronic and synchronic signifiers coexist – into that of the dead, where there is only synchrony.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The diachronic process of living becomes a synchronous structure, where everything in the life now ended can be seen as a totality, can, if you like, be spread out on the table. The life’s work becomes locked into a closed system, it is framed. It is a death that, in Heidegger’s terms, both ‘limits and determines … whatever totality is possible for Dasein’, and a death following which there is nothing more outstanding.[[5]](#footnote-5) The everyday, that diurnal labour, comes to an end. A writing life, incapable of representation while the subject is alive and capable of moving off in any direction, can now be represented or summarised.

Fortunately that’s not the whole story. Death, for Griffiths, is not the final signifier, it is not a conclusion that allows his work to be spread out and the totality of connections made. Rather, it serves as a starting point to begin to understand the range of work he produced and the ways that different parts might relate to each other. As Agamben goes on to say, after death the ‘signifier’, Bill Griffiths, although separated from the corporeal frame, continues to ‘wander’. And Griffiths work, not just his name, continues to wander. The form of the work, its open structures, resists folding back into a totality that can receive any kind of final explanation. This is true of all writing, of course, but I’m trying to claim that Griffiths work is a special case, that the sheer breadth of his subject matter and geographical range, the complexities of its relationships to humanity and the depth of his historical reach make his work difficult to contain.

The early poems in *Cycles* alone might be seen to be a contribution enough to British poetry in the way they combine complex histories of form and linguistic diversity with an understanding of what it is to be entirely human in an order that is always about to tip over into inhumanity. In retrospect they will come to be seen as one star in a constellation of work that contains a variety and range of scale and intensity, and which challenges notions of a complete work.

1. See *The Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* Vol 4 No 2, 2012 for a report on the symposium by Juha Virtanen. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Radical Philosophy* No 168, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/dorn/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Agamben, Giorgio. *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*. (London: Verso, 2007) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)