# Mobility and Automobility in Bill Griffiths

Griffiths’ poetry produces a range of complex responses to the ethics and politics of ideas of movement and practices of mobility in mid and late twentieth-century British culture.[[1]](#footnote-1) His life on the margins of settled social structures, and he lived in squats in London, on a houseboat that was later destroyed by fire, and as a guest worker in Germany, constructed a mobility that was in part a chosen way of life, and in part enforced through economic and legal restraints. For many years he wore Hell’s Angels colours, and had ‘love’ and ‘hate’ in homemade ‘prison’ tattoos on his knuckles. His appearance, particularly at a time when Hell’s Angels were seen as potential shock troops for the counter culture, was a source of intense speculation in the experimental poetry scene, within which he was an immediately recognisable figure. After settling in Seaham in County Durham he immersed himself in the region and the language of the North-East of England, writing books and articles on local dialect, some of which gained national recognition, and essays on botany and geology, local histories and ghost stories. Griffiths also supported a variety of individual prisoner’s causes, and the writing from his engagement with prisons and prisoners is a theme in his work from the 1970s to his final poems in *Tyne Txts,* andforms an important element in this study of mobility in his work, a mobility that was never only physical or geographical, but also one of thought and identity. [[2]](#footnote-2)

The complex and shifting nature of his public and private persona, and the range of his intellectual interests, was matched by not only the volume and range of his poetry, but also its instability. The poems themselves move between frequent versions of texts that defy any notions of an original or authoritative version, and this is reinforced by the diverse methods of publication.[[3]](#footnote-3) They exist in a fluid state, and their movement is not only between various written and spoken performances, but also in the unstable ways they produce meaning. For Griffiths the completed or finished text can only ever be a possibility that is never achieved, or is only achieved temporarily, and in the same way that every reading of a poem is a performance that produces new meanings, each publication context provides an opportunity for a variation of the text.[[4]](#footnote-4) These general comments are, of course, limited to his poetic output. The relationship between his non-poetic work and the poetry is a topic too big for this essay and the scale of his total output is still being assessed, but if mobility is also mobility of thought, then this is clearly an important aspect of Griffiths’ later work as he roamed across disciplines.

What became his final destination, Seaham in County Durham, and where he lived for the last two decades of his life, locates ideas and practices of mobility and movement.[[5]](#footnote-5) An ex-mining town, and therefore literally dug into County Durham, Seaham is also a notable harbour, built and expanded by the Londonderry family in the nineteenth century in order to export coal that was extracted from mines that extended three miles under the North Sea. The harbour itself is a unique and complex construction, still in use as both a major port and a local facility for fishing and leisure purposes, and one of the first sights on driving into contemporary Seaham is a somewhat incongruous large modern warehouse complex that forms a key part of the import and export business that has taken the place of shipping coal. [[6]](#footnote-6) Seaham was always, therefore, despite its relative geographic and economic marginalisation in an English or British context, linked to global trade, and its inhabitants deeply aware of the mobility practices of capital and labour. During its development as a coal mining area in the nineteenth century it attracted workers from Ireland, Wales and Cornwall, drawn there for work, and sometimes lured there unknowingly as strike breakers. Griffiths’ decision to move there, and his engagement with the language, culture and landscape of the North East was also in part economic; it was a place where he could afford to buy a house after the mines had closed and property prices were cheap. It was also an area he had visited in the 1960s, and an early poem entitled ‘North Shields’ (Griffiths, 2010: 31) is clearly located in the Tyneside landscape as it positions itself between Tynemouth to the east and South Shields across the river. The move from London initiated a rich and complex engagement with a region whose local characteristics were not the result of isolation from the mobility of people and things, but part of them, and where a strong local identity was constructed through the global breadth of its cultural and economic engagement.

His interests in ideas and practices of movement and mobility is evident in his poetry from the 1970s, where the work produces and critiques romanticised notions of biker gang culture. They are the kind of ideas that lead Sonny Barger, in his memoir *Hell’s Angel*, to describe the motorcycle run as ‘a moving party’.[[7]](#footnote-7) (Barger: 1) It is also a party that, while enjoying the freedom of the ‘open road’, is always likely to meet legal challenges. Its mobility is always threatened. Barger again says: ‘The Law and the road are one’, emphasising the symbiotic relationship between those that enforce traffic regulations, and are therefore free to operate outside the law, and the biker gangs, who challenge the restrictions of the law. (3) Despite being enmeshed in this web of law enforcement, and Barger and Hunter S Thompson’s books on the Hell’s Angels are as much about policing and the law as they are about biker culture, automobility was also an escape from conformity, from the ‘nine to five working stuff’ and the authority it assumed (Barger: 23). Barger’s book begins as a personal narrative of the history of the Oakland Hell’s Angels and the social and cultural conditions under which it was constructed. His desire was to be part of ‘… a close-knit club of men who could jump on their bikes, ride cross-country if they wanted to, and not abide by rules or clocks … I wanted a group less interested in a wife and two point five kids in a crackerbox house … and more interested in riding, drag racing and raising hell.’ (27) By the end of the book Barger’s life story has becomes a list of constant interaction with the police, of court cases and time spent in jail as the crimes of mobility are replaced by racketeering and general gangsterism. His first arrest and imprisonment followed a drunken bike ride and a collision with a car, while by the 1960s he says: ‘After Altamont life was one criminal cluster fuck after another.’ (177) Rather than mobility becoming an escape from the ‘system’, it simply becomes a way into the immobility of prison life, and the search for ‘freedom’ becomes the process by which freedom is lost. The petty traffic offences, for riding motorbikes that didn’t meet legislation, for speeding offences and other minor misdemeanours, become federal offences involving drugs, guns and murder. Hunter S Thompson’s book *Hell’s Angels* follows a similar trajectory. The ‘runs’ are always carried out in tandem with a police operation that might purport to threaten the run but is also in collusion with it. Brian Greenaway’s account of his life as a Hell’s Angel, which Bill Griffiths responds to in his piece ‘Review of Brian Greenaway’ (Griffiths n.d.:), is also one of constant interaction with the police and he says: ‘I knew the law would do anything they could to get me knicked, and in return I never missed a chance to run them down or get one of them alone in a dark alley.’ (Greenaway: 54)

The automobility of the Hell’s Angels depended on a road and a motorcycle, both highly legislated with highway codes and a meshwork of rules and regulations, and heavily policed by skilled officers in patrol cars, now partially replaced and reinforced by CCTV and other monitoring and recording systems. It also depended on one of the largest global industries, the automobile industry, and although they customised their motorcycles to create ‘choppers’ Hell’s Angles were also, at least in the USA, loyal to the Harley Davidson brand, despising the emerging Japanese machines. In their desire to live outside of mainstream social systems and structures they found themselves locked within them. Their apparent freedom, itself commodified within American culture and landscape, also depended on the immobility of the women who looked after them, their wives and girlfriends. Thompson might be exaggerating when he speaks of ‘the outlaws powerful disdain for either home telephones or mailing addresses’, and that ‘with rare exceptions they have assigned this aspect of reality to various wives, ‘mamas’, girlfriends and friendly hustlers’ (Thompson: 158), and seems to contradict himself when in other parts of the book he talks about places they work and live, but freedom from the everyday routines of keeping a roof over their heads was an important part of the mythology.[[8]](#footnote-8) This dependence on women for a measure of stability is accompanied by a deep misogyny, exemplified by Barger’s explanation of the rules of the Oakland chapter. The rule that ‘Girls will not sit in on meetings unless it is a special occasion’ has a two-word commentary: ‘Self-explanatory.’ (Barger: 42-3). The casual dismissal of the rights of women in the club is accompanied by an apparent casual attitude to rape, where it is a weapon in the war against conventional society, and against other gangs. It soon becomes clear that the romantic freedom the Hell’s Angels seek is only another set of conformities as hard to live with as those they seek to leave behind.

It is no real surprise therefore, that despite Griffiths different life trajectory, his early experiences with motorcycle gangs should have initiated what became a lifelong concern with the relationship between mobility and the freedom that automobility might suggest, and processes of law and imprisonment and its role in modern capitalism. Hi response is, however more politically reflective than the cruder tirades of Barger or the low rent sociology of Thompson.[[9]](#footnote-9) Mobility for Griffiths always means more than just running in one direction, on a Hell’s Angel’s ‘run’ or in the escape from the tedium of everyday life. Ideas of mobility, and practices of movement and motion, are profoundly implicated in both his politics and his poetics in the following ways.

1. Mobility is not just the geographical automobility of the motorcyclist, but also the mobility of the subject position. For Griffiths the outlaw is excluded from capital (apart from the shiny motorcycle, which goes everywhere with him), and seeks to break out of a condition of alienation by taking on a variety of subject positions through sustaining a mobility that constructs a variety of situations. From those situations different ways of being emerge. In a reverse of the more usual political assumptions, for Griffiths it is those who would traditionally control mobility and the power over movement, the bourgeoisie and their representatives in the police, who become fixed in his work. This is not a naïve or celebratory attitude on Griffiths’ part, and he makes no assumption that escape from either the network of legal regulation that surrounds movement through geographical space or the dominant ideology are possible, but he does question the notion of a proletariat left helpless and paralysed by the rapid sweep of global capital.
2. Through the relationship between mobility of the subject position and social class, the mobility of the outlaw figure becomes inextricably linked to social mobility. This connection is not unique to Griffiths. It was the mobility of workers and their ability to travel to work that supported the development of the suburbs as the twentieth century symbol of social mobility, rather than the non-conformity that the mobility of the motorcyclist pursued. The outlaw figure is therefore an embodied critique of any notion of a hierarchy of class positions.
3. The mobility of individuals takes place within a capitalist system that has to sustain the movement of capital and goods and services in order for it to function. It is only through the movement of things that profit can be turned. Ernest Mandel, in his paper on ‘The Laws of Motion of the Capitalist Mode of Production’[[10]](#footnote-10), refers to the way that capital is ‘thrown into circulation in order to increase in value’, and that ‘surplus-value’ might be ‘produced in the process of production’ but it is ‘realised in the process of circulation.’ It is also a capitalist system that moves people, and where a mobile labour force, across national boundaries, helps to reduce the costs of production.
4. Mobility is desirable for the wealthy traveller with a global perspective, for the outlaw figure who wants to transcend pressures of social conformity that capitalism must inevitably deploy in order to sustain a work force, for the economic migrant and for the political refugee, but in very different ways. It happens on a micro level, and the circulation of capital has been likened to the circulation of blood in the human body, and at a macro level through processes of colonialism and imperialism.
5. The ultimate punishment is to reduce the mobility of a citizen through imprisonment, and Griffiths explores the different levels of immobility that the prison system employ, from the open prison at Highpoint to the ‘squash cell’ at Wandsworth.
6. The complexity of Griffiths’ poetic practices and the forms he constructs are themselves a kind of mobility practice. They produce a reading and written subject that is always moving between positions, and a subjectivity that is temporary and conditional. The spatial organisation of the material on the page often requires a mobile reading practice, where both speed and direction are difficult to determine.[[11]](#footnote-11)
7. And in addition to six, although a separate point, the polysemous nature of the work and its tendency to produce multiple meanings, also produces a mobility not unlike that of the dialectic and its movement between ideas. This is in part a consequence of the formal experimentation he employs, and in part a consequence of the range of material from which the poems are constructed.

Griffiths particular contribution to an understanding of mobility therefore lies in his complex treatment of the production of cultural and economic power and the nature of subjectivity under varying conditions, particularly imprisonment. ‘Cycle’, the title of his early poem sequence, is a reference both to the idea of a song cycle, and also to a motorbike, and suggests constant circular movement. The second line of the first part of the sequence, ‘Cycles One, On Dover Borstal’ reads ‘as I ain’t like ever to be still but’, suggesting both not liking to be still and not likely to be still, developing the relationship between mobility (or immobility) and subjectivity in the context of imprisonment. The uncertain syntax is completed, if in a way that is unresolved and ambivalent, with the next line, ‘kaleidoscope’. (Griffiths, 2010: 64-6) The addition of the word ‘but’ sustains momentum, linking the opening phrase to the idea of the ‘kaleidoscope’, although forces the ‘kaleidoscope’ to move between noun and verb. While a reader might expect ‘kaleidoscopic’ to complete the grammar, or the inclusion of a possessive pronoun before ‘kaleidoscope’, they don’t get either. The image is startlingly complex, and constructs a situation that produces the subject. If the poetry is about incarceration then the moving figure within the cell is reflected back and fragmented by the multiple mirrors of the kaleidoscope, picked up again in the lines later in the poem where ‘You’re you / and I aint anyone but you // the bright crazy rings in agate’ where the image of the kaleidoscope is also like that of the architecture of a jail, with spokes radiating out from a hub. The word contains within itself something that sounds like, but is not, ‘collide’, where something hits up against something else and the final line of the first stanza, ‘lock and knock my sleeping’ confirms by its sound the slammed door of the cell. It is poetry that succeeds both in providing interlocking sounds and images, and a trochaic stress pattern that maintains the open echoing sound of its first word, ‘Ictus’. The subject in the cell is reduced from the trajectory of ‘running in the sun’ to going round in circles in the cell (in ‘cycles’), where his ‘feet are convicted’ are / prisoners in prison boots.’ His feet, the primary form of mobility, are themselves held prisoner.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In an earlier sequence entitled ‘1 – 7’, the early images in the poem repeatedly reference contained circuits, and through its animal imagery the experience of domestic life as a caged tiger. It is also a ‘merrygoround’, another circular motion, and he wants to write of ‘the spinning of the sun’ as day follows day in apparently never ending circuits. The speaking subject of the poem is held ‘in the loop’, before saying ‘this is my motorbike, and new - / for hiding’. The bike may be stolen and need to be kept hidden, but the rider of the motorbike also becomes invisible through the mobility it provides, constructing another kind of freedom. The desire to escape routine is never far away, a process that changes the circular motion into a trajectory. ‘One sun / you got up and run. I just aint Santa / Staid/ not sticking in jobs.’ Staying in one place becomes ‘staid’, not only sounding like the past tense of stay, and reflecting the imperative and the passive such as ‘I was staid’ or held back in one place, but also referring to a process of social conformity, of becoming ‘staid’.

Griffiths’ early poems enact practice of movement, and ideas of automobility, that critique any notion of home. This is reflected in the imperatives of Griffiths’ working life, and Clive Bush reports that Griffiths lived in Germany as a ‘guest worker’ before returning to live on a houseboat, itself an impermanent and mobile home that was accidentally burned while undergoing repairs. (Bush: 212) Hunter S Thompson in his book *Hell’s Angels* reinforces the romance of a nomadic lifestyle, free of responsibilities, when he writes: ‘I’ve never met an Angel who claimed to have a home town in any sense that people who use that term might understand it.’ (Thompson: 73) In *Five Poems* Griffiths says: ‘I wld kal jiri to the Ace when I wanted a home [go home’, a place that only functioned as a temporary home before it ‘shut’. (Griffiths 2010: 137) It is a poem in which he neither has a private home other than the public café of the Ace (a favourite place for motorcyclists on the London North Circular in the 1960s), nor a home within language. The sequence ‘sixteen poems for vic the gypsy bob and others’ begins by locating the poem in ‘English Heritage’, in the abbey of Rievaulx in north Yorkshire. (Griffiths 2010: 107-10) In language close to that of courtly romance the rider is ‘iron shoed, hot heart’, who turns in the direction of the ‘bays and pillars’ of the abbey. It is an act of riding that, in the third section of the sequence, involves the body, and not only the slightly downbeat ‘planks was my dogs’, referring to the stiffness of his feet from the cold. In an act of self-reflection the motorcyclist looks down at his ‘long arms’ on which ‘lay blue lines’ (the veins), which later become ‘wide arms astride’. The bike itself, a Sunbeam 7, has a petrol tank shaped like a heart when looked down on from above, making the bike into a living thing. The ‘one block’ refers to a single cylinder, although the Sunbeam S7 was a twin with cylinders unusually arranged in front and behind, meaning that the rider could only see the single block in front. The ‘line shine’ presumably caused by the ‘clock wise counter sun’, hit one of the cylinders like a sundial. It is the view of the world from the back of a motorbike, where the view is of the bike itself and the body of the rider, and the machine not only covers space, but is part of determining time. The rider does not inhabit a place, or a home, but lives within his own body in a moving landscape, looking both at it and out from it.

 The poem is not spoken in one voice, despite the ‘I’ in the opening poem, but its detachment from the individual lyric brings with it more human engagement rather than less. The summer section, 1-9, the action takes place outside of domestic settings and in appropriated space as it shifts around to construct the situation from a range of perspectives. Not only are the motorcyclists on a variety of ‘cycles’, from a Sunbeam to a ‘Hog’ (a Harley Davidson), but the colours range from blue to amber to pink to red before the Autumn mists develop a fragmented chryospraze light. At winter time the figure is immobile (although not tranquil) sat by the ‘silver ribs and its pipes’ (the cooling fins of the cylinder head and the exhausts) of the organic motorbike. It is, like the birds, killed by the cold ‘as still as birds carcass’ and the hand in the poem is a ‘castle hand’ from an Englishman’s home is his castle. The ghost in the poem is both the ghost of the bike, that ‘getta die undignified’ as it is shipped out on the back of a truck under a ‘navy moon’ and the ghost of the rider. The sequence ends with the story of an ‘Angel’ who was ‘run into the cells to fight hisself’ and who thinks he is the ‘new law’. It’s a futile gesture in the face of the Judge who hands down the ‘paper, Master | rondeau’, a form of authority and control that is like that of the repetitive poetic form.

Griffiths’ interests in mobility and the law are more fully realised in an extended treatment of Wandsworth Jail through the narrative of one prisoner (Griffiths’ friend Delvin or Delvan McIntosh) in the pamphlet *Star Fish Jail* (Amra, n.d. probably 1993), in *Notes from Delvin McIntosh* (Amra Imprint n.d.), *Delvan’s Book* (Amra Imprint n.d. probably 1994) and a later sequence ‘Durham: a visit to Durham Gaol’ (Griffiths 2002: 7-25).[[13]](#footnote-13) McIntosh’s story also forms section 6 of the poem sequence published as *Mr Tapscott: a poem in nine sections with inserts & list of resources*. The Tapscott sequence traces the history of Liverpool from a racial perspective, and from the immigrant ships of William Tapscott, through the reforming activities of William Roscoe to the Toxteth ‘riots’ of the 1980s. The prelude to the riots provides a context for the section on the way that his race, his poor educational background and his previous record for robbery and violence made him an easy victim for the police. Griifths also published *revising prison: an essay*, giving an account of the injustices perpetuated by the prison system in essay form.

One intellectual background to this work, and particularly to *Star Fish Jail*, is clearly Foucauldian, and the ‘centre like an EYE’ that references Foucault’s panopticon. The architectural design of Wandsworth prison (‘Wanno’ in the narrative) is the ‘*Star Fish*’ of the title of *Star Fish Jail*, and a note at the front of the text in Griffiths’ hand gives a brief history of the ‘star-shaped’ prison and that ‘most of which (e.g. Wandsworth) still claim to function.’[[14]](#footnote-14) (*Star Fish* n.p.) It is a place with multiple forms of containment: ‘In the centre of Wanno is an octagon: in the centre of the octagon is the circle || and in the centre of the circle: is a star.’ The punctuation through the colon, a feature that runs through the poem, brings this reader up at a dead stop as the different borders are arrived at. The space is not open to all, but ‘an open fret of steel panels, || banned to prisoners feet.’ It is a privileged space, for officers only, that is ‘open, frail … uniquely symmetrical … even and full of sense.’ The star shape becomes not only an animal with five fingers that correspond to the five wings of the main section of the jail, but also an animal that cannot move on its own on dry land. Once out of its sea environment it is immobile. And in *Star Fish Jail* the immobility is that of the prisoner, put into a situation that constructs their subjectivity: ‘reciprocally framing us as real: creating all words, || central recorder history-god: who … realises beings as arbitrary …’.

On the cover three hand-coloured five-fingered stars are arranged vertically on the page, making a bullet point of the each word of the title, while ‘bill griffiths’, all in lower case, runs vertically up the right hand side. Published by Amra Imprint in Seaham, Griffiths own press, it has an ISBN but no date. The title page begins ‘Bill Griffiths Presents’ followed by the title. This, he seems to be saying, is not his story, but someone else’s story, a trope he continues into the opening four lines: [[15]](#footnote-15)

I

begin:

started

with this ginger-headed geezer: this screw. (*Star Fish*)

In the exchange between prisoner and prison warder and an argument over a letter to a solicitor, the prisoner becomes both ‘wanker’ and ‘black bastard’, but, as the prisoner points out, not a ‘real black’ but a ‘half-breed’, stuck between ethnicities. These exchanges that construct the subjectivity of the prisoner are reinforced by a description of the prison that follows. Still in the first person voice of the prisoner it is described as an: ‘Overawing place I guess: Huge … roofs of cascade sound: landings cleared for beatings’. The nature of its proportions and materials are inhuman, and create an environment in which, despite its size, ‘there isn’t any room for law and things.’ Rather, it is a society made up of ‘secrets: divisions: || un-unites:’ and where the only human connection left is ‘terror’. The eye at the centre of the ‘Star Fish Jail’ becomes an eye that ‘Not sees: shows’ and in its representation of the world of the prison ‘makes you in it.’ It is a prison in which he is encouraged to be violent, to ‘bust the cell up a bit’, an offence for which he is locked in solitary confinement.

 The second part of the book begins by describing the life of the prisoner before prison, a story of domestic violence at the hands of stepmother and subsequent children’s homes, before tipping over into a life of crime.[[16]](#footnote-16) It is a life of crime in which his ability to move becomes severely curtailed, from his first encounter with the police where he is knocked to the ground and put in a car and then a cell, to his second, where ‘They pinned me against the fence’ and then ‘got me on the floor: pinned me there.’ It continues to describe his prison sentence for burglary when he is goaded into breaking up his cell, put into ‘solitary’ where he again breaks up his cell, and is then ‘dragged to this new hole’ and experiences ‘manhandling || like I could have no body even for myself: but had to be taught their way.’ He continues to resist, and ‘couldn’t settle, couldn’t sit’ and ‘tore up the mattress’ with the result that ‘they only pinned me: got the mattress out’ and he is reduced to movements that serve to keep the body in one place, rather than move it between places: ‘a set of moving ribs: jerking legs.’ Finally he is injected with a chemical tranquiliser, that reduces his movement to an even more limited shaking of the hands, an ironic mirroring of the time his thumbs are pulled ‘back and up to breaking: to bend and march me.’ These physical acts of constriction, and the effect of the drugs, produce an image of hope, taken from the image of the starfish that has been used to construct the spatial configuration of the jail and is now used to construct the prisoner. Just as the starfish is able to regenerate limbs, so too the prisoner wants to become ‘Loose-limbed, bright-skinned: limping by assault || see: I regenerate. || know: I want to grow.’

The poem develops the relationship between mobility and subjectivity, and in particular the ways that the subject of the poems is constructed through the situations that he is forced into. His ‘freedom’ before imprisonment is only ever conditional and he experiences varying degrees of immobility, whether at the hands of the step-mother and under the careless gaze of a father, at the children’s home he was sent to, or in the prison where his ability to do anything for himself is systematically eroded. After leaving the children’s home it is his sense of adventure that gets him into trouble, and his desire for material wealth: ‘I wanted the buzz: the adventure of the enterprise of the chance of it. || I really wanted to have some money: to own, || to venture your everything against my nothing.’

 A later poem, ‘Durham’subtitled *(A visit to Durham Gaol)*, purports to describe a prison visit, although goes well beyond that. (Griffiths 2002: 7-25) In his interview with Jane Marsh he describes how he became involved:

I was wandering through Durham Market Place one morning with well-known poetry figure Nicholas Johnson when I came on a stall manned by the bright sparks of the North-East ABC. Not thinking my guest was likely to want to stop and chat with them, I took some leaflets instead, one of which was an appeal on behalf of Ray Gilbert, then in Durham Jail.  I visited him twice there before he was moved away and was impressed by his resilience and commonsense in an environment a degree hotter than Hell.[[17]](#footnote-17)

It is increasingly speculative both in terms of its range of subject matter, and its relationship between the specific event of the visit and the general observations that might arise from that. The poem opens with a section entitled ‘The Great Gate of Durham’. I assume he means the Great North Gate, demolished in 1920. A guide book says:

[There were] a number of gates that pierced the old city walls of Durham but the most impressive of them all was The Great North Gate which stood at the top of the North Bailey where it joined Saddler Street. First built around 1072 and adjoining the castle to the west, it played a very important part in controlling the movement of traffic into the peninsula area.

In the early fifteenth century the building was largely rebuilt … to accomodate the city gaol. For the next four-hundred years it served a joint purpose of gate and prison. In the latter days of its life it was known as the `Gaol Gates'. John Howard, a prison reformer visited this gaol in 1774 and described its conditions; "The men are put at night into dungeons,one seven feet square for three prisoners - another the `Great Hole' has only a little window. In this I saw six prisoners most of them transports chained to the floor - in that situation they had been for many weeks and were very sick."[[18]](#footnote-18)

The Great Gate therefore limited and controlled the movement of people and goods through the city of Durham. That it was turned into the prison meant that it became further connected to ideas of mobility and immobility, situating the incarcerated on the edge between the city and the land lying outside the walls. Griffiths links the gate to the material that passes through it when he describes it as ‘A vast speculation’ (Griffiths, 2002: 7) held up by ‘plump pillars’. He also begins to construct some of the complexities of thought that will be explored through the poem, and in particular that the judiciary ‘declare the product the cause’, an assertion that while criminal law blames crime on the prisoners, it is the law that produces outlaws and therefore criminals. In the same way that the space of Wandsworth produces the subjectivity of the prisoner, makes him what he becomes, it is the situation of the law and its plump pillars that makes the criminal. The ‘truth’, however, is less straightforward than the simple ‘sentences the court hand out’, a reference to both the reductive prose of the law and the prison sentence that results from judicial process, and ‘is the consequence of many molecules || and may not be explained.’ The situation may construct the subject, but that does not mean that either the ‘being’ of the subject or the situation can have single ontological status in a chain of cause and event, but that both are multiplicities with complex overlapping connections and differences.

 The poem moves between the material presence of the building and the constellation of the starry sky. The text on the Bayeux tapestry that references Halley’s comet, ‘ISTI MIRANT STELLAM’, indicates ‘HOPE’, and might refer back to ‘sentence’ (prison or syntactic) or the ‘motto’ of the first section, or refer forwards to the end of the third section of the sequence: ‘IS AND NOT’, indicating the co-presence of optimism and not-optimism. Capitalised words and phrases appear in this section and infrequently throughout the poem, and, like Mallarme’s ‘Un Coup de Des’ with which they resonate, says something about chance procedures of both the law, and poetic indeterminacy, becoming fixed points around which ideas congregate. The sky itself, in the fourth section, brings the possibility, but not the probability, of annihilation of the self, a place in which the prisoner can lose him or herself and a symbol of common humanity. The poem continues, not with the materiality of presence or the potential absence of the sky, but to the mundane and everyday. A list of instructions to the visitor to hand over money and possessions before visiting is accompanied by a picturesque description of a wood delivery, and an explanatory note at the end of poem. The explanatory note links the material presence of the prison walls with the abstraction of money that disappears within them. The ‘hapless visitor’, and unlike *Star Fish Jail* ‘Durham’ is narrated by the visitor and the prisoner never appears, has thirty pounds, described as ‘some good earning’, stolen, ‘though the locker was still neatly secured’. The money was recouped by, ironically, the publication of the poem (this poem) in a ‘tiny edition’. The event brings together the ‘unfortunate’ prisoner and the ‘hapless’ visitor, who in turn becomes a victim of the prison system.

 An extended passage on ‘Kamandi’, a comic book hero who lives in a post-apocalyptic future where the humans have been reduced to savagery and the world is run by highly evolved animals paves the way for future sections of the poem, where Griffiths imagines the inmates as caged animals with ‘each head … a bear’s head’ and is advised by his ‘Vergil’ that they are ‘semi-wild’. Their animal characteristics are constructed by the cage that contains them, and as the narrator says: ‘by the terrible cage | they must be dangerous’. The cage is inside the ‘Perimeter and Fencing’ encountered earlier, a barrier that ‘only McVicar got through’, and beyond the ‘Guard Dog’. There is, on travelling deeper into the prison, a gradual loss of self. In section 14 entitled ‘Ledge of Thighs’, ‘you flatten to keep the ledge’ to continue and realise ‘it would be fatal | to extrude at this point yourself’. (15) This loss of a projected or extended self results in a section that draws on material from his early work and the ‘runs’ with the Hell’s Angels, on ‘a journey of | a prezzy’, where the prezzy is the ‘prez’ of ‘War W/Windsor text 3: || To Johnny Prez Hells Angels Nomads’ (Griffiths 2010: 119), a poem that references Wormwood Scrubs and Brixton prison. It is also a poem in which ‘One of a group of blokes like zoo-bears | Hill-less and wall-less were | Underanimally fighting back’. Back in Durham the ‘journey of | a prezzy’ results in ‘a tumble of copper’, describing the sun at evening time and the police, who are collectively a ‘tumble’ and who individually fall over. The poem imagines freedom not only from the prison but also the laws of physics, where bike riders can accelerate around bends, and ends with the image of the ‘sunbeam’ (both the Sunbeam motorbike and the beam of the sun) referenced earlier and its ‘click quartz clock’ that ‘end[s] the run’. (18) Biographies and the histories of prisons begin to coincide, and the ‘one block’ of the earlier poem, the cylinder block, becomes one of the ‘Old Blocks’ of the prison, and stuck in the ‘Intermediate Doors’ of section 22, ‘you’ are requested to ‘configure yourself’ as if in relation to the ‘Hayia Sophia’, a mosque and a museum. The poem ends in the ‘Visitor’s Centre’, a place where there is ‘Suddenly less love’. (p. 24) As the narrator has passed deeper into the prison, the qualities of ‘Memory and ability and confidence | have passed, ring after ring.’ These human qualities are a consequence of the concealment of the night sky, upon which men might wonder, and it’s replacement by ‘the light-neon’ and the ‘CLASH CLASH CLASH of doors’, cutting off any possibility of escape, whether physical or mental. As the narrator says: ‘I don’t think | I don’t think much of this idea.’

The poems foreground mobility practices and the actual and symbolic importance of automobility. For Griffiths to arrive or to stay is often a catastrophe. The figure at the end of ‘Vic the Gypsy’ is left on the garage floor, putting together the bits that make up a bike, while the unnamed Hells Angel is found running around a cell, fighting himself. (Griffiths 2010: 110) Going around in circles, deprived of the trajectory out, the response is to beat yourself up when the misplaced desire for freedom is curtailed. Mobility, affirmed through practices of movement, is part of the process of constructing situations from which subjectivity emerges, however temporarily. It not only brings about change in the subject and in the constructed situation, but also makes evident the material qualities that move, both wearing away the surfaces from the things that move and are moved through, reducing and accumulating value. Locating mobility in relation to imprisonment is particularly suggestive in Griffiths’ poetry, affirming it as a concern that runs through his work and from the pamphlets produced in London in the early 1970s to the late work in the North East, and the description of Ray Gilbert’s journey through Newcastle on the way to prison so evocatively described by John Muckle and Bill Lancaster in their consideration of *Tyne Texts*.

There are other potential approaches to the ways that a consideration of practices of mobility might support new readings of the poetry, not least those suggested by Griffiths’ late work in the northeast of England, where he not only wrote poems but stories, histories and other work. That research will have to wait, and requires considerable preparatory activity, gathering together a range of self published items that have not only escaped official attention from mainstream literary scholars, but also those who closely followed his poetry both before and after his untimely death.

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1. In an interview with Jane Marsh in 2005 Griffiths describes himself as a ‘nomadic soul’ (<http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=15617>), and in the prefatory note to the volume *Nomad Sense* (London: Talus, 1998) he ironically references the advert for the Orange mobile phone network: ‘The future is mobile.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bill Lancaster’s essay in this collection is an important source of information on Griffiths’ later years, and the breadth of his intellectual and writing interests beyond poetry. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Alan Halsey writes elsewhere in this volume about the challenges he faced in editing the *Collected Earlier Poems* and the problems of constructing a ‘collected poems’ made up of definitive versions. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Again, see Halsey for a detailed account of the production and distribution of some early work. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In the early 1990s Griffiths produced five pamphlets on the history of Seaham, dealing with topics such as the harbor, the mining industry and the Londonderry family (and Bill Lancaster mentions these when he recounts his first meeting with Griffiths) and published them through his Amra imprint. Constructed from print records in the Durham archive, and often with minor editorial intrusion, they do demonstrate Griffiths commitment to, and knowledge of, the region. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See <http://www.durhamrecordsonline.com/literature/dawdon.php>

and <http://www.portofboston.co.uk/pages/seaham_harbour.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In an interview with Paul Bachelor Griffiths describes himself as ‘a keen motorcyclist from the ages of 16-22 … and … part of a group of angels.’ (<http://www.paulbatchelor.co.uk/billgriffithsinterview.html>). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Greenaway says, after a short time of looking after himself, and despite a brutal and unaffectionate childhood that in other circumstances might have made him welcome independence, that ‘fending for yourself was hell’ and that he wanted to be ‘fed and looked after’. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. As late as 1990 Griffiths publishes a selection of his ‘Hell’s Angels’ poems alongside an extract from a novel by John Muckle (also a contributor to this volume). Muckle’s work shares many of Griffiths’ interests in movement, and particularly in his prose fiction. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <http://www.isg-fi.org.uk/spip.php?article139> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See my commentary on his early work in *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Will Rowe’s essay in this issue for a more detailed account of the relationship between poetic form and violence in this section of the poem. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The publishing history of *Star Fish Jail* is complex. Griffiths states in the introduction to the fourth edition: ‘This copy is part of the fourth edition of *Star Fish Jail*, issued October 1994. The 1st edition, in 40 limited copies, was brought out around Easter 1993 […]. The second edition came out at the end of the summer 1993, the material being considerably expanded and reorganised at that stage; that revised format was followed in the 3rd edition (March 1994) and this 4th, in both cases with some changes of detail.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Brian Greenaway says of Wandsworth: ‘In the short time I was there, my skin took on a prison pallor and my body and clothes the fetid prison smell…The air in that prison was always full of tension. It was that sort of place.’ (p.58) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The pamphlet *Seventy – six day Wanno, Mississipi and Highpoint Journal* is described as ‘from the work of D. R. MacIntosh and Bill Griffiths. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Greenaway gives a similar account in his book. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=15617> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. <http://www.englandsnortheast.co.uk/DurhamCastle.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)