

**Approximate transcript of An introduction to the Third Sub Voicive Eric Mottram Memorial Reading by Bill Griffiths at Sub Voicive Poetry, London, on 13th January 1998**

This is the third "Eric Mottram Memorial Reading" that I have chaired and the fourth time in four years that I have stood in front of a Sub Voicive Poetry audience, at this time of year, because of my respect for the late Eric Mottram and his work. The first time was the day after he had died, when I found myself chairing an evening of tributes from among those who had come to hear him read or who, knowing he had just died, came anyway because that was all one could do. As Gilbert Adair said later, the words "death" and "Eric" opposed each other so much one found it hard to put them together.

I believe it is time that I said a little myself, that is a little more than I have said in the past, usually extempore. This is also the first of the series' regular short introductions, by me or others, creating a context for the evening's programme. I am persuaded that this is necessary even if it involves telling the bulk of the audience what they already know

Eric Mottram (1924-1995) was one of the most significant figures in what I shall call, for want of a better term, innovative and investigative writing, at least, during the last three decades, at least, in this country and North America, at least.

At least in that field	At least in that time span	At least in those countries
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His range of interests was vast: there was very little he did not seek to know something of; and, about most things, seemingly, he knew a lot, meaning masses; and those interests interwove and informed each other; his influence undoubtedly goes beyond the transatlantic world.

His exceptional insight is obvious when one sees how early he saw and investigated the importance of Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs and others, and the depth of his understanding. But his great importance lies in his ongoing investigation of artistic endeavour being ignored and often attacked by the establishment throughout a life so hard-working that the extent of his output is quite staggering: recently, I have had the opportunity to see something of the extent of his unpublished writing and I am almost speechless on the matter.

Pre-eminently, he was a teacher. Not a teacher on a pedestal, not a teacher in or of a system, not a theoretician of pedagogy; but someone who by the authority of his hard-earned knowledge, his generosity of spirit and singular presence changed the lives by changing their mindset not of dozens but of hundreds and hundreds of students, and those who were not his students but were changed anyway, and changed those lives for the better.

I was only briefly his student; and I already knew Eric then; but perhaps because of that I remember it fairly clearly. It was, I think, 1981. Eric's topic for us was Melville, all of him, something which, before then, I thought I knew something about. I believe there were five one hour slots. Eric came in and sat in our circle, it was a small group, clutching a small plastic folder of notes to which he rarely referred; when he did refer to it, it was to check his memory, and, as I recall, he nearly always had it right. Then, relatively quietly, but at tremendous speed, he unloaded all that he could of his Melville on to, at, around and into us. What he gave us was a grasp of Melville which was so detailed and so yet cohesive that it rattled the brain after one lecture. And the next week, the picture extended and even filled in; and the next week; and the next week. It was almost matter of fact in manner; and at the same time it was extraordinary. He was calmly assured and yet urgent. I got a sense, then, of what "rigorous" meant, my understanding of Melville was so renewed as to be as a first time understanding.

Eric's teaching extended far beyond the lecture room, as I can personally attest; without considering the possibility of doing otherwise, he saw it as a duty, by which I mean the only sane and moral course open, to help those who would be helped to think for themselves as they learned.

Then there is his editorship of *Poetry Review* in the 70s. Much has been written and said of the circumstances of that, some of it by me, so I shall limit myself to noting the difficult circumstances under which Eric worked - a constant venomous attack by the ignorant which dispirited him - and the assertion, without any fear of contradiction, that his achievement as editor is exemplary.

I valued Eric Mottram highly as a poet, though not as highly as some perhaps, publishing in his lifetime and just after his death Resistances (1991) and Double your stake (1995). That others whom I respect think more highly even than I of his poetry has led me to a considerable amount of re-reading and re-evaluation. I have

read him closely; and, as a result, his significance as a poet, for me, has *risen* and steadily. So often, really close reading of a poet whom one had read quite closely before leads one to see their limits rather than to find previously missed strengths.

On top of that I note the degree to which Eric was still moving, expanding his repertoire of techniques and procedures, pushing himself into new poetic areas, in his 70<sup>th</sup> and briefly his 71<sup>st</sup> year.

Furthermore, it is now apparent that the poetry we had was very far from being all of his poetic output, a matter that is corrected to a small extent tonight and will be corrected more substantially by others in the next few weeks. That much work had not been published is no indication that it was or should be judged of lesser importance than his published work; it seems that Eric was just more interested in the next work, the next area of investigation, the next idea, a restless desire to make, far greater than a concern to see his work in print, though undoubtedly that concern was there.

I have said, I was hardly his student, but I count him as a friend. Not a particularly close friend, but a very important one to me, and one whose advice and support I miss quite bitterly. It is a cliché to say of someone that it was a privilege to have known them; but in this case it is the only honest thing to say.

That I started these memorials is an indication of the esteem in which I hold Eric both as a poet and a campaigner for poetry. These memorials enable me, in a very small way, to credit others whom Eric held in high esteem and so help to continue a small part of his endeavour. Outside of the community constituted by those in this room or who would wish to be in this room now, few care about *Sub Voicive Poetry* or its enthusiasms. Nevertheless, I intend it to be a real honour, all the more so because it lacks the hollow public acclaim of so much stated honour, to be asked to give an Eric Mottram Memorial Reading, not by association with me, but by association with the name of a remarkable and irreplaceable man.

And so to tonight's reader / performer of whom I shall say much less because I have said so much already and because, fortunately, he is still alive and well able to speak for himself.

Bill Griffiths is not only a poet; he is also a translator, scholar, writer of cookery books, recorder of folk tales and maker and adapter of ghost stories. Undoubtedly I have missed more than a few genres.

Recently, Bill has been archiving Eric Mottram's papers and collections for Kings College, London so, by now, I expect, he knows more than any of us about Eric, possibly more than Eric knew.

Bill Griffiths is a major poet. His poetry is learned, witty, funny, politically-astute, caustic, structurally unique, challenging and crafted. To me he seems only to get better but in such a way that the newer work throws light on the earlier so that it too becomes - apparently - better. His is poetry which requires and rewards re-reading. I always find him worth reading even when I am not at all clear what he is talking about, because he is often not an easy poet to read, having so much to say which contains its own difficulties and often its own inherent darknesses; it usually turns out to be my fault if I fail to understand.