

PETER CAMPION

## Rose Alley

*Laugh at the End of the World: Collected Comic Poems 1969–1999*, by Bill Knott. Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, Ltd., 1999.

*Speech! Speech!*, by Geoffrey Hill. Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000.

Satirical poetry is some of the best that we've got in English, yet these days there's so little of it. So why do poets steer clear of satire? Perhaps in Rose Alley, London, on the night of December 12, 1679, the risk was best defined: it was then that a group of thugs hired by Lord Rochester descended on Poet Laureate John Dryden and beat him to a pulp. The incident tells us a lot about the ambiguous position of the satirist. For Rochester was probably angry both because Dryden had disrespected his class superiority, and because Dryden, more deferential to the king than Rochester, had gained a social and professional superiority that the other poet resented. But whatever Rochester's exact motives, the beating made this much more clear: the successful satirist must both run with the fox and hunt with the hounds; and sooner or later he will get caught.

Despite this risk, a few contemporary poets have written admirable satire. Take Bill Knott and Geoffrey Hill, whose books are here reviewed. Neither is likely to end up in Dryden's situation. But even if poetry doesn't instigate fistfights in our time, I believe (perhaps sentimentally) that the stakes are just as high, the need for a satirical art that engages public life just as urgent. Knott's and Hill's work must be considered, I suggest, in terms of the Drydenian dilemma.

Of these two contemporaries, Bill Knott has, throughout his career, more overtly given his poetry an immediate political charge. In the sixties, under the pseudonym Saint Giraud, he wrote vitriolic antiwar poems. Many of these fail in the usual way that political poems fail:

their message pummels them. However, Knott's more recent work—much of it collected in *Laugh at the End of the World*—uses traditional forms like the sonnet for wild improvisation on political themes. Knott's skilled video-cam verse movement prevents these poems from becoming mere surrealism stuck behind a formal frame. Here, for instance, is the first long sentence of his poem "At the Nixon Memorial":

They say that robots simply have to slap mirrors  
Up against their voice grilles to try and make sure they're  
Not breathing, while I caress this monument,  
This eternal mall where Herod has chalked  $x$ ,

This statue stands for more than blowjobs in spaceships  
Or all our names have razed, aimless ocean frying,  
While a scab forms on the world's microphone: praise him.

There's a lot to be said for this bizarre grafting of pentameter and seemingly random imagery. The shift in register from political paranoia (in the reference to Herod) to pop-culture bemusement (in the conflation of the sexual revolution and space travel) certainly speaks to American civic life. The comparison may sound a little funny, but Knott does resemble Dryden—since he portrays both what is hateful and what is fabulous about his own, ruling nation. For if Rochester was an expert at lampooning in couplets, the Laureate possessed a unique talent for both commanding authority and subverting it: when he sardonically excoriates Shadwell in "MacFlecknoe," he does it with such merciless command that he seems to be speaking the lines from the throne of his good friend Charles II; yet the poem itself presents a regal procession repeatedly tarnished with images of shit. Although Knott's lines, like Dryden's, move too fast for involution, this same drama—expressed here by Knott's hatred of Nixon and by his acknowledged, if absurd, need for the statue—saves the poem from becoming mere whacked-out rant.

Yet too often the poems are simply that. When he ends his angry portrait of Robert McNamara in a poem called "Secretary," Knott seems unsatisfied with the poem itself; he spills over into a note in which he declares, "For his services in overseeing the murder of millions, he was appointed President of the World Bank . . ." etc., etc. Even if we agree with the poet (holding McNamara culpable is not a new and daring act of political science), is this type of writing anything more than predictable piety? Unlike Rochester, who cut down his

own era's privileged elite with such lines as "The heir and hopes of a great family, / Who with strong ale and beef the country rules, / And ever since the conquest have been fools," Knott does not have the skill of satirical portraiture. When Knott is angry at politicians or suburbanites, these subjects actually seem to disappear from the lines. Reading "Secretary," for instance, we aren't faced with the crimes of Robert McNamara, but merely with the anger that they produce in the poet. And we soon realize the poem's true theme: Bill Knott's no-good, very bad day.

Still, the best poems in the book accept this condition as the *donnée*. When Knott writes explicitly of depression, he is able to use both his technical skill and his political savvy to prevent the work from drifting into mere solipsism. In these poems, it is as if the undercurrent of Drydenian satire challenges contemporary self-portraiture. Here is one of the most accomplished poems in the book, an epigram called "Prisoner":

What raw name scrapes and saws at my breath-hatch . . .  
This voice wanted always to soothe, not grate.  
And its last noise, that rasp, that deathrale scratch?  
—A file, smuggled in to an empty jail cell, too late.

This poem can be read as the statement of a poet who regrets what truer voice he might once have unlocked. Yet consider the tonal shift, as it enforces the implicitly political subtext. In the second line, we hear that the voice "wanted always to soothe." With a poet as constantly facetious as Knott, it is hard to take this as genuine sentiment; indeed, what is the phrase but a brilliant play on the fuzzy diction of do-gooders who would run to defend the "inner children" of murderers and rapists? In the final line, however, a hint of Knott's political subversiveness returns: the file smuggled in "too late" sounds like a sardonic, yet effective, indictment of capital punishment. Though Knott's poem is a very different one, this turn between the second and fourth lines suggests something like the dialectic of power in "MacFlecknoe." If personal regret is the true theme of the poem, the political plot creates a balance—a tough, painful balance enforced by the rhymes.

To those familiar with his earlier work, Geoffrey Hill might not seem to be a poet with as obvious an interest in political satire as Bill Knott. His two finest, book-length poems, "Mercian Hymns" and "The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy," have their historical

contexts: the England both of the Dark Ages and of the poet's youth in the first poem, and the ravaged France of World War I in the second. But in the last ten years, Hill's poetry has changed. Even more explicitly than Knott—and more successfully—Hill has submitted his work to the Drydenian dialectic of power. At one point in his newest book-length poem, *Speech! Speech!*, the poet even transcribes the automatic voice of mass culture declaring “RECENT PAST AS DISTRESSED SUB-TEXT” (the voice serves a dramatic purpose similar to that of Henry's unnamed friend in Berryman's *Dream Songs*). And that recent past includes everything from the memorial service for Princess Di to the poet's own decision to take psychopharmaceuticals to the assassination of Colonel Fajuyi by the Obasanjo regime in Nigeria.

Yet the true drama of *Speech! Speech!* lies in the distressed historical subtext that Hill finds in language itself. For if the theory behind Hill's most recent book of prose, *The Enemy's Country*, is that our ostensibly native language is in fact as alien and treacherous as Rose Alley was for Dryden, Hill's new poetry puts that theory into practice. Consider this section, the eleventh of the 120 twelve-liners in the book:

Is MUST a true imperative of OUGHT? Is it  
that which impels? In the small hours a red  
biro clown-paints my pyjamas. Mirrors  
disclose no exit wound. Scrupulosity  
unnerved so <sup>1</sup> *gelassenheit* is a becoming  
right order, heart's ease, a gift in faith,  
most difficult among freedoms. That's  
fair enough, given injustice. Each strafe  
throws in some duds, freak chances. The libido  
of eunuchs, they say, is terrible. God  
how'd I'd like to, if I could only,  
shuffle off alive.

In these lines, Hill uses his rigorous diction itself to create political drama. To appreciate this poet we need to rise from whatever dispassion we are accustomed to as readers: we need, for instance, to find that *gelassenheit* is German for “dispassion,” and that “strafe” describes the type of bombing raids that the Germans inflicted on England during this poet's childhood. Indeed, the main theme of the book is right here: the “almost savage torpor” that Hill finds in mass culture becomes the target for his own attacks throughout the poem. And *Speech! Speech!* succeeds when the poet registers both sides of this war. In this section, for example, the authoritative pronouncement on the spiritual

lassitude of modernity rises from a hilarious and sympathetic act of speech: the poet blames a pen for splotching his pj's.

When sections of the book fail it is because the poet hasn't rendered such a convincing embodiment of whomever or whatever he satirizes. This problem was more troubling in Hill's last book, *The Triumph of Love*, where he attempted to satirize fellow poets who had become "Swedish millionaires"—winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature, that is. These passages failed not because they were nasty. Mere *politesse* never made great poetry—though I'd argue that the writers Hill impugned are no Shadwells and Flecknoes. Instead, the passages bombed because the poet did not portray any convincingly familiar trait; he simply alluded to these poets and, without presenting any evidence, expected the reader to agree with his condemnation. When Rochester places his character, Artemisa, in the midst of literary fops—"Amongst the men, I mean the men of wit / (At least they passed for such until they writ)"—we feel that we know these blowhards. But Hill's "Swedish millionaires" appear as little more than the poet's own crude voodoo dolls. In *Speech! Speech!*, the passage suffering most from this problem is the "RAPMASTER" interlude in the last third of the poem. The poet finds himself addressing a rapper, and when Hill abandons the character, he tries to do so with his best slick dis:

Skelton Laureate

was a right rapper: outdance you with your shades  
ány day. And is gone. Moriscos, hatchet-men,  
you would have been <sup>l</sup> and are.

"Moriscos" means Moors. Thus the insult says, in effect, "your people were known as ruthless petty criminals back then, and you do nothing to disprove the stereotype." To many Americans, this might sound like mere race-baiting. I'm not sure it should be read that way, since it is spoken in an obviously dramatized, satirical context to begin with. Throughout the poem, Hill's airwaves are repeatedly scrambled by such angry voices. Even if these lines are accepted as "Geoffrey Hill's opinion on race," the "RAPMASTER" passage fails precisely because it is not specific enough to truly offend. Nowhere in the "RAPMASTER" interlude does Hill prove that he has any real knowledge of rap music—much less of the modern "Moriscos" who might prefer Metallica, church hymns, or Schubert. For despite the "hatchet-men" slur, the passage is in fact about neither race nor rap; it is about the poet's own quarrel with mass culture. As if unable to play such a generalized part,

Hill's rapping straight man, like his "Swedish millionaires," never gains anything near the presence on the page that the poet himself has when he's portrayed in his pajamas.

Under-realized as this passage may be, it does prove Hill's willingness to walk down his own Rose Alley. Indeed, in *The Enemy's Country*, Hill praises Dryden's style of political argument for "being at once ingenious and at bay." If parts of *Speech! Speech!* suffer from remaining merely at bay, the most impressive poetry in the book is also ingenious. Consider these excellent satirical lines from the "RAPMASTER" interlude itself:

In the Algarve, places like that, the Brits  
are heroes | living as they háve to (*cheers*).  
Where áre we? Lourdes? SOME sodding mystery tour.  
Whát do you meán | a break? Pisses me off.  
Great singer Elton John though. CHRIST  
ALMIGHTY—even the buses are kneeling!

This reference to Princess Diana's rock-concert-like memorial service succeeds, first of all, because it is funny: the distinctly British, working-class register, "Pisses me off. / Great singer Elton John though" is spot on. Yet the poet's true skill here consists in knowing when to hover at bay and when to make the scene materialize: these lines move from the little-known history of a region in Portugal to a pop-culture event, just as the tonality masterfully modulates. When this strategy of shiftiness truly engages its examples—as it does not with the rapper, but does here with the convincing voice from the crowd—the result is something like Pound's repeating leitmotifs, or Dryden's own snakey couplets: the poem affects polyphony through a precise yet amorphous, politically charged diction.

Both Bill Knott and Geoffrey Hill have succeeded not only in conveying this charge but in doing so artfully. Though Hill has written with more ambition and consistency, neither poet is without his faults. In both Knott and Hill, inferior passages occur when the subject of the satire loses resolution on the page, when the real subject of the poem becomes the individual poet's anger. From Juvenal to Pound, anger, even obscene or bigoted anger, has contributed to great poetry; yet for true drama to exist, attacks must have a convincing target. For imagine Dryden and Rochester: a few days after the beating, Dryden probably tended to his wounds, and Rochester maybe felt an inkling of remorse (I think he must have—this was a man who continually needed to make amends for his rages; four years before, he smashed the

king's prized chronometer in the Privy Garden, then somehow wheedled his way back from banishment). But both poets undoubtedly got to work. Dryden's "Absalom and Achitophel" and Rochester's "Artemisa to Chloe" were being written at the time; and both poems became satirical masterpieces, ones that convincingly portray whom and what they spoof. Neither Knott nor Hill has given us satire of this magnitude. Yet in *Laugh at the End of the World* and *Speech! Speech!* they prove, through prosodic skill and tonal cunning, that they certainly have the potential. We will be lucky readers if, in these poets' future work, that potential is realized.