Wright eulogizes the poet Larry Levis as the weather, the rain, what falls down and falls away. In fact and in myth, the tone and dramatic form of *Appalachia* have everything to do with elegy, the elegy of our time and times in our own back yard.

—**Liam Rector**

Plaza de Loco: New Poems 1998 by Bill Knott. Self-published, 1998.

Let me add my voice to the chorus of those who have already proclaimed what has become increasingly obvious over the past two or three decades: Bill Knott is one of the best poets writing in America. Without question, he is the most original. His practice as a poet—his uncanny instincts, his waggish sense of humor, the stunning force of his imagination—make the work of other experimentalists look strained by comparison. Knott has single-handedly created his own aesthetic out of which he has produced poems of remarkable intelligence and beauty.

Knott is a true contortionist of verse—like Berryman or cummings—twisting words, grammar, and syntax everywhichaway in order to wring the last possible drop of meaning out of a phrase. And meaning is central to Knott's poetic ambitions. No matter how convoluted and oblique, his poems aren't meant to hide or deflect meaning but to illuminate it. It is, finally, our *perspective* that is being wrenched in order to allow us to regard reality in a new and surprising light. One feels oneself (almost physically) being forced by the imaginative logic in these poems:

> STORY OF OR
>
> (to Pauline Réage)
>
> To pose nakedness is
> To refute it. A pose
> Is a clothes. Like
> Stanzaic arrangements of
>
> The word which should
> Ideally, be in pain against
> Its w and its d. No slack
> Is why such heaves of or
>
> To denude itself could
> Make us exude gold, yet when
> Was that ever opposite enough
>
> What scream or epigram
> This sperm has come
> To measure our mouths for.

Knott follows this, on the same page, with a companion poem masquerading as prose:

> Note:
> For "or" to free itself from "word," it must strain

("heave") against the "w" and the "d" that enclose it. If, via this strenuous (perhaps squeamish) process, the meaning of "or" is transmuted from the English into the French as a sort of homage to the pseudonymous author of 'Story of O' (*Histoire d'O*), then, alchemically speaking, (or so an Aurealist might suggest) it will have risen from the pose of its measures to or-emerge as an else-gasm.

Some serious issues about language and reality are addressed here. To begin with, Knott makes an assertion about exhibitionism as opposed to real openness and disclosure. Projecting an image of self is not the same thing as revealing self. Those women, unfurled out of the middle of men's magazines, are not "naked" in any true sense. Air-brushed, coifed, powdered, lipsticked, glistening through filters and self-consciously posed they present—not themselves—but a fantasy image of themselves. In Knott's terms, they "refute" nakedness. Not revelation, but illusion is the result of such manipulation of our senses.

Then, unexpectedly, Knott turns the poem in another direction: formal arrangements of language—stanzas, lines, metaphors, typographical shapes—can also be a pose, a self-conscious arrangement of words that has little connection to our everyday experience of language. Most poetry projects an alluring image, but Knott is looking for the naked essence of language which, he suggests, can only be found by splitting words open (trading alchemy for physics), as if they were atoms waiting to release devastating hidden energies. When this happens, words "exude gold," which is to say: real poetry. The "or" (ore) embedded in w(or)ds emerges translated into the French "or," which means "gold." What results is language as basic—as visceral—as a scream, as contracted as an epigram, a kind of "sperm" that measures (considers or fits) our mouths for the purpose of uttering new truths.

To crack words open, then, is Knott's project: his poetic ambition. Yet, Knott's word-splitting manifesto is itself presented in a very formal arrangement of language: the stanzas, lines, and images he seems to be denouncing as potential elements of poetic illusion. But to crack things open—whether it be atoms or words—requires some force, some pressure, and pressure in poetry is supplied by form. "No slack" is what allows words to "exude gold." Scratch any great experimentalist and you will find a traditionalist—at least, someone who has mastered traditional forms and uses them to create a new poetic idiom.

But finally, a poem must be understood—regardless of innovation. In poem after poem Knott challenges us to be pliable, attentive, patient, willing to follow the contortions of his logic, to "stretch" our imaginations in the old sense even as we decipher the highly condensed meaning of his phrases. How does he do this? By "loading each rift with ore" (we're back to gold). These poems scintillate with verbal energy.

"From gaze-and-gone, that mine-or-yours is where / I remember us. . . ."

"The birch-upsurge of a sapling / separates my buttocks. . . ."

"May vidsnaps and ground zeroes grow on their graves."

"Am I similar to slime enough, be- / Mimic with muck?"

Such careful, taut, self-conscious phrase-making reminds one of Dylan Thomas's equally terse inventions—and they can be every bit as enigmatic. But meaning inheres in these lines the way emotion inheres in staves of music: a seamless coalescing.

Other lines are clearer, more direct and arresting in their playfulness:

"The way a ballerina boards a gunboat . . ."

"A dead dog in the bottom of my pram . . ."

"According to the Dictionary of / Glossolalia . . ."

"Only a fishhook can play Hamlet adequately—"

Except for the last, these are first lines—beginnings of poems—and have the quality all good first lines share: they snag the reader's attention immediately.

Still other lines haunt with the beauty of their rhythm, sound, and imagery:

"I am that serene derided echo / known as form. . . ."

"Now, while memory disciplines the occasion . . ."

". . . even the sea lay / in stills of inertia. . . ."

"Failure has surrounded me with flesh. . . ."

One need only compare this to the proliferation of flat, loose-jointed, amorphous verse in order to appreciate Knott's classical ear for organizing shapely and effective language and making it "exude gold." Real avant-garde verse doesn't simply abandon the classical. It transfigures it into something unexpected and strange, liberating a new beauty from the old.

A truly contemporary, up-to-date poet transmutes classical forms and themes as a matter of course by some natural (and thereafter cultivated) instinct of renewal—gained through a lifetime of attentiveness and hard work. Knott isn't trying to be modern and avant-garde: he is modern and avant-garde. One feels he could be nothing else. Knott has taken the best

features of post-modernist verse and made of them the basis for a seminal poetry.

Many of Knott's poems, however, are so pressurized and distilled—so shorn of all but the quintessential—they often feel encrypted. How far can logic bend before it breaks? And how much tension can language stand, torqued down to the syllabic-letter level, and still be expected to yield meaning? One is often defeated, reading these poems, by the sheer effort of concentration required. Some lines sound more like stutterings ("My pencil-popped oh tweezers species sex") or brain teasers ("time truer to one's due self than you") than discrete, meaningful lines of poetry. At such times one is tempted to renounce Knott's poems as gibberish, "the ruins of great intentions" as Pound said of D.H. Lawrence's poems at the beginning of this century. But we would we be wrong to judge Knott's work as mere rubbish. It may not always be easy to discern what Knott is up to, but whatever he is doing there is too much brilliance in it to simply dismiss.

Note: now for the bad news. *Plaza de Loco: New Poems 1998* is a self-published book (staple-bound and xeroxed), not available anywhere as far as I know. I found my copy—free—in a box on the steps of the Grolier Poetry Book Shop. But most of Knott's previous work is available, and anyone seriously interested in American poetry might, without much trouble, obtain copies of these important books. His last volume, *The Quicken Tree*, is available from BOA Editions, Ltd.

Kurt Brown

The Visible Man by Henri Cole. Alfred A. Knopf, 1998. $22.00 ISBN 0375403965.

The Visible Man, Henri Cole's fourth book, is a breakthrough book in Cole's ongoing body of work. Always strong formally, Cole's previous work was sometimes limited by a reliance on highly embellished but mere, static description. But in *The Visible Man* descriptiveness is always at the service of an overarching *action*—linguistic action, action in the very *movement* of the lyric, action in the utter propulsion of the narrative thru-line, and finally, and above all, *emotional* action in the animations of meaning within a poem. "... the end of description and rhyme, / which has nursed and embalmed me at once. / Language was more than a baroque wall-fountain."

The presiding, preceding spirit in *The Visible Man* might well be a latter-day, post-Stonewall Hart Crane. Cole's language and the movement of language are as packed and condensed as Crane's, yet the poems in *The Visible Man* have a savage candor that is nowhere coded in any way, never gnarled in veiled metaphor. Cole's frankness is not the confessing candor of an Oprah therapy culture, not something ruled by cheap and predictable epiphanies, but rather a scathing vivisection—wonderfully nasty, importantly Freudian, with self-preening and self-justification left in the dust of a relentless stampede of knife-edged examination. Perhaps not since Robinson Jeffers have we been in the presence of such a hawkish eye, but in *The Visible Man* the