

‘A Nice Noise’: *Briggflatts* and the Poetics of (In)Attention

Rebecca Bradburn

Reading in 1964 to the ‘teenagers and [...] miscellaneous provincials’ who composed Morden Tower’s debut audiences, Basil Bunting was struck by their (in)capacity to pay attention. These youngsters, he found, ‘were not hindered by the difficulties that annoy their elders’. Instead, ‘they took poetry as poetry – a nice noise – without questions about its “meaning”’. Placing the poem into its first reception contexts – Morden Tower on 22 December 1965 – this article traces how *Briggflatts* forms a larger experiment with such poetic (in)attention, consciously complicating the attentional and meaning-making processes of its listening audiences.

WRITING TO LONG-TIME FRIEND LOUIS ZUKOFSKY FROM WYLAM, NORTHUMBERLAND, on 28 July 1964, Basil Bunting details his latest poetic experiment: Morden Tower. The story is a familiar one, the tower the scene of Bunting’s poetic revival following his mid-century stagnation.¹ But at the time of writing to Zukofsky, the venue that was to form the centre of a global counterculture was still in its infancy, and Bunting gleefully recounts the hodgepodge make-up of Morden Tower’s debut audiences, gathering for a reading by Pete Brown. ‘Apparently from [Brown’s] lair in some sordid dosshouse in Liverpool he delights the young of that tough city with a brand of “pop” surrealism’, the poet notes with a somewhat scandalised air, Brown’s poetic reputation attracting to the tower what Bunting terms a mixture ‘of half academics, half teenagers, with a sprinkling of thugs’.² *Quelle horreur*. But when Bunting comes to read at the tower himself a month later, he finds that ‘the academics have gone on their holidays’,

¹ See, for instance, Edward Allen, ‘Performing on the Fringe: Basil Bunting and Morden Tower’, in Kate McLoughlin (ed.), *British Literature in Transition, 1960–1980: Flower Power* (Cambridge 2018) pp. 247–62.

² Basil Bunting to Louis Zukofsky, 28 July 1964, in *Letters of Basil Bunting*, ed. Alex Niven (Oxford 2022) pp. 258–60.

and in their place is a ‘much larger number of teenagers and some of the miscellaneous provincials who seek self-approbation in that sort of thing’.³ Yet for all his initial consternation, the poet finds the experience to be distinctly refreshing. In fact, he muses to Zukofsky, it is a decidedly ‘curious experience reading to these youngsters’. Free from preconceptions or bias, this audience is ‘not hindered by the difficulties that annoy their elders’. Instead, theirs is an uncritical – even surface-level – appreciation: ‘they laugh[] at the comic bits, [they’re] rapt at passages of intricate metric that nobody ever took any notice of before – not that they [understand] what was attracting them, but it certainly did attract’. In short, concludes Bunting, ‘they [take] poetry as poetry – a nice noise – without questions about its “meaning”’. Alongside an appreciation for this unexpected audience, the comment underscores Bunting’s fascination with their uncritical listening practices: what we might call an attention to inattention.⁴

In noting the behaviour of his debut listening audiences, Bunting lingers first and foremost over their attentional dynamics, and his interest here seems to be twofold. Firstly, as opposed to exhibiting a moment of heightened attention, these teenagers treat Bunting’s performance as something akin to background sound. Where attentional selectivity might isolate specific moments, producing a granular focus that seeks to extract poetic ‘meaning’, the approach of the audience is instead that of sonic abstraction, transforming the poem into a ‘nice noise’ that washes over the ears. One hears here a prescient echo of contemporary fears surrounding attention economy: a distractedness fostered by new technologies.⁵ But where contemporary rhetoric casts inattention as the enemy of focus, for Bunting it is not a source of anxiety, but rather a site of poetic potential.⁶ These ‘unabashed boys and girls’, to whom Bunting’s *Briggflatts* (1965) would later be dedicated, might not attend to meaning *per se*, but their distraction – or rather abstraction – from meaning seems to allow for a more immediate poetic appreciation. Framed thus, the poet came to see such attentional dynamics as an essential component in the enjoyment of poetry, and this

³ Ibid.

⁴ I am indebted in this article to thinking sparked by Lucy Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention* (New York 2020).

⁵ For more on this, see Claudio Celis Bueno, *The Attention Economy: Labour, Time and Power in Cognitive Capitalism* (New York 2017); Maggie Jackson, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (Amherst, NY 2008).

⁶ Key examples of recent work in the field of literary attention studies include: Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention*; Andrew Epstein, *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture* (New York 2016); Caleb Smith, *Thoreau’s Axe: Distraction and Discipline in American Culture* (Princeton, NJ 2023); Andrew Lee DuBois, *Ashbery’s Forms of Attention* (Tuscaloosa, Ala. 2006).

article takes this as a cue to to consider Bunting's *Briggflatts* as a larger experiment with this question of objective attention.

Once exiled to the canonical and geographical margins, Bunting has recently experienced something of a critical revival, and scholars have attended variously to the formal genesis and geographical environs of the poet's work, from *Briggflatts* to Persia.⁷ Yet relatively little focus has so far been paid to the task of tuning and composing attention in *Briggflatts*' first listening audiences, and to the mediating part that these compositional contexts might have on the poem itself. Taking a cue from Bunting's unabashed audiences, then, this article explores the manner in which this (in) attentional auditory relation between audience and poem, audience and poet, forms a crucial interpretative context for *Briggflatts*, first performed at Morden Tower on 22 December 1965. I begin by asking how the poem packages the sonic landscapes of Northumberland for listeners, considering the way in which it manipulates shifts in what Lucy Alford terms the 'field of spatiotemporal perception'.⁸ By attending to this unfurling of heightened attention, a suggestion of this article is that *Briggflatts* engages in a process of contemplation or devotional attention, reorienting the self in relation to the poem. Yet my aim is not only to diagnose the cognitive play of attention underpinning the poem. Rather, in attending to these moments of readerly affect, my larger purpose is to offer a new perspective on the question of inattention that lies at the heart of *Briggflatts*, and so on the politics inflecting Bunting's theories of composition.

Before beginning, it is important to interject a note of wariness regarding Bunting's mention of these 'unabashed boys and girls' who flocked to Morden Tower. Bunting is far from a straightforward or unproblematic figure, not least because of his much-debated sexual history with adolescent girls, and the poet's delight in his youthful audience must necessarily be read in the context of this discussion.⁹ Certainly, it is hard to avoid the apprehensive flicker of suspicion that Bunting's glee might stem from a

⁷ See, for instance, Alex Niven, 'The Formal Genesis of Basil Bunting's "Briggflatts"', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 42/3 (2013) pp. 203–24; Reem Abbas, 'A "Polyphonic Score": Basil Bunting's Persian Condensations', *The Review of English Studies*, 74 (2023) pp. 389–407; Annabel Haynes, 'Making Beauty: Basil Bunting and the Work of Poetry' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Durham, 2015).

⁸ Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention*, p. 3.

⁹ The most complete biography of Bunting currently available is Richard Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us: The Life of Basil Bunting, Britain's Greatest Modernist Poet* (Oxford 2014). For more on this aspect of Bunting's private life, see David Wheatley, 'Long Road to Briggflatts', *Literary Review*, Aug. 2022 <<https://literaryreview.co.uk/long-road-to-briggflatts>> (accessed 16 Oct. 2024); Richard Burton, 'Bunting's Saqis', *Infinite Ideas* (blog), 15 Nov. 2013, <<https://www.infiniteideas.com/buntings-saqis/>> (accessed 16 Oct. 2024).

different sort of leering: from a far more distasteful form of attention. That Bunting's poetry is of key critical significance is not in question – the recent revival of interest in Bunting's work, to which we add this special issue, attests to this. But our scholarship must be receptive to criticism; it has a responsibility to address, as opposed to skirt, critical difficulty. Only in attending to such matters can we do justice to Bunting's complex account of attentional practices – and to the women and girls in his life.

I. 'A strong song tows us'

Are you paying attention? And if you are, what precisely does that mean? In brief, attention functions as a shorthand for perception's capacity to isolate an object or phenomenon from its general surroundings – to bring it into focus, to use a photographic term, and consign other distractions to the background. But just as attention can be focused, so too can it be caught. Theorising modes of poetic attention, Lucy Alford describes a dual set of attentional dynamics: 'Active, or endogenous, attention', she explains, 'is characterized by an intentional work of attention in which the subject deliberately and purposefully focuses his or her attention on the object at hand. It is top-down, goal oriented, and purposive.'¹⁰ This is conscious attention, in other words – careful, considered, intentional. In contrast, Alford presents what she terms 'passive, or exogenous, attention'.¹¹ As opposed to the directive initiative of endogenous attention, exogenous attention instead sees 'the subject's attention ... caught and held by changes or movement in the environment, or by the sheer arresting nature of the object itself. It is bottom-up, stimulus driven, powered by reflexes and receptivity networks, and sharpened by the degree of sensitivity to perceptual change.'¹² If endogenous attention is premeditated, exogenous attention is responsive, the eye caught – arrested – by a passing phrase or word.

Attention, in other words, might manifest either as a form of active study or as reflexive arrest, and this tidy dialectic helps identify the attentional dynamics that Bunting introduces even in the opening lines to *Briggflatts*.¹³ To attend to the opening stanzas of the poem is to discover an ear caught on a landscape transforming under the touch of spring:

¹⁰ Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention*, p. 33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Briggflatts*, in *The Poems of Basil Bunting*, ed. Don Share (London 2016) pp. 41–61. All further references are to page and line number of this edition – hereafter *Poems*.

Brag, sweet tenor bull,
 descant on Rawthey's madrigal,
 each pebble its part
 for the fells' late spring.
 Dance tiptoe, bull,
 black against may.
 Ridiculous and lovely
 chase hurdling shadows
 morning into noon.
 May on the bull's hide
 and through the dale
 furrows fill with may,
 paving the slowworm's way.

A mason times his mallet
 to a lark's twitter,
 listening while the marble rests,
 lays his rule
 at a letter's edge

(*Poems*, p. 41, ll. 1–17)

Here, the bull's tenor brag echoes in harmony with the trickling and gushing of the river's madrigal, its song shaped by the modulations of the pebbles in the water's path. The tongue, tripping over the bilabial plosive phonemes of 'p' and 'b', mimics the stream's bouncing path, tumbling off the pebbles in its path.¹⁴ Broadening out to the wider sonic surroundings, the ear catches the tap of the mason's mallet, a sound itself timed to the twitter of the lark. The poem's opening, in other words, figures as a moment of heightened sonic attention, tuning in to the birdsong and streams alike, and the idea is one which has not gone unnoticed by critics.¹⁵ But two forms of sonic attention, crucially, are at play here. 'The bull I noticed one day in a farm near Throckley', Bunting told an interviewer in 1970, 'and you know, it struck me, at once, nobody has noticed the bull has a tenor voice' ('Annotations', *Poems*, p. 330). Nobody but Bunting, that is, and struck by bull's brag, this initial moment of inspiration rapidly shifts from exogenous to endogenous, the poet purposively pausing to interrogate the manner in which 'in spring, the bull ... dance[s] on the tip of his toes'.¹⁶

¹⁴ It's a music Bunting returns to later in the lyric 'Stones trip Coquet burn', as Richard Burton elucidates: *A Strong Song Tows Us*, p. 364.

¹⁵ See Richard Burton's elegant description (*ibid.*) of the poem's opening.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Where Bunting's compositional attention figures as active, the linguistic dynamism of the poem's opening line transforms the readerly experience into a much more passive affair. Just as the brag of the bull might not be avoided, the spondaic first syllable and the (ex)plosive release of air produced by the opening consonant force the sound onto the space and consciousness of the poem. Even as the ear is caught, however, attention just as quickly dissipates. Forced into hyperfocus by the bull's brag, the scope of sonic attention broadens, moving from bull to the River Rawthey's madrigal, then on to the mason, the mallet, the lark. As opposed to a moment of close or deepened attention, lingering over the precise aural architecture of the bull's brag, sensory perception is divided – or rather, diffused. Focussed on the acoustic environment of this northern landscape, the poem nonetheless demonstrates what Alford would a form of 'low-resolution focalization'.¹⁷ Far from a desire to pin down the precise granular mechanics of the lark's song, the mallet, the stream, *Briggflatts* instead concerns the subtler soundscape of the general environs. The poem's opening, then, presents a play with active attention and passive reception, its attentional lens both geographically specific and deconcentrated.

But if the poem's ear is caught, so too is that of the listener. Writerly attention equally begets readerly – or in this case, listener-ly – attention, and if *Briggflatts* allows its speaker to linger over an imagined acoustic environment, what might such a poem do for its audience? 'Brag, sweet tenor bull', the well-known opening line follows, erupting onto the acoustic landscape of the poem. But as the bull's brag batters the attention of the poem, so too does the heavy stressed syllable, then repeated threefold, hammer the listening ear.¹⁸ 'Poetry, like music, is to be heard', runs the now familiar Bunting maxim. 'It deals in sound – long sounds and short sounds, heavy beats and light beats, the tone relations of vowel, the relations of consonants to one another which are like instrumental colour in music.'¹⁹ Accordingly, these are heavy beats, the line's monochromatic austerity acting like the mason's 'mallets' in the eardrum.²⁰ Reading, the eye might linger over the words in its own time, re-sounding or re-reading specific lines or turns of phrase. But Bunting, as Alex Niven astutely reminds us, was consciously composing *Briggflatts* with an eye to its performance, and it is worth pausing over the cognitive impact this sonic texture might have on

¹⁷ Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention*, p. 40.

¹⁸ Alex Wylie refers to this line as 'lentissimo': Wylie, 'Bunting and the Vile Patterns of Expediency', *Essays in Criticism*, 65/3 (2015) pp. 305–25.

¹⁹ Bunting, *Three Essays* (Durham 1994) p. 34.

²⁰ For more on Bunting's monosyllables, see forthcoming work by Peter Robinson.

the listening ear.²¹ Where an iamb, tripping lightly into the ear of the listener, forms a far more tentative invitation to attend, the heavy, alliterative consonance of the opening line acts in the manner of a linguistic battering ram: brazen in its sonic assertion.

As opposed to an isolated instance, the verbal condensation of the opening line is symptomatic of the poem's linguistic texture as a whole, and it has become a familiar refrain in Bunting studies to speak of the verse's dense aurality.²² Composed of what Bunting termed in a letter to Gael Turnbull 'panels hinged on short lyrics', *Briggflatts* operates on a system of dense, interweaving sonic textures – spondaic stresses matched by viscous consonance and assonance, as in the poem's second section:²³

Who sang, sea takes,
brawn brine, bone grit.
Keener the kittiwake.
Fells forget him.
Fathoms dull the dale,
gulfweed voices ...
(*Poems*, p. 46, ll. 55–60)

Neal Alexander terms Bunting's rhymes 'clotted', and here you can see what he means: the 'i' of 'grit' catches on 'kittiwake', which rhymes in turn with 'take'; the 'ee' of 'sea' weaves into 'keener' twelve syllables later.²⁴ The 'u' of 'fathom' echoes in 'dull'; the 'ch' of 'fells' recurs again in 'forget'. These rhymes and aural echoes come thick and fast, trapping the ear in an aural loop, and the effect is only compacted on consideration of Bunting's recital practices. Bunting's Northumbrian accent might be, as critics have long speculated, largely contrived, but affected or not, the poet's characteristically Northumbrian elongation of 'ee' sounds – in say, 'keener' – and flattening of the 'ā' (as in 'takes') lend a lilting protraction to this richly mellifluous verse.²⁵ The poem traces a pattern of interlacing sounds, and my

²¹ Alex Niven, 'Basil Bunting's Late Modernism: From Pound to Poetic Community' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2013) p. 216.

²² See, for instance, Neal Alexander, *Late Modernism and the Poetics of Place* (Edinburgh 2022); Eric Falcì, 'Local Modernism', *The Cambridge Introduction to British Poetry, 1945–2010* (Cambridge 2015) pp. 68–90.

²³ Basil Bunting to Gael Turnbull, 4 Jan. 1965, in *Letters of Basil Bunting*, pp. 267–9.

²⁴ Alexander, *Late Modernism and the Poetics of Place*, p. 69.

²⁵ See Denis Goatcher, cited in Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us*, p. 16. As someone born and raised in Northumberland, I'm inclined to agree with this assessment. The phrase 'Northumbrian accent' also fails to account for the massively varied accents that occur within the Northumberland area. For instance: someone from Ashington

suggestion here is that this tune functions in a manner akin to sonic mesh – a lattice meticulously composed to snare the ear, hold it fast. All poems are, of course, interested in sound effects, to a greater or lesser extent: to suggest otherwise would be silly. The point is instead that the sonic density of Bunting's verse courts a particular and unique sort of aural adhesion, snaring the ear. This is, as Lucy Alford would say, an example of 'bottom-up, stimulus driven' endogenous attention, caught by arresting sonic texture of the verse itself.²⁶

II. 'Long earsick'

As the gluey overtones of the term aural adhesion might suggest, however, this invitation to linger over the sonic textures of *Briggflatts* does not necessarily translate into unhampered poetic focus. Rather, to think about the manner in which *Briggflatts* composes aural attentional dynamics is also to consider the manner in which this attention increasingly takes the form of inattention, or distraction. To state the obvious: *Briggflatts* is long – 729 lines long, to be precise. But banal as the observation is, it remains worth pausing to consider. Read out loud in its entirety, as the poem would have been on its first public airing on the evening of 22 December 1965, the performance would have taken roughly fifty minutes, with future performances longer still when performed alongside Scarlatti's sonata in B minor, L.33 as Bunting intended.²⁷ Discussing what he terms Bunting's 'debt' to the youths of Newcastle, Edward Allen notes that 'Bunting was well aware that he couldn't write a long poem without puncturing it with a few in-jokes, hence perhaps his admission in Part IV that poetry has become "a pedant's game", closing confession – after 50 minutes of dense singsong – that his listeners have been "long earsick"''.²⁸ Allen's point here is that Bunting's performance was crafted with the Tower's youthful clientele in mind, consciously pandering to his audience. To attend to this suggestion, however, is to realise – as Bunting does – that *Briggflatts* makes complex and concerted demands upon the listener's capacity to pay attention. After 50 minutes of dense singsong, his listeners would indeed have been 'long earsick', and Bunting was, as Allen suggests, well aware.

(north Northumberland) sounds distinct from someone from Hexham or Wylam (south Northumberland) – to say nothing of someone from Berwick. To call Bunting's accent Northumbrian is thus to engage, as Bunting would put it, in the parlance of 'Southrons'.

²⁶ Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention*, p. 33.

²⁷ See <https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Bunting/Bunting-Basil_Briggflatts_5-1-1982.mp3>. Bunting begins the reading at 09 minutes, 6 seconds, and finishes at around the 1-hour mark.

²⁸ Allen, 'Performing on the Fringe', p. 260.

Faced with fifty minutes of sustained auditory attention, something curious occurs. Try as one might, the attention wanders, drifts – ‘distracted from distraction by distraction’, as Eliot’s ‘Burnt Norton’ would say.²⁹ To identify this moment as provoking a state of aural inattention is not a pejorative assessment. Instead, it recognises something vital about the strange formal effects of *Briggflatts* as a whole. ‘A great deal of what people goggle at in *Briggflatts* is merely an undisciplined and indiscriminate use of Cynghanedd ...’, remarks Bunting, continuing:

Cynghanedd is of course all the things that hold poetry together by way of sound; various kinds of rhyme, real ordinary rhyme we are used to, the peculiar rhyme the Welsh like, when you come to the rhyme word and it doesn’t rhyme but the next word rhymes instead, or when a rhyme goes in the middle of the next line, or the end of the line rhymes with the middle of the line before.³⁰

An elaborate system of consonants, accents, and rhyme present in Welsh-language poetry since the sixth century, the Cynghanedd structure rhymes lines, words, sounds in an intricate sonic lattice – or as poet G. M. Hopkins termed it, ‘chimes’.³¹ According to this complex patterning, each individual line of verse contains a complex blend of alliteration and internal rhyme, texture rendered dense by repeated consonants. ‘It’s impossible to read such poetry quickly’, Gwyneth Lewis writes, ‘because the sheer number of consonants forces your mouth to take its time articulating each letter, much like talking with toffee in your teeth.’³² It is the phonic articulation of Pound’s ‘DICHTEN = CONDENSARE’: labouring over the dense condensation of this Cynghanedd verse, the tongue must slow or else be forced to trip. And insistent – or even, as some critics have put it, evangelical – about his belief that poets should compose aloud, Bunting would have been hard pressed to miss this fact. *Briggflatts* refuses – by formal conceit – to be read aloud quickly, and the poem’s pace, crafted thus, catches and distorts the contours of the listening experience, producing a somnolent mode of attention. Time distends, lulling the listener into a state of dilatory indolence.

²⁹ T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London 1959).

³⁰ Sean Figgies and Andrew McAlister, ‘Basil Bunting: The Last Interview’, *Bête Noire*, 2/3 (1987) pp. 22–50, cited in Don Share, ‘Annotations’, in *The Poems of Basil Bunting*, pp. 328–9.

³¹ Gwyneth Lewis, ‘Extreme Welsh Meter’, *Poetry Magazine*, 16 May 2023, <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70172/extreme-welsh-meter>> (accessed 16 May 2023); ‘CYNGHANEDD’, in Stephen Cushman et al. (eds.), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th edn. (Princeton, NJ 2012).

³² Lewis, ‘Extreme Welsh Meter’.

As for performer, so too for listener, however. What this ‘undisciplined and indiscriminate’ use of *Cynghanedd* means in practice is that, as opposed to neat end-stopped rhymes, Bunting favours rhymes that further disrupt the flow of sense, as in the opening to Part III:

Down into dust and reeds
at the patrolled bounds
where captives thicken to gaze
slither companions, wary, armed,
whose torches straggle
seeking charred hearths
to define a road.
Day, dim, laps at the shore
(*Poems*, p. 51, ll. 1–8)

Read aloud, the assonance of ‘down’ replays at the end of the second line in ‘bounds’; the consonance of the opening ‘down into dust’ returning mid-way through the stanza in ‘day, dim’. ‘Thicken’ catches on ‘slithers’, ‘armed’ on ‘charred’, and the rhymes – coming halfway through the line, indiscriminately – trip the listening attention, sending it stumbling. The ear snags, lodging in the midst of lines, being catapulted back unexpectedly. So the effect is not simply – as I’ve suggested – that the texture creates a certain sort of sonic adhesion. Rather, it creates within this a sense of aural misdirection: the listening ear, attending to the unit of sense, becomes caught on the repeated sound, ear – and thus attention – returned to several lines previously.

Brigflatts, then, is a poem formally designed to distend the attentional limits of the audience. Try as the listener might to produce a more exogenous, focused mode of attention, such an attentional stance is undercut by the poem’s infamous founding compositional technique – that of condensation. Bunting’s preference, as Tom Pickard notes, was for ‘taut music’, and in a lecture entitled ‘Zukofsky’ given at Newcastle University on 15 March 1974, he expounded the ‘several possible ways of condensing a poem’.³³ Composition is figured here not just as the process of refinement but equally one of concentration: the poet, Bunting notes, must ‘leav[e] out useless

³³ Tom Pickard, ‘Q&A: Tom Pickard’, *Poetry* (2010), <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poemcomment/240804>>; Bunting, ‘Zukofsky’, in *Basil Bunting on Poetry*, ed. Peter Makin (London 1999) p. 161. For the dating of this lecture, see Bunting, ‘Zukofsky’, Bunting on Poetry – Transcripts by Peter Making of Taped Lectures by BB, Basil Bunting Poetry Archive, Durham University Library: Archives and Special Collections, MSS 305/55-62.

connecting words' and 'strip[] away needless adjectives'.³⁴ But such condensation, as Reem Abbas astutely observes, 'banks on the possibility of multiple syntactical configurations'.³⁵ What she means by this is that Bunting's process of distillation formally builds into the line heterogenous – and often contradictory – interpretations. In 'Ode 15', Abbas demonstrates, this practice facilitates not one, but rather all the following reading for lines 'Nothing | substance utters or time | stills and restrains' ('Ode 15', *Poems*, p. 91, ll. 1–3): 'Nothing [that] substance utters or time | stills and restrains' or, 'substance utters [nothing] or time | stills and restrains' or even, 'substance utters or time | stills and restrains [nothing]'.³⁶ In *Briggflatts*, the same syntactic condensation plays out, as in Part II:

[...] he gauges
 lines of a Flemish horse
 hauling beer, the angle, obtuse,
 a slut's blouse draws on her chest,
 counts beat against beat, bus conductor
 against engine against wheels against
 the pedal, Tottenham Court Road, decodes
 thunder, scans
 porridge bubbling, pipes clanking, feels
 Buddha's basalt cheek
 but cannot name the ratio of its curves
 (*Poems*, p. 45, ll. 7–17)

Here the original subject (he) is suspended – forgotten – three lines above, and as paratactic clause piles on clause, the lines obscure the distinction between object and subject. With the original subject obscured so many clauses earlier, is it, for instance, the bus conductor who 'decodes | thunder'? Who 'counts the beat against beat'? Are the pipes, the porridge, active – or passive – subjects? On the page, the grammar can be teased out: lines can be re-read, subjects distinguished. But in the ear, each syntactical possibility remains resonant, reorienting and dividing the attending ear between competing units of sense.

Zukofsky, exalts Bunting, treats 'words as musical elements', in doing so 'rob[bing] the words almost entirely of their meaning'.³⁷ To treat words as sounds is, in other words, to abstract sound from sense, and in *Briggflatts* this semantic disassociation is twofold. 'Heightening attention in one area',

³⁴ Bunting, 'Zukofsky', in *Basil Bunting on Poetry*.

³⁵ Abbas, 'A "Polyphonic Score"', p. 4.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Bunting, 'Zukofsky', in *Basil Bunting on Poetry*, p. 158.

Alford explains, ‘means a redistribution of attentional resources over the whole physical and mental field. To focus the attention on one object is to simultaneously divert focus away from another.’³⁸ Attention, that is, is not an unlimited resource, and attending to the sound of the poem, the listening ear finds that the sense of the poem has already moved on. Units of sense and units of sound do not cohere – to stop to catch the assonance of ‘armed’ | ‘charred’ is to lose the thread of sense. While the eye might simply re-read the moment, in the midst of performance focalised sonic attention can effect a loss of semantic sense. Attention is intentionally diffracted, divided. Swept from sound to sound, the audience is asked to cultivate a form of responsive listening, the poem’s form negating endogenous attention. Unpicking accustomed or learned modes of poetic attention, *Briggflatts* forms an unstable object at the attentional levels of listener and text.

To be entirely clear – it’s not that the listeners are not paying attention. Instead, *Briggflatts* encourages an extremity of passive exogeneity, transposing the internal structures of a certain kind of inattention into poetic form, and these are precisely the listening practices Bunting identifies in his letter to Zukofsky in 1964. As opposed to resisting this mode of distraction, endogenous attention gives way to exogenous attention, until – caught on sound over sense – the poem becomes, as Bunting would put it ‘nice noise’. Or to put it another way: the poem performs what Walter Benjamin terms ‘reception in distraction’, standing as a self-reflective commentary on the point of poetry.³⁹

A good deal of critical thought has gone into the kinds of endogenous reading Bunting encourages, especially as it pertains to the inclusion of annotations and explicatory material.⁴⁰ The poet might proclaim that ‘Notes are a confession of failure, not a palliation of it’, but as Don Share’s recent edition makes plain, this did not prevent the poet from liberally providing impromptu – if cranky – commentary during interviews and letters. But the experience of page and stage are not necessarily interchangeable, and my purpose here is to construe more fully the place of such notes in Bunting’s *performance* of *Briggflatts*. Recent editions of Bunting privilege a shift in a reader’s attentional modality, the wealth of annotation and reference in editions such as Share’s encouraging a decidedly endogenous mode of reading.⁴¹ But on its first readings, and in subsequent performances,

³⁸ Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention*, p. 54.

³⁹ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London 1970) pp. 166–95.

⁴⁰ See, for instance, Don Share’s discussion of Bunting’s explanatory comments in his ‘Introduction’ to *The Poems of Basil Bunting*, p. xxiii.

⁴¹ That Share’s edition is a fantastic academic resource is not under dispute; my point here is simply to track how the edition shifts the attentional thresholds of

these explicatory aids would have been far from hand: put simply, there are no footnotes during an aural performance. Instead, 'follow the clue patiently' and you will find nothing – the references to Spenser, Jonson, Shelley in the first stanza of the poem, neatly detailed in Share's edition, remain so subtle as to pass by unobserved by most. The dislocation is far from accidental. With notes out of reach, the listener's attention consciously diffracted, *Briggflatts* performs a form of perceptual dislocation, complicating the attentional and meaning-making processes of poetry.

III. 'Meditate on name and date'

Bunting's manipulation of syntactic and sonic configurations in *Briggflatts*, then, require readers to listen – and indeed to take pleasure in listening – while simultaneously thwarting established perceptual techniques of poetic meaning-making. Cast adrift amidst this sea of sound, 'the star you steer by', as Bunting would say, 'is gone', with the listener's sole reference point the poet's distinctive voice. Here it is crucial to cast a speculative ear to the transfixing effect such sonic dislocation would have had in the initial performance venue of Morden Tower. After years of decline assisted by an absence of government funding, at the time of writing Morden Tower is a shell of what it once was. But in the years of its peak, one-time visitor to the Tower Tom Raworth remembers it as a place of 'stone, a battered couch, candles (no electricity), Basil's taste for red wine, smoking loads of hash and drinking many beers with Tom [Pickard]'.⁴² Allen Ginsberg likewise speaks of 'a crowded evening, candles, incense, music, beautiful-bodied company, stone walls, Pickard with the haircut of a valiant magician's attendant in charge of the Tower's rare library, Bunting the master himself smiling in the fete-oso [*sic*]'.⁴³ For all the romanticism which echoes in Ginsberg's flight of fancy, there remains nonetheless what Raworth terms 'the feeling ... of entering a secret cave in a stone ruin: and certainly "tribal" in those days'.⁴⁴ Lit by the flickering light of candles, filled with the fug of corresponding candle smoke and hash, the Tower provokes an impression of a hushed reverie – the listener lost amidst a haze of smoke and sound.

Bunting's work. Arguably, these notes might ironically be said to be their own form of distraction from the text itself. For more on Bunting's paratextual thresholds, see Rebecca Bradburn, "'On the Fly-Leaf": Basil Bunting and the (Peri)Textual Condition', *Oxford Research in English*, 12 (2021) pp. 1–22.

⁴² Tom Raworth, email to Edward Allen, 22 Apr. 2016, cited in Allen, 'Performing on the Fringe', p. 255.

⁴³ Allen Ginsberg, 'Allen Ginsberg and Morden Tower', cited in Niven, 'Basil Bunting's Late Modernism', p. 180.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

With his venue carefully constructed to cloister the listener from reality, Bunting was alive to the performative potential of the poetry reading. 'On my advice', writes Bunting to Dorothy Pound on 11 June 1965, 'they put in no chairs' in the Tower.⁴⁵ Instead, 'the audience sits on the floor', and Bunting was struck by the manner in which 'this abolishes the platform-and-audience atmosphere and produces an intimacy in which it is possible to get over much subtler effects than an audience on chairs seems able to get' – an 'astonishment' equally shared by attendees.⁴⁶ The experience was crafted to be as immersive as possible, a fact unsurprising to anyone familiar with Bunting's views on poetry performance. In a lecture at Newcastle University in 1974 Bunting lingers over the hypnotic possibilities of Persian poetry, a setting in which:

The king is sitting on his throne in one corner of the hall, with a few courtiers about him: that's the audience. Just opposite him is the ravi [reader], with the book open on a desk in front of him. On his left side is a small orchestra with strings and drums. The centre of the floor is occupied by the dancers, who are miming the story as it proceeds. And in the remaining corner sits the poet himself, Ferdowsi, conducting.⁴⁷

'They don't put on readings like that nowadays', he laments, 'though it seems to me the right way to do it'.⁴⁸

Bunting tunes in here to the contemplative potential of such poetic performance contexts – the manner in which the conscious construction of solemn ceremony elicits an ambience of reverential attention, and the conscious staging should give us pause. Sequestered from the outside world, the world narrows to this stagey performance environment, enforcing a space of deepened attention. If this sounds like a secular form of devotional veneration, that's because it is: discussing questions of contemplation, Simone Weil defined prayer as 'absolutely unmixed attention' – it 'presupposes faith and love'.⁴⁹ Focused contemplation, Alford explains,

⁴⁵ Basil Bunting to Dorothy Pound, 11 June 1965, in *Letters of Basil Bunting*, p. 278.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Basil Bunting, lecture at SUNY Buffalo, April 1976, audio recording published from Keele University by Richard Swigg, 1995. Cited in Niven, 'Basil Bunting's Late Modernism', p. 181. In addition to this, Bunting – highly dubiously and uncomfortably – expressed a desire for a *sagi*, a servile young girl on hand to pour wine for the audience.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* For more on Bunting's engagement with Persian epic, see Abbas, 'A "Polyphonic Score"'.
⁴⁹ Simone Weil, 'Attention and Will', collected in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (London 2005).

'has played such a large role in ... virtually all religious and philosophical traditions': one of the aims of devotional attention is to 'empty the space of the subject and its self-oriented thoughts in order to fill that space with the object of devotion', as she terms it.⁵⁰ That is, such immersive attention suspends the self in favour of the object in question, effecting a reorientation of self in relation to subject. 'Poetry lies dead on the page, until some voice brings it to life', Bunting famously insists in what is perhaps his best-known poetic commentary, 'The Poet's Point of View', penned in 1966. But my point here in considering Bunting's insistence on such a live performance environment is that such a setting became a vehicle for eliciting a mode of rapt, devotional attention. So, wildly fanciful though Alex Niven notes Ginsberg's remarks to be concerning 'the magic enacted in the Tower', they might nonetheless come close to articulating the aim of Bunting's performance project: Bunting as Prospero-esque 'master' and magician.⁵¹

IV. 'Sweet shit! Buy!'

So what's at stake if we attend to *Briggflatts* in this manner – if we treat poetry inattentively as nice noise, as opposed to a space for concerted meaning-making? Outside of contemporary fears surrounding the so-called attention economy, disciplines of attention – regimens for cultivating concentration in a distracted world – have a long and fraught history.⁵² As popular culture, mass media, and technological advancements such as television and radio became ubiquitous in Anglo-American and British society, the question of attention and inattention seized the cultural imaginary.⁵³ Think of Walter Benjamin's influential essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.⁵⁴ Faced with the constantly changing images on screen, Benjamin argues, the spectator's processes of association are disrupted, creating a new mode of participation with art: *Zerstreuung* (distraction). Where the concentrated viewer is absorbed by the work of art, the distracted mass inverts this, instead absorbing the work of art. 'The film', he notes, 'makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the

⁵⁰ Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention*, p. 55.

⁵¹ Niven, 'Basil Bunting's Late Modernism', p. 180; Ginsberg, 'Allen Ginsberg and Morden Tower'.

⁵² For more on models on attention in the nineteenth-century US, see Caleb Smith, *Thoreau's Axe: Distraction and Discipline in American Culture* (Princeton, NJ 2023).

⁵³ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' [1935], in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans by Harry Zohn (Schocken Books, 1969; repr. 2007), pp. 217–52.

⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.

movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one.⁵⁵

Benjamin's discussion of distraction here works as much to endorse as to explore this cognitive mind-wandering. Yet such rhetoric is not symptomatic of the contemporary discourse surrounding inattention. Instead, lapses in attention are seen more often than not as a moral or mental lapse: the enemy of productive labour. If human attention is a mode of labour, then distracted attention functions as shoddy workmanship: an inattentive worker is incapable of keeping the machinery of industrial capitalism running smoothly. 'Besides the exertion of the bodily organs, the process demands that, during the whole operation, the workman's will be steadily in consonance with his purpose', notes Karl Marx in *Capital* (1867). 'This means close attention', he writes, and one often at odds with the will. 'The less [the worker] is attracted by the nature of the work, and the mode in which it is carried on, and the less, therefore, he enjoys it as something which gives play to his bodily and mental powers', Marx clarifies, 'the more close his attention is forced to be'.⁵⁶ Attention must be forcibly subordinated to the will in order to produce productive labour, a task all the more difficult as the task at hand becomes more exploitative.

Bunting was far from unfamiliar with the task of subordinating his attention to the will to work. Unable to find meaningful work upon his return from Tehran following a stint as a *Times* correspondent, the poet turned to various, increasingly dismal journalistic positions, eventually taking a job at the Newcastle *Evening Chronicle*.⁵⁷ Forced to turn his pen to commercial pursuits, Bunting details the experience in *Briggflatts*:

Tides of day strew the shingle
tides of night sweep, snoring;
and some turned back, taught
by dreams the year would capsize
where the bank quivers, paved
will gulls stunned on a cliff
not hard to climb, muffled
in flutter, scored by beaks,
pestered by scavengers
whose palms scoop droppings to mould
cakes for hungry towns. One

⁵⁵ Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', pp. 240-1.

⁵⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. i (London 1990) p. 284.

⁵⁷ And, earlier, a stint as a spy – see Keith Alldritt, *The Poet as Spy: The Life and Wild Times of Basil Bunting* (London 1998).

plucked fruit warm from the arse
 of his companion, who
 making to beat him, he screamed:
 Hastor! Hastor! but Hastor
 raised dung thickened lashes to stare
 disdaining those who cry:
 Sweet shit! Buy!

(*Poems*, p. 51, ll. 14–31)

The poem forms a damning portrait of the state of journalism. Journalists figure here as rapacious 'scavengers', producing spurious 'dung' in the place of pieces of real consequence. The urge for profit, for meaning-making, for efficient workers, produces, in Bunting's words, 'shit'. Advocating for Bunting in a letter to Bengali Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, in the early 1930s, Ezra Pound wrote approvingly of the manner in which – though '[Bunting] has no money' – he 'simply will not melt himself into the vile patterns of expediency'.⁵⁸ Thirty years later, however, Bunting's highfaluting principles did give way to the need for economic expediency: the need for a job.⁵⁹ Only in his poetry, then, could such vile expediency be resisted.

Faced with this backdrop of attentional labour, distraction – or inattention – has the potential to operate a mode of resistance, explains Jonathan Crary. 'Though its history will never be formally written', he notes, 'the daydream is nonetheless a domain of resistance internal to any system of routinization or coercion'.⁶⁰ Impeding the efficiency of production, inattention resists institutionalised modes of value and meaning-making, and it is an ethos which the original performances of *Briggflatts* take to their heart. Bunting's project of poetic distraction – attentional division and devotional veneration – complicates the active, endogenous focus that renders the act of attending to poetry a form of productive labour. *Briggflatts*, Niven notes, is 'a great communitarian poem, a rewrite of Eliot's *Four Quartets* that sought to strip that work of its hieratic, hierarchical overtones'.⁶¹ More than this, though, *Briggflatts* forms a kind of *ars poetica*. The point of poetry is not meaning-making – not, as Bunting puts it 'explanation'. Instead, as

⁵⁸ Ezra Pound to Rabindranath Tagore, quoted in Noel Stock, *The Life of Ezra Pound* (New York 1970) p. 483. I am citing this from Wylie, 'Bunting and the Vile Patterns of Expediency'.

⁵⁹ For more on Bunting's views on capital, see Wylie, 'Bunting and the Vile Patterns of Expediency'.

⁶⁰ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Mass. 1999) p. 77.

⁶¹ Niven, 'Basil Bunting's Late Modernism', p. 176.

Bunting observed his initial Morden Tower audiences of ‘unabashed boys and girls’ on 28 July 1964, his main impression seems to be their spontaneous unmediated pleasure in poetry. Unhindered ‘by the difficulties that annoy their elders’, they ‘laugh[] at the comic bits, [are] rapt at passages of intricate metric’, ‘without questions about its meaning’.⁶² Poetry is not productive labour to them. It is simply enjoyment.

Composed in the anti-establishment milieu of Morden Tower, *Briggflatts* was a poem penned with an ear to its audience – an audience constructed of what ‘dole walla’ Tom Pickard lovingly termed ‘genuine people’. ‘For the most part they weren’t pretentious people. They were solid’, prevaricates Pickard, before conceding, ‘Actually, they were delinquents, a lot of my friends. They had no literary ambitions, so Basil had to make it work for them, and he did.’⁶³ Alongside being, amongst other things, a creation of a Northumbrian mythos, an autobiography, and an instruction manual for Tom Pickard, then, *Briggflatts* is in part a poem about the place and the point of poetry. Poetry, like man, ‘IS NOT AN END PRODUCT’, to quote Bunting’s earlier poem ‘They Say Etna’ (*Poems*, p. 271, l. 77). In writing *Briggflatts*, Bunting discovered poetry to be a cumulative and crucially collaborative process: a game of gathering and managing the threads of audience attention.

⁶² Basil Bunting to Louis Zukofsky, 28 July 1964, in *Letters of Basil Bunting*, p. 260.

⁶³ Alex Niven, ‘To Reach the Moon You Need a Rocket: An Interview with Tom Pickard’, *3:AM Magazine*, 2 Nov. 2012, <<https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/tom-pickard-interview/>> (accessed 19 May 2023).

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