Basil Bunting's Late Modernism: From Pound to Poetic Community

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For Louise

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… and stars and lakes
echo him and the copse drums out his measure,
snow peaks are lifted up in moonlight and twilight
and the sun rises on an acknowledged land.

– Basil Bunting, *Briggflatts* (1966).

And as I continued to drop through the hole
I found all surrounding
To show me that joy innocently is
Just be quiet and feel it around you

And I opened my heart to the whole universe
And I found it was loving
And I saw the great blunders my teachers had made
Scientific delirium madness

– The Byrds, ‘5D (Fifth Dimension)’ (1966

Introduction: A Live Tradition

> [Optimistic claims about modern poetry]… could have been made only in an age in which there were no serious standards current, no live tradition of poetry, and no public capable of informed and serious interest … For the most part [poetry] is not so much bad as dead – it was never alive. The words that lie there on the page have no roots: the writer himself can never have been more than superficially interested in them.
>
> – F.R. Leavis.[1]

> I don't think I can easily name any other half-century as the one between 1914 and 1960 odd with so many first class poets, any nearer than Elizabeth's reign … so we had a fortunate century. Naturally you don't expect it to go on that way.
>
> – Basil Bunting, interview with Peter Bell, 3 September 1981.[2]

On the 22nd of December 1965, Basil Bunting read his poem *Briggflatts* in front of a live audience for the first time. The venue was a small room on the upper level of a tower in the old town walls of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, an industrial city in the north-east of England.

Over the past eighteen months this medieval structure – known locally as the Morden Tower – had come to be occupied by a burgeoning collective of students, artists, poets, academics, and ordinary young people. A spirit of activism and assimilation presided over this cross-section of 1960s demography, which in Bunting's estimate comprised 'half academics, half teenagers, with a sprinkling of thugs'.[3] In subsequent years many of the people who sat on the floor as Bunting read his dense, lyrical late-modernist work would become notable cultural figures: Richard Hamilton, then employed in the Fine Art department of the University of Newcastle, was already a seminal name in Anglo-American visual art; Jon Silkin and Claude

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[1] *New Bearings in English Poetry* (Harmondsworth, 1932), pp. 11-12.

[2] 'An Interview with Peter Bell', *The Recordings of Basil Bunting: Northumberland 1981, 1982* (compact disc), ed. Richard Swigg (Keele, 1995).

[3] Basil Bunting, letter to Louis Zukofsky, 28 July 1964, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas (Austin). Hereafter, letters from this collection will be referred to by their sender and addressee, their date, and 'HRC'.

Rawson, also university employees, were or would become major literary critics; John 'Wilko Johnson' Wilkinson, an English literature student at the time, would become the lead guitarist in the British proto-punk band Dr. Feelgood; local teenager Gordon Burn later became a novelist, critic, and sometime collaborator with the artist Damien Hirst. Another writer, the poet Tom Pickard, who organised the Morden Tower readings with his wife Connie, was already being mentored privately by Bunting, who clearly regarded Pickard as his literary successor. Largely through the influence of Pickard, a teenage working-class 'dole walla' who had left school at fourteen without any qualifications, these readings were also attended by a number of local young men and women who did not become famous but whose presence was an essential part of the Morden Tower's ambience.[4] As Pickard would later put it, these members of the audience were 'genuine people'; more to the point, they were 'delinquents' with 'no literary ambitions'.[5]

For all the egalitarian currents of the past half-century (or perhaps because of a recent resurgence of old prejudices in the neoliberal period), it remains difficult to give this audience anything like its due in critical discussions of Bunting's poetry.[6] Indeed, for a certain kind of critic, the Morden Tower milieu is something of an embarrassment, an unfortunate adjunct to Bunting's late verse, which must be detached from its hazy countercultural origins before serious analysis can begin. In the introduction to a special issue of the Durham University journal published in

[4] See Gordon Burn, 'Living Memories', *The Guardian*, 11 June 2005.

[5] Alex Niven, 'To reach the moon you need a rocket: an interview with Tom Pickard', *3:AM Magazine*, 2 November 2012, http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/tom-pickard-interview/, accessed 27/06/13.

[6] For a recent critique of Britain poetry culture and its apparently public bias, see John Redmond's *Poetry and Privacy: Questioning Public Interpretations of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Bridgend, 2013), a study that opposes 'the distorting magnetism of publically-oriented interpretations' of modern poetry, p. 15.

1995, for example, Peter Lewis is at pains to distance Bunting from the younger generation that comprised the audience at the Morden Tower. For Lewis,

> … there were tortuous ironies, to put it mildly, in the championing of a poet so insistent about the *craft* of poetry as Bunting was, by young poets to whom freewheeling indiscipline was almost a literary creed as well as a lifestyle.[7]

Donald Davie echoes this view in *Under Briggflatts*, his Bunting-centric history of post-1960 British verse. For Davie, Bunting was the last, heroic exemplar of Poundian modernism and its traditions of verbal precision and neo-puritan dissent; at all costs, he must be disassociated from the poetic culture of 'impressionistic barbarism' that grew up around places like the Morden Tower from the 1960s onward. Where poets in this mould 'went wrong', argues Davie,

> … and failed themselves as poets, was in running together the aesthetics of the creative and the performing arts, or of the fine arts and the applied … [After the 1960s] the poet would see himself as a *performing* artist; and poetry would be thought of (we might say) as a service, not a manufacturing, industry.[8]

Both Lewis and Davie sketch a clear dichotomy. The younger generation in its shallow naivety was 'freewheeling' and 'impressionistic'; the older high modernist tradition Bunting represented was serious, rooted in reality, strenuously workmanlike, and deserving of epithets such as 'craft' and 'fine art'.

This thesis does not attempt to counter the basic argument that poetry has in the last fifty years become ever more complicit with consumerism and its invidious mores (what Peter Lewis sees as the elision of poetic creativity and 'lifestyle', and what Donald Davie interprets as the of rise of a culture of performance and 'service' in lieu of the old production-based verse economy). Indeed, as a socialist, I am wholly

[7] Peter Lewis, 'Homage to Basil Bunting: A Foreword', *Sharp Study and Long Toil* (Durham: Basil Bunting Poetry Centre, 1995), pp. 6-7.
[8] Ibid., p. 55.

in agreement with such readings of art under late-capitalism, and cannot but view the history of Anglo-American literature over the past half-century as one of steady decline against a backdrop of aggressive neoliberal expansion and the near wholesale erosion of social-democratic infrastructures (the very structures, I will argue hereafter, that were substantially responsible for the dramatic cultural flowering in the post-war period that gave writers like Bunting the chance to thrive).

However, unlike Lewis and Davie, I cannot accept the view that Bunting was fundamentally at odds with the younger generation that surrounded him at the time of his career-defining work *Briggflatts*. On the contrary, I believe that the Morden Tower and its ambience was not, or not only, a fortuitous platform from which Bunting was able to launch the late revival that centred on *Briggflatts* and its attendant writings. Rather, it was a place where a long-gestating variation of modernism in the Pound tradition was finally and emphatically implemented. The following study is informed by an immense though not uncritical respect for this tradition, and a desire to emphasise and advocate the peculiar synthesis it seemed to achieve in places like Newcastle in the decades after the World War II. At bottom, this thesis is a defense and exculpation of this strain of literary modernism, and an illustration of how much was achieved creatively when it entered a phase of populism and cultural centrality.

My subject is the personal and creative trajectory of Basil Bunting: his early absorption and adaptation of high-modernist tenets, his repeated failures as he attempted to implement its aesthetic, and the late, sudden, and brief encapsulation of his ‘entire mind’ at the time of *Briggflatts* and its attendant activities. Aside from the obvious advantages from the point of view of narrative and thematic coherence, the

choice of Bunting as a means of exploring the modernist *longue durée* is useful for other reasons. On a prosaic level, Bunting's dates coincide almost exactly with those of the long tradition of twentieth-century poetry I am interested in examining. Bunting was born in 1900, 'amid rejoicings for the relief of Ladysmith during the Boer War'.[9] His adult life began in 1919, in post-World-War-I London, with readings of Eliot's 'Preludes' and Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, and it ended in the marginal north-east of England in April of 1985, as the defeat of the British miners' strike announced the decisive arrival of a neoliberal creed that was characterised by supporters and detractors alike as a return to pre-twentieth century, 'Victorian values'.[10] In between these bookends, Bunting spent time in Paris with Ezra Pound and Ford Madox Ford during the high watermark of the continental avant-garde, in Rapallo with Pound and W.B. Yeats in the twenties and thirties, in New York with Louis Zukofsky and William Carlos Williams as Objectivist poetry emerged in the wake of the Wall Street Crash, and, after a long hiatus, alongside figures like Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, Tom Pickard, and Barry MacSweeney in poetry venues and universities throughout Britain and North America, as a refracted version of

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[9] Jonathan Williams, *Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal: Conversations with Basil Bunting* (Lexington, Ky.: Gnomon Press, 1968), no pagination.

[10] The phrase 'Victorian values' was famously deployed by the Conservative British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in a 1983 interview. See 'TV Interview for London Weekend Television *Weekend World*', 16 January 1983. http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=105087, accessed 7/3/13. Bunting's politics varied widely throughout his life, but there is little doubt that he viewed Thatcher's project with intense revulsion in his last years. See Tom Pickard's elegy written on the occasion of Bunting's death:

> A year-long miners' strike,
> broken.
>
> Police road blocks blocked the motorways
> and all roads leading to the north.
>
> *More reactionary than the thirties*
> the old fascist-fighting conchie told me.

See Tom Pickard, 'Spring Tide', *Custom and Exile* (London, 1985), p. 62.

Poundian modernism achieved popular breakthrough in the social-democratic period. Bunting's engagements with these milieus were serious and meaningful, and as such his example offers a rare opportunity for drawing connections and identifying divergences between the successive waves of a modernist tradition that stretches from the end of the 1920s to the mid 1980s.

Though my ultimate destination is the Morden Tower and its audience, then, my focus will for the most part be on the long journey that preceded its advent. While we should be wary of too-convenient teleological readings of Bunting's career, it seems that something like the Morden Tower's culture had been in his mind since his earliest years, a fact that goes a long way towards explaining why his later revival arrived with such a sense of culmination. In the first chapter of this study, I examine Bunting's first substantial poem 'Villon' (written 1925-6) in the context of his early correspondences and the singular biographical experiences that fed into that work. Already in this formative period, we can see that Bunting was both alive to the potential of an experimental modern verse form that followed the example of Pound and Eliot, and yet deeply dissatisfied with what he regarded as its major tragic flaw: the veneration of interiority, what Bunting in a letter of 1926 termed the 'plunge into solitary scribblings', which he regarded as a fatal dereliction of the 'essentially public' basis of literature.[11]

In fact, as I argue in Chapter One, this negative appraisal of a drift into privacy and subjectivism was not so much a critique of Pound-Eliot 'modernism', narrowly defined, but the core of a distinctive theory of 'modern' or post-renaissance English history partly informed by Bunting's upbringing in a Quaker environment. Bunting's

[11] The source of these two key phrases ('solitary scribblings' and 'essentially public') is a letter Bunting wrote to his friend J.J. Adams in February 1926. This letter will be examined in detail at the start of my first chapter.

peculiar modernist ethos was grafted onto the foundation of an oppositional non-conformist creed, one that saw the retraction of the post-Restoration English political settlement as a precondition to cultural revival. Immediately before beginning his poetic career, Bunting spent a year in prison for making a Quaker-influenced stand of conscientious objection to the World War I, and this experience seems to have embedded in Bunting's mind both a radical antipathy to the English establishment, and a feeling of impotence that this radicalism could ever amount to anything (as Bunting's friend Denis Goacher would later relate, '[Bunting] told me that this [prison] experience embittered him for life … He said it coloured all he thought about England, about the Establishment').[12] Perhaps it is unsurprising therefore that Bunting's early poetry, and 'Villon' in particular, was dogged by an insistent scepticism that at times bordered on total nihilism. Given that Bunting's idealism seems to have been underpinned by Quakerism, and by the ideal of a radically levelled, quasi-religious public platform for poetry, the disappointment, self-abnegation, and abortiveness of his very earliest compositions was probably inevitable. England in the 1920s was not overly sympathetic to Bunting's non-conformist modernism, and his sense of frustration and isolation as he attempted to begin a new bearing in English poetry is the hallmark of his twenties works.

One of the leitmotifs of this study is the essentially social foundation of poetic creativity, and the importance of sociality and collaboration is brought out in my examination of Bunting's rapid development after the faltering debut that was 'Villon'. Chapter Two argues that the isolation and pessimism of Bunting's earliest poetry was ameliorated to a significant extent by the second-wave modernist currents of the early 1930s. Although Bunting would later query the whole notion of

[12] Denis Goacher, 'Denis Goacher Talks About Basil Bunting', ed. Diana Collecott, *Sharp Study and Long Toil*, p. 197.

'Objectivist' poetry, and although he was at odds with his friend Louis Zukofsky on certain fundamental aesthetic and ethical points, the dramatic upswing in Bunting's creative output in the years 1930-33 seems clearly to have been the consequence of his close involvement during this period with both the American avant-garde circle that surrounded Zukofsky in New York, and with the continental milieu that gathered around Ezra Pound in Rapallo, Italy (the 'Ezuversity', in James Laughlin's famous phrase).[13] This is undoubtedly the key phase of Bunting's career prior to *Briggflatts*, and indeed the poetry and pronouncements he produced at this time are comparable to those of the mid sixties in their stylistic confidence and moral assertiveness. Abetted by the loose tutelage and sponsorship of Pound, and by the moderate buzz that followed the 'Objectivist issue' of *Poetry* (Chicago) in February 1931, Bunting created a body of work that, in its best moments ('Attis: Or, Something Missing', 'Chomei at Toyama'), attains to a level of sophistication and originality largely absent from poetry elsewhere in the 1930s. The enclave of Rapallo – a place where Bunting had stayed for brief intervals in the late 1920s, and which was his home for nearly three years between 1931 and 1933 – allowed him to experiment with organisational activities and to think seriously for the first time about the social basis of art.

As we shall see, the inspiration of music was central in this period of development. Bunting's actual musical activities of the time (his music journalism, his researches into sixteenth-century lute and vocal music) are not substantially documented. However, the poetry and prose writing Bunting produced in his final spell in Rapallo was clearly informed by an effort to innovate a 'cantabile' or song-like poetry, an effort that developed in tandem with Pound's similar musical experiments of the period. A key Rapallo essay, 'The Lion and the Lizard', shows that

[13] James Laughlin, 'What I Learned at Ezuversity', *New York Times Book Review*, 12 June 1988, p. 23.

Bunting's second-generation extension of the Poundian modernist project took both the Elizabethan lyric and modern popular music as models as it sought to innovate an 'epic music' that 'belonged to the object in hand', and rejected the magniloquence of orthodox English literature in favour of a 'world of daylight and full consciousness' (in the use of such terms, at least, Bunting showed an affinity with the Objectivists).[14] From the Rapallo period onwards, music became Bunting's most important creative byword, both as a way of denoting his interest in developing a 'rhythmically supple' cantabile poetry, and as a metaphor for a performative art that looked beyond the self-conscious 'easy magnificence' of English tradition to engage with physicality, objects, and the world of daylight.[15]

However, one of Bunting's many problems at this juncture had to do with the limited nature of Rapallo's performance environment, for Rapallo was ultimately an isolated pastoral retreat that offered little scope for reformist activities beyond the Vivaldi revival concerts that Bunting helped Pound to arrange. Even before Bunting left Rapallo for good in 1933, he had begun to brood once again over the nihilistic motifs that had concerned him in 'Villon', and this spectre would grow as the decade wore on, to the point that Bunting gave up poetry entirely by the outbreak of the World War II. In the latter half of my second chapter, and throughout my third, I suggest that while Bunting's creative paralysis in this period was at least in part due to his diffident personality and complications in his private life, there is also a significant sense in which the falling-off that occurred in the mid-to-late 1930s paralleled a broader crisis or 'dead end' in the evolution of Poundian modernism.

The narrative of modernist crisis is brought to the fore in Chapter Three, which offers a reading of 'The Well of Lycopolis' (Bunting's last major poem before

[14] 'The Lion and Lizard', in Basil Bunting, *Three Essays* (Durham, 1994), pp. 29-31.
[15] Ibid., p .30.

his hiatus), before drawing extensively on the Pound-Bunting correspondence of the mid-to-late thirties. In the midst of the painful unravelling of the Pound-Bunting-Zukofsky friendship, which ground to an abrupt halt in late 1938, we can discern a host of long-running political and aesthetic debates coming dramatically to a head. Pound dedicated his *Guide to Kulchur* to Bunting and Zukofsky in 1938, and they seem to have been his most reliable touchstones in the preceding period. This complicated tripartite relationship is key to an understanding of modernist poetry on the eve of the World War II, and it deserves more attention than it has been granted. Bunting often acted as a moderate in the thirties exchanges: he regularly attempted to prevent Pound's descent into Fascist incoherence, all the while showing fraternal concern and remarkable tolerance for his friend's often chilling outbursts. However, while Bunting can appear admirable in these letters because of the pragmatic course he steered between Pound's fascism and Zukofsky's abstruse theorising, his own loss of direction is also apparent. In the discussions of ideology and art between Bunting and Pound, we can see anticipations of the profound difficulties both would face in the ensuing period. For Bunting, who had by 1939 completely abandoned the political and stylistic campaigns that had galvanised him at the beginning of the decade, the compounded failures of the latter half of the decade resulted in an impasse. He would spend the next quarter-century attempting, and largely failing, to move beyond it.

Before entering his long hiatus, Bunting had spent much time in the mid thirties translating the ancient Persian epic, the *Shahnameh*. As he put it to Pound in 1935, this shift of focus was partly motivated by a desire to circumvent the 'unintelligible' endpoint toward which he feared poetry in the tradition of Pound (and

Zukofsky) was heading.[16] Bunting believed that the only way forward for a tradition mired in psychological inwardness and esoteric technique – what Bunting described as 'this indirect business' – was 'to try telling a story', a belief that accounts for his interest at this point in the Persian tale of the tribe.[17] Bunting's *Shahnameh* translation project was eventually shelved along with other poetic schemes in the late 1930s. However, in the post-World-War-II period (the subject of Chapter Four), Bunting would make other attempts at 'telling a story'. Beginning with a discussion of the long poem *The Spoils* (1951), which arose out of Bunting's actual experiences of Persia in the 1940s, in my fourth chapter I argue that Bunting's late poetry came to be dominated by an interest in civic environment that invested great importance in place, community, and relatedly, in the need for a conducive public setting for verse, which culminated ultimately in Bunting's mid-sixties statement of belief that 'poetry must be read aloud … in public'.[18] *The Spoils*, like most of Bunting's poetry prior to this point, did little to expand his audience, and its failure on original publication initiated a thirteen-year silence during which he wrote literally no verse. However, this long barren period came to an abrupt end after Bunting became involved in the Morden Tower readings from 1964. At this point *The Spoils* was republished with artwork by Richard Hamilton, and the way was prepared for the creative meridian of *Briggflatts* and its surrounding activities.

Because of the great success of *Briggflatts*, Bunting is often regarded as a one-work poet. While this view does a disservice to his other substantive achievements ('Villon', 'Chomei at Toyama', *The Spoils*, a handful of consummate lyrics) I cannot

[16] See Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 4 January, 1935, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (New Haven, Conn.). Hereafter, letters from this collection will be referred to by their sender and addressee, their date, and 'Beinecke'.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Basil Bunting, 'The Poet's Point of View', *Three Essays*, p. 35.

depart from it too far. Accordingly, from the latter half of my fourth chapter through the fifth I focus on the contexts and contents of *Briggflatts*, which was clearly the exceptional poem of Bunting's career in every sense. In these final sections, I argue that *Briggflatts* was a sudden – arguably a too sudden – crystallisation of Bunting's adaptation of Poundian modernism, an adaptation that had been evolving since the 1920s, but which had been continually put on hold due to a variety of internal and external impediments.[19] Specifically, through both historicist and formalist readings of *Briggflatts*, I argue that the poem epitomises Bunting's late realisation of a distinctive aesthetic that broke decisively with the legacy of first-generation modernism. With the help of the younger generation he encountered when he became involved in the Morden Tower readings from 1964, Bunting's orientation shifted finally away from an internally focused aesthetic in which creative abstemiousness had deteriorated into what Terry Eagleton has elsewhere called a belief 'that the most accomplished poem is a blank page'.[20] Freed from a stringent, partially self-imposed austerity, Bunting's poetry was reanimated as it was able to prioritise audience reception over and above psychological inwardness.

Historically, criticism about Bunting has tended to stress his scepticism. In what follows, I have sought to query the critical truism of Bunting the sceptic by emphasising the centrality of forms of qualified idealism in his creative project, notably a distinctive politico-religious brand of communitarianism that found expression in the endorsement of a public verse culture. Tracking the development of Bunting's poetic ideals – from the high modernism he inherited from Pound, to the more populist interpretation of verse he instantiated in the Morden Tower in the 1960s

[19] By 'too sudden', I mean that Bunting had great difficulty in following *Briggflatts*. After having written such a definitive, summative work in the mid sixties, Bunting wrote only a handful of short lyrics (five of which are included in the more-or-less canonical Second Book of Odes) before his death in 1985.
[20] Terry Eagleton, *On Evil* (New Haven, 2011), p. 66.

– will engender a more rounded view of Bunting's contribution to the development of modernism in its later phases than has been envisaged prior to this point. By considering Bunting as a poet of latent social idealism, as a writer who was most successful when he was cajoled out of the aporia of isolation and encouraged to enter a public environment, we get the true measure of his body of work. Foregrounding Bunting's preoccupation with reading aloud and pushing verse towards the condition of music in a public setting allows us to appreciate that his fundamental impulse was to escape from the limitations of self by deferring to the listeners that surrounded him.

Chapter 1: 'Villon' and Bunting's Late Arrival

> Weary on the sea
> for sight of land
> gazing past the coming wave we
> see the same wave …
>
> – Basil Bunting, Ode I:1[1]

> As for pessimism, no, though I'm a lot more at home with Timon or Schopenhauer than with Leibniz or the passing Pippa, but nihilist if you like. Yeats was perturbed by that in my very earliest published poems.
>
> – Basil Bunting, letter to Denis Goacher, 4 September 1965.[2]

Foreword

As a modernist poet Bunting presents an unusual case, because he did not develop publicly during the high-modernist period. Instead, he would become a cross-generational voice in the post-war years. Following his 'rediscovery' after 1963, Bunting was able to summarise earlier modernist precepts in précis form for the sixties generation, while also realising a vision of his own that might have come to light many years earlier in slightly different circumstances. Bunting, then, was a 'later modernist' in a literal chronological sense, just as Keats, Byron, and Shelley were later Romantics in comparison with Wordsworth, Blake, and Coleridge. But there is a more profound aspect to Bunting's lateness. From the very beginning of his career in the early 1920s, Bunting approached the legacy of his immediate predecessors with a scepticism that was by turns refreshing and problematic: refreshing because Bunting's critiques provided a much-needed counterblast to the mature digressions of first generation modernists (especially Pound and Eliot); problematic because his sceptical

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[1] Basil Bunting, 'Ode I:1', *Complete Poems* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2000), p. 97. All subsequent references to Bunting's poems are taken from this edition unless otherwise stated. Hereafter, references to the poems will be followed by page numbers in parentheses.

[2] Basil Bunting Archive, University of Durham. Hereafter, letters from this collection will be referred to by their sender and addressee, their date, and 'Durham'.

zeal was more often than not painfully self-directed. Bunting was invariably his own worst critic. Self-conscious fits of inadequacy and feelings of obsolescence would regularly threaten to jeopardise his existence as a writer, so that in a sense his career never quite got off the ground, or at least not until a younger generation of still later modernists sought him out and cajoled him into renaissance in the 1960s.

The narrative of Bunting's belatedness is a compelling one that should occupy a central place in any analysis of the evolution of modern poetry between the 1920s and the 1980s. Bunting's first work, particularly 'Villon' (dated 1925), is indelibly marked by the influence of Pound, who he met in Paris in 1923 and whose presence would hang over him in one way or another for the next half-century. Yet, as we shall see, in many ways it is as a qualification of and corrective to the Poundian project that Bunting's work is best viewed. Like Pound, Bunting began with the ambition of innovating a progressive, formally precise poetry free from Victorian obfuscation, a vigorous, 'live' medium for an accelerated epoch.[3] Bunting, though, would come to give Pound's notion of a 'live poetry' an idiosyncratic renovation. Arriving as a second-wave figure who would be again and again confronted with the feeling that modernism was coming up against an impassable dead-end, Bunting was forced to think in more than usually strenuous existential terms about what it meant for poetry to be, as it were, 'live' rather than 'dead'. Bunting's is a verse obsessed with motifs of an approaching endpoint or moment of erasure to an extent that far exceeds the modernist norm.

[3] The word 'live', of course, echoes throughout Pound's writing. To take some salient examples: to Bunting in 1935, Pound wrote that poetry should have a 'biologic live centre'; Ezra Pound, letter to Basil Bunting, undated (probably May 1935), Beinecke. Not long afterward, in *Guide to Kulchur*, he would comment: '[p]eople find ideas a bore because they do not distinguish between live ones and stuffed ones on a shelf. I mean there are ideas, facts, notions that you can look up in a phone book or library and there are others which are in one as one's stomach or liver, one doesn't have to remember them, though they now and again make themselves felt', (London, 1938), pp. 56-7. The most notable of Pound's uses of the term occurred in Canto 81, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Three.

But the great value of Bunting's final poetic achievements is their concomitant ability to offer the suggestion of a lyrical beginning or way forward. In his 1966 magnum opus *Briggflatts*, Bunting would at last write a condensed epic that offered a definitive response to the atmosphere of impasse that had dominated his life and work. This sudden public breakthrough is indisputably the most interesting fact about Bunting as a poet. But the long string of false starts that preceded this final success must also be granted sustained attention. Some fifty years prior to *Briggflatts*, Bunting was already thinking about how to escape from a dead-end of subjectivity into a public environment where it might be possible to revive and re-energise modern poetic culture. Many, if not most, of Bunting's central ideas were present from the start. His major problem, as we shall see, was one of implementation. Close readings of Bunting's early correspondence, and of his career-initiating poem 'Villon', will introduce some of the problems that faced Bunting as he composed his first works.

I. 'Must We Begin at the Beginning Again…?'

From Pisa in 1945, at the close of his Canto 81, Ezra Pound would suggest that the implosion of his aesthetic project – what he termed the 'live tradition' – had been threatened at some indefinite point by a failure of nerve:

> To have gathered from the air a live tradition
> or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame
> This is not vanity.
> Here error is all in the not done
> all in the diffidence that faltered …[4]

[4] Ezra Pound, Canto 81, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York, 1996), p. 542. All subsequent references to the Cantos are taken from this edition and will be cited in the following way: '(*Cantos*, [page number])'.

The final couplet here may well be a reference to narratives like that of Pound's friend Basil Bunting, the faltering of which he had witnessed at close quarters over the previous two decades. Bunting, of course, is mentioned explicitly several times in the *Pisan Cantos*, often in elegiac terms. As we shall see in Chapter Three, the references to Bunting in Cantos 74, 77, and 81 depict a career that had declined into apparent early obsolescence before the advent of the World War II. There are elements of both truth and fiction in this portrait. To a degree Pound's sense that Bunting's career faltered along with his own was fair enough: Bunting's gradual failure in the 1930s was tragic, and very nearly total. However, to Pound's portrait of Bunting in the *Pisan Cantos* we must apply the caveat that Bunting's diffidence was not something that deepened dramatically over time. It was not something that descended, as it did for Pound, after the disastrous running aground of an epic campaign that had started hopefully. For a number of quite specific reasons, Bunting was inclined to be radically dissatisfied with himself and his surroundings before he had even begun to write poetry.

Bunting's 1920s are somewhat scantily documented. Nevertheless, the material that does survive speaks powerfully of a young writer starting from a position of premature *Weltschmerz*. Even as a very young man, Bunting's feelings of superannuation could be all encompassing, and it is this attitude that dominates his earliest writing.

In February of 1926, Bunting wrote to his friend, the poet J.J. Adams, from his home in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The letter to Adams is an energetic, even agitated, piece of prose. It summarises Bunting's aesthetic at around the time he was composing his first substantial work, 'Villon':

> I have written one or two short poems, but worries have been too constant and too severe to allow any real work, even reading. A little Dante – too little. Another glance into Wittgenstein – 'Die Welt ist alles was der Fall ist', you know, leading, after three hundred pages of close reasoning to 'Woruber mann nicht sprechen kann, daruber muss mann shweigen [sic].' Eliot's poems. Dryden. Through the Dunciad once more. Eddington: a fallacious and misleading writer who evidently confounds religion with the residue of transcendental metaphysics. After my father died I read the whole of Hardy in about three weeks to quiet my soul. I found that I had never before realised what a command he has over English. Of his contemporaries, Butler alone surpasses him. The stylists, including Conrad and Ford, Flaubert and de Gourmont, fall far short of this excellence. Do they become stylists because they are aware of their imperfections, I wonder?
>
> But even the best are too static. Flaubert made a virtue of it, but a series of instantaneous photographs is not literature. We require a verbal cinematograph. The Drama? Who is tempted to go into competition with frauds like Pirandello and the rest? Gertrude Stein? But she is incomprehensible. Joyce is wide, but still static. There is no discharge, no catharsis. Must we begin at the beginning again, before the altar, and rewrite the Prayer-book as Aeschylus did? Should artists be priests and go about in reversed collars and pretend to be chaste? Somewhere we got lost, I think in Cromwell's time, and we have got further and further from the track, and now we are plunging into solitary scribblings, the antithesis of literature, which is essentially public.[5]

There is a large amount of casual literary namedropping here, of the kind one might expect from a young person of twenty-five who is keen to show off his erudition to an educated friend. But we can also discern the outline of a literary ethos in this restless cascade of references. Dante, eighteenth-century English satire, T.S. Eliot: these are the bare bones of Bunting's early poetic, even if he would modify this list of influences significantly over the next few decades.[6]

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[5] Basil Bunting, letter to J.J. Adams, 19 February 1926, Durham.

[6] The comments about Hardy are also interesting. Bunting's indebtedness to Hardy has been underplayed, perhaps because he is often viewed as a British modernist opposed to the post-Hardy tradition in twentieth-century verse that runs through the Georgian poets, Larkin, Davie, Hughes, and Heaney. It seems clear that Hardy's pessimism and his interest in pastoralism and rural labour must have impacted on Bunting in some way, particularly in later, pastoral works such as *Briggflatts*. Although Donald Davie remarked in 1972 that 'there is need of an essay or monograph that would map a way into the poetic universe of Pound by the firmly interlinked stages of a route that runs though from Landor to Hardy through Browning', no such work has yet appeared that makes specific reference to Bunting. See Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London, 1973), p. 3. Evidence that Hardy might have been a key influence for Bunting in his later years is provided in his lecture of 1969-70,

More intriguing than Bunting's reading list though is the gloss he puts on it. We can trace a movement in the extract from jejune deference to radical dissatisfaction with the contemporary scene. Hardy, the laureate of English melancholy and belatedness, is posited by Bunting as an antidote to the Francophone 'stylists'. This is a significant step. In rejecting an expansive, experimental continental tradition, and in avowing a lugubrious British pastoralist who forsook novel writing for a tersely minimal poetic mode, Bunting was taking a definite stance that would remain his basic position in succeeding years. Unlike Pound, Joyce, Charles Olson, and countless other writers of the century, Bunting would never attempt to write a vast, sprawling epic. Rather, he would become something like an austere lyricist in the mould of Hardy. Like Samuel Beckett, a nearer coeval, Bunting would generally adopt a stance of scepticism and negation rather than one of idealism and affirmation. In Beckettian parlance, he would attempt to leave things out, 'to come down to the bedrock of the essentials', where the slightly earlier Joycean-Poundian instinct had been to put everything, 'the whole of human culture', into a great meta-work.[7] For Bunting, the proto-modernist 'stylists' – Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, Gustave Flaubert, and Remy de Gourmont – suffered from just this flaw, from a cumulative tendency that sought to 'cover up' a superfluity of 'imperfections' with encrustations of stylistic matter. As he commented in a slightly earlier letter to the same correspondent, '[w]e are too precious nowadays, and it's Flaubert's fault, and Pater's'.[8] Reacting against this decadent 'preciousness', Bunting was adamant that condensation, brevity, and a reduction to the bedrock of essentials should be the cornerstones of the new poetry.

'Precursors', in which describes Hardy as the 'earliest of the rebels against the Victorian mode'. See Basil Bunting, *Basil Bunting on Poetry*, ed. Peter Makin (London, 1999), p. 106.

[7] Samuel Beckett quoted in *Beckett Remembering Beckett: A Centenary Celebration*. Eds. James and Elizabeth Knowlson (New York, 2006), pp. 47-8.

[8] Basil Bunting, letter to J.J. Adams, 14 January 1924, Durham.

But having first built up Hardy as a paragon of such stylistic restraint, Bunting quickly discards him ('even the best are too static'). What is Bunting getting at when he dismisses virtually the whole of the literary avant-garde of the mid-twenties as 'static'? Pirandello is a 'fraud', Gertrude Stein 'incomprehensible', Joyce is 'wide, but … static', and the ur-modernist Flaubert was 'not literature'. There is a harsh, unrelenting symmetry to these remarks. On the one hand, they advocate a Beckettian minimalism or anti-style that will revive literature by reducing it to fundamentals after the excesses of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. (In Bunting's view, this reduction might engender a *non*-static, more alive verse form: we will see the products of Bunting's early attempt to innovate a non-static poetry – a poetry apparently enlivened by the influence of musical touchstones – in succeeding chapters.) But this productive impulse is joined in the J.J. Adams letter by a desire to raze the entire literary scene to the ground, so that nothing is left behind but a kind of frustrated ache ('[t]here is no discharge, no catharsis').

The remainder of Bunting's career might be seen as a continual struggle fought on this scorched earth. Like his elder literary siblings – the Bloomsbury set, Wyndham Lewis's men of 1914, and other figures who achieved breakthrough in the 1910s and twenties – Bunting adopted a position of combined political-formal radicalism as he attempted to find a bolder way of making it new. But unlike these tendencies, who had initiated an important break with late-Victorian and Edwardian culture around the time of the World War I, Bunting had to wrestle at every turn with the problem of deciding exactly what he was opposed to. At times, it appeared that the troublesome answer was that Bunting was a radical opponent of *everything*. In his letter to J.J. Adams, we might first assume he was inclining toward a straightforward Imagist rejection of aestheticist grandiloquence in favour of poetic fundamentals. Yet

even classic modernist methodologies like Imagism appear to come under attack. For Bunting, even the best of his contemporaries, with their array of collage techniques drawn from the visual arts, their 'series of instantaneous photographs', their precious stylistic imperfections, had already become staid and outdated.

Was Bunting then an anti-modernist, a *post*-modernist in the most literal sense? To a degree this is an accurate designation, so long as we are careful to distinguish Bunting's anti-modernism from other British examples more deserving of the label (the reactionary traditionalism of Betjeman and Larkin, say, or Auden's social realism of the 1930s, with its desire to communicate in 'the speech of the common people').[9] Bunting's critique of Flaubert, Ford Madox Ford, Gertrude Stein, and James Joyce in the above extract is characteristic. Again and again, he would reiterate a familiar grumble about modernism: that it was a '[plunge] into solitary scribblings' and 'incomprehensibility'. In subsequent years Bunting would level this criticism at Pound's *Cantos*, at the work of his friend Louis Zukofsky, and, much later, at the 'diffuse' poetry of Allen Ginsberg.[10] It might seem ironic that Bunting, who for many people is a notably opaque, difficult modernist writer, should rehearse such a predictable traditionalist caricature. But it is in accord with his overall standpoint. There was a pragmatic, empiricist side to Bunting (note the sideswipe in the above extract at Arthur Eddington's apparent confusion of 'religion with the residue of transcendental metaphysics' – Bunting, as we shall see, was a virulent anti-Hegelian). While he was undoubtedly a progressive, Bunting could also be deeply antipathetic to art that showed heavy traces of mysticism, or that was outré without a clear reason. The formulation he quotes in the above passage – 'whereof one cannot

[9] W.H. Auden, 'Poetry, Poets and Taste', in *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings, 1927-1939* (London, 1977), p. 360.
[10] Bunting's remark about Ginsberg is contained in Tom Pickard, private manuscript sent to Alex Niven by, via email, 25 November 2011.

speak, thereof one must be silent' – was in fact the keystone of his literary ethic (despite his lightly mocking reference to Wittgenstein's need for 'three hundred pages of close reasoning' to prove the axiom). Remaining silent when one didn't have something to say, rather than filling the void with 'solitary scribblings', was exactly Bunting's procedure throughout most of his working life. Whether it is possible to make cogent progressive art while remaining dedicated to such an ascetic model of praxis is a question that will keep recurring as we examine Bunting's trajectory.

Bunting, then, was a later modernist who applied his fierce scepticism to modernism itself in a way that would make life extremely difficult for him. Bunting was, after all, and in spite of his scepticism, quite definitely a part of the Poundian milieu, and it did not bode well that he was so radically ill at ease with this literary environment as it stood in 1926. Yet added to this anti- or post-modernist critical impulse was something much broader than dissatisfaction with a wayward contemporary scene. Having followed Bunting through his unrelenting deconstruction of post-Flaubert European literature in the letter to J.J. Adams, we are confronted with a sudden, dramatic leap back through the centuries: '[s]omewhere we got lost, I think it was in Cromwell's time'. Exactly what, and more importantly whom, did Bunting consider had 'got lost' nearly three hundred years prior to his own era, at the time of the Civil War and the failed English revolution that occurred in its wake?

The idea that the decline of literature was part of an ongoing centuries-old process is a familiar one to students of modern literature. Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Yeats, Ford Madox Ford, and David Jones all concocted theories that revolved around the idea that a catastrophic historical break had occurred in Western art at some point during or after the Renaissance. For many if not most of these writers, such theories

of decline were a continuation in modified form of the nineteenth-century Romantic yearning for a revival of pre-industrial, pre-Enlightenment forms of cultural organisation. But in Bunting's interpretation, the notion of a post-Renaissance fall was something more than late-Romantic mythmaking. The remarks about Cromwell's time and 'rewriting the Prayer-book' do not seem to be born out of Romantic nostalgia. Rather, they contain the nucleus of a distinctive politico-religious theory of British history.

Bunting was brought up in a Quaker environment, and educated at a series of Quaker schools prior to his imprisonment for conscientious objection in 1918.[11] Probably as a result, 'Cromwell's time' and its atmosphere of religious experimentation and political radicalism seem to have stood at the centre of his ideological and imaginative universe. As he commented to Donald Davie in a letter of 1975, '[s]ome of the Ranters, and many of the first Quakers must have thought as I do, allowing for the change in vocabulary between their day and ours'.[12] *Briggflatts*, Bunting's 'autobiography', took its title from the hamlet in the North Pennines where George Fox preached to a crowd of a thousand people in the fourth year of Cromwell's Commonwealth, an event usually viewed as the birth of the Quaker movement. These touchstones were always somewhere in the background for Bunting. Although his sense of a failed English revolution would find application in a series of contemporary episodes throughout his life – the failure of the British General Strike of 1926, the failure of organised labour and the British left to respond to the Depression, the failure of Poundian modernism to achieve breakthrough from the thirties through the fifties – it is important to acknowledge that belatedness was an *a*

[11] Bunting's Quakerism was de facto rather than de jure. He summarised his Quaker background as follows: ' … between my uncle, who was a member of the Society of Friends, and others, there was a great deal of Quakerism about [in my childhood] and I was brought up entirely in a Quaker atmosphere'. *Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal*, no pagination.

[12] Basil Bunting, letter to Donald Davie, 9 October 1975, Durham.

priori part of Bunting's identity. Put simply, as a British non-conformist radical, Bunting was someone for whom failure and the restlessness of the internal émigré were starting points rather than mere looming possibilities.

A sort of atavistic non-conformist dissatisfaction, then, was one of the bases of Bunting's poetry. This goes a long way towards accounting for the bitterness and paralysis that dominated his career. The Quaker-radical grievances were so monumental, and of such long-standing, that they gave rise to a degree of hopelessness on Bunting's part that he would ever manage as a lone individual to reignite and realign a wayward tradition of British iconoclasm. The orthodox clampdown that had followed the radical heyday of the Quakers and Ranters was still apparently in his mind as a recent disappointment and an insurmountable historic blight. Yet this peculiar reading of history could also be a galvanising force that offered scope for a buried idealism to emerge in Bunting's writing at intervals. For all Bunting's scepticism, there were messianic undertones to his theory of a mid-seventeenth-century schism or collapse. The task of the modern poet, Bunting appears to suggest to J.J. Adams, is to 'begin at the beginning again'. We have wandered further and further from the track, in the years since the failure of the Puritan revolution, Bunting hints, but somehow we might be able to halt that wayward drift. How? The answer is couched in religious terminology. Perhaps writers ought to become like priests, to begin again, like Aeschylus, 'before the altar'.

Where did this somewhat obscure phrase come from? Most likely, Bunting is alluding vaguely to the origins of ancient Greek drama, to the Theatres of Dionysia at which Aeschylus's *Oresteia* were first performed in fifth-century Athens. At any rate, 'the altar' was a relatively common figure of speech in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century discourse. (To take a notable example, Marx in *Das Kapital*

refers to the modern colonial system as ‘‘the strange God’ who perched himself on the altar cheek by jowl with the old Gods of Europe’).[13] However, Bunting would keep returning to the altar motif. Indeed certain of his deployments of the word elsewhere suggest that this might have been something more than an arbitrary figure of speech.

In 1970, Bunting delivered a series of lectures on the history of English poetry at the University of Newcastle. The tenth lecture, titled ‘Precursors’, examined the ‘premonitory rumblings’ to a ‘kind of revolution in poetry which is usually attributed to Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and perhaps W.B. Yeats, about the time of the World War I’.[14] For Bunting, the precursors to this poetic revolution were all late-Victorian English writers: Thomas Hardy, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Charles Doughty, and Rudyard Kipling. Bunting’s reading of Kipling is the most extensive; he quotes the whole of Kipling’s short lyric of 1886, ‘L’Envoi’. His commentary on the poem is worth quoting in brief:

> The Victorians had been tormenting themselves for half a century to find some way of keeping the unifying power of Christianity though they had ceased to believe its myths … But what they fumble at at great length, Kipling gets into eighteen lines not easy to forget.[15]

There is a window here into understanding Bunting’s impulse to ‘begin again’ in 1926. The felt inheritance from the late-Victorians, the starting point of the ‘kind of revolution’ engineered by Pound, Eliot, and Yeats, was a sceptical modern sensibility that had to be condensed into a hardened lyric form free from circumlocutory fumbling. So far, we are on the familiar ground of pedagogical introductions to modernism (and of course this is exactly the context in which Bunting’s lecture was

[13] *The Portable Karl Marx*. ed. Eugene Kamenka (London, 1983), p. 283.
[14] *Basil Bunting on Poetry*, p. 106.
[15] Ibid., p. 107.

delivered). However, even more revealing than Bunting's praise for Kipling's concision, and more illuminating of his own literary project, is the glance at late-nineteenth-century attempts to find 'some way of keeping the unifying power of Christianity though they had ceased to believe its myths'.

In order to pick apart what Bunting may have meant by this, we must probe a little deeper into the Victorian legacy by glancing briefly at the work of the writers he nominated as precursors to the modernist revolution. Like Thomas Hardy's 'The Darkling Thrush' (a near analogue), Kipling's 'L'Envoi' is notable for its combination of pessimism with a glimpse of what Hardy in his poem calls 'some blessed hope', a fleeting intimation of a hopeful future. Both Hardy and Kipling metaphorise distant optimism in a music that resounds throughout the landscape to reanimate an inert modern wasteland. In Hardy's 'The Darkling Thrush', hope arrives in the tentative form of birdsong:

> So little cause for carolings
> Of such ecstatic sound
> Was written on terrestrial things
> Afar or near around,
> That I could think there trembled through
> His happy good-night air
> Some blessed hope, whereof he knew
> And I was unaware.[16]

As in much of Hardy's work, there is a forceful contrast here between the oppressive weight of history (the deadness of terrestrial things), and a remote rumour of providence that is just about audible even if the speaker himself remains barred from apprehending it.

[16] Thomas Hardy, 'The Darkling Thrush,' *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 3d ed., edited by Alexander W. Allison, et al., (New York, 1983), p. 846.

Bunting's poetry would continually echo this sentiment, not least in its tendency to use music and birdsong as metaphors for spiritual reawakening (the 'painful lark, labouring to rise' in the first part of *Briggflatts* being probably the most famous example). But his oeuvre can also be viewed as a recurrent attempt to work towards the more affirmative manner in which Kipling responded in 'L'Envoi' to the modern maladies of faithlessness and epochal fatigue. In Kipling's poem we have the same contrast as in Hardy's: between the decaying flowers and dying smoke of previous epochs on one hand, and the hope of resurrection on the other. Yet there is more vigour in 'L'Envoi''s movement from fatalism to renewal:

> The smoke upon your Altar dies,
> The flowers decay,
> The goddess of your sacrifice
> Has flown away.
> What profit then to sing or slay
> The sacrifice from day to day?
>
> 'We know the shrine is void,' they said,
> 'The Goddess flown –
> 'Yet wreaths are on the altar laid –
> 'The Altar-Stone
> 'Is black with fumes of sacrifice,
> 'Albeit She has fled our eyes.
>
> 'For it may be, if we still sing
> 'And tend the Shrine,
> 'Some Deity on wandering wing
> 'May there incline;
> 'And, finding all in order meet,
> 'Stay while we worship at Her feet.'[17]

Hardy's 'The Darkling Thrush' finds solace at the last in a sort of sighing, attenuated reprise of the stoicism of the protagonist of Tennyson's 'Ulysses'. It is, pointedly, the last nineteenth-century poem, an anatomical survey of 'the Century's corpse outleant' dated at the close of 1899. In subtle contrast, as Bunting suggests, Kipling's

[17] Rudyard Kipling, 'L'Envoi', *The Collected Poems of Rudyard Kipling* (Ware, 1994), p. 84.

‘L’Envoi’ is a proto-modernist poem that breaks decisively with Victorian morbidity. Whereas Hardy’s poem is a century’s ‘death-lament’, Kipling lights on a more constructive basis for maintaining faith and unity. In emphatic cadences, the last two-thirds of ‘L’Envoi’ describe a process of ‘tending’, a decoration of the Altar site that is embodied formally in an incantatory lyricism built out of solid, stressed monosyllables (‘shrine’, ‘wreaths’, ‘stone’, ‘black’) and decisive spondaic line endings (‘still sing’, ‘Her feet’). In lieu of Hardy’s elegiac diminuendo, Kipling places a bold, collectively voiced crescendo. For Kipling in ‘L’Envoi’, as Bunting saw it, there is potential in the unifying power of the remnants of religion and its ritual music. While Hardy’s speaker had remained an isolated ‘I’ ultimately cut off from the thrush’s redemptive music, Kipling introduces an apparitional crowd of believers who respond to looming nihilism and decline with an echoing succession of ‘we’s.

Beginning again before the altar, in the literal terms of Bunting’s letter to J.J. Adams, Kipling’s chorus finds a steeling unity in the trope of the community that circles the stone monument, just as, in formal terms, ‘L’Envoi’’s stanzas resolve after balladic quatrains into emphatic rhyming couplets (the final pairing of ‘meet’ and ‘feet’ is an especially powerful sound/sense fusion). In keeping an unbroken circle around the monuments of worship and remembrance, in maintaining a form that corresponds to its surrounding community, Kipling suggests, the flight of the gods might be reversed. And there is a constructive, progressive aspect to the conceit alongside its insistence on conservation and memory. A new spatial *context* is being foregrounded. In Kipling’s poem we have found something akin to Bunting’s ‘verbal cinematograph’ (a phrase that in turn recalls Pound’s ‘prose kinema’ in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*), a visionary space or religious theatre in which the recitation of music revives a dying landscape and allows for the return of the deity.

For all the light sarcasm of Bunting's comment about artists becoming priests, the importance to him of an analogous musical-religious model for poetry cannot be understated. What was lost in Cromwell's time, it would seem, was a vibrant, 'essentially public' context for literature; everything that followed was anti-literature, stasis, progressive paralysis and decay. The modern wasteland would have to be tackled by somehow reinstituting the occasions around which a nurturing, singing congregation could gather. The idea of a public, collective music suggested a way forward that had very little to do with the aesthetic gigantism and interior delving of a certain wing of modern writing: it allowed for a vital, reformist transposition of the positive social aspects of communitarian religious ritual into the environment of secular modernity.

But there was a troubling lack of cultural models on which to base this project. As we have seen, Bunting was less than impressed with the examples offered by his literary contemporaries and his immediate predecessors. Moreover, the musical-religious model was itself highly problematic. The crowd that stood on Firbank Fell near Brigflatts in 1652 to hear George Fox preach did not, like the speakers in Kipling's poem, have an altar to situate themselves around: their anti-ritualistic religion was founded in spontaneity, itinerancy, silence. And anyway, in subsequent years the English Quakers would either emigrate to North America or continue as persecuted subjects on the extreme margins of British culture.

Given that he was schooled in this tradition, it is hardly surprising that Bunting would be faced with serious difficulties as he sought to situate his self-proclaimed musical poetry in a country inimical to non-conformism while also grappling with his own natural inclination to valorise silence and negation over rituals and monumental permanence. In his letter to J.J. Adams he appears to be grasping at

possible modern candidates for resolving this problem: the theatre, the modernist novel, the photograph. None of these seemed quite plausible in 1926. Arguably, none would ever seem plausible to a pessimistic, depressive mind like Bunting's. But there was some hope in the vague but compelling dream of a 'verbal cinematograph'. If he could discover a mode of poetic performance that was spiritual and spontaneous, one that would provide scope for discharge and catharsis, like the practice of the early Quakers and Ranters, Bunting might consider that literature had moved closer back to 'the track'.

II. Foundational Biographical Contexts

> 'Do you mean that a prisoner forgives his prison?' said she, slowly and with emphasis.
>
> 'That was my speculation, Miss Wade. I don't pretend to know positively how a prisoner might feel. I never was one before.'
>
> 'Mademoiselle doubts,' said the French gentleman in his own language, 'its being so easy to forgive?'
>
> 'I do.'
>
> – *Little Dorrit*.[18]

Bunting's letter to J.J. Adams, with its urbane references and prescient grasp of high modernist dilemmas, seems a little too accomplished to be the work of a 25-year-old novice. This is because Bunting in early 1926 was not in fact a novice, but someone who had already racked up a good deal of experience – literary and otherwise – even if his compositional procedure was, as usual, lagging behind. Out of the nebulous beginnings to Bunting's adult life, we can observe two biographical events that impacted on the development of his ideas quite profoundly. The first is his imprisonment in 1918 in the final months of the World War I for conscientious objection, surely the most dramatic thing that ever happened to him. The second

[18] Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (Oxford, 1999), p. 18.

major event of these years was of course Bunting's meeting with Ezra Pound in 1923, which marked the beginning of one of the most important friendships in twentieth-century poetry. Brief summaries of these two incidents will provide a backdrop to Bunting's first literary statements.

The first of these experiences, Bunting's imprisonment in 1918-19, is best related via the summary Bunting's friend Denis Goacher gave to Diana Collecott in a 1989 interview. As Goacher prefaced his remarks, 'Basil told me all about his incarceration as a conscientious objector in the 1914-18 War; I don't think he told many people because he didn't like talking about it'.[19] It is telling, though hardly surprising, that Bunting should be reticent about describing what happened in 1918-19. As Goacher narrates it,

> [i]t was the most horrifyingly awful experience – far, far worse than anything that Ezra suffered at the DTC Camp at Pisa and subsequently in that 'snake pit hell-hole' in St Elizabeths.
>
> You must remember that Basil was born on March the first and that the Armistice was not until the eleventh of November 1918. He was born with the century, so he was called up soon after March the first 1918, refused to go, and was stuck in jail as a 'conchie'. What they did was to put you in a totally darkened cell, without a window, without any heating, and no furniture whatever, no clothes whatever … You just had to lie, when you could sleep, on the floor, naked; and you were allowed, once a day, a bowl of water and a crust of bread. This lasted for three days and you were then examined by a doctor, to see what condition you were in. If he considered that your condition was sufficiently sound, you went back on that regime for two days. If, at the end of say five or six days, your condition had deteriorated, you were then given a minimum of clothing and a little bit more food and water. At the end of that three days, in a slightly improved condition, you were put back on the no heating, no clothes and no light whatever. The idea, of course, was to break your spirit. Well Basil, who was a tough man, survived this for six weeks, and at the end of the six weeks he was still unbroken. So they let him out, and he was set to work making jute bags … and he was [subsequently] saved by the Armistice …
>
> Basil told me that this experience embittered him for life. He didn't make any bones about it. He said it coloured all he thought about England, about the Establishment, the 'Southrons' as he called us. It marked him in a way that Ezra's terrible experience in St Elizabeths, I don't think did.

[19] Goacher, 'Denis Goacher Talks About Basil Bunting', p. 196.

Because after all he was a very young man, and it was much, much worse.[20]

The fact that Bunting began his adult life in this way is crucial for a number of reasons.[21] Psychologically, Bunting's incarceration was obviously traumatic, such that, in Goacher's terms, he was marked for life. We should be careful not to speculate too copiously about the link between personal and creative lives. However, Bunting's experience of being beaten and kept in solitary confinement by the British state was one of such violence that its impact on his later creative narrative seems scarcely disputable. Repeatedly, throughout the remainder of this study, we will see examples of the bitterness engendered in Bunting by this early encounter with authoritarianism. A feeling of worthlessness and pessimism would hang over him in the ensuing years, so much so that he could comment to Pound in 1935: 'Most of my writing is shit … I know that, and don't need to be told'.[22] It seems likely that this self-loathing was at least in part due to the fact that Bunting had literally had his youthful optimism beaten out of him, at an age when most young people are at their most confident. Bunting would suffer because of his reluctance or unwillingness to act throughout his life, but we should remember that his adulthood began with an act of some independence and bravery, the brutal suppression of which must have been extremely difficult to recover from.

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[20] Ibid. pp. 196-7.

[21] Pound of course, would also put great emphasis on the episode, in the first of his *Pisan Cantos*:

> … hast killed the urochs and bison sd/ Bunting
> doing six months after that war was over
> as pacifist tempted with chicken but declined to approve
> of war …

For Pound, here and elsewhere, being put in jail is viewed as an irrevocable experience that shapes the whole of the rest of one's life and puts one firmly in a historical category of 'prison poets' ('Villon', Thomas Wyatt, Richard Lovelace).

[22] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 4 January 1935, Beinecke.

However, the significance of Bunting's imprisonment extends beyond the unfortunate psychological impact of his individual 'marking'. As Bunting appears to have told Denis Goacher, the shibboleth that he both volunteered for himself and had branded onto him by the English establishment was that of a political and cultural recalcitrant. From this moment on, Bunting would find it difficult and regularly impossible to fit into any of the mainstream structures and institutions of British life. Already, prior to 1918, he had been schooled in a non-conformist environment and missed out on an all-important Oxbridge place. But the twelve months Bunting spent in prison in 1918-19 decided once and for all that he would not follow the traditional path of the bourgeois English gentleman poet. Indeed, the fact that Bunting went to prison rather than the trenches or university at the close of the war meant that he was something of an anomaly in the literary culture of 1920s England. Unlike many of the Georgian poets, say, or the Bloomsbury set, or the Auden circle (with whom Bunting otherwise had much in common, as we shall see), Bunting was not inclined to eulogise England and Englishness, or at least not in any orthodox way. He did not, as did many poets in this and succeeding generations, treat the World War I as a cataclysm that ended a golden age of Victorian efflorescence. His melancholy was not founded in oblique nostalgia for a recherché Imperial past (for Bunting, British Imperialism was in an important sense the *cause* of his melancholy). Instead, he was naturally inclined toward progressivism, modernism, and internationalism. After his violent clash with the English establishment in 1918-19, Bunting's non-conformism was strengthened into a determined oppositional creed. England was a prison Bunting would try to escape from; London was a kind of black hole or vortex against which he would oppose his modernising aesthetic.

In this ideological sense, as well as in a more prosaic literary one, as we shall see, Bunting's prison experience seems with hindsight to be the natural precursor to his meeting with Ezra Pound in 1923. Indeed, it is surely not too fanciful to say that when Bunting stumbled out of jail he fell straight into the high tide of high modernism. According to Bunting's later recollection, it was almost immediately after leaving Winchester Prison in mid 1919 that he first discovered the poetry of Pound and T.S. Eliot. As he spent a somewhat wayward period living in Bloomsbury, eventually enrolling at the London School of Economics in 1920, Bunting had a conversion moment on discovering Eliot and Pound that spurred him on in his own putative creative efforts. He was 'delighted to discover that there were actually people doing what I had merely worked out in my head was the kind of thing that ought to be done. This was a revelation that it could really be done, that it wasn't a hopeless trade'.[23] Whether or not Bunting had already 'worked out in [his] head' the kind of the thing that Pound and Eliot were doing in the late 1910s is moot. The point is that they offered a 'revelation' to a young man whose idealism was otherwise threatened by relentless hopelessness.

Bunting's notoriously fraught relationship with Eliot will be explored in greater detail hereafter. Apparently he appreciated Eliot's 'Preludes' at this time, though it is difficult to trace the line of influence because Bunting always rushed to discredit Eliot at every opportunity.[24] As to Pound, it was undoubtedly his *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, published the year Bunting left Winchester Prison in 1919, which impressed most of all.[25] As we shall see, Bunting's early poems suggest that even

[23] Bunting quoted in Barbara Lesch, 'Basil Bunting: A Major British Modernist', unpublished PhD, (University of Wisconsin, 1979), p. 36.
[24] Ibid. p. 36.
[25] As Denis Goacher comments, 'Bunting saw ''Villon'' and *The Spoils* coming in a direct line from 'Homage to Sextus Propertius''. Goacher, 'Denis Goacher Talks about Basil Bunting', p. 202.

before he became friends with Pound in 1923, he spent a large amount of time poring over the deadpan modulations and lugubrious cadences of *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, a copy of which he apparently encountered soon after his release from prison.[26] In later years Bunting would labour the musical aspect of this literary encounter; he celebrated Pound's work as

> … the first poem which is consciously using the rhythmic material of music in the manner in which it was used, in a small number of his best poems, by Walt Whitman, but shows a greater skill, and shows a rhythmic variety which is very pleasing and very important to my mind. People have spent their time thinking about irony and so forth. That's there, but the thing that is important is a change in the view of rhythm and in the use of rhythm. [27]

As with most of Bunting's gestures at musicality, it is difficult to determine precisely what he means here when he credits Pound's use of 'the rhythmic material of music'. Nevertheless, it is clear that encountering *Propertius* was something of a breakthrough in general terms, probably largely for reasons that had little to do with music. Bunting was receptive for obvious reasons at this point to a poem that combined anti-authoritarian satire with the energetic wit of a delinquent lyric persona.

After a year of study at L.S.E., and another two years of itinerant employment and bohemian living in London, Bunting moved to Paris in the summer of 1923. At this point aesthetics and experience began to coalesce. Bunting first encountered Pound at a Montparnasse café, but their firm friendship was cemented when Pound bailed Bunting from a Paris jail in late 1923, after a riotous night on the town that ended with the latter being charged with disturbing the peace and 'what the French call 'rebellion''.[28] Remarkably, Bunting was carrying an edition of the French poet Francois 'Villon''s poems in his pocket when he was arrested; he had apparently been

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[26] Keith Alldritt, *The Poet as Spy: The Life and Wild Times of Basil Bunting* (London, 1998), p. 27.
[27] Dale Reagan, 'An Interview with Basil Bunting', *Montemora* 3 (Spring 1977), p. 73.
[28] Carroll Terrell, *Basil Bunting: Man and Poet* (Orono, Maine, 1981), p. 42.

encouraged in his choice of reading by Pound, who was working on his opera, *Le Testament de* 'Villon' with George Antheil at the time. Yet more uncannily, Bunting awaited his sentencing on the site where 'Villon' had been appraised nearly 500 years earlier.[29] When Pound visited days later, he was moved when he saw that Bunting had heeded his reading recommendation, and the elder poet expended a large amount of money and effort attempting to ensure Bunting's release.

So Bunting's second momentous spell of imprisonment ended with an exit brokered by Pound that was symbolic as well as expedient. Just as Pound gave Bunting his immediate freedom, he also offered him an entry point into the literary scene of the day. More importantly, Pound suggested a literary persona to Bunting, one with which he would be able to work through the impulses and ideas that were present in his mind at this almost implausibly novelistic moment of inauguration. Some three years later, Bunting would condense these formative experiences into a long poem of considerable subtlety.

III. 'Villon''s Anti-Individualism

> It is only humanists who find the world hopeless. It's a good enough world for stars or mushrooms, and why assume that it was meant for us?
>
> – Basil Bunting, letter to Denis Goacher, September 4, 1965, Durham.

Although 'Villon' was dated 1925 by Bunting in later collected editions, this seems likely to have been the date of the very earliest rough sketch: the poem was not finished even at the end of 1926, when Bunting wrote from London to Pound in Rapallo with a précis of recent creative ventures.[30] Bunting was 'unsuccessfully applying [himself] to journalism' at this point, and juggling various putative projects:

[29] Alldritt, *Poet as Spy,* p. 37.
[30] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 2 December 1926, Beinecke.

a ‘book on Dickens as a stylist and a master of form’, a ‘book on the history of the music halls’, a ‘book on the comparative anatomy of prisons’, and a ‘faint desire’ to write a manifesto poem with the uncharacteristically Romantic title ‘the Magic Harp’. But the ‘only thing of value’ Bunting could report of was

> ... a study, story, what-you-will, of a state of mind engendered by incipient D.T. plus influenza plus a clubbing from the French Police. Eliot has it at present, but I expect he will return it, he is so infernally cautious. Also I know it is immature. Also it ought to be part of a book instead of by itself.[31]

Eliot’s ‘infernal caution’ found an echo in Bunting’s own reticence about his ‘immature’ poem.[32] In fact, and though Pound would ultimately see fit to edit down the final version of ‘Villon’ by ‘at least one fifth’,[33] Bunting’s ‘study, story, what-you-will’ represented a substantial achievement in 1920s poetry, one that Hugh Kenner would later deem one of the seminal poems of twentieth-century British verse.[34]

What sort of announcement was the debut work ‘Villon’? Announcement is surely the wrong word. The poem didn’t appear in public until late 1930, when it was published by *Poetry* (Chicago) in a very different atmosphere to that of the mid-1920s. In fact, the time lag between Bunting’s initial composition of ‘Villon’ and its wider reception is deeply significant: it is a poem written under the shadow of an immense anxiety about whether or not it was likely, on the most elementary level, to be heard. ‘Villon’, it seems likely, is a poem inspired by Bunting’s research into

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[31] Ibid.

[32] Five months later, Eliot was still sitting on Bunting’s submission: ‘I intended to send you “The Salad Basket” when you wrote to me about Exiles some months ago, but it was then with Eliot, and letters to him were invariably met with the assertion that he had gone into the country and would be back in a fortnight. However I’ve got it back at last with various complimentary remarks which may or may not mean that he likes it – I don’t find him at all easy to fathom’. Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 10 April 1927, Beinecke.

[33] Reagan, ‘An Interview with Basil Bunting’, p. 72.

[34] Hugh Kenner, *A Sinking Island: The Modern English Writers* (London, 1988), pp. 219-20.

Dickens and the 'anatomy of prisons' at this time. It is a poem about enclosure, a poem about being stifled, suppressed, and having one's speech foreshortened. It is not, like *Briggflatts* or Bunting's contribution to the 1931 Objectivist issue of *Poetry* ('The Word'), a work of lyrical vitality and fluency. Those poems were written from a base of empowerment, in periods of political awakening, with the aid of active and supportive milieus. In contrast, 'Villon' was written by a young man writing from a position of depression and isolation.

We have already seen how Bunting's dissatisfaction with the literary scene of the mid-1920s engendered a fierce scepticism about the future of poetry, one that was tempered only by a faint messianic urge for a total, puritan overhaul of culture. A poem apparently written in 1924, 'Weeping oaks grieve, chestnuts raise …', which later became the first 'ode' in collected editions of Bunting's verse, encapsulates this attitude. It also shows how laboured final exclamations of hopefulness could be:

> Weeping oaks grieve, chestnuts raise
> mournful candles. Sad is spring
> to perpetuate, sad to trace
> immortalities never changing.
>
> Weary on the sea
> for sight of land
> gazing past the coming wave we
> see the same wave;
>
> drift on merciless reiteration of years;
> descry no death; but spring
> is everlasting
> resurrection. (97)

For all the experimental touches here (the free metrical structure, the idiosyncratic rhyme scheme), there is a telling inability to shake off the accoutrements of the nineteenth century. This abbreviated work of Tennysonian mournfulness is both a natural precursor to 'Villon' and a stark précis of Bunting's poetic persona in the mid-

to-late twenties. Spring and its everlasting resurrection remained a perpetual motivation for writing, but the weary pessimism of viewing life as a merciless reiteration of years provided the keynote of Bunting's early verse. His was not, at this point, a confident, iconoclastic new bearing in English poetry so much as an elegiac shrug that every progressive wave merely replicated the last.

As we have seen, the peculiar personal contexts outlined above – imprisonment, non-conformist marginalisation, lack of professional connections – provided the backdrop to Bunting's first poems and his feelings of world-weariness. One further salient personal episode was the death of Bunting's father in February of 1925. The following description, in another letter to J.J. Adams, of one of the attacks that preceded his father's death, is notable as an example of Bunting's singularly macabre writing style in its ascendancy:

> He's had angina off and on for a couple of years now, but never more than 'normal clinical angina', but a week ago he furnished me with the most harrowing sight I've yet seen. He was brought home in a taxi by his partner, after a very bad attack. He had another attack on the way home & then he lay on the sofa and had another. His face went a dirty grey colour, almost heliotrope, and it looked as though all the flesh had fallen off it & left just the skull and the skin. His eyes sank back into his head behind perpendicular black cliffs. There were huge deep lines where a normal man of sixty has wrinkles. He stared & stared at the back of the sofa & held tight to it. You know the Greco 'Agony in the Garden'? Greco knew how agony manifests itself but he was afraid of exaggerating so he's very much understated it. My father was like that Christ, only far worse, far more intensely hurt.[35]

Out of such harrowing sights, and the gathered traumas of his early twenties, Bunting would construct a dark, dense poetry that juxtaposed personal melancholy with a voice that attempted to speak in a much broader historical register.

[35] Basil Bunting, letter to J.J. Adams, 14 January 1924, Durham.

'Villon' – a persona poem clearly modelled on Pound's *Sextus Propertius* – allowed Bunting to venture out of himself. Although its point of origin is in the remarkable collision of biographical and literary contexts in Paris in 1923, it is a work dominated by a yearning to escape from selfhood into a liberating exterior world that never quite materialises. A condensed ideogram of the fifteenth-century French poet rather than a translation as such, 'Villon' nevertheless seems to have acted in the same way that Bunting's later translation projects did: as a means of bulwarking and extending the scope of what would otherwise have remained interiorised Eliotic rhythmical grumbles. In the mid-1930s Bunting would inform Pound that he had stopped writing poems of his own in order to focus on his translation of the Persian epic the *Shahnameh*, 'simply because I was so bloody sick of myself and couldn't find anything else that so completely excluded me'.[36] Similarly, the adoption of a persona was, as Bunting would later put it, a helpful thing to do '[w]hen you are young and haven't anything to say, except perhaps 'I'm so sad but I don't know why''.[37] Adopting some anterior voice – whether it was that of another language or another person – was from the start an integral part of Bunting's practice, a way of halting the descent into 'solitary scribblings' that he regarded as modern poetry's tragic flaw.

'Villon' is framed as a visceral purgation of the self from its first lines. Indeed, it is perhaps best viewed as a satire that ridicules humanistic conceptions of value.[38] Elegy in the high-modernist vein offered a foundational template for this satirical

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[36] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, undated (probably February 1935), Beinecke.

[37] Reagan, 'An Interview with Basil Bunting', p. 73.

[38] In a late interview Bunting argued that his anti-humanism arose out of a Swiftian worldview: 'Swift didn't admire the species man and neither do I. It's true that by considering oneself as just a product of the various chemicals one is made up of, it is not easy to bother. So long as you stay clear of humanism there is nothing to complain of. But if one is obliged to judge things from a humanistic point of view, there is no escape from pessimism. The Middle Ages distorted God, making a God who cared only for humans. Then the Renaissance came along and substituted man for God at the centre of things. If you do that, Swift's pessimism is inevitable. The universe is very large and in it man is no more important than animals or trees'. Dale Reagan, 'An Interview with Basil Bunting', in *Montemora* 6 (Spring, 1977), p. 68-9.

argument: something like the motto at the end of Pound's *Propertius* ('Small talk comes from small bones') is Bunting's starting point. Or, in Pound's more elaborate terms:

> 'He who is now vacant dust
> Was once the slave of one passion:'
> Give that much inscription
> 'Death why tardily come?'[39]

Bunting replicates these sentiments almost exactly, though he makes a significant modification as he introduces a 'we' where Pound had merely translated Propertius's first-person singular. 'Villon' begins with a first-person-plural statement about existence apparently made in the context of a crowd, albeit one that quickly becomes reticent about its own voice:

> He whom we anatomized
> 'whose words we gathered as peasant flowers
> and thought on his wit and how neatly he describes things'
> speaks
> to us, hatching marrow,
> broody all night over the bones of a deadman … (25)

The poem begins *in medias res* with a cinematic scene that is supposed to speak to *us* (a phrase emphasised by a rather odd enjambment that is perhaps a quirk of Pound's editing). Initially there is some promise of an anatomy lesson, a dissection for the benefit of the crowd of the poem's subject – 'Villon', or Bunting himself. But as in Kipling's 'L'Envoi', the anatomisation or sacrifice has already taken place. The quotation in the second and third lines is a rendering of the humanist scholar Clèment Marot's preface to a 1533 edition of 'Villon''s poems. We are arriving on the scene belatedly, post-mortem, at the end of the day when creative possibilities have been

[39] Ezra Pound, 'Homage to Sextus Propertius', *Personae: Collected Shorter Poems* (London, 2001), p. 215.

exhausted, when the shrine is void and nothing is left but the remains of too-neat flowers, wreathes of prettified words that no longer connect together. The ostensible biography of an individual has been swallowed by a grandly destructive force. Bunting has moved some way from Pound's superficially similar recruitment of the 1530s at the end of Canto 1, in which Andreas Divus's translation of Homer is viewed as an affirmative, enabling foundation of everything that follows in the *Cantos*. Pound's quotation had restated the humanist worldview; in 'Villon' Bunting was writing its elegy.

The subsequent verse prargraph continues to deploy disjointed syntax as it seeks to render a loss of faith in the old icons:

> My tongue is a curve in the ear. Vision is lies.
> We saw is so and it was not so,
> the Emperor with the Golden Hands, the Virgin in blue.
> (– A blazing parchment,
> Matthew Paris his kings in blue and gold.) … (25)

These 'instantaneous photographs' or fragments, which may well resemble those in Eliot's *The Waste Land* partly because the two poems had the same editor, are overlain in such a way as to obscure rather than illuminate. Vision is lies, and even the most magnificent artefacts in human history are liable to fade into nothing, just as words are liable to slip into ungrammatical nonsense ('we saw is so and it was not so'). Amid this syntactical and semantic slippage the ostensible protagonist is difficult to discern. We see glimpses of a prisoner 'hulloing to muffled walls', a 'naked beggar both blind and cold' (25), and allusions to 'Villon''s poems emerge gradually from the shadows (the 'Emperor with the Golden Hands' is taken from an allusion to Byzantine icons in 'Villon''s *Grand Testament*; the slightly later 'have pity on me!'

refrain (25) is taken from the opening of his *Epitre*).[40] But ultimately no clear subject is visible against a backdrop of languid pessimism.

Perhaps, along with the DTs and influenza, the confusion of this opening section is the result of technical inexperience on Bunting's part. But it seems that he is consciously interested in going beyond the Poundian template of using a historical persona to resurrect a heroic adventurer who is wiser and sharper than his surroundings. In fact, although Kenneth Cox, in a useful commentary on the poem, highlights the opposition of 'inward experience as against outward semblance', it is probably more accurate to say that Bunting rejects both exterior *and* interior semblance: he is attempting to supersede the modernist valorisation of subjectivity altogether.[41] The speaker in this first section is mocked as a pathetic nobody who is virtually dead in the prison of himself because he has no surroundings other than inert, scientifically measured stone walls:

> … Have pity, have pity on me!
>
> To the right was darkness and to the left hardness
> below hardness darkness above
> at the feet darkness at the head partial hardness
> with equal intervals … (25-6)

[40] The first verse of the *Epitre* invokes the aid of the Virgin Mary, the 'font of pity':

> O louee conception
> Envoiee ça jus des cieulx
> Du noble lis digne syon
> Don de Jhesus tres precieulx
> Marie, nom tres gracieulx
> Fons de pitié, source de grace
> La joye, confort de mes yeulx
> Qui nostre paix bastist et brasse.

The Poems of François 'Villon', translated and with an introduction by Galway Kinnell (Boston, 1977), p. 180.

[41] Kenneth Cox, 'A Commentary on Basil Bunting's *'Villon"*, *Agenda* 16.1 (1978), p. 23.

In elliptical, disorienting passages that pre-empt Beckett, Bunting rushes to rescind on the whole premise of this persona poem and ridicule an individuated consciousness that sees only visionary 'lies' and hallucinations of 'magic in the darkness'. Writing in contradistinction to the modernist mainstream, Bunting is intent on presenting the interior life as something limiting and played out rather than avowing it as an untapped resource of humanistic possibility. He is trying to escape from interiority, but he cannot in these opening lines break through to a space outside.

The argument of this vigorous, circumscribed overture is recapitulated and elaborated in the much-anthologised second half of the poem's first section, which updates Pound's 'Marius and Jagurtha together' refrain from the sixth part of *Propertius* by inserting a role-call of famous characters from the annals of Western history into a translation of 'Villon''s 'Ballade des dames du temps jadis' from the *Grand Testament*. While the theme is taken from 'Villon' by way of *Propertius*, the form may well have been inspired by the half-ironic ABAB verses of Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. Or perhaps, more probably, this blackly camp 'ballad' is the result of Bunting's researches into British music hall for the putative book project he mentioned in his 1926 letter to Pound:

> Remember, imbeciles and wits,
> sots and ascetics, fair and foul,
> young girls with little tender tits,
> that Death is written over all.
> …
> Abelard and Eloise,
> Henry the Fowler, Charlemagne,
> Genée, Lopokova, all these
> die, die in pain … (26)

If the poem's opening passages had sought to reduce the 'Villon'-Bunting protagonist

to a naked beggar, the ballad section makes this reduction truly universal. As Hugh Kenner argues, an extra emphasis should be placed on the 'and' in the first line of the above passage.[42] Bunting is not, or not merely, ironising the modern against the ancient, the great against the lowly, the wise against the foolish. He is not, like Pound in the *Cantos*, or James Joyce in *Ulysses*, seeking for a heroic figure whose wit triumphs over imbecility; rather, after having denigrated and dismissed himself and his 'Villon' persona, in a remarkable debut statement lasting not much more than 70 lines, Bunting proceeds to wash away the whole of humanity.

The paralysing upshot of all this is that Bunting's movement into an epic form of address is followed by an epic withdrawal and a return to a familiar impasse. Bunting attempts to resuscitate a dead art so that 'Villon' 'speaks to us'. As in Pound's first Canto, an encounter with the ghosts of the dead allows us to begin again in front of a site of sacrifice, where a corpse 'hatches marrow' and generates the panoramic vista of a poem containing everything (the encyclopaedic second half of the first section of 'Villon' is after all a sort of miniature *Cantos*).[43] Bunting manages to escape from his prison cell into a vast historical theatre, a poetic space in which he is able to give voice to a somewhat archaic, rhetorical, communitarian voice that summons the ghost of Gray's 'Elegy' ('when we ourselves are dead and gone | and the green grass growing over us' (27)). But his audience disappears almost as soon as he arrives there. The 'us' that initially appears to contrast with the claustrophobic death-in-life of atomised individualism is finally seen to be deaf and unresponsive.

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[42] Kenner, *A Sinking Island*, p. 219.

[43] Along with *The Waste Land* and *Propertius*, it seems highly likely that Pound's 'Canto 1' was one of the major influences on *'Villon'*. Bunting's 'little girls with tender tits' glances directly at 'Canto 1's 'tender girls', and in broader terms the premise of the first section echoes Pound's journey into the underworld to envisage 'souls out of Erebus'. Bunting's stress-heavy Anglophone diction – especially phrases like 'hatching marrow' and 'broody … over the bones of a deadman' – is also redolent of the vocabulary Pound used in his first Canto (eg. 'shattered the nape-nerve', 'dark blood flowed in the fosse').

There is a sighing lyrical capitulation at the close of this first section: everything is also nothing; everybody is nobody; the apprehension of the universe comes only with the knowledge that we all die in pain. We

> … know nothing, are nothing, save a fume
> driving across a mind
> preoccupied with this: our doom
> is, to be sifted by the wind,
>
> heaped up, smoothed down like silly sands.
> We are less permanent than thought … (27)

Perhaps Bunting the apostate English public schoolboy was not as dissenting as he might have wished to be. 'Doom', 'silly sands', 'nothing, save a fume', 'sifted by the wind': this is the diction of Tennyson freighted on the cadences of Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach'. 'Villon' begins with a yearning for an escape from solitude, but it doesn't manage to surpass nineteenth-century intimations of pessimism and erasure. The 'fumes of sacrifice' that had circled in the opening of Kipling's 'L'Envoi' had not yet begun to clear.

'Villon', then, is the work of a young poet in fetters. Attempts to find a way of speaking that might obviate a procession of illusory images from the past and present end in failure. Sound – tellingly positioned in opposition to the distractions of a falsifying 'vision' – is blocked at every turn by a silence that is figured as a brutal, external physical force, one that filters down into a self-loathing body in a manner that Michel Foucault would doubtless have found interesting:

> … hulloing to muffled walls blank again
> unresonant. It was gone, is silent, is always silent.
> My soundbox lacks sonority. All but inaudible
> I stammer to my ear:
> Naked speech! Naked beggar both blind and cold … (25)

Bunting was acutely aware that his soundbox lacked sonority, that he was all but inaudible, stammering to himself alone in the dark. The balladic outburst that explodes the first section of 'Villon' ('Remember, imbeciles and wits …' (26)) offers some relief: as Bunting comments in the second section of the poem, 'I kept myself from going mad | by singing an old bawdy ballad' (27). Yet it is not finally a song so much as a lament, or rather, an epitaph. What was this formidable force that was silencing Bunting every time he attempted to sing?

As we have seen (in the letter to Pound of 2 December 1926 quoted above), Bunting laid the blame for 'Villon''s limitations on himself and his own 'immaturity'. His response to creative difficulties was on the whole to retreat inward and backward, into an attitude of self-effacing nihilistic despair that stifled his lyric flights almost as soon as they were out of his mouth. 'Villon''s final couplet summarises this state of self-conscious paralysis obliquely: 'How can I sing with my love in my bosom? | Unclean, immature and unseasonable salmon?' (29). But what Bunting viewed as his own pathetic immaturity we might in fact see as a terrible over-ripeness. Bunting was following Pound in significant formal ways, but it would be years before Pound would suffer the misfortune of having to qualify his epic projections because of an experience of violent personal trauma. While Pound's *Cantos* of the early 1920s are saturated in erotic imagery and punctuated by anticipations of paradisiacal renaissance, Bunting was beginning with an autopsy in his first work 'Villon', a vision of all-encompassing obliteration written in the wake of his own prison experiences. As Pound awaited execution in Pisa in 1945, he would envisage

> … a beaten dog beneath the hail,
> A swollen magpie in a fitful sun
> Half black half white … (*Cantos*, 541)

But in the mid-1920s Bunting had already lighted on a strikingly similar imagery, as he transposed, at the close of 'Villon''s second movement, lines from 'Frères humains quie après nous vivez', the 'Ballade of the Hanged', written by 'Villon' as he prepared for his own execution along with his friends in 1461: 'Blacked by the sun, washed by the rain, | Hither and thither scurrying as the wind varies' (28). Bunting's vision – of gibbeted corpses swaying in the wind – was unhappily apt. Whereas a slightly earlier literary generation had posited various possibilities for modernistic rebirth, Bunting seemed to believe that his life was already over, that he might die like 'Villon' in his early thirties. 'Villon' was a debut work, but it also established a precedent for Bunting's career. Again and again, his poems would feel like apocalyptic conclusions rather than confident progressions.

But despite its atmosphere of paralysis, this was not a poem that paralysed its author once and for all. After its composition, Bunting was able to continue to progress. How? For all its qualities of confinement and restriction, 'Villon' is more than an embodiment of self-abnegation and disillusionment with its cultural moment. Most obviously, there is the basic fact of the poem's formal architecture, which might have offered a promising model of how the experiments of Pound and Eliot were to be refined and extended in the late 1920s if anyone had actually heeded its example. The first of Bunting's 'sonata' poems, 'Villon' demonstrated what might be done with the formula of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Indeed, it is clear that Bunting was intent on meaningfully adapting the Eliotic template of the mini-epic or 'long short' poem.[44] A parallel work to Louis Zukofsky's 'Poem beginning 'The'', which Bunting much

[44] The phrase 'long short poem', which I think useful (if unwieldy), is Denis Goacher's. See Goacher, 'Denis Goacher Talks About Basil Bunting', p. 205.

admired, 'Villon' showed that *The Waste Land* was not the singular, unrepeatable anomaly critics and poets of the late-1920s were beginning to regard it as.[45]

Like Eliot's poem, 'Villon' is a work that creates a scaffolding for a wide array of linguistic textures and emotive registers. First and foremost, it is able to do so because of the division of the poem into musically inspired 'movements'. I do not think it profitable to follow Bunting's formal-musical analogies too far. At any rate, other critics, notably Peter Makin, have exhaustively attempted to do so. After an extensive analysis in his indispensable study *Bunting: The Shaping of His Verse*, Makin concludes that any description of putatively musical structures in Bunting's long poems 'will be of impossible technical complexity, probably comprehensible only to an expert, and so complex as to lose contact with any readers sense of the whole'.[46] Nevertheless, in a looser, more constructive sense, Makin argues, we can say that Bunting followed the sonata form to the extent that, in his sonata poems, 'one set of emotionalities … is set in conflict with another … ; they interact; they change; at the end of the poem neither remains the same, and both are subsumed into an attitude that looks beyond both …'[47]

Something of this blueprint is clearly evident in 'Villon'. The first section, as we have seen, is characterised by stuttering, elliptical strophes, statements of various phrases or themes that appear to be organised around distinctive rhythmic units. As Makin suggests, it is probably fruitless to track these rhythmical patterns too closely, but there are some obvious examples of moments where Bunting appears to be

[45] This might well have been why Eliot was reluctant to publish it. As Ed Dorn commented in an interview on the subject in the late-1990s, 'Eliot was maniacal in the protection of his career', and Bunting 'certainly wouldn't have conformed to what Eliot wanted … a buttressing element to his own position in the canon'). Dorn quoted in Tom Pickard, private manuscript sent to Alex Niven, via email, 15 December, 2011.
[46] Makin, *Bunting: The Shaping of His Verse*, p. 253.
[47] Ibid., p. 257.

'catching the rise of the rhythm wave' in the manner Pound had advised back in 1913. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the third verse paragraph in Part I:

> It was not so,
> scratched on black by God knows who,
> by God, by God knows who. (25)

Exact repetition of phrases ('by God' x 3), close repetition of rhythmic units ('was not so' / 'God knows who'), and a forceful, onomatopoeic diction replete with assonance ('scratched on black', 'God knows' / 'was not so') combine to create a sonorous, syncopated texture, which echoes certain passages from Eliot's *The Waste Land*, such as the close of 'The Fire Sermon' ('O Lord Thou pluckest me out | O Lord Thou pluckest …').[48] In the second half of the first section, of course, the acoustic patterning becomes much more obvious, in the eccentric adaptation of ballad form:

> All that is piteous, all that's fair,
> all that is fat and scant of breath,
> Elisha's baldness, Helen's hair,
> is Death's collateral; … (26)

Again, the repetition and reliance on assonantal monosyllabic diction ('fat and scant') is conspicuous. So too is the dropped rhyme at the end of this stanza, a demonstration of how traditional patterns might be superseded by rhythmic momentum.

In the second section, quite different rhythmic motifs are introduced. There are no verse-paragraph breaks in Part II, though there are clear formal shifts: between rhymed and unrhymed passages, free verse and iambic tetrameter, and finally into a passage that recapitulates the stop-start patterning of Part I. By far the most interesting parts of this second section though, and arguably the key passages of the poem as a whole, are the two interludes in which Bunting returns to the tone of broad

[48] T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London, 1969), p. 70.

address he had discovered in Section I. At the beginning of Part II Bunting recounts that he was, like 'Villon', 'fettered to a post in the damp cellarage' (27). But then the lines lengthen out, and a remarkable rhetorical crux is announced:

> Whereinall we differ not. But they have swept the floor,
> there are no dancers, no somersaulters now,
> only bricks and bleak black cement and bricks,
> only the military tread and the snap of the locks … (27)

After a passage of iambic rhyming couplets that returns to the comic-ironic mood of the ballad section, this lyrical motif returns, and the poem reaches a climax:

> Whereinall we differ not. But they have named all the stars,
> trodden down the scrub of the desert, run the white moon to a schedule,
> Joshua's serf whose beauty drove men mad.
> They have melted the snows from Erebus, weighed the clouds,
> hunted down the white bear, hunted the whale the seal the kangaroo … (28)

Prior to this point, 'Villon' has been a poem about restriction and confinement, but here a startling formal shift at last enables Bunting to speak from a position of lyrical confidence. It is telling that Bunting credited Pound's *Propertius* as the first modern poem that is 'consciously using the rhythmic material of music in the manner in which it was used, in a small number of his best poems, by Walt Whitman'; in these passages in the second section of 'Villon', he manages to recruit a Whitmanian expansiveness that allows him to get to the heart of what he has wanted to say all along. Bunting's negativity is no longer internally focused. He has found a target for his critique: a subject, an argument. *They* have named all the stars. The emperors and prison guards have worn down the world so that renewal seems impossible. The suggestion is one of extreme pessimism, but it is also carries with it a sense of Whitmanian liberation: there is a world elsewhere that offers an explanation for, and a potential release from, the repetition of an ages-old narrative of domination. In the

shift from curtailed, circumscribed fragments to fluid lyrical cadences in this second section, Bunting achieves the first of a series of song-like outbursts that will sustain him over the years and provide a necessary counterweight to his inclination toward self-negation and silence.

Bunting is heading toward the kind of gesture W.H. Auden makes in his best poetry of the thirties, in which dramatic 'pan-outs' into a fantastic global *mise-en-scène* enable him to hint at possible sites of redemption in a fallen modern world. The final stanza of Auden's 'Spain' is the last of a series of such moves in that poem, and it echoes the vocabulary of 'Villon''s second section:

> The stars are dead. The animals will not look.
> We are left alone with our day, and the time is short, and
> History to the defeated
> May say alas but cannot help nor pardon.[49]

Elsewhere, in the second section of his elegy for W.B. Yeats, perhaps the most famous of these gestures at a topographical sublime, Auden is able to suggest that poetry

> … survives
> In the valley of its saying where executives
> Would never want to tamper; it flows south
> From ranches of the isolation and the busy griefs,
> Raw towns that we believe and die in …[50]

In 'Villon', Bunting sketches a similar map of pan-global 'isolation and the busy griefs'. Though his conclusion falls some way short of the qualified optimism of Auden's defence of poetry in the elegy for Yeats as a 'way of happening, a mouth', Bunting is at least attempting something analogous in 'Villon' when he breaks out of

[49] W.H. Auden, 'Spain', *Selected Poems* (London, 2009), p. 57.
[50] W.H. Auden, 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats', *Selected Poems*, p. 89.

his prison cell to explore a landscape of stars, deserts, white moons, snow-capped mountains, clouds, and kangaroos. Bunting would keep returning to this mode of mythical broadness as he sought to move beyond the stasis of modernist subjectivity. The mode of panoramic broadness tested in 'Villon''s second section offered a way of ensuring that scepticism about the dead-end of interior consciousness need not lead to a total impasse. Opposing humanist individualism could be productive rather than merely deconstructive if it found an outlet in an epic register.

Pound excised much of the first two sections of 'Villon' (which can only have compounded their elliptical nature), but he left the final section alone, allegedly grumbling to Bunting: 'I don't know what you young men are up to'.[51] Pound's incomprehension of the third and final part of the poem is telling. After the extraordinary outbreaks of Part II, 'Villon''s third section eventually arrives at a poetic mode that leaves Pound and Eliot behind and shows presentiments of Bunting's innovative poetry of the 1930s. For Pound, the ending was 'possibly too universul', and other commentators have agreed: Keith Alldritt remarks that there is a straining 'at the last … for philosophical utterance that is unsuccessful'.[52] However, the universality of this final section is surely its greatest strength. If 'Villon' can in some sense be described as Bunting's *Bildungsroman*, then its third section contains a muted epiphany or moment of arrival at something approaching a mature ethic.

The section begins with the introduction of a distinctive new rhythm-motif:

Under the olive trees

[51] '[Pound] must have chopped out at least one fifth, perhaps one quarter of the first two parts [of *'Villon'*], maybe more than that. He didn't touch the third part …' Bunting quoted in Dale Reagan, 'An Interview with Basil Bunting', p. 72.
[52] Ezra Pound, *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky*, ed. Barry Ahearn (New York, 1987), p. 71; Keith Alldritt, *The Poet as Spy: The Life and Wild Times of Basil Bunting* (London, 1998), p. 47.

walking alone
on the green terraces
very seldom
over the sea seldom
where it ravelled and spun … (28)

If Part II had sketched a mythical landscape of escape ruined by an imperious 'they', Part III depicts an actual site of post-traumatic refuge. Bunting – and it seems clearly to be Bunting by this point – is facing the Mediterranean, where he sees a mingling of 'Romans and modern men', and 'men of the sea | who have neither nation nor time' (28), visions that are described resignedly though without the aspect of menace that accompanies the hallucinations in Part I. Rhythmically, there is a clear attempt to emulate the rocking movement of water, which again seems to take its cue from the close of Eliot's 'Fire Sermon' in *The Waste Land*, another water onomatopoeia ('The river sweats | Oil and tar …'). Whereas the enjambments and fragmentary lines of 'Villon''s first section had amounted to a dramatic staccato reflective of the disorientation and claustrophobia of a prison environment, the abbreviated fragments at the start of its third section follow Eliot's 'Fire Sermon' in suggesting a lulling *rallentando*. The pace of the poem is slowing as its argument becomes coolly contemplative. Repetition here is used as a way of depicting a receding tide of thoughts:

… the mountains seldom
the white mountains beyond
or the brown mountains between
and their drifting echoes
in the clouds and over the sea … (28)

But the hypnotic sight of the sea also engenders a momentous realisation. Turning away from the 'drifting echoes' of the ancient-modern panorama he sees in the

Mediterranean seascape, in a new verse paragraph with a newly assertive rhythm, Bunting gives the outline of an aesthetic manifesto:

> … precision clarifying vagueness;
> boundary to a wilderness
> of detail; chisel voice
> smoothing the flanks of noise;
> catalytic making whisper and whisper
> run together like two drops of quicksilver;
> factor that resolves
> unnoted harmonies;
> name of the nameless;
> stuff that clings
> to frigid limbs
> more marble hard
> than girls imagined by Mantegna … (29)

The semi-colons and layout parallel the formal philosophy Bunting is sketching here. 'Precision' must clarify 'vagueness'; a 'chisel voice' must smooth the 'flanks of noise'; the poet must go in search of 'unnoted harmonies' and 'stuff that clings'. Bunting is testing out the parataxis and energetic futurist diction ('catalytic', 'quicksilver') that would predominate in his poems of the early 1930s such as 'The Word' and 'Attis: Or, Something Missing'. He is recommending a tighter, tougher, more acoustically alive verse that will refine the experiments of his first generation modernist predecessors and innovate new 'harmonies'.

It is hardly surprising that Pound found this bold statement of aims 'too universul' and looked with incomprehension on this section as the work of a wayward neophyte, while Eliot refused to publish it. Somewhat cut loose in this passage, unedited by Pound and free momentarily from Eliotic melancholy, Bunting suggested a way forward for the modernist template Pound and Eliot had established in the years around 1920. 'Villon' concludes, as Bunting's poems almost always did, with a restatement of pessimism:

The sea has no renewal, no forgetting,
no variety of death,
is silent with the silence of a single note. (29)

But the poem as a whole offers glimpses of ways in which the modernist long short poem might be improved and expanded into a form that could combine an innovative diction with a mode of universal address that set itself in opposition to the 'military tread and the snap of the locks', the elusive but clearly very real forces that sought to tie young poets in chains and cut off their attempts to speak in mid sentence.

IV. Jails and the Sea: Bunting's Two Modes.

'Villon' dramatises a struggle toward lyric utterance. Forty years later, in Part II of *Briggflatts*, Bunting would try something similar. Amid a description of a Mediterranean seascape, which recalls the third section of 'Villon', the sight of flying fish soaring over the 'water's surface between | appetite and attainment' incites Bunting to sketch another aesthetic manifesto in miniature:

Flexible, unrepetitive line
to sing, not paint; sing, sing,
laying the tune on the air,
nimble and easy as a lizard,
still and sudden as a gecko … (66-7)

Like the apologia for 'unnoted harmonies' and 'flanks of noise' in 'Villon', this sudden avowal of a 'tune on the air' recruits loose musical analogies to define an energetic poetic style founded in a 'flexible, unrepetitive line'. Yet there are also some noteworthy differences between the two definitions of prosody. While the elliptical phrases in the conclusion to 'Villon' had endorsed a neo-classical 'precision clarifying vagueness', a 'boundary to a wilderness', 'marble hard', and a 'chisel

voice', the neo-romantic outburst in *Briggflatts* recommends a liberated song that is inspired by flying fish, darting lizards, air, water.

These two modes or registers – broadly, the neo-classical and the neo-romantic – were constantly at odds in Bunting's verse. Sculpting and condensation were obvious virtues for Bunting, but they could also land him in a position of confinement and quiescence. A fierce editor of his own work both before and after the additional reductions of collaborators such as Pound and Zukofsky, Bunting was in constant danger that his Wittgensteinian inclination not to speak when he couldn't be absolutely precise was going to annihilate everything he made and stop off the wellspring of his creativity altogether. Fortunately, though, and somewhat in spite of himself, it seems, Bunting was sporadically able to let loose a spontaneous lyricism that injected pace and fluency into his poetry and engendered lines that could be sung 'on the air'.

In 'Villon', as we have seen, austerity and foreshortening predominate, both as negative external forces, and as the means by which Bunting is able to suggest a leaner later modernist style that might extend the anti-Victorian cleansing impulses he adopted from Pound and Eliot. Yet we also saw that the poem was at its strongest at certain moments in its second section, where it used a Whitmanian expansiveness to speak broadly and fluently on a rhetorical platform about an apparently pan-global malaise. In another poem of this period, the third of Bunting's 'odes' (dated 1926), there is another exploration of a conspicuously fluid poetic voice that contrasts emphatically with the curtailed rhythms that had reined-in 'Villon':

> I am agog for foam. Tumultuous come
> with teeming sweetness to the bitter shore
> tidelong unrinsed and midday parched and numb
> with expectation. If the bright sky bore
> with endless utterance of a single blue

unphrased, its restless immobility
infects the soul, which must decline into
an anguished and exact sterility
and waste away: then how much more the sea
trembling with alteration must perfect
our loneliness by its hostility.
The dear companionship of its elect
deepens our envy. Its indifference
haunts us to suicide. Strong memories
of sprayblown days exasperate impatience
to brief rebellion and emphasise
the casual impotence we sicken of.
But when mad waves spring, braceletted with foam,
towards us in the angriness of love
crying a strange name, tossing as they come
repeated invitations in the gay
exuberance of unexplained desire,
we can forget the sad splendour and play
at wilfulness until the gods require
renewed inevitable hopeless calm
and the foam dies and we again subside
into our catalepsy, dreaming foam,
while the dry shore awaits another tide. (99)

In a letter to Eric Mottram apparently written in 1978, Bunting would begin a list of the main influences on his life and work: 'Jails and the sea'.[53] If these were the two guiding archetypes in his poetry, then in 'I am agog for foam,' we have the counterpart to 'Villon''s depiction of jail: an onomatopoeia of the sea that is notably imprecise and even at moments vague, yet arguably all the better for it. Apparently written at a time when Bunting was 'under the spell of Mallarmé', the poem utilises a variety of formal procedures to create a decorative texture.[54] Whereas Bunting's acoustic effects would regularly be contained within a terse, monosyllabic diction redolent of Kipling's 'L'Envoi', here the sound patterning is effusive and elaborate (perhaps most emphatically in a bravura opening line that is overloaded with assonance, alliteration, and internal rhyme almost to exaggeration). Compound

[53] Basil Bunting, letter to Eric Mottram, Easter Monday 1978, quoted in Bill Griffiths, 'Basil Bunting and Eric Mottram', in *Chicago Review* 44 (February 1988), p. 32.
[54] Basil Bunting, 'Yeats Recollected', in *Agenda* 12/2 (Summer 1974), p. 38.

adjectives ('tidelong', 'unrinsed', 'sprayblown'), enjambment, and a conspicuous deployment of rhyme and iambic pentameter, formal characteristics that Bunting looked upon with varying degrees of ambivalence, paradoxically seem to have spurred him on to compose what is surely his most successful early lyric.[55]

This is not the careful, precise form Bunting would extol throughout his life whenever he was called upon to explain his aesthetic approach. While Bunting would elsewhere express disdain for verbal abstraction, here abstract phrases like '[t]he dear companionship of its elect' and 'the gay | exuberance of unexplained desire' seem to be deployed for their rhythmic effect and for their surface of erotic suggestiveness rather than for any graspable meaning. This is representative of a wider tendency in Bunting's verse. On the one hand, Bunting was dedicated to an abstemious anti-style, a dense, radical, second-generation poetic that found an ideal subject in describing the enforced silences and brutal strictures of the prison experience in 'Villon', and which seemed to go hand in hand with a sceptical worldview that saw only endless repetition and a narrowing-down of experience into oblivion. But Bunting's dedication to musical experiments and a sort of last-gasp lyrical idealism were continually liable to drag him in a radically different direction, into a poetic space where stylistic virtuosity rendered feelings of erotic exuberance and spiritual emancipation.

We have seen how a coastal setting figured the brief escape of 'Villon''s third section before Bunting returned to a perception of the ultimate unresponsiveness of the sea. 'I am agog for foam,' mirrors this sceptical conclusion ('the foam dies and we again subside | into our catalepsy'), but it is on the whole an emphatic expression of Bunting's lyrical inclination to 'sing the tune on the air', as he would later put in in

[55] Much to Bunting's surprise, at a dinner in Rapallo in the late 1920s W.B. Yeats recited this poem from memory, which gives some indication of its success as a declamatory showpiece within the Poundian milieu. Ibid., p. 38.

Briggflatts. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, a text roughly contemporaneous with 'Villon', Sigmund Freud argues that the religious worldview arises out of an 'oceanic feeling', a 'feeling … of being indissolubly bound up with and belonging to the whole of the world outside oneself'.[56] This might as well be a description of the oceanic mode in Bunting's poetry. When he managed to break out of his pessimism and speak to the 'whole of the world outside himself', it was regularly to images of the sea, and a correspondingly aqueous form, that he would turn. While Bunting's scepticism found expression in an adaptation of the Lucretian tendency to 'explain the world one atom at a time', as he would later put it, a counteractive impulse was to collapse everything together into a cumulative wash of sound, a poetic texture that could be rhythmically vigorous but not necessarily explanatory or precise.[57]

As yet, however, Bunting could only make stabs at the sort of subject matter that would fit with his oceanic side. 'I am agog for foam', dedicated to Peggy Mullet, a girlfriend of the time, is remarkable for its formal velocity rather than for its post-adolescent preoccupation with a frustrated sexual relationship. It is ultimately limited because it is a personal missive rather than a work of philosophical breadth. Moreover, the majority of Bunting's early odes tended to reiterate his inclination to circumscribe and to leave things out in the Beckettian manner when they might have been romantically inclusive. Ode I:11, dated 1929, is addressed to 'a Poet who advised me to preserve my fragments and false starts'. It is an emphatic defence of Bunting's sceptical approach to style, and embodies the sheer extremity of his early iconoclasm:

> Narciss, my numerous cancellations prefer
> slow limpness in the damp dustbins amongst the peel

[56] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (Harmondsworth, 2010), p. 4.
[57] Basil Bunting, 'A Note on Briggflatts' (Durham, 1989), no pagination.

tobacco-ash and ends spittoon lickings litter
of labels dry corks breakages and a great deal

of miscellaneous garbage picked over by
covetous dustmen and Salvation Army sneaks
to one review-rid month's printed ignominy,
the public detection of your decay, that reeks. (107)

This is a puritan poem that sets itself up against the 'printed ignominy' of the orthodox London press and publishing industry. However, it is of a piece with Bunting's 1920s oeuvre more generally because this kernel of political anger ultimately amounts to nothing more than self-punishment. The wealth of potential in these eight Alexandrine lines – there can have been few poets writing in English in 1929 capable of such technical showboating ('spittoon lickings litter | of labels') – is remarkable but ultimately abortive. Throwing one's numerous cancellations in the dustbin might well be preferable to churning out shoddy verse for the literary establishment, but the curtailment and destruction of work is hardly a cause for celebration in the long run, especially if one is writing from a position of social marginalisation. What is more, this apparently anti-narcissistic poem is in fact a highly narcissistic work, an empty display of stylistic prowess that is unable to look beyond the confines of its own dense, rotting matter. Much later, in *Briggflatts***,** Bunting would find a way of making this variety of failure sing, as he valorised the slowworm who prospers lying low, and the daring rat who rummages 'behind the compost heap' (69). But as a young man his obsession with his own failure was too acute to allow for such a rounded, worldly view of experience.

Bunting's verse before 1930 dramatises a struggle to escape and to progress from a position of solitary confinement that succeeds only very occasionally. His experiences of trauma seem to have led him to convert external pressures into an almost pathological lack of self-esteem that fenced-in his style and obviated the

possibility of him realising his ambition of innovating a musical verse. In order to go beyond this impasse, he would need some external impetus and the support of an artistic milieu. Both of these things would be partially forthcoming in the ensuing decade, though the instinct for withdrawal and self-cancellation would remain a formidable lingering problem.

Bunting's movements in the wake of 'Villon' were energetic, even if publication success and financial security continued to elude him. By the end of 1926, he had relocated from Northumberland to London, where he embarked on a sporadic career as a journalist, writing mainly for the High Tory journal the *Outlook*. In later years, Bunting was typically disparaging about his work for the *Outlook*, commenting that he 'mostly wrote drunk', because when sober he was 'too highbrow for them'.[58] However, while the majority of Bunting's articles were evidently quickly written pieces of hackwork, they also contained some interesting anticipations of his later aesthetic pronouncements.

In his role as the *Outlook*'s music critic, Bunting surveyed the performance culture of late-twenties London with alacrity. One of his most eloquent reviews, published on 17 March, 1928, was of a performance by the Hebridean folk singer Marjory Kennedy-Fraser, whose songs Pound had celebrated in his own music journalism a decade earlier as 'among the musical riches of all time'.[59] As he often did in his *Outlook* pieces, Bunting took the Kennedy-Fraser review as an opportunity to speculate in more general terms about musical aesthetics, in this case by way of an extended comparison between folk and lieder singers:

[58] Bunting quoted in Victoria Forde, *The Poetry of Basil Bunting* (Newcastle, 1991), p. 27.
[59] R. Murray Schafer, ed., *Ezra Pound and Music: The Complete Criticism* (London, 1978), p. 92.

> [Lieder singers] postulate, in their interpretations, not only a complete understanding of words and music, but a complete submission to the will, so far as it can be divined, of the composer. The singer must not allow his own imagination, be it never so superior to that of the song writer, to have part or lot in his rendering. He must show the acutest perception, but no invention. He must not 'go beyond his book'. He is the servant of a sophisticated intelligence and must work within the limits deliberately imposed by that intelligence.
>
> The folksong, on the other hand, whatever its origin, is, by the time it reaches the collector, a communal, or cumulative product. The singer is given the task of assimilating himself, not to a single mind or character, but to an indeterminate group. The sympathy required of the lieder singer is subjective, individual, like the passion of love; the sympathy required by the singer of folksongs is general, like the love of God or humanity.[60]

This is only a cursory summary of contrasting approaches to technique, yet is fairly clear which of the two Bunting most identified with. Bunting's description of the lieder singer as someone who shows 'no invention' and 'must work within the limits' of the text imposed on him seems like a paraphrase of his complaint in the letter to J.J. Adams of 1926 that contemporary literature was 'too static'. Conversely, he suggests by way of comparison, the folk singer is able to 'go beyond the book' to achieve something like the 'verbal cinematograph' he had recommended to Adams. Kennedy-Fraser's 'communal, cumulative product', Bunting argues, is analogous to a quasi-religious 'love of God or humanity'. As we shall see, in Bunting's later career this sympathy for communal art, for a way of 'assimilating … to an indeterminate group', would become central to his creative practice.

After the *Outlook* folded in the summer of 1928, Bunting moved once again to Northumberland. Living in a shepherd's cottage in the remote north of the county – a setting Bunting would later eulogise in the fifth section of *Briggflatts* – he was able to subsist for a short time with the help of a stipend provided for him by his sometime lover Margaret de Silver. Two politically motivated ballad poems, 'Gin the Goodwife

[60] Basil Bunting, 'Song and Folk Song'. In *Outlook*, 61/1572 (17 March 1928), p. 344. Basil Bunting Archive, University of Durham.

Stint' and 'The Complaint of the Morpethshire Farmer', both of which were dated 1930 in the later *Collected Poems* of 1968, almost certainly emerged from Bunting's experiences of rural Northumberland in this short interval. Both poems present emigration to North America as the only way members of rural communities can escape from England and the exploitations of its establishment overlords (the Duke of Northumberland and his punitive land rents are anathematised in both works). That is to say, both poems show Bunting working out the implications of the social ideals he had summarised in the review of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser – the preferment of community over circumscribed individualism, the 'general … love of God and humanity' – and moreover with the aid of a form derived ultimately from folk-song. In their sometimes clichéd, quasi-Wordsworthian vocabulary ('Morpethshire Farmer''s 'And thou! Thou's idled all the spring' (114) is archaically literary rather than realistically Northumbrian), not to mention their relative traditionalism, these poems are anomalies in Bunting's oeuvre, and it is significant that he did not attempt to write another ballad poem in later years. Nevertheless, Bunting's incorporation of a folk element into his poetic was noteworthy. His interest in both the cause and the culture of a Northumbrian grassroots would become increasingly important over time.

Following a short trip to Berlin at the end of 1928 (an experience later recounted in the 1931 *jeu d'esprit* 'Aus Dem Zweiten Reich'), Bunting travelled to Rapallo for a second year-long spell (he had spent a year there in 1924-25, just prior to composing 'Villon'). During this second stay in Italy, the seeds of the more substantial breakthrough of the early 1930s – of which more in the following chapter – were sown. During a day trip to Genoa, Bunting came across an Italian translation of the Japanese prose work *Ho-Jo-Ki* by Kamo-no-Chomei, which would later

provide the basis of his major work of 1932, 'Chomei at Toyama'.[61] Also in Genoa, Bunting discovered a copy of the Persian epic the *Shahnameh*, another of his major translation projects of the 1930s.[62] If Bunting's twenties had been marked by violent encounters, isolation, and an entrenched mood of fatalism, as he became increasingly integrated into the Pound milieu at the end of the decade, his poetic development began to accelerate at a rapid rate. Bunting became friends with W.B. Yeats over the course of 1929 (along with Pound, Bunting was a witness for Yeats's will during a health scare on Christmas Eve), and with George Antheil at around the same time (according to Yeats in a letter to Olivia Shakspear, Bunting was 'writing up' Antheil's music in the spring).[63] Perhaps spurred on by these encounters, Bunting composed a handful of short odes in 1929-30 (odes 9 through 19 in the *Collected Poems*). Although he was forced to leave Rapallo at the start of 1930 after Margaret de Silver withdrew his allowance, Bunting's career as a poet was now fully operative. As he entered the decade of his greatest productivity, in March of 1930 Bunting published a slim collection of his poetry to date on a limited print run via a private Milan press. This book, entitled *Redimiculum Matellarum* ('a necklace of chamber pots'), might have been a very modest beginning, but it was the public announcement Bunting had been struggling to make throughout the course of a troubled decade. More importantly, it seemed to provide the impetus that spurred a marked escalation of creativity in the first years of the 1930s, the most important phase of Bunting's early career.

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[61] Alldritt, *Poet as Spy*, p. 60.
[62] Ibid., p. 62.
[63] Allan Wade (ed.), *The Letters of W.B. Yeats* (London, 1954), p.759.

Chapter 2: Ideas into Action: The Early 1930s

> [Bunting] didn't get through to a very wide public, and that's partly chance, but I think it also expresses the way in which the modernism which he was a late figure in was gently but firmly repulsed by English literary life. It happened then and of course it's going on now, and I put it down to a particularly English version of the old dictum that knowledge is power. The English version is more subtle, it goes; ignorance is power. It's a precious commodity, you acquire it, you nurture it, you see that it's carefully and rather obliquely taught in institutions of higher learning, and an ignorance specialist will guard his own ignorance, acquire techniques for preserving it, and will then pass it on and preserve a status quo in a tick-over mode. And there is power in it. It's culturally a blight and it's with us. Basil was a victim of this.
>
> – Roy Fisher.[1]

Foreword

In the mid-1960s Basil Bunting looked back with intense nostalgia to the sheltered environment of Brigflatts, the remote Quaker hamlet in the North Pennines where he spent idyllic summers in the early 1910s, and where he had fallen in love with the young Peggy Greenbank. Writing to Louis Zukofsky in September 1964 as *Briggflatts* gestated, Bunting claimed that this was a poem about 'Peggy Greenbank and her whole ambience … and what happens when one deliberately thrusts love aside, as I then did – it has its revenge'.[2] It is heartening to observe Bunting the arch-sceptic in such a romantic mode, especially in dialogue with Zukofsky. (Elsewhere Bunting made a habit of chastising Zukofsky for his fondness for mystified 'abstractions'.) But can we really take the Bunting of 1964 at his word and conclude that the decisive event of his life was the end of the short-lived teenage romance detailed in the first part of *Briggflatts*? Was the drift and hopelessness recorded in the subsequent sections of this autobiographical poem wholly the result of a youthful decision to 'deliberately thrust love aside'?

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[1] Roy Fisher, untitled ms., Collection of Tom Pickard, sent to Alex Niven, via email, 15 December, 2011.
[2] Basil Bunting, letter to Louis Zukofsky, 28 July 1964, HRC.

One thing is certain at least. Bunting's poetry – and his later poetry in particular – is marked by an unrelenting mood of failure and regret. In the previous chapter we saw that there was probably a psychological basis for this mood in the traumatic experiences of Bunting's post-adolescence, and in the Quaker attitudes that led Bunting to look on the culture of establishment Englishness with dismay and resentment. However, in professional terms, there is really only one phase of Bunting's poetic career that seems to explain the portrayal in *Briggflatts* of a life spent recovering from an abjuration of youthful promise. In the early-to-mid 1930s, Bunting went from being a productive poet with radical aspirations and multiple prospects, to a writer who had by 1937 more or less completely given up on both poetry and society as a whole. For Bunting, the 1930s was a period of ambition, itinerancy, and ultimate disappointment and failure. This was a crucial phase that fixed the mould of his whole attitude to life and art, and against which everything that followed must be measured. At the heart of this crux, in the last years of the decade, was a crisis that occurred in the relationship between Bunting, Ezra Pound, and Louis Zukofsky, a climactic episode that would cast a shadow over the ensuing years and reverberate throughout major poems from *The Pisan Cantos* to *Briggflatts*. For all three of these poets, and perhaps for Bunting most dramatically, something seemed to snap in the fraught atmosphere of the time against a backdrop of Depression, ideological meltdown and widespread preparation for an all-out war.

What was the nature of this crisis in the development of their writing, and how might we situate this narrative within the wider development of Poundian modernist poetry? A step-by-step account of Bunting's thirties experience in the following two chapters offers an exemplary case study of modernist collapse in a crucial period that has often been occluded between the bright lights of the earlier high modernist period

and the post-war modernist resurgence. That it remains a relatively ignored narrative in official histories of twentieth-century Anglo-American literature suggests that the long-term effects of the failed modernist projects of the 1930s are still being powerfully felt almost a century later.[3]

I. Bunting's Objectivist Moment

Pound's Imagist and Vorticist projects of the 1910s might have provided the finale to his formative phase, but they also contained a yearning for an *engagé* programme to complement their formalist campaigns. While Pound would spend the ensuing years working through the implications of this impulse, in the wider world of Anglo-American poetry a sequel to the wartime 'isms' would be a long time coming. However, by the start of the 1930s, a major revision of Imagist precepts had arrived in the form of the Objectivist group of poets, perhaps the most dedicated, focused tendency to attempt to follow Pound's example prior to the World War II. The first – and arguably the only – artistic movement Bunting was ever attached to, the Objectivists provided his point of entry into the modernist literary scene, at least in terms of readership, and their philosophy and practice would remain integral to his worldview even after he left their orbit entirely at the end of the thirties. On encountering this tendency, Bunting's decade began with cautious optimism, or at least with resolve and energy, as he found himself part of a transatlantic milieu that

[3] A whole genre of literature about thirties British poetry fails to even mention Bunting. Robin Skelton's influential Penguin anthology *Poetry of the Thirties* (Harmondsworth, 1963) established a precedent for this when it omitted Bunting from a voluminous selection of over thirty poets from the decade that included such obscure figures as Clifford Dyment, H.B. Mallalieu, and John Pudney. Skelton's anthology was published in 1963, at the nadir of Bunting's obscurity; in the case of later celebrated and influential studies of the period, from Valentine Cunningham's *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford, 1988), to Alexandra Harris's *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London, 2010), Bunting's total absence is more puzzling, or perhaps merely illustrative of the parochialism and ideological bias of those works.

was about to make a significant contribution to modernism's second wave. In a less turbulent epoch, the Objectivists' radical revision of Pound's earlier Imagist tenets might have provided Bunting and the world with a more lasting legacy. As it happened, this movement never quite got off the ground, but it is worth thinking about what might have happened if it had.

Tellingly, Bunting's Objectivist phase began with a departure from England. In the summer of 1930, he relocated from London to Brooklyn, New York, in low spirits after a compacted failure of musical and journalistic schemes. Prior to this, in his last two letters to Pound from London, Bunting had been as unequivocal in his desire to escape from the English capital as Pound had been ten years previously:

> I hate Fleet Street … Since reaching London I have been in every daily newspaper office except Morning Post or Daily Worker … several pieces of advice – cant I supply juicy fragments from private lives of Yeats, Beerbohm, etc, Mussolini, King of Italy?[4]

As we saw in the previous chapter, a year-long spell in Rapallo had recently culminated in the private publication from Milan in March of Bunting's first, modest collection, *Redimiculum Matellarum*. But after he returned to England for a brief spell in mid 1930, such continental achievements counted for little. Furthermore, T.S. Eliot had 'hitherto refrained from answering [a] note' about his poetry, and an attempt to 'make publicity for Antheil' had been met by the London papers with indifference. 'I have sacrificed two pennies to Mercury as god of commerce, but he has lost his wings', Bunting concluded morosely. The next letter to Pound, dated June 17, 1930, and headed 'LONDON (Damn the place)', contained more news of failure: Bunting's campaign on Antheil's behalf was still bearing no fruit, and an attempt to stir up

[4] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 22 May 1930, Beinecke.

debate about the British gaming laws (a long-cherished cause of Bunting's) had run aground because of the disinterest of the press and the department of agriculture, and the non-involvement of Liberal Party leader David Lloyd George, who Bunting regretted he 'couldn't get at'.[5]

Bunting's first letters to Pound from New York initially continue in this dour vein, but at the end of 1930 and the start of 1931 a new spiritedness is evident. 'Villon' was published in the October issue of *Poetry*; Bunting married his first wife Marian in late 1930, and on November 21 he wrote to Pound saying that he had received a 'very pleasant letter' from Eliot, 'and at once leapt on the opportunity of pressing all my translations and other schemes on Faber and Faber'.[6] More promising news arrived at the beginning of 1931: 'H. Monroe has given me a rather informal commission to collect an English number of 'Poetry'. I am writing to McLeod, Auden, J.J. Adams, Collier, & Bertram Higgins'.[7] The commission was typical of this brief New York interval full of organisation, plans, meetings, and putative literary schemes. In the first week of January, Bunting dined with William Carlos Williams and visited a speakeasy with the poet-publisher Robert McAlmon, partly in an attempt to help Pound with preparations for the literary journal *The New Review*, then just getting off the ground. It was also during this American sojourn that Bunting cemented his friendship with Louis Zukofsky, who from this point onward would be his most important literary associate aside from Pound.

The activities of these weeks pre-empted the publication, in February 1931, of the famous 'Objectivist' issue of *Poetry*. For Bunting the Objectivist project – nominally an attempt by Harriet Monroe to come up with a new modernist 'ism' –

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[5] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 17 June 1930, Beinecke.

[6] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 21 November 1930, Beinecke.

[7] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 4 January 1931, Beinecke.

represented something more than just an opportunity to get published. Indeed, Bunting's letters at this juncture suggest an atmosphere of radicalism, one in which his animosity toward the British establishment and the orthodoxies of English literature was crystallising into a determined plan of action. In a letter to Pound of January 1931 Bunting outlined his ideas for a violent assault on the writing practices of notable contemporary poets:

> Zuk[ofsky] or you might rewrite a few poems not up to scratch from current decent volumes. Wring 'em dry, so to speak. I can imagine nothing more instructive than confronting the original & the improved version, with reasons for changes given briefly. The poets in question would maybe detest it, but what of that? All the better of there is controversy about it. MacLeish would make a good victim, or Auden. Forced to justify their own readings or accept yours, I imagine they would put up a good show & a heap of valuable little knicknacks of criticism might turn up in the mêlée.[8]

Such iconoclasm was not confined to matters of literary form. A long letter to Pound, apparently written in the first weeks of 1931, shows Bunting in a mood of polemical fervour, as he outlined his suggestions for a de facto British revolution (albeit in a tone that mixed seriousness with touches of humour):

> ENGLAND. If Wales and the North don't rise this autumn, there's little hope of anything but extinction. The new program of the T.U.C. [Trades Union Congress] should be drawn up quite simply, thus:
>
> 1. Hang Rothschild and a select retinue of 'merchant bankers'.
> 2. Confine Rothermere in Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum with public warning to Beaverbrook and the Berries.
> 3. Warn Australia Canada S Africa that if they dont both pay up their proportionate share of the cost of the fleet and loosen up a bit on the immigration restrictions, they will be put up for public auction to any buyer who cares to undertake the job of reconquering them, such as Germany or the U.S.A.
> 4. No import dues, and a bloody big supertax.
> 5. Abolish the game laws.
> 6. Abolish the Home Office.
> 7. Confiscate the church lands and royalties.

[8] Ibid.

> After that elect a new house of Commons and omit to summon any of the hereditary peers to parliament.[9]

This political exuberance fed into the creative ambience of the time. In spite of his jocosity, it seems clear that Bunting did feel as though both he and the country were approaching a make-or-break point ('If Wales and the North don't rise this autumn, there's little hope of anything but extinction'), and consequently that he would have to make a heroic effort to achieve something quickly or else risk falling by the wayside. As it happened he would indeed end up by the wayside, but at this stage failure seemed far from inevitable. In the first years of the 1930s, Bunting would throw everything into a concerted artistic-political struggle, the defeat of which would dominate his future work, just as Pound's defeats of the thirties and forties would define his.

But what of the poetry itself? With hindsight Bunting's contribution to the Objectivist issue of *Poetry*, a lyric entitled 'The Word', seems more fluent and confident than anything he wrote before *Briggflatts*. In later collections 'The Word' is dated merely 1930, so whether or not it was written specifically for the Objectivist issue is uncertain. Nevertheless, this somewhat overlooked poem is clearly the product of a period of moderate idealism, the work of a newly enfranchised poet intent on making a bold arrival into the Anglo-American literary scene:

> Nothing
> substance utters or time
> stills or restrains
> joins the design and the
>
> supple measure deftly
> as thought's intricate polyphonic

[9] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, undated, but apparently February 1931, Beinecke.

score dovetails with the tread
sensuous things
keep in our consciousness.

Celebrate man's craft
and the word spoken in shapeless night, the
sharp tool paring away
waste and the forms
cut out of mystery!

When taut string's note
passes ear's reach or red rays or violet
fade, strong over unseen
forces the word
ranks and enumerates …

Mimes the clouds condensed
and the hewn hills and the bristling forests,
steadfast corn in its season
and the seasons
in their due array,

life of man's own body
and death. …
The sound thins into melody,
discourse narrowing, craft
failing, design
petering out;

ears heavy to breeze of speech and
thud of the ictus.[10]

Like *Briggflatts* and other poems of the 1964-1966 revival period, perhaps the only other time in his career Bunting came close to this level of uninhibited confidence, there is a remarkable vivacity and force of voice in 'The Word', a sense of assurance that for once gains the upper hand over Bunting's scepticism and negation (although an 'appendix' added to the *Poetry* version – published as a separate ode in later collected editions – somewhat undermines the effect, with its self-reflexive scorn for a poet-figure described as a 'bleak paralyzed blob'). As in the first section of *Briggflatts*, Bunting's condensed, monosyllabic diction becomes a vehicle for

[10] *Poetry, 37/5* (February 1931), ed. Louis Zukofsky, p. 260.

energetic lyricism rather than halting dejection; lively enjambments and trademark hyper-alliterations (note the emphatic sibilance throughout) contribute to a flowing, ebullient form. The poem foregrounds stark presence/absence binaries in a series of rapid juxtapositions: 'Nothing | substance', 'waste and the forms', 'body | and death', 'the breeze of speech and | thud of the ictus'. But it differs from the vast majority of Bunting's poems because it is presence – a sort of liberated sonorousness and immanence – that predominates. This is the work of a poet writing in the most emphatic terms, a poet whose penchant for youthful neo-Romanticism (see the Mallarme-influenced lyric Ode I:3 discussed in the previous chapter) has not yet been wholly replaced with diffidence and self-imposed austerity. Not until the post-war moment of Olson and Creeley had made such things possible would Bunting revisit this expansive stylistic terrain.[11]

Bunting was generally a hard-line follower of Pound's exhortation to 'go in fear of abstractions'. Yet in 'The Word' we find him delighting in terms like 'substance', 'consciousness', and 'discourse', under a title that recalls the gnomic spirituality of Eliot's *Four Quartets* rather than right-naming and sticking to the facts. How to account for the singularity of 'The Word'? In fact, the poem offers a tantalising suggestion of how Bunting's aesthetic, and that of his '30s modernist coevals, might have developed in a more fruitful environment. Most interestingly, it seems to arise out of an attitude that combined a dedication to an apparently music-influenced poetry (the conceit running through 'The Word' is of an 'intricate

[11] Indeed, in subsequently published versions of 'The Word', many of the articles were removed to produce a curter form. For example, the first verse in the *Complete Poems* version reads:

> Nothing
> substance utters or time
> stills and restrains
> joins design and … (111)

Such excisions are subtle but important markers of Bunting's minimalism.

polyphonic score' or 'melody' that embodies – or 'dovetails with' – consciousness) with an underlying idealism and belief in a vision of poetic craft being bulwarked by utopian surroundings ('Celebrate man's craft | and the word spoken in shapeless night'). An obvious precursor to *Briggflatts*, 'The Word' initiates Bunting's interest in the topos of sound reverberating through a landscape that is magically alive with possibilities for artistic practice, a place where synaesthesia binds together the constituent parts of a man-made pastoral world and materialises consciousness, rather than merely providing the opportunity for an autotelic aestheticist avowal of sensation. In this poetic space, an idealised formalism extends outward into surroundings in which the 'hewn hills' suggestive of human labour coexist harmoniously with a perfectly proportioned natural order: 'the seasons | in their due array' (see also *Briggflatts*: 'each pebble its part | for the fells' late spring' (61)).

In an 'open letter' to Zukofsky of October 1932, Bunting would query the 'metaphysical' overtones of Objectivism, while reiterating his earlier puritan determination to 'begin at the beginning':

> The mystic purchases a moment of exhilaration with a lifetime of confusion; and the exhilaration is incommunicable but the confusion infectious and destructive. It is confusing and destructive to try to explain anything in terms of anything else.
> …
> I have no alternative principle. I do not think anything can be simplified. We can only be content to be begin at the beginning and to remain very near the beginning all our lifetime.[12]

Bunting appeared keen to prevent the putative Objectivist movement from acquiring a 'principle', from being extended into anything more expansive than its component parts. In his pronouncements, Bunting would apply fierce scepticism to both the wider ethic and the technical minutiae of the Objectivist template that Zukofsky sketched

[12] Basil Bunting, letter to Louis Zukofsky, 2 October 1932. HRC.

out in the February 1931 issue of *Poetry* (of which more momentarily). Some three years later, he would write to Zukofsky:

> I don't believe abstract words correspond to anything except the noise made in pronouncing them … Hate to see a friend I admire marrying off his mind to a third cousin of the jargon into which they translate Hegel and other misleaders of mankind … Follow up any abstraction a little way and it will commit suicide.[13]

In a similar vein of anti-idealism, to a polemically fizzing Pound in late 1935, Bunting writes: 'The poet's job is to define, but what the hell has justice got to do with it? Unless you want to string everything tight together, like a Hegel or a Tommy Aquinas, with a neat knot where the One True God should be?'[14]

However, in the 1930 poem 'The Word', Bunting is much more in accord with the idealism of both Pound and Zukofsky, intent on 'stringing everything tight together' with an essential utterance in exactly the manner he would later denigrate. In 'The Word', indeed, we can see precisely the same figure (a 'taut string') being deployed in a context that seems almost Hegelian: an ideal music that embodies consciousness and rings out triumphantly over 'unseen | forces the word | ranks and enumerates'.[15] Bunting continually disavowed formalised belief systems, but this did not mean that he rejected belief outright; as poems like 'The Word' and *Briggflatts* suggest, his latent idealism could blossom with remarkable poetic consequences in the right conditions.

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[13] Basil Bunting, letter to Louis Zukofsky (Pound's carbon copy), 27 April 1934, Beinecke.
[14] Basil Bunting, letter to Pound, 'last of 1935', Beinecke.
[15] Indeed, in early drafts of 'The Word', the line reads 'tight string'. Draft manuscript in the Basil Bunting Archive, University of Durham.

A direct comparison with Zukofsky becomes unavoidable at this point. Zukofsky's 'Sincerity and Objectification', which appeared a few pages after 'The Word' in the February 1931 edition of *Poetry*, reads like a prose gloss of Bunting's poem:

> In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody or form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody. Shapes suggest themselves, and the mind senses and receives awareness. Parallels sought for in the other arts call up the perfect line of occasional drawing, the clear beginnings of sculpture not proceeded with.[16]

Zukofsky's phrasing here is abstruse, but if we view these comments alongside the example of his and Bunting's verse, a poetic philosophy is just about discernible. A 'perfect line of occasional drawing', 'things as they exist … [directed] … along a line of melody': herein is the essence of Objectivism – a determination to use synaesthesia and abstract 'melodic' lines in tandem with an ethical commitment to 'awareness' and 'sincerity'. Peter Makin has highlighted Bunting's opposition to the finer points of Zukofsky's programme, but 'The Word' is proof that Bunting did not always practice what he preached. Indeed, as Makin concedes, Bunting's 'poems of this period show that he is more in sympathy with Zukofsky's main aim than otherwise'.[17] Momentarily, as he spoke from a platform of modest authority and professional enablement, Bunting tentatively adopted the Objectivist party line in his debut statement 'The Word'. For all that Bunting never tired of presenting himself as a sceptic, and repeatedly declaimed on the essential meaninglessness of art, it should be noted that at certain crucial points – namely, when he was writing his best poetry – he

[10] *Poetry*, February, 1931 p. 273.
[17] Makin, *Bunting: The Shaping of His Verse*, p. 42.

could be roused to an attitude of affirmation and idealism.[18] The Objectivist moment seemed briefly to provide him with the opportunity of creating a poetic correlative to his political radicalism of the time: a passionate defence of verbal craftsmanship rooted in sincerity and awareness, a call for the figure of the artist to be provided with the social apparatus necessary to perfect his 'intricate polyphonic score' and utter a bold 'word … in shapeless night'. This is a side of Bunting that deserves more emphasis.

Objectivism's corrective to the aestheticist inheritance augmented the political dimension of Poundian modernism, demanding a space for the sublimely wrought artefact within a similarly tangible social realm of 'things as they exist'. A short poem of Zukofsky's of the late-thirties offers a succinct summary of this ethically assertive formalism:

> The lines of this song are nothing
> But a tune making the nothing full
> Stonelike become more hard than silent
> The tune's image holding in the line.[19]

In his avowal of a tune that will make 'the nothing full', Zukofsky foreshadows Herbert Marcuse's later claim that art is a process of 'naming the things that are absent' – a way of 'breaking the spell of the things that are'.[20] For the Objectivists,

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[18] Perhaps the most succinct statement of Bunting's sporadic theory that art is meaningless is that quoted in Donald Davie's *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum: Two Decades of Essays* (Manchester, 1977), p. 288: 'A work of art is something constructed, something made in the same way that a potter makes a bowl. A bowl may be useful but it may be there only because the potter liked that shape – and it's a beautiful thing. The attempt to find any meaning in it would be manifestly absurd'.

[19] Louis Zukofsky, 'Anew' #20 in *ALL: The Collected Shorter Poems* (New York, 1971), p. 97.

[20] Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (London, 1991), p. 70. Marcuse is translating and paraphrasing comments of Paul Valery in 'Poésie et Pensée Abstraite'. Marcuse glosses his quotation of Valery as follows: 'Creating and moving in a medium which presents the absent, the poetic language is a language of cognition – but a cognition which subverts the positive. In its cognitive function, poetry performs the great task of thought … it is the ingression of a different order of things into the established one'. Ibid,. p. 71. Marcuse's notion that poetry is potentially revolutionary because of its rendering of 'absence' or non-referentiality – a notion that would become highly influential in the post-

this was the political duty of poetic form. Their variety of poetry does not seem to refer to anything but itself, yet it retains a belief that verse is an inherently moral medium able to haul something out of nothing and communicate a substantive reality that would otherwise remain shrouded in silence (Bunting's 'the forms / cut out of mystery'). If this is an abstraction, it is an abstraction that also connects with the 'stonelike' objective contexts of the real world and imagines an ideal landscape in which craft and environment might coexist fruitfully. Modernist poetry in the tradition of Pound was evolving into a tendency for which the social grounding of art would increasingly be stressed as vehemently as form. For poetry to truly attain to the condition of music, someone would have to wage an energetic campaign to ensure the right environment for the deliverance of the song. Although pessimism would regularly stand in the way in later years, the aesthetic-ethical campaign of Objectivism briefly offered the suggestion of a way of realising this goal to a creatively galvanised Bunting and his American associates.

II. 'Much below the sublime': The Assault on Form

Bunting would have a chance to further immerse himself in a climate of artistic praxis in the years immediately following his brief stay in New York. Apparently writing in the first weeks of 1931 while he was still in the United States, Bunting informed Pound that he was keen on the idea of helping to launch 'a new political paper in England' and 'a new publishing house on a serious scale'.[21] Yet he still regarded the notion of being an English poet with profound ambivalence, as mistaken remarks about the 'English' Samuel Beckett in the same letter to Pound show: 'Rereading

war period – has obvious affinities with Zukofsky's earlier aesthetic as outlined in 'Sincerity and Objectification' and in poems such as 'Anew'.

[21] Basil Bunting, letter to Pound, undated, Beinecke.

New Review, found I like Mr Becket [sic]: glad he's English, as a matter of national pride. Sorry he's English, since he's thereby liable to succumb to the triplecursed gentleman-idea, destruction of all things.' Perhaps partly as a result of this discomfort with England and Englishness, Bunting's next move at this stage was not to return to London but to rejoin Pound in Rapallo for a third and final spell that would last just over two years.

Following his arrival in Rapallo, Bunting was in an effusively positive mood. In a letter to Harriet Monroe of 5 March, his enthusiasm about the achievement of the Objectivist issue of *Poetry* is palpable:

> I think Zuk's number is an immense success. Rakosi, McAlmon, Carnevalli and Williams and possibly Reznikoff, besides Z himself, is illumination enough for any festa and the rest glow with reflected light. I am not so pleased with the prose part, but Zukofsky is so much more determined and systematic a critic than I that I can only be humble and suppose it is all right. Anyway, I don't remember that I ever saw a single number of any review with so much interesting work in it …[22]

As he bathed in the 'reflected light' of the Objectivist moment, it must have seemed to Bunting as though a wider breakthrough was imminent. Against the backdrop of widespread political and economic turmoil in Britain and America, a context that led many people to share Bunting's expectation of an imminent revolution in one or both of those countries, here was a new and vigorous strain of modernist poetry attempting its own literary coup. With the commission for the English counterpart to the Objectivist issue under his belt, the thirty-year-old Bunting was confident and combative; the early phase of his artistic apprenticeship was over, and now he had a chance to put the accumulated ideas of his twenties into action. A second letter to

[22] Basil Bunting, letter to Harriet Monroe, 5 March 1931, Durham.

Harriet Monroe, in July of 1931, speaks of a radical poetic project apparently propelled by a spirit of Wittgenstein-inspired reductionism and compression:

> I don't like formal logic. There are better ways of connecting things up and anyway Wittgenstein reduced logic logically to the noble conclusion 'Woruber mann nicht sprechen kann, daruber muss mann shweigen' [sic] some years ago and there seems nothing more to be done with that instrument after that.
> …
> I am engaged in rewriting Shakespeare's sonnets. They can do with it! After sufficient cutting and straightening out of inversions, rather a nice poem should emerge.[23]

In fact, the idea of editing Shakespeare down to the bare essentials had been in the back of Bunting's mind for many years. As Richard Caddell notes, '[t]he story goes that whilst he was at school … Bunting took the school copy of Shakespeare's sonnets: cutting out the inessential bits, straightening the syntax and so on to reveal the essence of the poems.'[24] The exercise was apparently repeated for the benefit of Dorothy Pound in the late 1920s, and now, in the early thirties, it was resuscitated in a context of creative productivity.[25] Never fearful of conflict, as he gleefully dismantled the central text of English lyric poetry, Bunting appeared intent on colliding head-on with the English literary tradition in the most strenuous way imaginable.

Other projects occupied Bunting in Rapallo over the next two years. Since 'Villon' was composed in 1925-6, there had been no long poems, but in 1931 and 1932, in addition to a handful of odes, Bunting completed three works of relatively substantial length, something of a career record.

The first of these, 'Attis: Or, Something Missing', was apparently begun in 1930, but acquired its final shape in Rapallo. The poem contains another 'rewriting'

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[23] Ibid.
[24] Introductory note to Basil Bunting, 'Shakespeare's Sonnets Edited', in *Sharp Study and Long Toil*, p. 48.
[25] Ibid., p. 48.

of traditional English literature, as well as an outright savaging of T.S. Eliot, one of its more outspokenly orthodox contemporary advocates. Its theme of sterility and impotence in a modern wasteland recalls Eliot, and indeed it begins with a caricature of the man himself as an aging, effete Bloomsbury socialite. In Bunting's portrait, Eliot's 'Prufrock' has become a self-fulfilling prophecy:

> Out of puff
> noonhot in tweeds and grey felt,
> tired of appearance and
> disappearance;
> warm obese frame limp with satiety;
> slavishly circumspect at sixty;
> he spreads over the ottoman
> scanning the pictures and table trinkets.
>
> (That hand's dismissed shadow
> moves through fastidiously selective consciousness,
> rearranges pain.) (30)

Eliot had been a major influence on Bunting throughout his twenties, but he was also apparently proving to be one of the major obstacles to the second-wave modernist projects of the early-thirties, Objectivism perhaps chief among these. In the midst of Bunting's make-or-break moment, Eliot appeared intent on withholding practical support from this British friend of Pound's, who was surely eminently publishable even if he was not yet showing signs of unequivocal brilliance. During this final spell in Rapallo, despite Pound's implorations, Eliot rejected a submission of Bunting's poems, on the grounds that they were 'a rather fuzzy imitation of the cantos'.[26] Faced with this snub, Bunting's strategy of beating Eliot at his own game in 'Attis' is perhaps understandable (and it should also be noted by way of qualification that Bunting expressed regret privately to Pound that the poem was 'unfair to Eliot').[27]

[26] Alldritt, *The Poet as Spy*, p. 76.
[27] Basil Bunting, letter to Pound, undated (apparently February 1931), Beinecke.

Yet for all the arch reflexivity of Bunting's reconstitution of the idiom of 'Prufrock' and *Mauberley*, it is also worth observing the ways in which he diverges from the writers he would later term 'the men [he] learnt poetry from'.[28] 'Out of puff' bears traces of Pound, but in the harshly sonorous confrontation of this first line, Bunting adopts a brusque diction more acoustically aggressive than anything Pound ever wrote, let alone Eliot (a skill he would later perfect in poems such as *Briggflatts* and 'At Briggflatts Meetinghouse'). Bunting's razor is sharper than that of his immediate predecessors; he is more caustic, and his verse form is more sonically abrasive. Similarly, Bunting's desire to surpass first generation modernist critical precepts is underlined in the first lines of 'Attis'. Eliot's stringent 'objectivity', his avowal, in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' of 'complexity of detail' over 'intensity, of the emotions' has in Bunting's eyes degenerated into the figure of a 'fastidiously selective consciousness' lazily appraising objects in a Jamesian context of bourgeois domesticity (perhaps for Bunting this is the essence of the English 'triplecursed gentleman idea, destruction of all things').[29] Clearly, this is an attempt to differentiate his own and the Objectivists' new commitment to a 'complexity of detail' from the apparently atrophied aesthetic of his modernist precursors. For Bunting, Eliot's critical awareness has been vitiated by his fetish for 'rearranging pain'. As he commented at around this time, 'Mr Eliot's Criterion is an international disaster, since he began to love his gloom, and regretfully, resignedly, set about perpetuating the causes of it – kings, religion and formalism'.[30]

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[28] 'Note on *Briggflatts*' (Durham, 1989), no pagination.
[29] T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in *Selected Essays* (London, 1950), pp. 18-19.
[30] Basil Bunting, 'English Poetry Today,' *Poetry 39* (February 1932), p. 266. It is interesting to observe Bunting showing such disdain for Eliot's 'love of gloom'. Bunting's gloominess in later years was profound, but we should always try to bear in mind the optimism of these youthful moments.

Echoing the iconoclasm directed at the allegedly Bloomsbury-corrupted, tradition-obsessed Eliot in its opening lines, the second section of 'Attis' ('*Variations on a theme by Milton*') affords Bunting another opportunity to attack the sonnet form, which he apparently regarded as a paragon of orthodox politesse and iambic stiffness.[31] In this case it is not the Shakespearean sonnet but Milton's 'Methought I Saw My Late Espoused Saint' that is reconfigured:

> I thought I saw my late wife (a very respectable woman)
> coming from Bywell churchyard with a handful of raisins.
> I was not pleased, it is shocking to meet a ghost, so I cut her
> and went and sat among the rank watergrasses of the Tyne. (31)

Milton's classical setting has been exchanged for a marginal northern English locale – Bywell in Northumberland, where Bunting lived briefly in the 1920s – and, in a similarly oppositional gesture, the pentameter of the original poem has been replaced with prosy free verse and an antagonistically modern idiom: Milton's diction has made way for curt phrases ('I cut her') and unpoetic commonplaces ('a handful of raisins', 'the rank watergrasses of the Tyne'). There are obvious precedents for such Dada-like bathos: in Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, for instance, which was perhaps the single most important poem in the development of Bunting's early style. But there is something here more confrontational, more directly oppositional even

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[31] The sonnet seems to have been one of the chief bugbears of the Objectivists. William Carlos Williams, for instance, is at pains in his autobiography to distinguish the Objectivist theory of poem-as-object from inherited ideas concerning formal autonomy:

> For past objects have about them past necessities – like the sonnet, which have conditioned them and from which, as a form itself, they cannot be freed.
>
> The poem being like an object (like a symphony or cubist painting) it must be the purpose of the poet to make of his words a new form: to invent, that is, an object consonant with his day. This is what we wished to imply by Objectivism, an antidote, in a sense, to the bare image haphazardly presented in loose verse.

The Autobiography of Williams Carlos Williams (New York, 1967), pp. 264-5.

than Pound's assault on British Imperialism of the late 1910s. What sort of poetic strategy motivated this section of 'Attis'?

A clue is offered in one of the last letters Bunting sent to Pound before arriving in Rapallo. Bunting's political programme at this time apparently incorporated ideas for the wholesale destruction and renewal of the language:

> I was trying to think up a way by which it could be made worth while for Russia or Brazil or somebody else with territory to spare to set up an autonomous but allied state, peopled by the million and a half English permanent unemployed … If I had the job, I'd make them learn a phonetic spelling, so that they would forget how to read the English newspapers and current dribblings. Simplify the language still more, if necessary, make the bloody native Portagoose or Kamchadale learn it with all existing irregularities removed, thus making a complete break with the bloody British past.[32]

A more considered gloss on the campaign for linguistic reform is contained in the short essay 'The Lion and the Lizard', written at about this time. Sent to Louis Zukofsky along with a letter dated May 1, 1935, Bunting says that it was 'Found amongst old papers'.[33] This remark and the content of the essay suggest that it was almost certainly written during Bunting's second (1929-1930) or third ('31-'33) spell in Rapallo, most likely the latter given that it begins with a extended discussion of Persian poetry, a subject to which Bunting was increasingly devoted as the thirties wore on. At any rate, 'The Lion and the Lizard' provides a succinct critical counterpart to Bunting's various schemes for radical reform of English literature in the early years of the decade. In attempting to illustrate the 'persistent vices of English poetry', Bunting argues that it is 'partly because it is so splendid that it is so inadequate':

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[32] Basil Bunting, letter to Pound, undated (probably January 1931), Beinecke.
[33] See Caddel's introduction to *Three Essays*, p. 4.

> Almost any of the [English] translations of Dante would serve to exhibit this fault, as would likewise a comparison of any of Milton's descriptive passages with descriptive passages from Dante or Homer. Life includes splendour but is not sustainedly splendid. Effulgence is liable to blind the beholder to all save itself: the detail, the texture of life, is lost or blurred.[34]

Again, as with the Objectivist project, there is attempt here to elevate 'details' and 'the texture of life' over aestheticist magniloquence for its own sake (what Zukofsky had termed 'mirage'). 'The Lion and the Lizard' illustrates its critique of English poetry by pointing to the inadequacies of Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* compared with the Persian original, and Bunting's dig at the English translators of Dante implicates Dante Gabriel Rosetti and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In other words, Bunting is extending the modernist quarrel with late-nineteenth-century Romantic and symbolist 'blurring' or 'blinding' (and appropriately the essay references mould-breaking, ur-modernist touchstones such as Fenellosa and Pound's *Instigations* – works that had initiated the quarrel over a decade earlier). But significantly, he also refines the critique into an attack on English literature as a whole. Against the inoculation of the artwork to 'all save itself', Bunting advocates a vital engagement with a 'world of daylight and full consciousness' (30), a context in which the aestheticist view of music-as-ineffable-form (the 'hampering haze of glory between the reader and the object' (28)) makes way for an 'epic music' that, as Bunting puts it, 'belongs to the object in hand, the matter in hand' (31). Once again, in spite of his reluctance to commit to the Objectivist programme, Bunting was showing sympathy with Zukofsky's exhortation in 'Sincerity and Objectification' to reject 'mirages' of seeing in order to think purely of 'things as they exist'.

For Bunting in 'The Lion and the Lizard', an emphasis on sound offers a means of reconnecting with 'life-giving detail' and 'anything much below the

[34] 'The Lion and the Lizard', *Three Essays*, p. 29.

sublime', a mode in which 'cacophony is at least as intricate an art as harmony' (30). This project will necessitate a total overhaul of the very idea of Englishness and English writing, and the establishment of a new canon:

> English poets are too often on their dignity, they strive too constantly to be sublime and end by becoming monotonous … They have often been the slaves rather than the masters of their meters. (The sonnet exploited Wordsworth, not he the sonnet.) This is partly because they have neglected the music of Byrd and Dowland so much more supple rhythmically than English poetry or than the music of the classical masters until recently most in favour … because they despise or patronize jazz and other popular music; because I might add, they do not value or study Dickens, from whom they could, if they would, learn more about poetry than from Milton, Wordsworth, Baudelaire and Rimbaud rolled into one. (30)

Bunting names 'Burns, the last of Dryden, the first of Wordsworth, the author of '*Arden of Feversham*', possibly Denham and Crabbe' as the 'few just men for whose sake Sodom may be spared' (31). Meanwhile, Shakespeare was judged not to be a literary poet but a writer whose 'method is admirably suited to the theatre, where actions and physical things are visible' (31). Bunting's hopes for modernist reform at this stage were increasingly finding expression in the view that modern English writers should take inspiration from the performative, the open air, the urban soundscapes of Dickens, the liveliness of popular song; anything that might supplant the 'debauch of easy magnificence' (30) that was in his view the essence of historical English prosody. And once again, he had a conspicuous contemporary example to position such hopes against: the 'remoter abstractions … forced adjectives, and conceits … of Mr Eliot', whose '*Ash Wednesday* might serve to demonstrate many of these errors' (31).

Such pronouncements were paralleled at the same time by a forceful attempt on Bunting's part to create a new variety of musical English verse. Returning to the first section of 'Attis', we can see the full extent of his attempt to innovate a

confrontational poetic form in which an enervated modernism (embodied in the caricature of Eliot slouched on his ottoman) is renovated by the Objectivist 'full consciousness', by accentuated details, sharp outlines, and life below the sublime:

> There are no colours, words only,
> and measured shaking of strings,
> and flutes and oboes
> enough for dancers.
> … … … reluctant ebb:
> salt from all beaches:
> disrupt Atlantis, days forgotten,
> extinct peoples, silted harbours.
> He regrets that brackish
> train of the huntress
> driven into slackening fresh,
> expelled when the
> estuary resumes
> colourless potability;
> wreckage that drifted
> in drifts out. (30)

We must be attentive to what is and isn't 'musical' here. Literally referencing musical instruments and motifs as Bunting does at the start of the passage does not in itself constitute a meaningfully new form of 'musical poetry'. To take another salient example, in the 'Sirens' episode of *Ulysses* James Joyce borrows the language and tropes of musical performance, yet his intention is not to advocate an alternative prose form; rather, he adopts musical terminology as part of a wider strategy in the novel of stylistic pastiche. In other words, music can be alluded to in a more or less arbitrary way without this implying a profound synthesis of disparate forms.

However, in the above section of 'Attis', as elsewhere in Bunting's verse (see also the fourth and final sections of *Briggflatts*), the abrupt reference to musical instruments is used heuristically to kick-start and draw attention to an experimental verse form in which the musicality of poetry (Bunting's 'cacophony') is foregrounded. As in 'The Word', poetic utterance is imagined as an 'intricate

polyphonic score'. Yet this is no symbolist 'haze'. Music is invoked in order to inject rhythmic energy and sonic vitality into the fabric of the verse, to sharpen rather than to blunt detail: to expose it to the elements. In the return to the treatment of the Eliot/'Attis' figure after the initial quatrain, experimental ellipses, jagged enjambments, and an acerbic, clashing diction ('brackish', 'slackening fresh', 'wreckage') combine to create a stark contrast with the 'measured shaking of the strings'. The delicate world of 'sublimity' and 'harmony' inhabited by Eliot and the inherited forms of English tradition is being violently repudiated and replaced with a challenging poetic mode for which the only suggested precedents are the phonoaesthetic prose of Dickens, jazz, music-hall, and the 'rhythmically supple', pre-Miltonic songs of Dowland and Byrd.

Quite how these influences might have impacted in specific ways on Bunting's verse is not immediately apparent. In the third and final section of 'Attis', which was published separately from the rest of the poem in Zukofsky's *'Objectivists' Anthology* of 1932, there are further loose appropriations of musical motifs. The title of the section, '*Pastorale arioso / (falsetto)*', suggests the influence of Bach and Vivaldi, and the Baroque revival project that was a central preoccupation for both Bunting and Pound from the twenties onwards (the arioso, which literally translates to 'airy', was a popular Baroque form). Moreover, the structure of this section is musically inflected. Bunting's interpretation of the 'arioso' consists of eight verse paragraphs of varying length and form, three of which begin with a refrain redolent of Dowland or Spenser ('Pines, my sisters, I, your sister'). Bunting improvises breezy, recitative-style pastiches of Elizabethan pastoral lyricism around the refrain:

> 'Pines, my sisters, I, your sister,
> chaffered for lambs in the marketplace.
> I also won the 14 carat halfhunter goldwatch

at the annual sports and flowershow.
The young girls simpered when I passed.
Now I am out of a job. I would like to be a lady's-maid
to Dindyma. (33)

There are interspersed elements of vaudeville ('Oh Sis! / I've been 'ad! / I've been 'ad proper'(34)), which perhaps betray the influence of the 'jazz and other popular music' advocated in 'The Lion and the Lizard'; although Bunting is probably also parodying Eliot in these instances:

'The peacock's knavery
keeps you in slavery.
The roses cheat
you, butcher's meat.
The myrtles' pretence
offends commonsense.
Yet a muse defrauds
the Mother of the Gods.
Ponder this allegorical
oracle.' (35)

Even though its use of music might well be ironic (a way of poking fun at Eliot's experiments with music hall in *The Waste Land*), this section represents an interesting formal experiment, one that moreover appears to offer an important precedent for Pound's musical appropriations in the second half of Canto 81 (of which more later). 'Attis' as a whole is the record of a period at which Bunting was placing music at the centre of a radical project of iconoclasm and innovation. For Bunting, there was profound political and artistic potential in the mere shift of emphasis from the words on the page to a new kind of English 'with all existing irregularities removed'. If, as Bunting suggested to Pound, the million and a half English unemployed might be liberated by exploring English in a phonetic spelling, perhaps poets might do something similar by recruiting musical analogies and attending to experimental forms of 'cacophony' in their writing. Exploring poetry-as-sound might lead the way

to an important break with the 'bloody British past' by way of a reformed, puritan mode that enabled literature to exist outside of the established church. The precise nature of his musical-literary synthesis was not yet set in stone. But the point is that Bunting was once again attempting to carve something out of nothing, grasping at an inchoate alternative English poetic and experimenting in tangible ways with a style that showed signs of evolving into something completely new.

III. The Rapallo Laboratory

Still the possibility of breakthrough hovered. On arriving in Rapallo in early 1931, Bunting busied himself with preparations for the 'English number' of *Poetry*. It is tantalising to note that W.H. Auden was a key part of those preparations. Bunting wrote to Pound in April of that year, in terms that suggest he saw Auden as a potential ally in his struggle to broaden the modernist programme:

> Auden's volume has reached me. I am considerably impressed with first turning over the pages. He is the first person I have come across who seems to have profited duly by 'Mauberley'… I don't like his assonances much. But the syntax is interesting, both where scrupulously of speech and where condensed in defiance of grammar. In short, the poems bear out the impression I got from Charade of his good points, without emphasising the bad I saw in it. There is other badness, clearly, but none seems ineradicable nor part of his personal equipment. Very varied badness, but one sort of excellence: that is hopeful surely. Wish I could do as well.[35]

Bunting's declaration of an affinity with Auden, with whom he corresponded briefly at this time, is interesting.[36] For the majority of his life, Bunting consciously inhabited

[35] Basil Bunting, letter to Pound, 11 April 1931, Beinecke.

[36] See Reagan, An Interview with Basil Bunting', pp. 74-5: 'When Auden sent his first book to Rapallo I thought there was something there that ought to be encouraged. Pound didn't. Pound thought there was nothing there and there'd never come out of it anything but bunk. I tried to write and suggest to Auden the way I thought things should go. He wrote back, quite pleasantly, but stating that what he really wanted to do was go on teaching rugby football at a prep school … The rest of that lot [Auden's

the role of the embattled outsider, whether as conscientious objector, modernist iconoclast, itinerant exile, or Northumbrian regionalist. But in the early 1930s, as these comments about Auden show, he appears to have genuinely believed that comprehensive reform at the heart of the English establishment was a real possibility. In one interpretation, Bunting did not become an exile and marginal figure out of choice, or because of any inherent Quaker antagonism. In slightly different circumstances, it seems plausible to suggest that Bunting might have become a central poetic presence in mid-twentieth-century England. Moreover, his view of Auden's poetry as 'scrupulously of speech' and 'condensed in defiance of grammar' offers an interesting suggestion: what if Auden had joined Pound, Yeats, Beerbohm, Zukofsky, and Bunting in Rapallo, and had developed the quasi-Objectivist tendencies Bunting identifies in his letter to Pound? Would Bunting have continued to develop and write productively into the forties and fifties if his brief correspondence with Auden at this time had burgeoned into a more lasting, professionally supportive friendship? A less embittered, less marginalised Bunting, and a less parochial, more formally daring Auden would have provided an interesting prospect.[37] Might a collaborative alliance

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circle], I didn't see much there, an occasional felicitous line or two; in general, a lot of bumbling along, not quite sure whether to toe the party line or to strike out for themselves, and with an amazing wastage of words'. For an interesting postscript, see Bunting's comments to Louis Zukofsky of 1951: 'Feeling I'd maybe been over severe on too little acquaintance I recently bought a collection of Auden and his friends. I was wrong. I was far too indulgent. They are a useless set of cunts'. Basil Bunting, letter to Louis Zukofsky, 14 March 1951, HRC.

[37] In fact, there is compelling evidence to suggest that Bunting was indeed substantially influenced by the Auden of *Poems 1930* during his final Rapallo period. The use of the phrase 'silted harbours' in *'Attis'* is almost certainly an unconscious steal from Auden's 'Consider this and in our time'. Similarly, here is Bunting's description of a northern mining disaster in 'They Say Etna':

> Four lads
> led the pownies
> a mile and a half through rising water,
> lampless because the stife
> asphyxiates lamps,
> by old galleries to the North Shaft.
> The water rose.

of this kind have forestalled the anti-modernist 'failure of nerve' that Herbert Read saw occurring in British poetry from the thirties onward?[38] Perhaps speculating in this way is fanciful, but we must try to ascertain exactly what happened to the personal and aesthetic campaigns of the 1930s. In what manner did Bunting's attempt to annex a British modernism fail?

For a while during the final spell in Rapallo the signs were mostly good, as creativity and activity flourished in surroundings that were frequently – perhaps overly – idyllic.[39] At the same time as Bunting was attempting to innovate a musical English poetry, he was also helping out with an actual project of avant-garde musical organisation, in a setting described by Pound as 'a laboratory for the *objective* (with emphasis strictly on that word) examination of music'.[40] As he instituted a seminal programme of concert performances, Pound's hopes for establishing a congenial space for artistic production seemed briefly to have been realised in the utopian collaborative community of Rapallo. As he commented at this time, '[a] small town

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The others
came five months later when it was pumped out
and were buried by public subscription. (183)

And here is a passage from the first poem in Auden's *Poems 1930*:

… A ramshackle engine
At Cashwell raises water; for ten years
It lay in flooded workings until this,
Its latter office, grudgingly performed.
And, further, here and there, though many dead
Lie under the poor soil, some acts are chosen,
Taken from recent winters; two there were
Cleaned out a damaged shaft by hand, clutching
The winch a gale would tear them from …

Auden, *Selected Poems*, p. 3. Again, the correspondence seems too close to be mere coincidence. Is it too far-fetched to suggest that Bunting's later poem *Briggflatts* might have been influenced in some way by Auden's earlier poetic treatments of the North Pennines? The evidence of Bunting's early-thirties poetry, coupled with the comments in the letter to Pound, suggests not.

[38] Herbert Read, *Form in Modern Poetry* (London, 1948), p. 6.

[39] As Bunting would later comment – with rare positivity: 'on the whole it was a very pleasant time'. Williams, *Descant on Rawthey's* Madrigal, no pagination.

[40] R. Murray Schafer (ed.), *Ezra Pound and Music: The Complete Criticism* (London, 1978), p. 323.

can provide a laboratory and can specialize in work not being done in the heavily monied "centres" up to the quality and number of its local performers'.[41]

Bunting was a key figure in this modernist pantisocracy. He was on the organising committee for the Rapallo concerts, and regularly promoted the venture in his role as a contributor to the local *Il Mare* newspaper. The *Il Mare* reviews précised Bunting's aesthetic philosophy of the period, which retained a heavy debt to Pound's influence. Yet there were also divergences and departures. In July of 1933, the German pianist Gerhart Münch performed a recital of works by Scriabin; Pound and Bunting exchanged views on the Russian composer in a double feature for *Il Mare*. For Pound, Scriabin was the 'greatest colorist after Debussy'. However, Pound went on,

> … precisely like Debussy, being a colorist, I believe he sins against durability; for the life of a work of art, even by a great inventor or artist, depends on elements belonging specifically to that art and no other, i.e., no 'transfer' from a contiguous art. Thus Debussy, having more visual than aural imagination, was more exciting *in his own time* than today, and today a work by Debussy is more exciting at the first hearing than after the tenth.[42]

It is difficult to pinpoint Pound's argument here. Is he suggesting that impressionist synaesthesia was all very well 'in its day', but that, in the tougher, more evolved modernist climate of the 1930s, this visual, 'colorist' approach will not do? And what are we to make of jargon terms like 'durability'? Bunting's defence of Scriabin, in a comment piece and a review of Münch's performance in *Il Mare*, is notable for the manner in which it sharpens and clarifies Pound's basic premises, in the same way that 'Attis' had sought to remind Eliot how far he had strayed by the early 1930s from the focus on complexity of detail in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. For

[41] Ibid, p. 323.
[42] Ibid, p. 324.

Bunting, Scriabin's great virtue is simple: he is a worthy opponent to nineteenth-century impressionist 'blurring', which is perhaps the argument Pound was attempting to assert before his convoluted phrasing got in the way. In his review, Bunting praises Münch's performance of Scriabin for its 'metrica perfetta' (perfect metric) and 'tecnica esatta' (exact technique). According to Bunting, Münch's performance

> … showed beyond doubt that the Russian composer's defects are less extensive than I thought, and the discoveries of his rich originality are startling even after twenty-five years. Although there was a part of the performance that descended into vague mysticism, it showed not the slightest trace of that sentiment which taints the work of many corrupted Western composers, such as that of Scriabin's immediate predecessor, Debussy. [My translation.][43]

While Pound had shown ambivalence about Scriabin 'from a mystical point of view', Bunting was in no doubt that such 'mysticism' was to be criticised rather than applauded. Once again, the second-generation writer was attempting to cleanse and renovate the aesthetic tenets of his predecessors.[44]

How this specific musical dialogue might have developed is irrelevant, because Bunting left Rapallo and Pound for good in late 1933. However, there are interesting glimpses of the sort of activities taking place at Rapallo during this interval. Writing in *Il Mare* in November 1933, Pound discussed a forthcoming performance by Münch and Olgar Rudge of music adapted from Oscar Chilesotti's collections of sixteenth-century lute music. Pound regretted the absence of Bunting who 'made a specialized study of the lute' and would therefore have been able to provide expert knowledge on 'the tradition of the chromatic style of the performers of

[43] *Il Mare* (June 1933), cutting held in Beinecke.

[44] There is an obvious poetic correlative to these debates. It was apparently during this period that Bunting and Pound together formulated the famous axiom DICHTEN=CONDENSARE (writing is condensation), which, as Pound relates in *ABC of Reading*, Bunting suggested while 'fumbling about with a German-Italian dictionary'. If any single phrase embodies Bunting's second-generation modification of Pound's modernist blueprint, this is it. See Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York, 1960), p. 36.

vocal music in the XVIth century'.[45] Indeed, as Francesco Monotti, an Italian member of the Rapallo circle later remembered, Bunting used to 'modulate his strange cadences to his own accompaniment on the guitar'.[46] Whether Bunting was experimenting with poetry performances to guitar or lute accompaniment, and what the precise nature of these experiments was, remains a mystery. At any rate, when Bunting left Rapallo for the Canary Islands in October 1933, the prospect of further extension and development of musical schemes trailed away in ellipsis along with most of the rest of Bunting's artistic projects (which partly accounts for the pathos in Pound's later aside in Canto 81: 'and as for his life in the Canaries …'). After the Rapallo concerts, though his writing continued in a trickle, Bunting would not take part in any sustained way in a public or performative occasion – musical, political, journalistic, or poetic – for over thirty years.

Even prior to Bunting's departure from Rapallo, a sense of frustration and dissipation had been gathering. In 1932, in the 'English' edition of *Poetry*, he commented:

> There is no poetry in England, none with any relation to the country, or of any considerable section of it … Poetry withdraws into itself. It can reach but a small audience, small enough to have special learning and, as it were, passwords; too small to hope to influence even a corner of the national culture, so that, proposing no end but the exercise of its special knowledge, it delights more and more in approximations to the acrostic, less and less in true concision, which implies force and clarity as well as paucity of words. The cure? – I can see nothing but patience.[47]

Bunting's poetic response to this English malaise was at least vigorous. The pinnacle of the three-year purple patch that had begun in New York in late-1930 was Bunting's contribution to Pound's *Active Anthology*, published in October 1933 at the exact

[45] Ibid, p. 348.
[46] Makin, *Bunting: The Shaping of His Verse*, p. 64.
[47] Bunting, 'English Poetry Today', p. 265.

moment Bunting left Italy. Indicative of Pound's esteem for Bunting at this point, the selection of the latter's work was copious, by far the most substantial in the anthology as a whole. The contribution begins with 'Villon', and showcases the full range of Bunting's early poetic oeuvre, from 'Attis' and the short satire 'They Say Etna' (from which Pound derived the slogan quoted in *Guide to Kulchur*: **MAN IS NOT AN END-PRODUCT, MAGGOT ASSERTS**), to tightly wrought Objectivist lyrics ('Weeping oaks grieve, chestnuts raise …'), and the two political ballad poems 'The Complaint of the Morpethshire Farmer' and 'Gin the Goodwife Stint'. But the central text of the selection, and arguably of Bunting's early career, is the long 'translation' poem 'Chomei at Toyama', a work that Pound proofread in its draft stages.[48] Apparently written largely in early 1932, 'Chomei' – a refiguring of an Italian translation of a work by the thirteenth-century Japanese poet Kamo no Chomei – is Bunting's preeminent Rapallo poem.[49] It is a work of exile and retreat, a work characterised by a mood of despondency and a creeping sense that time is running out and the world is receding from view. Yet it is also a cogent, sophisticated poem that shows Bunting operating with full confidence at a time of unusual productivity. This ambivalence resulted in a poem of taut energy and compressed drama quite unlike anything Bunting had written up to this point.

'Chomei' opens with a frenetic overture, a sketch of dynamic chaos that suggests the influence of Bunting's erstwhile neighbour at Rapallo, W.B. Yeats:

> Swirl sleeping in the waterfall!
> On motionless pools scum appearing
> disappearing!
>
> Eaves formal on the zenith,
> lofty city Kyoto,

[48] See Basil Bunting, letter to Pound, dated '30/7' (probably July 1932), Beinecke.
[49] Makin, p. 65.

wealthy, without antiquities!

Housebreakers clamber about,
builders raising floor upon floor
at the corner sites, replacing
gardens by bungalows. (85)

The poem unfolds in a context of violent upheaval, a landscape full of thunderbolts and earthquakes, cyclones and apocalyptic fires, 'droughts, floods, and a dearth'. Among other things, 'Chomei' is a Depression poem, as the ironic allusions to modern American collapse remind us:

… a wind
starting near the outer boulevard
broke a path a quarter mile across
to Sixth Avenue.
Not a house stood. (86)

For Bunting, in deadpan mode, this is a sign that 'men are fools to invest in real estate'. But this is not a setting in which upheaval and disorder seem to offer the possibility of positive rebellion. There is much futurist energy in 'Chomei', and several passages recall the vivid recitatives of 'Attis':

Crack, rush, ye mountains, bury your rills!
Spread your green glass, ocean, over the meadows!
Scream, avalanche, boulders amok, strangle the dale!
O ships in the sea's power, O horses
on shifting roads, in the earth's power, without hoofhold! (87)

But notwithstanding these bursts of songlike vitality, the sanguine mood of 1930-31 is being replaced with diffidence and ominous hesitancy:

Massacre without cause.

Portent? (86)
…
This is an unstable world and

we in it unstable and our houses. (88)

Bunting had begun the thirties in the thick of metropolitan activity, badgering Lloyd George about reform of the gaming laws and looking for work in Fleet Street, meeting with Carlos Williams and Zukofsky in New York, outlining ideas for a new political paper and publishing house to accelerate a British revolution. The Rapallo venture had initially promised an extension of these schemes: an ideal community or 'laboratory for the objective' populated by the best writers in the world, in which ideas could be put into action and Bunting might continue to extend and adapt the social and literary projects of his mentors as part of a specifically British campaign of reform. But of course, Bunting was no longer in Britain, or America, or anywhere in particular for that matter. The utopia of the 'Ezuversity' was truly a no-place, an ephemeral expat idyll in which notions of civic activism and linguistic reform were reduced to a small-scale provincial context where urgency was dissipated by leisure and isolation. After this point, Pound would become increasingly inveigled in a fantastically unhinged fascist project; Zukofsky and his Objectivist companion George Oppen swung violently in the opposite direction, to the extent that the latter gave up poetry altogether for a life of military service and clandestine activism that precluded his writing for the next thirty years.[50] The possibility of a unified tendency that might synthesise artistic and political campaigns was evaporating. It might have been expected that Bunting, a pragmatic and essentially moderate socialist, would have proved the exception to the rule. But his apathy and scepticism, combined with a

[50] See the introduction to George Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Davidson (New York, 2008), pp. xxiv-xxviii. The parallel between the respective hiatuses of Bunting and Oppen is notable. However, while their career paths followed a very similar pattern (initial moderate success in the early 1930s, revival in the 1960s after several 'lost decades'), Bunting at least does not seem to have been especially interested in Oppen's work. Oppen is conspicuously absent from Bunting's glowing letter to Harriet Monroe about the February 1931 issue of *Poetry* quoted above, and Bunting does not reference him elsewhere.

basic lack of publishing success and a supportive social apparatus, were now effacing the entire grounding of both his politics and his art.

In ‘Chomei’ the exile-poet narrator progressively slips out of sight as he describes chaos and tumult from afar in detached, indifferent terms. There are echoes here of Bunting’s great theme of the vanity of human wishes, which persisted through all of his major poems from ‘Villon’ (1925) to ‘At Briggflatts Meetinghouse’ (1975). ‘Chomei’s declaration of fatalism arrives in its fifth verse paragraph:

> Whence comes man at his birth? or where
> does death lead him? Whom do you mourn?
> Whose steps wake your delight?
> Dewy hibiscus dries: though dew
> outlast the petals. (85)

Yet Bunting’s scepticism here is something more than typical: there is a specific character to the metaphysical gloom. Throughout ‘Chomei’ there is a glaring absence of an assignable *cause* for the violent anarchy and that dominates the poem, the disasters of which are natural and ineffable rather than man-made. The focus of critique has been swept away to leave only endemic instability and drift (‘Where shall I settle, what trade choose | that the mind may practise, the body rest? (89)). Meanwhile, casual indifference is shown to even the most horrific of worldly entreaties:

> Fathers fed their children and died,
> babies died sucking the dead.
> The priest Hoshi went about marking their foreheads
> A, Amida, their requiem;
> he counted them in the East End in the last two months,
> fortythree thousand A’s … (87)

There may be some vague resentment directed at the powerful, at ‘avaricious bureaucrats’, ‘the rich’, and the secluded residents of ‘Riverside Drive’ where the

dead ‘lay so thick … a car couldn’t pass’ during a time of famine. But this is ultimately a poem of Wordsworthian retreat rather than a purposeful Poundian attack on an enervated capitalist civilisation. Suffering and injustice on an apocalyptic scale are merely the prelude to a process of inoculation, abjuration, and a stark realisation of pessimism:

> One generation
> I saddened myself with idealistic philosophies,
> but before I was fifty
> I perceived there was no time to lose,
> left home and conversation.
> Among the cloudy mountains of Ohara
> spring and autumn, spring and autumn, spring and autumn,
> emptier than ever. (89)

This is not a generalised, epic commentary on the bankruptcy of human existence like, say, *The Spoils*, but the record of a single individual’s headlong withdrawal from society. Like another doomed protagonist of early-thirties expat literature, Dick Diver at the close of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender is the Night*, Bunting’s Chomei is exiting the stage quietly rather than in a blaze of glory, moving from place to place until he finally ‘renounces the world’ (94) and disappears into a lonely, anonymous nowhere. Chomei’s final utterance from his beggar’s hut is meagre and disconsolate:

> I do not enjoy being poor,
> I’ve a passionate nature.
> My tongue
> clacked a few prayers. (94)

What has happened here to Bunting’s recent dream of a new English verse music? If music acted as Bunting’s driving impetus or life force, it is no wonder that there is little that can be called musical in ‘Chomei’, a poem that takes as its subject a gradual draining away of life and a jettisoning of physicality. Perhaps Rapallo’s pastoral idyll

had ultimately come to deaden Bunting's creativity. Taciturnity and self-doubt were once again foreshortening his lyrical fluency, and an overwhelming melancholy was replacing any lingering ambitions for reform. One does not have to strain too hard to see an echo or metaphor of Bunting's gradual relinquishment of poetic and political belief in the early-thirties in the following description of Chomei from the middle of the poem:

> A ripple of white water after a boat,
> shining water after the boats Mansami saw
> rowing at daybreak
> at Okinoya.
> *Between the maple leaf and the caneflower*
> murmurs the afternoon – Po Lo-tien
> saying goodbye on the verge of the Jinyo river.
> (I am playing scales on my mandolin.)
>
> Be limber my fingers, I am going to play *Autumn Wind*
> to the pines, I am going to play *Hastening Brook*
> to the water. I am no player
> but there's nobody listening,
> I do it for my own amusement. (90-91)

The key phrase here, of course, is 'there's nobody listening'. Without an audience, there was little point in attempting to innovate a cacophonous new variety of poetry. This realisation was gradually creeping into Bunting's increasingly diffident works.

Chapter 3: 'There are People under the Water': The Later 1930s

> The materialistic critique of society once objected against idealism that existence determined consciousness and not vice versa, and that the truth about society did not lie in its idealistic conception of itself but in its economy; contemporary men have rejected such idealism. They judge themselves by their own market value and learn what they are from what happens to them in the capitalistic economy. Their fate, however sad it may be, is not something outside them; they recognize its validity. A dying man in China might say, in a lowered voice:
>
> > Fortune did not smile on me in this world.
> > Where am I going now? Up into the mountains
> > to seek peace for my lonely heart.
>
> I am a failure, the American says – and that is that.
>
> – Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno.[1]

Foreword

In October 1933, faced with rising living costs in Italy, Bunting relocated to Tenerife, the largest of the Spanish Canary Islands, along his wife Marian and his first daughter Bourtai. He could not have known it at the time, but the departure from Pound and his circle at this point was an unqualified creative disaster. In the interval between his arrival in the Canary Islands and the meeting with Tom Pickard in late 1963, Bunting's poetic output slowed to an almost complete standstill. There were sporadic interludes of activity over the next three decades: a faltering post-Rapallo period in the mid-thirties notable mainly for 'The Well of Lycopolis', and an immediate post-war moment that was condensed in 'On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's Cantos' and *The Spoils*. But these were isolated spasms rather than full-on rediscoveries of creative confidence. By the end of 1933 when he arrived in the Canary Islands, Bunting had spent fifteen years – his entire adult life – struggling against various representatives of an English establishment that had caused him considerable hardship. From Bunting's

[1] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated by John Cumming (New York, 1972), p. 211.

perspective, his attempts at British reform had been continually and emphatically blocked: by an authoritarian culture that had jailed him, beat him, locked him in solitary confinement and, latterly, in the Depression period, secured an entrenchment of orthodox finance that had resulted in much suffering for the residents of his native north-east and countless others; by a literary culture that had refused him employment and had put down iron walls to stop the merest encroachment into England of modernism in the tradition of Pound (and arguably of any other form of modernism that didn't conform to the Eliot-Bloomsbury model); and by a media and publishing industry in which even the most potentially sympathetic friends seemed to be dead-set against allowing him into print.

In the early thirties, Bunting had found a way of channelling his antagonism to this centrifugal English culture, as he was able to ally himself with an Objectivist tendency that consisted of kindred poets writing from a position of marginality and attempting to make good on the earlier Poundian assertion that an iconoclastic music-of-the-phrase poetic might lead to a revolutionary break with the orthodox British past. But in the mid-1930s, he was faced with the reality that his struggle had proved consistently futile. After the failure even of a final attempt to find an outlet in exile in Italy and Spain, it would be fair to say that Bunting simply gave up. In the time-honoured tradition of the defeated radical, he had internalised the restrictive influences that had hitherto acted as a point of antithesis. He had evolved into his own worst enemy, self-critical to the point of paralysis. By the end of the decade, he was referring to his collected poems as his 'dust smothered pyramid'.[2] And the headlong capitulation did not stop there. When the World War II broke out, as William Carlos Williams put it, Bunting 'rushed across the United States from California to England

[2] Ode I:34 (129).

to enlist'.[3] Beating the establishment had proved impossible; joining it must have seemed like the only sensible option. At any rate, becoming a Wing Commander in the R.A.F. in Persia in wartime seemed to at least offer the possibility of temporary personal happiness, even if the only creative fruit of Bunting's 'imperialist' phase was the staccato nihilism of *The Spoils*, which emerged belatedly in 1951.

If Bunting's disillusionment in Rapallo had burgeoned at the same time as he managed to produce a substantial body of work, in the later thirties he found that his reservations about Western culture and the place of poetry within it were so profound that writing itself was eventually precluded. Following a final burst of satirical brilliance ('The Well of Lycopolis') and a period spent attempting to translate the Persian epic poem the *Shahnameh* (an ultimately aborted project), Bunting eventually exchanged cultural activism for more prosaic manual activity. Although T.S. Eliot finally published a lengthy extract (some 74 lines) from Bunting's translation of the *Shahnameh* in *The Criterion* in April 1936, soon afterward Bunting's life began to unravel. After returning to England in July, Bunting and his family spent an unhappy few months in London before Marian departed to America with the children, effectively ending their marriage. This was Bunting's point of total resignation. Without either a family or a literary coterie to support him, Bunting stopped writing poetry completely and became a professional sailor. After training at the Nellist Nautical Academy in Newcastle in 1937, Bunting acquired work on transatlantic ships, and subsequently worked as a seaman in New York and California. He achieved a liberation of sorts, as he more or less resigned as a poet and embarked on the life of oceanic escape that was always the lodestar of his imaginative universe. Moreover, sailing appeared to offer forms of social usefulness conspicuously lacking

[3] *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*, p. 264.

from Bunting's literary experiences of the early thirties. As Bunting would later comment:

> Sailing the Thistle [a boat Bunting purchased in 1937] was at least a man's life, not this louse-like writing for money … Good to have learned navigation and seamanship. Good to be in the public service even to the infinitesimal amount of an officer of the last and least of the categories of the naval reserve.[4]

'Public service' remained the keystone of Bunting's worldview, and he simply didn't feel that the Poundian milieu in Rapallo would be able to provide anything in this regard in the long term.

However, even during his time at sea, Bunting remained close to Pound in correspondence, and indeed he seems to have been Pound's most intimate correspondent throughout the period as a whole. As arguably the last of Pound's close friends to attempt to engage him in discursive debates about his fascist debasement, Bunting is a singularly interesting figure. The Pound-Bunting correspondence between 1933 and 1938 is compelling because it frames the ideological crisis between the pair as a real rupture between hitherto steadfast friends, and moreover because aesthetic debates are often indissoluble from political tensions. After reading the last major poem of Bunting's early career, 'The Well of Lycopolis', in the latter half of this chapter I will examine the unpublished Pound-Bunting correspondence of the later 1930s in detail.

I. 'The Well of Lycopolis'

[4] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 11 November 1938, Beinecke.

Though Bunting would later refer to it as 'about as gloomy a poem as anyone would want', 'The Well of Lycopolis' is one of Bunting's most confident, cogent poems.[5] Its success on the level of style and social critique is poignant, however, because it was spectacularly unsuccessful in its reception. If Bunting was by this point stranded on Tenerife and isolated from his milieu, 'The Well of Lycopolis' is stranded and isolated from the rest of Bunting's oeuvre: written in 1935, it is the most notable casualty of the publication slump that followed the anticlimactic 'breakthrough' of the selection in Pound's *Active Anthology* of late 1933. The poem would not appear in print until it was issued as part of the *Poems: 1950* collected works, which was in itself a barely read text; and by the time Bunting did acquire a significant readership in the mid sixties, some thirty years had elapsed, during which time the work's concerns and references had become wholly antiquated.

This reception history – or lack of it – is pertinent, because in contrast to 'Chomei at Toyama', 'The Well of Lycopolis' is a work that is overtly interested in the historical and social narratives of interwar Europe. As such, it is a shame that it did not succeed as anything like a social or historical intervention. It is important to stress that while Bunting had become increasingly *disengagé* during the course of the Rapallo interlude, he was still far from uninterested in politics when he arrived in the Canary Islands in 1933. In Tenerife, Bunting and his wife Marian were thrust into an environment of political foment that demanded a degree of ideological partisanship, even of those who, like Bunting, were not involved directly in any party political campaign. Although Bunting and Marian would mingle with many members of the island's Fascist elite (including, famously, Governor Francisco Franco), they were unmistakably on the side of the Popular Front on the advent of the Spanish Civil War

[5] Williams, *Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal*, no pagination.

in 1936. Bunting would only very cautiously endorse the Popular cause in a largely summative article for the Conservative journal the *Spectator* in July 1936 ('The Roots of the Spanish Revolt'); however, there is no doubt that his basic leftist orientation had not altered. There were even signs that a commitment to revolutionary politics remained the bedrock of his worldview: in 1935 Bunting apparently told Louis Zukofsky: 'I am not a Communist, nor have much sympathy with the communist dogmas: but the revolution I desire has several things in common with the Communist revolution … I desire Communism to be powerful'.[6]

In 'The Well of Lycopolis', this ideological ambivalence manifests itself in an oblique, satirical, neo-classical mode that is nonetheless at bottom a radical puritan attack on the capitalist wasteland of the interwar years. The poem is ostensibly an attempt to adapt Eliot's sexual theme in *The Waste Land* so that it becomes a specifically focused critique of Eliot's adopted home – Bloomsbury – and its apparent climate of sexual and moral corruption. The result is a rapacious satire that resembles both Eliot's poem and Wyndham Lewis's portraits of venal London bohemia in *The Apes of God* and *The Revenge for Love* (there is also a slightly facetious pun in the title on Radclyffe Hall's sexually explorative novel of 1928, *The Well of Loneliness*).

In the first of four sections ('The Well of Lycopolis' is the first and only of Bunting's sonata poems to be divided into quarters), 'Mother Venus' is introduced as a gin-drinking old woman pining for her youth in a Bloomsbury pub. Her dramatic monologue, which lasts for the majority of the Part I, is surely Bunting's most charismatic piece of vaudeville:

> I had them all on a string at one time,
> lawyers, doctors, business-men:
> there wasnt a man alive but would have given

[6] Bunting quoted in Alldritt, *The Poet as Spy,* p. 87.

all he possessed
for what they wont take now free for nothing. (39)

By this point Bunting had come very close to perfecting his adaptation of Pound's demotic mode in *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (which he would subsequently reprise only once more in his career, in the first section of *The Spoils*). What is striking about the mode as it refined here is the rhythmic energy in Venus's lament ('The selfish pig, never up to any good! | He used to cuddle me. Fat lot of good it's done me' (39)). This is a form of verse music enlivened by the acoustic of the street, rather than a sculpted sound poem or a Mallarmé-esque lyric: it lies between these two dominant modes in Bunting's work, and offers a suggestion of how his style might have developed had he not used it self-reflexively here to undermine his own livelihood (as well as Bloomsbury, 'The Well of Lycopolis' aims its attack at 'infamous poetry' itself (42)).

As the monologue mounts to a crescendo, the anti-imperialist connotations of *Propertius* are co-opted along with its diction ('But none of their Bacchic impertinence'), though Bunting's anti-British sentiment is more explicit than Pound's:

A dram of anaesthetic, brother.
I'm a British subject if I *am* a colonial,
distilled liquor's clean. (40)

'The Well of Lycopolis' is transplanted to interwar London, where the proverbial London drink (gin) becomes an invidious poison that debauches the populace. This premise is in one sense a straightforwardly comic-ironic device. Yet the fanciful conceit is also grounded in something approaching historical reportage:

It's the times have changed. I remember during the War
kids carrying the clap to school under their pinnies,
studying Belgian atrocities in the Sunday papers

or the men pissing in the backstreets … (40)

This might be superficially comic, but Bunting is in fact deadly serious. We should remember that Bunting spent the conclusion to the World War I as an incarcerated Quaker. As such his hatred for the machinations of the English establishment during and after the War – which is expressed here in the trope of ubiquitous sexual degradation – is authentic and visceral. In Bunting's eyes, the mainstream of British culture is both martial and meretricious. A sexually transmitted disease ('the clap', or gonorrhea) is juxtaposed with the atrocities supposedly committed by German soldiers in Belgium during the World War I, reports of which filled the British newspapers of the period. The link between sexual voraciousness and the slaughter of wartime is then further solidified, in the uncouth, perhaps misogynistic image of 'grown women | sweating their shifts sticky at the smell of khaki' during wartime (40). As ever, Bunting's stance is puritan; but, atypically, his radical anti-Englishness in 'The Well of Lycopolis' is also puritanical. The disease of a militaristic, moronic narcissism or malign love has infected the populace in the manner of a venereal disease. This conceit allows for an energetic phonoaesthetic vocabulary that describes bodily decay with barely disguised glee: 'Miserable dried up skin and bone' (40), 'have I wrinkles? grey hair? | teats, or dugs? calves or shanks?' (41), 'Blotched belly, slack buttock and breast' (41).

The effect of the Eliotic equivocation between disgust and vicariousness in the poem's first sections can be nauseating, but Bunting's street monologues are unquestionably effective. Moreover, this refined style seems to have allowed Bunting to write the most vehement political poem of his career. Bunting's cacophonous bombardment of England and Englishness is more savage than more celebrated social critiques of the period – those of, say, Orwell, or even Pound. Amongst other things,

Bunting is attempting to outdo his literary contemporaries in his radical antagonism to a supposedly effete liberalism. There has been some suggestion that Bunting is attacking the Auden circle (and with a shade of homophobia) in lines like the following:

> Open your eyes …
> at the sleek, slick lads treading gingerly between the bedpost,
> stripped buff-naked all but their hats to raise … (42)

But then it is probably futile to attempt to identify all the targets of Bunting's animosity. The point is that Bunting's rejection of his society is vicious and total. It is not only the effeminacy of the Auden-esque 'lads treading gingerly' that is being satirised, but also the shibboleths of a brutally exploitative, masculine, imperialist-capitalist culture bulwarked by lifestyle myths and advertising:

> Join the Royal Air Force
> and See the World. The Navy will
> Make a Man of You. Tour India with the Flag.
> One of the ragtime army,
> involuntary volunteer,
> queued up for the pox in Rouen. What a blighty! (44)

Immediately after this passage, close to the end of the poem, the mood shifts finally to pathos, as Bunting describes the likely endpoint of a culture that is impoverished in every sense. Again, the World War I is at the centre of this exposure of the bankruptcy of what he refers to as 'Blighty'. The 'involuntary volunteer' meets an ignominious end in the Dantesque landscape of trench warfare:

> Surrendered in March. Or maybe
> ulcers of mustard gas, a rivet in the lung
> from scrappy shrapnel,
> frostbite, trench-fever, shell-shock … (44)

Not since Pound's 'There died a myriad refrain' in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* had anti-war rhetoric been combined with such a comprehensive polemical denunciation of British mores.

However, 'The Well of Lycopolis' is also one of Bunting's most affirmative statements. As in 'Villon', there is a marked departure into lyricism in the poem's final (fourth) section. The Dantesque depiction of the World War I is framed by an actual quotation from the *Commedia*: 'Ed anche vo' che tu per certo credi | che sotto l'acqua ha gente che sospira', and Bunting's satirical mode is overlaid with sympathy as he describes a community of lost souls who 'cannot speak out because they are stuck in the mud' (44). Again, there is a restatement of the dynamic of 'Villon': the confinement of these prisoners is contrasted with another 'pan-out' into a fantastical global landscape:

> Stuck, stick, Styx. Styx, eternal, a dwelling.
> But the rivers of Paradise,
> the sweep of the mountains they rise in?
> Drunk or daft hear
> a chuckle of spring water:
> drowsy suddenly wake,
> but the bright peaks have faded. (44)

This is one of the fullest, most tragic expressions of Bunting's disappointed idealism. Whereas the tidal 'sweep of the mountains' might offer redemption, the living dead of contemporary London can hear only the nightmarish 'chuckle' of the gin spouting from the titular well. Oceanic expansiveness has been travestied as alcoholic impoverishment.

In Part IV, what has been a loose approximation of eighteenth-century satire metamorphoses into a statement of epic scope. As usual, Bunting has succeeded in the

first sections of the poem in washing away the world in its entirety. The self-defeating implications of his attack on the wellspring of verse (Venus) are unmistakable. Poetry itself is barbaric after Flanders (and, by extension, against the backdrop of the military-industrial complex that presided over the War and its aftermath). Writing in the late 1930s, Bunting concludes that he is utterly impotent as a writer:

> At my time of life it is easier not to see,
> much easier to tra-la-la
> a widowed tune in poor circumstances –
> tweet, tweet, twaddle,
> tweet, tweet, twat. (43)

Yet there are still places where a thought might grow. Bunting's loose translation of Canto VII of the *Inferno* depicts the sullen victims of an all-consuming anger, the 'irresolute, barren, dependent' who can find no joy in the cosmic universe. But while these others have been decisively submerged by the waters of Styx, there remains some suggestion that they might be reachable in a distant future:

> … besides I want you to know for certain
> there are people under the water. They are sighing.
> The surface bubbles and boils with their sighs.
> Look where you will you see it.
> The surface sparkles and dances with their sighs
> as though Styx were silvered by a wind from heaven. (45)

As Bunting would later write, in a letter to Peter Makin, this adaptation of Dante represents 'ultimate hope rising from the helpless victims of accidie'.[7] Bunting might have seen no way forward for poetry at this point, but there was a slim hope in patiently waiting until the lost community under the water might be 'silvered' by some sweeping movement of reform.

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[7] Bunting quoted in Keith Tuma, *Fishing by Obstinate Isles: Modern and Postmodern British Poetry and American Readers* (Evanston, Illinois, 1998), p. 169.

II. The Pound-Bunting Correspondence

If 'The Well of Lycopolis' is ambivalent in its engagement with the world, in the poem's aftermath Bunting tipped finally into total disengagement and abandonment. Anticipations of this abdication from poetry and politics in the thirties are at the forefront of Bunting's correspondence with Pound in the middle years of the decade. These were the crisis years for Pound, but he was not the only one approaching a climacteric. The intimacy and ardency that characterised the exchange of ideas between Pound, Bunting, and Zukofsky reflects a context of psychological, political, and emotional crisis for all three, and goes some way toward justifying Pound's description of the trio as 'strugglers in the desert' in the epigraph to his summative prose work of the period, *Guide to Kulchur* (1938). As such, the correspondence deserves more attention than it has hitherto been granted.[8]

In his first letter to Pound from Tenerife in November 1933, Bunting was still able to communicate some good news on the publication front. Harriet Monroe had written to inform him that 'Chomei at Toyama' was to get an 'Honorable Mention' in *Poetry*; moreover, 'Tennessee Observer publishing the rest of that poem, also 'Attis', also other things that have been printed elsewhere'.[9] However, despite his recent period of personal contact with Zukofsky, who arrived with his family in Rapallo in the autumn of 1933, a diffident Bunting was becoming eager to distance himself from the milieu that had provided him with such vital social and intellectual sustenance over the past three years: 'I don't know at all clearly what Zuk means by Objectivists

[8] Peter Makin's *Bunting: The Shaping of His Verse* and Keith Alldritt's *The Poet as Spy* are among the works that make reference to the Pound-Bunting correspondence, but neither examines it in detail, and the correspondence as a whole remains unpublished as of 2013.

[9] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 18 November 1933, Beinecke.

and am not likely to do any good by shoving my oar in'.[10] A letter at the start of 1934 shows Bunting continuing to aid Pound in his musical schemes at Rapallo (Bunting recommended the services of the conductor William Whittaker, who knew 'almost all Bach by heart' and whom Bunting knew from his youth in Newcastle). Then, in March, came a long disquisition on politics that set the tone for a debate between Pound and Bunting that would continue over the ensuing years.

Partly, Bunting appears to have been prickly about issues of personal finance. There was increasing desperation over the lack of substantial publishing success: 'As to the Eliot, if I had the British Museum round the corner it is just barely possible I might be able to fix up something he would take, but I doubt it'.[11] And Pound seems to have queried the fact that Bunting was receiving financial support from his American father-in-law. Bunting's response to this was testy:

> What do you suppose to substitute for fathers in law and similar institutions as a means of subsistence for poets? I never heard of an English poet who didn't have an independent income, or starve, or sponge. I dont know anything about your affairs, but dont believe you get paid enough to keep your family going. My receipts have declined steadily from little to less and now practically to zero since I got sick of lying for a living in Fleet Street. Bernard Shaw would say that was a clear indication that poetry was entirely useless since it commands no price. I don't think you take any such view.

But the quarrel was not merely a matter of individual circumstance. The discussion of personal economics came in a postscript to a lengthy attempt by Bunting to challenge Pound's increasing attraction to the pseudo-aristocratic elements of fascism:

> You saw England largely from the vantage ground of the nobs who run the show, if you'd seen it from prisons and mining villages you'd have the advantage of another point of view, you'd have a pretty good idea that whatever the Tories touch is damned, they spread their dirt over it. The other

[10] Ibid.
[11] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 21 March, 1934, Beinecke.

> parties are dumb and corrupt and all that, but they haven't that record. Some of them sometimes have done something good.
> …
> As to the revolution as you understand it, you know I have no enthusiasm for it … if you are thinking of Fascism, I believe in the personal genius of a chap like Muss. much as I do in the personal genius of Mr Bonaparte or O. Cromwell Esq. That is, I want it used, but I want an effective check on it, I want to be able to get rid of the great man when the time comes. In the present case I think the time came at the Decennial … Anyway, the part of Machiavelli he got it from isnt the part that treats of the <u>public</u> good.
> …
> And as for gents, it isn't their doing nothing I object to, nor getting a living at the public expense. Its a matter of education and seems to me to be, more than any other single thing, the seeds of destruction for the empire. Its something similar that prevents the people who have to live in the Tyne Dock and similar places from shooting a few policemen now and then, which would do more than anything to get their plight remedied. They have all cut off their own bollocks.

Against Pound's fascist-aristocratic revolution, Bunting advocates the cause of the 'public good', of the north-east miners and Tyneside dockers. He provides Pound with a lengthy summary of the northern mining heritage. But even as he advocates this alternative site of political potentiality, Bunting works in a sense of failed rebellion that he relates back to the defeated British General Strike of the previous decade:

> The strongest and most sensible, if somewhat clumsy, organisation in England, the Miners Federation of G.B. was busted in 1926. It was a very slow machine, but always open to conviction and very circumspect and levelheaded. If the other big unions had been as slow to make up their minds and as solid in sticking to them, the general strike would have been a revolution.

This basic standpoint is broadly in accord with Bunting's recent history. The concept of revolution was one that he regarded with profound seriousness, but his own hopes for political change had become muted by this point by a feeling of belatedness, impotence, and suppressed, inward anger at the 'nobs who run the show'.

For a while after this exchange the dialogue between Bunting and Pound returned to poetry. Bunting's translation of the Persian epic poem, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, had by this stage become his major project, as he would later put it, 'simply because I was so bloody sick of myself and couldn't find anything else that so completely excluded me'.[12] Bunting quoted George Curzon's 1892 work *Persia and the Persian Question* to Pound, informing him that Hamadan/Ecbatan had been the site of a Jewish colony and 'the tombs of Esther and Mordecai, still shown, in wooden coffins carved with Hebrew characters'. 'Any or all of this may serve you as matter for 'echoes' of the Ecbatana passage [in the *Cantos*]' Bunting commented, perhaps attempting in a very subtle way to nudge his friend away from his burgeoning anti-Semitism. Bunting's Persian projects were also having an impact on his style in ways that would only really become apparent in the post-war works. A letter to Pound of April 19, 1934, concentrates on attempts to find a way of embodying the musicality of the *Shahnameh*:

> Am endeavouring to be a as simple both in vocab. and syntax as possible, and as idiomatic as poss … As to onomatopoeic accompaniment, which is the marvel of the whole thing, alliterations, internal rhymes, contrapuntal arrangements of stress against ictus against succession of longs, hopeless task for anybody except Homer translating Firdusi or Firdusi translating Homer.

Such efforts would sadly not amount to anything in the way of publication, but it is important to note the attempt here to continue the sonic (or 'onomatopoeic') experiments of the early-thirties and the second-wave modernist process of 'simplifying the language still further', as Bunting had earlier put it. In the same vein, in October 1934 Bunting suggested to Pound that roots of Persian poetry were oral:

[12] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, undated (in response to a letter from Pound of 17 January 1935, Beinecke, so probably written soon after that), Beinecke.

> Within what I know [of Persian poetry] (which is Omar and Hafiz …) the variety's great. Corresponds at once to Greek epigram, English limerick, almost every short form. The stately business, though its there in Omar, isn't the unique mode Fitzgerald makes of it. Omar also splutters. And spits. Everyone seems to take huge metrical licences without blushing. But it seems to be the big majority were made to be sung. Especially Hafiz, who sings in his ghazals more magnificently than any poet I ever read …

Orality was also at the centre of exchanges about the history of English literature, as can be seen from Bunting's 'points of difference' with Pound after reading his *ABC of Reading*:

> 1) I think Burns is a serious omission. Maybe he is the only British poet who has contributed something not to be found anywhere else before him … I mean especially such as:
>
> Beneath these stanes lie Jamie's banes
> O death, it's ma opinion
> Ye ne'er took sic a bletherin bitch
> Into yere dark dominion.
>
> … Also the cantabile of songs that are have been and will be generally sung by a whole people, is something different from the cantabile of that elegy on Rochester, or of Shakespeare's cantabile. It's less Milanese or Viennese bel canto, more in the genius of this language. That's rare in any language and unique in English.
> 2) I think Swift's verse is a less important omission, but there's something there very foreign to Butler or Pope. If Swift's best is Gulliver, his second-best is still a good deal above most men's understanding …
> 4) I think Dryden's 'Fables' … contain, along with some bits of XVIIc dialect, a good deal of the clearest verse in English, for sense, syntax and sound: not the best, the clearest.[13]

Such remarks suggest a prehistory of involved dialogue between Pound and Bunting at Rapallo on the matter of a 'cantabile' or songlike poetry. Bunting's next letter continues the thread, probing deeper into the familiar Pound-Bunting notion of a 'dissociation' of poetry and music in the seventeenth century:

[13] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 18 July 1934, Beinecke.

> Re Rochester, I mean that Denham was functioning more consistently on at least nearly equal level thirty years earlier. All these fellows attended to Malherbe's views on diction without remembering that he wrote always and definitely to be sung. As you say, Waller was the last important English poet to bear it well in mind in a part of his work. The nineteenth century fellows tried, but had mostly forgotten how to do it: I think, witness Browning, but perhaps you wont agree.[14]

Bunting, as ever, was straining after the revival of a form of poetry that might be vocalised in a public setting. This specific dialogue continued into 1936, with Bunting advising Pound that Elizabethan lute-songs ('not late Jacobean') were 'written for music and dancing: syncopations inevitable, and must certainly have been used for effect'.[15] What Pound derived from the exchanges is not always apparent, as most of his letters to Bunting are not extant, but these discussions about an early-modern British cantabile would return to him at a crucial moment later on, as we shall see.

Yet for all the seeds of future developments we can observe in the correspondence with hindsight, it is important to stress again that for Bunting the mere notion of development was in the process of being discarded. 'Most of my writing is shit', Bunting wrote to Pound, apparently in early 1934, 'which is why I don't write more. I know that, and don't need to be told. But if you think my poems get shitty, or anything with a reasonable amount of pretence about it gets slipshod, please say so in no mistakeable phraseology'.[16] A more nuanced exposition of Bunting's sense of having reached a creative impasse is contained in his first letter to Pound of 1935, perhaps the fullest elaboration of his literary development in this period. Bunting comments that 'in trying to learn something about epic [translating the *Shahnameh*] I was very largely trying to get away from characters and deal with

[14] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 'August twentysomethingth, 1934', Beinecke.
[15] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 4 March 1936, Beinecke.
[16] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, undated (probably early 1934), Beinecke.

acts instead'.[17] This sense of rejecting the modernist interest in 'psychological' literature is combined with a desire to recapture an epic, public mode of address:

> I don't think Homer's characters are very interesting. What fascinates me, at any rate, is what they do. I know that they have been one and all so encrusted with later poetry of a different kind that you can't just use the word 'Ulysses' or 'Achilles' without conjuring up a whole host of ghosts of lines and attributes, in fact the entire recipe for 'poetic glamour''; even if its Homer himself that uses the word, the later accretions cant be entirely unstuck unless one is very thoroughly aware of them to begin with. But where there are not, in our languages, any such accretions, an epic character remains what he was to begin with: a series of actions, not at all the sort of person you or Browning would choose to make a persona of.
>
> It is true that Firdusi's people talk more than Homer's, and write letters, and in the Persian, at least, they do have 'characters' of a simple sort (and convincing sort), but what is important is still the act, and the letters are themselves acts, not in the least 'arranged' to display character. The whole gamut of them wouldn't keep a Flaubert or a Henry James busy two pages. Nor would Homers, deprived of the later associations.
>
> But the literature of the last – how long? – has all of it been psychological; people talking or thinking about things they didn't do, or would like to do, or why and why not. Even in the Cantos you nearly always prefer to show somebody thinking or writing or telling, and the interest is as much or more in the person as in the deed contemplated. Even your manner of narration where you don't interpose any definite mask seems to serve a similar end. It is all one manner or another of reflection. (I'm not attempting, Lord forbid, to belittle it: that would be idiotic)
>
> It occurred to me a long time ago that this indirect business had gone about as far as it would go without degenerating. Nobody is going to do it better than you for a hell of a long time, and Zuk can only introduce further complications of method that remove it from the possible reader, step by step, until somebody will arise who will justify the kind of things the academic nincompoops used to say about you, and be totally unintelligible. Hence 'Chomei', to reduce it to such simplicity as I could: which thereupon ended the matter so far as I personally am concerned. I can do nothing with it that will satisfy me. It is much better to leave the field to you, and perhaps to Zuk's elaborations and try telling a story…

In seeking an escape from modernism's 'indirect business', Bunting was aiming to innovate an epic mode in which 'action' predominated over psychological characterisation ('people talking or thinking about things they didn't do, or would like to do, or why and why not'). This in his view was the methodology of Flaubert, Henry

[17] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 4 January 1935, Beinecke.

James, and all 'the literature of the last – how long?'. Again, Bunting was straining after a literature that would, in his words 'enlarge the available quantity of *communicable thought*', for which 'recitation and chanting' seemed to be the most appropriate means of expression.[18] But at this point his sense of an escape route from the indirect impasse was a green thought and nothing more. Living on the Canary Islands, and attempting to cope with an increasingly fractious marriage, Bunting was reduced to playing his music to the pines like 'Chomei at Toyama'. 'Telling a story' in an epic setting would have to wait until much later.

After the debate about epic poetry, action, and characterisation, from the spring of 1935 onward, the relationship between Pound, Bunting, and Zukofsky began to unravel in an increasingly painful manner on the ground of politics. 'You surely got a bloody big bat in the belfry about economics', Bunting wrote on March 5. 'It seems to me just one of a good number of matters that are all pretty equally wrong'. The former L.S.E. student continued:

> I dont speak as one who hasnt considered the matter. Even lectured on it one winter: tough job with a lot of workingmen who had all read pamphlets out of or based on Marx and weren't taking anything for granted … But aint it all sort of leisure-time shove-hapenny to a feller like you who can and sometimes does write poetry which in due time and degree and by the usual process of dilutions and popularizations will ultimately affect most English speaking people a lot more fundamentally than any alteration in their financial status?
>
> This NOW business is symptom of impatience. If you want immediate results, you ought to be in politics or its bastard, leader-writing … Some such idea seems to be eating Louis, but he's got it mixed up with Marx. He says you make him shed tears because the five lines ending 'What are you box? I am Hathor?' are perfect, whereas other bits of recently printed Cantos, specifically Mussolini and something I don't follow about Yeats getting his mystic balls wet talking about boys are not, so he says, up to scratch … So he says he wishes you would take care of yourself and get me (by which he really means him) to see there aint no buttons loose and yr tie's straight before

[18] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, undated (probably early 1935) Beinecke.

> you make yr next public appearance. And 'there is no need telling him I said so, but no objections if you can do it without hurting his feelings'.[19]

As Pound became more and more virulently incoherent, his friends were showing fraternal concern and making gentle implorations to tone down the language. But Pound's anti-Semitism and ideological wildness were increasingly poisoning the fellowship. Apparently writing in May, Bunting rehearses comments of Pound's about Zukofsky in order to repudiate them:

> And that he [Zukofsky] hasn't any intention of looking at anything his ma hadn't already told him, wh may for all I know care he so, but what the hell has it got to do with poetry, haven't you written that Dante was diablement dans les Idees recues? And most of the lesser men deep in 'em. And the 'symbol of Zuk's race the wailing wall an obstacle in front not diminished nor removed just there to be wailed at with consciousness of rectitude'?
>
> Seems like a simile made to fit Eliot and that wouldn't be, apart from the racial interjection, out of place on him or even on the fortunately fictitious Mauberley. Zuk seems to do most of his moping in letters not in verses. Also he's a comyounest, wh may not be particularly intelligent, but there's more ways than one of trying to diminish an obstacle. Anyway, is it right for you to be so godalmighty gone on progress? We havent had the chance of observing very much of it. I dont believe in it at all, but if it exists, is it something a poet must take overt notice of? Doesn't he do all he do all his own bit for progress (or the maintenance of the world) by purely linguistic exercises? Public spirit is abused when people try to do what isnt in or pretty close to their own speciality. Aint that Cawnfucian? You and I and Zuk have to keep the language alive, and damn difficult it is, as I am finding more and more, and we dont do any very appreciable good by turning aside to propagate the worthiest causes in economics or politics or patent medicines or quack religions or other subjects we've only a secondary interest in.[20]

Unfortunately, far from heeding these warnings, Pound continued to lower the tone even further by conflating aesthetic critique with straightforward racial prejudice, in a letter that has survived in carbon copy:

> Progress/ waal is REGRESS any better.

---

[19] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 5 March 1935, Beinecke.
[20] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 6 May 1935, Beinecke.

and Zuk has ceased to WANT to get any better. If he

WANTED to make BETTER poetry, there might still be some hope.
But he wants to argue about how good his defects are.

and likex v every other god damn KIKE (this is not for transmi

ssion) he wants to put it over, and have others ADMIRE it.

which gives me a P A I N in the nekk.

Zuk's mere analysis, Talmudic analyzing is NOT much

better than Eliot's going over Marianne's top with a tape measu

measure.

lacking a biologic live centre … cutting into, is not more
vivifying than measuring/

and ZUK had not Possum's initial energy
/
seeing Eliot at 48, and not having known him in 1915

you prob do not get the perspective.

Zuk's mind has stopped/ apart from quite good NEGATIVE
dissection.
he can cut down into/

If I am mainly responsible for keeping some life in poesy

it is because I do not from personal reasons CLING to

the corpse.
It is very distressin to see the blokes die

by the wayside.[21]

At times Bunting seems to come close to agreeing with Pound's comments about Zukofsky, or perhaps more likely, to have been mildly gratified by the suggestion that he was the senior charge: 'Note with pleasure you think me faintly less dead than

[21] Ezra Pound, letter to Basil Bunting, undated (probably May 1935), Beinecke.

Zuk', was his response to the above letter.[22] But more usually in the correspondence Bunting's role is to defend Zukofsky while reiterating his own snowballing apoliticism and self-abnegation:

> Zuk isn't rotting … Unless you call it rotting to go Communist. That's a point of view. He seems to think it is a form of rotting, though he doesnt use words of that degree of disrespect for his elders, to go Douglas … It seems to this isolated islander that to spend a great deal of time on these bloody details of politico-economic organisation shows either a misunderstanding, or weakness in the essential function of poetry … Looking at [Zukofksy's 'A Poem Beginning 'The'] again the other day I thought it much more accomplished than anything I'm ever likely to do, and his work in general is much more firm and knowledgeable.[23]

Pound could not accept this, especially Bunting's withdrawal into neutrality:

> You really BLOODY fool /
> 'Go Douglas' your arse.
> …
> T ROT is to stay communist 1918 or Douglas 1918.
> The communist pewk is to STICK. To use' NO
> thought, to yell 'dictatorship of the fuckitariat'
> and NO thought as to how to COMMUNIZE IN a country already
> having machinery.
> IF you cd/ shift Z/ onto NEW
> formulae/
> even onto 'Communize the product'
> you wd. earn yr/
> keep.
>
> …
> The essential function of poet
> poetry is NOT the maintenance of ignorance/
> and orthology
> is part of the technique.
> Tennison was the sort of shit who did
> [lines missing at bottom of page]
>
> The poets job is to
> DEFINE and yet again define till the detail of surface
> is in accord with the root in justice/

[22] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 'Day after bloody Saint John', ie. 24 June 1935, Beinecke.
[23] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 28 July 1935, Beinecke.

shit for submit to the transient/
But poetry does not consist the cowardice which refuses
to analyze the transient/ which refuses to see it.

The specialized thinking HAS to be done or literature DIES
and stinks/ choice of the FIELD where that specialized analysis
is made has a percentage of relevance/
in no case can constipation of thought
EVEN in the detail, make for good writing. LUCIDITY[24]

For all that Pound's uncouth terms of expression here are unfortunate, he had a point. Bunting is a trenchant critic of Pound's more fanciful flights, but were his criticisms always justifiable if they came from a position of apathy and inertia, what Pound here terms 'the cowardice which refuses to analyze the transient'? Bunting's casual impartiality showed presentiments of his imminent move toward disillusioned self-regard and the ideological volte-face of his enlistment in a war whose predecessor he had been willing to go to prison to oppose. Caught between Pound's fascism and Zukofsky's communism, Bunting the 'isolated islander' appeared intent on rejecting engagement in general rather than offering any specific middle-way solutions. At times he seems to be on the verge of advocating a vague libertarianism: in January 1936 he alludes to himself as an 'agrarian', and in a slightly earlier letter there are reprisals of the cause of rural labour:

> Southern Portugal is still as depopulated by centuries old emigration as the rural parts of Ohio are by bad farming. These things are much more interesting to me than C.H. Doug., little as I expect you to welcome the announcement.[25]

On the whole though, these were timorous half-thoughts. In the face of Pound's iron dogmatism, Bunting showed little willingness to posit even the semblance of an alternative. At any rate his advocacy of the 'essential function of poetry' against the

[24] Ezra Pound, letter to Basil Bunting (Pound's carbon copy), undated (probably summer 1935), Beinecke.
[25] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 'Day after saint bloody John' ie. midsummer, 1935, Beinecke.

'bloody details of politico-economic organisation' was somewhat inadequate given that his own poetic productivity was stalling completely along with his ideological impetus. One of the most important facts to bear in mind about Bunting is that moments of social radicalism (1930-'33, 1964-'66) tended to provide the backdrop to his greatest creative achievements, while retreats into politico-economic scepticism (the late 1930s, the early 1950s) tended to coincide exactly with periods of creative dearth.

Yet to his credit, from 1936 onwards Bunting became increasingly eloquent and assertive in his opposition to Pound's racial bigotry, a singularly clear-cut moral issue in an epoch of political confusion. Matters truly came to a head for the first time in January 1936:

> Bugger intolerance, Ez, even when its you! I think I've guns enough to decommunize Zuk when I get near him, but if he becomes Head Particular Lenin to U.S. I don't see any reason for shelving him … I am sorry to inflict long letters on you, but it seems I must … A chap who writes the sort of letters you've been writing lately obviously isn't at his best, no doubt overworked, etc. The remedy is to work less … Anyway, the net boiling triple distilled is, that I desire to continue profiting by you, but don't get any profit out of mixed abuse and political intolerance. A bad bargain for you? I dont give anything in exchange? That's your affair. If I'm not worth better than what I've got lately I'd rather be dropped. I would lose a good deal, no doubt of it. I've enough confidence in my own abilities to think you'd lose something too.

After this there was a slight cooling. On returning to London that summer, Bunting seems to have been cautiously willing to help Pound with his political machinations, even to the point of alluding to the plan of 1931 to found a new political party in Britain, even if only to express scepticism about the idea:

> Don't quite see how to start my own party without some cash: and there aint no Can Grande about it. Have to stick to literachoor. But I may at least be able to catch myself a moonshee when I get a flat … I shall be seeing a Labour M.P. in a few days, maybe find out if anything is happening here. Nothing in

> the papers except armaments … Obvious the climate will encourage me to wake up again. Which is encouraging.[26]

The earlier idea of establishing a new political paper was also reprised. Pound clearly saw Bunting as a sort of British ambassador for his projects, which were by now almost exclusively politically oriented:

> Am telling 'em to use you as a London centre. You can get in Bridson or do what you like to improve the level of fellow contributors.
>
> NO licherary leaning WOTever.
>
> and dont try to undercut my political trend. ANYhow
> no room fer argument. You can feed em FACT and local colour.
>
> more poverty stuff the better.[27]

But Bunting's initial cooperativeness soon evaporated, as his frustration with Pound approached its apex and the relationship reached breaking point:

> Angold accuses you of connections with the British Union of Fascists: which I refuse to believe. I had the pleasure of longish intercourse with them eleven years ago, before they had given up trying to include any of the comparative decencies of Fascism (the efficiency, the only thing worth imitation in this country, they never had any idea of). I am not a Left sucker, I don't go mad at the idea of a blasphemy against democracy, don't think I'm talking blindly. But they spell Finance with three letters, J E W, and that's all you'll get out of them. And they don't stop at anti-semitism: their services in thus distracting public attention from public matters are recompensed by the police with a degree of freedom from interference which looks to a reasonably observant eye, and not only to two eyes, like collusion with pick-pockets. You are too valuable a pearl to go and cast yourself before swine of that sort, and I think, too acute to imagine that an identity of name necessarily indicates any further correspondence whatever with Italian Fascism …I see no sense in ditching the Yids, together with the Welsh, French, Dutch and ad inf. Financiers, in favour of Church and State. In fact, I prefer Mr Morgan to the late Duke of Northumberland, just as I prefer Stalin to the Tsar, Mussolini to nameless anarchy, and nameless anarchy to Alphonso.[28]

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[26] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 18 July 1936, Beinecke.
[27] Ezra Pound, letter to Basil Bunting, '24 sept, XIV', Beinecke.
[28] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 3 September 1936, Beinecke.

As he finally separated from his wife in late 1936 and began preparations for a professional life on the sea, Bunting was relinquishing all ties with the people and projects of the thirties. With desperate humour, in a letter of early 1937 that informs Pound about the disintegration of his marriage and the fallout from the abdication crisis the previous autumn, Bunting parodies the revolutionary impulses of the start of the decade, as well as Pound's recent comment about him being his 'London centre':

> I've been in touch with nothing and nobody lately, and can give no news … The only time I broke free from my personal affairs for a bit since September, was during the coup d'etat. I got in a round-robin to King Edward at the very start, offering to go 'to any length whatsoever' to dish Baldwin, and succeeded in keeping my very short tail of young men together and active during the crisis. The police ousted me from the lobby of the House of Commons.[29]

In a more serious tone, Bunting went on to offer a statement of defeat that is poignant in its sense of powerlessness and paralysis in the face of the apparently eternal immovability of an imperious English oligarchy:

> What seems quite certain is that not only no great change, but not even any substantial alleviation of the lot of the poor in England is going to be possible in future without civil war. That seems to be widely recognised. The owners will play the confidence trick as often as they can – Zinoviev letters, Post Office Savings in peril, League of Nations, Two Living Husbands, – having the whole press in their pockets and an opposition led from Eton and Oxford, that's not very difficult. But they have let it be known that if their trick doesnt work they will use their police …[30]

[29] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 9 January 1937, Beinecke.

[30] In earlier letter to Pound, on 28 July 1935 (Beinecke), Bunting had expressed a similar disillusionment with England: 'Curious to observe the manner in which these yng men from Oxford achieve their instantaneous reputations without having to do anything for them. Co-operation, a free hand with the butter, a few of the gang having influential fathers. NOTHING to be done with England without many guillotines, the whole bloody university-frequenting class to be exterminated. Wd still like to take the millions of unemployed out of England Germany, france Italy etc and start up a new concern, say in Australia, anywhere, and preferably with a language that would prevent them reading the newspapers.

With this realisation, with this reprisal of the old notion that only another civil war could save England, Bunting's involvement with Pound and with poetry and politics in general was more or less finished for the decade.

Though he and Zukofsky were the dedicatees of *Guide to Kulchur*, Bunting was by the time of its publication eagerly set on extricating himself from his friend and former mentor. Bunting's private annotations to *Guide to Kulchur*, probably made in the autumn of 1938, show an aversion to Pound's arguments that borders on outright disgust. Beginning even before the contents page, with a dismissal of Pound's statement 'The *man who builds dykes* is not of necessity an *anti-irrigationist*' (7) as 'careless writing', Bunting enacted a razor-like analysis of the first half of the work.[31] Pound's claim that he had 'reduced it all to one principle' (15) is judged to be a 'very dangerous and deeply ignorant thing to do: impoverishing language, establishing as real relations merely linguistic. No other <u>one</u> principle possible'; the exhortation to 'Seek friends among equals' (19) is glossed 'nonsense'; similarly, Pound's attempt to 'direct the reader's philosophy by prodding him with the probability that 50,000 people can define a stoic for every one who knows or has heard that Zeno is the father of stoic philosophy' (25) is labelled simply 'Balls'. 'These are almost empty words: bad writing', Bunting comments on Pound's announcement that he was aiming at constructing a 'totalitarian treatise … a New Learning or the New Paieduma' (27). 'Incredibly bad writing, slipshod, needless', Bunting writes on page 33, 'This is a plain lie' by the discussion of usury on page 64. On page 50, there is a longer annotation that explicates Bunting's major gripe with the Pound of *Guide to Kulchur*:

[31] Bunting's copy of *Guide to Kulchur* is held in the library of S.U.N.Y., Buffalo.

> A man who wants to set his ideas in order, wants to kill them: & that is what he will achieve with this misconception of scholasticism. He will substitute relations of language for relations of time, space, emotion, etc. He will become rigid: blind to what seems, because of mere grammar, to gainsay him.

For Bunting 'The best thinking isn't ideas' (29), though again, these criticisms were not accompanied by anything in the way of alternative suggestions as to what the 'best thinking' might constitute. At any rate, Pound's worldview was now repugnant to Bunting: 'Seems a funny kind of civilisation that appeals to E.P. One with anaemia; or chlorosis. An adolescent's rather priggish & very egocentric dream' (84). Better a life of seamanship where one might be in the 'public service' even 'to the infinitesimal amount of an officer of the last and least of the categories of the naval reserve', than be attached to the adolescent ideology of Pound's cultural project.[32]

The absolute full stop arrived in a letter of December 16, 1938. Bunting was looking for a decisive break, and Pound's continued anti-Semitism directed at Zukofsky provided the final straw:

> Every anti-semitism, anti-niggerism, anti-moorism, that I can recall in history was base, had its foundations in the meanest kind of envy and in greed. It makes me sick to see you covering yourself in that kind of filth. It is not an arguable question, has not been arguable for at least nineteen centuries … it is hard to see how you are going to stop the rot of your mind and heart without a pretty thoroughgoing repudiation of what you have spent a lot of work on. You ought to have the courage for that: but I confess I don't expect to see it.[33]

There were no further letters to Pound for an interval of nine years.

III. The Thirties in *Briggflatts* and the *Pisan Cantos*

[32] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 11 November 1938, Beinecke.
[33] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 16 December 1938, Beinecke.

Bunting's modernising project had failed unequivocally by the time of the World War II. Though he did not register this feeling of collapse in poetic terms contemporaneously, he would return to it later on. The great crux of the thirties is dealt with obliquely in the third part of *Briggflatts* (71-4), the section that embodies the pinnacle of the chiastic mountain range schema used by Bunting as a compositional guide for the poem's 'architectural' shape. Parts I, II, IV, and V of the poem represent Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter, but Part III rises above this structure, a visionary episode that depicts the middle of the journey of Bunting's life and provides the central exposition of the philosophical argument of *Briggflatts*. This is a phantasmagoria sequence in which real people and historical events emerge surreally out of a sort of composite summary of the Eliot-Pound modernist quest narrative. In a nightmarish Dantesque landscape, Alexander the Great and a cohort of fellow adventurers venture to the summit of the world:

> 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. (71)

The 'companions' are faced with a series of obstacles as they ascend a mountainous terrain. There are some resulting desertions:

> … some turned back, taught
> by dreams the year would capsize
> where the bank quivers … (71)

The imagery of Pound's Hell Cantos is reconstituted in a passage dealing with the figure of 'Hastor', a caricature of the *Times* journalist Hugh Astor, who provides the

focal point of a description of the avaricious ‘scavengers’ who litter the mountainside and dirty the ‘market’ with a spurious, faecal discourse (‘Sweet shit! Buy!’) (71). Bunting knew Astor from his spell as *Times* Middle East correspondent in the late forties, but it seems likely that the earlier failure to break the back of the London publishing industry was also in Bunting’s mind while composing this section:

> Leave given
> we would have slaughtered the turd-bakers
> but neither whip nor knife
> can welt their hide. (71-2)

As the party continues the ascent they move ‘past hovels hags lean from’, past ‘grey marshes’ where ‘some souse in brine | long rotted corpses’. They encounter ‘Guides at the top’ who ‘claim fees | though the way is random’. And there are more desertions:

> Some the Laughing Stone disables
> whom giggle and snicker waste
> til fun suffocates them. (72-73)

Eventually, the entire company caves in and pleads for a homeward return:

> But we desired Macedonia,
> the rocky meadows, horses, barley pancakes,
> incest and familiar games,
> to end in our place by our own wars,
> and deemed the peak unscaleable … (72)

And yet there is one figure who does not capitulate. Bunting recounts that Alexander

> … reached to a crack in the rock
> with some scorn, resolute though in doubt,
> traversed limestone to gabbro,
> file sharp, skinning his fingers …
> groping for holds in the dark … (72)

Once at the top of the peak Alexander encounters the angel Israfel, but suddenly a voice of mortality and negation interjects at the moment of his apotheosis:

> … Yet delay!
> When will signal come
> to summon man to his clay? (73)

Alexander now finds himself returned to a pastoral homeland, where lying amid 'moss and bracken' he feels 'a cold squirm snaking his flank' (73). This is the slowworm, a figure of patience and humility at the heart of *Briggflatts*' symbolic structure. Alexander has learnt that worldly ambition is futile, that only through slow diligence and quiet persistence can anything of worth be brought to fruition.

Here, at last, was Bunting's riposte to Pound. In the mid sixties, Bunting was finally able to sublimate his earlier experience of failure. The ascent of the mountain in *Briggflatts* is too oblique to be read as strict autobiography. In this late-period compendium of high modernist techniques, the mythical and historical allusions and stylistic complexities are so pronounced that we must always qualify and query the bluff realism of Bunting's claim that the poem's 'incidents and images' can 'take care of themselves'.[34] However, it is fairly clear that one of things Bunting is doing in the third part of *Briggflatts* – which adapts the central motif of Bunting's 1949 ode 'On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's Cantos' – is trying to explain and communicate in epic terms a central experience of defeat that he regarded as the essential crux of both his own history and the history of the vanguard modernist group of which he had once been a part. This section of the poem is a posthumous attempt to deal with the memory of an earlier trajectory that had ended disastrously in the middle years of the century, so that Bunting would have died in obscurity had the radical currents of the 1960s not found

[34] Bunting, 'A Note on *Briggflatts*', no pagination.

him out in the form of Tom Pickard and the 'unabashed boys and girls' at the Morden Tower who allowed Bunting to find a way back to his youth.[35] This is a narrative of Faustian idealism in which a heroic adventurer leads a band of brothers through a landscape of hellish struggle, only for the quest to gradually falter as, one by one, the fellowship is broken apart. Alexander, who embodies aspects of both Pound and Bunting, continues and is able to touch hands with God, but at the last he is brought back down to earth. It is only through failure and an acceptance of mortality that we are allowed to apprehend the surrounding world with clarity and prepare to die as fully aware human beings. That Bunting eventually managed to derive such a humane conclusion from the defeated idealism of his youth is inspiring. But it does not assuage the great pity of the original defeat, and neither does it compensate for the fact that this sublimation came so late and in such elegiac terms, as more or less the last statement of a poet who produced only a handful of poems in the half-century between the mid-thirties and his death in 1985.

Pound's retrospective handling of the thirties arrived earlier. In the *Pisan Cantos* the first substantial allusion to a fellow poet, after a cursory reference to Eliot, arrives a third of the way into Canto 74:

> … hast killed the urochs and bison sd/ Bunting
> doing six months after that war was over
> as pacifist tempted with chicken but declined to approve
> of war ' Redimiculum Metellorum '
> privately printed
> to the shame of various critics
> nevertheless the state can lend money … (*Cantos*, 451)

[35] Basil Bunting, preface to *Collected Poems* (London, 1968), no pagination.

The reference here is to Bunting's imprisonment as a conscientious objector at the tail end of the World War I, which fits neatly into a wider scheme in the *Pisan Cantos* of allusions to incarceration and prison poems and poets. Yet there is also historical specificity to these lines. The comment at the end of the passage ('nevertheless the state can lend money') seems like a belated continuation of the economic debates that had marked the Pound-Bunting correspondence of the mid-thirties. In a letter sent to Pound from Tenerife in July 1935, Bunting had expressed opposition to a nationalised state economy:

> It makes no odds or rather, it enhances the value of it, that you and the scut [Zukofsky] apparently agree on several points – public control of armament works, for instance, without, I daresay, considering that the damn concerns are already so bleeding public-spirited that its extremely hard to get hold of a few machine-guns to stage an insurrection. I would like to see more and smaller armament firms and plenty of competition. [Newcastle-based armament firm] Vickers nationalised would only be Vickers made quite effectively secret, and quite unapproachable by, say, German communists or Indian nationalists.
>
> (By the way, shouldnt study of Jefferson preserve you from that error?)[36]

This context of a prior debate about nationalisation suggests that the 'nevertheless' in Canto 74 might be something more than an arbitrary shift of subject. Is Pound suggesting that Bunting's failure to find a publisher and his recourse to private means to get *Redimiculum Matellarum* (the spelling error is Pound's) released in 1930 might have been obviated in a system that guaranteed public funding for the arts?[37] It is interesting to observe that Pound's train of thought in the *Pisan Cantos* often took the form of a kind of imaginary dialogue with former friends that picked up where they had left off many years previously.

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[36] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 17 July 1935, Beinecke.

[37] If so, this argument acquires an interesting postscript given the fact that later in life Bunting was indeed supported by state-funded arts fellowships and university positions, though he would remain a fierce anti-statist even as he accepted these roles.

Whether or not the ambiguities of Pound's syntactic shifts in Canto 74 are significant, it is certainly true that one of the important contexts for the *Pisan Cantos* as a whole is a yearning on Pound's part to put right recent wrongs, both by way of partisan defences of his friends in the manner of the comments about Bunting's *Redimiculum Matellarum*, and – much more interestingly – in a desire to downplay the most egregious and inexcusable of his actions of the last decade by erasing them and backtracking to an earlier context of comradely harmony. This reprise of the 'strugglers in the desert' motif dominates the sequence in a manner that can at times appear disingenuous through over-emphasis and cuteness of expression, as in the following translation from Confucius:

> To study with the white wings of time passing
> is not that our delight
> to have friends come from far countries
> is that not pleasure
> nor to care that we are untrumpeted?
> filial, fraternal affection is the root of humaneness
> the root of the process … (*Cantos*, 457)

Yet perhaps in poetic terms such gestures are justified: it is obvious that Pound cannot hope to find a way to paradise without the guidance of his friends and a dramatic resuscitation of the 'ship of souls' theme that had initiated the *Cantos* half a century earlier. Much is made of the *Pisan Cantos*' revival of a Romantic 'I' after the dry historical perspective of the 'Adams' and 'Chinese' Cantos. But it should also be stressed that many of the crucial moments of the sequence are notable for the dramatic reappearance of an epic 'we' mode of address at moments of dejection and emotional shipwreck:

> … so light is the urging, so ordered the dark petals of iron
> we who have passed over Lethe. (*Cantos*, 469)
> …

So we sat there by the arena,
outside, Thiy and il decaduto
the lace cuff fallen over his knuckles
considering Rochefoucauld
but the program (Café Dante) a literary program 1920 or
thereabouts was neither published nor followed …
(*Cantos*, 501)

Though Bunting had ended his contact with Pound in December 1938, in the *Pisan Cantos* he becomes one of the major recruits to an imaginatively posited scholarly cohort that has 'passed over Lethe'

The tendency is brought spectacularly to the fore in the central poem of the sequence, Canto 81. The second half of the poem marks the culmination of a movement toward increasing emotional intensity and an accumulation of personal references, both in the preceding Cantos and in the first half of Canto 81 itself. Slightly earlier, in Canto 77, Pound had shifted from 'Bunting' to simply 'Basil', with a reference to Bunting's attempt to translate the *Shahnameh* in Rapallo (*Cantos*, 494). In Canto 81, the brief history of Bunting's early thirties is completed with an allusion to his departure to the Canaries in October 1933:

… Basil says
they beat drums for three days
till all the drumheads were busted
(simple village fiesta)
and as for his life in the Canaries… (*Cantos*, 538)

The background to this passage – not mentioned in Carroll Terrell's *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*, though the issue was glossed by Bunting in *Paideuma*, 10:3 – is a postcard Bunting sent to Pound in April 1933 from Hijar in Aragon, where Bunting was holidaying with Eugen Haas, a German member of the Rapallo circle. The postcard, which is part of the Pound collection at Yale, shows a photograph of the Hijar skyline, and is addressed to 'Señor Pound':

> Royalistically, catholicly, or classically, we are about to uphold Pope or king by beating the drum in procession – Haas a big drum, B. a wide drum. Garrara! [?] Allala!'
>
> B. and H.[38]

This is the 'simple village fiesta' Pound mentions in Canto 81, the details of which were probably narrated in more detail by Bunting when he returned to Rapallo after this sojourn. The allusion slots into a series of references to Spain in the first half of the Canto; again, Pound is rifling through the filing cabinet of his memory, and Spain acts as an anchor for a tissue of reminiscences, an ideogrammatic lynchpin that is especially pertinent because of its association with an incumbent 1930s period of civil war and ideological factionalism. Bunting's Spanish excursion drops into Pound's head partly because it supplies a convenient detail of Spanish colour to flesh out this theme.

Yet Bunting is surely more than an arbitrary presence in Canto 81. The poem's first half is a rapid, spiralling descent into a personal hell that culminates in the crux of the primal howl immediately before the 'libretto' section. Pound is approaching an unavoidable moment of private insight. After the string of allusions to Spain, there is a geographical shift to Pound's native soil: references to Adams, Jefferson, Henry Mencken, George Santayana, and George Horace Lorimer morph into a recantation of an American folksong that acquires an uncanny aspect in this context (*Cantos*, 539). With more faint eeriness, Pound refers to himself as the 'wild rabbit', an evocation of Eliot's 'Brer Rabbit' nickname for Pound. The regression to a dream-like homeland of brotherly innocence is significant. To escape from the nightmare of himself in the 'halls of hell', Pound must look to his fraternal

[38] Basil Bunting, postcard to Ezra Pound, 12 April 1933, Beinecke.

companions, to the utopian fellowship of the 'literary program' and its scholarly preoccupations, a tendency that might be able to emerge triumphantly from the 'civil war' backdrop. In the first half of the Canto, as in Canto 74, Bunting is positioned beside Eliot as one of Pound's chief auxiliaries, and in the poem's second half, the quest for a 'cantabile' poetry that had dominated the relationship between Pound and Bunting in the early thirties becomes Pound's means of redemption.

At the start of that decade, Pound had regretted Bunting's departure to the Canaries in *Il Mare*, describing him as a specialist in the study of the lute and sixteenth-century vocal music. Amongst other things, the 'libretto' section of Canto 81 is a visionary continuation of this side of their artistic relationship, an attempt to backtrack to the discussion of aesthetic subtleties ('Then resolve me, tell me aright | If Waller sang or Dowland played' (*Cantos*, 540)) that had often taken the form for Pound and Bunting of trying to ascertain exactly when in the early modern period poets had ceased to sing to musical accompaniment.[39] Much later, in a lecture of 1970, Bunting went on record to provide a fuller exposition of the theories that he seems to have developed in tandem with Pound in the twenties and thirties:

> It was very late in literary history before poets began to forget the origins of their art and try to do without music. I have mentioned Campian [sic], who was writing words and music together in 1610. Edmund Waller wrote songs with very beautiful rhythms in collaboration with the musician Henry Lawes, in the middle of that century. People we do not now associate with music were associated with music nevertheless … In the end it was less the poets who threw over music than the musicians who threw over poetry. They became more interested in harmony than in the melodic line … So the poets gradually lost touch with music. They lost sight of the vast variety of possible rhythms. The noise they made became monotonous, and though they tried to compensate for that by wit, the monotony was infectious – the wit, the syntax, the diction, all became stereotyped … A poet must write by ear … if he starts counting syllables and heeding rules prosodists invent, writing verse becomes a pedantic game on a par with crossword puzzles.[40]

[39] See, for example, Bunting's letter of August 1934, quoted above.
[40] Lecture transcribed and published as 'Ears', Bunting, *Basil Bunting on Poetry*, pp. 35-6.

It is to such collaborative theories originating in the early 1930s, as well as to the campaigns of the 1910s, which Pound returns to at a critical juncture in Canto 81. Here, and in the *Pisan Cantos* as a whole (cf. especially Canto 80), Pound's and Bunting's shared sense of a momentous 'break' that separated poetry and music in England around the time of the Civil War becomes a way of simultaneously figuring the tragic dislocations of the recent war-torn past and alluding to the future possibility of an Elysium in which the English political system might be rescued and its art renovated by the return to an ideal poetry-music synthesis. Again, geography is key. Pound is here returning to 'his' England, and to his English friends, to Waller, Lawes, Jenkins, Jonson, Dolmetsch, Chaucer, Bunting, as well as that of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt the other men in the famous picture of 1914. A strong emphasis is being put on the birthplace of Pound's utopian artistic schemes; simultaneously, he is focusing his attention on the home of the British Imperium that had regularly acted as his point of antithesis, and that was now in a roundabout way acting as his prison keeper, just as it had done for Bunting in 1918. England was both heaven and hell for Pound in his hour of Manichean struggle: its Empire could be damned, but its aesthetic heritage offered the prospect of redemption.

Famously, in one interpretation, in the penultimate lines of Canto 81 Pound comes as close as he ever did to acknowledging the role his own 'vanity' played in his incarceration and in the breaking of the artistic fellowship within which Bunting was perhaps second only to Eliot in Pound's regard. Yet for all that we can agree with Pound that he was in many respects to blame for his own descent into hell, we can also sympathise or at least put into perspective the attitude with which the conclusion to his greatest poem and central artistic statement is delivered:

But to have done instead of not doing
this is not vanity
To have, with decency, knocked
That a Blunt should open
To have gathered from the air a live tradition
or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame
This is not vanity.
Here error is all in the not done
all in the diffidence that faltered … (*Cantos*, 542)

There is a timeless quality to these lines. But we should also remember that they were the response to a specific historical moment. In the run up to the World War II, the modernism of Pound and his friends had been buffeted and marginalised to the point that the 'live tradition' only really existed in 1945 as a paradisiacal vision in the mind of a soon-to-be executed prisoner of war. The presentation in Canto 81 of an idealism snatched from the jaws of defeat is a miraculous one with few parallels in English literature; but that shouldn't prevent us from acknowledging that the defeats and failures of the 1930s were very real, and very nearly fatal, for writers like Pound and Bunting.

What in the end can we piece together from the ruins? Pound's struggle took such an abominable wrong turning that people are rightly sceptical that anything he ever said is of any worth whatever. But in the teeth of such scepticism, it is very much to Pound's credit that he never relinquished his struggle against a politico-cultural system that made exiles of the best poetic voices of a generation while it bankrolled the Etonian and Oxfordian mediocrities that continue to fill the anthologies and the critical studies of the literature of the period to this day. We must try to complete the ellipses with which the thirties faded out in *Briggflatts* and *The Pisan Cantos.* Is it possible that the thirties dream of a political rising and a decisive break with the bloody British past might ever be resuscitated? As Bunting recognised, it is highly

likely that until another civil war occurs in Britain, the owners will continue to play their confidence tricks, the nobs will continue to run the show, and the lot of the poor and the inhabitants of the prisons and the former mining villages will remain as desperate as ever. But at least, in their poetic portrayals of a failed idealism, Bunting, Pound, and the Objectivists recorded with clarity a concerted struggle to break the spell of the way things were in England that faltered only under formidable external pressure, and which provides multiple examples of a revolutionary modernism that came very close to real breakthrough.

Chapter 4: The Post-War Reconstruction

> Born 1900. Entered a state of suspended animation, 1952.
>
> – Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 10 April 1958.[1]

> Consequently, the proper audience of an epic is not the *individual* in his absolute inwardness but the *citizen* as participant in a collective linguistic and social nexus.
>
> – Michael André Bernstein.[2]

Foreword

The post-World-War-II period eventually witnessed a great revival of Poundian modernism in Britain and America. However, the immediate post-war years were for Pound and Bunting – as for millions of others across the globe – a time of dispersal and confusion. What Pound referred to as 'the program' in Canto 78 had entered an uncertain phase, and the little poetry Bunting wrote at this time is accordingly replete with motifs of ambivalence and indeterminacy. Bunting's ode of 1949, 'On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's Cantos', equivocates between a resolve to continue the projects of the preceding era, and a mood of scepticism and disillusionment about the validity of such schemes after the upheavals of the thirties and forties:

> There are the Alps. What is there to say about them?
> They don't make sense. Fatal glaciers, crags cranks climb,
> jumbled boulder and weed, pasture and boulder, scree,
> *et l'on entend*, maybe*, le refrain joyeux et leger*.
> Who knows what the ice will have scraped on the rock it is smoothing?
>
> There they are. You will have to go a long way round
> if you want to avoid them.
> It takes some getting used to. There are the Alps,
> fools! Sit down and wait for them to crumble! (132)

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[1] Beinecke.

[2] *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic* (Princeton, 1980), p. 14.

The shift in these two verse paragraphs from questioning hesitancy to stoic assertiveness is abrupt and even faintly ridiculous (especially in the final line, with its sudden burst of exclamations). Yet, as we have seen, this oscillation between scepticism and belief had always been one of the central antitheses in Bunting's verse. In the post-war years, this pattern of determination countered by abnegation would be replayed and reiterated continually in Bunting's life and work, as he embarked on another period of itinerant movement.[3]

Having served with the R.A.F. in Persia during wartime, Bunting stayed in the country at the close of hostilities as an M.I.6. agent and British vice-consul of Isfahan. Bunting was recalled to England in June 1946, but he returned to Persia again in the spring of 1947, apparently acting as Chief of Political Intelligence, until he became the Tehran correspondent for the *Times* in early 1949. After another brief return to England in 1950, Bunting was in Italy in 1950-51, again on intelligence work, and then in Tehran again in 1951-52 for a final Persian spell. Following the nationalist coup led by Mohammad Mossadeq, in April 1952 Bunting was formally expelled from Iran, and he returned to Northumberland, where he eventually found work as local newspaper reporter, and settled down into a kind of obscurity that would last for well over a decade.

'On the Fly-Leaf …' reflects this backdrop of continual migration and existential uncertainty, a backdrop that had been present throughout Bunting's early career. On the one hand, it rehearses the old Paterian modernist notion that a poetry brought close to the condition of music should express nothing but itself. Bunting's famous criticism of the Cantos, related with pathos by Pound to Allen Ginsberg in

[3] To date, the best summary of Bunting's movements in the years 1945-52 is in chapters 10-12 of Alldritt *The Poet as Spy*.

Venice in 1967, that they 'refer, but do not present', is notable for its absence here.[4] In 'On the Fly-Leaf …', Bunting valorises Pound's work as a sublime empty signifier rather than a vehicle for containing history and economic theory. The view of the Cantos advanced here is that they *present* but emphatically do not refer to anything at all ('What is there to say about them?'). As if to underline this avowal of pure form, Bunting quickly follows his celebration of the poem that does not 'make sense' with an especially blatant musical verse showpiece: a compact series of resounding alliterative and assonantal effects ('Fatal glaciers, crags cranks climb …'), which leads rhythmically ('jumbled boulder and weed, pasture and boulder, scree') into the italicised quotations from an actual piece of music, the French-Italian folksong, 'Le Soir à la Montagne'.[5] This is poetry – and a commentary on poetry – that extols conspicuous formalism as a means of incarnating a 'chorus of joy and lightness'. We are on the ground here of Eliot's *Four Quartets* (which Bunting read and admired in the immediate post-war period), with its

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[4] Michael Reck, 'A Conversation between Ezra Pound and Allen Ginsberg'. *Evergreen Review* 55 (June 1968), p. 28.

[5] The first verse of 'Le Soir à la Montagne' is as follows:

> Voici venir la nuit
> là bas dans la campagne
> et le soleil s'enfuit
> a travers la montagne.
>
> Et l'on entend ...et l'on entend
> les montagnards ...les montagnards
>
> chanter dans la prairie
> un refrain joyeux et doux
> qui charme son amie.
>
> Tralalallallala ...

Clearly this song is alluded to because of its subject matter (a mountain), but it also seems likely that both Bunting and Pound knew this work from their time together in Rapallo. Indeed, partly with this in mind, 'On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's Cantos' has the air of a tragically blocked communication between the two friends, a poetic letter that was never delivered in a period of upheaval. See Goacher, 'Denis Goacher Talks About Basil Bunting', p. 207, for an interesting postscript to this narrative.

> … music heard so deeply,
> That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
> While the music lasts.[6]

Although Bunting's corresponding vision of transcendence in 'On the Fly Leaf of Pound's Cantos' is tempered by Quaker reticence (a carefully placed 'maybe'), the poem taken as a whole is a classic instance of the Paterian aestheticist tendency in modernist poetry, an example of, and apologia for, verse so sublimely wrought that it is completely ineffable. 'On the Fly Leaf of Pound's Cantos' enacts one of Bunting's essential aesthetic claims: that both poetry and music are, in 'their origin, and their essence', merely 'patterns of sound drawn on a background of time'.[7] These patterns 'may sometimes … be pleasing', but any 'attempt to find any meaning in [them]… would be manifestly absurd'.[8]

Yet, for all this high aestheticism, there is another side to this work, and to the Bunting of the post-war years more generally. Charles Olson's influential poem of 1945, 'La Préface', had contained the exhortation: 'Put war away with time, come into space'.[9] Although Bunting and Olson never met and do not seem to have been notably interested by each other's work, there are a number of striking affinities between the two figures, both major followers of Pound in their respective countries during this period. In particular, Bunting's poetry came to embody Olson's sense outlined in 'La Préface' that an emphasis on spatial motifs would be one of the defining characteristics of late-modernist verse in the post-war years. As such, Bunting's preoccupation with an enduring physical topography in 'On the Fly-Leaf …' is apposite. As it evolved, Bunting's post-war writing became increasingly

[6] T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* in *The Complete Poems and Plays,* p. 190.
[7] Bunting, *Basil Bunting on Poetry*, p. 3.
[8] Basil Bunting, 'Introduction', *Collected Poems* (London, 1968), no pagination; Basil Bunting quoted in Davie, *The Poet in the Imaginary* Museum, p. 288.
[9] 'La Préface', *A Charles Olson Reader*, ed. Ralph Maud (Manchester, 2005), p. 3.

preoccupied with monumental and spatial tropes: with specific locales, architecture, buildings, structures, and physical spaces of all kinds, a tendency that to a large extent cut against a concomitant residual idea of poetry as an ephemeral, dance-like form in which inchoate moments unfold ethereally in temporal sequence. Like Olson, Bunting would become increasingly interested in manufacturing or identifying a definite space for poetry to exist in, a process that would culminate in *Briggflatts*, a poem in which the depiction of a unique pastoral-industrial northern-English landscape combines with the invocation of an actual sacred place of worship (the eponymous Quaker meeting house). Bunting paralleled Olson in positing a distinct spatial enclave for the performance and fulfilment of poetic practice. And as with Olson's Gloucester, the terrain of Bunting's Newcastle/Northumbria was both a mythical inspiration and a galvanising real-world locale, one that provided the opportunity for release from the recondite formalism that had threatened to end Bunting's career altogether. Ultimately, the highpoint of Bunting's poetic career would take place not in surroundings that provided an irrelevant backdrop to ineffable aestheticist music, but in a setting that was concrete and essential to his work, and about which there is much to say.

I. Bunting's Post-War Impasse

'On the Fly Leaf of Pound's Cantos' was written at the time of the Bollingen Prize controversy, an episode that saw Pound's greatest artistic achievement, the *Pisan Cantos*, provoke an intense, partisan debate about the elderly poet. As such, Bunting's poem should be read as an oblique defence of Pound offered at a difficult moment, and as proof that their personal and literary relationship was still meaningful even after the moderate estrangement that followed the schism of late 1938. Indeed, in the

initial post-war period, Pound's influence on Bunting regained strength.[10] Pound's organisational machinations from St Elizabeths led to Bunting's only publication of the period: *Poems: 1950*, a more-or-less complete works put out via Dallam Simpson's Cleaners' Press from Galveston, Texas in its eponymous year. An acolyte of Pound's, Simpson (sometimes called Dallam Flynn) offered his edition of Bunting as part of a wider campaign of Poundian propagandising conducted by way of *Four Pages*, a journal in which Simpson published articles and poems largely at Pound's behest. Bunting was still firmly part of the Pound project in the eyes of the world, but at this stage the association was more of a hindrance than a boon for Bunting. Simpson's splenetic preface to *Poems: 1950* compounded Bunting's reputation for being an embattled Poundian more at home in a context of American and international modernism than in the British literary scene. It probably did little to boost Bunting's chances of publication in his own country over the next decade and a half. Responding to a contemporary critique of British poets made by John Berryman, Simpson's preface descends into a tirade against both England and, in particular, T.S. Eliot:

> We don't know which generation Mr Berryman refers to as young! Surely not the present … It doesn't seem possible he means the generation preceding … Bunting ignored for two decades, and no other passable verse being written during the period. Perhaps he means Mr Eliot? But no, one recalls now and again that Eliot was American, is British now only by virtue of documents of citizenry, and affiliation with Anglo-Catholicism, and a rapport with an assortment of notables, persons of peerage, etcetera.[11]

[10] Bunting began corresponding with Pound again apparently in late 1946, at first via Dorothy Pound. See Alldritt, *The Poet as Spy*, p. 110.
[11] Dallam Simpson, Preface to Basil Bunting, *Poems: 1950* (Galveston, 1950), no pagination.

Out of a probably misguided instinct of loyalty, Bunting, who was still in Persia at this point, let the preface stand.[12] Perhaps unsurprisingly, when the collection was then offered to T.S. Eliot and Faber and Faber, it was rejected, with the further complaint from Eliot that the poems were 'still too much under the influence of Pound'.[13] Perhaps Eliot's criticism showed a degree of perspicuity, in that *Poems: 1950* consisted almost entirely of material dating back to the thirties, that is, to a period when Eliot jettisoned publication of Bunting's work by Faber on exactly the same grounds. Bunting was marked as a Poundian and an Americanophile, one who, most importantly, had not produced any substantial works in the last fifteen years.

All of these events combined to ensure that the impasse in the trajectory of modern writing alluded to in 'On the Fly Leaf of Pound's Cantos' was paralleled by a continuation of the silence in Bunting's personal career. With hindsight, *Poems: 1950* is an important landmark in Bunting's publication history, but at the time it represented neither a creative revival for Bunting nor a milestone in his wider reception in either Britain or America (where the collection was limited to a print run of 1000 copies). Overall, the events of the early post-war period suggested that Bunting's career would probably end with a whimper rather than a bang, because of a lack of confidence on his part combined with a lack of serious interest on the part of others. No wonder then, that 'On the Fly Leaf of Pound's Cantos' has the feeling of a last stand, and can only summon resolve in the final instance through a stubborn reappropriation of silence as a heroic quality. To paraphrase the title and argument of Randell Jarrell's influential 1942 essay (a piece of writing that summed up the mood of many modernist writers in the forties and fifties), this must have seemed very much

[12] Bunting later commented of this episode: 'I was in Persia and thinking of anything rather than literature or poetry or publishing when I got a letter from [Simpson in] Texas offering, nay begging, to be allowed to do a volume of my work and I saw no reason why not; and that's all. I only set eyes on him once in my life, several years later'. Dale Reagan, 'An Interview with Basil Bunting', p. 71.
[13] Eliot quoted in Basil Bunting, letter to Louis Zukofsky, 22 June 1951, HRC.

like ‘the end of the line’ for an aging poet like Bunting, who had been a marginalised modernist writer even prior to the epoch-ending cataclysm of the World War II.[14]

But before Bunting began an even longer hiatus than the one that followed his departure from Rapallo in the mid-thirties, he was able to muster enough energy to write and publish in 1951, via *Poetry* (Chicago) a poem that is second only to *Briggflatts* in his oeuvre in terms of its range and importance. *The Spoils*, another three-part ‘sonata’ poem of 365 lines, is a work that stands alone in the middle period of Bunting’s life, at equal distance from the earlier Objectivist phase and the later revival period that followed Bunting’s meeting with Tom Pickard in the mid-1960s. As such, it is appropriate that this poem appears from a later standpoint to look in two opposing directions. Taken as a whole, *The Spoils* seems to summarise Bunting’s forties experience and strike notes of elegy for an apparently evanescing career, at the same time as it anticipates the expansive rhetorical mood of *Briggflatts* and its emphasis on place and a distinctive geographical *mise-en-scène*.

In *The Spoils*’ memorable opening, an Arabic epigraph ‘the spoils are for God’ (taken from The Qur’an, Sura viii) is followed by a powerful first quatrain that establishes a mood of nihilism that mirrors Bunting’s post-war depression:

> Man’s life so little worth,
> do we fear to take or lose it?
> No ill companion on a journey, Death
> lays his purse on the table and opens the wine. (47)

In this opening statement, ‘man’s life’ is dismissed in emphatic monosyllables, and death is welcomed as a friend. Bunting emerged from the war with a despondent, quietist view of life and art, such that *The Spoils*, his World-War-II poem, spoke of

[14] Randall Jarrell, ‘The End of the Line,’ *Kipling, Auden & Co.: Essays and Reviews, 1935-1964* (New York, 1980).

finality and the futility of writing afterwards in terms that layered of-the-moment Beckettian pessimism over an ingrained Humean scepticism and a core Quaker belief in radical negation.[15] In fact, *The Spoils* was written in Italy while Bunting was undertaking intelligence work for MI6; but though its composition predates Bunting's return to England in June of 1951, it is difficult to imagine a work more thoroughly apposite for a writer who would produce virtually nothing in the ensuing thirteen years. By repeating the resigned questioning of 'On the Fly Leaf of Pound's Cantos', *The Spoils* seems to round off Bunting's disappointing first half century with a retreat into the sort of bleakness and vacancy that characterised much art of the immediate post-war period, a tendency that resulted in a vogue for artworks in the mould of Robert Rauschenberg's 'White Paintings', John Cage's *4'33"*, and Beckett's Trilogy and *Waiting for Godot*. Like these contemporaneous post-apocalyptic works, Bunting's major theme in *The Spoils* is absence: his ambition for creating an affirmative verse music is dramatically undermined by a withdrawal into impenetrable quietude. This sense of a suffocated lyricism can be overpowering. At moments in *The Spoils*, Bunting's verse achieves a dense onomatopoeia as sonically vigorous as anything he ever wrote:

> Tide sang. Guns sang:
> 'Vigilant,
> pull off fluffed woollens, strip
> to buff and beyond.' (57)

But these moments of stylistic confidence are rare in the poem, and it is ultimately a half-realised, half-fulfilled work. *The Spoils* is a poem inhabited by a spirit of

[15] The Humean and Quaker influences on Bunting's life and work are baldly stated in the posthumous 'Note on *Briggflatts*' (Durham, 1989), no pagination. The allusions to Beckett here is intended as a mere analogy, although see John Seed's essay 'Irrelevant Objects: Basil Bunting's Poetry of the 1930s', *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics* eds. Rachel Blau du Plessis and Peter Quartermain (Tuscaloosa, 1999), pp. 126-143, for an interesting comparison of Bunting and Beckett in the post-war years.

defeatism and nullity, a work written at a time when Western art as a whole was prescribing silence as a salient gesture in an austere, post-traumatic period.

Given its content, the poem seems short and pared-down, and it was made even more so when, after corresponding with Louis Zukofsky in early 1951, Bunting decided to conflate the third and fourth sections, a fact that led even Bunting himself to comment on the obscurity of the published third (now final) section.[16] Obscurity and opacity are indeed the hallmarks of the work. *The Spoils* begins with bewildered existential questioning, and that is also how it ends, with a conclusion that reiterates the work's overarching suggestion that only God can decipher anything in the aftermath of a war:

> What else do we live for and take part,
> we who would share the spoils? (58)

Bunting, it seems, could not find an answer for this 'where next?' post-war dilemma. Summarising Bunting's correspondence with Pound in St Elizabeths, Keith Alldritt writes:

> … Ezra, ever the promoter and booster … urged Basil to found a literary magazine as a platform for the poetry and poetics they believed in. But Basil felt that he had neither the energy nor the commitment to do so. He was somewhat ill at ease with the course of the modernist movement. He felt that Yeats, Ezra himself, Carlos Williams, T.S. Eliot and Marianne Moore were all stages on a road to a degree of subjectivity that precludes a readership. He thought that the road had finally reached this point in the poetry of Louis Zukofsky; he maintained that 'nobody *can* read Zukofsky'. Reading this statement in St Elizabeths Ezra wrote over it an emphatic 'NO'.[17]

The Spoils was written by a poet who believed that modernist poetry had reached an endpoint of blank indecipherability. Even more so than Pound, who would soon

[16] See Basil Bunting, letters to Louis Zukofsky, 2 and 11 May, 1951. HRC.
[17] Alldritt, *Poet as Spy*, p. 110.

retreat into his own silence, Bunting's long-held belief in an opaque, 'musical' literature had led him to a cul-de-sac where his work was simply not being *read*, perhaps in part because he himself didn't believe that this was even a possible or worthwhile task.

II. Architecture and the place of the artist in *The Spoils*

And yet, for all that *The Spoils* is an endpoint, there is also a case for viewing it as a beginning, or at least a precursor. Although it was published in *Poetry* in 1951 to seemingly little fanfare, it was later published at the start of Bunting's revival period. At Tom Pickard's first meeting with Bunting in 1963, the latter recited the poem aloud in full, and a few months later *The Spoils* was published by Pickard's Morden Tower Book Room in a small printing of around 100 copies, which was distributed by Migrant Press, the Worcester-based publishing venture of Roy Fisher, Gael Turnbull, and Michael Shayer. A truly collaborative effort, the pamphlet and cover were designed by the artist Richard Hamilton, who was at the time a member of Victor Pasmore's Fine Art department at the newly created University of Newcastle (of which more momentarily).[18] Hamilton's austere, monochromatic cover features a photograph of the inside of a cavernous stone building, appropriately enough for a work published by the Morden Tower Book Room, a medieval tower in the Newcastle city walls.[19] Apparently taken by an undercover Bunting posing as a native two decades prior to this, the picture is of the ancient Jameh Mosque in Isfahan, Persia, a rhapsodic description of which dominates the second section of *The Spoils*,

[18] Prior to 1963 the university had been known as King's College, an appendage of the relatively more established, nearby University of Durham.

[19] Within three years, Hamilton would create his own popular-modernist version of the Rauschenburg-Cage 'blank canvas', in the form of his cover art for the Beatles' *White Album* (1968), a work that Ian MacDonald judges 'the world's most widely distributed avant-garde artefact', *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the Sixties* (New York, 1994), p. 230.

the only point at which the poem approaches the affirmative lyricism of *Briggflatts*. The mosque is the thematic heart of the poem. After the disillusionments of the first section, the shift in Part II to an expansive, rapturous description of its architecture is sudden and startling:

> They filled the eyes of the vaulting
> with alabaster panes,
> each pencil of arches spouting
> from a short pier,
> and whitewashed the whole, using
> a thread of blue to restore
> lines nowhere broken,
> for they considered capital
> and base irrelevant. (51)

Elsewhere the poem is almost unbearably bleak, but here Bunting, who would later (in the 1975 ode 'At Briggflatts Meetinghouse') descry the empty, ephemeral 'boasts' of Roman neo-classicism, cannot conceal his delight in portraying an architectural style that combines rich, dense patterning with a puritan disdain for the classical hierarchies of 'capital and base'.[20] Following closely on from the

[20] Aside from 'On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's Cantos' and *The Spoils*, Bunting's only other published poems from the immediate post-war period are a pair of short odes. The first ('Search under every veil …'), dated 1947, mirrors the war-engendered pessimism of *The Spoils* (We know by the dead / they mourn, their bloodshed, / the maimed who are the free. / We willed it, we.' (130)). However, the second of these works, dated 1948, is a Yeatsian lyric that pre-empts the second section of *The Spoils* in its spiritualised description of Persian poetry-as-architecture:

> See! Their verses are laid
> as mosaic gold to gold
> gold to lapis lazuli
> white marble to porphyry
> stone shouldering stone, the dice
> polished alike, there is
> no cement seen and no gap
> between stones as the frieze strides
> to the impending apse:
> the rays of many glories
> forced to its focus forming
> a glory neither of stone
> nor metal, neither of words
> nor verses, but of the light
> shining upon no substance;
> a glory not made

melancholic diminuendo of the first section's conclusion ('Life we give and take, pence in a market │…│ pence we drop in the sawdust with spilt wine.' (50)), the start of the second section is a moment of magic metamorphosis, and the abrupt change of tone and pace is signalled by energetic *Waste Land*-esque enjambments ('vaulting', 'spouting', 'using').

There is a palpable sense here of arrival at a long-sought-for destination, a sense that Bunting has finally found his Tempio or Byzantium, his sacred space for religious-artistic practice:

> The light is sufficient
> to perceive the motions of prayer
> and the place cool.
> Tiles for domes and aivans
> they baked in a corner,
> older, where Avicenna may have worshipped. (51)

In his correspondence with Pound in St Elizabeths, Bunting had described the architecture of Isfahan in enthusiastic terms, and it seems probable that Pound was also somewhere in Bunting's mind when he envisaged this vaulting, visionary structure and its oases of beatific stillness.[21] Within a few lines, the Taj-ol-Molk dome at the Jameh Mosque will be described as sitting on top of a 'forest of pillars', a phrase that recalls Pound's evocation of Venice and its 'forest of marble' in Canto 17 (as well as anticipating Bunting's own 'transept' built with 'pillars' of wheat that appears at the crux of *Briggflatts*' third section (73)). In Pound's poem, the description of the Venetian 'arbours of stone' is interwoven with a reappearance of

---

> for which all else was made. (131)

As with 'On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's Cantos', note the exhortation to 'See!…', a rather odd one for a poet elsewhere so intent on emphasising the need for poems to be *heard*, and more proof that Bunting was using the visual, external qualities of architecture as a means of escape from the 'subjective dead-end' that he felt had resulted from his and Zukofsky's musically-inclined experiments.

[21] See Alldritt, *The Poet as Spy*, pp. 110-11.

the central metamorphosis of the early Cantos, the Dionysus episode from Canto 2. Bunting's description of Isfahan is less metaphysical than Pound's portrayal of Venice, but it retains an echo of these paradisiacal Poundian moments. As with 'On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's Cantos' and its Dionysian 'chorus of joy and lightness', Bunting's reading of Pound has prepared the way for another rhapsodic evocation of artistic form, a valorisation of the (to him) ineffable splendour of Islamic architecture. The borrowing of the stone mason topos, a perennial favourite of Pound's, further solidifies the connection. To a degree, for Bunting as for Pound, the monumental work of stone provides a convenient metaphor for the miraculous, self-governing artefact.

With its strictly non-representational ethos, Arabic art must have seemed to Bunting like the Paterian ideal of a sublime, 'musical' formalism. Yet Bunting in *The Spoils* integrates his aesthetic vision with a wider discussion of the cultural conditions that framed the formal achievements of Isfahan in a way that is neither forced nor overly didactic. Bunting's Isfahan is not a mythical oasis but a tangible, observed place that is sacred because it provides a real-life historical model of a city that was at times able to provide the necessary conditions for the creation of exquisite artistic productions.

In this instance perhaps the contrast between the wartime experiences of Pound and Bunting should be noted. Like Charles Olson, who worked at Roosevelt's Office of War Information, Bunting spent the majority of the World War II (and part of the ensuing peace) as an employee of an Allied government administration. Bunting's lifelong antipathy to the British establishment was in part overcome throughout the forties, as he undertook work in Persia for the R.A.F. and M.I.6. *The Spoils* is the record of this somewhat anomalous phase of Bunting's life. It is perhaps

more than anything else a civic poem, a work written by a colonial administrator as he attempts to make sense of the physical and political infrastructure he found in Persia in the 1940s, and as such it represents an important milestone in the career of a poet for whom environment and the artist's position within it were increasingly becoming matters of critical importance. *The Spoils* recalls the search to identify a just statecraft evident in Pound's verse and prose of the 1930s. But it is the actual, minute pragmatics of civic existence – the specific conditions that enable the artist to get a job done – that is becoming progressively more fundamental to Bunting's thinking at this stage.

The Spoils' first section begins with an overview of the disparate 'sons of Shem' (Asshur, Lud, Arpachshad, and Arram) who were, according to biblical legend, the several ancestors of the 'Semitic' races. Taken together, their monologues create a wide-angle portrait of middle-eastern society in which contrasting customs, methods of governance, and philosophical outlooks are laid out and contrasted. Asshur, the first speaker, begins by surveying his subjects and the economic underpinning of their community:

> As I sat at my counting frame to assess the people,
> from a farmer a tithe, a merchant a fifth of his gain,
> marking of the register, listening to their lies,
> a bushel of dried apricots, marking the register,
> three rolls of Egyptian cloth, astute in their avarice … (47)

Before long, this overview of a society is exchanged for a close-up portrait of a solitary individual:

> … one stood in the door
> scorning our occupation,
> silent … (47)

The narrator Asshur sees his own image reflected mimetically back at him in the 'polished bronze' of the stranger's armour, a hint that he is a poet or artist of some sort (47). Another monologue in this first section (Arpachshad's) also depicts a poet figure exiled from a polis dominated by trade and continually on the verge of war:

> Bound to beasts' udders, rags no dishonour,
> not by much intercourse ennobled,
> multitude of books, bought deference:
> meagre flesh tingling to a mouth of water,
> apt to no service, commerce or special dexterity,
> at night after prayers recite the sacred
> enscrolled poems … (48-9)

It would be overly simplistic to make any firm connections between this persona ('apt to no service, commerce, or special dexterity') and Bunting himself, about whom Pound once commented, in the course of attempting to secure employment for Bunting, that 'he simply will not melt himself into the vile patterns of expediency', and for whom the post-war period was, as we have seen, a time of precariousness and hardship.[22] Nevertheless, it is clear that Bunting is intent on offering some sort of critique, filtered through this portrait of a mythical middle-eastern past, of a cultural landscape in which destruction and despair are associated with societies obsessed with 'commerce' (48) and 'repugnant trade' (49). (The concluding question of Arpachshad's first speech – 'What's to dismay us?' – is followed at the start of his next monologue with a direct answer: a role-call of apparently frivolous 'lifestyle' professions – 'Fullers, tailors, hairdressers, jewellers, perfumers' (49).) The desperate sense of having reached a stage of evolution beyond which all metaphysical speculation is futile and all art is barbaric recalls the theories of a post-war 'turn' or 'crisis' advocated by an Adorno or a Heidegger. Indeed, the following passage from

[22] Ezra Pound, quoted in Noel Stock, *The Life of Ezra Pound* (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 359.

the latter's essay on Nietzsche's 'God is dead' pronouncement offers an uncanny précis of *The Spoils*' argument and motifs:

> … the kind of men standing about in the market place … are not unbelievers because God as God has to them become unworthy of belief … [they] have abolished thinking and replaced it with idle babble that scents nihilism in every place in which it supposes its own opinion to be endangered. This self-deception, forever gaining the upper hand in relation to genuine nihilism, attempts in this way to talk itself out of its anguished dread in the face of thinking. But that dread is dread in the face of dread.[23]

Like Heidegger, Bunting did not believe that God was dead, merely that humanity had abolished thinking and replaced it with the idle babble of an atomistic, spiritually dead world. Amid *The Spoils*' presentation of a social framework structured around the nihilistic practices of the men standing about in the market place, the imaginative poet figure, what Heidegger in his essay terms 'the madman … the one who can hear, the one who seeks God, since he cries out for God', cannot find any sort of space in which to exist. Faced with this 'Dread | of what's to be, is and has been', Bunting is left asking the rhetorical question: 'were we not better dead?' (53).

As we have seen, in the second part of the poem, there is a momentary respite from this dispiriting suggestion, with the discovery of a positive religious-artistic environment amid the domes and aivans of Seljuq Isfahan. For the constructors of these sacred spaces at the peak of their medieval civilisation,

> … [t]heir passion's body was bricks and its soul algebra.
> Poetry
> they remembered
> too much, too well. (51)

[23] Martin Heidegger, 'The Word of Nietzsche', *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (London, 1977), p. 112.

But then, predictably, this temporary golden age dies with a tragicomic fall because of the blundering of the city's populace:

> But their determination to banish fools foundered
> ultimately in the installation of absolute idiots. (51)

The civilisation that enabled Omar Khayyam and Avicenna to flourish is broken apart by the dissolution of the Seljuq Empire that followed the death of Malik-Shah I in 1092. Bunting offers a final summary of Isfahan and its social achievements:

> For all that, the Seljuks avoided
> Roman exaggeration and the leaden mind of Egypt
> and withered precariously on the bough
> with patience and public spirit.
> O public spirit!
>
> Prayers to band cities and brigade men
> lest there be more wills than one:
> but God is the dividing sword. (52)

The religious and political unity of the empire that fostered the formal perfection of Isfahan (the city 'banded' by prayers) has disintegrated, its civic community replaced by warring individualism; the dividing sword of a annihilating God or fate has blasted Bunting's ideal city to pieces. At the heart of this passage – which marks a return to the mood of anarchy that presided over the poem's first section – a seemingly elliptical exclamation ('O public spirit!') in fact points the way to exactly what has been lost here. The dream that an artist might be allowed to exist productively in a prosperous public context is ended, and we are back to the weary fatalism of viewing life as nothing more than 'pence in a market … pence we drop in the sawdust with spilt wine' (50). The remainder of *The Spoils* never really regains the effusive tone evident at the beginning of part two. In the final section, Bunting's thinly veiled summary of the current biographies of modernism's leading lights (Eliot, Pound,

himself, possibly Zukofsky) continues the theme of the exiled, abandoned poet at sea for lack of grounding in a supportive environment:

> One cribbed in a madhouse
> set about with diagnoses;
> one unvisited; one uninvited;
> one visited and invited too much;
> one impotent, suffocated by adulation;
> one unfed: flares on a foundering barque,
> stars spattering still sea under iceblink. (55-6)

Only an ambiguous passage toward the end of the poem offers a modicum of hope that the marooned poet might one day find a way back to an audience:

> What we think in private
> will be said in public
> before the last gallon's teemed
> into an unintelligible sea – (57)

The Spoils, then, is a poem of annihilation and apocalypse, a poem that, in a practical sense, Bunting would find it difficult to move on from. It is a poem written by a man from a generation that had lived through unimaginable destruction and emerged from war with what must have seemed like nothing. However, as the post-war period progressed, aided by the efforts of a slightly younger generation, a climate of reconstruction and cultural renaissance began to gather pace in Britain, with an energetic, populist strain of modernism at its centre. What was, for artists like Bunting, a bleak end of the line, was for others an opportunity for the comprehensive regeneration and reorganisation of an entire society.

In its third and final 'contemporary Europe' section, *The Spoils* pre-empts *Briggflatts* by offering a frustrated call for organic renewal out of the decay and barrenness of war:

How shall wheat sprout
through a shingle of Lydian pebbles
that turn the harrow's points?
Quarry and build, Solomon,
a bank for Lydian pebbles:
tribute of Lydian pebbles
levy and lay aside,
that twist underfoot
and blunt the plowshare,
countless, useless, hampering
pebbles that spawn. (55)

Solomon's temple at Jerusalem is here associated with commerce and corruption, a 'bank' housing the 'pebbles' that have metamorphosed from the coins of the first section, and that are eternally hampering the possibility of growth, 'spawning' only further avarice and sterility. Solomon recalls the 'munificent patrons' alluded to in part two of *The Spoils* (52), a civic organiser whose attempt to 'quarry and build' will ultimately lead only to failure, destruction, and a society founded in greed and self-interest.

Yet ironically, at the same time as Bunting was detailing the 'construction and organisation afoot' in medieval Persia, only to present it as tragically doomed to annihilation because of the idiocy of its powermongers, modern Britain was experiencing its own period of widespread rebuilding and reconstruction. From Pisa in 1945, Pound had parodied Browning by exclaiming:

Oh to be in England now that Winston's out
Now that there's room for doubt
And the bank may be the nation's
And the long year's of patience
And labour's vacillations
May have let the bacon come home … (*Cantos*, 534)

As we have seen, this sense that there might be possibility in the aftermath of the World War II and the victory of Attlee's Labour Party in the 1945 General Election

was, if tentatively expressed by Pound, not at all advocated by Bunting at this point. If Pound was willing to continue organising and promoting his modernist program from St Elizabeths in the forties and fifties, Bunting's impulse was to retreat into a black hole of inactivity and pessimism that was only partially the result of difficult external circumstances. As such, he was indisposed to see the post-war era as a moment of opportunity in which the 'long years of patience | And labour's vacillations' might be brought to an end by Labour's programme of nationalisation, full employment, and the Welfare State.

Bunting's temperament combined with his temporary depression for a long time prevented him from attaching himself to a political cause in the post-war years, a puzzling fact given the Quaker tradition of dissent and activism he prized so highly. Indeed, Bunting's politics are not easy to make sense of. While socialism seems to have been his default position (an attitude he inherited from his father, a member of the Fabian Society in early-twentieth-century Newcastle) he also possessed a sceptical streak which meant his politics were somewhat different from, say, the optimistic, utopian communism of Louis Zukofsky. His Quaker distrust of authority and establishment also resulted in a libertarian tendency: he was inherently distrustful of centralised government, and therefore probably reluctant to get behind a Labour administration dedicated to the creation of a large, powerful state system based in Westminster. Indeed, in the immediate post-war years, perhaps as a consequence of his recent stint as an officer in His Majesty's Armed Forces and an M.I.6. agent, Bunting seems to have become more reactionary than at any time in his life. Writing to Pound in a letter of July 1953, Bunting poured scorn on Attlee and defended Churchill, famously Pound's bête noire:

> More I've seen of govts and the people who run them, more certain I've become that ANY gvt is evil and can only be tolerated when the other evils it can obviate are absolutely proved by long trial of them to be of perfectly satanic dimensions. There would be very few laws in my Utopia and hardly any govt to enforce them.
>
> Which brings us to Winston. Why judge him or any of these coves by some absolute standard? So long as somebody is going to govern us, better a lively intelligent body than a stultified clerk … both [Winston and Truman] took some pains to get round the heads of their abominable civil services and a little nearer to facts … Heaven save us rather from the Attlees, in the dark and content to remain in the dark, until some bloody catastrophe lights it up … Attlee, when told of the Persian nationalization demand, wrung his hands, wept and cried: 'Why wasn't I told?' He wasn't told because [the Imperial civil servants decided not to tell him]. That might have happened to Winston or Truman, but there'd be a good chance it wouldn't, they have too much contempt for these officials. I'm not talking about the absolute moral thises [sic] and thats of the Persian business, but about preferring facts to fiction in a wicked world. Winston does, to the limit of his not negligible energy.[24]

This was not the Bunting who had wholeheartedly supported the 1926 General Strike (of which Churchill had been a notoriously virulent opponent), nor the Bunting who would later be banned from Tynedale pubs in the early 1980s for loudly declaiming the cause of the National Union of Mineworkers at the time of the Miners' Strike.

Bunting's political pessimism at this time may simply have been a consequence of unbelief arising out of his apparently gloomy personal prospects. As Bunting wrote to Pound in July 1953,

> … oh Ez I am disheartened to such an extent I doubt if I can do anything at all. You say, with whatever portion of irony, that I can speak with authority (what about?), but in fact if there were anybody willing to print anything I could say, I still couldn't say it.[25]

Or perhaps his inability to see anything in the possibility of post-war reconstruction may have been in part due to the fact that he only returned to Britain in the late forties, when the initial optimism that accompanied the 1945 Labour landslide was

[24] Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 9 July 1953, Beinecke.
[25] Ibid.

beginning to dissipate amid austerity, power cuts, and food shortages. Certainly, from the perspective of 1951, when Bunting finally settled down in Britain for the long haul, the year in which Churchill's more reluctantly Keynesian Conservatives were re-elected, the notion that England might finally 'let the bacon come home', as Pound had put it, must have seemed slightly irrelevant, especially to a poet struggling for his livelihood and mired in a somewhat moribund, nostalgic literary scene. Nevertheless, whether or not Bunting supported or even acknowledged it, the effects of comprehensive reform of Britain's social and cultural infrastructure would be increasingly felt throughout the post-war years, to the point that, when Bunting came to write his masterpiece in the mid-1960s, he was able to do so in an environment in which art – and modernist art especially – was flourishing.

How to account for the shift from the fatalism of *The Spoils* to the romantic awakening of *Briggflatts*' opening lines? The change is too dramatic to be a case of mere aesthetic development. It is possible to identify certain motifs and images emerging in Bunting's poems of 1945-51 that would subsequently be refined and expanded in the post-1964 works.[26] Yet it is ultimately difficult to depart too far from Denis Goacher's view that the essential shape of Bunting's verse form evolved in only very small increments throughout his life.[27] In the late 1920s, at the start of his poetic career, Bunting settled on three modes in which the vast majority of his poetry up to the 1980s would be composed: the 'sonata' or 'short-long poem', the 'ode', and the 'overdraft' (typically a translation). This tripartite division was formalised in the first substantial collected edition of his works: *Poems 1950*. Although the 'overdrafts' are, perhaps predictably, relatively disparate, and although both the odes and sonatas

[26] To take three instances: *Briggflatts*' 'mountain range' schema (see 'Basil Bunting Talks About *Briggflatts*', p. 9) seems to be a descendent of the Alps trope in 'On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's Cantos; the form of *The Spoils* is closer to *Briggflatts*' than any of Bunting's earlier sonata-poems; and the architectural theme is condensed in the 1975 poem 'At Briggflatts Meeting House'.
[27] Goacher, 'Denis Goacher Talks About Basil Bunting', p. 201.

are more various than these neo-classical terms might suggest, Bunting's basic verse forms were never substantially augmented or overhauled. The stylistic changes that did take place were subtle and largely occurred on a local level, as we shall see in the following chapter in the case of *Briggflatts*.

There was no seismic formal-structural leap then, between *The Spoils* and *Briggflatts*, at least not one of the kind which separates, say, Pound's *Cantos* from his preceding work, or Eliot's *The Waste Land* from his poems of the late 1910s. What did change between 1951 and 1964, and changed quite markedly, were the circumstances in which Bunting's poems were produced, disseminated (or performed), and received. The 1965 edition of *The Spoils* has already provided an illustration of the change in publishing contexts that occurred as the post-war period evolved. What other new contexts undergirded Bunting's revival in the mid-1960s?

As we have seen, *The Spoils* was a poem intensely preoccupied with the problem of the poet in society, and with the need for a conducive civic environment or sacred architecture in which intellectual and religious activity might flourish, as it was supposed to have done in the Isfahan of Avicenna and Omar Khayyam. Bunting's post-war work as a whole is characterised by a profound yearning for a crafted, creatively environment that might provide a means of escape from isolated solipsism. During the post-war years Bunting, like T.S. Eliot in an earlier phase, groped for a conceptualisation of objectivity that would bulwark and give external definition to his aesthetic experiments. In Bunting's case, an attentiveness to workmanship and architectonic themes progressively emerged as the consequence of this impulse, as he cemented a poetic ethos that reflected his character and background far better than Eliot's ideological apparatus of Anglican-Royalist-Classicism. References to domes, arches, apses, pillars tiles, bricks, and stones of all kinds, became ubiquitous

presences in Bunting's verse, presences that evoked the sturdy, supportive civic framework for art that Bunting had already half-intimated was necessary during his extended apprenticeship as one of the Poundian 'strugglers in the desert'. And by 1965, when Bunting first read *Briggflatts* aloud at the Morden Tower in Newcastle, he had found a space for his poetry that fulfilled at least a part of the ideal of city that was conducive to creativity. In considering how Bunting went in the space of little more than a decade from a poet who had altogether stopped writing to one at the centre of a blossoming cultural scene, we must look briefly at the wider objective structures that provided the backdrop to this striking reversal of fortunes.

III. 'City of Patterned Streets': The Modernist Climate of 1960s Newcastle

Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the early 1960s was, like many other cities in Britain at this time, a place in which the benefits of the post-war planning initiated by the Attlee government in 1945 were beginning to be felt in a number of profound ways. Politically, the most important figure of the era was the city council leader T. Dan Smith, a charismatic Labour Party politician with a colourful biography. Smith would later become a symbol of the failure of post-war social democracy, when he was sentenced to six years imprisonment in 1974 for accepting bribes from the architect and property developer John Poulson. However, in the years immediately after he became chairman of Newcastle City Council's Housing Committee in 1958 and then leader of the council in 1960, Smith was a popular figure and an icon of regional pride and regeneration in the north-east of England. Smith's declared ambition was to turn Newcastle into the 'Brasilia of the North', a somewhat maladroit allusion to the new Brazilian capital being constructed at that time in South America under the supervision of the planner Lúcio Costa and the architect Oscar Niemeyer.

Fired by the ideal of an exotic modernist city, Smith embarked on an ambitious development programme that sought to replace Victorian slums with a planned city centre full of innovative new building projects. Newcastle became the first city in the country with its own planning department, an organisation that helped transform the landscape of the city. Futuristic walkways and uncompromising monochromatic structures began to appear throughout the town. Adopting the new 'Brutalist' style, Basil Spence, architect of the rebuilt Coventry Cathedral and the new University of Sussex, designed a bold, concrete new central library in the city centre. Plans were drawn up for an expansive redevelopment of Newcastle's civic infrastructure that would eventually result in the creation of Newcastle Polytechnic (latterly the University of Northumbria), a striking civic centre building to house the council, and a metro train system. There were also proposals for a shopping centre to be designed by the Danish modernist architect Arne Jacobsen, and an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to get Le Corbusier to design a building for Newcastle, what would have been his only British project. Across the river in non-Smith-controlled Gateshead, the British architect Owen Luder was responsible for the design and construction of two immense, visionary Brutalist buildings: the striking, monolithic Trinity Square Car Park, and the Derwent Tower, a 29-storey apartment building that quickly acquired the soubriquet the 'Dunston Rocket' because of its space-age appearance.

In short, under the aegis of Smith and other council figures, the region that Bunting lived in throughout the fifties and early sixties, in which he eventually came to write *Briggflatts*, was dominated by vigorous civic modernism. Newcastle, which had earlier provided the inspiration for Yevgeny Zamyatin's sci-fi novel *We*, as well as the subject for the first illustration in Wyndham Lewis's *Blast* (a dynamically

monochrome Vorticist woodcut by Edward Wadsworth), became the site of an energetic revival of ultramodern design that substantially altered the tenor and atmosphere of the town and the surrounding area. After a period of depression and industrial decline, a city that had pioneered developments in British engineering and technology in the nineteenth century was once again momentarily pervaded with a spirit of progressive optimism. And perhaps the most crucial fact about these new developments with regard to Bunting's case was the foundational base they established in the city for a translation of modernism into civic praxis.

Whereas, in the early-twentieth century, modernism had only very tentatively been integrated into the fabric of British life, in the fifties and sixties it became a pervasive cultural *modus operandi* with a reach extending into every aspect of popular and community living. New buildings, new towns, new technology, new furniture, new forms of music: new applied arts of all kinds were taking inspiration from early-twentieth-century modernism and implementing modernist forms in the receptive public setting of Welfare State Britain. To take a representative example, the Brutalist school of architecture that played such a crucial role in transforming the landscape of post-war Newcastle and Gateshead was a conscious attempt to revive the earlier high modernist phase or 'heroic age' of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. It was also, as the chief theorist of the movement Reyner Banham argued, a deliberate reaction to the provincial, nostalgic 'mood of elegant despair' that had characterised much art of the initial post-war period (notably what Banham labeled the 'fashionably morbid' school that included neo-romantic artists such as John Piper and Graham Sutherland).[28] Against the elegant despair of this lingering neo-romanticism, the Brutalists responded with a programme of determined futurism: their spare,

[28] Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (London, 1966), p. 13.

uncompromising buildings inverted the notion of a post-apocalyptic *carte blanche* so that it became a trope of 'white heat' optimism and possibility. Bunting had began the fifties by surveying the world in ruins in *The Spoils*, and he had concluded that there was no alternative but to stoically endure a silent, unacknowledged old age in a decaying, mercantile society ('Death | lays his purse on the table and opens the wine'). Yet as the fifties progressed and were succeeded by the buoyant sixties, in the wider British culture of which Bunting for a long time remained largely unaware, energetic new incursions such as Brutalism were responsible for a populist renewal of modernist precepts. The mood engendered by these developments would increasingly occupy centre stage as the initial post-war climate of romanticism and *Weltschmerz* evaporated.

Following Bunting's meeting with Tom Pickard these galvanising new contexts began to impinge obliquely upon his life and work. Spurred on by the enthusiasm of his younger friends ('Well, I thought, if poetry really has the power to renew itself, I'd better write something for these younger chaps to read'), Bunting began the process of composing *Briggflatts*.[29] It is a poem indelibly marked by the northern English countryside, yet it does not fit easily into any of the pastoral lineages in English letters, perhaps because it was composed while its author was travelling back and forth from his home in rural Wylam to his job working at the *Evening Chronicle*/*Journal* newspaper in urban Newcastle. The divide between city and country is far less pronounced in this part of the north-east than it is elsewhere in England, and Bunting's resulting depiction in *Briggflatts* of a rural terrain in which industry figures heavily was probably further reinforced by the fact that it was composed on train journeys that traversed this hybrid landscape. As he jotted down

[29] Basil Bunting, letter to Dorothy Pound, 11 June 1965, quoted in Makin, *Bunting: The Shaping of His Verse*, p. 124.

the lines that would eventually constitute his masterpiece, Bunting moved daily from the bucolic farmland of Wylam to the showpiece of Victorian engineering that was Newcastle Central Station, finally coming to a halt within view of the proto-constructivist bridges across the Tyne that had been so dramatically evoked by Edward Wadsworth in the first issue of *Blast*. Along the way, the thrusting Brutalist developments of sixties Newcastle and Gateshead became visible: energetic modernist correlatives to the poem being constructed on the inside of the train window.

There were more direct encroachments of Newcastle's modernist scenery into Bunting's creative environment during his 'revival' period. As we have seen, the cover of *The Spoils* was designed by Richard Hamilton working from the art department at the University of Newcastle. Since the early fifties, Hamilton and his department colleague Victor Pasmore had been instrumental in engineering a transformation of the city's art scene and educational infrastructure. Inspired by the model of the Bauhaus, they developed what became known as the Basic Design course, a template that has provided the model for art higher education in the UK ever since. And their attempts to apply abstract modernist formalism in a public context were not limited to the institution of a Bauhaus-style pedagogy in post-war Newcastle. Pasmore designed abstract murals for the new Newcastle Civic Centre, and he was also consultant designer for Peterlee in County Durham, a new town some twenty miles outside of Newcastle founded in 1948 to house coal miners and their families (one of several new developments resulting from the Attlee government's New Towns Act of 1946). Meanwhile, Hamilton was a seminal personality in the birth of pop art in Britain and America: his pop-futurist exhibition at the University of Newcastle Hatton Gallery in late 1955, 'Man, Machine and Motion', is often credited

as the founding event of the pop art movement. By the mid-sixties, following a correspondence with Marcel Duchamp, he was engaged in a painstaking reconstruction in his Newcastle studio of the latter's magnum opus of 1915-23, *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*. (When Robert Creeley visited Newcastle in the mid-sixties to read at the Morden Tower, Tom Pickard took him to visit Hamilton's work in progress on the *Bride* reconstruction.)[30] Aided by the social spending that enabled a huge expansion of the British higher education system of which they were part, Pasmore and Hamilton were key players in the implementation of an influential programme of popular civic modernism, one that filtered through into the lived experiences of an entire region, from the council leaders who would soon gaze at Pasmore's murals in the new civic centre, to the newly-housed coal mining families of Peterlee, to the new generation of Newcastle University students energised by Hamilton's pop art experiments (many of whom could not have attended university in the pre-war, pre-Welfare-State era). What is more, in combining fresh innovation with a striving to resuscitate the arts of the 'heroic age' of the Modern Movement, figures like Pasmore and Hamilton pointed to a way out of the impasse that had obstructed the trajectory of modernism in the war-torn, orthodox-finance-blighted era of the thirties and forties.

Pasmore, Hamilton and the other modernist developments in post-war Newcastle were not inspirations for a new formal breakthrough in Bunting's verse in the way that, say, Vorticism had been for Pound's writing in the late 1910s. But their modernist example was a crucial part of a wider development that caused Bunting's social orientation to shift decisively in a way that liberated his working practices and enabled him to write the poem of his life. The cultural context that underlay Bunting's

[30] Tom Pickard, email to Alex Niven, 2 January 2011.

revival provided both the theme and the occasion for *Briggflatts*: it was written for and because of a specific place, a specific milieu, and a specific set of circumstances. Perhaps more than any other major British poem of the twentieth century, *Briggflatts* is a work in which the galvanising potential of a meaningful, well-formed, two-way relationship between poet and community is realised. This fact represents a large part of its profound value and resonance today, at a time when the communal infrastructure of British art is being everywhere curtailed, and poetry has fewer and fewer spaces to exist outside a culture of literary celebrity and trade publishing. The product of a very different cultural climate, *Briggflatts* was only brought into existence because of younger generation figures such as Richard Hamilton, Tom and Connie Pickard, Roy Fisher, and Stuart Montgomery, figures dedicated to instituting new or unrealised modernist programmes in a society in which infrastructures like the Bauhaus-imitating University of Newcastle art department were making such experiments possible. The poem stands as a salient reminder of a brief period when post-war socialistic policies were combining with avant-garde local activity to create a belated breakthrough of modernism into a sphere where it was able to profoundly alter the lives of a significant portion of the British population.

In the Preface to his book on Bunting, Peter Makin is unrelenting in his emphasis on Bunting's formal introversion:

> I assume, as Basil Bunting did, that the reason-for-being of a poem is its shape. I go further, and hold that it is this shapedness (within the line, within the fit, within the book) that makes poetry a more effective carrier of information, communicator of states [than prose]. Critics of the 1990s, willy-nilly, choose Homer to think about for the same reason as did Coleridge or Pope: because, for them too, Homer's world *is*, with a clarity of existence beside which Thucydides' fades into blankness. Bunting's picture of the North, and of a twentieth century mind, will live when the more reliable accounts of the sociologists are mere library-filler.[31]

[31] Makin, *Bunting: The Shaping of his Verse*, p. vii.

There are countless examples, not to mention statements made by Bunting himself, which appear to support these claims. Yet there is ultimately something inadequate about Makin's analysis. Was Bunting's 'picture of the North, and of a twentieth century mind' brought into being solely as a result of its exquisite 'shapedness'? Will it continue to endure in the future because of a remarkable 'clarity of existence', like Keats's Grecian urn, or the artefacts of Yeats's Byzantium, or the ancient monuments Bunting continually tried to associate his verse with? In fact, even a cursory look at Bunting's biography offers a radically antithetical suggestion: that, far from being a monumental inevitability, Bunting's poetry, and *Briggflatts* especially, only came into existence at all because of an unusually supportive environment and the help of a conspicuously supportive artistic community

The 'music' motif in modernist literature is often treated solely as an issue of formal affinity between two arts. However, the case of Bunting demonstrates that a contingency on social planning, and an ethos founded in action, organisation, and praxis, was of at least equal importance to questions of form, when the question of musical affinity is considered. Part of the centrality of the idea of music for writers like Bunting and Pound was that it connoted a 'live' art form in which formal brilliance was only made possible with an enabling social and physical space. 'Form' was indeed always essential to Bunting's art, but his post-war experience underlined that music was something more than aesthetic autonomy. Verse music had to be produced, or performed, within a valid situational structure, with the help of an organised communal circle. As Pound had argued in *Guide to Kulchur*, the 'sense of

coordination, of the individual in a milieu … the need for coordination of individuals' was vital, and ultimately interrelated with matters of artistic technique.[32]

IV. The Ambience of *Briggflatts*

> I am also informed… that the Beatles, no less, spent a lot of money getting secondhand copies of [my] Poems 1950 and carry them around.
>
> – Bunting to Dorothy Pound, 11 June, 1965.[33]

Bunting received more help from his milieu than most. Tom Pickard's role in Bunting's revival has been well documented elsewhere, as has that of Connie Pickard as co-organiser. Richard Hamilton himself became a regular attendee of the Morden Tower readings, sitting on the floor as one of the 'unabashed boys and girls' to whom Bunting dedicated his *Complete Poems* in 1968.[34] Working at the same University of Newcastle graphics department from which he had created the poster for the seminal *This is Tomorrow* exhibition in London in 1956, Hamilton designed the packaging for the Morden Tower Book Room's first publication *King Ida's Watch Chain* (1964), a pre-*Briggflatts* collection that included a handful of Bunting's odes, as well as an article by Louis Zukofsky, a poem by Hugh Kenner, and a late but enthusiastic review by the latter of Bunting's *Poems 1950*. In 1965, as we have seen, this was followed by Hamilton's packaging for *The Spoils* (which included Bunting's clandestine photograph of the vaults of Isfahan), after which the baton was passed to Stuart Montgomery's Fulcrum Press, based in London, which became Bunting's publisher as he moved into wider view.

Provided with the supportive framework of the Morden Tower and its attendant

[32] Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, pp. 38-9.
[33] Beinecke.
[34] Basil Bunting, *Collected Poems*, preface, no pagination.

collective of artists and publishers (one that extended well beyond Newcastle itself, it is important to add), Bunting responded by composing a great communitarian poem, a rewriting of Eliot's *Four Quartets* that sought to strip that work of its hieratic, hierarchical overtones and present a modified vision of a 'history … now and England' for an alternative British landscape in which the egotism of the poet's autobiography is rechanneled not by the authority of an impersonal God, but by the objective structure of a homeland in which 'each pebble' plays its 'part' in creating a magnificent late spring (61).[35] This theme of interrelatedness and communal concord dominates *Briggflatts*. Often, this occurs by way of an adaptation of a classic Spenserian pastoral trope. Spenser was one of Bunting's chief sources in later years, and it seems probable that the refrain from Spenser's 'Epithalamion' is somewhere behind one of the key motifs in *Briggflatts*:

> So I unto my selfe alone will sing,
> The woods shall to me answer, and my Eccho ring.[36]

Spenser's image of a solitary poet whose song is given grounding and echoed by his surroundings reverberates throughout Bunting's poem, beginning in its opening lines with the bull's 'descant' on the River Rawthey's 'madrigal', the first link in a chain of sounds that ties together the first section:

> Brag, sweet tenor bull,
> descant on Rawthey's madrigal,
> each pebble its part
> for the fells' late spring. (61)

Similarly, at the crux of the poem, in the third section, the sagacious slowworm

[35] Cf. the very different, obstructing, arid 'shingle of pebbles' in the final section of *The Spoils* (55), a pre-Morden Tower poem.
[36] Edmund Spenser, 'Epithalamion', *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William A. Orem et al, (New Haven, 1989), p. 662.

counsels the poet-figure to return to a fecund, by-the-way homeland in which 'pillars' of ripe wheat and 'vaults stored with slugs' will provide the basis for organic regeneration. Here too, song finds an echo in the surrounding environment:

> So he rose and led home silently through clean woodland
> where every bough repeated the slowworm's song. (74)

And finally, in an interlude in the fourth section, music provokes a choral response from a numinous natural landscape:

> It is time to consider how Domenico Scarlatti
> condensed so much music into so few bars …
> …and stars and lakes
> echo him and the copse drums out his measure,
> snow peaks are lifted up in moonlight and twilight
> and the sun rises on an acknowledged land. (76)

Again and again in *Briggflatts*, the figure of music finding answer in sympathetic surroundings is reiterated; the opaque, unresponsive mountains of the condensed lyric 'On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's Cantos' have been exchanged for Wordsworthian echoing hills. And while such passages are undoubtedly drawing on an classical-pastoral model, it must also be stressed that Bunting's celebrated 'acknowledged land' is one populated by a supporting cast of real people inhabiting a tangible modern-industrial locale, by 'gentle generous voices' that 'weave over bare night' (63), by the music of 'Baltic plainsong speech' (62), by the mason's mallet, and by the mine workers whose cacophonous labours provide the occasion for one of *Briggflatts*' most sonorous, onomatopoeic passages:

> … hear the horse stale,
> the mason whistle,
> harness mutter to shaft,
> felloe to axle squeak,
> rut thud the rim,

crushed grit. (62)

In short, the pastoral idyll depicted in *Briggflatts*, especially in the opening section that was literally the poetic space in which Bunting re-emerged into creativity and attention, is a humanly constructed one: a harmonious setting for poetic music created by the ingenious craftsmanship of its inhabitants. Bunting's interest in the poetry and cause of the northern miners and other skilled professions meant that he was sympathetic to man-made idylls as well as pastoral ones: one of the suggestions of *Briggflatts* is that a setting for poetry is something that can be constructed by a human community in which every member contributes to the whole by way of a variety of equally instrumental 'arts' or 'trades'. In this vision, the individual poet may be integral, but he is not isolated.[37]

As well as being an 'autobiography', *Briggflatts* is consciously an address, a performance delivered to a circumambient audience, a tale of the tribe. Like Canto 1 – a work Bunting was much taken with – *Briggflatts* is a declamatory, oral work that uses Northumbrian history to invoke the importance of the epic 'we' that is both subject and object of the song.[38] In a letter to Louis Zukofsky in 1964, Bunting underlined the seminal impact of the Morden Tower attendees on his creative practice:

> … a curious experience, reading to these youngsters. They were not hindered by the difficulties which annoy their elders. They took poetry as poetry – a nice noise – without questions about its 'meaning'. They laughed at the comic bits, they were rapt at the passages of intricate metric that nobody ever took

[37] Again, Bunting's religious beliefs are important to bear in mind here. In a […] interview with Peter Bell, Bunting defines his religious ethos as an attempt to resurrect the Quakerism of the seventeenth century, at which point Quakerism was 'something akin to pantheism', so that 'man does not have the central place he does in most modern thought'.

[38] Bunting's readings of Canto 1 were among his best. Hear, for example, the reading at S.U.N.Y. Buffalo in April 1976, 'Lecture on Pound', *The Recordings of Basil Bunting: Buffalo 1976*, ed. Richard Swigg. Keele: Keele University, 1995.

> notice of before – not that they understood what was attracting them, but it certainly did attract … I found it all very encouraging.[39]

In *Briggflatts*, as in Spenser's poem, Bunting the long-exiled poet forced to sing unto himself, looks to his surroundings for an 'echo' of his melody. However, for Bunting it is not only the woods that answer, but also the sounds of the masons and miners working to build with the 'rocks' that 'happen by chance' a structured landscape in which 'no one bolts the door' (61), a safe environment that will nurture 'words to confirm and delight' (63). While the melancholy and fatalism of *The Spoils* is still present, there is in *Briggflatts* a sense of ecstatic release into benevolent space, a metamorphic moment even more laudatory and lyrical than the discovery of the Jameh Mosque in the second section of *The Spoils*. And this intrinsic poetic presentation of untrammelled artistry within the confines of an appreciative built environment seems quite obviously to be a reflection of the circumstances of *Briggflatts*' composition. *Briggflatts*' impassioned outflowings of romantic energy are presented as the result and reflection of concordant surroundings – both organic and synthetic – that provide the poet's art with civic foundations, a call-and-response landscape, and protective walls of masonry. As such, it is an apt record of a seminal moment in the history of literary modernism, of a brief interval when it appeared as though Bunting had achieved, in the context of Newcastle and the Morden Tower, the solution to a long-running dilemma: the problem of implementing in practical terms a meaningful integration of technique and audience. Bunting demonstrated that the perfection of poetic music can only be achieved in a conducive social setting, that aspiring towards the condition of music is not merely a question of subjectivity and the perfection of a sublime form, as Walter Pater had argued, but one that is also

[39] Basil Bunting, letter to Louis Zukofsky, 28 July 1964, HRC.

inextricably related to the matter of finding a venue.

Allen Ginsberg's account of his first reading at the Morden Tower in 1965, though wildly fanciful, nevertheless provides a good summary of the nature of the venue at the precise moment *Briggflatts* was gestating:

> … the magic enacted in the Tower articulated the unconscious of the entire city slumbering in the mechanic illusions of the century … Morden Tower was famed afar, appropriately English-tongue poets of the Western Hemisphere knew that Basil Bunting (companion and peer of the great word masters of the century) had found companions among the young in Newcastle who had answered the Great Call of Poesy. More charmingly, the young had sought out and found the older Bard in his obscurity near the city, and drawn him out to word-joust and night-intoxication …
>
> 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] I gave the most complete reading of my own written work that I ever vocalised in one evening. Knowing the minds and ears were fine, (or among the younger folk, if inexperienced, tenderly open), I began at my beginning as a poet and read past midnight all the scribbling I had done for a decade.
>
> Certainly happy circumstances for a poet, and happier to hear Bunting's concern 'Too many words, condense still more'. Thus reading at Morden Tower altered my own poetic practice slightly towards greater economy of presentation. So I learned more reading at Morden Tower than I had at a hundred universities.[40]

Although we can dismiss much of this as the product of Ginsberg's hypertrophied imagination (note Bunting's pragmatic attempt to curtail Ginsberg's grandiloquence), the emphasis on the 'magic' of the Morden Tower – that is, on its unique atmosphere and position as part of a wider culture – is surely not misplaced. Indeed, it is clear that Bunting himself was intent on promulgating the idea of the Tower as a place of high poetic practice. Interestingly, he did so in a way that clearly recalled his predilection for the religious and artistic spaces of medieval Persia. In a lecture delivered at the

[40] Allen Ginsberg, "Allen Ginsberg and Morden Tower", http://www.mordentower.org/allen.html, accessed 28/06/13.

University of Newcastle in 1974, Bunting spends much time describing the contexts of poetic performance that persisted when Ferdowsi composed the Persian national epic *Shahnameh* (which Bunting had spent years translating back in the 1930s):

> I was once shown in the Tehran museum a miniature in a very old manuscript, which shows how the epic was read, or at least how the Persians of a somewhat later century thought it had been read about the year 1000 [AD]. 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 [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. I'll recommend that to Connie [Pickard] next time I know she's putting on a reading at the Morden Tower. They don't put on readings like that nowadays, though it seems to me the right way to do it.[41]

Perhaps predictably, this performance environment was never actuated in late-twentieth-century Newcastle, though Bunting did attempt to introduce elements of Persian ritual into his readings at the Morden Tower and elsewhere from the mid-sixties onward (most famously – and dubiously from a gender point of view – a female *saqi*, a young woman acting as a 'handmaiden', would regularly be on hand to pour wine for the audience). However, the notion of an epic poetry made musical by its positioning in a coordinated formal setting – a musical *context* – was one that

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[41] Basil Bunting, lecture at S.U.N.Y. Buffalo, April 1976, audio recording published from Keel University by Richard Swigg, 1995. After his initial dialogue with Pound on the subject in the mid thirties (see the letter of 21 October 1934, quoted in the previous chapter) Bunting had continued to think about the musical aspects of ancient Persian poetry, even while he was in his fifties nadir. Writing to Pound in 1954, Bunting commented that the Persian poet Manuchehri

> wrote to be sung – they still had their ravi – personal musician and singer – in tow in his day; and is never unmindful of the music. With the whole tempo and tone utterly under control – most wonderfully in formal qasidas, but most strikingly in various anacreontics, more convincingly drunken than any I've actually seen elsewhere. And he uses all this to surround, or work up to, or lead down from, statements extremely simple, direct and moving, which are commonly the pith of the poem. Incidentally, being obliged, as anyone was in that century, to follow the lead of Al-Motanabbi from the older simplicity of Arabic verse into all the apparatus of internal rhyming and virtuoso stuff generally (from which I believe the Provenzal [sic] is ultimately though rather remotely derived) he did it so easily that the casual reader hardly notices the complications – they never divert his attention from music, diction, image, implication and matter. He never shirks the compulsory standard themes …

Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 12 May 1954. Beinecke.

seems to have been in Bunting's mind from the earliest days of the Morden Tower readings. Establishing an appropriate venue made poetry 'musical'. Placing it in an ambience of physicality and ceremony that distantly recalled actual dancing was of equal importance to intrinsic attempts to impose musical form onto verse. In a late interview, Bunting claimed that his poetic career began with the realisation that poetry should be 'organised, in the large, the architecture of it, in the way that musicians handle their themes'.[42] Yet for all Bunting's predilection for musical form (notably his use of the 'sonata' template), his allusion to 'organisation' and 'architecture' can also be taken on a more literal level: the interest in architectural themes spilled over into his wider method, so that obtaining the right setting for verse music became a thing of paramount importance.

In perhaps Bunting's most famous aesthetic statement, 'The Poet's Point of View', written in the summer of 1966 at the zenith of his revival, he is adamant on this point:

> Poetry, like music, is to be heard. It deals in sound, long sounds and short sounds, heavy beats and light beats, the tone relations of vowels, the relations of consonants to one another which are like the instrumental colour in music. Poetry lies dead on the page, until some voice brings it to life, just as music, on the stave, is no more than instructions to the player. A skilled musician can imagine the sound, more or less, and a skilled reader can try to hear, mentally, what his eyes see in print: but nothing will satisfy either of them till his ears hear it as real sound in the air. Poetry must be read aloud.
>
> Reading in silence is the source of half the misconceptions that have caused the public to distrust poetry.[43]

For all that the comparison of poetic and musical forms is central here, the great weight of Bunting's protest is on the demand for a 'live' poetry, for a poetry that is

[42] Peter Bell interview. See also Pound's adoption of architectural vocabulary to describe musical form in *Guide to Kulchur*: 'I have heard Bach described as barocco, and in a sense this indicates profound apperception. Bach builds up from the bottom, as distinctly as Wren did. In Bach's case the result is magnificent', p. 153

[43] Bunting, *Three Essays*, p. 34.

only properly brought into being when it is translated into 'real sound in the air', that is, when it rises to the level of being an applied craft in a public context. Pound's claim in Canto 81 that his greatest achievement was to 'have gathered from the air a live tradition' acquires a new relevance in Bunting's remarks. Indeed, it is palpable that Bunting has been galvanised by the climate of mid-sixties Newcastle into reawakening the old Poundian activist sensibility honed in his earlier music journalism and in thirties essays such as 'The Lion and the Lizard'. Advancing in leaps and bounds from the perspective of the early post-war years, when lonely pessimism and inertia had precluded an escape from modernism's subjective 'dead-end', Bunting's horizons had expanded by the time of *Briggflatts* and its manifesto-like corollary 'The Poet's Point of View' to incorporate an objective critique of the British cultural landscape as a whole. It is emphatically now the public, social, performative status of poetry that is dictating discussions of a verse 'music':

> All the arts are plagued by charlatans seeking money, or fame, or just an excuse to idle. The less the public understands the art, the easier it is for charlatans to flourish … it is not easy for the outsider to distinguish the fraud from the poet. But it is a little less difficult when poetry is read aloud.
>
> There were mountebanks at the famous Albert Hall meeting [the 'International Poetry Incarnation' held in London in the summer of 1965] … but the worst, most insidious charlatans fill chairs and fellowships at universities, write for the weeklies or work for the BBC or the British Council or some other asylum for obsequious idlers. In the eighteenth century it was the Church. If these men had to read aloud in public, their empty lines, without resonance, would soon give them away.[44]

As these comments show, even at his most affirmative, Bunting's scepticism remained a powerful counterweight to his optimism. Even as he is finally flourishing in post-war Britain, he cannot resist sniping at the public institutions he held at least partly responsible for his long years of exile. But the point is that regardless of this

[44] Ibid., p. 35.

lingering bitterness (note the non-conformist animosity to the establishment 'Church'), Bunting has escaped from the self-doubts that had threatened to annihilate his career, into a perspective from which he is able to include, analyse, and call for reform of Britain's cultural infrastructure, and the place of poetry within it.

'The Poet's Point of View' was published in the arts diary of the north-east organisation Northern Arts, a body founded by T. Dan Smith in the early-sixties to be the 'philosophical background' of his plans for the cultural regeneration of the city. While Bunting's disdain for the central institutions of the British establishment is still fixed in this short essay, its publication is evidence that by the mid-1960s he was positioned inside a civic architecture in which alternative means of artistic sustenance were available. Indeed, for most of the rest of his life, Bunting was sustained professionally by institutions of this kind: by the universities and arts fellowships that were frequently the result of the modern utopian planning of post-war Welfare State Britain. Following his sixties revival, Bunting held lectureships at the universities of Newcastle and Durham, became president of the Poetry Society in 1972, and president of Northern Arts in 1974. And while his attitude to these organisations was ambivalent, to put it mildly, he nevertheless seized on his new role of sinecured spokesperson as a chance to advocate the cultural cause of the region, just as he had used *Briggflatts* as an opportunity to underline man's indebtedness to the environment constructed around him. Reaching back into the ancient history of Northumbria, Bunting enthusiastically threw himself into attempts to devise a distinctive mythos for an area that he argued had been marginalised and neglected by the centres of English officialdom since the time of its Anglo-Saxon heyday, when the kingdom of Northumbria had been one of the artistic, political, and religious hubs of European

culture. Reflecting another shift in the zeitgeist of the post-war period, as the sixties gave way to the seventies Bunting turned increasingly from modernism to the heritage and folk culture that came to replace the earlier cultural moment of Brutalism and Harold Wilson's 'white heat' of technology.[45] The Lindisfarne Gospels, Durham Cathedral, the Anglo-Saxon saints Cuthbert and Acca, and the nineteenth-century colliery poet Joseph Skipsey became Bunting's main points of reference, as he sought to construct a historical foundation on which further revivals of Northumbrian culture might be built. On one occasion, when he was asked by Tom Pickard for advice about poetic form, Bunting rehearsed the old Objectivist dictum: 'Invent your own'.[46] This dedication to the invention of alternative forms and systems was carried over into Bunting's professional rhetoric of the period, as the need to bring into being an independent, autonomous identity and framework for Northumbrian culture crystallised into his guiding political principle.

Having travelled widely during the course of an adventurous life, in his later years, beginning with *Briggflatts*, Bunting's interest in appropriate venues for art and religion took an increasingly local form. Returning to his Quaker roots, Bunting's communitarianism sought expression not in civic, urban contexts, but in a valorisation of the by-the-way rural enclave; Bunting, like Charles Olson, had apparently come to believe that 'polis now is a few'.[47] While *The Spoils*' monumental architectural ideal, the Jameh Mosque, had been the centre of an empire, Bunting's later post-war works showed a preference for small structures that survived on the geographical margins.

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[45] In trying to understand the wider British cultural context through which Bunting moved in the post-war years, we might identify three broad overlapping phases or cultural 'moments': first, an initial period of austerity and depression presided over by nostalgia and neo-romanticism; second, a period of technological optimism and modernist revival peaking in the mid-sixties; and third, a period of pastoralism and small-scale localism dominated by folk culture and the nascent environmental movement. As we have seen, each of these phases impacted on Bunting himself in profound ways throughout the period.

[46] Tom Pickard 'Q&A' on the Poetry Foundation website http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poemcomment/240804, accessed 07/09/11

[47] Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, ed. George F. Butterick (London, 1983), p. 15.

Bunting's posthumously published 'Note on *Briggflatts*' makes a great show of disavowing a comparison with Eliot's *Four Quartets*, yet there is surely more than a trace of the narcissism of small difference in Bunting's rejection of Eliot's late-modernist sonata-form poem and its 'mystical Christianity'.[48] While Eliot's bucolic refuges are ideal and Platonic in the manner of Pound's, it is almost inconceivable that Bunting, an acquaintance of Eliot and an erstwhile admirer of *Four Quartets*, was not following Eliot in some sense with *Briggflatts*. At any rate, in 'A Note on *Briggflatts*' Bunting concedes the point that both *Briggflatts* and *Four Quartets* are named after 'little hidden places', before proceeding to locate the essence of his own spiritual worldview in the spatial paradigm of the Quaker meeting house and its acoustic ambience:

> The day's incidents hide our ignorance from us; yet we know it, beneath our routine. In silence, having swept dust and litter from our minds, we can detect the pulse of God's blood in our veins, more persuasive than words, more demonstrative than a diagram. That is what a Quaker meeting tries to be, and that is why my poem is called *Briggflatts.*[49]

In the last two decades of his life, Bunting was increasingly drawn to this Quaker ideal of a physical space for experiencing divine silence, and the reaffirmed music of *Briggflatts* was followed all too quickly by the final diminuendo of his writing career. As the impetus of his revival petered out, to an extent Bunting returned to the position of quietism he had occupied prior to *Briggflatts*. The seventies and eighties produced only a handful of short odes. While his final published poem 'Now we've no hope of going back …' features a desolate port setting, the most notable depiction of place in this last phase is to be found in an ode of 1975, 'At Briggflatts Meetinghouse', a poem that presents a compact summary of Bunting's post-war obsession with

[48] Bunting, 'A Note on *Briggflatts*', no pagination.
[49] Ibid.

protective, nurturing places:

> Boasts time mocks cumber Rome. Wren
> set up his own monument.
> Others watch fells dwindle, think
> the sun's fires sink.
>
> Stones indeed sift to sand, oak
> blends with saint's bones.
> Yet for a little longer here
> stone and oak shelter
>
> silence while we ask nothing
> but silence. Look how clouds dance
> under the wind's wing, and leaves
> delight in transience. (145)

On the one hand, Bunting's post-war trajectory comes full circle in this, one of his very last poems. Silence is once again offered as the only means of surmounting scepticism and decline. In this sense 'At Briggflatts Meetinghouse' recalls 'On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's Cantos', or *The Spoils*. Yet it should be noted that this yearning for the sublime ineffability of music – its 'silence' – is enabled by a specific ambience created by a specific community and its crafted shelter of stone and oak. With the right architecture, the dream of a community living in harmony with itself and with nature might one day be realised.

In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin had celebrated the liberating potential of a culture governed by mechanical reproduction, a culture that would dismantle the aura of the work of art and create a scintillating no-man's-land of aesthetic experience:

> The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room.[50]

But in the post-war period, Bunting acted out a quite different theory. As he

[50] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1969), p. 221

crystallised and presented a final summary of the Poundian modernist project in *Briggflatts* and its attendant writings, one of Bunting's great discoveries was that the poet must establish – with the help of his civic partners – a means of constructing new non-conformist cathedrals for his resounding choral productions.

Chapter 5: *Briggflatts*

> *An autobiography*, but not a record of fact. The first movement is no more a chronicle than the third. The truth of the poem is of another kind.
>
> – Basil Bunting.[1]

> *Briggflatts* is the great love poem of the 20th-century. This is not the most obvious thing in the world because it has the big structure, it has a musical element and a certain timing which, you know, is associated with modern poetry and in fact I think it's also a great modern poem in a sense that it takes geography and personal history and an incredible sense of place. But in the end it's about love and that's what makes it. Love poetry is not, hasn't been, significant in this century, which also makes this a very unique poem in that it uses the modern structure and range of affect which in fact actually the academy and the academic mind feel uncomfortable with. This has been Zukofsky's problem, this has been Olson's problem, this has been anybody's problem who wants to incorporate more and more narrative and cast the net wider and wider and Basil succeeded in doing this in *Briggflatts* in a very peculiar way.
>
> – Ed Dorn.[2]

Foreword

In the previous chapter we saw how the environment of Newcastle and Britain in the 1960s enabled Bunting to achieve a long-delayed breakthrough in his poetry. After a half-century of struggling to free himself from a variety of external impediments – the English literary establishment, Pound, his own feelings of belatedness – Bunting was able to move beyond first generation modernism and its nineteenth-century inheritance by lighting on a poetic that derived strength from the bulwarking support of a community. Dedicated, since his very first poems, to a public, contextualised poetry that might halt the modernist descent into 'solitary scribblings', Bunting found a space in the Morden Tower and its surroundings for a powerful work of post-subjective late modernist verse. Tom Pickard's recent description of the Morden Tower scene provides a moving summary of the extent of this achievement:

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[1] Note on *Briggflatts* in *Complete Poems*, p. 156.

[2] Tom Pickard, private manuscript sent to Alex Niven, via email, 15 December 2011.

> It was exciting and everyone was engaged in it, even Richard Hamilton in the art school. It was cross-discipline and cross-class too. And I would think that Basil did thrive on that tension, because it was an adoring, attentive audience at the [Morden] Tower. And they were – quote unquote – genuine people. For the most part they weren't pretentious people. They were solid. 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.[3]

What Bunting 'made work', with *Briggflatts* and its attendant writings, was a popular, communitarian variety of literary modernism that finally gave meaning to the claim that poetry was nearly synonymous with music. If the poet was declaiming to a responsive audience, and if his sound patterns were painted on an epic canvas that told the tribe's story back to it in some meaningful way, distinctions between the sister arts of literature and music were largely moot. A long-running modernist campaign of linguistic and social reform oriented around claims for a 'musical' aesthetic had made a substantial leap forward into a vital public context.

And yet, we also have to account for the fact that *Briggflatts*, the apotheosis of this crucial phase of modern poetry, was, ostensibly at least, Bunting's autobiography, a work that followed the model of Wordsworth's *Prelude* in taking the author himself as the subject of its epic narrative. Is the poem then a reiteration of the Romantic and high modernist dedication to a singular, interiorised consciousness? To what extent should we emphasise the word 'autobiography' that Bunting attached to the epigraph page of *Briggflatts*? In fact, as we shall see, for all its ostensible focus, the poem is structured as a narrative in which the poet ultimately comes to see his own wishes as insignificant. *Briggflatts* is a mini-epic that dramatises self-sacrifice, the history of a community, and that of literary modernism itself, in a manner that marks it out as a distinctive final chapter of a narrative in which he had been attempting to emphasise

[3] Alex Niven, 'To reach the moon you need a rocket: an interview with Tom Pickard', *3:AM Magazine*, 2 November 2012, http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/tom-pickard-interview/, accessed 28/06/13.

collectivity and public performance over isolated subjectivity since the early years of the twentieth century. A detailed close reading of the poem along with an examination of its draft manuscripts will help to foreground this fact.

I. The Genesis of *Briggflatts*.

I have emphasised that *Briggflatts* is a bravura performance clearly conscious of, and galvanised by, the fact that its author could by the mid-1960s rely on what Tom Pickard described as an 'adoring, attentive audience'. However, Bunting's discovery of this new platform for composition and performance did not happen immediately after his meeting with Tom Pickard. The pair first met in late 1963, the Morden Tower readings began a few months later, in March 1964, and *Briggflatts* itself was not first thought of until the autumn of 1964 at the earliest (it was not read in public until December 1965, and not published until February 1966).[4] What immediately preceded the composition of *Briggflatts* was a late – though not a final – resurgence of the self-loathing, self-cancelling tendency that had dominated Bunting's career since as far back as the time of 'Villon'. Bunting's friend Denis Goacher records staying with him in the summer of 1964, while he gave a reading at Morden Tower: 'He was absolutely in the doldrums, in the sense that he didn't feel he would ever write anything again. He said things like, 'Well, you know, you're trying to say something; I have nothing to say – I'm just a technician.''[5] Bunting's silence, his perennial sense that he 'had nothing to say' was lingering even with the support of the Morden Tower milieu. A letter to Louis Zukofsky sent just after Goacher's visit spoke of a new

[4] In his 1989 interview with Diana Collecott, Denis Goacher commented that he was 'quite sure' Bunting started *Briggflatts* 'sometime between September and end of [1964]', Goacher, 'Denis Goacher Talks About Basil Bunting', p. 198.
[5] Ibid., p. 198.

poem, a 'programme of an old man revisiting the scenes of his youth … as my father did in the few months before he died.'[6] But, Bunting admitted, he had 'no means to carry it out'; and anyway, he went on to exclaim with characteristic gloom, 'We are all very little more than turds'. The self-loathing and retentiveness that had led Bunting to comment, 'Most of my writing is shit' to Pound in 1935 was still as immoveable as ever. Ode II:4, apparently written concurrently with *Briggflatts*, encapsulates the mood of abnegation of 1964 and early 1965:

> You idiot! What makes you think decay will
> never stink from your skin? Your warts sicken
> typists, girls in the tube avoid you. Must they
> also stop their ears to your tomcat
> wailing, a promise your body cannot keep? (138)

For Denis Goacher, such sonorously lacerating writing ('stink', 'skin', 'warts sicken | typists') was an expression of Bunting's 'sexual crisis at the age of sixty-five or so'.[7] However, as we have seen, morbidity in this vein had been a stock feature of his verse since the 1920s. Whatever the cause, on the eve of *Briggflatts* Bunting was deadlocked in a familiar manner.

But then, there were also stirrings of birdsong. In the poem that eventually became the first in the Second Book of Odes, 'A thrush in the syringa sings', Bunting's readings of Hardy in his twenties finally bore fruit. The poem is dated 1964 in the *Collected Poems*, and Goacher argues that it 'must have been written at the very end of 1964',[8] that is, during the early stages of the composition of *Briggflatts*:

> A thrush in the syringa sings.
>
> 'Hunger ruffles my wings, fear,

[6] Basil Bunting, letter to Louis Zukofsky, 14 September 1964, HRC.
[7] Goacher, 'Denis Goacher Talks about Basil Bunting', p. 206.
[8] Ibid., p. 198.

lust, familiar things.

Death thrusts hard. My sons
by hawk's beak, by stones,
trusting weak wings
by cat and weasel, die.

Thunder smothers the sky.
From a shaken bush I
list familiar things,
fear, hunger, lust.'

O gay thrush! (135)

Bunting's comment to Goacher that he was just a technician is partially vindicated in this poem. The radical foregrounding of sound is more extreme than in any other of Bunting's poems since the 1926 ode 'I am agog for foam'. Like that work, 'A thrush in the syringa sings' is sonically alive in a way that verges on exaggeration: alliteration, assonance, rhyme, internal rhyme, and repetition are all utilised almost to excess in a remarkably small space. To look no further than the first line, observe the subtle alliteration that ties together 'thrush' and 'the syringa', and the birdsong onomatopoeia of the chiming assonantal sequence 'in the syringa sings'. This is a lushly ornamented strain of acoustic lyricism. But 'A thrush in the syringa sings' is finally an extremely successful poem because it is austere as well as decorative. 39 out of 50 words here are monosyllables, and the measured three-stresses-per-line pattern is maintained throughout with only one or two exceptions. Bunting had now lighted on a form in which the musicality that arose from a concentration of acoustic effects could be integrated with his penchant for monosyllabic minimalism and neo-classical carving.

Paralleling the balance between alacrity and restraint in the form of 'A thrush in the syringa sings' is a dichotomy of theme that represents a similar breakthrough. As we have seen, the song of the thrush is embodied emphatically by way of

Bunting's acoustic effects. Bunting is introducing a pastoral element to his long-running quest for the revival of a cantabile poetry in English. Hardy is a likely influence, as well as Shakespeare's songs ('When the daffodils begin to peer'), Spenser ('Epithalamion'), and the Elizabethan lyric in general. Some manner of springtime reawakening or renaissance is being signalled quite clearly in this variation on a traditional motif. Yet the thrusting movement of breakout and release occurs simultaneously with a restatement of 'familiar things', with the motifs of stricture and fatality that had provided the ground bass of Bunting's poetry up to this point. The first and final lines of the ode are effusive: separated out as standalone lines, they are song-like outbursts that bookend a pattern of repetition and circularity (see also the reappearance of 'fear, hunger, lust' just before the conclusion, a contraction of the second and third lines). In between, however, there is a stark antiphony. The greater part of the poem is concerned with death, with hunger, with various onomatopoeias of the 'hawks beak', the destructive, deflating force that has killed the thrush's offspring. 'Sons' become 'stones'; 'wings' collapse into 'things'; thunder takes the life out of the sky.

It is important to emphasise this double-pull in Bunting's verse, if only because it allows us to realise just how subtle the innovation he was introducing in late 1964 was. Bunting was not discovering a new religion: his philosophy was not undergoing a dramatic overhaul. Rather, he was finally managing to make his distinctive worldview sing in a way that did not totally renege on his entrenched commitment to elegy and epitaph. He was waking to the possibility of revival and creative breakthrough, and as he was doing so his radical scepticism and belief in the vanity of human wishes was thawing and metamorphosing into a kind of vitalism that associated mortality with diurnal movement instead of sheer paralysis and oblivion. In

a letter to Zukofsky sent in September 1964, a week before Bunting protested that he didn't have 'the means' to write a long work of historical summary, he was still rehearsing the idea that he was just about to 'petrify'.[9] He quoted a new couplet of poetry to prove it: 'In the grave's narrow slot | they lie: we rot.' But if all Bunting's poetry prior to this moment had ultimately foundered in the narrow slot, the prison walls of form and environment that had continually foreshortened his lyrical exclamations, at some point in the last months of 1964 he seems to have decided that a vocabulary of walls and stones could be used in counterpoint with, and as a supporting framework for, a poetry of musical vitality. An abbreviated version of the couplet he quoted to Zukofsky became one of the key phrases in the opening section of *Briggflatts*, which built on the innovations of 'A thrush in the syringa sings' with a sudden dynamism that is ultimately very difficult to account for, even allowing for these explanations.

Notoriously, Bunting destroyed the vast majority of his non-published writings and virtually all of his correspondence. However, one of Bunting's numerous cancellations has survived, and for an interesting reason. After the publication and success of *Briggflatts*, Bunting gave Tom Pickard the notebook he had used to sketch preliminary ideas and try out lines that would eventually find their way into the poem. In Pickard's words, the notebook was 'given to me as a boy so that I might learn the craft from it'.[10] It is testament to the indebtedness Bunting felt to the Morden Tower milieu in general and Tom Pickard in particular for giving him the support he needed to write *Briggflatts*, that he was willing to compromise his otherwise unyielding privacy in this way. Given the remarkable contents of the notebook, it is doubly

[9] Basil Bunting, letter to Louis Zukofsky, 7 September 1964, HRC.
[10] Tom Pickard, private manuscript sent to Alex Niven, via email, 15 December, 2011.

surprising that Bunting would choose to relinquish control of his literary affairs at this moment. But his gesture is in keeping certain motifs within the poem itself. If, as Ed Dorn has argued, *Briggflatts* is the 'great love poem of the twentieth century', then it is appropriate that Bunting should choose to abjure his mystique at this late stage, Prospero-style, by revealing the secrets of his craft to a young man for whom he felt immense gratitude and respect. As we shall see, *Briggflatts* itself is concerned with a similar relinquishment of self-centeredness and self-control.

Looked at as a whole, the *Briggflatts* notebook, which was eventually released into the public domain by Pickard, who gave it to the library at S.U.N.Y. Buffalo, confirms that the starting point of the poem was a powerfully romantic premise that was subsequently reduced in a rather more circumscribed final work.[11] We have seen countless examples hitherto of this tendency in Bunting to cancel out and draw back from idealism and effusive utterance. But it is difficult to imagine that any of the discarded drafts of Bunting's poems up to this point had been as effusive and untrammelled as the notes that led eventually to *Briggflatts*.

The poem's de facto starting point, jotted down on what is apparently the first page of the notebook (though it is not numbered), is straightforward enough:

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[11] The notebook is contained in the Poetry/Rare Books Collection at the University of Buffalo, State University of New York. In a useful blogpost on *Briggflatts*, Don Share has provided a thorough summary of the notebook's contents and structure: 'Bunting wrote first on recto pages, numbering them in the upper right-hand corner, then flipped the book over and wrote on verso pages, left unnumbered. He would try out a number of lines and expand these into sections of verse. Then he would rewrite the sections, incorporating revisions, and in some cases cancel the earlier sections. When a section had been finished, a new one was begun and worked on. At times, he drew scansion marks above or near certain lines. Some of the loose leaves can be interpolated successfully if either page numbers or repeated lines of verse make this possible; others seem orphaned, and may be from a second notebook of the same size. Bunting's handwriting in this material is not always easy to decipher, although in other autograph manuscript material, e.g. fair copies of poems, it is usually quite clear; this may support Bunting's claim that he worked on the notebooks while he was commuting to work. Many cancellations of entire sections consist of single diagonal strokes; horizontal lines are often drawn through individual words or phrases, but when Bunting has scratched out words or phrases they are difficult to reconstruct. The redundancy of material makes it fairly straightforward to correlate it with the published version of the poem. The notebook material also includes a number of drawings and some incidental text, e.g., a letter of recommendation on behalf of Tom Pickard, a mailing address, etc.' 'Short Notes on a Longish Poem', http://donshare.blogspot.co.uk/2008/05/short-notes-on-longish-poem.html, accessed 3/7/13.

The bull streams and laments

Baltic plainsong of their speech

The copperwire moustache, the
sea-reflecting eyes,
and Baltic plainsong speech, call up
Eric Bloodaxe …

There is nothing in these sketches that would be altered dramatically in the poem's final draft. Bunting appears to have started with a series of images or fragments, which were then melded together by way of a distinctive stylistic process (of which more momentarily). However, as Bunting's notes accumulate, a tide of affect gathers. Immediately after the notes on the bull, Bloodaxe, and other details from the opening sequence, there is a fragment of writing that is strikingly unlike anything Bunting allowed to appear in print:

Old woman, dying in the squalid
swept empty ward
thinking of the ragged sofa and
the cracked flowered cups left
behind in her room
and they have put her piano
beside her bed,
with the little Scarlatti Dminor
open on it
She has been mad for years,
putting Bach into god's place
praying to Bach
Two little great grandchildren bring flowers
frightened of the bare place, the beds
of the dying, the smell of death
and she stretches her hand to the
keyboard, just able to sound a
few notes, but she hears the
whole fugue as she dies.

This vignette recounting the illness of Bunting's nonagenarian mother Annie contains the seeds of motifs that would feature in the final poem: the Scarlatti sonata, of

course, is central to the poem's structure, and the comment about hearing the 'whole fugue' before dying suggests an interesting angle for approaching *Briggflatts*, which was, after all, very nearly Bunting's final poem.

But the unguarded sentimentality evident in this passage does not quite fit with established views about the poem, and it certainly offers a stark contrast to other works in Bunting's oeuvre. This is, clearly, a loosely transcribed note rather than a draft proper, and we cannot parse it in the way we might sections of the final published work. Nevertheless, it is not a prose fragment: the writing is arranged as verse, and it chimes with certain themes of *Briggflatts* in such a way that it might help us to understand the evolution Bunting's poetry was undergoing at this point. As with 'A thrush in the syringa sings,' the fragment juxtaposes a focus on dying and 'the smell of death' with a musical theme and images of rebirth and generational succession. Bunting, who had wanted to write a book about Dickens in his mid-twenties, was now displaying a Dickensian pathos and sympathy. Nearly thirty years after he informed Pound that his translations of the *Shahnameh* were an attempt to try telling a story as a way of circumventing the cul-de-sac of modernist 'indirect business', Bunting was discovering a nuanced style with which he could relate quotidian narratives that bordered on folk poetry. The sentimentality would be reined in considerably in the final version of *Briggflatts*, but a residue of the intimacy of this excised passage would be retained. The first section of *Briggflatts*, as we shall see, is constructed out of novelistic vignettes in this mould.

Moreover, it is significant that Bunting's newfound romantic mode was coalescing around images of women and mysticism. Bunting's mother, 'mad for years', was in fact a woman with some occult credentials. A product of late-Victorian culture, Annie Bunting read W.B. Yeats's horoscope in Rapallo, and owned a

substantial library of occult texts, which Tom Pickard would be given after her death to sell in his Ultima Thule bookshop in central Newcastle (presumably to customers who closely resembled the bohemians of the 1890s in attitude and outlook).[12] In isolation Annie Bunting's mysticism might appear to be an arbitrary biographical detail, but it makes sense that Bunting would try to eulogise her 'madness' at this moment. The *Briggflatts* notebook shows Bunting experimenting with a variety of ways of depicting an ethereal female muse against a backdrop of Northumbrian myth and folk history. A few pages after the passage describing Annie Bunting's illness, there is a brief, unelaborated note: ''Allendale witches' romanticism – graves etc. of the moment – 1673'. This is almost certainly a reference to a witch trial that took place in that year in Morpeth, Northumberland. Three local women were accused by the scullery maid Ann Armstrong of frequenting witches' meetings in Riding Mill, a village a short distance from Bunting's 1960s home in Wylam.[13] His interest in this incident, along with the intriguing gloss about Robert Graves, romanticism, and 'the moment', suggests that a complex of real and mythologised female 'hauntings' was an integral foundational element in the construction of *Briggflatts*.

Briggflatts, famously, is written 'for' Peggy Greenbank (Bunting's childhood sweetheart to whom many of the poem's most emotive passages are addressed). A portrait of Peggy is contained in the first section, and there are a number of brief retrospective glances at her in the later sections, as well as suggestions that Bunting's life was somehow ruined when he 'laid aside' his love for her in adolescence. However, the *Briggflatts* notebook suggests that she was a much more dominant

[12] See Victoria Forde, *The Poetry of Basil Bunting* (Newcastle, 1991), p. 31). There is an interesting juxtaposition in Bunting's library, donated to the library at S.U.N.Y. Buffalo. Perhaps due to a quirk of alphabetisation, Bunting's copy of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is placed next to a book, presumably once owned by Annie Bunting, entitled *Hypnotism Made Easy*.

[13] See Margaret Alice Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology* (Minneapolis, 2007), p. 35.

presence in original conceptions of the poem. Most notably, there are several drafts in the notebook of a lyric section apparently written from the perspective of Peggy as she was waiting for Bunting in the meetinghouse at Brigflatts as a child. The acute tenderness and oceanic imagery of these draft passages, which recall the close of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, is startling:

> Come at daybreak, love, daybreak,
> most of all, at daybreak,
> loved most of all, at first light,
> come alone,
> come before dawn, alone.
>
> Alone in the meeting house,
> steep the waves are, waiting,
> ~~waiting~~ in the meeting house, for him,
> waves, high waves. Waiting for him,
> waves steep, deep; no boat, no one to row,
> waiting, deep sea, no boat, no oar,
> for him. The boat, no oarsman.
> O drown, drown, waiting!
> Deep sea, drown me
> waiting for him.

If this represents the draft in an early, overflowing form, what appears to be the final or penultimate version of four or five attempts is scarcely less incantatory and fluid:

> I am sitting in the meeting house at Briggflatts
> The waves are around me. How high they are.
> And I am waiting for my sweetheart.
>
> Am I not in the meetinghouse at Briggflatts?
> The waves are around me, high and deep
> And I am waiting for my sweetheart.
>
> The waves are around me. How high they seem,
> and here is no boat, no oarsman.
> And I am waiting for my sweetheart.
>
> The waves of the deep sea are around me,
> there is no boat and I cannot row
> And I am waiting for my sweetheart

> There is no boat, ~~I cannot~~ no one to row,
> I shall drown, trembling[tumbling?], in the deep sea/great ocean
> I am waiting for my sweetheart.[14]

One of the drafts has 'III' at its head. This rubric seems to have been added later; nevertheless, from this it seems probable that Bunting intended the 'Alone in the meetinghouse' refrain to be the central, third episode in *Briggflatts*, the section that was eventually built around an adaptation of the Alexander the Great/Sikander narrative in the *Shahnameh*. Had Bunting placed these romantic interludes at the heart of the poem instead of the Alexander/Sikander episode, it would obviously have made for a radically different work. As we saw in Chapter Three, in the published version of *Briggflatts* the third section iterates an ethic of failure and withdrawal. Alexander/Sikander journeys to the summit of the world, where he is confronted with his own mortality and subsequently returned to a pastoral homeland where the slowworm figure advises him to embrace humility and patience. By stark contrast, the unpublished romantic interludes originally intended for Part III are unqualified evocations of a twilit space presided over by the spirit of Bunting's childhood sweetheart, in which erotic feeling is figured in the topos of a surging, engulfing sea.

Bunting has been deservedly celebrated for his intolerance of verbal imprecision. As Denis Goacher comments:

> … he wasn't the sort of writer who just spun things out of his head. He wanted to be rooted in reality and that is what makes him a very considerable poet, and, indeed, puts him head and shoulders above any other English poet of the last thirty years or so.[15]

The argument that Bunting was 'rooted in reality', that he was the great post-war representative of a Poundian tradition of right-naming and empiricism, is a persuasive

[14] Hereafter this and the preceding fragment will be referred to as 'Alone in the meetinghouse'.
[15] Goacher, 'Denis Goacher Talks about Basil Bunting', pp. 205-6.

one. But there is another argument to be made about Bunting's reluctance to spin things out of his head. This view would interpret creative abstemiousness as a disability rather than a virtue, and regard Bunting's tendency to excise anything that he did not consider to be 'rooted in reality' as pedantic at best, dictatorial at worst. Taken to an extreme, scepticism can easily tip over into arrogance about one's intellectual capacities. Throughout his career, Bunting fell victim to this variety of arrogance and sought to control his verse almost out of existence. Yet there was a counteractive instinct in his creativity. As the *Briggflatts* notebook shows, it is quite clear that at moments Bunting experimented with a verse form that abandoned quasi-scientific objectivity in favour of a Wordsworthian spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings and emotion recollected in tranquillity. Indeed, the Wordsworth parallel is apt, because it appears that in departing from the modernist 'no ideas but in things' credo at the time of *Briggflatts*, Bunting discovered an antithetical form of rootedness that derived inspiration from an ambient lyrical tradition rather than from literalistic renderings of atomised objects; in other words, in a transfer of control from himself to the people around him. Bunting declared that *Briggflatts* was 'not a record of fact … The truth of the poem is of another kind'. It seems that at least part of what he meant by this was that he was attempting to register a truth that could not be easily communicated by way of the rigorously sceptical apparatus he had honed over the previous forty years. As we saw in the previous chapter, instead of being guided by his own ocular perspicuity, Bunting came to be anchored by the steadying influence of his surroundings, which made for a poetry that was freed from the need to be objective on the level of the microcosm because it was rooted in the more powerful reality of the communitarian macrocosm.

As such, it is fitting that in writing *Briggflatts* Bunting was following Wordsworth in taking inspiration from the folk culture and ballad music of his locality, as he sought to create an evocative portrait of Peggy Greenbank in the idealised space of the Brigflatts meetinghouse. It seems possible and even probable that Bunting's source for the lyrical sections written from Peggy's perspective was the popular Northumberland folksong 'Water of Tyne':

> I cannot get to my love if I would dee,
> The water of Tyne runs between him and me;
> And here I must stand with a tear in my e'e,
> Both sighing and sickly my sweetheart to see.
>
> Oh where is the boatman, my bonny hinny!
> Oh where is the boatman? bring him to me;
> To ferry me over the Tyne to my honey
> And I will remember the boatman and thee.
>
> Oh bring me a boatman, I'll give any money,
> And you for your trouble rewarded shall be
> To ferry me over the Tyne to my honey
> Or scull him across that rough river to me.[16]

In this case, as so often throughout Bunting's career, the musical reflex was preparing the way for a creative breakthrough, and loosening up the anti-idealist embargo on abstraction and imprecise language. It is unfortunate that Bunting could not find a place for these passages in the final version of *Briggflatts*, or elsewhere for that matter. The poem remains an impenetrable modernist work to many readers, which is regrettable given that it was in essence motivated by populist sentiments. The

[16] We know that Bunting owned a copy of William Whitaker's *North Countrie Ballads, Songs and Pipe-tunes*, 'from which he played (on recorders) and sang throughout his life'. Given that Whitaker's anthology contains a version of 'Water of Tyne', which is in any case a very well-known song in Tynedale, it is highly improbable that Bunting was not familiar with it. See Richard Caddel and Anthony Flowers, *Basil Bunting: A Northern Life* (Newcastle: Newcastle Libraries, 1997), p. 29. The version of 'Water of Tyne' given here is taken from the vocal edition of *North Countrie Ballads, Songs and Pipe-tunes* (London: J. Curwen and Sons, 1921), p. 105.

inclusion of Peggy Greenbank's voice would have emphasised that it was, at heart, a poem about love and a renunciation of control.

II. The Formal Templates

A transition of sorts between the free lyricism of the excised 'Alone in the meetinghouse' passages and the more sculpted opening of the published version of *Briggflatts* is provided by a fragment in the notebook apparently written between the first and second drafts quoted above:

> None goes finer than she
> whose majesty
> shines through the notes
> tailored to fit her
> in Rome, in Tus,
> in Toulouse.
>
> None pays so meanly
> for queenly
> service of throats.
> Could he outwit her,
> indeed he'd feed
> to his need.
>
> Meeting the milkman's bill
> wants skill
> as the foal gloats
> and neighbours titter,
> hob never hot,
> rusts the pot.[17]

There does not seem to be an exact precedent for this experiment, but it shows clearly the influence of the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century lyric. Bunting had always shown a keen interest in the English lyrics of this period. Or, more precisely, his interest became especially keen at the very beginning and at the very end of his

[17] Hereafter this fragment will be referred to as 'None goes finer than she'.

career. As a young man he owned a copy of J. M. Roberston's 1914 study *Elizabethan Literature*, and in his twenties there were successive encounters with Elizabethan music and poetry. The same Dr William Whitaker who compiled the anthology from which Bunting probably knew 'Water of Tyne' was also a friend and colleague of the great madrigal collector Edmund Fellowes. In later years Bunting would refer back to Whitaker's 1924 revival performance at Newcastle Cathedral of Byrd's Great Service (based on manuscripts discovered by Fellowes) as an important episode in his youth.[18] And around the same time as the Byrd performance, in London in the early 1920s, Bunting cultivated an interest in Tudor music in keeping with contemporary bohemian trends. Through friendships with the Scottish composer-critic Cecil Gray and Philip Heseltine/Peter Warlock, the *enfant terrible* of 1920s English vocal music, Bunting became familiar with sixteenth-century songs, and his music journalism of the late-twenties (for the *Outlook*, and for Warlock's *Sackbut*) was heavily indebted to the influence of this milieu.

Bunting's renewed interest in the lyric forms of the English renaissance in the mid-1960s was surely in some way an attempt to revive these aborted youthful projects, a motivation in keeping with the overarching theme of *Briggflatts*. As creative molecules were crystallising in late 1964, discarded fragments from the past were being unearthed. Bunting was working towards the grand statement of *Briggflatts*' opening section and its motifs of spring and reawakening, and in the process the Tudor songs he had known in his twenties were providing the inspiration for a distinctive, modified style. I have said that the 'None goes finer than she' passage from the notebook is a loose pastiche rather than an example of a specific formal genre. However, it does closely resemble a number of poems Bunting spoke

[18] Williams, *Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal*, no pagination.

highly of in his later years. In his lecture series at the University of Newcastle in 1969-70, Bunting read aloud Thomas Wyatt's 'Longre to muse', as he attempted to demonstrate that Wyatt 'wrote by the spoken sound or the sung sound of the words, not by their numbers, the number of syllables'.[19] There is a large amount of debate behind that assertion, but Bunting's more general point about Wyatt – that his rhythms were idiosyncratic because of a possible musical influence – seems reasonable. 'Longre to muse' bears out this point:

> Longre to muse
> On this refuse
> I will not vse,
> 	But studye to forget;
> Lett my all go,
> Sins well I kno
> To be my foo
> 	Her herte is fermely sett.

Bunting talked only very cursorily in the lecture about the 'shape of the [poem's] stanza'. But presumably, his suggestion is that the form is so condensed and rhythmic, and the vocabulary so simple, that an original musical setting appears very likely (a useful contrast would be with, say, Miltonic blank verse, which tends to proceed by what Bunting elsewhere referred to as 'trotting': long, unvaried lines that lessen the emphasis on rhythmic idiosyncrasy, and that are discursive rather than songlike). 'Longre to muse' also conforms to Bunting's theory of 'cadence', the notion that 'poetry that can take great freedoms within the line, until it reaches a cadence'.[20] The two 'refrain' lines here ('But studye to forget' and 'Her herte is fermely sett') act as 'cadences' in this instance: they round-off the short, rhythmic passages and give a distinct phrasal shape to what might otherwise be a mere metronomic sequence. The

[19] Bunting, *Basil Bunting on Poetry*, p. 43
[20] Bunting quoted in ibid., p. 94. See *passim* for Peter Makin's discussion of Bunting's theory of 'cadence'.

rhyming couplets at the end of the stanzas in Bunting's 'None goes finer than she' serve a similar function, but in reverse: the shorter phrases ('hob never hot, | rusts the pot') are perfunctory cadences that contrast with the looser metre of the previous lines.

Also in the 1969-70 lecture series at Newcastle, Bunting discussed at length Frederick Keel's *Elizabethan Love-Songs*, which he argued was an important text for the modernist milieu of early twentieth-century London. He commented: 'Keel's book of Elizabethan songs is the only place I can think of where the poets could find the rhythms which began to reappear in English, and the first poets to use them were frequenters of Olivia Shakespear's drawing room – Yeats and Pound'.[21] Bunting illustrated his point by reading aloud a triad of poems from Yeats's *Responsibilities* (1916). Of the three, 'The Witch' is probably the most salient for our purposes:

> Toil and grow rich,
> What's that but to lie
> With a foul witch
> And after, drained dry,
> To be brought
> To the chamber where
> Lies one long sought
> With despair?[22]

Again, we can see how short, monosyllabic lines foreground a rich variety of rhythmic patterns (note in particular the spondaic line endings: 'grow rich', 'foul witch', 'drained dry'). We might consider that the unevenness of these lines (compare 'And after, drained dry' and 'To be brought') was not all that significant for Yeats: perhaps he was more concerned with writing a curt epigram with a simple rhyme scheme than maintaining metrical consistency. But for Bunting the unevenness was

[21] Ibid. pp. 121-3.
[22] W.B. Yeats, 'The Witch', *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London, 1994), p. 172.

deliberate. In his view, Yeats's interest in Elizabethan song had freed up his rhythms and allowed him to innovate a visceral style that broke decisively with iambic mannerism.

The most likely and the most interesting model for the 'None goes finer than she' experiment, though, is Edmund Waller's 'Go, lovely rose', which Bunting included in his list of works for a never published anthology of English poetry compiled in the late 1970s:

> Go, lovely Rose:
> Tell her, that wastes her time and me,
> That now she knows,
> When I resemble her to thee,
> How sweet and fair she seems to be.[23]

Bunting's rhyme scheme in 'None goes finer than she' (AABCDD, with reiterations in successive stanzas) differs subtly from Waller's five-line ABABB verses. But the affinities with Waller's poem are conspicuous. The short, rhythmically varied lines, and the emphatic rhyme scheme mark 'Go, lovely Rose' out as a likely antecedent of Bunting's experiment in the *Briggflatts* notebook. Of course, if Bunting was attempting something like a Waller pastiche, he may well have been doing so for more than arbitrary reasons. As we saw in Chapter Three, it is highly likely that dialogues in the early thirties about Waller and a 'cantabile' English poetry between Bunting and Pound provided at least a part of the backdrop to Pound's musical outburst in the 'libretto' section of Canto 81. It is possible, therefore, that Bunting was attempting to respond to the *Pisan Cantos* in some way, consciously or not, by experimenting with a form modelled on Waller's lyric in his first major poem written in the wake of that work (which Bunting almost certainly did not read until after *The*

[23] Edmund Waller, 'Song (Go, lovely rose)', *Selected Poems of Abraham Cowley, Edmund Waller and John Oldham* (Harmondsworth, 1998), p. 55.

Spoils was published in 1951). At the very least, it is revealing that Bunting was reviving, in more general terms, the pre-Civil War tradition of music-oriented poetry that for a complex of political and aesthetic reasons had been buried at the back of his mind as a utopian ideal since the 1920s.

Still, Bunting had not settled on the singular shapes that were eventually grafted together to create *Briggflatts*. The lyric of the English renaissance provided models of rhythmic variety, flexible, irregular patterns of rhyme and assonance, and useful examples of 'cadence' (the closing rhyming couplet, the 'refrain' line). While Bunting's glance at Elizabethanism in 'Attis' in the early 1930s had been a more or less ironic stylistic pastiche, the fragment in the *Briggflatts* notebook together with 'A thrush in the syringa sings' showed him finding inspiration in the attributes of the Elizabethan and seventeenth-century lyric that would allow him to maintain shape without killing spontaneity. In other words, the resuscitation of the Tudor vogue of the early-twentieth century was accompanying a new variation on the classic Poundian impulse to advocate the musical phrase over the sequence of the metronome. Yet the impact of these influences on the final form of *Briggflatts* is ultimately slight. There are explicit references to madrigals, to William Byrd, and to Spenserian pastoral tropes, but no sustained use of sixteenth and seventeenth-century forms, with the possible exception of an interlude in Part II that seems Skeltonic ('Win from rock | flame and ore ...' (68)).

Perhaps because Bunting was intent on writing a long poem of architectural scope, he needed to look beyond the model of the renaissance lyric phrase that worked so well in the context of short poems like 'A thrush in the syringa sings'. The first section of *Briggflatts* might in one sense be viewed as a series of neo-Elizabethan

pastoral lyric phrases (or as Bunting put it, 'madrigals') with accompanying 'descant' ornamentations: free, improvisatory flourishes that render the respective 'songs' of the bull, the river Rawthey, the mason's mallet, the lark's twitter, and so on. But to maintain a thread throughout this section, and throughout the remainder of the poem, Bunting needed a formal device that would bind these lyric flourishes together.

The solution to this problem appears to have arrived quite suddenly.[24] About a quarter of the way into the notebook is the following fragment:

> Often his meaning is made with a man
> who, if he thwart it, though thick-thewed.
> will whither white as ash, and wear
> his crutch crooked, with cramped gait
> hindering helpers. Little hope
> of ease has age to offer him who
> yielded not to youth, yet to withstand
> his hand's cunning on the keen cut
> of his teeth on words twisted tight
> ~~is sure~~ shames him. He shrinks into his shoulders
> hunched against hard looks. His heart heaves
> for sickness of its own sour scorn.[25]

Interestingly, as with the 'None goes finer than she' fragment, Bunting appears to have been attempting a loose adaptation of an archaic form rather than a strict pastiche. The starting point of the poem, the juxtaposition of the bull's song with the ambient 'Baltic plainsong speech' that 'calls up' Eric Bloodaxe was evidently followed by an attempt to render Eric's narrative in an appropriate historical style: the gist of this passage seems to be a displacement of the attributes of Bloodaxe, who is described in the final version of the poem as '[l]oaded with mail of linked lies' (68),

[24] There were, however, anticipations of the interest in the music of Anglo-Saxon poetic forms prior to this moment. In December 1959 Bunting wrote to Pound: 'I wonder how English dodged the clumsiness of the other Germanic languages. The Scandinavian one are not so bad, of course, but there's English in Beowulf, before ever the Norse came along, and a few lines of it are worth all the Germans ever did. The best bits of Sir Gawain are short (norse?), right way up, and telling. Also they sound, not to say resound'. Basil Bunting, letter to Ezra Pound, 1 December 1959. Beinecke.

[25] Hereafter this fragment will be referred to as 'Often his meaning is made with a man'.

onto the similarly disingenuous, self-deceiving poet figure (that is, Bunting). But finding a form for this subject was a far from straightforward task. Bunting made it clear in the annotations to the *Collected Poems* that his sources for Eric Bloodaxe were the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the Orkneyinga saga, and the Heimskringla. However, those are all prose works. Consequently, Bunting seems to have turned to Old English alliterative verse for formal inspiration, though with some selectivity; just as Pound borrowed elements of Old English verse in Canto 1 and in his translation of 'The Seafarer' while leaving space for his own idiosyncratic touches, Bunting kept only the basic structural glue of alliterative verse (that is, alliteration), without bothering to retain hemistichs, caesurae, kennings, and other technical paraphernalia. The 'Often his meaning is made with a man' fragment is essentially very similar to Pound's 'Seafarer', in that it deploys heavy alliteration but maintains flow and rhythmic variety by alternating the position of the stresses or 'lifts'. A line like 'yielded not to youth, yet to withstand' is orthodox alliterative verse, but 'hunched against hard looks. His heart heaves' (with its five 'h' alliterations and enjambment at the end of the line) is clearly not.

Even in this notebook exercise, then, Bunting was following Old English precedents only very tentatively. Moreover, as we have seen, his verse had long recruited heavy alliteration in the service of its dense, exaggerated onomatopoeias (in 1929's 'I am agog for foam', for example). However, we should not underestimate the crucial importance of this new emphasis on an alliterative ground bass. Superficially, the Old English mode is apposite as a stylistic incarnation of the historical leitmotifs in *Briggflatts*. Bunting was sketching a Northumbrian mythos, and he needed a formal counterpart to the early-medieval presences in the poem (Bloodaxe, Saints Aidan and Cuthbert, the Battle of Catraeth, the Lindisfarne Codex).

But the Anglo-Saxon influence also impacted more profoundly on the texture of Bunting's verse. If his experiments with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century forms had provided him with a template for a decorative, 'melodic' lyricism in which metrical freedom was combined with a bookending 'cadence' device (notably the final rhyming couplet), the experiments with Old English alliteration showed how these melodic phrases could be anchored rhythmically. Put another way, if neo-Elizabethanism allowed Bunting to sing freely, alliterative neo-Anglo-Saxonism returned his verse to the ground, to a visceral pulse that would work in a performative setting and evoke the 'dance' paradigm that he became so preoccupied with in his later years.[26]

The 'Often his meaning is made with a man' fragment is a stark antithesis to the love poetry of the 'None goes finer than she' fragment, and to the spontaneous overflow of the 'Alone in the meetinghouse' passages. It is heavily suggestive of processes of condensation and contraction. Its verbs – 'thwart', 'wither', 'crooked',

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[26] In a lecture of 1969 at the University of Newcastle, Bunting gave the fullest elaboration of his theory that poetry is intimately connected to dancing:

> … as I was coming down the [Zagros mountains, on the Iraqi-Persian border] I met a tribe of Kurds on the move, going up the mountain, hundreds of them, in little groups with their animals. And as my car approached I became aware of a sound like you hear when the tread is coming off your tyre – flap, flap, flap. I stopped the car and examined the tyres. They were alright. I noticed that the sound went on even after the car was stopped. A group of Kurdish women was approaching me. They wore the usual smock, fastened with a brooch at the neck and fastened again below the navel, but all in between is open, and the sound that I'd heard was their long, slack dugs beating against their belly as they walked: beating out a kind of march tune, steadily.

For Bunting, therefore,

> … poetry must arise … from the grunts and cries of … dancers. It is very closely related to music from its birth, and both are tied ultimately to the body and its movements … Poetry and music are both patterns of sound drawn on a background of time. That's their origin, and their essence. Whatever else they may become, whatever purpose they may sometimes serve, is secondary. They *can* do without it, in case of necessity. Whatever refinements and subtleties they may introduce, if they lose touch altogether with the simplicity of the dance, with the motions of the human body and the sounds natural to a man exerting himself, people will no longer feel them as music and poetry … They'll not think of them as human concerns; they will find them tedious.

Bunting, *Basil Bunting on Poetry*, pp. 3-4.

‘cramped’, ‘hinder’, ‘twist’, ‘shrink’, ‘hunch’ – quite obviously mimic a narrative in which the protagonist is seen to shrink into himself. After the subject of this passage has ‘yielded not to youth’, and to the ineffable ‘meaning’ of the divine ‘he’ (which is, presumably, love), he becomes a prisoner of his own body, a sort of Shakespearean villain whose emotions are stifled by his ‘cramped gait’. As the protagonist’s feelings are stifled, his ability to speak is also curtailed or ‘thwarted’ by a self-willed circumscription.

In an earlier phase, that would have been that for Bunting. A vocabulary of stricture and self-loathing would have presided over the conclusion to this creative project (that is, if Bunting had even allowed it to get off the ground in the first place). But, crucially, he was now looking at himself with a degree of self-awareness that enabled him to view this ‘cramped’ mode as a part of life’s texture rather than its dominant element. In formal terms, Bunting seems to have realised that the dense, pulsating diction of Old English verse could be used as a balancing *counterpoint* to the romantic, lyrical textures. Lyric spontaneity and a ‘thick-thewed’ rhythmic adhesive could be played off against each other in a complex onomatopoeia of the different registers of existence: innocence and experience, growth and decay, lightness and heaviness, melody and rhythm, love and mortality.

The synthesis of the opening section of *Briggflatts* is singularly innovative. It is difficult to say quite how Bunting lighted so suddenly and with such confidence on the intricate, sui generis stanza shapes that are unlike anything else before or since in English verse. But it seems likely that the two modes tested out in the notebook given to Tom Pickard in order that he might ‘learn the craft’ – the imitations of Renaissance lyricism and Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse – were key stylistic influences on this part of the poem in its final form. Bunting was finally writing with assurance because he

had found in these models a way of synthesising emotional sweep with accentual muscularity.

III. The Poem

Hugh Kenner judged the first line of *Briggflatts* to be 'the strongest … since 'And then went down to the ship''.[27] Whether or not this is true, it is fair to say that the opening line of *Briggflatts* and the section that follows represented a dramatic breakthrough both for its author and for Anglophone poetry as a whole at this juncture. How should we characterise this singularity? What sort of poetry does the start of *Briggflatts* innovate?

The poem's opening is on one level difficult to analyse, because it is so palpably a stylistic epiphany for its author: the sudden coming together of technical accomplishments is likely to obscure, at first, any discussion of the narrative subjects. In particular, the first stanza is notable for being perhaps the most cogent demonstration of a sonically animated verse form in Bunting's oeuvre:

> 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. (61)

[27] Kenner, *A Sinking* Island, p. 259.

A few glosses are helpful here: for instance, the Rawthey is the name of the river that runs through Brigflatts, 'may' is a species of hawthorn, the slowworm is a snake-like species of lizard. However, the focus in this passage is overwhelmingly on the sonic aspect of the poetry. We have already seen the formal influences that were pieced together to create this richly euphonious verse form, which Bunting described as 'superTennysonian' in a contemporary letter to Louis Zukofsky.[28] Alliteration is an obvious feature, especially at the beginning and the end of the stanza (brag/bull, descant/madrigal, pebble/part, for/fells, furrows/fill, slowworm's/way). The emphasis on heavy, monosyllabic diction might also be an inheritance from alliterative verse. On the other hand, the alliteration is used lightly enough that the lyric features float free. There are chiming assonances (brag/descant/dance/black/shadows, chase/may/dale/paving/way, tenor/descant/pebble/fells), multiple repetitions ('bull' and 'may'), and a gesture toward chiasm: the stanza is perfunctory at first, but it opens out romantically in the middle lines ('Ridiculous and lovely …'), before the return of the heavy alliteration and the clinching rhyming couplet in the final 'cadence'.

What is the net effect of these formal devices? The most obvious thing to stress about the opening of *Briggflatts* is its physical immediacy. This is a sophisticated, densely patterned form of modernist verse, but it is no mere display of stylistic prowess; rather, the acoustic patterning of these opening lines was designed to resonate in a public context populated by 'genuine people … with no literary ambitions', to borrow Tom Pickard's phrase.[29] With its strong rhythmic pulse, its assonances, and its emphatic rhymes, *Briggflatts* announces itself as a sound poem – a poem to be read aloud – from its powerful first syllable, which recalls the 'Hwæt!'

[28] Basil Bunting, letter to Louis Zukofsky, 10 November 1964, HRC.
[29] Niven, 'To Reach the Moon You Need a Rocket'.

exclamation at the start of the Old-English oral work *Beowulf*. This was something like a socially aware adaptation of the high-modernist inheritance. The populist exoneration frequently trotted out by modernist authors – that seemingly abstruse works simply needed to be 'heard' in order for them to 'make sense' – is finally justified by writing like that in the first stanza of *Briggflatts*. Whereas James Joyce had only talked about the fact that *Finnegans Wake* was 'pure music' (or, at most, experimented with producing audio recordings of it), in *Briggflatts* Bunting was actuating a modernist 'pure music' poetic, consciously producing an oral poem for the specific environment of the Morden Tower.[30]

If the opening of the poem presents an exceptional kind of sonically oriented form, throughout the remainder of Part I Bunting turns to a series of objective details that register the actuality of a community. We have seen how, in the *Briggflatts* notebook, Bunting was increasingly drawn at this juncture to a tone of novelistic broadness that bordered on sentimentality. If the first lines of the poem established a formal template for embodying verse of powerful sonic immediacy, in succeeding stanzas there is turn to narrative realism, as the folk-poetic tone tested out in the notebooks is applied to a series of realist portraits or vignettes.

The mason, apparently Peggy Greenbank's father, offers an opportunity to deploy a long-existing motif.[31] Since 'Villon', Bunting had continually resorted to images of walls and masonry. As we saw in the previous chapter, in the post-war period, particularly in the second section of *The Spoils*, in 'On the Fly-Leaf of

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[30] James Joyce, quoted in Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce,* 2nd edn (Oxford, 1982), p. 703.

[31] For a useful commentary on the mason, see Bunting's comments in 'Basil Bunting talks about *Briggflatts*', *Agenda 16/1* (Spring 1978), p. 12. '[Through Peggy Greenbank's father] I came to do mason's work, you see. I've rubbed down gravestones and that's how I know how it feels to rub down a gravestone. And your fingers aches on the damn job … and so on. I take care not to write anything that I don't bloody well know. And that is something that is different I think from a lot of the poets who write. If I write about how it feels rubbing down a gravestone, well I have rubbed down a bloody gravestone'.

Pound's Cantos', and in the late ode 'At Briggflatts Meeting House', an architectural vocabulary acted both as a metaphor for poetic craftsmanship, and as an embodiment of Bunting's yearning for a supportive environment for artistic production. In *Briggflatts* the descriptions of stones, rocks, and marble recall the suggestion made in 'At Briggflatts Meeting House', that a building of 'stone and oak' (145) can shelter the poet and his spiritual community. But there is also an antithetical suggestion: that stone constructions must be relinquished in order for diurnal movement to continue. This juxtaposition – of stone structures and their decay – is first introduced in the second stanza, in the contrast between the mason's creative labours and a counteractive process of fatality or 'abolishment':

> A mason times his mallet
> to a lark's twitter,
> listening while the marble rests,
> lays his rule
> at a letter's edge,
> fingertips checking,
> till the stone spells a name
> naming none,
> a man abolished. (61)

The gravestone motif is perhaps another inheritance from Hardy. It also rehearses the statement with which Bunting's career had begun – the opening lines of 'Villon', which were intoned 'over the bones of a deadman' (25). Now, however, the grave motif is iterated against the backdrop of a dialectic of birth and death, construction and destruction. If the rhythmically emphatic couplet 'In the grave's slot | he lies. We rot' (61) began life in the depressive early stages of *Briggflatts*' composition as another of Bunting's maudlin epitaphs, in the final version of the poem the connotation of imprisonment is combined with a suggestion that prison walls are

subject to decay, and that in fact decay will lead ultimately to regeneration and breakthrough.

As we have seen, formally this movement is communicated by way of an energetic interplay of fluid and staccato sonorities. As Part I progresses the theme is depicted through the juxtaposition of hard and soft surfaces and objects:

> Rub the stone with sand,
> wet sandstone rending
> roughness away. Fingers
> ache on the rubbing stone.
> The mason says: rocks
> happen by chance. (61)

As in the later poem 'At Briggflatts Meetinghouse' ('stones indeed sift to sand' (145)), there is a movement here from the monumental permanence of the headstone to the disintegrative sand that it will eventually become. Whereas, beforehand, even in the early stages of the writing of the poem, the grave motif was a way of reiterating a pessimistic 'narrowness', the final poem is guided by an ethic of universality that results from this dismantling of structures, by a movement away from the entombed individual towards the all-encompassing ocean that predominates in the poem's final lines.

In his 'Note on *Briggflatts*' Bunting expresses sympathy for 'Lucretius and his masters, content to explain the world an atom at time'. The first section of *Briggflatts* is constructed out of a series of such 'atoms' or realist fragments, but again it must be stressed that Bunting's strategy is atomistic only in a very qualified sense. If the poem explains the world one atom at a time, it also presents these atoms as elements in a wider process. Rocks might happen 'by chance', but by chance Bunting means something more than that they are purposeless, inert pieces of matter about which nothing can be said. Rather, 'chance' here resembles more closely Dylan Thomas's

'force that through the green fuse drives the flower'.[32] *Briggflatts* is a poem about a driving force that connects everything together: it contrasts with an unequivocally sceptical poem like *The Spoils*, which suggests that everything has fallen apart, that 'God is the dividing sword' (52). Whereas Bunting's previous poetry had emphasised separateness, in *Briggflatts* elements are firmly interlaced. Just as the mason's mallet moves synchronically with the lark's twitter, the epitaph stone is rhymed with both the mason's fingers and the sand that is used to corrode it (indeed, sand and stone become almost indistinguishable in the third stanza, where sandpaper merges with actual sandstone). A little later the stones metamorphose into corpses, but they also simultaneously evoke the labour of a northern mining community:

> Stone smooth as skin,
> cold as the dead they load
> on a low lorry by night.
> The moon sits on the fell
> but it will rain.
> Under sacks on the stone
> two children lie,
> hear the horse stale,
> the mason whistle,
> harness mutter to shaft,
> felloe to axle squeak,
> rut thud the rim,
> crushed grit. (62)

Subsequently, we encounter further subject rhymes: the death of Bloodaxe is declared 'by such rocks' (62), and as we shift to a domestic setting in which two children make love in front of a fire, the boy's testicles are described as 'pebbles' (63). Stone-like objects (rocks, grit, pebbles, sand) are first named and defined, then rhymed together.

If this first section is full of stones, the opposing presence is water, which becomes a driving force that infuses the various objects in the poem and ultimately

[32] Dylan Thomas, 'The Force that Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower', *Collected Poems* (London, 1952), p. 163.

wears them away. Rivers, streams, and oceans reappear continually in *Briggflatts*. Bunting is emphasising a dynamic of creation and erasure by demarcating various stages in a process of corrosion. During the course of the poem, the river flows towards the sea and corrodes the mountains and rocks of the land along the way. The first section concludes with a final statement of relinquishment that is mindful of this leitmotif:

> Name and date
> split in soft slate
> a few months obliterate. (64)

The poet can attempt to discern and define objects, but ultimately he must acknowledge the unstoppable temporal tide that will eventually obliterate him and the fragments that surround him.

As we saw in Chapter Three, *Briggflatts* is, amongst other things, an account of Bunting's modernist experience. Part III of the poem, which for Bunting was 'a nightmare or a dream', imagines the failure of the Alexander/Sikander adventurer as a nightmarish metaphor for the Poundian project.[33] Alexander's attempt to journey to the top of the world's highest summit ends ultimately in defeat, and a return to the lowly pastoral environment inhabited by the slowworm. Bunting is able to present the failure of an epic project as something that ultimately laid the ground for a later revival underpinned by humility and deference to one's surroundings.

Yet for all its biographical aspect, *Briggflatts* as a whole is perhaps tellingly reticent about its protagonist. If the poem is indeed an autobiography, then we must be mindful once again of Bunting's admonition that it should not be seen a record of

[33] 'Basil Bunting talks about *Briggflatts*', p. 15.

fact. In fact, the only substantial part of the poem that can be matched more or less straightforwardly to the events of Bunting's life is Part II, which is a fairly clear outline of Bunting's biography from adolescence to middle age. In this section, Bunting reiterates and finally relinquishes the self-directed negativity of his anti-humanism, so that, in the remainder of the poem, he can gradually move back towards the qualified idealism of Part I.

Part II begins with a noteworthy omission. After the childhood fantasia of Part I, Bunting leaps straight into his bohemian twenties without pausing to consider the prison experience that, as we saw in Chapter Two, was the pivotal event of his early life in both personal and creative terms. Perhaps, again, this is a warning not to regard the poem as strict autobiography. But there may also have been schematic reasons for eliding this narrative. Bunting had already comprehensively dealt with the incarceration motif at the start of his career (in 'Villon', his first major poem). If, as I have suggested, his final major poem *Briggflatts* is a Prospero-like narrative that is continually moving towards oceanic escape and renunciation, it makes sense that Bunting would seek to de-emphasise and downplay the jail experience that had, in Denis Goacher's phrase, 'embittered him for life'.[34]

Nevertheless, *Briggflatts*' second section summarises the depressive, restrictive mood of Bunting's early adulthood in more general terms. There is a pointed, cursory glance at the limitations of 1920s poetry at the end of the first passage in Part II, where the young Bunting is described as

> … sick, self-maimed, self-hating,
> obstinate, mating
> beauty with squalor to beget lines still-born. (65)

[34] Goacher, 'Denis Goacher Talks About Basil Bunting', p. 197.

The self-maiming tendency, however, is counteracted by a fast-moving onomatopoeia of the modern cityscape, and by passages of novelistic descriptiveness:

> Poet appointed dare not decline
> to walk among the bogus, nothing to authenticate
> the mission imposed, despised
> by toadies, confidence men, kept boys,
> shopped and jailed, cleaned out by whores,
> touching acquaintance for food and tobacco … (65)

This has the coruscating rhetorical drive of Pound's 'Hell' *Cantos*. Pacey enjambments and brusque descriptions of odious people and practices combine in a satirical mode redolent of Pope or Dryden.

But Bunting departs from these literary antecedents in his refusal to adopt a position of satirical aloofness, in his unwillingness to aggrandise his own voice against a backdrop of metropolitan corruption. As in 'Villon', Bunting is determinedly opposed to creating a heroic protagonist. He does not condescend to his surroundings; rather, he depicts himself wallowing in the mire along with everyone and everything else. The poet-protagonist is ridiculed as a venal Calibanesque monster whose attempts at ocular survey and definition are ultimately deluded and even slightly risible:

> Secret, solitary, a spy, 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
> to the half-pint
> left breast of a girl who bared it in Kleinfeldt's. (65)

A portrait of Bunting the formalist, the devout adherent of an ethos of 'shapedness', to borrow Peter Makin's term, is clearly discernible in this passage.[35] There is a heavy emphasis on geometrical vocabulary (angle, ratio, curve) that parallels the young writer's apparently unsuccessful attempts to learn a craft that is seen as analogous to carving or sculpture, in an inimical London environment where shapes do not quite correlate. Whereas, in Part I, the various fragments or pebble-like atoms were worn down and collapsed together by a unifying temporal force, in Part II, following Bunting's desertion of his youth and his first love, things are everywhere falling apart. The 'Buddha's basalt cheek' (apparently part of an exhibit in the British Museum), cannot be related to the adult experience of sensuality offered by the girl in Kleinfeldt's (a bohemian hangout around the corner from the British Museum in Bloomsbury). And, crucially, this creative and human failure is presented as something like a malign *misreading* of formalism. The poet-protagonist is writing from a position of arrogance and subjectivity. He is a clandestine 'spy' who surveys his environment with pseudo-scientific detachment, and as such he cannot see the wider picture that will explain and contextualise his stillborn lines.

But where will this contextualising perspective come from? At this point an oblique mysticism emerges in answer, in two verse paragraphs that resemble the Edmund Waller-inspired form of the 'None goes finer than she' passages in the notebook:

> You who can calculate the course
> of a biased bowl,
> shall I come near the jack?
> What twist can counter the force
> that holds back
> woods I roll? (65)

[35] Makin, *Bunting: The Shaping of His Verse*, p. vii.

If sixteenth-century lyricism is the formal model for these verse paragraphs, the spatial conceit (in this instance, a game of bowls) suggests the influence of Donne and Marvell. The sense of perspective, of process, that the young poet lacks in his attempts to objectively measure the world, is provided by an ineffable force that knows the wider significance of the spatial patterns that embody the trajectory of his life. Physical shapes are used to communicate a metaphysical argument: they are part of a macrocosmic movement that only the obscure addressee of these lines can 'calculate' or (in the subsequent paragraph) 'elucidate'. This is something quite different from the abortive materialism the poet attempted to perfect as he scanned the sights of London in the immediately preceding lines. The argument seems to be that only a long-delayed wisdom that defers to God or his equivalent will make rounded sense of the minutiae of craft.[36]

Subsequently, the egocentricism of the immature poet-protagonist is rhymed with a lengthy vignette about Eric Bloodaxe (65-6). The periplum or sea voyage that dominates Part II is introduced, as Bloodaxe is described as a despotic warrior-king who rules imperiously over his marauding ship and its crew. Again, it is tempting, as we saw it was in Chapter Three concerning Part III, to read this narrative as in some

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[36] In his later years, Bunting's notion that the poet must defer to external forces would acquire an increasingly overt religious aspect. Perhaps the fullest, most cogent demonstration of Bunting's turn to religious mysticism in his later years is contained in a letter to Donald Davie of 1975:

> towards the end of the book [Davie's book *Pound* was published in Fontana's Modern Masters series in 1975] you advance the notion that the excuse for poetry and the reason for writing it is the pleasure it gives. That's a much more general proposition, and one I don't want to let pass without dissent.
>
> Artists of any kind whose work is worth considering don't spend much time wondering why they do it, and a great many of them haven't the kind of clarity which would enable them to discern their own motives. Not greed of gain, of course, nor vanity of reputation, still less the youthful exhibitionism most of those who write to us display – and not the rather sycophantic desire to give pleasure. What keeps a man at it in spite of bitter poverty, general indifference, public distaste and so on? I do not think there is any contemporary expression for what holds him to difficult work such as his, but a few centuries ago, when the word still had an admitted meaning, they might have said he did it for the glory of God.

Basil Bunting, letter to Donald Davie, 25 September 1975, Durham.

way a commentary on the Poundian project. We have seen that Pound's first Canto was an important poem for Bunting, and it seems plausible that this section is alluding to the sea voyage in that work and perhaps even to Pound's biography, albeit obliquely. In any case, even if the similarities were unintentional, the comparison is telling. Whereas Pound's poem had emphasised the heroism of Odysseus and his band of brothers working co-operatively in the service of a heroic campaign, Bunting uses his periplum as another metaphor for a notably unheroic form of domination. Bunting's Bloodaxe is not a figure who, like Pound's Odysseus, is ennobled by self-sacrifice so much as a venal, self-regarding artist whose vanity and isolationism drive him towards failure.

Like the poet-protagonist at the start of Part II, Bloodaxe surveys his landscape with excessive clinical expertise but no sense of perspective. Again, a highly technical diction is deployed, betraying the influence of Bunting's professional experience of sailing in the late 1930s:

> Under his right oxter the loom of his sweep
> the pilot turns from the wake.
> Thole-pins shred where the oar leans,
> grommets renewed, tallowed;
> halliards frapped to the shrouds. (65-6)

The description is remarkably – perhaps overly – precise. As the O.E.D. tells us, an oxter is an armpit; thole-pins are bolts in an oar; grommets, halliards, and fraps are all terms that relate to fastenings used in sailing. As Bloodaxe scans the ocean, he applies a similar degree of precision as he 'blends, balances, drawing leagues under the keel | to raise cold cliffs' (66). But his attempt to subjugate the sea is of course misguided. Bloodaxe is alone in his perspicuity, isolated from his crew ('Nothing he sees | they see, but hate and serve' (66)). And anyway, the disintegrative, corrosive

tidal movement is always liable to work against Bloodaxe's attempts to 'raise cold cliffs'. The vanity of the individual is underlined by the unstoppable, unknowable, destructive force of the ocean:

> Who cares to remember a name cut in ice
> or be remembered?
> Wind writes in foam on the sea:
>
> Who sang, sea takes,
> brawn brine, bone grit. (66)

As in Part I, the clearly defined objects or particles are ultimately washed together so that their distinctiveness becomes an irrelevancy. The poet's preoccupation with the exacting formal precision of the 'name cut in ice' is a dead-end, a distraction from the more profound experience of love and community abandoned in the wake of the poem's first lines.

After this recapitulation of the 'death of Bloodaxe' motif, the remainder of the second section – by far the longest in the poem – compresses three decades of Bunting's life in a series of abortive stylistic modes. The sea voyage is the overarching conceit; it provides a convenient device for embodying a sudden shift between the poem's two main geographical hubs: the North Sea and the Mediterranean ('About ship! Sweat in the south' (66)). Subsequently, there are further shifts, as Bunting records his itinerant early adulthood (the 'summer' of his life according the poem's structure, based on the four seasons), and summarises a career spent trying out multiple poetic registers, none of which had quite worked prior to this point.

As we saw in Chapter One, at the heart of Part II there is an aesthetic manifesto in miniature that proclaims Bunting's essential yearning for a fluid, expressive verse form, a '[f]lexible, unrepetitive line | to sing, not paint' (66). But

surrounding this expression of an unattained formal ideal, there are repeated avowals of the other central idea of this part of the poem, the standout axiom that '[i]t looks well on the page, but never | well enough' (67). As parched south-European and later Middle-Eastern landscapes are described, verse forms are sampled and abandoned, and dissatisfaction grows:

> Days jerk, dawdle, fidget
> towards the cesspit.
> Love is a vapour, we're soon through it. (66)

At this point the motifs of decay resemble those in the rotting dustbin Bunting had evoked in his 1929 poem Ode I:8. The 'cesspit' in the above passage (elsewhere in Part II there are a series of analogous terms – 'sewer' (66), 'middens', 'threshing floor' (67) 'byre stink' (70)) represents a cul-de-sac of obsolescence and inertia rather than a potential site of organic renewal. Bunting's lines remain still-born and self-maimed.

The most cogent formal units in Part II encapsulate this sense of combined personal and stylistic failure. The first of these – a series of four quatrains in a loose metre – uses anaphora to work up to a final statement of deflation and disappointment. The paradisal Mediterranean world eulogised in Pound's early *Cantos* and literally experienced by Bunting during his Rapallo phase is depicted in sensuous detail:

> It tastes good, garlic and salt in it …
> […]
> It sounds right, spoken on the ridge
> between marine olives and hillside …
> […]
> It feels soft, weed thick in the cave
> and the smooth wet riddance of Antonietta's
> bathing suit … (67)

But then, in the fourth verse paragraph, we discover that these sensory perceptions are illusive:

> It looks well on the page, but never
> well enough. Something is lost
> when wind, sun, sea upbraid
> justly an unconvinced deserter.

Again, there is stress on an ineffable essence or soulfulness (a somewhat obscure 'it' or 'something') that is not being accessed amid the attempts to arrange the isolated atoms of experience into an ordered sequence that looks well on the page. In a subsequent passage that extends the Italian travelogue while reiterating certain motifs from Part I ('There is a lot of Italy in churchyards' (67)), this sense of a structural or visual inadequacy is evoked by way of a reference to the Lindisfarne Codex (68). Then a second four-stanza sequence, this time apparently in Skeltonics, presents another movement of deflation and downwardness. Here there is a return of the corrosion theme:

> Win from rock
> flame and ore.
> Crucibles pour
> sanded ingots.
>
> Heat and hammer
> draw out a bar.
> Wheel and water
> grind an edge
>
> No worn tool
> whittles stone;
> but a reproached
> uneasy mason
>
> shaping evasive
> ornament
> litters his yard
> with flawed fragments. (68)

This image of the mason's yard littered with flawed fragments is the paradigmatic moment of Part II. Bunting's malign interpretation of form in his early adulthood has led to a premature crisis and the disintegration of his art. A further, final recapitulation of Bloodaxe figures this crisis as another inglorious death: Bloodaxe's 'mail of linked lies', 'inert brain', and 'yarns falling to staple' (68) provide more examples of 'evasive ornament', objects that are intricately wrought but will never amount to anything. At the pinnacle of the section, Bloodaxe's death on Stainmore (a stretch of the North Pennines that surrounds Brigflatts) provides an ignominious conclusion to this sub-narrative (69).

At this point, however, at the nadir of the poem (which corresponds loosely to the moment Bunting more or less stopped writing verse in his late thirties), a more hopeful theme is introduced. A third and final four-paragraph riff obliquely details Bunting's itinerant experiences around the time of his departure from Italy in 1933. The first verse paragraph evokes another seascape:

> Starfish, poinsettia on a half-tide crag,
> a galliard by Byrd.
> Anemones spite cullers of ornament
> but design the pool
> to their grouping. The hermit crab
> is no grotesque in such company. (69)

Bunting's argument here is that the natural world, simply observed and registered in verse, is somehow a repudiation of the egotism of Bloodaxe, who, we have just seen, was murdered because of his lack of worldly wisdom (his 'inert brain' was 'never wise'). The starfish and poinsettia are compared to a galliard, a Renaissance dance; there is a simple aesthetic pleasure in observing and enjoying the nuances of existence. But this is no straightforward aestheticist avowal of an exquisite 'dance of

nature'. The situational context or 'grouping' of these organisms is emphasised, so that value is located in a world of synthetic roundedness and contrasts. The 'cullers of ornament' wish to break down nature into a series of pretty parts that can be categorised (and, presumably, sold as souvenirs). But the anemones' 'design' is resistant to this form of materialistic appropriation. It is only when the whole is considered that an authentic beauty – rather than superficially beautiful ornament – can be discerned. What remains after self-regard and avarice have died on the battlefield is a habitat that provides room for the grotesque hermit crab as well as the glittering anemones. The self-hating Calibanesque monster that we saw at the beginning of Part II has undergone a profound metamorphosis into a creature able to live well and harmoniously in an ecological chiaroscuro.

In the subsequent lines, Bunting's wartime experience of the Middle East is figured in further descriptions of animal life ('Asian vultures riding on a spiral | column of dust' (69)), which echoes the conclusion to Part II of *The Spoils* ('Have you seen a falcon stoop | accurate, unforeseen …' (53-4)). In the third and final verse paragraphs of this digression, there is a further exploration of a beauty that is born out of a balance between grotesquery and grace: 'But who will entune a bogged orchard …?' asks Bunting (69). How is it possible to continue when the summer of life has ended in failure and premature decay, in a 'disappointed July full of codling | moth and ragged lettuce'? The mini-section concludes with a quietly affirmative answer:

> Yet roe are there, rise to the fence, insolent;
> a scared vixen cringes
> red against privet stems as a mazurka;
> and rat, grey, rummaging
> behind the compost heap has daring
> to thread, lithe and alert, Schoenberg's maze. (69)

As ever, Bunting's musical allusions point towards an escape from limiting self-doubt. In the rotting orchard there are myriad forms of animal life that have the potential to create beautiful music-like shapes. Even the disease-carrying rat can become something 'lithe and alert', something able to produce a new artistry along the lines of Schoenberg's serialism. As Hardy suggested at the start of the century, there is always some hope whereof the lone individual is unaware. A new form of art can always emerge from an unexpected source.

In the peroration to Part II, which departs from the stanza format of the previous section to return to the modernist blank verse that is the staple of *Briggflatts*, these sentiments are repeated and summarised (69-70). There are more examples of unsightly animals that produce beautiful shapes (a 'cannibal slug', a spider that 'gleams like a berry'). Finally, the theme is emphatically underlined, by way of an adaptation of Ovid's claim, in the *Ars Amatoria*, that Pasiphae daughter of Helios committed adultery with a bull. The summer is ending, and in 'sweltering Crete' Pasiphae visits a 'stinking byre', where she stands

> … with expectant hand
> to guide his seed to its soil;
> nor did flesh flinch
> distended by the brute
> nor loaded spirit sink
> till it had gloried in unlike creation. (70)

There is clearly a glance here at Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan'. Bunting's biography of modernism is recapitulating earlier literary motifs in order to relinquish them. The turbulent epoch that Yeats had prophesied half a century earlier had indeed come to pass, most horrifically during the middle years of the century that provide the subject of *Briggflatts*' second section. But out of the violence and stink of the anarchy that

was loosed on the world in the twentieth century, we 'may bring something new to birth, be it only a monster'.[37]

Bunting provided a more extensive version of this argument in an interview with Dale Reagan in 1977:

> What progress is made is always made as a result of violent disturbances of one sort or another, whether you begin by talking about an amoeba or by talking about men. Once you settle down into the kind of thing that the Chinese had for centuries and that the Russians are trying to inaugurate, progress will be near nil in the end; nothing new will happen in such a society. So far as that particular aspect of things go, you might say that I prefer even the horrors of capitalism, but there are better things than either.

Here, as in *Briggflatts*, we can see how Bunting's scepticism had by his late years come to be qualified by faith and attenuated idealism. Man may be wicked, he may not be able to institute models for reform without resorting to authoritarianism. But progress will happen regardless because of an ineffable something or 'truth … of another kind', because of 'things better' than either of the two man-made extremes of twentieth-century politics. Again, part of the point about this ineffable progressive force is that it must be accepted rather than precisely defined. As Bunting put it in his posthumous note on *Briggflatts*, only after acknowledging our ignorance and worshipping in silence will we 'detect the pulse of God's blood in our veins'.

In Chapter Three we saw that the third, climactic section of *Briggflatts* ended with a victory snatched from defeat. Alexander/Sikander realises that his humility will save him, that 'lying low' and attending to one's homeland and surroundings will enable some manner of prosperous existence (73). The poem's fourth section follows on both from this realisation and from the earlier conclusion to Part II, which I have suggested

[37] See Bunting, 'A Note on *Briggflatts*', no pagination.

is partly an attempt to make sense of modern violence – with perhaps specific reference to the Second Word War – as something that is ultimately explicable when viewed in the context of the progressive destructive/creative force that drives through the poem. Following the successive climaxes of the poem's first half, Part IV is dominated by downward movements and a mood of elegiac ponderousness. Like the fourth, 'Death by Water' section of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, it is the shortest section of the poem in terms of line count, a *rallentando* or *diminuendo* passage that provides a bridge between the loud, perfunctory exclamation marks of Part III and the renewed 'years end crescendo' of Part V.

Texturally, Part IV provides an obvious contrast to the rest of the poem. A lengthy opening passage establishes the mode that persists throughout most of the section. Long, cumulative lines have replaced the sculpted verse paragraphs of previous sections:

> Grass caught in the willow tells the flood's height that has subsided;
> overfalls sketch a ledge to be bared tomorrow.
> No angler homes with empty creel though mist dims day.
> I hear Aneurin number the dead, his nipped voice.
> Slight moon limps after the sun. A closing door
> stirs smoke's flow above the grate. Jangle
> to skald, battle, journey; to priest Latin is bland. (75)

For Peter Quartermain, this is Bunting at his most Whitman-esque: in an extensive, highly technical close-reading of this passage, he argues that each line here 'grows out of its predecessor'.[38] I have little to add to Quartermain's analysis, except to draw attention to the important fact that this verse form is clearly another attempt to render the 'subsiding flood' of a post-bellum, late-middle age period in languid, undulating lines. The line-endings here are often weakly ambibrachic ('subsided', 'tomorrow'),

[38] Peter Quartermain, ''To Make Glad the Heart of a Man': Bunting, Pound and Whitman', in *Basil Bunting: Man and Poet*, ed. Carroll Terrell (Orono, 1980), p. 153, and *passim*.

and there is frequent recourse to a *sotto voce* diction full of heavy sibilances ('Slight moon limps after sun', 'stirs smoke's'). This linguistic texture accords with its setting. As Bunting pointed out in an interview, this 'autumn' section is set 'mostly in the [Yorkshire] Dales', that is, in river valleys immediately below the North Pennines.[39] Again, we should note that – aside from the second, meandering 'periplum' section – the poem seems to be following the movement of a river, from the mountainside (the Pennine village of Briggflats in Part I and Alexander/Sikander's summit in Part III), through the valley (the Dales in Part IV), and finally to the sea (the Northumberland coast in Part V).

The Dales locale also allows Bunting to introduce the 'voice of Aneurin'. The Welsh poet appears at this moment to 'number the dead' (75), as he did in his early-medieval poem *Y Goddodin*, which describes the Anglian obliteration of a force of Brittonic warriors at the Battle of Catreath in the early seventh century (Catreath is usually taken to be Catterick in the Yorkshire Dales; Bunting's notes for the *Collected Poems* show that he accepted this interpretation). The obvious parallel is between the aftermath of this battle and Bunting's miserable initial post-war period, and indeed much of the first passage in Part IV recounts experiences of mortality and a diminishing life force. There are a series of animal deaths ('ibex guts steaming under cold ridge', 'tomcat stink of a dying leopard' (75)), and subsequently the dead Gododdin are described in animalistic terms: the narrator sees Aneurin 'pacing between the game Ida [the first Anglian king of Bernicia/Northumbria] left to rat and raven | young men, tall yesterday, with cabled thighs' (75).

But as the passage progresses, the elegiac tone is joined by a more hopeful voice. There has been a subtle shift since the previous appearance of the

[39] 'Basil Bunting talks about *Briggflatts*', p. 15.

martial/medieval theme in Part II, where Eric Bloodaxe had 'ended in bale on the fellside' (69). The Gododdin warriors appear to die painfully, but they merge finally with their aqueous surroundings. A memorable image in this section describes the death of the young warriors in terms of the collapse of a monumental edifice into watery ground: 'Today's posts are piles to be driven into the quaggy past | on which impermanent palaces build' (75). The warriors' annihilation might be tragic, but it is not the sort of total oblivion Bloodaxe experienced; rather, after the death of the Goddodin – the 'first' Northumbrian inhabitants – Northumbria is somehow able to continue. Animal life, of course, carries on ('Red deer move less warily since their bows dropped' (75)), and, even more crucially, there are cultural importations and upsurges. Columba, the Irish monk who founded the early-Christian monastery on the island of Iona, enters the poem as time marches forward – 'as the soil shifts its vest' (75). In the next line, we encounter Aidan, an Ionan missionary who brought Christianity to Northumbria and founded the monastery at Lindisfarne, and Cuthbert, Aidan's great successor and Northumbria's patron saint. Together Aidan and Cuthbert 'put on daylight' (75), and the ground is laid for a miraculous revival, the Northumbrian Renaissance or 'Golden Age' of the seventh and eighth centuries. The most important achievement of the Northumbrian Golden Age, from Bunting's view at least, was the Lindisfarne Codex, which is eulogised with extraordinary lyricism in the ensuing passage:

> … wires of sharp western metal entangled in its soft
> web, many shuttles as midges darting;
> not for bodily welfare nor pauper theorems
> but splendour to splendour, excepting nothing that is. (75)

The hopelessness of a period of depression and decline is dissipating in artistic efflorescence. The vanity of a regard for 'bodily welfare' and human-centric 'pauper

theorems' is being repudiated by a religious universality that leaves out nothing and includes everything, the whole of existence. We have moved some way from atomism and sceptical abstemiousness. Now it is the all-encompassing ocean that is figuring an ethic of pantheistic broadness and generational succession ('runts murder the sacred calves of the sea by rule | heedless of herring gull, surf and the text carved by waves' (75)). The poem's core argument for an ethos that embraces transience, humility, and organic form is iterated at the climax of the section:

> Can you trace shuttles thrown
> like drops from a fountain, spray, mist of spiderlines
> bearing the rainbow, quoits round the draped moon;
> shuttles like random dust desert whirlwinds hoy at their tormenting sun?
> Follow the clue patiently and you will understand nothing. (75)

After half a century of trying, Bunting had finally written the converse to the lyrical outbursts in the second section of 'Villon', which had posited a global landscape of stars, deserts, and moon only to argue that it had been 'trodden down' by an imperious 'they'. *Briggflatts* suggests that the life cycle will continue to engender astonishing renewals, in spite of humankind's vanity.

The remainder of the fourth section is a tying together of disparate threads, a summary of themes that paves the way for the symphonic conclusion of Part V. As we saw in the previous chapter, there is dramatic outburst as the music of Scarlatti elides with a Spenserian motif of song resounding throughout a numinous pastoral landscape ('and the stars and lakes | echo him and the copse drums out his measure' (76)). Then another emotional climax arrives. The love narrative that disappeared at the end of the first section reappears, and, in a moving sequence, the narrator attempts to reimagine the visionary setting of Briggflatts and the love affair of his childhood:

My love is young but wise. Oak, applewood,
her fire is banked with ashes till day.
The fells reek of her hearth's scent,
her girdle is greased with lard;
hunger is stayed on her settle, lust in her bed.
Light as spider floss her hair on my cheek which a puff scatters,
light as a moth her fingers on my thigh.
We have eaten and loved and the sun is up,
we have only to sing before parting:
Goodbye, dear love. (76)

The folk-poetry tone returns here in lines that stay just on the right side of gender stereotyping. The poet's lover is here imagined in an environment of traditional domesticity, yet the portrait is not an orthodox one. Peggy Greenbank is not described in terms of the clichés of bourgeois existence, but as the embodiment of a chthonic wisdom that is the poem's driving force. The narrator must learn to reconnect with and worship this force if he is to continue to create. Peggy is the ultimate example of a person who is integrated with, and even indistinguishable from, her environment. She anthropomorphises the landscape and becomes an expression of the plants and animals of the northern English mountain-scape. In return, as in the previous passage, where the landscape had echoed Scarlatti's liberated music, the landscape comes to embody her ('the fells reek of her hearth's scent' (76)). In short, Peggy *is* Briggflatts. The poem here comes closer to positing its essential site of value than at any other point since Part I. As the drafts in the notebook seem to indicate, this idealism was the poem's starting point. The poet's love for Peggy is the closest thing we can observe to the core of meaning, the 'truth … of another kind' that Bunting argued should be grasped over and above objective 'facts'.

However, like the lovers who sing to each other across a river in the Northumberland folk song 'Water of Tyne', the poet and his sweetheart are separated by the same ineffable tidal force that was seen as the very thing that connected them

together in Part I. At this point, in Part IV, the poet revisits Brigflatts in order to renounce it. He must acknowledge externality and otherness, and the ultimate impermanence even of his lover, who is pointedly described with the aid of ephemeral metaphors – the fire's ashes, the spider's floss, the moth, food, sex. The crux of the poem is repeated once more to compound the tragic diminuendo ('We have eaten and loved and the sun is up.⏐Goodbye.' (76)), and the poem approaches an emotive silence.

Having reached this momentous cadence, the final lines in Part IV take us through autumn to the end of the year. Peggy's fire continues to burn out ('Applewood, hard to rive⏐its knots smoulder all day.' (76)) and Bunting returns for a final time to his self-hating mode:

> Where rats go go I,
> accustomed to penury,
> filth disgust and fury;
> …
> My bony feet
> sully shelf and dresser … (77)

This is surely the most directly biographical passage in the fourth section, almost certainly a record of Bunting's long, depressed 1950s, a period that lasted well into the early stages of the composition of *Briggflatts*, as we have seen. The writing recalls the theme of Ode II:4 ('You idiot! What makes you think decay will⏐never stink from your skin?'), written in early 1965. Bunting describes himself as a fenced-in victim of hunters in the obscurity of the Northumberland countryside, a 'rat' oppressed by the shibboleths of English enclosure and social hierarchy ('O valiant when hunters⏐with stick and terrier bar escape' (77). All that is left is final acknowledgement that we will always be separated from each other in the end, that we will ultimately 'disperse' like stars as 'the year ages' (77).

In keeping with the circular, diurnal theme in *Briggflatts*, its final section is something like a recapitulation of the rhapsodic opening of the poem. There is an emphasis on sound and emphatic cadence that harks back to Part I. After the diminuendo at the close of Part IV, a hard monosyllable ('Drip') returns us to 'Brag' in the poem's opening line:

> Drip – icicle's gone.
> Slur, ratio, tone,
> chime dilute what's done
> as a flute clarifies song,
> trembling phrase fading to pause
> then glow. Solstice past,
> years end crescendo. (78)

This is abstract, sonically oriented writing in a classic high-modernist vein, writing that is redolent of both Eliot's *The Waste Land* and the 'Sirens' episode in Joyce's *Ulysses*. It also recalls Bunting's experiments with an abstract sonic diction in his Objectivist phase (for example, in 'The Word', and in the first section of 'Attis'). Amid the pastoral subject matter and restatements of literary tradition that predominate in *Briggflatts*, this passage, and indeed the fifth section as a whole, is a stark reminder of the thoroughgoing modernism of Bunting's style.

Yet there are also obvious biographical contexts lurking beneath the modernist sound poem. After the bleak midwinter of Bunting's late middle age, a thawing process begins. The leitmotif of a movement towards water is embodied in a melting of ice, a 'dilution' of regrets. As in the previous section, we are told that hope is located in the external world, in unexpected ambient movements, in the beautiful shapes carved by nature that are observable but scarcely explicable:

> Winter wrings pigment
> from petal and slough

but thin light lays
white next red on sea-crow wing,
gruff sole cormorant
whose grief turns carnival.
Even a bangle of birds
to bind sleeve to wrist
as west wind waves to east
a just perceptible greeting –
sinews ripple the weave,
threads flex, slew, hues meeting,
parting in whey-blue haze. (78)

Though elegiac strains will keep returning, Bunting has finally found a way to return to the effusive lyricism of his youth. 'Grief' has been supplanted by a musical 'carnival'. The solitary 'gruff sole cormorant' morphs into a 'bangle of birds', which in turn weave elegantly into a futurist sunset ('hues meeting, | parting in whey-blue haze'). Isolation has been exchanged for pantheistic interconnection. A little later this moment of final arrival is crystallised: 'Then is diffused in Now' (79).

As is normal in *Briggflatts*, Bunting's biography is not being described here in straightforwardly factual terms. However, it is difficult not to view the final section of the poem as in some way a commentary on Bunting's late revival after his meeting with Tom Pickard in 1963, or at least as an oblique record of the wider Northumbrian renaissance that was occurring at the time of *Briggflatts*' composition. As well as the emphasis on an oceanic generality, there are also some specific, local, Northumbrian references. Surrounded by 'Young flutes' and 'harps touched by the breeze' (79), the poet is briefly able to speak in complete harmony with the surrounding landscape, and, crucially, with its human inhabitants. A long passage describes the labour of farmers in the Northumberland hills:

Shepherds follow the links,
sweet turf studded with thrift;
fell-born men of precise instep
leading demure dogs

> from Tweed and Till and Teviotdale,
> with hair combed back from the muzzle,
> dogs from Redesdale and Coquetdale
> taught by Wilson or Telfer. (79)

Adam Telfer and J.M. Wilson were famous Northumberland sheepdog trainers in the early twentieth century. Redesdale and Coquetdale are remote valleys in the mid-north of Northumberland, and the Till and the Teviot are tributaries of the River Tweed, a river that marks the northern limits of Northumberland and the historical border between England and Scotland.

Again, Bunting maintains a balance between the general and the particular. The geographical trajectory of *Briggflatts* does not have the verisimilitude of, say, Leopold Bloom's carefully plotted perambulation in Joyce's *Ulysses*. The journey from the mountainside of Briggflatts to the starlit coastal setting of the final section and the Coda incorporates many wild detours (to the Mediterranean, Persia, London, and so on); it embodies the central theme of corrosion and seaward movement in a highly generalised way. However, there is also specificity in many of the local references. The landscape described in Part V is the remote north-east corner of Northumberland (and therefore also of Northumbria, and of England). The end of the poem takes place literally at the end of the land, in an area where the Cheviot Hills give way to the North Sea, and its dramatic coastline that is dotted with the forgotten remnants of the Anglo-Saxon period, during which Northumbria was an important centre of the country. Landmarks of this area include Bamburgh, the ancient capital of the Northumbrian kings, and Lindisfarne, the cradle of early Christianity in England and the birthplace of the Lindisfarne Codex.

The most important location in Part V, though, is the Farne Islands, where Saint Cuthbert lived as a hermit during the final years of his life. The spirit of

Cuthbert, who 'saw God in everything' and learned to 'love without expectation', presides over the final section.[40] Cuthbert's island – Inner Farne – is the ground on which Bunting surveys the stars, 'which make time a paradox and a joke till we can give up our own time, even though we wasted it':[41]

> Orion strides over Farne.
> Seals shuffle and bark,
> terns shift on their ledges,
> watching Capella steer for the zenith,
> and Procyon starts his climb.
>
> Furthest, fairest things, stars, free of our humbug,
> each his own, the longer known the more alone,
> wrapt in emphatic fire roaring out to a black flue. (80)

At this point Bloodaxe's attempt to survey and subjugate the ocean in Part II is reprised. Although the stars' 'emphatic fire' is observable visually through scientific instruments, their sound, their 'tone', is ultimately 'beyond chronological compass' (80). All that is left is a last diminuendo. The specifics of the Northumbrian landscape and its people merge into an 'uninterrupted night' (80).

Finally though, while this cadence is being announced, the poem returns to Peggy and the love story. The starlight engenders another memory:

> Then is Now. The star you steer by is gone,
> its tremulous thread spun in the hurricane
> spider floss on my cheek; light from the zenith
> spun when the slowworm lay in her lap
> fifty years ago. (80)

As the poem winds down, the 'fifty years' of the lovers' separation becomes a sad, incantatory refrain:

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[40] Bunting, 'A Note on *Briggflatts*', no pagination.
[41] Ibid.

> Finger tips touched and were still
> fifty years ago.
> …
> Fifty years a letter unanswered;
> A visit postponed for fifty years.
>
> She has been with me fifty years. (80)

Only in death's 'noxus eterna uninterruptus', Bunting suggests at last, will his love for Peggy be recovered. After such finality, it is no wonder that Bunting found it difficult to write poetry after *Briggflatts*.

Conclusion

Like the majority of Bunting's major poems, *Briggflatts* is perhaps best viewed as a work oriented around a central motif of escape from selfhood into self-abnegation and universality, a poem that, as Ed Dorn has said, is 'in the end … about love'. Although it was apparently tacked onto the end of the poem as an afterthought,[42] the seventeen-line Coda to *Briggflatts* condenses this motif in final, summative form:

> A strong song tows
> us, long earsick.
> Blind, we follow
> rain slant, spray flick
> to fields we do not know.
>
> Night, float us.
> Offshore wind, shout,
> ask the sea
> what's lost, what's left,
> what horn sunk,
> what crown adrift.
>
> Where we are who knows
> of kings who sup
> while day fails? Who,
> swinging his axe
> to fell kings, guesses
> where we go? (81)

In this philosophical conclusion, we can see how profoundly Bunting's poetic had evolved by his late years. The 'us' or 'we' that is repeated multiple times here had, of course, been present from the start: in the first section of 'Villon', where Bunting had adopted a similar first-person-plural voice to argue that '[w]e are less permanent than thought', and to ponder gloomily about the inevitable endpoint of life, the time 'when

[42] 'As for the Coda, you will never believe it, but this is the truth. I'd written three-quarters of *Briggflatts*, was busy in fact on the last part, when I had to turn over papers on my desk to get something for the bloody income tax commissioners, and on the back of an old bill I found a poem that I'd written long before and forgotten when I wrote it, which required three or four lines cut out, and with those three or four lines cut out it was the Coda, and was obviously a part of *Briggflatts*'. 'Basil Bunting Talks About *Briggflatts*', p. 14.

we ourselves are dead and gone | and the green grass growing over us' (27). But in *Briggflatts* the final escape into plurality comes with a sense of arrival and assurance rather than elegy and melancholy, even if there is considerable tragic pathos in Bunting's description of his final separation from Peggy. If Bunting continually strains in his poetry to move from representations of the jail to those of the sea, the conclusion to *Briggflatts* is a culmination of his oceanic side, a sweeping oration that finds creative confidence and freedom in the ability to speak to the 'us' that is his surrounding audience. In 'Villon', gestures at a universalised historical panorama had been blocked by a vague, restricting force; in *Briggflatts* Bunting finally found an application for this historical, epic mode, as he created a Northumbrian mythos that spoke powerfully to a community about the kings and warriors of its medieval past ('what horn sunk | what crown adrift'), and moreover in a poem that, as we saw in Chapter Four, was written with a specific location (the Morden Tower) in mind.

We should be clear about what this late-modernist achievement amounted to. The 'strong song' Bunting managed to compose in *Briggflatts* was something very different from the sort of poetry Pound had recommended in his foundational modernist pronouncements of the 1910s. Famously, Pound's first Imagist edict of 1913 had stressed the need for the poet to 'behave as a musician … when dealing with that phase of your art that has exact parallels in music'. In the essay series published in A.R. Orage's *New Age* in 1911-12, 'I gather the limbs of Osiris', this 'musical' theory of poetry is reiterated. Pound comments of the troubadour poet Arnaut Daniel that he

> … discerns what Plato had discerned some time before, that *melos* is the union of words, rhythm, and music (i.e., that part of music which we do not perceive as rhythm). Intense hunger for a strict accord between these three has marked only the best lyric periods, and Arnaut felt this hunger more keenly

and more precisely than his fellows or his forerunners.[43]

In emphasising the Platonic aspect of his theory of *melos*, Pound shows himself to be in sympathy with the main currents of early-twentieth-century thinking about art and their nineteenth-century Romantic antecedents. In this mode, 'music' is recruited as part of a more general tendency of arguing for an electric revitalisation of artistic form, a mystical 'union' of words, rhythm, and song; as Pound himself admitted elsewhere in 'I gather the limbs of Osiris', this union was extremely difficult to define precisely.[44]

We have seen how this attitude was translated through Pound into the poetry of Bunting's early years. Attracted by the discovery 'that there were actually people doing what I had merely worked out in my head was the kind of thing that ought to be done', Bunting attempted – tentatively in 'Villon', and more earnestly in his poetry of the early 1930s – to innovate a refined, bolder form of English verse, at the centre of which were attempts to continue Pound's earlier valorisation of the 'best lyric periods', of times 'when the arts of verse and music were most closely knit together'. Guided by a desire to supplant orthodox English poetry's 'debauch of easy magnificence', in poems such as 'Attis', 'Chomei at Toyama', and 'The Well of Lycopolis', Bunting developed a highly sophisticated adaptation of Poundian modernism, one that foregrounded 'cacophony' over 'harmony' and spoke of an affinity with Byrd, Dowland, Jazz, and other forms of popular music.

However, by the commencement of the World War II, for the multitude of reasons explored above, Bunting's second-generation modernist project had run

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[43] Ezra Pound, 'I gather the limbs of Osiris', *Selected Prose*, ed. William Cookson (New York, 1973), p. 23.

[44] 'After squandering a good deal of time and concentration on the question of the relation of poetry and music, it seems to me not only futile, but very nearly impossible, to lay down any principles whatever for the regulation of their conjunctions'. Ibid., p. 32.

aground. As a letter sent to Louis Zukofsky in 1941 shows clearly, Bunting not only believed that modernist poetry had reached a dead end by the middle years of the twentieth century, but that 'learning and literature' as a whole had reached a point of near obsolescence:

> It seems so certain to me, Louis, that what you and I have stood for – let's call it learning & literature, without implying the commercialised knowledge & castrated rehashes that usurp the phrase – learning & literature are done, now. They were crippled in our generation: but we will find now, however the war turns out, that the life has gone out of them forever, as far as any language we are familiar with is concerned. Oh! I don't mean there'll be no Virgils, even, maybe, Horaces, to plump out the respectabilities of what's to come. But you'll write to please officials, not to put life into a language & a people. There'll be no object to writing, except the making a living by polite toadying.[45]

Although Bunting would attempt in *The Spoils*, his major work of the immediate post-war period, to reverse this felt decline with a narrative poetry that emphasised civic themes, by the mid 1950s he had returned to his accustomed position of depression and isolation.

In the 1960s, Bunting finally discovered a way of realising his essential sense, outlined in the above letter to Zukofsky, that poetry should 'put life into a language and a people'. But while *Briggflatts* finally lighted on a way of embodying a modernist lyric culture, its 'music' was of a very different kind from the Poundian *melos* and the late-nineteenth-century ideal of a sublime, autotelic art form. As we have seen throughout the course of this study, although Bunting never came close to producing a theoretical body of work to rival Pound's, the one essential feature of poetry that he can be found insisting on over and over again in his letters and occasional prose pieces is that it should exist in public. In its most extreme form, this

[45] Basil Bunting, letter to Louis Zukofsky, 20 April 1941, HRC.

belief was expressed as an insistence that poetry not only should, but *must* be read to a live audience. As he put it in his central aesthetic statement, 'The Poet's Point of View', published in the same year as *Briggflatts*: 'Poetry must be read aloud … The less the public understands the art, the easier it is for charlatans to flourish … it is not easy for the outsider to distinguish the fraud from the poet. But it is a little less difficult when poetry is read aloud'. The discovery of the Morden Tower enabled Bunting to realise this essential aspect of his literary ethos, and to perfect a form of late-modernist verse that was defined by its ability to resonate in a social environment.

In an appendix to *Bunting: The Shaping of His Verse* ('Solipsism and the Community'), Peter Makin challenges Stanley Fish's argument in *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, which Makin characterises as the view that 'meanings are shared in virtue of the fact that they are created by a community'. Makin refutes this argument in the following way:

> … supposing for a moment that one could, receiving all one's categories from an interpretative community, yet somehow know in a category-independent way, of the existence of that community, this would merely broaden the prison to the limits of that community; its walls would remain equally impenetrable.[46]

For Makin, the 'prison' of solipsism – what he terms 'Hume's problem' (that there is no way of definitely knowing, for example, 'of the existence of another subject') – cannot be surmounted by an escape into an 'interpretative community', a movement that, Makin argues, would merely 'broaden the prison'. I do not have any way of challenging Makin's argument here, accept to say that in Bunting's case, as I hope to have shown, this 'broadening' made all the difference. A community can be just as

[46] Makin, *Bunting: The Shaping of His Verse*. p. 344.

limiting, just as ‘impenetrable’ as the walls of consciousness, a place where it is impossible to avoid the fact that mankind is ‘desperately wicked’ and ‘incurably crass’, as Bunting once put it.[47] However, I think that Bunting’s narrative proves that poetry cannot survive in the long-term if it does not rise above such scepticism and find a way of existing as ‘real sound in the air’ in a communitarian environment where people can hear it. If any single realisation epitomised Bunting’s late modernism, this was it.

[47] Basil Bunting, letter to Denis Goacher, 4 September 1965, Durham.

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