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Basil Bunting : An Introduction to a Northern Modernist Poet : The Interweaving Voices of Oppositional Poetry

Richard Caddel

I'd like to thank the Institute of Oriental and Occidental Studies for inviting me to give this presentation, and for their generosity in sustaining me throughout this fellowship. I have to say that I feel a little intimidated by my task here, which is to present the work of a poet who is still far from well known in his own country, and who many regard as not an easy poet (is there such a thing?) in an environment to which both he and I are foreign. This is my first visit to your country, and Bunting, though he travelled widely throughout his life, never came here. That's a pity, because early in his poetic career he made what I consider to be a very effective English poem out of the Japanese prose classic, Kamo no Chomei's *Hojoki* (albeit from an Italian translation, rather than the original) and I think he had the temperament to have enjoyed himself greatly here.

I'm going to present him, as much as possible, in his own words, often using recordings of him reading. He read well, and his poetry has a direct physical appeal which makes my task of presenting it a pleasure, and I hope this approach will be useful for you as well.¹⁾ But first a few introductory words will be necessary. Basil Bunting is now recognised as one of the most important British poets of the Twentieth Century. We can see him as the foremost English exponent of modernism, and the most significant link between the high modernists (Pound, Eliot, Yeats, Joyce, Williams and Zukofsky—all of whom he knew, and who knew and respected his work) and the younger generation of poets emerging in the UK and in the USA. His basic assertion—that “poetry, like music, is to be heard” is still so radical in the context of English print-based literary authority that many still find his work challenging, even though few would dispute his achievement. It's worth quoting the following passage from *The Poet's Point of View*²⁾—Bunting's compression of a

lifetime's hands-on experience of poetry, so that it rings in our ears during the rest of this talk :

Poetry, like music, is to be heard. It deals in sounds—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 instrumental colour in music. Poetry lies dead on the page, until some voice brings it to life, just as music, on the staff, 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.

I'm sorry that Bunting is so consistently gender-specific here in his descriptions of poets and readers: I ask today's audience to make the necessary adjustments. This statement remains as radical today as it was three decades ago, and as troublesome to central British poetic theory. But many others are beginning to see the matter differently: American poet Charles Bernstein nods towards Bunting when he writes that “[t]o perform a poem is to make it a physically present acoustic event³⁾”—adding that for him there are just two sorts of poetry, “sound and unsound poetry⁴⁾”. Bunting lives.

Bunting was neglected for years in his own country, and I'll make some attempt to account for that here. His long overdue recognition came in 1965, with the publication of his longest single poem, *Briggflatts*, which is at once a kind of autobiography, a restatement of his love for a girl he'd known and separated from fifty years earlier, and a celebration of his roots, and his Northumbrian homeland. Although I'll be showing that Bunting was by no means a one-poem wonder, we'll be returning to *Briggflatts* again, not least for its interweaving of contrasting values, throughout his work, of wandering and homeplace, and of love, life and death, the recurrent themes and conflicts of most poetry.

He was born Scotswood-on-Tyne, a suburb of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in the Northeast of England, on March 1st 1900.⁵⁾ Born into a middle-class doctor's family with strong associations with the local mining community, his earliest memories were of his Northumbrian nurse singing folk songs to him. His subsequent life was, as we'll see, roving, at times gaudy, and usually penniless. Thanks in part to his roving, the reputation, and the lineage I've described above wasn't always so obvious and secure : no substantial collection of his work was published in his own country until he was sixty-five, and his previous collections amounted to a slim pamphlet published in Milan in the 1930s (*Redimiculum Matellarum* —A Necklace of Chamberpots) and a collection put together in Texas in 1950, without his involvement (Bunting was working for *The Times* in Tehran at the time). At many times over this career he becomes almost invisible : reviewing his work in Ezra Pound's *Active Anthology*, one writer thought that Basil Bunting was simply another pseudonym of Ezra Pound, and visiting Newcastle in the early sixties, US poet Robert Creeley assumed that Bunting was dead. Although his belief in his own work was absolute, Bunting's own self-effacing estimation of his achievement, for a literary reference book, was simply "Minor poet, not conspicuously dishonest". I'm going to present some threads of his work, where possible using recordings of him reading, and I'm going to give some consideration to the way in which it develops, in a way which may perhaps account, simultaneously, for his early neglect, and his current recognition.

It's said that one of the defining characteristics of the modernist poem is that it's always, in one way or another, talking about itself, trying to define that elusive act of creation it contains. I'm going to start by presenting a group of Bunting's poems which are, very obviously, about writing poetry, but which, in one way or another, assume the creative act, rather than trying to define it. As we go, little characteristics of Bunting—his life and his work—will emerge. Firstly, here is Bunting, late in life, using biting irony and a close observation of local language to give an account of a Newcastle minor official, refusing to pay a poet, in this case the young Tyneside poet Tom Pickard :

Poetry? It's a hobby.

I run model trains.

Mr Shaw there breeds pigeons.

It's not work. You dont sweat
 Nobody pays for it.
 You *could* advertise soap. [...]

Nasty little words, nasty long words,
 it's unhealthy.
 I want to wash when I meet a poet.

They're Reds, addicts,
 all delinquents.
 What you write is rot.

Mr Hines says so, and he's a schoolteacher,
 he ought to know.
 Go and find ⁶⁾*work*.

We'll hear more of Tom Pickard later. In the recording you can hear the distinctive voice of Basil Bunting, reading a poem casting scorn on anyone who can't see that poetry is a craft, a tricky business. And behind it, perhaps, we can hear the authority earned by a lifetime of pursuit of that craft, and the sorrow of one who knows all too well that the wages paid to such an approach are usually both lean and late. That poem was written in the mid-1960s and is presented as a straightforward transcription of the bureaucrat's response to Tom Pickard's request for a working wage for poets. But even in this Bunting has pruned the speech of officialdom in the manner he developed alongside objectivist contemporaries such as William Carlos Williams and Charles Reznikoff, distilling the official claptrap to its ridiculous essence. Bunting had tackled poetic poverty much earlier in his career too: his early ode "An arles, an arles for my hiring (Ode I: 12⁷⁾) is another soliloquy on poets's wages. I want to draw your attention to one feature amidst the modernist mannerisms of that 1929 poem: all the devices of classical reference, spiky

rhythm and syntax, the Poundian manner and so on are dominated, it seems to me, by that bit of local language in the first line. An arles, as few audiences in the world could be expected to know, is a coin given to a hired labourer in the North of England. Bunting received little in the way of arlespennies during his life, and indeed showed a consistent contempt for being hired.

Lest we should think he poured his scorn purely upon the philistine, here's another late ode, where the targets are poetic theorists, gathered at a poet's conference :

All the cants they peddle
 bellow entangled
 teeth for knots and
 each other's ankles,
 to become stipendiary
 in any wallow ;
 crow or weasel
 each to his fellow.

Yet even these,
 even these might
 listen as crags
 listen to light
 and pause, uncertain
 of the next beat,
 each dancer alone
 with his foolhardy feet.⁸⁾

Note again the recurrent contempt for being "stipendiary". Next time you're troubled by literary theorists, you might do well to murmur "crow or weasel/each to his fellow" ... Note too the insistence that one learns by listening and watching in silence—as crags listen to light : there's a Quaker sensitivity at work here, as there is in much of his work.

Early or late, there's a lot of listening to light, or watching sound, in Bunting. Most importantly, note the way the sounds of the poem bang together, the way the vowels and consonants chime or half-rhyme with each other. I'll be coming back to this later.

So—a poet must listen, must follow his craft, and above all, a poet must be strict with himself: in an early Ode, responding to the suggestion that he should keep his sub-standard output, Bunting is derisory:

Narciss, my numerous cancellations prefer
 slow limpness in the damp dustbins amongst the peel
 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.⁹⁾

Again, there's a real tension created here between the sound structure of the poem, its rhymes and form, and the syntactical structure which is almost completely oppositional to it. He was an expert editor with fireplace and wastebin. Over his lifetime, he put together about a hundred and fifty pages which he was prepared to put his name to: I wonder what the Councillor and the Theorist would make of that.

I mentioned in passing his early associations with Modernism and the Objectivists: it's worth spelling out those associations a little. Poetry began for Bunting with Ezra Pound's *Homage To Sextus Propertius*, which he was introduced to by Nina Hamnett in London, in about 1919. Bunting was fresh out of Winchester jail, where he'd been imprisoned as a conscientious objector for some months after the end of the First World War, and trying to find his way into literary life. After an abortive attempt to study economics at London School of Economics, he'd worked as a secretary to a Member of Parliament, as a

publisher's editor, and he wrote hack journalism for both the Labour and Tory press. In the early twenties, through Pound, he worked with Ford Maddox Ford on the *Transatlantic Review* in Paris ("putting Hemingway's early stories into English" he grumbled later), where he was imprisoned for a drunken assault on a policeman. And thence to Rapallo, where he worked with Pound and Yeats. Through Pound he came into contact with Zukofsky and Williams, and his work was included in both Zukofsky's "Objectivists" anthologies, and Pound's *Active Anthology*. He said later that when the few people who read your work are people like Pound, Williams, Yeats and Zukofsky, you know it's worth continuing, however long it takes for other people to catch up.

It's worth stressing that his friendship with Pound was steadfast, often heated and cantankerous, and important to both men. Bunting was, as far as I can tell, one of only a very few people in Pound's circle who carried on attacking Pound's increasingly manic fascist/racist ramblings, long after the rest of the poetic community had shut up about it. In 1938 he was lambasting Pound :

Every anti-semitism, anti-niggerism, anti-moorism, that I can recall in history was base, had its foundation in the meanest kind of envy and in greed. It makes me sick to see you covering yourself with that 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 ¹⁰⁾ on.

But of Pound the poet, he was consistently loyal and admiring : there can be few more exact comments on the Cantos than this, the last in my little group of poems about the craft of poetry :

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 léger*.

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!¹¹⁾

There is a story to the effect that Pound read this aloud in Saint Elizabeth's asylum—and wept.

I want to say a little about the background which Bunting came from, and the area he grew up in and very consciously called his home: the North-East of England. Not that I want to make this a sociology lecture, or because I work for the Northumbria Tourist Board, but because much of that upbringing, and that regional information, is important in the formation of the poetry—the principles which underpin the region, I'll suggest, underpin the poetry too.

“A poet is just a poet, but I am a Northumbrian man. It has always been my home, even when I've been living elsewhere.”¹²⁾

For Bunting this was a homeworld of stark contrasts: great riches and stark poverty. Heavy industry and coal mines, and remote shepherding hill communities. Great natural beauty from coast to Pennine ridge, and great urban squalor. These contrasts are Bunting's given material, the assumptions he worked with from his childhood.

—A region where the spirit of opposition permeates the history and the everyday reality of events;

—A border region, since Roman times, but not one of clean-cut division: the Brythonic tribesmen North of Hadrian's Wall—the Otodini—were closely linked to the British South of the wall;

—After the Roman period, it was the scene of the last stand of the Brythonic people—the Welsh, as we now call them—against the incoming Saxons, and the interface between

these two cultures is still perceptible in places within the region today;

—And in the classic “border warfare” of the middle ages, this is the “debatable land” —or the “threap land”, neither England nor Scotland, where the debate was usually conducted with a double-handed sword;

—A region as far as could be from “central government” and orthodoxy. If you’ve read Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, you’ll remember that it was to Newcastle that she chose to exile her wayward characters. It’s worth noting that the big catholic communities of industrial Tyneside and Wearside owe their origins in many ways to the exiled and politically dodgy catholic aristocracies of the North. Bunting spent much time in his last years in the Library of the Literary and Philosophical Society in Newcastle, studying the history of the Rising of the North, the brutal suppression of northern communities in Queen Elizabeth the First’s reign;

—And in those industrial communities grew the first, and the strongest of the threads of British socialism and left wing opposition—it was, largely, the Northern Steelworkers’ and Miners’ Unions which Margaret Thatcher sought to break in the 1980s;

—And, again far from the mainstream Anglicanism of the South, it’s the place which saw, amongst the solitary lives of the fellsides, the establishment of Quakerism—the faith which perhaps more than any other lays its emphasis on individual conscience and awakening, rather than central authority.

Bunting’s family were not Quakers, though he was brought up with Quakers around him, and in due course went to Quaker schools. He grew up in the middle of a period of growing regional self-awareness. His father, the doctor at the pit at Scotswood, was part of this movement, active in the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle, and friend to the intellectual forces of that movement. Amongst these, it’s worth mentioning pitman-poet Joseph Skipsey, who was a visitor to the Bunting house in the first years of the century and is said to have bounced baby Basil on his knee. Skipsey, friend of the great Pre-Raphaelites poets, who’d lost his job as College Porter in Armstrong College in Newcastle because the authorities couldn’t handle the string of notable artists and writers of the day calling on the college porter, when the notable scientists were calling on the college principal. Skipsey, who’d been found a job as custodian of Shakespeare’s house in

Stratford on Avon, in the South, with testimonials from all the literary giants of the age, but quit it because he couldn't stand southern patronage. I like to think that his gentle presence was formative, even at that very early stage.

Formative too was his schooling. Bunting was educated at Quaker schools at Ackworth in the North, and, from 1916, Leighton Park in the South : like Skipsey, he found the South difficult at first, and staked out the contrast very plainly in a letter to his headmaster :

I have utterly failed to be happy here ... I think there must be some great underlying difference between North & South which makes people with Northern manners comfortable and easy to deal with, but people with the Southern manners are, for me, utterly "impossible" & hateful ... I think it is your duty to give me my fare to Newcastle ¹³⁾ ...

Is it too much to observe that a month earlier he'd had to separate from one Peggy Greenbank, in the remote northern hamlet of Brigflatts in Cumbria? And that in about eighteen months he'd be imprisoned in the conscientious objector's cell I've already mentioned? The seeds of his great work were, in many senses, being sown at this stage.

- North and South ;
- Left and Right ;
- Periphery and Centre ;
- Non-conformity and Orthodoxy ;
- Roman and Celt ;
- Brythonic and Saxon ;
- Saxon and Norman ;
- English and Scots ;
- Beauty and Squalor ;
- Rich and poor ;
- Long sounds and short ;
- Heavy beats and light ;

—Vowels and consonants ;
 —War and peace ;
 —Boy and Girl—

—and so on. Two of the predominant images of *Briggflatts* are the Lindisfarne Gospels and Scarlatti. The Lindisfarne Gospels, from the heyday of Northumbrian art, present us on page after singular page with images of contrasting intertwining lines—forming not mere decoration, but the actual form of the pages. The keyboard sonatas of Scarlatti, which are binary in form, rely on the interaction of two contrasting themes (Bunting called his long poems Sonatas in acknowledgement of Scarlatti and J. C. Bach). There's an awful lot of binary contrast going on in those early years of Bunting's life. Peter Makin, in his wonderful book on Bunting, adds to this the isolated image of Bunting's Doctor father, performing amateur histological or genetic experiments in the scullery in Scotswood¹⁴⁾—so you have, hovering in your mind as you read Makin's book, the image of the double helix, the interweaving of opposing materials into a skein of life.

Listening to Bunting reading a late poem, set in the heart of Northumbria, we can hear how Bunting enacts those contrasts and contradictions over a short structure :

Stones trip Coquet burn ;
 grass trails, trickles
 till her glass thrills.

The breeze she wears
 lifts and falls back.
 Where beast cool

in midgy shimmer
 she dares me chase
 under a bridge,

giggles, ceramic
 huddle of notes,
 darts from gorse

and I follow, fooled.
 She must rest, surely ;
 some steep pool

to plodge or dip
 and silent taste
 with all my skin.

Now this has been described as a simple boy-meets-water-nymph poem. Bunting had already pointed out in the notes to *Briggflatts* that we have “burns in the east, becks in the west, but no brooks or creeks”. A very specific ear for water noises shows itself at that point in his great poem when he notes : “Their becks ring on limestone,/whisper to peat.” And a beck is not, as one edition of the standard American poetry anthology suggested, a mattock.

English words. Of the whole poem, only “ceramic” is (a) more than two syllables or (b) directly classical in origin. For the rest, it’s little groups of words combined almost abstractly for their sounds. The poem is held together—almost independently of its sense—by the way in which the sounds work—together, or even in opposition.

And we may follow the trails of some of those sound-groups through the poem :

- the “O” sounds and the “OO” sounds running throughout the poem ;
- the “TRIP/TRAILS/TICKLES/TILL/THRILLS” tongue-twister ;
- the “MIDGY/SHIMMER/BRIDGE/GIGGLES” group ;
- and the other “i” sounds which bind them together.

Of course, such an oversimplified way of looking at it doesn't begin to show the subtlety of the interaction between the sounds-but it suggests, I think, some of the contrasts of sound which are at work here.

The playful conflicts going on in *Coquet burn* relate very much to the Welsh rhymes and half-rhymes which Bunting liked so much.¹⁵⁾ Remember—because it was important to Bunting—that the earliest Welsh poetry was possibly composed in what is now the North-East of England, before they were driven back to the small area which we know as Wales today, and that *Coquet burn* is in the heart of Gododdin country. In his last interview, Bunting said :

You realise that a great deal of what people goggle at in *Briggflatts* is merely an undisciplined and indiscriminate use of *Cynghanedd* ... *Cynghanedd* is of course all the things that hold poetry together by way of sound ; various kinds of rhyme, real ordinary rhyme we are used to, the peculiar rhyme the Welsh like, when you come to the rhyme word and it doesn't rhyme but the next word rhymes instead, or when a rhyme goes in the middle of the next line, or the end of the line rhymes with the middle of the line before. And they like rhymes that don't have the same vowel, only the same consonants each side of it, and funny things like that, and a tremendous variety of possibilities in the alliteration and so on.¹⁶⁾

Bunting isn't the first English poet to turn to old Welsh forms for models : Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the Dorset poet William Barnes had both tried in the nineteenth century, and Robert Graves was also to have a go at it. But all these were academic attempts to follow strictly the formula of Welsh poetry : Bunting's attempt is far more free : an attempt to use the spirit, rather than the letter. Bunting had first shown interest in Welsh verse forms in the thirties, in correspondence with Louis Zukofsky. There are some pages in the Zukofsky archives in Texas which Zukofsky has copied from Bunting, with examples of medieval Welsh patterns and so on, derived from Selwyn Jones. But Bunting's main passion at that stage was Persian, and there's little to show for it, except for one isolated and to my mind rather academic *Cynghanedd* near the end of *Ode I* : 32 from the 1930s :

[...] hideous children of cautious marriages
 those who drink in contempt of joy.¹⁷⁾

He was getting, in many ways, the same input from his Persian material at this stage. A decade later, after the war, Persian was still providing his unifying principles, the ways in which he could bind and interweave the conflicting elements of his art. Here's an example, using the patterns of Persian art and architecture as an analogy for poetry amongst other things :

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
 for which all else was made.¹⁸⁾

Once again, we can follow these sound groups on their routes through this short poem :

- the “GOLD/STONE/GLORY” group ;
- the “LAPIS LAZULI/PORPHYRY/APSE” group ;

—and the group of implosive “WHITE/STRIDE/LIGHT” sounds.

Here it has to be noted that the way in which the sound groups develop and interact—across what is, after all, only a very few lines—is even more complex and subtle. And if we’re mad about meaning, we can reflect that the attempt here is not to render the boy-meets-girl duality of *Coquet burn*, but a unity, a totality, a *glory not made for which all else was made*.

The Welsh interest was rekindled during the war, which was a crucial period for him. He’d rushed back to Britain to enlist in the fight against fascism in very much the same way that US objectivist poet George Oppen had rushed into the US Army.

He’d joined the RAF, and signed up as a Persian translator when they called for them. There was a mistake here : Bunting’s Persian was classical, and the shock when he arrived in Tehran was much as you’d get if someone were to appear in modern London speaking Chaucerian English, or perhaps if I were to amaze you all by speaking fluently the Japanese of Chomei’s day. Travelling out to Persia, he fell in with a bunch of Welsh Fusiliers who sang all the time. One of them in particular recalled long conversations when Bunting would quote Firdosi and Sa’di, and this chap would come back with Aneurin, Taliesin and Heledd.¹⁹⁾ Later Bunting listed Heledd, lamenting for her brothers killed in eighth century border wars as a key poetess whose work should be better known (in fact, very little of the fragmentary body of her work is available, and some critics dispute her actual existence) : “Devastating poems, if you have any imagination. Not the sort of poem that goes down well at the present time.” And he’d quote :

Stauell Gyndylan ys tywyll heno
 heb dan heb wely
 wylaf wers tawaf wedy

(Cynddylan’s hall is dark tonight ;
 no fire, no bed.

I'll weep awhile and then be still.)

Densely patterned sound, the vowels and consonants interweaving to hold the piece together. “You have to use every scrap of your face to speak Welsh”²⁰⁾ he added.

By the end of the war, Bunting was a senior figure in the diplomatic service in Persia, and, reputedly, a top secret agent. He married a Persian girl, and was promptly thrown out of the diplomatic service. He stayed on as a *Times* correspondent, but was thrown out along with other Western journalists by Mossadeq.

Back in Newcastle, with a young wife and a young family, he discovered how difficult it is, in Britain, to get any kind of recognition. Forgotten as a poet, he worked until his eyesight failed as a subeditor on the shipping pages of a local newspaper. Writing to Zukofsky, himself overlooked amongst American poets, Bunting declared that he had one more poem in him, and in his letters to several friends in the early '60s we can glimpse fragments of it. The poem started to come together when a sixteen-year-old poet from Newcastle, Tom Pickard, came into his life seeking advice on poetry : *Briggflatts*, written to some extent as an object lesson, embodies the experience of Bunting's lifetime in its 700 line span—cut, we're told, from an original 2000 lines. Its world premier was in Newcastle, in the Morden Tower, under the auspices of Connie and Tom Pickard, on 22nd December 1965. Its recognition, by generations of poets in Britain and America, was almost instant.

Here's passage from *Briggflatts* which acknowledges the debt, to origins, to craft, to neglect, and nails it firmly, within the poem, in the context of the return to home and love which is the recurrent theme of that poem. It embodies in it all the elements of patterned, interweaving sound structure which we've heard earlier. Use your ears, and every part of your mouth, to hear how these elements fit together :

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.
 Rats have left no potatoes fit to roast, the gamey tang
 recalls ibex guts steaming under a cold ridge,
 tomcat stink of a leopard dying while I stood
 easing the bolt to dwell on a round's shining rim.
 I hear Aneurin number the dead and rejoice,
 being adult male of a merciless species.
 Today's posts are piles to drive into the quaggy past
 on which impermanent palaces balance.
 I see Aneurin's pectoral muscle swell under his shirt,
 pacing between the game Ida left to rat and raven,
 young men, tall yesterday, with cabled thighs.
 Red deer move less warily since their bows dropped.
 Girls in Teesdale and Wensleydale wake discontent.
 Clear Cymric voices carry well this autumn night,
 Aneurin and Taliesin, cruel owls
 for whom it is never altogether dark, crying
 before the rules made poetry a pedant's game.²¹⁾

Before the rules made poetry a pedant's game. we're back with poems about poetry here, and finally we're going to recognise that there's very little gap between poetry and life, and that the values one pursues in one relate closely to the ways in which one pursues the other. The conflicts and oppositions of one inform directly the structure and voicing of the other.

I've tried to present to you some of the ways in which he sought to make his poems, solid objects made out of sound, made to be sounded, out of the materials of his world. If we say that Bunting made poems by interweaving threads of sounds, it's worthless unless we go on to say that he did this not out of abstract aesthetic or "pauper theorem", but out of love for—or conviction of the importance of—the contrasts and conflicts which were around him. In ecological terms, this is an "open-system" or dynamic poetry, alert to its

own conflicts, interacting with the world around it, incomplete until it's physically enacted :

Poetry lies dead on the page until some voice brings it to life.

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- 1 Many of the poems referred to are available in the two-tape set : Basil Bunting : "Basil Bunting reads Briggflatts and other poems", Bloodaxe Books, 2000.
- 2 Basil Bunting : "The Poet's Point of View" in "Three Essays", Basil Bunting Poetry Centre, 1994, pp 34-35.
- 3 Charles Bernstein : "Thelonius Monk and the Performance of Poetry", in "My Way : Speeches and Poems", University of Chicago Press, 1999, pp 18-24, p 21
- 4 Bernstein, p 22
- 5 For an outline of his life, especially his associations with the North East of England, see Richard Caddel and Anthony Flowers : "Basil Bunting : A Northern Life", Newcastle, Newcastle Libraries and Information Service, 1997.
- 6 Basil Bunting : "Complete Poems", Associate Ed. Richard Caddel, Bloodaxe Books, 2000, p 140.
- 7 Basil Bunting : "Complete Poems", p 108.
- 8 Basil Bunting : "Complete Poems", p 143.
- 9 Basil Bunting : "Complete Poems", p 107.
- 10 Basil Bunting : letter to Ezra Pound, 16 Dec. 1938 ; quoted in Peter Makin : "Bunting : The Shaping of his Verse", Clarendon, 1992, p 79.
- 11 Basil Bunting : "Complete Poems", p 132.
- 12 Basil Bunting : "Out Loud", *The Listener* 94 (28 August 1975) p 274.
- 13 Quoted in Basil Bunting : "Complete Poems", p 236.
- 14 Peter Makin : "Bunting : The Shaping of His Verse" pp 15-16.
- 15 See for instance Richard Caddel : "Bunting and Welsh" in "Locations of Literary Modernism" ed Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp 57-66.
- 16 Sean Figgis and Andrew McAllister, "Basil Bunting : The Last Interview", *Bete Noir* 2/3 (1987) pp 22-50.
- 17 Basil Bunting : "Complete Poems", p 127.
- 18 Basil Bunting : "Complete Poems", p 131.
- 19 G. G. Evans : "Basil Bunting—Summer 1942", *Stand*, 1992, pp 68-70.
- 20 Jonathan Williams : "Basil Bunting : An Interview", *Conjunctions* 5, 1983, pp 75-87.
- 21 Basil Bunting : "Complete Poems", p 75.

Richard Caddel

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