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Robinson, P. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7903-5438
(2025) Bunting's Monosyllables. The Cambridge Quarterly, 54 (2). pp. 119-136. ISSN 1471-6836 doi: 10.1093/camqtly/bfaf017 Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/123598/

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Peter Robinson

1

Robert Creeley notes of Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts* that 'the insistent intimate nature of his work moves in the closeness of monosyllables, with a music made of their singleness',[1] while Kenneth Cox offers a bravura account of the auditory shape of the poem's first line as sounded by the poet himself:

> It consists of four words in five syllables, so disparate in meaning they might seem hard to combine. A monosyllabic imperative is succeeded by a vocative phrase containing four different vowels:
>
> Brag, sweet tenor bull
>
> Bunting sustained the vowel *Brag* without wobble, as though to signal the opening of his poem and give warning that the meaning announced is to be sound as well as sense. He made a slight pause at the comma. He had a way of pronouncing *sweet* that recalled the action of sipping a liquid through a lump of sugar: his love of language was as much oral as aural. He made a sharp cut between the final implosive t of *sweet* and the following explosive t of *tenor*. *Tenor*, its two syllables almost equal in length, was at the peak of his intonation, the r lightly trilled. The last word *bull*, strong by nature, was not emphasised. The vocative phrase as a whole descended in equidistant steps from top to bottom of the vocalic scale.[2]

Though brought up in the North and with a set of grandparents from the Northeast, my voice cannot begin to produce the vocalisation I am

[1] Robert Creeley, 'A Note on Basil Bunting', *Agenda* 4/5, 6 (1966) p. 19.
[2] Kenneth Cox, *The Art of Language: Selected Essays* (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2016) p. 90.

https://doi.org/10.1093/camqtly/bfaf017

fortunate enough to have heard the poet dramatise live. My leaping now on the phrase 'sound as well as sense' above comes from an engagement with these issues in *The Sound Sense of Poetry* (2018) where I endeavoured to show, among other things, that however much we are obliged by the divide-to-define rules of language to talk about sound and sense in poetry as if they were different things, in a poem being experienced they are one and the same. Furthermore, given that Bunting is dead, and none of us can ever hear his *viva voce* performance again, it's worth pausing a moment on what this sound sense of a poem might be, for Cox's account does suggest that the sound of a poem is the way the poet spoke it. By that token, when reading Wordsworth, we must remember to pronounce the word 'water' as 'watter'. Along the same lines, Bunting was capable of saying in the preliminary statement for the notes to his poem that 'Southrons would maul the music of many lines in Briggflatts' or, of the word *scone*: 'rhyme it with "on", not, for heaven's sake, "own"'[3] – as if implying that anyone born outside his dialect area were better off not voicing the poem at all.

A counter-position was summarised by J. H. Prynne in some observations preliminary to an unusual and rare reading of his *Kazoo Dreamboats* in Cambridge:

> Very briefly, I think that composed works in text-form should be allowed to find their way into the minds and thoughts of the reader without interference and without manipulation by their author; when the author reads a work aloud in public he or she imposes on it a set of definitive-seeming intonations and managements of shape and form, and these enter into the acoustic memory of the listener, and become an embedded part of the way in which the text registers and remains in the mind of the reader. And I disapprove very strongly of this: I think that texts should be free to move about in the minds of the reader without interference of any kind and that's the reason why I normally don't do these things.[4]

A fierce textual libertarianism proposes that writing has autonomous agency to move in minds. Yet, it is granted such agency only when lent it by readers who move the words so as to be moved. Furthermore, Prynne's point would discourage any reading out loud, since to do so would be to limit the implicatures of the words themselves, for the vocal performance of the poet is only a culturally privileged instance of particular intonations

[3] Basil Bunting, *Collected Poems* (London: Fulcrum Press, 1970) p. 156.

[4] J. H. Prynne, 'Judith E. Wilson Lecture 2016: Reading Kazoo', *Snow* 7 (Spring 2019) p. 37.

interfering with interpretive freedom in the reader's mind. Nevertheless, when anyone, the poet included, offers readings of Prynne's later work,[5] they find themselves sounding it with assumptions that it makes natural sense, even when the lexical items are such as may never have been experienced before in this particular order.

Thus, the approach implied here, throughout, is that while the politics of Bunting's regional accenting is legitimate as an identity status claim, as a view of how poetry travels independently of an author within a *Sprachraum* as wide as that of English-speakers, it is positively self-stultifying. By contrast, Prynne is not able to have 'works in text-form' so free of the spoken as not to be inflected by the constraints of one vocalisation or another, for even silent reading requires a form of ghost vocalisation to enable comprehension. Bunting's readings take and announce possession of his poems to an extent that might have prompted Prynne's hostility to such oral ownership, yet an authorial vocalisation, one among many possible readings, not only cannot be taken as definitive, but need not be so memorable as to embed itself into readerly experience of the work. Both of these statements of position by distinguished figures in the poetry revival of the 1960s might be traced back to Mallarmé's ceding of the poet's elocutory function to words in his 'Crise de vers' (1897):

> L'œuvre pure implique la disparition élocutoire du poëte, qui cède l'initiative aux mots, par le heurt de leur inégalité mobilisés; ils s'allument de reflets réciproques comme une virtuelle traînée de feux sur des pierreries, remplaçant la respiration perceptible en l'ancien souffle lyrique ou la direction personnelle enthousiaste de la phrase.[6]

Prynne's project might be seen as the *ne plus ultra* of 'la disparition élocutoire du poëte', though it may also be subject to the structural irony of modernist aesthetics whereby the more 'refined out of existence' writers are the more ubiquitously distinctive in their stylistic footprint. Bunting's monosyllables laid end to end aspire to a music in words that 's'allument de reflets réciproques comme une virtuelle traînée de feux sur des pierreries'. The diametrical opposition of these positions on the importance of

[5] See J. H. Prynne recordings in The Archive of the Now: https://www.archiveofthenow.org/authors/?i=77&f=1766#1766, accessed 22 March 2023.

[6] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Igitur, Divagations, Un coup de dés* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) pp. 248–9. [The pure work implies the elocutory disappearance of the poet, who yields initiative to the words, through the collision of their mobilized inequality; they illumine and teach others with reciprocal reflections like a virtual trail of fire on precious stones, replacing the perceptible breath in the old lyrical afflatus or the enthusiastic personal direction of the sentence.]

author-generated word-sounds demonstrates a decisive fault line or watershed in late modernist poetics.

2

To address the structure of Bunting's verse without the texture of his version of northern speech, I begin not with the poet's monosyllables but with that word 'tenor', the only two-syllable word in his great poem's opening line. Now, the difference between monosyllables and all other words in the English language is that monosyllables can't have pronunciation rules for the production of their stress contours. There are issues about how their vowels and consonants are sounded, but a moment's reflection on the different ways of sounding English monosyllables across the globe would lead to the conclusion that while there are manifold differences to how they may be sounded, these cannot be expressed as rules without entering the politically mined no-man's-land of Received Pronunciation, and of the regional or national counterblasts that such prescriptivism inevitably generates. What is more, the existence of rules for the pronunciation of words of more than one syllable is far-reaching for a poet, for the fact that 'tenor' must be pronounced with a falling pattern, a fully sounded and stressed first syllable followed by a reduced, weak-form second syllable, means that pretty much anywhere or anyway the word is spoken it will have some version of that pattern. While strings of monosyllables in sentences are intonated with relation to syntactical and semantic conventions, their stressing can vary considerably when spoken aloud. The shared pronunciation rules for words of more than one syllable are thus distinctly helpful in anchoring and communicating the rhythmic shape of poets' lines. Kenneth Cox, describing Bunting's pronunciation of the word 'tenor', does not say that the two syllables were given equal weight: 'its two syllables' were 'almost equal in length' with 'the r lightly trilled'. The poet's way of pronouncing the word aimed to give the second syllable of 'tenor' more stress and texture than I would, but even he could not reverse the stresses – for that would produce a near homophone with, for instance, the biting verb 'to gnaw'.

Here is Wordsworth using words of two syllables (and in one case three) to anchor the shape of his lines in anyone's speech, while surrounding them with monosyllables whose inflection depends on their syntactic-semantic roles in his sentences:

> A slumber did my spirit seal,
> I had no human fears:
> She seem'd a thing that could not feel

The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force
She neither hears nor sees
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course
With rocks and stones and trees![7]

The sound sense of a poem is, then, not the way the poet pronounces its words, nor indeed the way any one individual pronounces them (neither Tony Harrison, his schoolmaster, nor Cockney Keats),[8] but rather is the sound structure built into the ordering of its words, including relevant pronunciation rules, as here in the sequence of two-syllable words (*slumber*, *spirit*, *human*, *earthly*, *motion*, *neither*) plus 'diurnal', whose composed shapes, in Ezra Pound's formula, may thus be '"forced onto the voice" of the reader by the nature of the "verse"'.[9] But the reason why the word 'forced' here, even in scare-marks, may be unhelpfully inaccurate is because it fails to take account of rule-following in language use. The reader's voice is not 'forced' because such readers actively enable the poem to move by moving the words as they understand them according to their pronunciations, the words provided for their performance by an author also understanding them within the broad parameters of those native language speech performance rules and sounds. This reciprocity is more complexly interactive than Pound's aesthetic of an active artistic individual tended to allow.

Briggflatts includes a moment of exasperation with the received condition of poetic practice:

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.[10]

There is likely to be some mimetic wit in the fact that the first and fourth of these lines are alexandrines, while the second and fourth, though together they add up to twenty-four syllables, matching thus the duration of the bracketing lines, are structured with strong caesuras, and in the case of

[7] William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, and Other Poems, 1797-1800 ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992) p. 164.

[8] See Tony Harrison, 'Them & [uz]', *The School of Eloquence* (London: Rex Collings, 1978) pp. 20–21.

[9] Ezra Pound, *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941* (London: Faber & Faber, 1950) p. 254.

[10] Basil Bunting, *The Poems of Basil Bunting* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016) p. 55.

'dark, crying' with stressed syllables butted one against the other. The passage works to illustrate not only the kinds of measuring that might be thought pedantic but also instances of poetic modes prior to the emergence of neo-classical poetic forms developed in the practice of poets during the English renaissance. These 'rules' in Bunting's line, though, should not be confused with the pronunciation rules for words of more than one syllable that he himself depends on to structure his phrases (*Cymric*, *voices*, *autumn* and so on to *pedant's*), but refer rather to scansion rules with their terminology borrowed from Greek and with quantity-based metrics applied to a stress-based language, resulting in an infinitude of (often highly expressive) mismatches between the templates and their contents, mismatches which themselves may have helped perpetrate the ingrained assumption that sound and sense are different experiences in the complex singularity of performed or listened-to poetry.

This assertion in the midst of Bunting's poem might be thought a late Romantic nativist instance of Modernist anti-Petrarchan, pre-Raphaelite sensibility, challenging the effort to classicise with imports from Europe the composition of poetry in English (the language itself a hybrid pidgin created through layering imports from Europe) by domesticating Renaissance neo-classical learning about the structure of Greek and Latin verse through the Elizabethan and Augustan eras. Yet, of course, just as Marxist teleology would require a bourgeois revolution to lay the grounds for its further prophesied transformation of economic relations, it won't do simply to bracket out epochs of development in cultural formation. After all, such modernist poetics gain their polemical edge by resisting a state of affairs that they thereby acknowledge as formative, and Bunting's ambivalence about the example and influence of Edmund Spenser in his lectures on poetry is a further instance of the epoch-wielding that gave us the spiritual decline of Venice, the dissociation of sensibility, the corruption of art by usury, or the notion that human character changed in December 1910.[11]

3

Which brings me to Bunting's monosyllables, and to the first hint of *Briggflatts*' emergence in a letter to Louis Zukofsky of 16 September 1964 where he notes, in an elegiac mood, of his owing poems to 'Peggy Greenbank and her whole ambience' after reporting these two new lines: 'In the grave's narrow slot/they lie: we rot.'[12] The definitive version of this

[11] See e.g. the lecture on 'Spenser' in Peter Makin (ed.), *Basil Bunting on Poetry* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) p. 51.

[12] Alex Niven (ed.), *Letters of Basil Bunting* (Oxford, 2022; online edn, Oxford Academic, 18 August 2022), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198754817.003.0003, accessed 26 February 2023.

in his long poem required the substitution of 'he' for 'they', the colon changing to a full stop, and the cutting of that disyllable word 'narrow'. The resulting monosyllables are thus set against each other, instancing that most distinguishing feature of his verse. Such effects can be found in practically every work from 'Weeping oaks grieve' of 1924 to 'Now we've no hope of going back', released for publication in its definitive form nine days before the poet's death in 1985. If I were to hazard a difference between Wordsworth's use of them and Bunting's, it would be that for the earlier poet they are an ordinary resource ('She seemed a thing that could not feel'), while for the modernist follower they are a signature style-feature, as in: 'becks, flocks/and axe knocks.'[13] Yet, it is also worth thinking for a moment how we pronounce stressed monosyllables when they are placed next to each other. Here, I look again at a set-piece example, in this case a poem by one of his predecessors that Bunting would tend broadly to denigrate, that is to say, Tennyson, the poet who not only composed a line from the same monosyllable in 'Break, break, break' but also produced the wonderfully expressive monosyllabic: 'On the bald street breaks the blank day.'[14] Though these monosyllables, as text-form, might look exceedingly flat, though not unprofitably so, if spoken out loud, any speaker could not but minutely differentiate the stress-pitch of these syllables because intelligible sounds have to have an intonational curve produced by such differentiation. This phenomenon is a further indication of sense in sound, and one more reason for my arguing that sound cannot be prior to the sense, or vice versa.[15] Notice the pitch contour of 'bald street breaks' in which, at least in my intonation, the adjective rises, the noun drops slightly, and the verb rises above the adjective. What is notable about these instances is the way they diverge so markedly from the pedantry rules yet remain rhythmically expressive through the pronunciation rules. Given this divergence, it is as if poets have both to incorporate the history of prosody as it has come down to the present, while remaining conscious of the arbitrariness of the imposition, and yet at the same time to listen as carefully as possible to the actual speech rhythms, and to hear what tensions they set up between the template norms and the individual performances.

Perhaps it is worth noting in passing a reason why misunderstandings of what Bunting said, even in their most exaggerated late forms, may arise,

[13] *The Poems of Basil Bunting*, 44.

[14] Christopher Ricks (ed.), *Tennyson: A Selected Edition* (London: Longmans, 1989) pp. 351–2 for *In Memoriam* 7, and 165 for 'Break, break, break'. See also the passing slurs on Tennyson's work in Peter Makin (ed.), *Basil Bunting on Poetry* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) p. 104, 105, 106, 114.

[15] Peter Makin very helpfully explores these issues in Appendix 5 (a) and (b) of *Bunting: The Shaping of his Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) pp. 337–41.

and that is because they may be confused together as responses to two distinct questions. One such question asks what the key difference is between poetry and prose, and back comes the answer that poetry is characterised by the identification of sound patterning, seemingly (though not actually) above and beyond any semantic content. The other question asks how such salience of sound is produced. Bunting's objection to 'ornament' in sound patterning suggests that it cannot be added to the sense, while his remark to Gael Turnbull that 'It's just onomatopoeia. That's all it is. It's really very simple'[16] produces confusion since the familiar term implies the primacy of sense, and of sound supporting it. But as will be evident in what follows, not all of Bunting's monosyllabic curtness is imitative of things performing in nature. There is also a further difference to explore between the poet's much-advertised conceptual clarity and the complex multiplicity of experience embodied in *Briggflatts*. But the main point to underline is that intonation is embedded in writing and not something added to the sense (except when a mishap occurs and the meaningless contrast of intonation and sense needs correcting). It is a process of realisation that produces the sound sense in the immediacy of the performance.

Peter Makin may concede that 'the sound of a poem must be delivered by one who knows the meaning,'[17] but his language is unfortunately obliging him to give plain definition and temporal sequence to an experience that is neither so finite nor so clear-cut. It is true that if you had no idea of the meaning (because, for example your knowledge of its language was imperfect) work would have to be done to secure the meaning before you attempted a reading. But with poems written in a reader's native language, needing to know the meaning of a poem to read it out loud would seem to preclude ever beginning to find out what it meant by reading it. If we needed to know the meaning to sound it, why would we want to read it out loud anyway? Certainly not to understand, since that has supposedly already happened. In practice, the sound-shape of a poem in a native language and its meaning are reciprocally discovered through its sounding out, with improved intonations likely following from increased familiarity. Perhaps it would be more helpful to think not of the meaning of a poem but the experience it offers of meaning being unfolded.

I may have implied by some of the above that there are no rules for how to stress monosyllables, but if so, this was a contrastive simplification aimed at distinguishing them from the rules shaping the pronunciation of words with more than one syllable. As noted earlier, the pronunciation of monosyllables depends on their syntactical and thus also semantic placement in

[16] Cited in Makin, 242.
[17] *Ibid.*, 240.

contexts shaped by the words surrounding them, which can, of course, include other monosyllables. This is why, as I have discussed elsewhere, the 'I' at the start of Hardy's 'The Darkling Thrush' ('I leant upon a coppice gate') has a different stress-pitch value than the 'I', a rhyme word referring to the same figure, at the end of line 16 ('fervourless as I)'.[18] On that opening line of Bunting's ('Brag, sweet tenor bull'), Cox makes it clear that the poet placed 'Brag' and 'sweet' in carefully delimited separation from each other, emphasising the comma, and kept 'sweet' distinct from the first stressed syllable of 'tenor' by distinctly pronouncing as separate that same final and first consonant *t*. But are those three stressed syllables of equal weight? Is 'Brag, sweet' a spondee? But to ask that would, I imagine, be to invoke 'the rules' that 'made poetry a pedant's game.'

In order to turn a repeat of the same noise into a piece of communicative human speech, it is necessary to give each reiterated sound a slightly different inflection, to give a series of the same sounds a sonic 'contour'. The difference between 'Break, break, break' spoken to the sea as a meaningful evocation, and as a series of undifferentiated noises can be evoked by imagining how you would dehumanise its pronunciation so as to give the monitory coldness of a machine, a Dalek, for instance, and indeed that might be one way to intonate as dramatising the sea's indifference to human fate. Yet, if you want to call upon the sea, inviting it to do what it will do anyway, for self-tormenting and consolatory implications, you might pitch up the first one with a strong emphasis, then pitch the second one slightly lower, then go back to the earlier pitch for the third, but slightly lengthening and raising it further, following it with a sharp drop to indicate the end of a sense phrase, and not least because this repetition of imperatives to a natural force is an emphasised requesting. Something similar might be heard in the first three syllables of 'Brag, sweet tenor'. Cox noted that 'tenor' was 'at the peak of his intonation'.

So here I am faintly disagreeing with Creeley that it is 'a music made' from the 'singleness' of his monosyllables, because while it is true that Bunting does make a signature-style feature out of them, emphasising their singleness in a way that makes Wordsworth's use of them feel more *cantabile*, nevertheless, for them to communicate, as Cox describes, they have to be caught into minutely and acutely differentiated intonations, and such minute differentiations are what produce the unique sound-sense amalgams of individual lines, phrases, passages, sentences and stanzas. This is why that first line of *Briggflatts* also has a detectable falling cadence partially hidden by the seeming-spondee, informed and anchored by the stress-

[18] See Peter Robinson, 'Thomas Hardy' in Claude Rawson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to English Poets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) pp. 449–51.

pattern of 'tenor', then brought to a halt by the terminal monosyllable 'bull' – and on I could go into the second line, 'descant on Rawthey's madrigal,', noting how it is all brilliantly locked into place at 'madrigal', with its heterotonic couplet echo, where the full stress of 'bull' meets the slightly less emphasised third syllable of its rhyme word.[19] These are the means, among innumerable others, by which the following lines, with their predominance of monosyllables, combine to produce a form of words in which, as experienced out loud, it is not possible to say what is the sound and what the sense:

> letter the stone to stand
> over love laid aside lest
> insufferable happiness impede
> flight to Stainmore,
> to trace
> lark, mallet,
> becks, flocks
> and axe knocks.[20]

Notice how the polysyllabic third line here ('insufferable happiness impede') acts as both a desired release and a curb or limit, whereby the hard-to-define word 'happiness', paying tribute to his youthful 'laid aside' love, is hedged about. It is as if Bunting is indeed going in fear of abstractions, ones we are both drawn towards with the verse's movement and held apart from by the very impeding that enlivens the line with both Wordsworthian monosyllable and disyllable combinations ('letter the stone to stand/over love laid aside lest') and his more bravura performance in this stanza's final four lines. But, sad to note, along the lines of Yeats's 'The Choice',[21] it looks as if the sound sense here conveys ambivalence around the supposedly divided aims of living happily and writing well.

4

I would like to approach a conclusion by raising a related question about the kinds of monosyllables employed in *Briggflatts* at such formally foregrounded moments, for to conjure a sound world in five words with 'becks, flocks/and axe knocks' is not only to be privileging the directness of this

[19] *The Poems of Basil Bunting*, 41.
[20] *The Poems of Basil Bunting*, 44.
[21] 'The intellect of man is forced to choose/Perfection of the life, or of the work' in Richard J. Finneran (ed.), *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993) p. 246.

presentation as a synecdoche, as it were, for poetic honesty, but also to be ushering his stanza away from the equivocations implicit in 'insufferable happiness impede' to the safe area, as it were, of sensory evocation, enhancing with onomatopoeia and word choice a remembered experience that also acts metaphorically—for there is nothing necessarily percussive about those sheep, aside from the universal fact of death, theirs and ours.

Looking at these brief examples of lines and passages from *Briggflatts*, showing how Bunting employs a similar jamming of monosyllables against each other for the performance of very different tasks within the poem, not forgetting how he uses the stress inflections of two-syllable words in his compacted lines, does, then, reveal how much more sparing with reduced stresses he is than, say, Wordsworth in 'A slumber did my spirit seal'. Yet, it also underlines that Bunting uses them as any poet in the English language will be obliged to do. He too will anchor and lock in the shapes of his lines by employing their shared pronunciation rules, and, like Tennyson at his best, vary the expressive contours of his lines by means of the differential pronunciation of stressed monosyllables in conjunction. Here, again, is a reason why his polemical regionalism cannot explain the communicative and memorable power of his poetry, and why, if different regional or class accents would maul the music of this northern poetry, then that might reduce it to a local eccentricity. One substantial issue to explain would then be how and why the occasions and materials of *Briggflatts* mean it is able to make so much more effective and purposeful use of the poet's techniques than Bunting had been able to do earlier (for while it is true that, like Domenico Scarlatti, the poet was able to condense a lot of music into his lines, it is by no means the case that there is 'never a boast or a see-here' in his work, for it is precisely this that weakens some of his minor and occasional verse).

In this latter part of my essay, I would like briefly to address further what this monosyllable-ism can mean and whether it is anything other than the signature style of an unusual 'bolshiness'.[22] I'm thinking of the contrasting timbre in a set of monosyllables like 'Blame/stays the same' when encountered after having been attuned to sensory ones such as 'All sounds fall still,/fellside bleat,/hide-and-seek peewit' or 'Pens are too light./Take a chisel to write.'[23] Once again, in context, Bunting employs a combination of monosyllabic and polysyllabic words in an ordering that might be taken

[22] I borrow the word 'bolshiness' from Peter Makin's *Bunting: The Shaping of his Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) p. 20, where he notes it 'is a condition that may have much to do with poethood in general, and probably had a great deal to do with Bunting's particular way of being a poet.'

[23] *The Poems of Basil Bunting*, 42–43.

as monitory:

> Hounds falter and stray,
> shame deflects the pen.
> Love murdered neither bleeds nor stifles
> but jogs the draftsman's elbow.
> What can he, changed, tell
> her, changed, perhaps dead?
> Delight dwindles. Blame
> stays the same.[24]

In 'Delight dwindles', the poet again makes use of the pronunciation rules for words of more than one syllable, this time placing the rising contour of 'Delight' against the falling stress-pitch of 'dwindles', with the two stressed syllables butted against each other. And the shift from those self-conflicting polysyllables to the monosyllabic aphorism 'Blame/stays the same' again uses the return to plain speaking, as it were, to convince a reader (very effectively) of the truth-value in the simpler and straighter utterance clinched by the rhyme. But is it quite true, and especially in a sonic context that includes 'shame' deflecting the pen, that 'Blame/stays the same'?

After all, back in 1927, in his ode 'To Helen Egli', Bunting had included the echoingly cognate phrase 'shame changes the past':[25]

> Empty vast days built in the waste memory seem a jail for
> thoughts grown stale in the mind, tardy of birth, rank and inflexible:
> love and slow selfpraise, even grief's cogency, all emotions
> timetamed whimper and shame changes the past brought to no utterance.[26]

For if it is true that 'shame changes the past', then might it not be the case that the blame which produces shame in changing the past inevitably also changes the blame, not necessarily softening or lessening it, but changing it nonetheless, as understandings of the past are altered by shared acknowledgements of wrong implied in that word 'shame'? And is it not this that the entire sonata of *Briggflatts* performs, taking us through a shape in time so

[24] *Ibid.*, 44.

[25] In his biography, Richard Burton says the phrase 'eerily reaches forward nearly forty years to *Briggflatts*' and 'Bunting here regrets an opportunity unfulfilled, an affair acknowledged but unconsummated', *A Strong Song Tows Us: The Life of Basil Bunting* (Oxford: Infinite Ideas, 2013) p. 136.

[26] *The Poems of Basil Bunting*, 81.

that, altering our experiences of time for the duration of its reading, we are informed of how a larger tract of time, a lifetime, might also be reshaped in our creative understanding? But how good is the poem at keeping such a revaluation of past time in later life free from both a sentimental self-forgiveness and an unnecessarily punitive self-condemnation?

5

To conclude, then, with three more of the poet's monosyllables: 'Then is Now.' Again, the idea appears to be that profoundly contentious statements extending beyond opinion or individual subjectivity—because carved in his 'mason-like' verse—may be attempted because they have an affinity with the access to a primordial reality, a bedrock. Yet, 'Then is Now', emphatically resisting the common colloquial pairing 'now and then', is, on one level, a poetic counterfactual if ever there was one, and Bunting underlined that such counterfactuals cannot simply be asserted: 'I distrust memory extremely, but the effort to remember the various episodes in *Briggflatts*, for they are all however altered based upon my own past, the effort to remember it was a severe one which went on for many months. So that to make then into now is not something you can just say … it takes some doing!'[27] The poet's problem is, though, that while evoking experiences based on memories that embody this understanding, he is nevertheless obliged to 'just say':

> Snow lies bright on Hedgehope
> and tacky mud about Till
> where the fells have stepped aside
> and the river praises itself,
> silence by silence sits
> and Then is diffused in Now.

This convincingly evoked experience of temporal diffusion is then compressed into the assertion that he is obliged to 'just say': 'Then is Now.' The effort of memory and temporal condensation, with his monosyllables working as hard as he can make them, is reduced to this metaphor in the form of a copula, the metaphor undoing the counterfactual claim embedded in the copula, even as a metaphor it carries the poetic charge against the logic of the assertion. These complexities are themselves set going by the other contextual level of the utterance, for the years that it has taken the light to reach from Sirius to the Earth mean that its 'then' is our

[27] Cited from an 'Interview with Peter Bell, 3 September 1981' in Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us*, p. 386.

'now'. Yet, Bunting is using this as an analogy for his own lifetime, so the two planes for the truth-function of the statement do not equally apply, and the metaphorical level must be engaged. This underlines the way in which Bunting's monosyllabic phrase pivots, as it were, between an assertion of fact where the subject and the complement are logically the same, and a metaphor, where different nouns are yoked together by the verb. Yet, further, because of the nature of syntax, even the three-syllable sentence 'Then is Now', aspiring to transcend time, has inevitably to take place in time. The tension in this moment catches at the nature of the poem, its aspiring to triumph over time while yet being compelled, at this moment of assertion, to be elegiac.[28] This moment in the poem simultaneously underlines from a stellar perspective the minuteness of a human life in cosmic time, and, from a human perspective, the enormous importance of its time-transcending assertion for the evaluation of the lives involved.

If we look back at Bunting's 16 September 1964 letter to Zukofsky, we can see that a stated impulse behind the composition of *Briggflatts* is founded on its opposite, for, as he mentions, 'the Viking inheritance' is 'all spent save the faint smell of it':

> I owe poems to Rustam—part paid; – to Cooper Stephenson, who was killed in the great battle of March 1918, the closest of all the friends I've had; and to Peggy Greenbank and her whole ambience, the Rawthey valley, the fells of Lunedale, the Viking inheritance all spent save the faint smell of it, the ancient Quaker life accepted without thought and without suspicion that it might seem eccentric: and what happens when one deliberately thrusts love aside, as I then did—it has its revenge. That must be a longish poem.

And he adds that this 'looks like the programme of an old man revisiting the scenes of his youth, casting up with his accounts, as my father did in the few months before he died. I have no means to carry it out, but I must try.'[29] Thus, the asserted purpose of Bunting's monosyllabic music is to make a reckoning, to both accept the inevitable, and to resist it with whatever force of poetry, in Dr Johnson's phrase, he can muster—though again, I would want to underline the collaboration required from us to effect what is attempted. And attempted was the common human wish to be linked to

[28] My reflections on this issue have been much clarified by conversation after a draft of this essay was given as a paper at the Basil Bunting Symposium on 3 March 2023, and I would particularly like to acknowledge the observations made then by Liam Coles and Michael Rizq.

[29] Alex Niven (ed.), *Letters of Basil Bunting* (Oxford, 2022; online edn, Oxford Academic, 18 August 2022), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198754817.003.0003, accessed 27 February 2023.

things that come before our short stay on earth (the Viking inheritance, for instance) and to project forward into a time beyond that short stay. *Briggflatts* uses the sound sense of poetry to address these counterfactual ambitions.

Thus, Bunting's verse both aspires to be 'free of our humbug', like the stars, and yet tacitly to re-enact the classic and standard 'humbug' of poetry's time-resisting claim ('Then is Now'), and the strain in this aspiration might also explain some of Bunting's late comments about the priority of music over content, a sense that such freedom from the vanity of human wishes cannot be entirely achieved, and his poem not only doesn't achieve it, but succumbs in the final lines of Part V:

> Fifty years a letter unanswered;
> a visit postponed for fifty years.
>
> She has been with me fifty years.
>
> Starlight quivers. I had day enough.
> For love uninterrupted night.

That last line is, as Don Share notes, adapted from Catullus's 'Vivamus, mia Lesbia, atque amemus', his 'counting kisses' Carmen in which 'nox est perpetua una dormienda' ['there is an everlasting night'].[30] And no sooner has he got through these unusually polysyllabic lines (*unanswered*, *visit postponed*, *fifty*, *fifty*, *Starlight quivers*, *enough*, *uninterrupted*) than Bunting returns his poem to the evidently more congenial mode of the predominantly monosyllabic lyric Coda ('A strong song tows/us, long earsick') in which the first disyllable we encounter is that nonce word: 'earsick'.

This is why, in the end, it isn't only the music of *Briggflatts* that matters, as Peter Makin carefully explains in his magisterial monograph. It's what an experience of the music manifests as knowledge-value.[31] The sound sense of poetry underlines, then, that it is crucial what poets have to say in their way of saying it, and what Bunting has to say in *Briggflatts* about 'blame' and 'time' when properly and carefully understood in its unique sound-sense amalgams. For not being exercised by the consequences of their 'meaning', even when honourably to foreground the oral and aural

[30] *The Poems of Basil Bunting*, 361.

[31] This is also a term I gratefully borrow from Peter Makin, whose detailed comments on the contents of my essay helped clarify the thought and expression at various points.

verbal construction is not, let's face it, a way to respect those poems that we enjoy and value the experience of hearing, and rehearing, whether it be Dante Alighieri's presuming to judge, Ezra Pound's failing to make the incoherent cohere, or Basil Bunting's elegiac memorialising of his youthful romance with all it could be found to imply of poetry's role in the eventual vindication of a life.

The Cambridge Quarterly, 2025, 54, 119–136
https://doi.org/10.1093/camqtly/bfaf017
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