

*Pricking the Score*

Basil Bunting, *Complete Poems*. R. Caddel, ed., Bloodaxe, £9.95

Basil Bunting, *Basil Bunting Reads Briggflatts & Other Poems*. Two-hour double cassette, Bloodaxe, £9.95

Peter Makin, ed. *Basil Bunting on Poetry*. John Hopkins, £24.99

The career of Basil Bunting, who would have been one hundred last year, is now sufficiently well-known that it hardly needs repeating: co-dedicatée in 1934 with Louis Zukofsky of Pound's *Guide to Kulchur*, he remained a "struggler in the wilderness" until his mid-sixties when the publication of *Briggflatts*, his last substantial poetic work, brought belated critical recognition. Familiar with Yeats, Eliot, Ford Madox Ford, David Jones, MacDiarmid, Mina Loy, he knew his work would stand comparison with any and throughout the years of neglect trimmed and cut with the kind of conviction that only a poet utterly assured of his craft could manage; so that his complete poems, augmented in the present edition to include all the writings he more or less released in his lifetime remains, like the editions he personally oversaw, a relatively slim volume.

His poems are, as he said of the *Cantos*, as solidly formed as the Alps; "you will have to go a long way round / if you want to avoid them". Ignore them, dislike them if you will, but it would be foolish to deny their stature. There may be a host of reasons why Bunting is still perhaps relatively under-estimated, but the poems aren't going to shift from the path, and sooner or later a committed reader is bound to have to take account of them. Bunting himself would no doubt have argued about whether all the poems that appear here should be included in the book but the editor, Richard Caddel, presents convincing arguments for its shape. Bunting, who famously pruned chunks from Shakespeare's sonnets, was the severest of editors. If he preserved work it was not because he was casual about his manuscripts; everything printed here he *chose* to publish or circulate at one time or another. Caddel has respected Bunting's own arrangement of the poems and has presented the uncollected work separately. Perhaps the best argument is simply that the poems read so well.

For ultimately it's what Bunting wanted—that we should relish the *reading* of the poems. He will have been all too aware of the sort of argument that would dismiss criticism as at best a distraction from, and at worst a trashing of, the pertinence of poems when read aloud. But his resistance to criticism (in any case incomplete: he happily recommended Hugh Kenner's work) and insistence on reading aloud had little to do with a mystique about performance. It wasn't the truth of an improvised Present that mattered to him, or the sort of concern that led Williams to articulate the *occasion* of the poem as an essential "embodiment of knowledge". Whatever sympathies he might have had for such notions, his motivations were quite different. He stated his position clearly in the 1968 preface to his collected poems: "...I have set down words as a musician pricks his score, not to be read in silence, but to trace in the air a pattern of sound that may sometimes, I hope, be pleasing".

His craft at root derives from that simple, musical motive: to communicate, to please, with patterns of sound. Readers can try to build whatever edifice they like on this foundation, but they would misread Bunting if they ignore it. Fortunately we don't have to. A reader who hesitates to follow Bunting's advice to the letter—read *aloud*—has now two cassettes of him reading his own work easily available, plus the texts of a series of lectures he gave at Newcastle between 1969 and 1974 in which he reveals how his own reading in the history of English poetry is an extraordinary *hearing* of verse.

These lectures make a fascinating read. For a start they are edited by the most accomplished and thorough scholar of Bunting's work that we have. Makin's introduction is a wonderfully succinct and stimulating invitation to the poems; if he tends to read the score for the music, he nonetheless gives us as precise a summary as we could hope for of Bunting's insights. And like all the deepest insights, Bunting's are achieved with such clarity that, looking back, they seem inevitable; so that it's worth quoting Makin at some length in order to recognise just how much Bunting managed to clear away, and how simply he did it:

The main argument can be sketched quickly. Bunting assumes that art is shape, not content. There is no excuse, of course, for decoration: it simply spoils shape. In this art, in the English language, rhythm is the most essential shapable: and if the poet has the rhythm right, he probably needs nothing else to give main form to his poem.... But rhythm, the whole key to English verse, Bunting says, has to be made by English means. Languages vary in their constitutions; what has force in one may have little in another; stress is

the key to English, though not to French. Unfortunately, "the tradition" has imported the French concern with syllable count; coupled with a foolish rigidity in ideas about sequencing stresses, this has given birth to the bastard form called the 'iambic pentameter'.... This grotesque [iambic pentameter] has only heightened the English propensity for fluff, for decoration...for the pentameter is too long and invites glittering nothings to fill it out.... The cure is, first, a return to the essential of English, which is the play of strong stresses, irrespective of overall syllable count...; second an ear for music, for music is the true parent of poetry. The flexibility and intricacy of song as a frame for words taught Wyatt and Campion to bring forth words equally varied and alive in their cadences.

So Bunting advanced Wyatt from the status of a minor poet with dubious control over his material (in 1970, Muir's edition of the poems was still hardly canonical), to the "effective founder of modern English verse"—ahead of Chaucer. For Bunting *heard* that Wyatt was writing to a musical line rather than to the predictable metrical patterns foisted on him by Tottel with which his reputation was scuppered for 400 years. Bunting almost certainly exaggerated the extent to which Wyatt's words were intended to be sung (there seems no evidence to make the claim for the sonnets, and still only limited direct evidence for many of the lyrics: Bunting—quite reasonably—would have replied that the evidence was in the lines themselves), but it hardly matters. Wyatt has left us poems whose 'flexibility and intricacy' arises from their adherence to music rather than metrics, and Bunting seized on them as a means to invigorate his own lines. At exactly the time that Pound was inventing his *Propertius* and clipping *The Waste Land* into shape, Bunting found his own solutions to the ossified poetic habits of preceding generations in a rehabilitation of the musical methods of Wyatt and, further back, the stressed line of early British poetries. Without Wyatt and Beowulf, without having read them aloud and registered the movement physically in the voice, without having felt his mouth working round their rhythms, suppler than anything he could have taken from nineteenth century practice, Bunting's craft would surely have been slower to develop.

Not that one can doubt that it would have developed anyway. The appendix to the *Complete Poems* prints the two pieces of juvenilia that were published in Bunting's youth, both remarkably conventional given that Bunting knew and already admired Whitman. But only a handful of years later, at the age of 25, he published Villon, the first of his "sonatas", a poem managed with such accomplishment that it resembles the mature work of a writer who has long since assimilated

lated the influences that will be of most use to him. Bunting seems to have been gifted with the kind of conviction about himself and his work that permitted him to reach directly what he needed without having to search around clumsily amongst eventual dead ends like most young writers.

I don't think this is attributable simply to the rigour of his editing. Not the least fascinating feature of Makin's edition of the lectures is where they choose to begin: not with poetry at all, but with the *Codex Lindisfarnensis* and the astonishing graphic art with which Northumbrian monks and scholars embellished their manuscripts during the Dark Ages. Bunting actually insists that "I'm not going to explain the bearing of all this on poetry", although he then proceeds most effectively to do so. As interesting to readers of Bunting, however, is what his view of Northumbrian art says about his *own* work. Just as his anthropology looks speculative if not downright bogus when he argues about the possible origins of poetry, scholars could no doubt quarrel with some (though not a lot perhaps) of his commentaries on Northumbrian art; but the pertinence of his words is of another order.

There seems at first to be a confusion of detail and decoration, but the balance is never lost, and the main design shows through, ultimately, without insisting on itself.... The detail intertwines and repeats, and yet the richness of the detail never obscures the balance, the beautiful balance and symmetry of the main design.... [There's] much more to it than the hearer or beholder realises at first. [It wasn't done] by guess; it required some pretty complex geometry, a whole system of intricately related and balanced ratios.

There isn't a page of the *Complete Poems* that isn't testimony to the same skills. *Briggflatts* is the example par excellence and one could spend hours unravelling its symmetries. But if the poet has spent so much effort to make a design that doesn't "insist on itself", it would surely be impertinent to try and do it for him: as he said, "your reader is at least as smart as you". The design manifests itself when the poem's heard. The cassettes of Bunting reading would be worth having even if it was only for his rendering of *Briggflatts*. They allow us to hear how his pacing of the final pages completes the aural design of the whole as decisively as any recapitulation in the sonatas of Scarlatti, selections from which Bunting intended to punctuate the poem though they were unfortunately unavailable for this recording. But one can as easily illustrate aural design in the short poems.

A thrush in the syringa sings.

'Hunger ruffles my wings, fear,  
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!

The design here, created from the play of rhyme, internal or half-rhyme and repeated vowel shapes is too subtle to take in at a glance. The point is that, like the song of the common song thrush which is distinctive for both its variety and its repetition, the sounds are structured into an intricate pattern. They *determine* the form. This is Bunting's answer to the problems posed by a poet such as Spenser, who can make sounds that glitter in the ears but who too often fails to make them function structurally because he wanted them to serve, in Bunting's view, alien rhythmic methods.

It's this, I think Bunting would say, that gives pleasure in reading aloud: we can hear the craft of the poet in the detail of the lines, but we sense too the larger structures that emerge as the poem unfolds in time. These are lost in silent or interrupted reading just as effectively as they are lost if a piece of music is stopped in mid-course. It's surely at this point that Bunting collides with the poetics of a man like Olson, for whom one might expect he would have some sympathy. Form, for Bunting, is manifest at the moment of reading because of the poet's previous labour to get the structure sounding right: the 'main design' is realised, but not created, by the voice. Olson on the other hand viewed form as one more extension of the content of the occasion, altered, augmented, reshaped with each advancing syllable, so that the 'main design' might not be settled in advance. Just as can happen in the music of a composer like Cage who consciously welcomed unpredictable interruptions, so Olson's poems when he read could be diverted in mid-course, but neither poems nor music, in their maker's view, should be seen as being deformed by it; on the contrary, their form might be renewed by such interventions.

One might situate Bunting historically by his choices in this debate. He knew there was further to go along the routes he had opened up and made deliberate decisions about the distance he wished to travel. He far preferred audacious experiments that fail to tried-and-tested methods whose success is guaranteed in advance. He loathed pretention and respected risk-takers. At the same time he required utter dedication to craft. He rejected 'open field' writing, as readily as he dismissed ideas of form as 'organic'. His obstinacy and rigour steered him clear of improvisation, but his essential good humour and generosity allowed him to enjoy the inventiveness of children playing and the spontaneity of popular forms like ballads and blues. For a whole range of poets today he offers a way forward in the writing of poetry in English whilst simultaneously, because he lived at the cusp of a revolutionary period, he reveals a way back to its roots.