

Richard Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us: The Life of Basil Bunting*
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THE ROAD TO BRIGGFLATTS

Anglophone literary modernism, famously, has often had very little to do with English writers. The brahmins in the traditional account—Ezra Pound, James Joyce and T. S. Eliot—were all non-English in origin, for all the strenuous Anglophilia of Eliot's later years. More recently, the Anglo-American academy has tended to journey to the postcolonial margins in its quest for liberal pluralism—or, if you prefer, neo-Gladstonian munificence. Caught in the gap between these two tendencies, the English modernist poet Basil Bunting (1900–85) has not received as much attention as might have been expected for a writer with his avant-garde credentials. An adherent of Pound and Eliot who began as a politically radical, experimentalist poet of the twenties and thirties, and ended as an unlikely counter-cultural hero of the sixties and seventies, Bunting has been mentioned less and less in recent critical debates in the field. This in spite of his former centrality to the international poetry scene—among his many devotees in later life were Robert Creeley, Hugh Kenner, Thom Gunn and Allen Ginsberg—and the fact that his masterpiece of 1966, the verse autobiography *Briggflatts*, is surely the most substantial English-language poem of the late-modernist period.

The question of Bunting's maverick status in modern verse is the central narrative of Richard Burton's impressively weighty *A Strong Song Tows Us*—its title taken from a line in *Briggflatts*—which is the first biography of the poet that can fairly claim to be definitive; both *Basil Bunting: A Northern Life* (1997) by Richard Caddel and Anthony Flowers, and *Basil Bunting: The Poet as Spy* (1998) by Keith Alldritt are cursory sketches rather than fully realized portraits. In Bunting's early years, Burton uncovers much that is suggestive of a writer congenitally at odds with the high-bourgeois

English culture he would later use as a point of antithesis. Though born into relative suburban affluence, Bunting was raised against the backdrop of industrial Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and schooled in an environment at far remove from the pastoral Anglicanism that was and remains the *locus classicus* of so much English literature. His father was a Fabian doctor with close professional ties to the industrial mining culture of the English north-east; moreover, while he does not seem to have been a practising member of the Religious Society of Friends, he sent his son to Quaker schools in Yorkshire and Berkshire. Burton maintains that Bunting's Quakerism was half genuine, half a pose. But it seems clear that these early experiences fostered an attitude of politico-religious recalcitrance that would play a key role in ensuing years. Called up when he left school in the last months of World War I, Bunting took his radical Quaker stand as a conscientious objector and was rewarded with the better part of a year in jail. His treatment there was, by all accounts, brutal; Bunting was usually taciturn on the subject, but his friend Denis Goacher would later relate that 'the experience embittered Basil for life. He said it coloured all he thought about England, about the Establishment'.

Following his release from Winchester Prison in the summer of 1919, Bunting enrolled at the London School of Economics, encouraged perhaps by its Fabian patrimony. Among his contemporaries there was a young Lionel Robbins, who seems to have ushered Bunting toward the leading lights of high modernism at a crucial moment. As he would later inform Pound:

I met Robbins just before I went to LSE and did him the bad turn of persuading him to go there too. Tastes more or less better class Bloomsbury—i.e., aware of a lot of things you might not expect a prof of economics to have heard of. First person, I think, to show me any of Eliot's work, certainly first to show me bit of Ulysses in *The Egoist* (or was it *Portrait of J.J.*)? He used to like your works and probably still does.

Distracted by Robbins's reading recommendations—Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius* and Eliot's 'Preludes' were of particular interest—Bunting left university after four years without taking a degree, having set his sights on a career in writing. His poetic juvenilia had been, by his own admission, 'no good'. But the discovery of Pound and Eliot inspired him to look beyond the poetic climate of twenties London, where the mannerly nostalgia of the Georgian poets held sway until it was gently supplanted by the formal gradualism of W. H. Auden and his circle at the decade's close. Decamping to Paris in 1923, Bunting found employment at Ford Madox Ford's *transatlantic review*, and it was during his tenure here that a lifelong friendship with Pound was begun, after a chance encounter in a Montparnasse café.

Bunting soon became a prominent member of what the publisher James Laughlin called the ‘Eziversity’, the circle of poets, artists and musicians who gathered intermittently around Pound in the exiles’ idyll of Rapallo on the Ligurian coast in the twenties and thirties. This was the making of him creatively. In the company of Pound, Yeats, George Antheil, and younger poets such as the American Marxist Louis Zukofsky, he was given a point of entry into the interwar avant-garde, and for a while he relished the opportunity. He helped Pound with preparations for a seminal series of concerts at the Teatro Reale in Rapallo, began a major translation of the Persian epic *Shahnameh*, became peripherally involved in the ‘Objectivist’ verse movement spearheaded by Zukofsky and William Carlos Williams, and unfurled a sizeable body of work, most of which appeared as the lead contribution to Pound’s *Active Anthology* of 1933. In his own laconic summary: ‘it was a very pleasant time. I got a lot of poetry written, enjoyed the conversation, enjoyed sailing my boat, enjoyed the sunshine. I saw a good deal of Yeats’.

According to Yeats, the young poet was ‘one of Ezra’s more savage disciples’, and indeed there was more urgency to the Rapallo excursion than is suggested in Bunting’s account. But for now the disputations were aesthetic rather than political. When he wasn’t sailing his boat in the Tigullio Gulf, Bunting channelled his disdain for the English establishment into a determined onslaught on its literary traditions, a campaign that mixed puritanical modernist zeal with acerbic Geordie humour. He wrote to American editor Harriet Monroe in July 1931 to say that he was embarking on a project of ‘editing’ Shakespeare’s sonnets by removing apparently superfluous words, simplifying the syntax, sometimes deleting entire poems from the sequence—‘after sufficient cutting and straightening out of inversions, rather a nice poem should emerge’. The formal critique of English literature was elaborated in ‘The Lion and the Lizard’, a prose piece of the period:

It is partly because English poetry is so splendid that it is so inadequate. 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. English poets are too often on their dignity, they strive too constantly to be sublime and end by becoming monotonous. This is partly because they have neglected the music of Byrd and Dowland so much more supple rhythmically than English poetry, and because they despise or patronise jazz and other popular music.

Reacting against this splendid tradition, which he claimed stretched from Marlowe to Eliot, in his own verse Bunting attempted to extend Pound’s earlier imagist project by innovating an austere lyric realism, combining experimental gestures with a grounding in popular musicality.

The poets of fifteenth-century France were as present to him as to Pound. ‘Villon’, his debut work of 1925–6, takes poetry and history as its subject, conflating the life of François Villon with his own prison experiences:

In the dark in fetters
on bended elbows
I supported my weak back
hulloing to muffled walls blank again
unresonant.

Its opening section illustrates Bunting’s emerging poetic:

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

There is a curt, acoustically barbed aspect to these lines. The effect is derived in part from the use of quotation-collage—lines 2 and 3 are translated from a sixteenth-century prose text—in part also from the surgical, bathetic diction—‘anatomized’, ‘how neatly he describes things’—but perhaps mainly from stringent pruning processes applied *après la lettre* by the poet and his collaborators: Bunting’s compositional motto was ‘cut out every word you dare’, and like Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, ‘Villon’ was hacked down into its final published form with the aid of Pound’s editing pen, presumably in an attempt to rid the verse of its effulgent, ‘English’ aspect, and free up its rhythmic vitality.

However, while these techniques were stylistically successful at close range—‘broody all night over the bones of a deadman’ is a typically jagged Bunting riff—the drawback to this iconoclastic approach was that it could easily tip over into a form of self-effacing nihilism that abridged poetic composition altogether. Bunting’s life was riddled with hiatuses, depressions and near-fatal creative dead-ends. As a result, Burton’s narrative is necessarily uneven, having to account for several lengthy spells where no verse, not even of the radically abbreviated modernist-imagist variety, was being produced at all. Burton offers several plausible theories for Bunting’s creative abstemiousness: his private life was turbulent; he was a formal perfectionist; he may have suffered from clinical depression. More prosaically, there is the fact that for most of his career Bunting was roundly ignored by mainstream English publishing, which eventually became a rigid career obstacle rather than a spur for oppositional endeavour. A tragicomic sub-plot in Burton’s

book is carved out of Eliot's repeated refusals to publish Bunting at Faber and Faber from the thirties onward. Interestingly, Burton suggests, this antipathy may have been caused by the latter's stubbornness as much as by Eliot's growing distaste for aesthetic heterodoxy in the style of the *Active Anthology* as he became the Anglican-royalist-classicist potentate of English letters.

Whatever the cause, Bunting was not a functioning poet by the end of the 1930s. He trained to become a commercial sailor in 1937, and in 1940—Quaker principles notwithstanding—enlisted in the air force, serving as a squadron-leader in British-occupied Iran. As the war drew to a close, in a further astonishing twist, he became a British intelligence operative there. In 'The Well of Lycopolis' (1935), one of his last prewar poems, Bunting had satirized World War I and its aftermath, imagining a pandemic spreading from the trenches to plague Bloomsbury bohemia with a sort of cultural gonorrhoea:

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!

However, in Iran such vaudevillian savagery fell away completely, as he became involved in intelligence operations in Tehran and Isfahan. By 1947 he was enjoying a life of some luxury, installed as 'chief of all British Political Intelligence in Persia, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, etc'. After a brief return to Northumberland in 1950 with a sixteen-year-old Kurdish wife in tow—they had married two years earlier—Bunting went back to Iran as *Times* correspondent, only to be expelled from the country for good when Mossadeq came to power. His response to this episode has a distinct reactionary flavour, and cannot be explained away as mere personal bitterness. By 1953, the blimpish transformation complete, he went so far as to tell Pound in correspondence that he much preferred hawks like Churchill and Truman to a 'stultified clerk like Clement Attlee'.

As with the creative paralysis that stretched, more or less, from the mid thirties to the mid sixties, this ideological volte-face may have been another consequence of Bunting's scepticism. A self-proclaimed acolyte of 'Hume, the doubter', and a subscriber to Wittgenstein's dictum 'whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent', he was continually putting prohibitive barriers in the way of his intellectual and political impulses. A list of formative influences made late in life began: 'jails and the sea, Quaker mysticism and socialist politics, the slums of Lambeth and Hoxton'. Outside the Persian

interlude, Bunting identified as a socialist, eulogized the northern mining unions, and drew on a bedrock of puritan idealism as he sought to demolish traditionalist false idols. But his naysaying urge was such that it regularly threatened to subvert his own *raison d'être*. In his extraordinary mid thirties correspondence with Pound—letters that remain substantially unpublished, though Burton quotes a handful of key passages—Bunting can appear admirable as he opposes Pound's increasingly vicious Mussolinian fascism. A famous exchange of 1938, in which Bunting passionately berated Pound for anti-Semitic remarks directed at Louis Zukofsky, marked the temporary end of their friendship:

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.

But then Bunting's means of opposing Pound could also expose his own ideological confusion. Writing from his temporary home in the Canary Islands in 1935, a depressed, isolated Bunting was stubbornly non-partisan in the midst of the communism versus fascism debate then raging between Zukofsky and Pound: 'You and I and Zuk have to keep the language alive, and damn difficult it is too, and we don't do any appreciable good by turning aside to propagate the worthiest causes in economics or politics.' Though he still clung to the distant non-conformist dream of another civil war, by 1937 Bunting's scepticism about the prospects of English reform had hardened:

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 recognized. 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 doesn't work they will use their police.

A Strong Song Tows Us is not as alive to the significance of these thirties debates as it might have been. The narrative is readable, well-researched and compelling, but in his understandable desire to offer the first proper summary of Bunting's life, Burton has mostly shied away from extended historical and critical discussions, opting instead for a series of even-handed summaries

of the extant source material. As a result there are long, consider-all-angles disquisitions on, for example, the break-up of Bunting's first marriage, and his alleged interest in pubescent girls. These topics are not without interest, but given the importance of Bunting's role in certain crucial developments in mid-twentieth century history and culture, and the current paucity of the critical canon on the subject, the focus on private to the detriment of public life emerging from Burton's archival-summary method can be disappointing. An expansion of the two crucial decades in Bunting's life as an artist—the thirties and the sixties—and a lighter emphasis on foibles of character, might have made for a text that was analytical and interventionist rather than merely informative.

Burton does in fact devote considerable attention to the later of Bunting's two efflorescences: the tumultuous sixties period in which he enjoyed such a spectacular revival. Here the social backdrop is inescapable. In 1963 Bunting was sought out in retirement in rural Northumberland by Tom Pickard, a local working-class writer enthused by certain neo-modernist currents in post-war verse—the Black Mountain School, Ginsberg and the Beats, the new lyric culture of jazz and pop music. Pickard's teenage energy piqued the elder poet out of a decadal depression, and Bunting soon became the focal point of the Morden Tower readings, counter-cultural happenings organized by Pickard and his wife Connie in a dilapidated section of Newcastle's medieval walls. In the city as a whole, the star of popular modernism was in the ascendant: the painter Victor Pasmore had recently innovated a Bauhaus-style pedagogy at King's College—now the University of Newcastle—and vigorous Brutalist buildings were springing up throughout Tyneside. The Morden Tower milieu offered a more spontaneous underground correlative to these surface encroachments. In a context where much of the teleology of first-generation modernism seemed to be coming to fruition—that is, as certain parts of England finally, tentatively, and as it turned out rather briefly, began to *feel* modern—Bunting wrote the great English modernist poem *Briggflatts*, a densely constructed five-part work of some 700 lines, which he read for the first time to the Morden Tower's collective of students, academics, beatniks and proletarian delinquents in December 1965.

Briggflatts is an epic work of northern English non-conformism quite unlike anything written before or since. From its powerful opening lines, the poem offers a synthesis of lyric textures designed to resonate emphatically in the demotic ambience of the Morden Tower:

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.

Burton's close readings of the poem are sensitive, yet perhaps for reasons of space and critical genre he does not explore at length the deeper aesthetic roots of this peculiar verse music—its indebtedness to folk song, its faint recollection of the rhythmic pulse of Old English alliterative verse, its modernist sound patterns harking back to symbolist decorativeness. But the singularity of *Briggflatts* is surely apparent even without recourse to elaborate technical analysis; indeed, the poem's musical accessibility is the ground on which its political and formal identities coincide. Unlike Pound and Eliot, both of whom were rightists committed to various forms of social elitism, Bunting was latterly able to put into practice a deeply felt belief that modernist poetry could be both intellectually subtle and popularly vital if vocalized in the right setting. As he put it in 'The Poet's Point of View', a prose apologia of 1966:

Poetry must be read aloud. 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.

Born slightly later than his modernist confrères, which for a long time seemed a crippling disadvantage, Bunting eventually had the good fortune of living through the age of Bob Dylan as well as that of Ford Madox Ford. The sixties were a decade of egalitarian orality, and in them Bunting's long-running advocacy of poetry's spoken roots finally became socially apposite.

But for all that *Briggflatts* can be appreciated for its sonic immediacy, it is also a work that returns us again and again to underlying historical sub-currents—some of which are touched upon in Burton's account, some

not. The culmination of a lifetime of attempts to innovate an authentically progressive English verse, *Briggflatts* demands to be set beside Eliot's High Anglican *Four Quartets* (1945) as one of the major poems of public address of the mid twentieth century—what Pound might have called a tale of the tribe. Across its five sections, the poem narrates the struggle of an individual to succeed in a culture inimical to the mere notion of modernistic development. After a paradisaical opening section set in the Wordsworthian far north-west of England—the 'spring' or childhood phase of Bunting's life—we follow the protagonist as he is continually rebuffed in his struggle to 'make it new'. Bunting's prison experience is elided, perhaps because it had already featured in 'Villon'. But there is much bitterness and political rancour in Bunting's merciless description of early twentieth century London, which he recreates as a nightmarish tableau of avarice and artifice:

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.

The account of a tortuous struggle in Bunting's artistic career is paralleled by a figuration of the Viking warrior Eric Bloodaxe, 'king of York, king of Dublin, king of Orkney', whose death in battle in the northern English mountains is conveyed with phonaesthetic glee:

Spine
picked bare by ravens, agile
maggots devour the slack side
and inert brain, never wise.

Bloodaxe tried to conquer the world, the poem suggests, but his campaign was finally an ignominious failure which 'ended in bale on the fellside'.

In the central sections of the poem these historical echoes of defeat and vainglory are interspersed with further oblique accounts of Bunting's wanderings in the middle way of life—there are precise descriptions of an Italian seascape and an Asian desert—culminating in a bleak portrait of a depressive post-war experience: Bunting has by this point become 'accustomed to penury | filth disgust and fury'. Here, one might think, we are inhabiting a familiar mind-set of Eliotic pessimism, traversing a contemporary Dantesque inferno with a frustrated anti-hero whose superior intellect

cannot protect him from the depredations of a fallen world. However, the uniqueness of *Briggflatts* lies in its ultimate rejection of such melancholic high-modernist platitudes. Against the martial egotism of Bloodaxe, Bunting places the figure of Cuthbert, a seventh-century Northumbrian saint, whose appearance occurs as the culmination of an insistent celebration throughout the poem of northern English cultural activity: the Lindisfarne Gospels, the medieval Brythonic poem *Y Gododdin*, and—what are far more unusual presences—the artistry of an anonymous stonemason and the sonorous work-music of coal miners:

hear the horse stale,
 the mason whistle,
 harness mutter to shaft
 fellow to axle squeak
 rut thud the rim
 crushed grit.

This local backdrop also points to a way out of the dead-end of modernist subjectivism. Beginning with the introduction of the self-sacrificing Cuthbert, and continuing with a plotline in which Bunting rediscovers the lost love of his youth, the moral core of the poem progressively emerges as a sort of communitarian idealism. There is an implicit suggestion that the poet must relinquish his own vanity and renew himself in a harmonious social ecology where everyone and everything plays an equal part—a dream that for Bunting was immanent in his Northumbrian mythopoeia, an apparently non-hierarchical imagined community grounded in the productive labour of miners and shepherds and the buried remnants of the radical past.

The only thing about his life ‘worth speaking aloud’, as Bunting once put it, *Briggflatts* registers a *Weltanschauung* that is at once defiantly populist and anomalous in the pattern of English poetic culture. A work of popular avant-garde vitality in practice, its deeper significance lies in its excavation of a hinterland so different from the orthodox terrain embodied in its alter-ego work, Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. A studious biographer, adept at factual précis, Burton points out that *Briggflatts* was named after a small village in the northern Pennines, where Bunting spent an idyllic summer as a teenager enjoying the youthful romance described in the first section of the poem. However, another crucial fact about this setting—which Burton notes but does not explicate in detail, perhaps because doing so would contradict his desire to gloss over Bunting’s stifled messianism—is that *Briggflatts* was the *de facto* birthplace of English Quakerism. In 1652, in the third year of Cromwell’s commonwealth, George Fox stayed in the village just prior to

establishing the Quaker movement by preaching to hundreds of Seekers on nearby Firbank Fell, inspired by a vision of 'a great people in white raiment by a rivers syde, comeing to the Lorde'. For Burton, this is incidental, but for Bunting the seventeenth-century legacy was the very heart of the matter. Back at the start of his career, in the mid 1920s, Bunting wrote to a friend to say: 'we got lost, I think in Cromwell's time, and we have [since] got further and further from the track'. The next step in appraising Bunting must be to draw the obvious connections between such atavistic insights, the brief moment of sixties modernism in which Bunting spoke to his own radical community, and the future possibility of an overhauled English landscape suggested by both of these now mostly obscured historical precedents.