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Making Beauty: Basil Bunting and the Work of Poetry

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the representation of labour in the poetry of Basil Bunting, an aspect of his oeuvre hitherto critically overlooked, partly because of his avowed wish to keep politics out of poetry. Bunting constantly regarded the composing of poetry as work, and related the work of the poet to that of the traditional craftsman or skilled manual labourer. This conviction that poetry is work undermines his claim that his writing is apolitical, for work inevitably involves politics. Thus this thesis aims to demonstrate that political notions of work inform the form and prosodic techniques of Bunting's poetry as well as its thematic content. While his subject matter ranges from mining disasters, money and music hall, through to Persian myths, the universalising theme of work is present throughout. His presentations of artisanal, agricultural, industrial and artistic forms of work and, significantly, his gendered treatment of domestic labour, are all addressed in this thesis.

Looking at the poet in this new light entails a study of the background to his views about labour. The first part reads his early and later work alongside theories of labour by Marx and William Morris, and also investigates his correspondence with the leftist activist Objectivist poets. The second part frames Bunting's 'alternative' labour-focused modernism within the wider literary culture of the 1930s, with chapters on Bunting and Bloomsbury, on Bunting and Lorine Niedecker, and on his poetic portrayals of social inequality during the Depression era. The final part examines Bunting's role as a master-craftsman: it considers, firstly, his, and Pound's, anti-institutional models for poetic schooling, and, secondly, the work of one of his most important 'apprentices', Tom Pickard.

**Making Beauty
Basil Bunting and the Work of Poetry**

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PhD Thesis
Department of English Studies
Durham University
2014

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Note on referencing major primary sources:

Most references appear in footnotes at the end of each page, and an accompanying works cited list provides further finding information. However, all poems by Bunting (unless indicated) come from the *Complete Poems* (Bloodaxe, 2001) since this is the most definitive collection of Bunting's work to date, and is the only edition that is still in print. References to poems from this collection appear in the main body of in the following form: (*CP*, p. [page number]) . When a subsequent quotation from the same page (of *CP*) just quoted appears, no page reference will follow: its page number will be the last-quoted in the main body of the text.

The 2001 version of the *Complete Poems* organizes Bunting's odes into two 'books'. Numerical references to the odes refer to the book number, first, and then the ode number. For example, "Nothing", ode number fifteen in the first book of odes, appears as Ode 1.15. When appropriate the title of the ode, or its opening line, may be used in addition, or instead, of its numerical reference. His previously uncollected odes (those in neither Book One or Book Two) are referred to by their first lines or title.

Because of their major status among Bunting's poems, and existence as individually-printed volumes, *Briggflatts* and *The Spoils* appear in italics. All of Bunting's other works, if quoted from the *Complete Poems*, will appear in double quotation marks.

Archival material that I have quoted comes from the following places (abbreviated forms appear in the footnotes of the thesis, as shown below). I have, where possible, included the manuscript numbers:

Bloomington, Indiana: The Lilley Library at Indiana University. Basil Bunting correspondence with Dorothy and Ezra Pound is part of the Pound MSS II, 1900-1973. (Bunting correspondence, Bloomington)

Durham, U. K., Durham University, Palace Green Library, Basil Bunting Poetry Archive. (Bunting archive, Durham)

London, U. K., Kings College London, KCL Library, Eric Mottram Archive. (Mottram archive, London)

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For Doug

Introduction

‘Poetry is seeking to make not meaning but beauty’.

Basil Bunting, “A Statement” in *Descant on Rawthey’s Madrigal*

Making Beauty: Basil Bunting and the Work of Poetry investigates the representation of labour in the verse of Basil Bunting, an aspect of his oeuvre hitherto critically overlooked, partly because of his avowed wish to keep politics out of poetry. Bunting constantly regarded the composing of poetry as work, and related the work of the poet to that of the traditional craftsman or skilled manual labourer. This conviction that poetry is work undermines his claim that his writing is apolitical, for work inevitably involves politics. Thus this thesis aims to demonstrate that political notions of work inform the form and prosodic techniques of Bunting’s poetry as well as its thematic content. While his subject matter ranges from mining disasters, money and music hall, through to Persian myths, the universalising theme of work is present throughout. His presentations of artisanal, agricultural, industrial and artistic forms of work and, significantly, his gendered treatment of domestic labour, are all addressed in this thesis.

A key problem in Bunting criticism is the way his work has been compartmentalised; another reason, perhaps, for his undue marginalisation. Commentary on Bunting tends to separate into biography (viz. Forde, Terrell, Burton), considerations of his formalism (Makin), or – crucially – his regionalism (Quartermain, Lopez, Seed). In fact, Bunting’s reputation today is due largely to his ‘rediscovery’ in the early 1960s, implemented by the lively Newcastle-based poetry scene surrounding Tom and Connie Pickard’s Morden Tower reading series. Yet the dominance of South-centric, homogenizing cultural institutions has meant that he, along with many of the other fine poets of the North East, has been more or less dismissed as a ‘regionalist’.

Actually, though, Bunting 'learned the trick' of poetry from his association with the cosmopolitan poet Ezra Pound (a connection that might account for his apparent avoidance of politicised poetry, as noted above).¹ Hence a critical tension has arisen that positions Bunting either as an acolyte of high-modernism or a provincial poet. Because no sense of the overall reception of Bunting is available, the complexity of his oeuvre is missed: a complete rendering of this important figure should thus attend to the diversity in his work: his modernist formalism, interest in artisanal folk culture, leftist politics and his links with American Objectivist poets, and this is what I have tried to do over the course of this thesis.

I argue that Bunting's deployment of so many 'traditions' can be understood (and addressed for the first time together) by focusing on the uniting theme of labour. His presentation of poetry as 'craft' seeks to unite manual and intellectual labour, the division of which separates the poet from broader society. Craft and its implications of a certain kind of labour provides a perspective for Bunting on a range of cultures, from medieval Japan and Persia to the Northumbrian working class. Craft also clearly links Bunting to a Poundian strand of modernism. In distinction to the partial Buntings that exist, my close reading of the theme of work will reveal the poet's negotiation of multiple concerns and will address the resistance of his work to different kinds of appropriation. In this way my project will generate a substantially 'new' Bunting.

So, looking at the poet in this new light entails a study of the background to his views about labour. Part One – "Work" – sets up a theoretical framework for the thesis. It begins by introducing the premise of the thesis, gathering relevant material related to the politics of work and craft, and providing different perspectives on labour. Here, I present some of the thinkers that Bunting's work crosses over with,

¹ *Collected Poems* (London: Fulcrum Press, 1968). p. 9.

conceptually or chronologically: incorporating material and arguments from Karl Marx, William Morris, Theodor Adorno, Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky. All of these figures bear some relation to the manifold ways which Bunting's poetry engages with, and portrays work. Part One develops this framework with readings of a number of Bunting's lesser-known poems that deal with work, as well as with an analysis of *Briggflatts*, that is oriented around the theme of labour as it is presented in the poem.

Part Two – “Tradition” – places Bunting's ‘alternative’ labour-focused modernism within the wider literary culture of the 1930s, with chapters on Bunting and Bloomsbury, on Bunting and Wisconsin-based rural poet Lorine Niedecker, and on his poetic portrayals of social inequality during the Depression era.

The final part – “Knowledge” – examines Bunting's role as a master-craftsman: it considers, firstly, his and Pound's, anti-institutional models for poetic schooling, and, secondly, the work of one of his most important ‘apprentices’, Tom Pickard.



Part I: Work

The first part of this thesis reads Bunting's early and later writing alongside theories of labour by Karl Marx and William Morris, and also investigates Bunting's correspondence with the leftist Objectivist poets. The first chapter provides an introduction to the basic arguments of the thesis, and foregrounds what work means to Bunting. Investigation into Bunting's public prose and his private correspondence support my claim that there is politics in his poetics and confirms a politically aware, even active, force is at work behind these writings. Part One opens with a reading of Ode 1.15, "Nothing". Chapter One examines Bunting's ideas about work and labour in contrast with the Objectivist poets with whom he was published in the 1930s. Chapter Two continues to investigate different theories on work, making and politics, by introducing Morris and Marx into the argument, and by gathering poems by Bunting in which work is a prominent concern. Chapter Three looks more closely at Bunting's and Pound's politics and poetry. Chapter Four is a reading of *Briggflatts* that focuses on the theme of labour, and leads to Chapter Five, the concluding chapter of Part One, which considers how the human relationship with nature, that labour mediates, is at the root of Bunting's political world-view. It looks at the roots in Romanticism that Bunting's understanding of the work-mediated relationship between humans and nature might have.



Chapter One
‘Useful Work’

Bunting’s Craft Models and Creative Labour

Bunting’s preface to *Collected Poems* in 1968 gives a rare insight into his poetry-making process:

With sleights learned from others and an ear open to melodic analogies 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. Unabashed boys and girls may enjoy them. This book is theirs.²

Although Bunting is typically wry in implying his work is a kind of trickery, the craftiness implied by a sleight of hand also signals his more sincere beliefs about training and working as a poet. ‘Sleights’ refers to specifically manual practice, and the propensity to wield a tool, and so its use here connects poetic skill to other, more physical, kinds of craft.³ Bunting writes, presumably of poetry, ‘[i]f I ever learned the trick of it, it was mostly from poets long dead.’⁴ This modest, even dismissive, introduction, a sleight of hand in itself, is easy to overlook, but, as I shall show, his employment of the word, ‘sleights’ at the outset of his *Collected Poems* is a key to understanding his work as a whole. His introduction addresses the conclusive quality of this collection: ‘A man who collects his poems screws together the boards of his coffin. Those outside will have all the fun, but he is entitled to his last confession.’⁵ In bringing to mind hands and handiwork, dexterity and skilled manual work, Bunting’s definitive ‘sleights’ indicate the uniting concern of Bunting’s life works: labour, and the split between manual and intellectual labour.

In 1930 Bunting had already begun to align poetry-making with artisanal labour, celebrating the precision of the stonemason whose chiselled handiwork would be revived in *Briggflatts* 35 years later:

² Ibid. p. 9.

³ "Sleight, n.1". OED Online. June 2014. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/view/Entry/181656?rskey=GEdUsM&result=1> (accessed August 27, 2014).

⁴ *Collected Poems*. p. 9.

⁵ Ibid.

Nothing
 substance utters or time
 stills and restrains
 joins design and

supple measure deftly
 as thought's intricate polyphonic
 score dovetails with the tread
 sensuous things
 keep in our consciousness.

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

When taught string's note
 passes ears' reach or red rays or violet
 fade, strong over unseen
 forces the word
 ranks and enumerates...

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

life of man's own body
 and death...

The sound thins into melody
 discourse narrowing, craft
 failing, design

petering out.

Ears heavy to breeze of speech and
thud of the ictus.⁶

The poem's content is an argument for its form: the short lines maintain the poem's lapidary column-like structure, which works like a musical score, and supports the work's opening premise of something – a poem – arising from a previously blank page: "Nothing". The poem's form gives some instruction on how the work should be read, and read aloud, ideally, thus making sound out of pattern, as with music. Bunting consistently promoted the musicality of poetry, and in this work he is particularly concerned with the setting to music, or 'entuning', of human thought. The poem's first two stanzas describe a rhythmic relationship between the music-like pattern of human thought, an 'intricate polyphonic score', and the human body's interaction with the physical world which is preserved in thought: 'the tread / sensuous things / keep in our consciousness.' The tread suggests both an impression made by the physical world on the psychic world of the human, and the rhythm of footsteps. Bunting explained the genesis of poetry as the rhythmic bursts of breath that escape whilst dancing. In a lecture about the beginnings of poetry tellingly entitled "Thumps", he claimed, 'the arts are closely related. They have all a common ancestry. In particular music and poetry are twin sisters born of the primitive dance.'⁷ However, there are differences, he adds: 'Painting and sculpture make their designs in space; music and poetry make theirs in time. It is the succession of sounds that traces an outline on the background of time.'⁸ Bearing this in mind, what are the opening stanzas of "Nothing" suggesting? Partly that art cannot match the complexities and intricacy of human thought and feeling. However poetry, the third stanza suggests, comes close.

⁶ "Nothing", Ode I.15 (1930) in *Complete Poems*, ed. Richard Caddel (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2000). p. 111. The ellipses are Bunting's. All subsequent quotation from Bunting's poetry is from this edition, unless otherwise stated. Further citation from this edition will appear in the main body of the text, in the form: *CP*, [page reference].

⁷ "Thumps" (part of a lecture series given by Bunting at Newcastle University 1969-70) transcribed in *Basil Bunting on Poetry*, ed. Peter Makin (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). p. 19.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 19.

The third stanza is an argument for concision: in Bunting's view, poetic skill is to know language intimately (as a mason knows stone), to use it as directly and therefore concisely as possible, to know where its faults lie and where and how to cut lines and cut out words. Bunting famously favoured clean lines, evidenced by his paring away the waste in the young Tom Pickard's early poetry with a sharp pencil, and his belief in the wastepaper basket as the poet's most useful tool.⁹ Treating the primordial or pre-human night as unhewn rock (which, not yet having clear form, is 'shapeless'), Bunting uses 'the word' like a chisel to shape the world and make sense of mystery. This is man's 'craft' and it is specifically human, specialist, skilled work. The definite article that accompanies 'the word' separates it from the more general 'language' (as well as referring to John's Gospel in which from chaos comes The Word, and God, who forms the world):¹⁰ if language is the medium, or the mass, the word is the tool that makes sense from this chaotic mass.

The poem pursues its comparison of the known and physical elements of the world with the mysterious realm of the metaphysical and consciousness. The fourth stanza introduces scientific imagery to suggest the limits of the sensory world. The mere materiality of these empirically known and quantifiable things – the sound of a musical note or the colours of the visible spectrum – is emphasised, and is contrasted with the endurance of thought. A noise and a beam of light are examples of physical things that the first stanza claims are inferior to the human mind's versions of them. The message is somewhat easier to follow if read without line breaks: 'Nothing [that] substance utters or time stills and restrains joins design and supple measure [as] deftly as thought's intricate polyphonic score dovetails with the tread [that] sensuous things keep in our consciousness.' By evoking the limits of the visible world with reference to the red and violet ends of the spectrum of visible light, the poem also evokes the invisible as a parallel to the 'mystery' from which 'forms' can be cut out. The idea is Platonic: only a fraction of what exists is detectable by the senses: this does not mean

⁹ '[H]e believes that the wastepaper basket is the writers' greatest friend', writes a journalist in a clipping that Bunting sent to Roger Guedalla. Bunting archive, Durham. MSS 121/26 enclosing 121/28. BB Letter to Roger Guedalla postmarked 13 March 1980: "Some rubbish you might want for your bibliographic exercises", with enclosed newspaper article: "Bunting ground", an 80th birthday interview with Sue Hercombe; *The Journal* [Newcastle upon Tyne], December 20 1979.

¹⁰ 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' *The Bible : Authorized King James Version*, ed. Robert P. Carroll and Stephen Prickett, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). (John 1.1).

that what is not sensible is not also real. Bunting suggests that with poetry, which unites the senses with the mind, some of that mysterious unknown might be traced: 'the word ranks and enumerates.' Bunting suggests that poetry is redemptive; that it can make us see what we previously were blind to, and that it opens up the possibility for further human experience by expanding the horizons of the knowable.

The poem suggests that by being carefully selected and skilfully combined, the word can recreate the natural world. The word 'mimes' the physical world and so it cannot recreate these wonders of nature in their entirety, but the word, by allowing these images to be 'phanopoeically' stored, recollected and written via the intellect, promotes them from the merely physical to a metaphysical or transcendent realm.¹¹ The poem's initial message about poetry, it seems, is positive. When the things we can sense (hear and see) disappear, the word remains 'strong over unseen forces' and it 'ranks and enumerates'. Words can be used to talk about things that are not understood, or not known. Finally, the word can encompass the natural world within the mind via poetic imagery, therefore the word is greater than the physical world. Indeed, the power of The Word is so important to this poem that it took it as its eponymous title when it appeared in the Objectivist special issue of *Poetry*, edited by Louis Zukofsky in February 1931.

Jim Powell argues that the generative and transcendental potential of poetry introduced at the beginning of Bunting's poem is quashed specifically because of the poem's interaction with the physical world. Powell deems the Ode one of Bunting's more difficult,¹² and notes its references to both John's Gospel, and to Plato.¹³ The poem's fourth stanza, which describes nature recreated by the word, ends in a bathetic ellipsis: the argument begins to break down, leading to the final lines of the poem, which depict in both form and prose sense the disintegration of the argument and of the poem's power. Powell suggests that at this point, the poem becomes mortal like the world that it describes and occurs within. As well as imagery belonging to the

¹¹ I refer to Pound's use of the term, phanopoeia, to show how Bunting's ideas are aligned (even accidentally) with the older poet's. Pound writes that phanopoeia, one of 'three "kinds of poetry"', is 'a casting of images upon the visual imagination... In phanopoeia we find the greatest drive toward utter precision of word'. Pound, "How to Read" in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound. Edited with an Introduction by T. S. Eliot*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1954). pp. 15-40. pp. 25-26.

¹² Jim Powell, "Basil Bunting and Mina Loy," *Chicago Review* (1990). p. 19.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 20.

pastoral idyll, the word mimes life and death of the body, corresponding to sound 'thin[ning] into melody', and:

discourse narrowing, craft

failing, design

petering out.

(*CP*, p. 111)

Powell understands the poem as having an 'informing spirit', which is born from the 'nothing' that begins the poem: that which is the nothing of the pre-poem, that ultimately joins the physical world and dies like everything else, thus explaining the soaring-to-sombre tone change of the poem. He writes that this 'informing spirit' is:

A creature at first of the most abstract Platonic immateriality, [but] in the course of the poem it suffers a fall into substance, lured by a lust for "forms" and a taste for the brag of the play, and in the end dies all the way into matter, meeting its share of mortality in a narrowing, faltering demise.¹⁴

Powell's Emersonian 'informing spirit' opens up a new, Transcendentalist, avenue for thought on Bunting, which the limits of space prevent from being further explored in the current argument. For the matter in hand, Powell's reading helps to support my own interpretation that this poem attempts to write about the writing of itself, and the process of its own becoming as a poem. He even wryly gives it self-consciousness, writing that the poem 'discovers soon enough that it contains the germ of its own decay,' in the stanza celebrating and mimicking the natural world.¹⁵ If it is the case that this is a poem about a poem, the emphasis of the procedural, the becoming, which is not restrained by space (as a product is), nor by time, (as being is), fits with the poem's initial presentation of the transcendental (that which is not bounded by space and time), as superior to the merely sensible world.

Powell explains the transition of the poem from 'spirit' to mortal in some detail, and at the same time he interprets 'man's craft' as the making of poetry:

One kind of craft this poem embodies, celebrates, and subverts, is metrical. Bunting creates the rhythms of this ode's stanza by combining two measures derived through Horace from his Greek sources... Not only does Bunting successfully transfer these classical measures into English and handle them with

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

a completely unexampled mastery, but he has the integrity and fortitude to subject his own art to disintegration when the poem demands it – as it must, since one aspect of this ode's subject is the role melic art plays in poetic endurance.¹⁶

Powell explains that Bunting's poem enacts the kind of spirit-to-mortal decay that it describes, through its use of Greek forms and their subsequent decay by the end of the poem.

Indeed, 'thought's intricate polyphonic / score', which belongs to the Platonic realm of the non-material is transferred to the inferior realm of 'sensuous things', by the end of the poem in which all that remains are the senses and the poetry that is sensed: 'Ears heavy to breeze of speech and / thud of the ictus.'

Ode I.16 accompanied Ode I.15 as an 'appendix' in Zukofsky's *Poetry* (February, 1931) possibly because its depiction of alienated industrial labour appealed to Zukofsky's strong leftist values. If the two poems were originally intended to appear together, then an even harder fall for the poem, or its informing spirit, is implied. Here is Ode I.16 in its entirety:

Molten pool, incandescent spilth of
 deep cauldrons – and brighter nothing is –
 cast and cold, your blazes extinct and
 no turmoil nor peril left you,
 rusty ingot, bleak paralysed blob!

(*CP*, p. 112)

Here, steel manufacture provides the analogy for poetry-making: the poem, or poet, that once had potential, was 'incandescent', is now 'rusty'. Ode I.16 evokes the ferrous fervour of the Industrial Revolution, when rapid development in the iron and steel-making industries accompanied rapid growth of industry, and culminated in the catastrophe and disappointment of the Great Depression. Ode I.16 was written in the 1930s, when Bunting was travelling around the USA and Europe and, as I shall show in Chapter Eight, writing a sequence of poems about economic and industrial disaster.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 21.

This poem as an appendix to Ode I.15 portrays a most bathetic fall from the spiritual to the physical, useless and decaying: from 'blaze' to 'blob'.

Ode I.15, a poem about a poem, argues that by using words to write, think or talk about things that are not understood, meaning and understanding can be made. Poetry may exist in the physical world of the immanent, but by inviting further thought it approaches the transcendental. Bunting's views on the relationship of meaning to poetry would alter as his writing career continued, perhaps this is in part explained by Bunting's comment that '[p]oetry lies dead on the page, until some voice brings it to life'.¹⁷ Poetry is immanent and physical until its moment of being read. Bunting will continue to push his audience to look for the mystery around, not the meaning within, the poem. This poem provides a model for understanding Bunting's 1930s metaphysics, in which the sensible and conceptual worlds, thought and feeling, and the hand and the head coexist and combine to create greater understanding: this is why, as I shall show, the split between manual and intellectual labour implemented under capitalist industrial production is such a prominent concern throughout Bunting's oeuvre. Work and thought are not separate entities in Bunting's poetry, nor in his philosophy.

Bunting's view of poetry as labour appealed to Zukofsky's Marxist beliefs, extending the field of what could be considered work. It seems equally true that Objectivist poetics in turn provided Bunting with a means for presenting poetry as craft, aligning it with a working world whose overworked inhabitants may not have frequent access to their own inner world (though Bunting's relationship with the Objectivists was more inadvertent than Zukofsky's special issue suggests).¹⁸ Zukofsky,

¹⁷ "The Poet's Point of View" (1966), Basil Bunting, *Three Essays*, ed. Richard Caddel (Durham: Basil Bunting Poetry Centre, 1994). pp. 34-5, p. 34. Note that this short essay also appears as 'A Statement' in Jonathan Williams and Basil Bunting, *Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal. Conversations with Basil Bunting by Jonathan Williams* (Lexington, Ky.: Gnomon Press, 1968). [Unpaginated].

¹⁸ Marx writes about the importance of the 'inner world' to an individual's well being, and describes how the encroachment on the worker's inner world that the capitalist mode of production makes endangers and immiserates the worker: 'the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful the alien objective world becomes which he creates over-against himself, the poorer he himself – his inner world – becomes, the less he belongs to him as his own.' Karl Marx, *Capital : A Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Ben Fowkes and David Fernbach, trans. Ben Fowkes, V I: Penguin Classics (London ; New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1981). p. 66. As I shall relate, inner life, as a requisite of selfhood, and one of the casualties of alienation, is a key component to human happiness, as Marx understands it.

like Bunting, repeatedly stressed that making poetry was a kind of labour, and one that aligned the poet's work with other types of craft. Like Bunting, and Pound too, he felt an affinity with the troubadours, for whom poetry-making was an accepted profession. He tried to justify his role as a critic, presenting it as a kind of moonlighting, separate from his job as a poet:

Guillaume de Poitiers had several jobs. He was a poet. He went to war. Obviously he divided his energy, perhaps, perhaps not, to the hindrance of his poetry. At any rate – poetry defined as a job, a piece of work.¹⁹

“Nothing”, in its reference to sculpting, both in content and execution, is an attempt at externalizing and objectifying – that is to say, making an object of – an inner world. When the poem is read aloud, it is truly externalised: the poem is the ‘polyphonic score’ of thought to which it refers, and it demands performance to be fully realised. It must be thrown out, made objective, to achieve its transcendental potential. Correlating to Pound’s definition of poetry as ‘a composition of words set to music’, Bunting repeatedly made analogies between poetry and music, describing their written forms as the point of departure for a creative process, rather than its product.²⁰ His description of the act of writing compares the work of a poet to a composer in the quotation that opens this chapter: ‘I have set down words as a musician pricks his score’.²¹ Furthermore, Bunting’s ideas about poetry on the page as the beginning of a process that includes the poem’s performance, rather than a product itself, is brought to light by his comment, not only that ‘[p]oetry, like music, is to be heard’, but that ‘[i]t deals in sound... Poetry lies dead on the page, until some voice brings it to life, just as music, on the stave, is no more than instructions to the player... Poetry must be read aloud.’²²

In a lecture on Zukofsky given at Newcastle University, Bunting deemed Zukofsky ‘only less important than Pound to this century’ because ‘the chief thing, no

¹⁹ “‘Recencies’ in Poetry” Preface to *An "Objectivists" Anthology*. Edited by L. Zukofsky (Le Beausset: To, 1932). “‘Recencies’ in Poetry” is reprinted in Louis Zukofsky, *Prepositions + : The Collected Critical Essays*, ed. Mark Scroggins, [New ed.] ed. (Hanover, N.H. ; London: Wesleyan University Press, 2000). pp. 203-215, p. 207. All quotations from this essay come from this latter, more easily available, edition unless otherwise stated.

²⁰ “Vers Libre and Arnold Dolmetsch,” in Pound, *Literary Essays*. pp. 437-440, p. 437. ‘Most other definitions of it are indefensible, or metaphysical’, Pound adds.

²¹ Bunting, *Collected Poems*. p. 9.

²² “The Poet’s Point of View”, *Three Essays*. p. 34. See note 17.

other poet has stated and followed more clearly the notion of the closeness of poetry to music; even though he sometimes seems to forget it.’²³

B. B. Objectivist?

Bunting was included in the Objectivists special issue of *Poetry* (February, 1931) and *An “Objectivists” Anthology* (1932), his poems “Nothing” and “Attis: or, Something Missing”, appearing in the two volumes respectively. Both publications were edited by Zukofsky, to whom Bunting had been introduced by their mutual friend and mentor, Ezra Pound. But to what extent can the term ‘Objectivist’ really be applied to Bunting? Zukofsky described Objectivist work as having in common an interest in the craft of poetry. This interest in work and craft, and Zukofsky’s leftist beliefs appear to align him directly with Bunting, but Bunting nevertheless tried to distinguish himself from the group. Arguably, it is their shared interest in the *work* of poetry that actually distinguishes Bunting’s views from Zukofsky’s. Their different ideas of what ‘the job’ of poetry is comes to light when these ideas are put side by side, and considering Bunting’s relation to the Objectivist poets helps to position him more precisely than has been done so far.

Zukofsky’s biographer, Mark Scroggins, describes the Objectivists as ‘a group of poets who constituted the most important American poetic revolution in the middle decades of [the twentieth] century, with Zukofsky clearly at its head.’²⁴ Scroggins’ description seems at odds with his subsequent presentation of the poetic group as an inadvertent collective. Zukofsky’s own, notoriously abstruse, 1930s writings about Objectivist poetry are complicated further by his assertion that Objectivism did not exist as a poetic movement or an ideology. His preface to the *Anthology*, “‘Recencies’ in Poetry”, explained that the term, Objectivists, had been coined under some duress from Harriet Monroe who would only allow Zukofsky to take over her editorship for this issue if he appeared to have some unifying idea for his collection:

²³ “Zukofsky” in *Basil Bunting on Poetry*. p. 154.

²⁴ Mark Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life : A Biography of Louis Zukofsky* ([Emeryville, CA]: Shoemaker & Hoard : [Distributed by Publishers Group West], 2007). p. 104. Note that Scroggins does not capitalize ‘Objectivists’ or ‘Objectivism’; however I shall adhere to the standard set by Bunting, unless quoting. Zukofsky’s use of capitalization varies. He specifies, in the opening of “‘Recencies’ in Poetry”, ‘[t]he quotes around “objectivists” distinguish between its popular meaning in the “Program” of Feb *Poetry*, and the philosophical etiquette associated with objectivist.’ (*Prepositions +*. p. 203).

The interest of the issue was in the few recent lines of poetry which could be found, and in the craft of poetry, NOT in a movement. The contributors did not get up one morning all over the land and say “objectivists” between tooth-brushes.²⁵

Scroggins’ presentation of events suggests that the fashion for literary manifestos in the earlier half of the twentieth century might have been the main impetus behind the group’s conception. He asks:

was his defining term – “objectivist” – a deeply considered description of the commonalities his poetry shared with that of George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff, and William Carlos Williams, or was it an ad hoc formulation, a hastily conceived banner under which he could advance the poetry and careers of himself and his friends? In either case, through much of the 1930s Zukofsky saw the objectivist label, which seems to have hovered between a general definition of poetics and the name of a specific literary movement, as his best hope to bring his own work before a wider audience.²⁶

Zukofsky’s “Program: ‘Objectivists’ 1931”, an essay that accompanied his selection of work for the *Poetry* special issue, launched the idea of Objectivism onto the poetry-reading world. ‘An Objective (Optics) – The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus’, the piece began;

(Military use) – That which is aimed at. (Use extended to poetry) – Desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars.²⁷

Historic and contemporary particulars, it seems, can refer to almost anything. However, Zukofsky explains elsewhere that the poet is interested in particulars ‘outside of them[selves].’²⁸ Particulars are objective. Examples include:

²⁵ "'Recencies' in Poetry," in *Prepositions + : The Collected Critical Essays*, ed. Mark Scroggins (Hanover, N.H.; London: Wesleyan University Press, 2000). p. 214.

²⁶ *Poem of a Life*. p.104.

²⁷ Louis Zukofsky, "Program: 'Objectivists' 1931," *Poetry* 37, no. 5 (1931). pp. 268-272. p. 268.

²⁸ "'Recencies' in Poetry." p. 215.

a thing or things as well as a chain of events: i.e. an Egyptian pulled-glass bottle in the shape of a fish or oak leaves, as well as the performance of Bach's *St Matthew's Passion* in Leipzig, or the Russian revolution and the rise of metallurgical plants in Siberia.²⁹

Ruth Jennison's revelatory book about the Objectivists' political poetics, *The Zukofsky Era*, provides a useful guide to Zukofsky's ideas here. She picks up on his scientific and optical terminology, and explains:

Objectivism, despite the appearance of its name, is less interested in objects or even the perceivable data of the material world, than it is in the forms these objects take and the paths by which they travel, mediated, to become available to our perception. Objectivist poems, in short, assign themselves a task both fantastically utopian and rigorously materialist: to render poetically these subvisible 'rays' that thread the object to its perceiver. In this sense, Objectivism tenuously occupies that interstitial space in which the object assumes a form available to knowledge.³⁰

Jennison shows how these ideas about mediation and perception link to Zukofsky's Marxist understanding of making and working, an interest in the process of production, which appears to link clearly to Bunting's processual presentation of poetry-making above. Zukofsky wrote: 'A poem. This object in process – The poem as a job – A classic'.³¹ However, neither Bunting nor Zukofsky were proclaimed followers of Objectivism.

For his *Poetry* special issue, Zukofsky had been concerned with collecting what he considered to be the best American poetry of the last ten years, and had then sought to examine (at Monroe's behest) what was common to these poems.³² The Objectivist quality that he discerned was never intended to give rise to a poetic movement, or even a description of a poet rather than a poem; least of all to the

²⁹ "Program: 'Objectivists' 1931." p. 268.

³⁰ Ruth Jennison, *The Zukofsky Era : Modernity, Margins, and the Avant-Garde*, Hopkins Studies in Modernism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012). p. 19. Jennison roots the term 'Objectivism' in Marx's 'theory of the commodity form,' (p. 16) and states that 'Objectivists write from the place of that widening gap between the commodity's asocial form and its social content.' (p. 16).

³¹ "'Recencies' in Poetry." p. 209.

³² Zukofsky, "Program: 'Objectivists' 1931." p. 268.

ideology of an Objectivism. Zukofsky wrote about the foisting of the Objectivist label upon him and his selection of poets:

When I was a kid I started the Objectivist movement in poetry. There were a few poets who felt sympathetic towards each other and Harriet Monroe at the time insisted, we'd better have a title for it, call it something. I said, I don't want to. She insisted; so, I said, alright, if I can define it in an essay, and I used two words, *sincerity and objectification*, and I was sorry immediately. But it's gone down into the history books; they forgot the founder, thank heavens, and kept the terms, and, of course, I said *objectivist*, and they said *objectivism* and that makes all the difference. Well that was pretty bad, so then I spent the next thirty years to make it simple.³³

Much of Zukofsky's writing about Objectivism is, to put it simply, difficult, and furthermore, it seems this movement, like so many others, never wanted to be a movement. Scroggins even notes that initially, Zukofsky privately thought the idea, and he quotes the poet's letter to Carl Rakosi in 1930: '[f]oolish – but may excite the reading booblik, hysterectomied [sic] & sterilized readers of "Poetry" – and I owe it (maybe) to the *honor* (!) of my contributors.'³⁴

Monroe stipulated that the Zukofsky-edited special of *Poetry* must showcase a new group of poets, with a unified set of beliefs: as Scroggins says, 'not just new poets, but a new *ism*', but that 'when Zukofsky began assembling materials for the issue he had no intention of promoting a movement. How could he, since no such movement or "group" existed?'³⁵

A contested 'ism' it may be, but the use of the term as an adjective is permissible, and Objectivist poetry can be loosely defined as having an object-like quality – being a thing in itself – and it is this quality Zukofsky believed the works he gathered in his special issue of *Poetry* had in common. Zukofsky also explained that Objectivist poetry could stand apart from its author. Bunting described their shared

³³ "The Gas Age" in *Prepositions +*. pp. 170-171; see also 'Interview' with L. S. Dembo, also in *Prepositions +*: 'objectivism... I never used the word; I used the word "objectivist," and the only reason for using it was Harriet Monroe's insistence when I edited the "Objectivist" number of *Poetry*.' (p. 229).

³⁴ Zukofsky quoted by Scroggins, *Poem of a Life*. p. 112; original source a letter from Zukofsky to Carl Rakosi, 7 December 1930 (Harry Ransom Center).

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 105.

ideas about poetry, revisiting the topic in his last interview in 1984. His simple retrospective description also helps to clarify Zukofsky's optical analogies:

Zukofsky wanted to look at the things about him and to put them down as things, and he wanted the completed poem to be a thing, totally independent of its author. In those two points I'm in complete agreement with him, though we differed very strongly on many other things.³⁶

Complete agreement perhaps, but Bunting claimed that among his associates, he had the strongest interest in the poem's independence, facilitated by a focus on the poem's sound rather than its prose sense:

The Symbolist notions of sound, of poetry *as* sound, went further than Pound was prepared to go and were nearer to what I had in mind. I think that I have always been more concerned about the autonomy of the poem than any of the others – Pound, Williams or Zukofsky.³⁷

The main, objective, features of Objectivism also appealed to Bunting, though, dubious about what place 'philosophy' had in poetry, he was sceptical about other, more metaphysical, elements of the collective's poetics (as he may well have been of the Symbolists). Bunting thought that poetry and philosophy should not be 'mingled' and he spoke of how he loathed in literary criticism what he claimed to be 'bloody abstract nonsense', comparing it to 'metaphysics', itself deemed 'an absurd study'.³⁸ He added that '[t]he poem is an object; if it's nice, put it on the mantelpiece and look at it. If it's not nice, forget about it, that's all.'³⁹ Ultimately, Bunting does not identify himself as a member of Zukofsky's group:

I think that there is a sense in which 'Objectivist' is not too bad a term for Louis and the people who were closely connected with him; the idea being a noble one: one, the poem is an object which must stand by itself, a thing, and it

³⁶ Andrew McAllister and Sean Figgis, "Basil Bunting : The Last Interview [1984]," *Bete noire* 2, no. 3 (1987). pp. 22-50. p. 23. (This quotation also appears in Richard Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us : The Life of Basil Bunting* (Oxford: Infinite Ideas, 2013). pp. 199-200).

³⁷ Basil Bunting, letter to an unnamed recipient, in Dale Reagan, "Basil Bunting Obiter Dicta," in *Basil Bunting : Man and Poet*, ed. Carroll F. Terrell, Man and Poet Series (Orono, ME.: National Poetry Foundation, 1981). p. 269.

³⁸ McAllister and Figgis, "Basil Bunting : The Last Interview." p. 23; p. 35.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

should have, ideally no connection whatever with the chap who wrote it – it's just a thing in itself, it's made there; and secondly, the proper matter for poetry is objects, things about the place, which is of course derived from Wordsworth ultimately, though Wordsworth didn't put it that way in his prose writings. And you don't bother yourself about your own inner feelings.⁴⁰

Jennison understands Objectivism to have a much more political project than Scroggins' description suggests, and this helps to partially explain Bunting's distancing from the group. Her study of Zukofsky's influence on the American avant-garde and modernist literary culture from 1930s onwards identifies the Great Depression, a marker of capital's fallibility, as the source for this particular branch of modernism, and that, consequently, their formalism was inspired, motivated and accompanied by leftist political activism. She names three key members of Objectivism in her introduction, and describes their political motives:

Zukofsky, Oppen, and Niedecker responded to the crisis of the 1930s with a diversity of formal strategies, and, I would argue, a singularity of purpose: the crafting of an anticapitalist poetics that might emerge from the meeting of the oft-separated arts of activist direct confrontation and contemplative critique.⁴¹

Jennison presents Objectivism as a singularly significant movement in revolutionary modernism, and notes that the socio-political cultural conditions in which Objectivist work was made were integral to the poetry.⁴² She describes how Objectivism's relationship with its 'historical conditions of possibility' entails a triple-layered interaction with the financial climate.⁴³ This occurs, firstly, through '[c]ombined and uneven developments',⁴⁴ that is the way in which capital grows at different rates across national and international, and even urban and rural, boundaries.⁴⁵ Secondly, a growing distrust of 'the commodity form', compelled by the surplus and excess and unaffordability of the products of mass production that led to boom and bust, which reveals objects not to be the simple and solid things they appear to be, hence

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 22.

⁴¹ Jennison, *The Zukofsky Era*. p. 5.

⁴² Cf. Ibid. p.7.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 5.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 10.

⁴⁵ Cf. Ibid. p. 5.

Objectivism's interrogation of the object.⁴⁶ And thirdly, '[m]ediation': the way in which humans interact with the world via their labour: a relationship that is increasingly compromised by the developments in mass production, led by Fordism and Taylorism, of the time.⁴⁷

Bunting disliked the activist aspect of the Objectivist project, and perhaps this is partly why he dissociated himself from the group. His name is pointedly absent from Jennison's political-economic study of the group's work. However, as I shall show in Chapters Seven and Eight, his 1930s poetry of disaster, written in the aftermath of, and even about, the Great Depression, connects him to another key Objectivist poet, Lorine Niedecker.

Eventually, when asked whether his poetics had much in common with the tenets of Objectivism, Bunting replied:

Precious little. That was also Zukofsky's view. I think that he would probably have omitted me altogether but submitted to pressure from Pound, possibly also from Reznikoff. I wasn't anxious to be with them because I didn't like the manifesto he had decided on. And this in spite of the fact that so far as there is any having things in common, some general principles which were very much akin to the same general principles Ezra had laid down long before, and Wordsworth a hundred years before that again, apart from a few general principles, there wasn't much to have in common; but those I did have with Zukofsky.⁴⁸

Those general principles, as mentioned above, are a musical framework that conceives of the poem as a process, and the autonomy of the poem. Zukofsky describes how in Objectivist poetry, which possesses the quality of 'sincerity'

shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody or form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 15.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 18.

⁴⁸ Dale Reagan, "An Interview with Basil Bunting," *Montemora* 3 (1977). pp. 66-80. p. 72. The interview took place at Bunting's home in Wylam, 12 May 1975.

⁴⁹ Louis Zukofsky, "Sincerity and Objectification : With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff," *Poetry* 37, no. 5 (1931). pp. 272-285. p. 273.

Zukofsky's idea for Objectivist sincerity is centred on envisaging poetry's physical form; but a poem's object-ness is not merely what is seen on the page. 'Seeing', it seems, means 'realising' as much as it means to sense with the eyes, in Zukofsky's usage here. As Zukofsky continues, introducing the idea of a 'perfect rest', the rendering of a poem as something final, rather than a part of the process, is promoted:

Presented with sincerity, the mind even tends to supply, in further suggestion which does not attain rested totality, the totality not always found in sincerity and necessary only for perfect rest, complete appreciation. This rested totality may be called objectification – the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object. That is: distinct from print which records action and existence and incites the mind to further suggestion, there exists, tho it may not be harbored as solidity in the crook of an elbow, writing (audibility in two-dimensional print) which is an object or affects the mind as such.⁵⁰

The absolute, 'rested totality' of objectification suggests the possibility of an interaction with a poem as an object that leads to nothing more than the contemplation or interaction with the poem: a whole experience encompassed and completed within that moment. Zukofsky revisits these ideas in the preface to *An "Objectivists" Anthology*. This presentation of Objectivist poetry, as an end product, rather than a beginning, is at odds with Bunting's notion of poetry, dead on the page until some voice brings it to life. Zukofsky appreciates in poetry a certain quality that distinguishes poetry from other forms of text, that the writing is not only the recording of something else, but something in itself, and something that generates thought or feeling or more objects. Scroggins explains some of this 'less than transparent' prose

Here, as so often, Zukofsky analyzes the poet's tasks into the three realms of eye, ear, and mind. When a poet is writing with sincerity, he presents the unaltered, unretouched evidence of his eyes ("the detail, not mirage, of seeing"); he seeks honestly to embody the processes of his thought about the objects seen ("the things as they exist"); and, as he writes the words of the

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 273-4.

poem, those words will form “a line of melody” – a musical, aurally pleasing sequence.⁵¹

Predictably, Bunting dismissed Zukofsky’s quest for rested totality because of its metaphysics, writing a public response to the *Poetry* special issue, distancing himself from Objectivism almost as soon as it appeared. His minimal involvement with the group is attested to by the short shrift his biographer gives it. Burton, who looks to William Carlos Williams (another of Zukofsky’s Objectivists) and Hugh Kenner for his definition, writes that ‘[i]n a nutshell, Objectivism (vanished within a year and barely ever a movement as such) eschewed symbolism.’⁵² According to Burton, Bunting’s brief affair with Objectivist poetics was more a by-product of his relationship with Zukofsky, than a concerted participation in a group poetics: ‘Although Bunting agreed with Zukofsky that poetry was a kind of craft, he wasn’t greatly interested in Objectivism.’⁵³

Scroggins writes about Zukofsky’s relationship with Bunting in the early 1930s, and remarks that Bunting’s open letter to Zukofsky in *Il Mare* was ‘closer to the bone’ than any of the other criticism that Zukofsky received for his controversially complex theses.⁵⁴ Scroggins writes, ‘[h]owever knotty his own poetry might be, Bunting was master of a precise, Swiftian plain style in his prose; he distrusted abstraction and felt that the prose of “Recencies” had moved away from anything of possible value to readers of poetry or poets themselves’.⁵⁵ Scroggins comments

Zukofsky could not deny Bunting’s intelligence or goodwill, and Bunting had put his finger on a central paradox of Zukofsky’s writing. Zukofsky spent a lifetime attacking abstraction, whether in critical prose or in poetry... Nevertheless, the vast majority of Zukofsky’s critical prose, from the objectivist manifestos to

⁵¹ Scroggins, *Poem of a Life*. p. 111; p. 110

⁵² Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us*. pp. 198-199.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 199

⁵⁴ Monroe printed some of these responses in the following edition of *Poetry* (March, 1931) in an article suggestively titled, “The Arrogance of Youth”. Note that Zukofsky published two essays in *Poetry* (Feb 1931): “‘Recencies’ in Poetry” and “Sincerity and Objectification”. Bunting writes about both in his open letter, though he only names the former.

⁵⁵ Scroggins, *Poem of a Life*. p. 125

Bottom: on Shakespeare (1963), is marked not merely by tense, crabbed, and clotted syntax, but by relentless intellectual abstraction.⁵⁶

Bunting publicly chided his friend's 'flight into darkness'.⁵⁷ His critique of Zukofsky's "Recencies" essay, picks up on the two poets' shared idea of craft by comparing poetry-writing to another form of making:

If I buy a hat I am content that it should fit, be impermeable[,] of good texture, and of colour and cut not outrageously out of fashion. If I am a hatmaker I seek instruction in a series of limited practical operations ending in the production of a hat with the least possible waste of effort and expense. I NEVER want a philosophy of hats, a metaphysical idea of Hat in the abstract, nor in any case a great deal of talk about hats.⁵⁸

Bunting appears to balk at the difficulty of Zukofsky's critical prose, and contends what he deems 'metaphysics', and what could also be interpreted as a meta-poetic form of self-scrutiny, in Objectivist poetics. Scroggins and Burton make much of Bunting's attack, although Bunting cites Pound's imagist principles, and praises Zukofsky's critical skills as a close reader of poetry. He even calls the "Recencies" essay, 'admirable', but proceeds to some negative points:

[T]hese definitions of A Poem! You are not content to swab up Eliot's mess... I distrust your page 15. "A poem... perfect rest... the desire for what is objectively perfect... the desire for inclusiveness..." (I select what I like least). There is discrimination; but whether the things discriminated between have any bearing on poetry I doubt. If they have, it is remote.

The aspirations of the hatmaker can only faintly affect the hat.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Bunting, "Open Letter to Louis Zukofsky" originally published in *Il Mare*, 2 October 1932 (letter held at Harry Ransom Center); quoted in Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us*. p.199; Scroggins, *Poem of a Life*. pp. 124-5; and in Reagan, "Basil Bunting Obiter Dicta." pp. 240-243. There are some discrepancies – presumably due to human error – in Burton's and Scroggins' recording and referencing (respectively) of this letter.

⁵⁸ Bunting, "Open Letter to Louis Zukofsky", Scroggins, *Poem of a Life*. p. 125 (the comma is Scroggins').

⁵⁹ Reagan, "Basil Bunting Obiter Dicta." p. 241.

Bunting and Zukofsky, it appears, differ strongly in their views about the role, and the job, of the poet. Bunting takes issue with Zukofsky's advocacy of the 'desire' of the poet. He argues, against this non-objectivity: '[t]he psychology of the poet is not the critic's business.'⁶⁰ He expresses disappointment at Zukofsky's departure from their shared belief in the concrete-ness of language:

I have always supposed you to have a greater care for facts than almost any critic now living; a greater partiality for the particular, for the 'very words.' But these paragraphs about poetry look to me like flights into darkness, away from ascertained and reascertainable fact to speculative mysticism, to a region I think void of anything permanently valuable.⁶¹

Zukofsky's poetics repeatedly make the case for scientific 'standards of physical measurement' for poetry, advocating a refinement of poetry's definitions and boundaries in the quest for an all-important accuracy of vision and recording.⁶² He writes:

Good verse is determined by the poet's susceptibilities involving a precise awareness of differences, forms and possibilities of existence—words with their own attractions included. The poet, no less than the scientist, works on the assumption that inert and live things and relations hold enough interest to keep him alive as part of nature.⁶³

Bunting's open letter reprises Zukofsky's allusions to science, and his appropriation of scientific models reflects the focus on the measurable and the known apparent in his Objectivist poem, "Nothing".

Criticism is to poetry what anatomy, histology, physiology are to the living body. You quote Pound's triple distinction: melopoeia, phanopoeia, logopoeia: a contribution to the science. Criticism is concerned with what is written, not with the mind of the writer, as anatomy with man's body, not with the unguessable intentions of an unlikely Creator.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid. p. 242.

⁶² Louis Zukofsky, 'Poetry / For my son when he can read.' Originally published in *Chronos* (1948), republished in Zukofsky, *Prepositions* +. pp. 3-11. p. 6.

⁶³ Ibid. p. 7.

⁶⁴ Reagan, "Basil Bunting Obiter Dicta." p. 242-3.

However he also uses the standards of science against Zukofsky's theory, highlighting the inherent inaccuracies of the individual mind, compared to the facticity of things.

Twenty years later, Bunting's doubts about Objectivism had not subsided, and he still felt little affinity with the poetics of the so-called group. As seen in Bunting's response to an interview question about feelings in common (quoted above), it was the political, or perhaps ideological, aspect of Objectivism that repelled him. He didn't like the 'manifesto' of Objectivist verse, hinting at his overall distaste of politics in poetry. Despite his leftist aspect on work and labour, collective ideology did not appeal, even to the young Bunting, as his chastising words to Zukofsky suggest: 'a movement, a religion, is no substitute for clear-sight, even if it be a much better religion than those recently current amongst writers'.⁶⁵



⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 242.

Chapter Two

The Poet, the Mason; the Pen, the Chisel

Marx, Morris, Bunting and the Politics of Labour

By 1965, any hint of metaphysics, informing spirit or otherwise, was exorcised from Bunting's work, with only the refined and hardened nugget of the perceptible world appearing in his verse via the skilled, honed 'brief words' of *Briggflatts*. 'Man's craft' still appeared as the skill of concise expression, the labour of making poetry implied by the difficulty of putting the work together: 'Brief words are hard to find,' the first part of *Briggflatts* informs (*CP*, p. 64). Bunting spoke about the 'diligence' required of the poet, for poetry is 'a craft hard to learn'.⁶⁶ Asked in an interview whether he thought that craft was an important element of poetry, he responded:

Certainly... since the poem only exists when it is spoken, only exists as a noise. Getting the noise right, being able to handle the noise so that it makes a pleasant pattern of sound, is obviously of the very greatest importance... no efforts of practice are wasted.⁶⁷

Marx writes about the difficulty, or hard work, that is necessary to distinguish pastime from labour (any kind of labour) in a section of *Capital* that addresses the relationship that work creates between humankind and nature. He writes that the subordination of one's will to the necessary action of making something is what distinguishes that activity as work:

Apart from the exertion of the working organs, a purposeful will is required for the entire duration of the work. This means close attention. The less [the worker] is attracted by the nature of the work and the way in which it has to be accomplished, and the less, therefore, he enjoys it as the free play of his own physical and mental powers, the closer his attention is forced to be.⁶⁸

Bunting was concerned to make the distinction between poetry and pastime, and he was determined to show that poetry was work.

⁶⁶ Basil Bunting, "Yeats Recollected," *Agenda* 12 (1974). p. 47.

⁶⁷ Basil Bunting interview with Peter Orr [10 September 1965, Wylam] for the BBC "The Poet Speaks" series. Accessed on audio cassette at Basil Bunting Archive at Palace Green Library, Durham University. Rec C25.

⁶⁸ Marx, *Capital I*. p. 284.

The few similarities Bunting detected between his poetry and Objectivist writing are ultimately undermined by the main concept of his work: something that by the time he came to write his magnum opus, he had whittled down to that simple, non-crabbed, phrase, attesting his opposition to abstraction and to metaphysics: ‘Brief words are hard to find, / shapes to carve and discard’ (*CP*, p. 64). At this point in his career, the metaphysics that were detectable in his 1930s Objectivist work are no longer present: he maintains a belief that words are material, to a certain extent immutable (at least for one’s own personal motives) and that they may be used to make objects, much like a sculptor, or in this case a stonemason, makes objects.⁶⁹ He emphasises the necessary difficulty of the craft that attests the skilled labour it requires, and the necessity for brevity, concision – and so, though his friendship with Zukofsky endured, his relationship with Objectivism, if it had ever existed at all, was evidently now over. But Bunting continued to apply terms describing physical craft to poetry.

The analogy between poet and mason, between the work of poetry-making and artisanal labour, is employed by Bunting in Ode I.34, “These tracings from a world that’s dead” (1941), his work described as ‘sharp study and long toil’ (*CP*, p. 129) – a concept significant enough in his poetry to be taken as the title for the special edition of *Durham University Journal* (1995). Most famously the mason/poet figure appears in *Briggflatts* where his work is allied with nature: He ‘times his mallet / to a lark’s twitter’ (*CP*, p. 61). He delivers an epiphany later on in the same, opening section:

Words!
Pens are too light!
Take a chisel to write.

(*CP*, p. 63)

These lines demonstrate Bunting’s engagement with the relationship between work and art. Bunting addresses a divide between manual and intellectual labour that is developed in the capitalist mode of production with his representation of poetry-making as a form of labour. The interaction between human and nature that Bunting

⁶⁹ For more on Bunting’s anti-abstraction theory of language, see his essays, “The Written Record”, “Some Limitations of English” and “The Lion and the Lizard’ in Bunting, *Three Essays*.

outlines in “Nothing” and via the mason of *Briggflatts* is a valuable means by which human beings form a relationship with the objective world, as Marx explains:

Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature. He develops the potentialities slumbering within nature, and subjects the play of its forces to his own sovereign power.⁷⁰

Marx also stresses the processual, as opposed to the merely productive, nature of work: time, energy, and human life go into the making of a commodity. In this excerpt, Marx outlines how primary the relationship between human beings and nature is: it gives humans a ‘sovereign power’ and thus freedom (the freedom of self-expression in work and the freedom to make and exchange the products of one’s own labour). Marx describes labour as essential to the development of this relationship: it defines the human’s spatial and physical boundaries; thus a sense of self, being, space and purpose is created by work. Furthermore the human is in *control* of the relationship, and his or her body belongs to his or her self. The power, via one’s own body, to change the external environment refers to a potential for the individual to transcend their current position, by extending the parameters of their individual life and influencing the world beyond their physical body.⁷¹ That Marx stresses the fundamental quality of this interaction between human and nature indicates how destructive its obstruction, through the division of labour, is to the individual. Inherent to this relationship is the combination of intellectual and manual activity: ‘At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning,

⁷⁰ Marx, *Capital I*. p. 283.

⁷¹ This potential for transcendence, embedded in labour, Beauvoir tells us, in *The Second Sex*, is an opportunity afforded to men throughout history, but denied to women. Her writing on women and work shall be revisited in the section of this thesis that looks at Basil Bunting’s portrayal of women; however at this point it is interesting to consider that perhaps this opportunity is not only denied to women, but, under capitalism, to working class men and women.

hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes [verwirklicht] his own purpose in those materials.⁷² Another crucial aspect of work is that it distinguishes humans from animals, he adds, thus work helps humans to understand what it is to be human.⁷³

Importantly, Marx is concerned with the happiness, as part of the wellbeing, of the worker in society: in Marxist political economics, happiness is a right, not a luxury confined to the bourgeoisie. From some of his earliest works on political economy, he explains the unhappy situation of the modern manual labourer who sells his or her labour to the owner of industry for inadequate remuneration and is subject to the increasing division of labour:

the worker becomes ever more exclusively dependent on labour, and on a particular, very one-sided, machine-like labour. Just as he is thus depressed spiritually and physically to the condition of a machine and from being a man becomes an abstract activity and a stomach, so he also becomes ever more dependent on every fluctuation in market-price, on the application of capitals, and on the mood of the rich.⁷⁴

Marx is concerned for the emotional wellbeing of the worker, and suggests that unhappiness for the manual labourer is inescapable under the capitalist system, whatever the economic climate: ‘in a declining state of society – increasing misery of the worker; in an advancing state – misery with complications; and in a fully developed state of society – static misery.’⁷⁵ Although the term ‘misery’, related to ‘immiseration’, can connote financial impoverishment, and thus is not necessarily always related to affect, Marx’s conclusion, that ‘the goal of the economic system is the *unhappiness* [‘Unglück’] of society’ (the emphases are his), indicates he is worried about the emotional and affective fallout of capitalism.⁷⁶ The misery of the worker is increased by a double-alienation wherein he or she is forced to bring about his or her own downfall:

⁷² Marx, *Capital I*. p. 284.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Moscow, USSR: Progress, 1967). pp. 26-27.

⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 28.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

when society is in a state of progress, the ruin and impoverishment of the worker is the product of his labour and of the wealth produced by him. The misery results therefore, from the essence of present-day labour itself.⁷⁷

The worker's alienation is the root cause of their unhappiness, because the worker is no longer in control of what they make, and how it is made. Maker has become worker.

The tenets of Objectivism, and Bunting's poem, "Nothing", have something in common with what Marx expresses as a fundamental need for a human being ['ein menschliches Wesen'⁷⁸] to find correspondence between their inner life and the outside world: the worker realises himself or herself through his or her work by making something beginning inside (in thought or in the mind) that is then made object, both physically and in terms of being externalised. It therefore figures that the disintegration of the relationship between human and nature, through the development of machinery and division of labour causes a rupture in the relationship between worker and world: this is the beginning of alienation. Marx explains how it is detrimental to one's wellbeing to lose possession of this inner world. He writes, that what, first of all, constitutes the alienation of labour is that it

is *external* to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work and in his work feels outside himself.⁷⁹

The worker no longer owns their own labour, because it must be sold in order to survive. Consequently, Marx writes, the worker loses their selfhood, and their subjectivity: 'the worker's activity is not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self.'⁸⁰

In *Briggflatts* the mason's work within the rhythms of nature is representative of the relationship the pre-industrial non-alienated worker had with their world:

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 30.

⁷⁸ Ibid. (translator's notes) p. 14.

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 69.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Briggflatts shows this via the artisan who works the stone to craft his product. Bunting's presentation of craft-work challenges the models of work more familiar in modern capitalist society. John Seed writes about Bunting's socialist upbringing in "Poetry and Politics in the 1930s: Basil Bunting's Other History":

His family background placed him firmly on the radical wing of the political spectrum. He was born and educated among the Quakers, a dissident religious minority with a long and honourable tradition of pacifism and hostility to the British state.⁸¹

Seed also cites Bunting's conscientious objection, and his Fabianism as examples of the young poet's grounding in socialist ideas. Burton, too, looks a little at this background.⁸² Bunting's upbringing, and his involvement with the Fabians and Newcastle upon Tyne's Lit & Phil Society, plus his apparent interest and involvement in the labour movement, mean that the earlier socialist writings of William Morris are useful when thinking about Bunting's modernist interest in arts and crafts.⁸³ Bunting's apparent interest in artisanal labour and vision of craft-work as redemptive labour, as a means of re-connecting art and work and thus creating a form of non-alienated labour, can also be found in Morris's work.

Morris, a prominent critic of industrial production, wrote about the connective force that work can provide between humans and nature, describing craft as having an 'alliance with nature'.⁸⁴ Morris championed craftwork because it permitted this interaction with nature that would provide an alternative to the unhappy alienated worker:

⁸¹ John Seed, "Poetry and Politics in the 1930s : Basil Bunting's Other History," in *Sharp Study and Long Toil : Durham University Journal Supplement. Basil Bunting Special Issue*, ed. Richard Caddel (Durham: Durham University Journal, 1995). p. 103.

⁸² Cf. Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us*. pp. 34-38.

⁸³ For example, see his essay, Basil Bunting, "Observations on Left-Wing Papers (Ed. Peter Quartermain)," in *Sharp Study and Long Toil : Durham University Journal Supplement. Basil Bunting Special Issue.*, ed. Richard Caddel (Durham: Durham University Journal, 1995). pp. 44-47. He writes, 'Personal. I am not a Communist, nor have much sympathy with the communist dogmas: but the revolution I desire has several things in common with the communist revolution. I am also in favour of any serious improvement on existing conditions in the world at large, and a strong communist movement in the U. S. A. would certainly improve existing conditions'. (p. 46).

⁸⁴ William Morris, "The Lesser Arts," in *William Morris. Stories in Prose, Stories in Verse, Shorter Poems, Lectures and Essays. (Centenary Edition.)*, ed. G. D. H. Cole (London: Nonesuch Press, 1934). p. 495.

To give people pleasure in the things they must perforce use, that is one great office of decoration; to give people pleasure in the things they must perforce make, that is the other use of it.⁸⁵

Morris took Marx's ideas about the 'self-realising' potential of non-alienated labour, and combined them with earlier thought on work by Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin. E. P. Thompson writes about Ruskin as a major influence in Morris's concept of wholesome labour:

the act of self-realization in labour was, for Ruskin, no mere luxury. Like Carlyle, he believed that through labour man achieved his own humanity: but with Ruskin there was this difference – the labour must be *creative* labour, summoning up the intellectual and moral – and not only physical and mechanical – powers of the labourer.⁸⁶

Bunting, like Marx and Morris, was concerned about the wellbeing, or happiness, of the working world, including both the producer and consumer of poetic works: he wrote in a letter to Louis Zukofsky that he wished 'more people would have written in a way to give them pleasure.'⁸⁷

As a contrast to wholesome work, Bunting portrays the unhappy labour of an exploited and endangered mining workforce in "They Say Etna":

Gear, then, and gear,
 gritty-grinding.
The governor spins, raises its arms.
Two three-inch steel cables scream from the drum
seventy fathoms.
We carry lighted Davy lamps,
stoop along narrow track.
Trucks scold tunnel.
In a squat cavern a
naked man on his

⁸⁵ Ibid. p.496.

⁸⁶ E. P. Thompson, *William Morris : Romantic to Revolutionary*, [Rev. ed.] ed. (London: Merlin Press, 1977). p. 35.

⁸⁷ Basil Bunting, letter to Louis Zukofsky 1953, Reagan, "Basil Bunting Obiter Dicta." p. 232.

knees with a
pickaxe rips a nugget from the coalface.

(CP, p. 183)

In the poem, discussed in more detail in Chapter Three, the movement of gears suggests a homogenised workforce of miners: cogs in the machine. The poem presents the mediation of human interaction with nature by machinery; consequently the labourers are reduced to parts of the mechanism which, punningly, 'grind' for the 'governor', the governor suggesting simultaneously the foreman of the factory who propels the workers, forcing them to work faster, and the speed control of an engine. An emphasis on speed here signifies capitalist production's promotion of efficiency, the way in which workers generate more surplus value. The image created is violent and noisy, the machinery (the workforce?) screams. The human/nature complex inherent in healthy work is rendered more poignant by the image of a 'naked man on his knees' situated '[i]n a squat cavern', evoking images of early mankind whose work was once one with nature.

Morris wrote that 'everything made by man's hands has a form, which must be either beautiful or ugly; beautiful if it is in accord with Nature, and helps her; ugly if it is discordant with Nature, and thwarts her'.⁸⁸ Using Morris' criteria, the labour of mining, which Bunting portrays as discordant with nature, allows no possibility for the man or woman who works to make beauty while they work. Bunting believed that '[p]oetry is seeking to make not meaning, but beauty' (his statement inspired the title of the current work).⁸⁹ Beauty is not an extravagance, according to these socialist views of work and making, but a necessity for human happiness.

But, as Bunting's poetry shows, alienation does not only befall industrial labourers, but impacts upon all kinds of other creative work. In both poetry and personal correspondence, Bunting struggles between the fight for poetry-writing to be instituted as a form of labour, and therefore waged – complaining about the insufficiency of Arts Council funding – and the idea that it is impossible for money to ever provide equal or even adequate recompense for human life spent in labour.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ "The Lesser Arts." p. 495.

⁸⁹ Williams and Bunting, *Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal*. Unpaginated.

⁹⁰ 'Of course the candidates who crowd round you begging for subsidies include a great many charlatans. I think you should be able to tell charlatans from serious artists,

Marx provides a fundamental analysis of the alienated labour of the worker under the capitalist mode of production. He describes a critical point at which

So much does the appropriation of the object [that the worker produces] appear as estrangement that the more objects the worker produces the fewer can he possess and the more he falls under the dominion of his product, capital.⁹¹

This is a result of having been forced to sell as much of his or her labour, congealed into the object she or he produces, as possible in order to survive and never receiving fair compensation for this labour, since a portion of the income is always subtracted by the owners of industry. This is the crux of Marx's argument against alienated labour, and the basis of his account of reification, and he presents a vicious cycle by which the worker cannot afford to buy what she or he makes and so is increasingly materially unable to participate in the creation of wealth by accumulation of property. This situation in which the worker is constantly at a loss because the compensation for his or her life is always inadequate – always less than what is spent – is illustrated in “They Say Etna” by the culmination of capitalist greed and exploitation in industrial disaster, or a gross lack of care on the part of the mineowner.

Poetry? It's a Hobby (On Poetry and Society)

Theodor Adorno refers to a system in which the practice of poetry-making, as a whole, is only permitted to the privileged members of society:

poetic subjectivity is itself indebted to privilege: the pressures of struggle for survival allow only a few human beings to grasp the universal through

and dullards too. That is what you exist for. But I also think that it is better to let some charlatans get away with the spoils than to starve the men who originate the arts you administer.’ Basil Bunting, *Presidential Addresses : An Artist's View on Regional Arts Patronage* ([Newcastle upon Tyne]: Northern Arts, 1977). p. 10.

The poet's own increasingly painful penury is related in personal letters, for example to Eric Mottram: ‘Dear Eric, [b]y this time you must have forgotten that you ever knew anybody of the above name. However, local temporary irritations, progressive bankruptcy, and chores, chores, chores, havent yet completely banished you from my mind. (Bunting letter to Mottram, 13 November 1973, held in the Mottram Collection at Kings College Library, U. of London).

⁹¹ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. p. 66.

immersion in the self or to develop as autonomous subjects capable of freely expressing themselves.⁹²

Marx describes how the work of the ‘manufacturer’, the factory worker, is piecemeal, and thus the worker is reduced from human being to something more like a machine part in the overall production process:

Unfitted by nature to make anything independently, the manufacturing worker develops his productive activity only as an appendage of that workshop.⁹³

However, Adorno believes that a worker’s articulation can nonetheless prevail, even in broken, ‘fragmentary’ form, despite the prohibition of wholeness under the system of divided labour.⁹⁴ He writes of the need to express the consciousnesses of the oppressed workforce who also have an ‘inalienable right’ ‘to grope for the sounds in which sufferings and dreams are welded.’⁹⁵ However, whether this is possible, considering the manual labourer’s perceived limited access to high art, is at this point undecided. Bunting’s uncharacteristically political, and polemical “They Say Etna”, also expresses an engagement with and anger at the exploitation of humanity and a desire to change the silence of the working consciousness, by conceptually re-uniting work and art, dream and suffering. The poem brings to light some of the atrocities perpetrated by capitalism on its subjects, to whom wholesome labour is denied:

Make? For the making? The system limps.
Everything in this category is deformed,
even the bookkeeping.
(CP, p. 184)

Elsewhere, further definitions of work are put into humorous relief in Bunting’s satirical Ode 2.6, “What the Chairman told Tom” (1965), in which a puffed up and small minded local-council bureaucrat shares his thoughts on the subject. He begins:

Poetry? It’s a hobby.
I run model trains.

⁹² Theodor Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," in *Notes to Literature Volume One*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). p. 45.

⁹³ Marx, *Capital I*. p. 482.

⁹⁴ Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society." p. 45.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

Mr Shaw there breeds pigeons.

It's not work. You dont sweat.

Nobody pays for it.

You *could* advertise soap.

(CP, p. 140)

This pithy and witty poem, Bunting's revenge on Newcastle's Chairwoman of the Cultural Activities Committee, who apparently berated a very young Tom Pickard, reveals a little more about the battle that Bunting was waging against various cultural institutions, including arts councils and the education system; the reality behind the humorous poem is bleak.⁹⁶ Bunting, steered by the penury that a poet's life brought, worried about the separation between poetry and the working world, and, as the current work's section on Bunting and Bloomsbury shows, he was particularly aggrieved by the appropriation of poetry, a former bastion of traditional oral, working culture, by the elite, leisure classes. Such an appropriation risks having far reaching social consequences, for the privileging of the practice of art, and its consequent separation from work, appears to elevate the poet above the manual labour force, creating an atomised, abstract perspective, and exacerbating social stratification. Thus the reputation of art as toilsome or useful is diminished, and that all-important skill that Bunting believes is so necessary to good poetry, may suffer neglect. Bunting satirises the perception of art as pastime in "What the Chairman Told Tom" mocking the ignorance that supposes that art and work are in opposition, whilst also lamenting the increasingly supine position of the poet in society.

The portrayal of poetry as a hobby associates it with bourgeois leisure activity, thus further alienating art from the worker's world. In his poem, Bunting presents

⁹⁶ See Tom Pickard, *Work Conchy* (Coventry, UK: Beat scene press, 2009): Pickard describes how the Lord Mayor of Newcastle, (then Theresa Science Russell) wanting to support the Modern Tower, attended a reading in 1965: 'The Lord Mayor and the chairman of the Cultural Activities Committee, Mrs Gladys Robson, magistrate, leader of the council, and later model for Bunting's satirical poke at municipal morons, *What the Chairman Told Tom*, were to attend the reading to see what we were about and if we were deserving enough to qualify for financial assistance along with the amateur operatic society and other worthy cultural activities supported by the city.' (u.p. [16]) '[S]he was clearly contemptuous of my poverty, aspirations and frame of mind.' (u.p. [17]).

society's indifference towards, even loathing of, poetry as a career: it is seen as something unworthy and un-worked because the poet (it is believed!) does not 'sweat'. The Chairman's words are full of scorn for the scruffy young poet he contemplates:

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.

(*CP*, p. 140)

The filth of poetry (a strange accusation since the poet is supposed not to sweat), contrasts with the Chairman's ironic suggestion of advertising as suitable work for a person of words. Advertising, the making something of nothing, is the very opposite to the sort of hard craft that Bunting recognises as poetry, and the Chairman's suggestion hints at a world view that imagines a divided world of work: between manual and mental, and between sweaty and soapy-clean. Advertising represents the very divorce (in craft terms) between the product and its exchange, as the manufactured object is ultimately taken out of the hands of the maker, and enters the selling process: is sold by another, superior, kind of worker. In this analogy, work is presented as falling into two categories: that which makes sweat, and that which makes money, and if neither substance appears, then, according to the Chairman's criteria, the toil is not regarded as work.

Although Bunting's Chairman poem is a short skit (Burton even considers it uninspired) it corresponds to a wider social issue that reappears, sometimes unintentionally, throughout Bunting's work: work can no longer exist outside the capitalist exchange system and still be classified as 'useful' work.⁹⁷ The advertising industry, responsible for what Morris termed the 'puffery of wares'⁹⁸ is far removed from the ideal, and worthy, portrayal of labour in both Bunting's and Morris' presentations of work. The division of labour means that in the world of sales, that

⁹⁷ Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us*. p. 409.

⁹⁸ Morris, "Useful Work Versus Useless Toil." p. 607.

fundamental interaction between human and nature does not occur, and nobody's work is whole and entire. Morris forms an absurd image of inverted surplus value, as he writes on the action of this puffery, 'which has got to such a pitch that there are many things which cost far more to sell than they do to make.'⁹⁹In the process of divided labour a little of which Bunting depicts above, the surplus value of the commodity manufactured by the worker is not received by the worker him or herself, but by the members of society who enforce the workers' sweaty toil. The Chairman is portrayed briefly as factory boss

They do what I tell them,
my company.
What do *you* do?
(*CP*, p. 140)

Bunting is complaining about the exploitation of not just the poetic worker, but all workers, within his society.

In Ode 2.9, "All the cants they peddle" (1969), according to Burton written whilst touring poetry conferences in the United States, Bunting presents the commodification (and institutionalisation) of art.¹⁰⁰ Poetry has become something that is consumed, and therefore has entered into the capitalist system of production and exchange. Here is the poem in its entirety:

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

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us*. p. 418.

listen to light
 and pause, uncertain
 of the next beat,
 each dancer alone
 with his foolhardy feet.

(CP, p. 143)

This is a poem about modern day patronage. In a Pound-like critique, Bunting appears to poke fun at the sub-standard products of contemporary society's replacement for the traditional, individual, patron: the (presumably, in this case, academic) 'fellow' to whom the contestants like witches' familiars, crows and weasels, flock. The 'buying', by the institution of this toadyism (which is attacked in *Briggflatts*, too) results in the endorsement of bad artists, and bad art. This poem, and "What the Chairman Told Tom" lament that patronage has become institutionalised, meddlesome and ignorant: bureaucrats are now in control of society's cultural production. Close to the time of the poem's conception, Bunting wrote to Pickard, advising him how to get cash and maintain his position as a poet and organiser of readings, and Pickard recounts the lunchtime drink and conversation that they had in 1968:

"You know, Tom, the best way for a poet to survive, without a patron, is to find a sinecure. It used to be the Church, but these days it's more likely the BBC, or the British Council, or the universities... Of course they'd never give you a sinecure, but you might be able to manage in a country where the standard of living is low."¹⁰¹

In his poem, poetry appears to have been appropriated by an elite (Bunting probably means university academics) to whom the poets are forced to peddle their verse. The use of 'peddle' implies puffery – trying to sell something for more than its worth – thus, suggesting that the standards of the craft have slipped: poems are mere 'cants' (and a slip of the tongue changes the line's meaning to something even more insulting). The speaker doesn't include himself in the melee: 'they' peddle. In contrast, Bunting's poem is skilfully crafted: sound reflects the tone of the prose sense, spitty stressed plosives accompany the contempt of the first stanza; and the rhyme-scheme connects

¹⁰¹ Tom Pickard, *More Pricks Than Prizes* (Boston MA: Pressed Wafer, 2010). p. 7.

ideas and images, for example in the entwining effected by the assonance, ‘entangled’ and ‘ankles’, that creates a farcical image of a cartoon dog-fight.

The poem suggests a sorry state of affairs, in which poetry has become something that the public must be convinced they require and, rather than having an inherent link with society, it comes from outside and must be promoted in order to survive. ‘Peddling’ implies that poetry has entered the sphere of capitalist production and exchange, and is consumed like any other commodity as a form of cultural capital. The process of making poetry relies on stipends, and the institutions that hold the purse strings are portrayed unfavourably: ‘any wallow’. The labour of poetry is, like other forms of labour, divided and appropriated: the ‘fellow’ represents the owner of industry, whilst the workers must compete, biting ‘each other’s ankles’, for morsels. The speaker’s despair is sounded in the repeated ‘w’s of ‘Wallow’, which are reiterated in the same stanza in ‘crow’ and ‘weasel’ and ‘fellow’, aurally constructing a lament of ‘woe woe woe.’ The second stanza, promoting stillness and contemplation, suggests redemption is possible, by providing natural models, crags and light, as an alternative to the fast-paced competition of a capitalist society, although it doesn’t say very much about the intellect of these poets and patrons. The removed, and experienced older poet, advocates deeper thought: a pause, to the vigorous, and foolhardy, competitors who dance around.

“They Say Etna”, “What the Chairman Told Tom”, and “All the Cants they Peddle” all show in some way that when work and art are conceptually separated, both are constricted and impoverished. Bunting is concerned in these works, as in many others, to show how poetry and work are one and the same, and thus he argues against their separation. He perceives the risk of art’s elevation above the realm of manual labour because its conditions of manufacture require free time not afforded to all members of society. Art is in danger of losing sight of its connection with labour and begins to represent only the privileged set who are able to afford to make it. Thus art risks becoming solely the documentation of the lives of the privileged. In the situation where art has become the leisure-activity of the ruling class, culture exists as a compensation for the hours that craftless labour takes away, rather than as means to articulate the ‘sounds in which sufferings and dreams are welded.’¹⁰² Culture is not assimilated with work that can provide joy in the way Morris outlines, and therefore

¹⁰² See n. 94.

culture becomes something that effaces the condition of its own existence: it is leisure taken to forget work, rather than a complex of art and work.

Under the division of manual and intellectual labour, workers (and according to Morris, intellectuals) suffer, and art suffers too. Morris warns, that if the connection between the greater and lesser arts continues to deteriorate, eventually neither will have any meaning or purpose at all. He imagines:

Architecture, Sculpture, Painting, with the crowd of lesser arts that belong to them, these together with Music and Poetry, will be dead and forgotten, will no longer excite or amuse people in the least...¹⁰³

In the situation where art has become the leisure-activity of the ruling class, a wedge is driven between a so-called high culture (architecture, sculpture, painting, music and poetry) and a so-called low culture (the 'lesser arts' like masonry, carpentry, carving and other crafts).¹⁰⁴ Morris writes about the distinction between art and craft that arose with the arrival of industrialisation and capitalism:

The artist came out from the handicraftsmen, and left them without hope of elevation, while he himself was left without the help of intelligent, industrious sympathy. Both have suffered; the artist no less than the workman.¹⁰⁵

High culture relies on the offsetting of making in order to exist: somewhere, someone is doing the manual labour that permits part of the world to live in relative luxury. Responding to Marx's thoughts about labour and liberty, Terry Eagleton considers this unbalanced societal structure, and writes that in 'class societies... the energies of the majority are made instrumental to the profit of the few.'¹⁰⁶ He quotes Marx, who promotes the importance of the process of making over the product: 'In capitalist society':

"labour, life activity, productive life itself appears to man only as a means of the satisfaction of a need, the need to preserve physical existence. But productive life is species-life. It is life-producing life. The whole character of a species, its species-character, resides in the nature of its life activity, and free conscious

¹⁰³ Morris, "The Lesser Arts." p. 501.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. *Ibid.* p. 501.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 499-500.

¹⁰⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Marx and Freedom* (London: Phoenix, 1998). p. 20.

activity constitutes the species-character of man. [In capitalism], life itself appears only as a *means of life*.”¹⁰⁷

‘The product is after all but the summary of the activity, of production. If then the product of labour is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation’ writes Marx.¹⁰⁸

Marx describes how increasing division of labour deskills previously specialized workers, making them less able to express their own life world in their work.¹⁰⁹ At the same time their labour, congealed into the objects they produce for someone else, and exchanged on the market, enables others to continue a life free of manual work, with more leisure time to make and consume the products of ‘high-culture.’ The result is an increasing division between manual and intellectual life. Eagleton refers to Marx’s disillusioning portrayal of the impact that the division of manual and intellectual labour makes upon culture:

For Marx, culture really has only one parent, and that is labour – which for him is equivalent to saying, exploitation. The culture of class society tends to repress this unwelcome truth; it prefers to dream up for itself a nobler progenitor, denying its lowly parenthood and imagining that it sprang simply from previous culture, or from the unfettered individual imagination.¹¹⁰

Culture that once belonged to artisanal working groups no longer flourishes and art becomes the remit of the leisure classes at the same time as the working classes lose their access to the enjoyment, and expression that making provides.

According to Eagleton, Marx’s concept of freedom entails ‘a kind of creative superabundance over what is materially essential’, and that this creative superabundance could be available to everyone, particularly in the modern age where technology, if used to produce life’s essentials, should have reduced everyone’s

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 20. (Eagleton is quoting from Marx, *Early Writings*, (Harmondsworth, 1975). p. 328).

¹⁰⁸ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. p. 68.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Not only is the specialized work distributed among the different individuals, but the individual himself is divided up, and transformed into the automatic motor of a detail operation, thus realizing the absurd fable of Menenius Agrippa, which presents man as a mere fragment of his own body.’ *Capital I*. pp. 481-2.

¹¹⁰ Eagleton, *Marx and Freedom*. p. 8.

working hours.¹¹¹ However, capitalism develops an opposite version of this ideal society. Eagleton writes about a point at which capitalist society ‘has achieved a certain economic surplus over material necessity, releasing a minority of its members from the demands of productive labour into the privilege of becoming full-time politicians, academics, cultural producers and so on’.¹¹² He quotes from Marx, who argues that intellectual culture starts to imagine that it is separate from, and superior to everyday life and labour: ‘Division of labour only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of mental and manual labour appears... From this moment onwards consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice’.¹¹³

In order to counter the association that art-making may have with privilege or indolence Bunting represents poetry-making as something difficult, and comparable with hard graft. In *Briggflatts*, the poet/mason’s ‘[f]ingers / ache on the rubbing stone’ (CP, p. 61) and the ‘knotty wood’ of the carpenter, like language, is ‘hard to rive’ (CP, p. 63). The mason imposes a two-fold attack on the division of art and labour by his work not only being represented in the poetry, but by his voice, comprising part of the material of the poem itself.

The notion of artistic practice as leisure activity endangers art in its presentation of it as an easy activity. “What the Chairman Told Tom” satirises:

Who says it’s poetry, anyhow?

My ten year old

can do it *and* rhyme.

(CP, p. 140)

To combat this association of art with idleness, Bunting asserts that writing is hard work. Bunting presents the poet’s difficulties in the second part of *Briggflatts* in which the poet’s eye, gauging ‘lines of a Flemish horse,’ in Part II connect him back to Part I’s stonemason, whose accurate hand ‘lays his rule / at a letter’s edge’ and whose ‘fingers ache on the rubbing stone’ (CP, p. 65; p. 61). Contrasting with the physical pain that

¹¹¹ Ibid. p. 6.

¹¹² Ibid. p. 7.

¹¹³ Ibid. p. 8. (Eagleton is quoting from Marx, *The German Ideology*, (London: 1974). p. 51).

the mason's fingers endure in the undertaking of his manual labour, the poet's more psychological struggle to create is portrayed:

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.
 Secret, solitary spy, he gauges
 lines of a Flemish horse
 (CP, p. 65)

The poet's toil is presented, as he attempts, and regrets, versifying the society in which he moves about. The hardships that accompany the choice to write poetry are made clear in these lines, as the poet doesn't have enough money for food, thus demonstrating that he is not privileged. Here the undertaking of poetic labour is not leisurely. A stream of actions reiterates the knock of the mason's tool on stone, and the physicality of the work being created: the poet 'draws,' 'counts beat against beat,' 'decodes,' 'scans / porridge bubbling,' and 'feels' (CP, p. 65). Despite all his activity, and work, he must '[touch] acquaintance for food and tobacco' and his reward is to feel:

sick, self-maimed, self-hating,
 obstinate, mating
 beauty with squalor to beget lines still-born.
 (CP, p. 65)

Bunting writes in "They Say Etna", critiquing the whole capitalist system of production, that, 'the system limps': the poet's lines in *Briggflatts* are 'still-born' because of the breeding between beauty and squalor. Society is presented as sick, culture as ailing. The requirement for a healthy and useful art as a combined practice of manual work and intellectual art is denied.

Bunting uses models of skilled work to suggest an alternative means of acquiring knowledge to the 'special learning' that he describes as being owned by the

ruling class.¹¹⁴ He borrows artisanal craft forms to promote freedom in work, and to make this art available to everyone. Rather than reject the presence of the amateur in artistic practice, Bunting objects to the fact that the practice and experience of art is not available to all. His more socially-connected content counters elitist, abstracted and alienated art. His portrayal of the life of a poet challenges the more common conception (particularly of his era) of the poet as an exclusively educated, privileged and even indolent figure, speaking from the sidelines of society. He asks, in *Briggflatts*, ‘who will entune a bogged orchard...?’ (*CP*, p. 69)

For a poet who is often branded with that fatal term, ‘regional’, Bunting is surprisingly global. His poetry appears to be concerned with the silent life of his own, local, society, wherever is local to him at the time of writing, and he lives and writes within that locale. Part Two of *Briggflatts*, which I shall look at in further detail in Chapter Four, envisages the responsibility of the poet as to put to music, and therefore record, the everyday lives of members of society sometimes unable to voice their consciousnesses through their own work.

In Ode 1.18, “The Complaint of the Morpethshire Farmer” (1930) Bunting ‘entunes’ the struggle of his local, agricultural workforce. Though the farmer is unable to speak (the poet overhears him, ‘muttering this song’, *CP*, p. 114), Bunting articulates his struggle. The poet’s voice, in this poem, is the voice of the farmer, set to song. The poem is analysed in some detail in Chapter Seven. In other work, Bunting protests poetic penury, in one example by bitterly and humorously presenting the disdainfully meagre reward given for poetry. Ode 1.12 sees the demise of the poet, and Bunting satirising his own situation of economic desperation. He begs, ‘An arles, an arles for my hiring, / O master of singers, an arlespenny!’ (*CP*, p. 108). His muse responds, reminding him of the current disparity between paid-labour and the artifice of poetry: ‘Well sung singer, said Apollo, / but in this trade we pay no wages.’ The poem ends with humiliation, perhaps Bunting’s representation of the poet’s fall from his or her hubris, or perhaps his own experience:

¹¹⁴ ‘The gulf is unpassable’ Bunting writes in the essay that accompanied his special ‘British’ edition of *Poetry* (February), in which he complains that the high society Bloomsbury group possess too much power over British art. ‘Poetry withdraws into itself. It can reach but a small audience, small enough to have special learning and, as it were, passwords; too small to hope to influence even a corner of the national culture’. Basil Bunting, “English Poetry Today,” *Poetry* 39, no. 5 (1932). pp. 264-265.

The Lady asked the Poet:

Why do you wear your raincoat in the drawing-room?

He answered: Not to show

my arse sticking out of my trousers.

His muse left him for a steady man.

Quaeret in trivio vocationem.

(he is cadging for drinks at the streetcorners.)

(CP, p. 108)

The quotation from Catullus, made new by Bunting in his parenthesised last line, and the reference to Arles (centre of the troubadour's poetic world), suggest that poets have never enjoyed much financial reward for their efforts. But a reference to post-Weimar Germany earlier in the poem, and the consternation of the upper class Lady in the drawing room draw this poem into the modern age: polite and increasingly divided society make a poet's poverty even harder to endure.

This survey of crossover points between Marx's and Morris' theories of labour with Bunting's poems reveals the political nature of what Bunting is writing about in these poems, as well as the tradition with which he engages. Explaining Bunting's background in socialist craft tradition bolsters him somewhat against the negative association with Pound's beliefs about poetry and politics that may otherwise threaten a politicised reading of his work. For Bunting, poetry, though it is fundamentally about sound, is a means of sounding suppressed voices, and reclaiming poetry for a traditional, rural or working class community, and reasserting its roots in oral culture and history.



Chapter Three

'The Peasant's Bent Shoulders'/ 'Gritty Grinding' Ezra Pound, Basil Bunting and the Politics of Artifice

Bunting wrote of Pound despite 'his unfortunate anti-Semitism' that 'I reckon him my oldest, and perhaps my nearest friend.'¹¹⁵ The letter, regarding the campaign for Pound's release from St Elizabeths, shows Bunting's tender concern for the hospitalized older poet: a personal relationship between Pound and Bunting sometimes eclipsed by the representation of their poetic relationship as master and student. Bunting worries about how the American public might respond to Pound's liberation: 'Pound must, I think, be released very quietly. So I'm all for keeping more or less mum' and adding, 'I'd be anxious to do anything if I thought it would help at all.'¹¹⁶ In a further letter, on May 18, Bunting seems to retract his support for Pound's discharge, realising that Pound, now with a room of his own, has space and time in St Elizabeths to write (something he, at this point in his life, apparently longs for). However he adds 'I would like to see him set free, but mainly for the sake of the USA itself, which ought not, in the future, to have to be ashamed of its treatment of its greatest poet.'¹¹⁷

In the Preface to his *Collected Poems*, (Fulcrum, 1968), Bunting cited Pound as one of only 'two living men [who...] taught me much' (the other is Zukofsky). Again on the subject of poetic inspiration Bunting states in a letter, 'I don't want to play down my debt to E.P. It's great.'¹¹⁸ In an article of 1932, "Mr Ezra Pound," Bunting wrote that Pound 'made himself, early in his career, one of the most consummate masters of the technique of versification that our literature has ever seen.'¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Basil Bunting, letter to Peter Russell, 14 May 1950. Basil Bunting Poetry Archive, Durham. MS 169/11.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Basil Bunting, letter to Peter Russell, 18 May 1950; Basil Bunting Poetry Archive, Durham. MSS 169/12-14.

¹¹⁸ Basil Bunting, letter to Roger Guedalla, 6 May 1969; Basil Bunting Poetry Archive, Durham. MSS121/4-6. Bunting specifies: 'But repeat, Wordsworth first: Wordsworth never out of sight: Wordsworth most durable of all, most pervasive of all: Dante: Lucretius. My contemporaries come after those, perhaps after Spenser too. And I don't want to play down my debt to E.P. It's great. Just to keep the proportions.' Note that Bunting hardly ever uses the apostrophe for omissions in his typed letters (though his use varies in handwritten correspondence). However, for the purposes of consistency, I have altered the originals in this respect (only).

¹¹⁹ Basil Bunting, "Mr Ezra Pound (Ed. Peter Quartermain)." p. 38. The essay first appeared in *New English Weekly* (1932).

Reference to Pound's well-cited imagist manifesto explains the 'technique' to which Bunting, in part, refers. The three poetic principles that Pound lays out in "A Retrospect" (1918) demand:

1. Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome ¹²⁰

Bunting had a hatred of superfluity and verbosity in poetry to match Pound's. His less forceful advice to young poets, titled 'I suggest', warns: 'beware of adjectives: they bleed nouns' and so Pound's favouring of a pared-down and crystal-cut poetics understandably appeals to Bunting.¹²¹

Bunting's first wife wrote a series of letters to Roger Guedalla divulging intimate details about marital life with Basil, as well as providing information (though self-admittedly emotionally biased) about Bunting's early poetic attempts, life in Rapallo and friendship with Pound. Marian describes her former husband, along with René Taupin and Zukofsky as 'three young men drawn together by their admiration of Pound in New York in 1928-29', putting a somewhat sycophantic spin on Bunting's and the other disciples' interest in Pound.¹²²

Although in numerous letters to different correspondents, as well as in interviews, Bunting praised Pound's poetic techniques of scrupulous editing and use of musical frameworks, by the later period of his life he appears to feel frustrated by continued comparison to Pound that posits Bunting as a passive beneficiary rather than a co-creator of poetic technique. Still administering a gagging order on his personal life, in 1978 Bunting wrote to Eric Mottram, claiming that all that needed to be known about him was in the pages of his books, but, uncharacteristically, adding a clue to his poetic sources:

¹²⁰ Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect" (1918) in *Literary Essays*. pp. 3-14. p. 3.

¹²¹ Basil Bunting, "I Suggest". A postcard at Durham Library. Basil Bunting Poetry Archive, Durham. Also appears in Carroll F. Terrell, ed. *Basil Bunting : Man and Poet*, Man and Poet Series (Orono, ME.: National Poetry Foundation, 1981). p. 279. See Appendix A to this thesis.

¹²² Marian Bunting letter to Roger Guedalla, 7 November 1970; Basil Bunting Poetry Archive; MS 122/24.

Jails and the sea, Quaker mysticism and socialist politics, a lasting unlucky passion, the slums of Lambeth and Hoxton – these have had some effect, I think; but all the reviewers are likely to notice is that my verse has a rather superficial resemblance to Ezra's.¹²³

This letter appears to indicate an attempt by Bunting to separate his work from Pound's, and it seems the younger poet was frustrated by his reputation as prosodic Pound-parasite. He adds further on:

I don't want to minimise my debt to Ezra nor my admiration for his work, which should have 'influenced' everybody, but my ideas were shaped before I met him and my technique I had to concoct for myself. And, back to condensation: I could never get Ezra to do what I thought enough of it. I've usually more to the page than he has. And the silly bugger despised Wordsworth.¹²⁴

The notion that any similarity to Pound's work is superficial is out of sorts with other pro-Poundian sentiment in Bunting's letters and writing, but perhaps he here refers to content, trying to extricate himself from Pound's politics by declaring his own 'socialist politics'. However, in its very variousness his list of sources is Poundian, and a number of its items: prison; London life; non-conformist spiritual roots; political thought; and the sea, are recognisably sources for Pound's thinking and poetry too.

Bunting's need to assert his pre-Poundian literary existence is expressed in the same letter to Mottram, suggesting that his vast and varied literary and linguistic knowledge was what first stirred Pound's interest in the younger poet. According to Bunting, Pound recorded in *Cavalcanti* their second meeting, in which he helped the young Bunting, 'a Northumbrian intellectual,'¹²⁵ to get out of a Parisian jail, allegedly the

¹²³ Basil Bunting letter to Eric Mottram, Easter Monday [1978]; in Eric Mottram Archive, Kings College London.

¹²⁴ BB letter to Mottram, Easter Monday [1978]. Eric Mottram archive, KCL.

¹²⁵ Bunting refers to this mention in his letter to Mottram Easter Monday [1978]. Pound writes about the 'still extant folk-ways of the Latins... I was once engaged in trying to get a Northumbrian intellectual out of jail *emprès Ponthoise*, and in so doing I fell into converse with the Corsican cop on duty, and at the end of eight or ten minutes he drew from his pocket two poems written in Anagram, so that the letters beginning the lines in the one read "PIERRE ET MARIE," and in the other "LUCILE ET

same in which François Villon, was imprisoned. Bunting adds: 'Ezra never stopped marvelling that I was there, with a tattered copy of the *Grand Testament* in my pocket. I knew a great deal of it by heart then, and I think that's what first drew EP's attention to my merits, if any.'¹²⁶

Bunting's letter of 6 May 1969 to Guedalla which attributes his debt to Pound as 'great' also cites Wordsworth as Bunting's main and lasting inspiration, 'But repeat, Wordsworth first: Wordsworth never out of sight: Wordsworth most durable of all, most pervasive of all: Dante: Lucretius. My contemporaries come after those, perhaps after Spenser too.'¹²⁷ He light-heartedly chastises Guedalla, the fastidious compiler of the Basil Bunting *Bibliography*, for rooting through his paper past: 'I am sorry you've dug out so much dead journalism'.¹²⁸ Though he admits his apprenticeship to Pound, he also suggests that by 1969 (four years after *Briggflatts* was first published) he is no longer under the aegis of the (by this point politically unpopular) poet. Referring to an article in the *New York Sun* he claims to have written earlier in his career, Bunting warns:

Distrust anything of such a date, for I wrote with one eye on E.P. then, partly because it seemed to me that the only undeniable poet of the time wasn't getting a fair deal from the papers, partly because I wanted to please him, to go on learning what I could from him.¹²⁹

The relationship between Bunting and Pound is further evidenced by their mutual respect for poetic skill and, significantly, singularity. Pound wrote in 1930 to Louis Zukofsky, differentiating Bunting from the rest of his British contemporaries:

PIERRE," and after I read through them he added, as excuse, or as explanation, "Ca plait beaucoup aux dames."

There is still perfectly solid ground for arguing that the language of Guido is secret only as the language of any technical science is secret for those who have not the necessary preparation.' Ezra Pound and Guido Cavalcanti, *Pound's Cavalcanti : An Edition of the Translations, Notes and Essays*, ed. David Anderson, trans. Ezra Pound (Guildford, U. K.: Princeton U. P., 1983). p. 231.

¹²⁶ BB letter to Mottram, Easter Monday [1978], see above

¹²⁷ BB letter to Guedalla, 6 May 1969, see n.122.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ BB letter to Guedalla, 6 May 1969 (see n. 122).

I want to insert him as Eng. correspondent for H & H or Poetry or everywhere possible: to choke off snot from Beligions Ray Mortimers and bloomsbuggers in generl/ <confidenshul as is most of the rest>¹³⁰

Perhaps as the century moved on Bunting increasingly wanted to distance himself from Pound's continued political extremism. This work will now look at the formal and technical similarities between the poets, while also investigating the poets' differing political values.

Bunting on the Fly Leaf of Pound's *Cantos*

In February 1950, Bunting responded to a request from Peter Russell to contribute a note for a new compilation of Pound's works. Bunting missed the chance due to delayed post, but noted, 'I would anyway have declined the E.P. – *The Cantos* are as much fact as the Alps and as little likely to be lost sight of, so that I just don't have anything to say. There they are.'¹³¹ Bunting's reference recalls Wordsworth's epiphanic experience of the sublime Alps in *The Prelude*, though Bunting's succinct conclusion: 'There they are', contrasts with the emotional Romantic reaction the mountains summoned in Wordsworth. Bunting had previously written a poem very close in word and sentiment to his letter. The first stanza of Ode I.37, "On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's *Cantos*" (1949) asks:

There are the Alps. What is there to say about them?
 They don't make sense. Fatal glaciers, crags cranks climb,
 jumbled boulder and weed, pasture and boulder, scree,
et l'on entend, maybe, le refrain joyeux et leger.
 Who knows what the ice will have scraped on the rock it is smoothing?
 (CP, p. 132)

This stanza describes the construction of *The Cantos*. Bunting employs one of his favourite images of scraping and smoothing. Like cutting, chiselling and carving, these

¹³⁰ Ezra Pound letter to Louis Zukofsky, 1930 in Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky, *Pound/Zukofsky : Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky*, ed. Barry Ahearn (London: Faber, 1987). p. 58.

¹³¹ BB letter to Peter Russell, February 1950; in Bunting Poetry Archive Durham; MS 169/6.

verbs are intended to suggest a high degree of poetic skill and care behind the composition of the poem: an idea in opposition to the haphazard slinging-together that the (critic-mocking?) statement that '[t]hey don't make sense' might suggest. Importantly a level of autonomy is granted to the poem, which, like a mountain, people attempt to conquer, each finding their own routes and features along the way. His reference to geological, glacial shaping suggests that the full impact of *The Cantos* is not yet known. But the poem's unpredictability, its difficulty, and its treacherous 'fatal' paths are not adequate reasons for avoiding it. Recalling his all-important assertion that '[p]oetry is seeking to make not meaning but beauty', it emerges that Bunting's short tribute to Pound is actually celebrating the objective quality of *The Cantos*: they are out there, like a huge, natural object. Perhaps the Alps' awe-inducing quality is due to their pre-human existence. They do not exist for mere human individuals: it would be hubristic to think so, and the same goes for the individual critic reading a mass of poems, like *The Cantos*. Bunting's appraisal disputes the value of asking what the sense of *The Cantos* is: it would be the same as trying to work out the 'sense', or point, of the Alps. Zukofsky had expressed the same idea in "Recencies":

Ultimately, the matter of the poetic object and its simple entirety must not be forgotten. The *Cantos*' meaning is the *Cantos*: in spite of all the complexities they deal with.¹³²

Later, Bunting used the same justification when compelled to explain the knottier bits of *Briggflatts*: that a poem is a poem: '*Briggflatts* is a poem,' he wrote, 'it needs no explanation'.¹³³

The second stanza of his flyleaf poem juxtaposes bathetic nonchalance with lofty imperative:

There they are, you will have to go a long way round
if you want to avoid them.
It takes some getting used to. There are the Alps,
fools! Sit down and wait for them to crumble.

¹³² "'Recencies' in Poetry." p. 214.

¹³³ Basil Bunting, "A Note on *Briggflatts*" (1989) in *Briggflatts*, New ed. (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2009). pp. 40-41. p. 40.

The reprimand of the last two lines is a reaction to critical mis-readings of *The Cantos*, and implies Bunting's doubts about the public's taste in poetry. An inability to see the merits of *The Cantos* arises, the poem hints, because of the readership's wrongheaded requirement for sense and meaning in poetry.

The skill involved in poetic craft that Bunting alludes to with his image of the carving of language is also celebrated by Pound. In Bunting's letter to Pound's daughter, Mary de Rachewiltz, the poets' interest in craft is revealed through another mutual interest: Persia, where Bunting was living and working at the time of writing:

I have just had an ebullient note from Ezra, wishing he could have a job on my (imaginary) "staff" in Teheran. He would enjoy Persia, I believe: a country where they still make beautiful things by hand.¹³⁴

Again prizing skill, Bunting writes in a letter to Donald Davie about his *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor*, focusing his critique of Davie's book on the musical framework behind the composition of the *Cantos*:

possibly because you are a skilful poet yourself you do perceive and may make some of your readers perceive that the essence of the *Cantos*, at least, lies in their rhythms. Perhaps they are combined on musical models rather more consciously than you seem to allow. He and I discussed such matters a good deal about 1930, and I have no doubt at all that Walt Whitman's practice in a few poems such as 'Out of the cradle, endlessly rocking' first set Pound to combine, repeat, modify, rhythmic themes much as a good XIXc composer does.¹³⁵

Bunting's letters further reveal his admiration for *The Cantos* above all of Pound's poetry. Following Pound's death on 1 November 1972, Bunting and others started to plan a memorial concert in his honour – the organisation of which, Bunting admits to Denis Goacher, was waylaid until the following week because he was 'too upset' to do it previously.¹³⁶ Bunting intends to read 'an early Canto.'¹³⁷ His following letter to

¹³⁴ BB letter to Mary de Rachewiltz, March 21 1947; Bunting Poetry Archive, Durham; MS 68.

¹³⁵ BB letter to Donald Davie, 25 September 1975; Bunting Poetry Archive, Durham; MS 69.

¹³⁶ BB letter to Denis Goacher, 6 November 1972; Basil Bunting Poetry Archive, Durham; MS 90.

Goacher, in April 1973, discusses their impending reading at the Poetry Book Society. Bunting, demonstrating his interest in the honed formal craft of Pound's verse writes:

I've told them we'll read Cantos only, in such a way as to display the structure of the poem. (The people who still take refuge from EP in Mauberly [sic] or Propertius are out of date).¹³⁸

The excerpt demonstrates that Bunting perceives a structural progression through Pound's work, so he chooses the masterwork of the craftsman above the earlier work.

Bunting's described his relationship with Pound to Anne Tibble, a John Clare scholar:

You are right in thinking that there are considerable differences between my work and that of either Pound or Eliot; but I must not forget that I am indebted to both of them for technical processes I learned either directly from them or from their work. Perhaps those are fewer than they might seem, but they are important. As for Pound, I feel about him as the Elizabethans must have felt about Spenser. He showed a whole generation which had forgotten, what it could do with English verse, and nothing of his is any less beautiful in texture; most of it much more.

My concern is probably more uncompromisingly 'musical' than theirs. My work gains even more than theirs by being heard instead of read. I think theirs will always look more substantial on the page.¹³⁹

Bunting's and Pound's Ears for the Sea Surge

Even if Bunting believed his concern to be more musical than his professor's and his contemporaries' at the 'Eziversity,' it is worthwhile to consider Bunting's technical debt to Pound in further detail. The influence Pound's imagist principles had on Bunting is apparent – as well as his warning to 'beware adjectives', the younger poet praised Pound because:

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ BB letter to Denis Goacher, 8 April 1972; 1973 Bunting Poetry Archive, Durham; MS 91.

¹³⁹ BB letter to Anne Tibble, Easter Monday [1965]; Bunting Poetry Archive, Durham University; MS 95.

He excluded from his poetry the arbitrary inversions then, as still, common; the mechanical adjectives sought not because the sense needed them but out of habit or to fill up a line; all unnecessary explanation or elaboration; everything that impeded the swift, direct movement of a poem.¹⁴⁰

Bunting's own mastery of concision is apparent throughout his poems, and his presentation of stonemasonry as akin to the precision of good poetry-making is repeated throughout his work, such as seen already in the poem, "Nothing", shows brevity in both content and syntax as the poem rises in the middle to the climactic imperative:

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

(*CP*, p. 111)

Only two adjectives, 'shapeless' and 'sharp', make it into this stanza. Carefully placed and close in sound, the two words contrast each other to highlight the skill of the mason in chipping away all that is unnecessary or that clouds or confuses the final product, resulting in the revelation of clarity: out of the unknown or unintelligible comes solid meaning in object form. Though Bunting may feel that his work is more 'musical' than Pound's, there are nevertheless similar sounds that emerge from their works. The proliferation of voices and the attempt to connect those voices using musical form in Pound's *Cantos* and Bunting's *Briggflatts* provide further examples of shared formal technique. A thematic and sonorous example, found in Pound's "The Seafarer", reprised in *Canto 2* and audible as a source of inspiration for the sea-sections in Bunting's later *Briggflatts*, may help to highlight their mutual interest in sound:

May I for my own self song's truth reckon,
Journey's jargon, how I in harsh days
Hardship endured oft.
Bitter breast cares have I abided,

¹⁴⁰ Bunting, "Mr Ezra Pound (Ed. Peter Quartermain)." p. 38.

Known on my keel many a care's hold,
 And dire sea-surge, and there I oft spent
 Narrow nightwatch nigh the ship's head
 While she tossed close to cliffs. Coldly afflicted,
 My feet were by frost benumbed.¹⁴¹

Note the pared down syntax, stripped of unnecessary adjectives and conjunctions, instead the glue being provided by sound through alliteration. Bunting also recommended: '[j]ettison ornament gaily but keep shape' and 'cut out every word you dare' and this sentiment is shared by Pound in verb-less lines such as those in *Canto 2*:¹⁴² '[a]nd poor old Homer blind, blind as a bat, / Ear, ear for the sea-surge, murmur of old men's voices'.¹⁴³ Here Pound creates a complex of visual and aural 'image' in which the sounds created when the poem is read aloud complement what is described.

A soundscape provided as background to the poem's verbal content is also used by Bunting, thirty years after *Canto 2*, in one of the most sonically rich sections of *Briggflatts*:

Thole-pins shred where the oar leans,
 grommets renewed, tallowed;
 halliards frapped to the shrouds.
 Crew grunt and gasp. Nothing he sees
 they see, but hate and serve. Unscarred ocean,
 day's swerve, swell's poise, pursuit,
 he blends, balances, drawing leagues under the keel
 to raise cold cliffs where tides
 knot fringes of weed.

(CP, p. 66)

The natural surroundings of the physically demanding work invoke a contemplation of human mortality and the passing of time:

Wind writes in foam on the sea:

¹⁴¹ "The Seafarer" in *Personae: Collected Shorter Poems*, ed. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz, Revised ed. (London: Faber, 2001). pp. 60-63. p. 60.

¹⁴² "I Suggest". See Appendix A.

¹⁴³ *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York; [Great Britain]: New Directions, 1970 [1998 [printing]]). p. 6.

Who sang sea takes,
 brawn brine, bone grit.
 Keener the kittiwake.
 Fells forget him.
 Fathoms dull the dale,
 gulfweed voices...
 (CP, p. 66)

The technique (including Bunting's use of fragmented line, changing voices and correspondent sounds) and the content are close to Pound's. However, it is not simply pastiche: Bunting had first-hand seafaring experience and, since *Briggflatts* is, he proclaims, 'an autobiography', (CP, p. 60) this story and these sounds are also his own. Bunting's use of specialised nautical terminology, his 'thole-pins', 'grommets' and 'halliards frapped to the shrouds', forces focus on the sound of the words. He attempts to divert the listener's attention away from seeking the meaning of the poem, in order to assert his belief that music, in poetry, is prime. This is not to say that poetry should not have other content. Even this brief excerpt provides example of Bunting's recurrent engagement with labour, conceived and portrayed as human exertion and the expenditure of energy. Worried about the perceived split between manual and intellectual labour and subsequent association of poetry with elite leisure activity, Bunting warned that if poetry and music

lose touch altogether with the simplicity of the dance, with the motions of the human body and the sounds natural to a man exerting himself, people will no longer feel them as music and poetry. They will respond to the meaning no doubt, but not with the exhilaration that dancing brings. They will not think of them as human concerns. They will find them tedious.¹⁴⁴

From the close-up image of unfamiliar boat parts (which also becomes, effectively, the soundscape), the perspective zooms out and the rowers' toil can be heard: 'Crew grunt and gasp.' The whole work-system of the boat is displayed: the coxswain sits facing the rowers highlighting their opposing roles and perhaps representing a more

¹⁴⁴ Quotation from Bunting, "The Art of Poetry: A Lecture (1970)" in Reagan, "Basil Bunting Obiter Dicta." p. 230.

general division of labour in which the ability to articulate oneself raises one out of the manual labour class and puts the intellectual 'labourer' in charge. Their opposing positions also reflect class antagonism in the wider working world. The coxswain takes on the role of factory-governor, shouting orders at the workers, whose perspective he does not share: 'nothing he sees / they see', and whose alienated labour he appropriates to propel himself: the labourers 'hate and serve.' This is one image among many throughout Bunting's work of divided and alienated labour. The prospect of collective labour zooms out further to the wider surrounding natural environment, in which the wind, anthropomorphised, 'writes in foam on the sea,' evoking ideas about memory and death, and also playing with the rhythmic sea-song of the rowers and the concept of poet as singer. In a sculpted line the wind reminds the poet-singer, and the articulate coxswain, that all humans will die, that their voices disappear, and that nature is ultimately more powerful than any human leader: 'Who sang, sea takes'.

Bunting's belief in sound as the fundamental quality of poetry partly explains his distaste for poetry as a medium for dogma, for that would jeopardise the primacy of the sound by placing meaning (political project) first. Late in his life, and describing in the same interview the utter contempt he felt towards his contemporary British government, and the need for change, he stressed:

Of course there are these people who insist on shoving their politics and so forth into their poetry, if you can't keep it out well, let it go in, but, it doesn't add anything to the poetry. It's apt to take away from it. The same with their religion. You remember all the bloody preachy stuff you used to get in poetry, victorian [sic] poetry especially; it doesn't help. The stuff is there or it's not there. You get nowhere by all these explanations.¹⁴⁵

A promoter of poetry being read aloud, Bunting even suggested '[i]t is perfectly possible to delight an audience by reading poetry of sufficient quality in a language it does not know.'¹⁴⁶ The belief in the siren-like orienting power of sound, leads to the Coda of *Briggflatts*:

A strong song tows
us long earsick.
Blind, we follow

¹⁴⁵ McAllister and Figgis, "Basil Bunting : The Last Interview." p. 42.

¹⁴⁶ "The Poet's Point of View" in *Three Essays*. p. 34.

rain slant, spray flick
 to fields we do not know.
 (CP, p. 81)

Bunting draws from Pound metres borne on a rhythmic 'sea-surge': 'a strong song tows' both poets.

Early in his career, different forms of labour provided Bunting with sources of inspiration for the content and the rhythm of his poetry, in poems like Ode 1.22, "Mesh Cast for Mackerel" (1932), in which he compares the skill and sleight of hand of the fisherman to those of the poet:

Mesh cast for mackerel
 by guess and the sheen's tremor,
 imperceptible if you havent the knack –
 a difficult job
 (CP, p. 119)

The work is not just a metaphor, however, it is also direct treatment: he grew up amidst a bustling salmon-fishing industry near Scotswood. Flowers and Caddel write that '[s]ome of Bunting's earliest memories were of salmon being landed from the Tyne and onto carts', though they do not cite the poet directly.¹⁴⁷ Later in life, after his first marriage broke down in the mid-thirties, Bunting bought and lived upon a small boat named the *Thistle* for a year.¹⁴⁸ Burton describes him as 'a skilled sailor' and quotes from a letter to Pound:¹⁴⁹

"sailing the Thistle for a year was at least a man's life, not this louse-like writing for money... the Thistle served her main purpose in getting me through the worst period I've had... Harpooning congers, netting herring, is a good life. If

¹⁴⁷ Caddel and Flowers also mention salmon fishing in Scotswood in *Basil Bunting : A Northern Life* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Newcastle Libraries & Information Service in association with the Basil Bunting Poetry Centre, Durham, 1997). p. 11.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us*. p. 24; p. 252.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 252.

ultimately they won't let me write what I have to write, I'd lieber be a fisherman than another thing."¹⁵⁰

Bunting even enrolled at 'Nellist's Nautical Academy' to further hone his sailing skills,¹⁵¹ and his reputation as a sailor-poet spread among his Objectivist friends, with Niedecker writing about Bunting's 1938 visit to Zukofsky, that there was '[s]ome mention at the time of his going into the fishing business (he had yeoman muscles LZ said and arrived in New York with a sextant)'.¹⁵² Anthony Suter traces references to "The Sea in the Poetry of Basil Bunting", describing how this marine metaphor appears from Bunting's earliest work (in Ode I.1 "Weeping oaks grieve, chestnuts raise" and in "Villon") throughout all his subsequent long poems, and many of the odes. Suter makes something of a leap, presumably led on by the idiom associated with being 'at sea' and wonders whether, particularly in "The Well of Lycopolis" and "Attis: Or, Something Missing", '[t]he sea represents the whole of the philistine, easy-going society in which Bunting found himself.'¹⁵³ Indeed the sea is associated with monotony, its waves described as bringing a repeated regeneration, a 'perpetual spring' in Ode I.1 (Suter notes the Eliotic concept); and as an endless-seeming exile in "Mesh Cast for Mackerel", whose last lines portray the sailors' voices, who contrast the fun of the land with the dullness of the sea in a (mock) heroic farewell:

Remember us to the teashop girls.
 Say we have seen no legs better than theirs,
 we have the sea to stare at,
 its treason, copiousness, tedium.
 (CP, p. 119)

Peter Makin also identifies the recurring attention to the sea's wave rhythm, and roots Bunting's interest in Whitman's *Sea-drift*. He explains that although at some points the

¹⁵⁰ Basil Bunting letter to Ezra Pound, 11 November 1938, (letter held in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University) quoted by *ibid.* p. 255. The ellipses are Burton's.

¹⁵¹ Cf. *ibid.* p. 256.

¹⁵² Lorine Niedecker, letter to Cid Corman, quoted by Burton, p. 258, appearing in L. P. Faranda, Ed., *'Between Your House and Mine': The Letters of Lorine Niedecker to Cid Corman, 1960 to 1970* (Durham, 1986). p. 88.

¹⁵³ Anthony Suter, "The Sea in the Poetry of Basil Bunting," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* IX, no. 3 (1973). p. 294.

sea is, for Bunting, 'an unplumbable obscurity and unity with it seems to suggest annihilation, as at the end of Bunting's *Spoils*,¹⁵⁴ at others (as in "Mesh Cast for Mackerel") these ever recurring waves represent the 'limitlessly new, ever different'¹⁵⁵ and evoke 'Rhythm in the visual'.¹⁵⁶

Suter writes that the sea also provides Bunting with a metaphor for the solitude of the poet's life. Quoting the lines from *Briggflatts* that depict the unhappy sailors, he identifies the coxswain as the poet himself, rather than an autocratic representative of the work system that inhibits creative work: 'Nothing he sees / they see, but hate and serve'; 'The poet is the seer and the hated outsider'.¹⁵⁷ However, Suter also recognises Bunting's attention to the labour of the seamen. He writes that "Mesh Cast for Mackerel"

is symbolic of the lonely life of poets who exercise a difficult, dangerous technique... of course the temptation is to join the vulgar crowd, for recognition and for the comfort of being with the others, but the poet's vision, his superior thought and craft separate him from the rest of humanity, hence his paradoxical position and his tragedy¹⁵⁸.

With his recognition of labour and craft, Suter approaches, but ultimately misses the mark here. In a letter in 1953, to Zukofsky, Bunting asks:

Haven't we all, poets, been riding much too high a horse for a long time? A bit of the Yeatsian Grecian gold-smith or just plain potter (not for teacups though) or the guy who paints the Sicilian cars and British canal boats... Poets still act as though they thought they had some special claim. A skill worth preserving, with possibly some rather tenuous uses from the economic-social point of view: but if nobody buys my pots I don't accuse the customers of anything worse than poor taste, if nobody buys my poems what's the difference?¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ Peter Makin, *Bunting : The Shaping of His Verse* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1992). p. 13.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 14.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Suter, "The Sea in the Poetry of Basil Bunting." p. 295.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Bunting, Letter to Louis Zukofsky, 1953 in Reagan, "Basil Bunting Obiter Dicta." p. 232.

wrote Bunting to Zukofsky in 1953. It is not easy to accuse a poet like Bunting of ‘superiority’. To read into his work a longing for some sort of maritime “Palace of Art” to retreat to doesn’t seem to fit with the poet’s work, or wider life. “Mesh Cast for Mackerel”, while devising an apt analogy for the turbulent working life of a poet, also provides an example of Bunting’s concern for waning local industries and working cultures: the poem was titled ‘Fishermen’ when it appeared in *Poetry* (October 1934). The second quatrain of this four-stanza piece describes the fishing work as:

hazardous and seasonal:
 many shoals all of a sudden,
 it would tax the Apostles to take the lot;
 then drowse for months
 (CP, p. 119)

Bunting highlights the hardships of the fishing community, and the fluctuating success of the catch and resultant unpredictable income. Bunting’s association of the practice of poetry-making with the traditional skilled work of local industries is an attempt to highlight the shared oral tradition behind these processes: one in which knowledge is passed from generation to generation through apprenticeship by speaking, listening, seeing and doing. This oral tradition is what Walter Benjamin refers to in “The Storyteller,” an essay that explores the relationship between traditional craft labour and the rhythms of singing or storytelling. He writes that ‘[i]f peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university.’¹⁶⁰ Work and narrative, he believes, are foundationally linked. This type of story or song might offer a means for the suppressed voice of the alienated manual labourer to be sounded.

Pound and the Mechanics of Making

Pound, like Bunting, thought about how poetry might redeem otherwise monotonous mechanised labour. In “The Machine Art” he suggests how the sounds of machinery might be organised into a form of music that would spur on, even inspire the workers in the factory: ‘As I have said elsewhere, there is no reason why the shop noise shouldn’t be used as stimulus and to give swing and ease to modern work, just as the

¹⁶⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999). p. 85.

sailor's chantey or any working song has been used, by lumbermen, or by savages.¹⁶¹ Long before Pound's notorious critique of usury's alleged destruction of craft, Marx lamented the decay of the tools of handicraft under capitalism, at the same time arguing that machinery deadens, rather than enlivens, labour: human craft labour gives things life, contrasting with the dead labour fixed in capital by machine-driven divided labour. The following passage from *Capital* is concerned with rust and rot, like Pound's *Canto 45*, and exposes the idealism, even absurdity, from a Marxist perspective, of Pound's belief that factory work could ever redeem the alienated work of the manufacturer.¹⁶² In fact, Marx presents the opposite:

A machine which is not active in the labour process is useless. In addition, it falls prey to the destructive power of natural processes. Iron rusts; wood rots yarn with which we neither weave nor knit is cotton wasted. Living labour must seize on these things, awaken them from the dead, change them from merely possible into real and effective use-values. Bathed in the fire of labour, appropriated as part of its organism, and infused with vital energy for the performance of the functions appropriate to their concept and to their vocation in the process, they are indeed consumed, but to some purpose, as elements in the formation of new use-values, new products, which are capable of entering into individual consumption as a means of subsistence for into a new labour process as means of production.¹⁶³

Not only did Marx consider factory work to be psychologically and socially deadening, but he also described its physical impact on the individual body:

Factory work exhausts the nervous system to the uttermost; at the same time, it does away with the many-sided play of the muscles, and confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and intellectual activity.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Ezra Pound, *Machine Art and Other Writings : The Lost Thought of the Italian Years*, ed. Maria Luisa Ardizzone (Durham, N.C. ; London: Duke University Press, 1996). p. 81.

¹⁶² Furthermore, Marx believes that no redemption can come for the worker within the capitalist system: '[c]apital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the worker works is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour power he has bought from him. If the worker consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist.' (*Capital I*. p. 342).

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* pp. 289-90.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*p. 548.

Pound's interest in craft culture, and his anti-industrialism, heavily informed by C. H. Douglas's guild socialism, went awry early on. But, Makin reveals, Bunting was familiar with Douglas even earlier, having studied (for just three terms) under Douglas's associates while at the London School of Economics in the nineteen-tens.¹⁶⁵ Burton tells us that Bunting, too, admired the economist,¹⁶⁶ but his rather more scholarly background in economics did not lead him to the same conclusions as Pound. Richard Caddel believes their oppositional stances on socialist economics formed a backdrop to "They Say Etna".¹⁶⁷ Makin admits that 'Bunting did battle with Pound on politics', and hints that for Pound, guild socialism was a convenient vessel for, rather than the cause of, his more pernicious and paranoid beliefs: 'Pound was already beginning to be taken in by his own need for a fighting programme, and to believe his own assertiveness, which simplified history to the matter of economics, and economics to the matter of money and credit.'¹⁶⁸ 'The Douglassian programme favoured by Pound was not in itself the determining factor in the poet's later move toward the Right', writes Peter Nicholls.¹⁶⁹

A. R. Orage, editor of *The New Age*, and a member of the lively London scene that Bunting was dabbling in in the late nineteen-tens and early twenties, had developed his own economic theories from Douglas. Under the influence of Orage's adaption of Douglas's Social Credit theory, Pound's ideas about craft, work and exchange became increasingly paranoid, and swung round from left to right. Nicholls describes this swing as having its basis in Pound's misreading of *Capital*, and an ill conceived and misleading structuring of economics around exchange, rather than labour, as Marx had had it. Nicholls writes that this basis led Pound (via Douglas) to believe that creative work (for example writing poetry) could be autonomous, and therefore exist outside capitalist circulation, which immediately distinguishes his theory on money, and making, from one based on Marx and socialist theory:

The distinction between property and capital was, in a sense, a reflection of the opposition of the artist to the financier on which so much of Pound's economic

¹⁶⁵ Makin, *Bunting : The Shaping of His Verse*. p. 78.

¹⁶⁶ Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us*. pp. 82-83.

¹⁶⁷ Richard Caddel, "An Acknowledged Land," in *Ezra Pound and Europe*, ed. Richard Taylor and Claus Melchior (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993). p. 72.

¹⁶⁸ Makin, *Bunting: The Shaping of his Verse* p. 78

¹⁶⁹ Peter Nicholls, *Ezra Pound : Politics, Economics, and Writing* (Macmillan, 1984). p. 51.

thought depended. Property, like writing, was not in his view a commodity, but a tool for use... Like property, writing as the production of the autonomously creative activity of the self-employed writer seemed to him to promote and conserve values which impose no limits on the creative freedom of others.¹⁷⁰

Furthermore, Pound's misunderstanding of Marx, and his reversal of the relation of use-value to exchange-value laid out in *Capital*, led to his own 'Volitionist Economics', a combination of will, creativity, and political economy. In light of this, Nicholls asks, '[w]hat, then, is the relation between the aesthetic and economic at this stage in Pound's thought?' and explains:

It is through the concept of 'use' that Pound now attempts to close the gap between the economic and aesthetic. Whereas Marx had begun *Capital* by dissociating use-value from exchange-value (the sign of the transition to a capitalist economy), Pound's ideal of social justice is one in which exchange-value will become a function of use-value.¹⁷¹

Nicholls continues:

This helps to explain why Pound, while attempting an economic interpretation of history in *Cantos XXXI-LI* [sic], is so much preoccupied with the creative (and heroic) exercise of the will. What he calls his 'Volitionist Economics' depends on the separation of use-values and property from the 'cycle' of capitalist exchange through money'.¹⁷²

Bunting was not enamoured. Makin describes Bunting's response to a questionnaire on "Volitionist Economics" that Pound had sent him: 'Enigma. 2-buguous terminology ariot, [sic] I think', Bunting complained, and later on commented: 'The form of the

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 55.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. p. 57. Note: Pound explained in *ABC of Economics* that, contrary to the labour theory of value, he proposed a vision for society in which production would be governed by need, rather than how much labour was congealed in a product, in order to curb what he presented as the kind of waste and overproduction that destabilized markets. It was this type of overproduction, over-valuing, and hoarding he associated with 'usury.'

¹⁷² Ibid. p. 58.

statement is that of begging the question, which is a bit too oratorical for my crawling mind.'¹⁷³

Despite Pound's reversal of one of *Capital's* fundamentals, ('a rather silly misunderstanding'¹⁷⁴) and what Nicholls terms his '[q]uarrel with Marxism', the socialist background to Social Credit theory means it is not surprising that some of the key points of the Marxist critique of politics and economy intersect with Pound's.¹⁷⁵ But the fact, as Nicholls states, that Pound's economics do not consider 'the social relations of production' (a 'crucial weakness'), helps to explain why Pound, even in his zealous plan for factory work, does not engage with the drudgery and difficulty of this kind of physical labour very sympathetically:¹⁷⁶ Bunting's rowers 'grunt and gasp', 'hate and serve' despite their song, which gives rhythm to their work; in comparison, Pound's belief that orchestrated noise will bring 'swing and ease' seems much more idealistic, especially when compared to a Marxist report of factory work.

So despite the level of mutuality, and the camaraderie and correspondence the poets shared, a deeper political argument rumbles underneath their relationship. Their differing, even opposing, perceptions of real and ideal social organisation and how this is manifested in systems of work is one way in which this dispute is revealed. Anti-Semitic and paranoid rants about usury occur throughout Pound's *Cantos*, with a loathing of financiers and the hoarding of gold appearing as early as *Canto 3*. At the end of the *Canto*, an oblique critique of Jewish money-lending is rendered in Pound's triumphant portrayal of El Cid's cunning in tricking Raquel and Vidas into accepting his bags of gold (actually sand) as collateral for a loan of 600 marcos.¹⁷⁷ El Cid is the kind of hero that Pound celebrates throughout *The Cantos* as ingenious, active and quick-witted. As I will show, these are qualities he later perceives and praises in Benito Mussolini's leadership. The *Canto* ends with an image of the decay of once-splendid masterpieces of art: 'Drear waste, the pigment flakes from the stone, / Or plaster

¹⁷³ BB in a letter to Pound [1934], quoted by Makin, *Bunting: The Shaping of His Verse*. p. 78. Makin suggests '2-buguous' means 'ambiguous'. The original letter is held at Yale. Makin states that Pound's questionnaire can be found in J. Tytell, *Ezra Pound: The Solitary Volcano* (New York, 1987). p. 233.

¹⁷⁴ Nicholls, *Ezra Pound*. p. 58.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 47.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 56.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley, Calif. ; London: Published in cooperation with The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine at Orono, Orono, Maine [by] University of California Press, 1993). p. 10; Seymour Resnick, "'Raquel E Vidas" and the Cid," *Hispania* 39, no. 3 (1956). p. 300.

flakes, Mantegna painted the wall.¹⁷⁸ Carroll F. Terrell suggests that Pound blames usury for the demise of these frescos, presumably because of a lack of investment in their maintenance.¹⁷⁹ Pound's theory is repeated, as Terrell points out, in *Canto* 45, "With Usura", in which the frescoes of the Camera degli Sposi by Mantegna, patronised by the Gonzaga family, are presented as masterpieces only possible to make in 'a non-usurious era'.¹⁸⁰ This kind of painstaking artistic craft is not favoured, according to Pound, under usury in which 'no picture is made to endure nor to live with / but it is made to sell and sell quickly'.¹⁸¹ This *Canto*, and Pound's ideas about craft, and comparison with Bunting's treatment of craft, will be discussed in more detail further on. What is important to bear in mind at this point, is Pound's equation of effective authority with artistic creativity.

Effective patronage that leads to the making of masterpieces in a pre-usurious era, and efficient (and ruthless) leadership is articulated by Pound in the figure of Sigismundo Malatesta. *Cantos* 8-11, the "Malatesta *Cantos*", lay out the ups and downs of Sigismundo, ruler of Rimini 1432-1468, intrepid mercenary, and benevolent patron of the arts. Central to Pound's appreciation for Sigismundo was his commissioning of the Malatesta Temple in Rimini. Through his presentation of Sigismundo, Pound argues that good political leadership entails good artistic patronage. Good patronage is generous and laissez-faire. However, paradoxically, good leadership is, at the same time, authoritarian. *Canto* 8, mainly comprised of excerpts supposedly taken from a letter by Sigismundo to another great patron of the arts, Giovanni de' Medici, presents Sigismundo as this ideal patron. The 'good treatment'¹⁸² that Sigismundo means to give the temple's fresco artist, Piero della Francesca, includes a generous stipend and considerable artistic autonomy. Pound's Sigismundo writes:

I mean to make due provision,
So that he can work as he likes,
Or waste his time as he likes
... never lacking provision.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁸ *Canto* 3, Pound, *The Cantos*. p.12.

¹⁷⁹ Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos*. p. 10.

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁸¹ Pound, *The Cantos*. p. 229.

¹⁸² *ibid.* p. 29.

¹⁸³ *ibid.*

Pound focuses on Sigismundo's concern for both the artwork and the artist:

And tell the *Maestro di pentore*
 That there can be no question of
 His painting the walls for the moment,
 As the mortar is not yet dry
 And it wd. be merely work chucked away
 (*buttato via*)
 But I want it to be quite clear, that until the chapels are ready
 I will arrange for him to paint something else
 So that both he and I shall
 Get as much enjoyment as possible from it¹⁸⁴

The isolation of the phrase, 'buttato via', a translation of 'chucked away', emphasises Sigismundo's high regard for the artist's work.¹⁸⁵ Pound draws attention to Sigismundo the patron's concern as a contrast to the usury-decayed frescos of *Canto 3*. The 'Drear waste' discussed earlier is summoned here again, and highlights the political argument behind Pound's concern about culture and aesthetics. Sigismundo's wish for the artist to get 'enjoyment' from the making of the artwork provides another example of good patronage, and is the opposite of the self-serving interests of the capitalist owner of industry. This perhaps answers Pound's earlier question about why the contemporary labourer is not permitted 'swing and ease to modern work,' but Pound's perception that enjoyment is an important part of the process of making correlates with Bunting's ideas about ideal labour, and Morris's belief that pleasure taken in artisanal crafting is at the root of humankind's liberation and happiness.

Canto 9 continues to celebrate Sigismundo and develops the relationship between cultural patronage and political leadership as Pound portrays him favourably as a man of action. Pound relates Sigismundo's appropriation of marble from the Basilica Sant'Apollinare in Classe 'for the beautifying of the *tempio*.'¹⁸⁶ Sigismundo excuses himself decisively: 'Casus est talis' ('that's the way it is').¹⁸⁷ There is also

¹⁸⁴ Terrell believes the 'maestro di pentore' to be Piero della Francesca who did the fresco at the Temple: 'Sigismundo Pandolfo Malatesta Praying in Front of St. Sigismund' see *A Companion to the Cantos*. p. 38 ; *The Cantos*. p. 29.

¹⁸⁵ Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos*. p. 38.

¹⁸⁶ Pound, *The Cantos*. p. 36.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p. 36; Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos*. p. 45.

reference to Sigismundo's ingenuity, action and innovative warfaring: he 'set up the bombards in muck down by Vada / where nobody else could have set 'em'.¹⁸⁸ (These marshes will be reprised in *Canto* 41 in praise of Mussolini.)

The Temple represents, for Pound, an ideal societal structure: collaborative but individual and highly skilled artistic labour which leads to the production of beauty. In *Guide to Kulchur* he deems Sigismundo's building of the Temple as an '[example] of Civilization' and that in it 'a cultural "high" is marked'.¹⁸⁹ He continues: 'The Tempio Malatestiano is both an apex and in verbal sense a monumental failure' (presumably Pound feels it failed to provide apt monument to Sigismundo's political achievements, since he must remind the general populace about the alleged greatness of this rather tyrannical leader). The paragraph that follows details the artistic masterworks that Malatesta commissioned and amassed under one roof: 'He had a little of the best there in Rimini'.¹⁹⁰ However Pound uses his description of this spectacular collection as a vehicle for his own political rancour: in this case the suspicion that usury is responsible for the lack of 'Tempios' being built in the modern day. The splendour of Malatesta's temple is created '[i]n a Europe not YET rotted by usury'.¹⁹¹ These *Cantos* therefore are in part a testament where a monument has 'failed' to recall the conditions of its own production: the ingenious imagination of a financially generous leader; and a period Pound imagines as a pre-usurious cultural utopia. Pound writes of his Malatesta *Cantos*, again in *Guide to Kulchur*, that 'they are openly volitionist, establishing, I think clearly, the effect of the factive personality, Sigismundo, an entire man.'¹⁹² For Pound it was Sigismundo's singularity and wholeness, or self-reliance, that comprised this personality. Pound's appreciation of swift and decisive action, uninhibited by the proliferating voices, and the many desires and needs to be satisfied that a democratic process entails, is also his reason for finding Mussolini, too, a factive personality.

Reed Way Dasenbrook identifies the source of Pound's interest in Italian fascism in its apparent efforts to rescue the arts from the modern world's 'indifference

¹⁸⁸ Pound, *The Cantos*. p. 37.

¹⁸⁹ *Guide to Kulchur* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1952). p. 159.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Ibid.* p. 194.

to art'.¹⁹³ Naming Marinetti and Gabriele D'Annunzio as artist supporters of Mussolini, and contrasting Italian fascism with the 'plutocratic West Pound was in recoil from' and the culture-destroying Nazism of Germany,¹⁹⁴ Dasenbrook explains that Pound believed the commonplace separation in European countries between culture and government was damaging to both:

Italy seemed to offer a contrast, not just during the Renaissance but in Pound's time, and Pound's analogy between Sigismundo Malatesta and Benito Mussolini, thus, may not imply that he saw Mussolini as a patron of the arts as much as a patron of the leading minds of contemporary Italy.¹⁹⁵

Dasenbrook's theory here suggests Pound makes a distinction between the arts and 'the leading minds', but surely the point is, rather, that Pound celebrated in Renaissance and fascist Italy the close relationship between art and politics. Sigismundo's and Mussolini's patronage, in Pound's view, improve both art and governance. This appears to contrast entirely with Bunting's view on art's role in society in one sense; however, Pound's desire for the work of the poet to be recognized in society, and his scepticism and loathing of a philistine ruling class comprised of government, educators and other cultural institutions seem to match Bunting's.

Pound imagined that the resuscitation of good artists through patronage was crucial to civilization more widely. Nicholls explains Pound's overall 'attempt to make poetry an instrument of social change' and how

Pound's ideas about myth, rhythm, the image, and linguistic precision were... never exclusively 'literary' and technical, but were closely bound up with his developing conceptions of authority and economic justice.¹⁹⁶

Nicholls writes about the influence that Walter Pater's notion of the immediacy of the visual had on Pound's conception of the image, time, narrative, and therefore history and myth:

¹⁹³ Reed Way Dasenbrook, "Pound and the Visual Arts" in Ira Bruce Nadel, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). pp. 224-235. p. 232.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 232-3.

¹⁹⁶ Nicholls, *Ezra Pound*. p. 1; p. 2.

It was this emphasis on the instantaneous nature of 'vision' which led to Pound's own early conception of myth not as context and narrative, but as the revelation of single numinous objects. Such objects had, in the moment of their disclosure, the quality of absolute uniqueness, and Pound, like Pater, based his notion of a visionary world on an ideal of artistic production which is anterior to any form of mechanical reproduction. Pater's description of the cult status of art in ancient Greece had made the totalising capacity of the visual sense a correlative of the undivided labour which produced its object of ritual contemplation.¹⁹⁷

Pound, like Morris, imagines that ideal society can be formed from aesthetic models, but the kind of art considered to be an appropriate base for society is very different for Morris and Pound. Bunting, on the other hand, does not look to art for societal models, but similarly engages with the difficulty for the artist to survive under the working conditions in their modern society: the divided labour enforced by Western capitalism. For example, *The Spoils* celebrates the wholeness of work in Persian society in the same way that Pater regards the 'totality' of ancient Greek artistic practice.

The *Malatesta Cantos* show Pound looking back over the history of making of various artworks that he admires and trying to discover in that history what the specific and local working conditions, including the political conditions, of its manufacture were. Concerned that great art can no longer be made in the modern day, his historical tracing turns into a hunt to find a perfect system or order to apply to wider society. Though Pound is reluctant to give a definitive explanation of what he means by 'great art', his perception of its production appears to be individualist. His categories for great art itself are vague: one requirement is that it must be true. In "The Serious Artist", partly an inquiry into the relationship between individual and group, Pound writes that 'great art must of necessity be a part of good art. I attempted to define good art in an earlier chapter. It must bear true witness.'¹⁹⁸ Like Sigismundo in his leadership, the great artist is singularly gifted in his or her work: 'Obviously great art must be an exceptional thing. It cannot be the sort of thing anyone can do after a few hours' practice. It must be the result of some exceptional faculty, strength, or

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. p. 9.

¹⁹⁸ Pound, "The Serious Artist" in *Literary Essays*. pp. 41-57. p. 56.

perception.¹⁹⁹ Additionally, it is not just skill that the great artist possesses, but a fortuitous type of genius. Recalling the definition of the ‘major’ poet as one who is so luckily ‘born upon the stroke of their hour’, the great artist must possess ‘that strength of perception working with the connivance of fate, or chance, or whatever you choose to call it.’²⁰⁰ In “I Gather the Wings of Osiris” (1911), Pound explains the essence of this individual genius as ‘virtù’:

The soul of each man is compounded of all the elements of the cosmos of souls, but in each soul there is some one element which predominates, which is in some peculiar and intense way the quality or *virtù* of the individual; in no two souls is this the same. It is by reason of this *virtù* that a given work of art persists. It is by reason of this *virtù* that we can have one Catullus, one Villon; by reason of it that no amount of technical cleverness can produce a work having the same charm as the original...²⁰¹

The idea of inherent genius suggested by Pound’s concept of ‘virtù’ is, to egalitarian social thought, problematic, and is made more objectionable by Pound’s consequent argument that some individuals have a greater right to freedom and to financial resources than others.

Guide to Kulchur, which is dedicated ‘To Louis Zukofsky and Basil Bunting[:] strugglers in the desert’, provides an example of Pound’s association of language with power.²⁰² In a specific instance he equates verbal concision and accuracy with rigid social organisation (which he presents favourably). Kung (whose ‘wisdom’ Pound is praising) states that if he were ‘appointed head of government’ his first task would be ‘[t]o call people and their things by their names, that is by the correct denominations, to see that the terminology was exact’.²⁰³ He explains at length the gradual declension of society if this were not carried out, culminating in ‘the people [not knowing] where to put their feet or what to lay hold of or to whom they shd. stretch out their

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid. pp. 49; 56.

²⁰¹ “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris” in Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose, 1909-1965. Edited, with an Introduction, by William Cookson*, ed. William Cookson (London: Faber, 1973). pp. 21-42. p. 28.

²⁰² *Guide to Kulchur*. p. 5.

²⁰³ Ibid. p. 16.

hands'.²⁰⁴ Elsewhere Pound makes clear the connection he sees between the production of good art and certain kinds of societal organisation. In "How to Write" he comments that

[c]ivilization is a social order in which the more active, constructive, and finely perceptive intelligences are permitted to act with reasonable freedom, free from inane impediments, and in which they do actually cooperate or at least mutually irritate and stimulate each other'.²⁰⁵

His specification that merely 'reasonable' freedom should be granted to only a deserving portion of society is notably ominous.

Pound's involvement with politics, of course, extended beyond the imaginings and recommendations he makes in his prose, and the oblique praise for potent authority in the early *Cantos*. By *Canto* 41 Benito Mussolini is appearing explicitly, presented as another factive personality. The *Canto* begins with Mussolini's voice:

"Ma Qvesto,"
 said the Boss, "è divertente."
 catching the point before the aesthetes had got there;
 Having drained off the muck by Vada
 From the marshes, by Circeo, where no one else wd. have drained it.
 Waited 2000 years, ate grain from the marshes;²⁰⁶

The opening words, translated by Terrell as '[b]ut this is amusing', were spoken by Mussolini, having read a portion of the *Cantos*, to Pound in 1933.²⁰⁷ The juxtaposition of perceived poetic awareness with Mussolini's swift draining of the Pontine Marshes suggests that Pound equated what he took to be artistic intelligence with political forcefulness. Occurring in *Cantos* 8, 43 and 44 as well as 41, the draining of marsh land is an action repeated in *The Cantos* and, often presented as the singlehanded act of a powerful leader, is rendered as a trope for political forcefulness and the leader's control over nature. Close to the end of *Canto* 43 Pound documents Il Monte dei

²⁰⁴ Ibid. pp. 16-17.

²⁰⁵ *Machine Art*. p. 108.

²⁰⁶ *The Cantos*. p. 202.

²⁰⁷ Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos*. p. 167.

Paschi's 'draining the low land' of Florence in 1749.²⁰⁸ Terrell notes Count Fossombroni's moving of the River Chiana that led to the 'improved tillage' Pound refers to towards the end of *Canto* 44.²⁰⁹ The 'muck by Vada' is also grappled with in the Malatesta *Cantos*, and this repeated phrase, and image, aligns what Pound believes to be the political prowess of Sigismundo and Mussolini. The first lines of *The Pisan Cantos* are set in the aftermath of Mussolini's execution (and Pound's imprisonment at Pisa) and depict '[t]he enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant's / bent shoulders.'²¹⁰ With this image Pound attempts to create pathos for the disappointed worker whose welfare (or political support) Mussolini's public works were directed towards. Terrell explains that Mussolini had promised in 1934 that all peasants would own their own houses in eighty years.²¹¹ The impact of these lines relies on the previous development of the so-called factive personality. The 'factive' leader appears to be one who is characterised by activeness in making or doing, which is what Pound's marsh-moving image tries to convey. However, Pound's sympathy for the working man, like Mussolini's propaganda, is an attempt to promote his own ideal political system rather than evidence of genuine concern for the working class. This opening poem of the Pisan sequence is one of the longer *Cantos*, and is loaded with political and economic critique (for example Churchill is attacked for returning the 'putrid gold standard' to India) and historical and classical reference, as well as mysticism and personal anecdote.²¹² Bunting appears to have liked the poem, suggesting it as a possible reading for a Pound memorial, and his praise for *Canto* 74's free-mingling material conveys something of Pound's ambition for *The Cantos*: that open volitionism, mentioned above. Bunting also acknowledged its controversial politics:

if you want to take a chance of offending everybody except a few who really understand the poem, we could simply read *Canto* 74, the first of the Pisans, straight through. It is a very long canto, and would fill the time: but mainly, it is almost self contained, and in it, for the first time, all the assembled material

²⁰⁸ Pound, *The Cantos*. 222; see Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos*. p. 175.

²⁰⁹ *The Cantos*. p. 228.

²¹⁰ *Canto* 74, *ibid.* p. 445.

²¹¹ *A Companion to the Cantos*. p. 362. Terrell writes that the line is '[s]ignificant, as it reveals one social good Pound thought Fascism would accomplish.' The singularity of this apparent social good further supports my argument that Pound was not particularly interested in social welfare, beyond creating the conditions for good art.

²¹² *The Cantos*. p. 446.

mingles freely, fluidly, and makes something of its own that everybody can feel, even if they cant understand or explain.²¹³

‘Ben’ (Mussolini) and his lover are depicted, strung up after execution: ‘by the heels at Milano.’²¹⁴ Pound connects the persona of Mussolini with Manes, founder of Manicheans, then Dionysus, then Dioce, founder of Ecbatan, with Odysseus, and then Sigismudo Malatesta:²¹⁵

Fear god and the stupidity of the populace,
but a precise definition
transmitted thus Sigismundo
thus Duccio, thus Zuan Bellin²¹⁶

The two leaders appear within a few lines of one another, and form part of the poem’s collective of spirited thinkers and rulers, and apparent proponents and producers of great art, whose substance is contrasted with the hollowness of everyone else. Duccio, Terrell tells us, made most of the marble sculptures in the Tempio; Zuan Bellin (Giovanni Bellini) is also related to precision and great art: he was an ‘Italian painter who, like Duccio, transmitted a tradition by precise definition in his art,’ Terrell writes.²¹⁷ Pound reprises *Canto* 45, drawing out these two characters who ‘came not by usura’, but, we see here, thanks to tyrannical leadership and hands-off patronage.²¹⁸

Some pages later, even Bunting appears, the *Canto* drawing upon the story of his financial hardship as an example and critique of western governments’ failure to support great artists.

... Bunting
doing six months after that war was over
as pacifist tempted with chicken but declined to approve
of war “Redimiculum Metellorum” [sic]

²¹³ BB letter to Denis Goacher, 8 April 1973; Basil Bunting Poetry Archive, Durham; MS 91.

²¹⁴ Pound, *The Cantos*. p. 445.

²¹⁵ Cf. Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos*. p. 362. Terrell explains ‘Pound likens Deïoces’ aspiration to create a paradisal city with what he perceived to be Mussolini’s intentions.’

²¹⁶ *The Cantos*. p. 445.

²¹⁷ Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos*. p. 363.

²¹⁸ *The Cantos*. pp. 229; 230.

privately printed
 to the shame of various critics
 nevertheless the state can lend money
 and the fleet that went out to Salamis
 was built by state loan to the builders
 hence the attack on classical studies
 and in this war were Joe Gould, Bunting and Cummings
 as against thickness and fatness²¹⁹

These are some of the numerous personalities who would be celebrated in Pound's Paradise.

Sigismundo's factive personality as one of *Guide to Kulchur's* "Examples of Civilization" combined with Pound's definition of 'Civilization' and his interest in Mussolini as a contemporary Sigismundo, suggest that Pound's ideal socio-political structure would be one in which universal liberty could be compromised in favour of the production of good art. In the *Malatesta Cantos*, Pound writes that Plato 'had observed that tyrants / Were most efficient in all that they set their hands to'.²²⁰ It seems that Pound, convinced Mussolini's fascism would impel a new renaissance in the arts, might be prepared to sacrifice the freedom of the multitude to a tyrant's rule to secure the artistic freedom of a few.

Pound's fascism and anti-Semitism led to a rift between him and Bunting. This political disparity raises questions about why Bunting continued to praise Pound's poetry, and how he adopted and adapted his forms and techniques, using them for very different purposes. Though Bunting, too, desired liberty for artists to work unencumbered by bureaucracy and the necessity to earn a living by another means, he was deeply sceptical of the concession to political authoritarianism prescribed by Pound. Bunting believed, rather, that the abolition of big government would permit the arts to flourish. He wrote to Dorothy Pound (who was also acting as interlocutor between Bunting and her husband, while Pound was incarcerated) in 1953:

I am sure that any scheme, anything extensive or uniform, must put more and always more men under the mortmain of "administration"; and our only hope for our children is to destroy uniformity, centralisation, big states and big cities

²¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 451-452.

²²⁰ Ibid. p. 31.

and big factories and give men a chance to vary and live without more interference than it is in the nature of their individual neighbours to insist on.²²¹

They Say Etna

In 1933, Pound published Bunting's overtly political "They Say Etna", and provocatively (or perhaps just erroneously) praised it for its 'reactionary' and polemical political vigour in his preface to *Active Anthology*.²²² In contrast to the ideal work Pound presented in *Canto 8*, "They Say Etna" displays the hard manual labour of mining alongside representations of corrupt politicians and tyrants. The poem provides an unusually explicit example of Bunting's rumbling discontent with alienated labour. It begins with a foreboding, fuliginous cocktail of natural disaster and industrial pollution (with a measure of graphic and misogynist objectification):

They say Etna
belches as much poison
as Duisburg's pudenda
a littering sow
helpless in the railroad ditch.

(CP, p. 182)

In 1933, Duisburg was a burgeoning industrial German town which had grown rich on its coal and steel industries. The poem's muses are introduced next: 'The Muses Ergot and Appiol, / Mr Reader.' Ergot and 'apiol' continue the gynaecological theme: they are plant-derived poisons, historically used to induce abortion. 'What violence or fraud / shall we record?' the speaker asks these destructive personae. And the answer comes in an 'Infernal' procession of fictional and semi-fictional rulers, financiers and owners of industry: 'Popone' (who Caddel identifies as businessman Andrew Mellon), Ivar 'Kreuger' (a Wall Street villain), 'Hatry', 'Lord Bunting', 'Godunof', 'Stalin'.²²³ Thus the abortive female figures of the poem are associated with the poem's corrupt and corrosive world of high finance.

²²¹ Reagan, "Basil Bunting Obiter Dicta." p. 272.

²²² Ezra Pound, *Active Anthology*. Edited by E. Pound (London: Faber & Faber, 1933). p. 23.

²²³ Caddel, "An Acknowledged Land." p. 71.

Due to its critique of labour under the capitalist mode of production, as well as scathing satirical comment on contemporary world leaders, “They Say Etna” is, for Bunting, an uncharacteristically political, and persuasive, poem and appears to contradict his statement that “[Literature’s] function is not propaganda”.²²⁴ In fact, the poem was suppressed for many years, and was not included in any of Bunting’s monographs until Caddel rescued this ‘fugitive’ work in *Uncollected Poems*.²²⁵ In his thorough reading of the poem, Caddel has disclosed some of the more obscure references in this unusually polemical and jerkily-lined poem, and he identifies the Duke of Slumberwear as the Duke of Northumberland (he doesn’t say which one).²²⁶ Spotting the unlikely censure, he deems the poem ‘not Bunting-esque sonata or ode, what it most resembles is a Pound-esque Canto’.²²⁷ He notes a letter in which Pound cringe-inducingly refers to himself and Bunting as ‘we economists’,²²⁸ and thus deduces that Bunting, repelled, wrote the poem as a riposte to Pound’s economist posturing. In his preface to the uncollected poems, Caddel even calls the poem ‘Pound-pastiche’.²²⁹ Indeed, there are strongly Poundian elements to it. The lines

Lord Cummingway, Lord Tommanjerry, gear and gear,
Lord St Thomas and the Duke of Oppenham
think coals too cheap and costs too dear.

(CP, p.183)

recall Pound’s listing of irreverent nicknames and diminutives for modern day politicians in the Hell of *Canto* 15, and Bunting is also making a candidly anti-capitalist statement about the greed of the industry owner who perpetually seeks to extract more profit from labour. The fragmented narrative of the poem is close to Pound’s swift movement from subject to subject, voice to voice, in *The Cantos*. “They Say Etna” features speech interrupted by governmental edict:

Shall we consider the evidence in Hatry’s case?
Or take Lord Bunting – or
UKASE.

²²⁴ Bunting, “Observations on Left-Wing Papers.” p. 46.

²²⁵ Richard Caddel, “Introduction to Uncollected Poems” (1993) in Bunting, *CP*, pp. 179-180, p. 179.

²²⁶ Caddel, “An Acknowledged Land.” p. 72.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ Caddel, “Preface to Uncollected Poems” in Bunting, *CP*, pp. 179-180. p. 179.

No one to be found outside his own village

without

PAPERS.

(CP, p.182)

The semblance to real historical document evokes Pound's own method of presenting non-poeticised, 'factual' text, as demonstrated in his *Malatesta Cantos*: a technique he described as 'openly volitionist',²³⁰ suggesting they could speak for themselves, were autonomous, and could be compiled and experienced by the reader without comment from the poet.²³¹ Bunting also includes a dose of undiluted economics,²³² surely mimicking Pound's propensity for extensive lists of figures:

Also, to encourage more efficient tillage,
2/3 of the produce to be presented to the temporal Lord,
1/5 of the produce to be presented to the parish pope.

Yours you may say lovingly

Boris Godunof.

Or Stalin.

(CP, p. 182)

The theme of mining is reprised a little further on:

Gear, then, and gear,
gritty-grinding.

The governor spins, raises its arms.

Two three-inch steel cables scream from the drum
seventy fathoms.

We carry lighted Davy lamps,
stoop along narrow track.

Trucks scold tunnel.

²³⁰ Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*. p.194.

²³¹ Note the connection with his 'Volitionist Economics': further evidence of Pound's equation of art with economics and politics.

²³² "I take my poetry neat as a rule, finding Dante has a lot more kick without St. Thomas, which is just the difference, I thought, between us and Eliot, and gives us a better chance, for all our less slick technique, of outstaying him." Basil Bunting letter to Louis Zukofsky, quoted by McAllister in McAllister and Figgis, "Basil Bunting : The Last Interview." p. 23.

In a squat cavern a
 naked man on his
 knees with a pickaxe rips a nugget from the coalface.

(*CP*, p. 183)

The refrain 'gear and gear' through the poem and the 'governor' which 'spins, raises its arms' emphasise mechanised labour. In this stanza, Bunting presents a noisy and hostile working environment. The first half of the stanza, describing mining apparatus, is filled with 'g' and 'm' sounds, the throbbing noise of a machine at work. The second part focuses on the workers themselves. Their bent backs and physical hardship are implied by the proliferation of harsh, cracking 'k' plosives. The juxtaposition of the mechanical and the human labour in this stanza connotes the unhappy workers' mechanisation due to the division and organization of their labour into specific and rote tasks. Bunting further evokes the alienation of mining work by presenting the miner's labour as a violent act upon nature. This contrasts with artisanal labour, which works in tune with nature. Naked and bent in the mine, the twentieth-century worker of "They Say Etna" appears as early man: a symbol for the debased work done for another's profit. However, in a pre-industrial world, early humankind worked with nature. This relationship is dissolved with the introduction of machinery, which causes a split between human and environment: 'a / pickaxe rips a nugget from the coalface.' Here is presented the exploitation of the natural environment for economic gain, a corollary of the exploitation of workers too. The moment of transformation – the coal pulled from the coalface – is where value is generated from nature, but the worker, exploited by the mine owner, will not see this profit.

That the poem remained 'fugitive', to reprise Caddel's term, until after Bunting's death, suggests that he intended to distance himself from the kind of Poundian political proselytising that the older poet was so keen for him to adopt. However, Caddel believes the poem to be more a riposte to Pound's political didacticism than an earnest attempt at it. Caddel writes: 'In order to address Pound, to try, as it were, to argue back at him, Bunting deliberately adopts His Master's Voice.'²³³ Caddel's reading of "They Say Etna" as 'a debate' suggests the poem provides an example of the poets' divergence, and helps to explain Bunting's anomalously

²³³ Caddel, "An Acknowledged Land." p. 72.

demagogic tone.²³⁴ Further evidence that the poem was a response to Pound comes from his letter of 1953 to Dorothy Pound (in which he wrote about his fear of state administration, as quoted above). He opens his missive with a direct association of Ezra with Etna:

Well, well! Ole Ez does shy a profuse shower of stones when I ask him the way to the baker's. It is almost exhilarating. One of the craters on Etna does the same if you provoke it (I used a snowball; but its [sic] aim was no better than Ez's – that is, if he really intends to break any heads or windows.)²³⁵

The letter, seemingly approaching a *détente* with Ezra following a row about politics, continues. He expresses his gratitude to Pound for his guidance, but also argues his own case, stating his distrust of placing absolute value in the individual genius:

he did so much for me in so many ways that I never had the heart to argue with him, and I suppose he often thought I agreed – or acquiesced – when I didnt: for I daresay I began by having to see the rough of the world at closer quarters than he, and never valued men and their works at his estimate...²³⁶

Bunting counters Pound's concession for brutal dictatorships in the name of good art:

my old admiration for Zionists in Palestine and Fascists in Libya (because they make two blades of grass grow etc) has given way to dislike of them, because they interfere with and destroy the men they meet in the process: make men wretched in the name of Man.²³⁷

If Bunting intended "They Say Etna" to respond to Pound's dogmatic and didactic poetry, it is nonetheless a sincere political critique. After detailing numerous deaths due to a mining disaster, the poet expresses the disservice and deficiency of capital as exchange for a life spent in labour ('pownies' is archaic and perhaps also an almost-phonetic spelling of North Eastern miners' argot):

Four lads
led the pownies

²³⁴ Ibid. p. 69.

²³⁵ Basil Bunting letter to Dorothy Pound, 11 December 1953. (Bunting correspondence, Bloomington).

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

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

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

(The widows were provided for.)

(CP, p.183)

Bunting appears to critique the situation in which work's sole reward has become money, in the case of the industrial labourer, and the worker's *life* is spent in doing this work. The irresponsibility, brutality and indifference of the ruling class portrayed here is rendered in poignant contrast to the care shown by the miners towards their subordinates: the miners rescue of the 'pownies', who labour for them, leading them 'a mile and a half through rising water, / lampless'. The miners, however, are treated as less than animals by those who suppress them (literally, within tunnels, in this case), and force them into this labour.²³⁸

In a number of poems Bunting uses the situation of natural or industrial disaster as a means of assessing systems of power, perhaps because these moments interrupt, even challenge the smooth functioning of capitalism. In "They Say Etna", the bodies of young men are strewn throughout the scene, but those who are responsible for these deaths remain nonchalant, only retrieving the corpses after five months. The cost of their lives does not even amount to the price of their funerals, under this system of evaluation: instead of the mine-owners, the community pays.

The incident recalls one which occurred at the Montagu Colliery, where Bunting's father worked (as a doctor).²³⁹ The mine-owners failed to implement

²³⁸ Marx describes exactly this reverse anthropomorphism: 'political economy knows the worker only as a beast of burden, as an animal reduced to the minimum bodily needs'. In a system of alienated labour '[w]hat is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal.' Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. pp. 32; 69.

²³⁹ Cf. Makin, *Bunting : The Shaping of His Verse*. pp. 5-6.

adequate safety measures. Thirty-eight miners were killed.²⁴⁰ Bunting even recalls, in a letter to Pound in which he describes his family background and his upbringing as steeped in mining history and the labour movement, that ‘I was on the spot when the View Pit was flooded and forty-five men drowned, I heard what the men had to say about it and the whole cursed system when there wasn’t any question of politics, mining or otherwise, but just sheer human commonsense.’²⁴¹ It might be that Bunting is extending the truth in order to persuade Pound of his authority to speak about northern working class culture, but even so it is obvious that Bunting’s depiction of the mining disaster in “They Say Etna” is an attempt to bring to light the dangers and injustice this community of workers suffers.

An asterisk breaks the poem with a stark, silent moment following the disaster scene; then the next section, which opens with another appearance of the dubious muses, continues to question what money *is*, as the two classes of capitalist production are split by exclamation marks: ‘[t]oil’ and ‘[a]ccumulate’.

Sing, Ergot and Appiol, didactically:

‘Toil! Accumulate Capital!’

Capital is land upon which
work has been done (*vide* textbooks).

Capital is everything except the desert,
sea, untunnelled rock, upper air.

Breathed air

is Capital, though not rented:

²⁴⁰ The following record of the disaster comes from the Durham Mining Museum online archive: ‘It is with deep regret that I have to record the loss of 38 lives at Montagu View Colliery, situated at Scotswood, in the county of Northumberland, owned by Messrs. W. Benson and Son, Ltd.

This disaster is the worst that has occurred in the Division for a number of years, and was caused by an inrush of water into the workings of the Brockwell Seam at almost the lowest point in the colliery. The accident happened about 10.30 a.m. on Monday, 30th March [1925], in a district known as Robson's Bord Flat, following the firing of three shots by the deputy in charge.’ The record also mentions that ‘A relief fund was opened by the Lord Mayor of Newcastle-on-Tyne [sic], and met with ready response by the general public’.

<http://www.dmm.org.uk/names/n1925-01.htm> Accessed 12/07/2014.

²⁴¹ BB letter to Pound, 21 March 1934; from the manuscript collection at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale U. Quoted in Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us*. p. 25.

70 million tons of solid matter
 suspended in the atmosphere,
 November, in London,
 not by an act of God.

'The sea is his and he
 made it' – Who
 made Holland and whose is it?
 (CP, p. 184)

Here Bunting presents a world which is almost entirely appropriated by and apportioned (in exchange for capital) to the members of the ruling class, who then use the primary resource to make more capital. 'Textbooks' connote that 'special learning' that maintains the elite's superior position.²⁴² The laws of ownership, under capitalism are presented so directly at this point in the poem, that they seem random and absurd. A few things, the poem tells us, are not capital, but perhaps are only yet to be worked on and transformed into capital. For example upper air is not capital, but when it is breathed, it is. The sea, too, is not capital, the poem states, but then reconsiders in an ironic reference to Holland's history as a powerful banking nation whose landmass was made out of the sea. It is 'land upon which / work has been done'. God, in this presentation, is a manufacturer: the poem quotes from Psalm 95:5: 'The sea is his, and he made it,' linking the fundamentals of ownership to the Old Testament which is therefore conceived either as a prototype of the 'textbooks' to which the poem directs us, or as a contrast to the text book.²⁴³ This section of the poem is all rather tongue in cheek, a contrast to the local tragedy and the real victims of capitalism presented in the previous section. However there is at least one serious message: Bunting's association of the Psalms with banking and accumulation do appear to be mocking Pound's anti-Semitic conspiracies about world leaders and finance. The quotation communicates the inalienable nature of *nature*, and the Book of Psalms is a foundational Jewish text, therefore Bunting's reference to Holland, the banking nation, suggests that the 'usurers' were not the same people that Pound imagines. In Bunting's portrayal of the world, Pound's vision of an aesthetic or architecture by which ideal

²⁴² Bunting, "English Poetry Today." p. 265 see n. 115.

²⁴³ Psalm 95:5. *The Bible : Authorized King James Version*.

societal models can be envisaged, seems trite, even impossible. Everything is already owned!

And why the reference to Etna? In 1928 Etna erupted, destroying the town of Mascali. Mussolini used the swift rebuilding of the town – in the fascist aesthetic – as propaganda, an attempt to simultaneously reinforce his power and promote the efficiency of fascism.²⁴⁴ Mussolini drains the marshes, and fixes things, in order to make new capital: the poem underscores the fact that Mussolini is behaving like a capitalist whereas Pound imagines him as belonging to an older order. Pound mistakes the fascist regime for the ancient regime, when really, Bunting's poem helps to show, Mussolini's economic motives come from the same old capitalism. It is very probable that Bunting knew about the 1928 eruption of Etna when writing the poem. It is also possible, in light of his critique of named and unnamed dictators and rulers in the poem, that this oblique reference to Mussolini's public works marks his scepticism towards Pound's celebration of the dictator's draining of the Pontine marshes. The use of disasters to promote politics is effectively ridiculed by Bunting in "They Say Etna", and the poem exposes the bathos, one might even say the 'enormous tragedy', of material compensation, exchanged for human life.

Pound's "Machine Art" exemplifies his equation of aesthetic form with social organisation. He cites the 'engineering mind' with its precision, creativity and organised efficiency as the ideal model for the basis of political organisation, an idea which culminates in the statement 'The tyrant is biologically preferable to the bureaucrat, at least he has in him some principle of life and action.'²⁴⁵ Bunting's suspicions about the evils that may accompany a political model based on aesthetics are confirmed by Pound's apotheosis of the Sigismundo/Mussolini "factive personality". In 1974 Bunting clearly stated his antipathy towards Pound's politics, deeming him 'the most obvious' of the 'fascist beasts' in the thirties.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ Cf. David K Chester et al., "Mascali, Mount Etna Region Sicily: An Example of Fascist Planning During the 1928 Eruption and Its Continuing Legacy," *Natural hazards* 19, no. 1 (1999).

²⁴⁵ Pound, *Machine Art*. p. 78.

²⁴⁶ 'The young are apt to say that Yeats was an old square, or even a fascist beast. Such criticism may be irrelevant to poetry – I think it is – but it is as well to get it out of the way if possible. There were plenty of other fascist beasts about in the thirties, and among the poets, Yeats's close friend Ezra Pound is the most obvious. Eliot is another, the more insidious for being disguised as an English gentleman.' Bunting, "Yeats Recollected." p. 45.

An Alliance with Nature

The first lines of *Canto* 45, "With Usura", portray Pound's regret for the demise of traditional skilled labour and his praise for the artistic masters of the past. The lines that lament 'hath no man a house of good stone / each block cut smooth and well fitting / that design might cover their face' imply a belief in the redeeming properties that decorative arts possess for otherwise toilsome labour.²⁴⁷ The sentiment is close to that of Morris's criticism of industrial labour. Morris writes:

it is one of the chief uses of decoration, the chief part of its alliance with nature, that it has to sharpen our dulled senses in this matter: for this end are those wonders of intricate patterns interwoven, those strange forms invented, which men have so long delighted in: forms and intricacies that do not necessarily imitate nature, but in which the hand of the craftsman is guided to work in the way that she does, till the web, the cup, or the knife, look as natural, nay as lovely, as the green field, the river bank, or the mountain flint.²⁴⁸

Morris's criteria of aesthetics rely on the art-maker's ability to enter into this alliance. As quoted previously, he specifies things are beautiful if made 'in accord with Nature, and helps her; ugly if it is discordant with nature and thwarts her.'²⁴⁹ Bunting also believes in the positive quality of work that takes place in 'alliance with nature'. Skill and fulfilment are provided by craftwork, and moreover it is significant that Morris, Pound and Bunting refer, at different points, to the craft of carving or stonemasonry to illustrate a non-alienated, even ideal, labour. Bunting's stonemason-poet works attuned to the rhythms of nature; later in *Briggflatts* Bunting portrays the intricate patterning in the natural world via 'slowworm's mosaic' (*CP*, p. 64), whose work corresponds to the 'Lindisfarne plaited lines,' (*CP*, p. 68) describing the illuminated manuscript Bunting so admired that it inspired the structure of *Briggflatts* itself.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁷ Pound, *The Cantos*. p. 229.

²⁴⁸ Morris, "The Lesser Arts." pp. 495-6.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 495.

²⁵⁰ Tortoise deep in dust or
muzzled bear capering
punctuate a text whose initial,
lost in Lindisfarne plaited lines,

Pound's concern for the beauty or ugliness of the products of art and artisanal labour correlates with Morris's view in this respect. *Canto 45*, which engages directly with a craft-based workforce, locates the source which 'blunteth the needle in the maid's hand / and stoppeth the spinner's cunning' in a system that is, 'CONTRA NATURAM.' However, where Morris and Bunting deal with the unfairness of the capitalist system of production which divides the world unequally so that some have to toil under others, Pound critiques the 'unnatural' profit made on a loan by moneylenders. His anti-Semitism and his anger overshadow the more accurate understanding of a bigger system of labour and economics that Marx, Morris and Bunting address. *Canto 45* is ostensibly a vituperative piece of propaganda. As in *ABC of Economics*, Pound adopts a pastor's voice, complete with archaic '-eth' suffixes, to preach the evils of usury. The movement of the *Canto* is climactic, even hyperbolic. The repetition of the refrain 'with usura' adds to the poem's mounting emotion and its bitter tone, and moves the poem further away from an unbiased account or autonomous piece of art that might 'bear true witness'. The build up culminates in a fantastical usury-induced impotence revealing the poem's deliberate polemics and any sense that the poem is concerned with the actual working conditions of industrial labourers and craftspeople disperses.

Morris, as well as being both literally and metaphorically invested in the production of beautiful artefacts, is fundamentally concerned with the welfare of the worker in society. His interest in the products of craft goes hand in hand with his interest in the happiness that non-alienated artisanal labour can provide the worker, as opposed to the relative unhappiness that alienated factory labour causes them. His interest in 'the lesser arts' is due mainly to the fact that the process, as well as the products, of craft-work 'give people pleasure'.²⁵¹ E. P. Thompson writes that '[w]hile Morris was interested in the quality of the art products themselves, he was equally

stands for discarded love. (*CP*, p. 68).

The (industrialized) human world devastates nature: buries the tortoise and muzzles the bear, obscuring the beautiful design of nature (e.g. the slowworm's mosaic) that was celebrated by the Lindisfarne gospel. Peter Makin's long and detailed section on "The Lindisfarne Gospels" as form focuses on the patterns and structure of *Briggflatts*, cf. Makin, *Bunting : The Shaping of His Verse*. 219-238.

²⁵¹ Morris, "The Lesser Arts." p. 496.

interested in the manner in which these products were made, and in the people who made them.²⁵²

Bunting's critique of exploitative, alienated labour in "They Say Etna" reveals a sympathy with Morris's viewpoint. Morris's and Bunting's belief in the redemptive potential of working with nature addresses the same concern for the worker. The concern that Pound appears to have, when praising Sigismundo's treatment of his artist is slightly, but significantly, different. His admiration for Sigismundo and Mussolini stems from a fear that the production of good art is no longer possible, and it is chiefly his concern for art that provides the basis for his engagement with working practices. In contrast to Morris and Bunting, Pound's primary interest is in the product, rather than in the production process. He states that 'it is tremendously important that great poetry be written, it makes no jot of difference who writes it.'²⁵³

Although *Canto 45* presents a disempowered and redundant working class, the people presented are merely puppets employed to add pathos to Pound's wider political argument. Unlike the various workers and working communities presented throughout Bunting's oeuvre, these empty figures do not sweat, eat, drink, toil or die. They are only represented in relation to their labour, or rather their non-production: they are motionless and their tools rust and rot. The list of artworks and artists in *Canto 45* that come not 'by usura' forms the climax of the poem, and thus confirms a prioritization of artwork over artist.²⁵⁴ By contrast, Bunting's equation of poetry-making with craft and with work as a means of recouping the lost voices of a working community is closer to Morris's genuine communitarian values.

In the cantos and essays discussed, Pound writes in defence of an individual artist blessed with genius, and although Bunting would probably agree with a campaign to provide artists with sufficient financial support, there is an important distinction to draw between the poets' concerns.²⁵⁵ Where Pound seeks to protect the individual 'great artist' who has found his or her *virtù*, Bunting's attention to the artist, craftsman and poet, as makers, is closer to Morris's perception in which art and art-making

²⁵² Thompson, *William Morris*. p. 104.

²⁵³ Pound, "A Retrospect" in *Literary Essays*. p. 10.

²⁵⁴ *The Cantos*. pp. 239-240.

²⁵⁵ See Bunting's *Presidential Addresses* to the Northern Arts Council, in which he pushes the council to consider granting a living wage, and a lengthy award, to the artists they support, in order to fund a truly diverse culture of practitioners, rather than just those who can afford not to seek another income (n. 91).

provide a means of redeeming the alienated labour of the worker under the capitalist mode of production. Poetry is thus recovered from the classically trained and privileged few, and offers the majority a means of articulating themselves.

In the same essay in which Bunting denied the role of literature in propaganda, he also tries to work out how communist propaganda could be more effectively organised, and writes of the importance of literature to society as a whole. Its purpose, he believes, is 'to explore the resources of language and make language available for all existing or potential thoughts.'²⁵⁶ Though Pound also believed in a function of literature 'in the state' as 'maintaining the very cleanliness of the tools, the health of the very matter of thought itself',²⁵⁷ Bunting's inclusive aim to make language available for *all* articulation is not always shared by Pound. In contrast to Bunting's statement, on being asked what he believes, Pound is dismissive of the artistically uninitiated, writing 'I have for a number of years answered such questions by telling the enquirer to read Confucius and Ovid. This can do no harm to the intelligent and the unintelligent may be damned.'²⁵⁸

Despite Bunting's avowed belief that literature is no place for political proselytizing, the disparity between Pound's and Bunting's beliefs about art are, at root, socio-political. However, perhaps it is also this very argument against political purpose behind literary text that helps to explain why Bunting continued his association with Pound, praising his poetry and exploring his forms and techniques, long after the older poet gained infamy for his disastrous political choices.

This chapter has considered Pound's *Malatesta Cantos*, alongside later cantos, including reference to the post-war *Pisan Cantos*, to explore Pound's examination and presentation of the working models behind the aesthetics he admired: a quest he undertook in order to find a perfect system or order to apply to wider society. His ideas about making and art link to his praise for Mussolini (as shown through the references to marsh-draining). His aesthetic-political model represents a ideological split with Bunting, even though Bunting also depicts labour. Their argument, as

²⁵⁶ Bunting, "Observations on Left-Wing Papers." p. 46.

²⁵⁷ "How to Read" in *Literary Essays*. pp. 15-40. p. 21.

²⁵⁸ "Credo" (1930) in Pound, *Selected Prose*. p. 53. The full quotation, in fact, reveals the questioner as T. S. Eliot, and portrays him in much the same light as Bunting's satirical criticism does. Pound writes: 'Mr. Eliot who is at times an excellent poet and who has arrived at the supreme Eminence among English critics largely through disguising himself as a corpse once asked in the course of an amiable article what "I believed".'

evidenced by Caddel's research into the 'debate' surrounding Bunting's "They Say Etna", suggests that Bunting's poem is a direct criticism of Pound's political penchants: Mussolini and the kind of big political structures which suppress, alienate and mechanise a human workforce.

In "Machine Art" Pound writes of his 'very high commendation' of Fordist organisation: again dismissing the distinction between structure and society (the people), he surmises the system of Fordism is 'probably feudal'.²⁵⁹ '[Ford] has already experimented in tempo',²⁶⁰ Pound emphasises, identifying Fordism as one of the bases for his idea of a machine-made sound art. His concept is the opposite to Bunting's (and William Morris's) interest in the rescuing of art practice for the wellbeing of the people: 'machine art', as organised sound, *relies* on the organisation (thus division) of workers in industrial society that Bunting and Morris reject.

Perhaps Pound's interest in poetic form, too, is ultimately about organisation, and his interest in Ford reflects the correlation he perceives (or hopes for) between art and society. In contrast, Bunting was repelled by social ordering and organisation, as his private concern about the 'mortmain of "administration"' attests. Eventually, he came to distance himself from Pound's extreme politics, announcing: 'Hierarchy and order... were the prime virtues also to Yeats, Pound and Eliot. They are not virtues to me, only expedients that chafe almost as vilely as the crimes they try to restrain'.²⁶¹



²⁵⁹ *Machine Art*. p. 80.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p. 81.

²⁶¹ Bunting, "A Note on Briggflatts" in *Briggflatts*. (2009). p. 41. Richard Caddel notes that this is 'Bunting's only written statement on the poem.' (*Ibid.*) That Bunting chose to announce his opposition to Pound's and Yeats's politics in this defining statement highlights his desire to distance his magnum opus from the more odious aspects of their influence. *Briggflatts*, and the 'Note', represent a significant break with the past at this point in Bunting's career.

Chapter Four

'Becks, flocks / and axe-knocks'

Tracing Nature and Work in *Briggflatts*

Nature consistently appears in Bunting's poetry, and is frequently presented alongside work, when nature and man work together in human happiness. There are many examples of the coalescence of work and nature in *Briggflatts*, in which ideas that appear in Bunting's earlier poetry are explored and united in this magnum opus. The following reading of the poem is broken into numbered parts and a 'coda' that correspond to the parts of *Briggflatts* which they focus on.

I

The long poem's scene is set by the sounds of nature coming together, like the start of a symphony: we hear the descant brag of the bull; the splashing of Rawthey providing the main refrain; pebbles bouncing in the river's water. The second stanza introduces the mason whose work will provide the recurring conceit for poetic labour, impermanence, memory and life's close relationship with, indeed reliance on, death.

A mason times his mallet
to a lark's twitter,
listening while the marble rests,
lays his rule
at a letter's edge,
fingertips checking,
till the stone spells a name
naming none,
a man abolished.

(CP, p. 61)

The mason's work takes place within the sounds and the rhythms of the natural symphony that surrounds him, and his labour provides an example of the non-alienated work necessary to human happiness that Morris advocates above. The next stanza maintains the nature, work, life and death theme: 'Decay thrusts the blade' (61), interpretable as the notion that death compels life, and gives life on earth rhythm and purpose.

The journey that the two children and the mason take is mappable in real life, leading from the hamlet of Brigflatts, through the fells and dales of the Cumbrian countryside, through Garsdale, Hawes to the quarry at Stainmore, where the mason fills his cart with limestone. There is a certain ease to the labour depicted (or implied) in this section: rhythm propels the movement of the cart, and the noises of its motion are synchronised with the sounds made by horse and man: the two children hear

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

(*CP*, p. 62).

The quarry-workers' labour joins the soundscape: a macrocosmic version of the mason's mallet: '[t]heir becks ring on limestone, / whisper to peat.' Such is the synchrony with nature, that the fruits of the quarry workers' labour are abundant and so in this real-life idyll, even the horse's work is done for it: '[t]he clogged cart pushes the horse downhill.' The air is 'soft': the atmosphere of this scene of making within nature is gentle, and within this landscape the poet makes his first foray (as far as the poem shows us) into verse: 'laying the tune frankly on the air'. The ease and honesty involved in making poetry presented here contrasts with the 'bogus', still-birthered lines in the next section. 'Knotty wood, hard to rive' is not struggled with, but is burned for warmth: its difficulty avoided, it 'smoulders to ash' (*CP*, p. 63). The 'insufferable happiness' of youth and first love is conjured by this first section's portrayal of the interplay of nature and human life and work (*CP*, p. 64).

II

The work portrayed in the opening part of the poem is idyllic, the references are to tough work: '[f]ingers / ache on the rubbing stone'; '[p]ainful lark, labouring to rise!'; show that the work is not Arcadian (*CP*, p. 61). This is poetry that retains the Romantic tradition of a belief in the deep relationship between humankind and nature, but tries to shake off the association with poetic superiority, special purpose, spirit, or intellectuality. The second part overturns this idyll altogether with the description of

the protagonist's move to London. Within the city's confines the poet's creativity, and his love, are stifled by the unnatural urban world and capitalist industry:

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.

(*CP*, p. 65)

These 'bogus' prefigure the later men (journalists) of 'Hastor' (section III) who steal, exploit and scavenge for a career. For Bunting, and for the protagonist at this point, the capital city is an unreal world full of horror; an artificial landscape in which true artifice (writing poetry) is impossible. Bunting presents the poet's attempts at writing. He:

counts beat against beat, bus conductor
 against engine against wheels against
 the pedal, Tottenham Court Road, decodes
 thunder, scans
 porridge bubbling, pipes clanking, feels
 Buddha's basalt cheek
 but cannot name the ratio of its curves
 to the half-pint left breast of a girl who bared it in Kleinfeldt's.

(*CP*, p. 65)

A list of quotidian sounds pause at the suspended word, 'feels', bathetically aligning 'porridge' and 'pipes' with strong emotion. The effect is one of false melodrama: the poet is perhaps self-critically implying the lack of inspiration in his work during this period. His work debases the holy: Buddha's basalt cheek (such a statue is held in the British Museum, just off Tottenham Court Road) is compared to a Bloomsbury bargoer's breast. All the poet's observation and scansion produces nothing: 'mating / beauty with squalor to beget lines still-born.' (*CP*, p. 65)

Escaping from stifling London, the poem turns to the sea and to the work of rowing, and the turn in the poem's narrative is marked by the rower's physical movement:

Under his right oxters the loom of his sweep
the pilot turns from his wake.

(CP, p. 65)

James McGonigal writes about the second part of *Briggflatts* which shows the stonemason degraded to midden-maker and comments:

the formula "once upon a time" at least invokes in our transient world something older than recorded history, another fictive time in which the young are still able to struggle and take up the fight once more. Something of this ancient paradox is operating in the ambiguities of plot and imagery of Section II, and strengthening the listener's resolve as we follow, on and upwards, out of this place where humans have become subhuman and mechanical, trapped in a labyrinth of their own making.²⁶²

Bunting portrays the Carrara marble-quarrying industry:

White marble stained like a urinal
cleft in Apuan Alps,
always trickling, apt to the saw. Ice and wedge
split it or well-measured cordite shots,
while paraffin pistons rap, saws rip
and clamour is clad in stillness:
clouds echo marble middens, sugar-white,
that cumber the road stones travel
to list the names of the dead.

There is a lot of Italy in churchyards,

(CP, p. 67)

²⁶² McGonigal, "Bunting and Narrative: 'Part of the marvel'" in James McGonigal and Richard Price, eds., *The Star You Steer By: Basil Bunting and British Modernism* (Amsterdam; Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000). pp. 65-88. p. 78.

William Wootten's study of the meaning of stone in *Briggflatts*, describes this part of the poem as a denunciation of Pound's fatal faith in monumentalism. In a Duchampesque move, Bunting renders the marmoreal medium that Pound celebrates throughout *The Cantos* urine stained. Wootten writes that Pound 'is fascinated by marble and the poet's ability to make his art transcend time and temporal process.'²⁶³ However Bunting 'amends the Poundian description of marble... [It] is described in terms that link it inextricably with human, industrial and economic process, and, especially, with excretion and death.'²⁶⁴

Note also that in this section of *Briggflatts*, the marble appears in its natural state: like the coalface in "They Say Etna", work *is being done* to it. The noisy and destructive machinery, coupled with sweaty and unpleasant hard industrial labour stands in obvious contrast to the earlier (in both senses) stonemason's work. The visual landscape presented here 'stained like a urinal' and surrounding the local environment with clouds of dust is starkly different from the 'stone white as cheese' which 'jeers at the dale' in Bunting's Northumbrian landscape (*CP*, p. 63). The contrast in sound, too, is striking: here we hear rapping and ripping: a centre of 'clamour' in an otherwise still landscape; whereas the stonemason's landscape 'in such soft air' is so quiet that he can hear not only larks, but the stone 'resting' (*CP*, pp. 62; 61). The Northumbrian mason's affinity with nature is suggested by this metaphor. Furthermore the world surrounding Part I's mason is not *deadly* still, like the Italian marble quarry's (a troubling silence that pre-empts the death of a countryside home to dust-covered tortoises) but it 'trembles'. A sudden staccato of four quatrains of emphatic trochaic dimeter follow, depicting metal mining that might be ancient or modern, and the mason reappears 'reproached' and 'uneasy' (*CP*, p. 68). 'Shaping evasive ornament', like the poet struggling to find and, through articulation, regain what he has lost, the mason of Part II 'litters his yard / with flawed fragments' (*CP*, p. 68). A few paragraphs later, the connection between uneasy mason and poet who has lost landscape, love and labour is made as the poet's work is directly portrayed, and questioned:

But who will entune a bogged orchard,
its blossom gone,
fruit unformed, where hunger and

²⁶³ William Wootten, "Basil Bunting : 'Uneasy Mason'," *English* 51, no. 201 (2002). p. 237.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

damp hush the hive?
 A disappointed July full of codling
 moth and ragged lettuces.

(CP, p. 69)

III

Part Three is based on Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* story of Alexander the Great encountering Angel and harbinger of apocalypse, Israfel. The section depicts a Dantesque Hell holding journalists, fat cats, and possibly politicians, in the style of Pound's Westminster-based Hell *Cantos* (14 and 15). The natural world leads, through seascape, tide's turn and day fading to night, to cliffs on which gulls are

pestered by scavengers
 whose palms scoop droppings to mould
 cakes for hungry towns. One
 plucked fruit warm from the arse of his companion, who
 making to beat him, he screamed:
 Hastor! Hastor! but Hastor
 raised dung thickened lashes to stare
 disdaining those who cry:
 Sweet shit! Buy!
 for he swears in the market:
 By God with whom I lunched!
 there is no trash in the wheat
 my loaf is kneaded from.
 Nor will unprofitable motion
 stir the stink that settles round him.

(CP, p. 71)

Hastor, possibly a reference to a dark angelic creature, Hastur, from Lovecraftian mythology, is also, McGonigal suggests, a pun.²⁶⁵ McGonigal explains no further, but surely this is a lightly veiled grotesque of Bunting's former boss, the *Times*-owner Lord

²⁶⁵ McGonigal, "Bunting and Narrative" in McGonigal and Price, *The Star You Steer By : Basil Bunting and British Modernism*. p. 79.

Astor.²⁶⁶ This suggests the ‘scavengers’ who scream out to him are journalists: thus their shit-scooping, and their theft from each other (which is work carried out for a ‘hungry’ audience) indicate Bunting’s feelings about the relationship journalism has with language. Journalism is presented as a commodified, sold-out, form of writing, headed by a grotesque capitalist aristocrat who is so powerful that he has God as a colleague. Hastor swears that ‘there is no trash in the wheat / my loaf is kneaded from’ but this protest reveals either his mendacity or the unnaturalness of his product when the positive organic quality of the trembling wheat at the beginning of the poem, rhythmically synchronous with the river, Rawthey, and the mason’s mallet knocking in non-alienated labour, are recalled:

wheat stands in excrement
 trembling. Rawthey trembles.
 Tongue stumbles, ears err
 for fear of spring.
 (CP, p. 61)

Part Three’s vista of hell then expands to include alongside journalists, entrepreneurs, financiers, tricksters, or even world leaders (the ‘[g]uides at the top’ who ‘claim fees / though the way is random’. CP, p. 72). Chaos and horror ensue until Alexander’s epiphany occurs, thanks to Angel Israfil, and the prophetic slowworm, (with perhaps an intentional link between the debased nature of the exploitative profit that appears at the start of the passage and the meaningful prophet who enlightens the explorer, Bunting/Alexander/the listener) to remind the reader of mortality and the swift march of time, but also to reassure that death is part of the natural progression of life and living things. The natural rhythm that the mason works to is evoked again:

Sycamore seed twirling:
 O, writhe to its measure!
 Dust swirling trims pleasure.
 Thorns prance in a gale.
 In air snow flickers,
 twigs tap,
 elms drip.

²⁶⁶ Burton supports this hunch, calling the section a ‘grim portrait of the journalist’s trade, and especially of Hugh Astor of *The Times*.’ *A Strong Song Tows Us*. p. 355.

(CP, p. 74)

IV

Part Four depicts nature, and humankind's relationship with it, as a metaphor for poetry. The two Cymric bards, Aneurin and Taliesin are figured as 'cruel owls'; images of hunting represent the hierarchies in the natural life that are turned into tiers of death in the food chain.

Aneurin and Taliesin, cruel owls
for whom it is never altogether dark, crying
before the rules made poetry a pedant's game.

(CP, p. 75)

Bunting thus relates the history of the natural world to the human world through poetry (and poetry's history). The poem at this point develops its non-linear chronology through the proliferation of trans-cultural and trans-historical references, and the random sounding of various voices. The section, at the same time, makes repeated reference to the poem's structure through the recurring 'weaving' conceit. With its references to the bardic tradition there is a nod to the tradition of storytelling and chronicle, and this links the poem again to the Lindisfarne Codex (itself an analogue for craft in Bunting's poem). Thus voices and historical figures, and events, are woven together into an alternative history: one, Bunting believes, of the North. In the notes to the poem he writes: 'Northumbrians should know Eric *Bloodaxe* [sic] but seldom do, because all the school histories are written by or for Southrons. Piece his story together from the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, the Orkneyinga Saga, and Heimskringla, as you fancy.' (CP, p. 226) Thus the motive of Bunting's poem borrows from Pound's 'openly volitionist' method of compilation.

So Bunting is explicit about the need to record, or retrieve, a northern history; but *Briggflatts* is also a history of work. The vista seems to be a bird's eye view of the work that makes the world, compared to weaving, as the scenery moves from 'text carved by waves / on the skerry', to an address to the reader:

Can you trace shuttles thrown
like drops from a fountain, spray, mist of spiderlines
bearing the rainbow, quoits round the draped moon;
shuttles like random dust desert whirlwinds hoy at their

tormenting sun?

(CP, p. 75)

However this bustling scene of natural creative activity has its unpleasant side: the lice that feed on the result of the collaborate work of the rest. Bunting wards off scholarly exegesis, but perhaps also hints at his wider life view which finds pattern and sense in the big picture of nature, and not through individual acts of human intellection or reasoning:

Follow the clue patiently and you will understand nothing.

Lice in its seams despise the jacket shrunk to the world's core,
 crawl with toil to glimpse
 from its shoulder walls of flame which could they reach
 they'd crackle like popcorn in a skillet.

(CP, pp. 75-6)

The music of the poem continues to build up from its beginning as the twittering knock of the chisel on stone (CP, p. 62). A reference to piping, which Bunting's earlier poem about creative hermitude, "Chomei at Toyama" suggests, is a reference to the redemptive and individual 'work' of making music by oneself, lifts the poem's mood. Moving away from the doomy claustrophobia Bunting's lines about lice developed, the poem now presents work taking place in harmony with nature:

As the player's breath warms the fipple the tone clears.

It is time to consider how Domenico Scarlatti
 condensed so much music into so few bars
 with never a crabbed turn or a congested cadence,
 never a boast or a see-here; and stars and lakes
 echo him and the copse drums out his measure,
 snow peaks are lifted up in moonlight and twilight
 and the sun rises on an acknowledged land.

(CP, p. 76)

Sara R. Greaves' eco-poetic reading of *Briggflatts* compares Bunting's with Romanticism's relationship to natural landscape. She looks in particular at how

Wordsworth and Bunting connect the craft or work of poetry writing to the natural world, and the human experience of it. Greaves argues that in this fourth part:

Bunting's regionalism gradually takes shape as a means of expressing religious, cultural, political and linguistic unorthodoxy, of staking a claim for fierce independence of mind and resistance to an imposed language or values. The portrait of the rat, destitute and ostracised but free, captures this brilliantly...²⁶⁷

Greaves, reading Jonathan Bate's defining work of eco-criticism, *The Song of the Earth*, suggests that Bunting's liberated and ostracised position is, though unpleasant, at least free and it is this which permits him freedom of expression within strictures of verse, also:

If Romanticism helped pave the way for empire, then Bunting, writing in post-colonial times, challenges that discourse with his portrayal of a rebellious Northumbria refusing to toe the line and enduring, like the poet himself, thanks to a certain musical ideal: "Keeping a beat in the dark."²⁶⁸

Additionally Greaves makes the connection between a certain way of life; a certain kind of political belief; engagement with a certain kind of tradition and history (connected with the oral culture of Aneirin and Taliesin) and certain kinds of *work*, recognising in *Briggflatts* the preponderance of 'men whose livelihood relies on their intimacy with the natural world', naming among these 'local men and Wordsworthian simple folk'.²⁶⁹ She continues to explore the image of weaving in Part Four. According to Greaves, Bunting's references to weaving and webs aim to 'heal' (with craft) what the modern world severs: the relationship between person and place.²⁷⁰

V

Part Five shows an expanding view of nature. As the poem approaches its end – '[s]olstice past, years end crescendo' (*CP*, p.78) – nature comes to the fore and provides a frame upon which the approach of death, and how to cope with it, is

²⁶⁷ Sara R. Greaves, "A Poetics of Dwelling : In Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*," *Cercles* 12 (2005). pp. 74-75.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 75.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p. 71.

explored. The sentiment is that nature conquers all and that death, being inevitable, is a part of life and not something other or separate. The alignment of the seasons with stages of life is again made as part five conjures the dead of winter. Natural imagery abounds and seems to redeem the futility of life that might otherwise be evoked and here we see nature at work, making and frequently, more specifically, weaving, continuing the conceit developed in Part Four.

Even a bangle of birds
 to bind sleeve to wrist
 as west wind waves to east
 a just perceptible greeting –
 sinews ripple the weave,
 threads flex, slew, hues meeting,
 parting in whey-blue haze.

Mist sets lace of frost
 on rock for the tide to mangle.
 Day is wreathed in what summer lost.

(*CP*, p. 78)

Even maggots, or ‘gentles’ (one of the few words that make it into Bunting’s glossary to the poem), are creative and generative, rather than destructive: feeding on dead flesh they ‘compose decay’ rather than decompose, borrowing from the ongoing musical theme. Bunting’s use of the positive ‘compose decay’ rather than negative ‘decompose’, reflects his belief that death is not the opposite to life, but part of it. The increasing patterning and interweaving of images, themes, sounds and phrases at this point not only portray memories re-remembered but also Bunting’s bigger vision: the overarching pattern of life; the ‘soft web’ woven ‘not for bodily welfare nor pauper theorems / but splendour to splendour, excepting nothing that is.’ (*CP*, p. 75) The song laid ‘frankly on the air’ by the children in Part I is recalled here in the instruction to ‘[s]ing / strewing the notes on the air / as ripples skip in a shallow.’ (*CP*, p. 78) Poetry is compared to other kinds of natural noise. A voice commands:

Go
 bare, the shore is adorned
 with pungent weed loudly

filtering sand and sea.

(CP, p. 78)

encouraging the precision, concision and simplicity in making verse that Bunting repeatedly recommends. The implication is that the natural world balances usefulness and decoration: the useless excess that predominates in modern human culture does not exist in the natural world. Even rotting seaweed is *doing* something: death and decay are not purposeless.

In this web of memories and images, the mason is summoned once more: this time his craft is aligned with the sea's marks made on stone (a recurrent image itself, appearing in parts Four and Five):

Silver blades of surf
fall crisp on rustling grit,
shaping the shore as a mason
fondles and shapes his stone.

(CP, p. 79)

Recalling the frustrated lines from the previous part that warned, '[f]ollow the clue patiently and you will understand nothing' (CP, p. 75), the next verse paragraph in section five moves inland, and shows '[s]hepherds', who *are* able to 'follow the links' (CP, p. 79). 'Links', also a term for bumpy grass terrain, plays with the former lines to suggest that local, natural knowledge surpasses institutionalised learning. Bunting praises the shepherds' 'silent, accurate lips': precision, skill and the oral tradition are celebrated once again.

Stars, light and musical analogies take the poem towards another seascape some lines later until suddenly bookbinding is portrayed in the last few verse paragraphs of the fifth part, the books necessarily fixed (and thus chronological) order contrasting with the poem's advocacy of layered chronology and looping patterns:

The sheets are gathered and bound,
the volume indexed and shelved,
dust on its marbled leaves.

(CP, p. 80)

The diminishing stanzas, containing fewer and fewer lines, miming the dying light of the year's end. In these last few lines of the Part Five, Bunting draws attention to the poem's construction, defying his authorial supremacy by highlighting the poem's fabrication and subjectivity: it attempts to effect what he repeatedly called for: that all that should remain are his poems. Prior to *Briggflatts*, Ode 1.34 attempted to communicate this wish:

These tracings from a world that's dead
take for my dust-smothered pyramid.
Count the sharp study and long toil
as pavements laid for worms to soil.
You without knowing it might tread
the grass where my foundation's laid,
your, or another's, house be built
where my weathered stones lie spilt,
and this unread memento be
the only lasting part of me.

(CP, p. 129)

Post-*Briggflatts*, Bunting chastised his friend, and interviewer, Jonathan Williams, evidently allowing for a slightly more substantial memento than his pre-war doom had permitted:

Jonathan, I am surprised at you. What the hell has any of this to do with the public? My autobiography is *Briggflatts* – there's nothing else worth speaking aloud.²⁷¹

Coda

The coda of *Briggflatts* possesses the musical qualities of a sea shanty: the rhythms of work and song unite to compel the speaker (and the listener) towards the final lines. Time has moved on, and the change of pace and of mood is reflected by the decreased line length. In contrast to the long verse paragraphs of Part Four that reflected a final burst of communicative energy, the coda's terse, rhymed lines communicate the closing down of the poem and the poet's life, too:

²⁷¹ Williams and Bunting, *Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal*. Unpaginated. [p. 5].

A strong song tows
us long earsick.
Blind, we follow
rain slant, spray flick
to fields we do not know.

Night, float us.
Offshore wind, shout,
ask the sea
what's lost, what's left,
what horn sunk,
what crown adrift.

Where we are who knows
of kings who sup
while day fails? Who,
swinging his axe
to fell kings, guesses
where we go?

(CP, p. 81)

Blindness, the unknown, and the darkness that has been slowly approaching through the poem, arrive. It is '[n]ight' and only sounds, memories and visions remain.



Chapter Five

Celebrating Man's Craft!

Work, Nature and Politics in Poetry

A Radical Romanticism

As I have argued, rhythm and song accompanying labour permeate *Briggflatts*. Turning to Morris once more will now assist further consideration of the political implications of, or even background to, Bunting's various presentations of work-song.

One way in which Morris believes the decorative arts redeem the monotonous machine labour, necessitated by industrial society, is through their connection with nature. As noted previously, in Morris's view, beauty depends upon the maker's free access to and interaction with nature. Eagleton writes about the particular Britishness of the Morris tradition, that stems from a combination of revolutionary Romanticism and a belief in the restorative power of nature's beauty, with a Marxist critique of capitalism's impact on the human body and psyche. Eagleton's explanation of how art and politics are thus interconnected, in Morris's view, also speaks of the redemptive power that Morris believed art to possess:

From this radical-Romantic viewpoint, industrial capitalism was to be condemned for stifling a creativity which the arts, above all, most finely exemplified. Art was the enemy of alienation, craftsmanship the antithesis of labour. Human culture implied a community at odds with the atomised social order of the marketplace.²⁷²

Morris's and Bunting's ideas about nature connect back to Romantic, as well as Marxist, thought. Jonathan Bate's eco-critical re-rendering of Wordsworth as a nature poet addresses the fundamental link between nature and mind that is made in Romantic thought. He writes that *Romantic Ecology* is 'dedicated to the proposition that the way in which William Wordsworth sought to enable his readers better to enjoy or

²⁷² Terry Eagleton, "Wallpaper and Barricades [a Review of Fiona McCarthy's *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*]," *London review of books* 17, no. 43 (1995).

to endure life was by teaching them to look at and dwell in the natural world.²⁷³ For the Romantic, humankind's affiliation with nature restored integrity (wholeness) to the individual's spirit, and also provided the poet with a vessel for the self-examination, self-understanding, self-discovery and self-expression increasingly impinged upon by the burgeoning capitalist society.²⁷⁴ Bate quotes from Book VIII of *The Prelude*, "Retrospect: Love of Nature leading from Love of Mankind", and identifies the non-alienated labour of the shepherd (whose work occurs within and with nature), as a contrast to factory work:

But lovelier than this the paradise
Where I was reared, in Nature's primitive gifts
Favored [sic] no less, and more to every sense
Delicious, seeing that the sun and sky,
The elements, and seasons in their change,
Do find their dearest fellow-labourer there,
The heart of man; a district on all sides
The fragrance breathing of humanity,
Man free, man working for himself, with choice
Of time, and place, and object.²⁷⁵

Bate's account of ecopoetry might be helpful in thinking about Bunting's poetry as a space within which to imagine different possibilities for the world. Greaves explains Bate's assertion, which relies on a reunion of humankind with nature (a reunion that surely Bunting would support, too).

If we are the inheritors of the Enlightenment, of the positive but also the negative consequences of the supremacy of the human mind – including empire and oppression, technology and alienation, shortages of food, water and pure

²⁷³ Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991). p.4. Bate devotes an entire chapter ("A Language that is Ever Green") to exploring the importance of nature to Wordsworth.

²⁷⁴ Cf. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, The Norton Library (New York: Norton, 1973). Abrams' book addresses the Romantic aspect on nature which promotes the unmediated relationship between viewer (the poet) and nature. Abrams quotes from Coleridge, finding '[j]oy' in nature: "wedding nature to us, gives in dower / A new Earth and Heaven" (from *Dejection: An Ode*, quoted p. 29). Abrams uses Bacon to show how Romantic thinkers were troubled by the 'divorce and separation of mind from nature' p. 59).

²⁷⁵ Cf. Bate, *Romantic Ecology*. p. 22.

air—then learning how to “dwell” on earth, through a relationship with the natural environment based on reciprocity rather than exploitation, may come to seem essential. According to Bate, poetry can help bring about such a relationship, for which Romanticism provides a model – but only so far.²⁷⁶

Greaves, still interpreting Bate, is also concerned about the spiritual damage Romanticism has done to the Earth, exploiting it by trying to seek metaphors for self-transcendence. She writes: ‘This subordination of external nature—as of the biological body—goes hand in hand with the exalted ego.’²⁷⁷

Though some might argue this opinion is farfetched (after all does the Earth really ‘feel’ the effect of its spiritual exploitation?) what Greaves writes about the subjecthood and the empowered position of the exalted ego in relation to poetry is interesting. It is particularly useful to Bunting studies since Bunting was, during most periods in which he wrote, an exile, writing outside the mainstream and outside the dominant British middle class society into which he was born. However, if the exile is too privileged to speak sensibly for society, and the inner-circle member is, too, and everyone else is too downtrodden, ideologically brainwashed or desensitized to participate, how can any poetry be written? And how can anything change? Perhaps these questions are not, after all, of concern to a study of Bunting, since he is not much of an ‘exalted ego’. But he repeatedly acknowledged his debt to Wordsworth (possibly to the annoyance of Pound, whom, as I have mentioned, Bunting called a ‘silly bugger’ for disliking Wordsworth), and his commitment to landscape and rural life, and local language, as well as his real-life connection to Cumbria, link him to the Lakes poet.

The title of this section is a tribute to socialist activist and historian E. P. Thompson’s biography of Morris: the first that considered his socialism and political activism, as well as his writing and art. A connection between politics and poetry is made explicitly in the beginning chapters of the biography, introduced by Thompson emphatically as the first work on Morris that considers his previously-overlooked political activism. It is significant to my reading of Bunting, that *William Morris: Romantic Revolutionary* begins not with Marx or Engels, but with a survey of Romantic poetry, and Thompson deems the tradition which Morris later joins a ‘Radical’ – with a capital

²⁷⁶ Greaves, “A Poetics of Dwelling.” p. 66.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p. 67.

'R' – Romanticism. Thompson is interested in a particular form of political activity that John Keats engages in, though 'engages' is not quite the right word for it, because Thompson describes a sort of politicised *disengagement*: a rejection of contemporary politics and social life from the literary work as the most severe critique of that society. Making an argument that is usefully supplemented by Adorno's contemporaneous work on the politics of German lyric poetry (and the lyric poet's avoidance of participation in everyday life), Thompson deems Keats' removed poetic position 'radical' because of its rejection of life under a dominant power structure and mode of production.²⁷⁸ He writes:

[Keats'] private letters show that he was Radical himself in his sympathies, admired Orator Hunt, the chief speaker at Peterloo, and Richard Carlile, the courageous free-thinker, and shared Shelley's revulsion at the oppressive corruption of his times. And yet (if his late poem, "The Cap and Bells", be excepted) there is little evidence of direct political interest in his poetry.²⁷⁹

There is further similarity between Keats's and Bunting's apparent opinions about the purpose of poetry: Thompson writes that, compared to his more openly political poetic associates, 'Keats is less concerned ... with the communication of an all-important message, more concerned with the craftsmanship of his art.'²⁸⁰

Thompson explains that Keats's avoidance of politics in poetry should not be mistaken for the result of either social privilege or apathy. It: 'should not be seen as a desire on the part of Keats to escape from all social responsibilities.'²⁸¹ Where Bunting's avoidance of didacticism, dogma and politics is a consequence of his desire to rescue poetry from the privileged, Keats had a corresponding aim: 'As he saw it, he was defending art itself in a world which had no place for it.'²⁸²

²⁷⁸ Thompson's biography of Morris was first published in 1959; Adorno's "On Lyric Poetry and Society" aired first as a radio programme in the mid-1950s. Cf. Thomas Huhn, *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). p. 357. It should be noted that significant work in Romantic studies has moved the subject of Keats's politics along from where Thompson picks it up in *William Morris*, and that Thompson's own politics affect his reading of the poet. More recent work by Nicholas Roe has argued that politics are, in fact, not absent from Keats's poetry. Cf. *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (1998).

²⁷⁹ Thompson, *William Morris*. p. 10.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁸¹ *Ibid.* p. 17.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

Thompson deals with the difficult issue of what may be interpreted as an aloof, elitist, or even reactionary, nostalgia and escape to a pre-capitalist past that is present in many Romantic and pre-Raphaelite works: an 'escape' that often appears to favour the even less egalitarian system of feudalism. He describes Morris's early days in the 'Oxford group' with Edward Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti as 'the young men [who] pined in the luxurious misery of languishing after "the days that are no more."' ²⁸³ Eagleton takes on the British strand of socialism, the 'radical Romantic' viewpoint espoused by Coleridge, Carlyle and Ruskin, and accuses it of having 'mighty flaws', including being 'embarrassingly nostalgic, enraptured by the dream of an organic society of colourful peasants and clean-limbed artisans before the Fall into modernity.' ²⁸⁴ But Morris changed the British socialist tradition for the better:

The advent of William Morris was the point where this ambiguous lineage finally joined the modern world. Morris was of course quite as much a neo-medievalist as Carlyle or Ruskin; but his achievement was to take the Romantic critique of industrial capitalism and harness it for the first time to a progressive political force, the British labour movement. ²⁸⁵

In fact it is his 'nostalgia', Thompson believes, that enables Morris to gain the aspect on society and political economy that give his socialist views credibility, clarity and power. He argues that Morris's recourse to the Medieval period is not the cowardly retreat that it might be imagined as. Instead, the past provides a vantage point:

However much this reconstruction may have been modified by twentieth-century scholars, it was an influence of the very first importance in liberating Morris's mind from the categories of bourgeois thought. In this reconstructed world, Morris found a place, not to which he could retreat, but in which he could stand and look upon his own age with the eyes of a stranger or a visitor, judging his own time by standards other than its own. And the two men who

²⁸³ Ibid. p. 79.

²⁸⁴ Eagleton, "Wallpaper and Barricades [a Review of Fiona Mccarthy's *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*]." p. 8. Eagleton adds that these progenitors of Morris's ideas knew little of socialism and were 'radical and reactionary' idealists, and that '[i]t was this tradition which lay behind the great figures of Modernist English literature, radical reactionaries to a man (Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis) though not, as it happens, to a Bloomsbury woman.' p. 8.

²⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 8.

most influenced him in effecting this liberation were Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin.²⁸⁶

Thompson perceives Morris's return to a medieval, chivalric world as an attempt to find a position from which the modern industrial-capitalist society the poet rejects can be critiqued, or as an attempt to find a space within which another way of living may be imagined

Adorno, whose Frankfurt School Eagleton cites as a 'great inheritor' of Marx's Romantic-inspired critique of industrial capitalism, also writes about how the lyric poet's decision to not participate in social and political life is a political, even radical, act:

even resistance to social pressure is not something absolutely individual; the artistic forces in that resistance, which operate in and through the individual and his spontaneity, are objective forces that impel a constricted and constricting social condition to transcend itself and become worthy of human beings; forces, that is, that are part of the constitution of the whole and not at all merely forces of a rigid individuality blindly opposing society.²⁸⁷

The transgressive act of breaking out of society, whether spatially, or imaginatively, it seems is one way in which change might be imagined, and even effected. Bunting's unwillingness to admit to an engagement with politics, and his life lived in various outposts and outskirts of the centres mainstream literary culture can therefore be interpreted as further examples of a subtle, but subversive, radicalism of refusal.

The recuperation of Morris as a political progenitor that Thompson undertakes is itself a political project, as part of a Cambridge-based version of New Leftism, a movement counting among its affiliates, Raymond Williams and Eric Hobsbawm. Marxist historians and thinkers in Britain around the time of the first publication of Thompson's book in 1955 were casting around the British tradition, seeking in political, social, and what would later be interpreted as cultural, theory models for presenting Marxism in a way that dealt in particular with life in Britain. The fact that Morris is picked up on, by Thompson, as a radical and a socialist, instead of the aesthete and possibly reactionary conservative that he had sometimes been portrayed

²⁸⁶ Thompson, *William Morris*. pp. 28-9

²⁸⁷ Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society." p. 43.

as, is one of Thompson's motivations for the biography.²⁸⁸ The British New Left movement sought to assimilate the study of politics not just with economics, but with everyday life, and they were proponents of cultural studies in Britain. The post-war group's project to simultaneously study working conditions and financial structures with art-making or poetry is what makes Thompson's book on Morris a useful way into Bunting's poetry and prose: Bunting's work, however much he purports to avoid the fact, is testament to the idea expressed in the post-war leftist tradition, that politics and economics are not spheres separate to culture and everyday life, but features *of* and *within* culture. Additionally Bunting's prose appears to imply his belief that economics, which is only a subordinate of the human life that creates it, is presented as natural and external and paramount to all else by those who profit most, hence his desire to attack 'big states and big cities and big factories [...in order to] give men a chance to vary and live without more interference than it is in the nature of their individual neighbours to insist on.'²⁸⁹

Wootten's "Uneasy Mason" investigates Bunting's use of the natural world as a basis for the patterning of *Briggflatts*, and how the poem presents individual life and death within a bigger schema (which is still, ultimately, mortal, he points out).²⁹⁰ The interconnectedness of all life, that forms the framework for Bunting's *Briggflatts*, demonstrates an expanded understanding of the New Left movement's universalist interpretation of politics and society.

For Thompson's project, Morris is a useful thinker to add to the revised Marxist canon because he understands and addresses not only economics, but the material objects that make up his contemporary world, considering how they are made, and therefore also considering working lives. The lines quoted above with regards to nature and working conditions show that Morris's political beliefs and motivation for action are derived from contemplation of the working lives of the people. He looks not just at economic figures, but at everyday life, and then tries to implement change through culture. As I will try to show, Bunting's work demonstrates a similar understanding of the inextricability of the various elements that make up

²⁸⁸ Thompson directs his reader to look at Peter Floud, who thought 'Morris must be regarded not as a revolutionary pioneer and innovator, but rather as the great classical designer of his age' Thompson, *William Morris*. p. 97.

²⁸⁹ BB letter to Dorothy Pound, 11 December 1953. Lilley Library Collection. Indiana.

²⁹⁰ Wootten, "Basil Bunting : 'Uneasy Mason'." pp. 235-6.

individual life, and also human history and culture. Thus, if Morris has been a useful addition to the leftist British canon, perhaps Bunting is, also.

Radical Modernism?

Thompson's insight into Keats' radical self-removal might help to work out a possible contradiction in Bunting's poetry: that, despite its apparent leftist attention to labour, it is, Bunting tries to assert, apolitical. Even Vietnam couldn't motivate Bunting to alter his public position on politics, and he wrote to the "Against the War" special edition of *Poetry* magazine in 1972 that

Poetry does not seem to me to have any business with politics. Whatever thoughts the war in Vietnam puts into my head, they are not such as could be well expressed in any kind of verse...There's not a soul who cares twopence what I or any other poet thinks about the war, Nixon, Wallace, marijuana, pills, oil spills, detergent advertisements or the fog from Gary. We are experts on nothing but arrangements and patterns of vowels and consonants, and every time we shout about something else we increase the contempt the public has for us. We are entitled to the same voice as anybody else with a vote, no more. To claim more is arrogant.

So I won't be contributing to your special issue.²⁹¹

Prior to this later-life outburst he protested against the presence of politics in poetry numerous times, despite having a family background of non-Conformism and socialist activism, and possessing leftist beliefs of his own demonstrated by outbursts in prose and private letters. In 1984, just a few months before his death, he relented a little, revealing some of his political acumen, and rebellious spirit. The interviewer asks, '[a]ny thoughts on the current regime under Mrs. Thatcher?' And Bunting replies, '[i]t shows an intention of being the worst Government [sic] since 1906. And the people in it seem as bad as those in Lloyd George's 1919 cabinet.'²⁹² A short while later, the interviewer asks a drawn out question, apparently trying to eke out a little more of that political fire:

²⁹¹ Basil Bunting, "Correspondence," *Poetry* 120, no. 6 (1972).

²⁹² McAllister and Figgis, "Basil Bunting : The Last Interview." p. 125.

[Interviewer]: Can you say how you define a poet's place in a society like this one? Are you an unacknowledged legislator of the race? an ordinary bloke with a job of work like any other? a vestigial craftsman? an oligarch? a democrat? It often seems to me that it requires more confidence than one can afford to find a *place* nowadays, so maybe you don't even think about these things?

[Bunting]: There is no provision made for poets in this society. I try, under very difficult conditions, to maintain the art.²⁹³

That is Bunting's answer in its entirety.



Bunting wrote to Pound in 1934:

My grandfather, whom I knew pretty well when I was a kid, was a miner, son of a miner. I know the solidity of those people, and I watched it break up in '26, when I was all the time in a mining village, took the chair at one of Cook's meetings, stuck a knife in the tyres of a government strikebreaking lorry and tried unsuccessfully nearly every paper in the country to get the scandalous faked benches of magistrates who condemned the strikers to long terms of hard labour shown up. Not even the independent labour party's rag would publish the facts.²⁹⁴

For a writer imbued, not only with a developed knowledge and understanding of politics, but also with personal experience of the hardship and inequities of the social effects of politics put into practice, these words seem self-deprecating. It is surprising that Bunting appears to restrict the modes of articulation available to him to counter the injustices that he bitterly laments elsewhere.²⁹⁵ Despite Bunting's political awareness, he insisted that poetry should be kept clear of proselytising.

²⁹³ Ibid. p. 127.

²⁹⁴ BB letter to Pound, Quoted in Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us*. p. 25. See n. 241.

²⁹⁵ As mentioned so far, as a journalist in the 1930s, Bunting was sent to report on the miners' strikes, and wrote in support of the strikers; he mentioned in letters a predilection for revolution (but thought communism was going about it the wrong

In addition to the unavoidably political nature of anything produced within political conditions (that is, everything), in numerous instances and variable ways, Bunting's poetry portrays, engages and even argues against political and social situations. He wrote about the mining industry's fatal exploitation of its workers in "They Say Etna". Some poems, like "Complaint of the Morpethshire Farmer" and "O Ubi Campi" engage directly with exploited or disenfranchised members of specific local industries and attempt to voice their 'complaints' and the injustices these communities are subjected to. Notably both of these examples use the presentation of labour as a medium to highlight both the exploitation and sense of community that are entailed by manual work. In these cases communion comes through shared hardship, even ostracism from a wider world.

Other poems, like Ode I.23, "The Passport Officer" and *The Spoils* (in which the people 'despise police-work / are not masters of filing' CP, p. 53) contain scathing satires of bureaucratic, white-collar work:

This impartial dog's nose
scrutinizes the lamppost. All in good order.
He sets his seal on it and
moves on to the next.

(CP, p. 119)

Throughout his work, there is a prevailing theme that unites certain kinds of skilled manual and physical labour (like sailing and stone masonry) with the act of writing poetry, and it is particularly within the effort made to connect the work of poetry-making with the kinds of physical labour associated with pre-industrial craft and folk culture that Bunting's poetry is at its most political.

To return to my starting point, Ode I.15, "Nothing" being published in the 1931 special Objectivist issue of *Poetry* magazine, found its place among other experimental works by avant-garde, underground and communist poets. Of all Bunting's poems, it perhaps best exemplifies his project to link craft-work with poetry.

way); he corresponded and published with the American communist poets associated with Objectivism; he wrote an article about the ineffectiveness of left wing papers; perhaps best of all it is rumoured that the rabble-rousing protagonist of Zukofsky's *Ferdinand* is Bunting-derived – but Bunting insisted that poetry should be a domain kept clear of proselytizing.

The poem re-employs the theme first seen in *Villon* of the fragility and impermanence of the body (a metonym for the individual) compared to the endurance of the written word. Bunting seems both at odds with and reassured by the idea of a human's thoughts outliving their mind. As on a number of occasions, stone-masonic chiselling and the carving of carpentry are analogous to the act of writing which is thus seen, not just as the act of creating something permanent, but as the search for sense, order and clarity in a world of chaos. Thus these singular acts, ostensibly of mere decoration, provide a space in which an individual can escape a subjectivity determined entirely by capitalist industry and find freedom and the potential to give meaning to life.

The poem's call to celebrate craft affiliates Bunting with the historical folk activism typified by Morris. Morris claimed that his commitment to art and crafting was due to his certainty that the particular kind of labour that craft projects entail (involving an assimilation of intellectual and manual, or physical, work) has the potential to redeem, surpass and eventually replace the rote divided labour demanded by the factory lines of the new industrial age. Thus Morris's politics and aesthetics seek to implement better working conditions and working lives for the working class. Recognising a connection between hammers and happiness (that Bunting, too, makes in *Briggflatts*), Morris extolls the redemptive qualities of craftwork in pre-industrial society. Morris uses his medieval retreat, which Thompson argues is a politically charged move critiquing contemporary manufacturing processes, and puts forward the craft-model as an alternative society in "The Art of the People." He writes:

Not every day, you may be sure, was a day of slaughter and tumult, though the histories read almost as if it were so; but every day the hammer chinked on the anvil, and the chisel played about the oak beam, and never without some beauty and invention being born of it, and consequently some human happiness.²⁹⁶

Morris wrote about art as a portal to individualism, because art-making entails a complete or whole process of making (unlike the piecemeal labour endured by workers within capitalist industry). He perceived the transition that craft-work had made after the industrial revolution from a wholesome and universally available activity

²⁹⁶ Morris, "The Art of the People." p. 530.

of self-expression to a corollary of the oppressive system of commodity-production in which crafted objects are sold off to the non-labouring bourgeois class.²⁹⁷

Morris worries that, subjected to rote labour in an ugly urban world, people have been anaesthetised against the beauty that can be found in everyday life. "The Lesser Arts" describes the redemptive alliance with nature that craft establishes also emphasises the formal and material quality of what is produced. Bunting also aligns the craft theme and the mortality of the human with 'design' in nature, which is portrayed as something as beautiful as craft, and as inevitable as death. A possibility for the act of making to redeem some of the suffering of human life as Morris writes about, is suggested in Bunting's poetry.

But if Bunting argues that poetry is a craft, as much in touch with a history of folk-art and artisanal work, as stonemasonry and carpentry, then why does he deny himself the possibility of talking directly about politics? Why does he not permit poetry to be opened up for the expression of workers' rights? Why rescue poetry from the hands of a dilettante elite for the service of people belonging to a working culture, if it cannot then be used to change the political situation that enforces this divided class structure? As well as dissociating himself from the extreme politics of his predecessors as exemplified by Pound and the 'men of 1914', Bunting apparently worries about political poetry entailing a top-down didacticism. In an article on left wing newspapers he writes:

I am in favour of any serious improvement on existing conditions in the world at large, and a strong communist movement in the U.S.A would certainly

²⁹⁷ With a sentiment similar to later cultural commentator Thorstein Veblen, Morris noted that not only was the enjoyment of the making *and* the use of these objects withdrawn from the working class, but that the objects became symbols of idleness and waste – in turn the markers of wealth and privilege – for the middle and upper classes. Thus, in order to redeem the monotony of the working life of the working class, he prescribed a reinvigoration of the decorative arts, which were becoming a by-word for kitsch. He writes:

Let [the decorative arts] grow in one word *popular*, and there will be pretty much an end of dull work and its wearing slavery... I believe there is nothing that will aid the world's progress so much as the attainment of this; I protest there is nothing in the world that I desire so much as this, wrapped up, as I am sure it is, with changes political and social, that in one way or another we all desire. ("The Lesser Arts." p. 497)

improve existing conditions, provided it were a movement based on fact and action²⁹⁸.

He emphasises that '[s]uch a movement must be built up from the workingman, not down from the "intellectual."'”²⁹⁹ Perhaps, like Morris, he believes that first poetry must be rescued, and made available for all to write and hear to avoid the 'elevated' poet 'speaking down'.³⁰⁰

Thompson's earlier argument for a 'radical removal' helps navigate the complex issue of poetic position and privilege. One of the effects of alienated, divided and mechanised labour is that it turns individuality into a privilege. This means that any artist who has control over the product of their work is immediately distinct from an industrial, working class labourer. So how can a politically motivated leftist person, like Bunting, reconcile their art and their life with the privilege (and thus the exploitation of another) that their work entails? The issue of a privileged individualism arises in different ways repeatedly in post-war leftist cultural studies and critical theory. Reference was made earlier on to Adorno's theory about the modes of expression available to society in "On Lyric Poetry and Society". It is now worth looking at this essay again, and in more detail, as Adorno considers the withdrawn position of the Romantic lyric poet (and his or her modern counterparts). He writes:

part of the ideal of lyric poetry, at least in its traditional sense, is to remain unaffected by bustle and commotion. [It is a] sphere of expression whose very essence lies in either not acknowledging the power of socialization or overcoming it through the pathos of detachment...³⁰¹

²⁹⁸ Bunting, "Observations on Left-Wing Papers." p.46.

²⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 47.

³⁰⁰ 'In the thirties, very many American writers liked to think of themselves as workingmen and wrote for left wing magazines, and I would not be surprised to hear that EEC had been one such writer; but that was eyewash for the most part. These magazines were neither written nor read by workingmen. Of course, Mr Auden's friends were acting the same farce in England, we cant complain of the Yankees. Leftish magazines that really try to do something about social and economic conditions dont usually attract people who are pleased with themselves. They have, commonly, a rather shabby and philistine appearance.' (BB Letter to Barry Redern 14 March 1980; Basil Bunting Poetry Archive, Durham; MS 115).

³⁰¹ Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society." p. 37.

Adorno writes about how the deployment of the lyric 'I' does not necessarily connote superiority, but, rather, it is a radical action that seeks to reclaim the language, subjectivity and the relationship with nature that capitalism takes away:

The 'I' whose voice is heard in the lyric is an 'I' that defines and expresses itself as something opposed to the collective, to objectivity; it is not immediately at one with the nature to which its expression refers. It has lost it, as it were, and attempts to restore it through animation, through immersion in the 'I' itself. It is only through humanization that nature is to be restored the rights that human domination took from it. Even lyric works in which no trace of conventional and concrete existence, no crude materiality remains, the greatest lyric works in our language, owe their quality to the force with which the 'I' creates the illusion of nature emerging from alienation.³⁰²

The 'I' that opposes, or even protests against, the collective, Adorno's paragraph suggests, provides an opportunity for the individual to reconvene with nature, or at least to represent a return to nature, and thus begin to imagine how a human reunion with nature might occur, or what it might look like. This imagining has the potential to give rise to a subjecthood rescued from alienation. So even without writing about politics, it seems, a poem can be a politically forceful instigator of change.

However, although Bunting alleges to avoid politics in his poetry, I wonder if it would be possible to argue that he avoids presenting society? Even the definitive *Briggflatts* is not 'unaffected by bustle and commotion.' Furthermore, the lyric 'I' seems to be exactly what Bunting boycotts, in order to avoid speechifying as a single 'I' raised above a mass below. Greaves ponders the 'exalted individualism of the lyric I' used widely by Romantic poets and defines Bunting's poetry as modernist because of his eschewal of the 'I', and because of its attempt at autonomy; its avoidance of didacticism.³⁰³

The infrequency of the 'I' in Bunting's poetry is a way in which the poet further dissociates himself from the poem, and from the society which he appears to loathe (in Part Two of *Briggflatts*, for example). Adorno writes about how poetry (in his view in the lyric mode) can be recaptured to examine its conditions of production – conditions which are inescapably social. Rather than poetry being a mouthpiece for the

³⁰² Ibid. p. 41.

³⁰³ Greaves, "A Poetics of Dwelling." p. 77.

didact, or belonging to the realm of a cultural elite of bourgeois hobbyists, as Bunting worries about, Adorno believes that it can in fact provide a mode of articulation for the most exploited, alienated workers within capitalist industry. He writes that 'the greatness of works of art... consists solely in the fact that they give voice to what ideology hides. Their very success moves beyond false consciousness, whether intentionally or not.'³⁰⁴ His theory may also help, alongside Thompson's earlier argument, to illuminate the political nature of Bunting's alleged apolitical poetry, as he writes 'the demand that the lyric word be virginal, is itself social in nature. It implies a protest against a social situation.'³⁰⁵ Like Bunting, he recalls poetry's roots in oral folk culture, and he hopes that poetry can be grabbed back from the hands of the elite:

A collective undercurrent provides the foundation for all individual lyric poetry. When that poetry actually bears the whole in mind and is not simply an expression of the privilege, refinement, and gentility of those who can afford to be gentle, participation in this undercurrent is an essential part of the substantiality of the individual lyric as well: it is this undercurrent that makes language the medium in which the subject becomes more than a mere subject. Romanticism's link to the folksong is only the most obvious... example of this.³⁰⁶

Adorno describes the potential for poetry which might achieve a 'ground up' revolution of the kind that Morris and Bunting seek. Here I refer to a section of his essay, partially-quoted earlier, in which he explains how poetry may redeem the unhappy lives of manual labourers, indeed all exploited subjects of the capitalist system of production:

poetic subjectivity is itself indebted to privilege: the pressures of the struggle for survival allow only a few human beings to grasp the universal through immersion in the self or to develop as autonomous subjects capable of freely expressing themselves. The others, however, those who not only stand alienated, as though they were objects, facing the disconcerted poetic subject but who have also literally been degraded to objects of history, have the same right, or a greater right, to grope for the sounds in which sufferings and dreams

³⁰⁴ Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society." p. 39.

³⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 39.

³⁰⁶ Ibid. p. 45.

are welded. This inalienable right has asserted itself again and again, in forms however impure, mutilated, fragmentary, and intermittent – the only forms possible for those who have to bear the burden.³⁰⁷

For Morris, the same redemption is also possible, in his case via the decorative arts:

these arts have been the handmaids of luxury, of tyranny and of superstition... but it is also true that, among some nations, their most vigorous and freest times have been the very blossoming times of art: while at the same time, I must allow that these decorative arts have flourished among oppressed peoples, who have seemed to have no hope of freedom³⁰⁸.

By considering both poetry and handicraft, Bunting links the making of verse to history of the people: a culture of activism possessing the kind of revolutionary potential that he might favour. Thus I argue that Bunting doesn't 'avoid' politics because he is worried about tainting poetry, but is worried that poetry, in its current popular conception, is not the right vessel for socialist politics. But arguably he doesn't really avoid politics at all.



³⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 45.

³⁰⁸ Morris, "The Lesser Arts." p. 497.

Part 2: Tradition

The chapters in Part Two develop the theoretical groundwork of Part One in order to connect Bunting both positively and negatively to the poetic movements and wider world contexts, of his time. Part Two explores some of Bunting's 1930s poetry, continuing to look at how the politicised notions of labour that were discussed in Part One are manifested in Bunting's work. I consider Bunting's relationship to the British literary establishment and to high modernism within one of his key periods of poetic production.

As Part One discussed, Bunting resisted categorisation, even rejecting membership of the Objectivist group, and Chapter Six shows that he loathed the dominant contemporary British literary movements of the 1920s and 1930s, represented, in his mind, by Bloomsbury and even Eliot's *Criterion*. His vitriolic poem, "The Well of Lycopolis" reveals an unfortunate sexism that is partially rooted, I argue, in the masculinised portrayal of labour in the socialist tradition. The chapter surveys other portrayals of women in Bunting's work, too.

Chapter Seven is a brief but crucial bridge between chapters Six and Eight. It tries to consider Bunting's attitude towards gender in a different light by associating his work with that of another poet of the rural periphery, and a woman, Lorine Niedecker. Another aim of this chapter is to show how Bunting was not the lone figure that he is sometimes represented as, and that his rejection of mainstream British literary culture enabled his connection and affiliation with other, more diverse and international poetic figures. Bunting and Niedecker are both concerned with local and traditional forms of labour, but perhaps being cut off from the centres of power in the way that they are means that they are often left out of canonical lists. I assert that their rural modernism is invested in the traditions of alternative folk culture. The chapter compares Bunting's and Niedecker's portrayal of local labour politics and reads various works of Niedecker's alongside Bunting's "The Complaint of the Morpethshire Farmer", one example of what I term in the next chapter his 'disaster' poems.

Chapter Eight looks at the theme of labour and power relations in four of Bunting's 1930s poems that focus on industrial and natural disaster, and show that despite his preference for the rural life, his work was deeply concerned with the global events of his contemporary world.

Chapter Six
Beware Bull
Bunting and Women

This chapter reads “the Well of Lycopolis”, Bunting’s attack on the Bloomsbury group, inquiring why he found the group so abhorrent. A major issue that arises in the poem is the friction between the gender divide and the class divide: I will ask whether Bunting’s socialist egalitarianism is somewhat compromised by his androcentric view of vital and redeeming labour. Perhaps in seeking to recover the voices of one suppressed group in society he compromises the equality of another.

The previous section of this thesis has attempted to show that work is a fundamental theme in Bunting’s poetry and that, in the tradition of leftist thought that Bunting belongs to, certain kinds of work, including the wholesome labour of artistic or artisanal practice are fundamental to the happy functioning of society and the individual within it. One of the historical problems with Marx’s theory of work and many of the offshoots from it in British writing, is that the struggle for the liberation of the worker often presupposes that the worker is a man – something that Eagleton smoothly counters by changing the generic masculine pronoun of Marx’s and Morris’s writing into the feminine. But this is not merely a matter of language. Simone De Beauvoir’s groundbreaking and popular work of feminist history, *The Second Sex* was first published in 1949. Though Bunting was a man ‘as old as the century’, women’s rights underwent enormous changes throughout his lifetime, and it is to his deep rooted and unfortunate sexism, that my attention now turns.³⁰⁹

Beauvoir, writing less than a decade after Bunting wrote “The Well of Lycopolis”, not only explains how a woman’s relationship to the world is affected by her work, but also helps to build up an understanding of how work, more generally, affects individuals’ relationships with the world. Fundamental to her existential concept of not only financially liberating, but life-affirming work, is the idea of ‘projects’: a term that connotes activity, futurity and an externalization of one’s self. She writes:

Every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects;

³⁰⁹ Barry MacSweeney described the poet thus in “Black Torch Sunrise” in *Wolf Tongue : Selected Poems 1965-2000* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2003). p. 76.

it accomplishes its freedom only by perpetual surpassing towards other freedoms; there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion towards an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is degradation of existence into 'in-itself', of freedom into facticity; this fall is a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and oppression; in both cases it is an absolute evil. Every individual concerned with justifying his existence experiences his existence as an indefinite need to transcend himself.³¹⁰

Certain kinds of work, she believes, allow individuals to transcend themselves through their projects. Projects help a subject to 'surpass themselves towards greater horizons'.³¹¹ These projects entail the kind of liberated and liberating labour, as an experience of nature, that Morris and Marx write about. She writes 'man has a primordial interest in the substance of the natural world surrounding him that he attempts to discover in work, play and in all experiences of the "dynamic imagination"; man seeks to connect concretely with existence through the whole world, grasped in all possible ways. Working the soil and digging a hole are activities as primal as an embrace or coitus'.³¹² In Beauvoir's model the alternative, and opposing, form of work to these 'projects' is repetitive, does not alter the world beyond the work and the worker, and is thus interior, and maintains the worker's subordination: their 'immanence'. The transcendent possibilities of work are, she writes, unavailable to almost all women (as well as some men). But whereas transcendence is available to middle and upper class men, women of all classes suffer this immanence.

Beauvoir's development of the binary according to which men's labour is creative, generative, external to themselves, and therefore transcendent, and women's is domestic and internal, pointlessly Sisyphian, being either ignored or consumed on a daily basis, and always repeating itself and therefore immanent, adds an extra layer to the debate about alienation that, I have shown, Morris and Marx

³¹⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, ed. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, New ed. (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009). p. 17.

³¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 650.

³¹² *Ibid.* p. 57.

construct. The woman of leisure does not have the same freedom in her projects as the man of leisure does. In Beauvoir's conception, even craft work, when done in the home, is immanent and entrapping for the female whose life is not expressed by what she believes to be the pointless work of needlework, as her diatribe on doily-making demonstrates:

the bourgeois woman often has to resolve the derisory problem: how to kill time? ... "Women's handiwork" was invented to mask this horrible idleness; hands embroider, knit, they are busy hands and they move; it is not a question here of real work because the object produced is not the goal; it has little importance and it is often a problem to know what to do with it: one gets rid of it by giving it to a friend, a charitable organization or by cluttering mantelpieces or coffee tables; neither is it a game that reveals the pure joy of existence in its gratuitousness; and it is hardly a diversion because the mind is vacant: it is an absurd distraction, as Pascal described it; with needles or hook, woman sadly weaves the very nothingness of her days.³¹³

She adds: 'the unoccupied woman does not try to extend her grasp on the world in giving herself over to such activities, but only to relieve boredom; wan activity that does not open up the future slides into the vanity of immanence.'³¹⁴ She clarifies: 'No occupation is meaningful if it is only a pastime'.³¹⁵ Beauvoir even cites 'Mrs Dalloway' as a prime example of a woman who spends her life killing time.³¹⁶ For Beauvoir, the ability to transcend oneself is crucial to one's wider social group, and the history and power of that group: '[t]he fact that [woman] is denied transcendence usually prohibits her from having access to the loftiest human attitudes: heroism, revolt, detachment, invention and creation'.³¹⁷

Bearing in mind Beauvoir's contemporaneous concerns about womanhood and work culture, I shall now return to Bunting's rendering of the female subject. "The Well of Lycopolis" has received somewhat limited critical attention and more work needs to be done to fully illuminate its qualities, and its flaws. Makin provides

³¹³ Ibid. p. 648.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 651.

³¹⁶ Ibid. pp. 648-9

³¹⁷ Ibid. p. 677.

an exegesis of the poem, whose title he takes as a chapter heading, and his analysis is a useful starting point. His reading is governed by an argument he makes about Bunting's poetry of the period concentrating on the theme of cowardice in poetry but Makin does not conduct a feminist reading of the poem, and does not make sufficient mention of the unpleasant gender and sexual politics at work in "The Well of Lycopolis".

The poem was published in 1935, and is partially an attack on what Bunting perceived to be the overrated and overfed Bloomsbury group, whom he encountered from a distance when living in London in the 1920s. Lurking at the edges of Fitzrovia drinking spots and leafy squares (the Fitzroy Tavern's raucous and festive atmosphere appears in *Briggflatts* as Kleinfeldt's) Bunting evidently did not break into the centre of this London scene, which may account for some of his bitterness towards it³¹⁸ This chapter considers why he focused his enraged critique of contemporary culture on the group: in his view it represented a privileged, leisure-class dilettantism that turned the work of making poetry into a pastime and the preserve of the wealthy. He wrote, many years later:

What I resented about the Bloomsbury group in particular might be said to be two things: one, a certain cocksureness which in particular made me distrust Maynard Keynes. The other was that they were all of that well-to-do middle class, bordering on country gentry who felt that if you couldn't afford to live in Bloomsbury or Regent's Park or some similar, desirable, but very expensive part of the world, well, poor devil, there wasn't much to be expected from you.³¹⁹

This chapter also considers how some of Bunting's poetry uses the female body to signal indolence, luxury, a soft uselessness, sexual pleasure and indulgence; whereas the male body is vital. The association of the body with work and work with worthiness is rooted in the philosophy of muscular Christianity – which provides a route into Bunting's Quaker work ethic that, though useful, extends beyond the parameters of this current work. Certain works ("Carmencita's tawny paps" dedicated to 'All you

³¹⁸ Cf. Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us*. p. 134 on Bunting's Bloomsbury: his time in London was, apparently, much livelier than "The Well of Lycopolis" and *Briggflatts* make out.

³¹⁹ Reagan, "An Interview with Basil Bunting." p. 75. Also cited by Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us*. p. 118.

Spanish ladies; “The Orotava Road”; “Birthday Greeting”) are undeniably sexist in their desire-fuelled objectification of – often very young – women; others objectify the female body in order to convey a more general horror of the body, its functions and its mortality – take for example the ‘slack buttock and breast’ of “The Well of Lycopolis”; the belching ‘pudenda’ of “They Say Etna”; or the ‘flap-dugged/ matrons’ of “Under sand clay. Dig, wait”; (*CP*, p. 182; p. 139). Other poems, products of their era, fall into the idiom of casual sexism, or unconscious masculinism (the assumed ‘he’ of the reader, or worker); others represent sexist male voices, in an effort to portray an unpleasant, or callow, character (“Two hundred and seven paces”; “You idiot! What makes you think decay will”; and “Mesh cast for mackerel” all – albeit lightheartedly - portray eager men slobbering over “[g]irls! Girls!” (*CP*, p. 26). In many of the poems in which women characters or voices feature, they are vacuous and fickle, and tend to represent either the poet’s lack of faith in his poetic powers, or are vessels for talking about contemporary culture (For example, “Muzzle and jowl and beastly brow”; “Gertie Gitana’s Hymn to Waltzing”; “Attis: Or, Something Missing”). The Prufrockesque “Aus Dem Zweiten Reich” (1931) is another example of the poet’s equation of the emptiness of culture with (particularly middle class) femininity. “As appleblossom to crocus” pits the short-lived and labour intensive life of working class girls against the languorous, decadent days of middle class girls: ‘roses’, spent idly and emptily dawdling in tea shops:

As appleblossom to crocus
 typist to cottage lass,
 perishable alike, unlike
 the middleclass rose.

Each sour noon
 squeezed into teashops
 displays one at least
 delicate ignorant face
 untroubled by
 earth’s spinning
 preoccupied rather
 by the set of her stocking...

(*CP*, p. 121)

Just a handful of women characters are heroic (the resolutely strong ‘Goodwife’ is one example) though this paucity of positively-portrayed female characters is not necessarily sexist, but misanthropic, since few of Bunting’s male characters are heroic, either. Ode 2.2, “Three Michaelmas Daisies”, anthropomorphises and feminises cut flowers to create a poignant little poem about fleeting life; Ode 1.17, “Now that sea’s over that island” contains a compelling and impassioned portrait of Mina Loy; and Ode 1.35, “Search under every veil”, appears to be a genuinely sympathetic, and moving, description of a neglected young girl’s suffering.

Muses, following tradition, are always female and often the scapegoats blamed for the poet’s loss of confidence (which is often aligned with sexual prowess). For example, this is seen in Ode 1.3 in which some of the key themes and methods of “The Well of Lycopolis” and “Attis: Or, Something Missing” (1931) appear in prototype form. The unpredictable nature of the sea, which changes in a moment from frothing vigour to flat calmness is used to convey a contrast between energised and enervated work and sexuality, and the fickleness of love:

I am agog for foam. Tumultuous come
 with teeming sweetness to the bitter shore
 tidelong unrinsed and midday parched and numb
 with expectation. If the bright sky bore
 with endless utterance of a single blue
 unphrased, its restless immobility
 infects the soul, which must decline into
 an anguished an exact sterility
 and waste away...

(CP, p. 99)

“Reading X’s Collected Works” again blames the ‘Muse’s fornications’ for writer’s block:

I... cemetery of other men’s bastards let
 wane and peter out
 because I am jealous of the Muse’s fornications
 and over timid to be a cuckold!

Meanwhile you
 have raised a sufficient family of versicles;
 like you in the main.

(CP, p. 198)

Sexist portrayals of women and the pejorative depiction of emasculation are of course not only problems in Bunting's work, but crop up throughout both literary and political discourse. However Bunting's attitude toward sex, gender and sexuality is complex, controversial and seemingly at odds with his class egalitarianism. Only a few critics have attempted to broach this thorny issue and it becomes even thornier when Bunting's personal sexual history is added to the mix.³²⁰ The purview of the current work doesn't extend to the largely anecdotal (though convincing) information about Bunting's predilection for young girls. However, the way in which Bunting not only presents women's work, but uses women, and their work and the work of the domestic sphere to convey a softness, an idleness, privilege and even a uselessness (further tainted in places by a bitter misogyny of the most basic kind e.g. Duisburg's pudenda) in contrast to redemptive masculinised labour is a significant ethical issue with his work, and it warrants further feminist re-reading. Ian Gregson's essay on "Bunting's Rueful Masculinity" and David Annwn's collection of women poets' responses to reading Bunting's work shed some useful light on the topic. Nevertheless the subject of Bunting and women remains relatively unexplored.³²¹

³²⁰ Paul Batchelor makes a strong case for further inquiry into Bunting's real life relationships with and attitudes towards women, since these feature in his work. Batchelor is perhaps the first scholar to state explicitly: 'Bunting was attracted to pubescent girls.' Richard Burton's and Mark Thompson's heated responses to Batchelor's review of *A Strong Song Tows Us* show how the topic arouses emotion that can jeopardise an unbiased and scholarly account (Batchelor's moderate and sensitive reading avoids this problem). See Paul Batchelor, "Follow the Clue : Review of *a Strong Song Tows Us : The Life of Basil Bunting* by Richard Burton," *The Times Literary Supplement* (2014). See TLS letters to the Editor for Thompson's and Burton's responses on 4 and 11 July 2014, respectively. Batchelor replies to them: 'Whether or not Burton "disapproves" of Bunting's attraction to pubescent girls is beside the point: it should have been dealt with frankly, as it was a key factor in the breakdown of Bunting's first marriage, as well as his second marriage, and it plays a part in many of his poems, including *Briggflatts*. I do not "disapprove" of Bunting's "self-destructive ways", but I would have liked a more thoughtful account of them.' (TLS, letters to the Editor, 18 July 2014).

³²¹ Both of these essays appear in McGonigal and Price, *The Star You Steer By : Basil Bunting and British Modernism*.

Gregson adds Bunting to the masculinist modernist canon assembled and critiqued in Peter Middleton's *The Inward Gaze*: a tradition that includes Bunting's masters, T.S. Eliot and Pound, the proponent of 'spermatzoid' poeticising.³²² Middleton's investigation of modernist masculinity, 'a book about men's representations of their subjectivity and power as men', takes its title from "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley", a failed modernist who spends too much time looking in on himself and not outward, 'making images to reflect modern society to itself', Middleton writes.³²³ Middleton's study thus helps to frame, and indeed to date, Bunting, a 'son of Ezra', in terms of attitude towards gender and sexuality.³²⁴ Gregson's application of Middleton's identification of a certain sort of male modernist fear of the overt presence of personal emotion in the poetic text to Bunting's abstracted life story (and love story) in *Briggflatts* is apt, even revelatory. He takes from Middleton the idea of "male obliviousness" in which the male writer does not realise that his subjectivity, and his speaker, is not universal, but masculine. Middleton writes that '[m]en have written plenty about themselves as men; little of it consciously. When men are conscious of their gender they talk of heroic masculinity, of manhood and its vicissitudes.'³²⁵ Gregson cites Middleton's reference 'to impersonality as "a poetic technology for the careful handling of emotion" which is constructed because the poet regards emotions as dangerous and is above all concerned not to [be] contaminated by them.'³²⁶ As evidence, Gregson refers the reader to Bunting's "I Suggest", comparing it to Pound's list of "A Few Don'ts" (a comparison I also made in the previous section of this thesis) explaining that the emphasis on structure and sound above the poetry's prose-sense is one way in which Bunting avoids emotion and 'personism' in his own work.³²⁷ For

³²² Ian Gregson, "'Adult Male of a Merciless Species": Basil Bunting's Rueful Masculinity," in *The Star You Steer By: Basil Bunting and British Modernism*, ed. James McGonigal and Richard Price (Amsterdam; Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000). pp.109-121. p. 111.

³²³ Peter Middleton, *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992). p. 8; p. 2.

³²⁴ Cf. James McGonigal, "An XYZ of Reading: Basil Bunting in the British Tradition" in pp. 119-136.

³²⁵ Middleton, *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture*. p. 2.

³²⁶ Gregson, "Basil Bunting's Rueful Masculinity". p. 109. Gregson is quoting Middleton, *The Inward Gaze*. p. 198.

³²⁷ Frank O' Hara's tongue in cheek "Personism: a Manifesto" describes a different poeticising process to Bunting's, although it begins by stating that '[e]verything is in the poems', and O'Hara describes a similar dislike of abstraction and metaphysics. 'Now, come on. I don't believe in god, so I don't have to make elaborately sounded

Gregson, Pound's formalism is integral to male modernism: he writes in *The Male Image*: 'The demand for phallic hardness, for example, is central to Ezra Pound's prescriptions for Imagism (imposed by contrast with late Romantic impressionism) and is thereby one of the premises of male modernism.'³²⁸

However, Gregson argues that Bunting's breed of masculinism is not inherently problematic, or misogynist because, he argues, it is simply a mode within which these male writers try to explore their masculinity:

Mostly, it's a matter of male artists finding the aesthetic means with which they're most comfortable.

However, problems arise with it because these artists tend not to notice that what they're saying is gendered and not universal.³²⁹

There are several possible counterarguments to Gregson's assertion here: why should the sort of carving and solidity that Bunting advocates belong to an exclusively male domain? Furthermore, although "The Well of Lycopolis" is a poem seething with barely-suppressed vitriol, *Briggflatts* cannot be said to lack genuine, strong, and sorrowful emotion.

The link between creativity and male procreativity is often made in Bunting's poetry, with the masculine roles being associated with force, activity, making and hard work and the female roles associated with passivity, inactivity, indolence and excess. This is a significant aspect of Bunting's unsavoury attitude towards women, which arises in part because of his participation in a wider cultural tradition that equates

structures', writes O'Hara. 'Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody yet knows about, interests me a great deal, being so totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry... to give you a vague idea, one of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet's feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person. That's part of personism. It was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond). I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born.' In Paul Hoover, ed. *Postmodern American Poetry : A Norton Anthology* (New York; London: Norton, 1994). pp. 633-4.

³²⁸ Ian Gregson, *The Male Image : Representations of Masculinity in Postwar Poetry* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999). p. 7.

³²⁹ Ian Gregson, "Bunting's Rueful Masculinity."; *ibid.* p. 110.

artistic creativity with male virility. For example, as Gregson mentions, Pound writes that ‘the power of the spermatozoid is precisely the power of exteriorizing a form’.³³⁰ Pound contrasts what he sees as the creative and transcendent capabilities of the male with the immanence, disorganization and therefore subordinate position of the female: ‘in the symbolism of phallic religions man [is] really the phallus or spermatozoid charging, head-on, the female chaos; integration of the male in the male organ. Even oneself has felt it, driving any new idea into the great passive vulva of London, a sensation analogous to the male feeling in copulation.’³³¹

Gregson locates Bunting’s sexist attitude in his presentation of creativity and making, and draws on Bunting’s list of instructions to young poets, “I Suggest”. He singles out the direction: ‘Hate the passive’, and writes that Bunting’s piece of advice ‘seems to make the warding off of effusiveness explicitly the warding off of the feminine’.³³² He argues that Bunting’s characterisation of the excess that he criticises is feminine, and this reading corresponds to Pound’s feminised chaos. However, perhaps over-keen to defend Bunting’s sexist phrasing, Gregson labours to convince us that Bunting’s dismissal of ‘feminine’ passivity does not serve to explain the lack of feminist readings of Bunting, because ‘[for] a straight male to ward off the feminine is not necessarily misogynistic – it may simply represent an insistence on distinctively masculine self-definition.’³³³ Also, because in Bunting’s own work, the formal and aural qualities of poetry outweigh the significance of the prose sense, Gregson argues that the ‘gendered and not universal’ formalism behind Bunting’s advice to young poets ‘may well not have been helpful to women writing students.’³³⁴ Although at this point Gregson perhaps makes much of a small sentence (and arguably it is *he* who connects

³³⁰ Remy de Gourmont and Ezra Pound, *The Natural Philosophy of Love. Translated with a Postscript by Ezra Pound.*, ed. Ezra Pound, trans. Ezra Pound (London: Casanova Society, 1926). p. 169.

³³¹ Ibid. p. 170. ‘Duisberg’s pudenda’ in “They Say Etna” is perhaps Bunting’s misogynist equivalent to Pound’s presentation of London. Pound tries to argue that he offers this idea ‘[w]ithout any digression of feminism’ and that ‘as I am certainly neither writing an anti-feminist tract, nor claiming disproportionate privilege for the spermatozoid, for the sake of symmetry ascribe a cognate role to the ovule, though I can hardly be expected to introspect it. A flood is as bad as a famine; the ovular bath could still account for the refreshment of the female mind, and the recharging, regracing of its “traditional aptitudes”; where one woman appears to benefit by an alluvial clarifying, ten dozen appear to be swamped.’ pp. 170-171.

³³² Gregson, “Bunting’s Rueful Masculinity.” p. 110.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Ibid.

passivity with femininity in this case), further investigation into Bunting's equation of masculinity with creative force, and femininity with indolence and passivity forms a basis for looking at the poet's relationship with women as well as a means of exploring his ideas about work.

David Annwn, too, considers the portrayal of a certain kind of effusive poetry as feminine, but quickly puts the problem to one side, perhaps hoping at first that an exploration of Bunting's relationships with his contemporary, and more recent, women poets might redeem the poet's association with a masculinist strain of modernism. Annwn quotes lines from the first movement of *Briggflatts* including, '[h]er pulse their pace', to illustrate his argument that '[roles] associated with and inhabited by women are crucial in Basil Bunting's poetry.'³³⁵ However, by looking through collections of critical responses to Bunting and his poetry, and Bunting-inspired poetry readings, Annwn, writing in 2000, notes an absence of women poets, excepting Susan Howe's and Catherine Walsh's contributions to the Bunting special edition of *Durham University Journal* in 1995.³³⁶ Writing about C. F. Terrell's *Basil Bunting: Man and Poet*, Annwn speculates that 'either poets who happened to be women weren't asked to contribute, or they consciously stayed away.'³³⁷ His essay details his consequent conversations with women poets about Bunting's impact on their work. Although a number of the poets Annwn interviews cite Bunting as a strong influence, others admit to not having read him before they started writing, and others are deterred by Bunting's problematic treatment of women and his gendered, even androcentric, poetic perspective. The contemporary British poet, Frances Presley, comments that '[t]he gender issue is worth raising' and that '[i]t's a cliché – the avant garde [sic] male poetry scene, but one that recurs, especially in this country, and in the far north.'³³⁸ Elaine Randell, who was married to the late Barry MacSweeney, tells Annwn that 'Bunting is a northern man's poet because that's how he's been seen by his followers. A male club'.³³⁹

Bunting's apparent masculinism is at odds with the portrayal of his inclusive political views that I have attempted to highlight in the first part of this thesis. His

³³⁵ David Annwn, "Her Pulse Their Pace : Women Poets and Basil Bunting," *ibid.* (Amsterdam; Atlanta, GA). p. 123.

³³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 131.

³³⁷ *Ibid.* p.129.

³³⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 140-141.

³³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 141.

socialist values propose class-equality and are necessarily based on an idea of a communitarian society that would reject the division of labour and the subordination of one person to another and these ideals contrast with the hierarchy implicit in male chauvinism. On the other hand, this seeming contradiction fits in with the recurring representation in socialist discourse of both oppressive capitalist and oppressed worker as male. The gendered association of man with work, and thus with economy, effectively disenfranchises half of the population by implying a principally 'male' subjecthood and consequently arguments in feminist criticism have repeatedly brought to light the lack of representation of women within the working world, even within purportedly egalitarian socialist and Marxist thought. Tony Lopez helps to identify the 'northern' aspect to Bunting's values by focussing on Bunting as a maker committed to his geographical locale. He writes that 'Bunting seems to have had a deliberate sense of virtue compounded of masculine skilled labour, artistic integrity and nonconformist spirituality.'³⁴⁰ The poems that I shall discuss in this chapter align the craft of poetry-making with traditionally masculine labour, and contrast good work with the effete, enervated and feminised activity of the middle class domicile. Bunting's warning that if music and poetry 'lose touch altogether with the simplicity of the dance, with the motions of the human body and the sounds natural to a man exerting himself, people will no longer feel them as music and poetry' further identifies his gendered presentation of hard, and wholesome work as equated with poetry.³⁴¹ The basis of these gendered notions of work can be seen to stem from traditional representations of manly labour propagated by nineteenth-century muscular Christianity, whose doctrine (as well as a liberal tradition including William Morris) would appear to survive in Bunting's consciousness, despite this claim to non-conformism.

As early as 1911 Olive Schreiner was arguing in *Women and Labour* for female representation in work:

We demand that, in that strange new world that is arising alike upon the man and the woman, where nothing is at it was, and all things are assuming new shapes and relations, that in this new world we also shall have our share of honoured and socially useful human toil, our full half of the labour of the

³⁴⁰ Tony Lopez, *Meaning Performance : Essays on Poetry* (Cambridge: Salt, 2006). p. 152.

³⁴¹ "The Codex" a lecture given by Bunting at Newcastle University in 1969-70. in *Basil Bunting on Poetry*. pp. 1-18. p. 4.

Children of Woman. We demand nothing more than this, and we will take nothing less. *This is our* “WOMAN’S RIGHT!”³⁴²

It appears that, under the capitalist mode of production, in order for a subject to have a political voice it is necessary for them to receive some form of capital income, or rather for them to be a participant in the economic world. In societies where women’s and men’s work is significantly divided (entailing women’s labour taking place predominantly, or even exclusively, in the home), women have little or no participation in public political life.

In *Beyond Gender: The New Politics of Work and Family*, Betty Friedan, who also writes from a socialist perspective, refers back to her seminal feminist text, *The Feminine Mystique*, in order to compare women’s current situations to those of the 1960s:

It only struck me after I wrote *The Feminine Mystique* and became a feminist how little formal, traditional economics or even radical, Marxist economics had to do with women’s lives or putting a value on women’s work, even calling it “labor.”³⁴³

Betsy Wearing explains how, historically, sociological analysis of people living in capitalist society only took into account working practices and working lives. However, from the 1970s leisure time has begun to be accounted for both as an important influence on the subject’s creation of selfhood, and as a fundamental part of the working of capitalist economy. She notes the gender divide in earlier studies of capitalism:

Feminist analyses have critiqued the former excessive emphasis on the productive sphere and the work ethic as the basis of identity construction as a masculine perspective which ignores the everyday experiences of women. Women, they say, depend more heavily on the non-productive sphere of

³⁴² Olive Schreiner, *Women and Labour*, Virago reprint library ed. (London: Virago, 1988; repr., 1978). p. 68.

³⁴³ Betty Friedan, *Beyond Gender : The New Politics of Work and Family*, ed. Brigid O’Farrell (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press ; Baltimore ; London : Distributed by Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). p.14.

consumption and leisure as a source of some autonomy and sense of individual identity.³⁴⁴

Woolfwater: The “Well of Lycopolis”

The above statements help to frame Bunting’s mid-century masculinism and socialism. “The Well of Lycopolis” (1935) demonstrates his treatment of gender via different kinds of work and his treatment of labour via gender. It appears that, for Bunting, labour is a means of representing gender, and vice versa: in both cases the female body and woman’s ‘work’ are employed as metaphors for passivity, luxuriance or indolence, as seen in his critique of Bloomsbury in the later part of the poem.

“The Well of Lycopolis” is prefaced with a quotation from Gibbon’s description of the ancient town in lower Egypt in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: ‘*cujus potu signa / virginatus eripuntur*’: ‘the signs of virginity are taken away by drinking of this fountain’ (CP, p.17).³⁴⁵ Bunting notes that Gibbon describes the well as ‘a very convenient fountain’ (CP, p. 225).³⁴⁶ Antony Suter mistranslates the quotation, ‘the drink from which the signs of virginity are taken away’, and thus, having commenced in obscurity, he concludes that ‘[a]lthough lack of virginity is obviously connected with the prostitution Bunting depicts in his poem, the point of this reference is still not clear.’³⁴⁷ Gibbon points to Abu’l-Fida’s *Descriptio Aegypti* which mentions a spring in Egypt whose water, destroying the signs of a woman’s virginity, dispensed with the bother of verifying a new bride’s claim of innocence, liberating women from this sort of scrutiny, and presumably allowing them to enjoy premarital sex.³⁴⁸ But still it is not obvious whether the poem’s title, thus its overarching subject, is meant in a literal, physiological, sense (hence the well’s water can effect only

³⁴⁴ Betsy Wearing, *Leisure and Feminist Theory* (London: Sage, 1998). p. viii.

³⁴⁵ My thanks to Raphael Cormack for this translation.

³⁴⁶ Gibbon’s note explains: ‘Lycopolis is the modern Siut, or Osiot, a town of Said, about the size of St. Denys, which drives a profitable trade with the kingdom of Sennaar; and has a very convenient fountain, “*cujus potû signa virginitatis eripiuntur.*”’ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Volume the Third and Volume the Fourth.*, ed. David Womersley (London: Allen Lane, 1994). Chapter 27. p. 64. n. 112.

³⁴⁷ Anthony Suter, “Time and the Literary Past in the Poetry of Basil Bunting,” *Contemporary Literature* 12, no. 4 (1971). p. 521. n.15.

³⁴⁸ Cf. B. E. Isma’il ibn Ali Abu’al-Fida and Johann David Michaelis, *Abulfedae Descriptio Aegypti : Arabice Et Latine* (Goettingae: Apud Joann. Christian Dieterich, 1776). p. 92.

women), or whether it constructs a conceit regarding the lack of confidence of those who are sexually inexperienced, and is therefore a joke about male sexual stamina. It is never wholly clear, as Gregson argues, whether Bunting is arguing for or against sexual freedom in the poem, as he at once scorns his subjects' impotence at the same time as dubbing their sex lives 'abject' and 'infamous love' (*CP*, p. 42; p. 43).³⁴⁹ The physiological explanation for the title would indicate an uncharacteristically prudish implication that the women of the poem engage in pre-marital sex and that they are dishonest about their innocence. The metaphorical interpretation seems to fit with the poem's overall attempt to emasculate some of Bunting's male contemporaries via what Bunting considers to be sexually humiliating images. The fact that the Greek 'Lycopolis' can be translated as 'wolf town' suggests that the poem is indeed at least partially an attack on what Bunting perceived to be the Woolf-dominated London literary scene of Bloomsbury. The matter of 'Woolf' water will be revisited later on.

Bunting conceived the poem in the mid 1930s while living in Tenerife with Marian (née Culver) and their two young daughters.³⁵⁰ It was an unhappy period for him in which near-poverty was unremitting, the climate and lifestyle of the Canaries did not suit him, and his marriage and domestic life were falling apart. The poem's negative portrayals of women, particularly woman in a domestic role as what may be seen as degraded and, aligned with prostitution, whorish, is perhaps explained by bitterness towards his wife and unhappy marriage. Makin, drawing from the poet's interview in 1968 with Jonathan Williams, writes, 'Bunting's existence in the Canary Islands from 1933 to 1936 was utterly wretched, and he was clear enough that the "Well of Lycopolis" was a result of that gloom.'³⁵¹ The Buntings moved back to London in July 1936.³⁵² However things ended badly in January 1937 when Marian left Basil, taking their two daughters and unborn son to her hometown in America. He didn't see his daughters again until they had grown up, and he never met his son.³⁵³

"The Well of Lycopolis" has a pointed interest in woman's domestic role in the home as lover, mother and servant to the household. However, elsewhere in Bunting's work, labour is something enlivening, productive and empowering, and makes beauty,

³⁴⁹ Cf. Gregson, "Bunting's Rueful Masculinity." pp. 112-113.

³⁵⁰ Makin, *Bunting : The Shaping of His Verse*. p. 82.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 82.

³⁵² *Ibid.* p. 81.

³⁵³ Victoria Forde, *The Poetry of Basil Bunting* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1991). p. 43.

but here he uses perceived women's work to present debased and unproductive activity, which is symbolised by their infertility (and vice versa). The poem starts, in Dantesque epic-style, in media res, with a present continuous verb, describing the poet-narrator '[s]linking by the jug-and-bottle / swingdoor' where he encounters an alcohol-infused 'Mother Venus, ageing, bedraggled, a / half-quartern of gin under her shawl.' (CP, p. 39) The image is ironic. Unlike Dante's Virgil, Bunting's poetic guide will provide no inspiration (she will take him on a journey, nonetheless). Presented in this specific role as goddess of motherhood and domesticity, Venus Gentry suckles a swaddled bottle of gin. The point is that this 'Mother' is long past her years as a fertile producer and a protector, and her life now is empty and pointless: with no purpose or use, she becomes abject, asexual even grotesque. Where she once bloomed with vitality, sexuality and beauty, she now repels, as her monologue relates:

I had them all on a string one time,
lawyers, doctors, business-men:
there wasn't a man alive but would have given
all he possessed
for what they won't take now free for nothing.

(CP, p. 39)

Venus's speech seems stilted due to the syllabic irregularity between the lines, particularly in the packed-in beats of the last line quoted above, in which stress follows stress, 'now free', with not even a caesuric comma to help the orator. The drunkenly emphatic tautology: '[f]ree for nothing' highlights this deliberate overcrowding of the line. It's an unpleasant portrayal of womanhood, and unfortunately women don't make many positive appearances in Bunting's work: they are often either sexual objects, or objects of loathing and derision, but it is, admittedly, quite an accurate portrayal of a drunk voice, akin, perhaps even superior, to Eliot's attempts in *The Waste Land*. This syncopated section is noticeably different from Bunting's signature musicality: why is it that he doesn't lend his heroines the same tunefulness and skilled articulacy as he does some of his male voices? As in *The Waste Land* and in Pound's *Cantos*, too, Bunting uses style to underpin poetic masks, like his modernist forefathers. In this poem each character is, operationally, differentiated by their poetic sound. Mother Venus's ironic un-creativity is arguably reflected in the prosody of her verse in its lack of mellifluousness: it doesn't seem to have much in common with traditional classical

poetry, despite her associations, conveying that she is (now) no poetic artisan. She is supposed to be guiding him in his poetic ways, but Venus drunkenly stumbles and rambles, her subject matter leaps around stopping and starting, the sense sometimes difficult to follow like a real-life gin-fuelled spiel. It would thus seem that Bunting – master and commander of the concise – portrays her negatively via her imprecise verbiage. The positive association that Bunting makes between masculinity and concision is countered by this feminised prolix voice.

Venus is subject to a double-degradation in “The Well Of Lycopolis”, falling twice: from godly status to mortal (and perishing); and from motherhood to a beaten-up and worn-out lover. The first section of the poem is a re-writing of Villon’s ‘Les Regrets de la Belle Heaulmière,’ and the lines ‘[a]dvis m’est que j’oy regretter’ [‘by chance I heard the Belle complain’] open Villon’s original poem, and are used by Bunting to open the poem in the style of a dramatic monologue as an overhearing.³⁵⁴ The story is close to Villon’s original, which features a poet encountering the once-beautiful wife, or daughter, of a rich man lamenting the loss of her youth. Bunting explained to his audience in 1982 that many critics misinterpreted Villon’s tragic heroine as a prostitute. However, Bunting asserted long after his own poem’s publication:

[I]t is absolutely wrong. She was nothing of the sort. She was a rich woman, and she had no doubt spent her money and become poor and all the rest of it, but the man she is regretting and worried about is not as you find in half the French editions of Villon, a pimp. Nothing of the sort. He’s her boyfriend, that she no doubt is exploited by in every possible way but he’s the boyfriend of a rich woman... I use her for the introduction of Venus in the first part being a dialogue between the goddess Venus, and the goddess Polymnia, the muse of the more complicated kinds of song.³⁵⁵

Bunting ‘blasphemously’ uses Venus, revered bastion of dominant Western culture, to present one of his major themes: the corrupting force of capital. In this poem, love is degraded by commerce, and every sexual event in Venus’s story is told in terms of

³⁵⁴ Burton’s translation, Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us*. p. 233.

³⁵⁵ Bunting speaking to his audience at a reading in London, 1982, quoted by Burton, *ibid.* p. 233. I wonder whether a wish to appeal to the more progressive gender politics of the later Twentieth Century are partly responsible for Bunting’s revelation about (or revision of?) his 1930s work.

(capitalist) exchange. Venus calculates her self-worth within this paradigm: how attractive do others find her; and how much money will they offer her for her beauty? Her sexual prowess is weighed against monetary value, and perhaps this is Bunting's portrayal of her original sin, as Villon has it in his pre-industrial rendering: vanity. The 'lawyers, doctors and business-men,' whose former attraction to her she cites as proof of her former beauty and prowess, are powerful and wealthy, but she refuses them, because she 'was in love then and no mistake' (CP, p. 39). This appears to distance her from the profession of prostitution that makes love into a commodity. However, she admits even her beloved 'shifty young fellow' 'only cared for my money' (CP, p. 39). Their love affair is rendered as simply another example of exchange, where this time, in a reversal of roles, the woman buys sex with (domestic) labour:

If he'd made me take in washing he'd
only have had to say: 'Give us a kiss'
and I'd have forgotten my troubles.

(CP, p. 39)

The peculiar and bathetic image of Venus prostrating herself for a 'shifty' wife-beater, doing laundry for a kiss, is comic, as well as pathetic. Perhaps she is unable to know true love because she has sold herself, and so love will always be defined in terms of capital for her. She wonders, as an old woman, 'What did I *get out of it* besides a bad conscience?' (emphasis added, CP, p. 39) still imagining love as a selfish act of exchange, in which something should be gained. 'Mother' Venus, the goddess of love, begets a depressing formula for love that can only deteriorate as the poem proceeds.

The grotesque mixed with the domestic in Venus's description of love and marital life adds irony to Bunting's portrayal of the goddess, and also introduces another major theme of the poem: the First World War. Venus recounts the war in terms of bodily issues and hormonal secretions and this heated corporeal conflict is suggestive of the human body under attack on the battlefield. The goddess (anachronistically) remembers, 'during the War':

kids carrying the clap to school under their pinnies,
studying Belgian atrocities in the Sunday papers
or the men pissing in the backstreets; and grown women
sweating their shifts sticky at the smell of khaki
every little while.

(CP, p. 40)

The corporeal functions, 'pissing' and 'sweating', appear alongside martial violence (ironically juxtaposed with the marital violence described in the previous lines) and the mortality and fleshiness of the human body abused in sex and in war unites these two themes. The introduction of the War through the sexual response of the women left at home lays the ground for Bunting's critique of gender roles and relations during and after the First World War, which is revisited later on via further portrayal of the vulnerability and weakness of human flesh. Importantly it is thus perhaps the poet's outrage at the manifold injustices served in World War One that fuel the anger in the poem, and not an overarching hatred of women. The vernacular style adds to Bunting's irreverent portrayal of the goddess of love, but is also a 'translation' of Villon's own controversial use of everyday language. However, Bunting's other techniques, including his portrayal of the female body, psyche and sexuality, sacrifice a positive representation of women to make an argument about class, economics and war (thus also inadvertently implying that he believes these to be solely male domains).

Michael Freeman explains that the character of La Belle Heaulmière is an agent of medieval morality: '[m]edieval men (or, at least, medieval clerks) were encouraged to view women with an unhappy mixture of contempt and desire', he writes. 'What they aspired to was a state of serene contempt *for* desire. With the harrowing spectacle of the Belle Heaulmière, Villon obligingly provided them with a *contemptus feminae*.'³⁵⁶ Freeman also adds a crucial detail that might put the reader's mind back in the gutter that Bunting (I think somewhat playfully) tried to lift it out of: Villon's Heaulmière may have descended from the state of a rich woman, but she sings her ballade to a company of prostitutes. 'Villon has her recite to those whom Marot calls the "filles de joie", she advises the young whores to bear her experience in mind, to take advantage of men while they still have their looks, and to treat love strictly as a business transaction'.³⁵⁷ Furthermore, Freeman also writes a little about fifteenth-century Parisian life: many prostitutes 'hedged their bets by contracting marriages of convenience with tradesmen whose professions afforded their wives the opportunity

³⁵⁶ Mike Freeman, *François Villon in His Works : The Villain's Tale* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000). p. 124.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 124.

to mix with wealthy and influential men or by taking the precaution of pretending to be earning an honest living' while continuing their sex work.³⁵⁸

If not straightforward prostitution, then, Venus-cum-La Belle Heaulmière's exchange of sex as a commodity, nevertheless, contrasts with the work of motherhood, although the 'unlovely labour of love' that Venus mentions, could be a task performed in either role. She laments:

Love's an encumbrance to them who
rinse carefully before using, better
keep yourself to yourself.
What it is to be in the movement!
'Follow the instructions on page fortyone'
unlovely labour of love,
'or work it off in a day's walk,
a cold douche and a brisk rub down,
there's nothing like it.'
Aye, tether me among the maniacs,
it's nicer to rave than reason.'

(*CP*, p. 40)

This 'encumbrance', as Venus puts it, refers to contraceptive and abortive practices, covertly but frequently used by women in the roles of prostitute, lover and housewife, and so the avoidance of motherhood is also an issue at stake here. Perhaps Bunting intends to empathise with the quotidian, usually private, after-events of a woman's sexual life by bringing them in to the artistic realm of poetry. However the clinical list of 'instructions' ('a cold douche and brisk rub down') mark the anti-lyricism of Venus's verse paragraphs. The poem's association of Polymnia with 'more complicated kinds of song' is also of note, contrasting with the classical, pastoral, even virginal, 'simple' that appears to be favoured in the second part of the poem (*CP*, p. 42). In addition, if the poem is in part a lament for the destruction of human love relationships by warfare and the market in the modern world, then it portrays love's degradation as primarily woman's suffering. It is thus worth noting Bunting's sympathetic attitude towards the presentation of his heroines, in this (limited) aspect.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.* p. 125.

Venus laments modern day sexual intercourse, which has become, along with much else, bureaucratized and prescribed in the marital sex manuals of the early twentieth century. Her words on this subject, which express Bunting's own distaste for a rule-bound life, describe love as debased, routine and merely another domestic chore. The contraceptive ablutions deplete desire to the point where it is preferable to avoid sex altogether, 'better keep yourself to yourself.' Possibly deriding the Suffragette or feminist efforts of the time, Venus then wryly jokes, '[w]hat it is to be in the movement!' and continues with the manual. For an audience who might have found Venus's spiel at moments difficult to follow as it skipped about, rhythmically, thematically and chronologically, her concluding lines in this outburst provide some explanation for her erratic, even *effusive*, oration: '[A]ye, tether me among the maniacs, / it's nicer to rave than reason.'

Irony abounds in the next part of this mock-epic, as Venus, the opposite of the traditional poet-guide persona, is guided *by* the poet-speaker to visit Polymnia, Muse of sacred poetry, who exists in a similarly abject state:

Took her round to Polymnia's, Polymnia
glowering steadfastly at the lukewarm
undusted grate grim with cinders
never properly kindled...

(CP, p. 40)

The image is bathetic: the serious and pensive muse is preoccupied by housework, staring at a dirty hearth (this is another of the original Belle's fates). The poet notes immediately the slovenly state of Polymnia's household, thus presenting her as another failed domestic worker, useless and debased in her older age. However, in comparison to Venus's speech, her style is more succinct and musical suggesting that artistic skill endures when the body becomes decrepit and love life dwindles.

Polymnia berates the poet, her lines revealing Bunting's self-critique, as suggested by Makin, who reads the mode of the whole poem as self-attack and a diatribe on poetic cowardice: 'The poet has degraded [Polymnia] by his lack of guts, by his barren honesty', he writes.³⁵⁹ Makin refers to Polymnia's rebuke administered to the poet, in which the muse asks him:

³⁵⁹ Makin, *Bunting : The Shaping of His Verse*. p. 88.

What have you come for? Why have you brought the Goddess?

You who

finger the goods you cannot purchase,
snuffle the skirt you dare not clutch.

There was never love between us, never less
than when you reckoned much. A tool
not worth the negligible price. A fool
not to be esteemed for barren honesty.

Leave me alone. ...

(CP, p. 41)

Bunting presents the poet as abandoned by his muse. He renders himself, through her words, as an impoverished client, 'who [fingers] the goods [he] cannot purchase' and, in an image that conflates a snivelling child's attitude toward its mother with a wimpy lover, as a coward who doesn't 'dare', poetically. The alignment of 'tool' with 'fool' suggests that the poet is not worth his pittance and is unrecognised for what should be praised as 'barren honesty' reminiscent of Bunting's pithy (and apocryphal) auto-obituary: 'a minor poet, not conspicuously dishonest.'³⁶⁰ Perhaps Bunting is also drawing from his personal life and relationship in these lines, since his monetary pressures weighed heavily upon his marriage at the time of writing. As iterated by Venus previously, love is lost due to financial obligation. Polymnia appears earlier, in "Attis", (1931). She 'keeps a cafe in Reno' having abandoned Attis and, as Makin

³⁶⁰ I am yet to find a watertight reference to this apparently self-written epitaph. Jonathan Williams recalls it anecdotally in an essay about Stevie Smith (cf. Sanford Sternlicht, *In Search of Stevie Smith* (Syracuse; London: Syracuse University Press, 1991). p. 48.); Peter Quartermain claims it is 'too-often-quoted' and cites it without reference, in *Disjunctive Poetics : From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). p. 143; Richard Caddel's essay for *Jacket's* Bunting special issue takes the five-word phrase as its title, but doesn't give an earlier source (<http://jacketmagazine.com/10/cadd-bunt.html> accessed 6/03/12); Burton locates the quotation's apparent origin in J. Vinson's *Contemporary Poets* (Cf. Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us*. p. 3; p. 531 n. 6.). Indeed, the quotation is included as an apparently self-supplied comment from Bunting on his verse. The Editor's note to the volume states that: 'The entry for each poet included consists of... a comment by the poet on his verse if he chose to make one' (p. xv). Bunting's entry can be found in James Vinson, ed. *Contemporary Poets*, 3rd ed. / editor, James Vinson, associate editor, D.L. Kirkpatrick. ed. (London: Macmillan, 1980). pp. 211-213.

explains, 'offers her services in the land of instant remarriages.'³⁶¹ Entrapped in domestic life and forced to commit to drudging labour in order to make money for the family or face increasing poverty, divorce was evidently something that plagued bitter Bunting's mind through the 1930s.

Makin believes that the sexual imagery and activity portrayed as deviance and depravity in Bunting's 1930s poems like "Attis: Or, Something Missing" and "The Well of Lycopolis" are symbols for failed poetic practice. He writes:

There is a content, consistent over a group of poems written between 1924 and 1935, which concerns not ridiculous impotence merely, or hermaphroditry, or castration, or the indeterminate sexual identities of Bloomsbury. These are all a metaphor for cowardice in poetry. And the content is consistent (though modified) even though some of the poems appear to carry the label 'about Bloomsbury' and others, the label 'about me'.³⁶²

However, Bunting's use of female sexuality and woman's physiognomy, as well as male and female homosexuality as symbols for vitiated creativity and an indolent lifestyle, as contrasted with heterosexual male productivity and work, are highly problematic and tap into a history of the use of gendered symbols for different forms of labour. Bunting's male chauvinism (that may compromise the poet's other more egalitarian beliefs) cannot be excused as merely a poetic symbol used to criticise himself and other poets and perhaps it is specifically his engagement with a certain kind of masculinist discourse about labour and workers' rights that tends towards sexism.

The poet-narrator does not portray these 'contemptible women' kindly, but he does appear to associate his condition with theirs, despite his use of gendered symbols when describing their plights. At Polymnia's dwelling, the speech of the poet-narrator and the two fallen women become one in a unifying transformation of sound made into gas, 'we rhymed our breath / to the mumble of coke distilling.' The image is comforting and homely and suggests the non-hierarchy of a storytellers' circle, which contrasts with the gendered division perceptible elsewhere in the poem. A grave-sounding revelation is uttered: '[t]ime is, was, has been', but is lightened by Bunting's note that guides the reader to Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (CP, p. 225). This

³⁶¹ Makin, *Bunting : The Shaping of His Verse*. p. 87.

³⁶² *Ibid.* p. 82.

Elizabethan comedy features a brass head: a premonitory oracle fashioned by the eponymous, necromantic, but inept, 'friars'. Though Greene's head comes to an untimely end, after speaking only the words Bunting quotes, perhaps its spell is cast on Bunting's poem nonetheless. The poem intermittently pokes fun at the sort of occultism that was fashionable among the London literati in the 1920s.

The group's conversation resumes, and the presentation is unfavourable to the three speakers, whose voices mix with a 'gassy fizzling spun from among the cinders' and the 'emulsion of some unnameable oil' (*CP*, p. 40). If the implication here is that they are "gassing," gossip, the trite conversational mode historically and unfairly attributed in particular to women, is recalled. The lack of solid substance to their female-dominated conversation is suggested further on with the verb 'gabbing', in Polymnia's speech:

'Blotched belly, slack buttock and breast,
there's little to strip for now.

A few years makes a lot of difference.

Would you have known me?

Poor old fools,

gabbing about our young days,

squatted round a bit of fire

just lit and flickering out already:

and we used to be so pretty!

(*CP*, p. 41)

A comparison is drawn between the rejected poet and his unimpressed muse. What the poet-narrator expressed with mellifluous sounds, Polymnia (let's not forget, the muse of lyric poetry!) blurts out in short, strongly-stressed lines, filled with a spitty-sounding combination of 'b' plosives and sibilants.

Makin's reading of Venus, 'now a bedraggled old tart', and Polymnia, 'equally fallen', as victims of the poet's 'lack of guts' might imply that Bunting presents these ageing female characters sympathetically.³⁶³ Makin explains that the poet is to blame for Polymnia's sorrow: 'The Muse, like the gods, unworshipped withers.'³⁶⁴ However it must be kept in mind that Bunting, as the poet, is *creating* the tragic situations of these

³⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 88.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p. 89.

women, as well as depicting them. In addition, the lack of vitality and post-sexual status that Bunting attributes to these women is counterposed with the strong, living male virility that Bunting celebrates in other poems. Despite Bunting's apparent association of himself with these women the poem's misogynistic aspect is not absolved. Rather than truly ameliorating woman's reputation, Bunting drags himself down with the subjects he continues to portray as idle, moaning and base. Evidence of the poem's sexist portrayal of women includes its depiction of Polymnia's 'blotched belly, slack buttock and breast' in the moments after her rebuke. Her disapprobation of the poet-narrator, and her disavowal of their purported love are feasibly heart-breaking and the painful moment is made more bathetic by the humiliation of having Venus privy to the exchange. The unflinching coldness of her words implies a fickleness common to bitter poetic portrayals of cruel, capricious women by jilted male poets, and thus provides an example of Bunting's conservative representation of women. Angered by female rejection, perhaps the poet seeks revenge, writing "Polymnia's" part as a demeaning outburst exposing her body, her vanity and her self-pity .

So, returning to Makin's reading of Bunting's sexual imagery as metaphor for creative cowardice, I argue that the first part of "The Well of Lycopolis" is not merely an empathetic rendering of lost inspiration. The poet's muse, his inspiration, is this withered old woman, crouched by a fire, bemoaning her changed and aged genitals (as Villon has it). The demise of these two key mythic figures represents the poet's lack of vitality in love, via Venus, and creativity, via Polymnia. Further, and perhaps the overarching, irony of the poem lies in its basis as a lament for lost inspiration and creativity that is carried out in a creative act. This leads me to wonder whether Bunting truly despises himself and his work. This uncertainty is compounded by the following section which critiques the creative work of his peers and leads to a diatribe on his contemporary poetic, literary and artistic world. A sense develops that the poet-narrator's work is not valueless in itself, but is undervalued by the literary world and public readership because of its lack of adherence to a tradition of popular British writing, current in the 1930s, which Bunting proceeds to denunciate.

The second part of the poem begins with a morning-after atmosphere of regret and self-hatred. With irreverent black humour Bunting imagines the goddesses hung over.

His use of the words 'libation' and 'flat beer' once again juxtaposes the godly with the quotidian and the base:

May my libation of flat beer stood overnight
sour on your stomach, my devoutly worshipped ladies,
may you retch cold bile.

(CP, p. 41)

Bunting's bitter and bilious curse to Venus and Polymnia adds to the developing sense that the poem is his reaction to being forsaken by the muses. Gone, too, is any hint of sympathy towards these downtrodden female characters. The singular 'stomach' that the speaker wishes ill will upon is peculiar, since he curses two 'ladies': the singular noun implies that they share one stomach, and appears to represent the collective aspect of the trio's relationship, and again signifies that love and creativity (both momentarily departed) are discrete powers *within* the poet. The suggestion is that the poet has spent an evening drowning his sorrows, and that the first part of the poem is an imagined conversation in which he projects himself into three parts: coward, failed lover and failed poet.

However, where the first part of the poem presented Bunting's creative struggles as internalised, with the poet blaming his own lack of inspiration for his failure in poetry, the second part develops into a study of the external world in which his poetry seeks, and fails to achieve, positive recognition.

The verse-paragraph develops into an allusive dialogue as the poet, wondering if he is, after all, to blame, turns to nature to seek help for his poetic impotence:

Windy water slurred the glint of Canopus,
am I answerable? Left, the vane
screwing perpetually ungainlywards.
What reply will a
June hailstorm countenance?

(CP, p. 41)

It is difficult to avoid biographical intervention at this point, inspired by knowledge of the breakdown of Bunting's own tempestuous marriage, and this stanza and those which follow are particularly evocative of domestic battle. Sailing imagery pervades the sequence, with references to 'Canopus', an important navigational star, bad weather

and stormy seas, portrayed bathetically as '[w]indy water', which could also allude to the gripe water required to settle the beer-disturbed stomach of the previous lines. The sounds in the line, however, do not betray any demise in poetic ability. This irony is seen again in *Briggflatts* in which the poet, self-effacingly claiming that he is no good at poetry writes in sonorous, rich and masterful verse. The poet's skill and talent is presumably the star, whose light is obfuscated by life's problems. Bunting's poetic output was continuously curtailed by financial and familial problems and this is one of a number of references that he makes to the difficulties he faced. The images of sea-navigation are derived from the poet's real life at this time, when he lived on a boat, sailing the seas for twelve months in the aftermath of his wife's departure.

In an essay published in 1932 on "English Poetry Today", Bunting argued that political and societal structure influences the proliferation, promotion and sale of literature:

THERE is no poetry in England, none with any relation to the life of the country, or of any considerable section of it. The rulers of the United States can neglect poetry, leave it alone, because they are, more or less, the rulers the people want and admire (however discreditable that may be to the people, it leaves them free to dispense with any very thorough system of untruth); but the rulers of England for a generation or more have never been indifferent to literature, they have been actively hostile. They have even set up and encouraged the frivolous imbecilities of cat-poetry, bird-poetry, flower-poetry; country-house Jorrocks-cum-clippership poetry (as Mr. Masfield does it); country-family cleverness (the Sitwells); and innumerable other devices for obscuring any work that smells of that objectionable quality, truth.³⁶⁵

Bunting argues that the support for just one kind of writing, inoffensively 'frivolous imbecilit[y]', is a conservative mechanism. The poetry has an exclusive set of promoters and audience with an elite knowledge or education (implied by reference to the Sitwells and 'country-family cleverness') and by its not experimenting with, or pushing the boundaries of, language, preserves tradition and reserves articulation in high literature for the ruling class voice. By doing so it simultaneously conserves the existing class structure and ruling power. This connection between actual power and

³⁶⁵ Bunting, "English Poetry Today." p. 264.

literary influence is recognised by Bunting in his alignment here of the 'rulers of England' and the Bloomsbury associates (some of whom, of course, would have been both). Note also his implied praise of 'truth' in poetry, which links this criticism with his lack of recognition in Part One of "The Well of Lycopolis" in which he is 'not to be esteemed for barren honesty' – suggesting that he, and other good writers are obscured by a wealthy and powerful literary industry. This also suggests perhaps that the goddess and the muse have left the poet-narrator in favour of more mainstream, or commercial, 1930s poets.

Bunting believed that poetry's purpose was 'to explore the resources of language and make language available for all existing or potential thoughts.'³⁶⁶ His argument for an inclusive poetry, and effort towards achieving a means of universal articulation, is related in "English Poetry Today". Bunting worries about the 'small audience' that poetry in its current state reaches.³⁶⁷ Bunting's enthusiasm for the vernacular, irreverent, transgressive medieval poet, François Villon, at this time highlights his interest in poetry as optimum vehicle for counterculture. However he is concerned that *popular* modern poetry has lost its potential to express new, possibly revolutionary, thought, and also, ironically, its relevance to the populace, to the extent that it is no longer a threat to the ruling class, but an aid to their power. He writes:

There is no need for complete suppression. If the price of poetry is high, or books hard to get by smuggling; and if education is managed so as to represent Rupert Brooke as the romantic high-light of the last generation, Humbert Wolfe as the delightful drawing-room poet of this, the divorce between literature and the British subject is complete. The gulf is unpassable. The intelligent reader in England is the frequenter of two small public-houses in Bloomsbury, plus a few isolated idiosyncratic scholars in the provinces.³⁶⁸

Bunting believes that the dominance of bourgeois-produced and bourgeois-promoting poetry makes poetry unfit for universal articulation. He suggests that popular poetry's appropriation by the upper classes effectively silences the majority of the population. The poem ends with an image of men, silenced and trapped under muddy water. The

³⁶⁶ "Observations on Left-Wing Papers." p. 46.

³⁶⁷ "English Poetry Today." p. 265.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 264.

scene is taken from Dante, but is also powerfully reminiscent of the trenches of World War One in which so many powerless (voiceless) working class men lost their lives due to the frequently-incompetent upper-class leadership. This will be discussed in more detail further on, but the repeated association that Bunting makes between voice, or the ability to articulate, and power, is clear. Ezra Pound, too, recognises the discrepancy of a system of inactive rulers and an exploited (and enormous) underclass in Britain in the early twentieth century. The class division in the British troops in World War One, and the devastation this arbitrary organization inflicted upon the young male population, is also articulated by Pound in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley”. Though not making such a strong claim on behalf of the working class, in fact arguing that death equalised the soldiers, Pound too laments the loss of life on the behalf of a corrupt superior power that the War brought about:

Daring as never before, wastage as never before.
 Young blood and high blood,
 fair cheeks and fine bodies;³⁶⁹

And:

There died a myriad,
 And of the best, among them,
 For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
 For a botched civilization.³⁷⁰

In the hands of the ruling class, Bunting worries that ‘Poetry withdraws into itself’ and in doing so it no longer has the potency to change wider society: its apprehension requires ‘special learning’ and it becomes ‘too small to hope to influence even a corner of the national culture.’³⁷¹

What begins to appear, in the second part of “The Well of Lycopolis” (and is subsequently developed) is a critique of this ruling-class-led movement in literary culture, and a comparison of its relative softness (expressed by Bunting via a metaphor of femininity) to the preferable hardness that Bunting frequently advocates. This hardness appears in “The Well of Lycopolis” as ‘stone’ and in its solidity and

³⁶⁹ Pound, *Personae: Collected Shorter Poems*. p. 188.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p. 188.

³⁷¹ Bunting, “English Poetry Today.” p. 265.

permanence suggests an a priori – or pre-existent - nature and something tending towards truth.

am I answerable? Left, the vane
screwing perpetually ungainlywards.

A succession of seemingly unrelated voices and concepts follow Bunting's (previously quoted) request for a response to his 'answerability': 'What reply will a June hailstorm countenance?' (*CP*, p.41) The poem is thrown into a verbal storm, evoking the paratactic bricolage that juxtaposes classical references with lyrics from popular culture and quotidian commodities in Eliot's *Waste Land*. Burton identifies the lyrics which come from a popular Musical Hall song:³⁷²

'Let's be cosy,
sit it out hand in hand.
Dreaming of you, that's all I do.'
Eiderdown air, any
girl or none, it's the same thing,
coats the tongue the morning after.
Answer?
(*CP*, p. 41)

The inverted commas around the first three lines link these lyrics to the unanswered question about who is to blame for the obfuscation of his light: 'am I answerable?' The jilted poet/lover addresses either his audience, or his lover, or, most likely, both, seeking their evaluation and reasons for their rejection. However the reply comes in the contrived, commodified, and impersonal language of popular music, leading to his further disavowal of modern popular poetic practice. The lines are negated by the fact that there is nothing cosy in the rest of the poem, nor is there anything that suggests that anyone dreams of the poet. The cynical lines that follow, countering the love-song lyrics, disperse any fantasy of romance, expressing indifference to a certain kind of possibly promiscuous love: 'any / girl or none, it's the same thing'. The line breaks create layers of possible meanings and mimic the misunderstandings and disconnect

³⁷² 'The reference is to Beth Slater Whitson's 1909 song, "Meet me tonight in Dreamland".' Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us*. p. 237.

between two lovers, and emphasise, through unintelligibility, the alienation that the isolated poet feels from human communication and the popular ideal of love.

The verse paragraph is completed by seven lines which seem to provide the 'answer' asked for in the first seven:

Answer?

If words were stone, if the sun's lilt
could be fixed in the stone's convexity.

Open your eyes, Polymnia,
at the sleek, slick lads treading gingerly between the bedpots,
stripped buff-naked all but their hats to raise,
and nothing rises but the hats;
smooth, with soft steps, *ambiguoque voltu*.

(CP, p. 42)

The double-conditional with no conclusive, resultant clause (there is no 'then...' to the 'ifs') emphasises the impossibility of the statement; it is far removed from reality. It also provides a build up of tension that is unfulfilled, evocative of the possible sexual disappointment entailed when 'nothing rises but the hats'. For Bunting, as sometimes for Pound, too, the hardness of stone or crystal is akin to the stability of truth. As seen later in *Briggflatts*'s advice to 'take a chisel to write', this is another example of Bunting's use of stonemasonry as a metaphor for (ideal) poetry-making. The image created here addresses the relationship between words and things, and wishes for as direct a relationship between the word and the reality as possible. The narrator's distress in "The Well of Lycopolis" is caused by a broken promise: a problem that arises only because of the non-fixity of carelessly selected words and language's capability of being meaningless or mendacious. The image of the stone containing fluctuating waves of sunlight in its stillness and fixity is powerful, and cryptic. There is a notion of motion, and energy, captured in stone, and if stones are words, then the suggestion is that within words there are things, solidified.

Again, Bunting asserts the importance of truth in good writing, and this equates to concise language, carved like stone. Plato's "Analogy of the Sun" compares sunlight's revelation of the things we see to goodness's revelation of the truth in the things we think, but Bunting repeatedly wards off the sort of mysticism that he believed accompanied Neo-Platonism. Thus though he uses this seemingly neo-Platonic imagery

of stone and sunlight (this also appears in *Briggflatts* as the divinatory ‘disk / hubbed by the sun’, and in “Nothing”) he favours the solidity of stone over the transmutability of light and thought, and he came to loathe the sort of mysticism that these symbols connote.³⁷³ In “English Poetry Today”, again, he writes that recent poetry, in its purposeful esotericism, ‘delights more and more in approximations to the acrostic, less and less in true concision, which implies force and clarity as well as paucity of words.’³⁷⁴ Further on he argues for the importance of energy to poetry (with an emphasis on political energy, as opposed to apathy): ‘zeal, if not indispensable to poetry, is at any rate at present a desideratum. But who in England can be zealous, being hopeless?’³⁷⁵ The problem expressed in the verse paragraph, however, is that good poetry, which has force and hard crystal-clarity, with energy fixed in it, is ignored by Polymnia (his readership as muse) whose eyes are closed to the reality of the poets she now favours, having abandoned the narrator. Counter to the energised masculine hardness of the stone poetry, empirical and accurate, that the narrator promotes, Bunting presents his contemporary poetic culture as the weakness of mysticism and an enervated, soft world of effeminate and impotent young gigolos.

The zeal in poetry that would come from newness (or youth) in literature is quashed, Bunting believes, by the dominant conservative trend in literary culture. The third verse-paragraph portrays the delights of new love, celebrated through the virgin lovers, Daphnis and Chloe, and is contrasted by the world, identified geographically, of Bloomsbury.

Daphnis investigated
 bubbleless Chloe
 behind a boulder.
 Still, they say,
 in another climate

³⁷³ Powell’s reading of “Nothing”, discussed in Part One, helps here, as he explains Bunting’s earlier poem as an unravelling of the Platonic prioritization of the mind and language over the physical and sensory world: ‘the poem turns on itself. Setting out to sing in praise of the pure intellect’s creative engagement with ideal forms, it finds itself compelled instead to enact the realization that thought and forms both depend upon mimesis of the physical world.’ Powell, “Basil Bunting and Mina Loy.” p. 20. For Bunting, physical things, like stones, are the closest thing to ‘truth’, and as Wootten shows, eventually even stones ‘sift to sand’, as one of Bunting’s last poems, “At Briggflatts Meetinghouse” states. See Wootten, “Basil Bunting : ‘Uneasy Mason’.” p. 236.

³⁷⁴ Bunting, “English Poetry Today.” p. 265.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 268.

virgin with virgin
 coupled taste
 wine without headache
 and the songs are simple.
 We have laid on Lycopolis water.
 The nights are not fresh
 between High Holborn and the Euston Road,
 nor the days bright even in summer
 nor the grass of the squares green.

(*CP*, p. 42)

Juxtaposed against the Bunting-esque ideals of 'virgin with virgin / coupled taste / wine without headache' Bloomsbury offers 'Lycopolis water,' referring to the beginning of the poem and the drink's power to destroy the signs of virginity. Furthermore, implying a lack of novelty in Bloomsbury's writing, as well as revisiting the topic of the group's steamy sex life, Bunting complains: 'The nights are not fresh / between High Holborn and the Euston Road, / nor the days bright even in summer / nor the grass of the squares green.' (*CP*, p. 42)

The poem appears to represent innocent love through this classical reference: Daphnis and Chloe are so demure that they look at each other behind a stone; and this is compared to what Bunting presents as the debauched exhibitionism of contemporary culture. Furthermore, Daphnis and Chloe's pastoral idyll is aligned with classical verse and 'simple' song (*CP*, p. 42). A volta is created at the line '[w]e have laid on Lycopolis water' by the sudden introduction on the opening beat of a first person plural, and the final five lines of this fourteen line verse paragraph are therefore comparative: a negative contemporary reality compared to the ancient idyll. In contrast to the shy virgins, everyone in Bloomsbury or Britain is defiled by Lycopolis water, the lines imply. I wonder if there is intentional word play between the virginity of the classical lovers, and the 'Virginia'-ty of the 'Woolf'-water drinking Bloomsbury group. Stephen Burt writes that Bunting's presentation of Daphnis and Chloe's love here is

'dysphemistic', perhaps confusing the subject matter of the lines that close the verse paragraph with that of the opening lines.³⁷⁶

Gregson crucially distinguishes between early and later Bunting, and writes about "Attis: or Something Missing" and "The Well of Lycopolis" that:

Both these poems are premised upon the widespread modernist assumption that modern culture is marked by the absence of values and forms of fulfilment that were abundant in earlier cultures... Both these early Bunting poems obsessively return to forms of sexual imagery in a tone of indignation and satirical scorn whose object remains difficult to define.³⁷⁷

Gregson pinpoints the particular difficulty of these poems, and their disturbing quality, in their 'lack of thematic focus':

These poems accumulate their images so that they seem to say that modern sexuality is decadent and enervated. In doing so they also assume that sexual roles should be conventional ones as those are understood in the modern period: active potent heterosexual males, passive fertile heterosexual females. Yet the ancient Greek world that the poems evoke in their references to gods and goddesses is surely famous for its radically different assumptions about sexual roles and behaviour.³⁷⁸

Unlike Burt's fascinating analysis of forms of youth in Bunting's work, which misses the past tense of Daphnis's investigation of Chloe, as well as the volta that puts the idealised past in contrast with his contemporary world, Gregson acknowledges Bunting's idealisation of Classical sexuality. Anyone familiar with Bunting's work, and stories about his life, would also recognise that it is unlikely that Bunting would portray youthful romance negatively, or, as Burt expresses it, present 'pubescent sexuality in dysphemistic terms'.³⁷⁹

But why does Bunting dislike Bloomsbury and their associates so passionately? Why does he think their work lacks energy? It seems, from his argument in "The Well of Lycopolis" that it is at least in part due to a certain resentment of and distaste for

³⁷⁶ Stephen Burt, *The Forms of Youth : Twentieth-Century Poetry and Adolescence* (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2007). p. 80.

³⁷⁷ Gregson, "Bunting's Rueful Masculinity." p. 112.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.* p. 112.

³⁷⁹ Burt, *The Forms of Youth : Twentieth-Century Poetry and Adolescence*. p. 80.

their work-free and privileged lifestyles. Energy and light are associated in Bunting's poetic ideal and the contemporary art portrayed in this poem possesses none of this energy: the days are not 'bright even in summer'. Nothing lives, not even grass. Relating to his bigger argument about class relations, the Arcadian image of the perfectly manicured lawns of the private gardens kept by invisible, unaccounted-for workers is evoked in Bunting's mention of the famous squares, hinting at the wealthy lifestyles of the Bloomsbury-dwellers and suggesting a life whose indolence relies upon the exploitation of an invisible underclass who are, elsewhere in the poem, 'muttering inaudibly beneath the quagmire' (CP, p. 45).

The final verse paragraph of the second part returns to the stormy sea, and pits as comparison to the effete Bloomsbury a heteronormative masculine 'us' who engages in hard physical labour, using imagery of bloody-fingered sailing and erectile full-functionality:

Neither (*aequora pontis*)
 on the sea's bulge
 would the 'proud, full sail'
 avail
 us, stubborn against the trades,
 closehauled,
 stiff, flat canvas;
 our fingers bleed
 under the nail
 when we reef.

(CP, p. 42)

This short section manages to incorporate Lucretius ('*aequora pontis*': 'level ocean') and Shakespeare with an image of human work struggling against uncooperative nature. The phallically 'proud' and 'full' sail doesn't help the bleeding-fingered sailors to cross this windy stretch. The quotation is the opening of Shakespeare's Sonnet 86, in which a jilted lover asks the object of his affections whether it was his rival's bold poetry that swept his intended off their feet:

Was it the proud full sail of his verse,
 Bound for the prize of all-too-precious you,
 That did my ripe thoughts in my brain inhearse,

Making their tomb the womb wherein they grew?³⁸⁰

In the sonnet, the poet loses both lover and creativity at the hands of his opponent. Thus via this reference, the poet-speaker of “The Well of Lycopolis” again claims to jealously withdraw from poetic life, while in fact continuing to engage with it directly, scorning, in this case, the spirit-compelled poetry of another. ‘Was it his spirit, by spirits taught to write / Above a mortal pitch, that struck me dead?’ asks Shakespeare’s speaker.³⁸¹ A sympathetic character is developing, though it is still at the expense of gender equality, since masculinity represented by the bulging sail and the sailors’ exertion is pitted against the continued conceit of chaotic nature, traditionally feminised (including in Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*). This representation of male superiority and assumed male subjectivity provides another red flag for a gender-conscious reading. It seems that the poem is developing a storm/wind metaphor for the speaker’s lover, again testifying to Bunting’s own stormy home life.

From stormy sea and bleeding nail, the poem opens its third part with another attack on Bloomsbury, where the wind (represented by Aeolus) the sea, and the sun are sexually dominated by a female force, and this female conquest is portrayed as utterly loathsome ‘infamous’ and ‘abject’ and unnatural:

Infamous poetry, abject love,
 Aeolus’ hand under her frock
 this morning. This afternoon
 Ocean licking her privities.
 Every thrust of the autumn sun
 cuckolding
 in the green grin of late-flowering trees.

(CP, pp. 42-43)

‘I shall never have anything to myself’, whines the poet’s speaker, unwilling to share his natural domain with this female force (or is it the female whom he must share with cuckolding nature?).

³⁸⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1988). p. 108.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*

The next seven lines, marked out as new paragraphs, but syntactically flowing from the un-end-stopped complaint, appear to revive the occultist theme. The sentence continues from the section before it:

stare in the tank, see
 Hell's constellations,
 a dogstar for the Dogstar:
 women's faces
 blank or trivial,
 still or rippled water,
 a fool's image.

(CP, p. 43)

This appears to be an image of soothsaying, linking back to the Friar Bacon reference in Part One: the magician had a magic glass in which he could 'scry' the future. Water scrying was also a method of conjuring visions used by spiritualists in the 1920s, where presumably the duped would gather round to stare at their own faces 'a fool's image'. This obscure reference to clairvoyant activity links to the crystal-ball like image of the sun 'fixed in the stone's convexity', that Bunting refutes the possibility of in Part One, too. The poet's criticism is about a lack of awareness of reality, perhaps. The next lines portray the fool: '[a]t my time of life it is easier not to see, / much easier to tra-la-la.' The joke is that these visionaries' poetry is blind.

In 1933, Bunting reviewed the work of Bloomsbury associate (and occultist) Mary Butts for the Rapallo paper *Il Mare*. In the article, he disparaged 'the rich or almost-rich dilettantes of bohemian art and life' and proceeded to attack the Bloomsbury group, berating (and ridiculing) what he saw to be their idle lives and pretentious, amateurish artistic practice:

These are the chosen few who condescend to write or to paint in the quiet, comfortable, rich squares of Bloomsbury and who do not seem to notice that the sweet, drippy, unbearable smell of decadence which has recently pervaded every English product, comes precisely from Bloomsbury... that dung heap believed to be a bed of lilies.³⁸²

³⁸² Bunting, an article in *Il Mare*, translated from Italian by Dale Reagan in Reagan "Basil Bunting Obiter Dicta." p. 249.

Using quasi-religious terminology, perhaps to refer to Butt's Crowley-esque mysticism, Bunting criticises Butts because she 'sanctifies and worships it [the group], the stubborn rear-guard of a dying golden age in which the servants were servile and even the well-off tradesmen prudently bowed to Birth and Education.'³⁸³

Thus, "The Well of Lycopolis" reviles the conservatism of the poetic forms which reiterate and reinforce old models of the ruling class: the tradition enacts

Squalid acquiescence in the cast-offs
of reputed poetry. Here, Bellerophon,
is a livery hack, a gelding,
easy pace, easy to hire,
all mansuetude and indifference.

(CP, p. 43)

In the preceding lines, the poet has directed these blinded and archaically luxuriant poets to 'stare in the tank, see/ Hell's constellations' where otherwise, we read now, they avert their eyes:

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

(CP, p. 43)

Perhaps unfairly parodying the voice of a Bloomsbury poet, the poem becomes empty of meaning and thin of sound: 'tra-la-la' is 'a widowed tune'. The poetic phrase is bereft of meaning because the concrete reality of work is missing: its 'poor circumstances' – the same impoverished conditions which were to beget 'lines still-born' in *Briggflatts* (CP, p. 65) – are those in which the pleasure of labour and craft do not exist and the resulting product is weak. The averted gaze and feigned innocence that 'tra-la-la' implies makes for poor poetry, as Bunting defines it: 'twaddle'. The life presented is cut off from the truth of material conditions of existence: work and economic exchange.

³⁸³ Ibid.

Via this part of the poem's presentation of the poetic poverty of widowhood, (which links with Venus's and Polymnia's penury in Part One) the poet upholds a masculinised ideal of work. In this poem, femininity, as the other, and the object of Bunting's satire, becomes the solipsistic self-indulgence of sexual pleasure, the violence of castration and the leisured life of bourgeois society. Feminine, or feminised, symbols are used to portray the group's decadence. The feminine and homoerotic sexualities that the group represent, in this poem, and that represent the group, apparently threaten the heteronormative male pride and productivity as the masculinised 'work' of poetry is cuckolded by feminised leisure. Even sexual pleasure in this feminised world takes place without (male) physical effort as the female character is pleased by nature in a kind of erotic arcadia. This is could also be a joke about the post-Romantic intensity of feelings portrayed in Woolf's writing.

Later the lines portray Bloomsbury as castrating: 'Here, Bellerophon, / is a livery hack, a gelding'; then dominated by female sexuality: 'Tweet, tweet, twaddle. Endure / detail by detail the cunnilingual law.' The 'tweet, tweet, twaddle' sequence harks back to its previous summation, 'twat' and perhaps combines a critique of the prolixity of Woolf's stream of consciousness technique ('endure/detail by detail') with a misogynistic portrayal of female power as 'cunnilingual law'. The poem takes its title from Radclyffe Hall's cult novel of 1928, *The Well of Loneliness*, which follows the life and lesbian love affairs of its central female character, 'Stephen Gordon'. Pairing his portrayal of the Bloomsbury group with a novel that at the time, causing moral outrage, signified obscenity, scandal and bad writing shows his project was to undermine the group's artistic superiority and authority via depictions of their sexualities. Bunting's employment of homosexuality to criticise the group's creative practices demonstrate his sexism and severely undermines his criticism of conservative cultural tradition and promotion of progressive politics. His dated 'in joke' about *The Well of Loneliness* hopefully helps a twenty-first century reader frame these unpleasant views in their historical context.

By its end, the poem has associated the Bloomsbury group with the horrors of the First World War and the iniquities of class society as a whole. The group appear as (capitalist) pigs, 'Gadarene swihine', 'with their snouts in the trough, kecking at gummy guts' (*CP*, p. 43). This image of undiscerning greed is paired with working voices singing a sea shanty: 'Way-O! Bully boys blow!' Portraying the upper class as Gadarene swine implies their arbitrary rule, and their erroneous, pig-headed herd-mentality.

The First World War represented as attack on the male body continues, opening the final section of the poem. The poem's critique of class hierarchy develops, emblematising the ruling class's metaphorical asphyxiation of the working class – the soldiers forced into, and now stuck in, the mud, summoning images of trench warfare. These people are disempowered and they cannot speak. Bunting references an alternative to the British canon of Bloomsbury, taking lines from Dante's *Inferno*, and presents the working class bemired and gurgling:

Stuck in the mud they are saying: 'We were sad
in the air, the sweet air the sun makes merry,
we were glum of ourselves, without a reason;
now we are stuck in the mud and therefore sad,'
That's what they mean, but the words die in their throat;
they cannot speak out because they are stuck in the mud.

(CP, p. 44)

There is, in this section, a sense of the poet's potential to give voice to those disenfranchised by the ruling class, and the quest for knowledge begun in the jug-and-bottle, nears its end. The speaker promises to announce the suffering of these underlings:

muttering inaudibly beneath the quagmire,
irresolute, barren, dependent, this page
ripped from Love's ledger and Poetry's:
and besides I want you to know for certain
there are people under the water.

(CP, p. 45)

The certainty with which the speaker confirms the presence of these 'irresolute, barren and dependent' contrasts with the blind eye, and the world of spirits and shadows in the second part of the poem. But the poet is also saying that modern poetry has so far failed to give a voice to these people in the quagmire. Arguably with a similar aspiration to Woolf's, Bunting avoids attaching himself to a bourgeois-complicit literary tradition that perpetuates ruling ideology, via his assemblage of neglected *enfants terribles*, like Villon and Robert Greene, and his irreverent recasting of Classical works. For many modernist writers the failures of the ruling class in the First

World War indicated a need for change in the power systems of the West – something that is seen in Pound’s post 1918 writing, too. Striving to find new forms with which to articulate a crisis in culture believed to be responsible for, and perpetuated by, a rotting, archaic political system would unfortunately lead some modernists to right-wing extremism and other forms of disastrous political experiment. As mentioned previously, the misogyny-model operating in Bunting’s poem can be seen in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” in which England and its ruling class are personified and gendered as decrepit and decaying, like Bunting’s Venus and Polymnia. Pound, like Bunting, uses feminization as a device to pit honour against dishonour, industriousness against the inert, the effete and the archaic. The ‘old bitch’, representative of the country that hosts an antiquated class-system still remembering the structures of feudalism and a ‘botched civilization’ is to blame for the enormous loss of young men ‘believing in old men’s lies’.³⁸⁴

In addition to his critique of the class iniquities exposed by loss of life in the First World War, Pound’s vision sees western culture as in need of drastic change that needs rejuvenating art. He criticises this society for prizing the (supposed) kitsch over the artwork:

The tea-rose tea-gown, etc.
 Supplants the mousseline of Cos,
 The pianola ‘replaces’
 Sappho’s barbitos.³⁸⁵

The domestic connotations of the tea-rose, the tea-gown and the pianola again summon the binary model of constructed male and female stereotypes of work. Here, as in Bunting’s critique of the Bloomsbury circle, the female domicile – the plush fabric of privileged home life – is portrayed as weak in comparison with the sturdy products of hard work, summoning traditional images of manly toil. It is significant that both poems use the soft furnishings of the feminised middle class domicile as a contrast to the masculinised image of front-line warfare. Bunting sees that culture no longer provides a means by which all members of society can articulate themselves. However, where Pound blames degraded and useless culture on what he sees to be the

³⁸⁴ Pound, *Personae: Collected Shorter Poems*. p. 188.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p. 186.

permeation of the amateur, Bunting recognises that it is the permeation of commerce in culture that weakens it as a means of universal communication.

In “Gertie Gitana’s hymn to waltzing” (an “Uncollected Ode”), which features poor Polymnia again (he is evidently still angry with her), Bunting presents art as in a quandary in which the artist is forced to choose between (re)creating the homogenised and commodified popular art that predominates in his contemporary western culture, or harking back to classicism. Despite Bunting’s occasional forays into Homer, Catullus and Lucretius, here he criticises classical erudition as a stultifying regurgitation:

Gertie Gitana’s hymn to waltzing,
 come to think of it, that’s the goods.
 You, thirddrate muse, Polymnia-alias-Echo
 who’ll foster our offspring
 begotten in a Waterloo Road three-and-sixpenny bed-and-breakfast
 between indifference and bad habit
 established by Erasmus and other idiots
 nuts on the classics?

(*CP*, p. 193)

Bunting presents a mutilated, dualised culture. Art can be purveyed as commodity and is carried out or consumed as a leisure activity. For the underprivileged, as seen previously, this takes place outside the hours of work and so becomes recompense for work instead of providing commentary on work, further removing it from the truth of life of its participants. Alternatively, culture provides art as something rarefied and obsolescent – referring only to a past-world, referred to only by and for the members of an elect and educated few. Again Bunting uses femininity to convey the small and the unimportant, the soft in culture. The music hall star (Gertie herself) is substandard and commercial – the fodder of the ‘murdering crocodiles’ – those who capitalise on the profits of the commodification of song (*CP*, p. 194). The ‘thirddrate muse’ is imagined supine, prostituting herself in a seedy hotel. This polemic is emphasised formally by the mirrored hyphenations of ancient apostles of deep thought, music, dance and poetry ‘Polymnia-alias-Echo’ (though the alias has begun the implication of falsehood that is to continue in the poem) and the reflected image, the grimace, of the ‘three-and-sixpenny bed-and-breakfast’. The degradation of the (paid) public performance of song and

music that Bunting portrays seems especially poignant considering the importance that he places upon the sound of verse and his emphasis on reading poetry aloud.

The culture that Bunting abjures is one which, to participate in, whether as creator or audience, requires payment. Asserting the ugliness of capital, again using a female protagonist as figure of blame, Bunting extends this theme of exchange to portray a prostituted culture, fallen into the hands of business where economic profitability is the definition of value. Poetry becomes a means of accruing wealth as it becomes subsumed into the entertainment industry (the music hall). In its alignment with capital, the means of measuring the value, the worth, of poetry it is alienated from its original worth as a means of communication for all. Money is inserted between the human and the work (the poem). Bunting writes about this sullied exchange (which is yet again brought about by a woman):

Then Barbara

bribing the brain with dud cheques
for any figure on the Bank of Aeolus
(paid up capital twentyone consonants
and five vowels, debtor to
sundry windbags, sundry bags of wind,
cent per cent cover in the vaults, vocables
on call or short notice to any amount)
made up so skilfully you wouldnt know her
works the same con-game on the same dupe twice.

(CP, p. 194)

Bunting predicts an entombing of this debauched culture and delivers a warning:

No inclination,
inclination at the wrong time, soul
not at home to callers:
its possibly ultimate inhumation
made flesh under a neat strewing of granite chips
complete with kerb. (But no stone,
Sadi's right, dogs would piss on it).
Without science, if you please, or psychology!
A mere prescription, as:

“Take one look at the truth about yourself,
you’ll never want another.”

(*CP*, p. 193)

The ‘botched civilisation’ which ‘demanded an image / of its accelerated grimace’ in Pound’s poem is met, fifteen years later, with this commercial grotesque.³⁸⁶ Bunting’s lines are perhaps a riposte to the demands of these customers: a mirror-image, its grimace – the truth about itself that it takes, and, sickened and sated, for once, will never want another.



³⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p. 186.

Chapter Seven

Shifting Peripheries

Basil Bunting and Lorine Niedecker Outside the Modernist Canon

Though Bunting's political values in the 1930s were couched in unfortunate gendered terms, there were some women poets whose work he admired, and who (sometimes) admired him in turn. He praised, in particular, Mina Loy, Marianne Moore and fellow Objectivist, Lorine Niedecker. Annwn, who is concerned by the lack of women critics and poets working in the Bunting tradition writes: 'Without doubt, it was Lorine Niedecker amongst the [women poets he read] who inspired most admiration on Bunting's part, an admiration which she reciprocated.'³⁸⁷ This chapter will therefore look more closely at Bunting's correspondences with Niedecker particularly during the 1930s in the post-Objectivist special issue period. Of course there were wider world concerns influencing the poets and thus this chapter will look at some striking similarities in their Depression-era work.

In a conference keynote in 2012, Harriet Tarlo spoke about how the poets' distinct and distant geographies defined their work and their friendship.³⁸⁸ This chapter will consider how, in being mutually marginalised, Bunting and Niedecker as poets, and Objectivist associates living outside the respective cultural centres of New York and London in the 1930s (and afterwards), formed a connection. If Bunting was, as he is sometimes described, self-marginalising, how was it that he felt a kinship with these American experimentalists? Was Bunting really the regionalist that he is sometimes imagined to be? His life, lived all around the world, was as cosmopolitan as any high modernist's. This chapter contributes to the wider project of this thesis, to posit another modernism to the mainstream, one which is primarily concerned with work and craft; is geographically or regionally concerned, but not bounded; one which surmounts anxieties about extremist politics and declares its agenda, but still admits the apolitical.

The work of these poets, who both suffer critical neglect, is similarly often situated in, and focussed on, particular local natural environments. However it is

³⁸⁷ Annwn, "Her Pulse Their Pace : Women Poets and Basil Bunting." p. 128.

³⁸⁸ Harriet Tarlo, keynote address at the Basil Bunting And Friends Conference, July 2012 at Durham University.

possible that theirs is a connection additionally, and perhaps more prominently, based on a focus on local working practices. Both poets' oeuvres feature satires of over-keen white collar workers (Bunting's "The Passport Officer", and Niedecker's *The President of the Holding Company*); critiques of alienated or exploitative industrial labour (Bunting's "They Say Etna", and Niedecker's "News"); and advocacy of wholesome craft work (Bunting's *Briggflatts*, Niedecker's "For Best Work"). One might ask how these poets can be considered "peripheral" when their focus is on something integral to global capitalist society. It might be important to question whether it is the poets' critical approach to labour; and their indictment of capitalist industry, that keeps their work peripheral to publically accepted poetry. Is there space to bring this leftist and labour-focused modernism into central canonical Modernism?

The argument here centres on an idea of the margin, or periphery, as a liminal, even unclaimed, space possessing revolutionary potential. As both Bunting's and Niedecker's writing avows, peripheral places are disregarded and simultaneously exploited and neglected by central government and the financial system: several of the poets' works from the Depression era pay attention to local communities traditionally united by labour, and now broken apart by the movement of capitalism across the globe; the purchase of land and factories within that movement; the division of labour that follows; and the movement of people that ensues. The chapter will focus on the 1930s work of these two poets, since the era marks a shift towards a globalised capitalist culture, which seems significant when considering the poets' subsequent increased attention to the local and the particular. Continuing a theme touched upon in the first section of this thesis, this chapter asks whether the move towards the local constitute a protest. The places furthest away from the centres of power can be the most neglected by their governments, but perhaps in being at a further distance from that centripetal force of capitalism, the peripheries are also the place with the greatest potential to imagine new possibilities for society.

Poetry and Place

Bunting and Niedecker paid close attention to their local, natural environments. Although Bunting lived in London, Paris, Rapallo, the Canary Islands, Isfahan and Teheran, he returned to and remained committed to the natural environment of his native North East England, moving to rural Northumberland in his later life, and paying

visits to Brigflatts Meeting House near Sedbergh, Cumbria, site of the truculent and dingy River Rawthey whose sound infuses *Briggflatts*. Niedecker's poetry linked up with European surrealism and the cosmopolitan, metropolitan late modernist avant-garde of William Carlos Williams and Zukofsky, although she was born on Black Hawk Island, near Fort Atkinson in 1903 and maintained a close focus on her native Wisconsin. She kept an eye (and an ear) on the local flora and fauna, as well as the folk, paying attention to the local labour in the dairy industry, and transcribing Wisconsin argot into her collection, *New Goose* (1946).

The poets' frequent descriptions of specific natural environments and their focus on locale in this sense has already been fruitfully explored by a number of scholars, including Harriet Tarlo, Elizabeth Willis, Jenny Penberthy, Michael Davidson, and Ruth Jennison. I want to consider whether Bunting's and Niedecker's is a connection additionally, and perhaps even more prominently, based on a focus on local working practices. Their mutual interest in language and speech (for Bunting as sound; for Niedecker as material that makes up the object of the poem; for both as the vessel for folk history) implies an interest in humanity and humanness, something that should be underlined: although these poets dwell on the margins, they are not isolated, or anti-social.

Chapter Seven will consider exactly why "the local" was so important to Bunting and Niedecker. For Bunting, careful attention to the local is the only way of ever approaching something like truth. Concentration, he believes, admits the precise and excludes the general. Writing about left wing newspapers in the 1930s, Bunting declares that '[e]ffective action must be based on full and correct information' and continues to argue that absolute accuracy is imperative for change to occur. The only way to ensure this sort of accuracy, he argues, is 'to collect [it] from a restricted area.'³⁸⁹ Bunting imagines that this method of localisation grants a means of grasping something whole: information is portrayed as tangible material, there to be collected scientifically. Although Bunting tried to separate his prose from his poetry, his envisaging of language as concrete evidently informs his poetic practice, and is manifested by his repeated portrayal of the act of poetry-writing as akin to stonemasonry. The precision he achieved specifically through concision also reveals a strong connection with Niedecker's clean-cut and compact poetics, and both poets'

³⁸⁹ Bunting, "Observations on Left-Wing Papers." p. 44; p. 45.

attention to the poem as something possessing physical form, and their desire to make the poem whole, or graspable, links them to the overall project of Objectivist verse. Close, almost scientific focus on the natural environment permits this kind of view: Niedecker wrote to Zukofsky '[f]or me, when it comes to birds, animals and plants, I'd like the facts because the facts are wonderful in themselves'.³⁹⁰

Bunting's and Niedecker's attention to the local and particular is not a result of merely folksy regionalism and love for one's birthplace. The concentration and focus that a specified locale allows enables the poets to lay their tunes down 'frankly,' without generalisation, furthering the imagistic tenet of 'direct treatment'. The physicality implied by the act of laying a 'tune' down, as *Briggflatts* suggests, and as was discussed in the first part of this thesis, shows that in Bunting's mind, poetry is something that is made in space, as well as time. He writes: 'Poetry and music are both patterns of sound drawn on a background of time'.³⁹¹ This emphasis on form, physicality, the craft-method link Bunting's concerns to those of the Objectivist poets. The easy link that he makes between the conceptual and the material, for example in "Some Limitations of English," in which he compares the 'analytical abstraction of modern European languages' to the dissolution of craft industries: both occurring as a result of the machine age, further aligns his way of thinking with Objectivist poetics.³⁹² Niedecker too combined focus on local and natural environment with a concern for the local community. Elizabeth Willis studies the influence of William Morris's craft socialism on Niedecker. Niedecker even wrote a poem, "His Carpets Flowered", about Morris. Willis writes that 'Niedecker's work is saturated with politics... Her

³⁹⁰ Niedecker letter to Zukofsky, 10 March, 1958. Quoted in Jonathan Skinner, "Particular Attention" in Elizabeth Willis, ed. *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place* (Iowa City, Iowa; London: University of Iowa Press 2008). pp. 41-59. pp. 44-5. The letter is published in *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky, 1931-1970*, Ed. Jenny Penberthy. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1993). p. 243-4.

³⁹¹ Bunting, "The Codex" in Bunting, *Basil Bunting on Poetry*. p. 243.

³⁹² Cf. Bunting, "Some Limitations of English": in *Three Essays*. pp. 22-26. 'It is comparable to the breakup of craftsmanship with its complex of deft motions which are not separated from one another in the mind of the craftsman into a series of simpler motions which can each be performed by a separate man into a series of simpler motions which a machine can do. We lose contact with whole things and deal with items instead: and these items have a thinness of meaning, an absence of associations by comparison with the thing as a whole. We gain fluency and rapidity at the expense of solidity and completeness.' p. 24.

poems insist that art and labor are inseparably bound.³⁹³ Willis's study explains how, for Niedecker, work is a social act that ties one to one's community, as well as to one's environment. Willis describes a poetics that is strikingly similar to Bunting's, in both concern and execution. She writes about 'Niedecker's practice of producing highly concentrated poems intended for long-term consumption, asserting her intellectual activity as both mechanical and manual labor within the vocabulary of her local economy.'³⁹⁴

The local as a source of community is explored in the 1930s Objectivist period work of these poets. This aspect of the local is important because it offers an alternative centre of power, and thus creates an alternative way of living, to that offered by fully fledged capitalism: when local community is disrupted by the greater forces of the market, as Niedecker's "Uncle", and Bunting's Ode 1.18 "The Complaint of the Morpethshire Farmer" depict, that alternative centre is destroyed, and thus the people living on the rural outskirts lose any power they once possessed by losing their land, their livelihoods and their identity. As I will show in the next chapter, the impact on rural and local communities made by ruptures in the wider economic and geographic sphere, is explored in a number of Bunting's poems written in the 1930s, but the present chapter focuses in particular on the plight of the Morpethshire Farmer – a representative of a community, literally peripheral, located on the borderlands between Scotland and England.

"The Complaint of the Morpethshire Farmer" (which I hereafter refer to as "The Complaint") is one of a group of poems that Bunting wrote in the 1930s, which appear to have been motivated by a sense of injustice at the way in which his contemporary financial world exploits and displaces people from the land in which they are born and in which they live. Three Odes (1.18, "The Complaint"; 1.14, "Gin the Goodwife Stint"; and 1.31 "The soil sandy and the plow light") all combine a depiction of current hardship with a projected image of the future these (agricultural) workers face, working in another part of the country, or even on another continent. John Seed writes that Bunting's polemical "Gin the Goodwife Stint" and "The Complaint" 'reflect

³⁹³ Elizabeth Willis, "The Poetics of Affinity : Niedecker, Morris and the Art of Work," in *Radical Vernacular : Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*, ed. Elizabeth Willis (Iowa City, Iowa; London, U. K.: University of Iowa Press, 2008). p. 224.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 225.

the impact of economic depression on rural Northumberland. Both express a deep political pessimism'.³⁹⁵

"The Complaint" depicts the struggle of the local agricultural workforce. The poem highlights the farmer's inability to speak: the poet-speaker overhears him, '[o]n the up-platform at Morpeth Station', 'muttering this song' (*CP*, p. 114).³⁹⁶ Then, using a traditional folk method, attempts to give the farmer's plight sound by reporting his speech in song. As is also seen in Bunting's Virgil-derived Ode 1.31, an 'ubi sunt' motif is used to heighten the poignancy of a lost past:

Where are ye, my seven score sheep?
Feeding on other braes!
My brand has faded from your fleece,
another has its place.

The fold beneath the rowan
where ye were dipt before,
its cowpit walls are overgrown,
ye would na heed them more.

(*CP*, p. 114)

By referring to a long-gone 'shire' designation for the area around Morpeth, a still-extant town, Bunting claims old land for the now displaced farmer. In this poem, he is concerned with catching a dying tradition of skilled labour, literally a departing culture, as the (presumably tenant) farmer is set to leave the North East of England for Canada, forced out by the sale of his land underneath him. Bunting strives to keep the rural work tradition of the Northumbrian farmer alive with his use of colloquial language and inflection: 'ye... braes... dipt... cowpit... ye would na heed them more'. In his notes to the poem, he explains, for the uninitiated, that 'cowpit means overturned' (*CP*, p. 227). The specialised argot of the rural worker recalls a predominantly oral tradition. Matthew Hart notes the lack of written local dialect in Bunting's poetry. He writes of Bunting's 'circumvention of dialect orthography' despite his interest in local

³⁹⁵ Seed, "Poetry and Politics in the 1930s : Basil Bunting's Other History." p. 106.

³⁹⁶ The poem is reproduced in its entirety in Appendix B of this thesis.

and traditional oral culture.³⁹⁷ However, Hart's chapter on Bunting's regionalist poetry and his emphasis on reading verse aloud does not mention either "The Complaint" or the ancient Cumbric shepherd's counting system that opens Ode 2.12, "Dentdale Conversation": 'Yan tan tethera pethera pimp' (*CP*, p. 200). Bunting's prioritization of oral over written culture is asserted in "The Written Record", an essay drafted, but seemingly not published until after the poet's death, in which he writes about the Ozymandian (i.e. dominant, but destructible) quality of the written document and the 'bias of paper':

The written record, transcribed and handed down for centuries in the same form, grows into a ponderous tradition and leads to the illusion of permanence, - even permanent growth. But there are few things as easily destroyed as paper. Susceptible to rapid consumption by fire and slow decay, paper cannot survive a geological catastrophe, or even a relatively short period of neglect... Yet on the professorial stool and among its unattached proponents words acquire the finality of a definition.³⁹⁸

So, for Bunting, a recourse to oral culture is a political move: a move against dominant culture. He writes about the difficulty to record an oral culture within written culture: 'Paper's authorities on language record that any idea can be translated into any language: but it must be stated in terms of the categories of that language in which it is expressed.'³⁹⁹ Thus in the process of being translated into written culture, oral culture is destroyed. Therefore in "The Complaint of the Morpethshire Farmer", he is doing something unusual. The poem's metre, also, is markedly tight, and different to the more varying and personalised musical rhythm of his other verse. The poem is written in ballad form, with the repeated and strict rhyme, A, B, A, B. The rhythm varies a little in each quatrain, a slight alteration from the unbroken iambics dreaded by Pound. The form, here, speaks.

The prose sense complements the traditional (and ironically adopted) 'complaint' form. But Bunting's use of the ballad is surprising for a poet who is usually

³⁹⁷ Matthew Hart, *Nations of Nothing but Poetry : Modernism, Transnationalism, and Synthetic Vernacular Writing* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). p. 98.

³⁹⁸ Bunting, "The Written Record" in *Three Essays*. pp. 8-19. p. 18; p. 8. (Editor Richard Caddel's introduction notes that "The Written Record" probably dates to around the 1920s or 1930s. Cf. p. 3).

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 16.

more experimental with prosody and form. Wordsworth's influence on Bunting is audible in this attempt to capture local voices in simple, traditional song-forms. The ballad links to a tradition of orally-related folk culture and local song. The poem is made to be sung, in order that the voice of the farmer (of the disenfranchised rural community) may ring out. In this work, Bunting protests the appropriation of the worker's work-environment that is purloined and divided up amongst the wealthy ruling classes. The plight is made more poignant by its new incarnation as a pleasure-garden. Where once work crucial to survival took place, the leisure activities (in this case, grouse-hunting) of the upper classes are prioritised and the environment is changed: 'Sheep and cattle are poor men's food, / grouse is for the rich' (*CP*, p. 115). The poem exposes and criticises the defectiveness of a political system which has its base in the affluent South, many miles from the area which it is devastating. This destruction of land is also the concern of Ode 1.31, which takes as its scene the blasted landscape of the Dust Bowl Midwest.

The ranging but specific geographies of Bunting's 1930s odes help to convey Bunting's prizing of specificity, smallness and localness. Bunting once wrote about his politics, 'I began with a wish to limit my aims (abolish the protection of 'game' in England to extend the range of black-faced sheep), and they were still too abstract and ambitious to do anything but harm if I'd persisted.'⁴⁰⁰ For Bunting truth is achieved, at first, by concentration, by focus on the local.

Perhaps the most prolonged, and explicit, portrayal of a community's demise under burgeoning capitalism that Niedecker makes can be found in her short prose piece, "Uncle", which, based on actual events, details the downfall of a family dairy business. There are further, shorter, examples, from her poetic work, which similarly present folk culture as a blighted alternative to capitalist big business. In these works, and others, arguably, Niedecker pays even closer attention to how form can supplement what the prose sense says than Bunting does. Take for example "'Canvass' 'For exhibition' 'Tea'", an early work which I read as a 'trptych', in which three columnar poems are laid out alongside each other across a landscape page, and in which words and phrases across the poems are interlinked by internal rhymes [see Figure 1 below].

⁴⁰⁰ Bunting in a letter to Pound, in Reagan, "Basil Bunting Obiter Dicta." p. 272.

The manifold ways of reading the triptych lend it a democratic mutability of meaning (and the sense is up to the reader to decide). If peripheries, or borders, are sites where there is potential for change, for alternatives to be imagined without the influence of the central power, then Niedecker's triptych form reflects the multiple possibilities of the peripheries. The opening words, 'unrefractory petalbert', terms related perhaps to basic physics, first present an image of light beams travelling through different media, unbent (undeterred?), where normally they would be bent; then 'petalbert' couples the rays with centripetal force: is the pull of centralised mainstream culture what is suggested here?

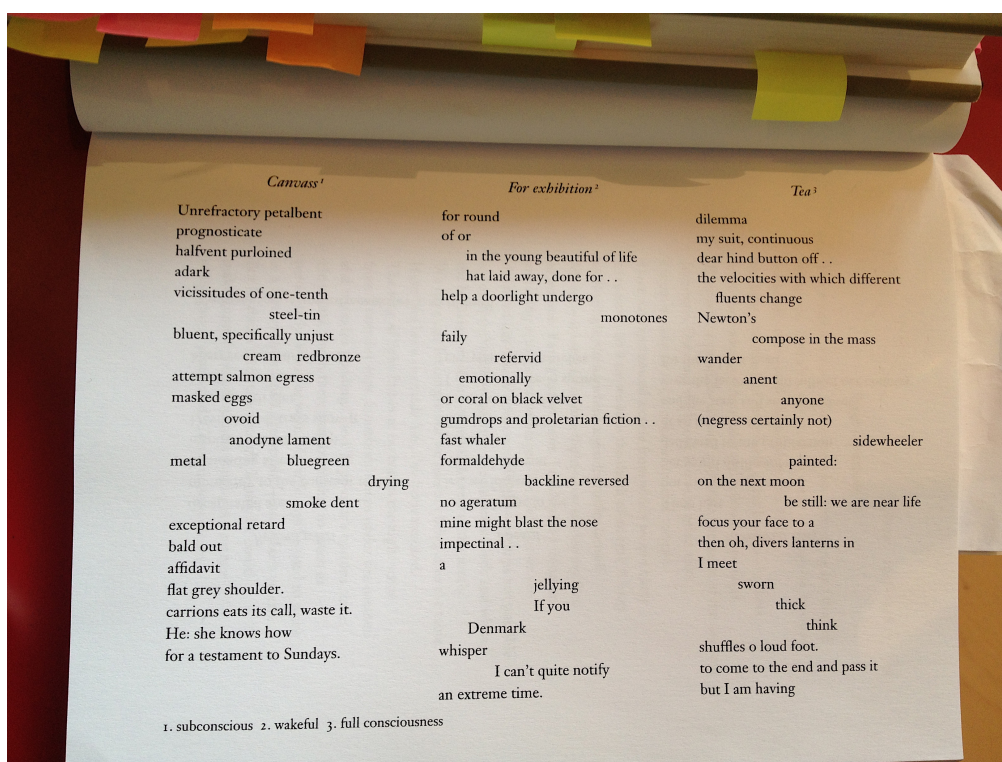


Figure 1: Lorine Niedecker “ ‘Canvass’; ‘For Exhibition’; ‘Tea’”. In *Collected Works*, Ed. Penberthy, p. 33.

If that is the case then its alternative is offered by the numerous ways in which the poem can move next – to lines to the side or below: many combinations of words are possible: ‘unrefractory petalbert / for round / dilemma’ or ‘unrefractory petalbert / prognosticate’, just to begin with. Peter Middleton refers to Niedecker's craft: she was ‘a grand master of rich inference in a terse phrase.’⁴⁰¹ These dream words of Niedecker's (it is said she recorded them on waking, with a pencil she kept under her pillow) form countless connections but it is the invitation to the reader to make their

⁴⁰¹ Peter Middleton, "The British Niedecker," in *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*, ed. Elizabeth Willis (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press). p. 251.

own poem that is interesting, and political. This method is also a seeming continuation of Pound's 'openly volitionist' project, though it has more in common with Zukofsky's paratactic work in which spaces on the page mean as much as words do, than it does with Bunting's poetry. The poem does not relay or create a singular message, but is the demonstration of the manifold possibilities that an unbounded future holds. In another work, Niedecker affirms the importance of the spaces between the words (the peripheries):

For so long one
has seen nothing
to be really anxious
about – it's always
just a flower in
the buttonhole,
but insipid con-
nections count
for a day –
tomorrow is
the fairest.⁴⁰²

If, for Bunting and Niedecker, poetic forms are related to geographic locations, then this work suggests that meaning is made in the margins.

By the mid-1930s Niedecker's poetry had become less oneiric, more rooted in waking life (though still containing those shimmying alternative possibilities for interpretation). 1936 saw the beginning of what Penberthy terms Niedecker's 'folk project', which included the publication of her "Mother Geese" and *New Goose* sequences: nursery rhyme-inspired series which collected images, voices and stories from her local community, as well as national news, and scientific and naturalist data.⁴⁰³ These short and memorable pieces use the same sort of devices as Bunting's "Complaint". The rhyme and rhythmic patterns common to popular, balladic, folk forms simultaneously act as mnemonics and make the poems even more poignant, as

⁴⁰² Lorine Niedecker, from "Next Year or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous" in Lorine Niedecker, *Lorine Niedecker Collected Works*, ed. Jenny Lynn Penberthy (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 2002). p. 49.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.* p. 372 (notes).

the suffering and hardship which many of them depict are far from the playful, optimistic and child-orientated content of the classic nursery rhyme. Take, for example:

A country's economics sick
affects its people's speech.

No bread and cheese and strawberries
I have no pay, they say.

Till in revolution rises
the strength to change

the undigestible phrase.⁴⁰⁴

In this poem the same concern raised by Bunting's "The Complaint" about the inability of a predominantly oral culture to speak out against the destruction of its culture, is raised. Niedecker also makes a connection between post-industrial revolution economics, anthropomorphised as 'sick', and the equally unfair Early Modern body politic. In this modern rendition, if the head (the economic system) sickens, the mouth (the 'people's speech') sickens, too.

New Goose contains poems which depict the dire plights of individual workers, for example the southern sharecropper (an equivalent farmer features in Bunting's Ode I.31) for whom, punningly, 'housing conditions are grave.'⁴⁰⁵ One poem's heartfelt protest against legal restrictions for ice fishing (in the 1940s, a method of catching fish more suited to subsistence, or sport, with no commercial potential!) is reminiscent of Bunting's protest about the sale of land in "The Complaint" and "They Say Etna": who owns the ice? This is the full poem:

Here it gives the laws for fishing thru the ice –
only one hook to a line,
stay at the hole, can't go in to warm up,
well, we never go fishing, so they can't catch us.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid. p. 86.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 98.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

The sense is reiterated and the themes of 'fishing', leisure and ownership are revived in a poem on the next page of the sequence:

We know him – Law and Order League –
 fishing from our dock,
 testified against the pickets
 at the plant – owns stock.

There he sits and fishes
 stiff as if a stork
 brought him, never sprang from work –
 a sport.⁴⁰⁷

The poet-speaker is allied with the local labouring society. The poem speaks for a working, and politically engaged '[w]e' who claim their place – 'our dock' – against the 'him' who doesn't work, who is an owner of industry, and for whom fishing is only for fun, and not for food.

Equally present in Bunting's and Niedecker's work of this period is an attention to folk knowledge, for example of the kind somewhat bitterly imparted in this short poem from *New Goose*:

My man says the wind blows from the south,
 we go out fishing, he has no luck,
 I catch a dozen, that burns him up,
 I face the east and the wind's in my mouth,
 But my man has to have it in the south.⁴⁰⁸

This poem also presents a counter to the traditional gender roles in work that, as I have argued in the previous chapter, exist in Bunting's work. But the man is 'burned up', emasculated by his woman's success, and there's a hint that he takes his revenge psychosexually (or even just sexually), imposing his will: he 'has to have it in the south.'

Bunting's and Niedecker's real-life attachments to the environments that they portray are necessarily political, and thus these geographies take on a political

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 99.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 97.

dimension in the poets' work. Michael Davidson writes that for Niedecker, people and places are inextricably interlinked: 'human and natural history form a continuum in which to comment on one is to invoke the other.'⁴⁰⁹ He quotes from her notes to "Lake Superior" to illustrate his point; in these, Niedecker writes: 'the North is one massive, glorious corruption of rock and language. People of all nationalities and color have changed the language, like weather and pressure have changed the rocks.'⁴¹⁰

The political possibility of the unclaimed space of the margins that opens up in Bunting's and Niedecker's work is of particular interest to my investigation into Bunting's political poetics, and looking at Niedecker's more openly socially engaged poetry helps illuminate this aspect of Bunting's work. Furthermore, the connection that these poets make between natural landscape and rural human community is something that simultaneously unites them, and singles them out among their peers. They are apparently isolated and regionalist figures, living far apart and in very different environments, but they find something in common with each other (Bunting visited Niedecker in the mid 1960s.⁴¹¹ They wrote poems for one another, Quartermain informs: Niedecker's *The Ballad of Basil*; Bunting's "To abate what swells").⁴¹² Jenny Penberthy writes that in January 1971, six days after Niedecker's death in Black Hawk, Basil Bunting, in Wylam Northumberland, wrote a letter to *The Wisconsin State Journal* (a local newspaper, thus tending towards that sought-after truth through accuracy):

Lorine Niedecker... will be remembered long and warmly in England, a country she never visited. She was, in the estimation of many, the most interesting woman poet America has yet produced. Her work was austere, free of all ornament, relying on the fundamental rhythms of concise statement, so that to many readers it must have seemed strange and bare. She was only beginning to be appreciated when she died, but I have no doubt at all that in 10 years time Wisconsin will know that she was its most considerable literary figure.⁴¹³

⁴⁰⁹ Michael Davidson, *On the Outskirts of Form : Practicing Cultural Poetics* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2011). p. 85.

⁴¹⁰ Niedecker, quoted by Davidson, p. 85. Quotation source: Jenny Lynn Penberthy, ed. *Lorine Niedecker : Woman and Poet* (Orono, Me.: National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1996). pp. 313-4.

⁴¹¹ Cf. Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us*. p. 423.

⁴¹² Peter Quartermain, "Take Oil/ and Hum: Niedecker/ Bunting" in Willis, *Radical Vernacular*. pp. 271-283 p. 282, n. 12.

⁴¹³ Basil Bunting quoted in introduction to Niedecker, *Lorine Niedecker Collected Works*. pp.10-11.

As well as a friendship between them, there is commonality in their work despite the considerable geographic distance that separates Black Hawk Island from Northumberland. The poets' seeming self-marginalisation is complicated by the fact of their trans-national, trans-continental relationship; in fact, their marginal positions unite them. Peter Quartermain writes that, uninterrupted by the distractions of poetry readings and high society, the pair's outlying locations led to 'a certain kind of bookishness' and he quotes Richard Caddel's avowal that living on the margin permits a kind of freedom unattainable when located closer to the centre of power. Quartermain believes Bunting and Niedecker share:

an affinity with borders and border creatures, the overlooked and the unrespectable – “a kinship,” as Elizabeth Robinson says, “with persons on the edge.”⁴¹⁴

Middleton has written about Niedecker's relationship with both folk and literary culture, as well as her interaction with her local natural environment and working community. His essays, “Folk Poetry and the American Avant-Garde: Placing Lorine Niedecker” and “Lorine Niedecker's ‘Folk Base’ and her Challenge to the American Avant-Garde”, examine the effect that transferring traditional, local culture into national, or even international print culture has on that folk culture, as well as how participation in a trans-national collective impacts the individual, rural writer and her community.⁴¹⁵ Davidson's work on what he terms Niedecker's “Critical Regionalism” also considers the poet's politicised, folk-experimentalist poetics.⁴¹⁶ He has even asserted that her rural, leftist, localist focus provides another – an alternative – modernism. And a number of critics have spotted the similarities between Bunting and Niedecker. Many of the shared features of the two poets' work can be drawn together

⁴¹⁴ Peter Quartermain, “Take Oil/ and Hum” in Willis, *Radical Vernacular*. pp. 271-283. pp. 278-9.

⁴¹⁵ Cf. Peter Middleton, “Folk Poetry and the American Avant-Garde: Placing Lorine Niedecker,” *Journal of American Studies* 31, no. 2 (1997). pp. 203-218; and “Lorine Niedecker's ‘Folk Base’ and her Challenge to the American Avant-Garde” in Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain, *The Objectivist Nexus : Essays in Cultural Poetics*, Modern and Contemporary Poetics (Tuscaloosa ; London: University of Alabama Press, 1999). pp. 160-188.

⁴¹⁶ Cf. Davidson, “Life by Water: Lorine Niedecker and Critical Regionalism” in *On the Outskirts of Form : Practicing Cultural Poetics*. pp. 75-91.

under their materialist tendencies, expressed in the poetry by an attention to form. In their work, poetic form is aligned with plastic form, political structures and natural topographies. Arguably these poets' addresses to the centre from the margins, and attempts to find something whole and complete through a focused, localised specificity in their work, demonstrate a resistance to the kinds of abstraction created by capitalism: theirs is a reaction to an increasingly fragmented, atomised, modern world, and that is a thoroughly modernist matter.



Chapter Eight

O Ubi Campi!

Basil Bunting's Disaster Period

As discussed in Part One, in “They Say Etna” and *Briggflatts* Bunting presents industrial labour as discordant with nature. Through these presentations his poetry argues against the split between manual work and intellectualised or leisured art. The first part of this thesis used William Morris’s theories about working, making and art, as well as aesthetics, to argue that in the Morris-led socialist tradition of thought, the conditions of an artwork’s manufacture are inseparable from its beauty. Furthermore, Morris sees that the mode of production typical of handicraft favours an egalitarian system of exchange, whereby the maker of the product, ideally, receives his or her due. This contributes to the well of human happiness. He writes about the moral aspect of craft:

the pleasure of *buying* goods at their due price; with the pleasure of *selling* goods that we could be proud of both for fair prices and fair workmanship: with the pleasure of working soundly and without haste at *making* goods that we could be proud of.⁴¹⁷

This chapter investigates Bunting’s poems’ portrayal of wider world concerns by examining a group of poems written in the 1930s that depict historical and contemporary global events. An inquiry into the failure of large governments to respond to or prevent natural disaster is common to all of what I term Bunting’s 1930s ‘disaster poems’. This group includes two long poems: “Chomei at Toyama” and “They Say Etna” and a trio of odes (as mentioned above, these are Odes I.14, “Gin the Goodwife Stint”; I.18, “The Complaint”; and I.31 “The soil sandy and the plow light”). All of the poems are situated in specific places, and depict the negative impact of wider-world powers on local communities. The odes focus on local cultures whose traditional skilled labour is no longer required in the increasingly globalised capitalist system. The three odes, in some way or another, portray migration and the isolation from one’s community that migration, necessitated by the actions of a corrupt,

⁴¹⁷ Morris, “The Lesser Arts.” p. 512.

negligent or inept overarching power, brings. If Bunting believes local knowledge tends more closely to truth and expertise than a global perspective, then he also portrays the damage that will be done to the histories and culture of the displaced people (because they lose their locales), as well as the impact that their displacement will have on their ability to practice fulfilling work and live in satisfactory conditions. In a final twist, this local expertise might very well include the agricultural knowledge and awareness of the local land that would be required to prevent or limit the impact of large scale disasters, a type of expertise that is so old and entrenched in the oral tradition that it is even put into verse by Virgil, hence Bunting's reference to the pedagogic agricultural verse of *The Georgics* in Ode 1.31.

Chomei at Toyama

Thomas Cole, reviewing *Poems: 1950*, acknowledges something which only a few critics do: Bunting's attention to the exploited and neglected members of society, with a particular focus on how their condition is a direct result of an inept, or elitist, government combined with a greedy class of managers and industry owners; in other words an unmistakably socialist conscience. Cole, in 1950, not only spots Bunting's leftism, but also wonders whether the poet's politics might be the cause of his relatively minor presence in the poetic world. Cole writes that "Chomei at Toyama":

contains much of Bunting's railing against the ultimate decadence which follows bad government and the over-crowded conditions in great capitals. It is surprising with what ease Bunting operates amid social ideas (which ideas I suspect have helped keep him out of the picture in English poetry these past thirty years).⁴¹⁸

In "Chomei at Toyama", Bunting explores the inequalities of the capitalist system by imagining a life lived outside of it. The poem, which is a translation, or Poundian renewal, of the medieval Japanese Kamo-no-Chomei's *Hojoki*, "The Ten Foot Square Hut," portrays a poet who exists outside society. Considerably pre-dating the Walden Pond of Thoreau's work, or Bunting's own seclusion, this poet has rejected the corruptions of his society. He removes himself, thus allowing for an objective

⁴¹⁸ Thomas Cole, "Bunting: Formal Aspects," *Poetry* 78, no. 6 (1951). p. 367.

viewpoint, from which he may observe and comment upon the wrongdoings of this society.

“Chomei” is a poem of protest-by-rejection in the vein of the lyric tradition. It presents society (both ancient and modern) as corrupt, unequal and even fatal, for those at the bottom. The poem moves through three key stages: in the first, the medieval protagonist relates a series of disastrous events that befall the city (a surreal hybrid of medieval Kyoto, modern Los Angeles and rural England). He is well placed to observe, and comment upon these events, he asserts: ‘I have been noting events forty years.’ (CP, p. 85) This external observer moves further and further away from the city life that he comes to abjure.

Bunting explained he developed “Chomei” as a translation, ‘condensation’ and poeticisation of the twelfth-century Japanese prose original:

The Ho-Jo-Ki is in prose, but the careful proportion and balance of its parts, the leit-motif of the House running through it, and some other indications, suggest that he intended a poem, more or less elegiac; but had not time, nor possibly energy, at his then age, to work out what would have been for Japan an entirely new form, nor to condense his material sufficiently. This I have attempted for him.⁴¹⁹

The first pages of the poem list the impact of several disasters on the society observed, and the rulers’ response to these disasters. The first is a fire, set specifically in medieval Japan:

On the twentyseventh May eleven hundred
and seventyseven, eight p.m., fire broke out
at the corner of Tomi and Higuchi streets.
In a night
palace, ministries, university, parliament
were destroyed.

(CP, p. 85)

Sixteen great officials lost houses and
very many poor. A third of the city burned;

⁴¹⁹ Bunting’s notes that accompany “Chomei at Toyama” appear in Harriet Monroe (Ed), “News Notes,” *ibid.* 42 (1933). p. 357.

several thousands died; and of beasts,
limitless numbers.

Men are fools to invest in real estate.

(*CP*, p. 86)

The anachronistic reference to the modern and American-English 'real estate' is incongruous: this is evidently not a straight translation. The endless cycle of human suffering is conveyed by the modern terminology used to deliver the medieval speaker's conclusion on viewing the fire: the moral of these events is that '[m]en are fools to invest in real estate.' (*CP*, p. 86) Capital and ownership of property by the ruling class are presented as the cause of the rest of society's degradation. Inequity causes the exponential suffering of the weak: in the case of the fire reported by Chomei, the mass of lesser members in society are so numerous and faceless that they are unquantifiable as individuals:

The next disaster, a cyclone, is dated in the Japanese medieval period, but is specifically located in modern LA, and it swiftly follows the first:

Three years less three days later a wind
starting near the outer boulevard
broke a path a quarter mile across
to Sixth avenue.

(*CP*, p. 86)

It is evident that Bunting is using Chomei's removed viewpoint to regard contemporary western consumer culture. This constitutes a two-fold removal since the hermit, Chomei, exists outside society in a geographical sense, and Bunting, by using an obscure medieval Japanese text to think about life in the contemporary West, positions the poem outside society in a temporal sense: though, as the poem reveals, things are not so different. Bunting advises, through the mouth of Chomei: '[t]o appreciate present conditions / collate them with those of antiquity.' (*CP*, p. 87) And so the poem proceeds, collating the natural and financial disasters of medieval Japan with those of the modern era, knowing already how the present will compare with the past. Philip Hobsbaum writes about Chomei that '[i]n leaving the world, he discovers his

sense of it.⁴²⁰ This is one of the fundamental aims, and ironies, of the poem. The collation prompts the realisation that society has failed to progress from brutality to beneficence, and the exploitation of the weak continues.

Bunting's poem, like others written in the period, presents natural and economic disasters in order to put social and political structures to the test. The way in which disaster impacts the different levels of society is symptomatic of the longer-term, and wider, functioning of that society. In the case of the cyclone, the poem suggests that the historical, and fatal, disregard for the impoverished will continue. His widely-spaced lines are chillingly sparse:

Massacre without cause.

Portent?

(*CP*, p. 86)

The third disaster is entirely man-made, or in fact state-made, and the poem portrays financial disaster coupled with human displacement. The decision of the rulers (and perhaps the modern manifestation would be the markets) to move the city is presented as something that just happens, as if decreed by a god:

The same year thunderbolted change of capital,
fixed here, Kyoto, for ages.

Nothing compelled the change nor was it an easy matter
but the grumbling was disproportionate.

(*CP*, p. 86)

The impulsive decisions of those in power cause devastation to the old and the new cities, and its citizens. The speaker of the poem has more foresight than whoever commanded the move:

There was no flat place for houses, many vacant lots,
the former capital wrecked, the new a camp,
and thoughts like clouds changing, frayed by a breath:
peasants bewailing lost land, newcomers aghast at prices.

⁴²⁰ Philip Hobsbaum, "Beyond the Iambic Norm" in McGonigal and Price, *The Star You Steer By: Basil Bunting and British Modernism*. pp. 35-53. p. 37.

No one in uniform: the crowds
resembled demobilized conscripts.

(*CP*, p. 87)

Again, the event is located specifically in Kyoto but its outcome is related in modern, and American terms featuring 'vacant lots' and 'demobilized conscripts.'

After the citizens return to the old Kyoto (the new site was unsuitable), the poet-speaker pauses his presentation to consider what he has seen, and delivers the aforementioned instruction for the poem:

I have heard of a time when kings beneath bark rooves
watched chimneys.

When smoke was scarce, taxes were remitted.

To appreciate present conditions
collate them with antiquity.

(*CP*, p. 87)

Disasters four, five and six arrive together in one line, and again Bunting combines past Kyoto and present LA (cars on Riverside Drive) in their presentation:

Drought, floods, and a dearth. Two fruitless autumns.

Empty for markets, swarms of beggars. Jewels

sold for a handful of rice. Dead stank

on the curb, lay so thick on

Riverside Drive a car couldn't pass.

The pest bred.

(*CP*, p. 87)

Following the lines about looking to the past to appreciate the present, this image of the present mocks the idea of human progress. Rather than beneficent governance, beggars plague a scene in which rotting corpses present a mere inconvenience to the elite individuals who venture out in cars.

The seventh disaster even more obviously clashes past with present being, juxtaposing 'is' and 'was'. Furthermore, the poem suddenly enters into a Romantic lyric

mode, the voice (it doesn't sound like Chomei's) apostrophising in a typically English landscape:

Crack, rush, ye mountains, bury your rills!
 Spread your green glass, ocean, over the meadows!
 Scream, avalanche, boulders amok, strangle the dale!
 O ships in the sea's power, O horses
 on shifting roads, in the earth's power, without hoofhold!
 This **is** the earthquake, this **was**
 the great earthquake of Genryaku!

The chapel fell, the abbey, the minister and the small shrines
 fell, their dust rose and a thunder of houses falling.

(*CP*, pp. 87-8. Emphasis added.)

Though the earthquake took place in the twelfth-century Genryaku era, here it becomes representative of a rumbling breaking of the whole humanity. The chapel, abbey and minister belong to England (not America); the small shrines are Japanese. Chomei laments about the earthquake: 'Nobody mentions it now. / This is the unstable world and / we in it unstable and our houses.' (*CP*, p. 88) The poem presents the instability of collective memory alongside the instability of physical structures. Such transience renders material wealth meaningless. At this point the poem moves away from its depiction of disasters old and new, and moves into its second phase: an extended polemic against consumerism and commercialism:

A poor man living amongst the rich
 gives no rowdy parties, doesn't sing.
 Dare he keep his child at home, keep a dog?
 He dare not pity himself above a whimper.

But he visits, he flatters, he is put in his place,
 he remembers the patch on his trousers...

If he lives in an alley of rotting frame houses
 he dreads a fire.

If he commutes he loses his time

and leaves his house daily to be plundered by gunmen.

The bureaucrats are avaricious.

He who has no relatives in the Inland Revenue,

poor devil!

(*CP*, p. 88)

The inarticulate suffering of the 'poor man', who 'doesn't sing' is exacerbated by the system of power in his society, a stultifying hierarchy. Bureaucrats in the 'Inland Revenue' highlight that this power structure is still standing in the present day (in Britain). The succinct phrasing of the last two lines quoted evokes the concision of the aphorism. Bunting plays on an older form of wisdom, such as is seen in the fable, presenting a proverb for modern times and exposing the worthlessness of the system of capital as means of exchange and cause for exploitation. The folk form that could communicate the sufferings of the downtrodden lower class in the poem instead offers further bad news: confirmation of the society's inescapability.

In his notes to the poem, Bunting writes that Kamo no Chomei 'was as modern as, say, Cummings. His Kyoto had a number of curiously detailed parallels with modern New York and Chicago.'⁴²¹ By this point in his life Bunting had stayed in New York, as well as Los Angeles, and had witnessed first hand some of the devastation that followed the Great Depression, as well as encountering the many newly-homeless migrants fleeing the Dustbowl (whose quandary is focused on in Ode 1.31). The impermanence of human life, and particularly social standing is constantly referred to in Chomei. From the buildings that fall, the towns that are destroyed, the property that is lost or devalued and the people who flee and societies which crumble in the series of natural disasters in twelfth-century Kyoto, the instability and impermanence of bewitching capital is always in the background of the poem. Bunting's cross-temporal references to Sixth Avenue and Riverside Drive hint at the danger humans put themselves in by trusting, like a God, a merely physical edifice: a cipher for money. Wall Street was, of course, such a street, and the disastrous fallout from the Crash of 1929 occurred because of such blind trust in finance. In "Chomei" in the same, unexpected and devastating way as the financial market did in 1929, nature turns; and

⁴²¹ Bunting, Notes to "Chomei" in Monroe (Ed), "News Notes." p. 357.

it devastates, the poem argues, because humans have turned away from their own natures and treat money as if it were natural. Furthermore they abuse the natural world in order to accrue profit. “Chomei” suggests it is particularly society’s reliance on material goods, and property, that makes humans so vulnerable. The modern objects and concerns in the poem are not contrasted with the old world, but show how similar human life is and how little has changed. ‘Bureaucrats’ (‘great men’ in Dickins’s 1907 translation) are still ‘avaricious’.⁴²²

The poem presents the inequities and the oppressiveness of a system in which every action demands recompense and Morris’s ideal of labour carried out for pleasure (for oneself or another) is impossible. For the ‘poor man’

Whoever helps him enslaves him
and follows him crying out: *Gratitude!*
If he wants success he is wretched.
If he doesn’t he passes for mad.
(CP, p. 89)

After this list of dilemmas, the protagonist decides society is hopeless, and looks for an alternative, and his first consideration involves labour. The speaker asks: ‘Where shall I settle, what trade choose / that the mind may practise, the body rest?’

The poem moves into its third, and final, phase depicting the outcome of the speaker’s choice of rural solitude over city living: ‘I built a house to suit myself’:

...before I was fifty
I perceived there was no time to lose,
left home and conversation.
(CP, p. 89)

The craft that fills the speaker’s days after leaving ‘home and conversation’ fulfil the requirements for wholesome work and a happy life that Morris demands: ‘hope of rest, hope of product, hope of pleasure in the work itself’ and that the rest be ‘rest enough and good enough to be worth having.’⁴²³ In “Chomei”, the speaker, even when he is making music is presented as an artisan, like the mason of *Briggflatts*. He works using his hands (the defining factor in manufacture and handicraft):

⁴²² Kamo No Chomei, *Hō-jō-Ki* : (*Notes from a Ten Feet Square Hut*), trans. F. Victor Dickins (London: Gowans & Gray, 1907). p. 17.

⁴²³ Morris, "Useful Work Versus Useless Toil." p. 604.

Be limber, my fingers, I am going to play *Autumn Wind*
 to the pines, I am going to play *Hastening Brook*
 to the water. I am no player
 but there's nobody listening,
 I do it for my own amusement.
 (CP, p. 91)

As I have shown, private letters reveal the outspoken leftist beliefs that Bunting tends to suppress in his poetry. Under the current system of power, this sort of pleasure in the freedom to work for oneself (that, as he writes to Zukofsky, he wishes people would find in writing) is not available to everybody. The accrual of power and capital, or the need to survive, in Bunting's view, replaces pleasure. He regards capital suspiciously and with contempt. Again, to Zukofsky, he writes about 'the idle... thirst for money.'⁴²⁴ It is idle because it does not promote wholesome labour, and doesn't lead to happiness: whether for individual or society. The kind of labour promoted in Chomei is useful, constructive and physical, represented by the poet's building of his house, an alternative to the 'unstable world' that he rejects. The speaker writes about his construction: 'reckoning it a lodging not a dwelling, / [I] omitted the usual foundation ceremony.'(CP, p. 89) Rather than imagine that human society has some control over nature, the house is built to entirely accept and prepare for the natural transience of life:

I have filled the frames with clay,
 set hinges at the corners;
 easy to take it down and carry it away
 when I get bored of this place.
 (CP, p. 89)

The poem presents solitude positively, at first, portraying a life spent walking mountains, observing the rhythms of nature, playing music, reciting poetry, raking ashes, looking at the view: 'a very economical way of enjoying yourself.' (CP, p. 91) The speaker's relationship to time, mediated by nature, rather than employer, is also liberated; but the poem begins to introduce a certain sad, or sour, note to Chomei's extra-societal lifestyle:

⁴²⁴ Bunting in a letter to Zukofsky, 1953. Terrell, ed. *Basil* *ibid.* (273)

Neither closed in one landscape
 nor in one season
 the mind moving in illimitable
 recollection...

I know myself and mankind.

(*CP*, p. 92)

Hankering, vexation and apathy,
 that's the run of the world.

Hankering, vexation and apathy,
 keeping a carriage wont cure it.

(*CP*, p. 93)

The misleading glister of wealth versus the positive acceptance of life's fleeting existence is a philosophy that permeates the whole of Bunting's translation. Interestingly, he chooses to leave out the part in Chomei's original that preaches the message of acceptance explicitly:

The hermit-crab is satisfied with a narrow shell for its home, which shows that it knows its own nature... So is it with me. A man who knows himself and also the world he lives in has nothing to ask for, no society to long for; he aims only at a quiet life, and makes his happiness in freedom from annoyance. But those who live in the world, what do they do? They build mansions, but not for their own pleasure; 'tis for their wives and families, for their relatives and friends, for their masters or teachers, or to store their property⁴²⁵

In Bunting's condensation this appears simply as:

I know myself and mankind.

.....

I dont want to be bothered.

(*CP*, p. 92)

The line of ellipses leaves the reader to work out the rest of the message. The inference is that humans suffer greatly during natural disasters because their material

⁴²⁵ Chomei, *Hō-Jō-Ki*. p. 25.

world is not designed to accept its own ending. The earthquake, fire, drought and famine in the poem belie the stability and the message of progress that humans attribute to cold hard cash, and stately buildings. Bunting chooses to omit the implication in Dickins' translation, that one's own friends and family are part of the burden (though this doesn't mean he didn't agree).

The speaker's work of building the house, which is 'no trouble at all' is set alongside his creative work: singing (*CP*, p. 90). In Chomei's life of solitude, no distinction is made between intellectual and manual forms of labour. The poet asks:

A man like me can have neither servants nor friends
 in the present state of society.
 If I did not build for myself
 for whom should I build?
 (*CP*, p. 92)

Creating for oneself (and one's own survival) is promoted again, though this time it is presented in relation to manual labour, and this labour is presented as undifferentiated from the song. However the sense that the removed speaker has compromised the positive aspects of social life, company and kinship, for help with work and conversation, develops. It is not possible to enjoy a social life outside of society, and this is something the speaker laments. The last lines of the poems confirm the speaker's loneliness:

I have renounced the world;
 have a saintly
 appearance.

I do not enjoy being poor,
 I've a passionate nature.
 My tongue
 clacked a few prayers.
 (*CP*, p. 94)

By the end, the poem indicates the impossibility of individual happiness in a world where others are suffering, suppressed, and exploited.

O Ubi Campi!

Bunting's Ode 1.31 (1936) is part warning, part report, part reproach. The poem is evidently set in the American Dust Bowl, though its epigraph, 'O ubi campi!' is taken from Virgil's *Georgics*, a poetic 'how to' guide to agriculture. The quotation is used in this context to lament the lost green fields of the prairielands, and is another example of Bunting's collation of present conditions with those of the antiquity. With his opening quotation Bunting ironically sets the tone of the poem, one of longing for a pastoral idyll, which leads to the main thrust of the poem: an indictment of contemporary farming practices within a burgeoning world of consumer capitalism and mass production, and a portrayal of exploitation, destitution and displacement within this world. As well as signalling to the bucolic verse tradition, Bunting also makes use of the 'ubi sunt' motif. The regretful and retrospective 'where are...?' is used by poets as diverse (but significantly united by Bunting's high regard) as Khayyam, Dante and the Anglo Saxon author of *The Seafarer*. The device also appears in Villon's *Testament*, in which the nostalgic poet pines for the beautiful women of the past, asking as a refrain, '[w]here are the snows of yesteryear?' The motif assembles a complex of different time-points by drawing attention to difference between the moment of the poem's 'speaking' (who is it who asks 'where?'), the historical moment referred to, and the 'yesteryear' of the past that is no longer discernible (hence inquiry into its whereabouts).

The poem conjures past, present and future: the opening pines for the green grasslands which once covered the prairies from Texas to Canada, but now, the first sentence, informs, the 'soil' is 'sandy and the plow light'. At this point the damage, through ploughing, is still happening and the poem focuses on the impact acts of the past that were carried out 'without forethought' have on the present. Bunting employs a combination of the present continuous and the present perfect tenses in the first, extended, sentence of the poem:

The soil sandy and the plow light, neither
 virgin land nor near by the market town,
 cropping one staple without forethought, steer
 stedfastly ruinward year in year out,
 grudging the labour and cost of manure,
 drudging not for gain but fewer dollars loss

yet certain to make a bad bargain by
misjudging the run of prices.

(*CP*, p. 126)⁴²⁶

In this section, there is foreboding: time intertwines as the poem speaks about the past in the present tense, and is aware of the future: the soil and the plough 'steer stedfastly ruinward'. The assertion that these actions occur 'without forethought' again complicates the aspect of time, as the words come from the present and speak of the past for which the future, in not yet having happened, did not exist, not even in the consciousness of the farmers and their families. It also indicates the lack of future that the land itself would come to have because of its destruction, a process already begun. The lack of human agency in this opening sentence is significant, suggesting the absent and unconcerned state, which was responsible for the development of this impending disaster.

The next sentence, directly addressing an individual, contains a delayed introduction of the first sentence's subject: '...How glad/ you will be when the state takes your farm for / arrears of taxes!' The exclamation marks imply the bitter irony for these farmers who are caught between destitution and death on the prairies, or destitution and death in the cities. The summoning of the individual ('you') draws attention to the voice of the speaker, as well as calling into question the identity of the subject. Who is the 'you' addressed, and who is the trans-temporal and omniscient narrator? The play with time in the poem enables the prescient speaker's awareness of and regret for the situation. Furthermore, this play with time, and with subject in the short poem demonstrates the difficulty of speaking about disaster, and the contingent problems about disaster of accountability, human or natural responsibility and how the chronicling of the cause of disaster is carried out. The opening sentences imply that the farmer purchased the farm with cheap, and easily acquired, government credit, perhaps convinced by a compelling advertising campaign that promised purchasers a better life on the Great Plains, and also suggests that the farmer is no expert: not even aware of the need for crop rotation, the farmer plans 'one staple without forethought'.⁴²⁷

⁴²⁶ The poem is reproduced in full in Appendix C of this thesis.

⁴²⁷ The cause and even the severity of the American Dust Bowl are greatly contested, and many accounts take a political angle on the disastrous period. Pare Lorentz's film,

The second sentence, and the third, both prophetic exclamations, speak to the past about a future that (we now know) is certain. The state is also implicated in this simultaneously ongoing and impending disaster. 'No more cold daybreaks / saffron under the barbed wire the east wind/ thrums, nor wet noons, nor starpinned nights!'. Talk of taxes recalls the state drive to sell off land, purchased for easily-acquired credit (lent by the state itself), and indicates the poem's ideological position that perceives a land devastated by burgeoning universalization, and apparent technological progress in agricultural practice which is required for mass production. The government's drive for food production during the First World War is sometimes cited as a major (and politically-motivated) cause of the eradication of grassland in favour of wheat fields. Placing blame is an ideologically motivated act itself, and thus the poem reveals a hint of the poet's personal political position. The barbed wire acts as a metonym for the partitioning and sale of the land, also hinting at danger, and the 'wet noons', which of course are scarce in a dust bowl, transport the poem from the particular to the more universal.

It might seem odd that Bunting's trio of 'pessimistic' 1930s odes jump from Northumbria to Kansas, particularly bearing in mind Bunting's belief in the authenticity of local knowledge, but the poet had some experience of the Dust Bowl period in America. During the 1930s Bunting lived in Los Angeles, at one time sharing an apartment with the German folk artist, Karl Drerup. Living with meagre means Bunting encountered, and wrote about in letters to friends in England, many migrant workers from all over the world. Living in a booming West Coast city during one of the most significant periods of internal displacement that the United States had ever known, Bunting would surely also have been keenly aware of the plight of the ex-prairie refugees.

"The Plow that Broke the Plains" (1936) was criticised for placing responsibility for the disaster on the settlers themselves (as Bunting's poem could also be interpreted to do), but the film also apportions some blame to the government for persuading people into purchasing this former grassland. 'A land of high winds and sun. A country without rivers. Without streams. With little rain,' the film repeatedly stresses. 'Settler, plough at your peril', its narrator warns. The film argues that the prairies should never have been used for growing crops. It depicts the government push for the growing of wheat: the economy was thriving from selling the crop to European countries during the First World War, and this would account for the 'one staple' grown in Ode 1.31. It is possible that Bunting's poem was inspired by this polemical film.

The past is ironically portrayed as beautiful in its anti-bucolic horror: the 'saffron' sunrise is synaesthetically joined with the sonorous silhouette of barbed wire which cuts across the orange backdrop, thrummed by the invisible, and fatal, wind. The sounds soar in the next lines, indicating the impending future drawing nearer: the future is almost present:

...The choir
of gnats is near a full-close. The windward
copse stops muttering inwardly its prose
bucolics.

At last, the prophecy for the future arrives in the final lines, and the prospect is bleak:

...You will find a city job
or relief – or doss-and-grub – resigned to
anything except your own numb toil, the
seasonal plod to spoil the land, alone.

Once again Bunting is presenting bad labour, though in this instance the urban setting is perhaps not the horror it appears as in other works, for example, Ode I.26 in which a newly-fledged and crazed city slicker demands:

Give me another

double whiskey and fire-extinguisher,
George, here's
Girls!'

(CP, p. 122)

Ode I.31 uses the depleted grassland turned into dead dust bowl as a metaphor for western life in general: over spent, exploited and wasted. The lonesome and unproductive labour required of the farmer whose land is destroyed by greed forces the farmer to relocate and take up a position in the modern world.

The remote destruction of land by an uncaring government is also of concern in "The Complaint" (dated 1930), which I discussed in the previous chapter. The Morpethshire farmer is eventually forced to leave for Canada:

A liner lying in the Clyde

will take me to Quebec.
 My sons'll see the land I am leaving
 as barren as her deck.

(*CP*, p. 115)

Ode I.14, "Gin the Goodwife Stint" (1930), also depicts a tenant farming family forced to relocate to Canada (this time on the Canadian Pacific Railway ticket) because of their aristocratic landlord's inflated rent. I shall look at the poem in more detail, next. The ranging but specific geographies of these three odes help to convey Bunting's prizing of specificity, smallness and localness.

Gin the Goodwife Stint

The ploughland has gone to bent
 and the pasture to heather;
 gin the goodwife stint,
 she'll keep the house together.

Gin the goodwife stint
 and the bairns hunger
 the Duke can get his rent
 one year longer.

The Duke can get his rent
 and we can get our ticket
 twa pund emigrant
 on a C. P. R. packet.

(*CP*, p. 110)

The poem is emphatically headlined: only a few poems in this first batch of odes feature a title. Bunting mixes the literary with local oral tradition, scattering his poem with words and phrases from Northumbrian dialect, like 'gin', pronounced with a hard 'g' and meaning 'if.' Stint here means to scrimp in order to save up. Note, also, the English spelling of 'ploughland' compared to the Americanised 'plow' of Ode I.31.

The first stanza presents an environment undergoing the transition from once useful and labour-maintained land (that also provided the means of labour and survival for its inhabitants) into overgrown decrepitude. ‘The ploughland *has gone to bent*’: there is at this point no suggestion that there is any external influence on this land, and it seems as if nature has simply taken its course as a result of inaction. Fields left unploughed grow into bent – a thick, wild grass, as Bill Griffiths explains in his guide to North Eastern dialect.⁴²⁸ The heather that covers ploughland in “Gin the Goodwife Stint” also sprouts up in “The Complaint” in which there is further detail that helps to locate the reason for this overgrowth. “The Complaint” shows that the devastation of the farmland that literally and metaphorically feeds and nurtures the local community is carried out for the gain of leisure land:

Sheep and cattle are poor men’s food,
grouse is sport for the rich;
heather grows where the sweet grass might grow
for the cost of cleaning the ditch.

(CP, p. 115)

The identity of the narrator isn’t disclosed in the first stanza of “Gin the Goodwife” but responsibility for the entire family’s survival is handed to the ‘goodwife’ who is presumably one of the least empowered members of this local society. The poem partly celebrates the resolve of this heroine (she is one of Bunting’s only positively represented and female characters), but does it also lament the woman’s having to take on this responsibility? The poem suggests that it is only thanks to the domestic power of the woman (a mother and a wife in this case) that anything can continue. The voice belongs to someone sharing this strife, but who passes on the responsibility. Peter Robinson notes that: ‘The appearance of a first-person-plural pronoun in the second lines means that the speaker is probably the goodwife’s husband... a father forced into a situation where he is unable to provide.’⁴²⁹ The third and final stanza reveals the stint is not for continued survival in the local environment, but to cover the cost of emigration: ‘we can get our ticket’.

⁴²⁸ Bill Griffiths, *A Dictionary of North East Dialect*, 2nd ed. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Northumbria University Press, 2005). p. 25.

⁴²⁹ Peter Robinson “Bunting’s Emigrant Ballads” in *Twentieth-Century Poetry : Selves and Situations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). pp. 39-48. p. 44.

“Gin the Goodwife Stint” appears to only apportion blame to the Duke, and doesn’t appear to pass judgement on the husband who can’t provide for the family. However Bunting’s uncollected ode, “Dentdale Conversation” (1978) blackly satirises what he presents as the North Eastern agricultural worker’s inability to act against (or even with) change, or to engage with the wider world and the forces which act upon the worker’s life and community. Perhaps “Dentdale Conversation” is set in an earlier period than the goodwife’s. In these possibly pre-Depression good times, money is spent on alcohol and the gloomy forecast future is ignored. For the Dentdale farmers, drink and repetitious domestic chores help to suppress the thought of future hardship and seditious (and thus preventative) action.⁴³⁰

Yan tan tethera pethera pimp
 Nothing to save but nothing to skimp.
 Lambs and gimmers and wethers and ewes
 what do you want with political views?
 Keep the glass in your windows clear
 where nothing whatever’s bitter but beer.

(CP, p. 200)

Robinson bypasses the possibility of the poem’s irony and reads “Dentdale Conversation” not as critique but as approbation of a simple and uncompetitive way of life, calling it ‘frankly quietist.’⁴³¹ I don’t believe that it is a straightforward piece of nostalgia: its title (not always ascribed) suggests that it is reported speech, ‘overheard’, like the polemical “Complaint”. With this dual perspective (people speaking, poet reporting) Bunting withdraws his own subjectivity from the poem in an attempt to distance the poet’s authority and personal political position. He also avoids the difficulty of claims to veracity and experience that might be implied if the poems were written solely in the first person. His approach also complicates the issue of responsibility. The poems encourage a search for who is to blame for the poverty and displacement that the rural communities suffer. Although Bunting avoids proselytising, he exposes these specifically ‘Northumbrian’ rural communities, and the content and

⁴³⁰ Ode I.7 (1928) “The day being Whitsun we had pigeon for dinner”, set in London, conveys a similar sense of Bunting’s frustration at the populace’s political apathy, complaining there is ‘never a spark of sedition / amongst the uneducated workmen.’ (CP, p. 103)

⁴³¹ Robinson, *Twentieth-Century Poetry : Selves and Situations*. p. 39.

style of the poems are designed to elicit a strong response to the break up of the communities.⁴³²

The second stanza of “Gin the Goodwife Stint” repeats the conditional, echoing the precarity of the situation described. The warning, or threat, of ‘if...if’ is repeated. Bunting’s use of ‘gin’ rather than the standard ‘if’ reiterates the importance of language to Bunting’s poetry and his beliefs. Language, and particularly local language, for Bunting, connects the speaking subject to their history and to their potential power (hence the devastating cultural loss incurred when a language dies). Historians writing on early twentieth-century and interwar migration from the North East of England and Scotland to Canada have looked specifically at the extent to which culture is lost on moving, and at the impact that loss of culture (tied directly to language and dialect) has upon what becomes a dislocated community. Marjory Harper writes about agrarian Scottish settlers in Canada, who suffered under the same regime of displacement as Northumbrian farmers. Connecting language with subjectivity (and therefore individual power) she considers the ‘linguistic, religious and social symbols of [the settlers’] identity’ and acknowledges the role language plays in the maintenance of a culture, noting that ‘loss of identity was perhaps most noticeable in Gaelic-speaking communities’ as the language fell into disuse.⁴³³ This role that language plays within culture and cultural preservation is particularly significant with regards to oral cultures like the goodwife’s, or the Morpethshire farmer’s, or that of the shepherd who uses an archaic numerical system to count his sheep, ‘yan, ‘tan’, ‘tethera’. The paperless poetry belonging to an oral culture is preserved in the memory, and is made more memorable for a non-literary audience by its use of the ballad form whose regular rhythm, rhyme and repetition or refrain, act as mnemonics.

By repeating and writing a dying dialect into a literary canon, as Bunting does in “Gin the Goodwife Stint”, these quietened voices are embedded into a concrete (or paper) history. The use of ‘gin’ and ‘bairns’ confirm that the speaker of this poem is local to the poem’s unnamed setting (though by linking it to ‘Morpethshire’ it can be deduced as Northumbrian). The second stanza introduces an external oppressor: the Duke, for whom the goodwife must stint and the children must starve. The local

⁴³² The medieval kingdom of Northumbria no longer exists, but once comprised part of Scotland and much of the North of England (including Cumbria, where Dentdale now lies, and Northumberland, whose county town is Morpeth).

⁴³³ Marjory Harper, " 'Crossing Borders: Scottish Emigration to Canada', History in Focus," <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Migration/articles/harper.html#15>

people, presumably descended from families who have lived, in the feudal tradition, as tenants on the land for centuries (which is implied by the use of orally-transmitted dialect) are caught in an increasingly iniquitous and insecure situation in which the price of their land depends on the whims of the owner.⁴³⁴ Robinson observes that the Duke appears previously in “They Say Etna”, and indeed he does, in this case even more polemically presented as an indolent member of the expropriating leisure class:

Item, the Duke of Slumberwear can get more
by letting the shooting although there is nothing to shoot
but a dozen diseased grouse and a few thin leveret
than by cleaning the ditches to make the ground healthy for sheep.

(CP, p. 183)⁴³⁵

The land is turned over to the most profitable use, with neither regard for the welfare of the farming families whose livelihoods depend on the land, nor with care for the maintenance of the land itself.

The third stanza describes the forced migration of the traditional agricultural community from Northumbria to Canada. Pound explained in notes to the version of the poem that he included in the anthology, *Confucius to Cummings*, that Bunting refers to the two-pound ticket across the Atlantic on a steamboat run by the Canadian Pacific Railway.⁴³⁶ Pound also included “The Complaint” in this anthology, and Bunting is collected again with fellow Objectivist William Carlos Williams. However it is E. E. Cummings, Pound believes, with whom Bunting has the most in common. Pound connects the two based on what he perceives as their poetry’s fully realised political potential:

⁴³⁴ Marx describes exactly such a situation in *Capital I*: the capitalist will always protect their profit putting their workers in the front line: the workers feel each bump in the economy much more harshly. Later on he also describes the clearing of the Scottish highlands for game hunting in the nineteenth century, and the impact on the local agro-economy, the community, and the ecosystem in “The Expropriation of the Agricultural Population”. The chapter even refers to decline of black-faced sheep: the same cause that motivated Bunting’s early activism (cf. Marx, *Capital I*. pp. 889-895; black-faced sheep appear on p. 895. n. 33 (an excerpt from Robert Somers, *Letters from the Highlands*).

⁴³⁵ Cf. Robinson, *Twentieth-Century Poetry : Selves and Situations*. p. 40.

⁴³⁶ Ezra Pound and Marcella Spann, eds., *Confucius to Cummings: An Anthology of Poetry*, New Directions Book (New York: New Directions Pub. Corp., 1964). p. 314.

Of the poets who appeared in the 1920's [sic] it has been asserted that Cummings and Bunting show a deeper concern with basic human problems in relation to the state of the times, Cummings with irony, Bunting in more glum sobriety.⁴³⁷

The packet that Bunting mentions would have included cheap land, sold by the C. P. R. company itself.

The poem's action doesn't clearly take place at any particular time. It could represent the contemporary flight of a Northumbrian populace. However the C. P. R.'s immigration incentives began in the late nineteenth century as track was built across the country: thus the poem is potentially nostalgic not only in its use of a lost language (as the poet sees it), but also in its temporal setting. Bunting expresses in a few lines of poetry the complex and totally destructive movement of British and particularly Scottish agricultural workers to Canada, starting in the nineteenth century, and encouraged by the growing Canadian railway industry.

Furthermore it seems that this rural displacement occurred in tandem with an exodus from mining towns to industrial centres elsewhere in Britain, thus contributing to the break up and breakdown of North Eastern traditional culture that Bunting bemoans. David Renton writes that '[m]igration has never just been about people crossing international borders: between 1927 and 1938, more than 100,000 people left the north-east as part of a national scheme to relocate people living in poor mining areas.'⁴³⁸ Many people left Britain for Canada, hoping for a better life. In the post-Depression 1930s immigration began to be more tightly controlled and established Canadians were hostile towards the prospect of a continuing influx of agricultural and skilled labourers.⁴³⁹ Considering the subsidy implied by the 'two pound' ticket, it appears that Bunting's poem is set in a time before this slump.

William Carlos Williams's and Peter Robinson's readings of Bunting's ballads suggest that the era referred to in the poem is unimportant, since the expropriation and subsequent spoiling of land is a situation without end, and, according to them, is a practice that persists. In 1948, in a comment on "The Complaint", Williams describes a

⁴³⁷ Ibid. p. 316.

⁴³⁸ David Renton, "Crossing Occupation Borders: Migration to the North-East of England," <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Migration/articles/renton.html>.

⁴³⁹ "Canada History Project," <http://www.canadahistoryproject.ca/1930s/1930s-07-intolerance.html>.

situation where corporations, not individuals, are responsible for the impoverishment of rural communities. Bunting, too, understands that the problem is systemic, and arguably he personifies both the disenfranchised and the disenfranchiser via his characterisation of the stoical goodwife and her vulnerable ‘bairns’, and the villainous Duke, to stir sympathy for political effect. This sense is also expressed through the sound of the poem (as Robinson explores extensively). The catalectic trochaic trimeter of the line ‘gin the goodwife stint’ beats an emphatic urgent rhythm and opposes the regularity of the (more traditionally balladic) iambs of the ‘Duke’ lines. Thus, as Robinson also argues, focus on sound when listening to this poem still directs the ear to the important, and political, message.

Robinson notes that “Dentdale Conversation”, “Gin the Goodwife Stint”, and “The Complaint” have been linked to “They Say Etna”. He critiques Makin’s analysis of these poems. Makin recognises political activism, rather than quietism, in Bunting’s poetry of this period and Robinson quotes a rather inscrutable statement from Makin’s work, about “They Say Etna”: It ‘is a political statement that works by art. And art gives it not only force, but accuracy’.⁴⁴⁰ Robinson disagrees, suggesting the legitimacy of Bunting’s facts and figures suffer for the sake of a poetic polemic, thus undermining its political efficacy.⁴⁴¹ But the poem is not apolitical: ultimately Robinson accepts the presence of politics within the poem and considers how an ideological project can animate poetic form, explaining ‘[p]oems outlast political programmes, but, as in the pre-eminent case of *The Divine Comedy*, it is frequently a political involvement that energises the poetic forms whose memorable shape persists.’⁴⁴² This admission of politics is welcome in the case of Bunting’s ballads, for even by the publication of *Complete Poems*, Bunting had noted about the Morpethshire farmer’s song that ‘[t]he war and the Forestry Commission have outdated this complaint.’ (*CP*, p. 227, n. l:18) Robinson believes that Victoria Forde’s description of “Gin the Goodwife Stint” and “The Complaint” as poems in regional dialect, underrates the poems’ range of reference and their debt to a wider tradition of ‘literary adaptations of folk songs’ that counts Burns, Wordsworth and Coleridge among its practitioners.⁴⁴³ This may be true, but it is important not to understate the presence in these poems of the lost

⁴⁴⁰ Makin, *Bunting : The Shaping of His Verse*.p. 57. Quoted Robinson, *Twentieth-Century Poetry : Selves and Situations*. p. 39.

⁴⁴¹ *Twentieth-Century Poetry : Selves and Situations*. pp.39-40

⁴⁴² *Ibid.* p. 40

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.* p.42

communities whose history is sedimented in the traditional oral balladic form of the poem. Adorno's description of form as 'sedimented content' expresses the indissoluble link between an artwork's historical context, its material (or its language, if it is writing) and its form.⁴⁴⁴ He writes: 'The aesthetic force of production is the same as that of productive labor and has the same teleology; and what may be called aesthetic relations of production - all that in which the productive force is embedded and in which it is active - are sedimentations or imprintings of social relations of production.' And that '[w]hat is specific to artworks - their form - can never, as the sedimentation of content [Inhalt] fully disown its origin.'⁴⁴⁵ Bunting's emphasis on voice and reading aloud connects the history depicted in these poems to the oral tradition, and included in his list of instructions to young poets the advice, 'use spoken words and syntax.'⁴⁴⁶ The coexistent literary influences in Bunting's poetry should not overwrite the references to oral and traditional local culture. Thus Robinson's reading diminishes the political potential of "Gin the Goodwife Stint". He asks, 'is this brief lyrical ballad with its almost toneless, mute resistance a political statement at all?'⁴⁴⁷ He considers the poem's setting as a means of differentiating this 'quietist' work from that of Bunting's predecessors:

Bunting produced a specificity of rhythmic and structural implication that reveals the quatrains of Pound and Eliot to be largely cosmopolitan literary-critical exercises. Capital cities are places where wide ironic perspectives and political statements may find a hearing. Bunting's poems are located far from such vicinities of power. When Pound came to make his most sustained attempt at political statements he was obliged to go to Rome.⁴⁴⁸

Robinson believes that the poem is politically motivated, but his reading nevertheless underplays the very 'unquiet' political history of the North East's labour movement. It is evident that Bunting perceives and portrays an imbalance between the centre of government in the South and the relatively powerless North East of England; and he locates injustice and speaks out for the people who have no voice. Robinson considers

⁴⁴⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002). p. 5.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 5; p. 139.

⁴⁴⁶ Basil Bunting, "I Suggest". See Appendix A.

⁴⁴⁷ Robinson, *Twentieth-Century Poetry : Selves and Situations*. p.44

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 45

the potential for political activism available to the goodwife and the Morpethshire farmer and interprets their departure to Canada as action against a rotten system, an 'engagement', not apathy:

in both cases these ballads are laments, poems about a defeat, and, like the straitened country people whose fates are spoken through them, their resistance is a making of what they can from loss. Their engagement involves a withdrawal. Nevertheless, it is an engagement, and the two ballads have the impetus of a political concern giving urgency to their shaping of voices.⁴⁴⁹

To return to the complex (and incendiary) issue of blame and responsibility that Bunting ignites, if "Gin the Goodwife Stint" is coupled with "The Complaint", the land's dilapidation becomes even more clearly connected with a double-degradation at the hands of the distant landowner who neglects the land and thus also neglects the people who live on the land. Furthermore, this is enacted purposefully to turn what was once the labouring land into a mock Arcadian pleasure ground for shooting grouse. In "The Complaint" the farmer, nostalgic for lost sounds, sorrows '[t]o hear the flurry of the grouse / but not the lowing of the kye' (*CP*, p. 114).

My reading, parallel to Robinson's, is that these poems are concerned not so much with quietist nostalgia, oppression and discrete ruling class acts of iniquity, but have a wider aspect looking into issues of power, passivity and blame. Bunting uses elusive subjects and layering of narrative voices not only to circumvent a direct didacticism, but to suggest that no individual is *solely* to blame for the ruining of land and community: 'the Duke' is selfish and abuses his power, but the people are passive and unwilling to accept and change with the passage of time: they don't engage with national politics, so are eventually eviscerated by a brutal and growing capitalism. This expanding financial system ultimately brings about the disenfranchisement and dissolution of the community depicted in the poems.

In 1948 William Carlos Williams commented on "The Complaint", thinking about the poem's reflection of a global problem in capitalism. Williams describes witnessing similar appropriation and misuse of working land by the ruling classes from the once-working communities of Vermont. He, like Bunting, seeks the culprit. Williams delves into the complexities of waste-capitalism in a more overt way than

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p.48

Bunting but Williams's analysis helps to explain what is portrayed by agricultural desuetude in Bunting's poem. Williams interviews the local people about the decline in local agricultural labour. He discovers that no one will work:

Why? \$5,000,000 worth of real estate, farm land, had been bought up by wealth during the preceding year. And why, again? Top executives of the usual corporations have to show a loss on their income. What better vehicle than a farm? And with what disastrous effect on local farm labor, since the more they pay (the owners) the more loss they can show. Thus if they produce maple syrup at \$2 a pint, minimum, it means nothing but benefit to them though it is disaster to everyone in the neighborhood, except, of course the farm-laborer who grabs for the pennies while his own land runs down. Such artificial manipulation of prices, as our present income tax laws permit and even foster, tends inevitably toward such abuses.⁴⁵⁰

Williams's reading expands the poem's remit from its Northumbrian rural locale, and the lion's share of blame is apportioned to a global financial system. The relationship between Duke and folk is feudalist and represents the lack of progress made in liberty and equality under capitalism. Williams considers how the same situation exists in the United States and his description explicitly links the actions of wealthy individuals to corporate interests, and ultimately the wider financial system. He had been encouraged by Pound to read George Crabbe's revelatory poem comparing the realities of country life to the idyll, *The Village* and this gives a possible root to Bunting's polemic pastoralism, too.⁴⁵¹

This chapter has discussed the interplay of past and present in "Chomei" and in Ode I.31, and has considered the difficulty of locating the events of "Gin the Goodwife Stint" in an exact time. In a similar vein, Bunting's reference to Morpethshire complicates the situation in time and place of "The Complaint." Morpethshire has not existed on maps for over two hundred years. Therefore the Farmer's (and Bunting's) designation of 'Morpethshire' hints at nostalgia for a long lost system of local administration and rule as opposed to centralised government. In contrast to the

⁴⁵⁰ "Comment on Basil Bunting's "Complaint of the Morpethshire Farmer" from *Four Pages*, 1948. Reprinted in William Carlos Williams and James E. B. Breslin, *Something to Say: William Carlos Williams on Younger Poets*, The William Carlos Williams Archive Series (New York: New Directions Pub. Corp., 1985). p.170.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

Morpethshire to which the Farmer belongs, the poem describes Northumberland as ‘a bare land / for men have made it so.’ (CP, p. 114) There is a critical contrast between the traditional system of shires and kingdoms represented by the name ‘Morpethshire’ and the modern regime which designates the area as ‘Northumberland’, representing a shift of power from feudalism to capitalism, in which power is centralised and located in the south of England. What’s more “The Complaint” makes clear that the degradation of the land is not naturally caused, but ‘men’ are to blame. But which men? I wonder if Bunting is partly criticising, or at least interrogating, the sense of ‘homeland’ that the regional dwellers he portrays possess: a position hostile to the outside world and to change, but that does not fortify the citizens against the appropriation of their land, land which they so strongly see as their own that they conserve its old name in common parlance. I don’t believe Bunting is blaming the local people’s apathy for the entire problem, but that he wants to portray a world that is broken apart by greed, selfishness and inactivity. If Williams is right, then perhaps the poems suggest both the local people and the dukes bear these traits (though one side possesses these traits in as much abundance as they do their material wealth). Williams’s argument suggests that there is a bigger framework to individual action that will continue to overpower small and weaker groups until there is a united force against it: it is the market system in the western capitalist world that, he argues, not only permits but fosters the selling of a cow for a handful of beans and the destruction of farmland and rural communities and their ability to survive, let alone prosper.



Part 3: Knowledge

Part Three looks at the poetic lineage that leads from Ezra Pound, through Basil Bunting, and arrives in 1960s Newcastle, with Tom Pickard. The study furthers my inquiry into Bunting's engagement with different forms of labour and work, and is specifically oriented around the idea of a poetic apprenticeship as an alternative mode of education, and one which has much in common with a history of skilled manual labour; one which prefers the guild model to the university. This section will reprise, and look more closely at the attention that Pound and Bunting both pay to a particular kind of pre-industrial craft, which I explored in Chapter Three: the poets' attitudes towards and their interests in the politics behind the artisanal bear some resemblance to each other, but are, I argue, crucially differently rooted in their almost opposing beliefs about the 'folk' who make this art. Now I shall home in on the concept of folk culture by considering how these three poets write about, and enact, a poetic pedagogy; how their thoughts about the pedagogic process, and "learning" and making poetry, vouch for an anti-establishment and anti-institutional mode of knowledge acquisition and poetic practice, practice both as the learning process itself and praxis, or the activity carried out, once mastered.

Chapter Nine asks how a craft – like the craft of poetry – is learned, how it can be taught, and how the social structures that craft-work occurs within, and develops, offer an alternative mode of education to the institutions of the school, the college or the university. I consider a line that runs from Pound, through Bunting, to the Newcastle-born poet, and co-founder of the Morden Tower reading series, Tom Pickard. The relationships between Pound and Bunting, and then Bunting and Pickard have been described as "apprenticeships" both by critics and by the poets themselves. The connotations (with skilled manual labour and a pre-industrial means of learning) of an "apprenticeship" reveal some of the ideas that are fundamental to these three poets' ideas about work, and, indeed, to their own work.

Chapter Ten looks in more detail at the outcome of Pickard's apprenticeship to Bunting. In the mid nineteen-sixties there was a short period of overlap between the poets featured in Chapter Nine, in which Pound, at last released from St Elizabeths, had published his *Drafts and Fragments*; in which Bunting, recovered, rediscovered and revived by the North Eastern poetry scene, had written and was publishing and

performing his magnum opus *Briggflatts*; and Pickard, still a teenager, was publishing his first volume, *High on the Walls* and organising the seminal series of experimental poetry readings, famously featuring poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Ed Dorn, Gregory Corso, Seamus Heaney, Barry MacSweeney, Allen Fisher, and Bill Griffiths at the Morden Tower in Newcastle upon Tyne.⁴⁵² Represented in the Pound-Bunting-Pickard triumvirate are three crucial stages of (poetic) life: a poet, finished with battle, reaching his twilight years; a poet, resuscitated, in the middle of his life; and a poet, newly born or, as the *Newcastle Journal* – no great friend to the poet – described the young prodigy at the time:

An out of work teenager from a secondary modern D stream [who has] played an important part in Newcastle's cultural renaissance.⁴⁵³

The attention the journal pays to Pickard's Welfare State status and education, rather than his poetry, is indicative of how this story of poetry's struggle to prove itself to the establishment as something worthwhile, as well as its struggle against the establishment in general, will work out.



⁴⁵² Cf. "Poets Who Have Read at Morden Tower," <http://www.mordentower.org/links.html>.

⁴⁵³ *Newcastle Journal* editorial, 8/2/1966, quoted in Pickard, *Work Conchy*. u.p. [p. 25]

Chapter Nine

The Poet's Apprentice

Pound, Bunting, Pickard and Poetic Pedagogy

Tom Pickard wrote about Bunting's debt to Pound's poetic masterhood, and he describes Bunting's scholarly relationship under Pound:

Pound had taught him a great deal about poetry up to that moment – and he knew there was a long way to go. His apprenticeship to Pound begun [sic] in the early twenties when the older poet, hearing of the young Northumbrian's ballad and musical hall repertoire, got him out of jail after a drunken barney with a Parisian policeman.⁴⁵⁴

Bunting tended to resist (as Pickard would resist after him) his portrayal simply as a tutee under a master, arguing rather that *he* had taught Pound a few things. He relented a little on his former indignation in his previously-quoted letter to Anne Tibble (Easter Monday, 1965). He was still adamant about his originality, but acknowledged his 'debt' to both Pound and Eliot:

there are considerable differences between my work and that of either Pound or Eliot; but I must not forget that I am indebted to both of them for technical processes I learned either directly from them or from their work. Perhaps those are fewer than they might seem, but they are important.⁴⁵⁵

Pound openly acknowledges Bunting's influence, and a phrase that he attributes to Bunting, 'Dichten = Condensare' is scattered through his work.⁴⁵⁶ He attempts to explain the phrase's significance to his work in the introduction to *ABC of Reading*:

I begin with poetry because it is the most concentrated form of verbal expression. Basil Bunting, fumbling about with a German-Italian dictionary,

⁴⁵⁴ *More Pricks Than Prizes*. p. 9.

⁴⁵⁵ BB letter to Anne Tibble, [1965] Easter Monday [April 19] (Bunting archive, Durham)

⁴⁵⁶ Cf. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*, Faber Paper Covered Editions (London: Faber and Faber, 1961): "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree." Dichten = condensare.' (p. 36); the phrase appears again in the same book on pages 92 and 97.

found that this idea of poetry as concentration is as old almost as the German language. 'Dichten' is the German verb corresponding to the noun 'Dichtung' meaning poetry, and the lexicographer has rendered it by the Italian verb meaning 'to condense'.⁴⁵⁷

So Pound owed something at least to the younger poet, and thus it seems that a poetic apprenticeship can encompass some two-way traffic: the transmission of knowledge can be symbiotic. Although Bunting hesitated to portray Pound's relationship with him as pure mentorship, he deemed poetry 'a craft hard to learn and only acquired by long apprenticeship'.⁴⁵⁸ Bunting was positioned in the middle of the two other poets: as an apprentice to Pound, and tutor to his own apprentice, the teenage Tom Pickard. At least that is how Bunting perceived it, as he wrote to Dorothy Pound in a letter of 11 July 1967 that he had that year experienced 'a series of small miracles, or things as unexpected and welcome'.⁴⁵⁹ He was writing to Dorothy about his rediscovery by a group of Newcastle-based poets and poetry-readers, led by Pickard, who with his wife, Connie, were holding readings at Newcastle's Morden Tower, and nurturing a growing experimental poetry scene. Bunting recalls his first encounter with Pickard:

a boy of 18, long-haired and fairly ragged, with a fist full of manuscript. He said: I heard you were the greatest living poet, so I brought my poems. Are they any good? Naturally I expected drivel, but thought it only kind to have a look. Well, there was a good deal of drivel, a good deal of useless violence, and a good deal of rather helpless filling out of lines: but not very deeply buried there was poetry such as one is lucky to see from time to time, and such as I had never seen from a young man, let alone a boy.⁴⁶⁰

He continues to describe the process of Pickard's apprenticeship:

I told him surgery was required, took a pen, and crossed out a lot that was encumbering the stuff. He watched, then grabbed up his manuscripts and disappeared. I thought he was gone for good, offended. Not a bit of it. In two days he was back, and he had done for the rest of his work what I had done for

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 36.

⁴⁵⁸ Basil Bunting, Bunting, "Yeats Recollected." p. 47.

⁴⁵⁹ Bunting to Dorothy Pound. 11 July 1967 (Bunting correspondence, Bloomington)

⁴⁶⁰ Bunting to Dorothy Pound. 11 June 1965. (Bunting correspondence, Bloomington)

two or three poems. That is my chief pleasure, the discovery of a new poet, a good one, young enough to grow a great deal.⁴⁶¹

Pickard, too, has described this ‘apprenticeship’ and his account of the relationship gives some idea of what a poetic apprenticeship might be, and how it might be carried out. Asked in an interview what Bunting’s work meant to him, he replied:

I served a kind of apprenticeship to Bunting, taking my poems to him when I was sixteen or seventeen. He made his library available and introduced me to the work of his contemporaries⁴⁶²

Pickard recalls Bunting’s teaching methods, and training that he undertook, and says that the lessons he learned have stayed with him:

I remember him in the mid-sixties, first taking a blue pencil (more like a bloody scythe) to my early poems and leaving only two lines standing. “Just hang on to it, you’ll find a use for it somewhere.” Bunting’s admonitions and strictures are never far from my mind, but I do occasionally trespass into uncharted territory for the hell of it. He encouraged experiment and suggested that we shouldn’t be afraid to fail. It’s almost an empirical approach to making poems.⁴⁶³

He emphasises that Bunting’s advice has a continuing influence on his poetry:

My tendency, after Bunting’s urging to cut down as soon and as often as possible, means that several baggy lines end up as a short phrase. My preference anyway is for a taut music. His critical voice is always in my ear. I mean, I don’t think I would publish a poem if I thought that Basil would have considered it crap. And if I’m tempted to be lazy and leave a line slack to more easily convey a “meaning,” I can hear his candid reproach—“It doesn’t matter what you meant to say.”⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

⁴⁶² Tom Pickard, "Q&A: Tom Pickard," *Poetry* (2010), <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poemcomment/240804>; "Lark & Merlin," *Poetry* 197, no. 3 (2010); "Q&A: Tom Pickard". All subsequent quotation from this interview are from this web source.

⁴⁶³ "Q&A: Tom Pickard".

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

Pickard writes that early on in this apprenticeship, Bunting passed down to him the notebook for *Briggflatts*, 'given to me in 1965, and from which I was meant to learn how to write a long poem.'⁴⁶⁵ So for these poets, a poetic apprenticeship is, simply, a process of learning and practicing the technical aspects of poetics. On Pound's Imagism, Bunting writes:

Pound's announcement of the results of his years of technical research... was the whole life of Imagism. But he was not content to rest there. While the other Imagists were attempting with varying success to live up to his list of "Don'ts", he had turned with the same energy and thoroughness to other matters. His apprenticeship was over, he could begin to record the modern scene.⁴⁶⁶

The impact that Pound's 'List of Don'ts' had on Bunting and then Pickard is apparent, or rather, audible, in their work, not only in their concision, but also in the role that music plays in their poetry. Pickard admits his 'preference for a taut music'. Pound writes: 'Music rots when it gets *too far* from the dance. Poetry begins to atrophy when it gets too far from music'; and that '[r]hythm is a form cut into TIME, as a design is determined SPACE.'⁴⁶⁷ Bunting's words from a lecture he gave at Newcastle University link these ideas:

Poetry and music are both patterns of sound drawn on a background of time... if they lose touch altogether with the simplicity of the dance, with the motions of the human body and the sounds natural to a man exerting himself, people will no longer feel them as music and poetry.⁴⁶⁸

The alternative schooling that Bunting gave to Pickard entails more than just a list of instructions, but the kind of learning-by-demonstration that other kinds of artisanal apprenticeship use. The *Briggflatts* notebook becomes a sort of talisman, and Bunting's voice which remains, for Pickard, 'always in my ear', forging a psychic link between master and apprentice. The apprenticeship also imparts more concrete, or physical, skills training. The analogy Pickard humorously makes between the pen and

⁴⁶⁵ "Sketches from "My Voice Locked In: The Lives of Basil Bunting"," *Chicago Review* 44, no. 3/4 (1998). p. 76.

⁴⁶⁶ Bunting, "Mr Ezra Pound (Ed. Peter Quartermain)." p. 38.

⁴⁶⁷ Pound, *ABC of Reading*. p. 61; p. 198. Emphases are Pound's.

⁴⁶⁸ Basil Bunting, "The Codex" in *Basil Bunting on Poetry*. pp. 1-18. p. 4.

the scythe links the tools of intellectual and manual labour, and a poetic apprenticeship, like training in other kinds of craftwork, thus appears to involve learning through observation, practice, and graft. Bunting's comment about learning poetry through a long apprenticeship appears in a short essay on Yeats' poetic language. In the essay, Bunting compares the craft of writing poetry to the more physically active, and visual, practice of painting, linking the pen with the paintbrush, and the mind with the hand:

Just as we say some painter thinks with his brush, so Yeats thought with his pen, and if his pen ever misled him on purely poetical matters, it was so rarely that I cannot think of an instance, though perhaps a search through his volume might bring a few to light. I don't suppose that he was born that way. Poetry is a craft hard to learn and only acquired by long apprenticeship.⁴⁶⁹

A three-year period in the nineteen-sixties saw the publication of Pickard's *High on the Walls* (Fulcrum, 1967), Bunting's *The Spoils* (Morden Tower Book Room, 1965) and *Briggflatts* (Fulcrum, 1966), and Pound's *Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX-CXVII* (New Directions, 1968). Represented within this time span, is the birth, the second coming, and the retirement of three poets from three generations: Tom Pickard's first book was published; Bunting's revival, instigated by Pickard's Morden Tower reading series and his support of the older poet, led to *The Spoils* coming out fourteen years after its writing, and the genesis of *Briggflatts*; and Pound was to approve no further *Cantos* before he died in 1972. Bunting mentions Pickard to Dorothy Pound in a letter sent a week after Ezra's death: Pickard is organising a memorial for Pound in Newcastle. It is clear from the letter that Dorothy and Ezra Pound were both familiar with Pickard, seemingly on a personal basis. After detailing the events, and promising that Tom will send a copy of the programme to Dorothy, Bunting writes:

We hope you will approve of all this. It seems the only thing we can do to honour Ezra's memory at present, when it most needs doing, though it might be possible to prepare something more thorough for the next Newcastle festival, next autumn.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁹ Bunting, "Yeats Recollected." p. 47.

⁴⁷⁰ Bunting to Dorothy Pound. 8 November 1972. (Bunting correspondence, Bloomington).

Thus, although Pickard's street-savvy Newcastle lyrics seem a world away from Pound's reference-heavy paratactic and encyclopaedic *Cantos*, steeped in Classical, Medieval and American history, a real-life, as well as a poetic crossover exists between them.

Learning Form

The notion of an apprenticeship has been modified in the present day from its original designation for a kind of artisanal schooling under a skilled master thanks to its appropriation by free market forces. A late capitalist rendering of the term, and practice, which imagines entrepreneurship, mercantilism and big business as 'craft', tears the idea of apprenticeship from its significantly non-institutionalised beginnings and sphere of artisanal labour. At the same time, the separation of manual from intellectual labour that is encouraged within the capitalist process of production also implies that post-Industrial Revolution 'craft' work is merely a matter for the hand, and not for the mind. Hence a modern day and government-sponsored apprenticeship in manual labour (at least in Britain) currently has little in common with Morris's ideal of a training in whole and wholesome labour, imparted via an education which passes knowledge and skill from mouth to ear, from eye to mind, and, ultimately, from hand to hand. Instead, it separates one work force from another by creating a forked path early in a person's life whereby they choose either the manual or the intellectual route. This in turn ensures a perpetually divided work force in which people are either brought up as managers or labourers.⁴⁷¹

⁴⁷¹ <http://www.apprenticeships.org.uk/Be-An-Apprentice/Other-Questions/FAQDetails1.aspx> Children are allowed to enter training from the age of 16 in order, the scheme's website promises, to become engineers, financial advisers, vets and/ or accountants. Applicants, another .gov website states, 'must not be engaged in full time education' <https://www.gov.uk/apply-apprenticeship> - thus illustrating the divide between a school and a skills-based learning. Polly Toynbee wrote on the eve of national Apprenticeships Week 2013 about the ineffectiveness of the Coalition Government's scheme to make any difference to widespread youth unemployment: 'Class cuts like a knife through everything as the government blames "low aspiration", chivvying the young into weak schemes with no jobs at the end. Chicken and egg: why should a society bother with expensive training for low-paid, undervalued workers in retail, social care or nurseries? A culture that pays so many people so little for essential work will never improve opportunities for those it undervalues from birth.' <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/feb/09/apprenticeship-schemes-fail-young>

Pickard rails against the state's exploitation of its poorest and most vulnerable members, and he continues to revisit the battle that he has waged since the mid 1960s against a welfare state that only deems the most unpleasant, most dangerous and debasing labour 'real work' for its beneficiaries. In *Work Conchy*, a book whose title tips its hat to Bunting's conscientious (hence 'conchy') objection in World War One, Pickard writes about his own battle with the welfare office waged because, for a poet, '[t]here is no such category of worker in any modern state.'⁴⁷² Pickard relates one meeting with a dole officer:

You can't write, you're only half-literate, you haven't even GCE O levels, your poetry consists of emotional distress signals, illiterate name droppings, improper spelling of proper nouns and intellectual cloud bursts.⁴⁷³

For poets on the dole, writing poetry, as "The Chairman Told Tom", 'it's a hobby.' (*CP*, p. 140)

Sensing the future for artisanal and artistic work Pound, Bunting and Pickard all assert that poetry *is* labour and, by linking poetry to song and oral culture, demonstrate that it has potential to summon the pre-industrial craft which united hand and mind (in this case, with voice). Take, for example, the following, ironic, poem from Pickard's first collection:

THE WORK

writing poems

Chloe Gover writes for *The New Left Project* that the Coalition's new apprenticeships are 'the government's palliative to a programme that hinges, in a seemingly oppositional way, on cutbacks instead of investment for growth.'

http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/the_truth_about_apprenticeships

Even the CEO of J Sainsbury PLC believes the term 'apprentice' has been 'hijacked', as he explained in an interview with Faisal Islam : A lot of things masquerade as apprenticeships which are not what you and I would recognise as an apprenticeship – learning a skill over an extended period of time...I think it's pretty hard to do what most of us would think of as an apprenticeship in three or six months. Therefore the word has been hijacked, which I think is unhelpful in the debate".

<http://blogs.channel4.com/faisal-islam-on-economics/plastic-apprenticeships-and-jobs-hogging/17379>

⁴⁷² Pickard, *Work Conchy*. u.p. [pp.1-2]

⁴⁷³ *The Order of Chance* (London: Fulcrum Press, 1971). p. 58.

(keeping rabbits)
 each day the shite
 to be cleared
 fresh straw to be laid⁴⁷⁴

Or the following, more serious, example demonstrates Pickard's interest in voicing the lived experience of local labourers. This poem, with its conflation of rocks and words, its concern for documenting an unspoken history of exploited labour, its short lines of pithy Anglo Saxon, and its attention to internal rhymes and sound, neatly shows Bunting's influence on Pickard:

NENTHEAD

The lead long drawn
 from the mines
 and the miners dead

Their deserted workings
 are left
 like monuments

where the crag crumbles
 and the murmur turns
 the stone to sand.

The ghostly trickle
 of the stream
 has washed away the silt

and a soul
 poured into me⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷⁴ *High on the Walls*, 2d ed. (London: Fulcrum Press, 1968). p. 18.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 37.

This poem is concerned with a local history: a history so local, in fact, that, sedimented and figured as stone and then sand, it has actually become a part of the landscape: the history *is* the locale. The poet, the lyric 'me' who is only revealed at the very end of a poem, stands and watches aeons pass as rock becomes sand, then silt, and finally is washed away completely by a mere trickle of water. Within this decay Pickard represents the disappearance of a once-thriving and seemingly solid mining community, and the potential loss of that non-documented, oral history. The poet, in a Romantic turn, becomes the vessel for these passing voices, 'a soul poured into me', and the becoming of the lyric subject, the 'me', can only occur through this near-spiritual visitation. In this way, Pickard's poem pays homage to its own poetic history, and the local history that it reanimates, as well as to its poetic antecedents. The poem uses the technique that also forms the basis for much of Bunting's work, employing sounds that complement the prose sense of the poem. For example 'long lead drawn / from the mines' sounds, through long and open vowels and enjambment, the slow and arduous process, and the long history, of mining. The image in which time 'turns / the stone to sand' is close to one that appears in *Briggflatts*, and Bunting's phrase portraying an ironic reversal of time, directing the stonemason to 'rub the stone with sand', shares the same sequence of three feet of catalectic trochees. This rhythm recurs throughout *Briggflatts*: it is possible that Pickard knowingly imitates it. Pickard's poem suggests that a communion between people, even people separated by many generations, is made possible via nature, and, more specifically, by a shared landscape. This 'communion' is also represented in *Briggflatts* in which the landscape described by the poet evokes within one stanza Bunting's childhood and a cart ride with his first love and a whistling mason, and visions of violence from over a thousand years ago:

Stocking to stocking, jersey to jersey,
 head to a hard arm,
 they kiss under the rain,
 bruised by their marble bed.
 In Garsdale, dawn;
 at Hawes, tea from the can.
 Rain stops, sacks
 steam in the sun, they sit up.
 Copper-wire moustache,
 sea-reflecting eyes

and Baltic plainsong speech

declare: By such rocks

men killed Bloodaxe.

(*CP*, p. 62)

Briggflatts is comprised of a series of visions and voices from the past and Bunting and Pickard share this interest in poetry that sounds suppressed voices.⁴⁷⁶

Curiously, Pickard's "Nenthead" from the 1967 first edition of *High on the Walls* is reprinted as "Killhope" in his *Collected Poems* (2002). Perhaps this geographical shift to another lead mining town just three miles east of Nenthead is carried out because of the fittingly bleak outlook the town's name lends the poem. Lines from "Nenthead" have been swapped around in "Killhope" and combined; the shape is considerably changed from the neatly carved quartet of tercets plus concluding couplet of "Nenthead". In Bunting style, '[t]he stream' becomes 'the syke', the poem adopts a local argot obscure to a reader unfamiliar with Borders dialect. Furthermore, the Romantic crux and concluding couplet, which might have promised a glimmer of hope in the earlier version as the spirit of history passes to the poet, is excised entirely from the 2002 version.

The operation of oral history within folk culture is fundamental to Bunting's thoughts about learning and the passing on of knowledge. Poetry, he shows, provides an alternative mode of communication to that offered by the legal and educational systems. Poetry, as part of oral and aural culture, counters dominant culture that

⁴⁷⁶ At another moment, later in the poem, the poet is taken over by a Welsh bard:

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.

Robert Creeley writes about these lines and about Bunting and history in "A Note on Basil Bunting":

'In short, I am curious to know if an implicit quality of language occurs when words are used in a situation peculiar to their own history. *History*, however, may be an awkward term, since it might well imply only a respectful attention on the part of the writer rather than the implicit rapport between words and man when both are equivalent effects of time and place. In this sense there is a lovely dense sensuousness to Bunting's poetry, and it is as much the nature of the words as the nature of the man who makes use of them. Again it is a circumstance shared.'

<http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft4tlnb2hc&chunk.id=d0e3175&oc.id=d0e4876&brand=ucpress>). Accessed 20/09/14.

prizes the written document, whose making is itself reliant on an extensive and exclusive education, above all else. Folk culture's oral history provides a means of articulating a suppressed or forgotten history. By linking poetry with labour, Bunting, Pound and Pickard oppose a division between manual and intellectual labour and demonstrate that poetry has potential to summon the wholesome work models common to pre-industrial craft. So, Pickard, living in severely straitened circumstances in the 1960s and 70s was forced into battle with the dole office because they did not consider poetry-making to be labour; Bunting acknowledges poetry as a 'hard' craft; and Pound writes that '[t]he confusion in the public mind has a very simple cause: the desire to get something for nothing or to learn an art without labour.'⁴⁷⁷ One way in which both the conditions for making poetry and the public mind might be improved is via promoting its once-vital connection to craft-work, folk culture and thus physical creative labour.

Poetry as Alternative Education

The alignment of poetry with manual labour, or handicraft, is of particular significance in Pound's, Bunting's and Pickard's work, as their employment of apprentices or apprenticeships indicates. The kind of work performed under an apprenticeship, and the process of learning that apprenticeship entails, offer an alternative to the capitalist mode of production: the craft-worker enacts a whole process from beginning to end, as opposed to the divided labour of the manual worker under capitalism. The mode of learning advocated by craft and that takes place under an apprenticeship is predominantly oral and active, unlike the written, institutionalized, and standardized schooling and training within a capitalist culture. Bunting wrote the introduction to Pickard's *High on the Walls* and praised the raw quality of Pickard's work, a result, Bunting thought, of the young man's non-institutional pathway into poetry: 'Tradition and fashion have no power over a man who has escaped education, with fresh eyes, a fresh voice, and skill to keep the line compact and musical.'⁴⁷⁸

Bunting's attention to Pickard's 'education' as described in his brief, two-paragraph, introduction is telling. Pickard left school at fourteen. Bunting believed, to a

⁴⁷⁷ Pound, *ABC of Reading*. p.197.

⁴⁷⁸ Bunting's preface to Pickard, *High on the Walls*. p. 7.

certain extent, in the school of life. He wrote to Zukofsky about the way in which school merely served the purpose of providing a future workforce:

I think of the huge armies of teachers (no disrespect to you!) engaged in making whole encyclopedias of statements seem self-evident axioms, to go unquestioned and un-found-out for the future. The fresh discovery a man makes is examined and has meaning: what he learns at school has only purpose, not his own purpose either. The newspapers, the popularisers of all degrees – hateful in their usefulness. You cannot be useful and retain possession of your own mind.⁴⁷⁹

Although Bunting himself invested in a healthy amount of self-selected classics, his promotion of auto-didacticism and self-improvement never reached the instructive and prescriptive heights that Pound's did. He continues, 'Mr Pickard has yet to read most of the English classics, which must change his writing more or less, perhaps not always for the better.'⁴⁸⁰

Pound championed autodidacticism and self-improvement through reading. He published numerous volumes of instructive prose, on subjects ranging from music, to money, to Mussolini, and a number of poetry anthologies-cum-reading manuals, including *The Spirit of Romance* (1913), *ABC of Reading* (1934), and *Guide to Kulchur* (1938), and, put together while he was still in St Elizabeths, *Confucius to Cummings: An Anthology of Poetry* (1964). *Confucius to Cummings* collected Pound's, and other poets' translations of Pound-approved work from Confucius, through Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Dante Alighieri, François Villon, Thomas Wyatt, Marlowe and Shakespeare, Burns, Keats, Whitman, Swinburne, Yeats, Wyndham Lewis and William Carlos Williams, H. D., Eliot, Basil Bunting and – as promised – Cummings.⁴⁸¹

Pound's confidence in the redemptive quality of knowledge and his scepticism towards institutionalized learning led him to a prescriptive (and ironically didactic) promotion of auto-didacticism as seen, for example, in his ABCs of reading and

⁴⁷⁹ Basil Bunting letter to Louis Zukofsky 1943, reprinted Reagan, "Basil Bunting Obiter Dicta." p. 273.

⁴⁸⁰ Basil Bunting, preface to *High on the Walls*, Tom Pickard. (London: Fulcrum, 1967)

⁴⁸¹ Note that the writers are ordered according to their year of birth – all apart from Bunting, the youngest member of the anthology who is displaced, probably for alliteration's sake, by Cummings. But perhaps Pound thought him too minor to prop up the bookshelf he compiles in this collection.

economics. Despite Bunting's protest that his own poetry's meaning was secondary to its sound, it seems that he shared Pound's aim to employ poetry as a pedagogic tool that would introduce articulacy to the uninitiated. However, Pound's writing implies hostility towards academia, whereas Bunting found himself teaching at universities from Newcastle to Santa Barbara. Pound wanted to coax a certain type of dormant, but brilliant, mind into the poetic light, whereas Bunting wanted to rescue poetry for all, and by aligning it with everyday manual labour, portrayed the practice of it as a poetic apprenticeship. Bunting, talking of 'passwords' and 'idiots, nuts on the classics', protested against what he considered a high modernist predilection for knowledge that favoured an elite education.⁴⁸² He spoke later in life about the overzealous aims of the high modernist movement, with which he associated himself: 'The world doesn't spend all its time reading books, and we all assumed that they do.'⁴⁸³ Pound was less egalitarian when it came to the matter of ensuring access to poetry, and he was concerned that poetry in the 1910s was being ruined by the increasing presence of amateurs.⁴⁸⁴

Pound's *Cantos* and Bunting's *Briggflatts* and *The Spoils* invite a democratic, or 'openly-volitionist', if not autodidactic, learning, through their use of multiple languages and references, juxtaposition and parataxis, non-linearity, and altering narrative voices. Despite the 'democracy' that these forms invite, openness of the verbal content of the poems to a wide audience is debatable: is an academic education required of the reader for a fulfilling experience of these poems?

A pervasive distrust of institutions (particularly educational institutions) is another shared feature of these poets' works. For a quick illustration one might note the portrayal of financial corruption with scatological imagery, used by all three poets:

⁴⁸² Bunting warns that in the current state of writing: 'Poetry withdraws into itself. It can reach but a small audience, small enough to have special learning and, as it were, passwords; too small to hope to influence even a corner of the national culture, so that, proposing no end but the exercise of its special knowledge, it delights more and more in approximations to the acrostic, less and less in true concision, which implies force and clarity as well as paucity of words.' Bunting, "English Poetry Today." p. 265; 'idiots / nuts on the classics' feature in "Gertie Gitana's hymn to waltzing" *CP*, p. 193.

⁴⁸³ Bunting quoted in Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us*. p. 17.

⁴⁸⁴ 'Freshmen in poetry are unfortunately not confined to a definite and recognizable class room. They are 'all over the shop'. Is it any wonder 'the public is indifferent to poetry?' Ezra Pound, "A List of Don'ts" (1913), appearing in "A Retrospect" (1918) in Pound, *Literary Essays*. p. 3.

the images of Pound's *Hell Cantos* are recalled by the 'turd-bakers' of *Briggflatts* and Pickard's prune-eating London bankers:

Balls Brothers
 the directors
 of the Bank of England
 take a daily delivery
 of Port Salut
 Sage Derby
 and dried fruit

when these gentlemen
 eat their prunes and shit
 the pound will float
 and we will swim in it⁴⁸⁵

The extract comes from a poem inspired by Pickard's job as a delicatessen delivery boy in the City of London. He recalls in his memoir that he delivered dried fruits daily to the offices of 'these gentlemen' of the establishment.⁴⁸⁶

Poetry Against the Institution

Despite Pickard having made what Bunting termed an 'escape' from institutionalised learning earlier in his life, he later found himself awarded a C. D. Lewis Fellowship:

[It] required me to "teach" one day a week in a London secondary school which subjected a few pupils suffering from wayward talent or a sense of withdrawal to long sessions with me.⁴⁸⁷

Like Bunting, Pickard has given readings and taught at universities in the UK and in the United States. The notion of a poet as a teacher, an educator as well as a master, opens up questions about what responsibilities a poet might have within this role,

⁴⁸⁵ "Golden City Delivery Boy", first published in *Custom and Exile* (Alison & Busby, 1985) reprinted in Tom Pickard, *Hole in the Wall : New & Selected Poems* (Chicago: Flood, 2002). pp. 63-64.

⁴⁸⁶ *More Pricks Than Prizes*. p. 31.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p. 26.

particularly when those as suspicious of institutions as Pound, Bunting and Pickard are the teachers in question. The fact that all three poets were imprisoned at least once in their lives is another experience that they have in common, and might help to explain, or vindicate, their hostility towards certain kinds of institutionalised social control. Furthermore, a number of the poets who provided inspiration for Pound, Bunting and Pickard, such as Villon (for whom Bunting wrote his prison-poem, *Villon*) and Jamie Allen (the notorious Borders piper and repeat-deserter whose story Pickard tells in *The Ballad of Jamie Allen*) both spent their lives dodging the law, and not always managing to.

Pound's *How to Read*, takes on 'our institutions of learning', a phrase that Pound footnotes, correcting himself, 'The proper definition would be "Institutions for the obstruction of learning."⁴⁸⁸ At the beginning of *ABC of Reading* Pound announces a clear pedagogic intent:

ABC [o]r gradus ad Parnassum, for those who might like to learn. The book is not addressed to those who have arrived at full knowledge of the subject without knowing the facts⁴⁸⁹

In other words, this reading manual is not for readers who take the lift rather than the stairs. This brief preface demonstrates the poet's belief in the possibility of self-improvement through auto-didacticism, a route that circumvents the stifling constriction of the school room or lecture hall, albeit with one's hand held by the masterful poet-guide. By 1934, Pound still believed in the possibility of extra-institutional learning although he makes a small concession in his 'private word to teachers and professors': 'I am not idly sowing thorns in their path. I should like to make even their lot and life more exhilarating and to save even them from unnecessary boredom in class-room [sic].'⁴⁹⁰ He writes the book as a more extensive follow up to *How to Read* (appearing in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, Faber 1954, with a footnote

⁴⁸⁸ Ezra Pound, "How to Read" in *Literary Essays*. pp. 15-40. p. 15. n.2 Pound describes a situation in which '[t]hose professors who regarded their 'subject' as a drill manual rose most rapidly to positions of executive responsibility (one case is now a provost). Those professors who had some natural aptitude for comprehending their authors and for communicating a general sense of comfort in the presence of literary masterwork remained obscurely in their less exalted positions.' (pp. 15-16).

⁴⁸⁹ Pound, *ABC of Reading*. p. 9.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 11.

'*New York Herald*, "Books", 1928 or '27.')⁴⁹¹ Pound hopes that this 'text-book... can also be read "for pleasure as well as profit" by those no longer in school; by those who have not been to school; or by those who in their college days suffered those things which most of my own generation suffered.'⁴⁹² Later in the book, Pound resumes his attack on the establishments of school and college. He warns that '[t]he teacher or lecturer is a danger. He very seldom recognizes his nature or his position. The lecturer is a man who must talk for an hour', and that '[i]t is not the teacher's place to enforce an opinion.'⁴⁹³

Pound begins the *ABC* with a wry tone, pleased to be the amusing instructor, perhaps, and avoiding the arid sincerity of the typical educationalist. As he 'warns', '[g]loom and solemnity are entirely out of place in even the most rigorous study of an art originally intended to make glad the heart of man.'⁴⁹⁴ He seeks to combat dullness in poetry, and this aspect of his wider battle is taken on by Bunting and Pickard.

Pound's premise that 'a classic is classic not because it conforms to certain structural rules' that, he points out, the author would never have heard of, but 'because of a certain eternal and irrepressible freshness' is echoed in advice given by Bunting to Pickard.⁴⁹⁵ When Pickard asked: 'What about form, Basil?' Bunting spoke plainly: 'Invent your own.'⁴⁹⁶ Pickard explains these words are 'tattooed, as it were, on my writing hand.'⁴⁹⁷ The linking of poetry to the musical phrase also pervades the three poets' work. Pound writes

The author's conviction on this day of New Year is that music begins to atrophy when it departs too far from the dance; that poetry begins to atrophy when it gets too far from music; but this must not be taken as implying that all good music is dance music or all poetry lyric.⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹¹ Pound describes his earlier "How to Read" at this point as 'a controversial pamphlet summarizing the more active or spiky parts of the author's earlier critical skirmishing, and taking count of an enemy.' *ibid.* p. 11.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.* p. 83; p. 173.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 13.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 13-14.

⁴⁹⁶ Pickard, "Q&A: Tom Pickard".

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁸ Pound, *ABC of Reading*. p. 14

Bunting thought *good* poetry was inseparable from music of 'the dance'; and, as seen above, Pickard has a similar 'preference... for taut music.'⁴⁹⁹

Bunting's advice to Pickard about form and originality appears to have a possible root in Pound's writing. The troubadour poets were much celebrated by both Bunting and Pound, it would seem at least in part due to their innovative forms. Pound stresses:

Note: There is a tradition that in Provence it was considered plagiarism to take a man's form, just as it is now considered plagiarism to take his subject matter or plot.⁵⁰⁰

And he writes that great art is not something that just anybody can make. 'Great art': cannot be the sort of thing anyone can do after a few hours' practice. It must be the result of some exceptional faculty, strength, or perception. It must almost be that strength of perception working with the connivance of fate, or chance, or whatever you choose to call it.⁵⁰¹

Both Pound and Bunting write about the necessity of poetry to keep language alive. To 'new mint' speech, writes Pound; to 'make new' and to revivify, says Bunting.⁵⁰²

Bunting expands on this responsibility of the poet, writing to Pound:

You and I and Zuk have to keep the language alive, and damn difficult as it is, as I am finding more and more, and we don't do any appreciable good by turning aside to propagate the worthiest causes in economics or politics⁵⁰³

⁴⁹⁹ Bunting, quoted in Forde, *The Poetry of Basil Bunting*. p. 248; Pickard, "Q&A: Tom Pickard".

⁵⁰⁰ Pound, *ABC of Reading*. p. 69.

⁵⁰¹ "The Serious Artist" in *Literary Essays*. pp. 41-57. p. 56.

⁵⁰² 'It has been the function for poets to new-mint the speech, to supply the vigorous terms for prose' writes Pound in "The Wisdom of Poetry" *Selected Prose*. pp. 329-332. p. 331. The purpose of literature, Bunting believes, is 'to make new thoughts possible, to specify what was vague, to render understandable what was not. In brief, to preserve in good condition, intact and faultless, the most necessary of all instruments for social life.' (Open Letter to Sherry Mangan, *Il Mare*, 20.8.32. (Tr. Fr. Monotti). MS 303/1, Bunting archive, Durham). Bunting writes: 'Every revivification of poetry has taken the same route, towards the language of the streets and the cadences of song or bodily movement.' ("Literature Review" for *The Criterion* 1938, in Reagan, "Basil Bunting Obiter Dicta." p. 236.)

⁵⁰³ Bunting to Pound, 1935, quoted in "Basil Bunting Obiter Dicta." p. 233.

So the 'freshness' that these poets seek, it seems, is available in poetry that 'makes new', and the way to 'make new' is with innovative form.

Bunting, and Pickard too, promote the benefits of an extra-institutional learning that can occur within poetry. Summoning (again) the active reader, Bunting advocates poetry that allows the reader room to explore or enter the poem via gaps. *Briggflatts* warns, 'follow the clue patiently and you will understand nothing.' (*CP*, p. 75) On poetic form, Bunting said:

There are two kinds of concision. One involves a paucity of words. The second kind, which is much neglected, involves the habit of leaving *things* out. You get on with the matter in hand, leaving out what the reader can supply for himself.⁵⁰⁴

Although Bunting learns from Pound, and Pickard learns from Bunting, that concision is key in poetic form, it is important to bear in mind that all three advocated formal experiment, leading to the discovery of a personal, signature style. Bunting declared: 'It's not conformity to a type that makes the work of art valuable, but its difference from other works of art.'⁵⁰⁵

The Poet as Pedagogue

A line runs through Pound, Bunting and Pickard connecting them not only in terms of poetic form and sound, but in a certain anti-establishment attitude and a lack of confidence in modern institutionalised systems of learning. Their prizing of poetic originality, and the necessity for self-discovery that this entails is one way in which this pedagogic non-conformism is implied. Their anti-institutionalism also affected the way in which the poets distributed their work and ideas, including in the way in which they shared their skills with other poets. Their preference for poetic 'apprenticeship' (as opposed to 'schooling') combines ideas about work, history and culture, and politics. Pound wrote about the relationship of poetry to institutionalised study:

There is one quality which unites all great and perdurable writers, you don't NEED schools and colleges to keep 'em alive. Put them out of the curriculum, lay them in the dust of libraries, and once in every so often a chance reader,

⁵⁰⁴ Basil Bunting in an unpublished interview, 1976 in *ibid.* p. 237

⁵⁰⁵ Bunting, "The Codex" in *Basil Bunting on Poetry*. p. 1

unsubsidized and unbribed, will dig them up again, put them in the light again, without asking favours.⁵⁰⁶

Demonstrating the alternative to a college course, a set of instructions for a 'study' half way through *ABC of Reading* demonstrates the ambitious expectations that Pound apparently has for his reader-student. The list of tasks includes the following activities for the student to undertake or to consider: 'How much of Walt Whitman is well written?'; '[p]ick out the dozen best old ballads'; '[i]f you are trying to find a summary of the conscience of a given century, where would you go to find it?'; and '[t]ry to find a poem of Byron or Poe without seven serious defects.'⁵⁰⁷

Rather than the lecture, Pound advocates a one-to-one (or small group) learning process that would involve the kind of transmission of knowledge found in oral folk culture:

In general we may say that the deliquescence of instruction in any art proceeds in this manner. [sic]

I A master invents a gadget, or procedure to perform a particular function, or a limited set of functions.

Pupils adopt the gadget. Most of them use it less skilfully than the master. The next genius may improve it, or he may cast it aside for something more suited to his own aims.

II Then comes the paste-headed pedagogue or theorist and proclaims the gadget a law, or rule.

III Then a bureaucracy is endowed, and the pin-headed secretariat attacks every new genius and every form of inventiveness for not obeying the law, and for perceiving something the secretariat does not.⁵⁰⁸

Makin introduces *Basil Bunting on Poetry*, a compilation of Bunting's university lectures, by comparing Bunting's views on the importance of meaning in poetry with Zukofsky's:

Very conscious that a poem was not a lecture... they concluded, in the words of Zukofsky's "A" 6, 'the melody! the rest is accessory': the poet must concern himself above all with the sound of the words.⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁶ Pound, *ABC of Reading*. p. 45.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.* p. 79; p. 80; p. 79.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.* p. 200.

Makin contrasts the younger poets' views with Pound's:

I do not think Pound had ever seen the question in quite this light. He thought craftsmanship with sound indispensable, but probably (as in his old "centaur" metaphor) in the role of the emotion carrier for the central "revelation". With all his New England moral inheritance, there is no doubt he thought that the value of poetry was ultimately its ability to bring necessary understanding to the reader, hence to save, in one way or another, civilization, or at least *il salvabile*.⁵¹⁰

The comparison between Pound's and Bunting's beliefs about poetry and meaning reach a crux here, and have a strong bearing on how the position and responsibility of the poet is perceived. Pound, although he apparently despised the academy, believed in the poet as an alternative teacher for society, whereas Bunting, perhaps chastened by where Pound's soapbox didacticism got him, was much more reluctant to proselytise. Instead, Bunting advocated a training through poetry, but did not try to argue that poetry could improve all of society's minds in the same way that Pound did.

One question that arises from this study, is about how long a poet's apprenticeship lasts. Does the poet have to take on their own apprentice in order to fully complete their training? As I have argued in presenting Bunting's relationship to Pound, the movement of knowledge in an apprenticeship does not have to be uni-directional (from master to student) as is more common to mainstream schooling, but symbiotic. Pickard's own propensity for teaching people about poetry started as early as his apprenticeship under Bunting did. Perhaps for Pickard, more than for Bunting, poetry itself can become an alternative educator. The writer Gordon Burn wrote about the impact that the Morden Tower readings had upon him as a teenage boy: these events, he says, 'were the first sign to me that writing could be something more than a set text to be slogged through with dutiful encircling and underlinings and comments of 'v.imp' and 'signif' in the margins.'⁵¹¹



⁵⁰⁹ Peter Makin, ed. Introduction to Bunting, *Basil Bunting on Poetry*. p. xviii.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹¹ Gordon Burn quoted in Pickard, *Work Conchy*. u.p. [p. 4]

Chapter Ten

A Long Apprenticeship

Tom Pickard and the Bunting Tradition

The final chapter of this thesis considers how the knowledge passed on and acquired through a poetic apprenticeship manifests itself and develops. It looks at the more recent work of Tom Pickard, as an example of where the poetic lineage running from Pound, through Bunting, is heading. This investigation takes into account how Bunting's and Pickard's ideas about education and knowledge feed into their interpretations of 'tradition'.

I have looked in previous chapters at how poetry provides Bunting with a means of articulating an alternative, possibly disappearing, history and indeed perhaps even a means of preserving dying local cultures dislocated from the centres of power. This chapter turns to Pickard's work, as poetry in the Bunting tradition, picking up where Bunting left off.

The chapter entails a close reading of Pickard's *Lark & Merlin*, published in 2010 in *Poetry*. The poem, and the Q&A with the poet that accompanied it, are freely available on the Poetry Foundation website.⁵¹²

As Chapter Nine has shown, many of Pickard's poems engage directly with labour and politics. But, rather than make the self-evident, though fascinating, connection between the politicised presentations of work in these poems and those which I have identified in Bunting's works, Chapter Ten looks at a more lyrical recent work by Pickard. Like *Briggflatts*, *Lark & Merlin* was published in *Poetry* magazine, in 2010. Looking at this personal and emotional love poem (potentially Pickard's own magnum opus), in which the poet is immersed in the natural landscape of Northumbria, enables further investigation into the process and the outcome of a poetic apprenticeship. *Lark & Merlin*'s connection with Bunting's *Briggflatts*, this chapter shows, is deep-rooted, though the poem is at the same time singularly Pickardian.

'How long does an apprenticeship last?'

I interviewed Tom Pickard in February 2014, and asked him this question. He replied

⁵¹² <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/240804>

that his apprenticeship to Bunting was ongoing. So, at least for Bunting and Pickard, apprenticeship is not just an active training, but acts like influence. A poetic apprenticeship, it seems, is not only concrete and practice-based, but psychical. As quoted in the previous chapter, Pickard describes Bunting's posthumous presence at his writing desk: 'His critical voice is always in my ear.'⁵¹³

Memories, and concerns about memory and the possibility of a poetic afterlife on earth feature throughout Bunting's work: even some of his juvenile work exhibits a premature obsession with ageing, death and posterity. *Briggflatts* asks, 'who cares to remember a name cut in ice or be remembered?' (*CP*, p. 66) and states that even what is carved in stone is impermanent:

It is easier to die than to remember.

Name and date

split in soft slate

a few months obliterate.

(*CP*, p. 64)

Bunting wrote in "A Note on *Briggflatts*":

Old age can see at last the loveliness of things overlooked or despised, frost, the dancing maggots, sheepdogs, and particularly the stars which make time a paradox and a joke till we can give up our own time, even though we wasted it. And still we know neither where we are nor why.⁵¹⁴

By old age Bunting seems to be comforted, rather than concerned, by the impermanence of individual life. Maggots, which appear in "They Say Etna" and *Briggflatts* represent the dissolution and transformation of the individual and are thus, perhaps surprisingly, a positive presence when they appear in Bunting's writing. Bunting's pleasure in impermanence is also evident in his attitude towards his paper legacy, which involves a crucial distinction between Bunting the individual, and Bunting's poetry. Pickard (whose own work is part of a poetic legacy) writes that Bunting 'wanted only his work to speak for him and his life.'⁵¹⁵ He quotes from a letter

⁵¹³ Pickard, "Q&A: Tom Pickard".

⁵¹⁴ Basil Bunting, 'A note on *Briggflatts*' (1989), reproduced in Bunting, *Briggflatts*. p. 40.

⁵¹⁵ Pickard, "Sketches from "My Voice Locked In: The Lives of Basil Bunting"." p. 75.

Bunting sent to an editor at Faber who had asked for some biographical detail about Pound:

Dear Mr Wooding – Thank you for sending me the book – It makes me shudder. No doubt it is fitting that maggots consume us in the end, or at least the rubbish we scatter as we go; but I'd rather leave the lid on my dustbin and the earth on my friends' graves. – Piety takes curious forms: the toenail clippings of Saint What's His Name are revered. I don't think religion is much advanced by that. It would be more profitable, more to his glory, to throw away some of the poems Pound printed than to print those he threw away himself – I apologise for my lack of empathy for the industrious compilers.⁵¹⁶

Despite his modest protests about wanting to be eaten up by maggots, Bunting's name is remembered (this is surely reassuring for the tradition of poetry following him), and his work infuses the work of a younger generation of poets. Bunting also took on the American poet, August Kleinzahler, as an apprentice, among others, but his traces are most audible in some of Tom Pickard's poems.

The notion of a continuing development through a persisting apprenticeship forms the final part of this chapter, looking at Pickard's later work, to see what happens to Bunting's influence as the younger poet grows. One poem in which it is easy to trace Bunting's becks, flocks and axe knocks, is Pickard's *Lark & Merlin*. Like his earlier "Nenthead", whose ex-mining history and scarred landscape can be considered in comparison to seascapes from *Briggflatts* and *The Cantos*, *Lark & Merlin* shares some of its key themes and concerns with Bunting's and Pound's work. Pickard's work, too, is concise, carefully carved, and attentive to sound. Both *Briggflatts* and *Lark & Merlin* are foregrounded by nature: Pickard's poem opens with a wren's 'scalpel song', mirroring the lark's twitter to which the mason times his mallet in the second stanza of *Briggflatts*. The scene, a Cumbrian one like Bunting's Stainmore, at Hartside Pass, evokes a memory of love and a sexual encounter. Though the natural imagery and the power of the wind and the sounds that the poem creates, are powerful and stirring, the mood overall is reflective and melancholy.

The poem opens with a scene set in a café surrounded by the wilderness of the fells:

⁵¹⁶ Ibid. Bunting's letter (1977) is held in the special collections at SUNY Buffalo.

I
 a wren,
 perched on a hawthorn
 low enough to skip
 the scalping winds,
 sang a scalpel song

 seafrets drift
 sheer along shorelines

 listening to hail spray glass
 and wind
 and a waitress laugh
 in a cafe without customers
 I fell to fell thinking ⁵¹⁷

The brutality of nature, but the seeming sense and certainty of the life cycle that results from this brutality, is another fundamental source of patterning and reasoning in *Briggflatts* and *Lark & Merlin*. The title of Pickard's poem comes from an encounter the poet had walking on the fells. In an interview he described how he saw a merlin, a type of falcon, chasing the much smaller lark through the sky, intent, and gaining, on its prey: despite its imminent death, the lark continued to sing as it tried to fly away.⁵¹⁸ In *Briggflatts* and in *Lark & Merlin*, the life cycles in the natural world provide a conceptual foundation with which the poems present and evaluate the brutality of human and social life.

As well as establishing a 'natural' framework, the opening paragraph of *Lark & Merlin* alludes to cutting and carving: Pickard's 'scalpel' sounds rather more scientific than the chisel with which Bunting commands us to write in *Briggflatts*, but nonetheless connects the poem again to the work of Pickard's mentor.⁵¹⁹ Bunting's chisel makes an

⁵¹⁷ "Lark & Merlin." All subsequent quotations from this poem are from this web source and hence no page number is indicated.

⁵¹⁸ Tom Pickard, reading *Lark & Merlin* at Alington House, Durham, February 2014.

⁵¹⁹ 'Pens are too light. / Take a chisel to write.' (*CP*, p. 63).

even earlier appearance in "Villon", in which careful words make new forms by clarifying and hardening thought:

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

Pickard denies that his scalpel was a deliberate tribute to Bunting, and so perhaps his response indicates the unconscious, psychical, level at which poetic influence and apprenticeship take place:

I wasn't consciously thinking of Bunting's chisel maxim, only of how sharp and incisive the song of the wren was and how to convey the sense of menace running through the rippling beauty of it. The creature's song is so loud it always amazes me to hear it and to see the diminutive body that issues such volume flitting about the undergrowth.⁵²⁰

Pickard recalled in this interview, which appeared alongside the poem, Bunting's blue pencil as 'a bloody scythe' with which he would edit and assess the younger poet's work.⁵²¹ Pickard asserts that many of the Buntingesque resonances in this poem were unconscious, so this apprenticeship has a psychological dimension, but also says that Bunting's critical voice reminds him to keep his writing concise. Perhaps scythe and

⁵²⁰ Pickard, "Lark & Merlin."

⁵²¹ Ibid.

scalpel have intermingled in the poet's unconscious memory of that 'surgical' first lesson with Bunting that the old poet wrote about to Dorothy Pound.

There are numerous points of crossover in Pickard's work and *Briggflatts* as evidenced in the first lines of *Lark & Merlin*. The landscape upon which Pickard's poem opens leads to the poet's recollection of personal history in the second part, in the same way that the land around the disused lead mine in "Nenthead" evoked the voices of the past; and in the same way that the 'rocks' of Stainmore, in *Briggflatts* conjure a historical vision:

By such rocks
men killed Bloodaxe.

Fierce blood throbs in his tongue,
lean words.

Skulls cropped for steel caps
huddle round Stainmore.

(*CP*, p. 62)

The 'skulls cropped' might refer to the short hair of the warriors, but also suggest decapitation, therefore violence and conflict: the Battle of Stainmore, in which Bloodaxe the Viking was killed, may have left skulls scattered around the area. Perhaps they are a metaphor for the region's rocks referred to in the poem: The Nine Standards Rigg, an ancient group of cairns, stand at the top of Hartley Fell, close to the area of Stainmore. Since the poem at this point permits an infusion of past and present, these 'skulls' are a touchstone for accessing the past, but also reflect a present in which workers collect stone from a local limestone quarry (there is one such quarry at Hartley, near Stainmore):⁵²² 'Their becks ring on limestone,/ whisper to peat.' (*CP*, p. 62). Like the warriors in battle there before them, these men wielding tools, wear steel helmets. Presumably this quarry is where the mason collects his material and fills the 'clogged' cart which, heavy with limestone, 'pushes the horse downhill' (*CP*, p. 62), another of Bunting's implications about the unstoppable momentum of time. Pickard's reference to 'scalping winds' suggests a similar action to the skull-cropping of

⁵²² C. f. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/domesday/dblock/GB-376000-507000/page/8> accessed 4/3/14. The route might look something like this: <https://mapsengine.google.com/map/edit?mid=zxZTV2hYqdx.c.kC1vzL97rRts>

Briggflatts. In an earlier poem, these scalping winds blew memories of a lost love from the poet-speaker's mind: he writes about 'the sculpting winds / that taught me to forget.'⁵²³ The change from sculpting to scalping is a move from an action which improves and refines, to one which violently, and painfully, obliterates. Pickard, it seems, is looking for a bleaker feeling: and that, unconsciously or not, brings the poem closer in tone to the violence and regret conveyed in *Briggflatts*'s skull-littered Stainmore scenes.⁵²⁴

...Rime

on the bent, the beck ice,
 there will be nothing on Stainmore to hide
 void, no sable to disguise
 what he wore under the lies,
 king of Orkney, king of Dublin, twice
 king of York, where the tide
 stopped till long flight
 from who knows what smile,
 scowl, disgust or delight
 ended in bale on the fellside.

(*CP*, pp. 68-69)

This fragment demonstrates succinctly Bunting's virtuosic sound-sculpting. Bunting's verse rarely rhymes, but these lines form half of a rhyming verse paragraph, in which all lines end with an assonant 'ai', and in which most lines rhymes fully with at least one other. The homonymic implication of 'rime' (a sort of ice) is a play on words, but is also suggestive of the link Bunting keeps making between solidification and writing.

⁵²³ Tom Pickard, "Reading Creeley's "Histoire De Florida"," *Chicago Review* 52, no. 2/4 (2006). p. 221

⁵²⁴ Stainmore and Bloodaxe crop up a number of times: Bloodaxe appears twice in Part 1 as a vitalizing vision while the narrator in his youth travels over the fells with his first love: 'Fierce blood throbs in this tongue' (62); and as someone with whom the reflective poet-speaker identifies, because he too fled and was betrayed (64); in Part 2, Bloodaxe is now portrayed as a liar, and his corpse appears, 'Spine/ picked bare by ravens, agile/ maggots devour the slack side/ and inert brain, never wise.' (*CP*, p. 68) Finally a reference to the killing of Bloodaxe appears in the final, uncertain and questioning stanza of the poem (quoted at the end of this thesis).

Sound, in Bunting's and Pickard's poems, is atmospheric as well as evocative. The atmosphere of Pickard's café scene, created by the hail spray at the window and a waitress's burst of laughter, relies on sound for its effect, and for the poet-speaker these sounds, and silences, stir the sense of the absolute that precedes a deeper memory and vision of the past.

The punning line that links the verb 'to fall to' to the specific geography of the Cumbrian fells suggests nature's influence on the poet's mind; his thought is transported by the rural landscape almost unconsciously.

Pickard says that out of season, these gaps in the usual hustle and bustle of the café open up as suddenly as the weather changes (and the weather is very changeable there):

I have sat on my side of the partition, working or gazing out of the window at a thick cloud snaking over the hill and down into the valley, reducing the view to a few yards, while the girls in the café, having a break and chatting cheerfully, suddenly go silent. It is beautifully eerie, and I have witnessed it many times, with otherwise garrulous customers, too.⁵²⁵

These silences are not announced by the prose sense in this verse paragraph, but via the lineation, which separates each sound: hail; wind; laughter, and surrounds it with space. Without punctuation, and sparsely distributed, Pickard's poem has a synaesthetic effect. Form makes meaning beyond prose sense, and this technique is one passed down from the master, whose song is also 'scalped', in this equivalent fells-situated soundscape:

All sounds fall still,
fellside bleat,
hide-and-seeek peewit.

(CP, p. 62)

The first point Bunting made in his commentary on *Briggflatts* hinted at an unwavering favouring of the sound of poetry above all else:

The Northumbrian tongue travel has not taken from me sometimes sounds strange to men used to the koine [sic] or to Americans who may not know

⁵²⁵ Pickard, "Lark & Merlin."

how much Northumberland differs from the Saxon south of England. Southrons would maul the music of many lines in *Briggflatts*. (CP, p. 226)

Bunting's influence in this area is audible throughout Pickard's work. Bunting, mischievously warding off the critic, writes:

Briggflatts is a poem: it needs no explanation. The sound of the words spoken aloud is itself the meaning, just as the sound of the notes played on the proper instruments is the meaning of any piece of music.⁵²⁶

Emphatic streaks of long-voweled ictuses, such as those in '[a]ll sounds fall still', are a typically Buntingesque gesture. Pickard, too, clashes stressed syllables together, partly a by-product of the mostly Anglo Saxon-rooted language in his poetry:

a sullen light through vapor
thins a line of hills

the edge of everything is nothing
whipped by wind

watched on a webcam
bound to a bedpost
gag on my shaft

rose blush of road-kill rabbit
insides out on tarmacadam

cumulus in a tarn
its fast shadow
flees far hills

a wave of sleek grass
skiffs mist

⁵²⁶ Basil Bunting, 'A note on *Briggflatts*' in *Briggflatts*. p. 40.

my hand thought of her
 a photograph
 waiting to happen⁵²⁷

The poem pushes for emphasis through repeated bursts of stress at the beginning of lines: 'watched on a webcam / bound on a bedpost/ gag on my shaft'; 'cumulus in a tarn / its fast shadow/ flees far hills', and the object of the narrator's desire: a 'her', appears.⁵²⁸ The violence of the pornographic image is emphasised by the repeated pattern of trochee followed by iamb (an extra unstressed beat accompanies the first two lines). The image is out of key with the lines surrounding it: the reference to modern technology, the webcam, is incongruous with the timeless natural landscape surrounding it. Is this another vision of the past whipped up by the wind, or evoked by the violent flash of blood on the 'road-kill rabbit' corpse? Who or what gags? Is the poetic voice perhaps choked by the force of nature? In the Old English sense 'shaft' refers to a creation, nature or origin: the image is recognisably sexual, of course, but perhaps also reflects feeling 'choked up' by the recollection, as well as by the strong wind.

Pickard describes the setting of the poem as 'the last wilderness in England', and the endless space informs the poem's form. He explains:

It's a truism to say that in an "empty" landscape the eye and mind assume a different sense of measure. The savage relentless beauty of it, hills just roll on ahead of you, and the sky laid out above. There's a form to that: "I accrete – lichen to limestone / sphagnum to peat."⁵²⁹

In this case, in this wilderness and space, the shock intervention of the technological image, the man-made webcam, and the pornographic image, induces a claustrophobic zooming effect. Everything is momentarily shifted: from the wilderness of the fells the poem is suddenly transplanted to a bedroom scene, and perspective is altered too as a passive presence who is 'watched' and 'bound', and an active voice that perhaps uses the imperative, 'gag', are introduced. Out of the 'nothing' in the preceding couplet, suddenly something arises. The tersely uttered 'gag on my shaft', could also be

⁵²⁷ "Lark & Merlin."

⁵²⁸ Ibid.

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

telegrammic for 'she gagged on my shaft', and the utterance arises violently. Like a suppressed thought, this memory interrupts the poem's contemplation in an alarmed, brusque way. The speaker's lost love is still present. The poem states 'the edge of everything is nothing', but the psychosexual moment that follows belies this: moments share edges with other moments. The whipping of the wind summons a sado-masochistic memory, it would seem. The 'rose blush of road-kill rabbit / insides out on tarmacadam' provide a route back into the natural landscape: the flesh colour connects with the sexual image, the road with the manmade, but the scene has gone outside again. The private recollection of the speaker, however, is not included to make meaning in itself, but rather it is *how* the image appears that is important. In a kind of anti-sublime evocation, this image arises as a result of the poet-speaker's contemplation of the natural scene.

The next lines reveal the poem's love object, whose flighty presence is conjured by fast-flying clouds and mist. The moving natural scenery causes the poet's emotional and physical reaction, his 'hand thought of her', so the loss of love (and lover) is palpable.

Pickard's use of the region-specific word 'tarn', a mountain lake, connects the poem to its place, and its poetic predecessors. Is his evocation of a sort of neo-sublime in this landscape a tribute in part to Wordsworth who, Bunting tells us, also walked in these hills?⁵³⁰ If the fells provide for Pickard what the Alps did for Wordsworth, this suggests that the 'gag' implies the ineffability (or unswallowability) of the sublime: this is a crude joke, but a possible one, that the gagging refers to the indescribable excess of the sublime. The poet is silenced, cannot articulate the whole, and this is signalled again at the very end of the poem, which worries about containing the articulation of human experience in one individual lifetime (one small mouth). I shall return to the closing lines further on.

Pickard describes the neo-sublime that he seeks to capture on the fells:

It is possible to encounter danger and a frequently changing and extreme beauty at the same time. The Romantic experience, perhaps – and Casper David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* occasionally suggests itself. The

⁵³⁰ Basil Bunting and Jonathan Williams, "Interview with Basil Bunting 1976," *Poetry Information*, no. 19 (1978). pp. 37-47. On p. 43 Bunting tells a story about wishing, as a child, that he had been patted on the head by Swinburne, who walked in the same Northumberland hills as Bunting and his father did, and who had, apparently, been patted on the head by Wordsworth when he was a child.

almost constant winds so intrigue me that I've taken the Romantic experience even further by persuading a friend, the writer and musician Rebecca Sharp, to bring her Celtic harp out onto the fells with me to let the winds play the instrument while I recorded it.⁵³¹

The lines that close the first section of Pickard's poem try to capture this wind, and as it is personified as a 'she' it becomes an analogue for the speaker's evasive lover. But of course neither wind, nor the lover, can be caught, and this is another sign of the ineluctable nature of the sublime compared with the impossibility of suppressing feelings and memories:

this come-to-kill wind
rips at the root

here she comes
and there she goes
rushes bow to rime

I should shut down
close off
stop
if I could

how quick the mist
how quick⁵³²

'Rime', another word for hoar-frost, is not exclusively Northern, but is at least geographical language, and as mentioned above, the word also crops up repeatedly in the seascapes of *Briggflatts*. Here is another example:

Rime is crisp on the bent,
ruts stone-hard, frost spangles fleece.
What breeze will fill that sleeve limp on the line?
A boy's jet steams from the wall, time from the year,

⁵³¹ Pickard, "Lark & Merlin."

⁵³² *Ibid.*

care from deed and undoing.

(CP, p. 76)

In both poems the terminology specific to the nature of a certain place ('rime', 'a chill mist or fog' is 'regional', the *OED* states; the aforementioned 'tarn', or mountain lake, is of course only found on mountains) is combined with phallic imagery, or indeed activity, to convey a sense of reflection, loss, and regret.⁵³³ While the shaft in *Lark & Merlin* chokes, Bunting's breezeless scene features limp laundry, as bathetic as a drooping windsock, and the references to rime/rhyme and line imply that a concern about the impotence of his verse. This allegedly 'limp' line is juxtaposed with an image of boyish virility, in a masculinist show of power, as the narrator as a carefree young man urinates against a wall. Pickard and Bunting use male virility as a metaphorical counter to the melancholic powerlessness against nature, and time passing, and love departing, that they want to express. The past days of thrusting, gagging and urinating with abandon, contrast with the feelings of regret and loss of the 'now' of the poem.

The second part of Pickard's poem reveals more about the speaker's love story. The narrator undergoes a process of transformation, first from poet-speaker to the lark-prey of the title's merlin: the poet becomes the lark who sings to his murderer:

my lover, the assassin,
is beautiful

she has come to kill me
and I concur⁵³⁴

The merlin/ lover/ assassin is the muse and inspiration for the poet's song:

as she flew past a lick
of her melodic nectar
stuck to my wing,
making flight, for an instant,

⁵³³ "Rime, n.1". *OED Online*. December 2013. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/view/Entry/165999?rskey=vLPy6U&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed March 05, 2014).

⁵³⁴ Pickard, "Lark & Merlin."

sticky

Section two has a softer sound than its precursor. The lines, often starting with a light syllable, follow an iambic pattern, and the effect is lilting, the tone reverent, soporific and enamoured, explaining the poet's seduction and acceptance of his slaughter.

The last sequence of lines in the second part portrays the impotence of human emotion compared to the great force of nature: it is impossible to make a human imprint on the routine and course of nature by trying to control it or force it into sense or shape:

my heart, the cartographer, charts
to the waterline,
is swept back as the tide turns
wiping the map blank, wave
after moon-drawn wave

By the third, and final, part of the poem, the poet-speaker, who is now figured not as an individual part of nature's cycle, like a lark or a merlin, but as nature itself, is gathered together again. The process is akin to action within the natural landscape:

it has gone on for days

strumming rushes
taking up tales,
taking them on

the fall of my foot,
on tufts

a stroke of light along a law lain in under a long cloud

I accrete – lichen to limestone
sphagnum to peat⁵³⁵

⁵³⁵ All *ibid.*

A law is another northern and Scottish term describing the local geographic feature, a type of suddenly-rising hill. Bunting had made the association between natural landscape and permanence, contrasted with the ephemerality of individual life before Pickard. Perhaps the following lines from *Briggflatts* are what Pickard refers to when he says that

Although [Bunting] strove to help me find my own voice, it is inevitable that he still resonates very deeply, and I probably echo him unconsciously on occasion. While attempting to answer another of your questions just now, I came across just such an echo – referring to sphagnum and peat. It was quite a shock to me.⁵³⁶

Bunting writes:

Summer is bergs and fogs, lichen on rocks.
 Who cares to remember a name cut in ice
 or be remembered?
 Wind writes in foam on the sea:

Who sang, sea takes,
 brawn brine, bone grit.
 Keener the kittiwake.
 Fells forget him.
 Fathoms dull the dale,
 gulfweed voices...

(*CP*, p. 66)

Bunting's Stainmore and Pickard's Hartside pass are geographically close to one another, and share natural features and a landscape, so as sites for poetic inspiration, it is unsurprising that they evoke similar sounds and images and a similar tone. Pickard's images of accretion and the process of once living organisms calcifying or decaying into other substances (lichen to limestone; sphagnum to peat) is remarkably close to Bunting's 'solidification' tropes. The examples from *Briggflatts* above, indicate that in Bunting's work, wherever there is stone or another kind of solid, a line about speech,

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 190.

writing or memory is never far away. Pickard describes his surprise, on rereading his own poem, at the unconscious echoing of Bunting in 'sphagnum and peat'.⁵³⁷ He explains how Bunting showed him Northumbria, and shared with him this landscape. An ambulatory appreciation for one's environment and the natural world, therefore, is another way in which a poetic apprenticeship takes place, with poets literally on the ground.

Pickard's poem closes in a darkening world: 'late shadows gather in the dark'.⁵³⁸ The poem's love story takes on the chronological sequence of a turn of the earth. The time of the poet-speaker's romantic relationship is matched with the diurnal moment in, and movement of, the natural world. In this twilit moment, the speaker reflects on the verse that has been made during the love affair's, or the poem's, 'lifetime':

words unwrite
 as they are written
 unspeak
 as they are spoken

songs sprung
 from heart and lung
 to tongue

unsung⁵³⁹

The poem, a song, pays close attention to its living, physical origin: the heart and lung. Although these bodily organs add a literal vitality to the poem, the mood is sober. The poem ends with a concern about the inadequacy of writing, or the inadequacy of what has been written:

drunk winds stumble over shuffling roofs
 shake his sleep who dreams
 a lost love
 will not
 let

⁵³⁷ "Q&A: Tom Pickard".

⁵³⁸ "Lark & Merlin."

⁵³⁹ Ibid.

go

recurring swirls
of old gold
blown light

you can't help
but be in it

as it opens and falls back on itself
unfolds and unsays

I do not want to die
without writing the unwritten

pleasure of water ⁵⁴⁰

The poem is perhaps at its closest to Bunting's work here, and blown light is reminiscent of the night time of *Briggflatts*'s coda in which 'starlight quivers' (*CP*, p. 81). Pickard's 'lost love' that 'will not/ let/ go' matches diminishing lines with the diminishing light. *Briggflatts*, too, has a tenacious memory of love. Standing alone in its own paragraph is the line: 'She has been with me fifty years' (*CP*, p. 80). Memory tortures the poet-speaker, in both cases, and the torture, it is suggested can only, possibly, be eased by writing it down. Coupled with this torture is a further complication, that the words won't work the way the poet wants them to, and this in turn leads both poems to express a concern that death will come before what needs to be written is written: 'I do not want to die/ without writing the unwritten', writes Pickard; 'It is easier to die than to remember', writes Bunting.

Lark & Merlin's chronological frame of a day and a night is a smaller version of *Briggflatts*'s year, from spring to winter, to reflect the stages of human life, and love. The fifth, and final section of *Briggflatts* before the coda, is set in winter, and shares

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 189.

with Pickard's reflection on what's lost, and fear of what's not yet done, a crepuscular light mingled with the sounds of the natural scene:

Drip – icicle's gone.
 Slur, ratio, tone,
 chime dilute what's done
 as a flute clarifies song,
 trembling phrase fading to pause
 then glow. Solstice past,
 years end crescendo.

(*CP*, p. 78)

Despite the proximity of the poem's (and apparently the poet's) end, the poem creates this crescendo with a landscape rich with natural imagery and thriving life containing salmon, 'gentles' (which are maggots), bluebottles, sea, shepherds, sheep and dogs, and a sort of cosmic music:

Young flutes, harps touched by a breeze,
 drums and horns escort
 Aldebaran, low in the clear east...
 Starlight is almost flesh.

(*CP*, p. 79)

The stars lead the poem to its apex, a post-Romantic vision of the unquantifiable expanse of the timescale of the universe, which is 'beyond chronological compass':

Furthest, fairest things, stars, free of our humbug,
 each his own, the longer known the more alone,
 wrapt in emphatic fire roaring out to a black flue.
 Each spark trills on a tone beyond chronological compass,
 yet in a sextant's bubble present and firm
 places a surveyor's stone or steadies a tiller.
 Then is Now. The star you steer by is gone,
 its tremulous thread spun in the hurricane
 spider floss on my cheek; light from the zenith
 spun when the slowworm lay in her lap
 fifty years ago.

(CP, p. 80)

From this momentous, immeasurable eternity, comes a reflection on writing as the poem reaches its close, and textual document is analogous with a lived life:

The sheets are gathered and bound,
the volume indexed and shelved,
dust on its marbled leaves.

Lofty, an empty combe,
silent but for bees.

Finger tips touched and were still
fifty years ago.

Sirius is too young to remember.

(CP, p. 80)

Pickard's poem ends with resolve, to carry on, and to continue to try to surmount the presently ineffable. The speaker of *Briggflatts*, too comes to a resolution, before reaching the questioning coda, accepting the approach of night, and death:

Starlight quivers. I had day enough.
For love uninterrupted night.

(CP, p. 80)



Conclusion: Now We've No Hope of Going Back

This thesis opened with a study of Bunting's poem, "Nothing", which ends with a complex of human thought, the body, craft and nature, in which the dying human body's poetic breath (the 'breeze of speech') slows and stops:

life of man's own body

and death...

The sound thins into melody,

discourse narrowing, craft

failing, design

petering out.

Ears heavy to breeze of speech and

thud of the ictus.

(CP, p. 111)

These lines seem bleak, but if read alongside Morris's "The Beauty of Life" their bleakness summoned by the failure of the body and death is dispelled as being all part of the 'beautiful' design of life. The overarching message of *Briggflatts* is that nature has (or even *is*) a beautiful and meaningful pattern, and that humankind belongs to this pattern. Morris writes about 'that kindly struggle with nature, to which all true craftsmen are born; which is both the building-up and the wearing-away of their lives.'⁵⁴¹

The first part of this thesis constructed a theoretical framework upon which to display the politics of Bunting's poetry. It showed that although the super-human schema of nature and natural design is at play in Bunting's work, particularly in *Briggflatts*, people and politics are a part of this design. The overwhelming presence of craft in Bunting's poetry signals a socialist tradition and a concern for the suppressed cultures and people of the world. In fact, as Chapter Five argued, the interweaving of

⁵⁴¹ Morris, "The Beauty of Life." p. 538.

human work with nature that the craft of Bunting's work portrays, indirectly refers to Morris's notion of ideal and liberating labour.

The Spoils (1965), which Bunting was working on in 1951 whilst living in Iran, is partly a vision of ideal society, based on Bunting's perception of 'Persian' culture, and the poem contains a number of examples of nature and work combining to create human happiness. Its first part, a dialogue between the Sons of Shem, referencing an Old Testament text significant to both Hebraic and Islamic literature, poses a distinctly anti-money and anti-material argument. It presents a market culture, in which Asshur sits at his 'counting frame / to assess the people' (*CP*, p. 47). The first part of the poem concludes with an aphorism from an unnamed narrator, perhaps the figure who silently scrutinises Asshur's accounting activity:

What's begotten on a journey but souvenirs?
Life we give and take, pence in a market,
without noting beggar, dealer, changer;
pence we drop in the sawdust with spilt wine.

(*CP*, p. 50)

Part Two of the poem refers to the building of temples, portraying artisanal collective labour: 'Malekshah cut his pride in plaster' (*CP*, p. 51). The poem proceeds to depict a falling away and falling down of the idealised Persian culture, built upon this unalienated work, to the western societal model. Then, in contrast, a series of artisans are named, coupled with swift assessments of their work, beginning with 'Hajji Mosavvor's trembling wrist' from which comes 'grace of tree and beast' (*CP*, p. 52). Hajji Mosavvor, Bunting explained in a letter to Pound, was a famous contemporary miniature painter, whose work Bunting had encountered in Iran.⁵⁴² Nayastani the flute player joins the presentation, his vitalised labour implied by reference to his 'breath' which 'chases and traces / as a pair of gods might dodge and tag between stars.' The subsequent verse paragraph aligns this creative labour with the work of the 'fowler', whose work not only entails, or permits, but relies upon communication with nature:

⁵⁴² 'Hajji Mosavvor, Mosavvor-ol-Molk, the greatest living miniaturist, and one of the best ever: has paralysis agitans, but draws perfectly in spite of it.' Bunting to Ezra Pound, c/p Dorothy Pound, 27 June 1951. (Bunting correspondence, Bloomington).

A fowler spreading his net
 over the barley, calls,
 calls on a rubber reed.
 Grain nods in reply.

(*CP*, p. 53)

A pastoral scene is followed by a brief conclusion about this community's labour culture:

They despise police work,
 are not masters of filing:
 always a task for foreigners
 to make them unhappy,
 unproductive and rich.

(*CP*, p. 53)

The ideal labour of the poem's second part leads to its conclusion in which the narrator enters, speaking in the first person, inspired by what he has observed:

All things only of earth and water,
 to sit in the sun's warmth
 breathing clear air.
 A fancy took me to dig,
 plant, prune, graft;
 milk, skim, churn;
 flay and tan.
 A side of salt beef
 for a knife chased and inscribed.

(*CP*, p. 55)

The freedom of working according to one's volition, that was first presented in "Chomei at Toyama" is revived here and presented without the caveats about loneliness and exile. Perhaps by the 1950s Bunting felt that he had discovered a society to which a person could belong, while also being free. The non-monetary exchange of a carved knife for salt beef is distinctly, but perhaps unconsciously, Morris-esque. The deadening force of money is contrasted with the vital force of nature: 'How shall

wheat sprout / through a shingle of Lydian pebbles' (*CP*, p. 55). The poem then makes a case against contemporary big governments, and presents the disadvantages of modernisation:

Let no one drink unchlorinated
living water but taxed tap, sterile,
or seek his contraband mouthful
in bog, under thicket, by crag, a trickle,
or from embroidered pools
with newts and dytiscus beetles.

(*CP*, p. 55)

Roosevelt appears and the poem turns its attention to the Second World War, drawn from Bunting's own experiences of working at a naval base in Glasgow: '[t]ide sang. Guns sang' (*CP*, p. 57). This conflict is the poem's last scene, as the speaker concludes: 'What else do we live for and take part, / we who would share the spoils?' (*CP*, p. 58).

There is much that could be developed from a reading of *The Spoils* that the limits of this current study do not allow for. One direction in which this thesis could expand is towards Bunting's Persia. 'I love Persia and the Persians, the city artisans, the village farmers, the tribesmen', wrote Bunting to Karl Drerup.⁵⁴³ Don Share writes about how Bunting's political and economic values are embedded in his Persian translations, as well as in *The Spoils*, the masterwork that emerged from his studies:

Bunting's versions of Persian poems have retained their currency. Much has been written about Pound's obsession with economics. Bunting was far subtler, to say the least. With no small wryness—given the depressed economy of the thirties, when he began to translate Persian poetry—he called some of his translations "overdrafts."⁵⁴⁴

Another aspect to Bunting's affection for craft models is the anonymity traditional to artisanal work. Chapter Three quoted correspondence from Bunting to Zukofsky to illustrate Bunting's modesty: 'Haven't we all, poets, been riding much too high a horse

⁵⁴³ Bunting to Karl Drerup, 24 January, 1947. (Bunting archive, Durham MSS 355/1-3.)

⁵⁴⁴ Don Share, "Caveat Emptor: On Basil Bunting's Persia," <http://donshare.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/caveat-emptor-on-basil-buntings-persia.html>.

for a long time?’⁵⁴⁵ Bunting continues, comparing the craft of the poet to other forms of craft, in the manner of *The Spoils*. He writes:

Without anonymity you can't have a healthy art nicht wahr. Nobody's stripes are daubed on the circus caravans, nobody knows who tiled the Majed-e Shah, Durham Cathedral exhorts nobody... Poetry is overrun with guys who want to tickle their own vanity, and I don't like it Louis! That's what falsifies everything. If we'd had the sense to be anonymous amongst these, when you were Objectivising, and to stay anonymous, maybe we'd have had more effect so that more people would have had pleasure in reading us and more people would have written in a way to give them pleasure.

Reverting to the West has made me more convinced than before that we've got to learn almost everything from the East (which, to the measure of my limited experience is the lands of Islam) before there's a chance of any peace of mind or dignity for most of us. And that's a way of saying To [sic] hell with material welfare, and, logically, of all the laws and reforms and adages designed to procure it.⁵⁴⁶

Bunting hoped that he had excised his authorial self from *The Spoils*, claiming the poem was 'very much cleared of anything peculiar to the author, unless one's notion of a final SHAPE is, in some recondite way, personal.'⁵⁴⁷ Bunting's hopes for anonymity might be somewhat dashed by the fact that his distinctive craft-oriented politics are woven inextricably into *The Spoils*. Furthermore, the poem's form, sound and content are recognisably Bunting's, but perhaps this wouldn't have disappointed him. In the introduction to his collection of works by Northumbrian miner and poet, Joseph Skipsey, he wrote:

A man's circumstances seldom matter to those who enjoy what he makes. We buy our shirts without asking who the seamstress was, and should read our poems without paying too much attention to the names they are printed over.

⁵⁴⁵ Bunting, Letter to Louis Zukofsky, 1953 in Reagan, "Basil Bunting Obiter Dicta." p. 232.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁷ Bunting letter to Dorothy Pound, 24 August 1951, (Bunting correspondence, Bloomington).

Things once made stand free of their makers, the more anonymous the better. However there are exceptions.⁵⁴⁸

Bunting explains that Skipsey's work stands apart from 'the nameless elaborators of ballad and folksong and... from literary poets' because, as a Northumbrian, his work belonged to no written literary tradition, and the ballad tradition had died out before his birth.⁵⁴⁹ Thus he was, in Bunting's mind, a singular talent, and '[h]e had to speak with his own mouth even when he meant to speak for all his people.'⁵⁵⁰

The post-industrial revolution balladeer as a mouthpiece for 'his people' is an empowered and empowering role. Chapter Three quoted from Benjamin's "The Storyteller" which shows how oral cultures are suppressed by dominant literary culture, in a microcosmic version of what industrial modernity and capitalism do to individual, local and traditional cultures. Benjamin also describes how the documentation of history is inevitably political, and that it is always a history of the victor, hence of the dominant power, and that it therefore always hides within it some atrocity perpetrated against the dominated. This is potentially the history that could be voiced by oral culture and storytelling if those were not also suppressed by dominant culture. It is interesting that Benjamin speaks of the ruler's 'spoils', in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History." He writes:

Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to the traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.

⁵⁴⁸ Joseph Skipsey, *Selected Poems*, ed. Basil Bunting (Sunderland: Ceolfrith Press, 1976). p. 7.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.⁵⁵¹

I think Bunting would have balked at the idea of calling Skipsey, or himself, a 'historical materialist', but Bunting's revival of Skipsey's poetry, and his own work, his correspondence with folk forms and his attempts to articulate suppressed or waning folk cultures are ways in which he brushes history against the grain, and Benjamin's thesis helps to illuminate how this is a political act.

John Seed writes in "Poetry and Politics in the 1930s" that 'rigorous division of political action and the writing of poetry' in Bunting's work is a reaction, partly, to what Bunting perceived to be the ineffective and hypocritical political activism of the 1930s leftist poets' (another group of British writers whom Bunting despised!).⁵⁵² It is true that Bunting tried to distance himself from any group who touted a message, particularly a political message, but what I hope that my argument has helped to highlight is that Bunting's poetry is, nevertheless, political.

The second part of the thesis built upon the theories and histories of work that I show to be behind Bunting's writing. Chapter Six addressed the complicated, and complicating, issue of Bunting's portrayal of women. For example, although women characters (La Belle Heaulmière, Venus, Polymnia, Woolf) motivate "The Well of Lycopolis", none are protagonists. Instead, the active force behind the poem is the male seer (a hybrid of Bunting and the narrator) who, with his gaze and his pen, is the all-powerful, omniscient creator of the poem and its world. Despite what Bunting projects about his poetic impotence and failure, paradoxically the poem has been written: the act of creation has been carried out successfully. Perhaps Bunting's negative portrayal of certain characters in the poem as the result of the poet's embittered diatribe against post-war urban capitalist culture could be more easily swallowed if the vessels for this criticism were not exclusively women and gay men.

Bunting's portraits of female characters tend to be either objects of sexual desire or sexual disgust, but it is also the sexism of his era that so easily adopts these characters as vessels for complaining about much wider and often male-dominated concerns, like society or political systems. Bunting's poem is radical in one sense, but that sense is undercut in its blindness towards the politics of gender and sexuality.

⁵⁵¹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*. p. 248.

⁵⁵² Seed, "Poetry and Politics in the 1930s : Basil Bunting's Other History." p. 106.

Ian Gregson's reading, which I considered at the beginning of Chapter Six, finishes with an analysis of the masculine identities in Bunting's later work. He sees a progression from the out and out sexism of Bunting's earlier work to the more emotionally nuanced and self-reflective 'Inward Gaze' of *Briggflatts*. Meanwhile Stephen Burt writes that *Briggflatts* may never have been written if it were not for the sixties youth culture that sought out the older poet and persuaded him to write again.⁵⁵³ If Burt is correct, and he makes a good case, then this would perhaps account for the mellowing, or progression, of Bunting's attitude towards sex and gender. He does, after all, dedicate his first *Collected Poems* (1968) to both 'unabashed boys and girls' (CP, p. 21).

Chapters Seven and Eight argued that Bunting's, like Niedecker's, focus on region and place is not the result of political apathy, or passivity, or even the sort of retreat from society that Adorno's lyric poet makes, but an attempt to focus his poems for the attainment of greater accuracy. Furthermore, this focus on the everyday lives and different kinds of work in the communities that are portrayed in the poems, is politically motivated. Even the portrayal of Chomei's isolated community of one includes details about the ideal sorts of work that he carries out. Bunting's social consciousness appears in the poetry of this period in the form of 'disaster poetry' that interrogates the responsibility for and reaction of big governments to environmental and industrial disasters.

Chapters Nine and Ten attempted to work out what the process of a poetic apprenticeship entails, and what it produces. The educative model of an apprenticeship fits with my overall investigation, since it is the historical training method of skilled manual labour. Thus Pound's, Bunting's and Pickard's use of the term to describe poetic schooling consciously refers to the practice of making poetry as a craft, rejects the mainstream institutional education model, and indicates its position in terms of the history and tradition of pre-industrial artisanal and folk culture. Again, "The Storyteller", quoted in Chapter Three, can be read alongside the argument that I believe Bunting is making. In Benjamin's account of the dying art of storytelling and the effacement of oral culture in the face of developing capitalism he writes: "If peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university."⁵⁵⁴ "The Storyteller" describes the kind of alternative 'schooling' that I believe Pound,

⁵⁵³ Burt, *The Forms of Youth : Twentieth-Century Poetry and Adolescence*. p. 76.

⁵⁵⁴ Benjamin, *Illuminations*. p. 85.

Bunting, and Pickard all provide, or undergo. This is a method of learning that entails participation in, rather than removal from, everyday life and the world of work, particularly manual work. Learning takes place alongside work. The demise of this method of learning – note Benjamin’s use of the past tense – is the result of the same concern that I have argued occurs throughout Bunting’s work: the division of manual from intellectual labour under the capitalist mode of production. But Pickard, as shown in Chapter Ten, is still writing and, he believes, is still undertaking his apprenticeship. Poetry, it would therefore seem, still offers this rare opportunity to combine intellectual and manual activity and skill, both in one’s work, and one’s learning.

Chapter Ten returns to the ongoing metaphor of hardness – or even *the process* of hardening – found in Bunting’s poetry, and locates it, too, in Pickard’s work. Reading Pickard’s *Lark & Merlin* alongside *Briggflatts* illuminates features in both poems. Bunting’s influence on Pickard is evident in the sounds, scenery and even the prose sense of this poem, perhaps in this work more than in Pickard’s more overtly political, and earlier, work. But Pickard develops his own method of chiselling: with its sparse lineation and lack of sentences, and clouding commas and full-stops, this poem is more pared down than anything by Bunting, and yet is more rooted in lived experience, less in reference to text. The speaker of the poem feels himself in a process of becoming, being assembled or taking form as a part of the natural landscape. Because of the value that Bunting and Pickard (and Pound, too) place upon writing as a process of solidification, Pickard’s term ‘accrete’ might also usefully be used to describe the process of a poetic becoming, an alternative education. Pickard’s poem accretes, composed of the poet’s own life events, feelings and surroundings, but also composed of work that comes before it. Returning to an argument made in the first chapter of this thesis, I therefore suggest that a poetic apprenticeship, like the craft that it entails, in taking the form of its process from nature, and in taking place in nature, is wholesome and re-forges the connection between human and natural world that the production line of capitalism destroys.

Much more could be written about Pickard’s later work, as well as his role in Bunting’s revival in the 1960s, and a study of what became of the fertile poetic culture of Newcastle after the 1960s-1970s highpoints of the Morden Tower has still not been undertaken, despite critical interest in other, associated, groups of ‘linguistically innovative’, post-war British poets. These are further possible avenues for future scholarship. Additionally, the craft model that is, I have argued, so frequently at work

in Bunting's poetry might give way to a study of the presence of craft in other British and American (late) modernist work. Research into what might be termed 'craft modernism' is timely, considering the growing interest in 'literary geographies' and 'regional modernisms'. Such a project could take into account just such regional characteristics as Bunting's craft models celebrate.

Where we are who knows
of kings who sup
while day fails? Who,
swinging his axe
to fell kings, guesses
where we go?

Briggflatts, Coda.

Appendix

Appendix A

Basil Bunting, "I Suggest". Available as a postcard in Durham Library. Also see <https://www.dur.ac.uk/basil-bunting-poetry-centre/poems.quotes/quotes/>

I SUGGEST

1. Compose aloud; poetry is a sound.
2. Vary rhythm enough to stir the emotion you want but not so as to lose impetus.
3. Use spoken words and syntax.
4. Fear adjectives; they bleed nouns. Hate the passive.
5. Jettison ornament gaily but keep shape

Put your poem away till you forget it, then:

6. Cut out every word you dare.
7. Do it again a week later, and again.

Never explain - your reader is as smart as you.

Appendix B**Ode I.18 “The Complaint of the Morpethshire Farmer”**

On the up-platform at Morpeth station
in the market-day throng
I overheard a Morpethshire farmer
muttering this song:

Must ye bide, my good stone house,
to keep a townsman dry?
To hear the flurry of the grouse
but not the lowing of the key?

To see the bracken choke the clod
the coulter will na turn?
The bit level neebody
will drain soak up the burn?

Where are ye, my seven score sheep?
Feeding on other braes!
My brand has faded from your fleece,
another has its place.

The fold beneath the rowan
where ye were dipt before,
its cowpit walls are overgrown,
ye would na heed them more.

And thou! Thou's idled all the spring,
I doubt thou's spoiled, my Meg!
But a sheepdog's faith is aye something.
We'll hire together in Winnipeg.

Canada's a cold land.
Thou and I must share
a straw bed and a hind's wages
and the bitter air.

Canada's a bare land
for the north wind and the snow.
Northumberland's a bare land
for men have made it so.

Sheep and cattle are poor men's food,
grouse is sport for the rich;
heather grows where the sweet grass might grow
for the cost of cleaning the ditch.

A liner lying in the Clyde
will take me to Quebec.
My sons'll see the land I am leaving
as barren as her deck.

(*CP*, pp. 114-115)

Appendix C**Ode 1.31**

The soil sandy and the plow light, neither
virgin land nor near by the market town,
cropping one staple without forethought, steer
stedfastly ruinward year in year out,
grudging the labour and cost of manure,
drudging not for gain but fewer dollars loss
yet certain to make a bad bargain by
misjudging the run of prices. How glad
you will be when the state takes your farm for
arrears of taxes! No more cold daybreaks
saffron under the barbed wire the east wind
thrums, nor wet noons, nor starpinned nights! The choir
of gnats is near a full-close. The windward
copse stops muttering inwardly its prose
bucolics. You will find a city job
or relief – or doss-and-grub – resigned to
anything except your own numb toil, the
seasonal plod to spoil the land, alone.

(*CP*, p. 126)

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Bloomington, Indiana, The Lilly Library at Indiana University. Basil Bunting correspondence with Dorothy and Ezra Pound, part of the Pound Mss II, 1900-1973.

Durham, U. K., Durham University, Palace Green Library, Basil Bunting Poetry Archive.

London, U. K., Kings College, University of London Library, Eric Mottram Manuscript Collection.

Additional Digital Resources

“BBC History”

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/domesday/dblock/GB-376000-507000/page/8>

Accessed June 2013.

“OED Online”

<http://www.oed.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/view/Entry/181656?rskey=GEdUsM&result=1>

Accessed August 27, 2014.

