

“Mauling the music”: Southrons (and Others) Reading *Briggflatts*

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I

Basil Bunting’s poetic career was discontinuous, blotted by periods of inactivity, neglect and obscurity. Until the publication of *Briggflatts* in 1966, expatriation and stubborn devotion to region, military service and refusal of it, poverty and occasionally, a certain stylish comfort all worked, in different ways, to inhibit the production or dissemination of his poems. Hospitable both to self-denial and self-conceit, Bunting permitted and encouraged biographical inaccuracy, usually by omitting to correct, though he was occasionally its origin too. The result is a rather small number of poems – one or two major achievements among them – surrounded by voluminous misprision, lacunae, variously authentic reconstruction, and over-writings. Bunting’s concern with aural texture and his Northumbrian localism both affect the reception of this corpus.

Sound is the crucial component of Bunting’s poetics. His many statements of this principle are subject to misunderstanding by critics who point out that Bunting’s poems are not sound alone – they are rich in connotation and visualizable image. Peter Makin corrects the misapprehension effectively: “What Bunting in fact said was that sound-work – ‘patterns of sound drawn on a background of time’ – was the only essential in poetry” (240). Verse may have other aspects, but without sound-patterning it is not verse, a defensible proposition which Makin’s account goes on to develop rather narrowly, and chiefly by reference to other poets than Bunting. Makin’s swerves away from Bunting serve as a practical demonstration of the

difficulties inherent in attempting a rigorous account of sound as semantic vehicle. Utilitarian champions of prose sense in poetry and deconstructionist theorists raise like and valid objections: given the arbitrary and various relation of sound to meaning, onomatopoeic effects are impossible to verify objectively. But few would deny that Bunting is unusually and centrally interested in sound-patterning, that the way words sound is, in many of his poems, and certainly in *Briggflatts*, a primary structural principle. Throughout his career he experimented with quantitative measure in English, though he acknowledged the inexactitude of the science for a language in which syllable length is variable (Bunting, "Thumps" 27).

More productive of controversy and triviality alike is the question of Bunting's status as Northumbrian poet. From his schooldays on, Bunting was often away from north-eastern England; his sense of a "grand underlying difference between North and South which makes people with Northern manners comfortable & easy to deal with, but people with the Southern manners [. . .] 'impossible' & hateful" (Basil Bunting to Charles Evans, his headmaster at Leighton Park School, October 1916; Bunting, *Complete Poems* 236) dates from these first excursions, and should be accounted genuine. However, when English autochthony is under dispute, birth and manners are rarely as decisive as vocabulary and accent. Bunting's poetry does not use many words confined to Northumbrian usage, even in passages of recollection and intimacy where we might expect them, as for example the first section of *Briggflatts*, which describes a journey on a mason's cart undertaken by an adolescent boy and girl, and their subsequent lovemaking. His note to the poem begins with an insistence upon "the Northumbrian tongue travel has not taken from me." "Tongue" might imply "language," dialect, local usage, but Bunting seems to mean "accent," because he continues: "may sound strange to men used to the koine or to Americans who may not know how much Northumberland differs from the Saxon south of England. Southrons would maul the music of many lines in *Briggflatts*" (*Complete*

Poems 226). Bunting's ordinary speaking accent was somewhat closer to the koine than this might suggest (there are few pronunciations in recorded interview material, for example, which would sound particularly "strange," and none which would present problems of comprehension to American or southern English listeners), though it is at the same time recognisable as a northerner's to a listener familiar with English regional variations. For readings of *Briggflatts* especially, Bunting assumed an accent which self-consciously reconstructed the Northumbrian of his childhood. For example, his guttural /r/ in a line such as "Rain rinses the road" is a feature not part of his speaking voice, now barely extant in Northumbrian accents but well-represented among speakers of Bunting's generation and older (Wells 368). The decision to read *Briggflatts* in this way is manifestly coherent: Bunting thought recital aloud central to the poet's work,¹ so his readings are dramatized; *Briggflatts* is a poem named for a place in a region which was the poet's birthplace, his real and imaginative home, so reading in an accent associated with that region seems not unreasonable; it is a poem concerned with the past, which in part explains the use of a form of that accent which is no longer common; it is an "autobiography, but not a record of fact" (*Complete Poems* 226), so the difference between the poet's speaking voice and the assumed accent mounts implicit commentary on the fictional qualities of recollection. I will argue that there are other ways for readers to inhabit this poem, but Bunting's pronunciations are clearly deliberate, and a reasoned artistic case can be made for his choices.

Nonetheless, Bunting's assumption of a reading voice has occasioned considerable unease among commentators. In an interview otherwise remarkable for sympathetic support, Bunting's friend Denis Goacher comments:

1. In his lecture "Ears," Bunting describes a recital of Persian classical poetry involving musicians and a trained singer or "ravi," concluding caustically: "That is how a poetry reading ought to be arranged, but it cannot be done for five pounds and your train fare, with no time for rehearsal" (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 33).

His Northumbrian accent was a manufactured one. He had, in fact, a very refined voice but had two things in mind when reading his poetry aloud. He was very careful to keep the flat A's and a bit likely to roll his R's, but he certainly did not, in normal speech, roll his R's to the prodigious extent that he did when reading his poems. I never heard any sort of Northumbrian sound like that! There was also a slight over-emphasis on wanting to bring back the valuable consonants and, in particular, to make up for the elision of the R in English Southern speech. I thought he had a point there – [. . .]. But the self-conscious rolling of his R's, I thought, slowed up the actual course of the line . . . He is really tracing back his past, recovering the accent he was born with, with a layer of nostalgia. But, I repeat, there is an over-emphasis on regionality, because he wished to make a point against Southern speech. (204)

His snobbery aside, Goacher's confidence that his experience represents the totality of Northumbrian accents, past and present, might be thought typical of an overweening Southron, were not his words repeated almost exactly, for example, by Katrina Porteous, a poet born in Aberdeenshire and resident in north-eastern England: "Bunting's manufactured Northumbrian accent, which sounds nothing like any Northumbrian I ever heard" (qtd. in Armstrong). Goacher identifies the deliberation but suppresses the positive dramatic element in Bunting's readings, giving priority to a reactive and reactionary explanation – "because he wished to make a point against Southern speech" – when the poem's matter and form would seem to support more fully and extensively the motive of "recovering" origins. Given that a master theme of *Briggflatts* is that such recovery is tragic in attempt and impossible of completion ("nostalgia," undoubtedly present in all its political and ethical dubiousness, seems nonetheless a belittling term), a "manufactured" accent might be more suitable to the poem or of greater interest to listeners than

one instantly assimilable to the category of *Northumbrian we have heard spoke*.

The preoccupation with authenticity or otherwise of Bunting's reciting accent bespeaks a preoccupation with his extra-poetic pronouncements to the detriment – sometimes the exclusion – of concern with poetry. There is no anti-Southron polemic in *Briggflatts* itself, though much in the notes. Those notes can be seen as minatory, but a playful curmudgeonly quality – Bunting's gloss on "skerry" reads "O, come on, you know that one," on "Scone" "rhyme it with on, for heaven's sake, not own" (*Complete* 226) – serves as my justification for the unscholarly exercise which occupies the rest of this paper. I must state before continuing that I, like Bunting in this if nothing else, am not a linguist ("Thumps" 25), and since my study of linguistics and phonology has been confined to elementary texts, I welcome correction by those informed and expert. It remains for others to offer an objective phonological analysis of Bunting's recitals.²

What I propose here is rather different, indeed idiosyncratic, though I hope not quite beyond the bounds of literary scholarship as it is beyond those of linguistic. My intention is to begin an investigation into how a reader comes to inhabit a poem by speaking it aloud; I stress *begin*, for this paper constitutes at best a discussion document. I asked two readers to record the first part of *Briggflatts*, and made a recording of myself reading the same – this paper, however, for reasons of space, confines itself to the first nine stanzas of the twelve in part 1. All three readers are poets and performers of poetry in some capacity – I have less experience on stage than my colleagues, though regularly put in a turn in the lecture theatre. All three of us might in various ways be defined as southerners, though only I, perhaps, am a Southron. Cliff Horseman (CH) was born in 1973 in Frankfort, Kentucky, where he lived until 1991. He has lived in Dublin since 1997. Dave Lordan (DL), the second, was born in Derby of Irish parents in 1975, grew up

2. Some initial work was done by Kelvin Corcoran in the late 1970s, using oscilloscope analysis of Bunting's recordings. This relates only to the first stanza of *Briggflatts* and remains unpublished.

in Clonakilty, West Cork, and now lives in Co Wicklow. I (KF) was born in Tehran in 1978, to English parents, and spent most of my childhood in Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire with periods abroad in Singapore and Turkey. I have lived in the Republic of Ireland since 1999. These readings, in addition to Bunting's own, form the basis for the following account.

I

Brag, sweet tenor bull,

descant on Rawthey's madrigal,

each pebble its part

for the fells' late spring.

Dance tiptoe, bull,

black against may.

Ridiculous and lovely

chase hurdling shadows

morning into noon.

May on the bull's hide

and through the dale

furrows fill with may,

paving the slowworm's way. (Bunting, *Reads Briggflatts*)

Bunting's alveolar trills become pronounced where semantic content or connotation point to temporality, which in this stanza means earliness (*spring, morning*); kinesis (*spring, hurdling, furrows*) or the bull's anthropomorphised absurdity (*Brag, tenor, Ridiculous*). Uvular fricatives might again suggest movement (*through*) but seem also connected with localism (*Rawthey*). The eighth stanza of the poem also suggests a strong connection between uvular /r/ and domestic

intimacy. Even in the other rhotic readings (CH, DL), the distinction that Bunting makes between /r/-sounds is lost, and an arhotic reading (KF) seems a further impoverishment. For example, in any rhotic reading, “morning into noon” enacts a marked change, *or* becomes /ʊ:/, an effect muffled by the loss of a strong /r/ sound in *morning*.

Bunting pronounces the vitally important *May*, and syllables sharing its /eɪ/ sound (*paving, way*), in a manner characteristic of a number of north-eastern English accents, making the syllable progressively longer, so that feature of the accent seems magnified. This pronunciation, however, lacks the connotative value of the distinction between /r/ sounds mentioned above, and any reading which preserves the assonance does little damage to the poem.

DL persistently misread *descant* as *decant*, a parapraxis which seems to reflect an awareness of the stanza’s water music at the expense of a coherent metaphor. CH’s pronunciation of the second syllable of *Rawthey*, which could be heard as a mispronunciation by speakers from England and those familiar with English place-name convention, registers with a rhyme the semantic importance of *may* and *way*.

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.
Painful lark, labouring to rise!

The solemn mallet says:

In the grave's slot

he lies. We rot. (Bunting, *Reads Briggflatts*)

Trilled /r/ sounds and long vowels again characterise Bunting's reading of this stanza: he gives full value, for example, to the /e / of *says*, when other speakers contract it to a more neutral sound. The mallet's "words" are connected by sound in Bunting's reading to the *pav[ed]* way of the slowworm through *may*, generation to extinction, in a manner that goes unremarked in the other recordings.

Soft /t/ sounds in DL's reading de-emphasize the closing couplet; consequently, perhaps, he lays less stress on *rot*. The imitative quality of the stanza – consonants intended to mimic the chipping sounds of chisel against stone – is altered, though not I think minimised, by an Irish pronunciation of /t/ at the ends and in the middle of words. It is tempting to say that it makes the stone sound softer than *marble*, but this is probably simply to transfer the poem's interest in the literal durability of different types of stone into the metaphorical realm of phonetic description. CH's crisp /t/ sounds, especially in *twitter*, offer an effective contrast.

KF's vowel in *none* cancels the intentional link with *abolished*, *slot* and *rot*, as the other speakers' do not – again, southern English pronunciations seem to impoverish sonic texture.

Decay thrusts the blade,

wheat stands in excrement

trembling. Rawthey trembles.

Tongue stumbles, ears err

for fear of spring.

Rub the stone with sand,

wet sandstone rending

roughness away. Fingers
ache on the rubbing stone.
The mason says: Rocks
happen by chance.
No one here bolts the door,
love is so sore. (Bunting, *Reads Briggflatts*)

Bunting's uvular /r/ in *Rawthey* is less marked here, though a trace of the same sound in *trembles* creates a minute echo effect, again perhaps imitative. Perhaps oddly, given his importance to a biographical reading of the poem, the short vowel /e/ in *says* does not link the mason's words with his mallet's. Bunting also seems to take less care to give the rhyme words a rhotic pronunciation, precisely at a moment when the listener might expect the assumption of an accent associated with a particular person or place. The vowel-cluster *ears / err / fear* demonstrates an east / west distinction rather than a north / south one: for the Irish and American speakers, the vowels in *ears / fear* and *err* are similar; for both speakers from England they are distinct.

Stone smooth as skin,
cold as the dead they load
on a low lorry by night.
The moon sits on the fell
but it will rain.
Under sacks on the stone
two children lie,
hear the horse stale,
the mason whistle,
harness mutter to shaft,

felloe to axle squeak,
rut thud the rim,
crushed grit. (Bunting, *Reads Briggflatts*)

Bunting's uvular /r/ in *lorry* and *rain* again seems to function as an index of intimacy, as the narrative of this primal journey begins. The aural textures of this stanza are dense, and can be seen as richly imitative of its subject matter, but can be realised without undue mauling in any of the dialects of English represented here.

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. (Bunting, *Reads Briggflatts*)

Bunting's uvular /r/ is not phonetically consistent: here *rain* is pronounced without it, where in the previous stanza the /r/ sound was a notable, even exaggerated fricative. The connection between uvular /r/ and moments of emotional intensity is, by this fifth stanza, well-established. The unusual sound in *rocks* points to the importance of Bloodaxe's death-scene as exemplar; in

reflecting it draws attention to a self-portrait which *reflects* upon temporality, being both an act of anticipation (the boy who undertook the journey and *sit[s] up* does not wear a moustache, the man who remembers it does) and recollection, evoking Viking ancestry. The sound may be artificial, assumed for an occasion, but it is not without denotative content.

Some issues of rhythm emerge in the other recordings. CH says *moustache* as a trochee; the English and Irish speakers reverse the emphasis. The standard American stress interrupts the trochaic underpinning of this part of *Briggflatts*, forcing the listener to attend at a moment of temporal shift. Similarly, DL's markedly trochaic *plainsong*, where the other speakers say something closer to a spondee, creates a moment of mischievous syncopation out of high seriousness and tension, undercutting the potential self-importance of a speaker who positions himself as an autochthonic link between past and present.

Fierce blood throbs in his tongue,
lean words.
Skulls cropped for steel caps
huddle round Stainmore.
Their becks ring on limestone,
whisper to peat.
The clogged cart pushes the horse downhill.
In such soft air
they trudge and sing,
laying the tune frankly on the air.
All sounds fall still,
fellside bleat,
hide-and-seek peewit.

Her pulse their pace,
palm countering palm,
till a trench is filled,
stone white as cheese
jeers at the dale.

Knotty wood, hard to rive,
smoulders to ash;
smell of October apples.

The road again,
at a trot.

Wetter, warmed, they watch
the mason meditate

on name and date. (Bunting, *Reads Briggflatts*)

These stanzas, describing the final stage of the young lovers' journey, present few problems of realisation in the accents of English represented here. A non-rhotic pronunciation of *air* (KF) perhaps muffles the pun which is obvious to a reader of the page text. Politics of region and social class prompt the English reader to view Bunting's note on accent as polemical and exclusive. Readers from other English-speaking cultures tend to be quicker to see Bunting's caution to "Southrons" as an underestimation of the "music" of his poem. It is quite possible to imagine a text which would not sing without, for example, the lengthened vowel-sounds which feature in many north-eastern English accents; such poems exist, particularly in the folk and traditional corpora. I would contend that *Briggflatts* is not such a poem, though if any passage in it might be adduced in favour of the opposing viewpoint, it is the following stanza:

Rain rinses the road,
the bull streams and laments.
Sour rye porridge from the hob
with cream and black tea,
meat, crust and crumb.
Her parents in bed
the children dry their clothes.
He has untied the tape
of her striped flannel drawers
before the range. Naked
on the pricked rag mat
his fingers comb
thatch of his manhood's home. (Bunting, *Reads Briggflatts*)

This narrative of adolescent sexual exploration releases in Bunting's reading a flurry of uvular fricatives: it replaces his more usual trill in almost every rhotic sound here. I have already remarked the connection between this phoneme and local, domestic themes in *Briggflatts* – it seems to be for Bunting the sound of the hearth, here, literally so. He lengthens vowels in *clothes*, *tape*, *comb*, *hood*, *home*, exaggerating the characteristic regional pronunciation in a way which might strike the unsympathetic listener as unintentionally comic. It's a risky choice in recital, given that the text is careful to avoid coyness, punning on *prick*, for example, to offset the euphemism *manhood*. I think Bunting gets away with it – only just, but rather magnificently – creating with those long vowels a sort of wheedle which refuses idealisation of the scene, insinuates transgression without relinquishing tenderness.

Other readers might find ways of speaking this stanza which are comparable to Bunting's

vestal rhotacism. CH deliberately uses short front vowels in *naked*, to approximate a pronunciation which, in conversation, he identified as being characteristic of his mother's Appalachian family. His sense of the stanza's sensitive and intimate material, meanwhile, provoked a repeated parapraxis: *prickled* for *pricked*. Like Bunting, DL and CH do not pronounce *clothes* with a voiced dental fricative. DL identifies this as a characteristically Irish (contrasting it in conversation to "English" speech) articulation, and CH as a rustic and juvenile one. *Drawers* is vestigially disyllabic in all the recordings, despite substantial differences in vowel and rhotic quality: there seems to be agreement that the word denoting an item of underclothing is pronounced rather differently from the one meaning the furniture it might be stored in.

A similar *entente* is reached over *with cream and black tea*, which Bunting liked to quote as an example of his use of quantitative measure (Bell). Differences in accent do not affect the basic alternation of long and short syllables. Quantity is a resource, rather than a structural principle, in *Briggflatts*, but the status of the technique in English verse offers an analogy to the way this text generates sound when read aloud. True quantity, as Bunting remarks (*On Poetry* 27), though rare, obtains despite differences in emphasis and pronunciation. Similarly, the sound-patterning of *Briggflatts* is remarkable for its lack of dependence on a particular regional accent: most sound-effects are notably transferable even into "Southron."

The example of *Briggflatts* might lend support to J.H. Prynne's

lack of interest in the performance of poems in their author's own voice [. . .]; the specific occasional delivery is no more than an accidentalism of sound and behavior, since it is the language of the text that has and produces voice, and not the mere vocal equipment and habits of a speaker. An author-speaker of text in self-performance may seem to be a special case, in that features of such delivery can seem to be communicating an authentic textual inwardness, from the stance of

an authorized knowledge and self-interpretation. But such semblance is really delusional; this is to undo the work of mental ears, by a kind of primitive literal-mindedness: “Look, the poet is wearing red socks! Now at last we understand everything!” (Prynne 130)

If we need to locate the interest and appeal of *Briggflatts*, “the text,” and not a region of north-eastern England should indeed be our focus. It is as powerful a poem in the mouth of a Kentuckian or a Corkman as it is in the Northumbrian voice that (*pace*) travel *had* partially taken from its author, and which had to be recovered and assumed in recital. It has true quantity, if you like, because although the sound-patterns are integral, their arrangement shows every sign of being textual work: Bunting, deliberately or not and more often than not, chose assonantal and alliterative chimes that obtain across many different dialects of English, and in doing must reject at least some of those which are specific to Northumbrian, as he overwhelmingly rejects regionally specific vocabulary. The textual source of these sonic effects is liberatory: it opens the poem to speakers who wish to inhabit it; its textures are robust enough to take quite a bit of mauling, after all.

And yet there is something unsettling about the dismissive tone of Prynne’s remark. Oddly, given that in the same lecture he acknowledges with relief that “the arduous royal road into the domain of poetry (‘what does it mean?’) seems less and less an unavoidably necessary precondition for successful reading” (Prynne 132), he presumes that those who cleave to their primitive interest in an author-speaker’s redaction do so in the interests of furthering “knowledge,” “interpretation,” “understand[ing] everything!” However, if this essay has led me to any conclusion at all, it is that the performance of poems is of aesthetic, rather than hermeneutic value. We might take an example which has recurred in my analysis of the recordings: Bunting’s persistent association of uvular /r/ with intimacy and domesticity. Like all

signifiers its relation to the signified is not integral: there is nothing intrinsically home-like about uvular fricatives, and semantic content means listeners easily perceive the themes without the presence of the sound. Indeed, the reason for the link sounds almost facile when articulated: it is a feature of a regional accent which the poet remembered from childhood, but which, by the time he came to write the poem, was fast obsolescing, fitting for the poem's subject and mood of painful, irrecoverable loss. This interpretation is reasonable and likely, but as hermeneutic insight it is very nearly null: understanding goes no way to accounting for the effect, which to my mind is haunting, risky, and audacious, but to others, to quote some off-the-cuff responses from conversation and correspondence, "a bit embarrassing," that "bloody awful burr."

The ninth stanza of the first part of *Briggflatts* finds hospitable room for both text and voice. Further work on this poem might be of best use in helping to dismantle some of the value judgments (including Bunting's own) that assert the primacy of one over the other, and redirect attention to their interweaving. *Briggflatts* has generated much cantankerous excrescence, but the poem itself, though something short of gentle, is a generous home to voices.

Gentle generous voices weave

over bare night

words to confirm and delight

till bird dawn.

Rainwater from the butt

she fetches and flannel

to wash him inch by inch,

kissing the pebbles.

Shining slowworm part of the marvel.

The mason stirs:

Words!

Pens are too light.

Take a chisel to write. (Bunting, *Reads Briggflatts*)

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