Canadian Social Science
Vol. 7, No. 3, 2011, pp. 98-102

ISSN 1712-8056 [Print]
ISSN 1923-6697[Online]
www.cscanada.net
www.cscanada.org

Basil Bunting's Objectivist Perspective in Poetry and Musical Association

LES PERSPECTIVES OBJECTIVES DE BASIL BUNTING DANS LA POÉSIE ET DANS L'ASSOCIATION MUSICALE

Farid Parvaneh[1]

Raaheleh Sadaat Araabi[2]

Abstract: Basil Bunting, British poet, is one of the rare great modernists who have not been given their due or properly studied. An understanding of his work will help us understand modernism more appropriately. Reference will also be made to opponents who put sight and visuality over and above everything else in man's effort to acquire knowledge of this world in general. The researchers in this article seek to achieve two goals in this paper. The first or the main goal is to consider the Modern English poet Basil Bunting's Objectivist roots according to Mitchell's paper in 2008. The second goal, which naturally emerges from the first one is to present sound play from Bunting's own view and define them, regarding to Schott's contributions in 2003, in a part of his long poem, Briggflatts, which lead to the kind of Aural and visual dancing. Then we will conclude , as Bunting mentions more and more, poetry is only its sound.
Key words: Bunting; Objectivism; Poetry; Sound; Visuality; Aurality

Résumé: Basil Bunting, poète britannique, est l'un des rares grands modernistes qui n'ont pas reçu leur dû ou n'ont pas été bien étudiés. Une bonne compréhension de son travail nous aidera à comprendre le modernisme de façon plus appropriée. Des références seront également faits pour des opposants qui ont mis la vue et la visualité au-delà de tout le reste de l'effort de l'homme d'acquérir des connaissances de ce monde en général. Les chercheurs de cet article visent à atteindre deux objectifs dans le présent document. Le premier ou le principal but est d'examiner les racines objectivistes du poète moderne anglais Basil Bunting selon le document de Mitchell en 2008. Le deuxième objectif, qui découle naturellement du première objectif est de présenter diffuser un show sonore du point de vue personnel de Bunting et les définir, en se référençant aux contributions de Schott en 2003, dans une partie de son poème long, Briggflatts, qui conduit à une sorte de bande sonore et de danse visuelle. Ensuite, nous allons conclure que, comme Bunting mentionne de plus en plus, la poésie est seulement le son.
Mots clés: Bunting; Objectivisme; PoÉSie; Son; VisualitÉ; Auriculaire

DOI: 10.3968/j.css.1923669720110703.015

Basil Cheesman Bunting is a significant British Modernist Poet who gets his fame after the publication of Briggflatts in 1966. He has a lifelong interest in music that led him to emphasis the sonic qualities of poetry, particularly the importance of reading poetry aloud. He is an accomplished reader of his own works.

Before looking at his poetic thoughts , it is worth noting the influences in Bunting's life towards his musical way of seeing and organizing poetry. Basil Bunting's aunt was a concert pianist, and it was through hearing her play that he first came to love music when a child. He used to ask her to play him Scarlatti sonatas, a first sign of his interest in that composer and in that particular musical form. He also had the good fortune to live near Newcastle in the days when William Whittaker ran the Bach Choir. Bunting's experience of music was deepened and widened by his work as critic on the London paper, *The Outlook*. Furthermore, his close association with Ezra Pound in Rapallo, on and off from 1929 to

[1] Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Qom Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qom, Iran. E-mail:faridparvaneh@gmail.com
[2] MA student of English Language and Literature, Azad University, Karaj Branch, Tehran, Iran.
*Received 27 March 2011; accepted 10 May 2011

1933, cannot but have encouraged his love of music. Pound, especially in the 1920's, was passionately interested in it and went as far as to compose an opera about Villon, *Le Testament*, and a violin sonata. In the summer of 1933, Bunting was on Pound's organization committee for the first series of his concerts in Rapallo, and he wrote a review of the opening recital by Olga Rudge and Gerhard Munch in *Il Mare* of 1st July. Also while in Italy, Bunting came across some manuscripts by the Italian musicologist, Oscar Chilesotti (1848-1916), that were apparently of interest to pound.

Bunting's Objectivist roots, as Diane Mitchell believes, partially account for what might be termed his formalism. George Oppen, a member of the 1930s movement, explained it in 1966 in terms of the poem as an object and the concomitant restraint of the poet's interiority:

> Oppen's explanation underlines the fact that this…[movement] was not…principally concerned with people's objective attitude to reality, but 'the poet's recognition of the necessity of form, the objectification of the poem.' Oppen's statement, in stressing the form of the poem, is at pains to insist that we should value a poem not because, as in confessional poetry, we are invited to share the tortured ego of the poet (Plath, Berryman,much of Lowell), but because the poem itself has achieved an equilibrium of its own, "an objectification."(Tomlinson, "Objectivism" 136-37)

Bunting similarly "stresses that a poet is an artificer:' A work of art is something constructed, something made in the same way that a potter makes a bowl'"(138). He is therefore, like Oppen, "opposed to both the manipulation of the poet's personality in appealing to the reader and to the over-insistence of a rhetoric that would lay hold of the reader's feelings and try to inflate them"(Tomlinson 138). Charles Tomlinson explains that, according to Objectivism, a poem is not "a personal soap opera"(145), but rather grows out of and reflects "the integrity of the poet's handling of language and subject-matter"(145). In other words, "the Objectivist poet is not saying 'look at me,'but 'look at the form of what I have made'"(145).Bunting in his 1932 *Open Letter to Zukofsky* provides the following analogy as an illustration of "what I would understand by Objectivism, if the word were mine"(qtd. in Reagan 241):

> 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 good 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.(qtd. in Reagan 240-41)

It is absurd to abstract an essence of *hat* or to understand a hat as anything other than a discrete object. There is therefore no point in theorizing about hats or, perhaps more importantly, psychoanalyzing a hat because a hatmaker does not provide the kind of content in his or her product that is amenable to psychoanalysis. Bunting uses another analogy based on craftsmanship in 1969:

> A work of art is something constructed, something made in the same way that a potter makes a bowl. A bowl may be useful but it may be there only because the potter liked that shape, and it's a beautiful thing. The attempt to find any meaning in it would be manifestly absurd.(qtd. in Milne 288)

Donald Davie associates this particular analogy with William Carlos Williams in 1944 talking about "the necessity of form, the objectification of the poem," when he defined a poem as " a small or large machine made of words"(Davie, "English and American" 278). Davie notes that these kinds of declarations are rarely "worded with care"(280), and therefore also rarely "defensible as [they] stand…"(280). As Peter Makin observes, in a more specifically poetic context Bunting's statements of this type generally amount to, "in effect,[the claim that] 'Poetry is only its sound'"(Bunting 239).

Briggflatts has come to be heralded as one the most important of post-war British poems. Yet it has been most famously acclaimed for its sound. Bunting's own pronouncements about sound's primacy and its import for *Briggflatts* are the stuff of legend:

> There is no need of any theory for what gives pleasure through the ear, music or poetry. The theoreticians will follow the artist and fail to explain him. The sound, whether it be in words or notes, is all that matters. It is perfectly possible to delight an audience by reading poetry of sufficient quality in a language it does not know.("The Poet's Point of View" 81)

> I have never said that poetry consists only of sound. I said again and again that the essential thing is the sound. Without the sound, there isn't any poetry.

> Briggflatts 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 instrument is the meaning of any piece of music.("A Note on Briggflatts" n.p.)

> Briggflatts is just onomatopoeia. That's all it is. It's really very simple.(Makin, Shaping 242)

And these are but a representative sampling. Yet they have faced their share of derision – most strenuously from Peter Dale's *Basil Bunting and the Quonk and Groggle School of Poetry* and Peter Ure's *The Sound of Poetry: A Rejoinder to*

Basil Bunting. Even Bunting's supporters usually find themselves constructing a distance between his poetry and his comment: "There is every reason to follow Lawrence's warning: Never trust the artist. Trust the tale; there is no reason to expect Bunting's comments on his own verse, or his theories about verse in general, to be consistent with his practice"(100). Yet when we trust the tale that is *Briggflatts*, sound is absolutely essential to its meaning. It *is not* the only thing – it is bound up with thematic, syntactic and visual meanings to forge a series of tensile nexuses – but it is the overarching force. And in this article the researcher appreciates David Scott study for expanding the existing acknowledgement of that force, following him, she explores the poem's sonic minutiae and the particularized rhythms of its component parts. Through such mining, meanings begin to arise anew and inform the social and political implications of the poem's formal and historical layering. Bunting commits to sound an ethical force that questions assumptions and interpretive frameworks, and enriches the means by which human beings stand towards each other and their inhabited landscapes.

Throughout his life, Bunting remained adamant that poetry's primary affinity was to music, but that its lifeblood plundered an even more primeval force – that of the dance:

> The movements of the human body dancing dictate a rhythm. It is not at all difficult to see how music is born… I don't need to elaborate, or to show how all the elements of music arise. The fundamental one is there, dictated by the human body doing what it is natural for it to do. Poetry must arise very similarly, from the grunts and cries of the dancers. It is very closely related to music from its birth, and both are tied ultimately to the body and its movements. ("The Codex" 3)

Hugh Kenner similarly remembers Bunting's insistence on this bedrock:

> He talked of the primacy of dance – "Watch your children when they are going to school; they don't walk – they dance!" He had even known, he said, a naturalist who came upon a tribe of gorillas dancing. The dance is in our animal blood, and so is the rhythmic chanting of unintelligible sounds; and the poet is he who can gather up this blood-rite and miraculously contrive that the words shall make gestures of meaning as well.("Sound of Sense"65)

The dance predominates and should remain present as poetry's physical core and the retainer of its suppleness: "Whatever refinements and subtleties poetry and music may introduce, if they lose touch altogether with the simplicity of the dance, with the motions of the human body…people will no longer feel them as music and poetry. They will respond to them, no doubt , but not with the exhilaration that dancing brings. They'll not think of them as human concerns; they will find them tedious"("The Codex"4). But how, then, to maintain that motion and exhilaration? How to construct in poetry a dance that transcends metaphor?

> Brag, sweet tenor bull
> descant on Rowthey's madrigal,
> each pebble its part
> for the fell's 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. (CP 61)

Kenner has talked cogently of the stanza's consonantal abutments – the prime example being the poem's opening line where " its five discrete vowels, held apart from one another by consonantal junctures, resembles a musical phrase from the keyboard more closely than what usually gets called musicality"("Sound of Sense"67). Kenner, following Northrop Fry, caustically remarks that poetic music is not synonymous with mellifluousness. On the contrary, mellifluousness, if anything, is removed from music because of its negation of contrast: "an array of like sounds is not at all what anyone expects of music"(66). Bunting's stanza strikes precisely because mellifluousness is so absent. Only four of the lines demonstrate classic alliteration, but we have alliteration that rings across lines – two central words, "bull" and "may", for instance, are each repeated three times. Hence, alliteration works as a mode of recall across significant gaps rather than as a key to grouping identical sounds.

Rhythm, in contrast to melody, carries the sound. Mere meter stultifies dance; rhythm enables it to flourish. The predominant rhythm that drives *Briggflatts* corresponds to Old English strong-stress metrics, but in part I the muscle of its bass-line doesn't quite became clear until we divide the lines of its twelve, thirteen-line stanza into *pairs*. For instance, in

the opening stanza, following the heavily stressed first line, a set of five-stress *caesured* pairs develops – capped by a final four-stress line:

Brag, sweet tenor bull , descant on Rowthey's madrigal,
each pebble its part for the fell's 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.(CP 61)

What is perhaps even more remarkable about these lines is that when we map their stresses, it becomes clear that the system of strong-stress metrics serves to undergird an elaborate pattern of cross-cutting alliteration that marks the stanza as performing a complex, intertwined, but quite distinct dance:

b	s	t	b	d	r	m
	p		p	f	l	s
d	t		b	b	m	
r		l		ch	h	sh
m		n		m	b	h
th		d		f	f	M
p	s	w				

Mapped across the caesura, a pattern of two halves engaged in a separate though interlocking dance emerges. On the left we have the dance, predominately, of the plosives – *b,t,p,* and *d* – whereas on the right we have a combination of fricatives – *f* and *h* – and the nasal *m*. and yet these two distinct halves hesitatingly come into contact as the predominant element of one dance is fleetingly mirrored in the other: the *d* and *b* slip momentarily to the right, and the *m* to the left. The dancers meet. This aligning of consonants recalls Zukofsky's intricate metrics based on the *how of articulation*, though Bunting's arrangements are less structured and therefore allow for greater flexibility and more pronounced movement.

But the visual dance that becomes apparent when we map the stanza according to its cross-cutting alliterative strong-stresses serves only as corollary to the aural dance that emanates, echoes and shifts within the ear. That dance cannot begin until the poetry is read aloud. Bunting himself is adamant on this point:

> 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. A skilled musician can imagine the sound, more or less, and a skilled reader can try to hear, mentally, what his eyes see in print; but nothing will satisfy either of them till his ears hear it as real sound in the air. Poetry must be read aloud…(" The poet's Point of View" 80)

What this energy seeks is an emotional interaction with the reader, the audience, which generates the sheer joy and vigor of unbridled movement. For Bunting's aural dance to be precipitated, the body, initially through the voice and the mouth, must be activated. Richer Caddel's introduction to the *Complete Poems* exhorts the reader, "Read these poems aloud…For the new reader, the first experience of sounding these poems in the air, howevwe inexpertly, will be *physical* – but above all enriching".(11-12)

The aim of the present study ,in the first step, was to introduce modern English poet, Basil Bunting and then to elaborate his objectivist traces regarding to Diane Mitchell's perspective in poetry. By the means of this approach to clarify that word patterns which may at first appear dense and complicated on the page become articulated and clarified, resonating across the poem's structure and therefore the subtleties and echoes of language which hold a poem together are revealed by the process of sounding it and at the end to show this method on the first part of Bunting's long poem, Briggflatts, regarding to Scott's sound divisions. In a nutshell, according to Bunting:

> "Poetry, like music is to be heard. It deals in sound – long sounds and short sounds, heavy beats and light beats, the tone relations of vowels, the relations of consonants to one another which are like instrumental colour in music. … A skilled musician can imagine the sound, more or less, and a skilled reader can try to hear, mentally, what his eyes see in print: but nothing will satisfy either of them till his ears hear it as real sound in the air. POETRY MUST BE READ ALOUD."("The Poet's Point of View 80)

REFERENCES

Bunting, Basil. (2000). The Poet's Point of View. In W.N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Ed.), *Strong Words: Modern Poet on Modern Poetry* (pp. 80-82). Northumberland: Bloodax Books Ltd.

Bunting, Basil. (1975). *Third Programme Interview with Eric Mottram*. London: BBC.

Bunting, Basil. (1989). *A Note on Briggflatts*. Durham: Basil Bunting Poetry Archieve.

Bunting, Basil. (1999). The Codex. In Peter Makin (Ed.), *Basil Bunting on Poetry* (pp. 1-18). Baltimore: John Hopkins UP.

Bunting, Basil. (1968). *Collected Poems.* London: Fulcrum.

Caddle, Richard. (1994). Introduction to Bunting. *Complete Poems.* Oxford: oxford UP.

Davie, Donald. (1998). English and American in Briggflatts. In Clive Wilmer (Ed.), *With the Grain: Essays on Thomas Hardy and Modern British Poetry* (pp. 275-283). Manchester.

Kenner, Hugh. (1981). The Sound of Sense. In Carrol Terrell (Ed.), *Basil Bunting: Man and Poet* (63-69). Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation.

Makin, Peter. (1992). *Bunting: The Shaping of his Verse.* Oxford: Clarendon.

Milne, William S. (1981). Basil Bunting's Prose and Criticism. In Carroll F.Terrell (Ed.), *Basil Bunting: Man and Poet* (pp. 275-289). Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation.

Reagan, Dale. (1981). Basil Bunting: Obiter Dicta. In Carroll F.Terrel (Ed.), *Basil Bunting: Man and Poet* (229-274). Orano, Maine: National Poetry Foundation.

Tomlinson, Charles. (2004). Objectivism: William Carlos Williams and Basil Bunting. Marco Fazzini (Ed.), *Resisting Alterities: Wilson Harris and Other Avatars of Otherness* (133-146). New York: Rodopi.

Ure, Peter. (1966, Apr. Summer). The Sound of Poetry: A Rejoinder to Basil Bunting. *Diary of the North-Eastern Association of the Arts*, 3.