

Basil Bunting's Aesthetic Function: Art vs. Intellect

FONCTION ESTHETIQUE DU BASIL BUNTING: ART VS INTELLIGENCE

Farid Parvaneh¹; Raheleh S.Aaraaby^{2,*}

¹Assistant Professor. Department of English Language, Qom Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qom, Iran.

²MA in English Language and Literature. Karaj Branch, Islamic Azad University, Karaj, Iran.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Basil Bunting is most commonly thought of as 1930s and 1940s poet grouped with some other poets such as Louis Zukofsky and Lorine Niedecker under the label "Objectivist". The present researchers seek to achieve two goals in this paper. The first goal is to argue that Bunting pushes the aesthetic function to the very brink of sense but holds it there, oscillating on the cusp of referential meaning, thus creating a contested, liminal space where sound and sense content for the constructive axis of meaning-construction. The second goal is to construct an oppositional relationship between art and intellect and conclude that if the best poetry aspires to a state of pure music, that aspiration moves it even further away from the intellect¹. 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.

Key words: Bunting; Aesthetics; Form; Art; Intellect; Music

Résumé

Basil Bunting est le plus souvent considérés comme des années 1930 et 1940 de regroupés les poètes avec quelques autres poètes tels que Louis Zukofsky et Lorine Niedecker sous le label «objectiviste». Les chercheurs comtemporains cherchent à atteindre deux objectifs

dans le présent document. Le premier objectif est de faire valoir que le Bunting pousse la fonction esthétique au bord même du sens, mais y maintient, oscillant sur le point de sens référentiel, créant ainsi un litigieuse, espace liminal où le son et le contenu de sens pour l'axe constructif de sens-la construction. Le deuxième objectif est de construire une relation d'opposition entre l'art et de l'intellect et de conclure que si la meilleure poésie aspire à un état de la musique pure, que l'aspiration se déplace encore plus loin de l'intellect. Référence sera également à des adversaires 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.

Mots clés: Forme Bunting; L'esthétique; L'art; L'intelligence; De la musique

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Zukofsky, Bunting, and Niedecker usually find themselves conjoined in a sentence also including the word "Objectivist". As has been oftentimes pointed out, the nexus is historically misleading as Niedecker's work was included neither in the February 1931 "Objectivist" issue of *poetry: A Magazine of Verse* nor the subsequent 1932 *An "Objectivist" Anthology*, and it was the *Poetry* issue that in fact introduced her to Zukofsky and engendered their correspondence. Bunting's connection with the group is also suspect. Though included in both of the formative documents, he has not been shy in distancing himself – "I wasn't anxious to be with them...apart from a few principles, there wasn't much to have in common"

¹Much of the following discussion either directly or indirectly takes its cue from David Giles Scott and Amy Diane Mitchell, Stanford and Western Ontario University dissertations.

(Reagan, p.72), and his name is usually excluded from critical discussions. The “Objectivists” as a group have garnered a renewal of attention recently, headed by Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ and Peter Quartermain’s collection of essays, *The Objectivist Nexus*, Michael Davidson’s editing of Oppen’s *New Collected Poems*, Mark Scroggins’ edition of essays on Zukofsky, *Upper Limit Music* – the first section of which concentrates on the 1930s – the printing of all of Zukofsky’s work by the Wesleyan press to coincide with his 2004 centenary, and Niedecker’s own centenary in October 2003 marked by an international gathering of poets and scholars in Madison, Wisconsin.

The burgeoning of attention has done little to form a critical rapprochement as to what the term “Objectivist” actually means, and DuPlessis’ and Quartermain’s introduction is careful to narrate differences: “the proportion of such key concepts as ‘sincerity’ and ‘objectification’ varies in each narrating of the issues by the poets...There may be a shared vocabulary, but its applications and gloss differ from writer to writer. In short, the term ‘Objectivist’ has situated meanings, not an absolute one” (7). Indeed, Marjorie Perloff’s aptly titled essay written before the recent flurry, might still stand as a description of the critical nexus: “Barbed wire entanglements”. The researcher emphasizes the critical aspect of this to think through the necessity of form; to make of each poem an object; to think with things as they exist.

Furthermore, the “objectivist” lens focuses on their poems as completed, autotelic objects – as formal things in themselves – when in each instance, form presents a nexus wherein such aspects of poetic shape as sound, visual spacing, rhythm, and meaning inhere in conjunction with an attempt to re-establish the physiological as a considerable and fundamental aspect of poetic form and meaning. For Bunting, poetry inhabits not solely the terrain of musicality and poetic sound but also the physiological viscera of the inner organs as working in conjunction with the voice and mouth as things crucially made tangible within the poem. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music*’s definition of song as “the natural human means of self-expression (as it is for most birds)” represents that which objectivist poets attempt to keep alive within the written medium as a means of engaging with, to recall Khayyam’s inscription, specific political and emotional crises that the turbulent historical period represented, ranging through John F. Kennedy’s assassination, the Vietnam War, US domestic unrest, and, particularly for Bunting, the loss of specific social and cultural communities. Sound’s physiology speaks out the secrets in their ledgers.

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, p.241):

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, p.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*, p.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, p.239).

Readers quickly pointed out to Bunting that *Briggflatts* in particular is far more complex than this statement about sound allows: “Critics hastened to tell him that this was nonsense: it ignored, for example, all those rich images. Friends pointed out that *Briggflatts* itself was hardly mere sound: it was not poem that one could grasp merely by listening to it” (239). What Davie correctly argues, however, is that the importance of these Objectivist statements lies less in whether or not they are strictly defensible than in what they imply about how the movement conceived of the relationship between poet and reader. John Berryman, for instance, “does indeed nudge and cajole and coax his readers, in a way that one can be sure...Oppen and Zukofsky are offended and incensed by” (*English and American*, p.280). The Objectivists, however, work out of the assumption that “a poem is a transaction between the poet and his subject more than it is a transaction between the poet and his readers” (*English and American*, p.280), and although Bunting is “more social, more public, than Oppen” (*English and American*, p.280), he has a similar “determination to cut the reader down to size, by making him realize that he is only as it were a bystander” (*English and American*, p.280). That hat, the bowl, and the poem simply are, and are self-sufficient and they are no more dominated by either the poet’s or the reader’s egotistical desires than is the Objectivists’ doctrine of “refusal of a rhetoric of self-regard.” (Tomlinson, *Sense* 7)

Bunting’s insistence on the musicality of poetry, combined with his Objectivist focus on form, implies a certain amount of anti-intellectualism in his conceptions of his poetry. In his 1970 lecture *The Art of Poetry*, he identifies the musical qualities of poetry with poetry’s essence: “Poetry and music are both patterns of sound drawn on a background of time, that is their origin and their essence. Whatever else they may become, whatever purpose they may sometimes serve, is secondary” (qtd. in Reagan, p.230). According to Bunting, this music is devoid of intellectual content proper. He therefore (in 1977) upbraids both other writers and himself for making

too much use of literary allusion, unlike Yeats, who wrote what Bunting considered very self-contained poetry:

...we tumbled below Yeats. Yeats is very careful. He produces very few references to previous literature. His references are those you can find in the life around you, and that is much easier, and much better, and more provident, especially where literary fashions change. Eliot above all, of course, is using other literature all the time. Pound, to a considerable extent; Zukofsky, to some extent; me also/and that will weigh against us as the century goes on. (qtd. in Reagan 249-50)

Bunting also criticizes Pound in 1935 for betraying his own project of perfecting language by turning aside from the language itself to secondary concerns such as economics and politics:

Doesn't he [the poet] do all his own bit for progress (or the maintenance of the world) by purely linguistic exercises? Public spirit is abused when people try to do what isn't in or pretty close to their own specialty. Ain't that Confucian? 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 politics or patent medicines or quack religious or other subjects we've only a secondary interest in. (qtd. in Reagan 233)

He backs away from unambiguously chastising Pound and instead focuses on the need for critics to confine themselves strictly to the music of poetry, but his distaste for poetic involvement in *secondary* topics is evident. Furthermore, Victoria Forde quotes from "some principles of criticism" (71) that Bunting stated in a 1927 article, principles that "changed only in expression during his lifetime" (71) and that decisively construct an oppositional relationship between art and intellect:

No art depends principally or even largely on its appeal to the intellect, and in the Age of Reason itself Pope was preferred to Young for melody, not for sense; Voltaire's style gained for him more admirers than his doctrines, and Chardin was appreciated not for the realism of his rabbits but for the nobility of his rhythm and design... it may be due to the deficiency of my intellect that it gets but little more from one art than from another. If music speaks first to the emotions, so, it seems to me, do poetry, sculpture, painting, architecture, even the prose art of fiction, whether in the drama or in the novel... All arts are of a party against the intellect, and if music does outrun the others it is by a very short lead. (qtd. in Ford 71)

Thus, if the best poetry aspires to a state of pure music, that aspiration moves it even further away from the intellect.

Which is not to say, however that the best poetry should be utterly devoid of content. As Forde notes, Bunting never goes so far as to directly "equate...music and poetry. He never denies the essential differences between them..." (Forde 77). As he puts it, "I've 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" (qtd. in Forde 77). Without the musical element of poetry, it can never achieve the fullness of its own potential; he claims in the 1966 article

The poet's Point of View that, "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" (qtd. in Milne 277). Once the essential music is "established... you can add all sorts of stuff if you want to" (qtd. in Forde 77). This *stuff* may even consist of the complex levels of meaning that are elaborated in the literary hermeneutic schemes of Augustine and Dante: "You can, if you like, have as elaborate a system of meanings, sub-meaning, and so forth, as Dante had in the *Divina Commedia*" (qtd. in Forde 77). To elaborate on Bunting's analogy of the potter's, bowl, complex levels of meaning perhaps form the components and consistency of the clay, but the end product exists primarily for its form, not its ingredients. Sara Greaves seems to be considering this possibility when she compares Bunting's use of form with T.S.Eliot's objective correlative; Bunting's "sonata form...[with its] movement from exposition to development to recapitulation, is a way not to elicit *specific* emotions, as with the correlative, but to provide an impersonal framework for emotion" (146).

Nonetheless, however one finesses Bunting's musical claims and their relationship to traditional content, there remains a fundamental and fundamentally insoluble tension between the aspiration to pure form and the existence of secondary content in these claims. Undoubtedly the rhythms and figures of the *Divine Comedy* account for much of its importance, prominence and continued appeal; but the *Divine Comedy* also functions as a political, philosophical, and theological argument. If it did not function in these ways – that is, if only its form mattered – Pound, for instance, could not deliberately accent its potentially heretical components for his own ends, a reference to the Averroist whom Dante places in Paradise alongside "orthodox thinkers in 'the heaven of the sun'" (Terrell 694), because it would simply make no sense to claim that the *Divine Comedy* could be heretical in the first place. It seems to the researcher entirely possible to create a form that is in and of itself heretical, but that possibility does not exist in a vacuum. It arises only out of preexisting intellectual arguments, and is thus not the self-contained bowl that Bunting desires. Were he truly committed only to pure form, he should perhaps have been writing nonsense poetry, or anticipating the experiments of sound and language poetry. As Peter Dale argues in his blistering attack on *Briggflatts*, "the claim to pure music warns off all exegesis" (55), but "in fact, Bunting massively contradicts himself in that meaning is easy enough to detect in *Briggflatts*" (57). Furthermore, Bunting and other "sound-merchants never go as far as creating neologisms in English phonetics nor abandon entirely the syntactical structures of their native tongue" (58). A kind characterization of Dale's attack on both Bunting and other *sound merchants* would be that it is uncharitable and refuses to engage with this kind of poetry in an openminded way; nevertheless, the researcher

believes that he is correct when he claims that “this use of musical form is ultimately a mere metaphorical usage” (58), one that is itself “a form of anti-rationalism” (58). The tension between form and content in Bunting’s conception of poetry therefore reveals an underlying anti-rationalist or anti-intellectual attitude more than it does his actual achievement of this attitude in his poetry.

Anti-rationalism, however, is not in opposition to various forms of mysticism. Bunting links poetry’s essence not only to music but to dance, and it is in this second association that the possibilities he sees for transcendence in poetic form become evident. He equates that the formal possibilities of poetry with exhilaration:

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 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. (qtd. in Reagan 230)

Hugh Kenner explains that Bunting saw dancing as a primal element of human nature:

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. (65)

Bunting also remarked once that the essence of both poetry and music is dance: “The further poetry and music get from the dance and from each other, the less satisfactory they seem” (qtd. in Forde 248). To alter his original scheme for the arts, therefore, according to this statement it is dancing that is both utterly essential and utterly anti-rational. It is also not meaning but, in Kenner’s terms, “gestures of meaning” (65). But what precisely is this gesture or, perhaps even more importantly, what does it gesture towards? Bunting’s enduring love for Yeats’ poetry may hint at an answer. As Kenner explains, “he thought Yeats’s ‘I am of Ireland...’ had very little meaning but was a fine poem for all that; its show of meaning sufficed” (65). Its *show of meaning* is doubtless also its *gesture of meaning*. Yeats’ occult mysticism provides a *content* of sorts for a number of his poems, and it may be this mysticism towards which Bunting’s musical forms gesture. Indeed, his association of children, primal dancing, and gestures of meaning, combined with his anti-rationalism, recalls stanzas VI and VII of Yeats’s *Among School Children*:

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;
Soldier Aristotle played the taws
Upon the bottom of a king of kings;
World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras
Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings
What a star sang and careless Muses heard:
Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.

...
Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance? (184-85)

This brushing aside of philosophy and mathematics, of “blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil,” taken together with the insistence that the dancer might in fact be indistinguishable from the dance, falls into the tradition of poetic and philosophical claims that, in Makin’s words, “purport... to find a Whole in the cosmos” (*Bunting*, 276), but which in fact are only “telling us to see one” by means of “well-used triggers” (276).

Briggflatts participates in this process of telling us to see a whole: This Whole is... mirrored in an intuitive way, by the Form of the Poem, various triggers in which tell us to consider it as another sort of Whole: the kind of whole created by Paterine literary music. It is thus above and beyond being affected by the mere cultural or personal history out of which it emerged, and which we are not to question. (276)

The Whole is a site of ineffable transcendence that is inextricably bound up with the form of poetry, much in the way that the dance is inextricable from the dancer. What Bunting tries to refer to through the figures of music and dance, therefore, bears a strong resemblance to some of Pound’s theories of poetry as well: as Ford observes, “[Bunting’s] insistence that poetry be read aloud is underpinned by Pound’s theory of melopoeia” (249). Melopoeia does indeed refer to something ineffable in poetry, an effect that the researcher has argued Pound used to try to evoke initiatory, Gnostic experiences for his reader. Pound does, however, have doctrines and arguments and plans for the general amelioration of the world; Bunting, on the other hand, seems to be after melopoeia for melopoeia’s sake alone. His analogy of the potter’s bowl implies that he does not want his poetry to refer outside itself to other things on its own plane, if it refers to anything else, that *else* is mystical, transcendent, and independent of intellect and rationality.

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