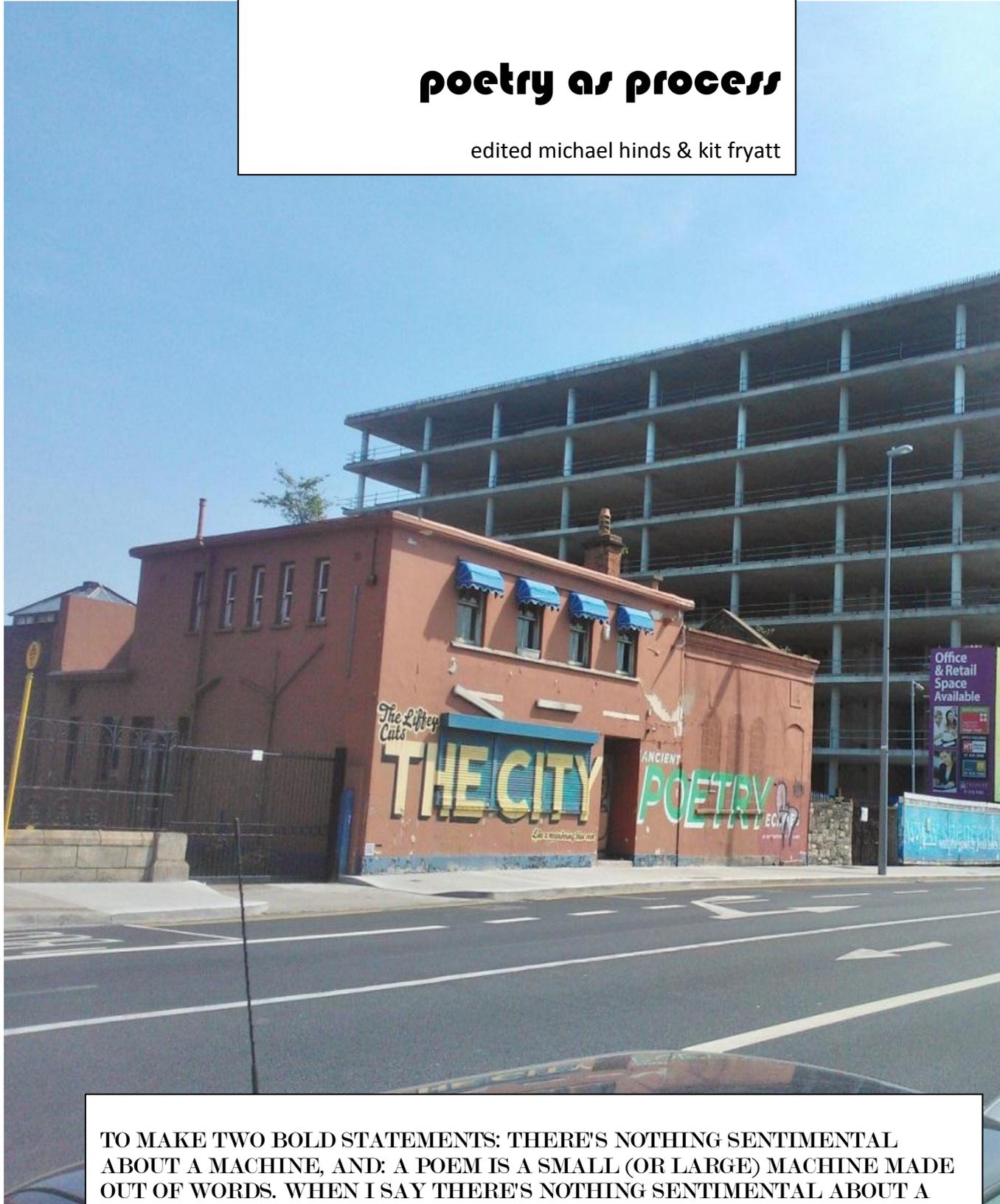


c. 2012

# POST IV:

## poetry as process

edited michael hinds & kit fryatt



TO MAKE TWO BOLD STATEMENTS: THERE'S NOTHING SENTIMENTAL ABOUT A MACHINE, AND: A POEM IS A SMALL (OR LARGE) MACHINE MADE OUT OF WORDS. WHEN I SAY THERE'S NOTHING SENTIMENTAL ABOUT A POEM, I MEAN THAT THERE CAN BE NO PART THAT IS REDUNDANT.

PROSE MAY CARRY A LOAD OF ILL-DEFINED MATTER LIKE A SHIP. BUT POETRY IS A MACHINE WHICH DRIVES IT, PRUNED TO A PERFECT ECONOMY. AS IN ALL MACHINES, ITS MOVEMENT IS INTRINSIC, UNDULANT, A PHYSICAL MORE THAN A LITERARY CHARACTER. – WCW

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sappho and fats waller on the way home from the pub

## maurice devitt

### *girly man* – poetry as reality TV

For most poets the publication of a new collection is a rare and significant event, defining a further point on the arc of their writing life, which runs at a controlled, and largely parallel, distance from the highs and lows of their everyday life. Not Charles Bernstein. Not *Girly Man*.

Bernstein has a vision where poetry and life are asymptotic – poetry is not a series of discrete events stapled on to the life of the poet; poetry is a continuous shadow of that life, a shadow that is just a few beats behind. For Bernstein everything connects as he seems to live in an infinite cross-hatch of poetry and daily life – today it could be an after-school conversation with his son, Felix, a dinner party at Marjorie Perloff's or a call from Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, tomorrow it could be a poem.

While this approach has the advantage of a single unifying aesthetic, it opens up a greater risk around quality control as Bernstein's poetry seeks to track the mundane and humdrum as well as the surprising and inspiring. He seems to see this as a risk worth taking and side-steps any potential issue by adopting an approach to poetry which is both inductive and phenomenological – his fundamental position is that the perceived effectiveness of a poem is not determined by the quality of the inputs and inspiration, but by how the reader reacts to the final work – “poetry's power to evoke emotion is unrelated to any utilitarian idea of the meaning or ideas a poem conveys; rather the emotion is aroused by the sound of the words” (Bernstein, *Apoetics* 58).

So for Bernstein poetry is the portal through which he observes and responds to the world, although recognising the limitations of language, time and truth. While language<sup>1</sup> is the essence of how we express ourselves, it often falls short when seeking to describe a musical or visual arts experience – the art critic plays an important role but can never fully communicate what it was like to *be there*. Language is only one dimension of our sensory experience and while advances in Neuro-Linguistic Programming have shown how words can actively create meaning and emotion, language on its own can't fully describe our world. For this reason *Girly Man* is littered with links to other sensory experiences, particularly music and visual art, as Bernstein seeks to “develop more fully the latticework of those involved in aesthetically related activity” (Andrews and Bernstein ix).

*Girly Man*, published in 2006, is Bernstein's fifteenth full collection of poetry, in a prolific writing career which started with his first collection, *Asylums* in 1975. Always considered an innovative and radical thinker about poetry, he has also written extensively about the theory of poetics and is probably best known for his seminal role, with Bruce Andrews, in the foreground of the Language poetry movement – in 1978 Andrews and Bernstein founded L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine which they edited for 13 issues between

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<sup>1</sup> Bernstein tends to use the word “language” to encapsulate all forms of creative expression and differentiates poetry as “the art of (verbal) language” (Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems* 227). However, in this critique I use “language” to denote simply spoken or written expression.

1978 and 1981 and which became a lightning-rod for all that was new and radical about poetry during that time.

The term *Girly Man* was originally spawned by the comedians, Dana Carvey and Kevin Nealon, for a series of satirical sketches about two Austrian bodybuilders, Hans and Franz, on *Saturday Night Live* in the late 1980s. However, its provenance is more normally associated with Arnold Schwarzenegger, who borrowed the term, and used it extensively, perhaps most notably at the 2004 Republican National Convention, as a pejorative term for people who didn't support that party's singular vision for America (Schwarzenegger 3).

The cover art for the collection is a painting by Susan Bee, Bernstein's wife, entitled *Fleurs Du Mal (Flowers of Evil)*, a rather arty title for what looks like a promotional poster for a 1950s B-movie possibly titled *The Scientist and the Show-girl*. Bernstein continued this B-movie connection in the title of his recent book of essays and inventions, *Attack of the Difficult Poems*, possibly reflecting his ongoing interest in popular culture and his constant desire to avoid the perceived elitism of poetry. The other connection here is that *Fleurs du Mal* was the title of the most significant collection by the French poet, Charles Baudelaire, a poet who Bernstein originally admired as "a crucial poet in terms of what we call the modern history of the representation of the everyday" (Bernstein, "Attack of the Difficult Poems" 176), although later believing that Baudelaire had fallen short because he never fully integrated with the ordinary, as he continued to observe it "from his own point of detached privilege" (177).

Flicking through the collection the first impression is that it is unusually long. However, reading Bernstein's own extensive "Notes and Acknowledgements" at the back of the book it quickly becomes clear that *Girly Man* is essentially a collection of collections – the book is in seven sections each of which has been published previously, either as a pamphlet or as a series of individual poems. Prior to the recent publication of his first book of selected poems, *All the Whiskey in Heaven*, Bernstein had believed that each of his books was "a constellation of chosen poems that give the book a specific gravity" (Sanders 6) and for this reason he "couldn't imagine excerpting parts of those books; it would be as if you asked a novelist to do a selected paragraphs." (Sanders 6). This probably explains why Bernstein decided to collate such an extensive and stylistically-varied collection, a collection that now feels like the genome of this important period in American life. It might also explain his choice of title, as he seeks to herd the various strands of reflection under a term that can succinctly capture the *zeitgeist*, albeit ironically. Respecting these completist tendencies, I have also taken the view that a balanced review of the work requires a critique which forensically plots Bernstein's latticework of meanings and connections.

As we start to examine the book in more detail, we see that *Girly Man* is essentially the programme for a far more extensive and dynamic world, one which cannot be fully represented by the flat words on the page. Charles Bernstein is convinced of a world where technology, through the medium of hypertext, has created a multi-dimensional opportunity for creative expression and believes that it is important his poetry will help to provide the key. While *Girly Man* can be read in isolation as simply another expansive and erudite poetry collection, it achieves true exponential value as it reaches beyond the words on the page through both the dedicated micro-site on the website of the Electronic Poetry Centre and the specific links to other media happenings, whether in the shape of the visual art of Richard Suttle and Mimi Gross, or the music of Ben Yarmolinsky and (the other) Charles Bernstein. In the "Notes and Acknowledgements" at the end of the collection Bernstein

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encourages the reader to visit the website, thereby hoping to create a dynamically evolving environment for the collection.

The first section of *Girly Man* is entitled *Lets Just Say* and is comprised of four poems written in the spring and summer of 2001, and published as a pamphlet in 2003. The title sounds tentative and conciliatory, and the poems are presented in a quite matter-of-fact tone. However, like a lot of Bernstein's work they are riven with irony. *In Particular* is actually not particular at all and through the music of repetition, internal rhyme ("A Montenegrin taking Excedrin"<sup>2</sup> (63)) and variously ingenious or inane word-play ("A Czech man in a check suit"(77) or "A Syrian swami on Lake Origami"(59)) Bernstein has created a hymn to diversity. While the poem was written long before the full collection was conceived it is a very effective opening poem, both in the widescreen tableau it creates and the anticipation of the swarming, Breughel-like scenes which will be played out in the second section of the book, set in the wake of 9/11. There is also a sense of melancholy, or maybe even nullity, as the poem circles in on itself, starting and ending at the same point, the flat, discursive tone seeming to reflect the futility and interchangeability of everyday tasks.

The tone of "Thank You for Saying Thank You" is stridently satirical, visiting a topic that has been a favourite of Bernstein's since the days of the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E movement – the challenge of the "difficult poem". By addressing the reader directly he draws us into the debate and forces us to take a position. Using very controlled parsing of plain speech and a short line, the poem reads like a very open, assertive defence of the "accessible poem"(2). However, while it is a "totally / accessible poem"(1-2) most of Bernstein's other claims in the poem are deliciously untrue: it is not "all about / communication"(24-25) nor does it say "just what / it says"(90-91). It is like Bernstein is miming the poem into a mirror, with the growing belief that the opposite of every assertion is true. The reader is left with the disconsolate view that if this is accessible poetry I don't want it or, as Bernstein cautioned in his essay, "The Difficult Poem", "Readers of difficult poems also need to beware of the tendency to idealize the accessible poem. Keep in mind that a poem may be easy because it is not saying anything."(Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems* 5).

In the title poem of the section Bernstein returns to repetition and off-kilter epigrams to de-stabilise our thinking. The anaphora of "Let's Just Say..." creates a very insistent, incantatory rhythm while the double-spacing means every proposition stands alone and hangs for seconds before we read the next. The choice of the tentative, vernacular "Let's Just Say..." gives greater power to the propositions that follow, each of which playfully trips our expectations of language and logic: "Lets just say that every time you fall you never hit the ground"(1), "Lets just say that sometimes a rose is just a read flower"(8), as Bernstein seeks to work at "angles to the strong tidal pull of an expected sequence of a sentence"(*Contents Dream* 38). The litany also touches on deeper issues of language as it, questions representative norms, "Let's just say that green is always a reflection of the idea of green"(11), challenges the accepted meaning of common expressions, "Let's just say that pretty ugly is an aspiring oxymoron"(28) and flags the double-edge of language, "Let's just say that mankind suffers its language"(25), a theme that re-emerges throughout the work.

The final untitled poem in the section has echoes of the earlier poems in its pounding repetition of "& every...", its short line and its circular narrative. It opens like a fairy-tale as it declares that "every lake has a house"(1) and evokes memories of childhood

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<sup>2</sup> All poems quoted are from *Girly Man*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

songs e.g. the traditional Irish tune “The Rattlin’ Bog,” and puzzles - convert “lake” to “slope” and back in 21 steps! . Although some of the transformations are clever (“& every thought has a trap / & every trap has a door”(16-17)) the poem feels quite monochromatic, lacking the linguistic colour and depth of the earlier poems.

The second section of the collection, *Some of these Daze*, is a series of five prose-poems largely written in the days following 9/11. They are composed in what Bernstein describes as a “serial aesthetic”(Bernstein, *Granary Books* 1) where “one perception immediately follows the next, without an attempt to create an overall hierarchy or controlling narrative.”(1). *Some of these Daze* opens with “It’s 8:23 in New York,” a peripatetic description of walking through New York in a *daze*, in the hours after 9/11. It is a memo of denial and disbelief as New Yorkers look for reassurance in the everyday activities of “bicycling and rollerblading”(53-54) or, Andrew, the local hairdresser stays open because “people would want to have him there, standing in front of his shop.”(49). It feels like the early stages of grief, a theme consistent throughout the poems and borne out by the specific reference to (Elisabeth) Kubler-Ross<sup>3</sup> in “Aftershock”. This first poem is loosely stanzaic, a form carried through to the other poems. In “Today is the next day of the rest of your life,” explicit separators are studded throughout the poem, giving the feel of an ensemble piece comprised of overlapping vignettes.

The dimensionality of the poems feels naturally progressive. “It’s 8:23 in New York” consists largely of stunned observation, the limited emotional comment seeking to understand rather than analyse, as in “This could not have happened. This hasn’t happened. / This is happening.”(59-60). The episodic nature of “Today is the next day of the rest of your life” is inter-cut with political comment - a friend of Bernstein’s writes “It’s a bit ominous,... the way the politicians are speaking about talking with one voice”(32-33). While this is the first time we see explicit reference to what is probably the strongest theme in the collection, Bernstein’s fear of a dogmatic, binary world, his full-on invective is temporarily stayed by the enormity of the human tragedy. As a result the initial response is guarded, as he tries “to get by talking with no voice”(34). However in the inchoate search for understanding, his analytical mind is quickly at play as he laments the short-comings of language, “the image is greater than the reality / the image can’t approach the reality / the reality has no image”(45-47) and closes the poem with the haunting statement that “our eyes are burning”(48) an image that reverberates and anticipates questions about response and retribution.

“Aftershock” opens with a post-catastrophic catharsis: “Thursday night it started to pour. The piercing thunder claps echoed over Manhattan.”(1-2). After this cleansing, the tension builds, peaking with the “visceral need to lash out...to destroy in turn for what has been destroyed”(19-20). The style remains stanzaic and episodic, but the content has shifted from passive observation to latent reaction, and Bernstein’s school-book declension of the verb “to bomb”(51-56) introduces subsequently the ambivalence of identity and blame, a moral shift which culminates in the closing-line “We is they.”(59), which provides a seamless link into “Report from Liberty Street”.

Written between September 18 and October 1, “Report from Liberty Street” starts with the picture of physical devastation and switches quickly to the people’s reaction, as “We look on, perhaps not yet ready for despair, against our stronger instincts, which well up, boundless and bare.”(14-15). While stylistically the same as the earlier poems in the

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<sup>3</sup> The psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross introduced a model entitled, “The Five Stages of Grief” (now “The Kubler-Ross Model”), in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*. The model now has universal acceptance.

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section, the tone is transformed by the echoing refrain, "They thought they were going to heaven." (3), repeated throughout the piece as though seeking to counterpoint the unbridled hatred expressed towards the perpetrators of this "dastardly" (81) act. Again we have Bernstein's aversion to the binary, his belief that nothing is singularly right or singularly wrong; he seeks to understand before judging. This aspiration can be frustrated by the polarising power of language, however: by a t-shirt slogan reads "What Part of Hatred Don't You Understand?" (63-64), and the media's moralistic vocabulary runs from the "cowardly" to the "dastardly" (81). In the poem he dramatically switches between the innocence of the individual victims as "No one deserves to die this way" (93) and the less certain national innocence, as he tentatively posits that "We got what we deserved," (89) and "We / have our own domestic product" (107-108). He closes the poem with a line from "Ozymandias," a bleak reminder of the inevitability of imperial decline, prompted here not only by the act itself but by the xenophobic sophistry of the political response.

The epistolary poem "A Letter from New York" closes the section beautifully. While the earlier poems were almost like letters to himself, in this letter to his friend Arkadii in St Petersburg, Bernstein, aided by time and physical separation, seeks to provide perspective but realises it is impossible. It is too soon and "there is no place to which to return" (57). Like November 22, September 11 will now be etched into the consciousness of America and everything will be framed as being before, or after, 9/11. Bernstein captures this perfectly with his final image of the day in August "we drifted aimlessly down the Neva." (66) a starkly pastoral image considering all that has gone before, but an image that really shimmers – what was once never-ending now seems unreachable.

"World on Fire" was written by Bernstein in July and August 2002, and published as a chapbook in 2004. The title suggests a continuity and resonance with "Some of These Daze," although it is formally and thematically very different. The poem titles are cleverly deceptive as, mostly derived from the song-writing of Jimmy Webb, Johnny Mercer and others like them, they create an expectation of popular lyricism that is conventionally thought of as unproblematic. In general they are quite traditionally structured, starting with the seemingly pastoral "Didn't We," which is set out in couplets, then progressing through the tercets of "One for the Road" and the two sonnets which centre the collection, "In a Restless World Like This Is" and "Ghost of a Chance". Bernstein's traditional titles and forms represent a bedrock of normality; on this platform Bernstein builds an endlessly shifting world of fear and uncertainty. Having moved from the grand canvas of 9/11, where the enormity of the event obviated any need for seering imagery or sparkling wit, Bernstein has returned to the micro-world of relationships, of middle-class angst, of consumerism. It is a world of constant change where we take nothing for granted and the Sisyphean nature of everyday life means "We're getting there, just / Fall a little further behind by day" ("One More for the Road" 13-14) or, in the turn of "In a Restless World Like This Is," "all the further you'll / Have to go on before the way back has / Become totally indivisible." (12-14).

With echoes back to "Let's Just Say," Bernstein uses the suggestive power of language to reflect this uncertainty, as he lulls us with stock phrases then veers into the unexpected, "Follow the / rules then go straight to the linen closet / for folding." ("The Folks who Live on the Hill" 12-14), or "Refurbishment / is just around the hospital coroner." ("Choo Choo Ch'Boogie" 16-17) He ironically asserts the moral authority of poetry with instructions and aphorisms that should make sense but don't, as he suggests we "Overcome fears of cloning / by using patent leather shoes." ("Choo Choo Ch'Boogie" 26-27). He also displays an unerring, yet sardonic, ear for the sounds of popular culture, as *Looney*

*Tunes* become “ludic runes”(“Sunset at Quaquaversal Point” 13) and *Busta Rhymes* becomes “busted rhymes”(1).

Bernstein believes that all poetry is a balance between absorption and impermeability or as he says in his poem/essay “The Artifice of Absorption,” “The intersection / of absorption & impermeability is precisely /flesh, / as Merleau-Ponty uses this term / to designate the intersection of the visible / & the invisible.”(Bernstein, *Apoetics* 86) and he is constantly changing the mix between the two. In *World on Fire* he seems to favour impermeability as each poem seeks to offer glimpses of meaning only to divert us when we seem in touching distance. Bernstein’s approach is to switch primacy from the signified to the signifier, by creating unexpected combinations of language that in turn evoke new reactions in the mind of the reader, based largely on texture, rhythm and sound. While this aesthetic is a constant undercurrent to Bernstein’s work, he seems to use it with more deliberate intensity here, in *World on Fire*, and also later in “Likeness.”

In the *Warrant* section the oblique stylistic cohesion of *World on Fire* is supplanted by a mish-mash of different styles, each of the poems having a quite explicit external inspiration which serves to prompt the reader to look beyond the collection, thus creating a seemingly arbitrary collage of experience. The section opens with the eponymously-titled poem where Bernstein frustrates any potential absorption by addressing the reader directly. The poem is shaped from the found text of a legal contract between poet and publisher. The long sentences, multiple lists and short line create a breathlessness and submissiveness in tone, as though nervously reciting for a superior. The pacing is pulled up at two key points, by the practical commitments of the fifth stanza drawn out in a more prose-like line and by the grudging resignation of the closing agreement, “To exercise this option/I agree to make payment in full in the next thirty (30)/days.”(99-102).

The anti-absorptive technique of directly addressing or questioning the reader is repeated in both “Questionnaire” and “Language, Truth, and Logic” and has the effect of removing any artifice around the mimetic nature of the poems, thereby prompting the reader to respond directly. “Questionnaire” again feels like a found poem based on a standard personality questionnaire. Its presence in a poetry collection, where the answers are not important, prompts us to study the nature of the questions in more detail. The most striking aspect is their representation of a world of absolute truth, an idea that is anathema to Bernstein. Normally he would use irony to debunk this myth; here the polarity of the statements themselves has the same effect.

“Language, Truth, and Logic” is a title which could summarise Bernstein’s poetic drivers yet it originally emanates from the philosopher A.J. Ayer’s book of the same name from 1930. The book provides a starting-point for the poem with the intricate philosophical discussion, presented in a conversational matter-of-fact tone, seamlessly segueing through the principles of David Ross’s *The Right and the Good* and J. L. Austin’s *A Plea for Excuses* (71). The poem deals humorously with complex arguments of philosophy, the simple language and form running a jagged line of dialogue between Samuel Beckett and the Marx Brothers.

The short poem “Why I don’t Meditate” flippantly swats the burgeoning ubiquity of meditation and mindfulness, with the grand opening assertion that “Mental health is probably overrated”(1) raising our hackles and then trailing off into a specious argument in favour of a “little anxiety”(1) and “chairs with heavy cushions”(4).

The New York poet and editor Kevin Killian encouraged Bernstein to write a short lyric for the original theme tune to *Nightmare on Elm Street* and while the resulting 6-line

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poem is vaguely mysterious it loses out to the jarring menace of the original music. The poem is certainly less than the sum of its parts, but placed in the collection it piques the reader's interest in two directions: the presence of two Charles Bernsteins – heaven for the language poet: two people, one name – and the door into the exceptional cinematic experience that is *Nightmare on Elm Street*.

Cultural references are rife in the composition of "He's So Heavy, He's My Sokal." The title partially inverts the well-known phrase, "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother," perhaps most famous as the title of a popular song by Bobby Scott and Bob Russell that was a major hit for The Hollies in 1969. In addition the poem itself is a very close copy of the song written by Milton Schafer, and popularised by Danny Kaye, "Please Don't Tickle Me." The *Sokal* that pervades the poem is a reference to the physicist, Alan Sokal, who published a hoax article in *Social Text* 46/47, which seemed to debunk what Sokal termed "currently fashionable postmodernist/poststructuralist/social-constructivist discourse theory"(184). Bernstein's inversion of the title and his use of *Sokal* as a mildly aggressive verb are initially surprising. However the contradiction is somewhat clarified in Bernstein's essay "Fraud's Phantoms"(Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems* 206) where he initially seems to support Sokal's approach but then castigates him for taking his own hoax too seriously: "Sokal's glosses of the hoax give no comic relief and indeed are filled with high moral tone in the defense of empirical truth"(212). Once again the poem offers little in isolation but does prompt the reader to investigate and connect with the key debate of cultural veracity.

In the *Warrant* section Bernstein includes two translated poems "Cum ipse..." and "from *Canti Antichi*" attributed to the Italian poet, Antonio Calvocressi. To the reader they immediately take on the customary gravitas of translation but closer inspection reveals that Bernstein is playing with us and our natural assumptions. Bernstein's notes indicate that "Cum ipse... has been reconstructed from documents recently discovered near Rome"(62) yet the transition between original and translation indicates a rather fluid boundary between Latin and English: "Ammo"(4), although echoing the well-recognised "Amo"(3) in the previous line, seems to have no origin in Latin and translates rather conveniently to "Ammunition"(4), similarly the previously-unknown "masturboris"(5) becomes "handles himself"(5) and the Latin "quamquam"(11), normally translated as "although", playfully becomes the English plural "qualms"(11). No surprise that Bernstein views accuracy as "the bogeyman of translation"(Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems* 199).

"from *Canti Antichi*, translated as " from Ancient Songs," looks like the true translation of an Italian love-song, although there is no evidence that the poet or original poem ever existed. The translation seems quite traditional in structure, with the consistent opening line in each 5-line stanza, "O! Heart of mine"(1) and the intermittent end-line rhyme. However, the final poem descends into satire as Bernstein over-dramatises with his intense punctuation and the ever-more sundering violence captured in the sequence of "cleaved"(2), "broken"(5), "fractures"(7), "ripped"(9), "hemorrhage"(10), "bludgeon"(13) and "exploding"(15).

While clever and playful in exposition these two poems ask serious questions about language and truth as applied to translation, questions which mirror Bernstein's fundamental view of poetry. For Bernstein, every piece of writing is essentially an exercise in translation - whether it is the traditional translation of language to language or the more usual translation of thought/idea to word - and in every case the source and outcome must be able to stand apart. This is central to Bernstein's phenomenological view where readers

react to the sound and shape of the final work and don't judge it based on assumptions about the inputs or creative process.

The ekphrastic, "Slap Me Five, Cleo, Mark's History," inspired by the painting *Cleopatra* by Bernard Duvivier, shows Bernstein at his expansive and allusive best. Shaped as a 239-line monologue from a gallery guide (descended from Mark Antony) and delivered in a pacy, dead-pan style it is littered with contemporary cultural references, including re-run stations *Nick at Night* and *TV Land*, some homespun psychoanalysis of Cleopatra's condition, the Betty Ford clinic, Y-zero-K, bald men wearing baseball caps and it even purloins the words of "These Foolish Things" to create the fictitious vocal standard, "Roman Nights of an Egyptian Queen." The delivery and sparkling one-liners would stand comparison with the comedy of Woody Allen or The Marx Brothers, "I guess that's poetic license / (how do you apply for one of those?)"(152-153) or "You didn't invite me here to talk / about myself, well you didn't invite me here / at all."(31-33).

For the reader the poem is a real roller-coaster as its content ranges peripatetically from the cloying introduction of a game-show host, through the fate of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI, the cuisine at *Montrachet*, the romanticisation of suicide, the 1963 film version of *Cleopatra*, right through to the essence of Roman history, where Julius Caesar crosses the Rubicon. There are echoes of Bernstein in the guide himself, as he seeks to make the painting more accessible and achieves this through invention, creating fictitious, latter-day back-stories for the key characters in the painting. The poem exhibits the power of poetry to fluidly connect words and ideas, and to create credible associations between disparate realms of experience. Of course the monologue could have been shaped as prose but, written to be spoken or read aloud, the lineation and white space of poetry serve to accentuate the dramatic power and rhythm.

Large elements of *In Parts* were written as companion pieces to the artwork of Richard Suttle, a close friend of Bernstein's: "*Reading Red* initially published as a collaborative book... with the poems superimposed on images of his painting"(184) while *In Parts* was "written.....for the catalog of *In Parts*, 1998-2001"(184). Publishing the poetry without the related images is consistent with two familiar traits in Bernstein's writing, firstly, his belief that the most important aspect of poetry is the end-product and how we react to it – a reaction independent of the source – and secondly, that writing can act as a door opening into a much wider world of creative expression. While the *mise-en-page* of the five poems in *In Parts* is quite individual (although *Pomegranates* and *12<sup>2</sup>* look similarly haiku-ish) there is a consistency of tone and execution. As we move from poem-to-poem it is like moving from room-to-room in an art gallery – echoes here of Bernstein's view of the poetry collection as a "group show"(*My Way: Speeches and Poems* 57). The poems are segmented into discrete statements, assertions and aphorisms (reflecting the title *In Parts*), each of which stands alone for consideration and reaction, while continuing the conversation with other sections and other poems.

These are poems of texture, colour and shape but as always with Bernstein the plates are shifting. Sometimes he seems to refer directly to the source of his inspiration, "Where the fold should be / There is no fold"("Reading Red," segment 10 1-2) or "the red does not / touch the blue"("In Parts," segment 10 1-2), sometimes he plays with the texture of the language itself "masonry steps / CONCRETE"(*In Parts*, segment 3 6-7) or "the syntax inside the nouns touch"(*In Parts*, segment 12 6), often returning to the overlap between life and language, "my elbow against your / composure / burns like wax"(*12<sup>2</sup>*, segment 9 1-3) or "art is not an copy of nature but an extension"("In Parts," segment 6 1). Although the titles

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seem arbitrary there is a synergy between them: the wordplay of “Reading Red” also sets up “red” as a common motif, “Pomegranates” continues the “red” link while conjuring up the image of seeds for each of the poem’s segments, “In Parts” serves both to describe the overall section and to foreground another common theme of Bernstein’s, the tension between touching and separation, “12<sup>2</sup>” is self-referential in terms of the number of segments and the (approximate) number of syllables in each segment and *Photo Opportunity*, with its circular structure, creates the image of flicking through a series of photographs and then passing back through them to find a particular one.

After the amorphous coherence of *In Parts*, *Likeness* feels like a compilation album with nods to all of Bernstein’s familiar styles. There’s the translation (of the translation) poem, “Pocket in the Hole,” two ekphrastic poems, “Jacob’s Ladder” and “Further Color Notes,” the incantatory list poem “Likeness,” the re-vamped song lyric, “Shenandoah,” the clever monologue, “Secrets of a Clear Hand” and even the love poem, “Don’t Get me Wrong” with the aching plea, “Don’t say goodbye no more”(25). While there are some high points, the verbal larking and jaunty rhythms of “Secrets of a Clear Hand,” the simplicity and hope of the reverberating “Comforting Thoughts” and “Should We Let Patients Write Down Their Own Dreams?,” and even the mantra-like cleansing of “Likeness” resonating back to “In Particular,” too many of the poems fall down when compared to their most direct antecedents. “Rain is Local” looks like a doodle from any one of Bernstein’s list poems, the rather robotic “Jacob’s Ladder” could have been retrieved from the cutting-room floor after “Reading Red,” and “Further Color Notes” is flat and hermetic.

There are too many poems in this section where Bernstein seems to run content against form: “Interim Standoff” starts beautifully with “If discipline is required / you’re more than competent / less than able.”(1-3) only to run aground in a mire of punctuation and hard edges, while in reading “Pocket in the Hole” the word selection feels distinctly aleatoric and, despite its heavy use of alliteration, the rhythm is like walking through treacle. This of course could simply be another exercise in discombobulation by Bernstein. Presented with what look like neat, ordered lyric poems we expect them to flow smoothly, only to find ourselves picking our way carefully through them as word combinations jar with our expectations of rhythm and meaning. It is as though Bernstein is following his long-held and consistent practice of making “language opaque so that writing becomes more and more conscious of itself as world generating, object generating”( *Content’s Dream* 71). Here he seeks to do this within the straitjacket of tightly structured poems and for me, this reflects, a weakness in Bernstein’s approach. Dense, opaque language works best when the poem has space to breathe and the reader doesn’t have the sensation of clambering over rocks. In this section I feel the grunginess is further exacerbated by a dilution in the quality of rhythm and content. The downside to framing poetry as a lens through which to track and interpret daily life is that large parts of our lives are uninteresting and, no matter how clever or iconoclastic the word structures, in the absence of an essential music, the mirroring poetry will, in turn, be equally uninteresting.

So, after a poetic odyssey of 146 pages, we finally get to meet *Girly Man* and in this, the seventh, and final, section Bernstein seeks to pull together the best of what has gone before. Even with a similar variety of style and content, there is an absolute cohesion; the same word-play and humour but here they are the servants of a clinical intent. Every poem pays its way, beginning with the magnificent “War Stories.” A list poem, driven by the thumpingly anaphoric, “War is...” it presents as a series of seemingly definitive truths about war which on closer examination reflect: ambivalence, “War is unjust even when it is

just.”(55); inversion of accepted truth, “War is a horse that bridles its rider.”(66); paradox, “War is a five-mile hike in a one-mile cemetery.”(14); situational certainty, “War is the right of a people who are oppressed.”(45) and ambiguity, “War is tyranny’s greatest foe. / War is tyranny’s greatest friend.”(63-64). While the pounding rhythm and the surprising thought combinations are largely what keep the poem vibrant and fresh, Bernstein also uses some familiar techniques: mirroring, “War is raw”(60); juxtaposing common phrases, “War is never having to say you’re sorry”(2) and transposing tired clichés, “War is the end justifying the meanness”(72) or “War is the opiate of the politicians”(30). The poem is exceedingly clever and thought-provoking and we initially read it with the comfort of personal distance; that is, until the closing lines where Bernstein funnels the ambiguity of war into the certainty of personal accountability, “War is the answer. / War is here. / War is this. / War is now. / War is us.”(91-95)

This is followed by the idyllically-titled “There’s Beauty in the Sound of the Rushing Brook as It Forks & Bends in the Moonlight.” However, it is not as it seems. An ironic take on the immigrant’s search for the American Dream, it counterpoints very directly with Schwarzenegger’s speech at the Republican National Convention in 2004, where he asserted that for an immigrant “there is no place, no country, more compassionate, more generous, more accepting and more welcoming than the United States of America”, (Schwarzenegger 1) the implication being that it is the fault of the immigrant if they don’t realise this and profit from it.

Questions of national identity also surface in “Death Fugue(Echo)” which was originally written by the German poet, Stefan George, but brought to Bernstein’s attention by Marjorie Perloff in her memoir *The Vienna Paradox*. It reflects Perloff’s personal experience growing up in the Jewish community of Vienna just before the Second World War, her family never really being accepted as truly Austrian. The Austrian echoes with Schwarzenegger, and Hans and Franz, are interesting but coincidental.

Faced with important issues like terrorism, nationalism and international conflict what role does the individual play, and how are they to respond? Bernstein seems to suggest two potential paths, the first to use the power of creative expression, an approach reflected in much of this collection, the second to take personal responsibility for what is in their own control, and what they can influence.

The path of creative expression is reflected in both, “A Poem is not a Weapon,” a blank but powerfully subversive take on the latent power of poetry and language to trigger change - referenced throughout the collection - and also in “The Beauty of Useless Things: A Kantian Tale,” a short allegory, based on an after-school conversation with Felix, Bernstein’s son, which again re-iterates Bernstein’s aesthetic – it’s not important how art is planned or created, it is more important how the reader/consumer reacts, as in “The face is the meaning.....the beholding is the face”(9-10).

Bernstein has included two poems in this section which are set out as personal explorations. In “Sign Under Test” he is tentative and unsure as he wrestles “again, taste to taste, with his own self-inoculations.”(2-3). The form and style are familiar but interspersed with the clever, pithy aphorisms and the philosophical observations there are more personal assertions and uncertainties: the resignation of “My cares turned to wares.”(58); the hesitation of “A girl I once met told me her name rhymed with orange. /Did I just imagine that?”(53-54); the insecurity of “If you lead you’d have to know where you are going whereas I only know where I am not going”(95-96) and the plaintive pleading of the closing “Save the last chance for me.”(139). It is as though he is re-examining long-held beliefs and

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principles and, as he looks to re-shape them, feels the need to verify each as a “Sign Under Test”.

By the time “Self-Help” comes around Bernstein’s tentativeness has disappeared, at least superficially. Presented in similar form to “Sign Under Test”, but this time with possible solutions, it reads like a series of bumper stickers: “Marriage on rocks. – Nothing like Coke”(5); “Miss the train? – Great chance to explore the station!”(20); “Nothing doing. – Take a break!”(22). Topics range from the advantages of baldness and the problems of misprogramming VCRs, through to “AIDS ravaging Africa.”(50) and the torture of “Abu Ghraib prisoners”(54) but the important factor is that all are imbued with a sense of confidence and the belief that, in the face of problems, the one who takes positive action survives, while the “Other drowns.”(60). This newly-found confidence and can-do attitude starts to seed possible feelings of hope.

The penultimate poem in the collection, *The Bricklayer’s Arms*, seems quaintly named conjuring up as it does images of English pubs and anchor tattoos. However, it is, in fact, quite a profound poem both in form and content. The choice of the bricklayer as a type of Atlas figure – echoes here of the emergency services being the heroes of 9/11 – the synecdoche of “Bricklayer’s Arms” as the symbol of omnipotent strength, the anaphora of “The Bricklayer’s Arms...” driving the rhythm of the poem and creating the feel of a street-song, and the intensive use of alliteration and lists of descriptors to fine-tune the music. For once there is no evidence of the twisted narrative, the diverting word-play. It is a journey poem set on a definite path: the bricklayer’s arms fight through all the vicissitudes of life, and although they may be ultimately “stamped by the artifice of token / and projection. The bricklayer’s arms / cradle the soul of the lost world”(103-105). It is a serious and thought-provoking message, laced with yearning and hope. By stating this so directly in his penultimate poem, Bernstein seems to be clearing the stage for his *coup de grace*, where irony becomes truth.

In choosing the phrase that has become explicitly ironic, *Girly Man*, as a title for the collection, as well as his final section and final poem, Bernstein is seeking to unite the collection under a flag of open debate, compromise and hope. Initially readers’ curiosity will have been piqued by the unusual title and their resultant research would have surfaced a prescribed tone. This tone is reinforced by the strong resonance between the first two sections of the collection, a resonance which leaches into the third section, then becomes more intermittent and oblique in the next three sections, only to return with a bang in the final section as “Girly Man” creates a book-ending cohesion.

The poem “Girly Man” bluntly copper-fastens this resonance as it plays us out. While the chorus is pure vaudeville, the message is direct and unflinching as “The truth is hidden in a veil of tears / The scabs of the mourners grow thick with fear”(1-2). The title is now worn as a badge of honour to describe people who are not ruled by binary truth, people who:

are not afraid  
Of uncertainty or reason or interdependence  
We think before we fight, then think some more  
Proclaim our faith in listening, in art, in compromise(23-26)

It takes a while to get to the discovery of this civic and aesthetic courage, but the journey has been worth it. *Girly Man’s* arc is a process of acculturation, essaying a poetics of the liveable and achieving an impious peace.

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**annette skade**

**hatmaker:**

**craft, language, music and performance in basil bunting's *briggflatts*.**

Basil Bunting's emphasis on craft and music in *Briggflatts* may be partly attributed to his involvement with a group of poets in the 1930's, including Louis Zukofsky, Alfred Dehn and William Carlos Williams, who worked together to produce *An Objectivist Anthology*. At the time Zukofsky, who edited the anthology, was circumspect as to the exact nature of Objectivist poetics:

From the very start, the format Zukofsky chose in 1931 prompted indignant responses from readers wanting the editor to place the poetry by Charles Reznikoff, Carl Rakosi, Basil Bunting, George Orpen, Kenneth Rexroth, Robert McAlmon, William Carlos Williams, himself and others within the context of a tradition. How is Objectivism related to past poetry. Is it a new ramification (such as Dadaism, Jemenfotism, Surrealism, for instance) [...]?" one reader was to ask in the April 1931 edition of *Poetry* (53). Zukofsky's exasperation was apparent in his response: "Poetry is 'past' or 'news' only to historians of literature and to certain lay readers; to poets (craftsmen in the art of poetry) and to competent critics, poetry" (55). in the April 1931 edition of *Poetry* (53)....And to the question: "Is Objectivist poetry a programmed movement (such as the Imagists instituted) [...]?" (53), his reply was equally terse: "To those interested in programmed movements 'Objectivist' poetry will be a programmed movement" (55). ( Fiona McMahon 2009)

It is evident that there was a desire to avoid being defined by any particular movement and that the idea of Objectivist poetics was meant to be a loose one. Michael Davidson in his book *Ghostlier Demarcations* indicates the breadth that any definition of Objectivist poetics would have to encompass:

Objectivist poetics stress exactitude and sincerity, visual immediacy over introspection and irony. The eye is the model for poetic meditation. ....As for language, poetry should achieve a ratio between speech and music, a formula that would accommodate both Williams' plain style and Zukofsky's or Bunting's elaborate metrical experiments and often baroque diction."(1997, 23)

In his autobiography, Williams tells us. "We together inaugurated first the Objectivist theory of the poem and then the Objectivist press. 3 or 4 books were published including my own collected poems. Then it folded". (1967, 264)

Susan Kumamoto Stanley asserts that Bunting aligned Objectivist tenets with Pound's 1912 Imagist tenets. These were as follows:

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 the sequence of the metronome. (1994, 11)

Objectivist poetics were interpreted differently within the group. Essentially Zukofsky felt

that Eliot too was on an Objectivist quest: the “desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars: Finally though Eliot went a step further and this is what bothered both Bunting and Zukofsky for Eliot transformed the historic and contemporary particulars into a transhistorical myth. (Kumamoto Stanley 1994 53-54) In 1932 Basil Bunting wrote an open letter, published in *// Mare*, to his friend and fellow objectivist Louis Zukofsky<sup>1</sup>. In it he takes issue with Zukofsky’s approach to critical analysis.

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 with darkness, away from ascertained and reascertainable facts to speculative mysticism, to a region I think void of anything permanently valuable.(Kumamoto Stanley,1996, 14)

For Bunting, the poem is a tangible object, an object that is not imbued with abstractions. If the poem is an object, then the poet can be likened to a craftsman working on that object. Bunting continues:

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. This is what I would understand by Objectivism, if the word were mine.<sup>2</sup>

This letter reveals that as a young man Bunting held views concerning poetry entirely consistent with those expressed in his lectures in the nineteen seventies.<sup>3</sup>

It seems to me that the language of criticism, the language of grammar and prosody, in this country and perhaps in all countries , is full of words imposed from Latin, Greek and other learned languages, such as men normally use when they want to make vague statements sound precise, or when they want to make remote generalities seem relevant. ( 1999, 1)

### **Craft**

In his lecture on the *Codex Lindisfarnensis* Bunting likened the process of writing a poem to the skills employed by Eadfrith in illuminating the Lindisfarne Gospels . He refers to the complexity of the work and the laborious care taken to achieve it and concludes, “This is the way you’ve got to write poetry, you know: every word has got to be thought of with all that care.” (1999, p10)

Basil Bunting emerges as a man whose interest throughout his life is in poetic craft: the poem as an object to be worked, the poet as one who can be likened to Eadfrith as a skilled practitioner of his craft but also, and perhaps half- disingenuously, to a hatmaker. He dismisses less practical theories of poetry as “flights with darkness” and perhaps the

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<sup>2</sup> Zukofsky appears to have been like-minded: Ira B. Nadel in notes on his essay “ A Precision of Appeal” Louis Zukofsky and the *Index of American Design* states:

In 1946 Zukofsky reiterated his analogy between poetry and handicrafts when he cited a weaver and an architect as examples of craftspeople whose actions achieve ‘constructions apart from themselves,[and] move in effect towards poetry’ ( “Poetry” *Prepositions* 8). In a 1969 interview with L.S. Dembo , Zukofsky returned to carpentry: ‘[P]eople are free to construct whatever table they want, but if it’s going to be art you had better have some standard. I at least want a table that I can write on and put to what use a table usually has’ ( Interview 268) (Scroggins,2012 )

<sup>3</sup> See *The Codex* Basil Bunting on Poetry 1-18.

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reference to “vague statements” in words imposed from learned languages is a swipe at Neo Platonists. In his notes on *Briggflatts* he makes this explicit:

Hierarchy and order, the virtues of the neo-platonist quasi- religion, were 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.( 2009, 41)

It is evident that the past impacts on the present for Bunting and : “Then is Now “(2009, 32), and that he considers poetic craft in the present in Northumberland to be on a continuum linking to those past craftsmen, and to artists and craftsmen to come. In *the Codex* he talks of the creation of a Northumbrian Art for the twentieth and twenty first century and suggests that artists of the region do not mimic “what has come to us from Rome or Europe or from the South of England “ but that they should try to “discern what is our own”. (1999, 16-18) Bunting looks to the past to inform the future, but it is a Northumbrian past and a Northumbrian future that fires his imagination.<sup>4</sup> The emphasis on poetry as craft in *Briggflatts* reflects this view and there are numerous references to craft throughout the poem. The trope of the mason underpins Parts I and II of the poem and returns in Part V . Bunting lingers throughout the second verse of Part I on the image of the mason who performs the mundane but exact tasks required for his craft: hammering, laying his rule. He listens to a lark. He is shaping a name. Bunting sees the poem is an object to be worked as a mason works stone. Unlike the mason’s work, however, it is unclear whether a poet’s work will last through time, and perhaps the line about spelling a name “naming none/ a man abolished” is a reference to Bunting’s struggle to be published throughout his life. The poet “dare not decline/to walk among the bogus” (2009, 17). The poet’s disdain of himself and “the bogus” contrasts with an appreciation of craft and craftsmen, such as of the ship’s pilot in verse 2 “he blends, balances, drawing leagues under the keel” (18). There are references to “Lindisfarne’s plaited lines” and to metalwork:

Win from rock  
flame and ore  
Crucibles pour  
sanded ingots.

Heat and hammer  
draw out a bar.  
Wheel and water  
Grind an edge. (2009, 20)

The poet is now a “reproached/ uneasy mason” unable to make anything but “flawed fragment.” Part III begins with an extremely long verse spanning three pages (2009, 23-25). Bunting depicts a world in conflict, where society has broken down. The nearest we get to craft in this section is a depiction of “turd-bakers”. The reaper and miller cannot ply their trade as “grubs adhere even to stubble” (2009, 25). Part III gives a vision of war , death, and famine where society has disintegrated and no craft can take place. The last two lines signal a desire to return home.

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<sup>4</sup> Zukofsky also had a great interest in historical craft as well as the craft of poetry and was an important contributor to *The Index of American Design*. See Ira. B. Nadel’s “ ‘A Precision of Appeal’ ”(Scroggins 1999, 112-126)

So he rose and led home silently through clean woodland  
where every bough repeated the slowworm's song (2009, 26)

Home to the poet is not only his region, but is that place where the poet can engage fully with his poetic craft. It is regained with difficulty though, and in Part IV we have an accomplished interlacing of images of home and Northumbrian history, and images very foreign to Northumbria. Columba, Cuthbert and Aneurin mix with dying leopards and ibex guts. These foreign images are for the most part decaying and harsh, making reference to war and carnality, but also perhaps signalling a growing disenchantment with Persia:

Aidan and Cuthbert put on daylight,  
wires of sharp western metal entangled in its soft  
web, many shuttles as midges darting; (2009, 27)

In Parts IV and V the angular strokes of the mason's hammer, prevalent in the references to poetic craftsmanship of Part I, are replaced by a more intricate and sinuous imagery. The reference to medieval monks leads us to think of Anglo-Saxon interlacing, which Bunting discusses in detail in his series of lectures in the nineteen eighties, not just in illuminated manuscripts but also in stone and metal. The trope of metal work, signalled in Part II, (2009 20) is picked up and extensively worked in Part IV and picked up again in Part V. The working is complex but never moves into the philosophical or emotional: feeling is conveyed by well-chosen words that signify *things* in the poet's experience. It is akin to the intricate patterns of Anglo-Saxon craftsmen working in metal, stone or vellum.<sup>5</sup>

There is a spool of thread running through Part IV which manifests itself as "guts", "wires", "cabled thighs", "midges darting", "spiderlines" (2009, 27) , a "girdle", "spider floss", "cobweb hair" , and even "a boy's jet"(28): the thread which is hard and functional in the first long verse of Part IV(2009, 27) becomes softer as the poet encounters his lover in verse 3 (2009, 28). This thread may be akin to a repeated strain in music, or the sinuous, painted lines of an illuminated manuscript. This thread is "entangled", and the spider and cobweb images reinforce the intricate nature of the poetry and the complexities of life for anyone who dares to weave.

The interlace trope continues in Part V, "pigment", gruff sole cormorant (as depicted in the Lindisfarne gospel) "threads", "lace". There is also reference to weaving, which was signalled in Part IV by the repetition of "shuttles" (2009, 27) " sinews ripple the weave"(2009, 30). Here also the mason returns. Whereas Part IV reveals the complexities encountered by the poet in his early middle age, through the interlacing of images and the references to Anglo-Saxon interlace, the return of the mason may signal a return to some simplicity: to a certain resignation, made more explicit in the Coda:

Who,  
swinging his axe  
to fell kings, guesses  
where we go? (2009, 33)

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<sup>5</sup> For further exploration of the Anglo- Saxon interlace and the interlacing of the verbal and visual in *Briggflatts* see *Basil Bunting, Lindisfarne and the Anglo-Saxon interlace*, by Clare A. Lees

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His choice of words from the Germanic root in *Briggflatts* is a deliberate one and differs from his neighbours in 1960s Northumbria, as consciously chosen, (They had not been educated at boarding school nor spent years abroad in the company of poets), but there is strong evidence in *Briggflatts* of an emphasis on and comfort in dialect. There is also a sense in which Bunting's regionality is a political stance: an assertion of northernness:

Poets like Basil Bunting and David Jones should not be simply placed in an adjacent canonical space. Instead, the complex refiguring embedded- however unwittingly- in Kavanagh's notion of "parochialism" can be applied to them as to other works and figures. The "region" becomes not only the zone for an alternative politics, but also an imaginative space that can be made to enact temporalities and rhythms that differ from metropolitan rhythms. Regionality becomes a stance for poetry as well as a site for poems. Its investment in the linguistic registers and vocabularies of Northern England, its sharply carved stanzas and lines, and its harmonic densities make *Briggflatts* into a kind of sedimented epic, wherein the poet mimics a geological formation to an extent unseen in other twentieth century poetry. (Eric Falci, 2009, 204)

In *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathemata*, David Jones, like Bunting, uses historical events from his region or country, (in Jones' case Wales) to inform the present. Jones too had an interest in the craft of the past, particularly in the development of lettering: "He (Jones) maintains that the whole quality of a civilisation, or a culture, can be shown in a very short inscription, or derived even from a single letter. "(Bunting 1999, 8). *Briggflatts* has strong historicopoetic elements, fusing the life of Bunting with events from the past:

..of a man's life, interrupted in the middle and balanced around Alexander's trip to the limits of the world and it's futility....Those fail who try to force their destiny, like Eric; but those who are resolute to submit, like my version of Pasiphae, may bring something new to birth, be it only a monster.(Bunting, 2009, p40)

Bunting lays great emphasis on the history of the art and craft of his region: "Autumn is a reflection, to set Aneurin's grim elegy against the legend of Cuthbert who saw God in everything."(1999, p xv)<sup>6</sup>

### Words

The conscious use of Germanic root words may show a preference for spare, radiant language but may also be accounted for by the dialect which surrounded Bunting as he grew up. This may lead us to dismiss Bunting's use of dialect as a pose. However, in an interview published in the *London Magazine* in January 1971, the Northern English poet Ted Hughes makes explicit that which I believe is implicit in Bunting's poetry: "I grew up in West Yorkshire. They have a very distinctive dialect there. Whatever other speech you grow into, presumably your dialect stays alive in a sort of inner freedom, a separate little self. Without it I doubt that I would ever have written verse." (Ted Hughes in interview) Hughes' "inner freedom, a separate little self" could be deemed a poetic space, created by the language and experiences which shape an individual. It may act as a seedbed for writing and define a person's relationship with their home region. In Part I Verse I of *Briggflatts* there are around fifty words. All but six are rooted in the Germanic word hoard. Germanic words are bold script, Italic words are italicised,( "Brag" is first found in Spencer):

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<sup>6</sup> Clare A. Lees refers to Bunting's engagement with earlier Northern poetic and visual traditions as "a commonplace of modern scholarship" (2010, p111)

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 slowworms way.* (2009, 13)

It is unlikely that Bunting arrived at this selection of Germanic root words without deliberation and his motivation may partly be explained by reference to the following reminiscence by Ezra Pound, who Bunting cites, along with Zukofsky, as a major influence:<sup>7</sup>

*Dichten = condensare*

I begin with poetry because it is the most concentrated form of verbal expression. Basil Bunting fumbling about with a German- Italian dictionary found that this idea of poetry as concentration is almost as old as the German language. 'Dichten' is the German verb corresponding to the noun 'dichtung' meaning poetry and the lexicographer had rendered it by the Italian verb meaning 'to condense' (1987, 36)

In spare and powerful Germanic root words, Bunting finds this condensing of images and ideas, generating simple language that is dense with meaning; evidently, Pound may have influenced Bunting here. In 1934 the American laid down ways in which words are given energy or "charged":

Nevertheless you charge words with meaning in three ways, phanopoeia, melopoeia, logopoeia. You use a word to throw a visual image on to the reader's imagination, or you charge it by sound, or you use groups of words to do this

Thirdly, you take the greater risk of using the word in some special relation to 'usage', that is, to the kind of context in which the reader expects, or is accustomed, to find it. (1987, 37)

Reading through the poem we see words carefully selected with all three ways in mind. It is instructive, to explore the words in *Briggflatts* that jar against the Germanic register. In the first verse of Part I, if we sift out those of Germanic root, we find words related to music: tenor; descant; madrigal. These may signal Bunting's belief that a poem is like a piece of music<sup>8</sup> and their context also conflicts with normal "usage" which charges the words with more significance (Pound's logopoeia). The opening lines "Brag sweet tenor bull/ descant on Rawthey's madrigal" (2009, 13) are lines of lasting power, which take hold of the mind rather like a compelling piece of music might. The words are charged in all the three ways recommended by Pound but "Rawthey" is also given significance amongst the Italic words of the second line. This immediately informs us that this is a poem of place. When spoken by Bunting it also informs us that this is a poem of dialect; the uvular "r" being particular to the North East. May is an important word here, and Bunting gives us a note: "May, the flower,

<sup>7</sup> "...but two living men also taught me much: Ezra Pound and in his sterner stonier way Louis Zukofsky." (2009, 44)

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 3

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as haw is the fruit, of the thorn" (2009, 37). It signals a thread which runs through Part I: May, Hawes, spring. This thread reinforces meaning. "Dance" and "chase" are from Old French. None of these words sound odd in terms of register. Dance itself is important in Bunting's poetics, as a precursor to poetry, and is an appropriate allusion in this first verse.<sup>9</sup> There are two words remaining from the Latin root: "paving" and "ridiculous". "Paving" is in itself important, reminding the reader that we are setting out on a path with the slowworm. Being a simple two syllable word serving as part of a common phrase "paving the way" it does not jar. However, the word that really stands out both in syllabication (four syllables) and in its change in register is "ridiculous". When one hears Bunting read *Briggflatts*, we hear this word spoken with affection as one would expect in a line "ridiculous and lovely". It can also be noted that in a stanza containing only five adjectives, two are contained in one line. This signals its importance: the bull is ridiculous and lovely, so is this part of the poem, so is youth: an older man( Bunting subtitles this poem "a biography") looking back on his youthful love. As a Latin scholar, Bunting would also be aware of the origin of the word "ridere" the latin for "to laugh". The bull is "ridiculous" but, man is the only animal that is risible: this poem explores the essentially human.

It may be that Bunting chooses Germanic root words from the North East of England because they "sound right", just as Italic words sound right in a Southern European landscape.<sup>10</sup>

It sounds right, spoken on the ridge  
between marine olives and hillside  
blue figs, under the breeze fresh  
with pollen of Apennine sage. ( 2009, 19)

Part II commences with a striking change in register and a contempt for self and those around him:

Poet appointed dare not decline  
to walk among the bogus, nothing to authenticate  
the mission imposed (2009, 17)

The (polysyllabic) contempt and estrangement, begun in verse 1 with "authenticate", is picked up in verses 2 and 3 with "calculate" and "elucidate". Some level of content returns with Bunting at sea and the Germanic root words again gather strength: "Thole-pins shred where the ore leans".(2009, 18) The fusion of Italic and Germanic root words in the short lines commencing "Win from rock", work well as a deliberate device to indicate that things are still out of kilter. While almost achieving the tone and register of Part I, they are actually a deliberate distortion of it:

No worn tool  
whittles stone;  
but a reproached  
uneasy mason

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<sup>9</sup> Referring to dance Bunting says "Poetry must arise very similarly.....It is very closely related to music from its birth and both are tied ultimately to the body and its movements" (1999, p3)

<sup>10</sup> Bunting speaking of Wyatt " You (will) have noticed how simple the language is. There are none of those Elizabethan mouth-filling polysyllables that mean so little." (1999 p46)

shaping evasive  
ornament  
litters his yard  
with flawed fragments. (2009, 20)

These lines also demonstrate Bunting's skill in empowering words from an Italic language root. "litters" has particular force, containing the idea of rubbish, the screwed up papers that may indicate failed poems, and the literary world. Parts IV and V show a Bunting returned to his homeland and a gradual return to the simple. The coda provides us with some of the simplest, sparest lines, with a simple *ababa* rhyming scheme, signifying a resignation that touches the "we" of the collectively human.

A strong song tows  
us, long earsick.  
Blind, we follow  
rain slant, spray flick  
to fields we do not know.  
(2009, 33)

As Bunting explores his coming of age in Part I of *Briggflatts*, he also self-consciously explores the language which shaped him, and asserts his commonality with the people of his region. He asserts a common world view with those from his area and even when far from home in Parts II and III; this commonality is always his reference point. Bunting's uses words as a device to indicate where he and his poem belong: Part I, as shown above, is almost exclusively written in Germanic root words, appropriate to the dialect of his area. However, the further the poet travels from home and the more estranged he becomes, the more Italic words are used. Bunting's use of dialect is a self-conscious appeal to a common Northumbrian world view, as Eric Falci elaborates:

*Briggflatts*, published in 1965 after a long silence, is an intensely rooted poem, and uses the histories, mythologies, and geographies of Northumberland to evoke an "archipelago of galaxies" that encompasses a millennium and ranges from the farthest edges of the Celtic fringes and Scandinavia through Southern Europe to Asia (Bunting 2001, 70). (2009, 208)

Bunting had an agenda in his use of dialect. It is instructive to refer to Mark Scroggins on Zukofsky here:

The real problems of knowledge, as Zukofsky explores them in his poetry, lie in the social, interpersonal bases of our shared worldview, in the extent to which our communications one with another are made in the medium of a language that we have inherited and which shapes us. (1997, 9)

The words used by Bunting point to a desire to do many things: to use words "charged" in the three ways that Pound identifies; to celebrate the North,<sup>11</sup> and in particular Northumbria; to provide language that is spare and musical and to place the poem on that continuum of northern creativity which, according to Bunting, stretches back to the Lindisfarne Gospels.

Bunting has a skilled and considered use of language. Like the mason, who "lays his rule/at a letter's edge/ finger tips checking", (2009, 13) Bunting, like any good poet,

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carefully checks each word. The tone and radiance of the Germanic root word hoard of Northumbria is Bunting's rule. When the poetry runs straight along this line, then, it portrays a poet true to himself and to his region. When the language deviates from this Bunting is skilfully using italic words in a new way, usually with a change in usage which allows us to look at the word afresh, or to denote a shift in region, signalling that things are out of kilter, and the poet and poem are far from home.

### Performance

"...lines of sounds drawn in the air which stir deep emotions which have not even a name in prose. This needs no explaining to an audience which gets its poetry by ear." (Basil Bunting. 2009 p42)

On 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1965 Bunting read *Briggflatts* in public for the first time in a venue that was once the home of a craft guild:

Up a cobbled back lane in Newcastle, where the ventilators of Stowell Street expel the cooking smells of the Orient, squats the Morden Tower. It forms part of the 13th Century City Walls and in the early 17th Century was the meeting place of the Company of Glaziers, Plumbers, Pewterers and Painters. ( David Whetstone, 2004)

Photographs taken at the time show a small simple room with most of the audience seated on the floor. This was far from a regional backwater however. Allen Ginsberg read at Modern Tower in 1965 and wrote an enthusiastic and amusing (if somewhat flowery) account of his night there:

A crowded evening, candles, incense, music, beautiful-bodied company, stone walls, Pickard with the haircut of a valiant magician's attendant in charge of the Tower's rare library, Bunting the master himself smiling in the fete-oso I gave the most complete reading of my own written work that I ever vocalised in one evening. Knowing the minds and ears were fine, (or among the younger folk, if inexperienced, tenderly open), I began at my beginning as a poet and read past midnight all the scribbling I had done for a decade.(Ginsberg, 1968)

The first reading of *Briggflatts* took place within months of the Ginsberg reading and one can imagine the atmosphere to be very similar. Bunting's reference to an audience "which gets its poetry by ear" can only be aspirational. Most if not all of Bunting's audience at Morden Tower would be more used to getting its poetry by reading, but as Ginsberg says "the minds and ears were fine" and the minds of the "younger folk" were open. It is apt that the ancient home of a craft guild should echo with images of craft in the carefully crafted words of Bunting. A fine example of "Then is Now." (2009, 32), and is wholly appropriate for a poet who sees his work on a continuum with a Northumbrian past.

Was Bunting a performance poet? He would be in absolute agreement with performance poets as to the value of the spoken word and the emphasis on sound. In a paper on Performance Poetry in 2011, David Lordan states

In simple chronological terms performance poetry has an absolute predominance over page poetry. The defining feature of performance poetry is its orality and for 99.99 % of human history is a history of oral culture. That is the only poetry was performance poetry. It is so-called page poetry which is the stranger in the house of poetry.<sup>12</sup>

Thus far we can imagine David Lordan's views on poetry as performance to be similar to

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<sup>12</sup> David Lordan, unpublished, *Performance Poetry* ' Mater Dei Institute seminar 2012 ,

those of Bunting. When considering possible views on poetry as performance in the sixties it is instructive to consider the following statement by Ginsberg regarding his poem, *Kaddish*:

I have read this huge poem aloud only three times. The first reading of the complete text was for *The Catholic Worker* after they opened a new salvation centre near the bowery in 1960. I didn't read the whole poem aloud (except once to Kerouac in my kitchen) in public again till the occasion of the recording at Brandeis University Nov 24th 1964.

I've done it only once since then a year later in Morden Tower, Newcastle, England for a small group of longhaired kids in the presence of the greatest living British poet Basil Bunting. I was afraid that reading it over and over, except where there was a spiritual reason, would put the scene into the realm of performance, an act, rather than a spontaneous poetic Event, happening, in time." (Ginsberg, 1966)

Ginsberg quickly exchanges the word performance, which also has connotations of musical performance, for "act" which smacks of the circus. For poets such as Ginsberg, at least, reading poetry aloud had nothing to do with performance, which had negative connotations. It may be that Ginsberg is so disdainful because of the sensitive subject matter of *Kaddish*. Bunting, while not quite so particular, still responded negatively to the idea of acting a poem, but was also disdainful of certain poetic affectations. After disparaging some poets who "lack voice" or "lose the swing of the metre" (2009, 43), he scorns those who have mannerisms "such as the constant repetition of a particular cadence, producing an effect rather like the detestable noise parsons make in church." He also has words of caution for actors who "cannot bear to leave their beautiful voices in the dark, they must use the whole range on poems that need only a short scale. He concludes "....actors and poets alike, if they but speak the lines, will give you more of a poem than you can get by reading it in silence." It must also be noted that Bunting himself had a stylised delivery of his verse, which was quite different than his ordinary speech but was nevertheless more natural than some of his contemporaries.

When Bunting speaks of "lines of sounds drawn in the air which stir deep emotions which have not even a name in prose." we get the impression of an actively listening, but otherwise passive, audience. In the same paper quoted above, Dave Lordan describes a more active audience for performance poetry: "At times poetry performance- precisely because its orality, accessibility, thematic adaptability and potential for audience interactivity becomes completely integrated into the *modus vivendi* of an emergent community."

Bunting grappled with ideas of sound and meaning, at times appearing to assert that poetry has no meaning if not spoken aloud: "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." (2009, 42). For Bunting the poetic event is primarily an auditory experience. He later struggles to clarify this: "I've never said that poetry consists only of sound. I said again and again that the essential thing is sound." (2009, 44)

The interactivity with audience which Lordan attributes to contemporary performance poetry might have been novel to Bunting, but photographs from Morden Tower of Bunting with Ginsberg shows his obvious enjoyment of Ginsberg's mammoth performance there in 1965. Ginsberg's anecdote of that night tells of Bunting's advice: "Certainly happy circumstances for a poet, and happier to hear Bunting's concern 'Too many words, condense still more' which altered my own poetic practice slightly towards greater economy of presentation."

## Music

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Bunting has read *Briggflatts* with Scarlatti's Sonata in B minor L33 as musical accompaniment and has stated that the poem is influenced by the Lindisfarne gospels and Scarlatti's L33. Both these works create an intricate effect, one visually in the illumination used, and one musically: Scarlatti's L33 is a beautiful example of baroque counterpoint, its minor key sets a plaintive tone and the interweaving sinuous instruments can be heard independently. This works well because of the strength and beauty of the *cantus firmus* (main melody). There is a strong harmonic cadence to signal a firm ending to the piece.

To read *Briggflatts* with Scarlatti's sonata in the mind is to gain further understanding of the poem. The tone of *Briggflatts* is sombre from the outset, as is any music in the minor key. The life of the poet, the strong sense of place and the search for home is the *cantus firmus*, the main melody which is constant through the poem. This is a simple, human, evocative feeling with which the poem is charged. Similarly L 33's *cantus firmus* is evocative and easy to access, a melody that one can find oneself humming and which never disappears throughout the sonata. The final bars of Scarlatti's piece provide a strong harmonic cadence, a feeling of resignation and rest and of finality. The Coda in *Briggflatts* has a similar mood. In 1989 Bunting described this mood as "man is contemptibly nothing and may live content in humility" (2009, 40) yet the Bunting of 1965 picks up the small suggestion of something more, in the final bars of L33 as he ends this resignation on a question "... Who / swinging his axe/to fell kings, guesses/where we go? (2009, 33)

In baroque counterpoint the main melody is joined by other voices and instruments which interweave with it, sometimes in unison, sometimes following the main melody, sometimes contrasting with it, almost always, in Scarlatti's day, in consonance with the notes of the main melody.

Bunting expanded on the musicality of his poem in a radio interview with Hugh Kenner in nineteen eighty:

....[was] the notion of a sonata, where two themes which at first appear quite separate, and all the better if they are strongly contrasted....gradually alter and weave together until at the end of your movement you've forgotten they are two themes. And that struck me when I was very young as a form that poetry should and could exploit. (1999, 207)

The complimentary themes in *Briggflatts* of craft and poetic craft, provide a consonance with the main melody or theme of life, place and search for home which plot Bunting's personal history. The historical theme of people, objects and events in Northumbrian (and western) history, something we might not expect to see in "An Autobiography" (the subtitle of the poem), provides a certain dissonance and adds hugely to the texture of the poem. The tone of Part II conveys the poet's estrangement from his surroundings and the historical images are similarly dissonant.

The figure of Eric Bloodaxe, a Viking King of Northumbria, may assert a strong Northumbrian identity but also signals violence and betrayal. The decay picks up on the trope of rot in Part I and violence signals images of war in Part III, as well as Bunting's personal betrayal by Lord Astor (the "Hastor" of Part III) who put an end to Bunting's career as a foreign correspondent. Bunting weaves seemingly disparate themes together, but, as in counterpoint, allows us to hear all the voices moving together. By the coda we have become used to the historical images and the return to the image of the king and the axe, couched in simple language, does not seem out of place but seems to add to the feeling of resignation. I believe that, in the Coda, Bunting does achieve the weaving together of themes so that the reader/ listener forgets they are separate. The Coda is simple but dense, fusing historical

images with those of the sea and human emotion, perhaps the emotion which has “not even a name in prose” as Bunting asserts in the quote which begins this chapter. Here again and finally, Bunting reminds us of the importance of the ear, and of the music of the poem. Part III, which Bunting’s diagram indicates is pivotal, provides a most dissonant music, underscoring the poet’s estrangement. This dissonance grows to a discordant pitch as Bunting fills the verses with clashing images.

The *cantus firmus* of place, life and home is strong here, and again in the sombre tone of B minor, other voices almost work in unison with it, but can still be heard: “slither” reminds us of the “slowworm” whose path we follow in Part I, and the “charred hearths” return to the trope of decay. The sea voice continues but raises dissonant notes “.....grey marshes/ where some souse in brine/long rotted corpses” the salt freshness of the sea becomes a brine for corpses and the sombre tone of the poem now becomes a powerful discord as the poet piles up images of cannibalism and the horror of war. We get the sense that these too are life experiences of the poet and that the *cantus firmus* has become loud and raucous here. For Bunting such discordance was another weapon in the poetic arsenal.

Bunting’s pivotal position in the development of Place Poetry in the twentieth century is widely acknowledged, “In Bunting’s wake came a series of important works in the 1970s and 1980s that reconceptualised poetry’s involvement with the landscapes and locations of “coiled, entrenched England” (Hill 2000:112). There is no doubt that Basil Bunting helped to further the now widely accepted view of poetry as craft, as well as the use of simple, charged language as part of that craft. We may refer back to his early “collaboration” with Zukofsky, Williams and others, “...I have chosen to stress what might be called an Objectivist continuum running through modernism. The phrase refers both to a literary movement launched in the early 1930 and to a general tendency to toward objectification in much modernist and postmodern poetry” (Davidson, 1997, 23) Davidson’s “movement” may be too firm a word but it is undoubtedly true that the *Objectivist Anthology* and the later works of Bunting and his fellow poets in that collaboration, did much to further “a general trend towards objectification.” (Davidson, 1997, 23)

In Bunting’s emphasis on sound, language and music, and his insistence on poetry being spoken aloud, he also has something to say to present day spoken word and performance poets and to the more experimental poetry of the twenty first century:

Poetry is seeking not to make meaning, but beauty; or, if you insist on misusing words, its “meaning” is of another kind, and lies in the relation to one another of lines and patterns of sound, perhaps harmonious, perhaps contrasting and clashing, which the hearer feels rather than understands...” (2009, 4)

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