

Basil Bunting, Poet of Modern Times

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IT MIGHT seem surprising to label Basil Bunting a 'poet of modern times'. He always insists that his thematic preoccupations are of secondary importance: his subject matter is to 'fill' the structures of his poems.¹ Basil Bunting has never been associated by his few critics with 'thirties' poetry and does not even figure in the Penguin anthology devoted to that period,² although that was when he was most intensely productive, writing *Attis: or, Something Missing, Aus dem zweiten Reich* (both of 1931), *Chomei at Toyama* (1932) and *The Well of Lycopolis* (1935), plus a large number of shorter poems (Odes). Bunting even attacks the 'committed' poetry of the period in *The Well of Lycopolis*:

Open your eyes, Polymnia,
at the sleek, slick lads treading gingerly between the bedpots,
stripped buff-naked all but their hats to raise,
and nothing rises but their hats;
smooth, with soft steps, 'ambiguoque voltu'.

[p. 32]³

W. H. Auden is spared the full blast of this attack, for in an article of 1932 Bunting says he finds him 'interesting'; but this praise is not unqualified because he also describes him as 'various'.⁴

English Poetry Today, however, spurns T. S. Eliot's *Criterion* as 'an international disaster', thus showing one point in common

¹ A view expressed in his interview with Richard Hoggart in the B.B.C. 2 'Release' programme about his work, 23 November 1968, and implied in Anthea Hall's 'Basil Bunting explains how a poet works', *The Journal*, Newcastle-on-Tyne, 17 July 1965, p. 7.

² *Poetry of the Thirties*, edited and introduced by Robin Skelton, Penguin, 1964.

³ Page references in brackets after the quotations are to the 1968 Fulcrum Press edition of the *Collected Poems*.

⁴ 'English Poetry Today', *Poetry* (Chicago), no. 39, February 1932, pp. 264-71.

with the poets of the 'thirties who regarded the author of *The Waste Land* as a 'lost leader' since he had adopted orthodox religion and right-wing politics. The very same article, moreover, opens on a note suggestive that poetry should be rooted in its own times: 'There is no poetry in England, none with any relation to the life of the country, or of any considerable section of it.'¹ Mockery of the writers of 'committed' poetry does not at all mean that Bunting espoused the views of their opposite numbers, the members of the Bloomsbury Group:

The nights are not fresh
between High Holborn and the Euston Road,
nor the days bright even in summer
nor the grass of the squares green.

(The Well of Lycopolis, p. 32)

There is, therefore, a hint of a deeper social bias than might at first appear. A man who was committed to prison as a conscientious objector at the end of the First World War and who lived through the period of the Depression, cannot have helped being aware of the social climate of his time. There are small, but telling suggestions of this in his journalism for the London paper, *The Outlook*. *Throb: An Inquiry*² shows his aversion to sensationalist reporting. In *Alas, the Coster's End*³ he laments the disappearance of costers from the London streets in much the same terms as a defender of the small shopkeeper against the super-market giants in the 1970s. Later, working for *The Times* as their official correspondent at Teheran, from January 1949, to May 1950, and again from September 1951, until his expulsion in April 1952, Bunting revealed himself to be a highly sophisticated political reporter. Bunting the man, therefore, cannot be accused of political or social ignorance.

One surprising omission from Basil Bunting's poetry of the late 1930s is any reference to the Spanish Civil War. It could be supposed that this omission comes from lack of interest, but Bunting was well aware of conditions in Spain, although he held his own very personal view of them and remained unaffected by the political idealism of the period. Bunting was in the Canary

¹ *Ibid.*

² *The Outlook*, London, 19 February 1927, pp. 188-9.

³ *Idem*, 26 March 1927, pp. 328-9.

Islands in 1935 and in Spain itself in 1936. It was at this time that he sent a report on the Spanish situation to *The Spectator*.¹

The article, no doubt partly conceived as an antidote to naive left-wing enthusiasm, is written in a half-exasperated, half-ironic tone. Bunting is intent on revealing the stupidity and the corruption involved in the whole affair. He begins by showing how the elections were rigged by the Left so that they had a bigger majority in the Parliament than would otherwise have been possible. Also, many Catholics and Monarchists were ejected from Parliament and their defeated left-wing opponents installed in their place. Bunting comments wryly: 'The process is traditional in Spain, but apt to mislead foreign observers who judge the state of parties in the country by their representation in Parliament.' And he is cynical about the enthusiasm for Communism in the country: 'The enthusiasm for the red flag developed *after* the election, when the U.G.T. promised immediate work for everybody. A few months later, with rising prices and no great amount of work at all, enthusiasm was abating.'

About the possible outcome of the Spanish conflict, Bunting is in general astute. He thinks that Franco may be 'driven to disguise a purely military dictatorship as Fascism', and he forecasts a long, bloody and bitter war between two evenly balanced sides. He wonders, however, whether the Left has not a better chance in the long run. As a Parthian shot to balance his earlier comments, Bunting says he doubts if Franco and the Right can solve Spain's problems any better than the Left. The whole article, therefore, is more severely critical than what was written by most poets at the time, and has a detached, negative quality about it.

The neglect of the social aspect of the poet's work perhaps comes from the negative form that it takes. Bunting has never espoused the cause of any particular group or proclaimed any political doctrine. I once heard him described as being 'too anarchist to vote'. Whether this is exactly true does not matter: it is a remark that shows the spirit of the man. Although associated with Ezra Pound in the 1930s, Bunting never seems to have accepted the latter's economic theories, even if one line from

¹ 'The Roots of the Spanish Revolt', *The Spectator*, 24 July 1936, p. 138.

Chomei at Toyama does sound Poundian: 'Men are fools to invest in real estate' (p. 76). Also, he was conscious of the dangers of Fascism long before the Second World War; *Odes I, 13* (1929) about a tiger satirizes the attitude of people who will not recognize danger when they see it: 'He is said to have eaten several persons / but of course you can never be quite sure of these things' (p. 99).

Social concern in Bunting is more often than not accompanied by profound pessimism. Part III of *Briggflatts* (1965) is the type situation of this attitude. It describes the civilizing mission of Alexander's journey which comes to nothing because of the irremediable baseness of Man's nature:

Leave given
we would have slaughtered the turd-bakers
but neither whip nor knife
can welt their hide.

(p. 62)

Bunting may be socially concerned, but he can see no easy remedy.

Michael Hamburger sees the negative aspect of Bunting's thought when he talks about the 'anti-scientific bias' in *Villon* (1925)¹ It seems that Basil Bunting would have little sympathy for modern space projects:

But they have named all the stars,
trodden down the scrub of the desert, run the white moon
to a schedule,
Joshua's serf whose beauty drove men mad.
They have melted the snows from Erebus, weighed the clouds,
hunted down the white bear, hunted the whale the seal
the kangaroo,

(p. 16)

This is coupled with a hatred of modern bureaucracy:

they have set private enquiry agents onto Archipiada:
What is your name? Your maiden name?
Go in there to be searched. I suspect it is not your true name.
Distinguishing marks if any? (O anthropometrics!)
Now the thumbprints for filing.

¹ Michael Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry: tensions in modern poetry from Baudelaire to the 1960's*, 1969, p. 272.

Colour of hair? of eyes? of hands? O Bertillon!
How many golden prints on the smudgy page?

(*Villon*, p. 16)

which reappears in *The Spoils* (1951):

They despise police work,
are not masters of filing:
always a task for foreigners
to make them unhappy,
unproductive and rich.

(p. 43)

A similar hatred of authority explains why the figure of Villon in prison was so sympathetic to him.

Bunting is very conscious of the materialism of his age, especially of the evils of city life. *Attis, or: Something Missing* (1931), partly intended as a parody of T. S. Eliot, evokes a drab, stale, urban existence in terms reminiscent of the *Preludes*:

The gorgon's method:

In the morning
clean steets welcomed light's renewal,
patient, passive to the weight of buses
thundering like cabinet ministers
over a lethargic populace.
Streets buffeted thin soles at midday,
streets full of beggars.
Battered, filthily unfortunate streets
perish, their ghosts are wretched
in the mockery of the lamps.

(p. 21)

This wretchedness, Bunting says in *The Well of Lycopolis*, has killed both love and poetry. *Aus dem zweiten Reich* (1931) shows another kind of city, slick, efficient, hygienic Berlin as a breeding ground for superficial, inferior literature. These are the sort of conditions the true poet has to struggle against. Part II of *Briggflatts* pictures the 'poet appointed' with cheap city tricksters in sordid surroundings. Moreover, these surroundings represent the material from which the poet has to create his literary work. The poet must find harmony in ordinary sights, even in squalor.

Secret, solitary, a spy, he gauges
lines of a Flemish horse
hauling beer, the angle, obtuse,
a slut's blouse draws on her chest,
counts beat against beat, bus conductor

against engine against wheels against
the pedal, Tottenham Court Road . . .

(p. 55)

Chomei at Toyama (1932) contrasts the evils of city life with rural tranquillity. As if destined by fate, all sorts of natural disasters happen to the city — fire, whirlwind, earthquake — while the countryside is a haven of peace and security. The opposition between sordid town and green countryside is basic to the north-east of England where Bunting was born, but in *Chomei at Toyama* it becomes idealized to exist on the level of symbol. In reality, Bunting shows himself conscious of the sometimes desperate plight of the farmer.

Three short poems of the 1930s describe different aspects of the agricultural depression. Two dialect poems, *Gin the Goodwife Stint* (*Odes I, 14* (1930)) and *The Complaint of the Morpethshire Farmer* (*Odes I, 18* (1930)), present embittered victims of the depression, who see emigration as the only course left open to them. By 1936, the tone has become bitterly ironic. In *Odes I, 31*, revolt has drained away and become sardonic compliance, self-willed ruin:

How glad
you will be when the state takes your farm for
arrears of taxes! No more cold daybreaks
saffron under the barbed wire the east wind
thrums, nor wet noons, nor starpinned nights!

(p. 116)

Here the alternative is flight to the big city:

You will find a city job
or relief — or doss-and-grub — resigned to
anything except your own numb toil, the
seasonal plod to spoil the land, alone.

(p. 116)

We can imagine the extent of Bunting's sarcasm by measuring this passage against what we know he thinks of city life.

Such a poem deepens the contrast between rural and city life beyond the ordinary formula which has been the stock-in-trade of so many poets. We have the feeling that here is a man who, as

Gael Turnbull has remarked¹ has really experienced hardship. At the same time, he is not self-pitying; he can stand aside from his own suffering and laugh at it:

I too was once a millionaire
 (in Germany during the inflation:
 when the train steamed into Holland
 I had not enough for a bun.)

The Lady asked the Poet:
 Why do you wear your raincoat in the drawing-room?
 He answered: Not to show
 my arse sticking out of my trousers.

(*Odes I, 12* (1929), p. 98)

We can therefore take him all the more seriously when he mocks in Swiftian manner a House of Lords enquiry into a shipping disaster:

Ocean spare the new twinscrew dieselengined tanker,
 spare the owners and underwriters
 litigation.

(*Odes I, 24* (1933), p. 111)

One surprise of the political aspect of Bunting's poetry is that it does not condemn warfare. Bunting, the former pacifist, enlisted in the R.A.F. at the outbreak of the Second World War and later worked for a British intelligence organization in Persia. This makes him very unfashionable in the 1970s when, in intellectual circles and among the young, the occupation of soldier is not an honoured one.² In *The Spoils*, Bunting sees war as a means of regeneration, if only temporary, for modern society corrupted by money. This is his conclusion to a poem that traces the high ideals of the ancient Semitic way of life (only through Western contact do Arab and Jew become corrupted), and presents the high point of Seljuk civilization and its continuation in modern

¹ In 'An Arlespenny — some notes on the poetry of Basil Bunting', a series of cyclostyled sheets (unnumbered) published by the Tarasque Press, Nottingham, 1965, for a poetry reading by Bunting.

² Is it significant that Bunting's narrator in *Chomei at Toyama* remains dry-eyed in front of scenes of horror?

A child building a mud house against a high wall:
 I saw him crushed suddenly, his eyes hung
 from their orbits like two tassels.
 His father howled shamelessly — an officer.
 I was not abashed by his crying.

(p. 78)

Persia, where art informs a whole way of living. War and the nearness of death make the Westerner conscious for a time of the true value of life where 'the spoils' are 'for God'. The end of Bunting's poem gives the great Northern convoys a share in these spiritual riches:

From Largo Law look down,
 moon and dry weather, look down
 on convoy marshalled, filing between mines.
 Cold northern clear sea-gardens
 between Lofoten and Spitzbergen,
 as good a grave as any, earth or water.
 What else do we live for and take part,
 we who would share the spoils? (p. 48)

The Spoils suggests Bunting's idea of a perfect life, in contrast to the corruption of modern, Western civilization, but nowhere does Bunting put forward a political programme for the achievement of this form of society. Rather, he possesses — as befits a writer who in fact subordinates social interests to aesthetic ones in his work — a poetic ideal of a better world, somewhat akin to a belief in a Golden Age.

Let them remember Samangan, the bridge and tower
 and rutted cobbles and the coppersmith's hammer,
 where we looked out from the walls to the marble mountains,
 ate and lay and were happy an hour and a night;
 so that the heart never rests from love of the city
 without lies or riches, whose old women
 straight as girls at the well are beautiful,
 its old men and its wineshops gay.

Let them remember Samangan against usurers,
 cheats and cheapjacks, amongst boasters,
 hideous children of cautious marriages,
 those who drink in contempt of joy.

Let them remember Samangan, remember
 they wept to remember the hour and go.

(*Odes I*, 32 (1937), p. 117)

This is a glimpse of what another great anti-conformist of the twentieth century has called 'the prefiguring vision of the heaven that saints and poets have imagined'.¹ The poet returns to his art as the only force for good in a corrupt world.

¹ Bertrand Russell in the 'Prologue: What I have lived for' of his *Autobiography*, 1872-1914, 1967, p. 13.