



## A POETICS OF DWELLING In Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*

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### *The object of a quest*

Late twentieth century criticism of Romanticism has brought about a reappraisal of its main tenets and sought to break down its monolithic stature by a historicist interrogation of its ideology with respect to gender and Imperial politics. New canons have been proposed and from Romanticism we have moved to Romanticisms. Modern poetry also modifies Romanticism, treating it less as an epoch than as a mode within which to work, adapting it to suit modern perceptions and methods. After all, the English Romantic poets lived and wrote through the whole experience of hope and disillusionment: theirs was the master epic narrative of the aspiration to social liberation and ensuing dismay, easily adaptable to the twentieth century. Perhaps we should say, therefore, not that Romanticism recurs, as if as a reaction from within or without Modernist or postmodern poetry against the neo-Classical leanings of those movements (logocentricity, arbitrary formal rules, urbanity...), but that it endures as an aspiration—as a sense of what may be. In which case it would not be appropriate to consider, for instance, Ted Hughes's adaptation of the Romantic sublime, or Geoffrey Hill's use of Romantic irony, as nostalgic, but rather to say that such poets are explorers and experimenters pursuing the ideas and methods of their predecessors in the light of their achievements and especially, perhaps, of their failures. Modernism does this, and cannot be simplistically contrasted with Romanticism any more than Postmodernism can; for the former is Romantic in its desire to adhere to transcendence even as it reflects incoherence, in the force and immediacy of its imagery, among other aspects, the latter in its concern with "creating new forms in order to 'impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.'"<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the pejorative label of 'nostalgia' clings to Romanticism

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<sup>1</sup> "Modern and postmodern are both marked by the sublime, with its emphasis on the unrepresentable, but while the modern sublime indulges in 'good forms' which provide solace for the 'missing contents' of the unrepresentable, thereby exhibiting a nostalgia for the unattainable, the postmodern sublime creates new forms in order to 'impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable' "[Roberts 141-56, with quotations from Lyotard 81].

because of Pound's imperious "Make it new": his will to wrench poetry out of post-Romantic decadence and rethink it into an adequate response to early twentieth century dislocation and alienation. Yet one of the ways in which modern poetry answers this need is by drawing on the past and adopting lost ideals for poets and poetry, to which Pound's own poetry testifies. In this respect Romanticism is both the object of a quest and the model for that quest—at once a poetics and a paradigm.

### *Universalising and anti-universalising tendencies*

To a discussion of the role played by Romanticism in modern poetry, both kinds of reappraisal are important: while critics such as Margaret Homans and Anne K. Mellor have brought to light the dominating masculine voice in the Romantic sublime, and the appropriation of feminine values to that end,<sup>2</sup> uncovering a feminine Romantic discourse in the prose of Dorothy Wordsworth and women poets; while a discourse of empire-building has been discerned in the dominant Romantic discourse, Jonathan Bate in his inspiring work *The Song of the Earth* takes the part of another oppressed "voice," that of Nature. He sees, for instance, in Wordsworth and John Clare an anti-universalising tendency running counter to the dominant emphasis on universals, as well as a love for humankind which to some extent contradicts the widespread view that the poets abandoned their revolutionary ideals and replaced them in their maturity with a personal, internal liberation through a relationship with a beneficent Nature. Meanwhile the poets introduce their own correctives to, for instance, the Romantic view of Nature, with the onus on violence in the early Hughes, the interconnectedness of humankind and the objects of the natural environment in the late Bunting. For unlike oppressed peoples or groups, Nature has no voice of its own and relies on us to find it one, more exactly to make it one.

The problem addressed by Romanticism is the rift between humankind and nature, the "progressive severance" produced by the major philosophical revolutions since the seventeenth century that has "licensed, or at least neglected, technology's ravaging of the earth's finite resources." Romanticism responds to this in that "it regards poetic language as a special kind of expression which may effect an imaginative reunification of mind and nature, though it also has a melancholy awareness of the illusoriness of its own utopian vision" [Bate 245]. This "imaginative reunification" is of the essence, and if Romanticism endures today as a living force in modern poetry this, perhaps, is due to the emphasis laid on dreaming, or the half-conscious state of daydreaming. Dreaming in Romantic poetry is not an artifice, not a narrative device as in medieval poetry, but a valid mental activity in its own right. There are poems derived from dreams, such as "Kubla Khan" or "Lucy Poems," poems which resemble dreams, such as "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," writing which is inspired by a daytime dreamlike state such as Rousseau's *Rêveries*, or which hovers between dream

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<sup>2</sup> "This dominating power of masculine spirit, absorbing and transcending feminine nature's own dominating powers, goes further than just overwhelming nature. Or, rather, it overwhelms partly by appropriating and colonizing elements of the feminine" [Day 191].

and reality as with Wordsworth's poems "The Thorn" or "When We were Seven." What Romanticism dreams of, through all these texts and many others, is a return to nature, and this dreaming is a large part of Romanticism's legacy: a healing, restorative dreaming for which our need is increasingly pressing, while increasingly overlooked. And although I shall not be using Freudian analytical tools here, Freud's emphasis on dreaming as *work*, similar to that of grieving, is significant. Such dreaming can take the form of a naïve idyll or be beset with self-consciousness, the awareness of the inherent inadequacy of language; ideologically it can be revolutionary or reactionary; it can rely on the violence of metaphor or the more peaceable negotiating of metonymy. But whatever the nature of the dream, its role is to dream us back to nature.

For poetry such as this, written in the wake of Romanticism, Jonathan Bate coins the term "ecopoetics": "Ecopoetics asks in what respects a poem may be a making (Greek *poiesis*) of the dwelling-place—the prefix *eco-* is derived from Greek *oikos*, 'the home or place of dwelling' "[Bate 75]. There is a critic who dares to put great store by poetry. In this he is, as a critical theorist, a Romantic of the ilk of Shelley. He states his ambition for poetry in these terms: "Our survival as a species may depend on our capacity to dream the return to nature—which can never be realized—in the work of our imagination" [Bate 37].

### *Ecopoetics as dwelling*

Bate begins with what he terms the "dilemma of environmentalism," whereby humankind can be said to be both "a part of and apart from nature," and rereads some of the central texts in our culture (Descartes, Rousseau, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, among others)—along with some pointedly less central ones (Aimé Césaire's *Une tempête*, Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *New World Trilogy*, for instance)—, to illustrate and explicate how exacerbated this dilemma has become in Western civilisation. The terms "survival" and "species" reflect Bate's interest in ecology, and he draws on evolutionary models such as biodiversity and "keynote" species as analogues—or should I say literal descriptions—of the role of the poet in the modern world. If we are the inheritors of the Enlightenment, of the positive but also the negative consequences of the supremacy of the human mind—including empire and oppression, technology and alienation, shortages of food, water and pure air—then learning how to "dwell" on earth, through a relationship with the natural environment based on reciprocity rather than exploitation, may come to seem essential. According to Bate, poetry can help bring about such a relationship, for which Romanticism provides a model—but only so far. The Romantic view of external nature, for instance, one might call utilitarian, in that it subordinates nature to suit its spiritual needs just as intensive agriculture or industry subordinates it to material needs; as M.H. Abrams writes: "the outer scene is not presented for its own sake but only as a stimulus for the poet to engage in the most characteristic human activity, that of thinking."

Ecopoetic poetry would try to correct this refusal to see landscapes in the name of symbolism and transcendence, and seek to celebrate them for

their own sake. It would also challenge the notion that thinking is the most characteristic human activity, or at least play it down in favour of the biological body and the senses, while aiming to take the onus off the human altogether. Bate writes: "Romanticism as traditionally conceived may not be so ecologically attuned [...] for the aspiring spirit of the Rousseauesque or Wordsworthian contemplative is sometimes forgetful of the biological body" [Bate 81]. This subordination of external nature—as of the biological body—goes hand in hand with the exalted ego. As Margaret Drabble has it, Romanticism was founded on the "extreme assertion of the self and the value of individual experience," [*The Oxford Companion to English Literature* 842-43] a position incompatible with dwelling, which involves more than returning from the country to the city equipped with "Nature's boon." Moreover a parallel can be drawn between exploitative attitudes to nature and fellow humans, and it has been claimed that this assertion of the self, combined with the universalising tendency of Romantic poetry, what Wordsworth called in the "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads* "the beautiful and permanent forms of nature," contributed to constructing an ideology of empire:

In a very real sense the Romantics [...] help prepare England for its imperial destiny. They help teach the English to universalize the experience of "I," a self-conscious task for Wordsworth, whose massive philosophical poem *The Recluse* sets out to organize the universe by celebrating the universal validity of parochial English values. [Ross 138]

Contemporary Australian poet Les Murray illustrates an enduring influence when he says that he and his schoolmates didn't like poetry because it "was for us a remote and unreal form of writing which referred to the seasons and flora and class-ecology of an archipelago off the north-west coast of Europe" [Les Murray 168]. Ecopoetic poetry may use the lyrical "I," but would seek rather to counteract its universalising tendency through the presentation of "bioregions" such as, in this case, Australia. So while Romanticism dreams a return to nature, the emphasis it lays on human potential and the powers of the mind—Shelley's "human mind's imaginings"—leads it to propose the abstract solutions of "plastic" (especially Coleridge) or mythopoetical (especially Blake) synthesis rather than to enhance "dwelling" by finding a voice for nature. A dwelling-place is a home, and I would add to Bate's conception of ecopoetics the Old English derivation of the word "dwell" in tarrying, delaying; to tarry means to take one's time, to hold back the march of time and step out of it, as with music; to play truant as it were on the rat race, on routine. This is also what happens when we slip out of conscious thought into daydreaming. Romanticism is thus still of the essence, but it needs adapting to contemporary consciousness, acutely aware not only of human potential but also of human failures. It is thus in the lineage leading from Romanticism to ecopoetics that Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts* can helpfully be placed.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Bate suggests himself an ecopoetic reading of this poem: "Notoriously deracinated, the high Modernist is the very antithesis of the bioregionally grounded poet. Could this be one reason why Basil Bunting has been excluded from the high Modernist canon,

***Briggflatts at long last***

*Briggflatts* is a long poem which dreams a return to nature, while remaining undeluded as to the practicability of such a return. Such self-consciousness was already, we have seen, present in Romanticism and is reinforced in modern poetry by twentieth century preoccupations with language and text. There are different ways of dealing with this linguistic awareness, pertaining to tragedy or to comedy; a comparison between Hughes and Bunting, for instance, reveals that the (early) poetry of the former heightens the tension between nature and culture by exacerbating nature's irreducible Otherness, by focusing on the dividing line between the two and dramatizing the journey across it;<sup>4</sup> whereas the late poetry of the latter throws a sop to the frontier guard and concentrates on porosity, on making inroads into the territory of the Other. Thus the stonemason who appears at the beginning of the poem at work on a grave slab, explicitly links writing and death and recalls the notorious gap between word and thing, the demise of the world in the word, and serves to posit, as it were, Bate's "environmentalist dilemma," whereby we are both "a part of and apart from nature."<sup>5</sup> Here is the second stanza,

A mason times his mallet  
To a lark's twitter,  
Listening while the marble rests,  
Lays his rule  
At a letter's edge,  
Fingertips checking,  
Till the stone spells a name  
Naming none,  
A man abolished.

However, in this primitive Œdipal scene the mason does not merely embody the Law, but also the ways round it: "Wetter, warmed, they watch / The mason meditate / On name and date." And:

The mason stirs:  
Words!  
Pens are too light.  
Take a chisel to write.

Far from exacerbating the opposition so as to transcend it by means of a Hughesian shamanic flight, the text works to attenuate it, smoothing and softening the sharp edge through a range of moves.

Indeed, the poem is suspicious of the sublime or the transcendental, as Part III of the poem ironically suggests, with its portrayal of the ambitious but fruitless ascent of a solitary climber. Instead it confidently fuses nature

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even though Ezra Pound championed him almost as vociferously as he did T.S. Eliot?" [Bate 234-37].

<sup>4</sup> However, this comparison should not blind us to the humour in Hughes; in "Mount Zion," for instance, a cricket singing from within the church wall enrages the parishioners while providing a way through.

<sup>5</sup> In Samuel Beckett's *Trilogy*, the bedridden Molloy captures this acute Modernist awareness when he says: "Yes, even then, when already all was fading, waves and particles, there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names."

and culture: "Brag, sweet tenor bull, / descant on Rawthey's madrigal, / each pebble its part / for the fells' late spring." Or:

Drip—icicle's gone.  
Slur, ratio, tone,  
Chime dilute what's done  
As a flute clarifies song,  
Trembling phrase fading to pause  
Then glow. Solstice past,  
Years end crescendo.

This is a delicate anthropomorphism in which culture and nature, the visual and the auditory, tenor and vehicle, weave in and out defining each other, closely intertwined to form an exquisite web through which past guilt ("what's done") is at last healed, thereby integrating humankind into the complex set of relationships between it and the environment, the mind and the world. Thus simile and metaphor work to make links and draw together dissimilar entities, pragmatically admitting nature into culture's ken and vice versa: "Stone smooth as skin," "stone white as cheese," and here a "dialogue" is created between animals, plants and stones: "stone [...] jeers at the dale," "becks ring on limestone, / whisper to peat," "Brag, sweet tenor bull..." In this way the landscape begins to take on a voice, an effect produced also by means of an objectivist poetics which acts as a counterweight to the "egotistical sublime," based as it is on the withdrawal of the self to make way for things presented objectively. While the lines above are anthropomorphic, for instance, they are not anthropocentric; the quiet drip of the icicle, the sounds of the natural environment, are brought to our attention as much as the cultural and emotional associations. And essential to the strategy is of course the poetic line itself, a sensitive boundary between art and culture, word and world, its sound, syntax and rhythm a manifestation of the impact or imprint of both. Hence the poet-mason, who is said to be "listening," who "times his mallet / to a lark's twitter" and disdains language that has become unanchored from the world and left to float adrift ("Pens are too light!"), aiming for words carved in stone in time to the lark and which alone are equal to the task of transmitting or transmuting the rhythms of nature: "Take a chisel to write."

#### *A voice with a view*

The ecopoetic strategy of *Briggflatts* seems to consist indeed in breaking down the monolithic entities of Self and Other, Man and Nature, and in this autobiographical poem deeply influenced by Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the self is refracted through a range of personae, human and animal, as if to deny humankind its supremacy. The landscape is fused with parts of the biological body, eroticised by the dispersal in the text of sexual metaphors such as the pebbles and the slowworm, infusing it with desire. Moreover, the most obvious Romantic Others, woman and nature, are not merely passive receivers and enhancers of the active masculine sublime, but active agents themselves, whether sexually ("kissing the pebbles") or spiritually, as in these often-cited celebratory lines, where perfectly ordinary verbs like "lifted up" and "rises" are made to read as conscious self-praise:

As the player's breath warms the fipple the tone clears.

It is time to consider how Domenico Scarlatti  
Condensed so much music into so few bars  
With never a crabbed turn or congested cadence,  
Never a boast or a see-here; and stars and lakes  
Echo him and the copse drums out his measure,  
Snow peaks are lifted up in moonlight and twilight  
And the sun rises on an acknowledged land.

Part and parcel of this approach, likewise, is the focusing on the intimate details of the landscape, meticulously recording its distinctive sights, smells and sounds, as if staking a claim for the maxim “small is beautiful”:

Riding silk, adrift on noon,  
A spider gleams like a berry  
Less black than cannibal slug  
But no less pat under elders  
Where shadows themselves are a web.

We have seen how *Briggflatts* modifies the Romantic poetics of severance and union by side-stepping the dialectical opposition and adopting a pragmatic attitude of acceptance (of severance) and assertion (of union). Now it is time to turn to Romanticism’s role as a quest paradigm, for Bunting’s poetics of dwelling is not a given—it is no “unfather’d vapour”—but painstakingly acquired, through “sharp study and long toil” [34].

### *A quest paradigm*

The poem is a quest in both form and content, it relates a past quest (the poet’s life, his search for a style to equal the mason’s craft), while itself taking the form of a quest—for which sonata form provides the structure—and commenting the writing as it is being written. The challenge here, it seems to me, was to allow the writing itself, the poetic line, to tell its own story, reflecting as a verbal icon the vicissitudes and turpitudes of the novitiate poet, as of the mature one writing in the present: an ironic strategy dependent for its success on a strong complicity with the reader. For the writing must simultaneously fit the stylistic demands of the mature poet and the organic unity of the whole, while reproducing ironically the failures, the wrong roads taken, the artistic dead-ends. This theme is sometimes clearly expressed as here, in Part II of *Briggflatts*,

It looks good on the page, but never  
well enough. Something is lost  
when wind, sun, sea upbraid  
justly an unconvinced deserter,

and sometimes suggested through irony and indeterminacy.

An example of the way in which poetic language itself effects this “upbraiding” is the last four lines of the following stanza, a succinct summary of the poem’s opening stanzas and a brief inventory consisting of spondaic monosyllabics and clustered consonants. These lines remain coterminous with the world of young fusional love (“Her pulse their pace”) while standing disjunct from it, an anchorless group of showy ostentatious vocables, “light” words cut adrift, disposed here by means of Modernist juxtaposition: the prized treasure of the poet led astray by the love of words:

Take no notice of tears:  
 letter the stone to stand  
 over love laid aside lest  
 insufferable happiness impede  
 flight to Stainmore,  
 to trace  
 lark, mallet,  
 becks, flocks  
 and axe knocks.

Indeed, a few lines later, at the beginning of Part II, we have a rational-intellectual language of measuring and calculation, leading to alienation, self-disgust and emotional and artistic sterility: “sick, self-maimed, self-hating, / obstinate, mating / beauty with squalor to beget lines still-born.” As in Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” emotional and spiritual truth is necessary to authentic creativity, and this constitutes a critique of Modernist logocentricity similar to the Romantic stance on neo-classical rationality. If Modernism was a poetics of exile and alienation and urban rootlessness, reflected by juxtaposition and disconnectedness, then Bunting’s ecopoetics seeks to heal that severance from within Modernism through weaving—or dreaming—links between things, so that the text resembles a textile, a woven fabric, or rather the “Lindisfarne plaited lines” that stand as an aesthetic model.<sup>6</sup>

There is, for instance, a tendency in *Briggflatts* towards autotextuality, rather than the intertextuality of his earlier, more strictly Modernist verse, with words or phrases—the riverbed pebbles, the slowworm, the singing voices of the young lovers or the hard applewood for the fire—recurring, slightly changed, throughout the text, in keeping with its intimation of the interrelatedness of all things. Clearly the last four lines of the stanza above are not “stillborn,” they resonate back through the poem and have their own music contrasting liquids and plosives, combining binary rhythm and couplet rhyme and syntactical finality (“and”). An ironic finality, however, both celebratory and wry, an indeterminacy which reflects that of the whole dilemma between the satisfactions of poetry and the anguish of love betrayed, between art and life, culture and nature... An indeterminacy, therefore, fluctuating from text to world and back again, undermining the force of the opposition and keeping faith with both.

### *Music and realism*

The notion of keeping faith with the world is related of course to realism. Bunting’s trademark is, together with the sensuous vibrancy of his verse, an authenticity of experience and observation in which the “Whole Man”<sup>7</sup> seems to partake. While it is true to say that his realism works to counteract Romantic abstractions—a criticism most frequently levelled at Shelley—and idealising tendencies, and while realism and Romanticism are often

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<sup>6</sup> Bunting’s note reads: “Lindisfarne, the Holy Island, where the tracery of the *Codex Lindisfarnensis* was elaborated. This beautiful illuminated manuscript was the work of Eadfrith, Bishop of Lindisfarne, towards the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.”

<sup>7</sup> The title of an article by Bunting (*The Outlook*, 19 May 1928).



contrasted, the Romantic revolution was at the same time, at least as theorised by Wordsworth in the "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads*, a realistic one: "Le Manifeste pourrait en fait s'intituler : 'Pour un nouveau réalisme en poésie'" [Vitoux 18]. There was realism in its attack on the artificiality of poetic diction in favour of a language "spoken by men," a language adapted to the sincerity of feeling of simple country folk, and Romanticism was realistic also in its reaction against the preconceived, literary view of nature characteristic of neo-classical poetry, and in the reaction against the picturesque, where rather than art imitating nature, the landscape was made to imitate art. And while Wordsworth's imagery remained subordinate to a "higher" purpose, "Wordsworth's aim is not the preservation of images in itself, although this is important, but the pursuit of infinitude and eternity" [Homans 51-52], he nevertheless favoured a more realistic representation of nature, which is one of the reasons for Bunting's lifelong admiration for him: "he kept his eye on the thing."

As to Bunting's realism, it answers a similar aim to see the world as it is and use the language actually used; thus it hard-headedly deals with facts ("excepting nothing that is," we read in *Briggflatts*), explores the harsh reality of a dirty gypsy girl [8] or a "gay" songthrush: "fear, hunger, lust" [1], presenting an unsophisticated view of humankind harried by physical and sexual needs and close to the animals. See for instance this presentation of the lark, so different from Shelley's figure of the inspired poet, his "unbodied joy" and "profuse strains of unpremeditated art": "Painful lark, labouring to rise!" and "Breathless lark / drops to nest in sodden trash" or the use of "unpoetic" imagery, such as sewers, compost heaps and sweat, as in: "Steep sluice or level, / parts of the sewer ferment faster. / Days jerk, dawdle, fidget / towards the cesspit." Far from using nature as a storeroom of symbols, with scant attention to their material, concrete representation, Bunting's imagery has an immediacy and a mimetic thrust and things are presented first and foremost through their thinginess: "Slight moon limps after the sun. A closing door / stirs smoke's flow above the grate."

So Bunting picks up the thread of realism in Romanticism, fuses it with Modernist imagism and objectivism, to produce a poetics of dwelling, which, as the fourth extract above suggests, has to do with recognition: "And the sun rises on an acknowledged land." Indeed, according to Bate, characteristic of ecopoetic poetry is the "pre-scientific magic of naming":

The denomination of objects does not follow upon recognition; it is itself recognition [...]. For pre-scientific thinking, naming an object is causing it to exist or changing it; God creates beings by naming them and magic operates upon them by speaking of them. [Merleau-Ponty 177-78]

Thus Bunting's concise, elliptical lines, enhanced by paratax, acknowledge the elements of the landscape and distinguish them in their singularity.

### ***Bioregionalism as strategy***

Distinguishing things in their singularity is also achieved through another aesthetic, conducive to ecopoetics, that of regionalism or, as Bate has it, bioregionalism. In this too Wordsworth provides a model, as derived from a

discreet counter-discourse within the Romantic canon. Wordsworth's mature patriotism and conservative politics are widely known: "Wordsworth slowly settled into the role of patriotic, conservative public man, abandoning the radical politics and idealism of his youth" [Drabble 1085]. Yet the poet Laureate's patriotism, according to Jonathan Bate, cannot be simplistically aligned with Burkean nationalism, in that it does not embrace the country as a whole and is not straight-forwardly conservative, but deals with smaller entities such as counties (Kent in the "Sonnets dedicated to Liberty") or regions (the Lake District).<sup>8</sup> In this respect his poetics pertains to the chorographic technique of the Elizabethans who sought to consolidate national feeling by proceeding from county to county, writing "geography through history." Wordsworth's interest in Kent, Bate argues, lies more in the county's history of resistance to oppression and fraternal solidarity than in its visibility from the French coast. And the hills and lakes explored in childhood or the Welsh borderland that is home to Tintern Abbey, later revisited as powerful sources of poetic inspiration, are specific places, often named. Indeed, Wordsworth was the first poet to attach such importance to where and when his poems were written,<sup>9</sup> a strategy which pertains to a form of realism as it does to ecopoetics.

Bunting's bioregionalism can be seen as a reaction against Modernist urban, cosmopolitan poetics, a strategy likewise adopted by other late British Modernists such as Hugh MacDiarmid, David Jones, Seamus Heaney and Geoffrey Hill. Like the Romantics, the Modernists had high ambitions for poetry and its transformational power, and they were similarly universalistic: reacting against the consensual, parochial poetics prevalent in Victorian literature, they aimed to reflect and respond to the rising mechanization and social alienation of international capitalism, while drawing their far-flung fragments together through the use of structuring devices such as music and myth.<sup>10</sup> Typically exiles, drawn to the great financial centres of London, Paris and Zurich, their poetry was polyglot and multicultural. Disillusioned or undeluded about this ambition to reflect so vast a concept as 'an era and the West,' the choice of regionalism is a scaling down of ambition and a retreat into the known, a return from Modernist impersonality to a Romantic emphasis on emotion<sup>11</sup> and, for Bunting, experience. Indeed, Bunting's bioregionalism implies no doubt a critique of Modernist logocentricity and autotelics: if Modernism had failed, this may

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<sup>8</sup> "Wordsworth is moving here towards an image of organic England which may well be construed as Burkean. But the precise location in Kent sets Wordsworth apart from Burke" [Bate 216].

<sup>9</sup> "He was the first English poet to record in detail the circumstances of composition of his own works, just as he was the first to reflect publicly and at length upon his own art and its development [...]. Again and again in these reflections, he tells us *where* he wrote a particular poem" [Bate 205].

<sup>10</sup> "The Modernists were aiming not at, or not *finally* at, a poetics of indeterminacy but rather—as suggested by the Poundian title of my own book on the subject—at achieving a coherent splendor" [Gelpi 518].

<sup>11</sup> There is no need to recall Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," although worth remembering that, in Eliot's criticism likewise, "the final value is emotion rather than some classical idea of order" [Faulkner 26].

have less to do with the difficulty of making the fragments cohere,<sup>12</sup> than with the fact that its far-reaching aims led poets to write of things with which they were not sufficiently familiar, of which they had no direct experience.<sup>13</sup>

The use of dialect is significant here. Wordsworth raised a few eyebrows with his claims for “language really used by men,” through which the poet-theorist was combining politics and poetics: a new poetic diction in keeping with democratic values. But language as spoken is necessarily not standard speech but particularized, to some extent dialectal, as Bunting implies when he insists that Wordsworth’s, as well as his own, poetry should be read with a Northumberland accent: “Southrons would maul the music of many lines in *Briggflatts*” [210]. A dialect belongs to a landscape, that is to say a geography and a biology, a history and a body of myth and legend. More precisely it is a metonymy, and this trope is significant in that in metonymy tenor and vehicle are pictured side by side, in a relation of contiguity rather than substitution, which is the case with metaphor. Bunting uses dialect sparingly in *Briggflatts*, but enough to suggest an intimacy between word and thing and to draw tight the links between poem and landscape, with the aim of resisting the abstract, universalising tendency inherent in language.

And as with Wordsworth’s praise of the rebellious Kentish yeomanry, refractory to oppression, the Northumbrian culture celebrated here—a fusion of Anglo-Celtic influences—often found itself in conflict with distant power centres, be it London or Rome. Borderland battles, for instance, were common, such as the oft-sung Battle of Catteridge, during which almost all the Welsh army lost their lives: “I hear Aneurin number the dead, his nipped voice;” as Bunting’s final, unfinished sonata wryly puts it: “Men of the north / ‘subject to being beheaded and cannot avoid it / of a race that is naturally given that way.’” And alongside the assassinated Viking Eric Bloodaxe, stands the legendary Saint Cuthbert,<sup>14</sup> who struggled to defend the locally-implanted Celtic Church against Roman Catholic expansionism, as related by that revered Northumbrian chronicler, the Venerable Bede.<sup>15</sup> The significance of religious history becomes evident when we consider that *Briggflatts* is the name of a tiny North Yorkshire hamlet, one of the five houses of which is a Quaker meetinghouse founded by George Fox himself. The Society of Friends, like the Celts before them, were the victims of persecution, and, as we consider the various strands relating to the Northumbrian matter, Bunting’s regionalism gradually takes shape as a means of expressing religious, cultural, political and linguistic unorthodoxy, of staking a claim for fierce independence of mind and resistance to an

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<sup>12</sup> “Modernism has thus permanently enriched our literature, though leaving its problems unresolved. It has sharpened and intensified our awareness of the complexity of existence and so our need of, what it suggests we cannot have, a unifying philosophy” [74].

<sup>13</sup> “I take care not to write anything that I don’t bloody well know. And that is something that is different I think from a lot of the poets who write. If I write about how it feels rubbing down a gravestone, well I have rubbed down a bloody gravestone” [Bunting 1970, 12].

<sup>14</sup> Peter Makin (1978) has demonstrated the importance of Saint Cuthbert to the poem, despite the fact that he is not explicitly mentioned.

<sup>15</sup> For an impassioned romanced immersion in this period see Melvyn Bragg’s *Credo*.

imposed language or values.<sup>16</sup> The portrait of the rat, destitute and ostracised but free, captures this brilliantly,

Where rats go go I,  
 Accustomed to penury,  
 Filth, disgust and fury;  
 Evasive to persist,  
 Reject the bait  
 Yet gnaw the best.  
 My bony feet  
 Sully shelf and dresser,  
 Keeping a beat in the dark,  
 Rap on lath  
 Till dogs bark  
 And sleep, shed,  
 Slides from the bed.  
 O valiant when hunters  
 With stick and terrier bar escape  
 Or wavy ferret leaps,  
 Encroach and cede again,  
 Rat, roommate, unreconciled.

In the course of his book, Bate suggests that “racial oppression and the exploitation of nature go hand in hand” [89]. If Romanticism helped pave the way for empire, then Bunting, writing in post-colonial times, challenges that discourse with his portrayal of a rebellious Northumbria refusing to toe the line and enduring, like the poet himself, thanks to a certain musical ideal: “Keeping a beat in the dark.”

As well as the mason, the slowworm and the rat, the poem includes shepherds, local men and Wordsworthian simple folk: men whose livelihood relies on their intimacy with the natural world:

Shepherds follow the links,  
 Sweet turf studded with thrift;  
 Fell-born men of precise instep  
 Leading demure dogs  
 From Tweed and Till and Teviotdale,  
 With hair combed back from the muzzle,  
 Dogs from Redesdale and Coquetdale  
 Taught by Wilson or Telfer.

I have mentioned the role of webs and weaving in this poem, and the first line above clearly picks up the thread of—and answers—an ironic, provocative line which appears earlier in the poem: “Follow the clue patiently and you will understand nothing.” In the phrase “shepherds follow the links,” ‘links’ acts as a pun, since the word has a precise geographical meaning (rising ground) while also meaning a link in a chain,

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<sup>16</sup> Brigflatts is thus not dissimilar to Eliot’s Little Gidding, where N. Ferrar (1592-1637) set up a small religious community based on Anglican principles. In contrast with *Brigflatts*, however, here history is universal (“a pattern / Of timeless moments”) and national (“History is now and England”) rather than particular and regional, and Eliot’s symbolic, abstract language and incantatory rhythms lead to an epiphany which foreshadows Bunting’s “And the sun rises on an acknowledged land” (*supra*), but which is based on unveiling (“know”) rather than weaving (“acknowledged”): “We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time” [222].

another image belonging to the “web” paradigm (chainmail also comes into the poem, that of the traitor Bloodaxe: “Loaded with mail of linked lies.”) The shepherds are thus presented as initiates, as competent readers of nature as a text, or of the text as nature, in contrast with the reader, misled by the Logos. On the one hand we have the phrases “fell-born”—where ‘fell’ is a dialect word denoting a geographical feature, foregrounded by ten recurrences in the course of this 717-line long poem—, and “follow the links,” shimmering back through the poem as text; on the other the precise description and proper nouns, metonymies of the landscape; the shepherds are thus posited as figures of the poet, standing Janus-like at the junction between text and world, culture and nature, articulating yet attenuating the eco-poetic dilemma that we are “a part of and apart from nature.” So “logos” is redefined—or rather, defined once again—in terms of presence / absence: Heraclitus’s unity of contraries, as formulated here by Heidegger,

But Logos does not originally mean discourse, saying. The word means nothing that is immediately related to language. *Lego*, *legein*, in Latin *legere*, is the same word as our col-lecting; “reading,” as lecture, is only a sort of collecting. That word means putting one thing next to another, bringing them together, nay: gathering; in such an operation things are all at once distinguished from one another. [Heidegger 132]

#### *“Long earsick,” long I-sick*

This twofold (but barely contradictory) movement of articulation and downtoning is likewise in evidence in the rhythmic and musical characteristics of the poetic line. This is an aspect of Bunting’s writing in which the Romantic problematics of presence and absence is particularly acute. A crucial feature of Romantic poetry, according to M.H. Abrams, was that it “invited the reader to identify the protagonists with the poets themselves” [Abrams 129], thus the typical Romantic lyric gives an illusion of presence that creates the fiction of “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” at the present moment. The exalted selfhood of the lyrical “I” is posited as the source of this overflow of feelings—as a self therefore which is outside language, using it for self-expression. Metre plays a crucial role in this; the iambic pentameter is renowned for its fluidity and flexibility, its all-purpose expressivity. As one poet-critic has put it: “blank verse and free verse [are] the natural vehicles of the true voice [of feeling].”<sup>17</sup> So much so that, according to Antony Easthope, a critic writing in the wake of Benveniste and Lacan, one of the characteristics of English Romantic poetry is that the signs of poeticity—the text as verbal, vocal production—tend to fade into the background in favour of this expressivity; in other words, the ‘enunciation’ withdraws into the background while the ‘enounced’ predominates. In this it contrasts with medieval and Modernist poetry, Easthope claims, where techniques such as parataxis and fragmentation disturb the flow and draw attention to the poeticity or enunciation. Similarly, Easthope accuses the music of poetry of creating an illusion of harmony in which the self or the body sees itself as wedded to the universe, in an experience of union with the One:

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<sup>17</sup> Sir Herbert Read, cited without a reference in Donald Davie (*Articulate Energy* 262).

Paradoxalement, la musique est devenue pour la poésie un alibi du rythme. Le stade de la poésie l'a menée à son degré dernier, puisqu'elle y figure l'ineffable. Caution du flou, c'est le rythme-émotion. Un permis de mystique, où la notion de rythme s'est fondue dans l'essence de la vie. [119]

The Romantic overtones are clear: the musicality of the Romantic iambic metrics leads to an all-embracing synchronicity, so that the identification between protagonist and poet, poet and reader, finally culminates in union with the cosmos. With respect to this notion of harmony, literal and figurative, Bunting is very much a Modernist, and his verse follows Pound's injunction: "(To break the pentameter, that was the first heave)" [532]. Rather than transporting the reader forwards with a smooth fluidity, Bunting's writing introduces a heavy roughness in the language, a sinewy substantiality produced by the slow spondaic rhythms and clashing consonants. The production of sound requires matter, friction, and lips, teeth and tongue—the body, once again—are solicited, a physicality which hinders the expression of a transcendent ego and obstructs subjective identification. Instead, what we hear is the voice of the Other: the body, unconscious drives—maybe Nature. The taut tense line resists the march of time as "the clogged cart pushes the horse downhill," and the reader is invited to tarry, to dwell on the sound of words, dwell in a new-found world.

### *Negotiations*

If Romanticism endures in modern poetry, it is partly because humankind is still—more than ever—in need of a relationship with nature. Basil Bunting's poem *Briggflatts* creates the conditions for such a relationship, adopting and adapting Romantic principles within yet against Modernism, by means of a pragmatic poetics which sidesteps the severance/reunification dialectic and assertively opens negotiations between language and landscape. The quarrel with the abstractions and universals of the Logos is common to both Romanticism and Modernism, and the poem echoes the Wordsworthian realist-regionalist counter-discourse as a cogent antidote, whereby a gritty Northern music resists the pull of the iamb and the smooth flow of Southern speech, to savour the singularity of things. Crucially a poetry of listening, it summons us back to nature through animal-alert lines such as these, taken from the "slowworm's song":

Sycamore seed twirling,  
O, writhe to its measure!  
Dust swirling trims pleasure.  
Thorns prance in a gale.  
In air snow flickers,  
Twigs tap,  
Elms drip.

Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts* presents an eco-nomy of ecopoetics whereby, to return to Heraclitus, "Nature speaks by making, man makes by speaking," in so doing it pursues in its distinctly modern idiom Romantic aspirations; for here poetry of place continues to offer a place for poetry.

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