

# The meaning of sound – the sound of meaning. A personal poetic journey

David Banks

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David BANKS

**The meaning of sound – the sound of meaning.  
A personal poetic journey**

I first came to poetry in the late 1960s, through the so-called Liverpool Poets<sup>1</sup>, and in particular Adrian Henri and Brian Patten. However, I very soon became interested in the work of Basil Bunting<sup>2</sup>, and if I were to claim one poet as the person who influenced me then that would be Bunting. I believe that when the dust has settled on the history of twentieth century British poetry, it will be Basil Bunting, rather than, say, T.S. Eliot, that will be remembered as one of the greatest poets of this era. It is noticeable that while I know of a considerable number of poets who would claim to be poetical sons, or at least to have been to some extent influenced by Bunting, I know of no-one who would say the same thing of Eliot.

For Bunting, the link between poetry and music is very strong, and particularly important. He often interspersed his poetry readings with music, usually by Corelli or Scarlatti. He often stressed that sound was the most important thing in poetry as in this extract from a 1976 interview:

Well, I believe that the fundamental thing in poetry is the sound, so that whatever the meaning may be, whatever your ultimate intention in that direction might be, if you haven't got the sound right, it isn't a poem. And if you have got it right, it'll get across, even to people who don't understand it.<sup>3</sup>

Such statements led some to misinterpret him as saying that meaning was unimportant, and that the only thing that mattered was sound. But this he specifically denied. In a 1975 interview he said:

I've never said that poetry consists *only* of sound. I said again and again that the *essential* thing is the sound. Without the sound, there isn't any poetry. But having established it and kept it clear that the sound is the essential, the main thing, you can add all sorts of stuff if you want to.<sup>4</sup>

David Banks

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I certainly would not wish to attempt to define poetry. In fact, such an attempt would be doomed to failure as there may well be as many definitions as there are poets. However, I would like to think that in my poetry, as in Bunting's, the sound is of prime importance. English is however, not a naturally rhyming language, and so for me most of the sound patterns pass through alliteration and rhythm. This can perhaps be heard in the following poem<sup>5</sup>, which dates from the 1980s, and which describes a well known site in western Brittany.

**Le gibet des moines, Finistère**

where land ends  
brooding on breakers  
staring out storms

their starwards phallic  
stone lechs once  
male glory raised

till tonsured scouts  
with upturned female  
symbols topped them off

thus circumcised  
if not castrated  
by these rough hewn crosses

providing gibbets  
for their time  
and tourist sights for ours

slim-fit monoliths still  
Christ cross the countryside  
stalking pagans

the same sea  
shifts  
the schist

Many of my poems are derived from visits to more or less exotic places: Iceland, Iraq, Yemen, Algeria, Jordan, etc. I also think that the poet should be able to say something about the political and social events of his time. When the Iraqis gassed the Kurdish village of Halabja in 1988, I was reminded of

The meaning of sound – the sound of meaning

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my experiences in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1976. Although I never went to Halabja, I did go to Amadiyah, which was also subject to gas attacks. All of the events mentioned in this poem actually happened.

**Kurdistan 1976/1988**

the day we fled from Amadiyah  
arab jeep behind us  
down the Kurdish mountain road  
there was no gas

though crowds of Kurdish eyes  
watched the lone Arab  
fail to get our papers

the day they stopped us on the road from Rowanduz  
bullet pocked villages  
napalm scars across the valley  
there was no gas

though a pistol in a trouser belt  
was held anonymous authority  
for search and question

the day we passed through Gully Ali Beg  
ironic poppies blinking  
above the surging summer waters  
there was no gas

though talk was still of battles  
the resistance of heroic few  
abetted by the mountain

the day they fled from Amadiyah  
peshmergas' wives and children  
left the sudden dead behind them  
and creeping misty clouds

At one time houses were never silent. If you went into an empty house, even if there was no other noise, you would always hear the ticking of a clock somewhere. The age of quartz has changed all that, and brought in silence where for several centuries ticking had represented the passing of time. That is the idea which sparked off this poem on the passage of time and the process of aging.

David Banks

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**Age**

quick crosswords  
space the waning days  
of mundane morrows

ultimately stretched  
the landscape relief subsides  
desert-like and level

now that pendulums are past  
waiting for the quartz clock to tick

diurnal tides  
crunch the coastal trim  
with lunar regularity

budding seasons  
blend from squall to shower  
with persistent humidity

now that pendulums are past  
waiting for the quartz clock to tick

plans conjugate  
only in the past imperfect  
never potential

waiting for the cryptic  
moment of revelation  
and reunion  
    waiting

waiting  
    quartz clocks never tick

I think most people do not realize that it is possible to hear the tide turn. It is best on a very calm day. Go to the edge of the sea at low tide, at the end of the period of slack water. Wait and listen. There is a period of absolute silence then you will hear a gentle swish. The tide has turned and is coming in. That is the experience described in this poem.

**The Sound of the Turning Tide**

sound like water seeks  
its level seeps to fill  
all space left unattended

communication struggles  
through the bric-à-brac  
of decibels the permanence of hum

boomerang chattering massages  
the sayer the hearer untouched  
hears only the spheres

a medieval music  
thrumbing in celestial silence  
like the space between the phonemes

so stand on sand and seek  
the silence of slack water  
then listen to the turning of the tide

the first sluggish syllables  
barely gurgle burst  
and sink in waiting sand

bubbles aspirate in almost  
silent plosive spray  
leave ringlets on the beach

new formed wavelets  
lean towards the shore  
and gossip up the shingle

so bend your lugs and learn  
the silence of slack water  
listen to the turning of the tide

The following poem plays with rhythm. The first, second and fourth stanzas have a slow plodding rhythm, and this is broken by the third stanza, which has a much lighter skipping rhythm.

David Banks

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### Spring Song

iron sulphate blackens moss  
raking aerates stifled sward  
earthen patches punctuate  
spring drizzles primrose grass

spring tides discover rocks  
crustaceans cower in lithic clefts  
dredged sand silts  
wrack precedes algal bloom

beneath the wind stripped branches  
mimosa blossom precipitates  
down below the tide-line  
rollers delve the fore-beach

shags guard naked rocks  
gulls glide cliffside bound  
spades cleave sodden earth  
soon the sound of mowers

I hope that in the above poems the aspect of music, in terms of sound and rhythm is evident. In the following poem, music is explicitly evoked. I hope also, that my poems are not devoid of a sense of humour, though some may find it humour of a rather wry or twisted sort. Perhaps something of that is present in this poem too. The images come from a visit to the mountains of Mercantour.

### Minimal Mountain Music

presto  
streams cascade in frenzied fugue  
counterpoint from rock to stone

adagio  
marmots screech across the scree  
simple slide of minor third

andante  
chamois' hooves strike on stone  
unpitched power percussive beat

allegretto  
winds glissandi through the pass  
gambol past below the peaks

da capo al fine  
ad infinitum

## The meaning of sound – the sound of meaning

Most people believe that Thomas Edison invented the electric light. However, in the north-east of England, it is claimed that the electric light was invented by Joseph Swan. In fact the truth is that they invented it simultaneously, and independently, but Edison was a better businessman than Swan. Swan's house is close to the now famous contemporary sculpture *The Angel of the North* at the southern entry to Gateshead.

**The Invention of the Electric Light**

in the shadow of the Angel  
 more or less  
 though it wasn't then there  
 Swan switched on  
 brightening the gloom

while *outré atlantique*  
 by dint of bombast  
 even blatant lies  
 the American guy  
 laid claim

carbon filaments  
 and vacuum flasks  
 jotted down in notebooks  
 for future patents  
 possible lawsuits

by buying the press  
 cf. Paris Exhibition  
 a conquest of Europe  
 confounding rivals  
 by acumen and brightness

so with fingernail flick  
 modern nows switch on  
 forgetful of the sweat  
 and Swan *pace* Edison  
 in the shadow of the Angel

This poem was written after my trip to Yemen. The architecture of the old town of Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, is amazing. Since all the buildings are constructed in hand-made mud brick, nothing is symmetrical, giving the whole an organic look. Moreover, the windows all have a half-circle of stained glass at the top, so that as darkness falls in the evening, and the lights come



David Banks

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on, it gives an effect of fairy-lights, which is almost unreal. For readers unfamiliar with this culture, perhaps I can point out that a *jumbiya* is a curved dagger, which Yemeni men wear in a rather phallic position, and *qat* is a leaf which is chewed for its mild narcotic properties. Many Yemeni men (and some women) spend most of the afternoon chewing qat.

### Sana'a Nightfall

in organic half circles  
over windows fixed  
gladdening the gloom  
dusk musk fairy lights  
infiltrate the nightness

intra-muros alleyways  
sink in medieval murk  
as chador bustling figures  
for walled palm gardens  
desert the urban tracks

the medina thronged suq  
islanded in sudden night  
glitters its jumbiya hilts  
through qat sodden air  
drunk on cardamon and myrrh

the muezzin punctuates  
the gloom shrouded glitter  
camels tread incessantly  
the sesame encircling mill  
with Koranic invocations

adobe brick towers  
ease towards the night  
growing vegetal orifices  
stained windows flickering  
silencing the day

At one point in my academic career I was teaching a course in the history of English, which obviously included Old English. Since my poetry makes extensive use of alliteration, and alliteration is the basis of Old English prosody, I thought it would be interesting to use Old English prosody as a framework, and to write poems in that form, and that is more or less what I have been doing since then. Old English poems have four beats to a line, and the third

beat alliterates with the first, or second, or both. They are usually printed with a space between the second and third beats. The following is an example, and I sometimes claim, with tongue in cheek, that this is the lost bit of Beowulf that I discovered. It is an occasional poem (I think the occasion is obvious) but I hope that it goes beyond the occasion that instigated it.

### **Beowulf and the Fangs of Mass Destruction**

fangs of terror   towers destroyed  
laying waste   the land's equanimity  
installing fear   stifling peace  
igniting wrath   the rage of the hero  
Beowulf declares   Christ his witness  
in bathic depths   the beast possesses  
the might of fangs   of mass destruction  
so hero Beowulf   beast defying  
vowed the death   of dastardly fangs  
plunged the depths   of darkest gulf  
sought the beast   sought his fangs  
laid waste the land   where lorded beast  
bombarded palaces   bridges homes  
electricity pylons   and pipes for water  
telecommunications facilities   fortified bunkers  
scratched in cellars   for signs of fangs  
scoured the desert   for signs of fangs  
but Beowulf found   no beast no fangs  
not the slightest menace   of mass destruction  
but hero Beowulf   beast dispatched  
declared the beast's   disappearance worth  
the myth of fangs   of mass destruction

At one point I became interested in Joseph Banks (for obvious reasons!), who sailed round the world with Cook on his first circumnavigation on the Endeavour. The collection of plants and animals that Joseph Banks made during his trip established him as the foremost botanist of his day, and he later became President of the Royal Society and he founded Kew Gardens. This poem could be thought of as being in the mouth of one of the sailors on board the Endeavour as it neared the end of its voyage.

### **Endeavour Log Extract (1771)**

not until we reached  
Batavia did sickness strike  
'twas Captain's pickled cabbage

David Banks

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did it so they say  
kept the scurvy all at sea  
a trick reserved for gentlemen  
a wily ruse had them  
begging for it please

and Mr. Banks' beasties  
pickled too in spirits save  
those fit for eating  
like those marine birds musketed  
with weird greens and tubers  
from tropical climes all stowed  
jars and pressed plants  
and ledgers crammed with drawings

so homeward bound for Plymouth  
Sound Portsmouth or Dover or  
perhaps to dock at Deal  
no more naked chocolate  
breasts nor rolling planks  
Venus having transited mid-voyage  
what crow's nest cry  
ah the Lizard

A few years ago I became interested in the scientific language of the late seventeenth century. This poem is linked to that interest. Since the Newton myth, which he himself helped create, presents him as the great empirical scientist; many people do not know that he continued to practice alchemy and numerology right up to the end of his life, nor that he was a devout Unitarian, and used his influence to get the rule governing Cambridge professors changed so that he did not have to take orders in the Anglican Church. This poem is placed in the mouth of Newton towards the end of his life.

### **Isaac Aging**

only dust in the depths of the crucible  
gold notwithstanding soon to gleam  
what warranty of wealth spiritual  
transfer to physick transparent purity  
even de Fatio's temptation defeated  
not like the heinous incestuous Hooke  
forever whoring housemaids and niece

The meaning of sound – the sound of meaning

---

trying to appropriate priority in gravity  
couldn't count nor calculate cyphers  
vague notions but no numbers  
my milling coinage in the disdained mint  
mere practical application apprehending fraudsters  
mine the genuine giant's shoulders  
on which others may stand to survey the cosmos  
the unity of godhead will grant the triumph  
fusing alchymical conquest and faith  
in the gilding of dust in the depths of the crucible

One of my minor interests is early travellers in the Middle East, and among these are some notable women, including Gertrude Bell, who can be compared with T.E. Laurence whom she knew fairly well. Gertrude Bell was largely responsible, behind the scenes, for the constitution given to Iraq after the First World War, which denied a homeland to the Kurds despite a previous treaty giving them one, thus ultimately creating many of the current problems in the Middle East. These elements can be found in this poem.

**Ringin' for Iraq**

oh Gertie you got it wrong  
at least the roughcut Kurdish bit  
fusing southwards with islamic factions  
squabbling for a scrap of desert dune

yes Gertie you got it wrong  
ably abetted by timorous T.E.  
a slowly aging spinster spellbound  
by the sparkle in an Arab prince's eyes

ah Gertie you got it wrong  
of course you couldn't forejudge George  
at eighty decades' distance dreaming  
of revenge and markets twixt the rivers

but camelcading across the desert  
in image building girlish glee  
doing your Empire darndest best  
oh Gertie you got it wrong

I shall end with a rather more philosophical poem, which is a reflexion on the possibility of life after death.

David Banks

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### Thoughts on After

will my molecules migrate all azimuth  
moth-like fluttering forever outwards  
when these neurones numb their firing  
will zero extension zap the void

when my coil uncurled in mortality  
shuffles off to shadowy shades  
shall my me remain in essence  
forever flavouring an infictive universe

back-sliding down some black hole  
to rebirth beyond the big bang  
hailed by polyphonic hosts to bliss  
everlasting perfection forever uncontrasted

tottering on the edge of an existential chasm  
caught between eternal extinction  
and permanent perfection perpetuated forever  
preferring the tottering to a possible void

David Banks  
*Université de Bretagne Occidentale*  
CEIMA / EA4249 HCTI

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to their individual collections, there are two Penguin anthologies devoted to the Liverpool Poets. These have work by Adrian Henri and Brian Pattern as well as that of Roger McGough. They are *The Mersey Sound*, Penguin Modern Poets 10, 1967, and *New Volume*, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Basil Bunting's *Collected Poems* were first published by Fulcrum Press in 1968, and a second edition with some additions was published by Oxford University Press in 1978. A small volume of *Uncollected Poems*, edited by Richard Caddel, was published by Oxford University Press in 1991. For biographical and critical accounts of Bunting and his work see, for example: Terrell, Carroll F. (ed.) 1980, *Basil Bunting, Man and Poet*, Orono, Maine, National Poetry Foundation; Forde, Victoria 1991, *The Poetry of Basil Bunting*, Newcastle, Bloodaxe Books; Caddel, Richard & Anthony Flowers 1997, *Basil Bunting, A northern life*, Newcastle, Newcastle Libraries & Information service/Basil Bunting Poetry Centre. Several journals have devoted special issues to Bunting, including *Agenda* 16:1, 1978 (Basil Bunting

The meaning of sound – the sound of meaning

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Special Issue), *Poetry Information*, 19, 1978 (Basil Bunting Special Issue), and *Durham University Journal* Special Supplement, 1995 (*Sharp Study and Long Toil*, Basil Bunting Special Issue, edited by Richard Caddel).

- <sup>3</sup> Williams, Jonathan & Tom Meyer 1978: “A conversation with Basil Bunting”, *Poetry Information*, 19, 37-47.
- <sup>4</sup> Mottram, Eric 1978: “Conversation with Basil Bunting on the occasion of his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, 1975”, *Poetry Information*, 19, 3-10.
- <sup>5</sup> The poems which appear here were published in *Vole File*, 1995, Brighton, Pentagraph Press, *Seven Exodes*, 2002, London, Oasis Books, *Celt Seed, Selected Poems*, Salzburg, Poetry Salzburg, and *Radicals*, 2009, Nottingham, Poetry Monthly Press. Some had previously appeared in the following magazines or anthologies: *Oasis*, *Pearls of Peace*, *Parnassus of World Poets*, 1995, 1999. “Kurdistan 1976/1988” was also published as a poemcard by Hilltop Press, Sheffield, in 1990, with a second edition in 1991. “Thoughts on after” has, as yet, not appeared in print, but is forthcoming in *Poetry Salzburg Journal*.

