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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 Poets¹, and in particular Adrian Henri and Brian Patten. However, I very soon became interested in the work of Basil Bunting², 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.³

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.⁴

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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 poem⁵, 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

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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.

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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.

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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

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

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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
bombaraded 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

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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

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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.

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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

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Notes

¹ 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.

² 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

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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).

- ³ Williams, Jonathan & Tom Meyer 1978: “A conversation with Basil Bunting”, *Poetry Information*, 19, 37-47.
- ⁴ Mottram, Eric 1978: “Conversation with Basil Bunting on the occasion of his 75th birthday, 1975”, *Poetry Information*, 19, 3-10.
- ⁵ 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*.

