



CRITICISM

VOLUME

120

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 120

Michelle Lee
Project Editor



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Poetry Criticism

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." In *Interpreting Blake*, edited by Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Edited by Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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Basil Bunting

1900-1985

English poet, editor, and critic.

INTRODUCTION

A British modernist and protégé of Ezra Pound, Bunting produced poetry that privileged sound and rhythm over meaning. He attempted to reproduce the forms and qualities of musical compositions, terming his poems sonatas and contending that oral presentations of poetry were far superior to reading the written text. His most famous work is the long poem *Briggflatts* (1966), often compared to T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. However, Bunting's work has until recently been far more neglected by readers and critics than his more famous modernist contemporaries, Eliot and Pound.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Bunting was born on March 1, 1900, in Scotswood, Northumberland, near Newcastle, into a family of Quakers. His parents were Annie Cheesman and T. L. Bunting, a physician. He attended Newcastle Royal Grammar School for two years and then studied at Quaker boarding schools, first in Ackworth and then in Berkshire. During World War I, Bunting was a conscientious objector in accordance with his Quaker beliefs. He was arrested and spent more than a year in prison where it is believed that he first encountered the poetry of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. After his release in 1919, Bunting began writing poetry and enrolled in the London School of Economics, but left after approximately eighteen months without earning a degree. He traveled to France where he met Pound and the two became friends. Pound began serving as Bunting's mentor and helped him secure an editorial position with Ford Madox Ford's *Transatlantic Review*. He and Pound edited a poetry anthology that contained a number of Bunting's poems from this period, and his work also appeared in Louis Zukofsky's *An "Objectivists" Anthology*. In 1930, Bunting married Marian Culver, with whom he had a son and two daughters. During the next two decades, Bunting traveled extensively and lived at various times in Italy, the Canary Islands, and Iran. He served in the British Military Intelligence in Iran (then Persia) during World War II, and he remained in Tehran after the war, working at the British Embassy. In 1953, he returned to Iran as a correspondent for the *Times*;

however, he was expelled from the country within a matter of months for refusing to allow censorship of his news stories. Bunting's first marriage ended in divorce, and in 1948, he married Sima Alladadian. The family returned to England in 1953 and Bunting spent the next several years in an editorial position with the Newcastle *Morning Chronicle*, struggling to support his family and producing very little poetry. In the 1960s, his work, which had been almost completely neglected by readers and critics, was rediscovered with the help of Tom Pickard and Jonathan Williams, young poets who assisted him in getting his work published. The appearance of *Briggflatts* in 1966 finally established his reputation as an important modernist poet. In addition to his writing and editorial work, Bunting taught poetry at a variety of English and American universities until 1973 when he retired. He died on April 17, 1985, in Hexham, England.

MAJOR WORKS

Bunting's earliest surviving poetry was composed in 1924, and he began submitting pieces to *Poetry* magazine two years after that. In 1930, the privately printed volume *Redimiculum Matellarum* appeared. It contains twelve short odes informed by Bunting's interest in musical forms, plus "Villon," his first "sonata." "Villon" also appeared in *Poetry* in October, 1930, the piece having been submitted by Pound, who had drastically edited it, cutting it by nearly half. Bunting's other sonatas written prior to World War II include "Attis: Or, Something Missing," "Aus dem zweiten Reich," and "The Well of Lycopolis," a self-described "gloomy" poem written while Bunting lived in the Canary Islands in the late 1930s. The piece was not published until it appeared in his second volume of poetry, *Poems 1950* (1950), a volume that was revised and reissued fifteen years later as *Loquitur*. After a lengthy period of literary inactivity in the 1950s and early 1960s, Bunting began writing again in 1964; he produced eight odes that would later appear as a section of the 1968 volume *Collected Poems*. In 1965, he published his *First Book of Odes* and *The Spoils*, which had been written in 1951 and published in *Poetry*. A year later Bunting produced his masterwork *Briggflatts*, a five-part autobiographical poem. The lengthy sonata was first published in *Poetry* and was then issued later that year in book form in England. In 1994, *The Complete Poems*, edited by Richard Caddel, was published by Oxford University Press. A collection of his critical essays, *Basil Bunting on Poetry*, appeared in 1999.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Bunting made use of the literature of the past in creating his own poems, one of the best examples being "Villon," in which he imitated the form of the French poet Villon. Anthony Suter has studied Bunting's use of earlier texts and contends that it is always done with respect; however, "respect for other poets never becomes unhealthy reverence," nor does it prevent him from parodying his predecessors. Donald Davie discusses Bunting's undeserved reputation as "a slavish disciple of Ezra Pound," contending that Bunting's influences were far more diverse than many critics believe. Davie lists a great number of poets admired by Bunting—Dryden, Burns, Spenser, and Wordsworth to name just a few—and concludes that "Bunting's canon . . . is more radical than Pound's and more consistent." Ben Howard praises Bunting's "polyglot allusiveness" to a wide range of historical, geographical, and cultural references, noting his ability "to integrate such disparate materials as Northumbrian history and Greek myth, local dialect and Latin mottoes, colloquial speech and allusions to ancient Persian tales."

Bunting's privileging of the musical or aural aspects of his poetry over content, theme, or meaning, has been lauded by some critics and has drawn fire from others. W. S. Milne notes that throughout his literary career Bunting has "remained one of the few English poets of this century to adhere to a poetic which regards a poem as a performance in sound." Eric Mottram believes that some of Bunting's passages "reach standards of sound and measure unsurpassed in this century." Stefan Hawlin refutes the notion that Bunting had little use for attempting to discern meaning in poetry; rather, Bunting "challenges our casual dualism of sound and meaning, implicit so often in the use of 'readings', a use which starts to tear apart meaning, so-called, from experienced sound." Peter Dale, however, disagrees, quoting Bunting's own advice about *Briggflatts*: "The attempt to find any meaning in it would be manifestly absurd." Dale concludes, therefore, that reading the poem would apparently be "a meaningless experience," and he contends that the poet's positions on meaninglessness and on poetry as pure music or pure sound "seem to be designed to warn people off any approach to the poem." Complicating this is the fact that Bunting composed his poetry in his native Northumbrian dialect, and claimed that those from the south of England "would maul the music" of some of his lines.

Bunting's relative obscurity as a modernist poet—particularly in comparison to such contemporaries as Pound and Eliot—has been studied by a number of scholars. Hawlin reports that Bunting "has always had a small, influential body of supporters, but he has been treated with neglect or indifference by the wider professional readership of poetry." John Seed complains that

Bunting's poetry "is still not securely part of the official canon. Nor is it part of the English curriculum in secondary and higher education." Seed cites numerous causes including "literary modernism's English demise and its contamination by the political values of the extreme Right." He has also studied Bunting's "idiosyncratic publishing history," noting that the poet "was isolated from literary groupings in London and struggled to find any British journal or publisher who would take his poetry seriously." Only the journal *Poetry*, based in Chicago, consistently published Bunting's work, and Bunting acknowledged his debt to the journal in the preface to *Collected Poems*. Andrew Lawson finds that Bunting's position as "the original English modernist," or according to some, the *only* English modernist, has cut him off from the tradition associated with Pound and Eliot and "preserved him in a splendid but critically restrictive isolation," which might explain his critical neglect. A related issue is Bunting's lengthy period of literary inactivity during the 1950s and early 1960s. The most obvious explanation for his silence during that time is that he was far too preoccupied with earning a living as a journalist to spend time on poetry. Peter Makin (see Further Reading) believes, though, that Bunting was disappointed in his early efforts, particularly *The Spoils*, written in 1951, but unpublished in book form in England until 1965. In the mid-1960s, according to Makin, Bunting changed directions and finally came into his own with the composition of *Briggflatts*, which the critic describes as a far more personal poem, "more revelatory of strong emotions" than his earlier work.

 PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Redimiculum Matellarum 1930
Poems 1950 1950; revised as *Loquitur* 1965
First Book of Odes 1965
Ode 11/2 1965
The Spoils 1965
Briggflatts: An Autobiography 1966
Two Poems 1967
What the Chairman Told Tom 1967
Collected Poems 1968
Version of Horace 1972
Uncollected Poems 1991
The Complete Poems 1994

Other Major Works

Selected Poems of Ford Madox Ford [editor and author of preface] (poetry) 1971

Selected Poems of Joseph Skipsey [editor] (poetry) 1976
Basil Bunting on Poetry (criticism) 1999

CRITICISM

Anthony Suter (essay date autumn 1971)

SOURCE: Suter, Anthony. "Time and the Literary Past in the Poetry of Basil Bunting." *Contemporary Literature* 12, no. 4 (autumn 1971): 510-26.

[In the following essay, Suter discusses Bunting's use of the literature of the past as source material for his own poems, particularly those written early in his career.]

The whole of the upbringing of Basil Bunting (born 1900) and many of the influences on his life prepared him to be profoundly conscious of literature and the literary past. Bunting's father was a doctor who had wide literary interests. Basil Bunting remembers how he used to read Wordsworth's poems aloud to the family.¹ Through his home background, his father's extensive library, and his education at the Quaker schools of Ackworth and Leyton Park, he came to have a very wide culture, with a feeling for literature and a gift for languages which have never left him. It was during his youth that he came to know Spenser, Wyatt, Villon, Malherbe, Dante, and the classics of Greek and Latin literature, especially Homer and Lucretius.² This culture was not entirely literary. Basil Bunting's aunt was a concert pianist, and it was because of hearing her play that he first formed his love of music. As a boy he used to ask her to play Scarlatti sonatas to him—an early sign of his interest in that particular musical form and in that composer.

Bunting travelled widely, and it was during a period of a few months in 1923, spent as sub-editor to Ford Madox Ford on the short-lived *transatlantic review*, that he met Ezra Pound. It can safely be said that this was the literary encounter of Bunting's life. Pound's influence was not confined to the Paris period, although his ruthless cutting of Bunting's first (published) long poem, "Villon," dates from this time.³ After further years of travel, mainly in Italy, and work as music critic on the London paper *The Outlook*, in the late 1920s, Bunting went to join Pound at Rapallo in 1929, where he remained until 1934.

It was during this time that the influence of Pound on the younger poet was most profound. Respect and sympathy must have been mutual, for Pound celebrates

the private publication of Bunting's first book, *Redimiculum Matellarum* (Milan, 1930) in the first of the *Pisan Cantos*:

Bunting

doing six months after that war was over
 as pacifist tempted with chicken but declined to ap-
 prove
 of war "Redimiculum Metellorum" [sic]
 privately printed
 to the shame of various critics

.

and the fleet that went out to Salamis
 was built by state loan to the builders
 hence the attack on classical studies
 and in this war were Joe Gould, Bunting and cum-
 mings
 as against thickness and fatness. . . .⁴

Pound influenced Bunting in all the obvious things he could teach: imagism, economy of diction (particularly telling influences for Bunting's short poems, the *Odes*), rhythm, and ideogrammic method. In addition, he encouraged the young poet's existing interest in translation and literary culture. Pound, in the years around 1914, had reintroduced the medieval idea that the writer should represent as much of human culture as possible. He could preserve the past in the present, Pound felt, by the transposition of the techniques of other languages, other periods, other cultures into twentieth-century English poetry. In this, Bunting followed Pound, incorporating into his own poems references, translated passages, and closely imitated techniques from other writers.

We can see Bunting at the beginning of his career setting off, in a minor way, on the same course as his poetic mentor, just as T. S. Eliot had done. We shall see, moreover, that the parallel with Eliot does not end there, because like Eliot, Bunting freed himself from the influences which first dominated him. Bunting has only very rarely expressed himself in writing on the subject of poetry and has never gone so far as to theorize about literature in general.⁵ Why he uses material from other literature in his work has to be studied from the poetry itself. However, it can at least be said that Bunting conceives of literary material as subject matter to "fill" the structures or shapes that he has in mind for his poems.⁶

The most obvious aspect of Bunting's use of literature of the past—because of its direct connection with the same kind of phenomenon in Eliot and Pound—is that it is often respectful. This does not rule out the possibility of parody. On the contrary, in his note to "Attis: or, Something Missing" (1931), the poet says: "Parodies of Lucretius and Cino da Pistoia can do no damage and

intend no disrespect.”⁷ An author rarely parodies another writer within the framework of a serious piece of literature if he does not think that the other is worth parodying.

Throughout Bunting’s first long poem, “*Villon*” (1925), there is obviously a deep sympathy for the French poet. He represents, first of all, a technical ideal to be followed, as Bunting shows when he imitates his verse form:

Remember, imbeciles and wits,
sots and ascetics, fair and foul,
young girls with little tender tits,
that DEATH is written over all.

Worn hides that scarcely clothe the soul
they are so rotten, old and thin,
or firm and soft and warm and full—
fellmonger Death gets every skin.

All that is piteous, all that’s fair,
all that is fat and scant of breath,
Elisha’s baldness, Helen’s hair,
is Death’s collateral. . . .

(p. 14)

In fact, it is interesting to put passages from Villon and Bunting side by side. The caesura is marked / and the number of syllables in each half line indicated:

Je congnois / que pauvres et riches, (3-5)
Sages et fous, / prêtres et lais, (4-4)
Nobles, vilains, / larges et chiches, (4-4)
Petits et grands, / et beaux et laids, (4-4)
Dames a rabrassés collets, (no pause)
De quelconque / condition, (4-4)
Portant atours / et bourrelets, (4-4)
Mort saisit / sans exception.⁸ (3-5)
(n.b. irregularly placed caesura on
clinging line)

Three score / and ten years after sight (2-6)
of this / pay me / your pulse and breath (2-6 or 4-4)
value received. / And who dare cite, (4-4)
as we forgive / our debtors, Death? (4-4)
Abelard / and Eloise, (3-5)
Henry the Fowler, / Charlemagne, (5-3)
Gneée, / Lopokova, / all these (2-6 or 6-2)
die, die in pain. (irregular)

Bunting employs the same verse form as Villon, octosyllabic quatrains with a basic iambic rhythm, rhyming A B A B, with the only exception being that he arranges his lines in groups of four instead of in the groups of eight of Villon where the rhyme sound B of the first four lines is repeated as A of the second. One may note how both Bunting and Villon are masters of alliteration: for example, the labial consonants in “pay me your pulse and breath” and the “f” and “m” sounds

in “*La mort le fait fremir. . .*” Bunting’s narrator also would like to identify himself with Villon as a fellow-poet who survives death by the great poetry he has written:

The Emperor with the Golden Hands

is still a word, a tint, a tone,
insubstantial-glorious,
when we ourselves are dead and gone
and the green grass growing over us.

(p. 15)

Nonetheless, Bunting’s poet-narrator does not feel he is sufficiently great or mature an artist to attain this ideal: “How can I sing with my love in my bosom? / Unclean, immature and unseasonable salmon” (p. 17). Despite this admission of failure, much of the poem turns on the facts that both Villon and the narrator are profoundly affected by the idea of death, both experience imprisonment, and both are concerned with an attack on the absolute—immortality—by means of poetry. Thus, a kind of intimacy between them is established.

The same sort of impression of collusion between the source poet and the admirer is created by the jocular aside to Cino da Pistoia, “eh, Cino?” in “*Attis*.” It is the familiar tone of one writer addressing another. In the same poem, respect for Lucretius is obvious from the way in which much of the argument depends on aspects of the Latin poet’s thought; the atheism of Lucretius, his desire to banish superstitious fear from people’s minds, is effective counterpoint to the way in which Bunting mocks the Attis myth.

Respect for other poets never becomes unhealthy reverence. The way in which Bunting can stand aside from the literary works he introduces into his own poems is shown by his parodies. These can be divided into two categories: the respectful or serious, which can be linked with the examples discussed above, and then the less serious, in which Bunting obviously has tongue in cheek. In the first category fall not only the imitation of Villon in the poem of that title but also a parody of Villon in “*The Well of Lycopolis*” (1935). Each in its different way is intended to be in homage to Villon, the first more obviously so because it attempts to reproduce in English not only Villon’s themes, such as imprisonment and death, and his imagery and tone, but also his very verse form. In “*The Well of Lycopolis*,” the adaptation is rather of the spirit of “*Les regrets de la belle heaulmière*.” Its translation into colloquial language comprehensible by the average, modern English or American reader renders it more immediate than the first Villon poem:

“Blotched belly, slack buttock and breast,
there’s little to strip for now.
A few years makes a lot of difference.

Would you have known me?
 Poor old fools,
 gabbing about our young days,
 squatted round a bit of fire
 just lit and flickering out already:
 and we used to be so pretty!"

(p. 31)

Villon's spirit lives here for those who have never read his poetry in the original language. Paradoxically, this is not true to the same extent in the case of the earlier poem, which is closer to Villon in purely technical terms, because an acquaintance with the French original is necessary to appreciate its ultimate refinements. Another example of this deliberately serious imitation of a technique borrowed from poetry of the past is a passage of *Briggflatts* (1965) that possesses the hard, brittle beauty of Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse:

Who sang, sea takes,
 brawn brine, bone grit.
 Keener the kittiwake.
 Fells forget him.
 Fathoms dull the dale,
 gulfweed voices. . . .⁹

Parody is less serious in tone when it takes the form of "literary jokes." This aspect is absent from "*Villon*," where Bunting's narrator is the admiring beholder of the poem's chief source material, and where irony, by means of a contrast between past and present reality, is at the expense of this narrator. However, the joke is very apparent in "*Attis*." Besides the serious parody of Lucretius already mentioned, and all the more effective because of its juxtaposition with this, there is the parody of the Milton sonnet, "On his Deceased Wife":

I thought I saw my late wife (a very respectable woman)
 coming from Bywell churchyard with a handful of raisins.
 I was not pleased, it is shocking to meet a ghost, so I cut her
 and went and sat among the rank watergrasses by the Tyne.¹⁰

This represents a change in Bunting's manner of parodying another poet, and the change may result from the influence of T. S. Eliot's method. At least it shows the same kind of approach as Eliot's. Normally, when a "straight" adaptation or quotation of literary material is made, there is an ironic comparison at the expense of the present; here the irony is a double one. What was a beautiful visionary experience in Milton's poem has been deliberately cheapened in the modern one. The poet is not merely saying that the reality of the present does not fit the view represented by the poem he adapts; he is saying that the "reality" once represented by the earlier poem no longer coincides with the "reality" of the present as stated in the argument of the modern

poem. Moreover, Bunting's adaptation of the Milton sonnet is placed in the context of a poem which questions belief in the immortality of the soul. Thus, Bunting succeeds in making the sentiment behind the original Milton poem seem ridiculous. Eliot works in the same way in *The Waste Land* when he juxtaposes references to Elizabeth and Leicester in their gilded barges with indications of other apparently (and only apparently) more sordid sexual encounters on the river, or when he concludes his description of the typist's lovemaking with a parody of Goldsmith:

When lovely woman stoops to folly and
 Paces about her room again, alone,
 She smooths her hair with automatic hand,
 And puts a record on the gramophone.

Bunting catches an Eliot-like tone in his Milton parody, which goes as far as actual imitation if we remember that the "handful of raisins" in Bunting resembles Mr. Eugenides' "pocketful of currants." Therefore, in a way, Bunting is writing double parody here, parody of Milton and parody of Eliot at one and the same time. This is not just an accident of language unconsciously provoked by the adoption of Eliot's general method, for the remainder of "*Attis*" contains other imitations of Eliot's style, and these are taken up again in Bunting's following poem, "*Aus dem Zweiten Reich*" (also of 1932). In "*Attis*," the *Waste Land* theme of exile is evoked in the realistic language of the very early Eliot poems such as the "Preludes":

And O Purveyor
 of geraniums and pianos to the Kaiserin!
 the hot smell of the street
 conversing with the bleat
 of rancid air streaming up tenement stairways!

(p. 21)

Also, in concluding a hunt scene:

"I recollect deep mud and leafmould somewhere: and
 in the distance Cheviot's
 heatherbrown flanks and white cap."

(p. 20)

Whereas the influence of Eliot in "*Attis*" is to be seen in such obvious examples of parody as the preceding ones, the same is absorbed far deeper into a fabric of the poem, "*Aus dem Zweiten Reich*," so that all the Eliot-like procedures can qualify as parody. Certainly the meeting with Herr Lignitz in Part II of the poem might be parody in its reminiscence of the meeting with Mr. Eugenides in *The Waste Land*:

Herr Lignitz knows Old Berlin. It is near the Post Office
 with several rather disorderly public houses.
 "You have no naked pictures in your English magazines."

It is shocking. Berlin is very shocking to the English.
Are you shocked? . . ."

(p. 26)

However, the other aspects of the poem which could possibly be traced to Eliot's influence, in particular the satire of modern urban society, are assimilated to such a degree as to become one with Bunting's art. The assimilation into which parody develops only serves to emphasize the serious purpose to which even humorously turned parodies are put. The Eliot parodies support a criticism of modern society just as much as the Villon parodies serve to express the situation of a poet limited by his experience and his technique, and that of the ordinary human being limited by aging and death.

Bunting's use of literary material in his poems is not confined to parody as a vehicle for the development of themes, nor to the adoption and assimilation of other men's techniques. He often refers deliberately to the works of other poets and writers, especially those of the past, and directly transposes (without going so far as imitation or parody) tags of their writings into modern English. These "quotations" (together with the parodies, for they serve other than entirely as parody) have a value as references to different systems of thought or poetic visions.

The early poems depend heavily on this sort of material for their subject matter. In the later ones, just as in T. S. Eliot's last poems, there is far less reliance on sources, at least for the reader's comprehension of the poems. The gap between what Bunting was doing at the start of his career and the work of his later years can be judged if one compares "*Attis*" (1932) with *Briggflatts* (1965). Without a fairly good knowledge of Latin and Italian literature, not to mention English, the reader would find the former incomprehensible without a reference book; apart from referring to Lucretius and Milton, the poem contains a parody of Cino da Pistoia and demands a knowledge of Catullus' Poem 63 about Attis. *Briggflatts*, although it contains references to the past, does not depend on a precise knowledge of these to communicate its meaning.

Bunting himself admitted in conversation¹¹ that the public for poetry has changed since he began writing. What one could expect in terms of erudition from one's audience, he claims, was far greater a generation ago than now. His present poetry, thus, has changed with the times in minimizing erudite reference. However, it would be unjust to say that his earlier poetry is "dated" by its use of literary allusion; we have only to read lines from the concluding part of "*Villon*" to know that this is not true:

Under the olive trees
walking alone

on the green terraces
very seldom
over the sea seldom
where it ravelled and spun
blue tapestries white and green
gravecloths of men

.
and the men of the sea
who have neither nation nor time
on the mountains seldom
the white mountains beyond
or the brown mountains between
and their drifting echoes
in the clouds and over the sea
in shrines on their ridges
the goddess of the country
silverplated in silk and embroidery
with offerings of pictures
little ships and arms
below me the ports
with naked breasts
shipless spoiled sacked
because of the beauty of Helen. . . .¹²

Despite the change in the reading public, the poet can justify use of literary material by employing references to other literature as "echoes" of other cultures. This is the "reference value" I mentioned earlier. It is what Eliot was doing with success in *The Waste Land*. With Bunting the problem is more complex. The success of his use of "literary echo" varies from poem to poem and even within the different parts of each poem.

In "*Villon*," for example, although for an appreciation of its ultimate refinements a knowledge of the original French poetry is necessary, the parody of the French poet is so telling as to have an effect comparable to that of Villon himself. When it comes to development of theme, however, it is doubtful that the modern reader would understand fully without a knowledge of Villon's life and poetry. The main argument of the poem depends on the dialogue between Villon and the poet who is Bunting's persona-narrator. This dialogue takes place in the context of the prison (which suggests the physical limits imposed upon the poets), the limits of death and human experience, and the poets' awareness they will be critically evaluated by writers in the future. The first two themes require little or no previous knowledge of Villon. However, the theme of the poet's critical reception by posterity is not entirely obvious unless one knows that among the first lines of the poem is a quotation from Clement Marot's 1532 preface to Villon's works: "whose sords we gathered as pleasant flowers / and thought on his wit and how neatly he described things."¹³ This is not the sort of knowledge most readers have, unless they are students of French literature. Further, no one but a Villon specialist is likely to recognize the reference, in Part II of the poem, to the fact that Villon himself refers to Psalm 108 in *Le Testament*. Bunting incorporates his own version of part of the psalm in his text, but this can have a value only for

the truly initiated." In both these cases Bunting achieves a "literary echo" only for an extremely limited group of readers.

These, although they are connected with general themes, are points of detail. The main idea of the poem does in fact depend on a successful evocation of a poet of the past, who happens to be Villon, and of his situation, which is compared to that of a modern poet. In general, the reference to the past works as Bunting wants it to here.

This is not entirely true of "Attis" and "The Well of Lycopolis." The fact that they refer to diverse sources makes them more difficult. Moreover, the reader who knows these sources well will follow the argument of the poems much more easily than one who does not, for even translations here sometimes depend on the reader's knowledge of material outside the poem, whereas in "Villon" the French poet is actually evoked within the poem itself. This is the case in "The Well of Lycopolis," where in Part I Villon's words and attitudes are transposed into a modern idiom; but this device appears only in the first quarter of the poem and thus cannot provide unity. The development of much of the rest relies on references to classical mythology and to Dante. The very reference of the title to "The Well of Lycopolis" is obscure, as in Bunting's most unhelpful note, which merely says that the well and its effects are mentioned in a footnote in Gibbon.¹⁵ Also, understanding the use of passages from Dante in Part IV of the poem, again alluded to in the note to the poem, requires a knowledge of *The Divine Comedy*. The parallel Bunting intends between the eternal suffering of those in the mud of Hell (the quotation is from Canto VII of the *Inferno*) and the mud of the Flanders battlefields in the First World War is otherwise lost.

Similarly, in "Attis," much of the meaning of the poem is lost for one not familiar with Catullus or at least with the Attis story in Greek mythology. As in "The Well of Lycopolis," complete understanding comes from what one already knows outside the poem. Since Bunting admits that his notes to the *Collected Poems* are a "confession of failure,"¹⁶ he too must think that his literary references do not always work as he would have liked them to. Nonetheless, with sufficient background one can grasp what Bunting is doing. The effect desired is the same as in "Villon" and in the Eliot-like parodies discussed above: the poet is trying to give an extra dimension to both past and present by juxtaposing them like interreflecting mirrors. Moreover, in "Attis," this notion is supported by imagery of decay and renewal which expresses the perpetual conversation between past and present:

reluctant ebb:
salt from all beaches:

disrupt Atlantis, days forgotten,
extinct peoples, silted harbours.
He regrets that brackish
train of the huntress
driven into slackening fresh,
expelled when the
estuary resumes
colourless potability;
wreckage that drifted
in drifts out.

(p. 19)

The same is true of the next poem in which he employs a literary source, "Chomei at Toyama" (1932). There Bunting takes an ancient subject—the reflections of Chomei, a twelfth-century Japanese poet, on the disasters that occur during his lifetime—to emphasize the eternal nature of the sufferings of man and the intimate relation of his fate to the cosmic cycle of events. What distinguishes "Chomei at Toyama" from all of Bunting's other long poems prior to its composition, apart from "Aus dem Zweiten Reich," is that it stands entirely on its own. The reader need have no acquaintance with its source, the *Hōjōki*, which is entirely assimilated into both the design and subject matter. (Bunting says in his notes that the shape of the *Hōjōki* exactly fitted the conception of the poem he had in mind.)

This represents a turning point in Bunting's work; from there on, with the exception of "The Well of Lycopolis" (1935), literature or other source material is no longer required for understanding as it is in such a poem as "Attis." Bunting's short poems, *Odes*, are almost entirely free from literary references. Parts I and II of *The Spoils* (1951) contain some easily recognizable Biblical references and a wealth of material concerning the life of the people of Persia in ancient and modern times, some of which the author explains in notes. Still, what Bunting has called "an English poem with Persian subject matter" depends less on erudition than on the language and imagery employed.¹⁷ (We have already remarked upon the purity of language achieved when Bunting frees himself from his source material in "Villon.") From the images taken from the life of a people—the women washing and baking bread, the men engaged in agriculture—and the picture of life posed between past and future, one grasps clearly the idea of a civilization going through a continual process of decay and renewal:

Have you seen a falcon stoop
accurate, unforseen
and absolute, between
wind-ripples over harvest? Dread
of what's to be, is and has been—
were we not better dead?
His wings churn air
to flight.
Feathers alight