

Packing the line

HUGH KENNER

BASIL BUNTING (BORN 1900, Northumberland, England) learned in Quaker meeting-houses or perhaps in his cradle what most of us know as a poetic discipline of the 1920s: Pack the line tight. Part of that decade's adventure was to abolish what Wyndham Lewis called "prepositions, articles, the small fry." Ordinary sentences seemed littered with Styrofoam pellets. But—

*Weeping oaks grieve, chestnuts raise
mournful candles*

—that was the way to do it.

That is also the opening of the earliest poem Bunting has preserved (1924); he didn't have to work toward compactness, he started from it. He's rootedly English in this; enjambment of word against word was a Saxon way in the time of the *Beowulf* poet; prattle marks a silly dissipation of attention, or a bogus-colloquial need to be liked, or both.

But it's an impacting discipline, apt to clog movement; even Bunting's movement is sometimes clogged. His way of freeing it is to let sound lead to sound, remember sound.

*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.*

Gone, tone, done, song, four variations on a note, all at line-ends; and *glow*, when we come to it, glows like a triumphant rhyme, though it answers to nothing

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more than an ambient tonality of *o's* (and will force us to assert the final vowel of *crescendo*). Three sentences here, so compacted they're nearly crabbed, are miraculously opened up by the auditory patterning, "as a flute clarifies song"; characteristically, he states a musical analogy for what's going on.

But it's not prose. Be guided by the lineation, and mark the accretion of sounds. "Syringa sings" tells us to listen for "—ing(s)," which sound duly recurs five times (*wings, things, trusting, wings, things*), with assonances in *hunger* and *thunder*. Also, *thrush* gets picked up in *ruffles*, then again in *thrusts, trusting, bush, list, lust*. Then



That is a detail from *Briggflatts*, which it's becoming a cliché to call the first major longish English poem since *Four Quartets* 35 years ago. The distinction is deserved. But here (in a short review) is a short poem entire:

A thrush in the syringa sings.

*'Hunger ruffles my wings, fear,
lust, familiar things.*

*Death thrusts hard. My sons
by hawk's beak, by stones,
trusting weak wings
by cat and weasel, die.*

*Thunder smothers the sky.
From a shaken bush I
list familiar things,
fear, hunger, lust.'*

O gay thrush!

As the syntax fan will note, that's as densely packed as 50 words can well be. "My sons by hawk's beak, by stones, trusting weak wings, by cat and weasel, die"—so runs the fourth sentence word for word in prose, and though clear it makes mannered prose indeed.

beak, introduced as late as the fifth line, finds its echo in *weak*, is dissociated into *shaken* . . .

It's an obsessed little tune, in short, that carries the burden of the thrush, and "O gay thrush!" is of course an irony. (People think it's a carefree bird, much as Keats seemed to think the nightingale—Philomel, rudely forced—poured forth her soul in ecstasy.)

But "O gay thrush" is a dissonance too. There's been no acoustic preparation for "gay"* and these three strong monosyllables would seem strayed in from some other poem but for the principle the American poet Ronald Johnson invokes when he quotes Charles Ives to elucidate this very line: "All the wrong notes are right."

ALL THE WRONG NOTES are right. The three words are simply wrong, and yet a voice that can find a way to speak them terminates the poem. And whose voice—not the voice of the thrush, which commands all the middle of the poem—spoke the first line, which said that the thrush "sings"? As the thrush

*The dictionary meaning, please.

BASIL BUNTING

Ode 7

(from the Second Book of Odes)

Ille mi par esse deo videtur

O, it is godlike to sit selfpossessed
when her chin rises and she turns to smile;
but my tongue thickens, my ears ring,
what I see is hazy.

I tremble. Walls sink in night, voices
unmeaning as wind. She only
a clear note, dazzle of light, fills
furlongs and hours

so that my limbs stir without will, lame,
I a ghost, powerless,
treading air, drowning, sucked
back into dark

unless, rafted on light or music,
drawn into her radiance, I dissolve
when her chin rises and she turns to smile.
O, it is godlike!

Ode 32

(from the First Book of Odes)

Let them remember Samangan, the bridge and tower
and rutted cobbles and the coppersmith's hammer,
where we looked out from the walls to the marble mountains,
ate and lay and were happy an hour and a night;

so that the heart never rests from love of the city
without lies or riches, whose old women
straight as girls at the well are beautiful,
its old men and its wineshops gay.

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

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