

## Poets in Rapallo: Bunting & Pound

**Massimo Bacigalupo**

Università degli Studi di Genova

*This paper reconstructs the association of Bunting and Pound when both were residents in Rapallo at various periods between 1924-34, collaborating on the Il Mare literary supplement (1932-33), consorting with Yeats and Hauptmann, and promoting and reviewing the concerts that Pound was organizing. Local references in Bunting's verse are elucidated, and accounts by him and others of those very productive years are cited. As late as 1985, the year of his death, Bunting was recalling humorously his days in Rapallo, which he fittingly memorialized in his poetic autobiography Briggflatts.*

1. Bringing news of Basil Bunting from Genoa to Durham, reminds me very much of the fact that Newcastle is nearby.<sup>1</sup> However, Bunting was always the poet-traveller, and presents himself consistently in his work as somebody in the wings, surviving precariously, but enjoying being unrespectable and scoffing at the rest. He picks up the persona of the poète maudit, identifying in his first major poem with François Villon, the vagrant jailbird, friend of thieves and prostitutes who has always fascinated turn-of-the-century literati, but who is also a great poet. So Bunting's vagabondism was not a literary pose, but a personal trait. He was a modern troubadour without intending to be anything but himself. His travels took him very far, East and West, but surely his life on the Mediterranean coast in Rapallo in the late 1920s and early 1930s was decisive in

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was given at Durham University on the occasion of Basil Bunting's 95th birthday celebration, sponsored by the Basil Bunting Poetry Centre. I dedicate it to the memory of Richard Caddel (1949-2003). Much information was taken from Forde and Makin. Since this was written, biographies of Bunting have been published by Keith Aldritt (1998) and Richard Burton (2013).

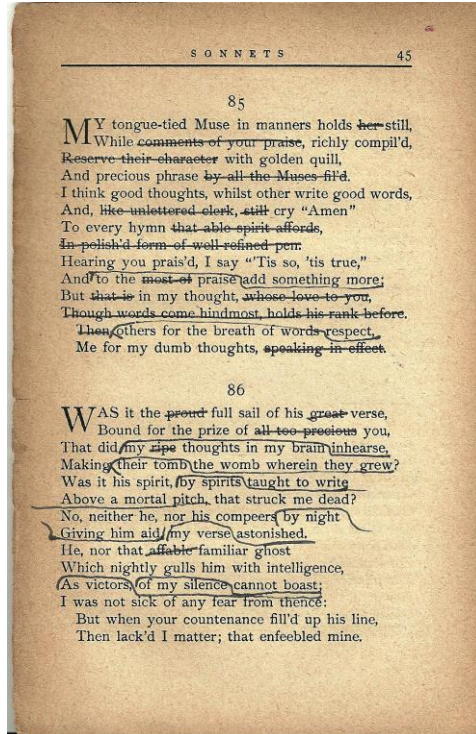
making him the poet we know. Here he consulted with his mentor Ezra Pound and with Pound's mentor William Butler Yeats, here he brought his first wife and raised their first child, here he wrote three of his "Sonatas", his brilliant evocation of "Chomei at Toyama", and a good number of "Odes", as he called his shorter poems. This period was to stay in his mind as happy and fruitful, and it has its place in his poetic autobiography, *Briggflatts*.

Bunting arranged his work chronologically, though his dates are not always accurate. So, leafing through *Collected Poems*, we can easily see that the greater part of the "First Book of Odes" belongs to this fruitful period, and that very little was written between 1935 and 1965, which is the date of *Briggflatts* and the "Second Book of Odes". This twenty-year silence was broken in 1951 by the notable sonata "The Spoils", which by the way also seems to have been drafted in part in Italy, when Bunting was working in Lucca, and returned for a short visit to Rapallo (February 1951). *Briggflatts* and the contemporary Odes were in turn followed by another twenty-year silence, as Bunting became steadily better known and admired, but only wrote a few short pieces, howbeit of high quality. He is not a particularly prolific poet, and had a just appreciation of silence. In this he may be closer to T.S. Eliot than to Ezra Pound, who didn't worry about being didactic and so could keep producing Cantos until his energy was exhausted – there was always so much to tell his benighted readers. Bunting obviously did not have this attitude, though in "The Spoils" he does provide a capsule account of Persian history. He and Pound shared the idea that poetry should be condensed to the maximum.

We have Bunting's notorious revisions of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. These are in a German (Tauchnitz) edition of the *Sonnets*, which Bunting dated 1921 or 1926, probably the latter. But the heavy marks of revision may belong to the Rapallo period of 1931-33, as a sort of Poundian exercise:

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Was it the full sail of his verse  
Bound for the prize of you,  
That did inhearse my thought in my brain,  
Making the womb wherein they grew their tomb?<sup>2</sup>



1. Shakespeare's Sonnets 85-86 with Bunting's autograph emendations, c. 1926. (Rapallo, private collection)

<sup>2</sup> Sonnet 86 ("Was it the proud full sail of his great verse") as revised by Bunting in his copy of the *Sonnets* (Leipzig, Insel Verlag, no date). Inscribed inside front cover: "Si amas, eme. Curculio of Plautus. B C Bunting, Feb 1921". On the booklet's last page he has a list of major writers by century: "19 – Joyce, Eliot / 18 – Wordsworth, Byron, Dickens, Ibsen, Dostoevsky" etc.

Bunting appears to have left this book behind in Rapallo when he moved rather suddenly and inexplicably to the Canaries in September 1934. So he didn't have it with him when he quoted the same sonnet in "The Well of Lycopolis", a Sonata written in the Canaries which recalls in title as well as subject-matter Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

Neither (aequora pontis)  
on the sea's bulge  
would the 'proud, full sail'  
avail  
us, stubborn against the trades,  
closehauled,  
stiff, flat canvas;  
our fingers bleed  
under the nail  
when we reef. (CP 32)

Here we find the same protest against pompous rhetoric that Shakespeare suggests in the rival-poet sonnet, and that Bunting in turn aims at Shakespeare himself. But in the poem Bunting makes good his claim, suggesting the ruggedness and vigor of his economy of (poetic) subsistence.

Compactness is highlighted by Pound in *ABC of Reading*, written at the end of 1933, which provides the formula "Dichten = condensare", and credits Basil Bunting with discovering it in a German-Italian dictionary, so demonstrating that "this idea of poetry as concentration is as old almost as the German language" (36). The formula is "Mr. Bunting's discovery and his prime contribution to contemporary criticism" (92).

The fact that *dichten* means both to write verses and to condense doesn't mean that the two activities are associated, but poetry, if not philology, is made of these happy coincidences, i.e., puns. And this was the period when Pound was most insistent on condensation. The literary supplement of *Il Mare*, published fortnightly between October 1932 and March 1933, ran the motto: "He who says in 100 words what he can say in 10 words is capable

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of murdering his father”, attributing it to the rather old-fashioned poet Giosuè Carducci. In later issues the attribution was tactfully followed by a question mark, the author of the motto being clearly none else but Ezra Pound.

It is worth mentioning that Pound’s pamphlet *ABC of Reading* suggests the spirit of those days when the elder poet held forth in his seafront attic to his young protégés, who certainly admired him, but very much this side of idolatry. Bunting and Zukofsky were highly independent characters, not hangers-on, and Bunting never suffered from the anxiety of influence (as Zukofsky did to some extent). James Laughlin, a younger disciple, visited at about the same time, and it is equally true of him that he liked Pound, accepted what he liked, and went on to write his very individual and witty poetry. So this was a period when Pound was still the good teacher, who challenges but does not expect slavish imitation. *ABC of Reading* captures this stimulating Rapallo atmosphere, and even devotes some pages to the concerts that Pound was enthusiastically organizing in the Rapallo City Hall, some of which Bunting reviewed for *Il Mare*: after 1933 Pound seems to have devoted more time and energy to the town’s music season than to its literary cenacle. And of course the connection of poetry to music is, as much as the principle of condensation, a Poundian conviction deeply shared by Bunting. After all, the “Sonatas” are Bunting’s *Cantos* and *Quartets*. There are six of them, of varying length, and there could have been more, had not the determined Bunting decided that he had more or less had his say. In his very first *Mare* contribution he quotes the final statement of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*: “Whereof we cannot speak, thereof must we be silent”, which since 1933 has even become hackneyed. On that occasion Bunting suggests that poetry is fighting for a little ground taken away from the condition of silence. It makes it possible to speak of things otherwise destined not to be expressed.

I have suggested the connection between the series of Sonatas and the series of Cantos – and perhaps we could note that also Zukofsky wrote a serial long poem, *A*, where however the weight of Pound’s model exacts a heavier price than in Bunting, who is a Poundian with a difference. Zukofsky, on the other hand, can be a little plodding in his imitation of the master. A “canto” is literally a

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“song”, hence the common musical model evoked by the title. Then the model is thematized by frequent references to music, particularly in Pound’s and Bunting’s most moving and personal works: *The Pisan Cantos* and *Briggflatts*. The music of Domenico Scarlatti, a Neapolitan contemporary of Bach, is to *Briggflatts* what the somewhat earlier Clement Jannequin, John Jenkins and John Dowland are to *The Pisan Cantos*.

“As the player’s breath warms the fipple the tone clears”, says Bunting, as he approaches the end of the fourth movement of *Briggflatts*. His own poetic tone clears as his breath warms, as he goes on and sees his way through his metaphoric-realistic account of his life. There follow the much-quoted lines:

It is time to consider how Domenico Scarlatti  
condensed so much music into so few bars

(There it is, the everlasting condensing imperative, *dichten = condensare!*)

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. (CP 66)

There is a lovely transition from didacticism, slightly ironic perhaps, in the opening “It is time to consider...”, which could remind us of *Alice in Wonderland*: “The time has come, the Walrus said, / to talk of many things”. Old Bunting, at 65, is a little magisterial, and in stressing that condensation does not mean congestion makes us wonder if his work is not in fact at times a little congested. But the theme of words, of purifying the language of the tribe, connects *Briggflatts* to such modernist works as *Four Quartets*, and it is interesting that Bunting praised highly *Four Quartets* at their appearance to his life-long correspondent Zukofsky, commenting that he was hard to please, and that there were “few Eliotisms” (which may not be our impression today). In the *Briggflatts* excerpt

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Bunting moves from the ethics of language to an endearing utopia, in fact the myth of Orpheus. Nature is said ideally to listen and respond to Scarlatti's music. The passage climaxes in the final line, a powerfully Blakean image of paradise on earth, of man becoming master of his land and his destiny. "The sun rises" may even remind us of the close of *Ulysses*: "The sun shines for you he said...". An acknowledged land is a space that is known through words, music of perception. It is just full awareness. What the poet and perhaps man generally are after. Wallace Stevens puts the same feeling as follows in "The Rock", written 15 years before *Briggflatts*:

They are more than leaves that cover the barren rock

They bud the whitest eye, the pallidest sprout,  
New senses in the engendering of sense,  
The desire to be at the end of distances,

The body quickened and the mind in root.  
They bloom as a man loves, as he lives in love... (527)

This is quite striking, coming from an anti-naturalist poet like Stevens. And it is interesting that Bunting goes on, like an Arab pasha, to praise his woman companion:

My love is young but wise. Oak, applewood,  
her fire is banked with ashes till day.  
The fells reek of her hearth's scent,  
her girdle is greased with lard... (CP 66)

It is old old poetry, the poetry of the nomad and of the Bible – a clear utopia. Since I have mentioned Wallace Stevens, let me note how these two Modernist traditions: the naturalistic (Poundian) and the anti-naturalistic (rhetorical?) coalesce in themes. "The desire to be at the end of distances" is exactly the desire for "an acknowledged land". In both traditions a role is played by abstraction, pure form: dense word patterns and symbols in Stevens; music in Bunting. The real is reached by way of the unreal. Stevens in his insurance executive shirt and tie, and Bunting in his ancient mariner's

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turtleneck (see the nice portrait in the Fulcrum *Collected Poems*) are not so remote after all. Not so remote as suggested by those critics who believe that one must take one or the other tradition, Pound, or Eliot, or Stevens. We have use for all of them.

The connection of song and love is also made by Pound in Canto 81, where he praises the Elizabethan and Jacobean song-writers in terms similar to Bunting's on Scarlatti:

Hast 'ou fashioned so airy a mood  
To draw up leaf fro the root?  
Hast 'ou found a cloud so light  
As seemed neither mist nor shade?

Then resolve me, tell me aright  
If Waller sang or Dowland played. (*Cantos* 540)

The poet “fashions”, or in even more archaic terms, “finds” (in the sense of *trobar*, as in troubadour) – he finds – nature

and stars and lakes  
echo him and the copse drums out his measure.  
(Bunting, CP 66)

So, Pound goes on, there is no telling who is the poet and who is the musician, they are a loving couple, a pure concord – Waller and Dowland. At which point Venus, always associated with art, makes her entrance, in the figure of her eyes, and in a Chaucerian quotation, which also, given the previous rhetorical question, fits the context very well:

Your eyen two wol sleye me sodenly  
I may the beauté of hem nat susteyne

And for 180 years almost nothing. (*Cantos* 540)

Pound's conclusion has the didacticism of Bunting's opening: “It is time to consider...”. It is like an aside of the explicator while all this



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musical debate is going on. Between Chaucer and Dowland or the Tudors, some 180 years went by without any major poet making his mark. One must put up with silence. And wait for the music to begin again:

Ed ascoltando al leggier mormorio  
there came new subtlety of eyes into my tent. (*Cantos* 540)

The eyes are still there in August 1945 in the prison camp near Pisa – not 180 years but 550 years after Chaucer.

2. Bunting arrived in Rapallo with Pound in 1924, more or less independently as we know, and met him by chance, as he told the story, on a mountain top – at Montallegro, passing in front of the little inn where Ezra and Dorothy were having lunch. Pound had not yet settled permanently in Rapallo, when this is supposed to have happened, in Spring 1924. These were really “poets in their youth” (as a northern master of Bunting, Wordsworth, put it). Pound was already 39, Bunting 24, as old as the century. Bunting always pointed out that in those days there was no cable-car to Montallegro, so he had walked all the way up, as the Pounds had. The cable-car was built during his later stay in Rapallo, as he could very well see, for the house in which he lived, Villa Michele Castruccio, is precisely under the cables, and he must have followed the process of construction. This house, where he lived with his first wife, is about one third of the way uphill. Quite a climb along olive trees and terraces and flowers and near some cows and goats, probably more frequent in 1930 on the Rapallo hillside. Now the valley is rather built up, but the villa, much restored, is still pleasantly isolated and quite imposing. It was a good life, except for the climb.

Bunting’s first residence in Rapallo is beautifully depicted in his letter to Pound when he returned to London, 29 April 1926:

I would have starved there sooner than seek a living elsewhere. Rezzo told me I could find work in Naples, but I stayed on the beach – the beach of the third cove eastwards from Rapallo, listening to the sea, the slowest clock on earth.

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What is the opposite of *Accidie*, its corresponding virtue?  
Contented idleness, not sloth: that's Rapallo's air, I think. Just  
to look at the girls going about their business was Mahomet's  
paradise... (Makin 35)

This must refer to summer 1925, when probably Pound was not much in Rapallo (his daughter was born on 9 July), and sounds like the description of a remote Greek island today, inclusive of the pride of possession: one's own cove. What the Rapallesi must have thought of the young unkempt Britisher sleeping on the beach can be imagined, but they were used to putting up with foreign eccentrics, though usually these also had money. Under the same sensual impression with the landscape (for which one may consult Elizabeth Russell's newly popular *Enchanted April*, which is about similar revelations and came in 1922), Pound wrote some strangely exotic and idle cantos, such as 17:

And the birds sleepily in the branches...  
With the first pale-clear of the heaven  
And the cities set in their hills,  
And the goddess of the fair knees  
Moving there... (Cantos 74)

Readers have worried about this puzzling self-contentment of the otherwise virtuous and strenuous Pound. Now, also thanks to Bunting, we discover that he was just describing the Pacific island he had discovered at long last. As for Bunting, Ode 3, dated 1926, seems to record his memory of "the slowest clock on earth". By the way, note what a notable letter-writer Bunting is. Very trenchant, but friendly and willing to take time to tell a story or draw a picture. We admire these epistolary heroes more and more as we get more and more impatient with writing. Pound very rarely in his letters describes anything, including Rapallo, so that reading many Pound letters is more fatiguing than reading Bunting's. Ode 3 is "I am agog for foam" (CP 89). There appears to be the same debate on *accidie* as in the letter:

If the bright sky bore

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with endless utterance of a single blue  
unphrased, its restless immobility  
infects the soul, which must decline into  
an anguished and exact sterility  
and waste away: then how much more the sea  
trembling with alteration must perfect  
our loneliness by its hostility.

This is masterful, though the meaning is a little shifty. It has a Poundian feeling but departs from the Pound standard in the insistent use of enjambment, perhaps suggesting, together with the long words and the regular quatrain rhymes, the rhythm of the waves. A disguised love-poem, it is about yearning for the rough sea – Italian *mareggiata* – in the days of calm. The beginning seems to be an imperative, or prayer:

I am agog for foam. Tumultuous come  
with teeming sweetness to the bitter shore  
tidelong unrinsed and midday parched and numb  
with expectation.

Foam is to come to the shore which has not been touched by the life-giving waves “tidelong”, i.e., for a whole tide, and which is numb in the midday. In the following passage, quoted above, the sea “trembles with alteration”, one senses the change in the air. This prepares us, makes us more lonely. Then love returns:

But when mad waves spring, braceleted with foam,  
towards us in the angriness of love  
crying a strange name...

It is wonderful to jump into the waves when the summer sea becomes choppy, though one must be careful. This moment of intensity is to be followed by inaction again:

and the foam dies and we again subside  
into our catalepsy

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The cycle of perception and imperception again. “And for 180 years almost nothing”.

“I am agog for foam” is the poem that William Butler Yeats admired and quoted to Bunting at a Rapallo gathering, when both poets were again in residence there in 1928-1931. I think we can understand why Yeats would have responded to this eloquent set-piece, which has a movement of dance and traditional passion, vision, and symbol. Though its theme is like *The Waste Land*'s, where man waits for rain and gets the thunder and ends in sterility (“London Bridge is falling down”), the passion is more Yeatsian or Poundian. A weary passionate poem from a young man, who slept on the beach and thought of a distant love. (I happen to own a recording of Pound reading “I am agog” in the 1960s.)

3. When Bunting returned to Rapallo in 1928 he set upon an intensive spate of work, despite the trip to the United States and his marriage there in July 1930. It was probably after his return in January 1931 and his taking residence with Marian in the Villa Castruccio on the hill, that he set to work on “Attis” and “Aus dem Zweiten Reich”, his second and third Sonatas. The latter contains, in the vignette of Gerhart Hauptmann, a direct reference to the “village”, as Rapallo was called by its visitors:

The renowned author of  
more plays than Shakespeare  
stopped and did his hair  
with a pocket glass  
before entering the village,  
afraid they wouldnt recognize  
caricature and picturepostcard,  
that windswept chevelure.

Who talked about poetry,  
and he said nothing at all... (CP 27)

This is very close to Pound's contemporary Canto 35: “So this is (may we take it) Mitteleuropa”, which (unlike Bunting's sonata)

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reveals Pound's morbid preoccupation with Jewishness, but proceeds in the same anecdotal way:

“I am a product”,  
said the young lady, “of Mitteleuropa”,  
but she seemed to have been able to mobilize  
and the fine thing was that the family did not  
wire about papa' death for fear of disturbing the concert...  
(*Cantos* 173)

Grudging praise, in the context, again, of Rapallo and its Pound-organized concerts. Bunting has less authority in his writing, but sees less bound to generalize from single instances. The title “Aus dem zweiten Reich” does provide a general heading, like Pound's Mitteleuropa, but Hauptmann doing his hair is just a little silly, and doesn't prove anything much about anything. A “great man” in decline, he keeps mum while the young expatiate on literature (I take “Who” to be not Hauptmann but the person who is addressing him). There is a caricature of Hauptmann in Rapallo by Max Beerbohm that makes the same point as Bunting, suggesting that Hauptmann is doing his best to look like Goethe. This may actually be the caricature referred to in the poem. We can indict Bunting here of being too quick to pass judgment, in the way of a 30-year-old, vis-à-vis an old master (Hauptmann was 70 in 1932). Even Yeats, who was three years younger than his German fellow-Nobel Prize recipient, confessed in his journal, that whenever he walked into town to the Caffè Rapallo, the preferred setting for the Pound gang, he suffered from “stage-fright”. Therefore he moved for a while to an isolated hilltop over Portofino, and the result was – “Byzantium”. These old fogeys can surprise us.

At the Caffè Rapallo, on 28 July 1932, Pound got together with Italian and international friends to launch the “Amici del Tigullio”, a group that was to organize literary and musical events. *Il Mare*, the local weekly, was to print a literary supplement every other week, and of course Pound and Bunting, with Eugen Haas and Ramon Masoliver, from Germany and Spain respectively, were to write about “foreign affairs” (Affari esteri). The first meeting was

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reported humorously in the paper by Edmondo Dodsworth, an Italian with an English name who was to work with the group in the next few years:

What names!

Let me introduce: Ezra Pound, usual expression of vastness: the tropics at his belt and the polaris at his finger-ends.

Basil Bunting, by chance an English poet; in reality, an Assyrian magus certainly used to thinking in cuneiform script, and whose smile, too too tranquil, threatens the direst disasters.

Deicides both, sterilizers of defunct pantheons, iconoclasts and very piratical.

Very well, ye great shades of Drake and Walter Raleigh!  
With them we shall march, even if with a knife in our loins,  
toward life or toward death, but anyhow... onward!

(*Il Mare*, 17 September 1932)

As we can see, Pound and Bunting had a reputation for wildness, but were clearly much liked by their literary friends. In August 1932 *Il Mare* published a humorous issue in which they figured with Gino Saviotti, the main Italian influence in the group. The caricatures were by Gubi, and Bunting's has been made familiar by the cover of the 1991 *Uncollected Poems*, edited by Richard Caddel. Given the humorous context, the drawings are all accompanied by funny verses. Bunting's read:

Direbbesi un caprone  
che il monte un dì discese  
e invece è un artistone  
dell'almo suolo inglese.

Which can be translated as follows:

You'd say he's a billy-goat  
Just come from the mountain –  
Instead he's a great artist  
From England's lovely land.

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Bunting appears with beard and mustache, the billy-goat's beard no doubt to the Rapallesi, as we also see him in the well-known picture in the Durham archive, said to have been taken in Tenerife,<sup>3</sup> while the background leaves no doubt that the setting is Rapallo. This is also proved by another picture taken on the same terrace, where Bunting appears with Haas and Masoliver of the *Mare* group, who surely never travelled to visit him in his Atlantic hide-out. "And as for his life in the Canaries..." Pound mused in that very Canto 81 I quoted a few pages back. The pictures were not taken in Villa Castruccio, but on the terrace of the attic the Buntings moved to after the birth of Bourtai in November 1931, sometime in the winter between 1932 and 1933, I'd say, judging fro the heavy clothing.

Another memento of the *Mare* period has remained in Rapallo, in the form of an autograph book belonging to Piera Ruggeri, daughter of the owners of Caffè Rapallo. She was born in 1915, and the book was an idea or present of Ezra's to the thirteen-year old girl. Pound wrote on the front page "Il libro di Piera", Piera's Book, copied out a stave from his "opera" Villon with the words:

Dictes moi ou n'en quel pays est Flora...  
Ezra Pound 1928

This reminds us of the role that Villon plays in the Bunting-Pound connection, from Bunting's first sonata, "Villon", published in *Poetry* in 1930 and in *Il Mare*, translated into Italian by Dodsworth, in 1933. Villon's Heaulmière, also set to music by Pound, is again paraphrased in "The Well of Lycopolis". Villon, as I said, was a persona to both men, and Pound would identify with him when in late middle age, in his sixtieth year, he would be also imprisoned, as Bunting had been as a young man. *The Pisan Cantos* may be said to be modelled on the *Grand Testament*. One of the Villon quotations is in Canto 81, and is usually unnoticed:

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<sup>3</sup> See illustration credit on back cover of Bunting, *Uncollected Poems*, and captions in Forde 41-42. Burton corrects this inaccuracy and includes a snapshot of Basil and Bourtai on the same balcony, near the old Rapallo harbour.

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Thou art a beaten dog beneath the hail,  
A swollen magpie in a fitful sun,  
Half black half white  
Nor knowst'ou wind from tail  
Pull down thy vanity  
          How mean thy hates  
Fostered in falsity,  
          Pull down thy vanity... (*Cantos* 541)

Bunting had rendered the same passage in “Villon”, twenty years earlier:

Blacked by the sun, washed by the rain,  
hither and thither scurrying as the wind varies. (CP 16)

*Puis ça, puis là, comme le vent varie...*

I return to Piera’s autograph book. Pound’s page is followed by another music manuscript, written out by George Antheil, Pound’s musical friend, in April 1929. On the next page, dated April 17, 1929, there is a quatrain by a greater master:

Much did I rage when young,  
Being by the world oppressed,  
But now with flattering tongue  
It speeds the parting guest.

I think we can see in Yeats’s scornful account of fame the pride and passion that link him to the Villon persona we have just noted in Pound and Bunting. These poets are close to each other in essential ways. They followed a certain idea of nobility, what Pound referred to disparagingly but self-defensively as “the sublime in the old sense”. Despite the times when they were not able to communicate distinctly, they could be aligned under Milton’s definition of poetry as “simple, sensuous, and passionate”. That they were all in the same “village” for a few months is a surprising coincidence, but clearly

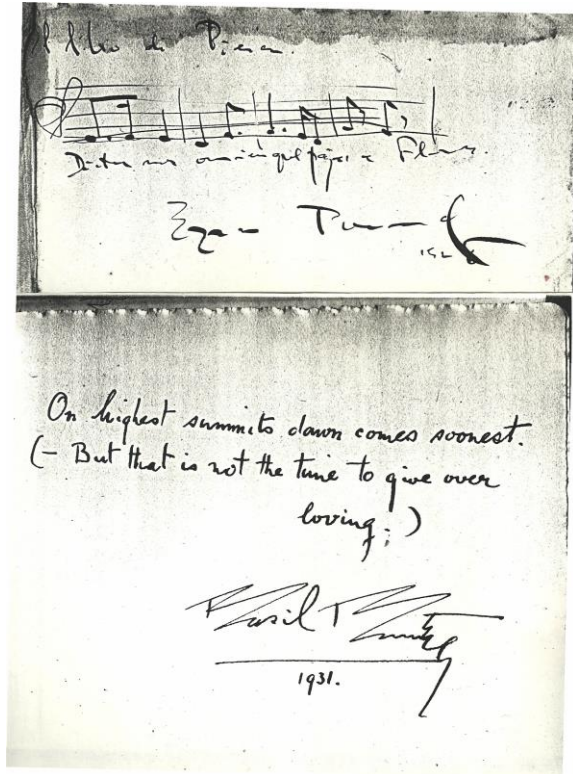


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they could get along with each other. Three poets, three generations at a twenty- to fifteen-year remove from each other.

We turn another page in Piera's book and find a drawing by Giuseppe Viviani, the Italian painter, May 1929, of San Michele di Pagana, one of the covers that Bunting spoke of in his letter. After three undated pages signed by an American and two Germans, we finally come to the following:

On highest summits dawn comes soonest.  
(- But that is not the time to give over loving)  
Basil Bunting  
1931



2. Autographs by Ezra Pound (1928) and Basil Bunting (1931) in "Il libro di Piera" (Rapallo, private collection).

This, “as cold and passionate as the dawn”, is Bunting’s alba: concentrated in objective statement – two long lines of musical and colloquial verse. The lovers see the dawn approach from their eyrie, but are not distracted from the pleasure of being together. My reference to Yeats’s “The Fisherman” suggests a context, and Pound often recurred to the theme of the Provençal alba.

On the following pages we find other contributors to *Il Mare*, like Gino Saviotti, then Gerhart Hauptmann himself, Pound’s musical collaborator Gerhart Münch,<sup>4</sup> Marinetti, who wrote letters to *Il Mare*, and Fernand Crommelynck, the notable Belgian playwright.

The last two autographs, both long passages, dated August and November 1932, are by Masoliver and Haas, Bunting’s two good friends from the “Affari esteri” group. The dates are just those of the *Supplemento Letterario*, and of the picture on the Buntings’ terrace. Piera was a lucky little girl to get so many autographs from Italian and foreign writers. Her “Libro” is like an object history of the Rapallo vortex, in which Bunting took his place with so much confidence and success.

4. The years that followed, as we know, were not always so bright. Bunting writes to the Pounds consistently as to mentors, even after a strong letter to Pound indicting him for his anti-Jewish statements.<sup>5</sup> When *Guide to Kulchur* appears in 1938, dedicated from Rapallo to him and Zukofsky, “strugglers in the desert”, he cannot but admire his old teacher who produced such a powerful book – a prose companion to *The Cantos* – between a concert, a swim, a tennis match, and a social credit tract. But, as I suggested, if Pound helped Bunting, the latter’s firm good sense and friendship also helped Pound to conserve what sense of proportion was left him. So did his Italian friends, who liked him without ever taking him too seriously. Lay Rapallo knew how to place such eccentric phenomena as Pound.

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<sup>4</sup> For information on Münch (1907-1988) see Estrada.

<sup>5</sup> See Bunting’s letter of 16 December 1938, transcribed in Bacigalupo 70.

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Let him dance in the evening in the nightclubs with whoever could put up with him. He was at home in his village.

The memory of the Mediterranean, as I have said, was to return in Bunting's autobiography, *Briggflatts*, again uniting the senses to the abstraction of form:

It sounds right, spoken on the ridge  
between marine olives and hillside  
blue figs, under the breeze fresh  
with pollen of Apennine sage. (CP 57)

These are the Ligurian smells and breezes that Pound also remembered poignantly at Pisa. As in this evocation of another "ridge":

Lay in soft grass by the cliff's edge  
with the sea 30 metres below this  
...  
the gemmed field *a destra* with fawn, with panther,  
corn-flower, thistle and sword-flower.  
(Canto 76, *Cantos* 477-78)

Bunting does not say in his quatrain what it is that sounds right on the ridge, just as Pound does not explain who it was that "lay in soft grass by the cliff's edge" and saw the visionary ladies and looked at and smelled the growing flowers. Bunting's passage is more down to earth, less Whitmanian. He's not, like Ezra and Walt, communing with his soul and the kosmos and Venus (female or male), but listening to the precise melodic line of a Scarlatti – or a Bunting. He loves clear voices, good talk – a recurrent theme in *Briggflatts*, as in the aftermath of the touching love-scene of part I:

Gentle generous voices weave  
over bare night  
words to confirm and delight  
till bird dawn.  
Rainwater from the butt  
she fetches . . . (CP 53)

*Massimo Bacigalupo*

There would be a point in following Pound's and Bunting's fancying of archaic customs ("When I lay in the ingle of Circe" – Canto 39). They seem to live at moments in a Biblical world – the world of the Odyssey is with them. But, to return to "It sounds right", let's remember how well Bunting suggests contentedness and physical well-being. The body is an instrument of perception, not sentimentalized or mystified or made mystical as in Lawrence (whom Bunting did not care for). "It sounds right". A life is spent in getting the right sound. And one knows it when one gets it.

So this is perhaps Bunting's homage to his days in Rapallo in his symbolic and courageous autobiography. As mentioned earlier, he did little writing of verse in the final two decades, though his lines on Briggflatts meeting-House and his envoi, "Perché no spero", are particularly beautiful and accomplished. The latter may be seen also as an answer to Eliot, who used the same Cavalcanti poem in *Ash-Wednesday*, a poem Bunting did not admire: "Because I do not hope to turn again...". Bunting is, typically, more definite in his writing:

Now we've no hope of going back,  
cutter, to that grey quay  
where we moored twice . . .

The ending is quite comfortless, holds out no hope, as Bunting sets out for his last journey:

We have no course to set,  
only to drift too long, watch too glumly, and wait,  
wait like the proud.  
(*Uncollected Poems* 24)

Bunting omitted the last three words in reprinting the poem, thus changing the rhyme scheme from the previous two verses. Every reader will decide for herself which version she prefers.

"Perché no spero" was written in 1977. Bunting was merciless about old age in his correspondence, which was as witty and trenchant as ever to the end. In fact, a long letter to Peter Makin,

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written 1 April 1985, eighteen days before the poet's death, shows him to have been very capable of returning to Rapallo, at least in imagination. He describes here in wonderful detail the local celebrations for the Madonna of Montallegro, and the lights that are floated at night in the bay on her fiesta (1-3 July). He and Pound must have shared their fascination with these floating lights ("Thousand of grease-paper or plastic boxes, about three inches by two, partly filled with oil and a rag floated on it for wick. The breeze drifts them out till the whole gulf seems alight with them..."). Pound had written in the mid-1930s

But in the pale night the small lamps float seaward.  
(Canto 47)

Bunting's prose description is equally poetic, and astonishingly precise, thinking of the forty-year interval between the observation and the description. Later in the same letter, Bunting describes a village picnic near the Montallegro church, on the top of the hill where he and the Pounds first got together in Rapallo, and suggests, possibly with an old man's vanity, that he wooed successfully the local girls:

There they plant the seeds which grow into next March's crop of bastards, and have done so for ages. The sanctuary is probably older than Christianity.  
This I think the Pounds never saw, never when I was there certainly; they were scared of Bacchus when he stepped out of the pages of the books they liked to meet him in. Somehow they learned that I had vanished into the gorse, and all Philadelphia allied with Kensington rose up against me.  
(Makin 38-39)

In another paper I will report whether anybody can be found in Rapallo born in March (or rather April) around 1930 and resembling – Basil Bunting.

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