

**Abstract:**

This article aims to present new understandings of how place, identity, and text are configured in British modernist poetry, particularly in the extended poem. Focusing chiefly on Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts* (1966), the discussion explores this poem's alignment of geography and history as sources of identity, noting a stark contrast with the kinds of rootlessness more readily associated with the Poundian long poem. Bunting can be seen to marshal a variety of spatio-temporal signifiers to convey a located identity, and it is demonstrated that Hugh MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926) enacts similar processes more explicitly. MacDiarmid and Bunting's historicised and located writing is briefly contrasted with Louis Zukofsky's depthless language, which carries conflicting spatial implications. William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* is then discussed as representing an American poetics of place that shows key commonalities with Bunting, but works with a distinct conception of history. Ultimately, it is argued that Bunting and MacDiarmid can be viewed as typifying a specifically British modernism, even whilst complicating and interrogating notions of Britishness. Their shared poetics of place are concerned with maintaining roots in the local site, but also asserting Northumbrian and Scottish nationalisms.

**'Local site and historical depth': *Briggflatts*, *A Drunk Man*, and British****Modernist Poetics of Place**

An interesting effect of Basil Bunting's publishing history is that he has seemed at different times to belong to slightly different literary historical contexts. Viewed as a 'disciple of Ezra

Pound' for a large part of his career,<sup>1</sup> Bunting is the only British writer in Louis Zukofsky's *An 'Objectivists' Anthology* (1932), his work placed alongside that of American and internationalist *émigré* modernists: Pound and Zukofsky, as well as T. S. Eliot, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff, William Carlos Williams, and others.<sup>2</sup> Upon the publication of *Briggflatts* (1966), however, Bunting seems suddenly repatriated as a senior peer of the 'British Poetry Revival',<sup>3</sup> and one of an earlier generation of British modernists, awaiting reinstatement in a revised canon.<sup>4</sup> In this guise, Bunting is grouped with David Jones and Hugh MacDiarmid by Sarah Broom, Donald Davie, Peter Finch, Eric Homberger, Eric Mottram, and Peter Quartermain, to name a few instances.<sup>5</sup> Broom characterises the three writers as 'neglected British modernist poets', which usefully sums up the way the grouping is generally used – as invoking a canon of overshadowed modernists specific to a British context, and thus distinguishable from other pedigrees of modernist. Importantly though, are Bunting, Jones, and MacDiarmid 'British modernist poets' simply because they are

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Davie, *With the Grain: Essays on Thomas Hardy and Modern British Poetry* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1998), p. 292. The same phrase is used by John Seed, 'An English Objectivist?: Basil Bunting's Other England', *Chicago Review*, 44.3-4 (1998), 114-26 (p. 114).

<sup>2</sup> *An 'Objectivists' Anthology*, ed. by Louis Zukofsky (Folcroft: Folcroft Library Editions, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents, 1950-2000* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), pp. 37-54.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Broom, *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 223-24

<sup>5</sup> Broom, pp. 223-24; Davie, *With the Grain*, p. 217; Peter Finch, 'British Poetry Since 1945' (2001) <<http://www.peterfinch.co.uk/enc.htm>> [accessed 13 May 2016]; Eric Homberger, *The Art of the Real: Poetry in England and America Since 1939* (London: J. M. Dent, 1977), p. 179; Eric Mottram, 'Basil Bunting: Human Framework and Nature', in *Sharp Study and Long Toil*, ed. by Richard Caddel (Durham: Durham University

modernist poets from Britain, or is it necessary to theorise a 'British modernism', with a distinct history and set of tendencies?

In order to address this question, the current article will focus specifically on Bunting and MacDiarmid's contributions to the development of the long modernist poem, connecting *Briggflatts* to MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926). Beginning to trace the key distinctions between their use of the form and its more familiar characteristics in American modernism, I will show that the British modernist long poem involves rootedness in landscape as a key source of identity. This is in direct contrast with the Poundian long poem, whose key techniques are evocative of rootlessness and geographical mobility. Full consideration of a wide range of long poems is beyond the scope of this article, but it suffices to note the critical commonplace that Pound's ideogrammatic method, in its rapid juxtaposition of materials, can be seen to disturb any sense of a stable geographical setting. Zukofsky's "A", meanwhile, frequently works with a sense of linguistic depthlessness which resists the idea of a historically and geographically located poetics.

Having expounded a model through which Bunting and MacDiarmid's configuration of place, text, and identity can be understood, I will briefly consider Zukofsky's attitude to language, showing how the British modernist writers work with a model of surface and depth that is alien to the form of modernism Zukofsky typifies. Finally, I will turn to Williams's *Paterson* in order to address a specifically American poetics of place which complicates the distinction between rootedness and rootlessness. I will suggest how Williams intertwines identity and place in a way comparable to Bunting, but works with a different conception of history. As a whole, the discussion will contribute to an

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Journal, 1995), pp. 71-82 (p. 71); Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. ix.

understanding of a British modernist poetics of place departing from American counterparts.

Part of what will be demonstrated is that the British poets utilise processes of historical and geographical rooting in order to strengthen positions that are supposedly marginal to a dominant English/British centre. Through the relation of identity to specific places, the poets attempt a reconstruction of prevailing and homogenising notions of British space, and this is part of what defines a British modernist poetics of place. As Neil Corcoran notes of Jones's poetry, an 'alienating otherness is strategic, intended to make the reader painfully aware of the cultural, political and linguistic diversity of which the "Great Britain" of the post-war period is in fact composed'.<sup>6</sup> It must then be noted that the concept of 'British modernism' is used here as a critical convenience to describe these three writers from across the British Isles who typify a poetics of place focused on historicised national identities. Those national identities are emphatically not 'British' – indeed their poetic expression signifies a refusal to be subsumed by such an umbrella term. It would be more accurate, though less convenient, to describe Bunting as a Northumbrian modernist, MacDiarmid as a Scottish modernist, and indeed Jones as a Welsh modernist. Yet it remains that their shared tendencies in expressing those specific modernisms justify the use of a single, if flawed term that acknowledges their commonalities whilst naming the composite identity they implicitly problematise.

### ***Briggflatts*, Biography, and the Poetics of Historicised Sites**

The extended poetic text is evidently crucial to understanding modernist poetics and, therefore, to defining the nature of British modernism as a discrete category. David Perkins argues that '[a] plain line of succession extends from the high Modernism of the 1920s to

the new poetry of the 1950s and 1960s', and that this succession can be observed in 'the Modernist long poem'.<sup>7</sup> He goes on to argue that 'this genre begins with *The Waste Land* (1922) and the first sixteen *Cantos* (1925)', and continues in Eliot's *Four Quartets* and the rest of Pound's *Cantos*. The genre is then developed by Williams's *Paterson*, Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems*, and Louis Zukofsky's "A", ushering in a more flexible version of the form, in which context Perkins views *Briggflatts* and Jones's *The Anthemata*.<sup>8</sup> In her study, *On the Modernist Long Poem*, Margaret Dickie disagrees on the genre's central figures, grouping Pound, Eliot, and Williams with Hart Crane. Yet, her definition is perhaps loose enough usefully to encompass multiple perspectives: she says that the phrase 'the Modernist long poem', 'for all its inadequacies as a designation, has the merit of distinguishing the salient feature of this otherwise unidentifiable genre'.<sup>9</sup>

Defining a specific poetics of place within this variable terrain, I will begin by analysing the ways in which *Briggflatts* relates identity to place. Bunting's concern with history and time is crucial to this, and I will suggest that the environments he evokes are mediated through the use of a cluster of signs and symbols invested with historical and cultural meaning. I will then show how MacDiarmid makes explicit a similar process of exploring a geographically specific identity through a series of cultural references. The located identity written by each poet is possible because of purposeful invocation of historical depths specific to geographical sites. Both undertake an excavation of the local site

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<sup>6</sup> Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940* (Harlow: Longman, 1993), p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry, Volume 2: Modernism and After* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 212.

<sup>8</sup> Perkins, p. 212.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Dickie, *On the Modernist Long Poem* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986), p. 6.

and form a set of signifiers which invoke that site. The language of the poem itself is at times made a visible part of that network of signification. In this way, Bunting and MacDiarmid each position a located identity not just in relation to what we might call a spatial breadth, but in relation to a meeting point of that breadth with an historical depth.

Initially, it may seem that *Briggflatts* constructs a written identity in relation to time rather than place. *Briggflatts* is subtitled 'An Autobiography', and thus it deliberately calls attention to that fact that it constructs a written identity through its narrative.<sup>10</sup> That narrative proceeds through a five-part structure, which Bunting explicates in a number of ways, claiming a parallel with the musical form of a sonata,<sup>11</sup> making an analogy with the four seasons of the year,<sup>12</sup> and citing a symmetrical diagram of climaxes that he supposedly drew before writing the poem.<sup>13</sup> Each of these ideas implies a view of the biographised self as heavily structured and formed cumulatively through progression and development. To illustrate this, we might focus on the idea of a seasonal structure, which is the most evident from an initial reading of the poem. In fact, the seasons are directly suggested as a structuring principle at various points in the poem – for example, 'Guilty of spring / and spring's ending / amputated years ache' (p. 16).

The idea of the self as structured seasonally suggests that selfhood is experienced as temporal progression through a series of defined phases, and this implication is echoed in

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<sup>10</sup> Basil Bunting, *Briggflatts* (1966; repr. Highgreen: Bloodaxe, 2009), p. 9. All references to the poem itself will use this edition.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8; see also Victoria Forde, *The Poetry of Basil Bunting* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1991), pp. 147-76.

<sup>12</sup> Basil Bunting, *A Note on Briggflatts* (Durham: Basil Bunting Poetry Archive, 1989), [n.pag.].

the poem's fundamental assumption that it makes sense to explain identity through a narrative biography divided into distinct sections. More than this, the idea of a seasonal progression suggests that selfhood is cyclical, and thus it universalises selfhood and posits it as commonly experienced. In commenting on his use of this device, Bunting makes this universalising clearer, whilst also tying the idea of cyclical selfhood to his use of mythical and historical figures:

Commonplaces provide the poem's structure: spring, summer, autumn, winter of the year and of man's life. . . . Love and betrayal are spring's adventures. . . . In the summer there is no rest from ambition and lust of experience, never final. Those fail who try to force their destiny, like Eric; but those who are resolute to submit, like my version of Pasiphae, may bring something new to birth.<sup>14</sup>

As the universalising phrase 'man's life' suggests, Bunting's seasonal motif posits the self as an essential and commonly experienced temporal event. This view of selfhood as a universal temporal cycle makes history (Eric Bloodaxe) and myth (Pasiphae) a store of lessons about the self, so that 'man' progresses by accumulating self-knowledge, just as Bunting's autobiography proceeds as a logical development of self-awareness and reflection. The seasonal device, then, allows the personal timeline of Bunting's narrative to be connected to a more public timeline of history.

It may at first seem useful to contrast Bunting's stress on narrative time with a more

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<sup>13</sup> Basil Bunting, Peter Quartermain, and Warren Tallman, 'Basil Bunting Talks About *Briggflatts*', *Agenda*, 16.1 (1978), 8-19.

<sup>14</sup> *A Note on Briggflatts*, [n.pag.].

spatial approach. The Poundian long poem generally lacks the extended narrative continuity we might link to a temporal progression, and it seems that this axis has been displaced by a spatial one that allows the self to be constructed within a series of rapid movements. Yet, Bunting seeks to tie selfhood as a progression through time directly to selfhood as a continuous experience of places. So, he asserts that the seasonal structure has a spatial logic as well as a temporal one: 'Spring is around Briggflatts, Summer is all over the place – London, the Arctic, the Mediterranean. Autumn is mostly in the Dales, and the last part is mostly on the Northumberland coast'.<sup>15</sup> The temporal and narrative progression of self from childhood through adulthood to old age is accompanied by a geographical movement from a place of home through a wandering exploration that results in a return. This is evidenced in the text, so that, for example, Bunting's view of summer as providing 'no rest from ambition and lust of experience'<sup>16</sup> is reflected in the poem's second section precisely by rapid movements, syntactical and geographical, whose parataxis is reminiscent of Pound's ideogrammatic method:

No tilled acre, gold scarce,  
walrus tusk, whalebone, white bear's liver.  
Scurvy gnaws, steading smell, hearth's crackle.  
Crabs, shingle, seracs on the icefall.  
Summer is bergs and fogs, lichen on rocks. (p. 18)

As Victoria Forde recognises, quoting the same comments as above, '[t]he chronological

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<sup>15</sup> 'Bunting Talks', p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> *A Note on Briggflatts*, [n.pag.].



movement through the parts eventually became symbolic of the stages of a lifetime, involving spatial as well as chronological progression'.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Quartermain notes that 'the chronological structure . . . does involve a spatial movement': this becomes particularly clear when the culmination of both axes, in a 'Winter' 'mostly on the Northumberland coast', marks – as Quartermain comments to Bunting – a decision 'to turn back into your own Spring'.<sup>18</sup> By tying the terminus of a temporal cycle (Winter) to that of spatial one (home), *Briggflatts* makes more overt the way in which its autobiography maps selfhood through both geographical and temporal movements.

The reason I have made a distinction between what we might call temporal and geographical axes of identity is not to suggest rigidly that a text must stress one or the other over an intersection of the two, but rather to suggest that the two intersect in *Briggflatts* in a way that we may not expect from a modernist text. By interweaving place and time and defining the self in terms of a logical relationship to both, *Briggflatts* seems to sustain selfhood as a rational and whole entity, and this goes against the characteristically modernist sense of experience as fractured. That unexpected wholeness is implicit in the poem's structure, and Corcoran hints at this in noting that 'binding motifs give *Briggflatts* an exceptional coherence for a Modernist long poem'.<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey Wainwright goes further, commenting that Bunting's claim of a poem's structure preceding its linguistic contents

would seem to contradict our familiar supposition about modernist technique that it is precisely a lack of confidence, of grasp upon the world, that results in

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<sup>17</sup> Forde, p. 210.

<sup>18</sup> 'Bunting Talks', p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Corcoran, p. 34.

fragmentation, (shored against ruins); that a method of juxtaposing various materials is made necessary by an inability to hold increasingly disparate and complex experience within controlled organisation and statement or within the order of narrative.<sup>20</sup>

Bunting's confidence in poetic structure is linked to a discourse that understands selfhood as heavily and rationally structured. It is by closely relating history and place as axes of identity, and by therefore understanding the self as 'at one' with the historicised landscape, that *Briggflatts* dispels any sense of the self being made up of 'increasingly disparate and complex experience'.

The relationship of self to place and time occurs not only in the overall way in which the poem structures itself as an autobiography, but also consistently throughout the poem in ways that I will now discuss. I do not wish to suggest that the critical reception of *Briggflatts* as a modernist poem needs to be rethought; rather, I wish to demonstrate how British modernism is able to maintain coherence of identity in terms of a temporal framework because it is able to root the self within the historical depth of specific geographical sites. The way in which the reliance on located identities allows British modernist poets to constitute their own distinct canon is hinted at by Quartermain, who argues that '[Bunting's] very Northumbrianness . . . served to separate him from the English koiné and from the English modernist tradition', tying him instead to a 'reinvention (with Hugh MacDiarmid and David Jones) of an older and regional poetic strain'.<sup>21</sup>

Focusing on the first section of the poem, I now wish to illustrate some of the ways in

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<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Wainwright, 'William Wordsworth at Briggflatts', *Agenda*, 16.1 (1978), 37-45 (p. 42).

<sup>21</sup> Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics*, p. ix.

which place and time both feed into *Briggflatts*'s autobiographical subject. In terms of explaining that self through a temporally progressive narrative, *Briggflatts* functions initially by establishing in its first section a fragment of narrative that depicts the speaker as a youth in an idealised relationship with a female character. This section is the 'Spring' of the poem's seasonal structure, and Stefan Hawlin describes it by way of reference to depictions of Eden, to Blake's conception of 'Innocence', and to Wordsworth's 'spots of time'.<sup>22</sup> The comparison with Wordsworth becomes useful when we consider Patrick H. Hutton's argument that Wordsworth's *The Prelude* 'reflects the newfound sense of history of the modern age, one that owes considerable debt to an emerging notion of the developing self'.<sup>23</sup> Hutton clarifies this by saying that the key to understanding this development

lies not in the salient events that mark the flow of Wordsworth's life history on the surface of his narrative, but, rather, in the arresting moments of self-illumination that reveal its psychological substructure. These were the unforgettable moments that he called 'spots of time'. . . . Through all the reorderings, displacements, and confluences of his versions of *The Prelude*, these remained fixed points.<sup>24</sup>

Like Wordsworth's 'spots of time', the scenes depicted in the first section of *Briggflatts* are preserved as fixed reference points on a developmental temporal trajectory of self-growth and self-reflection. This is signalled by the recurrent reflection upon them in later parts of

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<sup>22</sup> Stefan Hawlin, 'Bunting's "Briggflatts": A Quaker Masterpiece', *Modern Language Review*, 94.3 (1999), 635-46.

<sup>23</sup> Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993), p. 155.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

the poem, but also by the fact that the whole opening section is biography in third-person, preserved at a distance from the immediate first-person of the rest of the poem. The opening of *The Prelude*, intriguingly, is in present tense, in contrast to the bulk of the autobiographical text. The immediacy of Wordsworth's remembered self is thus increased while Bunting's is reduced, but the effect of formally separating a past self, and past interactions with landscape, is nonetheless shared by the two poets. Bunting's opening ends with the collapse of the idealised romantic relationship, and from this point of departure the poem can be understood as the narration of the speaker's time-based self-development, which occurs along the lines universalised by the seasonal motif.

If *Briggflatts*'s time-based trajectory of development is interwoven with a spatially motivated one, one way in which this is achieved is that the poem's first section recalls not only a relationship with a lover, but also with a place of home. The two are tied together in a direct conflation that makes explicit how the interweaving of place and time roots the self in a particular landscape. As Dennis Brown argues, 'Bunting's [muse] is of the earth, earthly: her genitals are "thatch"ed, her girdle "greased with lard". Here woman is local, natural wholesome and simple. She is "home"'.<sup>25</sup> Brown's comments make clear this interweaving, and they incidentally highlight the questionable gender dynamics at work in Bunting's poetics of place. The quotations Brown uses are from the two points in *Briggflatts* where this conflation occurs most obviously. The first appears in the following passage from the first section:

Sour rye porridge from the hob

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<sup>25</sup> Dennis Brown, 'Basil Bunting: *Briggflatts*', in *British Poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s: Politics and Art*, ed. by Gary Day and Brian Docherty (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), pp. 23-32 (p. 27).

with cream and black tea,  
meat, crust and crumb.  
Her parents in bed  
the children dry their clothes.  
He has untied the tape  
of her striped flannel drawers  
before the range. Naked  
on the pricked rag mat  
his fingers comb  
thatch of his manhood's home. (p. 15)

By following the sentimental description of a domestic scene with a description of the girl's pubic hair as 'thatch of his manhood's home', Bunting ties her directly to that domestic scene – she is, figuratively, an idealised thatched cottage he occupies. This conflation depends upon a problematically essentialised connection of femininity and domesticity, whilst reinforcing that connection through the well-worn trope of vagina-as-domicile.<sup>26</sup>

Tied to the poem's conception of 'home', the girl is therefore also conflated with the landscape and locale on which the first section focuses. This is made clear later in the poem, in the second passage from which Brown quotes:

The fells reek of her hearth's scent,

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<sup>26</sup> Sigmund Freud traces this symbolic connection back into antiquity in *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. by G. Stanley Hall (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920), Chapter 10: 'Symbolism in the Dream', pp. 122-40.

her girdle is greased with lard;

hunger is stayed on her settle, lust in her bed. (p. 28)

The fact that 'The fells reek of her hearth's scent' suggests the way in which *Briggflatts's* conception of 'home' and the local site relies not just on the landscape, but on its associations with the girl's kitchen, essentialised domesticity, and sexuality. The dual meanings in this passage make the link between the girl's sexuality and the domestic scene more direct: 'hearth' conflates the kitchen fire with her sexual organs; 'her girdle is greased with lard' because a 'girdle' is 'an English griddle' (*Briggflatts*, p. 38), but at the same time, of course, we are to imagine a corset lubricated with cooking fat; meanwhile, 'her settle' carries erotic meaning, its proximity to 'her bed' making 'hunger' both sexual and gastronomic. It is partly because of this conflation of the girl with a place of home that the speaker's subsequent movements are able to be both temporal and spatial: he moves temporally away from the moments of their relationship, arriving at an acceptance of loss via a time-based biography of self-development; but also he moves spatially away from the place that she is linked to, and his return to that place is married to the climax of his personal growth. Tellingly, the speaker's departure from a feminised home is immediately expressed in terms of promiscuity, and the ensuing geographical restlessness is echoed by shifts of attention from 'whores' to 'a slut's blouse' to the 'left breast of a girl' (p. 17).

That the opening of *Briggflatts* exists as the idealised reference point of subsequent spatial and temporal movement signals the coinciding of what I have described as two opposing axis of identity. Crucially though, the text's depicted environment acquires a temporal dimension not only through the speaker's biography, but also through a greater historical depth with which the speaker's biography is aligned. Bunting thereby constructs an

identity that relies on a specific conception of Northumbrian-ness, rooted in the geography of that place and its history. Brown calls *Briggflatts* ‘a poem of local site and historical depth’, and this phrase is useful for the purposes of my discussion because it concisely expresses the way in which the two axes coincide in order to form a biography.<sup>27</sup> Brown applies the same term to David Jones’s *The Anathemata*, and in fact I see its implications as crucial to the workings of the British modernism that Bunting, Jones, and MacDiarmid form.

In the case of Bunting, it is worth noting that his ‘local site’ is Northumbria, not Northumberland or the North of Britain generally. Bunting consistently makes this clear in talking about the poem, and the blurb of the latest edition bills him as ‘the Northumbrian master poet’. This is notable because Northumbria is an historical designation, referring to a kingdom whose identity and culture have supposedly been subsumed within those of England and Britain. *Collier’s Encyclopedia* states that ‘Northumbria was one of seven states . . . that dominated seventh-century England’, and suggests that its coast, ‘with its monasteries of Lindisfarne, Jarrow, and Monkwearmouth, was the center of Anglo-Saxon civilization’; yet it also notes that ‘[t]he possibility of a Northumbrian hegemony over the kingdoms of North Britain was ended by the Pictish victory at Nectansmere in 685’, and that ‘Northumbria became part of Danelaw [in 876]’.<sup>28</sup>

By using Northumbria as its local site, *Briggflatts* challenges prevailing notions of Britain and England. It reassigns to Northumbria the importance and meaning it once had, asserting its distinctness of identity and thereby upsetting any homogenising identities that seek to subsume it. William Wootten glosses this in two ways : firstly he says that ‘the very construction of that Northumbrian Modernism is contingent not only upon

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<sup>27</sup> Brown, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> *Collier’s Encyclopedia*, ed. by Lauren Bahr and Bernard Johnston (New York: Macmillan, 1992), Vol. 17, p. 647.

Northumbrianism being different from, but also on its subsuming of, English and British conceptions of identity'; secondly, he argues that 'Bunting's Northumbrianism, like any nationalism, is not opposed to a centre as such, just where that centre happens to be at present'.<sup>29</sup> One purpose of Bunting's positioning of self in relation to historicised place is, then, to re-centre and re-shape Britain in terms of how its multiple identities are represented. As this suggests, British modernism's poetics of place may be rooted in specific landscapes but simultaneously interested in reshaping broader conceptions of national space.

In invoking his local site of Northumbria, Bunting begins with the basic method of naming a series of places. The poem itself is named after a hamlet in Cumbria, while a river in that area is named twice in the first page, followed by the places Garsdale, Hawes, and Stainmore in quick succession (*Briggflatts*, pp. 13-14). This naming territorially demarcates the poem's local site, which is then given historical depth with reference to a variety of site-specific material, including the Lindisfarne gospels ('Lindisfarne plaited lines' (p. 20)), which Bunting claims as a structural and stylistic precedent of his work,<sup>30</sup> and from which the latest edition of *Briggflatts* takes its cover image. Bunting also incorporates cultural and historical references that have associations with other places in Britain, such as the Welsh poets, Aneirin and Taliesin, who roughly coincide with the peak of Northumbria's cultural prominence (p. 27). What this achieves is the establishing of a series of cultural links that go against the notion of southern England as the cultural 'centre' of Britain. Bunting cites the

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<sup>29</sup> William Wootten, 'Basil Bunting, British Modernism and the Time of the Nation', in *The Star You Steer By: Basil Bunting and British Modernism*, ed. by James McGonigal and Richard Price (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 17-34 (pp. 17, 18).

<sup>30</sup> Peter Makin, *Bunting: The Shaping of His Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 119-238.



contexts and peers to which his Northumbrian identity is related historically, and thus implicitly critiques the sense that this identity is peripheral to a southern centre. In fact, his remodelling of Britain reinstates an alternative centre that renders the South peripheral, as Tony Lopez has argued in more detail.<sup>31</sup> This strengthens Wootten's sense of a re-centring of Britain by Northumbrian nationalism, whose 'wished for state' he sees as 'imbued with or prefigured by its ancestral history'.<sup>32</sup>

The figure of Eric Bloodaxe is a particularly important signifier in the historical depth of Bunting's Northumbria, being 'king of Orkney, king of Dublin, twice / king of York' (p. 21). Gareth Williams, writing for the BBC on 13th-century Viking sagas, clarifies that 'Eric's death at Stainmore in 954 brought an end to independent Viking rule in Northumbria'.<sup>33</sup> Resurrecting 'the last independent king of Northumbria',<sup>34</sup> Bunting demonstrates how the located identity of his poem relies on reinstating that cultural independence. Moreover, the centrality of Bloodaxe to the text underlines that Bunting is consciously working with Northumbria as an historical designation as well as an immediately experienced landscape. The use of Bloodaxe allows the history of the self to be linked to the history of Northumbria, and that linkage occurs as Bloodaxe becomes an alter-ego for the speaker – 'an autobiographical screen' as Keith Tuma puts it.<sup>35</sup> The poem's use of Bloodaxe to represent or

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<sup>31</sup> See Tony Lopez, 'Under Saxon the Stone: National Identity in Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*', in *Sharp Study and Long Toil*, ed. by Caddel, pp. 114-22 (p. 115).

<sup>32</sup> Wootten, p. 29.

<sup>33</sup> Gareth Williams, 'Eric Bloodaxe' (2009) <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings/bloodaxe\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings/bloodaxe_01.shtml)> [accessed 13 May 2016].

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Keith Tuma, *Fishing by Obstinate Isles: Modern and Postmodern British Poetry and American Readers* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 177.

analogue the poem's speaker again illustrates how the spatial and temporal meet in that central identity, and how the Northumbrian place of home is constructed through its history.

Bloodaxe is first mentioned in the following passage:

In Garsdale, dawn;  
at Hawes, tea from the can.  
Rain stops, sacks  
steam in the sun, they sit up.  
Copper-wire moustache,  
sea-reflecting eyes  
and Baltic plainsong speech  
declare: By such rocks  
men killed Bloodaxe. (p. 14)

This passage invokes a specific locale through the act of naming. The relevance of Bloodaxe to that site is as part of a history made tangible in physical features of the landscape ('By such rocks'). It is presumably the poem's mason figure (the female lover's father) who makes the closing declaration. But, through a shared place and ancestry, the mason and Bloodaxe are conflated: 'sea-reflecting eyes / and Baltic plainsong speech' suggests the Viking king, but the mason acquires the same characteristics through a connection with the past enabled by an historicised environment.

At the end of this first section the male youth leaves the feminised home of lover and locale. As he embarks on that geographical departure, he is conflated with both the mason and Bloodaxe:

Brief words are hard to find,  
shapes to carve and discard:  
Bloodaxe, king of York,  
king of Dublin, king of Orkney.  
Take no notice of tears;  
letter the stone to stand  
over love laid aside lest  
insufferable happiness impede  
flight to Stainmore. (p. 16)

The lines 'shapes to carve and discard' and 'letter the stone to stand / over love' conflate the poet with the mason, who was inscribing a gravestone earlier in the poem (p. 13). The poem itself is thereby imagined as an act of physical inscription and commemoration, and the first 'shapes to [be] carve[d]' here are in memory of Bloodaxe. The poet is then conflated with the Viking king too, as the passage can be read as ascribing shared emotions to the two figures. Their shared emotional experience is closely related to their shared spatial experience: the emotional journey of both Bloodaxe and the speaker is accompanied by a geographical journey leaving Northumbria, travelling from place to place, and eventually returning to the same local site. In the above passage, therefore, the 'flight' joins the two figures in a physical movement, unified by their overlapping within a common territory. Bloodaxe effectively functions as an historical precedent for the speaker's spatial experience. Accordingly, when the speaker is sailing from place to place in the poem's second section he is transformed into an exaggerated Viking figure:

Under his right oxters the loom of his sweep  
the pilot turns from the wake.

Thole-pins shred where the oar leans,  
grommets renewed tallowed;  
halliards frapped to the shrouds.  
Crew grunt and gasp. Nothing he sees  
they see, but hate and serve. (pp. 17-18)

As Brown argues, *Briggflatts* may be read as ‘the song of a Modernist “Viking”, plunderer of experience, who chooses freedom instead of “hearth”’.<sup>36</sup> The passage I quoted from the first section demonstrates how this transformation occurs: namely, through the speaker and Bloodaxe’s ‘local site and historical depth’.<sup>37</sup> The passage allows all three male figures (poet, mason, and Bloodaxe) to be interrelated through a shared relationship to the historical depth of the local site, and thus they are loosely united in a specifically masculine persona that counterparts the essentialised femininity of landscape and lover.

### **(Dis)located Language: Surface and Depth in Zukofsky**

Bunting’s notes to *Briggflatts* confirm how his focus of Bloodaxe is part of a process of constructing a Northumbrian identity. The notes do in fact seem largely geared towards making such things explicit; as Lopez argues,

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<sup>36</sup> Brown, p. 27.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

the notes themselves reconstruct an ancient Northumbria by harnessing old north-south divisions and prejudices, mixing up some northern words with others not so restricted, and presenting a quick check-list of names and texts to establish the basis for a cultural identity.<sup>38</sup>

Bunting's focus on explaining 'northern words' is particularly important, because it highlights that the process of condensing the local site's historical depth into a network of signifiers at a linguistic level. Bunting pointedly stresses that his notes act as a glossary, and that the dialect they explain belongs to an identity that opposes prevailing Englishness: he begins them by saying '[t]he Northumbrian tongue travel has not taken from me sometimes sounds strange to men used to the koine', adding that 'Southrons would maul the music of many lines in *Briggflatts*' (*Briggflatts*, p. 37). Brown argues that Bunting's 'fundamental word-hoard is composed of historically rooted terms', adding that '[h]is linguistic craft builds up a textual site where words, as thoughts, constitute one transhistorical continuum'.<sup>39</sup> This 'textual site', I would argue, functions as a series of references to spatial and temporal points through which Bunting's poetics of place relates written identity to an historical depth beneath geographical and textual surfaces.

The process of constructing a relationship between identity and place through the textual surface of the poem constitutes the strongest similarity between Bunting and MacDiarmid, and is key to understanding how British modernism uses a symbolic invocation of history to construct that relationship. In MacDiarmid this use of the linguistic texture – as

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<sup>38</sup> Lopez, p. 118.

<sup>39</sup> Brown, p. 28-29.

a series of references that construct voice and self in relation to place and history – is more thorough and overt. This is primarily because much of his work is written in Scots, as the opening dedicatory passage of *A Drunk Man* – more overtly and densely unfamiliar than any other part of the poem – makes clear to an uninitiated reader:

Can ratt-rime and ragments o' querry  
And recoll o' Gillha' requite  
Your faburdoun, figuration, and gemmell,  
And prick-sangs' delight?<sup>40</sup>

If we compare MacDiarmid's use of Scots to that of more recent Scottish poets, we can better understand how MacDiarmid's poetic voice is concerned with constructing a located selfhood, positioned in relation to the history of a specific location. Tom Leonard, for instance, frequently writes in a form of Scots that corresponds to his Glaswegian dialect and accent. The self written by the text therefore seems tied to speech acts specific to urban Scotland.<sup>41</sup> Poetic voice, here, is tied to an actual voice and in that way linked to the experience of a particular area of Britain. This constructs a located identity, but not one that is obviously sustained by an historicising of that location.

MacDiarmid's Scots, on the other hand, does not correspond to the speech patterns of any current or past individual or group, but instead functions as an amalgam of variously-

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<sup>40</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), ed. by Kenneth Buthlay (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987), p. 2. All quotations from the poem will use this edition.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Tom Leonard, 'Six Glasgow Poems', in *Intimate Voices: Selected Work 1965-1983* (Buckfastleigh: Etruscan, 2003).

sourced textual materials, some of which might have been found in the author's own speech, but many of which he recovered from dictionaries and other sources, as Davie has explained.<sup>42</sup> In this form of Scots, the poetic voice does not form its identity by corresponding to someone's actual linguistic experience, but by interrelating linguistic fragments from across Scotland's geography and history. Thus, MacDiarmid constructs an identity that attempts to speak for Scotland as a whole, maintained as a whole by an overall geography and history. That MacDiarmid's linguistic procedures are the foundation for a purposeful construction of a national identity has been made explicit, since, as Nancy K. Gish notes, MacDiarmid 'called for a re-creation of language as a foundation for re-creating a nation'.<sup>43</sup>

It might be assumed that British writers writing in English but outside the conventions of 'standard English' are constructing 'regional' identities, in whatever sense; yet, MacDiarmid's text appears to make little distinction between the diverse regions of Scotland, or in fact between different time-frames. Recognising the former, Kenneth Buthlay writes, in editing *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, 'I have not indicated the demarcation of regional dialect forms, since . . . the poet in practice ignored such distinctions' (*A Drunk Man*, p. viii). MacDiarmid is concerned with constructing an identity that is located in Scotland as a whole, made up of the various potential identities of its parts and rooted in many diverse histories simultaneously. This process is part of MacDiarmid's valuable contribution to a British modernism – not because he has much at all to say about Britishness, but precisely because he is part of a cluster of poets in the British Isles reminding us of pluralities and contestations that interrupt Britishness. As Wootten helpfully points out:

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<sup>42</sup> See Donald Davie, *Under Briggflatts* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1989), p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> Nancy K. Gish, *Hugh MacDiarmid: The Man and His Work* (London: The MacMillan Press, 1984), p. 21.

‘forms of British Modernism and the divergent nationalisms, potential nationalisms and idiosyncratic and unrealisable nationalisms latent within the British state are often closely connected’.<sup>44</sup>

Like MacDiarmid’s identification with Scotland, Bunting’s identification with Northumbria is based on a nationalist reassertion of identity. Bunting also homogenises various potential histories and localities which would make up contemporary Northumbria, whilst his use of a northern English set of linguistic reference points to sustain an identity can similarly be understood as an amalgam of dialects and vocabularies. Once *Briggflatts* is seen in light of MacDiarmid’s text, the process of signifying elements of a cultural past in order to construct a nationally located identity to assert in the present becomes clearer. The difference between the two poets stems from the fact that Bunting’s Northumbrian national identity needs to be more fully reconstituted; a Scottish national identity, on the other hand, is in some senses ready for MacDiarmid to adapt. Both poets, as writers of a national identity, imply an historical continuity between the biography of a self and the history of a site. Brown calls this a ‘transhistorical continuum’ in regards to *Briggflatts*.<sup>45</sup> But, in fact, there is a distinct discontinuity for Bunting, because a large period of Northumbria’s non-existence must be explained or ignored in order for the relevance of his particular located identity to be asserted. To sidestep that issue, Bunting naturalises the processes he uses to locate identity. MacDiarmid, on the other hand, can rely more fully on a continuity in Scotland’s existence, and can oppositionally assert the current relevance of his located identity in a less problematic way. It is for this reason that *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* can afford to make explicit the way in which located identities are constructions. It does this

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<sup>44</sup> Wootten, p. 17.

<sup>45</sup> Brown, p. 29.



by consciously deconstructing an existing form of Scottishness and subsequently fashioning another to take its place; in doing so, the poem sheds further light on processes left implicit by Bunting, and points to key features of a British modernist poetics of place.

*A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* can in part be understood as an extended exploration of Scottish nationhood and culture. From the outset it is made clear that this exploration centres on the way in which self is related to place. MacDiarmid makes this clear by juxtaposing the speaker's inability to locate himself immediately – 'And dinna ken as muckle's whaur I am / Or hoo I've come to sprawl here 'neth the mune' (p. 10) – with the broader question of locating oneself in relation to the nation. MacDiarmid addresses that broader question directly in these lines:

(To prove my saul is Scots I maun begin  
Wi' what's still deemed Scots and the folk expect,  
And spire up syne by visible degrees  
To heichts whereo' the fules ha'e never recked[]). (p. 6)

This stanza begins to link a wider question of Scottishness to the speaker's problem of making sense of his experience of place. But also the stanza self-reflexively suggests that this Scottishness will be constructed within his written voice. The stanza begins a bracketed section that acts as an aside between writer and reader, self-reflexively signalling how the poem will begin and how it will progress. The idea of Scottishness is implicated in that self-reflexivity, and it is suggested that the speaker will construct his Scottishness within the poem, beginning from stereotyped elements and building up to less obvious ones.

Accordingly, when the opening of the poem explores 'what's still deemed Scots and the folk

expect', it treats that existing conception of Scottish identity as a construct, and playfully deconstructs it. This begins when the speaker says of Scotch whisky, 'a' that's Scotch aboot it is the name, / Like a' thing else ca'd Scottish noodays' (p. 6). He continues:

You canna gang to a Burns supper even  
Wi'oot some wizened scrunt o' a knock-knee  
Chinee turns roon to say, 'Him Haggis – velly goot!'  
And ten to wan the piper is a Cockney. (p. 6)

In this passage MacDiarmid points towards the performative nature of Scottishness, suggesting that it exists as a series of stock images and actions (Robert Burns, haggis, bagpipes), which he deconstructs by questioning their supposed authenticity. Yet, at the same time, the hostile description of 'a knock-knee / Chinee' is surely motivated by anger at perceived cultural appropriation, raising the question of who has the right to perform nationhood.

MacDiarmid's deconstruction of a located identity occurs most frequently in the opening pages of the poem. After this the main focus shifts to MacDiarmid's subsequent reconstruction of Scottishness in terms of his own set of signifiers. These signifiers build upon the 're-creation' of Scottishness that already occurs on a linguistic level.<sup>46</sup> The process is enacted openly and frequently with self-reflexivity, so that the national identity constructed is, like the stereotyped version, to be understood precisely as a construct.

The most notable signifiers are the moon and the thistle. The predominance of these symbolic images strengthens the earlier suggestion that locating the self within nation and

culture is an extension of locating the self within the local site: for almost the entire poem the speaker is lying on a hillside, next to a thistle and below the moon, so that these images are features of his immediate location that become symbolic of broader concerns. The exact meaning of the symbols, their relationship to each other, and their meaning for the speaker fluctuate continuously, so that within any few pages a number of possibilities are presented:

The munelicht's like a lookin'-glass,

The thistle's like mysel'. (p. 22)

I were as happy as the munelicht, withoot care,

But thocht o' thee – o' thy contempt and ire –

Turns hauf the warld into the youky thistle there. (p. 24)

For ilka thing a man can be or think or dae

Aye leaves a million mair unbeen, unthocht, undune,

Till his puir warped performance is,

To a' that nicht ha' been, a thistle to the mune. (p. 24)

The thistle and moon act as blank canvases onto which the speaker projects any number of fleeting meanings. Yet, the thistle is most consistently identified with ideas of Scottishness, and this maintains a background presence through all the fluctuations, whilst at times being made explicit:

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<sup>46</sup> Gish, p. 21.

I canna feel it has to dae wi' me  
Mair than a composite diagram o'  
Cross-sections o' my forbears' organs  
.....  
And yet like bindweed through my clay it's run,  
and a' my folks' – it's queer to see't unroll.  
My ain soul looks me in the face, as 'twere,  
And mair then my ain soul – my nation's soul! (p. 28)

By using the thistle as a symbol for Scottish identity, yet also as a malleable and fluctuating symbol, MacDiarmid makes explicit the constructed and unfixed nature of located identities. This is evident when the rapidly shifting meanings of self, place and symbol lead to a playful sense of fabrication:

– Am I a thingum mebbe that is kept  
Preserved in spirits in a muckle bottle  
.....  
– Mounted on a hillside, wi' the thistles  
.....  
Or am I juist a figure in a scene  
O' Scottish life A.D. one-nine-two-five? (p. 26)

As Robert Crawford argues, MacDiarmid's Scottishness 'might seem a cultural "given"', but is in fact 'a clever cultural construct whose effect has been to develop and valuably alter many

of our ideas about Scottishness'.<sup>47</sup> By deconstructing the located identity so that it also embraces and enhances, MacDiarmid's poem makes explicit processes that are naturalised in Bunting's. It underlines that fact that identity is constructed in relation to place via history, and via a utilisation of the local site's historical depth; but also it reveals how that process of drawing upon historical depth relies on the use of cultural signifiers that are linked to the local site by an investment of value and meaning.

MacDiarmid's linguistic and symbolic construction of a located identity resonates with processes found in Bunting's later text. The way in which this common ground helps define a British modernist poetics of place becomes clearer if we think about the very different attitudes to textuality and language found in an American long modernist poem such as Zukofsky's "A". Given that Bunting and Zukofsky were long-term correspondents, and that Bunting's repeated insistence on the primacy of sound suggests a continued self-identification with objectivist poetics, the comparison of their contrasting models of language and identity is important. Whilst the British modernist poets ascribe language depth by using it to invoke a cultural history, Zukofsky continually insists on the flatness and materiality of language, as shown particularly in his processes of transliteration. Strictly speaking, to transliterate is to 'replace (letters or characters of one language) by those of another used to represent the same sounds; to write (a word, etc.) in the characters of another alphabet'.<sup>48</sup> The process that Zukofsky uses several times in "A" takes this one step further by translating the sound of one language into the existing vocabulary of another (rather than merely into its alphabet). Bunting highlights the detachment of meaning and

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<sup>47</sup> Robert Crawford, *Identifying Poets: Self and Territory in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), p. 44.

<sup>48</sup> 'transliterate, v.', in *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/204859>> [accessed 29 September 2016].

sound in this process: discussing Zukofsky's transliteration of the *Book of Job* he says that it 'is just as much a translation as the words in the English Bible. . . . The one misses out the meaning, the other misses out the sound'.<sup>49</sup> The first two stanzas of this section (in "A"-15) read as follows:

An  
hinny  
by  
stallion  
out of  
she-ass

He neigh ha lie low h'who y'he gall mood  
So roar cruel hire  
Lo to achieve an eye leer rot off  
Mass th'lo low o loam echo  
How deal me many coeval yammer  
Naked on face of white rock – sea,  
*Then* I said: Liveforever my nest  
Is arable hymn  
Shore she root to water  
Dew anew to branch.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *Basil Bunting on Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 160.

<sup>50</sup> Zukofsky, "A" (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 359.

Since Zukofsky is transliterating into English words, this passage is not without meaning for the English language reader. Yet the principal reason for Zukofsky's use of the words is not their meaning or syntactical logic but their ability to mimic Hebrew sounds; the poem, therefore, 'consciously subordinates meaning to sound'.<sup>51</sup>

By stressing sound over meaning as a principle of translation, Zukofsky asserts that language is a flattened soundscape that poetry playfully explores, rather than a system of referential signifiers. This assertion of the depthlessness of language is continually reinforced by Zukofsky – in his constant wordplay as well as in similar instances of transliteration – and is the most obvious way of distinguishing his work from that of the British modernists. The contrast between Zukofsky's use of language and a use that implies historical depth is similarly made by Quartermain, who finds in Zukofsky's "A"-13 'the kind of pun that relies on the *suppression* of history'.<sup>52</sup> This detachment of language from history reflects a detachment from place, just as Bunting and MacDiarmid's linguistic reliance on history reflects their *attachment* to place. The assumptions frequently implicit in the way we talk about depthless language clarify the link to a particular relationship with place. For instance, Quartermain argues that the transliteration in Zukofsky's "A"-15 is imbued with 'multidirectionality' and 'rejects singularity in ways in which *Briggflatts* does not; for words are loosened from syntactic structure and can *range*'.<sup>53</sup> Whilst Quartermain's focus here is on syntax, he implicitly asserts that differences in the treatment of language in these poems

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<sup>51</sup> Peter Jones, 'Louis Zukofsky', *Poetry Nation*, 5 (1975), 109-14 (p. 111).

<sup>52</sup> Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics*, p. 99.

<sup>53</sup> Peter Quartermain, 'Parataxis in Basil Bunting and Louis Zukofsky', in *Sharp Study and Long Toil*, ed. by Caddel, pp. 54-72 (p. 65; original emphasis).

are spatial, having to do with being located or dislocated. The idea of Zukofsky being able to 'range' within his language is based on a sense of Bunting's language being rooted in a place and Zukofsky's being uprooted and capable of geographical movements.

This is clarified most fully when Bunting and MacDiarmid make their ascription of depth explicit. This happens at various points in their texts, and the metaphors they use are vital to understanding their treatment of language. In the following passage MacDiarmid's discussion of selfhood in terms of a tension between surface and depth simultaneously suggests two distinct discourses on identity:

For mine's the clearest insight

O' man's facility

For constant self-deception,

And hoo his mind can be

But as a floatin' iceberg

That hides aneth the sea

Its bulk: and hoo frae depths

O' an unfaddomed flood

Tensions o' nerves arise

And humours o' the blood

– Keethin's nane can trace

To their original place.

*Hoo many men to mak' a man*

*It tak's he kens wha ken's Life's plan.* (pp. 130-32; original emphasis)



The comparison of the self to 'a floatin' iceberg / That hides aneth the sea / Its bulk' suggests that the self is experienced as a duality of conscious, visible surface and unconscious, unknowable depth. But the italicised lines seem to suggest that the self is a social and cultural construct – that it takes 'many men to mak' a man'. This de-essentialises selfhood in a way that contradicts the sense of inaccessible depths; yet MacDiarmid holds the two discourses together.

This becomes more interesting when MacDiarmid immediately applies the metaphor to nationhood, and thus to the located Scottish identity his text manufactures:

But there are flegsome deeps  
Whaur the soul o' Scotland sleeps  
That I to bottom need  
To wauk Guid kens what deid,  
Play at stertle-a-stobie,  
Wi' nation's dust for a hobby. (p.132)

The phrase 'soul o' Scotland' essentialises Scottishness, and again this essentialising relies on the idea of depth ('flegsome deeps'). As before, this coexists with a seemingly contradictory discourse: MacDiarmid describes his own act of writing as 'Play[ing] . . . / Wi' nation's dust for a hobby', undermining the idea of a 'soul o' Scotland' by suggesting that the poem constructs Scottishness from historically referential materials ('nation's dust'). In this passage MacDiarmid shows how he is able to reconcile the two discourses. Buthlay's annotations explain 'stertle-a-stobie' as 'exhalations rising from the ground on a hot day' (p.

132). This image suggests that whilst Scottishness lies dormant in the 'flegsome deeps' of the past, MacDiarmid's need to 'wauk Guid kens what dead' involves bringing that historical material to the surface – only then can he reconstruct Scottishness within the linguistic surface of the poem. This is key to understanding MacDiarmid's attitude towards language, which assumes historical depth but insists on the need for a self-conscious re-utilising of those depths. It is because MacDiarmid views language in terms of this tension between surface and depth that his text is able to invest language with historical signification, and in this way participate in a constructive process of locating identity in a historically depthful local site.

In *Briggflatts* a sense of the depthful quality of language is linked directly to the physical ground of the local site. This underlines the fact that the contrast between the depth model of MacDiarmid's Scots and the depthlessness model of Zukofsky's transliteration has to do with their being writers of located and dislocated identities, respectively. In the first part of *Briggflatts*, where an experience of the local site is romanticised and celebrated, writing is, once more, presented as a masculinised act of physical inscription:

A mason times his mallet  
to a lark's twitter,  
listening while the marble rests,  
lays his rule  
at a letter's edge,  
fingertips checking,  
till the stone spells a name

naming none. (p. 13)

There is a tension over the permanency of this act of writing, because the stone is a gravestone, and the writing of 'a name / naming none' is linked to the transitoriness and decay envisaged elsewhere in this section. But the poem counterpoints that transitoriness with its use of the landscape as an historical record, and the act of writing is presented as being in line with that landscape (so that in the above lines the mason 'times his mallet / to a lark's twitter'). Ultimately, the presentation of writing as inscribing an epitaph understands writing as a form of physical memory.

This understanding is possible precisely because of the links between the speaker and the historical depth of his location. This becomes clearer as the poem's narrative moves away from the local site, and we are given different views on the act of writing:

Who cares to remember a name cut in ice

or be remembered?

Wind writes in foam on the sea:

Who sang, sea takes,

brawn brine, bone grit.

Keener the kittiwake.

Fells forget him.

Fathoms dull the dale,

gulfweed voices. (p. 18)

Brown argues that '[s]uch a passage grounds all personal and historical allusions in a landscape'.<sup>54</sup> The passage does this by contrasting the impermanency of 'a name cut in ice' or written 'in foam on the sea' with the previous section's image of a name written in stone. In the second stanza the lines 'Fells forget him. / Fathoms dull the dale' suggest that the speaker's travelling has detached him from the historical depth of the Northumbrian landscape, and this is confirmed in the later lines 'Something is lost / when wind, sun, sea upbraid / justly an unconvinced deserter' (p. 19). It is this detachment from the landscape and its history that has caused the impermanence. Accordingly, 'Fells forget him' shows how the landscape is posited as an historical record or memory. The word 'upbraid', meanwhile, carries the immediate meaning of chastisement, but also is suggestive of an untangling or unbraiding of the roots which allow access to that physical memory.

Later in the poem, Bunting makes more explicit the linking of historical record and landscape, offering an image that crucially illustrates the poetics of place found in British modernist long poems. He writes, 'Today's posts are piles to drive into the quaggy past' (p. 27), envisioning history as physically embodied in earth. The perceived depth of history is here embedded in the physical depth of a landscape, and it is this complex depth to which poem links writing as physical inscription. Furthermore, the phrase suggests the various grades of solidity a poetics of place might encounter. Here, the historicised site is 'quaggy', but when safely on home ground, Bunting and MacDiarmid encounter more substantial historicised territory. In either case, the suggestion of surface and depth reveals a model of place, identity, and text with which we may define the nationally-focused poetics loosely grouped under the banner of British modernism.

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<sup>54</sup> Brown, p. 25.

## History for Futurity: *Paterson* and Poetics of Place

My distinguishing thus far of a rooted British modernism from an uprooted American modernism is a useful framework for reading the poets under discussion. The distinction is complicated, though, by Ursula K. Heise's observation that, in the United States, 'rootedness in place has long been valued as an ideal counterweight to the mobility, restlessness, rootlessness, and nomadism . . . often construed as paradigmatic of American national character'.<sup>55</sup> This reinforces my sense of a rootlessness typifying American modernism, yet also reveals how this glosses over the parallel modernism committed to a poetics of place, as expounded, in particular, by Olson and Williams. Though a thorough discussion of either poet lies outside the scope of this article, I will conclude by looking at the first book of Williams's *Paterson*, thereby sketching some key ways in which the handling of identity, locality, history, and language in the American long poem differs crucially from its British counterpart, even whilst sharing notable features.

For Quartermain, the detachment of language from history links Zukofsky to Williams, and is contextualised in both these poets by two specific experiences. The first of these is learning English as a second language: Quartermain says that '*both Williams and Zukofsky learned English as their second language*, and so are free to use English without the clutter of history'.<sup>56</sup> The second is living in America, and Quartermain argues that both 'Williams and Zukofsky are . . . struggling to establish the American'.<sup>57</sup> The first point reminds us that Zukofsky's rootlessness may be connected more to his Jewishness (and Yiddish-

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<sup>55</sup> Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 9.

<sup>56</sup> Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics*, p. 99.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

speaking upbringing) than to his typifying of an American modernism; yet the second point seems to refute this, underlining his depthlessness as belonging to Heise's 'American national character'.<sup>58</sup> In the case of Williams, the second point reminds us of affinities between *Paterson* and the poems of Bunting and MacDiarmid; yet the first point asserts that Williams's writing of a located identity operates ahistorically, in marked contrast with the British poets.

If Williams is 'struggling to establish the American' in *Paterson*, he achieves that national goal, like Bunting, through a focus on an immediately experienced locale. Eric Homberger thus suggests that the poem 'is ultimately about the survival of the local as a meaningful reality in American life'.<sup>59</sup> Specifically, we might say that Williams stresses the local environment as shaping the life of an individual, and vice versa:

. . . the city  
the man, an identity – it can't be  
otherwise – an  
interpenetration, both ways.<sup>60</sup>

This interrelation between identity and place – 'the man' and 'the city' – offers one way of reading the first main section, where Williams uses a number of different images to suggest possible forms of this 'interpenetration'. The opening image is a panoramic view of the city depicted as a man:

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<sup>58</sup> Heise, p. 9.

<sup>59</sup> Homberger, p. 119.

<sup>60</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 3.

Paterson lies in the valley under the Passiac Falls  
its spent waters forming the outline of his back. He  
lies on his right side, head near the thunder  
of the waters filling his dreams! (p. 6)

The last phrase of this passage ties the flow of the river to the flow of the personified city's thoughts. Alongside this are depicted 'machinations / drawing their substance from the noise of the pouring / river': here, the industries that use the river for power are also now 'drawing their substance' from the personified city's flow of thought. If we think of industrial growth around a river as something that causes a city to develop in a particular place, the image transforms the city's history into one human thought process.

Whilst the poem envisages the city as a sleeping man, 'the man' and 'the city' are also symbolically related in other ways. James E. Breslin notes that 'Paterson is both a generic figure, all the citizens of the city of Paterson, and a particular person, who is a doctor and a poet'.<sup>61</sup> In the third of these devices, the personified city becomes a playful self-parody of Williams himself: a Doctor whose 'works / have been done into French / and Portugese' (p. 9). As Williams conflates a version of himself with the poeticised place, the poem becomes at least in part a kind of autobiography, comparable to *Briggflatts*, whose '[p]oet appointed' (p. 17) is at times an exaggerated Bunting. An additional link emerges as Williams genders aspects of place, like Bunting expressing the relationship between self and locality in terms of an interpersonal relationship governed by normalised gender roles. In Williams, the

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<sup>61</sup> James E. Breslin, *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 178.

city is given as male, and this is counterpointed by a feminisation of the surrounding landscape: 'And there, against him, stretches the low mountain. / The Park's her head, carved above the Falls' (p. 8). Though the essentialised link between femininity and domesticity is not present here, Williams shares with Bunting the sense of the female as the broader dwelling place for a specific, masculine located identity: thus, Paterson the poet-city is nestled in 'her monstrous hair / . . . scattered about into / the back country' (p. 8). This gendered arrangement is construed as harmonically mirroring the non-human surroundings, where, comparably, 'the wood-duck nests protecting his gallant plumage' (p. 8).

A further similarity between *Briggflatts* and *Paterson* is that both imply a view of selfhood and written identity as structured. As I have outlined, Williams relates the poet-city's flow of thought to the progression of the river towards, over, and away from the Passaic Falls: 'they leap to the conclusion and / fall, fall in air!' (p. 8). That this is part of a structured, located autobiography is suggested by Williams when describing his central motif:

the course of the river whose life seemed more and more to resemble my own life as  
I more and more thought of it: the river above the Falls, the catastrophe of the Falls  
itself, the river below the falls, and the entrance at the end into the great sea.<sup>62</sup>

This structuring device is comparable to those used by Bunting, such as the comparison of identity to the cycle of the four seasons. Both devices position identity in terms of a combination of spatial and temporal axes; but, interestingly, Williams specifically undercuts

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<sup>62</sup> Williams, cited in Jerome Mazzaro, *William Carlos Williams: The Later Poems* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), p. 73.



a sense of cyclical time in his epigraph to Book One, which begins ‘: *a local pride; spring summer, fall and the sea*’ (p. [x]). Here, Williams uses the terminus of his own structuring device (the sea) to interrupt the cyclical, temporal structure drawn upon by Bunting.

Demonstrating that the comparison of his experience to the flow of a river does involve a temporal axis, Williams writes of the Passaic Falls, much later in the poem: ‘The past above, the future below / and the present pouring down: the roar,/ the roar of the present.’ (p. 144) Clearly, the sense of time within Williams’s poetics of place is one that privileges the present over the past and future, not stressing the relevance of distant history to self-knowledge in the way that Bunting's cyclical model does. It is now clear, returning to *Quartermain*, that we cannot accurately see *Paterson* as dispensing entirely with ‘the clutter of history’; but the poem does downplay history in stressing an immediate, new experience of the local site. Williams seems to provide a mission statement when he writes:

To make a start,  
out of particulars  
and make them general, rolling  
up the sum, by defective means –  
Sniffing the trees,  
just another dog  
among a lot of dogs. (p. 3)

Emphasising ‘the roar of the present’ through registering the details of the immediate environment, Williams privileges bodily experience: ‘we know nothing . . . beyond our own complexities’ (p. 3). This primacy of the body informs a canine relationship to place that is

investigative and sensory.

The question remains, how Williams attempts to 'make . . . general' his 'particulars'. Does Williams's stress on the instantaneous local accumulate into a national, American project, or is this to apply 'defective means' comparable to the description of Northumbrian and Scottish identities as 'British'? For Perkins, Williams's approach is based on the fact that 'Rutherford – America – was new. . . . [E]xperience in the American environment is a new thing'.<sup>63</sup> This national newness exists in opposition to a focus on history, which Williams dismissively characterises as European: '[Europe's] enemy is the past. Our enemy is Europe, a thing unrelated to us in any way'.<sup>64</sup> Whilst stressing the specifically American aspects of Williams's approach, I am hesitant to adopt Quartermain's argument that Williams is 'struggling to establish the American'.<sup>65</sup> In fact, whilst Williams suggests that he wants to reach some general truth or knowledge by 'rolling / up the sum' of immediate, local, sensory experience, it may seem that he wishes to move from the local to the universal, bypassing the national.<sup>66</sup>

Whether or not Williams's project is nationally motivated, it is clear that *Paterson* seeks to find means of expressing a relationship with place centring on a newness that critics have repeatedly identified with America. The second part of Book One is particularly concerned with newness or separateness:

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<sup>63</sup> Perkins, p. 267.

<sup>64</sup> Williams, cited in Perkins, p. 263.

<sup>65</sup> Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics*, p. 99.

<sup>66</sup> In reading all of the poets I discuss here, it is worth noting Crawford's argument that 'regional and national identities are never fixed, but are fluid, part of an ongoing dialogic process whose every articulation is open to a different and transforming response' (pp. 13-14).

a bud forever green,  
tight-curved, upon the pavement, perfect  
in juice and substance but divorced, divorced  
from its fellows, fallen low. (p. 18)

As this suggests, the poem relates what is 'divorced' to what is new and fresh and 'green', evoking the idea of a specifically American newness of experience, divorced from a (European) past. If Williams's germinal 'bud' of experience may remain 'forever green', the implication, of course, is that it will never flower – will never be brought to fruition. This implication perhaps motivates Williams's grappling with the question of how what is 'green' may be represented and understood – how it may be coaxed from its 'tight-curved' state and explicated. This question is raised early in the poem with regards to the flowing of water/thought/time: 'What common language to unravel?' (p. 7). Where Bunting continually relies on shared systems of signification to describe his experience of place, Williams's is in search of such a 'common language'. The following passage, for example, makes clear how the experience of a new place may be accompanied by a crisis of identification and signification:

– girls from

families that have decayed and  
taken to the hills: no words.

They may look at the torrent in

their minds  
and it is foreign to them.  
...  
– the language  
is divorced from their minds. (pp. 11-12)

Here, the connection between individual consciousness and the flow of the river is repeated. Yet the possibility is introduced of a disparity between the two – of a failure of identity and locality to coincide, resulting in (or indeed from) an estranging of language.

Part of the endeavour of *Paterson* can be understood as the attempt to establish a language that will reconcile self and place not by reference to an existing language's 'clutter of history', but by establishing new spatio-temporal significations based on immediate, concrete exploration. Lytle Shaw addresses this element of *Paterson*, and in describing Williams's engagement with historicised place strikingly employs the same surface/depth model that Bunting and MacDiarmid implicitly promote: 'Williams and Olson . . . want to dig into the earth to find historical objects'.<sup>67</sup>

*Paterson* can thus be read partly as an attempt to construct for an American environment the set of locating devices Bunting uses to identify with Northumbria; but where Bunting draws upon a set of cultural reference points inherited from a perceived depth of history, Williams sets out to manufacture his own in an explorative practice that Shaw describes as fieldwork. The process of construction at work here is suggested when the second section of *Paterson* describes its own component parts: 'a mass of detail / to

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<sup>67</sup> Lytle Shaw, *Fieldworks: From Place to Site in Postwar Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2013), p. 8.

interrelate on a new ground' (p. 20). Crucially, this 'new ground' makes Williams's appeal to historicised landscape far more provisional than in Bunting or MacDiarmid. As Shaw suggests: 'For Williams and Olson, historical contact with objects . . . tends to hold out the possibility of future social contact: research suggests potential, not yet actualized, social formations'.<sup>68</sup> This is a key difference between *Paterson* and *Briggflatts*: where Bunting is able to sustain a 'social formation' encompassing individuals far removed in Northumbrian history, for Williams such place-based social contact 'is always offered to *futurity*'.<sup>69</sup>

The provisional nature of Williams's spatio-temporal signifiers (his language to express a new place) is echoed by the fact that the majority of his explicitly historical material is not integrated into his verse. Rather, it is included in prose fragments, often relating items of local history and resulting in what Shaw calls an 'unsynthesizable collage of historical sources' (p. 13). Drawing from an article by Ralph Nash, Mazzaro argues that the prose passages can be classified into 'three general categories: newspaper clippings and factual data, directly transcribed; authorial summaries of historical data, excerpted from old newspapers, local histories, and so forth; and personal letters'.<sup>70</sup> The motifs and themes of the prose passages interact with those of the poetry, collaboratively creating new symbols of locatedness.. In the opening section, prose passages narrate local histories that centre on the river. Specifically, they tell us about animals leaving the river and humans entering it: a shoemaker finds pearls in mussels (pp. 8-9), boys catch a seven-foot sturgeon (pp. 10-11), a woman falls into the water and dies (pp. 14-15), and a man makes a career out of jumping in (pp. 15-17). These materials provide an historical axis for the river, which then helps

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<sup>68</sup> Shaw, p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>70</sup> Mazzaro, p. 58.

establish the metaphorical conflation of the river with human thought and a particular individual. Crucially, these materials are visibly extra-textual: their status as historical source materials set apart from the located identity of the verse passages resists any sense that the historical and contemporary actors exist, like Bunting's speaker and Eric Bloodaxe, on an unproblematically shared geographical plane.

Mazzaro explanation of how the use of 'historical data' is reconciled with Williams's stress on newness and immediacy helpfully points towards the distinct characteristics of Bunting, MacDiarmid, and the 'British' form of the modernist long poem they typify. Breslin sheds further light on this in talking of 'the absence of any public mythology' for Williams to utilise.<sup>71</sup> He argues that the prose passages of *Paterson* constitute 'raw material in the process of generating symbolic import'.<sup>72</sup> This status of Williams's 'historical data', coupled with the collage technique he employs, suggests that, even in the 'place-based enquiries of Williams and Olson',<sup>73</sup> American modernism's long poem can be productively distinguished from that of Bunting, MacDiarmid, and other modernists of the British Isles.

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<sup>71</sup> Breslin, p. 172.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>73</sup> Shaw, p. 4.