

WILLIAM BRONK  
IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY:  
NEW ASSESSMENTS

edited by  
Edward Foster and Burt Kimmelman

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earth sciences, measured the interplay of energies, money matters, how man treats man, or has in time — his history.

Nothing we say makes sense, finally.

All right; we believe certain things.

There are things we can say within that belief unless they negate it. None of them deals with a real world.

There is a real world which does make sense.

It is beyond our knowing or speaking but it is there. (LS 146)

The poem begins with the argument that even the concept of a “real world” is a human concept, yet as the poem’s conclusion acknowledges, this concept exists because we know “There is a real world which does make sense,” though we can never know it fully, or even speak of it without resorting to human ways of understanding. Our history, and our attempts to divine nature’s secrets, including our own, does not matter, at least according to Bronk. What they amount to are beliefs, and these beliefs are of value only within systems that do not refute them.

In conclusion, Bronk’s poetry captures the thinking mind in pursuit of its object, the natural world. In this sense, Bronk became less fascinated with nature and more with the nature of things. Moreover, while the object remains forever elusive, Bronk reassures us in the act of defiantly continuing his pursuit, in the interest of knowledge and because this pursuit is one of the most important aspect of what defines us as human beings. The “real world” may only be the words as I have spoken them, but that I *can* speak of them says something about the world that otherwise might not be said.

## Aphoristic Haecceity: William Bronk & the Analytic Lyric

“Speaking of poetry, we found it resisted definition. Speaking of what there is, we find it resists all statements, and direct statement most of all. Are there two perceptions here, or are they one? One might say, for trial, that poetry is a statement about what there is, so attentive, so scrupulous, that it parakes of the nature of its subject: what there is, is poetry; it is not made; it is attended to.”\*

THE FULL MEASURE OF WILLIAM BRONK’S POETRY — from *Light and Dark* (1956) to *Last Poems* (1999) — turns upon this reflection from “The Lens of Poetry” (1970). Indeed, these closing lines (“what there is, is poetry; it is not made; it is attended to”) return in Bronk’s final poem from February, 1999.† Bronk tells us that the lens of poetry “focuses on reality, on what there is, and it illuminates and clarifies,” yet “makes nothing; changes nothing.”‡ Poetry and reality may thus equally resist *apodeictic*§ language; poetry, however, “is serious and unevasive as few activities are” while reality “evades all statements of it, even the statement a poem makes.” Whereas poetry may not define such inscrutability per se, reality “cries out for the directest kind of statement.” Bronk’s deft, incisive, and lucid poems listen ever so closely to that inchoate call, “impossibly so, but so, nevertheless.” His unwavering lyrics dance along the hard-edged crescent between two existential cusps: “First, is to learn we have no strength of our own. / Second, an outside power is impotent, too. / The strength we acquire is to live with powerlessness.”\*\*\*

\* “The Lens of Poetry,” *Elizabeth XY*, ed. James Weil (New Rochelle, NY: The Elizabeth Press, 1970), rpt. *The Lens of Poetry*, ed. W. Sheldon Hurst (Queensbury, NY: SUNY Adirondack, 2011), unpaginated.

† “Art isn’t made; it’s in the world almost / unseen but found existent there. We paint, / we score the sound in music, we write it down.” (BOL 300)

‡ The striking echo here of Auden’s oft-quoted elegy for Yeats suggests an exceptional instance of poetic influence. See: Burt Kimmelman, *The “Winter Mind”: William Bronk and American Letters* (Madison, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1998), 27.

§ *Apodeictic*: “of clear demonstration; established on incontrovertible evidence.” Oxford English Dictionary.

\*\* “Letter to Eugene Canadé, 8 May 1976,” *The Light is Still: Eugene Canadé and William Bronk*, ed. W. Sheldon Hurst (Queensbury, NY: SUNY Adirondack, 2010), 26.

For Bronk, the poem's arc between those antinomies traces the folding of presence and absence, light and dark, invoking each ineffable phenomenon through figurations of mere obliquity, perplexity, and undecidability:

All the opposition there is in the world  
is nothing much to this one: the way we try  
to talk in sensible terms — what else? — of what  
we know escapes (and we want it to) from sense.  
Suppose, for example, we were born, as we say we are,  
and died, in the end, after a reasonable life:

No would be all I could say to that, which I want  
more than anything else that I could want. (LS 116)

"The Opposition," for example, paradoxically affirms the refutation of what remains unsayable. In many other poems from *That Tantalus* (1971) — such as "The Story Of Mankind From Earliest Times To The Present Day," or "The Mask The Wearer Of The Mask Wears," or "The Unbelievable," or especially "The Wonder Of Our Contrariety" — as well as throughout his Elizabeth Press volumes,\* we sense the crux of Bronk's poetics hinging upon such poignant tension between desire and denial: "we are denied those shapes and spaces of desire by our desire which rejects them. Shapeless and impalpable ourselves, we want that reality which has no shape to occupy."<sup>†</sup> Many of Bronk's readers have argued for the centrality of a *desire for the real* in his work, but a more capacious phrase might be a *desire and despair for the real*.<sup>‡</sup>

William Bronk's poems playfully engage with and disengage from the limits of language, thought, and vision, thereby moving us toward a wordless world, but not yet quite beyond the utterances of such encounters with the real. Bronk's

\* Bronk's poetry and prose first found me through James Well's wonderful letterpress editions during my years at Powell's Books (The Burnside Store, Portland, OR) where I managed the Small Press section, 1990-93.

† "Desire and Denial," *A Partial Glossary* (New Rochelle, NY: The Elizabeth Press, 1974), unpaginated, rpt. VSC, 51.

‡ See: Joseph Conte, "Not by Art Alone: William Bronk's Meditative Negativity," *The Body of This Life: Reading William Bronk*, ed. David Clippinger (Jersey City, NJ: Talsman House, Publishers, 2001), 163-74; John Ernest, "William Bronk," *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 165, ed. Joseph Conte (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1996), 69-80; Edward Foster, "Conversations with William Bronk," *Postmodern Poetry* (Hoboken, NJ: Talsman House, Publishers, 1994), 1-19; and Norman M. Finkelstein, "William Bronk: The World as Desire," *Contemporary Literature* 23.4 (1982): 480-92.

distinctive contribution to the analytic lyric — what I wish to call his *apophatic haecceity* — discloses apt glimpses of the real: not as it appears, but as the real cannot only not yet appear as such.\* Poems embodying the signature of that *via negativa* abound. In *Life Supports* (The Elizabeth Press, 1981), for example, we find "The False Corner," "Rational Expression," "The Puzzle There," "As Seen," "Local Landscapes," "What Form The World Has," and especially "The Line: The Stuff On Which We Turn".

I assume the stuff may be called reality.  
Oh, this is idle, I know that. We invent  
the terms that say we wish we knew; but in  
these terms we find their controverts by which  
the stuff denies and affirms itself: is itself.  
It is more than we can say. Said things  
are less than this. (LS 213)

As Bronk suggests in "The Lens of Poetry," within and against the indeterminate forms of language dwells the unknown, enigmatic world that may be tenuously addressed through affirmative negation. Even (perhaps especially) the most idiosyncratic and intimate narratives belie the inscrutability of the real:

Plays and stories teach us the belief in our  
biographies that really happen that way  
as if they were what happens. As if we were.

Well, we are; but solidity disappears  
from that as it disappears from the physical world  
into invisible atoms, into small  
charges and giant forces not ordinary.

And what things are are not the things we see. (BOL 106)

Mystical language such as this has garnered for Bronk both high praise, as arguably "the most metaphysical poet of his generation,"<sup>†</sup> and chastening criticism, as "the dark angel of the power of the mind."<sup>‡</sup>

\* *Apophatic*: "to speak off; to deny." *Haecceity*: "the quality that makes a person or thing describable as 'this'; the property of being a unique and individual thing; quiddity." Oxford English Dictionary.

† David Biespiel, "To Understand America," *Hungry Mind Review*, 1 April 1999, 1.

David Clippinger holds that “the relationship between form and divinity” signals the “explicit spiritual dimension of [Bronk’s] sustained poetic interrogation.”<sup>†</sup> Can poetic language convey an extra-linguistic experience? By confronting the limits of representation, can poetic language intimate what might lie beyond those boundaries? Bronk responds to questions such as these in a 1989 interview with Edward Foster:

EF: One final time. Are words other than the things they name?

WB: . . . I don’t know. Are they? What else do you want them to be? But are words other than what they mean? One problem about them is that we don’t know what they mean . . . My poems come to me in their own language, and if they were not in that language, they would not have any force. (Foster 17)

Bronk’s apparent equivocation here derives from two principles that remain remarkably consistent throughout his published works: first, that poetic language can indeed affirm the extra-linguistic realm if only in terms of an encounter within and against the limits of figuration; secondly, that poetry emanates from the outside, on its own terms, almost in an eidetic form of dictation. *Some Words* (1992) — perhaps more than any other volume of Bronk’s poetry — extends these principles to a felicitous relationship with an undeniable (albeit elusive) experience of something more than the text of the poem. “Community,” for example, offers an irreducibly numinous experience:

He hardly speaks to me during the day  
gone as he is before — or as soon as — I  
get up and I’m alone in the house, the yard  
or with what I do where I go when I go out.  
I come and go as I please. He never shows  
an interest in all that. No, it’s at night  
and after I go to bed. You couldn’t call  
it words spoken or anything we do  
together but, even so, the presence is there.  
Some mornings there’s remembrance as much as if a note. (BOL 109)

\* John Taggart, *Songs of Degrees: Essays on Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 50.

† David W. Clippinger, *The Mind’s Landscape: William Bronk and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2006), 209.

Should we read this particular poem in terms of what Tom Andrews calls the “secular visionary poem . . . which embodies a spiritual search even though that search has nothing explicitly to do with God’s existence or inclinations”?<sup>\*</sup> Or shall we read “Community” along the lines of what Sherry Kearns calls “Bronk’s poetic relation to the unconscious, to the real world which he intuited but did not know”?<sup>†</sup> Is Bronk a secular visionary artist, a metaphysical poet, an archetypal hero, or a prophet of negation? But Kimmelman argues that Bronk’s acute sensitivity to the limits of language “neither demands that order be imposed upon [the world] nor accepts [the real] as ontologically vacant” (Kimmelman 141). “Some Words” likewise requires nothing more nor less from us other than that we “Bring some words together toward a real” (BOL 121).

The liminal / lumninal<sup>‡</sup> hinge between language and existence for Bronk is tenuous because, for this poet, both phenomena are nearly one-in-the-same and equally conditioned by loss. If there *is* a difference, language only brings us to the realization that we can’t know what that difference might be or mean. As John Ernest observes: “Bronk leaves the inexpressible unexpressed and works instead to indicate the limits of expression and thereby to suggest what he cannot hope to say” (Ernest 171). Bronk’s persistent concerns with irony, self-reflexivity, and linguistic subjectivity yield, especially in his elegies and elegiac poems, meditations upon the limits of poetic form on the cusp of transfiguration.

For example, “The Emptiness of Human Being” articulates a world fully comprehended by and confounded in language, a world of discursive forms within and against which we “hide from ourselves, of course from ourselves, — who else? — / that emptiness of content length couldn’t fill / no matter how long it might be — forever if it were.” (LS 172). The first stanza’s undercutting of elegiac consolation shapes Bronk’s intensified engagement, in the second stanza, with the linguistic materiality involved in that disjunctive confrontation:

No excuses: evasions are what we try:  
form as adversary or, failing form,  
other divisions, assertions by negatives.  
We are the not this, not that.

\* Tom Andrews, “Via Negativa: a Symposium,” *The Ohio Review* 56 (1996): 123.

† Sherry Kearns, “Metaphor Again: William Bronk’s Real World,” *The Body of This Life: Reading William Bronk*, ed. David Clippinger (Jersey City: Talisman House, 2001), 230.

‡ Liminal: “pertaining to the threshold or initial stage of a process.” *Lumninal*: “of or pertaining to light; an opening, passage, or canal.” Oxford English Dictionary.

The determined self makes be by partialness,  
sets out his space, says here is truth,  
is his, says less is all, defends, fades. (LS 172)

Poetic form haunts and torments, invites and cajoles, remains aloof and discontent, as if Bronk were proposing a negative dialectic between presence and absence grounded entirely upon mere deixis: "We are the not this, not that." And yet, however, on the facing page in *The Meantime*, on the other side of the seam / seem, we notice a deft, eight-line poem titled "The Conclusion":

I thought  
we stood at the door  
of another world  
and it might open  
and we go in.  
Well,  
there is that door  
and such a world. (LS 171-2)

James Weil's Elizabeth Press volumes call for our attentiveness to Bronk's *poetics of the whole work* — that is, the true listening, reading, and selecting given to each book's creation and celebration: "the true reader opens himself to the experience of the work and so honors it. My reader, James Weil, in his openness to my work, published my books when no other publisher wanted to."<sup>\*</sup>

Henry Weinfield convincingly argues that "Bronk's poetic career up to and including *Life Supports*" develops along the lines of "three essential phases:"

an apprentice phase (*My Father Photographed with Friends*); a phase in which, having come into maturity and having developed his characteristic line, Bronk writes poems in a variety of forms (*Light and Dark*; *The World, the Wordless*; *The Empty Hands*; *That Tantalus*); and finally, a phase in which he composes in set forms, which become ever more circumscribed (*To Praise the Music*; *Silence and Metaphor*; *Finding Losses*;

*The Force of Desire*) until, in a dialectical reversal, an expansion occurs once again (*Life Supports*).<sup>\*</sup>

*That Tantalus* marks a turning point for Weinfield's interpretation: after that collection, Bronk's work increasingly demonstrates a doubly-motivated "impulse toward condensation and compression" shaped by the poet's acceptance of artistic limits and metaphysical limitlessness. Notwithstanding our keen attunement to Bronk's emerging poetic maturity, we would do well to find instances of the poet's "brilliance and hard-edged poignancy"<sup>†</sup> in numerous earlier poems (such as "Metonymy As An Approach To A Real World," "The Tree in the Middle of the Field," "The Aria," and "Green as a Verity") as well as in the later books — those undeniably striking moments when that liminal / luminal hinge swings, a door opens, and "There is only the light, the light!" (LS 35). Henry Lyman asked Bronk in 1984 about this very line from "The Annihilation Of Matter" — how the poem handles relationships among language, objects, and 'the light':

HL: The poem moves right through objects, to the light.

WB: Yes.

HL: Implying that objects are in the way for you, sometimes?

WB: No, objects are not in the way, unless we regard them as ultimate. They're not important in themselves, the objects aren't. What is important is what they can tell us about the light.

HL: Which is? Only light?

WB: I'm not going to tell you what the light is. You know.<sup>‡</sup>

David Clippinger underscores the importance of this *other* side to Bronk's poetry — "a sense of transcendence [that] may seem antithetical to the basic philosophical tenets espoused in his writings, which clearly denounce the possibility of knowing any aspect of what [he] calls the 'real world.'"<sup>§</sup>

Bronk's concern with the dire linguistic condition of human experience becomes quite intense in his longest elegy, "The Arts And Death: A Fugue For Sidney Cox." Joseph Conte argues that this poem follows the generic rules of elegy

<sup>\*</sup> Henry Weinfield, *The Music of Thought in the Poetry of George Oppen and William Bronk* (Iowa City, IA: U of Iowa P, 2009), 175.

<sup>†</sup> David W. Clippinger, "Before the Dawn: A Preface to *Bursts of Light*," William Bronk, *Bursts of Light* (Greenfield, MA: Talsman House, 2012), 1.

<sup>‡</sup> Henry Lyman, "Conversations with William Bronk," *Talsman* 14 (1995): 6.

<sup>§</sup> David W. Clippinger, "Luminosity, Transcendence, and the Certainty of Not Knowing," *Talsman* 14 (1995): 9.

<sup>\*</sup> As David Danced," *ESTIVAL: The Keepsakes Collection selected by James L. Weil* (Hudson Falls, NY: Richard A. Carrella, 2011), 9.

and achieves a qualified consolation somewhere between despair and oblivion: "Our lives are part of the real and as such persist; only our language closes, *only forms have an end*" [my emphasis].\* The difference between Conte's interpretation and mine turns upon the following lines:

World, world, I am scared

and waver in awe before the wilderness

of raw consciousness, because it is all

dark and formlessness: and it is real

this passion that we feel for forms. But the forms

are never real. Are not really there. Are not.

I think always how we always miss the real.

There still are wars though all the soldiers fall.

We live in a world we never understand.

Our lives end nothing: Oh there is never an end. (LS 27-8)

What is *real* here? "[T]his passion that we feel for forms." But what are *forms*? Bronk tempts us to make a clean separation between, on the one hand, "the wilderness / of raw consciousness [which is] dark and formlessness" and forms, on the other hand, which "are never real . . . Are not really there . . . Are not." However, *our passion for forms* is the nexus of both dimensions — the fear and awe Bronk articulates when faced with this impossible relationship between consciousness and linguistic structures, which are at once mutually exclusive and inclusive; infinite and finite; senseless and sensible.

After this point in the chronological development of Bronk's poetics, his eleges turn even more resolutely toward the eidetic and linguistic aporias that "The Arts And Death" confronts. John Taggart reflects upon one such poem, "The Increasing Abstraction Of Language," and asserts that Bronk hypnotizes us into nihilism.† Michael Heller‡ counters that Bronk warns us that Language is the hypnotist:

\* Joseph M. Conte, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 231.

† Taggart, *Songs of Degrees*, 49.

‡ Michael Heller, *The New York Times Book Review* (1977): 28.

Amazement is not too strong a word  
so I am amazed at the way the language survives  
other structures: we go on talking as if  
we had never lost all we come at last  
to lose, the time and place the language described,  
was part of, itself, the hypnotist who set  
his subjects in trance and movement and walked off stage,  
left them doing whatever it was they did  
and walked away to where, wherever it is  
where there are no subjects any longer, where  
there is nothing to do, nothing for them to do,  
nothing doing, where its own sound  
is all the language hears or listens to  
and talks and keeps on talking to the end. (LS 170)

An unstable field of language construed as discursive form conditions the impossibility of consolation for our existential losses. "[W]e go on talking as if / we had never lost all we come at last / to lose," yet language does not mediate either subjectivity or voice, but projects merely the form of "its own sound" that exceeds all losses "and talks and keeps on talking to the end." Despite such persistent insistence on linguistic indeterminacy, Bronk is not a 'language' poet; for his work, like the writing of Susan Howe, pursues irremediable, ineluctable existential phenomena at the limits of figuration. Unlike Bruce Andrews, for example, who once proclaimed\* the need for 'language writing' to critique representational signification and philosophical teleology by achieving a poetics and a politics of syntactic fragmentation, Bronk achieves precise meaning; philosophical reflection, and a lyrical direct address while also underscoring the probable impossibility of such linguistic registers.

What does it mean in the twenty-first century to claim any American writer as 'metaphysical'‡? From Eliot's oft-cited essays (c.1921) to Matz's anthologies of 'mediative' poetry (c. 1963) to monographs (Smith, 1991) and edited collections

\* Bruce Andrews, "Text and Context," *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 31-38.

† See: W. Scott Howard, "Anglo-American Metaphysical Poetics: Reflections on the Analytic Lyric from John Donne to Susan Howe," *The McNeese Review* 46 (2008): 36-52; and "Fire harvest: harvest fire": Resistance, Sacrifice & Historicity in the Elegies of Robert Hayden," *Reading the Middle Generation Anew: Culture, Community, and Form in Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, ed. Eric Haralson (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), 133-52.

(Burrow, 2006), many scholarly arguments have been advanced,\* but has there ever been a *writerly tradition* of metaphysical poetry? And, if yes, in what ways might we see Bronk's poetry and prose working within and against such a poetics? The crux of my argument in this essay would place Bronk's work within an Anglo-American line of metaphysical poetry and poetics — from Renaissance English writers (e.g. Donne, Layner, Browne) to early American poets (e.g. Bradstreet, Taylor, Dickinson) to influential moderns (e.g. Frost, Stevens, Moore, Bishop, Oppen, Francis†) — that informs the singularity of his accomplishment.‡ Within that selective and robust gathering of companionate works, the poetry consistently delivers a cluster of key characteristics: the elaboration upon (rather than the explanation of) a poetic conceit; rapid developments of comparisons between dissimilar ideas; sudden contrasts (without explicit transitions) between concepts and images; direct treatment through indirect syntax; and (perhaps most tellingly) intellectual passion shaped into a manifold of sensibility *on the verge of eidetic experience*. I agree with David Clippinger that Bronk's poetry is not fundamentally neo-Platonic because his works demonstrate persistent skepticism about symbolic correspondences between human and divine orders (Clippinger, *The Mind's Landscape*, 209). Whereas Eliot's notion of 'manifold sensibility' (Eliot 64) invokes a centered subject who lights upon and delights in the linguistic de-centering of identity and meaning, Bronk's poetic personae would engage the predicament of de-centered subjects covered by and recovered within and against the linguistic materiality of their existential ineffability.§

\* T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1975), 59-67; Louis Martz, ed., *The Meditative Poem* (New York: New York University Press, 1963); —, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964); Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); Barbara Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Arthur Clements, *Poetry of Contemplation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990); A.J. Smith, *Metaphysical Writ* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Frances Austin, *The Language of the Metaphysical Poets* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992); Colin Burrow, ed., *Metaphysical Poetry* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

† I would like to thank Henry Lyman for his reflections on Bronk's admiration for the poetry of Robert Francis.

‡ See: W. Scott Howard, "roses no such roses: Jen Bervin's *Nets* and the Sonnet Tradition from Shakespeare to the Postmoderns," *Double Room* 5 (2005):

[http://webdelsol.com/Double\\_Room/issue\\_five/jen\\_bervin.html](http://webdelsol.com/Double_Room/issue_five/jen_bervin.html); —, "The Brevities: Formal Mounting, Transgression & Postmodern American Elegies," *Talisman* 23-26, *The World in Time and Space: Towards a History of Innovative American Poetry in Our Time* (2002): 122-46; and "Limits, Lacunae & Liminality: New and Recent Poetry by William Bronk, Ed Robertson & Gustaf Sobin," *Denver Quarterly* 34.4 (2000): 107-23.

§ The tenor of those registers in Bronk's poems resonates with more recent works that stage playful critiques of eidetic poetics, such as Michael Palmer's *Sun, Joan Retallack's Afterimages*, and Donald Revell's *Arctady*.

The Elizabeth Press volumes offer the best place to witness Bronk's emerging attainment to *unspeakable thinness* ['apophatic haecceity'], which achieves remarkable precision in several poems in *Life Supports*, including "As Seen":

we exist  
as tiniest wholes in the almost infinitely  
divisible *what* there is. It is our heir  
which is before and after us whose stuff  
we are, becoming visible, whose stuff  
we were, unseen, unknown, invisible. (LS 211)

And yet, perhaps we should not be surprised to find those qualities on every page in the later books as well. Considering the volumes of primary work published since 2000 (i.e. the SUNY Athronadack Art & Poetry Series books, \* *ESTT VAL*, and *Bursts of Light*) how will the trajectory and distinctiveness of Bronk's poetry and prose be evaluated in new ways? That discovery will surely begin again with the beginning:

All this unvessel'd light:  
our untouched dissatisfactions  
flood from our hands  
held cupped to catch them in. (LS 2)

\* In addition to the volumes already cited in this essay, those titles are: *The William Bronk Collection: It Becomes Our Life* (2000) and *Painter & Poet: A Collection of Letters* (2008).