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THE REVOLUTION  
IN AMERICAN POETRY AND POETICS  
AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY  
AND THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTY-FIRST

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IN  
WIL

W. Scott Howard

## 'THE BREVITIES': FORMAL MOURNING, TRANSGRESSION, & POSTMODERN AMERICAN ELEGIES\*

### I

Yet each to keep and all, retrievements out of the night . . .

—Walt Whitman, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"

The art of losing isn't hard to master.

—Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art"

MAJOR THEORISTS AND CRITICS OF THE 'MODERN' AMERICAN ELEGY (such as Jahan Ramazani, Peter Sacks, Celeste Schenck, W. David Shaw, and Melissa Zeiger) differentiate the pre-modern from the modern poem on the grounds of generic resistance and transgression.<sup>†</sup> The pre-modern elegy, in the tradition of such pastoral elegies as Milton's "Lycidas" and Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," offers a work of mourning and an art of saving that involves three rhetorical movements (lamentation, praise, and consolation), which culminate in visions of spiritual transcendence, apotheosis, and poetic inheritance. The modern elegy, following such works as Swinburne's "Ave Atque Vale" and Bishop's elegiac villanelle "One Art," constructs a work of melancholic mourning and an art of losing that critiques the genre's pre-modern formal and rhetorical conventions,

<sup>†</sup>I would like to thank my graduate students Amy England, Terence Huber, Greg Kinzer, and Bryan Walpert for their spirited and insightful contributions to the 1998 "Theory and History of the Elegy" course that helped shape some aspects of my argument in this essay. I also wish to acknowledge the participation of my colleagues Jerry Chapman and Cole Swensen, who offered constructive suggestions for this chapter's revision.

<sup>†</sup>See Ramazani, "The Wound of History," 405-406, *Poetry of Mourning*, 1-31, and *Yeats and the Poetry of Death*, 7-13; Sacks 312-328; Schenck, "When the Moderns Write Elegy," 97-98, 108; Shaw, *Elegy and Paradox*, 79-102; and Zeiger 1-25.

especially those of spiritual transcendence. This section proves to be somewhat reductive given the traditional, English, and American literary traditions.

From the earliest Classical works in Greek, Theokritos ("The First Idyll"), and Virgil's American exemplars by Benveniste ("The Thief in the Rigging"), Olson ("There is a Draft Oppen"), Oppen ("The Book of Job and a Draft of Tate"), and Tate ("The Lost Pilot") two double-gendered generic and modal themes: the simultaneous generic conventions; and a resistance to the traditional. How can generic resistance and transgression? Ramazani argues with frequent qualification: "poetic genre's possibility?"<sup>§</sup> Or, to pose the

<sup>†</sup>I am relying mainly upon Ramazani's argument that applies in general to the works of the five classical American elegy's generic resistance and transgression from European literary traditions; and existential ethics in a capitalist society (312-313). Schenck then spiritual transcendence for literary gain, or resistance to that the metaphysical trope of paradox — so far into an open war of opposites" (5) in the modern elegy's modernity in terms of: anti-consolatory relegation of death and the mortal to a feminized revisions of the Orpheus myth that foreground the

<sup>†</sup>On the Classical elegy, see: Aiken; Alexiou; Berg; Luce; as Pastoral Initiation." On the Renaissance and Early Modern: Mell; Pigman; Potts; Scodel; Smith; Williams; and Bethea; Blasing; Bradford; Kingsley; Meyer; Minoccon; Deconstruction," Stanford; and Stone.

<sup>†</sup>Lilley argues this point for elegies by Renaissance and early modern women, especially for elegies by Queen Elizabeth I, "Self and Otherself;" Katherine Philips, "Sonnet V: To the South Downs;" Emily Dickinson, "After Death" and "Dead Before Death;" Sylvia Plath, "The Truth the Dead Know;" Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Same Death Over and Over or Lullabies A Proud Old Woman Watching the Tearing Dove 86-13504." Such a logic of "renunciation and cancellation" to elegies written by women, as Schenck asserts in

<sup>§</sup>Ramazani qualifies his central thesis many times in

## 5: FORMAL TRANSGRESSION, & AMERICAN ELEGIES\*

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\* AMERICAN ELEGY (such as Jahan Ramazani, and Melissa Zeiger) differentiate the forms of generic resistance and transgression.† The pastoral elegies as Milton's "Lycidas" and "Lycidas Bloom'd," offers a work of mourning and lamentation (lamentation, praise, and consolation), apotheosis, and poetic inheritance; as Swinburne's "Ave Atque Vale" and "Ave Atque Vale" and a work of melancholic mourning and an American formal and rhetorical conventions,

reference Huber, Greg Kinzer, and Bryan Walpert for "The History of the Elegy" course that helped shape my knowledge the participation of my colleagues Jerry Zeiger for this chapter's revision.

of *Mourning*, 1-31, and *Yeats and the Poetry of Death*, 7-13; 108, 108; Shaw, *Elegy and Paradox*, 79-102; and Zeiger

especially those of spiritual transcendence and consolation.\* Such a paradigm, however, proves to be somewhat reductive given the diverse history of the poetic elegy in the Classical, English, and American literary traditions.†

From the earliest Classical works in the genre by Moschus ("The Lament for Bion"), Theokritos ("The First Idyll"), and Virgil ("Eclogue X") to modern and contemporary American exemplars by Benveniste ("A Measure for LZ"), Levis ("Elegy With a Petty Thief in the Rigging"), Olson ("There was a Youth whose Name was Thomas Granger"), Oppen ("The Book of Job and a Draft of a Poem to Praise the Paths of the Living"), and Tate ("The Lost Pilot") two double-gestures shape the elegy's most prevalent and perplexing generic and modal themes: the simultaneous appropriation of and transgression against generic conventions; and a resistance to both spiritual transcendence and elegiac consolation.‡ How can generic resistance and transgression be an index of elegy's modernity, as Ramazani argues with frequent qualification, if those same rhetorical gestures condition the poetic genre's possibility?§ Or, to pose the same question from a more vexing point of view:

† I am relying mainly upon Ramazani's argument in *Poetry of Mourning* for my presentation here of this paradigm that applies in general to the works of the five critics mentioned in the above note. Sacks grounds the modern American elegy's generic resistance and transgression upon two levels of cultural alienation: intellectual displacement from European literary traditions; and existential angst due to tensions between individual and communal ethics in a capitalist society (312-313). Schenck theorizes a duality: modern American elegies either appropriate spiritual transcendence for literary gain, or resist consolation due to the lack of a sacred vision (98). Shaw holds that the metaphysical trope of paradox — so fundamental to the pre-modern elegy's poetics — "breaks down into an open war of opposites" (5) in the modern elegy. And Zeiger, via Swinburne's "Ave Atque Vale," redefines the elegy's modernity in terms of: anti-consolation; resistance to the "English neoclassical elegy's triumphant relegation of death and the mortal to a feminized, distanced, and disembodied realm of nonbeing" (26); and revisions of the Orpheus myth that foreground the politics of gender.

‡ On the Classical elegy, see: Aiken; Alexiou; Berg; Lambert; Race; Rosenmeyer; and Schenck, "The Funeral Elegy as Pastoral Initiation." On the Renaissance and Early Modern elegy, see: Draper; Fradenburg; Kay; Lange; Lilley; Mell; Pigman; Potts; Scodel; Smith; Williams; and Weinfeld. On the modern American elegy, see: Bedetti; Bethea; Blasing; Bradford; Kingsley; Meyer; Minoock; Muske; Schenck, *Mourning and Panegyric*, and "Feminism and Deconstruction;" Stanford; and Stone.

§ Lilley argues this point for elegies by Renaissance and early modern English women writers (87). The claim holds across the genre's history, especially for elegies by women. Consider, for example, the following poets and poems: Queen Elizabeth I, "Self and Otherself;" Katherine Philips, "Orinda upon little Hector Philips;" Charlotte Smith, "Sonnet V: To the South Downs;" Emily Dickinson, "#280: I felt a Funeral, in my Brain;" Christina Rossetti, "After Death" and "Dead Before Death;" Sylvia Plath, "Daddy;" Marianne Moore, "A Grave;" Anne Sexton, "The Truth the Dead Know;" Gwendolyn Brooks, "the funeral;" Adrienne Rich, "Not Like That;" Audre Lorde, "The Same Death Over and Over or Lullabies Are For Children;" Lucille Clifton, "move;" Kay Boyle, "To a Proud Old Woman Watching the Tearing Down of the Hurricane Shed;" and Sapphire, "Autopsy Report 86-13504." Such a logic of "renunciation and cancellation," to borrow Lilley's phrase (87), is not, however, limited to elegies written by women, as Schenck asserts in "Feminism and Deconstruction" (22-24).

§ Ramazani qualifies his central thesis many times in *Poetry of Mourning*, noting precedents for generic resistance and

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if generic appropriation, resistance, and transgression inform elegy's rhetorical ground, then are we dealing with a poetic genre that has always been modern or perhaps even post-modern?° Some critics have argued that point.†

This essay addresses a topic no less problematic than the difference between the pre-modern and modern elegy: a poetics of the postmodern American elegy. Is such a thing not impossible? "There is, for instance, the problem of the elegy" ("Origen" 38), writes Bin Ramke, suggesting both the futility and inescapability of elegy for contemporary poets concerned with challenging a poetics of loss dominated largely in America, since 1960, by various cults of personality and "the Confessional mode" (Perkins 588-590). On the one hand, this essay offers an historical scope. Working outward from paradigmatic modern American elegies by Elizabeth Bishop and George Oppen, I will differentiate the characteristics of postmodern works in the genre, focusing primarily upon the poetry of William Bronk. On the other hand, however, this essay does not — nor should it — present a unified theory of the postmodern American elegy. That would be an impossible gesture, given the elegy's current diversity of forms, themes, occasions, and styles. My point of departure, in keeping with this collection's theme, will be a study of innovative American elegies that define poetic tradition as both a working context of artistic change — rather than an unchanging transcendent pattern within and against which all poems should be measured — and "a trust in radical form, however [scrupulously] achieved" (Foster, "Preface," vii-viii).

Given those parameters, I will argue that the postmodern American elegy introduces a new linguistic turn and a concomitant attention to poetic form conceptualized as a discursive field of indeterminate linguistic signification within and against which poetry constructs its subjects and objects of study in so far as they are devisable. This trope of a turning toward poetic form as field distinguishes many innovative American elegies (by poets as diverse as Charles Bernstein, William Bronk, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, W.S. Merwin, and Bin Ramke) from pre-modernist and modernist texts.‡ When the post

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transgression in pre-modern elegies by both American and English poets. These modifications enrich his book's historical scope and interpretive depth at the same time that they weaken his principal distinction between the pre-modern and the modern elegy.

°In this essay I will attempt to articulate a quasi-periodizing notion of the postmodern American elegy and will not argue for such anachronistic classifications as, for example, a 'postmodernist Classical' elegy.

†See Fradenburg 177-180 and Zeiger 26-42.

‡This trope of elegy's postmodern linguistic turning modifies Sacks' theory of elegy's psychological turning toward a substitute love-object (1-12). On the distinction between modern and postmodern American elegies that I

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modernists rewrite elegy, they often not also articulate the linguistic and cultural engaging in meta-critiques of both poetics.

One consequence of this heightened anti-consolatory consolation, which ye poetics. Another consequence, I believe elegies, is the emergence of new ideas of innovative elegists writing today the poem seemingly implausible propositions of antitheses and critiques of generic conventional indeterminate fields, or forms, of discourse many postmodern American elegies of transgression.

Who would I show it to

—W. S. Merwin, 'Elegy'

**I**S A POSTMODERN ELEGY POSSIBLE? Upon one hand, the existential absence of the one includes the poem's reason for being. Given "Elegy," from Merwin's *The Carrier of Ladders*, refusal not simply to mourn, but to acquiescent, accepting — in a word, 'elegy' alone provokes further reflection; and transgresses generic distinction as an implying a postmodern poetics of loss.

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formulate here, for example, compare respectively Lorine Niedecker's "Bonpland," Charles Olson's "Larry Levis' "Elegy With a Petty Thief in the "Internal Loss Control," Lynn Hejinian's "Elegy, or, eikon basilike," and Bin Ramke's "Elegy as O

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modernists rewrite elegy, they often not only resist and transgress generic conventions, but  
 also articulate the linguistic and cultural construction of loss and consolation, thereby  
 engaging in meta-critiques of both poetic theory and practice.

One consequence of this heightened ironic self-reflexivity is the aporia of an  
 anti-consolatory consolation, which yet retains traces of pre-modernist and modernist  
 poetics. Another consequence, I believe, that signals the singularity of many postmodern  
 elegies, is the emergence of new ideas of poetic form as field of discursive consolation. For  
 innovative elegists writing today the poetics of loss involves *formal* mourning, as ironic and  
 seemingly implausible propositions of anti-consolatory consolation complement appropri-  
 ations and critiques of generic conventions, or forms, that turn upon the possibility of  
 indeterminate fields, or forms, of discourse. Form thus refigured becomes a site and sign in  
 many postmodern American elegies of generic resistance and the sure brevities of artistic  
 transgression.

## II

Who would I show it to

—W. S. Merwin, "Elegy"

**I**S A POSTMODERN ELEGY POSSIBLE? Upon first reflection, this laconic text by W. S. Merwin  
 would seem to suggest an implausible situation facing the contemporary elegist. On the one  
 hand, the existential absence of the one person to whom this elegy would be written oc-  
 cludes the poem's reason for being. Given this metaphysical and linguistic negation, "El-  
 egy," from Merwin's *The Carrier of Ladders* (1970), can be read strongly as "an anti-elegy, a  
 refusal not simply to mourn, but to write a sonorous, eloquent, mournful, but finally  
 acquiescent, accepting — in a word, 'elegiac' — poem at all" (Scholes 38). Yet the poem's  
 title alone provokes further reflection; for this so-called anti-elegy ironically appropriates  
 and transgresses generic distinction as an elegy, giving us an elegy about elegies and thereby  
 implying a postmodern poetics of loss. (I will return to Merwin's "Elegy" in my essay's

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formulate here, for example, compare respectively the following modern works (James Tate's "The Lost Pilot,"  
 Lorine Niedecker's "Bonpland," Charles Olson's "There Was a Youth Whose Name Was Thomas Granger," and  
 Larry Levis' "Elegy With a Petty Thief in the Rigging") with these postmodern texts (Charles Bernstein's  
 "Internal Loss Control," Lynn Hejinian's "Elegy, for K. B.," Susan Howe's "a bibliography of the king's book;  
 or, eikon basilike," and Bin Ramke's "Elegy as Origin").

conclusion). This double-gesture of generic appropriation and transgression constitutes one of elegy's oldest and most persistent rhetorical components. While all artistic genres variously partake of this two-fold enabling condition — working both within and against aesthetic and cultural traditions — the elegy, perhaps more than any other type or mode of literary production, employs this rhetorical double-gesture as a signature of the genre's most central formal and thematic concern: the dialectical (and/or non-dialectical) tensions between absence and presence.

In what ways do generic and modal literary distinctions apply (if at all) to innovative writings at the close of the twentieth-century? By definition, aren't innovative (i.e. avant-garde) texts concerned primarily, as Poggioli argues (67), with the agonistic, sacrificial struggle of transgressing literary conventions? After an era (since 1950?)<sup>†</sup> in which many poets, theorists, and critics have undertaken an unprecedented critique of traditional components of literary works — in particular: essence, voice, subjectivity, linguistic signification, and transcendence (to name a few) — what poetic remains remain for elegy, the second oldest literary genre (after the epic) with a continuous history? *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993) tells us that the elegy is usually a short, ceremonious poem written in response to the death of a person, but may also concern more general meditations upon love, death, and philosophical principles (Preminger 322-324).

If the preservation of essence, voice, and subjectivity are central to the elegist's work of mourning that involves a three-fold rhetorical movement from lamentation to praise to consolation wagered on an incarnative poetics of positive signification and spiritual transcendence, then, it would seem, the elegy should cease to exist (as either a definable or devisable genre or mode) for postmodern, innovative, avant-garde poets. Is a 'postmodern' elegy therefore impossible? Is the contemporary American elegy *postmortem*?

The poetic elegy continues to thrive in a remarkable diversity of forms and themes as the twenty-first-century emerges. Some critics have recently remarked that the elegy may be the most popular and vital of poetic genres still being written.<sup>‡</sup> Despite such a proliferation

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\*See Barbiero. In response to recent statements on contemporary American poetics by Mark Wallace, Jefferson Hansen, and John Notto, Barbiero modifies Poggioli's central claim that avant-garde artists perform sacrifice their indebtedness to their predecessors for the sake of achieving the really new work. Barbiero discerns instead a conservative trend emerging within American literary communities, or what he calls "an avant-garde without agonism" (151-153). Barbiero sensitively differentiates this new ethos from the poetics and politics of language writing, thereby articulating a new generation's growing sense of identity within (and perhaps not necessarily against) tradition.

†See Perkins 331-334.

‡See Muske and Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 1-31.

in recent years of poetry concerned with mourning, anthologies dedicated specifically to the genre include not only one collection of the poetic elegy collection: Peter Washington's *Poems of Mourning* (1999), which offers far and wide from Horace to Farid Ud-Din Allana, offering perhaps two dozen works that represent postmodern achievements in mourning. Other anthologies published since 1969 include elegies as a formal and cultural: Randall Dudley's *Whoever Someone Else Thought He Was* (1991) and *Life: Seventy-Six Poets Respond to AID* (1993). *Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (1993) is the most comprehensive gathering; but the volume includes only a minor portion of the volume's international scope.

Scholars have neglected the genre of mourning in this essay's composition, less than one would expect. The pre-modern and modern elegy by Jahan Ramazani's *Mourning and Panegyric* (1988), Jahan Ramazani's *Elegy and Paradox* (1994), and Melissa F. Hill's *Postmodern Poetic Genres* (1994) are suspiciously unthought (and the postmodern course. In fact only one book, David Rigsbee's *Elegy* (1999), promises an investigation that recapitulates much of Ramazani's postmodern mourning and thereby performs a double gesture to (and transgressions against) the genre of mourning and transcendence and consolation (Rigsbee, 1999). More than once, even these claims for the

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\*See note on p. 115 above.

†At least this is Rigsbee's argument in his dissertation. At the time of this essay's composition, he tells me in his dissertation, he has been working outward from "the local terrain well), but from Grossman and Rorty . . . I think, look to Wittgenstein . . . and beyond to

iation and transgression constitutes one component. While all artistic genres — working both within and against — is more than any other type or mode of e-gesture as a signature of the genre's critical (and/or non-dialectical) tensions

inctions apply (if at all) to innovative. By definition, aren't innovative (i.e. argues (67), with the agonistic, sacrificial after an era (since 1950?)<sup>†</sup> in which many unprecedented critique of traditional com-, voice, subjectivity, linguistic significance poetic remains remain for elegy, the a continuous history? *The New Princeton* ne elegy is usually a short, ceremonious on, but may also concern more general principles (Preminger 322-324).

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in recent years of poetry concerned with so many different kinds of loss, there are no anthologies dedicated specifically to the modern and postmodern elegy. In fact, there is only one collection of the poetic elegy currently in print at the time of this essay's composition: Peter Washington's *Poems of Mourning* (Everyman 1998). Washington's selections range far and wide from Horace to Farid Ud-Din Attar to Elizabeth Bishop and Joseph Brodsky, offering perhaps two dozen works that could be considered modernist, but no elegies to represent postmodern achievements in the genre. Four topically organized anthologies published since 1969 include elegies and elegiac poems within larger contexts both occasional and cultural: Randall Dudley's and Margaret G. Burroughs' *For Malcolm: Poems on the Life and Death of Malcolm X* (1969 and now out of print); Harry Gilonis' *Louis Zukofsky, Or Whoever Someone Else Thought He Was* (1988 and now out of print); Michael Klein's *Poet's For Life: Seventy-Six Poets Respond to AIDS* (1989); and Carolyn Forché's *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (1993). Of these four collections Forché's provides the most comprehensive gathering; but the elegies and elegiac poems included therein comprise a minor portion of the volume's international scope and political focus.

Scholars have neglected the genre's modern and postmodern avatars. At the time of this essay's composition, less than one dozen journal articles follow pioneering studies of the pre-modern and modern elegy by Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy* (1985); Celeste Schenck, *Mourning and Panegyric* (1988), Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning* (1994), W. David Shaw, *Elegy and Paradox* (1994), and Melissa F. Zieger, *Beyond Consolation* (1997).<sup>\*</sup> Compared to other poetic genres such as epic, or lyric, or prose poem, for example, the modern elegy remains suspiciously unthought (and the postmodern elegy virtually invisible) within critical discourse. In fact only one book, David Rigsbee's *Styles of Ruin: Joseph Brodsky & the Postmodernist Elegy* (1999), promises an investigation of the latter subject. Rigsbee's argument, however, recapitulates much of Ramazani's post-Freudian theory that modern elegies exhibit melancholic mourning and thereby perform oppositional cultural work through their resistance to (and transgressions against) the genre's conventions, especially those of spiritual transcendence and consolation (Rigsbee, DAI, 210).<sup>†</sup> Yet, as Ramazani reluctantly concedes more than once, even these claims for the elegy's modernity, or postmodernity in Rigsbee's

<sup>\*</sup>See note on p. 115 above.

<sup>†</sup>At least this is Rigsbee's argument in his dissertation. Although I could not see Rigsbee's book, forthcoming at the time of this essay's composition, he tells me in a recent correspondence that, for his revisions of the dissertation, he has been working outward from "not so much . . . Sacks and Ramazani (who cover the psychological terrain well), but from Grossman and Rorty . . . [and] from Joseph himself . . . whose own views surprisingly, I think, look to Wittgenstein . . . and beyond to Derrida" ("Styles of Ruin: Revisions").



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case, fail to distinguish the pre-modern from the modern elegy and/or elegiac work because one can readily find evidence of such resistance and transgression throughout the genre's history.

In opposition to those critics who would anachronistically extend the categories of 'modern' and/or 'postmodern' to poems such as "The Book of the Dutchess" by Chaucer, or "Ave Atque Vale" by Swinburne, I wish to reserve the designation postmodern for elegies that are (in terms of practicality) more recent than and (in terms of poetics) truly different from either pre-modernist or modernist works. By employing the term "postmodern" I wish to invoke merely a quasi-periodizing concept; for not all elegies written today are postmodern — nor should they be — according to the generic and modal distinctions I have thus far submitted. To be sure, postmodernism connotes the style of a period, but does not denote the period of a style. In addition to my estimation above of the elegy's two persistent double-gestures, I would also like to offer the following refiguration of the genre's formal and thematic characteristics in order to articulate a working definition of the modern elegy that will inform my central argument concerning the postmodern American elegy. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia* notes that "[t]raditionally the functions of the elegy were three, to lament, praise, and console" (Preminger 324). This construction implies a linear rhetorical progression that does not hold for all modernist elegies, nor does it apply to postmodernist texts. Such a thematic definition, however, can still be useful if slightly modified. First of all, modern and postmodern elegies frequently employ these three rhetorical components, but often in the manner of a collage rather than in a strict linear fashion. Secondly, modernist and postmodernist elegies frequently invoke gestures of lamentation, praise, and consolation only to overturn them through both expressions of ambivalence, anger, and angst, and techniques of erasure, irony, and satire. These strategies of resistance and transgression, it should be noted, extend and exaggerate pre-modern generic conventions, thereby achieving such aporetic propositions as an anti-consolatory consolation.

The modern elegy thus works within and against pre-modern traditions, but often heightens the genre's simultaneous appropriation of and transgression against generic conventions as well as the poetic form's resistance to both spiritual transcendence and consolation. The modern elegy also frequently employs and/or critiques three rhetorical components central to the genre's pre-modern conventions (lament, praise, and consolation), though not necessarily in that order of presentation. The postmodern elegy, I contend, exhibits these traits as well, but often introduces a new linguistic turn and a concomitant concern with poetic form — not form as defined by verse, meter, and rhyme — and

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not mythopoetic form as construed by m — but form imagined as a discursive fi sense of poetic form as field differs as v TION" (387) in which a depersonaliz manages relations between objects (391 form as a field of indeterminate signi: American elegies today from either pre-: often not only resist and transgress gen and social construction of loss and consc derive from such meta-critiques of bc anti-consolatory consolation (which, I readers steeped in a hermeneutics of irc field of linguistic signification that notv rhetorical negation — a post-transcende

Not long, but it isn't anyway  
determined by the interval: we mourn,  
maybe, the brevities, as much as to say  
form were the enemy — the length of  
to hide from ourselves, of course from  
that emptiness of content length could  
no matter how long it might be — for  
—William Bronk, "The

**A** COMPARISON BETWEEN ELIZABETH B  
"The Emptiness of Human Being" (16  
modern and postmodern American eleg  
essay. Bishop's elegiac vilanelle articula  
solatory consolation; and approaches, y  
poetic form as an unstable discursive fi  
playfully skeptical critique of essence, vi

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\*See Bernstein, Conte, and Holden for further ex

modern elegy and/or elegiac work be-  
 nce and transgression throughout the

chronistically extend the categories of  
 'he Book of the Dutchess" by Chaucer,  
 serve the designation postmodern for  
 nt than and (in terms of poetics) truly  
 works. By employing the term "post-  
 ing concept; for not all elegies written  
 according to the generic and modal  
 postmodernism connotes the style of a  
 addition to my estimation above of the  
 like to offer the following refiguration  
 order to articulate a working definition  
 argument concerning the postmodern  
 at "[t]raditionally the functions of the  
 minger 324). This construction implies

all modernist elegies, nor does it apply  
 however, can still be useful if slightly  
 elegies frequently employ these 'three  
 a collage rather than in a strict linear  
 elegies frequently invoke gestures of  
 urn them through both expressions of  
 sure, irony, and satire. These strategies  
 id, extend and exaggerate pre-modern  
 ic propositions as an anti-consolatory


ainst pre-modern traditions, but often  
 of and transgression against generic  
 e to both spiritual transcendence and  
 ploys and/or critiques three rhetorical  
 inventions (lament, praise, and consol-  
 ation. The postmodern elegy, I con-  
 es a new linguistic turn and a concomi-  
 ned by verse, meter, and rhyme — and

not mythopoetic form as construed by modernists, such as T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens  
 — but form imagined as a discursive field of indeterminate linguistic signification.\* This  
 sense of poetic form as field differs as well from Olson's theory of "FIELD COMPOSI-  
 TION" (387) in which a depersonalized yet kinesthetic and organic artistic intention  
 manages relations between objects (391). The postmodern linguistic turn toward poetic  
 form as a field of indeterminate signification marks the departure of many innovative  
 American elegies today from either pre-modernist or modernist texts. Postmodern elegists  
 often not only resist and transgress generic conventions, but also thematize the linguistic  
 and social construction of loss and consolation. Two consequences, as I have argued above,  
 derive from such meta-critiques of both poetic theory and practice: the aporia of an  
 anti-consolatory consolation (which, I should note, appeals greatly to a generation of  
 readers steeped in a hermeneutics of irony); and new ideas of poetic form as an unstable  
 field of linguistic signification that notwithstanding constitute — albeit in the manner of  
 rhetorical negation — a post-transcendental locus of elegiac consolation.

### III

Not long, but it isn't anyway  
 determined by the interval: we mourn,  
 maybe, the brevities, as much as to say  
 form were the enemy — the length of form —  
 to 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.

—William Bronk, "The Emptiness of Human Being"

 COMPARISON BETWEEN ELIZABETH BISHOP'S "ONE ART" (1970) and William Bronk's  
 "The Emptiness of Human Being" (1976) yields many of the distinctions between the  
 modern and postmodern American elegy that I have outlined in the above sections of this  
 essay. Bishop's elegiac vilanelle articulates an art of losing; offers an aporetic anti-con-  
 solatory consolation; and approaches, yet turns away from, a postmodern concern with  
 poetic form as an unstable discursive field. Bronk's text, on the other hand, engages in a  
 playfully skeptical critique of essence, voice, subjectivity, linguistic signification, and spiri-

\*See Bernstein, Conte, and Holden for further examinations of postmodern notions of poetic form.

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tual transcendence to articulate an anti-consolatory consolation of poetic form construed as a contentless field of discursive instability. "One Art" thematically resists elegiac transcendence and consolation, yet recuperates those generic components through the poem's negotiation of the villanelle's variable verse form, metrical pattern, and rhyme scheme. "The Emptiness of Human Being" enacts a postmodernized formal mourning, offering a critique of both the generic conventions of elegy and the field of discourse that informs such losing art.

The first two stanzas of Bishop's elegiac villanelle (which laments, in part, the loss of her companion in Brazil, Lota de Macedo Soares) propose an ironic art of gaining mastery over disaster as a qualified consolation for the small daily losses that gradually accrue with time. The stakes increase in the third, fourth, and fifth stanzas: places, names, intentions, a mother's watch, houses, two cities, two rivers, and a continent are all swept synecdochically into the poem's tragic joy with the *ubi sunt* motif. As the poem progresses, Bishop achieves a paradoxical sense of both dizzy melancholy and restrained mourning through the villanelle's variable couplet. We are assured that the art of losing is possible to master because no loss ensures complete disaster.

The final stanza, however, complicates this hyperbolic yet balanced equation. In lines 16-19 Bishop imbricates the art of mastering loss with the art of writing disaster. The poem's variable couplet at last emerges intact from this context of existential crisis and discursive play, presenting an ironic anti-consolatory consolation: the art of losing is not impossible to master "though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster" (19). Bishop's insistence here upon the act of writing ("*Write it!*") forces a qualified closure that unsettles more than it consoles. The repetition of the final simile ("like . . . like disaster") heightens our awareness of both the poet's self-reproach and the poem's artifice. What may, at first glance, merely resemble a tragedy (i.e. something like disaster) thus begins to read as a literal disaster (i.e. something like like) that exceeds this poem's figurative capacity to achieve consolation — no matter how ironically qualified.

Jahan Ramazani reads "One Art" as a paradigm for the modern elegy that achieves neither spiritual transcendence nor consolation, but remains immersed in loss beyond recovery (4). Despite Ramazani's attention to verse, meter, and rhyme in his commanding interpretations of many poems in *Poetry of Mourning*, he offers no reflection upon the importance of the villanelle's verse form for Bishop's achievement of an anti-consolatory consolation in this poem. On a thematic level, Bishop's elegiac villanelle does resist elegy's modal conventions of attaining spiritual transcendence and consolation, and also seems to challenge even elegy's more problematic (though no less conventional) double-gesture of

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generic appropriation and transgression — calls "the impossibility of filling the void (*Panegyric* 11). However, on a formal level metrics, and rhyme scheme — "One Art" the elegy's pre-modern and modern traditions — twentieth-century villanelles, like "One Art" and couplet lines and that such a genre's earliest traditions (97-109). Bishop through a particular form of verse that central couplet even as those elusive lines recuperation. The couplet returns — at the poem's art of losing.

In her elegy for Robert Lowell, "Refiguration of the Sympathetic Nature" against existential transience. One of them upon a sympathetic understanding of worlds. While the mortal condition is thus affording a consolation for loss: as they installed within the poem's representative theme, however, introduces a separation: associates nature's sympathetic consolation of transience akin to poetic principles signifies his departure from those registers. Poetic language may be unstable for Bishop it often is for Bronk. In "North Have poems such as "The Weed," "At the Fish Death in Nova Scotia," poetry provides creation within and against existential recuperative powers; yet Bishop's poem modified quotations in the fifth stanza/ment/re-arrangement he may no longer Art," suggests a postmodern construction draws from that aporia to secure elegiac invariability — the one art toward which

consolation of poetic form construed as "t" thematically resists elegiac transcendent components through the poem's metrical pattern, and rhyme scheme. "The third formal mourning, offering a critique of discourse that informs such losing

villanelle (which laments, in part, the loss of repose an ironic art of gaining mastery of daily losses that gradually accrue with fifth stanzas: places, names, intentions, a continent are all swept synecdochically as the poem progresses, Bishop achieves restrained mourning through the villanelle of losing is possible to master because

verbolic yet balanced equation. In lines with the art of writing disaster. The in this context of existential crisis and by consolation: the art of losing is not *(like it!)* like disaster" (19). Bishop's insistence on a qualified closure that unsettles more ("like . . . like disaster") heightens our sense of the poem's artifice. What may, at first like disaster) thus begins to read as a reads this poem's figurative capacity to be qualified.

form for the modern elegy that achieves but remains immersed in loss beyond meter, and rhyme in his commanding voice offers no reflection upon the impermanence of an anti-consolatory consolatory villanelle does resist elegy's modalities of consolation, and also seems to challenge (less conventional) double-gesture of

generic appropriation and transgression — that is: the articulation of what Celeste Schenck calls "the impossibility of filling the void by means of a compensatory vision" (*Mourning and Panegyric* 11). However, on a formal level — that is, concerning the poem's verse form, metrics, and rhyme scheme — "One Art" recuperates these rhetorical elements central to the elegy's pre-modern and modern traditions. Ronald McFarland reminds us that many twentieth-century villanelles, like "One Art," employ great variation in their use of enjambement and couplet lines and that such modulations in meter and rhyme complement the genre's earliest traditions (97-109). Bishop's villanelle ultimately achieves consolation through a particular form of verse that allows her to lose, revise, then recover the poem's central couplet even as those elusive lines formulate the thematic impossibility of such recuperation. The couplet returns — albeit in a different version — despite (and due to) the poem's art of losing.

In her elegy for Robert Lowell, "North Haven" (1978), Bishop invokes, through a refiguration of the sympathetic nature motif, a similar idea of poetic recovery within and against existential transience. One of the pastoral elegy's most central conventions turns upon a sympathetic understanding of the relationship between the human and natural worlds. While the mortal condition is finite, nature's cycles return from year to year, thus affording a consolation for loss: as the seasons return, so will the departed spirit once installed within the poem's representation of the natural landscape. Bishop's twist on that theme, however, introduces a separation between Lowell and nature. In lines 19-20 Bishop associates nature's sympathetic consolation not with returning cycles, but with modalities of transience akin to poetic principles of revision and metrical variation. Lowell's death signifies his departure from those regenerative forces, as Bishop suggests in lines 26-30. Poetic language may be unstable for Bishop, but not indeterminate nor without content, as it often is for Bronk. In "North Haven," as in "One Art" and other elegies and elegiac poems such as "The Weed," "At the Fishhouses," "Song for the Rainy Season," and "First Death in Nova Scotia," poetry provides an anti-consolatory consolation of linguistic creation within and against existential mutability. Lowell's death remains beyond nature's recuperative powers; yet Bishop's poem enacts a revision of Lowell's words (through modified quotations in the fifth stanza) that ironically performs the work of derangement/re-arrangement he may no longer carry forward. This poetic revision, as in "One Art," suggests a postmodern construction of loss and a critique of consolation, but withdraws from that aporia to secure elegiac consolation within linguistic principles of variable invariability — the one art toward which Bishop's elegies aspire.

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In reply to the many questions I posed in the above two sections of this essay, I would now like to turn to William Bronk's "The Emptiness of Human Being," the first stanza of which includes a phrase, "the brevities," that shapes my essay's title and informs my central argument about poetic form, generic transgression, and postmodern American elegies. Bronk's writing has often been compared to the work of Wallace Stevens, W. H. Auden, and Herman Melville among others,<sup>7</sup> but not to that of Bishop despite great affinities between both poets. The work of each excels in a precise economy of intimate and often confrontational statement; expresses desires for friendship, community, and connection to the real; and strives to articulate a mysticism at the heart of both human consciousness and poetic language. Bronk, however, does not embrace Bishop's optimism (however qualified), nor does his poetry delight in the wondrous imagery we find so often in Bishop's work. In fact, Bronk has been described as "a master of the short, imageless poem" (Stefanile 231-232). Bishop's "One Art" and Bronk's "The Emptiness of Human Being" offer valuable points of comparison and contrast in this discussion of modern and postmodern American elegies concerning emerging ideas of poetic form as an indeterminate field of linguistic signification. In "One Art" poetic form serves as a site for both celebrating and recovering loss while in "The Emptiness of Human Being" poetic form turns against such possibilities and toward a more desperate field of language and cultural discourse.

Many of Bronk's readers have argued for the centrality of a desire-for-the-real in his work, but a more apt phrase might be: a desire-and-despair-for-the-real.<sup>8</sup> Death plays a significant role in Bronk's poetry — not only physical death, but death construed as the limit of both consciousness and poetic expression. Indeed the distinction between existence and language for Bronk is extremely tenuous because, for this poet, both phenomena are nearly one-in-the-same and equally conditioned by loss and absence. 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" (71). Bronk's consequent concerns with irony, self-reflexivity, and linguistic subjectivity yield, in his elegies and elegiac poems, meditations upon the limits of poetic genre.

"The Emptiness of Human Being" offers a reflection upon death that turns upon a critique of conventional elegiac transcendence and consolation. Bronk's witty and humorous challenge to the genre's rhetorical characteristics nonetheless articulates a positive,

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although admittedly partial, gain: an iron of consolation. But how can that be: above, this paradox informs one of the g however, introduces a heightened conce reveals:

Not long, but it isn't anyway  
determined by the interval: we mo  
maybe, the brevities, as much as to  
form were the enemy — the lengt  
to hide from ourselves, of course f  
that emptiness of content length c  
no matter how long it might be —

What we mourn today in the poe  
the absence of essence, or voice, or subje  
conditions of self-reflexive, autonomot  
"the length of form — / . . . that em  
how long it might be — forever if it we  
and indeterminacy of linguistic signific  
and difference from the poetics of B  
Oppen. "The Emptiness of Human Be  
confounded in language, a world of cc  
which we "hide from ourselves, of cours  
of content length couldn't fill." Ne  
contentless form will always appear too  
can return our presence, voice, intentic  
merely our disappearance, or, at best,  
against a field of indeterminate signific  
cutting the possibility of spiritual transe  
"no matter how long [form] might be  
human essence, nor announce an int  
emerge. "[T]he brevities" are formal j  
Bronk's text offers both an elegy upon t  
as a consolingly ironic, anti-consolatory

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<sup>7</sup>See Bryfonski and Ernest for overviews of criticism of Bronk's poetry.

<sup>8</sup>See Ernest 70, Finkelstein, Foster "Conversations with William Bronk" 13, and Kimmelman 141.

bove two sections of this essay, I would  
 ss of Human Being," the first stanza of  
 my essay's title and informs my central  
 on, and postmodern American elegies.  
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 that of Bishop despite great affinities  
 precise economy of intimate and often  
 endship, community, and connection to  
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 Bishop's optimism (however qualified),  
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 the short, imageless poem" (*Stefanile  
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 etic form turns against such possibilities  
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centrality of a desire-for-the-real in his  
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 ysical death, but death construed as the  
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reflection upon death that turns upon a  
 consolation. Bronk's witty and humor-  
 stics nonetheless articulates a positive,

s poetry.

m Bronk" 13, and Kimmelman 141.

although admittedly partial, gain: an ironic, intellectualized consolation framed as a critique  
 of consolation. But how can that be: an anti-consolatory consolation? As I have argued  
 above, this paradox informs one of the genre's oldest rhetorical conventions. Bronk's poem,  
 however, introduces a heightened concern with poetic form, as the first stanza so succinctly  
 reveals:

Not long, but it isn't anyway  
 determined by the interval: we mourn,  
 maybe, the brevities, as much as to say  
 form were the enemy — the length of form —  
 to 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. (1-7)

What we mourn today in the poetics and poetry of loss, Bronk suggests here, is not  
 the absence of essence, or voice, or subjectivity in language; those are givens — the enabling  
 conditions of self-reflexive, autonomous art. We mourn instead "the brevities" — that is:  
 "the length of form — / . . . that emptiness of content length couldn't fill / no matter  
 how long it might be — forever if it were." In these lines Bronk celebrates the ambivalence  
 and indeterminacy of linguistic signification and thereby indicates his work's affinity with  
 and difference from the poetics of Bishop and other modernist poets, such as George  
 Oppen. "The Emptiness of Human Being" articulates a world fully comprehended by and  
 confounded in language, a world of contentless representational 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 a poem might be, the text's  
 contentless form will always appear too brief because no length of linguistic representation  
 can return our presence, voice, intentionality, or subjectivity to us since language signifies  
 merely our disappearance, or, at best, our partial appearance/disappearance within and  
 against a field of indeterminate signification. Bronk's first stanza thus concludes by under-  
 cutting the possibility of spiritual transcendence with the somewhat nihilistic prospect that,  
 "no matter how long [form] might be — forever if it were," a poem can neither incarnate  
 human essence, nor announce an interval between vanishings whence presence might  
 emerge. "[T]he brevities" are formal just as the mourning in this poem is purely formal.  
 Bronk's text offers both an elegy upon the formal (i.e. generic) conventions of elegy as well  
 as a consolingly ironic, anti-consolatory reflection upon that formal (i.e. discursive) critique

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of poetic tradition. This second rhetorical movement — this linguistic turn toward poetic form as a contentless field of signification — distinguishes Bronk's elegy from either pre-modernist or modernist texts because here we discover a singular concern informed by (yet truly new to) the tradition.

The poem's second stanza also articulates such a linguistic turn, extending the first stanza's reflections upon poetic form and an attendant ironic undercutting of elegiac consolation. Here though Bronk underscores the discursive indeterminacy involved in that skeptical understanding:

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.  
The determined self makes be by partialness,  
Sets out his space, says here is truth,  
is his, says less is all, defends, fades. (8-14)

Linguistic form haunts and torments, invites and cajoles, but remains aloof, discontented and contentless, signifying a hollow linguistic subjectivity, as if Bronk were proposing a negative dialectic grounded entirely upon deixis: "We are the not this, not that." The only consolation, it would seem, is the brevity of form, that insufficient poetic space within and against the indeterminate field of signification where "The determined self makes be by partialness, / sets out his space, says here is truth, / is his, says less is all, defends, fades." Bronk's elegy offers an anti-consolation that consoles only in so far as it is partial — that is: a transgression against generic and social codes of mourning that remains both brief and deceptively formal.

One way to articulate the other side of this skeptical view, which some might describe as nihilistic, would be to turn to Derrida's idea of tragic joy: "the Nietzschean affirmation, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation" (292). Bronk's elegy, I believe, embraces such a philosophy, especially when one considers the poem's placement within the composition of *The Meantime*. On the facing page we find this poem titled "The Conclusion":

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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.

Much like Derrida, Bronk invites his reader that confronts the worldliness of a world," but for Bronk, like Derrida, to irremediably Other, conditioning the po

David Clippinger also argues for this — "a sense of transcendence [that] may espoused in his writings, which clearly what Bronk calls the 'real world'" (9). Bronk's transcription of a purely transcend dict his more salient observations concern Bronk's use of language and silence, his John Taggart's gloomy proclamation of to choke and feed upon itself" (42). To Stevens' poetry on Bronk's early work such a way that he can't help but read the mythic positivism of Stevens' circ disembodied voice "splendid in the se chapter on Bronk in *Songs of Degrees* concerns Bronk's playful (if often bitter) humor.

Bronk's elegies included in the seven by The Elizabeth Press signal an impos

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\*See Derrida, *Aporias*, 20.

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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.

Much like Derrida, Bronk invites his readers to take up the work of an active interpretation that confronts the worldliness of a wordless world. Poetry may be a door to "such a world," but for Bronk, like Derrida, that reality remains aloof, aporetic, irreducibly and irremediably Other, conditioning the possible impossibilities of language and culture.<sup>6</sup>

David Clippinger also argues for 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 Bronk calls the 'real world'" (9). Although Clippinger's latter claims (26-30) for Bronk's transcription of a purely transcendental "flow of the infinite eternal" (28) contradict his more salient observations concerning what remains irreducibly undecidable in Bronk's use of language and silence, his essay nonetheless offers a necessary corrective to John Taggart's gloomy proclamation of hubris in Bronk's work: "a poetry [that has] begun to choke and feed upon itself" (42). Taggart does argue convincingly for the influence of Stevens' poetry on Bronk's early work (25-28), but his devotion to Stevens dominates in such a way that he can't help but read Bronk as derivative, as a poet who chose to forsake the mythic positivism of Steven's circle (40) and dwell instead within the regions of a disembodied voice "splendid in the solipsistic silence that surrounds it" (46). Taggart's chapter on Bronk in *Songs of Degrees* consequently misses much in the poetry, especially Bronk's playful (if often bitter) humor.

Bronk's elegies included in the seven volumes of his poetry published during the 1970s by The Elizabeth Press signal an important turning in his poetics.<sup>7</sup> Here I agree with John

<sup>6</sup>See Derrida, *Aporias*, 20.

<sup>7</sup>These books of poetry are *That Tantalus* (1971), *To Praise the Music* (1972), *Silence and Metaphor* (1975), *The Meantime* (1976), *Finding Losses* (1976), and *The Force of Desire* (1976).



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Ernest that Bronk's poetic identity achieves a definitive signature in these books that focus specifically upon his attempts and failures to "meet the demands of the reality beyond the 'truths' of human claim" (74). Bronk's earliest elegies from *My Father Photographed With Friends and Other Pictures* (written in the 1940's, published in 1976) and *Light and Dark* (1956) are not yet postmodern in the sense I have proposed in this essay concerning form as field. "The Remains of a Farm," for example, sifts through the wreck of human hopes for and work toward prosperity in order to "reconstruct the intent" and thereby consolingly "see the things disaster failed to see / and know that a weaker force would have let them be" (19). "Soldiers in Death" and "My Father Photographed With Friends" are indeed poems that resist the elegy's generic conventions, but, in keeping with modernist poetics, nonetheless offer such critiques as anti-consolatory consolations. Through elegiac resistance these poems respect the particularity of loss and, as Ramazani argues, thus oppose "a social 'order' that would pathologize and expel the bereaved" (13). However, Bronk's war elegy, "Memorial," approaches a postmodern idea of linguistic form as a site of impossible compensation for loss:

The war came as a water rising, leaving us homeless.  
The easy company of the dispossessed was a grave joy.

On the crest of waters we invaded the distance.  
Recession will find our shells far: high up in mountains.  
It will be explained how they came there.  
It will not be understood. (24)

Bronk's concern with the inscrutable linguistic condition of human experience becomes even more pronounced in his longest elegy, "The Arts and Death: A Fugue for Sidney Cox." Joseph Conte argues that this poem, "in keeping with the generic rules [of elegy] offers something other than despair at the close — not redemption, but not oblivion either. Our lives are part of the real, and as such persist; only our language closes, *only forms have an end*" (231) [my emphasis]. Conte's reading of this elegy, however, veers away from the formal aporia Bronk intimates, stressing instead an optimistic recuperation of a quasi-transcendental ground. Here I would echo Ernest's claim that Bronk's poetry discloses the "closure upon which his own reliance on language depends" (79), giving us, I believe, merely a partial glimpse of the real — not as it appears, but as it cannot appear as

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such — within and against the endless  
The difference between Conte's interp:

World, world, I am scared  
and waver in awe before the wilde  
of raw consciousness, because it is  
dark and formlessness: and it is re:  
this passion that we feel for forms  
are never real. Are not really there.

I think always how we always miss

There still are wars though all the

We live in a world we never under

Our lives end nothing. Oh there is

What is real here? "[T]his passion th  
tempts us to make a clean separation l  
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concerns: the fear and awe Bronk artic  
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From this point Bronk's elegies tur  
Arts and Death: A Fugue For Sidney  
Elizabeth Press books in particular off  
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signification. Taggart reflects upon "I  
*The Meantime*, and argues that Bronk hy  
(28) counters that Bronk warns us that

such — within and against the endless and indeterminate forms of linguistic signification. 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. (35)

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." Our passion for forms is the nexus of both concerns: the fear and awe Bronk articulates when confronted by this impossible relationship between consciousness and linguistic structures, which are at once mutually inclusive and exclusive; finite and infinite; sensible and senseless.

From this point Bronk's elegies turn even more resolutely toward the aporia that "The Arts and Death: A Fugue For Sidney Cox" brings to the foreground of his poetics. The Elizabeth Press books in particular offer perhaps the best place to study Bronk's emerging concern with a postmodern notion of what I have here posited as form as field. Unlike Bishop's elegies, which turn to poetic form as a means of recuperating loss, Bronk's elegies and elegiac poems turn poetic form against itself, seeking the formless, yet finding only losses beyond recovery situated within and against an indeterminate field of linguistic signification. Taggart reflects upon "The Increasing Abstraction of Language," also from *The Meantime*, and argues that Bronk hypnotizes us into such nihilism (49). Michael Heller (28) counters that Bronk warns us that Language is the hypnotist:

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. (10)

An unstable field of language construed as representational 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 this insistence on linguistic instability, Bronk is not a Language poet; for his work, like the writing of Susan Howe and even Samuel Beckett, pursues irremediable existential phenomena at the limits of language. Unlike Bruce Andrews, for example, who proclaims the need for Language writing to critique linguistic meaning and philosophical depth by achieving a poetics and a politics of syntactic fragmentation and surface non-signification (31-38), Bronk achieves precise meaning, philosophical reflection, and a lyrical direct address while also underscoring the possible impossibility of such linguistic registers.

George Oppen’s elegies from *Seascape: Needle’s Eye* (1972) and *Myth of the Blaze* (1975) provide a further point of contrast between a modernist and a postmodernist poetics of loss. Critics often draw parallels between Oppen and Bronk, though the tenor of their works differs considerably. Oppen, as is well known, promoted Bronk’s poems to New Directions Press, which, in 1964, published *The World, the Worldless* (Ernest 73). However, in a letter written within months of the book’s publication, Oppen expresses concerns for “the solipsist position” in Bronk’s poetry (Ernest 73). Oppen also felt ambivalent about the quality of Bronk’s poetry printed during the early 1970s by The Elizabeth Press. In a letter

(dated 18 June 1974) to James Laughlin those volumes (i.e. *That Tantalus* and *To I* of [Bronk’s] lesser work” (Ernest 73). purposes here, as Bronk’s elegies publicize the indeterminacy of linguistic reference and the transcendence of linguistic reference. Oppen’s elegies, in contrast, stress transcendence, and consolation within the field of linguistic reference.

In “Song, The Winds of Downhill,” Oppen’s elegy on the theme of existential impoverishment to a consoling meaning and life: verbs, prepositions, a syntax too often taken for granted and a landscape too often taken for granted. Rachel Blau DuPlessis cites this poem — that is: his ability to reconfigure being in light of “a scrutiny (a reading?) of the world and’ so common as to be unread” (118). The imperative to re-connect syntax to poetic language that foregrounds both the theme of the poem and the theme of the poem.

In “Of Hours” Oppen recuperates the theme of the poem (“[d]isgrace of dying” (211). “The Invention of ‘sanity’ in order to “redeem / I and the temperate streets” (226). Oppen’s sympathetic nature theme — that is, landscape — but then turns toward the theme of the poem (“the coast” (243). The difficulty of this is the possible resurrection of experience may be the transience and resilience of life on the side of the knife” (244), the possibility of reflection.

Some readers may object to my focus on “The Emptiness of Human Being” as a concession made, variations upon the theme of anti-consolatory consolations within the field of linguistic reference. Edward Foster, Bronk discusses his intention in the early 1970s:

(dated 18 June 1974) to James Laughlin, New Directions publisher, Oppen worries that those volumes (i.e. *That Tantalus* and *To Praise the Music*) offer "a somewhat damaging amount of [Bronk's] lesser work" (Ernest 73). This last detail is perhaps the most telling for my purposes here, as Bronk's elegies published during the 1970s turn increasingly toward the indeterminacy of linguistic reference and the consequent impossibility of elegiac consolation. Oppen's elegies, in contrast, strive for the recuperation of linguistic signification, transcendence, and consolation within a context of existential loss and artistic fragmentation.

In "Song, The Winds of Downhill," for example, Oppen moves from a lament upon existential impoverishment to a consolatory return to the most radical components of meaning and life: verbs, prepositions, and conjunctions — those elements of grammar and syntax too often taken for granted and thereby dissociated from the objects they inhabit. Rachel Blau DuPlessis cites this poem in her estimation of Oppen's "situational poetics" — that is: his ability to reconfigure both the poem's personae and the reader's perspective in light of "a scrutiny (a reading?) of the 'substantial' meaning of some words: 'would with and' so common as to be unread" (118). Oppen's elegies, I believe, reveal the poet's modernist imperative to re-connect syntax to the world through a disjunctive reading/writing of poetic language that foregrounds both silence and deixis.

In "Of Hours" Oppen recuperates life and language out of "fragments of metal" and the "[d]isgrace of dying" (211). "The Impossible Poem" proposes an antithetical relinquishment of 'sanity' in order to "redeem / Fragments and fragmentary / Histories in the towns and the temperate streets" (226). Oppen's "Myth of the Blaze" initiates a critique of the sympathetic nature theme — that is, the desire to locate consolation within the natural landscape — but then turns toward the sheltering image of an "impossible . . . shack / on the coast" (243). The difficulty of this image and the image of the Tyger, however, signifies the possible resurrection of experience and language: only within a fragmentary structure may the transience and resilience of life be grasped. Existence and language are "bread each side of the knife" (244), the possibilities of each equally conditioned by a harrowing reflection.

Some readers may object to my formal reading of Bronk's elegies on the grounds that "The Emptiness of Human Being" and "The Increasing Abstraction of Language" are, all concessions made, variations upon the sonnet; hence, like Bishop, Bronk situates his anti-consolatory consolations within a traditional verse form. In a 1989 interview with Edward Foster, Bronk discusses his interest in closely reading Shakespeare's sonnets during the early 1970s:

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And I went through a period of many months, maybe a year, with Shakespearian sonnets. Almost every night before I went to sleep I would read one or two and read them very carefully: what's he saying here? How's he doing this? What's he mean by this word? Very close reading, so I suppose it probably formed my mind into thinking in that span, and I also occasionally before and after that period wrote in fourteen lines, but it wasn't a decision on my part — except that it was an interesting form and what could be done with it, and I didn't have to force it.

(17)

All of the poems in *To Praise the Music* are fourteeners; in *The Meantime*, which contains a mere fifteen poems, all four of the fourteeners are elegies. Many of Shakespeare's sonnets are elegiac in mood and theme. How does Bronk's use of that verse form as a vehicle for elegy differ from Shakespeare's?

Sonnet 74 offers a poignant contrast with "The Emptiness of Human Being," for both elegiac poems confront and construct the difficulty of existential loss at the level of deixis — that is: within and against the linguistic mechanisms that condition all possible articulations of any distinctions between "the here and the there, the now and the then, the we and the you" (Godzich 166). Shakespeare's sonnet, as Helen Vendler convincingly reasons (337-339), sublimates body and language to spirit "by a sleight-of-hand in the couplet, turning on the relative pronoun *that which*" (338): "The worth of that is that which it contains" (13). Thus Shakespeare's elegiac sonnet asserts: after death the worth of the body and language is that which they contain; and [that (spirit) which] is [this (sonnet) which] that with thee, dear reader, remains. Poetic form, in this case, assures the preservation of essence, elegiac transcendence and consolation. In Bronk's case, however, poetic form turns against such metaphysical and linguistic certainty, indicating at best "evasions . . . other divisions, [and] assertions by negatives" (15). Whereas deixis serves Shakespeare as a hub for the sublimation of body and language into spirit, deixis serves Bronk as a spoke toward the indeterminate peripheries of identity and signification: "We are the not this, not that" (15). Bronk turns the sonnet's form against itself in his elegies composed of fourteen lines; articulates a postmodern anti-consolatory consolation of poetic form discovered as an indeterminate field of signification; and thereby denotes theaporetic brevities of such desire and despair for elegiac transcendence and consolation. In this regard Bronk's elegies have much in common with those of many innovative poets writing today.

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Ubi sunt in terza rima, o love in trans

—Bin Ramke, "Elegy"

**I**N *Poetry as Epitaph*, KAREN MILLS-COURTS explores the poetics of language (strongly influenced by the study of the poetics of loss. One of her presentations and the representations with language. Caught between both in a work of indirect yet intended revelation inevitable erasure (i.e. representation); neously announce the death of the spirit point of departure for discussions of the

Mills-Courts' larger argument can however, leads her to problematic inferential epistemic shift, which begins somewhere predominantly presentational to represent, poetic language (140-150). The de-reveal such an incarnative, or presentational a representational poetics conditioned attain presence, in the wake of the C predicated upon the self's prior absence (150-152). To her credit, Mills-Courts located "in a single 'catastrophic' moment subjectivity holds that modern poets (unfettered access to an Augustinian indistinct but interpenetrating phenomenon

Many American poets writing elegy — freely employ what could be called For that reason I have deliberately avoided American elegy. My central thesis that poetic form construed as an indeterminate Mills-Courts' claims for poetic discovery somewhere in the seventeenth and eighteenth

## IV

Ubi sunt in terza rima, o love in translation.

—Bin Ramke, "Elegy as Algorithm: Seasonal Lamentation"

**I**N *Poetry as Epitaph*, KAREN MILLS-COURTS formulates a theory of representation and poetic language (strongly influenced by the works of Heidegger and Derrida) that pertains to any study of the poetics of loss. One of her central claims concerns two rhetorical motives, the presentational and the representational, that constantly liberate and limit a poet's work with language. Caught between both motives, Mills-Courts argues, poetic discourse creates a work of indirect yet intended revelation (i.e. presentation) within a discursive context of inevitable erasure (i.e. representation); "[f]or the very words that seem to give life simultaneously announce the death of the speaker" (2). This preliminary thesis offers a useful point of departure for discussions of the poetic elegy in any time period.

Mills-Courts' larger argument concerning the emergence of modern subjectivity, however, leads her to problematic inferences. Perhaps the most vexing of these addresses an epistemic shift, which begins somewhere in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, from predominantly presentational to representational logics in western literature and, in particular, poetic language (140-150). The devotional writings of George Herbert, for example, reveal such an incarnative, or presentational, poetics; those of Coleridge and Wordsworth a representational poetics conditioned by the disruption of a subjectivity that can only attain presence, in the wake of the Cartesian moment, through a structure of language predicated upon the self's prior absence from and indeterminacy within systems of signification (150-152). To her credit, Mills-Courts cautions that such a paradigm shift can not be located "in a single 'catastrophic' moment" (150). Nonetheless, her theory of Cartesian subjectivity holds that modern poets (since Coleridge and Wordsworth) no longer have unfettered access to an Augustinian incarnative understanding of existence and language as distinct but interpenetrating phenomena (140-150). I wish to disagree with this view.

Many American poets writing elegies — earlier in this century as well as very recently — freely employ what could be called an incarnative poetics of presentation and presence. For that reason I have deliberately avoided in this essay a total theory of the postmodern American elegy. My central thesis that many innovative elegies turn upon new ideas of poetic form construed as an indeterminate field of linguistic signification complements Mills-Courts' claims for poetic discourse since the emergence of a Cartesian moment somewhere in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, I would not anachronis-

tically project my articulation of the elegy's 'postmodernity' into those earlier contexts without first undertaking a more thorough analysis of shifting philosophical and cultural relationships between early modern and modern poetics. That topic lies beyond the means of this present work, which situates a point of departure within a limited scope of modern American elegies.

How do we explain the persistence of elegy at a time when so many innovative poets have grounded their work in an epistemological break from literary tradition? Should we be surprised to find poetic elegies in a book such as Lyn Hejinian's *The Cell* (1992)? The first untitled entry (7) in this diaristic sequence, written over roughly a two year period, engages with a deconstructive assessment of spiritual transcendence framed within a meditation upon death that, in the last line, offers an ironic resistance to conventional elegiac consolation. The object of writing, we are reminded, does not concern the representation of a centrally located human essence, voice, subjectivity, or philosophical depth of reflection, but a confrontation with the contentless surfaces of language and the material world (lines 1-10). The poem's concluding irony implies that experiential and physical absences attributable to death, like "concavities" (18) on the surface of language and natural objects, offer a singular perfection. The poem presents this point of view without regret; but how do we understand the implications of such a negative affirmation, especially if our goal is to read this poem/entry as an anti-elegy or anti-elegiac work? How are such antithetical prospects different from the rhetoric of either the pre-modern or modern elegy? If the experience of death no longer offers a cause for lamentation in poetic discourse, then are elegies no longer possible? At what point does such an ironic undercutting of elegiac consolation become a new kind of consolation, albeit in an intellectualized, anti-consolatory way?

Hejinian's *The Cell* consists of one hundred-and-fifty entries, only one of which carries a title, "Elegy, for K. B." (92-93). The persistence of elegy here provides at least one answer to these questions; for Hejinian's ostensible critique of elegiac themes in this book works both within and against the genre's conventions. On the one hand, as in the opening entry, Hejinian recapitulates an anti-consolatory gesture that emerges in such pre-modern elegies as Moschus's "Lament for Bion" and "The Wanderer" as well as in modern elegies such as Swinburne's "Ave Atque Vale," Hardy's "At Castle Boterel," and Bishop's "North Haven." Each of these poems grapples with the idea that the irremediable experience of death is tantamount to a perfection of absence, rather than of presence or of the soul's transcendence from the world of human suffering into an eternal world of spiritual wholeness. On the other hand, Hejinian's elegies emphasize something that these pre-modern and modern poems do not address: the linguistic and cultural construction of both loss and resistance to

elegiac consolation, the indeterminate "further explanation" ("Elegy, for K. B.")

Merwin's "Elegy" offers one last der-theorization) of postmodern elegiac anti-poem suggests at once that the genre resides within and against the limits of the definition of the cultural work of mourning. I expect to see further refigurations of modern elegy and Zeiger, and we can also hope to see the writing of cultural histories.

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elegiac consolation, the indeterminate forms of which speak for themselves and have "no further explanation" ("Elegy, for K. B." 93).

Merwin's "Elegy" offers one last clue to the astonishing persistence (and under-theorization) of postmodern elegies: "Who would I show it to" (137). This sardonic anti-poem suggests at once that the ground for a postmodern poetics of loss not only resides within and against the limits of genre, but turns upon the reader's active interpretation of the cultural work of mourning. Following Ramazani's ground-breaking text, we can expect to see further refigurations of modernist poetics, as in the recent studies by Rigsbee and Zeiger, and we can also hope to see a new praxis of reading the elegy as a vehicle for the writing of cultural histories.

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Mark Scroggins

## Z-SITED PAT AND H

**B**ORN IN 1904, NOT HALF A DECADE reinventing himself at the beginning of a savage and funny parody of Eliot's opening movements of a *Cantos*-like poem, Zukofsky has been the leader and primary theorist of its few heady days of public prominence. He travelled with Williams, Carlos Williams, and George Oppen. But the Objectivist movement, passing poetic trends, and for some time of seemingly universal public indifference correspondences — with Williams, Zukofsky, and the sporadic interest of small presses and literary magazines.

By the 1970s, however, Zukofsky's recognition. Although James Laughlin's New Directions Press revived interest in the Objectivist movement in the 1960s, and Rakosi through the 1960s. In 1968, the Objectivist "movement" by inviting Zukofsky to Wisconsin; the following year he published *Pat Zukofsky: A Study* as "The 'Objectivist' Poet: Four Interviews" more widely available. "A" 1-12, a limited edition published by Cid Corman's Origin Press in 1959, was included in the Objectivist Editions Series in 1966, and that publisher also collected his shorter poems, hitherto available only in the volumes *ALL: The Collected Shorter Poems, 1956-1964*. In contrast to his earlier work, which was viewed in venues as prestigious as the *New Yorker* and *Poetry*.