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OUR ANXIETY IN READING WILLIAM BRONK

I'm waiting for a friend in the lobby of the Hilton Chicago Hotel; we're going to have lunch nearby, taking a break from the psychically draining fun of the AWP conference. The lobby merges into a cocktail lounge on one edge, not far from the concierge desk, and across from it a restaurant whose tables and chairs spill out from its inner sanctum into the passageway. Just then I see two poets I know, sitting on one side of a table, facing the lobby, getting ready to eat but seeming to be waiting for someone before they begin. They see me. I walk over to
to
say
hello.

These are two friendly people I run into regularly. These days they often read together, host readings together, sign books at book fairs, and so forth. They are local to me (though I run into them elsewhere). I would characterize them as being two of the mainstays of what I'll breezily call the northern New Jersey poetry scene. In fact one of them is what you might call its doyenne; she is widely published, recipient of a number of fellowships and at least one major award, and is a college professor (she's not Alicia Ostriker). The other, too, is well published, recipient of fellowships, and so on.

I don't mean to gossip but the brief conversation among the three of us that follows is just too juicy not to mention here, and it gets me to the point I want to make about William Bronk's spotty reception (despite some awards and a swath of critical commentary about it). So, back to my story.

They beckon me to sit down across from them though the doyenne warns me that they're meeting someone. They've put down their menus as we all take a deep breath. One of them, not the doyenne, starts with "Gee, what did I read about you the other day?" It was "something somewhere, connected with" me, which she thought was exciting. "Was it on the internet or what?" she asks.

"Was it a conference or something?"

“There’s a going to be a William Bronk conference coming up in April,” I say.

“Oh, right; *that’s* what it was.”

Just then the other one blurts out, “I *hate* Bronk.”

“Really?” I ask, politely raising an eyebrow (not quite shocked but a bit surprised at her bluntness).

“He’s intellectual,” she explains; she says this with a vehemence that really surprises me, almost as if she’s spitting out an accusation at someone — not at me necessarily, looking into the air in front of her. She has condemned some affront Bronk has committed.

“Oh. Okay,” I say. “Yeah, I can understand why you might feel this way” (the politician in me is quick to maybe close off a topic that now she’s looking a bit bent out of shape about). But she won’t let it go. She’s found her moment.

“Yeah. He’s a phony,” she says, still not directly at me but simply making this pronouncement, looking past me. Then she does look right at me and adds, with a slightly apologetic smile, “I’m sorry; but this is the way I feel.”

“Okay,” I say. “Sure.”

Now, I would say that my exchange with her was not quite the candor of daytime TV. But I really should have picked up long before being caught in this crossfire that I was sauntering into a trap.

We all pause. “Okay,” I say again. “I guess Bronk’s not for everyone. Sure.”

Just then the third member of what I’m now imagining is their *folie à trois* shows up, so I yield my seat with a “nice to see you” and amble back to the waiting area in the lobby, trying to get out of their line of sight.

My friend and I had a great lunch, about a block from the hotel.

a half century ago — continues to perplex and sometimes to disturb a lot of readers, quite likely a majority of poetry readers. Bronk’s poetry *also* disturbs us, possibly in more than one way.

For one thing, some people are discomfited because Bronk’s poems are unequivocal in their demand for the reader’s attention and self-investment, for a real commitment (I don’t mean a reader’s recognition but rather the attending-to necessary in a communion of a sort). Bronk’s poems are in this way, as well as in related ways, what you might call *difficult*. Yet lines like we find in the very late poem “No Big Bang” are denotatively not at all difficult to parse:

NO		BIG		BANG
No		big		bang.
	We			begin
with		no		beginning,
				endlessly
				end. ⁷

Nevertheless, this poem does wait for the careful reader to engage its language, an exquisitely lapidary language. A lot of readers don’t want to slow down enough — as if reading poetry is like reading the daily news (à la Pound and Williams).⁸ But then there is this other problem: the poem’s words, in their material existence — something I’ll return to later — are beautiful. Beyond the textuality in and of itself, moreover, there is the problem of what the words say, beyond their material existence. Here’s another of the very late poems, predictably titled “As Though”:

It	will	do	what	it	wants	—	maybe	some
of	it	to	you	—	and	you	can	do
may	want	and	it	won’t	matter	to	it.	
					But		we	
			have				dignity.	
We	act	as	though	it	would.	(BOL	213)	

The early and midcareer poems — though they may at times be more lengthy or exhibit more verbal pyrotechnics — are neither more nor less possessed of a clarity and singularity of outlook, neither more nor less supple while making rigorous statements.

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On vacation from college in the mid sixties, I asked my mother, a high school English teacher, to read *The World, the Worldless* recently published,⁹ which I eagerly wanted to share with her. She was not especially a reader of poetry, but she was a serious reader. Her verdict back to me a couple of days later was: “He leaves you no corner in which to hide.” This was at a time when such a reaction had still mostly to be formulated in print.

Bronks’ poems disturb. They disturb not only in the unmitigated searching of their discourse, but in the palpable texture of their words and lines whose exactness is unnerving, almost as if the poems’ subtext is precisely exactitude. And the pleasure of the poems, or at least that’s what I call it, is that. It is an immense pleasure but you have to be ready for it. The poems offer us — and their persona’s position is pretty much that we can take it or leave it — a kind of Kantian sublime. And yet the quality of Bronk’s language and the depth and/or acuity of the skepticism it contains, and overall his attestation of a worldless world, all are a part of some larger experience. It is this experience that I’d like to discuss now. Let me return briefly to my weird encounter at the AWP.

I can understand why this acquaintance of mine, the doyenne, who in our small-pond New Jersey poetry world is a sort of king- or queen-maker, feels the way she does about Bronk. Hers is a poetry of story — I might say a poetry of soap opera but she really does have a talent for metaphor and her poems are interesting (though Bronk would have been offended by their sloppiness). My own complaint about her poetry -- setting aside her obtuseness as can be seen in her take on Bronk’s work, that is, her wild misjudgment of it and him--is that as a poet she does what Charles Olson warned against in his great essay “Projective Verse” (that essay paved the way for and is privileged in the Allen anthology). To use his word, she “sprawls.”¹⁰ Olson, whose poetry on its surface could not be more different from Bronk’s, admired Bronk, most fundamentally

because Olson understood that he was living in a world of fundamental uncertainty in which knowledge was at best provisional, and that the best a human being could hope for was to be able to enjoy what years ago computer programmers termed a *limited look-ahead*, but he also, separately, thought highly of Bronk's ability to craft a poem, surely recognizing it as in keeping with the writing he and others of the Allen anthology represented--since Bronk cared as much as it is possible to care about language.

My AWP acquaintance would never find the time for, does not possess the capacity to attend to, such as this. She doesn't concern herself with lapidary statement (or maybe better to say, as a mutual poet-friend has put it to me, simply, "she doesn't care about language"). Whatever the motivations for the Language poet Ron Silliman's derisive characterizing of a certain segment of the poetry community, which I had wanted to think no longer existed, a community perpetuating a tradition apart from the avant-garde impulse Ezra Pound most of all gave birth to (yes, I know Bronk did not have any use for Pound), Silliman's snarky naming of that other community "The School of Quietude"¹¹ still, today, must be viewed as viable (even as I recognize the quietness of a lot of Bronk's poetry, and even as, alternately, it seems odd to be calling so much of poetry written today "experimental"--notwithstanding, perhaps, the Flarf and Conceptual Poetry movements). It's true that Bronk's voice can be understated, even quiet, and yet it is all the more devastating for its quiet presentation to the reader of the worldless world.

Lately I'd been undecided about the greater American poetry landscape — but thinking about it because of an essay I'm writing for that book I mentioned on poetry since the Allen anthology -- until the doyenne went and declared Bronk "a phony" I had not realized that the chasm is still there, more or less. The poetry emerging after the Second World War was comprised of two streams, one dedicated to Pound's dictum to "make it new" and the other clinging to the comfort of a NeoRomantic vision bolstered by bedrock Newtonian physics and enhanced by the concept of the Enlightenment-sponsored singular and stable Freudian ego that could be plumbed in what now seem to me maudlin ways of limited use by someone like Robert Lowell or Anne Sexton — theirs poetries of limited vision. The poetry of the midcentury was a long time ago, and it's even further back in time to the point at which, say, Werner Heisenberg proposes

Quantum Mechanics and its uncertainty relations. What I have never gotten a whiff of in Bronk's work is nostalgia. He was too honest for that.

The doyenne's dismissal of Bronk as an intellectual is telling — not because she has no appreciation for, maybe gets impatient with, a kind of writing that Olson praised when he wrote, after reading Bronk's poems, "I may have, for the first time in my life, imagined a further succinct life"¹², a statement that comes to appear on the back cover of *The World, the Worldless*. My gut feeling is that her glib dismissal ultimately has to do with a psychological need she has to look away from what Bronk seeks to make plain.

It's interesting that Bronk had no use for Olson's poetry — though increasingly over the years, as a number of readers and acquaintances of Bronk know, he did not think much of or simply could not muster interest in almost everyone's poetry — and surely Olson's work is in *most* ways quite different from Bronk's; yet I think Olson and Bronk shared what I'll suggest was a fundamental world view and a certain understanding and appreciation of language that fit with that view or cosmology. And then there is Robert Creeley, who was said to have disparaged Bronk in *sotto voce* at times, but who also publicly wrote appreciatively of him. And I'll always cherish what was for me an epiphanic moment when I opened a letter from Creeley containing his permission to quote passages of his work in my then upcoming book on Bronk — Creeley had scribbled an encouraging note on the permission page itself, in the margin (here allow me to pose a digressive question: does avant-garde poetry have to inhabit our society's margins?); Creeley ends the inscription with an apostrophe — "World, world!" — in quotes and with the exclamation mark we find in a line from Bronk's poem "In Contempt of Worldliness":

How one comes
to despise all worldliness! World, world!
We cling like animal young to the flanks of the world
to show our belonging; but to be at ease here
in mastery, were to make too light of the world
as if it were less than it is: the unmasterable.¹³

Bronk's *cri de couer* could well have come from the title of George Oppen's

Mountain Review in which Bronk's work also appeared, initially because of Corman, then Creeley, journals that fed the Allen anthology) (Corman said Bronk's work was the "thread that [bound] all the issues [of *Origin*] together").¹⁷

Bronk's spare but potent language, however, proposed a kind of ultimate existential construct that undermined the possibility of a ground, the awareness of which is key in Oppen's poem "World, World —," for instance when Oppen writes, "The self is no mystery, the mystery is / That there is something for us to stand on."¹⁸ We only really appreciate the world, as unreal as Bronk insisted it was, through language proper, a language whose diction and textures, whose rhythms are singular, not to be altered. And I wonder if Bronk's language does not finally account for the problem people have in sticking with Bronk — that is, that the unrelenting, unswerving inquiry Bronk mounts, perhaps unparalleled and in any case on a par with, let's say, Pascal or Beckett — as Henry Weinfield and Paul Auster first noted,¹⁹ respectively — an inquiry whose pleasure is a most distilled, cerebral, and yet aesthetic, engagement for the reader. This reader must make the commitment to staying with Bronk — by exercising no less a cerebral as well as an emotionally charged attention.

Louis Zukofsky, too, was dismissive of Bronk, with just about as much brevity as my poet acquaintance disposed of him in Chicago (but for different reasons), characterizing Bronk's poetry as "All that Stevensian bothering."²⁰ Thus we find Zukofsky, a poet who did very much attend to language — and whose poetry poses challenges that I feel would be suspect in the sort of New Jersey poetry scene suggested by my spoofing of the doyenne. And it's interesting that, like Stevens', Zukofsky's work can be, if not flamboyant then at least texturally and rhythmically sumptuous, creating a sensorium (just what he promises when he situates poetry according to "the upper limit / music").²¹ Decades ago I made a case for why Bronk's poetics was better suited to the skeptical philosophical substrate Stevens' work trades on,²² and frankly I still see my position as plausible, my argument being that Bronk's language in its austerity is more appropriate than Stevens' flamboyance. What I would add here now is how Bronk's poetics of language, if I may term it as such, is finally what daunts readers, and only secondarily is it his philosophical outlook and/or cerebralism (or "intellectualism," if that is appropriate to say); it is not,

moreover, as he has been rightly or wrongly accused of, his gloomy solipsism.²³

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Thus what I'm suggesting, counter-intuitively perhaps, is that Bronk's work is less a continuation of a sensibility established by his direct forbears Frost and Stevens. As regards these two important Modernist influences on Bronk, I would distinguish their work from his first of all on the basis of his concern for the very materiality of language — which is an important factor in comprehending, to my mind, Zukofsky, Oppen, Creeley, Olson, Corman, Levertov, Blackburn, others in the Allen anthology, as well as a great many poets who see themselves or who are seen to be a part of the avant-garde, of course including someone like Silliman.

Bronk is not alone in writing poems whose ultimate pleasure, a pleasure most people become uncomfortable with, lies in the yoking of a radical skepticism with an extremely precise language, a language that must be precise, and this includes an awareness of language's materiality that gave rise to lines like Bronk's pithy stipulation in his poem "The Abnegation" — "I will not / be less than I am to be more human, or less / than human may be to seem to be more than I am" (*LS* 120) — or in this statement from Bronk's poem "The Winter Light": "We are aware / that that isn't all that there is," where in a single line the linguistic particle "that" is used "first as a conjunction, then as a demonstrative pronoun, and then as a relative pronoun" (Kimmelman *The "Winter Mind"* 121). Even so, I am maintaining that one reason why someone like Creeley is anthologized and Bronk is not nowadays is also in part because of the latter's reclusiveness, such as Henry Weinfield and I alluded to in our introduction to the special Bronk issue of *Sagegtrieb* issue in 1988.²⁴

It's possible that within the avant-garde world in which practitioners are arguably more attuned to the creation of language, deliberately "disjunctive" or not, a lot of younger experimental poets, at present unaware of him, might find Bronk of interest and a great pleasure. My use of the term *disjunctive* here is indebted to Peter Quartermain's ground-breaking critical work of twenty years ago, *Disjunctive Poetics*.²⁵ Speaking of the Modernism of Stein and the Objectivists, Quartermain writes that "they challenge[d] our assumptions about

the processes of reading, about what constitutes ‘value’, about knowledge and about ‘knowing’. [Their poems,] decontextualized object[s, created] enormous problems for the reader, and it is the experience of these problems which constitutes that of the poems” discussed in his book (Quartermain 2). Within the context of Quartermain’s thesis, then, I am saying that Bronk’s work can be seen -- though he might be upset to think so -- as akin to the poetry that operated under the sign of the disjunctive.

As provocative and stupendous a claim as I am here maybe making for Bronk — that is, of him as being a disjunctive poet, a poet who, furthermore, abjured the easily won world of neoRomanticism, a world that I guess was alive and well at the recent AWP conference — to see Bronk among the post-war radically experimental poets who embraced him is to begin to gain a peculiar understanding of what he was doing. As well, it is to begin to appreciate fully his achievement. And lastly it is to begin to find a way to gain for his work the recognition it deserves. Here is where he departs from the Frostian neoRomantic tradition as well as the skeptical tradition of a poet like Stevens who did not take the final step that beckoned to him, while Bronk did. I think this claim bears some serious consideration. Bronk disturbs. He staked out a claim for a new realm Stevens referred to as “that absolute foyer beyond Romance.”²⁶ And I think a lot of younger poets welcome inhabiting that place along with Bronk.

NOTES

1. Donald M. Allen, Ed. and Pref., *The New American Poetry, 1945–1960* (New York: Grove Press, 1960).
2. See, e.g., David W. Clippinger, *The Mind’s Landscape: William Bronk and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2006); “Redrawing the Boundaries of Poetry: The Small Journal and the Example of *Maps* (Winter 2001), <http://www.flashpointmag.com/clipnger.htm>; and *Neither Us nor Them: Poetry Anthologies, Canon Building and the Silencing of William Bronk* (Argotist Ebooks, 2012; <http://www.argotistonline.co.uk/Ebooks%20index.htm>).

3. Paris Leary and Robert Kelly, Eds., *A Controversy of Poets* (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1965).
4. Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson, Eds. Robert Frost Intr., *New Poets of England and America* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957).
5. Robert McDowell, Ed. *Poetry After Modernism* (Brownsville, OR: 1991).
6. Reissued in 1998.
7. William Bronk, "No Big Bang," *Bursts of Light: The Collected Later Poems* [hereafter cited as BOL] (Greenfield, MA: Talisman House, Publishers, 2012), p. 255.
8. "Literature is news that STAYS news" (Ezra Pound, from *ABC of Reading* Ch. 1). "It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there" (William Carlos Williams, from *Asphodel, that Greeny Flower*).
9. William Bronk, *The World, the Worldless* (New York: New Directions – San Francisco Review, 1964).
10. "It comes to this: the use of a man, by himself and thus by others, lies in how he conceives his relation to nature, that force to which he owes his somewhat small existence. If he sprawl, he shall find little to sing but himself, and shall sing, nature has such paradoxical ways, by way of artificial forms outside himself. But if he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share. And by an inverse law his shapes will make their own way." Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," *Collected Prose*, Eds. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander, Intr. Robert Creeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 247.
11. See, e.g., Ron Silliman and Thomas A. Vogler. "Ron Silliman Interview [with Thomas A. Vogler]." *The Argotist Online*. Accessed 5 August 2011. <http://www.argotistonline.co.uk/Silliman%20interview.htm>.
12. [1] Olson, Letter to Bronk, 14 September 1964; in the Columbia University archives. This appeared on the front cover flap of the first edition of *Life Supports*.
13. William Bronk, "In Contempt of Worldliness," *Life Supports: New and Collected Poems*, New Edition. 1981. Jersey City: Talisman

- House Publishers, 1997, p. 72; hereafter cited as LS.
14. George Oppen, *This in Which* (New York: New Directions, 1965).
 15. Oppen's letters to Bronk are archived at Columbia University, while Bronk's letters to Oppen are archived at the University of California, San Diego; see also, *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, Ed. and Annot. Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990); and "The World(lessness) of William Bronk and George Oppen," *Sagetrieb: Paideuma* (forthcoming)
 16. William Bronk, *Light and Dark*. Ashland, MA: Origin Press, 1956; 2nd ed., New Rochelle, New York: The Elizabeth Press, 1975.
 17. Cid Corman, *The Gist of Origin 1951-1971* (New York: Grossman/Viking, 1975), p. xxxvi.
 18. George Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, Ed. Intr. Annot. Michael Davidson, Pref. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions, 2002), p. 159; hereafter cited as NCP.
 19. Henry Weinfield, Review of *Life Supports*. *Sulfur* 3 (1982): 238-42; and, Paul Auster, "The Poetry of William Bronk," *Saturday Review* 8 July 1978: 30-31.
 20. Qtd. in Charles Tomlinson, "Objectivists: Zukofsky and Oppen, a Memoir," *Paideuma* 7 (1978), p. 444.
 21. "I'll tell you. / About my *poetics*-- / music / speech // An integral / Lower limit speech / Upper limit music[.]" Louis Zukofsky, "A"-12, "A" (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 138.
 22. Burt Kimmelman, "Centrality in a Discrete Universe: William Bronk's Poetry and Philosophy in Relation to Wallace Stevens," *Sagetrieb: A Journal Devoted to Poets in the Imagist / Objectivist Tradition* 7.3 (Winter 1988): pp. 119-30; see also *The "Winter Mind": William Bronk and American Letters*, Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press / London: Associated University Presses, 1998.
 23. See among others, Norman Finkelstein, *The Utopian Moment in Contemporary American Poetry* Rev. Ed. (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses / Bucknell University Press, 1993); and, John Taggart, *Songs of Degrees: Essays on Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994).
 24. Henry Weinfield and Burt Kimmelman, "Introduction" to William Bronk

- Special Issue, *Sagetrieb: A Journal Devoted to Poets in the Imagist / Objectivist Tradition* 7.3 (Winter 1988): pp. 5-7.
25. Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1992).
26. Wallace Stevens, "Local Objects," *Opus Posthumous*, Ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Vintage / Random House, 1957), p. 112.