

The Late Agnostic:  
William Bronk as Religious Poet

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# **The Late Agnostic: William Bronk as Religious Poet**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the poetry of William Bronk (1918-99). Through close readings of individual texts and broader thematic explorations it demonstrates that Bronk can and should be viewed as a religious poet.

In agreement with previous scholars, via original thematic and formal comparisons of the poets' work, it positions Bronk as a poet of the sublime and a follower of Wallace Stevens. Based initially on distinct differences in the ideas expressed by Bronk and Stevens, it progresses to demonstrate that Bronk should be understood in a context of postmodernity, and reveals key parallels and similarities between his work and that of notable post-structuralist theorists. It offers the first sustained and detailed overview of the unique place that sleep and dreaming hold in his poetry.

These aspects of the discussion variously contribute to a fuller understanding of Bronk as a religious poet. The later chapters of the thesis offer an important overview of the development of his religious outlook, from his first published work in the 1950s to his death in 1999. This is vital to understanding the poetry because previous published criticism has invariably presented a single religious or atheistic stance and overlooked the often contradictory theological dialogue sustained across his poetry. The thesis therefore provides a critical overview of his changing ideas of God, and their interaction with concepts of life and the self, identifying key moments in their development.

Beyond original contribution to the existing knowledge and critical understanding of Bronk's work through original close readings of many poems from across his career, and the hitherto unremarked explorations of its post-structuralist character, the general argument of this thesis – that Bronk is a religious poet of positive agnosticism – will aid all serious readers of his poetry.

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## **A Note on Referencing in this Text**

Except where indicated otherwise, all poems by Bronk are quoted from *Life Supports: New and Collected Poems* (San Francisco: North Point, 1981; New Edition 1997) or *Bursts of Light: The Collected Later Poems* (ed. by David Clippinger) (Greenfield, Mass.: Talisman House, 2013). These are referenced in the text as *LS* and *BOL* respectively, and quotations are given with page numbers. For all other book and journal publications, this thesis uses the Author:Date referencing system, according to MHRA guidelines. Online sources are referenced in footnotes in the text. A full bibliography is included at the end of the work.

## THE LATE AGNOSTIC

Once, I thought I might once know  
some minor thing of the world but a start though.  
That was a long time. There isn't an I  
or a world to know. There is something not known.

*(LS 178)*

## Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

Spiritual influences? “I’m a religious poet, though not formally anything. I love *The Book Of Common Prayer* and *The Cloud of Unknowing*. [...]”  
(capitalisation *sic.*) (Perkins in Clippinger 2001: 36)

The aim of this thesis is to explore and provide original demonstration of the ways in which William Bronk’s writing can and should be understood as religious poetry. Contextualising his work in twentieth-century histories of American poetry and international cultural theory, it provides a significant and original contribution to the understanding of Bronk’s poetry, in terms of its themes and forms, and their concomitant development. It refers to existing critical literature, particularly as a source for extra-textual commentary from the poet himself (as in the quotation directly above), often citing agreement with previous findings and interpretations but also contesting points of detail and general claims. Ultimately its conclusions support the growing appreciation of Bronk as a significant poetic voice, probably the foremost spiritual and meditative English-language poet of his time.

This introductory chapter provides an overview of the current thesis, a discussion of the methodologies used, and a survey of the critical literature consulted. The literature review begins with a brief description of the published primary sources that exist alongside the poetry, these being recordings of Bronk reading and in conversation and transcripts of interviews. It indicates passages from a few key texts that provide a broad contextualisation of Bronk’s work and together give an indication of the currently prevailing critical responses to his poetry, then moves on to consider particular areas of the existing literature that pertain directly to the areas under discussion in the current thesis. The second chapter augments the current understanding of Bronk’s emergence as a follower of Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost by new close readings of texts by Stevens and Bronk, drawing formal and thematic contrasts and connections between the two poetries, giving examples from different periods in Bronk’s career. Using citations from primary theoretical texts and associated critical works, chapter three

positions Bronk as a postmodern poet. It reveals and explores crucial connections between ideas expressed in his work and those found in that of various 'post-structuralist' writers. The fourth chapter views him as a poet of the sublime, examining different understandings of that concept and how they relate to the poetry. Chapter five discusses the important place that sleep and the act of dreaming hold in Bronk's poems, and discusses the effects that his reflective awareness of these phenomena has on the sceptical epistemology that his poetry develops and expresses. The longest individual chapter in this thesis, part six is a survey and discussion of the place of God in Bronk's poetry. Whereas previous critics have inevitably tended to simplify the poet's complex and apparently contradictory points of view in this respect, the chapter uses close readings of key poems and careful assessment of broad themes to reveal and discuss the poet's ongoing changing relationship with the entity and idea of God. Chapter seven then takes these working notions of God and discusses their use in the poetry against and alongside the related but distinct themes of Life and the Self. The concluding chapter draws on the preceding discussion and findings to offer an understanding of the place of faith in Bronk's work, in particular relation to the position of the Eucharist in his poetry.

The principle method of analysis used in this thesis is the close reading of individual poems to reveal and explore textual details, significances and ambiguities. These readings are grouped thematically, and often chronologically throughout a chapter, to trace Bronk's changing use of particular themes, ideas, and words. Across the whole thesis these readings contextualise and illuminate one another, with an understanding of ideas introduced over a series of poems often vital to appreciating a later, shorter text. These close readings are complemented and informed by existing critical and theoretical literature, particularly in the chapters that relate Bronk's work to Wallace Stevens, to post-structuralism and to the sublime, but also in other chapters where the existing body of work on Bronk is cited. Thus some areas of the thesis are driven by the language of the poems themselves, with close readings supported by external literature where appropriate, while others take their momentum from theory and literary criticism, encountering the poetry as it echoes, reflects or challenges the critical ideas. Throughout this study, occasional moments of brief unapologetic



praise for Bronk's work reflect a secondary purpose of this thesis: to demonstrate its author's belief in the unique brilliance of the poetry in question, with the intention that it might reach a wider audience in the UK.

Beyond newspaper and magazine reviews of individual volumes, it is possible to provide a fairly complete survey of the published critical work on Bronk. Such surveys have appeared periodically, including Edward Foster's 'A William Bronk Checklist: a selected bibliography' (Kimmelman & Weinfield 1988) and Burt Kimmelman's 'A William Bronk Bibliography' (1998: 192-197). Since the poet's death the body of critical commentaries has increased, but remains small. The comparative critical neglect of William Bronk has been explored by some who have sought to assess and celebrate his place in the ongoing history of poetry; the single most important work in this respect is David Clippinger's chapter 'Us and Them: Poetry Anthologies, Canon-Building and the Silencing of William Bronk' (Clippinger 2006: 160-184), which discusses Bronk's eventual omission from Donald Allen's 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*.

A lengthy collection of audio recordings of Bronk reading his poetry in 1978 is maintained in the Pennsound online archive administered by the University of Pennsylvania<sup>1</sup>, and in 1992 readings and an interview with Bronk were broadcast as part of the 'Poems to a Listener' series that appeared on American public radio (Lyman & Bronk 1992). Part of the importance of these recordings is that they remind us that Bronk's poems were very much written for performance, and that to limit their consideration to their appearance on the printed page is to do them a disservice. Transcripts of four further interviews (or 'conversations') with Bronk are also available; the first appeared in the magazine *Credences* (Bertholf 1976); next was Weinfield's *A Conversation With William Bronk* in the 1988 *Sagetrieb* special edition (Kimmelman & Weinfield, eds.); Edward Foster's *Conversations with William Bronk* followed (Foster 1989); and Katzman's 1996 interview with Bronk was published in the online magazine *Artzar*<sup>2</sup>. These interviews are useful in revealing how the poet viewed his own work and its influences. In terms of the current study, defining and positioning

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<sup>1</sup> <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Bronk.php> (accessed 29 May 2013)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.artzar.com/interviews/bronkpart1.htm> (accessed 9 March 2011)

Bronk as a religious poet, we should note what he states at the end of that 1996 interview:

BRONK: [...] do you know a book called *The Cloud of Unknowing*?

[KATZMAN:] I've heard of it.

BRONK: 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century.

[KATZMAN:] Mystical Catholic thing?

BRONK: Yeah. Apparently he was a monastic figure. Nobody knows exactly who he is. But it is, very definitely, even though it was written in the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, a 20<sup>th</sup> century book. A great deal of which I wrote, actually. When I read it I'd find whole paragraphs, hey, I wrote this!

Henry Weinfield had already remarked on this connection in "'The Cloud of Unknowing': William Bronk and the condition of poetry' (1988).

As this chapter will indicate, and to read his collected poems confirms, Bronk is a poet of ideas in the most distinct sense (Feld 1972: 49; Weinfield 2009: 126). He deals in the conceptual and ontological far over and above the concrete and visceral, although not entirely to the exclusion of the latter. What is more, the overwhelming majority of his poems carry 'meaning' in the form of a proposition, dialogue or argument, as opposed to having been created to simply stand as objects in themselves or to describe objects in the world. Certainly these meanings can be difficult or impossible to paraphrase, should we even wish to, although several commentators have tried. In fairness to the critic, Weinfield's lengthy "rough paraphrase" of 'Corals and Shells' (LS 70) "with at least some of the ambiguities drawn out" is offered partly as a demonstration of the inadequacy of such an approach (Weinfield 2009: 134). Bronk's poetry is very personal but never confessional in the sense that Berryman's and Lowell's poems were held to be. It avoids mere listing of material and perceptual aspects of individual experience, in favour of sustained enquiry into the source and nature of these. These aspects of the poetry, its absolute grounding in and simultaneous separation from the poet's biographical experience, together with its inherent post-structuralism and its consistent approach to the sublime, are inseparably woven together along with a remarkable linguistic sensitivity and a demonstrable

formal awareness to provide the basis for Bronk's extraordinary poetic achievement.

Unlike many poets who are rightly or wrongly heralded as significant, Bronk's poetry is not and never was of the avant-garde: "He is infinitely more significant as a poet than a bus load of avant-garde experimenters" (Heller 1988: 135). In the term's definition of 'vanguard' or 'leading a movement', Bronk's work would seem to have had insufficient direct influence and inspired too few imitations to qualify. Likewise, its formal innovations are too subtle to represent any sort of break with tradition. However, "he was able to contribute significantly to America's mid-century avant-garde movement in poetry" (Kimmelman 1998: 21; cf. also Kimmelman in Foster & Kimmelman 2013: 124). Such claims need not be considered contradictory because, as Kimmelman and others go on to demonstrate, a considerable measure of this contribution is to be found in the correspondence between Bronk and certain of his contemporaries, most notably George Oppen (Kimmelman 1998: 131-32; Clippinger 2006: 103 *et passim*; Weinfeld 2009: 11-34), and the presence of his early poems in certain magazines, particularly the *Origin* series (Foster 1999: 60; Clippinger 2010: 206-7). In fact, the strength of the poetry's claims to radical importance are heightened by its conservative adherence to an Anglo-American formal lyric tradition (Weinfeld 2009: 108), his subtle and intriguing manipulation of the iambic line notwithstanding. Its development from the start owes a great deal to Frost and particularly Stevens, and apparently takes very little direct influence from the likes of Pound and Zukofsky. In terms of poetics, Bronk was more influenced by his predecessors than by his contemporaries (Foster 1999: 88; Weinfeld 2009: 146), presumably due in part to isolation from any regional 'scene' or academic circuit. Unlike poets such as Ginsberg or Creeley, to name two among many, he never fell in with the academy nor sought to make a financial living by his writing. He worked as a teacher of literature only briefly as a young man (Kimmelman 1998: 15; Gilmore 2006: 115, 121).

Somewhere around the time that his collection *The World, The Worldless* was published in 1964 Bronk found his own poetic voice and a unique contextual paradigm for its operation. His verse had moved away from imitations of Robert Frost (Foster 1988, 114; Grogan 1992: 87; Kimmelman 1998: 96-100; Weinfeld

111) and closer to ground that had been broken by Wallace Stevens (Tomlinson 1972, 45; Corman, 1976: vii; Taggart 1994: 27-9, 33 *et passim*; Kimmelman 1998: 102-16; Hatlen 2001: 108; Weinfield 2009: 114-8), rapidly advancing towards a model of thinking that is unparalleled in modern poetry. By the late 1960s (and this date is not coincidental, in light of global and local political events and their impact on an intellectual culture of which Bronk in upstate New York was at the fringes) he had found the conceptual arena in which he would continue to work. After this date, although there are gradations in tone and form, the essential subject matter of his poetic output remained fairly consistent for the duration of his long career. This is truer of Bronk than of any other major poet and is one of his poetry's principal strengths (Kimmelman 1998: 161) and perhaps its fatal weakness: "There was time for Bronk to reject the circle that forced him into a situation for which, as I believe the poems plainly show, he came to understand there could be no resolution. But he maintains his residence within, a proud figure among his own wreckage." (Taggart 1994: 47)

## **Wallace Stevens**

As further indicated below, others have taken particular exception to the approach to Bronk expressed in Taggart's essay 'Reading William Bronk' (1994: 25-50). Although it makes various valid and interesting criticisms, I too disagree with certain of its claims and value judgments; its strength lies in the explicit connections it draws with Wallace Stevens's work. Within the trajectory of American letters, specifically poets whose verse is concerned with the sublime experience, it is necessary to understand Bronk as a follower of Stevens, chronologically, formally and methodologically. There is general critical consensus that Bronk's early work owed some debt to his reading of Wallace Stevens; Bronk himself states it in certain terms:

I was reading praise of Stevens, and I thought, well, let's see what he's doing. And I was very taken with whatever that book was and went to the bookstore and ordered the earlier things. And that's when I started

sounding like Stevens, I was so taken with his voice. But I don't think there were any ideas influencing me there... It was still a beautiful voice, but what the hell was he saying? (Foster 1989: 28)

Stevens and Bronk were contemporaries, although only just; in the early 1950s their work appeared in separate issues of Cid Corman's *Origin* magazine (Gilmore 2006: 152) when Stevens was an established and celebrated poet and Bronk just commencing his literary career. Although in the statement above Bronk acknowledges the impact that Stevens's poetic language had on his own, he immediately disputes that the poetry's conceptual content had any such influence. Nevertheless we are informed that he had told a friend in an earlier letter: "I had to stop reading Stevens because I couldn't hear my own voice for listening constantly to his" (Bronk to Chuddihy 1978) (Kimmelman 1998: 26; Clippinger 2006: 84) and elsewhere: "I was so overwhelmed by Stevens to the extent that ... I had to stop reading him because I couldn't hear any other voice, or any other way of saying things" (Bertholf 1976: 15).

For some, this connection is considered sufficiently self-evident to be stated plainly and with confidence: "Bronk's epistemological concerns find their source in the work of Wallace Stevens" (Clippinger 2001: 171); "the books in which Bronk moves rapidly towards maturity... are marked by Stevens's characteristically abstract language" (Finkelstein 1988: 33). Eric Hoffman notes that Robert Frost as well as Stevens was an important early influence (Foster & Kimmelman 2013: 73). In some cases, particularly where Bronk's first efforts are concerned, distinction between verbal and conceptual similarities is unnecessary; there are occasional moments where Bronk simply sounds like an imitator of Stevens. John Taggart (1994: 27-8) is not the only critic to remark on the stylistic closeness of Bronk's poem *Her Singing* (LS 25) to Stevens's celebrated 'The Idea of Order At Key West'; Clippinger agrees that Bronk's poem "blatantly echoes" that piece (2006: 81). Weinfield points out the debt that Bronk's 'The Mind's Landscape on an Early Winter Day' (LS 20) owes to Stevens's 'The Snow Man' but concludes: "what Bronk is saying in 'The Mind's Landscape' is so different from what Stevens is saying in 'The Snow Man' that the two poets in this instance are almost at antithetical removes from each other" (Weinfield 2009: 115).

However, by the 1960s the sound of Stevens's voice in Bronk's work had been successfully muted. As we will see, this is manifest in and due to Bronk's preference for straightforward conceptual statement over the building of illustrative scenarios, and his eschewal of a Stevens-type style of florid and sometimes obtuse imagery. Kimmelman's choice of terminology is particularly pertinent: "What may occur after reading Bronk is the understanding that Stevens' poetic thought may not be as grand, or as sublime, as Bronk's concision and quietude" (Kimmelman 1998: 107). Overall, the resultant differences in linguistic style have met with differing assessments by critics:

In fact, what jumps out at a reader when comparing his work with that of Stevens, is an obvious difference in texture. Stevens's language is lush, while Bronk's is austere. Stevens's philosophy is compelling — yet Bronk's is more rigorous and penetrating, in part because of his poems' typically plain speech. (Kimmelman 1998: 26)

Stevens' symbol language and his surface language — all those "whiroos / And scintillating symbols such as children like" — are important beyond their helping us understand Stevens because it is these things that are neither amplified nor adapted in Bronk's otherwise close identification. In disregarding them, Bronk disregards much more. ... (Taggart 1994: 29)

Bronk assumes Stevens' voice to find his own, does find his own and brilliantly, but retains a mistaken version of his master's circle even after the mistake — the result of a necessarily partial assumption — would appear to be recognized out of pride. (Taggart 1994: 49-50)

Weinfield (2009: 108-11) has admirably discredited this particular reading of Bronk as merely a failed acolyte of Stevens, and Norman Finkelstein also refers directly to Taggart's essay when he states that "too much has been made of his links to Wallace Stevens" (1982: 482). However, there is a great deal of truth in the general comparisons that Taggart draws when he describes what Bronk gained from the older poet:

He writes a loose iambic line in a variety of stanza formations; his attitude is aloof, patrician, occasionally clownish. His subject matter remains constant throughout all his poems: a constant meditation on the relation of the imagination and reality. (Taggart 1994: 28)

Weinfield focuses on the shared epistemological foundations of their respective poetries:

... what Bronk took from Stevens was considerable. First of all, on the level of content, Stevens gave him *permission*, as it were, to locate himself as a poet for whom meaning could no longer be transferred by some external religious or philosophical tradition ... Like Stevens, Bronk contemplates a landscape that is metaphorically barren because meaning is dependent on the mind alone (Weinfield 2009: 117)

Considering the similarities in their subject matter, Clippinger's chapter-long comparative analysis, which draws on a wide range of poems, offers the following general statements:

... both poets are drawn to the processes by which meaning is constructed, asserted, discovered, and their poetry often exchanges in the dichotomy of the actual and the real — the explicit conflict between subject and object, mind and matter, imagination and reality... At the core, Bronk and Stevens share a skeptical worldview, which their poetry articulates, albeit in different ways... Ultimately the influence of Stevens upon Bronk manifests not so much in terms of content ... but rather as a poetics predicated upon the fluidity of the "idea of ideas" (Clippinger 2006: 82-83)

This matches Kimmelman's earlier assessment:

... both poets strongly question the possibility of knowing the world in which they live; they doubt whether an empirically based reality is feasible,

or whether such a reality can be known and represented through language.  
(1988: 119)

Comparing Bronk's 'The Smile of the Face of a Kouros' (*LS* 66) to Stevens's 'Sunday Morning', Kimmelman explains how Bronk's "view is the exact opposite of Stevens'... [he] chooses to value puzzlement and formlessness rather than to celebrate any delusory promise of form" (1988: 127). Then, finally synthesising the issues of style and content: "Stevens' images suggest an ontological fullness while they inappropriately describe the emptiness of *being*. Bronk, however, reflects emptiness in a succinct poetic, one true to its vision" (Kimmelman 1988: 129).

Further findings on the nature of Bronk's break from Stevens are based in the latter's own assertions, and form an accurate assessment of a key theoretical separation between the two:

Stevens remarks, "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe it willingly." [*Opus Posthumous* 189] Such a will to power leads Stevens to assert, "It is the belief and not the God that counts." [*Ibid.* 188] Such a stance proposes the merging of the fictive and the real: "What it seems / It is and in such seeming all things are." [Stevens 339] Bronk ascribes no such power to the fictive: all truths are man-made and therefore cannot transcend their fictionality regardless of the force of belief. (Clippinger 2006: 84)

As will be shown through the discussions in chapters two and three of the current thesis, Bronk's understanding that "all truths are man made" corresponds with his essentially postmodern outlook and therein lies the important separation and progression from the attitude sanctioned by Stevens.

## **The Sublime**



Burton Hatlen's essay 'William Bronk and the Sublime' (Clippinger 2001: 107-32) is illuminating, and is particularly remarkable for its theorising of two distinct strands of twentieth-century American poetry, each based in one Kantian class of the sublime, that are ultimately tied together in Bronk's work. As the above discussion reveals, Hatlen is not the only commentator to have noted the influence made on Bronk by Stevens. As he rightly appreciates and demonstrates, one important connection between the two poets is their handling of sublimity as a theme in and motivation for their work. However, we come to realize that Bronk's poetry represents a movement deeper into territory that his predecessor opened but never fully explored, and this will be further explored in chapters two and four of this thesis.

Weinfield makes passing reference to the idea of the sublime in the following revealing statement:

Although Bronk's confrontation with formlessness marks him as a poet of the sublime, what is finally most telling in *The World, The Worldless* is its turn to the beautiful – or, more precisely, the dialectical tension between the sublime and the beautiful in the book. Kant associates the beautiful with ordered forms ... But the *experience* of the beautiful is not orderly or formal but, in its own way, ineffable – “as though we could say of music only, it is.” [LS 61] If anything, the experience of the beautiful is more complexly ambivalent in Bronk than that of the sublime: it emerges out of feelings of acceptance, reconciliation, and pleasure, but also, at the same time, sadness. (Weinfield 2009: 129)

The passage above first of all indicates that Bronk's status as a “poet of the sublime” can almost be taken as self-evident. The claim is made confidently with no detailed explanation from the critic, except in comparative terms contrasting the notion to “the beautiful”; it is enough to state that an unspecified concern with “formlessness” marks him as such. Weinfield may indeed be correct that in 1964 when *The World, The Worldless* appeared Bronk's reflections on beauty were still better realised or “more complexly ambivalent” than his response to personal and wider cultural apprehensions of the sublime. However, he fails to note how this

focus shifts as the poet's career progresses. The discussion throughout this thesis will demonstrate that this perceived privileging of the beautiful is certainly not the case throughout the development of Bronk's career.

The Kantian distinction between the mathematical and the dynamic sublime is used as a foundation for Burton Hatlen's essay (2001) which uses the definition offered by Terry Eagleton, regarding the concept as an historical phenomenon which came to prominence in the eighteenth century and is associated with "broad cultural currents" of that time. Hatlen comments on certain of Bronk's poetic predecessors and the affinities and dissimilarities between his work and theirs, separating his selection into two traditions according to their approach to the sublime, referred to as the "eternal ungraspable totality". These groups he divides according to a Kantian model of the dynamical and the mathematical sublime; the former being in the Stevens tradition and including Emerson and Frost, who by use of metaphor seek to bridge the gap between the self and the world; and the latter in the tradition of Pound, but including Wordsworth, Shelley and Whitman as well as Olson, Creeley and Oppen, all metonymically moving towards the unsayable by increments. He finds that in his approach to the sublime Bronk represents a synthesis between these two groups, and "refuses the totalizing gestures" of either. As part of his argument, in the second half of the essay Hatlen considers God's place in the poetry and is able to confidently dismiss him as a metaphor:

Bronk is sometimes willing to invoke a traditional religious vocabulary in talking about the mystery that stands over against us, but the status of the vocabulary seems equivocal. (...) More often ... Bronk denotes the mystery that stands over against us, not as "God," but as "reality" or "the world" or even simply as "it" ... (Hatlen 2001: 120)

However, as the examples and discussion given in later chapters (particularly chapter six) of this thesis will illustrate, there is a movement in Bronk's poetry from the idea of the sublime towards that of 'God' that cannot always be simply dismissed as "equivocal".

## God and Religion

A main purpose of this thesis is to provide original discussion of the place of God in Bronk's work in order to better understand the religious outlook that his poems express. Two fairly early Bronk poems appear in Harold Bloom and Jesse Zuba's anthology *American Religious Poetry* (2006: 348-50); of these two poems, 'The Mind's Limitations are Its Freedom' (LS 125-6) has received very little commentary (but see Kimmelman 1998: 158-60), while several critics have mentioned 'Virgin and Child with Music and Numbers' (LS 45) in support of various arguments and observations. Kimmelman (1998: 163) includes it in his discussion of music as a theme in Bronk's early work; Corman quotes the final five lines in his survey of *The World, The Worldless*, but perhaps negligently does not quote the passage to which he refers when he mentions:

In one of the letters quoted above Bronk made slashing allusion to the meaninglessness of the notion of God to him – and yet the word "Baby" brings back the feeling of the sacred – the wholeness all seek with wholeness. (Corman 1976: 30)

On a similar note, Charles Tomlinson concludes his very short essay 'A Note on William Bronk and Place' with a suggestion concerning the final words of the poem's last line: "that 'even so' prevails, entailing, if you like, an act of faith." (1972: 46), and Burton Hatlen's reading of the poem focuses on the balance of "joy" and "despair" in its content (Clippinger 2001: 119). Gilmore informs us that George Oppen particularly admired this poem, and quotes some correspondence relating to it, most significantly the following statement from Bronk, writing to Oppen in 1962: "I concede that I am not a Christian and don't often write on Christian themes..." (Gilmore 2006; 218-19) What seems crucial in this statement, however, is the word "often", for as Foster also notes (Foster & Kimmelman 2013: 65) there are a significant handful of poems where he does just that, and handles those themes with a sensitivity unusual among the ranks of the irreligious.

Returning to Hatlen's essay, and to Bronk's collection *That Tantalus* (1971), we find that Hatlen has made a less than complete survey here. His figures are inaccurate and his conclusions are questionable:

... I looked through the collection *That Tantalus*, collecting explicit religious references. The word "God" appears four times in this sequence and "Christ" once; but one use of "God" and the use of "Christ" are exclamations, "Dear God" (LS 108) and "Good Christ" (LS 103), while one "God" is a heartfelt "God help us" (LS 112). One use of "God" is heavily ironic: the poem titled "Of the Several Names of God" actually invokes none of those names and says nothing about God. And one is clearly negative: "it was plain that there never was to be / the City of God" (LS 117). More interestingly, in one poem Bronk invokes the passage in Exodus in which God speaks to Moses out of the burning bush. But what interests Bronk here is God's tautological (and thus logically absurd) self-definition... (Clippinger 2001: 120)

In fact, there are at least five named mentions of God in the collection; Hatlen appears to have overlooked 'That Something There is Should Be' (LS 111). Furthermore, in their contexts there is no reason to assume that "God help us" (from 'Making It', LS 112) is any more heartfelt or less of a footnote than "Dear God" (from 'Where We Are; Or Getting There is Only Half the Fun', LS 107/8). What these figures should indicate is that God is gradually becoming more of a concern within Bronk's writing at this stage in his life, although this concern remains peripheral. Noting here that either Hatlen or the typesetters have misrepresented the name of the poem<sup>3</sup>, in chapter six we will examine the claim that 'Of The Several Names Which Are God's' "actually says nothing about God".

"In Our Image, After Our Likeness" (LS 30-31) has been discussed by Finkelstein in some depth (2001: 208-10). It takes its title from the biblical account of God's creation of man (Genesis 1: 26); in the title to Bronk's poem we should note the inverted commas indicating direct speech and thus a level of

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<sup>3</sup> cf. the quotation above, *sic*. They have also inverted the words "was never" (from 'Civitas Dei', LS 117).

removal between poet and subject matter, which he is reporting rather than experiencing. Later poems (including 'The Being', discussed below) will find a shift to a more involved stance. Among this class of poems, 'Virgin and Child with Music and Numbers' has drawn the most attention from various scholars (see above). This is a twenty-one line address to Mary, Christ's mother, which deals with the mysteries of music and mathematics, framed by the very human love and fear surrounding the flight into Egypt (Matthew 2: 13-23). The intimations of betrayal and broken promises that the poet imagines Mary to have felt during this episode are universal: "We are not / fulfilled. We cannot hope to be."

Recognised as a landmark poem within Bronk's oeuvre, the poem 'On *Credo Ut Intelligam*' (LS 88-89) is referenced more than once during this current thesis. It has rightly been the object of considerable scholarly attention, most notably Ernest's careful study: "Bronk confronts Anselm not to dismiss faith, but to examine the terms upon which faith must be founded" (Ernest, 1988: 146). Tom Lisk calls the poem's central tenet "a brave but humble assertion" (Clippinger 2001: 151), and Don Adams' short essay 'Pleading the Permanence of Ignorance: The Poetry of William Bronk' refers to it as Bronk's "most explicit statement regarding his vocation as a poet" (Clippinger 2001: 134). Kimmelman (1998: 66-68 & 179-80) returns to the poem when expounding on the concept of 'worldlessness' in Bronk's writings. When Hatlen mentions it, however, he is guilty of putting words into Bronk's mouth:

... in "On *Credo Ut Intelligam*": "Reality is what we are ignorant of" (LS 89). To Bronk, anyone who claims knowledge of the real is guilty of idolatry: the worshipper of God is always worshipping an image constructed by the human will — and therefore false. Not only shalt thou not make a graven image of God, Bronk tells us; thou shalt not even make a *verbal* image. (Clippinger 2001: 121)

Yet it is possible to approach the poem from a different, more sympathetic view; not a prohibition on verbal expression, but a personal meditation and reflection on the individual's realisation that any construct or representation is an inadequate expression of our deeper intimations and concerns. This

representation might be of God or otherwise, but it is important to note that it is belief, neither belief in everything nor in anything specific, that the poem rejects, and that God is not mentioned in the verse.

Hints of a willingness or desire to approach this nameless something persist through *Silence and Metaphor* (1975), notably in 'Where It Ends' (*LS* 161) which for Corman "brings to epitome all the poems of light and trees" (1976: 96) and of which Finkelstein says:

The poet is so swept up by his luminous vision that here he gives himself entirely to its expression .... breaking into the common expression of astonishment in what becomes, ironically, a religious poem in spite of itself. (1982: 490)

Clippinger refers to 'Where it Ends' in his discussion of light as a theme in Bronk's work; using recognisably religious language to describe its function, he sees light in this poem as:

a transcendental signifier of the 'real' world (marking) the boundary beyond which humans cannot cross... Light reveals infinity as well as the finitude of humanness; it is the intensity of joy and the recognition of the depth of despair. (Clippinger 2006: 59)

As Finkelstein (1982: 490) rightly points out, "oh Jesus Christ! This light!" is a secular colloquialism and not a declaration of Christian devotion, but the connection with the divine light (John 8:12 etc.) cannot be overlooked. We can and probably should read 'Where it Ends' as some sort of religious celebration. Elsewhere in the same collection in the poem 'The Lover As Not The Loved' the poet says "I stood on the bridge by the T / in the late faint light, worshipping" (*LS* 157).<sup>4</sup> Daniel Leary persuasively argues that here "the 'love of God' is ... the mystery which Bronk is talking about", finding that this poem describes "an arc of yearning inquiry which opens into a revelation of the love and grace of God" (Foster & Kimmelman 2013: 147, 149).

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<sup>4</sup> The "T" is a local junction of two canals; (cf. Gilmore 2006: 300).

Meanwhile, Edward Foster might not be wrong in claiming “[Bronk’s] work reaches conclusions that are notably Augustinian and Calvinistic” (Foster & Kimmelman 2013: 66-67) but in trying to claim some sort of Christianity for Bronk by drawing out certain philosophical points of comparison with those two towering theological figures, his essay overlooks the huge and crucial fact that unlike Bronk they both attested actual belief in the resurrected Jesus Christ as God incarnate. In reference to one particular poem, Weinfield suggests that for Bronk “the structures and strictures of Calvinism remain intact — although, ironically, not only Christianity but God himself has disappeared” (2009: 138). Foster also dismisses the suggestion that Bronk was “a secular humanist or an agnostic. He was neither” (Foster & Kimmelman 2013: 65). This is partly a question of semantics, of course, but while the body of this thesis is little concerned with the charge of ‘secular humanism’ it stresses throughout Bronk’s positive enquiring sort of agnosticism.

## **Dreams**

Alongside the discussion of religious ideas in Bronk’s poetry, this thesis gives prominence to the place of dreams and sleeping in his work. In chapter five substantial attention is paid to the implications that these phenomena have for epistemology and Bronk’s conceptions of knowledge and certainty. Only a couple of previous critics have noted the important and unique role of dreaming and sleep in the world-view expressed in Bronk’s poetry. Kimmelman’s discussion of the topic is brief, though he notes that “Bronk has written many poems about dreaming, and does not take the fact of dreaming lightly” and suggests that “in dreams Bronk may enjoy perhaps the most authentic rendezvous with himself” (1998: 133), observing that for Bronk the world as perceived in the dream is revealed as more exact, definable and even tangible than the pre-existent object world from which it departs. Thus when he mentions ‘The Dream of a World of Objects’ (cf. chapter five of this thesis) Kimmelman remarks that “the awake world... is all unsurety, without the palpable and dependable” (1998: 134). This is a fair reading; one which places the waking experience at the centre of the poem’s

concern. The dream is not explored or deciphered, it is held up as a measure or distorting mirror to the ordinary, but importantly in the terms of the current discussion it is one which we can, if only in the recollection, grasp in what remains of its entirety and speak of with confidence.

In the essay 'The Ones We Meet Asleep: William Bronk and the limits of dreaming' (Foster & Kimmelman 2013: 45-58), when he positions Bronk "at the cusp of ... our post-secular movement" (46) seeking "communion with the unknown" (47), Joseph Donahue begins to suggest the obscure but crucial links between dreaming and theology in Bronk's poetry. In findings somewhat similar to those discussed in chapter five of this current thesis, Donahue notes the unique nature of the dream within Bronk's poetry: "the one narrative that cannot be made consequential, that cannot therefore be disparaged" (57). That essay provides useful and interesting readings of several individual poems and is to be commended.

## Poetic Form

This thesis offers no original appraisal of Bronk's general use of poetic form *per se*, although discussions of individual poems and groups of poems often rest heavily on analysis of structural technique and its relationship with the content of the work. Several previous critics have offered valuable analyses concerning aspects of Bronk's poetic style, including but not limited to Grogan (1992) and Weinfield (in Clippinger 2001); some of these are referenced at relevant points throughout this study.

However, the impression gained from reading these works and most of the others cited in this review of the existing literature is that critics have a great deal more to say about Bronk's earlier (pre-1980s) work than the later books. It must be granted that this is not universally true, and that the recent volume *William Bronk in the Twentieth Century* (Foster & Kimmelman 2013) is somewhat more balanced in its coverage, with particularly Weinfield's essay 'Late Bronk' (Foster & Kimmelman 2013: 183-95) counting as an important exception. However, there is nonetheless a sense that at times some of the later Bronk volumes have been



regarded as interchangeable and even expendable components of an unshapely mass of shorter poems that constitutes Bronk's later work. Weinfield finds the cause of this shapelessness in Bronk's abandoning of structured verse forms:

The struggle for form, perhaps never fully organic, had for so long been conducted through fixed forms that when the external edifice is abandoned as an organizing principle, there is no longer any *room* for formal development. ... in the majority of poems the line has gone slack and the tensile strength so evident in the great work has disappeared. (Weinfield 2009: 176-7)

It is true that it is easier for a critic to write more about a longer poem containing more obvious literary techniques, and this current thesis will inevitably exemplify this again. While it is probably true that the earlier work offers more interest and appeal at a variety of levels, sidelining the latter half of Bronk's output does it a disservice. Yet as an example, by no means atypical, in a recent review of Bronk's achievement, Weinfield devotes over sixty pages to readings of the first ten collections (those which appear in *Life Supports*). By contrast, barely four pages cover the totality of the eleven volumes covering the period 1985-1999, with the majority of this space devoted to a single three-line poem (Weinfield 2009: 107-79).

Here at the conclusion to the introductory chapter it is necessary to acknowledge a conscious attempt in this thesis to address this imbalance by focusing at times on later shorter poems which have had comparatively little previous attention. By doing so this study is able to observe the overarching development of Bronk's changing religious attitudes, providing a unique and original discussion of their effect over his whole career as opposed to the snapshots that other studies have offered. Thus the next chapter, which discusses aspects of Wallace Stevens's influence on Bronk's writing, will consider poems from fairly early and quite late in Bronk's career.

## Chapter 2: Wallace Stevens (and Robert Frost)

Inevitably, Bronk's writing diverged from the path that Stevens opened for him. While both poets are remarkable for continuing to handle, more or less, the same few themes for the duration of their careers, there are fundamental differences in their discoveries. This chapter offers a reading of Bronk's 'There is Ignorant Silence at the Center of Things' against Stevens's 'The Ultimate Poem is Abstract', thus augmenting the current critical understanding of the relationship between the two poets' works, by contrasting and comparing their respective approaches to the sublime. The discussion also points out a small but significant expression of the debt to Robert Frost that Bronk owed and apparently recognised. In pursuing the contrast and comparison of his poetry with Bronk's, two further examples from Stevens are considered. One is a fairly early poem, 'Study of Two Pears', while 'Not Ideas About the Thing, but the Thing Itself' is from towards the end of his writing life. Both are fairly well-known pieces, having been the subject of various critical studies, and for this reason the readings below are limited to certain points that bear particular relevance to Bronk's work.

Before comparing specific poems by Stevens and Bronk in more detail, and in addition to the various findings summarised in the literature review, I should like to draw attention to a very short extract from one of Stevens's major works, 'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction'. That this is a selected extract not a full text has bearing on an important differentiating feature which previous comparisons of Stevens and Bronk have left unstated; the major poems in which Stevens lays out his epistemological and ontological concerns tend to be much longer pieces than any poetry that Bronk produced. This has the effect of allowing Stevens to provide illustration and pursue deviations within individual poems, whereas Bronk's works are in general and by necessity more singular in their focus. Certainly Stevens produced several notable and powerful shorter lyrics, but unlike almost all of Bronk's verse, these almost always rely on the introduction of dramatic characters or specific concrete imagery (cf. Brown 1970: 63). Frequently for Stevens a shorter piece will illustrate or restate the standpoint or manifesto that has been laid out in other longer verse, as with the example of 'The Ultimate Poem is Abstract' given below, which relies on an awareness of 'Notes Towards a

Supreme Fiction' for a fuller appreciation. Conversely, Bronk develops and expresses his ideas via an accretion of shorter pieces, followed by a distillation of the same.

'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction' is well over 600 lines long, far in excess of any verse Bronk ever produced. Towards the end of its third and final section the narrator prophesies or desires a future time:

...To find the real,  
To be stripped of every fiction except one,

The fiction of an absolute ...

(Stevens 1990: 404)

This hitherto undiscovered "real" is hardly less a constant theme for Stevens than it is for Bronk, and the idea of stripping away fiction is certainly present in the latter's work too, as will be discussed further in the next chapter of this thesis. Yet crucially Bronk exceeds Stevens's vision and desire in that he would also strip us of that one "fiction of an absolute". Put another way, as Kimmelman has rightly stated: "Rather than cling to the world before him, as Stevens seems to be doing when he speaks of the Supreme Fiction of that world, Bronk realises its unreality" (Kimmelman 1998: 105).

'The Ultimate Poem is Abstract' (Stevens 1990: 429-30), appeared in the 1950 collection *The Auroras of Autumn*. The following analysis of that poem reveals certain features typical of Stevens's work that contrast with Bronk's, whose poem 'There is Ignorant Silence in the Center of Things' from *The World, The Worldless* (1964) is then considered in comparison. Verbally and stylistically 'The Ultimate Poem is Abstract' offers immediate resonance with Bronk's poetry, due in part to the comparatively high frequency of abstract nouns in the text. This is hardly atypical of Stevens, but for all his rightful claims to be considered a poet of ideas, much of his poetry is firmly located in a world of things and objects.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> A glance through the *Collected Poems* will confirm this claim. Stevens's method of using objects to allow his ideational verse to take shape is complex but essentially twofold; noumenal ideas of things provide subjects for image and metaphor, and actual objects in

poem by Stevens is centred on the abstract ideas of “intellect” and “communication” but is nonetheless and is ultimately driven by a desire to be meaningfully immersed in that world of things.

‘The Ultimate Poem is Abstract’ is a fairly late Stevens poem, from the penultimate collection written and published in his lifetime. The three-line stanzas had become a favoured form by this stage, although by no means exclusively so, and the particular cadences of the enjambed and loosely iambic line provide a simultaneously musing and declamatory rhythm, which is quite typical. As its title suggests, it is in one important sense a poem about poetry, one of several such pieces that Stevens produced, and it thereby represents a stage in his career when his writing became explicitly self-reflective. The poem has attracted some attention from critics pursuing an overview of Stevens’s career. In an account that reads Stevens as operating in a sort of perpetual reconfiguration of Keats, Helen Vendler describes this poem as:

a second-order reflection on the inevitability of questions... a rewriting, at a second-order level, of a Keatsian ode; it recounts in an abstract way Keats’s attempt to remain “at the middle” of the beautiful world, praising its generosity to all the senses, its plenitude of being (Vendler 1980: 36)

The description “second-order” is not being unkind; it refers to a step back in reflective stance, a reflection on a reflection. Another commentator has observed in this poem features typical of Stevens at work:

... in one of his favourite rhetorical maneuvers, Stevens works hard to overwrite the optative character of his fantasy by paratactically heaping up reformulations and exemplifications of a state of well-being (Eeckhout 1964: 191)

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the world are a starting point for reflection and meditation. By contrast, Bronk can and certainly does take inspiration from the phenomenal world, but his style is remarkable and even unique in his persistent refusal to illustrate ideas through metaphors. For a fuller discussion of the importance of objects in Stevens’s poetry, cf. eg. Vendler 1986: 6-9.

From this same review we can also note an important aspect of the poem, that despite its title, according to its own terms this is not the 'ultimate poem'; it is a poem about that and its pursuit, as Bart Eeckhout explains:

Language itself is too helplessly at the edge to pull this off. At most it can only hint at what this enormous enjoyment might be; it can only provide us with a vague *sense* of it, point *toward* it, and in the act of hinting, in the act of writing a poem about this hinting, not only *provide* a sense of it but *make* sense of it for us, now, here, who have not yet succumbed to the ultimate abstraction that is death. (Eeckhout 1964: 192)

The title 'The Ultimate Poem is Abstract' refers us to the first part of Stevens's own 'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction' ("*It must be abstract*"; Stevens 1990: 380), but neither there nor in this piece does the poet specify precisely what "abstract" is and how the term should be understood. At the simplest level this title may mean that the "ultimate poem", the very best or the very last, will deal with ideas not things. More likely it will itself be an idea, not a thing; it will be separate in its form and subject from the world of things, abstracted from the world. Removed from the actuality of poetry, non-existent as a thing, we experience it in the pursuit of a sort of noumenal or Platonic ideal. By apparently describing an imperfect poem, and being one itself, the poem's meaning remains open. Its content may support any or all of these ideas to some extent, but hardly makes their detail any clearer. By the title's claim, if we are to take it seriously, this is the product of a poet who feels qualified, at least within his own schema, to dictate the terms of what poetry is or should be.

The question that opens the first line offers the reader a startling half-complete image, and the narrator's subsequent reflection on the question introduces the character and situation that operate as a point of departure for the poem's rhetorical musings. There follows a brief measure of lyric inventiveness, iambic and alliterative, seeming to describe an archetypal poet's stuttering attempts at 'nature poetry'. The second stanza explains the relative importance within the poem of the question over its answer; we must presume at least on one level that "the particular question" is that in the first line, as this is revisited in the

next stanza. However, there is also an implied suggestion concerning the wider value of continued enquiry versus settled belief:

This day writhes with what? The lecturer  
On This Beautiful World Of Ours composes himself  
And hems the planet rose and haws it ripe,

And red, and right. The particular question—here  
The particular answer to the particular question  
Is not in point—the question is in point.

The third stanza takes us back to the initial question, but can only do so via qualification (“If the day writhes, it is not with revelations / One goes on asking questions”) and negative description; rather than offering any positive answer it reinforces the inevitability of questioning. In terms of the scenario involving “the lecturer”, who is probably some non-specific quasi-Keatsian poet (cf. Vendler 1980: 36), this would appear to be a comment on the inadequacy of nature poetry if not of language itself. The day may “writhe” in the terms of the constructed scenario but the metaphor will never be a complete representation. This stanza also introduces a vague term without any clear prior referent, leaving us to wonder quite what is one of which “categories”. The “placid space” could be that created by the hemming and hawing of the lecturer’s composition, or possibly even this poem itself (which excludes the self-referential possibility of these being the same thing), were it not for the confusion brought about by the pronouns “It” in the fourth stanza. It is not clear whether these two occasions of “It” are equivalent, and whether the “intellect” or some other “placid scene” therefore lacks blueness, nor how far an understanding of Stevens’s personal symbolic code<sup>6</sup> might help us decipher this. Certainly there is reference to a change in perception or interpretation, as if the purity of something’s blueness relies on the observer’s complete agreement with its claim to blueness:

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<sup>6</sup> “Throughout Stevens’ poetry green is an indicator for the pure poetry ... blue [is the] color of sky-imagination (see “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” “Holiday in Reality,” “Sea Surface Full of Clouds”)” (Taggart 1994: 29).

That, then, is one  
Of the categories. So said, this placid space

Is changed. It is not so blue as we thought. To be blue,  
there must be no questions. It is an intellect  
Of windings round and dodges to and fro,

In the fourth and fifth stanzas there is description of a non-linear “intellect” at work and, in the same spatial terminology, of the failures (“wrong obliques and distances”) in reasoning and imagination that this brings. Then a further instance of negative description (“Not an intellect in which we are fleet”) followed by a somewhat obscure image: as apparently no dictionary lists the compound noun “cloud-pole” we should assume it is Stevens’s own creation:

Writhings in wrong obliques and distances,  
Not an intellect in which we are fleet: present  
Everywhere in space at once, cloud-pole

Of communication.

Albeit this is a poet being imaginative and inventive rather than willfully problematic, allowing the reader’s imagination to meet with or diverge from his own, what is singularly remarkable is the treatment (or rather the avoidance) of the metaphor by other critics. As has been stated, “The Ultimate Poem is Abstract” is hardly a famous poem, but it has received some attention in academic circles. In the case of this one very brief phrase, these discussions have invariably entirely ignored it or merely assumed that its meaning is self-explanatory or unimportant; thus Eeckhout, for example, can refer to “the dynamic centrality of a swift yet omnipresent ‘cloud-pole / of communication’” (Eeckhout 1964: 191) but neglects to suggest what, if anything, this construction actually signifies. This observation is not intended as a criticism of previous scholarly works, but indicates a

particular feature of Stevens's work; his tendency to introduce potentially confusing imagery alongside the poetry's already complex ideas.<sup>7</sup>

The concluding pair of stanzas declaim the unmet desire for centrality and therefore completion, and finish on a note of sensory joy, which, even if it cannot entirely be realized, provides solace by being imagined. They position human existence, in the sense of intellectual and emotional experience, at a periphery, without entirely stating to what it is peripheral. By direct reference back to the initial scenario, these stanzas provide the poem with a unifying conclusion, and simultaneously present an opening-out into unspecified possibility. A significant difference from the original view of "This Beautiful World of Ours", a view which the poem has discredited, is expressed in the preposition positioning us relative to it; where the poem opened with the dominance lent by "On" here the discussion is of being "In", part of rather than external to the world and its beauty:

It would be enough  
If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed  
In This Beautiful World Of Ours and not as now,  
  
Helplessly at the edge, enough to be  
Complete, because at the middle, if only in sense,  
And in that enormous sense, merely enjoy.

This shift in perspective may indeed describe a movement away from "false sublimines, with their attendant false effort toward the grand style" (Vendler 1980: 6), but the construct could be similarly viewed to represent a change in focus from poetry's attempting to achieve the transcendent to its formulating an awareness of the sublime. The rejected idea in the fifth stanza of "an intellect... present / Everywhere in space at once" is explicitly transcendent; the implicitly unattainable nature of the final possibility of centrality confirms the poem's address to the sublime. Verbally represented by an implied shift in space, the

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<sup>7</sup> Of course the imagery serves to create the poetry, and to introduce or illustrate the ideas. The issue is raised here in order to contrast Stevens's work with Bronk's, in whose poetry ideas and imagery have a very different relationship.



notion of a presence “On” or “In” the World to access these respective possibilities exposes the spatial metaphor at work in the etymologies of the terms ‘transcendent’ and ‘sublime’.<sup>8</sup>

If challenged to state what this poem is about, one might opt for ‘a blue sky’ or ‘the inadequacies of poetry’, but while navigating the salient themes and devices of ‘The Ultimate Poem is Abstract’, the above discussion has illustrated the difficulty in finding or constructing a single consistent and coherent narrative or linear train of thought through one of Stevens’s poems. In the poem’s own words, Stevens’s poetry is the product of “an intellect / Of windings round and dodges to and fro”. Of course there is no necessity for poetry to allow readers the comfort of such simple interpretative gestures, and furthermore there are a good many Stevens poems where this kind of reading is possible. His style is not obtuse and fragmented in the fashion of certain other poets with whom he shared an era, but even this poem shows a diversity of imagery that is absent from nearly all Bronk’s work. This imagery can demand an effort of interpretation from the reader, as with the instances of “blue” and “cloud-pole” above, a feature which reflects one of Weinfield’s observations:

there is very little ambiguity of the Stevensian kind in Bronk’s work... we might say that the difficulties of this poetry resides mainly in the complexity of its ideas — not (as frequently is the case in Stevens’s work) in the difficulty of establishing the author’s intentions.

(Weinfield 1998: 116-17)

There are moments where ‘The Ultimate Poem is Abstract’ sounds like it might have come from Bronk’s pen, but tellingly these are the parts that deny the possibility of imagery in its usual sensory and phenomenal aspects. The condensed repetition of its second stanza (“The particular question—here / The particular answer to the particular question / Is not in point—the question is in point”) seems to explicitly prefigure occasional passages, from *The World, The Worldless* in particular, where Bronk employs similar lexical technique and

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<sup>8</sup> Respectively: trans- ‘beyond’, scandere ‘to climb’; sub- ‘up to’, limen ‘lintel’ (cf. Oxford English Dictionary).

content to comparable effect. For instance, from ‘The Truth As Known’:

... we could ask  
— who? — almost anybody, what’s  
it all about? Yet, asking, not  
wait for an answer, or getting one, part  
of one, suspect it, scoff... (*LS* 34)

or ‘The Outcry’: “...because the point / was not the point, because the world, or  
what / we took for the world, is breaking...” (*LS* 64).

In the same way, based on its music and its conceptual content, most of  
that Stevens poem’s final sentence, carried across the last two stanzas, could  
conceivably have made its way into any Bronk collection of 1960s or 70s:

...It would be enough  
If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed  
In This Beautiful World Of Ours and not as now,  
  
Helplessly at the edge, enough to be  
Complete, because at the middle, if only in sense...

In sound and content, these lines bear a definite similarity to the ending of Bronk’s  
‘There is Infinite Silence in the Centre of Things’, discussed below. One can  
compare their sound and form with a passage such as this, from ‘How  
Indeterminacy Determines Us’, taking into account variable stress patterns, multi-  
clausal grammatical structure, the first-person plural subject and an overall tone  
of resignation:

... the world is ours;  
it is only ours; others that move there,  
or seem to, are elsewhere, are in another world,  
their world; only we see from time to time  
— shattered, as though we were nothing, or not

stable — sometimes we see what they see,  
no world we know...

(LS 57)

However, although Bronk is certainly capable of ending a despairing poem on a note of hope, it is difficult to imagine the final line of Steven's piece ("And in that enormous sense, merely enjoy") concluding any of Bronk's poems. This is not because personal enjoyment is always alien to his worldview, for he is capable of celebrating individual emotion: eg. "I want to cry my wild happiness" (*BOL* 43). Its dissimilarity from Bronk's position is found in the scale it employs, the unlikely idea of enjoyment providing recompense or atonement in an "enormous sense", in a world where "... nothing matters that we are or do" (*LS* 210).

By contrast with Stevens's poem, there is little "enjoyment" in Bronk's piece, below. Instead there is a sort of disjointed uncertainty, after the bewildering act of confronting the ineffable:

#### THERE IS IGNORANT SILENCE IN THE CENTER OF THINGS

What am I saying? What have I got to say?  
As though I knew. But I don't. I look around  
almost in a sort of despair for anything  
I know. For anything. Some mislaid bit.  
I must have had it somewhere, somewhere here.  
Nothing. There is silence here. Were there people,  
once? They must have all gone off. No, there are still  
people, still a few. But the sound is off.  
If we could talk, could hear each other speak  
could we piece something, could we learn and teach, could we know?

Hopeless. Off in the distance, busyness.  
Something building or coming down. Cries.  
Clamor. Fuss at the edges. What? Here,  
at the center — it is the center? — only the sound

of silence, that mocking sound. Awful. Once,  
 before this, I stood in an actual ruin, a street  
 no longer a street, in a town no longer a town,  
 and felt the central, strong suck of it, not  
 understanding what I felt: the heart of things.  
 This nothing. This full silence. To not know.  
 (LS 44)

This is a fairly early Bronk poem, from the first collection to bring him critical acclaim, and the one in which his own poetic voice became assured. Although Foster briefly refers to it as one of the “major Bronk poems” (1988: 112), this particular poem has received almost no critical attention, no doubt because it is located within a collection filled with equally striking verse, much of which is more immediately accessible to criticism. Its final lines in particular bear a remarkable similarity to the close of ‘Metonymy as an Approach to the Real World’ (LS 36), which is lyrically the richer poem.<sup>9</sup> The only critical references to ‘There is Ignorant Silence...’ are in passing; Cid Corman quotes the final five lines of as an example of Bronk in “visionary” mode (Corman 1976: 29), while Foster finds the whole thing reveals “vexed resignation” that is comparable to Herman Melville’s (Foster 1988: 112).

At twenty lines it is longer than his later work, but somewhere close to the mean length for *The World, The Worldless*. Its explicitly questioning rhetoric is typical of that collection, in which more than half of the poems contain question marks (cf. Foster & Kimmelman 2013: 17). Although the enjambed lines of complicated multi-clausal sentences are more generally reflective of Bronk’s style at this period, their combination with the terse, often single-word phrasing is not anomalous. Later Bronk poems also frequently employed this kind of syntactic brevity, although where Stevens could be observed “paratactically heaping up

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<sup>9</sup> For discussion of ‘Metonymy as an Approach to the Real World’ cf. Kimmelman (1998: 37-40) and Clippinger (2006: 57-8, 203-4). It also finishes with the contemplative narrator beholding a cityscape:

Once in a city blocked and filled, I saw  
 the light lie in the deep chasm of a street,  
 palpable and blue, as though it had drifted in  
 from say, the sea, a purity of space.

reformulations and exemplifications" (Eeckhout 1964: 191), Bronk's staccato phrasing here pushes that technique further, while still maintaining a consistent and coherent train of thought. It is ultimately a matter for spoken performance as to the effect of the stops on the poem's rhythm; as with the Stevens poem there is certainly no strict and regular meter at work, but here the movement of the verse demands more variation. Among lines broken up by heavy punctuation, others come rushing quickly on longer thoughts: "almost in a sort of despair for anything". Taking "Silence" as its theme, the punctuation guides us to include silence in its vocalization, drawing attention to the gaps between the words and the thoughts: "I must have had it somewhere, somewhere here. / Nothing. There is silence here."

Like Stevens's poem, Bronk's opens with a rhetorical question, but the direction this time is internal and self-reflective, focusing on the speaking self rather than the perceived world around him. In this sense the poem is again about poetry, taking a self-effacing position that challenges the very act of creation that it constitutes. There is a certain ambiguity to the whole piece, introduced by the simple word "got", indicating both possession of something to say and the compulsion to state it. Ignorance and unknowing remain persistent and crucial themes throughout Bronk's writing, often linked with silence (cf. the 1975 collection *Silence and Metaphor*; also Clippinger 2001: 175-181), and this is among the poems in which Bronk is working towards formulating the ideas that are told in 'On *Credo Ut Intelligam*'. There is an emotional response to this nascent awareness of ignorance, but it is offered in markedly hedged terms, "almost in a sort of despair", as if to imply that he cannot with confidence comment on even his own attitude. The ambiguity continues with the search for the "misplaced bit" of knowledge, which will provide grounds for speaking. The critical self-awareness of the speaker is loaded with irony; with nothing to say, he breaks the silence by declaring that "There is silence here". The "people" that populate the poem are vague and unspecified, but their role is to create a bleak lonely world of individuals in isolation, unable to communicate with one another. The first ten-line stanza closes on a faint note of hope, with the possibility of gaining and sharing knowledge, but this is dashed in the next line.

The second stanza offers a view of the dynamic social world, but one that is remote and lacking any firm detail: "Something building or coming down. Cries. / Clamor." The attitude is ultimately solipsistic, external activity is driven to "the edges", but there is no comfort to be had in the "mocking" realisation that we may not be at "the center" of anything, even our own existence and experience. Then, as the poem moves towards its conclusion, its ideas begin to take shape and are reified into the image of the narrator in the "actual ruin", probably referring to one of Bronk's journeys to pre-Columbian city sites (cf. Bronk 1983a: 3-39; Gilmore 2006: xxiv-xxv *et passim*; Diemont in Foster & Kimmelman 33-44), which are also the obvious inspiration for certain other poems. Next to this outward physical locating of the speaker, the turn to introspection centralises the personal human experience as the crux of the poem. This is an experience of the inability to comprehend, and key to the whole poem, linking it to the confession in the opening lines, is the honest self-assessment: "not / understanding what I felt". This, then, is Bronk's expression of the human condition, to feel without understanding, but to attempt nonetheless to intellectualise and analyse that feeling.

Steven's 'The Ultimate Poem is Abstract' offers a similar view of the individual positioned within and against the world, where the "intellect / Of windings" sends us in perpetually mistaken directions. The principal difference in outlook that the two poems express is that Stevens hopefully posits a situation where we might "merely enjoy" that relationship with the world, whereas Bronk resignedly denies the possibility of escaping the feeling that comes with the realization of ignorance. All the narrator is left with is: "This nothing. This full silence. To not know." Beyond the subtle difference in conceptual attitudes to the limitations of human knowledge and understanding, there are formal and structural comparisons to be made between the two poems. One clear similarity is in the spatial metaphor of centrality that both poems employ, Bronk's narrator is at the centre of things, but does not find the "enjoyment" that Stevens promised. Both poems work towards a final denouement, which presents the possibility or actuality of the narrator perceiving himself central to his experience of the world. As has already been implied, one difference between two poets' work in general is the straightforward single-mindedness of Bronk's poetry, against the oblique

“dodges to and fro” of Stevens’s abundant imagery. We see this reflected in the titles of these two poems; that of Bronk’s poem, while similarly propositionally didactic, bears a much clearer connection to the poem’s content than Stevens’s does.

However, the most apparent stylistic difference between the two poems, which in turn reflects the wider tendencies of the poets’ work, is in the very base stuff of lexical content. Bronk’s verse is in general much more plain and sparse than Stevens’s, and indeed less decorative than that of almost any other poet writing in English. We have commented on the relative scarcity of concrete nouns in ‘The Ultimate Poem is Abstract’, which brings its content in that respect on a par with ‘There is Ignorant Silence at the Center of Things’; to populate its imagery with things, the former offers only “lecturer”, “planet”, “space” and the mysterious “cloud-pole”, while the latter has “people”, “ruin”, “street” and “town”. The significant difference, however, lies in the contrasting use of adjectives. Stevens colours his nouns by applying qualities that are frequently corporal or physical: “Beautiful” (twice), “rose”, “ripe”, “red”, “right”, “placid”, “blue” (twice), “fleet” and “enormous”. Bronk’s adjectives are fewer in number, and place the observer rather than the object as the determining factor in the description, tending towards the judgemental rather than the attributive: “misaid” “Hopeless” “Awful” “actual” “central, strong” and “full”. Here then we see demonstrated one vital difference between Stevens, for whom the world centres on possibility that can be accessed via the imagination, and Bronk, for whom the world is centred on “nothing”.

Moving aside from Stevens for a moment, we can note a couple of extra-textual references evoked in ‘There is Ignorant Silence at the Center of Things’. The first is probably coincidental, relating to the simple oxymoron “sound / of silence” in the second stanza; the first version of Simon and Garfunkel’s song of that name was released in 1964, the same year as the poem’s publication, although it did not become a hit until late 1965. The second reveals more about Bronk’s literary influences; the description of the remnant buildings (“a street / no longer a street, in a town no longer a town”) is an obvious allusion to Robert Frost’s celebrated poem ‘Directive’ (1946):

... a house that is no more a house  
Upon a farm that is no more a farm  
And in a town that is no more a town.

...

(Frost 1971: 377)

A memorable phrase, its skillful deployment by Bronk serves to strengthen this particular poem, but an awareness of its provenance asks that we consider its intertextual connotations. 'Directive' is one of Frost's more difficult poems, and perhaps also one of his best. It is 62 lines long, and since its publication has been the subject of critical acclaim and conflicting interpretations (cf. Lewis Tuten & Zubizarreta 2001: 78-79). Frost had died in 1963, a year before 'There is Ignorant Silence...' was published. As a younger man, Bronk had been a critical and careful reader of Frost's poems (Gilmore 2006: 39, 87), both poets had studied at Dartmouth College and had mutual acquaintances there and elsewhere (Kimmelman 1998: 27) and the two had met and conversed (Clippinger 2006: 24, Gilmore 2006: 39).

Contemporary critics agree that Frost's style and cadences were particularly influential on much of Bronk's earlier work (Clippinger 2006: 36, Kimmelman 1998: 96-102; Weinfield 2009: 111; Frost & Kimmelman 2013: 75-76). It has been indicated that what Bronk took from Frost was the presence of a certain conversational tone and idiom in his poetry (Clippinger 2006: 37, Grogan 1992: 87-88), but whilst this impression of poetry as speech was very much retained (cf. Grogan 1992) it would also be fair to claim that Bronk's assumption of his own mature voice required the expulsion of Frost's. Nevertheless, it seems likely that this very obvious verbal echo ("a town no longer a town") is introduced in conscious tribute to the older, more famous poet, and by doing so draws attention to the differences that have developed between the two writers' works. In this sense it is probably not coincidental that Bronk chose to quote Frost here, in the first of many explorations of silence as a concept: the notion of "Ignorant Silence at the Center of Things" would seem directly opposed to the conceit presented in one of Frost's shortest published works, where that unspoken centrality is all-knowing:



### The Secret Sits

We dance round in a ring and suppose,  
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

(Frost 1971: 362)

While there is direct and quite probably intentional allusion to Frost in 'There is Ignorant Silence at the Center of Things', it is less clear how conscious is the tribute to Stevens in Bronk's poem 'Three Pears This Time'. Yet it is hard to believe that this poem, from Bronk's final collection, was not written with Stevens's 'Study of Two Pears' somewhere in mind:

### THREE PEARS THIS TIME

The three pears are not the subject here.  
It's just that their curves, intrinsic to it, are still  
incidental. It's their transparency  
that shows us how there is something we know there is  
although it is never depicted or even seen  
despite some clear allusion in smudge or line.

(*BOL* 259)

Here is the Stevens poem, published 57 years earlier:

### Study of Two Pears

I  
Opusculum paedagogum.  
The pears are not viols,  
Nudes or bottles.  
They resemble nothing else.

II

They are yellow forms  
Composed of curves  
Bulging toward the base.  
They are touched red.

III

They are not flat surfaces  
Having curved outlines.  
They are round.  
Tapering toward the top.

IV

In the way they are modelled  
There are bits of blue.  
A hard dry leaf hangs  
From the stem.

V

The yellow glistens.  
It glistens with various yellows,  
Citrons, oranges and greens  
Flowering over the skin.

VI

The shadows of the pears  
Are blobs on the green cloth.  
The pears are not seen  
As the observer wills.

(Stevens 1990: 196)

Vendler translates the Latin of the first line for us: a “little manual for pedagogues”, and discusses poem’s description of how the “painterly illusion of

two dimensions masquerading as three falsifies as much as any indulgent and evasive simile might" (Vendler 1969, 144-45). Eeckhout supplies a fairly extensive review of the poem's critical reception, and a thorough reading from the first line, which "betrays a characteristically theoretical basis" (1964: 163) to the final couplet which "end(s) a radically descriptive poem with a general observation" (1964: 165). He sees it as "an analogy between the poet's and the painter's task...[that] tries to outdo painting in registering, or responding to, the irreducibility of our world of sense" (Eeckhout 1964: 160-61). It is also possible to read the poem ironically, as though Stevens's intention in the piece is to lampoon its pedagogue narrator (cf. Brown 1970: 75-76).<sup>10</sup> As has been pointed out, this is a pictorial poem despite its final assertion, with every description rooted in the visual. It is also very direct, with the first stanza explicitly denying the possibility of metaphor. In this latter point, it might be said to resemble a good deal of Bronk's poetry, except that his rarely (after the earliest collections) tries to depict and represent things and phenomena with anything like the detail that Stevens's language attempts: "They are yellow forms / Composed of curves / Bulging toward the base. / They are touched red."

The essential formal differences between the poems are clear on first reading; the early-career Stevens writes a series of measured, end-stopped quatrains, with the numeral headings adding to the systemised effect. The late-career Bronk writes a much looser, freer line, in which the effects of versification are barely apparent. This latter observation is fairly reflective of his technique at this stage; if the line breaks were removed the immediate effect would be one of quirky aphoristic prose. However, it is the subtle but absolute contrast between the standpoints of the two poems that is crucial to understanding where Bronk arrives after departing from Stevens. Whilst Stevens's poem seems like an attempt to replicate an object (the pears) in a painterly way, although it is more fittingly described as an example of the failure to achieve this, and may even in fact be a poem about the act of looking at a painting, Bronk's seems actually to be a poem about a painting, although it may in fact be a meditation on an object (the pears).

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<sup>10</sup> This is certainly a plausible suggestion, but it does not change the face value of the poem's content. That is to say, the text presents a situation and set of ideas whether the poet agrees with those ideas or not.

In the case of Bronk's poem, the reference to "their transparency" in particular would appear to indicate the probability of the former. Whatever their respective starting points, their divergent philosophical positions are revealed in their conclusions. Whereas for Stevens "the pears are not seen / as the observer wills", which is to imply that the object's actuality merely surpasses the observer's conception of its ideal form, for Bronk the impression of the object "shows us how there is something we know there is". Here the necessarily flawed portrayal of the specific object's form implicates the existence of something transcendent to the object world in which that object exists. Even the "curve" of the pears, "intrinsic" to both the portrayal and the actual object remains incidental to the ineffable but certain sublime presence that, from Bronk's standpoint, constitutes the 'real world' and as such is present behind and within artistic endeavour.

Stevens maintained this primary concern with the thing itself, rather than the ideas that surround it, throughout his writing life. The quintessential demonstration of this claim is 'Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself' (Stevens 1990: 534), deliberately chosen by the poet to be the final poem printed in his *Collected Poems* (Bevis 1988: 150) and as such in one way his last word on its subject. Within the context of examining broader parallels between Stevens's poetry and the experience of Buddhist meditation, William Bevis calls this six-triplet verse "One of Stevens' greatest poems" and provides a detailed and convincing discussion of its content and effect (1988: 149-53). Pertinent to the current comparison with Bronk's poetry is the assessment of how Stevens's poem denies its own title by actually describing "Ideas about the Thing" and not the "Thing Itself". This is an ironic form of apophasis, the "ideas" being introduced into the poem by the poet claiming to state what they are not; the sun is "No longer a battered panache above snow"; being heard not dreamt, the bird's cry was "not from the vast ventriloquism / Of sleep's faded papier-mâché". "It is very hard not to connect 'ideas' in the title with 'knowledge' in the last line" (Bevis 1988: 151).

For Stevens, like William Carlos Williams and the Objectivist poets with whom Bronk was marginally associated at the beginning of his career (Kimmelman 1998: 122; Weinfield 299: 11 *et passim*), a poem proceeds from the object of contemplation, even when the matter of the contemplation is its focus. The object in 'Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself' is the "scrawny cry"

(Brown 1970: 182) to which the text keeps explicitly returning, being the first call of a dawn chorus: “A chorister whose c preceded the choir”. It is out of the narrator’s perception of the object that the sense of the sublime arises<sup>11</sup>, so in fact from neither the thing itself (to which it is subsequent) nor ideas about it (which it precedes) (cf. Vendler 1980: 12). By contrast, Bronk once stated in conversation: “There are no ideas in things. ... Take this, William Carlos!” (Weinfield 1988: 27), and this challenging claim is essentially borne out through his poetry (eg. “Objects are nothing”, *LS* 35).

Whereas Stevens developed his philosophy or world-view through his poetry and then used it as a foundation for descriptive writing that restated the philosophy, Bronk does away with the perceived need that Stevens still felt to write poems ‘about’ objects or events in the world. For all the suggestions that Stevens was a poet of ideas, there are few if any of his poems that do not take as their starting or focal point an incident, thing or person. This is not so in the case of Bronk. Like Stevens his themes are located in the abstract, but unlike the past master he frequently (though by no means always) avoids grounding them in the concrete. Over his career we can trace his eschewal of any form of imagery in the traditional sense. This is particularly noticeable as his poems shorten (Taggart 1994: 48), but also lends a unique strength and substance to certain longer pieces. This separation from the visible and tangible is never entirely complete, which itself lends force to the images that he does choose to support and exemplify his sustained philosophical argument.

Ultimately the differences between the poetries of Bronk and Stevens reflect and express diverging attitudes towards the world and the language we use to describe it. Both are poets of the sublime (Hatlen in Clippinger 2001: 125), but while “...in Stevens the sublime, the Kantian moment of the impulsion toward the transcendent, marks not the fallen limitation of representation and metaphor, but rather their boundless pervasiveness” (Beehler in Arensberg 1986: 144), in awareness of the limitations of representation Bronk’s poems tend to take essentially the opposite stance; discussion of this feature of the work is included in chapters three and four of this thesis. It has been noted that Bronk’s use of

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<sup>11</sup> The status of the sublime as an activity of the mind is discussed in the next chapter of this thesis.

metaphor sets him apart from his predecessors and contemporaries (eg. Taggart 1994; Kimmelman 1988: 37), and his understanding of metaphor as concept is also discussed in chapter three. It is intended in a positive light when said of Stevens that "Metaphor is ... the perfect analogue to the way fresh cortical associations focus one's perceptions, to the way the self creates, as it receives, the world" (Bevis 1988: 144), but Bronk's appreciation that "the self creates... the world" is problematic for him. Thus he eschews metaphor in an attempt to circumvent some of the fictions it sets up as real. Furthermore, in one important sense, differences between Stevens and Bronk can be seen as generational, emblematic of a wider philosophical and scientific movement into post-modernist thinking. Here Kimmelman should be credited with a succinct and viable analysis:

... neither Frost nor Stevens could fully extricate himself from a world that rested on Isaac Newton's principles of physics.

Bronk, conversely, or a poet such as his friend George Oppen, is engaged by a world defined by extreme uncertainty ... in sympathy with an epistemology that accepted the world's presence often as self-contradictory, and that lacked closure. (Kimmelman 1998: 21)

Whereas Stevens was a definitively modernist writer, an appreciation of Bronk's operating within a postmodern cultural climate is not only essential to comprehending his progression out of the Stevensian model, but furthermore to understanding certain contradictions and uncertainties fundamental to shaping his religious attitude. Thus, an assessment of the distinctly postmodern and post-structuralist features of Bronk's poetry forms the next chapter of this thesis.

### Chapter 3: Postmodernism and Post-Structuralism<sup>12</sup>

This chapter of the thesis suggests and demonstrates new ways in which Bronk's poetry can be accessed and understood, by regarding it in the light of key texts and claims associated with twentieth-century Postmodernism and Post-Structuralism. Historically these have been contentious taxonomic categories, but the broad range of claims and concepts that they cover include two key aspects that are essential to Bronk's work: assertions of ontological and epistemological uncertainty; and a concern with and approach towards the sublime. The first of these aspects is addressed in the discussion below, while the second is addressed in the subsequent chapter.

First of all, this section considers Bronk's work in relation to the concept of Post-modernity. It uses Jean-Francois Lyotard's definitions of "modernity" and "postmodern" to situate Bronk within that broad cultural classification. It then makes reference to a brief statement made by Mark Rudman in 1988 in the *Sagetrieb* special edition devoted to Bronk, which hints at an unexplored connection between Bronk's work and that of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan. By viewing the poetry alongside relevant extracts from introductory and exploratory texts reviewing the arguments and claims of poststructuralism and deconstruction, it suggests that we can more fully appreciate Bronk's position in literary history by appreciating the post-structural nature of his philosophical position. Specifically, it explores whether Lacan's concept of 'the Real' is a useful approach to some of the difficulties and paradoxes of Bronk's poems, and finds that there are conceptual and verbal similarities that can broaden an appreciation of the notions at stake in Bronk's work. It goes on to discuss the role of metaphor as subject matter as well as technique.

In a frequently-cited passage that appears in the appendix to *The Postmodern Condition: a report on knowledge*, one of the earliest and still among the most influential discussions on the topic, Jean-Francois Lyotard informs us:

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<sup>12</sup> Parts of this chapter appear in the essay 'William Bronk, Post-Modernity and the Post-Structuralists' (Bober in Foster & Kimmelman 2013: 8-16).

Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the “lack of reality” of reality, together with the invention of other realities. (Lyotard 1984: 77)

Those familiar with Bronk’s oeuvre will hear in this statement resonance with a longstanding theme of the poetry, the unknowability of reality, which has been discussed at length by previous critics (including eg. Hatlen in Clippinger 2001: 113-17, 127-30; Lisk in Clippinger 2001: 138-39; Conte in Clippinger 2001: 173). We do not know if Bronk had heard or read Lyotard, but it is fair to imagine that he would have known people who had. It seems less likely to suppose that Lyotard had read or heard of Bronk. The proximity of their ideas might be an inevitable result of a shared cultural experience of a certain type of ‘modernity’.

These very short extracts, separated in their publication by thirty-five years, will briefly suffice to demonstrate the correspondence between the central paradox reported in Lyotard’s claim and Bronk’s expression of a similar notion. First, from the poem ‘Loew’s World’:

This unreality is one we know:  
the actual is no more real than this.

(*LS* 53)

and the entirety but most particularly the opening line of ‘Realization’, the first poem from Bronk’s final volume:

Reality isn’t real. Why do we look?  
We look because the real is the shape of desire:  
that the world be real and we a person in it.  
We believe our beliefs to pretend that that should be  
or abide a world whose reality isn’t real.

(*BOL* 258)

The first of these examples is taken from an 18-line poem that offers either a



parable or a sustained metaphor (it is hard to determine which) about an audience in a movie theatre. The second example here, 'Realization', represents a distillation of key ideas from the fifty-year writing career that preceded it, and as such is an archetypal late Bronk poem. The discussion below and in later chapters will address questions of reality, desire, belief and pretence. In terms of his 'post-modern' stance, this basic claim "reality isn't real" would seem to provide a secure affinity to what Lyotard observed.

Although this key connection between Bronk's mode of thought and that of his philosopher-theorist contemporary should not be overlooked, the parallels here take us beyond simply confounding the term 'reality'. When Lyotard talks of a "shattering of belief" there stands behind that image an idea similar to the experience Bronk describes in several poems. These include some of his most memorable and impressive early works, as in the opening sentence of 'The Belief in the Self Abandoned' where he declares: "Belief goes in time, belief in the self / included." (LS 37), and 'The Creation of the World' which includes the statement: "We begin to believe. But it doesn't stand." (LS 68). Both of these poems have earned critical attention from other commentators, the latter most notably by Norman Finkelstein in his essay 'William Bronk and the Creation of the World: a few remarks' (Clippinger 2001: 205/6).

A further important poem in this vein is 'On *Credo Ut Intelligam*', at almost sixty lines one of Bronk's longest poems; this short extract is from close to the end where we again hear significant resonances with the notion of the "unreality of reality", prefiguring Lyotard's essay by a full decade:

Reality is what we are ignorant of.

Let me not have a life to look at, the way we look  
at a life we build to look at, in the world belief  
gives us to understand ...

(LS 89)

There is a great deal to be said about 'On *Credo Ut Intelligam*', and some of what has already been said is referenced in the literature review in chapter one of this

thesis. What should be added here is first that these few lines confirm for the poet both the existence of reality and its unknowability. Such a construct is a semantic and conceptual opposite to the notion that Lyotard's phrasing suggests; rather than positing a "'lack of reality' of reality" (which seems to deny the possibility of there ever being a 'reality') the poem suggests the necessary existence of 'reality' beyond perception and appearances. This epistemological approach is altogether more mystic than analytical, yet concomitantly "belief" here is not 'shattered' but calmly put aside, in a process that is more intellectualised than it is a base emotional response.

It appears that Bronk can be more complicated and subtle in his paradoxical formulations than a simple interpretation of Lyotard's aphorism allows. Bronk can be difficult to read, but not for the reasons that many of his contemporaries' work is difficult. In the example below, a simultaneous declaration of unbelief and avowal of truth aptly illustrates a notion described by Jonathon Culler, who while discussing Paul De Man's concept of 'unreadability' states:

Stories of reading that refuse the idealizing *dénouements* stress instead the impossibility of reading... Such unreadability does not result simply from a central ambiguity or choice but from the way in which the system of values in the text both urges choice and prevents that choice being made. The simplest examples of such unreadability are paradoxical injunctions...  
(Culler 1983: 81)

In the following line from Bronk the "paradoxical injunction" is turned inward and we are left witness to the poet's resolution to remain situated in the mutual exclusivity that his world-view consists. Such disbelief in apparent or inferred truth is both a reversal and the extension of a concept discussed in later chapters of the present study where we will consider the possibility of belief in a non-existent God. Here, then, is the closing line of 'The Abjuration Avowed': "No; I don't believe. But it is true." (LS 156)

Furthermore, with Lyotard's reference to "the invention of other realities" we may recall lines such as the following from 'The Failure To Devise A Better

World', the very title of which warns against the hopelessness of such schemes. The full twenty-four line poem describes how we make these attempts, setting up a sort of conflict between "the mind" and "the heart", in which the "hopeful" heart confronts the mind's knowledge of the world, creating a dialectic process implying a binary distinction between rationality and emotion:

The mind spies  
upon itself and seeks its subterfuge,  
its feints and camouflage ...  
...  
Could it be, though, the heart, if you want to call it the heart,  
that teaches the mind to see around corners, to look  
backwards, to do what the heart could never do  
itself, to disbelieve visions, to disbelieve?  
(LS 75)

The "mind" is the active inventor of realities, a subversive agent in that it corrupts reality through its reinterpretations to afford a "sneaky triumph". Meanwhile, despite the closing suggestion that the heart issues checks that lead the mind to mistrust its own fictional creations, still the heart "has to believe / while desire holds". What we are offered therefore is a vision of two orders of reality, one rational and artificially constructed, the other unknowable and intuited through the existence of desire. As this part of the study will go on to mention, and Bronk's poetry makes abundantly clear, the ubiquitous presence of 'desire' remains a major theme for the duration of his career and a crucial aspect of his world-view.

The purpose of the mind's inventions is to make the 'unreality of reality' more bearable in a context where subjectivity and language determine the interpretation of and response to every experience. The poet's awareness of this process is expressed clearly in a poem such as 'The Use of Invented Order', from which a few lines will serve to illustrate the point:

We invent an order for this:  
to say we see, to say that besides the world,

There is something which is.

(LS 86)

An indication of whether this ordering occurs at a societal and/or individual level is not offered here, nor are its precise means or methods described. The role of language in the process is also left unstated at this point, though we are given to understand that the 'order' being referred to invokes a wider process of myth-making. In any case, there is the intimation of ideological processes at work, crucially with no specific instances ever being directly critiqued or even mentioned, bearing out their effects on the individual and the society at large.

An extension of the same argument is stated quite explicitly in these lines from 'The Stance', where the perpetual renewal and reconfiguration of ideology is highlighted:

We invent models, some quite difficult,  
so complex that, with changing times, demands  
alter and we stand, admittedly, always shy.

(LS 149)

As a caveat we should recall that the quotation against which we have been comparing these fragments of the poems provides a definition of "modernity" and is taken somewhat out of context from an essay ostensibly discussing the effects of technology on the concept and uses of knowledge. While the drive for rationalisation may indeed be a symptom of modernity, poems such as 'The Stance' and 'The Failure to Devise a Better World', along with others from across Bronk's career, suggest that the will to impose the deceptions of order on ourselves is integral to the human condition in a way that transcends the individual's position in history.

Nonetheless, the increasing popular awareness of the factors contributing to this situation is perhaps part of the 'post-modern condition', while Lyotard's definition has come to stand as an important part of an endlessly debated definition of 'post-modernity'. In his introduction to *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard also said: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity

towards metanarratives” (Lyotard 1984: xxiv). Without complicating this definition further, we can look for evidence of such incredulity in the poems and find examples of metanarratives held up to scrutiny and scorn, as in this extract from a particularly well-wrought poem, ‘The Extensions Of Space’, which plays on the archetypal myth:

What do we do about the tortoise? We thought  
we had dispensed with that nonsense, and still  
some elephant’s back is wanted to hold, if not  
the literal globe, our worlds, our artifacts,  
our facts; and underneath, a tortoise, ground.

Only, if we go down that far,  
no ground exists for facts or tortoises:  
(...)

(LS 50)

The memorable line “Ideas are always wrong”, which appears twice in the fairly early poem ‘Blue Spruces in Pairs, a Bird Bath Between’ (LS 34) can be seen as another manifestation of Bronk’s dismissal of any attempt to construct metanarratives. We can also turn again to ‘On *Credo Ut Intelligam*’ to find this avowal:

I disclaim the invented world  
of which we say there might be ultimate things  
unknown about it (...)

(LS 88)

These examples are plainly not exhaustive, but serve to illustrate the continued and crucial importance of this idea to Bronk’s work and the vision it expresses. It is put succinctly in these final lines of the six-line ‘Good Story’:

god stories,

science stories,  
all because  
know isn't.

(*BOL* 127)

Equal footing is granted to 'science' and 'god' in these lines, where neither is granted the capacity to adequately account for our existence or situation, and both offer mere stop-gap explanations.

In terms of assessing the post-modern nature of Bronk's poetry, it is important to note the particular scientific revelations and discoveries that have shaped the prevailing scientific understanding that has emerged in the twentieth century. Ronald Collins' essay 'Science and the Poetry of William Bronk' (Clippinger 2001: 213-25) makes admirable work of situating the poetry in relation to the poet's interest in cosmology, relativity and quantum mechanics. Collins' claims concerning Bronk's sympathy with Einstein's claim "my God is Spinoza's God" will be considered in a later chapter of this study. Although Collins introduces the concepts of quantum nonlocality and the uncertainty principle into the discussion of Bronk's work, neither he nor any subsequent critic has hitherto noted how the following poem provides a beautiful (or horrible) translation of this concept into personal terms (Barber's Bridge is a site on the canal, a mile or two from Bronk's home):

#### THE RAPPORT

There's a dead dog at Barber's Bridge  
tied to a tree and two ugly stories why.  
Make your own choice, either could be.  
Hearing, seeing, I believe both of them.

(*LS* 178)

Here two of the distinguishing features of Bronk's work are brought together, as its confrontation with ontological and epistemological difficulties draws strength from its grounding in the locality of the poet's hometown. The particularities of

belief that the final line expresses (assuming an implied mutual exclusivity between the “two ugly stories”) are paradoxical and nonsensical according to the classical model, but understood in a quantum context where a photon behaves as wave or particle according to the observer’s situation, or where a cat in a box can be both dead and alive, the claim is not merely sound, but honest and essential.

If these various features of his work – its questioning of reality, its disavowal of belief, its mistrust of metanarratives, and its embracing of uncertainty – are sufficient to allow Bronk the label of ‘postmodern poet’, more accurately we should name him a poet of post-structuralism. For important and sustained periods in his career he produced and restated theories that were absolutely contemporary with the emergence of similar ideas and notions among literary and social theorists whom we now call ‘post-structural’, and his poems express an approach to language and experience that is equivalent to theories and attitudes that became associated with these schools of thought. As far as the literature review reveals, no previous critic has gone so far as to apply this term to Bronk, although some have come close. Clippinger rightly informs us that:

The ideational thrust of Bronk’s poetry places him within the lineage of twentieth-century philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jacques Derrida, and Giorgio Agamben ... Bronk’s project can be understood as an investigation into how human existence is contained within a prison of representation[.] (Clippinger 2006: 210)

Although one may debate whether and how far individuals in this list deserve to be labelled ‘post-structural’, this “lineage” is undoubtedly post-structuralist.

In 1988 a single statement from Mark Rudman in a series of notes titled ‘Toward a Reading of the Poetry of William Bronk’ (49) offers a brief glimpse of this connection, but to date it has not been explicitly expanded upon:

A friend who is steeped in Derrida and Lacan tells me she wants to write her dissertation on the theme of desire in contemporary poetry. (...)  
Bronk’s lyric investigations precede deconstruction, even structuralism

Chronologically speaking, Bronk's poems cannot 'precede' structuralism in any ordinary way, but the statement operates better as an invitation to reflection and discussion than as any kind of final pronouncement. This current study will not offer any detailed analysis of the work of Derrida or Lacan, although the subsequent discussion calls on a lay understanding of certain themes and ideas with which they are accredited. The most important aspect of this assertion from Rudman is that it suggests that the presence of certain 'post-structural' theorists and practitioners can be helpfully borne in mind when seeking to contextualise the conceptual and ideational content of Bronk's poetry.

There is no single accepted definition of 'post-structural(ism)', it is rather an overarching term for a collection of related ideas, theories and texts. Its implications are political as well as philosophical, but for the present I shall limit the discussion to the linguistic base on which these ideas are founded. A few short extracts from an introductory text on the subject provide the opportunity to draw direct parallels with Bronk's poetry:

Language is a much less stable affair than the classical structuralists had considered... If this is so, then it strikes a serious blow at certain traditional theories of meaning. For such theories, it was the function of signs to reflect inward experiences or objects in the real world, to 'make present' one's thoughts and feelings or to describe how reality was. (Eagleton 1996: 112)

The failure of language has become a popular, even clichéd theme for modern writers, but while other poets are content to demonstrate the phenomenon at work, Bronk actually describes it. Furthermore, a key phrase in relation to Bronk's work here is 'the real world', a frequent and recurring idea in poems from the 1960s onwards. As hinted in the parallels drawn to Lyotard's phrase (above) the student of Bronk's poetry will soon realise that the nature and existence or otherwise of a 'real world' is the subject of some of his most memorable pieces. Various commentators have discussed and traced this aspect of his work at some length and it is rightly viewed as one of his work's defining themes: "This real world and its relation to Bronk's poetic persona occupy a central place in



hundreds of his poems” (Kearns in Clippinger 2001: 226) (also cf. Kimmelman 1998: 125, 180 *et passim*; Clippinger 2006: 51-53 *et passim*; Collins in Clippinger 2001: 219; etc.). What the above passage from Eagleton makes clear, and what Bronk understands and expresses, is that the familiar ‘signs’ that constitute language are unsatisfactory tools for describing ‘how reality was’. This is true at a level beyond their mere inability to replicate experience via description; for Bronk and the post-structuralists the whole system by which we tell ourselves we know reality is flawed.

Several critics have noted this aspect of Bronk’s work (eg. Foster 1988: 111; Heller 1988: 134; Grogan 1992: 86). Corman suggests that an early poem ‘The Arts and Death: a Fugue for Sidney Cox’ (LS 26) “introduces the theme of language failure itself and the palpable deception we practice on ourselves through it” (Corman 1976: 13). In fact this becomes a more pressing issue for Bronk only after his first few published collections, perhaps in part as a manifestation of his frustration at earlier poems’ failure to express more definite meaning than they do attain. Even then the poems that express this concern are fairly infrequent, though they are important. Most of the time, however, he is willing if not exactly content to allow words and grammar to continue in an imperfect job of expressing meaning. The occasional rejoinders that arise, usually in the manner of a full poem on the subject, are all the more significant for their function as internal contextualisation for the pieces that surround them. One of the first poems in which he turns his attention to the structure, effects and limitations of language is ‘The Importuning of Truth’:

(...) what language means to say  
is *object*, *subject*, *verb*. Says *it*, says *you*,  
says *I*. Oh, it says *I*, says *am*, says *do*,  
says *make*, says *have*. It does. It says these things.

Predicate is predicate: a lie.

(LS 138)

Finkelstein (1988: 75-76) identifies ‘The Substantive’ (LS 140) and ‘Gnomon of the

Pronouns' (LS 178) as examples of Bronk's concern with language and its attempts to express a world that precedes and contains it. Bruce Campbell, who finds that Bronk confronts "a dilemma not unlike that of language philosophers, forced to discuss language by means of language", rightly makes a similar point about the poems 'Rational Expression' (LS 207) and 'On the Failure of Meaning in the Absence of Objective Analogs' (LS 104) (Campbell 1988: 96-97).

Other fairly early poems that exemplify this theme in various ways include 'The Increasing Abstraction of Language' (LS 170) and this untitled three-line poem:

These are invented words and they refer  
to inventions of their own and not to a real world  
unresembled, inexpressible.

(LS 198)

In relation to this particular poem, one recent critic states the following:

In semiotic linguistics, language signifies an originary lack; as such, the lack testifies to the primacy of enigma wherein ideology intercedes in order to provide structure to a language system. As Bronk argues, one does not encounter the truth inherent in language but the fact that language masks truth.

(Clippinger 2006: 214)

What this claim suggests is that the 'absence of a presence' that constitutes the "originary lack" which language aims to fill (cf. Spivak in Derrida 1976: xvii), and that this absence is the "enigma" on which Bronk's worldview turns. Yet it is important to realise that simply highlighting and exploring the failures of language would not be sufficient ground on which to build an oeuvre with the stature of Bronk's.

When approaching Bronk's poetry it is certainly necessary to remember and occasionally announce the fundamental shortcomings inherent in language, as the poet himself does, but it is the "truth" irredeemably obscured by the imposed

structure of language at which he nonetheless drives. So in 'The Puzzle There' the same idea is again clearly stated, but is qualified thus:

... language is grasp, not what  
we grope for, whatever that is:  
it is a puzzle. Interestingly enough  
though, the recurrence of certain grammatical  
ideas from tongue to tongue as person, say,  
number, tense, suggests a validity  
of these, a closeness to what there is ...

(LS 209)

At times in Bronk's writing there appears a genuine regret for the lost presence that language masks. The idea expressed here is that although language may be "a puzzle" it is one to which there should be a solution of some kind, even if all we can hope for is that the answer confirms the 'primacy of enigma' behind it. In relation to this short extract, it is worth mentioning a feature of the poem that is typical of Bronk's unique poetic voice. At the basic level of the poem's postulated argument the words "Interestingly enough / though" are entirely redundant. Yet what they achieve is the personalisation of an abstract concept, bringing the presence of a poetic persona to the very heart of the intellectualised versified argument. It is this persona which feels and expresses the loss and desire that brings a consistent humanity to the poetry. In Bronk's later collections the instability and inaccuracy of language remains an irregularly recurring theme, as in 'Speeches', where the tone seems almost wistful:

Words change shape and come to have  
other meanings in other languages.

(BOL 134)

This recognition of the inability of language to consistently and completely express a presence or reality beyond itself, as a theme present both in Bronk's poetry and in various trains of post-structuralist thought, leads us to consider the

constant pursuit and inevitable failure of a metaphysical grounding for existence and experience:

Western philosophy... has yearned for the sign which will give meaning to all others – the ‘transcendental signifier’ – and for the anchoring, unquestionable meaning to which all our signs can be seen to point (the ‘transcendental signified’). A great number of candidates for this role – God, the Idea, the World Spirit, the Self, substance, matter and so on – have thrust themselves forward from time to time. Since each of these concepts hopes to *found* our whole system of thought and language, it must itself be beyond that system... (Eagleton 1996: 113)

In one frequently cited four-line poem Bronk uses this very same metaphor of an anchor, hoping and searching for it but finding it absent:

#### THE WORLD

I thought you were an anchor in the drift of the world;  
but no: there isn't an anchor anywhere.  
There isn't an anchor in the drift of the world. Oh no.  
I thought you were. Oh no. The drift of the world.

(LS 182)

Various conflicting interpretations of this poem have been put forward. To these four lines Weinfield devotes four full pages of commentary and critical praise, including detailed semantic and conceptual comparisons to illustrate “Bronk’s revisionary relationship to Shakespeare and Wordsworth” and a formal cataloguing of lexical repetition and tonal qualities (Weinfield 2009: 163-7). For Weinfield this poem is a “beautiful” evocation of “Pascal’s desolate universe”. To Michael Heller, who mentions the poem in his discussion of silence as a theme and motivating force in Bronk’s poetry, it “makes a gesture toward the philosophical syllogism as if the processes of rationality and logic could lock out unease” (Heller 1998: 137). Gilmore finds an interpretation located in biography, placing the

poem's composition after the end of an intense and significant love affair, stating thus: "Whatever else this stunningly bleak poem may be about, I believe it reflects Bronk's loss of his only great sexual passion" (Gilmore 2006: 248). What we plainly see is that the text is 'open', in a way that Barthes might have called *scriptable* (see below) but not in any syntactically disjunctive Joycean sense. Here the ambiguities that allow the reader to create meaning rest in the indeterminacy brought by the lack of reference for either the pronoun subject "you" or the apparently meaningful but altogether imprecise "drift of the world". The recording that exists of Bronk reading this poem in 1978<sup>13</sup> reinforces the musicality of the piece but offers no suggestion of an exclusive meaning. Meanwhile, this poem provides an example in extremis of Bronk's adept use of internal lexical and syntactic repetition.

Returning to the passage quoted from Eagleton's discussion of post-structuralism, as the poems tell us in so many ways, there is no attainable 'transcendental signified' for Bronk, but something intuited rather than intellectualised still continually implies its existence beyond his or our reach. We find this described in lines such as these, from a poem titled 'Out There':

... Knowledge and power are what  
we want until we find, at last, they are not.

There is a state outside of me too, without  
these things. Reality? The God? I apply  
to it. It has my reverence and awe...

(*BOL* 21)

As well as 'Reality' and 'The God', from the list of candidates for the role as quoted above, Bronk devotes considerable attention to exploring several of these over the course of his career. The 'real world', in the way that Bronk continually uses and interrogates the term, can be usefully understood as a concept parallel or even

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<sup>13</sup> <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Bronk.php> (accessed 29 May 2013)

identical to this 'transcendental signified'. The language of the final statement in Eagleton's statement above resonates with the closing couplet of a pivotal poem, 'The Real World': "There is a real world which does make sense. / It is beyond our knowing or speaking but it is there." (*LS* 136)

The paramount importance of 'reality' as a notion in Bronk's work invites us to explore its definitions further. A survey of post-structural theorists and their commentators, however, finds that in line with Lyotard's claim they are wary of the word and reluctant to use it in their writings. It might be said that a principal function of the post-structural project is to convince us of the absence or at least unknowability of a state of affairs befitting the label 'reality'. Nonetheless, Culler, in a discussion of Richard Rorty's study of the philosophical tradition, finds that 'reality' is integral to all schools of philosophy:

Reality is the presence behind representations, what accurate representations are representations of, and philosophy is above all a theory of representation. (Culler 1983: 152)

However, the problem that Bronk and the post-structuralists discern when faced with this view of philosophy is put forward in this extract from the poem 'Instead':

... the slow words  
seeming to particularize, delineate,  
make real and touchable, — what were these?

(...) The world was. I spoke of it,  
spoke to it, responded, sensed or made its shape.

It is unspeakable, that which exists.  
All I ever said was spoken of what  
is not ...

(*LS* 147)

This poem appears to be a reflection on the body of poetry that has built up before

it, but like a significant minority of Bronk's work, such as 'The World', discussed above, the absence of precise reference points makes interpretative certitude difficult and the resultant ambiguity lends an eerie charm to the verse. Here in 'Instead' lines that may be about the poet looking over his previous compositions could very legitimately refer us to processes of language acquisition and use in infancy and later life. In either of these cases, or potentially in others, the naivety of the narrator's efforts with language highlights the relevance to this current discussion.

It is reasonable to posit the equivalence of the 'reality' that Rorty posits with a "real world... beyond our knowing or speaking", where that final line of 'The Real World' provides an exposure of philosophical failures to provide a 'representation' that can identify or describe such. A fairly early instance of Bronk's addressing "the presence behind representations" can be found in these opening lines of the poem 'Where? What?', which begin with a play on Johnson's refutation of Berkeley:

"Well, of course," he said, "we take a different approach  
to reality." As though it were something that lay  
like a lump in the yard, that anyone could kick.  
What should I say? We conspire together to pretend  
reality means whatever there is, is there.

(LS 77)

The post-structuralists' discussion of 'reality' leads us to the investigation of a related notion, which the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan identified as 'the Real'. As we will briefly note, interpretations and practical understandings of what is meant by 'the Real' are nebulous, and Lacan's own usage of the term shifted throughout his career (Sheridan, in Lacan 1977: x). It is important not to confuse this with 'reality', although the two concepts are linked in that the Real is a contributory part of the psychoanalytic subject (or 'self') that experiences the latter: "The real, insofar as it is situated in relation to the death drive and the repetition compulsion, has nothing to do with ... the reality principle." (Lerude 2005). Furthermore, the semantic connection between the two is obvious and

important. However, in an introductory discussion of Lacan's basic ideas, we are warned:

Very little can be said about the REAL. It is the primordial experience of whatever is prior to any attempt to represent it in any system of symbols. It is something like Immanuel Kant's unknowable THING-IN-ITSELF, except that Lacan seems to stress the experience of the thing rather than the way the thing is prior to experience. But once we acquire a language, giving us a system of signs in which to re-present "the real", "the real" is lost to us forever. (Palmer 1995: 82)

It is extremely revealing to contrast this 'Beginner's Guide' definition with the following excerpt from a more scholarly text:

...the Lacanian Real is a much more complex category than the idea of a fixed trans-historical "hard core" that forever eludes symbolization; it has nothing to do with what Immanuel Kant called the "Thing-in-itself," reality the way it is out there, independently of us, prior to being distorted by our perceptions (Zizek, 'How to Read Lacan'<sup>14</sup>)

The brief survey of ideas suggested here indicates that the reviewer finds it much easier to accurately state what the Real isn't than to offer a positive definition of the term. The Real is ineffable; it is not coincidental that this situation provides a clear echo of the *via negativa* theological approach, which will be discussed later in this study in relation to Bronk's treatment and use of the idea of God. When we briefly consider Lacan's Real in relation to Bronk's poetry there are two important and related issues intimated in the above quotations. The first is the notion that experience exists prior to its representation, the second is that any attempt at 're-presentation' through language obscures or dissolves the experience. As Bronk puts it in 'Questions for Eros': "What name is not diminishment?" (LS 211), while the impossibility of returning to a state of experience prior to expression is related in these lines from 'Conjugation':

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.lacan.com/zizalien.htm> (accessed 10 January 2012)



We are not  
equal to a separate concept of ourselves  
from which a real world would depend if we were cause  
in an infinite universe and made any effect  
as small, even, as a separate self of the self.

But the real we mean to make is not made real:

...

(LS 220)

As we will have occasion to point out, Bronk frequently proves himself capable of creating complex syntactic structures in his verse, creating a particular interrelationship of music and meaning. This is far from being his only style of composition, but it is certainly one aspect of his voice that contributes to its overall range. Such an effect is apparent in the first part of the lines quoted above, where an attempt at paraphrase finds that the most succinct meaning is already present. If necessary we could pare away clauses to leave us with the proposition: ‘if we were [a] cause and made any effect, a real world would depend [on us].’ Of course the assumption being made here, expressed through the use of the conditional subjunctive, is that we are not a cause, and that the real world does not depend on us. This seems to be a feature of Lacan’s Real; unlike the Symbolic and the Imaginary orders, the Real cannot be said to proceed from us: “The imaginary is the field of the ego... the symbolic order (language) dominates over the imaginary order” (Laznik 2005). Finally, we should note the music as well as the meaning in the line “But the real we mean to make is not made real”. With just a little effort five definite beats can be discerned in each line preceding this one, and that effort is worthwhile for what it lends to a spoken performance. This kind of accentual blank verse is absolutely typical of Bronk’s longer poems throughout most of his career but so too is the occasional reversion to much stricter iambics that reinforces the underlying rhythm of the poem. Here therefore the antimetabole (“real... make... made... real”) in the final line of our example is

presented in a strictly regular iambic stress pattern after a single anapest.<sup>15</sup> Its conceptual meaning turns on the imprecision of individual words in the language, with “real” the noun clearly meaning something quite different from the adjective. This recalls the reminder that the ‘Real’ should not be confused with ‘reality’, and that our experience of the latter may be dependent on the former, at a level we cannot grasp through the conceptual structures with which we work.

Sheridan briefly traces a development of Lacan’s deployment of the term ‘real’, concluding:

Hence the formula ‘the real is the impossible’. It is in this sense that the term begins to appear regularly, as an adjective, to describe that which is lacking in the symbolic order, the ineliminable residue of all articulation, the foreclosed element, which may be approached but never grasped[.]  
(Sheridan, in Lacan 1977: x)

Thus the Real might be impossible to access but it is not non-existent, and nor is Bronk’s ‘real world’. Here in full is the poem ‘The Idea of Real’:

This can’t be the real world and to put the two  
words together defines the problem or poses it:  
can worlds be real? Can we know reality?  
Reality of the world is what we say  
it is and we can be wrong limitless times  
and try it again. All right: we have a sense  
of real. It moves us. Maybe real is.

(*BOL* 42)

As we come to understand from the various discussions of the Lacanian ‘real’, no ‘this’ can ever signify it. In the poem, juxtaposing “the two / words” “real” and

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<sup>15</sup> This occasional return to the iamb has a definite musical effect, of the poetic line escaping the poet’s control only to be drawn back in, and is certainly the result of skilful composition rather than mere coincidence. The next line, the penultimate in the poem, hides its five stresses in a welter of syllables, before the last returns to the off-on pattern, approximately thus: “not even the **lover** is, nor the **loved**, though **there is love**; / nor **can** our **quarrels make** a **self** of **us**.”

“world” offers a paradox when we consider the first in the Lacanian sense, if the “world” is what we encounter outside ourselves and translate via recognition of a point of difference between us and it. This apprehension of difference from otherness is a crucial part of the Lacanian ‘imaginary’, which is a realm exclusive from the real. In these terms then, the simple answer to the first question stated in the third line of ‘The Idea of Real’ must be ‘no’. The second part of that line is based in the rhetoric that we have observed Bronk establishing throughout his career, and while “we can be wrong limitless times” there is no suggestion or hope that we can be right in what “we say it is”. Yet as we will see below, it is an important truth about Lacan’s ‘real’ that we should “have a sense of” it:

...we all have an intuitive experience of the real in such phenomena as the uncanny, anxiety, the nonmeaningful, and poetic humor that plays upon words at the expense of meaning. Thus, when the framework of the imaginary wavers and speech is lacking, when reality is no longer organized and pacified by the fantasy screen, the experience of the real emerges in a way that is unique for each person. (Lerude 2005)

This is also a crucial aspect of what Bronk views as ‘real’. At one surface level the poem ‘To Prospero, Afterwards’ describes an audience member’s reflections on leaving a theatre. It may not be coincidence that *The Tempest* is referenced more than once in Bronk’s poetry, along with *Hamlet* at various times and *As You Like It* at least twice in his earliest collections. Furthermore, the metaphor of humans as actors and life as a play script is one to which he infrequently but repeatedly returns. In the case of this particular poem, the idea of the spectator considering the play that has gone before him can easily and meaningfully operate as a symbol for the thinker contemplating “an intuitive experience of the real”. Here is the poem in full; the ellipses at the end are Bronk’s own:

I didn’t believe it anyway, which now  
is faded, as you foretold. I felt your spells  
without surrendering to them. I wanted to,

but it wasn't real. I knew it wasn't real.

But, you know, there was something — the way the music or the lights —  
something about the lights, their sequences —.

Of course, it wasn't real. And yet ... You know ...

(LS 76)

So while “the lights, their sequences” are the on-stage effects they are also the sequence of day and night and the order of the seasons, and the movements of the sun and stars. There might be “something about” the effect of these phenomena that at times allows an observer to intuit the presence of (the) “real” despite the knowledge that attempts to represent it will necessarily fail.

That metaphor of life as theatrical drama referred to above is used in the fourteen-line ‘The Method’, which begins with an exemplary acknowledgement of its own artifice: “I try the idea: in the drama, it may be we / the actors in the drama.” The poem goes on to extend and explore the metaphor, concluding with a couplet filled with insistent, antistrophic echoes again illustrating that “intuitive experience of the real”:

(...) There isn't anything I know  
— watch and listen — or could guess, the play is about.

I feel something, as if it were about  
something. I feel something. What's it about?

(LS 138)

We have seen that Bronk adopts the terms ‘reality’ and ‘real’ apparently somewhat interchangeably, and it would not be valid to claim that the way he deploys the latter is in strict accordance with Lacan's use of the term. Furthermore, one of Lacan's translators warns us:

[this] concept of the ‘real’ is not to be confused with reality, which is perfectly knowable: the subject of desire knows no more than that, since for it reality is entirely phantasmatic” (Sheridan, in Lacan 1977: x)

However, there are strong resonances with Lacanian concepts in some of the ideas that Bronk lays out, and two closely related points here strengthen the validity of the comparison at hand. The first is the importance of desire in this scheme. Of course this is a key concept for the psychoanalyst, and an understanding of its causes and implications is central to Lacan’s work and method (Sheridan, in Lacan 1977: viii, *et passim*). For Lacan, “Desire (fundamentally in the singular) is a perpetual effect of symbolic articulation” (Sheridan, in Lacan 1977: viii), just as Bronk “sees desire not / as something to satisfy but to live with” (*LS* 126). It is hardly an exaggeration to suggest that ‘desire’, again as a concept in the singular, rather than its manifestation in specific focus on discrete objects, is the main theme of Bronk’s work at certain periods (cf. Finkelstein 1982; Kimmelman 1998: 91-5; Clippinger 2006: 228; Weinfield 2009: 172). We saw an example of this in the discussion of ‘The Failure to Devise a Better World’ (see above) which also supports the second point to notice here; the suggestion that for the agent beset by desire “reality is entirely phantasmatic”, which is to say illusory.

Bronk’s poems return to this notion many times, as in the fourteen-line poem ‘The Fantasy’: “if desire could make a world, then one / were made and it should stand until desire / should fail.” (*LS* 140); and in shorter, later pieces like this one:

*UNBELIEVER*

We want to believe but the factual is a belief  
less fact the farther in or out we push.  
We fantasize a reality made out  
to be simpler than that but it won’t do  
either and we haven’t any reality.

(*BOL* 79)

There are semantic issues here for the reader to contend with, similar to those in 'Realization', discussed earlier in this chapter. One important feature of Bronk's status as a poet is that the internal consistencies of individual poems are much more important than achieving any sustained argument, so that words and concepts may therefore be used differently according to the circumstances, across or even within various collections. In 'Unbeliever' the distinction between what we perceive or construct as "factual" is contrasted to the inaccessible presence that constitutes "fact", being two separate notions related to the "reality" that we "fantasize" and the "reality" which we don't have, respectively. Within the Lacanian construct, it could be claimed that the former of these would be 'the Imaginary' and the latter 'the Real'.

While we find that the Lacanian 'Real' is not the 'real' of Bronk's "real world", the concepts are nevertheless related and comparable. Later parts of this study will draw on the preceding discussions, but to move on for the present we will turn to certain aspects of Bronk's literary style and relate these to post-structuralist theories and observations. Bronk's plainspoken style has been noted and discussed (Grogan 1992), and here he differs from so very many of his academically sanctioned contemporaries whose poetics likewise offer sincerity and integrity but do so through layers of linguistic and/or imagistic play. Paradoxically, this straightforwardness can make his work difficult to read (Taggart 1994: 32) in a climate where interpretation has become one of the purposes of reading:

The most intriguing texts for criticism are not those which can be *read*, but those which are 'writable' (*scriptable*) – texts which encourage the critic to carve them up, transpose them into different discourses, produce his or her semi-arbitrary play of meaning athwart the work itself... The 'writable' text, usually a modernist one, has no determinate meaning, no settled signifieds, but is plural and diffuse, an inexhaustible tissue or galaxy of signifiers, a seamless weave of codes and fragments of codes, through which the critic may cut his own errant path. (Eagleton 1996: 119)

Bronk's writing is not fragmented in the way that many postmodernist texts seem

to be, but it certainly demonstrates a lack of “settled signifieds”. Indeed, this lack constitutes one of its principle motivational features. With only occasional early exceptions, its language has an unornamented quality while retaining a distinctive musicality that owes a great deal to cadences born of colloquialism (Grogan 1992).

His continued determination that his work should *mean* as well as *be* (Weinfield 2009: 109) is ultimately what sets it apart from that of his peers. Certainly his poetry is deeply conceptual, and he favours the abstract noun over the concrete more than perhaps any other poet in English. His work is ‘plural and diffuse’ in the sense that many important concepts that he uses (eg. ‘love’, ‘reality’, ‘God’, ‘the world’) are necessarily undefinable, yet he works them into internally consistent propositions that speak directly and unequivocally of their indeterminacy, offering flashes and sustained passages of the rare evocative beauty that allows great poetry to surpass interpretive concerns. The methods by which Bronk’s poetic voice is expressed are not necessarily standard traditional lyric and poetic techniques such as metaphor and straightforward comparison, although these are far from unrepresented in his work. Nor are they the stylistic tendencies of the objectivists; paradox and quasi-prosaic repetition are more frequently defining features of his poetic style, and we have noted how he tends to avoid ornamentation in his language.

This aspect of the work can cause disquiet for a reader who is accustomed to verse laden with mellifluous adjectives and sensual imagery. It can even confound those accustomed to less traditional forms of verse, as illustrated by John Taggart’s discussion of Bronk’s poetry, which expresses considerable frustration with certain fundamental stylistic choices that Bronk makes. At one point we are told: “The agent of transformation is the imagination, and its agent in poetry is metaphor” (Taggart 1994: 30). It is partly Bronk’s failure to follow this dictate that appals Taggart:

It is a truism, but it holds: poetry is showing, metaphor and image; prose is telling, exposition and analysis. What is distressing about this representative poem [‘About Dynamism, Desire and Other Fictions’, LS 144] is that not only can it not even mount some illustrations for its argument (the circle turns and turns, we’re back to the old illusionism), but

it also isn't an argument. ... A dogmatic voice is a tired voice in poetry, maybe even a dead one. There is no need for the persuasion of figures. And why should there be? He knows. Hubris. (Taggart 1994: 44-5)

There seems to be a misunderstanding of what Bronk is aiming at here (cf. Weinfield 2009: 108). In one way, his refusal to rely on metaphor and symbolism as determining features of his work reflects an underlying appreciation of their artifice.

During a discussion of Derrida's *Plato's Pharmacy* and De Man's *The Epistemology of Metaphor*, Culler provides the following partial explanation of a deconstructionist view of metaphor:

In theory, metaphors are contingent features of philosophical discussion; though they may play an important role in expressing and elucidating concepts, they ought in principle to be separable from the concepts and their adequacy or inadequacy, and indeed separating essential concepts from the rhetoric in which they are expressed is a fundamental philosophical task. But when one attempts to perform this task, not only is it difficult to find concepts that are not metaphorical, but the very terms in which one defines this philosophical task are themselves metaphorical. ... The literal is the opposite of the figurative, but a literal expression is also a metaphor whose figurality has been forgotten. (Culler 1983: 147/8)

The first thing to note is that these understandings about the character and ubiquity of metaphor are by no means solely the work of Derrida, De Man, Bronk, or any other individual. The study of metaphor as a linguistic and psychological phenomenon had been ongoing for much of the twentieth century (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). Furthermore, this passage limits its subject to the field of "philosophical discussion", which would seem to exclude most forms of modern poetry, for "separating essential concepts from the rhetoric in which they are expressed" somewhat defeats the whole purpose and function of such a use of language in which form and content are so uniquely connected. Yet the tone and attitude of Bronk's interest in metaphor is often much closer to that of the



philosophical theorist than the traditional poetic practitioner. In fact his poems do use metaphor in the standard sense of allowing a description of one thing to stand for that of another, albeit rather infrequently. We have mentioned above Bronk's exploration of the old conceit that 'all the world's a stage', and other critics have noted the recurrence of the house motif in his work, which at certain points in his career is used as a metaphor for human life. In fact, although Bronk himself agreed when asked that the "house is a frequent metaphor with me",<sup>16</sup> actual instances of its use in the poetry are scarce and often separated by many years. The house in question is often but not always the poet's own, and may be a symbol (of impermanence or the absence of a transcendent order; see 'My House New Painted' (*LS* 39), and the untitled "Ultimate reality has its own / zip code" (*LS* 196), respectively) rather than a direct metaphor. There are certainly other instances of traditional lyric metaphor at work in Bronk's poems, including the "anchor in the drift of the world" discussed above, but in general these are somewhat sparsely scattered throughout the oeuvre.

More interesting, when viewed with regard to its apparently unique nature within poetic writing and its affinities with the ideas mentioned in the quotation from Culler immediately above, is Bronk's explicit address of the concept of 'metaphor'. Comparatively early in his work, here in the second stanza of the fourteen-line 'Paradise Now and Then', the abstract notion is curiously reified:

We see these Edens in the world, believe in them.  
 Was the first garden such as Adam could leave,  
 Eve leave, and be really elsewhere, apart  
 from the presence whose metaphor the garden was,  
 feeling the absence? Landscape is metaphor  
 and only metaphor. But, oh, I have loved it so.

(*LS* 133)

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<sup>16</sup> Katzman; <http://www.artzar.com/interviews/bronkpart1.htm> (Accessed 9 March 2011)

Here internal sibilance and verbal repetitions contribute to a verse that gains much of its musical effect from its assonant patterns, where multiple long ‘ee’ sounds, including the remarkable enjambed rhyme “leave / Eve leave”, give way to the round “only... oh... so.” Bronk’s use of religious imagery will be discussed in a later chapter of this study, and at this stage it is sufficient to note the meaning and function of the term ‘metaphor’ as it is used here. We have already commented on difficult and paradoxical position of “belief” in Bronk’s schematic world-view, and these lines contribute to our understanding of how for Bronk belief is formed and used. There is a beauty in vegetative growth that stands for a “presence”, such as these lines would have us believe mankind has always intuited, and the first use of metaphor in this stanza is a standard model of such, where beautiful views are described as “these Edens”. ‘View’ is the correct term here, for the verb used is “see”, and there is clearly something of the sublime being communicated in the view that can make us believe. Admittedly, I am inferring that “beauty” is involved here. However, particularly in light of the topic of the sublime discussed in the next chapter, I would hold this to be a reasonable inference. It is a simple progression from the Eden story to understand how there the garden (any garden) is a metaphor for God’s presence. Thus the conceptualisation “landscape is metaphor” is as true for us, who are absent from God due either to original sin or post-enlightenment cultural shift, as it was for Adam and Eve after their expulsion. What is harder to fathom, but is crucial to a fuller understanding of Bronk’s vision, is the next part of the phrase: “and only metaphor”. The pronounced implication there is that landscape – and by extension all the physical world, because everything is landscape from somewhere – has no existence in or for itself, and functions only to reveal that which it stands for.

This is an important deviation from post-structural or deconstructive understandings of metaphor, which focus on its linguistic and epistemological aspects (Norris 1987: 82-83). Rather, the suggestion that Bronk puts forward in ‘Paradise Now and Then’ could be seen to operate in a transcendentalist paradigm that has more to do with apophatic mysticism than contemporary philosophy. Nevertheless, his concern with metaphor has much in common with post-structuralist commentaries that stress both the technique’s effect of ‘masking’ actual presence, and its inevitability within linguistic systems. *Silence and*

*Metaphor*, the title of Bronk's 1975 collection of double-quatrains, is itself a metaphor for language, used as metonym for human existence. This is one of the poems in that collection:

*THE SIGNIFICATION*

I will not say that metaphor is the great  
thing. How should I? Metaphor is a way  
to handle, signify, designate;  
we do not handle the great things, though we try.

We make out there is something lost in the letting go.  
What loss? What loser? Want invented them.  
Want says the loss is real. Want is real.  
It is hard when we do not say what want wants.

(LS 152)

Here the second stanza restates concerns and techniques that we have discussed earlier, namely loss and desire and the connection of those with what is "real", as well as using anaphoric sentence structure for iterative effect. In this particular poem, these ideas and techniques are contextualised by the first stanza, which also provides an implicit suggestion of awareness that certain tropes of speech in the poem (including "to handle" and "the letting go") are metaphors that are hardly "separable from the concepts". Of course the poem does not and cannot tell us what "the great things" are, for we cannot "signify [or] designate" them, but by refusing to tell us that metaphor is among them it actively excludes its involvement among them.

Nevertheless, as an inherent function of language it seems that metaphor is crucial to our world view. In the following poem from later in Bronk's career, the orders by which we provide meaning to our lives are described as 'metaphor' in that they imply the qualities of something else's otherwise unknowable presence. It may therefore be stated that the poem uses the term 'metaphor' metaphorically,

on the understanding that this does not diminish the radical epistemological challenge that the poem offers:

*SUBJECT MATTER*

Science is metaphor. So is truth.  
It seems for all time. Others repeat  
its experiments. Within its terms, it  
is usable. How should we, inside  
and of its metaphor, question it?

(*BOL* 182)

This challenge is similar to that taken up in the title poem of Bronk's final volume, *Metaphor of Trees and Last Poems*, asking us to consider our own lives as not being in or for themselves but representing something beyond our experience.

These few examples demonstrate that for Bronk, who uses the word 'metaphor' in the titles of two of separate collections yet tends to lean away from its use in a traditional sense, the concept of metaphor is one useful way of approaching knowledge and existence. To draw this current discussion to a close, and to pre-empt debate about the apparently inconsistent and paradoxical positions in Bronk's treatment of divinity, we will briefly return to Culler's text where, in a discussion of deconstructive criticism (although the truth of the statement applies to other methods of critical reading) he explains:

Critical disputes about a text can frequently be identified as a displaced reenactment of conflicts dramatized in the text, so that while the text assays the consequences and implications of the various forces it contains, critical readings transform this difference within it into a difference between mutually exclusive positions. ... What is put in question are the presuppositions and decisions that convert a complex pattern of internal differences into alternative positions or interpretations. (Culler 1983: 215)

Perhaps the most immediately obvious occasion of “displaced reenactment of conflicts dramatized in the text” with regard to Bronk’s work is in the contrasting and contradictory responses to its presentation and use of the idea of ‘God’. However, there are further examples of “a complex pattern of internal differences” to be found in Bronk’s work. One can witness the effects of these in Weinfield’s conflict with Taggart’s 1978 essay ‘Reading William Bronk’, which he suggests “misreads Bronk so egregiously it offers us a paradigmatic instance of how *not* to approach him” (Weinfield 2009: 108).

The following poem incorporates and illustrates several of the features that have been discussed in this chapter, and demonstrates how the fictional nature of narratives that we construct to bring sense and order to our existence is another theme which Bronk explicitly presents, and which contributes to the positioning of his work in the post-structural camp:

That any such transcendental meaning is a fiction – though perhaps a necessary fiction – is one consequence of the theory of language I have outlined. (Eagleton 1996: 114)

This idea is apparent on multiple occasions throughout Bronk’s poetry, and I will limit the brief discussion here to the following fairly late poem:

*THE FICTION OF REAL*

The false roles we play are a way to rid  
ourselves of falsity and be real in a real  
world as we need to be to realize  
our potential. There is where the action is  
and inaction is wrong. The need is for faith  
and vision and, unless we believe, our fiction falls  
and we with it, our civilization ends.

(BOL 56/7)

There is a certain ambiguity to the title, and throughout the whole poem, based in

the duality of meaning expressed by the term 'real'. In one sense it is what we perceive as actual, and in another it refers to the absent presence behind that construction. As we have seen, the difference revealed by this duality is part of the fundamental grounding for Bronk's poetic vision. Immediately the poem's first line begins we are immersed in one of the metaphors that have developed as part of language, thus shaping our perceptions and ideologies; reference to the "roles we play" reveals how the theatre metaphor Bronk has previously explicitly explored is in fact inherent in shared cultural-linguistic experience. We are thus reminded of the importance of metaphor in the overall assembly of our perceptions and beliefs.

What this poem also indicates, which has so far not been mentioned and which many critics seem to overlook, is one of the aspects that lends great strength and even beauty to Bronk's work. That is the occasional but significant intimation of a certain responsibility to ourselves; a worldview based in the denial of reality could easily lead to passivity and nihilism, but here we are firmly told: "inaction is wrong." Of course, the language used to express this responsibility, "faith / and vision", and the apocalyptic imagery of the final line, may itself be considered as metaphor. Investigation into the changing nature of Bronk's recourse to these ideas will make up a considerable part of the remainder of this thesis.

This chapter has variously demonstrated important areas of ground that Bronk shares with key Post-Structuralist writers. These include his mistrust of any implicit claims for linguistic authenticity, the dismissal of overarching explanatory 'metanarrative', and an interest in metaphor as a crucial component of knowledge and its expression. Ultimately, of course, these ideas were neither discovered nor invented by Bronk or any of the other twentieth-century writers whose work has been cited. They are part of an ancient tradition that includes but is not limited to the early Gnostic writers, medieval Christian mystics such as the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Nicholas of Cusa, and various other claims and investigations. What Bronk essentially shares with these writers as well as with the Post-Structural theorists is that his work is a part of a continuing reaction to positivist claims regarding the actuality and potential of human knowledge. As such it is part of a rich and varied sceptical tradition, and in the case of Bronk is

focussed through a particular lens that involves certain aspects of a particularly American poetic tradition.

First, however, we can state that even the most sceptical philosophies must to a greater or lesser degree accept that some level of objective existence persists somewhere. For the deconstructivist critic this may be the presence of the text, for the radically sceptic theologian it may be that of an unseen unknowable supreme being. For Bronk, despite his repeated nullifications of nearly every single aspect of existence, there is only one theme that remains curiously untested in his treatment of the world. His attitude to sleep, and with it the associated phenomena of dreaming, is his single touchstone of certainty in a world composed of doubt and denial. A deeper exploration of what Bronk's poetry tells us about sleep and dreaming may therefore prove invaluable to understanding its claims about belief and faith.

The next part of this study will discuss various aspects of the notion of 'the sublime' and their expression in Bronk's poems. William Bronk is a poet of the sublime (Hatlen in Clippinger 2001: 107-32; Weinfield 2009: 125); I will argue in the next chapter that he is more consistently so than any of his contemporaries or secular predecessors. However, in order to place such a claim in an appropriate contextual framework we should first understand, as this chapter has demonstrated and other commentators have sometimes taken for granted, that Bronk is very much a poet of post-modernity and/or a postmodern poet: "Bronk has been identified as a post-modernist..." (Lisk in Clippinger 2001: 140); "Bronk, the postmodernist..." (Kimmelman 1998: 95); "... to encounter Bronk's work is to be brought into the realm of philosophic enquiry—and especially many of the most pervasive questions in postmodern theory" (Clippinger 2006: 207). This term "postmodern" when applied to Bronk indicates more than a chronological location for his work, and should not be seen as a euphemism that excuses or disguises a lack of coherent meaning. His is decidedly not a poetry of discordant surface images nor even of deep discordant symbolism, charges that can be levelled at other poets who carry that label. Of course, like those immediate contemporaries and all other poets, Bronk's output reflected and was in a sense a product of a certain cultural environment. But unlike most of the poets whose work is anthologised as 'postmodern' his is less a mere manifestation of post-

modernity and more an ontological critique in blank verse of the condition of human existence viewed through a particular reflective subjectivity.



## Chapter 4: The Sublime

The sublime, an exalted state exceeding representation, is a religious, philosophical and aesthetic concept. In his handling of the sublime Bronk makes a crucial departure from the ambivalence and scepticism that would seem to connect his work with the post-structuralist camp. This chapter of the thesis will show how Bronk at times employs post-structural conceptualisations of the sublime, but moves beyond these into transcendental schemas more akin with traditional religious expression. After briefly tracing and introducing the concept of the sublime, it will note a couple of important critical precedents that relate Bronk's poetry to the sublime, going on to situate him as part of a history of sublime poetics in English. Close readings of several poems from different stages of his career follow. Two poems from *The World, The Worldless* (1964) respectively access the sublime via the beautiful, and find an address towards 'absolute negativity' which is identified as one aspect of the postmodern sublime. Two poems from *Silence and Metaphor* (1975) are cosmological in their attentions. The substance of further eight shorter poems from *All Of What We Loved* (1998) include religious myth and symbol, contradictory ideas and statements and the presence of an active unnamed force or agent identified as "it", thus prefiguring discussions in later chapters and helping form an understanding of Bronk's particular religious and philosophical stance(s). Many of these discussions focus on poems that have hitherto received no published critical notice. Finally the chapter returns to the genealogical history of the poetic sublime to discuss significant ways in which Bronk differs from his predecessors.

Before turning to the poems it is necessary to briefly sketch a definition and understanding of the term 'sublime' and its important connections with poststructuralist thought. It is also necessary to review the claims already made concerning Bronk's relationship with and attitude towards the sublime. Cultural and artistic impressions of the sublime are changing and, particularly by virtue of the post-structuralist framework of ideas that defines his philosophy, Bronk's work reflects these changes. That is to say, the sublime has become an intellectual conception of a psychologically internal state, and Bronk's poetry is capable of

reflecting the resultant complexity of ideas relating to this, while retaining the emotional intensity of simpler conceits.

Although the term and concept can be traced to at least the first century CE (Shaw 2006: 4), contemporary philosophical considerations of the sublime tend to some extent to be rooted in certain complex passages composed by Immanuel Kant (Shaw 2006: 72 *et passim*). In his essay 'William Bronk and the Sublime' Burton Hatlen assumes his reader's knowledge of Kant's distinction between the mathematical and the dynamical sublime (Clippinger 2001: 107-132). Briefly and essentially the mathematical sublime is or relates to vastness and infinitude while the dynamical refers to the awe-inspiring power of natural events. An industry has long existed providing commentary on Kant's work; probably the most important single point to take from it here is that "[Kant] regards the sublime as an attribute not of nature, but rather of the mind" (Shaw 2006: 82). The common understanding of Kant's ideas in this respect will be considered further in the discussion of Bronk's poem 'Not Defined' (*BOL* 210), below.

What we learn from exploring the concept of the sublime is that the term's meanings and implications have shifted over several centuries of use, and that it remains an important point of philosophical and theological debate. The following descriptions will prove valid and pertinent to the discussion of the notion within Bronk's work:

In broad terms, whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding, whenever the power of an object or event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear, *then* we resort to the feeling of the sublime. (Shaw 2006: 2)

Sublimity, then, refers to the moment when the ability to apprehend, to know, and to express a thought or sensation is defeated. Yet through this very defeat, the mind gets a feeling for that which lies beyond thought and language. (Shaw 2006: 3)

In the late twentieth century the concept of the sublime begins to fill a more complex role in theoretical discussions:

... postmodern culture endeavours to retain a sense of the unrepresentable as absolutely other. It seeks, as the French theorist Jean-François Lyotard argues, to sustain 'the incommensurability of reality to concept which is implied in the Kantian philosophy of the mind' ... Postmodernism, as Lyotard sees it, is not a deviation from but rather a radicalisation of Kant's original 'Analytic' ; it aims to maintain the shock of the sublime so as to prevent the ascendancy of the rational over the real[.](Shaw 2006: 116)

As the previous chapter of this thesis began to illustrate, and will be further shown below, this "incommensurability of reality to concept" and the corresponding absence of an "ascendency of the rational over the real" are conspicuous themes in Bronk's poetry as it approaches and considers the sublime. To this extent, the poetry continues to express ideas that remain fully in accordance with an essentially postmodernist stance. Yet a further distinguishing aspect of the role of the sublime in postmodern theory, specifically in its 'post-structuralist' manifestations, is its substitution for the transcendent. In this context, probably the best-known exploration of the sublime is Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, which configures the concept of sublime as a necessary political gesture to reinforce any form of ideological discourse. In his reading of Kant via Hegel, Žižek reaches a conclusion that appears to dismiss the possibility of the sublime's equation with an actual transcendent other:

... the status of the sublime object is displaced almost imperceptibly, but none the less decisively: the Sublime is no longer an (empirical) object indicating through its very inadequacy the dimension of a transcendent Thing-in-itself (Idea) but an object which occupies the place, replaces, fills out the empty place of the Thing as the void, as the pure Nothing of absolute negativity — the sublime is an object whose positive body is just an embodiment of Nothing. (Žižek 1989: 206)

This description of "an object whose positive body is just an embodiment of Nothing" recalls the conclusion of Bronk's 'There is Ignorant Silence at the Center of Things' (LS 44) where at the centre of experience the narrator finds: "the heart

of things. / This nothing. This full silence.” In this current discussion Bronk’s sense of the sublime as it is approached and expressed in his poetry will be explored further to assess whether and how far it corresponds with this image of “the void... the pure Nothing of absolute negativity”.

Other commentators explicitly remark on the status of the sublime in the work. Finkelstein states: “[Bronk] is able... to relate his consciousness as a poet to the notion of species consciousness,<sup>17</sup> which, for all his solipsistic skepticism, binds him to *the world* in a way that marks him as a master of the sublime” (Finkelstein 1982: 483). I take this claim for Bronk’s “species consciousness” to refer to his repeated positioning of narrative stance in the first-person plural that refers to a generalised human condition; as Weinfield states, by his use of “we” Bronk expresses a “modesty and a generosity” (Clippinger 2001: 69) that can be claimed for few other poets which allows him to speak for us as humanity. Very many of the claims Bronk makes for us touch on ideas and feelings that have a relationship to the sublime, in various senses of the word. Many examples of this kind of inclusive metaphysical observation can be found across Bronk’s poetry: “We, in the dark, beset by love and fear” (*LS* 53); “we are / though something apart from anything we know” (*LS* 154); “Death is to remind us how temporal / we are” (*LS* 223); etc.

There is a further way in which the study of the sublime can assist our appreciation of Bronk’s place within literary history. Describing a quite different aspect of the sublime, that of rhetorical excellence, Shaw refers to Harold Bloom’s vision of a line of poets surpassing one another across generations: “Wordsworth... attains the sublime by outperforming the example of his great predecessor John Milton... Wallace Stevens gains his sublime when he in turn struggles with the influence of Wordsworth” (Shaw 2006: 23). Part of Bronk’s coming to poetic maturity involved finding his own voice out of the influence of Stevens (see chapter two), and comparison of their work can reveal how he “wrests the potency” (Shaw 2006: 23) of the older poet. Of course it would be a travesty to use this view of literary influence to suggest that Stevens or Bronk is a

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<sup>17</sup> Finkelstein refers us to a critique of Karl Marx for an explanation of this term. A brief definition is: “consciousness of the human species as a natural kind or collective entity... of engaging in a mode of life which is specifically human, however much it may differ from the lives of other human beings” (Wood 2004: 19).

'better' poet than Milton. However, it is absolutely valid to suggest that they are respectively better at communicating earlier and later twentieth-century experience than their forebears, and that their poetry may be more immediately relevant by virtue of its recasting the problems of the human condition in contemporary terms.

Weinfield compares Bronk's poem 'Certain Beasts, Like Cats' (*LS* 46) to the work of Keats, and finds in it "a perfect balance between intellection and sensuality." (1988: 143) Perfection in a poem is a matter for a reader to feel or decide for themselves, but I can allow Weinfield his hyperbole as concerns this remarkable verse. George Oppen reportedly wrote of what was to become *The World, The Worldless*: "these poems are perfect" (Clippinger 2006: 104), while Corman refers to this particular piece as "visionary utterance" (Corman 1976: 30). At 22 lines it is long for Bronk, and it may be considered closed in form – being five quatrains and a final couplet that offers unification and closure. Its thematic concerns and repetition of key words ("life" or "live" is repeated seven times in the first stanza and several times again thereafter) and its variation on a regular meter are all typical of Bronk's work at this period. What might make the poem particularly accessible compared to much of Bronk's work is its coupling of paradox and metaphysical themes ("we despair, / seeing the loveliness") with an evocation of natural imagery by the reassuringly familiar use of adjectival noun phrases ("white long-legged birds"; "purple flowers"). Such an ordinary and apparently simple use of recognisable physical description is almost absent from many later Bronk poems. However, here in 'Certain Beasts, Like Cats' the poet addresses the sublime via contemplation of the beautiful:

Because we do not live some life  
different from the life that we do live,  
sometimes I would have traded life for death  
to feed my life to all that feed on life.

Along the river, white long-legged birds  
lift one foot slowly, pause to put it down,  
and lift the other, down, and feed, absorbed

in certainties that never fail, though blind.

Great drifts of purple flowers hold  
the roadside; patrols of purple flowers roam  
through fields and climb to overtop high banks.  
Purple is what color there is in the world.

Certain beasts — like cats — are sleek and quick,  
their skins shimmer with light; they dream.  
What force there is in fish that live their years  
in the cold darks of the sea, swimming the darks.

In August once, I dozed on an unused bridge  
to hang in the very world, in the teeming air.  
Great world, your lives are such that we despair,  
seeing the loveliness, to live our lives.

Yet men are all of these, and more than these,  
strong beasts, dark fish, white birds, and colored flowers.

Like much of Bronk's work, 'Certain Beasts, Like Cats' expresses a fundamental dissatisfaction with the human condition as part of the wider world, and it concludes with considered acknowledgment of and resignation to human mortality. Yet this is a sublime dissatisfaction, in that it arises when apprehension surpasses the beautiful. In this respect, the key line that summarises the poem's standpoint is from the final quatrain: "we despair, / seeing the loveliness, to live our lives." Furthermore, like many of Bronk's most successful pieces, this is a poem that acknowledges the necessity of death (cf. Feld 1972: 47-48). Unknowable, annihilatory and terrifying, our relationship with death is instilled with a sense of the sublime, in both the concept and its actuality. As suggested in this poem, Bronk's confrontation of the sublime does not exclude the contemplation of death.

Unusually, the regular quatrains of 'Certain Beasts, Like Cats' at first adopt an almost exact iambic meter, although this rhythm begins to dissolve in later stanzas where the alliteration becomes more complex and effective. As with all Bronk's mature verse there is no regularized rhyme-scheme to the poem, but instead it makes use of the stressed repetition of individual words in the opening stanza, "live" and "life". These words occur seven times in accentuated positions, and six of these words form pairs, "live" echoing "life" to indicate the theme of the poem. Always intrusive when considering "life" however, is the looming notion of mortality, thrust into the equation with the third line's pairing of "life" with "death". Both "life" and "death" are presented as part of an interrelated, holistic ecology, with the drive towards self-destruction reconfigured as an act of giving: "to feed my life to all that feeds on life".

Although higher order animals' awareness of death might be more developed than had previously been believed, the knowledge that we are each going to die seems to be one of the differences in human and animal self-awareness. Having no consciousness of their own mortality, animals are not "capable of death as death" (Heidegger 2001: 176). The animals of 'Certain Beasts, Like Cats' may have consciousness, but it is not self-consciousness; they do not have the same self-awareness as the narrator and by implied extension the rest of humanity. The birds "feed, absorbed / in certainties" that are blind to their causes and effects, as the birds are blind to the questions of ontology and metaphysics that challenge humanity, and to the sensations of sublimation that this poem suggests.

As is the case with a few other poems in *The World, The Worldless*, 'Certain Beasts, Like Cats' in part addresses the relationship between the natural world and the built environment. In the third stanza the army of "purple flowers" position and define the presence of the road, and extend beyond human manipulation of the physical world. The repetition of "purple" over this stanza is a simple technique that succeeds in building the impression of quantity, and with it the strength of "life" as it manifests itself in the spreading plants. Continuing this expression of perceived vigour in the growth of life around him, there is a tone of admiration for physical attributes in the adjectives that describe the animals of the poem's title ("sleek and quick"), and in the "force" of the fish. Beyond its

alliterative quality here, this word “force” is layered with meaning, suggesting the Newtonian concept of motion, the pressure of deep-sea water, and the emotive power of fish as a symbol, while when a cat or a human eats a fish there is a transfer of chemical energy: “life... feeds on life.” Thus it is observed that death is never far away from life, and this sense of mortal temporariness explicitly applies to the fish “that live [out] their years”.

Just as the reiteration of “life” in the first stanza forces consideration of the meaning or definition of the word, so too the somewhat baroque “darks” is foregrounded by its repetition. The word seems to be a signpost for the poet’s inventiveness and manipulation of language, and contrast and comparison with the “sleek and quick” cats that “shimmer with light”, a description that might at other times be applied to fish, but which has a ring of the angelic also. Discussing specifically the description of the fish, Weinfield states that: “in the imagery... and in the metrical substitutions of that line, there is a feeling of the sublime that merges with the beautiful” (Weinfield 2009: 131). The “lives” of all these animals, the cats, birds and fish, are, along with “our lives”, those of the “Great world” invoked in the final quatrain. They call back to the first stanza, providing the poem with a concluding unity, and prefigure the concern for ‘life’ as an active agent that Bronk will develop and explore in later collections. Yet finally, after the poem’s careful eulogising of the natural world, the closing couplet here indicates separation and an elevation of mankind over his fellow creatures, a crucial aspect of much religious theorising.

As Weinfield (2009: 131) indicates, one effective feature of ‘Certain Beasts, Like Cats’ is the way the lyric “I” moves in and out of the verse. This is indicative of the way some of Bronk’s most successful poems are simultaneously personal and universal in their scope. A similar example can be viewed in ‘The Extensions of Space’, which is situated in a world where the perception of apparent certainties, such as gravity and logic, is perpetually tainted with doubt and uncertainty. The world in which the poem operates is that defined by Heisenberg and Gödel, which was stated in ideas that had appealed to Bronk (Kimmelman 1998: 40; Collins in Clippinger 2001: 218 *et passim*; Gilmore 2006: 319). Here, humankind’s search for understanding of the universe is characterized by the process of questioning, which has its own syntax and grammar that the poem exploits. These post-



modern ideas concur with the implications that Bronk sets out, that a belief that this search can reveal more than incomplete answers is naïve and flawed:

#### THE EXTENSIONS OF SPACE

The point must come when nothing matters more  
than *who*. *What* has been heard too often; *when*  
and *where* renew with shiny bangles stuff  
gone dull. It is too late now for *why*.  
The question is, "Who is it, is it you?"

When I came out of the house, the world, the sky,  
were moving outward. There had been a big  
explosion somewhere, not here, but far.  
Somewhere another explosion countered. More.  
The world goes whooshing. Focus is in and out.

What do we do about the tortoise? We thought  
we had dispensed with that nonsense, and still  
some elephant's back is wanted to hold, if not  
the literal globe, our worlds, our artifacts,  
our facts; and underneath, a tortoise, ground.

Only, if we go down that far,  
no ground exists for facts or tortoises:  
finally, we come to where there is nothing there  
to underprop our worlds; logic rides high,  
a balloon, and under it, we pass and go.

These are grave things, gravities,  
worlds holding in suspension worlds,  
and nothing under them. But also, look  
some persons bridge all across the farthest space

that we can conceive, and are solid there.

(LS 50)

Here we find Bronk near to his most verbose and expressive. Although as is typical there is no formal rhyme at the line ends, traditional lyric effects of alliteration and assonance can be observed throughout the loosely five-beat lines. Twenty-five lines is a fairly long poem by his standards, and unlike almost all of the later work and much of the earlier each stanza contains definite visual imagery of some kind. There is dynamism in the verse that his poems do not always demonstrate, and a straightforward linear drive throughout; each of the five-line stanzas introduces and develops a new and distinct thought, leading on to the next.

An indication and reflection of how the sublime may be reached when rational analysis falls short, 'The Extensions of Space' opens with a denouncement of most of the questioning process; interplay between notions of time and space exists within the poem's rejection of "What", "where", "when" and "why", with all four presented amongst temporal considerations. "[H]as been", "renew... gone" and "too late" firmly position in the past the italicized words and the abstracted inquisitive notions they represent, while the overwhelming importance of "who" is situated at a "point" which has not yet come but which is inevitable. Geometrically a "point" has position without magnitude, but the word can also mean a moment of time without duration. Regarding the poem as a self-contained entity, this "point" is reached twice, explicitly at the end of the first stanza and implicitly in the final lines of the final stanza. Although the poem's first line addresses questions of time, it is human beings, to whom *who* will usually refer, exist also in space and as a part of space. Time and humanity can thus both, in different senses, be said to be "Extensions of Space".

The revelation of the sublime is apparent in the second stanza, where we find an attempt to describe or evoke the moment at which "points of comparison disappear". The central line of the second stanza demonstrates Bronk's capacity to use the inherent music of his language to create a sort of assonance of meaning as well as sound,<sup>18</sup> beautifully connecting "somewhere", "here" and "far". These

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<sup>18</sup> For another instance from the same collection, cf. 'The Truth As Known' (LS 41):  
"...asking, not / wait for an answer, or getting one, part / of one, suspect it, scoff, know it

terms provide the focus for a reading of the verse; the narrator's "house" ceases to provide the comfort of seclusion, and fails to offer answers to the questions mooted above. Scale and points of reference are difficult to establish when "[f]ocus is in or out"; the power of the event defeats the possibility of effective verbal description while the dominant images of this stanza are those of movement and once again uncertainty. Leaving the security of solipsism by force or choice, the narrator confronts the universe in which he and his home exist. "A big explosion somewhere", which the dominant contemporary theory of creation would call the 'Big Bang' suggests a belief in the universe as a series of physical actions and reactions; the first "explosion" is an action to which "another explosion" is the reaction. The ambiguity of expression in this world-view depends on the two instances of "somewhere" and whether they refer to separate locations, and on the final word of the fourth line, the isolated syllable "More." An optimistic reader could apply "More" to the number of explosions, allowing us to believe that one reaction in this universe is made in response to another. This suggestion supports classically modelled theories of cause and effect, and may even support the possibility of ultimate justice or reward, or at least something to look forward to. Yet if we allow "More" to refer to the increased magnitude of the second explosion, the conclusion invited is that creation is merely the possibly arbitrary result of overcompensation within a physical chemical reaction.

There is a disarming humour displayed in the colloquial inquiry that opens the third stanza, with the sudden appearance of a sublime and unexpected "tortoise". An allusion to the archetypal myth<sup>19</sup> that a flat earth rested on the back of an elephant that in turn stood on the shell of an enormous tortoise, in terms of literal belief most of the world has indeed "dispensed with that nonsense", but the questions and uncertainties that informed this conclusion persist. Philosophy has

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was false." In this example "asking" connects with "answer", and "scoff" with "false", at the level of both signification and pronunciation.

<sup>19</sup> A couple of the earliest cited references to the idea can be found in John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: "Had the poor Indian philosopher (who imagined that the earth also wanted something to bear it up) but thought of this word *substance*, he needed not to have been at the trouble to find an elephant to support it, and a tortoise to support his elephant" (Locke 1996: 73); "the Indian before mentioned (...) saying that the world was supported by a great elephant, was asked, what the elephant rested on; to which his answer was a great tortoise: but being again pressed to know what gave support to the broad-backed tortoise, replied, something, he knew not what" (118).

for centuries been a search for a figurative “elephant’s back” to underpin our experience of the world; despite continued movements to reassess the goals and reference points of philosophy, all that we experience, perceive and possess would still seem to require an “elephant’s back” of reality to support it. This experiential level of existence is in turn supported by a “tortoise” of (meta)physics, supplying the rules and reasons by which reality must exist and to which it must comply. Yet as scientific and theoretical arguments continue to expose the flaws in any quest to order and objectively understand the universe, and developments in quantum mechanics and chaos theory, for example, prove traditional concepts of physics fallible, one might sometimes be tempted to call a halt to the questioning. It is the human condition, as Bronk perceives it, that we cannot stop this search until we drive ourselves against one or another manifestation of the sublime.

From the bleak opening lines to the concluding sentence, ‘The Extensions of Space’ repeatedly attests the strength and persistence of humanity, but constant reminders of mortality are never far away. Thus while that phrase may show how we continue the journey of our lives, even in the knowledge of our ignorance and illogicality, “pass and go” also reads as a definite euphemism for death. That theme is reiterated in the pun on “grave” in the next and final stanza. The word-play on “grave” is at least as old as Shakespeare, although by juxtaposing it with “gravities” Bronk introduces confirmation that mortality is as scientifically unavoidable as gravitational attraction between two bodies of matter (this claim appears to hold true even in a world of post-Newtonian physics).

The remaining first half of this final stanza (“worlds holding in suspension worlds, / and nothing under them”) indicates a new view of a universe, self-sustaining and potentially godless, that has superseded the elephant / tortoise construct. The following sentence, however, opening with an eager imperative<sup>20</sup> reintroduces a human message of hope into a scientifically described creation. A narrative tone of self-assured authority has been present throughout the poem, eventually betraying itself as misplaced with the erroneous declaration “finally...” in the penultimate stanza. A self-critical narrator would realize the precedent that lies behind “final” declarations; belief in cosmic elephants and ‘turtles all the way

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<sup>20</sup> There is possibly a comma or other punctuation mark missing after “look” at the end of line 24 in the *LS* edition.

down' was one such "final" explanation. The closing lines see the didactic, almost priestly tones relinquished in favour of a lyrical, even mystic, couplet reminding us of the human genome's method of overcoming the mortality of the individual body: "we can conceive...".

Much of this reading of 'The Extensions of Space' regards it as a quest for identity in a world of uncertainties, and finds the poem answering the question posed in the first stanza with illustration of a journey through systems of belief, beyond mere belief into a system of thought and doubt founded on reason, science and logic. Whilst philosophers and mathematicians may argue about its finer points, logic maintains a power over most of us, it "rides [us] high". However, Bronk makes such fluid use of language that ambiguities are often present in his apparently plainspoken verses. Much of this poem bears out a rare kind of beauty because its images are evocative, but rarely precise. The first stanza in particular may read as the unhappy end of a love affair; then as possessions are being redistributed one partner asks "What do we do about the tortoise?" In the second stanza the word "countered" carries connotations of currency and trade; read an avaricious tone into the single word "More" and the explosions become those of a crashing stock market. These observations are made not to suggest that we should read the poem as analogy or coded reference, but to demonstrate the potential effectiveness of skilfully deployed equivocation within the lyric.

The handling of the memorable central conceit in 'The Extensions of Space', that of the tortoise on the elephant's back, aptly illustrates certain points that were raised in the discussion of Bronk's postmodernity. It demonstrates the definitively postmodern "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard 1994: xxiv), and by exposing the fallacy of this specific metaphor it reflects a skeptical awareness of the ubiquity of metaphor in general. Ultimately, the tortoise-elephant metaphor is a figurative attempt at framing the sublime impossibility of providing a rational and complete grounding to account for "our worlds, our artifacts, / our facts". The poem is a contemporary restatement of the problem, demonstrating a knowing awareness of its unsolvability via its narrator's own inclusion among the unknowing: "we come to where there is nothing there / to underprop our worlds". Yet although that "nothing" is "the pure Nothing of absolute negativity" that Žižek claims constitutes the sublime, Bronk avoids the

potential descent into nihilism by a characteristic centralisation of humanity and human concerns: “nothing matters more / than *who*”; “some persons bridge all across the farthest space”.

The two poems discussed above are taken from *The World, The Worldless*; the following two poems are taken from Bronk’s collection *Silence and Metaphor* (1975). They again exemplify his continuing concerns with the sublime, in its manifestation as an awareness of the ineffable at the borders of human experience. Both are cosmological in their scope, and thus invoke Kant’s mathematical sublime, but simultaneously centralise the human observer, confirming the sublime experience as an internal process involving both thought and feeling. Like all of *Silence and Metaphor*, these poems are in the double-quatrain form:

#### UTTERANCES

There are no near galaxies: this  
as far as any, if not in terms of miles,  
we know how meaningless miles are  
in terms of miles. How far from me to you?

Everything is, almost in the utterance,  
metaphor — as we measure miles, and miles  
are meaningless, but we know what distance is:  
unmeasurable. But there are distances.

(LS 152)

The most striking verbal feature of this piece is its lexical repetition. The sense of the verse is built up by the accumulation of “miles” and “meaningless”, before the final homophonic “distance is / ... distances” underlines the theme. The poem’s initial claim is, once again and typically, presented as propositional statement of fact: “There are no near galaxies”. This is swiftly followed up by a pre-emptive dismissal of comparative nearness, which positions the poem’s discourse within the locus of human experience and conception, as opposed to the theoretical and

imaginative. The suggestion is that it is equally impossible for us to conceptualise the distance from here to Proxima Centauri as to Andromeda. A further case of repetition that echoes between the stanzas is the claim that “we know”, both “how meaningless miles are” and “what distance is”. An assumption of shared knowledge here perhaps relies on the poet’s supposition that the reader, or at least the addressee, is in agreement with a claim previously made in the poem ‘On Divers Geometers’: “...all measures measure themselves, / none measure the world” (*LS* 93).

The question that closes the first stanza is a sudden simple short phrase at odds in content as well as structure with the longer opening sentence. It draws the poem’s focus back from the vast and abstract to the relationships between people, as we saw in the examples given above, and is an important part of so many of Bronk’s poems. The answer to that question, were one possible, would depend not simply on the general or specific identity of the “you” as well as the “I”, but also on quite how the question is to be understood; that is, how literally physical or metaphorical ‘far’ is taken to be. Yet the opening claim of the second stanza implicitly acknowledges this concern, by diminishing the rhetoric behind the question to the status of metaphor, which separates it a further level from the actual it would purportedly represent. In an example of structural repetition that mirrors the first stanza, the conclusion arrives in single short sentence that follows a longer multi-clausal arrangement. The remainder of this second stanza restates the claims of the first, with the additional self-effacing caveat that its own utterance is as meaningless as the measurement of miles. ‘Utterances’ closes on an ambiguous turn that offers to transcend the narrator’s situation (and also therefore ours) within this potentially hopeless instance of sublime awareness of the vastness of space.

Meeting the awareness of finitude against vastness, with measurement having been dismissed as meaningless, all we are left with is the affirmation: “But there are distances.” Whether we find hope or despair in this straightforward statement depends entirely on our interpretation, the poem in itself offers no judgement on its implications. Either the presence of distances leaves us all perpetually isolated and remote, unable to answer “How far from me to you?” because the measures we must use are meaningless, or the fact that there are

distances means that the metaphorical terms by which we understand these and other phenomena lend validity to our attempts to represent and speak meaningfully of them. This latter attitude endorses the presence of poetry in the world.

More repetitive lexis is at work in the following poem, where the key terms are “purpose” and “we don’t know”. That phrase “we don’t know” might be seen as representative of Bronk’s general poetic message, but alongside the negativity of the refrain is a compulsion to try to know. Bronk as a poet is caught in the very human act, indeed a sublime act, of trying to understand a universal scheme of which he can never have complete knowledge. The stars and planets, visible but impossibly distant, are a reminder of the fundamentally limited human condition yet still a source of hope, beauty and even stability:

#### THE LIMITS OF KNOWLEDGE

The unpurposive lights in the sky at night, far  
from telling us what purpose is as, say,  
*there is no purpose* (as may, perhaps, be so)  
say only how we don’t know what it is.

But Venus, tonight, was beautiful in the west.  
If I wake toward morning, as many times I do,  
and look in the east, Vega will be there.  
What certainties are these? We don’t know.

(LS 155)

The fairly complex syntax of the first quatrain reflects structural similarities with ‘Utterances’; in each poem’s first stanza a simple initial clause is augmented and qualified across the sentence unit. An effect of sublimation is brought about by the failure to resolve the first quatrain’s proposition on its own terms, necessitating a movement out of abstract theorising (about “terms” in ‘Utterances’ or “purpose” here in ‘The Limits of Knowledge’) into the immanence of lived experience. From the lofty vastnesses of each poem’s first stanza, huge in their subject and their



attempted conceptual scope, we are led to a reduction to the simplest of statements: “there are distances” or “We don’t know.” Focussing closer on the syntactic and formal effects at work in ‘The Limits of Knowledge’, regarding the final word of the first line we see that grammatically it belongs to the second. Rhythmically it completes the fifth stressed beat of the blank verse line, but the effect of the syllable “far” is limited neither to the completion of a colloquialism (“far / from telling us”) nor to the balance of poetic meter. It serves an effective adjectival function as a descriptor of the preceding “lights”, particularly when the poem is spoken with appropriate attention to line-breaks, reinforcing their status as agents of the sublime (in this case both mathematical and dynamical).

Furthermore, a single, subtle syllable carries an important consideration within the poem. It speaks not of “what purpose is” but of “what purpose is as”. Some things can only be described through this kind of metaphor, by describing something with which they share features or characteristics. We are called again to notice the limits of language and the unsolvable problems of defining what it is to be, of what “is” indicates. The limits of knowledge are accounted for in part by the limited materials through which knowledge is expressed (language) and by the limited tool which seeks to order impression, experience and linguistic expression (the mind). The implicit suggestion is that purpose can be referred to only by comparison, rather than by means of direct definition. Words could not express a definition of purpose if it were to exist on the vital or universal level to which the poem directs us. There is, however, a level on which the mind can conceive or hope for an absolute purpose to the world, and in this conceit or hope there can be found an aspect of the sublime experience, which can and should be understood as a manifestation of religious desire (cf. Ernest 1988).

The above discussion of four poems from the 1960s and 1970s respectively has augmented the current understanding of Bronk as a poet of the sublime (cf. Hatlen). Later in Bronk’s career, while the content of the poems becomes generally more distilled, the same major themes are maintained. A late collection, *All of What We Loved* (1998) has attracted comparatively little critical attention, and the remainder of this chapter offers close readings of eight individual poems that have hitherto been overlooked by critics and reviewers. At both the formal and thematic levels, *All of What We Loved* is typical of the books that appeared

towards the end of Bronk's life. Gilmore's brief review of the collection is introduced thus:

[it] contains one hundred fifty-nine short poems which express the major thoughts, feelings and themes he had written about throughout the previous forty years. Not surprisingly for so old and ill a poet, the ephemeral, sojourner quality of life and the inevitability of death become salient in these poems. Their tone varies from wit to earnestness. (Gilmore 1994: 306)

As the following discussion will demonstrate, these "major thoughts, feelings and themes" not only include but in fact depend upon the poet's awareness of a sublime (and/or transcendental) other against and in relation to which life and death are experienced.

The first poem in *All of What We Loved* is apparently a fairly straightforward didactic proposition, or more accurately a pair of propositions, the latter of which particularly would seem to paradoxically negate its own validity, and also that of the remainder of the volume. These poems are invariably brief, and might in general be described as epigrammatic rather than lyric. Even if the ostensible purpose of the opening poem is not to glorify its two subjects but rather to denigrate the tool of reference, that is to say to establish or restate the poet's mistrust of language at the outset of the collection, its subject matter necessarily marks it as an approach to the sublime. There is a certain appeal in the simple syntactic repetition at work here, and when spoken aloud the poem benefits from an adherence to an iambic stress pattern with appropriate elision in the second line:

INDETERMINATE

The universe is not in our terms  
and we aren't either in any terms of ours.

(*BOL* 208)

Here, then, is an example of when “the power of an object or event is such that words fail”; if the sublime is what surpasses language, then according to a reading of the first line, the universe as an entity and/or a concept must be considered sublime. This is a reasonable claim, and if its brevity wants elaboration that is because such elaboration is impossible by its own definition. If that first line is taken to mean that our terms of expression are inadequate or unsuitable for describing the universe, then the second suggests that “we” too may be bracketed similarly. This rendering of humanity as sublime is supported when we recall the statement that the sublime is “an attribute not of nature, but rather of the mind”. So on one level this short introductory poem establishes humanity not as object or category but as an experience which cannot be meaningfully distilled into language. Thus the poem would operate as a denouncement of the humanities and social sciences, for while the terms of the poem may still allow the possibility of reductive explanations accounting for many phenomena in the world, this does not include the complex activities of human beings.

However, there are subtleties of meaning at work in the poem’s few words. The title itself warns us that a fixed understanding of their content should not be sought. Philosophically and scientifically, indeterminacy is a feature of recent and contemporary understandings of the world, and one which has been insightfully associated with Bronk’s writings (cf. Collins in Clippinger 2001: 213-25). A brief etymological diversion is useful here; “[In]determinate” comes from a Latin root related to “terminus” connected with boundary or ending. Thus to speak of a “term” as in a word or phrase is in a sense to apply boundaries to an object, defining it and excluding what it is not. This act is precisely what the linguistic understanding of the sublime disallows, and what the poem dismisses as impossible to achieve when attempting to discuss mankind or the universe. One important and indeterminate aspect of the poem, reliant on an interpretive understanding of its grammar, is how far it allows for the existence of the universe at all, because “in our terms” (being those to which our understanding and expression are restricted) it “is not”. Furthermore, if we “aren’t either” in those terms, the question must arise on whose terms we are present and thus able to make and receive utterances such as the poem.

Although the sublime character of such a question could be said to lie in its being unanswerable, it provides an important rhetorical conceit in the context of this collection. In the following poem, as with ‘Indeterminate’, we are made aware of an order of being (or “happening”, which need not be the same thing) beyond that in which we operate:

#### INTEGRAL CALCULUS

To set down with careful accuracy  
not our own lives — trivial,  
however unseeming to be — but something else  
happening although hardly to any of us.

(*BOL* 208)

Again it is revealing to consider the meaning of the title and its relation to the content of the verse. In mathematics integral calculus is the study and operation of the functions of integrals, which are numerical measurements of areas within a graph. An important feature of these integrals is that they operate within specified intervals, that is to say they verge towards but never reach the infinitesimal. Like other branches of mathematics it is an abstract method of representing and communicating objective truths in the actual world. Perhaps significantly, considering Bronk’s concern with the term and concept “real”, integral calculus is a branch of so-called real analysis, and in light of the comments made about “terms” in the discussion immediately above it is worth noting that an integral is a ‘limit concept’ which serves to provide boundaries and thereby exclude (encyclopediaofmath.org: 2014). The four lines that comprise the poem might just be read as a description of this mathematical process, which requires “careful accuracy” to describe “not our own lives” but “something else / happening” (ie. the behaviour of numbers).

At least equally possibly, though with less obvious relevance to their title, the poem’s content may refer to a chronicling process such as diary keeping or news journalism, records of births and deaths, or Bronk’s poetry itself. According to this latter possibility, the “careful accuracy” would refer to precise recording of

the words that the poet claimed to encounter rather than compose (Weinfield 1988: 38-9). In any case the main force of the didactic message here appears twofold; first that our lives are “trivial” despite any indications to the contrary, and second that there is “something else / happening” which to some degree has an effect on us. While we can confidently state that these interrelated notions are generally in keeping with the overall context of Bronk’s work, there are particularities to be considered within the terms of their expression here. It is difficult to fix a precise meaning for that final phrase, “happening although hardly to any of us”; taking a stance that “we” signifies humankind one could expect the gist of the idea to be that whatever this “something” is, it affects all of us just a little. In fact, what the poem seems to be saying is that there are nearly none of us to whom it is “happening”. Perhaps unwittingly, this introduces the possible notion not necessarily of an elect few with privileged access to “something else / happening”, but certainly of different degrees of sensitivity to sublime (and/or transcendental) otherness among individuals. Meanwhile, the infinitive form of the opening verb phrase renders it the grammatical subject, and grants an unfinished quality to the whole quatrain, as if its several clauses are left waiting for an active verb to tie their strands together. As well as offering a warning against overly rigorous textual exegesis, this serves to heighten the idea of ineffability, returning us to the notion of the sublime as a powerful motivation within the poems.

As the above discussion of ‘Integral Calculus’ begins to show, in some of Bronk’s later poems the reader’s search for logical argument can threaten to overwhelm the work’s indubitable status as lyrical poetry. The potential therefore exists to read Bronk as merely an eccentric and inconsistent philosopher. One way in which the poems successfully overcome this danger is by returning to subjective feelings, as in this next example:

#### SNEAKING ONE

At times, we find person and place  
to make us real.

It may be, under all

the rest of it, one we keep to only ourselves.

True, we're all nothing and nowhere but,  
ho hum, don't want it that way any more.

(*BOL* 209)

The further one reflects on this poem, the more poignant its sadness becomes. Its title indicates a guilty and harmful pleasure, perhaps recalling Bronk's relationship with alcohol, which he had almost but not entirely given up by this time (Gilmore 329). At the outset the verse hints at becoming a love poem in the traditional mode, but the absence of grammatical articles before "person and place" depersonalises its content. In the schema that Bronk has spent his career creating, the idea of being "[made]... real" would be an ultimate unattainable goal, yet here he avows not just its possibility but even its actual occurrence. He goes on to concede some kind of solipsism in this experience, that this state of being "real" is not or cannot be shared. Then when the final couplet turns the poem in on itself, it is with a crushing negation followed by that whimsical and regretful "ho hum" introducing what would be a complete rebuttal of a lifetime's thought, if only willing desire could permanently overcome reason.

So what is being 'sneaked'? It may indeed be a love affair, or a single poem that stands against the wider collection, but very importantly it is also hope within what threatens to be a bleak nihilistic system. Part of Bronk's poetic appeal lies in the personal voice that lends a humanising quality to his highly conceptual subject matter, and can be heard at moments like this. In this respect it is significant that it is "person and place" (notwithstanding the absent article) that connects us with the "real". There is a strong case to be made for connecting Bronk's "real world" with certain aspects of the sublime (cf. Clippinger 2001: 114-7), and we see here that he holds out hope that moments of our experience can provide a unique and personal connection to that "real".

As has already been briefly stated, current philosophical conceptions of the sublime tend to owe a certain historical debt to the work of Immanuel Kant. Insofar as the following poem presents Bronk's understanding of and response to one aspect of Kant's philosophy, it may recall 'On *Credo Ut Intelligam*', which

tackled Anselm's theological epistemology. However, this later work foregoes critical argument in favour of rhetorical questions, although it retains the personal stance that leaves no doubt as to the poet's own identification with the narrating "I":

NOT DEFINED

Immanuel Kant, my teacher said,  
thought the human mind couldn't conceive of the all,  
the universe, as finite or infinite:  
by each the other is disallowed.

That's my memory of it, probably wrong.

Did he think a mind more adequate would do?  
A limitation in those ideas themselves ?

I need hardly dispute him either way.

(*BOL* 210)

Confirming at least half of the general stance that the poet's teacher described, Shaw states the following as part of his discussion of Kant's 'mathematical sublime': "The concept of infinity, which belongs properly to reason, is presented negatively by virtue of the inability of imagination to present an object that would be adequate to this concept" (Shaw 2006: 80). This, then, is the mind's failure to "conceive of ... / the universe as ... infinite". However, this by no means equates to an inability to conceive of infinity, for as we learn:

The very fact that we are able to conceive of infinity as a whole, that we are able, in other words, to comprehend ideas which exceed direct empirical presentation, shows that 'we are beings with capacities that transcend the limitations of our finite phenomenal existence' ... Sublimity, therefore rests

in the human capacity to think beyond the bounds of the given. (Shaw 2006: 82)

An analysis of what Kant actually said about this matter is secondary to forming an understanding of the poem, which concerns itself only with what the poet remembered his teacher having said. In fact the poem seems to refer us to a certain passage in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which includes the following challenging statement:

The universe exists for me only in the empirical regress of the series of phenomena and not per se. If, then, it is always conditioned, it is never completely or as a whole; and it is, therefore, not an unconditioned whole and does not exist as such, either with an infinite, or with a finite quantity. (Kant 1991: 208)

There is no suggestion either in this poem or elsewhere that Bronk had read Kant, although equally we cannot assume that he hadn't. Indeed by the caveat "my teacher said" and the swift disclaimer in the fifth line, he dismisses the actual terms of the philosopher's argument as barely relevant. What Bronk is addressing above all in this poem is his concern with the distinct but interrelated ideas raised in lines six and seven; the inadequacy of human understanding to apprehend the entirety of "the all", and the "limitation in those ideas" that we use in our conceptual discourse. These expose the failing by which the mind is drawn up short in its attempts to conceptualise the (in)finity of the universe, and by which the sublime is internally formulated or revealed: "Significantly, both realisations [the mathematical and dynamical sublime] arise on the basis of an initial failure in our ability to comprehend" (Shaw 2006: 83).

The poem on the very next page of *All of What We Loved* prefaces later discussion in this chapter and elsewhere in the thesis:

BIG BANG

Now to be Adam as he was first,



Eve and her generations still inside  
and unconsidered yet. He was complete  
and never again after the casting out  
not of him from the Garden but out from him  
of us, his uncloned splinters since to come.

(BOL 210)

The reader acquainted with Bronk's work will recognise a return to a familiar theme here (cf. Finkelstein 1982), and his use of doctrinal myth will be addressed in more detail in a later chapter of the current thesis. However, at this stage we can limit the discussion to the way in which this poem restates a concern with the sublime, in this case invoking both the 'mathematical sublime' via its suggestion of returning ("Now") to the impossibly distant origins of the universe, and also the 'dynamical sublime', inviting us to realise "a pure 'idea' of totality or freedom, which is not subject to the empirical, contingent conditions of nature" (Shaw 2006: 83) by imagining a time and state prior to the dictates of circumstance and genealogy. This poem supplies the first obvious use of religious imagery in *All of What We Loved*, and is also among the most recognisable examples of formal verse in the collection, strengthened by the remarkable metaphor presented in its firmly iambic final line.

Yet an understanding of the poem 'Big Bang' cannot be complete without acknowledging this, the last poem in *All of What We Loved*:

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

(BOL 255)

To read this as advocating a steady-state cosmological theory would be misguided. Rather as with many of Bronk's short lyrics it is a warning against the acceptance

of orthodoxy, an enactment of his earlier pronouncement “ideas are always wrong”. It is also a direct refutation of the stance taken in the poem ‘Big Bang’, an acknowledgment of the impossibility of a return to Eden at any literal, figurative or even imaginative level, a denial of that uncharacteristic appeal to the imagination that set the poem ‘Big Bang’ into being. If we try to understand its claims and implications at a straightforward level it is necessary to ascertain the status of “We”; does the pronoun refer to each individual, or to humanity as a species, or to some broader universally-inclusive category? In any case the claims are irrational, illogical and unsupported by most of the available evidence. Yet to denounce the poem on that basis is to take a sort of logical positivist stance that denies the value of poetic language, and also to exclude the possibility of a sublime truth that in its moment of utterance or reception is felt or intuited as true despite its apparent irrationality.

Much earlier in the volume, the following piece had introduced certain important notions to the collection:

#### QUICK TAKE

You’re a show of something making, something there.  
A short show. Look quick or you miss it; you’ll be gone.  
But it’s there. Reverence it. As it is.

(*BOL* 211)

Key among these ideas is the conceptualising of the otherwise nameless “it” as an active creative force, which is expounded soon afterwards:

#### AS THOUGH

It will do what it wants — maybe some  
of it to you — and you can do what you  
may want and it won’t matter to it.

But we  
have dignity.

We act as though it would.

(*BOL* 213)

Hatlen (Clippinger 2001: 120) specifically equates this “it” with both God and the Real World. For further discussion of this idea, including why it is not necessarily helpful to understanding the concepts at work, see chapter seven of this current thesis. The presence of distinct and different ‘its’ signified by the word’s six instances in ‘As Though’ both foregrounds the difficulty in naming the subject “it” beyond the use of the pronoun, and also blurs the boundaries between the doer and the action done. It has been stated that sublimity lies in the inability to articulate an internal experience in a way that through facing this inarticulation the mind experiences a deeper, broader truth than language admits. Bronk’s “it” as used in these two poems and many others in the latter part of the collected works is paradigmatically sublime; any of the nouns he might have used, including those which Hatlen lists, are insufficiently bounded by the finitude of their scope to approach expression of what it is that deserves “reverence”. The pronoun is the only safe resort, loaded with potentiality thanks to its exactitude.

The second person address used in both of these poems is comparatively rare in Bronk’s work, and thus has the effect of emphasising the relevance of the message to its reader. Structurally the three lines of ‘Quick Take’ elegantly connect constituent ideas, as in the echo of the words “show” and “there” from the first line in the second and third lines respectively. One of these ideas is the universal poetic staple that is the brevity of life, and others can be traced from Bronk’s earlier collections; that our lives can be described through the metaphor of theatrical performance, that there is “something” beyond or outside us and we are instruments of its expression, and importantly that this “something” is to be revered. ‘As Though’ further personifies the subject by granting “it” volition, but places its activity firmly at distance from the addressee. However, the susceptibility of this stance to anarchic nihilism is avoided by a neat structural turn, a counterclaim which locates a sense of morality in our “dignity”.

In terms of the current discussion, while ‘Quick Take’ does evoke ideas of the ‘mathematical sublime’ in tackling life’s brief finitude, the ‘dynamical sublime’ such as is provoked by the wonder at nature is absent. This stimulation of the

imagination is very much rooted in a real world (Shaw 2006: 81/2) which despite his wishful stance in 'Sneaking One', Bronk has perpetually disavowed. Thus rather than a view of the dynamical sublime, here in 'Quick Take' we are offered an intimation of transcendence like that which John Milbank indicates post-structural conceptions of the sublime have overlooked (Milbank 1998). Meanwhile, 'As Though' invites little realisation of the sublime but is absolutely concerned with a certain sort of transcendence, although apparently not the kind that might impose an objective morality.

There are, as I hope to have implied, myriad further instances of Bronk approaching the sublime through his poetry. As the several examples in the lengthy discussion above reflect, some of these attempts are more memorable and successful than others. Nevertheless, it is clear that the sublime in various guises is absolutely a key theme of Bronk's work, from almost the very beginning of his published career. This discussion has augmented the findings of the previous chapter in demonstrating that Bronk is a poet of ideas, and has indicated how in continually returning to the sublime experience his poetry represents a genuinely religious impulse. Like aspects of religious experience, the sublime is a "state of mind" which occurs when "experience slips out of conventional understanding", when the "limits of reason and expression" meet the "unknowable void", at "the moment when ability to apprehend, to know... is defeated" (Shaw 2006: 1-3). Although Bronk seeks to move beyond this moment of defeat, this is precisely the region of experience where the better part of his poetry exists. Sometimes grounded in actual events and places, like the "bridge" where he "dozed" in 'Certain Beasts Like Cats' (Gilmore 2006: 274), just as frequently these ideas are entirely abstract.

In these terms we can very briefly contrast Bronk to such a monumental figure as Wordsworth, whose own discussion of the sublime exists within and relies upon his impressions of the immediate. Wordsworth's 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey' has been held as exemplary of the Romantic sublime (Shaw 2006: 8-9), and in one important sense Bronk maintains this (post-) Romantic concern with bringing the "sense sublime" to the work by including the feelings of 'I' and 'we' so frequently in his poems, as distinct from a postmodern sublime presented through a bricolage of surfaces that transmits sublimity by

refusing finite interpretation. Yet the Romantics had to anchor their sensations to objects; the 'Tintern Abbey' text is filled with the actual stuff of physical nature: "the tall rock, / the mountain, the deep and gloomy wood" (Wordsworth 1998: 59) and so on. Even the most sublime musings on truth and beauty needed the touchstone of a Grecian Urn. Similarly, as the discussion in the previous chapter indicates, Wallace Stevens relies on the imaginative reconfiguration of objects and experiences to access the possibility of the sublime. Bronk on the other hand frequently does away with this necessity for context, presenting his intellectual considerations and conclusions without any reference to external objects or events.

So far this brief introduction to the concept of the sublime has intentionally excluded theological aspects of its definition. Earlier in its conceptual history, it would have been accurate to suppose that "the sublime, in its purest form, is emblematic of the creative power of God, that point of stillness beyond the veil of the contingent" (Shaw 2006: 47). According to the contemporary theologian John Milbank "the transcendent, or the unrepresentable creator God, is the paradigmatic instance of the sublime" (Milbank 1988: 259). The quotation from Žižek earlier in this chapter ("the sublime is an object whose positive body is just an embodiment of Nothing") would seem to exclude the possibility of any of the traditional theistic or deistic conceptions that necessarily include elements of transcendence in their world-view. However, in contrast to this position, Bronk's conception of the sublime at times appears to rely on the possibility of a certain immanent transcendence. He repeatedly evokes something particular but intangible and ineffable that is separate from our lived experience of this world but is simultaneously immediately intuited as present and pervading.

"As a result of secularism... we seem less inclined to regard the breakdown of reason and experience as indicators of a higher or spiritual realm" (Shaw 2006: 3); but at times in Bronk's work we observe an active exploration of the "sacred or mystical aspects" of his own experience of the sublime. If "the postmodern sublime... is defined not by its intimations of transcendence but rather by its confirmation of immanence", we can see how parts of Bronk's work can be held to support the claim that the possibility of sublime transcendence is "an illusion brought about through our misperception of reality" (Shaw 2006: 3). On one hand,

considering his disavowal of subjective certainty we can label Bronk's a specifically post-structuralist attitude to the sublime:

It is notable... that a 'poststructuralist' concern with the sublime is correlated with a stress that we cannot consistently maintain a step outside the *illusion* of a secure identity, a secure subjectivity. (Milbank 1998: 259)

Yet on the other, as we will observe in chapter six, we see him reject the "modern and postmodern... substitution of sublimity for transcendence" (Milbank 1998: 259) by repeatedly affirm the possibility or even necessity of something that he calls "God".

The next chapter of this thesis will discuss the important position of dreaming and sleep in Bronk's poetry.

## Chapter 5: Sleep and Dreams, Certainty and Doubt

This chapter will observe the development of Bronk's use of dreaming and sleeping as indicators of certainty. It presents original readings of several poems, including some that have previously received little or no critical attention. My readings focus on Bronk's use of dreaming and sleep in these poems, with particular attention to their implications concerning the possibility of certainty within his sceptical epistemology. In terms of the wider argument of this thesis, findings from this discussion will inform the final conclusion, including speculation on the possibility of religious knowledge. To increase general appreciation of Bronk's poetic methods, where appropriate, the discussion in this current chapter also pays close attention to formal and rhetorical techniques. By close analysis of seven poems from *Life Supports*, composed between the mid-1940s and the late 1970s, and eight shorter pieces from *Metaphor of Trees and Last Poems* (1999), it traces the poet's exploration of sleep's nature and its position in relation to other aspects of his experience. In doing so it provides a partial overview of formal and structural evolution and development within the wider body of Bronk's verse. It refers in detail to several of Bronk's other poems, and draws on various critical and biographical texts to support its claims and findings. By way of illustration and conclusion, the chapter ends citing a single exemplary verse from the early 1980s.

Thematically, there are two areas in which Bronk's poems of sleep and dreaming share particular ground with ideas that are important to religious thought in general. These two themes are vital to Bronk's poetry overall, and the discussion in this chapter will reveal their particular importance at certain times in his sleep and dream poetry. These two notions are bound together so tightly within and between the poems discussed here as to be inextricable. Chronological journey through the various poems therefore considers the themes as they run alongside one another:

1. The first of these two important notions is the idea of knowledge and the possibility of certainty. Within Bronk's developing conceptual structure where "Reality isn't real" and "Ideas are always wrong" a very

few (relative) certainties nevertheless remain. Consistently across his writing career one of these certainties is the recognition that sleep occurs, and happens to everyone frequently and regularly. Beyond this we can add that a special kind of certainty is available whilst dreaming.

2. The second important theme that recurs in the sleep poems as well as elsewhere (cf. Feld 1972) is another universal certainty that Bronk addresses in his poems: the inevitability of death. Points of comparison between sleep and death have been variously stated throughout history. Where Bronk's poetry draws these connections it does so in characteristically careful ways, never relying on unexamined tropes or similes. As the discussion later in this chapter reveals, the links made between sleep and death in Bronk's poems tend towards enquiry, usually removed from the simpler symbolism that other writers have used so often.

A third relevant theme is barely explored in this chapter, except through intimations in a couple of my own rejected interpretative readings. Most cultures in human history have found special religious or supernatural significance in dreams and their content. Similarly, contemporary secularists may choose Freudian or Jungian perspectives among other approaches to their dream lives. Neither the prophetic phenomenon of the dream interpreted as vehicle for a message with divine origins, nor its more recent guise as an emergence of the unconscious self appear outwardly significant in the poems discussed here. However, both of these ideas will come into play in the final concluding chapter of the thesis.

In its abstracted form, sleep is one of very few events or conditions in which we all share. The certainty with which we can make this claim apparently remains valid even within an epistemological construct such as Bronk's, where "Reality isn't real" and "Ideas are always wrong". Sleep is an intensely personal experience, in which we become totally introverted, and in that sense shares at least superficial characteristics with the state of contemplation from which Bronk's poems often proceed. The states of sleep and dreaming are necessarily



related in our experience<sup>21</sup> and in Bronk's poetry tend to be conceptually co-dependent. He does write about sleep without mentioning dreams, while at other times a reference to sleep will include the subset 'dreams' by implication, important distinctions between the states notwithstanding. However, there is sufficient crossover of subject matter for Bronk's 'sleep poems' and his 'dream poems' to warrant parallel consideration.

Bronk's 'dream poems' are not generally concerned with the content of dreams, but rather with the act of dreaming. This in itself sets them apart from most dream writing, particularly poetry. As one poem says: "The matter was not the dream but having it" (*LS* 74). This concern with the general phenomenon rather than the details of particular instances stands broadly in accordance with the wider thematic concerns of Bronk's work. Even so, the poems that attend to the dream world are populated by even fewer concrete nouns than others. That actual things are particularly scarce in Bronk's poems of sleep and dreaming should hardly be a surprise, sleep and dreaming each themselves being somewhat abstract concepts. However, from Chaucer to Blake and beyond, long and varied traditions of dream poetry in English are filled with fantastic or mundane objects and events dreamt by their narrators. In Bronk's case, even where the dream's subject matter is presented directly, he maintains a distance from that content and develops a concern with its implications for the world outside the dream.

A manuscript copy of the following poem appeared untitled in Bronk's letter dated 19 June 1945, shortly before his discharge from the army, while he was still employed on defensive and clerical duties in the Caribbean (Gilmore 2006: 111-12). It first received publication in 1951 in *Origin 3* alongside the work of poets including Charles Olson and Robert Creeley. When it became available again, in the volume *My Father Photographed With Friends* (1976) its title underwent a simple and absolute revision, that necessarily demands a similar shift in how we understand the poem(/s) and its (/their) ontological framework.

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<sup>21</sup> However, they are not strictly co-existent. We might be accustomed to think of dreaming as a part of sleep, but researchers report how "sleep... is periodically and abruptly interrupted by another physiological constellation as distinct from ... sleep as sleep is from waking" (Kramer 1969: 10). This is REM sleep, of which dreaming is a feature. Popular terminology (including that used in this discussion) does not distinguish between REM and NREM sleep, nor will it feasibly need to.

The poem that was originally called 'The Self Encountered in a Dream' became known as 'The Other Person in a Dream'.

In light of the central argument of my thesis that Bronk can and should be read as a religious poet, it is worth very briefly mentioning a somewhat forced but important and valid reading of the poem, in which it corresponds to certain traditional religious values. Notwithstanding vocabulary and imagery suggesting atonement and the mystery of faith, this is neither hymn nor prayer in any ordinary sense. The discussion below concerning the identities behind the poem's pronouns does not even raise the idea that the "you" could somehow stand for 'God' in any straightforward or conscious way. Yet without its title (or with a different title) 'The Other Person in a Dream' might be a devotional hymn, with "I have received you" central to the speaker's celebration of the deity:

#### THE OTHER PERSON IN A DREAM

Beyond the slightest doubt I find you right  
for there is nowhere any simple bliss  
or any terror not to be relieved.

But nevertheless you promise and disturb  
and in the sad images which you enlist  
rejoicing seems equally right with weeping words.

The barely articulate arguments which you advanced  
in the quiet occluded hours of the mild night  
are clear to me and just. I have received you.

And I will surely look for you in the streets by day  
when all my mind is the dream's for what you say.

(LS 4)

Before addressing issues of doubt and certainty expressed in the poem, at least two further concerns are pertinent to better appreciating the text's place within

Bronk's evolving poetic style and its epistemological content and implications. The first of these is an observation of some of the formal and stylistic devices at work, which will be particularly valuable when comparing this to later poems. Secondly, an exploration of the speaker/reader (or the 'I/you') relationship presented here proves inconclusive.

Assuming we see the poem on the page before we hear it (as is usually now the case with Bronk's work), we might be struck by the syntax of the first tercet stanza before processing its grammatical meaning. The absence of punctuation assists a grammatically literal understanding of the problematic double negative running across lines two and three. The final clause of these, "not to be relieved", applies primarily to "terror", while "simple" in its meaning of 'basic and unchanging' operates on "bliss" with similar effect. The key word "for" at the start of the second line is not there merely for scansion; as a conjunction it has a very specific function. The poet might have used any of a variety of words ('but', 'and', or 'when' would have made different poems); "for" serves to position the whole sentence as an agreement to a proposition already stated. Employing the sublime states of "bliss" and "terror" as metonymy for all conditions between, the implication is that no affective experience in the poem's landscape is absolute. A curious and imprecise turn of phrase like "weeping words" we might presumptuously guess was settled on in the interests of assonance, rhyme and alliteration. This is typical of the period in Bronk's writing when he was still finding his own poetic voice (cf. eg. Kimmelman 1998: 38). These traditional stylistic techniques are very much concerns in his earliest collections, and much less so if at all in the later volumes.

To understand the first and second person relationship in this poem, we must first discredit the possibility that the reader is the primary "you" of the verse. Certainly this form of direct address occurs sometimes in Bronk's poems, but it is difficult to read this as one of those moments. While the first stanza allows that interpretation, the next complicates the possibility. Especially if we approach the text knowing that it was previously 'The Self...' we are less personally the "you" of an author-reader relationship. That the reader never knows what 'you' the poem's addressee had said, that we are left guessing at the specifics of the I/you relationship that the poem has come out of, may even point to wilful

concealment on the author's part. Paul Pines suggests that the "you" in this poem is the poet's own father (Foster & Kimmelman 2013: 163-64). Its publication in *My Father Photographed with Friends* may offer some evidence to support this idea, but little or no direct textual support is to be found for this claim. Furthermore, the original title 'The Self Encountered in a Dream' implies identification on the part of the speaker with the subject that is not seen elsewhere in the few poems where Bronk does write about his father.<sup>22</sup> After this change in title, which took place some time between 1951 and 1976, the remainder of the poem had been subject to no revision, in that its words, lines and punctuation are identical. However, it would be inaccurate to claim that it had undergone no change. The title provides contextualisation, being a pointer to (if not a firm explanation of) a referent for the recurring "you". We are left with at least three clear choices for interpretation of the I/you relationship, which need not be entirely mutually exclusive of one another: the first and second persons are aspects of one individual's psyche (William Bronk himself and/or the poem's narrator); or the narrator has dreamed of a meeting with another individual (whose identity may be known or unknown to him); or the narrator and addressee have been involved in a conscious waking night-time conversation that is retold through the intimated metaphor of a dream. A fourth possibility, that "you" is any commonly recognised idea of God, is appealing but lacks any contextual support and surely applies only without any conscious authorial intent.

'The Other Person in a Dream' was composed before Bronk's characteristic brand of scepticism had fully taken shape, but is nonetheless remarkable within the oeuvre for the certainty with which it offers its pronouncements. A glance through the rest of the collection *My Father Photographed with Friends* will reveal a scarcity of such assertive adverb phrases as "beyond the slightest doubt" and "surely" which frame this piece. It is significant these phrases occur in the first and last stanzas, the parts that are unequivocally about the dreaming process. In ordinary speech 'beyond the slightest doubt' will usually imply that the speaker and the rest of the world, either other people's opinions or the material evidence, are in agreement on a point of fact. However, the title has already situated us in

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<sup>22</sup> eg. 'My Father Photographed with Friends' (*LS* 15), 'Token' (*BOL* 137), etc.; also cf. chapter eight, and Gilmore (2006) 6 *et passim*.

the dream world of the poem, and the dream is an internalised experience. A strong sense of doubt can be present in a dream, similar to how it can be felt in waking life, but the idiom invites us to explore the question of whether certainty can be established there. Even cursory answers are revealing; certainty in a dream is encountered only in terms of the dream. Nevertheless, this certainty is carried through in memory and reflection to the waking day. Whatever we make of the suggestion contained in the final line (perhaps an expression of longing, possibly one that shows a persona detached from emotional responsibility), the penultimate line reveals the status of the dream within the poem's philosophy. The dream is memorable, useful and remarkable because it informs and establishes a contrast between the "quiet occluded hours of the mild night", where the narrator's experience is confined by the internalisation of sleep, and the populated "streets". The only residual certainty that remains in the waking world is that which is carried through in recollection from the dream. Yet neither we nor apparently the narrator can say of quite what in this instance we are certain or ignorant.

That Sophistic Paradox – how would we know what it is we do not know? – looms large over Bronk's work as a whole, and directly informs the specific focus of this chapter and the wider aims of this study. Its validity taken for granted in the verse below, and the presence in classical philosophy of variations on that theme is reflected by the plural noun in the poem's title. We may reasonably ask if we are to suppose that the paradoxes of ignorance are opposite and equivalent to those of knowledge, or whether they are indeed precisely the same. The implication of the poem's title is that we are not to assume ignorance to be a simple or comprehensible state. At least two distinct but related paradoxes emerge:

- i. Ignorance relies on knowledge for its existence. If we are ignorant of a fact we cannot know we are so, for such knowledge would require that we have some understanding of whatever is in question. As an example, it is logically unsound (although certainly not meaningless) to declare "I am ignorant of love".

- ii. Ignorance cannot be simultaneously complete and self-aware. If I truthfully state “I am ignorant”, I am expressing knowledge, so my statement is partially inaccurate.

By merely offering a route into such a discussion, but without even going so far as to suggest or imply any of its awkward prosaic content, Bronk demonstrably fulfils the function of a poet over and above that of an ontological philosopher. Nonetheless, he exposes the basic and fundamental mutual dependency that must exist between the states or concepts of knowledge and ignorance. This informs the connection between the poem’s title and its content: it is partly because we all know these things (that death differs from sleep, that we are aware of feeling almost but not quite complete ignorance) that we can meaningfully talk of “a common humanity”. The common experience of sleep is presented as a destination both mysterious and mundane, which by its inevitability and persistent failure to reveal its nature confirms and reinforces the sense of frustration at the incomplete information imparted during waking experience:

#### IGNORANCE AS WELL AS KNOWLEDGE HAS ITS PARADOXES

Mornings, we look back on sleep and see it  
from another side. Like a house. We went in  
through the front, and came through it, and out the back  
and then looked back on it. In there,  
it was different.

To be dead is something else again  
from sleep. We don’t look back on that. If it is real  
at all. we must be in it and won’t come out.

We are very ignorant men and know nothing about  
the things that matter most to us. Remember the man  
who felt so much alone, so much apart,  
he said we shared a common humanity, we were all

members one of the other, each one?

(LS 55)

The printed punctuation in the second stanza of the collected edition (*sic* above) is confusing and presumably inaccurate; the decision whether to omit the full stop in line 8, transpose it to a comma or capitalise the “we” that follows it may have significant impact on the lines’ spoken delivery; and a lesser, though far from negligible, effect on their meaning.

We should not mistake the stance in the central lines of ‘Ignorance As Well As Knowledge Has Its Paradoxes’ for one of religious orthodoxy, as major creeds all tend towards notions that death, while certainly real, is somewhere from which we can somehow “come out”. No attempt at detail is lodged in the metaphor: “In there, / it was different” is scant and sufficient description. Dreams and temporariness are features of sleep that are found to have no equivalent in death. The expressed similarity between the states, or at least between our apprehension of them, rests in the word “again”; both sleep and death are places we enter, different from the waking world in which our observations and judgments are made. Informed by these two unknowable constants, the ignorance of man and by extension of “humanity” is asserted.

In one sense the final stanza seems thematically disconnected from those which precede it, to the extent that as readers we are required to formulate our own sequiturs; this omission or obscuring of a connecting line of thought is uncommon but not unknown in Bronk’s poems. He is not a poet who typically withholds detail or information from a reader; the sense in the poems is more usually one of a rigorous attempt to describe fully often difficult concepts. In this case, however, our role as reader or listener requires that we consider not only who “that man” is or might be, but just as importantly whether we “remember” him. It is possible that the poet had a particular figure in mind, but it is unclear from the scant information given if this might be Socrates, the Buddha, Jesus, Mahatma Gandhi, Joseph Smith, William Bronk even, or some other unnamed individual, known or unknown. We must allow that the answer to the question “remember the man...?” might be ‘no’.

If intellectual self-depreciation is extended in the third stanza to include a wider scope of human understanding, its modesty thus paradoxically implies the comparative superiority of the privileged individual who is able to point this out. Various crucial to the verse and its meaning, however, are the two words “very” and “men”, either or both of which might have been omitted while retaining the approximate sense of the line. Yet to achieve the urgency and completeness of the thought it would not be enough to say ‘we are ignorant’, which allows room for a moderate amount of knowledge to be present. However, nor are we absolutely ignorant, for even here the poet is communicating in ways and of things that we can use and understand. The text allows for us having some knowledge, though only of comparatively unimportant matters, and also some awareness that there may further knowledge to be had of the important things; this is the Sophistic Paradox described earlier and evoked in the poem’s title.

Knowledge gained through sensory experience, and its contrasting expression in the respective worlds of dream and waking, remain at the centre of the poet’s concerns in ‘The Dream of a World of Objects’ (*LS* 72). Figures of speech that would be a clichéd metaphor for the loss of the dream on waking are here radically and inventively reapplied. If we look for prosaic meaning in the penultimate sentence (below) and ask what is the “it” that “dissolves [and] slips away”, we find it must be the world, whatever definition of that term we choose to use. The dissolution metaphor may evoke the subjective psychological phenomenon of experiencing dissociation from the physical environment (cf. Gilmore 2006: 317-25) and thus imply a world that exists, perhaps only fleetingly, in the processes or moments where the subject apprehends the object. “[W]e” and the world (“it”) are the only active doers of verbs in the poem. Thus an apparently idiosyncratic personal reflection as told in stanza one is drawn out into a shared, even generic, human experience: “we dream”. The dominant or preferred state is made quite apparent according to the central comparison (“Good. / / But better...”). According to this distinction, the dream is apparently a mere subversion, entirely dependent on and drawing its content from the waking experience. The tangible physical aspects of the (waking) world that we ordinarily associate with the properties of objects – “touch”, “weight” and “edges” – become



the stuff of the dream, with the implication that the only “frame” we can give to our view of the world is indefinite in shape, if it has any form at all:

#### THE DREAM OF A WORLD OF OBJECTS

Sliding asleep, and entering the dense dream  
of a good room at a place in the object world,  
and touching: eyes and fingers feeling it there  
- as a blue bowl, sun on a brown chair,  
sharpness of surface, edges on everything.  
So dense. The density. A reduced world.  
The room. The peacefulness. The quiet. Good.

But better, nevertheless, the waking world,  
the object-poor, the edgeless. We dream of touch,  
of weight, of the definite frame, but rather this.  
As it is. This is an almost senseless world  
and boundaryless; it dissolves, it slips away,  
is bodyless as music and as rich.  
We should never have thought that this could be so.

(LS 72)

By inverting more common descriptions of dream and waking states, so that here the dream is solid and the waking world fluid, ‘The Dream of a World of Objects’ offers a subtle reconfiguration of the ways and terms by which existence is understood. The fluidity between the two states over a liminal moment on their threshold is asserted by the unusual but by no means obscure image of ‘sliding asleep’ as opposed to falling there.<sup>23</sup> The poem thus opens with a movement out of the default position of being awake and describes a smooth transition into the dreaming state. The particular deployment of adjectives in the opening lines is

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<sup>23</sup> For a flawed but revealing illustration of the trope’s comparative rarity, an internet search engine returned “falling asleep” from “about 12,900,000” pages and “sliding asleep” from 219 ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com) 24 Jan 2013).

both evocative in its vagueness and musically effective: 'the dense dream / of a good room' invites the reader to apply their own specifics that need not and could not match those that might have provoked or inspired the poet.

The dream world is crucially and fundamentally one of solidity and certainty. The action that follows occurs in the dream and reveals how subtly the dream departs from the ordinary experience of waking: distinctions between the sensory perceptions become blurred, so that it is both "eyes and fingers" that touch and feel. We are invited to believe therefore that awareness in or of this state might be a more subjective process than it is in waking consciousness, less dependent on experience of objective reality mediated through the input of the senses. Either the dream or the object world is manifest "as" (not 'in') the attributes of things, namely their colour and the delineation of their edges, the place of demarcation between what an object is and what it is not. The importance of "as" (not 'in') is that these named attributes become the entirety of the objects' existence, confirming the frame of reference as overwhelmingly subjective. It is the object world as experienced through the dream that is being reported, and the precise grammatical referent for the "it" in the third line becomes unimportant. The play of definite and indefinite articles helps shows how the concepts are used here. By the simple virtue of having been already mentioned, "density" and the "room" are afforded definite status as we would expect. We can contrast "A reduced world" with "the object world", and consider the implications of this difference: that there is one single actual world of shared objective experience, and that the dream is a reduction of this world into merely one of a plurality of subjective impressions, each of which is a copy of the original, possibly inferior in value because it is simplified and incomplete, but somehow comprehensible.

An important parallel with 'The Other Person in a Dream' may be coincidental but reveals a wider technique or concern that is borne out across several poems, manifest in the word "nevertheless". Particularly in the early works, Bronk's are poems of inquiry. As happens here in 'The Dream of a World of Objects', a poem may open with a pronouncement or assertion that is shown or felt to be true, but which is contradicted or qualified by the remainder of the verse. Here then, in the second stanza, we are presented with the preferred alternative to the dream, a state of waking consciousness which may be more vital

because it is more true. Yet this world is fluid in our apprehension of it, and little can be said of it with certainty: “it dissolves, it slips away”. That the “waking world” suffers a paucity of objects challenges the assumption that it and the “object world” are the inseparable same. Yet if in the interpretation we hold to the belief that the “object world” is also the “object-poor”, as I agree we should, then what remains for its inhabitants? For this world to be termed “edgeless” raises more questions than it can answer. As the corporeality of the first stanza’s concrete nouns dissolves into intangible concerns, one thing we have left is a sense of loss expressed through the language. The nugatory suffix *-less* becomes as emblematic in its recurrence in the second stanza as the active presence defined by *-ing* was in the first. Acknowledging that the whole poem provides a list of conceptual and perceptual failures encountered in the apprehension of the world, and without overstating a positive message to the verse, we should at least note the qualification that “almost” brings to “senseless”, and find it sufficient to dispel any charge of outright nihilism.

‘The Dream of A World of Objects’ is one of the shorter poems in *The Empty Hands*, and its comparative brevity reflects the relative straightforwardness of its structure. Three poems separate it in the collection from the 20-line ‘The Recurrence, Among Other Things, of Dreams’. At this latter poem’s title moment (lines 14/15) the dream is stated as a direct metaphor for waking existence, a conceit that recalls the blurring of distinctions posited by that poem. Indeed, the theme that provides the foundation of the two poems being so similar, the ‘recurrence’ in the title becomes a pun on its return to the poetry after a quarter-century gap. The ‘other things’ include objects, people and phenomena in the world, one point addressed by the poem being the fact that we should have repeat experiences of any sort. Within this framework provided by the title, the opening statement starkly illustrates one of the striking and possibly unique aspects of Bronk’s use of the dream in his poetry. There is no content or ‘dream imagery’ here; the poem is another example of how for Bronk “there are no ideas in things” (Weinfield 1998: 27). Against this conceptual background and in light of the current chapter’s argument, it is the dream and only the dream that offers “assurance” of continuity:

## THE RECURRENCE, AMONG OTHER THINGS, OF DREAMS

The matter was not the dream but having it,  
then having it again – the assurance, not  
that this was real, but that this remained. The point  
was this: one thinks of the world, of being here,  
or being wherever we are, wherever we can be said to be, wherever that is  
– one thinks of that as a necessary effect  
of where we were before and the steps we took  
to leave there, where we went then.  
But did we? When? Did we move here? From where?  
Hah! We're not new here, are we?  
The intricate progress prepared and moved away.  
It happened to someone and something and somewhere else.  
Sleep nudges us to wakefulness  
in which we have recurrent dreams of place,  
of where we are – wherever that might be.  
Did you know there were animals said never to sleep,  
whether daylight or darkness, always awake?  
What is their wakefulness but like our sleep?  
Do you care that time is irreversible?

(LS 74)

The web of echo and repetition set up during the first proposition of 'The Recurrence, Among Other Things, of Dreams' is amplified and complicated in the second, a fifty-two word sentence composed of a string of clauses requiring an array of punctuation to hold it sensibly together. Amongst its vagueness and qualifications it challenges a basic assumption, that an effect should be determined by a cause. It doing so it implicitly asks that we reconsider what we understand by "being here" (where 'here' = 'the world'), and also the relationship between past and present, and how much if at all our conscious volition can be involved with this. Like a great many of Bronk's poems it decentralises the personal from the experience of the world, while simultaneously acknowledging

the primacy of subjectivity: “one thinks... / – one thinks... / But...”. Again a certain technical effect such as we saw in ‘The Dream of a World of Objects’ is achieved when very short phrase units, including even single words, come straight after a conceptually and grammatically complex claim. Here the questions suppose or imply answers from the listener or addressee, typifying and emphasising a dialogic rather than outright declamatory or didactic tone to the work in general.

The poem contains two instances of the abstract becoming the active subject, with the effect of gently disturbing received expectations of doer/done relationships. Human experiences of time passing as a series of changes and repetitions are subject to the “intricate progress” and part of it, but in any present moment we remain always at distance from it. “Sleep nudges us to wakefulness” is another inventive redesignation of constituent relationships in a situation; more ordinarily we would speak of being nudged awake out of sleep, not by it. Subjective autonomy is diminished; what happens to us is part of the process, or “progress”, and the ground is prepared for the crucial metaphor: “recurrent dreams... of where we are”. The invocation of a plaintive “wherever”, an echo of its earlier thrice-repeated occurrence, helps to reinforce the poem’s thematic unity.

Whatever these animals were that were “said never to sleep”, and the poet’s source for the story remains undisclosed, they are likely to be a fictional class of creatures.<sup>24</sup> Certain medieval bestiaries recorded that lions slept in a state of awareness with their eyes open, which is the closest documented example among the higher orders of mammals that a brief survey has so far uncovered. The alliterative effect “whether daylight or darkness, always awake” is suitably reminiscent of the earliest English verse. In this poem, the uncanny effect of the idea is extenuated by the shift to the direct “you” form of address, in a rupturing of the sympathetic identity or at least common ground shared between the poet and his reader or listener. Earlier, the third person “one” and the repeated “we” had invoked a commonality, a sense of shared experience, even an intimation of trust, but in the closing lines we are being more spoken to than for.

Reading this next poem against those discussed above, we find recognisable stylistic similarity in the short dialogic sentence units. Here the

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<sup>24</sup> However, “[some] animals never exhibit a state that meets the behavioral definition of sleep” (Pappenheimer 1976: 25)

activity is reported out of a very personal experience, yet as previously no attempt is made to relate the particulars of any occasion. In a striking similarity with 'The Recurrence, Among Other Things, of Dreams', the opening line of 'The Ones We Meet Asleep' (LS 82) once again gives a statement denying us access to any specific content, the verb tense informing us that this is a poem about dreaming, not about a dream: "I should have to go silent on whom I meet / even if I knew." In comparison to 'The Other Person in a Dream', which ended hopefully or at least forward-looking, 'The Ones We Meet Asleep' carries through to the waking world a position of unimproved ignorance. Repeatedly and insistently we find a familiar stance; we can encounter certainty *in* the dream and retain certainty *of* the dream, but that provides neither substitute nor grounding for the remainder of reality. The third and penultimate lines in particular summarise this key idea:

#### THE ONES WE MEET ASLEEP

I should have to go silent on whom I meet,  
even if I knew. If I knew I couldn't say.  
I don't know. That is, I know them there.  
We know each other. They've been expecting me,  
or seem to be; I know to go to them.  
But no, I guess I couldn't say who they are.  
I could say a little of what we do.  
I listen? Yes, something like that.  
I don't know what it is I listen to.  
They explain. They mean to show me something. What?  
I don't know anything I didn't know.  
They tell me something. I listen. I have to do that.

(LS 82)

Reviewing the three poems from *The Empty Hands* (1969) ('The Dream of a World of Objects', 'The Recurrence, Among Other Things, of Dreams' and 'The Ones We Meet Asleep') it is apparent that Bronk's portrayal of dreaming in that collection is as a process that goes beyond augmenting and confirming what the

poet knows about the world. They each confess and assert a thoroughly minimal knowledge of waking experience (cf. "This is an almost senseless world"; "I don't know anything I didn't know"), while in each of the poems dreams are perceptual activity that takes place during sleep (we dream in or of sensory perceptions) reminding the dreamer of the presence of something more complex external to or beyond themselves (cf. "The intricate progress prepared and moved away"; "They tell me something. I listen.").

'The Ones We Meet Asleep', the last of the three, is insular and self-contained, a smaller poem than 'The Recurrence, Among Other Things, of Dreams', which deals the dream-subject into a weightier hand carrying concepts of causality and mortality: "Do you care that time is irreversible?" Along with 'The Dream of a World of Objects' all three offer a conceptually similar ontological denial effected by the narrator's positioning at distance from the source or subject of knowledge: "It dissolves, it slips away". Against the uncertainties of these poems and within the context of the collection, the dream functions as more than merely a reassuring touchstone; its constancy provides both metonym and metaphor for existence: "We dream of touch / of weight, the definite frame"; "we have recurrent dreams of place"; "I know to go to them / ... / They explain". *The Empty Hands* expands and explores a world-view where the poet "plead[s] the permanence / of ignorance" (LS 88) in an experience of reality where "There is no limited truth. There is no truth." (LS 93) Yet in its every occurrence, the dream seems to remain the one vital exception to this attitude.

The suggestion that death is a place we journey to, never to return, has been understood by poets since before Hamlet first spoke of an "undiscover'd country". The metaphor of sleep as a place is learned in nursery and is found rooted in the language if we consider the term 'go to sleep'. In *The Empty Hands* Bronk situates the place of sleep on the border of the place of death; the three poems from that collection discussed above all refer to sleep in terms of a place to or within which the narrator moves, and where the experience of this movement constitutes the dream. Here in the very title of 'On Life and Death: Sleep the Intecessor' from *That Tantalus* (1971) the special, even sacred, status of sleep is confirmed by the definite article as well as the choice of descriptive noun. The religious connotations of "intercessor" are hardly coincidental, evoking the

functions of prayer and the clergy in connecting aspects of the mundane experience with the spiritual. Sleep is furthermore at least implicitly privileged as perhaps the only state or situation able to intercede between these two opposing positions:

ON LIFE AND DEATH: SLEEP THE INTERCESSOR

I step into death; (I take it it may be death,  
though step is not the word) then out again.  
More, so to say, as to sleep, or exactly so:  
no movement of mine, but sleep comes over me.  
It seems completely right. Yes, I am he.  
I smile and nod. The sought-for found. I'm here.  
Is sleep the seeker? I looked, though, everywhere.  
As I look now at death, the way we look  
at a house we plan to move into: we stand  
in the rooms only to stand in the rooms. We think  
of that to move us into the house. That door  
– an inward or outward door? And the window there.  
What does it look out to? What shape are the rooms?  
We go; come back; are easier day by day,  
for this has been our house though we lived away  
in a false and smaller place to shun this house  
– reverberant room after room however we go.  
Its spaciousness is what we hardly dare  
and what we ran from once to a little place  
we made between two ends and called it place  
as though it were, as though our life were there.  
Death house, I come to you now for life  
if there be life for us, if we may live.

(LS 103)



'On Life and Death: Sleep the Intercessor' is perhaps a little complicated, though far from impenetrable, with only limited internal diversions within the text. Compared to contemporary works by many other poets it is positively straightforward. It is nonetheless helpful to an understanding of the poem, and with it the very important position that sleep holds at this stage in the development of Bronk's poetic and ontological vision, to identify the shifting narrative stance it employs.

In the opening lines the simple first-person statement is immediately interrupted and followed by complicated meta-textual qualification and refutation, before a swift return to the initial stance ("into... / ... then out again"). In lines 3 and 4 the same occurrence is reported from an alternative perspective. The first-person "I" briefly proliferates, centring the subject on the narrator's experience, until line 8 when the focus widens to "we" for most of the remainder of the poem. It is a significant feature that the indefinite but universal experience of contemplating mortality is dealt with in the first person ("I look... at death"), whereas it is in the shift to the practical and particular that common ground is found ("the way we look / at a house we plan to move into"). With the intimation of a further layer of metaphor implied but left unstated (lines 15-22), that figure is reiterated and becomes somewhat obscure. The closing couplet recalls the title and opening line, providing direct address to its named subject, stating conceptual opposition if not outright paradox, moving back to the first person by rounding out again to include the "I" among the "we".

For a poet to announce "I step... / (... though step is not the word)" immediately demands that the audience question what the word is, and why it should not have been given in the first place. It borders on the unsatisfactory; it betrays self-consciousness taken almost to the level of a fault, but it also exemplifies the honesty, lack of pretension and commitment to constant enquiry, both intellectual and emotional, that Bronk's poems of this period represent. The acute self-awareness of the poetic voice reinforced by the phrase "may be", it bestows permission on itself to persevere with the model assembled not just in the opening clause here but variously in all the preceding poems considered above. Repeatedly there, as in this first couplet here, sleep and/or death were considered as locations to be visited. That same notion is carried into and through

this poem, but the lines that follow spell out an active reassessment of the metaphor. If 'On Life and Death: Sleep the Intercessor' seems unrealised as a finished poem in comparison to 'The Meeting Ground' (discussed below) for instance, it is for precisely this reason; at points in the verse we are able to trace the poet coming into an idea, shifting his stance to fit with a newly-forming concept.

When we look for expressions of certainty in 'On Life and Death: Sleep the Intercessor', we begin to find that Bronk's attitude to sleep in this respect appears to be changing. The reason for this is the growing schematic connection between sleep and death. In this poem, unanswered questions (such as the detail and function of the "door" and "window") reinforce the mystery of the subject, while the precision of the metaphor dissolves. It is true that "(w)e go; come back" from sleep, but when moving house we do not usually make such trips with any great frequency. The inconsistency arises in the attempt to construct a triangular metaphor: sleep  $\approx$  death  $\approx$  "a house we plan to move into". At moments in the verse each of the three subjects stands in place of one or both of the others, a complex technique that it would be inaccurate to call ambitious because ambition implies intent at the outset; we have already noted the apparently organic development of the idea within the process of its composition. It is not clear whether wakefulness or life or both are the intended recipients of the label "false and smaller", but it is apparent that we return to (or out of) sleep "day by day", and doing so we might become more accustomed to the notion of death. Situated thus on the same ground as these two vast unknowables,<sup>25</sup> life and death, there can be little wonder that the certainty with which sleep had formerly been related has now been disrupted. Importantly, however, a confidence in the recurrence and certainty of sleep remains. In its contrast with the hesitant first couplet, the poem's third line demonstrates this most clearly; when sleep was death it provoked uncertainty in expression, when sleep is sleep it is "exactly so".

'On Life and Death: Sleep the Intercessor', like several of the poems already considered in this chapter, is an example of Bronk writing in an 'open' form, insofar as there is no division into regular stanzas, but an apparently spontaneous

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<sup>25</sup> These are 'known unknowns': we know that we don't know all there is to know about them (cf. discussion of the Sophistic Paradox, above).

composition that runs down the page in five-beat lines of varying syllabic length until the thought that prompted it reaches some kind of a conclusion. Its theoretical complexity is to be expected, but the syntactic awkwardness is uncharacteristic. The language seems to become grammatically confused towards the end of this poem, more than once giving the impression that there is a word or phrase missing from among the complicated counter-dependant clauses which are offered with only sparse punctuation. The adjective 'reverberant' in line 18, for instance, is difficult to connect to the object that precedes it – a lot of work is asked of the dash “–” that opens the line. To overstate the faults or difficulties of the piece, however, risks overlooking the charm and severity that rest in turns of phrases such as “a little place / we made between two ends”, a gentle but alarming description of being alive, repeating the notion offered in this poem and others; that wakeful consciousness is not the supereminent state of our being.

The conceptual stance of 'The Meeting Ground' (*LS* 106/7), also from *That Tantalus*, is both an exploration and a realisation of the suggestions relating to sleeping and dreaming introduced in the various poems discussed so far. These themes – including place, passivity, death, and the ego within the community – are distilled and concentrated into a lyric by turns simple and syntactically complicated, with a tone that is a step away from the urgency and even violence that characterised much of the work produced by Bronk in the 1960s. While no less severe in its message 'The Meeting Ground' offers a gentleness that prefigures the acceptance, even stasis, of poems and collections that would follow through the 1970s. For the first time in any of the poems the abstract thing or state of sleep is solidified as well as being located. Its proximity to and affinity with death is again explicitly drawn, and our inevitable susceptibility to both is restated, as is our considerable but not total ignorance, which relates to our relative insignificance.

One of the key messages, not just of this poem but of the whole life's work, is given in perfect iambs of the simplest monosyllables: “and of those states there isn't much we know”. As previously, this professed ignorance is unalterable but not entirely absolute; and as so often in Bronk's poetry the reason for the poem's existence seems to be not the pronouncement of this all-enshrouding ignorance, but the glimmer of certainty or belief that we can fix on in that darkness. So in

lines 7-9 the key word 'but' and the assertion that follows is an affirmation of our very existence: "we *are* the ground", which is to say that we are fundamental. This formative idea is so important – it seems to take the poet by surprise and he repeats it, as if to make certain – that it becomes a key idea that we will find expressed variously but essentially all the way through to the end of Bronk's career.<sup>26</sup> This inversion of the standard model of understanding, namely that life lives us rather than our living life, is rarely if ever expressed or implied by the subjective stance of his previous poems. This is not to suggest that any revolution in Bronk's personal belief system has taken place, only that 'The Meeting Ground' is a notable stage in the evolution of the idea. What he achieves by the plain insistence in these lines ("we are the ground / somehow on which they meet: the meeting ground. / Not something on that ground – we *are* the ground") is the pronouncement of a position that will become integral to the poetry. The germ of this idea is to be found in 'The Recurrence, Among Other Things, of Dreams': "It happened to someone and something and somewhere else", where the 'it' is the active subject, both grammatically and practically:

#### THE MEETING GROUND

Sleep is limper, has a suppler skin  
 than waking, lies that much nearer in against  
 whatever there is that, in death, ingests  
 us, as something does, whatever it is that does.  
 We are wakers but wakers who sleep, sleepers who die,  
 and of those states there isn't much we know  
 but that they meet each other and we are the ground  
 somehow on which they meet: the meeting ground.  
 Not something on that ground – we *are* the ground.  
 Or again, as though *they were* and we  
 lay over them, too close to separate,  
 are what they are, all three, and they are we.

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<sup>26</sup> This is discussed at more length in chapter seven of the current thesis.

Except as sleep informs it, waking is what  
 we sometimes mean by death, a place apart,  
 a going away. Come closer in: we are  
 the death we die, we live awake with it  
 and sleeping, search it out. I wake in the night.  
 Mornings the same. Sleep opens me.  
 My watchfulness. Naked. As in a door.

Here at the end is that door again, which we encountered at the centre of 'On Life and Death: Sleep the Intercessor', an emblem of sleep and/or death as a place we move into. Recognisable techniques characteristic of Bronk are at work in the syntax and narrative of the piece, most prominently the insistent reiteration of its theme through repetition of (in this case several) key words, and also the movement from the generalised "we" to the personal "I", and the combination of sentence-lengths from the multi-clausal to the very simple and the single-word. Enjambment is once again frequent.<sup>27</sup>

Examined as an agent in the multi-clausal proposition that extends over the first four lines of 'The Meeting Ground', sleep is drawn as insidious, even potentially dangerous. Its relationship with us is realised by the accumulation of comparatives ("limper", "suppler", "nearer") that imply its constant approach and indicate its superiority over waking in these respects. Sleep is afforded a malleability that waking does not have, and that allows it (but significantly not therefore necessarily us) closer proximity to death, which is here presented in terms variously and simultaneously threatening, mysterious and matter-of-fact: "whatever there is that, in death, ingests / us, as something does". It is not so much the nature or action of death that is explored via the figure of sleep here, but rather how we might formulate and express an understanding of it.

It is reasonable to claim that Bronk's poetry approaches the concept as well as the actuality of death, and does so as squarely and directly as any contemporary verse (cf. Feld 1972: 47). In line 16 of 'The Meeting Ground' the

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<sup>27</sup> "I've never understood why enjambment matters one way or another, why it's worth speaking of" (Bronk in Weinfield 1988: 32). In general terms, it is worth mentioning in relation to a study of how the poet connects thought, line and breath.

follow-up to the narrator's invitation is stark in its finality, and the punctuation assures us that this inverted cliché is a direct continuation of the instruction to approach: ": we / are the death we die". So the invitation to closeness is also a route into this mode of thinking, a preparation for the reader about to become party to an uncomfortable message for one accustomed to believing that they are the life they live. Death becomes the object of life, a constant presence during wakefulness and actively sought through sleep; the plural pronouns employed through the whole poem enforce the universal applicability of this claim. Here we again invert the pre-eminence of waking over sleep. Where a few poems previously sleep had been "a step into death", now from within sleep waking becomes "a going away"; so waking is the death of sleep, an ending of the life experienced in a dream. Except, as the poem states (and here lies the potential confusion in its expression) sleep "informs" waking insomuch as they are cyclical; one always brings an end to the other, unlike the process that is ended by death. Here then we have a variation on the metaphor where either figure can stand for the other, both being a sort of metonym for life, but each being a force of change and thereby standing for death. Within this metaphor, the certainty of sleep reflects and precedes the oncoming certainty of death.

Having thus far established that Bronk uses sleep and dreaming at infrequent but crucial moments in his early (pre-1980s) writing life, the remainder of this chapter will move forward to consider their role and function at its very end. In doing so, it will become apparent that some syntactic and explanatory complexities are dismissed, favouring brevity of expression which assumes a certain understanding and acceptance of ideas previously established. This is entirely representative of overall changes in Bronk's stylistic technique, whereby an overarching movement from the intricate to the aphoristic can be observed. However, it is not to suggest that the focus and results of his considerations neither shift nor evolve. Together, and sometimes separately, dreaming and sleep are significant themes in Bronk's final volume, *Metaphor of Trees*; of all the individual later volumes it seems to pay the most direct attention to sleeping and dreaming. As he remarks in some of the poems, this reflects the poet's changing interests and attention: "Nights are the real part. / I should have heeded that more, earlier" (*BOL* 292). Although the night does not necessarily

involve sleep, accumulating age and the approach of death would seem to have contributed to this professed turning towards the night-time experience, particularly in light of observations regarding sleep as a preparation for death.

Life's inevitable destination hangs unspoken over the following poem, where duration is a principal theme. However, this is neither a lament on brevity nor a meditation on longevity; the title does not refer to specific life expectancy but to the more basic and typically unquestioned idea that life occurs over time. In this respect, key phrases in the poem are "the short while" and the repeated occurrence of "time". We can observe how the poem would retain its sense in respect of the sleeping/waking relationship if either instance of "time" were omitted:

#### THE LENGTH OF LIFE

Not experience itself but the grasp and feel of it  
are as strong or stronger while we sleep than they  
are when wide awake. In the short while, the waking  
experience may have some consequence but we are aff-  
ected without volition by what we dream and we know  
that neither time in the end has any consequence.

Isn't the sleeping time as much our life as the waking?

(*BOL 266*)

The opening sentence offers its proposition based on the fundamental assumption that "experience" occurs and we have some incomplete "grasp" of it. This is the principle that provoked "The matter was not the dream but having it", and a mark of the thoroughly sceptical framework that Bronk's poetry constructs and maintains. Within the grasp of experience, certainty is relative; we may or may not be able to attain more of it while sleeping (ie. in the dream, presumably). However, despite the possibility raised of sleep being equally obscured to experience as waking is, one key word gives us a clue suggesting it has in fact retained its privileged status. The idea that "volition" occurs in waking but not in sleep seems to render the waking experience less authentic, turning it into the

type of wilfully constructed artificial narrative that is dismissed elsewhere in the poetry. The inclusive “we” in the fourth line assumes that the reader and/or some part of a wider community share the speaker’s conviction on this point, whether or not we admit it.

Bronk’s later works often sound similar to one another because they are composed in the same genuine narrative voice. One defining feature of this voice is that by this stage in the poet’s career there was apparently no revision whatsoever of the written words after they reached the page.<sup>28</sup> The carrying through of this compositional spontaneity into the published text possibly also accounts for the curious and unusual enjambment over the word “aff-/ ected” between the fourth and fifth lines. There is possibly no similar example to be found in Bronk’s poetry, and considered in light of the exceptionally long lines in this verse it gives the impression of having been determined by the manuscript page size. Yet the effect of including the broken word here is to deny any possibility of that fourth line ending on a positive clause, so that neither “we are” nor “we are affected” can strike an affirmative note. The question mark, so frequent in the earlier collections, is comparatively rare in this last volume. Everywhere it does occur in *Metaphor of Trees* it is in the context of rhetoric whereby a clear answer is presumed or implied in the questioning. This reflects a broader changing stance overall, a movement from interrogation to meditative reflection.

In terms of structural and formal similarities, certain stylistic consistencies are clearly seen when we consider the very next poem in the sequence. Again spread over seven lines, here are only two sentences. The first is simple; subject-verb-object preceding a qualifying adverb phrase. The second, comprising six-and-a-half lines including only a single comma, is a complex but grammatically consistent construction of multiple interwoven clauses and conditions. With its simple phrasing, the introductory couplet is straightforward and prosaic; while the first line offers very strong anapaests, in the second their continuation is subtle enough to be feasibly coincidental. Then in lines three and four we

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<sup>28</sup> Despite some claims to the contrary (eg. Weinfield 1988: 38), manuscript notebooks at Columbia University’s Rare Books and Manuscripts Library reveal that the longer earlier poems were often subject to substantial redrafting.



encounter that illuminating flash of poetry that continues to surface in these late poems. Line four is almost irrelevant to the sense of the poem, but central to the creation of its mood:

“LET’S LOOK AT THE RECORD”

People in therapy write down their dreams  
before they fade. Without such evidence  
our waking narrative too would lose itself  
in all the coming on, the day to day  
almost as fast as dreams and need to be  
invented over again by someone else  
for it to say it mattered either time.

(*BOL* 266)

The given fact stated in the initial proposition relies on the uncontested shared knowledge that dreams happen and our memories of them fade; no suggestion is made that Bronk himself underwent any formal “therapy” of the kind described here. If the written “record” of the title is a ‘dream diary’, then the comparable “evidence” for the “waking narrative” is the accumulation of information about the events of our waking lives, via written records and/or continuing memories, that together comprise the invention of narrative by which we order our lives. The poem thereby suggests that certainty of experience is created rather than discovered, that narrative happens at the point of experience during both waking and sleeping, and that it may be retained through inventive effort. However, as found in much earlier examples, despite or perhaps because of the apparently colloquial tone it is difficult to meaningfully paraphrase or confidently interpret the whole poetic statement. It is unclear precisely what we are to understand by the idea of our personal narrative being “invented over again by someone else”; this may refer to the writing of history, the eulogising of the dead, the archiving of information or the uncorrected memories of others. It certainly might relate to the poet’s personal anxieties concerning misrepresentation, and to the hope that the poems might speak for him. Similarly

it can refer to a fear of the loss of individuality and/or selfhood in the repetitive regeneration of humanity, where the living of life is shared between so many.

Later in *Metaphor of Trees* we find another short poem, again pertinent to the current discussion, where overall the exact claim of the poem is difficult to perceive. Of course, in most circumstances a poem should not necessarily make a 'claim'. However, when it is offered up in tones such as these it is practically impossible that we should not to some extent seek to test its validity. On closer examination we see that this next piece may be absolutely representative of a key finding in this current discussion, a demonstration that Bronk's later poems retain the stance that privileges sleep and dreaming as a location where certainty may be attained:

#### DOUBLING IT

Vocabularies of sleeping and waking have terms  
and meanings of terms which are different from  
each other and validities of separate sorts.

This is true as well of terms we use  
often within the waking hours themselves  
in talking and thinking what we know is not.

(*BOL* 270)

"Vocabularies" here is probably a metaphor, as well as the actual words and phrasing we use when talking about or during "sleeping and waking" respectively. As a metaphor it is therefore quintessentially structuralist, viewing the patterns and structures of the world and our experience as analogous to language. However, we have already shown how for Bronk, who can accept the solidity and validity of language systems only up to a certain point, it is necessary to move beyond this construct when seeking to establish a consistent and authentic epistemology. Thus the next five lines discredit the structuralist metaphor by revealing the instability of the "Vocabularies" across different contexts, and then from a single position "within the waking hours themselves" where they may be used to assert what we know to be false. The speaker offers some claim of

certainty, indicated by the absolute didacticism that opens the fourth line, but paradoxically what he claims as truth is that we deceive ourselves when forming truth claims. Sleep and waking are “different”; what validates a truth in one state does not apply in another. Yet the phrasing in line 4 suggests that a parallel claim is to be drawn from the second half of the poem. Thus we should conclude either that waking is different from itself (a difficult concept) or that during “the waking hours” the “terms / and meanings of terms” are different from one another. Implicitly at least this is not the case during sleep, where a validity of experience, albeit partial and fleeting, prevails.

A similar comparative stance is offered in ‘Comp Lit’ (*BOL* 283), where the poet uses a kind of personification metaphor, with “Sleeping and waking” afforded sentience and volition:

#### COMP LIT

Sleeping and waking tell each other tales.  
It’s not an argument. Each one needs  
the other to cut away its own excess  
in a story it would still only partly believe  
and wishes the other’s story were somehow true.

The “excess” of either state is its accumulation (after being awake long enough a healthy person will sleep, and vice versa), and “excess” also refers to the unbelievable or improbable parts of either state’s narrative that the arrival of the other brings to an end. If this poem denies the truth of waking, it also through direct comparison denies the truth of sleep-time experience, and the narrative drawn from that. Interpretative sophistry reminds us that since the poem is presumably composed and narrated from an awoken point of view its claims need not apply to sleep. Moreover, we should notice that it is not ‘we’ or ‘us’ who do the understanding here, but the personified subjects “Sleeping and waking”, aspects of the life that lives us. However we resolve its difficulties, ‘Comp Lit’ once again shows late in the poet’s work the themes of sleep and knowledge continuing to intertwine. Furthermore, as will be shown when discussing his conception of God,

total consistency merely at the level of avoiding contradiction is not among Bronk's main concerns. To reinforce the observations made in previously in this thesis regarding Bronk's status as a post-modernist, 'Comp Lit' presents its metaphor on a crudely structuralist platform (experience understood as communicative strategy) with subtle but important post-structuralist overtones (the term "tales" refers not merely to the construction of a narrative, but carries imaginative, inventive and diversionary connotations).

There are many references to dreaming and sleep in *Metaphor of Trees*, more than are included in this present survey. They variously demonstrate how essential features of Bronk's understanding and description of the world are reinforced by his attitude to the significant part of life that is spent not awake. Uncovering these features we recognise concerns that were discussed in a previous chapter, such as the constructed perception of narrative within experience, as described with musical effect in the second and third lines here:

#### DISCONTINUITY

We come away, mornings, and go back  
into the continuing narrative of days  
we read as real for its continuing.  
But the mind doesn't let go of the stumbled-on  
strength of fragments we recognized in the night  
and holds from them a where we were if we were.

(*BOL* 295)

In 'Discontinuity' sleep is shown as the privileged side of the binary opposition, the starting point from which we move and where we return. More evidence of Bronk's subtle and creative lexical deviations can be seen; the phrase "holds from them" is a curious construct; "holds" in this context implying pre-existence of the dream's content (as with "recognized"), a passive retention of what is already there, whereas we "read", which is to say invent or interpret, the waking part. With their "stumbled-on / strength" these "fragments" are more authentic and

valid than the “continuing narrative”, allowing a sense of location that is absent from Bronk’s frequently dissociative view of waking life (cf. Gilmore 317-25).

The caveat “if we were” that closes ‘Discontinuity’ has essentially the same effect as the closing line in the four-line ‘Corrective’, which is modest in tone, avoiding the self-aggrandising deception of supposing it can state the primary function of dreaming. Sidestepping confrontation, it points out an effect that most or all dreamers can feel and heed, the idea that there is more to living than “the expectations and values” of being awake:

#### CORRECTIVE

In dreams, there comes a perspective which lowers  
the expectations and values we had in the day.  
It doesn’t deny or combat them as much as it says  
merely don’t be so sure about those things.

(*BOL* 286)

Often, it seems that Bronk would have that final injunction apply to all of experience. It is a gentler aspect of the intense scepticism that sometimes demands ultimately the complete negation of what we think we know:

#### DISCRIMINANT

Knowing day from dream  
age can say  
they neither were.

(*BOL* 293)

This direct reference to “age” is not out of keeping with the tone of Bronk’s final collections. Here it allows vantage over the past, and the voice in ‘Discriminant’ speaks with knowledge or belief gained from experience. This is the briefest and perhaps therefore the most direct poem in *Metaphor of Trees*, and as such it is highly significant to the current discussion. All that is certain here is that nothing

is certain; the non-being of perceived realities is an absolutely key theme in Bronk's work, and probably his most conceptually difficult concern. 'Discriminant' presents this notion by reference to the conditions of dreaming and waking, acknowledging the difference between the two, but ultimately rejecting the *a priori* existence of either. It does so with as much simple music that the play of consonants and vowel shapes allows, the poetic effect heightened by the sudden realisation that "were" is the principal verb and not an auxiliary in the last sentence.

Formally these poems are quintessentially late Bronk, having been written in the final year or two of his life. Thus we are able to observe whether and how changes in his writing style have come to affect the substance of the poetry's ideas as well as their expression. In the case of his poems about dreaming and sleep, we find that some ideas retain essential similarities to those expressed in earlier works: sleep can operate as a preparation for death; and we can gain a different kind of knowledge in and through dreams, but like the knowledge gained awake this is partial and frustrating. The shortening of the poem and loosening of the line frequently leads to an increased ambivalence and imprecision in meaning. Yet paradoxically this can allow a poem to become more meaningful, as the poet's own rejoinders and qualifications become less necessary and the potential to locate meaning is correspondingly increased. Where the early poet fretted and obfuscated ("all my mind is the dream's for what you say") the later Bronk is able to declare that the dreams "may have some consequence" and to leave his explanation there. Above all, these later poems retain the characteristic melding of the personal with generalised human experience. The stance is always the poet's own, and although at one level they may appear to offer a degree of intimacy, there is no detail in their revelations besides expressing a general mood.

Against a backdrop of doubt and ignorance, the recurrence of sleep and the phenomenon of dreaming have repeatedly provided moments where the poet has been able to grasp at fragments of secure knowledge. Yet the type of understanding and certainty afforded by sleep and dreams has a different quality from waking, and this difference continues to interest the poet: "Sleep is limper, has a suppler skin / than waking" ... "A reduced world' ... "In there, / it was different." While this fleeting contentedness provides some of the warmer

moments in Bronk's earlier poetry, sleep is also at times closely connected with the idea and reality of death. At these moments it is used not as a metaphor or symbol for death, but as a kind of preparation for the end of waking life. By the time of *Metaphor of Trees and Last Poems*, the differences between sleeping and waking seem to become less distinct in the poet's ongoing understanding of the world. Yet this lessening of distinction does not diminish the importance of that difference. Sleep remains a special part of life, holding an ongoing interest for a poet concerned with certainty and knowledge, continuing to provide for him an important alternative vantage on existence.

As spoken themes dreams and sleep only rarely intrude on the content of *Life Supports* and appear hardly more often in *Bursts of Light*, the collected later poems. However, overall their presence rarely disappears from the poetry for long. At times when they do appear they tend to maintain the status we have identified, bringers of brief intimations of limited certainty in a world where ignorance prevails. They are usually explicitly described as similar to but subtly different from waking, and any metaphor for death tends to be secondary to the poem's principal meaning. It is precisely because these themes recur infrequently yet repeatedly that they can seem so memorable when they do surface. It is revealing to note the position of these poems within the collections; Bronk will go for years without drawing on sleep/dream imagery, then produce a few such poems in very quick succession, as if moving the motif to the forefront of his concerns for a while. However, previous literature and commentaries on Bronk's poetry have paid very little attention to this important aspect of the work.<sup>29</sup> This chapter has addressed the formulation and development of Bronk's understanding of sleep and dreams as it is expressed through his poetry at different times. The discussion is presented in support of the overall argument of the current thesis, that Bronk should be understood as a religious poet with major concerns falling outside mundane waking life, and as a self-contained contribution to the wider understanding of sleep and dreaming in Bronk's poetry. It has shown how the poetry, usually deeply sceptical, expresses a particular kind of certainty only in its descriptions of sleeping and dreaming. Importantly, it has observed in

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<sup>29</sup> Joseph Donahue's essay (Foster & Kimmelman 2013) is a very recent and welcome contribution to the subject.

‘The Recurrence, Among Other Things, of Dreams’ and ‘The Meeting Ground’ the formation of an idea that becomes crucial to Bronk’s message, the suggestion that life lives us as opposed to our living life. This is discussed in more depth in chapter seven, but for now the fact that the idea can first be seen emerging in poems about dreaming reflects the significance of sleep and dreams to Bronk’s formative world-view.

Meanwhile, the religious connotations of dreaming are well documented. Dreams have a place in most or all established religious and spiritual traditions; in contemporary secular global culture we value them perhaps less than any society that has gone before us. The concluding chapter of this thesis will return to certain examples of Bronk’s dream poems that have not been mentioned in the current discussion. For now, one final example from *Careless Love and its Apostrophes* (1985) reinforces the value of dreaming for Bronk’s poetic persona, demonstrates how the same epistemological concerns present themselves there and reminds us that dreams can be terrifying as well as mundane. Its central and marvellous truth expresses the bravery of welcoming and embracing the dream world:

#### CERTAIN QUESTIONS

The dreams are not happier — oh, far from that,  
— some quite horrible — and still I prefer  
them to the waking life except I’m not awake.  
I’d dare to be; I’ve always wanted to know  
— more, maybe than anything else — what  
it’s about and the dreams seem closer to.

Are they though? That’s what they don’t say.

(BOL 25)

Its central tenet is the oft-repeated theme that we see running through Bronk’s whole career: “I’ve always wanted to know/ ... what / it’s about”. As with several of the poems discussed above, here the dream invites us “closer” than waking endeavours allow to a knowledge which, like certain religious truths, may be



intimated through subjective experience but is nonetheless ultimately unrealisable.

## Chapter 6: God<sup>30</sup>

Recent responses to Bronk's poetry have tended towards the possibility of viewing Bronk as explicitly a religious poet (eg. Ernest 1988, Leary in Foster & Kimmelman 2013), while certain criticism addressing only the earlier poetry had described an essentially anti-religious stance (eg. Conte in Clippinger 2001, Christensen in Clippinger 2001). These different responses should not necessarily be surprising, as Bronk wrote poems that are sometimes mysteriously vague, often paradoxical, and that frequently contradict one another, directly or by inference. This chapter describes several of these poems, reading some in close detail, primarily because it is fascinating to observe how Bronk's use of the notion of God within his poetry changes and develops over his lifetime. Although critics have had their say regarding Bronk's status as a religious poet or otherwise, and have talked about how God figures in the poems, they have tended to apply a single stance as characteristic. Until now there have been no study that convincingly acknowledges and assesses the changes in this respect that happen over Bronk's quite long career.

Throughout his life Bronk composed hundreds of poems that made recourse and reference to God via different approaches. However, his attitude towards and use of the term 'God' and various related ideas develops and radically changes over the duration of his career. This simple fact has been overlooked by most or all previous commentators on the subject, and its illustration and discussion constitute part of the current chapter's original contribution to our understanding of the work. Meanwhile, in most of the instances where Bronk evokes God there can be observed an aspect of the sublime at work, namely the expression of an internal feeling in response to impossibly formidable concepts. Yet many of these poems seem to furthermore confirm for Bronk the existence or presence of a transcendent order that cannot be known or attained but can be intuited. Chapter four of this thesis discussed the wider philosophical distinction between the sublime and the transcendent as it specifically applies to Bronk's poetry. As this current chapter will illustrate, the idea of God that Bronk develops

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<sup>30</sup> Some of this chapter's findings are mentioned in the essay 'William Bronk, Post-Modernity and the Post-Structuralists' (Bober in Foster & Kimmelman 2013: 8-16).

relies on the sublime feeling that the poet experiences within himself contributing to and then being surpassed by an intellectualised acknowledgement of the immanence of transcendence, an acknowledgement that does not have its origins in an intellectual process, but that finds its expression there.

The following two short poems are taken from Bronk's penultimate collection, *All of What We Loved* (1998). They are included here at the beginning of this chapter as a brief and self-illustrative example of the complicated, contradictory roles that the notion and person of God had come to play by the end of Bronk's long career:

#### ACQUIESCENCE

Love God. God is one. God's love is love  
for God as ours for us. Be at one with God.

(*BOL* 233)

#### *GOD BLESS CAPTAIN VERE*

EVEN GOD ISN'T GOD.  
IF HE WERE WOULDN'T BE GOD.

(*BOL* 239)

The attitude that dismisses the first of these poems as an ironic gesture sadly misses its point, but so too would one that read it as religious proselytising. Its presence in *All Of What We Loved* seems to indicate the poet's search for a sort of peace with the world and himself, as seen in many later poems including some surveyed here, which was notably lacking from his early collections. It furthermore indicates his acceptance of God, not necessarily as an entity with a personality but certainly as a workable concept. While the title 'Acquiescence' represents the stance its content portrays, it thereby challenges the idea that the act of loving God would require activity beyond submission. This conception invites something like a return to a prelapsarian natural state, and the possibility of reconciliation with God.

In fact, it is perfectly possible to find a consistent Christian message in 'Acquiescence'. The central proposition of the poem is indistinct ("God's love is love / for God as ours for us"), because it depends on a certain grammatical interpretation; but if "love / for God" is taken not as a noun phrase meaning "love directed towards God" but rather allowing "for God" to become a possessive adverbial clause, then the statement accurately reflects the doctrine of analogy, offering a similarity but not equivalence in the love found in God and that in man. The other short sentences describe the fundamental imperative of Christian practice (Matthew 22: 37), a declaration of monotheism, and a reminder of the doctrine of atonement.

The other poem here is evidently not in keeping with orthodox theology. '*GOD BLESS CAPTAIN VERE*' is unique in Bronk's published work for being the only poem presented entirely in an upper case typeface, which offers the possibility of its being shouted rather than spoken. A certain effect of its being the last hurried cry of a condemned man is augmented by the abbreviated non-standard grammar of the second line. Its title, printed in italics in the collection, is taken from Herman Melville's allegorical novella *Billy Budd, Sailor*. They are the last words that the title character utters before his execution on the orders of the Captain (Melville 1995: 80).

For a fuller explanation of the philosophy at work here, it is necessary to turn to a prose work produced by Bronk over fifty years previously. His essay on Melville was eventually published along with his work on Thoreau and Whitman in 1980, but had apparently been completed by 1947 (Gilmore 2006: 145). Passages in 'Herman Melville; or, The Ambiguities' reflect sympathetically on Melville's own religious and theological position:

[He] was a fervent man who was unusually conscious of Christian teachings, and who read the English Bible not only as a writer might read it for its richly beautiful language, but also as one who was moved by its religious ardor. His religious feeling was too intense and personal to find much ease in the Christian Church. (Bronk 1983a: 179)

A general Protestant consciousness pervaded everyday experience in 19<sup>th</sup> century New England, and Bronk was certainly aware of nearby regional history. Yet his assessment of Melville as “unusually conscious of Christian teachings” is applicable even within that context. As we will see at various times throughout this chapter, there is a strong sense indicated by many of the poems that the above passage could be equally true of Bronk himself. During a discussion of religious attitudes, he makes the observation that “Melville was thoroughly versed in contradictory, incongruous knowledge” (Bronk 1983a: 203); one such contradiction is of course indicated in the poem. The essay closes thus:

[Billy Budd's] only words, which he called out clearly and loudly, were “God bless Captain Vere!” .... It was Melville's great cry of affirmation and acceptance. For that little moment, in an irreparably evil and ambiguous world, ambiguity and evil with all their consequences were acquiesced in, and Jackson and Bland, Ahab, Claggart, and Ishmael, and the evil Whale itself, were drawn up and absorbed in a clear act of conviction and faith. Herman Melville was at peace. God bless Captain Vere! (Bronk 1983a: 203)

In ‘*GOD BLESS CAPTAIN VERE*’ Bronk is thus revisiting a position he had first set down when he was a much younger man. It is clear that the older poet now has the confidence to present the idea without recourse to any of the impressive techniques and forms that marked his earlier verse style. In the briefest of terms the poem is denying one notion of God while simultaneously affirming the presence of something else referred to by that same name.

The problem of evil, which has challenged theologians and religious believers for many centuries, continues to confuse both writers' definitions and understandings of what ‘God’ might or cannot be. Bridging the apparent opposition between the content of ‘Acquiescence’ and ‘*GOD BLESS CAPTAIN VERE*’, Bronk's early essay ends on the suggestion that it was an act or process of acquiescence that brought peace to Melville. A similar process can be traced in Bronk's own changing relationship with his concept of God; this will be evidenced throughout this chapter. In one sense the simple religious directive of ‘Acquiescence’ therefore represents a culmination of the poet's lifelong practical

religious enquiry, but in another so too does the self-negating denial that '*GOD BLESS CAPTAIN VERE*' insists. These two poems mitigate one another, each informing our understanding of the other, and for a fuller appreciation they may demand the context of the whole volume, and the range of Bronk's work that came before that. Ultimately, the certainty and confidence with which their instructions and declarations are announced is the product of the poet's continuing enquiry into and reassessment of his wider epistemological and metaphysical concerns, in which God develops an important role.

It is worth charting the path to God that Bronk treads. At first, theme and content are explicitly drawn from Christian texts and ideas. Invariably in these pieces an aspect of the creed is directly or indirectly evoked, and always found wanting. These poems at times reflect Bronk's developing interest in the concept of belief and the nature of disbelief, addressing the notion of God in various ways but always using it in a sense that appears broadly compliant with the deeply sceptical stance that typifies a great deal of Bronk's writing. The next part of this chapter therefore explains and illustrates how the poet's particular form of disbelief is frequently presented by reference to explicitly Christian ideas and motifs, to observe to what extent Bronk accepts or rejects these. Some important critical work already exists on this subject (eg. Ernest 1988; Finkelstein in Clippinger 2001; Conte in Clippinger 2001).

However, as will be revealed and discussed in detail, a sudden and remarkable change in Bronk's approach to God appears in 1976 in the poem 'Who Feels It' (*LS* 173). One of this chapter's unique and important contributions to the existing literature is the signposting of this one poem as a crucial moment in the development and expression of Bronk's religious writing, augmented by close critical reading of the piece. I will then proceed to discuss the emergence of God as a significant theme in two of Bronk's volumes from the mid-1970s, and suggest that this represents a genuine if tentative and incomplete movement on the poet's part into the realm of faith. However, by reference to these and later collections I will show how the poet retains a concern with denying certain traditionally accepted theistic attributes. Towards the end of the chapter a detailed assessment of another significant poem 'Stations' (*BOL* 46) provides some contrast to

conclusions put forward by Foster (in Foster & Kimmelman 2013) regarding Bronk's religious attitude.

The younger Bronk's grounding in Christian teaching can be seen in the remarkable poem 'Not Noah' (*LS 30*), not naming God outright but certainly presenting the poet standing in relation to a more magnificent power than himself. From its sudden initial exclamatory triphthong it is musical in form and heart wrenching in content, with a world of subtleties packed into its few lines. Whilst 'Not Noah' does not name God outright, it certainly presents the poet standing in relation to a more magnificent power than himself, and explicitly acknowledges his cultural grounding in the Judeo-Christian tradition:

NOT NOAH

Aie, the light! Last night the light  
toward sunset spread out, out.

Not earth only but  
sky also. Flood, flood.

So northern lights in full dark  
light nothing, are pure light.

Who could be Noah? No!  
Drown. drown. Let earth drown.

(*LS 30*)

That first syllable (or two) may even have been unique in the annals of printed poetry to that date. There is certainly something of the Beat about it – indeed the whole short poem may be suited to stylised recitation (with saxophone accompaniment) in a smoky jazz bar – but that was decidedly not Bronk's scene. The interjections 'oh' and 'ah' are familiar to readers of lyric poetry in a more classical tradition, and both are employed in the pages surrounding 'Not Noah'. When written down, however, neither can express the intensity of feeling that

“Aie” offers; ‘Oh, the light!’ would be reflective and contemplative, “Aie, the light!” is immediate and startling, even terrifying. The name or nature of the response that the light prompts, be that emotional or physical, becomes secondary or irrelevant beside the depth of the feeling.

Despite or because of the sudden immediacy of the introductory cry compounded by the exclamation mark, separation between the experience and its report becomes ironic, even comical. It is as if in the moment before the words “Last night” the poet regains and reasserts control over his thought and expression, testified by the simple, forceful rhythm, but that this moment took a whole night to resolve itself into the first line of the poem. The second line, a grammatical continuation of the first, may very likely report a sunset, or it is a precise and evocative description of the phenomenon known as ‘crepuscular rays’, where light shines in apparently widening columns through gaps in cloud cover, or between trees or sometimes buildings. The brevity of language here, and even the order that the words are deployed, requires us to consider the process, and particularly how it might be relative to the observer’s position; logically we might want the preposition “toward” to apply to “Last night”, connecting it temporally to the sunset, but grammatically it belongs to “the light”, and thus forms a spatial relationship with the zenith. When the light “spread[s] out” it is becoming removed from its point of origin, yet from another point of view, that of the observer, it is filling the field of vision. “[O]ut, out” lends a sensation of continued movement to the scene, suggesting further unceasing dissipation, but it also recalls Macbeth’s ‘brief candle’, that quintessential soliloquy on the swift passing of light and life.

If the “northern lights” in the third couplet are the aurora borealis then the science of the claim is wayward; we know, as Bronk should have even in the mid-1950s, that they illuminate charged particles in the atmosphere. Yet these lines prefigure a notion memorably expressed in a later poem,<sup>31</sup> and the term “full

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<sup>31</sup> “Objects are nothing. There is only the light...” from “The Annihilation of Matter” (*LS* 35). cf. Hatlen’s discussion of light as an archetype in Bronk (Clippinger 2001: 119-20). Kimmelman is careful to insist that ‘light’ should be read in the work as “actual light”, not interpreted as a symbol (Kimmelman 1998: 39-40). However:

...perhaps in “The Annihilation of Matter” the light can refer to the manner in which the unseen reality, as if an immanence, exists within the same space as the supposed unreality of material objects that the persona realizes actually disclose



dark” is an indication or reminder of Bronk’s talent for disarmingly innovative phrasing.<sup>32</sup>

Noah at God’s command ensured the survival of the human race. The “No!” in the fourth stanza becomes then a violent rejection of humanity, and the repeated command “drown” is spiteful and destructive. Yet the question that opens the penultimate line is one of identity rather than action, and the auxiliary conditional “could” as opposed to ‘would’ makes this a matter of possibility not choice. The narrator is overcome by the light and its transcendental associations; he is the first to drown in it, and he is as helpless to prevent its force spreading over the earth as Noah facing the floodwaters.

When Paul Christensen calls Bronk an “atheist” (Clippinger 2001: 183) he may be broadly and crudely correct, but only as is reflected in the poet’s earliest few collections. Even so, this is a type of atheism that reserves the possibility of evoking God as a literary device at the very least. I see little reason to suppose that the religious language used in ‘The Unsatisfied’ (LS 29) is ironic when the stance is so clearly heartfelt:

... Praise God.  
The loveliness. Our cold eyes are comforted.  
These bright angels of fire light the sky  
...

‘The Unsatisfied’ shares a marked similarity in theme with ‘Not Noah’, being an intensely felt response to the beautiful but fairly ordinary sight of light in the evening sky, drawing on traditional religious ideas in its expression. The whole stance of this poem is unequivocally religious, and the dichotomy of “the unattained” and “the unsatisfied” at its conclusion is central to the conception of religious desire (Bronk’s in particular and the wider notion in general; cf. Ernest 1988) and to the separation of God and man.

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the light, in other words actually lead him to intuit the real as much or more than themselves. (Kimmelman 1998: 40)

<sup>32</sup> Like ‘sliding asleep’ in ‘The Dream of A World of Objects’ (LS 72), discussed in a separate chapter, this seems a fairly obvious trope until we consider its removal from ordinary terms of expression.

However, moving forward only a few years to Bronk's next published collection there are definite grounds for considering *The World, The Worldless* to be an outwardly atheistic work. A brief line from a contemporary reviewer is pertinent to the discussion: "For religious orthodoxy and promises of salvation he holds no hope" (Robert Spector discussing *The World, The Worldless* in *Saturday Review*, cited in Gilmore 2006: 202.) This would indeed seem an astute enough summary of the issue as it is dealt with in the collection; here is a definite rejection of any previously admitted possibility:

...  
ideas are always wrong, always unfixed  
and often their power to make the world real is lost.  
(LS 34)

A brief illustration of this suggestion can be found if we compare the poem 'A Bright Day in December' with two poems mentioned above, 'Not Noah' and 'The Unsatisfied'. Like each of those, 'A Bright Day in December' takes as its objective inspiration the sensations provoked by light in the winter sky. Yet whilst the previous poems had found the promise of transcendence in a heavenly vision and brought forth exclamations of emotional intensity, this poem takes a very different turn. Here "the unattained" that was posited in 'The Unsatisfied' has vanished. The first person singular (and its self-reflexive appearance in parenthesis) marks the poet's awareness of subjectivity and intellectual rationality in his changing opinions, in lines that contain a dismissal of cosmological as well as theological debates concerning the end of the universe:

...  
I have done  
with promises (or say I have) of things  
to come: the all-light; the all-dark;  
something slow emerging; the slow (or fast)  
and final decay.  
The thing we have to live

with, the last thing, is it is all  
here, and was, and will be, is all there is.  
Nothing is coming but what is already here...

(LS 42)

This apparent dismissal of theistic or transcendental possibilities surfaces repeatedly throughout that collection, as in these lines from 'Not My Loneliness But Ours':

... The human loneliness  
is the endless oneness of man. Man is one;  
man is alone in his world...

(LS 43/4)

Or, from 'The Nature of the Universe':

... there is no other, nothing, as nightly, the far  
glitter of distant stars proclaims it ...  
(...)  
we are nowhere, there is no other place,  
and nothing to turn to, in solitude.

(LS 59)

Over the following decade the strength of these atheistic assertions gradually changes and softens, but until the mid-1970s (see below) there is little or nothing in his work that constitutes a positive theology. The crucial poem in respect of Bronk's particular form of disbelief at this stage in his life is 'On *Credo Ut Intelligam*' (LS 88-89), referenced and analysed in some depth by previous critics (see literature review in chapter one of the current thesis). 'On *Credo Ut Intelligam*' is a thoroughly, even militantly, agnostic poem, that stands as an important signpost in Bronk's career, a formative point at which he recognises, verbalises and accepts the crucial agnosticism that will sustain his philosophy. In this period we also encounter poems such as 'The Creation of the World' ("... We

begin to believe. But it doesn't stand." *LS* 68; see Finkelstein in Clippinger 2001: 205-6).

In the conclusion of 'The Duplicities of Sense' (*LS* 79) we find the first use among several throughout Bronk's writing career of the holy name as a colloquial exclamation. Despite the evocation of God's name, this conception of the universe as "shapelessness, / randomed with atoms" remains distinctly post-modern and post-religious. Ostensibly removed from its actual nominal significance, in two forms coupled for double emphasis, the employment of the name here undoubtedly demonstrates a considered rejection of doctrine and a transgression of the third commandment. In doing so it draws attention to these concepts and forms a reminder of their traditional and historical place in attempts to comprehend reality and the world. Furthermore, it imbues just the suggestion that this is an actual term of direct address and therefore some kind of prayer:

... Jesus, God, this is a world where we  
are under compulsion not to stay with the sane  
— where besides the shape of things, is shapelessness,  
randomed with atoms whose dance we please to be,  
all private, nothing and all in a world  
where the sense we commune together to make is wrong.

A less straightforward expression of agnostic ambivalence surfaces in 'Of The Several Names Which Are God's' (*LS* 99). This is a difficult, disjointed poem which fails to rank among Bronk's finer achievements; the relationship between its title and its content is as unclear as that between some of its short sentence-length stanzas, and there is little beautiful poetic phrasing to mitigate this awkwardness. Part of the poem's difficulty arises from the lack of obvious connection between the three sections (planting beans – disorder in dreams – the narrator's solitude), but the thread of landscape ("There have been dreams / having to do with landscapes, journeys there") and mankind's use of the earth ("putting pole-bean seeds in the ground") does hold them together. This clarifies the connection of the closing lines with the previous content when we allow

“exposure” to bear connotations of open spaces and “defense” to be physical barricades:

I stand completely exposed; no defense  
is any longer capable of help.

And no one attacks me. The attack is where it has gone.

When we consider the title in relation to this reading we find not irony at the absence of God in the poem, as was suggested by Hatlen (Clippinger 2001: 120), but an insightful exploration into what ‘God’ is or has meant over history. Hebrew editions of the Old Testament contain at least seven distinct words that are translated as ‘God’ or ‘LORD’, frequently in compound with other words according to the function that God fulfils at different times (Wilson, 461-72). Other religions, current and historical, have ascribed different names to signify one God or various deities with different roles. Hence a poem that refers to planting seeds and the shifting seasons, to the interpretation of messages in dreams, and to metaphorical armour worn by an individual, has as its themes the same fundamental roles that God has filled.

Retrospectively we can see *That Tantalus* and *To Praise The Music* (1972) opening ground for the emerging acceptance of some kind of spiritual faith, although this was surely less apparent while the works were being composed. We encounter poems such as ‘Veni Creator Spiritus’ (LS 116) which shares its title with a liturgical hymn and invokes the idea of “an infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere” (cf. Finkelstein in Clippinger 2001: 207-8), or ‘90. Domine Refugium’ which offers a very specific reference to Psalm 90, a well-known and pious reflection on mortality and the passing of time. The inclusion of the number in the poem’s title is a curious and blatant signpost to that text. Echoing the psalm, the poem finishes:

... What we destroy  
is a symbol; it were as though we destroy ourselves.  
If something is, let the symbol go. Teach

us to know the number of our days, how it is not.

(LS 134)

Precise meaning here is elusive and almost irrelevant; knowledge of the previous lines hardly clarifies these final clauses. They establish (or remind us) that destruction is inevitable and (in a typical Bronk gambit) that we are a symbol – though of what we are not told. Considering the poem’s title and what that indicates about the possible addressee of the final imperative sentence we may very well read “what we destroy” as God. This operates in two distinct and mutually exclusive senses: we may destroy a God by crucifixion for him to be made complete again, or by reason and science whereby he becomes unnecessary. Yet Bronk is suggesting neither of these things, for it is the symbol not the being that he would destroy. Of course if the being *is* the symbol this swiftly becomes a circular argument, but that should not preclude its appeal or validity.

These tentative excursions into belief are far from securely Christian, although they remain framed in sacred texts. Thus ‘The Being’ commences with an assertion that might please orthodox religious believer and secular rationalist alike, although the continuation of the first line will soon disavow the former’s position. Here is the full seven-line poem:

*THE BEING*

The bush did burn. The tablets, in the end,  
were blank for Moses’ guesses. But it did burn.

They were with the tree. I denied them the fruit of the tree  
but they were with it. Mine was the image they showed.

Son? There are many sons. He had a name.  
I am the nameless one. I am who am.  
Not one of those. Not given. Not anywhere.

(LS 115)

The narrative stance here is not easily categorised. A scarcely tolerable interpretation of the poem places the persona of William Bronk at the core of the lyric, indeed at the centre of the universe with an element of his psyche playing the antagonist's role in the garden of Eden. The final line is thus an extreme of self-denial. Or, a similarly dubious reading puts the human ego "I" in this same position, privileging subjectivity within creation and framing the suggestion in a metaphor drawn from culturally significant myth. I cannot suggest that either of these readings are preferable to these below, but they alert us to the complexities of Bronk's ambiguities, and as such should not be discounted.

Alternating between sacred doctrine and apparently blasphemous profanity, the first six lines of 'The Being' cannot be a straightforward parody of anyone's notion of God as Hatlen seems to suggest: "what interests Bronk here is God's tautological (and thus logically absurd) self-definition" (Clippinger 2001: 120). Hatlen's argument assumes that the poem's final line is the voice of the poet rather than that of the imagined persona that narrated the main body of the verse, but there is really no need to take this point of view. The interpretation of the line must rest on the referent for "those". If this is a new narrator 'Not one of those' will turn us away from the previous speaker, and all the ideas associated with its divinity. If this is a creator God narrating, the thing being denied is probably simply a "name", as was introduced as an object in the previous couplet. My suggestion therefore, in keeping with the general development of the use of God in Bronk's poems and in contrast to Hatlen's argument, is that the poet is here establishing the presence of an agency in the universe that fulfils some but not all of the defining characteristics of the Christian God. 'The Being' is an early indication of a notion we will see developed later, that Bronk's own emerging conception of 'God' is of something nameless, whilst the idea or being that religion names 'God' is a symbol through which this can be approached.

There is a kind of consistency to the claims laid out in the first three couplets of 'The Being', but it is not one that fits any widely held belief system. The first initially appears to put forward a reasonable rationalist point of view ascribing the biblical episode of the burning bush (Exodus 3: 2-4) to natural phenomena and that of the stone tablets (Exodus: 24:12, 34:4) to human agency, as if its author had access to privileged knowledge. The second is unambiguous, its

first person assertions entirely matching the accounts of Eden in Genesis (1: 26; 2: 15-7). The meaning of couplet three is less clear, but if we are to assume that the narrator is God the Father it would certainly seem to contradict the notion of Christ as his only begotten son. The notion of God as nameless is not doctrinal<sup>33</sup>, though it may be a flawed interpretation of the Jewish refusal to pronounce the Tetragrammaton, as carried through into biblical editorship. The rendering “I am who am” is one of several accepted translations of God’s words to Moses in Exodus 3: 14 (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1.2.1, article 213).

Many poems from this period in Bronk’s life have rightly been the subject of previous critical attention. In relation to the current discussion, for example, ‘Where It Ends’ (“... it is a hard world, empty and cruel; / but this light, oh Jesus Christ, this light!”) (*LS* 161) has been discussed by Corman (1976: 96), Finkelstein (1982: 490) and Clippinger (2006: 59); Leary convincingly presents ‘The Lover As Not The Loved’ (“I am wholly absorbed in it, am nothing more”) (*LS* 157) in his discussion of the “Mystery of Faith” in Bronk’s work (Foster & Kimmelman 2013: 147-49) (cf. Literature Review in chapter one). Certainly these should be counted among Bronk’s most beautiful poems, and the honest expression of their unequivocally religious message undoubtedly contributes to their lyric strength. Yet it is important to remember that ‘Where It Ends’ and ‘The Lover As Not The Loved’ appear in the wider context of a collection that at other moments finds no meaning for us, either in this world or in some received notion of a deity beyond it: “There is only this and it isn’t anything” (‘Looking At It’, *LS* 161); “...*here* is our only life, our terms / have to be of only here” (‘Wanting To Come Back’, *LS* 161). Acknowledging this contradiction is an important part of appreciating Bronk’s position, where a range of competing ideas operate within the poetry.

‘Love’, which had made occasional important appearances before this point, suddenly flourishes in Bronk’s next collection *The Meantime* (1976). While hardly an outright cheerful volume, it is certainly one of Bronk’s most vibrant. This tone is set by two short poems early in the volume; ‘The Non-Lying of Figures’ with the opening line “Love has transfigured me...” (*LS* 174); then ‘In

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<sup>33</sup> Hence Exodus 21: 7 “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain”; also cf. eg. Jeremiah 23: 26-7 “prophets who prophesy lies...who think to make my people forget my name” and Psalm 7: 17 “sing praise to the name of the Lord most high.”



April' which begins "Spring again and the intensification of love..." (LS 174) *The Meantime* frequently celebrates human connectivity and sociability in a way that was more or less absent from earlier collections, where society and human relationships were usually presented in much more abstract terms.<sup>34</sup> There is one poem in *The Meantime* that within the current discussion stands out as a milestone in his changing attitude to and relationship with God. To my knowledge, no-one has yet raised the importance of this moment, a turnaround from the earlier poems of denial. The title of this piece might simply be a question without the standard punctuation; the two poems immediately preceding this are titled 'Who Needs It' and 'Who Wanted It', and like many of Bronk's poems they broach the relationship of identity and subjectivity, as their titles would indicate. The title of this poem may in part be a question asking whether and where a line can be drawn to separate the subjective experiences of "joy" and "despair" from the point out of which they emanate:

#### WHO FEELS IT

Lord, my despairs strengthen as your despair;  
 so this gaiety, these joys,  
 are sourceless other than as your joy.  
 As so. Let there be nothing, Lord, of mine.

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<sup>34</sup> We can speculate on the reasons for this upturn in the poet's spirit, and find them in his personal life:

"By the early 1970s... After half a century of suppressing his sexual desires, he began to express them openly. From dearth of love to surfeit, he found himself simultaneously engaged in erotic relationships. (Gilmore 2006: 229)

The publication date of *The Meantime* corresponds with reported relationships with Laura Greenlaw and the shadowy 'Luke' (cf. Gilmore 2006: 230-34, 242-48). Bronk's personal papers at the University of Columbia archive reveal a great deal more about 'Luke' than Gilmore's biography permits. What the available evidence suggests is that at around this time the late-middle-aged Bronk was for perhaps the first time enjoying the benefits of sustained romantic and/or erotic relationships. Some of the poems in *The Meantime* are addressed to "love", apparently a genuine term of endearment for a particular person but possibly the concept 'love' itself. As we saw in 'Acquiescence' earlier in this discussion, and we will note again, love becomes a concept that for Bronk gains important associations with his idea of God.

Let all my loves be only as you  
and lovers love me the same as I.  
Let nothing be the nothing still it was  
always, and will, except as it be you.

And you, my lord, unable to other be,  
be all only and despair absolute.  
Joy, then: nothing possible  
except the all: all possible: the joy!

(LS 174)

Of course, neither love nor joy had gone entirely unnoticed before now; but prior to *The Meantime* love had been something remote and fleeting that happened despite the world's vicissitudes rather than an essential component of our experience, as in 'Love As A Great Power' (LS 128-9) where it is presented as a mysterious force caring little for humanity. Meanwhile, joy was balanced with despair rather than outweighing it, as in 'Virgin and Child With Music And Numbers' (LS 45). For the length of *The Meantime* that balance is tipped in joy's favour, as epitomised here in 'Who Feels It'. Suddenly flooded with love and joy, it is a significant and important coincidence that this is the first of Bronk's many direct petitions to (the) "Lord". As we will see below, others arrive soon that are addressed to "God". It is reasonable to question whether "Lord" means something equivalent to 'God' here, and particularly in light of the contents of the next collection the answer is very probably yes.<sup>35</sup>

The rate of lexical repetition here is perhaps higher than we have found in any examples of Bronk's poetry so far; it would be almost as quick to enumerate the words that do not recur as those that do – quicker if we discount conjugations of 'be'. There is a very limited variety of verbs too: "strengthen" and "love", the passive rhetorical imperative "Let", but more numerous are the several variations

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<sup>35</sup> There is a quite plausible but probably unnecessary and out-of-context reading of 'Who Feels It' as one voice within an entirely human relationship. If so, there may be clear and overtly sexual master-servant power delineations – but if this is to be the case then the addressed party is so far deified that the more obvious religious interpretation holds good.

on 'be'. These formal features may rise from the novelty of the tone and subject matter, together with the poet's general tendency to repeat a word in order to bring himself and/or the reader closer to the idea of the object or notion that it signifies. Furthermore, the repetition of a word when applied to God or man (which is to say the second and first persons of the poem) offers to indicate a fundamental connection between the two, as if what each feels by "despair" might differ only in magnitude. Yet the first line is conceptually strange, and indeed ambiguous, for what becomes stronger depends on whether the verb "strengthen" is transitive or intransitive – if transitive, despair yields hope; if intransitive, man's despair is a barometer of God's. Similarly we can read "so" in the second line as a conjunction or as an adverb; in the first case we would understand that the speaker's mood, be it "despair" or "joy", is dependent entirely and correlatively on his Lord's; in the latter divine "joy" is the sole origin of human happiness, but need not fluctuate as ours does. Either way the "so" in line 4 is a pronoun and the "As" effectively qualifies it rendering the preceding statements potentially fallible. "Let..." in the fourth, fifth and seventh lines may in each case be a petitionary request – a plea that the speaker be proved right – or a kind of propitiatory atonement, a submissive appeasement in the face of inevitability.

Having no clear point of reference in any of the preceding poems that would indicate the poet's attitude here, it is perhaps impossible to decipher these linguistic subtleties. What can be said is that with this new emergence of love and joy as primary aspects of the poetry Bronk has identified or formulated a focus for his celebratory attentions and that the focal point shares characteristics and mode of address with a traditional theistic concept of God. The "Lord" of 'Who Feels It' is apparently eternal, self-existent and immutable, though he does not necessarily demonstrate other attributes that religions ask us to expect. Nonetheless, the body of this poem would not be out of place in a work of Christian mysticism. It is essentially a prayer of supplication and adoration, an exclamation of intense happiness.<sup>36</sup> Above all, 'Who Feels It' is an act of communication with a greater

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<sup>36</sup> More than happiness, in fact. Here and elsewhere Bronk uses the term 'joy' with similar connotations to C.S. Lewis' definition:

an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply distinguished from both Happiness and from Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) has indeed one

force or being and an acknowledgement of that being's absolute greatness. The explicit reference to the existence and continuation of processes beyond our understanding, a key theme throughout the whole oeuvre up to and after this point, is clear in the final lines; that they are also beyond even definition is apparent via the verbal paradoxes and ironies ("all only"; "nothing possible / except the all : all possible") and the hints at a lack of final distinction between joy and despair.

So here is a crucial moment in the relationship between Bronk's writing and his conception of God. We could suggest that his resort to the idea of God is the poet's response to a world where he finds in himself both joy and despair, and where external elements are variously gentle or cruel (cf. 'Where It Ends' *LS* 161), none of which he can control, explain or rationalise. Yet this by no means provokes or represents any kind of religious conversion, but rather a kind of disassembly of his agnosticism in that he becomes able to move between apparently utterly contradictory positions, as poems from the next two collections suggest.

Presumably due to the self-imposed limitation of the four-line stanza, the poems in *Finding Losses* (1976) all seem thematically consistent within themselves; we find none of the incongruous movement between juxtaposed ideas and images that sometimes occurs in earlier and later pieces. A significant proportion of the poems in *Finding Losses* (fifteen or so) might be said to deal with distinctly theological matters. Two or three of these might be seen as sympathetic to Christian belief; one reads as an outright prayer to the Old Testament God, giving no reason in itself for us to suppose it ironic; three or four appear on first reading decidedly atheistic; and the others suggest a deistic stance which is at odds with any orthodox doctrine. Taken together with his alternative title 'Lord', God is present (albeit sometimes by his absence) in approximately one fifth of the verses in the collection – a great enough proportion to warrant his being called a

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characteristic, and one only, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again. Apart from that, and considered only in its quality, it might equally be called a kind of unhappiness or grief. But then it is a kind we want... Joy is never in our power and pleasure often is. (Lewis 1999: 1253)

Lewis goes on to describe this feeling as a "signpost" to his Christianity, rather than finding it imbued with divinity in itself as Bronk seems to.

theme here. There are many other poems that we can speculate *could* be about God, and very likely in some respects are.<sup>37</sup> The current discussion will limit itself to only a handful of these pieces, offering original critical responses to poems that have hitherto been overlooked by commentators. A significant contribution to the existing literature is represented by the illustration that notwithstanding their contradictory aspects, the poems in *Finding Losses* and to some extent those in *The Force of Desire* (1979) in one respect show Bronk at his most 'religious', in that it is here that he most directly confronts his idea of God.

The ideas of divinity drawn up and explored in these two collections are those that Bronk carries through to his later work, informing various aspects of his philosophy and world-view thereafter. The 'nescience and impotence' attributed to God early in *Finding Losses* may be said to apply throughout the collection and beyond it. We hear that he is not the creator of the universe, but that he is glorious nonetheless and worthy of or at least a suitable object for our love. He is part of a personal relationship with the poet, and has been so with others also. His actual existence on any level other than the symbolic is unattested. This poem, curiously divided into two numbered stanzas, makes it quite clear the God he has in mind does not bear the attributes that Christianity teaches:

#### HE PRAISES NESCIENCE AND IMPOTENCE

1. Whoever's in charge's in charge the same way  
we are: there are things we can do  
and things we can't do. We make a try.  
We are whatever there is, whatever we are.

2. Blessed art thou, oh God, in thy impotence.  
If there is another way to live, as we wish  
there were, we would. What more were there?  
Love God. We are at one in this.

(LS 180)

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<sup>37</sup> Consider, for example, the first two poems in the collection, 'Gnomon of The Pro-nouns' and 'The Late Agnostic' (LS 178)

It may reasonably be assumed that “Whoever’s in charge” in the first stanza corresponds to “God” in the second. His similarities with humankind are much of the matter here, the “nescience and impotence” surely confirming that this is not the doctrinal God of the scriptures. The fifth line particularly is on the face of it an inversion of any orthodox theistic religious stance. By contrast the eighth is simple, inclusive and ecumenical. Significant to the overall development that we are observing, this final line is the first of several occasions over the next twenty-five years of writing poetry where Bronk extols therein us to “Love God”.

Briefly considering the *via negativa* method that Weinfeld observes Bronk using (1988: 143), there is something more subtle at work here. In ‘He Praises Nescience and Impotence’ we have a definite instance of describing God by what he is not, but with the important distinction that what he is not is precisely what he is usually described as being. Bronk uses a traditional theologian’s rhetorical technique of negative comparison to define to his reader this version of the ineffable, but does so by relying on our knowledge of the traditional conception of ‘God’ and inverting aspects of that. There is certainly something praiseworthy spoken of here, beyond and including our ubiquitous desire. This something seems to exist beyond the subjective, although its activity may only be inferred by us in the subjective, as the very next poem indicates:

#### DESIRE AS CONTRITION AND ABSOLUTION

Lord, acts of devotion by devotees  
aren’t any good to you and you haven’t a way  
to reward them. There is desire though  
and it rules. You ask. We do.

(LS 180)

It is important to note that it is “desire”, which everyone feels, and not any general or particular belief that offers the subjective functions of “[contrition and absolution]”; which is to say that we can and do feel these effects regardless of our beliefs or lack of them. One implication, consistent with previous observations

(Ernest 1988), is that religious belief which outwardly shows itself in ritual activity is one possible manifestation of that overarching desire that attends to us all. Once again here for the narrator belief is focussed in direction and paramount in importance but imprecise in form. This is in one respect another *via negativa* poem, suggesting that the Lord may indeed want something of us but implicitly stating that what he wants is not to be revealed in any scriptural tenets. This is not to say such instructions should not be observed, quite the opposite – the poet realises that people follow them because they feel a desire to express remorse and receive forgiveness. ‘God’ is a symbol or a focal point, desire is the reality.

A couple of poems later, the possible implications of this are enforced in angry tones:

PRIDE, WHICH GOES NOT ONLY BEFORE  
BUT BEHIND AND PROBABLY SIDEWAYS TOO

There is no one and nothing to defy so it has to be  
myself that I stand up against, I stretch  
my back at. Goddamn you, I won’t!  
God damn you I won’t.

(LS 181)

In the context developed so far this need not be an atheistic claim. The uncertainty expressed in the title, with its ironic reference to the fall of man, hints at an underlying agnosticism, but neither disbelief nor nihilism. This is probably Bronk’s longest title, longer than a few of the actual poems and almost a poem in itself. The text of the poem does not claim God’s non-existence, but that whatever does exist (if anything) cannot be deified. In this sense it could very reasonably be read as predestinarian, espousing the limitations of free will as working at an entirely internal subjective level (“it has to be / myself I stand up against”) because other greater processes will remain as unaffected by our breaches or denials as they were by our devotions in ‘Desire As Contrition And Absolution’. It is also legitimate, however, to read the poem’s oblique title as a warning against such an attitude. The respective objects of the first damnation and the speaker’s

refusal (“Goddamn you, I won’t!”) are unclear, perhaps unimportant in that they reflect a general mood; with only the introduction of a comma-length pause before its second syllable the final line becomes much calmer and clearer, and it is hard to read it as anything other than a direct address and challenge to “God”. Quite obviously this cannot be the God of the scriptures, except insofar as this damnation further denies and negates his being, but it is very plausible that it is the “Lord” addressed several times already, and indeed the “God” we were recently urged to love. Thus this poem can be an affirmation of the existence of some kind of God but a refusal to pay him that sort of affection.

This is the same attitude that provokes the couplet ‘He Importunes The God’, which with ‘He Praises Nescience And Impotence’ represents the only other occasion where *Finding Losses* deviates from its standard quatrain form. This poem may be a sort of joke, but it expresses a certain attitude to religious desire and/or obligation:

#### HE IMPORTUNES THE GOD

Why do I have to do this? I’ve got  
a poem I’d rather write than this one.

(LS 179)

The difficulty is that it is unclear quite what that attitude is. Either the title and the content are mocking and mutually self-referential, its shortened form a sort of giving-up-halfway, and this is therefore a refusal to make devotional requests and so a rejection of obligation; or the title describes the couplet as a heartfelt request to the deity with the implication that the conditions of the address, based in newly-revealed faith and belief, are so fundamentally necessary that they silence the poet’s other concerns. If it is to be taken seriously, it is not possible to say whether the poem as a statement is theistic or atheistic. In itself it neither confirms nor denies any orthodox doctrine except that of unquestioning obedience. We should certainly note the definite article in the title as the first of several occasions where Bronk uses it with ‘God’, reinforcing the notion’s absoluteness and distinguishing it from any exclusive patron deity of any religion



or sect. The same construction arises in '17 March': "Love hasn't much / to do with whom. I glorify the God / for this. ..." (*LS* 185). Bronk's tendency to compromise and stop short of absolute denial, which can contribute to the colloquial conversational tone of many poems, is demonstrated by this description of love which "hasn't much / to do with whom"; the principal point being that love as an exterior force is not discriminatory (thus coinciding with the Christian ideal of *agape*), but with an underlying admission that there is nonetheless something happening on a selective interpersonal level.

Previous critics (eg. Kimmelman 1998: 169; Weinfield 2009: 126) have rightly noted Bronk's intense, even militant scepticism. Coupled with burgeoning emotional intensity, and presumably combined with his early exposure to twentieth-century New England Protestantism, this manifests itself not in simple atheism but in a kind of active agnosticism, exemplified directly in one way in a poem such as 'The Late Agnostic', but also in the contrast and contradiction that exists in the next two poems. The first emerges from a concern with the theological intersection of cosmology and subjective religious desire. In accordance with the findings laid out in Chapter 2 emphasising Bronk's inherent post-modernism it hints at a connection with scientific chaos theory:

#### THE RANDOM

If there were a maker I'd praise the maker but  
 I think there isn't one; making is ours.  
 My random love sings at random. I  
 (who am I?) sing nevertheless (to what?): I praise.  
 (*LS* 187)

This is a bringing-together of ideas that have been raised in the preceding poems. The suggestion "making is ours" corresponds with the position taken in 'The Final Despair' where the narrator, apparently in the persona of the creator God concludes: "They did it themselves. It wasn't me" (*LS* 184). Here in 'The Random' the modest qualification "I think" allows the possibility of error whilst reinforcing internal subjectivity as the arbiter of action and opinion; the "random love" is that

reported in '17 March'. The questions in parentheses are answered only by the final statement, where the reported activity defines its agent and the narrator's identity is subsumed into what he does: "I / ... sing... I praise." 'The Random' makes it apparent that Bronk is not seeking to worship the creator God of the Old Testament and the Apostle's Creed, and so it is all the more surprising when, a few poems later, this prayer<sup>38</sup> arrives:

FOR ANY SPEAKERS

Oh God, who in the night-quiet called  
Samuel to you, call us then too  
and in the day-noise call that, hearing you,  
we may more plainly say the nameless name.

(LS 188)

Its title is generous and inclusive but not prescriptive, offering the verse for recitation by anyone, clearly not limiting it to the situation of William Bronk. The poem thus offers an invitation to a community of shared experience signified by the "we" in the last line, and here the nature of that experience is that of hopeful (and impossible) desire to recognise and accordingly express the ineffable.

As before, Bronk uses a specific biblical text as the model for understanding this desire; Samuel was an Israelite judge and prophet, who one night in his childhood was visited by the voice and person of God (1 Samuel 3: 3-14). This poem is the expression of a longing distinct from but related to the "envy" described in 'On Seeing Two Friends Together': "... the Bliss of God. No doubt / there are those who have it. I envy them" (LS 179). In both poems this describes the desire for religious experience, formulated in such a way that the desire itself becomes a religious experience. It would be a step too far to state that 'For Any Speakers' indicates an unfulfilled desire for a religion to take the place of

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<sup>38</sup> For a definition of 'prayer' see James "...by which term I understand no vain exercise of words, no mere repetition of certain sacred formulae, but the very movement itself of the soul, putting itself in a personal revelation of contact with the mysterious power of which it feels the presence, — it may be even before it has a name to call it." (1909: 464): This last phrase here is significant, resonating with Bronk's concern over God's namelessness.

the sceptical religious philosophy that the poet has so far entertained, because the adverb phrase “more plainly” suggests that through the poems or perhaps his actions, the speaker has already been saying the “nameless name.” As we saw in ‘The Being’ this namelessness had for some time been a feature of Bronk’s conception of God. From this we can conclude that Bronk’s uses of the names ‘God’ and ‘Lord’ are representative of the nameless, rather than signifiers of the thing itself. Basic Saussurean structural linguistics informs us that the signifier is arbitrary; that is to say, things don’t have names until they are given. A functioning network of signifier-signified relationships (‘signs’) constitutes a language. Bronk is constantly aware of the fallibility and arbitrariness of words, and occasionally expresses this: “... A message is meaningless / in the end: not wrong but meaningless. / As language is...” (from ‘On The Failure Of Meaning In The Absence Of Objective Analogues’, *LS* 104); “...That ‘I’ — / as arbitrary as the proper name...” (from ‘The Plainest Narrative’, *LS* 107). Yet he is usually content to apply names according to their everyday practical usage. ‘God’ is the single exception to this, for being nameless he exists outside the network of signs.

To this crucial statement about God’s nature according to Bronk’s idea of it, and without presuming to speculate over its extratextual consequences, we can briefly add further formal and thematic observations on the poem ‘For Any Speakers’. There may be just a faint touch of ironic mirth if not actual light-heartedness in the neologistic phrase “day-noise” that contrasts the placidity and perhaps solitude of “night-quiet” on one hand with the busyness on the other. From the beginning of Bronk’s writing but increasing in the final books he is periodically concerned with the differences in mood and perception between night time and daytime experiences.<sup>39</sup> ‘For Any Speakers’ reads as a request that what is felt and/or believed at one of these times be carried through into the other. A second point to note involves the punctuation of the verse. Of over sixty poems in *Finding Losses* this is one of only two instances constructed as a single sentence, as though its several clauses were one spontaneous connected thought. We should not take this as necessarily reflective of an inherent honesty in the

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<sup>39</sup> This is to some extent indicated in the discussion on sleep and dreams, in chapter five of the current thesis.

poem (not wanting to imply wilful dishonesty in any of the others), but the singular directness that this feature lends does add to the effect of sincerity here.

As we have noted, 'Who Feels It' would be well suited to a place in any anthology of religious verse, and similarly 'For Any Speakers' could find its way into a collection of contemporary Christian prayer. There are a few more of Bronk's verses that would also fit this latter category, including 'Acquiescence', but the majority of his addresses to God are far from doctrinal. This does not preclude their being considered prayer, as we will find with some of the examples taken from *The Force of Desire* (1979), discussed here, and with certain later poems.

From the four-line stanza, Bronk progresses or descends to the three-line. *The Force of Desire* comprises sixty-six untitled tercets, and as such constitutes Bronk at his most sustainedly aphoristic. The theological stance in *The Force of Desire* is essentially a continuation and development of the positive theistic claims made three years previously in *Finding Losses*. A considerable proportion of these poems, positioned at varying intervals throughout the collection, either directly address God or the Lord, or refer to his nature or to his relationship with the poet, and in that respect 'God' is as much a feature of the work as its titular 'desire'. God's existence is taken as granted here, and indeed hereafter throughout Bronk's career. Of course the terms of this existence continue to be debated, and they remain clearly not those of organised religion despite references to "grace", "praise", "worship" and invisibility. However, it can be said that over the course of *The Force of Desire* Bronk comes to a more or less consistent position regarding God, inasmuch as the various instances where 'God' or 'Lord' is addressed or described can all be held to refer to an operatively similar conceptual notion.

Some of these poems are discussions and descriptions of the poet's conception of God and his attributes, others are direct addresses and petitions to the "Lord". Several are included in both of these categories. Of those that represent direct address, there are some that would seem to approach classical definitions of prayer, and others that are variously removed from standard ideas of reverence, such as this singularly charming verse that picks up on themes and ideas already raised:

As I am, Lord, there are little things I know  
whereas You have places of ignorance  
I know nothing of and cannot attain to.

(LS 199)

This poem condenses questions of selfhood, being and identity into three simple syllables (“As I am”) in order to establish grounds for comparison between speaker and addressee. Certain recognisable tactics are employed; as we witnessed elsewhere (ie. ‘He Praises Nescience And Impotence’) absolute statements about self-perception are rejected in favour of a modest compromise: here “there are little things” that the poet knows. The second line is a perfect example of Bronk’s tendency towards semantic ambiguity at crucial moments, obfuscating attempts at precise translation of meaning while retaining a strong sense of message and purpose, thereby contributing to the mystic transcendental tone of these poems. In this case we cannot know whether the addressee as well as the speaker is ignorant of what is being spoken of – for what exactly does it mean to “have places of ignorance”? Plausibly the best reading sees this as a celebration of a “Lord” whose ignorance, paradoxically and in direct opposition to the doctrine of omniscience but in accordance with previous poems, stretches further than the poet can comprehend.

Yet despite his fondness for ambiguity, Bronk generally seems keen for his reader to know what the poems are talking about, if not exactly what they have to say about it. This poem marks a shift to the capitalized pronoun that is retained for the remainder of *The Force of Desire*, but rarely employed afterwards. The reasons for this may be predominantly practical rather than pious, although an aspect of reverence is unavoidably implied. The differentiated address helps to prevent confusion in, for instance, another poem that follows very soon afterwards:

Awed, He spies His Beauty in you and is  
astonished. Also, anguish riddles Him,  
you not being other, He alone.

(LS 199)

Bronk is not averse to the occasional pun, and here “riddles” stands for both ‘permeates’ and ‘confuses’. Here thematic and formal features are shared with other poems in the collection; the connection between “Him” and the unnamed “you”, recalling an earlier phrase “In you I worship the God...” (*LS* 198); uncertainties of idea and mood despite the linguistic imprecision of the final line (as discussed in relation to the poem above); and the personification of its subject with decidedly human attributes that stand in contrast to traditional expectations of divine nature (‘awe’ and ‘astonishment’ are difficult to reconcile with prescience and omniscience). “Beauty”, capitalized here but not elsewhere, becomes a feature of Bronk’s God explored further in the poems that follow. There is a sense, introduced here by the possessive pronoun, that “He” is the source of all beauty, although this is not explicitly stated. Significantly, this poem can be seen as another instance of the poet attempting or presuming to psychologise God, which he does by imagining how he (the poet) would feel were he in God’s position as observer. As such this is a brief and remarkable love poem, with its first half containing a central message along the lines of ‘your beauty is so wonderful it amazes God’; to this end, the whole poem uses the idea that has already been established of a fallible but necessarily existent God.

The poems surveyed here combine to demonstrate the importance of the idea of ‘God’ (and the subsidiary term ‘Lord’) in Bronk’s poetics and epistemology at this time, and his confidence in using the terms while still trying to locate meanings for them. Despite the instance above where God is psychologised as if he were located within the individual, it should be restated for emphasis that this God is a transcendent feature of the universe, rather than a sublime creation of the individual’s mind:

Lord, I cannot see You; I  
 have nothing else to examine but my mind.  
 It is extraneous. I look for You there.

(*LS* 200)

Although this may initially seem the nearest Bronk has come to a direct identification of God with the psyche, that is not the function or effect of the poem, and it would be erroneous to draw such a conclusion. In fact the very opposite is a more accurate assessment, in that the poem presents a speaker who looking internally cannot find there the object of his search. This is a religious questing poem in earnest, but brought up to post-modern date in the self-contained terms of subjectivity. In the curious phrase “It is extraneous” the subject “it” should grammatically refer to the “mind” in the previous line. Yet in ordinary speech ‘extraneous’ is rarely if ever used without a relative object; by definition extraneity requires a point of comparison. So these lines raise the unanswered question: in relation to what is the mind “extraneous”? The body, God, and the material world; these are all possibilities that present themselves, but in the poem’s own brief terms there is no obvious resolution. What is certain is that the poem’s narrative stance (which takes after the classical form of prayer, albeit somewhat briefly) indicates that this “Lord” has existence, even if that existence extends no further than its being a conceptual focal point for a certain kind of thought or attention.

Whether an utterance is defined as prayer may very well depend more on the mindset of its speaker than on the words spoken.<sup>40</sup> This notwithstanding, many of the poems considered so far, though by no means all of them, share features that might objectively designate them as prayer. Prayer takes many forms, and addresses to ‘God’ or ‘Lord’, various requests for intervention or information, expressions of praise and exultation, and vows of obedience have all found their place in *Finding Losses* and *The Force of Desire*. The kind of prayer described in the next poem would seem to exist in an altogether more formal religious setting than the poetry book:

If we pray for protection from hate, that strong force,  
the hatred is Yours we pray against, un-  
deserved as it be. Protect us against ourselves.

(LS 200)

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<sup>40</sup> cf. James 1909: 464; (see footnote 38, above)

This poem does not comment on the purpose and value of prayer *per se*. Rather, it labels its addressee as simultaneously antagonist and protector; a paradox that points to the unity of God as a means to account for the problem of evil. Various theological possibilities could support the poem's central claim "the hatred is Yours we pray against", from unorthodox suggestions of a malign or disinterested deity, through to more traditional notions of evil as punishment for or correction of sin. Certainly, the Old Testament God exhibits hatred (eg. Proverbs 6: 16-19), but in terms of Bronk's own developing theistic position as expressed through the poems, it may be that the divine attribute of "hatred" is drawn out of the 'ignorance' and 'impotence' already professed.

On the most straightforward level, the paradox in this poem immediately exposes an apparent flaw that has often been levelled at religion – if God is good, whence comes evil? – and invites us to witness the absurdity in praying to God for protection from God. However, its concluding petition "Protect us from ourselves" seems to position the effective value of faith above that of self-reliance and perhaps also above rationality. This short poem, like the one preceding it, is bound up in ambiguities and complications that provoke its conceptual appeal. It can be held to illustrate how the poet's frequent use of usually negative human qualities in his descriptions of the divine ought to be understood via the doctrine of analogy. This concept, often accredited to Thomas Aquinas, essentially states that words are used similarly but differently when applied to finite or infinite beings:

a creature is not like to God as it is like to another member of its species or genus, but resembles him as an effect may in some way resemble a transcendent cause although failing to reproduce perfectly the form of the cause . . . Thus words like 'good' and 'wise' when used of God do signify something that God really is, but they signify it imperfectly because creatures represent God imperfectly. So, 'God is good' does not mean the same as 'God is the cause of goodness' or 'God is not evil'. It means that what we call 'goodness' in creatures pre-exists in God in a higher way. (Aquinas 2006: 142-43)



Where Aquinas' doctrine of analogy is more frequently applied to offer an understanding of God's love, Bronk's poem invites us to utilise it to draw an alternative conception of God. Elsewhere he similarly speaks of "ignorance" or "pity" to comparable effect, as below.

Individually these short poems offer half-stated theological hypotheses and glimpses at intriguing possibilities and paradoxes; together they combine to reveal aspects of the poet's multifaceted and sometimes contradictory relationship with God. Hence this next poem demands an imaginative response if we are to account for its first premise:

God, I pity You; forgive me.  
Who am I to pity anyone,  
let alone You? Your man. Therefore.

(LS 201)

Should we wish to explore *why* God is pitiable, we would do well to look at the defining attributes that he has been granted in previous verses, where numerous psychological flaws of humanity are attached to his person. Additionally or alternatively we might imagine the failure or corruption of a divine plan, and find in the world's imperfections sufficient cause to pity its architect. Either way the reasons for the poet's stance here, should he even need any, are secondary to the subversive thrust of the statement that God should be an object of man's pity. Again we should note the possibility of meaningfully applying some version of the doctrine of analogy here, that the way in which the word and therefore the act of "pity" is applied to God is not the same as it would be applied to man. Be that as it may, its use in the second line ("pity anyone") informs us that a generalized understanding of the term can be applied.

In the first line therefore we have a God who is on one hand rightly or wrongly the object of pity, a very unorthodox notion of divinity but quite in keeping with the characterization that Bronk is bringing into focus. On the other hand God seems equipped with the authority for forgiveness. This latter attribute may be drawn out of Christian doctrine, though the objective value of God's forgiveness while potentially inferred is no more stated than that of the poet's

pity. The subsequent request for forgiveness (if we are to take it even half-seriously, as I believe we should) certainly gives the implication that “pity” here is not a positive force or emotion. In ordinary usage the verb ‘pity’ requires or implies that the active subject holds a position of superiority over its object, and it is presumably for this assumption that the poet asks forgiveness.

This is therefore another disruption of the traditional notion of the relationship and power dynamic between God and man, but if Bronk were concerned only with disrupting ideas rather than expressing truths we should be less likely to meet with the retraction (or at least recognition of impropriety) that follows. The strength of the statement is not reduced by the attitude described in the poem being theoretical and subjective, for by such an account ‘worship’ or ‘praise’ would be similarly reduced; if the actual act of stating ‘I worship...’ is to worship (as we suppose in practice), then to say ‘I pity...’ is a meaningful act in itself. The fact that ‘pity’ is never again evoked by Bronk in relation to God (while ‘worship’ and ‘praise’ certainly are), and that the poem turns an almost complete volte-face within its three lines (without ever quite denying its initial stance), gives the impression of the poet testing a position, actively exploring a statement without a preconception of where it will arrive, as is the case in some of Bronk’s most successful poems. By closing on “Therefore” the poem confounds ordinary expectations of cause and effect at the syntactic level, which carry through to the conceptual. It may be an afterthought of the kind more frequent in speech than in writing, connecting any given two of the clauses preceding it; or it is a shrug of acceptance; or one may read it as a marker of circularity which returns the poem to its first line and so offers a self-deprecating reason for the “pity”.

More importantly in the current discussion, in the poem’s own brief context the answer “Your man” is a pledge of allegiance, and secondarily perhaps also in some sense an assertion of masculinity. This avowal may be seen to stand quietly as another important signpost in the poetry as a whole, after which the reader can observe the poet’s acceptance of a particular conception of God, albeit one that we have seen created and developed on his own terms. If we refer to the God of *The Force of Desire* as ‘conceptual’ we should recall that this notion exists within the context of a poetry where ‘the world’ and ‘reality’ are similarly acknowledged to be fictional constructs: “Oh God, I can as little be said to be / as

you can. Untruths..." (LS 195). His actual existence seems no less strongly validated by the poems' terms as are those of the material world or the poet's individual identity. Though beset with ambiguities, there are perhaps surprisingly few outright inconsistencies within these poems, individually or as a selection. This is contrary to what we observed in *Finding Losses*, and seems therefore to suggest a crystallisation, at least a temporary one, of the poet's definition of this nebulous concept.

In *Finding Losses* we saw Bronk interrogate the God of Judeo-Christian tradition, possibly even hoping to find a place for him in his philosophy ("Oh God, who in the night-quiet called / Samuel to you, call us then too..."). Though he found him wanting ("If there were a maker I'd praise the maker but / I think there isn't one..." LS 187) he was unable or unwilling to completely dismiss this idea of God from his philosophy, and that doctrinal figure remained as a template for a deity that the poet might be said to have shaped in his own likeness; claims of God's 'ignorance', "powerlessness", and "longing" all reflect Bronk's picture of humanity and of himself as an individual. Yet mitigating any psychological narcissism we might suppose this to reflect, other poems affirm the intuited presence of the absolute other. The necessity for the poet to subjugate himself in praise and worship is carried through into *The Force of Desire*, where God operates as much more than merely a conceptual construct that exists to allow the expression of a certain attitude to the ineffable wonderment of creation. By addressing his poetry to a figure he calls "Lord" the poet strongly suggests a relationship equivalent to the Christian master-servant metaphor. However, many of the attributes that God is granted are expressed as what would be flawed human characteristics. Despite or because of these, the poet expresses a non-specific but apparently genuine commitment to that figure: "Your man. Therefore."

As we saw in the two examples that opened this chapter, Bronk certainly never settles on a conception of God that closely matches any doctrinal definition. However, he continues an enquiry into the possibility of faith for the duration of his writing life. Frequently, God becomes for Bronk the object of a generalised universal love to which he seems to suggest he and others should aspire. Yet as if to warn himself or his reader away from any conventional religious interpretation

of the term and its related ideas, he just as frequently offers poems that disassemble traditional theistic notions or provide assertions that run contrary to received spiritual beliefs. The discussion in this chapter so far has revealed how *Life Supports* includes Bronk's investigation into what God is and is not, with the collections *Finding Losses* and *The Force of Desire* providing a sustained but oblique interrogation of the figure he addressed in the single poem 'Who Feels It', which stands at a crucial juncture in this explorative process. Thereafter, for the later period covered by *Bursts of Light* he seems to have a more fixed idea of what this God isn't, and to some extent is. Yet even if the poet's idea of God is no longer changing, he is even less able to positively locate that idea, hence the continuing obliqueness in the directions of approach throughout *Bursts of Light*, the ongoing *via negativa* employed in his descriptions, and the apparent contradictions that recur. Over the course of *Bursts of Light* Bronk develops fine and varied means of expressing a particular form of theistic agnosticism. That is to say, there is a thing called God (or 'god') but the poet does not know what it is, and he goes about discovering this by circling a central ineffable idea of God with poetry reflecting multiple facets of his intellectual and emotional response to God, but which never exactly manages a satisfactory positive definition. We see furthermore that the question of God's existence ceases to matter so much as the possibility of faith in what cannot be known for certain.

From the opening pages of *Bursts of Light* the Judeo-Christian God slips further away from the poetry's sphere of activity. Perhaps the last appearance of 'the Lord' in the poems is in the understated, dismissive four-line 'The Word', from *Manifest and Furthermore*. The use of 'certification' is presumably an intentional pun, the narrator seeking neither proof nor a diagnosis of madness:

The Lord speaks to some and I don't ask  
for certification nor do I envy them.  
I question their hearing and go on, unspoken-to  
doing whatever the ignorant find to do.

(Bronk 1983b: 36)<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The text in the *Collected Later Poems* (BOL 36) omits the word 'nor' on the second line.

Later, in *The Cage of Age*, the 'lord' has been reduced to lower-case lettering and his vague, impersonal status reflected in the poet's choice of indefinite articles:

THAT AM

So weird a world: evil prevalent,  
shouldn't we honor some lord of a universe  
his acceptance of fault and assumption of fault — if fault  
then let it be his and not an adversary's  
we invented for him? Love such a lord. That he is.

(*BOL* 200)

Ambiguity sounds in the last line's final utterance; does the prescribed "love" bring "such a lord" into being? Or is "That" a synonym for 'such' or 'thus', an affirmation that this is the poet's conception of an existent "lord of [this] universe"? Either way, this rendering of the divine being, devoid of satanic antagonist, falls short in promise of immanence while surpassing in unknowability the God of traditional doctrine.

In *Careless Love and Its Apostrophes* the Judeo-Christian God had been implicitly set on the same footing as the pagan deities. In 'At Delphi, Perhaps? Dodona?' ("It's more, of course, that just anybody's guess / what the God could have meant ...") (*BOL* 6) he is no more nor less existent and relevant to the world than other historic deities. Yet only two poems later, in a precise and typical example of the kind of contradictions that characterise Bronk's treatment of these ideas, 'Weighing the Atom' finds Christian doctrine held up as truth, albeit as a partial aspect of something more akin to pantheism than transcendent theism:

(...)

Even the One God exemplified His real  
trinity. And more? The Everything  
of One considers itself. I look too.

(*BOL* 7)

As Leary states: “The terms [of ‘Weighing the Atom’] are descriptive but distant, as if God is only barely real, and hardly personal.” (Clippinger 2013: 148). Indeed, hereafter in Bronk’s collected poems “distant ... barely real, and hardly personal” are defining aspects of the God that he intimates, approaches and presents.

Elsewhere in *Careless Love and Its Apostrophes* Bronk strikes up on the theme of God again, relating it to the dismissal of certainty and metanarratives that we have previously discussed, but crucially to the strength and honesty of his poetics, relating rationalised conceits to a response that is personal and emotive, if counterintuitive:

*from* REDUCTION

(...)

We pretend moralities, not to be good but safe there.

We pretend them God-given, we pretend a revealed God.

And feel comforted.

My faith is a God unseen. I face terror.

(*BOL* 15)

The “terror” comes not from knowing an awesome God, but from the absence of such knowledge or belief; note that the poet’s faith is not *in* a God unseen, but that the faith is as distant as an invisible and possibly pretended God. He might know that the faith is there somewhere, but in everyday activity and usually poetic meditation also he is far removed from it. One issue that Bronk contends with here and later is not our existence in a world where a particular understanding of God is no longer relevant, but how to personally and as a society cope with a world where religious faith has ceased to be a prime motivator. This last, brief poem from *Careless Love and Its Apostrophes* might be called Nietzschean or Marxian in the atheistic possibilities it opens:

## THE WONDER

Let it go unprotested we are useless, mortal and alone. Man, you are  
marvellous and freed.

(*BOL* 18)

Inevitably, according to the agnostic pattern of deistic claim and atheistic counter-claim, the poet cannot hold onto these certainties for long. Very early in *Manifest and Furthermore* the twelve-line 'Out There' is a calm meditation on a kind of personal peace that has come from appreciating the uselessness of "Knowledge and power". In this mood, it closes with a quatrain that again confesses a relationship to a transcendent other:

There is a state outside of me, too, without  
these things. Reality? The God? I apply  
to it. It has my reverence and awe, my love.  
I am content there where I wanted once.

(*BOL* 21)

This might be an instance where Hatlen's claim (*TBOTL* 120) about Bronk's interchangeable use of equivocal terms holds true, for here "it" and "God" are potentially equivalent, except the speaker is not clear whether "God" is the correct term here. The word is used to designate a thing not a name, again something "distant ... barely real, and hardly personal". Whatever the "state" should be called, the two possibilities here ("Reality? The God?")<sup>42</sup> are listed as brief rhetorical questions without waiting for an answer; this poem is not one in which Bronk attempts definition of either term, though he does so elsewhere. The uncertain status of the speaker's relationship with this imprecise external transcendent is reflected in the ambiguity of the verb "apply"; either the poet "[petitions] it" or "[appertains to] it", or likely both. So the source of the professed contentedness is

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<sup>42</sup> This recalls the list of candidates for the "transcendental signifier" (Eagleton 1996: 113), cf. chapter three.

also told ambiguously; either he is contented by merely the act of application, in which case its origin is internal, or he receives it from being part contained within the “state outside”. There is no reflection on or rationalisation of how he is made “content”. The poem stops at a statement of how things are, or seem to be at this moment in the poet’s changing perspective. Incidentally, and relevant to the point about ambiguity of meaning at a lexical level, I see no reason to prefer ‘content’ as a noun in this instance, although the possibility makes legitimate sense, favouring the notion of his being contained.

It has been suggested previously in this thesis (see chapter three) that preoccupation with finding rational logical sense in individual poems, as well as with finding consistency between different ones, can hamper an appreciation of Bronk’s verse and the nature of its message. This is not to say we should do neither, but that last stanza of ‘Out There’ demonstrates a case where multiplicity of potential meaning strengthens the effectiveness of his discourse on an ineffable sublime. Towards the very end of the same collection,<sup>43</sup> this next piece ‘Stations’ is a further example of how a degree of equivocality is brought about, partly by Bronk’s somewhat free use of pronouns. Quite probably the poet had a precise idea of what each “it” and “you” should mean here, a notion of who the unspecified group of “others” should be, and how far they can be said not to “know and feel”, but these things are not plain from the text. Yet I call this ‘equivocality’ instead of ‘equivocation’, because I do not think any masking of the meaning was intentional. Rather, the potential for understanding the topic is opened up by an increase in verbal possibilities, and a closed reading of Bronk, such as some critics would offer, does the poetry a disservice. In the context of this study, ‘Stations’ is an important poem because it presents mature reflections on a specifically Christian subject:

## STATIONS

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<sup>43</sup> *Manifest and Furthermore* is divided into two parts of approximately equal length. In terms of the poems’ form, themes and content it is difficult to determine a specific reason for this division; further investigation of original manuscripts might confirm whether this is a purely chronological split. ‘Out Here’ was in the *Manifest* section, while ‘Stations’ is in *Furthermore*.



The metaphor of the cross however it once  
was positioned or temporized gives us a place  
and time as though it has a specific one.

Oh, God, I sense it is now and whenever.

Slight

and momentary, I bear the pain with you.

Redemption is not possible because  
we are all part of it and no-one there  
to be redeemed.

You mean the empty ones too  
who don't know or feel?

Yes, I mean them.

Sufferer, your goodness, oh God, is in  
your torment and compulsion.

I will have no other God.

(*BOL 46*)

The Stations of the Cross is a long-standing tradition used in Catholic and other churches, where representations of events on Christ's journey from trial to crucifixion and burial are used as points of spiritual focus for prayer and meditation. Bronk's poem has no direct reference to the detail of the Stations themselves, with the first triplet stanza going some way to dismissing the relevance and necessity of the specifics, but refers to the Passion of which the cross and its Stations are symbols. Foster discusses this poem against a Calvinistic perspective:

Bronk will not accept the "redemption" that the Stations [...] promise. At issue is "substitutionary atonement" — that is, whether Christ's death atoned for the sins of a "limited" few or for everyone. ... "Stations" places [Bronk] not as an unbeliever but among unbelievers who are untouched by the atonement... The poem illustrates a tension between established

doctrine and questioning, specifically between what one may wish and what one is compelled to accept. He concludes “I will have no other God” than He who compels.

...

Thus I would read Bronk in “Stations” as working with doctrines, understood in this context as metaphors, drawn from the Anglo-Catholic tradition of his childhood but arguing from a position in which what matters is not what one does but what is done to one. Correspondingly, poetry to Bronk is not the result of one’s will but rather the result of what has been willed for one. (Foster & Kimmelman 2013: 69-70)

In the next chapter of this thesis I will talk further on Bronk’s writing “from a position in which what matters is not what one does but what is done to one.” In fact, his stance seems very frequently to come from that position, occasionally explicitly,<sup>44</sup> and Foster’s discussion of this as being grounded in Bronk’s early religious training is convincing. In relation to ‘Stations’ Foster’s argument seems to be that in this poem and others Bronk positions himself among the unsaved, which may well be true. However, this by implicit extension is set against an acceptance within this Calvinistic framework that there exists a group of the preordained elect saved by virtue of Christ’s sacrifice – (for otherwise why call it ‘Calvinistic’, which is a very particular subset of ‘deterministic’?) – and I cannot agree that Bronk is working within such a construct. Foster does a fair job of contextualising ‘Stations’ within a history of New England Calvinist philosophy, but his essay fails to contextualise the poem within the body of Bronk’s work.

A glance at the poems immediately around ‘Stations’ in the collection is useful to appreciate the thematic and formal paradigms within which Bronk was working at the time. Prior to ‘Stations’ comes ‘Finding the Way’ (*BOL* 46) a loosely iambic triplet, with an apparently anti-Christian message; its first line (“Who needs a way? The point is there isn’t one”) contrasts abruptly with John 14: 6 (“I am the way”). It is worth noting that the Latin phrase for the Stations of the Cross

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<sup>44</sup> eg. “Accomplishment accomplished nothing” (*LS* 154); “It will do what it wants — maybe some / of it to you — and you can do what you / may want and it won’t matter to it” (*BOL* 203).

is *Via Crucis*, translated as ‘the Way of the Cross’. Then straight after ‘Stations’ is ‘The End of the World’ (*BOL* 47), briefer still, with an outlook universally bleak and unrepentant, but fundamentally agnostic: “...Who cares if final [losses]? / It wasn’t our idea: we came to it.” The agnosticism is revealed in the word “if”, an unwillingness to state that the “terrible / losses” are in fact the “final ones”. As for the referent for “It” in the poem ‘The End of the World’, neither the world, nor its end, nor received doctrine were ‘our idea’, but there is no reason at all to suppose the plural possessive pronoun here includes only the unsaved unbelieving parts of humanity.

Acknowledging that a statement made in any one of Bronk’s poems can with little hesitation be refuted in another, notwithstanding the context provided by the poems around it, we can consider in more detail what ‘Stations’ says about God and how the forms and techniques used affect its content. At eleven lines (or fifteen, depending on how we count them)<sup>45</sup> it occurs near the very beginning of a period when his poems are becoming progressively shorter, coming some years and a few volumes after Bronk had renounced his devotion to particular poem lengths for specific collections.<sup>46</sup> No other poem in *Manifest and Furthermore* uses line breaks with the frequency that they are employed here; one effect of the broken lines is to allow pauses for reflection, slowing the pace while retaining the rhythm, another is to transmit a sense of dialogue, as discussed below. The quasi-iambic five-stress line common to most of Bronk’s verse is retained throughout the poem, elongated but still resonant across the final broken line and its climactic declaration.

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<sup>45</sup> How we should count or divide the lines is probably of little consequence to appreciating the poem, although it can certainly help guide a spoken rendition. Justification for considering ‘Stations’ to be an eleven-line poem can be found by comparing eg. ‘For Peter Kaldheim’ (*LS* 124), another piece that uses the broken blank verse line in a similar way. ‘For Peter Kaldheim’ appears in *To Praise the Music*, a collection of “fourteen-liners” (Weinfield 1988: 31), and for this reason it would seem wrong to think of it as a nineteen-line poem. Similarly, ‘Weathers We Live In’ (*LS* 214/5) is from a collection of twenty-line poems, but its one overhanging syllable on the broken sixteenth line could take its count up to 21. In each of these cases the integrity of the five-beat blank verse line is maintained by allowing the broken line to interrupt itself as a new thought without a new breath.

<sup>46</sup> ie. Producing poems of respectively fourteen, eight, four, three, and twenty lines in five of the six collections from 1972 to 1981; cf. eg. Weinfield 1988 28-32.

As well as the specific Stations depicted and used in the religious ritual, the title applies more broadly to the poem as reference to stages on a journey, in this case a metaphorical movement towards an understanding of God. In the poem the journey is clearly personal to the poet, as the repeated “I” attests. Significantly, the word “metaphor” in the first line makes it clear that we are to understand the cross as figurative for the burdens of suffering that all individuals carry through life, as distinct from the ‘symbol’ of the cross asking us to consider the particular suffering of Jesus, which is how the Christian visiting the Stations would more typically be expected to view it. Juxtaposed in the first triplet with this ancient symbolism is a subtle indication of a very contemporary understanding of space-time as a single continuum, with “place / and time” referred to as a singular possibility. An example of the potentially overlooked imprecision of pronouns arises in the very first line; does the “it” that was “positioned or temporized” refer to the “metaphor” or the “cross” itself? Of course, with the object presented in its function as metaphor the distinction is blurred, perhaps to the point of indifference. Yet an understanding of this carries through, overtly or otherwise, to affect interpretation of the fourth and possibly seventh lines, assuming “it” has the same referent in each. For if “it” is only metaphor (ie. human suffering) the fourth line holds an entirely humanistic view of transcendence through suffering, whereas if “it” is the actual Cross of Calgary and the associated Passion then the second couplet stanza is an affirmation of transcendent divine presence through incarnation and resurrection.

Personally I would tend toward the former interpretation, but the point is raised here as an example of how, intentionally or otherwise, Bronk allows diverse possibilities to present themselves through apparently straightforward texts. So it is often difficult to say confidently that he means one thing at the exclusion of another. Yet very often these details are not essential to appreciating the gist of a poem, as whether in the fourth and fifth lines of ‘Stations’ it is the speaker “I” or his experience of the “pain” that is “Slight / and momentary”. Here I would favour the first option, setting as it does the person against the vastness of time, but the second compares his own discomforts with Christ’s agonies and is just as valid. Previously we have commented on the employment of God’s name as a rhetorical device in the poetry, functioning to foreground the theological

possibility of somehow speaking to God at those moments.<sup>47</sup> Here in line four of 'Stations' an apparently colloquial exclamation is revealed by the context to be actually an explicit address to the deity; in the penultimate line it is easier but not exclusively necessary to consider "oh God" as merely colloquial exclamatory emphasis, and not the identification of God as the "Sufferer" to whom the line is addressed. Lack of clarity demands a reader consider who is in dialogue with whom or what within the poem; the poet with himself? the poet with the poem? the poem with the poem? the poet with God? In different ways, it can be any or all of these.

'Stations' affirms Bronk's acceptance of a transcendent model of understanding that has parallels with and can be approached through specifically Christian metaphor and symbolism. It does not suggest that this model is anything but a workable fictional construct, and does not afford it a special status as being more true than any other idea. It does however suggest the intuited acceptance of an otherness outside of him, and the key word here is "sense" in the fourth line. This is no doubt the same "state outside of me" encountered in 'Out There', which poem after poem draws near to and retreats from, and which is found through feeling and hope (terms suspiciously close to 'faith' but without that confidence) rather than empiricism and rationality. Belying the Calvinist terms that Foster's reading of the verse applied, everyone is simultaneously contained within the "pain" ("we are all part of it") and "Redemption" is not even a category in this scheme of understanding, but in a crucial expression of the love and humanity at the heart of Bronk's poetry, "goodness" prevails. Yet Foster's suggestion that "poetry to Bronk is not the result of one's will but rather the result of what has been willed for one" holds true, even if 'Stations' says little or nothing concerning this directly; variations on this idea that poetry is not created but revealed or discovered may be based on Bronk's own claims (eg. Weinfield 1988: 39-42) and in certain later poems themselves (eg. "Art isn't made", *BOL* 300; also 'Holy Orders', see below). The notion that the composition of the poetry is a religious process, while implied in Foster's essay, has its clearest explicit foundation in Bronk's own work. Yet given the various definitions and discussions of God that

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<sup>47</sup> See, for example the discussion of 'The Duplicities of Sense' (above) but there are dozens of other examples throughout Bronk's career.

the poetry has offered, it is not at all obvious that the capitalised “God” of ‘Stations’ shares an identity with the lower case ‘god’ at the frontispiece to *Living Instead*: “*I am servant to the god; he does his own work.*” (BOL 67)

It seems safe to assume that some of this “work” is the poetry, although it includes more than that (“Poetry wasn’t all”; BOL 62), and that for Bronk the relationship with this god is made apparent through the creation of the poems; whether this god has any status beyond the fictional and metaphorical is less clear. Bronk’s understanding that actually writing the poems is itself an act of religious devotion first becomes explicit in *Manifest and Furthermore*:

### HOLY ORDERS

What counts is that we write it down or paint,  
dance, compose, the way we are given to.  
So watch and hear and the hell with what we thought  
it should do: it doesn’t care about us.

(BOL 43)

In the Christian churches Holy Orders are sacramental vocations and the rites associated with these. To present the artist and their practice in these terms, as this poem does, is to construct a metaphor, but it is a metaphor which can be honestly lived and experienced. Sherry Kearns says of this poem: “That art doesn’t care puts it in the same category as life and life’s forces, the world, the real” (Foster & Kimmelman 2013: 118); the next chapter of this current thesis will explore in more detail the relationships between “life and life’s forces”. Here in ‘Holy Orders’ Bronk presents an understanding of art and his experience of producing and consuming art in terms what it is like; ie. it has characteristics of religious worship and devotion. Like God, art is something of which it is difficult to speak directly, so we use metaphor to approach it (“Metaphor is a way / to handle, signify, designate; / we do not handle the great things, though we try”, LS 152). Kearns is correct to suggest that for Bronk art and God are things of the same order, as ‘Holy Orders’ indicates. To this we can add that both are similarly encountered throughout the day-to-day, where glimpses of the transcendent

and/or the sublime illuminate the mundane, but it is important to realise that the 'god' that manifests in the poems is not the totality of the 'God' that has elsewhere in the poetry been discussed, refuted, challenged and praised.

Ultimately, as Bronk moves through his later collections, he tests and restates the ideas of God that have come to him over a lifetime. Perhaps at times there is a measure of irony in his attitude, as in this prayer to an absent deity:

FOR DESPERATE PEOPLE

Oh God, who said not now when Martha and Mary  
asked, have strength for others when you haven't come.

(BOL 81)

Yet to whatever extent we allow a self-conscious postmodern position to colour our reading, a poem such as 'For Desperate People' reveals Bronk's ongoing engagement with concepts rooted in the stories and ideas drawn from Christian texts. Many further examples can be found over the remaining volumes that comprise the *Collected Later Poems*, variously telling continuous multiplicities of stance and expression, affirming and negating apparently as the poet's mood changes. Supported by poems like 'The God That Will Not Be' ("The god that will not be is what there is. / I paint the images but none is it, / ..."; BOL 222) we can have some confidence in suggesting that Bronk tends to disbelieve more than he believes in: "The gods of this world are not God" (BOL 264); "The forms of gods are not God" (BOL 265); "In my belief, I need to keep my doubts" (BOL 271).

This chapter has surveyed a selection of poems from across Bronk's career, including some of the most significant in terms of tracing the development of his attitude towards the notion of the divine. There are dozens more in which the figure or idea of God is referenced, addressed, dismissed or interrogated; some of these are discussed in the concluding chapter of this thesis. The current chapter began with a discussion of two very short poems containing apparently incompatible ideas of God. The development of how Bronk has used and understood that word and its associated ideas reveals that the exhortation "Love God" in 'Acquiescence' is best considered genuine and heartfelt. Meanwhile, in the

briefest of terms '*GOD BLESS CAPTAIN VERE*' actively denies one notion of God while simultaneously affirming the presence of something else referred to by that same name: this is what Bronk is doing over his own career; he is a religious poet of caveats and rejoinders, expressing an agnosticism that manifests itself through alternating and simultaneous belief and disbelief, pleading "the permanence / of ignorance" (*LS* 88). Meanwhile, his agnosticism extends from simple uncertainty about God's actuality and nature, expressing doubts about the most fundamental aspects of subjective experience. Bronk's understanding of the concept of the self and its relationship with God is discussed in the next chapter.



## Chapter 7: Our Lives, Our Selves

The title poem of the early work *My Father Photographed With Friends* has been recognised as the single most realised piece in that collection, worthy of comparison with Bronk's mature style (Clippinger 2006: 37-39). It is a thirteen-line meditation on the intersection of memory and photography, among other concerns, and contains these lines at its centre:

And I, as in some later picture of myself,  
look for a person identified beyond doubt, and knowing that he  
is none of the ones that he is not, yet still unsure,  
under the features composed and trusting, who is there.

(LS 15)

Here the author is searching for the identity of his late father by studying his image in a photograph, but the wider concern is with the possibility that anyone's identity could be transmitted through merely a picture.

*My Father Photographed With Friends* was completed before the intense scepticism that came to dominate Bronk's work took its shape and expression through his poetry. However, we can view the formative origins of that outlook in that title poem and particularly in the lines quoted above, in the inability to trust the equivalence of the apparent and the real. A few years later, Bronk's recognisable poetic voice finds clear and sustained sounding in *The World, The Worldless*. The concerns of *The World, The Worldless* are essentially iconoclastic and radically post-modern in their attacks on established beliefs and ideas concerning the nature of knowledge and experience, and one of the most powerful lyrics in that collection is 'The Belief in the Self Abandoned' (LS 37). Fundamental to the whole foundation of knowledge and experience, is the presence of an agent which is able to know, which put very simply is more or less equivalent to the Cartesian 'Cogito'. In one reading of 'The Belief in the Self Abandoned' Bronk attempts to challenge that notion, but finds himself caught in a paradox.

Such a reading tells us we are mistaken if we suggest that in asserting "I" we do not refer to ourselves. Some kind of belief in the self is unavoidable, at some

level it is implicit and necessary simply to be able to utter “I”. Thus the particular form of “Belief in the Self” that is here abandoned would seem to be that of a narrative continuing self from which consciousness emanates. We find this expressed in the first three lines:

Belief goes in time, belief in the self  
included. What was it I was, or thought I would be?  
Who could remember? ...

This continuing development of a single identifiable self is described and dismissed over the remainder of the first stanza:

... Something of fruit, or trees,  
of things that show their form from the start and grow  
larger, fuller, riper, in the same form.  
More of that form. That was wrong. For me  
it was wrong. No matter. There are changes. Forms are destroyed.

Yet the minimal immediate “I” is maintained, providing the narrator’s identity at the moment of writing. Thus the second stanza includes three statements, with only the first being a direct metaphor, that directly indicate the presence of something existent: “I am the stripped house, paint-peeled, / ... / ... I am open ... / ... I am here ...”.

It is from this difficult starting point that this exploration of Bronk’s understanding and presentation of the self begins. I suggest that the ‘belief’ that is professed as abandoned is at one level ‘faith’ or ‘trust’ – a rejection of self-reliance, of selfhood as a primary source of strength or hope. On another level, Bronk is in agreement with contemporary psychological theory when he suggests that “what [ ] I was, or thought I would be” is not the self as it is at the moment of utterance or beyond, and so abandons the fictional narrative by which the self has been constructed.

Bronk’s overarching conceptual approach involves a rejection of the notion that explanatory narratives can provide metaphysical meaning at a cultural and

societal level (cf. chapter three). In poems such as ‘The Belief in the Self Abandoned’ and others discussed below, this suggestion is extended to include the personal, forming a disavowal of ‘narrative self’ and thereby serving to strengthen the philosophical and epistemological unity of Bronk’s work. The position these poems develop further sets apart his point of view from that of certain celebrated American poets, whose work is fundamentally positive and affirming.<sup>48</sup> Bronk’s position here, in relation to internal personal narratives, undeniably and inseparably has its origins in the same responses to experience and the world as his claims concerning external reality.

Interrogating and eventually establishing the existence of desire, despite the elusiveness of its object, Bronk’s poetry frequently falls to investigating the subject that performs the desiring. For Bronk, a pre-existent transcendent otherness seems to exist, albeit “beyond our knowing or speaking” (*LS* 136). The key word here in terms of this current chapter is “our”, a reflection of the straightforward assertion that there must be a first person for otherness to be other than. In one important sense this idea refers us to the notion that the self exists always and only in relation to other people, as discussed below. More essentially it asks us to consider ground closer to the Cartesian *cogito*, and it is at this essential level that Bronk’s concerns often lie.

The terms of Bronk’s ‘belief’ in God having been thrashed out over a lifetime (see previous chapter), it is safe to say there is something he can describe as God even if only as a workable concept to deny or debate. These ideas of God occupy the category of transcendent otherness, alongside other variously related and distinct terms: the ‘real world’ (eg. Kearns in Clippinger 2001), ‘worldlessness’ (Kimmelman 1998: 152-181) and, significantly here, ‘life’. Hatlen (Clippinger 2001: 120-1) is mistaken when he implies that these terms are effectively interchangeable; one important difference between God and life is that in our conception of the former, which is necessarily our own construction, we might just find some grounds for hope:

#### FOR DESPERATE PEOPLE

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<sup>48</sup> Walt Whitman is the archetypal example.

Oh God, who said not now when Martha and Mary  
asked, have strength for others when you haven't come.

(BOL 81)

In 'life' as an active independent agent there can be no such optimism or delusion: "life doesn't care / what we do" (BOL 137), "I think of life's indifference" (BOL 282). This idea finds voice in the 1981 collection of 20-line poems *Life Supports* (the 'New' of *Life Supports: New and Collected Poems*), significantly arriving after Bronk's peak of interest in God in the mid-1970s. Prior to this the concept 'life' had not been explicitly personified, and Bronk had been generally content to employ it in the abstract sense familiar in ordinary usage. One early indication of the idea of life as separate and remote from us even while we are living it can be found in these lines from 'The Freedom We Feel' in *That Tantalus*:

... He thought of life  
as something happening to him, but he sees it go on  
as it must have always gone on — near but away.  
If life may be said to happen, it is not to us.  
...

(LS 96)

However, it is not until three successive poems in *Life Supports*, 'Evaluation' 'Questions and Answers', and 'The Wants of Life', that we perceive the establishment of a notion that will become more important over the latter part of Bronk's career. Part of the importance of Bronk's movement from the tercet form in *The Force of Desire* to the 20-liners of *Life Supports*, with an effect of strengthening the overall body of his work, lies in the opportunity that these blank-verse explorations allow for formative ideas to be explored and developed. Here there is room for circumstantial qualification, as with the "if", "or" and "sometimes" from 'Evaluation':

... Life lives  
our life; if it seems whimsical

it's because we assume a purpose, as much as to say  
it has one, or one we know about.  
Sometimes, it lets us go our way, bored  
with us, contemptuous. ...

(LS 215)

or insistent rhetorical building, as here in 'The Wants of Life', where the repeated  
"again" stands for generations of gingko trees or humans:

... Millions of years.  
Hundreds of millions. Its static phrase again,  
again, again. What's wanted ever of us?  
We don't know. Life is aside from us,

though we are lived...

(LS 216)

If God and life are for Bronk different facets of an active transcendent  
other, then part of their difference lies in the reciprocity of the otherness-  
relationship. It is hard to be indifferent to Bronk's God; although we must accept  
we cannot understand him we may as Bronk does rail against him, choose to deny  
him, love, worship or fear him, and Bronk recognises that there are ways of  
building an operable fiction around him:

#### ON SEEING TWO FRIENDS TOGETHER

No doubt there is a truth which might be called  
(what it isn't) the Bliss of God. No doubt  
there are those who have it. I envy them.  
God help us! Boil, balls! Boil!

(LS 179)

By contrast, life is observable in its physical activity and presence, but offers no such hope or consolation:

#### ANYWAY

We think we should learn from life's teaching us  
not to repeat our mistakes. But the doer's not us.  
The does is life and learning's not its concern.

(*BOL* 191)

So while we can love God and hope or trust that his unknowable nature cares for us, life (in its sense of an independent active agent, rather than its manifestation in human beings) is even more remote and treats us with an indifference that according to Bronk's vision we return with contempt:

#### ITS AND OUR BRAVADO

Life celebrates life with deaths  
of millions — us or indifferently some  
other creatures. It's not as though it found  
someone or something to sacrifice to  
or even it's any sacrifice. No,  
it's just a kind of fireworks spectacular  
to show how great it is, what it can do.  
I suppose we should be impressed, we ought to care.

(*BOL* 196)

This image of life as a brief, expensive show of its own vanity is much more consistent with the attitude intimated here in *Metaphor of Trees and Last Poems*:

#### BASIC ANOMALY

They must have said, 'Send the mortals in

to live life; we haven't got anyone else.'

It doesn't work if anybody thought it would.

Life should be eternal and less of a crowd.

(*MOT* 67)

than the version (mis)printed in the collected later poems:

They must have said, 'Send the mortals in

to love life; we haven't got anyone else.'

It doesn't work if anybody thought it would.

Life should be eternal and less of a crowd.

(*BOL* 276)

The difference of one letter is small but crucial, because to Bronk while there might be an intuited suggestion that something internal or outside is asking us to 'love' God, the only responsibility we have to the agent Life is to continue living it. Such is part of the message in the following poem, one of the infrequent occasions where Bronk adopts a much shorter poetic line:

#### SELF LEAVES A NOTE

Let life have us

selflessly.

The self we make

was make-up

anyway.

There wasn't one.

We loved God.

The effect of the short line, used so sparingly across Bronk's many volumes, is generally as here to slow the delivery and/or reception of the content, breaking the sentence into constituent thoughts and separate breaths. So in the first lines of 'Self Leaves a Note' we receive the initial instruction followed at a slight remove by the adverbial qualifier, which focuses separate attention on the two parts of the sentence. The first part "Let life have us" is an inversion of the ordinary understanding of ownership as it is linguistically expressed, for we are more used to the idea of our having life. This renewal of the expression is entirely consistent with Bronk's understanding of life as a transcendent agency, as we have seen in its development and expression up to this point. We realise that the adverb "selflessly" applies to us, as recipients of the imperative, for in Bronk's view the object "life" does not demonstrate the benevolence that the common usage of 'selfless' suggests.

Yet any understanding of 'selfless' as meaning 'altruistic' here is ironic and short-lived, as the second brief stanza-unit tells us. A brief line-by-line examination reveals separate ideas at work, consistent with notions discussed in more detail below, and with one of Bronk's several distinct signature rhetorical stances. Self is not a given pre-existent entity, but something we are responsible for creating: "The self we make"; it can be understood as having the effect of a mask or costume, not as concealment but rather as providing definition: "was make-up"; and there is nothing that can be done to change this state of affairs, as the poet simply reports without passing judgement: "anyway". It is noteworthy that this whole phrase would sit in perfect iambic pentameter on a single line, perhaps the unconscious expression of a lifetime's habit of writing in blank verse.

Within the frame of the immediate discussion, the distinction between "life" and "God" in 'Self Leaves a Note' is fairly clear. The existence of life is unquestionable, its action is palpable in our being lived. The presence of God as an entity beyond being the object of our love is not attested, which is entirely consistent with the portrayal of the theme as set out and explored in the previous chapter. However, firm statements regarding the presence or existence of the self are harder to make stand up. There is an 'I' speaking, at least by extension through



the 'we', but the individuality of that first person is denied by the sixth line: "There wasn't one." The 'I' is thereby leaving a suicide note on behalf of self; taken in isolation it would appear that this poem suggests individuals are subsumed into the transcendent other, by their love for God and their status as a vessel for life's activity. For a fuller appreciation we should not take Bronk's poems in isolation, particularly the later works. They exist as a network of contradictions and amendments; if we say that 'Self Leaves a Note' attempts to take a sublime cosmic perspective and other poems are grounded in the locality of human relationships we are in danger of oversimplification, because these two stances inform each other and the spaces in between. Yet there is a truth to that claim which does not iron out the contradictions, but helps us to reconcile the view from opposite sides of the folds and creases.

If self requires the other, then concomitantly the other requires a self, and in the distinction laid out here it can be stated that whereas God requires a subject to love it, life needs an object to live it. Yet we have seen that Bronk's poetry thrives on the contradictions between what is and what seems, and the failure of language to grasp and express meaning. In the previous chapter we saw repeated examples of positive theology sitting alongside apparently atheistic assertions. Thus the following poem does not deny God, but denies the efficacy of prayer directed externally in that the God to which we pray is not that transcendent other of existent but unknowable reality, but rather a feature of the narratives we construct:

#### SUBJUNCTIVE

The first premise of prayer is we be apart  
 from the prayed-to, be persons separate  
 and, in our subjection however humble, proud  
 to be subject of our sentence: as cannot be.

(*BOL* 116)

In terms of its commentary on the nature of the self, we are reminded that Bronk frequently demonstrates a poet's interest in language as an imperfect tool for

reflecting the world. The title of this poem refers us to the verb form “be” used in its first two instances, the subjunctive mood being used in English to describe states that are not (or not yet) actually existent. The title’s implication is that “we” are subjunctive or not existent in the sense that the model in which prayer is used would have us be. In the simple wordplay on “subjection” and “subject” we see the notion of our being under the dominion of God is coupled with the idea’s reflection in language; in the “sentence” that is formed by the verbal expression of hope in prayer, we present our being as something that can be acted upon, as is the grammatical subject of a clause. Yet the structuralist implications of this comforting narrative are denied: this “cannot be”. To these observations we must add the pun on “sentence”, describing our lifetimes as well as our utterances, where the usage of ‘decree passed by a court’ historically precedes ‘grammatically complete syntactic unit’.

We should not, therefore, necessarily cite ‘Subjunctive’ as indicating a mystic view that has us at permanent oneness with the universe in any or all of its transcendent facets. By contrast to such a simple understanding, other poems tell us that our relationship to life (which we have seen to be part of that transcendence) is temporary, and that otherness goes on before, after and around us:

#### NON-SPATIAL

We meet life in the living and in us too.  
It walks in and looks around and leaves.  
We aren’t life. It doesn’t need the space.

(*BOL* 133)

The first line reminds us that it is by viewing our similarity with others that our own selves are affirmed. The noun-phrase “The living” includes unavoidable connotations of mortality, in an implicit invitation to contrast that group with “the dead”, taken up in the second line. We have already commented that the personification of “life” as a poetic device began for Bronk in the early 1980s; here

in 'Non-Spatial' he is sufficiently comfortable with the metaphor to sustain it throughout, as in this poem from his final collection:

#### THE FLORA AND THE FAUNA

While still one-celled, as much of it still is,  
that life that brought me here had us all in mind.  
It takes its own time what next to make  
and then it does and discards them afterward.  
It doesn't get whatever it is it wants.

(Bronk 1999: 11)<sup>49</sup>

According to this line of thinking there may be a purpose and an end to evolution ("whatever it is it wants") but by this late stage in his writing life Bronk has ceased to seem upset or worried by his inability to know what this could be. The tone here and in most of the other poems from *Burst of Light* cited in this chapter is significantly calmer and quieter than many of the pieces in *Life Supports*, particularly the works of the 1960s and early 1970s. The significance of this will become clearer in the final part of this current chapter, when we discuss Bronk's attitude to ageing in the development of the self.

Meanwhile, we can understand from the observations made so far that in Bronk's work "life" must be understood as something much broader than merely 'our lives'. During the process of living and in our encounter with otherness we create narratives that present ideas of individuality. Considered in light of the over-arching transcendence that life represents, in one sense "self" is the name that we give to the illusion of autonomy that the limitations on our understanding and conception obtain for each of us:

#### DIVISION OF LABOR

Life thinks things like galactic shapes,

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<sup>49</sup> The version of this poem printed in the *Collected Later Poems* reads 'like' for 'life' in line 2 (*BOL* 260). The *Metaphor of Trees* copy is obviously preferable.

the ranking of physical forces, coding of traits  
in DNA. It lets our regard be our selves  
and frees our attention for wars and other games.

(*BOL* 147)

Note that the shapes of galaxies are determined not by God, who might care, but by life, which doesn't. In our apprehension of universal laws ("physical forces"), the very big ("galactic shapes") and the very small ("DNA") we are drawn into a sense of the sublime; what remains is "our selves" in their day-to-day living, in a history defined as "wars and other games". This poetic understatement is only half-ironic and here rests one of the challenges to accepting Bronk's vision, sometimes it can seem so remote as to be inhumane. His mitigating grace is found in the more frequent genuine expressions of friendship and affection that rise in the work, but statements like this one when viewed out of (or even in) context seem apparently glib and uncaring. Yet they are provoked by integrity and honesty, for beyond the personal level, at a broader remove, the human body as a vessel for life has equivalent value to a tree or shell.

A fairly early poem 'Corals and Shells' (cf. Weinfield 2009: 134-35) concludes by inviting comparison between our living bodies and the fossils of ocean-dwelling creatures from past aeons: "... It kills us. We are glad it does. / Corals and shells. Shall we ever cover a land?" (*LS* 70). A much later piece condenses that idea and includes that of life as something separate and transcendent:

#### WASTREL

Life-wasted life-stuff like  
leaves yearly, fossils once, we'll  
lie wasted,  
wasted by  
that which isn't,  
life is,  
is life.

(*BOL* 128)

The metaphor of humanity as 'waste' is the same as provides the term "discards" in 'The Flora And The Fauna'. In this instance the short poetic line combines with the lexical repetition to an accumulative effect, with the words piling onto one another as leaves on the ground or generations over history. Subject to the unknowable whims and cyclical vicissitudes of life, in our end we finish just as all its other vessels. Life meanwhile sustains the permanence suggested by the insistent "is, / is" and transcends our simplistic notions of being ("that which isn't, / life is").

The thought that life's being is different from ours recalls again that doctrine of analogy that was traditionally used in descriptions of God. The problem is that language cannot extend far enough beyond the world in which we live. Hence we have the necessity to fall back on the subjunctive at some occasions, or this next approach which assembles a sort of hierarchy of meanings for 'being' through its deployment of "am" and "is". In its opening propositions, 'Asides' threatens to direct us to that sublime mystical oneness where the self is negated, and though it eventually does something similar the sublimity is evoked through separation not unity, in our dismissal from the transcendent otherness:

#### ASIDES

Besides me, I am the others and, besides,  
I am life which, being life, dismisses me  
but, besides life, I am the idea of life  
which life is besides and isn't dismissable.

(*BOL* 180)

In one sense, essence precedes existence here in that I find my being ultimately in the idea of life; but this is a circular construct because the "idea" is held only in my already existent imagination. The paucity of language is in some way to blame for these complications, if we could comfortably read "essence" for "idea" the poem would be an affirmation of transcendence and a comforting vision of oneness with

the universe. Rather it is the opposite, a potentially terrifying suggestion that what we take to be selfhood is an illusion, whereby individuality merges with “the others” and the object “me” is dismissed by “life”, evident in its activity but also in an ever-present “idea” that we can neither effectively verbalise nor eject from our minds. Over the quatrain the insistent repetitive lexis helps blur the boundaries in the self/other relationships that the poem describes and confounds. We are left with the resonance of the “dismiss[al]”, like the “wast[ing]” of ‘Wastrel’, or as the poet puts it elsewhere: “left behind: piles of junk, / pieces of history” (*BOL* 279).

In the following piece, the understanding that life cares no more for humans than for vegetation is expressed in terms that have their origin in Bronk’s particular conceptual understanding of metaphor:<sup>50</sup>

#### FORESTED

We are metaphor of trees  
 its simile and symbol.  
 We are oak and pine  
 gingko and olive  
 tulip and buckeye  
 cypress and willow  
 our sweet sap.  
 We are fungus host  
 lightning vaunter.

(*BOL* 293)

This poem from near the very end of Bronk’s own life, which gave the title to his final collection, encapsulates an attitude to the wider concept of life that is grounded in the immediate and local but extends into the universal. The important conceit of this poem is there in its first line, with the inversion of the hierarchical opposition inherent in metaphor. This is far from mere corruption of

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<sup>50</sup> Essentially a creatively post-structural point of view; cf. chapter three of this thesis; and eg. ‘The Wanted Exactitude’: “The way we shade in and out of sleep / ... / ... marks us as metaphor / and metaphor our medium ...” (*BOL* 96), etc.

linguistic expectation for surface effect, but an expression of an attitude developed and described in the poems discussed above, among others. In the first line the “trees” are metonymic, standing for the ‘it’ of which we are “simile and symbol” (hence “its” not “their”), but they are also things in and for themselves, inasmuch as Bronk’s vision allows any living thing to be. Trees are a favourite symbol and image for Bronk, and along with the house are among the very few objects to appear recurrently in his predominantly abstract works. Close to the edge of town in Hudson Falls, his house was and remains surrounded by a small wood. Some of the species in the list above stand in that wood, and many of the trees that appear in his poems would be the actual specimens that overlook his windows. Representatively, trees are ubiquitous, but stand over us as examples of life at its most mysteriously different.

‘Forested’ is ungrammatical in its syntax, but that does not detract from its gist and effect. We can receive it in three short sections, and hear its changing meters; the first lines, telling of abstract relationship by the metaphor of metaphor, are essentially iambic; the list of species is dactylic; and the last lines are of a slow and indeterminate rhythm. In that list of species we are presumably to find both similarity and difference, with individuality present only as slight variation in the category ‘tree’ or within the given species, and invited to apply that idea to people and trees. The real strength of the poem, which makes it succeed as a poem rather than just a rather obtuse ontological statement, is in the creative expression of the closing lines, where the sound and meaning combine to remind us of Bronk’s lyrical ability. The construct “lightning vaunter” is particularly effective, like trees we stand vertical and boastful against the crashing forces of nature.

In ‘Forested’ Bronk takes it on himself to speak for a plural community via the pronoun “we”, a typical stance from *Light and Dark* (1956) onwards. As much or more so than any major poet in the language, time and again he uses this first person plural referring to conditions and experiences that he feels are shared by variously part, most or all of humanity. While otherness exists at a remove from humanity in the transcendence of God and the agency of life, and is apprehended in the feelings and awareness of the sublime, there is also an otherness that

separates individual humans. This is the basis of the ordinary use and understanding of selfhood; I am not you and we are neither him nor her.

We have already seen (in 'Asides', above) that the separation of self and otherness can be problematic for Bronk. There is at one level some truth in Weinfield's claim that "Bronk's 'I' is nearly always a 'we'" (1988: 140). In fact the 'I' is one part of a larger collective 'we', and here works against the wider prevailing attitude, in that he allows his own personal experiences to stand for similar experiences that others have. So when he speaks of an encounter with "A bird ... / on Thompson's wall" it really doesn't matter whether that wall is in upstate New York or central Africa or anywhere else; the point of that poem is in the interaction of humanity and another class of life:

... birds, maybe this kind, are older than me,

older than man and birds are bird, men  
and man, anonymous. Neither makes  
event or a history. ...

(LS 127)

There are numerous instances where we could comfortably exchange the poet's "I" for "we" and not affect the general sense of the line or the whole verse; for example: "I took the idea somewhere, sometime of the world / and me in it" (from 'The Way Of The World', LS 71). However, specifically in that example or generally in many of the others that we could find, to suppose plural and singular as interchangeable would be to deny voice to an individual "I" that speaks for the poet William Bronk.

The writer's role in the world might not be any more valuable than anyone else's, but his actual activity, both as a poet and as an individual, differs from the other however slightly. Here it is that separation of "I" and "you" within the unity of 'we', stated in a stanza from 'Of The All With Which We Coexist':

If I am anything at all, I am  
the instrument of the world's passion and not



the doer or the done to. It is to feel.

You, also, are such an instrument.

(LS 71)

The many poems reviewed in this chapter tend to focus on the essential unity of 'we' (which itself is often consumed by the greater force 'life'), because Bronk's concern and perspective arises from the apparent loss of selfhood resulting from his habitual contemplation of the sublime. However, the poems do acknowledge differences and distances between individuals, albeit only from our very limited point of view, and it is in these differences that the identities we call 'selves' can be found. If the supposition of "person, time and place" is part of a fiction, it is the fiction in which we move and interact, in which "alike" is not "identical":

If, so to say, there were *I*, the *I* there were  
were like those replicated houses — alike  
but made to look as though unlike as with  
a different colour roof, a panel of brick  
in front, the rooms reversed, but all alike.

Supposing person, time and place, we suppose  
a redundant clumsiness, a multiple lie  
that has to be told all over again, ...

(LS 101)

There is in fact a good deal of William Bronk's persona in the "I" that narrates his poems. Some of this arises from the biographical information scattered incidentally through the collections, in the names of people and places that he encountered. A great deal more can be found in propositions that reflect opinion and point of view, in the general and universal sense (as most of this thesis has addressed) and in infrequent but telling responses to personal circumstances: "Grotesque at fifty to be probationer / of love" (LS 109); "I used to think it was impossible with boys. / It is impossible with girls too." (LS 183); "When I had love it felt like cigarettes, / like alcohol, it was like sleep." (BOL 236).

One thing that can be stated about this persona is the fact that he has an existence troubles him: "What am I then, because in a sense, I am / though clearly not?" (*LS* 157).

As variously shown in, for example, 'Conjugation' (*LS* 220), 'The Receptors' and 'The Plainest Narrative' (*LS* 105-6), Bronk maintains an understanding of how our experience of the world is shaped and mediated by the language with which we describe it. This 'experience' includes the ongoing process of creating and sustaining our selves in relation to others, and to our own past and future. As well as the separation of grammatical persons, the understanding that the first person can operate variously as subject and object is both reflected in the language and forms a vital aspect of self-awareness.

The distinction between 'I' and 'me' is fundamental to a contemporary understanding of the self as a constructive process (see below), but a further point is crucial to the current discussion. Jonathon Brown provides a psychologist's explication of a conceptual separation within the first person singular: 'I' differentiates us from others, provides a sense of personal continuity and is necessary for motivation at a practical level; 'me' provides cognitive location and is used for theoretical motivation (cf. Brown 1998: 14). Meanwhile, a third aspect of the first person is integral to the current discussion; the reflexive case 'myself' and 'ourselves' provides a lexical clue to the status of selfhood as something born out of a transitive action that 'I' do to 'me' (cf. Wiley 1994: 44), a notion perceived and explored by Bronk in the following memorable piece:

#### THE MASK THE WEARER OF THE MASK WEARS

Yes, look at me; I am the mask it wears,  
as much am that which is within the mask.  
Nothing not mask but that. That every mask.

The mask will fall away and nothing lost.  
There is only the mask-wearer, the self-aware,  
the only aware, aware of only the self.

Awake, it dreams: is every character;  
is always more; is never more than that.  
It contemplates; tries any mask of shape.

Any is nothing. Any is not what is.  
But that it should be. That it should seem to be.  
That it be no more than that, and yet should be.

And that it turn to look, look favourably,  
look lovingly, look long, on what there is.

*(LS 117/8)*

Weinfield has this down as “one of the greatest poems that Bronk ever wrote” (Weinfield 2009: 143) and provides a fine exegesis of the poem, to which I will refer in order to augment my discussion here. Working from the “it” of line one, Weinfield asserts:

On the one hand, the “it” refers to Being or Life, or perhaps even to God, but in any event it refers to that which transcends any particular human being and in which every human being has its source. On the other hand, the “it” refers to the self, but a self that is disembodied and, like Leibniz’s monads, that mirrors, contains, and mediates something like Being or Life.  
(Weinfield 2009: 144)

The difficulties with equating Life and God in Bronk’s work having been explained earlier in this current chapter, in this respect it is important to concede that ‘The Mask The Wearer Of The Mask Wears’ arrives before the mid-1970s when the poet’s conception of God begins to crystallise. There should be no doubt that Weinfield is right to find the poem powerful and beautiful, nor that his assessment of its formal characteristics is astute and revealing. Yet reference to a “disembodied” self that “mirrors, contains and mediates” the transcendental brings us to the sort of ground where a spirit or soul would dwell.

In light of the psychologist's I/me distinction, I should like to add a third referent for the "it" in the first line; after the initial instruction to focus on "me" we have the accusative first person already present as the object in the sentence. That is to say, "I" is the mask "me" wears; or put another way, a search for the objective "me" finds the façade "I". This is not a wilful disguise but a necessary construction of narrative to provide continuity between past and present. The complex of our being(s), as may be being attested by the deceptively simple syntax of lines one and two, includes the frame (ie. that necessary narrative construct) as much as what is being framed. The two instances of "that" in line three need not have different referents, if we can accept Bronk as capable of employing apparent contradictions or allow him the movement from specific to general. Only the notional objective "me" does not qualify as "mask" by this definition, and every "mask" (that is, the appearance of personal identity in individuals) has its basis not just in their objective "me" but crucially in its dialogue with their "I".

Then we need not be satisfied to call the falling away of the mask in the second tercet merely a point when "the self achieves awareness" (Weinfield 2009: 144), but instead should focus on the inevitability expressed in "will". Death and sleep are the two obvious candidates here, more likely the latter in this case. When we lose consciousness the reflective, reflexive narrative that we constantly perform to create and maintain ourselves ceases or is interrupted, or in the case of dreaming may be radically disturbed. To be "aware of only the self" is stupor or nirvana, because self is a construct that relies on otherness. The suggestion that sleep is the subject of the second stanza is reinforced by the contrasting "Awake" that opens the third. The "dreams" performed by the reflexive self during waking include those of imagination and "contemplation", the necessary construction of possible future narratives that provide motivation for continuation of personal existence. Then in the closing stanzas, which Weinfield calls the "turn[ ] from the indicative to the optative mood", we encounter that certain structural technique common to some of Bronk's most effective and successful works, a movement from a bleak vision of rationality to a kind of emotional empiricism where the presence of hope is paramount. Yet we need not necessarily see the loving look as directed "towards Being, the source of 'what there is'" (Weinfield 2009: 145),

where Being is that mighty transcendent otherness, but rather as a much gentler inward look that asks us to value us as the sources of our selves.

That idea, that we create ourselves, goes against determinist views of traditional theology and solely mechanistic biological perspectives. In this sense it corresponds with Bronk's unorthodox opinions regarding God, and mitigates his statements concerning life as dominant over our being; despite his assertions that life can and does discard us as it will, we nonetheless exist among the values and relationships that we assemble. Contemporary theories agree that we create and shape our selves over a lifetime in light of internal motivations and external pressures, although the details of this process are a matter for much debate (cf. Elliott 2001: 152-57; Stevens 1996: 18-24, Wiley 1994: 40 *et passim*). Emerging understandings of cognitive, social and evolutionary psychologies both reflect and inform societal and individual attitudes to the self, which is to imply (as was also suggested in chapter three) that while expressed in unique and sometimes brilliant poetic form, the underlying beliefs and ideas that Bronk thinks and feels are in some sense a product of the time and place in which he is writing.

This thesis began by positioning Bronk as a specifically postmodern poet, in that the ideas in his poetry are frequently paralleled in postmodern and post-structuralist theories. In his discussion of 'The Postmodern Self', Anthony Elliott summarises arguments put forward by Zygmunt Bauman:

According to Bauman, the guiding impulse of the modern self is that of mastery. The desire for mastery takes the self into the controlled and controlling world of rationality and rational decision-making. ... However, this search for self-mastery is, according to Bauman, self-defeating, illusory, fictitious. ... [M]odern ethical rules governing self-conduct provided practical help in achieving moral self-certitude. Not so postmodern forms of selfhood, however. After the demise of the modern, foundational ethical code governing the regulation of the self, life in postmodern times becomes increasingly fraught and ambivalent. (Elliott 2001: 145-46)

There are two connected issues here, each in its way refracted through Bronk's poetry. First is the failed notion that rationality can provide adequate grounds for

self-governance, and second the ambivalent morality that contemporary post-modernity fosters. The rejection of rationality as the apex of motivational forces is coupled with an awareness that we willingly cling to the fiction of control it offers:

#### CONTROL GROUP

The greatest placebo is the rational mind.  
We believe in it beyond the place it applies  
where we use it knowing it gives no control.

*(BOL 238)*

Clearly “the rational mind” has a role to play in our self-awareness and the construction of our narrative self, but the “place it applies” is narrower than would allow us the kind of self-mastery that we seek. Nevertheless, we proceed in our “illusory, fictitious” narratives, only to be surprised when they fail to match up with reality:

#### IGNORANCE REVEALED

Our world is not as we would have it or how  
we could even have thought to make it but delights  
us often in startling ways that make us think  
we don't know anything about ourselves.

*(BOL 146)*

Poems like ‘Control Group’ and ‘Ignorance Revealed’ are quick, pithy condensations of ideas that Bronk’s poetry has explored at length over several decades. Once we are familiar with the paradigms of his world-view, we can comfortably accept them as simple restatements of key ideas about the limitations of human knowledge, in these cases as they apply to the construction of self-identity. More difficult, because they challenge what we perceive as humanistic decency, are the very few poems that most clearly reflect the “fraught and ambivalent” morality of these uncertain times. Whereas a reader might draw

inference from the disavowals of reality in the earlier collections, explicit examples of apparent moral detachment begin to appear in the last collections, although remaining very infrequent. In a world that “justifies itself” (*BOL* 245), capable of “enormous cruelties / and losses” (*BOL* 291), there is little or no irony in a claim like “Fights and football, wars, they’re all good” (*BOL* 260). These few poems are epitomised by this piece, where the stance is of one almost as uncaring about the actualities of suffering as he had previously made ‘life’ out to be:

‘AS THOUGH WE WERE SOMEONE ELSE AND MAYBE WE ARE’

As though we were someone else and maybe we are  
we try to keep ourselves away from what  
the world gives little value to and starves  
in multitudes or slaughters indifferently.  
That’s us. We can’t much care. We have ourselves.

(*BOL* 300)

Originally left untitled in *Metaphor of Trees and Last Poems*, this is Bronk’s penultimate work, and as such was written by a very ill man on the edge of death. This is critical to a fair understanding of the verse, in terms of the poet’s awareness of his relative proximity to his own individual finality and in light of the changing perspective brought by ageing, discussed below.

As we have seen to be occasionally and sometimes frustratingly the case with Bronk’s poems, precise interpretation rests on an ambiguous pronoun. Here the question is what is “us” in the final line? It is either the object “we” of the second line, or the subject “what / the world gives little value to” of the second half of that sentence. Once again, the precise referent does not matter to the gist of the poem; in this case that we take solace against the sufferings of others in the idea of a self constructed over a lifetime. The value of this solace is not attested, nor could it be; we have been told time and again that the ideas we hold of selfhood are fictional and mistaken. Instead we are left with a statement, made powerful and difficult by its honesty, reflecting the inevitability of self-interest in a seemingly cruel and certainly uncaring world.

What 'As Though We Were Someone Else...' doesn't tell us, but very many of Bronk's poems imply, is that as well as "ourselves" we have each other. The strength of Bronk's statements about universality is reinforced by the frequency with which his poems refer to precise and specific localities. It has already been stated in this chapter that his concern with selfhood differs from many poetic predecessors and contemporaries in that he tends to address general questions of identity rather than particular life events. Although we can piece together a fair amount of biographical information from the work as a whole, the details are almost always incidental to the broader themes and message of the poetry. This chapter has adopted the view of the self as an ongoing process, a project constantly under construction. By combining this view with an examination of how Bronk uses the specifics of his own life experience we can gain an important perspective that deepens an appreciation of the poetry as a collected whole.

In his discussion of the self under postmodernity, Elliott describes how aspects of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theories have been particularly influential in discussions of contemporary culture (cf. Elliott 2001: 136). Earlier in this thesis we traced a thread of similarity connecting Bronk's concerns with Lacanian ideas of desire and the Real, to which we can at this point add a third related topic, that of loss:

According to Lacan, loss and mourning are at the heart of the psyche; and this means that, no matter how hard individuals try to find various emotional substitutes for loss, a profound sense of emptiness always marks the self. (Elliott 2001: 137)

If awareness of the centrality of loss is part of a postmodern post-structural understanding of the self then Bronk's attitude falls firmly into that category, as in these lines from 'The Mind's Landscape On An Early Winter Day' where part of the internal conversation that defines selfhood is plainly expressed:

...

What the senses feel is loss, and not less loss  
for being neither final nor complete.



The senses and the mind agree it seldom is.

For loss is what we live with all the time.

None knows this better than the mind should know...

(LS 20)

This is an early Bronk poem (from the 1950s) and as his work progresses he tends to drop the explicit theme of 'loss' in favour of its resultant 'desire'. Nonetheless, it appears at moments in one form or another: "The loss — help us — how shall we say the loss? / It's still there." (LS 138). In Bronk's poems loss and desire, which should both be understood non-specifically without the necessity of any object to be lost or desired, have their presence in the distance between self and other. This applies whether that other is an actual person of the poet's acquaintance or his conceptual notion of God or life. They are also present in that distance whereby self *is* other, both in the I/me distinction that allows us to be subject to our own object, and in the gap between what 'I' was and what 'I' will become.

Bronk's final poems, indeed his last collections, become increasingly concerned with the fact and associated phenomena of growing old. This poem is from *Death Is The Place* (1989); Bronk would live another ten years after its publication:

HAS BEEN

It used to take time — ten years,  
twenty — for now to glaze over, age  
itself into a harmless then. Now,  
in my mild years, it comes with the glaze on.

(BOL 59)

The idea of a generalised sense of loss on a personal level is heavily present in lines like "Things, that now, I can't any longer do" (BOL 276) or "Much is gone from the days now" (BOL 292). Yet the inescapable fact of ageing, the movement between "now" and "then", can be perceived time and again across Bronk's poetry.

These final observations are made to illustrate my claim that the presence of loss makes itself known to Bronk in the distance between self and other, and to augment the observation that the grace that saves his poetry from bleak nihilism comes not in a relationship with God but in the obligation he feels to love others in the world.

In the sense of the facts of his biography, Bronk talks about himself infrequently but apparently unashamedly. At times he is happy to name the places that comprise his hometown and its environs, although there is a falling away of this feature of his work after the 1970s. Meanwhile, readers of his collected work come to be on first-name terms with a few individuals; we can look to Gilmore's biography (2006) or speak to Bronk's friends for details of Laura or Lauren, Mike or Paul, Vincent or Dan. Often the poems are addresses to these people, or in the case of the latter two names they are part of Bronk's ongoing meditation on the nature of art. By populating his work with real people, Bronk is strengthening its grounding in a world whose reality he repeatedly dismisses as fiction. It would seem that part of what convinces him of its unreality is our inability to grasp and hold any sustained concept of those persons who are ultimately all we have to value here. Thus practically every time he talks about an encounter with an actual person, it is framed in terms of ageing and loss. As we have seen, Bronk is predominantly a poet of ideas and abstracts, so these poems that report encounters with people are scarce and dispersed. 'Uncle Will' (*LS* 97-98) tells us about the growth and regeneration of an old man's garden, and in the following three examples the focus is on the brevity of youth:

#### THE NEW MARINE ON THE BUS

You were translated and it was beautiful.  
Fresh from the graduation, lean and proud,  
you'd made it. That astonished joy:  
for the first time, almost, it was all real.

I had rather a text of your own, grubby and poor  
as it were, as I think it is and ought to be;

but the beautiful is beautiful as it comes.

Acknowledging, I said, "Good luck!"

(LS 158)

17 MARCH

I met a young friend on the road with his girl whom he hugged.

He turned and hugged me. Love hasn't much

to do with whom. I glorify the God

for this. And there are ages, times of the year.

(LS 185)

DEAR LAURA

Teen-ager now, Adrian was here.

As he left, — Did I still have the coffee mill

he used to grind, growing up? I did.

To give it to him was a gift he gave to me.

(BOL 246)

This chapter of the thesis has shown that we should view Bronk's work as presenting an ongoing, changing and maturing self against a developing understanding of otherness (ie. God and life). Beginning in earnest with the violence of *The World*, *The Worldless*, though doubtless present in his earlier volumes, and culminating in the resigned accepting tones of the *Last Poems*, the process he traces and which his changing poetic voice reflects is one of learning, of coming to terms, and most crucially of growing old. Here, from *The Force of Desire*, is an acknowledgment of a changing personal perspective, presented in his gentle but authoritative tone. The poem is unusual in the collection for comprising three grammatically self-contained lines, which adds to the effect of assurance created

by Bronk operating in his didactic voice, as a narrator removed at one level from assertions that stand unquestioned, yet entirely contained within the subject 'we':

First is to learn we have no power of our own.

Second, an Outside Power is impotent too.

The strength we acquire is to live with powerlessness.

(*LS* 196)

Again we find that a five-beat stress pattern gives optimum force to the lines, but following an irregular rhythm. It should be counted among Bronk's strengths as a craftsman that he is able to supply such consistent variety to his work.

The major theme of the poem is undeniably "powerlessness", and this complies with ideas already presented – the "helpless... despair" (*LS* 194) and the 'impotence' (*LS* 180) ascribed to God. The final clause of the first line, "of our own", is a moment of irony, offering the promise of an external resource only to be dashed in the second. The capital letters on "Outside Power" are a wry indicator that God or something like his classical image is being spoken of here, but the description that follows tells us that "Power" is in one sense a misnomer. In another, line two represents a fairly astute summary of a nominally deist position, whereby a creator God sets the universe in motion and then withdraws.

Just as important as the fact of powerlessness is the frame in which it is presented, as a learning process that comes in stages. While we read this as a personal journey of self-discovery that the poet is still undergoing, we may also see it from an historical perspective, although when Bronk talks about history he tends to tell us in the text. In either sense it can describe the acquisition and renunciation of certain aspects of the religious attitude, principally the giving over of one's self to God's will, but "Outside Power" is not limited to divinity. Without the third line this would be a bleak and hopeless (not to mention unfinished) chain of thought. Yet in that final line we find exemplified so much of what is positive and life-affirming in Bronk's work,<sup>51</sup> that in spite of all we find "strength" and make a life by it.

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<sup>51</sup> cf. 'Evaluation': "Life affirming", he says, as though life / waited for our approval..." (*LS* 215).

## Chapter 8: Conclusion - Bronk as Religious Poet

One of Bronk's quintessential verses is 'Realization', the opening poem of *Metaphor of Trees*,<sup>52</sup> which was discussed in chapter three in relation to Lyotard's assertion concerning the "unreality of reality":

Reality isn't real. Why do we look?  
We look because the real is the shape of desire:  
that the world be real and we a person in it.  
We believe our beliefs to pretend that that should be  
or abide a world whose reality isn't real.

(*BOL* 258)

Its first clause is more than silly paradox or verbal trickery; the imaginative sidestep required to grasp this poem is perhaps a little like the process necessary to appreciate a Zen *koan* (cf. Clippinger 2001: 203). At the surface, that first statement "Reality isn't real" could be 1) a claim that language is imprecise; or 2) asking us to reappraise the term 'real'; or 3) flagrant nonsense. However, here in the poem it is none of those things, at least not exclusively any one of them. We can probably all sympathise with feelings of dissociation that might find a conscious mind perceiving that the immediate world seems somehow unreal (Gilmore 2006: 315-25), although in this poetry 'is' has superseded 'seems'. Also, the comparable phrase 'whiteness isn't white' makes clearer sense. According to this parallel example, the abstraction ('whiteness' or 'reality') of the quality ('white' or 'real') is not a thing in or of itself. So the statement 'Reality isn't real' is meaningful on the level of immediate emotive response, and only meaningless or

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<sup>52</sup> There is also another poem titled 'Realization', from *Some Words* (1992). At five lines, with no concrete nouns (except perhaps "world") it is fairly typical in form and content for that stage in Bronk's writing life, and bears considerably similarities to the later 'Realization':

Our lives in their daily reference to the actual world  
seem to happen there. In retrospect,  
their shape is otherwise: actual terms  
have little to do with them, cannot describe  
what they are. But those are the terms we need to use.

(*BOL* 107)

paradoxical at first glance. In the poem 'Realization' and broadly speaking through Bronk's work a distinction must be made between 'reality' (ie. the real and immediate world) and what is 'real' (ie. a different level of truth exists in ways beyond our firm knowing). So, dreams are real and God is real, but the correspondence of either to reality is ineffable and imprecise; the moments when that correspondence is felt are times when the sublime enters our daily lives.

One of the areas that Bronk's reader (and commentator) must negotiate is how to think about and respond meaningfully to the ideas held in a body of work where "Reality isn't real" and "Ideas are always wrong". If the poet stopped at these claims his work might still be challenging and interesting, but it would not hold the essential grounding in human experience that bestows charm and often beauty on the verse. Thus the second part of that first line of 'Realization' asks the driving question that prompts much of Bronk's poetic endeavour: "Why do we look?". The reasons given are recognised as excuses or evasions, so that "... the world be real and we a person in it. / We believe our beliefs to pretend that that should be." That is, we want affirmation of our selves, so we behave and believe the ways that we do. Often when reading Bronk, as in this poem, we may wonder whether the poet is especially privy to the information he imparts, and therefore acting as teacher or sage, or whether we do all know or at least suspect these things and the poem's expression is an articulation of what we already knew. The more successful of the poems can bestow this latter sense.

In 1940 Bronk left Harvard graduate school after a single semester's study (Gilmore 2006: 41-49) having written a letter to a close friend in which he describes disliking the kind of poetic criticism "in which one first isolates the 'prose content' and then examines the devices." (Gilmore 2006: 78). Over several chapters, this thesis has reinforced and developed the existing germinal understanding of Bronk's status as a religious poet, partly by isolating the 'prose content' of his work, supplemented by occasional examination of its literary techniques and devices. In doing so it has provided original readings of key poems, signposting significant moments indicating the development of ideas within his output, reflecting the expression of the poet's changing relationship with God. Thus it has provided new vantage points from which to view Bronk as a religious poet, augmenting the observations made by Ernest (1988) and Leary

(Clippinger 2013) which place his poetry as not merely metaphysical but deeply spiritual. It has indicated previously unstated formal and stylistic departures from the poetry of Wallace Stevens, which has been widely and rightly acknowledged as a significant influence on the earlier work. Importantly, it has traced Bronk's approach and response to various aspects of the sublime over a broadly chronological route across his career, including his changing ideas of God, and the nature of the self and its relationship with aspects of the transcendent and ineffable. This understanding of the poetry as a process recording the development of ideas, often with poems in direct dialogue with one another, is frequently overlooked but ultimately essential to appreciating the work as a whole. The thesis has also given attention to the significant parts that sleep and dreaming have played at times in Bronk's writing life, and doing so has reinforced and extended certain ideas also put forward by Donahue (Clippinger 2013), as well as connecting these phenomena to themes of epistemology that are key to many of Bronk's poems. The discussion in this concluding chapter will offer further speculative connections between Bronk's use of dreaming and his religious outlook.

At this stage it is necessary to note areas of future research that relate to the themes discussed but which nonetheless have fallen out of the scope of the current thesis. In reading Bronk as a poet of the sublime and a follower of Stevens, it must be remembered that Bronk was an American poet, writing in a uniquely American poetic and artistic tradition in which particular aesthetic and philosophical aspects of the sublime are connected with the American landscape (Wilson 1991: 7 *et passim*). This is usually considered most apparent in the work of certain landscape painters (Wilson 1991: 6), while Stevens's short poem 'The American Sublime' from *Ideas of Order* (1936) might be credited with bringing an awareness of this already existent concern into the practice of poetry (cf. Wilson 1991: 4, 7). In this extract from the fourth and fifth stanzas there is subtle ambiguity in the phrase "comes down / To", maintaining the suggestion of 'descends upon' alongside 'is reducible to'. This latter meaning brings Stevens's claim in line with the revelation that the sublime is a function not of an external force, but of the mind itself (cf. Shaw 2006: 2-3, 82 *et passim*).

...

One grows used to the weather  
The landscape and that;  
And the sublime comes down  
To the spirit itself,

The spirit and space,  
The empty spirit  
In vacant space.

...

(Stevens 1990: 131)

Probably not until close to the very end of his life (see discussion of 'Transubstantiation' at the end of this chapter) did Bronk's poetry ever use the word 'spirit' in the sense employed here, and his developing concepts of God and Life do not allow us to settle on the absence of transcendence in his world-view. However, the notion of 'emptiness' in [almost] "vacant space" is very much in tune with poems such as 'There is Ignorant Silence at the Centre of Things' (cf. chapter two). Over his writing life Bronk "grows used to the weather", which is not to say it becomes entirely unremarkable for him (eg. "Some weathers are harsher than we can bear", *LS* 214; "Broken sky mirror / blue-shadowed snow", *BOL* 20; "the weather is always / unusual", *BOL* 231); rather, like dreams, it is a peculiar facet of existence, inevitable and unpredictable. More significantly in terms of his being an American poet of the sublime, he draws inspiration from his local landscapes, moving beyond the recognition of beauty there into sublime astonishment.

Further exploration of Bronk's poetry and the development of its relationship with the sublime would do well to consider his treatment of landscape, including aspects of the contemporary and the historical. Connected with this, and with Bronk's earlier poetry and prose about pre-Columbian sites (Bronk 1983a: 3-39; Gilmore 2006: xxiv-xxv *et passim*; Diemont in Foster & Kimmelman 2013); it could be revealing to explore whether and how far he explicitly and implicitly addresses or reflects the existence of a specifically American identity, and its expression during the late twentieth century. So while



at a theoretical level the current thesis has positioned Bronk at a particular moment in poetic and philosophical history, further political and historical specifics remain to be considered more deeply. Contemporaneous news reports and technological advances affected the content of poems, and investigation into how the opening of new scientific realities affected the religious content of the poetry should be considered (cf. Kimmelman 1997), including in certain poems inspired by the vastness of space.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, Gilmore (2006: 258) has commented on the geographical proximity of Bronk to the epicentre of the Stonewall riots, but no published material refers to Bronk's responses to the Civil Rights Movement.

Speculations such as these lead us to confront one unfortunate limitation of the current thesis, viz. the lamentable failure to exploit the existing archive of Bronk's manuscripts, correspondence and related miscellany held by Columbia University in their Rare Books and Manuscripts Library (cf. Gilmore 2006: xxi-xxii). Too early in the composition of this study the researcher was able to spend a few hours among those papers, in a brief and somewhat unfocused journey through their content. As the argument of the thesis evolved, initial research that focused on developing drafts of individual poems became less relevant. Subsequently, in significant part for reasons of financial expense, a decision was made to limit the content of this thesis to the available published work.<sup>54</sup> This has had the effect of keeping the actual poetry at the very forefront of the discussion, allowing the text to predominate over biographical information and conjecture. Thus the persona of the poet William Bronk has been addressed here at the exclusion of the man Bill Bronk, whom other writers have been and remain much better placed to discuss (cf. eg. Clippinger 2001: 3-39). Of course, there is significant overlap between those two figures, but claims made about the figure that this thesis refers to as 'Bronk', including his opinions and beliefs, refer not necessarily to the neighbour, art collector, friend and businessman who ran Bronk Coal and Lumber (Clippinger 2001: 13, 22; Gilmore 2006: 123-4, 149-51 *et*

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<sup>53</sup> eg. 'Utterances' (*LS* 152) & 'The Limits of Knowledge' (*LS* 155) were published while space travel was very much in the public consciousness.

<sup>54</sup> The archive contains 95 boxes of material, c. 40,000 items. Only a few (c.10%) of these have been catalogued, and none have been microfilmed, so remote access is impractical if not entirely impossible. From a UK base, repeated physical access is prohibitively expensive.

*passim*) but to a figure that his published poems created. In light of discussions in chapter seven regarding the nature of the self, and of poems such as 'Against Biography' (*LS* 198) or 'Unseemly' ("We may have been this then and that now / or another time but we aren't our histories. / ..."; *BOL* 203) this seems befitting. Nevertheless, it is recognised that the discovery of further connections between the poet's life and his writing will contribute to the understanding and appreciation of the poetry.

Another significant limitation to the study's scope has been its focus at times on Western Christian theology and doctrine at the exclusion of other denominations and religions. At one level this has been inevitable; from childhood onwards (Gilmore 2006: 4-5; Foster in Foster & Kimmelman 2013) Bronk's own influences were enmeshed in a culture that had its very foundations in Christianity. The discussion has been mindful throughout to ensure that the word 'religious' is not used as shorthand for 'Christian'. Sometimes it may have used the word 'religion' when 'spirituality' would have been preferable; it is recognised that these are difficult and nebulous terms. The most important things in life – God, love, art, freedom – tend to be the hardest to define. However, it is certain that the God that Bronk interrogates and even tries to define is more or less the Judeo-Christian God, as it was for Immanuel Kant, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, R.S. Thomas, A.R. Ammons, and countless other poets and thinkers from a shared and sprawling modern philosophical tradition. It may be that in future through textual connections and comparisons Bronk's poetry is able to reveal more about some of these writers' works. We should also note that at times Bronk's God is close to the God of Einstein and Spinoza, "this cosmic religious sense, which recognizes neither dogmas nor God made in man's image" (Einstein 2009: 49; cf. Jammer 1999: 73-74 *et passim*); except that Bronk does not share their "deep faith in the rationality of the structure of the world" (Einstein 2009: 50):

#### A SUBSTANTIVE WORLD DISCERNABLE TO THOUGHT

Einstein couldn't accept the uncertainty  
that quantum thinking found it hard to find.

For him, the truth needed to be certain truth.  
He must have thought his own formulas,  
mathematically sound, were more than that.  
He must have thought their soundness indicates  
a substantive world discernable to thought.

(*BOL* 167)

Rejecting both the necessity for and possibility of certainty, Bronk disavows science as another fictional metanarrative, sometimes explicitly coupled with God: ie. "Our gods and sciences, our telescopes..." from 'Strip Tease' (*BOL* 167); "god stories / science stories" from 'Good Story' (*BOL* 127) (see chapter 3); albeit reserving it some limited praise: eg. 'The Age of Science': "... at least, we have a method at last and if / it doesn't work I don't know what we can do" (*BOL* 33).

Outside the Western tradition, similarities with Taoist ideas in Bronk's poems deserve further consideration ("I said, how could I have ever gotten to be Tao? I never read it. ... And she said, well, according to karma, you're probably a reincarnation of Lao Tzu" Foster 1989: 38; cf. also Clippinger 2001: 200). Likewise, although Clippinger (2001: 194 - 203) provides a useful introduction to the affinities with Buddhist ideas in Bronk's work, too little has yet been made of certain close resemblances within the poetry to Vedic ideas which prescribe how acknowledgement of dreaming can set our consciousness on a course to detachment and freedom (cf. Easwaran 2007: 109-12). Yet ultimately it is necessary to remember that Bronk is neither a Buddhist nor a Vedic mystic, because even if the overviews of the respective philosophies reveal areas of similarities and comparison, the crucial details of any religious doctrine or practice are vigorously denied by Bronk's poems. Certainly there are parallels with the Vedic *Atman* (cf. Easwaran 2007: 37 *et passim*) in Bronk's conception of 'life' and its relationship to the 'self' ("All life is one, changeless, nameless, formless," Easwaran 2007: 254) just as another set of parallels can be found in the conceptions of God and the self that Emerson and the Transcendentalists recognised (cf. Foster 1999: 72-73): "In youth we are mad for persons. Childhood and youth see all the world in them. But the larger experience of man discovers the identical nature appearing through them all" (Emerson 2003: 211); "When we

have broken our god of tradition, and ceased from our god of rhetoric, then may God fire the heart with his presence” (221). Yet for these surface similarities, Conte is essentially correct if over-emphatic when he states: “Bronk rejects even a tentative consideration of the identification of the human mind with an Emersonian Oversoul” (Clippinger 2001: 171).

Bronk shares with Emerson an appreciation that the experience of solitude in the contemplation of the cosmic may be a route to the sublime: “if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and what he touches” (Emerson 2003: 37)<sup>55</sup> but he never allows his concerns to become lost there: “... Turn Hubble here. / Look at us....” (LS 234). Bronk would probably agree with Emerson’s assertion (as doubtless would Wordsworth and probably many others): “In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows” (Emerson 2003: 38); but would have little sympathy with the commodification of nature that Emerson describes: “All the parts incessantly work into each other’s hands for the profit of man. ... the endless circulations of the divine charity nourish man” (41). Clearly, Emerson did not invent these ideas any more than Bronk did, although they each may have discovered them anew. However, so influential was the Transcendentalist project in certain circles that Harold Bloom follows Sydney Ahlstrom in crediting Emerson as the “theologian” of “the American Religion” (Bloom 1992: 16; Bloom & Zuba 2006: xxvi).

The introductory literature review in chapter one of this current thesis remarked that two Bronk poems appear in a recent popular anthology of religious verse (Bloom & Zuba 2006: 348-50). The ‘American Religion’ defined by Bloom in his introduction to *American Religious Poems* (Bloom & Zuba 2006: xxv-xxvii) is a broad church indeed, and differs somewhat from his narrower conception of the term in his earlier book of that name (Bloom 1992). That earlier study was an historical and contemporised account focusing on organised religious movements in the USA, and we have seen how Bronk bears little affiliation to any of these. Bloom suggests that this manifestation of the American Religion proceeds from “a knowing, by and of an uncreated self, or self-within-the-self, and the knowledge leads to freedom” (1992: 49); we have seen (cf. chapter seven) that the idea of an

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<sup>55</sup> cf. eg. “The Limits of Knowledge” (LS 155).

“uncreated self” is at best problematic for Bronk. So ultimately we must reject the suggestion that Bronk’s work representatively manifests the kind of American Religion which Bloom calls “irretrievably Gnostic” (1992: 49) because Bronk, as this thesis has helped to demonstrate, is variously and avowedly agnostic.

However, the ‘American Religion’ as it is comes to be described in *American Religious Poems*, is drawn with so broad a brush that it can include all aspects & counteraspects of spiritual practice and contemplation. Bronk’s work sits comfortably in an eclectic selection reflecting Bloom’s claim: “Religious poetry, in the United States, has little to do with devotional creeds of the Old World” (Bloom & Zuba 2006: xxv). In his introduction to this later work Bloom identifies the most potent of his selected ‘religious’ poets as operating somewhere close to the Transcendentalist ideas set out by Emerson (Bloom & Zuba 2006: xxviii). In this study we have seen how Bronk moves beyond what Bloom refers to as the “crucial components in Emerson’s American religion: the God within; solitude; the best and oldest part of the self, which goes back before creation” (Bloom & Zuba 2006: xxvii). Thus, working at various times through a distinctly post-structuralist paradigm, Bronk’s writing provides an affirmative response to the rhetorical question posed: “can ‘religious poetry’ be renewed, even in the mode [...] termed ‘the American Religion’?” (Bloom & Zuba 2006: xliii). Bronk’s agnostic faith is based in his direct experience not of the world (or even of *a* world),<sup>56</sup> but of his own being in it.

One crucial poem in respect of his particular form of unbelief is ‘On *Credo Ut Intelligam*’ (LS 88-89) with its active first person verbs (“I plead the permanence / of ignorance” ... “I disclaim the invented world”) and personification of concepts (“That world, which asks / our belief, and offers us understanding back” ... “Belief, which visas us our entry there, / comforts our incoherence”). ‘On *Credo Ut Intelligam*’ has been the object of previous scholarly attention, most notably Ernest’s careful study: “Bronk confronts Anselm not to dismiss faith, but to examine the terms upon which faith must be founded” (1988: 146). Lisk calls the poem’s central tenet “a brave but humble assertion” (Clippinger 2001: 151) and Don Adams’s short essay ‘Pleading the Permanence of Ignorance: The Poetry of William Bronk’ refers to ‘On *Credo Ut Intelligam*’ as

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<sup>56</sup> “And oh, it is always a world and not the world.” (LS 32)

Bronk's "most explicit statement regarding his vocation as a poet" (Clippinger 2001: 134). Kimmelman returns to the poem when expounding on the concept of 'worldlessness' in Bronk's writings.<sup>57</sup> Contrary to Hatlen's assertions (Clippinger 2001: 121; cf. chapter 1 of this thesis) 'On *Credo Ut Intelligam*' is certainly not a prohibition on verbal expression, but a personal meditation and reflection on the individual's realisation that any construct or representation is an inadequate expression of our deeper intimations and concerns. This representation might be of God or otherwise, but it is important to note that it is belief, not belief in anything specific, that the poem rejects, and that God is not mentioned in the verse. It is a thoroughly, even militantly, agnostic poem, and stands as an important signpost in Bronk's career, a formative point at which he recognises, verbalises and accepts an important facet of his philosophy.

In addition to the observations that previous studies have raised, I would draw attention to two further aspects of 'On *Credo Ut Intelligam*'. The first is a broad claim concerning the formal construction of this poem and others, which can be held as an example of how at this stage in Bronk's career the form of the verse is very often an extension and requirement of its content. Later (after *To Praise The Music* in 1972) he will begin using prescribed lengths (14-, 8-, 4-, 3-, and 20-line poems according to the collection), but in 'On *Credo Ut Intelligam*' (more than 50 lines of variable stanza length) there is a sense that this is free verse (albeit restrained by the five-stress line) insofar as the poet wrote what he had to say until he had finished writing it. A similar conclusion can be reached when considering the irregular form of other comparatively long poems including 'Some Musicians Play Chamber Music for Us' (*LS* 18; see below) and 'Virgin and Child with Music and Numbers' (*LS* 45; cf. chapter 1) among very few others. It may not be mere coincidence that these are also poems that clearly include religious themes. The second point to raise is the importance in 'On *Credo Ut Intelligam*' of the notion of community as a source of hope. For all its assertions of the world's unknowability its message, indeed its very existence as a text, relies absolutely on the knowability of humanity; the confident belief that there are others in the same position as the narrator. This is expressed variously through suggestions of common attitudes and experiences (the non-specific "day's

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<sup>57</sup> Kimmelman 66-8 & 179/80

adventure” applies to everyone), through the presence of language as a theme, the reliance we place on shared knowledge (“someone knows / or somebody will shortly know”), and in the value of historical and literary communities – Bronk genuinely shares a tradition with Anselm, though they are separated by centuries and a gulf of theological opinion. Most of all this importance is demonstrated by the fluid movement between the ‘I’ of perception and the ‘we’ of application: “I plead the permanence / of ignorance, that we acknowledge it” ... “I disclaim the invented world / of which we say there might be ultimate things”.<sup>58</sup> The fact that we are ignorant does not mean that we cannot or should not be ignorant together; to refer back to the final line of ‘The Duplicities of Sense’: “the sense we commune together to make is wrong” (*LS* 79) – but we commune nonetheless.

Chapter three of this thesis examined Bronk’s status as a poet of post-structuralism, demonstrating affinities with the theorists’ rejection of metanarrative. The classic example of metanarrative in the Western tradition is biblical theism; the major players in the post-structuralist field were rarely drawn on details regarding their attitude to traditional theism, but in one interview Jacques Derrida had the following to say:

If belief in God is not also a culture of atheism, if it does not go through a number of atheistic steps, one does not believe in God. There must be a critique of idolatry, of all sorts of images in prayer, especially prayer, there must be a critique of onto-theology, the re-appropriation of God in metaphysics ... In order to be authentic – this is a word I almost never use – the belief in God must be exposed to absolute doubt. I know that the great mystics experience this. They experience the death of God, the disappearance of God, the nonexistence of God, or God as being that is called NonExistence: “I pray to someone who doesn’t exist in the strict, metaphysical meaning of existence, that is, to the presence as an essence or substance.” (Caputo *et al* 2005: 46)

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<sup>58</sup> This seems a clear refutation of Weinfeld’s claim that ‘I’ when used by Bronk is always implicitly a ‘we’ (1988: 140). In fact the ‘I’ is one part of a larger collective ‘we’, and here works against the wider prevailing attitude.

I will not call Bronk a “great mystic”, but he might be a great poet. In his poems we find him experiencing “The death of God, the disappearance of God, the non-existence of God [and] God as being that is called NonExistence”. We are invited to share in his prayers “to someone who doesn’t exist”. We receive his poetry’s critique of idolatry and ontotheology, and even the “re-appropriation of God in metaphysics”. Certainly his belief in God is “exposed to absolute doubt”.

Challenging notions of selfhood and identity Bronk rejects categories that Jehovah laid down in the covenant with Abraham, that secular societies and religious communities continue to acknowledge:

#### ORDER OF APPEARANCE

No-one’s a Jew or a non-Jew. We assume  
roles or are cast in them. By saying we are,  
we can be persons but person’s a role we act.  
Underneath is something that sleeps and dies.  
In the world day, be awake and alive with that.

*(BOL 275-76)*

Bronk’s use of the metaphor that casts human life as a ‘role’ is mentioned further below. Like in ‘Winter Sacrament’ (discussed below in relation to the Eucharist) here in ‘Order of Appearance’ Bronk stresses his concern with the here and now, “the world day”. Yet the claim here is genuinely challenging and potentially offensive, his disdain for categories of personal identification which are no doubt based in genuine history may seem coherent and consistent only in a world where “Reality isn’t real”. We have seen that Bronk wrote in a postmodern climate where Divine Providence was being replaced by chaos and co-incidence, and transcendent metanarratives were largely or entirely dismissed. His writing happened in an historical context where an increasingly secular society, albeit retaining a place for strong religious voices, was becoming further removed from active regard of the sacred. Yet an awareness of the sacred as a concept remained strong, if sometimes only as a point of reference for gestures of rebellion.

However, it must be stressed that Bronk never fell into a reactionary



iconoclastic post-modern stance, and sought out the sacramental at occasional important times. In a secularised post-Nietzschean era even Christian theologians were compelled to discuss the 'death of God' seriously (Altizer 1967: 15, 136 *et passim*); Bronk appreciated that the God of the Bible (who is undeniably the God of the Jews) was no longer actively intervening and that the old categories were being superseded, but this does not amount to atheism:

THE UNMOURNED

The God that was said to be dead was a person. They die.

The god there is is there where nothing is there.

(*BOL* 278)

This is surely the position that Derrida saw the "great mystics" take, the "experience ... [of] God as being that is called NonExistence."

Although Bronk's status as a mystic is questionable and ultimately semantic, his work with dreams places him near that field. It is well documented that God has often spoken to men and women in dreams, and here the late Bronk characteristically reassesses Genesis 32: 24-30:

OTHERWISE

Jacob wrestled to be blessed. In sleeps of my own,

I don't wrestle the man or feel concern

for me or anybody watching there.

(*BOL* 254)

Precise veracity of his conclusions aside, the most important modern investigation into dreaming was certainly that of Sigmund Freud who was responsible for popularising the understanding that dreams can provide some insight into the latent activities of our minds. An enormous range of psychoanalytic

interpretations have addressed religion and religious phenomena,<sup>59</sup> but stated very simply the classic Freudian view of the matter is that religion is a deep-seated and culturally acquired expression of the need for “a sensation of eternity” (Freud 2002: 3), comparable to neurosis (Gay 1995: 429-36), with the idea of God being a projection of the powerful father figure (Freud 2008: 18-19). Albeit for Bronk “the matter was not the dream but having it” (*LS* 74), if the God that wrestled Jacob was less present in his unconscious than the figure of the Father was surely more so:

TOKEN

Even my father, dead some fifty years  
and buried away, dreamed back one night and we  
were easy and laughing together though never before.

(*BOL* 137)<sup>60</sup>

Someone else for whom the presence of the father was troublesome was Prince Hamlet, whose plight was considered infrequently but recurrently by Bronk. In this ending to the fourteen-line ‘Equals’ it is not at all clear whether the father is Bronk’s own or humanity’s, figuratively or literally:

Our father is always a ghost on the battlements  
even alive, even as we, and the battlements insecure.

If I touch you, what shall you answer me?  
Inequities. Nothing is ever the same.

(*LS* 146)

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<sup>59</sup> cf. Extended Bibliography on the subject available from the Freud Museum in London: <http://www.freud.org.uk/education/topic/10573/subtopic/40010/> [accessed 3 April 2013].

<sup>60</sup> cf. Gilmore (2006: 6, 99-100) for further discussion of Bronk’s relationship with his own father.

This same ambiguity is encountered in 'Poem for the Nineteenth of March: St Joseph's Day'<sup>61</sup> (LS 212), another poem of agnosticism where phrases "the actual / is not the real" (lines 10-11) and "Our ideas are wrong" (line 12) are variations on a recognisable theme. From the initial address "Father, foster me as your false son" to the closing assertions "we have had the falsities: / fathers not our fathers, sons not ours" (lines 18-19) the ambiguity of speaker and addressee is sustained. Referring the poem's final line (line 20) in comparison to a particular line by Stevens discussed in chapter two of this thesis we see how difficult and more rewarding Bronk's world can be when viewed against Stevens's. Where Stevens instructs us to "merely enjoy", Bronk has: "We have despaired; have loved them; and been glad".

'Poem for the Nineteenth of March' is one of the twenty-liners that make up the collection *Life Supports* (LS 206-27) which concludes the first *Collected Poems*. In the same section of the volume the metaphor of life as theatrical drama, to which Bronk often returns, receives extended treatment in 'At the Theater I' (LS 224) and 'At the Theater II' (LS 225), comparisons between the action onstage and the lives in the auditorium. The metaphor in these two poems can be straightforward – "the time is coming when we have to leave" (LS 224) – but the symbolism of the situation is sustained and effective. It has been remarked that Bronk uses few metaphors (cf. eg. Taggart 1994), but his fondness for the notion that sees all the world as a stage has been noticed (Donahue in Foster & Kimmelman 2013: 51-5). By returning to that trope over his career Bronk is able to use it variously and explore it as his world-view develops. It first emerges in 'The Method': "I try the idea: in the drama, it may be we / the actors in the drama" (LS 138), and is revisited time and again: "The deep earth and the even deeper sky / are sets not used on life's stage" (from 'Bare Boards at the Globe'; BOL 139); "isn't it grand, / even in the smaller parts, the crowd scenes, to wear those clothes, to speak those lines" (BOL 160); "Life wants so much for us to know its plays / it gets a part in one of them for us" (BOL 202); "our part / is part in dozens of plays at once" (BOL 229); on occasions, metaphors are reversed: "After the last act, the actors, dead / on the stage, come out and take a bow, alive" (BOL 247).

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<sup>61</sup> ie. The husband of Mary and foster father of Jesus.

The figure of Hamlet also features in 'The Wakeful', where the soliloquy's famous lines regarding sleep and perchance dreaming lend inspiration to Bronk's resetting the metaphor: "... Being's an outbreak, / a waking bit in the night and our sleeping again" (*BOL* 197). 'The Life' is a twenty-line musing on biography and legacy apparently prompted by Shakespeare's text: "Hamlet suggested to Horatio a gap / in Horatio's life — commanded it really, 'absent / thee from felicity,' he said —" (*BOL* 33). Very early in Bronk's published career his Shakespeare of choice was *As You Like It*, providing titles for 'The Fool in the Forest' (*LS* 3) and the short lyrics 'Thou Winter Wind' (*LS* 5) and 'Winter and Rough Weather' (*LS* 5). Overall the poet reserved his strongest affinity for Prospero (the poem 'To Prospero, Afterwards' (*LS* 76) was discussed in chapter three of this thesis in relation to post-structuralism and representation of the 'real'), although Donahue (Foster & Kimmelman 2013: 53) nominates Miranda (and cf. Gilmore (2006: 170) for a suggestion of Bronk in the position of *The Tempest's* shipwrecked sailors).

Like Prospero, Bronk understood that what we perceive as real is temporary and illusive. The magician declares "We are such stuff / as dreams are made on, and our little life / is rounded with a sleep" (*The Tempest* IV.1.154-6) and Bronk's poems on sleep and dreaming have reiterated this truth. Here is the beginning of a 9-line poem, which moves away from the dream into wider ruminations, and expresses waking life like the dream world being played out on a stage set:

(from) SUCH STUFF

Waking, the dream's detail delighted me: I saw every nail in the set.

Those are things that would have been lost; they fade rapidly.

Waking life fades the same way: detail, the set, everything.

(...)

(*BOL* 12)

While the poem observes that details in the memories of events and waking actions fade through each day-to-day, thus paralleling the dream, there is a wider reflection on mortality and perspective at work. 'Such Stuff' comes close to the start of the poems that begin to address ageing (cf. chapter seven); and with that in mind we see these lines translating into an idea of how over years and through a lifetime an individual's life might be said to fade; the third line carries a definite echo of the "sans everything" that concludes Jacques' 'All The World's a Stage' (*As You Like It* II.7.165). Yet Bronk's appreciation and expression of the human place in a broader scheme extends beyond the sideways shift from waking to dream; he can zoom out to the cosmic scale. This is how that poem ends:

... Sometimes I want the stage gone. I  
gone with it. Only the light left.

The light may be a darkness: those holes we speak of.

Light is held there condensed and heavy, can never escape.

(*BOL* 13)

Figuratively we are the stuff of dreams, but as atoms and quanta we are literally the stuff of the stars. Light was the first thing spoken into being (Genesis 1: 3), and will be here after we are gone. Yet the divine light is not all, there are "those [black] holes ... / Light is held there", and beyond our current knowing there is dark matter, something more, further away from us, and always more, further away from us.

Christian thought may have shaped Bronk's world but that did not extend to church attendance, or belief. He grew attached to the symbols, and they permeate his poems. 'Some Musicians Play Chamber Music For Us' is probably the second-longest poem that Bronk published. It is the opening poem in *Light and Dark* (1956):

...We elevate and offer up

the broken pieces chosen from our days.

So by such sacrament is the world made real,  
a true presence caught, never reduced  
to final elements, nor totalled up...

(*LS* 19)<sup>62</sup>

In the terms of the longer poem the belief and the ritual which “[make] real” are the making and hearing of music, but it is possible, even necessary, to extend these particulars to a broader world-view. Certainly the “sacrament” described here is symbolic, but assumptions are explicit in its expression. Our “responses” (*LS* 18) seem to be acts of praise, and that there is something deserving of such is therefore preferable if not actually required. By no means does this poem state that this something should or can be understood as God, but we have seen throughout this thesis that other poems definitely do so. In these few lines at least, unlike elsewhere in Bronk’s poetry, one might freely if speculatively transpose the term ‘God’ for “the world” and retain a similar sense of reverence and communion. However, to do so would be entirely misleading, contrary to the claims of Hatlen and Lisk<sup>63</sup>; for even if ‘Some Musicians Play Chamber Music for Us’ is hardly a poem about God it draws imagery from religious practice. In this poem “the world” is not ‘God’, but they are being held in comparison, and similarities between our attitudes towards the two concepts are revealed.

The five lines quoted above might (and perhaps should) be read as metaphor for the inevitable selectiveness of memory and of any form of artistry. Yet in this discussion they serve to enforce how Bronk’s poetry and the thought processes it expresses and develops were the product of a life where metaphysical understanding and conjecture were unavoidably informed by the Christian traditions that surrounded him personally and that historically contributed to American culture. William Bronk Snr “was a Methodist” (Gilmore 2006: 4) while the younger William’s mother Ethel attended “the more prestigious Episcopalian

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<sup>62</sup> Fuller discussion of ‘Some Musicians Play Chamber Music For Us’ has been offered by eg. Corman (1976: 3-8,) Kimmelman (1998: 165-7), Clippinger (2006: 94-95).

<sup>63</sup> cf. Clippinger 2001: 120 & 150, see discussion in previous chapter.

church" (Gilmore 2006, 5); "Bronk was raised as an Episcopalian" (Kimmelman 1998: 63). As an adult he was "not a Christian" (Gilmore 2006: 219), close neighbours and family do not recall his ever attending church as an adult, except for weddings and funerals,<sup>64</sup> although this may not in fact be the case (cf. Foster in Foster & Kimmelman 2013: 66). Yet as this thesis has found evidenced by the content of many poems, he remained a keen and critical reader of the Bible, and took an active interest in the faith of others. No-one with whom I have spoken recalls Bronk ever having taken the Eucharist, but between 'Some Musicians Play Chamber Music For Us', which in 1956 became essentially the first Bronk poem available in book form, and the 1999 poem 'Transubstantiation', almost his very last, the sacramental ritual of holy communion unobtrusively frames the entire oeuvre.

Witnessing a search for new symbols and rituals, from 'Sunday Morning' onwards Wallace Stevens appears to have recognised that he was living through the emergence of what Harold Bloom and others have (rightly or wrongly) called a "post-Christian" nation. Thus Stevens asked in the very last lines of 'The American Sublime': "What wine does one drink? / What bread does one eat?" (Stevens 1990: 131). The rite of Holy Communion is referenced in four or five of over 2000 poems by Bronk, but in light of the findings discussed throughout this thesis we can surely make out that his whole poetry has circled towards an answering of that question; and if the answer is 'we don't know' then the findings of his lifetime's enquiry are borne out there.

In this piece from 1976, although we find Bronk gently and presumably wilfully obscure, the contrasting paradoxical urges that we have seen typifying his particular agnosticism are unambiguous. The title's somewhat playful notion of 'all but not quite all' reminds us of the concern with "all" in 'Who Feels It' (LS 173, see discussion in chapter six), while the adverb 'however' in front of it might somehow refer us back to a specific preceding poem, although precisely what it is qualifying and how seemingly eludes paraphrasing. Just as likely, it is a cautionary qualification against all notions or ideas, spiritual or materialist, that anyone might hold. A kind of duality that allows or requires the mind and body to be considered separately is here implied though not prescribed:

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<sup>64</sup> Author's private conversations, April 2012.

HOWEVER, THE SPIRITUAL IS ALL BUT NOT QUITE ALL

Not you, your corporal. The great grace  
of bodies promises more, some ultimate.  
I want and hope the same way I hope  
for rationality, hard thought, the mind.

(LS 179)

The identity of the second person addressee is not immediately apparent, possibly it is a general reader, or perhaps an objective abstraction of the poet himself. Perhaps, in light of the discussions that have gone before, this 'you' is the difficult god of Bronk's personal agnostic theology, although I would suggest this is not the case. It could be that an exact referent does not matter. The relationship of the two halves of the first non-grammatical statement is unclear; we do not know whether the "Not" is negating only the "you" before the comma, or that which follows also. In the former case the "corporal" would stand in preference to "you", and in the latter it would be excluded as a part of it, though excluded from what is not obvious. Nor is the meaning of "your corporal" unequivocally apparent – as a noun 'corporal' is a serving rank in the army or it is the cloth on which the bread and wine of the Eucharist are placed on the altar. Rather than trying to reconcile either of these definitions with the rest of the verse, it is easier and perhaps more correct to assert that Bronk uses it in this phrase as a sort of possessive adjective, where the body's quality (that of corporeality) stands for its essence (that of being a body), and clearly this can hardly apply if the 'you' is God. Probably the poem refers to the sublime effect on the individual of perceiving and/or imagining physical human bodies (their 'great grace'), and to the religious effects of that sublimity (ie. the "want and hope" for "some ultimate"). Overall, the philosophical outlook is a form of agnosticism that simultaneously entertains conflicting possibilities, with desire perpetually present as a determining factor, as the unnamed and unknowable object of the poet's "want and hope", grammatically and logically absent from the third line, contrasts with "hard thought" that presumably excludes sentimentality and imaginative conjecture. By framing the



poem according to the Cartesian physical/spiritual dichotomy and using the adjective ‘corporal’ as shorthand for a more general noun-substance, Bronk shows his concerns and tentative half-conclusions to be in line with classic religious points of view. That the best-fitting literal meaning of “your corporal” is attribution of ownership to the linen on which communion relics stand is no mere coincidence but reveals a deep-rooted etymological connection between what happens in this poem – the poet receiving intimation that the spiritual “all” can take a physical form – and the ritualistic reminder that the Eucharist grants confirming the ultimate instance of the spiritual becoming physical in God’s Incarnation as Christ. Within its own well-developed agnostic schema, Bronk’s poetry recognises the truth of this incarnation (“Even the One God exemplified His real / trinity”, *BOL* 7), but the scenes of his devotions are not church buildings and his texts are not the words of men (My lord is the ordinary, the green / the dirt green grows in —”, *LS* 75); like the fool in the forest he finds tongues in trees and sermons in stones.

His poetry can lift us out of a post-structural meta-Eden<sup>65</sup> and place us among friends at the dining table, moving the concern from the cosmological to the domestic, from the extremes of joy and despair to contentedness and tolerable uncertainty. This genuine expression of faith and comfort does not parody the church setting but transposes it, and at its centre rests the heartfelt celebratory agnosticism that I have tried to show present throughout Bronk’s whole poetry:

#### DRAW NEAR WITH FAITH

The stew, the wine: we take these sacraments  
to our comfort. And talk awhile. What do we mean  
to say? We don’t know this, or what

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<sup>65</sup> ie. the creation of the creation myth, cf. “The Final Despair”, immediately preceding ‘Draw Near With Faith’:

To do it, I made my own image — man.  
Then I made her out of him.  
She looked like me too.  
They did it themselves. It wasn’t me.

(*LS* 184)

our comfort is. We take it anyway.

(LS 184)

'Draw near with faith' has long been one of the invitations the officiating priest may use prior to the giving of communion (*Book of Common Prayer* 1928: 75). In the worldwide Anglican Communion, including the Episcopal church attended by Ethel Bronk and her young son William, this invitation would usually be preceded by the Lord's Prayer, in turn prefaced by the Eucharistic Prayer. Since 1979 versions of that prayer may include an exhortation to "proclaim the mystery of faith" (*Book of Common Prayer* 1979: 363), at which point Presbyterian churches and others, including the Church of England, declare "Great is the mystery of faith" (*Book of Common Worship* 1993: 71). As an older man Bronk no doubt recognised and appeared to understand the truth of that statement.

Here in 'Draw Near With Faith', from *Finding Losses* (1976) which was the scene of a fairly sudden renewal of the poet's interest in 'God' (cf. chapter six), we have the definite image of the Eucharist again for the first time since 'Some Musicians Play Chamber Music for Us', and probably the first use of the word 'faith' anywhere in the collected poems. Looking back we find occasions where Bronk had described something that we possibly could call 'faith'<sup>66</sup> but he does not name it such and its object is always rather vague. Clearly that object remains unspecified here, but there can be no doubt about the religious terminology used in the approach. Human society replaces communion with God as the sacred purpose, Christ removed from the equation, the everyday "stew" replaces the holy bread or wafer, but the ritualisation of eating retains its figurative meaning as a provider of "comfort". The interrogative "What do we mean / to say?" (where the positioning of the enjambment heightens the force of the question by effectively posing it twice) has multiple connected implications, referring to mundane apparently carefree after-dinner conversation, or to deeper matters of ontology, and self-reflectively to acts of writing and to this actual poem itself; thus perfectly exemplifying a claim rightly made for Bronk's poetry in general: "in his usage the

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<sup>66</sup> That is, put somewhat simply, 'belief based on confidence before proof'. Eg. "There is a real world and it does make sense. / It is beyond our knowing or speaking but it is there." (LS 136)

idioms of ordinary talk seem, almost inadvertently, to refer to that other-worldly-realm.” (Grogan 1992: 86)

The idioms of lyric poetry are more than usually present in ‘Winter Sacrament’, from *Careless Love and Its Apostrophes*. Its first three lines contain more adjectives than successive pages of Bronk’s poetry at other times; the weight of metaphorical verbs in the third line is almost equivalent to that in whole volumes:

#### WINTER SACRAMENT

Quick pussy willows luminous against  
a distance of blue, snow paper-plain  
that sprigs are inked into, barked hawthorn brassed  
in the sun: this is your body given to me  
that I should have no other life than this.

(*BOL* 5)

The sense is of comfortable awe, a gentle personal sublime, the poet falling back on the traditional techniques of his art (“barked hawthorn brassed / in the sun”) in a celebration of nature that resonates with the Emersonian ideal yet finds its expression in the liturgy of Eucharist. Yet the concluding couplet is steeped in ambiguity and implicit paradox that would hardly seem plausible outside the body of work that Bronk has been establishing. It denies a hereafter, yet the addressee, the second person possessor of the “body”, connotes the sublime transcendence that religion seeks.

In the short section *Last Poems* that concludes *Metaphor of Trees* the possibility of transcendence through sublimation is presented without critique in a simple short verse that recalls :

#### TRANSUBSTANTIATION

Ring the little bell, sing Gloria.  
In elevation, the spirit fills the air,

is risen. We betoken in bread, in wine.

(*BOL* 298)

Bronk was an ill old man when he wrote this (Gilmore 2006: 301-14), and knew himself to be close to death (cf. Wolff in Clippinger 2001); his “spirit” would soon pass out of its physical body, the “bread” and “wine”, both metonymic and metaphorical, which had sustained him through life would change their form again. Even alongside the noncommittal shrugs he tells in other poems even closer to the end (eg. “It hasn’t even a now in eternal terms”, *BOL* 299; ‘As Though We Were Someone Else and Maybe We Are’, *BOL* 300), I can hear nothing but honesty in this verse, a genuine and even hopeful appreciation of the mystery of faith.

So full of contradiction and qualification, there is no way to paraphrase Bronk’s deeply spiritual agnosticism, just as there can be no overall unifying theory of Bronk’s poetry. It speaks for itself, the poems speak to and for one another, yet we can and do speak around it. I have little doubt that William Bronk was one of the most important religious poets of his times. His lifetime of enquiry into his own peculiar devout agnosticism has produced a unique and unparalleled body of work.

EVEN SO

The god we need to learn to love gives  
us no reason to — no knowledge, power, or other  
magnificences: being male or female  
or neither of these. If we come to love ourselves  
we need to love ourselves in the same way.

(*BOL* 70).

Faith, hope and love are at the poetry’s questioning heart. This thesis has shown one way of reading those poems.

J. M. Bober

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*shanti shanti shanti*