William Bronk and the Geography of America
by Edward Halsey Foster

Loss, William Bronk says in his poem “The Mind’s Landscape on an Early Winter Day,” “is what we live with all the time.” Not even Eliot among our major American poets was as deeply affected in his work by the sense of loss that seems to pervade our civilization as Bronk has been.

The disintegration of conventional moral and spiritual certainties in nineteenth-century America led to claims as drastic as, on the one hand, Emerson’s, that individuals could find spiritual truth intuitively in solitude and, on the other, Melville’s, that spiritual truth, if it could be known, would be unbearable and destructive. In *Moby-Dick*, the Pequod’s quest to locate spiritual meaning behind nature ends with Pip’s insanity, Ishmael’s abandonment, and Ahab’s death. Both Melville’s and Emerson’s claims imply a nation of solitary men, of “Isolatoes” as Melville called them, “each Isolato living on a separate continent of his own.” The spiritual life which had in the Middle Ages made community possible had become for Melville and Emerson the very thing which made community impossible.

Bronk understands the implications of conclusions like Melville’s and Emerson’s. The loss of a common spiritual reality and the contingent loss of community is the crucible of American experience, and Bronk is the poet
of the anguish and despair which that loss necessarily entails.

Many poets in our century have made a literary business of their anguish at the collapse of community in America, but their anguish has often seemed to come too easily. It is like the anguish of early adolescence, self-absorptive in its ferocity and conviction. The anguish of early adolescence is secretly coupled with the belief that there are ways out, and so the poet can afford to be self-indulgent and political. But Bronk's anguish is mature, and it has nothing to do with solutions. There is no way out. In "The Abnegation," he says,

> I want to be that Tantalus, unfed forever, that my want's agony declare that such as we want has nothing to say to the world; if the world wants, it nothing wants for us. (p. 120)

Bronk understands that our loss is greater than most of us may imagine, that now even our sense of time and place is no longer really tenable. All things are provisional, and we are not secure even in our imaginations. Out of these realizations, Bronk has devised a poetry of extraordinary power. As critics increasingly acknowledge, he is among the major American poets of our time.

II.

William Bronk was born February 17, 1918, in Fort Edward, New York, but grew up in the large Victorian frame house at 57 Pearl Street in the neighboring town of Hudson Falls where he still lives.

He did his undergraduate work at Dartmouth, where he studied under Sidney Cox, who taught poetry not as a technical exercise but as the expression of something totally felt and meant. Cox also taught at the Cummington School of the Arts in Cummington, Massachusetts—one of the earliest and most important summer programs for people in the arts—and Bronk joined him there in the late 1930s.

Bronk was one of the contributors to Five Cummington Poets (1939), a chapbook of works by people associated with the school. His contributions, "Pause Before Spring" and "Concert of the Ancient Instruments," were his earliest published works of consequence. He also contributed "On a Course Known Backwards" to Four Dartmouth Poets (1940), which Cox edited. At Cummington, Bronk met the poet and editor Howard Moss, who published "March, Upstate" in The New Yorker in 1949. These seem to have been Bronk's only major publications until his work began to appear regularly in Cid Corman's Origin in 1951.

Bronk served as a lieutenant in the U.S. Army from 1941-45 and then taught briefly at Union College in Schenectady, New York. For many years
he managed a business inherited from his father, the Bronk Lumber Company on Perry Street in Hudson Falls. Bronk has never married and, following the deaths of his parents, has lived much of his life alone.

Bronk’s first major publisher was Cid Corman. In 1950 Robert Creeley was looking for material for a “little magazine” he hoped to publish, and Corman asked Samuel French Morse, whom Bronk had known at Dartmouth and Cummington, to suggest poets whose work could be included. Morse suggested Bronk. The poetry impressed Corman, and when Creeley’s magazine did not materialize, Corman included Bronk’s work in the first issue of Origin.

*Origin* is among the most important magazines in American literary history. The premier issue opened with the first of Charles Olson’s Maximus poems and included work by William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley, and Richard Eberhart. Corman published Bronk’s work in many subsequent issues and in 1956 edited and published a selection of the poems under the title *Light and Dark*. This was Bronk’s first published book. (He had earlier completed a volume of poems, *My Father Photographed with Friends*, and a study of Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville, *The Brother in Elysium*, but they were not published until 1976 and 1980, respectively.)

*The World, the Worldless* (1964), Bronk’s next book, was issued by New Directions. All of his other books have been published by James L. Weil’s The Elizabeth Press except for the collected poems, *Life Supports* (1981), and the collected essays, *Vectors and Smoothable Curves* (1983), both of which were issued by North Point Press.

Until recently, Bronk’s work was little known. His books appeared in elegantly printed, but limited and expensive, editions, and they were seldom reviewed. Major critical attention began about a dozen years ago. In 1972 *Grossteste Review* devoted an issue to Bronk’s work. 4 Charles Tomlinson, Gilbert Sorrentino, and Cid Corman were among the contributors. In 1976 an issue of *Credences* included an interview with Bronk and commentary on his work by Robert Bertholf. 5 A detailed study by Felix Stefanile was published the following year in *Parnassus*. 6 Important reviews by Richard Elman and Michael Heller appeared in the *New York Times*. 7 And there were many others. 8 The single book-length study to date is Cid Corman’s *William Bronk* (Carrboro: Truck Press, 1976).

The publication of *Life Supports* confirmed Bronk’s growing reputation as a poet of considerable importance. There were enthusiastic reviews in many of the major journals, and in 1982, it received the American Book Award. According to a reviewer in the *Nation*, “Poetry, for me, this year, was a single book: the collection of all of William Bronk’s poems . . . . He is, at this moment, our most significant poet.” 9

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III.

There are several reasons why it took so long for Bronk to receive the recognition he deserves. In the first place, his poetry has little in common with that of the so-called “academic poets”—poets, that is, whose work is marked essentially by technical virtuosity and who were the dominant force in American poetry at the time Bronk began to publish. Nor can he be easily grouped with experimental poets of the past two or three generations; among other things, his is very much a poetry of abstractions, while they have generally followed William Carlos Williams’ famous dictum “no ideas but in things.”

Generally the more successful and better known experimental poets have also followed Williams in using colloquial, spoken American English, its rhythms, syntax, and vocabulary. Bronk’s language, on the other hand, can be “textbook” English; his syntax and vocabulary are at times highly Latinate. His sentences can become a claustrophobic tangle of appositive and dependent phrases and clauses. He will use the subjunctive and add such provisos as “it seems” and “I think.” He will also qualify, adding or implying “but also this,” “and this,” and he will present an argument only to undermine it or show it in a paradoxical light. His point is to be as precise as the language and the poetic conventions he has adopted permit, and the result is the English of a highly learned but thoroughly unpretentious man, disarmingly honest, precise in his diction.

Bronk is unlike many of his contemporaries in choosing to stay, at least marginally, within the limits of traditional prosody. While many of his contemporaries have looked for new poetic forms imbedded in the structure of the spoken language, Bronk has experimented with such traditional forms as the quatrain (in his book Finding Losses), tercet (The Force of Desire), and sonnet (To Praise the Music). Some of his early work, such as “The Arts and Death,” involves complex metrical experiments, but most of the poems tend to employ simply a fairly regular four or five beat line.

Perhaps the central reason it took so long for Bronk to receive serious critical attention is his subject matter and its attendant emotions. His poetic vision is intellectually intricate and often entails profound depression and despair; nor will he compromise that vision. When he is humorous, the humor can be sardonic or bitter. There is a great refusal simply to please, to use language merely to entertain.

Fundamentally, the poems restate again and again a small number of observations or philosophic positions, but the poems are less concerned with them than with attitudes which they evoke, and Bronk’s major achievement lies in the careful modulation of emotion ranging from
pathos to compassion to anguish to depression and despair. Bronk has said that his poetry concerns things that we conceptualize only to find them unreal, beyond apprehension, and it records the experience of that discovery. It is in the record of that experience, the emotions involved, that his poetry's great power is centered.

Many of Bronk's early poems are the meditations of a man with extraordinary insight and emotional force, terrifyingly aware of the limits and deceits of his human situation. Gradually, however, Bronk abandoned meditative poetry for a more public form of expression, a poetry of statement, and his work became increasingly didactic. The phrasing became more formal, syntactically complex. The result can be a poem with a highly formal syntactical pattern possessing the quality of intricate inlaid work.

IV.

Bronk's philosophic positions are the excuse, perhaps the origin, for his poetry, not the poetry itself. They serve the function of, for example, Dante's medieval theology and Yeats' occultism—as systematic constants, that is, against which and with which the poet can measure the complexities and ambiguities of human behavior. However, just as it is important to know something of Aquinas to read Dante, it is essential to have some understanding of Bronk's philosophic positions as a unit when reading his poetry. The poems deal individually with those positions but imply at times a collective understanding of them. (In this regard, it could be argued that the poems are all interrelated, parts of one grand work rather than separate, individual achievements.)

Bronk is an exceedingly well read man, and in his thinking, we sense a sympathy with the ideas of men as various as Schopenhauer, Gödel, Wittgenstein, and Whitehead. But it does not matter whether his philosophic positions are original with him or whether they are borrowed from others; in the poetry, they are totally his own. Nor finally does it matter whether or not Bronk's philosophic system is logical and consistent; what poetry offers, after all, is not a consistent set of ideas but, within individual poems, consistency of poetic vision. Essential though it is to understand Bronk's ideas, the excellence of his poetry is elsewhere.

Bronk has written two introductions to his philosophic system, The New World and A Partial Glossary. The first is more comprehensive and easier to read. The second may be too condensed for anyone who does not know the poetry already. The essays in The New World are as elegantly constructed as Bronk's best poems. Based on visits to Inca and Mayan
sites—Machu Picchu, Tikal, Palenque, and Copan—they are meditations on history and geography, time and space.

*The New World* begins with a discussion of Machu Picchu. Although there is no evidence that the world of the Incas was influenced by European civilization, there are startling similarities between their world and ours—that is, we can understand their world not only archeologically (by adding up the ruins of their world and seeing if we can find in them signs of political and social orders like ours) but intuitively as well. This civilization left no written record, no recorded history, but it can easily be seen that it was a civilization with an aesthetic sense like ours. We see it in their stonework, in the patterns of the environment that they built for themselves. Man is apparently the product of far more than his historical situation, and this is, for Bronk as it must be for everyone, astonishing evidence: “as though we were to find an algebra among cats.” The evidence is enough to allow one to investigate these ancient American civilizations, Inca and Mayan, not as an archeologist but as a poet, drawing conclusions as much from intuitions as from known facts.

At Tikal, perhaps the oldest of the great Mayan cities, Bronk wonders about the source of “time”—the fact that every civilization invents its own units of time (hours, weeks, months), its own way, then, of envisioning and, therefore, inventing future and past. But here, as at Machu Picchu, there is the awareness of a link between civilizations, a link that is fundamentally human, and it is the awareness that whether we are dealing with Tikal or our world, we are confronted with the sense of “a continuing present,” something which does not depend on units of time, or measurement of any sort, to be realized. That “continuing present” is not, like the past, invented; it exists outside the individual civilization and is essential to the human condition.

At Palenque, which is famous for the great variety of its Mayan architecture, Bronk is concerned with the perception of space, the ways in which it is organized to give us an awareness of place, direction, geography. But he also finds that once a civilization has established a geography, it is abandoned. Man creates a place for himself in the universe, imposes a map on the land, only to abandon that geography as if the point lay not in the geography, the sense of place itself, but rather in its creation.

Copan is Bronk’s final example. This was the Mayan center of learning, the “library” of the culture. Bronk indicates that Mayan history, after all, was only an invention (like the sense of time on which it depends), and it does not outlive its culture; it is not real in an absolute sense. “Whatever we are,” he insists, “we are not historical.” Nonetheless, if time and history evaporate with the cultures of which they are essential components, man
himself persists; there is somehow a constant, something that does not vanish with civilizations.

Bronk suggests that whatever we create has behind it some constant force which lends to all civilizations their similarities (that all civilizations, for example, have a geography, however radically distinct from each other they may be), but that force is beyond our control: "I think we are totally unable to affect it." What began for Bronk as an amazed awareness that there is something basically the same in all men and all civilizations ends with the possibility that this sameness is beyond our control and drives us to build civilizations which are inherently imperfect, constructions of imagined time and space—constructions which invariably destroy themselves. We are shaped by forces beyond our control or our doing. All we ultimately know is this. Beyond, all is impenetrable silence.

V.

We imagine the world to have spacial and temporal boundaries, but in fact, says Bronk, it is "shapeless and timeless." We never see things for what they are. Like Melville in The Confidence Man, Bronk sees the world as a complex charade, a game in which no one knows the rules or the true identity of the players. In "The Mask the Wearer of the Mask Wears," he characterizes our world as a series of masks and masques, performances and disguises, nothing ever turning out to be what it seemed. The means and terms out of which that world is created, "reason, time and place," permit, according to "The Receptors," "a multiple lie." (p. 108)

"Boolean Algebra: X²=X" argues the nature of the charade in terms of mathematics and science. Man, the poem claims, desires form, order, at any cost, and out of this come the structures of mathematics and science. Men believe that there are laws of nature, but nature has no laws: it simply is. Men assume that there are laws for nature just as there must be laws for civilization. The form, the order, the law of nature is the abstraction men devise, but nature is oblivious of it. The process of abstract scientific reasoning is, by implication, solipsistic—a means by which men trap themselves in what are assumed to be analogues for nature but which turn out to be thoroughly self-referential. "Geometers," Bronk writes in "On Diverse Geometries," "all measures measure themselves, none measures the world." (p. 101)

Although we can not escape from the charade, there are moments when we can at least sense the existence, if not the nature, of something which precedes it and out of which it grows. Bronk calls this the Real, and its force in our lives is unrelenting. It is always there, but we seldom recognize it.

In "The Lover as Not the Loved," Bronk defines man as "a feeling
instrument," not, that is, as a free agent able to effect his own destiny. (p. 167) He is part of a process greater than himself, and its purpose is what he unwittingly fulfills.15 But his sense of the process, which is the way the Real affects us, is limited largely to sleep, dreams, the visionary corners of life. It is, of course, the same power which Bronk tries to define in _The New World._

In "The Apartness," Bronk argues that failure to know whatever is Real results from some flaw in the business of knowing, and in "Rational Expression," he says that "What we know is not true and what is true/ is beyond our knowing." (pp. 164, 210) One of Bronk's metaphors for the force of the Real in our lives is light, the means by which the world is seen but which is not the world itself. Our common sense world may be a charade, a continuum of lies, but the light, which lets us see the charade and so brings it to life, is real. In "The Real Surrounding: On Canaletto's Venice," Bronk argues that the source and subject of a Canaletto painting and its power is not the city of Venice—the great city of illusions—but "the luminous air," the light that makes the illusions possible. (p. 112)

Bronk generally refers to this power, metaphorically understood as light, as "desire," and desire is what makes possible form, order, all the apparent lies that constitute this charade in which we live and from which we derive our identity. Bronk's concept of desire suggests Schopenhauer's concept of the will. Schopenhauer argued that what we call the world is really the expression of will, a grand primal force or demiurge, but he also believed that will does not have a specific direction or object. Will simply drives man to act, only to be dissatisfied and so to try something else; no conclusion is ever satisfactory. For Bronk, on the other hand, desire certainly has its purpose. We simply can not know what that purpose is.

Desire manifests itself in the creation of form much as wind becomes visible in the movement of leaves on a tree. In "The Fiction of Shape," Bronk says, "The Form is a tool to tell, an abstract of, not itself, but of that desire it tells about." (p. 146) Some forms, however, are apparently clearer indications of their origin, desire. Music has a particular value as an indication of that origin.16 Above all perhaps, there is poetry.

On a simple level, poetry keeps us aware, as Bronk says in "The Preference," that there are things far more important than the obligations of everyday life. (pp. 173-74) More importantly, poetry has an interior life, a vitality not present in a discipline like history.17 But one imagines that, for Bronk, poetry's greatest value must lie in its use of metaphor; metaphor can not tell us what the Real is, but it can point toward it.18 So, too, Bronk's poems can not tell us what the Real is, but they can give us a general sense of the direction in which it is found.
Bronk may remind us of the Buddhist who knows that words and the Real are never the same, that in effect the word cannot be made flesh, and all we can do is point toward the truth, not name it. Creating form, creating the poem, might be seen as a religious act, though Bronk does not say this explicitly; in creating the poem, the poet may point to, and certainly gives shape to, whatever it is that determines the world. The poet is in effect present at the creation.

But even this is at best a partial victory and needs qualification:

> These poems that, once, I thought might be support and comfort to me, come bad times, are now an emptiness. I need to know that all their strength is only as a strength fills them, some strong life, and my strong life is down as living things show life so, . . .

(“The Destroyer Life,” p. 213)

Just as strength leaves man and his civilization, so do the poems, like history and all forms, die.

VI.

It might be instructive to compare Bronk’s philosophic positions with those of such major twentieth-century philosophers as Whitehead and Wittgenstein, but while affinities would certainly be found, Bronk’s work is actually much closer to that of Emerson, Melville, and other writers of the American Renaissance. In important ways, his work involves a synthesis and reevaluation of ideas and observations which they developed. The Brother in Elysium, dedicated to Sidney Cox and completed in 1946 (although not published until 1980), stands at the beginning of Bronk’s work, and in it we can see Bronk’s thinking taking shape. The book examines Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville to find what they tell us about society and friendship, and in Bronk’s observations and the things he chooses to emphasize we can find, in primitive form, various ideas which have become central to his poetry.

He begins his study of Thoreau with the statement that Thoreau’s “faith in the common interests of man was so strong that he knew that following the dictates of his own conscience would not make him an enemy of society.” One corollary to this, which Bronk does not develop but which is implicit in both his work and Thoreau’s, is that man thinking and working alone is by no means merely solipsistic or self-deluding; there are “common interests” from which we all proceed. Thoreau’s ideal was the self-sufficient man, he who welcomes solitude and silence, not institutions and laws, as the origin of truth. Friendship in turn is not a matter of getting
along with others, a purely social function; friendship arises from a mutual ability "to nourish and care for the spirit." Thoreau in short provides the example of the man who does not exile himself from society and is no misanthrope yet understands that truth is not a social or communal matter; you don't reach truth by way of a committee. If there is an ideal community, it is a group of people thinking and working alone—the antithesis of what community has generally been assumed to be.

Thoreau's insistence that truth originates in silence has special interest for Bronk: "silence [for Thoreau] is the world of potentialities and meanings beyond the actual and expressed ...." It was the well from which Thoreau got the water to slake his thirst for truth. But the tragedy was this: that he could not transform truth into statement: "...in spite of his earnest attempt to translate the silence into English, it would remain little better than a sealed book." Looking forward, we see Bronk's awareness that the process out of which form rises can at best be understood metaphorically; the Real is something to which we can point but which we can never know.

In Whitman, Bronk locates "one great cosmic and elemental passion," a grand desire which finds its expression for him in death and love. Whitman's concept of desire as the great primal force is not Bronk's, but the similarities are evident. It is as if Whitman were an anticipation of Bronk at his most profound.

Finally, in Melville Bronk notes that good and evil cannot be separated from each other, that moral warfare is inevitable and permanent. Nature, on the other hand, is serene: "Silence alone was the only voice of God." We are back with Thoreau's fundamental realization. Man's own serenity, like Billy Budd's at the moment of his death, comes from acceptance, and just such acceptance marks many of Bronk's most recent poems. One wonders if Bronk himself believes that acceptance is the only antidote for our despair at the discovery of what the world really is; stated another way, is despair the price we pay for refusing to take the world as it really is? Perhaps if we can't believe in the world, it may in some ways be best to act as if we could.

Bronk's ideas also have roots in Emerson's work. In effect, Emerson claimed that nature was a manifestation of spirit and its symbol. If approached intuitively, nature reveals the spiritual purpose behind things. The physical world is not itself what finally matters; what matters is the spirit it represents. Spiritual truth is not something that can be taught by a church, school, or other institution; it reveals itself to the individual in solitude.

Dealing with these ideas in the chapter titled "The Masthead" in Moby-
Dick, Melville suggested that the person who opens himself to revelation of this sort will at the same time lose his identity, his sense of himself. Spiritual truth is seen as inherently destructive. But Emerson welcomed his obliteration of the self: in his famous description in *Nature* of the transcendental experience, he said, "I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance." The moments of highest awareness, of spiritual illumination, involve the destruction of the self and an ecstatic acceptance of solitude.

In his search for spiritual origins, Bronk, too, finds solitude and loses the self, which appears as only another mask. But the loss of the self is not accompanied by Emerson's sublime spiritual awareness. Bronk follows Emerson in renouncing the world and the self, but in turn he has only what he calls "the inference" of something more. ("The Inference," p. 158)

And "the inference" is *only* that; whatever spiritual truth there is is beyond our understanding. In "The Mind's Limitations Are Its Freedoms," he says,

...there are always messages we find
—in bed, on the street or anywhere, and the mind
invents a translation almost plausible;
but it hasn't any knowledge of the language at all. (p. 135)

These lines are surely a critique of Emerson's position, but they may also be a sardonic comment on Whitman's statement in "Song of Myself," "I find letters from God dropped in the street, and every one is signed by God's name, And I leave them where they are, for I know that others will punctually come forever and ever."29

It is more difficult to place Bronk in the context of twentieth-century American literature than in the context of the American Renaissance. As we have seen, his prosody and the determined abstractness of his work are at odds with the work of many of the best American poets of this century. Nonetheless, in the early poetry, there are occasional echoes of other poets. "The Fool in the Forest," for example, sounds very much like Frost. (p. 12) But these early influences were either soon discarded or so thoroughly absorbed as to be, in the poems themselves, individually indistinguishable.

It is tempting to compare Bronk with another poet whose major work appeared in *Origin*, Charles Olson. Both poets began their work with close studies of nineteenth-century American literature, Bronk in *The Brother in Elysium*, Olson in *Call Me Ishmael*. Both were fascinated by Mayan civilization and used it as a measure against which the modern world could be understood. Both recognized the loss of community at the center of our
civilization, but Olson felt that community or "polis" as he calls it was still a viable possibility. It is true that Olson spoke favorably of Bronk's poetry, but Bronk has said that Olson's never appealed to him. Whatever the similarities between the two men, there are greater differences.

As critics have repeatedly suggested, the one modern predecessor whose influence repeatedly surfaces in Bronk's work is Wallace Stevens. Bronk's poem "Her Singing" is very close to the sense and at times the phrasing of Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West," and there are other Bronk poems where an influence can be at least distantly sensed. In fact, Bronk has said that he stopped reading Stevens because that poetic voice was so overwhelming, so dominating that his own poetry was becoming only a kind of imitation. Bronk, however, has also said that he does not know where he got the idea of the world as fictive which is also central to Stevens, and indeed Bronk could have gotten it from Plotinus or Zen Buddhism or from any one of a thousand other sources, including his own experience.

In any case, Stevens' poetry is far more sensual, colorful, and physical than Bronk's, and there are very few places where one might confuse the work of one for the work of the other.

Bronk is finally no one's disciple. He has certainly immersed himself in the work of some of his predecessors, but his poetry is far more than a synthesis of, or comment on, theirs. He deserves a place in their company—but on his own ground.

VII.

Near the end of Walden, Thoreau tells us that "In a pleasant spring morning all man's sins are forgiven .... The sun shines bright and warm this first spring morning, recreating the world ...." The joy that Thoreau felt appears occasionally in Bronk, but while it is characteristic of Thoreau, it is rare in Bronk. His dark poetic vision has little to do with morning and spring.

If a single image could be called characteristic of Bronk's poetry, it would be the light of winter—that cold, penetrating, and uncompromising light that tells us how little of life survives, is permanent. Bronk, confronting an impermanent world, asks what has meaning, what is it we really feel or know, but he finds no answers, is left only with "the inference."

"The mind is always lost and gropes its way,— lost, even when the senses seize the world and feed as though there never could be loss. It is this winter mind, the ne'erdowell that never finds a plan, that tells us see. And we open our eyes and feel our way in the dark.

("The Mind's Landscape on an Early Winter Day," p. 28)
Bronk, after all, is trapped by the world he critiques; if he would communicate, he must use "reason, time and place" to phrase his arguments. He must use reason to undo reason. He shows that while reason tries to locate or establish permanence—to find "laws of nature" or "God"—nothing holds except "the inference." What one generation believes are "laws of nature" the next qualifies or discards—as in similar fashion Bronk qualifies Emerson. But reason remains to devise new detours, promising a direct route to the Real although never fulfilling the promise. Bronk never compromises this vision, never offers even the possibility of permanent catharsis or relief. He is too honest to leave us anywhere but where we began—with the sense of permanent loss, the sense of a civilization built on sand.

But for the moment there is at least the poem to sustain us, never valued for its own sake but valued as a means of approaching the Real, of getting beyond the accumulated strictures of history and geography. Poetic form is a window to the Real, but the glass in that window is opaque. The cold light shines through, and we know that something is on the other side, but what that is, we can never know. □

Notes
5Vol. II (May, 1976), 9-11.
12Ibid., p. 20.
13Ibid., p. 35.
14Ibid., p. 43.
15This is a frequent idea in Bronk’s work. A representative example of its use is in his essay “Desire and Denial,” *A Partial Glossary*, in *Vectors and Smoothable Curves: Collected Essays* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983), p. 50.

16See, for example, “Some Musicians Play Chamber Music for Us,” pp. 25-27, and Bertholf, p. 25.

17The distinction between history and poetry is the subject of “The Lives of Poets,” pp. 29-30.

18For Bronk’s definition of metaphor, see Bertholf, p. 21, and “Utterances,” p. 161, and “The Signification,” p. 182.

19In Corman, p. 93, Bronk is quoted as saying that he has been reading Rush Rhees, a Wittgenstein disciple. Bronk recognizes similarities between Rhees and himself, but there is no indication that he (Bronk) was influenced by Wittgenstein. If there is a source outside Bronk’s own experience for his ideas, it is likely to be found in American writings.


26Melville, pp. 961-62.


28See, for example, “The Belief in the Self Abandoned,” p. 44.


30Bertholf, p. 17.

31This has been repeatedly argued, most fully by Taggart in “Reading William Bronk,” cited above.

32Bertholf, p. 15.
