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A JOURNAL OF
CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND POETICS

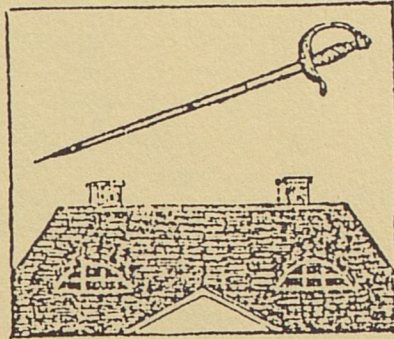
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WILLIAM BRONK

poems - conversations - bibliography

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"George Oppen, the Last Days"



GILBERT SORRENTINO

"Seven Gaudy Poems"

JOSEPH DONAHUE

"Desire"

number 2

\$5

Spring 1989

TALISMAN

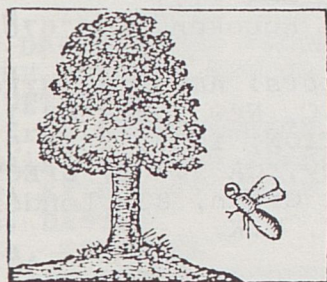
A JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND POETICS

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Each issue of the new **TALISMAN** centers on the poetry and poetics of a major contemporary poet and includes a selection of new work by other important contemporary writers.

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WILLIAM BRONK

"a brilliant poetry, and his alone"

--George Oppen

This issue of TALISMAN is dedicated to William Bronk. In addition to new work, it includes conversations with him, an essay on his aesthetics, and two poems earlier published in That Tantalus. Many of the other poets represented here are among his "co-workers"--his publishers, critics, and friends.

Bronk studied under Sidney Cox at Dartmouth and the Cummington School of the Arts. Cox, whose other students included Philip Booth, Reuel Denney, and Samuel French Morse, was the author of one of the earliest books on Robert Frost and, as director of the Cummington School, had much influence in the shaping of American poetry.

Bronk attended Harvard briefly as a graduate student, served as a lieutenant in the army during World War II, taught for a year at Union College, and then returned to the village of Hudson Falls, New York, where he had grown up, and where until recently he managed a fuel company established by his father.

In 1950 Morse showed some of Bronk's poems to Cid Corman, and Corman showed them to Robert Creeley, who asked to include them in a little magazine he was then planning. When the magazine did not materialize, Corman published the poems in the first issue of Origin. Much of Bronk's best early work appeared in Origin and in Creeley's Black Mountain Review. Corman also published Bronk's first book, Light and Dark (1956).

Poets have long recognized Bronk's achievement. As the bibliography in this issue indicates, most of the important critical work on him has been done by poets. His work has been celebrated by Olson, Oppen, Sorrentino, Carruth, and many others. In addition, most

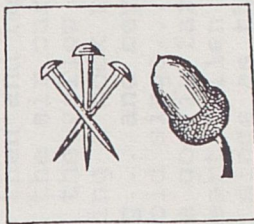
of his books have been issued by small presses established or managed by poets: Burning Deck, Grosseteste, Origin, New Directions, The Elizabeth Press, and so forth.

One of the great unpublished books of our time must certainly be Seven Significant Poets, the anthology in which Charles Tomlinson planned to include Bronk, Laughlin, Niedecker, Oppen, Rakosi, Reznikoff, and Zukofsky--all of whom were recognized by poets long before they received much attention from academics and professional critics.

Like the others who would have been represented in Tomlinson's anthology, Bronk, it is true, has in recent years received some recognition from the academy and the critical establishment (Life Supports was, after all, given the American Book Award in 1981.), but his work is still not represented in standard anthologies, nor is it discussed in most recent academic studies of contemporary poetry.

But that sort of recognition will come with time. What matters and what has always mattered is a poet's reputation among other poets, and the decision here was made long ago, and the verdict is absolutely clear.

--Edward Foster



Burt J. Kimmelman

5.2.87 WAITING FOR DIANE AT THE KLEE SHOW
MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

If in the space
there are 2

lines, let one be
the wild happiness

the edge

measures . And if
there are faces,

we are
their round eyes,

or the hat the foot

the finger all the lighted
extremities

there . if
in the warm

light we must be

them, then we must
be

them. Let
the o

in 'oh you'

mean we are
here

beyond
any form .

Josephine Jacobsen

HERE

(for Roy and Bee)

I am leaning on the windowsill by the sea-flats,
the Sound then and beyond it the sea; a gull
is riding the air currents and small and far off
people on the yellow flats are stooping to dig:
I am holding a book that says...of hammered gold and gold
enamelling... and beyond the wall a voice clear as dew and
rich as gold sings... adieu, adieu... commending their small
table to a god in farewell; the lips are dust, and the throat,
and the heart fallen too, but the voice on its thread
sings and sings as the gull rides over the yellow bands
where the small figures bend and dig, and the letters form
...or set upon a golden bough...and this, all of this happens
at once: the gull's close feathers, the figures, invisible
fingers and the voice of the dead singing as I breathe.

THE CODGERS

Sweet codgers at one with the world, at one with pain, at one with the enemy truckling down to them, so that they, lazy lotophagoi, lie in stocks of laughter, vodka, mescaline, rich randy cigars, and they nod, that's it, like sandpipers nodding, bobbing on the ice and frozen sand, my friends!--come to my bosom and bottoms up.

Yeah, fuck the youngling, let her lie full fucked and comatose when four bells ring a strangled clang in the dingy tied to the pandemonium tree. And the red and yellow parrot hollers his rage over and over, a litany in the mandanor shrub. See, look, listen, bare your senses to the betrayal of you, how the witches will divide up our consciences and throw them barfing up into the winds with hysterical gestures, and the sun rises black at the end of the vale, the cowed inbred dragon screws the jackass that gobbles down the purple bougainvillea in his lambent orgasm. Another leaf, dear friends, another toke, let us sizzle the cake of the black seed in our crude stone pipes, for a vapor like oxygenated godship scents the wind of this day of our last triumph in the only actual world of betrayal!

Robert Creeley

LATER
for Bill Bronk

Time seems to have been an unintentionally stable disposition of some curiously outside factor, that stayed there no matter--

and while my own so-called plans were variable even when I hardly wanted them so, still this ticking was always out there despite no one knew quite where.

So company in that fact was immensely helpful, and Bill's wisely particularizing surmise especially so, like he looked and beheld it all ironic-- and returned "time" to being simply chronic.

[August 16, 1988]

Gilbert Sorrentino

SEVEN GAUDY POEMS
for William Bronk

A wanting, a desire,
the bente moone with hire hornes. Pale,
how odd that (They have this orange hair!)
white moons are blank, blank moons
dreams of Kansas.

Is the eye interested in

what is? The History of Ideas

1: "Slid down the zeppelin and cut his rump."

This cottony and juiceless orange is
dry. Crackle of leaves,
the rushing darkness of the summer evening,
nothing is the thing that rhymes with orange.

The current cant is "needs,"
is "loose in heaven"
to go with... Their cruel northern faces
(over Córdoba) are blanco yet.

City steaks:

color: or the lack of it:

one orange,

2: the back door opens, cold air. Bottle of Worcestershire.

This cottony and juiceless orange
blown erratically over the rusty grass
across the dirt road from the white farmhouse--
who knows it, knows it. Even in Laredo...

What does one need
with her face averted? The woman,
set in a kind of fixed intelligence:
when Flaubert looked up he saw the

dead steers and flies.

Is black a color? Or how about white?

And it deals with it how?

"3: Snow halfway up the door, the unpaved street,
of course."

Ice, thin and fine. A crystal,
a white wooden church, its yard overgrown,
and in Laredo church bells chime and chime.

4.

To live,
tends her roses:
That. Writes no poems. God help us,
same moon. Blanc. These things prove...

Flies to Kansas City,
black and white, whatever they say.
Six orange...
4 dead in Jersey City, ruptured aneurism.

What did one expect the world to be?
Luminous in the bleached sunlight?
With sweet grasses? And in the dark, blue air
and orange twilight over Joliet?

Ah, but what does one---?
Her pale hands:
they go down to the sea. With those faces
that rhyme is necessary.

Dreams of steak
is always chic.
What of its silent peripheries?
5? (Independence Day he smokes his grampa's pipe.)

The world is eminently fair.
The birds are gone, save for the Blue Dazzle,
the slow scribbling of the Fireflies.
How is it that I have come out here?

Desire? Submerge the ego.
We can almost see right through the moon
that orange hair, calling to us to come, come!
For instance, a dance

the pilot steers down.
"But chic," says Baudelaire, "is
--have a orange?--
6 Packards and broken hearts."

What a bitter taste that leaves
of the jays.
An old black Ford with stained grey seats,
where nothing rhymes with orange.

7.

In the image of a knight,
that perfect blue. Delicate coin
(all bag and baggage) and with sighs of thanks
is a stance.

Who? The "Kansas." City,
a memory of the hand and not the mind.
But do the intellectual
7, who the toothy child in glasses, with....? An orange cat:
if one could only rail against it.
Thin smoke, white against azure,
parked in the massing shadows. The shadows.
I have your photo in a black silk dress.

CONVERSATIONS WITH WILLIAM BRONK

[The following conversations were recorded in July and August 1988 at the poet's home in upstate New York and were edited later that summer and fall.]

July:

EF: The Brother in Elysium [Bronk's book on Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville, written in the late 1930s and early 1940s] must be one of the first times a poet came to terms with the great nineteenth-century American writers. For that matter, I don't think there were many scholars working on them then. How did you get involved in that project?

WB: As I said in the letter, I took a course when I was in graduate school at Harvard--a course in the Concord people, I think it was. I've forgotten now what it was called--"Transcendentalists" or something of that sort, and it was from a man who should have been family, but it was a terrible, dull course. I had read certainly Thoreau and Melville before that. I hadn't read much Whitman, and I hadn't thoroughly read Thoreau or Melville, but I decided that they were interesting people, and in that sense I couldn't continue with graduate school--I couldn't take any more of it. And that [writing The Brother in Elysium] would be a sort of equivalent project that I could do which might substitute for it.

EF: You were at Harvard in the late thirties?

WB: Well, I was there in the fall of '38, and I left in January of '39.

EF: Why did you leave?

WB: As far as I was concerned, literature wasn't treated in any sense as an art. Literature was a scholarly subject in the same way that chemistry or economics may have been. And the idea that literature was an art was a

totally foreign idea. And I decided that, no, I couldn't do that.

EF: What kind of courses did you take?

WB: I took a course in satire, and I had that transcendentalist course or whatever it was. Of course, I had Anglo-Saxon, and you don't expect that to be . . . but that was as much a literature course as any of the others were. Primarily it was a course in Anglo-Saxon grammar. But what else did I have? I had eighteenth-century prose.

EF: Had you read Thoreau, Emerson, Melville, Whitman earlier when you were at Dartmouth?

WB: I know I had read some Thoreau and Melville at Dartmouth, and I may have read some Whitman. I don't know. I never had such a course because we didn't take English courses. We had what were called English honors, and at that time, which is not true now, you were assigned a teacher, and you started with very early English literature and worked your way up, and there would be one other or maybe two other students in your group. You'd meet once a week. You'd say, well, this week we're doing Chaucer or Whitman, and we would meet one evening with the teacher, and we would each read a paper that we had done on what we had read that week.

EF: Who were you doing it with?

WB: I did it junior year with. . . . He was a kind of poet. He had gone to one of the Oxford colleges after he went to Dartmouth, and he had won the principal poetry prize while he was at Oxford, and I think that was sort of the end of him as far as writing poetry was concerned. A very nice man. Had something of a problem with alcohol. We would sometimes get a telephone call--don't come this evening--I've got a touch of ptomaine. And he always offered us a beer, and the beer was always in a glass that smelled very strongly of gin. And shortly after that, he was a suicide. I think he was a notably unhappy man.

And then senior year I had David Kelly Campbell Lambuth.

EF: Well, where does Sidney Cox [to whom The Brother in Elysium is dedicated] come in?

WB: Sidney was the writing teacher, and just by chance I had him for freshman English, and then I took his writing course sophomore year, and sophomore year I also took a course with him in the novel. But those are the only courses. I occasionally went and sat in on regular courses. I went sometimes to Chaucer, and there was a very distinct personality that taught Shakespeare, a colorful man--Walter Brooks Drayton Henderson. And he was an experience. I used to go and listen to him sometimes.

EF: It seems to me that The Brother in Elysium marks a great divergence from what people were doing with American literature at that time.

WB: I didn't know. I probably didn't know what most people were doing with American literature at that time and then probably didn't care either as far as that goes--although I had some familiarity with what [F. O.] Matthiessen and [Howard Mumford] Jones were doing, but what I didn't know about what they were doing didn't interest me. And one thing about the honors program at Dartmouth was that it was, particularly with the two men that I had for tutors, it was an individual thing, and you were not necessarily expected to do the conventional thing. It was a very free program, and I can remember particularly senior year with Lambuth instead of a scholarly paper--maybe it was the Keats paper--I wrote a poem. So that I wasn't prepared for the type of academia that I found at Harvard, and it was a shock to me that I couldn't deal with that sort of thing because I had my degree at Dartmouth with highest distinction. I was the leading scholar in the English department, and that was the largest academic department at my time at Dartmouth. The most majors were in English, and I was among other things not only disappointed at Harvard, but I was incompetent. I couldn't do that kind of thing. And I think it was a very good thing that I couldn't. And probably that would have been true not only at Harvard but at various other universities that were giving graduate programs. I wouldn't have been capable of

getting a graduate degree because it was an approach that was just not my nature at all.

EF: So then you did it your own way, wrote the book . . . and finished it in 1946?

WB: Yes, '46.

EF: When was it finally published?

WB: Oh, much, much later--maybe 1970.

EF: It was published before it appeared in Vectors and Smoothable Curves?

WB: Yes, it was published simply as The Brother in Elysium. Jim [James Weil of The Elizabeth Press] published it, and I think it sold maybe five copies. I've got packages of them up in the attic like Thoreau with A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers.

EF: It's very unfortunate, I think, that it wasn't published in 1946. It's an extremely important answer to what the scholars were and, for that matter, still are doing. I think it was in '47 that Olson's Call Me Ishmael came out.

WB: Pretty much at that time, yes.

EF: Another absolute refusal to go along with the academic manner.

WB: I never read it.

EF: Never? It's a wonderful book. The prose alone is marvelous.

WB: Well, I probably thought I'm not going to read his Melville book. Nobody will publish mine. And then it was only later that I had some correspondence with Olson.

EF: Any correspondence on Melville?

WB: I don't think so. I think mainly on Central America, because he had at that time--I never see it mentioned anymore--but at that time, he was very interested in pre-Columbian civilization, and I think the first time I was going to go down to Central America, I wrote to him and asked him, and he gave me names of people I should see, and I'm pretty sure that this was how I happened to talk with and become quite friendly, when I was there, with the man who was the curator of the museum in Guatemala City, a very nice man. I'm not sure of that, but I know there were people that he suggested I see. I think in some cases I was able to, and in some cases I wasn't.

EF: I think there's going to be a new edition of [Olson's] The Mayan Letters if there isn't already. You'd read those?

WB: No, I hadn't read those. In the early issues of Origin, there were some things, and he had a grant from some foundation to go back and do archaeological studies which I think he never did, but I think Black Mountain . . . Is Black Mountain operating again?

EF: I don't think so.

WB: I don't think so either, but someone was insisting to me the other day that, oh, yes, and I don't think that is possible.

EF: The review may be published again. But not the school.

WB: Oh, maybe that was it. Who's doing that?

EF: I don't know, but I may have seen it around. I'm not sure.

Let's see. There's something else about The Brother in Elysium I meant to ask. Why did you choose those particular three writers--why not Emerson?

WB: For some reason or other, Emerson doesn't really interest me. And I don't know why. He doesn't put me off. From time to time, I read something of Emerson's, sort of inadvertently. I don't have any inclination to go further with it and say, oh, I must read other things. At that stage, we all would have read some of the Emerson essays, but I felt with Thoreau that I had to read all of Thoreau, and I felt the same way with Melville--that I had to, that anything Melville wrote I had to read. It's almost with Emerson as if, yes, I know what he's talking about, and it wasn't that I was disappointed in this. You feel in a way sort of, you've had him. In spite of his plainness, there's a kind of mystery about Thoreau. I don't see any mystery about Emerson. It's sort of like reading a book of sermons, and he's more of a moralist--good sound moralist, God knows--and a liberal moralist. Thoreau is a person, and, all right, Emerson was, too, in his way, I suppose, and maybe he would be even more of a person if I read more of him, but he simply never attracted me. I can't make a case against him.

EF: What about the language--preferring Thoreau's language to Emerson's?

WB: There you go on language again.

EF: Of course.

WB: I don't know. I don't seem put off by his language.

EF: I was wondering about Frost, about Robert Frost, and his connection with Thoreau, which it seems to me is fairly tight.

WB: You think so?

EF: Well, again, the language.

WB: I never think of them together at all. I think Frost has always seemed to me a very domestic person, a familial person, which Thoreau was not. He was familial in the sense that he was very definitely a son--he was a member of that family, but he didn't make any family of his own, and that's an essential part of Frost. There was his marriage and his children and his trying to make a living for his family and that sort of thing. Thoreau was very definitely a bachelor, and I don't think of them together at all. I'm sure that you could point out all sorts of things that they have in common, but I think the product is a totally different person.

EF: Frost and Emerson?

WB: Maybe, but there again, I don't know that much about Emerson.

EF: Frost must have been very important in your early work. I think we talked about that once.

WB: Oh, yes. Yes, certainly, partly because he was a friend of Sidney's, and he was somebody that I used to see and talk to--not extensively or anything, and I very much liked his work. And then again Sidney worshipped him, Alice [Cox's wife] always thought to Sidney's detriment--that he was so taken with Frost that he neglected himself.

EF: Well, Frost must have been an enormously powerful presence there at that particular time--the late thirties, I mean. It seems that over and over again that's who I come up against: it's Frost when I look at poetries that were emerging at that time and a little later. Richard Wilbur most obviously--but

people like Philip Booth, Leo Connellan, Robert Francis, Hayden Carruth, and any number of others.

WB: One name that came up recently--William Meredith.

EF: Frost's influence was so powerful that among poets from upper New York State and New England very few--you, Olson, Creeley, for example--were totally able to break away from that voice and that example, and I was wondering what it was that let you do it.

WB: Well, there were things that I wrote when I was still in school and shortly afterwards that were very Frosty, and I think a little shows up in the published work. I don't think much. But certainly in a formative way, he was very . . . I mean that was what I was trying to do when I was eighteen, twenty, in some sense.

EF: I've been working on a article on your poetry and its relation to the work of other writers, and one thing I've been trying to get at is that Frost very clearly thought that what a poem could do is make some sort of connection between the natural world and the spiritual world, and he thought it could almost be done in metaphor. He really thought that, and that goes entirely against the grain of your own work, I think.

WB: Absolutely stated I wouldn't say that it does. The tone, the voice is certainly not Frost, but I wouldn't say but that I maybe feel the same way.

EF: But your poetry repeatedly comes back to saying that you might move toward dealing with the world of spirit, but finally you can't name it.

WB: Oh, yes.

EF: I think that Frost thought that he could. I hear it in the poems.

WB: Yes, he probably did. Sidney used to rebuke me for not being more Frost than I was, for not taking Frost's moral attitude, so I guess I did break away from him, but I don't think that it was ever a deliberate thing.

EF: It just happened.

WB: We're two different people.

EF: That book on Sidney Cox [William R. Evans, Robert Frost and Sidney Cox], I was looking at it a couple days ago and noting that one of the letters there is from Frost, and he's coming to Dartmouth, and he specifically hopes that you will be at dinner. . . . He singled you out from all the other people.

WB: Yes, I can't remember that dinner. [Sidney used to have evenings at his place], and if Robert was in town, chances are he would be there. It would be a group of five, ten, or fifteen people.

One time when I was going to Harvard, he was on the train probably out of Hoosick Falls . . . and I saw Robert get on the train, and I went and sat with him. We had a talk from there to Boston, and he told me where he was living, I think Mt. Vernon Place, and said come see him. Call first. I never went.

EF: Did Cox specifically influence your poetry?

WB: I don't know specifically except that I remember that probably that was one reason why I tried using rhyme. I finally decided that I couldn't do it at all well, that I would be better off without it. I was a fairly docile child, and if this was what Sidney told me I should do and what Robert was doing . . . if you want to be a poet, it's what you do.

EF: So what led you to a poetry of statement instead of nature lyrics that Frost and his followers were generally doing?

WB: What got me away from that? I suspect that it could very well have been the intense concentration on The Brother in Elysium where nature hardly came in at all. Oh, the ocean with Whitman. Well, of course, nature writing in Thoreau all the time, but Thoreau didn't moralize on it. So the nature writing in poetry that I did at that time was probably sort of imagistic. I do remember little sorts of imagist poems at that time. But I suspect that it was probably Melville more than the others that got me dealing more with philosophical problems.

EF: Did you at that time by any chance read Thomas Browne?

WB: Oh, yes, it shows. Well, it's nothing to be ashamed of. I think probably at that time I read Browne. Probably I may first have read Browne in one of my Harvard courses. I'm not sure of that. I may well have read Browne when I was at Dartmouth, but I don't remember.

EF: Do you still read him?

WB: I probably haven't read him in five or ten years. If I were talking to someone, say to some young person, and I felt it might be good for him to read Browne, I might read him some Browne, and get to doing it. It might come up that way. Or I might find a book in my hand when I was looking for something else, and it might be nice to look at this again.

EF: Were you reading Browne in connection with Melville?

WB: No, I didn't make any connection. Is there a connection?

EF: I think that Melville's language . . .

WB: Probably yes. I guess Melville would have read him, wouldn't he? With me, it was not for that reason.

EF: So The Brother in Elysium is the watershed. . . . The early poems, the first book [My Father Photographed with Friends] predate it, and everything then follows. . . .

WB: Some of My Father Photographed with Friends would have been written during or before The Brother in Elysium, maybe some of it afterwards. I'm not sure. I'd have to look at it and make sure what's in there and what isn't.

The Brother in Elysium was all written before I went into the service in '41 except for the last chapter of the Melville, and I could not have written that at that time, and what I said there was not different from what I was thinking earlier, but I wasn't able to say it then. So it was only when I was five years older that I could have written the last chapter of the Melville.

EF: You grew up in a sense with Melville almost next door. Pierre . . . [The Gansevoort estate, which belonged to Melville's mother's family and which served him as a model for "Saddle Meadows" in Pierre, is

located a few miles south of the town in upstate New York where Bronk has lived most of his life.]

WB: It meant nothing.

EF: You weren't aware that . . .

WB: Oh, I may have been aware of it, but it didn't . . . And I don't think of Melville there at all. . . . There may be a little bit of Gansevoort in Pierre, but I don't think it's in Melville otherwise. And I really don't know how long he was there. I think his mother was there, but I don't think that he himself spent very much time in Gansevoort.

* * *

EF: When the work on Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville was behind you and you were moving toward the poetry of Light and Dark, did you sense that you were working with other poets or was this a kind of poetry that was entirely your own? I mean that by the 1950s, the work you were doing was clearly distinct from what poets who had come from Frost were doing, and it was also very different from what Olson was talking about in "Projective Verse." How did you see your own work in relation to what other people were doing?

WB: I wasn't very much aware of what other people were doing. I wasn't reading other people--at least not other poets, though I probably along that time began to read Auden, and I know that it was in 1946, 1945-46, when I was teaching at Union College that I began reading Stevens. Stevens was someone whose name I knew, and he was someone whom Sam Morse read. [Bronk and the poet Samuel French Morse were among Sidney Cox's students both at Dartmouth and the Cummington School of the Arts in Cummington, Massachusetts. Morse was instrumental in getting the Cummington Press to publish Stevens's Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction (1942) and edited his Opus Posthumous (1957).] A new collection came out at that time, I think Transport to Summer. I'm not sure, maybe Parts of a World, but whatever it was,

it was very well received, and 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, and as time went on, and as he wrote other things, I had no idea what he was doing. It was still a beautiful voice, but what the hell was he saying?

EF: After Stevens was there anybody that seemed within the same field?

WB: Well, Auden continued to interest me.

EF: That's curious. I wouldn't have expected Auden. It's such a different kind of music.

WB: Well, I don't know as Auden influenced me at all, but I liked his work, and I had known for a long time someone who had also known Auden. We had a mutual friend so that I had some personal contact with him--not very much. What year would that have been? '48. Auden was the judge for the Yale Series [of Younger Poets], and I guess that was when the personal contact started. The Yale Series at that time was restricted to thirty and under, and that's how I know it would have been '48, because that's the last year I would have been eligible. I sent him My Father Photographed with Friends, and he didn't choose it, but he wrote me a very nice note and said that if I came to New York sometime, he would be receptive if I wanted to come see him, and I did.

[Among other poets publishing at the time] I always enjoyed Sam Morse's work. Of course, I knew him at Dartmouth. And Reuel Denney's work, whom I never knew, I never met, but he had been Sidney's student, and he was Yale Series in '38 or '39, and he wrote that beautiful book [The Connecticut River and Other Poems].

* * *

EF: I've been wondering about language, and what gives words authority. Reading your work, I would assume that you believe that language has no final authority, and so I ask then how you feel a poem is possible.

WB: It isn't. Oh, I don't know, Ed.

EF: It seems to me that a lot of people, poets anyway, burrow around looking for some way to explain language, justify it in some ultimate way.

WB: Well, I try to. I worry about these things, but I don't come up with anything but expediency.

EF: Expediency. Well, what is the difference between language used expediently in business and language used expediently in poetry?

WB: Well, I guess there's some place where I would still be with Frost in his phrase "a momentary stay against confusion."

EF: So that is the purpose it finally serves.

WB: Well, certainly when I hear that phrase of Frost's, I have no quarrel with it. It's probably not the whole story, but it's hard to argue with. There are other things I'm sure that language does, but this is one of them, one of the more important ones, and it is momentary. Well, no, "momentary" isn't . . . because it keeps coming back. The validity isn't total, but the validity remains, so "momentary" is the wrong word--because it continues in time, and as far as I'm concerned, it is more partial than it is momentary. But "momentary" makes a better sound.

EF: Is there any way to talk about music in that context--as part of the way of keeping the confusion, the chaos outside?

WB: I don't know as I can say any more about it than I have said in some of the poems. I don't really know anything about the music. I can't speak technically of music at all.

EF: I meant music in language. When the words are arranged in that . . .

WB: Yes, well what would seem to be the same statement is not the same statement because of the way it is phrased. It's the difference between a wax figure and a living person, you know, that kind of thing. Well, the context

is very different depending on how it's stated. It can be restated in other terms and still retain some intellectual validity, but it has no intellectual force when it is stated without music--if you want to call it music.

EF: Music gives it the intellectual force.

WB: Yes. I may sometimes have a kind of an idea about something that I want to say and might be able to say, well, I want to write a poem about such and such that's been bothering me lately, but that is not the poem at all, and I'd have to listen for some time to hear where the poem is . . . before I can hear the poem, any statement that I could make about those lines. Well, no, that's not it--that is not it--that doesn't do it--that is not what I'm feeling. And someone reading that might say, what you're trying to say is such and such, and it isn't what I'm trying to say at all. His phrasing might be true, too--but who cares?

EF: Phrasing then is part of the music, and it's unique to the speaker. The rhetorical device might be borrowed, but the particular use of it in that circumstance is unique to the speaker.

WB: The phrasing is the music, and the phrasing is the statement.

EF: So the poem is in some ways a statement of the person rather than the idea.

WB: Well, now, Ed, I'm not going to get into that. Yes, I know, well, sure, it probably is. Nobody else could say my poems, so in that sense it is a statement of me, but on the other hand, the poems usually come as a surprise to me: you mean, that's what I mean?--is that what I mean?--I don't mean that. Then, yes, all right, I have to accept it. The experience is as though it had nothing to do with me. And when I say the poem is there and has nothing to do with me, I know how that can be disputed, and I don't think that it is worth disputing except that I'm simply saying, not as propounding a truth but simply as relating my experience. And if someone wants to say, well, that is absurd--of course, you write the poems--yes.

EF: But it's very different from writing a book like The Brother in Elysium.

WB: Not entirely different. I was telling you earlier that in 1941 I knew what I needed to say for the conclusion of the Melville, but I couldn't say it. I had no authority. But in 1946, I was able to say it, and it was not different from what I wanted to say in '41, but I didn't have the capability of saying it then. And I have no explanation for that except, of course, by then I was older. And there are things I say now in the poem that I might have wanted to say thirty years ago and didn't dare say, couldn't say, but they're not different in idea. I had no language then that I could speak what I am speaking now.

EF: Is there a way to characterize the difference between what you do in the prose works and what you do in the poems?

WB: There is a distinct difference between the prose and the poetry, but I can't say what it is. I don't know what it is.

EF: But it is not a question of intending to write prose.

WB: Well, the thing that always comes back to me, the most clearly defined experience of that, is when I was talking to a young friend about seeing Bergman's Cries and Whispers, that movie. And I was describing the movie to him, and what he would do with costume among various other things, and this young man said, hey, you ought to write a poem about that. And I said, I can't--no, that's not a poem--I can't do a poem on that. But the idea was there, and I couldn't get rid of it, and I wanted to do something with it. There was something there that I wanted to say, and that's what came out as the prose piece "Costume as Metaphor." And I could not have done it as a poem. It wasn't a matter of I didn't have the ability to do it then and I may have it now. That is not true. It is not a poem. I write what some people might call poetic prose. I write a very formal prose, and in some ways my prose is more formal than my poems, and my poems are more prosy than most people would consider proper for poems. But

even so, there is a distinct difference, and what I wanted to say in "Costume as Metaphor" . . . I wanted to make a prose statement. Somebody else might have been able to say that in a poem, but what I wanted to say there was something I couldn't say there in a poem. But what that difference is, I don't know.

EF: The difference is not in the rhythm but in the kind of statement--if they can be considered separately.

WB: Are you asking, or are you saying?

EF: I'm wondering.

WB: I don't know. I would have said, yes, there is a difference in the rhythm. There are probably technicalities about everybody's work, including mine, that can be accurately perceived and stated. I don't work that way. It's not the way it happens as far as I'm concerned. The technique is all unconscious. It is not a matter of prose dictating to me how it should be written, and my saying, oh, well, now I'm writing prose, and I have to do this or that. This is the way it's coming out because I am writing prose. Maybe to some extent when I'm writing poetry . . . frequently, I suppose that if I'm working in a five-stress line . . . a couple of times I have had people say that they thought my . . . what is the term for line break? In something like jumping over a fence.

EF: Enjambment.

WB: Enjambment. That I handle enjambment very well. And I wasn't aware of using enjambment. As a matter of fact, most of my life I didn't even know what the word meant, but when I come to the end of a five-stress line, I go to the next line, and in that sense my enjambments are not accidental because I'm consciously doing that, but the effect of enjambment is something that I haven't planned on. It is something that happens, and I take it that there are people who are consciously using . . . and they are breaking the line not because of certain stresses but because they think this makes an effective enjambment. They write in irregular lines.

EF: I have a feeling that in many ways that is the kind of challenge that Frost set up for

himself. You feel it sometimes. Kind of self-conscious.

WB: Could be. I don't know.

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WB: I feel more and more and more as time goes on that I don't give a damn. If someone is attracted to the poem, fine, and if they're not, I don't really care. Although once somebody is, I do care. If some stranger writes to me and says . . . And the way you have liked the poetry and written about it, that's very gratifying--you and Henry and Norman and so on. I'm glad that somebody's listening, but whether somebody's listening or not doesn't stop me, and I don't think that the object is that more and more people should listen. I don't think that matters at all.

EF: Well, there are some very powerful people, of course, people who decide what everybody else should read, and their influence is felt in high school and college anthologies. The poetry they are passing on now is sometimes, in its way, the equivalent of Lowell and Holmes a hundred years ago. That's who people were reading then, and they weren't reading Thoreau and Melville. It took a tremendous change . . .

WB: Don't you suspect that's always been so?

EF: Probably, except there was a time when Frost, say, and Eliot and Stevens were heard . . . by their own generation.

WB: Frost was heard. I don't think Eliot was heard very much until long after "Prufrock." Somebody told me what the sales of the first Eliot collected poems were, and it was a thousand copies or something like that, and that was fairly late in his career. But then Frost wasn't heard at all until he was forty or so, but he made a big deal about being heard, and he promoted it, and I'm given to suspect that it really wasn't his voice that was being heard. And I don't want to be heard that way.

EF: He understood something about American commercial . . .

WB: That's where I've been lucky. I didn't have to use the poems as a way of feeding myself. And it's a tremendous conflict or problem for any young artist. . . . I mean how do you feed yourself? How do you live? Maybe it's somewhat less for poet because a poet doesn't need space and doesn't need materials. A painter, a sculptor, a musician . . . even a musician has to have a place with a piano or something of that sort--very difficult to work without some kind of living quarters where you have a piano. A poet doesn't need anything, but there's a kind of similar problem because of the fiscal circumstances. There's no money in it for a long, long time, and then there isn't a lot usually unless you consciously go after it and write to sell. Or paint to sell and so on. And it can be destructive. It can be the end . . . with all the maneuvering you have to do in order to get connections, get the right gallery and critics on your side and so on. I have the luxury of being absolutely independent from that. Certainly some of the attention I get is from you and from Norman and Henry and so on, you people who are teaching and reading. And whether I would have been able to go on with no notice at all . . . I have no respect for the American Book award, and yet I suppose that the fact that it was there is helpful. . . . I got a little of it without trying very hard, but it was very minor, and it was in a very small circle. Probably a great deal of it through Origin, and there are ways in which I owe a lot to Cid Corman. . . . If it hadn't been for Corman's Origin, I don't know where I would have been published. And a lot of the subsequent publication came about because my work was seen there. George Oppen saw my work there and got his sister to publish The World, the Worldless. If your name appears in certain places, then . . .

Well, I think most magazine editors have no independent judgment at all, don't know what they're doing, and they would publish because they'd seen him in somebody else's magazine: well, this guy must be all right. And in many

cases, this guy is not all right. This guy is an absolutely terrible poet, but he's been published here and there, so he must be all right and is accepted by all sorts of people that have no feeling about poetry or anything else. Oh, this guy's good--yeah, I've seen him--he's being published in lots of places. They have absolutely no feeling about the work at all. And I don't think any of my response has been on that basis. I think you happened on my work and actually liked it because it did something to you, and I think that's the same thing that happened with various people. Nothing is ever pure in itself, but I think that is largely true. Such acceptance as I've had is very small, and I don't care whether the most respected critics are reading it at all. I'm not writing for Helen Vendler. I'm not writing for Harold Bloom or whoever superseded them, if somebody has . . . I'm writing for my fellow humans, most of whom don't care either.

EF: Can poems exist without readers?

WB: Yes.

EF: Lots of people tell me that's not true, but I know it is, myself.

WB: Yes, some of my own pieces . . . I feel quite certain this is a poem whether or not anyone ever reads it. Not everything I've ever written. And I'm glad if somebody reads them, but that doesn't do away with the fact that that poem is there whether anybody reads it or not.

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August:

EF: These are questions which touch on a number of things particularly important to certain younger poets now and which we talked about a year ago last March. They're all questions of language and how we are to understand its nature and power. When I wrote to ask about reprinting "The Smile On The Face Of

A Kouros" in TALISMAN, you mentioned that something of that work was also in a four-line poem you had written sometime later--that it had been possible later to rephrase that . . .

WB: The one about Paul. ["Paul, Prisoner Of The Lord, And Courses Run"]

EF: Yes, and that opens problems for me--problems about ideas and language and whether, as some would claim, they are the same thing--and thought and voice and whether they are the same thing.

WB: You expect me to tell you!

EF: Well, is the idea its language?

WB: Well, in either of those two poems, the idea is the language, but there is some sort of feeling which is independent of the language and which can take another form but is still the same idea or feeling depending on . . . Well, how could I metaphor it? There's a sense in which all children are alike and all childish in certain ways, but every child is different from every other child. There are certain aspects of childhood which are fairly constant for children in various locations, various nationalities, and so on, but they are expressed in different ways depending on the individual child or depending on the individual country or whatever.

EF: Is it what you call "desire" in your work?

WB: Desire. Well, that's Norman's big card. [Norman Finkelstein, "William Bronk: The World as Desire," Contemporary Literature, 23

(1982), 480-92] I feel the less I analyze my work, the better, and I'm not going to talk about desire in reference to my work. It's there--no question. I'm not denying it, but I think that's for somebody else to analyze, not me. But I can recognize when an idea comes up again that, yes, this is what I was talking about. Do you not see the likeness between the Paul poem and the Kouros poem?

EF: No, of course, the likeness is undeniable.

WB: I probably wasn't aware of it when I wrote the Paul poem, but when you spoke of "The Smile On The Face Of A Kouros", somehow or other that came to my mind, and I thought, this in a much more concentrated form, this is

the same poem, but it was felt very differently, and I doubt very much that I was thinking of the Kouros poem when I wrote the Paul poem, but I was simply thinking of that idea that we prepare our lives as a piece of work and hand it to the gods at the end--which is something that I don't agree with but which has been a prevalent and admired idea for centuries.

EF: So the poem names something outside itself.

WB: I suppose so, but I think you only recognize the name after the poem is finished. The poem is a poem, but afterwards you see a likeness between it and something else. These two kids belong to the same family--and you look like your father. I can remember experiences in which I either wrote a new poem or failed to write a new poem and then realized: oh, you already wrote that poem back in 1947, and there it is again but in a very different form.

EF: Then in responding to a poem, are you asked to respond to something which precedes the poem or to the poem as such?

WB: Why does it have to be either/or?

EF: It's both.

WB: Well, I would think so.

EF: Presumably anyone could devise a name to evoke a prior or common feeling, but the poem has to be of interest in itself.

WB: But it's not just a translation. There's a different quality. When I was growing up--I don't know if it's still done--that was the way poetry was taught in high school. Is that what a précis was? You distill the poem or analyze the poem into an idea, and that was what you were supposed to do. I guess some people have a great resistance to poetry, and it doesn't mean anything to them otherwise, but to someone who has a sensitivity to poetry and for whom a large part of its meaning is its poetics, the fact that it is in that form . . . I suspect that there is nothing in my work that can't be reduced to the absolutely banal. If you make that kind of reduction of what the poem is saying . . . Sometimes people

say to me, "Well, what you're saying is such and such," and I resent that because I'm not saying just that. . . . If I just wanted to say that, I wouldn't have needed to make a poem of it. It wouldn't have been a poem. What's interesting about a poem is that it has force.

And I think I do something similar to what Roberto Juarroz does. He states things rather flatly, but they're nevertheless stated rather effectively. They have force because of the tension which arises in the way that he states them and the relation of line two to line seven and line one to line two and so on.

There is a tension that is built up that gives his ideas some force. I doubt if there are ideas that have a lot of force except for what they derive from the circumstances of the expression. Because we all know a great many statements that we recognize unfeelingly--it doesn't mean anything to us, but at other times, the circumstances would make that a very powerful, very meaningful statement. And the same thing is true of the language in which it is stated that is true of the circumstances. It makes it powerful. Otherwise it's the usual bore.

EF: Did you read Dante when you were young?

WB: No. I haven't read much Dante when I was older. I did read Mandelbaum [Allen Mandelbaum's translation of The Divine Comedy], partly because I had gone on that Italian trip with Mandelbaum and knew him and was interested in what he had later done with it. It doesn't do much for me.

EF: Paradiso in its use of theological abstractions and images of light . . . in the way it deals with ideas, it seems to have a correspondence to your work.

WB: Well, maybe, and maybe if I could read it in the Italian, it would do much more for me. I don't mean to dismiss it. I'm sure it's a very powerful work. I've seen evidence of it in lots of other people. I'm not moved by it.

EF: Does one poet influence another, or does one borrow from another? The critic speaks as if it were a paternalistic matter. That's not my experience. I don't believe it.

WB: Well, if you think there are coherences between what I say and what Dante says, you are yourself answering your question. "Are there ideas which precede the poem?"--maybe that isn't the way you put it. In a sense when you find that kind of coherence among contemporaries or among long separated people, you must feel there are because I don't talk like Dante. Dante doesn't talk like me. And here it isn't as much a matter of the idea as much as it is a matter of expression.

EF: The question I want to get at is whether poetry is essentially historical. Is the poem solely within time, or is there something exterior to time which the poem brings into history, language. Either poetry is exclusively a communal project to which each poet contributes in succession, or there is something prior to history which the poet can reveal in language.

WB: Well, I wouldn't question at all the second alternative, and I don't know--it may be true, the first alternative. And I don't think that they eliminate each other. I think that they both could be true to some extent. I think that poetry is from our perspective something that hasn't always been, but I think that what is more important is that what we think of as innovation isn't really innovation--or that if it simply is innovation, it is going to look tacky in a few years. But more importantly, there is something which it does now that it always has done, that we are expressing in our own individual terms something which has been said before. Why should we read Dante or Shakespeare except because we still have the same sort of realizations that they had. We miss some of the terms, but . . . There were some people here the other night. They've been friends of mine for a number of years. I don't see them very often. He is a Zen adherent, and she is a specialist in Eastern religions. And I was reading recent work [to them], and she said, I finally have realized what you are--you're Tao. And I said, how could I ever have gotten to be Tao? I never read it. I said, as far as I'm con-

cerned there are certain ideas that are human ideas and ultimately they get around. And she said, well, according to karma, you're probably a reincarnation of Lao Tzu. We were talking about Stephen Mitchell's new translation [of the Tao Te Ching], which hasn't come out yet, and she specified in various ways that I can't elucidate, my very close adherence to the ideas of Tao, but there has never been any attempt [on my part] to elucidate Tao or promote it or express it as such. There simply are things that I have felt that I needed to express that corresponded to that.

EF: You never had a course or background in Eastern thought or philosophy?

WB: No. Of course, in my circumstances or yours we'd naturally come up against it in our conversation with people who have. And also there are certain things that anybody that leads a reflective life . . . I think there are a limited number of ideas in the world, and probably none of them is new.

EF: You found great similarities between your thinking and The Cloud of Unknowing.

WB: Well, other people were finding it before I'd read The Cloud of Unknowing and saying, have you ever read The Cloud of Unknowing? And I hadn't, but when I did out of curiosity read it, I said, yes, this guy's been stealing from me.

EF: One thing about the Eastern works is that they were much less available in this country when you began writing than they are now.

WB: At least I didn't have any contact with it. Of course, Thoreau talked a good deal about the Upanishads. Probably most of what I picked up, Eastern ideas, was through Thoreau. Maybe in other ways. But it was never a pursuit.

EF: Then poetry can deal with that which is outside history.

WB: Well, I wrote a long essay about how absurd history is.

EF: You were dealing with the Mayans and the Incas. [The New World]

WB: We find totally unconnected civilizations, cultures, peoples, having very similar ideas,

and it's the nature of the beast or the nature of ideas. Sometimes there's a much greater divergence, that's noticeable anyway, between individuals in a single community--that are more notable than the dissimilarities between two cultures.

EF: But though the ideas are transcultural, the poem itself is not translatable . . . as Dante.

WB: That's right. It's not even translatable into the same language.

EF: Is the poem then a juncture between the historically relative and something essential?

WB: That may be true, Ed, but I don't think in those terms. That's not the way it happens. The way it happens is that the poet has a certain realization, and he realizes in terms that are his experience at that time. To somebody else it might seem like such a juncture, but that's not the way it happens to the poet.

EF: You've written books that conform to certain patterns. Poems of two quatrains. A book of triads. Is that something that was willed, or was it the necessary . . .

WB: Again, it is something that happened, and if it is willed, it is willed unconsciously. It never happens that I said, well, I think that the essential poetry today is poetry in three lines, and I'm going to have to start writing poetry in three lines. It's just that it started to happen in that way. I had written fourteen-liners before, and that's probably the one that I can recall most closely. I got interested in it as a satisfying form--you know, the convenient length as it seemed to me then, and I also got very interested in what Shakespeare had done with it. And I went through a period of many months, maybe a year, with Shakespearian sonnets. Almost every night before I went to sleep I would read one or two and read them very carefully: what's he saying here? How's he doing this? What's he mean by this word? Very close reading, so I suppose it probably formed my mind into thinking in that span, and I also occasionally before and after that period wrote in fourteen

lines, but it wasn't a decision on my part--except that it was an interesting form and what could be done with it, and I didn't have to force it. This is the way things happen. The same thing with the twenty-liners or the four-liners or the eight-liners or the three-liners. This was the way things came to me at that time. And the last two or three books it's no longer been happening. I haven't looked to see if there's any particular form that dominates any of those, but I think that was what determined a collection, when I ceased writing in fourteen lines or ceased writing in four lines.

EF: What tells you now when a book's complete?

WB: I don't know what does now.

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

WB: Well, they mean an awful lot of things, most words in English anyway--as anybody who does crosswords is aware of. I don't know. Are they? What else do you want them to be? But are words other than what they mean? One problem about them is that we don't know what they mean. We think we know what they mean, but I have had literate people totally, as far as I'm concerned, misread a poem that I've written. I don't understand . . . how the hell did he come up with that? I didn't mean anything like that, and I think that I'm a fairly direct speaker in a poem, and I think that clarity is something that I usually achieve. But often it's a quite different clarity from what I intended. And I think it's fair to say it's a misreading of the poem, not simply that the poem has a reading that I didn't intend. I don't feel that.

EF: I don't believe one has complete control of language. It devises its own patterns.

WB: Oh, very much so in my own experience although I don't think that is the experience of a lot of other writers who work and rework a poem. My poems come to me in their own language, and if they were not in that language, they would not have any force. Sometimes before I get it written down, the language kind of slips, and I think: I don't know, that is

not it, that's not it. I'm saying something which is intellectually more or less the equivalent, but it is flat--it doesn't work. And then if I'm fortunate, it will come back to me: oh, yes, that's the way the poem is, and it's simply a matter of changing the tone or changing the language--which would not be the case if it were a neutral kind of idea. . . .

EF: But poems can be read without attention to "meaning." And there is great pleasure in reading for the music, for the song.

WB: Oh, there are times when the only way that we can read them is that because . . . "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Who knows what that means? Oh, I'm sure that there are thousands of people who will explain just exactly what John meant by that, but as far as I'm concerned, the meaning is nothing that I would try to explicate. And the whole force of it is destroyed by explication. And there are all sorts of things of that sort. But not every poetic expression is powerful in that way. It may still be valid. The nursery rhymes which are said to have had very specific, frequently political meanings in their own times, [a meaning] which is lost to most people today, and I expect that there are some scholars who will give you a rundown on "Humpty-Dumpty," for example--its political meaning. Who cares at this point? And in a sense it doesn't really mean anything, and yet we've all . . . it's part of our childhood and obviously did mean to us . . . completely apart from its original sense.

EF: And there's poetry that sets up a rhythm, a tone that is pleasing, and doesn't make statements in a conventional way.

WB: John is making a statement.

EF: He is, but it's not in the realm of conventional discourse. We can't approach it through paraphrase.

WB: If you are simply trying to make a pleasant sound, then that's something else.

EF: No, the poetry I mean is more than that, but it's severed from the world of conventional meaning.

WB: Yes, but there's a distinction there between its having content and its not having content.

EF: Well, nonsense syllables, but I don't mean that. Gertrude Stein's Stanzas in Meditation clearly has meaning but not in any literal or usual way.

WB: But I think that you have to have something that you are meaning and not simply depending on the words to give you a meaning.

EF: There has to be personal intent?

WB: You have to mean it. You can't do it hoping that the words will mean something that you don't mean I think that Gertrude was not depending on the words. I think that she meant something. She had something that she was saying, she wanted to say, and she wasn't saying, well, if I just do this . . . although she was the one who promoted automatic writing: give the words their lead, and they'll tell you their meaning. So maybe I'm wrong about her.

EF: I don't think so.

WB: But you go back a few steps to what was said earlier about the words being in charge, the words taking control of expression . . . I have repeatedly had the experience, when the poem gets written down, of saying, oh, God, no, I don't mean that--but hesitating to change the meaning because it seems to me the way it has to be said--and then only later, maybe the next day, two days later, the next week: yes, I guess that's what I do mean. But the initial rejection of what the poem is saying because it seems to me something that I don't particularly want to mean, a meaning that makes me uncomfortable or embarrasses or contradicts something else I've said or whatever. Having to accept that when I've lived with it for a little while Admitting, yes, yes, I guess that is what I mean.

* * *

William Bronk

THE LICENSE

Summer is the deepness of trees. I am won
by the wonder. Riches. Splendor. The tree itself
fruit I feast on. I am unforbidden.

You know, when we first came here these houses were all empty. Some of us made them, after a fashion, livable again but, as you can see, there are parts we don't use and pieces we've added on or taken off, rooms we've divided, things like that to try to suit us more. You need a permit but some of us go ahead anyway.

Those houses there were just put up. They weren't here. People find that easier. I think it's wrong and, up back, there are more houses like this, roofs good, walls solid, dark maybe and strange, brush and trees around but even so, vacant to be had. You know, I wonder who it was that built them. They weren't like us.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

The I is like the eye: it watches while mind and body do things on their own. Quite often out of sight, they come up with surprises -to themselves as much as the I. Willful, like kids, they take stupid chances, they quarrel and conspire, get smart, learn a little, win the I with their charm but show scant affection back. Even the help they give seems less compassion than a boast. And don't they mean to destroy the I in the end?

What we do gets so natural
 feels so good to us
 we forget what we are
 and any interruption,
 lessening,
 even the final breaking off
 seems terrible and wrong.

THE IMPORT-EXPORT RATIO

Was he the father or the son? We mix up generations and people of the same name not any way related. We do know (are pretty sure) this family married that one but forget which one was the bride and which the groom. It was important.

Our pleasures, too: we can take pleasure in the most austere self denial or gross indulgence and be proud with the same pride in either pleasure. Where is the pride when it's gone? The things that mattered never did. Inside, there's nothing to hold on to.

Not asking for mercy
or stating,
I stand
in a presence.

MAY CARD

When I woke up, all outside
was a light green fog, a window full
and it was the ginkgo out in little leaves.

AT FOUR IN THE MORNING

Poetry wasn't all. In some degree
I found what others find
is enough to live for that might be still
enough if there isn't some more that's left to say.

IMAGE AND LIKENESS

They have been thought to be Gods and Goddesses and, feeling power, we have entreated them -strengths we knew such as sun and moon are or how wars come or crops grow- should they, in their turn, know us as it seemed they should for all their bearing, seeming intention, on us. How should we not have thought they saw and heard?

And their beauty, too; it awed us to be around them, our lives in their sanctuary, even if they not know us, didn't see, didn't hear.

We saw sacrament as much as if we, ourselves, were God -our meager selves we barely understood, dark source, dark ending, doubtful power, suffering, having to be and having to be ourselves.

Rosmarie Waldrop

THE PICTURE
for William Bronk

though the shape's not
stable enough to prove
that observation can produce its object
our language can be seen

an ancient city
mazes of winding streets, squares crowded
old and new houses bulging with additions
from various periods
and spreading outward

the picture is sudden
I experience it
as a grey luminous enough for
translation, nuances of weather
and the magpie returning to its nest
with pieces of glitter

can breath find its way in the alleys between
or tunnels, do we ever penetrate
to the foundation
the tilting ground dissolving
into past
the probability of sleep
surrounded by new boroughs

I also like to think of it
of language, as a form of
light continuing beyond the shadow
of the city limits

what's to be done with it?

the picture seems to
spare us a thousand's worth of trouble
it is painted
on an uncurved surface

this is how it takes us in



You are not required to complete the work, but
neither are you free to desist from it.

--Rabbi Tarphon

Have I loved the Torah more than God,
sailing in an ark to the homeland of the text:
or have I been recalled by a handful of slogans,
the leaking resonance of glamorous tropes
reduced to empty shells?

The primal vowel is caught in the throat:
aleph, the utterance which precedes the truth,
in which is contained the formula of negation,
mem and tav: to be found at last
inscribed upon any forehead.

The clay collapses upon the creator,
the letters lie in a heap:
or freed from the flesh, do they rise upward,
seeking the limiting code?

Bound and unbound to the limits of the world:
covenant prior to all known covenants:
from a displaced source come restless messengers,
yearning for authority from absent kings.

Henry Weinfield

THE LIVES OF THE POETS

Dying his life, living his death,
Chatterton starved that Rowley might breathe.
The lives of the poets are my life--
I am the lives of the poets.

Homer was blind. The rosy-fingered Dawn,
Who rises in the east from Tithon's throne
Spreading her beams upon the wine-dark Sea,
Was but an epithet to hold his memory.
And what was Troy? Homer invented Troy.
Troy was a name, a landscape in the mind
Of someone we call Homer, who was blind.

The lives of the poets are my life--
I am the lives of the poets.

Dante, who lived in Hell, conceived of bliss
Through Beatrice--but who was Beatrice?
She was a little girl, a Florentine
Whom he had met when she was eight or nine.
The Earl of Surrey calls her Geraldine,
Tracing her lineage from the Tuscan line
Of Petrarch's Laura--Laura, for the air
Which, being anguished, echoed his despair.

The lives of the poets are my life--
I am the lives of the poets.

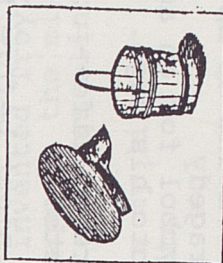
Shakespeare (as in the well known parable
By Señor Borges) was invisible.
At Stratford-on-Avon he built himself a house,
And there he lived and died--anonymous.
He was not Hamlet, nor was meant to be
The heroic figure of a tragedy
Whose life becomes the symbol for an age--
Because he disappeared into his page.

The lives of the poets are my life--
I am the lives of the poets.

Shelley was drowned. The night before he died,
He wrote these words: "Then what is life? I cried."
The triumph of life is the lofty pride
Of a luminous angel--wings against the void.
For Shelley and Shakespeare and Chatterton,
And Homer and Dante--all are forms of one
Spiritual life unfolding in time,
Whose essence is light, whose motion is in rhyme.

The lives of the poets are my life--
I am the lives of the poets.

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DAPHNIS AND CHLOE
for Elaine

Circumstances would make me
whisper all the secrets of this morning,
early, trespassing on foreign soil,
winding down the hill--poppies, bluets,
buttercups--

I'd wander over any hill
to any meadow, any clearing,
any spring you ask--I'll come
with gifts and flowers: invitations
are the only thing I want or need,
I love you.

THE COURAGE NOT TO TALK

Students may thank you for a word
they say you said at the right
moment.

Nod and pretend
you remember.

Nothing is lost
by failing to be totally exact...

A kiss from your son may stop
you in mid-thought to prove
that life is love or it's a waste.
Be grateful.

Not everyone arrives
at such assurances...

Victims
in Palestine may suffer on
for being who they are.

Recall
the last beatitude whose prophecy
is justice.

Something will change,
and if you're not alive
to see it, what's the loss?

Since gratitude and love and pain
are languages you learn to speak
by keeping still, keep still.

Silence has a million dialects,
and every dialect's a mystery,
and every mystery's a reason
to be glad you're listening.

Practice

for mystery each night before
you sleep.

Think past your eyelids,
past the ceiling, past the roof
and clouds and into spaces
so immense that no geometry
but God's can measure them.
Or else imagine you're about
to die.

The words you want
to say are hiding on the other
side of death.

They tell you
they're too sacred to be heard.
They say the only word
you need to speak is breath.

PETITION

How to pray.

How. And to

(so to speak)

whom.

What

possibly do I deserve

to ask?

This:

if any

in my family

be struck,

or must wait long

in pain,

I be the one.

Daniel Wolff

from WORK SONNETS

We live off air. And since that's true,
we live off what our senses miss.
And so it makes some sense to kiss
what isn't here. I live off You.

I dream our bodies pressing close
and know the drug that feeds that dream
is all the distance and the days between.
Breath by breath, I overdose.

You know how some guy will show his girl
- at a bar, let's say, or in the working place -
by holding a picture that holds her face?

By holding my breath, I make a world
as real as any photograph.
Love, after all, is that thing which none of us can have.

Charles Bernstein

PRECISELY AND MOREOVER

She hits the
lake and now
it's time for

Like
five'll get
one, ten'll get/
roaring into the
blast of last
year's rasp,
or bereft on a
beach outside
a full-scale
rivet. "We've
got the best
employee
incentive plan
around: they don't
work
out, we
fire
them." Slipping

in the freeze-
dried morning,
sipping on old

trends turned
sour, new
friends turned
the corner to a
bitterer break
than cast

iron. Bust
your pajamas
'cause the

calendar is
dormer. Hail as
the whittle in a
grain of plow.

Michael Heller

MYTHOS OF LOGOS

First the stars or the patterning of stars in darkness, and then perhaps someone climbing up a mountain to close the gap. Begins in dusty foothills, then forest, then high empty tundra and piles of rock, and at the top to brush at with the hand the spangled emptiness. But the hand feels nothing, sweeps nothing but the cold air. The loveliness of blackness for the first time brings solitude. And then one keeps silence at failure, nurses anger and shame, swallows the bitter taste.

And so the world becomes another place, and now I must confess to the many things that I forgot to say, was afraid to say, for fear, for love, for shame, O ancients and splendid hosts whose words come before and after,

Who have uttered out, one theory goes, what was written in the gene codes and in the stars' imprints before our speech. And now, those lucid structures are gantries to my nights, wheeling and reassembling.

And yes the whole career is night, is crafted out of silence. And so the sentences out there were not unsaid, nor did they blow away with stellar dust and stellar time. They settled down about my head, resembling a dome the exact shape of my skull hidden from others by a flap of skin.

Joseph Donahue

DESIRE

Death's green
and gold corona
in the wavering branch
and the shuttle of syllables through white light
and the pleasure of the mind of God permeating all accident
and no the guard cannot
shut the light from your cell.
The chasm of gold, spill of red on the river.
The black boat at midpoint and the island lifted in fire
or the incarnation
of color in a vivid field where
solitude opens toward you.
Not memory
but its plenitude as
you awake from a joy
that trembles at the far end of time
unable to say what words have kissed you
in your sleep.

Day's ferocity meanders
through the lack of significant feeling
(each watching

the face of the other fading,
each a ghost in the other's dream but only one is still alive)
and your thoughts circle back to Juan de la Cruze

his grimy dungeon when
tears still in evidence a woman steps from the shadow
of the psychiatrist's door giving you her number and the

prelude to an evening's
harmonic diaspora unrelated to
recent dark events.

Words freshly tilted drift asked.
The aura of recent racial beatings touches the airy realm of the
fire escape where she talks about her diffidence

about the man she's "with"
and the city arrests its nightly glimmer
to attend her vulnerability and the rain mingles with

your discrete elation as
continuities in the lives of others rise
like land seen from an approaching ship

but the ship veers into choppiest regions.
You feel upbraided by the pettiness of your agonies
though you are older than you look and nearing a point of crisis

which seems both intermittent and perpetual
and partakes of the more sinister
of rationales regarding the presence of the poor

who loll drugged
in broken boxes in icy weather as
further questions stir.

Desire a city across the water which the attrition of leaves
makes visible or a time when place was simply the notation of silence
as through smoke and rain millennia exfoliate.

It's someone else's dream
this bewildered amusement left on your tape
this surprise party the world has arranged for you
and your life passes and you
wait for the secret call when the guests have arrived,
you wait for the one who will intimately mislead you through the rain.
Yes things seem to be happening
but far off and illegible like the bottom line of an eye chart
and you are frustrated in your search for some collapse of clarity
or deletion sufficient to break your
ritualized gestures of defeat, the way a sudden turn
toward intimacy in a conversation can resemble
a cycle of fire purifying your past.
But can you say what presses for entrance at the stern gates of time?
Now and then there is a flicker at the edges of things
canceling all disappointment
lifting you in the wave of others enroute to work
as the world opens into amplitude and rushes into stillness.
You have lived in the expectation
of some startling recompense, like some secret
Spanish Jew enduring the Reformation you have tended

this law in silence and mounting adversity.
Meaninglessness was simply a mood which bothered you for a while
but now you appear to shiver in this chaste defilement,

this voluptuous schism revitalizing all thought.
What was that shadow that flickered across the street?
Not a cloud but the living nightmare of a life but it passes now

as gold cataracts of light wash over the brick
braided and intricate as the portico of a Caribbean mosque.
There is no place you can enter and be safe at last.

Not even the raptures and hierarchies of art
or the luminous swath of rainclouds and blue mist
and the gold rooftop across the river

or the cluster of berries,
bare branch supple with raindrops
as three sparrows rest and their weight does not

jostle the silver equipoise
of fallen rain tapering now
into exhilaration.

At night the letters
recombine in hopeful bulletins,
not promises but the pleasures they give.

Flare, flashbulb. The speaker reviews the
abuses of a far off prison system,
her turban the color of early spring

yellow beneath fresh shoots breaking into cold wetness.
As if you had torn up a snapshot of some
remembered bliss

And the Kodachrome bits blow through the world
and incidents take on the color of that former time
though far from where you are.

As the memory of someone
long dead might brush the mind --
you feel you have just seen a crucial part

of a life you can never know.
Where was that mountain town?
Why did the bare breasted occultist warn you so cryptically?

Why did you steal a car
and who was the man who died in the parlor
with such violent bravura?

An embarkation has long been underway.
(You dream of your brother. You miss him.
He comes in he's late for work but he wants to ask you

if you will give him a swimming lesson.)
Your routine opens into a sphere
colored with blankness and depth and beasts

from the scrolls of Renaissance cosmographers
and you discover that paralysis is part of the voyage
those twilight Sunday afternoons when phone rates are down

reconstructing daylight as night deepens.
Music cleansed of lament and
lutes and loved ones locked in earth as

from vast regions
facts bespeak an altered emptiness
and you sense a desire behind desire and to taste that

would be to know
the beauty God knew
the moment before Creation

when meanings mirrored
the needs which evinced them.
No view of the river today

its threads of green and gold.
The man in his cell
turns beneath his ratty blanket.

He is a second
Jean Genet, equally
stroked and scolded

but destroying his books so that
his lovers can never be distracted from his whims
by the beauty of their image in the text.

All things announce the hour
the plane's shadow cutting the cloudbank
ocean the fiery

splay of noon's winter mirror.
The cities of the earth glitter in the folds of the mountains
and yes these dreams at last will lead you out of
famine and bondage.

You have no clear account of your route
except that a mystery sufficient to your desire

for comprehension awaits you.
Boat a fiery sliver toward what sea
its bowline script half risen from the froth

in the flux of inference adrift
in the echo of similitude across great distance
as in a notebook kept hidden for years and now almost filled

silver threads the
interweaving current
broken

by a black branch
held in a window that looks onto brick.
You cannot see, but you see.

You do not
feel at home but
you are.

TUTORIAL

The play of a bow across strings, say.
Or wind through trees.
The slightest variation alters the response.
And there are degrees of intensity,
impressions so subtle
that we are unconscious of the event
or of the union of events that produced the effect-
and unconscious even of the effect.
Or wonder so extreme,
and prompted by events themselves,
it is, itself, a sound response.
It tells what music
or wind or any event that moves us deeply
moves us to. It says what,
unmoved, we could not otherwise have said
or have thought to say.

What it was we didn't know.

* * *

Any order precludes some other: one function of memory is to present things out of order. I would love to begin "and even before that..." "The point must come when..." "First though, look at this..." Jesus, they always told me, spoke in parables so that the common people, the uneducated, could comprehend the gospel, though he himself said--according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke--that it was to keep the unworthy from understanding. "What am I saying?..." "Doubtless, it is the complex..." If we wonder what to believe, our minds incline towards ideas of gravity. (It is an immense security to quote.) I have wanted for a long time to address a paragraph to William Bronk, remembering how some of his poems back in Origin--I found out only later that he had already published a volume--helped me unravel some snarls in my own expression. Since we last met, an age has gone by.

James Laughlin

THE SMALLEST BLESSING

A cold wind freezes me inside
when I consider that someday
(perhaps not too long distant)
I won't be here to watch you
smile or listen to you laugh
or stroke you and touch you
where you love to be touched
I had such fears when I was a
child though there was little
reason for them (what had I to
lose then except my childish
self) but now when there's ev-
erything to lose that is love-
ly and excellent what can I
think what consolation can I
find there's only the thought
that no one has ever been cer-
tain whether we know what we've
lost and long for its return.

THE WORD HARD

She said reading had turned him hard
to bask in the difficulties;
he smiled, lifted a hand as if
to draw the veil across her face
and said that if hard meant polished
as a stone gets smooth in water
or the earth beaten down by feet
he would accept and even welcome
the word. It did not seem she heard,
for a grin came upon her then
that he could not recall seeing
for months. How strange, he said, to miss
now what I didn't even know
was gone. Was it my smile was gone?
she said, as if in certain dread,
with no graceful way to forgive
in advance the hard words coming:
it was like the times he heard her
far off in the kitchen singing,
her mood impervious to his
and vice versa. Anyone else
could have seen their long tug of war
nearer what it was, but these two
felt only what was to be heard
in advance of hard words coming.

James L. Weil

IMPERATIVES COMPOSED
FOR BILL'S VOICE

What I write makes no
difference. I write

indifferent to
the difference it

does not make. It has
nothing to do with

our undoing. There
is nothing to do,

all done. I write. I
love you. Love me. Write.

Michael Perkins

THE HOUR OF PASSIONATE SPEECH

Each morning the heavy cats
Go forth to stalk
What winter has left behind.
The flies start their music now,
In all the windows
Their urgent buzzing.
Everything waits
For the gravid earth.
It is the hour of tongues,
When lovers invent words
And place them gently
In each other's mouths.
It is the hour when soil
Translates the solar language
And birds make leaves tremble
With the endless opera of trees:
The hour of passionate speech.

GEORGE OPPEN, THE LAST DAYS

In a mortuary the only serious subject is mortality. And that may be true of poetry too, only we are diverted by earthly matters, or like Oppen get Alzheimer's disease on the subject. Oppen himself has not dealt with the anguish of death, for he wrote only from experience. I have tried to find my way to it from a line of his, "in events/ the myriad lights/ have entered us," but from that it follows that in death a particular set of events conclude and their particular lights simply leave, and I weep that it is not that neat or easy.

There was never any mystery about Oppen's character or his working principles. Already far into Alzheimer's he said to his sister, June: "I don't know if you have anything to say but let's take out all the adjectives and we'll find out." The curious pertinacity of character!

The morning his wife Mary and I drove him to Oakland to enter him into The Home for Jewish Parents he was very quiet. I explained that I was going along just to keep them company, and he said, "That's nice," and that's all he said. Mary and I tried to use up the time by talking but he was out of it and when I looked over for a moment to see what was going on, his body was rigid, his eyes fixed outward into space, terrified. When we reached the Home, he went along without a word as Mary and I carried the baggage. There in the vestibule we had to wait while his room was being prepared.

We were now in the milieu of very aged women in the final stages of illness and infirmity, the average age being eighty-six. They were walking about slowly, with great difficulty, this way and that, mostly to their rooms. We couldn't think of anything to say that would sound right or have any interest for him at such a time, so Mary and I just

stood and looked on. The atmosphere was not threatening, but the physical sight confronted him with that fate from which there is no escape and closed in on him. For the first time he was alone with it and he fell into the starkest inward state where no one could accompany him. But his body remained where it was. He stood very tall and straight, towering over the little white-haired ladies as if he were asserting his eternal distinction from them. His eyes, however, were distraught and lost, for this was an ending he had not counted on.

At that moment three very frail women, deep in conversation, came limping towards him from the dining room. They looked better dressed and put-together than the others, who had long ago given up trying to look attractive, and showed more class and self-assurance. The smaller one had a particularly kindly face with gentle features and the finest white hair. Anywhere else I don't think he would have noticed her, but here as they approached him and she looked up and their eyes met, at once his face lit up like someone surprised at encountering a kindred spirit in such a dismal place and walking over to her, he greeted her, and with just the suggestion of a gallant gesture he bent over as if to help her. She acknowledged this with a soft smile and walked on.

"By God," I thought, "he's found a friend. He's going to make it!" But it was not so.

He was no longer able to read or write but I didn't know that.

At his 75th birthday celebration he had been afraid that someone would ask him for his autograph and he would start to write his name and forget how to finish it. He had always been a quiet, observant man, but as time went on, he spoke less and became more quiet. He still came up occasionally with bright insights as before, droll and witty in his characteristic way, but they were no longer related to what was being said. His civility remained unimpaired, however, and his body

seemed to be in good shape. He went on walks with Mary and exercised at a gym and did pull-ups and exercises on his crossbar at home and could stand on his head.

One radiant summer day he and Mary and Leah and I had driven out to Fort Funston for a picnic with some young poets. When we got to the picnic area, everybody started doing something, setting the table, laying out the food, or just chattering and feeling good. Mary had warned the young men that George was not up to answering questions, and they refrained. He stood off by himself, some distance from the others, his face clouded over. They approached him only briefly to say something pleasant, then retreated, and he replied in a word or two.

When the table was set, Mary noticed that she had left something behind in the car and told George she was going back to get it. He nodded and just watched her. It was a long walk back, down a hill, then along a flat stretch and around a bend, and when she started the descent, he walked over to the edge and stood there, his bearing erect like a captain on the high bridge of his ship, but tense, locked in. His eyes followed every step she took, going down and along the meadow, her figure getting smaller and smaller, then the bend, and when she passed out of sight, his eyes were lost to everything else. I have seen a dog tied to a post look in just such a way and not move a muscle, peering into the exact space in the store where his mistress has disappeared. It was not until Mary came into view again that he relaxed. He watched her for a few minutes, then walked back to where he had been standing before.

"Ah, George," I sighed. "Have you come to this?"

Since he could no longer read or write, he had become fidgety and had to get out of the house and walk, but he couldn't remember his address and would get lost, so Mary always had to go with him. One day, however, he stole the car keys and slipped out without her knowledge. He had been a good driver all his

life but had not driven for two years because of his condition. She waited anxiously. Finally the phone rang. It was the police. He had been in an accident, the car demolished. The police had found him sitting bolt upright in his seat, unaware that the blood was gushing out of the back of his head. As he told Mary afterwards, he had had an irresistible impulse to drive on the open road and he sped wildly down the freeway, speeding weightlessly into an unfamiliar ecstasy. Suddenly it ended. In front of him was a blank: he didn't know where he was (he was on the Bay Bridge). He slammed on the brakes and the car behind smashed into him. All he could say to Mary afterwards was that he had never felt so great. He couldn't understand it.

I am with George again at The Home for Jewish Parents and he is standing in the vestibule waiting for his room to be readied. Off at the other end a circle of chairs has been set and voices are heard as aged ladies and one lone Adam amble out of the dining room on their way to the chairs. It will take them several minutes to plod the distance of about twenty feet, each step measured and hesitant. It is folksinging time. The folksinger, a smiling young woman with a guitar, greets them by name as they approach and settle in their chairs. She sings Latino and Israeli songs with a hearty beat, then stops and tries to teach them the words, calling on them with her eyes, her head beckoning, her body beckoning, to sing along; she will carry them on her undaunted spirit. And one voice does respond, faintly, and a couple of heads nod to the beat, but Adam's eyes are closed and a few others have one eye open and the other, as in a cartoon, X-ed out.

It is not a performance. It is a plea to obliterate old age, and she has reached far out and called on song to help her, for youth and vitality and a smile, however radiant and true, are not enough. When it is over, there are still little smiles here and there and faces are not quite so cheerless. Then the ladies slowly stand up and disband, lumbering

by as before. When he sees me, Adam stops a moment with a friendly look, as if glad he has found another man to chat with, and I return his smile and am about to say something when I notice that his expression remains the same. He can't speak. He's had a stroke.

When the music started, I had looked over to see what effect it was having on George, but he was out of range, shut in the same absorption. The beat and the sense of people and voices swarming nearby were so strong and insistent, however, that he leaned forward, craning his neck to see what was going on. At that moment his face looked as if he might walk over to investigate, but the next thing I knew, he was back in limbo.

While we were waiting, one of the clerical workers joined us, a dark-haired, vivacious young woman. Good-hearted Miriam out of the Bible. Considerately she stood back a little and tried to see without being conspicuous. I learned why. She loved poetry and read a good deal of it, and it was natural for her to be there, watching. She couldn't wait to read the book Mary had left in the office, his Collected Poems.

Word now came that the room was ready and the three of us trudged down the long hallway after the nurse, Mary and I, the executioners, carrying the bags. We examined the room. It was clean and light. There were two identical, slightly worn, blonde dressers, two identical plain beds and two identical armchairs, each piece blanched of its former occupants. George stood awkwardly and did not look. Mary busied herself. She unpacked a watercolor by her that he was fond of and hung it near the door. Then she set a framed snapshot on the mantle to remind him who he was. It was Mary and George, beaming and in vigorous health.

There was a framed snapshot on the other dresser too. Of the absent roommate. Where was he? Perhaps being led down the hall by a nurse. Middle-aged in the picture, standing in the sun in shirtsleeves, an ordinary man being photographed. Next to him, also in shirt-sleeves, David Ben Gurion, the prime minister,

equally plain. Apparently taken on a trip to Israel. Someone had left it there as a reminder. No other sign of him in the room.

Since Mary was coming back the next morning, parting was not hard for George that day. In fact, things looked good at first. She came almost every morning and took him out for a drive in the park, and they basked in the spring flowers, and he was relaxed and agreeable. The head nurse, a large, bluff, good-natured black woman who inspired confidence, came by his room and introduced herself by her first name, and he, always responsive to the natural, liked her at once and introduced himself by his first name. And the Jewish community newspaper ran a feature story on the Home's first Pulitzer Prize poet-resident. And he liked the food he was getting there and ate more than at home, and danced with one of the volunteers during the music period. And June became his younger sister again, as in childhood, and all the affection he had felt for her then came back and their visits were tender.

Mary's visits ran a more poignant course. When she had been with him long enough and said she would have to go, he'd walk with her to the front door, as if he were going home, and she would have to explain that she was not well enough to care for him, and he with his customary courtesy would reply, "Of course," slightly apologetic at having forgotten. But he could not hold on to that thread and the scenes at the door continued and became more difficult.

"Why do I have to be here?" he would expostulate. "We've been together for fifty years. Aren't we husband and wife?"

Finally she stopped the explanations and would beckon to a nurse to take over. Then his memory got still worse. On a visit Leah asked him, "George, do you know who I am?" George studied her face, hesitated, and then said sweetly, "No. You know I have this sickness. I can't remember." "I'm Leah Rakosi," she said. "Oh." George's face lit up. "Of course, Leah and Carl Rakosi." Had that light come into his

face because he was having a pleasant memory of us or because he had succeeded in connecting her name with mine? It was doubtful at that time whether he recognized anyone but Mary and June.

He continued to eat a lot but looked gaunt and became more and more restless and agitated. He could no longer be trusted in the dining room and had to have his meals brought to him. His absent roommate had come back, a small, harmless old man who was incontinent and slept most of the day. They paid no attention to each other except when there was a stench in the room. Then George would burst into a rage and shout.

There was nothing to stop him from walking out the front door if he felt restless but in his Alzheimer's mind it seemed to him he was in a menacing situation from which he had to escape and when no one was looking, he slipped into the garden at the back and climbed over a wall to get away, wandering for hours through poor black neighborhoods, lost. The Home simply stepped up his sedation.

About this time he became delusional about the nurse's aides who had to dress and bathe him in the morning, poor black overworked women whom under other circumstances he would have hailed compassionately and probably idealized. They looked fierce and sinister to him as if they meant to destroy him, and he was terrified, and when they approached him, he threatened them with his fist to go back. They called the head nurse.

"What's the matter, George?" she asked reassuringly. "Don't you trust us?"

No answer.

"Don't you trust me?"

"I trust you."

But it had no effect on the delusion. Finally in his mind they were beating him and he struck back and had to be strapped to his chair. Then came a sudden kidney failure. He was rushed to the hospital and given only a few days to live, but he survived. The question now was, "How much longer?" The Home would not take him back and the referring

physician, therefore, transferred him to a small nursing home run by a psychiatrist, a locked facility where he died in a coma on a Saturday evening July 7, 1984, whether from Alzheimer's disease or another kidney failure or because no one had noticed that he had not passed water in nine days or from all three, I don't know, but thus ended George Oppen, who had upheld the integrity of nouns and looked with dismay on their undoing by adjectives, and such, that are no match for them.

Adieu, gentle friend.

George Butterick

(1942-1988)

poet - scholar - critic

In the awakened air
at night, children refuse to sleep
the dark perfection.

Samuel Retsov

THE BAROQUE SOUND OF WILLIAM BRONK

The baroque argument is resolved in a vigorous statement of alternate phrasings and variant conclusions. It is in the phrasing that the argument matters, and the authority of form is manifest in a transcendent vision which absorbs all contradictions and elaborations into perfect balance. However complex the argument, a simultaneous respect for restraint and silence is essential. The baroque depends on paradox.

The baroque is possible until the orthodoxy of classical form becomes its own subject, or distinction and passion seem merely disjunction and dissonance.

The elegance of Thomas Browne is the matter of his expression. The dome Borromini created for S. Ivo is astounding (for us, though it is no more than his aesthetic allowed--as even his critics had to know) since it so fully explores the variant forms proposed. What frightens is simply having to preserve that intricacy and balance forever, for once it is begun, it can never be abandoned. If one is true to the aesthetic, not merely toying, the price can be, in exhaustion, no less a price than that the architect paid.

The baroque may be the most serious and demanding of aesthetics, and the demands are enormous, but if its intricacy and harmony are consistent, the rewards can be the grace, assurance, and complexity of Buxtehude or Bach.

The baroque crossed the Atlantic in the aggrieved complexities of Puritan Jeremiads, the steeples of New England churches, town meetings, and the poems of Edward Taylor, but here it remained a provincial expression, never fully understood, until the simplicities of

neoclassicism and Federalist reason finally smoothed its lines into that commonality, political and otherwise, which is everywhere.

The spirit remained, however, and Thoreau and Melville read Browne, his voice modulating in such different ways into their own. William Bronk studied Melville and Thoreau in his first book, The Brother in Elysium, and whether he took either or both as his model or whether he went back to Browne or Herbert or another metaphysical master, Bronk's great early works are clearly shaped according to a baroque sensibility and aesthetic. Ideas gain life like musical phrases in a fugue: stated, inverted, augmented, diminished, they are always turning in a space they define. There is great joy in the sheer complexities of syntax and the shape of words.

Browne and Thoreau have a similar joy, but in their scholarship, the answers for them must often have been known before they wrote, and, therefore, it is Melville who seems Bronk's probable model, forever adding to the structure until the exhaustion of possibility is its own skeptical end. The point is never to hide or obscure, but to decorate and discover, to provide a sacrament and homage to that silent, expressionless god from whom the work began.

Bronk's poems, despite their reserve and quietly modulated diction, are baroque compositions responding to, and illuminating, whiteness and silence. No other poet of his generation has come closer to Melville. None has been as powerful in understanding and utilizing the intricacies of reason and syntax. His work is among the principal poetic achievements of our time.

William Bronk
Two Poems from THE EMPTY HANDS

ON CREDO UT INTELLIGAM

Anselm believed in order to understand.
He knew the method: -- science, common sense,
for him, theology -- beliefs invent
exclusions, take things piece by piece, regret
they don't add back again. Someday they will.

But I have spent too long, relied
too much on understanding, not
to be ashamed to call a helper in
because it fails, or shut my mind
to what the mind receives, or scheme a false
frame by force to make an odd piece fit.
No, we need to fail to understand
unless it means no more than contemplate,
examine; even then, we do not know
what, in the examination, who asks whom,
or fails to answer: the contemplation absorbs,
but we don't know.

I plead the permanence
of ignorance, that we acknowledge it.
It goes where we go, gets there first, and waits
to be the find we make wherever we think
to have gone: the days adventure, the same surprise.

I sit here aware of what prays for saying, but not of what to say it of, not of whom to say it to, -- an awareness, feeling, aware of something felt.

I disclaim the invented world of which we might say there might be ultimate things unknown about it, not wholly understood, but we have the fundamentals anyway, and the stuff before us, and someone knows, or someone will shortly know. That world, which asks our belief, and offers us understanding back, has cost too much in what it shuts away of all our awareness, the reaches of ignorance.

It doesn't speak of them; it speaks of itself.

Belief, which visas us our entry there, comforts our incoherence, offers to teach some simple terms, the easy speech of the land as time, for one, in sequences, or space, as extensible, or any person discrete from any other, living a finite life, with birth and death, and something to build between. We hear this language spoken and understand,

but it remains the special speech of the place, resisting translation, unable to say what we mean.

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, a snowman life: hurry to pack it solid, buttons on and a proper hat, finished before dark, before the rain to wash it away. We dress our lives as we might dress a doll of self, getting and giving, a self the child we get.

How should I turn my head away to look at anything other than that I am ignorant of, it being all; or make belief event a world or a life besides, it being there?

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THE SMILE ON THE FACE OF A KOUROS

This boy, of course, was dead, whatever that might mean. And nobly dead. I think we should feel he was nobly dead. He fell in battle, perhaps, and this carved stone remembers him not as he may have looked, but as if to define the naked virtue the stone describes as his. One foot is forward, the eyes look out, the arms drop downward past the narrow waist to hands hanging in burdenless fullness by the heavy flanks. The boy was dead, and the stone smiles in his death lightening the lips with the pleasure of something achieved: an end. To come to an end. To come to death as an end. And coming, bring there intact, the full weight of his strength and virtue, the prize with which his empty hands are full. None of it lost, safe home, and smile at the end achieved.

Now death, of which nothing as yet -- or ever -- is known, leaves us alone to think as we want of it, and accepts our choice, shaping the life to the death. Do we want an end? It gives us; and takes what we give and keeps it; and has, this way, in life itself, a kind of treasure house of comely form achieved and left with death to stay and be forever beautiful and whole, as if to want too much the perfect, unbroken form

were the same as wanting death, as choosing death for an end. There are other ways; we know the way to make the other choice for death: unformed or broken, less than whole, puzzled, we live in a formless world. Endless, we hope for no end.

I tell you, death, expect no smile of pride from me. I bring you nothing in my empty hands.

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WILLIAM BRONK

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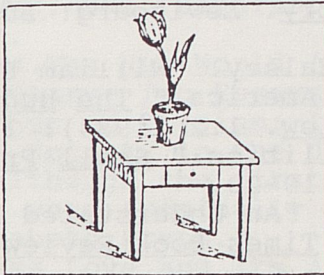
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