

Review · Kevin Oderman

Vectors and Smoothable Curves: Collected Essays. William Bronk. San Francisco: North Point, 1983, 221 pp. \$20.00.

We read a poet's metaphors for his own work with a justifiable wariness, but with fascination, too, because even aggrandizing metaphors are telling; indeed, metaphors, considered or not, seem always to report on the mind that made them. William Bronk is not a notably metaphorical poet, unless we accept his view that all language is metaphor for what it can't express. Still, in a letter quoted in Cid Corman's *William Bronk: An Essay*, he describes what he is after in his own poetry of statements as "the shape of rocks as they lie against each other not the sound they make as they tumble together." It's an odd metaphor for poetry, curiously apt for William Bronk's, and likely to provide a measure of satisfaction to both Bronk's partisans and his detractors. Readers who don't like Bronk complain that his poetry is cold, heavy, dense (and too abstract — there's a limit to the goodness of any metaphor). Bronk enthusiasts prize his integrity, philosophical weight, and the felt substantiality of a Bronk poem. The metaphor is not self-aggrandizing; the poet's place in it is humble. Bronk sees poet as maker, in his own case, as drystone mason.

A good deal of the substantiality of Bronk's work rests with his preoccupation with "subject." Bronk traces his own emphasis on the substantive to his training in writing at Dartmouth under Sydney Cox, where the sole injunction, apparently, was to "say something and mean it!" The lesson took. For over thirty years with a truly daunting persistence, Bronk has chipped and hammered at man's radical ignorance of the failure of his conceptions of reality to get at reality itself. The primacy Bronk grants to subject in his poetry blurs the expected distinction between William Bronk, poet, and William Bronk, essayist. *Vectors and Smoothable Curves: Collected Essays* doesn't reflect on *Life Supports: New and Collected Poems*; they're too close to reflect. The statements in the essays are prose, but, to revert to Bronk's metaphor, it's obvious the statements were cut in the same quarry as the statements in the poems.

This is particularly true of the first two sections of the book, "The New World" and "A Partial Glossary." Bronk himself said of an essay in "The New World" (again in a letter cited by Corman) "that it is, in all but technique, the full equivalent of my poetry."

The six essays that comprise "The New World" have as their occasion Bronk's several visits to pre-Columbian sites in Central America (Macchu Pichu, Tikal, Palenque, and Copan), but the essays, each one more than the last, transcend their occasions. In the first, "An Algebra Among Cats," Bronk bothers with description, and there are very fine descriptions, like this one of "the most beautiful wall in America," at Macchu Pichu:

Since no mortar was used it was necessary for each stone to match perfectly all other stones that it touched and these are not like brick or building block that are regular, interchangeable units. Probably no stone was cut quite like another. In many cases they are roughly rectangular, but each one has its variations in size and shape. An inner angle of one is perfectly reflected by an outer angle of the one adjoining, and even after all the intervening time, there is no space at all between. This correspondence, moreover, was not merely of the surface but extended as deep as the stone. What periods of patient effort each one must have required to give us now the great satisfaction of harmonious order, of the pieces for once put together even if the pieces in this instance are only stone.

(These stones have a life of their own.) By the fifth and sixth essays, though Copan is in the title of each and their ostensible occasion, Bronk's transcendence is so complete that the site goes unmentioned in the body of the text. Instead, Bronk's confronting of the remains of a disappeared civilization has had a catalytic effect on how he sees our own civilization, any civilization; they are all arbitrary, nothing really, simply ineffectual projections of our desire for a world. What characters in Conrad suffer by moments but can't stand, Bronk holds to (significantly Conrad is the sole modern author mentioned in these essays, though his appearance is, I think, by affinity rather than influence). Bronk maintains we live by habit in a sham reality, a pretended world:

The human situation seems less a come-as-you-are party than a party to which we are bidden to come as our favorite character and, though we are sometimes cheap or shy, we do fairly well. We put on the costume and badges, the mental attitudes, the facial and vocal expressions of *something*, of *someone*. Such an action gives shape and clarity to our desires, gives them poles and simplicity; it sets us up as some sort of marked-off existent. It is of course evasive. It is hard to face how insanely evasive until we have watched the fatal despair with which we fight off the loss of an assumed identity. An assumed identity is made from appearances and lets us be nothing and yet appear to be something. We don't so much want to be something as we want to be allowed to look like something, to be granted general recognition—even acclaim—as what we pretend to be, to win the prize for Best Costume.

Bronk says “we” here but means “you.” The force of his thought works like an acid on consensus reality; he wants it to, wants to get beyond sham conceptual realities to an unconceived, inconceivable reality he calls the “worldless world.”

The two short essays in “A Partial Glossary” were written soon after “The New World” and further develop (or distill) Bronk’s ideas on costume (as a metaphor for all our pretensions) and desire. They are, I think, as condensed a prose as I have ever read. For instance, about language, Bronk says: “We speak in tongues however prosaic our speech may be. The boldness of language supervenes our actual experience. It means to say what we don’t know. It creates the world as if the world were. Its whole necessity is metaphor.”

If “The New World” and “A Partial Glossary” are integral to Bronk’s mature achievement, the place of “The Brother in Elysium,” the third and largest section of *Vectors and Smoothable Curves*, is less certain. Although the most recent of Bronk’s prose works to appear, it was written much earlier (it is dated 1946, but composition began before the war). This is not to say that these essays on the ideas of friendship and society in Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville do not bear on Bronk’s mature work, much less that they are not independently rewarding. “The Brother in Elysium,” in fact, establishes an American heritage for Bronk’s (worldless) world view. Though the Bronk who wrote them

hadn't yet achieved the monumental simplicity of his mature style (massive and ringing masonry), he had already attuned his ear to the silence in words, behind words, and to the ambiguities inherent in any speech. His turns out to be a good ear for hearing American fathers murmur.

Nearly forty years ago Bronk wrote that "Melville tenaciously clutched his own uncertainty like a golden bough." The event, I think, has shown Bronk more tenacious than Melville. Indeed, Bronk demonstrates the surprising viability of an art predicated on not knowing, on ignorance. It's Bronk's way not to turn from the abyss he sees darkly under the sham of human affairs, but to turn to it. He finds that there is a reality beyond the realities we conceive of, which we can respond to, "trembling and shaking, or vibrating in tune as though we were instruments a music were played on and we arch and turn to have the contact closer. Our responses are presences that tower around us, seemingly solid as stone."