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JAY PARINI

Editor

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GEORGE OPPEN

(1908—1984)

Anton Vander Zee

No single set of lines can fully capture the evolving complexities and intensities of a remarkable poetic career. But the opening lines of George Oppen's Pulitzer Prize–winning book of poems *Of Being Numerous* (1968) come very close. "There are things / We live among 'and to see them / Is to know ourselves.'" (*New Collected Poems [NCP]*, p. 163). These lines arrive as both an admonition and a challenge to readers. Published in the wake of John F. Kennedy's assassination and in the midst of the Vietnam War, the poem that unfolds from these opening lines is full of things that Oppen thought his mid-1960s audience must see, even if they are reluctant to do so. The poet draws attention to "A plume of smoke," for example, "visible at a distance / In which people burn" (p. 173). This act of seeing quickly merges with an uncompromising sense of the complicity: "If it is true we must do these things," Oppen continues, "We must cut our throats."

Although these charged words about truly *seeing* the things that we live among speak to their wartime context, much of what distinguishes Oppen's poetry in general resides in these lines as well: an intense focus on the meaning of existence; a deeply ethical scrutiny of the self in relation to other; and the promise of some deepening knowledge, at once mysteriously charged and utterly matter-of-fact. Indeed, it is a hallmark of Oppen's poetry that he can seem most profound when expressing himself in the simplest terms.

Oppen's dedication to clarity and sincerity, to conviction and truth—these are totemic words in his poetic imagination—might at times have seemed almost naive in the era following World War II. It can certainly seem so today. Oppen's readers now are familiar with a postmodern poetry that traffics in knowing irony and skepticism, having moved beyond such illusory hopes for truth or knowledge. Yet, for reasons that are quite clear once one grasps the shape of Oppen's career and the constellating moments of conviction that comprise it, poets and critics alike tend to accept his strong and grounded ethical stance and his commitment to truth on its own terms: so earnestly it is expressed in his poetry, and so authentically it is reflected in his life.

FROM MODERN TO CONTEMPORARY

Before considering Oppen's extraordinary life work and life, it is important to note more broadly the unique position he occupies in relation to both modern and contemporary poetry. Critics and anthologists alike tend to divide twentieth-century poetry neatly between poetry before and after World War II. On the one side, one finds the modernist greats such Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Jean Toomer, William Carlos Williams, and Hart Crane. On the other, one finds the emerging contemporary voices that filled out Donald Allen's landmark *New American Poetry* (1960) anthology—poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Denise Levertov, Amiri Baraka, and Barbara Guest. The modernist poets, the story goes, were heavily invested in the restorative power of form and myth. They tended toward an achieved impersonality in their poetry while maintaining a strong ambition for a totalizing, coherent poetic vision that might adequately contain the world, if not make it new. Postmodern poets, however, were skeptical of any such totalizing vision and tended, instead, toward a free verse that would more closely reflect and scrutinize the intimate rhythms of life and mind.

It is a clarifying, if reductive, story—and it is not a story in which Oppen fits in any neat or sensible way. Figures that fit uneasily within received critical narratives often reveal overlooked intensities in the poetic mainstream. They therefore help one tell new stories about how and why poetry might matter beyond convenient accounts of schools and movements, of influence and inheritance. Oppen is certainly one such figure.

Though he would achieve poetic success much later in life after earning the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for his fourth collection, *Of Being Numerous*, Oppen's literary career had its moorings in the 1930s, when he emerged as a promising young modernist upstart. By the time he published his first book, *Discrete Series,* in 1934 at the age of twenty-six, he had already brought out key works by Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Louis Zukofsky through two different publishing ventures—one based in France, one in the United States. He visited Pound in Italy and the sculptor Constantine Brancusi in Paris. A portfolio of his poems had appeared in a special 1931 issue of *Poetry Magazine* dedicated to the so-called objectivist school, which appeared to be a calculated response to, and extension of, the imagist movement of early modernism. He published additional poems in *Poetry* in 1932 and was anthologized in Pound's *Active Anthology* in 1933. Furthermore, his first book was introduced by Pound himself and reviewed generously by Williams, offering an enviable modernist pedigree. Given Oppen's accelerated entry into the modernist mainstream, he would seem to have quickly assumed the role of a cosmopolitan figure in touch with the transnational literary currents of the day.

Oppen, however, could not square his early poetic success with the political realities of the times. After *Discrete Series*, Oppen did not publish another book until 1962, a period of silence without parallel in American poetry. Behind this silence lay many pressing political concerns and personal matters. Oppen and his wife, Mary, joined the Communist Party in 1935 and were heavily involved in community organizing and advocacy. The couple later had a daughter, Linda, and Oppen departed to fight in World War II shortly thereafter, unable to remain on the sidelines in light of the clear Fascist threat. After the war, despite Oppen's heroic service in the European theater, where he was gravely injured, the Oppens were forced into political exile in light of the Smith Act and the aggressive prosecutions and inquisitions of the House Un-American Activities Committee. They remained in Mexico for nearly a decade, raising their daughter and accomplishing the necessary work of survival among the expatriate community. Understandably, when Oppen returned to America and to the poetry scene in the late 1950s, he felt as though he was beginning again.

Oppen, then, is one of the rare figures in twentieth-century poetry who, despite arriving late to the formative moments of both modern and contemporary poetry, still casts a profound shadow over both. Indeed, Oppen's early poetry offers a powerful critique of the modernism that seemed to inspire it, just as his later poetry admonishes, variously, the cult of personality, the mannerism, the lyric reserve, and the inward confessional turn that dominated so much postwar poetry. After making a strong initial impression on the modernist literary scene, Oppen quickly assumed a role as a sort of "elder statesmen," as Michael Davidson notes in the introduction to the *New Collected Poems* (2002), for the host of young poets emerging in the decades after World War II (p. xxii).

THE LONG FOREGROUND: SUCCESS, SILENCE, AND EXILE

George Oppen was born in 1908 into an upper-class Jewish family in New Rochelle, New York, an upbringing of financial privilege against which he would define himself for the rest of his life. His father, George Oppenheimer, was a wealthy diamond merchant who in 1927 changed the family name to Oppen. Alongside the material comforts of these early years, however, was a deep sense of personal tragedy. Oppen's mother, Elsie Rothfeld Oppenheimer, killed herself when he was just four years old, and the record of his reflection on these years suggest a strained,

abusive relationship with the woman who became his father's second wife, Seville Shainwald. This led to a turbulent high school career at Warren Military Academy that was cut short when Oppen was behind the wheel in a fatal car accident, resulting in his expulsion (he had been suspected of drinking). After traveling through Europe, Oppen returned to take his high school diploma and, almost on a whim, accompanied a friend to attend what is now Oregon State University at Corvallis.

There, Oppen experienced two momentous and nearly simultaneous events that impacted his future in both life and letters: a poetry instructor named Jack Lyons introduced him both to Mary Colby, with whom he would share a most intimate and remarkable married life, and to modern poetry, via Conrad Aiken's anthology *Modern American Poets* (1922). Like his high school career, however, Oppen's time in higher education would end prematurely—and abruptly. But while his high school years ended tragically after years of personal and psychological hardship, his college career ended almost before it started in a pact of love that would illuminate his life until the end.

In Mary Oppen's autobiography, *Meaning a Life* (1978), she describes this coincidence of love and letters that they both felt so profoundly: "I found George Oppen and poetry at one moment," she writes (p. 63). After Lyons introduced the two, Oppen asked Mary out. "He came for me in his roommate's Model T Ford," Mary recalls, "and we drove out into the country, sat and talked, made love, and talked until morning" (p. 61). A lake of fog descended on the field where they had camped, a moment that would attain an iconic quality of mystery and wonder in Oppen's poetry. Nearly forty years later, in a poem called "The Forms of Love" from *This in Which* (1965), Oppen would dramatize this formative moment. As they talked away the evening hours, the car perched on a hill, a lake seemed magically to emerge below them as the moon rose. The car in which they camped became "ancient" as they emerged into a strange new world. By the poem's end, their "heads / Ringing under the stars" (*NCP*, p. 106), Mary and Oppen descended into a thick patch of illuminated fog, a place of surreal mystery and ephemeral beauty that nevertheless marked the entrance to their very real and enduring love.

That Oppen returns to this formative moment forty years later speaks to the intensity of his relationship with Mary, who was a near constant presence both in his poetry and as an interlocutor in so many of his later interviews (she is nearly always present and contributing, often completing Oppen's own sentences). It is Mary's love—and, by extension, the domestic space of home and fatherhood—that gives Oppen's poetry, which can so often seem spare and ascetic, a sustaining softness. It also offers a grounding model for the kind of human connection that would be such a crucial part of Oppen's broader political vision.

Oppen and Mary's illicit night out resulted in Mary's expulsion and George's suspension. Both chose to leave school rather than appeal the charges despite the unevenness of the punishment; they had, after all, found each other. By the next summer, they were living together in San Francisco, and by summer's end they had scrapped more sensible plans—nursing training for Mary, matriculation at Berkeley for George—and abandoned relative stability and family support for deeper ties to the American landscape. Mary, in her memoir, describes their search in a way that shows how closely wed art and life were for the two: "We were in search of an esthetic within which to live," she writes, "and we were looking for it in our own American roots, in our own country" (p. 68). They went to seek the poetry that was living now, and the life that might give rise to that poetry. "Hitchhiking became more than a flight from a powerful family," she continues. "Our discoveries themselves became an esthetic and a disclosure" (p. 68).

Their travels took them to Texas, where they married, and then back to San Francisco, where tensions with family emerged once more. In 1928—Oppen was just twenty, and Mary slightly younger—they decided to make their way east, hitchhiking once again, this time as far as Detroit, where they purchased a small sailboat and charted a path toward New York City. There they

mingled with key modernist figures and formed lasting connections with two in particular who would figure prominently in George's poetic development—Louis Zukofsky and Charles Reznikoff. Still unsettled, by 1929 they were back in San Francisco and then off to Europe. Settling in the south of France, they launched a more formal literary venture, starting the small press To Publishers, which published important work by major modernist figures such as William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound as well as Louis Zukofsky's *An Objectivist's Anthology* (1932), which featured early work from Oppen. As noted above, they also visited Pound in Rappalo, Italy, where they glimpsed warily the aesthetic and political disposition that would turn sharply toward fascism and anti-Semitism as World War II approached. By 1933 the couple had moved back to New York and launched the Objectivist Press, which continued to bring out key works by modernist poets, and which would also publish Oppen's first book, *Discrete Series*, in 1934.

Oppen's first book was deeply informed by the general atmosphere of the 1930s: economic collapse, widespread suffering, and the surging force of political organization on the Left. The book's unassuming title suggests its governing organizational strategies, strategies that also reflect Oppen's emerging politics. In a 1968 interview with the literary critic L. S. Dembo, Oppen explains that "discrete series" refers to a "phrase in mathematics. A pure mathematical series would be one in which each term is derived from the preceding term by a rule. A discrete series is a series of terms each of which is empirically derived, each of which is empirically true" (*Speaking with George Oppen [SWGO]*, p. 10). A specific kind of lyric series, the serial poem suggests a movement motivated not by some overarching structure, but by the negotiation between—and often chance encounter with—distinct particulars. Put simply, the serial poem, as Oppen deployed it, allowed him formally to dramatize the relationship between the one and the many, between part and whole, without subsuming one into the other. William Carlos Williams, in his review of the book, offers his own gloss on the title that captures the key connection between poetic experiment and literal experience: "I feel that he is justified in so using the term," Williams writes. "It has something of the implications about it of work in a laboratory when one is following what he believes to be a profitable lead along some one line of possible investigation" (Hatlan, p. 268).

These poetic experiments, for Oppen, were also experiential, and many of the poems in *Discrete Series* track the poem's speaker as he moves through urban space, settling now upon a man selling postcards, now a parked car, now a ship's mast, now the inside of an elevator. Such poems seek to give a glimpse into the world, but their idiosyncratic syntax blocks easy access to that world, which is very much the point: to make it new often entailed making it strange. In the poem that places us inside an elevator, for example, the initial image—"White. From the / Under arm of T // The red globe"—resists any easy association with the poem's place, focusing initially not on the mode of locomotion itself, but on the buttons and their embellishments, what Oppen later in the poem calls the "shiny fixed / Alternatives" that constrain one's action in this place (*NCP*, p. 6).

In such poems, we are not quite sure what we are looking at, nor how we are supposed to feel about it. The reference in this poem might have been more familiar to a reader in the early 1930s, describing, as it does, the controls in an elevator of that era. But even then, the poem's intense focus on the particular speaks to a certain difficulty of relating the part to the whole. This difficulty has less to do with literary or cultural posturing than it does with a certain difficulty of experience itself. In this poem's case, the fine period detail ironically reflects what seem to be shiny alternatives of economic class: you are either going up or going down. As with life itself, where some hoped-for ascent is balanced against the certainties of death, the economic choice seems "fixed" in advance.

Another poem—one of the many poems in *Discrete Series* that serve as aesthetic self-reflections—depicts, with only slightly less obscurity, a car, "closed in glass... / Unapplied and empty: A thing among others" (*NCP*, p. 13). Even as the

poem is about a certain exclusive waste and luxury as the car sits closed, vacant, "unapplied," it also speaks to a certain detachment from experience. The car, like so many workers, is just one thing among others, and the poem's syntactic difficulty and vague references at times force readers' own sense of detachment as they struggle to relate and connect the poem's particular references. The poem, then, is a comment on the luxurious safety from which one might view the urban environment, but also a cautionary comment on the luxurious safety of poetry itself—its gaze safely ensconced in its own "unapplied and empty" gestures safely positioned behind glass.

In poems such as these, one can see the relationship of Oppen's early work to the "objectivism" with which it was initially aligned. Objectivism was never intended to name a coherent poetic movement or even to define a set of shared poetic strategies. Instead, Louis Zukofsky invented the moniker under some pressure from the editor of *Poetry*. In an essay accompanying the special issue, Zukofsy broadly positions this cohort of poets in relation to the imagists that preceded them: "Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing," he writes, "of thinking with things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody" (p. 273). While Oppen's poems are not always melodious—indeed, their jarring syntax often resists the easy accommodations of melody—the emphasis on detail, direction, and thinking with things as they exist captures something crucial about Oppen's poetry, both at this early stage and throughout his career. In "The Mind's Own Place," Oppen's most significant (and one of his very few) prose publications, Oppen writes that "modern American poetry begins with the determination to find the image, the thing encountered, the things seen each day whose meaning has become the meaning and the color of our lives. Verse, which had become a rhetoric of exaggeration, of inflation, was to the modernist a skill of accuracy, of precision, a test of truth" (*Selected Prose*, p. 30). That insight has more to do with his work and that of his fellow objectivists than it does with modernism proper, a movement that he would as often define himself *against*, whether explicitly or implicitly.

Indeed, Oppen also sought to distinguish his poetic project from the insular sentimentalism into which imagism had devolved. "The weakness of Imagism," Oppen writes in his daybooks, is that "a man writes of the moon rising over a pier who knows nothing about piers and is disregarding all that he knows about the moon" (*Selected Prose*, p. 82). Oppen, in this early work, sought something less contrived, something simpler: to make knowledge of accrued experience, and to make poems of that accrued knowledge. His early poems are objects of experience and perception, loosely bound "moments of conviction," as he would later describe them (*SWGO,* p. 10).

Oppen's primary concern in his early poetry was not unlike the one Whitman announces in the first inscription poem to the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*. What does it mean to sing the self, a single separate person, yet also utter what Whitman famously called the word "democratic," the word of the people? In *Discrete Series,* this tension between the singular self and the multiplying others is consistently modeled on the level of both form and content. And while Oppen would later return with confidence, or at least considered conviction, to utter something like Whitman's democratic word, it was his investment in the people, in the suffering of those myriad others, that led to a poetic silence that would last nearly twenty-six years.

The charged confluence of poetry and politics that informed Oppen's first literary efforts buckled under the weight of the times. Oppen no longer found in poetry a viable response to the unfolding crisis of the Depression, and in 1935 he and Mary joined the Communist Party. Compelled by Socialist ideals and the Marxist view of history, the couple devoted themselves to work as community activists and organizers, experiencing a political awakening that seemed a world apart from the poetry scene they had joined so eagerly.

Why politics instead of poetry? Why did Oppen see the two as such distinct endeavors? In his 1968 interview with Dembo, Oppen reflects

on the necessity of choosing political engagement. Faced with millions of families visibly suffering on the streets, Oppen describes how, for people like himself and Mary who had precisely *chosen* a certain class existence, turning their back on privilege, political engagement and fellow-feeling with the masses was the most obvious choice. And at this time for Oppen, poetry and political engagement were simply not compatible: "If you decide to do something politically, you do something that has political efficacy," he reasoned. "And if you decide to write poetry, then you write poetry, not something that you hope, or deceive yourself into believing, can save people who are suffering" (*SWGO*, p. 20). But even as the Depression caused Oppen to abandon poetry as an act of political conscience, there were other more personal factors as well: "there were some things I had to live through," Oppen continues, "some things I had to think my way through, some things I had to try out—and it was more than politics, really; it was the whole experience of working in factories, of having a child, and so on."

The reasons for Oppen's literary silence, then, are complex. Thus it makes some sense that Oppen, when asked about his long departure from the literary world, most often gave a rather curt answer—one supplied for him by the conservative critic Hugh Kenner during one such conversation. Kenner, who perhaps did not want to hear about the leftist backdrop to Oppen's charged choice, interrupted the poet mid-story: "In brief, it took twenty-five years to write the next poem" (*SWGO*, p. 20). Oppen appreciated the shorthand explanation and would trot this line out in nearly every interview he gave for the rest of his life.

As the Depression deepened, Oppen and Mary's choice to involve themselves more directly in social and political matters might seem an abandonment of poetry and of the aesthetic more generally. Yet in retrospect, Oppen would frame even this abandonment of his literary ambitions precisely as a poetic endeavor, not unlike how Mary frames their early travels in which they sought an "esthetic" in which to live. "And when the crisis occurred," Oppen explains in an interview later in life, "we knew we didn't know what the world was and we knew we had to find out so it was a poetic exploration at the same time that it was an action of conscience, of feeling that one was worth something or other" (*SWGO*, p. 218). For Oppen, seeking knowledge—not propositional knowledge or knowledge of mere facts, but knowledge of deeper truths rooted in personal and communal experience—was a fundamentally poetic endeavor. Poetry, for Oppen, was a preconceptual activity, an activity that must precede argument and concrete knowledge. It represents an openness to experience and ideas: a "making," to recall the roots of the Greek *poiesis*, in the deepest sense. The prominent Oppen critic Peter Nicholls, in his major study *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (2007), cites a passage from Oppen's papers that aptly captures this sense of poetry: "For me," Oppen writes, "the writing of the poem is the process of finding out what I mean, discovering what I mean" (p. 39). Thus, although Kenner's interpretation of Oppen's silence is a bit reductive, obscuring, as it does, the political reasons behind the silence, it does aptly frame the choice as an extended aesthetic pause—a sort of epic caesura allowing space for experience and reflection.

Just as Oppen's literary record thins out during this period to the point of vanishing, so too does the biographical record. With few extant letters and notebooks, what one knows of this time must be gleaned from Oppen's later letters and interviews that briefly address this period; from Mary Oppen's autobiography *Meaning a Life*; and from the FBI files kept on the Oppens for twenty-five years—a record that Rachel Blau DuPlessis makes excellent use of in her introduction to the *Selected Letters* (1990).

Concurrently with joining the Communist Party in 1935, the Oppens joined the Workers Alliance of America (WAA). This latter group sought to create a unified political platform for the masses of unemployed. While the organization counted its members in the millions, its organization was driven by local engagements, with neighborhoods divided into separate councils. Working on this level, the Oppens were

directly engaged in the struggles of their neighbors. As a result of their organizational work, the Oppens were arrested on multiple occasions. With the birth of their daughter, Linda, in 1940 and the looming crisis of World War II—the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact caused them to doubt their commitment to the Communist Party—Oppen increasingly felt called to engage this global conflict. In 1942 Oppen was exempted from military service not due to his age—he still qualified in that regard—but because he had work at Grumman Aircraft in Long Island. As Oppen was aware, his choice to leave that job and move to Detroit to take another job amounted to a direct enlistment into the U.S. Army. Oppen's military service took him to Europe, where he was engaged in some of the key battles of World War II, including the Battle of the Bulge. Just weeks before the war ended, Oppen was badly wounded after taking cover in a foxhole under heavy bombardment. All of his companions died in the attack, and Oppen was helplessly pinned under their weight in addition to shrapnel. This experience of horror and survival would haunt him for his remaining decades. Indeed, the foxhole and the blasted landscape of the war-torn front became, for Oppen, indelible images of ruin, apocalypse, and a rending of the human fabric, images that would challenge and temper his future attempts to ground his poetics in enduring faith in the human community.

Having recovered from his injuries, Oppen returned from the war with a Purple Heart, among other commendations. The Oppens moved shortly after his return to Redondo Beach, California, where Oppen took on various construction and carpentry jobs. Though they technically remained members of the Communist Party, the Oppens had no close ties with the organization or its leadership at this time. This didn't stop the harassment by authorities in the midst of the increasingly hostile environment of the Second Red Scare. Authorities had launched a witch hunt for subversives with connections to radical politics; they wanted names. In 1950, unwilling to name names, and fearing backlash and possible arrest due to their past political affiliations from the thirties, the Oppens decided to exile themselves in Mexico. They made this choice to protect those with whom they worked, but also to protect their young daughter, fearing that they could be taken away from her.

The Oppens remained in Mexico for eight years. As an American, Oppen was barred from undertaking any kind of manual labor, so the family found its options restricted to a life of bourgeois ease among the expatriate crowd. Thus the Oppens were forced to live a life they had abandoned in a place in which they had no inclination to remain. Given the heavy scrutiny of their leftist affiliations, political conversation, much less action of any kind, was simply impossible. And even as foreigners, they were still subject to frequent harassment and suspicion on behalf of the Mexican government as well as the CIA and FBI. Their years in exile were marked by stress, depression, and struggle.

Finally in 1958—Oppen was then fifty years old, Linda just entering college—the Oppens were able to renew their passports; after visiting the states and returning for brief periods to Mexico, the Oppens moved back to the United States permanently in 1960. They settled once more in New York—Brooklyn, to be more precise, not far from Louis Zukofsky, their old colleague from their early publishing ventures. This urban location—along with the vast experiences Oppen had accrued during his long silence—would form the backdrop of his next three books. Once back in the States, Oppen worked tirelessly to reenter the literary world, resuming friendships with his fellow objectivist poets from the 1930s, contacting editors of key literary journals and presses, and working diligently on what would be his first collection since *Discrete Series* in 1934.

A RETURN TO POETRY: THE MATERIALS, THIS IN WHICH, *AND* OF BEING NUMEROUS

Oppen had made a deliberate and forward-looking decision to abandon his literary efforts in the mid-1930s. His return to writing after a long absence was marked by a similar clarity of purpose and vision. "I knew that there would be three books when I started *The Materials*," he

explains in an interview from the early 1970s, even noting a "vague outline" for how he hoped to proceed (*SWGO*, p. 39).

The first book, *The Materials* (1962), would think through what he called his noumenalism, which we see in this book's intense phenomenological focus on humankind's relationship to the physical universe, and how an awareness of the self is inextricably tied to an often difficult recognition of arbitrary, intractable, and sometimes violent forces. Oppen saw the second book, *This in Which* (1965), as drawing these disparate materials into a more coherent vision, one that makes room for a sense of wonder—even sublime wonder. The final book in his projected three-book series—*Of Being Numerous* (1968)—is Oppen's best known and justly considered his masterpiece. There, the concerns with the things of the world and history, along with his finely tuned capacity for wonder, find a firmer middle ground in the social. The book, as Oppen put it, would lay out "the fact that one does live historically ... that one must live in some relation to history" (*SWGO*, p. 39). To live historically, for Oppen, is not to live in the past, but to live one's life in conscious connection with an unfolding social history—the story of the people—and to see one's life as inextricably bound to those of others, for better or worse. What Oppen would often call the necessary concept of humanity, then, became a necessary and grounding force in his work and life.

This clear shift of attention from an alien and often violent world in *The Materials*, to a sense of wonder in relation to nature in *This in Which*, and finally to an accommodation with the social fact of existence in *Of Being Numerous*, provides a useful, though obviously reductive, shorthand for understanding this important middle period of Oppen's career.

Oppen would often speak of his second book, *The Materials*—the first after that momentous silence—in matter-of-fact terms. In a 1970 interview Oppen describes the book as "just gathering again the way to begin this" (*SWGO*, p. 39). That simplicity masks two guiding inquiries that motivate this book and suggest the contours of his evolving literary career: the first inquiry is aesthetic, and hinges on the compatibility of poetry and politics, or art and life; the second inquiry is existential, and hinges on the meaning of human existence more generally. If the first inquiry asks what it means authentically to make art, given the political crises of the times, the second asks what it means *to be* at all.

Frequently in *The Materials*, ideals of family and love form a protective reserve that frame these two guiding inquiries: these ideals model his sense of broader human interconnection, and also serve as a barrier from harsher existential realities. The first poem he wrote after his long silence—"Blood from the Stone"—embodies these inter-animating tendencies. The poem consists of four numbered sections, a formal echo of the loosely linked lyric series that Oppen had also deployed in *Discrete Series*. The first section opens upon a domestic interior, his wife returning home with a bundle of groceries, catching his eye as she stands framed by the entryway. The familiar simplicity of this initial scene leads, as often happens in Oppen's poetry, to a more momentous realization: "Everything I am is / Us. Come home" (*NCP*, p. 52). This is what one might call a threshold poem in the broad, generic sense: think of Walt Whitman's "There Was a Child Went Forth," or other poems pitched between inside and outside, safety and risk. But Oppen's threshold poem unfolds on a much smaller, domestic scale, and it is less a poem of setting out than of returning—returning home to the United States after nearly a decade in exile, returning to writing, returning to a literary community. Oppen captures the momentousness of that return in a way that invites the reader to see the domestic sphere as an essential link to, and metaphor for, broader ideals of community.

Section 2 of the poem shifts radically from the domestic interior and its easy ethic of connection to memories of the past and the political struggles of the 1930s, memories that appear as a "spectre" as Oppen struggles to grasp the "inexplicable crowds" (*NCP*, p. 52). After the clear homecoming in section 1, section 2 seems more difficult to parse. Why are the thirties—which invite the poet to imagine the "spectre" of these "inexplicable" crowds—so obscure and inacces-

sible? And to whom? Oppen, here, reflects on how the passing of time causes historical particulars to become fuzzy—a process in which he is perhaps also complicit. In response to historical forgetfulness, which is a forgetfulness of the social itself, Oppen pushes against the modernist aesthetic of invention—one senses Pound's dictum, make it new, echoing in the background—with an ethic of answerability, of response to crisis. After asking himself and the reader to square belief and action, to square one's sense of how the world *might* be with the way it is, Oppen responds by presenting what we might call an ethic of answerability:

> Not invent—just answer—all
> That verse attempts.

The ethic of love that drives the first poem in this series, then, is harnessed here to drive a broader social cohesion, even if that cohesion is cast in the form of a question: "That we can somehow add each to each other?", the section concludes: "Still our lives" (*NCP*, p. 52)

The ethic of "answerability" and response requires an understanding of history that seeks to address the "inexplicable," and to clarify the "spectral," by drawing a line of connection between past and present. Driving this effort is the simple word "still," which suggests both imagistic clarity (a "still" image), and a continuity or endurance that signals a commitment to ideals of communality. The difference between answering and inventing, then, is the difference between an aesthetic that leads outward toward ethical and communitarian concerns, and one that folds in on itself and its own aesthetic ambitions.

The third section shifts abruptly as well, showing a deepening sense of crisis moving from the Depression to the global conflict of World War II. This section strains against the opening epigraph from Jacques Maritain and its easy equation of personal awareness and human connection: "We wake in the same moment to ourselves and to things" (*NCP*, p. 38). Against this easy identification, Oppen writes that "There is a simple ego in a lyric, / A strange one in war" (*NCP*, p. 53). Deeply rooted in Oppen's war experience, this section looks with horror on the ways in which war reduces bodies to mere matter.

In the final section, the poem shifts from the domestic space of section 1, to dueling visions of historical memories of the Depression and war in the following two sections, to a concluding cosmic scale beyond history. Here, Oppen poses more profound existential questions, where the human life span and all the tragedies that unfold therein are pitched against a cosmic backdrop of space and time. Near the end of the final section, however, Oppen attempts to hold the generational and cosmic registers together at once:

> Mother
> Nature! because we find the others
> Deserted like ourselves and therefore brothers.
>
> (*NCP*, p. 54)

Blood and stone, human time and the planet's time. These pitched oppositions of scope and scale are beautifully held together in that broken exclamation: "Mother / Nature!" How distant these two poles can seem; how difficult to draw blood from the stone, life from nothingness; how dire the need to grasp the significance of the *now* in relation to the vastness of geological time. And yet, how necessary. For Oppen, though we are divided from nature and alienated from the earth's raw materials, we also find compatriots in desertion. And this is the root of Oppen's ethic of community—a community, as Oppen makes clear in the poem's final lines, that must be *chosen*: "So we lived," Oppen concludes. "And chose to live."

The patterns that emerge in "Blood from a Stone" repeat throughout *The Materials*. Reflecting on his own childhood in "Birthplace: New Rochelle," the force of survival is found, once more, in family: "My child, / Not now a child, our child / Not altogether lone in a lone universe" (*NCP*, p. 55). Oppen, here, invests so much in some ethic of hope for the future, as he would also do in "Return" from the same collection: "Mary, we turn to the children ... / Wanting so much to have created happiness" (*NCP*, p. 48). Once again, this family ethic leads to a broader sense of connection with the people—what Op-

pen calls "that crowd, the living, that other / Marvel among the mineral" (*NCP*, p. 65).

In "Time of the Missile," encountering the nuclear threat, Oppen returns once more to what threatens the ethic of love, that marvel among the mineral: "My love, my love," he writes, "We are endangered / Totally at last" (*NCP*, p. 70). An openness to the world entails an openness to inhumanity as well—an inhumanity evident in the war, and magnified by the threat of nuclear annihilation. This anxiety hovers over many of the poems in *The Materials*. Such a threat leads to a dangerous inwardness, a falling back within the shelter of the self. "What is the name of that place / We have entered," Oppen asks in "The Crowded Countries of the Bomb." "Despair? Ourselves?" (*NCP*, p. 78). The world has grown utterly precarious, a sense signaled by Oppen's reflection on the cold doctrine of mutually assured destruction, which for him amounts to an assault on human bonds. This realization calls forth a false ethic of inward shelter and self-concern. The poem ends with a dark vision of retreat: "Walking in the shelter, / The young and the old ... // Entering the country that is / impenetrably ours" (*NCP*, p. 78).

In "Survival, Infantry," later in the collection, Oppen returns again to the devastated landscape of war. "Where did all the rocks come from?" Oppen asks. "And the smell of explosives / Iron standing in mud?" (*NCP*, p. 81). Driving this blasted landscape to a postapocalyptic future threatened by nuclear war, Oppen writes in this poem of being "ashamed of our half life and our misery." The nuclear pun could not be clearer.

This in Which, while it shares much with the earlier book, seems, as Peter Nicholls notes, to mark a shift: "The voice is now less anxious," he writes, "the social criticism drier and more assured, and here it is coupled with a determined effort to 'grasp the world' ... in all its actuality" (p. 63). It is that latter aspect that most distinguishes this volume from what comes directly before and after. In *The Materials*, Oppen struggled to locate a sense of affirmation in domestic particulars and in the broader structures of generational continuity; in *This in Which*, Oppen works ambitiously to develop a broader relationship to the ineffable core of being itself, returning more earnestly and intentionally to that earlier collection's epigraph from Maritain: "We awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things."

No single poem embodies this strategy more fully than "Psalm," one of Oppen's most widely known poems next to his sprawling serial poem "Of Being Numerous."

In "Psalm," the poet attempts to bring the reader face-to-face with ordinary experience—here, an encounter with a deer. But rather than lead the reader to see the familiar as strange, as was his strategy in *Discrete Series*, he invites the reader to grasp the familiar's charged, elemental presence. The poem begins:

> In the small beauty of the forest
> The wild deer bedding down—
> That they are there!
>
> (*NCP*, p. 99)

Though Oppen had attempted a similar epiphanic vision in his "Eclogue," the first poem of *The Materials*, his efforts there seemed ironic, shadowed by "men talking / Near the room's center" plotting "[a]n assault / On the quiet continent" (*NCP*, p. 39). This mysterious seat of power—one isn't sure what these men are discussing or planning, but it seems to have nefarious implications—leads to a bucolic vision through the window where "Flesh and rock and hunger" persist. Amidst what seems a degraded landscape, Oppen's glimpse of some pastoral resurgence cannot fully answer the mysterious machinations of power, the threat of assault, and the bare sense of hunger that shroud the poem in despair. In "Psalm," however, Oppen is able to isolate the charged sense of recognition and emergence—it seems a moment outside, beyond, or perhaps beneath history. The small beauty here is not shrouded by impending historical crises but lifted out of that morass into a realm of rare natural beauty. "That they are there!" he exclaims, urging us to sense the immensity of a scene that seems constructed of the small and diminutive: "the small beauty of the forest," the "eyes / effortless" the "soft lips," the "small teeth," and, of

response captures something that critics rarely say about Oppen: that his masterpiece "Of Being Numerous" is not a confident or final statement on that ethic of connection, but a finely tempered, attenuated, and cautious one.

Along these lines, Oppen famously ends his poem with an excerpt from a letter Whitman wrote to his mother in which the bard meditates on the newly installed statue atop the Capitol Building: "The capital grows upon one in time," Whitman writes in the excerpt, "especially as they have got the great figure on top of it now, and you can see it very well.... The sun when it is nearly down shines on the headpiece and it dazzles and glistens like a big star: it looks quite"—and here, Oppen breaks the prose paragraph, suspending the final word on its own line a few hard breaks below—"curious ..." (*NCP*, p. 188).

This ending, Oppen notes in an earlier interview, was "partly a joke on Whitman, but also because men are curious, and at the end of a very long poem, I couldn't find anything more positive to say than that" (*SWGO*, p. 12). "Of Being Numerous," then, is not so much a confident statement of interpersonal connection but an honest reflection of how fragile that connection could be. The recognition that emerges near the end of *This in Which* as it cautiously balances transcendent vision and apocalyptic anxiety precipitates this crucial choice in "Of Being Numerous." It is not a natural choice for Oppen. Admitting this difficulty explicitly into the poem, Oppen excerpts words shared with him in correspondence with the poet Rachel Blau DuPlessis, who was trying to help Oppen describe the tenuous position a poet occupies: "'Whether, as the intensity of seeing increases,' she wonders, 'one's distance from Them, the people, does not also increase'" (*NCP*, p. 167). Even as Oppen crafted a poetics of vision that would be sincere and honest, he understands here that the space an artist carves out is necessarily removed, necessarily apart from the crowd. Art risks singularity, risks what he calls "the bright light of shipwreck." But it is precisely that shipwreck that precipitates the poem's grounding ideal in numerousness:

> Obsessed, bewildered
>
> By the shipwreck
> Of the singular
>
> We have chosen the meaning
> of being numerous.
>
> (*NCP*, p. 166)

And it is, precisely, a *choice*.

Thus, Oppen leaves us in this crucial collection with a vision not of singularity but of numerousness; not of clarity but of conflicted curiosity; not of confident knowledge but of careful self-scrutiny; not of ecstatic connection but of simply choosing to be with and among others.

POETIC LATENESS: METAPHYSICS AND MORTALITY FROM SEASCAPE: NEEDLE'S EYE *TO* PRIMITIVE

Oppen's final collections mark a striking change in his evolving poetics that were in some ways anticipated by his and Mary's relocation in the mid-1960s, after the bulk of *Of Being Numerous* had been written, from Brooklyn to San Francisco, where he would live for the rest of his life. More than a merely geographical shift, this was a move from the polis to the periphery, from the urban center to the edge of the republic. With the move, Oppen's poetry focused increasingly on the concept of the horizon—the horizon of empire, the horizon of life, the horizon of being itself. The poems emerging from this move tend to be more abstract and more philosophical; while earlier work used an honest (albeit idiosyncratic) syntax in the service of clarity, these new poems seem to embody and enact Oppen's admission, in *Of Being Numerous*, that "Words cannot be wholly transparent. And that is the 'heartlessness' of words" (*NCP*, p. 194).

These poems meditate on the sea, on mortality, and, increasingly, on memories of the past and childhood. Oppen's earlier poems had coincided with an investment in existential and continental philosophy—Martin Heidegger and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel were both key figures for him, as were the works of Simone Weil. The late work, by contrast, returns to more

specifically literary currents, with William Blake figuring prominently—his "Tyger," brightly burning, being a prime example of those small nouns Oppen favored—and also to religious themes, particularly related to his Jewish identity (the Oppens took an extended trip to Israel in these later years, and the experience, though difficult, furnished ample materials for Oppen's late poetry). The new poems abandon punctuation and, eventually, capitalization—cues that would typically help the reader decipher or parse the difficult syntax. This makes the poems feel less familiar, less immediate, and therefore more strange and estranging. To substitute for the more prosaic forms of writerly control that have been stretched to the point of vanishing in the late work, the reader relies on visual cues unique to poetry: generous use of white space, pronounced caesurae, and line breaks that seem, like the sea, to wash over one another offering wave upon wave of mingled meanings.

This resistance to grammars that could be more easily parsed marked, for Oppen, a resistance to the grammatical tyranny of predication. In an interview with Dembo, Oppen clarifies what might seem a strange grammatical hang-up: "I'm really concerned with the substantive," he writes, "with the subject of the sentence, with what we are talking about, and not rushing over the subject-matter in order to make a comment about it. It is still a principle with me, of more than poetry, to notice, to state, to lay down the substantive for its own sake" (*SWGO,* p. 10).

To resist predication, of course, is to resist the basic structures of grammatical sense. But the ultimate goal was not obscurity, but rather clarity: to let the thing speak for itself. In one of his daybook entries, Oppen tries to define this sense of clarity with reference to what he calls the "object" (here "object" should be understood as any substantive): "The OBJECT in the poem: its function is to burst the boundaries of the poem" (*Selected Prose*, p. 214). In many ways, Oppen's late work operates via precisely this logic: the individual words, individual objects, of a poem are framed in such a way that easy sense and predication are held at bay as Oppen seeks to recover the initial power and force of substantives themselves. In that sense, the late works emerge from that shift we witnessed near the end of "Psalm" where Oppen moves from a more familiar tradition of wonder in his recognition of the "small beauty of the forest" and to those "wild deer" to a sense of wonder grounded in language itself that is the primary instrument of this wonder: "The small nouns / Crying faith / In this in which the wild deer / Startle, and stare out" (*NCP*, p. 99). The poem, here, its small nouns, is precisely the thing—the *this in which.*

This is also a primary meaning of objectivism as Oppen understood it. It had less to do with some objective point of view, or some strict observational stance; rather, it meant, as he writes in a letter to Mary Ellen Scott, "to objectify the poem, to make the poem an object. Meant form" (*Selected Letters*, p. 47). While Oppen still remained very much committed to seeing those things we live among, to recall the opening lines of "Of Being Numerous," the emphasis on poetic form in his earlier work was more of a means to an end. In the late work, however, the tortuous grammars are not merely a test of some broader sincerity or social commitment; rather, they can often seem an end in themselves as Oppen seeks the real in the aesthetic itself: "What is seen in the window is 'realism' what is seen in the mirror is beauty," Oppen writes in a daybook entry around the time he composed his final books (*Selected Prose*, p. 221).

One might think that the opposition here would favor the former—a vision of reality over mere beauty. This, as we have seen, is the tendency of Oppen's early work, and the window was a crucial metaphor for outward-looking vision from the very first poem in *Discrete Series,* where Maude Blessingbourne—a literary borrowing from Henry James and a stand-in for Oppen's own emergence from class privilege to political activism—moves to look out the window "'as if to see / what really was going on'" and sees clearly past rain and road toward a vision of "the world, weather-swept, with which one shares the century" (*NCP*, p. 5).

As many critics have noted, Oppen would come to see this as a crucial gesture in his mature poetry. But in the late work this essential gesture,

this ethic of seeing, comes into question. Oppen had already come to second-guess this metaphor near the end of "Of Being Numerous." It seemed to presume a sheltered access to that external view, when one really only sees "the motes / In the air, the dust" that obscure rather than enable vision (*NCP*, p. 186). In this late daybook entry, however, over that typed language about mirrors and windows, Oppen writes in script: "*But beauty does appear to reflect / to shine: to reflect* to shimmer / *the world: to reflect*!" (*Selected Prose*, p. 221). This "shimmer" of beauty, which frees the poet from mere conceptual domination, allows the poet, as he would write in a 1974 letter to Martin Rosenblum, to "[learn] from the poem, his poem: the poem's structure, image, language: he also does not write what he already knows" (*Selected Letters*, p. 285).

In an interview from the winter of 1973, Oppen's interlocutor asks about what distinguishes these new poems, about what has changed in the years since the publication of *Of Being Numerous*. Oppen, at first, demurs: "No ... I think the books all led here. I think my life led here. It's about a further time of life. It's about the horizon, the needle's eye, somewhere near as far as one's going to get" (*SWGO*, p. 46). Even as Oppen denies any sharp change, he signals the shift toward metaphysical concerns, toward a contemplation of mortality as he approaches the ultimate horizon of his own life: "The earlier poems dealt with some concentration on the fact of the actual. All of them were about that—the actual as miracle, the common places, the most, 'that which one cannot / Not see,' I wrote, over and over again in the poems." Oppen notes that his newer poems have the same intentional vision, but what comes into view has simply changed: "They seem different," he continues, "because it's a different kind of actualness which seems more lucent, less solid, less chunky" (*SWGO*, p. 46). Whereas Oppen would often discuss his early work through metaphors of physical materials and substance—he would describe shaking a line to make sure nothing jangled, or note his intricate composition process in which words were continually cut and pasted over one another or physically nailed to a wall—these later works threaten to rise off the page, the syntax breaking off into abstraction and shot through with lucent jolts of sense. This shift in Oppen's poetics, perhaps, achieves what Oppen talks about when he notes that sense of reflective shimmer: the way beauty might capture the real, the thing itself—or at least capture the difficulty of the attempt.

The first poem in Oppen's *Seascape: Needle's Eye* (1972) embodies some of these qualities associated with the late work. And like most of the late poems, it is nearly impossible simply to extract quotes from, so imbricated and uncertain are the connections between words and phrases. The poem, titled "From a Phrase of Simone Weil's and Some Words of Hegel's," seems to regress rather than progress, to move deeper into the mysterious significance of the poem's object rather than outward toward a simpler explanation. We are far from those iconic opening lines from "Of Being Numerous" and their readily available sense. As the poem opens, its tempo carefully paced by white space, Oppen tries to bring the reader to something elemental, something essential: "In back deep the jewel" (*NCP*, p. 211). Seeking that treasure, nature's pride, the poem continually folds back on itself like a wave presenting a series of substantives that comprise a series of repetitions: liquid, pride, birds, beaks, place, glass, water. But to what end? In a sense, the poem dramatizes a search for meaning, for that gleaming treasure which is too often obscured by the ego and its presumptions. Pitched between that elemental treasure and the pride of the living, the poem enacts the foundational struggle of the late work: how to get past the ego and back to language itself, and therefore back to reality, to the thing itself.

In the end, this particular poem's answer to that struggle is to bring the reader to the "shimmer" of beauty that concludes the poem: "glass of the glass sea shadow of water / On the open water no other way / To come here the outer / Limit of the ego." No longer able to dissolve his ego into the populous, into the ideal of numerousness, Oppen undertakes a solitary venture to that horizon, the limit of life and knowledge and sense. The late work struggles with this outer

limit—a limit that threatens ideals of social commitment and continuity while risking a radical openness to interpretation.

If there is a force that works against this dissolution, it is through language and through love. Oppen is most easily understood in these late poems when he imagines language as something solid, something one might grasp:

> so poor the words
> *would with and* take on substantial
> meaning handholds footholds
>
> (*NCP*, p. 220)

And when he does speak with clarity in these late works, the effect is often devastating. "Anniversary Poem," a section from a longer series, begins with ruminations on the abstractions of time and depth as the poem threatens to drift from sense. But life's attachments—here, his life with Mary—so precious, return in the end to give the poem a final, grounding sadness: "We have begun to say good bye / To each other / And cannot say it" (*NCP*, p. 227).

Oppen struggled throughout his career to balance the poetic self against the other, the solitary singer against the crowd, the shipwreck of the singular against the meaning of being numerous. Indeed, this is the generative tension that gives his oeuvre such dynamic tension. If the late work tends toward extreme abstraction at times, if its meaning can be difficult to grasp much less parse grammatically, Oppen maintained, in the end, an absolute commitment to sociality, to the voices and lives of others. Nowhere is this more clear than in the final poem in his final book, *Primitive* (1978). There, Oppen returns to a certain comfort—comfort in memory, comfort in the idea of the continuity of generations as offering a sense of permanence beyond one's life, and comfort in the presence of others. Returning to the themes of his early work, he describes the social and material world he lived through as a "music more powerful / than music," for mere art can only sustain one for so long until, as the poem's conclusion reminds us, "other voices wake / us or we drown" (*NCP*, p. 286).

These lines, in many critical accounts of the poem, are often interpreted with reference to their revision of the final lines of T. S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," with the subtle substitution of "or" for "and" signaling a shift from a certain antisocial high modernism out of touch with the people to an engaged objectivist politics. This is true enough, but more fundamentally, where "and" obviates choice, "or" demands it. "Or" reminds us that Oppen's work is driven not only by a commitment to those other voices but by a commitment to commitment itself, a commitment to sincerity and truth, and to those moments of conviction, each one a choice, that constitute the broader web of Oppen's evolving poetics.

The choice of being numerous, of being open to other voices, underscores how important it is to attend to the many registers, the many voices, of Oppen's own work—its anxieties and self-examinations, its broad historical and philosophical references, its shifting formal strategies, and, of course, its commitment to those literal other voices that ground Oppen's work from beginning to end.

What Oppen admired about his contemporary William Bronk might be said of his own work:

> that clarity & honesty can produce so piercing a music
> a poet who fits no school whose work justifies no one's poetry but his own
>
> (*Selected Prose*, p. 183)

Unlike William Bronk, however, who remains the more obscure figure, George Oppen has had a remarkable and enduring impact on poets at least since the publication of *Of Being Numerous*. Part of this has to do with his association with fellow objectivists, many of whom coincidentally returned to the literary scene with important publications in the sixties and seventies, and who themselves continue to animate contemporary poetry in remarkable ways.

Rather than register Oppen's importance in relation to this or that school, or this or that poetic tendency, one can finally say that his achievement was fundamental in both the sense of the questions it sought to explore and in the formal and ethical model this inquiry offered for later poets. As the critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis

course, those "small nouns / crying faith" with which the poem concludes.

With this final gesture Oppen connects the same restorative powers of nature to the potential of language itself. Poetry, Oppen suggests in "Five Poems About Poetry," is only of use insofar as it might rescue humanity—rescue us, he writes, "As only the true // Might rescue us, gathered // In the smallest corners // Of man's triumph" (*NCP*, p. 104). *This in Which*, as a collection, emphasizes these smallest corners: as in that scene of deer bedding down, as in a simple and direct language that might bring this familiar scene to life.

This in Which has a core tendency toward metaphysical, sometimes abstract speculation as Oppen engages a certain kind of romantic sublime, but if one takes the collection as a whole, one notices how Oppen often catches himself at times in the excesses of reverie. At the end of a longer serial poem near the conclusion of *This in Which*, for example, Oppen draws the reader out to a certain extremity of sublime feeling. Seeking to define a certain experience of pure presence, of *being-there*, Oppen describes an ideal world offering a clarity of experience and truth: "thought leaped on us in that sea / For in that sea we breathe the open / Miracle // Of place, and speak / If we would rescue / Love to the ice-lit // Upper World, a substantial language / Of clarity, and of respect" (*NCP*, p. 156).

But that upper world of crystalline clarity, so distant from crisis on the ground, is also a siren song portending danger. Oppen was always cautious of his power as a poet. It is fitting, then, that the poems that conclude *This in Which* seem to beat a path away from these "northerly" abstractions of the "ice-lit / Upper world" as they realize that any substantial language must be found much closer to everyday experience rather then natural reveries. The final poem in the collection, "World, World—," speaks directly to the dangers of a false "northerly" vision: "Failure, worse failure, nothing seen / From prominence, / Too much seen in the ditch." The northerly vantage obscures real vision, however damaged and damaging. Quoting that earlier poem, Oppen writes that "'Thought leaps on us' because we are here. That is the fact of the matter." Those moments of intense reverie, he notes, are too often taken as an inward escape, a false shelter. The poem turns, in the end, to a sense of self once more oriented toward the social: not only "the act of being," but the "act of being / More than oneself" (*NCP*, p. 159). The existential drive to grasp "being" is grounded once more in the social—a grounding that would deeply inform Oppen's next book.

Oppen's reputation as a poet rests largely on his accomplishment in *Of Being Numerous*—particularly in the eponymous title poem of that collection. Oppen's great serial poem suggestively collates the social and existential anxieties that persisted in his earlier work, as well as its small triumphs of vision and love that might redress those anxieties. In this poem, he revels in a sense of the ordinary that is both beneath and yet above art: "I too am in love down there with the streets," he writes. "To talk of the house and the neighborhood and the docks // And it is not 'art'" (*NCP*, p. 169). He rails against war and power: "It is the air of atrocity, / An event as ordinary / As a President. // A plume of smoke, visible at a distance, / In which people burn" (*NCP*, p. 173). And he turns to love as a matter of final importance: "Not truth but each other // The bright bright skin, her hands wavering / In her incredible need // Which is ours, which is ourselves" (*NCP*, pp. 183–184). And yet beneath these resonant intensities, the poem's energies are directed clearly toward a more muted social ethic that in many ways speaks for itself.

Oppen's sense of communion with humanity is precisely not ecstatic, and it is not always particularly inspiring; it is simply necessary. When asked in a 1973 interview to talk about how Whitman's more ecstatic and emphatic sense of union with others might relate to his own, Oppen admits that "[*Of Being Numerous*] didn't come out entirely optimistically on those grounds. What I was saying there is that we're absolutely dependent on some concept of a thing called 'humanity' in which we participate, that we cannot really live without it. I wasn't saying that because I think it's a good moral. I was saying it because it seems true" (*SWGO*, p. 50). This

has noted, "the impact of Oppen's poetry is not aesthetic only, but a kind of ontological arousal to thinking itself—not to knowledge as such, but to the way thought feels emotionally and morally and processually in time" (Shoemaker, p. 212). Perhaps because Oppen spoke not so much beyond but beneath the primary movements of the day, he continues to speak to us today. Oppen offers a fundamental, grounding poetic orientation, and poets continue to look where he points.

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