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“Survival’s Thin, Thin Radiance”: George Oppen’s Post-War Poetics

In 1958, the year the Oppens' exile in Mexico came to end, George Oppen's wife Mary began seeing a therapist due to ongoing depression resulting from what she describes as marital strain.¹ Oppen also attended and during one session told the therapist of a dream he'd had of going through his father's papers after his father's death, and finding a file marked 'How to prevent Rust in Copper.' He doubted that his father, however “frivolous” he may have found him, would believe that copper rusts. For some reason, Oppen found this dream quite funny and, upon waking, began to laugh hysterically. “When he told the doctor the dream,” Mary recalls, “laughing again at its ridiculousness, the doctor stopped him, 'You were dreaming that you don't want to rust,' he said. On the way home George stopped and bought a pad of paper and some pencils and started to write” (*MAL*, 202). Oppen sometimes recalls this story a bit differently, noting that he did not immediately set out to write after hearing the therapist's interpretation. In a letter from 1966 he describes how he

was driving somewhere the following morning, and found myself swerving the car from one side of the road to the other - - - deliberately - - and howling with laughter, actually swaying from side to side on the seat, howling with laughter and swerving the car from side to side of an empty road - -. And it was one of those startlingly witty dreams; I was laughing at a small thing in the dream, and one which was not really very funny. An excuse for elation, a false excuse for elation. I guess I knew I knew, or knew I

would. The dream said in its imagery that I was not going to rust - - - but it was not until two years later that I sat down with a piece of paper for the first time in twenty years and thought my way into a poem.²

As Rachel Blau DuPlessis has observed of this incident, Oppen's driving represented an "almost suicidal mania" that left him with the shocking recognition that "I could have killed myself: so now what." The recognition is that Oppen has not only survived this single moment of recklessness but rather that he has *survived his entire life* to that moment, and would continue to survive. Therefore, an opportunity had risen that he could now relinquish himself of whatever fear he still possessed, be it of guilt, of success, of failure, of his obligations as husband and father, or his talent as poet. DuPlessis remarks: "something finally got decided in the way of facing the long repressed and long deferred literary vocation."³

In light of this interpretation, Mary found it "significant" that the dream involved Oppen's father, who died in 1952. Oppen's relationship with his overbearing and domineering father was difficult; his father's death, Mary believed, in some way psychically relieved Oppen of whatever ambivalence he had about being a poet. In a letter to Philip Levine from 1969 or 1970, Oppen relates some details concerning his father in the hospital. He was not dying; Oppen came from a "Hypochondriac family," and yet, Oppen writes,

the meeting in his hospital room as equivocal, as difficult, as dangerous to me as all our meetings – The nurse came into the room and asked me to wait outside a moment. I walked down the hall to a little waiting room and sat down. The floor-nurse on duty recognized me (I look like my father) She said, I guess what a man cares most about in his life is his son. I was startled, I was absolutely startled and absolutely unprepared. My father's temperature was running fairly high, I realized that he must have talked of me. My face must have shown how startled and how unprepared I was. The nurse saw it, and she began to cry . . . God help us all . . . --survival . . . never a wholly admirable story (SL, 208).

Oppen considered his father's need for a relationship with his son, with whom he was mostly confrontational, to be pathetic. In addition, Oppen had been placed in the strained and uncomfortable position of being unable to reciprocate his father's feelings - fearful of death, desperately wanting some sort of reconciliation - though it appears that this reconciliation was something that neither he nor his father were prepared to seek.

If Oppen needed to be relieved of his father, he also needed to be relieved somewhat of *being* a father. His delay in writing again was to some extent exacerbated by their having a young daughter to raise, and this prior obligation required he and Mary, according to Oppen, to remain "*disguised*" in order that their daughter could be "brought up differently and to be different." Elsewhere in his letters, Oppen explains that "there were only some fifteen years that political loyalties prevented me from writing poetry. After that I had to wait for [my daughter] to grow up" (SL, 30). As Mary observes in an interview, their daughter "had to leave home for either of us to get going again."⁴

"I stopped writing," Oppen later explained in a 1969 letter to June, "to begin with [because of] the catastrophe of human lives in the 'thirties . . . But later we had a daughter." At the time of his writing this letter, Oppen confessed that he found himself "hesitat[ing] over a line, thinking of my daughter reading it . . . tho she is twenty-seven and in no way weak" (*SL*, 186). He wanted to protect his daughter from the world's horrors, and not to deprive her of happiness and this became one of the reasons he delayed writing again. Yet there was also a lingering fear that he may no longer possess the ability to write ("Also (1958) . . . that I confessed to myself that I possessed a marked ability" (*SL*, 315)). In fact, his decision not to begin writing may be better understood as a more generalized sort of fear, of which protection of his daughter from a world that he feared to admit to her (or to himself) was nearing the brink of nuclear destruction, coupled with the feeling of inadequacy or ambivalence over his perceived lack of talent, were but the more obvious symptoms. This period of silence became in some ways a prism through which these various tensions and fears were put forth by Oppen and in some way came to be resolved by the poetry. "There was a good deal of unspoken guilt in Oppen," DuPlessis argues, "untrackable feelings on which the poetry helped him make good."⁵

In a 1969 letter to his niece Diane Meyer, Oppen states that if "all of us – people – have come about as far as humans were ever fitted to go, had or have the any possibility of going" then "I cannot bring myself to say that we must live in order to deceive each other, even to deceive the children. And [our daughter] grew up to discover that the world was not as snug as we pretended." Despite the lack of hope

for a better world and the dream of utopia destroyed by everyday realities, we “get born into the thing, we just find ourselves here and we are as we are.” Oppen felt his duty as poet to “promise happiness sometimes in the poems, I suppose, merely by describing happiness.” He wonders if it is sufficient “comfort if I say Me too . . . Us Too . . . We know . . . Here we all are . . . This is what we are talking about always, and the children will not always be children, and will talk of this” (*SL*, 184-85). A passage from “Of Being Numerous,” makes evident Oppen's ambivalence as to whether or not this saying amounts to comfort or self-deception:

My daughter, my daughter, what can I say
Of living?

I cannot judge it . . . And it was not precisely
Happiness we promised
Ourselves;
We say happiness, happiness, and are not
Satisfied.

Tho the house on the low land
Of the city

Catches the dawn light

I can tell myself, and I tell myself

Only what we all believe

True⁶

. . . even if this truth amounts to despair. As he remarks in a letter to his sister from 1962, while "it is necessary to talk, to begin to talk . . . we are afraid the children will overhear us. But someday someone will overhear the children and face absolute despair" (SL, 55). Quoting Irving Younger in *The Nation* in his 1971 poem "Some San Francisco Poems," Oppen writes:

*So with artists. How pleasurable
to imagine that, if only they gave
up their art, their children would be
healed, would live (NCP, 223)*

Oppen came to accept that the artist must confront the world with honesty. Whether or not one writes, the world remains violent and men, women and children continue to die as a result of this violence. This acceptance, in some ways, is a kind of acquiescence, an admittance of failure that he as a communist, having given up his art, could achieve a socialist ideal where such violence would be eradicated. The removal from political activism, inasmuch as the Oppens took part in civil disobedience and other acts that might result in imprisonment, to dedicate one's self to the raising of a child, required a degree of remoteness from the political stage. Yet, his daughter's maturity and the increasingly desperate political situation again required his attention,

albeit as poet rather than political activist. As Oppen observes in his personal papers, the return to art came about as a result of this emergency:

we devoted ourselves to creating happiness for the three of us [himself, his wife and daughter], and for a few friends and their children so far as possible . . . But now what will happen to us in twenty years is ---- We must discuss it again, We must try to understand it.⁷

This renewal, or, as Peter Nicholls describes it, "beginning again,"⁸ rather than merely picking up creatively where he left off two decades earlier, is also conveyed in his 1968 interview with L.S. Dembo. Speaking with Dembo, Oppen elaborates:

there was the fact of the child too. But this is a little difficult for me to say. There is a difference in one's attitude, in what one wants to say and doesn't want to say, doesn't want to put down on paper, when one is speaking to a child – well, I can't say I was speaking to our baby daughter. I'll simply say I was being a father, and fathers don't confess to fears even to themselves. This is in its way political, too. It's part of the whole pragmatism of social and political attitudes, the test of goodness, which extends awhile when one is thinking of a child. But it's much more complex. It was actually sort of a different time of life that I sat down again and set myself, *for the first time really*, to complete a poem, to *really finish a poem and to be sure I felt I had completed it*. It was as a matter of fact in 1958.⁹

While these matters required resolution, the irresolution of still other matters undoubtedly contributed to Oppen's desire to return to writing, in particular Oppen's complex feelings of guilt and fear. Of these varying forms of guilt, the fact of his having survived the war while others died is quite complex and involves three distinct

aspects: his guilt over having fought to kill in order to save his family from the abstract threat of fascism; whether it was right to risk his life in order to do so and therefore leave his wife a widow and his child fatherless; and last, and perhaps most importantly, over whether it is right to allow another to die in order to save one's own life. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, in her own struggle to come to terms with Oppen's frustrating and unsettling implications of his return to poetry, also suggests that his "recovery from wartime was also at issue – all the scarring, emotional stress, guilt, sorrow and survivor's luck make, according to veterans, a very fraught minefield."¹⁰

First, guilt over having survived: Oppen's guilt, as he describes it, at times fits the definition of the phenomenon commonly described as "survivor's guilt," a condition first diagnosed in the sixties after doctors began noting similar conditions among Holocaust survivors. Those with survivor's guilt are often troubled with having survived after others have died, by the randomness and lack of meaning of another's death, and a difficulty understanding why it is that they survived and others did not, especially given their close proximity or otherwise involvement in the event. A common form of survivor's guilt results from one being forced physically to prevent the death of another; this definition almost certainly applies to Oppen's experience in the foxhole.

In a wrenching passage from Oppen's poem "Semite," he speaks of the "guilts / of the foxhole" and "the terrible knowledge / of deception": Oppen suffered severe wounds from shrapnel after coming under attack by German forces somewhere in the vicinity of Urach: "88 mm shell landed in a foxhole," Oppen writes in a letter. "Three

of us were in that fox hole" (SL, 203). The most detailed account of this story was told to Michael Davidson during an interview with the Oppens in January 1978:

In the army, [Oppen's] job was to drive a convoy truck. It happened, late in the war that this convoy came under artillery fire. Along with the other drivers, George leaped from his truck and sought shelter. It turned out that they were next to a field, and the nearest shelter George could find was a hole which had been dug out by a previous artillery blast. (Not the best place to hide, George would later come to realize, as the enemy gunners had already figured out how to hit that spot.) No sooner had George gotten in the ready-made foxhole than a second American soldier jumped on top of him.¹¹ He was followed by an artillery shell which landed close enough to send shrapnel through the one soldier into George.

George knew he was wounded badly, but that the man on top of him was in even worse shape; however, *George's guilt, which he evidently felt all his life thereafter, centered on the fact that he did not attempt to drag or carry the badly wounded soldier above him to safety or himself attempt to find medical attention, even though either course would have been mortally foolish.* In fact, George lay there, bleeding, watching this other man die – and, knowing, he claimed, that there was a moment when the man realized that George was not going to go after help, and grew accusatorily, desperately, hostile. In any case, the other soldier did die, and George stayed in the foxhole a number of hours, until there was no longer any danger of further artillery or sniper fire. The shrapnel wounds penetrated his back, chest and face. As a result of the close proximity of shell fire, Oppen also suffered a bilateral ruptured right ear drum. Davidson includes an anecdote from Oppen which illustrates the seriousness of his wounds:

When he was well enough to be released, and as part of the military routine, he went to reclaim his flak jacket. The attendant who went to get it came back saying that the serial number he'd been given must

be wrong since (and at this point George held out his arms as if holding up a tattered jacket) *this* jacket belonged to someone who had died. Evidently no one with such severe shrapnel wounds would have been expecting to survive.¹²

While lying in the fox hole “slightly injured,” Oppen insists, “and with no apparent means of escape, certainly no possibility until nightfall,” he began to think of poetry, specifically Thomas Wyatt’s “They Flee From Me,” a sixteenth century lyric poem concerning love for a perfidious woman, the opening lines of Louis Zukofsky’s “A” (“a round of fiddles / playing Bach”) and “poem after poem” (SL, 238) of Charles Reznikoff’s, particularly Reznikoff’s untitled poem Oppen mis-remembered as “the girder / still itself among the rubble.” The actual word is “rubbish;” the reason for Oppen’s revision may have been due to his location at the time. “[W]e meant to be ourselves among the rubble,” Oppen explains to interviewers Burton Hatlen and Tom Mandel, “and it was rubble or it was very close to rubble. It was very close to catastrophe, you know, not only close but was catastrophe because a world war is catastrophe, after all.”

Reznikoff, Wyatt’s and Zukofsky’s poems “seemed to fill the space around” Oppen and he “wept and wept.”¹³ A late poem of Oppen’s, “Myth of the Blaze,” elaborates:

why had they not

killed me why did they fire that warning

wounding cannon only the one round I hold a superstition

because of this lost to be lost Wyatt's

lyric and Rezi's

running thru my mind

in the destroyed (and guilty) Theatre

of the War I'd cried

and remembered

boyhood degradation other

degradations and this crime I will not recover

from that landscape it will be in my mind it will fill my mind (*NCP*, 247)

Oppen told interviewer Reinhold Schiffer, he was surprised "to find Wyatt's poem running and running and running through my mind. I can just state the facts. I don't know what to make of them."¹⁴ This sudden rush of lines and imagery from Oppen's favorite poems certainly came to him as a result of the horrifyingly traumatic experience of war, and of the stark realization that he might not survive the night. That he remembered this poetry at such a time seems to have informed his later telling Hatlen and Mandel that he "at no time stopped being a poet."¹⁵ What is more likely is that he returned to these poems as a psychological defense, a way of reducing or removing the fear that he felt, or of distancing himself from the immediate danger that he faced. Where other soldiers likely clung to crosses or Bibles or the photo of a loved one, Oppen clung to poetry. Oppen may not have known what "to make of" the

poems that came to him during that night in the foxhole, but this much is clear: at this moment Oppen came to associate poetry with survival. His return to poetry decades later was prompted almost immediately by a dream later interpreted by Oppen as a fear of death or decay. And, after the war, not just only his survival but the survival of humanity was threatened with disaster. In 1949 the Soviets tested their first atomic bomb, helping to set off the arms race, and in 1954 the US tested the first hydrogen bomb. The looming specter of nuclear annihilation meant that the entire world had entered its own foxhole, awaiting the blast that would mean certain doom.

"I perhaps cannot write poetry in war time," Oppen observed in a letter written in the late sixties, at the height of the war in Vietnam. "I become ashamed, I become sick with shame."¹⁶ Despite his apparent inability to write, Oppen insisted that he "at no time stopped being a poet." It is important not to take this statement quite so literally, particularly when keeping the former statement in mind. His "poet" might better be defined as someone like the "man in the ditch" in his poem "Route," trapped in an "overturned wreck," able to see "without despair."¹⁷ Or said a different way: "I at no time stopped seeing in the manner of poetry" (*NCP*, 198). In his poem "Presses Were Busy Enough," Oppen states that "Perhaps I was dealing nevertheless / With the essence of literature / To get down / Never the effort to go up" (*NCP*, 332). Another such example of his "dealing" with the "essence" of poetry in this "manner" while in the "ditch" (in Oppen's poetry a metaphorical representation of an extreme moment, likely referring back to the foxhole or the car wreck from Oppen's youth) is Oppen's encountering the scent of cooking while walking among the ruins of a French

village, a moment captured in "Blood From the Stone." Oppen describes this passage in a letter to Robert Duncan, as representing "a rebirth of words in war" (*SL*, 183),¹⁸ another example of Oppen's association of poetry with survival:

rounding the corner of some wall

Into a farm yard – France – The smell of wood-smoke from the kitchen;

An overwhelming sense of joy!

Stops everything. More still than the water trickling among the cobbles

(*NCP*, 53).

Second, Oppen's guilt over having fought to kill: both Oppen and Mary agree that his service in the war was, in retrospect, ill advised. "It was essentially at Mary's expense, or partly at Mary's," Oppen told interviewers Burton Hatlen and Tom Mandel.¹⁹ It "was a mistake," he later told interviewer Reinhold Schiffer, for which he "still [felt] guilty."²⁰ A surprisingly confessional essay, "Non-Resistance, etc. Or: Of the Guiltless," originally published in a small hand-press journal in the summer of 1974, illustrates Oppen's conflicted and complex emotions over having served in the war. Oppen observes that were he to have "fought, and fought to kill, I would suffer guilt, the guilt of guilt AND the guilt of fear, the desire to run . . . the guilt of the foxhole . . . and who does fight? The deceived, the idiot, the stupid and also those with no choice, those who must be heroes to refuse the crime" of not serving in war.²¹ According to his niece Aubrey Degnan, Oppen was uncertain whether he had in fact killed anyone, an uncertainty that greatly troubled him.²² It seems likely that he had. As Joe Hanley,

another soldier who served in the 411th, states, "I never had hand-to-hand combat with any of the enemy, but I know I was responsible for many deaths. It's so easy when you're swinging a BAR, a browning automatic, firing away. It's a machine gun."²³

"If I killed," Oppen writes in "Non-Resistance, or: The Guiltless," "I would suffer guilt. If I did not, I would suffer . . . I don't even know a word, a name for what I would suffer." He felt compelled to "resist a force – a force such as the force of Hitler – a force that would exterminate almost all those I knew, friends, daughter, Mary, nieces, grand-nieces, grand-nephews, radicals, liberals" and had he not resisted this force, it would almost be as if he "did not exist and never had;" such cowardice would result in

the terrible knowledge of a fake, a lie, that nothing had been as I said, pretended, that I loved no one, that those who had loved me or anyone like me had deceived themselves, pitifully, tragically, had deceived themselves, had drawn the simplest, delusory mere warmth from my presence, had been deceived, betrayed, demeaned, had given all they could give for nothing, had been nothing – In the last moments they would know this. Die like me, or fight with nothing, without what they had thought was themselves, without a past, with nothing. Thrown away, unloved, shamed degraded

stripped naked, herded into the gas ovens.

Think

Think also of the children. The guards laughing (*SPDP*, 46).

The concluding lines of this passage are a self-quotation from his poem "Semite," which captures these conflicting emotions in a breathlessly elliptical series of images:

guilt

of the foxhole what is a word a name at the
limits

of devotion
to life the terrible knowledge

of deception

a lie told my loves tragically
pitifully had deceived

themselves had been betrayed

demeaned thrown away shamed
degraded

stripped naked Think

think also of the children
the guards laughing so the hangman
comes to all dinners Aim

we tell each other the children cannot be
alone whereupon murder
comes to our dinners (*NCP*, 251-52)

Faced with the horror of death and "at the limits" (which, because of Oppen's elliptical structuring can mean simply "the limits" in an abstract sense, but also the "limits // of devotion" and the "limits // of devotion // to life"), Oppen wonders what the word "Semite" actually means. This is not simply an example of Oppen's indictment of anti-Semitism nor is it his disclaimer that in death we are all equal; it can also be interpreted as his personal guilt for having deceived those he loves, both his fellow soldiers or fellow human beings, whom he must kill or allow to be killed in order that he (and his loved ones) might live. We "deceive ourselves," he argues, that it is "Better . . . to aim a rifle at an unknown man and pull the trigger. Carefully, if we can . . . Or release bombs from the air." However, one must remember that the enemy "target . . . has 'his own' army, the children will display the medals." Therefore, he not only has he deceived those he loves in that his concern is limited in proportion to his fear of death and his need to survive, he has also deceived the children who become the war's most terrible casualty, those innocents "demeaned thrown away shamed / degraded // stripped naked,"²⁴ whose deaths incriminate us all: "the hangman / comes to all dinners."²⁵ So while we comfort ourselves that the "children cannot be / alone" their "murder" is visited upon all of us. Humanity is guilty for having allowed their deaths to occur, even if one did not directly contribute; hence,

Oppen's later dismissal of the war crimes tribunals at Nuremberg as "disgusting sanctimoniousness" (*SL*, 112).

However we might deceive and comfort ourselves with the violent ritual of war, still the "children cannot die alone" and it is their fate that penetrates this mask of complacency, revealing the ugliness of humanity, the betrayal of individual against individual. After all, Oppen writes, "There must have been a father, a mother, there must have been friends, there must have been *someone*" who could protect these children, just as Oppen felt he was protecting his own child by going to war (*SPDP*, 46). As he observes in his poem "Route," after describing a man who drove his bicycle into a tree to spare the life of his family, "In all probability a man will give his life for his child provided his child is an infant" (*NCP*, 197). Oppen's insistence that there must have been someone to protect the children closely resembles the question posed to him by his daughter after reading her *Exodus*: "Where were the adults?"

Mary informed friend Stephen Schneider that, "just after demobilization," Oppen "violent":

One of the fist fights took a serious turn. The adversary this time turned out to be a Mafioso, stronger and better skilled than George. "He really hurt George" said Mary, matter-of-factly.²⁶

This tendency toward violent behavior was deeply rooted: as a teenager Oppen displayed a similar capacity for self-destructive acts: "suicidal driving, and game playing, fist fighting, the acceptance of any dare at all." (The "suicidal driving," of

course, is not unlike his "suicidal mania," "swerving" his car "from side to side on an empty road" after his "rust in copper" dream.) However, where Oppen's earlier turmoil involved alleged abuse by his step-mother, this latest manifestation of self-destructive behavior was of a considerably more complex nature, resulting in a number of conflicts; primarily from his guilt over having fought to kill while in the army and whether it was right to risk his life in order to do so and therefore leave his wife a widow and his child fatherless. There was also the fact of his having survived the war while others died. Oppen's beating by the Mafioso type, according to Schneider, "began a certain change, partial recovery from war, in a way."²⁷ That recovery was Oppen's realization that while combat required him to kill in order to help stop fascism (and to keep himself from being killed, as per Mary's instruction that he return home safe), the behavior that was acceptable during war was not acceptable in civil society. Oppen had not taken part in war just so everything in which he believed (the resistance of fascism, the rescue of European Jewry) in essence meant nothing to him. Moral opposition without action keeps one's hands clean yet inaction, in the case of the fight against fascism, amounted to virtual surrender. Oppen could not idly stand by and await the war's outcome. He may have been morally opposed to murder in war, yet it was inconceivable that one could allow fascism to prevail because of this moral objection. Simply put, there was what he felt was right and then there was what was required of the situation in which he found himself. If taking part in war contributed to his guilt it does not necessarily mean that *not* taking part in war meant something worse to him than guilt. Those who were "guiltless" were those who

refused resistance, for they were those without responsibility. Oppen later asserted his mystification that one could “say he is 'in favor' of a war,” wondering if that meant that “he is in favor of someone else fighting it” (SL, 303). Schneider recalls a conversation he had with Oppen while in Mexico:

Prompted by something, I forget what, I said “the thing is, altruism is incapable of producing values.” George froze. His fork was in the air with some food on it. He stared at me. There was a short silence. With his eyes on me he said, with intensity, and slowly “there is nothing more important to understand than that.”²⁸

For Oppen, ideals without action are mere deception. Yet the crux of Oppen’s argument is the impossibility of *constructing an ethic*; that ethics exist only in action. Therefore, ethics are not the basis of our actions; instead, they confirm the appropriate behavior that we all agree is the best and most appropriate course of action. The idea of a universal rule of ethics is of less consequence than a particular situation requiring a specific moral strategy. One’s ethics, Oppen argues, must be tested by the reality of any given situation. Oppen would “try not to talk of ethics” because “the senses must be appealed to somewhere in every test of truth” (SL, 387),²⁹ declaring that “we cannot construct an ethic unless we know what we want and how much we want it” (SL, 193). Thus, the desire for solutions is no longer dependent on those offered by one or another meta-narratives and rather is arrived at through an individual’s encounter with existence, where ethic or moral values are tested experientially rather than

theoretically. One simply cannot “[invent] an ethic,” Oppen argues; “you can only talk about what you feel.”³⁰ Oppen argued that he was “just reporting my experiences in life,”

including the one that when they drop enough jellied gasoline on children, you can't stand it anymore. I'm just stating a fact about what you can and cannot stand. If it didn't bother one to burn children, why say it? I don't understand inventing an ethic; I'm just trying to understand what the ethic is, how long it can last. An ethic is a funny thing: when it's gone, it's gone and you can't mourn it. You can only talk about what you actually feel.³¹

In his interview with Dembo, Oppen, discussing his poem “Route,” remarks that there was no time in his life when he “suddenly decided that now I’d write some philosophy. I’m just telling about what I encountered, what life was to me . . . I’ve written about what happened and the place it happened in, and that, I suppose, is the only philosophy I could possibly understand anyway.”³² In a 1973 conversation with Robert Sheppard, the discussion turned to novelist George Eliot, whom, Oppen felt, embodied “an art of the real” (in particular *The Mill on the Floss*). Eliot’s work, Oppen explained to Sheppard,

tests morals against what really happens to people and what people really want. The girl in the flood runs back to her brother. There is no popular moral point in that. She’s just telling what – you’ll excuse me – a heart [says]. And she thinks an ethic in society must be, you know, based on what you want. It’s nice once in a while for somebody ever to mention that, aside from theories . . . Her morality can be

attacked, and will be attacked now by a great many people, and it's absolutely non-political. It doesn't put forward a programme . . . ["[S]o much contemporary writing," Sheppard interjects, "ignores the fundamental humanism of what you're describing." Oppen agrees.] This metaphysical humanism: there's something we believe. There's something we want mankind to be or to become, and that's all we care about, actually.³³

Oppen did, however, find an example of a writer who did not ignore this "fundamental humanism," who in fact made it the central problem of his work: Bertolt Brecht. At some point during 1963 to 1965, Oppen, Schneider observes, then living in Red Hook, New York, specifically referred in conversation with Schneider to Brecht's play *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (composed between 1938 and 1943). Brecht's play tells the story of a young prostitute, Shen Te, who wants nothing more than to be good. Her desire, as she proclaims later in the play, in a short poem reminiscent of Oppen (in Eric Bentley's translation) is "To let no one perish, not even oneself / To fill everyone with happiness, even oneself / Is so good."³⁴

At the play's start, three gods are searching for evidence of good in the world and are hard pressed to find any. (In one of the play's many incongruities, their definition of good resembles the Ten Commandments). The gods think they have found evidence of good in Shen Te, a prostitute who puts them up for the night. Shen Te disagrees with their conclusion, however, arguing that she has been hospitable only because she is in need of money to pay her rent. Seeking to buy her agreement, the gods pay her enough money that she is able to buy a store, in which she allows several homeless villagers to reside. Because of this and other kindnesses the villagers nickname her

"The Angel of the Slums." Yet, as Shen Te comes to learn, it is simply not enough to be good; one must also guard oneself from the evils of others. Because Shen Te is so obliging, she is also easily exploited, that is, until she adopts a more assertive, and less agreeable, male persona, named Shui Ta. Because her altruism differs from bourgeois exploitation, she is forced into situations in which she does not want to take part.

In *The Good Woman*, Brecht is no more forgiving of those exploited by the bourgeois, those who, despite their shared predicament, treat one another quite poorly: for instance, a barber bashes the hand of the water seller with a hot iron. When the water seller asks the witness to testify on his behalf, no one steps forward, leading Shen Te to remonstrate: "Your brother is assaulted and you shut your eyes?" She chastises them for their complicity in injustice and in their own continued oppression; they have "stopped answering / They stay put / They do as they're told / They don't care / Nothing can make them look up / But the smell of food."³⁵ (This line is of course reminiscent of Brecht's aphorism from *The Threepenny Opera*: "Food first, then morals.") As the play develops, it becomes clear that Shen Te might have saved herself a great deal of trouble had she been less dogmatically strict about her goodness and more willing to compromise her integrity by adapting her moral beliefs to the particular demands of her situation, which is to say, had she behaved more like her male alter ego, Shui Ta.

It seems that Oppen's interest in *The Good Woman*, as his specific reference to it in conversation with Schneider, is a result of his identification with Shen Te, whose virtue is invariably compromised by the reality of her situation and who, like Oppen, wanted

most to bring “happiness” to those she loved. “I don’t know how to measure happiness,” Oppen states. “The issue is happiness, there is no other issue, or no other issue one has a right to think about for other people, to think about *politically*, but I don’t know how to measure happiness” (SL, 212). Oppen understands that it is simply not enough to want to do good; one must also act, and in acting necessarily compromise one’s virtue and integrity. “I think the point” of Oppen’s reference in context of their conversation, writes Schneider, “was that human affairs can, or do, make virtuous conduct impossible, no matter how vehement the desire to act virtuously, and certainly the sense of what he said was praise of Brecht’s exhibition of this *engrenage*. [Oppen said] Something like ‘as Brecht describes’ this can be impossible (and it is important to realize that).”³⁶

As Schneider notes, Oppen’s 1964 poem “Street” clearly has Brecht’s play in mind (as well as Oppen’s daughter):

Ah, these are the poor,

These are the poor –

Bergen street.

Humiliation,

Hardship . . .

Nor are they very good to each other;

It is not that. I want

An end to poverty

As much as anyone

For the sake of intelligence,

'The conquest of existence' –

It has been said, and is true ----

And this is real pain,

Moreover. It is terrible to see the children,

The righteous little girls;

So good, they expect to be so good . . . (NCP, 127)

As organizer for the Communist Party during the Great Depression, Oppen, too, tried to help the poor. Not because they “are . . . very good to each other”; the poor in Oppen’s poem, like the villagers in Brecht’s play, are not virtuous simply by the virtue of their being poor. Oppen wanted to help the unemployed of 1930s New York because he desired “An end to poverty / As much as anyone.” The poor have been demoralized, Oppen argues, by an abstract “Humiliation” and “Hardship.” Like Shen Te forced to take on the persona of Shui Ta, Oppen underwent a transformation from an idealistic youth to a politically sophisticated and cautious maturity. His desire for

good, just as Shen Te's, was compromised by the necessity of any given situation, by party politics and the need to fight in war. He joined the Communist Party to bring about the end of hunger and fascism and later struggled with some of his decisions as necessary actions that later brought him regret (or, as he put it, "guilt"). Everything he did he did, like Shen Te, "To help my neighbor / To love my lover / And to keep my little ones from want."³⁷

Oppen's poem "Street" threatens to succumb to a simplistic view of human nature as innately good but compromised by the demands of society, the "Humiliation, / Hardship" which has made the poor not "very good to each other." Oppen wisely avoids this predicament through his subtle use of the verb "expect" instead of "are" in the poem's concluding lines: "The righteous little girls; / So good, they expect to be so good." Virtue is not innate; instead, it is something one acquires and struggles to maintain, situation to situation. It is a matter of integrity, of conviction. More importantly, it is a matter of action; to morally object to something without intending to act upon it amounts to what Oppen calls a "necessary self-deception" (as he later referred to his participation in communism) (*SL*, 278). "That man is good," he writes in his papers, "that man is gregarious, I suppose, and must act, at least some of the time, accordingly" (*SPDP*, 81). If one feels fascism must be stopped but had no compulsion to help stop it, then this suggests that one really does not believe that it is the right thing to do. Moral beliefs, one assumes, should be intrinsically motivating; one should choose to do what one feels is right even if it means compromising one's values. In war, for instance, Oppen might throw himself under a tank because he had a moral

obligation, whatever the repercussions of this sacrifice (i.e., his killing or being killed). That Oppen might have sacrificed himself for his “nobilities” left him in turmoil of guilt concerning his motivations in taking part in war and the result of his actions, actions that might result in his death or the death of others. According to Schneider,

It is the calculation, the pressure to be cunning, to manipulate, to calculate, that brings its own shame later. I am thinking here of George telling how he controlled a group of German prisoners: he told their sergeant that if one of the prisoners broke and ran he would not shoot that man, but would shoot, and kill, the sergeant.³⁸

Oppen, Schneider observes, “knew about such situations, such undesired progressions toward unlikable deeds, [and] felt Brecht had achieved clarity about them.”³⁹ Writing his daughter in a letter from 1966, Oppen refers to his being touched that she had kept a copy of the Brecht poem “To Posterity,” a poem he may have given her in an attempt to explain or defend his communism and war service (“Do not judge us / Too harshly,” the poem implores). Reading Brecht’s poem helps illuminate Oppen’s motivations, the reasons for his difficult decisions and the repercussions of these decisions, both on himself and his family.⁴⁰ As he explains to his daughter,

I’d remembered the Brecht poem. It’s very moving and very serious . . . I talked of it very often . . . And now it is strange and moving that you find you have kept it all these years. What it says has been very nearly the central problem – maybe it has been the only problem - - for us as a family.

Self sacrifice! one could almost say: you may sacrifice anything but
yourself. (SL, 131-32)

Given the importance Oppen places on Brecht's poem, "To Posterity" as descriptive of the "central problem" for his family, "maybe the only problem," I here include the complete text of Brecht's poem in H.R. Hays' masterful translation, the one Oppen knew and referenced:

1.

Indeed I live in the dark ages!

A guileless word is an absurdity. A smooth forehead betokens

A hard heart. He who laughs

Has not yet heard

The terrible tidings.

Ah, what an age it is

When to speak of trees is almost a crime

For it is a kind of silence about injustice!

And he who walks calmly across the street,

Is he not out of reach of his friends

In trouble?

It is true: I earn my living

But, believe me, it is only an accident.

Nothing that I do entitles me to eat my fill.

By chance I was spared. (If my luck leaves me

I am lost.)

They tell me: eat and drink. Be glad you have it!

But how can I eat and drink

When my food is snatched from the hungry

And my glass of water belongs to the thirsty?

And yet I eat and drink.

I would gladly be wise.

The old books tell us what wisdom is:

Avoid the strife of the world

Live out your little time

Fearing no one

Using no violence

Returning good for evil --

Not fulfillment of desire but forgetfulness

Passes for wisdom.

I can do none of this:

Indeed I live in the dark ages!

2.

I came to the cities in a time of disorder

When hunger ruled.

I came among men in a time of uprising

And I revolted with them.

So the time passed away

Which on earth was given me.

I ate my food between massacres.

The shadow of murder lay upon my sleep.

And when I loved, I loved with indifference.

I looked upon nature with impatience.

So the time passed away

Which on earth was given me.

In my time streets led to the quicksand.

Speech betrayed me to the slaughterer.

There was little I could do. But without me

The rulers would have been more secure. This was my hope.

So the time passed away

Which on earth was given me.

3.

You, who shall emerge from the flood

In which we are sinking,

Think --

When you speak of our weaknesses,

Also of the dark time

That brought them forth.

For we went, changing our country more often than our shoes.

In the class war, despairing

When there was only injustice and no resistance.

For we knew only too well:

Even the hatred of squalor

Makes the brow grow stern.

Even anger against injustice

Makes the voice grow harsh. Alas, we

Who wished to lay the foundations of kindness

Could not ourselves be kind.

But you, when at last it comes to pass

That man can help his fellow man,

Do not judge us

Too harshly.⁴¹

How is this poem representative of the "central problem" of "Self-sacrifice?"⁴²
Oppen was asking his daughter not to judge him too harshly; his intentions were honest, sincere. He did not mean to risk his life and, thereby, risk losing his wife and daughter. He meant only to fight injustice, to make the "rulers" less secure. Like Brecht, Oppen refuses the stoicism of the "old books" which pass for wisdom; living in

the “dark ages” demanded action. While he did not commit himself to political action and war “only for the sake of deceiving others,” as he writes in the same 1966 letter to his daughter, he doubted the necessity of his action, wondering if Brecht’s old books were correct:

We have oscillated between the knowledge that we love only those whom we really and actually love . . . risking ourselves, that is, risking each other, each other meaning also you. I had that dream – I think I told you. It was a nightmare, I felt it as a nightmare, the worst I ever had, and I was not able to get out of it for a week or two weeks. It was in war time, which made it harder to accept . . . We’ve surely not solved it – just oscillated. It cannot be solved as a question between two conflicted claims, they simply conflict sometimes. What one owes to one’s wife and child and friends even is to keep oneself as safe as possible. -- There’s no way round it, one’s nobilities, minor or not, are at their expense. But just because it would be unbearable to find oneself alone in the universe, the social ethic has roots of great power. It is why I become so angry at those who *depend* on the poor, the oppressed, for their ethical well-being, for their ‘values,’ as they so horribly say. I wish, I wish the poor and oppressed did not exist, and we could look only for what we do really value, ‘the ground I stand on’ as you wrote not long ago . . . the thing begins with the positive, with what one does want. We must know what we really do value, what we really do want, nothing else will stand up (*SL*, 132).

As important as the “rust in copper” dream has proved (and most of Oppen’s biographers and critics, myself included, point to it as an important if mysterious moment of psychological and emotional catharsis), it was an earlier dream, a “nightmare,” that finally proves more important in regard to the creation of Oppen’s late work. The dream, Oppen writes, occurred at an uncertain time in the past -

according to a letter to John Crawford written shortly before the above letter to his daughter (where it is quoted almost verbatim), the dream took place sometime shortly after the Second World War – and involved his war service, yet is otherwise not recounted, though it may have related to his near-brush with death in the foxhole. Apart from Oppen's desire to fight fascism, if only to keep from deceiving himself or others, there were limits to his heroism, to the lengths he might go to protect himself or his fellow soldiers.

Oppen later interpreted his “nightmare” of war as meaning that he “shouldn't be trying to kill people, hero or no hero. Or not as part of an army.” The dream, he reported, “damn near killed me . . . But I still don't know if it's 'true' . . . I know it was what I thought. But there's a limit to my superstition: *I don't know that I know absolutes and can't imagine knowing absolute values, even in dreams*” (SL, 126-27, italics mine). The “war in a way rescued me,” he writes in a letter from 1959, “that is, rescued [me] back to the rocks, the open world. I feel this too about the open world; more strongly than I feel anything else” (SL, 186). The water trickling down the ruined walls of a French villa, the girder still itself among the rubble – a world of things transcending the names or limitations of the events surrounding them. When Oppen began writing again, he kept this refusal in mind; his poems were content to, as he puts it, “describe everything that we already know, and declare every belief that we already hold.” If something is true, it should simply be enough to be named, without resorting to argument. Addressing this problem in “Route,” Oppen observes:

We are brothers, we are brothers? -- these things are composed of a moral substance only if they are untrue. If these things are true they are perfectly simple, perfectly impenetrable, those primary elements which can only be named (*NCP*, 197)

If these things are true, Oppen argues, we do not need to proclaim them as moral certainties (as at Nuremberg). We need only name them, as we name "those primary elements" that remain "impenetrable" and "can only be / named." Later in that same poem Oppen observes that "A man will give his life for his friend *provided he wants to*" (*NCP*, 197, italics mine). A 1969 letter to DuPlessis attempts to describe the complexities of these feelings, and his resolve to prove to himself, following the war, that his motivations for fighting were in fact justified:

We had by no means found our lives unbearable up to that time, we were pretty anxious to get home safe, we were pretty confident the war was going to be won, for that matter . . . Unspoken, undiscussed, there simply was an understanding that men would take great risks, but would not simply throw themselves under a tank with a stick of dynamite as some of the Spanish republicans did - - and by which one man could stop a tank. Some of the French maquis did comparable things - - - It means that a guerilla equals something more than fourteen very heavily armed men - - But I had forgotten . . . Or not really: I had thought that people could not stand against fire. Once they could not. The Japanese, I've been told, could not, and I knew the Germans could not. I thought no one could.

"A man will give his life for his child" . . . It's simply true . . . A husband or wife will also . . . if that's how they feel . . . But one shouldn't pretend to have such motives where one doesn't, one mustn't pretend or even think he SHOULD be a guerilla if he is not. He should if he is: if he isn't, what does the should mean? A fake ethic, a forced ethic, we cannot construct an ethic unless we know what we want and how much we want it . . . it is wrong to become a hero only for the sake of deceiving others as to what one wants and how much one wants it . . . It is the most drastic way of propagating misinformation (SL, 192-93).

Oppen's feeling of "guilt" was over his possible "self-sacrifice," his intensely personal and deeply emotional (and not always conscious) struggle with this "central problem." Oppen was "rescued" by the war, back to the "open world" because he discovered he should not be killing people and therefore came to doubt "absolute values, even in dreams." He became highly suspicious of the use of poetry to argue moral claims. This became the central concern of the poetry he came to write after the war.

There is considerable evidence that Oppen intended to write "Of Being Numerous," with its question as to "whether or not we can deal with humanity as something which actually does exist,"⁴³ from very early on after his return to writing. In his papers, Oppen writes that he "should have a fourth book; which would be 'Of being Numerous and Other Poems.' That was what I knew I could do to begin with, that would complete what I knew I could talk about."⁴⁴ The poem, he explains in a 1970 letter to poet John Taggart, was initially

conceived as a process of thought, section by succeeding section: but very drastic revision, rearrangement, re-writing (therefore) involved: changes in the thinking, too - - - something over a two-year process. The first section written after some third or so for the poem had been down, and altered the conception in my mind drastically (SL, 209).⁴⁵

Yet, even allowing for these “drastic” changes, one can still follow a thread over Oppen’s thinking about “sacrifice” (both personal and impersonal) from its incarnation in his nightmare of war to an aesthetically mediated culmination in this crucial, career-defining long poem. Evidence of this can be found in the poem’s earlier incarnation as the 1964 poem “Another Language of New York” in *This In Which* and, tellingly, in a 1963 letter Oppen composed to his cousin, the painter Ethel Schwabacher.

The previous December he had attended with Schwabacher and his family a film version of Euripides’ *Electra*. Writing in a 1962 letter to his Schwabacher concerning the film, Oppen observes that its

conflict becomes clear as a raising of the question of the importance of a nation, the importance of a culture as against the simpler relationships and simpler emotions of father and child and mother and child, if one remembers the necessity of a sacrifice, the ‘practicality’ of a sacrifice - - is as definite as - - say - - the sacrifice of a soldier who undertakes a suicidal mission . . . It is not, then, simply a play about madness, or fear or cowardly contrivance - - That Clytemnestra says at one moment: One must believe in the Gods because if one did not, life would cease to have meaning . . . You see what I’m saying: the question of the play is the question of being numerous. . . we’ve been thinking about it for a

long time. Because we cannot exist, however mothers may feel, without a sense of depth in the past and expectation in the future (SL, 72).

Euripides, like Oppen, was an artist faced with uncertainty and estranged by the irrationality of life. Unlike Oppen, Euripedes looked to the Gods as guarantors of the accuracy of perception. In so doing, Euripedes transformed Greek theater, Nietzsche argues, from concern over warring primal mysteries to subject matters that appealed more to the chorus, from the heroic man to the embodiment of mass consciousness; *Electra* is a meditation on the desire for control that motivates the necessity of certain forms of human knowledge. Yet, as Nietzsche pointed out so often, the world cannot be understood absolutely. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, in their introduction to *Electra*, describe Euripides' play as a "challeng[e]" for the "audience to maintain moral clarity in the face of extreme distaste for the agents of justice." These agents of justice "do irreparable damage out of confused and flippant motives with the guidance of heaven," just as, in Oppen's time, leaders of the Communist Party, both in Russia and in the United States, succumbed to unquestionably heinous tactics, always within the context of the preservation of the revolution and a mythological promise of utopia (a secular mythology not all that different from its sacred counterparts). Similarly, fascist and totalitarian regimes created police states with the justification of achieving an ideal social order. "*Electra*," translators Grene and Lattimore explain, "is another phase in [Euripides'] campaign against Apollo, the morality of the gods, and the tender-minded human champions of 'justice' – a concept in fact cold and difficult,

admirable in the abstract, ugly in concrete situations."⁴⁶ While the gods' justice remains admirable in the abstract, in "concrete situations" it becomes ugly. Oppen undoubtedly was reminded of the inability to maintain perfect ethical behavior, as in a time of war.

Euripedes' play, like Brecht's, pointed toward an ethics continually tested and revised by the demands of the situation. Oppen was troubled by the word *humanity*. The experience in war made him question civilization's fundamental moral and social mores, leading him to wonder whether or not "humanity" is something more than simply a word; as he explained to Dembo, "whether or not we can deal with humanity as something which actually does exist." Is the concept of the word "humanity," Oppen asks, like, say, the concept attached to the small noun "sun," in fact, valid? Or is it "simply a word"? According to Oppen, *Of Being Numerous*, one of his few poems to specifically address his experience in war, "tries to say that there is a concept of humanity that is something we want humanity to be or become and this would establish the basis of an ethic."⁴⁷ As he elaborated in conversation with Robert Sheppard:

This is a little bit difficult . . . There's a metaphysic of morality . . . I mentioned it somewhere. You see, this is a question 'of being numerous,' that is, of the concept of mankind. Now, again, I'm not moralizing, I didn't invent this; I just say it exists and we can't be happy without it. I pointed out, people of a certain age (a certain age I might well say!): the length of time we might possibly live is not an unimaginable length of time, in terms of one's memory. It's less than what one has experienced . . . If they had, say, twenty years before the world was going to end, they would probably not bother to live it

out. The end of one's own life is by no means equivalent to the end of the world. There is something called humanity which makes it possible for us to live. It's a metaphysical concept. . . There's a metaphysic of morality which absolutely must be taken – and I'm talking about a pure hedonism: what we want. But the metaphysic is there; it's in us. We can't disregard this little factor. Socrates tried, you know. It's a tragic and touching scene⁴⁸

¹ The exact nature of her depression goes unexamined in Mary's autobiography *Meaning a Life* (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1978), hereafter cited in text as *MAL* by page number in parentheses – one is left with the impression that it was due to variety of factors, including their exile in Mexico, elsewhere described as an unhappy, difficult time in their lives, together with their daughter's impending return to the United States to attend college.

² Rachel Blau DuPlessis, ed. *The Selected Letters of George Oppen* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990) 66. Hereafter cited as *SL* by page number in parentheses.

³ DuPlessis, "Oppen from Seventy-five to a Hundred, 1983-2000," in *Jacket Magazine*, <http://jacketmagazine.com/36/oppen-duplessis.html>

⁴ Michael Davidson, "The Oppens: Remarks towards Biography," *Ironwood* 26 (fall 1985) 312.

⁵ DuPlessis, "Oppen from Seventy-five to a Hundred, 1983-2000."

⁶ Michael Davidson, ed. *New Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 2002) 181. Hereafter cited in text as *NCP* by page number in parentheses.

⁷ Stephen Cope, ed. *Selected Prose, Daybooks and Prose* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008) 109. Hereafter cited in text as *SPDP* by page number in parentheses.

⁸ Peter Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (London: Oxford University Press) 3.

⁹ L.S. Dembo, "Interview with George and Mary Oppen," in Dembo, Cyrena Pondrom, eds., *The Contemporary Writer: Interviews with Sixteen Novelists and Poets* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press) 189. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰ DuPlessis, "Oppen from Seventy-five to a Hundred, 1983-2000."

¹¹ Note the inconsistency between the number of other soldiers in the foxhole in Davidson's re-telling and in other accounts by Oppen himself. This inconsistency is especially odd considering the otherwise very detailed account Davidson provides.

¹² Davidson, "The Oppens: Remarks Towards Biography," 309-10. Italics mine.

¹³ Burton Hatlen and Tom Mandel, "Poetry and Politics: A Conversation with George and Mary Oppen," in Hatlen and Mandel, ed. *George Oppen: Man and Poet* (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation) 1982, 24.

¹⁴ Reinhold Schiffer, "Interview with George Oppen," *Sagetrieb* 3, 3 (fall/winter 1984) 13.

¹⁵ Hatlen and Mandel, "Poetry and Politics: A Conversation with George and Mary Oppen," 25.

¹⁶ Peter Nicholls, "Wars I Have Seen," in *A Concise Companion to Twentieth Century American Poetry*, ed. Stephen Fredman (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) 23-24.

¹⁷ Worth noting here is Oppen's use of the word "ditch" in contrast to "prominence"; the word "ditch," as Susan Thackeray observes, turns up here and in several other of Oppen's poems: "World, World -," "Some San Francisco Poems," and "The Speech at Soli," the last of which relates specifically to his experiences in war. Thackeray rightly interprets this ditch as representing both "the mortal accident that Oppen precipitated at the age of nineteen" but also "in some related way to the "fox-hole" that also recurs many times in Oppen's later poetry." Thackeray, *George Oppen: A Radical Practice* (O Books and the Poetry Center and American Poetry Archives, 2001) 55.

¹⁸ In the letter, Oppen refers to a poem from his collection *The Materials* titled "Narrative," possibly referring to "A Narrative"; however, because "A Narrative" contains no apparent reference to war and was in fact published in the subsequent collection *This In Which*. Oppen is probably referring to "Blood From the Stone," initially titled "To Date." Since this title is somewhat like "Narrative," Oppen is probably confusing the two.

¹⁹ Hatlen and Mandel, "Poetry and Politics: A Conversation with George and Mary Oppen," 34.

²⁰ Schiffer, "Interview with George Oppen," 13.

²¹ Quoted in Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 107.

²² Author interview, Aubrey Degnan, August 2005.

²³ Joe Hanley, quoted in Studs Terkel, *"The Good War": An Oral History of World War Two* (New York: Ballantine, 1984) 270.

²⁴ Curiously, this hearkens back to Oppen's description of his own "boyhood degradation" recalled in the poem "Myth of the Blaze," a recollection spurred by his having to bury his dog tag in the rubble of Alsace, fearing capture by the Germans. The complex knot of associations grows increasingly tighter.

²⁵ The hangman as symbol of the brutality and terror of the fascist police state takes on greater complexity in the following comment from a 1974 letter to : "and there's a poem of Brecht's - 'To Posterity' I think. 'even the cry for justice/ makes the voice grow harsh . . . we who wanted most to be kind have not been able to be kind['] . . . possible to accept this . . . But they've lied TOO much . . . there seems almost no way back - For them. ((or: it's a mistake to invite the hangman to dinner)) (*SL*, 282).

²⁶ Stephen Schneider, letter to Hoffman, 18 January 2009.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ DuPlessis, ed., "The Philosophy of the Astonished: A Selection from the Working Papers" *Sulfur* 27 (fall 1990) 203.

³⁰ Dembo, "Interview with George Oppen," 166.

³¹ Dembo, "Interview with George Oppen," 178-79.

³² *Ibid.*, 185.

³³ *Moralis*: George Oppen Interview, 1973, <http://robersheppard.blogspot.com/2006/11/moralis-george-oppen-interview-1973.html>.

³⁴ Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, tr. Eric Bentley (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1966) 89.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 71-2.

³⁶ Schneider, letter to Hoffman, 1 March 2009.

³⁷ Brecht, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, 137.

³⁸ Schneider, letter to Hoffman, 18 January 2009.

³⁹ Schneider, letter to Hoffman, 19 January 2009.

⁴⁰ Notably, Brecht's poem is the same poem Oppen turned to for an explanation of why he decided to give up writing poetry to commit himself to political action: "Ah, what an age it is . . ."

⁴¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Selected Poems*, tr. H.R. Hays (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1959) 173-77.

⁴² It should be stated here that DuPlessis, editor of Oppen's *Selected Letters*, is inferring that, given Oppen's admiration for that poem and the poem's subject matter, "To Posterity" is the poem to which he refers in the letter to his daughter.

⁴³ Dembo, "Interview with George Oppen," 173-78.

⁴⁴ DuPlessis, ed., "The Circumstances," 155.

⁴⁵ The "first section" alludes specifically to those passages having to do with Oppen's receiving Schneider's 1965 translation of Yves Bonnefoy's *Du Mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve*, composed in 1953. Oppen's radical re-working of the opening passage to the poem was undoubtedly influenced by his reading of this poem. See Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 88-93, for a fascinating discussion of the poem's influence on Oppen.

⁴⁶ David Grene and Richard Lattimore, eds., *Euripides: V* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959) 10.

⁴⁷ Dembo, "Interview with George Oppen," 173-78.

⁴⁸ Robert Sheppard, "*Moralis Interview with George Oppen*, 1973."