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The Shipwreck of the Singular: George Oppen's "Of Being Numerous"

[*Note:* In its original form, this essay was published in *Ironwood* (#26, Fall 1985, a special George Oppen issue). For various reasons, I did not include it in any of the three essay collections I have published since that date. But the time for reconsideration is now opportune. In the past two decades, we have witnessed Oppen scholarship coming of age, beginning with Rachel Blau DuPlessis's edition of *The Selected Letters of George Oppen* (Duke 1990), Michael Davidson's *New Collected Poems* for New Directions (2002), and Stephen Cope's publication of Oppen's *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers* for California (2007). These three superbly edited volumes have been followed in 2007 by Peter Nicholls's seminal study *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (Oxford). Oppen's place in the twentieth-century poetry canon now seems assured. At the same time, commentators have continued to assume that because Oppen was once an active Communist, his later poetry must somehow continue to speak for a materialist view of history—a view at odds, of course, not only with his Modernist forebears, but with most of his contemporaries. In his Preface to the *New Collected Poems*, for example, Eliot Weinberger declares that "only Oppen, among [our elders] spoke directly to the political consciousness and the political crisis of the time [1968]" (ix). And Michael Davidson, in his Introduction to the *New Collected Poems*, puts it this way;

In 1968, [Oppen] published his best-known book, *Of Being Numerous*, the title poem of which expands an earlier sequence, "A Language of New York," from *This in Which* and reflects the poet's opposition to the Vietnam War. . . . How is it possible, the poem asks, to be both unique and yet live as a social being? "We are pressed, pressed on each other," Oppen says; yet at the same time "We have chosen the meaning / Of being numerous" and must reconcile ourselves to a social contract. Although these were issues facing many during the turbulent late 1960s, they carried special resonance

for a poet who had relinquished the singular in favor of the social totality in his earlier career. (*New Collected Poems* xxv.)

But to what extent did the Oppen of “Of Being Numerous” actually reconcile himself to the social contract? And how did that “contract” relate to the “social totality” (membership in the Communist Party) of the 1930s, when Oppen renounced poetry for the sake of political work? These were questions posed in my *Ironwood* essay, and it seems worthwhile to raise them again today. What follows, then, is a heavily revised version of the earlier essay.

The Sad Marvels

To begin with: the title “Of Being Numerous” is equivocal. The preposition “of” has no subject (does it refer, say, to the *condition* of being numerous or to the *difficulties* of being numerous or to the *necessity* of being numerous?); the phrase hangs, so to speak, in mid-air—“of being”—and the adjective is abstract and impersonal. Not ‘many,’ not “a crowd,” but a reference to pure number, and a punning reference at that (“numerous” also referring to the poet’s “numbers” so that we can read the title as being “Of being a poet.” And, when we turn from the title to the first lyric in Oppen’s forty-poem sequence, a sequence often considered his masterpiece, we find a similar concentration on the abstract, the conceptual, the function word:

There are things
We live among ‘and to see them
Is to know ourselves’.

Occurrence, a part
Of an infinite series,

The sad marvels;

Of this was told
A tale of our wickedness,
It is not our wickedness. (163).

Of the eight nouns in this passage—"things," "occurrence," "part," "series," "marvels," "tale," "wickedness" (twice)—not one is concrete. The two adjectives—"infinite series," "sad marvels"—are evaluative rather than descriptive, and the verbs are either copulatives or infinitives, with the exception of the intransitive "We live." Indeed, the number of prepositions and pronouns, taken together, is greater than that of nouns, adjectives, and verbs combined, and the syntax of the title is replicated in the line "Of an infinite series," and echoed, with slight variation, in "Of this was told."

In this disconnected world of "There" and "this," of "we" and "them" and "ourselves," of an unspecified "occurrence" and a "tale" without a teller, it is not surprising that what "We live among" are not people, but "things." "'And to see them' /," says the poet, citing Robert Brumbaugh's *Plato for the Modern World*, "is to know ourselves."¹ Does this mean that we ourselves are no more than external "things"? And is the "occurrence" that is "a part / Of an infinite series," our own existence or that of the process of life that goes on despite us? The poet rejects, in any case, the Bible's notion of the fall ("a tale of our wickedness"),² with the simple response that it is circumstance, not native predisposition, that determines our fate. But, no sooner is that statement made than it gives way to a cited prose passage: "'You remember that old town we went to, and we sat in the ruined window, and we tried to imagine that we belonged to those times—It is dead and it is not dead'" (163).³

"A tale of our wickedness. / It is not our wickedness"; "It is dead and it is not dead." These contradictions point to a curious arrest, if not paralysis on the poet's part. No sooner does the "earth speak and the salamander speak" than "the Spring comes and only obscures it--." With these words, the cited story abruptly breaks off, making way for, without at all modulating into, poem #2. And this lyric like the first will be characterized by extremely tight sound structure.

So spoke of the existence of things,
An unmanageable pantheon

Absolute, but they say
Arid.

A city of the corporations. (163)

Here "So" is stretched out to become "spoke" and the "An" of line 2 is echoed in "unmanageable pantheon," while its initial A recurs in the following three lines: "Absolute"—"Arid"—"A." Moreover, in what is surely a significant chiming, the third syllable of "corporations" rhymes with "ay" two lines up, and its final syllable "-tions" loops back, in a near-rhyme, to the "things" of line 1. Sound structure, it would seem, must contain its substance because nothing else does: "the world, if it is matter, / Is impenetrable" (164).

It has been argued, most notably by Burton Hatlen, that Oppen's stance in this and related poems is specifically Marxist. "Of Being Numerous," says Hatlen, is "Oppen's most extended meditation on what might be called 'the ontology of the human collectivity.'" As Hatlen explains:

Oppen's is a "materialist" poetry in its rigorous refusal to surrender to what I would call the "transcendental temptation." . . . But for Oppen as for Marx the material world is not simply a given. Rather it is "in process," as human labor reshapes the raw materials of nature. The *people* exerting their *labor* upon the *material* world. . . . "truth" for [Oppen] exists, if it exists at all, neither in "nature" nor in the splendid solitude of the reflective mind, but only in the collective, ongoing life of the people "*en masse*" (as Whitman liked to say) as they collectively make through their labor the only world we can know.⁴

Similarly, Eric Mottram takes this and related poems to constitute "a rare form of intellectually committed, socially responsible work which considers the issue of a

human future within a precise and ecological sense of men and women among the facts and objectives of the world.”⁵

This case for Oppen’s “populist vision” (the phrase is Hatlen’s) strikes me as wishful thinking on the part of those critics who long to see Oppen’s twenty-five year silence (he wrote no poetry between 1933, when he and his wife Mary joined the Communist Party, to 1958, when they returned to New York from an eight-year exile in Mexico) as a gestation period for the poetry that was to come. Surely, according to this line of reasoning, the political activism of these years must inform, however covertly, the work itself. Thus, although Oppen himself regularly insisted that his poetry must be dissociated from his political engagement,⁶ the poems whose seeds were being sown during the “political” years would inevitably find, so the argument runs, their “creative ground” in the human world of society and history” (Hatlen, *Not Altogether Lone*,” 333).

The assumption behind this argument is that, however firmly the Oppen of the 1960s renounced a life of political action, his Marxist vision remained intact. Certainly, Oppen himself did nothing to dispel this view. As late as 1980, Mary Oppen told Burton Hatlen, “Both [George and I] refer to Marx as something basic from which to proceed. I don’t know any other economist that I would look to for information on which to base my ideas.”⁷ And nowhere in their published prose do the Oppens give so much as the slightest hint that that they had come to regret their youthful involvement in the Communist Party.

What is *not* said, however, is more revealing. Asked by L. S. Dembo how long he was a active Party member, Oppen replies “Not so many years” and evasively talks about the “difficulty of escaping from the Communist philosophy” and the difficulty with our own thinking” (Dembo 175). These difficulties are never specified, but in the notebooks recently published, we find entries like the following:

Russia—Well, but the Russians have not had a very long experiment in atheism. And during its course they have been very carefully kept to a limited number of ideas. There is simply a great deal they have

not yet become aware of that a large part of the world IS aware of----. And none of which is answered by dialectical materialism.⁸

Given such doubts, perhaps the easiest way out was to divorce poetry from politics, as Oppen tried to do on his return to the U.S. in 1961. "What did you do," Dembo asks Oppen, "when you got back to New York?" "Sat down and wrote poetry" is the immediate answer.

But it can hardly have been so simple. Tom Mandel is surely right when he remarks that it will not do to dismiss the "problem" of the 25-year gap in Oppen's career by citing, as Oppen himself loved to do, Hugh Kenner's words, "In brief, it took 25 years to write the next poem."⁹ As Mandel puts it:

A certain suspicion attaches to George, a suspicion on the part of another generation of poets quite screwed down to what they're spending their lives doing, for having given up the task during 25 years. . . . it seems a questionable move when someone abandons the art as not holding enough for him, "not the most important thing in the world" . . . But wouldn't it be just the poet's task, to make it important?¹⁰

It would, but the motive for "Of Being Numerous" was hardly "the infusion of a populist vision into an immanentist poetics," which Hatlen takes to be at the center of Oppen's long poem (333). Rather, Oppen's is a poem about exile—specifically, the acute sense of pain and disorientation attendant upon the exiled American poet's attempt to relearn "a language of New York," to make his way through the new "city of the corporations." The "journey," which is not temporal but spatial, erasing all or almost all autobiographical traces, is through a landscape of dislocation, of absence, a visual "landscape" of short, abrupt lines ("From lumps, chunks," as Oppen put it in "Image of the Engine," *NCP* 42), surrounded by white space. "Of Being Numerous," it turns out, is primarily a case "of being separate." Except—and here the other meaning of "numerous" comes into play—that one can make poetry of one's experience.

A Language of New York

The "myth of return," depersonalized and abstracted, is introduced in poem #3 of "Of Being Numerous":

The emotions are engaged
Entering the city
As entering any city.

We are not coeval
With a locality
But we imagine others are,

We encounter them. Actually
A populace flows
Thru the city.

This is a language, therefore, of New York (164)

We can read this, at one level, as a parodic version of "The Burial of the Dead" in *The Waste Land*: "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many." Here there is not even a "crowd" but only an abstract "populace," and there is certainly no Stetson. On the contrary, the city (nothing specifies it as being New York except that Oppen tells us it is) appears as if "Glassed / In dreams" (# 32), a conceptual rather than perceptual reality. There is no direct expression of feeling, only the third-person reference, "The emotions are engaged," a sentence further distanced by the qualified repetition in lines 2-3: "Entering the city / As entering any city." The act of entering cannot be directly experienced; it must be qualified, transformed into generalization about "any city."

The city never comes into focus. Rather the poet keeps his distance: "We are not coeval / With a locality / But we imagine others are. / We encounter them." Again, word choice is revealing: "coeval with" not part of," "coeval with" not Brooklyn Heights or Second Avenue, but with a "locality." And the inhabitants of this "locality"

remain faceless and nameless—they are “others,” “them,” “A populace.” What, in this context, can Oppen possibly mean by “This is a language, therefore, of New York”? “Of Being Numerous” stands at the opposite pole from Frank O’Hara’s New York poems, with their fierce concentration on the perceptual and the particular, their fear of losing the particular or of finding that there is nothing beneath the surface. Oppen, in contrast, cares little about New York and its characteristic images but a great deal about the phenomenology of the mind. His poetic structure thus mimes the fits and starts by means of which his consciousness comes to terms with its new condition. The “language is not “of New York,” as the poem would have it, than of the enclosed glassed-in cityscape as seen from office or automobile.¹¹ “We are not coeval / With a locality,” the poet admits, “But we imagine others are.” The short, end-stopped lines are characterized by a kind of lock-jaw: “locality” picks up, in reverse order the *c-o-a-l* of “coeval,” “We” points down to “With,” “are to “a,” and then “We are” reappears with two words between subject and the original predicate, as if something were buzzing in the speaker’s ear. The rhythm is purposely unlovely:

/ / || / ^ || ^ /
 This is a language, therefore, of New York

Again, the buzz of “This is” (/s/ followed by /z/), the impediment to flow produced by the caesurae, the slowness of the monosyllables “of New York.”

A good deal has been written about Oppen’s relationship to the masses, but, at least in “Of Being Numerous,” there is no relationship:

For the people of that flow
 Are new, the old

New to age as the young
 To youth (#4, 164-65)

These tautologies make no sense until we remember that it is not “the people” who are “new,” but the observer, who has, like Rip Van Winkle, absented himself from the scene, thus finding much to marvel at in the age of the old and the youth of the young, as of the “tarred roofs / And the stoops an doors--/A world of stoops.” Roofs, stoops, doors—these assonantal nouns form a chain of signifiers, whose sound is more prominent than anything which they might signify. Indeed, the stoops and doors do not constitute a threshold to life inside a particular house. On the contrary, in poem #5, the “populace” has receded entirely and we are presented with the following scene:

The great stone
Above the river
In the pylon of the bridge

'1875'

Frozen in the moonlight
In the frozen air over the footpath, consciousness

Which has nothing to gain, which awaits nothing,
Which loves itself. (165)

Oppen's focus is not on the bridge or even the pylon of the bridge, but on a single stone in it, bearing the inscription '1875.' The date, placed on a line all by itself, surrounded by two-line blocks of white space, has a peculiar pathos. It is as if the poet's cognizance of the inscription exhausts whatever interest he may have had in the history of the bridge and, by extension, in the city: one bare fact and he has had enough. “Frozen in the moonlight / In the frozen air over the footpath” (note the complex sound repetitions here) accordingly refers, not only to the bridge but to the consciousness “which awaits nothing, / Which loves itself.”

How to escape such mental gridlock? The dilemma is succinctly stated in poems #6 and #7.

6.

We are pressed, pressed on each other,
We will be told at once
Of anything that happens

And the discovery of facts bursts
In a paroxysm of emotion
Now as always. Crusoe

We say was
'Rescued'.
So we have chosen.

7.

Obsessed, bewildered

By the shipwreck
Of the singular

We have chosen the meaning
Of being numerous. (166)

In his correspondence, Oppen repeatedly refers to these lines as “the burden of the poem”—“the concepts evolved from the fact of being numerous, without which we are marooned, shipwrecked.” And again:

I'm quite Marxist, indeed. 'The shipwreck of the singular' I wrote. We *cannot* live without the concept of humanity, the end of one's own life is by no means equivalent to the end of the world, we would not bother to live out our lives if it were---

And yet we cannot escape this: that we *are* single. And face, therefore, shipwreck.¹²

"Humanity," Nicholls notes, "is apparently rehabilitated here, but less as an existential reality than as a 'concept' or horizon which we need to live out our individual lives" (97). But what happens when "humanity" is reduced to a concept? Rescue, in this scheme of things, marks the return to a world where "we" are uncomfortably "pressed, pressed on each other." And since that world is so distasteful to the poet—even a simple date like 1875 can intrude only intermittently on a "consciousness / Which loves itself"—any possibility of social transformation evaporates.¹³ "We have chosen," says Oppen bravely, "the meaning / Of being numerous," but it is not a "meaning" he can bring himself to accept.

The pain attendant upon this realization is the subject of the unfolding sequence. Alone, under "the thin sky / Over islands / Among days / Having only the force of days" (166), the poet surveys the city's buildings, "Absolutely immobile, / Hollow, available." At moments (for example in #9), he takes comfort in the thought that 'I am one of those who from nothing but man's way of /thought and one of his dialects and what has happened / to me / Have made poetry" (167). To prove the point, he even brings himself to compose a sympathetic vignette about a working-class girl named Phyllis, a vignette perhaps meant to counter the mock-pastoral "Corydon and Phyllis" in Williams' *Paterson*, Book IV:

Coming home from her first job
On the bus in the bare civic interior
Among those people, the small doors
Opening on the night at the curb
Her heart, she told me, suddenly tight with happiness—

So small a picture,
A spot of light on the curb, it cannot demean us

I too am in love down there with the streets
And the square slabs of pavement--- (169)

To take the final lines at face value (David McAleavey, for example, writes: "The city itself can inspire ecstasy, and consequently is not irredeemable"¹⁴), is to ignore the rhetoric of distancing I spoke of earlier. Phyllis works, not in a specified place, but in a "bare civic interior," and her colleagues are a faceless, nameless group—"those people." But then Phyllis herself, depicted as "Coming home from her first job / on the bus," remains a mere cipher, so that the poet's report, "Her heart, she told me, [was] suddenly tight with happiness," expresses a momentary fantasy of wanting to care for others, even as those others remain remote and inaccessible. A similar process occurs in poem #14, when Oppen tries to bring himself to commemorate his World War II army buddies:

Among them many men

More capable than I—

Muykut and a sergeant

Named Healy,

That lieutenant also-- (171)

"How forget that?" the poet asks himself, "How talk / Distantly of 'The People' / Who are that force / Within the walls / Of cities"? But the lyric in which these lines are embedded makes only too clear that the real question is "How remember that?" The speaker says he "cannot even now / Altogether disengage himself / From those men / With whom I stood in emplacements, in mess tents, / In hospitals and sheds," but the roll call yields no real image. Aside from the two proper names, Muykut and Healy, and the reference to their respective ranks, he does not provide us with a single identifying feature of his fellow soldiers.

This withdrawal from human contact also characterizes the sequence's Vietnam War poems (#18-#20). Completed in the pivotal year 1968, it would seem appropriate that "Of Being Numerous" would make some reference to the war. Yet despite all the talk of "atrocious," "Insanity in high places," and "Failure and the guilt / Of failure,"

there is curiously little personal passion or absorption in Oppen's indictment. The "casual will" of the helicopters cannot, at this juncture, touch him as does the following quite unrelated perception:

There can be a brick
In a brick wall
The eye picks

So quiet of a Sunday
Here is the brick, it was waiting
Her where you were born

Mary-Anne. (#21, 175)

Two tercets and a single line, bearing the most ordinary of female names, Mary-Anne. Of the lyric's thirty words, only four have more than one syllable. The rest are themselves little "bricks," building blocks carefully assembled so as to produce the poem's hushed intensity. The emotion, in this seemingly quite impersonal poem, is generated by its repetition ("There can be a *brick* / In a *brick* wall . . . Here is the *brick*"; "*Here* is," "*Here* where"), its rhyming of "brick" and "picks," and its parallel predications: "There can be," "Here is," "it was waiting," "you were born." The speaking voice circles around these obvious facts—a kind of mantra for a "quiet" Sunday, by means of which the poet can get outside his own consciousness. To pronounce, in this context, the name "Mary-Anne" is, so to speak, to insure the reality of human contact. *Mary-Anne*: any reader can respond to such naming.

"All the little nouns," Oppen tells L. S. Dembo, "are the ones I like the most: the deer, the sun, and so on." These nouns, he insists, "do refer to something . . . appearances represent reality, whether or not they misrepresent it" (Dembo 162). But the fact is that such "small nouns" as "brick" and "Mary-Anne" function primarily as designators rather than as pointers. Indeed, what Oppen calls, in poem #22, "Clarity /

In the sense of *transparence*," is the clarity created by the spatial design of verbal units rather than by their semantic resonance.

This is another way of saying that the "populace" that "flows / Thru the city" finally becomes much less important than the syntactic arrangement of words as "particles of matter" (Dembo 163). Consider the following passage from #26:

Street lamps shine on the parked cars
Steadily in the clear night

It is true the great mineral silence
Vibrates, hums, a process
Completing itself

In which the windshield wipers
Of the cars are visible. (179)

The image of the parked cars, their windshield wipers visible under the street lamps, might be found in, say, Williams' poetry. But Oppen wedges the conceptual statement of the tercet between the two "imagistic" couplets and introduces phrases like "In which," the effect being to create a sound structure based on short *i*'s:

steadily—in—it—is—mineral—completing—itself—in—which—windshield—visible

These twelve instances of the /i/ phoneme are projected against a background of long /ay/glides: "shine," "night," "silence," "Vibrates," and "wipers," and the patterning is further enhanced by the alliteration of *s*'s and *w*'s, the eye rhyme of "*steadily*" / "*clear*," and a number of other vocalic echoes. At the same time, the rhythms are insistently prosaic and choppy, as in

/ || / / /
It is true the great mineral silence

/ || / || /

Vibrates, hums, a process

the tension between separation and phonemic fluency underscoring the ambivalence “of being numerous.” The stage is now set for the prose of #27:

It is difficult now to speak of poetry— about those who have recognized the range of choice or those who have lived within the life they were born it--. It is not precisely a question of profundity but a different order of experience. One would have to tell what happens in a life, what choices present themselves, what the world is for us, what happens in time, what thought is in the course of a life and therefore what art is, and the isolation of the actual. (180)

Note here that Oppen’s pronominal references are resolutely third-person, that his nouns—“range,” “choice” (twice), “life” (three times), “question,” “profundity,” “order,” “experience,” “world,” “time,” “thought,” “art,” “isolation,” “actual”—are purposely reticent in their degree of abstraction. “One would have to tell what happens in a life,” says the speaker, but Oppen is not about to tell us what happened in *his* life or what “choices” he has made. Rather, “the isolation of the actual” is now seen in terms of architectural space:

I would want to talk of rooms and of what they look out on and of basements, the rough walls bearing the marks of the forms, the old marks of wood in the concrete, such solitude as we know—

and the swept floors. Someone, a workman bearing about him, feeling about him that peculiar word like a dishonored fatherhood has swept this solitary floor, this profoundly hidden floor—such solitude as we know. (180)

Empty rooms, basements, rough walls, swept floors—and everywhere a kind of Beckettian solitude. The generic “workman,” a projection of the poet himself, is obsessed with this solitude, this “isolation of the actual.” The “solitary” floor, moreover, is “profoundly hidden.” Hidden from whom? And how is this image of the

void transformed into “the one thing” the artist “must somehow see”? Here we turn to #28:

The light
Of the closed pages, tightly closed, packed against each other
Exposes the new day,
The narrow, frightening light
Before a sunrise. (180-81)

After this climactic and poignant moment, in which “the shipwreck / Of the singular” is squarely faced, the sequence loses some momentum. Poem #29, “My daughter, my daughter, what can I say / Of living?,” leads into memories of the poet’s past—his daughter’s childhood and his then-young wife’s “flood / Of desire,” her ‘bright, bright skin, her hands wavering / In her incredible need” (183). Arresting as such images are, they mark a retreat into a private life—the life of the nuclear family—that protects us from the condition “of being numerous.” Toward the end of the sequence, however, Oppen reintroduces “the isolation of the actual” in the image of the unspecified voice of #38, which tells someone that ‘You are the last / Who will know him / Nurse,” a voice that, as Ron Silliman has noted,¹⁵ is “created wholly out of the placement of the word *last*, the rhetorical closure of he statements via the repeated terms *You* and *Nurse*, and the increased formality gained by the final use of the word *him* in the third stanza:

You are the last
Who will see him
Or touch him,
Nurse. (187)

In #39, the line “The sad marvels” brings us back full circle to the opening lyric of the sequence. But now the brave attempts to take cognizance of “the things / We live among,” yields to the bare statement:

In the least credible circumstances,
Storm or bombardment

Or the room of a very old man. (188)

The re-entry into the City, the re-assimilation of “a language of New York,” ends abruptly with this image, which is, so to speak, “Frozen in the moonlight,” even as are the number 1875. displayed on the pylon of the bridge (#5). But—and this is oddly touching—Oppen was evidently not content to conclude on what must have seemed to him such a downbeat. For wasn’t this supposed to be a poem about “of being numerous,” of finding one’s place “in the human world of society and history”? Hence the final section, in which Oppen quotes part of a letter of 1864 from Whitman to his mother, describing the view of the newly completed Capitol, with its “great bronze figure, the Genius of Liberty I suppose,” on top, gleaming in the sunset.

It is difficult to think of Oppen as sharing Whitman’s concern for the civic life of the nation at a particularly tense moment in its history. Still, he manages to make the Whitman passage his own by taking the final word “curious” from the sentence to which it belongs and setting it off as follows:

The sun when it is nearly down shines on the headpiece
and it dazzles and glistens like a big star: it looks quite

curious. . .’ (188)

The suffix *-ous* takes us back to the “Numerous” of the title. The small adjective stands alone surrounded by white space, “curiously” measuring “the isolation of the actual,”

which is the condition of the poet, having endured “the shipwreck of the singular.” What is finally affirmed in this beautiful and difficult long poem is not, I think, any sort of “populist vision,” much less the possibility of social transformation. Rather, “Of Being Numerous” is a testimony to the need for—but difficulty of--survival—survival won by the “curious” ability of *poesis* itself to make the “numbers” interlock.

Notes

¹ In *Ironwood*, I attributed this quotation to Jacques Maritain’s *Creative Intuition*, which gave Oppen the epigraph for *The Materials*, “We awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things” (NCP 38). But Peter Nicholls, whose research on this and other poems has made it possible for us to read Oppen more accurately, has determined that, Maritainesque as Oppen’s citation is, the actual source was Brumbaugh (1962), “There are objective forms which attract us, and when we see them clearly, we know our real natures and in some sense actually achieve, through this knowledge, a transcendence of time” (Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 87; and cf. 30-35).

² Nicholls cites Oppen’s own note that the reference is to “the expulsion from Eden,” and suggests that the line may echo the first line of *Paradise Lost*, “Of man’s first disobedience” (87-88).

³ Nicholls points out that the passage is a direct transcript of Mary Oppen’s words, paraphrasing Yves Bonnefoy’s long poem *Du mouvement et de l’immobilité de Douve*. Nicholls discusses in great detail the possible meanings of the longer passage in which these words are embedded, concluding that Bonnefoy’s emphasis is on Stoic “consent” and “acceptance”—qualities that, Nicholls believes, Oppen obliquely celebrates as well (88-93). But Oppen cuts the lines off after “the Spring comes and only obscures it,” implying that, whatever Bonnefoy meant, Oppen does not quite share the French poet’s “epiphany of finitude.”

⁴ Burton Hatlen, “‘Not Altogether Lone in a Lone Universe’”: George Oppen’s *The Materials*,” in Burton Hatlen (ed.), *George Oppen: Man and Poet* (Orono, Maine: The National Poetry Foundation, 1981), 325-57; p. 333. This collection is subsequently cited as Hatlen.

⁵Eric Mottram, “The Political Responsibilities of the Poet: George Oppen,” in Hatlen, 149-67; p. 156.

⁶ In his interview with L. S. Dembo, *Contemporary Literature* 10 (Spring 1969): 159-77, for example, Oppen says, "I didn't believe in political poetry or poetry as being politically efficacious. . . . 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" (p. 174). This interview I subsequently cited as Dembo.

⁷See Burton Hatlen and Tom Mandel, "Poetry and Politics: A Conversation with George and Mary Oppen," in Hatlen, 23-50; p. 28.

⁸ George Oppen, "Daybook II: IV" (c. 1962-65), in *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*, ed. Stephen Cope (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 98.

⁹ Oppen first recounts this story in the interview with L. S. Dembo, 174. See also Dembo, "Oppen in his Poem: A Discussion," in Hatlen, 197-214, p. 202.

¹⁰ Letter to Burton Hatlen, 22 October 1980, rpt. as "Appendix" to Hatlen and Mandel, "Poetry and Politics," 49.

¹¹ For a brilliant analysis of this glass imagery, see John Wilkinson, "The Glass Enclosure: Transparency and Glitter in the Poetry of George Oppen." Forthcoming.

¹²Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *The Selected Letters of George Oppen* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 121, 265.

¹³ Cf. Wilkinson, "Oppen's is an unpeopled world, a strange vision or a lifelong socialist. The animation belongs to stone, sea, sun, crystal, as they respond to the isolated self, or the self and his wife. Oppen's sense of humanity was abstract and separate."

¹⁴David McAleavey, "Clarity and Process: Oppen's of Being Numerous," Hatlen, 381-404, p. 389.

¹⁵ Ron Silliman, "Third Phase Objectivism," *Paideuma: Special Issue: George Oppen*, 10 (Spring 1981), 85-89, p. 89. Silliman's brief essay is one of the most acute treatments available of Oppen's language and style; see especially his catalogue of formal devices on pp. 87-88.