INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI

A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700 800/521-0600

Letting silence talk "The meaning and color of our lives":
a Heideggerian reading of
George Oppen's "Of Being Numerous"

by

Richard Carter, B.J.

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English Language and Literature

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

4 September 1998

© Richard Carter, 1998

National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-36814-9

The undersigned recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
and Research acceptance of the thesis

Letting silence talk "The meaning and color of our lives":
a Heideggerian reading of
George Oppen's "Of Being Numerous"

submitted by Richard Carter, B.J.
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

_____
Thesis Supervisor
_____
Chair, Department of English

Carleton University
September 25, 1998

To Robert Hogg
for his "possible light."

Abstract

I attempt in this paper to do two things: first, to examine Martin Heidegger's strong influence on George Oppen's long poem "Of Being Numerous"; and second, to show how the free-verse rhythms, bare images, and plain speech of Oppen's poetry gyrate together as if they formed a living thing, drawing readers into a vortex of silence that beckons from everyday things. Heidegger's philosophy articulates a contemporary crisis of meaning that has arisen from an inability to talk of everyday things. Writing of city life, Oppen expresses the crisis Heidegger describes. The strange result is that silence talks--the foreignness of ordinary things becomes less distant.

Myself is always the present--and therefore invisible. What there is to see, to know, is the direction of the tide, the shift of wind--Myself is on the deck between the water and the wind, between the cabin and the sea--between the rope and the sail.

George Oppen

Since, however, the time span when Dasein becomes involved in the reticence of carrying something out, and even of genuinely getting stranded, is different from that of idle talk which 'lives at a quicker pace', so that viewed publicly it is essentially slower, idle talk will have long since gone on to something else, to what is currently the very newest.

Martin Heidegger

The chaos of bridges and skyways, desolated chimneys, gloomy factories, queer industrial masts and spars, infernal and stinking machinery which surrounds New York is one of the most moving--and beautiful--spectacles in the world.

Jacques Maritain

Despite the fallibility of a sailboat and the impossibility of steering a straight course, despite currents, fog or nighttime, we still find our way. George and I have good vision, which is a great help; I can see after dark, but George usually makes out the numbers on the buoys before I do. Such abilities become valuable when sailing small boats.

Mary Oppen

George Oppen loved the sea. In early youth he used to learn of riggings, ships, and piers, and later when his wife Mary and he were approaching old age they would still spend summers sailing up the Maine coast, tacking upwind on a tiny boat and voyaging out at dawn into the smell of salt water and the murmur of the waves (Meaning 81) (Booth 33-4). "My childhood was the sea," he wrote in 1973--"the inescapable myth of the sea" (Oppen, Letters 251). At the age of nine he experienced the myth in a poem by Robert Louis Stevenson.

The rain is falling all around
It falls on you and me,
It falls on the umbrellas here
And on the ships at sea. (119)¹

"Been trying to say all my life what I recognized then," Oppen wrote of the poem in 1965 (119). What had he recognized? Rain, after all, is not unusual, nor is its tendency to fall on other people while it downpours on oneself. This tendency, however, may be stranger than it appears; in fact, it may be the strangest thing of all. "To occupy the 'idea', to live in it," Oppen wrote in 1976, "this is simply and pre-

---

¹ According to Rachel Blau Duplessis, editor of Selected Letters of George Oppen, the Stevenson original has a different second line (Oppen, Letters 119).

cisely the undertaking of poetry" (316). Stevenson expresses in the first two lines the fact of social existence. But the final lines "occupy" this idea of society and "live" in it and point to what it means. Rain "falls on the umbrellas here" and "on the ships at sea." The juxtaposition between "umbrellas here" and "ships at sea" exceeds by far the difference between a "you" and "me", for "you's" and "me's" meet everyday, and the thought they share experiences is so commonplace it hardly merits mention. And yet, "you" and "me" are always separate. The "you" passes the drug store at the corner in the rain and disappears, leaving "me" sopping at the bus-stop. The "you" and "me" so companionable in the first two lines become suddenly strangers in the second. The rain falls simultaneously on passers-by here and ships out there, just as it falls on the "you" over there and the "me" over here. The feeling is vertiginous.

Stevenson taught nine-year-old Oppen solitude. We in cities live alone with a crowd, while ships on the Atlantic live with ocean. We grow against outsideness. The sea, for Oppen, became early on a metaphor for what survived beyond his apprehension. What survives, surely, are things-- whatever contains matter. "There is, in some places, at some

times, for some people," Oppen writes, "the simple intuition of existence. Of one's own existence, and in the same instant the intuition . . . of the existence of things, absolutely independent of oneself, and, in some form, permanent" (88). A thing consists of matter. Yet this matter itself is the "constant flowing" of "the mixing and separating of primordial elements which are themselves indestructible" (89). Amid this flow at any time are things: human beings, rocking-chairs, beetles, dawns and stars.

Oppen's poems reveal a serious, passionate listening for permanence, for ground to stand on, even if this ground is but "the mixing . . . of primordial elements," or things like cars and tenements bespeaking city culture in decay. No image to Oppen seems more enduring, or more apt for expressing the aloneness that confronts us in the city, than the wilderness of the sea. He first expressed the image in "Party on Shipboard" [from his first book Discrete Series (Objectivist Press, 1934)]. He expressed the theme again in "Population" [from The Materials (New Directions, 1962)], before his perception of outsidersness culminated in the title sequence of his Pulitzer-Prize winning book Of Being Numerous (New Directions, 1968).

The sequence is political. It seeks the possibility of an ideal city--a common place--in which people can live meaningfully together. It also faces directly a modern crisis endangering this ideal: an emptiness in which self-absorption muddies intuitive meaning, and the many stifle the imagination of the few. "I suffer doubts about whether it might not be better simply to keep still," Oppen wrote in a 1963 letter to Denise Levertov. "But what must be said about keeping still is--that we abandon one another . . . ." (Oppen, Letters 79). Oppen cannot forgive abandonment. "It is necessary to talk," he says in a 1962 letter, "to begin to talk. I mean to be part of a conversation among honest people" (55). Similarly, in "Leviathan", he writes that "We must talk now. Fear/Is fear. But we abandon one another" (Oppen, Collected 68). Oppen reaches out in what he writes. Driven to speak of a New York community in ruins, he confronts a vast outsideness in its people and the things they live among. He confronts a sea.

Anyone reading George Oppen likely senses that he

speaks to approach silence rather than avoid it². The clarity of his better work reveals an apprehension of things that "say nothing", folded securely in themselves amid a forever elusive permanence that underlies appearance. The magic of his poems is that the strangeness of the thing survives in words; the silence talks. No doubt this concept puzzles those more used to prose than poems--for what is language for but conversation? Surely conversation must be audible. The answer, if there is one, must stem from Oppen's aim in writing poetry, and from the reader's and community's conviction that his work is worth their trouble. Oppen's aims are many. But crucial in Oppen's work is his attempt to write of things so that they stand among one another as themselves--at rest with silence. "Of Being Numerous" may be Oppen's most moving attempt to reconcile talk with the silence of outsideness, to unify community with the individual "shipwreck/Of the singular." This poetic effort owes much to the philosophic effort of Martin Heidegger.

This paper will funnel from the larger context of West-

---

² I am not the first critic to notice the relation between Oppen's work and silence. Rachel Blau DuPlessis in the North Dakota Quarterly 55.4 (Fall 1987): 18-36. and John Taggart in IRONWOOD 16.1-2 (Spring/Fall 1988): 31-2. have both written on the subject. Unfortunately, I was unable to order these issues in time to include any proper mention of them.

ern civilization illumined by Heidegger to a discussion of Modernism, George Oppen and "Of Being Numerous" itself. But before that process can begin we need to understand the philosopher's relevance to Oppen, and why the former's influence on the poet is so important. Oppen refers to Heidegger in both letters and interviews, and in an epigraph for This In Which (New Directions, 1966) where he quotes " . . . the arduous path of appearance" from Heidegger's An Introduction to Metaphysics (Heidegger 96). In Oppen's letters the references are few and sporadic. In a 1967 letter to Frederic Will, for example, Oppen said of reading Heidegger that "having no German at all, much less Heideggerian German, I am dependent on translations, therefore my knowledge of Heidegger is sharply limited" (Oppen, Letters 156). Despite this limitation, Oppen seemed to value Heidegger's work. In an interview with David McAleavey, Oppen declared that Being and Time--along with Jacques Maritain's Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry--had affected strongly both him and his work (McAleavey, Oppen 117). "Ideas like Heidegger's have been important to me for a long time," he told L.S. Dembo in 1968, "as early as the first poem in Discrete Series" (Oppen, Interview 169). Central to this first book was the

title, for it meant "a series of terms each of which is empirically derived, each of which is empirically true" (161). The title referred to the series of untitled poems in the book. Each stood like an object on its page, unconnected logically to the poems which preceded or followed it, yet forming with the other poems a unity of things like one might discover in a kitchen, park, or mall. Each thing, however, had a meaning independent from the rest, a wholeness understandable only through itself. I mention this book because the "discrete" style of that long poem is similar to "Of Being Numerous", and because this style will resonate with much of the discussion on Heidegger following.

It would be misleading, however, to convey the impression that Oppen read only German philosophers, and found little to interest him in the work of other poets, especially Americans. Several coeval compatriots had an obvious influence on Oppen, in particular Louis Zukofsky, Charles Reznikoff, Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Others, such as William Bronk, Carl Rakosi, and Allen Ginsberg³, Oppen clearly admired, and he mentioned often his respect for

---

³ Oppen praised Ginsberg's "Kaddish" very highly in a 1962 review, declaring: "It is not a poem which could easily be forgotten" (Oppen, Three 329). Oppen also exchanged letters with Bronk and Rakosi.

T.S. Eliot. Nevertheless, Oppen has said that the poets most important to him were temporally and culturally more distant than these compatriots, and included Rainer Maria Rilke, William Blake, William Langland and John Keats (Letters 104) (McAleavey, Oppen 116). Jeremy Hooker contends that Oppen is still very much an American poet, whose "awe belongs, in part, to a specifically American tradition which arose from the experience of the pioneers and settlers (and) apprehends nature with conflicting emotions of wonder and fear" (Hooker 29). Hooker maintains that this pioneering state of mind viewed nature as a "savage wilderness" that people needed both to tame and to take care of (29). It seems unlikely that William Wordsworth did not experience a "wonder and fear" in the Lake District similar to what Americans felt in 19th Century Wyoming, or that Ted Hughes did not share on the Yorkshire moors the same awe Oppen felt in New York City. To emphasize Oppen's Americanness in criticism can miss the relevance his poems have for the contemporary West as a whole. Compatriot contemporaries taught Oppen technique, focusing more on the *how* than the *what*. Poets such as Langland, Blake and Rilke, however, shared Oppen's natural earnestness and seriousness. They confirmed for him the

what--what poetry is for. Oppen has learned from these poets what Michael Heller calls "the weight of thought or meaning . . . the desire to maintain the forebear's depth" (Heller 54).

Oppen cares most deeply about the what. He seeks communication. He has not given up hope in the ability of language to mean, despite a conviction that, in T.S. Eliot's phrase, words "slip, slide" and contain meanings that alter over time (Eliot 19). He believes strongly--as Eliot did--that communication is both vital and possible, and stresses repeatedly the importance of " . . . the subject of the sentence, with what we are talking about . . . The important thing is that if we are talking about the nature of reality, then we are not really talking about our *comment about it*; we are talking about the apprehension of some thing" (Letters 161-2). In "The Building of the Skyscraper" he writes

There are words that mean nothing
But there is something to mean.
Not a declaration which is truth
But a thing
Which is. (Oppen, Collected 131)

Words exist only because "there is something to mean;" speech, the communicating sound, arises from the human in-

instinct to make sense of what is unfamiliar. We find the unfamiliar among things. Oppen's second book, The Materials (New Directions, 1962), begins with a quotation from the French philosopher Jacques Maritain: "We awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things" (Oppen, Collected 16). This intuitive awakening, according to Maritain, precedes language. Language exists only because something *matters to people*.

But by admitting that there "are words that mean nothing," Oppen hints at a metaphysical problem which 20th Century technology has made acute. We live among things-- buildings, cars, fast foods, hard drives--that "mean nothing". We have lost touch with the something that "means"; we cannot *talk* of it; we retreat towards the only certainty left: ourselves. But by "ourselves" I mean what is most familiar in a life: trivial chores, efficiency and the self-consciousness they encourage. This retreat makes possible only superficial self-awareness, for true self-understanding develops from apprehending the outsideness mentioned earlier. Retreat, in the end, can nurture only solipsism. "Of Being Numerous" is probably the most detailed expression in his work of solipsism and the tension underlying it--that

while there is something to mean, expressions of this meaning are short-circuited by a general inability among Westerners to see. Martin Heidegger's description of what he calls *Everydayness* in his 1927 work Being and Time illumines this handicap.

3

Many critics of Oppen's poetry during the past few decades have noted the importance of Heidegger's thought to Oppen's achievement. Few, however, have discussed the philosopher's thought in any depth, and usually mention Heidegger only briefly. Sometimes the philosopher is invoked in connection with the opening poem of Oppen's first book, Discrete Series. Oppen said he wrote this poem in 1929, the year Heidegger--unbeknownst to Oppen at the time--gave his acceptance speech as the chairman of philosophy at the University of Freiburg. Heidegger spoke of boredom as the stimulus for mental alertness through which one can encounter beings authentically. Oppen's poem, coincidentally, expressed the same thought--"boredom" which caused Maude

Blessingbourne⁴ to approach the window and see "the world, weather-swept, with which/one shares the century" (Oppen, Collected 3). David McAleavey refers to this coincidence in his Ph.D. thesis If to Know is Noble: the Poetry of George Oppen (Cornell University Press, 1975) (Noble 94-9). Other critics, such as Randolph Chilton (89) and Jeremy Hooker (Boundaries 86), talk of concerns which Heidegger and Oppen share, and mention such Heideggerian terms as being and Mit-dasein (co-existence). But without explaining these terms and similarities the comparison feeds readers half-baked criticism.

Chilton, for instance, comments that Heidegger influenced Oppen as much as Alfred North Whitehead influenced Williams, adding that both Heidegger and Oppen write about ontology. Yet he maintains that, unlike Whitehead and Williams, Heidegger and Oppen believe things exist only when they are perceived (89). This statement is a serious misreading. While it is true that Heidegger argues things only come into being through language, he distinguishes between existence and being. The original Greek meaning of being was both to arise and to endure (Heidegger 52). "Existence", on

---

⁴ Maude Blessingbourne is a character from a Henry James short story called "The Story in It" (McAleavey, Noble 89).

the other hand, meant to depart from such permanence; it was "nonbeing" (53). The distinction makes more sense when one understands that for a thing to "be" it is seen to "arise and endure." A thing that merely exists hides outside us; we do not see it "arise and endure," so it can have no permanence for us. It is merely an unknown outsideness, what Heidegger calls the Open. Paradoxically, a thing unperceived "is" only insofar as it "is not" meaningful; it "is" an unknown, for "absence is not nothing" (Heidegger, Poetry 184). Since Heidegger's work is built upon a belief in the importance of intuitive apprehension, he must believe that something is there to be apprehended, that something "exists" before words allow it to "be". Oppen, meanwhile, emphasizes repeatedly his belief in the existence of things "absolutely independent of oneself" (Oppen, Letters 88), and that "there is something to mean" as yet undisclosed to perception (Oppen, Collected 131). Oppen's whole effort is to apprehend existence, to talk its reticent silence into being.

Jeremy Hooker remarks that Oppen's thought, like Heidegger's, "apprehends the difficulties of achieving meaning and authentic being in the world" (Hooker 30)--a useful statement in itself, but needing more expansion. Elsewhere,

Hooker suggests that "Of Being Numerous" explores the Heideggerian relationship between being-in-the-world (Dasein) and being-with-others (Mitdasein) (Hooker, Boundaries 86). This observation is striking and valuable, but the terms he uses are never explained. The result is that his comment makes sense only to those familiar with Being and Time.

Joseph Noble published last year an essay on community, comparing Oppen in relation to Heidegger and Jean-Luc Nancy. The essay, he writes in a footnote, is merely part of a longer work-in-progress about Oppen (Noble 213). Nevertheless, the essay is probably the most detailed discussion of Heidegger and Oppen available. Noble discusses, as I do, Oppen's relation to things and to community. He writes that Oppen shares "Heidegger's attitude towards things," for both writers, although in different ways, attempt to talk of outsideness (219). Like Chilton, however, Noble confuses being and existence. "How can we 'let a being be just the being that it is'" Noble asks, quoting Heidegger, "when the way we know a being is through thinking and language?" Noble implies that language fails, that it cannot express the "being" of a thing. But on the contrary--the "being" of a thing can only emerge *through* language. Language fails only

insofar as it decays to such an extent that it cannot allow outsideness to take root. Certainly Noble is right when he says that Heidegger explores the "same tension between the thing perceived and our perception, the same tenuous line between thing and thinking about it that we found in Oppen" (220). The trouble, though, is understanding where this tenuousness comes from. Noble implies that apprehension is inherently impaired. Heidegger, at any rate, believes that this handicap is historical, not inherent. Why does perception so rarely apprehend beings authentically? Noble drops this essential question to talk of community, yet surely the question of community depends on a thorough discussion of the perception that makes it possible. A more detailed examination of Heidegger's thought is necessary to give us a greater grasp of the ideas that Oppen "occupies".

This paper will be a Heideggerian reading of "Of Being Numerous," illumined by Oppen's one essay, letters and interviews. Still, many would question the value of a Heideggerian interpretation. If I seek to articulate the importance of the poetry itself, what value could a theoretical reading have? Surely the poetry is paramount. John Freeman rightly points out that "there is already a considerable

bulk of critical writing about Oppen, and despite its virtues, much of it seems even more than most other criticism, to annihilate the poetry rather than enhance it" (42). The critic then has the difficult job of shedding light on why a poem is valuable--what it means--without choking intuitive meaning with the logical noose of argument. Heidegger's thought cannot replace the poetry, nor can it account for its value. But it can clarify why the poem has such relevance, and therefore importance, to the contemporary West. Heidegger's philosophy effects a post-mortem on Western civilization. It puts the 20th Century into a context where communal alienation may be partially understood, and in which the poetry of George Oppen can be heard most clearly.

My aim is to show how Oppen expresses the metaphysical problem Heidegger articulates, and how his approach to the silence of things points a way toward speaking "himself out". I will focus more on content than on form. But since any proper discussion of meaning involves considering how this meaning is expressed, a limited discussion of technique will be essential. Heidegger, meanwhile, will be of value to us in two ways: he will clarify the historical context of Oppen's work, and he will help us in the poem itself by pin-

pointing how Oppen "awakens" to the world through his apprehension of things.

4

George Oppen and Martin Heidegger were near contemporaries. Oppen was born in 1908, Heidegger in 1889. Both men grew up early in the 20th Century when Western society experienced great commercial and political flux⁵. Heidegger believed the root of this flux was metaphysical decay, a decay so all-encompassing and terrible that he spent his life dedicated to elucidating its seed. Earlier works such as Being and Time (1927) and An Introduction to Metaphysics (1935) attempt this elucidation in great depth. The former articulates Heidegger's understanding of contextual human existence. The latter focuses on the modern "forgetfulness of Being," which he believes to be the virus of our contemporary crisis of meaning. Some later works seek a way forward. Poetry, Language, Thought⁶ (1971), for instance, contains essays examining art, architecture and poetry as ways

---

⁵ This flux is explained in part 5.

⁶ In German, these essays first appeared in the 1950s and 1960s.

of once again uniting us with Being by attending to the "thereness" of the thing. Intuitive perception lets the thing approach.

Intuition is a key word for Oppen, Maritain and Heidegger. Maritain uses the word explicitly, and Heidegger, while he is less blatant, writes that

Being is what shows itself in pure, intuitive perception, and only this seeing discovers being. Primordial and genuine truth lies in pure intuition. (Heidegger, Being 160)

What is "pure intuition"? The concept is crucial to much of Heidegger's work, and needs some explanation. First, it is worthwhile clarifying what intuition is not. Heidegger argues that modern thinking suffers from the conviction that everything meaningful is calculable and explicit. The consequence of such thinking is that all that "means" is measurable by logic. Logic itself is harmless when confined to mathematics. But when humanity itself becomes confined to mathematics, authentic human happiness is stunted. Heidegger argues in Being and Time that the deepest meaning surfaces chiefly through moods which impel us toward discovering things and ourselves (Heidegger, Being 128-9). Things "mean" because we "care" to talk of them--and care is the being of human existence (123). "The virtue of the mind," Oppen

writes in "Guest Room" "Is that emotion//Which causes/To see" (Oppen, Collected 87). Some emotion "causes" us to seek meaning by seeing something. This sight must be a bringing-together of outsideness and oneself.

Jacques Maritain's Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry (1953) provides a useful description of intuition insofar as it applies to poetry. Poetic Intuition develops in the unconscious mind, making associations in hibernation that suddenly awaken as words. Like Heidegger and Oppen, Maritain emphasizes that intuitive understanding is born of emotion, that passion drives artists to talk of the outsideness they confront (Maritain 393). The unconscious mind works like a paper mill. It selects from a forest of memories and sensory impressions in the Unconscious of Flesh. These memories and impressions become images that drift downstream to the Pre-conscious of Spirit where the Illuminating Intellect--the primal passion for understanding--rummages among them, generating an Inner Music. This music associates various images until words carry the rhythm of new-found combinations to the conscious mind (91-8). One is never conscious of intuitive thought in process, for it works unseen in the recesses of awareness.

Heidegger, heralding intuition, shunned Cartesian logic--not because rationality in itself was bad, but because he sought a new kind of thinking that could bring us closer to Being. "The only possible step that remains," he wrote, "is to stand on the very ground from which logic rose and to overturn it (*as the dominant perspective for the interpretation of being*)" (Heidegger 158)⁷. He set himself the difficult task of trying to rescue philosophical thinking from scientific calculation, and yet still achieve elucidation. Accordingly, he wrote essays that avoided linear argument, used familiar words in unfamiliar ways (Earth, World, Clearing), used unfamiliar words that he invented (Ownmost, Being-There), and guided readers through mazes of uncertainty so his conclusions would strike like revelations. Heidegger's awareness that explicit statement can destroy meaning, and his admiration for the intuitive reach of poetry, may explain why he so often seems to veer around a subject. But the value of this lateral approach ought to be clearer when we discuss Being itself. I shall summarize those aspects of his thought which will be most relevant to our discussion of "Of Being Numerous": the Western meta-

---

⁷ My italics.

physical problem and the "everyday" context that nourishes it.

Heidegger outlines the Western problem in An Introduction to Metaphysics. Apprehension is grounded in a "receptive attitude toward the appearing" of a thing (Heidegger 141). This "receptive attitude" developed in antiquity from an awareness of the overpowering majesty of all that is. The most fundamental wish of all may be the passion to belong to this majesty and be at home in it. This passion pressures the mind to collect perceptions of things and to express the newborn associations through language. "Logos", the Greek word for speech, meant originally "to put one thing with another, to bring together, in short, to gather" (105). Something that has being appears as an enduring permanence that has unfolded into a togetherness. "Logos" apprehended the togetherness of the thing. Since then "logos" has developed into "logic". Logical calculation has become the essence of Western thinking, and intuition has become inimical to it (104). The inability among Westerners to apprehend with a "receptive attitude" has destroyed our relation to things. We cannot bring them "near" to us any longer because logic cannot unconceal their alien outsideness. Dis-

tant from things, we become distant from ourselves. "No god", Heidegger says, "any longer gathers men and things unto himself, visibly and unequivocally, and by such gathering disposes the world's history and man's sojourn in it . . . divine radiance has become extinguished in the world's history" (Heidegger, Poetry 91). We face an abyss of meaning.

What has caused this dislocation? Heidegger argues that ancient Greek philosophy brought about our metaphysical demise (Heidegger 158). The attempt by philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle to seek a rational apprehension of appearance had two important consequences. First, their influence meant that people started to perceive the world as separate from the self; people became intellectually distinct from what they saw. Second, the rational thinker sought utter certainty. Things were no longer valuable in themselves, but only for the abstract measurements they contained.

Here, a crucial division was sown; the Westerner became self-consciously dedicated to abstraction. Thinking no longer meant the "unconcealment" of a being but an abstract "idea" about it (Heidegger 102), a "comment" about it

(Oppen, Letters 161-2). Heidegger maintains that Christianity continued this tendency towards abstraction:

It was in the Sophists and in Plato that appearance was declared to be mere appearance and thus degraded. At the same time being, as *idea*, was exalted to a suprasensory realm. A chasm . . . was created between the merely apparent essent here below and real being somewhere on high. In that chasm Christianity settled down, at same time reinterpreting the lower as the created and the higher as the creator. These refashioned weapons it turned against antiquity (as paganism) and so disfigured it. (Heidegger 89-90)

Meaning no longer derived from the sensory apprehension of appearance. "Thought and knowledge," meanwhile, "come to be differentiated from faith" (162). The hoicking apart of intuitive faith and thought left logic as the only way to make associations, and thus prepared a foundation for "modern, mathematically structured technology" (162). The success of modern physics in the 18th Century and the scientific thinking this entails has affected the way Westerners understand themselves, nature and the relationship between the two. Heidegger explains scientific thinking in his essay "The Question Concerning Technology." The tendency towards abstraction, logic, and the Renaissance conviction that people were their own masters meant that one began to regard things in terms of practical usefulness. Nature became a commodity;

it mattered only in terms of a calculable outcome, not as the mysterious beginning and end of all things.

"Everywhere", Heidegger writes, "everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering"

(Heidegger, Question 322). Nature becomes mere "standing-reserve", he writes. "Whatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve no longer stands over against us as object" (322). The Industrial Revolution of the 19th Century and the subsequent mass production and technological achievements of our own century are clear evidence of efficient, calculating thinking--a manner of perception which Heidegger calls En-framing (325). Commodification blocks our sight of Being.

Heidegger explains the perceptual handicap:

The forest is a forest of timber, the mountain a quarry of rock . . . We can abstract from nature's kind of being a handiness; we can discover and define it in its pure objective presence. But in this kind of discovery of nature, nature as what "stirs and strives," what overcomes us, entrances us as landscape, remains hidden. (Being 66)

We put things in boxes and measure them; the inexplicable lurks among them, unseen, saying nothing. Western civilization since Aristotle has gradually widened the division between people and nature, and fostered the belief that mean-

ing is abstract and measurable, not concrete and mysterious. Our senses instinctively seek meaning from what is concrete and mysterious; Enframing will not let them have it. Herein lies our metaphysical crisis--that the physical body has become almost incapable of relating to what is beyond the reach of itself.

Until now we have looked at the West from a distance. But the division Heidegger writes of between people and nature happened--and still happens--among the everyday lives of people "taking care of things." Heidegger spends the first half of Being and Time explaining contextual communal existence which he calls co-existence (Mitdasein). He focuses more closely in the second half of the book on the individual paddling in this contextual sea, and on the possibility of living authentically amid communal silence.

Western society is "thrown". It knows itself only from within itself, its recollections, its dates and monuments, its art-works and records and most essentially in the language that its people speak. Heidegger calls human co-existence "thrown" because it is like a baseball in mid-air, launched from the pitcher of the past towards an unknown batter at the plate. The metaphor, however, only half works,

for co-existence continually "throws" itself forward through developments within itself; it propels itself without ever touching the ground.

Everyday co-existence plays out a communal World wherein each person is a "being of human being" called Dasein (Heidegger, Being 22). Dasein essentially means "human being"--a being aware of itself as being "there" in a particular place. "There" are things, objects, people and landscape. The World is the social result of this awareness. To ignore what is "there", to ignore outsideness, is then to repudiate one's very nature. "A being which questions Being by first questioning its own Sein [being]," George Steiner writes,

is a Dasein. Man is man because he is a 'being-there', an 'is-there' . . . Dasein is 'to be there' . . . and 'there' is the world: the concrete, literal, actual, daily world. To be human is to be immersed, implanted, rooted in the earth, in the quotidian matter and matter-of-factness of the world. (Steiner 80-1)

The "concrete, literal, actual, daily world" hums with the activity of *Everydayness*. Everydayness enacts the World with the "taking care of things" (Being 71) that constitutes everyday life, the lens through which the authentic experi-

ence that Oppen calls "shipwreck" must shine, if it is to shine at all. The World changes continually within itself over time in response to what is not itself, and expresses this change in the things we "take care of." Imagine a giant bubble. Inside thrives the stock exchange, offices and shops; outside extends wilderness. Usually no one notices this wilderness, since clatter and chatter demand one's full attention. But sometimes--in moments of boredom, perhaps--the remoteness of things exerts such pressure on the mind that the person perceiving feels compelled to apprehend what waits beyond the bubble, elucidating with a language native to the World inside. Co-existence filters apprehension with our words, propelling itself through the speech of those who are capable of encountering outsideness.

Heidegger believed poets were especially important. Their job in his view is to resuscitate language from a contemporary decay in meaning. Unexpressed, things remain aloof from us, steeped in quiet outsideness and "impenetrable" (Oppen, Collected 148). Words, Heidegger says,

are not wrappings in which things are packed for the commerce of those who write and speak. It is in words and language that things first come into being and are. For this reason the misuse of language in idle talk, in slogans and phrases, destroys our authentic relation to things. (Heidegger 11)

The modern decay of language is particularly serious since speech is the essence of being human (Heidegger, Poetry 189), and since language is the "House of Being" (132). But even this decay is merely symptomatic of a greater problem that Heidegger calls the "forgetfulness of Being". To talk of this forgetfulness, however, we must first clarify what it is we have forgotten. Heidegger explains being in An Introduction to Metaphysics, where he arrives at two premises. First, almost no one today can explain what being is. Second, despite being unable to explain the word, everyone knows being when they see it; a car is, the sky is, the buildings are, I am. It appears, however, that the contemporary understanding of being is limited to mere objective presence--a thing mathematically verifiable. This development can be no surprise considering the aforementioned abstraction of meaning and the reduction of thinking to logic. I have already described being as something that "appears as an enduring permanence that has unfolded into a togetherness." Heidegger, though, is more specific. Before Plato and Aristotle, the ancient Greeks understood being as *physis*: "the emerging and arising, the spontaneous unfolding that

lingers. In this power rest and motion are opened out of original unity. This power is the overpowering presence that is not yet mastered in thought" (Heidegger 51). At the heart of this passage appears a contradiction: being is both a natural unfolding (change) and a lingering (permanence), both rest and motion. Heidegger explains the contradiction:

Yet what thus comes up and becomes intrinsically stable encounters, freely and spontaneously, the necessity of its limit . . . Coming to a stand accordingly means: to achieve a limit for itself. (49)

A thing cannot be until it has become; it cannot become unless it strives to be. What it strives for is "a limit for itself," like a blade of grass against the wind or a fisherman against the sea. A thing has being by *standing against* the limits of itself, thus forming a togetherness. This togetherness "is" only when our apprehension gathers it through the logos. The togetherness of a thing dwells within language, for language is the "house of being."

In our discussion of being we must make a further distinction: "Being" differs from "being". A "being" is exclusive to one thing within the concrete world; "Being", however, is the greater force that binds all beings. It is the fused globe of all that is, the central will (Poetry 100).

"Every being", Heidegger writes, "is in the will. It is as something willed" (101). The central force of Being wills every being that "is" towards uncertainty; it "ventures" us towards the "Open", the "great whole of all that is unbounded" (106). A person must stand in the Open to encounter Being. Modern society, however, suffers from "a forgetfulness of Being," for Being no longer "ventures" us towards the Open.

So far we have discussed Dasein (one's deepest sense of what it means to "be" in a place), the manifestation of co-existence in the World as Everydayness (the daily taking care of things), being (the apprehended essence of a concrete thing), and Being (the apprehended fusion of all beings). We have described the metaphysical problem Heidegger writes of as a "forgetfulness of Being," and we know the root of this forgetfulness in ancient Greek philosophy and the consequent self-conscious abstraction of meaning. But while Being itself may be clearer to us, the manner of our forgetting it in ordinary life remains obscure.

Ordinary life brims with people "taking care of things." Amidst the bustle stands the individual, whose use of "public transportation" and "information services such as

the newspaper" alters how he or she encounters other people and things (Heidegger, Being 119). "The others", Heidegger says, "as distinguishable and explicit, disappear more and more" into social oblivion, and mean nothing to the person lost among them (119). Of course, it is not public transport and newspapers alone that have destroyed community; they are mere symptoms of a modern tendency towards explicit measurement, which I described earlier as Enframing. Public transport improves efficiency; newspapers provide facts. Yet both these services aim to satisfy the everyday appetite for efficiency and the accomplishment of practical chores by "taking care of things." Fast transport allows people to partake of more busyness; timely facts allow readers entertainment or useful information related to Everydayness. Neither service touches anything alien.

Among buses, overpasses, skyscrapers and shoppers, the person who seeks self-realization must struggle continually against the language that he or she has learned to speak, and against the pressure of convention. Both language and convention arise within the World among the tongues of the indistinguishable mass of people mentioned earlier. Heidegger calls this mass the They. "We enjoy ourselves and have

fun the way *they* enjoy themselves. We read, see, and judge literature and art the way *they* see and judge" (119). The They, however, are normal people who, in their breathless "taking care of things," have forgotten why they take care of them.

Part of the reason for falling prey to convention is an abstract understanding of time. A genuine awareness of time understands it existentially in terms of one's life and death. A "vulgar" awareness of time treats the concept as an "ecstatic" objective force "outside" oneself, mistakenly picturing events as a linear series of occurrences stretching from the beginning of history towards infinity. Past and future fade (Being 386-87). "Thrown and entangled Dasein," Heidegger writes, "is initially and for the most part lost in what it takes care of . . . Looking away from finitude, the inauthentic temporality of entangled everyday Dasein must fail to recognize authentic futurity and thus temporality in general" (389). All that seems manageable is the present, although a moment's thought will make one realize that a present cut loose from its moorings can have no direction.

People "take care" of things. But they "take care" now

because they imagine a future. Similarly, people "take care" now a certain way because they learn from the past. Unmoor the present from past and future, and suddenly "taking care" loses all footing; one forgets how one did things before, and what one should labor for; there is no anticipation of the future. Thus, Everydayness consists of "Making Present", producing things that serve only an ephemeral purpose. When the present founders, we founder also. Just what it means to dock within the harbor of oneself we shall see presently, but for now let it suffice that people forget why they work; work buys food and increases comfort, but rarely expresses what is essential. "Falling prey" to taking care of things, we become completely "Entangled" in Everydayness, and forget the past and future in contextual self-absorption.

Sometimes we remember. Sometimes, amid the clamor of the traffic and the telephones, we hear what Heidegger calls the "call of conscience," and become reticent (252). I have described "care" as the being of human existence, a drive arising from an emotional response to outsideness. This response, however, first forms from the "call of conscience." Mostly, this call whispers to deaf ears. "Losing itself in the publicness of the They and its idle talk," Heidegger

writes, "(Dasein) *fails to hear its own self in listening to the theyself*" (250). The call of conscience summons Dasein out of the inauthentic obscurity of Everydayness, and speaks "*solely and constantly in the mode of silence*" (252). It is like "*an alien voice*" (255). The person attending to this call exhibits Resoluteness--a patient listening to the silence of what is not oneself. Resoluteness means "letting oneself be summoned out of one's lostness in the They" (275) to encounter the inexplicable ground of all that is. Resoluteness is an "anticipation of death" which "brings Dasein back to its ownmost potentiality-of-being-a-self" (282-3). The inevitability of death emerges from listening resolutely to the call of conscience. Heidegger is specific, however, about the meaning of death. Everyone knows death is inevitable, for science explains it easily as a body that stops working. But understanding death as a biological phenomenon is different from realizing what it means existentially. The thought of not existing anymore is frightening. Death's inevitability may be certain, but the time and manner of its occurrence is mostly uncertain, as is the puzzle of what happens afterwards--what happens to "me". All we know is that we have come from an unknown that will take us back

again. A true grasp of death is a sudden faith in the survival, in some form, of what is not ourselves; it is astonishment at the mystery we have come from. We all know that death nurtures life, but the cliché makes more sense in terms of Being. We need something to *stand against*. An attentive listening to one's conscience brings one up against what is perpetually outside and unknown. Authenticity means "standing against" death. The revelation inherent in this grasp of mortality happens in what Heidegger calls the Moment--the present that "is held in authentic temporality". The Moment lets us "encounter for the first time what can be 'in a time' as something at hand or objectively present" (Being 311); it is the opposite of Making Present.

Everydayness, however, blocks out the Moment at every opportunity. Heidegger argues that Western society, preoccupied with taking care of things, failed to notice--in fact, could not notice--that its philosophical beginnings abstracted meaning and fostered a self-consciousness from which we have yet to recover. Meaning degenerated into measurable abstraction, and people became isolated--things close to them through sight and touch became dead. Understandably, survival demanded that taking care continue. This taking

care, however, could express nothing vital, for it had been reduced to a frantic Enframing and Making Present, evaporating both past and future from the modern World. Thus, Everydayness alienates us from our true nature, and outsideness remains unencountered.

5

The metaphysical problem Heidegger articulates became acute early this century. Three historic shocks punctuated the years between 1900 and 1950. The most obvious was the First World War (1914-1918). In 1929 the Great Depression plunged North America and Europe into economic chaos, spurring a vigorous Communist movement in the 1930s that Oppen and his wife Mary supported. The Second World War (1939-1945) is notable for two of the worst horrors in history--the Holocaust, in which roughly 6-million Jews died, and the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The pressure of these historic shocks transformed the social mood. The authority of the Judeo-Christian god now seemed a sham. How could any god permit such horrors? Moreover, the Judeo-Christian faith had little control over mod-

ern life--it did not run the factories or the banks; it could not temper warfare; it had lost its communal importance. Consequently, the Modernist period--from roughly 1890 to 1930 (Bradbury and McFarlane 52)--burgeoned with poetry remarkably different to what preceded it in tone, content, and form. Often the tone was ironic, the content despairing, and the form both spare and obscure. Nineteenth Century verse, by contrast, frequently expressed unabashed sincerity in tone, confidence in content, and used popular verse forms based on end-rhyme and regular meter. But decay had infected poetry. The worst verse of the previous half century had degenerated into trite sentiment that refused to face the horror of war, the banality of popular culture, the misery of assembly line production, or the squalor of cities; it failed to see what the West had become.

Younger poets sensed they needed a new direction. But the more dedicated among them--notably, H.D., Pound, Eliot and Williams--realized that, to respond to the modern world, they needed to use words so that their meanings could be heard; they needed precise expression and dedicated thought, not the clutter of nebulous feeling. In 1912, Pound, H.D. and Richard Aldington agreed on the three principles of the

Imagist movement, which Pound recapitulates in "A Retrospect":

1. Direct treatment of the "thing" whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome. (Pound 36)

These principles revolutionized poetry. They introduced free verse to an English-speaking world shackled with rhyme and regular meter, and clinging to an outdated idealism that muddled clear expression. Oppen summarized the revolution this way in his essay "The Mind's Own Place":

Modern American poetry begins with the determination to find the image, the thing encountered, the thing seen each day whose meaning has become the meaning and color of our lives. Verse, which had become a rhetoric of exaggeration, of inflation, was to the modernists a skill of accuracy, of precision, a test of truth. (Oppen, Mind 132)

George Oppen first encountered modern poetry when he was a youth of about 18. In 1926, he enrolled in a poetry course at the University of Oregon in which he met his future wife, Mary Colby (Meaning 61). His life changed. He and Mary married, then hitchhiked and sailed from California to New York City where they met Louis Zukofsky, Charles Reznik-

off and William Carlos Williams.

Ezra Pound, whom they met later in France, wrote the preface to Oppen's first book, Discrete Series (Objectivist Press, 1934). In it he declared: "I salute a serious craftsman, a sensibility which is not every man's sensibility and which has not been got out of any other man's books" (Pound, Preface 13). Pound intended this praise to defend Oppen against reviewers who would dismiss the younger poet's work because it ostensibly resembled his own and that of Williams. The resemblance undoubtedly exists. Oppen could have resisted the formal innovations of his contemporaries--as W.H. Auden and Robert Frost successfully did--but he decided to embrace them. His choice indebted him to Williams, Pound, Eliot, and to poets closer to him in age, such as Zukofsky and Reznikoff.

Harriet Monroe agreed in 1931 to publish an issue of Poetry (Chicago) featuring work by Zukofsky, Reznikoff, Williams, Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Basil Bunting and others. Monroe agreed to Pound's request to let Zukofsky edit the issue, but she wanted a name for the group, so he called them Objectivists (Oppen, Meaning 91). Many of the Objectivists, including Zukofsky, thought the word "Objectivist" mislead-

ing, since it implied falsely that those under its umbrella wrote similar work (Oppen, Letters 46-7). Still, while the work of Oppen, Zukofsky, Reznikoff and others was diverse, several characteristics distinguished it from the Imagist poetry that preceded it. One was an emphasis on the "little words--the words 'and' and 'but'--the word 'is'" (Oppen, Statement 60), and a concomitant effort to speak of ordinary things experienced in daily life, so that things could be encountered as beings, and so readers could encounter authentically "the meaning and color of their lives." A second key characteristic of Objectivism was an attempt to think with the poetic image, to write philosophically, so that what Pound called "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" could be integrated into a larger whole than the Imagists had achieved (Pound 37).

Zukofsky's poetic convictions helped Oppen develop his own. Oppen stresses that while he has reservations about Zukofsky's poetry, he remains indebted to talks they had about their work (Oppen, Meaning 94). The Zukofsky essay, "An Objective", focuses on how a poet perceives, or ought to perceive, and how this perception can best be expressed. The poet, Zukofsky says, should think "with the things as they

exist" and direct "them along a line of melody" so that the author may achieve a "rested totality . . . called Objectification" (Zukofsky 20-1). The poet must empathize with the world and things in it so deeply that their silences register as music heard as words--so silence talks. This musical speech determines its own form on paper, so that it appears to be a natural being. Oppen agrees that form should develop according to the poet's perception. But his emphasis differs. Oppen writes in his "Statement on Poetics" that poetry is a "music that refuses all trumpets . . . all lusts and emotions that aren't there, it is a music, quite simply, of image and honest speech--image because image is the moment of conviction" (Oppen, Statement 60). Oppen rarely describes in detail how he writes. He is more interested in what the poem points towards, what it says, and whether the expression is genuine.

Three key themes bind George Oppen's poetry with that of other Objectivists: honesty, intuitive perception and clarity. What distinguishes Oppen, however, is his emphasis on three other things: the bare noun--the thing in itself; metaphysical anguish; and talk. Zukofsky, as we have just seen, spoke of the need to give breathing space to the lit-

tle words. But Oppen takes this conviction in his own direction. Few adjectives and adverbs clutter his work, and he often leaves out verbs so nouns can radiate the "thereness" of things. "I still have trouble with verbs," he told L.S. Dembo in the 1968 interview (Oppen, Interview 161). In a 1967 letter he explains his fascination with nouns. "What one feels about a thing," he writes, is different from the thing itself. "The second is the major fact thru which we will reach wherever we are going" (Letters 153).

The thing is silent. Yet its silence presses down with so much weight that it seems to the observer that all matter, all things that have ever happened, move closer. Simultaneously, this closeness embraces with arms of perpetual distance, the irretrievable beginning, and a vacuum opens. The vacuum grows cosmic before the observer, and as the gap widens, the permanence and magnificence of its size suddenly impels him or her to belong, to step forward into the vacuum and create something, to commit violence. Oppen, suffering metaphysical anguish from such pressure, wants to bring the thing home, to talk of it, and he does so along the "arduous path of appearance" (Heidegger 96).

Two poems serve as useful preludes to "Of Being Numer-

ous." One is "Party on Shipboard" from Discrete Series
(1934):

Party on shipboard

Wave in the round of the port-hole
Springs, passing,--arm waved,
Shrieks, unbalanced by the motion--
Like the sea incapable of contact
Save in incidents (the sea is not
water)
Homogeneously automatic--a green capped
white is momentarily a half mile
out--
The shallow surface of the sea, this,
Numerously--the first drinks--
The sea is a constant weight
In its bed. They pass, however, the sea
Freely tumultuous.

What strikes one first about this poem is the jarring, "unbalanced" rhythm, beginning with the hard stresses in the first line that culminate in a spondee ("port-hole") before "springing" forward haltingly from caesura to caesura, line-break to line-break towards the sudden certainty of "The sea is a constant weight/In its bed." The rhythm carries a "discrete series" of images: a wave glimpsed through the port-hole; an "arm waved"; "shrieks". The run-on sentence sprawls towards "the constant weight" with an agonized bewilderment that its jolts and swings, its tilts and shouts,

reveal as if by accident. But what must occupy our attention now is the strangeness with which this revelry is expressed. So far we know that the mere feeling of the lines, their rhythms and images, "unbalance" us. We know also that the drunk party-goers on shipboard, shrieking, waving, are "unbalanced by the motion" of the sea-borne ship. Surely the strangeness of this poem emerges from Oppen's concentration on the so-called unimportant "arbitrary fact", resonating with an outsideness that is alien (Oppen, Mind 132-3). Perhaps it is this strangeness that "unbalances" us. The title, "Party on Shipboard", implies that the party will be the centre of attention. But where in the poem is any description of the party, those attending it, or what they are doing? The answer is simply "arm waved,/Shrieks", and maybe "the first drinks." The poem ignores the party, and looks outwards, as if holding an interviewer's microphone to the sea.

The sea responds. A wave is the poem's subject. Like the sea it is "incapable of contact/Save in incidents", roving among waves who cannot talk to one another.

. . . a green capped
white is momentarily a half mile
out--

The phrase "green capped" in line seven provides specific detail about a particular wave that is separated from "Homogeneously automatic", both semantically and rhythmically. Amid the homogenous mass of the ocean move individual waves. But this "green capped" individual of line seven becomes faint in the ocean-like sweep of the following line, then disappears abruptly from "out--" into silence. The person is there, yet lost to our sight. The "green-capped" breaker could as easily be a stranger in a ballcap passing on the sidewalk.

If every wave suffers this isolation, then the sea itself is "incapable" of touching what matters to each, for authentic community, in the sense of authentic co-existence, depends on communication. Amid this ocean rolls the "singular" wave, "incapable" of discovering either common or individual meaning. The wave rarely encounters others authentically, and when alone it surrenders to breezes and the tides, conforming to an ocean "homogeneously automatic". Surrender leads people "numerously" astray from penetrating the "shallow surface of the sea."

The party is an instance of Everydayness--the city's persistent Making Present generating so much clamour that

the They can never properly hear outsideness. The alien ocean tolls the bell of the inarticulated, the sound of what we have not yet talked into being. Humanity is a sea. Yet we are more than bodies, and the sea is more than water. The calm certainty of the line "The sea is a constant weight/In its bed" suggests the sea as the sea, literally permanent primordial matter, waiting to be encountered, tumultuous and incalculable. But we intuit humanity also as a "constant weight", if only to imagine a future for ourselves. "We cannot live without the concept of humanity," Oppen wrote in 1973 of "Of Being Numerous", "the end of one's life is by no means equivalent to the end of the world, we would not bother to live out our lives if it were" (Oppen, Letters 263).

In "Population" [from The Materials, 1962] the feeling is greater than in "Party on Shipboard." The intensity of this feeling will be missed by those who translate "intensity" as "fast-paced". The strength of much of Oppen's poetry derives from passion calmly controlled.

Population

Like a flat sea,
Here is where we are, the empty reaches
Empty of ourselves

Where dark, light, sound

Shatter the mind born
 Alone to ocean

Save we are
 A crowd, a population, those
 Born, those not yet dead, the moment's

Populace, sea-borne and violent, finding
 Incredibly under the sense the rough deck
 Inhabited, and what it always was.

There can be no better example in Oppen's poetry of Zukofsky's "rested totality". Oppen uses commas and vertical space to achieve clarity. Whereas "Party on Shipboard" emphasizes dislocation and disorder, "Population" points toward a unity underlying this disorder, and the change may indicate a shift in Oppen's emphasis between the ages of about 25 and 50, when he wrote no poetry. Both "Party on Shipboard" and "Population" speak of humanity metaphorically as a sea. The earlier poem, however, contains a cleverness which the later poem dispenses with. "Party on Shipboard" is a performance, replete with unnerving rhythms, disconnected images and a metaphor the reader must translate. In "Population" Oppen spells out his comparison: "Like a flat sea,/Here is where we are." He has come to believe that a poem's value emerges less from cleverness than from the acute expression of acute perception. "The distinction be-

tween a poem that shows confidence in itself and in its materials," Oppen wrote, "and on the other hand a performance, a speech by the poet is the distinction between poetry and histrionics" (Oppen, Mind 133). I do not mean that "Party on Shipboard" fails as poetry. I only point out the difference between the poems to show that by the time The Materials was published in 1962 Oppen had come to view clarity and communication as the essential ground of his work.

He wants to speak directly. He tells readers in the first line that our world, "Here", is like a "flat sea", leveled to mathematical banality. The "empty reaches" of outsideness in the things we live among are "empty" because they are "Empty of ourselves," empty of the struggle inherent in being. "Where struggle ceases," Heidegger writes, "the essent does not vanish, but the world turns away" (Heidegger 51-2)⁸. We no longer voyage amidst uncertainty, but withdraw into the certainty of Everydayness where the "dark, light, sound" of modern life "Shatter the mind born/Alone to ocean." The human mind cannot make sense of the world that presses down upon it. Technological progress, Heidegger says, has reduced distance concretely, reducing

---

⁸Essents are "things which art" (Heidegger 1).

travel with airplanes, or transmitting TV shows from Europe. But this efficiency does not allow us to feel any more at home (Heidegger, Poetry 165-6). We can only feel more at home by "attending to what is near" (166). We are born "Alone to ocean." This fundamental solitude, which is the solitude of death, means that the most essential relationship we have is with the uncertainty that survives outside us. The word "ocean" is suspended above a blank space as if it were the Pacific itself. The next word, however, is "Save"--for what saves us--and "saves" is a strong word--from the terror of aloneness is that "we are/A crowd, a population, those/Born, those not yet dead." In these lines Oppen alters the rhythm to suggest both the lurching of a boat at sea and the brisk movement of humanity on board "taking care of innerworldly things." We have one another's company and the language that we share; with these we face the void. The void reminds us that we are only "the moment's//populace, sea-borne and violent," impermanent and limited. It is in our nature to be "sea-borne", braced against the unfamiliar and trying always to snare it in the violence of our thoughts. Heidegger articulates the concept Oppen "occupies":

The *violent one*, the creative man, who sets forth

into the un-said, who breaks into the un-thought, compels the unhappened to happen and makes the unseen appear--this violent one stands at all times in venture. In venturing to master being, he must risk the assault of the nonessent . . . he must risk dispersion, in-stability, disorder, mischief. (Heidegger 135)

Oppen focuses less on this inherent violence than on the simple joy of company, of conversation, for although we are "born/Alone to ocean" we still find "Incredibly under the sense the rough deck/Inhabited, and what it always was." Ignited beneath our senses is the intuitive hope that humanity is a real concept, and that Being has not vanished completely.

6

Wallace Stevens describes in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (1942) the predicament of the modern poet.

We are confronting, therefore, a set of events, not only beyond our power to tranquilize them in the mind, beyond our power to reduce them and metamorphose them, but events that stir the emotions to violence, that engage us in what is direct and immediate and real . . . and these events are occurring persistently with increasing omen, in what may be called our presence. These are the things that I had in mind when I spoke of the pressure of reality. (Stevens 22)

He introduces his concept of the pressure of reality with a problem endemic to modern art. "The idea of nobility," he writes, "exists in art today only in degenerate forms," a problem due to an inability among artists to find the right balance between imagination and reality (12-13). Stevens's essay describes two artistic tendencies: one towards the connotative and imaginative, the other towards the denotative and realistic. The former can kill language by "dissipating their sense in a multiplicity of associations," while the latter can destroy words by stripping them "of all association" (13). Modernist literature, he argues, is basically connotative, but warns that this trend "cannot continue against the pressure of reality" (16). This pressure is the combined suffocation of living among things that mean nothing, and of being exposed--physically, emotionally, mentally--to the endless din of foreign events and information over which one has no control. No one can hide. Pessimism in our era, Stevens writes,

has been so active, so confident and so intolerant that the commonplaces about the romantic provoke us to wonder if our salvation, if the way out, is not the romantic. All the great things have been denied and we live in an intricacy of new and local mythologies . . . which are asserted with an ever-enlarging incoherence. (17)

Wallace Stevens's thoughts serve as a valuable introduction to Oppen's approach to poetry. Stevens was right that the connotative trend was dying, and Oppen, it turns out, became the definitive denotative poet, striving to strip association from his poems and present the world as bare and lucid. "When words become everything," Oppen wrote, "they become *nothing*" (Oppen, Daybook 9). A poet "creates the world to which we turn incessantly," Stevens says, for the poet's job is to "help people live their lives" (29-31). This task sounds very much like "'suffer the things of the world and . . . speak them and himself out'" that Oppen spoke of in "The building of the skyscraper" (Oppen, Collected 131).

Stevens's point was that, while imaginative connotation is preferable, sometimes the pressure of reality forces a poet to return to something real again, a grounded permanence, and express it denotatively. True poets know that they must fluctuate between these two extremes, depending on the reality of the world in which they live. Oppen knew that he lived amidst great incoherence, and felt that sometimes art could not be justified. "There are situations," he wrote, "which cannot honorably be met by art, and surely no one need fiddle precisely at the moment that the house next

door is burning" (Oppen, Mind 136). This view may explain why he wrote no poems for roughly 25 years. His stated aim in "Of Being Numerous" is to achieve "clarity . . . in the sense of (both) silence" (Collected 162) and transparency. This aim is very similar to a statement Oppen makes in "Route," where he declares his only motive in poetry was "to achieve clarity" (185). Clarity may not provide a calculable solution, but it may give readers an emotional grasp of the resoluteness with which Oppen confronts himself and the things around him.

The problem he faces is metaphysical. We have abandoned intuitive meaning for Enframing, appearance for abstraction, and the inexplicable for the practical and familiar; we have forgotten what it means for a person to be. Oppen says in the Dembo interview that his aim in "Of Being Numerous" was to see whether humanity existed (Oppen, Interview 162). No doubt we physically exist. But Oppen meant something deeper. For how can we truly "exist" if we no longer know what it means for a person "to be"? "The covenant is:" Oppen writes in section 24 "There shall be peoples" (164). We live among people. Yet we also live among human creations--such as language--without which we would have no way of understanding

ourselves. The covenant, Heidegger might say, is we live among people (co-existence) and the inner-worldly things they make or use.

"Of Being Numerous" attempts to grasp intuitively the bleak inauthenticity of modern living, and to somehow "speak" it "and himself out" (131). The first half of the poem, from sections one to twenty-eight, expresses the depths of the Western abyss: the triumph of Enframing; our dissociation from things; the love of fate and the consequent fear of human will; the terrible isolation of authenticity as shipwreck. The second half of the poem, from sections twenty-nine to forty, tries to move forward. The tone becomes more personal when Oppen, having plummeted into metaphysical darkness, realizes that he is not defeated. Inexplicably, he has faith. This faith is not a religious faith exactly, for Oppen was not an orthodox Jew, but his love for being alive remains undiminished, along with his convictions about the importance of awe and companionship.

"Of Being Numerous" criticism frequently interprets the sequence as a comment about the difficulty of being a modern poet. Jeremy Hooker calls the sequence "the most penetrating poem about the possibility of poetry in our time" (Hooker

40). Majorie Perloff declares that Oppen's subject in the poem is the "acute sense of pain and disorientation attendant upon the exiled American poet's attempt to relearn 'a language of New York'" (Perloff 196). Hugh Kenner calls the sequence "a long poem about, among other things, how poetry may be possible" (Kenner 205), while Burton Hatlen argues that it shows how the artist and society are united through language (Hatlen 264-5).

No one reading this poem need deny that a poet wrote it, that George Oppen suffered greatly while writing it, or that the sequence--by its denotative manner of speaking--does not expose the great pressure of reality under which he worked. But if we choose the theme of the poet as our focus we are likely to miss what is most compelling among its pages. Artists are not the only people seeking authenticity, nor do they suffocate amidst the They alone. If they did, Oppen's job would be quite meaningless, for he seeks to move "us in the direction we are going" (Oppen, Interview 173-4), and a society in which "us" are only poets is not a community at all but a cabal. David McAleavey's comment that the sequence is an analysis of clarity and process and their relation (McAleavey, Noble 189) veers closer towards the

poem's heart. Oppen encounters motion and rest simultaneously in the world, both being and becoming, and he seeks the permanence of clarity amidst the incoherence of processes that envelop us. Yet whether a thing exhibits stillness or speed, Oppen's search for clarity is the same: an "occupation" of the "idea" of our isolation from things, and an attempt to "speak (us) and himself out" by attending to the voices of their silences. Such attention must be paid to things as beings in themselves, empirically true, discrete, and independent of a larger whole. "Of Being Numerous" follows the example of Discrete Series. Oppen attempts to present each section as a thing encountered in itself. The best way to discuss the poem, then, is to accept wholeheartedly the apparent unconnectedness of the "things" the poem presents us with, and plunge in.

First, however, Heidegger's essay "What are poets for?" will illumine the apprehension that Oppen achieves in the sequence. Heidegger has already explained a modern metaphysical problem, rooted in antiquity, which has severed our intuitive relation to things and isolated us from Being. The result is that we lose our own being (Dasein) and the possibility of creativity. Humanity--blocked from its true na-

ture--is groundless; it faces an abyss. Heidegger writes:

"The integralness of the whole of what is remains now in darkness" (Heidegger, Poetry 117). The only possibility for restoring an authentic communal relation to Being lies in the *Turning*.

Assuming that a turn still remains open for this destitute time at all, it can come some day only if the world turns about fundamentally--and that now means, unequivocally: if it turns away from the abyss. In the age of the world's night, the abyss of the world must be experienced and endured. (92)

People only are insofar as they can speak. Since language is the "house of Being," and since the speakers most receptive to Being are poets, the modern poet's job is to endure and experience the abyss, yet still "attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods. This is why the poet in the time of the world's night utters the holy" (94).

Being is the central will, exerting its pressure on every being, so that each is "ventured", or drawn, towards the Open. Plants and animals, unlike people, are "admitted into the Open" because they are unself-conscious. "The higher its consciousness," Heidegger explains, "the more the conscious being is excluded" from the Open (108). People stand "over against the world" and are "unshielded" from the

knowledge of death and uncertainty. Plants and animals, "shielded" from this anxiety, are not blocked from the Open by a conscious effort to understand. They go with the "venture". Human unshieldedness is an anxious self-consciousness isolating us from things rather than uniting us with them. The poet, then, enduring the abyss, must venture into the Open and "affirm unshieldedness within the widest orbit" (124). He or she must submit to the "unconcealing Presence" (123) of Being by welcoming complete uncertainty, and acknowledging the inevitability of death, so that what Maritain calls Intuitive Pulsions can gyrate with a music capable of speaking a thing's silence (302). In truth, it is not the silence of a thing that speaks, but its being, its meaning for us, which is concealed in silence until apt apprehension can express it. Heidegger refers to Rainer Maria Rilke, who declared that the poet's task was to "impress this preliminary, transient earth upon ourselves with so much suffering and so passionately that its nature rises up again 'invisibly' within us" (Rilke qtd. in Heidegger, Poetry 130). The true poet, Heidegger says, turns "the unwholesomeness of unshieldedness into the soundness of worldly existence" (138).

Words, if they make poetry, gather together "earth, sky, divinities and mortals" (149)--what Heidegger calls the *fourfold*. A poet apprehends meaning in familiar things so that people (mortals) are gathered together in relation to both the sky (the Open) and the divinities that result from this relation. We see this relation early in "Of Being Numerous":

There are things
We live among, 'and to see them
Is to know ourselves.' (Oppen, Collected 147)

Oppen introduces the poem with the most basic and essential fact about human existence: we "live among things." Yet the statement goes on to combine this obvious fact with something far less obvious: that our ability to see these things determines how we see ourselves.⁹ The quotation is almost identical to the Jacques Maritain epigraph in The Materials: "We awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things." This theme is the soil from which all Oppen's poetry grows, and it introduces the perceptual crisis underlying the sequence.

Occurrence, a part
Of an infinite series,

---

⁹ Oppen paraphrases Robert S. Brumbaugh from the book Plato and the Modern World (Oppen 21).

The sad marvels; (147)

These things we live among are "sad marvels": marvelous because they exist and we do not know why; sad because they emit only an unfamiliar silence. The lines of this passage seem as if they have been squeezed out with great effort. They lack a verb, and seem enclosed in a little group, unconnected to the stanzas that surround them. They are mere, inexplicable, "occurrence" amid an "infinite series" which seems too large to comprehend. The things we live among are born of mere cause and effect by forces beyond our control. We are victims, the passage implies, of fate.

Of this was told
A tale of our wickedness.
It is not our wickedness. (147)

We are victims also, it seems, of guilt. Oppen in this third stanza refers to the Judeo-Christian tale of the fall of Adam and Eve. This tale is "of" "the sad marvels"; it is a myth the West created and nourished to explain our relation to "occurrence". Our first parents disobeyed God by eating an apple from the tree of knowledge. As punishment, God banished them from paradise and condemned them to mortality. Oppen's view of this story is similar to Heideg-

ger's, for Oppen says the fall "is not our wickedness." The wickedness is inherited and unreal.

Connections emerge. A people suffused with guilt and a contempt for what their senses perceive have come to fear the things that appear around them; they distrust them. With this barrier between themselves and things, people cannot encounter outsideness. The final stanza of part one clarifies this problem.¹⁰

'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, and you cannot imagine either its life or its death; the earth speaks and the salamander speaks, the Spring comes and only obscures it--' (147)

The prose quotation seems itself like an occurrence without connection to anything else, as if fate had dropped it on the page. People look out the "ruined" window of Western contextual existence, but cannot know for certain what it might have been like to live in "those times". We are stuck with modernity. The past is dead because it has already happened; it is "not dead" because it has led to the present. Yet the present seems isolated from both the past and any

---

¹⁰ Much of "Of Being Numerous"--and much of Oppen's work generally--uses quotations. The fourth stanza is a quotation from his wife Mary translating the French poet Yves Bonnefoy.

anticipation of the future. The contemporary person seeking authenticity has been uprooted. The earth obscures all we know of ourselves; spring arrives from some unknown source through cracks in the pavement. Certainty, in the end, submits to puzzlement.

Abstract talk of suffering is easy; Oppen's determined work was not. His attempt to rid his lines of fake refinement has exposed a man chilled by every word. "Occurrence" cannot have many rivals for being the dullest word in the English language. Its mere sound suggests dullness. The voice begins phlegmatically with "O", rises slightly with the hard stress of "ccurr"--providing a faint hope of struggle--before flatly falling to a feeble stop with the soft "ence". The word is its own coffin; occurrence is not even remotely interesting, yet it happens every day, everywhere, all around us, billions of times over every second. It happens, in fact, so frequently, that apprehending genuinely one instance of it amidst such incoherence seems impossible, for it is only "a part/Of an infinite series." The occurrence is but a component of a growing massive complex extending in an "infinite series". There is no pity in this line. The calm movement from "a part" to "an infinite se-

ries" magnifies the unendurable boredom of "occurrence" unimaginably, so that the reader totters suddenly with vertigo. The person who can still experience awe feels that "occurrences" are "marvels", but our general apathy towards them makes them "sad"; we are not at home among them.

Amid such isolation, however, people can do little else but talk "of the existence of things" to make their lives understandable. Yet even the existence of concrete, familiar things, Oppen writes in part two, is "An unmanageable pantheon" (148) of mere occurrence. The pantheon is "arid". Its things are not made; they occur. Human creativity has surrendered to the occurrence of Everydayness in which things are mere expressions of Enframing. All talk of nature has reduced it to the "pure joy/Of the mineral fact"--an economic resource rather than the fundamental mystery. Enframing delimits things. But anyone who has experienced wonder knows that existence matters to us because it is *inexplicable*. Destroy all intuitive feeling and things become merely objectively present and "impenetrable". Those who would see become closed.

The emotions are engaged
 Entering the city
 As entering any city. (149)

City-dwellers are not defeated yet. Their bodies awaken at the presence of human civilization. But Oppen does not use the word "awe". He says "emotions are engaged". The passive construction indicates a lack of empowerment. We do not know what "engages" "the emotions"; the "engager" is abstract and distant. And which emotions are engaged? Oppen implies that it does not matter. "The emotions are engaged" entering New York City just as they would be entering any other city. Oppen's refusal to articulate specifics--which emotions, what engages them, which city--prevents us from being able to identify with any of them. We are uninterested. Whatever emotions are affected, none seems to be "that emotion//Which causes/To see" that Oppen writes of in "Guest room" (87). People who refuse to look at the mystery of things "tho they feel on their skins/Are not pierced", he writes in "World, world" (143). Only awe is the "virtue of the mind . . . Which causes/To see" (87).

In the second stanza of part three Oppen makes a key distinction. We are not "coeval/With a locality/But we imagine others are" (149). People and the things they live among--whether human or natural--are forever divided. Things

have their own beings outside of human understanding; they are doorways to the Open. All the same, we "imagine" that other people are part of a locality because we encounter them as we encounter things. We belong to a populace, and to the language of that populace. Oppen concludes part three by declaring that his poem is born of "a language, therefore, of New York,"¹¹ and his language is an expression "of being numerous," not merely of being "singular".

In part four, Oppen expands on the theme of contextual existence when he writes

For the people of that flow
Are new, the old

New to age as the young
To youth. (149)

The "people of that flow" are always braced against the mystery of birth and death. But modern dwellings are "petty alibi"--the trivia of Everydayness--because they avoid any encounter with nature on its own terms. Part five reveals this evasion more concretely in the description of a bridge pylon.

The great stone

---

¹¹ Oppen lived in New York during the 1930s, late 1950s and 1960s.

Above the river
In the pylon of the bridge

'1875' (150)

Oppen's description of the stone is a tremendous effort to reveal it as the banal construction it is. The sluggish pace of the first three lines ridicules the "great" stone "Above the river" with verbless, passionless expression. The stone dominates, and yet it points only towards itself. The achievement of this building has been "frozen" into permanence with the date "1875". Suspended in mid-air, however, the confident date illumines itself as an instance of Making Present. Neither the bridge nor the date reveals the uncertainty to which we are always new. They exhibit only "consciousness

Which has nothing to gain, which awaits nothing,
Which loves itself. (150)

The recurrence of "which" unifies the three phrases into a death-march drumbeat. The "Consciousness" revealed in the bridge pylon sought only transient efficiency. It had nothing authentic to gain because it "awaits nothing"--a dull occurrence among dull occurrences that "loves itself".

In part six, Oppen introduces the central theme of

shipwreck. The shipwreck theme is loosely based on Daniel Defoe's novel Robinson Crusoe in which an Englishman marooned on a desert island is rescued eventually by civilization. In "Of Being Numerous", the Crusoe story explores the tension between the "singular" and the "numerous", which is roughly the same tension articulated in Heidegger's Being and Time. Shipwreck occurs as either isolation or death, and can apply to both the "singular" person and the "numerous" They. Amidst the They we are "pressed, pressed on each other," unable to encounter one another meaningfully. City-dwellers, so close together physically, experience others as occurrences. Among so much that means so little, the pressure of reality pushes us towards what pleasure is easiest: the short-lived "discovery of fact" which "bursts/In a paroxysm of emotion" (150), satisfying appetite and fueling the social consumption of nature which Heidegger calls Enframing. "Crusoe//We say was 'rescued" (150) because solitude is anathema to the They. We are "obsessed, bewildered" by isolation, and fear the "shipwreck/Of the singular" (151) because it means, at bottom, confrontation with either death or death itself. We have chosen the "meaning/Of being numerous" as the collective avoidance of death.

Strangely, the persistent avoidance of death and metaphysical uncertainty leads to an apparent love of uncertainty. Oppen in part eight calls this love the "love of fate". Dasein means to struggle with the uncertainty inherent in being oneself in a particular place. But a person who has no way to talk of the world can find no way to struggle against the inexplicable. This difficulty can be resolved easily by refusing to encounter the Open. Fate then means to put the unknown on hold until it can be fitted into a chart and made familiar. "Amor fati" hardly means a love of uncertainty--quite the opposite. People fear uncertainty so much that they refuse to encounter it, and label it "fate" in order to surrender their willpower. Fate is the seeming inevitability of a World in which

Slowly over islands, destinies
Moving steadily pass
And change

In the thin sky
Over islands

Among days

Having only the force
Of days

Most simple
Most difficult. (151)

Heidegger discusses fate as a "lostness in the They" that blurs one's true "potentiality of being." Oppen in these lines conveys the feeling of the concept--the absolute homelessness and apathy of a people without meaning. "Destinies" move excruciatingly "slowly" over islands and over people, who are also islands, though in a sea of Everydayness.

"Destinies" is a strong word; whole lives are determined by this force "Moving steadily" with the certainty of a machine towards a conclusion hidden from the people it affects. A resolute listening to the mystery at the heart of things fires one towards creativity. But an apathy towards things renders such listening nearly impossible. The first line stretches a pentameter horizon of "destinies", which shift in the second line to three stresses, then peter off to two, and then silence, as if the possibility of true destiny had gradually faded with the sureness of drifting clouds across the sun. The second stanza picks up the possibility of destiny, but "thins" to a mere two lines "In the thin sky/Over islands"--thin, because we find no meaning in it, because it is "impenetrable", an occurrence. The agony of this poem is the cruel way it keeps the possibility of destiny alive, toying with it from bleak stanza to bleak stanza, from three

lines, to two, and then the single phrase "Among days". Underlying the words is the presence of someone trying desperately to talk of what is happening to him, what it is like being unable to relate authentically to anything. The drop from each stanza to the next demands that the reader endure the silence of solitude, while maintaining a hope that the succeeding lines will dash. "Among days" is almost as far as Oppen can go; will has been compressed to two small words choked by a wilderness of blank space. Yet the following phrase emerges with sudden strength: "Having only the force". "Only" seems a bad omen. But the line muscles outwards with three hard stresses and with "force", seemingly ready to break free of its chains at last--only to collapse back upon the reality "Of days". And the reader feels tricked. The phrase is deliberate torture, pretending a possibility towards authentic destiny by expressing a mere tautology.

Anguished, perhaps, by the hopelessness of part eight, Oppen speaks personally in the ninth section. He is torn by both a longing to escape the They and a need to belong to them. He quotes a student friend of his, Rachel Blau, who asks him

'Whether, as the intensity of seeing increases,

one's distance
from Them, the people, does not also
increase'. (152)

Oppen admits that she is right. He longs to, and needs to, escape the stifling clutches of the They. Poetic apprehension itself tempts him with the "unearthly bonds/Of the singular"--the authenticity possible in solitude. These "unearthly bonds" are the beautiful "bright light" of shipwreck that in the Moment unites him with divinity, and allows him to gather "earth, sky, divinities and mortals." Shipwrecked in the Open, the solitary person can resolve metaphysical anxiety with the perception of outsideness.

In part ten Oppen despairs. "The isolated man is dead", he writes, "his world around him exhausted" (153). This exhaustion is manifested in "New arts", whose artists use the "bright light of shipwreck" as an excuse to avoid any responsibility to the They. "The shuffling of a crowd is . . . nothing but the many that we are" (153). Mere physical existence does not guarantee authentic existence. The "they cannot 'bear'" the truthfulness of solitude. Yet the solitary "meditative" person knows that this bright light is still "a light for the times", even among buildings which are "Absolutely immobile,//Hollow, available," for although mod-

ern dwellings are "Hollow, available", along with the entangled people who live in them, the unexpected "bright light" of the Moment remains possible. Oppen tells of his friend Phyllis Rivera who "Coming home from her first job/On the bus in the bare civic interior" felt her heart "suddenly tight with happiness" (154). This passage is the first instance of genuine hope in the poem because the "bright light" of her happiness both isolated her from, yet bound her to, the "hollow, available . . . civic interior."

We "presume", Oppen writes in part twelve, that a single person is "'one occasion of a sensitive reaction to an actual world'". Human survival depends on living among each other, on reconciling individual freedom with the political community. The passage is followed by a tiny poem:

the rain falls
that had not been falling
and it is the same world (155)

This poem may be one of the most penetrating passages in Oppen's work. In only 14 words he expresses both the marvel of mere existence¹²--apparent permanence--and the strange fact

---

¹² Martin Heidegger begins An Introduction to Metaphysics by asking "Why are there essents (things that are) rather than nothing?" This, he says, is the fundamental question of metaphysics (Heidegger 1).

that this "same world" is perpetually transient. The line "the rain falls" suggests in its brief simplicity the vertical rainfall; the longer second line "that had not been falling" extends the rain horizontally so that a scene develops--a street, perhaps. The second line continues the subject of the first in its longer reach and rhyming of "falls" with "falling". But the similarities carried by the rhythm and rhyme unite an ontological opposition: the rains falls, yet did not. On the same sidewalk, by the same building, in "the same world", rain both did not fall and does fall. The passage is similar to the poem by Robert Louis Stevenson cited at the beginning and to the first poem in Discrete Series that described "the world, weather-swept, with which/one shares the century" (3). All three describe a process independent of perception, the "constant flowing", as Oppen wrote, "of primordial elements" (Letters 89) that constitutes outsideness. It is this outsideness that each person must face, and which the political society must confront if it is to address meaningfully its metaphysical sickness.

We grow old against something which does not, just as primitive societies grew old making "objects/Of wood and the

bones of fish" (155). People "talked" and "gathered in council" making things amid their "thrown" existence. The primitive world which Oppen describes puts into relief the state of mind so missing from our own. These primitive people were "patient with the world"; they did not try to Enframe it; they were "credulous,/Their things shone in the forest" (155) with the wonder they had experienced.

This primitive society, however, can "never return". Oppen and others must endure what Heidegger calls the "world's night" of "shoppers,/ Choosers, judges" whose fast-paced taking-care-of-things is "without issue, a dead end" (156). Part thirteen cries out against those who

. . . develop
 Argument in order to speak, they become
 unreal, unreal, life loses
 solidity, loses extent, baseball's their game
 because baseball is not a game
 but an argument and difference of opinion
 makes the horse races. They are ghosts that
 endanger

one's soul. (156)

This tightly-knit passage pounds like the waves of a storm, splashing over the dike that tries to contain them, surging from comma to comma, drawn-out, controlled, embittered. The They try to exert control on the Open to contain it in argument, a manufactured package, in which the simple joy of

baseball becomes an industry. Oppen's anger in these lines is also a desperation, as if he has been held underwater for too long and finally fought his way back up for air. Argument presses down with so much weight that the mystery of things "loses/solidity, loses extent," and the people he encounters become "unreal, unreal". The passage is a drawn-out breath buffeted constantly against banality, which Oppen expresses with the repetition of "loses" and "unreal". The They have become inauthentic "ghosts" who exist only physically; they exist, but have no being.

But Oppen "cannot disengage" himself from the They. Heidegger writes: "'The others' does not mean everybody else but me--those from whom the I distinguishes itself. They are, rather, those from whom one mostly does not distinguish oneself, those among whom one is, too" (Heidegger, Being 111). The Western society that created the They created Oppen too; he is part of them. Moreover, the They is more than a vague mass. They are normal people whom Oppen met during his Second World War experience in "mess tents,/In hospitals and sheds and hid in the gullies/Of blasted roads of a ruined country" (157). Oppen's struggle with Everydayness continues, although he knows that he cannot talk "Distantly of

'The People,'" who are "that force/Within the walls/Of cities" that erects "walled avenues/In which one cannot speak" (157). Oppen hates the emptiness that thrives among the They. Yet neither can he isolate himself, for he belongs to a political society that he wishes to change, and he seeks amidst his solitude companionship. Resoluteness bridges the gap between oneself and the cosmos; it unifies. Yet there seems no guarantee it unifies people. Authenticity is by definition isolating: the result of a one-on-one closed-door session with death. Oppen feels torn between seeking this necessary isolation, and identifying with the people around him. Too much isolation leads to solipsism; too little destroys authenticity.

Parts fifteen and sixteen are both quotations, the former possibly from Saint Augustine, the latter from the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard¹³. The passages, like Mary's quotation in part one, present themselves as unexplained occurrences. Part fifteen epitomizes flaccid solipsism, beginning with the most basic question of all: who am I? "'Find me/So

---

¹³ Oppen is unclear about the source for section 15. He writes that section 16, from an earlier version of the poem, was a quotation from Saint Augustine. In the final version, the section 16 quotation is from Søren Kierkegaard. Oppen, as far as I could tell, never disclosed his source for section 15, so I am guessing it may be Saint Augustine (Oppen, Daybook 21).

that I will exist'" the passage says because we cannot "be" unless we can speak. Knowing oneself means being able to talk about one's experience. Here, however, the speaker has grown so self-absorbed that he or she cannot name anything except what is close at hand: "belly", "hair" and "navel". The world has evaporated so completely from the speaker's perception that only a pathetic murmur remains: "Find me". The directive to "Find me" means that "me" is lost, and this lostness feeds itself with each surrender to the They. Kierkegaard's passage in part 16 shows both the cyclical trap of Everydayness and the opposing struggle inherent in living authentically. Working people contribute to Everydayness, if only to survive. Once we are fed and clothed we can turn our attention to other things such as outsideness, which "trouble" us. We work to allay our troubles and endure struggle--"the nether world"--to gain meaning. Yet we are continually both troubled and in need of food and shelter. Thus the practical necessities of Everydayness perpetuate themselves--one "gives birth to his own father" (158)--and yet, struggle is also the essence of Dasein, the effort without which we cannot truly "be".

The first sixteen parts of the poem have set out for us

the banality of city dwelling, the love of fate and consequent fear of human will, and the general inability among Westerners brought up to think scientifically to find or create meaning out of things they "live among". Oppen begins in part eighteen to reveal the consequence of solipsism. In part seventeen Oppen writes

He wants to say
His life is real,
No one can say why

It is not easy to speak. (159)

It does not matter who "he" is. "He" is faceless, just like millions of other modern city dwellers who want to "say" their lives are "real", but who discover it "is not easy to speak". The clarity and purity of these lines are shocking. "Our true faith is said in the simple words," Oppen wrote, "for we cannot escape them" (Statement 60). The brevity of the lines magnifies each word's importance so that "say" and "real" resonate with the basic human connection between speech and being. But "No one can say why//It is not easy to speak." The stanza break between "why" and "It" communicates effectively the difficulty of forming a thought on the tongue against a blankness gazing from every road and railing. Speaking requires thinking and thinking requires ef-

fort. But modern society discourages all effort that detracts from Enframing. And if speaking is to nourish the self-awareness that makes life "real", it must pay heed to the "call of conscience."

Our speech, then, is "rootless", without attuned perception to guide it. Without language, reality itself decays as something that truly "is". People become as meaningless as objects, and apathy spreads dry rot within real feeling. Part eighteen refers to the Vietnam War, and to the unreality of its very real horrors.

It is an air of atrocity,
An event as ordinary
As a President.

A plume of smoke, visible at a distance
In which people burn. (160)

Oppen has no interest in pretense. Civilization has become faithless, and Oppen sees no value in ducking this fact.

"I'm just stating a fact," Oppen said of the passage, "about what you can and cannot stand. If it didn't bother one to burn children, why say it does? I don't understand inventing an ethic . . . you can only talk about what you actually feel" (Interview 166). The feeling here is strong, but deliberately understated. "There is a bothersome detachment here," Geof Hewitt writes of Oppen's work generally, "as if

Oppen has discounted himself from the viewpoint of the poem. This results in uneven poetry, often too engaged with games instead of play" (Hewitt 824). Hewitt's remark illumines the easiest critical mistake--expecting from poetry traits which are not essential to it. Hewitt, presumably, expected to hear about George Oppen's life, or wanted an engaging personality. The verdict "uneven poetry," however, seems hard to justify when Hewitt has missed so completely Oppen's aim in writing. Oppen's work, influenced by such earnest predecessors as Langland and Rilke, is always a sincere search for meaning--hardly a "game"--and the distance in the poems reveals an effort to forget himself before the presence of Being. "He subdues his personal presence," Alan Golding writes, "and does not use a strong central voice to organize his sequences" (Golding 223). This comment is fair for most of Oppen's poetry, and indicates that, like other Objectivists, Oppen's true interest in writing poetry was not self-exposure, but what his poems pointed towards, an outside-ness, and that tempered by the presence of his voice this wilderness could make itself a home among his pages.

Outside in Vietnam, bombs explode. Oppen's plain, undramatic speaking contrasts with the horror he describes, so

that the abstract concept of "atrocitiy" is "an event ordinary/As a President." The first stanza distances the reader with abstraction, while the second creeps from a vague "plume of smoke, visible at a distance", which might be something harmless, to the sickening final phrase "In which people burn." Horror has become a statistic. Cruelty can only be understood authentically through the empathetic attempt to face horror oneself--to endure emotionally the inevitability of death. The "casual will" (160) of these bombings in Vietnam is not authentic at all, but rather enacts our complete surrender to fate. Complete surrender, Oppen declares, is "Insanity". It means we are trapped in inauthentic co-existence like a "fly in the bottle." But Oppen could mean two things. First, modern city dwellers are trapped in Everydayness and fettered to the cruelty that solipsism permits; we are all crazy. Second, Oppen may mean that only the unconventional person whom society considers a lunatic can glimpse beyond the bubble of our social context. Probably he intends both meanings. Atrocitiy is insanity which the They consider sane; resoluteness is sanity which the They consider madness. Only the so-called lunatic--the artist or philosopher, perhaps--can glimpse the "bright

light of shipwreck."

Heidegger explains that the They spend their spare time exhibiting curiosity (a love of novelty), ambiguity (a love of fate) and idle talk (a love of triviality) (Heidegger, Being 157-64). All three encourage the satisfaction of short-term pleasure. "--They await//War", Oppen writes in part twenty, "That the juices may flow in them/Tho the juices lie" (161). People are "curious" about the war because news of distant atrocity excites their "juices". "Ragged hordes" of past eras were willing to die for something they believed in--the "passions/Of that death" (161). But the modern "riders/Of the subway" know only "Failure and the guilt/Of failure." They know they are pathetic, but fear to address this weakness. The failure Oppen writes of is the failure to know oneself, to be human--an inability to know what human means.

Anyone dissatisfied with the modern clamor of taking care of things, Oppen suggests, probably longs for some indication that "we do not altogether matter." Part twenty-one replies to this longing.

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

So quiet of a Sunday

Here is the brick, it was waiting
 Here when you were born

Mary-Anne. (162)

This passage, along with the short stanza already mentioned in part twelve, is among the more striking in the sequence. The first line suggests ontological uncertainty--there "can be" a brick. Oppen does not compare this possible brick to anything else. He allows the brick to be itself among the context of things¹⁴ relevant to it. The brick forms part of a brick wall, which people built to house themselves. The passage moves from brick to wall to the person watching and the quiet Sunday atmosphere. The slow deliberation of "can be" forces the reader to dwell in his or her imagination on the brick as an isolated being before the poem pans out and the reader perceives the brick amidst a scene. Bricks are so common in cities that most people never notice brick walls, let alone the individual bricks within them. Bricks are just resources we use to build cheap offices and apartments. Oppen's description, however, undercuts practical usefulness.

---

¹⁴ Heidegger in Being and Time calls this context "Relevance". Taking care of innerworldly things constitutes Everydayness. But all these things that we take care of form the unifying context of Relevance. Relevance is the "being of innerworldly beings" (Heidegger, Being 78). Each thing is "relevant" to a communal way of apprehending nature.

The brick is itself, in a wall. The brick can be. The brick can be seen on a particular Sunday by a particular person. But Oppen leaves the possible encounter of person and brick as just that--only a possibility. The only certainty is the brick, which was "waiting/Here when you were born//Mary-Anne." The repetition of "Here" in the second stanza emphasizes the presence of a brick outside its usual context. All of a sudden the brick is more than itself. It is a porthole to the Open. It is a mysterious centre that was "waiting/Here" before "you were born". The space between "born" and "Mary-Anne" emphasizes the "waiting" of the brick, the permanence of matter and the impermanence of a human being's life.

The imagist intensity of the passage can be easily missed. "There can be" has great potency following the previous passages because it offers, unlike most of those before it, genuine apprehension--a rare drink of water in the desert. The reader's heart quickens at the words "can be", and attends to the brick, as if his life, or hers, depended on it. The brick, in all its ugliness and unimportance, retains in the poem a fixedness, an inexplicable reality, that was "waiting/Here when you were born//Mary-Anne." Oppen has

said that he tried to "construct a method of thought from the imagist technique of poetry" (Interview 161). The method requires attentiveness, a listening so patient that a thing exposes its foreignness. "When we are touched from out of the widest orbit" of such foreignness, Heidegger writes, "the touch goes to our very nature . . . Our nature is set in motion" (Heidegger, Poetry 125); we rediscover Dasein.

Carl Rakosi once wrote of George Oppen:

He's the only man I know who can get away with the curious notion that feelings don't have to be expressed in poetry; they can be assumed from the situation. He gets away with it because he's patient and his eye will not let itself be distracted from its object . . . If you've never seen what it sees, it's because you haven't sat still long enough and looked as hard as he has. (Rakosi 247)

In part twenty-three Oppen approaches the poem's climax with a description of American Everydayness--Ford Mustangs, business deals and television news. He expresses his fear that under the "blind pressure" of inauthentic living the "Entity/Of substance/Changes also" (163) and that humanity as a concept--what he was seeking in the writing of this poem--has vanished completely. All we know of humanity, he writes in part twenty-four, is that "There shall be peoples" (164). The Judeo-Christian covenant that meant a solemn

agreement between God and His people now means only physical survival. The "things/We live among" cannot connect us to what is beyond--to what is metaphysical. In part twenty-five the theme of occurrence resurfaces.

Strange that the youngest people I know
Live in the oldest buildings . . . . (164)

The comment is both literal and figurative. Oppen knew many young people who, poor and attracted to the city, found cheap housing in old tenements. He also may have meant, however, that we all are young compared to the bare matter, the outsideness, we live our lives against. The young, he says, are

Scattered about the city
In the dark rooms
Of the past . . . . (164)

The "dark rooms of the past" contain our beginnings, beginnings that, isolated both from past and future, we cannot properly understand. Even today, the "ancient buildings/Jostle each other//In the half-forgotten" (164). The "jostle" of Everydayness continues to play out the "half-forgotten" beginnings of Western history. The buildings of

modern New York City, which contain the "dark rooms of the past," are a metaphorical "Chinese Wall" between ourselves and what remains outside and unexpressed.

The buildings stand. Oppen's habit of listing facts without comment--such as young people live in old buildings, and ancient buildings jostle each other--implies that the facts are irreversible. He lets the facts stand like the buildings themselves. They look as if they will last forever, and the thought of such permanence prolonging the agony of our separation from Being leads to the climax of section twenty-six. The They has turned the contentedness of belonging to a place "to a conclusion in suicide"--we no longer know what dwelling means, what birth and death make possible, or how to even articulate to ourselves the moods we experience everyday.

We want to defend
Limitation
And do not know how. (165)

Oppen becomes blunt--out of necessity. Many readers will consider the climax merely rhythmic prose; they will look for sensuous images and will not find them. The abstract bluntness, however, is Oppen's way of adapting to Stevens's pressure of reality; the crisis of meaning crying out in all

the preceding passages push for order of a kind to stand at last; Oppen must talk. To avoid the thought that all his feeling has pointed to would prevent elucidation.

The first stanzas gather order with their regularity; each is a triplet. Each triplet reads like a thought expressed with shortness of breath. "We want to defend/Limitation" on scientific thinking. But we "do not know how" to defend such limitation on a world that sprawls around us, for we have "lost the metaphysical sense/Of the future". We are at "The end of a chain

Of lives, single lives
And we know that lives
Are single

And cannot defend
The metaphysic
On which rest

The boundaries
Of our distances.
We want to say

'Common sense'
And cannot. (165-66)

Subjectively, lives are always "single". Yet the contemporary Westerner is alone in another way--we have lost a "'common sense'" because we cannot "defend/The metaphysic" that the West is based upon. New generations meet the pros-

pect of withering "in the infirmaries//And the supply depots, supplying" the "irrelevant objects" of consumerism (166).

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. (166-67)

This image may be the most important in the poem. It cuts deeper than the abstract thoughts which precede and follow it because--like passages in parts twelve and twenty-one--it apprehends familiar concrete things intuitively. Like the brick in the brick wall, the streetlight on the parked cars becomes a being in itself. The Open reveals itself as "the great mineral silence . . . a process/Completing itself." Oppen shows the reader mere matter, mere silence, without reference, and the attention Oppen gives to something so ordinary is unnerving. Suddenly the image is no longer only streetlight on parked cars but a "great mineral silence" as huge and as old as matter itself. The vertiginous feeling this association creates forces us to imagine what moves of its own accord beyond our perception. Amid this "mineral si-

lence", the "windshield wipers/Of the cars are visible". The "windshield wipers" are instruments of survival that help us see when we drive in the rain. Yet these wipers are things with only a practical purpose; they express no awe; they defy human limitation; they represent the calculating "power of the mind . . . which

Is not enough, it is nothing
And does nothing

Against the natural world,
Behemoth, white whale, beast
They will say and less than beast,
The fatal rock

Which is the world -- . . . . (167)

The passage falls from line to line, comma to comma, until the final drop from "rock" to "Which is the world" where the momentum crashes suddenly to a halt. Reading it is like slipping down a steep hillside; each pause is momentary; the gravel crumbles beneath one's feet; the handholds of weeds snap loose and the reader tumbles towards the "fatal rock//Which is the world." Death--both personal and communal--is the one fact the ingenuity of windshield wipers cannot prevent. Suddenly, civilization seems incredibly pathetic.

O if the streets
Seem bright enough

Fold within fold
Of residence . . . . (167)

The stanza hesitates. The incomplete sentence trails off in an ellipsis. Yet the question is real and essential, for Oppen has written a more affirmative statement of these lines: "I think there is no light in the world but the world. And I think there is light" (Oppen qtd. in Rudolf, 101). Somehow, if meaning is to flourish for us again, it must be spoken through an apprehension of the world, of things, and of the "great mineral silence" at the centre of those things. We must learn again to

See thru water
Clearly the pebbles
Of the beach
Through the water . . . clear
As ever they have been. (167)

We must learn to apprehend the "processes completing themselves" in "the great mineral silence" because we belong to these processes. *To be* means one begins and ends by standing forth against the Open "mineral silence".

Heidegger in his later work turned to poetry as a possible way to rebuild the bridge between modern civilization and Being. Oppen too sees some hope in poetry. Accordingly, he becomes frankly personal in part twenty-seven about the

role of the artist.

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
. . . . (168)

Oppen seeks the Open among familiar things such as rooms, basements, walls and concrete. He also wishes to talk of solitude. We live in a society "bearing the marks" of the past in all we see around us; we stand on a "profoundly hidden floor" (168). But we stand alone with such remnants. And while the modern person has lost "common sense", the artist, in Oppen's view, must seek just that. He or she must "'suffer the things of the world'" and "'speak them and himself out'" (131).

One must not come to feel that he has a thousand
threads in his hands,
He must somehow see the one thing;
This is the level of art
There are other levels
But there is no other level of art. (168)

Oppen's stated poetic aim in part twenty-two had been "Clarity in the sense of silence" (162). In part twenty-seven he expands this conviction. Clarity means that the reader must "somehow see the one thing;" he or she must see what it means to stand alone on a "profoundly hidden floor." This

"seeing" is the bright light of shipwreck, the light of a world that has fallen prey to Everydayness in which people are "closed pages" who cannot talk to one another.

7

People are closed to themselves, to others, and to the world. They live "among things" that mean nothing; they fall prey to taking care of things amidst Everydayness; they are driven by a utilitarian Making Present that tries to define the world as something explicitly measurable. Since we can no longer talk of the immeasurable, we cannot talk of Being, for in order for something "to be" it must stand against its immeasurable origin--the mystery of existence. For people to stand against this origin they need to know of it; they need to talk of it. But we are "closed pages", packed in cities like pages in a book. We have no authentic community. No one reads us as a novel whose parts form an obvious whole, but as isolated fragments and occurrences.

Oppen's poem reads very much like isolated fragments and occurrences. There is no clear narrative flow, and Oppen mixes his discrete thoughts with quotations from others, creating a series of seemingly disconnected thoughts that

mirror the modern alienation from Being. It appears that Open has given us "a thousand threads," but he has not. The first half of "Of Being Numerous" moved very deliberately to show "the one thing" amidst this clutter--our dissociation from things, each other and ourselves; our love of fate as avoidance of the Open; and the daily fury of Making Present to generate the illusion of understanding.

The second half of the poem moves deliberately too. Open tries to "speak (the world) and himself out" (131). He cannot build faith out of nothing, however, and so he turns to companionship for guidance. At first he wonders whether his love for his daughter is mere longing for an "alibi".

And in the sudden vacuum
Of time . . .

. . . is it not
In fear the roots grip

Downward
And beget

The baffling hierarchies
Of father and child

As of leaves on their high
Thin twigs to shield us

From time, from open
Time. (171)

Do we not seek permanence and companionship because we fear

death? Death means the death of companionship, the company of stones. But, as Rainer Maria Rilke writes in the first of his Duino Elegies, "Every angel is terrible." Beauty terrifies. We fear "open/Time", yet because of its beauty we also encounter it joyfully through awe, like Linda Oppen awaiting "the birds and the deer" and the "blue bright sky" (172).

Because the known and the unknown
Touch,

One witnesses--.
It is ennobling
If one thinks so.

If to know is noble

It is ennobling. (172)

A modern forgetfulness of Being cannot destroy the mystery at the heart of existence, for the "known and the unknown" forever "touch"; when we witness this mystery in the Moment we belong to the earth again. Knowledge that springs from awe exalts the nobility of this mystery and "ennobles" us. Momentary awe of beauty can connect us to ourselves, things and people simply because only through what is concrete and worldly can we apprehend the beauty and terror of the Open

Which is ours, which is ourselves,
This our jubilation
Exalted and as old as that truthfulness
Which illumines speech. (173)

Yet the "things/We live among" block this connection and
 Everydayness ignores it. We should define a human being, Op-
 pen says, as being "beyond the rescue/Of the impoverished."
 The They suffer from spiritual impoverishment and an inabil-
 ity to see; awe is alien to them. An authentic person must
 "keep//His distance" from the They to "witness" the Open,
 and must embrace "the shipwreck/Of the singular". This ship-
 wreck, however, is far from solipsism. Awe unifies. Nearer
 to the Open and to things, we become nearer to ourselves and
 to each other.

For us
 Also each
 Man or woman
 Near is
 Knowledge

Tho it may be of the noon's
 Own vacuity. (176)

Awe nurtures companionship. It spurs us to talk to ourselves
 and to others of what we do not know in some way that
 "ennobles" the inexplicable. Nevertheless, Oppen suggests,
 we need to break the historic "paths/Of the mind" which shun
 intuition in favour of logic. Nature, and the happenstance
 occurrences of which it is composed, exist "'neither for
 self/Nor for truth'"--they are completely outside human

knowledge. The Walt Whitman passage at the end of the sequence points the way forward. Oppen's quotation from a letter Whitman wrote to his mother reveals the older poet's amazement at a human creation, a "great bronze figure" which "glistens like a big star" and "looks quite//curious". Curiosity in the sense of a genuine desire to understand oneself, rather than the mere love of novelty that Heidegger describes, is the root of being human--it is how we *stand against*. "The long poem," Oppen wrote in 1970, "ends almost jokingly with 'curious'. But it is not a joke entirely. If I were asked, why do we want to be here--I would say: it is curious . . . the root is curia: care, concern" (Letters 402).

8

What is it that glistens? Whitman writes in 1864 of a new "bronze figure" representing liberty, which stands atop the Capitol in Washington, the political centre of the United States. To Whitman, however--at least, from Oppen's quotation--it seems the Capitol's national significance has far less importance than the new statue surmounting it with

brightness. The statue's height and beauty commands in Whitman such excitement that he declares that it resembles "a big star," a sight so wondrous that his senses tingle when he sees it. Oppen shares Whitman's capacity for awe. He discovers it when he sees the world around him--a "blue bright sky", parked cars, highrises or bricks. But awe is more than delight. It awakens from an emotional response to the silence of things, a silence abruptly magnanimous, a distance so close it terrifies the observer. "Solitude", Oppen wrote, "involves the sense of the missing, the hugeness of that which is missing, therefore it seems to contain the possibility of redemption" (Oppen, Daybook 28)--the possibility, however slight, that Being will warm the capillaries of the void.

Martin Heidegger articulates in his philosophy a contemporary forgetfulness of Being grounded in the self-consciousness of ancient Greek philosophers. A gradual distrust of appearance developed. Things, whether natural or human-made, had value only insofar as they contributed their immediate usefulness to everyday activities. Both Oppen and Heidegger, writing in the 20th Century, grew aware of a world in which people found little meaning in the things

that they encountered--for their senses exposed them every day to marvels that they could not understand, an outside-ness that they had not learned a speech for. The metaphysical crisis at the heart of Heidegger's work pivots on his conviction that authentic human happiness stems from an intuitive tuning to the inexplicable. When this marriage fails, humanity fails too.

Oppen addresses this problem in "Of Being Numerous". Using a sequence made of the perceptions he expressed, Oppen "occupies" the concept of despair--a despair in which the tongue is tied and senses dulled from everything the earth brings forth for apprehension. Amidst the clutter of the sequence, like the individual floating in the sea of Everydayness, Oppen tries to gather his perceptions into a whole. He finds that he belongs to those he fears. Yet the They are never entirely distant, for among them Oppen finds companionship. He also discovers that genuine talk happens among the mouths of those who know the "shipwreck/Of the singular." Shipwreck is the Moment Heidegger describes, the sudden stepping forward into darkness and uncertainty to find, overpowering, a light, just like the shining statue that Whitman saw. Awe is the warmth of companionship, the heart

of human society, and maybe the foundation of a city. "Of Being Numerous" demonstrates the civic value of intuition, and the human necessity of drifting out alone upon the oceans that enclose us, and learning, in their "widest orbit", to talk of them.

Works Cited

- Booth, Philip. "Seascape: George and Mary in Maine." IRONWOOD 26 13.2 (Fall 1985):32-7.
- Bradbury, Malcolm and McFarlane, James, Eds. Modernism. London: Penguin, 1991.
- Chilton, Randolph. "The place of being in the poetry of George Oppen." George Oppen: Man and Poet. Ed. Burton Hatlen. Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1981. 89-99.
- Eliot, T.S. Four Quartets. London: Faber and Faber, 1970. 19.
- Freeman, John. "'The act of being' and the act of reading: a poetry for a people in danger." Not comforts//But vision: Essays on the Poetry of George Oppen. Ed. John Freeman. Salterton UK: Interim P, 1985. 42.
- Golding, Alan. "George Oppen's serial poems." Contemporary Literature 29.2 (Summer 1988): 221-40.
- Hatlen, Burton. "Opening up the text: George Oppen's 'Of Being Numerous'" IRONWOOD 26 13.2 (Fall 1985): 263-94.
- Heidegger, Martin. An Introduction to Metaphysics. Trans. Ralph Manheim. New York: Doubleday, 1961.
- . "The Question Concerning Technology." Basic Writings. New York City: HarperCollins, 1993. 311-41.
- . Being and Time. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany: State University Of New York P, 1996.
- . Poetry, Language, Thought. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.
- Heller, Michael. "'Knowledge is loneliness turning':

Oppen's going down middle voice'" IRONWOOD 26 13.2
(Fall 1985):51-61.

Hewitt, Geof. "Oppen, George." Contemporary poets of the English language. Ed. Rosalie Murphy. Chicago: St. James P, 1970. 823-4.

Hooker, Jeremy. "Seeing the world: the poetry of George Oppen." Not comforts//But vision: Essays on the Poetry of George Oppen. Ed. John Freeman. Salterton UK: Interim P, 1985. 26-41.

---. "'The Boundaries of Our Distances': On 'Of Being Numerous.'" IRONWOOD 26 13.2 (Fall 1985): 81-103.

Kenner, Hugh. "Disconnected Numerousness." IRONWOOD 26 13.2 (Fall 1985):205-11.

Maritain, Jacques. Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry. New York: Pantheon, 1953.

McAleavey, David. "Oppen on Literature and Literary Figures and Issues." Sagetrieb 6.1 (Spring 1987): 110-33.

---. If to Know is Noble: the Poetry of George Oppen. Ann Arbor USA: Cornell University Ph.D., 1975.

Noble, Joseph. "Oppen, Heidegger, Nancy: Being-Together in the World." Talisman (1997): 213-222.

Oppen, George. "An adequate vision: A George Oppen Daybook." IRONWOOD 26 13.2 (Fall 1985): 6-31.

---. Collected Poems. New York: New Directions, 1975.

---. "Interview with George Oppen." L.S. Dembo. Contemporary Literature 10.2 (1969): 155-177.

---. Selected Letters of George Oppen. Ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis. Durham: Duke University P, 1990.

---. "Statement on Poetics." Poems of George Oppen (1908-1984). Ed. Michael Thorp. Newcastle-upon-Tyne UK: CLOUD, 1990. 59-61.

---. "The Mind's Own Place." Montemora 1 (Fall 1975): 132-37.

---. "Three Poets." Poetry (Chicago) 100:5 (August 1962):329.

Oppen, Mary. Meaning A Life. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow P, 1978.

Peck, John. "George Oppen and the world in common: a descriptive polemic." George Oppen: Man and Poet. Ed. Burton Hatlen. Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1981. 63-85.

Perloff, Marjorie. "The Shipwreck of the Singular: George Oppen's 'Of Being Numerous.'" IRONWOOD 26 13.2 (Fall 1985):193-204.

Pound, Ezra. "A Retrospect." The Poetics of the New American Poetry. Eds. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman. New York: Grove P, 1973. 36-7.

---. "Preface to Discrete Series (1934)." Paideuma 10.1 (Spring 1981):13

Rudolf, Anthony. "Wozu Oppen?" Not comforts//But vision: Essays on the Poetry of George Oppen. Ed. John Freeman. Salterton UK: Interim P, 1985. 101-2.

Steiner, George. Heidegger. Glasgow: Fontana, 1978.

Stevens, Wallace. "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." The Necessary Angel. New York: Vintage, 1965. 3-36.

Zukofsky, Louis. Prepositions. London: Rapp & Carroll, 1967.

IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)

APPLIED IMAGE, Inc
1653 East Main Street
Rochester, NY 14609 USA
Phone: 716/482-0300
Fax: 716/288-5989

© 1993, Applied Image, Inc., All Rights Reserved