# Speaking the Estranged

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# Speaking the Estranged: Essays on the Work of George Oppen

*by*

MICHAEL HELLER

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CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham, Cambridge CB1 5JX United Kingdom

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First published 2008

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Lightning Source UK Ltd

Typeset in Swift 10 / 12

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ISBN 978 1 84471 440 7 paperback

Salt Publishing Ltd gratefully acknowledges
the financial assistance of Arts Council England

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ENGLAND

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

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# *Acknowledgements*

Many of the essays in this collection have been previously published in slightly different form or given as presentations at various institutions. I would like to identify and thank the editors and organizations who made them possible, especially New Directions Publishers, The University of California Press, Johns Hopkins University Press and Wesleyan University Press, publishers of the poetry and prose of George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky, whose visionary publishing has given us the work of these important poets of our time. Material from the estate of George Oppen appears with the permission of Linda Oppen under the following notice: (c) Linda Oppen quoted with permission.

“Utopocalyptic Moments: Objectivists in the Thirties” was presented at the Poets of the Thirties Conference held at the University of Maine, Orono. It was originally published in *The Objectivist Nexus*, Alabama University Press, 1999.

“Writing Occurs” was presented as a lecture at the Modern Literature Studies Seminar at Sussex University. I thank Peter Nicholls for arranging this seminar.

“A Mimetics of Humanity: Reading Oppen’s *Of Being Numerous*” was originally published in *Pequod* magazine and reprinted in *American Poetry*.

“Knowledge Is Loneliness Turning: Oppen’s Going Down Middle-Voice” was originally presented in 1985 as the first George Oppen Memorial Lecture at San Francisco State University. It was published in *Ironwood* magazine.

"Oppen, Stevens, Wittgenstein: Reflections on the Lyrical and the Philosophical" was presented at the Notre Dame Conference on the Lyrical and the Philosophical. It was published in *Sagetrieb* magazine.

"Speaking the Estranged: Word and Poetics in Oppen's Poetry" was published in *Chicago Review*.

"The Voice of the Impersonal: Oppen and Celan" was the plenary address at the Conference on the Impersonal in Literature held at the Université Du Maine, LeMans, France. A version of this address was published in *PN Review*.

"Poetics of the Letter" was published in *Sulfur* magazine.

"Encountering Oppen: A Memoir" was originally published in the Mentor issue of *Ohio Review* and reprinted in my collection *Uncertain Poetries: Essays on Poets, Poetry and Poetics*.

# *Preface*

This book collects the majority of my essays on the work of George Oppen written after publication of my 1985 study of the Objectivist poets, *Conviction's Net of Branches: Essays on the Objectivist Poets and Poetry*. These essays further develop aspects of Oppen's poems and his thinking about poetry and poetics as shown in his letters and notes written across his entire career. They stand, overall, as originally published or presented, but have been updated and corrected where necessary. Reprinted here also is my memoir "Encountering Oppen", which appeared in my previous collection of essays, *Uncertain Poetries* (Heller 2005), but which I felt belonged as a kind of coda to bring this collection full circle. My introduction, an overview of Oppen's work, has not appeared before, nor has the essay on his recently published *Daybooks*.

I was fortunate to have known George and Mary Oppen, to speak personally and correspond with them frequently for many years. I cannot imagine having written poetry or about poetry without the sense of their companionship, a feeling that continues to this day. Other friends, now gone, to whom I owe debts of insight and historical information were Carl Rakosi and Armand Schwerner. My thanks to Linda Oppen for her support and friendship of many years.

I have been aided greatly by the work of other writers. I am indebted to Michael Davidson for his labours on behalf of Oppen's work. All quotations of the poetry of George Oppen are taken from the recently published *New Collected Poems*, edited and introduced by Davidson, which brings together the poems of Oppen's 1975 *Collected Poems*, his Black Sparrow book, *Primitive*, along with some twenty pages of poems published in magazines but previously uncollected. Another thirty-seven pages, entitled "Selected Unpublished Poems", are culled from the

George Oppen archives at the University of California at San Diego. Davidson rightly justifies these inclusions as deriving from "Oppen's compositional method, his tendency to embed poems in the midst of a kind of *textual* rubble" (Oppen 2002, xiv) consisting of scratched-out and rewritten words, of phrases and whole poems cut from previous drafts and pasted down over existing texts. These newly found poems give us a more complete idea of Oppen's working methods; many of them are equal in quality to Oppen's published work. If a few seem weak or slight, still they help us to understand a difficult poet whose life and career, sketched out in Eliot Weinberger's memoir-like preface to the *New Collected Poems*, are curiously truncated by Oppen's twenty-five years of silence. While I have a few reservations, discussed below, concerning Davidson's introduction, I want to express my deep gratitude for this book, especially for the meticulous notes Davidson has written to the poems, describing their composition, publication and links to Oppen's life, his thought and readings of other writers and for Davidson's restoration of the original spacing and format of Oppen's first book, *Discrete Series*. This well-produced and carefully edited collection must be regarded as definitive as well as indicative of Oppen's importance in contemporary poetry.

I want to thank Rachel Blau DuPlessis for the *Selected Letters of George Oppen*, another careful labour of love and critical attention without which I could not have written most of the essays included here. My thanks also to Stephen Cope, whose edition of *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers* is a major event for the study of Oppen's work. In addition, I want to express my gratitude for the writings and conversations I have had with other poets and critics, among them Hélène Aji, Jane Augustine, Marcel Cohen, Yves DiManno, Norman Finkelstein, the late Larry and Justine Fixel, Serge Gavronsky, Eric Hoffman, Steven Jaron, Burt Kimmelman, Abigail Lange, Jack Marshall, Marjorie Perloff, Peter Nicholls, Anthony Rudolf, Naomi Schwartz, Mark Scroggins, Hugh Seidman, Eric Selinger, Harvey Shapiro, John Taggart, Nathaniel Tarn, Robert Vas Dias and Henry Weinfield.

# *Introduction*

"All things/speak if they speak the estranged". These are the lines of poetry by George Oppen from which the title of this collection and of the essay included here entitled "Speaking the Estranged: Word and Poetics in Oppen's Poetry" are derived. Estrangement literarily, politically and philosophically is the salient condition of George Oppen's work and constitutes the themes, in a number of different ways, of the essays published here. From the work's conception, its forms and meanings, to how critics have read him, there is one constant: a felt sense of displacement, of a barely understood "otherness" concerning his poetry and other writings, the few prose essays and the fragmentary Daybook entries that surround it.

Oppen's work, now embraced by a wide range of readers, poets and scholars, has had a complicated reception. His rigorous search for what he called "clarity" in poetry, as Eliot Weinberger, in his preface to Oppen's *New Collected Poems*, reminds us, did not result in the small gemlike perfected verbal artefact. Rather his poems look instead, as Weinberger notes, like "the struggle [for clarity] itself", a wrestling with language and truth, showing forth in all its messiness, its detours and cul-de-sacs, its hesitations and reworkings.

Ezra Pound early on understood the nature of Oppen's writings. In his Preface to *Discrete Series*, Oppen's first collection, published in 1934 when Oppen was in his early twenties, Pound set the terms for the reception of Oppen's poetry, asking "how great a variant from a known modality is needed by the new writer if his expression is to be co-terminous with his content", and then concluding: "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" (Oppen 2002, 4).

That Pound felt it necessary to bracket Oppen's work between two kinds of originality, the "variant from a known modality" required for expression and a "sensibility" unlike anyone else's, stands today as both shrewd testimony and even shrewder prophecy concerning how we read this poet. Nothing resembling the poetry of *Discrete Series* had previously been seen in American poetry, and Pound's emphasis on the work's uniqueness was entirely correct.

Now, with essentially all of Oppen's work before us, it is clear that poetic lineage and context also have much to do with the complications of reading him. Oppen's relationship to his forbears, to Pound and Williams, to a lineage that extends back to Whitman and forward to the practice of contemporary poets has now been explored in some detail, including in my own early study of the Objectivists, *Conviction's Net of Branches*. At first glance, the influences seem obvious. Oppen as a young man came under Pound's tutelage, and from the beginning, read and deeply admired Williams. His close companions in modernist poetry were the other original Objectivists, Charles Reznikoff, Louis Zukofsky and Carl Rakosi, all of whom, while writing in widely differing styles, embraced the group's ethos of "sincerity" and "objectification", an identification with and modification of Pound's "Imagist Dos and Don'ts". Yet a closer look at Oppen's work further complicates this issue of lineage. Pound, in that introduction to Oppen's *Discrete Series* mentioned above, also wrote, "I see the difference between the writing of Mr. Oppen and Dr. Williams. I don't expect any great horde of readers to notice it". But of course, for anyone who has compared the two, the difference is there, especially in the way each may have thought about what constituted the basic building blocks of their poems. Williams' work is image- and line-based. Through fidelity to the visual object and his later concept of the "variable foot", Williams strives to offer some measure of regularity to the poems. By contrast, Oppen's work concentrates on individual words, placed on the page and in the poems' syntax almost to isolate and dissociate one word from another in order to bring into focus the burdens, linguistic, historical and poetic, that they bear.

From a more recent perspective, both in appearance on the page and what one might call its intentionality, Oppen's work stands in isolation from any recognizable mainstream current in American poetry. Certainly it stands at a considerable remove, it would seem, from T. S. Eliot's tradition-inflected if hallucinated language or Wallace Stevens' lush and playful universe full of "de-creations" and polychromatic words. Nevertheless, Eliot figures powerfully in Oppen's work as both counterfoil and example (Oppen refers to him over a dozen times in his letters and recasts some of his lines in *Primitive*), but the two poets appear to be writing in different languages. And Stevens' lyrical and philosophical dance with uncertainty feels almost comfortable in contrast to Oppen's existential edgings towards silence and nothingness. Oppen, in his letters, lightly disparages Stevens for "his little elegances" (Oppen 1990b, 77) but also acknowledges the poet's depth. There is affinity between these two poets, as I try to demonstrate in my essay included here, "Oppen, Stevens, Wittgenstein: Reflections on the Lyrical and the Philosophical", but that affinity is less linguistic than psychological.

Another source of difficulty in reading Oppen concerns stylistics. Most mainstream poetry tends to emphasize the prose-like effects of phrase or sentence to offer recuperable and easily paraphrasable meanings to readers and critics. W. H. Auden and even William Carlos Williams, to a certain extent, are poets in whose work the phrase or sentence, or metrical pattern and rhyme, are prominent. Auden's conversational sonorities are deeply marked off from the dense and quickened cut of Pound's cadences in *The Cantos*, cadences that in their economy and compression are somewhat echoed in Oppen's poems. Oppen admired Auden but pronounced himself "unaudenified" (and "uneliotified" as well), feeling that American poetry had divided into two main branches, one looking to Eliot and Auden as models and one following Pound and Williams. He felt himself to be among the latter. Oppen was, in a sense, writing against a background and legacy of such popular figures as Auden and Auden-influenced writers like Lowell and Berryman, poets, well-emblematised in the linguistic and metaphorical usages of much poetry now being written. An Oppen poem, with its unadorned if charged speech, seems almost like a curio, a black and white photo at odds with the hip technicolour field of the contemporary poem.

The look of Oppen's poems on the page, particularly the work published after *Of Being Numerous*, has led a number of critics to apply a contemporary, post-modern vocabulary to his work, to read back into it strategies and suggestions which Oppen himself thought were ludicrous or, worse, inimical to poetry. The signature gesture of such a tactic is to focus primarily on Oppen's early poem sequence, *Discrete Series*, and then to read its gestures and movements into the later—much later and enormously different—work. Michael Davidson's introduction to Oppen's *New Collected Poems*, while exemplary in almost every other way, strikes me as erring in this direction. The only extended detailed close reading of a poem in the introduction is from the *Discrete Series* sequence, a reading in which Davidson falls into a sort of post-modern jargon, saying, for example, that Oppen's poems "argue against totality", or that Oppen's faith in "speech and speech acts", a simple truth for most poets, is there "because it is only in its reduced, functional state that language may reveal its complicity in the production (rather than reflection) of reality". My own view, elaborated in a number of essays in this book, is that the over-emphasis on *Discrete Series* tends to distort the picture of Oppen's career.

Oppen's work itself complicates matters further. As a poet whose language is spare and whose sentiments uncommon, he would, at any time, be difficult to put into focus or place into an academic category. While acknowledging what was important to him in the work of other poets, Oppen expressed dislike for poetic schools and systems and sought out in his readings, as he put it in his notebooks, a "philosophy of the astonished". To be "astonished", to spend one's efforts recording amazement, as much of Oppen's poetry seems to do, rather than to proclaim it or one's self as its author, is, in a celebrity-driven age, a stance almost guaranteed to be misunderstood.

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In a time of violence and violent rhetoric, Oppen's poetry attempts, as Weinberger says, "to speak in the roar of history". At its deepest levels, his work expresses a complex intersection of doubt, hope and fear, of endangerment for himself and humanity. A thematic of disaster and possibility shapes even his earliest poems. My essay "Utopocalyptic Moments: Objectivists in the Thirties", argues that Oppen's *Discrete Series*, published in 1934, just prior to his abandonment of poetry, is a work haunted by the idea of the ineffectuality of poetry to be an agent for the social and political changes that Oppen and his wife Mary were working to bring about. *Discrete Series*, in this regard, can also be seen as a door the poet himself closed as he entered into a proposed utopian world, the poetry for which could not be written in the language Oppen felt available to him. Not only did he refuse to write socialist realist poetry, but he may well have felt in the future, in the possibly Marxist state his actions might help achieve, there would be none of the pessimism and doubt that had once propelled him to write. This was of course the "party line" of the late twenties and early thirties that condemned "negativism" and even objectivity as bourgeois reality. And, in a sense, it is a truism that utopias are arenas from which fear and doubt are inherently banished. In accordance with the Marxism of those times, the idea of poetry as a kind of *agon* might very well wither along with the capitalist state. The strictures on poetry, literature and the other arts in post-revolutionary Russia, and later among the cultural elite of the American Communist Party in which Oppen held membership, would seem to suggest this mentality.

A recent essay on the Oppens by Eric Hoffman, "A Poetry of Action: George Oppen and Communism", published in the academic journal *American Communist History*, describes Oppen's commitment to the American Communist Party, including his activities during his time in Mexico in the 1950s where he and Mary fled to avoid harassment and possible persecution. The essay, drawing on the memoirs of friends and associates, on FBI sources and translated KGB intercepts, tracks the nature of the couple's commitment to the party, and it raises the possibility that both George and Mary Oppen were involved in espionage for the USSR. The evidence in these documents also suggests that at times both Oppens were close members of the Stalinist wing of the party, associations which they maintained despite the show trials of the 1930s. According to Hoffman, the Oppens maintained their faith in the party almost up to the mid-fifties when Krushchev made his widely broadcast speech enumerating the horrors of Stalin's regime and the anti-semitism of the infamous "Doctor's Plot". After these revelations, and while still in Mexico, Oppen seems to have had something like a conversion experience. He had begun reading existentialist thinkers as well as Heidegger and Jacques Maritain. At this time, as Mary Oppen wrote in her memoir *Meaning A Life*, Oppen had his dream of being enclosed and rusting in a water-pipe, a dream so disturbing that he sought the aid of a psychiatrist. The story is that immediately after this consultation, Oppen went home and began to write poetry.

Critics have written about Oppen's "return" to poetry (I have done so myself), but in light of the new material about the Oppens and their time in Mexico, I think "return" may not be the best descriptive word. It fails to take into account not only the disillusionment with the Communist Party that Oppen finally experienced, as he describes it in his letters, nor with the silence he maintained on the details of his involvements during his Party days. Most significantly, the word "return" precludes opening a discussion on Oppen's reversal of belief in art's efficacy. Clearly, there was such a reversal. Hoffman, in a passage referring to “the God that failed” so many, cites Oppen’s comment, “the Communist proposition—all Marxist propositions…” required of “the poet, the writer, the artist, philosopher, scientist [the] surrender of self-determination…”, producing “a fatal society” that “has nowhere *good* to go” and “nothing to see” (Hoffman 2007, 27). My essay, “The Voice of the Impersonal: Oppen and Celan”, speculates on the linguistic dimensions of Oppen’s inability to write poetry during his period of Communist activity. With his self-determination restored, Oppen began to write poetry again. He had come to see, as Hoffman points out, that the task of the poet was essentially prophetic, that poetry, as Oppen writes in a 1959 letter, “has got to be written into the future” (Oppen 1990b, 22).

It is my impression that the poetry Oppen wrote after his Communist period does not “return” to anything that he had done previously. Instead, he is writing a radically different poetry, chastened by having followed a failed path, recognizing it as having failed. It is almost as though he starts from new ground, but still has to face “unarmed” the same problems of human suffering, political upheaval and cultural crisis that led him into the Communist Party to begin with. But also now, he *is* armed, we might say, with the knowledge of that failure. Oppen did not “return” but in fact came anew to poetry, and in a greatly changed state of mind. Poetry held other possibilities he had not seen before, those of truth and clarity, possibilities that were in opposition to the political efficacy he had demanded of himself and which would have been demanded of him by the party. And so, like his Crusoe in *Of Being Numerous*, Oppen was “rescued”, rescued into poetry.

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Oppen, as he started to write poetry again, had shifted from the received truths of party politics to poetry, as he described it in “The Mind’s Own Place”, as a “test of truth” (Oppen 2008, 32). Yet what remains constant between early and later Oppen are the foundations that undergird his poetry, the psychological, intellectual and cultural pressures that he had chosen to place himself under, first in his youth and then throughout his career. What had changed was where Oppen now located his hopes, not in political action, but in realizing a deeper sense of the world through poetry and truth (the “limitless limited clarity” of *Of Being Numerous).* In effect, after almost thirty years of silence, Oppen had forged a new poetics, albeit one powerfully linked to his doubts and to the uncertainties of any realization.

In appearance, much of the newer poetry, with its shortened lines and isolated phrases, superficially resembles work in *Discrete Series*. But it is hard to imagine finding lines in the later work like these: “Her ankles are watches/(Her arm-pits are causeways for water)” (Oppen 2002, 9), lines that suggest surrealism, archness or a kind of sophisticated, even superior knowingness? In the later work, language is no longer deployed as an instrument of social commentary, but rather revered for its denotative and referential qualities. It is part of the poet’s “*via povera*”, seeking truth and clarity.

These new poems, then, appear to be derived from an intense concentration on a small number of elements and a vocabulary restricted to a few nouns and verbs, words Oppen saw as pointing to real objects and processes in the world. He continually referred to himself as a “realist” poet. And yet, his “realist” outlook does not sufficiently explain either the shape of the poetry or its effects on readers. For that, we must look elsewhere: not only into the history of the poet and the times he lived through, but also to see how he operates like a scientist demanding of himself more refined and powerful ways of using language to arrive at both clarity and articulation.

Poetry was to proceed, Oppen insisted in an interview with L. S. Dembo, by statements that “could not *not* be understood”. And yet, as we see, Oppen’s clarities lead deeper into ambiguity and complexity. Every act of precision and clarification seems to generate uncertainty. For Oppen, such uncertainty is not theoretical, not a matter of intellectual difficulty, nor a calculated effect of his writing. Rather, the uncertainty of the poetry seems intensely lived out in the very moment of its composition. The poems convey, along with their imagery and knowledge, a palpable feel for the harrowing loss, disorientation and cultural and poetic exile that Oppen himself went through. Political disillusionment, the close-up experience of injury and near-death in World War II, the cultural and political wars of the fifties and sixties, all contribute to an aura of isolation and fear permeating his work. The emotions expressed are “testing” places, arenas of conflict in which possibility and hope confront the poet’s deepest fears for himself and humanity.

This paradoxical quality characterizes Oppen’s post-silence poetry almost from its beginnings. It seems haunted by both failure and possibility. The vocabulary of *The Materials*, Oppen’s first collection after beginning to write again, is exemplary, suffused with birth and death, with first things and closures. The “we awake” of the epigraph by Jacques Maritain and the book’s first poem “Ecologue”, with its “O small ones/To be born" (Oppen 2002, 38, 39) signal one of the deepest strains in the work, renewal. At the same time, in "Image of the Engine", the second poem of the collection, the poet writes of "the engine that stops", of "companionship ending" and "all embarkations/Foundered" (Oppen 2002, 40–42), dark motifs touching on failure and lost friendships. New beginnings are here entailed in the dashed dreams of the political. By the end of the poem, the conflicting tensions seem to bring Oppen to a new place, almost as though he had uttered an *at last* to himself, as if a period of mourning and grief were over. The last section of the poem points to the power of desire, to its protective effects against estrangement and alienation. The "world" has been "set" in human "hearts". We are "locked out" from the material substance of the world, from its "lumps, chunks", and seek "love at last among each other". Amidst "a crumbling/rubble of our roots", through "ultimate mishap", we find "the heart thundering/Absolute desire" (Oppen 2002, 42). For Oppen, the engine of politics had stopped. He had lived through personal and public calamities with desire intact, desire to know, to be in relationship with his world. He was the "machine [that] stares out" searching for "someone/in the garden!/Outside and so beautiful" (Oppen 2002, 41).

Something new motivates his poetry. He had given up poetry rather than use it to manufacture political "truth" or action. But now, as both his poetry and letters proclaim, he was fearful of any utopian visions. Now, by an almost complete reversal of method from the poems in *Discrete Series*, Oppen felt a need to investigate the limits of knowing, of humanity, including a testing of our abstract value-laden language. Poetry no longer spurred action, at least in any overt sense, but, instead, was to interrogate the consequences of wanting to know, of trying to sense the dangers of closure, of the completed or prematurely closed image. Emblematic of this stance is "Solution", a short poem from the late fifties about the assembling of a jigsaw puzzle:

> …showing a green
> Hillside, a house,
> A barn and man
> And wife and children,
> All of it polychrome,
> Lucid, backed by the blue
> Sky. The jigsaw of cracks
> Crazes the landscape but there is no gap,
> No actual edged hole
> Nowhere the wooden texture of the table top
> Glares out of scale in the picture,

Sordid as cellars, as bare foundations:
There is no piece missing. The puzzle is complete
Now in its red and green and brown (Oppen 2002, 45).

The feel of the poem is complex. The “sordid” foundation of the table top strikes as less threatening than the puzzle’s “complete”-ness, its naive, though false, picture of familial and childlike pastoral enchantment. The finished puzzle presents a domesticated version of bourgeois life realized as material well-being, but it overlays a world “crazed” by suspicious cracks, the barely visible clues that give the lie to the fables we construct about ourselves, the ones that hide power and the malevolent will of politics. Oppen declared himself a “populist” poet, but his poems continually explore, almost as a critique, seemingly populist goals, “its metaphysic/In small lawns of home” (Oppen 2002, 50) or “survival’s/thin thin radiance” (Oppen 2002, 72). He sought, as he insisted, to write a “poetry of statement”, yet one that would resist the falsifications of the mind and language, and expose the “crazed” landscape of contemporary life.

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In *Of Being Numerous*, Oppen notes that we are “obsessed, bewildered //By the shipwreck/ of the singular” (Oppen 2002, 166), “We are not coeval/With a locality/But we imagine others are” (Oppen 2002, 164), Displacement, the failure of our political and social solutions, these all translate in the poem into fear. But this fear is also, in a sense, prompting and validating possibility. Henry James remarked that the writer wants to put himself in a tight place; Oppen’s mode is to situate himself close to the point where, as he writes in the poem, “the known and unknown touch”, a razor-edged boundary between anxiety and terror. It is the place where one utters “truth” to the self in its most desperate moments.

Fear, for Oppen, is the test of truth, an attitude not very far from C. S. Peirce’s dictum that truth is what we are prepared to act on. One finds evidence of such testing throughout Oppen’s work, in direct expressions in his letters and notes of the need to be “be afraid” as one sets down a word, to maintain the creative impulse at its highest tension even while dwelling with “the knowledge”, as he wrote more than thirty years before in *Discrete Series*, “not of sorrow but of boredom”. In the poem (perhaps the only poem in *Discrete Series* that hints at the orientation of his later work), knowledge of boredom is the motive for the poet to approach the window, to gaze at "the world, weather-swept, with which one shares the century" (Oppen 2002, 5).

In later Oppen, such boredom (an almost Sartrean *ennui*) marks not only a dis-ease with habitual circumstances but a sense of the terror at entrapment in linguistic and conceptual bonds. Such boredom is not only a prime animator of alienation and violence but also a potential starting point for possibility. Oppen's career-long meditations on boredom and its contrary, fear, stem from these entwined potentials. In *Of Being Numerous*, he strategically rehearses the two ideas again: now he speaks of "the boredom which discloses everything" (Oppen 2002, 186), threatening, deadening, capable of transforming individuals into "shoppers,/Choosers, judges…", where "the brutal/is without issue/a dead end" (Oppen 2002, 170). Clearly, these words remind us that Oppen's poetry grows from roots that had been buried in the rubble of his youthful Marxist idealism, and is, in effect, a search for a substitute to the collectivist vision that he adhered to while an active, committed Marxist.

As I discuss in my essay, "A Mimetics of Humanity", for Oppen, "being numerous", is a fragile near-fictional construct, played out against, as the poem tells us, the "unearthly bonds of the singular" and the potentially hazardous enchantments of the "bright light of shipwreck". As with the nuclear family pictured in "Solution", the concept of "humanity" consists of a maze of cracks, the word itself a linguistic fig leaf. In a later section of the poem, Oppen seems to insist that the concept of "humanity" is not a given or even "natural", but a convention borne of fear and reinforced by language: "Covenant!//The covenant is/there shall be peoples" (Oppen 2002, 176). The idea is inscribed into culture and co-exists in tension alongside the dissonances and actualities of singular physical and psychic identity. For Oppen, only a rigorous speech—the highly determined language of the poem—is adequate to the necessary task of witnessing and exploring this situation.

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Oppen's later poetry, written after *Of Being Numerous*, is among the most radical poetic projects of the twentieth century. At first sight, the work seems strange, fragmentary and nearly unreadable. The lines, widely separated by the white space of the page, make large grammatical and syntactical leaps. It is as though the poet had taken the jigsaw pieces of "Solution", and tossed them around, lifting out a piece here or moving a piece there in order to expose what lies beneath the table top, the "sordid" bare foundations that support the picture puzzle. These open spaces are both threatening and alienating. Familiar horizons of meaning have been displaced by the gaps, reminding both poet and reader of "the isolated man", who in *Of Being Numerous*, "is dead, his world around him exhausted" (Oppen 2002 167).

Oppen referred to himself as "the clumsiest of poets", and felt that the act of writing a poem always engenders the possibility of ruining the entire enterprise. His writing after *Of Being Numerous* shows the marks of high risk-taking, of a willingness to pursue the poetics of articulation to the borders of silence and misreading. From *Myth of the Blaze* to the very late poems, some written in the first stages of the Alzheimer's disease which led to his death in 1984, Oppen pursued this radical poetics of embedding isolate words or phrases in the disorienting white space of the page, attempting to achieve the clarity of meaning and knowledge that he had sought from the start. One such poem which sweeps the reader up into Oppen's late poetics, even as it refers back to poems written earlier, is "All This Strangeness":

> it is a sea but is it music
> binds
> the spell
>
> or thought it is a sea
>
> no place but the place
> of desire the little boat runs up
>
> against the long flanks of the wave *shadow*
> *brought into light* a place
>
> like all others desire
> desire at the heart of the living
>
> world the poem (Oppen 2002, 345)

While illustrative of the late work, the poem also rehearses many of Oppen's continuing themes, the sea, sailing vessels, humanity, personal love made manifest by the poet's attentiveness, the "*shadow/brought into light*", that finally makes real both world and desire. Here, his questioning poetics both ask and answer. Music, as the ordering principle of poetic language, brings us to "no place but the place of desire". In one of his early poems, Oppen compared poetic composition to carpenter's work, to the building of little boats, which he himself had done. Now the "little boat" of the carpenter-poet follows the tidal swells of language, riding on the waves of "desire".

Those "hearts thundering absolute desire" in "Image of the Engine", words that impelled Oppen's new life and new poetics, are echoed in this poem. And yet, even in the depth of this new articulation, the mystery of existence, of our collective lives is maintained. It is that "unknown" which at bottom fuels the poetics. In *Of Being Numerous*, the poet speaks of the "open miracle of language", and in "All This Strangeness", language

> spells itself out (*why then*
> *all this strangeness*) to say
>
> all you know all
> you are all
> that has happened the world's
>
> birth stirs like a breeze
> in the streets and the lights
> of the fast car

Language gathers us into Oppen's world and makes us inhabit it in a way that fulfils hope, justifies, in a sense, the fate of our being numerous, in the great ocean of language. This, for the poet, is the promise of poetic speech

> overtaking us
> on the highway were the lights
> of other lives dazzling silver
> ....
> poem said you may see
> the poem
> spells itself out (Oppen 2002, 346)

We are "all that has happened", our knowledge and hope bound up in the words we use. This is the prophecy and confirmation of Oppen's work. His singularly unique voice returns us to our communal home in language.

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# *Utopocalyptic Moments: Objectivists in the Thirties*

The thirties began with any number of utopian ideas in place, whether it was communism's classless society, an American rural pastoralism, Douglas's Social Credit or the fascist goal of an orderly society led by benevolent dictators or wise oligarchies who would save the state. The decade ended in apocalyptic fears and horrors, whether it was the rise of Nazism or the Moscow show trials or the advent of a world war encompassing most of mankind. Utopocalyptic, then, is my made-up name for a sense of uncertainty, for that odd socio-political or cultural product, both fever and exacerbation, in which an individual is torn between idealized hopes and gnawing dread. The utopocalyptic might, then, consume a poet in the thirties faced with the warring forces of left and right, with peace and conflict, with the sense that every utopian vision is predicated on an apocalyptic vision of what would occur if it was not realized. Terms like utopian or apocalyptic are considerably larger and more grandiose than left or right or even such parallel pairings as socialism and fascism. But it is in their very largeness that these terms are most useful, for poetry embodies, even if only by implication, a powerful backward and forward dynamic, an admixture of hope and fear, of prophecy and foreboding, that is lacking in the more narrowly political terminology. In the thirties, such a passionate dynamic and its constructions constituted a virtual sub-genre of poetic activity.

The role and function of poetry, as well as other literary forms, is a central problem for the writers of the thirties who viewed past and future with almost visionary intensity and desire and in anguish over human (social) possibilities. Was the poem to be seen as something personal and in some sense private or was it to be useful, enlisted in the public good? If the poem was to have some sort of effect on the social order, what sort of poem would it be? Writers uncomfortable with current literary modes, unwilling to adopt unreflectively their inheritance of conventional literary forms, often correlated questions of craft to the larger socio-political or cultural conditions with which they felt concerned.

Even poets who rejected the categories of public and private spheres were, without exception, categorized on political grounds by the swirling currents and movements that surrounded them. In this double-bind, a writer floated along on a stream of acceptance or rejection beyond his or her control. When a poet found an audience by which to be published and read, it was often in accordance with the dictates of someone else's political and cultural interests. Being accepted or rejected by this or that group or faction might be solely based on the political consideration of the work in hand and/or its placement in one literary journal or another. On so categorizing poets, on demanding visions of them, there was much agreement. Archibald MacLeish may have best expressed this outlook when, in *Poetry* in 1931, he wrote: "poetry, which owes no man anything, owes nevertheless one debt—an image of the world in which men can again believe".

The extent to which such notions reduce terms such as "avant garde" or "traditionalist" to mere political qualifiers is one index to the degree to which writers felt they were caught up as writers in political and social circumstances, and therefore in writing circumstances, as a rule beyond their control. This political situation had, therefore, its effects upon craft as well, and the negotiation of a utopocalyptic moment manifested, not so much in the poet's complicated feelings towards his times, but in the poet's investigation of his or her own ambivalence.

Not all poets, of course, nurtured or honoured this ambivalence, but the most successful or interesting negotiations of a utopocalyptic moment suggest that the poet, even as he or she affirms something, has some capacity or dimension which allows him to see into the darkness, into the ambiguities and difficulties of affirmation. In the most complex cases, we sense that such a poet has become aware of the psychology of judgement, aware that the imposing of a heavy closure on human affairs has the negative power to generate its own anxiety.

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Left or right. One poetical/political vector of the thirties was aimed at modern life, viewing left wing politics as its worst excrescence. In many ways, the Fugitives embodied some of the most regressive aspects of this tendency. Southern-aristocratic in orientation, antebellum in their view of the ordering of society and economics, the Fugitives were formalist in their poetics and anti-technological with respect to modern life. "Religion can hardly expect to flourish in an industrial society", John Crowe Ransom wrote in *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), a title taken from the song "Dixie" and expressing the pugnacious character of the group. Allen Tate had already suggested that "only a return to the provinces, to the small self-contained centers of life, will put all-destroying America, to rest". This was regionalism with a vengeance. Yet such a return did not mean becoming a provincial poet, for among the Fugitives an internal conflict expressed itself in the disparity between the poet's physical geography and his or her poetic machinery, heavily identified as it was with Eliot and his writings on the metaphysical poets. Tate, especially, raised Eliotic or metaphysical wit and irony to an almost parodistic degree because it afforded distance, which after all is a decidedly cosmopolitan consciousness, one enabling these poets to be "at home" in the cultural backwaters of the agrarian South. Like the Roman poets, Juvenal and Horace, who were also models for the Fugitive group, a rueful acceptance of the *status quo* led to shrewd appraisals of the irony of the poet's situation rather than to visionary or utopocalyptic notes in the work. This expedient mystification was a subtle way of blocking out any disturbing truth. Thus Ransom could write in 1938, "the true poetry has no great interest in improving or idealizing the world, which does well enough. It only wants to see it better". The emphases on traditionalist craft, on the British tradition and canon in this "true poetry", and reflected as well in New Critical attitudes on the appropriate relation of life to art, insulated the patrician Fugitive poet from the contingencies of history, in particular from the noise of those under one's foot clamouring for social change. Robert Penn Warren's early poem "History" (1935), full of windy abstractions such as: "the leaves of the land/freshening the arbor/recall our honor/and we descend./ We seek what end?" is a typical example of rhetoric used to avoid any sort of concrete reference to any ugly or offensive facts of Southern history. Likewise, Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" (written in 1928 and revised in 1937) manages never to allude to slaves or states' rights. Tate claimed that it was about "contemporary solipsism". Both poems are, in fact, constructed of what Jonathan Morse in his remarkable book, *Word By Word*, refers to as "virtual history", history freed from the troubling burdens and "entrainments" of its own vocabulary. The idea that Confederate "honor" can be isolated from what that honour defended is one of the principal examples of the shielding effect of Fugitive self-reflexive irony.

Fugitive irony, however, is not the only means of dealing with the ambivalence I mentioned above, the knotted entanglements of hope and fear. In my category of utopocalyptic poet, I would also place Hart Crane. Crane's poem, *The Bridge*, begun in the late twenties before the cataclysm of the Crash, was meant, as Crane says in his essay "Modern Poetry", "to absorb the machine, *i.e.*, acclimatize it as naturally and casually as trees, galleons, castles and all other human associations of the past" (Crane 1966, 261). Behind the poem, "what has principally spurred them [the thoughts and conceptions concerning *The Bridge*]", he told Waldo Frank, was "the Spengler thesis", (Crane 1966, 230) not so much the Spenglerian Decline of the West but Spengler's morphology, that theory of transformative and metamorphic inherencies of destiny itself to which the poet could become attuned and so write out the myth of the age. The new hero of such an age would not be the warrior or poet but the engineer or technician.

Crane writes in Section IV, "Cape Hatteras" of *The Bridge*: "The nasal whine of power whips a new universe.../Where spouting pillars spoor the evening sky/under the looming stacks of the gigantic powerhouse/ Stars prick the eyes with sharp ammoniac proverbs...New verities, new inklings..." (Crane 1966, 90). Here, Henry Adams' virgin and dynamo are replaced by technology cast in biblical dimension, one which constantly infers spiritual transcendence, as when the poet looks at the bridge and proclaims: "How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!" (Crane 1966, 46). The language of the poem wars between desperation and celebration, between the recalcitrant materialism of the subject matter and the attempt to place that matter on a mythic plane. What Yeats spoke of as rhetoric, as "the will attempting to do the work of the imagination", appears to permeate nearly all of its passages.

The real drama of the poem is in how the clotted language, the piled-on orisons try to force connections. The rhythms in the lines, the jazz-inflected syncopations strive for a kind of expressive naming, as though Crane's ultimate American word would exhibit the torsions of a construction gantry or the interior of a power plant. The diction, loaded with its "thous" and "thys", is often at war with itself. So Crane's exhibition occurs in a language darkly qualified by the "nasal whine of power", by "looming" and "sharp ammoniac", phrases which suggest a writer caught in the half-conscious ambivalence of his project. For *The Bridge* roots *geist* in (of all things) the unyielding attributes of material objects. It is a bit of American animism or transcendentalism gone somewhat berserk, an animism which is partly alleviated by Crane's depiction of American "nomad raillery", its down-and-out-ers, those least capable of being caught up in the technological transformations which govern the mythic status of the work.

Crane sensed his own ambivalence, I think, when he wrote in "Modern Poetry" that "the mere romantic speculation on the power and beauty of machinery keeps it at a continual remove; it cannot act creatively in our lives until, like the unconscious nervous responses of our bodies, its connotations emanate from within..." (Crane 1966, 262). In fact, one way to read *The Bridge* is to see it as continually trying to subsume within the psychic economy of a reader the material fact of the Brooklyn Bridge and the technological advances it represented.

Critics were divided over the success of Crane's poem. Clearly, his attempt to make the physical object of the bridge into a spiritual fact could not be attempted head-on. R. P. Blackmur, writing in *The Double Agent* in 1935, explained Crane's ambivalence this way: "Crane labored to perfect both the strategy and the tactics of language so as to animate and maneuver his perceptions—and then fought the wrong war and against an enemy that displayed, to his weapons, no vulnerable target" (Blackmur 1935, 273).

Crane's later poems, such as "The Broken Tower" with its "visionary company of love" appear to deconstruct thoroughly the Spenglerian trope of *The Bridge*. "The Broken Tower" can be read as a minuscule reflector of Crane's epic, one suffused with an air of reflexive poignancy as it forsakes linguistic structural engineering and "builds within a tower that is not stone". Here Crane's poetry is no longer concerned with marvels of wire and steel (which he had claimed "lend a myth to God") but with something beyond the material, "the matrix of the heart".

In his essay "American Poetry 1920–1930", collected in *Prepositions*, Zukofsky attacks the "indefinite language and prolong[ed] verbal indecision past the useful necessity of meaning" of Crane's poetry. "Crane errs on the side of mysticism", Zukofsky writes, placing this "unfortunate" problem on Crane's "pseudo-substratum of idea contrasting with the [the poem's] feeling tone" (Zukofsky 2000, 140). Rejecting Crane's "spirals of conceits" and by inference, the near mechanical application of Crane's idealism, Zukofsky's critique can be seen as part of a larger, career-long movement in his own work to find, as he later said of *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, a means of putting "all philosophy to rest", in other words, of claiming, as the possibility of poetry, a way of seeing or being in the world which is superior to any allegiance to system or philosophy. If *Bottom* and "*A*" represent culminations of this intention, then the poem "Mantis" and its supplement, "Mantis, An Interpretation", a work of the thirties, constitutes an important way station towards that goal.

We know that Zukofsky was deeply influenced by Marx at the time of writing "Mantis". His relationship to Marx's thought, however, was marked by a 'dialectical' dilemma of the very sort which Marx himself invokes in his famous aphorism concerning the philosopher whose job is no longer to describe the world but to change it. The dilemma, as it arises in Zukofsky, concerns, of course, the question of the poet's role as either reflector of the world or as instrument of change. Written during a period when most Marxist-oriented poets were following the mandate of a 'socialist realist' poetry for the masses, "Mantis", far from being a piece of propaganda or a purely Marxist "proof", is an example of Zukofsky's poetics at work—especially as given in statements like "An Objective". That is, the poem itself appears to be governed by a poetics of open and unfinished composition, one that cannot be tamed to a philosophical conception. Such a poetics is clearly enjoined in Zukofsky's epigraph from the Latin to "Mantis, An Interpretation" that "names are sequent to the things named", and in Zukofsky's use, almost as a litany of Dante's and Cavalcanti's sense of poetry, of "'(thought's torsion)'/*la battalgia delli diversi pensieri*.../the battle of diverse thoughts" (Zukofsky 1991, 68).

Like Crane's *The Bridge*, Zukofsky's poem, too, is a drama of the struggle of myth over and against the word. The utopocalyptic moment of the poem, the pressures brought to bear on poetic composition, here concerns not only the political status of the poem or poet, but the nature of words in relation to art and reality, especially as a totalised world view, one form of which is Marxism's attempts to subordinate all human activity to its categories and analyses.

In a sense, Zukofsky's poem reminds us of the antagonism between high modernist art and the impulse to provide meaningful social commentary. "The growing oppression of the poor", Zukofsky writes in the *Interpretation*, "is the situation most pertinent to us" (Zukofsky 1991, 69). If this is so, then, for poets of the thirties, as I have described above, the condition of this oppression is bound up, not only in external political relations about which one could propagandise *via* one's poetry, but in the very nature of poetic activity. The poem tries, on one level, to resolve these tensions. It is part formal plaint for the poor, as in the sestina's last lines, unmistakably hortatory, which read: “Fly Mantis, on the poor, arise like leaves/ The armies of the poor, strength: stone on stone/ And build the new world in your eyes. Save it!” (Zukofsky 1991, 66). At the same time, much of its modernist tendencies and idiosyncrasies, its obeisance to “making it new” are contained in the “Interpretation”, the explanation in open-form which partly explicates the sestina, while reminding us that “our world will not sustain it,/ the implications of a too-regular form” (Zukofsky 1991, 70).

Now you will recall that Zukofsky elsewhere has stated that the poem has a function, is a “job”, as he puts it. In this case, the job of the poem is not only a call to alleviate the condition of the poor, but, as I believe the interpretation makes clear, to resist the strictures which a purely socio-political view would impose on the poem. To do this, Zukofsky must honour and be faithful to the starting point of the incident which, in effect, generated the poem, the gratuitous occasion of the mantis in the subway, an occasion which sets into motion (“movement”) a series of thoughts and associations creating an order of relations faithful to the initial experience and contrary to the expected usages of the incident as symbolical (“no human being wishes to become/An insect for the sake of a symbol”) (Zukofsky 1991, 70) of the poor’s oppression or of the demonisation of capital. In other words, the poem’s turn is to be towards “an incident, *compelling any writing*” rather than the typical politicised use of language as propaganda or “message”. By staying with “thought’s torsions”, wherever they will lead, Zukofsky places his trust, not in political rhetoric but in something having “enough worth if the emotions can equate it”, in this case, from “Provencal myth” to “airships” or comments by the “British Admiralty”. “Mantis”, in effect, offers its own felt series of interrelationships, a counter-continuity, one not made up of Marxist analyses but of intuitive connections established by having been faithful, as Zukofsky insists, to the “original shock still persisting”. This is not so much a new making as a constant desiring, beyond a political schema, to be in touch with a social world. “So that”, Zukofsky writes:

> … the invoked collective
> Does not subdue the sense’s awareness,
> The longing for touch to an idea, or
> To a use function of the material:
> The original emotion remaining,
> like the collective,
> Unprompted, real, as propaganda (Zukofsky 1991, 72).

In effect, Zukofsky is trying here to find a way of refusing the hard conceptualisations of ideology and theory, so that he may return the act of poem-making to something that is simultaneously open-ended and analytical. Not so much to deny his own Marxist insights as to prevent any philosophy from having a hegemonic hold over existence. Because the world, in its entirety is beyond a single conception, so the poem must find its own unified form. The complexity of that form demands that the poem strive, as Zukofsky says in "Mantis's" brilliant final strophe, to hold "the simultaneous, the diaphanous, historical in one head" (Zukofsky 1991, 73).

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Now where such Zukofskian dexterity was absent, another powerful and fateful dynamic took over. I am thinking here of Oppen in the thirties. Oppen, reflecting back on the early days of the "objectivist" project, said that its aim was to replace the dreariness of "right thinking by an act of perception". Like Zukofsky, Oppen had tried to reopen the poem to experiences and perceptions which political theory or "right thinking" would deny or obscure. "Perhaps", he wrote retrospectively in a letter to Martin Rosenblum, "the word *revelatory* does define a common intention or effort—all experience is valid—the revelatory experience of one's own life—it is this that was uppermost in my mind (age 20 or thereabouts)" (Oppen 1990b, 285).

As I reread Oppen's *Discrete Series* (Oppen 2002, 3–35), looking for the 'drama' of the poems, I now find that the work, more than anything else, embodies a troubled vocabulary and structure of absences which clearly embeds the creation of the poem in the utopocalyptic moment of the thirties and perhaps, gives us as well, a few hints about Oppen's abandonment of poetry. Lacking "archival" proof, my remarks here are necessarily speculative.

Oppen's poem, written on the tail end of the Imagist movement and yet pushing against the boundary of language as it interacts with sensory and visual information, suggests an interrogation of Imagism's limits. (We must recall that William Carlos Williams' own questioning of Imagism was occurring at this time.) But this interrogation seems only part of a yet deeper undercurrent running through much of the work.

Let us speculate: The first section of *Discrete Series*, unlike the remaining ones, is composed in a straightforward, even classical syntax. Its language is literary and allusive, as in such phrases as: "rain falling in the distance more slowly" and "the world, weather swept" (Oppen 2002, 5), in the Jamesian referencing itself. These are the cadences of a language dying—dying, mind you, not because it has been de-authenticated but because the mechanical, scientistic and machine-like world which began to emerge in both the economic and artistic spheres will no longer speak in or listen to such a language. It is, in fact, a language on the verge of abandonment because there is no longer any community to hear it except as museum piece or anodyne (such as in the popular fiction of the period). Still, Oppen's intention, as can be seen from this first and the remaining sections, is to see "what [is] really going on". Only now, whatever language is to be used must be the language of "perception", i.e., *what is* can only be registered by a perceptual act become language. If the poetic language of the nineteenth century was rhetorical (made rhetorical by circumstance), and is now unhearable, that of the twentieth must be sensible and tangible, i.e., the strictest sort of Imagism. But that consideration in itself creates a problem.

When Williams remarked that Imagism failed because it lost all "structural necessity", he may very well have been referring to the kind of difficulty which Oppen confronted. Pure Imagism, a poetry of the strictly visible, cannot establish a set of relations between its parts. It can render a datum, indeed, that is its *forte*. But it cannot articulate the discursive (communal, social, philosophical) order in which data are held (realism) or in which they ought to be held (prophecy).

At this time, Oppen, like Zukofsky, was deeply influenced by Marxist thought and by the desire to be a socially useful individual in the face of the massive poverty of the Depression. So the question, as it came to him, was whether there was any social utility in poetry. If one thing having utility would be the poetic truth of the socio-political situation, then, in effect, the one poetic tool or technique Oppen can allow himself is Imagism. This is because perception, Imagism's basis, being undeniable, is always true. But what if that one tool, a severe and rigorous Imagism claiming to be free of ideological rhetoric, appears to be inadequate to the "job" poetry must accomplish for Oppen to remain a poet?

Clearly, such an inadequacy is continually signalled in the poems that make up *Discrete Series*, in their syntactical and denominative porosity and in their constant reference to what is hidden or can't be realized. For instance, reading *Discrete Series* (a work of thirty pages) one finds that in addition to the numerous syntactical gaps which make up Oppen's poetic signature, as it were, there are, scattered throughout, no less than five question marks, at least four "ifs" and over a dozen questions or implications of questions by way of negative troping. Here are some phrases which indicate what I think constitutes the tenor of the work (I have added a few words of my own to bring out my point): "Thus/Hides the//Parts" (Oppen 2002, 7); "Over what has the air frozen?" (Oppen 2002, 8); the question of what is "Not evident at 'The Sailor's Rest" (Oppen 2002, 10); what is left unstated in "He has chosen a place/With the usual considerations,/Without stating them" (Oppen 2002, 11)?; Why is "the closed car" "less strange" (Oppen 2002, 13)? How are we to resolve the passage which reads: "Tho the face, still within it,/Between glasses—place over which/time passes—a false light" (Oppen 2002, 13)? What of that falsity? And what of the mystery of: "Is it you who truly/excel the vegetable/.../Incognito as summer/Among mechanics" (Oppen 2002, 28)? Why the questioning poignancy of: "O what O what will/Bring us back to /Shore" (Oppen 2002, 32)? I find that these passages make a very interesting litany, one that suggests that at almost every turn, the language is on the edge of disappearing, of curling under itself, into absence. And such absence leaves us with an unbridgeable distance between the poem and the reality it meant to see when the narrator in the first passage wondered "what really was going on" on the other side of the "window glass". Here, the demand on the poet to invoke "right thinking" by perception—particularly placed on a poet who later expresses a strong belief in the small nouns, in the substantives of language—leads only to an abyss, a field of gaps and craters in meaning and even visualization.

Please understand me: the porosity of *Discrete Series* is not a failure of poetic will or integrity; it is the reverse. Indeed, as one reads the series, one thinks of Pound's line in *Canto XIII* about historians who were willing to leave blanks for what they did not know. In my reading, *Discrete Series* is less a poem about avant-garde technique or even "making it new" than a desperate cry in the poetic-political wilderness over insufficient means and, given Oppen's politics, the ultimate insufficiencies of his own poetry to enact social change or offer hope. In other words, as I have said in "Oppen and Stevens: Reflections on the Lyrical and Philosophical", *Discrete Series* is a poem written "under duress" of Poundian Imagist principles and yet, at the same time, it is written when Oppen felt most strongly, as he wrote in retrospect, "a tremendous difficulty of honesty, the whole weight of sincerity [seeming] to rest on one's shoulders" (Oppen 1990b, 82). The cry of the poem, its resolving trope, is the voicing of its own inability to conform to the hegemonies of the Marxist thinking of the thirties.

A further inference here is that, in Oppen, the porosity of the poem signalled the failure of a purely descriptive/referential poetics. Imagist techniques alone had become insufficient to articulate the poet's personal internal struggle or torment between poetry and politics. A reading of his later poetry and his letters after he began to write poetry again in the late fifties would in my judgment confirm this inference. Thinking back over his experience of the thirties in his letters, Oppen returned again to his abandonment of poetry in this way: "Maybe I admire myself more however, for knowing what is one thing and what is the other and what are the levels of truth—that is to say, for simply not attempting to write communist verse. That is, to any statement already determined before the verse. Poetry has to be protean; the meaning must begin there. With the perception" (Oppen 1990b, 22). When the means at hand failed him, when he could no longer reach to the level of truth he required of the poem, he dropped poetry for other tools.

I would add one more note on this subject. Someone attempting an assay of the comparative poetics of Oppen and Zukofsky might begin with this thesis: the very rigor of a poetics of pure perception or of, at least, its attenuated version in Imagism, was to be Oppen's undoing while for Zukofsky, perception—we remember the mantis as starting point—had been mainly a transformative beginning. Utopocalyptics at work.

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Zukofsky's way was one way out of the dilemma that Oppen had set for himself. Williams, that most difficult of writers to pin down, was involved in another. He was dealing with the political situation on a number of levels. On the one hand, perhaps with some irony, Williams, in the 1930s was collaborating with Nathanael West on an issue of *Contact II*, which was to feature the "good writing [even] among Communists". At the same time, in his well-known 1932 letter to Kay Boyle, a letter that is nearly a textbook of his poetics, Williams writes, "Bosh! All I want to do is to state that poetry in its sources, body, spirit, in its form in short, is related to poetry and not to socialism, communism or anything else that tries to swallow it" (Williams 1957, 131). "Good writing", "poetry", were, for Williams, not opposed to politics but were—on the level of thought—categories larger than socio-political systems. Poetry, he wrote in *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, is “the apex of knowledge”. It is “the one purely articulate form, more so than action which involves the mind so scantily, or to know” (Williams 1957, 1974, 66).

Williams’ views on this matter are most compelling stated in *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, but it may be useful here to see briefly how, in the thirties, Williams’ poetics were already establishing the idea of the poetic word or language as a mode of realization which had priority to any systematized belief.

Williams, in a letter from 1932 to Ezra Pound, discussed the “inexplicitness of modern verse as compared with, let us say, the *Iliad*”. “Whereas formerly”, Williams writes, “the music which accompanied the words amplified, certified and released them, today, the words we write, failing a patent music, have become the music itself, and the understanding of the individual (presumed) is now that which used to be the words” (Williams 1957, 126). Here we sense an attempt by Williams to clear the ground for poetry, not that poetry does not always bear some ideological trace or burden, but that for the poet, the attempt to signify can precede or take into account or even nudge aside the ideological atmosphere it is written under.

Zukofskian objectivist poetics were, for Williams, the way for this goal to be achieved. In a 1932 letter to Marianne Moore, he remarked of this method or honour code as he saw it in her work: “The meaning of the objective, the realization of its releasing quality, instead of its walling effect when badly comprehended, has been nowhere so well forced to the light. It is the underlying reality as well as the supreme difficulty of an art” (Williams 1957, 123). He pronounced this realization in her own poetry “a sense of triumph”.

Such an intention, to show the “releasing quality” of the objective, seems to me self-evident in much of Williams’ most powerful poems of the period. “Perpetuum Mobile: The City”, for example, a work which, formally, already prefigures the “variable foot” of the later poetry, is something of a demonstration. In the poem, the narrator is speaking to a woman about the city: “a dream/ we dreamed/each separately/we two/ of love/ and of/ desire—”. This is the dream “toward which we love”, a dream Williams says “a little false”, yet of such power that “there is no end/ to desire—/ let us break/ through/ and go there—/in vain”. The counterpoint of these lines, the force of desire and the hopelessness of attaining its object becomes the repeated motif of the poem. A litany of brutal factuality, of meaningless work, crime and gluttony is punctuated throughout the poem by the choral refrain of “for love”. The poem is constructed, as Williams once defined his poetics, out of “inimitable particles of dissimilarity” a means by which the traces of a thing can imply what is left out as well as what is included. This effect is similar to that of Williams’ “obsolete” image of the rose in the earlier *Spring and All*, where the visual datum “becomes a geometry” that “penetrates/ the Milky Way” (Williams I 1986, 430–435).

The spatiality of “Perpetuum Mobile”, its disjunctive deployment of images, rather than simply giving us a picture of the city, presents us with the ganglia of emotions that the modern city might induce. The poem, bent on embracing the harsh contraries of modern life, thus pits a utopian vision of the city with its repetitions of “for love” against the human results, the way people actually live in the city. The poem’s “dream”, the imagined city, is “a little false”, its images and evidence contradictory, as in “For love/his eyes are blown out” or in the passage where the city’s inhabitants are “guzzling/ the creamy foods/while out of sight/ in the sub-cellar” is “the foulest sink in the world”. The poem juxtaposes its images in such a way as to create a network of relations that palpably render the ambivalent texture of city life, “a dream/ of lights/ hiding/ the iron reason/ and stone/ a settled cloud—/City/ whose stars/ of matchless/ splendor—” (Williams I 1986, 434–435). As with nearly all of Williams’ later work, the appeal of the concrete imagery, sensuous and visual, accounts beyond rhetoric or conceptualisation for an actual historical matrix, an authentic datum, authentic because, in its unity, it has refused an easy surrender to a one-dimensional treatment of its subject. As with other objects in the world, the poem can be approached again and again for a variety of reasons, from knowledge to pleasure, to surprise. The poem as name, or as Zukofsky had it in his epigraph “names are sequent to the things named”. Which is what the English poet Charles Tomlinson wrote concerning the intention of Williams’ work: “to name what possesses no name”.

In yet another transposition of a utopocalyptic moment, Wallace Stevens’ late 1930s poem, “The Poems of Our Climate”, dramatizes the problematic of the poets such as the Objectivists above who were torn between the heaven or utopian world of the beautiful image and the restlessness of the mind faced with a very earthly apocalyptic chaos. For Stevens, a poetry of contemplative moments is insufficient and leaves a hunger to be fulfilled, not by a poetic dictum but by the uncertainties of existence, where “the imperfect is our paradise” and where “delight”