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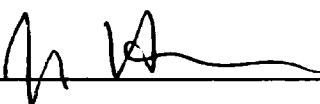
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"OF BEING NUMEROUS" AND THE ROMANTIC POETICS OF GEORGE OPPEN

by

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B.A. University of Montana. 1999

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

April 2002

Approved by:



Chairperson



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"Of Being Numerous" and the Romantic Poetics of George Oppen

Chairperson: Robert Baker ~~RB~~

George Oppen's long serial Poem "Of Being Numerous" is a late modernist exploration of traditionally Romantic themes such as the individual's place in relation to the larger social world and poetry's role in that world. Also of central concern is the Romantic attempt to renovate a fallen, commodified world.

Through the Philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Martin Buber we find an uneasy individual stance that refuses both the solipsistic isolation of the hermetic and the unreflective everydayness of the "numerous" masses. Oppen instead concentrates on a smaller, family-based, chain of relationships that allows him a clearing in which to open himself to poetic vision.

The poem moves through horror and despair at what it means to be "numerous" and ends in a mode of quietude, a mode that celebrates basic human connection and the miracle of Being itself.

"Of Being Numerous" and the Romantic Poetics of George Oppen

To Celebrate is my will; but what? And to sing with others,
but in this utter solitude I lack all that's divine.
-Hölderlin

Introduction: The Poem Grows

In 1789 William Blake produced his first copy of *Songs of Innocence*, a small though complex group of short lyrics which examined innocence itself as a problem to be dealt with, as a question. The poems are deceptively simple, the moral and political placement of the speaker shifting from one poem to the next and sometimes vanishing completely into the background. They do their best to form a whole.

About five years later (Blake dates it 1794), *Songs of Experience* appears. The two books are brought together and described as "Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human

Soul." Careful readers acknowledge a wink and a nod with this description. The irony is subtle but central. The work already begun in *Songs of Innocence* is carried to a pitch with the introduction of *Songs of Experience*. Namely, the deconstruction of the very categories being attended to. Particularly interesting in this changing context is the inclusion of identical poems in each volume. "Little Girl Lost" and "Little Girl Found," for example, enact a shift of perspective within the poems themselves. The poems' prophetic voice and imagery both express and dismiss the supposed dangers (physical, sexual, etc.) of seven-year-old Lyca's oblivious innocence. The first poem exposes the untruth of these fears, and the second discloses this new truth to her parents, those 'experienced' souls who fear the worst. When these poems are transferred to *Songs of Experience*, they undergo a greater transformation than that of coloring. The expanded context and --only supposed-- reversal of perspective change the implications of the vision, explode it, refuse to allow it to remain explicable as 'innocent' dreaming. Placing the vision in a context of experience politicizes and radicalizes the vision. The poem is growing.

More than a hundred and fifty years later (1965), George Oppen's volume *This In Which* appears, and within this volume we find a poem entitled "A Language of New York." It is a small grouping of eight short lyrics, hammering at its theme, its problem, its question. The question is Humanity,

and the prognosis, judging by the poem, is not good. Section after section indicts modern humanity, especially as typified by the modern city-dweller, for crimes of stupidity, shallowness, cruelty, wanton consumerism, and the almost complete emptying out of language. Section two assures us in our revulsion:

...they will come to the end
First of all peoples
And one may honorably keep
His distance
If he can.

End stop. Period. But of course, that's not the end. The poem attempts, futilely, to turn, to find what Oppen will later refer to as "the boundaries of our distance" (CP 165), with the reminders of actual, particular men he has known. This singularization is a momentary balm that cannot stand against the "force within walls" that is humanity. Every small redemptive move the poem makes is short-circuited, deconstructed, exposed. The poem is powerful in its pathos, in its phlegm, and in its failure. This poem never fully turns upon itself, never approaches its real questioning.

Three years later, *Of Being Numerous* is published, its title poem comprised of forty short lyrics, turning and turning upon themselves. Seven of the eight sections of "A Language of New York" appear within it, only mildly revised¹. The seed, when set beside the forever circling

¹Section four is abandoned for what I can only imagine to be its

rings of the new poem, is transformed. The shock, as Oppen might say, is metaphysical.

This similarity between Oppen and Blake is accidental though instructive, but there are greater, deeper, and essential similarities as well. Oppen inherits a visionary, often apocalyptic, poetic from Blake and his contemporaries, and continues to employ and destroy Romantic dialectical movements. Like so many moderns, he is struggling with the ever more complex consequences of Enlightenment and Romantic modes of thinking and can no longer consider truly shedding the new life these revolutions built up, but also lives daily with the horror that has come of it. It has often been said that the Romantic movement goes downward and inward², and the Romantic impulse may finally be grinding to its logical conclusion, a conclusion most of the Romantics foresaw and feared: solipsism on a massive scale. The modern world sees the individual turning inward, separating from its community, and appearing to find none of the revelatory sources of creative power dreamed of by the Romantics. Oppen, standing in the midst of the failure of Enlightenment ideals, the Romantic project, and his own involvement in a failed Marxist project, continues this dialogue, re-shapes it in troubling and fascinating ways, trying to reverse the

too-overt discussion of the building of the poem. *Of Being Numerous* instead allows this discussion to arise as a kind of subtext.

²c.f. Northrop Frye "The Drunken Boat: the Revolutionary Element in Romanticism" in *The Stubborn Structure* (London: Methuen, 1970), p 203.

inward movement, to re-think our numerousness and somehow still cling to our singular and Romantic ideals.

Or so this essay hopes to prove. In its full context, "Of Being Numerous" forms an incredibly complex, occasionally impenetrable poem of crisis. The crisis is not new, and it is not unfamiliar to Blake and his fellow Romantics. The crisis is that of the single human attempting to realize an authentic relationship with his world and his fellow human beings. "A Language of New York" outlines the initial crisis, that of the fallen state of that world. The forestalled apocalypse of "Of Being Numerous" compounds the crisis by attending to the simultaneously solipsistic and creatively productive aspects of the 'poetic' refusal of that world. The crisis is, therefore, Romantic. That is to say, at its best it is human and undogmatic in its reaction to modernity. That is to say, it attempts to ward off despair. Its charms are its words, its talismans are its faith in its language. The poem grows with its questioning.

This essay will attempt a patient reading of all forty sections of "Of Being Numerous" while contextualizing the sequence within the framework of a Romantic crisis as well as the Heideggerian and Buberian philosophical tensions that help to shape the poem's movements. This means I will attempt to explicate a poem meant to be undergone, essentially to transcribe the dialogue between one reader and the poem and pretend that the poem has spoken, "which act is/ violence" (CP 98). The hope, meager enough, is to

focus a simple spot of light upon this extraordinary poem. The faith is that this spot of light, artistic or not, will not demean us.

Part One: The Fallen World (sections 1-8)

There are things
We live among 'and to know them'
Is to know ourselves'.

The poem opens with an assertion that throws us back to *The Materials* and its epigraph from Maritain (apparently the only meaningful contribution by Maritain to Oppen's thinking). It introduces Oppen's worldliness, his dedication to the possibility of humanity's authentic relationship to the world. And the next lines:

Occurrence, a part
Of an infinite series,

The sad marvels;

introduces a vexed and vexing temporality, a troubling though inescapable conception of history that will become a major factor in the poem (CP 147). This is not Pound's "poem including history," far from it, but rather a meditation upon how history does or doesn't contain the poem, a lament for the schism that lies between the two. At least this is one thread of the poem. One lament of many. So many tales of wickedness, the occurrences in which the world is made real, is disclosed, in which we "know ourselves." But this is not our wickedness, we are told, and the voice comes like Blake's. But which Blakean voice is it? Is this the

prophetic voice of "Little Girl Lost" that assures or the "voice of the devil," come not to comfort but to challenge?

And lest we are lured too easily into the former view, lest we think we're heading toward some Emersonian celebration of nature, Mary Oppen's words sound a respectful though somewhat despairing note. Despairing or not, the location is unquestionably edenic. That it is a fallen Eden is demonstrated by the gap between man and his world. The world and its things are viewed through the "ruined window" --a career-spanning trope for the poem³-- and all that seems to come of this vision is a drastic uncertainty. The natural world itself seems to actively cover itself over, to obscure itself.

And so to speak the existence of things is a task being taken up, a challenge to be met, already short-circuited by the "world," the Spring, the machinations of time that obscure any objective approach (CP 148). That this is an "existence of things," that is that the world is made of things, is borne out by Wittgenstein and Heidegger and acts (quite independently of both thinkers) as a central tenet of Oppen's faith. But this fairly simple tenet is challenged both by those natural obfuscations and by the technological manifestation of modernity as the force that makes the world an object for its subject. Things become objects.⁴ There is

³Cf. Maude Blessingbourne back in *Discrete Series* (CP 3).

⁴In *Being and Time* we learn that this interpretation of knowledge "contains as much 'truth' as it does vacuity," and "subject and object are not the same as Da-sein and world" (56). Even the formulation of a

a tension here for the poet as metaphysician. While one recognizes the dangers of a pure Cartesian split, of an objectifying metaphysic, one is also dedicated to a poetry (especially as found in imagism) of sight, of 'vision' as understood in a very grounded and worldly context (I will have more to say about Oppen as imagist later). Such a poetry relies almost totally on the belief in a world that exists "out there." This is simply one more instance of the incompatibility of poetry with the 'real' (i.e. political) world. Oppen does not miss this incongruence, but meditates upon it. It is finally a central concern, for one way of demonstrating the singular and numerous dichotomy comes by trying to reconcile Oppen's dedication to dialogue and community with his assertion that "the only life for humanity is the life of the mind" (The Contemporary Writer 177). This is Cartesian talk, and it may be dangerous talk, but it points us on our way to seeing how Oppen's "singular" antihero is the poet, and he may just be the only hero left. More of this later.

While Mary speaks in awe at the inexplicability of the 'natural world,' which is always simultaneously closing and disclosing itself to us, there is in section two an

rejecting statement is said to be fatal, as it allows the grounding metaphysic to remain unchallenged. It is important to note that while much of the poem's vocabulary is Heideggerian, that vocabulary doesn't quite bear out in Oppen's poetics (there is no such simplicity of differentiation for Oppen between objects and things) but the 'force' and the procedure are inescapable. Oppen refuses dogmatism of any kind, but, instead, utilizes a dialectical movement --even when clearly rejecting one side of the dialectic-- to tease out and "test" the truth of his poem.

ironically pejorative description of the world as "unmanageable." The adjective speaks not only of objectification but of a kind of utilitarian relationship to 'nature' that is vexing to Oppen. There is a tension here between a thinker who recognizes the oppressive and nihilistic metaphysics that objectifies and empties out things and language and a man whose Marxist leanings are always tempting him to push such considerations behind the simple question of human happiness. More often than not, Oppen's conscience keeps him on the former path, but the latter is always there as a safety net when he falls into despair over the seeming impossibility of his task.

SK...
 Absolute
 ...

What is certain is that the natural world is covered over by the "city of corporations" in which the objectification is in direct service to a commodification of these 'objects.' The syntactic doubleness of "Glassed/ In dreams// And images--" speaks of a reciprocal movement in which the human mind's poetic sensibility is both commodified and constituted by vulgar consumerism -glassed in- and the way in which that sensibility has been sublimated and exploited in order to build this city of corporations which is "glassed" in dream images: advertising that seems to constitute the very structure of the city.

But already there is a turn signaled by the dash; the "pure joy/ Of the mineral fact" is joy. Joy is not a word found ironized in Oppen; it is in some sense the extremity of human experience: the revelation. "The mineral fact"

returns us to the 'thingness' of the world. As in "The Building of the Skyscraper": "we look back/ Three hundred years and see bare land" (CP 131). But it is not only that somewhere beneath the city there is "world," but that the city is a world, that a populace flows through it, is born, lives, and dies. And there is always a desperately hopeful belief in the purity of the world that finds comfort in the steel and stone that make up the mineral fact of the city. As Reznikoff's steel girder is "still itself" among the rubbish, the world continues to assert itself as world even in the corporate city (*Complete Poems of Charles Reznikoff* 1; 121). Whether anyone recognizes this assertion may of course be the sole deciding question. The possibility of joy comes from this awareness, this revelation: what constantly asserts itself in Oppen's poetry as the miracle of place. As Wittgenstein has it: "It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists" (*Tractatus* 149). It is this "mystical" awareness of the miracle of the world and the constant return, with Heidegger, to Leibnitz' question: "why is there Being at all and not rather Nothing?" that serve as groundings for both Oppen's faith and his poetics. The poem's return to the impenetrability of the world --notably sexual language applied to the Freudian city of sublimated desire-- is a movement toward this faith, toward faith as a kind of metaphysical negative capability, a willingness to reside within the unmanageable and inexplicable, to approach it with awe.

This understanding of the city as 'world' is borne out by the phenomenological reaction to it. "The emotions are engaged/ Entering the city/ As entering any city" (CP 149). The stagnant monuments of the tenements both await us (cf. sect. 21) and outlast us (cf. "Party on Shipboard" CP 13). In Heideggerian terms, we are "thrown" into this already extant world. The thrust of this section skirts this idea only briefly and moves into the central question and problem of the poem (and Oppen's poetics as a whole): the question of humanity.

In an important interview with L.S. Dembo, Oppen says, "Of Being Numerous asks the question whether or not we can deal with humanity as something which actually does exist" (*The Contemporary Writer* 175). Section 3 approaches the question negatively. We encounter others as part of the city, coeval with it. They are part of the world into which we are thrown. This already objectifies the other, even identifies the other with the city itself. We see others as things. But there is a further distancing that occurs by recognizing the gap between the self and the "populace" that flows through the city. This is meant as a revision of what we "imagine," i.e. that others are simply objects in the world, but is clarified into a more complex and uncertain force. The singular noun "populace" for the many which it is liberates the others from static thingness but also performs a further violence. The objectification of human beings is carried to its logical conclusion as a

singular object: humanity. This object is destructured and metamorphosed into a force. "This is a language, therefore, of New York." That is to say, this is of necessity, this is already understood.

"The people of that flow/ are new" picks up the river metaphor and extends it into a symbol for an inauthentic being-in-the-world that moves through the city, finding everything new (CP 149). This emphasis on the "new" has been critiqued quite thoroughly by Heidegger. It finds itself manifest as "curiosity," or the "restlessness and excitement from continual novelty and changing encounters" (*Being and Time* 161). This "curiosity" is part of Da-sein's fallenness or falling prey, and the allusive calling up of the biblical Fall that comes with that name works in much the same way as the "tale of our wickedness"; it connects the knowledge of the world with our separation from it. This semi-active way of being appears to have little bearing on this "flow" until we arrive at the curious newness in relation "to their dwelling." The term is almost certainly adopted from Heidegger, the singular "dwelling" for the plural "their" signifying their way of being rather than simply their homes or dwelling-places. The Heideggerian dwelling encompasses both, showing how the way one lives in relation to the earth, to one's world, is constitutive of one's being. Da-sein, as being-in-the-world, is one who dwells. The flow, the nameless force that moves through the city, does not have this relationship to its "there." The "tarred roofs/

And the stoops and doors--/ A world of stoops--/ are petty alibi." They stand as a mockery of authentic dwelling, not in their structure itself --that is to say not in a simple dichotomy of urban and agrarian-- but in the way their building is experienced.

Building as Dwelling, that is, as being on the earth, however, remains for man's everyday experience that which is from the outset "habitual" --we inhabit it, as our language says so beautifully: it is the *Gewohnte*. For this reason it recedes behind the manifold ways in which dwelling is accomplished, the activities of cultivation and construction. These activities later claim the name *bouen*, building, and with it the fact of building, exclusively for themselves. The real sense of *bouen*, namely dwelling, falls into oblivion.

(*Poetry, Language, Thought*

147-8)

The people of that flow "inhabit," but they do not dwell. They approach dwelling as newness, as novelty. They are, to use a central trope, rootless, and "satirical wit/ will not serve." That is to say, it is no joke. This rootlessness has powerful ramification.

In his *The Pound Era*, Hugh Kenner makes much of *The Cantos'* "signed Column." It is a simple double column cut from one stone, and signed by the craftsman in a gesture of pride. Williams is reported to have asked, "how the hell could we have any architecture when we ordered our columns by the gross" (*The Pound Era* 323). The significance of the column certainly has much to do with craftsmanship, but both

Pound and Williams direct the question toward economics. When the question arises in "Of Being Numerous," the root of the dilemma is found not in mechanization, mass-production, or usury. Oppen, not surprisingly, finds the question to be one of metaphysics.

The object in question in Oppen's poem is the inscribed date of 1875 on the pylon of a bridge. The nineteenth century date is telling, pointing back with Williams to a time when one would bother to date such a thing, when it was thought to be 'permanent.' And it is also shocking in the city of corporations, this thing that has lasted, this sign that this place does pre-date us, that others came before. And the question of pride is not absent either. But these all come together into a moment, one of the "sad marvels." The subject of the section is not the bridge, the pylon, the date, or the men who chiseled that date into the stone. The subject is the speaker's reaction to it. One wants to speak of a Joycean epiphany, but it is rather a moment of symbolic transference. The historical record of what is taken as an instance of authentic building as dwelling is named as "consciousness// Which has nothing to gain, which awaits nothing,/ Which loves itself" (CP 150). This Cartesian consciousness which hovers disembodied above the footpath is simultaneously the source of the subject/object metaphysic already critiqued and the source of a powerful way of being that is for Oppen, despite any limitations and dangers, the necessary path for humanity. It is "the life of the mind,"

and what will soon be troublingly troped as "the shipwreck of the singular".

That "we are pressed, pressed on each other" is not necessarily a product of modernity but an essential condition, and the complaint seems to arise simultaneously with it (CP 150). The factory provides the necessity, and the tenements rise to fill it. Freud tells us this 'civilization' is our discontent, Sartre tells us Hell is other people, and Oppen tells us, yes, of course, but this is what we've chosen.

The choice is central. The will of the "we" that has chosen to inhabit and embody (the word here at its most literal) this force, this pressure (a weight in its bed), is divisible into its singular lives. This is the difference between Humanity and the sea: we are more than this weight. Or so we constantly assert. The American city is the causeway in which the mass of humanity flows, and each human voice believes itself singular.

This tension is not new. This tension is not even American. This tension is human --as understood within a context of 'Humanity', and the questions it brings to the fore are crucial ones.

But just as Oppen fits into a tradition of a Romantic crisis, he also fits into a tradition of crisis philosophy that moves from Kierkegaard through Nietzsche and Heidegger. This accounts somewhat for his curious stance, but that stance is made more curious by his dogged humanism, his

liberalism, his populism, and his almost religious belief in the possibility of humanity. The poetic and philosophic, for all their commonalities, form opposite poles. Before moving on, we'll examine just how Oppen does fit into this philosophic tradition and how he keeps himself outside its lure of solipsistic despair.

The central tropes of the poem revolve around Oppen's strange nomenclature for a standard opposition: singularity and numerousness for individuality and community. This latter, in its fallen state, has been variously labeled the crowd, the herd, or the they-self (das Mann). That this latter element, this oppressive 'they' exists, that it is oppressive, that it endangers the individual's ability to exist in a proper attitude toward his world, is taken as simple fact. Kierkegaard rails against it and suffers personal seclusion in the face of it. Nietzsche simply disdains it and is awestruck by the incredible power it wields. Heidegger gives it the place of Satan in the spiritual development of his Da-sein as he continually applies the vocabulary of Genesis to his critique. Even Martin Buber, in his brilliant critiques of Kierkegaard⁵ and Heidegger, seems to feel no reluctance in naming the mass of humanity as fundamentally botched and dangerous to the soul. The essential difference, and the essential question, is how

⁵Heidegger seems impossible to imagine without Kierkegaard, and it is in that way only that Kierkegaard seems to really connect to Oppen's thinking.

one lives his or her individual existence in the context of this "numerousness."

Heidegger's answer is especially poignant for Oppen because it holds such an appeal. Its romantic valorization of the single individual as bearer of language, shepherd of Being, revealer of Truth, rhymes nicely with Oppen's romantic tendencies. Heidegger speaks to the artist and for the artist and in weary want of an artist. It is not surprising that so many artists have found his voice compelling. But there are fundamental contradictions within Heidegger's discussion of the relation between Da-sein and the They. These contradictions, rather than necessitating a refusal of the doctrine, lead Oppen into a space of uncertainty where the examination of the philosophy's problematic leads into the circuitous questioning that is the poem. The force of the poem comes from the refusal to either ignore the contradiction or let it be subsumed under any dialectical finagling. Oppen finds in Heidegger a dramatic demonstration of his own unease. It is the very question of being numerous.

Heidegger allows only a few defining characteristics of Da-sein. One is its dwelling, its being-there (as the name more than suggests), its worldliness. Another is its being-with, or Mit-dasein, which accepts the other not only as valid but as defining of Da-sein's very existence. We exist in our relationship to the world and to others. Furthermore, the Being of Da-sein is defined as "Care," a

slippery term, yes, but even the most simplistic cognitive thinking of the word must acknowledge its relational nature. Having already discussed Da-sein's Being-in-the-world, let us now examine this Being-with as Care as characteristics for a moment and assure ourselves of its centrality.

As Heidegger attempts the disclosure of Da-sein in its everydayness, he asks the question, "Who is it who is in the everydayness of Da-sein?" (*Being and Time* 107). So far, Da-sein is only the "I" that exists in its "there". It is a self. But in this world there are other beings, not simply objects that Da-sein approaches as objectively present, but other Da-sein, other selves who alter our very attitude toward the "I," for they are in-the-world as well, and their existence is tied up inexorably with mine. Despite the compulsory language of subject and object, there is here required a recognition of the very sameness of the other, of the impossibility of imagining an "I" without it.

"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. This being-there-too with them does not have the ontological character of being objectively present "with" them within a world. The "with" is of the character of Da-sein, the "also" means the sameness of being as circumspect, heedful being-in-the-world.

(*Being and Time* 111)

To a great degree it is others, the they, whom we 'take care' of as manifest in "concern." This being-with as care is so fundamental that any authentic being-one's-self is not

being separate from the they, but is rather "an existentiell modification of the they" (*Being and Time* 122). This definition makes selfhood always a shipwreck, a separation from the they.

Or so it appears. Martin Buber's critique of Heidegger and the they-self calls this talk a sham.⁶ Heidegger's doctrine, he asserts, is wholly monological. The individual, the "I," seeks resoluteness as a solitary being. Buber points us toward Heidegger's pathways to becoming "resolute," and shows how they all point Da-sein away from being-with and toward solipsism. Da-sein becomes resolute by moving through angst and toward one's own death --for Heidegger the most individual affair--, and by learning to answer the call of conscience, the call which brings Da-sein into its guilt, or knowledge of its thrown state. There is also a backward movement to this resoluteness that connects one with his historical destiny. This is an unstable and potentially troublesome movement and constitutes the only real connection with others Da-sein need have, and that connection is with an extinct --and romanticized-- ancestry. What is central is that Heidegger pays lip service to a relational grounding for Da-sein, while Da-sein's becoming resolute is a wholly individual affair. Selfhood is, finally, a positive and permanent modification of the they.

⁶*Between Man and Man* pgs 163-181.

Buber says that Heidegger's self is a closed system, and that is finally the bright light of shipwreck. That separation may lead to creative acts of will, but they make the self sick. Buber accepts a great deal of Heidegger's project, but wishes to ground it in a genuine relation between man and man.

I think this revision of Heidegger, through Buber, is the closest to Oppen's standpoint, and it of course resolves none of the difficulties still inherent to that project. What Oppen finally takes from Heidegger is his Romantic belief in the quiet power of the individual mind to reveal truth. The movement of this thought is important as well, and I think that it is telling, and most important, that for all the philosophical turning and re-turning, call and response, Oppen could have --and surely did-- read Blake's *Jerusalem*. There too we find a self sick and divided, its creative powers compromised both by its relation with and separation from its other aspects. And there too, the final awakening comes with the simplest of revelations: "This is friendship and brotherhood; without it man is not" (*Jerusalem* 96.16).

This alignment between the "shipwreck of the singular" and the creatively nihilistic impulses of Heidegger and Nietzsche is given credence by section 8's discussion of "Amor fati" (CP 151). Here Nietzsche's love of fate, as typified by the "Eternal Recurrence of the Same," functions

as one response or alternative to our choice of being numerous. It has its affinities to what Oppen sees as a metaphysic based on concepts such as luck, and is dismissed in its symbolic form --the serpent eating its tail-- as "the root/ of evil" (CP 137). Fate and destiny, contrary to the individual will (disregarding any possibility of a Zarathustrian will-to-fate), strips humanity of its responsibility and signals the resigned death-in-life given its most poignant expression in Eliot's *The Waste Land*. This state (as well as that poem) is the necessary state for conversion. The nature of that conversion is endlessly variable, but Blake's renovation of the individual and its sensory-creative powers, leading toward an apocalypse on a larger socio-political scale, certainly rhymes more with Oppen's thought than, say, joining the Anglican Church. Anglicanism, of course, may well be much more consoling to the individual than an attempted Blakean apocalypse of the soul, but the latter is almost certainly what "Of Being Numerous" is moving toward.

The circle of fate that moves steadily by, shifting like the clouds, is propelled only by a vulgar temporality: "Among days// Having only the force/ Of days." This resignation to fate as history, to an amorphous social project long forgotten, suffers most greatly from its total lack of praxis. The question, unasked today, is that of praxis:

What do we believe
 To live with? Answer.
 Not invent --just answer-- all
 That verse attempts.
 That we can somehow add each to each other?
 (CP 31)

This earlier manifesto appears in "Blood from the Stone" (importantly marking Oppen's return to poetry after twenty-five years of silence) and already the seeming lack of project is oppressive. What are we doing and why? These are the basic questions for civilization, the "Most simple/ Most difficult."

Part Two: the Redemptive Movement (Section 9-14)

Section nine opens with a quotation from one of Rachel Blau DuPlessis' letters. In essence, it is simply a misapplication of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, though it is poignantly misapplied. The question "Whether, as the intensity of seeing increases, one's distance from Them, the people, does not also increase" reinforces the separation of the singular poet, but also deconstructs the very concept of the numerous as something objectively present. As we approach the sea of the Them, we find only individuals, and this simple fact makes the force these individuals form especially troubling. These lines also reinforce a separation between 'practical' social action and the poetic dedication to vision.

Oppen's answer to these charges is once again that the only life is the life of the mind. "I can enter no other

place": that quiet and dreadful statement exemplifies the "shipwreck of the singular" (CP 152). But, there is an explicit valorization of the poetic power in his assertion that this entering of the self, this search for vision, that "instant in the eye," is worth the requisite distance from the people. We must enter the singular for what it offers. The dream of the beach --the shipwreck metaphor slowly filling out-- is a dream of a place where the singular is held in its unearthly bonds, where the sea laps at one's feet, where one has access to genuine vision, eternity in a grain of sand. This is a prototypical romantic valorization of the individual without any wit or irony, though not without reservation. The bright light of shipwreck is still light, and light is that first, most powerful miracle. The question remains, what kind of vision "the people" offer, and how one is to escape the obvious solipsistic trap that this valorization opens.

Section ten outlines Oppen's philosophy of failure, perhaps the most homegrown, primitive metaphysic imaginable. The metaphysic revolves around simple human dialogue and the fore-acceptance of the failure of that dialogue. We begin with a rejection of a kind of numerous art, the dythrambic art of the late sixties that would destroy the "isolated man." Oppen says simply, "I will listen to a man, and when I speak I will speak, tho he will fail and I will fail. But I will listen to him speak." This is the only hope, and the reactive response to the failure of this hope is to try and

find a voice of the masses. This voice, the poem tells us, is nothing, and says nothing.

Instead, Oppen refuses to discard the simple dialogic metaphysic, despite an only half-ironic admission of its failure, because it is, to a degree, the height of our progress. That it has not supplied us with the happiness we await is something we must learn to bear.

The light seeps into section eleven as into the city, unwarranted, undeserved. This is again miracle. Another miracle is that the city does not exclude the possibility of joy.

But before any moment of joy we have the city figured as man, a movement made explicit in Blake's poetics, and taken up by Williams' in his *Paterson*. Oppen imports the technique and employs it throughout the poem in more subtle and implicit ways than either of the two. Here, the buildings are empty shells, much like the cave/skull images that proliferate throughout Blake's work, awaiting some self, any self, to enter. But of course, one can enter no other place but one's self, and Blake's caverns are almost always symbolic of an enclosed or imprisoned self. The individual standing in the city waves only to himself, a mildly comical moment in the poem, but the imagery drives it home. The buildings "stand on low ground, their pediments/ Just above the harbor" (CP 153). This image rhymes with the poet as Crusoe standing on the beach, staring out to sea, seeing only himself, while the water moves at his feet. This

waving to oneself comes to look like a kind of intellectual masturbation. As Buber tells us, "that one can stretch out one's hands to one's image or reflection in a mirror, but not to one's real self" (*Between Man and Man* 167). And again, the cry for dialogue is heard.

"Speak// if you can// Speak" comes like the voice of one crying in the wilderness, and we receive a small story about Phyllis⁷. Phyllis is transported by a moment of joy, her heart is "suddenly tight with happiness" at the vision of a spot of light on the curb. She has sudden access to the miracle of light and place. Oppen says, this moment, this light, cannot demean us, and he simultaneously declares that it is not 'art.' That it cannot demean us is a statement of faith. This moment is essential to human happiness. It is central to the simple existential fact that we want to be here. That it is not art is a statement of aesthetics and terribly obvious. Phyllis is not experiencing 'art' (in quotes), but life, the world, light and joy. She is experiencing for a moment what it means to be human. In this light, 'art' vanishes.

Sections twelve and thirteen form a contrasting pair, and this pairing is used to examine the modern world as held up against the primitive. This is a dichotomy explored by many, and the ends to which it is used are legion. Some use it to enforce a city as jungle metaphor, stressing the

⁷"Not neoclassic": another wink at *Paterson*.

primitiveness of modern life. Reznikoff's subway station⁸ works, for the most part, in this way:

This subway station
with its electric lights, pillars of steel, arches of
cement, and trains--
quite an improvement on the caves of the cave men;
but, look! on the wall
a primitive drawing.
(*Reznikoff 2; 31*)

But as Reznikoff never left the city, knew nothing other, his relationship to it is significantly different from Oppen's.

Another pole is the valorization of the primitive, the backward glancing toward origins that appear to be lost or at least dangerously corrupted in the modern world. Heidegger can be quite extreme in this movement. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, he rejects the basic narrative of "the development of humanity from a wild huntsman and a traveler by dugout canoe, to a builder of cities and person of culture" (165).

These are notions from cultural anthropology and the psychology of primitives. They arise from falsely transferring a science of nature that is already untrue in itself to human Being. The fundamental error that underlies such ways of thinking is the opinion that the inception of history is primitive and backward, clumsy and weak. The opposite is true. The inception is what is most uncanny and mightiest.

⁸More on this important locale later.⁷

This longing for "the inception" is what appears to be manifest in Oppen's description of the 'primitive' relationship to the world.

They made small objects
 Of wood and the bones of fish
 And of Stone. They talked
 Families talked,
 They gathered in council
 And spoke, carrying objects.
 They were credulous,
 Their things shone in the forest
 (CP 155)

And the insistence that it will "never return, never" with its elegiac tone, does seem to speak to Heidegger's entropic version of modernity. But while Oppen gives prominence to the primitive's relationship to their objects and their world, in particular to their overcoming of an objectifying relationship, the emphasis falls most on their ability to speak, their "council" dialogue that sustains them. Buber wishes to find proof of this primacy of relation in the primitive's language.

The nuclei of this language, their sentence-words-- Primal pre-grammatical forms that eventually split into the multiplicity of different kinds of words-- generally designated the wholeness of relation. We say, "far away"; the Zulu has a sentence-word instead that means: "where one cries, 'mother, I am lost.'"... What counts is not these products of analysis and reflection but the genuine original unity, the lived relationship.
 (*I and Thou* 69-70)

The emphasis on origins remains, but the sense of the value of those origins has shifted in predictable ways. Whereas Heidegger would find at the origin Being and Da-sein in a

right relationship to that Being, Buber finds, manifest even in the language, the essential relation between beings. This is the relation Oppen seeks everywhere and cannot find in modernity. (One need only compare the verbs applied to each group to determine their relationship to the world. The primitive makes, talks, gathers, speaks, and carries; the modern finds, shops, chooses, judges, develops.) The contrasting moderns

...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.

These are the ghosts that endanger one's soul, and how does one begin to even attempt to speak to such a ghost? How does one begin to reestablish the dialogue of the council in a world where a rotten bureaucratic process stands in its stead. The only possibility, it seems, is simple dialogue between individuals, and Oppen has already labeled that endeavor a failure⁹.

The only possibility of it ever returning (though he will explore other possibilities, as he must) is apocalypse, now able to be realized in the most un-spiritual terms, those of nuclear annihilation. This possibility stands as an

⁹Section 13 is particularly interesting in its shift of context. As it appeared in "A language of New York", it was simply another beat in the anti-modern diatribe, whereas here it is the second movement of a dialectic, no less damning, but more compelling in its dialogic shape.

imposing force behind all of the poems, and the nihilistic tendency it seems to produce is, at best, a Nietzschean wish for danger. If we are now totally endangered, might we not begin asking the simple and most difficult questions? No, "they will come to an end/ first of all peoples" to do so. The section ends with another indignant cry of singularity: "One may honorably keep// his distance/ if he can."

The following section immediately speaks of the impossibility of that distance. It heroically names individuals who emerge from that force of numerousness, as if trying to establish and maintain their reality. Yes, there is a force that is 'the people,' and they continually counteract the wish and need to speak, but there are things to be said, perhaps these names, these single lives to be spoken out. The poet speaks out, drowned by history which only moves over him with the force of days, its forward-moving wheel, and perhaps what he cries is: "Find me" (CP 158).

Part Three: A New Covenant (Section 15-26)

Sections 15 and 16 demonstrate Oppen's editorial abilities. Both sections have been stripped of any relevance to their original contexts but acquire new valences and resonances within the poem.

Fifteen, or the 'chorus (androgynous),' appears first as a somewhat sinister lampoon of what Oppen thought to be

the central movement of contemporary poetry written by women (Letters 110). He mourns the lack of a strong tradition, of a monumental voice, for women poets, and sees most of the poetry appearing around him to be concerned mostly with making itself heard rather than attempting a poetic opening to the world. At one point in his correspondence Oppen decries the lack of metaphysical thought in women. Troubling as all this may be, the re-contextualizing of these lines (and the emphasis on the androgyny of the chorus) signal a radical rethinking. Perhaps, as with Phyllis and her spot of light, this cry is not 'art,' but it is recognized as a genuine, human cry. It is the cry of loneliness in seclusion. It is Oppen's cry.

Similarly, the quotation from *Fear and Trembling* ignores its original context completely. The movement of the thought seems in itself appealing to Oppen, but it is also a kind of manifesto, a declaration that the poet has not (or should not) resign himself. In these lines speaks one of the most powerful tropes of Oppen's oeuvre: the Orphic journey to rescue love. In this spirit the poem pushes onward, attempting to search out the dangerous path upward, and fighting the urge to look back.

Central to the task of rescuing love is the task of rescuing language. We find the same image applied at the end of "A Narrative" where the speaker outlines the project to

...rescue
Love to the ice-lit

Upper World a substantial language
of clarity, and of respect.
(CP 140)

Here, love and language are inseparable, and in section seventeen we find the downward movement enacted again as the poem moves into the underground realm of the subways where the "roots of words/ dim". This way of envisioning the subway is not unique; Reznikoff has multiple such visions of the city's underground, and Eliot's *Four Quartets* begins its Dantesque descent into asceticism in the London tube, but Oppen is attracted to a more complex vision. His underground is both the 'anti-ontological' world of the they-self where language is corrupted, but it is also the Freudian underworld, a Greek underworld, a place of origin that contains the possibility of both vision and rebirth.

Reznikoff gives an inscription for the subway: "This is the gift of Hephestus, the artificer,/ the god men say is lame," (*Reznikoff* 1; 111) and this ambivalent vision is found also in Oppen's "Vulcan" in which the crippled girl is both the creature of this underworld and the creator. That poem's sadness comes from a sense of betrayal of the childhood dreams of possibility, a driving underground of those nascent creative powers (it is, therefore, a very Blakean poem), but in section seventeen we attempt to reconcile ourselves with our choice of being numerous and ask, what this movement could mean. Oppen sees in it a fleeing from selfhood and responsibility but also a desire

for praxis. "He wants to say/ His life is real,/ No one knows why." Again it is the cry of the lost soul aching to be found, but to find him, we must navigate through the "ferocious mumbling, in public,/ Of rootless speech."¹⁰

The next triptych of sections moves us back into the subway by way of Vietnam and the atrocities committed there in a curious diffusion of numerousness and singularity. The difference becomes more and more difficult to establish. The military action, in the name of a people, operates as the disembodied hand of a bewildered public. It is a public immured in an objectifying metaphysic that makes "a plume of smoke, visible at a distance/ in which people burn" appear "ordinary" (CP 160). But within this numerousness is the individual will, turned atrocious. Wittgenstein's fly in the bottle becomes a man in a helicopter, hanging above the city that burns. This is the other pole of the bright light of singularity, the shipwreck of an ethic that advocates pouring napalm on children. If this is a tension we think will simply go away, we are fooling ourselves, and may as well cut our own throats. But we can't.

And so, section twenty moves into a despairing search for consolation in the face of these facts. It moves quickly through shallow rationalizations for humanity's addiction to massacre, a dedication to a history of moments, the sad

¹⁰'Root' is itself a difficult trope to explicate. It speaks less of a philological origin, as in Heidegger, than of an honest, sincere relationship to language.

marvels. Finally, the obsession is with death, a Freudian death-drive coupled with an erotic thrill at the news of war. For, "who escapes/ Death// Among these riders /Of the subway" appears to be a simplistic rationalization. But far from accepting the inevitability of mortality, the subway riders are instead subjects of a death-in-life, a cycle of destruction and rebuilding without praxis. They are victims of their own guilt and failure, of their complicity with a ruined ethic. In a stunning lyrical shift, Oppen holds out the possibility of forgiveness, and simultaneously aligns it with a furtherance of the death-instinct that wishes finally to simply not matter.

We might half-hope to find the animals
 In the sheds of a nation
 Kneeling at midnight,

Farm animals,
 Draft animals, beasts for slaughter
 Because it would mean they have forgiven us,
 Or which is the same thing,
 That we do not altogether matter.

In the sub-linguistic world of the subway, the unwholesome burden of civilization pushes one ever downward. The hope of rescue seems small, and the movement of the poem accepts and celebrates this smallness.

This smallness, this belief in a simple, clarifying simplicity does not lead to primitivism, but instead finds itself, like Phyllis' spot of light, manifest by the very city itself.

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.

The tonal shift of this section, developing out of the elegiac conclusion of section twenty, signals a genuine shift of approach. The voice is paternal and quiet, patient. It calls Mary-Anne, picked singly from among the numerous, into a consciousness which experiences the miraculous world in its 'minute particulars'. The first three lines could not be more simple and direct in their telegraph meter. They tell us what we know, that the world is impossibly complex, and simple. This is a voice that is moving closer to silence, to inexplicable clarity. Silence is both a goal and a trap for Oppen. There is the Wittgensteinian mantra that says "what we cannot speak about, we pass over in silence" (*Tractatus* 7), and a line from Brecht (much quoted by Oppen) that says that sometimes it can be a crime to write of trees. This speaks to Oppen's constant concern that what he is doing in his poetry is simply rationalizing inaction, talking himself into his dark. It has affinities with Beckett's constant movement toward silence, a silence that is a withdrawal, as if every word were a confession being extracted under torture. In its brightest light, the poem wants to enact the consciousness it describes, but that Emersonian eyeball, that transparent sphere that takes in

the world still resembles too much the hermetic womb of the solipsist. The question still remains, and we follow a recovering movement that appeals to the most basic human emotions and perhaps the last remaining ties between individuals: those formed in the family.

The first exploration of this theme shows its destructuring, its infection by the city of corporations. The swiftly changing vocabularies, the changing of the language, is accelerated by the dominance of consumerism and media jingoism. That "the people will change again" is not incidental to this shifting language (CP 163). The very roots of the words, the seed in the ground, "the lump" under the soil, is changed in this acceleration. The "entity/ of substance" is infinitely variable and therefore unstable. It threatens to become meaningless.

This is made more poignant as the lump in the soil, buried beneath the blind pressure of numerousness, becomes the embryonic child, the child produced in a horror of sexuality:

In two dozen rooms,
Two dozen apartments
After the party
The girls
Stare at the ceilings
Blindly as they are filled
And then they sleep.

This serializing of sexual relations, of procreation, in which the girls stare blindly beneath the blind pressure, demonstrates the 'world' turned into a factory farm of

advertising set up to produce only commodified language and lives.

Section twenty-four approaches this state of things with the biblical call for numerousness. "There shall be peoples". This is the covenant, we are told, and in a letter, Oppen explicates the covenant as signifying once again the miracle of place. "'The covenant is' that in this unlikely world, 'there shall be Peoples' and people" (*Letters* 321). Yet, the covenant is, by definition, a promise, and the covenant to the Israelites was not simply that they would be a people, but that they would be a light unto the world. This covenant, as we have already seen, has devolved into a sterile generation lacking all motivation or purpose. The speaking out of the covenant is initially ironic, as it has already failed, but still requires speaking out, for it is a covenant of great import.

But the young still, perhaps instinctively, long for connection, for 'roots'. They fill the old buildings (and are nightly 'filled' themselves) in an unaware desire for an historical sense, for their missing "peasant traditions," as Williams has it (*Imaginations* 131). They are "The Pure products of America," but where Williams says they "go crazy," Oppen has "investing". This is a troubling word here, ambiguous as it is. The young may well be "investing," as one must in the corporate city, in a financial sense. Read this way, investing simply stands in for "go crazy." But they also have the power to invest the buildings with

history and purpose, acting the Nietzschean giver of values. They are transforming what were once storehouses for immigrant workers into something new, changing the "half-forgotten" "ponderous business" that made the tenements battlements. Or so one might hope. If this movement is underway we see little sign of it. But that the Chinese wall of the city still stands, that the people still inhabit and constitute this wall, that the wall exists to keep out and hold in, this leaves little hope. They instead "carry nativeness/ To a conclusion/ In suicide" (CP 165).

This leads us into the central section of the poem. Twenty-six takes all that has come before it and sets it spinning. It is part rant, part meditation, part confession. It embodies, in its microcosm, the whole movement of the poem, and it signals the end of the back and forth struggle between the singular and the numerous as encountered thus far. With a great uneasiness, Oppen here attempts to wash his hands of the project, and the remaining sections will again move toward the quiet stillness, part *Ars Poetica*, and part personal confession. But first let us examine this last cry before the poet disappears into the underworld.

We begin by outlining, once again, the problem at hand. Oppen reduces it to its lack of praxis, its loss "of a metaphysical sense/ Of the future," without which there can be no meaningful covenant. Each individual feels himself the end of "a chain of lives, single lives," not necessarily a culmination, but an end. We recognize this singularity, but

cannot formulate, as the poem has been attempting from the start, a metaphysic that can encompass this knowledge coupled with our need for community, the "boundaries of our distances." We cannot, finally, get outside ourselves even enough to find any "common sense," that phrase acquiring new valences here. All that we have to stand on is the "denial/ of death that paved the cities," a Freudian sublimation that only exacerbates the problem. The cities are paved "Generation/ for generation" which is to say that the project is unendingly exponential in its denial of death, but also that this is generation for generation's sake. Once more we have a useless propagation, a metaphysic that hopes to find some purpose in simply adding each to each.

But even this project fails as the new generations inherit a corrupt and suffering world in which they are all-too-single, cut off from their generation, supplying "irrelevant objects" in direct contradistinction to the primitive peoples who carried their objects through the forest.

And the single mind, the consciousness that floats above it all, can do nothing against the natural world. Our singularity too is conceived as part of a traditional negative objectification of the natural world, in which the single mind plays hero in the tragedy that is his world. The shattered self that is this hero, shattered in a Blakean sense, disconnected from itself and incapable of wholeness, has dreamed this world. The city, "Fold within fold/ of

residence," is the city and the mind, the mind's own place. It has made its Hell, and singly, it cannot make a Heaven of it, no matter how it tries.

The closing movement is back to a visionary consciousness. To experience the world through its minute particulars, to reside (dwell) within it as opposed to over and against it, to attempt finally to see. This is always the saving movement, and it has already been seen in its possible limitations, but there is a genuine faith in the renovating power that allows one to

...see through water
Clearly the pebbles
Of the beach
Thru the water, flowing
from the ripple, clear
As ever they have been.

Part Four: The Renovation of the Self (section 27-40)

Having already cursorily described the final sections of "Of Being Numerous," I want to now assert that these sections continue to fit a pattern of Romantic crisis. Thus far, the poem has been speaking almost solely of modernity on the larger social scale, wishing to upend cultural mores, destroy economic and metaphysic systems, and move 'humanity' toward some --as of yet undisclosed-- New Jerusalem. The individual, in this movement, was set up as the nemesis of the modern forces, the antihero to the dustpan culture, and its possible source of redemption. The inherent dangers

posed by the valorization of the individual were stated, understood, and finally accepted as necessary. But the project couldn't get off the ground. The poet carries his lamp in the daylight, crying that the culture is dead, and no one hears. The mind might move mountains, but this mountain of flesh, this humanity, remains unmoved.

This failed revolution, ending as it does in its moment of clarity and vision, turns the revolution inward. Harold Bloom describes this as a fundamental aspect of Romantic poetry,¹¹ but it is also a fundamental part of the Judeo-Christian ethos that Romanticism grew out of. The apocalypse is forestalled. The time is still yet to come. In the meantime, one sets his house in order.

How one reads Oppen's reaction to this failure is debatable. Rachel Blau DuPlessis makes the claim that after these poems Oppen "simply turn[s] his back and move[s] away from the necessity for this struggle into a beautiful, stark landscape of awe, almost devoid of man-made objects and certainly empty of a mass of people" (DuPlessis 76). That is to say, he flees into that most traditional escape of the pastoral. This overstates the case a bit, for those pastoral movements have always been present, and a concern for humanity is far from abandoned. Oppen's last published lines are a turn on Eliot's *Prufrock*: "till other voices wake/ us

¹¹"The Internalization Quest Romance" in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970), pg xy-zz.

or we drown" (*Primitive* 31), and there is a certain sense that after thirty years of tortured writing, Oppen simply felt entitled to collapse into landscapes. But DuPlessis is right in emphasizing the narrowed sphere of relations, the emphasis on family and the cultivation of Buberian relationships. This becomes primary to Oppen's redemptive journey.

This journey will also move underground, into the basements of the self, to try to restore the relationship to language. This is seen now as the poet's fundamental task. The workman sweeping the basement floor, searches for a word, "like a dishonored fatherhood," searches for the roots. The walls bear the marks of the forms, the beams used to build the basement, but also the shadows of the forms in this Platonic cave. The workman sifts through the shadows, blindly as tradition would have it, to find "the one thing" (CP 168). This is the solitude of the poet: the bright light of shipwreck, "the narrow, frightening light/ Before a sunrise." That is to say, the task to be accomplished before the new dawning.

And as the world apocalypse is forestalled and transformed, the individual starts again to try to find his connection to others. The family unit becomes the model for (or modeled on) the 'Primitive' society. They are the council within which one speaks, and the baffling hierarchies of father and child are given here a much

greater attention that the simple generation for generation's sake confronted earlier.

Section twenty-nine is addressed to "my daughter," a dialogic move the importance of which we can easily appreciate. Again we find the paternal voice, calmly attempting to bestow something, and confronted with its own failure. The father and the daughter are both "caught in reality/ together," and both must try to feel their way. That he is speaking to his grown daughter makes this paternal voice even shakier, and when we hear "I have a daughter/ but no child" the fact that this is a linguistic distinction makes it no less true. Our relations are predicated by our dialogue, by what is said, and the poet is here trying to work his way into a confession. Happiness as a concept seems empty enough and when placed against the vision of the house being caught in the dawn light, it becomes vacuous. That happiness is life, our being here, is what he means to say, what he says later, in another poem: "What is or is true as/ Happiness" (CP 197). The subject is life, and the father has so little to say. He finds himself caught up in the common, rootless language, trying to avoid platitudes, trying to be honest, and yet compelled to speak. And so he does:

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

This is a restatement and reinterpretation of the "denial of death" that paved the cities, and it is a rejection of the metaphysic that sees life as only single and the end of a chain of lives. As he says in "the Image of the Engine": "I know that no one would live out/ thirty years, fifty years if the world were ending/ with his life" (CP 19). It is in the face of history, of a force that moves only with the force of days, that "open time", that the roots --the parent-- clutch downward, make themselves a dwelling place, that the child should glow as the extension of possibility that would die otherwise. The desperation is acknowledged, but also the beauty, for the child is testament to the miracle of place. "If one had been born here/ How could one believe it?" (CP 172), we are asked, which is to say, how do we begin to believe it, being born here. This Heideggerian awe at the world (complete with Heidegger's metaphoric landscape) is then set up against section thirty-one's microcosm of unfolding sense. Without conceding the question of whether "to know is noble," he paints a simple but beautiful picture of that witnessing. Knowledge comes with

an almost (or completely) physical "touch," a reaction to the world, to another, to the unknown.¹²

This is as far as the I/Thou system can progress, it seems, attaching oneself to a select few, to attempt to experience real dialogue with them. To disregard systems of knowledge, epistemological prisons in which the other become an object of knowledge present at hand, this is almost impossible even with those whom we love. But it is possible, just as joy is possible, just as beauty. Beauty, which twists the perfect life in a flood of desire. The desire: "not truth but each other". This opposition begs the question, of course¹³, and the poem seems to say that truth as knowledge is empty, that "each other" is precisely the truth one is seeking. This need, the desire for human connection

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

Truth here retains the Heideggerian meaning as *aletheia*, while simultaneously critiquing Heidegger's system for becoming resolute. The connection of individuals, in loving dialogue, is the truth which illumines speech, the key to

¹²Also notice the similarity between this epistemology and Henry James' description of the artist's power "to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece from the pattern" (*Art of Fiction: Tales of Henry James*, 352. Norton, New York & London, 1984).

¹³it is, of course, a play on Keats' "truth is beauty, beauty truth"

renovating language and therefore humanity. But this is, of course, slow going and difficult to imagine on a social scale.

But the way one approaches such relations is already determined by social conditioning, and the petty, though pervasive, separations of man and woman remain. Blake's emanations are female shades of masculine selves, and though they are essential to the wholeness of the self, they perform destructive obfuscations such as hiding the "most evident God/ under a covert" (CP 174; *Jerusalem* 30.32). Section thirty-four speaks as a comment on *Jerusalem* and its implicit sexual politics. It begins in a celebratory precession of the world and its "beautiful particulars". Albion finds his wholeness in the minute particulars of the world once he has joined again with Jerusalem, his feminine emanation. This is the feminine will done so much damage by the various voices of the book. "Infiniteness" is put in place of God, in Oppen's poem, and in this he follows closely with Blake. But Oppen makes explicit a connection between infiniteness and the feminine as generative creator. Women carry life, yes children, but literally life, with them into the dangerous and uncaring world. That they do so, heroically or not, is testament to the infiniteness that is found within them. They are tired and they are desperate, and they carry us still.

Section thirty-five is a tiny flash, an apocalyptic afterthought that erupts at the seeming impossibility of the task at hand.

...or define
Man beyond rescue
of the impoverished, solve
whole cities

before we can face
again
forests and praries...

"Solve" is the word the whole section turns on, and it seems quite out of place. It speaks initially of a kind of social contract, some solution to the problem of the city, but we have already seen how these solutions are lacking. And once man is defined as "beyond rescue" the only 'solution' left seems to be once again the wish for some nuclear catastrophe, to clear the playing-field and begin again.

But we move inward again, as the poem returns to the miracle of the world, "the obvious". "That which one cannot/ not see" is how Henry James defines the 'real,'¹⁴ and to be enworlded is to "see" the world, to take it in, not as objectively present object of knowledge. This system of thought continues to haunt, is almost impossible to escape. That "each/ Man or woman/ Near is/ Knowledge" is a maddening fact. The final answer to the question whether to know is

¹⁴James, Henry. *Critical Muse: Selected Literary Criticism*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1987).

ennobling is finally "no, it is madness." These paths of the mind, or socially constructed modes of thinking and taking in the world, must themselves be broken, or there is little else left but that apocalyptic fire.

Section thirty-seven continues to hammer at linguistic degradation, to try to create its language of clarity and respect. This begins here, ironically, as revision.

"...approached the window as if to see...,'" is quoted from Oppen's first book of some thirty years before. Here is Henry James again, and Heidegger, whose essay "What is Metaphysics" cites boredom as an attunement that "manifests beings as a whole" (*Pathmarks* 87). And the three of them all cross when Oppen uses the word "boredom" back in nineteen thirty-four. But here, as the poet climbs out to the precipice, so much the wiser now, he says he should not have written of the weatherswept world visible through that window/poem, but of the detritus of a civilization that obscures that view. That is what one cannot not see or speak. The century of argument since James' time has led only to the proliferation of abstractions, what cannot be "seen" at all. Or --and we have learned by now to observe these transitions-- to speak of the notes themselves, the chain of lives, "links of consequence" that are still relevant "at the mind's end". This last phrase is obscure, but it invokes both an image of the borders of the mind, such as are described in "Route" --"These things at the limits of reason, nothing at the limits of dream, the dream

merely ends"-- and also the mind's end which is death (CP 196). This latter valence points us toward the next two sections in which the subject appears to be Oppen's dying father, but is also Oppen himself reflected. That baffling hierarchy of father and child is one link of consequence that seems especially "relevant" at the mind's end.

Thirty-eight addresses the nurse who will overcome simple objectifying knowledge in relation to the old man. "How could one know him?" we are asked. "You are the last/ Who will see him/ touch him" is not, as it may first appear, a lament. It is rather a description of two individuals entering into an authentic relation, be it Buber's I/Thou or Heidegger's 'care'.

A letter to Philip Levine describes Oppen's experience with his sick father and his nurse, and gives us entry, finally, into the riddle of the "sad marvels":

Message that my father (in S F) was dying.
 Hypochondriac family; my father less ill than that,
 the meeting in his hospital room as equivocal, as
 difficult, as dangerous to me as all our meetings-- The
 nurse came into the room and asked me to wait outside a
 moment. I walked down the hall to a little waiting room
 and sat down. The floor-nurse on duty recognized me (I
 look like my father) She said, I guess what a man
 cares most about in his life is his son. I was
 startled and absolutely unprepared. My father's
 temperature was running fairly high, I realized that he
 must have talked of me. My face must have shown how
 startled and how unprepared I was. The nurse saw it,
 and she began to cry God help us all.

(Letters 208)

This is an example of the infinite series of "occurrences" that flash upon us. These sad marvels are when one really sees the world. "Neither for self/ nor for truth" these moments come upon us, but they move us and change us. Baffling indeed.

And that is, essentially, the final movement of the poem. We have seen the revolutionary struggle turn inward and seen demons subdued. But section forty gives us Oppen's "joke on Whitman" and the "curious" hanging down the page like a quiet question, but it also shines forth as a kind of manifesto, a symbolic (doubly symbolic) figure that embodies and emanates the bright light of shipwreck. In this land that is in some sense our home, there is a dream of liberty. We aren't surprised if Oppen acts bashful about this sentiment, curious as it is, but it is a positive statement after all. With one word he moves back outward from the private epiphany in "the room of a very old man" back into the social sphere. The poem ends by looking out, as if through a window, and finding a world constantly asserting itself as real. Therefore, the poem ends in joy.

Conclusion:

One of the primary difficulties in approaching Oppen's poetry is trying to place it within a larger framework. It is customary to label him an 'objectivist', though while Oppen never denied the name it is clear that beyond the most basic emphasis on form, on seeing the poem as object, each

'objectivist' imagined the label as meaning something distinct to his own work. There was no manifesto, and there were no dogmatic definitions. This very point might tell us more about Oppen's work than any manifesto could. Oppen defied any dogmatism or prescriptive definition other than his own very subjective and difficult to classify insistence on sincerity and clarity.

Where his position becomes interesting is that he openly defies any imagined split between Romanticism and Modernism. In Oppen's work, they are continuous. One might certainly make a similar claim for many other modernists,¹⁵ but Oppen seems to insist on the continuity whereas most of his contemporaries insist on something more like a radical refusal of Romanticism. In contrast to this popular conception, Oppen offers this description of his influence: "[R]eally Blake is more important to me than Williams, and several philosophers may be more important than Pound. The contemporary poets aren't the most important thing in my life, with the exception of those few things that really matter to me" (*The Contemporary Writer* 184).

There is a certain amount of 'anxiety of influence' present in this statement, to be sure, but also a great degree of truth. Oppen's belief in the primacy of Poetry is unabashedly Romantic in its conception if not its execution. Oppen does not, nor could he, write like a high Romantic.

¹⁵I am thinking especially of Williams in his *Spring and All*.

Oppen is thoroughly Modernist in his technique, and his position of skepticism and quietude is in direct conflict with any hyperbolic voice or claim. This is what creates his unique sound, feel, and power: he explores and undergoes traditionally Romantic themes while applying Modernist techniques of syntactic shifting and sometimes willful obscurity. This last point is said in seeming contradiction of Oppen's many claims to clarity, and in closing I wish now to explore briefly what that clarity might mean.

Oppen tells L.S. Dembo in their conversation that he considers the image to be "a test of truth" (*The Contemporary Writer* 174). He gets himself into a considerable amount of trouble in trying to explain this statement to Dembo, in trying to make such an idea relate properly to the act of poetry. He goes on:

I'm trying to describe how the test of images can be a test of whether one's thought is valid, whether one can establish in a series of images, of experiences... whether or not one will consider the concept of humanity to be valid, something that is, or else have to regard it as being simply a word.

(175)

It should be granted that this does little to clarify how such testing of images is enacted, and we notice that Oppen's single example is of something definitively unimagistic, an abstraction called humanity. If we say simply that this is a negative example, that the impossibility of humanity is already accepted here, then we

must disregard all of "Of Being Numerous." Rather, we must rethink both our conception of the image and of truth.

This is Heidegger's most lasting and important influence on Oppen: he shows him a path out of "sloppy American imagism" and into a visionary poetic. While many poets have been influenced by Heidegger's thinking on aesthetics and poetry, few seem to have taken it so much to heart, or managed to actually put it into practice. What this influence means is that when Oppen calls the image a test of truth he is not referring to any vulgar conception of truth as correspondence, but rather of truth as uncovering, as revealing, as image itself. What is true is what is made manifest, what appears. This explains Oppen's slightly eccentric refusal to write of anything he hadn't seen with his own eyes, and it explains his ongoing fascination with teasing out the implications of such an invaluable abstraction as 'humanity.' How and in what way does Humanity disclose itself to us? "Of Being Numerous" gives us flash after flash of alternately beautiful, gruesome, and horrific revelation, of humanity --for better or worse-- stepping out into the clearing of the poetic field of vision.

Oppen is haunted by what reveals itself. He is tormented by it. He is in love with it. He believes --with seeming sincerity-- in the absolute primacy of the poetic project in the renovation of humanity, and he is filled with the Romantics' despair in the face of the possible failure

of that project. His absolute integrity stems from his refusal to descend into any ironic distance from that despair or to simply engage in stylistic posing in the midst of it. What he relies on is his own clarity of vision. "Clarity, clarity, surely clarity is the most beautiful thing in the world" (CP 185). This is simply another way to say that what is beautiful is that the world is here, that we are in it, that there is something for us to stand on. Perhaps most importantly, the poet 'sees through water,' sees the world made manifest, and in doing so, can believe in the truth, in the reality of the world, and in its shocking beauty.

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