

In the Common Dream
of George Oppen

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*If, on that beach, on that jagged shore where one sees, if you
encounter a tree . . . one must acknowledge that tree ——
what's there*

—George Oppen

IN
THE
COMMON
DREAM
OF
GEORGE OPPEN

A kingdom is a simple thing
A place where doors usurp their keys.
One can laugh there at the gate
And then enter or walk away

A kingdom is these breaking things:
A stony beach, the unmoving edge
One sails a life to see, to sit
In the open, waiting for a tree

A simple thing, an easy tree. Crossed out
A simple cross—Can it then be borne
Across the gaping kingdom
We give all our life to see

Crossed out. Having given
All our life to the sea, we wait
For a pillow to fall upon us
In knots of sleep.

Incipit

In the beginning there was a man named George Oppen. His biography was well known: a poet who abandoned poetry for war, who spent 25 blank years before filling another page, who then wrote himself into a coterie of young admirers, won a Pulitzer, became senile with Alzheimer's, and died scratching vague aphorisms into the wall of his nursing home (*The world is black magic / The world is half magic*). Yet not much was known behind these facts of a life. The only thing certain about him was that he had written many poems, and that some of them, such as 'Of Being Numerous,' were very well respected. All of his poetry was, after his death, put in a book called *New Collected Poems*. In a review of *This Ocean, or Oppen Series*, an earlier version of *In the Common Dream of George Oppen*, Chris Piuma wrote:

There is, of course, no poem called "Hell" in Oppen's *New Collected Poems*.

And, later:

To be sure, there is no poem called 'Our Own Private Idaho' in the *New Collected Poems*, nor even a mention of Idaho.

This then raises the question: In those 25 blank years, did George Oppen visit the green shores of Idaho? If he did, what impact would this have had on the poetry he wrote after those 25 years? Who, looking back across the abyss of those unwritten times, will fill their blankness? And will we arrive—will we find—our first, bright century waiting just ahead of us if we descend into that immemorial—

I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me begin again.

In the beginning there were no questions, and thus no need for answers. It was not until stories started being told that mysteries arose. And as the stories were passed from generation to generation, what was lost in forgetting, censor, and mistelling, was precisely the foundation for common understanding. There came, instead, a lurking in variation, alternate endings, beginnings, middles—all of them interchangeable. It was as if every dropped twig sprouted a new tree.

There was then a forest of stories told—all of them more or less the same, but none of them corresponding. Many poets became lost in that dark wood. Some called it Hell, and some called it Paradise. William Blake called it a Tyger. So, after Blake, Oppen addressed this place of vagary in a poem called, appropriately enough, ‘The Poem:’

*to save the commonplace save myself Tyger
Tyger still burning in me burning*

In the forest George Oppen was burning from the inside out. It was as if he had fallen in the darkness, his foot caught on an exposed root, and the “commonplace”—that is the common place, the forest—had at his touch caught flame. Tangled in those roots, Oppen’s legs burned. And then his arms burned, and then his torso, and then his toes and his hair. Then his face burned, and then his hands. And as his hands burned, and as the tree he was caught in and all of the forest’s birds burned, their flames in turn ignited his name, and—lastly, slow—it burnt from his body. So we probably can’t even speak of George Oppen anymore.

But in the beginning there was a man. He told us that, in the beginning, we have to choose the meaning of beginning—i.e., we must choose our own myths. Here are our choices:

- a) In the beginning there was a child who, holding a mollusk’s shell up to her ear, first uttered the word “ocean,” which

started the flood that still soaks us to this day.

- b) In the beginning there was “Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned.”
- c) In the beginning there was Oppen who wrote, “I’ve never read [Jack] Spicer, but will.”
- d) In the beginning there were echoes, and the thud that started them: A lone minotaur—startled at a glimpse of his own image—dashed out of the cave and, stumbling at the cliff’s edge, fell into the canyon. The thud was Plato’s laughter.
- e) In the beginning there was a startle. I woke in the Waremart in Caldwell, alone, finding myself sorting through the notebooks in the stationery aisle, which I begin to notice were all filled with the markings of a familiar hand.

And now, having chosen—if we can choose—we begin at the beginning, offering a line to Oppen from the opening Canto of Dante’s *Inferno*:

Tu se’ lo mio maestro e ’l mio autore

Translation:

You are my teacher and my author.
These hands that father yours
have pricked, have vivisected me—

As we proceed, include this dedication in the spaces to come: between wrenched trans- and shaky ab-duction—between the dismembering of the forgotten, still lurking, and the constitution of false memory—this is the beginning:

But that wasn't the beginning. In an earlier version of '*Incipit*,' the phrase "this is the beginning *colon*" is followed by "we must find our lyrical necessities." These words were scratched out. In an even earlier version, "this is the beginning *colon*" is followed by a summoning of Dante at the outset of *Vita Nuova*, when he writes, "I will copy into this little book the words I find under that heading,"—i.e., of *incipit vita nova*—"if not all of them, then at least their significance." It then went on to reference Ovid's tale of the flood, in which "stray birds, searching in vain for a landing, tumble exhausted into the sea." They are moments of beginning anew and ending defeated: a house is built and another destroyed. But the line drawn between them, if it was even a line, has been scratched out; therefore this, the beginning, is where we begin:

Host

Necessity lyrical to find
neighbor's window broke.

As chimney formed from smoke I go
to cicadas, alfalfa
the distance of house from where
feet'd tremble is Idaho, a coming
Host to wing smashed into
you takes no stepping light

finding it harder to sleep at night.
Cold bed's to be bartered
&c's retarding, as the woe
of two round a tree—

one falls the other
fells, ahoy timber to follow
what hands or house one brings.

cf. Robin Blaser's 'Cups': *two poets in a tree is clearly / the same thing as poetry.*

Boise

Bark, in Idaho, was
the stripping of fingers seen through
a mirror, green

from alfalfa traces. The landscape
buckling, readjusted
were your fingers what cannot

grip, folded
in Idaho these leaves
were carried through, across from

you. In Idaho
that city of trees I see
hands touching water, a river

to wash my fingers of
absence, what should be you or
I, in Idaho.