Speaking the Estranged

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   Essays on the Objectivist Poets and Poetry
Uncertain Poetries: Essays on Poets, Poetry and Poetics

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‘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.

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

‘Poetics of the Letter’ was published in *Sulfur* magazine.

‘Quick Notes on Love and Desire in Oppen’s Poetry’ was presented as an informal talk at the Kelly Writers House in 2008.

‘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, Le Mans, France. A version of this address was published in *PN Review*.

“Oppen’s “Non-Return:” Some Speculations” was presented at the Edinburgh University Conference on George Oppen in 2009.

‘Encountering Oppen: A Memoir’ was originally published in the Mentor issue of *Ohio Review* and reprinted in my collection *Uncertain Poetics: 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 Poeties* (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 labors 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.
Prefatory Note to the Expanded Edition

Two essays and a transcribed talk have been added to the original edition of this book. These new additions both expand on previous themes already mentioned and develop new ground for discussion of the meaning and import of Oppen's work. In ‘Oppen's Non-Return: Some Speculations,’ I discuss further an idea I only hinted at in my introduction, that Oppen's beginning to write poetry again in the nineteen-fifties is best seen not as a continuation of the practice and thought found in his Discrete Series, but as a new beginning with aims and methods that differ from the earlier work. In ‘George Oppen's Investigative Poetics and the End of Discourse,’ I read closely several of Oppen's poems that have received little attention. My intent is to further expand on the idea that Oppen's lyricism can be seen as an end result of his philosophical and rhetorical structuring of idea and image, a theme developed in my earlier essay ‘Oppen, Stevens, Wittgenstein: Reflections on the Lyrical and Philosophical.’ My talk, ‘Quick Notes on Love and Desire in Oppen's Poetry,’ takes a brief look at a subject rarely discussed in the criticism on the poet, the idea of Oppen as a poet of love. As well, some minor errors and typos have been corrected.
“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 literally, 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 gem-like perfected verbal artifact. 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-emblematized 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 technicolor 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 Khrushchev 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 armpits 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 poverta”, 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/Founderered” (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 not 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 co-eval/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
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entrainment 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

gainst 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
Speaking the Estranged

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 fulfills 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.