Oppen

A Narrative

Also by Eric Hoffman

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All This Strangeness: A Garland for George Oppen

Oppen

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Eric Hoffman

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Preface

As Eric Hoffman's precise and solidly constructed biographical narrative makes clear, George Oppen was no ordinary poet nor did he lead anything like an ordinary life, certainly not the life we have come to associate with poets of the last twenty or thirty years who are often situated in or adjacent to the academy with its particular necessities and comforts. In retrospect, Oppen's life and that of his constant companion, his wife Mary, seem both courageous and, to use one of Oppen's favourite words, "astonishing" or, as Robert Creeley remarked of their travels, there is something of a "fairy-tale" quality about them. Hoffman's highly readable account of their lives shows the complicated and often difficult ways that this fairy-tale unfolded.

The rough outlines of Oppen's life are known. He and Mary spent a number of years in the small American literary world of the 1920s and early 1930s, close to poets such as Charles Reznikoff and Louis Zukofsky, and the more well-known figures of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. In those years, they travelled to Europe and while there established TO Publishers that published books by poets who were then virtually unknown but now are part of our modernist canon. We know that in the early 1930s, Oppen, along with Mary, abandoned the world of poetry to live and be involved with workers' politics, that they joined the Communist party, that George worked as a carpenter, a labour organiser, a tool and die machinist, a soldier, and that they fled to Mexico during the red-scare days of the McCarthy era. And we know that after some twenty years of silence, Oppen, then in his late forties, began to write poetry again. The rest, as they say, is history.

Hoffman's narrative is the first full-length account of the details behind that thumbnail sketch. Complex, highly-nuanced and well-documented, his narrative makes clear that few careers in modern poetry are so entwined with biography as Oppen's. It is not simply the experiences that Oppen lived through that shaped his work. Most important to the poetry and to our fuller understanding of it was Oppen's very close attention to the texture and meaning of those experiences and to the language he would deploy in rendering them. As Hoffman's book demonstrates, Oppen's close reading of his own life accounts in great part for the particular distinctiveness of his poetry, for its uncommon power and integrity.

In his letters and writings, Oppen insisted that he had no dogma, no theory to guide him. The ground of his work, as Hoffman makes clear, was in his conscious efforts to be exposed to the impingements of the world he lived in, to build his poetry, as he wrote, in the glare of "the brilliance of things", to "be astonished" by his encounters with his world. Oppen thought and wrote into the uncertainty of his times yet with the vocabulary of a man confidently trusting his senses and intelligence, investigating his experience, guided by an ethos of "sincerity" and truth-seeking. He writes of himself in 'Of Being Numerous' as one "who from nothing but a man's way of thought and one of his dialects and *what has happened to me* have made poetry" [my italics].[1] In the *Daybook*, he places the central arena of his work "in the circumstance of being alive",[2] and in a later passage, he notes "It is impossible to assume that the world of things could be proved if we had not experienced it—" (137). "The small nouns crying faith" of 'Psalm' (NCP 98), his most well-known poem, were to be his testimony.

Oppen's poetry, then, is a record of the concrete experiences of his life, to test them and give them meaning, to shape that struggle into poetry. For him, the testing of language and thought in the poem were the only authentic and sufficient means of arriving at the truth-value of a work.

Hoffman's biography concentrates on the circumstances of Oppen's life, a life that for the most part is either not very well known or worse, shrouded in romanticisms and projections. Drawing on a wealth of sources including communications and letters from contemporaries of both George and Mary, from family members and friends and many participants and correspondents throughout almost all the phases of their lives, and making full use of the historical record, Hoffman's narrative explores in considerable depth Oppen's thinking about his own work, his reasonings and judgments on himself and his contemporaries in life, politics and poetry. Throughout, Hoffman supplies a rich contextual background to the Oppens' story, one in which public and private life continually intersect not only in the socio-cultural aspects of their lives but in the undergirdings of love, hope and guilt that empower the thought and poetry.

As Hoffman shows, Oppen was fully conscious of how his life history played into every aspect of his art. This book not only fills in many blanks in the poet's life and career, but most important, for readers and scholars of Oppen's work, it provides an *aide-mémoire* to the poems themselves,

not as critique or exegesis, but showing how every incident in Oppen's life opened a potential field for composing poems. A portrait of George and Mary is revealed, illuminating "what happened" to the Oppens and what Oppen, as a poet, made of the complexities thrown before him by what he lived through, and equally, what he tried to make happen as social activist and, later, by taking up poetry again.

For the reader of the poetry, Hoffman's narrative carries a kind of electrical charge as event after event becomes both potential and flashpoint for a poem or induces a meditation on the act of writing and remembering. This is an incident-filled book. One reads through it, wondering how Oppen found time, as he claimed in the *Daybook*, to spend eight hours at his desk trying to get the words right. Yet behind the meticulousness of his practice lay an almost mystical vision, one that, as he writes in 'The Poem', sought "to light the room that measures years" (NCP 270). Hoffman's book, a decade's long project in itself, gives us an accounting of those years, years of extraordinary challenge and fulfilment. It deepens our awareness and significantly enriches our sense of the poetry and the humanity that informs it.

Michael Heller
New York City
2013

Notes

[1] George Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, Michael Davidson, ed., New York, NY: New Directions, 2002: 167. Hereafter cited in text in parentheses as NCP.

[2] George Oppen, *Selected Papers, Daybooks, and Prose*, Stephen Cope, ed., San Diego, CA: University of California Press, 2008, 74. Hereafter cited in text in parentheses as SPDP.

Notes for the main text will be found at the back of the book.

Introduction

In Marjorie Perloff's review of the 2002 *New Collected Poems*, a gathering of the poetry of George Oppen (1908-1984) both collected and uncollected, Perloff argues that the reason for Oppen's lengthy critical and readerly neglect, which has since come to an end, is the "austere, uncompromising, and unforgiving" quality of his work.[1] Yet this explanation is insufficient; lack of compromise has never been a criterion of an artist's achievement, and there are more than a few examples of so-called "difficult" artists having acquired a large audience. More accurately, this neglect results, in part, from Oppen's uncertainty over both the quality and the reception of his poetry after he began writing again in the 1960s and 1970s following a nearly twenty-five year creative silence, in particular the reaction of a younger generation of poets with whom he became associated.[2] This apparent neglect also results from Oppen's overall ambivalence concerning issues of self-promotion; for example, while he lamented the lack of a readership for poetry, including his own, after receiving the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1969, he also cancelled a series of important readings.[3] Moreover, while his then-unpublished letters and personal papers are teeming with observations on poetry and poetics, he published only two reviews (one on Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson and Michael McClure, the other on Thomas McGrath) and a handful of short prose essays.

In fact, the publication and reception of Oppen's poetry occurred outside the mainstream, appearing for the most part in the "little" magazines of the 1930s and in xeroxed and mimeographed small journals in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Oppen self-published his first book of poetry, *Discrete Series*, in 1934, during the depths of the Great Depression; aside from a handful of reviews and copies sold, critics and readers ignored the book. The publication of his second and third collections, *The Materials* (1962) and *This In Which* (1965), resulted from a collaborative effort between his half-sister June Oppen Degnan's *San Francisco Review* and James Laughlin's New Directions. Laughlin also published the Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *Of Being Numerous* (1968) and Oppen's *Collected Poems* (1975), which includes the collection *Myth of the Blaze*, followed by *Seascape: Needle's Eye* (1972), published by Sumac; the English edition of his *Collected Poems* (1972), published by Fulcrum; and his final volume, *Primitive* (1978), published by Black Sparrow Press.

While Perloff doubts that Oppen will ever have a large following, the size of his audience has grown, and in the years since his death, critical commentary on Oppen's work has increased exponentially. Perhaps most importantly, his poetry is now finding its way into the anthologies, which had previously eluded him. This is partially the result of Oppen's involvement in a so-called literary "movement" named the "Objectivists," which some historians[4] now recognise as a legitimate literary phenomenon, possessing coherent characteristics, and as an important bridge between the high modernist period of the pre-Second World War and the experimental poetry of the post-war decades. Recent years have seen a re-structuring of the literary canon, allowing the inclusion of writers from various ethnicities, genders, classes, and otherwise marginalised traditions such as the avant-garde with which Oppen is generally associated. This suggests that Oppen's place in the literary canon seems assured.

This recent crop of Oppen readers and scholars owes considerable debt to the early, ground-breaking work of two editors: Michael Cuddihy and Burton Hatlen. Cuddihy edited two important special issues (in 1975 and 1985) on Oppen in his journal *Ironwood*, and Burton Hatlen at the National Poetry Foundation in Orono, Maine dedicated issues of the journals *Paideuma* and *Sagetrieb* to Oppen's works (in 1980, 1984, and 1993) and in 1981 produced the monumental *George Oppen: Man and Poet*. This essential volume includes a number of important essays by key Oppen scholars, including Henry Weinfield, Norman Finkelstein, John Taggart, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Michael Heller, among others, critics who in the years following have at regular intervals contributed many insightful articles, reviews and essays on Oppen's work.

Moreover, the notes, jottings and poem drafts that make up Oppen's "daybooks", deposited with his papers at the University of California San Diego (UCSD) in 1983, began to be mined by scholars and over the following decades selections were published in numerous small journals. These writings have provided additional insight into Oppen's poetics. Assemblages of the scattered writings, often grouped by subject matter, include those by Michael Davidson (1985), Cynthia Anderson (1987, 1988 and 1990), Dennis Young (1988) and DuPlessis (1989, 1990); still later selections are those by Stephen Cope in 1999 and 2002, followed by a more comprehensive selection in Cope's *Selected Prose, Daybooks and Papers* in 2007. Prior to the publication of that book, the largest collection of Oppen's non-poetry writings was DuPlessis' monumental *Selected Letters*, which appeared in 1990 and which has to date remained an invaluable resource for Oppen studies.

Yet perhaps the most significant contribution to the Oppen "revival" in recent years is the publication of his *New Collected Poems*, first in 2002 and again in paperback, together with a compact disc featuring audio recordings of various readings by Oppen, in 2008, edited by Michael Davidson and introduced by Eliot Weinberger. Several major critical estimations soon followed: Peter Nicholls' 2007 book-length study *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, and Michael Heller's collection of Oppen essays *Speaking the Estranged*, published in 2008, the centennial of Oppen's birth. That year also saw several Oppen centennial symposiums: at the Poets' House in New York City, at San Francisco State University—which since 1984 has held an annual George Oppen Memorial Lecture—at the State University of New York Buffalo, at the Kelly Writers' House at the University of Pennsylvania and at the University of Edinburgh. Festschrifts in online journals also appeared: *Jacket2* in 2008 and *Big Bridge* in 2009, adding a substantial contribution to an already burgeoning critical heritage.

I had the honour of presenting at the New York conference in 2008; there I gave a talk on Oppen's political identity, the result of research into government files on the Oppens. This work is part of another important advance in Oppen research, namely the recent proliferation of biographical information on the poet. DuPlessis in her *Selected Letters* and other researches, and of course Mary's autobiography *Meaning A Life*, published in 1978, already provide considerable background. Moreover, a recent flurry of candid memoirs by those in the American exile community in Mexico in the 1950s—including Bernard Gordon (1999, 2004), Jean Rouverol (2000) and Diana Anhalt (2001, 2006)—where the Oppens, avoiding political persecution, lived for nearly a decade, offers a glimpse into an otherwise largely mysterious period in the Oppens' lives.[5]

A thorough study of how socio-cultural and historical events and trends have played a part in Oppen's resurgence is regrettably beyond the scope of this book (regrettable mainly because Oppen was certainly concerned with posterity, specifically how, or if, future generations would read his work). Instead, the present text comprises this author's view of what inspired that legacy, more specifically the potential reasons for his abandonment of poetry for nearly a quarter century and the implications of the end of that poetic silence. To begin writing poetry again following an almost twenty-five year period of non-writing is by no means an inconsequential act. This book, therefore, is a study of those factors that

contributed to Oppen's writing poetry again and what he chose to write.

To understand a poet's work it is necessary to understand the life from which it came. Thus, the first half of this book is largely a biography concentrating on the years 1908 to roughly 1958, the period between Oppen's birth and the year he began to write poetry again. The events of the twentieth century interweave with Oppen's private life, beginning with his nineteenth-century-style Edwardian childhood immersed in the infancy of that distinctly twentieth-century medium of motion pictures. D.W. Griffith was a neighbour, and Oppen's father owned movie houses in and around San Francisco; Oppen would find work and a love of Charles Chaplin in his father's theatres.[6] In 1935, during the Great Depression, George and Mary, spurred by the Communist Party's achievements in organizing the unemployed, joined the Workers Alliance of America (WAA), a communist front organisation. Their quarter-century political commitment resulted from a deeply felt obligation to combat unemployment endemic during the Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe during the Second World War. Because the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) demanded that artists use their talents in service of the communist cause, Oppen decided to stop writing poetry rather than make his poetry a vehicle for didactic political expression.

The exact length of the Oppens' communist membership and the details concerning their activities and associations are highly speculative (Oppen readily admits that there are few accounts in his writing about his experiences in the Party).[7] Perhaps because he became a member of a political party under constant surveillance and attack by the United States (US) Government, Oppen kept none of the letters or other daily records one might otherwise keep. Up to now, Oppen scholars—apart from Peter Nicholls[8]—have overlooked this transitional period and as a result it has gone largely undocumented. This present volume includes substantial research into existing governmental surveillance records of George and Mary (primarily by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI]) that casts new light on this important period. Because Mary also covered much of this period in detail in her autobiography, I concentrate on information not previously known or discussed there or in Oppen's other writings, specifically his daybooks and letters.

While a Party member, Oppen kept private his background in the arts, divulging his literary identity to a select few. Following the war, he chose to devote himself to his role as husband and father. Exile in Mexico in the 1950s seems to have further postponed his writing. Later, Oppen

would claim that he never entirely abandoned poetry, that there were more immediate concerns requiring his attention, and that he simply did not have time to write. Yet these explanations are unsatisfactory; for example, when he began writing again, taking place were numerous proxy confrontations and the terrifying prospect of a nuclear exchange between the Cold War-era US and Soviet Union. Thus, in the 1960s Oppen could have easily channelled his energies into further political action by taking part in any number of political movements, including the anti-nuclear proliferation and anti-Vietnam movements, yet Oppen, perhaps sensing an insurmountable geopolitical stalemate with only one potential and hopelessly deadly outcome, decided in 1958 that he would prefer to devote his energies to poetry.

As a result, a sense of urgency hangs over the poems Oppen wrote during the next decade: he would produce three major collections within the next ten years (roughly 1958 to 1968). Survival, in all its forms, is a major theme of this work; many of the poems map an ongoing critique of the isolation of modern experience, resulting from a homogenised, mechanised society, an uncertainty arguably intensified by the social and political turmoil of the Cold War, Vietnam and Civil Rights eras. In interviews, letters and daybooks, Oppen repeatedly addresses the metaphysical implications of these crises, and, indeed, their consideration deeply informs his poetry. The difference between the singular and the numerous, the human as individual and as part of a collective, are subjects he obsessed over during the 1960s. With 'Of Being Numerous', Oppen intentionally set out to write—and arguably achieved—the defining poem of the era, the 1960s equivalent of T.S. Eliot's seminal 1920s modernist poem 'The Waste Land' (1922).[9]

Oppen, in dealing with the trauma of war, became increasingly anxious concerning both the precarious nature of his times and the consequences of his personal decisions. Because of these concerns, when he began writing again he made it his *causa primoris* to establish a poetic humanism that would reject the certainty of moral pragmatism and psychological dogmas. Tangentially, he could confront complex personal feelings of weakness, fear and his overwhelming sense of guilt. Yet his poetry is not an exercise in psychologizing, nor is it merely an expression of emotional catharsis. For as much as Oppen considered poetry to be an emotional response to the world, he also recognised its criteria of clarity, perceptual acuity and exactness, criteria well-equipped to make an honest appraisal of conflicts both public and private.

The reasons Oppen gave for his rekindled creativity are nearly mystical. Deeply distrustful of psychoanalysis (see SL 232-33), be it Freudian or Jungian, Oppen (and Oppen's scholars) have often relied on a reductive explanation for his creative resurgence, referring to an anecdotal dream that occurred in 1958, his *annus mirabilis*. In this dream, Oppen, then living in exile in Mexico, imagined going through his deceased father's files and discovering a document detailing the prevention of rust in copper. The following day he related this dream to his therapist, who provided the interpretation that—to put it simply—Oppen did not want to corrode.[10] This revelation apparently prompted Oppen's decision to write again, as, in one permutation of this story (the dates and circumstances change), later that day he purchased a pad of paper and then sat down to write a poem for the first time since 1935. Though this dream suggests genuine revelation, it tells only part of the story. He *was* running out of time, yes, but clearly, he faced something less prosaic than an abstract fear of death. Rather, his foremost concern was a need to communicate experiences and ideas accumulated over the past two decades. A political protest or a Party meeting, activities that had been for him sufficient means of expression, were no longer enough. It *must* be poetry, and not, for example, a sit-in or a soapbox speech. Oppen wanted to say something that amounted to more than political speechifying. As George Orwell observes, the language of politics, like that of law and science, consists of "ready-made phrases" that "anaesthetise the brain".[11] Oppen, as he did in the thirties, did not mean to regurgitate these phrases but to open up possibilities through the investigatory and intuitive impulses of poetic language. The same convictions that resulted in a creative silence now demanded that he write. Poetry provided a way out.

He was essentially beginning from scratch. In an effort to hone and shape this rebirth, and give it focus, Oppen turned to the writings of those philosophers whose works he first read during exile in Mexico.[12] Jacques Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1953), a key work for the Oppens during this period, is a study of poetry's unique ability to express emotion and intuition; Martin Heidegger's philosophy, primarily concerned with the question of being, also had an impact.[13] Oppen's interest in Heidegger resulted from Oppen's recognition of the creative potential latent in the unfolding of Being, providing him with one of the principal motivations for the creation of his mature work, particularly *This In Which* and *Of Being Numerous*.

If, as Heidegger declares, language is the "house of being" and poetry the most exact utilisation of language consciousness—similar to Ralph Waldo Emerson's declaration that "language is fossil poetry"—then Oppen's decision to begin writing poetry again, particularly mindful of these Heideggerean concerns, is a recognition of the metaphysics of this difficult precision. Put simply, Oppen thought poetry a direct conduit of consciousness and therefore the best method with which to confront his fears and uncertainties. His interest in Heidegger, much discussed among critics, is, I believe, the result of the philosopher's work as an embodiment of the same wonder that Oppen encountered when confronting what he calls in his long poem 'Of Being Numerous'[14] an emotional reaction to the actual world and one that galvanises the best of his 1960s poetry.

Oppen's fascination with the actuality of existence, and the urge to express this experience of the actual, stems from his acknowledgment of the fragility of existence, a fragility he undoubtedly experienced firsthand. Because he saw combat in Europe toward the end of the Second World War, Oppen knew all too well the expendability of life and the ease with which life can be extinguished, as his nearly was; at the end of the war he suffered near-fatal wounds. While he occasionally discusses this near-death experience, when he does he recites only the event's circumstances while remaining silent concerning what must have had a profound metaphysical and emotional impact.

More revealingly, however, is a dream only vaguely described but one that quite clearly became of equal if not greater importance than the corroded copper dream. It was a dream of war that convinced Oppen, who even in combat remained uncertain about the morality of killing another human being, of his inability to accept any absolutist moral schema (see SL 126-27 and 132). This moral uncertainty permeates his post-war work, imbuing it with the unshakable conviction that the most sincere statements are those closest to truth. As a modernist writing in the tradition of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, Oppen inherited this value of truth—perhaps better stated as authenticity—from his Romantic forebears, who saw in the "self-determined freedom" (in Charles Taylor's description) of self-expression a rebellion against compulsory, and therefore inauthentic, literary (and later moral) conventions and restrictions. Oppen goes one further, however, describing this resistance to insincerity in poetry as arising from an adherence to, and a more refined comprehension of, reality (see SL 382, for just one instance).

Oppen's avoidance of Orwell's ready-made phrases is apparent in his admiration for the work of Ezra Pound, who influenced Oppen considerably, as he did nearly every experimental poet of his time, particularly with regard to an insistence on clear and precise imagery and language. Yet there came a decisive split between the two when, prior to the outbreak of war, Pound's political sympathies came to lie with Italian fascism and Oppen's with Marxism. Pound's poetry became a mouthpiece for increasingly hysterical political and economic beliefs, while Oppen gradually awakened to the conviction that there were severe limitations in utilizing poetic language for political ends, bringing the two poets into stark relief. In the end, Pound provided Oppen with a cautionary example of what may have happened had Oppen allowed his poetry to become subservient to his politics, writing Party doggerel in the 1930s as opposed to an early recognition of the uncompromising political autonomy of his art.[15] Poet William Bronk, by contrast, would show Oppen a way to incorporate into his work an increasing openness and ambiguity, arguably providing him with a tangible counter-tradition to Poundian coherence.

Furthermore, Oppen took the previous generation of poets—Pound foremost among them—to task for remaining silent in their poetry concerning the various crises of their time, specifically the Holocaust.[16] This has not prevented some critics from misinterpreting Oppen's silence during these years as somehow an acknowledgment of the impossibility of a poetic response to this immense historical tragedy. For example, critic Stephen Cope draws a comparison between a statement Oppen makes in his 'Pipe-Stem Daybook' (a gathering of loose leaf notes bound by pipe stem c. 1966) that writing poetry during a violent time is a reprehensible act, and Theodor Adorno's (somewhat facile) statement "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (SPDP 184). However, the comparison is I think misguided, and for several reasons. First, Cope rightly acknowledges that it is "highly unlikely" Oppen knew Adorno's statement (264); second, Oppen stopped writing nearly a decade before the full extent of the Shoah became apparent and in response to the far different calamity of economic depression. Finally, Oppen began writing again partially as a response to the catastrophes of war, the Holocaust included. Given the nature of his poetic silence and the ethical and moral imperatives apparent in his 1950s and 1960s poetry, it seems likely that Oppen would be diametrically opposed to Adorno's statement, i.e. that it would be barbaric *not* to write. Oppen's criticism of Pound, T.S. Eliot

and W.H. Auden, et al., for failing to address the horrific events of the first half of the twentieth century suggests that had Oppen continued to write, he certainly *would* have addressed these atrocities. In fact, a number of his most powerful postwar poems involve emotional and philosophical ruminations on the profoundly massive social, psychological and metaphysical repercussions of these events.

Though that war ended, victory came at catastrophic cost. Millions of lives were lost as the result of warfare, starvation, disease or genocide. Nuclear weapons, with the potential of destroying all life on earth, were developed and, even more cruelly and frighteningly, utilised as a means of achieving peace through stalemate. The Cuban Missile Crisis, when the US and Soviet Union came dangerously close to all-out nuclear war, occurred only a few years after Oppen returned to writing. These experiences inform some of Oppen's most powerful poems, works written in the tradition of apocalyptic literature, a genre extending from the post-Exilic Jewish culture of the Old and New Testaments to William Blake and Allen Ginsberg, two poets Oppen much admired. In light of this potential catastrophe, Oppen argued that human values should provide meaning, and reconcile and reestablish humanity's place in a randomised universe described by quantum mechanics. Oppen adopts similar criteria in his poetry, in his emphasis on emotion and intuition, in his reaffirmation of the power of the human imagination to find its correlative in the natural world, and in his offering the qualities of adaptation, transformation and renewal as suggestive of a new morality while simultaneously acknowledging humanity's innate destructiveness.

Though the word "apocalypse" is most often associated with destruction, its etymological Greek meaning is a "lifting of the veil" or a "revelation", and to Oppen all good poetry should involve some form of revelation. This standard for poetry is undoubtedly influenced by the Romantics, particularly that of Blake's concept of a "Poetic Genius" that provides a kind of extrasensory, or intuitive, awareness of the infinite upon which all philosophical and experiential advancements depend, what Harold Bloom calls "the primacy of poetic imagination over all metaphysical or moral systems".[17] Yet Oppen cautioned against regarding poetry as merely revelatory, instead conferring upon it the arduousness of intellectual penetration, describing the act of writing poetry as nothing short of a method of thinking (see SL 99).

Finally, while Oppen viewed his world as one of crisis—meaning a transitive moment of decisiveness and of truth—it is important to

recognise that every writer whose work is apocalyptic considers her or his contemporary world as undergoing disaster. For each of us, our time is an end to an era, a transition from old to new. Oppen's poetry, through its openness and its tireless search for clarity and truth, gives voice to this process. Our very survival depends upon our willingness and ability to remain open to one another, and to the limitless possibilities of our shared world. Our only philosophy should be that of astonishment.

Oppen: A Narrative is not strictly biography, not entirely criticism. Inasmuch as this book presents a "narrative", it is the most basic of conflicts: that of a man's fall into self-division and of his eventual redemption through self-integration. Because of the events of his life —his political struggles, his war efforts, his political exile and creative reawakening because of the actual crisis of human survival posed by political failures and the horrors of the modern world—Oppen developed a poetic aesthetic of openness and uncertainty (as opposed to political certainty). As mentioned above, Oppen was deeply distrustful of psychological explanations for creative expression (seeing creativity not as a cure but as a "force" [SL 233]). So too is this author; I do not pretend to make any definitive claims, or to arrive at any definitive conclusions concerning Oppen's decision to stop writing and begin writing again, or what he chose to write about. I only offer my best interpretation of the materials at hand. Indeed, truth is nearly always liminal, as Oppen's subtle fabric of words already carefully attests.

Oppen is a paradoxical poet: a self-described populist[18] utilizing an ambiguous, occasionally difficult yet hauntingly clear syntax, urgently hovering at the edge of silence. Such a refreshingly measured, carefully weighed and painstakingly crafted verse is especially welcome in an era of countless ephemeral information. It is difficult to find another poet writing in English engaging in concerns both public and private with such nearly absolute fearlessness and conviction. His poetry is among the most lucid evidence we have in English that precision is often antonymous with simplicity.