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George Oppen and the Poetics of Sincerity

by

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In such a way that they have the whole world as background.

Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*

Introduction

Metaphysical truth is distanced through abstraction; sincerity is bound to the particular. human utterance and contingent upon circumstance: sincerity is the haven of the provisional. Determined as sincerity is by the subjective nature of belief, our hope of convincing others of the possible truth of an expression (in whatever form) lies in our ability to persuade: enter artifice, subversive sibling. It is in this navigation of the intersubjective that the universalizing impulse first takes hold: we want others to enter into the fold—or at least to acknowledge the validity—of our beliefs. To this end we manufacture a body of evidence to lend what we have come to call objectivity to our marvelous rhetorics of proof and vivisectionist logics. It is in fact by the very desire for—and necessity of—establishing what we have in common through these communications that we discover the prospect of community, the body politic—and up surges our Leviathan. We entrust others to speak on our behalf and elect them to positions that allow them to enforce what is believed to be the general good. But as this representative cannot plausibly speak with accuracy about the hopes and dreams of each individual in the community, so our attempts at objective legitimization fail us: inevitably we fumble and stutter, discovering somewhere along the way that we can no longer say "we" without lying.

Of course, to be sincere is not necessarily to be moral; one can be sincere about anything. But in the very same hour that language came to be, lying also came to be, creating the need for signs that allow us to indicate or evaluate the relative sincerity of an expression. To indicate sincerity by form is a type of corruption: the idiosyncrasy of a specific communication is wrecked by introduction into a generic system. Sometimes this is a necessary convenience; more often, this fluxgate deviation results in what might be called the homogeneity of the common place. Over four centuries ago, in Europe, the forms of sincerity had been mastered by a certain class of society to such an extent that handbooks on how to manipulate one's audience achieved great popularity; if Montaigne claimed that his age was characterized by dissimulation, where, in this media age, do we find ourselves?

In as much as convention obscures the depth contours of a given expression (as with the cliché), one way of characterizing the now traditional intent of experimental art is to say that it is involved in efforts to recuperate what might be called the *sincere effect* which existed when the world was new—before the forms of sincerity had been rigidly systematized. Experimental art has, over the years, paradoxically enlisted flotillas of irony and artifice in a war against the burgeoning flood stream of the platitudinous—even making art out of the platitude along the way—in diverse attempts to retrieve meanings which have been submerged by our inclination to homogenize. But the artifice of art is not (only) the artifice of persuasion or seduction: art is not an advanced form of rhetoric. There are more effective ways of achieving compliance. Art does not project or hypothesize or attempt to prove or legitimate by the application of a universalizing systematic: our romance with art exists to satisfy our desire to transcend the subjective without compromising the integrity of the subject.

Breakwater West: The Provisions of Solitude

At 78° fifty-two minutes west and 33° forty minutes south, about three-hundred and sixty miles west of Valparaiso, Chile, lie three small islands: Más-á-Tierra, Más-á-Fuera, and Santa Clara. The islands became known collectively as Juan Fernandez once they were happened upon serendipitously by the Spanish navigator Don Juan Fernandez in 1572. Más-á-Tierra, the largest and most storied of the islands, is twelve miles long and not more than three and a half miles wide at any point. The south end of the island is home to a number of wooded volcanic peaks (the tallest of which is 3,005 feet) that border precipitously on the surrounding seas; a grassy, sparsely wooded coastal plain descends from the valley on the north end of the island, leading eventually to a crescent shaped beach protected by tall headlands at each end. These naturally occurring breakwaters made what soon became known as Cumberland Bay an ideal place for sailors cruising the South Seas to refit and recover, after messy engagements or trying voyages around the Horn, while remaining almost undetectable to passing ships.

This fortuitous geography probably accounts for why the island has been home to an extraordinary series of marooned inhabitants. Soon after Juan Fernandez was discovered by Europeans, some Jesuits were quick to institute a colony on the island, but

the isolation proved too severe and it was abandoned in 1596. The first record of a man to be sequestered to solitude at Juan Fernandez was by way of shipwreck; though his name remains unknown, he lived there for five years until rescued. Among his rescuers was one William Dampier, who also happened to be aboard the *Bachelor's Delight* when a Mosquito Indian by the name of Will was rescued in 1684; Will had been accidentally abandoned a few years earlier when his apprehensive shipmates sailed off in a panic at the sight of three unknown ships. Some early inhabitants of Juan Fernandez were neither unwilling nor alone, however. Rather than continue with what they must have deemed a dubious expedition, five "gentlemen" requested to be set ashore with their four black servants in 1687; they reportedly had a "quiet time" until they were picked up in 1690. A group of French buccaneers, on the other hand, stayed on Juan Fernandez and feuded for some ten months. In 1720, Captain Shelvocke's *Speedwell* was accompanied by a mysterious black Albatross for several days of very bad weather before the bird was shot by one of the mates; this action, later to be immortalized by Coleridge, was surmised to have led directly to the wreck of the *Speedwell* at Juan Fernandez. The most fascinating inhabitant of Juan Fernandez, however, is one Alexander Selkirk.

Slowly over islands, destinies
Moving steadily pass
And change

Born the seventh son and the seventh child in the town of Largo, Scotland, in 1676, Selkirk was, according to the local superstition, supposed to be gifted with the second sight. R.L. Megroz, who wrote a comprehensive book on Selkirk, characterized him as

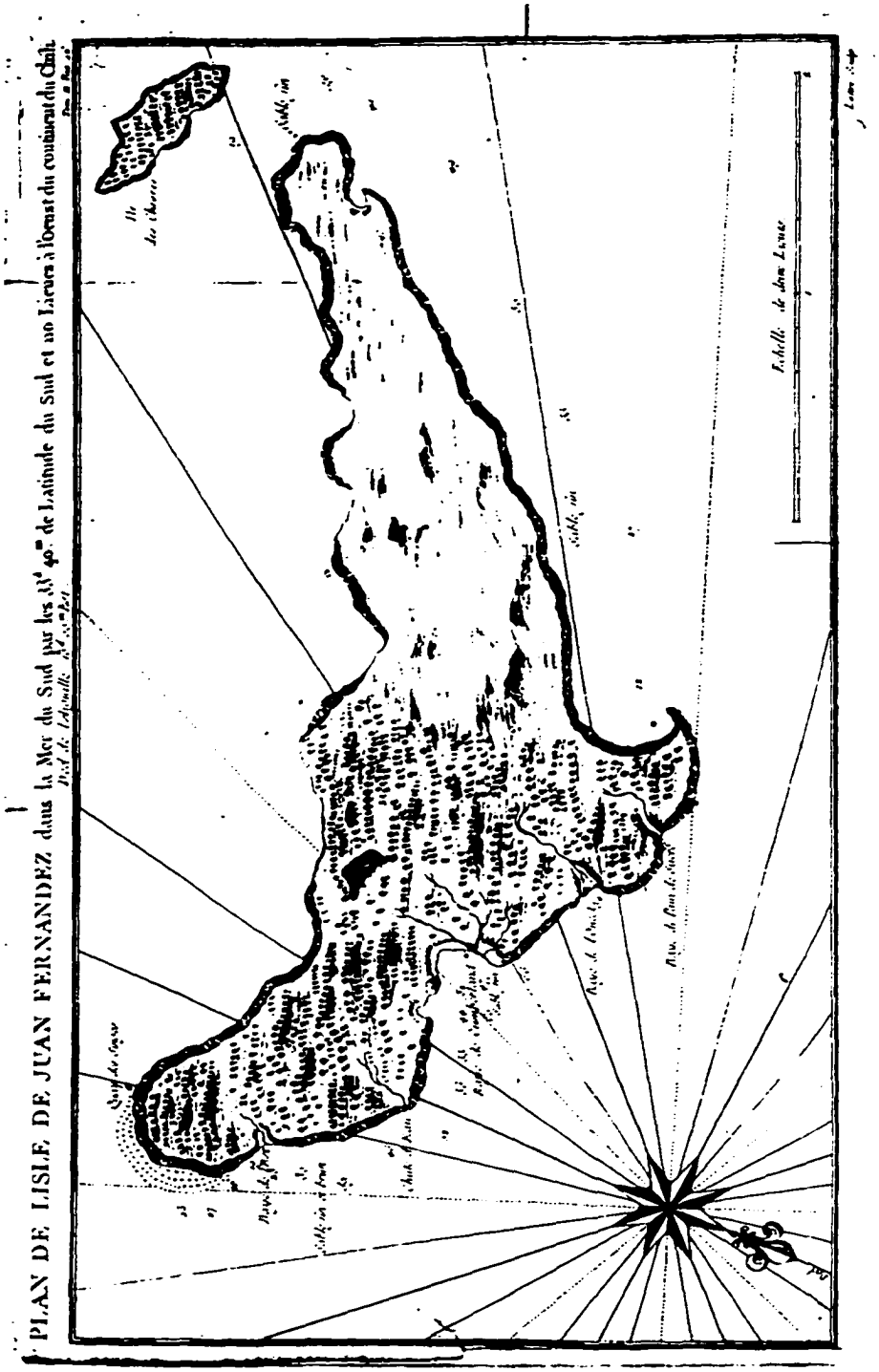
follows: he reacted against his father's "Presbyterian severity" while identifying with his mother's "romantic disposition"; he was, in any case, an extraordinarily unruly child, and would turn out to become a man of what several commentators have referred to as "quick parts." At the age of thirteen he was seen brandishing a club while leading a march on the town church; the money collected in the parish had not, it seems, been distributed to the poor as promised. At the age of nineteen he was, as the "Minutes of the Kirk Sessions" have it, "dilated for his undecent beaiver in ye chrch" (25). After leaving Largo for six years, he returned a highly adept mariner—but was promptly cited yet again before the church elders: "he confessed that, he having taken a drink of salt water out of a can, his younger brother Andrew laughing at him for it, he did beat him twice with a staff. He confessed also that he had spoken very ill words concerning his brother, and particularly he challenged his elder brother, John, to a combat, as he called it" (28). Selkirk "appeared before the pulpit," was publicly rebuked, and promised amendment. But he soon left Largo again and was hired by William Dampier as sailing-master (the equivalent of first-mate) for the *Cinque Ports* in 1703.

Dampier had orchestrated a privateering mission whose purpose was essentially to loot Spanish and Portuguese ships in the South Seas. The expedition was an unqualified failure. After several ineffective engagements, the *St. George* and the *Cinque Ports* anchored at Juan Fernandez to refit, but a quarrel broke out between Captain Stradling of the *Cinque Ports* and his crew: forty-two men went ashore in protest, in effect disabling Stradling's ship. While Dampier, who was in charge of the *St. George,* managed to reconcile Stradling and his crew, differences in strategy between Dampier and Stradling led the two ships to part company in May of 1704. Three months of listless sailing later,

Stradling and Selkirk themselves wound up in a dispute while again making repairs and gathering provisions at Juan Fernandez. Perhaps recalling a dream he had had months earlier in which he saw "the Cinque Ports pounded to pieces in a great storm and sent to the bottom with all hands, while from the sky a solemn voice proclaimed the complete failure of the expedition," Selkirk asked to be put ashore with his effects (Poling 24).

> Clothes; a seaman's chest; bedding; a musket; a pound of gunpowder; a quantity of bullets; a hatchet, a knife, and other tools; a kettle; a few pounds of tobacco; a flipcan; the Holy Bible; some books of devotion; others on navigation and mathematics; mathematical instruments; some practical pieces; two meals of victuals.

"He leaped on shore with a faint sensation of freedom and joy. He shook hands with his comrades, and bade them adieu in a hearty manner, while Stradling sat in the boat urging their return to the ship, which order they instantly obeyed; but no sooner did the sound of their oars, as they left the beach, fall on his ears, than the horrors of being left alone, cut off from all human society, perhaps for ever, rushed upon his mind. His heart sank within him, and all his resolution failed. He rushed into the water, and implored them to return and take him on board with them. To all his entreaties Stradling turned a deaf ear, and even mocked his despair; denouncing the choice he had made of remaining upon the island as rank mutiny, and describing his present situation as the most proper state for such a fellow, where his example would not affect others" (Howell 521).



Map of Juan Fernandez (French, 17--?). New York Public Library, Map Division.

To dream of that beach
For the sake of an instant in the eyes,

The absolute singular

The unearthly bonds
Of the singular

Which is the bright light of shipwreck

Despite the nearly edenic beauty of the island, Selkirk was, understandably, in complete despair for some months and spent many hours staring out to sea in the hope of spotting a ship; he often had thoughts of "self-violence." As it was whelping season, seals and sea-lions made an unbearable amount of noise during the night, and trees and rocks sometimes came crashing down from the heights due to the soft soil. Rats gnawed at various parts of his body until he was able to breed cats, which, it is said, soon numbered in the hundreds, causing Selkirk to meditate bitterly on the probability that, were he to die on the island, the cats would eat the flesh off of his corpse. The island had fresh water, and Selkirk was soon able to take full advantage of the variety of meals which certain combinations of the flora and fauna offered. He also eventually became so fleet of foot that he could run down the goats which roamed the island—descendents of those left behind by Don Juan Fernandez himself. He lived in two huts, one to serve as bedroom and the other as kitchen (this latter probably having been originally built by Will, Selkirk's predecessor). After about eighteen months of solitude Selkirk began to

Selected flora:	Selected fauna:	Selected fish:
ferns, vines, wild flowers, pampas grass, cotton trees, sandalwood, watercress, purslane, parsley, turnips, cabbage palms, Malagita bushes, black-plum trees, various fruits and berries.	blackbirds, thrush, two kinds of hummingbirds, cats, seals, sea-lions, goats, rats, fowl.	snappers, bonitos, sea bass, yellowtails, and a variety of shellfish

feel at peace: he was not only able to provide for himself but even experienced a considerable amount of pleasure in "governing" over his habitation. He prayed out loud in order to preserve his voice, and he would often spend several hours at a time singing and dancing with the cats and goats he had tamed. He crafted ornaments to decorate his home; he kept a precise account of the days of the week, and sometimes carved his name into trees in the attempt to provide a lasting record of himself. These markings have never been discovered; however, there is now a commemorative plaque on Juan Fernandez identifying "Selkirk's Lookout"—the perch from which he is supposed to have looked for a friendly sail.

Chorus (androgynous): 'Find me
So that I will exist, find my navel
So that it will exist, find my nipples
So that they will exist, find every hair
Of my belly, I am good (or I am bad),
Find me.'

Early in the year of 1709, the *Duke* (a ship of 320 tons, 30 guns, and 117 men) and the *Duchess* (260 tons, 26 guns, and 108 men) rounded the Horn after what was described as an "icy nightmare." This was only the second time in history that English ships were able to navigate the Horn successfully. Neither ship had been to port in two months, their sails were torn, masts fragile, rigging frayed, and hulls barnacled and worm-eaten: they needed to shore up, and badly. Selkirk spotted the ships in the vicinity of Juan Fernandez, knew they were English, and proceeded to light fires to attract their attention; the *Duke* and *Duchess*, however, suspected that Spaniards were living on the island. Desperation prevailed; on February 2, Woodes Rogers, commander of the *Duke* and *Duchess*, noted the following in his log: "We sent our Yall ashore about Noon, with Capt. *Dover*, Mr. *Frye*, and fix Men, all arm'd. [S]uch heavy Flaws came off the Land, that we were forc'd to let fly our Topsail-Sheet, keeping all Hands to stand by our Sails, for fear of carrying 'em away: but when the Flaws were gone, we had little or no Wind. These Flaws proceeded from the Land, which is very high in the middle of the Island. Our Boat did not return, so we sent our Pinnace with the Men arm'd, to see what was the occasion of the Yall's stay; for we were afraid that the *Spaniards* had a Garrison there, and might have seiz'ed 'em. We put out a Signal for our Boat, and the *Duchess* showed a *French* Ensign. Immediately our Pinnace return'd from the shore, and brought abundance of Craw-fish, with a Man cloth'd in Goat-Skins, who look'd wilder than the first Owners of them" (Rogers 125). After four years and four months of solitude, Selkirk was rescued. However: upon discovering that the ubiquitous William Dampier was pilot of the expedition, Selkirk, proclaiming Dampier's ineptitude, initially refused to

come aboard; he was, finally, prevailed upon to leave his "dominion." Woodes Rogers also noted the following upon encountering Selkirk: "At first coming on board, he had so much forgot his Language for want of Use, that we could scarcely understand him, for he seemed to speak his words by halves. We offer'd him a Dram, but he would not touch it, having drank nothing but Water since his being there, and 'twas some time before he could relish our Victuals"; it was, indeed, some time before Selkirk could even wear shoes (Rogers 129). But this was of little consequence as Selkirk's second sight had served him well: he discovered that the *Cinque Ports* had run aground soon after leaving Juan Fernandez; the entire crew was forced to surrender to the Spaniards before the ship foundered completely, and there is no surviving record of any of his former shipmates.

The *Duke* and *Duchess* were then in the middle of what one author has described as "possibly the most successful 'round-the-world privateering expedition ever to leave English soil," which Selkirk quickly became an integral part of by performing his usual duties as mate—and some unusual duties as soldier and pillager (Poling 8). After an arduous voyage, Selkirk arrived back in England in October of 1711, and his adventures were soon widely reported. Sir Richard Steele, among the first transcribers of Selkirk's story, remarks the following upon first meeting him in London: "I could discern that he had been much separated from Company, from his Aspect and Gesture; there was a strong but cheerful Seriousness in his Look, and a certain Disregard to the ordinary things about him, as if he had been sunk in Thought.... The Man frequently bewailed his Return to the World, which could not, he said, with all its Enjoyments, restore him to the Tranquility of his Solitude" (Sutcliffe 47). When Selkirk returned to his hometown of Largo, though it was in a splendid gold-laced uniform, "his aversion to everybody's

society was soon noticed, and his amusement was to teach tricks to two cats belonging to his brother. He was often surprised in tears. Then he became elusive, going out all day, and returning only to go to bed" (Megroz 151). He was so forlorn that he built a replica of his "bower" on Juan Fernandez in a cave behind his father's house.

> And one may honorably keep
>
> His distance
> If he can

He spent most of his days wandering the hills or fishing in his little boat, until he met a girl named Sophia Bruce—with whom he eloped to London. Nothing was heard of Selkirk for many years until a certain Frances Candia showed up in Largo as his widow: he died serving as a lieutenant on the ship *Weymouth* in 1721, probably of yellow fever.

How did Alexander Selkirk's story become the one which remains known when there were so many others like it? For the simple reasons that his was the most amenable to the morality tale and that very capable writers rewrote his story in such a way that it would be instructive to their contemporaries. Selkirk's trials are particularly susceptible to ideology, after all: how often does one literally find Man Alone in modern society? Here we have a modern Adam, just after his expulsion from Eden:

> Cursed be the ground because of you;
> By toil shall you eat of it
> All the days of your life:
> Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you.

But your food shall be the grasses of the field;

By the sweat of your brow

Shall you get bread to eat,

Until you return to the ground—

For from it you were taken. (Genesis 3: 17-19)

Selkirk is the Man in the Wilderness who must, by the sweat of his brow, provide for his own survival because of the sins he has committed—the sin here presumably being Selkirk's adolescent rebelliousness. The fact that Selkirk eventually became happy with the state of affairs at Juan Fernandez only puts the corrupting forces of modern civilization in relief. Woodes Rogers, in *A Cruising Voyage Round the World*—the best-seller which made Selkirk famous in his own lifetime—provides us with a particularly lucid instance of the morality tale: "By this one may see that Solitude and Retirement from the World is not such an unsufferable State of Life as most Men imagine.... We may perceive by this Story the Truth of the Maxim, That Necessity is the Mother of Invention, since he found means to supply his Wants in a very natural manner, so as to maintain his Life, tho not so conveniently, yet as effectually as we are able to do with the help of all our Arts and Society. It may likewise instruct us, how much a plain and temperate way of living conduces to the Health of the Body and the Vigour of the Mind, both which we are apt to destroy by Excess and Plenty, especially of strong Liquor, and the Variety as well as the Nature of our Meat and Drink: for this Man, when he came to our ordinary Method of Diet and Life, tho he was sober enough, lost much of his Strength and Agility" (130-1). Perhaps such conclusions are to be expected in the England of 1712—especially when written by a famous buccaneer.

Or so Edward Cooke, a Captain under Rogers during Selkirk's rescue, must have thought when the first edition of his *A Voyage to the South Sea and Round the World*, though published in the same year, did not sell nearly as well: he devoted only a few superficial lines to Selkirk's trials. Sir Richard Steele is savvy enough to follow Rogers' example in making the lesson in puritan economy sanctimoniously clear: "This plain Man's Story is a memorable Example, that he is happiest who confines his Wants to natural Necessities; and he that goes further in his Desires, increases his Wants in Proportion to his Acquisitions; or to use his own expression, *I am now worth 800 Pounds, but shall never be so happy, as when I was not worth a farthing*" (Ross 310). The poet William Cowper nevertheless disregards Selkirk's own account and chooses instead to present solitude as a form of torture in his "Lines Attributed to Alexander Selkirk":

I am monarch of all I survey,
My right there is none to dispute;
From the center all round to the sea,
I am lord of the fowl and the brute.
Oh, Solitude! Where are thy charms,
That sages have seen in thy face?
Better dwell in the midst of alarms,
Than reign in this horrible place.

The only verses in fact known to have been written by Selkirk are to be found on his "flipcan" ("flip" was a combination of beer and spirits favored by sailors): "Aex. Selkirk, this is my one. / When you take me on board of ship, / Pray fill me full with punch or flip" (Megroz 6). John Howell, writing in 1829, finds something else to emphasize

disproportionately: religion. He professes that Selkirk practiced "that simple but beautiful form of family worship" during his solitude—despite the fact that Selkirk was notoriously uninterested in religion prior to his seafaring escapades. It is true that Selkirk himself would later to remark that "he was a better Christian while in his solitude than ever he was before, and feared he would ever be again" (Howell 522). But Howell gives no account of how Selkirk might have recovered his faith, and instead simply asserts that he sung a psalm, read some scripture, and "finished with devout prayer" before he each day on Juan Fernandez; the same "duties" were performed at the end of each day, and so we come to Howell's conclusion—totally unsupported by any of the first-hand accounts—that "the greater part of his days was spent in devotion" (522). Selkirk has become a monk. The boy of "wayward humours and irregular conduct" who induced church censure, Howell assumes, must have repented somewhere along the way in order to find redemption and return to the fold: if Selkirk is a version of Adam, Howell would also have him be a version of the prodigal son—even though Selkirk's "return to the fold" of society (as distinct from religion) is clearly not a happy one. But it is with the same sort of creative hyperbole which Howell uses in the dramatic description of Selkirk's marooning cited above that he would like to mold Selkirk's story: it is worth recalling that the prodigal son is celebrated upon his return precisely because he demonstrates the meaning and power of the faith by having left it, making him available to "appear before the pulpit" as the subject of more (re)constructive preaching.

A former governor of Juan Fernandez by the name of Thomas Sutcliffe does well to stay close to Rogers' account in the re-telling Selkirk's story in 1843, though even he cannot resist inflecting the tale with some moral meaning. This time the tone is Romantic

as the landscape itself becomes the authority: "Such were the dominions of Alexander Selkirk," Sutcliffe writes of his own dominions, "where the beauty, at once, and solemn grandeur of the scenery, were well calculated to produce a chastened cheerfulness, a sober and pensive complacency" (35). But R.L. Megroz, in his 1939 study of Selkirk, will have nothing of either Howell or Sutcliffe as his purpose seems to be to provide the first thorough and reliable documentation of Selkirk's life. But even Megroz cannot resist wagging his finger: he describes Selkirk's years after Juan Fernandez as the "wretched last phase" in which he had to suffer the "misery which he had brought on himself" because of his betrayal of Sophia Bruce, to whom Megroz devotes a very sympathetic chapter. Megroz does, however, redress the situation of Selkirk's religious phase, noting that the "inclination to piety was characteristic" among castaways: it is within the predictable narrative frame to which most were socialized at the time. Indeed, upon his return to society, Selkirk quickly returns to his old ways and becomes wanted in Bristol for drunken assault (112-3). James Poling's 1967 account of Selkirk and his rescuer, Woodes Rogers, is an almost gleeful rendition of their adventures and exploits: while the most complete of all, its sole impulse is that of narrative: there are few moral catechisms to be found here. The virtue of most importance to Poling is that which allows one to carry on in the face of adversity. He has little tolerance for Selkirk's darker moods, insisting that Selkirk get on with "the business of living" rather than wallow in sorrow after his marooning, and describing Selkirk's attempt to re-create his life of solitude after returning to Largo as "tragic nonsense" (100, 248). Selkirk's survival is attributed to his being born in Fife county, known for its "cold contempt for meekness

and conformity," and to a certain kind of rugged physique which harbored the "guts and fortitude" to keep him from surrendering to less pragmatic sentiments (10).

When a certain Andrew Selkirk, unrelated to Alexander Selkirk, passed away in 1909, an obituary read: "DESCENDANT OF ROBINSON CRUSOE DEAD" (Megroz 19). Such is the power of a gifted writer that he or she can cause the intermingling of fiction and reality. Despite the very just allegations that he had, without acknowledging it, freely adapted and dramatized Selkirk's experiences, Daniel Defoe insisted that *Robinson Crusoe* was a true story written by Crusoe himself. "Robinson Crusoe's Preface," to be found in Defoe's *Serious Reflections*, asserts the following: "I, Robinson Crusoe, being at this time in perfect and sound mind and memory, thanks be to God therfor, do hereby declare their objection is an invention scandalous in design, and false in fact; and do affirm that the story, though allegorical, is also historical; and that it is the beautiful representation of a life of unexampled misfortunes, and of a variety not to be met with in the world, sincerely adapted to and intended for the common good of mankind, and designed at first, as it is now farther applied, to the most serious uses possible" (Bloom 5). It is interesting to contemplate to what extent a story can be "historical"—a word which is here being used as a synonym for "true"—while being both "allegorical" and "of a variety not to be met with in the world"; it is also interesting to consider how the phrases "beautiful representation" and "sincerely adapted" severely mitigate the claim to historical accuracy. What with the carefully mimicked legalese of the opening sentence, it is difficult not to admire how Defoe negotiates these troubled waters in the voice of one of his greatest creations—and all of this mock sincerity and

authenticity to ensure that his book would be taken seriously as a treatise on economy and religion.

Several chroniclers suggest that it is likely that Defoe actually met with and interviewed Selkirk; this has not been substantiated, however. On the other hand, Megroz is quite certain that Defoe read a book called *The Improvement of Human Reason, Exhibited in the Life of Hai Ebn Yokdhan*, a treatise written by Ibn Tufail (or Abu Jaafar Ebn Tophail) in 1198 and translated into English from the Arabic by Simon Ockley in 1708:

> In which is demonstrated
> By what Methods one may, by the meer
> Light of **Nature**, attain the Knowledg
> of things **Natural** and **Supernatural**;
> more particularly the Knowledg of God,
> and the Affairs of another Life.
> Illustrated with proper FIGURES.

Ibn Tufail relates the story of a newborn babe who is sent to an unpopulated island in an ark so as to prevent the discovery of a secret relationship of which the child is the (by) product. Tufail also tells us of an alternate version of the story in which the genesis of the babe on the island is spontaneous, the result of a fortuitous rendezvous between spirit and appropriately fermented earth. The child is nursed by a roe, and quickly becomes acclimated to the animal kingdom, managing to learn, by way of puzzling and speculation, many animal languages. When the roe dies, the boy—it is of course a boy—dissects her to find out the cause of death and thereby learns the basics of anatomy,

biology, and surgery. He soon discovers fire, teaches himself to cook, and conducts and in-depth examination of the local flora and fauna. Always reasoning, the boy begins to look for the "voluntary agent" in sensible things; "then he consider'd, that a Thing Created must needs have a Creator," and so inaugurates his theological career (84). Much hard thinking follows, and Yokdhan, who has now become a man, is rewarded with a divine vision. He eventually reaches an enlightened state (in which his spirit is almost entirely divorced from his physical being), but is interrupted by the arrival of Asal, who has come to the island for a life of solitary ascetic contemplation. They become friends, discover the affinity of their beliefs, and embark for Asal's society to preach to the people; upon discovering that the people prove intractable to the ascetic way, Yokdhan and Asal conclude that it is meant only for the elect and return to their island, never to be heard from again. In Ockely's appendix, it quickly becomes clear that he is not interested in the literary virtues of Tufail's work, or indeed in the work as a cultural artifact: Ockley's sole purpose in undertaking this arduous translation, it seems, is to provide a platform from which he can preach against Enthusiasts—those among his contemporaries who believe that they can achieve such visions as Yokdhan did without the trappings of institution and ritual. Ockley argues against the possibility of attaining such visions on one's own, or at all, pointing out that none of this is mentioned in the gospel, and that we should not therefore expect prophets in our time.

One can see how Defoe might be tempted to use Tufail's story of island solitude as a template to impart a different set of virtues; fused with the timely event of Selkirk's dramatic experiences, the result would be irresistible, particularly at a time when the novel form, still in its infancy in Europe, was expected to provide both instruction *and*

enjoyment. Defoe's departures from the life of Selkirk are too numerous to address in detail here, though I believe a few changes are particularly salient. The duration of Crusoe's stay on the island (which is relocated to a fictitious spot of land 9 degrees 22 minutes north of the line, somewhere to the east of the river Oronoco) is, first of all, twenty-eight years, giving Defoe ample time to demonstrate his theory of economics while allowing Crusoe himself to achieve full-fledged repentance—neither of which Selkirk, being merely human and not allegorical, managed to do. What Crusoe calls his "original sin" is his opposition to the "excellent advice" given to him by his father before he first entered the seafaring life (198). This advice essentially consisted of remonstrances not to leave the "middle station of life" (i.e. the middle class), a position which, his father believed, offered the "fewest disasters" of all (28). But Crusoe is disaster bound, due in part to an adventurous spirit and in part to a steadfast desire to increase his personal wealth. Luckily for Crusoe, his exceedingly rational and entrepreneurial mindset keeps him alive long enough to confront his "sins." Defoe's famous realism is here made manifest in large part through the extensive lists, calendars, accounts, and records Crusoe keeps. After allowing Crusoe to plunder the wrecked ship, for example, Defoe makes sure to list, down to the last nail, precisely what Crusoe garnered for himself—a bounty that Selkirk could only have dreamed of.

Then he has Crusoe sit down and make a register, "like debtor and creditor," of the "Good" and "Evil" elements of his marooned condition (83). And here begins the description of Crusoe's astounding industry and ingenuity, all made possible through an enlightened rationalism: "So I went to work; and here I must needs observe, that as

Two saws, an axe, a hammer; bread, rice, three Dutch cheeses, five pieces of dried goat's flesh, and corn; some clothes; carpenter's tools; pistols, gunpowder, shot; swords; nails; a dozen or two hatchets; a grindstone; musquets; a hammock and bedding; rigging, ropes, and twine; canvass; three large runlets of rum, a box of sugar, a barrel of fine flower, a hogshead of bread; pieces of cable and iron; two or three razors, one pair of large sizzers, ten or a dozen of good knives and forks; pens, ink, paper, four compasses, mathematical instruments, dials, perspectives, charts, books of navigation; three Bibles and various other books; a dog and two cats.

reason is the substance and original of the mathematicks, so by stating and squaring every thing by reason, and by making the most rational judgment of things, every man may be in time master of every mechanick art. I had never handled a tool in my life, and yet in time, by labour, application, and contrivance, I found at last that I wanted nothing but I could have made it" (85). This confidence in his own ability to master his situation through appropriate doses of reason and labor is evident even in times of difficulty. Soon Crusoe begins to plan each day's work, and, after having progressed from the condition of hunter-gatherer to the state of farmer, he makes seasonal planting schedules. When, after many years of solitary labor, Crusoe encounters Friday and teaches him "to say Master," a community begins to form; joined by Friday's father and a Spaniard, Crusoe reflects on his mode of government: "My island was now peopled, and I thought my self very rich in subjects; and it was a merry reflection which I frequently made, how like a

king I looked. First of all, the whole country was my own meer property; so that I had an undoubted right of dominion; 2dly, my people were perfectly subjected: I was absolute lord and lawgiver"; Crusoe does not forget to omit that he "allowed liberty of conscience throughout" his dominions (240-1). Most startling, however, is the (entirely unnecessary) list which Crusoe, masquerading as a victorious general, makes of the "savages" he and his newfound comrades have killed: "3 killed at our first shot from the tree./ 2 killed at the next shot./ 2 killed by Friday in the boat," and so forth, "21 in all" (237). Lest one think that Crusoe's passion for order is pathological, it is worth noting that Crusoe also devotes inordinate amounts of time to calculating his wealth, whether that be measured in goats or coin. Although Crusoe does call the money which he has while on the island "sorry, useless stuff," he does not fail to take account of it when he leaves the island; in fact, despite his renunciation of money, Crusoe—like Job—conveniently comes out the richer for his sufferings in the end.

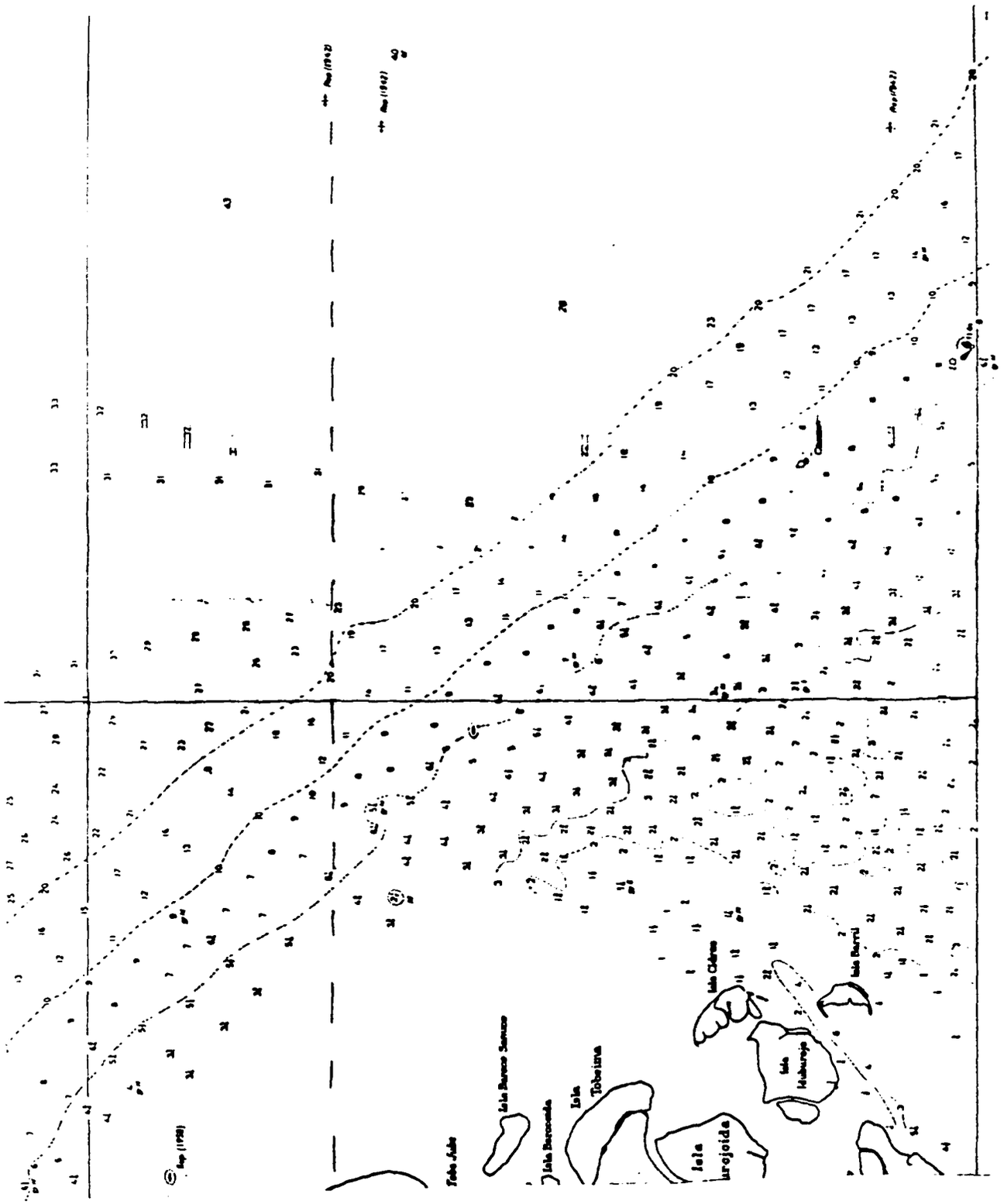
Crusoe becomes dangerously ill at the very beginning of his career as the self-sufficient solitary man, and it is during this illness that he realizes his "sinful" nature, confronts his past misdeeds, repents, and vows that he will henceforth live a devout life. Although Defoe commits several pages to this revelation (complete with an unmistakable allusion to St. Augustine's revelation), it is rather remarkable that references to Crusoe's newfound faith come up only incidentally during the remainder of the narrative: as Crusoe's personal economies wax, religious references wane and become simply token ("thanks be to God"). Although Crusoe does remain consistently faithful—he even tries to convert Friday and frets about being friends with a "Papist"—the final pages of the narrative send Crusoe "upon the wing again": he acknowledges that he is "inured to a

wandering life" despite the fact that it was precisely his first wandering which was construed as his original sin (297). And this is after Crusoe himself has realized that his story bears marked similarities to that of Job and the prodigal son. The final pages of the narrative describe how Crusoe breaks "his" island up into lots for the inhabitants—while maintaining ownership of the whole—and how he devises ways to insure propagation there: he sends seven women to serve as wives (apparently the first women ever to set foot there), promises to send more "women from England," along with five cows, some sheep and some hogs. *Robinson Crusoe* is no *Moll Flanders*.

Although many readers are at odds as to whether Defoe deliberately delivers a cohesive economic and/or religious treatise in *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe's wish that the book would be taken seriously certainly came true. The first major figure to take up the issue is Rousseau, who writes in his *Émile* (1762) that, while he hates books, the only book useful for his proposed ideal education is *Robinson Crusoe*. If the student begins by training the senses, then proceeds to "learn by doing" and is finally permitted to attempt basic trades like agriculture and carpentry, what better model than Crusoe? Martin Green has observed in *The Robinson Crusoe Story* that Rousseau "presents an ideal student through the image of an individual alone on a desert island," which would explain why Rousseau limits the reading of *Robinson Crusoe* to those parts that deal exclusively with survival on the island (34). The Puritan morality tale, in other words, is discarded in favor of a "treatise on natural philosophy," while solitude, as Ian Watt has remarked in *Myths of Modern Individualism*, becomes the essential state (even in Defoe's London and Rousseau's Geneva). Since Rousseau recommended reading *Robinson Crusoe* for boys (and only boys) between the ages of twelve and fifteen, this made the book enormously

popular among children in that age group, much as it is today. But the popularity of the trope itself has not been limited to younger audiences, as Green makes clear: the Crusoe story has been abundantly recycled and revised by successive generations in order that each may project onto it their own vision of its importance. In fact, Watt argues that the heroic status accorded to Robinson Crusoe as a figure has gone a long way to contribute to the most positively inflected of the myths of individualism which still circulate today.

In 1857, Karl Marx refers disparagingly to an ideal "eighteenth century individual" which some social and economic theorists had imagined in what he termed their *Robinsonades*: *Robinson Crusoe* had evidently achieved such popularity that it could serve as the archetype for modern visions of utopia (222). A precedent for this had already been set by another treatise on the ideal state, however: Thomas More's rendering of utopia (literally "nowhere"), published in 1516, also relies on the construction of a fictitious island not subject to the complexities of the real; aligning himself momentarily with Marx, More envisions utopia as a place in which private property does not exist. In 1845, however, Marx had written the following famous lines in *The German Ideology*: "For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular. exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remains so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming a



A segment of the nautical chart Serpents Mouth to Rio Oronoco; the dotted line marks the latitude where Crusoe's island is supposed to be located. The islands to the right mark the Venezuelan coast and the mouth of the Oronoco. The cross-hatched "Rep" notations indicate shipwrecks, with dates of last known location in parentheses. Soundings in fathoms (one fathom equals six feet). Defense Mapping Agency #24390.

hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic" (160). One would think that Crusoe's island life fits this latter description rather neatly, and Marx recognized this when he came to write the first volume of his *Capital* in 1867. While examining the mysteries of commodity fetishism, Marx uses Crusoe as a foil since his "experiences are a favourite theme with political economists" (324). If commodities are defined as being both "objects of utility" and "depositories of value"—a value measured according to their "social relations" and not according to the amount of labor required to produce them—then Crusoe's productions are not commodities since they are useful only to himself. The division of labor does not affect Crusoe adversely; he is not alienated from himself: "In spite of the variety of his work, he knows that his labour, whatever its form, is but the activity of one and the same Robinson" (324). In bourgeois economies, on the other hand, the products of labor acquire a certain "magic and necromancy" as they become commodities—commodities which soon begin to "appear as independent beings endowed with life" like the productions of the "mist-enveloped regions of the religious world," thereby becoming elevated to the status of fetish (321).

We are pressed, pressed on each other,
We will be told at once
Of anything that happens

And the discovery of fact bursts
In a paroxysm of emotion
Now as always. Crusoe

We say was
'Rescued'.
So we have chosen.

The story of shipwreck and subsequent island solitude predates both Robinson Crusoe and Alexander Selkirk. But the popularity of *Robinson Crusoe* enabled the trope to move from fact to allegory and finally to transcend into cultural commodity: the tale is now so pervasive that one finds books with titles such as *Robinson Crusoe in One Syllable Words* and *Robinson Crusoe, Social Engineer* in the libraries along with the many more distanced retellings which Green has identified. The social relations simply between *versions* of the story are myriad. Defoe's story is so readily on everyone's lips that one can refer to it in the most oblique terms without the usual fear of being too allusive or obscure. For example, in a postscript—entitled simply "Crusoe in England"—meant in part to serve as a corrective to Defoe's relentlessly positivistic Crusoe, Elizabeth Bishop presents a Crusoe whose pathos is of a piece with that actually experienced by Selkirk during his first months on Juan Fernandez: "None of the books has ever got it right," the narrator asserts. Though this phrase refers to the fact that his island—whose existence, like that of Utopia, is fictional—remains "un-rediscovered, un-renamable," Crusoe here details some of the gloomier aspects of solitude which the books, indeed, haven't captured at all. The island, while primordially lush, was not, he insists, such an appealing place to live: "the whole place hissed," functioned as "a sort of cloud-dump," and was pervaded by the smell of goat and guano. In the company of fifty-two "miserable" volcanoes and numerous waterspouts, spectacles only to armchair travelers, Crusoe felt increased loneliness: "Beautiful, yes, but not much company." The island seemed to enact a sort of specular mockery of his solitude by containing just "one kind of everything"—one kind of snail, one kind of tree, one berry, one sun. A forced

inwardness brought forth the least remarkable of his "island industries"—a "miserable philosophy." Like his home-made flute, Crusoe, traversing "the weirdest scale on earth," became wholly out of tune when reduced to solitude; this changes completely upon the arrival of Friday (accounts of whom the books again have it "all wrong"), who, in addition to being "nice" and "pretty to watch," became much needed company. Solitude, in Bishop's vision, is not romantic: the human animal was not intended for it, and it seems that we can only be happy in a community of loved ones. But upon Crusoe's return to a larger community in England, that other island, misery descends again as Friday dies (of measles) and his previously unmediated relationship with his environment proves unreproduceable. When, for example, he used his knife on the island, it "reeked of meaning"; now its "living soul has dribbled away" as it sits on the shelf—its next destination the local museum and transfiguration into commodity.

The most remarkable treatment of Selkirk and Crusoe—and many other related issues—is *Desert Islands and Robinson Crusoe*, by the irrepressible Walter de la Mare, whose purple prose surely ranks among the best. The book has no single thesis; it is instead a thoroughgoing meditation on the theme of solitude both within and without literature. This leads to a rather extraordinary structure: the book begins with a seventy-two page essay which is linked, by a novel form of footnoting, to a further two-hundred and twelve pages of thoughts, associations, and citations (some of which, like the one concerning "Cannabis Indica, experiments on," are very extensive). For example: a phrase in the beginning of the book, like "money is money's worth," which is used while examining Defoe's motives for writing *Robinson Crusoe*, can be easily located in the "footnotes," where de la Mare explores the subject in ways that may at first seem

tangential but later provide for a significant accretion of meaning. The inevitable cataloging of related source material is equally engrossing: who would have known about *Isle of Pines*, written in 1668 by Henry Neville, in which a shipwrecked quintet—George Pine, his master's daughter, a black woman, and two maidservants—manages to populate an island with 1,789 souls *before* the death of George Pine himself; "a rather depressing manifestation of man's rivalry with the rabbit" indeed (41). Islands are used to propagate all sorts of fantasies. More importantly, de la Mare is the only writer on this topic actually to ask—if not to answer fully—the question of what it must be like to be forced into solitude indefinitely. De la Mare wonders what *Robinson Crusoe* would have been if "the attempt had been made to reveal what a prolonged unbroken solitude, an absolute exile from his fellow-creatures, and an incessant commerce with silence and the unknown, would mean at last to the spirit of man. A steadily debasing brutish stupidity? Hallucinations, extravagances, insanities, enravishment, strange quests?" (70). Will the voices competing for attention in your head finally relent? Will things long innocuous suddenly become clear? Will you talk aloud to yourself, or to phantasms from your past? Which memories will fade, and which will persist? Will the faces of your loved ones become indistinct, merging into a single, all-purpose face? Are manners needed away from company? What kind of ethics develops in solitude? How quickly will time move? Is the progress of a day decided by necessity or by whim? Will your eyesight adjust to longer periods of darkness? How many different versions of a happy return will you imagine? Will you become less inhibited? Will you whistle? Will you dance? Invent games? Will art and literature seem more or less necessary?

Crusoe's specular fame eventually returned home to Selkirk himself by way of the comedian Michael Palin, of Monty Python fame, who visited Juan Fernandez during the filming of *Full Circle*, a whimsical travelogue produced for public television. But the latest instance of Crusoe's ascension to the level of cultural commodity is a reality-based game-show, called "Expedition Robinson" on its debut in Sweden and "Survivor" in its American incarnation: a group of carefully selected contestants is deliberately stranded on an island and assigned certain tasks to complete. The contestants are subject to specific rules and conditions, the most important of which is 24 hour video surveillance; this allows the public—who can view selections of the day's events on TV or watch continuous live streaming on the internet—to monitor each of the contestants continuously. By way of a tediously fabricated voting process, the survivors vote one of their kind out of the game-show every week: the lone survivor who has not been voted out wins a very large cash prize. In a bizarre twist on Selkirk's life, the task at hand is not to survive solitude, but rather to survive community—the physical community of a handful of people, and the virtual community of millions. Islands are used to propagate all sorts of fantasies. Selkirk and his fellow survivors of solitude are evidence of human ingenuity and adaptability, but no more: not of morals, economics, or religion. The stories of those who haven't survived are never heard.

Obsessed, bewildered

By the shipwreck
Of the singular

We have chosen the meaning
Of being numerous.

Isolarii

(island books)

An island
Has a public quality

"Ballad"

1

When Woodes Rogers observed that Alexander Selkirk, due to having been separated from company for more than four years, "had so much forgot his Language for want of Use" that he "seemed to speak his words by halves," Rogers was inadvertently reminding his readers of the obvious though often overlooked fact that language is the product of human beings living together: it exists for the purposes of communication in community. Curiously, one of the central aims of *Robinson Crusoe* appears to be to demonstrate precisely a single man's independence from community, a circumstance which has in turn made way for the transformation of Crusoe himself into a figure representing heroic individualism. Lionel Trilling has written, however, that the very idea of the individual is only a relatively recent invention. With the breakdown of the feudal system in Europe and a Church with significantly diminished powers, Trilling maintains that the entity which we now recognize as society came into existence in the late sixteenth century (less than a century before Selkirk was born), producing an equally dramatic change in human psychology: "Which is to say—although one rather dreads saying it, so often has it been said before, so firmly is it established in our minds as the first psycho-historical concept we ever learned—that the new kind of personality which emerges (the verb is tediously constant in the context) is what we call an 'individual': at a certain point in history men became individuals" (24). This becomes problematic because of a marked increase in

self-consciousness: society requires the individual to play different roles within it, creating a more complicated sense of identity which must be managed in direct relation to others. Pre-societal man (the noun is tediously constant), Trilling believes, had no sense of internal space, did not imagine himself in more than one role, and was not so much an object of interest to others; societal man, however, has a strong sense of privacy, looks into larger and brighter mirrors, and begins to think of the self "as that which he must cherish for its own sake and show to the world for the sake of good faith" (25). Societal man, in other words, must *present* himself around others, and it is this activity which first gives rise to the concept of sincerity with relation to people. While sincerity had been used in relation to things (e.g. doctrines, translations, objects) for some time, it is only when the notion of a self to which one could be true—or false—became prevalent that sincerity among people even became an issue. And it is of course through language that sincerity is primarily communicated. An exegesis of the role of sincerity in western literature reveals, perhaps not unexpectedly, that it is a concept which is invoked and enacted time and again as a critical component of a healthy society; less expected, however, is the discovery that innovative writing attempts to recover what I would call the *sincere effect*. As language becomes increasingly systematized, as words and phrases flatten into platitudes after constant, inattentive use, it becomes ever more difficult to express oneself sincerely; insisting over and over that "I feel your pain," for example, is not likely to be met with credulity—no matter how earnest the attempt. New expressions must be formulated: it then falls to the poet to restore expansiveness to language and surprise to expressions, to "make it new" in the service of a better society.

The observations on the emergence of the individual are to be found in Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity*, perhaps the best treatment of the subject available. The book is a fine example of the type of scholarship which, in its presumed command of entire literary epochs, habitually makes sweeping generalizations seem historically true. The type of clairvoyance which allows him to pinpoint the moment when "society" and the "individual" come into being is startling. There is something about this sort of claim which is both absurd and admirable: on the one hand, it could not possibly be true in the strictest sense, and the claim demonstrates a rather appalling arrogance (was even Socrates not able to see himself as an individual?); on the other hand, the idea—central to the parsimony of the Trilling's project as it is—is evocative in a way that few contemporary critical texts have the courage to be. But instead of relying too heavily on Trilling's suspect historical claims, we can turn to Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense" for philosophical guidance as to how integral sincerity is to modern society; typically, Nietzsche approaches the topic by examining one of sincerity's more subversive siblings—dissimulation. Nietzsche writes that "the art of dissimulation has reached its peak in man" as a direct consequence of the intellect—the most powerful tool we have available in our struggle for survival. Given our penchant for "deception, flattery, lying and cheating, slander, false pretenses, living on borrowed glory, masquerading, conventions of concealment, [and] playacting," Nietzsche is baffled as to how the desire for truth might have arisen in us in the first place. Echoing Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, Nietzsche suggests that humans are forced to live socially "out of necessity and boredom"; and this is when he believes the desire for truth first surfaces in us, since living in a community requires the legislation of laws and language. Though I

cannot go into an extended exposition of the brilliant argument Nietzsche makes concerning language, it is enough to say that he presages Ferdinand de Saussure and countless contemporary theorists in insisting that there is in fact no direct, causal relationship between language and truth. The essence of Nietzsche's insight is based on the observation that each experience of every individual is unique; the moment we try to fit any type of language to an experience, we begin the process of intuitively generating metaphors which, while being aesthetically pleasing, nevertheless cannot communicate the "truth" of the experience. With the invention of shared languages, however, a level of generalization became necessary for pragmatic communication: we cannot, for example, insist on ascribing new metaphors to every new object or experience if we are to participate successfully in a community. And so with the law: while a universalized application of the law cannot possibly do justice to the particular event under scrutiny, new laws cannot be created for every case which comes before a court. The distinction between truth and lying therefore arises from this situation on false pretenses: the truth becomes what is generally agreed upon as true in a given community—this is why, for example, we assign the term "leaf" to myriad objects of variegated shapes and colors. Every word, that is to say, becomes a *concept*. "What is truth?" Nietzsche asks; "a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, in short, a sum of human relations which were poetically and rhetorically heightened, transferred, and adorned, and after long use seem solid, canonical, and binding to a nation. Truths are illusions about which it has been forgotten that they *are* illusions" (250). It is this forgetting which allows us to believe, in other words, in the truth an expression; it is this forgetting which allows us to live in communities, for out of these solidified metaphors—these concepts—

we can create the schemata which structure society: "a pyramidal order according to castes and classes, a new world of laws, privileges, subordinations, boundary determinations." Never mind that the schemata are illusions—we agree to call them "real" and "true" both because we have forgotten that they are illusions and because they protect us (from each other). This is how the *rational* being constantly lives in and with dissimulation; but "that enormous structure of beams and boards of the concepts, to which the poor man clings for dear life, is for the liberated intellect just a scaffolding and plaything for his boldest artifices" (255). Nietzsche is essentially arguing that society is constructed on a scaffolding of an encrusted language of concepts which dissimulates reality; only those with liberated intellects can resuscitate language from its conceptual grave.

One of the earliest of these liberated intellects is Michel de Montaigne, the inventor of the essay form, who wrote at exactly the time that Trilling believes "society"—and thus the "individual"—came into being. In the note to the reader which prefaces his collected essays, Montaigne writes: "I want to be seen here in my simple, natural, ordinary fashion, without straining or artifice; for it is myself that I portray"; presaging Rousseau, he adds that his "defects will here be read to the life" (2). What is to follow in the essays, in other words, is meant with the utmost sincerity. Montaigne, however, was uncannily aware of the contradiction inherent in professing sincerity while using literary and rhetorical techniques to do so. A plain list of facts about the author would not be very enticing, after all, and how much of our lives are made up of facts simple enough to be related without resorting to a device as straightforward as, say, metaphor? In "Of Giving the Lie," Montaigne acknowledges with pleasure the

falsification inherent in writing: "I have had to fashion and compose myself so often to bring myself out, that the model itself has to some extent grown firm and taken shape. Painting myself for others, I have painted my inward self with colors clearer than my original ones. I have no more made my book than my book has made me—a book consubstantial with its author, concerned with my own self" (504). Montaigne's prescient insight, of course, applies to all first person accounts—letters, memoirs, and other so-called non-fiction. Montaigne follows with a revelation all too relevant to *our* age. "But whom shall we believe when he talks about himself, in so corrupt an age," an age in which "dissimulation is one of the most notable qualities," he teases; he then reveals that he is fully cognizant of the purpose of rhetoric, namely, persuasion: "our truth nowadays is not what is, but what others can be convinced of" (505).

This points to the ever-present but covert art/artifice dilemma: if the term "art," broadly taken, comprises all those skills which a person might make use of during the course of a communication which contribute to the aesthetic value or quality of the communication (those skills, that is to say, which are employed to make communication *pleasurable*), then the term "artifice" denotes the extent to which the craftsperson has departed from the literal transference of information (which some might call truth, and others fact) between people. But artifice was not always negatively construed as it is today; at one point in the history of its use it was actually associated with a high level of technical skill: "artifice" derives from the Latin *artifex*: *ars* (art) + *fex* (maker) = craftsperson. The negative connotation which artifice has come to acquire results from the mythic importance traditionally ascribed to Nature, which was for so long equated with the Real, and, by extension, the True. But as these three terms have come under

scrutiny they have been shown to be neither mythical nor monolithic; human constructions, also the result of art and craft, have been assigned their own value, as have the skills and techniques which produced them. Art, however, is usually regarded suspiciously because its use value is not easily perceived; what, after all, is the *use* of the pleasure conferred by art? What is not often recognized is that the pleasure is the result of something more than mere sensual stimulation: art, in its most basic state, communicates that which cannot be communicated in any other form, it is non-paraphrasable (a circumstance which sometimes turns criticism into an exercise in futility); the pleasure results from the articulation of that which was thought inarticulable. Art, then, is that mode of communication which is necessarily aware of its own form, and which uses that awareness to manipulate that form. For writers interested in sincerity, therefore, the choice between simplicity and complexity of expression is fraught with difficulty. Some maintain that simplicity is the most accurate indicator of sincerity, and that complexity, conversely, betrays an intent to mislead; but even simplicity, however it is finally conceived, requires mastery of the means of expression. If the goal of the writer is to communicate truth, then it follows that one can use any means available to have the audience believe that truth—including lying. Therefore, the more techniques of persuasion at one's disposal, the proponents of complexity maintain, the better. Montaigne, clearly, has chosen for complexity; that is, it can be assumed that his expert use of irony in reflecting on the duplicities of writing represent a salient aspect of that self he wants his readers to get to know.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau attempts a project similar to that of Montaigne's. Although he was not the first to use the word "sincerity," it is well known that when

La Carte de Tendre (1654). This map, conceived by Madeleine de Scudéry, was used as an allegorical representation of the position of various members of Scudéry's salon with regard to her affections. Newcomers to the salon begin at Nouvelle Amitié (at bottom) and attempt to reach any of the three cities of Tendre (Tenderness), mastering the requisite skills (like Respect) and avoiding the distractions (like Forgetfulness) offered by towns along the way. The "petit village" of Sincerity is described in *La Gazette De Tendre*, the organ which documented the progress and regress of salon members, as a place which receives few visitors.

Rousseau opened his *Confessions* (completed in 1770) with the statement that he would display a portrait of himself which would be "in every way true to nature" he set a precedent according to which all future protestations of sincerity in literature would be measured; indeed, his own claim to truthfulness has since been debunked, revealing the *Confessions* to be as intricate a work of artifice as any which followed. "I have displayed myself as I was, as vile and despicable when my behavior was such, as good, generous, and noble when I was so. I have bared my secret soul as Thou thyself hast seen it, Eternal Being!" Rousseau writes, and he follows this with a challenge to his "fellow men": "let each one of them reveal his heart at the foot of Thy throne with equal sincerity [sincérité], and may any man who dares, say 'I was a better man than he'" (17). The use of the word sincerity in relation to religion is not unusual; the *Oxford English Dictionary* informs us that, since its migration from Latin—where *sincērus* means clean, pure, and sound—to English in the sixteenth century, the earliest uses of sincerity are most often to be found in religious contexts:

1536: The syncere and pure doctrine of Goddes worde

1546: That England might the better attain to the sincerity of Christ's doctrine

1557: But as of synceritie...speake we in Christ

1583: A Defense of the sincere and true Translations of the holie Scriptures

The idea of the confession, of course, presupposes that some wrong has been done which needs to be admitted before the supplicant can proceed on righteous paths, a procedure which St. Augustine was the first to undertake in public in his *Confessions*, a book which was, if not the model, then at least one of the primary literary reference points for Rousseau. What Augustine initiated was a process of extended self-reflection that no

writer had yet attempted, enabling his audience to be privy to his private experiences. Henri Peyre, in *Literature and Sincerity*, has observed that Western writers before Augustine were much more interested in suasion, rhetoric, and technical mastery than in revealing personal information about themselves; faithfulness in imitation was stressed, but the self had yet to be considered as the *subject* of imitation. Authorial sincerity in literature, therefore, was not a quality which could be evaluated. The meanings of sincerity which Rousseau wants to evoke in the above passage, however, are the ones which are most familiar even in today's usage: freedom from falsification, dissimulation, and duplicity; genuineness, honesty, and forthrightness. Apropos the complex presentation of selfhood in Montaigne, Rousseau wants to create the illusion that being sincere is at bottom a simple activity; the first syllable of *sincere*, after all, is said to have the same origin as that of *simplex*.

Interestingly, both Augustine and Rousseau drew up elaborate plans which, though profoundly differing in method, were aimed at the betterment of society, suggesting that sincerity as a precept has an integral role in utopian visions in general. Montaigne too recognized the dependence of a given community on sincerity: "Since mutual understanding is brought about solely by way of words, he who breaks his word betrays human society. It is the only instrument by means of which our will and thoughts communicate, it is the interpreter of our soul. If it fails us, we have no more hold on each other, no more knowledge of each other. If it deceives us, it breaks up all our relations and dissolves all the bonds of our society" (505). Leon Guillhamet, in *The Sincere Ideal*, argues that the personal virtue of sincerity was held to be essential by a disparate group of eighteenth century English writers in search of their own utopia (whether internal or

external); the sincere state was believed to be "singularly incorrupt" by such authors. an imagined prelapsarian world. While Guillhamet is able to trace a valuation of guileless behavior to Homer, Dante, and St. Paul, he too believes that the concept is relatively new, especially when used specifically in relation to literature. Guillhamet identifies a number of manifestations of sincerity which will be useful to us, some of which can be found in the following composite list of characteristics with which sincerity in literature is often *marked*:

1) Ideals of conduct like simplicity in life and language.
2) Spontaneity of speech and action, indicating the absence of duplicity.
3) A distrust of logic and argument.
4) A desire for organic wholeness.
5) The belief that cities are corrupting forces.
6) A vision of a Second Eden, New Jerusalem, or some other Utopia.

The idea here is that each poet whom Guillhamet examines had a vision of an ideal. prelapsarian world which could be attained through the practice of certain central virtues like sincerity. The term evidently seemed to be in such popular use that Alexander Pope had to differentiate between an older type of sincerity and a newfangled sincerity in his correspondence; and Jonathan Swift criticized a "modern sincerity" which so many of his contemporaries seemed to be affecting.

As Guillhamet writes, the utopian desires of certain eighteenth century writers were more often entertained in the imagination than carried out through pragmatic action (with the notable exception of Benjamin Franklin); the dawn of the Romantic era brought with it a more direct challenge to that division between private and public. This relates

Temperance, Silence, Order,
Resolution, Frugality, Industry,
Sincerity, Justice, Moderation,
Cleanliness, Tranquility,
Chastity, Humility.

I made a little Book in which I allotted a Page for each of the Virtues. I rul'd each Page with red Ink, so as to have seven Columns, one for each Day of the Week, marking each Column with a Letter for the Day. I cross'd these Columns with thirteen red Lines, marking the Beginning of each Line with the first Letter of one of the Virtues, on which Line & in its proper Column I might mark by a little black Spot for every Fault I found upon Examination to have been committed respecting that Virtue upon that Day.

I enter'd upon the Execution of this Plan for Self Examination, and continu'd it with occasional Intermissions for some time. I was surpris'd to find myself so much fuller of Faults than I had imagined, but I had the Satisfaction of seeing them diminish.

After a while I went thro' one Course only in a Year, and afterwards only one in several Years, till at length I omitted them entirely, being employ'd in Voyages & Business abroad with a Multiplicity of Affairs, that interfered, but I always carried my little Book with me.

But on the whole, tho' I never arrived at the Perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell far short of it, yet I was by the Endeavor a better and a happier Man than I otherwise should have been, if I had not attempted it.

Benjamin Franklin: "It was about this time that I conceiv'd the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection" (1771).

to the meaning of sincerity which has long been associated with wholeness and integrity: one of the reasons why sincerity was first used in describing objects was to indicate the object's purity, or the fact that the object was "free from any foreign element or ingredient" (OED); the Romantics were of course unusually interested in this kind of organic wholeness to their lives—no division between thought and action, life and literature. The urge to have poetry be an active force in daily life is what makes many of the Romantics the true precursors to twentieth-century avant-garde writers, whose central concern was also to remove the barriers between art and quotidian existence: the intimate

relationship between innovative (later to be configured as "new") writing, sincerity, and social change begins here. The young Wordsworth is a case in point. The "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, hovering somewhere between being a classical defense of poetry and a manifesto, asserts the importance of the "experiment" (as it is identified in the "Advertisement" to ***Lyrical Ballads***) which the authors are conducting in the realm of poetry; the experiment was undertaken in order to "ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavor to impart." The type of pleasure referred to here is, like the pleasure which Philip Sydney writes of in his "Defense of Poesy," not of the entertainment variety: it is of the sort that makes poetry eminently useful to society. Wordsworth insists that without the type of pleasure which poetry provides there would be neither sympathy nor knowledge, for both are sought after because they provide pleasure; in this way the poet's function is as follows: "the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time" (606). A poem is to "illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement," and if it is a good poem it will enact this "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (598). Wordsworth is at pains to show that this primary state of excitement is crucial to the health of society: city life, he believes, blunts the "discriminating powers of the mind," and as a consequence we search for artificial stimulation such as can be found in "frantic novels" and "extravagant stories" when we should be reading poetry.

The connection between the technical innovations in the poetry proper and the social change which the poetry is supposed to effect is not to be underestimated: the claim is, in essence, precisely the same as that made by many twentieth-century avant-garde movements. The particular technical innovation at hand is equally crucial: the "real language of men," it was believed, would bring poetry out of the world of the elite and into the marketplace: "Poets do not write for Poets alone, but for men" (608). These efforts to change the place of poetry in society have made Wordsworth interesting to a number of critics who have written about sincerity—despite the fact that Wordsworth rarely used the term himself. David Perkins argues in *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Sincerity* that it is the seemingly artless, unaffected, and unpremeditated quality of Wordsworth's poems which makes them appear to be sincere articulations of the "real language of men." This effect—which, it should be noted, Wordsworth worked very hard to create—is achieved through several methods, the first and most important of which is to conjure up, like Montaigne, the illusion of intimacy between the reader and the text. Conversational poems, internal monologues, apparently spontaneous expostulations—all were aimed at generating this intimacy, this sensation that the reader is, as Wordsworth put it, "among friends." But Jerome McGann, reiterating a remark by John Stuart Mill which describes these types of poems as having the structure of "overheard musings," believes that there is a sort of sacredness to that structure which was meant to designate the poetic space as a very privileged one which non-poets were expected to be in awe of: "The sign of the poem's sincerity was the fact that it was in communion with these higher things: you [the poet] weren't paying attention to the world, you weren't talking, it wasn't a rhetoric" ("Private Poetry, Public Deception"

140). The poet is separated from those whom he observes, for although the poet is a "man speaking to men," he has the added capacity to recollect emotion in tranquility and render that emotion in verse—a capacity which few are blessed with. One could also object that adopting the voices and personas of, say, Goody Blake and Simon Lee is a decidedly insincere activity, but Perkins argues that for Wordsworth it was not so much an exercise in imitation as it is in evolving "the germ within," as Coleridge has it. The organic process of creating a poem begins with an intuitive apprehension, not with an imposed program or argument; the poem chooses the poet. Perkins believes that this accounts for Wordsworth's dislike of argument and consequent ability to entertain contradictory ideas (along the lines of Keats' Negative Capability): "Wordsworth does not attempt to persuade either himself or anyone else by argument. The reason is simple. Argument...should convince no one. If we equate intellectual honesty with logical inference and nothing else, we are shouldering an impossible burden" (113). The young, revolutionary Wordsworth made a serious attempt to erase the separation between his life as a poet and his life as a politically concerned individual; the older Wordsworth, on the other hand, lost the "inquiring spirit" and exchanged it for beliefs which Perkins thinks were "controlling and imprisoning" (263). The notion that there should be a continuum between ideas expressed in poetry and actions taken in the world at large is perhaps best exemplified by P.B. Shelley, whose thoughts we will soon have occasion to explore more deeply; the crucial point, however, is that what becomes the myth of Romanticism is predominantly characterized by a *sincere* approach to the whole of life. McGann argues that sincerity was one of the "touchstones" by which Romantic poetry measured itself, and that Byron was the sole dissenter who exposed the hypocrisy of the naively sincere

mode by making poetic identity much more complex. "If a contradiction exposes itself at the core of Romantic self-integrity," McGann writes, "we confront an illusion in the Romantic idea(l) of spontaneity and artlessness. Romantic sincerity only presents itself as unpremeditated verse; in fact it involves a rhetoric, and contractual bonds with its audiences, which are just as determinate and artful as the verse of Donne, or Rochester, or Pope" (123). Wordsworth's "Preface" belies the idea that the poems in *Lyrical Ballads* resulted from a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: Wordsworth had an articulated agenda, and he employed a rhetorical strategy to achieve that agenda.

The romantic preoccupation with a sincerity that organically links the disparate elements of life had apparently become commonplace enough by the mid-nineteenth century that Victorian critics could use sincerity as a self-evident term of literary appraisal. Patricia Ball has very usefully revealed how such writers as Carlyle, Arnold, Hunt, Keble, Lewes, and Hulme appropriated the Romantic interest in sincerity. Victorian critics high and low strapped their sense of moral urgency to the Romantic notion of personal vision, resulting in "a confused emotional-moral test for literature imposed without qualification, and the adulterating of an idea concerned at its inception with the study of the creative mind and the genesis of poems" (2). Generally speaking, the Victorian critic valued simplicity and honesty of expression over complexity; cleverness was in fact distrusted, and the most important criterion for writing meaningful poems was to have a "heart spilling over with passion." In 1840, for example, Carlyle wrote an essay called "The Hero as Poet" in which he discusses the heroic qualities of Dante and Shakespeare; before coming to the outrageous conclusion that the "treasure" of Shakespeare is worth more to the British Empire than all of India, he uses the word

sincerity at least a dozen times as a self-professed "measure of worth." "Sincerity, I say again, is the saving merit, now as always," Carlyle reminds us (97). For Carlyle, it is "a man's sincerity and depth of vision that makes him a Poet"; and like Sidney, Carlyle will have his hero-poets be visionaries—"He is a vates, first of all, in virtue of being sincere"—who guide us to the good and beautiful (84). Dante and Shakespeare are primarily similar in their sincerity; echoing the romantic virtues of organicity and spontaneity, he writes: "Shakespeare's Art is not Artifice; the noblest worth of it is not there by plan or precontrivance. It grows-up from the deeps of Nature, through this noble sincere soul, who is a voice of nature" (108). In another extension of romanticism, Carlyle praises silence as the ultimate sign of sincerity; for if there is no language, there can be no dissimulation: "Let us honour the great empire of Silence once more!" he urges, adding later that "speech is great; but Silence is greater" (101, 108). Silence, in the form of the unspeakable and the inexpressible, is as much present in Shelley's "Mont Blanc" as it is in Tennyson's "In Memoriam," a poem in which Gerhard Joseph in fact identifies an entire "rhetoric of silence" designed to demonstrate the sincerity of Tennyson's suffering (21). Matthew Arnold, discussing Dante in "The Study of Poetry" (first published in 1880), makes the following very revealing statement: "But for supreme poetical success more is required than the powerful application of ideas to life; it must be an application under the conditions fixed by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. Those laws fix as an essential condition, in the poet's treatment of such matters as are here in question, high seriousness;--the high seriousness which comes from absolute sincerity. The accent of high seriousness, born of absolute sincerity, is what gives...to such criticism of life as Dante's, its power" (325). While McGann believes that Byron

was exempted from the standard Romantic sincerity, Arnold thought otherwise. In his essay on Byron, Arnold cites Swinburne as a believer in the necessity of sincerity: "The power of Byron's personality lies in 'the splendid and imperishable excellence which covers all his offences and outweighs all his defects: *the excellence of sincerity and strength*' " (358).

The seemingly sudden emphasis upon sincerity in the English literary tradition is noted by a prominent American in 1856. Emerson identified sincerity as the foundation not just of English literature but of the "English national moral style" in his *English Traits*: the "practical power" of the English rests on their "national sincerity"; the English "are blunt in saying what they think, sparing of promises, and they require plain-dealing of others," Emerson writes (830). Emerson also remarks, interestingly, that the English "will not have anything to do with a man in a mask"; what, then, led to Oscar Wilde, a man who not only spurned sincerity but believed that masks were liberating? Trilling credits Wilde and Nietzsche with the introduction of irony as a literary device which can free one from the idea of being faithful to a single, true self. As for sincerity, Wilde tells us in his "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young" that "the first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible" and later famously announces that "in all unimportant matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential. In all important matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential." Mimesis—whether of the self or of things—has been discarded altogether as the aim of art; in "The Decay of Lying," Vivian cites Socrates' critique of poetry in the *Republic* as an affirmation of the point he is trying to make: art and lying are indeed closely related, and this should be celebrated. When Wilde writes that "Art never expresses anything but itself" (an apt formulation of the "art for art's sake" aesthetic), he

is indicating that the separation between art and what he perceived as the taint of morality which Victorian critics like Carlyle and Arnold first began to assert has now reached rather dramatic proportions. For Wilde, however, this does not entail an even greater sincerity in the service of an even more sanctified (and removed) art; on the contrary: now "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art."

Wilde's taste for the artificial leads him to a remarkable aspersion of what we commonly call facts: "They are vulgarizing mankind," he writes. And it is in America that Wilde sees the reign of fact at its most potent:

> The crude commercialism of America, its materializing spirit, its indifference to the poetical side of things, and its lack of imagination and of high unattainable ideals, are entirely due to that country having adopted for its national hero a man who, according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie, and it is not too much to say the story of George Washington and the cherry-tree has done more harm, and in a shorter space of time, than any other moral tale in the whole of literature...and the amusing part of the whole thing is that the story of the cherry-tree is an absolute myth. 980

Emerson, of course, would have taken exception to this irony-laden comment, though he would likely have been even more upset by Wilde's desecration of his definition of the spiritual in "Experience": the spiritual is "*that which is its own evidence*" according to Emerson (475); in the "Decay of Lying," however, Vivian says: "After all, what is a fine lie? Simply that which is its own evidence." Wilde, clearly, was quite unappreciative of the literary renaissance taking place in America during the mid-nineteenth century.

Though it now seems ludicrous to judge an entire nation's sincerity—that would require the violent suppression of diversities of thought, emotion, and culture in order to achieve a useful level of generalization—Trilling approvingly cites Tocqueville in his attempt to do so. Despite the tendency of American speech to be "elaborate and abstract" in comparison to the English, Trilling believes that this did not mean Americans were not sincere: "they talked as they did because they lived in a democracy. The democratic dispensation required them to shape their speech not by the standards of a particular class or circle but by their sense of the opinion of the public" (113). The sense of public in America is naturally very different from elsewhere, especially since Americans tend to identify their democratic impulses with the abstract assertion of basic rights to be found in "The Declaration of Independence"; there is a sincere belief in abstract truths. This makes American society *thin*, according to Trilling, and English society (privileging personal sincerity as it does) is "thick," "impermeable," indubitably "there" (113).

There is, indeed, a startlingly high level of abstraction to be found among Emerson's essays—notwithstanding the preacherly sincerity which accompanies his extraordinary philosophy. The most obvious element of sincerity which links Emerson to the Romantic tradition is a mistrust of logic and rhetoric and the consequent preference shown for spontaneity, surprise, and the organic. In "Experience," one finds a succession of statements reflecting these characteristics of sincerity: "I distrust facts and inferences"; "Life is not dialectics"; "The great gifts are not got by analysis"; "Life is a series of surprises"; and so forth. Furthermore, it is in Emerson that the preference for "surprise" is explicitly allied with a concept of the "new"; it is the new, after all, which is most surprising. "In the thought of genius there is always a surprise," Emerson writes, and it is

clear that he has the specific genius of poetry in mind (483). As against the distanced relation between the poet and society which near contemporaries such as Arnold articulate, the poet is *organically* integral to a healthy society for Emerson. Poets reveal our own souls to us by deciphering the symbols of nature which ordinary individuals cannot comprehend; the "Universe is the externisation of the soul," Emerson writes, and "the world is a temple, whose walls are covered with emblems, pictures, and commandments of the Deity" (453-4). The poet is the person who can articulate the symbols of the universe for us, the symbols to which ordinary people have become desensitized. Immersed as we are in "custom and gross sense," our lives have become dulled and we engage in "very few spontaneous actions" (472). Emerson's theory of language is similar in many respects to that of Nietzsche: for both, language was originally poetic but became aesthetically deadened over time. Whereas each word used to be a poem in and of itself, now, through common use, "language is fossil poetry" (Nietzsche's "concepts") which is too often rigidly systematized. Emerson uses religion as an example of how this happens: "the history of hierarchies seems to show, that all religious error consisted in making the symbol too stark and solid, and, at last, nothing but an excess of the organ of language" (464). This explains Emerson's distrust of logical systems, for logic is the most pertinent instance of the systemization of fossil poetry, and it also explains his consequent glorification of the "transcendental and extraordinary" in literature—as well as his predilection for the surprise elicited by the new (462). Emerson constantly uses the word "new" in his formulations of what we need to break out of the thoughts which have become prisons; what follows are a few of the more interesting articulations to be found in "The Poet" and "Experience":

The experience of each new age requires a new confession

The foremost watchman on the peak announces his news

Every new relation is a new word

New passages are opened for us into nature

The poet...has yielded us a new thought

He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene

He is the only teller of the news

The expression is organic, or the new type

Which things themselves take when liberated

I feel a new heart beating with the love of the new beauty

I am ready to die out of nature

And be born again into this new yet unapproachable America

The heroic role assigned to poets is noteworthy: "we are miserably dying" according to Emerson, and "Poets are thus liberating gods" (462-3). Also worthy of note, however, is Emerson's worry that no such poet existed at the time that he was writing "The Poet": "I look in vain for the poet whom I describe" (465).

And "there you have Walt Whitman, the begetter of a new offspring out of literature, taking with easy nonchalance the chances of its present reception, and, through all misunderstandings and distrusts, the chances of its future reception" (779). This splendid remark is taking from a review of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* written for the *Brooklyn Daily Times*—written, that is to say, by Whitman himself, the man who prefers "always to speak for himself rather than have others speak for him." Whitman answers Emerson's call quite literally; he will be the poet who applies the idea of the new to the

form of poetry as well as to the position of the poet in relation to the public. Whitman's relationship to sincerity is best considered by way of his understanding of candor. In the "Preface" to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he writes that the "great poets are also to be known by the absence in them of tricks and by the justification of perfect personal candor" (725). "How beautiful is candor!" he exclaims, reminding us a few pages later that "whatever satisfies the soul is truth." Emily Dickinson too appears to believe in candor, but she, like Montaigne, foregrounds the necessity of artifice in creating the effect of candor: "Candor—my Preceptor—is the only wile." Formal devices are needed, in other words, to communicate the truth: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant-- / Success in Circuit lies / Too bright for our infirm Delight / The Truth's superb surprise." The role of formal innovation in communicating the "surprise" of truth will return with certain twentieth century avant-garde movements; for Whitman, however, the key is for the poem to appear natural, denuded of "tricks." Whitman thought that the poet, as usual, is a seer; he or she has a sort of proleptic hold on the future—"the prescient poet projects himself centuries ahead"—so that the poem which results will be speak across time: "A great poem is for ages and ages in common and for all degrees and complexions and all departments and sects and for a woman as much as a man and a man as much as a woman" (729). The importance of this inclusiveness is not to be underestimated, for the privileged position of the poet has too often and for too long been claimed by men of a single complexion; and indeed that usurpation will continue as the aggressive positioning of the poet in relation to the "masses" remains gendered as masculine by many, if not most, of the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century.

For Whitman, however, the inclusiveness is part of the sincerity of his project: he does not want to be above but rather *among* the other members of society; there needs to be a basic integrity to the relationship between the poet and the public, a wholeness which would only be marred by hypocrisy and dissimulation, by "tricks." Whitman achieves this affect in "Song of Myself" by creating a catalogue of nearly everybody and everything, both good and bad; he then proceeds to attempt an identification—which turns out to come a bit too close to obliteration—with various individuals: "I am the man....I suffered....I was there." As with Emerson, experience provides the foundation for an authentic knowledge of both the truth and the other. Like Montaigne and Wordsworth, Whitman also conjures up an intimacy—generated in solitude, away from the corruption of the city—with the reader which will make the reader feel included: "This hour I tell things in confidence, / I might not tell everybody but I will tell you"; and again the final lines of the poem have the author "stop some where waiting for you."

Although Whitman certainly wants to *present* himself as sincere, it must be noted that these are only Whitman's expressed intentions; in reality, as with any other poet, there is a rhetoric being employed to create a desired effect. Jeffrey Walker, in *Bardic Ethos and the American Epic Poem*, has provocatively suggested that there is in fact a rhetoric of persuasion distinct to the American epic which Whitman initiated. This rhetoric involves taking the stance of a person with privileged vision who can lure the peoples of a nation away from their baser desires and guide them towards an ideal society. Whitman is in the position to iterate and channel the noblest aspirations of our collective soul, as it were; disturbingly, this type of guidance also provides the impetus for making the "untransacted destiny" of America *transactable*: Whitman "constructs a

rhetoric around the mythology of untransacted destiny, a rhetoric that has for its purpose the ethical conversion of its reader, and that rests persuasive force in a massively amplified ethical appeal" (31). Walker has also made the observation that, despite Whitman's populism, he interpolates, through Emerson, an orphic voice which is distinct from the "multitude" which it seeks to address. Moreover, while Whitman's imaginary audience consisted of millions, his ideal audience, the audience which could conceivably understand and carry out his message, consisted of "persons of sufficiently Romantic or transcendentalist stripe to accept the convention that poetic utterance is an orphic revelation" (23). There is an important sense in which Whitman is addressing an *elect*, in other words, and this problematic will reconfigure itself crucially with Pound.

2

Peter Bürger argues in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* that it is the bourgeois appropriation of art in mid-nineteenth century Europe that makes way for the revolt of the twentieth century avant-garde against the institutionalization of art. Since the avant-garde acquires, by way of a separation from institutional sheltering, an unprecedented view of what Burger calls the "artistic means" employed in the past, form—as against content—becomes the focus of innovation. This is to say that the idea of the new, first articulated by Emerson and then publicly enacted by Whitman, reaches its apotheosis in the twentieth century—largely by way of the inspiration which *technological* discoveries offered to artistic *technique*. The most obvious example of this is Marinetti and the Futurists, who believed that technology was an *extension* of the self. Some classic characteristics of sincerity are still evinced, however. Marinetti's *Founding Manifesto of Futurism* (published in 1909 in *Le Figaro*), for example, reveals an exaggerated respect for the idea of spontaneity, which is transmuted into speed and aggressive action in the attempt to avoid creating the impression of duplicitous premeditation (purportedly evident in the stagnant arts to be found in such places as "past loving Venice"). Like Whitman, moreover, Marinetti claims that the Futurists "will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot" in the great modern cities; in his violent attempt to integrate art with the praxis of everyday life, Marinetti demonstrates an almost hyperbolic

sincerity. In the writing of Blaise Cendrars one can clearly see that modern technology and modern technique fuse in a new type of organicity, a new type of wholeness indebted to the Romantic vision of sincerity; he writes in *Profound Today*:

> Believe me, everything is clear, ordered, simple, and natural. Minerals breathe, vegetables eat, animals emote, man crystallizes. Prodigious today. Probe. Antenna. Door-face-whirlwind. You live. Eccentric. In integral solitude. In anonymous communion. With everything that is root and summit and that throbs, revels, jubilates. Phenomena of this congenital hallucination which is life in all its manifestations and the continual activity of consciousness. The motor spirals. The rhythm speaks. Chemistry. You are.

Apollinaire articulates Emerson's insights—and what will turn out to be Pound's practice—concerning the new most succinctly: "*Surprise is the greatest source of what is new*," he insists in "The New Spirit." And it is the new, of course, which allows for a retrieval of the sincere effect in art. Dada, while maintaining the energy of Futurism in its desire to *épater le bourgeois*, manifests the distrust of logic and common sense so prevalent in the type of sincerity practiced by the Romantics and appropriated by the Victorians. In the Dada Manifesto of 1918, Tristan Tzara parodies Marinetti brilliantly as he writes: "I am against action; for continual contradiction, for affirmation also, I am neither for nor against and I don't explain because I hate common sense." The dialectical process of thinking is discarded because it "is an amusing machine which leads us / in a banal manner / to opinions we would have had anyway"; and besides, "logic is always false." In a memorable formulation, Tzara's *Proclamation Without Pretension* argues for

"the anti-philosophy of Spontaneous acrobatics." Surrealism too shows a great interest in spontaneity by way of the valuation given to automatic writing and dreams; analysis, the surrealists believed, is too often privileged over the imagination. Witness Breton's definition of Surrealism in the 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*: "Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt of any aesthetic or moral concern."

The avant-garde writer who most rigorously unites the idea of the new with that of sincerity is Ezra Pound. Pound significantly re-situated the concept of sincerity in his "A Credo" (published in 1918) by applying it directly to the practice of writing avant-garde poetry: "I believe in technique as a test of a man's sincerity," he writes, revising Carlyle's "test of a sincere heart." Though already addicted to the declamatory style of manifestos, the young Pound does occasionally exhibit an interest in the uncertainty of the writing process and a distaste for full-scale rhetorical assault. In the 1914 Vorticist manifesto, for example, Pound asserts that "the 'image'" so crucial to Vorticism "is the furthest possible remove from rhetoric," and that "the author must use his image because he sees it or feels it, not because he thinks he can use it to back up some creed or some system of ethics or economics" (*Gaudier-Brezska* 83, 86). As Rachel Blau DuPlessis has pointed out in her essay "Objectivist Poetics and Political Vision," this is the strain of Pound's thinking which would influence the "Objectivist" poets of the early 1930s so strongly: this is the Imagist Pound, the Pound not yet agitated by conspiracy theories and (at least ostensibly) open to insights which could be encountered during the writing process. Even before his association with the "Objectivists" in the early 1930s, however,

Pound's mind began to close as he merged his long-standing anti-Semitism with economic and literary theories in an effort to become, as DuPlessis aptly puts it, "the unacknowledged executive director" of the world by way of a new cultural renaissance (141).

Echoing Emerson, Pound writes in his 1934 *ABC of Reading* that "literature is news that STAYS news" (29). As regards his own poetic practice, Jeffrey Walker contends that Pound essentially revises Whitman's approach to the American epic. Pound writes in 1909, for example, that "the vital part of my message, taken from the sap and fibre of America, is the same as his. Mentally I am a Walt Whitman who has learned to wear a collar and dress shirt" (*Selected Prose* 145-6). Poetry becomes professionalized with Pound: it becomes a craft like any other which one can learn through the application of the proper techniques upon the proper materials. The influence of Whitman can also be detected in Pound's desire to "tell the tale of the tribe" or, alternatively, to effect "the speech of a nation through the mouth of one man." Pound's position in relation to the public whom he is addressing, however, is significantly different from Whitman's: Pound is at once the orphic visionary and the enlightened educator. While Whitman, according to Walker, could rely on an Emersonian "aboriginal conscience" which was already "saturated with deity and with law," Pound felt that he needed to construct a text which would provide the intelligent reader with a historically grounded ethos (54). But the hermetic character of the *Cantos* demands that the dutiful reader become a student of the master, carrying out the sort of exegesis required of a scriptural text; this naturally limits Pound's audience to what Walker calls the "latent aristocracy" willing and able to serve

as future members of the elect who will guide the rest of us in constructing the ideal society.

Whereas the success of Whitman's rhetorical schema was dependent upon his bardic charisma and desire for inclusiveness, Pound grounded his rhetoric in the strategical arrangement of what Michael André Bernstein describes as a " 'phalanx' of historical, literary, and economic 'particulars'" which "compel an intellectual as well as aesthetic agreement" from his students-elect. Bernstein has written of Pound's dissatisfaction with conventional history and his desire that the *Cantos* be a historical treatise constructed according to the principles of Louis Agassiz and Leo Frobenius, scientists who believed that historical knowledge should be gotten by induction from an arrangement of isolated facts. One of the major contributions which Pound thus makes to modern poetics, Bernstein believes, is that verse is opened to "domains of experience long since considered alien territory" (40): "a poem including history," as Pound has it. One of the other major contributions is the ideogrammatic method, a technique which allows for the combination of disparate subjects into a "new unity"—a "new type of metaphor," in fact (42-3). This method is constituted figuratively by the juxtaposition of discrete particulars and literally by the inclusion of ideograms drawn from Pound's reading of Confucius. A number of critics have thoroughly demonstrated the extent to which Pound's version of Confucianism served as the bridge between the poetics he practiced in the *Cantos* and the politics he espoused, but it remains to detail the implication of sincerity in all of this.

DuPlessis has remarked that Pound's autodidacticism eventually became so reflexive as time passed that he was referring to his own *Cantos* when he wrote that "with

one day's reading a man may have the key in his hands." The book Pound had in mind, however, was his translation of Confucius, a work which he evidently valued above all others; it is also a work which is virtually preoccupied with the idea of sincerity and which counsels the reader to "make it new" in life as well as literature. Pound had first translated Confucius' *Great Digest* in 1928, but he began seriously reworking his translation in the late 1930s; Hugh Kenner tells us that in 1945, while Pound was imprisoned at the Detention Center near Pisa, he had managed to procure notebooks in which he simultaneously wrote fair copies of new Cantos while finalizing his translation of Confucius (474). This goes some way to explain why the sincerity ideogram surfaces a number of times in the *Pisan Cantos*, where one also finds a pertinent instance of the essential role assigned to sincerity in Pound's poetics: "in principio verbum / paraclete or the verbum perfectum: sinceritas" (LXXIV). This is the (partially) latinized rendering of John 1, 1; Carroll Terrell translates as follows: "In the beginning was the Word / the Holy Ghost or the perfect Word: sincerity." The sincerity ideogram, in fact, serves as the frontispiece for the entire *Cantos*.

While acknowledging Pound's great powers of translation, Hugh Kenner makes it clear in *The Pound Era* that Pound's *Confucius* is highly idiosyncratic, and this is due in part to the fact that Pound had very limited resources at the DTC. In 1936 Pound had begun studying the Chinese characters themselves (rather than previous translations of them): he had acquired a Chinese text, a pirate copy of James Legge's famous translations (into English) of Confucius, which unfortunately lacked Legge's "Prolegomena," his indices, and his comprehensive dictionary of all of the Chinese characters of the primary texts. The idiosyncrasy of Pound's final version of *Confucius*

was due in large part to the unusual technique of translation which Pound adopted. Ernest Fenollosa had already suggested that Chinese ideograms be viewed not simply as transparent elements, as letters in western alphabets, but rather as essentially poetic representations of the world. It was in accordance with this principle that Pound approached his Chinese texts: when he disagreed with Legge's translations, or found the footnotes conflicting (both of which happened quite often), he would interpret visually. Given some basic knowledge of the various strokes which constitute an ideogram, an astute observer, it was thought, could come to a determination of the meanings of that ideogram largely by considering what the elements of the ideogram looked like they were doing in relation to each other. If we know, for example, that the character  stands for "man," and the character  stands for "word," using this method we might easily come to the conclusion, as Pound did, that the ideogram as a whole means "Fidelity to the given word. The man here standing by his word" (22). This is, however, among the simplest of ideograms in the Chinese; Pound was probably one of the few people in the world who had enough confidence in his interpretative capacities to trust that he could discover Confucius through the method described. According to Kenner, however, this process was fully consistent with Pound's deepest convictions: Chinese became to Pound "the old western dream, a universal language...expressed in natural signs"; this organicism, Kenner writes, he had from Fenollosa who had it from Emerson: the faith that "in nature there are signatures, that they attest a coherence, that honest men far apart in space and time may therefore read them alike" and through them perceive a "single moral reality" (449). It is this "single moral reality" which Pound hoped would be as much evidenced in his *Cantos* as it was in his *Confucius*.

There is, however, more to this conceptual consistency between the method of translation Pound used and the final content of his translation. This has to do with the privileging of vision and visuality in the process of gaining knowledge: when it is not a literal mainstay of the process, vision is the dominant metaphor used to describe the progressions and regressions of knowledge. This is of course not the first time such an observation has been made with regard to western (generally European) ways of knowing. And given the explicit foregrounding of vision in Imagism as well as in Objectivism, it should perhaps not surprise us that this is again the case with Pound's *Confucius* (Kenner in fact shows a certain luminescence to be essential to Pound's spirit), but the case is somewhat more complicated and interesting when tracing the meanings attributed to sincerity. Some of the vocabulary enlisted for the perpetuation of the light-as-knowledge metaphor:

The eye

{Look, see, watch, gaze, focus, clarify} = Clarity

The sun

Take the following, drawn from Tseng's comments upon Confucius' remarks, as one representative example: Tseng writes, "All of these statements proceed from the ideogram of the sun and moon standing together"; Pound adds, between brackets, "that is, from the ideogram which expresses the total light process." Then, immediately afterward, Pound paraphrases the "gist" of the first chapter of Tseng's comments as follows: "Make clear the intelligence by looking straight into the heart and then acting.

Clarify the intelligence in straight action" (36). Pound's light suffuses everything, it is total, complete—not, that is to say, limited in any sense (as it will be for Oppen). And so the foundation is laid for the operating metaphor of the famous directive, said to have been embossed in gold upon T'ang's bathtub, which follows on the heels of Pound's rendering of the "gist"—

AS THE SUN MAKES IT NEW

DAY BY DAY MAKE IT NEW

YET AGAIN MAKE IT NEW

All of the above differs markedly from Legge's translation, and even from Pound's own 1928 translation. There is nothing whatever concerning light in Legge's translation of Tseng's comments; nothing concerning the sun or the moon or the "total light process"; on T'ang's bathtub, there was instead written "If you can daily renovate yourself, do so from day to day. Yea, let there be daily renovation" (361). Even Pound's 1928 version of the "make it new" lines read "Renovate, dod gast you, renovate" (448).

And the situation is similar with the sincerity ideogram, an ideogram which surfaces 35 times in *The Great Digest* and the *Unwobbling Pivot*. Before offering his translation of *The Great Digest*, Pound presents the reader with several pages of glossary, defining only the seventeen characters which he determined to be essential to the text. He is in accordance with Legge about the sincerity ideogram, though where Legge simply notes, next to the ideogram in his glossary, "sincerity," Pound elaborates:

'Sincerity.' The precise definition of the word, pictorially the sun's lance coming to rest on the precise spot verbally. The righthand half of this compound means: to perfect, to bring to focus.

It seems that Pound found it necessary to create a rather striking visual image—a "complex of intellectual and emotional particulars in an instant of time"—for a concept which is not so abstract as to be misunderstood by the general reader. While sincerity is commonly taken to be the quality associated with simply meaning what one says, for Pound the term had a more evolved significance which was integral to the politics put forth in *Confucius*. Here is one instance of the central role which sincerity played in the Confucian system (the bracketed remarks are Pound's):

> When things had been classified in organic categories, knowledge moved toward fulfillment; given the extreme knowable points, the inarticulate thoughts were defined with precision [the sun's lance coming to rest on the precise spot verbally]. Having attained this precise verbal definition [*aliter*, this sincerity], they then stabilized their hearts, they disciplined themselves; having attained self-discipline, they set their own houses in order; having order in their own homes, they brought good government to their own states; and when their states were well governed, the empire was brought into equilibrium. (33)

Even a cursory examination of the entirety of *Confucius* shows Pound consistently interlocking the order and discipline of a person's mind, home, and country through "the

precise verbal definition" which the honorable pursuit of sincerity is supposed to offer. It is quite clear that Pound felt he was doing the world a service by translating Confucius: Pound not only perceived Confucius to be an instance of what had been considered an exclusively American dream—"starting at the bottom as market inspector, having risen to be Prime Minister"—but he also thought Confucius embodied the distillation of centuries of tried and proven pragmatic philosophy. In the prefatory note to his 1945 translation Pound writes: "China was tranquil when her rulers understood these few pages. When the principles here defined were neglected, dynasties waned and chaos ensued. The proponents of a world order will neglect at their peril the study of the only process that has repeatedly proved its efficiency as social coordinate" (19). The formula is quite apparent, as is the closing threat. Confucian personal, social, and political reflections effectively constitute the sub-text of Pound's wartime politics.

Ironically, Pound's high estimation of his own re-constructed Confucian agenda was one of the factors which led him to be declared of "unsound mind" when he was brought to Washington, D.C. in late 1945 to stand trial for providing "aid and comfort" to the enemies of the United States by way of his virulent and often hysterical wartime radio broadcasts (Heymann 181). The broadcasts—which sport such appalling titles as "Pogrom," "Philosemite," "Big Jew," and "Why Pick on the Jew?"—were addressed to some imagined audience of Americans across the Atlantic who might, through Pound's coercion, achieve some of the political change which he claimed he had been thwarted from effecting himself for the past twenty years or so. While the treason charges were mainly corralled around the instances in which Pound could be said to have been providing "aid and comfort" to the Axis powers, Pound's anti-Semitism was inseparable

from the political opining in the broadcasts. A typical formulation: "You have got to learn a little, at least a little about the history of our allies. About Jew-ruin'd England. About the wreckage of France, wrecked under yidd control" (#80). This is how Pound, ever the amateur economic theorist, explained World War II: "The war is PART of the age old struggle between the usurer and the rest of mankind: between the usurer and the peasant, the usurer and producer, and finally between the usurer and the merchant, between usurocracy and the mercantilist system" (#70). Bernstein has usefully broken down Pound's economic beliefs into four major points of concern. The first asserts that the issue of production has been solved, and that it only remains to *distribute* goods and services equitably. The second point is that it is possible to legislate this change in distribution by taking control of credit away from the "usurocracy," a group mainly comprised of the people who run banks and whose motivation is entirely selfish. Thirdly, any person or institution or government who does not do anything about this usurocracy is at some level a collaborator with the creditors. The fourth point is that "private property is to be preserved as an essential basis of individual freedom" as long as governments make sure that those who have less are not victimized by those who have more (61-2). To Pound the war was about money, about usury, about the fact that Germany and Italy were able to escape the clutches of the powerful banks by "managing economic recovery without their aid" (Kenner 464); America, it seems, was only participating in the war to secure the power of that usurious economic system: that was the ethic at stake for Pound, and he was passionate about it—he mastered the harangue: "Will you folks back in America NEVER realize that you are fightin' this war IN

ORDER to get into debt.... Wars are made to make debt. The other reasons are hooey" (#95).

And who was in control of the usurious system, and thus responsible for the "wreckage" in France, England, and America? Some mythic cohort of Jews: "Of that understanding, i.e., the understanding between various sets of international yidds, doing business simultaneously from various busnisch addresses located in different world capitals, the [sic] no longer in ALL the world capitals, there has never been any doubt" (#69). Pound had some of his own "solutions" to the problem in mind: "Don't start a pogrom; SELL 'em Australia" (#69). That Jews and many other supposed undesirables (Gypsies, blacks, homosexuals) were being systematically rounded up and herded off to concentration camps or otherwise harassed was a fact well known at the very beginning of the war (even in the early 1930s), and though there is some disagreement as to what the general public knew about what actually took place in those camps during the war, Pound, in 1943, seems to have had some idea, for there are references within the broadcasts to the "clean up" and "delousing" necessary in England and America—exactly the terms the Nazis used while ushering people into gas chambers. And it's not as if one had to know all of the details to recognize that what Hitler and Mussolini were undertaking was deeply wrong. Pound, in other words, chose what to believe.

During Pound's trial, four expert witnesses, a combined force from the prosecution and the defense, agreed that Pound exhibited, among other things, a high degree of paranoia. There is considerable disagreement among scholars and biographers as to whether Pound had been insane for many years, whether he was simply depleted and frustrated by long stays in extremely trying environments immediately prior to the

hearings, and whether, had he gone to trial, he would have been cleared of the charges. It is not my concern here to offer a clinical diagnosis or legal hypothesis, but rather to illustrate the role of Confucius and sincerity in this period of Pound's life. Dr. Wendell Muncie, one of the psychiatrists who evaluated Pound, made two relevant observations during his testimony: the first was that Pound was delusional because he believed he had been "designated to save the Constitution of the United States for the people of the United States"; the second was that Pound believed he had "the key to the peace of the world through the writings of Confucius" which, had his translations been given appropriate circulation, would have prevented the Axis from being formed and maintained peace—and "this becomes his blueprint for world order in the future" (Heymann 195). These evaluations are corroborated, with exactly the same references, by the other experts. Though it is a repulsive fact, it is nevertheless also important to recall that Pound had said to an interviewer on May 8th, 1945 (Victory in Europe Day) that Hitler and Mussolini "were successful insofar as they followed Confucius; they failed because they did not follow him more closely" (122).

There is little doubt that Pound was sincere; sincerity does not necessarily imply morality—one can be sincere about anything. What is at issue, however, is that Pound did not follow his own advice concerning sincerity, as DuPlessis rightly points out. Pound evidently understood his own injunction that technique be a test of sincerity as meaning: since my technique is so extraordinarily good, what I believe sincerely must be manifested as truth in my work. As DuPlessis argues, this causes the *Cantos* themselves to have "the inner dynamic of a manifesto" precisely because "Pound's political desires overrode, eroded, and negated his poetic practice" (146, 141). Bob Perelman, in *The*

Trouble with Genius, keenly observes that the Confucian ideogram is essential to Pound's peculiar methods of proselytizing in the *Cantos*: while initially "promising vivid immediacy," the ideogram becomes "a never-ending gesture of verbal discontinuity designed to evoke masterful artistic distance" (54). This is a result, Perelman says, of Pound's contradictory megalomania: while militating against academies and institutions and simultaneously attempting to rescue and disseminate what he considered to be great literature for the world at large, Pound saw himself as the hero-genius distinct from the multitude whom he was telling how—and what—to read.

Curiously, Perelman sees Pound's self-designated genius-role as his exemption from the avant-garde as Peter Bürger has defined it: if the avant-garde is "a series of tendencies that aim at overcoming the separation of art from everyday life," as Perelman interprets Bürger, then Pound would certainly fit the definition with no trouble at all; but Bürger, Perelman claims, does not allow for the existence of the genius (11). It seems to me that by this definition very few people indeed could be considered avant-garde: it would be difficult to argue, for example, that men such as Marinetti and Breton saw themselves as having pedestrian intellects—all the evidence points to the contrary, in fact. While they may not have specifically termed themselves as geniuses, they certainly saw themselves as heroic in a basic sense: they were providing the techniques, the technology, for social and psychological liberation; they were the vanguard, just as Pound was. The contradiction which Perelman points out in Pound seems to be inherent to the very idea of the avant-garde, however inadequate it may appear to us today: somebody needs to be leading the troops. In addition, if one considers the manifesto as the form which most obviously indicates the attempt to be avant-garde, as Marjorie Perloff has

done in *The Futurist Moment*, then Pound certainly qualifies since he wrote more manifestos and was associated with more movements than nearly anybody in literary history. Furthermore, Pound matches Renato Poggioli's identification of the agonistic moment within the avant-garde rather nicely: "in the febrile anxiety to go always further," Poggioli writes, "the movement and its constituent human entity can reach the point where it no longer heeds the ruins and losses of others and ignores even its own catastrophe and perdition. It even welcomes and accepts this self-ruin as an obscure or unknown sacrifice to the success of future movements" (26); Pound attempted to "transform the catastrophe into a miracle"—and failed (66).

Renato Poggioli, in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, reiterates Baudelaire's insightful paradox that "the chief task of genius is precisely to invent a stereotype" (80). It seems, in a way, that Pound has accomplished this "task of genius" through his commandment to "make it new," a phrase which became a cliché at least by the time Andy Warhol got to his Cambell's soup cans and Brillo boxes. To "make it new," in other words, has long been the stereotypical activity of the avant-garde artist, embodying the idea of the inspired genius who is ever innovating through the advancement of technique. It also appears that avant-gardes traditionally want to make a direct correlation between these technical advances within the arts and social change in the world at large. Interestingly, however, just as Pound apparently misread "technique as a test of a man's sincerity," he mistook his own "make it new" policy as we find it in his *Confucius*: once Pound had invented his political and poetical program through Confucius, he stood by it—day in, day out. In the "Note" preceding *The Unwobbling Pivot*, Pound declares that "only the most absolute sincerity under heaven can effect any

change." It is difficult to believe in anything absolutely, to maintain absolute sincerity, if one is indeed dedicated to making it new every day. Under the denomination of "Ethics," the "Note" ends with the following observation:

> The archer, when he misses the bullseye,
> turns and seeks the cause of the error in himself.

3

In 1930, Pound asked Harriet Monroe to allow the twenty-six year old Louis Zukofsky to guest-edit an issue of *Poetry* magazine; Monroe agreed, with the condition that Zukofsky provide a name and a rationale for his selection of poets. The poets whom Zukofsky chose for the February, 1931 issue were mostly young and unknown; he called them "Objectivists," indicating his reluctance to name the group by insisting on the adjectival form as well as the quotation marks. It was "NOT a movement," as Zukofsky later underscored; it was not another "ism," as in Amy Lowell's Imagism and Any Rand's Objectivism; and it was not a philosophical stance meant to oppose the subjective: there was "no infringement, i.e. of philosophical etiquette, intended" (*An "Objectivists" Anthology* 24). Among those included in Zukofsky's *Poetry* were the four other poets who would continue—for better or for worse—to be associated with the core "Objectivist" group for the rest of their lives: the thirty-seven year old Charles Reznikoff, the thirty-one year old Basil Bunting, the twenty-six year old Carl Rakosi, and the twenty-three year old George Oppen. All of them were politically left-leaning, all but one (Basil Bunting) were both Jewish and American, and all would go on to write remarkably disparate, distinctive poetry. The editorial rationale which Zukofsky offered to the readers of *Poetry* consisted of an essay devoted largely to the work of Reznikoff called "Sincerity and Objectification." This is an important essay for a number of

reasons, not least of which that it influenced Oppen greatly; the concern here, however, will be how the two terms of the essay's title radically reconceived both the poet's approach to the poem and the constitution of the poem itself, in the end offering a very effective rebuttal to certain pervasive critiques of poetry's value in society.

Zukofsky's interest in the concept of sincerity cannot be linked with certainty to Pound's configuration of the term, but given that Pound was already working on his translation of Confucius by the time he and Zukofsky became friends, it is more than likely that Zukofsky's sincerity is marked by in some way by Pound's. In fact, Zukofsky writes something which clearly derives from Pound under the heading "Program: 'Objectivists' 1931" in *Poetry* magazine:

> *An Objective: (Optics)—The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus. (Military Use)—That which is aimed at. (Use extended to poetry)—Desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars.*

This formulation makes prominent use of three words which are featured in Pound's definition of sincerity in Confucius: Zukofsky's "rays" emanate from Pound's "sun," and it is the poet's job to bring those rays to a "focus" in order to make the poem "perfect." Zukofsky makes his definition of the "objective" of the Objectivist poets parallel to Pound's Confucian sincerity. In "Sincerity and Objectification," Zukofsky selects Reznikoff's phrase, "The ceaseless weaving of the uneven water," as an illustration of sincerity since each word possesses "remarkable energy as an image of water as action," and later asserts that Reznikoff's poems "are almost constant examples of sincerity"—though not so much of objectification (275, 278). Sincerity comes to stand in for a sort of

realism for Zukofsky; it is signified by a "preoccupation with the accuracy of detail in writing," a detail which can be produced only if one's *craft*—akin to Pound's idea of technique—is adequate (280). "The mind is attracted to the veracity of the particular craft," Zukofsky writes of Reznikoff's poems; and further, "the lives of Reznikoff's people slowly occur in the sincerity of the craft with which he has chosen to subdue them" (275, 282). The final sentence of the essay again asserts the interdependence of sincerity and craft; Zukofsky perceives a contemporary "literary market" which is "not interested in sincerity as craft" (284). The emphasis which Imagism had placed on the visual capacities of the poet is everywhere apparent in "Sincerity and Objectification," despite the Objectivists' explicit rejection of what Oppen calls the "quaintness" of the Imagist poetry which was, thanks to Amy Lowell's anthologies, prevalent in America at the time. Zukofsky's constant reference to craft, however, indicates that he has taken Pound's desire to be Whitman in a "collar and dress shirt" a step further: the poet's act of perception and his scrupulous use of craft are much more grounded actions here, not, that is to say, the actions of an exalted visionary existing on an ethereal plane, but rather those of an artisan whose medium happens to be the poem. This conception of the poet as a person who *works*—rather than as a passive, exalted someone who is lucky enough to have visions and inspirations—has significant consequences, consequences which we can only understand once we have examined how Zukofsky's idea of "objectification" answers certain critiques of poetry's role in society which continue to be bandied about.

The most prevalent of these critiques is offered in Plato's *Republic*, when Socrates dismisses the poet from his ideal city because "he is a maker of images which are very far removed from the truth" and because "he sets up a bad government in the

soul of every private individual" by gratifying that individual's most ignoble desires (605 b-c); even Homer is to be excluded. Some several demonstrations of rhetorical baiting after this infamous expulsion, Socrates has Glaucon agree that those imitative poets—that is to say, those poets who wrote anything save "hymns to the gods" and "eulogies of good men"—who would like to present arguments as to why they *should* be allowed into the Republic, as well as friends and supporters who believe similarly, are welcome to do so at any future point: they will be heard (but not, of course, before the end of this particular dialogue). Lending a certain inertia to a word whose force has not yet expired some two and a half thousand years later, Socrates encourages, rather smugly for he believes his points to be irrefutable, countervailing arguments: "for we shall certainly benefit if poetry is shown to be not only pleasant but *useful*" (607 e; emphasis mine). Retrospectively, it seems as if poets (not to mention other artists) in certain parts of the Western world have rarely received the benefit of the doubt with regard to their usefulness to society ever since Plato's recording of that initial skepticism: in a way which is poignantly relevant in America today as the arts are once again explicitly being asked to prove their use value ("value" here being qualified also by the companion terms of "family" and "monetary"), poets must prove their cultural legitimacy, must justify the necessity of both their practice and their product, rather than assume, as they feel, that they do in fact contribute in very real if often intangible ways. And all of this argumentation is to be carried out through a discourse which implicitly privileges what is called "reason," an ability which P.B. Shelley, for one, distinguishes entirely from the imaginative capacity which enables and constitutes poetry; this, then, is to ask poetry to be translated into legalese—the art, apparently, does not speak for itself, or perhaps it

speaks in terms which the skeptics either do not understand or refuse to acknowledge as legitimate.

Poets have by and large had a great deal of difficulty in deflecting the type of two-pronged critique which is typified and perhaps best formulated by Plato in his *Republic* (and which is not mitigated by Plato's half-serious comments on poetry in *Ion*): namely, that poetry is, at the very least, a second order form of mimesis, and that poetry itself serves no useful purpose. Once poetry is perceived as useless, it follows quite naturally that poetry cannot be considered a valid profession, and the poet him or herself is often consequently subjected to the question of whether he or she contributes to society in other ways. It may be helpful here to foreground several moments in literary history which serve to excite or otherwise call attention to this problematic of mimesis and its consequences. These moments will then set up a radical though often overlooked change in the perception of what a poem is, and what it is supposed to do; this change was, naturally, gradual, but it began to gather a crucial momentum in the late 1920's and early 1930's when Williams became involved with the Objectivists.

Beginning essentially with Whitman and Mallarmé, a long series of experiments involving the visual presentation of poems eventually resulted in what can be seen as perhaps the only unassailable answer to Socrates: that the poem is an object which, much like all the other objects in the world, has little or nothing to do with the representation of anything outside of itself; it cannot be translated, it is its own event, and must be dealt with on its own terms. This latter was the essence of the Objectivist position, even though Williams was responsible for both the incipient formulation of that perception, and of a later variation of that perception which received notoriety through Charles

Olson's appropriation of Williams' ideas and a total misinterpretation of the Objectivist position in his essay "Projectivist Verse." Olson's essay, however, was importantly influential for a younger generation of poets who were more or less associated with Language poetry; his poetry, moreover, especially the most experimental elements of it contained in "The Maximus Poems," was also extremely influential, effecting what can be considered as the culmination of the the-poem-as-object idea in much Language poetry (particularly that of Susan Howe).

One of the earliest instances of a poet arguing at length for the importance of poetry is of course Sir Philip Sidney's "The Defence of Poesy," which was published in 1595 by two separate publishers. One publisher used the title by which we now know the essay, while another chose to substitute the telling phrase "An Apology for Poetry": both titles successfully indicate the presence, at one point or another, of an *attack*. Sidney claims that his primary motivation for writing the piece is his perception that poetry had fallen "from almost the highest estimation of learning . . . to be the laughing-stock of children" (212); the tacit aim of the piece, however, is to provide a formidable response to Socrates' critique, in the *Republic*, of poetry as a third order form of knowledge. To make explicit what is implicit in the extended quotations from the *Republic* above: since poetry was seen by Socrates to function almost exclusively through mimesis, the idea was that the poet could not, in the first place, accurately or revealingly represent its presumed subject: if a poet wrote about a chair, for example, there was no possible way for him or her to "know" a chair in the way that, say, a wood-worker might "know" the chair; the poet was therefore bound to misrepresent the chair in his or her writing. Secondly, if the poet could not even be said to "know" an existing chair any more than an average person,

Socrates believed it to be inconceivable that the poet would then be capable of apprehending—not to mention representing in writing—the essence or ideal Form of that chair. The same absurd logic could be applied to anything else which the poet might include in his or her poem. The remaining appeal which a poem might have for us, Socrates concluded, must come from the morally misguiding entertainment which its representation of our emotions and desires would provide.

Sidney's response to this, though well-known, could bear repeating here. Among other interesting maneuvers, Sidney attempts to shift the balance from the poet's being essentially an imitator to the poet's being primarily an inventor: "Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature" (216). This act of creation, secondary only to the divine, is made possible, of course, by the poet's being a *vates*, a visionary; it is also made possible by the poet's *craft*, an element in the profession of poetry which Sidney, himself the inventor a "new" sonnet form, does not neglect to emphasize heavily, for if poetry would mistakenly be understood to be the natural resultant of a certain mystical inspiration—not, that is to say, as the result of *work*—then it would be much more difficult to argue for the validity of poetry as a profession. As Sidney remarks concerning both the relative virtue of the poet as well as the quality of his craft, "in the most excellent work is the most excellent workman" (228). The end result, the final value of poetry, according to Sidney is, rather famously, to "teach and delight" with an aim toward moral and spiritual improvement: "the final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made worse by

their clayey longings, can be capable of" (219). Thus Sidney vies for poetry's reinstatement as a most praiseworthy and heroic activity.

If I may be allowed to abbreviate my pre-twentieth century remarks to a brief look at what I consider to be only the most relevant responses to the type of critique which Plato and Socrates offered, I would like here to consider Shelley's version of the story, for not only does he very obviously juxtapose his essay with Sidney's by titling his piece "A Defence of Poetry," he also serves as a convenient bridge figure to the twentieth century because of his increased emphasis on the agency of the poet him or herself in the process of making the poem (which I will address shortly). As with Sidney, Shelley's defense was partially a response to the apparently prevalent attitude among his contemporaries that the poetry being written at the time was not worthy of serious attention. This attitude was famously displayed in a half-mocking essay written in 1820 by Shelley's friend Thomas Love Peacock called "The Four Ages of Poetry," which asserts that poetry moves through a repeated, four-stage cycle, the last stage of which (the "age of brass"—Peackock's and Shelley's age) was the most meagerly endowed with poetic virtue. This, for instance, is how Peacock describes some of the most distinguished of his contemporaries: "Mr. Scott digs up the poachers and cattle-stealers of the ancient border. Lord Byron cruizes for thieves and pirates on the shores of the Morea and among the Greek islands.... Mr. Wordsworth picks up village legends from old women and sextons; and Mr. Coleridge, to the valuable information acquired from similar sources, superadds the dreams of crazy theologians and the mysticisms of German metaphysics" (Shelley, 479).

Interestingly, as Donald Reiman notes in his preface to Shelley's "Defence," Peacock, after mocking the accomplishments of the poets of the age of brass, suggests that people with any sort of intellectual talent should not fritter away their time writing poetry, but should instead pursue some of the "new" sciences such as economics and political theory which, in Reiman's re-phrasing, would "improve the world" (479). Although the idea that the "best" poets and artists are rarely, if ever, recognized as such by their contemporaries has by now become a platitude, it is present in full force here: although Peacock does not quite manage to muster up the courage to dismiss Homer as Socrates did, he does assert not only that the poetry of his compatriots is useless, but also that poetry itself is no longer an occupation worth pursuing, for to suggest that people with anything to contribute stop writing is to say, in effect, that the time and tradition of poetry has passed *altogether*, having to his mind been more adequately replaced by the "new sciences." This is clearly a variation of Socrates' theme that poets don't do anything useful for society, and Shelley, socially and politically aware as he was, had no intention of allowing that sort of derision to pass unanswered.

Shelley writes: "But poets have been challenged to resign the civic crown to reasoners and mechanists on another plea. It is admitted that the exercise of the imagination is most delightful, but it is alleged that that of reason is more useful. Let us examine as the grounds of this distinction, what is here meant by Utility" (500). Here Shelley collapses Peacock's criticisms of poetry with the notion, made popular by Jeremy Bentham, that what a society should aim for is to provide the greatest amount of good (read: pleasure) for the greatest number of people. Paying homage to Sidney, Shelley had announced earlier in the essay that "poetry is ever accompanied with pleasure" and that,

along with this pleasure, some quantity of wisdom was apprehended from the poem by the reader (486); realizing that the latter part of this announcement was not only subject to question but difficult to prove, Shelley understands that, confronted with Bentham and Peacock, he must somehow show that the pleasure which poetry provides as "the expression of the Imagination" is a preeminently useful one (480). He does this by differentiating between two different kinds of pleasure: the one is "durable, universal, and permanent," while the other is "transitory and particular" (500). Poetry, of course, participates in the first kind of pleasure. The second kind of pleasure is constituted by those activities which provide for our basic survival, and it is this kind of pleasure exclusively which the likes of Peacock and Bentham underscore as the most useful. Shelley writes to the effect that, while that second kind of pleasure is unarguably essential, the orchestration of the various means, methods, and institutions which are to provide that kind of pleasure for a given society would be both haphazard and harmful without the type of guidance which the imagination, through poetry and other works of art, lends to the process. Witness the following:

> Whilst the mechanist abridges, and the political oeconomist combines, labour, let them beware that their speculations, for want of correspondence with those first principles which belong to the imagination, do not tend. . . to exasperate at once the extremes of luxury and want. . . . The rich have become richer, and the poor have become poorer; and the vessel of the state is driven between the Scylla and Charybdis of anarchy and despotism. Such are the effects which must ever flow from an unmitigated exercise of the calculating faculty. (501)

This is finally what allows Shelley to claim that "the production and assurance of pleasure in this highest sense is true Utility," and his logic is true to the rhetorical schema he has set up in the "Defence." Also worth some scrutiny, however, is the question of what agency it is that provides a given poet with the type of imaginative capacity which Shelley values so highly, for if the poet/poem is presented as acting as some kind of mirror of nature or reality, then poets are still accountable to the authority of mimetic fidelity, whether the poetry mirrors that which is most useful to society or not. And once a poetry—as an act of primary representation—is held accountable to something outside of itself, it can again easily be condemned as, at minimum, a second order activity; the poem is then not a creation in and of itself with its own unique imaginative space, but rather a transparent medium (at best), or a grainy looking-glass (at worst). Shelley is considerably more modern than Sidney in this regard: where Sidney was radical in suggesting that the poet was inventing upon nature (as opposed to simply rendering a faithful copy), Shelley removes the stress put upon nature as force altogether and inflects the poet him or herself as the central agent of and source for the imagination.

In the first place, Shelley does not make the assumption that language is transparent to any degree: "for language is arbitrarily produced by the Imagination and has relation to thoughts alone" (483). In other words, there is no standard outside the relationship between language and thought against which the poem can be measured; the only type of mirroring which Shelley has language "do" is that which occurs between the poet's thoughts and his or her imagination—poets use "language as the hieroglyphic of their thoughts" (483). This effectively scuttles the mimetic critique. Even when attempting to account for the origins of inspiration Shelley makes sure to locate the

mysterious originary force within the poet; consider the following description of the creative process: "for the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure" (504). Poems, apparently, are initiated with an organic process over which the poet has virtually no control since the poet is entirely unaware of the "invisible influence" within him or her self which helps to furnish the poem's incipience. Shelley shows the Muses to be the airy figures that they are, and transfers both the power and the responsibility of being creator from the divine or the daemonic to the creature of the poet.

"Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present, the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire: the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (508). What is fascinating in these grandly evocative final lines of the "Defence" is that Shelley has the poet function essentially as an unaware mirror, which would seem to contradict both the agency which Shelley earlier ascribes to poets and the non-mimetic quality of the poetry which he wants to follow from that. The key to understanding the apparent contradictions here lies in the use of the word "futurity": Shelley, though he does not say so openly, clearly considers poets to be visionaries—vates, as Sidney claimed—but it is of course impossible to be literally mimetic of the future. What allows poets to be (unconsciously) prescient is Shelley's idea that poets, through language, make transactions with the faculty of the imagination, which

contemplates the "good" (pleasure) which is "durable, universal, and permanent" and which should provide for a positive future. The acknowledged legislators of the world, meanwhile, deal almost exclusively with the faculty of reason, which contends only with the type of transitory "good" which is associated with everyday, mundane affairs.

It was perhaps the growing disparity between the world which the imagination saw and the world which reason saw which led George Oppen to revise Shelley's final sentence in his poem "Disasters": "of wars o western / wind and storm // of politics I am sick with a poet's / vanity legislators // of the unacknowledged // world" (11). Oppen believed that the poet's habitat, the world of the imagination, was no longer acknowledged at all by the world at large—a world dominated by reason. Although figures such as Sidney and Shelley attempted to re-constitute the value of poetry in relation to society, it seems as if the impetus, or at least the poignancy, of Socrates' critique was so strong that by the turn of the 20th century many poets and artists became increasingly frustrated with both that type of critique and that type of response (i.e. that the purpose of art is to represent, and that artists are visionaries): it could be argued that this is precisely what led many 20th-century avant-gardes to challenge the traditional separation between art and popular culture. The Objectivist response to the Republic's critique is possibly the most radical and effective. Rather than attempting yet another re-formulation of what the task of poetry is, this response begins with a change in the perception of what a poem *is*, and it can be most easily summarized in the following deceptively simple assertion: the poem is an object. Although the roots of this perception can be traced all the way back to such things as illuminated texts and hieroglyphics, the most pivotal consciousness of the "objectness" of poetry in the West can be found in

Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and in Mallarmé's "Un Coup de Dès" where both poets begin to realize that there is a physical quality to poetry which had not been adequately exploited since George Herbert's experiments in poems like "Easter Wings." Of the many poets who subsequently extended those initial explorations in visual tactics, Guillaume Apollinaire, Blaise Cendrars, and Ezra Pound are among the better known; also of interest is the work of various self-designated "visual" or "concrete" poets. As the evolution of a particular conceptual position is here being traced, however, these are instances whose contributions must be omitted from this telling of the story.

William Carlos Williams, writing in 1925, observes the following while remarking upon Marianne Moore's poetry:

> But what I wish to point out is that there need be no stilled and archaic heaven, no ducking under religiosities to have poetry and to have it stand in its place beyond "nature." Poems have a separate existence uncompelled by nature or the supernatural. There is a "special" place which poems, as all works of art, must occupy, but it is quite definitely the same as that where bricks or colored threads are handled. (Williams, 125)

This demystification of the creative process in poetry, this placement of poetry among everyday objects, functions as a sort of declaration of independence for poetry: the poem is seen as its own event, and while that event is certainly unique, the pressure put upon poetry to contribute to society in the manner in which Sidney and Shelley hyperbolized about is here deflated by Williams' very deliberate positioning of the poem among other objects whose effective use also requires a real-world knowledge of craft. The poem now

ceases to be regarded as simply an intellectual or imaginative construct with certain possibilities as a printed, visual object, but as an object in all senses of the word.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis, in a footnote buried at the end of *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, mentions that this essay by Williams in particular may have given the Objectivists the impulse to attempt to articulate a fresh attitude toward poetry. There is considerable evidence to support that idea since the core of the Objectivist group at the time—Oppen, Zukofsky, and Reznikoff—was friendly with Williams and ran the press which first published Williams' essay in 1932. It is also apparent that the Objectivist position is a thorough revision of Imagism, particularly the tenet of the latter which commanded "the direct treatment of the 'thing'" in the process of writing the poem. In an interview with L.S. Dembo in 1969, moreover, Oppen says the following with respect to his version of the origin and content of Objectivism:

> What I felt I was doing was beginning from imagism as a position of honesty. The first question at that time in poetry was simply the question of honesty, of sincerity. But I learned from Louis, as against the romanticism or even the quaintness of the imagist position, the necessity for forming a poem properly, for achieving form. That's what Objectivist really means. There's been tremendous misunderstanding about that. People assume it means the psychologically objective in attitude. It actually means the objectification of the poem, the making an object of the poem. (160-1)

That "misunderstanding" which Oppen refers to will surface again shortly; what I also wish to underscore here is Oppen's emphasis on the quality of form in a poem (which is

basically the equivalent of craft) and the necessity of the poem's being treated and regarded as that which it is—an object. This is what Zukofsky, as the official mouthpiece of the group, had to say concerning Objectivism in the "Preface" to *An "Objectivists" Anthology*:

> A poem. A poem as object—And yet certainly it arose in the veins and capillaries, if only in the intelligence—Experienced—parenthesis—(every word can't be overdefined) experienced as an object—Perfect rest.... The desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars—A desire to place everything—everything aptly, perfectly, belonging within, one with, a context.... The desire for an inclusive object.... A poem. The object in process—The poem as a job (15)

And, from "Sincerity and Objectification":

> This rested totality may be called objectification—the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object. That is: distinct from print which records action and existence and incites the mind to further suggestion, there exists, tho it may not be harbored as solidity in the crook of an elbow, writing (audibility in two-dimensional print) which is an object or affects the mind as such. (273-4)

Though Zukofsky's prose is somewhat turgid, his points are well worth remarking upon. Firstly and I think most importantly, there is no sense in which either Oppen or Zukofsky would have the poem be mimetic; whereas the Imagist position clearly depended upon the quality of a given poet's perception and subsequent rendering of the "intellectual and

emotional complex in an instant of time," the Objectivist has no such explicit, outside standard by which to measure the quality or success of a particular poem. This is not to say that attempts at representation do not exist at all within the various poetries of the Objectivists; rather that fidelity of representation is no longer the primary aim of a poem. Although I have shown how both Sidney and Shelley respectively attempted to overturn the tyranny of mimesis over poetry, the fact that both consider poets to be visionaries puts a significant burden upon poets as a profession since it privileges the poet as well as the quality of his or her *vision*, which in turn can retroactively hearken back to the activity of mimesis (as it does with Shelley). Asserting that the poem is an object with the same ontological status as any other object subverts both claims of the mimetic and the visionary. As with Williams, the interest in the craft of poetry, though indeed very vaguely defined by the "Objectivists," is what allows the "Objectivists" to view themselves not as visionaries but rather as professionals, professionals in much the same manner that woodworkers and lawyers are professionals with defined tasks and accomplishments; it is in this way then that poets are seen to have tangible roles in society.

Obviously unaware of either Zukofsky's statement that "Objectivists" was meant to be understood as "in quotes: no infringement, i.e. of philosophical etiquette, intended," or of any of the other writings of the Objectivists, Charles Olson writes the following concerning the topic in his essay "Projective Verse" (1950): "It is no accident that Pound and Williams both were involved variously in a movement which got called 'objectivism.' But that word was then used in some sort of a necessary quarrel, I take it, with 'subjectivism.' It is now too late to be bothered with the latter. It has excellently

done itself to death, even though we are all caught in its dying. . . ." (24). Olson's last line here does resonate, but when he moves from dismissing Objectivism to defining another attitude which he calls "objectism," it becomes rather difficult to ignore the glaring re-statement of what is essentially the Objectivist position:

> What seems to me a more valid formulation for present use is "objectism," a word to be taken to stand for the kind of relation of man to experience which a poet might state as the necessity of a line or a work to be as wood is, to be as clean as wood is as it issues from the hand of nature, to be shaped as wood can be when a man has had his hand to it. Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. (24)

Although the difference in formulation is significant (and, yet more significantly, produces entirely distinct results in the poems which Olson goes on to write), the points of emphasis remain precisely the same, as can be more easily detected in Olson's statement, which prefaces his comments on Objectivism, that "the projective involves a stance toward reality outside a poem as well as a new stance toward the reality of the poem itself" (24). For his part, Oppen, commenting upon "Projective Verse" in a letter to Cid Corman, relates that he thinks "that what there is to that concept was said more accurately some time ago by Zukofsky in speaking of sincerity and of objectification" (*Letters* 40). Even Robert Creeley, in introducing Olson's *Selected Writings*, paraphrases

one of Olson's assertions concerning Projectivism in the following way: "this means, very literally, that a poem is some *thing*, a structure possessed of its own organization in turn derived from the circumstances of its making" (7). My point here is a simple one: despite Olson's apparent ignorance of the suppositions of Objectivism, Projectivism could not have come into being without the simultaneously conceptual and pragmatic change in the perception of what a poem is which the Objectivists helped to bring about.

Williams, it seems, was quite excited about "Projective Verse"; in a letter to Robert Creeley he wrote: "I share your excitement, it is as if the whole area lifted. It's the sort of thing we are after and must have" (Olson 6). But Williams had reason to be excited since two years before, in the 1948 essay called "The Poem as a Field of Action," he had in essence prescribed the innovations which Olson formulated. Where Williams described the poem as a field of action, Olson encourages poets to write in "open" form, otherwise known as "composition by field" (Williams 280; Olson 16); where Williams proposed "sweeping changes from top to bottom of the poetic structure," Olson reiterates Creeley's notion that "form is never more than an extension of content" and suggests the experimental use of the typewriter (281; 16); where Williams insisted that "the only reality we know is MEASURE," and wrote "where else can what we are seeking arise from but speech? From speech, from American speech," Olson writes that "speech is the 'solid' of verse, is the secret of a poem's energy...a poem has, by speech, solidity, everything in it can now be treated as solids, objects, things" and claimed that the typographical form of the poem, however radical, must consistently indicate some kind of "voice" for the reader (283, 289; 20-1); where Williams saw a realm of possibility for poetry in the discoveries of chemistry and physics, Olson called to mind "the kinetics of

the thing.... A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it...all the way over to, the reader" (287; 16). Although I do not have the patience here to undertake a full exposition of the essay, it seems to me that the "Projective Verse" manifesto is an amalgam of Objectivism, Williams' ideas, Olson's own curious version of the Romantic idea that there is an organic relationship between the poet and the poem, and a whole collection of phrasings and figurings which indicate a distorted sense of the importance of his understanding of the "masculine" in literature (which begins with the concept of the "projective" itself).

Nevertheless, Olson's manifesto and his poetry were influential enough that he not only spearheaded what Donald Allen took to be the New American Poetry in 1960, but—what is perhaps the surest sign of success—became the focus of attack for some among the next generation of experimental poets associated with the Language poetry school. In his important anthology of Language poetries called *In the American Tree* (1984), Ron Silliman explains why many poets took issue with any poetics that considered itself to be speech-based, as Olson's poetics was:

> It was the particular contribution of *This* [one of the earliest journals of Language poetry, to which editor Robert Grenier contributed an essay which contained the statement "I hate speech" in bold type], in rejecting a speech-based poetics and consciously raising the issue of reference, to suggest that any new direction would require poets to look (in some ways for the first time) at what a poem is actually made of—not images, not voice, not characters or plot, all of which appear on paper, or in one's

> mouth, only through the invocation of a specific medium, language itself.... This anthology documents what became of that suggestion. (xvi)

The issue, in other words, is once again mimesis. While poets like Williams and Olson had drawn attention away from the visually mimetic, they did so only to re-convene around the practice of auditory mimesis: one had to be able to hear the "voice" (particularly some conjectural American voice) in their poetries, and the texts of the poems, whether through certain kinds of rhythm and meter or through other forms of typographic experimentation, were required to *represent* that "voice." As the initially peculiar—because seemingly unnecessary—inflection of "itself" in the phrase "language itself" signals, poets were now interested in the specific, meaning generating operations of the very medium which poets (with a few important exceptions like Shelley) had traditionally understood to be mimetic; to question the referential accuracy of language is essentially to question its mimetic capacities. What Language poets, beginning in the 1970's, discovered was in fact quite similar to what post-structuralist theorists were unveiling at virtually the same time: the fact that language could be considered mimetic in only the most limited sense (if at all). As Shelley had understood a century and a half earlier, language's primary relationship is with our imaginations, our thoughts (and can indeed be conceived of as coeval with self-conscious thought), not with some objectively consistent reality outside of language. Lyn Hejinian's comments are particularly apt and succinct in this regard:

> Language itself materializes thought; the writing realizes ideas. One discovers what one thinks, sees, says, and as the words unfold the work, the work, directed by form, extends outward. Language in writing such as

> that collected here is no longer an intermediary between the writer and the world or between the concept of the work and content. Language is not the instrument of expression but the substance. It is inseparable from the world, since it is in the nature of language to be entangled in a system of reference and cross-reference. (Silliman 487)

Note the use of the word "materializes" in Hejinian's first sentence: it is my belief that the change in the perception of poetry which the Objectivists argued for both allowed and created the foundation for the insight that language is a material, and that poems, consequently, are objects with their own unique characteristics and contributions. That insight subverts the dialectical schema of "mimetic" and "non-mimetic" and "useful" and "not useful" which the discourse of reason (to borrow from Shelley's own dialectic) privileges. Although I suspect that we will never be entirely free from the type of critique which Socrates proffered, the aforementioned insight momentarily liberated some poets from the old mimetic paradigm.

4

In 1928, after hitchhiking from the west coast and sailing across the Great Lakes, through the Erie Canal, and down the Hudson River, George and Mary Oppen, both a mere twenty years old, arrived in New York City. A serendipitous set of circumstances quickly led to budding friendships with Zukofsky and Reznikoff, and in 1929 the Oppens left for France with the idea of embarking on an "Objectivist" publishing venture. The Oppens needed to see if they were "any good out there," they needed to discover just how they were going to live as artists in the world, and America at that time was not hospitable to young poets writing in an as yet unacknowledged tradition. After exploring France and settling in the Var, they started To Publishers (as in "to whom it may concern") with Zukofsky as the general editor; the idea was that they would print inexpensive paperbacks that curious browsers (like students) would be willing to take a risk on purchasing. They published three remarkable texts in the span of a few years before folding: William Carlos Williams' *A Novelette and Other Prose*, Ezra Pound's *How to Read*, and Louis Zukofsky's *An "Objectivists" Anthology*. Pound—the man who had already instigated two major literary movements with Imagism and Vorticism, the man who had written manifesto after manifesto in a desperate effort to save Western civilization single-handedly—was again behind this major attempt at making it new. This time, however, Pound left Zukofsky to shape and articulate the mission of a diverse

group of younger poets who, perhaps rightly, saw Pound as the single most reliable guide to the great poetry of the future.

In 1931, however, the Oppens visited Pound in Rapallo, Italy, and recognized errancy. Looking every bit the poet-hero with cape and cane, Pound stood at the waterfront and pointed out over the sea, saying: "from there came the Greek ships" (*Meaning A Life* 132). The gesture was evidently meant to establish a direct connection between the oldest European epic tradition (Homer's) and Pound's own epic travails as both a poet and admiral of the constantly advancing guard of his compatriots; paradoxically, the most modern—the most "new"—was also the oldest and most traditional. But George and Mary Oppen, both competent sailors with all the requisite navigational skills, recognized immediately that Pound was pointing in the wrong direction. Not coincidentally, they also noticed that Pound was shockingly out of touch: he didn't understand the evolutions of American idioms (like "boyfriend" and "girlfriend") and instead counseled the Oppens to "read the poets in their own tongues." They wanted to tell Pound to "go home," but Pound was nearly twice their age and "respect for him as a poet forbade our telling him that we lacked respect for his politics" (132). This was a critical moment for George Oppen: it marked the beginning of his realization (confirmed by Pound's behavior in the years that followed) that poets could no longer be seen as heroes engaged in some epic quest-romance to legislate humankind through innovative literary practices. Among the consequences of this realization was that Oppen gave up the writing of poetry for nearly twenty-five years in order to address the social and political turbulence of the time more efficaciously. When Oppen returned to poetry in the late 1950's, it was with a poetics of sincerity constructed from the debris

of the modernist avant-garde—an avant-garde which he never saw himself as having participated in. In a 1978 interview, Oppen reflects: "Oh, the whole crisis of the avant-garde. I really never at any time said to myself, 'I'm being avant-garde.' The word has no particular place to me. I wrote the way I could" (130). When Zukofsky is suggested as someone who was deliberately trying to be avant-garde, Oppen instinctively reaches for Pound's aforementioned dictum as measure: Zukofsky, Oppen thinks, was interested in the "make it new" idea in a "somewhat different sense"; "My 'make it new'," Oppen says, "was a new vision, absolutely. Not *necessarily* entangled in the way the poem was written." Where Pound would have demanded a unity between socio-political vision and the techniques used in writing poetry, Oppen sees a demarcation: technical advances in poetry do not entail social or political advances. That romance is over—the trajectories are recognized as discontinuous. Just as the Objectivists had taken the poem from its aerie by emphasizing its role as an object existing alongside other objects, Oppen redefined the role of the poet in society by abandoning the podium and deflating interest in the persona of the poet, actions which are at the heart of his understanding of sincerity. Instead of making prescriptive statements insisting that poetry could save the world, Oppen practiced a poetry of "encounter" that aimed to participate in what he thought of as a "conversation" about humanity: this was Oppen's "new vision."

Sincerity was a primary concern from the very beginning of Oppen's career as a poet. Referring to the time of *Discrete Series* and the birth of Objectivism, Oppen wrote in a letter: "There seemed at the time a tremendous difficulty of honesty; the whole weight of sincerity seemed to rest on one's shoulders. As how should it not? But there was perhaps not a body of honest work, certainly not an accepted body of honest

contemporary work, a sincere and public conversation in which to join" (*Letters* 82). This was a circumstance which Oppen believed to be a problem for many young American writers of his generation: "we grew up on English writing—and German fairy tales," and the only American literature available, according to Oppen, was in the Oz books and Mark Twain, leading aspiring writers to believe that, as Americans, they were to be among the "minor characters" in comparison to the abundance of major characters in English literary tradition ("The Mind's Own Place" 135). Of course, an extraordinarily vital American literature had been in existence for some time, but many of the texts of which it is comprised were not widely known and certainly not canonical in the 1920's. This led Oppen to identify with certain "major" characters in the English literary tradition: "I can perfectly well remember my image of myself, a writer, growing up, was to be Thackeray, to be Dickens" (Schiffer 11). All of this resulted, Oppen thought, in "the need to make our own literature," a literature "which went in search of the common, the common experience, the life of the common man" so that a "sincere and public conversation" could be initiated in America ("The Mind's Own Place" 135). English literature apparently did not correlate to America and it was Oppen's sincerity that impelled him to align the literature of the nation with the experience of its people.

The discovery of the stirrings of an incipient national conversation was revelatory for Oppen. As a boy he read the Romantic poets; as a freshman in college, both he and Mary heard Carl Sandburg sing and read; they also took a class in which they read Conrad Aiken's *Modern American Poets*. Mary Oppen recalls: "I don't think any of us in [the] class had known that poetry was being written in our times" (*Meaning A Life* 61). This was the class in which George and Mary met, and within months they left together

to create their own lives as writers; Oppen says that the anthology literally "sent us off on our escape from home" (Schiffer 12). This was an "escape" because Oppen felt that he could not arrive at a literature that came to terms with either "the common" or "the common man" from within the confines of his family, suffused in bourgeois values as it was; in a much repeated paraphrase of Sherwood Anderson, the Oppens referred to this as the attempt to find out "if we were any good out there" (Hatlen 31). The narrator of Anderson's "Song of the Soul of Chicago," the 1918 poem that is the source of this phrase, refers to himself as one of a number of "muddy things" that will resist any poet's attempt to "sing us into paradise"; instead of being serenaded (and deluded) by someone else's song, the narrator hopes that "in some grim way our own song shall work through." This matches surprisingly well with Oppen's desire to create a literature that goes in search of the common man; the poem also mirrors Oppen's do-it-yourself politics: "We want to give this democracy thing they talk so big about a whirl. We want to see if we are any good out here, we Americans from all over hell. That's what we want" (62-3).

Discrete Series, Oppen's initial contribution to the conversation he envisioned, was published in 1934; notwithstanding that Pound saluted a "serious craftsman" and a unique "sensibility" in the preface to the book, Oppen's personal sincerity in effect caused him to stop writing. He could not, firstly, reconcile the purposes of his poetry with the direct action demanded by the Depression; in an interview, he insists that "If you decide to do something politically, you do something that has political efficacy. And if you decide to write poetry, then you write poetry, not something that you hope, or deceive yourself into believing, can save people who are suffering" (Dembo 174). It was

in fact in France that the Oppens' political awakening began. They were startled by the poverty there and wary of economic and social trends in America. In Venice they were surrounded by Black Shirts demonstrating in fanatic worship of Il Duce. They read Pound's *ABC of Economics*, thought it ridiculous, and refused to publish it; Pound's incipient reverence for "The Boss" struck them as "a sudden intrusion of madness" (*Meaning A Life* 136). They read Trotsky's *History of the Soviet Union* and watched in distress as Jewish refugees from Germany began arriving in Paris in 1932: "we could feel more than we could understand of the threat to the Jews," Mary Oppen writes, adding, "we began to understand that this threat was portentous for us as well" (138). They returned to America as quickly as they could, arriving by ship in New York City in 1933. Confronted with the national trauma of the Depression, they investigated the various ways in which they could provide help and eventually decided to join the Communist Party in 1935—not as artists, but as relief workers. Oppen was unwilling to write poetry which was explicitly allied with a socio-political "cause"; reflecting on that time in their lives, Oppen said: "It's a narrow public for poetry. It always will be. We didn't dream of addressing the crowds with poetry. And we distinguished, as I said, between poetry and politics" (Hatlen 33). Despite this ability to disentangle poetry and politics, there was continuity between the two, a fact that Oppen has acknowledged: "It means we knew we didn't know enough from the poetry that was being written; from the poetry that we had written. And when the crisis occurred we knew we had to find out so it was a poetic exploration at the same time that it was an action of conscience" (25).

But this does not explain Oppen's poetic silence after the Depression, and Oppen was well aware of this: "there were some things I had to try out—and it was more than

politics, really; it was the whole experience of working in factories, of having a child, and so on." These actions essentially constitute a thoroughgoing reconstruction of Pound's idea that poetic technique be a "test of sincerity." For Oppen, sincerity was not simply an aesthetic precept relegated to the realm of poetry—it was a way of a living his life (a life that happened to include writing). He took Pound's idea of the "test" much more literally than Pound himself did, a fact which Mary Oppen recalls: "George was told as a child that he was not good with his hands, and it was all aimed towards following your father's footsteps into your father's enterprise or business or whatever it was, and certainly not becoming a poor peddler Jew or something like that. So George set himself to test himself—and he did"; Oppen "was always testing himself, he was not in any way willing to fall into that other pattern of the pure intellectual who didn't know the workings of the world" (Young 20-1). This is perhaps what spurred Oppen's remark to the effect that Pound could never have believed in Major Douglas' economic theory had he worked in a factory for any length of time (DuPlessis 22).

As a relief worker for the Communist Party during the Depression, as a soldier in World War II, and as an exile during the McCarthy era, Oppen tested himself in ways that Pound could not approach. But besides this there is implicit in Mary's remarks the idea that good poetry cannot be written without undergoing tests such as these, tests which bring the poet in touch with "the common experience" of the "common man." In this light, it can be perceived that Oppen's twenty-four year silence is not an aberration in his poetics—it is entirely consistent with his poetics of sincerity. Rachel Blau DuPlessis offers a much-needed reading of the "poetics" of Oppen's silence in her essay "'The familiar / becomes extreme': George Oppen and Silence." She points out a fact which is

easily overlooked: that Oppen could have written poetry while being politically active; Oppen's silence, in other words, was a "historical choice" that implied a "critique of modernism" (21-2). She identifies Eliot, Williams, Zukofsky, and—the central figure here—Pound, as the poets whose political and aesthetic positions Oppen responded to, albeit very quietly, by way of his silence as well as his poetry: for as we shall see, Oppen's poetry is conditioned by, and emanates from, silence.

The Oppens were active members of the Communist Party until about 1941; in 1942, George Oppen joined the Army. An excursion into some of Oppen's experiences in the Army—particularly those which constituted perhaps the most trying test Oppen undertook in his lifetime—reveals the structural support which undergirds Oppen's understanding of sincerity: his relationship with Mary. Enlisting in the Army, like joining the Communist Party, was also an "act of conscience" in as much as Oppen at that time believed that "a Jew who didn't go was a pretty despicable creature"; but it would turn out to be a critical "poetic exploration" as well (Young 37). It wasn't necessary for Oppen to fight in the war: he was exempted from the draft because he worked for Grumman Aircraft in Hempstead, Long Island. Apparently though, Oppen was very concerned with receiving a machinist rating, a rating which he could not get at Grumman because of what Mary Oppen calls "poor labor relations." He quit Grumman and went to work in Detroit where he could (and eventually did) get the rating, knowing full well that the change of job and the move would make him—happily married at thirty-four with a two year old daughter—eligible for the draft:

> Served as transport Non-Com with the Anti-tank co: Later as gunner.
>
> 103 Division: 411 Infantry Regiment. (*Letters* 202)

As Mary reports, the choice to enter the war in the fashion that he did was later to cause Oppen considerable anguish: guilt for leaving his family and jeopardizing his life to assuage the other guilt of the good fortune that allowed him to grow up in a relatively secure environment. Going off to fight "was unnecessary and wrong" Oppen says in an interview: "I still feel guilty about it. It was essentially at Mary's expense, or partly at Mary's. And the Army didn't want me. They wished to hell I wasn't there most of the time." Because of Oppen's age—he was called "Fader Oppen" by the other soldiers—he was considered of limited use, though his skills as a "very fancy driver" and a translator of French would prove to be valuable (Hatlen 34).

Oppen fought in the Battle of the Bulge as well as in the Central Europe Campaign; he had also been in a unit which liberated part of a prison camp: as Mary says, "he certainly saw those horrors first hand" (Young 37). On April 22, 1945, less than three weeks before Victory in Europe Day, Oppen was seriously injured—not "slightly injured," as he phrases it below—when an 88mm shell landed in a fox-hole which he was occupying with two other soldiers (both of whom died from the blast); he describes the event in a letter:

> (I was with ((tho perhaps not very useful to)) the US infantry in France during the Second World War, and in the final days of that war found myself trapped in a fox-hole, slightly injured, and with no apparent means of escape, certainly no possibility until night-fall. I waited, I think, some ten hours, and during those hours Wyatt's poem--'they flee from me...,' and poem after poem of Rezi's ran

> thru my mind over and over, these poems seemed to fill all the space around me and I wept and wept. This may not be literary criticism, or perhaps, on the other hand, it is

What is most telling here is that, enduring what must surely be among the most trying conditions imaginable, Oppen—who has not written a single poem in more than a decade—finds sustenance and solace in poetry. This event and others like it must be given serious consideration when the value of art and literature to society are contemplated; one wonders whether castaways, both real and imagined, might have had experiences similar to Oppen's.

There are several other remarks here that bear commenting upon. Firstly, what was it in Wyatt's poem that appealed so strongly to Oppen? It is difficult to conceive of a man more opposite in character to Oppen than Wyatt. The consummate courtier, Wyatt (1503-1542) spent most of his life in the service of Henry VIII (though he was briefly out of favor—and in the Tower—for having an affair with Anne Boleyn) as a diplomat and ambassador to such countries as France, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands; he was a translator and a poet whose every word (as the New Historicists have detailed for us) contributed in some way, shape, or form to the self-fashioning which was apparently requisite to succeed in courtly life. It is useful to recall that, writing somewhat later in the century, Montaigne assessed the character of the time as follows: "Men form and fashion themselves for it is as for an honorable practice; dissimulation is among the most notable qualities of this century" (505). And Francis Bacon, some years later, counseled those of his contemporaries with social ambitions to the effect that "the best composition and temperature is to have openness in fame and opinion; secrecy in habit; dissimulation

in seasonable use; and a power to feign, if there be no remedy." Machiavelli, writing during Wyatt's lifetime, was famously forthright in summarizing some of the qualities which would prove beneficial for someone—in this case, a prince—engaged in courtly affairs: a prince doesn't need to have good qualities, Machiavelli suggests, "but he should certainly appear to have them. I would even go so far as to say that if he has these qualities and always behaves accordingly he will find them harmful; if he only appears to have them they will render him service" (100). The shameless emphasis which Machiavelli places on the manipulation of appearances is what interests me most here: courtly personages, he suggests, cannot survive profitably without the artful and shrewd contrivance of a system of images and simulacra—a language which will, in a curious inversion of what is otherwise considered a good quality—*faithfully* enact the subterfuge one desires. After all, whether a wizard of images or not, "everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you really are" (101). As might be expected, this resulted in extraordinarily complicated intrigues and manipulations.

Since poems were often circulated among the members of a certain coterie long before they were published (most of Wyatt's poems, for example, were published five years after his death), it is not implausible to assume that they were part and parcel of the spinning of images involved in vying for favor. To what degree were poems weapons used to accuse, tease, and dissimulate in early modern England? As Machiavelli writes with characteristically understated humor, "there is simply no comparison between a man who is armed and one who is not" (88). Words and wit were Wyatt's rapier and buckler—thrusting, parrying, and deflecting with such speed and agility that the man behind the moves is lost in the flurry. It was indeed the courtier's intention not to be

understood too completely: to have any sort of power, motives and means had to be dissimulated to such a degree that it is often extraordinarily difficult for modern readers to determine just how a Renaissance poet did feel about the ostensible object of his love in a particular lyric (and especially with the sonnet sequence: Sidney and Shakespeare are most noteworthy in this regard). The sincerity of the amorous emotions—love, betrayal, lust, sorrow, and so forth—expressed in the poetry of many Renaissance courtiers, in other words, was seriously compromised by their desires—very sincere indeed—for position and power. Realizing that their true motives might be transparent to readers with a certain shrewd acuity is perhaps what set two of the most prominent of these poets to making statements which would seem entirely unnecessary with almost any other poet:

Wyatt: I am as I am and so will I be ("I am as I am").

Shakespeare: No, I am that I am (Sonnet # 121).[1]

Shakespeare's sonnet, which puns elaborately on the words "level" and "vile," is also clearly a response to another of Wyatt's poems, the fabulously obfuscatory "There was never a file half so well filed." The more important point of reference for both of these poets, though, is of course Exodus 3.14, where the god of the *Old Testament* is asked by Moses to name himself and responds by enunciating the word "Yahweh," which translators have traditionally rendered as meaning "I am that I am." It seems that the significance of these slightly scandalous appropriations is as follows: both poems deal extensively with the negative effects of public opinion and basically respond by saying that no matter what people think or say concerning the narrators, they are who they are and they will ever remain as such. The move these poets have made is quite

[1] Although Sidney's sonnet "Stella oft sees the very face" also plays with the same formulation ("I am not I, pity the tale of me"), it does not have quite the same effect as these two instances.

mischievous: although responding with such resilience might appeal strongly to a reader's conception of individuality, making such an assertion neither requires that the poets be good or that they demonstrate consistency: the underlying sentiment is rather one of despondency; these characters will continue to do whatever they want without regard for public opinion—and they have given notice to that effect. Again, it is the fact that these poets found it necessary to attempt to assume what is generally supposed to be the ideologically stable position of god which I find particularly fascinating: no matter how playful the poems are, the use of this most ultimate of claims is an exposition of self-fashioning at its

> They flee from me that sometime did me seek
> With naked foot stalking in my chamber.
> I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek
> That now are wild and do not remember
> That sometime they put themselves in danger
> To take bread at my hand; and now they range
> Busily seeking with a continual change.
>
> Thanked be fortune it hath been otherwise
> Twenty times better, but once in special,
> In thin array after a pleasant guise,
> When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall
> And she me caught in her arms long and small,
> Therewithal sweetly did me kiss
> and softly said, "Dear heart, how like you this?"
>
> It was no dream: I lay broad waking.
> But all is turned thorough my gentleness
> Into a strange fashion of forsaking.
> And I have leave to go of her goodness
> And she also to use newfangleness.
> But since that I so kindly am served
> I would fain know what she hath deserved.

most urgent and desperate, a strong indication that the whirlwind of simulations and dissimulations in a courtier-type lifestyle could easily display the aporia of "selfhood"

which we have become so accustomed to hearing about in relation to post-modernism. Not only are we at a loss in coming to certain conclusions as to the character and identity of the poet/narrator in any number of Renaissance era poems, but, what concerns me most here, we also have little or no idea as to the degree or quality of his (in most cases) sincerity.

On a quick, surface reading, "They flee from me" seems simply to express sorrow for being left by a loved one; this would seem appropriate to Oppen's recalling the poem while alone and frightened in a fox-hole: where are his loved ones? Upon closer inspection, of course, the sentiment of the poem becomes somewhat more complicated: the poem seems to be about sexual inconstancy and betrayal; the speaker, it is presumed, once had satisfying sexual relationships with those, once "gentle, tame, and meek," that sought him out in the past but who have recently become "wild" and range about seeking "continual change" in partners. The second stanza of the poem is a reminiscence of a specific encounter with a woman which was particularly poignant to the narrator: her words to him, "Dear heart, how like you this?" apparently spoken in a moment of tenderness, become devastatingly ironic when the following stanza reveals the nature of her forsaking him: the woman initiates an agreement to the effect that they no longer need to be constant to each other: "and I have leave to go of her goodness / And she also to use newfangleness." Where once the narrator was the master of his deer (in the first stanza his lovers are described metaphorically as some sort of animals), his dear "hart" is now broken by their active desire for others. The final couplet of the poem is typical of Wyatt's ability to turn what has up to now been a passively lamenting surface tone to a bitter, vindictive, and deeply accusatory one; the sense of the lines translates as follows:

since you have treated me so badly for being good to you, I wonder how you, who have done much harm, will in turn be treated. It seems that it is less the loss of this particular sexual love which upsets the narrator (who will clearly still be sought out, either by the same woman or by others) than it is the loss of power: he has been upstaged by those who were subservient to him.

Whatever one's personal views on the matter, it is, again, difficult to imagine an approach to amorous relationships more distant from the one espoused by the Oppens than that of the narrator of "They flee from me": the Oppens' love for and devotion to each other was astonishing; they sometimes referred to their meeting as "miraculous." Mary writes of their first date: "One day when I was sitting on the library steps George asked me to go out with him that evening, and I agreed. He came for me in his roommate's Model T Ford, and we drove out into the country, sat and talked, made love." Mary then emphasizes that "we talked as I had never talked before, an outpouring" and that "once we found that we shared the same vision, our response to each other was to stay together" (*Meaning A Life* 61-3). In his working papers, George wrote of that first night: "I swear that in three minutes I understood what she was telling me: that I could work, and so I was free. No one could tell me what to do. I understood in three minutes, and I knew I was free. I knew we were free" (Anderson 195). Elsewhere, he adds: "All meaning, all meaning that I have ever known or know now or I suppose will ever know, will ever register, was embedded in that moment, all my life has flowed from it" (*Ironwood* 321). George dedicated his *Collected Poems* to "Mary/ whose words in this book are entangled/ inextricably among my own"; Mary dedicated *Meaning a Life* to "George, whose life and mine are intertwined."

Wyatt's deeply misogynistic and manipulative narrator, moreover, seems the antithesis of Oppen's caring and protective nature. Mary has said that Oppen bore the "tremendous responsibility" of being the "one man" who all the women in his life—sister, niece, daughter, wife—"really could trust and love and accept" (Young 44). Why, then, did Oppen find Wyatt's poem so moving? Was it simply a matter of the poignant loneliness evoked by the opening line of the poem? Was Oppen a bad reader—did he repress the more disturbing meanings of the poem? Given the acuity of Oppen's reading powers as expressed throughout his letters and working papers, it is tempting to posit a third alternative: that Oppen understood the dynamics of the poem fully. Here is Oppen's poetic rendering of the long hours in the trench, from "Myth of the Blaze":

> lost to be lost Wyatt's
> lyric and Rezi's
> running thru my mind
> in the destroyed (and guilty) Theatre
> of the War I'd cried
> and remembered
> boyhood degradation other
> degradations and this crime I will not recover
> from the landscape it will be in my mind
> it will fill my mind and this is horrible
> death bed pavement the secret taste
> of being lost
> dead
>
> clown in the birds'
> world what names
> (but my name)

and my love's name to speak

There are at least several possible associations which can be made with the guilt Oppen refers to here; each of them can be characterized as having to do with Wyatt's "strange fashion of forsaking," though for different reasons. The first is the guilt Oppen felt for leaving Mary and Linda, his daughter; there is also the possibility that Oppen felt guilty about essentially cutting himself off from his natal family when he and Mary first left for New York in 1928 in order to see if they were "any good out there." Another type of guilt has to do with the "boyhood degradation" which Oppen alludes to in the poem; in his working papers, under the heading "Auto bio notes," Oppen writes:

(sexual: unable to believe the ... or even
complicity of an adult woman (and my father's wife) I
assumed all guilt (of thought, of reaction) was mine)
(age 12)

When he was four years old, Oppen's mother had a nervous breakdown and committed suicide; his father remarried five years later, and his stepmother apparently abused him, sexually or otherwise. From the same set of notes Oppen made towards an autobiography: "with my father's second marriage there opened on me an attack totally murderous, totally brutal, involving sexual attack, beatings, beatings disguised by the assistance of doctors." George was not the only victim; his older sister Libby "fought" and was "utterly defeated" by the stepmother. He writes: "I still wake sometimes to the guilt of having deserted my sister, I refused absolutely to support her or even to listen to her"; Oppen concludes: "had I supported my sister- - my sister might have been saved." He wrote these comments believing that his failure to protect his sister eventually led to

her suicide in 1960; though he could not have predicted her death while fighting in the war, he must certainly have felt some responsibility for ensuring exclusively for his own survival. But here we see Oppen once again fusing survival with poetry: "I set myself to survive" Oppen writes; "I don't know whether or not I thought my chances very good. Perhaps I did. I knew only or almost only Romantic poetry, and most of the poetry I know seemed to promise that despair would create poetry - - I think I saw myself as surviving" (Anderson 193-5). Undergoing such traumas and then reliving them while experiencing another sort of trauma that threatens survival in a much more immediate sense, Oppen must have felt a terrible loneliness, a loneliness aggravated by a heightened awareness of the love that he and Mary discovered and shared. In some essential sense George and Mary Oppen rescued each other from their respective oppressive pasts. George offered Mary a life devoted to art and politics away from the isolation she felt growing up in Oregon; and, though George thought of himself as a poet from a very early age, Mary offered him the freedom from an abusive family encased by bourgeois values which allowed him to *become* a poet. Mary, clearly, became essential to George Oppen's survival: the restoration of trust, the valuation of fidelity, the freedom he speaks of; perhaps most importantly, their relationship offered a continuously renewed, private enactment of the type of conversation which in effect became the archetype for the "sincere and public conversation" Oppen sought in the world at large. Their companionship provided the basis for a genuinely renewed comprehension of sincerity.

It is not known for certain which of Reznikoff's poems Oppen recalled while wounded; there is, however, part of a poem from *Jerusalem the Golden* (1934) which surfaces again and again when Oppen writes or speaks of specific poems which have

been meaningful to him. In a letter to Zukofsky in 1958 Oppen says that "I found pieces of Rezi's poems and yours going through my head during the whole war. Old men eating food all through Europe: girders still themselves where nothing else was" (8). Zukofsky wrote no such lines; Reznikoff, however, wrote:

> Among the heaps of brick and plaster lies
> a girder, still itself among the rubbish.

and, elsewhere—

> Showing a torn sleeve, with stiff and shaking fingers the old man
> pulls off a bit of baked apple, shiny with sugar,
> eating with reverence food, the great comforter.

Oppen admired Reznikoff's poetic integrity more than anybody else's, and it was a habit of Oppen's to freely re-arrange or otherwise "improve" upon others' lines, especially lines which he had devoured and internalized with fondness; in another letter, for example, Oppen substitutes the word "rubble" for "rubbish" in Reznikoff's poem (14). The substitution accrues significance as Oppen repeats it in an interview much later in life: "'The girder still itself among the rubble' and we recite that line over and over to ourselves—and we meant to be ourselves among the rubble—and it was rubble or it was very close to rubble. It was very close to catastrophe, you know, not only close but was catastrophe because a world war is catastrophe, after all" (Hatlen 29). Where Reznikoff, who loved to walk the streets of New York, was perhaps looking out on a vacant lot under demolition, Oppen was witnessing not trash but the rubble of war (buildings, bunkers, the broken). What Oppen associated with the girder: the old men, and himself, surviving as themselves, and, though downfallen, essentially intact—a symbol of survival

among ruin. The *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates an obsolete meaning of sincerity: "free from hurt; uninjured," as in Dryden's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*: "the inviolable body stood sincere." And Joseph T. Shipley, in *The Origin of English Words*, suggests these possible roots for "sincere": the Latin *sine* (without); Latin and English *caries* (decay): without decay. The girder—Oppen—remained sincere.

And so we see that it is not simply poetic technique which "tests" sincerity for Oppen: the sincerity of his beliefs—and of his very life—was deliberately tested through profound extra-poetic experiences. In fact, it is somewhat misleading to separate Oppen's experience of sincerity from his poetic notion of sincerity, as the two are existentially intertwined; the following notation in his working papers, for example, reveals the degree to which the particular experience at hand—that of being wounded—informed his poetics:

> OBJECTIVE: "OBJECTIVISM"
> THAT EVEN SORROW OR THE MOST TERRIBLE WOUND MAY PROVE ONE TO BE PART OF THE UNIVERSE, NOT EXCLUDED, NOT FALLEN FROM IT I THINK THERE IS NO OTHER SINCERITY. (Anderson 207)

That the night in the trench becomes reconfigured in the very terms of Objectivist poetics here properly reinforces the perception of Oppen as a man to whom poetry was absolutely essential; that sincerity is the term that Oppen chooses as an indication that he is not fallen from the universe, that he is part of humanity, not excluded, is a fascinating idea to which we will return shortly.

5

Oppen's injury sent him to a hospital in Nancy, France; but because the United States still had "interests" in Europe even after Germany had been defeated, the military was not expeditiously demobilized and Oppen could not return home to his wife and daughter until November—the very same month that Pound was brought to the United States to stand trial for treason. After Oppen returned from the war, the family moved to California where Oppen worked as a contractor and carpenter until 1950. Although the Oppens were not active in the Communist Party after the war, they had not renounced their membership and naturally began to feel quite uncomfortable as McCarthyism grew increasingly insidious. The FBI file on the Oppens, obtained by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, reveals that the Oppens were "watched" from 1941 to 1966; the FBI in fact visited the Oppens twice in 1949, prompting the move to exile in Mexico, where harassment continued in diluted form. Mexican law forbade foreigners from engaging in manual labor, and the Oppens, though they had hoped to immerse themselves in Mexican life, were in effect consigned to a bourgeois lifestyle. Oppen worked mainly as a supervisor in a cabinet-making shop; he also attended art school (by way of the GI Bill), made wood carvings, and built a small sailboat. In 1958, seven years after they had first applied, the Oppens were finally issued their U.S. passports, and by early 1960 the Oppens were

living permanently in New York. Not accidentally, 1958 was also the year Oppen began writing again.

It is worth contemplating for a moment just what brought Oppen back to poetry after his twenty-four year long series of self-testing. While Oppen's return to poetry was in part precipitated by a dream which revealed to Oppen that his poetic skills could not "rust," it is also important to note that Oppen, as he makes clear in an interview, never at anytime ceased to think of himself as a poet (Dembo). Moreover, Oppen—in his early fifties when he started writing *The Materials*, his first book since *Discrete Series*—felt that he had "only so much time left" to do what he wanted to do (Dembo 174). Yet more significantly, it is clear that Oppen felt a pressing need to engage in a public discourse that did not involve image manipulation or rhetorical posturing. Among his letters, for instance, one often comes across calls for an egalitarian "conversation among honest people," a crucial emendation of the more exclusively qualified "communication between intelligent *men*" as Pound puts it in "The Serious Artist" (*Literary Essays* 55). While this initially appears as rather idealistic, Oppen's hope was based on the reality of his relationship with Mary. He could believe in the value of conversation because he experienced it with her—it is not simply coincidental that their first meeting involved an all-night conversation. DuPlessis, in "Objectivist Poetics and Political Vision," is entirely right to contrast the Oppens' approach to that of the patriarchal Pound, who attempted to exclude Mary from conversations when the Oppens visited, and in whom Oppen saw "no feminine," an observation which pertains to the history of the early avant-garde in general (135). Oppen's preoccupation with the sort of conversation he wished to participate in was quickened in the years immediately following his return to poetry; in

1963, for example, he writes with increased urgency: "That matter of one's peers—I have come to believe again, perhaps in more rather than less despair, that the only possible hope is in the conversation with one's peers. Or in thinking as if one were in contact with one's peers" (*Letters* 82).

It should be no surprise, then, that Oppen's meditations on sincerity continued in a more consciously articulated form after his return from exile. Unlike many other poets, Oppen never expressed disaffection with the choices and associations of his youth: the tenets of the Objectivists, as formulated by Zukofsky, are cited approvingly—in letters, interviews, working papers—throughout Oppen's life. But Oppen continued to make the concept of sincerity his own. Indeed, when Oppen observed in 1961 that Zukofsky had written "very brilliantly" of sincerity, he seems to have imputed a certain "epic quality" to Zukofsky's "Sincerity and Objectification" that is difficult to trace (*Letters* 47). This association also turns up in Oppen's working papers:

> SINCERITY: THE WORLD IN THE POEM (EPIC)
>
> Yes, it places a burden on the poem: that burden is everything.
>
> The absence of that burden leaves------

It leaves "well, little" but "perhaps not nothing"—an equivocal qualification if there ever was one ("'The Anthropologist of Myself'" 149). The burden, for Oppen, was to engage with reality in a way that his fellow poets had not done, to test himself so that he could include the world in the poem with some sense of experiential verisimilitude, rather than simply projecting the poem onto the world; as he phrases this rhetorically in a letter, "Sincerity demands that one has BEEN there?" (287). The epic quality that Oppen refers

to, then, has less to do with writing long bardic poems than it does with the sort of realism that Zukofsky praised Reznikoff for in "Sincerity and Objectification."

Oppen offers three major public delineations of his poetics after his return to writing: the essay "The Mind's Own Place" (1963), the interview with L.S. Dembo in 1969, and a combination interview/statement on poetics conducted by Reinhold Schiffer in 1975. The consistency of his poetics as expressed in these documents is remarkable; all emphasize the same points of concern, though sometimes, in the interviews, with some appropriate uncertainty with regard to terminology—as he tells Dembo, "one tries not to write anything that is wrong, but conversations are another matter" (177). Also to be noted is the tangible pleasure with which Oppen engages in the conversation as initiated by the interviewer; in both of the interviews at hand, he shows the predilection for allowing the interview to proceed freely rather than by program or convention: these are, after all, precisely the types of conversations he valued so highly.

"The Mind's Own Place" provides the most sustained elucidation of Oppen's poetics. Published in 1963—just after *The Materials*—"The Mind's Own Place" shows Oppen again deliberately positioning himself on the poetry/politics axis. The title of the essay emphasizes the sovereignty of the artistic mind, which is always and again threatened by the authoritarian—whether the authoritarian is imminent within an individual, purveyed through rigid systematicity, or both. The phrase is a slightly contracted version of a well-known sequence in Milton's *Paradise Lost* which runs as follows:

> Hail horrors, hail
>
> Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell

Receive thy new Possessor: One who brings

A mind not to be changed by Place or Time.

The mind is its own place, and in itself

Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.

What matter where, if I be still the same

And what I should be, all but less than hee

Whom Thunder hath made greater? (I, 250-58)

The speaker of these lines, as Oppen well knew, is Beelzebub; "so to the Puritan Milton it is the devil's doctrine" he writes in a letter, indicating clearly that he prefers freedom of mind to subjugation—as who wouldn't? Shelley famously declared that Satan, due to his rebelliousness and superlative eloquence, was the true hero of the Christian epic in spite of Milton's Puritanism; like Shelley, Oppen—who did not adhere to any religious system—read this passage politically: Beelzebub represents the artist who gladly disburdens himself or herself of the constraints of authoritarian government; what the artist gains from this unshackling, Oppen believed, is freedom from the injunction to reconcile artistic truths with political systems.

"The poet," writes Oppen in the essay, "speaking as a poet, declares his political non-availability as clearly as the classic pronouncement: 'If nominated I will run: if elected I will hide.' Surely what we need is a 'redemption of the will'.... But what we must have now, the political thing we must have, is a peace" (137). Oppen has no delusions, however, about this proposed "peace"; he has, shall we say, a thoroughly realistic understanding of politics. "A peace is made by a peace treaty," he says—

> And we have seen peace treaties before; we know what they are. This one will be, if we get it, if we survive, like those before it, a cynical and brutal division of the world between the great powers.

Later in the same essay, Oppen elaborates: "And where is the poet who will write that she opened her front door, having sent the children to school, and felt the fresh authentic air in her face and wanted—*that?*" (137). Oppen refers here to Denise Levertov, whose poem (which begins with "The Authentic!" and concludes with the "cold air" coming in "at the street door") he praises earlier in the essay for its clarity and honesty. The essential question, albeit rhetorical, which Oppen poses is therefore: how can a politically relevant generalization—"*that*"—be constructed from a realization of the authentic as presented in a poem? It cannot: a poet "is not likely to find the moment, the image, in which a political generalization or any other generalization will prove its truth" (134).

So once again poetry and politics are presented as distinct enterprises; but Oppen's vision of how poetry is involved in the shaping of an intersubjective discourse with socio-political import can be glimpsed as he merges thoughts of Objectivism, sincerity, and the "test" in an extremely condensed fashion. Witness the following progression: "It is possible to find a metaphor for anything, an analogue: but the image is encountered, not found; it is an account of the poet's perception, of the act of perception; it is a test of sincerity, a test of conviction, the rare poetic quality of truthfulness" (133). In theory, Oppen's approach to sincerity is here remarkably similar to Pound's, as the continual association of technique with sincerity demonstrates: "Are you seeing technique as producing sincerity" Oppen asks a correspondent in a letter; "I would think in this sense: that attention to technique will force a change or even reversal in the

poem—there is no reason to versify what one already knows" (287). But the factor which makes it new for Oppen with each foray into the realm of poetry is the encounter. Rather than have the poem be a record of thoughts previously known, the poem marks an encounter with the unknown. As DuPlessis has argued in "Objectivist Poetics and Political Vision," this is precisely the point where Oppen chose to differentiate himself from Pound: where Pound came to his poetry with a predetermined agenda to expound, Oppen saw poetry as a test of truths not previously known, thereby remaining open to the "new" (however one chooses to define it). This effectively prevents the poem from being didactic: "Poetry," Oppen relates later in the essay (perhaps with Pound specifically in mind), "is not an advanced form of rhetoric" (137). He explains: "It is a part of the function of poetry to serve as a test of truth. It is possible to say anything in abstract prose, but a great many things one believes or would like to believe or thinks he believes will not substantiate themselves in the concrete materials of the poem." The truth which may be established in a poem, however, is still not necessarily politically salient: the poem is simply "testing" the veracity of what the poet experiences; what is verified through the poem comes to be seen as among the materials of a shared reality, and in this way Oppen believes that he can discover what is *common*—and therefore fundamentally important—to our experience. What is critical here is not so much that the truth (which is not a metaphysical concept to Oppen, as we shall see) is captured and rendered in poetry, but that the attempt to discover it is made—and this is sincerity.

We have seen that Oppen writes to find out what he believes, that he does not come to the poem in order to execute a program of previously established meanings: poetry is not an advanced form of rhetoric, and its ideal end is therefore not persuasion.

The poem tests Oppen's convictions with regard to specific meanings: what he would like to believe will not substantiate itself in the materials of the poem. And for Oppen, one of the material elements of the poem is its prosody. While we normally think of prosody as the specific description of an approach to rhyme and meter, Oppen thinks of it more broadly, and it functions as the primary testing element in his writing process, as he describes in the "Statement on Poetics": "it is a music but it is a rigorous music—a music that refuses all trumpets, all sweet harmonics, all lusts and emotions that aren't there, it is a music, quite simply, of image and honest speech—*image* because image is the moment of conviction. It cannot be altered and it cannot be falsified without one's knowing it. Prosody is a language, but it is a language that tests itself" (26). Despite the dissatisfaction with which Oppen and the Objectivists regarded the Imagist poetry of their time, Oppen more than once refers to himself as essentially Imagist; his understanding of the image itself should be seen as similar to, if not exactly the same as, that of Pound: an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. The image for Oppen is the manifestation of "a moment, an actual time, when you believe something to be true, and you construct a meaning from these moments of conviction" (Dembo 161). This construction of meaning from the image, however, is subject to the "testing" which is prosody; Oppen's project is to reduce the poem to what he can believe through what he calls "the sequence of disclosure" which his prosody enables ("Statement" 26). His poetics is reductionist in the most basic sense, and this is accounted for by the hundreds of drafts which he needed to write before he felt a poem to be ready for a reader: Oppen once said that he wrote more slowly than anybody he knew of. Oppen wrote in a letter that he looks for the "thinnest possible surface" in his poems: "at times, no doubt, too

thin," he remarks, and then adds that he is "much more afraid of a solid mass of words" (40). This "thinness," however, does not mean that Oppen wants his poems to be ephemeral, transparent; in fact, he wants just the opposite: he thinks of the form of the poems "as immediacy, as the possibility of being grasped," and this approach is closely linked to his interpretation of Objectivism as "the making an object of the poem" (Dembo 160). The object which results has been thoroughly subjected to prosodic testing, leaving only the images which represent "moments of conviction" and the meanings which flow from them.

But the status of the poem as object acquires an additional dimension with Oppen. While studying Oppen's drafts and working papers housed at the Archive for New Poetry at the University of California, San Diego, Michael Davidson observes the following. As he was working on a poem, Oppen apparently resorted to what Davidson refers to as a sort of "textual impasto": instead of re-writing a given poem on a new piece of paper, he would cut and paste changes to the poem on the original sheet of paper, resulting in a rather astonishing "palimpsestic" object with a topography (some poems rise a dozen or more pages high). Davidson observes that poems from *The Materials* are "built" in just such a way out of a ring binder: "the whole pile of pages is held together by pipe cleaners that are wrapped, at the top, around a number 2 pencil and a one-inch roundhead screw" (77). Other pages in the collection are fastened by such things as pins, wires, metal clasps, and, in one case, a nail hammered into a piece of plywood; as Davidson remarks, "a better definition of Objectivism cannot be imagined." Davidson also came across a page on which Oppen wrote that "Mankind is a conversation"; he writes that this page, typical of those to be found in the archive, is "the material analog of that conversation" in

its "wandering and questioning" (66). Davidson argues that Oppen's published poems "represent the outer surfaces of a larger debate that appears fragmentarily in broken phrases, ellipses, quotations, and italics" throughout his working papers; it is intertextual and interdiscursive "thinking itself" (70-1). That Oppen's drafts were material, interdiscursive analogs of conversations immediate and distant will soon be borne out by a textual analysis of one of his poems.

Oppen's reductionism and pace of writing explain the minimalism of the poems, as well as how he can believe that he has "a tremendous sense of talking like a common man" since there is no verbosity, no elevation of tone, no superfluous word which survives his revisions (Schiffer 14). This is presumably of a piece with his desire for American literature to treat the common experience of the common man. But if Oppen talks like a common man, why, then, are his poems "difficult" in that way that has become so negatively inflected by conventional critics?

> I do the best I can on that. I'm just not able to know whether it'll be understood, whether it won't be understood. I've agonized over that since *Discrete Series*, and certainly in *Discrete Series*, where almost everybody said it's incomprehensible. But I was doing my level best to speak as simply—in a sense I mean...I don't want to become hysterical but I *am* speaking very simply. Well, I'm not talking about terribly simple matters. (Schiffer 15)

He does not "take refuge in any policy of obscureness in the writing" as he believed Zukofsky did. In fact, Oppen's friendship with Zukofsky ended when he revealed to Zukofsky that he thought he was using "obscurity" as a "tactic" in his writings, which

indicated quite clearly to Oppen that they had very different ideas of who they were writing *for* and *to*. A telling incident occurred when Oppen was preparing *Discrete Series* for publication: "I had these great heaps of correction and correction and correction—I forgot how this came up—very frank thing on Louis' part—he said, 'George, they don't care'" (Hatlen 45).

But talking like a common man does not mean that he trusts the vernacular or his own "voice" (Ginsberg) or some hypothetical American voice (Williams): "I don't subscribe to any of the theories that poetry should simply reproduce common speech and so on. My reason for using a colloquial vocabulary is really a different one" (Dembo 167). Since his primary concern is to "notice, to state, to lay down the substantive for its own sake," Oppen prefers using what he refers to as the "little words" (like "tree" and "hill" and "sun") that—despite their diminutive size—harbor the reality which needs to be examined; this is why he tells Dembo that he has "trouble with verbs," that one of his worries in writing is to resist "rushing over the subject-matter in order to make a comment about it" (161-2). Oppen understands that words are often just "categories, classes, concepts, things we invent for ourselves"; but there are nevertheless certain words "without which we really are unable to exist"—certain words which do represent an important aspect of reality. He says that he uses these words as an act of faith, a faith that "the nouns do refer to something; that it's there, that it's true, the whole implication of these nouns; that appearances represent reality, whether or not they misrepresent it: that this in which the thing takes place, this thing is here" (163). The "thing" is Oppen's "substantive," the material reality which we share and which Oppen finds the most mysterious of all. This mysteriousness emanates from Oppen's idea that matter is in the

end "absolutely impenetrable, absolutely inexplicable"; we may throw a succession of new names at the smallest particles of matter in order to explain them, but "at any given time the explanation of something will be the name of something unknown" such as an atom or a quark. It is in this way that Oppen believes that "Things explain each other, / not themselves," as he phrases it in the poem "A Narrative." But nouns comprise only one class of words which Oppen examines; his poetic "test" extends to other words and attempts to determine whether they, too, represent things that actually exist. For instance, Oppen uses the following five words as examples of the important "little words" in his "Statement on Poetics," and a brief exercise in association shows just how crucial they are in illuminating a shared reality: is, and, but, before, after. Similarly, Oppen reveals that he was testing the word humanity in *Of Being Numerous*: he was asking "the question of whether or not we can deal with humanity as something which actually does exist" (Dembo 162).

Oppen often writes of a particular kind of boredom that is integral to his poetics: "Nothing more real than boredom—dreamlessness... / Native in native time... / The purity of the materials" (*Collected Poems* 186). This is not the type of boredom which is characterized by listlessness and *ennui*; it is, rather, a certain metaphysical approach which Oppen shares with Heidegger—it is a watchful, perceptive state of being. Boredom of this sort produces a disinterested clarity which reveals the elemental, material world upon Oppen's encounter with it: "I have not and never did have any motive in poetry / But to achieve clarity" (185). The consciousness which allows clarity to be achieved also provides for "an awareness of the world, a lyric reaction to the world" (164). This cultivated awareness could alternatively be described as "the mind's own

place"; in the interview with Dembo Oppen refers to it as "the life of the mind"; in the "Statement on Poetics" he calls it consciousness and "actualness." Oppen believes that the greatest virtue of this consciousness is that it is "capable not only of thinking but has an emotional root that forces it to look, to think, to see. The most tremendous and compelling emotion we possess is the one that forces us to look, to know, if we can, to *see*" (Dembo 173). Oppen says that he "despairs" of those whose minds do not compel them to see: "If the virtue of the mind is missing, if somebody is 'wicked' in my sense, I have nothing to say to him and it is this fact that causes me to mourn, now and then, for large sections of humanity." If this "virtue of the mind is that emotion which causes us to see" in the way that Oppen describes here, then sincerity is that virtue which causes him to say, for the presence of sincerity does not merely indicate that one *believes*, it indicates that one expresses what one believes.

In spite of the profound doubt which Oppen expresses above with regard to whether he can actually have a conversation at all with those who do not feel impelled to see, to achieve clarity, it is the quality of sincerity that brings his poetry into the public sphere—the poetry becomes part of the public conversation. The extent to which sincerity is integrated with Oppen's poetics can be seen in the following excerpt from his working papers: he writes that form is

> what makes the poem *graspable*
>
> Sincerity is the attention outward.
> Objectification is creation
> obviously enough
>
> to write at the moving edge of both of these
>
> ("'Meaning is to be here'" 199)

Sincerity is the attention outward: from the self to the other, through the medium of poetry. Poetry becomes Oppen's form of socio-political intervention because it is the record only of what he has found to be true: no dross, no rhetoric, no compromise. It is often said of politicians that even those with the best intentions must compromise once they enter the political arena—the process corrupts. This is the result of the ever-present friction between the particular and the universal, between the individual and the community, and as language is the very substance of these relations, it too corrupts (as Nietzsche has shown). Oppen understood this; he did not believe in the purity of language, but he did believe that he could construct his own system of testing language, of testing convictions: he chose poetry as the most effective way to participate in a public conversation that does not require that one compromise one's personal or political integrity. This was his way, and he understood that it was fraught with difficulties: "It is true," Oppen writes in his "Statement on Poetics," "that my own temperament, my own sense of drama, enters into this: I like to seem to be speaking very simply—and a sense of drama is dangerous, I know that, this again is a question of modulation, as is music: a question of honesty, question of sincerity—the sincerity of the *I* and the *we*, it is tremendous drama" (26). Oppen's poetics was infused with a dramatic insistence on the importance of sincerity to the vitality—indeed the very survival—of the I and we of community; this drama is potentially "dangerous" because it can make poetry take on a kind of operatic hysteria. This is why Oppen's process of writing is as rigorous as it is—to prevent the drama from becoming overblown, as it did with Pound.

Unlike Pound, however, Oppen was not interested in advertising or promulgating what he thought was the most meaningful way to go about the process of living and

writing: he saw first hand in the examples of Pound and fascism how dangerous it can be to speak for others—and consequently resisted rhetorical flourishes almost completely. Although Oppen naturally had his own beliefs as to what was ethical and what wasn't, he never broadcast his opinions with unequivocal confidence as Pound (literally) did. Neither was Oppen averse to expressing his opinions in letters and interviews, as we have seen, but there are two conspicuous facts which separate him from nearly all of his contemporaries. Firstly, in addition to his almost twenty-four year poetic silence, there is another type of silence in Oppen's life—a rhetorical silence. Oppen wrote very little critical prose: he published—with considerable trepidation and defensiveness—one essay and one review, each only a handful of pages in length. In his working papers, Oppen revealingly writes: "I must make *no* system, or I will be enslaved by another man's" ("Romantic Virtue" 5). This is of course a revision of William Blake's famous statement in "Jerusalem" which asserts the importance of creating a system of one's own; Oppen, though a great admirer of Blake's, nevertheless felt it essential to underscore the "no" with his pen. This sentiment reveals Oppen's stern resistance to discursive rhetoric: he will not tell other people what to do, what system of poetry or politics to subscribe to—particularly by way of essay or manifesto.

The second fact which makes Oppen so unusual is that he almost unilaterally qualifies his discursive statements with phrases such as:

> I'll just put it in personal terms
>
> Perhaps I spoke a little carelessly
>
> I realize the possibility of attacking many of the things I'm saying
>
> What I felt I was doing was

I'm just telling about what I encountered

I'm just reporting my experiences in life

All I actually know is what happened to me and I'm telling it

And if I don't speak for myself, who will; and if not now, when?

In all of these expressions Oppen simultaneously emphasizes the epistemological value of subjective experience while recognizing its limitations. Speaking for oneself—among the principle corollaries of sincerity—is one of the characteristics Oppen admired most in those who participated in the New Left during the 'sixties: "its people spoke for themselves," as against those of the Old Left, who "were not speaking for themselves, and therefore there was something essentially and deeply wrong with them" (*Letters* 192). Similarly, in his "Statement on Poetics," Oppen writes: "I, surely, cannot hope to prescribe" (25). This attitude I would again put in opposition to most of the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century with their declarations and manifestos—part and parcel of the mechanisms of legitimization which all movements seem to require. Oppen's resistance to discursive public prescription was a result of his political insights and his understanding of how freedom and individuality can be compromised in movements (whether artistic, political, or both): when he spoke, he spoke only for himself, and this was crucial to his understanding of sincerity. Another way of putting this is that Oppen witnessed the disastrous end of the "heroic" poet lineage first hand in Ezra Pound. One can therefore see Oppen as a person who sought for another viable way to exist as a poet in the world: what he found was that he could only sincerely present what he had "encountered" by way of poetry in a conversation among honest people.

If it is true that poetry became Oppen's form of socio-political mediation, then it is only appropriate that we turn to his poetry in order to see how Oppen configured the "sincerity of the *I* and the *we*" upon his return to writing. When they were finally issued their passports in 1958, the Oppens headed back to New York. The poems which make up *The Materials*, Oppen's first book since *Discrete Series* (and the book in which Oppen once said that he was "again refusing some of the heroics of poetry"), were begun during the Oppens' final months in Mexico and finished in Brooklyn (Schiffer 16). Despite the uncertainties which Oppen confronted as he tried to understand a much-changed America, he was quite elated about the very possibility of coming to full maturity as a poet when the country was most ready to hear him: "I very strongly get a feeling that the time is most exceedingly ripe. People have perhaps been stewing up rather arty soups long enough" he wrote in 1961 (*Letters* 44). However, the America of "roads clogged with everyone in the whole country driving a car, everyone on earth playing three radios" initially seems to have overwhelmed Oppen: "I've got almost nothing written" he wrote to his sister in 1960, adding "My head seems to buzz. I can't hear myself" (22, 38). And it was not simply a question of being able to hear himself—but also of who would hear *him*. In 1961 he wrote the following to the poet Naomi Replansky (ten years his junior): "The sense of audience, I suppose, is pretty well absent for everyone these days.... I have no idea who reads a poem of mine, if anyone does, aside from half a dozen people or so who could hardly omit to" (54).

The poem "Leviathan" addresses Oppen's interest in a "conversation among honest people" (whether they be older or younger) in a most direct way. Among the poems which comprise *The Materials*, it is easily the most severe assessment of the

perceived political and social reality in America in the early 'sixties. "Leviathan" also happens to be the last poem in the book, which adds additional weight to its insights. How interesting, then, that "Leviathan," like "The Mind's Own Place," also politicizes Biblical conceptions of good and evil while retaining moral urgency. The title of the poem of course makes reference to "the Elusive Serpent" (Isaiah 27, 1) whom the God of the Old Testament had "formed to sport with" (Psalm 104, 26); Leviathan is also, according to the translators of the Jewish Publication Society's *Tanakh*, the "embodiment of chaos" and often "stands for the forces of evil in the present world" (670). The most pertinent appearance of Leviathan, however, is in the final chapters of The Book of Job, when God finally deigns to respond to Job's demand for an explanation of his terrible suffering. The most common interpretation of the lesson which God delivers to Job is that humans are not in a position to question God's motives: we cannot hope to understand God's ways, and should learn to accept our fate through an act of faith. God's memorable speech to this effect makes prominent use of the figure of Leviathan:

> Can you draw out Leviathan by a fishhook?
> Can you press down his tongue by a rope?
> Can you put a ring through his nose,
> Or pierce his jaw with a barb?
> Will he plead with you at length
> Will he speak soft words to you?
> Will he make an agreement with you
> To be taken as your lifelong slave?
> Will you play with him like a bird,

And tie him down for your girls? (40, 25-29)

The mocking, viciously sardonic series of rhetorical assaults comes to a false concluding cadence with God indicating that, if Job cannot even hope to conquer Leviathan, how then could he have the audaciousness to question God, the very creator of Leviathan?

Who then can stand up to Me?

Whoever confronts Me I will requite,

For everything under the heavens is Mine. (41, 1-3)

But that's not all: another twenty-two verses are devoted to evocations of Leviathan's prowess and might in what seems to have become an extended demonstration of divine machismo. If "There is no one on land who can dominate" Leviathan, "Made as he is without fear," (41, 25) then how much more powerful must God be? Job, terrified, gets the point, saying—

Therefore, I recant and relent,

Being but dust and ashes. (42, 6)

This is a sad moment in literary history. The subject of a bet between God and the Adversary (as the JPS translation has it), Job has learned always to demur, and never to ask questions; dialogue between God and his subjects is, to say the least, strongly discouraged. Job is even paid hush money: God gives him twice what he had before his uncharacteristic upstart behavior—and Job had been a very rich man.

Aside from the theological question of where, if not from God, the evil which Leviathan represents came from, there is another issue worth contemplating here. If humans cannot, by God's own admission, control or subdue Leviathan, we are, indeed, powerless over evil and chaos. The only way we can defeat evil, of course, is by

enlisting God's help—it's all about power, in other words. Even Thomas Hobbes, a devout Christian, acknowledges in *Leviathan*, his treatise on government and human nature, that "this question" concerning the prosperity of evil on earth "in the case of Job, is decided by God himself, not by arguments derived from Job's sin, but his own power" (214). The story becomes increasingly interesting as the figure of Leviathan takes on political garb with Hobbes. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes argues that man is by nature a selfish creature decidedly unfit for social intercourse. Without the restraints of government, we live, he says, in a state of "continual fear, and danger and violent death", and our lives are "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (161). It is therefore necessary, Hobbes argues, to create a contract between people which unites them in a commonwealth, a sovereign representative "person" whose power is greater than that of any individual subject:

> For by art is created that great *Leviathan* called a *Commonwealth*, or *State*, in Latin *Civitas*, which is but an artificial man; though of greater stature and strength than the natural, for whose protection and defense it was intended; and in which the sovereignty is an artificial soul, as giving life and motion to the whole body; the magistrates, and other officers of judicature and execution, artificial joints; reward and punishment, by which fastened to the seat of the sovereignty every joint and member is moved to perform his duty, are the nerves, that do the same in the body natural; the wealth and riches of all the particular members, are the strength; *salus populi*, the people's safety, its business; counselors, by whom all things needful for it to know are suggested unto it, are the memory; equity and laws, an artificial reason and will; concord, health; sedition, sickness; and civil war, death. Lastly, the pacts

> and covenants, by which the parts of this body politic were at first made, set together, and united, resemble that *fiat*, or the *let us make man*, pronounced by God in the creation. (129)

Leviathan precisely because, by the authority assigned to this artificial man by every subject, it wields a power second only to God's, and "that by terror thereof he is enabled tc perform the wills of them all, to peace at home and mutual aid against their enemies abroad" (177). In this way Leviathan becomes "that *mortal god*, to which we owe under the *immortal God*, our peace and defense."

With all of this—and much more—as the subtext to Oppen's poem, it is quite remarkable that "Leviathan" is only fifteen lines long. The earliest drafts of the poem are in fact only six lines long, and begin with the phrase which becomes the fulcrum of the final version: "We must talk now." As indicated earlier, Oppen appears to have been gravely concerned about the nature and quality of discourse—public and private—in America at the time; "we must talk now" can thus be read as an updated and revised version of the alienated voice in Eliot's "The Waste Land" that says "Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak." In a letter of 1962 Oppen writes:

> I believe people are terrified. Those who aren't will be. Someone said to me the other day "Change the axioms." And that was a writer of high school science textbooks! It is necessary to talk, to begin to talk. I mean to be part of a conversation among honest people. (55)

The last sentence of this letter can be found, almost verbatim, in the opening lines of later drafts of "Leviathan." One draft begins with the epigram (attributed to Oppen's friend Steven Schneider) "Happiness is the pursuit of it," and then proceeds: "And knowledge

the pursuit of it? I mean to be a part / Of a discourse among honest people. / Go shout / in the market / That Newton is as dead as God." This passage is revealingly elaborated upon in the same letter; Oppen writes:

> Of course we are afraid the children will overhear us. But someday someone will overhear the children and face absolute despair. The physical scientists will give us no peace. One imagines a new Nietzsche crying in the market place: "Newton is dead. Haven't you heard? Newton is dead." Narrative, which is everyone's art, and everyone's comfort, is wearing out. There is no fact more obvious than that every life ends badly. Very badly. Loneliness, desertion, irreparable physical injury. Every ship sinks. Every calamity the hero escapes he does not escape. I mean to be part of a discussion among honest people. (55)

Our fantasies of human progress, Oppen appears to be saying, have become transparent, revealing a none too encouraging reality of suffering and destruction; so naturally it is urgently necessary that we begin to talk. "Perhaps what I would like is a truly democratic culture," Oppen wrote in a contemporaneous letter:

> Not a polemic nor a moralistic culture in the arts but a culture which permits one man to speak to another honestly and modestly and in freedom and to say what he thinks and what he feels, to express his doubts and fears, his immoral as well as his moral impulses, to say what he thinks is true and what he thinks is false, and what he likes and what he does not like. What I am against is that we should all engage in the most vigorous and most polemic lying to each other for each other's benefit---" (64).

The fear that children might overhear these hypothetical discussions stems, I think, from Oppen's extreme sense of protectiveness concerning both his daughter and youth in general: the reality exposed in these discussions, Oppen feared, would terrify the children. These sentiments are also closely paralleled in drafts of "Leviathan"; the following is a transcription of the typescript of one of the earliest drafts of the poem:[1]

> We must talk now. Nothing ours
>
> But words. We are too many
>
> To live by pettiness, silence, by deception
>
> Of each other. There is no shelter of the past
>
> Will give shelter, no ~~haunting~~ adult shadow
>
> ~~Of ourselves~~
>
> Will cast a shelter of the past behindus.

The typescript was edited by hand; at the bottom of the page Oppen wrote and underscored the words "to provide." The adults, it seems, failed in their duty to provide shelter for the children, the subsequent generations; if the adults do not soon engage in an honest discourse, Oppen believed, it is quite possible that the adults will instead overhear their children (discussing what?) and "face absolute despair" as they realize that they have left them completely exposed to the vicissitudes of modern life, precisely in the way that Hobbes' Leviathan was supposed to prevent.

"And knowledge the pursuit of it?" Oppen asks Steven Schneider in a subsequent draft; "knowledge," however, becomes "Truth" in the final, confident version of "Leviathan": "Truth also is the pursuit of it: / Like happiness, and it will not stand." It is

[1] Oppen's handwritten corrections to the preponderance of typing errors are indicated by strikethroughs and bracketed notations; I will alert the reader when handwriting is transcribed directly.

telling that this poem results from what was initially a private interchange between friends; but the privacy is transcended as the language becomes increasingly abstract. The opening couplet asserts that neither truth nor happiness is something which can be kept—or bought—in the manner of material objects; they are unquantifiable, subjective apperceptions. While this assertion may seem viable to us, it is unusual that Oppen suggests that truth is akin to an emotional state which everyone defines differently: the scientists whom Oppen refers to in the early drafts, for example, would surely contest that truth is, quite simply, an objectively verifiable fact, or an hypothesis which is proven through the application of a particular system of logic. Oppen's emphasis on the process, rather than the end, may seem like a clever answer to capitalists and the "physical scientists [who] will give us no peace"; the lines which follow reveal something else, however:

> Even the verse begins to eat away
> In the acid. Pursuit, pursuit;
>
> A wind moves a little,
> Moving in a circle, very cold.

The images here are, clearly, negative. What is the predatory acid which the verse is immersed in? Why does the wind move in a circle, and why is it so cold? I believe that what Oppen is contemplating in these opening verses of "Leviathan" is the quandary which rigid logical systems put us in to. If the first couplet is analyzed logically, one quickly comes to see that in fact the assertion is tautological: how can one "pursue" truth when truth is actually the very process of pursuit? How can one have a pursuit without

an end? The dog chases its own tail; a "wind moves a little, / Moving in a circle, very cold": a paradox, but not a liberating one for Oppen, since this method of thinking preys upon poetry. The rhetorical maneuvering incumbent to logic is, for Oppen, antagonistic to poetry—poetry is not to be used as "an advanced form of rhetoric" in order to reach a desired end. This interpretation is supported by lines from a draft of "Leviathan" which attempt to point out that what we normally think of as "fact" (or "truth") is deceiving:

> Locked up
> With the tool box and the lunch pail - - .
> The world moves and where are we ? [The] Tool box
> and the tools,
> The height gauge, the dividers an[d] the files
> ~~Are~~ [N]ot small iron handles
> Of the fact. The mind must tell itself
> What it knows. It is not the misty, ghostly,
> the imagined
> Which is inexplicable
>
> But the 'preponderance of objects'.

The tools, the gauge, the dividers and files, the iron handles, the lunch pail—these are all products of positivistic endeavor, the human desire for "progress" and *pursuit.* It is interesting to note that Oppen believes we are "Locked up" among such objects, and that the cold wind of the final version of the poem also blows in these windowless rooms. What is inexplicable is not what we generally think of as mysterious, but the

"preponderance of objects" which, like the tools we have made, we treat as mute fact—and it is to this that Oppen believes we must collectively turn our attention.

The abstractions of the first three couplets of the poem are negated by the personal immediacy of the following lines in the first version:

> How shall we say?
>
> In ordinary discourse—
>
> We must talk now. I am no longer sure of the words,
>
> The clockwork of the world. What is inexplicable
>
> Is the 'preponderance of objects'. The sky lights
>
> Daily with that predominance

The certainty of the opening lines has receded, and an urgency becomes apparent: all that this poet, so unsure of his words, knows is that "we must talk." But about what? Here again we encounter the abstract, "objects"—which to Oppen were quite concrete. In a draft of the poem, Oppen links the "preponderance of objects" directly with the following lines:

> [body of the Tiger]
>
> The body of the Tiger, it is the ~~Tiger's body~~,
>
> The nounds, t[h]e nounds of our spreech

The allusion to Blake's "The Tyger" (a favorite of Oppen's) is not inappropriate. As with the Job story, one of the central questions of Blake's poem is who, if not God, could "frame" the "fearful symmetry" of a dangerous beast. The tyger functions for Blake as

Leviathan does for Job—except for one crucial difference: the creator in the poem is explicitly made analogous to the figure of the writer. Blake is empowered as a Promethean figure who has stolen the light (knowledge) which enables him to create, through writing, the "bright" Tyger; therefore Blake too, like Oppen in "The Mind's Own Place," can be seen as allying himself with the Adversary. Like the tiger burning bright, Oppen's "preponderance of objects," denoted by the nouns of our speech (the "little words" that link us), "lights" the sky; it is the subject of both fear and fascination—it is "what is inexplicable." Light also had a positive valence for Oppen, especially when linked to knowledge; thus the "preponderance of objects" is the "predominance" which we should heed, the *material* which should be the focus of our collective attention, the subject of our talk—*now:*

> And we have become the present.

The poem enacts its own desire, burrowing through history up to the present: if the reader has arrived at this point of the poem, he or she is in fact conversing with the poem at that instant. Why, then, does Oppen reiterate the injunction to "talk now" in the final two verses of the poem? "We must talk now. Fear / Is fear. But we abandon one another." The simple fact is that our conversation, if even achieved, remains within the domain of poetry: socio-political reality has not been affected. And do we continue the conversation outside of the domain of poetry? Oppen thinks not: we cannot face our fears and we abandon one another in the frantic attempt to protect our own. Oppen's final judgment, which operates both as an evaluation of his contemporaries and as a proleptic appraisal of the future, is remarkable in its conviction; even among the drafts of the poems one can find the concluding phrase written across a page in full capitals. Leviathan, the "artificial

man" who was to protect us from each other, is consumed by the older, more dangerous Leviathan that has caused us to abandon one another.

Breakwater East: The Privations of Community

It is said that there were marooned sailors around the area of the lower Hudson river at the turn of the sixteenth century, not long after Don Juan Fernandez first encountered his eponymous islands in the South Seas. But these European sailors, though surely lonely, were not alone: as many as fifteen thousand people, in at least eighty separate habitations, lived on the land that was called Lenapehoking ("where the Lenapes dwell")—land that would later be known as Angoulême, Mannados, Manhattes, and New Amsterdam. The geographical peculiarities of this land began to form seventy-five thousand years ago, when advancing glaciers arrested their southward movement directly over what we now call New York City, flattening all that lay beneath it. As the climate started to warm about seventeen thousand years ago, the glaciers began to melt and retreat, leaving a remarkable terminal moraine—boulders of various sizes strewn together with earth in an arc-like pattern from Queens to Bay Ridge—as well as large lakes inundating sizable portions of the region. Much of the water managed to spill into the Atlantic Ocean through a low-lying area now referred to as the Verrazano Narrows, but a continuing influx of the Atlantic, which was itself swelling with glacial runoff, eventually creating the myriad intricate New York waterways which still exist today.

Under the soil
In the blind pressure
The lump,
Entity of substance
Changes also.

Humans, no doubt nomadic hunters, first came to the region about eleven thousand years ago, but eventually followed their prey—woolly mammoths, bisons, saber-toothed tigers—elsewhere.

Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace report in *Gotham* that most European settlers were transported when they first beheld Lenapehoking: the Dutch poet Jacob Steendam exclaimed "O this is Eden!" while Englishman Daniel Denton was equally excited, writing that the area seemed a "terrestrial *Canaan*" where "the Land floweth with milk and honey" (3). But this was no pure, undespoiled landscape: the Lenapes ("men" or "people") had long been hunting, chopping trees, planting fields, and constructing homes, leading Burrows and Wallace to the astute conclusion that "the abundance that so amazed early European visitors was thus no mere accident of nature, for 'nature' was an artifact of culture as well as geology" (9). The Lenapes lived in small, loosely organized communities that often relocated as the seasons and the soil dictated. Lenapehoking was all verdant landscape teeming with wildlife at the time, and the waterways offered an abundance of fish and shellfish. The Lenapes traveled through the area by way of a complex pattern of trails that encompassed all five boroughs; they fished, farmed, and hunted throughout, but never regarded the land as their own. In fact, the Lenapes were not particularly interested in property, whether in the form of land or of objects, as property would limit their mobility. This perhaps accounts for why the Lenapes were not

divided by class, but rather by kinship—a matrilineal kinship. Sharing and reciprocity was the standard within and among clans, and fighting—when it took place—was a short-lived and small-scale affair. Each Lenape clan had the opportunity to use land within a certain territory; these territories could be shared with other clans by negotiation, though nothing remotely similar to a real estate sale ever took place until the Europeans arrived.

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.

They were patient
With the world.

In 1524 Giovanni de Verrazzano became the first European to set eyes on Lenapehoking from the deck of *La Dauphine*: the Lenapes came out to greet the visitors in well over a score of their own small boats; the meeting has been described as a "happy encounter." But a squall forced Verrazzano back out to sea, leaving further exploration to Estaban Gomez, a black Portuguese pilot who sailed further up the Hudson and captured fifty-seven Indians for sale as slaves a year later. But it was the Dutch who were the first systematically to explore and exploit the area. Daniel Defoe writes of the Dutch as "The factors and Brokers of Europe": "They *buy* to *sell* again, *take* in to *send*

out, and the greatest Part of their vast Commerce consists in being supply'd from All parts of the World, that they may supply All the World again" (16). This is an apt characterization: In 1621, the Dutch West India Company was capitalized at 7.5 million guilders (a startling sum by contemporaneous standards) in order to take command over trade in west Africa and the Americas, much like the East India Company (capitalized in 1602 at 6 million guilders) had done in many parts of Asia. It was in fact under the auspices of the East India Company that Henry Hudson and his *Halve Maen* (Half Moon) explored the Hudson river in 1609 in the attempt to find a northwest passage to Asia; Hudson's positive reports concerning the commercial potential of the area prompted further investigation. Agents from the West India Company began appearing in Lenapehoking in 1622; in 1624, Cornelis May arrived on the *Nieu Nederlandt* (New Netherland) with thirty families, a few of whom settled on modern day Governors Island while most settled further north on the Hudson, Delaware, and Connecticut rivers, delimiting the territory of what would become New Netherland. Among the passengers is one Cryn Fredericksz, an engineer who has with him specific guidelines for the construction of a small town on Manhattan island: "since their whole country is man-made, there are no 'accidents' for the Dutch. They plan the settlement of Manhattan as if it is part of their fabricated motherland" (Koolhaas 17). This would become potently manifest in the Manhattan Grid (proposed in 1811), a speculative, optimistically proleptic fantasy of regulated commerce and habitation: "a matrix that captures, at the same time, all remaining territory and all future activity on the island." Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas believes that "it is the most courageous act of prediction in Western

civilization: the land it divides, unoccupied; the population it describes, conjectural; the buildings it locates, phantoms; the activities it frames, nonexistent" (Koolhaas 19).

Exemplifying this penchant for control and regulation, the West India Company issued Provisional Orders to all the inhabitants of New Netherland, who were told "to obey and to carry out without any contradiction the orders of the Company then or still to be given, as well as all regulations received from the said Company in regard to matters of administration and justice" (22). Trading outposts were quickly established and company ships began to ply the waters to Lenapehoking with increasing regularity. This had a rather negative effect on the Lenapes: the most radical changes to their society came as a result of the Europeans' interest in the fur trade, which became established in the area as early as 1600. Though the Lenapes were at first resistant to and uninterested in trade with the Europeans, trading furs for European goods (such as blankets, brass kettles, iron drills, hoes, knives, combs, and eventually guns and alcohol) became both irresistible and inevitable as a market economy was forced upon them. Competition for trapping territories became keen among the Lenapes; sharing among the clans was less attractive than before; the men were away from home for longer and longer periods of time, often letting their families go hungry; tribal traditions began to disappear; and alcohol began to infiltrate Lenape society. Additionally, the formation of the crusading Iroquois League to the North of Lenapehoking was a threat to the livelihood of the Lenapes so that "with Europeans at their front door and Iroquois at their back, the Lenapes were doomed" (13).

As remote trading posts were threatened by Indians and other Europeans vying for control over the trade of fur and wampum, the West India Company began to consolidate

in Lenapehoking—"Manahattes" specifically. For this purpose, Peter Minuit, the newly ordained Director of the company, "bought" Manhattan from the Lenapes in return for some trade goods of little monetary value. When the settlement was renamed New Amsterdam soon after, it had about 270 inhabitants. As Burrows and Wallace note, the foundation story of New York is a myth which, like most evocative myths, somehow manages to characterize the city accurately. A letter of 1626 indicates that the West India Company bought "the Island Manhattes" from local Indians for 60 guilders, a sum which Burrows and Wallace determine to be about $669 (not $24)—still a "bargain basement" price. But it is quite probable that the Indians who "sold" the island a) had little concept of European real-estate, and b) did not live there in the first place, and were therefore not in a position to sell it. The swindle, whether enacted by the Dutch or the Indians, nevertheless becomes the archetypal story of a city that would never be primarily controlled by military, religious, or governmental interests; New York would forever be a "city of deal-makers, a city of commerce, a City of Capital" (xvi).

A city of the corporations

Glassed
In dreams

Expanding the commerce of the nascent city meant expanding into Brooklyn, where settlers had ample room (and freedom) to grow such essentials as corn, tobacco, and wheat. A ferry between the two islands was established for the transportation of these goods as early as 1640. By the time Whitman came to use the Brooklyn ferry in the mid-nineteenth century, however, it had become steam operated and was used primarily

by commuters: in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," for example, Whitman observes, identifies, and engages with the "living crowd" that crosses from shore to shore at sunset. Indeed, he observes, identifies, and engages with any number of "others" who will "enter the gates of the ferry," "watch the turn of the flood-tide" and "see the islands large and small"—whether it be "a hundred years hence" or "ever so many hundred years hence" that they do so. Whitman attempts, despite what he knew to be countless differences in the phenomena of subjective experience, to fuse with the populace of New York, a populace which he views as a microcosm of the nation. His contemporaries—and we are all his contemporaries—are more "curious" to him than might be supposed, and he catalogs and extols the commonalties of our experience:

> I am with you
>
> Just as you feel / Just as you stand
>
> I too Lived / Watched / Saw / Look'd
>
> Knitted the old knot of contrariety

As the this list gathers force and momentum, he informs his reader: "Closer yet I approach you, / What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you.... Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?" (86-91). The subject of address switches from the commuters on Whitman's ferry to the reader, and subjectivity begins to break down:

> What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that
>
> looks in my face?
>
> Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?
>
> We understand then do we not?

What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?
What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not accomplish
is accomplish'd, is it not? (96-100)

What is promised, accepted, and accomplished, Whitman believes, is a certain union, a fusion between people that is intended to remind us of our common humanity; in as much as this is enacted by the poem, Whitman, in an extraordinary series of imperatives directed at objects of his observation, ends the poem by encouraging the world to continue to frolic, throb, suspend, gaze, sound out, live, play, consider, fly, receive, diverge, flaunt, burn, thrive, and expand—people and objects alike are told to "flow on" in our variegated appearances and activities.

In 1860, however, the bosses and boosters of Brooklyn—a city which was rapidly becoming one the largest in the nation—decided that a bridge spanning the narrowest section of the East River would improve the commercial prospects of Brooklynites while luring Manhattanites to Whitman's "beautiful hills of Brooklyn" (and the distractions of Coney Island). After a series of payoffs and political machinations, Brooklyn's Boss McGlouglin and his colleague William C. Kingsley commissioned John Augustus Roebling to design and build a structure the likes of which had never yet been seen: the longest suspension bridge in the world, supported by cables anchored in masonry towers that would be taller than anything in the entire continent. The Brooklyn tower was completed in 1875, but not until a number of the German, Irish, and Italian laborers hired for the project died from the bends (an unknown affliction at the time) while drilling and blasting for bedrock below the river.

The great stone
Above the river
In the pylon of the bridge

'1875'

Frozen in the moonlight

New York once again demonstrated its propensity for showmanship when the cables were first strung across the river in 1876. During what the *Tribune* described as "the best attended circus in the world," the lead mechanic of the entire enterprise, clad in a linen suit and straw hat, slid from one side to the other in a little seat attached to a wire. However, the official opening of the bridge on Memorial Day, 1883 was accompanied by tragedy: twelve people died when someone in the crowd of thousands crossing the bridge for the first time thought that the bridge was collapsing, causing a stampede.

In 1900, the population of New York City is close to 3.5 million, necessitating another technology of travel and transportation. The first subway runs in 1904: on the opening day, there were 110,000 passengers; two days later, there were 350,000—an effective demonstration of the future role of the subway as the technology that allows Manhattan to inflate daily with the influx of that populace, mingling together in close proximity, which it has attracted from the outer boroughs (Lankevitch 145). In 1916, a few blocks to the east of the present day World Financial Center, men digging the IRT subway tunnel encountered something extraordinary twenty feet below street level: the remains of a 17th century Dutch galleon. It was soon concluded that this was the *Tyger*, a

ship which, while under the command of Adriaen Block, burned and sank on the Hudson around 1613.

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,

In the forests of the night

Block and his crew became one of the first Europeans to spend any significant time on Manhattan when they were forced to winter there after the *Tyger* was destroyed. With help from the Lenapes, they built the *Onrust* (Restless), with which they subsequently charted (fairly accurately, as it turns out) many of the surrounding waterways, including the East river and the Long Island Sound. It is speculated that the *Tyger* wound up underneath Manhattan through a combination of drift and landfill. By 1810, for example, we know that the naming of West Street was made possible by a partnership of public and private shipping interests that extended the waterfront—widening and elongating Manhattan—along the lower Hudson river: "spiked wooden poles were drop-hammered into the river bottom to form sea walls, then the water lot they enclosed was filled in with rubbish, earth, and cinder" (338). The prow of the *Tyger* was removed and is now housed at the Museum of the City of New York, while the rest of the ship remains walled in somewhere below the intersection of Greenwich and Dey streets, "and to this day, so the story goes, subway trains careen within inches of this ancient, landlocked ship" (Hatlen 263).

The image of a shipwreck cast in the earth (and debris) below one of the most populous cities in the world is one which is highly illuminative of what is arguably Oppen's greatest poetic endeavor, a poem which investigates the quandary of the "shipwreck / Of the singular" while contemplating the meaning "of being numerous."

This poem was written entirely while the Oppens were living permanently in New York City. The Oppens drove to New York from Mexico in January of 1960, returning to America once and for all; after six months, they moved from Manhattan to Brooklyn. Oppen took a room situated under the Brooklyn Bridge and gained a unique perspective on the city, a perspective from which Oppen could engage in the Objectivist practice of "thinking with things as they exist."

'1875'

Frozen in the moonlight
In the frozen air over the footpath, consciousness

Which has nothing to gain, which awaits nothing,
Which loves itself

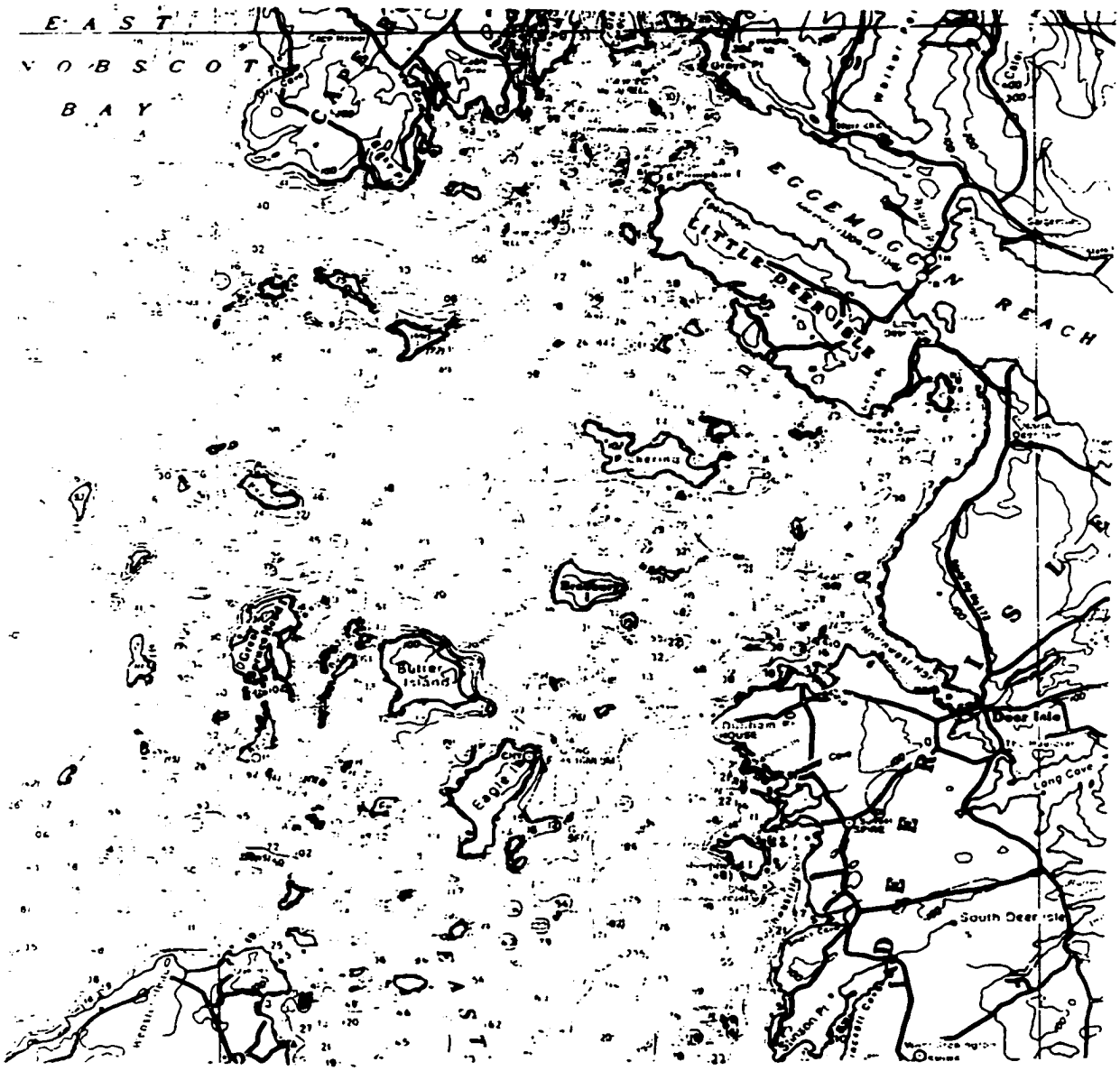
One imagines Oppen walking across this massive bridge between two islands, crossing the same waters Whitman crossed, gazing at the turbulent East River through the cross-hatched spans, shaping and re-shaping lines that would enter his great island poem—illuminated by moonlight on a cold winter's night. But this is not the only perspective which would influence Oppen's writing of "Of Being Numerous": the Oppens began spending their summers on Little Deer Isle in Penobscot Bay, Maine in 1963. The Bay is remarkable in that there are hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of islands large and small, isolated and in clusters, strewn about the bay. Sailing in these waters with Mary in a rather fragile 18' O'Day daysailer offered a more rarified experience of islands.

Slowly over islands, destinies
Moving steadily pass
And change

In the thin sky
Over islands

"The viewpoint from 'the islands'," Oppen wrote, "is simpler" that that from the city, but still "most difficult": "It presents a dead end, the shipwreck of the singular. In the face of which we seem to have chosen from the beginning the 'meaning of being numerous'" (*Letters* 116). Penobscot Bay and New York City exist together in a kind of island overlay in "Of Being Numerous"; the islands in both regions clearly represent the singular, and their existence in close proximity to each other—one island within sight of the other—simultaneously suggests community.

Oppen completed "Of Being Numerous" in early 1966; the Oppens continued to live in Brooklyn until 1967. In its first incarnation, to be found in the 1965 collection *This In Which*, the poem is tellingly titled "A Language of New York." A spare eight sections long, "A Language of New York" is a poem that investigates the distances between people—between individuals, as well as between groups of people—the relationship between people and place, and the way in which we use language to navigate between people and places. It is, in other words, a dialectical poem which demonstrates that *we are relations*, a fact which Oppen believed we have not fully come to terms with. New York City is quite naturally, due to the confluence of culture, commerce, and geography, the archetype of these relations: it is a city in which the numerous is continually haunted by the shipwreck of the singular, and in which both are forcibly



Little Deer Isle in East Penobscot Bay, where the Oppens had a home. Soundings in feet. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration #13302.

grounded and encompassed by "the mineral fact" of the city, the "impenetrable" matter which provides both bedrock and circumference.

> We are not coeval
> With a locality
> But we imagine others are,
>
> We encounter them. Actually
> A populace flows
> Thru the city.
>
> This is a language, therefore, of New York

Oppen knew for years that he was working and writing toward "Of Being Numerous"; it would also turn out to be a book which he would have some difficulty getting beyond once complete. Seven of the eight sections of "A Language of New York" end up only slightly modified in the forty sections of "Of Being Numerous." As he began re-writing "A Language," Oppen thought the object of his revisions was to "try to get again to humanity as a single thing, as something like a sea which is a constant weight in its bed"; he was grappling with "the fact of being numerous, without which we are marooned, shipwrecked" (111, 121). Oppen here seems to be asking whether "humanity" is merely a word. Does it represent something which actually exists? Does it stand for an idea that has never been realized? Is numerousness, our collective existence, the equivalent of humanity, or does humanity entail an ethics oriented towards the preservation of the community rather than the individual subject? If humanity does exist and implies something other than the "choice" for numerousness by default, then our attitude towards

community must change radically: humanity as such must be actively preserved. Or would we all be better off as Alexander Selkirks, each with our own island? Curiously, "Of Being Numerous" does not answer these questions; the singular/numerous opposition, though the most central, is after all but one among a number of oppositions which Oppen contemplates in the poem. "Of Being Numerous" remains fundamentally dialectical, but unlike "A Language" it is constructed out of a *series* of oppositions: the singular vs. the numerous, distance vs. nearness, solidity vs. evanescence, young vs. old, clarity vs. obscurity, and rootless speech vs. rooted speech. And unlike other dialectical constructions—one thinks immediately of the Hegelian conception of the dialectical progression of history, for example—Oppen's dialectical oppositions do not resolve into syntheses that become terms in further dialectics. "Of Being Numerous" does not have a thesis to "prove"—it is not an advanced form of rhetoric. The poem is an investigation of the "amor fati" (love of fate) which drives humans onward, but the questions which follow from it are "confronted, not answered"; the poem "simply shares the problem" with which we are collectively confronted ("An Adequate Vision" 21). There is another impetus for writing:

> Clarity
>
> In the sense of *transparence*,
> I don't mean that much can be explained.
>
> Clarity in the sense of silence.

Of *This In Which* Oppen wrote that he hadn't written "a decisive expression of the period," as Eliot had done with "The Waste Land": "I meant not to try in this book. I mean to try in the next" (*Letters* 108). As *Of Being Numerous* was intended to be just such a "decisive expression," some cultural and political aspects of the period need to be foregrounded. In a January 1960 issue of *Harper's Magazine*, Eric Goldman wrote that Americans "live in a heavy, humorless, sanctimonious, stultifying atmosphere, singularly lacking in the self-mockery that is self-criticism. Probably the climate of the late Fifties was the dullest and dreariest in our history" (Howard 30). Intellectuals of the left, after hiding from, evading, and even colluding with anti-Communist sentiment (as most malevolently enacted by the House Un-American Activities Committee) were hoping desperately for a way to re-engage with politics; they wanted a "President who takes a big view of his function, who takes pride rather than fright from the challenges that lie ahead—a President who demands much from us," as Peter Drucker put it at the time. John F. Kennedy, perhaps unwittingly, answered the call; but his appeal extended well beyond America's recuperating intelligentsia. Kennedy created a much greater sense of engagement in the political process for many Americans, a phenomenon which Marshall McLuhan ascribes mostly to television, "the most recent and spectacular extension of our central nervous system" (317).

TV is what McLuhan calls a "cool" medium, a medium which allows for a high degree of viewer participation because it does not structure the viewer's experience and allows the viewer to supplement the sensual information he or she receives by way of imaginative engagement; this is opposed to reading, which McLuhan believes is "hot" because it provides an inflexible, linear structure filled with pre-fabricated experience.

Kennedy's "blurry, shaggy texture" during the debates with Nixon, who had, by contrast, a "sharp, intense image," therefore made him perfect for TV: viewers could engage with an image that needed supplementation, but not one which was already formed (329). McLuhan predicted victory for Kennedy in 1960 because Kennedy used TV "with the same effectiveness that Roosevelt had learned to achieve by radio. With TV, Kennedy found it natural to involve the nation in the office of the Presidency, both as an operation and an image" (336). Kennedy won in a squeaker; but Nixon won in 1968 in part because he had consented to exploit the medium of TV with a very cleverly constructed ad-campaign (Howard 414).

The hope that Kennedy came to represent was, as many have observed, in some ways a naive and arrogant one. The poem which Robert Frost read at Kennedy's inauguration presents these characteristics in condensed form: Frost speaks of "young ambition eager to be tried" (not unlike Oppen's self-testing) and "a golden age of poetry and power / Of which this noonday's the beginning hour." A golden age in which poetry is accorded such stature by the state would be welcome indeed. But Frost also hoped that America would become increasingly involved with the "swarming" races abroad so that we could, in his sinister phrase, "teach them how Democracy is meant"—a phrase which we can now read ironically as an accurate assessment of the administration's intentions during the Vietnam War. Kennedy's specific successes and failures do not need to be detailed here; what is worth observing, however, is that Lyndon Johnson, upon inheriting the mantle after Kennedy's assassination, hoped to maintain the American public's newfound interest in politics through what Tod Gitlin has termed a sort of "paternalistic liberalism." During his state of the union address in 1965, Johnson announced an

ambitious program to move the U.S. toward what he called the "Great Society"; he later said that the U.S. is "mighty enough—its society healthy enough—its people strong enough—to pursue our goals in the rest of the world while building a Great Society at home." The movement toward this Great Society would consist largely of a war on poverty as well as civil rights legislation (the latter of which Johnson did make considerable progress on); but in the years of 1965 and 1966 alone there were race riots in Omaha, Chicago, Cleveland, Brooklyn, Atlanta, Minneapolis, Grenada (MS), Dayton (OH), San Francisco, Jersey City, Jacksonville, Baltimore, and Los Angeles. In his desire to emulate Franklin Roosevelt by combining effective international and domestic actions, Johnson was assured failure on both fronts: Vietnam, which saw unparalleled escalation under Johnson (U.S. involvement reached its peak with 542,000 troops in 1968), was no World War II, and Johson's commitment to that war drew vital energies and funds away from his Great Society program. And of course it's not as abstract as all that, there were other, more specific, moral failures for which the Johnson administration was entirely responsible—like napalm.

18

It is the air of atrocity,
An event as ordinary
As a President.

A plume of smoke, visible at a distance
In which people burn.

19

Now in the helicopters the casual will
Is atrocious

Insanity in high places,
If it is true we must do these things
We must cut our throats

The fly in the bottle

Insane, the insane fly

Which, over the city
Is the bright light of shipwreck

Oppen expressed some ambivalence about these two sections of "Of Being Numerous" because they "appear somewhat as an outburst, an outburst of horror" and because they issue from "the need to take a stance somewhere" in the face of "the insane, poisonous Johnsonian flies" (*Letters* 177). Taking an ethical stance is of course necessary in many circumstances; but Oppen did not want to oversimplify what was after all a very complex issue, and being polemical is not the most felicitous tactic to use in a poem which attempts to establish whether the term "humanity" has any representative validity. Oppen uses the fly in the bottle as a metaphor for both the "villainous bombardier" who drops napalm and the pilot of a helicopter flying over the city—and both are castigated as "insane," "atrocious." In fact, Oppen suggests that we should cut our own throats rather than inflict such pain on others. The pilot/bombardier, however, also becomes the subject

of Oppen's metaphysical empathy: by describing the solitude of this person encased in metal and glass flying high above the earth as emanating "the bright light of shipwreck," he reminds us of the humanity of that person and of the insane domino-logic (that Asia will collapse wholly into Communism if Vietnam is not preserved) and the brutal arbitrariness of causality (as in the draft) which has led that person to undertake an act which must be destructive to his own concept of humanity. The last line of section 19 adds an "inflection of the bright light of shipwreck which breaks thru the attempt to declare simply and spontaneously that the atrocious is the atrocious"; Oppen adds, "without retracting, you know. It *is* atrocious" (177). In this manner Oppen can acknowledge atrocity without obliterating humanity—an act which would entail its own kind of violence. It is perhaps in this sense that Oppen believed there was "ambivalence woven thruout the poem; and perhaps most glaringly in 'the bright light of shipwreck'" (237). Oppen saw this ambivalence—instantiated by the double vision of atrocity and humanity in the two sections above—as causing a kind of necessary imperfection in the poem: "a difficulty I suppose of courage or of honesty in permitting the imperfect to appear imperfect, and the difficulty of distinguishing that decency from the indecency of permitting mere sloppy work, a different kind of faking--. Imperfect, but I think it has to be" (128-9). By not eliding the humanity of the bombardier dropping napalm, Oppen disrupts the smooth surface of a traditional aesthetics which would demand uniformity: Oppen's deliberately enacted ambivalences and imperfections are those without which we would not be able to understand humanity at all.

There is a more erudite reference embedded within the "fly in the bottle" phrase; Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, conducts the following brief dialogue

with himself: "What is your aim in philosophy?—To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" (#309). Although Oppen has said that he wasn't sure if he understood Wittgenstein when he encountered that proposition (and "didn't care so much" if he understood him either), there is an alignment between the two thinkers here which is worth delineating. Wittgenstein's project in the first half of the *Investigations* is to disabuse philosophers from an assumption which has entrapped philosophy for centuries, the assumption that "language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts" (#304). We assume all too quickly that words correspond in some essential way to what they are said to represent. For example, when we examine the expression or description of a mental process, we assume we are examining the mental process itself—we assume that language is transparent, mimetic, a vehicle for the transportation of facts and information. According to Wittgenstein, this error, made at the very beginning of all philosophical thought, leads to innumerable other errors and confusions; his project, therefore, is to expose this "grammatical fiction" through the deliberate construction and enactment of language-games which show that the meaning generating elements of language are highly dependent on context (#307). These language-games will help show the philosophical fly out of the bottle by eradicating the assumptions we habitually make about the function of language. The parallel with Oppen is that he believed that we had gotten ourselves trapped in a situation in which we must kill other human beings—namely, the Vietnam War—through the application of an absurd, cold war logic which assumes (among other things) that waging democracy abroad ensures democracy at home. When the bombardier dropping napalm is transformed into a pilot in a helicopter hovering over the city, the dialectical theme of the

poem is reprised: the singular hovering encapsulated over the numerous. It is again as if Oppen is saying that thinking of the singular in opposition to the numerous is a philosophical and existential trap, that the "amor fati" which humans seem to cherish leads us too easily to the presumption that this is how it must be, that having chosen the numerous we cannot protect the integrity of the singular subject. What we need is paralogy—the thinking beyond or outside of logic which liberates us (at least for a moment) from the constrictions of the one logic which we believe is our fate; for Oppen, too, wants to show the fly the way out of the bottle. But he once more shows his typical reluctance to suggest absolute solutions, his resistance to polemic, when he writes in 1965 about "dropping burning gasoline on people" and offers: "if we should begin honestly to converse -- as against the present tenor of editorials and election campaigns -- - I believe we would reject the worst excesses. And I would settle, naturally, for avoiding the worst excesses" (*Letters* 112-3).

If we should begin honestly to converse: the implication, of course, is that we haven't. This can be partly ascribed to one of the privations of community—numerousness—we have "chosen" for. In New York during the Sixties, the official population was close to eight million people, a figure which has not yet been surpassed. This was enabled by the collaboration of the subway system with an unprecedented form of architecture that turned the physical limitations of an island into a strength by creating structures that can contain multitudes by rising hundreds of feet into the air. Rem Koolhaas believes that this is an instance of what he calls *Manhattanism*, a previously unstated and unformulated theory that governs the architectural mutations of the island. Manhattanism aspires "to exist in a world totally fabricated by man, i.e., to live *inside*

fantasy"; a central element of the fantasy is a "culture of congestion" and the "hyper-density" of the city's populace is exploited by the city's architecture (10).

> The roots of words
> Dim in the subways
>
> There is madness in the number
> Of the living
> 'A state of matter'
>
> There is nobody here but us chickens
>
> Anit-ontology—
>
> He wants to say
> His life is real,
> No one can say why
>
> It is not easy to speak
>
> A ferocious mumbling, in public
> Of rootless speech

One of the most prevalent forms of rootless speech, Oppen thought, is argument: we "develop / Argument in order to speak" and thus become "unreal, unreal" while "life loses / solidity, loses extent." Argument is a form of anti-ontology, just like the anti-ontology humorously displayed in the Alex Kramer and Joan Whitney song in which the farmer with a gun is informed by someone in the chicken-coop that "there ain't nobody

here but us chickens." The only section of "A Language of New York" not to make it into "Of Being Numerous" is one in which Oppen describes how to avoid rootless speech; the section seems to have been transmuted into the one cited above. The only way to "restore" words "to meaning / And to sense," Oppen writes in "A Language," is to treat each one of them as enemies, or ghosts "Which have run mad / In the subways" and the institutions and the banks; they may be captured "one by one" if one proceeds carefully as a poet does. Until we do that, however, "What have we argued about? what have we done? // Thickening the air?" It is therefore imperative to "Speak // If you can // Speak" in order to participate in the "sincere and public conversation" we are desperately in need of.

Oppen was not the only one thinking about sincerity in the Sixties; academics, too, had undergone an awakening—although of an altogether different sort. After the Victorians appropriated the idea of sincerity from the Romantics, literary critics like I.A. Richards persisted in using the term as an indication of value. In 1929, Richards writes in *Practical Criticism* that sincerity is "a word much used in criticism, but not often with any precise definition of its meaning" (263). Believing that sincerity is nevertheless the "quality we most insistently require in poetry" and the "quality we most need as critics," he sets out to redefine the term and eventually resorts to Legge's translation of *Confucius* for his final assessment—as does Pound, uncannily, at almost exactly the same time (265). In 1949 this invokes peremptory dismissals of the uses of sincerity as a critical term from the New Critics such as W.K. Wimsatt and Austin Warren; sincerity, after all, should be under the jurisdiction of the intentional fallacy. In their *Theory of Literature*, Wellek and Warren write that "the frequently adduced criterion of 'sincerity' is

One knife on the round, a steak and a half
He locked up the barnyard
With the greatest of care
Out in the henhouse somethin' stirred
When he hollered "Who's there?"
This is what he heard

There ain't nobody here but us chickens
There ain't nobody here at all
So quiet except you stop that fuss
There ain't nobody here but us

We chickens tryin' to sleep
And you bust in
And hobble hobble hobble hobble
With your chin

There ain't nobody here but us chickens
There ain't nobody here at all
You're stompin' around, and shakin' the ground
And kickin' up an awful fuss
We chickens tryin' to sleep
And you bust in
And hobble hobble hobble hobble
It's a sin

Tomorrow is a busy day
We got things to do, we got eggs to lay
We got ground to dig, and worms to scratch
Takes a lotta sittin' gettin' chicks to hatch

There ain't nobody here but us chickens
There ain't nobody here at all
So quiet except you stop that fuss
There ain't nobody here but us

Kindly point that gun
The other way
And hobble hobble hobble off
And hit the hay

Tomorrow is a busy day
We got things to do, we got eggs to lay
We got ground to dig and worms to scratch
Takes a lotta sittin' gettin' chicks to hatch

There ain't nobody here but us chickens
There ain't nobody here at all
So quiet except you stop that fuss
There ain't nobody here but us

Kindly point that gun
the other way
And hobble hobble hobble off
And hit the hay

Hey daddy, whaddya say?
It's easy pickens!
There ain't nobody here but us chickens

Kramer-Whitney: "Ain't nobody here but us chickens," as sung by Louis Jordan.

thoroughly false if it judges literature in terms of biographical truthfulness, correspondence to the author's experience or feelings as they are attested by outside evidence. There is no relation between 'sincerity' and value as art" (80). And later: "As for 'sincerity' in a poem: the term seems almost meaningless. A sincere expression of what?" (208). By the Sixties, however, the term seems to have been revivified for critical use; witness not only the aforementioned works dedicated to the subject by Peyre (1963), Perkins (1964), Ball (1964), and Trilling (1969), but a smattering of essays proposing reassessments. Patricia Meyer Spacks, in "In Search of Sincerity" (1968), seeks to rehabilitate the term by arguing that technique, in as much as it allows for the complex presentation of experience, is perhaps "the source of what we agree to call sincerity in literature." In "On Sincerity: from Wordsworth to Ginsberg" (1968), Donald Davie points out that, what with the poetries of such as Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg, "the question of sincerity can never again be out of order." Herbert Read, on the other hand, wants something much less definitive in his essay "The Cult of Sincerity" (1968). After doing a quasi-deconstruction of the term, he broadens the scope of his investigation to such an extent that sincerity becomes almost meaningless: "To ask 'What is sincerity?' is in effect to ask 'What is man?'," he writes, and ends the essay by revealing that a "state of openness" is the only meaning he can give to sincerity.

What specific historical events led these writers to think about sincerity again cannot easily be divined; but another phenomenon of the decade can be made explicit in the effort to shed indirect light on the resurgence of sincerity: namely that irony—that much harassed companion of sincerity—was undergoing a revival at the time as well. It would be useful to contemplate irony here for a moment through the prism of Paul de

Man's "The Rhetoric of Temporality," an essay which was first published in 1969 and which remains the most insightful philosophical investigation of the topic to be found. After noting that irony is "a problem that exists within the self," De Man introduces Baudelaire's notion of *dédoublement*, a doubling of the self which occurs as a direct result of irony: in order for irony to exist, the self must retreat from empirical reality to reflect on that reality *through language*. The moment irony is engaged there is a split between the self which exists in empirical reality and that which exists in language, reflecting on the empirical self; but de Man further suggests an infinite regress of irony which proceeds immediately upon its birth: the self becomes ironically aware of the split within the self, creating yet another *dédoublement*, and so forth. "It may start as a casual bit of play with a stray loose end of the fabric, but before long the entire texture of the self is unraveled and comes apart. The whole process happens at an unsettling speed" (215). Soon the self reaches a state of "unrelieved *vertige*, dizziness to the point of madness"; while the self can become ironically conscious of this madness, however, de Man believes that it can never be free from the dialectic of self-destruction and self-invention—it is an endless process which does not result in a synthesis of disparate selves. It is worth observing here that the experience of the self/selves with an ironic temperament is exactly the opposite of the experience offered by sincerity, which lies precisely on the integrity of the self.

Irony was very much at play in the arts during the Sixties—perhaps as a direct result of the Arnoldian high seriousness of visual artists in the Fifties. Moreover, irony and artificiality always seem to go hand in hand, as Oscar Wilde well knew. Susan Sontag recognized this when she published her "Notes on Camp" in 1964; after

dedicating the essay to Oscar Wilde, she writes that camp is a "sensibility" whose essence is "love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration." Later she states that "one is drawn to Camp when one realizes that 'sincerity' is not enough. Sincerity can be simple philistinism, intellectual narrowness." Strangely, however, Sontag also claims that "one may compare Camp with much of Pop Art, which—when it is not just Camp—embodies an attitude that is related but still very different. Pop Art is more flat and more dry, more serious, more detached, ultimately nihilistic" (292). An anecdote told by Andy Warhol in *Popism* casts some humorous ironic light on Sontag; Warhol has just arrived at a party:

> When I saw Susan Sontag, I asked David how he'd snagged her, because she was considered the dazzling intellect of the year. She'd just published her famous essay...on the differences between high, middle, and low "camp," and she was very influential—she wrote about literature, pornography, films (especially Godard), art, anything. David told me that he'd heard she didn't think too much of my painting—"I hear she suspects your sincerity," he said. Well, that was no surprise, since a lot of dazzling intellects felt that way. I didn't go over to talk to her, but I watched her from where I was sitting. She had a good look—shoulder-length straight dark hair and big dark eyes, and she wore very tailored things. She really liked to dance, too; she was jumping all around the place. (88)

As for Oppen's concern about the role of poetry in society, Warhol tells us that by 1968 John Giorno created the Dial-A-Poem phenomenon; predictably, the pornographic poems received the most calls (255). Warhol also writes of a friend, who happens to

have been a poet, who told him: "The minute I heard Bob Dylan with his guitar, I thought, 'That's it, that's what's coming in, the poets have *had* it'"(38). Poetry lost its position as the form of choice for the expression of a given *zeitgeist*, first to the novel and now to rock music, which commands an audience of unprecedented size and scope; poetry is no longer in a position to speak for the People (was it ever?). Morris Dickstein, in *Gates of Eden*, writes that if "the hallmarks of folk music were purity, simplicity, and sincerity," then "when Dylan plugged in to an electric guitar at the Newport folk Festival in 1965...in effect the folk era ended and the rock era began" (188). What were the hallmarks of rock music in the sixties? Sincerity is certainly not prevalent among them. Ever the raconteur, Warhol relates a story concerning a trip The Velvet Underground took to Los Angeles, where the promoter Bill Graham tried to persuade the band to perform in San Francisco: "I can't pay you much money, but I believe in the same beautiful things that you do," Graham is reported to have said. After Graham left, "everyone dished the West Coast rhetoric—we weren't used to that kind of approach. 'Was he *serious*?' Paul laughed. 'Does he think we actually *believe* in this? *What* "beautiful things"?'." Warhol reflects: "That's what so many people never understood about us. They expected us to take the things we believed in seriously, which we never did—we weren't intellectuals" (169).

> Or, in that light, New arts! Dithyrambic, audience-as-artists! But I will listen to a man, 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. The shuffling of a crowd is nothing—well, nothing but the many that we are, but nothing.
>
> Urban art, art of the cities, art of the young in the cities—

The isolated man is dead, his world around him exhausted

And he fails! He fails, that meditative man! And indeed they
cannot 'bear' it.

The meditative man who is contrasted with the young man who practices the "new arts" is quite clearly Oppen; though he attempts to communicate with the young, "he fails," as does his project: the youth, with which America has always been enamored, cannot envision a productive place for the anomalous Oppen, the "isolated man" watching from a distance. Rachel Blau DuPlessis once asked Oppen "Whether, as the intensity of seeing increases, one's distance from Them, the people, does not also increase"; by framing this question within the poem itself, Oppen acknowledges this inescapable double bind with which poets are often confronted. He knows he cannot be "with" the people because his intention is to see humanity as a whole and create poetry from what he sees—even while he recognizes that one cannot talk "distantly of 'The People'."

Yet I am one of those who from nothing but man's way of thought and
one of his dialects and what has happened to me
Have made poetry

To dream of that beach
For the sake of an instant in the eyes,

The absolute singular

The unearthly bonds
Of the singular

Which is the bright light of shipwreck

While Oppen is dreaming of the beach of poetry and contemplating the numerous from a distance, the "new arts" are spreading throughout the country. On a trip through America in the early sixties, Warhol—inadvertently reconfiguring Emerson's tenet that "everything good is on the highway"—noted with glee that the farther west he and his friends drove, "the more Pop everything looked on the highways"; as the decade progressed, Pop, of course, went mainstream, so much so that a group of academic architects was successfully able to purloin the Pop aesthetic and issue a pseudo manifesto entitled *Learning from Las Vegas* (39). In 1968 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour took their students at the Yale School of Art and Architecture on a tour of Las Vegas in order to become more fluent in the "commercial vernacular" which they would come to praise so highly. The American obsession with the new, first identified and articulated by Emerson, is echoed by these entranced academics on their way to discovering their true identities as "architect jesters": "For the artist, creating the new may mean choosing the old or the existing. Pop artists have relearned this. Our acknowledgement of existing, commercial architecture at the scale of the highway is within this tradition" (6). Indeed, the debt to Warhol is everywhere apparent: "Pop artists have shown the value of the old cliche used in a new context to achieve a new meaning—the soup can in the art gallery—to make the common uncommon" (72). In Las Vegas, this "new meaning" is most visible on the "strip," where the gas stations, motels, billboards, and such are all part of a "system of inflection toward the highway" (35). What Venturi et al. appreciate about Las Vegas is the manner in which what traditional

architects would call the "ugly and ordinary" structures which line the highway deflate the supposed pomposity of orthodox modernist structures designed by architects who are only interested in the "heroic and original." The time for "heroic communication through pure architecture" has passed, these writers believe, and they want us to look to Las Vegas to learn about what the People want: "the world cannot wait for the architect to build his or her utopia, and in the main the architect's concern should belong not with what ought to be but with what is" (129).

> Phyllis—not neo-classic
> The girl's name is Phyllis

Their goal, therefore, is to introduce the ugly and ordinary commercial vernacular into the academy by way of ironic appropriation: "we feel that people's architecture as the people want it (and not as some architect decides Man needs it) does not stand much chance against urban renewal until it hangs in the academy and therefore is acceptable to the decision makers" (161).

The writers of *Learning from Las Vegas* are right to critique the lofty utopian desires of modernist architects while insisting that they come down from the tower and step into the marketplace. But if modernist utopian visions parallel religious yearnings, then Venturi et al. can be seen as expressing the desire to secularize utopia—they want to create a Las Vegas that everybody could love, and a Levittown in which everybody could live. The dangerous assumption embedded in the argument of *Learning from Las Vegas*, of course, is that the people—here seen as a gigantic, id-driven beast—*like* the ugly and ordinary in places like Las Vegas and Levittown; "many people like suburbia," they

write, believing that we should also learn from Levittown (154). This is one reason why these architects spend a good deal of time praising a home for the elderly called the Guild House (designed by Venturi); it displays all the right signs of ironic appropriation from the commercial vernacular. The truth, however, is that its wit is much more likely to be appreciated by savvy architects than by its unfortunate inhabitants. At the very end of *Learning from Las Vegas*, the writers finally do realize that the structures which they have praised on an aesthetic level are by and large marketing tools appealing to our "deeper drives"; they have made a convincing case for the aesthetic of billboards appreciated from a distance, but this does not mean, of course, that all of us People want a billboard in our backyards. They argue that just because they praise the purveyors of commercial vernacular "it does not follow that we architects who learn from their techniques must reproduce the content or the superficiality of their messages" (which sounds suspiciously like a high-modernist concentration on form to the exclusion of content); but that is precisely the point: a billboard without a semi-nude woman or phallic object is not going to sell much to the people (162). Pop art without both the vernacular *and* the commercial is not popular art; capitalism insures that commerce will almost always outstrip our higher intentions.

Guy Debord would likely have thought of the manifestations of capital in Las Vegas as comprising what he termed a *spectacle*. In 1967, enmeshed in the revolutionary sentiment fermenting throughout France, Debord defines the spectacle as "*capital* accumulated to the point where it becomes image"; the spectacle "corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life," it is the "acme of ideology." Modeled formally and dramatically on Martin Luther's *Theses*

and Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, the theses which make up Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* are the philosophical articulations of the uprisings of May '68 in which he participated. Debord's main contribution to the Marxist theory of economics is the idea of the spectacle: his first thesis states that the "whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation." Among the modern conditions of production, advanced media technologies must be conceded the dubious distinction of exacerbating this spectacular representation. Indeed, the mid Sixties witnessed significant extensions of our media capabilities: the launching of Early Bird, the world's first communications satellite, as well as Telstar, the first satellite to transmit live television broadcasts—both in America. Gerald Howard speculates that the television media's "immense technical and logistical efforts" in reporting on Vietnam had the unexpected effect of suggesting its irreality to the American public, creating a disturbance in America's image of itself: "the disjuncture between what we were told and shown and what we sensed we learned for ourselves was so great that the ultimate casualty was this country's cohesion" (264).

—They await

War, and the news
Is war

As always

That the juices may flow in them
Tho the juices lie.

Morris Dickstein has acutely observed that the Sixties in America, much like in Debord's France, continued a longstanding utopian strain: "The spirit of the sixties witnessed the transformation of utopian religion into the terms of secular humanism...the sixties translated the Edenic impulse once again into political terms" (vii). Due in part to these various utopian impulses, the sense of cohesion that Howard noted was also wrecked by the innumerable encounters between those who wanted actively to change the society in which they lived and those who wanted to maintain the status quo—one thinks of the sit-ins, the teach-ins, the be-ins, the strikes, the riots, the marches, the demonstrations, and the violence that most characterize the decade. Debord's idea of the spectacle further emphasizes this lack of cohesion: the spectacle is not simply a reflection or distortion of reality—it is a third term, an object in and of itself. If money facilitates the movement from *being* to *having*, the presence of the spectacle indicates that we have moved from having to *appearing*; it is in this sense that the spectacle constitutes the "official language of generalized separation" between people and reality: the function of the spectacle in society, therefore, is "the concrete manufacture of alienation." As the spectacle produces alienation and is "the opposite of dialogue," Debord, not unlike Oppen, insists at the end of his treatise that our emancipation from the spectacle cannot occur until "dialogue has taken up arms to impose its own conditions upon the world."

One of the most important, if often overlooked, aspects of "Of Being Numerous" is that it is a profoundly dialogic poem: it contains twelve direct citations (some of them quite lengthy) from texts or persons of significance to Oppen—Mary, DuPlessis, Williams, Kierkegaard, Whitehead—and many more indirect allusions. "Of Being

Numerous," in other words, is the enactment of an extraordinarily wide-ranging conversation. Mary is given a certain stature by being cited in the very first section of the poem, but Whitman is given an equivalent stature by being allowed to speak the entirety of the final section.

Whitman: 'April 19, 1864

> The capitol grows upon one in time, especially as they have got the great figure on top of it now, and you can see it very well. It is a great bronze figure, the Genius of Liberty I suppose. It looks wonderful toward sundown. I love to go and look at it. The sun when it is nearly down shines on the headpiece and it dazzles and glistens like a big star: it looks quite
>
> curious . . .'

The citation is from a letter that Whitman wrote to his mother, a fact which may have resonated with Oppen. While writing a letter concerning his sister's death (which he thought was a suicide) Oppen reconstructed his mother's final letter as follows:

> We've been happy - - I love you -- I worry about the children and school and their clothes -- it seems -- since I did this and don't know why -- that I am not fitted for the business of life (35)

Given that Oppen is consciously—albeit somewhat ironically—playing Whitman's role in "Of Being Numerous," it is not inconceivable that he privately thought of the poem as a letter to his own mother concerning the "business of life" in multiple senses.

Further, it can be no coincidence that the citation from Whitman is dated 1864, almost exactly one hundred years before "A Language of New York" was written. Though Whitman wrote this letter while he was volunteering on behalf of the Union in Washington, D.C. during the Civil War (an experience with which Oppen could certainly identify), Oppen has selected from the letter in such a way that we could easily read Whitman's comments as describing New York. New York was once the capital of the nation, after all, and is in some ways still its most powerful city; the "Genius of Liberty" could be the Statue of Liberty, also made of bronze, which has welcomed so many of the immigrants—so many of Williams' "pure products of America"—that now live in the "black / Rectangular buildings" of the city. Whitman is also the author of two great poems which, like "Of Being Numerous," deal primarily with relations—personal, historical, geographical, physical, ideological—by way of a meditation on New York and the populace which courses through it: "Song of Myself" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."

The citation undergoes a slight change in the transfer from "A Language" to "Of Being Numerous": the semi-colon after "star" is changed to a colon, slowing down the pace as one is about to read the final four words of the poem, and there is more white space—more silence, more hesitation—between "quite" and "curious." Oppen indicated that he ended on "curious" "partly as a joke on Whitman, but also because men are curious, and at the end of a very long poem, I couldn't find anything more positive to say than that" (Dembo 164). The joke may not have been on Whitman however, since it is

evident from the letter that, much like in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Whitman uses "curious" very equivocally—not in a spirit of national optimism as Oppen might have assumed. In the letter Whitman writes of visiting the House of Representatives at night to hear the members speak; but he is disappointed as "the speaking and the ability of the members is nearly always on a low scale. It is very curious and melancholy to see such a rate of talent there, such tremendous times as these" (165). Oppen might very well have been thinking along precisely the same lines during the "tremendous times" of the Sixties.

It is strikingly fitting that Oppen, who reconceived the role of the poet in society through an understanding of sincerity that emphasized the necessity of conversation and encounter, came to meet Pound for the first time in decades in the offices of New Directions a month after having won the Pulitzer Prize for *Of Being Numerous*:

> We met Pound again in 1969. Jay Laughlin and two or three other people of New Directions in the room. Pound enters with Olga Rudge. Pound silent. Olga and the rest chatter to cover the situation. I didn't want to chatter, and stood up to leave Jay says to Pound: give George a copy of your book. Pound says—uninflected, low voice: How do I know he wants it. I walked over to Pound and held out my hand and said, I want it. I had stood close, so that Pound would not need to reach out. But Pound stood up, and that brought us touching, or nearly touching each other. Pound took hold of my hand, and held on. I began to weep Pound began to weep We cried all over each other -- by that time neither of us could speak, so I took the book, and left. I don't know, perhaps

> neither of us knew what we were crying about----or, of course, I do know. Every sincere or serious poet who ever met Pound has reason to have loved him. I write this out simply for the sake of the facts, the historical facts. (*Letters* 259)

The book referred to is Pound's *Drafts and Fragments*, the collection of poems with blacked-out lines in it, the final installment of the *Cantos*, the very work in which Pound admits the failure of his totalizing project and attempts contrition: "neither of us could speak, so I took the book, and left."

M'amour, m'amour
what do I love and
where are you?
That I lost my center
fighting the world.
The dreams clash
and are shattered--
and that I tried to make a paradiso
terrestre.

I have tried to write Paradise
Do not move
Let the wind speak
that is paradise.
Let the Gods forgive what I
have made
Let those I love try to forgive
what I have made.
. . . .

To be men not destroyers.

Ezra Pound, from "Notes for CXVII et seq."

Though he and Pound were finally unable to speak together, Oppen's poems engage Pound directly in a dialogue, enacting the very sort of "sincere and public conversation" that Oppen wished for—and in accordance with Pound's own statement that "the best criticism of any work...comes from the creative writer or artist who does the next job" (*Literary Essays* 406). "Of Hours" responds directly to specific lines from the *Cantos* while synthesizing some of the traumatic events of Oppen's life which I have emphasized here: lying wounded in the trench, his sister's death, and "meeting that poet again." Of the hours in the trench and his reasons for being there, Oppen writes: "No man but the fragments of metal / Burying my dogtag with H / For Hebrew in the rubble of Alsace." These lines are placed between and among thoughts of his sister and Pound: "Lonely sister my sister but why did I weep / Meeting that poet again what was that rage." At moments the poem is in fact a direct address to Pound:

> Old friend old poet
> If you did not look
> What was it you 'loved'
> Twisting your voice your walk

The "love" is the love which Pound professes in his final cantos, and the twisted voice was heard, most notably, on his radio broadcasts: since Pound chose not to look and instead saw only projections of emotion and belief, he remained, as the final line of Oppen's poem indicates, "unteachable." In "The Speech at Soli" Oppen explicitly reveals the essential difference between Pound and himself; Pound is one of the "mad kings // gone raving // war in incoherent / sunlight it will not // cohere it will NOT that / other." Pound attempted to enforce his vision of coherence, while Oppen looked and saw

and accepted both the incoherence and the discrete coherences. Oppen must surely have felt the incoherence between Pound's "raving" and his undeniable position as a great poet to be a tragic one, a personally painful instance of the humanity he dedicated his life to illuminating.

Postscript

To be read posthumously It will as a matter of fact happen And it is a big fact
It is a big fact which will happen for very small reasons. To have said, with more or less
eloquence and sincerity---that one understands nothing at all !!

--George Oppen, in his working papers.

On the last page of a 1999 *New York Times* "Week in Review," pinioned between an article on the ethics of defense lawyers and one asserting that "Spying Isn't the Only Way to Learn About Nukes," another article reveals to readers that "There's a Resurgence of Poets, and They Know It." Jesse McKinley's point, of course, is that poetry in America is flourishing, and in many different forms; McKinley briefly notes the most public manifestations of this flourishing: there are poetry slams, cowboy poetry festivals, poets reading on radio and TV, poetic rap lyrics, and a bevy of surprisingly popular contemporary renderings of "classic" texts. While detailing this resurgence of poetry, McKinley observes that "poetry professionals"—an ever growing sub-class of writers—agree that "the passions of the poetry wars of the mid-1990's (roughly the establishment versus everybody else) have subsided."

But McKinley's observation is more hopeful prognosis than studied reality. The agreement referred to above, for example, was not much in evidence at a conference at Barnard College that took place immediately before the appearance of McKinley's article. "Where Lyric Tradition Meets Language Poetry: Innovation in Contemporary American Poetry by Women" aimed to show that the divisions between the "establishment" and its most vocal critics, here corralled under the rubric of Language poetry, are not as rigid as they seem, and indeed the conference did succeed in debunking some of the most prevalent stereotypes which each camp has suffered from. As many at the conference were quick to point out, however, the categories of "Lyric tradition" and—most particularly—"Language Poetry" are, even as necessarily generalizing labels go, unusually inadequate to the task of indicating the diversity of writing practiced by these poets. But this did not prevent certain perceived differences from being reinforced. After two days of discussing the various points at which the two sides "meet," considerable acrimony followed as some argued that certain poets in the lyric tradition were merely co-opting techniques that the Language poets had pioneered; the Language poets, moreover, had only recently, after years of neglect, been accorded some respect by the academy, while poets from the lyric tradition enjoyed all the benefits of legitimacy (such as prizes, fellowships, teaching positions, and wide publication). The conference subsequently reverted to the terms of the "poetry wars": one side was accused of being conventional and falsely innovative, while the other was derided as hankering for obscurity.

The reason for McKinley's misapprehension concerning the poetry wars is that the poets at the Barnard conference, acclaimed as they may be, are not included in

McKinley's research on the scene of American poetry, and this is partly a function of the mechanisms of the poetry market that I would like to analyze here. McKinley spoke to only a handful of poets, each of whom belongs to the "lyric tradition" that still largely controls the terms of the debate as to what constitutes "good" poetry: Jonathan Galassi, Dana Gioia, Seamus Heaney, Bob Holman, Robert Pinsky, Alice Quinn, Sparrow, and Mark Strand. My interest here is not in perpetuating the poetry wars; nor is it in issuing a peace accord. Neither do I have an investment in confabulating new and ostensibly more accurate terms to replace the beleaguered ones which have for so long been used to differentiate one kind of poetry from another: the establishment vs. the avant-garde, the traditional vs. the experimental, the conventional vs. the innovative, lyric poetry vs. Language poetry. Many have noted the inadequacy of these terms. There are, firstly, more than two communities, and, though each has its own mechanism of conferring legitimacy, the communities are not neatly ordered and divided. Secondly, the poetry rarely fits the category as neatly as some would hope. But it seems to me that these labels are still useful when examining social (and political) self-identifications among poets—as long as they are not used as absolute denominations. Everyone bemoans the encampments, but few look closely at how they continue to be formed. For even if differences in style or approach are not as marked as one camp or another might have us believe, the exigencies of the current poetry market more often than not demand self-identification. And the social alliances that ensue are not only the result of specific friendships and localities—they are solidified by genealogy: anthologies, criticism, who publishes whom. Each side constructs its own family tree, sprouts its own network of roots and branches, and is naturally proud of its heritage. A consideration of Oppen's

place—or rather, placements, for his genealogies are multiple—in all this is instructive: despite his active resistance to being incorporated into any sort of poetry market, an examination of how he has been anthologized reveals that he has been claimed as an important figure in the heritage of both the lyric and the experimental traditions. Moreover, the concept of sincerity—a concept which is at the heart of Oppen's poetics—also turns out to be one of the central concerns around which these two traditions oscillate, indicating that Oppen is relevant to the contemporary poetic scene in ways that have not as yet been adequately explored.

Despite his multiple legacies, however, Oppen's beginning was unequivocally avant-garde. Although each of the Objectivists in turn has maintained that theirs was not a movement, the direct involvement of Pound (the progenitor of two major previous movements in Imagism and Vorticism) and the publication of Zukofsky's manifesto-like "Sincerity and Objectification" virtually assured the Objectivists the outsider status necessary to avant-gardes. Sidney and Shelley had outlined the poet's position as the prophetic visionary; the Objectivist understanding of vision, on the other hand, is much more mundane and concerns the craft of writing much more than the elevated status of the poet: not one of the Objectivists was interested in having a poetry "career." But Oppen, more than any other Objectivist, deliberately abdicated that traditional role of the poet as *vates*. A powerful instance of just how much Oppen resisted being a public figure can be found in a letter he wrote to Elizabeth Kray at the Academy of American Poets in 1969, soon after he had won the Pulitzer prize and was set to do eight readings across the country over a period of just over three months.

Dear Betty,

You'll be angry and entirely right. But I have to cancel this tour And forget it was ever offered

It would seem I can't go into business as a famous man -- or half-famous either. I didn't know that about myself, or had forgotten

I don't know how to apologize: there is in fact no way

Betty, I'm sorry I can no longer hear my own poetry, I will never be able to write another line, I will never know myself again - - there is no use starting on this track. The books will have to fend for themselves I lack a public character: I am afraid I am incapable of it. (*Letters*, 203)

The mere thought of being a public figure jeopardized Oppen's ability to write, and this appears to have been a constitutional fact; but he was also consciously against the poetry market: he once wrote in a letter to a friend that he was "hiding - - From readings, etc.," from "competitive literature," and that he "better remain slightly underground" (206). As for schools of poetry, Oppen wrote in his working papers:

Schools of poetry I don't want the name of a school to occur to me when I read a poem As if one said, this is a Buick, this is a Volkswagen—the traffic seems to become very *heavy*

("Anthropologist," 145)

Given his position on these subjects, it is not surprising that Oppen's work was rarely anthologized. We may like to think that poems always speak for themselves, but the reality is that the controlling interests in the poetry establishment need to have their

attention drawn to work that has not already received the academy's imprimatur. John Taggart, writing in 1985, was the first to register serious concern about Oppen's absence in the most widely used anthologies: he singles out the then current editions of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (as well as its *Modern* counterpart), *Contemporary American Poetry*, *The New Pocket Anthology of American Verse*, and *The Voice That is Great Within Us*. What with the central role which anthologies play in canon formation, Taggart is rightfully anxious that Oppen's work will be absent in the annals of literary history. Although Taggart does not say so, the situation is particularly surprising as Oppen's work was published by a very well regarded press (New Directions), appeared in widely distributed journals (like *Poetry*), and was even briefly brought into the spotlight by a major prize. Taggart attributes the absence to the still formidable New Critical attitudes which have great difficulty in treating poems which do not submit to demands for what he calls "finished" verse. Taggart observes that Oppen's poem "Ballad," which initially appears amenable to anthologies because of both its conciseness and its referencing of a traditional poetic form, resists the New Critical demand for "rhetorical finish" because it "radiates" thought in process at "every point" (256). He also notes Oppen's "disregard" for conventional punctuation and the poetic devices which students have for so long been trained to locate in poetry. Most important to Taggart, however, is the minimalism and austerity of Oppen's poems, the result of the "radical (if quiet) stripping away" that Oppen believed necessary in order to achieve clarity (260-1). Taken altogether, these qualities make Oppen's poetry "difficult" for uninitiated editors to comprehend, and Taggart believes that they simply have not taken the time to come to terms with a poetry of difference. Difficulty, however, has never prevented editors and

critics from coming to an appreciation of particular poets—one need only think of "The Waste Land" or any number of other poems that a reader must struggle with in order to understand. This is especially true within the strictures of New Criticism, which prized complexity and ambiguity in poetry so highly. Difficulty only becomes a problem to these critics when the poem at hand is not susceptible to the New Critical apparatus; this is to say that difficulty becomes a problem when the poetry is part of an entirely alternative tradition. Such is the case with Oppen: Objectivism, long completely unrecognized by academia, is still underrecognized, and this is partially the result of specific historical contingencies.

Although what Ron Silliman has called the first phase of Objectivism, which began with the "Objectivist" issue of *Poetry* in 1931, was initiated with the collusion of Pound and Williams, the poetries exhibited—diverse and explicitly *not* constituting a movement—were nevertheless in opposition to the prevailing aesthetic of diluted Imagism, such that Oppen, Zukofsky, and Reznikoff had to publish their own work. The second phase of Objectivism (again according to Silliman) is characterized by a long silence, lasting until the 1960s: though some of the Objectivists continued to write during this period, very little of their work was published. This resulted in the notable absence of Objectivist work in Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* anthology (published in 1960). As has been frequently noted, Allen constructed his anthology as a direct response to *New Poets of England and America*, an anthology published in 1957 and edited by Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson: this was the first of the anthology wars. Allen writes in his preface that the work in his volume shows "one common characteristic: a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse"

which one finds in *New Poets of England and America.* Allen describes his poets as comprising "our avant-garde, the true continuers of the modern movement in American poetry" as initiated by "the practice and precepts of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams." Here one finds groupings of poets from the Black Mountain School, the San Francisco Renaissance, the New York School, the Beat Generation, and an unidentified or unidentifiable fifth gathering. Charles Olson, only two years younger than Oppen, is given a certain primacy by leading off the collection; his "Projective Verse" manifesto also heads the "Statements on Poetics" section.

Third phase Objectivism consists of the return of the Objectivist poets to the public arena in the 1960s: after twenty-four years of silence, Oppen publishes *The Materials* in 1962, *This in Which* in 1965, and *Of Being Numerous* in 1968; Niedecker publishes *My Friend Tree* in 1961, her first book in fifteen years; Zukofsky publishes *Bottom: On Shakespeare* in 1963, *All, The Collected Short Poems* in 1965, and returns to his long poem *"A"*; Reznikoff publishes *By the Waters of Manhattan* in 1962 and the first volume of *Testimony* in 1965; Basil Bunting publishes *Briggflats* in 1966; and Carl Rakosi publishes *Amulet* in 1967. A series of extraordinary interviews with Oppen, Zukofsky, Reznikoff, and Rakosi in a 1969 issue of the academic journal *Contemporary Literature* seemed to indicate that the Objectivists would soon find their way into the canon; but this was not to be—at least, not yet.

Writing in 1996, Dennis Young, in "Anthologies, Canonicity, and the Objectivist Imagination," echoes Taggart's anxiety about Oppen's absence from the anthologies. He also confirms that the absence is due to the fact that the poems "do not conform to a tenacious New Critical mindset" which privileges poetry from what Charles Altieri has

called the "romantic-symbolist" tradition—a tradition that the Objectivists explicitly agitate against (146-7). What is perhaps most surprising, however, is just how many anthologies Oppen appears in now, only several years after Young wrote his essay. This could well be the result of the substantial critical attention Oppen has received over the last two decades, and this attention has not been limited to academic journals: The National Poetry Foundation published *George Oppen: Man and Poet* in 1981; a 1981 issue of *Paideuma* was devoted to Oppen; Michael Heller published *Conviction's Net of Branches*, a study of the Objectivists, in 1985; *Not comforts/But Vision*, a collection of criticism, was published by the Interim Press in 1985; a 1985 issue of *Ironwood* was dedicated entirely to Oppen; and Duke University Press published Rachel Blau DuPlessis' *Selected Letters of George Oppen* in 1990. Perhaps, considering the provenance of Oppen's work, it should not be surprising that several of the anthologies that Oppen now appears in are anthologies of "experimental" or "outsider" poetry: his work can be found in Eliot Weinberger's *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders*, Douglas Messerli's *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry*, and Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris' *Poems for the Millennium*. While Marjorie Perloff deserves credit for bringing Oppen to the attention of the academy, it is also worth observing that *poets* writing in what might be called alternative traditions have done much of the critical work on him. Taggart, Heller, and DuPlessis (most of all) are just three of the poets who have devoted considerable time and energy to producing such scholarship; Ron Silliman, Cid Corman, Bruce Andrews, and Charles Bernstein are others.

In the introduction to his compendious *From the Other Side of the Century*, Messerli writes that his selection focuses on those "who previously had not been extensively anthologized and whose writing seemed to extend and challenge the tradition of innovative American poetry beginning with Emily Dickinson" and continuing through Stein, Pound, Williams, and H.D. Messerli explicitly links the purposes of his anthology with those of Allen's *New American Poetry*: "no major volume has served our own generation," he writes, and then acutely observes that no anthology at all has served the Objectivists. Correcting that oversight, Messerli begins the anthology with a selection of work from each of the Objectivists. Rothenberg and Joris likewise dedicate ample space to the representation of Objectivist work in *Poems for the Millennium*, an anthology of extraordinary scope that examines radical poetries from around the world. Weinberger's *American Poetry Since 1950* includes generous portions of Oppen and several other Objectivists. His anthology is deliberately constructed as "an alternative to the existing anthologies," which only include work by poets belonging to what he calls the "ruling party"; the poets of the ruling party have exclusive access to the "channels of recognition" and canon-making of which anthologies are a so vital a part. The "opposition party," of which Oppen is apparently a member, is "still intensely aware of its outsider status" even while being dissatisfied with the usual labels applied to them: "avant-garde, experimental, non-academic, radical." Though Weinberger is openly hostile to Language poetry, he does end the anthology with Michael Palmer, who is also seen as benefiting from the "concentrated and self-critical lyricism of Oppen," and whose poem "Sun" is described as "one of the major works of a still-unnamed new poetry."

Also like Oppen, Palmer is praised by ostensibly opposed communities, as we shall soon see.

But the "new" poetry that Palmer represents for Weinberger has been named: despite his own resistance, Palmer has almost always been categorized as a Language poet: he is present in both Messerli's *"Language" Poetries* anthology and Ron Silliman's *In the American Tree.* Moreover, Paul Hoover writes in the introduction to his *Postmodern American Poetry* that Palmer was one of the "early workers in what is now called language poetry" and that he "remains among its leading practitioners" (xxxvii). "The Objectivist movement in general" (and Zukofsky in particular) is identified by Hoover as a precursor to Language poetry; thus, Oppen is for Hoover—as for Messerli, Weinberger, Rothenberg and Joris—part of the lineage which produced and continues to produce outsider poetry. It is therefore baffling that not one of the Objectivists is included in Hoover's anthology, while Language poets are generously represented. As Hoover does not explain this absence, it is difficult to divine its rather ominous presence. Like Donald Allen, Hoover begins his *Postmodern* anthology with Olson, and—after noting that Olson used the word "postmodern" as early as 1951—he defines the scope of the postmodern as "the historical period following World War II" (xxv). As Alan Golding has observed, however, this historicizing definition of postmodernism conflicts with the aesthetic definition. As with Weinberger, Hoover perpetuates the bifurcation between conventional and experimental poetries; but Hoover does so by equating the postmodern with the avant-garde: "postmodernist poetry is the avant-garde poetry of our time," he writes, and it is clear that he wishes to deploy his vanguard of poets against the forces of "mainstream culture" and "the narcissism, sentimentality, and self-

expressiveness of its life in writing." Since Hoover's own genealogy of postmodernist poetry includes Objectivism, it cannot be on aesthetic grounds that Objectivism is excluded; it must therefore be historical. But this makes no sense either as nearly all of the major Objectivist works were written well after World War II—and well into the sixties and seventies, in Oppen's case. Additionally, the first three poets in the anthology (Olson, Cage, and Laughlin) are of the same generation as Oppen. Weinberger's cut-off date of 1950, and even the cut-off date of 1960 which Messerli uses, does not prevent Oppen from being included in either anthology. It is possible, of course, that Hoover considers the Objectivists as modernists, but this would be an unusual characterization which, considering the late work of Oppen, Niedecker, and Reznikoff, would require considerable elision and justification. If the denominations of "modern" and "postmodern" must be adhered to, then Oppen should be seen as, at the very least, a *transitional* figure between the two periods/aesthetics. As a pedigreed Norton anthology, it is also possible that Hoover's is simply a companion work to *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, but this would require both the adequate representation of the Objectivists in the latter (which only includes Zukofsky and Bunting) and a denial of Hoover's otherwise unquestionably eclectic editorial choices.

But if Oppen's is an outsider poetry, how did it come to win the Pulitzer Prize? How is it that Oppen is one of only four poets—the others are Williams, Ashbery, and Snyder—in Weinberger's anthology to win the prize? The judges in 1969, the year Oppen won for *Of Being Numerous*, were James Dickey, Howard Nemerov, and Louis Simpson. Simpson, it should be remembered, was one of the editors of *New Poets of England and America*, the anthology that is at the origin of the poetry wars. While I do

not wish to make too much of something as dubious and circumstantial as a prize, it is remarkable that *Of Being Numerous*, a book of considerable difficulty, came to be appreciated by three poets who are part of a supposedly opposing tradition, a decidedly lyric tradition, a tradition that has otherwise almost completely neglected Oppen.

One of the few exceptions to this neglect is Louise Gluck, an established lyric poet and Pulitzer Prize winner. Her award-winning book of essays, *Proofs and Theories*, contains a short piece called "On George Oppen" that attempts the difficult task of expressing admiration: "tribute seems necessary: a way of affirming certain values" (29). One of the values she wishes to affirm is what she believes to be the simplicity of Oppen's language; she points to Oppen's use of the word "sense" in a poem, describing it as "typically direct and practical," and she takes this to be representative of Oppen's desire to "make a language available for common use, not a hermetic patois" (31). Gluck here shows the predilection for a poetry which is not "willfully obscure," as some would have it, and it can be assumed that she would construe Language poetry, which dismembers and reconfigures our "common" language in order to emphasize its materiality and thereby question its supposed transparency, as "hermetic patois." Indeed, the other poets whom Gluck expresses admiration for in *Proofs and Theories*—like Eliot, Berryman, Kunitz—are all, unlike Oppen, widely known and accepted; Gluck's selections for her edition of the *Best American Poetry* series are also consistent with the established lyric tradition. Oppen is not part of an alternate tradition in Gluck's construction—to her, he is a lyric poet. In fact, Gluck seems to be largely unaware of poetry written in alternate traditions. It is instructive, for example, to consider just what poetry Gluck has in mind when she writes in "Against Sincerity," the essay which

follows "On George Oppen," that "our present addiction to sincerity grows out of a preference for abandon, for the subjective 'I' whose impassioned partiality carries the implication of flaw, whose speech sounds individual and human and fallible" (41). While the criticism is apt, one needs to ask who is included in the use of the first person plural: one thing that experimental poetry—and Language poetry in particular—cannot be criticized for is addiction to sincerity or the unquestioning use of an impassioned "I"; experimental poetry is evidently not "our" poetry. However, in an odd collision of interests, one of the few things that both lyric and experimental poets seem to share is a disgust for what Charles Bernstein calls "little me" poetry, which Jorie Graham calls the poetry of "mere self" and which is often described as being excessively concerned with sincerity.

Gluck, much like the New Critics René Wellek and Austin Warren, argues against the appearance of sincerity in a poem in as much as it leads "away from that text" and toward the critical quagmire of biography and intention. Instead, Gluck requires that the poet "constantly intervenes and manages, lies and deletes, all in the service of truth" (34). Gluck rightly distinguishes truth from sincerity, which only requires that one *believe* that one is telling the truth and leads too easily to the "little me" poetry that she too dislikes. Dennis Young also expresses distaste for this type of sincerity. He contrasts Oppen's poetry, a poetry "not wedded to a drama of self," to that produced in workshops and all too often found in anthologies: "these poems tend to be self-confessional...intent on displaying the stamp of the poet's personality, they privilege the suffering ego" (155). Where the Objectivists aim to reveal "the presence of the world" in their poems, poets in the romantic-symbolist tradition conjure up "the presence of the poet," resulting in the

perverse situation where "evidence of the author's suffering becomes a verification of sincerity" (154).

The sort of sincerity secreted by the poems Gluck and Young are against is one that privileges simple expressions over complex, and can be seen as a direct descendent of confessional poetry. However, from the critic's standpoint—and this is precisely the point that Wellek and Warren make—one can never be sure how artful a writer has been regarding the representation of his or her experiences in a given poem. This is the reasoning used by those of a New Critical slant in order to justify ignoring the social, historical, and biographical context in which a poem is written in favor of concentrating exclusively on the text. When it comes to Oppen, however, Gluck's own beliefs concerning sincerity are set aside as she continually inflects her judgement of his poetry with evaluations of his character, falling prey to the very critical turn that she wishes to shun: "Oppen's poetry, to my mind, demonstrates...a profound integrity, a self so well established, so whole, as to be invisible" (79). She also notes "a sanity so profound as to be mysterious," an "austerity and distaste for blather," and an "absence of vanity" in his poems—qualities which apply conspicuously well to Oppen's personality. Is not this intimate alignment of the poet with the poetry precisely what she was arguing against in her comments on sincerity?

More importantly, Gluck is apparently unaware of the crucial significance of the concept of sincerity to Oppen. At least one aspect of Oppen's reconfiguration of sincerity which has been explored here is acknowledged by the editors of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*: they write that Oppen "rescues the meaning of *sincerity* from a narrow confessionalism" (2434). The editors also write in the

introduction to their selection of Gluck's work that it is indeed the "easy equation of art with personal experience" that Gluck rejects in "Against Sincerity"; they then name Oppen as a noteworthy predecessor to Gluck. It is startling to find that both Niedecker and Oppen are represented in the *Norton*'s collection of "American Poetry Since 1945," and this is certainly an important victory for them. Equally startling, however, is the omission of all of the other Objectivists. In fact, the Objectivists are not even mentioned in the general introduction to the period: Oppen and Niedecker are referred to only once as examples of the influence of Williams' "powerful minimalism." Moreover, the apologetic tone which the editors adopt when they attempt to justify Oppen's presence in the anthology is disconcerting: his late poems are described as "too elliptical"; other poems "seem thin" and are either "too cerebral" or "too cryptic"; most important, however, is that "reading Oppen requires full attentiveness." What good poetry does not require such attention? And if Oppen is a genuine predecessor to a completely legitimized poet such as Gluck, then why would he need such deprecatory defending? Are the editors anticipating criticism for the inclusion of Oppen? The answer lies in the naming of other younger poets to whom Oppen's work has been important: Michael Palmer, Kathleen Fraser, Charles Bernstein, and Susan Howe—all experimental poets. The *Norton* editors are among the few to recognize that Oppen has more than one legacy; but they only represent one of them. Not one of the poets whom Oppen is said to have influenced is represented in the anthology; in fact, not a single contemporary experimental poet (whether associated with the Language poets or not) is included. Although the editors are justified in lamenting the "distressing tendency on the part of some poets and critics to define 'schools' of poetry as if they were mutually exclusive,"

they have chosen to ignore a major tradition in American poetry. What is distressing is the claim that the anthology is "designed for undergraduate courses introducing students to the *full* range of American literature," as the preface has it.

Jorie Graham's *Earth Took of Earth* anthology expresses no such pedagogic concerns: Graham tells us that she picked her own "indispensable" poems in compiling the "100 Great Poems of the English Language." The anthology initially appears as quite eclectic and far reaching, and Graham goes to great lengths to enumerate the various differences among the poets represented: "I wanted variety." Nevertheless, she found that the differences "began to blur and thin-out" once she realized that her selection constitutes a "communal song" which turns out to be "about the nature and force of Poetry itself"—this thanks to the to the fact that she "looked for beauty." Graham would like to believe that her anthology therefore avoids the petty squabbles that continually take place between poetic communities: "this song-in-many-voices will serve as an antidote to the encampments into which American poetry seems to insist on organizing itself...it is precisely against such politicizing and strangulation (and packaging) of vision, against all the dust and nonsense socially-restricted descriptions of our poetics invite, that a collection such as this sings its long, brave song." Graham wants us to believe that her anthology transcends the fray, habitating as it does in the domain of beauty, and that it is not subject to social, political, and commercial reality. The work of Oppen, Niedecker, and Zukofsky is happily seen to embody this mysterious force of Poetry which helps launch the anthology into the great beyond. Graham's seemingly arbitrary decision to cut off the anthology "at the generation born in 1927" saves her, in part, from having to decide which poets of her own generation to include. But Graham does believe that the

work of two poets born after 1927, Adrienne Rich and Derek Walcott, needs to be included; she explains that she was "unable to resist a certain shapeliness and variety" that their work offers, though it is certainly not a risk to include them, established as they are. It is somewhat of a risk, however, to include a poem of Michael Palmer's as her "Afterword"; she does not explain why she does so.

However, the choice can be seen as strategic: in an anthology that only occasionally strays—and not very far—from poetry firmly embedded in the lyric tradition, it is clever to point to an alternative tradition as a final gesture. But the poems she chooses from this alternative tradition are among the least obviously experimental, resulting in what Alan Golding (in another context) has called "aesthetic tokenism"; that is, Zukofsky's " 'A'-11," Olson's "Maximus, to himself," Duncan's "A Poem beginning with a Line by Pindar," and Palmer's "Notes for Echo Lake" can be read as part of the lyric tradition without too much difficulty: all *appear* relatively conventional in form. This fact can be best illustrated by considering how the contours of the anthology would have changed had Barbara Guest (born in 1920) taken the place of Rich or Walcott, and had work by Susan Howe or Rosmarie Waldrop been chosen instead of Palmer's. Once again, difference in name is elided by the sameness of appearance. And it is disingenuous for Graham to insist that her anthology is not in fact a packaging of vision: it is her vision, and it *should* be her vision. But in order for Graham to admit to that she would have to deny her own assertion that the song-in-many-voices transcends the poetry wars. Her refusal to do so makes it difficult to "forget about romanticism, symbolism, surrealism, objectivism, imagism, modernism, [and] postmodernism" in order to "feel our common humanity" when she believes that "the *outsider*, here, is whoever has shut the

valves of heart and mind, not tried to figure and state truth, not believed deeply enough in words." So, for Graham, Oppen is positively construed as an insider to a lyric tradition that sings its "communal song," while for Weinberger and others Oppen is positively construed as an *outsider* who rebels against this particular anthem.

Graham cites Oppen in her introduction to the 1989 *Best American Poetry*—though precisely why she does so remains unclear to me. But, as if the mere mention of his name prompts thoughts of sincerity, Graham, immediately after citing Oppen, points out the "desire for sincerity" that she detects in some contemporary poetry: the type of sincerity evinced by these poets, she believes, is marked by the standard "distrust of eloquence" and a consequent perception of language as a force that can too easily contaminate an originary self (xxii). This belief in the "pure" self is then contrasted with the belief, shared by the Language poets, in a self that is "constructed" by language (xxiii). But Graham's understanding of Language poetry is wanting; she writes that Language poets dismantle "articulate speech in an effort to recover a *prior* version of self, a cleaner one, free of cultural association—a language free of its user!" (xxi). Even in terms of her own characterization of what Language poets do, this description is contradictory: for how can one believe that the self is "constructed" by language while hoping to "recover" a self that is "free" of language? The aims and values that Graham attributes to poetry, moreover, conflict directly with the largely Marxist-driven critique that Language poetry offers. Graham unabashedly proselytizes for poetry, describing poetry as having a "moral and spiritual undertaking": she writes that "the act of the poem is identical with a spiritual questing" (xxvii). Citing Charles Bernstein in the introduction to his *"Language" Poetries* anthology, Messerli points out that Language poets see the

poem as existing "in a matrix of social and historical relations that are more significant to the formation of an individual text than any personal qualities of the life or voice of an author" (3). Graham, on the other hand, thinks that "our poems promote voice...and personality" even while they address a capital significant other such as "God, nature, a beloved, an Idea, Abstract form, Language...Chance, Death, Consciousness" (xxix, xxvii). For Graham, a good poem emanates a nearly divine aura, and a mortal reader should therefore not be allowed to become what she calls the "co-creator" of the poem; for Bruce Andrews, "Language work resembles a creation of a community and of a world-view by a once divided-but-now-fused Reader and Writer" (Messerli, *Language*, 4). I point these differences out only to show that Graham's aesthetic ideology is essentially Romantic and therefore firmly a part of the lyric tradition. This also happens to be the very ideology that Language poets generally distrust. All of this goes some way to explain the level of representation the Language poets receive in the anthology: only three or four (depending on who's counting) of the seventy-five poets selected could be labeled as Language poets.

Nevertheless, Graham is again at pains to insist that the "diversity of the work" she has chosen "is staggering, and reminds one of how truly huge this nation is" (xxx); and David Lehman, the general editor of the series, claims in his foreword that "this book stands as evidence that the poets of rival sects may consort to their mutual enhancement" (ix). This leads Graham to suggest that, despite what "the various polemicists would have us believe," the differences that exist between communities of poets does not signal a rivalry, but rather "a wonderfully varied and passionate family argument, in which much cross-pollination is going on" (xxx). This cross-pollination has led to what Graham

calls "hybridization," a phenomenon that pleases her as it seems to point to "a genuine revival of poetic ambition." Graham is undoubtedly right; but one needs to ask how often it is colonization—and not cross-pollination—that is going on; one also needs to ask under what terms and conditions this family argument is taking place. Power is extraordinarily concentrated within families: every family has its law, its enforcer, its patriarch or matriarch, its sibling rivalry. This is to say that if we are to talk of the family, we must also talk of the *values* which that family holds dear. What is the genealogy of this family? Who is the favorite child? Is Language poetry the "difficult" child, or perhaps the prodigal child? Who has been disowned and disinherited? And, most important for my purposes, was George Oppen adopted, illegitimate, or a long lost cousin?

Strangely, Graham apparently believes that the members of our poetic family do not need to compete in the marketplace: the poet is "essentially an outsider to the marketplace" (xxvi). This is consistent with her conception of the transcendental nature of the poetic enterprise. It would seem unnecessary to have to point out that poets and their creations *are* part of the marketplace. As language is the common currency of communication, it cannot but be that the language of poetry itself participates in the marketplace, albeit with less insidiousness (on the whole), than the language of advertisements and politicians. The poetry *profession* in America is completely permeated by the marketplace, and while it may not be the same marketplace that dominates Wall Street, it has the same impetus: money, power, security, position. Graham, highly decorated and influential as she is, knows this. All the observers of the contemporary poetry scene, from Messerli to McKinley, agree that poetry is burgeoning;

there are more poets and more readers than ever before. But this means, of course, that the competition for publishers, prizes, fellowships, and teaching positions is extraordinarily keen, and so it is not surprising that the poetry wars—and all the attendant machinations and intrigues—continue: allegiance, however spurious, is demanded as those who do not fall within easily identifiable categories often suffer serious professional consequences.

That Oppen was able to resist the pressures and the seductions of the marketplace was mostly a result of his understanding of sincerity, but also partly of luck. Having received an inheritance that was "big enough" at twenty-one, Oppen was free from some of the difficulties that follow from having to earn money in order to survive. Oppen was aware of these circumstances, as he indicated in a letter of 1970:

> I do not know if these last four books could have been written if I had worked to the age of retirement - - worked steadily in poverty - - I think they would not have, and I think, as you think, that it is a terrible thing to say. We had help from the dead. (*Letters*, 208).

But Oppen's inheritance did not prevent him from working until the age of fifty, and it certainly did not guarantee that he would write the remarkable poetry that he did. Oppen could not remain outside of the poetry marketplace for long, however, for "to be read posthumously" also means to be reconstructed by the poets, critics, and editors who come after: George Oppen has become irrevocably involved in the poetry wars. Ironically, in spite of all the obvious political and aesthetic differences between lyric poets (such as Gluck and Graham) and experimental poets (particularly the Language poets), they do appear to agree on the value of Oppen. So if Oppen is an instance or even a source of

Graham's vision of "hybridization," then he provides a significant challenge to the insular encampments that still exist within American poetry. Ron Silliman, in *The New Sentence*, argues precisely that Oppen challenged the division between the academic poets and the new American poets of the 1960s, creating an important third alternative that effectively reconfigured the scope of American poetry. We must continue to have such alternatives; but we must also be sure to pay attention to the poets who offer them.

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