

“The Sad Marvels:” Astonishment and the Problem of Humanity in George Oppen

Zachary Alapi

George Oppen’s *Of Being Numerous*, in many ways, exhibits stark minimalism and a succinctness of language and poetics. While Oppen’s long poem does not adhere to conventional epic standards of length, its philosophical project, combined with the inclusion of the poet’s personal experiences and perceptions, confronts the reader with the most total of scopes by attempting to resolve the German philosopher Martin Heidegger’s question of “why are there essents¹ rather than nothing?” (*Metaphysics* 1). Whereas Heidegger’s philosophical inquiry detailed in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* attempts to resolve, conceptually and linguistically, the problematic fact of existence, Oppen, through poetry, and especially in *Of Being Numerous*, acknowledges that the quest for understanding of the thing-in-itself, or the essence of essents, is inextricably linked to the concept of humanity and the individual’s place within a larger framework. In “The Mind’s Own Place,” the poet’s only full-length essay on poetics and poetic philosophy, Oppen suggests that “the emotion that creates art is the emotion that seeks to know and to disclose” (173). Implicit in this statement is the premise of questing in pursuit of the disclosure of knowledge, which for Oppen means that the emotion of the poem is what enables access to what Heidegger terms Being²—the most primal of philosophical concepts that underlies all facets of existence and is thus present in the unfolding *event* of the poem itself.

In his introduction to Oppen’s *Selected Poems*, American poet Robert Creeley establishes this crucial link between mind and unfolding: “I think much becomes clear, in fact, if one recognizes that George Oppen is trying all his life to *think* the world, not only to find or to enter it, or to

¹ “Essents” refer to “existents,” or “things that are.”

² Analogous to essence/truth. Being is the foundation of existence and essents themselves. As such, Being is beyond all physical analogues. Throughout this paper, references to Being as it relates to essence/truth will always use a capital “B,” even though Heidegger does not always make this syntactical distinction.

gain a place in it—but to *realize* it, to *figure* it, to have it literally in mind” (xi). It is this literal realization and figuration that supports Oppen’s desire to circumvent mere *appearance*,³ meaning that Oppen must engage with essents, or the things-in-themselves, as the facts of existence that are subsumed under the very idea of Being to reveal truth. For Oppen, honesty and sincerity are paramount in poetry as “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” (“The Mind’s Own Place” 175). Striving to access Heideggerian Being unfolds truth, and *Of Being Numerous*, as well as other poems such as “Psalm” and “A Language of New York,” attempts this unconcealment of essents through the use of nouns, *astonishment* manifested from a sincerity of perception, engaging with the concreteness of the city, and, subsequently, understanding that the problem of humanity is as much a recognition of concealment as a definitive understanding of Being itself.

To understand how Oppen’s poetry presents unfolding and poetic *astonishment*, redefining the poem as an *event* is crucial. Regarding Heidegger’s question of “why are there essents rather than nothing?” one must recognize that “the content and the object of the question react inevitably on the act of questioning. Accordingly this questioning is not just any occurrence but a privileged happening that we call an *event*” (*Metaphysics* 5). Reacting on the act of questioning existence implies activity, and Oppen strives to ground such seeking action in the concrete nouns of the poem itself without imbuing the *things* portrayed as anything other than what they *are*. In “The Mind’s Own Place,” Oppen discloses what adhering to the actual *meaning* of nouns allows and circumvents:

If we can hold the word to its meaning, or if we can import a word from elsewhere—a collective, not an abstract noun, to mean “the things that exist”—then we will not have on the one hand the demand that the poet circumstantially describe everything that we already know, and declare every belief that we already hold, nor on the other hand the ideal of the poet without any external senses at all. (174)

³ Essents perceived erroneously according to arbitrary/conditioned factors such as death and temporality (negates Being). Heidegger desires to circumvent mere appearance (thing-concepts) to access Being.

Oppen seeks to avoid repetition in his poetry—the repetition of knowledge, beliefs, and associations arbitrarily attached to thing-concepts—by using external senses, primarily sight, as the positive employment of the individual’s faculties of historical being-there, or *Dasein*.⁴ This relates to Heidegger’s hermeneutical phenomenology, which implies the discovery of true essence through a belief that the “essence of *Dasein* (being-there) lies in its existence” (Jeanrond 60). While phenomena must be studied in light of factors such as death and temporality, which condition how one perceives what *is*, Heidegger and Oppen attempt to elucidate a purity of *questioning* Being by finding meaning in a temporal and existentially problematic existence. Such a project is rendered authentic or inauthentic based on whether one can question Being in a manner that removes the presuppositions that always guide interpretation. This is where the *personal I* clouded by arbitrary signifiers becomes, for Oppen, the *seeing eye* grounded in the sincere astonishment of the encountered object. In his *Daybooks*, which read as a pastiche of quotations, philosophical maxims, and scattered thoughts, Oppen outlines this problem of presuppositions and questioning in explaining his rejection of Imagism: “The weakness of Imagism—a man writes of the moon rising over a pier who knows nothing about piers and is disregarding all that he knows about the moon” (82). The amalgamation of piers and the moon would, for Oppen, imply disregarding the *thingness* of piers and the moon *themselves* to race towards arbitrary connotations of what combining these two essents evokes.

Oppen’s poem “Psalm” effectively addresses this concern by demonstrating how the nouns, or essents, themselves prompt an emotional response through a sincerity of perception. In his interview with L.S. Dembo, Oppen elucidates his “faith” in nouns when asked whether this faith is “in the world as world” or in “man’s ability to know the world:” “Well, 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, and that these things do take place” (176). Oppen uses the first three stanzas of “Psalm” to establish the reality of presence and purity of perception through the concreteness of encountering deer:

⁴ Literally translated as “being-there.” Though Heidegger rejected this un-nuanced translation, *Dasein* relates to authentic experience and the purity of questioning Being through understanding the factors that condition one’s perception of essents.

In the small beauty of the forest
 The wild deer bedding down—
 That they are there!

Their eyes

Effortless, the soft lips
 Nuzzle and the alien small teeth
 Tear at the grass

The roots of it

Dangle from their mouths
 Scattering earth in the strange woods.
 They who are there. (NCP 99)

Oppen moves from the “small beauty of the forest” to the “deer bedding down,” which physically reduces the scene’s scope by focusing on the noun (deer) and the act of bedding down; this trajectory closes space, confining the observer’s physical perspective to the deer *themselves*. Such spatial manipulation relates to how Heidegger explains that poetic superiority lies in the poet’s ability to speak as though the essent is being newly expressed, or unfolded: “Poetry [...] has always so much world space to spare that in it each thing—a tree, a mountain, a house, the cry of a bird—loses all indifference and commonplaceness” (*Metaphysics* 26). The line, “That they are there!” exclaims and captures how Oppen spares the majority of the forest’s space to emphasize the deer; encountering the deer as a poetic subject infuses the noun with meaning through presence. After listing factual actions of how the deer eat grass, Oppen begins the third stanza by acknowledging the “roots” of the grass, which moves away from the tearing action, grounding the reader in the most essential element of the grass’ physicality and acknowledging, as Peter Nicholls suggests, the perceived essents “without seeking to reduce them to objects of knowledge” (“Of Being Ethical” 160). “They who are there” also furthers this reorientation by again retreating from the “strange woods” to imply Heideggerian being-there (*Dasein*), emphasizing the perceiver’s scope. Vacillating between expansive and condensed spaces/perspectives allows Oppen to place particulars within the totality of Being.

If Oppen’s emphasis on the aforementioned nouns implies an unfolding of essents, it also demonstrates the necessity to observe and allow such an unfolding to take place. This is where the poet’s personal

perspective and stance enters the *event* of the poem through an attitude of astonishment. Astonishment, however, implies a measure of reflective restraint: “I’m really concerned with the substantive, with the subject of the sentence, with what we are talking about, and not rushing over the subject-matter in order to make a comment about it” (Oppen, “Interview” 174). When Oppen mentions “[...] the leaves that shade them / Hang in the distances / Of sun” (NCP 99), the expanse of “distances” is “Of sun” and thus belongs to something concrete and knowable. In “The Existential World of George Oppen,” L.S. Dembo posits that “Oppen argued that in uttering small words like ‘sun’ and ‘shade’ one was implying an entire cosmos” (81), which is apt if one considers “cosmos” in light of its relation to the thing encountered—the thing *present-at-hand*. If the “shade” and “sun” imply something cosmic, it is always in relation to “Their paths / Nibbled thru the fields [...]” (NCP 99), which affirms a connection between the thing *present-at-hand* (deer) and the perpetually fluctuating scale containing this appearance. Thus, “unconcealment of entities, this is never a state that is merely present-at-hand, but a happening. Unconcealment (truth) is neither an attribute of factual things in the sense of entities nor an attribute of propositions” (Heidegger, “Work of Art” 679). The small nouns “Crying faith / In this in which the wild deer / Startle, and stare out” implies the astonishment of sincere perception through “startle” and “stare out” (NCP 99). Isolating “this in which” of the penultimate line reads as a philosophical equation for Being (“this”) and its containment of a given essent (“in which” a given essent⁵). The penultimate line’s use of the first preposition “In” places the “wild deer” within the statement “this in which,” subsuming the essent (deer) within Being (this in which), suggesting that deer reflect the possibility of unfolding Being. As Heidegger stipulates, in the unfolding of a concept as universal as Being, “reference to what is subsumed ‘under’ it not only is advisable but is the only hope of overcoming its emptiness” (*Metaphysics* 81). The deer are an example of an essent subsumed under Being, and, as Paul Kenneth Naylor contends, Oppen uses Being “to point toward the context ‘in which’ beings—such as deer, such as an observer of a deer or a reader of a poem—can be” (105). “Psalm” ends with the deer literally staring out, beyond themselves, towards the implied viewer. Rather than looking inward, it is the outward gaze and act of encountering that will

⁵ *Is* as in meaning the given essent is perceived beyond appearance.

define Oppen's unique use of subjectivity and quest for unconcealment in "A Language of New York" and *Of Being Numerous*.

The importance of presence and the possibility of disclosure in everything are paramount, and Oppen believed "that consciousness exists and that it is consciousness of something, and that is a fairly complete but not very detailed theology" (Oppen, "Interview" 176). The "something" Oppen refers to is analogous to consciousness of his surroundings—both literal and within the physical poem—and the essents and people encountered therein. This is how a measure of truth is revealed given that "the work is the fighting of the battle in which the unconcealment of what is as a whole, or truth, is won" (Heidegger, "Work of Art" 680). When thinking of Oppen, one must recognize the "workly" character of the work and how the poem, through words, is effected. The Heideggerian "work-being" is how the work itself unconceals mere appearance to access truth, or Being, creating the framework wherein the battle for this disclosure is waged. In building towards *Of Being Numerous* and developing this project of unconcealment, Oppen heightens his engagement with concreteness and the problem of humanity in "A Language of New York." The poem begins by describing "A city of the corporations" (NCP 114), which John Wilkinson addresses, arguing that "'Corporations' signify not only the skyscrapers of the despised advertising industry exploiting people's dreams but also the corporeal nature of humans" (226), demonstrating a distinct concern with physicality. Oppen subsequently combines a concrete evaluation of the cityscape with hints of something ephemeral: "Glassed / In dreams // And images—" (NCP 114). These lines situate the "glassed" corporations within dreams and images (whatever they may be), suggesting that the materiality of materials within the poem, and even the poem itself, contain an indescribable quality of concrete essents that has no directly knowable physical analogue. The lines, "Tho it is impenetrable // As the world, if it is matter // Is impenetrable" show Oppen questioning whether the world is mere matter (NCP 114), implying its negative impenetrability if essents do not act as a storehouse of something more substantive. While this desire to move beyond matter seemingly contradicts the denotations of "objectivism," a misunderstanding of this loose categorical movement is best redefined in Oppen's own words, explaining his "objectivist" concern with achieving proper poetic form: "People assume it [objectivist] means the psychological objective in attitude. It actually means the objectification of the poem, the making an object of the poem" (Oppen, "Interview" 173). Objectivism, for Oppen, moves beyond matter, as the *thing* is the folly of

mere appearance, whereas the *thing-in-itself* unfolds essence and moves beyond the “glass” or “images” to authentic being-there (*Dasein*). This complexity of representation is at the core of Heidegger’s metaphysics: “The path now mentioned is that of *doxa* in the sense of appearance. Along this path the essent looks now thus and now otherwise. Here only opinions prevail. Men slide back and forth from one opinion to another. They mix being and appearance” (*Metaphysics* 112). Oppen’s use of “glass” is especially relevant for skewing perspective as it reflects and distorts depending on lighting and point-of-view. Nevertheless, the ability to still see through glass implies that one can circumvent Heidegger’s “arduous path of appearance” to perception beyond the physicality of matter.

Oppen alludes to perception beyond matter by emphasizing the value of individual words. Again, as seen in “Psalm,” the poem’s world shifts—in the case of “A Language of New York” from an open expanse populated with skyscrapers to banks and subway tunnels:

Possible
 To use
 Words provided one treat them
 As enemies.
 Not enemies—Ghosts
 Which have run mad
 In the subways
 And of course the institutions
 And the banks. (NCP 116)

Recalling Heidegger’s elucidation of the struggle to circumvent appearance, Oppen’s war on word-enemies is actually a struggle against the arbitrariness of what words have come to signify. Michael Heller describes how, on the one hand, in Oppen “there is a powerful belief in the generative power of language; on the other, there is the objectivist faith in the realist power of rescuing the sign from the arbitrariness of its signification” (“Oppen, Stevens, Wittgenstein” 71). It is this belief in the generative power of language that prompts Oppen to move from describing words as “enemies” to “Ghosts” in the above passage. Words have a translucent, elusive quality magnified by arbitrary signification that skews the unfolding of authentic meaning. Oppen connects this frustrating contradiction between objective truth and representational truth by listing “institutions” and “banks,” emblematic of deceitful structures built on rhetoric. Furthermore, the premise of words running

mad “In the subways” implies facsimiles of meaning have become hidden, almost underground, and must be unearthed, just as Heidegger advocates “transfiguring the object into the blaze of its standing-forth, in truth’s objectified self-disclosure” (Wilkinson 223). By identifying the necessity of unfolding essents, Oppen outlines his intention to overcome this philosophical impasse by restoring meaning to words:

[...] If one captures them
One by one proceeding

Carefully they will restore
I hope to meaning
And to sense. (NCP 116)

Before tackling the problem of humanity in *Of Being Numerous*, Oppen overtly expresses the desire of restoring words to *meaning* and *sense*, as opposed to restoring meaning and sense *to* words. This subtle difference is crucial since Oppen seeks to develop a language of investigation by moving from the concrete *towards* meaning, rather than imposing meaning on the concrete. Such a painstaking process requires a deliberate “one by one” capturing of words in order to allow them to stand-forth through the astonishment of sincere perception. The problem of humanity and of the individual’s perception of the world and essents is intrinsically, as Heidegger suggests, related to the problem of locating Being: “*In each of its inflections the word ‘being’ bears an essentially different relation to being itself from that of all other nouns and verbs of the language to the essent that is expressed in them*” (*Metaphysics* 88). Thus, one can conceive of the premise of the *tree-ness* (Being) of a tree, for instance, more readily than the *Being* of Being, which highlights the struggle of using concrete nouns to access an ephemeral concept. Beginning in “A Language of New York,” Oppen will grapple with this existential uncertainty in *Of Being Numerous*, as an amalgamation of personal experience, the city’s concreteness, and the omnipresence of humanity—a fact of existence of which the individual is part—cohere in a recognition of the ceaseless striving to locate and unfold Being.

Throughout *Of Being Numerous*, Oppen outlines the groundwork for a poetics of seeking, framing his poem as an *event* where essents unfold beyond mere appearance. In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger elucidates a synthesis of matter and form where the “thing-concept puts us in a position to answer the question concerning the thingly element in the

work of art. The thingly element in the work is manifestly the matter of which it consists. Matter is the substrate and the field for the artist's formative action" (657). Poem "1" outlines the poet's "thesis" in conjunction with how matter leads to formative action:

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

Occurrence, a part
 Of an infinite series,

The sad marvels; (NCP 163)

Oppen does not simply reproduce Heidegger's question of "why are there essents rather than nothing?" Instead, the statement "There are things" acknowledges the fact of existence and connects it to the lives of the collective "we," which can be read as analogous to humanity. The problem of sight, however, complicates a cohesive definition of humanity since self-knowledge seems to depend on a form of sight beyond appearance, implying the necessity of objective perception that is difficult for individuals. Here, the collectiveness of humanity jostles with subjectivity, and the reader is reminded that occurrences are a part "Of an infinite series," suggesting that the importance of recognizing essents should imply a constant unfolding that negates stasis. As Michael Heller asserts, by not grounding the poem's beginning in a concrete essent, Oppen shows how "the 'test of images' is not whether they successfully express the poet's state of mind but whether or not they might validate a particular meaning or concept. The image [...] is not an expressive medium but an investigative one" ("A Mimetics of Humanity" 41). "The sad marvels," a peculiarly contradictory phrase, infers the danger of the individual's preconceptions clouding authentic understanding of essents; Oppen's shift from the "I" to the "eye" acknowledges this arduous path of investigation and gradually enables the privileging of uncritical astonishment, or marvels, gleaned from sincere perception that sheds the "sad."

Poem "7" further clarifies the investigative stance of Oppen's long poem by acknowledging the framework of humanity without offering a concrete definition. In his interview with L.S. Dembo, Oppen reveals his concern with humanity in relation to reality:

The important thing is that if we are talking about the

nature of reality, then we are not really talking about our *comment* about it; we are talking about the apprehension of some *thing*, whether it *is* or not, whether one can make a thing of it or not. *Of Being Numerous* asks the question whether or not we can deal with humanity as something which actually does exist. (175)

Poem “7” circumvents conventional commentary on the philosophical decisions and impasses it presents by first rendering conceivable the possibility of humanity:

Obsessed, bewildered

By the shipwreck
Of the singular

We have chosen the meaning
Of being numerous. (NCP 166)

While shipwreck is a classical poetic metaphor, the word “singular” carries greater poignancy as it is placed in a similarly structured and demarcated phrase, allowing the word and the isolation it connotes to linger before a stanza break. The use of “meaning” is critical as it appears analogous to the *idea* or *conception* of being numerous, and the act of choosing imbues the collective “we” with the agency of constructing and developing a notion of humanity. Of course, the actual word “humanity” is conspicuously absent in Oppen’s definition of it “because ‘humanity’ is a word that culture has surrounded with communal sentiments, religious, social and political that obscure what the word denotes or points to” (Heller, “A Mimetics of Humanity” 42). While Heller is correct in his assessment of obscured meaning, the problem of how to *know* what humanity means lingers. Attempting to resolve this difficulty of definition, Peter Nicholls argues that the main theme in *Of Being Numerous* “is that of the apparent unknowability of what is not the self” (161-62). Nicholls cites the lines, “As the world, if it is matter, / Is impenetrable” (NCP 164), which appear in Poem “2” and in “A Language of New York.” This “matter,” as stated above, is analogous to faulty perception, meaning that one cannot simply ignore the possibility behind, or beyond, Heideggerian appearance because it is not the self. Thus, “the unknowability of what is not the self” is still an extension of the self; humanity is, in a sense, unknowable, yet it is a system

of which the individual is an intrinsic part.

One such way of using the self to access the meaning of humanity is through engaging with cities and urban structures. Oppen begins poem “3” with the lines, “The emotions are engaged / Entering the city / As entering any city” (NCP 164), establishing the idea of a city as a storehouse of human emotions and experiences. Emotions are engaged because the city is a canvas upon which humanity is enacted and unfolds. In his article “Speaking the Estranged: Word and Poetics in Oppen’s Poetry,” Heller discusses how the fragmentary character of Oppen’s poetry “embodies a yearning, an expression of the pressures and difficulties of articulating an idea or experience, while at the same time acknowledging the near-impossibility of succeeding” (84), which importantly points to the struggle for clear expression as poem “3” continues:

We are not coeval
 With a locality
 But we imagine others are,

We encounter them. Actually
 A populace flows
 Thru the city. (NCP 164)

How individuals are tied to a locality, or one’s perception of the other as intrinsically linked to the space they inhabit, is unclear. The use of “Actually,” isolated through enjambment, shows Oppen revising his statement of “We encounter them” and thus challenging the assumed inclusivity of humanity. The double collective (we, them/a populace) of such a statement is already muddled given how “we” differs from “them” in establishing an inclusive or exclusive—for the speaker of poem “3”—definition of humanity. By connecting the flowing populace to the city, Oppen intelligently leaves the reader with an image of motion; rather than debating the philosophical implications of the above passage regarding the communal connotations of humanity, its contribution to the poem and discussion of cities lies in how it enacts an unfolding within the poem, establishing the work as an active and revisionary *event*.

Oppen begins poem “11” by describing a pervasive “light for the times” (NCP 168), which carries peculiar cosmic qualities and symbolic connotations of knowledge. The light described, however, is quickly grounded in the concrete: “In which the buildings / Stand on low ground, their pediments / Just above the harbor” (NCP 168). In his *Daybooks*,

Oppen provides a clue for how to connect this abstract “light for the times” to the subsequent buildings and harbour: “There are objective forms which have meaning for us, and which we live among, which we cannot escape, and when we see them clearly we *understand* our true natures” (199). Light that “seeps anywhere” alludes to insight and understanding working its way into the concrete, which Oppen exaggerates by describing the structures he engages with as “Absolutely immobile” (NCP 168). To unpack this rare abstraction of light, Heidegger’s explanation of how unconcealment occurs is helpful: “Unconcealment occurs only when it is achieved by work: the work of the word in poetry, the work of stone in temple and statue, the work of the word in thought, the work of the *polis* as the historical place in which all this is grounded and preserved” (*Metaphysics* 191). Mentioning the city in this equation is hardly haphazard, and the *word* “light” in poem “11” “works” in its seeping towards and becoming part of the subsequent structures/buildings. In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger’s analogy of the construction of a Greek temple for a god helps illuminate how the work unfolds essence, or truth. The temple Heidegger speaks of copies nothing, and it is not a work whose purpose is to make it easier to realize how the god looks; rather, “it is a work that lets the god himself be present and thus it is the god himself” (“Work of Art” 670). Thus, the work of art uses craft to bring forth true essence (in the case of the temple, the god) that is dependent on the thingly and aesthetic aspects of the work, just as the work is dependent on the essence that it reveals. If one reads the light Oppen describes as symbolic of truth, or the presence of Being within a given essent, the relationship of the poem itself to the images and ideas described becomes clearer in intention, even if the final resolution of how objects are more than apparitions remains elusive.

Oppen furthers the reciprocal relationship between essence/truth and the thingly/concrete element of the work to continue his project of unfolding in poem “11:” “Hollow, available, you could enter any building, / You could look from any window” (NCP 168). Considering Heidegger’s analogy of the god’s presence in the Greek temple through its construction, Oppen uses these lines to allude to the individual finding a dynamic counterpoint in the concrete. The hollowness of buildings is quickly qualified as availability, suggesting possibility for the entrance of *something*, including Being (essence/truth). Mentioning windows recalls the potential obscuring qualities of glass in “A Language of New York,” yet Oppen establishes a connection through looking, or sight: “One might

wave to himself / From the top of the Empire State Building—” (NCP 168). This image of one waving to oneself implies a symbolic recognition of essence within the building. Rather than evaluating the “I” (or “you”) perceived, the *seeing eye* is given precedence as the astonishment of seeing oneself in the concrete is permitted to stand forth without commentary. Here, Oppen abstractly prepares his reader for the inclusion of personal experience into the concrete. When Paul Kenneth Naylor stipulates that “‘Being’ is the pre-position of whatever is; it is that which allows the ‘things we live among’ to be located” (104), it is this assumption of the truth of Being that drives Oppen’s combination of the concrete and philosophical. This imbuing, however, does not stop there; the reader is brought into the work through the second person—“You could look from any window”—and helps turn the poem into a participatory *event*.

Oppen introduces the first person into this section alongside “not neo classic” Phyllis, crafting a quotidian scene where she is “Coming home from her first job / On the bus in the bare civic interior / Among those people [...]” (NCP 169). Emotions are then combined with the movements and functions of the city: “Her heart, she told me, suddenly tight with happiness—” (NCP 169). There is no direct connection between the images and Phyllis’ happiness—only coexistence. Similarly, Oppen’s own emotions are grounded in details:

So small a picture,
A spot of light on the curb, it cannot demean us

I too am in love down there with the streets
And the square slabs of pavement— (NCP 169)

By focusing on a spot of light, square slabs of pavement, and love connected to the literal streets, Oppen links his emotions to an astonishment of essents captured in a snapshot, or “So small a picture.” Oppen articulates the intent to combine meaning with essents in his *Daybooks* when he writes, “But I speak of the things I see, and that I see everyday, because my life is led among them, because I have no life free from them, and must obviously find meaning in them if I am to find meaning. *at all*” (158). It is this necessity of acknowledging the facts of existence—the things one lives among—that leads the poet “To talk of the house and the neighborhood and the docks” (NCP 169), even if they are not the subject of conventional art.

Despite this emphasis on concreteness and objectivity in

representing the essent-itself, Oppen's personal perceptions and experiences, particularly related to war and his family, enter the poem. This forces the reader to question and evaluate how objectivity and the disclosure of Being are aided and obscured by this inclusion. Oppen, who served during World War II, was deeply affected by the experience and overtly references it in poem "14:"

I cannot even now
 Altogether disengage myself
 From those men

With whom I stood in emplacements, in mess tents,
 In hospitals and sheds and hid in the gullies
 Of blasted roads in a ruined country, (NCP 171)

The section continues, ending with a negative—"In which one cannot speak"—echoing the opening "cannot" and thus recording "the difficulty of disengagement and engagement" (Tryphonopoulos 12), which privileges the purity of inquisitive striving and demonstrates that despite a perhaps latent desire, one cannot disassociate oneself from humanity. While intimate recollection would seemingly negate the unfolding of Heideggerian Being in essents, Oppen grounds his memory in objects and materials: emplacements, mess tents, hospitals, sheds, gullies, blasted roads—these create emotional associations by reinforcing how, through physical actions of standing and hiding, Oppen was engaged with the men he served alongside. These essents (mess tents, hospitals, etc.) "[transport] us into such a condition of being that in our representation we always remain installed within and in pursuit of unconcealment" (Heidegger, "Work of Art" 677). Instead of overtly describing the hardships of his war experience, Oppen uses concrete essents to place the reader within a framework where emotions arise and essents unfold. By simply naming the soldiers Muiykut and Healy without describing their fate, Oppen imbues the nouns with possibility, perhaps hinting at loss through the aborted phrase of "More capable than I—" (NCP 171). Just as soon as he places the reader inside his war experiences, Oppen broadens his scope with a philosophical apologia for the inclusion of personal experience:

How forget that? How talk
 Distantly of 'The People'

Who are that force
 Within the walls

Of cities

Wherein their cars

Echo like history

Down walled avenues

In which one cannot speak. (NCP 171)

“The People” carry a mystical quality of “force,” heightened by the ephemeral “Echo like history” and the absence of speech. While “The People” remain vague, their presence within walls and cars again melds the abstract with the concrete. This, combined with the aforementioned recollections of war, introduces mortality as central to the problem of humanity. Heller explains that *Of Being Numerous* “[mingles] autobiography and metaphysics—or rather, as is the essential feature of Oppen’s vision, [investigates] the metaphysical implications of one’s own experiences, and, conversely, the experiential basis of one’s philosophical generalizations” (“Speaking the Estranged” 85). It is clear that Oppen’s war experiences gave him a particular view of humanity; to talk “distantly” of “The People” is inherent in a construction of humanity that lacks meaning, whereas engagement with personal history allows glimpses of this unknowable concept to reveal itself, down the “walled avenues / In which one cannot speak” properly of such abstractions.

Similarly, in poem “29,” Oppen references his daughter to allude to larger philosophical themes. When Oppen writes, “My daughter, my daughter, what can I say / Of living? // I cannot judge it” (NCP 181), the declamation acts as both a lesson from father to child and reminder of the poem’s philosophical stance of letting essents stand for themselves. By mentioning “living,” Oppen implicitly invites a discussion of mortality, and Peter Nicholls, in *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, argues for neutrality in this thematic conversation: “Death, in fact, is a constant presence in the poem, as Oppen seeks to arrive at a sufficiently complex sense of mortality to avoid the false consolations of both optimism and pessimism” (85). The house that “catches the dawn light” could be enough to incite happiness and overcome the pessimism of death, but Oppen recognizes that happiness has lost meaning through erroneous definitions: “And it was not precisely / Happiness we promised / Ourselves;” (NCP 181). Intrinsic in poem “29” is the truth that “all we believe” is trapped in “the sudden vacuum” (NCP 181), which reminds the reader that to escape this stasis one must allow truth, or essence, to unfold without the

preconceptions of arbitrary signification. Oppen tries to achieve this by unfolding the meaning of his relationship with his daughter as separate from conventional hierarchies:

The baffling hierarchies
Of father and child

As of leaves on their high
Thin twigs to shield us

From time, from open
Time (NCP 182)

The shielding leaves are the concrete representation of the “baffling hierarchies;” it is clear that Oppen desires to access the essence/truth of his personal relationship with his daughter, but the problem lies in extending this recognition to humanity as a whole. As finite, mortal beings, Oppen and his daughter “can know the what-is [of their relationship] only insofar as [they] recognize and participate in its temporality” (Hatlen 15). This establishes a framework where their being-there (*Dasein*), by revealing *nothing* concrete, paradoxically enables glimpses of the totality of humanity/Being. Oppen understands the fluctuating nature of the father-child relationship, and that is why “Oppen’s ‘clarity’ sets itself off from any kind of conceptual thought—it is ‘silent’ rather than explanatory—and what is seen in its light is allowed to ‘be’ for itself rather than exemplifying merely membership of a larger class” (Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism* 91). The clarity in poem “29” is Oppen’s feelings towards his daughter, where the “thin twigs” potentially obscuring the meaning of their relationship are fragile, and access to the “open / Time” that extends to a line containing only a period demonstrates the possibility of inserting *something* new that is born of *nothing* concrete or preconceived. If there is an authentic “we” in numerousness, “it is one rooted in the family rather than in a larger social group” (Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism* 103); the problem of disclosing what the empty space in poem “29” can contain is the problem of extending microcosmic experience to macrocosmic humanity.

While Oppen’s inclusion of personal experience does not invalidate the objective, philosophical quest in *Of Being Numerous*, the resolution of how to unfold meaning and truth in essents amidst one’s historical being-there (*Dasein*) and perceptions of objects involves an understanding of limitations. Circumventing concealment and the

difficulties of direct perception are alluded to in poem “36”:

Tho the world
 Is the obvious, the seen
 And unforeseeable,
 That which one cannot
 Not see
 Which the first eyes
 Saw— (NCP 185)

The world is perceived and unforeseeable essents, which attempts to connect the paradoxical divide between the entity *present-at-hand* and the essence/truth of the essent as dependent on its unfolding. “First eyes” connotes a purity of perception, while the double negative of “cannot / Not” cleverly uses enjambment to suggest the individual’s *not-seeing* and blind trust in appearances. Grammatically connecting the two lines creates positive recognition—sight shifting to insight—and is an example of how “The line sense, the line breaks, and the syntax are intended to control the order of disclosure upon which the poem depends” (Oppen, *SL* 141; qtd. in Tryphonopoulos 4). What the “first eyes saw” is aborted, forcing the reader to recognize that pure perception occurs in instants. Dembo pessimistically argues that “the attempt to acquire knowledge about ‘what is/really going on’ can only end in ennui, for nothing is going on that is reducible to meaning” (70). Dembo’s assessment retains validity with regards to striving forward—to isolate and capture definitive meaning. Oppen and Heidegger recognize the continuous conflict of unconcealment, which “is at the same time a combat against concealment, disguise, false appearance” (*Metaphysics* 192). Thus, attaining truth/Being is not the poet’s only victory as “knowledge as recognition rather than knowledge as truth” is implied in the limitations of language (Naylor 110), which *Of Being Numerous* presents a sense of possibility.

The removal of one’s attachment to concepts is what buttresses the poem’s investigative qualities, and a sense of palpable solitude, or recognition that one is single, paradoxically entwined with humanity is the sustaining tension of life. In Poem “38,” the lines, “You are the last / Who will see him / Or touch him” (NCP 187), addressed to a nurse caring for a dying man, aptly moves towards this meeting of humanity and the singular—an omnipresent possibility whose outcome is constantly rejected, sought-after, and, possibly, attained. The uncertain outcome of the nurse-patient encounter reflects that “only against the background of silence can

our words take on meaning” (Hatlen 16), and this silence is the understanding that transcendent joy does not define humanity; rather, the recognition of shared experience, even if it is collective grief or suffering, is what establishes commonality where being-there (*Dasein*) is harmoniously experienced. Burton Hatlen astutely describes how the nurse and patient “as two human beings come, simply, face to face” and that “this moment will lead nowhere, since the man is dying, but for this very reason the nurse and the old man are, briefly, fully present to one another” (21). There are only things “Occurring ‘neither for self / Nor for truth’” (NCP 187), which challenges the desire for meaning through a knowable transcendent principle by privileging seeking. Oppen ends his lengthy investigation of humanity with the word “curious” because “I couldn’t find anything more positive to say than that” (“Interview” 177). Here, Oppen, albeit with characteristic restraint, betrays that the problem of humanity and the task of unfolding “the sad marvels” is an optimistic quest—and he encourages readers to nurture their curiosity by investigating the personal, factual, and blank spaces in between.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Blattner, William. *Heidegger's Being and Time: A Reader's Guide*. London: Continuum, 2006. Print.
- Creeley, Robert. “Introduction.” *George Oppen: Selected Poems*. New York: New Directions, 2003: xi-xvi. Print.
- Dembo, L.S. “The Existential World of George Oppen.” *The Iowa Review* 3.1 (1972): 64-91. Print.
- Hatlen, Burton. “Oppen and the Unspeakable.” *Paideuma* 40 (forthcoming, 2013): 1-50. Print.
- Heidegger, Martin. *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Trans. Ralph Manheim. New Haven: Yale UP, 1964. Print.
- . *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. Trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1995. Print.
- . “The Origin of the Work of Art.” *Philosophers of Art and Beauty*. Eds. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1964: 647-701. Print.
- Heller, Michael. “A Mimetics of Humanity: Reading Oppen’s *Of Being Numerous*.” *Speaking the Estranged: Essays on the Work of George Oppen*. Cambridge, UK: Salt, 2008: 40-51. Print.

- . "Oppen, Stevens, Wittgenstein: Reflections on the Lyrical and the Philosophical." *Speaking the Estranged: Essays on the Work of George Oppen*. Cambridge, UK: Salt, 2008: 64-81. Print.
- . "Speaking the Estranged: Word and Poetics in Oppen's Poetry." *Speaking the Estranged: Essays on the Work of George Oppen*. Cambridge, UK: Salt, 2008: 82-93. Print.
- . "'Towards an Incomplete Work': An Addendum to Oppen's *Daybooks*." *Speaking the Estranged: Essays on the Work of George Oppen*. Cambridge, UK: Salt, 2008: 101-105. Print.
- . "'Writing Occurs': Reflections on Oppen, Zukofsky and Objectivist Poetics." *Speaking the Estranged: Essays on the Work of George Oppen*. Cambridge, UK: Salt, 2008: 29-39. Print.
- Jeanrond, Werner G. "The Development of Philosophical Hermeneutics: From Schleiermacher to Ricoeur." *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance*. New York: Crossroad, 1991: 44-77. Print.
- Naylor, Paul Kenneth. "The Pre-Position 'Of': Being, Seeing, and Knowing in George Oppen's Poetry." *Contemporary Literature* 32.1 (1991): 100-115. Print.
- Nicholls, Peter. *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. Print.
- . "Of Being Ethical: Reflections on George Oppen." *Journal of American Studies* 31.2 (1997): 153-170. Print.
- Oppen, George. Interview with L.S. Dembo. *The Contemporary Writer: Interviews with Sixteen Novelists and Poets*. Eds L.S. Dembo and Cyrena N. Pondrom. Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1972: 172-190. Print.
- . *George Oppen: New Collected Poems*. Ed. Michael Davidson. New York: New Directions, 2008. Print.
- . "The Mind's Own Place." *George Oppen: Selected Poems*. New York: New Directions, 2003: 173-182. Print.
- . *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*. Ed. Stephen Cope. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2007. Print.
- Tryphonopoulos, Demetres P. "The Prosody of George Oppen's Poetry of the 1960s—'Tho it is impenetrable.'" *Paideuma* 40 (forthcoming, 2013): 1-17. Print.
- Wilkinson, John. "The Glass Enclosure: Transparency and Glitter in the Poetry of George Oppen." *Critical Inquiry* 36.2 (2010): 218-238. Print.
- Zukofsky, Louis. *Prepositions: The Collected Critical Essays of Louis Zukofsky*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1981. Print.