

A DAOIST PERSPECTIVE ON GEORGE OPPEN'S
POETRY AND POETICS

by

XIAOSHENG YANG

HANK LAZER, COMMITTEE CHAIR
PHILIP BEIDLER
HEATHER WHITE
EMILY WITTMAN
THOMAS FOX

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ABSTRACT

I use Daoist principles of ontological simplicity and the unmediated relationship between man and the ten thousand things to analyze George Oppen's poems and poetics. First, I conduct a survey of the current state of American poetry studies and Oppen studies in China. Second, I examine Oppen's poetics of "a language of silence." Third, I seek the compatibility between the two Daoist principles and Oppen's poetic philosophy of silence and clarity. Fourth, I interpret Oppen's representative poems, particularly his only long poem, "Of Being Numerous" through a Daoist perspective. Finally, I analyze two Chinese scholars' translations of the first section of "Route," and I also give an account on how I translate "Of Being Numerous" into Chinese.

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1. THE CURRENT STATE OF MODERN AMERICAN POETRY STUDIES IN CHINA

American literature studies have long been an academic discipline in China although colleges and other educational institutes where the bulk of American literature studies are undertaken focused mainly on the historical aspect of literature. The favoritism to literary history and literary movements over individual writers and their works would have provided a quick overview of what has happened in American letters from Puritanism of the 17th century to present day postmodernism. Chinese scholars of American literature apparently did not hesitate to draw on the experience of their western counterparts, though as for which historical periods merit more attention and how to corral writers into different schools of thoughts, they had their own observations and reservations. The effort to assert the historicity of literature and literary figures would soon see its goals achieved: American literature in the order of their occurrence became familiar to Chinese intellectuals who between 1949 and 1979 only had limited access to western literary texts, and American literature presently became a popular course for an ever growing body of college students of foreign literature. But such an approach, with all of its educational justifications, has its limits.

The historical representation which aims at providing a wide range of writers and exhibiting the progress of American literature first and foremost is arbitrary and biased. According to Alan Golding, author of *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry*, not only historicizing and moralizing approaches in the formation of a poetry anthology but also such criteria as universal excellence and revisionism by which poets are canonized, succumb to partiality. Golding argues that either editors, poets, and college professors canonizing poets, or poetry magazines,

college press and other educational institutions publishing poetic canons, they do so within a social and political mechanism that aims to shape the social subjects and make possible and available only a certain range of social positions and attitudes. In other words, the formation/interpretation of an anthology, as long as it remains a historical process, will always be incomplete, and liable to change. Ziqing Zhang, the editor of the voluminous *A History of 20th Century American Poetry*, for instance, claims that Oppen is a comparatively minor poet in the group of the Objectivists, and in his book, he gives little attention to Oppen's writings.¹

In contrast, when asked whose poems are worthy of introduction to Chinese readers by a prestigious press in China which plans to restart its influential series on translations of international poetry, Yunte Huang, a comparative literature scholar and editorial board member of that press, affirms that "he [Oppen] is one of the few I shall recommend to them."² By citing these two well-known Chinese scholars' disparate opinions on such an American poet as Geroge Oppen, I do not propose that Oppen is a controversial figure in terms of his intellectual heft and historical significance in the development of modern American poetry, rather, I intend to highlight that the mapping out of American poetry (particularly historically) is impossible to be unbiased, and is certain to leave some poets over/under-represented. Meanwhile, precisely because of its arbitrariness and prejudice, the angle of historicism, paradoxically, increases the potential for critics to reclaim and redeem those historically less prominent yet otherwise critical poets. I would argue that Oppen and other Objectivist poets are those whose works are underappreciated and that their works now merit a long overdue attention and recognition among Chinese readers.

The asymmetry between China and America in the publication and reception of post-modernist American poets is striking though the research on their works has substantially increased in the last decade in China. For instance, the Chinese/American Association for Poetry and Poetics

(CAAP) was founded in China in 2008 with Marjorie Perloff being the president and Charles Bernstein, the vice president, both of whom have been known for their affinity for experimental and avant-gardist poetry. The CAAP's latest annual conference on November 28, 2015, attracted over 140 poets, poetry scholars, and literary magazine editors from in and outside China. A survey of the anthologies of modern and contemporary American poetry that did get published in China over the past three decades would help explain why some of the American poets are popular with Chinese readers and others are not.

The anthologies and literary criticism under examination are all written or edited by the Chinese. For the sake of "authenticity," I have excluded those translated anthologies because though the publishers are able to make manifest their intention and interest by publishing such anthologies, they nevertheless utilize their western counterparts' perspectives to express their or their readers' sentiments. One of the first books I have examined is *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* published in 1995 by Henan University Press, in which Yu Peng, the author has surveyed forty-six poets spanning from Ezra Pound in the 1920s to Robert Bly in the late 1960s. In order to "give the readers some clear clues to these poets" (the author's words), the author divides the poets into twelve categories:

The Imagists:	Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle, William Carlos Williams
Chicago Poets:	Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg
Conventional Poets:	Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost
The Fugitive:	John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren
Modernist Poets:	T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Robinson Jeffers, Marianne Moore, E. E. Cummings, Archibald Macleish, Hart Crane, Wystan Hugh Auden
Poets Arising After WW II:	Kenneth Rexroth, Theodore Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, Randall Jarrell, Karl Shapiro, David Ignatow, Howard Nemerov, A. R. Ammons
The Black Mountain Poets:	Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov
The Beat Generation:	Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder
Confessional Poets:	Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath
The New York School:	Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery
Neo-Surrealism:	Robert Bly, James Wright, William Stanley Merwin

The Black Poets:

Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Imamu Amiri Baraka

Without a doubt, Ezra Pound in the first chapter of “The Imagists” can also be subsumed in the chapter of “Modernist Poets.” What I take issue with is not the proper placement of a poet in a particular category, as Peng claims from the outset that there does not exist clear boundaries to wall in and wall out poets and that the poets are actually exploring, consciously and unconsciously, new possibilities beyond the schools they are associated with. The chapter of “Confessional Poets” argues that in the 1960s many poets endeavored to break away from the formalist tradition and to write poems of the personal rather than the impersonal. Following that argument, Peng goes to great lengths to outline Confessional Poetry and its major contributing poets. Admittedly, psychoanalytic and autobiographical poetry constitutes part of the American poetic scene in the 1960s and 70s. Yet it is not what the post-modernist poetry is all about. Oppen’s poems have little to do with psychoanalysis, but they arose on the literary horizon around the late 1960s as well. (In 1969 Oppen won the Pulitzer Prize for his book *Of Being Numerous*.) Moreover, Oppen, along with Louis Zukofsky, initiated in 1931 the Objectivist movement whose tenets of sincerity, intelligence and clarity are known to have palpably influenced poets from the New York School and the Black Mountain School. If John Ashbery, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, along with Confessional poets occupy one-third of Peng’s 20th century American poetic landscape (they very well deserve the attention), it is absolutely necessary to add to the book one more chapter that includes Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, and Charles Reznikoff, if only to make the American poetic vista of the 20th century appear to be less incomplete and less one-sided.

Eleven years after Peng’s book, another scholarly work on American poetry, *A History of the Artistry of American Poetry*, was put into print by Jilin People’s Publishing House. Apart from the

well-established Puritan poets, the Transcendentalists, and American Romanticists prior to the 20th century who constitute the book's first chapter, the remaining three chapters basically repeat what its predecessor did in 1995 and instead of adding new names to the list, has focused once again on Allen Ginsberg, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Robert Duncan, John Ashbery and Robert Bly. Another telling example is *A Review of Some Selected Modern American Poems* published in 2006 by Henan University Press, the same publishing house that over a decade earlier published Peng's *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century*. The author has telescoped the history of modern American poetry, and in her book Langston Hughes becomes the last poet preceded by the poets included in Peng's books with the exception of Amy Lowell, Sara Teasdale, and Elinor Wylie.

What inclines Chinese editors and scholars to spend more effort, for instance, on the modernists, the Beat generation, and Confessional poetry? They have apparently followed the writings of other contemporary American poets, as some of the works they have anthologized are from non-Confessional poets who wrote right into the 1980s and 90s, only that the representation of these poets is disproportionally small in their books. In the two-volume *Modern American Poetry: An Anthology* which includes 519 poems by seventy-three American poets, none of them being from the Objectivist movement, the editor and translator, Yiheng Zhao, has revealed one of the difficulties he and other editors were faced with— “you may find in some libraries anthologies of modern American poetry edited by Americans or scholars from other countries. It is hard to find an anthology that is engaged with one individual poet, let alone his entire works [...] I had the chance to do my research in America and during my one year stay in the University of California, I combed in its several libraries the ‘Modern Poetry Archives’ and the ‘Special Collections Sections’ and found the works of most of the poets. I then made some editorial change over my anthology accordingly.”³

China had been severed from the rest of the world for decades until 1979 when the rapprochement between China and the United States finally allowed the mutual cultural communications to get off the ground. Before the country's opening up to the outside world, not only did modern American poetry studies grind to a standstill, but also the whole academy of American literature, media, and arts was suspended, and it is no wonder that in the years right after Deng Xiaoping's reform there were very few resources of modern American poetry available for Chinese scholars and readers. To speak fairly, the under-representation of avant-gardist poetry could well have resulted from not being able to read those poems in the first place and in the following three decades with the political reform broadened and deepened, this scarcity of materials was soon changed and readers were able to see the publication of more comprehensive reviews of modern American poetry and more ambitious anthologies engaged with avant-gardist poets and their works: Ziqing Zhang's *Language Poems* in 1993, Shouren Wang's *A New Literary History of the United States* (Volume 4) in 2002, and *Selected Poems of Charles Bernstein* by Zhenchao Nie and Lianggong Luo in 2011, to just name a few.⁴

The limited access to modern American poems in the early 80s delimited the scope and boundaries within which 20th-century American poets were studied in China and led to few non-Confessional poems being anthologized. However, to explain why Confessional poetry, in proportion, caught more of the limelight, one also needs to take a closer look at the editor's intentions and the readers' expectations back then. In the prefatory note, Yiheng Zhao has elaborated on the standards by which the poems are anthologized and one of the criteria of his is the translatability and readability of the poems—"we endeavor to keep those that interest our readers, to particularly keep those readable ones."⁵ Yu Peng echoes Zhao's words and points out what most of his readers expect of the western poems: "To this day, many readers still pass

judgment on modern western poems according to the conventional Chinese aesthetic principles and insist that those poems are not like poems.”⁶ To cater to the readers who looked for the totality of meanings (such as themes, characters, and moral/spiritual standing) or the image-based meanings in poems was clearly a major consideration for the editors when they decided to anthologize a sizeable proportion of confessional poems. But the compilation of an anthology is never a simple pandering to the public, as Peng remarks in his book that “our aesthetic perspective is still on the same level as we appreciate Shelley, Pushkin, Raphael and Leonardo Da Vinci. It is not hard to imagine what an arduous work it is for us scholars of foreign literature. The anthology I write is just a pigmy effort [to change the traditional aesthetic perspective].”⁷ For this reason, a small number of non-Confessional post-modernist poems are retained in their books, presumably, as a gesture to encourage readers to at least try some of the other postmodernist poems, only that the gesture is less conspicuous and more tentative. As my dissertation revolves around George Oppen, let me take a step further to see how Oppen is received in China, and what benefits Chinese readers will get by reading his works.

It was around 1929 that Oppen began to publish some of his first poems in *Poetry*. His first book *Discrete Series*, however, was published in 1934 by the Objectivist Press. After that, there was the well-known twenty-five years of silence before his second book *The Materials* was released to the public in 1962 (a number of the poems in the book were actually drafted in the year 1959). In the following 17-18 years till 1978 roughly every three years, a new book of his would be published: *This in Which* (1965), *Of Being Numerous* (1968), *Seascape: Needles's Eye* (1972), *Myth of the Blaze* (1972-1975), *Primitive* (1978). Oppen also had one chapbook, *Alpine*, published in 1969.⁸ On top of that, *The Collected Poems of George Oppen* appeared in 1975; Mary Oppen's *Meaning a Life*, an autobiography dedicated to the Oppens, appeared in 1978; a highly-acclaimed

edition of Oppen's correspondence, *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, edited by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, saw its publication in 1990. Two anthologies —Robert Creeley's *George Oppen: Selected Poems* and Michael Davidson's *George Oppen: New Collected Poems* were both published in 2002, and following them are Stephen Cope's *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers* in 2007 and Richard Swigg's 2012 book, *Speaking with George Oppen: Interviews with the Poet and Mary Oppen, 1968-1987*. Resourced with the publications that have covered Oppen's life, poetic writings, and his intellectual activities privately and collectively conducted with family members, editors, and other poets, American literary scholars and critics would luxuriate themselves in the studies of Oppen's poetics, and, over the past two decades, a significant number of books and academic journal on/relative to Oppen's works have been published in America.⁹ In stark contrast, his books of poetry, memoir, letters, prose, monographs, and the scholarly works regarding his writings can hardly be found in China except at a handful of major university and national libraries where a very small number of books on/by Oppen, mostly in English, are available to the public.¹⁰

Oppen's poems all having been successfully published during his lifetime and posthumously, the anthologizing of them in popular poetry books in America, however, was not as satisfactory. It would actually take a lot of effort and quite some time to get them published. For instance, it was as late as 2003 when some of Oppen's poems were finally anthologized in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*. In the same year, *The Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*, edited by Helen Vendler, was published. But Oppen's poems did not have the same good fortune with it as with the Norton series and were not included. *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (paperback), edited by Rita Dove and published in 2011 also chooses not to include Oppen's poems. To anthologize a poet's works has

long been considered a complex issue. Just as Alan Golding has argued convincingly that with many factors at work, it is literally not feasible to find a set of impartial standards to anthologize and canonize poems. Therefore, Oppen's works, though being increasingly favored by some editors of anthologies of American poetry, would in the meanwhile be neglected or under-represented by other editors who might represent a different social position, public sentiment or poetics/ideology. With this said, it is still exciting to see that in the arena of American poetry, Oppen's works have arisen from relative obscurity to prominence over the past two decades.

The lack of uniformity in terms of having Oppen's poems anthologized raises a pragmatic problem for Chinese scholars and editors who yet have to make another round of selection after their western counterparts, and obviously, they have exercised caution and reluctance when it comes to including in their books American poets whose names are not regularly mentioned in mainstream or popular anthologies. Writings by Chinese scholars relative to Oppen's poems, if there are any, generally fall into three categories of books: the history of American literature, the history of American poetry, and the monographs on specific poets, genres and poetic movements in the U.S. Yaoxin Chang's *A Survey of American Literature* since its first edition in 1990 has been "the Ministry of Education's recommended textbook" for college students across China. Although the third edition of 2008 has added an introductory chapter to works of over fifty contemporary American writers and poets, it does not allocate a single paragraph to Oppen. The voluminous *A New Literary History of the United States* has covered in its Volume IV, "Post WWII American Literature 1945-2000," a large number of avant-gardists; yet unfortunately, it has chosen to skip Oppen in its depiction of the post-WWII poets. In *Dictionary of American Literature: Authors and Works* (2005), a reference book aiming to be as inclusive and comprehensive as possible, I do not find the mentioning of Oppen's name or his works.

In a limited number of books on the history of American poetry, Oppen has been granted a modest spot thanks to the more narrowed and more focused scope of research. Ziqing Zhang's *A History of 20th Century American Poetry* was one of the earliest that has introduced Oppen to Chinese readers though Zhang did not consider Oppen a major poet among the Objectivists. Yongbo Ma's *American Poetry since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders* of 2002 spearheaded the introduction of a new generation of American poets.¹¹ Strictly speaking, his book does not comply with the standard I have previously laid out, for it is a Chinese translation of Eliot Weinberger's work. The reason I single him out is that in his book I have found the first ever translated poems of Oppen's— "Route" and an excerpt of "Some San Francisco Poems."¹²

Interestingly, the first academic journal article on George Oppen that was ever published within China is not by a Chinese scholar, but by Hank Lazer, a poet and English professor from Alabama whose "The Peculiarities of the Making of Cross-Cultural Literary History: Poetry of George Oppen and Larry Eigner" appeared in 2013 in the 5th Issue of *Foreign Literature Studies*. With reference to Chinese culture and literary aesthetics, Lazer's essay has elucidated some of the key features in Oppen's poems that would resonate with the Chinese. The other publication on Oppen is my own translation of "Of Being Numerous" (OBN). The entire poem, together with a brief introduction of the poet, was published in the 2013 October Issue of *Poetry Monthly*. To sum up Oppen studies in China, I would paraphrase a recent remark by A-Xiang, editor in charge of the Poetry International section of *Poetry Monthly*: "very few Chinese readers of poetry know George Oppen and his poems. There has been no Chinese translation of his books, and strangely, we know nothing about this 1969 Pulitzer Prize winner for poetry who obviously was an elder to poets from the schools of Black Mountain and Beat Generation. At times, we are given a range of

poets whose translations we publish, and for this reason, many of the western poets are overlooked.”¹³

For geographical and political reasons, contemporary American poetry studies in China largely halted during the years between 1949 and 1979. With English/American literature gradually establishing itself as one of the major academic disciplines at Chinese colleges and universities since 1979, American poetry studies has witnessed a marked development across the country.¹⁴ Apart from covering the canonical poetic works prior to WWII, Chinese editors of American poetry anthologies also endeavor to introduce avant-gardist poems to Chinese readers so that they could have a glimpse of the latest development in American poetry. A survey of contemporary American poems published in noteworthy collections over the past thirty years in China shows that Confessional poetry, for instance, is far better represented than Objectivist poetry. One reason is that in the U.S., Objectivist poetry itself proves more controversial than Confessional poetry in terms of its participating members, aesthetic credos, and techniques. The wide recognition of such a leading Objectivist poet as George Oppen was a fairly recent thing compared with the numerous accolades for Robert Lowell and other Confessional poets. Second, the formalist aesthetic standards of theme, plot, character, and moral positioning etc. remain popular with Chinese readers, and “readability,” a very questionable criterion for anthologizing poems, has kept many of the seemingly opaque avant-gardist works away from a Chinese readership. Those two reasons, among other factors, render George Oppen a nameless figure in American poetry studies in China. With this said, Oppen’s increasing popularity with language poets in America, the sheer vacuum of Oppen studies in China, the commonality between his poetics and some of the Daoist principles (which I will elucidate in the next few chapters), and the burgeoning research

activities by Chinese literary scholars are ample indications that Open studies in China will be a rewarding and illuminating project for both literary critics and average readers.

2. GEORGE OPPEN'S POETICS

In a May 22, 1973 interview with George Oppen, Charles Tomlinson, alluding to the long hiatus in Oppen's poetic career, asked if Oppen's second book *The Materials* published in 1962 was a new beginning from his first book *Discrete Series* written in the early 1930s. Oppen says, sure-footedly, "No. I did not feel far. I had felt, as Kenner was hinting, that I simply didn't know enough to continue to go further than *Discrete Series*."¹ This remark was made five years prior to the publication of his last book, *Primitive*, and eleven years before his death. What Oppen wants to express, if only implicitly, is that he has absolute faith in his own way of writing. What is it then that has for decades so deeply fascinated him as a poet? Combing through his selected prose, daybooks, papers, and his correspondence with publishers and fellow poets, one finds that Oppen would go repeatedly to the themes of language, human consciousness, and individuality versus collectivity. One might say that most poets would contemplate and write the same subject matter throughout a career. True, unique with Oppen though is that readers can always relate, for instance, his thinking of language to that of human consciousness, all the way to spirituality and the universe. In him, one feels the quality of honesty and sincerity, not in the sense that he unveils the truth of things, but in that he is always seen standing behind what he believes to be the truth—the kind of old-timey honesty and stubbornness often associated with a man of his word.

Oppen does not like adjectives much. Referring to the word "beautiful" in his poem "Image of the Engine," Oppen explains that "since I don't use many [adjectives], I don't need a very fancy one."² The result: he overuses "beautiful" in his anthology.³ It becomes an act of faith that he only picks up modifiers when he needs to speak of a subjective reaction. His view on adjectives

resonates with many modern poets and writers. Gertrude Stein in “Poetry and Grammar” wrote that “Adjectives are not really and truly interesting [...] In a way as I say anybody knows that because the first thing that anybody takes out of anybody’s writing are the adjectives.”⁴ Most of the adjectives, even those describing the physical attributes of things, are prescriptive, and the use of them in a poetic work, according to Stein and Oppen, is an attempt to impose personal perceptions and feelings on things. Adjectives are considered a barrier between the gazer and the gazed.⁵ “I don’t think life should be valued only when it can be sentimentalized,” Oppen explains in his daybook, and his lack of interest in objectifying things with adjectives should be a good point of entry for examining his poetry and poetics.⁶

Contrasting to his suspicion of adjectives, Oppen’s gusto for nouns stands out. He doubts abstraction, the intellect for what exists, Newtonian mechanics, Freudian psychoanalysis, political conceptions, formal logic, among others; yet he shows tremendous enthusiasm for visible, concrete things and their thingliness.⁷ Because things are usually represented by nouns, Oppen’s faith, as he writes in his daybook, readily goes to nouns. But what I am examining here, in addition to his predilection for concrete objects, is his metaphysics as a poet. Behind his affinity for nouns is an array of epistemological questions that we must seriously take heed of.

If Oppen is interested in the thingly nature of the world, it is because he believes that the world exists on its own. For him, the world is both dominant and impenetrable. There are abounding references to the thingliness of the world in his writings.⁸ One could see it expressed in many of his poems in which the world, often epitomized by the sea, rocks, among others, stands toe-to-toe in front of humans and invites humans to enter into its mystery. The centrality of the physical world is also articulated in his journals: “I speak of the things I see, and that I see every day, because my life is led among them, because I have no life free from them”,⁹ and “[l]ife is, in

any case, irrevocably committed to a world without a god.”¹⁰ Noteworthy also is that there was a stint of time before and after WWII when Oppen was a member of the American Communist Party. Supremacy of the materiality of the world is one of the fundamentals of dialectical materialism the Party propagated.¹¹ If Oppen rejected Communist doctrines in the late 1950s, he would still have believed for some twenty years that the world in essence is made up of a myriad of things. To use Oppen’s own words to describe the preponderance of the world, “There are things/ We live among ‘and to see them/ Is to know ourselves’” (OBN, section 1).

For such a poet as Oppen, well-read in modern science and philosophy, and widely connected through correspondence with other contemporary poets and scholars, to come to believe the impenetrability of the world requires that he give serious thought to Newtonian mechanics, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Christian theology that have been clearly aiming to give humanity a sense that the world *is* penetrable after all.¹² There are two entries in *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers* on Newtonian theories and the gist of both is that Newtonian rationalism brings us only to determinism and passivity and that it is but an illusion that the force of life can be rationally found. He has reflected his opposition to Freudian analysis in one of his journals as well, claiming that psychoanalysis is a therapy that only deals with an individual’s immediate problems, and, therefore, has little to do with what the individual really wants for himself. To the existence of spirituality, Oppen’s mind is less resolute: At one time, he appeared to be suspicious of Darwinism— “The thing took place entirely by chance. It is said that the process occupied a great many years. The only question is—Does one believe it?”¹³ He seems more ready to accept the notion of God’s vast ubiquity by jotting down such remarks as “it is possible to conceive of god making the universe; it is impossible to conceive of the universe making god,”¹⁴ and “[w]e will finally say God or we

will be unable to say anything.”¹⁵At another time, he would be found hesitating over the omnipresence and omnipotence of God.¹⁶

If for Oppen, the ten thousand things are the essence of the universe, what then are human intellect and consciousness in relation to the universe? Is it a part of it, or does it stand apart from it? For a Cartesian, our existence as a thinking being is beyond doubt— “I think, therefore I am,” and this statement is a benchmark and foundation for all human beliefs and activities. Following it, a Cartesian suggests that man should step inwardly from his outward involvement with things and sever the bond between subject and object. From a Cartesian point of view, human consciousness transcends the world, and any connection or interaction between the self and the material world is irrelevant and illusive. A materialist, on the other hand, backed by Newtonian theories and neuroscience, claims that all, including human brain, must function by the laws of physics and physiology. For a believer in materialism, the world can and must be explained in scientific terms and there is no need to postulate anything called a subject of perception. By insisting that intellect and consciousness are nothing but another “object” with some special kind of structures possessed by the brain, a materialist goes in a direction diametrically different from a Cartesian’s.

As I have argued, Oppen’s belief in the prevalence of the myriad things is well documented and represented in many of his writings. But I am also convinced that Oppen equally values the human consciousness and intellect. In a lengthy explanation of the meaning of “actualness,” Oppen writes that “Impossible to doubt the actualness of one’s own consciousness: but, therefore, consciousness in itself, of itself, by itself carries the principle of ACTUALNESS for it, itself, is actual beyond doubt.”¹⁷ For Oppen, the two entities of the world and the human intellect have formed a mutually dependent and inseparable bond, and the one is of significance only because of

the existence of the other. This is a kind of phenomenological stand (Oppen was familiar with phenomenology. He claimed that he had read quite a bit of Merleau-Ponty) — consciousness always refers to some object and it cannot exist alone.¹⁸ It is always consciousness of something. Thinking without thinking of something or someone is a false proposition. Only in relation to an object can thinking happen. In brief, consciousness is relational.

Also worth mentioning is that phenomenology that I relate to Oppen's worldview differs from the study of what causes our consciousness of objects. The former emphasizes what the objects that we believe ourselves to experience in the world mean to us whereas the latter, concerned with scientific data and experimentation, falls within the scope of psychology and neuroscience which Oppen strongly opposes. Furthermore, phenomenology investigates how objects appear to our consciousness, and it is likely that in our consciousness, an object differs from what it objectively looks like in the real world. This stance guarantees that consciousness can be independently studied in addition to its inseparability from the outside world. In short, to understand a human being phenomenologically requires the combination of subjectivism and objectivism: all experience must be a particular subject's experience or a subjective experience, and at the same time the description of such experience is not of purely inner experience, but of one's involvement with the world that is independent of his experience of it.

From his suspicion of adjectives and affinity for nouns to his belief in the dominance of things and the co-existence of consciousness and the universe, our findings so far do not seem to help much in our understanding of him as a poet, for if the existence of consciousness is valid, reasoning and intellection germane to the human consciousness is valid, and then our existing perceptions and knowledge of the world are valid. Considering that Oppen takes a dislike of the human intellect, isn't it confusing that a poet at once believes in consciousness and disbelieves its conceptualized

externals such as the world of the workings of conceptual, logical and discursive Reason? To address this question, we have to look at what aspect of intellect Oppen gives credit to and what aspect he does not. So far our impression is that the intellect or consciousness Oppen values is dissimilar to the intellect that is often associated with the everyday concepts and ideas. Jacques Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, a book that is believed to have had a profound influence on Oppen, will shed some light on this question regarding Oppen's seemingly inconsistent and ambivalent attitude toward intellect and the world.

In his book, Maritain explains in detail the coexistence of consciousness and the myriad things.¹⁹ On one side of Maritain's equation is the self, and, on the other side, Things. The coming together of the world and the self results in artistic creation. Referring to ancient Chinese and Indian artists' emphasis on things, Maritain claims that "The inner meanings of Things are enigmatically grasped through the artist's Self, and both are manifested in the work together. This was the time when poetry became conscious of itself."²⁰ The self, according to his interpretation, is a configuration of multiple elements. On the top of it resides the Soul which is followed in order by Intellect, Imagination, and Eternal Senses. "Poetic intuition," which is also "creative intuition" is born in the "spirit unconscious" of the Intellect (the three terms are all coined by Maritain himself), apart from a concept to be formed. With the reality of things in the world and the subjectivity of the poet as its contents, poetic intuition is a kind of non-conceptual or pre-conceptual knowledge in act. It can only awaken to itself through the poet's suffering the things of the world, because not knowing itself, the soul has to go to the external world where all the reality, all existing things, and all existential relations among beings and nonbeings have in themselves the secret senses and significance that are in accord and union with subjectivity.

Only when making things resound in him and grasping the objective reality of the outer and inner world can subjectivity be obscurely revealed and awakened.

We now have two categories of intellect. On the one hand, we have ideas, concepts, and theories which produce in us an intellectual conformity with the truths involved; on the other hand, we have an obscure, inexpressible, and non-conceptual intellect without parallel in logical reason. To be a creative poet first and foremost requires that the poet expose himself to things connatural to the soul. He enters into the world of things and by his ability to step into the unknown, to wonder and contemplate, his intellect is informed and enlightened beyond his knowing. Maritain's argument has addressed head-on the question we have of Oppen's understanding of the relationship between intellect and the world. The intellect Oppen treasures is of a higher calling that transcends the intellect we often associate with human conceptualizing and reasoning. For him, a poem is an intellectual act which is not formed *by* things, but *with* things, and which, by this essence, is always forming in meaning. It can be rightly described as an "occasion of a sensitive reaction to an actual world" (OBN, section 12).

From his preference of nouns over adjectives, Oppen makes manifest the prevalence of things. Meanwhile, the prevalence of things does not exclude the existence of consciousness. The consciousness Oppen holds fast to is of a higher order. It varies from the one we connect with ordinary concepts and ideas, and it lies latent in a poet and cannot be awakened by itself. Through the poet's immersing himself in the all-encompassing world of activities, it is stimulated because the inner meanings of things are connatural with the poet's consciousness. Now the questions are: for Oppen, what is the inner meaning of a thing and how can a poet access it through his writing?

From ancient Greek philosophers to modern day scientists, generations of people have made various attempts to reveal the essence of things. According to Heidegger, instead of coming close

to the essence of things, humans end up distancing themselves from it. Heidegger argues that at the beginning of human history, man is not an enclosed inner realm facing an outer world. In the unity of the structure of “being-in-the-world,” self and the world are one and together. But this harmony, this sense of mutual belonging was disrupted as *the theoretical* in Western life began to take dominance. Theorizing, based on an attitude that it is a detached process—a “view from nowhere”—attempts to secure man a spot where he could comprehend, dominate, and, at length, go beyond and surpass things. But the matter of fact is that our understanding of the world arises out of a specific situation, and, therefore, cannot be impartial or infinite. It is made possible only by a relation to being that must be assumed and not yet conceptualized. Heidegger does not dismiss the premise that truth exists, what he takes issue with is the assumption that our achieving of it is an ahistorical and self-grounding process. He insists that only through seeing his existence as “being-in-the-world” rather than creating an opposition between self and non-self, inner and outer, can man grasp the relevance and implication of specific parts of things.

By corollary, a poetic work, as Oppen makes it, should not be an object of our thinking. It should not be a sign or symbol in conformity to a given state of affairs. Like the meaning of the ten thousand things, we cannot interpret the meaning of a work because there is no final determinate meaning to get at. Not a matter of description and representation, a poem is an occasion where we allow ourselves to harken and follow than to ascertain and make a judgment of things. It is a setting up of a world, not in the sense that the world becomes the collection of objects for us to see, or that it is an imagined framework added by our representation to the sum of the given things. The world poetry establishes is the covert throng of a surrounding that is beyond human intelligence and cannot be objectified or conceptualized. The inner meaning of a thing a poet craves for through poetry, accordingly, is not the thought, the theorized, or the schematized,

because that which we take for granted, as Heidegger insists, produces no truth at all. The truth of a thing is the opening up and infinite approaching and revealing of what it is. It is rather a non-judgmental, constantly bringing into consciousness process than a thing awaiting us to grasp, secure, and master.

The inner meanings of things, in essence, is identical with human intellect and creative intuition. They are congenial to and connatural with each other, and in order to have creative intuition, a poet goes after the inner meanings of things through which his intellect and poetic intuition are awakened. Instead of a conceptual closure, the essence of things keeps holding back and giving forth. The pursuit of the inner meanings of things becomes eventually a process of un-concealment, or concealment in the name of un-concealment. The question of how a poet accesses the truth of things through his works really turns out to be how by virtue of poetry he occasions the process of un-concealment.

In order to see how un-concealment is initiated in a poem, let us take a close look at a few lines that appear in two of his most well-known poems. In “Route,” Oppen writes:

Clarity, clarity, surely clarity is the most beautiful
thing in the world,
A limited, limiting clarity

I have not and never did have any motive of poetry
But to achieve clarity

and then in OBN, he explains what he means by “clarity”:

Clarity
In the sense of transparency,
I don’t mean that much can be explained.

Clarity in the sense of silence.

In both poems and indeed in quite a few other poems, Oppen has highlighted “clarity,” “transparency,” and “silence,” and if we take “clarity” as a manifesto of his aim and objective, we

must make clear what “clarity” refers to and how “transparency” and “silence” play a role in producing clarity.

When we look in the dictionary, the definition of “clarity” is roughly put into two categories: 1) the quality of coherence and intelligibility, and of being certain and definite; 2) the quality of being easy to see or hear, and of transparency or purity. In relation to Heidegger’s “being-in-the-world,” there originally does not exist a dichotomy between the self and the world. The two entities co-exist and neither is given superiority over the other. Theorizing in the hope of giving a coherent, intelligent explanation of the world has fundamentally altered the original harmony between the two because the analytical way of knowing is not terribly keen on looking for the hidden causes of things. Mostly, it aims at organizing and systematizing observable experience. By so doing, it becomes oblivious of the holistic nature of the myriad things and eventually polarizes the self and the world into two opposing positions. Far from being able to explain what the world is, analyzing and objectifying at best give a limited representation of the world, and at worst, distort and destroy in advance the essentials and numerous possibilities the world offers for us. From a Heideggerian point of view, the interpretation that clarity equals intelligence and certainty is a pseudo-proposition, and to understand clarity as coherence and intelligibility would never help a person acquire clarity. If we want something better than a positivist version of clarity, we must let go of the sense of totality and certainty and the other abstract conceptualizations of the world.

According to the English lexicon, clarity also refers to the quality of being easy to see or hear, and of transparency or purity. This type of clarity, absent of human conceptualizing, depends more on objects themselves. Instead of soliciting the intellect of the perceiver, this kind of clarity stresses the attributes of the perceived—the ease or limpidity with which an object flashes on our eyes or a voice trumpets at our ears. There is less intellectual involvement on the part of the gazer. Based

on his personal manifesto of “clarity in the sense of transparency,” and “I don’t mean that much can be explained,” I would argue that Oppen’s notion of clarity is more in alignment with the latter definition. His mission as a poet is to restore an object in its pristine state and to seek to uncover the thing as it presents itself to us rather than to interpret an object in some “intelligent” way or to give meaning to things. For him, only when things are in a pre-conceptual and non-reflective condition can the limits on their potentials be lifted. The “*uncoveredness*” is the essence of things, and from among the ever surging representations of things a poet reaches that which awakens his consciousness. To be more specific, clarity stands for a new relationship between the gazer and the gazed. Instead of asking the onlooker to wear a different pair of lens to *re-view* a plant, Oppen means for him to take it all off and wipe and dust the leaves of the plant so that its true colors and vitality could of itself shine through.

“Clarity in the sense of transparency” boils down to the restoration of objects in their primal condition and the removal of preset perceptions between the self and the world. If Oppen’s primary goal in poetry is to forge an unmediated relationship between the viewer and the viewed, then “clarity in the sense of silence” is the means to that goal. To achieve transparency, a poet relies more on his eyes than his mind’s eye: If in the past only a beam of light was allowed to go through the organs of his intellectual faculties, now he lets his whole body bask in the glory of the sun. Touched by the light, a numinous feeling in him beyond his cognizance emerges. Silence, in essence, is an attitudinal issue for a poet.

When there is no split between the self and the world and when the self and the world are on an equal footing, subjective experiences would remain as they are without being judged. They spontaneously arise, and together with things involved open up a field of cosmic mutual interpretation. From a poet’s point of view, what could restrict our experience of the world is

ordinary language: it gives definitions of reality, regulates life in accordance with a network of standardized invariables, and makes our world into a system of meanings. The idea of everyday language should be differentiated from the idea of language because, in order to experience the world of things in its pristine state, humans must also rely on language. We live in language, and the power of language distinguishes us from stones, plants, and animals. With language, we have established a fundamental understanding of consciousness and our identity as sentient beings. To a large extent, language makes us what we are.

There was a time in human history when a more productive relationship between the self, language, and the world existed. Heidegger traces it to ancient Greece when language, directly connected to things, was able to give people an authentic experience of reality. But the basic Greek experience of the Being of beings began to diminish when Roman thought took over the Greek words. The Greek language was appropriated, but not the Greek experience. Detached from things, the Roman thought became rootless. According to Heidegger, western thought following Roman's continues to lose touch with true reality and culminates in man's transposing his propositional way of understanding into the structure of the thing itself. Vitality and intensely tied with human experience, language is the essential part of Being. But ordinary language, inadequate and unreliable after centuries of appropriation, reaches a point where it cannot describe the reality beyond it. In the meanwhile, it would be a complete misapprehension that ancient Greek language is superior to modern language. What Heidegger deplores is that the way we use language distances ourselves from things, rather than facilitating the intermingling of the two.

Through "silence," Oppen attempts to restore a meaningful relationship between language and reality. But how could one give rise to creative language through silence? Should he remain passive and let "silence" overwhelm him? The answer to these questions involves two processes

in reverse directions: first, the current relationship between language and reality must break down into silence. For Oppen, the primordial reality of the world, regardless how we conceptualize it, keeps silently boiling up—it is what he calls “an infinite series” (OBN, section 1). The universe is impenetrable, misty, but not necessarily terrifying, and all we need to do is to throw ourselves into that universe, keep our mind open, let things happen, and follow along with them. Keeping silent is a conscious decision aimed at individual enlightenment. It clearly differs from pure passivity or nihilism in which one has no intention to connect language with reality, or articulate the experience of true reality in language.

In the course of the second process, the language of true self emerges from silence. Without the overlay of ordinary language, a poet’s true self listens to that which emanates from the realm of the indescribable; it exposes itself to the original reality of things without segmentation or differentiation. Meanings constructed within the frame of everyday language are now modified and deconstructed. A form of new language, miraculously, originating from the life-breath silence and capable of describing it, is brought into being. In brief, silence restores the direct connection between the self and things. Silence becomes the source of language.

The core of silence is to cut into and reconstruct the network of everyday language which has degenerated into decoration and mannerism. Silence, whether it is literal or metaphorical, in a given poem, refers to a condition and surrounding, where readers are given the opportunity to scrutinize old meanings and rules of language, and to reestablish new meanings and new rules that could un-conceal reality, though, un-concealment, as I have argued previously, could never conclude anything once and for all: one un-concealment leads to another concealment and so on alternately. Un-concealment is, in fact, concealment in the name of un-concealment.

The sound of silence abounds in Oppen's poems. Alluded mostly to the impact on one's ears, silence, nevertheless, can also be transformed into visual representations on paper just as the cardiogram marking the beat of a human heart: the spikes and dips in the tracings visualize blood pounding and heart throbbing whereas a flat line betokens demise of life. From the line's movement on a cardiogram, we see what we are supposed to hear. Similarly, to situate the sound of "silence" in Oppen's poems, one has to look at how space, the visual equivalent of silence, is represented. I do not mean that the more space one finds in his poems, the more silence those poems make. The sound of silence results from the interactions between space and words. Space makes us focus and contemplate the words within it while words give space new meanings. More importantly, the spatial representation of silence—blank pages, breaks, and spaces between lines and stanzas—allows us to keep an empty and spacious mind not in the sense that we discard all knowledge, but in the sense that we could have an unblocked mind. When our mind is uncluttered and when we have a "purer" view, the meanings of words in the white space of the page gains new significance. Let me use an example to illustrate how space is used as a kind of intentional silence to change the dynamic between words and to give words new meanings and significance.

"To C. T." is the penultimate poem in his 1965 book *"This In Which,"* in which Oppen first alludes to it being originally ordinary sentences in a letter to his friend Charles Tomlinson. If that was the case, the poem could be restored to its original form of sentences:

One imagines himself addressing his peers I suppose. Surely that might be the definition of 'seriousness'? I would like, as you see, to convince myself that my pleasure in your response is not plain vanity but the pleasure of being heard, the pleasure of companionship, which seems more honorable.²¹

Thus written, "To C. T." becomes a solid prose paragraph, leaving no hesitancy or inarticulateness in terms of its message and we are expected to fully comprehend the immediate denotations of all of the words. When the paragraph is spaced into divided lines and when the standard sentences are

fragmentized, the meanings of the words without our knowing become less monolithic and far more unstable:

One imagines himself
addressing his peers
I suppose. Surely
that might be the definition
of 'seriousness'? I would like,
as you see,
to convince
myself
that my pleasure in your response
is not
plain vanity
but the pleasure of being heard,
the pleasure
of companionship, which seems
more honorable.

Although the poem's trope still revolves around the poetic persona "I," and that the interpretation of it still relies on the grammatical configurations of the various constituents in the poem, yet the communication between the addresser and his addressees, because of this spatial modality of writing, suddenly becomes less univocal. "Pleasure" is not merely a person's heartfelt appreciation of his friend's understanding. It acquires the attribute of a non-subjective noun, and all of sudden, what pleasure *is* matters much more than *whose* pleasure it is.

The breaking and spacing out of otherwise neat sentences are facets of what I mean by silence in a poem. This kind of silence is mediated by language, but it cannot be expressed in language. In the above poem, there is no change whatsoever in the words or punctuations. But because of the vertical, elongated array of the constituents of the poem, the unsayable begins to manifest itself. Silence, in a word, is freedom regained. It encourages experimentation and empiricism for the poet and his readers. It allows both parties to reconsider language, and through language, the world.

In this chapter, I have first analyzed Oppen's different feelings toward adjectives and nouns. His affinity for nouns leads us to the conclusion that he values equally the myriad things and the

human intellect. For him, there are two tiers of human intellect. On the top is the ungraspable, intuitive intellect whereas at the bottom lies the intellect that is customarily associated with ideas and concepts. Ungraspable as it is, intuitive intellect could be awakened by a poet's embracing the ten thousand things since things are connatural with creative intuition. In order to immerse himself in things, a poet must use a language of transparency, because the ordinary language, far from a qualified mediator, distances the perceiver from the perceived things. A language of transparency is also a language of silence. Through restructuring and renovating the network of everyday language, silence is achieved and a new, unmediated relationship between the self and the world, established.

3. A COMPARISON BETWEEN GEORGE OPPEN'S POETICS AND DAOIST PRINCIPLES

Though well over two millennia and half a world apart, the Daoist sage, Laozi, is no stranger to Oppen. The two must have “encountered” each other many times, and it is only fair to say that Oppen knows Laozi and his work, *Dao De Jing*, all too well. Oppen has always been familiar with Chinese literature: in his letter to John Crawford, he writes “I once read thru 10 years’ worth of Soviet Lit today and of Chinese Lit today.”¹ He made comments on ancient and contemporary Chinese novels in his correspondence with another friend of his;² he gave a detailed analysis of Chinese politics of the day;³ misquoted Chairman Mao’s 1957 political slogan;⁴ made references to a Chinese Buddhist text in his daybook;⁵ and used Zen and Daoist tenets to comment on a poem his daughter, Linda Oppen Mourelatos sent him.⁶

Oppen was also an avid reader of Heidegger. He openly acknowledged Heidegger’s influence on his worldview and generously quoted Heidegger in his poems and other writings.⁷ Heidegger was closely connected with Eastern Asian philosophers, and his philosophy in his later poetry was significantly informed by Ch’an (Zen) Buddhist and Daoist thoughts.⁸ In an introduction to a selection of works by D.T. Suzuki, William Barrett vividly describes that “a German friend of Heidegger told me that one day when he visited Heidegger he found him reading one of Suzuki’s books. ‘If I understand this man correctly,’ Heidegger remarked ‘this is what I have been trying to say in all my writings’ .”⁹ Apart from the anecdote that evidences Heidegger’s respect for Ch’an (Zen) Buddhism, the German philosopher, with the help of a Chinese scholar, spent a few months translating the first eight chapters of *Dao De Jing*.¹⁰ The extent to which Heidegger’s thinking has

been influenced by Daoist and Buddhist ideas is so significant that some scholars even proposed to examine Heidegger's early writing when his thinking was not overshadowed by Buddhism and Daoism. The close tie between Heidegger and Eastern Asian philosophers is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but one can extrapolate that through Heidegger, Oppen was conversant with Laozi's thought.

Additionally, the philosopher Jacques Maritain is widely acknowledged as another important source of inspiration for Oppen. Not only does this Frenchman's name appear in quite a few of Oppen's poems and essays, his work *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* is believed to have exerted a major influence on Oppen's thinking during his productive years between the mid- and late 1960s.¹¹ In his book, Maritain has analyzed Chinese art through a Daoist perspective—"[the Chinese] have a cosmic faith, a sacred veneration for Tao, the primal source, and for heaven, in which the spirits of all that is visibly shaped pre-exist and from which they come down into things to hide in them and shape and move them from within."¹² It is almost certain that if Oppen's thought was somewhat nourished by Maritain's book, he must have been familiar with Daoism whose core principles are explicitly laid out in the first chapter of that book. To conclude, Oppen is no stranger to Laozi the poet, and certainly no stranger to Daoist thought.

The factual evidence strongly indicates that Oppen knows Laozi well. But familiarizing oneself with a thought differs from being influenced by it. Oppen may have read *Dao De Jing*, yet we cannot indulge ourselves right away with a claim that Eastern Asian thoughts have an impact on him as it has on Heidegger. As a matter of fact, Oppen never mentioned *Dao De Jing* in his poems, or his other writings, though he did allude to "Tao" (Dao) on quite a few occasions. What needs to be examined then are the basic Daoist principles and their compatibility with Oppen's thought. Oppen would not have claimed that Laozi's work influenced him, but some of the Daoist

perceptions of the self, the world, and language would definitely resonate with him and could have indirectly informed his writings.

For scholars within and without China, Laozi the person is as obscure and vague as the book he presumably wrote. *Shi Ji* (*The Book of History*, or *The Historical Records*) mentions that Laozi was a petty government official in charge of his dukedom's library.¹³ He was a contemporary of Confucius, and it is recorded that Confucius once visited Laozi and solicited his opinion on “*Li*” (ritual propriety). Right before Laozi began to conduct a life of seclusion, a guardian at a military pass persuaded him to finally write down the two-volume book of *Dao De Jing*.¹⁴ Regardless in what circumstances and by whom it was written, the philosophical ideas expressed in this book of five thousand characters have been hardwired into Chinese culture and mentality, and for many centuries have exerted a profound influence on China's religions, ethics, agriculture, governance, medicine, human hygiene and so on and so forth.¹⁵ Daoism is seen to have been particularly conducive to the studies of ecology and environmental protection.¹⁶ Through Daoism, the relation between man and nature is reassessed, and such urgent ecological issues as human responsibility for environmental maladies have begun to receive more public attention in recent years. On top of that, as aesthetics and poetics, Daoist principles of spontaneity and concordance between man and nature have provided literary critics with new perspectives through which Western and Chinese literature are re-examined and re-appreciated.¹⁷

Daoist ideas permeate a whole spectrum of disciplines from physics to psychology and from astronomy to poetry. The popularity of Daoist studies is not only an interdisciplinary phenomenon but also goes beyond national borders. Ever since it was first translated into English in 1868, *Dao De Jing* had close to sixty different English versions by the 1960s.¹⁸ It has been the single most popular Chinese text outside China. Despite its many versions, however, Eastern Asian aesthetics

in general and Chinese Daoist poetics, in particular, did not seem to have contributed much to American poetry and poetics in the first half of the 20th century, except perhaps for Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* and *Cathay*, interspersed with more Confucian than Daoist thought, and for Ernest Fenollosa's *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* through Ezra Pound, which anchoring to the kinetic features of Chinese characters, is regarded as a partial and incomplete interpretation of Chinese language and poetics.

A fair assessment of the influence of Daoism on modern American poetry should include that of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism. As I have previously mentioned, David Hinton asserts that Daoism and Ch'an Buddhism follow the same spiritual tradition and Ch'an Buddhism is the development and supplementation of Daoism. In one of the talks transcribed in *Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness: Zen Talks on the Sandokai*, Zen Master Suzuki Roshi writes that "Originally, *Sandokai* was the title of a Daoist book. Sekito used the same title for his poem, which describes Buddha's teaching. What is the difference between Daoist teachings and Buddhist teachings? There are many similarities. When a Buddhist reads it, it is a Buddhist text, and when a Daoist reads it, it is a Daoist text. Yet it is actually the same thing."¹⁹ According to Suzuki Roshi, there is essentially no distinction between Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism and Daoism. The British-born philosopher Alan Watts also confirms the pervasive influence of Daoism on Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism— "in order to understand how Zen came upon this view one must consider the environment in which Zen first arose, which was the native Chinese world of Taoism."²⁰ Together with Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism, Daoism is to be found to have a more far-reaching and significant influence on American Poetry of the last century than first considered.

In the first half of the 20th century, "Dao" (the Way) and *Yinyang* were all that Daoism was about for a large number of American poets who would have related themselves to this Eastern

Asian philosophy. According to Yiheng Zhao, American poets who were genuinely influenced by Daoist ideas during the period of American Modernism are Carl Sandburg, Robinson Jeffers, and William Carlos Williams. He asserts that Sandburg’s “Cool Tombs” and “Grass” have reflected Daoist ideas of silence and man’s becoming part of nature. Although the article, “The Pacific Influence in American Poetry” Zhao references to support his argument can hardly indicate the current state of comparative literature studies, Zhao has acutely pointed out that it is the distrust of ordinary language that has connected Robinson Jeffers’ work to Daoist thought.²¹ Among those post-WWII American poets, Zhao argues that Robert Bly, James Wright, Charles Wright, and Kenneth Rexroth are prominent in terms of being influenced by Daoist and Buddhist writings.²²

...A man of
 Sixty years, still wandering
 Through wooded hills, gathering
 Mushrooms, bracken fiddle necks,
 And bamboo shoots, listening
 Deep in his mind to music
 Lost far off in space and time.
 The valley’s soul is deathless.
 It is called the dark woman.
 The dark woman is the gate
 To the root of heaven and earth.
 If you draw her out like floss
 She is inexhaustible.
 She is possessed without effort.
 “The Heart’s Garden The Garden’s Heart”

...
 The valley spirit never dies.
 It’s called dark female-enigma,
 And the gate of dark female-enigma
 is called the root of heaven and earth,
 gossamer so unceasing it seems real.
 Use it: it’s effortless.
 TTC, Poem 6

By highlighting the similarities between Poem I from Kenneth Rexroth’s “The Heart’s Garden The Garden’s Heart” and Poem 6 of *Dao De Jing*, Zhao argues that American poets since the 1960s onward have an in-depth understanding of *Dao De Jing*, and some of their works have demonstrated a wide range of Daoist ideas of “Wuwei” (non-assertive action), “Wuyu” (non-assertive desire), “Wuzhi” (non-assertive knowledge), and “Ziran” (being spontaneous).

As for the dissemination of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism among American poets, Japanese philosopher D. T. Suzuki's *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* was no small contribution; Arthur Waley also wrote an opus on ancient Chinese thought, and he became one of the first westerners who ever articulated the relation between Zen Buddhism and aesthetics and poetics.²³ The English-born philosopher, Alan Watts's *Zen, The Way of Zen*, and his lecturing on Daoism and Zen Buddhism enjoyed praise and accolades among American poets, particularly those of the Beat Generation. Of contemporary poets who have a special affinity for Zen Buddhism, Jackson Mac Low, Lucien Stryk and Gary Snyder stand out. Snyder, the most well-known of the three, has for years devoted himself to the study of mythology and the discipline of Eastern religions. He lived in Japan and practiced Zen, and in his poems which often contain a Zen-like stillness, Snyder "seeks to restore contact with a vital universe in which all things are interdependent."²⁴

Daoist philosophy has gained currency in an increasing number of academic disciplines. The study of it has become an international phenomenon. In this chapter, I have first demonstrated that Oppen had ample access to *Dao De Jing*; then I have enumerated that in the last century particularly from the 1960s onward, Daoism and Ch'an Buddhism have evidentially exerted broad influence on American poetry. Since this dissertation focuses on how to use Daoism as poetics and aesthetics to interpret Oppen's poems, in the following paragraphs, I will elaborate on some of the Daoist aesthetic principles before I make an analogy between the two poets so far apart in time and space.

First, Daoism advocates total egalitarianism among the myriad things and rejects the preponderance or centrality of man in the universe. Poem 25 reads, "Indeed the Way is all-supreme, / And heaven too, and earth, and man—/The four things in this world supreme, /and among them one is man" (*DDJ*).²⁵ This statement has basically dismissed the ontological foundation that would

differentiate humans from other beings. Without the ontological distinction between man and the myriad things, the perceiving subject is rendered no authority over the life of other beings. Instead, the world becomes, alters, and thrives of its own accord— “that all ten thousand may come forth/ Without his possession” (*DDJ*, Poem 2).

The Daoist sage believes that human beings do not keep or give order to the world, and our perception of the relation between man and the world based on the ontological differentiating does not reflect the real dynamic between the two. This view on the formation of the self and the world resembles what Heidegger advocates in his book, *Poetry, Language, Thought*:

The different things, plant and beast on the one hand, and man on the other are identical in that they come to unite within the same. This same is the relation which they have, as beings, to their ground. The ground of beings is Nature. The ground of man is not only of a kind identical with that of plant and beast. The ground is the same for both. It is Nature, as ‘full nature’.²⁶

Here Heidegger has stated two closely related premises: one is that man and the world are *identical*, which automatically removes the gazing subject from the position of power and dominance, and puts him in a place where equality among the myriad things is absolute. The other premise is that the oneness of man and the world is grounded in Nature which, in Heidegger’s proposition, represents more than the natural phenomena:

It [Nature] means the Being of beings. This [nature] is the incipient power gathering everything to itself, which in this manner releases every being to its own self. The Being of beings is the will. The will is the self-concentrating gathering of every *ens* unto itself. Every being, as a being, is in the will. It is as something willed. This should be taken as saying: that which is, not first and only as something willed; rather, insofar as it is, it is itself in the mode of will. Only by virtue of being willed is each being that which, in its own way, does the willing in the will.²⁷

Heidegger’s Nature or “power gathering everything unto itself” is a concept that includes the will on the deep level and the beings (humans as well as non-human beings) on the surface level. No longer the measure of all things, humans become one element or segment of the functioning of the

cosmos and give themselves to “the will” and manifest “the will” through their acting and presencing.

“The will” is tantamount to the functioning of the Way: — “The number one of the Way was born. / A dyad from this monad formed. /The dyad next a triad made;/ the triad bred the myriad” (*DDJ*, Poem 42) and “Becoming begets all beings below” (*DDJ*, Poem 40). Laozi’s “Dao” (the Way) and Heidegger’s “the will” are both “the Being of beings.” As it is materialized through the gradual proliferation of things from one to myriad, one might have the impression that unlike Heidegger’s will-beings dyad, the Way presents a hierarchical order in the course of its actualization. Far from it, the Way basically follows a spiral fashion— “Unseen, unheard, above, apart, / Standing alone ever true to itself, / Swinging in cycles that never fail,” and “All-supreme and passing-beyond,/passing-beyond and reaching-far,/reaching-far and reverting-back” (*DDJ*, Poem 25), and “The Way moves on by contra-motion” (*DDJ*, Poem 40). The Daoist sage emphasizes that the Way gathers all beings and returns itself equally to each and every one of them, therefore all are believed to be on an equal footing. In addition, Heidegger’s Nature, as “the incipient power,” “the gathering,” and “the will,” does not refer to the scenic, external nature and its own existence cannot be directly perceived while in *Dao De Jing*, the Way is the combination of the seen and the unseen, the metaphysical and the physical. It has forms— “the Way reveals shapes half-seen and then half-hid. / In dark half-lit, a likening; / In light half-dark, forms visible;” (*DDJ*, Poem 21) yet it is beyond cognizance— “Ever void, Dao provides/ But does not fill. /To a welling font akin, /The living myriad’s sacred source/ Is like the darkness of the deep” (*DDJ*, Poem 4).

The Daoist premises that man is on a par with the world in absolute terms. That the Way overlooks and resides equally in man and the myriad things would resonate with Oppen. The meat

of Oppen's thought, as I have previously argued, is that the essence of man does not sit at the center of the universe and that the self and the world are two mutually dependent entities though the world takes dominance and remains largely impenetrable to humans. Man is not considered as a cognitively privileged being. Because his consciousness (or in Jacques Maritain's words, his creative intuition) is unable to awaken itself, he has to immerse himself in things connatural with his consciousness so that his consciousness can be activated. As he cannot knowingly single out the thing whose essence kindles his creative intuition, a poet should not feel entitled to have authority over the world. He must overcome the polarity and hierarchical difference between the gazing subject and the gazed object, allow himself to mix entirely with what is around him, and let the things relational to him awaken his consciousness, if only in a mysterious way.

When Laozi propounds in the first poem that "The Way as 'way' bespeaks no common lasting Way, /The name as 'name' no common lasting name" (*DDJ*), he clearly seeks to disrupt the entrenched political order and epistemology of the day. To validate and solidify its control over people, the ruling class during the Warring Period established a whole gamut of political structures and the rationale behind these structures. A person was taught how to behave properly as a social being and his perception of reality was acquired through learning ideas, concepts and other abstract knowledge. It is true that an individual experiences the world on a daily basis, but his experiencing only verifies somebody else's knowledge and establishes a limited knowledge of/for himself. This is why Laozi reiterates that a sage should "keep the folk/ From knowing and craving" (*DDJ*, Poem 3), and "refuse the wise, dismiss the intellects, / The folk will reap a hundredfold" (*DDJ*, Poem 19). He believes that there is "no need to venture past the door/ To know this world below the skies, / Nor peer outside the window frame /To see the heavens' works and ways" (*DDJ*, Poem 47). Instead of a strategy to keep people ignorant and benighted, Laozi contends that the more one

asserts oneself, the more likely he is biased and one-sided in his view, and the farther he keeps himself away from the occurrences of the world. Meanwhile, discouraging “knowing and craving” is not a gesture of total passivity. In multiple poems, Laozi emphasizes replacing self-assertion with all-embracing— “By reaching utmost receptivity / And keeping steadfast stability, / I, as myriads come forth in profusion, / Contemplate their circulation” (*DDJ*, Poem 16). Passivity restricts an individual’s engagement with the world whereas all-embracing enables him to be open, expansive, and impartial. To be sure, without understanding and knowing, an individual may feel the world about him shadowy and murky. But knowledge is not always knowingly acquired. Out of confusion and darkness, clarity and enlightenment often unexpectedly come forth.

While questioning the conventional understanding of knowledge, Laozi has acutely realized that in the course of internalizing social norms and forming perceptions of the world, language plays a decisive role. If the values, tradition, and cultural practices we perpetuate could not reflect the original state of life, then everyday language with a *made* system of signifiers and signifieds, cannot reveal the truth involved either. As a matter of fact, the Daoist sage never has much confidence in language at all— “Spare speech and let things be” (*DDJ*, Poem 22); “the Way continues on unnamed” (*DDJ*, Poem 32); and “great eloquence like reticence” (*DDJ*, Poem 45). The moment when a way is conceptualized and a name named, it immediately becomes a particular way or name that falls short of explaining the whole picture of reality. In other words, if a person sticks to words and does not use his senses, or sticks to rules and ignores the direct experience of everyday life, he misses the true source of knowledge.

Laozi and Oppen both believe in the oneness of man and the world. For Laozi, the myriad things, as distinct and equal entities, are essentially uniting within the Way while in Oppen’s view, the essence of man and essence of the world are intrinsically connected. They counterpoint and

evoke each other, though one resides in human consciousness and the other, in the natural world. In order that the ten thousand things could appear of themselves, Laozi argues that all conceptualized externals with language being the principal one be discarded— “Those who know it do not say it; / Those who say it do not know it” (*DDJ*, Poem 56)—so that there would be no subjectivism overlooking objectivism and that all could thrive freely in its very pristine state. To build a congenial and authentic relation between the self and the world, Oppen also sees the critical role language plays: like Laozi, he is aware that ordinary language obstructs a subject’s passage to the world. He distrusts the language that centralizes us human beings, and he endeavors to restore everyday language to its primordial state— “a language of clarity,” which does not pass judgment or make assertions, and which is a thing itself with boundless potentials.²⁸

Let us look at two short poems “A Theological Definition” and “Waking Who Knows,” both titles indicating some degree of epiphany or awakening, be it spiritual or secular, to see how the Way can be used as a hermeneutic for the interpretation of Oppen’s poems. In the first poem, Oppen writes:

A small room, the varnished floor
Making an L around the bed,

What is or is true as
Happiness

Windows opening on the sea,
The green painted railings of the balcony
Against the rock, the bushes and the sea running

The room, the varnished floor, the shape of L formed by the bed and standing for “letter” and “language,” and the mattress box all remind us of our civilized existence. Since “As” in the poem functions as a transitional word, “Happiness” can either be grouped with “What is or is true,” or be put together with “Windows opening on the sea, / The green painted railings of the balcony /

Against the rock, the bushes and the sea running.” Let us first relate “what is or is true *as happiness*” to the first two lines of the poem, we immediately get the impression that the room, the floor, the human thinking, the bed, and those that set us *Homo sapiens* apart from nature is happiness.

As we parse the sentences differently, we also can assert that happiness refers to the “Windows opening on the sea,” and the painted railings of the balcony against the rock. Shunryu Suzuki claims that all things are different and “because they are different they have equal value, and equal value means absolute value.”²⁹ To use a Daoist aesthetic principle to explain, we humans are not ontologically privileged and “the world is the noncoherent sum of all orders defined from the myriad perspectives taken up by each item in the totality of things.”³⁰ Obviously, Oppen believes that happiness stems from that which makes us unique from the rest of the world. But like a Daoist, he is also acutely aware that happiness relies on the recognition and appreciation of those non-human entities. The quality of human living makes us happy, but the ultimate happiness is realized through embracing and becoming one among the myriad things instead of differentiating himself from the world. In the meanwhile, the oneness of the self and the world by no means requires that the individual concerned should efface his identity. It only suggests that he respect the existence of, for example, the rock, the bushes and the sea which have equal and absolute values as he does. There are no dyads between the beings and the non-beings, and any construal of the world that puts human beings above other beings is entirely irrelevant. In brief, a person’s awakening to the truth of life means that he dismisses the cognitive privilege he has over the world and the comforts of any *a priori* understanding/assumption of experience.

The Daoist sage advocates deconstruction of the ontological foundation and rejects the division between subject and object. Any effort to assert, represent, coerce, or appropriate the myriad things are considered a hindrance to a human being’s ultimate happiness—“The heaven

lasts, the earth endures./And the reason why they do?/ by disowning what they yield, /Heaven can last and earth endure” (*DDJ*, Poem 7); “Self-display does not illuminate;/ Self-justifying sets no pattern;/Self-advancement won’t succeed;/ Self-assertion cannot lead” (*DDJ*, Poem 24); “Under its mantle all beings thrive;/But ruling them not, nor desiring aught” (*DDJ*, Poem 34); and “For Dao begets but does not keep, /Works its way but does not bind” (*DDJ*, Poem 51). Again, to use this Daoist perspective of non-assertion to examine Oppen’s “Waking Who Knows,” we find the oddities in it suddenly become natural, informative and thought-provoking:

the great open
doors of the tall
buildings and the grid
of the streets the seed

is a place the stone
is a place mind

will burn the world down alone
and transparent

will burn the world down tho the starlight is
part of ourselves

First of all, like other poems from *Primitive*, “Waking Who Knows” does not use capitalized letters and punctuations (in *Primitive* the number of uppercase letters and punctuations can be countered on one’s fingers). With lowercase letters throughout the poem, every word visually draws the same span of attention. And thanks to the lack of punctuations, lines 4-7 form a pattern of parataxis with words and phrases being placed one after another without indicating coordination or subordination. Seed, stone, and mind line up, and we have a linear arrangement of three statements: the seed is a place; the stone is a place, and the mind will burn the world down alone, each segment conveying a complete message in its own right. Even if what will burn the world down is the mind, this

statement is not a justification for dismissing the validity of the other two statements—the seed is a place and the stone is a place— as there are no subordinate relations among them.

Oppen’s language in this poem resembles the kind of non-referential language the Daoist sage often uses which focuses on how a word transitions and transforms meanings rather than on how it accurately denotes and describes messages. Language becomes a path by which we see what is normally not seen. Each word carries syntactically the same amount of importance, and because the fragmented statements are without hierarchical depth, one is given the liberty to make new connections and interpretations. For instance, “the doors of the tall buildings” and “the grid of the streets” can be paired up for one set of interpretation. Or “the grid of the streets” can become an appositional phrase for “the seed,” and then as the seed is a place, “the grid” is a place too. Nothing can be fixed through reference and the whole point is not which connection is the most relevant; rather, it is the opening up of more possibilities and the unleashing of language’s potentials that make this poem worth perusing. Like “so much depends/ upon/ a red wheel / barrow,” “Waking Who Knows” is making an epistemological statement: “*the great open* is the goal of poetry.”

Last but not least, Daoist principles of diversity and equality enable us not only to take notice of what is big but also to give unbiased attention to what is small. The Daoist sage believes that the Way is materialized in the tiniest particles and, for this reason, the smallest thing contains as much truth: “Way is perennially nameless, / an uncarved simplicity. Though small, / it’s subject to nothing in all beneath heaven.” (*TTC*, Poem 32). We can safely liken this saying to Oppen’s statement that “one— and I in particular, as he knew from my essay—has a peculiar faith in small words, a feeling that they are in immediate touch with reality, *with unthought and directly perceived reality*” (italicized by me).³¹ Now going back once again to the small words such as the articles in the poem, one finds that all the nouns are preceded by articles except the word “mind.”

If “a” or “the” was added to “mind,” the mind would then reduce from collective to individual consciousness. Without the article, the mind versus universe relation becomes an ontological proposition obviously of a much wider scope. If the human mind can overtake the physical world, there is the possibility that it will destroy humanity as well, for as it might “burn the world down,” it might also burn down the starlight that is “part of ourselves.”

One core Daoist principle is that there is no ontological difference between Being and beings. The other key Daoist principle that would help us delve deeper into Oppen’s poems is the complementary and contradictory nature of the myriad things. In Poem 2, Laozi said “The harder the easier consummates; / The long the short decides, / And higher lower measures; / Bronze gongs jade chimes join, / And former latter sequence form” (*DDJ*). The object within objects cannot make an action that is entirely of/to itself and we live in a world of dualism full of forms and sounds which are generated by something formless and soundless. Confucius advocates that by setting up a model himself, one can shape people and events within his cognizance. Laozi, however, prefers the opposite: one should observe the interactions of the events and let them take their course and fulfill their hidden potential for reversal. Speech and silence form a duality. Speech has a *Yang* function and silence, a *Yin* function. As *Yin* and *Yang* interact, speech is silence and silence becomes a form of speech. Laozi teaches us to think about seeming dualities in a non-dualistic manner, and this world of dualities ever complementing each other and ever moving to the other direction abounds in *Dao De Jing*. Before I elaborate its relevancy to Oppen’s poems and poetics, let us first take a look at *DDJ*, Poem 11:

Thirty spokes join the wheel nave
And make of void and form a pair,
And a wagon’s put to use.
Clay is thrown to shape a vase
And make of void and form a pair,
And a vessel’s put to use.

Door and window vent a room
And make of void and form a pair,
And a room is put to use.
Thus the value of what is
Depends for use on what is not.

This poem is built around the terms of what is and what is not in a spatial context and “becoming formed” depends on “void,” and vice versa. The statement that “Thus the value of what is/ Depends for use on what is not” indicates that space and form are relational and essentially are each other. By heeding the unseen and the unheard, one is promised their secret usefulness: speech and silence constantly alternate and in silence one hears the most messages.

On top of its political applications, Poem 11 proposes a poetic aesthetics, I think, analogous to Oppen’s. Here is the Daoist logic: when one’s mind transcends the forms— “spoke,” “clay,” “door” and “window”— it awakens to the reality of space. Space is purity and purity gives clarity. When one acquires a sense of transparency and clarity, one acquires the freedom to fully understand oneself and the world. Therefore, Daoist clarity is a mind-purifying process and is realized through embracing the physical and metaphysical spaces and their secret usefulness. In relation to this tenet, Poem 14 outlines — “something looked for but not seen, / or listened for, not heard, / or reached for, not found:/ Call one “dim,” one “faint,” one “slight,”/ not for summons nor for challenge” (*DDJ*). To look for, listen for, and reach is to give full swing to experiencing. Instead of resorting to conceptualization, it allows one to thoroughly expose oneself to the world in a pre-reflective way. One’s recognitions of how the world works becomes a kind of witnessing of it. Contrastingly, the activities of seeing, hearing and discovering, with the purpose to ultimately summon and challenge would keep one from the true knowledge of the world, because by so doing, one loses the position to have a neutral, detached, impartial observation of the manifestations of the world, which by nature is ever “dim,” “faint,” and “slight,” and which alters in a way that cannot be calculated or predicted by humans.

The world consists of opposites that are part of a unified relationship. The Chinese sage sees the limits of us focusing on the one and ignoring the other. This Daoist wisdom relates to, yet differs from the Daoist principle of ontological simplicity I have previously outlined. The lack of ontological distinction means absolute equality between the self and the world whereas dualism of things lays emphasis on things' contradicting, yet essentially completing each other. "The formed" depends on "the void," and the volume of speech, paradoxically, is decided on by the depth of silence. Space and silence produce both physical and metaphysical clarity, a condition in which one is free to question, refresh, and expand the knowledge of oneself and the world.

Like the absence of ontological foundation, the Daoist principle of seeming opposites between silence and speech aims for us to have a renewed relationship with the myriad things. To pursue silence/clarity is Oppen's goal in poetry too. Oppen insists on the co-existence of the two domains of human consciousness and the indifferent universe. The interactions between the two are accidental, partial, local, and most important of all, require no mediation. That is to say, for the poet to write a poem, he should not resort to abstractions, transcendental ideals, or political ideologies—he should not be at a prearranged or fixed state or position to write—instead, he should allow his senses to reach out for and receive the ten thousand objects. For Oppen, poetry-writing requires that one recognize and accept one's state of mind as it is rather than abstracting what we think poetry should be. The desire for clarity is indeed the desire to be free of all inherited thoughts and customs, and to have a language that can grant a poet immediate experience/relationship with the world. Oppen's motive of poetry clearly bears many of the attributes of a Daoist practice.

To apply Daoist perspectives on clarity in a given poem, I would first evaluate whether the metaphysical space in it is a sum of oriented perspectives furnished by different beings, that is, if all beings/non-beings are granted an equal footing in it. Secondly, I would take note of "the

opposites.” For instance, the present and non-present tenses form a pair of opposites. Why would Oppen have a liking for the present tense? Is it because a sense of past and future would underline causality, prediction, and the inherited human knowledge which he (as well as the Daoist sage) rejects? Thirdly, I would examine if the words in a poem are to represent or to suggest, to appropriate or to participate. The explanatory words resemble the confining forms of “spoke,” “clay,” “door,” and “window,” whereas those participatory ones belong to the ever-generating “void” and the empty center. They subtly constitute another pair of opposites. Not every poem of Oppen’s fits well with the Daoist aesthetics I have mentioned, but those that do are particularly enlightening. Here is one titled “Leviathan”:

Truth also is the pursuit of it:
Like happiness, and it will not stand.

Even the verse begins to eat away
In the acid. Pursuit, pursuit;

A wind moves a little,
Moving in a circle, very cold.

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

And we have become the present.

We must talk now. Fear
Is fear. But we abandon one another.

Truth, in Heidegger’s words, is not something that “exists in itself beforehand, somewhere among the stars, only later to descend elsewhere among beings.”³² It is a kind of unconcealedness and openness of the Open rather than the unconcealed and the Open. In this poem, truth is perceived

as forever processive and transitory which is in accordance with Heidegger's "openness of the Open," or Daoist aesthetics of "void" and its usefulness. "The verse" is regarded as the embodiment of human consciousness and in front of it stands the formless, wild world that keeps revealing and concealing. There is obviously a dynamic between the two entities, and when the world changes, human consciousness evolves accordingly, otherwise "the verse" embodying subjectivity will "eat away in the acid," a chemical that implies the imbalance among various compounds and alludes to corrosion and futility.³³ In the third and fourth stanzas, Oppen raises the question of how humans should pursue the truth of life by way of poetry in the vast expanse of space where "the wind" moves according to its own spiral pattern and is totally indifferent to human feelings. The reader twice hears the suggestion for "talking" in the following stanzas, but what exactly should we talk about?

"Eclogue," another poem of Oppen's covers the same topic of human discourse amidst the universe, and it reads "The men talking/Near the room's center. They have said/More than they had intended." One can easily detect the difference between these two types of talking: in "Eclogue," we are presented with a social setting in which speech is directly connected to one's intentions and one's inner thoughts. Talking becomes a non-substantive social clatter. The excessive talk results in the conceptualization and objectification of what does not need to be conceptualized or objectified. In "Leviathan," however, talking specifically points to some "ordinary discourse"—a non-assertive and non-theorizing discourse. The statement that "I am no longer sure of the words" blossoms into three readings: 1) "I am not sure of the words of the past"; 2) "I am not sure of the words by past poets/generations"; and 3) "I am not sure of the words when they are perceived as an independent entity of, for instance, 'the clockwork of the world.'" The

implications of “the words” are meant to be complicated, but the statement—whatever “the words” might refer to—explicitly declares language’s distinct and independent status in relation to its user.

How then could “we have become the present” in the next stanza? The Daoist sage believes that when one ignores the empty center and focuses on the visible forms of spoke, clay, door, and window, one would think that one comprehends and takes control of the objects. The sense of comprehension inevitably leads him to look for past causes and predict future results. The world then would be diachronically perceived. But when one changes from Newtonian physics to a physics that is current with quantum theory or with a Daoist theory which dismisses mechanical causality, one will find that the only valid place for him is here and now: one segment of presence connects to the next. A sequence of phrases of presence constitutes the course of time, and human consciousness among others, are but one phrase of presence. At the core of this sequence is the non-presence, or what the Daoist sage would claim “the hub within the wheel.” In order to become present, it is necessary for humans to have a pre-conceptual appreciation of the world and its void and formlessness. “Fear/Is fear” seems to say that it would be intimidating that one puts aside one’s perceptions of the universe and pre-reflectively embraces it. But that scenario would look better, Oppen immediately adds, than when human consciousness “abandons” the world and clings entirely to itself.³⁴

In this chapter, I have first investigated the factual evidence that would link Oppen to Laozi. I argue that two Daoist principles resonate strongly with Oppen: one is the dismissal of the centrality of man in the world; the other, the complementary and contradictory nature of the myriad things. For Laozi, egalitarianism among the ten thousand things derives from man’s recognition of the omnipresent Way whereas for Oppen, connaturality between the self and the world put all of the beings and nonbeings on an equal footing. To make things appear of their own, the Daoist

sage sticks to silence, by virtue of which the myriad things thrive without being judged, coerced or appropriated. Oppen also believes in a language of silence. He strains to restore our everyday language to its original state so that language, as a thing per se, can unleash its many potentials and spark the creative intuition in the poet. I conclude this chapter with a passage from the poet Michael Heller that elaborates quite beautifully on the unique qualities of strong poems. I think his remark relates well to both men's poetics and philosophical aesthetics.

If we look closely at the effects strong poems have on us, we may discover something quite strange. The poem 'alters consciousness' it is said; it shakes up and disrupts our certainties. We could say it introduces uncertainty where perhaps there was none before. New truths, new conceptions of world or life are tendered by the poem. Yet we return again and again to the poem to find ourselves shaken up. What is curious about powerful poetry, what is profound about it, is not the conceptions of truth offered but the disruption, the actual opening and experiencing of what is when the conceptions have been torn away. In the moment of that happening, everything we are has a bearing— our experience has led us here—and is also beside the point. The only thing which has meaning is the uncertainty; our attempt to maintain a grasp on the solidity of our views has been undermined. How strange! What is actually true is not the certainty but the uncertainty. If we are willing to recognize that moment, to live thoroughly in that understanding, we recognize that it is just as we give up our views and our values, give up ourselves and our credentials that poetry takes place.³⁵

4. A DAOIST PERSPECTIVE ON GEORGE OPPEN'S WORKS

4.1 A Daoist Perspective on George Oppen's "Of Being Numerous"

"Of Being Numerous" (OBN) is the only long poem Oppen ever wrote, and probably the most well-known one of his as well. It is the central poem in the book *Of Being Numerous*, which brought him the 1969 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. The poem has forty sections, being an expansion of an earlier sequence, "A Language of New York" from *This in Which*. A concentrated reflection of Oppen's poetics, OBN touches on such ontological and epistemological questions as the self in relation to the world and the dynamic between singularity and social totality, alludes to the key social issues of the eventful 1960s, and most importantly, has itself been a field for philological experiment and exploration. It has raised more questions than it has answered, concealed more than it has unconcealed, questioned more about the truth of life than it has validated, and because of its refusal to render finality in meaning, OBN has held a particular fascination for poets, critics, and general readers since its publication in 1968.¹ In this part, I will utilize Daoist principles to illustrate some of its bewildering chapters and to offer a supplementary perspective on Oppen's poems in general.

1
There are things
We live among 'and to see them
Is to know ourselves'.

Occurrence, a part
Of an infinite series,

The sad marvels;

Of this was told

A tale of our wickedness.
It is not our wickedness.

‘You remember that old town we went to, and we sat in the ruined window, and we tried to imagine that we belonged to those times—It is dead and it is not dead, and you cannot imagine either its life or its death; the earth speaks and the salamander speaks, the Spring comes and only obscures it—’

The first nine lines include a citation from Robert Brumbaugh’s *Plato for the Modern World*. Marjorie Perloff, in her reading of this part, claims that the poet rejects the Bible’s notion of the fall “with the simple response that it is circumstance, not native predisposition that determines our fate.”² She also raises two critical questions: “Does this mean that we ourselves are no more than external “things,” and “is the ‘occurrence’ that is ‘a part/of an infinite series,’ our own existence or that of the process of life that goes on despite us?” To these questions, she does not offer answers.

These questions, from a Daoist perspective, could be answered. One of the propositions Laozi makes in *Dao De Jing* is to eliminate the distinction between man and the myriad things, which stands diametrically opposite to the western viewpoint of man’s dominance over things. Laozi does not deny intellect— “Others are bright and clear: /I’m dark and murky. /Others are confident and effective: /I’m pensive and withdrawn,” and “People all have a purpose in life, /but I’m inept, thoroughly useless and backward. /I’ll never be like other people:/I keep to the nurturing mother” (*TTC*, Poem 20). Clearly, to choose the way of unknowing is a decision Laozi knowingly makes. Laozi’s point is to decentralize subjectivity, and he insists that instead of transcending things, an individual should seek to forge direct contact with the world relational to him. Noteworthy also is that Daoist strategy for ontological simplicity differs from passivism. Take *TTC*, Poem 48 as an example— “Less and still less/until you’re doing nothing yourself/And when you’re doing nothing yourself, there’s nothing you don’t do”—which shows that man still needs to take action, as non-

assertive as the action is. In contrast, a passive individual does not create his own initiative and he accepts, come what may.

The idea that things are the Other, standing aloof and detached from humans is incongruous with Daoism. Dao goes across all divisions and permeates all beings. It is not that *Homo sapiens* become less important in the Daoist world; it is the ten thousand things beginning to acquire a significance that is so far woefully overlooked. Their essence, on a par and connatural with human's, flashes upon, informs and interacts with human's intellect. What is Dao? Laozi does not know, he speculates that "Apparently it [Dao] precedes gods and creators" (*TTC*, Poem 4). He would not define it as a form of higher spirituality, or a thing, or a concept—"something you meet without seeing a front/and follow without seeing a back" (*TTC*, Poem 14), and "look at it: not enough to see. /Listen to it: not enough to hear" (*TTC*, Poem 35). As a matter of fact, Laozi believes that the more one conceptualizes Dao, the farther away one deviates from it because the act of intellectual inquiry would ultimately prioritize intellect over spontaneity which is the process of Dao in the world. Rather than going to the bottom of Dao, Laozi suggests that more attention should be given to Dao's manifestations and the ways and means by which it is manifested—"For the sage all the ten thousand things are what they are, and thus they enfold each other."³

Humans live among things. Humans' knowledge of themselves derives less from their objectifying activities than from their receptivity of things. When we become truly receptive to the world, the distinction between internal and external, Self and the Other, dissolves. With this said, the idea of the oneness of man and myriad things is demonstrably a "sad" thing for a western mind, particularly when all happenings suddenly become "part of an infinite series" beyond his reasoning power, and when his enlightenment is seemingly "at the mercy of" the lesser beings. The last stanza of section one shows a scenario of a man's giving himself to the world of things. The flow

of time (a human concept) is disrupted. Past and present become segments lined up in a synchronic rather than diachronic order, all pointing to emptiness in the center. The seasons change, the earth moves, only the cycle of life from birth to death goes on. One cannot help wondering what would befall an individual when one lives in a world where the self gives up control over the ten thousand things.

2
So spoke of the existence of things,
An unmanageable pantheon

Absolute, but they say
Arid.

A city of the corporations
Glassed
In dreams

And images—

And the pure joy
Of the mineral fact

Tho it is impenetrable

As the world, if it is matter,
Is impenetrable.

In the second section, each line starts off with what Oppen calls “the small words” —so, an, arid, a, glassed, in, and, of, as, is—except for the multisyllabic word “absolute” in line three. In addition to their unique sound structure which Perloff has delineated in her article, these words are highly suggestive.⁴ “So” in line one, for instance, can be interpreted in multiple ways due to different shades of meanings it has as an adverb. One would ask “who” or “what” could have spoken of the existence of things, or whether the existence of things could sufficiently speak for itself. It seems that Oppen’s intention is “neither to give meanings to things nor to break through to some impossible ‘thing in itself’. Rather, he will seek to uncover or recover the thing as it offers itself to us.”⁵

A poetic language of silence could present multiple propositions for readers whereas behind a language that explains much one hears but the interpreter's voice. The primary difference between a Romanticist and an Objectivist is that the Romanticist acts as the purveyor of messages while the Objectivist rejects the burden of explanation. An Objectivist does not believe that one can access truth through a language of description. He does not argue against the premise of truth though for him truth is something that is never final. The notion of a language of precision that can acquire ultimate truth is considered by Objectivists as problematic and unrealistic. A descriptive poem expresses opinions, not truth, just as Charles Altieri writes that "art becomes a social and cultural force and not some form of individual therapy or self-regarding indulgence in the resources of the individual's imagination."⁶ To attempt to live true to life, an Objectivist poet would rid himself of authority over language and treat language as an independent entity. This is how Objectivist poetics works: the poet creates a work with emotion, which is different from creation for the sake of emotion. The meaning a work has generated corresponds largely with the words on the paper (their denotations and connotations, pronunciations and spatial arrangement) rather than with what is originally on the mind of the poet. That is to say, the poet hands over control of his work after it is done, and literally becomes the medium (or midwife) of what he has written. Different readers interpret meanings differently and the ingathering of interpretations simultaneously gives answers to old questions and brings forth new inquiries. Oppen's poem approximates a development process by which he first brings his readers to a halt in comprehension. The pause (or silence) allows readers to rethink the implications of the individual words, raise questions about established human knowledge, and eventually come up with interpretations directly related to their own empirical experience. The dynamic between silence and voice makes a poem continuously reveal and conceal.⁷ "So" is but one of the many semantic idiosyncrasies in

OBN. To the question of human existence, many answers have been given but none is complete or all-inclusive. Instead of giving a closure to it, Oppen uses “So” at the onset of section two to further open up the debate.⁸

In *The Music of Thought in the Poetry of George Oppen and William Bronk*, Henry Weinfield points out the thing that distinguishes Oppen from the rest of Objectivists. He argues that Objectivist theory wants to prioritize both the poem and the world of objects. In order to conflate these two domains, it “manipulates the criterion of sincerity, so as to make it appear to apply to both of them in the same way.” On the one hand, Objectivism insists on language expressing an inspired moment; on the other hand, because of the materiality of language, words cannot be entirely transparent and “the poetic object will always be deflected from the initial experience.”⁹ Oppen’s stand as an Objectivist is akin to that of a phenomenological reductionist. He concurs with the opinion that external reality is beyond grasping and takes only the world that relates to him as its essential reality, that is, a localized, relational reality. Hence in section two, when he alludes to the fact that the existence of things is “absolute,” he also acknowledges that the world is fundamentally “impenetrable” and “unmanageable.”

3
The emotions are engaged
Entering the city
As entering any city.

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

In section three, “we,” “locality,” “the others,” and “language” interact with each other in an enigmatic way. Marjorie Perloff claims that in this section, Oppen places a premium on the phenomenology of the mind. The glassed-in high-rises (she alludes to the previous section) and the generic terms of city, locality, and populace indicate that the poem is tilted toward an individual’s consciousness coping with its new condition rather than toward a specific cityscape. Barzilai also remarks that emotion and imagination are the subject matter of this section— “the experience of entering the city takes place at a more visceral, sub-verbal level than that of the intellect,” and that a language of New York is “a sub-verbal language, deriving from the emotion and the imagination and the flow of people, rather than from verbal utterance. It is physical and concrete, manifested in the inhabitants rather than in the abstractions of words and semantic phrases.”¹⁰ Both analyses center on how the mind reacts to reality.

While it is more customary to read section two in this manner, a Daoist perspective allows us to consider it differently. The Daoist sage insists on the oneness of the self and the world; that is, both entities must at length unify under the Way. There are people (“we,” “others,” “them,” and “A populace”) and things (“the city,” “any city,” “a locality,” and “New York”).¹¹ Among the people, “we” differ from “others,” for “we” are not as coeval with a location. Additionally, except for “New York,” nothing specifies the places, and “City” represents more of a conceptual reality. “The emotions are engaged/Entering the city/As entering any city” provides a glimpse of the human life: regardless of whether it is “we” or “others,” a sentient being has to routinely deal with things, or “enter the city.” Yet, some of us living in modernity have long ceased forming meaningful connections with locality because “we” feel “a locality” offers us nothing but its material usefulness. “We” do not represent the entire humanity and some “others” out there are still intimately interacting with “locality.” Henry Weinfield asserts that “Those ‘others’ could be

the natives or primitives that Oppen will juxtapose against his own society, or perhaps those who belong to another time, or perhaps those who simply do not possess the same kind of consciousness or self-consciousness as the poet and whom he will later regard alternately with fondness and suspicion.”¹² Despite his focus of inquiry, Weinfield finds out that the “others” embody an attitude and sentiment toward locality “we” fall short of. Although “we” possess self-consciousness at a depth that “the others” do not, “the others,” nevertheless, are the ones that live by/with a “locality” in a truly comfortable, unreflected manner. For those “others,” there exists what I would call a Daoist bond between the self and the object. “The others,” I would also add, are not necessarily from a different time or world as Weinfield has alluded because “we encounter them.” They are the numerous, the “populace” going right through the thingness of the city. Poetic language results from an individual’s daily engagement in a “locality,” and living among urban realities constitutes the most vivid language of, say, New York.

4

For the people of that flow
Are new, the old
New to age as the young
To youth

And to their dwelling
For which the tarred roofs

And the stoops and doors—
A world of stoops—
Are petty alibi and satirical wit
Will not serve.

Section three ushers in the idea of numerality. Section four then centers on the relation between “the people” and Concept. We have the people, “the old” and “the young,” and the man-made concepts of “age” and “youth.” The flux of individuals living in time and responding to circumstances courses across the surface of the earth. It is ephemeral and transient in contrast to the *made* concepts. The assonantal nouns of roofs, stoops, doors in the last two stanzas constitute

for human beings a “dwelling,” a concept that is aligned with the concepts of “age” and “youth.” The tawdry “tarred roof” and the stoops being “petty alibi” and “satirical wit” overtly point to politics and ideology. That they “will not serve” is a clear rejection not only of the dismal enclosure of a “dwelling,” but also of abstraction and the artificial concept of time.

5
The great stone
Above the river
In the pylon of the bridge

‘1875’

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

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

The inscription “1875” on a stone under the pylon of the bridge comes to focus in section five. The date occupying a line all by itself and keeping spatially separated from lines before and after it underlines the long history of the bridge, and with the flow of river under it, evokes as well the process of time. But “frozen in the moonlight” and “in the frozen air over the footpath” in the next two lines immediately discourages whatever interest one may have in the history of the bridge. The inscription surrounded by an overwhelming coldness offers literally nothing to one’s consciousness. Moreover, consciousness, because of its obsession with itself, expects little from the world’s externals. It has nothing to lose or “gain” in terms of the world. Oppen is a materialist who vehemently refuses what Rachel Blau DuPlessis would call “spiritual faddism” and “higher consciousness” (Marjorie Perloff’s term is “transcendental temptation”), and section five juxtaposes inherited, “frozen” human knowledge with an isolated individual’s consciousness.

6
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

7
Obsessed, bewildered

By the shipwreck
Of the singular

We have chosen the meaning
Of being numerous.

The two sections of six and seven have been the focus of Oppen scholarship. His work is not thoroughly critiqued if these two sections are not analyzed. Oppen once wrote:

I am quite Marxist, indeed.
'The shipwreck of the singular' I wrote. We cannot live without the concept of humanity, the end of one's own life is by no means equivalent to the end of the world, we would not bother to live out our lives if it were...
and yet we cannot escape this: that we are single. And face, therefore, shipwreck.
And yet this, this tragic fact, is the brilliance of one's life, it is 'the bright light of shipwreck' which disclose-----'all'.¹³

Based on the last sentence in the quote and among others, Henry Winfield argues that sections six and seven show the poet's thought on how to become a unique individual as well as a social being. Winfield asserts that "the poet's concern here has to do with the status of the individual vis-à-vis mass society, and with whether the individual as an individual (specifically, the poet or the "meditative" man of section ten) can continue to exist in the context of society as it is constituted in the twentieth century."¹⁴ Other scholars such as Marjorie Perloff interprets this section in a different light. She claims that "Rescue, in this scheme of things, marks the return to a world where 'we' are uncomfortably 'pressed, pressed on each other,' since that world is so distasteful to the poet—even a simple date like 1875 can intrude only intermittently on a "consciousness / Which

loves itself.”¹⁵ Regardless of her focus of scholarship, Perloff sees a dichotomy not only between the individual and society but also between the isolated self and the world of things.

The repeated “pressed” in the first line is critically informative in that it suggests the dynamic between subjectivity and objectivity. In Daoist vocabulary, “天下” is a frequently used term (Poems 13, 26, 28, 29, 30, 32, 37 in *Dao De Jing*, to just name a few). It literally means “all beneath heaven.” If examined more closely, “天下” is interchangeably applied to humanity, society as well as the natural world. Not having an ontological foundation, “We” from a Daoist angle, may as well refer to all that lives under heaven. We split the first line into two— “we are pressed [on each other]” and “[we] pressed on each other.” That “We are pressed [on each other],” in addition to expressing the inevitability of things’ occurring, seems to suggest that the relation between the self and the myriad things is not spontaneous or congenial. The self is forced to deal with things out of utilitarian concerns, and they are made to interact with each other. This type of interaction is bound to be detrimental to the self because the only motive herein is to maximize the usefulness of things.

That “[we] pressed on each other” in the active voice, meanwhile, produces a different effect: intentionality joins in the process and “we” intentionally initiated the act of “pressing.” It seems to state that in the past, man and nature acted willingly on each other, only that they no longer do so now. We are unable to empirically experience the world, and instead, are informed by others “of anything that happens.” Oppen insists that “the discovery of fact” does not derive from reading history and philosophy books. It happens during those inspired moments— “in a paroxysm of emotion/Now as always”—when the self ventures forth into the unfamiliar and experiments with the uncertain.

The lines that “Crusoe//We say was/ ‘Rescued’,” according to most of Oppen critics, express, if implicitly, that an individual’s destiny lies in becoming part of the collective. Considering in

section eight that “We have chosen the meaning/Of being numerous,” and in section nine that “one’s distance from Them, the people, does not also increase,” coupled with Oppen’s own remarks I have quoted above— “We cannot live without the concept of humanity,” the message that a singular should live within the framework of numerality outside himself can be validated. What does it mean to identify oneself as a member of society? Obviously, it is more than “the shipwreck of the singular” returning to civilization and material convenience. From a political and economic perspective, Crusoe’s activities on a deserted island are no difference from those exploitative adventures carried out by the other 17th century European colonists except that he is single-handed and terribly poorly equipped against all the odds. The message, I would argue, is not on how fortuitous it is for an individual to reach civilization after being trapped for over twenty-eight years in a dire and depressing situation. We do not know if Crusoe feels euphoric about being rescued or not. As a matter of fact, he seems to have enjoyed his stay on the island, homesick as he is.¹⁶ The point is Crusoe’s spiritual deliverance, moral elevation, and intellectual enlightenment would mean nothing if it was not placed within the context of humanity and mass society. His secular or religious epiphany is substantiated only when he rejoins the masses. When “[w]e have chosen the meaning/Of being numerous,” the individual, as an entity, is not superseded by the collective, rather, he picks up a narrative of humanity so that he could further explore his own consciousness.¹⁷

8

Amor fati
The love of fate

For which the city alone
Is audience

Perhaps blasphemous.

Slowly over islands, destinies
Moving steadily pass

And change

In the thin sky
Over islands
Among days

Having only the force
Of days

Most simple
Most difficult

For many, the claim that “The love of fate” sounds “blasphemous.” When the omnipresent and omnipotent God is gone and everything becomes contingent and provisional, the world returns to “an infinite series.” The city, the embodiment of things, turns out to be the only “audience” for the poet. There is no other way for consciousness to move forth, and passing over islands becomes inevitable. Without the guidance of an omniscient deity, where destinies would lead us will remain ineluctable and impenetrable. “Having only the force/Of days” underlines the flow of time. But what force can “days” have on destinies moving steadily across things except that they are the markers of birth, death, and rebirth? We ascribe meanings to the ten thousand things. Yet there is no transcendent frame to our lives. While it is “most simple” for a Daoist follower to relegate human consciousness to a role among things, it becomes “most difficult” for those with a mind of logic and science. Oppen understands this all too well because to see the world without an ontological foundation first and foremost needs “a radical *un*-learning of all that one knows.”¹⁸

9

‘Whether, as the intensity of seeing increases, one’s distance
from Them, the people, does not increase’
I know, of course I know, I can enter no other place

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

As I have previously argued, Oppen, being a materialist, is not interested in mystical derivation and direction. He understands that he belongs to “man’s way of thought” and his places and dialogues. The first two stanzas have demonstrated the dynamic between the One and the Many. The question is if one’s exploration of truth happens within the context of numerality, how could we wrap our mind around the idea that the singular, “the bright light of shipwreck,” is also independent, “absolute,” and has “the unearthly bonds?” How could self-effacement and self-identification occur simultaneously? Actually, the last six lines could well be interpreted as such that although one remains within humanity, one essentially stays away from immediate engagement with other human beings and with things of the world. Not only do the readers have trouble untangling the relationship between the singular and the numerous, Oppen himself also appears to be unwilling to say what role an individual should play within the context of collectivity. He quotes Rachel DuPlessis to describe the difficulty of keeping a balance between “the intensity of seeing” and “one’s distance from Them, the people.”¹⁹

The advantage of a Daoist perspective on Oppen’s poetry lies in that while the Daoist sage acknowledges the pluralistic situation of human relations, he always uses non-dualistic unity as a common basis for such a situation. Before we shed some Daoist light on this to all appearances paradoxical assertion, we need to briefly clarify the relation among the self, society, and the myriad things. According to Laozi, the oneness of the self and the world is absolute, that is, the mechanism of the two entities is one and the same. The unifying power—*Ziran*, or the process of Dao in the

empirical world—breaks through all of the artificial divisions. Daoism opposes man’s superiority over nature, calling man’s dominance over nature unnatural. It also discourages differentiation of Self from the Others. “民” (citizen) occurring over thirty times throughout *Dao De Jing* always alludes to the numerous. An individual immerses himself with humanity that contains the essence of Dao; because of his self-effacing and becoming part of the numerous, he is able to observe and revere Dao. Now an observant and purveyor of Dao, he stands out enlightened. “Hence, in putting himself last/ the sage puts himself first” (*TTC*, Poem 7); “Give up self-definition/and you’re soon apparent [...] simply give up contention/and soon nothing in all beneath heaven contends with you” (*TTC*, Poem 22); “It never makes itself vast/ and so becomes utterly vast” (*TTC*, Poem 34); “wanting to lead the people/ he follows along behind them” (*TTC*, Poem 66), to just name a few, all center on a premise that the more one effaces oneself, the more prominently one would reemerge. The prominence one later acquires differs from the prominence one’s wealth, intellect or physical prowess have previously brought him. It represents an individual’s deep understanding and internalization of the Way and his intrinsic connection with the ultimate source of life. The reason that an individual could enjoy a complete harmony with the Dao by means of society or in the context of humanity is that, in the eyes of the Daoist sage, society is a phenomenon not unlike the myriad things. The principles governing nature govern every aspect of societal functions as well. Whether he lives in a hustling and bustling city, or in a remote village where people grow old and idle and chickens and dogs call back and forth, as long as he returns inwardly to the uncarved simplicity, he will be able to develop an understanding of Dao and forge an “unearthly” connection with it. Additionally, an individual’s belief in the Way does not mean that he transcends people around him. He definitely exceeds his past self in terms of being awakened and enlightened. This standing out of the self is entirely personal and has nothing to do with another individual in

whom also lies the essence of the Way, latent and hidden as it is. His engagement in society helps put an end to his obsession with the self and provides for him opportunities to act on and be exposed to things. In the process of acting, he discovers his importance and significance not necessarily derivative from his own consciousness but from something beyond himself. In other words, he finds his self by forgetting himself. He finally reaffirms a sense of singularity by decisively choosing and embracing numerality.

Using this Daoist philosophy that self-effacement makes/enhances self-identification, I find “the absolute singular” in the context of “becoming numerous” less difficult to interpret, though I by no means intend to relate Oppen’s singularity to some of the mystic experience outlined in *Dao De Jing*. The poet enters the city and embraces what has happened to him. As a member of the moving populace, he forgets, if temporarily, his mind, and his subjectivity. He is allowed to form an unmediated connection with the city and those living in the city. By saying “unmediated,” I mean that his activities in the context of humanity have fewer dealings with the inherited knowledge or his own intellect than with the ten thousand things and that he and the world become more interdependent on each other. As a staunch materialist, Oppen shows no interest in exploring what the “unearthly bonds/ of the singular” are. He is a poet with a clear phenomenological bent: the ultimate truth lies in nowhere other than the singular— “the bright light of shipwreck”— encountering the wild, wild world.

10

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.

11

it is *that* light
Seeps anywhere, a light for the times

In which the buildings
Stand on low ground, their pediments
Just above the harbor

Absolutely immobile,

Hollow, available, you could enter any building,
You could look from any window
One might wave to himself
From the top of the Empire State Building—

Speak

If you can

Speak

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

Coming home from her first job
On the bus in the bare civic interior
Among those people, the small doors
Opening on the night at the curb
Her heart, she told me, suddenly tight with happiness—

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—

To talk of the house and the neighborhood and the docks

And it is not 'art'

While the poet reasserts singularity in the context of collectivity, what he faces in reality is an opposite scenario. Michael Davidson and Henry Weinfield both refer “dithyrambic, audience-as-artists” in section ten to the youth revolt in the 1960s.²⁰ That “The shuffling of a crowd is nothing—/well, nothing but the many that we are, but nothing,” combined with the crowd

becoming artists makes a declaration that art by/for the masses will not come to much fruition.²¹ “I will listen to a man,” Oppen repeats himself, despite the fact that “he will fail and I will fail.” Between consciousness and the masses, there is a delicate balance. Oppen never advocates the centrality of consciousness. The “meditative man” by isolating himself from the numerous does not have much chance to prevail, and his world, not *the* world, eventually has nothing to offer except for his own consciousness. But when the masses become speaker in poetry, art equally verges on failure. It is practically impossible to assert one over the other, and Oppen’s stand lies right in the middle: consciousness makes sense only when it relates to activities of the masses. Poetry reflects precisely the synergy between the One and the Many rather than the dominance of one over the other.

The word “light” that starts sections ten and eleven makes individual consciousness a recurring trope of this long poem. The light permeates through time and space— “[that light] seeps anywhere, a light for the times.” It obviously has kept a meaningful tie with realities. In Weinfield’s interpretation, the buildings, particularly “the Empire State Building,” stand for art while “down there with the streets” represents local reality. They might engage different physical effort and speak for different aesthetic tastes. But I would argue there is no distinction between the skyscrapers and the back alleys in terms of their aesthetic worthiness, both being part of the metropolis. They are “absolutely immobile,” “hollow,” and “available” for anyone to enter. The imperative sentence— “Speak// If you can// Speak” widely spaced apart—highlights the urgency of a new language. It is a call for the same language I have analyzed in section three. Only through entering those receptive buildings, animating and interacting with them by looking and speaking through their windows can one make and speak a language of his own.

“Phyllis,” as Oppen stresses, “not neo-classic,” refers to an actual city girl, not a pastoral archetype, or a shepherdess in a stylized classical antiquity. Why would Oppen bother to make reference to Phyllis? The name does appear in William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson* IV. Williams has been a friend and mentor of Oppen’s. In order to rejuvenate Phyllis, one needs to render her within the daily grind of a city dweller: the modest city bus, the flow of populace, the tiny scenes of doors opening at the curb, the well-trodden square slabs of pavement and so on and so forth. Phyllis symbolizes the realm of poetry and what has reanimated her life is not what is distanced or remote, but the day-to-day simple interactions with the crowd and, particularly, with the “a spot light on the curb.” The last two lines— “To talk of the house and the neighborhood and the docks//And it is not ‘art’” with the quotation marks on “art”— explicitly state the difference between the poet who is captivated by human activities down there on the streets and those who are only interested in wandering in the ghostly realm of high art.

12

‘In these explanations it is presumed that an experiencing subject is one occasion of a sensitive reaction to an actual world.’

the rain falls
that had not been falling
and it is the same world

...

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.
This will never return, never,
Unless having reached their limits

They will begin over, that is,
Over and over

The opening sentence of section twelve— “In these explanations it is presumed that an experiencing/ subject is one occasion of a sensitive reaction to an actual/ world” —sets up a phenomenological and essentially Daoist premise. Firstly, an experiencing subject, apart from alluding to us *Homo sapiens*, apparently includes other sentient beings. All are equal constituents of the cosmos. Secondly, in what manner we act matters more than who the actors (the agitive subject) are. The next three lines— “The rain falls/ that had not been falling/and it is the same world”— gives an impression that the world follows its own course and cycle despite an individual’s volition. The rain embodies a process that was disrupted and now resumes on track or a journey in the right direction after it has gone awry for a while. It indicates a categorical imperative that “we live and should live in such a way that we must wish to live again.”²²

According to Oppen, there is a clear gradation in the development of poetic language. First, people use tools of “wood,” “bones of fish,” and “stone,” and empirically experience the ten thousand things. Then, they begin to talk among themselves and families. The circle expands and they gather and speak in council. The distinctive feature of this formation and evolution of language is that these individuals are clinging to the basic elements of the world, and because of their faith in these primitive elements, they are always receptive, that is, “they were patient with the world.” With this said, the poet unequivocally states that this receptivity of the myriad things “will never return, never” if we keep being obsessed with transcending all that is around us. Like the temporal let-up of rain, the attempt to coerce will fail. Intellect alone can’t make a subject. Intellect interacting with the world makes who we humans are. Perhaps only when a man takes

things to extremes will he understand language and its intrinsic relation to such small things as rock and wood.

13

unable to begin
At the beginning, the fortunate
Find everything already here. They are shoppers,
Choosers, judges;...And here the brutal
is without issue, a dead end.
They develop
Argument in order to speak, they become
unreal, unreal, life loses
solidity, loses extent, baseball's their game
because baseball is not a game
but an argument and difference of opinion
makes the horse races. They are ghosts that endanger

One's soul. There is change
In an air
That smells stale, they will come to the end
Of an era
First of all peoples
And one may honorably keep
His distance
If he can.

If section twelve implies the relation between language and the ten thousand things, section thirteen depicts a dire scenario where language loses touch with realities of the world. When language becomes an inherited knowledge and severs direct ties with realities, it loses extent and solidity and has less to do with the world's occurrences than with people's opinions on those occurrences. Worse still, when we believe that language only belongs to those "fortunate," we willingly deprive ourselves of our natural right to language. Our soul will forever be endangered as long as we lament not being in the rank of the fortunate. Unless we restore the direct relation between reality and language, we will literally be "unable to begin/At the beginning." The good thing though is that the world dominates, and it moves on regardless and will not change its course. The air "smells stale," but all will "come to an end" and start all over again. Antithetical to the

idea of a change of language from empirical to theoretical in section twelve, the poet in section thirteen calls for the language to return from representing abstraction and collective wisdom to exploring the self and its relation to the world. That “one may honorably keep/His distance/If he can” once again encourages people to individually experience the world.

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,

Among them many men
More capable than I—

Muykut and a sergeant
Named Healy,
That lieutenant also—

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.

“We,” “they,” and “people” in OBN are never univocal in meaning. As I have analyzed in section three, there are basically two groups of people under the term of “we”—those who are coeval with a locality and those who are not. So is “they” in section twelve: it refers to those who make objects (and language) by forming an interactive relation with the world of things, as well as to those using language as a tool to coerce and appropriate. So is “people” in sections thirteen and fourteen. In section thirteen, the poet asserts that he would prefer to distance himself from

people. What he rejects actually is a perspective or those with the perspective that the making and maintenance of poetic language (not ordinary language) is a collective effort and cannot be made by an individual. The word “people” in section fourteen, however, refers to those with whom he experiences the world and shares the meaning of language. Language is the means of action induced through communication or communicative action among people. Therefore, in the statement that “I cannot even now/Altogether disengage myself/from those men” in section fourteen, “people” no longer stands for the perspective Oppen opposes, but for the real, experiencing individuals. Instead of the embodiment of lofty principles and ideals, Muiyut and Healy, with whom Oppen “hid in the gullies,” are part of the realities of the world, and more specifically, part of Oppen’s war experience. Going through cities (and wars of course), these people have produced the most powerful language. “One cannot speak,” because he cannot speak it in its totality. In other words, language is correlated with human experience. As human experience is a process rather than a product, language is the processive embodiment of meaning as well, and we participate in the generation of meanings.

15
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.’

In section fifteen, Oppen reiterates that a poet becomes poet only when he can find himself. “Navel” is an organ that absorbs nutrition. One has to find it so that it can provide for oneself; “nipples” are a food source, but before one could discover them, they would not produce milk. The self should not be judged. It simultaneously takes and gives, consumes, and provides in its

interaction with the world. The self becomes an androgyny of mother and son, giver, and receiver in one.²³

16
'...he who will not work shall not eat,
and only he who was troubled shall find rest,
and only he who descends into the nether world shall
rescue his beloved,
and only he who unsheathes his knife shall be given
Isaac again. He who will not work shall not eat...
but he who will work shall give birth to his own father.'

Very rarely would Oppen allude to Greek/Roman myth or Bible stories in his poems. Section sixteen by reference to "the nether world" and "Isaac," is unique in this regard.²⁴ Its message is less ambiguous, its tone, more positive. Those who take concrete actions will be rewarded, particularly those in the field of poetry. Man eats because he works. He works, therefore, he is able to redefine his ancestor's legacy. A poet could establish his position in his country's literary history. More often, it is his successors who through their bold discovery and incisive perspectives perpetuate his status as a poet. In this sense, a new generation of poets has the responsibility and privilege to "give birth to" their predecessors. Meanwhile, to steer a course one's predecessor has carved involves risks and losses: a poet would "be troubled"; he has to descend into "the nether world" and even sacrifice what is dear to him before his effort pays off.²⁵

17
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

Anti-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

When a human being becomes the subject matter, his intellect/consciousness, apart from his physical configuration, will naturally be taken into consideration. Similarly, when we relate “us” to chickens, or an average Joe among the masses, intellect/consciousness that differentiates us from other creatures will be significantly suspended. The statement that “there is nobody here but us chickens” immediately reduces us to physical and biological existence, and like the chirping of birds, our talk loses relevancy and becomes a “ferocious mumbling.” This mumbo jumbo is fanatic because it is rootless and purely political. It is endangering too, as it inundates all of the individual voices and only gives rise to one rumbling, silly, aimless voice. In contrast to the clamor of the crowd, the roots of words grip deeper into realities. They are as quiet, substantive, and real as an individual’s life. No one can tell how a word is rooted in the dimly-lit reality of subways, or why ultimate truth lies in an individual’s daily activities. It becomes even harder to explain it now than ever before when the “rootless speech” of the public takes dominance and when we relegate ourselves to becoming dull, blindly following masses.

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

The last two lines of section eighteen clearly allude to war and violence (the Vietnam War in particular). In alignment with “A ferocious mumbling” in section seventeen, “the air of atrocity” further reminds people of the dangers of fanaticism of the mumbling crowd. The madness of the Many would immediately become *ordinary* in the face of an equally fanatical, self-righteous individual. Capitalized “P” in “president” should refer to one of the war-time presidents, and along with an article “a,” it could also be applied to an office or any powerful individual.²⁶ A self-satisfied fool and a group of blind followers are both extraordinarily “atrocious”; yet between the two, neither stands out.

The helicopters fly high in the sky, and if “the casual will” in the aircraft is atrocious, it is also insane. “Insanity in high places” would be readily associated with the madness of those in high positions. The next line suggests that if we let either of the two parties of the self-centered individuals and the mad, mumbling crowd wreak atrocity on other members of society, what is left for us is the death of hope— “cut our own throats.” “The fly in the bottle,” according to Oppen’s letter to Alexander Mourelatos, may well refer to the insane, poisonous Johnsonian use of helicopters that inflicts atrocity on humanity. His comment in the same correspondence— “we are not those insane flies”—also suggests that to cocoon oneself to his narrow, private world is as ridiculous and pernicious as the masses’ fanatical mumbling. In sections 17-19, Oppen endeavors to clarify two types of individuals: those who lead an ordinary, empirical life, a life bolstered and improved upon by the fact that every part of it could be proven through physical evidence readily

apprehended by the senses, and those in high places of power who put themselves into artificial and political categories and ultimately become immune to the real. “The fly” can become “the bright light of shipwreck” when it keeps meaningful contact with realities, and it certainly can turn itself into an insane fanatic if it is obsessed with political ideology and ideals.

20
—They await

War, and the news
Is war

As always

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

Great things have happened
On the earth and given it history, armies
And the ragged hordes moving and the passions
Of that death. But who escapes
Death

Among these riders
Of the subways,

They know
By now as I know

Failure and the guilt
Of failure.
As in Hardy’s poem of Christmas

We might half-hope to find the animals
In the sheds of a nation
Kneeling at midnight,

Farm animals,
Draft animals, beasts for slaughter
Because it would mean they have forgiven us,
Or which is the same thing,
That we do not altogether matter.

Although no one would “wait” for the atrocity of war, it is the war that they end up facing.

The multitude may have “the juices,” the vitality, yet the creative faculties they have more often

than not are unreliable. The order by which Oppen describes history is itself informative: history reflects what has happened and without great things' happening, the earth will be deprived of history. Not that man makes history, in Oppen's statement, the world's occurrences are in the first place in the making of history. "Armies" and "the ragged hordes," a reminder of war and its senselessness, further refuse individualism, and the only justification for the individuals' joining the war is that they believe they are sacrificing themselves for some grand cause. "*That* death" might make death noble and somehow laudable. Following that, however, are an adversative "but" and a rhetorical question. As an anticlimax, the clause, "who escapes/Death," seems to express that no matter how one glorifies death, the result is the same. All must perish and there is nothing inspirational or sublime about the demise of life.

The subway passengers push and shove their way into and out of the train. For all intents and purposes, one passenger looks and behaves like the other. Totally divested of individuality, they resemble the "armies" and the sleep-walking "ragged hordes" in the previous stanza who only know how to follow orders, repeat the same actions, and perpetuate often corrupt, artificial messages. "Failure" and "the guilt of failure" relates to Hardy's "The Oxen," in which Hardy contrasts the innocent belief of childhood with the skepticism and loss of faith of adulthood. It centers on how people are beguiled into believing in God's omnipotence and divine revelation; this is analogous to the abortive attempt to glorify war and valorize individual self-sacrifice for the so-called "greater good." What a failure it would be to impose fake, artificial meanings upon what is happening in the world and to supersede the singular with the "ragged hordes" and the subway passengers whose sole goal is to either materialize ideology or implement uniformity of practice and behavior.

If there was an ultimate divinity in the universe, we would pray for forgiveness and redemption; we would sympathize with those animals kneeling at midnight and feel sure that they would pardon us because of our belief in divinity. Yet this is something we can only *half* hope for, for divine presence may well be another *made* concept. If divinity is but a mental construction, then humans have to subject themselves to the facticity of life and, therefore, there is no point of differentiating the self from the world. The claim – “which is the same thing/That we do not altogether matter” has a twofold meaning: if there is a god in transcendence, then in his eyes all in this mundane world is the same. We do not matter to each other because we, the mortal, fallible, flawed, only matter to Him; or if we dismiss high spirituality which is nothing but a totality of human thoughts and ideas, we then immerse ourselves into the physicality of the world. Under the Daoist premise of ontological distinction which I have previously delineated, how could human beings, matter more than non-human beings such as the oxen?

21

There can be a brick
In a brick wall
The eye picks

So quiet of a Sunday
Here is the brick, it was waiting
Here when you were born

Mary-Anne

Henry Weinfield remarks that the implications of the brick are entirely ambiguous and indeterminate. To fathom the meaning of the eye’s picking out a brick in a brick wall apparently poses difficulty for not a few literary critics. In a letter to a friend of his, Oppen writes, “We’re committed, Mary and I, as artists, and therefore very seriously, to the common, the un-doped, the un-staged, the plain and ordinary daylight. Whatever we see now, we’ll see that way—or fight to do so.” Right after this comment, he adds “I believe we cannot be astonished by any hallucination

whatever. Whereas we are totally astonished by daylight, by any brick in a brick wall we focus on.”²⁷ In addition to indicating the One in the Many—the wonder of the singular, that is also a poet of the numerous, clearly, the brick (as well as the daylight) symbolizes the thing in its pristine and primitive state. The problem, though, is that people would rather get confused by abstraction and false perception than get at the being of a thing in its originality. Throughout his life, Oppen fights against the derangement of the senses, which Raihan Kadri describes as “a method, a concerted effort at affecting perception.”²⁸ The senses filter and tune sensibility but they do not represent the feeling of sensibility itself, the intuition and the will that would desire change in the first place.

That on a quiet Sunday the eye picks a brick for no reason or purpose and with no subsequent result represents an ideal strategy to counter the hallucination and fantasy we sometimes have of this world. It is not a complicated strategy, and no phrase than the Daoist saying, *Ziran*, (the translation of it varies. Some would call it occurrence appearing of itself, others would say spontaneity or occurrence of its own accord) could better describe it. The essence of *Ziran* is that 1) each being rises and falls spontaneously; and that 2) the interaction among things is based on the absolute understanding that one does not coerce, appropriate, or objectify the other. The eye (not the mind) encountering a brick which is part of a wall of bricks constitutes a typical Daoist state of things. Not awaiting anything in particular, consciousness and things mingle with each other harmoniously. What one embraces simultaneously is the One as well as the Many. Mary-Anne can be a specific person walking into this poem the way Oppen’s wife and daughter often do. Or more likely, she stands for human presence on the face of the earth. For Oppen, good poems derive from humans’ direct engagement with “the brick” of the world.

22

Clarity

In the sense of transparence,
I don't mean that much can be explained.

Clarity in the sense of silence

Succinct and affirmative, section twenty-two is considered a guideline for poetry composition. That a poet should seek an unmediated language to write becomes the thrust of this section. An unmediated language refers to one that expresses the least of subjective feelings/reaction. It aims to draw readers' attention to what Heidegger calls the "root word" meaning of words as a way to reach an original philosophical worldview and to forge a connatural relationship between intellect and the material structures of the world.

Without exaggeration, silence is the only means to observe Dao as well. The Daoist sage and his followers insist that language is grievously inadequate to describe the Way. In order to "govern" the world, paradoxically, one has to reject the words, that is, the conventional values of words and resort to silence. One should let one's mind wander in simplicity, accept things as they are without bothering to clarify them, and make no room for personal opinions. Only by giving up small "clarity" achieved by our conventional use of language can we have great "clarity" of reality which is constant regardless of the words. Oppen's attempt to transform language into a means of exploration, in essence, is the same as Laozi's attempt to transcend language, because both work toward tearing away the screen language puts between consciousness and things, and both yearn for a direct relationship with things.

23

'Half free
And half mad'
And the jet set is in.
The vocabularies of the forties
Gave way to the JetStream
And the media, the Mustang

And the deals
And the people will change again.

Under the soil
In the blind pressure
The lump,
Entity
Of Substance
Changes also.

In two dozen rooms,
Two dozen apartments
After the party
The girls
Stare at the ceilings
Blindly as they are filled
And then they sleep.

There are two changes juxtaposed in this section. One is the social change: the arrival of the jet set age and Jetstream (a reference to a brand of luxurious mobile home or/and the airplane that could take advantage of high-altitude jet stream wind), the launch of a new model of Mustang, and the jargon of the media. Parallel to this dazzling shift of social patterns is another change that is happening “under the soil/In the blind pressure.” In correspondence to the new development in media, technology, and fashion in the 60s, people quickly updated their “vocabulary of the forties” so that they could follow the new social norms and manners. Meanwhile, “The lump, /Entity of Substance” carries out a transformation right under our feet, only that no one takes heed of it. The situation is similar to what English Metaphysicist John Donne described centuries ago.²⁹ Commercialization, along with a nationwide commodity fetishism rapidly alter people’s behaving and speaking, yet it won’t alter the fundamentals we stand on, which stick to their own course and direction. Since they are steadfast and change without regard to human volition, they merit more of our attention and respect.

With regard to the girls going to bed, there are two equally relevant interpretations. 1) That “they are blindly filled/And then they sleep” apparently is a disturbing depiction of female

passivity. As they reside in the same, nameless apartment rooms, lured by the glitz and glamor of the city life, and exhausted by the idle social chit-chat, they may well embody a populace living in a time of decadent consumerism. If this is the case, the last stanza, by zooming in on a dozen girls being blindly replenished and falling asleep has demonstrated the direct, dire consequences of modernity and its appalling artificialness. 2) Although the buildings are monotonous and the girls have been penetrated, unbeknownst to themselves, their slumbers, from a Daoist perspective, can be a positive thing as well: firstly, these women are not necessarily victims. They act on something unknowingly. On a philosophical and epistemological level, the Daoist sage particularly encourages people to be absolute “simpletons” with mind utterly blank and bemused (*TTC*, Poem 20). As the ten thousand things are happening to us every day beyond our awareness, it is just irrelevant to assert limited and often biased human knowledge to the occurrences of the world. For this reason, Laozi suggests not-knowing as a means to knowing. Secondly, we should not assume that what is given to them must be extraordinarily damaging or pernicious. These women go to sleep and their sleep foretells a change in gestation similar to that of the “lump” in the previous stanza. When the festivity is done, they leave behind all of the artifacts that belong to the party and plunge right into sleep. In a state of temporary unconsciousness, the facticity of life kicks in, and their minds and bodies once again become part of the Daoist universe where being and non-being work together harmoniously. Because of the return to physicality, their whole being participates uncannily in the cosmos.

24
In this nation
Which is in some sense
Our home. Covenant!

The covenant is
There shall be peoples

With the nation, our home, covenant, and peoples, section twenty-four clearly anchors on the idea of plurality. “Covenant,” capitalized, and emphasized (with an exclamation mark), implies not only an agreement among people but also a serious commitment to that agreement. The statement— “The covenant is/ There shall be peoples” –creates a nuanced effect: we belong to humanity and each one of us is part of a unifying collectivity. It is meaningless to have a covenant if the aim is not to hold us in common; in the meanwhile, we must respect individualism. The covenant upholds individual independence and self-reliance for all of its participating members regardless of their race, culture, religious persuasion, and political affiliation. Paraphrased, the last three lines seem to admonish: we, as a group, must have a consensus and be committed to it, and the consensus is that we should allow the singular within the context of the numerous distinct entity to which he is entitled.

25
Strange that the youngest people I know
Live in the oldest buildings
Scattered about the city
In the dark rooms
Of the past—and the immigrants,

The black
Rectangular buildings
Of the immigrants.

They are the children of the middle class.

‘The pure products of America—’

Investing
The ancient buildings
Jostle each other

In the half-forgotten, that ponderous business.
This Chinese Wall.

Instead of developing the young and giving hope for the immigrants, the oldest buildings, the darkest rooms, and the black, rectangular housing become the perfect locations to confine these

poor people. Their growth is miserably deformed and dangerously homogenized. Worse still, brought up in these run-down buildings, they are supposed to shoulder responsibilities as the main constituents of society in the future. If we take a look at William Carlos Williams' poem "To Elsie" from which "The pure products of America—" comes, we find that Oppen has replaced the original line "go crazy—" with a dash only. He does not need to highlight the craziness of leaving the entire generation in an impoverished and neglected condition and of mercilessly subjugating the singular to the numerous, the madness of it is self-evident.

There are two readings of the lines 10-13, depending on where we place the modifier, "Investing": if it is "the pure products of America" jostling each other, the "products" or the young population would be similar to those in section ten who except for being able to shuffle each other, are nothing significant but a crowd. If the pushing back and forth happens metaphorically among the "ancient buildings," it then finds a perfect analogy with the ponderous Great Wall of China. Both undertakings serve more to contain than to protect. The way the dilapidated buildings obstruct young people's growth is exactly the same as the traditional Chinese walls used to confine Chinese people within certain boundaries. Lastly, "that" in "that ponderous business," and "This" in "This Chinese Wall" constitute a lexical antithesis which, apart from vivifying the moves of pushing and shoving, enables the wieldy business of jostling each other and the Wall of China to constantly reveal each other's absurdity.

26
They carry nativeness
To a conclusion
In suicide.

We want to defend
Limitation
And do not know how.

Stupid to say merely that poets should not lead their lives

Among poets,

They have lost the metaphysical sense
Of the future, they feel themselves
The end of a chain
Of lives, single lives
And we know that lives
Are single

And cannot defend
The metaphysic
On which rest

The boundaries
Of our distances.
We want to say

'Common sense'
And cannot. We stand on

That denial
Of death that paved the cities,
Paved the cities

Generation
For generation and the pavement

Is filthy as the corridors
Of the police,

How shall one know a generation, a new generation?
Not by the dew on them! Where the earth is most torn
And the wounds untended and the voices confused,
There is the head of the moving column

Who if they cannot find
Their generation
Wither in the infirmaries

And the supply depots, supplying
Irrelevant objects.
Street lamps shine on the parked cars
Steadily in the clear night

It is true the great mineral silence
Vibrates, hums a process
Completing itself

In which the windshield wipers
Of the cars are visible.

The power of the mind, the
Power and weight
Of the mind which
Is not enough, it is nothing
And does nothing

Against the natural world,
Behemoth, white whale, beast
They will say and less than beast,
The fatal rock

Which is the world—

O if the streets
Seem bright enough,
Fold within fold
Of residence...

Or see thru water
Clearly the pebbles
Of the beach
Thru the water, flowing
From the ripple, clear
As ever they have been

This section might be the longest one in OBN. Weinfield suggests that the first three lines express the idea that “one ‘nation’ or ‘people’ has risen up in the war against others until it too succumbed to the lemming logic in which it was enmeshed.”³⁰ In relation to the previous section, if “pure products of America” bear some features of nativeness, then nativeness, to a large degree, means coercing and pushing our “youngest people” and “immigrants” like lemmings to politics and the relative fortune of this country. The very practice of assimilating and nativizing is suicidal because it suppresses individuality as much as it upholds uniformity.

For Oppen, it is not a question of singularity OR numerality, but of being One AND being Many, as explicitly expressed in *Dao De Jing* which advocates the multitudes of dualities complementing each other. There should be a limitation for both, and the question one often encounters is that the line between the two is hard to draw, let alone to defend. The word “merely” in line seven plays a linchpin role in the interpretation of the following eight lines. If Oppen simply

said, “Stupid to say that poets should not lead their lives/Among poets,” the undertone would be that a poet’s creative life could somehow rely on the inherited incremental knowledge. With the adverbial, the sentence approximates to something like “it is stupid to just say that poets should not lead their lives among poets.” Clearly, stupidity is less associated with what is said than who says it. For Oppen, it seems that before making a statement, one should first and foremost become an empiricist. Action always speaks louder than empty words.

A poet should not sever ties with reality. Otherwise, he will have nothing left but a consciousness which alone is nothing. On the other hand, a poet cannot afford to lose “the metaphysical sense/of future” either, or he will turn out to have merely an external existence and be part of a physical process that goes on despite him. In Oppen’s mind, “the metaphysical sense” is absolute no matter whether the person faces humanity or the natural world. We cannot defend “limitation” or “The metaphysic/On which rest / The boundaries /Of our distances” because that which differentiates the One from the Many originates from a communal understanding. It is formed by both parties and keeps developing and evolving. Additionally, “common sense” refers less to “man in the street” wisdom than the idea of the singular and the numerous complementing and consummating each other.

We are ignorant if we keep denying that “death” which has factually been part of the “filthy” pavement on which we walk for generations. Because of this denial, we would have serious trouble understanding ourselves. In a letter to his sister June Oppen Degnan, Oppen writes that “To recognize the new, the ‘new generation’: not by the dew on them. On the contrary, where there are the clearest and sharpest marks of trampling, of devastation, destitution, the rawest wounds, is the head of the army column.”³¹ Rather than a “subject” or an innocent sense of the new generation, Oppen focuses too on their wounds and injuries. If we focus on “the dew” aspect of the new

generation, we would never have the chance to access the facticity of life of “the wounds untended” and “the voices confused.” The denial of “death that paved the cities” is a denial of the physicality of the universe, and the consequences of it are while the supply depots can keep supplying goods, we will still be “wither[ing] in the infirmaries,” because what we are given are “irrelevant objects,” and a few glimpses of the artificial life, not the real, factual life.

Instead of “stand[ing] on//That denial/Of death that paved the cities,” Oppen has provided something more solid for us to stand on. “Street lamps,” “parked cars,” “clear night,” “windshield wipers” present themselves crystal clearly in front of us and silently mingle with our consciousness. This stance resembles *Wuwei*, or the nonassertive action in Daoism: a person acts in accordance with the Way through which all things arise and pass away of their own accord. Such activities proceed without reference to any principles or rules. Being spontaneous, unmediated, and within one’s field of influence, *Wuwei* is to be characterized as acting that does not seek to own or control what it acts upon. Objectification in abeyance, the self and the ten thousand things join the “process of /completing itself.” In the whole interactive process, mind alone is not enough, since “it is nothing and does nothing.”

In the last two stanzas, what we seem to have is a transparent eyeball taking in all that flashes upon it: the bright streets, the receding folds of residence, the clear water, and the shiny pebbles in the stream. Only when we realize the inadequacy of our inherited knowledge and cast our eyes externally to the world of things which have always been there can we be enlightened and have a better understanding of our generation as well as the hidden, intrinsic ties linking us with the physical world.

27

It is difficult now to speak of poetry—

about those who have recognized the range of choice or those
who have lived within the life they were born to—. It is not

precisely a question of profundity but a different order of experience. One would have to tell what happens in a life, what choices present themselves, what the world is for us, what happens in time, what thought is in the course of a life and therefore what art is, and the isolation of the actual

I would want to talk of rooms and of what they look out on and of basements, the rough walls bearing the marks of the forms, the old marks of wood in the concrete, such solitude as we know—

and the swept floors. Someone, a workman bearing about him, feeling about him that peculiar word like a dishonored fatherhood has swept this solitary floor, this profoundly hidden floor—such solitude as we know.

One must not come to feel that he has a thousand threads
in his hands,
He must somehow see the one thing;
This is the level of art
There are other levels
But there is no other level of art

By using “now” in the statement, Oppen seems to say that the difficulty did not exist in the past and that it has resulted from changes in one’s epistemology or changes in human culture/history over time. Whether the word “or” in line two aims to contrast two groups of people or to give an account of one group with the reference to the other, they both have something to do with the difficulties we now are saddled with. The wisdom to recognize “the range of choice” does not necessarily help poetic creation, because it prioritizes consciousness, and due to the promise of knowing, brings certainty and predictability to the essentially unpredictable life. Meanwhile, to live the life one was born to offers little inspiration for a poet, either. It only means that one would identify oneself with the circumstances in which one was brought up, conform, if unconsciously, to a set of ideas and principles, and keep a fixed perception of life. Oppen intends to stay apart from these two categorizations of people by using third-person pronominal references. Their work becomes difficult to talk about, not because of its profundity, but because of the perspective they have on life. If a poet is able to tell “what happens in a life,” and “what choices present themselves,”

he gets hold of that life and is able to make a conscious perception of it. In that case, intellect would be inevitably prioritized, because to explain what the world is, its occurrences in time, and one's thoughts during the span of his life require constant thinking. When intellection and ideation become crucial in the formation of art, the self and the world, both being the actual, will be dichotomized. The more we objectify our experience, the more centralized our consciousness becomes. Lines 2-8 once again call one to remember some of the characteristics of a Daoist aesthetic understanding of man and nature. The ancient sage excludes anthropocentrism and objectivist construal of the world that puts us at the center of the universe. Such construal does not reflect what the natural world is. Based on explicit and implicit theories of human experience, it relates only to an individual's personal feeling, knowledge, and action. Daoism promotes a non-theoretical approach to the world, and the world must be experienced deferentially.

Oppen offers an alternative poetics. In his poems, the physicality of the world relational to the individual has replaced individual reflection of the world. The rooms, what they face, the basements, "the rough walls," and "the old marks of wood" take a focal/central position. Note the implication that it is on such concrete objects as "the rough walls" that one spots the "marks of the forms" and the essence of poetry. Additionally, concentration on the myriad things creates a sense of solitude, because no longer mediated, the uncanny, extraordinary interaction happens only between the self and the world.

"Dishonored fatherhood" refers to being in the state of an irresponsible parent. If this fatherhood is disgraceful, then the practice of "someone" also does not deserve much respect, because he is related to that dishonored elder. The narrator "I" and that "someone" are both sweeping "floors" and till the same "profoundly hidden" land of poetry. That "someone's" solitude comes from his obsession with a "peculiar word" (a language of self-expression) whereas the

solitude the narrator feels results from elimination of mediation between the self and the ten thousand things. The narrator's withdrawal paradoxically is a gesture of reaching out and being open, as the dash following the first "solitude" implies, whereas that "someone else's" withdrawal stands for a closure because it ends up in consciousness taking control of the world.

There are many options a poet can choose in terms of creating a poem. For Oppen, this is not merely a technical issue, or "a thousand threads/ in his hands." It represents a belief, which a poet, if he is honest enough, must see and firmly hold on to. To understand and make art does not require the mastery of all of those techniques, instead, it asks for a poet's commitment and belief in "the one thing," regardless of his artistic and creative propensity. Like a Daoist follower, he must embrace both the One and the Many, and the essentially non-dualistic relationship between them. We may be shown his technical virtuosity at "other levels." It is at this one and single level that he presents himself as an artist.

28
The light
Of the closed pages, tightly closed, packed against each other
Exposes the new day,
The narrow, frightening light
Before a sunrise.

This section symbolically demonstrates the relation among the light of art, inherited knowledge/history, and nature. "The closed pages" can inspire and inform a poet, and their light of wisdom contributes to the advent of "the new day." At the same time, because it generalizes/finalizes things, the light of the book is no comparison to the light of nature. Nature reveals itself to us gradually and can be "frightening" because, without reference to human knowledge, it is unpredictable, taking on a life of its own. By the same token, it is enlightening as well, for inspiration and wisdom for a poem ultimately derives from and belongs to the rising sun, the epitome of nature and the cosmos.

29

My daughter, my daughter, what can I say
Of living?

I cannot judge it.

We seem caught in reality together my lovely
Daughter,

I have a daughter
But no child

And it was not precisely
Happiness we promised
Ourselves;

We say happiness, happiness and are not
Satisfied.

Tho the house on the low land
Of the city

Catches the dawn light

I can tell myself, and I tell myself
Only what we all believe
True

And in the sudden vacuum
Of time...

...is it not
In fear the roots grip

Downward
And beget

The baffling hierarchies
Of father and child

As of leaves on their high
Thin twigs to shield us

From time, from open
Time

Ridding ourselves of the concept of time, we become existential beings, and in terms of reality,
my daughter and I represent but experiential differences. My experience of life is not necessarily

more authentic than hers and any of my/her judgment of living becomes partial and contingent. Biologically, “I” father her, yet I do not hold authority over her in experiencing reality in which we both are caught. In this sense, “I have a daughter,” but I have “no child.” Lines 5-6 to last—“the baffling hierarchies /Of father and child”—corroborate this assumption that the father-child dyad conveys more philosophical (and political) than biological messages, as also explicitly expressed in section sixteen where Oppen quotes, “he who will work shall give birth to his own father.”

To be happy, one must be satisfied with what has happened to him, what is happening to him and, possibly, what will happen to him. Since we are NOT satisfied, we are not happy. Unhappiness is not an individual issue, it is an existential reality beyond time and space. What man in his primordial state promised would not have been happiness, for if it had been, he would have had the intellect greater than the Creator and he would have known the totality of things. Or, if it had been happiness he assured himself of, it should be significantly different from a modern man’s definition of happiness. Against the perpetual background of “the house on the low land/Of the city” catching “the dawn light,” what could have humans promised and what could be real happiness for us suddenly become serious epistemological questions.

“I can tell myself, and I tell myself/Only what we all believe/True” echoes “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” in section nine. These lines reiterate Oppen’s belief in the One becoming the Many. But we have to make this statement carefully, because rather than prioritizing one over the other, Oppen is only interested in the dynamic between the singular and the numerous. Supposing in the vacuum of time we witness the growth of roots, the structure of predecessor and successor would immediately become irrelevant. Paternity of a child only means that the father is

as fortunate to claim everything as the child is unfortunate to find everything out there has already been claimed. As there is no succession of the old by the new, those high on the thin twigs will always be there and will not be replaced by us underneath them. Gripping downward and begetting would become some kind of repeated mechanics and nothing could alter the status of those high above. Worst still, in the name of shielding and protecting us, they keep us from challenging and changing the monotony of the process and we, as the perceivers, are deprived of the opportunity to have an authentic connection with the actual world.

30
Behind their house, behind the back porch
Are the little woods.
She walks into them sometimes
And awaits the birds and the deer.

Looking up she sees the blue bright sky
Above the branches.
If one had been born here
How could one believe it?

In this section, the connection between the narrator and nature appears to be immediate and intimate, and the poet is engaged in what I have repeatedly called a Daoist pursuit. First off, she lives by the woods, and it only takes a few steps for her to walk into the arms of nature. Second, the interaction between the two is not coerced or forced: the woods surround her and she, though waiting for “the birds and the deer,” seems quite contented with whatever that comes to her. Thirdly, thinking and ideation becomes secondary. What we see is an experiencing subject exposing herself directly to the natural objects of trees and sky.

Scrutinized more closely, this section also bears some dissimilarities with the Daoist ideals. In a landscape poem shaped by a Daoist cultivation of the rivers-and-mountains realms, nature sits in the center. The landscape presents itself right in front of the man. If they happen to be somewhere else in the proximity of his living, their overwhelming presence is unmistakable. In

section thirty, nature makes a small scene in reference to the house and the back porch. Undoubtedly healing and nurturing, it is more like a pleasant resort where one would rather visit than reside. Additionally, the fact that she *sometimes* steps into them and spends most of her days presumably somewhere else further indicates that she is not ready to be entirely immersed in nature. The last two lines in subjunctive mood seem to state that such a harmony between objectivity and subjectivity is too good to be true, or it is no longer humanly possible to live harmoniously with the myriad things, or that it simply is a falsity to lose the self to the world of things. The transparency between the gazer and the gazed leads to the awakening of man's consciousness. But in terms of the oneness of man and the world, Oppen apparently is tepidly interested. Culturally and historically, it is less possible for him to step further into the deep dark-enigma and the so-called gateway of all mystery like a Daoist sage would.

31
Because the known and the unknown
Touch,

One witnesses—
It is ennobling
If one thinks so.

If to know is noble

It is ennobling.

According to Laozi, the fact of the world is that the perceiving subject should have a perpetual communication with things, events, and phenomena. The perceiver should not be in the position to define or judge what is presented to him. Whether he likes what he sees or feels, he is the witness to the interaction and is part of the unknown consequences of it. The lines— “It is ennobling/ If one thinks so”—seems to assert that such a phenomenological approach to the relation between the self and the world would lend dignity and nobility of character to those who think phenomenologically. The next two lines, “If to know is noble// It is ennobling,” further extends

the previous statement: if to know is a noble undertaking, then to know spontaneously the ten thousand things as well as to participate unknowingly in their workings would definitely elevate/enlighten the person involved.

32
Only that it should be beautiful,
Only that it should be beautiful,

O, beautiful

Red green blue—the wet lips
Laughing

Or the curl of the white shell

And the beauty of women, the perfect tendons
Under the skin, the perfect life

That can twist in a flood
Of desire

Not truth but each other

The bright, bright skin, her hands wavering
In her incredible need

“Beautiful” is the *cantus firmus* of this section. Since this adjective expresses a subjective response, one must ask what makes someone feel something is beautiful or otherwise ugly. Oppen does not give a definition for beauty, instead, he puts forth some small but self-sufficient nouns for an answer: the colors of red, green, and blue, the “wet lips/Laughing,” “the curl of the white shell,” and the “tendons/Under the skin.” For him, the criterion for being beautiful changes and what is regarded as perfect and ideal can twist and be twisted due to the “desire” of the perceiver. When the Daoist sage claims that “all beneath heaven knows beauty is beauty/only because there’s ugliness” (*TTC*, Poem 2), he understands that nothing is absolute and that the world is made up of contradictory and complementary opposites. Although Oppen’s focus is not on dichotomies and polarities of things, he acknowledges that all aesthetic standards are provisional and artificial, and,

ultimately, irrelevant. The woman's "incredible need" for beauty, for the kind of idealized ecstatic response contradicts the poet's fundamental beliefs. For Oppen, instead of an abstraction, beauty lies in a dazzling series of particulars. To experience beauty/ truth requires that one recognizes the fluidity of beauty in its capacity to surprise and enliven, and identify oneself with others, particularly with the myriad things.

33
Which is ours, which is ourselves,
This is our jubilation
Exalted and as old as that truthfulness
Which illuminates speech.

If we take the liberty to call "speech" poetry, then what "illuminates" poetry, according to section thirty-three, is its quality of "truthfulness." Age-old and exalted, that truthfulness, also a source of great happiness (or jubilation), relates to "ourselves" and that "which is ours." In Oppen's poetic language, "ourselves" represents the singular, the self, and the perceiving individual whereas the ten thousand things relational to the self are usually considered as "ours." Straightened up, the whole section seems to state that if a poem wants to express something, it must adhere to truthfulness. Since there is "no truth but each other," we can only look for a continuum of relative truthfulness. Besides, truthfulness is not an abstraction or concept. It engages the self ("which is ourselves") and those humans and non-humans relational to the self ("Which is ours").

34
Like the wind in the trees and the bells
Of the procession—

How light the air is
And the earth,

Children and the grass
In the wind and the voices of men and women

To be carried about the sun forever

Among the beautiful particulars of the breezes
The papers blown about the sidewalks

‘...a Female Will to hide the most evident God
Under a covert...’

Surely infiniteness is the most evident thing in the world

Is it the courage of women
To assume every burden of blindness themselves

Intruders
Carrying life, the young women

Carrying life
Unaided in their arms

In the streets, weakened by too much need
Of too little

And life seeming to depend on women, burdened and
desperate
As they are

“The wind in the trees” in the first stanza switches our attention to the many “beautiful particulars of the breezes,” one of which is “the voices of men and women” carried about in the bright open. The physical world and simple human activities in it afford us a glimpse of “truthfulness” and “our jubilation.” Meanwhile, the bells of the procession, a reminder of religion and ritual, add a spiritual and metaphysical dimension to the world’s occurrences. From a Daoist reading, “The papers blown about the sidewalks,” can be interpreted either as a disruption of the unity between man and nature or as a contributor to it. If for some readers, they appear to be incongruous with the scene, it is because they are artificial and man-made, and represent what the Daoist sage would call the human attempt to express a kind of order/truth. On the other hand, the justification for them to be of the beautiful particulars, however, lies in that they move wherever the wind goes and that they do not impose themselves on anything else—They fly in the wind and communicate, as-a-matter-of-factly, with sidewalks, trees, grass, and among other objects.

The quotation— ‘...a Female Will to hide the most evident God/ Under a covert...’ —comes from William Blake’s poem “Jerusalem The Emanation of the Giant Albion.” Its chapter 2, plate 34, lines 25-35, from which Oppen has quoted, according to Minna Doskow, has described the consequences of mere physicality. Doskow claims that “Man, Los explains, has replaced his divinity with physicality and thereby denied or annihilated himself,” and that “Los further anticipates the consequences of Vala’s domination in the rule of the merely natural as the single principle of man’s existence leading to the merely material universe of mathematics and empirical science, ‘the Wilds of Newton & Locke’.”³² I have argued in the previous chapter that Oppen leans towards a phenomenological worldview. Only when consciousness is not regarded as an object with some special structures possessed by the brain can we give relevancy to it in our understanding of the relation between the self and the world. For this reason, right after the quote, which in Doskow’s words, alludes to the replacement of man’s divinity by physicality and the annihilation of himself and his consciousness, Oppen clarifies his understanding of the world, “Surely infiniteness is the most evident thing in the world.” What he means his reader to heed is that the physicality of the universe is undisputable and the cosmos cannot be expounded by means of mathematics and physics.

The lines— “Is it the courage of women/To assume every burden of blindness themselves”— remind us again of the girls staring at the ceiling. In section twenty-three, the girls are *blindly* filled whereas here they carry the burden of *blindness*. The repeated root word “blind” presses for some consistent implications. Let us say that living in the world requires a kind of not-knowing, which I have outlined in section twenty-three, then the “courage” they demonstrate here in section thirty-four specifically is in reference to the quality of acting instead of thinking. Because these women have assumed the burden of blindness, the rest of humanity could relish the vitality of life. Their

moves bring in change and innovation, and, for this reason, they become the “intruders” on stagnation and conventionality. “Introducers” could also refer to some unknown forces. Carrying life, these forces act on those receptive individuals and enact change in them without their knowledge.

With this said, the fact often is that as responsive to the unknown forces of the world as they are, these courageous individuals often do not get the recognition and help they deserve. Although a meaningful life very much depends on them, they are “unaided” and are often woefully distracted by “too much need/ Of too little.” The two words “weaken” and “need” merit our attention: When it comes to *need*, we always have a clear idea with regard to the circumstances, the course of action, the necessary duty, and the specific items we covet. It relates to predictability, assurance, and one’s knowing what he/she is doing. Too much need distracts/burdens people, because individual judgment, decisions, and requirements would supersede his/her intuition and initial feelings towards things. In order to get what he yearns for, a person would reach out for specific things rather than let the world of things flash upon and inform him. Such aggressiveness toward the unknown often ends up in the individual’s acquiring “too little,” since, in the process of acquiring the One, he often loses sight of the Many, which potentially could be more useful. Like these women, we all have a piece of “burdened and desperate” mind and with good reason, we all attempt to conceptualize the world. We wander between “to know” and “not to know,” and this is a constant state of mind for humans.

35
... or define
Man beyond rescue
of the impoverished, solve
whole cities

before we can face
again
forests and prairies...

“Man beyond rescue,” with “man” capitalized, leads us to the remembrance of the first man in Eden and the blunder he made. It also reminds us of the “tale of our wickedness” indicated in section one. We are immediately obliged to define him in a spiritual light. Adding the next line to it— “Man beyond rescue/of the impoverished,” we have a more historical than spiritual figure who is entrusted with the task of easing the economic burden off the shoulders of his fellow citizens. This modern “man” is a hybrid of materiality and spirituality, and we must describe him in both religious and scientific terms.

Before we can face forests, prairies, we have to face and “solve/ whole cities.” Again, it is not *the* or *a* city, the word “cities” like “cities” in section three remains a generic term. It is a synonym for clusters of materials: cities have bridges, houses, and streets which involve man’s physical effort. Besides, people live in cities, and cities create an environment capable of influencing those city dwellers. By simply looking at the architecture of a city, for instance, one comprehends the reality. A city, in a sense, stands for the cosmos. To “solve/whole cities” eventually raises the question of how our mind should react to the realities of our world. It has a phenomenological bearing on the relationship between a person and the myriad things relational to him.

36
Tho the world
Is the obvious, the seen
And unforeseeable,
That which one cannot
Not see

Which the first eyes
Saw—

For us
Also each
Man and woman
Near is
Knowledge

Tho it may be of the noon's
Own vacuity

—and the mad, too, speak only of conspiracy
and people talking—

And if those paths
Of the mind
Cannot break

It is not the wild glare
Of the world even that one dies in.

The first three lines reiterate what Oppen advocates: the physicality and impenetrability of the world. Because of the break, lines four and five— “That which one cannot/Not see”— conveniently convey two messages of 1) the limit (or the intentionality) of consciousness, and 2) the obviousness of the idea that the world remains unfathomable for humans. That “Which the first eyes// Saw—,” possibly alluding to Adam and Eve, brings us back to a time when humans were able to genuinely appreciate and respect the world of hidden truths and mysteries. That “...the world/ Is the obvious” in lines one and two, does not mean that there is nothing profound beneath the surface of the earth, or that the world only represents emptiness or vacuity of existence. What is the obvious is the unfathomable nature of the world and its process of concealing and un-concealing, not the individual objects or phenomena that are obvious or are easy to comprehend.

We can use bare prose to formulate the next seven lines after “Which the first eyes/Saw—” into different statements. I use commas to mark where I pause: 1) For us, also each man and woman near is knowledge, though it may be of the noon's own vacuity; and 2) For us also each man and woman, near is knowledge, though it may be of the noon's own vacuity. In the first case, man and woman near us confer knowledge, that is, through relating oneself to other individuals and interacting with them one can access knowledge. This message is echoed in section nine in which Oppen claims that “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,” and in section fourteen where Oppen insists that he could not disengage himself from those men with whom he fought during the War. In the second case, apart from the dynamic between nearness and distance, approach and withdrawal, singular and numerous, Oppen seems to express that we are unable to shake off the burden of inherited knowledge so much so that we lose sight of the “wild glare” of reality. By resorting to myth, philosophy, religion, and science, we give up the opportunity to understand and embrace the world at first hand. That “near is knowledge” requires that we put aside our own projections of the world and remain closer to the myriad things. Lastly, the clause “Tho it may be of the noon’s /Own vacuity,” in my opinion, does not necessarily mean that knowledge, whether it comes from the interaction of the singular with the numerous, or the individuals with the world, discloses the vacuity of existence. This clause, with reference to the first lines of the “Maude Blessingbourne” poem in *Discrete Series*, “The knowledge not of sorrow, you were/saying, but of boredom,” and to “the boredom which disclosed/Everything—” in the next section of this poem, does not mean that knowledge is obvious or boring, but that we should take an attitude of “boredom” to approach what is shown to us. One should not make a judgment of whether the noon is empty or void of meaning. Instead, one is encouraged to empty his mind, suspend his intelligence and critical faculties, and take a non-committal and nonconsequential stance to approach the world of things.

“[T]he mad, too, speak only of conspiracy” is another way to say that the mad have nothing but a conspiracy to speak of. Whether “the mad” belong to “people talking” in the next line, or “people talking” together with “conspiracy” becomes the object of the predicate “speak of,” it is less important than the association Oppen has made between speech and insanity. “Conspiracy” like the “argument and difference of opinion” in section fourteen and the “ferocious mumbling”

in section seventeen, poses an obstruction between the gazer and the gazed. It makes our language empty, silly, and sick. Such a language becomes the mad man's exclusive possession.

If one's mind does not create new paths, or break the old ones, metaphorically, one will end up in a very unpleasant situation: he dies in this world and remains ignorant of the "wild glare" of it, or even worse, he dies in some illusion and never gets the chance to encounter the reality of the world at all.

37

'...approached the window as if to see...'

The boredom which disclosed

Everything—

I should have written, not the rain
Of a nineteenth century day, but the motes
In the air, the dust

Here still.

What have we argued about? What have we done?

Thickening the air?

Air so thick with myth the words *unlucky*
And *good luck*
Float in it...
To 'see' them?

No.

Or sees motes, an iron mesh, links

Of consequence

Still, at the mind's end
Relevant

The first three lines, with reference to the very first poem in *Discrete Series* Oppen published in 1934, seem to express that boredom can facilitate access to knowledge, apart from being

customarily associated with excessive wealth and ease. How could boredom become a precondition to having a renewed contact with “everything”? An average individual’s activities, according to Laozi, are sensation-and-pleasure-seeking one way or another — “the five colors,” “the five tones,” “fast horses and breathtaking hunts,” “things rare and expensive” (*TTC*, Poem 12). In contrast to sensation-seeking is the concept of boredom which can be described as a process of “seeing without seeing.” It means that an individual stands immobile and irresponsive to things taking place around him. He sees and experiences things, but does not fixate on them. Instead, he nurtures a feeling that he is about to encounter something beyond what he sees. Daoist boredom emphasizes a state of subjective absorption and the ability to overcome over-directed attentiveness. It is not that we do not emotionally and intellectually engage ourselves in what we undertake. The whole point is that in our dealings with the world, we, as the perceiving subject, should not lose ourselves to the thinking of specific activities. Daoist boredom, in brief, calls for free will and free thinking.

The “rain/of the nineteenth century day” apparently relates to history and inherited knowledge. Oppen deplors that too much talent and intellect has been invested in emulating the past achievements. He calls for a switch of attention to the small, modest yet existing substance, the prime matter, from which all originates. The following three questions and the affirmative “No” explicitly express Oppen’s dismissal of mythology and among other forms of past or artificial knowledge. He urges people to go to the root of things, to things in their primitive state. By grasping the fundamental and the basic, one will weave “an iron mesh” that would explain all. This mesh again is comparable to “Heaven’s net” in Poem 73 of *Dao De Jing*. In Laozi’s perception, one who follows the Way does not need to strive and yet he will skillfully overcome;

not to speak, and he will obtain a reply. The way, like meshes of the net of Heaven, contains all wisdom of living.

The last two lines—“Still, at the mind’s end/ Relevant,” have designated a Daoist philosophy: one should not fear what’s beyond one’s cognizance, nor should he assume that only chaos and abyss prevail in the land of the unknown. The externals do not cause fear and anxiety in us. They predate our existence here on earth and will survive us. The apprehension comes from within because we are afraid of losing authority over the universe. By stressing the relevance of not-knowing, Oppen has drastically changed our worldview. For him, beyond the mind’s end is the untapped land of abundance, creativity, and happiness. If we give up the centrality of reasoning and intellection, instead of disorder and confusion, we are promised a lot of “relevance” out there.

38
You are the last
Who will know him
Nurse.

Not know him,
He is an old man,
A patient,
How could one know him?

You are the last
Who will see him
Or touch him,
Nurse.

This section can be seen as a retreat to a private life.³³ Using an unspecified voice, Oppen describes the relation between a nurse and an old patient. The first three lines indicate that being an uncommunicative patient, the elderly man is hardly known to anyone else other than the nurse whose first responsibility is to know who/what his patient is. Also, she is going to be the last person to know the elderly person, as no one else is so frequently in his proximity. Yet, Oppen immediately dismisses this assumption, claiming that since one patient is no different than another

one, the intensified care of a patient does not necessarily lead to a close relationship between the caregiver and receiver, and what is needed of her is her expertise rather than her friendship with the bedridden person. Quite certain though is that in her profession, she does often “see” and “touch” her client regardless of whether they know each other well or not. Who then is this old man? Being old, hospitalized, he reminds us of temporality and historicity of life. This is not to say that he stands for the degeneration of life. Based on Scott M. Campbell’s analysis of Heidegger’s early philosophy on life, the recognition of the temporality of life is an enlightening moment because it allows a person’s life to encounter the world: “Life avoids itself and evades itself; it is not aware of its own ruinance because it is too busy caring for its world. It holds itself in its cares, and care is overwhelmed by cares. In other words, life’s openness to the world (care) is covered over by those things to which life is open: its cares, concerns, and preoccupations, that is, those things that it takes care of,” and “the temporality of life is an enlightening within life that emerges when life’s cares become intensified. The awareness of temporality is enlightening because life is open to the world, only because it is temporal. Factical care is a temporalizing process through which life encounters the world. Ruinance is thus founded on that temporalizing that is also an enlightening and an openness to the world.”³⁴ Briefly, when young, one is hardly open to the world, because one only cares about the cares he constructs for himself; when he gets older and facticity of life sinks in, he realizes the historical and temporal constitution of life, and is able to embrace the world, and explore life’s worldly (thingly) dimension, which has always been a source of vitality and intensity. Apart from indicating a change of life/death, the old man, essentially, represents a renewed tie between man and the world, and the cares given to him by the nurse embodies the temporizing process of life.

For the nurse, to see and touch her client symbolically is to witness and experience an enlightenment, whether she realizes it or not. Oppen clearly gives an urgency to this witnessing, and through the nurse, he encourages his readers to realize life's facticity and to restore one's openness to the world so that one could retrieve more meaningful messages from the world.

39

Occurring 'neither for self
Nor for truth'

The sad marvels

In the least credible circumstance,
Storm or bombardment

Or the room of a very old man

Things occur not for the sake of some individuals; nor do they reveal high ideals or some forms of truth. They happen regardless of consciousness. It would be sad for a thinking mind to shut off its objectifying and conceptualizing capacities. The world is full of marvels, and to maximize living in this marvelous place, one has to change the conventional mindset. However credible/incredible the circumstance is, great things happen. Whether it is in "Storm or bombardment//Or the room of a very old man," marvels come and they come from the facticity and physicality of the world.

40

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...'

On an unattached second page of a letter to John Crawford, Oppen discussed the question of “thought” and “thinking.” He says, “There are thoughts easily available to me because they have already been thought. There is an almost audible click in the brain to mark the transition between thought which is available because it has already been thought, and the thinking of the single man, the thinking of a man as if he were a single man... ‘Of Being Numerous’ is constructed around that click, of course—and the poem ends with the word ‘curious.’ I had set myself once before to say forthrightly, ‘We want to be here,’ and the long poem ends almost jokingly with ‘curious.’ But it is not a joke entirely. If I were asked, Why do we want to be here---I would say: it is curious---the thing is curious---Which may be referred to, briefly, as O’s Affirmation.” In a letter to an unidentified correspondent, Oppen further explains, “I ended with the word ‘curious,’ of which the root is curia: care, concern[.]”³⁵ Based on these two letters, we can discern the difference Oppen has made between thought and thinking. Thought, generally, refers to existing knowledge, concepts, a retrospect of what’s happened and is happening, the end product of thinking, whereas thinking is a process done by a solitary individual. It does not require a result, nor does it solicit other people’s help; it is action-, not judgment-oriented, and it aims at exposing oneself to things. It prefers individual enlightenment to moral, political correctness for the collective. It is not Whitmanian optimism that makes Oppen admire his predecessor. The intensity with which Whitman looks at the capitol and the curiosity that he shows toward the bronze figure mesmerizes Oppen. The whole passage is riveted on one individual watching an object, and there is no premeditated thought involved. Whitman’s thought is evoked by what is flashed upon his eyes, and the scene keeps stimulating and refreshing his thinking. For Oppen, this is exactly what is most needed for a poet: he faces a thing, with thoughts in abeyance. His thinking takes the liberty to change in accordance with what he sees and hears. He maintains a sense of curiosity, not about

his own consciousness, but about how consciousness reacts to what is reflected on it. He knows that ultimately, the search for an answer, not the answer itself is the essence of poetry.

4.2 A Daoist Perspective on George Oppen's Other Representative Poems

In this chapter, I will first demonstrate briefly two western critics' interpretations of "Solution" from *The Materials* and "Psalm" from *This In Which*; I will then analyze them and other poems from a Daoist perspective of spontaneity and the undifferentiated existence of myriad things. I will also use the Daoist principle of silence and space to interpret "The Occurrences" and "Exodus" from *Seascape: Needle's Eye* and "Who Shall Doubt" from *Myth of the Blaze*. My intention is not to compete with or replace western critics' approaches to Oppen's works. By covering poems from different books by Oppen, I attempt to show that a Daoist angle can enhance and supplement current critical interpretations of Oppen's poetry.

Michael Heller's *Speaking the Estranged: Essays on the Work of George Oppen* revolves around the topic of estrangement. His book centers on the language that differentiates Oppen from his contemporaries as well as on the implications Oppen's poetry of clarity has generated. Concurring with Eliot Weinberger that Oppen's struggle for clarity is actually a wrestling with language and truth, Heller asserts that by placing emphasis on individual words, Oppen is intent on showing and testing the limits and potentials of poetic discourse. He claims that poetry for Oppen was a process and that Oppen's clarities paradoxically produced ambiguity and uncertainty which, rather than a theoretical proposition, embodied a crucial reality of life. Poetry was unable to close up or "clarify" anything, or to be conclusive. It "no longer spurred action, at least in any overt sense, but, instead, was to interrogate the consequences of wanting to know, of trying to sense the dangers of closure, of the completed or prematurely closed image."³⁶

Based on the understanding that poetry investigates and explores the falsity of bourgeois life we construct about ourselves, Heller gives his interpretation of “Solution” from *The Materials*:

The puzzle assembled
At last in the box lid showing a green
Hillside, a house,
A barn and man
And wife and children,
All of it polychrome,
Lucid, backed by the blue
Sky. The jigsaw of cracks
Crazes the landscape but there is no gap,
No actual edged hole
Nowhere the wooden texture of the table top
Glares out of scale in the picture,
Sordid as cellars, as bare foundations:
There is no piece missing. The puzzle is complete
Now in its red green and brown.

Compared with the sordid table top, the puzzle’s “complete”-ness is menacing, for it has constituted a familial and childlike pastoral illusion. The completed puzzle “presents a domesticated version of bourgeois life realized as material well-being,” only that the “cracks” by crazing the landscape serve as the reminder of the untruthfulness of the life we build for ourselves, the hidden power, and “the malevolent will of politics.”³⁷

Heller’s point is that Oppen prefers a non-referential and suggestive (connotative) to a referential and denotative language and that his poems have produced a reality of complexity and uncertainty. Heller’s remark about poetic language stands not far from Daoist aesthetic principles: The Daoist sage, as I have argued in the previous chapter, advocates natural parity— there is no ontological privilege to any object and the world is a sum of equally valid orders. Without ontological foundation, human knowledge and feelings form *a*, not *the* perspective on nature, and, accordingly, any goal for a language (or knowledge) of totality is unattainable. By stating “A name become name isn’t the perennial name” and that “the unnamed is the origin to all heaven and earth”

(*TTC*, Poem 1), Laozi clearly eschews naming and proper names and insists that the ever transforming world can only be understood through an “un-naming” language of suggestion and allusion. For Heller, a language of clarity is a language of uncertainty which derives from as well as produces an uncertain reality. The “cracks” in contrasting with the completeness of the puzzle, indicate that behind the complacency of contemporary living are life’s unpredictable turns and moments. The Daoist does not deny the fact that the language of denotation is unreliable, nor does he argue against the vicissitude and unstable nature of life. Yet “Solution,” from a Daoist perspective, is not an existentialist’s exhibition of the life; rather, it presents a solution to the existential crisis man faces by encouraging him to live honestly with himself and with nature.

According to Poem 25 of *Dao De Jing*, the myriad things all have valid entities. “A barn,” “man,” “wife,” and “children” all have distinct and independent existence, and they are supposed to be “polychromatic.” Their uniqueness and differences are further manifested through “The jigsaw of cracks.” The Daoist sage asserts that diverse and distinct as myriad things are, they are all uniting under “Dao,” for “Dao” (or the Way) generates and resides in every one of them—“Way gave birth to one, /and one gave birth to two./Two gave birth to three/and three gave birth to the ten thousand things” (*TTC*, Poem 42), and “Becoming things, Way appears vague and hazy./All hazy and impossibly vague/it harbors the mind’s images./All vague and impossibly hazy/it harbors the world’s things” (*TTC*, Poem 21). The world in the eyes of the Daoists is absolutely egalitarian, strikingly diverse, and perpetually unifying. The perceiver and the perceived belong to one piece of the puzzle, and the ideal picture of human existence is man living with/by the world. Although the “cracks” crazing the landscape are a reminder of man-made boundaries and distinctions, the connectivity and mutual dependence among the puzzle pieces cannot be disputed. There is essentially “no gap” between, say, “a barn” and “man,” and together they form a complete

their sacred origins and to eternity is very much a replica of Laozi's "you abide by perennial Integrity/and so return to infancy" (*TTC*, Poem 28).

For Barzilai, the poet is the agent through whom the world is perceived— "objects in the Objectivist poems function as a trigger for the poet's own subjective response to them," which means that the images normally would not be treated as images per se but as the representations of subjectivity, permeating in the poem as a whole.³⁸ The poet by resorting to the "primitive modes" reenacts the primordial experience. The sub-verbal, pre-reflective experience is comparable to one's observation of Dao, only that, unlike Barzilai's approach which presupposes the poet as the sole gazer, the eastern philosopher encourages people to embrace *Ziran* (to be one's natural self and to be what is ever thus), forsake authority over the world, and mix entirely with what is around them.³⁹ Hence, for a Daoist to procure a primordial revelation, a unicursal, human perspective on the world is replaced by a multicursal, all beings' perspective. Let us go back to the same poem to see how Daoist aesthetics works there.

The Latin inscription "*Veritas sequitur...*" means "the truth follows," and together with the title "Psalm," it gives readers a sense that the poem would be centering on something perennial and universal. Yet except for "The small nouns/Crying faith" that would seem to express "that it is," the poem has largely demonstrated "what it is"—a non-symbolizing and non-assertive understanding of the world. What Peter Nicholls describes as "the absolutely simple recognition of the 'primary fact'" could well have been termed by the Daoist sage as "a world seen from a non-human perspective," or more vividly, "a deer's perspective."⁴⁰ In the previous part of this chapter, I have mentioned that ontological simplicity (or the lack of ontological distinction) in Daoism renders beings and non-beings equal status. Stemming from this premise is a reconsideration of man's position in relation to the world about him, and we can see much of

Laozi's effort is to persuade man from centralizing or aggrandizing himself and to restore importance to the idea that an animal, for instance, holds the essence of life as relevantly as a human does. The sage cautions people not to "[dwell] on things" (*TTC*, Poem 2), or "stretch onto tiptoes," "hurry long strides" (*TTC*, Poem 24), or "coerce all beneath heaven" (*TTC*, Poem 30); urges them instead to "Just do what you do, and then leave" (*TTC*, Poem 9), "inhabit the furthest peripheries of emptiness" (*TTC*, Poem 16), "embrace uncarved simplicity/self nearly forgotten" (*TTC*, Poem 19), give up "self-reflection," "self-definition," and "self-promotion" (*TTC*, Poem 22), and "steer clear of extremes,/clear of extravagance,/clear of exaltation" (*TTC*, Poem 29). Moreover, he emphasizes that credit and credence needs to be given to "valleys," "waters," "the absolute simpleton" (*TTC*, Poem 20), and "the vibrant child" (*TTC*, Poem 55), for in them lies the primary unity, enlightenment, and essence of life connatural with that latent in an intelligent grown-up.

Imagined by the poet, "Psalm" shows a world seen from the deer's eyes. Without human conceptualization or objectification, all we know about the deer is that it is *in* the world. There is nothing grandiose or conclusive about the scene, all being small, quiet, and open. In what Heidegger calls western "calculative thinking," there is always an object of perception, a proposition, or some type of finite conclusion, and thinking always points to the subject's finding something; in Daoist "meditative thinking," truth is not "what-is," instead, it is a process, a "letting it go," or *Ziran*, as Laozi would term it. "Startled, and stare out" in the last line, be the agentive subject a man or a deer, corroborates what Laozi describes as the authentic reaction to the world's myriad things and its phenomena: we behold in awe and respect what is presented before us, and adapt ourselves to the current condition rather than to decipher or justify it. "Alien" and "strange" speak of a subjective reaction. Yet it is hard to pin down who the acting subject is. The small teeth of the deer may look *alien* to humans, or the deer may just appear to be unfamiliar to the grass

dangling from its mouth. So is the word “strange”: whether the deer feels the woods strange, or we sense the woods mysterious is something one can never tell, both being valid interpretations. Reading them, one cannot help feeling that the perspective on the woods is ever changing—now an angle from the deer and in a second, it becomes a human point of view.

As the last poem in his 1965 book *This In Which*, “World, World—” centers once again on the relationship between the experiencing subject and the objective world. In the first stanza, the poet writes “Failure, worse failure, nothing seen / From prominence,/ Too much seen in the ditch.” A dichotomy between “prominence” and “in the ditch” is established, and following the two opposite positions are two equally contrasting results— “nothing seen” and “Too much seen.” It is easy to apprehend, considering Oppen’s distrust of language of obscurity and abstraction that one would acquire little from “prominence,” a word that indicates class privilege and literally expresses nothing except that it leaves everything precisely as it is without.

That nothing is seen from prominence explains explicitly the author’s deep doubt about the generalized meaning of words; how do we interpret the claim of “too much seen in the ditch”? Isn’t it a good thing that one faces directly the ditch, or the concrete thing itself and takes in as much as he could? “Too much” instead of “much” seen in the ditch, coupled with the outcry of “failure, worse failure” in the first line, seems to say that something excessive must have been done to the ditch than was needed. The ditch is a human construction and literally has little to show, being a narrow channel where drainage runs. If too much is seen there, it is not that the ditch itself is a spectacular scene, but the mind, in possession of a number of opinions and perceptions, manages to conjure up things for it. For instance, the ditch could be a poignant reminder of the cruelty of WWII when Oppen’s comrades fought and died on the battlefield. In the next stanza— “Those who will not look/ Tho they feel on their skins/ Are not pierced,” “see” in the first stanza

is replaced here with “look.” This change of words further confirms that “to see” in the first stanza represents more than a mere glance. It involves the perceiver’s observation of the visual object as well as his objectifying and conceptualizing of it.⁴¹

The Daoist sage asks people to “look” rather than to “see,” which means that in lieu of objectification, one should learn to approach an object in a pre-conceptual way. If a person becomes preoccupied with discussing, for instance, the ditch’s design and its history, he engages himself not to the thing or its relations with what is around it, but to a series of self-indulgent sentiments so much so that the more he “sees” the ditch, the less he is able to get a true sense of what it is. Different from perceiving, “looking” makes a stance of welcoming and embracing. Rather than transcending himself over the ten thousand things, one encounters things and lets things flash on him. He puts aside the application of human knowledge to myriad things which renders him but confused and frustrated and immerses himself instead in things nearby in order to have an authentic experience of them.

In the second stanza, those that do not look and only feel things on their skin are the very people Laozi in Poem 14 of *Dao De Jing* exhorts us not to become. That “they feel on their skins” implies that rather than authentically engaging themselves in the world, they mingle with things very superficially—“on their skins”—, or just touch upon the skin of things. They make light of experiencing the world and focus on communicating experience, resulting in their obsession with selfhood. The next two lines— “One cannot count them /Tho they are present” in relation to the previous stanza could be a suggestion that one should not take into account those who do not know how to be receptive to the world, despite their consciousness. I would interpret the two lines in a different light: the word “count,” literally, is a gesture of determining, assessing or reaching the totality of something, and therefore that “one cannot count them” means that one cannot count

what is uncountable. For example, one can write down what is on his mind, but to put his thoughts in an orderly and scientific way is as irrelevant as a mathematician jotting down a problem of which he has already had the answer. Oppen's version of reality according to stanza four— "It is entirely wild, wildest/Where there is traffic/And populace"— is that we basically reside within a vibrant group. When an individual self-effacingly involves himself with the group and lets the singular start to become part of the numerous, the world will then turn into a dynamic populace.⁴²

In the next five lines— "'Thought leaps on us' because we are here. That is the fact/ of the matter. / Soul-searchings, these prescriptions, //Are a medical faddism, an attempt to escape, / To lose oneself in the self"—, the message here is fairly straightforward that tantamount to a medical faddism, searching inwardly would lead one in a direction where he would eventually be cocooned in his own thinking. In his daybook, Oppen writes "Not of course Freudian investigations—not the sense of the self, the sense of the not-self. The sea, for instance—or the front yard."⁴³ Alluding to Freudian theory, Oppen remarks that as a therapy, psychoanalysis only deals with the immediate problem and has little to do with "what anyone believes that he wants of himself."⁴⁴ Both entries of his have explicitly expressed a refusal of psychologically based interpretations and of sole reliance on human intellect and reasoning.

What Oppen has propounded, instead, is a phenomenological approach that takes both the objective world and our "inner selves" into account. The last four lines state that there is nothing mysterious about the self. Instead, what needs to be addressed is what choice one should ultimately make. "We want to be here.//The act of being, the act of being/more than oneself" lay out two suggestions: we should immediately resort to human acting rather than conceptualizing or placing it in a flow of past, present, and future; we should allow occurrence to appear/disappear on its own

accord, and have confidence that our acting would present a richer generative source than our consciousness working only for its own sake.

The idea that language could describe the self and the world dominated western poetics for centuries until the late 19th century when Symbolists began to question language's adequacy in revealing the truth of life. The ensuing Modernism of the early 20th century, because of its focus on language, was considered by many as a movement of philology. As a matter of fact, what is the essence of language and how it functions in poetry not only become technical concerns for a poet but also reflect his poetics and worldview. Instead of looking at language as a representation of things, Objectivist poets would define it as an object itself and attempt to demonstrate its un/under-explored flexibility and complexity. Language comprising of what is said (its denotative attribute) and what is suggested (its connotative feature) forms within itself a duality. With the development of science and technology, humans are eager to establish a range of standardized invariables, give definitions of reality, and subjugate living into a system of meanings. The more we give priority to a language of accuracy and precision and relegate the importance of its suggestive functionality, the farther away we are from experiencing the world in its genuine state, because when we become oblivious to one of its two complementary attributes, we essentially block ourselves access to its essence. It is not a matter of picking a descriptive language over a suggestive one, it is about the authenticity and integrity of language. In this regard, Oppen's poetics is strikingly similar to Daoist principle— "words of clarity sound confused" (*TTC*, Poem 78). If Laozi's emphasis on language in its original state is not to clarify things, then what Oppen and other avant-gardists have done is to give back language its long-neglected potential and to restore in language what Laozi would call the balance between "presence" (what is said) and "absence" (what is suggested).

An authentic language for Oppen is not a language that can explain much because denoting and describing is but one side of language. Oppen has stated that he desires a poetic language of clarity and silence: the less a poem explains, the more possibilities (and suggestions) it generates, and the more authentic our experience of life (and language per se) becomes. Now the question is in a specific poem how to locate “silence.”

To have silence in a poem essentially is to cut into and reconstruct the network of language. By allowing readers to halt or pause over the old meanings and rules of language, silence initiates the process of un-concealment: The mind momentarily “boggles”; decoration and mannerism give in; new meanings arise in a grammatically or semantically new condition; and a different reality begins to present itself. Silence is also materialized by way of spacing in poems. The spatial representation of silence such as breaks and extra space between lines would force readers to pay attention to each individual word as well as to the impact spacing makes on the relation between two originally adjoining lines/stanzas. Spacing gives words new significance and words inject new meanings to space, just as Wai-Lim Yip remarks about Chinese poetry: “The success of the Chinese poets in authenticating the fluctuation of concrete events in Phenomenon, their ability to preserve the multiple relationships in a kind of penumbra of indeterminateness, depends on a great extent on the sparseness of syntactic demands. This freedom allows the poet to highlight independent visual events, leaving them in coextensive spatial relationships.”⁴⁵ Put into a conventional paragraph by deleting the spacing between the stanzas, one would quickly change “The Occurrences” from *Seascape: Needle’s Eye* into a few “intelligible” sentences punctuated with dangling words and phrases:⁴⁶

1.Limited air	drafts	Limited air	drafts	In the treasure house
2.In the treasure house	moving and the movements of the	moving and the movements of the	moving and the movements of the	living Things
living		fall	something balanced	Move With
3.Things fall	something balanced	Move	all one’s force	Into the commonplace that

4. With all one's force
5. Into the commonplace that pierces or erodes
6. The mind's structure but nothing
7. Incredible happens
8. It will have happened to that other
9. The survivor The survivor
10. To him it happened
11. Rooted in basalt
12. Night hums like the telephone dial tone blue gauze
13. Of the forge flames the pulse
14. Of infant
15. Sorrows at the crux
16. Of the timbers
17. When the middle Kingdom
18. Warring with beasts Middle Things the elves the
19. Magic people in their world
20. Among the plant roots hopes
21. Which are the hopes
22. Of small self interest called
23. Superstition chitinous
24. Toys of the children
25. Wings of the wasp

pierces or erodes The mind's structure but
 nothing Incredible happens It will have
 happened to that other The survivor The
 survivor To him it happened Rooted in basalt
 Night hums like the telephone dial tone blue
 gauze Of the forge flames the pulse Of infant
 Sorrows at the crux Of the timbers When the
 middle Kingdom Warring with beasts Middle
 Things the elves the Magic people in their world
 Among the plant roots hopes Which are
 the hopes Of small self interest called
 Superstition chitinous Toys of the children
 Wings of the wasp

Clearly the musicality of line 2— “moving” and “living”—is foregrounded than when it is strung up with lines 1 and 3, thanks to the spacing between them.⁴⁷ Lines 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7, together would make a sentence univocal in meaning— “Move with all one's force into the commonplace that pierces or erodes the mind's structure but nothing incredible happens.” It would belong to a language of “presence,” defining and predicating that: “the commonplace” would overwhelm but “the mind's structure.” Now a semi-independent segment, the eroding and piercing of “the commonplace” in line 5, for instance, becomes self-sufficient and would have an impact on more than “the mind's structure” that follows it. “The mind's structure” though still being within the influence of the commonplace's erosion, now sticks closer to “but nothing” in the same line, thus

generating a suggestion that “the mind’s structure is itself nothing,” which accords covertly with Oppen’s phenomenological stand: “The act of being, the act of being/More than oneself.”⁴⁸

Line 9 contains two “survivors.” One survivor, in reference to line 8, will be experiencing something in the future whereas the other survivor, referring to line 10, seems to have already experienced “it.” By repeating “The survivor” twice in the same line, Oppen not only implies that experiencing is a continual, sustained human activity but also draws readers’ attention to the implications of “survivor”: what have they survived? Are they individual survivors or survivors as a group? Why is it inevitable that the survivors have to experience it? Line 9 witnesses the disruption of conventional syntactical configurations and by using repetition and space, it sparks and sustains critical thinking among readers on surviving and survivor.

Oppen intimates in lines 11-16 an array of things and images: basalt, the night, telephone dial tone, gauze, forge flames, infant’s pulse, and timbers, in addition to the sensuous effect they have made. In lines 12, 13, and 14 in particular, “Night hums like a telephone dial tone blue gauze/ of the forge flames the pulse/ of infant,” except for “blue” which clearly modifies “gauze,” a string of nouns clusters together. It is relatively explicit which the modifiers are and which are to be modified. The point is that Oppen has intentionally chosen non-reflective nouns over adjectives and participles, among other reflective words. Notwithstanding “Night hums like a telephone dial tone” and “gauze of the forge flames” being simile and metaphor, the words involved are crisp and less-refined (in the sense that they resort to immediate senses rather than sensations). They produce a bouncy sound effect and are apt to be associated with concrete images than some delicate feelings.

Lines 17-20 focus on the “middle Kingdom,” which could be a specific location or just a state of mind where one would run into beasts, “Middle Things,” the elves, and its residents living among the “plant roots.”⁴⁹ It is not easy to pin down what this part of the poem talks about, and

when asked about the elves and the magic people, Oppen first says that “I guess I just loved it. It’s that picture, the chitinous wing,” then adds, “that’s what I wrote it for. It’s just that tune, and that delight in. I forget the poem a little. I forget if it says anything heavy.”⁵⁰ “The chitinous wing” followed by what Mary Oppen immediately interpolated during the interview, “Of the wasp that they sat edging back there,” indicates that Oppen might be describing a miniature world of insects and wasps that live right under their noses.⁵¹ Noteworthy is the word “the” at the end of line 18. Severed from “Magic people” in line 19, the emptiness after “the” creates an interesting dynamic: the natural flow of reading of line 18 is suddenly interrupted, and one is made to go back and forth to find some grammatical relevancy for the article. The very endeavor to comprehend “the” in line 18 ends up with readers’ making different conjectures about the words and phrases adjacent to it (I am drawn to “magic people” and I am simultaneously thinking about a group of average people and the ways and means by which they are thus entitled). Readers may not be able to reach a conclusion for the poem just as the interviewer states that “I don’t know if it’s easy for you; it’s obviously not easy—but to talk of “Occurrences” at all.”⁵² The point is that “the,” because of the line break, becomes a piece of building material of which readers are given total autonomy.

The space between “hopes” and “Among the plant roots,” also makes the word “hopes” the center of attention. It, by spatially detaching itself from the nearby words/phrases, forms paradoxically multiple relationships with those very words/phrases. It enables readers to highlight different themes and topics. One of the tropes I can come up with is that “hopes” are people living among natural vegetation. “Hopes” is not only a belief, a kind of “superstition” we stand over in awe, but also a vision that each and every one of us, and “toys of the children,” and “wings of the wasp” just exist there *in* the world.

“Exodus,” the last poem in *Seascape: Needle’s Eye*, centers on “miracle” within young children. There are at least two places where due to spacing the meanings of words are multiplied.

In lines 8 to 11:

We stare at the end
Into each other’s eyes Where
She said hushed
Were the adults We dreamed to each other

The placement of “Where” away from the rest of the line makes it a visual focus of the whole stanza. Even though one tends to read it like “We stare at the end into each other’s eyes,” and “where (She said hushed) Were the adults,” one must at the back of one’s mind ask “what happens if I connect ‘where’ to the first two lines?” “Where,” because of the sparseness around it takes dominance and is ready to be associated with every action that is happening in the poem. The best way I think to read these few lines is to stop thinking of the grammatical connection among the words and instead, let the words lead our mind around, that is, form an intuitive sense of the mind moving behind the words.

Oppen finishes the poem with an optimistic vision of miracle occurring, but he also acknowledges in the interview with Kevin Power that miracle and potential being existent, he just does not know what and where that miracle is. His remark makes “where” denotatively and connotatively all the more interesting.

Miracle
Of their brilliance Miracle
of

The preposition “of” is another example of the reconstruction of language. The line is broken and miracle without a reference or determinative becomes but a hint. It is now up to the readers to discover what and where it lies. Coupled with “Where” in the previous stanza, the message Oppen

wants to convey, however, is consistent: the miracle can reoccur, but before that, we have to ask ourselves constantly what it exactly is and whence it comes.

“Who shall doubt” in *Myth of the Blaze* is actually a long sentence cut into small segments like “To C. T.” in *This In Which*: “consciousness in itself of itself carrying ‘the principle of the actual’ being actual itself ((but maybe this is a love poem Mary)) nevertheless neither the power of the self nor the racing car nor the lily is sweet but this,” and the leitmotif of it is likely to be “‘this’ matters more than one’s ego, or technological advancement, or even nature.”

- 1.consciousness
2. in itself
- 3.of itself carrying
4. ‘the principle
5. of the actual’ being

- 6.actual
- 7.itself ((but maybe this is a love
- 8.poem

- 9.Mary)) nevertheless
10. neither
- 11.the power
- 12.of the self nor the racing
- 13.car nor the lilly

14. is sweet but this

This little poem also features 1) lines 4 and 5, lines 7 and 8, and lines 11, 12 and 13 are single-spaced while the rest of the poem, doubled-spaced. Because these segments are spatially held closer, readers are inclined to read them more as a whole than as detached words, and their meanings tend to be less centrifugal than the rest—the principle of actual being (though one still wonders what it is), the love poem, the denial of ego and possibly of the supremacy of science and technology; 2) lines 2 and 3 starting with prepositions “in” and “of” produce a far more nuanced effect than “consciousness in itself of itself carrying,” whose grammatical structure is but a configuration of functions. The prepositions act out as verbs, “in” gives a sense of “being engaged

in” whereas “of,” together with “carrying”, reads more like “something carries of its own volition.” Reading these lines becomes a mental activity rather than a corroboration of some grammatical rules. 3) The double brackets in lines 7 and 9, as a novelty, makes “this is a love poem” and Mary, Oppen’s soulmate, the centerpiece. Lines 10 and 14 are far apart, resulting in “is sweet but this” being self-sufficient in meaning. Without lines 10 to 13, one could interpret the last line as “but for *this*, all is sweet.” With them, one is made to question: “What is *this*?” “What does ‘sweet’ specifically refer to?” Setting “neither” far apart from “is,” Oppen allows such a small word as “this” to speak on its own term.

5. THE TRANSLATION OF GEORGE OPPEN INTO CHINESE

5.1 An Analysis of Two Chinese Translations of the First Section of “Route”

In the past few chapters, I have elaborated on Oppen’s poetics and its compatibility with some of the Daoist principles, and applied these principles in the analysis of Oppen’s OBN and among his other representative poems. On the one hand, we are presented with the near absence of Oppen studies in China; on the other hand, there are these striking similarities between Oppen’s poetics and Laozi’s thought which has been so well-known and revered by the Chinese for centuries. In this regard, the introduction of Oppen to Chinese readers is not only urgent for Chinese scholars and academicians but also has a political and cultural bearing that is both far-reaching and forceful for average Chinese people. Before I get to the translation of “Route,” let me first elucidate how crucial and beneficial it is to translate/introduce Oppen to China.

According to a 2013 statistics, translations represent around seven percent of China’s domestic book market. American poetry in translation accounts for a minuscule share of it. Because people do not have access to Oppen’s books, they could not become interested in him. His obscurity reinforces itself. To break this vicious cycle and allow people to read and care about a poet is the most obvious benefit scholars would get by translating Oppen into Chinese. Secondly, the growing interest in Oppen’s works by avant-gardist poets in America is a good indicator that there is an intrinsic tie between Oppen and those contemporary poets, and particularly with Language poets. If philology is the primary concern of the modernists, who despite their political, genre, and literary affiliations, attempted to address the in/adequacy of language in revealing the world, then Objectivists, by advocating the objectification of language, quintessentially partook in

the modernists' empirical movement with language. Meanwhile, the Objectivists' emphasis on treating language as an object allows them to form another kinship relationship with Black Mountain poets who see language as being fundamentally expressive, rather than constitutive of those who use it—"meaning, that is, has its beginnings in the poet as intimately as in the words," and with Language poets who argue that meaning primarily derives from language and that, ideological in nature and function, language has the ability to "victimize" the subject.¹ In brief, Objectivist poets in general, and Oppen in particular, play an important, if not the most crucial, transitional role, in linking Modernism with post-Modernism. If Chinese scholars are as truly enthusiastic about Ezra Pound of the last century as with Robert Creeley and Charles Bernstein of the 21st century, it would greatly benefit them if they give adequate attention to such a transitional figure as Oppen.²

Thirdly, in relation to the first benefit I have highlighted, because of Oppen's obscurity, commodification would not have any significant impact on Oppen's works in the domestic market, which allows translators to have a "disinterested interest" in his works. They could put other priorities than just interpreting what his poems mean on their translating agenda. One thing at the top of their checklist is how the dichotomy between the singular and the numerous, being one of the main themes of Oppen's poems, is analogous to the individual and collective dyads embedded in the mindset of Chinese people. The translation of Oppen could well engage Chinese readers living in a different cultural and political environment to address such serious questions as "what is selfhood in relation to the society he lives in?" and "are social relations always prior to the self?" and to ultimately discuss and debate if it is worthwhile to sacrifice individuality for the so-called greater good.

Fourthly, different translations, according to Laurence Venuti, generate different domestic remainders which would reflect the linguistic, cultural and social conditions of the receptors. A translation demonstrates not only its translator's social position, intention, and lexicological effort but also the broad receiving ideology, social values, and political beliefs of a particular historical moment.³ By examining the domestic remainders in the existing translations of Oppen's poems, Chinese scholars and readers would be given a chance to revisit, restore, and learn from a particular cultural and political moment in history. Lastly, the translation of Oppen could hopefully establish a common understanding between domestic and foreign readers. What I mean by common understanding is that Oppen's translation, no matter how un/popular it will be, would likely create a community with shared interests within and without China. The domestic and foreign constituencies of this community may approach the translation differently, and will probably never meet or talk with each other; but they, as members of an imagined collective, could potentially produce an influence on commercial, cultural, and political activities within a society.⁴ Let me start off by first going back to the idea of the domestic remainder, and see how "interpretants" brings history and its conducive lessons to Chinese scholars and readers.

It is fortuitous that I have found the translations of the first section of "Route," a true rarity considering the meager number of Oppen's publications in China, in both Ziqing Zhang and Yongbo Ma's books. Zhang and Ma represent two generations of Chinese scholars of American literature, and their writings (translations) epitomize scholarship of two very distinct time periods in Chinese history: Zhang's monograph, as he has stated in its preface, started in 1983 when the country's political and economic reform was still in its very nascent stage and when the Internet was but a concept, whereas Ma's book finished up three years into the new millennium when China, as the 7th largest economy in the world, was eager to catch up to the U.S. to become a world

economic and political power and when interconnecting via electronic means was increasingly becoming part of people's life. Following are two tables, each in its left column is the first section of "Route" with all of the lines being numbered, in its right, the Chinese equivalence by Zhang and Ma, respectively:

(Ziqing Zhang's translation)

- | | |
|--|------------------------------|
| 1. Tell the beads of the chromosomes like a rosary, | 1. 说出染色体空泡像玫瑰花园, |
| 2. Love in the genes, if it fails | 2. 基因里的爱情, 如果它失灵 |
| 3. We will produce no sane man again | 3. 我们将不会再生出神志正常的人 |
| 4. I have seen too many young people become adults, young | 4. 我见过太多的年轻人变成大人, 年轻朋友变成 |
| 5. friends become old people, all that is not ours, | 5. 年迈的老者, 那不是我们的一切, |
| 6. The sources | 6. 根源 |
| 7. And the crude bone | 7. 原骨 |
| 8. ——we say | 8. ——我们说 |
| 9. <i>Took place</i> | 9. 产生了 |
| 10. Like the mass of the hills. | 10. 像山体。 |
| 11. 'The sun is a molten mass'. Therefore | 11. "太阳是熔体。" 因此 |
| 12. Fall into oneself——? | 12. 跌入人们自身——? |
| 13. Reality, blind eye | 13. 现实, 熟视无睹 |
| 14. Which has taught us to stare—— | 14. 它教育了我们凝视—— |
| 15. Your elbow on a car-edge | 15. 你的肘搁在汽车边 |
| 16. Incognito as summer, | 16. 夏天般隐匿, |
| 17. I wrote. Not you but a girl | 17. 我写道。不是你而至少是 |
| 18. At least | 18. 一个姑娘 |
| 19. Clarity, clarity, surely clarity is the most beautiful | 19-20. 明晰, 明晰, 明晰肯定是世上最美的东西, |
| 20. thing in the world, | 21. 一个被限制而又有限性的明晰 |
| 21. A limited, limiting clarity | 22. 我没有, 从没有任何诗的动机 |
| 22. I have not and never did have any motive of poetry | 23. 除了获得明晰。 |
| 23. But to achieve clarity | |

(Yongbo Ma's translation)

- | | |
|---|-------------------|
| 1. Tell the beads of the chromosomes like a rosary, | 1. 告诉玫瑰园一样的染色体珠子, |
| 2. Love in the genes, if it fails | 2. 爱情在基因里, 如果它失灵 |

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------|
| 3. We will produce no sane man again | 3.我们将不再能生出健全的人 |
| 4. I have seen too many young people become adults, young | 4.我见过太多的年轻人长大成人，年轻的朋友 |
| 5. friends become old people, all that is not ours, | 5. 成了老人，那一切都不是我们的， |
| 6. The sources | 6.根源 |
| 7. And the crude bone | 7.天然的骨头 |
| 8. ——we say | 8. ——我们说 |
| 9. <i>Took place</i> | 9.发生 |
| 10. Like the mass of the hills. | 10.像群山。 |
| 11. ‘The sun is a molten mass’. Therefore | 11. “太阳是溶化的物质”。因此 |
| 12. Fall into oneself——? | 12. 跌入人们自身——? |
| 13. Reality, blind eye | 13.现实，盲目的眼睛 |
| 14. Which has taught us to stare—— | 14. 教我们凝视—— |
| 15. Your elbow on a car-edge | 15.你的肘靠在汽车边上 |
| 16. Incognito as summer, | 16.夏天一样匿名， |
| 17. I wrote. Not you but a girl | 17.我写道。不是你而至少是 |
| 18. At least | 18.一个少女 |
| 19. Clarity, clarity, surely clarity is the most beautiful | 19-20. 清晰，清晰，清晰肯定是世界上最美的东西， |
| 20. thing in the world, | 21.一种被限制而又有限制性的清晰 |
| 21. A limited, limiting clarity | |
| 22. I have not and never did have any motive of poetry | 22.我没有，从没有任何诗的动机 |
| 23. But to achieve clarity | 23.只是要达到清晰 |

First, both translators have endeavored to keep as much of the original form as possible. Apart from the extra space between, for instance, lines 2 and 3 and lines 8 and 9, Zhang and Ma have retained in their respective inscriptions the indenting of “friend” in line 5. Zhang’s translation does not observe the form of the source text as closely as Ma’s: 1) “—we say” in the middle of line 8 has been moved to the left end, in alignment with lines 7 and 9; 2) The period in line 11 is placed behind rather than within the quotation marks; 3) The space between lines 16 and 17 has

been deleted; 4) A period is added to line 23; 5) Lines 19 and 20 are combined into one line in the translation; 6) “and” in line 22 becomes a comma. Ma’s inscription has addressed the first four discrepancies and adhered to the form of the original text. But as far as the last two discrepancies are concerned, he is more in agreement with Zhang than with Oppen.

Secondly, lines 5, 8 and 20 all start with a lowercase letter— “friends,” “we,” and “thing,” but in both translations, they are of the same size as the other characters (unlike English, Chinese characters do not have upper or lowercase letters. There are two forms of written Chinese: traditional and “simplified”—the traditional one was the universal communicative currency among the Chinese before the 1950s and now is only used by Chinese living in Taiwan, Hongkong, Macau and other countries other than mainland China while the simplified one having simplified the traditional characters is popular with people in mainland China. Traditional and simplified characters can look the same as in the case of “雨” (rain) or substantively differently. “体” (body) is a simplified character which in its traditional form becomes “體,” though other than looking differently, they are exactly the same, denotatively and connotatively.) The difference and emphasis that a lowercase letter makes at the beginning of each poetic line in the source text is lost in translation. It can be partially compensated for by shrinking font size of the related Chinese character to suggest that that character be given particular attention; but obviously, it is not the best lexicological equivalence and unless footnoted, does not make much sense to the target readers because the implication of a small letter in a word is still different from that of a downsized word. For this reason, Zhang and Ma choose to keep all of the characters in their inscriptions uniform in size. Line 9, “*Took place*,” italicized in English is un-italicized in the two translations. This should be a minor technical obstacle, but Zhang and Ma have both decided to keep “*took place*” a regular, un-italicized phrasal verb in their translations.

Moreover, in English, a different situation calls for the use of a different tense (and voice). A present tense decodes a habitual action, and a future tense, future action. The case of present tense expressing a future action, for instance, is an exception and, therefore, limited to some special verbs and conditions. The Chinese language has fewer tenses, and one grammatical configuration can express the present, the past or even the future action, depending largely on the context and the particles involved. Line 17 “I wrote” without recourse to any context conveys a clear message that “I” did the writing in the past rather than at present whereas in both translations it is far from self-evident that “writing” occurred in the past: It could be a past action or a present one, or both. In line 22— “I have not and never did have any motive of poetry”—the sense of time which is articulated in English becomes vague and indistinctive in Chinese: just based on both Ma’s and Zhang’s inscriptions, Chinese readers who do not speak English will most likely infer the source text as “I do not, and have never had any motive of poetry” unless an extra particle indicating the past tense is added to the second half of the sentence. With this said, Zhang’s translation is much more careful than Ma’s in terms of taking heed of the nuances of the original text. Zhang’s translation of “young people *become* adults, young/ friends *become* old people ” (lines 4 and 5), in comparison with Ma’s, give more of a sense that a person’s coming of age and getting old is a repeated, lasting human experience than a temporal and personal one (italicized by me). This focus on the particulars of the source text is exhibited more prominently in the translation of line 9, “*Took place.*” Ma has translated it as “发生” whereas Zhang has made it into “产生了。” There is no major difference between “发生” and “产生” as the lexicological equivalence for “take place.” The highlight is that Zhang goes the extra length to add a “了” to “产生,” to make it definitively express a finished-up action (“了” is the very particle that is often used at the end of a Chinese sentence to indicate a completed occurrence).

Yet the most exciting thing between the two translations is the different Chinese characters they choose for the same words in the source text. Tinged with an antique color, Zhang's wordings are much more literary: "old people" (line 5), "crude bone" (line 7), "a molten mass" (line 11), "Incognito" (line 16) in translation becomes "aged people, people of advanced years," "bone in its primitive state"; "a hot, melting lump," and "be in anonymity"; Zhang also takes a few liberties with two of the original lines rather than translate them literally. For example, in line 1 "rosary" originally means 1) a set of Roman Catholic prayers that are repeated in a specific order, and 2) a string of beads that are used by Roman Catholics for counting prayers. The way Oppen puts it at the end of the line makes "telling it like a rosary" and "beads of the chromosomes like a rosary" both relevant readings. Zhang's inscription has reflected neither of them. Because "rosary" originates from Latin "rosarium" or "rose garden," based on *rosa*, "rose," he chooses to show the original rather than the just literary meaning of "rosary," and the whole line turns into something like "tell the bubbles of the chromosomes like a rose garden."⁵ Moreover, instead of a verbatim translation, line 13— "blind eye"— becomes in his translating language, "turn a blind eye," or "ignore."

Ma's choice of words is much less literary and reflects more of what the lines connote than what they denote. He prefers "old, elderly people," "natural bone," "a hot, melting, fusing thing (matter)" and "nameless, anonymous" to the formal, literary wordings Zhang has selected, and his "tell the 'rose-garden like' beads of chromosomes" gives more of the impression that chromosomes bear some semblance to a string of beads, though his translation of "like a rosary" into "rose garden-like" is as subjective and flawed as Zhang's. Additionally, "blind eye" becomes "eye unable to see" in lieu of "to turn a blind eye" or "ignore," the latter strongly implying the presence of subjectivity and human consciousness.

To sum up, Zhang and Ma both have heeded the original form of the poem: Ma has more closely maintained the original form, though, in both inscriptions, lines 19 and 20 are combined into one line to cater to the demand of domestic readers. The lowercase letters in “friends,” “we,” and “thing” are regularized, largely because of their untranslatability in Chinese, and the italicized phrasal verb “*Took place*” being un-italicized either results from the translators’ negligence, considering that it is easy to italicize words in both languages, or more likely from a common understanding that an italicized “发生” (“*Took place*”) does not make much difference in Chinese because Chinese readers do not feel the same emphasis italicization, a western typographic practice, makes on words as it does the English readers. The subtlety, sophistication and new dimension created by the changed tenses and voices wear a different face in Chinese translations. Some become vaguer while others get clearer, for which the linguistics of the translating language is responsible: the tenses demonstrated in lines 17 and 22 are beyond domestication unless extra words are added to them. This being said, some lines could retain their implications of time for the target readers if the translator paid close attention to the nuances of the source text. Lastly, Zhang’s language is more standard and formal, and he takes more autonomy in the interpretation of some originally ambivalent lines while Ma’s tend to be less literary and more literal, though, in the translation of some lines such as lines 1, 19, 20 and 21, he is palpably influenced by Zhang.

The unique feature of each translation is what Venuti would call “the domestic remainders” or “interpretants,” produced consciously and unconsciously by the translators. They reflect the individual’s social position and attitude as well as the receiving ideology and the interests and intelligibility of a society at a particular historical moment: That Zhang’s translation does not follow as closely the form of the original text as he should have had might be caused by the less

advanced proofreading and editing techniques of his time. In the postscript, Zhang states that editing was a major challenge for him and that the references and indexes both conducted manually proved to be a particularly tortuous difficulty. He invited two junior colleagues first to input the references and indexes into a computer and before printing, had another two individuals join in the project to type and convert the draft into a printer-friendly version. Unlike today's printing process, publishing in Zhang's time had to go through the hands of "computer-savvy" personnel and editors/censors who were not as familiar with modern American poetry, and the routine of work, and bureaucracy, necessarily made printing of the book more than one year behind schedule.⁶ When the draft was redacted from hands to hands, errors would have been inevitable.

Notwithstanding American poets and scholars' assistance and his Chinese colleagues' proofreading and reviewing, Zhang was the sole contributor to this voluminous book of more than 1,000 pages, which could have resulted in the kind of erroneous placement of words and stanzas. As humble as he could be, Zhang claims in the preface that a better version of the history of American poetry should be written in the next century and that he feels absolutely contented if his book could help clear the road for a new generation of scholars. His remark while reminding us to read his book critically reflects very much the academic practice of his day. Such a major writing project as this one was assigned from a government-affiliated research institute. As part of a key national arts research project listed in the sixth Five-Year National Plan, it was first handed down to Chen Jia, a renowned English professor and honorary director of Nanjing University, and through him to Yongcai Yao, head of the Foreign Studies Institute of Nanjing University who then invited Zhang to take the *mission* (Zhang's word). It was a mission that aimed at filling the gap in American poetry studies in China, and like many other research projects of the time, it was a state-planned rather than market-oriented project. The book has over 1,100 pages and totals 890,000

words. 500-1,000 copies of the first edition were printed. Its limited circulation made it hard for the author to get quick and adequate feedback from domestic editors and readers.

Having the advantage to carry out a fully-funded project on his own, Zhang made his personal imprint on the work. While some of the marks turned out to be technical errors beyond the translator's knowing, many others bear distinct authorial intention.⁷ One reviewer comments that Zhang's book has discarded the traditional formality in which literary history was delineated. It presents to readers huge amounts of first-hand materials and major events in the history of American poetry and based on these materials and events the author, according to that reviewer, metes out objective judgment. Yet regardless of on what aspect(s) of American poetry Zhang weighs in his opinion, his description cannot be entirely objective. Any objective description is itself just another *made* claim and should not be privileged over others. For instance, Zhang states that "to clearly express his thoughts and emotions in poetry is Oppen's life-long aesthetic pursuit."⁸ There is a good reason for him to say that sincerity and honesty are what Oppen goes after in poetry. Yet being sincere does not mean that Oppen has to show his personal thoughts and emotions in poetry. In a sense, what another reviewer has said about Zhang's book is more relevant—"from beginning to end, the book shows the author's thinking about tradition and innovation."⁹ It is this innovative spirit that I think has emboldened Zhang to inject his understanding into the translation of "Route," resulting in, for instance, "blind eye" in line 13 into "turn a blind eye to" or "ignore." "Eyes unable to see" (Ma's translation) and "turn a blind eye to" (Zhang's translation) express different philosophical premises. If "eyes cannot see," then the world is impenetrable, or more accurately, human intellect is not omnipotent. An individual's thoughts, emotions, and his very ego, in the face of the world, can only express *a*, not *the* meaning of it. But "to turn a blind eye" presupposes that an individual's eyes could embrace all and that human

intellect would take control of the world by selecting/denying one over the other. Zhang's translation, if implicitly, has centralized subjectivity, which is in line with his problematic interpretation of Oppen's poetics.

Ma's translation, done almost 20 years after Zhang's, faced far fewer technical challenges. The broad use of computer and office software reduced the procedures of publication. With Zhang's book as a reference, Ma would have been more aware of the form of "Route" and could have relatively easily singled out the textual mistakes in Zhang's translation. Besides, Ma could have utilized some of the interpretive words Zhang had used—"like a rosary" translated into "rose garden-like beads" can hardly be taken as a coincidence.

Moreover, initiated by a publisher rather than a research institute, though publishers in China are largely financed by the government, Ma's project reflects the publisher's concerns: "we [the publisher] could see very clearly that publication of foreign poems has always been sporadic and unsystematic. The reason we publish *The Series of the 20th Century World Poetry* (Ma's book is one in the series) is to change the status quo," and "the poems included in this series are the *great* poems by some *great* poets from around the world, among whom many are Nobel Prize winners in literature or winners of well-established poetry awards" (italicized by me).¹⁰ Obviously, to expand readership was the publisher's main concern and those eye-catching adjectives in the editor's foreword clearly aimed at the mind as well as the pocketbook of the consumers. Ma apparently took both Oppen's poetics and the publisher's concerns, that is, the book market and the acceptance of Oppen among average Chinese readers, into account. His translation featuring informal and simple language was an attempt to accord with Objectivist's tenet of clarity as well as to satisfy the demand of ordinary book lovers.¹¹ 4,000 copies of the first edition were published at length, quadruple that of Zhang's book.

The form and wordings in Ma's translation differ from Zhang's, but like Zhang, he has combined lines 19 and 20—"Clarity, clarity, surely clarity is the most beautiful/ thing in the world"—into one line. By introducing foreignness of the source text, the translator expects his inscription to influence the receiving intelligibility and eventually to stimulate innovative thinking, research, and writing. For example, line 8 starts with a blank, a dash, and a lowercase letter "w," followed unexpectedly by a phrasal verb "take place" in past tense in line 9 and then ends with a period after a prepositional expression in line 10. Irregular and novel, they together aim to challenge the boundaries grammar and punctuation make in the English language. When translated into Chinese, the exoticism, though somewhat reduced, is still striking and would potentially influence many Chinese poets. Instead of maintaining the foreignness and innovative appearance of lines 19 and 20 in the receiving language, both translators have changed it in favor of the reading habit of the domestic readers. In the source text "clarity" and "things in the world," separately put in two lines, are two tropes and the perception of beauty only occurs when readers read them out together or intellectually connect them up. There is a dynamic between "clarity" and "thing" covertly expressed by the separation of lines 19 and 20 just as Robert Hass writes about Oppen: "You can actually watch, as the words are laid down on the page, the process from which the perception of the thing gets born into its numinous quality as a word, an abstraction out of the thing."¹² In translation, the combined sentence becomes an affirmative statement: "clarity is the world's most beautiful thing"—"thing" no longer refers to the myriad things in the world and in the Chinese inscription, there only exists the one abstract thing called "clarity." In terms of "and" in line 22, Zhang and Ma both replace it with a comma, for the Chinese speakers use "和," the Chinese equivalent of "and," far less frequently than their English counterparts. The consistency in both translations in terms of combining lines 19 and 20 into one line and replacing "and" with

a comma in line 22 indicates the inevitability of differences between the source text and its translation, the dominance of domestic interests and more importantly, the temporal and provisional nature of translation.

By comparing the interpretants in Oppen's translations, we have found 1) a void in translation that Chinese scholars should fill up quickly: how lowercase letters in English could be effectively reflected in translation. 2) When a poem aims at exhibiting the boundaries and potential English grammar/words create, discrepancies in Chinese multiply, and vice versa. 3) The wording in a translation reflects the translator's predilection and bias as well as the receiving social condition and ideology. In an environment where central planning dominated, what Zhang participated in was a key national project in the field of social sciences that aimed to fill a gap in American poetry studies in China. With the target readers being intelligentsia, Zhang has used orthodox and formal language. In a time of full opening-up in economy, Ma's translation was directed toward an informal, simple language that could be better received by non-professional readers. 4) It is also noteworthy that while introducing foreignness of the source text into Chinese, the translators also have to take the domestic reading habit into consideration. The combination of lines 19 and 20 and the replacement of "and" in line 22 appear to be the compromises the translators have made to cater to the demand of Chinese readers, though, in hindsight, the combination is detrimental to the two translations and should have been avoided.

5.2 My Translation of “Of Being Numerous” into Chinese

After a comparison of the two inscriptions of the first section of “Route,” I have reached a conclusion that translating is an ongoing process that requires not only the linguistic negotiation of language but also the becoming of the translator as a determinate social relatedness.¹³ As a translator of “Of Being Numerous” myself, I would think these requirements hold good for me as well. Sushi, a Song poet, once wrote: “when you are in the scene, you cannot see the scene.” I hope a reflection on my translation of Oppen’s longest poem would give myself an opportunity to “jump out” of the scene so that I could resume investigating and appreciating what Hank Lazer, among other Language poets, calls “the most important American long poem of the latter half of the 20th Century.”¹⁴

Before I started off, as a preparation I listened to Oppen’s voice reading OBN on Pennsound. Oppen appeared to give a reading of it many times. He and his audience must have loved the poem dearly since each reading would take approximately twenty minutes and that would require from the poet and his listeners a lot of attention and emotional engagement. I perused the poem many times, and imaginatively put myself among Oppen’s audience, but I still feel that there are words, lines, and even stanzas in my translation that still need to be refined, or even revised. Put more professionally, my understanding of some of the sections would stand a chance of being different than another translator’s. It was in this state of mind and with a “caveat” for myself that I started the job of translation.

The first challenge was immediate, the title “Of Being Numerous.” Yongbo Ma in *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders* translates it as “论许许多多.” His introduction to

George Oppen is strikingly brief and “Of Being Numerous,” or “论许许多多” as he puts it, is casually mentioned as “one of the poet’s works.” With this said, Ma’s book makes a breakthrough in terms of translating such a poet as Oppen who, up until then, remained largely unknown to the Chinese. It is clearly unfair for me to say that Chinese publishers have a propensity for big names in American poetry. For one thing, their American counterparts, out of various concerns stinted on publishing works by those less well-established poets, resulted in fewer available materials for Chinese scholars to work on. For another, canonization is a complicated process and has to factor in poets, their works, editors, domestic readers, and the market. In this regard, Chinese editors of American poetry seem to have not a few cultural and political challenges to overcome.

A decade before Ma’s book, in his introductory essay on Objectivist poets, Ziqing Zhang translated “Of Being Numerous” as “许许多多” in which the preposition “论,” or “Of” in English, is deleted. As “numerous” has many Chinese equivalents, the fact that both have used “许许多多” strongly indicates Ma has made reference to Zhang’s translation. Neither Ma’s “论许许多多” (“on/about being many”) nor Zhang’s “许许多多” (“being many”), in my opinion, demonstrates adequately the multiplicity of meaning of the preposition “of” which, used to begin a title, merits close scrutiny, however enigmatic it might be at first sight. Ma’s translation gives readers a lopsided impression that “being many” is already a premise whereas Zhang’s has skipped “of,” and “许许多多” (“being many”) looks more like a forthright statement or conclusion. Nevertheless, I am aware that I am not in a position to judge which of the two is more relevant; neither do I want to claim that mine betters theirs in conveying the messages of the poem. What I would say is that translation inevitably divulges a translator’s ideation and understanding of the original text, and the choice he makes in translation is bound to reduce/extend the message (s) a poem originally aims to convey.

My initial reflection of “Of” is that it expresses a relationship between two entities (the part versus the whole; one of belonging, in which the things on both sides of “of” form an association; or a specific thing against a general category, and so on and so forth). After I have carefully analyzed the poem, particularly the sections of 1, 2, 5, 12, 26, 36 and other collateral materials of his notes, letters, and daybooks, I feel more comfortable to translate the title into “作为群体” (belonging to the many, being part of the many, with an undertone that it is also a personal, individual decision). It is not that my wordings idealistically mirror all the shades and shadows of the original, but that I have formed an opinion that one of the leitmotifs of the poem is the interaction between two distinct yet mutually dependent entities of the world and human consciousness. In my translation in general, I would use Chinese equivalents that are as open-ended and all-inclusive as the original so that readers of Chinese could have similar reading experience. But if semantically I am unable to do that, I would just mull over what I believe is the poem’s message and translate it into Chinese that I know would risk narrowing or adding up to what the original words are meant to convey. I do not take Ma’s “论许许多多” (On being many), because I believe it is not on the premise of “being many” that Oppen starts his poem; rather, I am convinced that from the outset Oppen means his readers to move back and forth between being numerous and being singular, and my translation of “Of” as “作为” or “becoming part of” shows, if not all, my understanding of the theme of the poem: ultimately there exists a possibility that an individual could immerse himself in an all-encompassing world of human activities.

The different semantic configurations of a sentence in English and Chinese pose another challenge for my translation. Whereas the fundamentals of a sentence in both languages are “subject + predicate (and can sometimes be minimized to a predicate only),” English is flexible in where to add a supplementary element such as an adverbial of time or place to a sentence.

This is a typical compound sentence in English. Even though the antecedent “that” after “the life” is gone, the relation between the two “those” and “about” are very clear, thanks to the conjunction “or” and the relative pronouns “who” and the invisible “that.” This poetic line or more properly described, a segment of a line grows into two parts with the second part containing a subordinate sentence of its own. It is a standard “grapes like” English sentence.

Translated into Chinese without making any structural change, what seems regular and commonplace in the original becomes very incongruous in the target language because as far as this sentence is concerned, Chinese prescribes that the preposition “about” should be followed by nouns or pronouns and that any further subordinate relation is not allowed after the nouns and pronouns. If the object clause such as the one in section twenty-seven contains within itself an attributive clause, that attributive clause in translation has to transform itself into an adjective and is placed as a modifier before the word to be modified. Now the poetic line turns itself into something like this during translation:

About+ 1) “who-have-or-recognized-the- or 2) “who-have-lived-within-the-(‘they-
range-of-choice” + “those” were-born- to’)-life”+ “those”

A Chinese sentence, structurally speaking, resembles a concatenation of train compartments. Each compartment can have its auxiliaries, but the auxiliaries have to be contained within their own compartment and all of the compartments, in a linear arrangement, point to the all-powerful locomotive, which is the predicate (or, in this case, the prepositional word). In the course of translating a “grapes like” English sentence into one or multiple “bamboo-like” Chinese ones, the relational words, particularly the antecedents and introducers in it, become extremely crucial. By

virtue of these “markers,” relations between words, phrases and clauses are illuminated, a whole sentence is dissected, its components regrouped and realigned, and a Chinese equivalent produced.

What I do then is to cut the sentence into two and add another “about” before the second “those.” (In Chinese, the second “those,” together with its attributive clause is already a lengthy sentence itself. When strung along with the first “those” clause, it stands so far away from the preposition “about” that the semantic connection between them would be lost if not inserted with another “about” before the second “those” to reinforce the grammatical relation herein). I then add commas between the two clauses, making them juxtaposed and counterpointed. It is an audacious move, I should say, but one based on the deciphering of the markers in the original and on the common practice of Chinese language users who are accustomed to sentences arranged in a linear order.

It is common knowledge that rules cannot explain all aspects of a language and where there is a rule, there will be an aberration and vice versa. As a translator of English, the meaning of a word in a given context and its relation to other words and sentences, marked by adjuncts, relatives, and clauses, always matter more than what grammar books prescribe. My purpose is not to reiterate the differences in two languages which is beyond the scope of this research, but to describe how a translator perceives and overcomes these differences. For me, I would first look at the overall configuration of a sentence/stanza, particularly those marker words, before I put the flesh of meaning on a word. The meaning of a word comes from its relation with its neighboring words and from the role it plays in a sentence.

In translating OBN, I often find that the relation between a word and words adjacent to it very unstable to a point that it no longer helps define the meaning of the word concerned. A word/phrase sometimes also fails its grammatical function and dangles in the midst of an otherwise neat

sentence. The implication of a sentence cannot be concluded or finalized. When perspectives change, its meaning and tone undergo a subtle change as well. This versification is not a simple demonstration of technicality, because, over a stretch of 40-50 years, Oppen was consistent in terms of his poetics and poetic language. I think Ezra Pound is right when he writes in the preface to *Discrete Series* — “I salute a serious craftsman, a sensibility which is not every man’s sensibility and which has not been got out of any other man’s book,”— it is more of a hell-bent belief in poetry than of some showmanship.

If the dissecting, fragmentizing, disrupting, among other philologically “going-against-the-grain” techniques, offer for a halfhearted poet operating conveniences, they represent for Oppen a belief in the absolute objectification of poetry. To objectify a poem does not mean to stand detached from, or remain hidden behind it, rather, it calls for a poem being treated objectively, as a commodity, or an independent entity. The words of a poem per se have value, regardless where the poet stands. For an Objectivist, a poet’s mission is to allow words to play out their potentials to their fullest. The rules imposed on words while facilitating comprehension place limitations on their potentialities as well. It is like crude oil that for centuries was designated as a burning material before thousands of its other uses were applied. To pursue the “crudeness” and pristine state of language so that language like crude oil can unleash its numerous possibilities is Oppen’s conviction, and in order to redeem a language in its primal state, the choice he makes is to get rid of designations, descriptions, and among other conventional formations given to words. It is not difficult to identify the semantic similarity between “Up/Down. Round/Shiny fixed/Alternatives” he wrote in the early 1930s and “*gold* said her golden/ young poems for she sleeps and impossible/truths move,” an excerpt of “GOLD ON OAK LEAVES” from his 1978 book *Primitive*,

and when we are at once addled and amazed by these words set free from preset grammatical formulas, we should realize that Oppen is inviting us to find in his poem *a*, not *the* meaning.

As far as readers are concerned, the potentialities unleashed by words in a poem make each reading experience refreshing and fulfilling. But for a translator, the translation of a word that does not follow the prescribed and prefixed rules of language poses a real challenge. Let us take a look at section eight to see what I mean by challenge:

Amor Fati

The love of fate

For which the city alone
Is audience

Perhaps blasphemous.

Slowly over islands, destinies
Moving steadily pass
And change

In the thin sky
Over islands
Among days

Having only the force
Of days

Most simple
Most difficult

Thanks to the period after “blasphemous,” I can divide the whole section into two groups with “the love of fate” being the primary message for the first group and “destinies” “pass” and “change,” for the second. The markers—the attributive clause that starts with “for which” and the present participles of “moving” and “having”—gives me a degree of certainty as to how to construct two “bamboo-like” Chinese sentences. What I then find ticklish is the translation of the phrase “Perhaps blasphemous” and the last two lines of “Most simple/ Most difficult.” Without

distinct antecedents, they stand out in the poem. The connection between “Perhaps blasphemous” and the prior words is not well connected, grammatically speaking. It is more like a free agent ready to form ties with any word within the previous lines: “the love of fate” could be “blasphemous”; so could be “the city,” or “audience,” or the entire first four lines. Even though “*Amor Fati*” or “The love of fate” is said to be taken from Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals*, *Ecce Homo* and that it is likely to have something to do with the Vietnam War insomuch that the connection between “‘the love of fate’ and ‘perhaps blasphemous’” is favored, one would still not be able to take that connection as the only relevant one. This—the intended detachment of “perhaps blasphemous” from the other words—throws a wrench into the translating work: of a stanza expressing a relatively coherent message emerges a phrase that does not fit in with the whole schema.

So are the last two lines of this section. Can we say that the way “destinies” “pass” and “change” is at once “simple” and “difficult”? We most likely can. Can we relate it to the statement of “The love of fate” and claim that to express a commitment is as simple as to live up to the commitment is difficult? There is no reason that we cannot. Were the whole poem fragmented and there were no connectives implying connection between, for example, “The love of fate” and “for which the city along/Is audience,” the translation of the whole section would be easier because the translator then is not responsible for writing down what is not in the original, though he must try his best to leave enough leeway for readers of the target language to decide what the lack of connectives means to the whole poem. But when the connectives are there in the text, implicitly or explicitly indicating the relation between words/sentences or groups of words/sentences, it would be the translator’s fault if he did not present that relation in the translated text. Oppen often breaks or complicates relation among words/sentences by interpolating space, punctuations,

participles, prepositions, among other things. This technique of his often makes me stop short of producing a section “neat and coherent” in meaning. As “Perhaps blasphemous” in English is open for interpretation, so is its Chinese equivalent which must be made to stand incongruously with the prior lines of that section.

Another challenge that I recollect clearly during translation is in section four where Oppen writes:

For the people of that flow
Are new, the old
New to age as the young
To youth

And to their dwelling
For which the tarred roofs

And the stoops and doors—
A world of stoops—
Are petty alibi and satirical wit
Will not serve.

Oppen is a poet who shows little zeal in witticism, and therefore, much of my attention is on how to properly reflect the meaning of each individual word in the context. Cadence and rhythm for me are of secondary importance, since firstly, Oppen does not have the intent on making alliteration, for instance, a conspicuous feature of OBN. Secondly, the cadence in the target language often loses its resonance, due to the linguistic difference between the two languages. What sounds smooth in English turns out to be rough in Chinese, and vice versa. In section four, “the tarred roofs” and “And the stoops” obviously is an example of assonance. More importantly, from “And the stoops and doors” to “A world of stoops,” “stoops,” though the same word, clearly expresses something beyond a porch, platform, entrance stairway, or veranda at a house door. It is a bon mot probably indicating a body position, a lowering of oneself, among other similar meanings. Now I have to take into consideration the musicality “stoop” and “roof” have produced

as well as the double meanings the recurring “stoop” has conveyed. Frankly speaking, the connotation the word “stoop” makes and the assonance made by “stoop” and “roof” cannot be replicated in their entirety in Chinese. To compensate for it, I have translated “stoop” in “And the stoops and doors—” into a disyllabic two-character phrase, “门阶” that means porch, stairway, and pillar. I then manage to use the first character in the phrase, “门,” together with a third character to produce a Chinese equivalent for “door (大门),” and use the second character in that disyllabic phrase, “阶,” plus another two new characters to translate “stoop” in “A world of stoops” into a Chinese phrase, “阶下汉,” which both refers to a starter and implies a descent from dignity and superiority. Although I am aware that “stoop” may mean something else considering the fact that in the original, there is no determiner to specify its reference, the best I can do is to 1) form some kind of assonance between “stoop (门阶)” and “door (大门)” by means of “门,” to assimilate to and compensate for the assonance made by “stoop” and “roof” in the original; and 2) create a connection between the two “stoops,” now two different terminologies in Chinese sharing one character. Obviously, I have audaciously (not imprudently though) removed the sound effect made by “roof” and “stoop” in the original text because their Chinese equivalents would not accommodate that sound effect. Instead, I have created a new connection between “stoop (门阶)” and “door (大门)” by virtue of “门” to make up for the assonance made “stoop” and “roof” in English. In brief, what I have done with the words “roof,” “stoop” and “door” is not much a literary translation as it is a simulacrum of the original that aims to approximate an effect on Chinese readers as the original on their American counterparts.

I have enumerated, among others, three challenges that I came into in the course of translation: The title, the differing semantic configurations of English and Chinese, and the

rhythmic aspect of a word/sentence. Prior to translation, I have actually taken as the trope of the poem the dynamic between the individual (the singular) and the collective (the numerous), and the universe and human consciousness. I have injected my understanding of the poem into my translation of the title. When it is technically impossible to translate the original verbatim, I would take a translation that risks increasing/decreasing the meaning of the original. The structure of an English sentence tends to be open-ended, and when translated into Chinese, it has to follow a linear order of “subject+ predicate+(supplementary elements)+object.” The marker words (conjunctions, participles, prepositions, and antecedents and introducers in a clause) are crucial elements for an English to Chinese translator. In OBN, Oppen often disrupts or uses the marker words in an unconventional way so much so that many of the sections support multiple interpretations and multiple points of viewing. Words that break the smooth flow of meaning in the original will probably do the same in Chinese. It is not that I intend to test Chinese reader’s intelligence. I would rather believe that it is Oppen’s intention for us to find a new meaning for the word. Lastly, the textual subtlety of the original and the musical and idiomatic flow of it are the hardest to capture in the target language, and, therefore, they suffer the most in translation, due to different semantic and phonetic configurations of English and Chinese and the different cultural and social contexts. When there is no equivalent in the target language to create an alliteration or assonance, what I do is to translate it indirectly to produce an effect similar to what readers of the original would experience.

NOTES

I. In this dissertation, George Oppen's long poem, "Of Being Numerous" is abbreviated to OBN and all of his poems are quoted from *New Collected Poems*. New York: New Directions, 2008.

II. Except for the quotes and the book titles that contain *Tao Te Ching (Dao De Jing)*, or "Tao (Dao)," or "Lao Tzu (Laozi)," I use *Dao De Jing* for the book of 道德经, "Dao" for "the Way," and "Laozi" for the author of 道德经.

III. In this dissertation, I make use of two different translations of *Dao De Jing*: Moss Roberts' *Dao De Jing: The Book of the Way* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), and David Hinton's *Tao Te Ching* (New York: Counterpoint, 2000). Moss Roberts' book goes by the abbreviation of *DDJ*, and David Hinton's by the acronym of *TTC*.

1. THE CURRENT STATE OF MODERN AMERICAN POETRY STUDIES IN CHINA

1. Ziqing Zhang's remark on George Oppen comes from an email he wrote on February 4, 2013 to Hank Lazer, in which Zhang writes "[a]s for the Chinese translation of George Oppen, we haven't translated his poems in China so far as I know. Comparatively speaking, he is a minor poet in the group of the Objectivist poets. I have made a brief comment on him in my book."

2. Yunte Huang's comment on George Oppen comes from an email he wrote to me on May 8, 2014.

3. See *Modern American Poetry: An Anthology*. Beijing: Foreign Literature Press, 1985, p. 1.

4. American scholars and readers on the other side of the Pacific Ocean also had to face the reality of inadequate representations of some of the avant-gardist poets in poetry anthologies in the 1970s and early 80s. For instance, it was as late as in 2003 that *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*

finally included many tremendously influential poets that the previous edition did not, including Lorine Niedecker, George Oppen, and Louis Zukofsky.

5. See p. 2 of *Modern American Poetry: An Anthology*.

6. See *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century*. Kaifeng: Henan University Press, 1995, p.1.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

8. Throughout his poetic career, Oppen's output of critical prose is notoriously slim: "Three Poets," a review of Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson, and Michael McClure in 1962; "The Mind's Own Place," Oppen's most extensive essay on poetics, in *Kulchur* 3, No. 10 in 1963; "A Review of David Antin's *Definitions*" in 1968; "On Armand Schwerner" in 1969; "A Note on Tom McGrath etc." in 1972; "A Letter" in 1973; "Untitled: '...will'," and "Non-Resistance, etc. Or: Of the Guiltless" in 1974; and "Statement on Poetics" in 1984.

9. Robert Baker's *In Dark Again in Wonder: The Poetry of René Char and George Oppen* in 2012, Henry Weinfield's *The Music of Thought in the Poetry of George Oppen and William Bronk* in 2009, Peter Nicholls's *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* in 2007, Lyn Graham Barzilai's *George Oppen: A Critical Study* in 2006, to name a few, are books specifically anchored to Oppen's poetry and poetics. With these books available in bookstores, Marjorie Perloff asserts that "we have witnessed Oppen scholarship coming of age," and that "Oppen's place in the twentieth-century poetry canon now seems assured." This comment comes from "The Shipwreck of the Singular: George Oppen's 'Of Being Numerous'" on Marjorie Perloff's own website. Accessed 21 Jan. 2016, <http://marjorieperloff.com/essays/oppen-numerous/>.

10. Beijing Foreign Studies University is the top and the most comprehensive foreign studies institute in China. I have checked its library, and out of the total of five relevant entries, two directly refer to Oppen: Peter Nicholls' *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (2007) and the 1975 version of *The Collected Poems of George Oppen*. The other three, *American Experimental Poetry and Democratic Thought* by Alan Marshall (2009), *Poetry as Re-Reading: American Avant-Garde Poetry and the Poetics of Counter-Method* by Ming-Qian Ma (2008), and *The Oxford Book of American Poetry* by David Lehman (2006), touch upon a few of Oppen's poems and his poetics. The National Digital Library of China, an online service of the

National Library of China, shows ten books relative to George Oppen. Robert Creeley's *George Oppen: Selected Poems*, Michael Davidson's *George Oppen: New Collected Poems* and Stephen Cope's *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers* are listed in its database but not Mary Oppen's *Meaning a Life*, Rachel Blau DuPlessis' *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, or other Oppen scholarship I have mentioned above. Noteworthy is the library of Peking University, the best comprehensive university in China, which has the 1975 version of Oppen's collected poems. The said books by Mary Oppen, Robert Creeley, Michael Davison, Stephen Cope, and Rachel Blau DuPlessis are not listed in its database. But books by western scholars that include writings on Oppen's poems or poetics are plentiful, and readers can easily access numerous digitalized academic journals by western literary critics. The wide availability of electronic materials to readers across the world is attributed to the latest development of technology and the academic cooperation between the two countries of the U.S. and China.

11. Eliot Weinberger authored the book which was first published in America in 1993. Ma translated it into Chinese with Hebei Educational Press in 2002.

12. In *A History of 20th Century American Poetry*, Ziqing Zhang has discussed four of Oppen's poems: "Drawing," "Party on Shipboard," "From a Photograph" and "Route." He has only translated a few lines from these poems, and in the case of "Route," a few stanzas. Compared with Yongbo Ma's translation of "Route" and "Some San Francisco Poems" spanning over twenty pages, I would say Zhang's translation resembles a synopsis rather than a complete translation of these poems.

13. See p. 38 of *Poetry Monthly=Shi Ge Yue Kan*. Hefei: Poetry Monthly Press, 2013.

14. By 2015, forty-four Chinese universities and colleges have been qualified to grant Ph.D. degrees in British/American literature to students. Most of the comprehensive universities have had an English department where a variety of literature courses are offered.

2. GEORGE OPPEN'S POETICS

1. The original question is "[d]id you feel, then, in coming back to write the next poem, that you were making a totally new start, and those poems that went to make up *The Materials*—did you feel that you

were so far away from *Discrete Series* you could no longer take over where you'd left off?" See p. 59 of *Speaking with George Oppen: Interviews with the Poet and Mary Oppen, 1968-1987*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012.

2. See p. 204 of *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

3. The adjective "beautiful" has been used twenty times in *New Collected Poems*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2008.

4. See p. 290 of *Toward the Open Field: Poets on the Art of Poetry, 1800-1950*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2004.

5. With regard to the use of adjectives, Ezra Pound is also a staunch opponent to the reign of adjectives and abstractions, insisting that "the natural object is always the adequate symbol." From "A Retrospect" in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, pp. 4-5.

6. See p. 56 of *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*.

7. Oppen writes that "I am concerned with ontological being, real being, not an ultimate abstraction," and that "I should suppose that nothing—nothing at all—but the constant repetition of abstract words could blind us to that presence." See p. 187 and p. 123 of *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*. Obviously, Oppen regards abstraction as pernicious to poetry. In terms of "human intellect," "Newtonian mechanics," "Freudian analysis," "political conceptions," "mechanics," and "logic," see pages 42, 61, 69, 72, 84, and 187 of the abovementioned book where Oppen expresses, in varying degrees, his skepticism of all forms of man-made ideas.

8. See his poems of "Giovanni's Rape of the Sabine Women at Wildenstein's" and "The Building of the Skyscraper." Also in "The Building of the Skyscraper," Oppen writes that "But a thing/Which is. It is the business of the poet/ 'to suffer the things of the world/ And to speak them and himself out,'" which unequivocally demonstrates the thingliness of the world.

9. See p. 158 of *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

11. Oppen joined the Communist Party in 1935 and ceased being an active member of the Party in the 1950s. Eric Hoffman argues that in spite of the fact that Oppen grew disillusioned with the Party, he still participated in the Party activities as late as 1956 when he was living in Mexico as a political exile. From “‘A Poetry of Action: George Oppen and Communism’: Responses and Further Investigations.” *American Communist History* 9.2 (2010): 187-199.

12. According to the correspondents listed in Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, there had been roughly eighty-seven people in correspondence with Oppen over the years, and the majority of them were poets, literary critics, and college professors. See pp. 354-362 of *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990.

13. See p. 77 of *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

16. Oppen writes “I can only say it seems to me absurd to imagine a god who exists in transcendence and who speaks to man, or interferes in his affairs, or judges him. Life is, in any case, irrevocably committed to a world without a god; it postulates god only in that it is irrevocably committed,” and “If ‘God’ means the unknown whole of which one is a part, then God is the word to use.” See p. 185 and p. 221 of *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

18. See p.311 of *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*.

19. The western philosophers Oppen is believed to have read include Heidegger, Merleau-Pointy, Jacques Maritain, and Wittgenstein, all of whom have discussed extensively such topics as intellect, its conceptualized externals, and the universe.

20. See pp. 27-28 of *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. [New York]: Pantheon Books [1953].

21. The letter was written on April 24, 1963 by Oppen to Charles Tomlinson, in which Oppen says “It’s pleasant to know that you like the Materials: it is wonderfully generous of you to take the trouble to say so. I was troubled while working to know that I had no sense of an audience at all. Hardly a new

complaint, of course. One imagines himself addressing his peers, I suppose — surely that might be the definition of ‘seriousness’? I would like, as you see, to convince myself that my pleasure in your response is not plain vanity but the pleasure of being heard, the pleasure of companionship, which seems more honorable.” From Richard Swigg, ed., “Addressing one’s peers: The letters of Charles Tomlinson and George, 1963-1981,” *Jacket 2*, May 2014, accessed 10 Jan. 2016, <https://jacket2.org/feature/addressing-ones-peers>.

3. A COMPARISON BETWEEN GEORGE OPPEN’S POETICS AND DAOIST PRINCIPLES

1. See p.303 of *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*.

2. In the same letter to John Crawford, Oppen writes “as for China: ditto But no need to go into it: there was the famous Sons and Daughters (have I the title right) which sold several trillion copies or whatever.” Later Oppen makes a correction on the margin and says he has the name of the book wrong and what he means is another one in the 50’s. See p. 303 of *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*.

3. See p. 198 of *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers* where Oppen hypothesizes a war between the U.S. and China and its dire consequences.

4. Stephen Cope rightly points out that Oppen misquotes Mao’s slogan “Let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend” in his essay “The Mind’s Own Place.” See p.247 of *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*.

5. See p. 33 of *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers* where Oppen describes a conversation between a Zen Buddhist monk and his master. Stephen Cope recognizes that the proverb mentioned in Oppen’s description is a “commonly cited” one, but he is unable to locate Oppen’s source.

6. See p. 9 of *The Selected Letters of George Oppen* in which Oppen writes “the first stanza is pretty much the Zen ‘Void’—that we’re objects like any little object in the universe, or maybe don’t exist at all since only for a time. And the rest says we have a sort of permanence.” Also, see p. 282 of the same book where Oppen touches upon the Daoist idea of permanence and temporality— “Almost oriental, Mary said The tao, the way A way. Our way. —and masculine and feminine?”

7. The poet, Michael Heller once said, “Oppen read deeply in Heidegger and made use of his thought in developing his own poetics, one that was resistant to dogma and preconceived ideas of what poetry ought to be.” See p. 94 of *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, Albany: SUNY Press, c2009. Heidegger’s quote appears on the first page of Oppen’s book “*This in Which*” and according to several of his outbound letters, Oppen read arduously Heidegger’s “Metaphysics: Identity and Difference”: “That night I sat up late, very carefully reading the essay.” Oppen admits that some of Heidegger’s thoughts are so important to him to a point that it “alters the subjective conditions of [his] life, the conditions of [his] thinking, from that point in life.” Not only did he read Heidegger, he even gladly lent “a selection of Heidegger early and late periods” to Robert Duncan in 1969. See p.135 and p. 182 of *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*. Also, see p. 66 of *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* where Peter Nicholls remarks that “for Oppen, reviving his poetic ambitions in the early sixties, the work of Heidegger must have seemed to offer a complex development and intensification of some of the ideas he has already absorbed from Maritain.”

8. David Hinton is the translator of the four central masterworks of ancient Chinese thought: *Tao Te Ching (Dao De Jing)*, *Chuang Tzu*, *The Analects*, and *Mencius*. He often refers to Daoism and Ch’an (Zen) as one spiritual tradition—“Taoism was eventually supplemented and intensified by Ch’an (Zen) Buddhism, which is a melding of Taoism and Buddhism.” See p. xviii of *Tao Te Ching*. New York: Counterpoint, 2000.

9. See p. xi of *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*. New York: Anchor, 1956.

10. Paul Shil-yi Hsiao was a Chinese scholar traveling in Germany in 1946. He described his encounter with Heidegger, and how the two worked together on the translation of *Dao De Jing*. The translation was incomplete, and only a small portion of the work has been translated. During the 1960s when Hsiao visited Heidegger and talked about Laozi, Heidegger playfully said that it was Hsiao who did not want to finish up the translation with him. See “Heidegger and Our Translation of the *Tao Te Ching*” in *Heidegger and Asian Thought*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987. pp. 93-101.

11. See p. 254 of *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*.

12. See p. 14 of *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*.

13. *Shi Ji* (*The Book of History*, or *The Historical Records*), authored by Sima Qian of Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.-8C.E.), is often regarded as China's first "biography style" chronicle. It covers a span of roughly three millennia from the beginning of Chinese civilization to Emperor Hanwudi Era (156 -87 B.C.E).

14. Whether Laozi is the author of *Dao De Jing* has been a controversial issue in and outside China. For instance, Hans-Georg Moeller insists that the ancient book is the outcome of the collective effort. His comments reflect the opinions of many Chinese scholars of *Dao De Jing*. See p. 3 of *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

15. Followers of religious Dao regard Laozi as their founder, though religious Dao, formed much later in Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220C.E.), is markedly different from philosophical Dao. David L. Hall claims that "Until recently, scholars of Daoism, particularly those in the West, have typically drawn a rather sharp distinction between the *Dao Jia* (the school of Daoism) and *Dao Jiao* (religious Dao)," and "[more recently] there have been attempts to identify in the *Dao Jia* a 'mystical philosophy' that has its roots in the thought of Laozi and Zhuangzi." See pp. 245-246 of *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape*. Cambridge, Mass.: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2001.

16. See p. xii of *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape*. The general editor of the book, Lawrence E. Sullivan remarks that his book is one in a series which results from the research "involving the direct participation of some six hundred scholars, religious leaders, and environmentalists brought to Harvard from around the world during the period of research and inquiry."

17. Wai-Lim Yip has analyzed some of the Chinese and Western poems by virtue of Daoist and Ch'an Buddhist ideas of trusting one's natural being and functioning within Nature's way. See pp. 133-137 of *Diffusion of Distance*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. Also, see p. 169 of Zong-qi Cai's *Configurations of Comparative Poetics: Three Perspectives on Western and Chinese Literary Criticism*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002. One of the principal messages of Cai's book is that "[the union

of man and nature] is to be achieved by suspending one's perception and thought and letting the Dao work its way through nature and man unhindered.”

18. Yiheng Zhao writes that between 1886 to 1924, there were as many as sixteen English translations of *Dao De Jing* and that another forty different English versions were published between the 1920s and 60s. See p. 314 of *The Muse from Cathay*. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2003.

19. “Sandokai” is a poem made up of twenty-two couplets and is chanted every day in Soto Zen temples throughout the world, and almost always when a memorial service is held for the founder of a temple. Sekito (Sekito Kisen) is the composer of “Sandokai” and founder and Great Master of Ch’an (Zen) Buddhism. See p. 29 of *Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness: Zen Talks on the Sandokai*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

20. See pp. xvi-xvii of *What Is Zen*. Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 2000.

21. Based on Zhao’s footnotes in *The Muse from Cathay*, “The Pacific Influence in American Poetry” is a section from *Anthology of Magazine Verse* published in 1926.

22. See p. 11 of *The Early Poetry of Charles Wright: A Companion, 1960-1990*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2009. By referring to a section of Charles Wright’s *Night Journal*—“The Chinese say we live in the world of the ten thousand things,/ Each of the ten thousand things// crying out to us / Precisely nothing, / A silence whose tune we’ve come to understand,” and to a remark made by the poet: “The things of this world are my only happiness...As I once said in a verse, ‘what gifts there are all here, in this world,’” Robert D. Denham attempts to articulate the congenial relation between *Dao De Jing*’s “Ten Thousand Things” with Charles Wright’ poetics.

23. Here I refer to Arthur Waley’s *Zen Buddhism and Its Relation to Art*. London: Luzac, 1922.

24. See p. 2673 of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 7th ed. Vol. E. New York: Norton, 2007.

25. In Roberts’ version of the translation, “人” in “道大，天大，地大，人也大。宇宙间有四大，而人是四大之一” is translated into “man,” which reflects its literal meaning in Chinese. Some Chinese

scholars over the past centuries argued that “人” should also be understood as “true emperor” while many others, including Guying Chen, a contemporary Laozi scholar to whom I make references, insist that we should take “人” literally. I choose Robert Moss’s translation because it fits well with my argument of egalitarianism between man and nature.

26. See p. 98 of *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Perennial Library, c1971.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

28. In terms of Oppen’s “clarity,” Michael Heller expresses a similar opinion: “in both his poetry and in his correspondence with me and others, constantly stressed his own search for a poetics free of dogma and a priori views of poetry. When I began to study Buddhist thought seriously and was exposed to notions such as *sunyata*, nontheistic and nonessentialist thinking, emphasized in Trungpa’s writings and personal teachings, I felt then a sense of a poetry without credentials, of the activity of making poetry as a kind of path, or at least, a reinforcing of the path I had set out upon.” See p. 94 of *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*.

29. See p. 42 of *Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness: Zen Talks on the Sandokai*.

30. See p. 247 of *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape*.

31. See p. 62 of *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*.

32. See p. 59 of *Poetry, Language, Thought*.

33. The Oppens made an acquaintance with an American etcher, Ponce deLeon who might have talked to the couple about the depths of focus in a picture. In one of his 1963-64 papers, Oppen writes that Ponce deLeon’s concept of etching can be applied to writing—“a style can be too much on the surface. It can also be too little on the surface; the thing behind it can lack immediacy.” See p. 60 of *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*. Apparently for Oppen, the use of acid in the painting is a matter of keeping balance among different elements. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to interpret “eat away in acid” as “lose balance.”

34. See p. 173 of *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers* where Oppen writes “to think of nothing clearly, to perceive no object simply, is to avoid fear.” Prior to this statement, on p. 163 of this book he claims that “if we do not admit these things, if we deny or look away from these things, we abandon one another.” These two sentences validate my understanding of the last line of the poem that Oppen recognizes the risks an empiricist poet faces. But his message to us is unequivocal: if we abandon the things, we will finally abandon everyone.

35. See pp.188-189 of *Uncertain Poetries: Selected Essays on Poets, Poetry, and Poetics*. Cambridge, UK: Salt Pub., 2005.

4. A DAOIST PERSPECTIVE ON GEORGE OPPEN’S WORKS

1. Among the critics are Marjorie Perloff, Robert Creeley, John Taggart, Peter Nicholls, Hank Lazer, and Michael Davidson. Many of the critics are poets themselves.

2. Marjorie Perloff, “The Shipwreck of the Singular: George Oppen’s ‘Of Being Numerous,’” accessed 18 Jan. 2016, <http://marjorieperloff.com/essays/oppen-numerous/>.

3. See p. 47 of *The Complete Works of Chuang Tsu*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968. Watson’s remark is on Chuang Tsu, a Daoist follower and major advocate of Daoist thought. “The sage” refers to Laozi and other people who are in pursuit of “Dao.”

4. Marjorie Perloff remarks that “the ‘An’ of line two is echoed in ‘unmanageable pantheon,’ while its initial A recurs in the following three lines: ‘Absolute’— ‘Arid’— ‘A.’ Moreover, in what is surely a significant chiming, the third syllable of ‘corporations’ rhymes with ‘ay’ to lines up, and its final syllable ‘-tions’ loops back, in a near-rhyme, to the ‘things’ of line one. Sound structure, it would seem, must contain its substance because nothing else do: ‘the world if it is matter, / Is impenetrable.’” See “The Shipwreck of the Singular: George Oppen’s ‘Of Being Numerous,’” accessed 10 Feb. 2016, <http://marjorieperloff.com/essays/oppen-numerous/>.

5. See p. 333 of *George Oppen: Man and Poet*. Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine at Orono, 1981.

6. See p. 33 of *Enlarging the Temple*. Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University Press, 1979.

7. I find that line breaks and varied spacing have been widely used by Objectivists and poets closely associated with Objectivism. In a remark on Lorine Niedecker, the editor of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (7th edition) says that “the apparent simplicity of her work gains its power from a wide range of formal resources, including the *silences* between words indicated by line breaks and varied spacing on the page. Like other experimental American poets, she uses the space of the page to suggest the movement of the eye and mind across a field of experience” (Italicized by me). See p. 2097 of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 7th ed. Vol. E.

8. In terms of silence, absence versus voice and presence, Peter Nicholls, after a thorough research into the provenance of the prose quote in section one of OBN, remarks that it comes from Oppen’s reading of Bonnefoy’s book *Du mouvement et de l’immobilité de Douve*. Nicholls also states that “Bonnefoy’s preoccupation with time and change in *Douve* generates a poetic vision which is, in some ways, surprisingly close to Oppen’s.” And if in *Douve*, Bonnefoy “has often stressed that it is in absence, and because of death, that ‘presence’ comes to full realization,” then in OBN, Oppen could well have resorted to absence and silence to suggest the unutterable or the impenetrable aspect of human living. See p. 89 of *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

9. See p. 29 of *The Music of Thought in the Poetry of George Oppen and William Bronk*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009.

10. See pp. 81-82 of *George Oppen: A Critical Study*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2006.

11. I say cities are of things because, firstly, a city has a location. It is made of different materials. It takes a certain form. There is the “thingness” in cities. Then the building process involves physical effort—muscles and the senses of sight and touch. A city also is an environment capable of influencing those living in it; besides, a city with its facilities, roads, parks, and houses stands for the cosmos. “In the absence of books and formal instruction, architecture is a key to comprehending reality.” See p. 102 of *Space and Place: The perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977.

12. See p. 46 of *The Music of Thought in the Poetry of George Oppen and William Bronk*.

13. See p. 263 of *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*.

14. See p. 49. of *The Music of Thought in the Poetry of George Oppen and William Bronk*.

15. Marjorie Perloff, "The Shipwreck of the Singular: George Oppen's 'Of Being Numerous,'" accessed 10 Feb. 2016, <http://marjorieperloff.com/essays/oppen-numerous/>.

16. Some critics argue that the rescue of Crusoe symbolizes a denial of the state of nature. The state of nature refers to the conditions of what the lives of people might have been like before civilization came into existence. Without the framework of an organized society and with primitivism dominating, Crusoe would probably have found more happiness.

17. In her memoir, Mary Oppen says that "we needed to find our generation, to meet the poets and artists of our times and to find a way of life in which the poetry we felt within us could come out of our lives." See p. 120 of *Meaning a Life: An Autobiography*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: Black Sparrow Press, 1978. Numerality does not replace singularity. Through it, an individual explores what is within himself.

18. See p. 52 of *The Music of Thought in the Poetry of George Oppen and William Bronk*. Weinfield's statement sounds strikingly similar to Poem 20 in *Dao De Jing*: "People all have enough and more./ But I'm abandoned and destitute,/an absolute simpleton, this mind of mind so utterly/muddled and blank.//Others are bright and clear:/I am dark and murky./Others are confident and effective:/I'm pensive and withdrawn,/uneasy as boundless seas/or perennial mountain winds.//People all have a purpose in life,/but I'm inept, thoroughly useless and backward./I'll never be like other people:/I keep to the nurturing mother"(TTC). Though Oppen is not similarly humble and self-effacing, the commonality between the Sage and Oppen is that they both attempt to increase the possibility of returning to a state of supreme identification with the world. The world and the self have an intrinsic relationship with each other, and the world mediates that relationship.

19. In 1965, Rachel DuPlessis wrote to George Oppen and she queried "Whether, as the intensity of seeing increases, one's distance from Them, the people, does not also increase." As a young college student, DuPlessis could not decide whether she should choose "the singular" or "the numerous," and she wondered if section seven, whose gist is that the One co-exists with the Many, should be dropped. Oppen replied "on

7, I don't agree really. I need that, and need it as flat as it is to establish that half of the burden of the poem which is hardest to establish---the concepts evolved from the fact of being numerous, without which we are marooned, shipwrecked---it is in fact unthinkable without them." Clearly, Oppen thinks it is crucial to understand singularity within the context of numerality. In 1968, Oppen again mentioned that he had used DuPlessis' sentences in his poem. He said "A young friend' phoned during the first hours of the Columbia sit-in. She talked for --I think--more than half an hour. Troubled by events and the difficulty of finding her role, her place. She wanted to be among the *actives*--- and felt that she somehow was not and could not wholly be so--- Talked, as I say, a long time. After she hung up I remembered that it was from one of her letters to me that I took the quotation in *Numerous*:

'Whether, as the intensity of seeing increases, one's distance from
Them, the People, does not also increase'
Dramatic. She had somehow foreseen it."

Oppen is claiming by sending him this letter, DuPlessis foresees the tough stuff in life that everyone has to face, the tough stuff of finding one's role and place among the numerous. See pages. 390, 121, and 176 of *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*.

20. Michael Davidson claims that "'Dithyrambic, audience-as-artists' presumably refers to the youth revolt as well as the Brechtian happenings and living theater in late 1960s art world." See p. 381 of *New Collected Poems*. Henry Weinfield remarks that the opening of section ten "recalls the days in the 1960s of the living theater, with its roots in the ancient dithyramb." See p. 55 of *The Music of Thought in the Poetry of George Oppen and William Bronk*.

21. This can definitely relate to his twenty-five years of lacuna in poetry writing. Unlike many of his leftist contemporaries who hold that art, poetry, in particular, is created by and belongs to the masses, Oppen never does one in the interest of the other. For him, it seems that the mass political, ideological movements, and art never would do much good for one another.

22. See p. 71 of *Nietzsche and the Horror of Existence*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2009. It is originally Nietzsche's words. Kain changes it a little to delineate Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence." I find it quite relevant to section twelve of OBN.

23. In his February-March 1965 letter to Diane Wakoski, Oppen wrote "I, I I I I, find me, find my navel, so that it will exist, find my nipples, so they will exist, find every hair of my belly, find..." it is a root of poetry, it is indeed, well, I don't know. But just, I think, the necessity of getting further. Because it seems to me still the pitfall that has trapped every woman poet who has written in English." See p.110 of *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*.

24. According to Michael Davidson, this section is a setting of the opening to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* in which Kierkegaard claims that "he who will not work does not get the bread but remains deluded, as the gods deluded Orpheus with an airy figure in place of the loved one, deluded him because he was effeminate, not courageous, because he was a cithara-player, not a man." See p. 382 of *New Collected Poems*. If a poet does not endeavor to take action and carve a new course for himself, he would either fail or remain misled.

25. Oppen remarks "art can come only from a very dangerous thing to do. To search for the roots of one's own existence and one's own sensibility. And try to body that forth, to cause it to appear in clarity." See p. 124 of *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*.

26. In a June 1968 letter to Alexander Mourelatos, Oppen writes, "I think of the phrase 'the fly in the bottle' as a quotation from you, not as a quotation from Wit [tgenstein] because that was the moment when we understand each other [CP 160] I remember that W. had said it of course, but I don't know that I understood W. when I encountered the phrase, and certainly I didn't care so much if I understood him or not so—a quotation from you. And, in the context of the poem, immediately the vision of the insane, poisonous Johnsonian flies who are not us Not the four of us What our differences, we are not those insane flies." See pp. 177-178 of *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*. President Lyndon Johnson was on Oppen's mind when he wrote the poem. Michael Davidson holds the opinion that "Oppen links this remark

to President Lyndon Johnson's role in the escalating Vietnam War and the use of helicopters in that war.”

See p. 382 of *New Collected Poems*.

27. See p. 105 of *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*.

28. See p. 29 of *Reimagining Life: Philosophical Pessimism and the Revolution of Surrealism*. Madison [N.J.]: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Pub. Group, c2011.

29. In his masterpiece, “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning,” John Donne writes “Moving of the’ earth brings harms and fears; / Men reckon what it did, and meant; /But trepidation of the sphere, / Though greater far, is innocent.”

30. See p.81 of *The Music of Thought in the Poetry of George Oppen and William Bronk*.

31. See p. 109 of *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*.

32. See pp.79-80 of *William Blake's Jerusalem: Structure and Meaning in Poetry and Picture*. London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1982.

33. Michael Davidson alludes to the death of Oppen's father. See p.100 of *On the Outskirts of Form: Practicing Cultural Poetics*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011.

34. See pp. 96-98 of *The Early Heidegger's Philosophy of Life: Facticity, Being, and Language*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012.

35. See p. 402 of *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*.

36. See p.8 of *Speaking the Estranged: Essays on the Work of George Oppen*. Cambridge, UK: Salt Pub., 2008.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

38. See p. 12 of *George Oppen: A Critical Study*.

39. See p. 8 of *Dogen's Genjo Koan: Three Commentaries*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2011. “To study the way of enlightenment is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body, and mind, as well as the bodies and minds of others, drop away. No trace of enlightenment remains, and this no-trace continues

endlessly.” According to Ch’an (Zen) Buddhism, a perspective from nobody and nowhere will eventually help an individual gain enlightenment.

40. See p. 73 of *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*.

41. See p. 10 of *Space and Place* where Yi-Fu Tuan elaborates on the relationship between “see” and “think.” He states that “to see and to think are closely related processes. In English, ‘I see’ means ‘I understand.’ Seeing, it has long been recognized, is not the simple recording of light stimuli; it is a selective and creative process in which environmental stimuli are organized into flowing structures that provide signs meaningful to the purposive organism.” The process of seeing is also the process of ideation and intellection.

42. “‘Truth’ for [Oppen] exists, if it exists at all, neither in ‘nature’ nor in the splendid solitude of the reflective mind, but only in the collective, ongoing life of the people ‘en masse’ (as Whitman liked to say) as they collectively make through their labor the only world we can know.” This comment was made by Burton Hatlen in his article “‘Not Altogether Lone in a Lone Universe’: George Oppen’s Materials.” See p. 333 of *George Oppen: Man and Poet*.

43. See p. 69 of *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

45. See p.47 of *Diffusion of Distances: Dialogues Between Chinese and Western Poetics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

46. From "George Oppen." PennSound. Web. 05 Feb. 2016. Oppen read this poem on a few occasions. PennSound has included two readings of “The Occurrences” by Oppen on May 3, 1972, at San Francisco State University, and on a day between April 25 and 29, 1979 at Harvey Shapiro’s home in Brooklyn, New York. In both readings, Oppen read “Warred” instead of “Warring,” as is shown in Michael Davidson’s book. “Warred” makes much more sense than “Warring,” since after the interrogative pronoun, “when,” a predicate, rather than a present participle, is needed.

47. This arrangement seems to corroborate Peter Nicholls’ remark that [Oppen]’s way of shifting emphasis from the content of his words to the pure fact of their utterance, implies a poetics of being that

does not now require the impacted syntax of *Discrete Series* and can thus produce more fluent and expanded structures.” See p. 74 of *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*.

48. Listening to two of his recordings in 1972 and 1979, one could hear a very distinct pause between “but nothing” and “incredible happens.” The line break and the pause make “but nothing” closer to “the mind’s structure” that precedes it than “incredible happens” that follows it.

49. Michael Davidson asserts that lines 24 and 25 of the poem might have resulted from Oppen’s perusal of Ezra Pound’s *Pisan Cantos*. It is possible that Oppen’s “the middle Kingdom” refers to China, because, in Pound’s epic work, Chinese characters and Confucian dictum abound, and Oppen would have noticed the Chinese elements in it. See p. 389 of *New Collected Poems*.

50. See p. 109 of *Speaking with George Oppen: Interviews with the Poet and Mary Oppen, 1968-1987*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012.

51. There is, of course, a possibility that Oppen is referring to an imagined realm or some high ground for poetry. This interpretation, however, seems less convincing, particularly when one takes into consideration Rachel DuPlessis’ remark that “George was mischievous and teasing about and definitely NOT interested in any of the spiritual fads of the 60s. He used to cite what is from Walt Kelly (Pogo) I think: ‘Not Zen but now.’ The pun appealed, and so did the sentiment. Any fuzz of higher consciousness and any ungrounded a-political windiness would be NOT to his taste.” This remark is an excerpt from her correspondence to Hank Lazer on July 4, 2015.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

5. THE TRANSLATION OF GEORGE OPPEN INTO CHINESE

1. See p. 16 of *Understanding the Black Mountain Poets*. Columbia S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, c1995.

2. I have checked the anthologies of American poetry authored by Chinese scholars. It is as easy to find Robert Creeley’s poems and the remarks on his poetics as it is difficult to find Oppen’s. For instance, *Selected Contemporary American Poetry* translated by Min Zheng has included 133 poems from 36

contemporary American poets. Yet it does not have Oppen's poems. *Selected Poems by Modern American Poets* edited by Yan Zhuang zeroes in on the poetic achievements of the second half of the 20th century. Creeley is the eighth poet introduced in the book and is placed ahead of Robert Duncan, and Allen Ginsberg.

3. According to Lawrence Venuti, translation studies undergo several stages from the linguistics based, normative approach to the hermeneutic approach, and to approaches that see translation as a negotiation between two cultures (translation as acculturation). Translation is a decision-making process and the study of translation requires a comprehensive knowledge of linguistics, literary history, literary theory, and cultural history. It unifies rather than compartmentalizes different academic disciplines. Venuti argues that the concept of equivalence in translation is irrelevant and that translation is nothing but a provisional interpretation of the source text. Translation must be understood as a de-contextualizing and re-contextualizing process: one set of intratextual, intertextual and interdiscursive relations, as well as the context of reception, are lost and replaced by another set of intertextual and interdiscursive relations established by and within the translation. In a word, translation produces and proliferates cultural differences. These differences are the "remainders" and are given a specific name in poetry translation — "interpretants." The domestic remainder is always present in the language. It "consists of such variations as regional and social dialects, slogans and clichés, technical terminology and slang, archaisms, and neologisms, literary figures like metaphors and puns, stylistic innovations, and foreign loan words," and can be both intentionally and unintentionally released by the translator. See p. 37 of *Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice*. London; New York: Routledge, 2013.

4. Ideal as it is, the imagined community across national borders is but a "utopia" for such a translating theorist as Lawrence Venuti who insists that different cultures, sentiments, interests, ideologies and so on and so forth can only foster a community of *domestic* interests, however hard the translator communicates the source text to the receiving audience. However, he does not deny that a transnational community of readership is a relevant way of "imagining a future reconciliation of linguistic and cultural difference, whether those that exist among domestic groups or those that divide the foreign and domestic cultures." See p. 29 of *Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice*.

5. Michael Davidson also makes a note on this line. He asserts that in a letter to John Crawford of 1973, Oppen mentioned Langland's "for truth telleth that love is a treacle that abateth sin" and said that that line moved him tremendously. See p. 385 of *New Collected Poems*. The interpretation of the word "rosary," if we take Oppen's words seriously, should be tilted toward "treacle" than "bubbles."

6. See p. 1102 of *A History of 20th Century American Poetry*. Changchun: Jilin Education Press, 1995. Zhang explains the long delay in the publication. In his appreciative remarks, he falls short of saying the delay was the result of bureaucracy.

7. Apart from the erroneous placement of some of the words in the first stanza of "Route," in the introduction part, Zhang asserts that Ezra Pound's preface, which originally was to *Discrete Series*, was to Oppen's 1969 book *Of Being Numerous*. This apparently is a factual mistake that Zhang fails to recognize.

8. See p. 402 of *A History of 20th Century American Poetry*.

9. From "A History of 20th Century American Poetry." By Feng Song. *GMW*. Guangming Daily, 26 Jan. 2000. Web. 16 Feb. 2016.

10. See pp. 1-2 of *American Poetry since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders*. Shijiazhuang: Hebei Education Press, 2003.

11. Oppen favors clear, simple words and is always concerned if his readers could understand his language. See p. 209 of *Meaning a Life: An Autobiography*. Mary says, "George, insisting on clarity and understanding, speaking of his difficulty in knowing if the readers would understand; Louis, with a shrug replying, 'It doesn't matter, they don't care if they understand you or not.' Louis was implying, why don't you write like me—does the reader care whether you have arrived at truth," and "not knowing how to say it without insulting Louis, but implying that Louis used incomprehensibility and obscurity as a tactic, George said, 'You're tougher than I am, Louis,' referring to Louis' disregard of the reader."

12. See p. 113 of *Regions of Unlikeness: Explaining Contemporary Poetry*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.

13. The term, "the becoming of each individual as a determinate social relatedness" comes from Anne Fairchild Pomeroy's *Marx and Whitehead: Process, Dialectics, and the Critique of Capitalism*. Albany:

State University of New York Press, 2004. I have found it very relevant to my analysis of the intentionality of the translator who not only stands for a certain social position and attitude but also appropriates and integrates the ideology, the interests and the intelligibility of the receiving society.

14. The quote is from a February 4, 2013 email Hank Lazer wrote to Ziqing Zhang.

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APPENDIX

A Translation into Chinese of “Of Being Numerous”

作为群体

1

有些事

我们身处其中，“关注它们
就是认识我们自身”。

事情的发生，一个无限的系列中的
一部分，

令人感到遗憾和惊奇的万千事物；

一个我们性本恶的故事
曾经讲的就是这个。
这不是我们性本恶的事情。

“你记得我们去的那座老城，我们坐在
毁坏的窗户上，我们努力地想象我们属于
那些时代——它是死的又是活的，它的生存或者它的死亡
你都无法想象；大地说话，火-
蜥蜴说话，春天来了只让它变得暗淡——”

2

人们曾这样谈论事物的存在，
一座难以约束的万神殿

不容置疑，但是他们说
缺乏生气。

一座由公司和团体组成的城
被玻璃覆盖
在梦里

还有许多影像——

矿物一般的事实带来的
纯粹的快乐

尽管无法穿透

像这个世界，如果它是物质的，
无法穿透一样。

3

感情专注
走进这座城市
如同走进任何一座城市。

每个地点和我们都
分属不同的年代
但是我们猜想别人的情况和我们正好相反，

我们与他们邂逅。事实上
一群老百姓缓缓穿过
城市。

这便是纽约的一种语言

4

因为那些人流中的人
都是新人，老人们
和世代相比都是新人
如同青年们和青春相比

还有和他们的住宅相比
对住宅来说，涂有焦油的屋顶

门阶和大门——

一个处处要人当阶下汉的世界——
都是些微不足道的托词，嘲讽的妙语
也不中用

5

巨大的石头

在河流上头
在大桥的塔门里头

‘1875’

在月光下
在人行道上方冰冷的空气里冻住了，意识

一无所获，一无所待
迷恋着自身

6

我们推挤着，彼此推挤着，
人们很快要告诉我们
正在发生的事情
真相猛然大白于
一阵剧烈的情感中
现在和一直以来都是这样。我们说

克鲁索是被
“解救”的。
我们做出这样选择。

7

沉迷于，困惑于

作为个体的
失事的海船

我们选择了作为群体的
意义。

8

Amor fati
热爱命运

为此只有城市本身
是听众

或许有读神明。

慢慢地在岛屿上方，命运
平稳地移动，经过

并改变

在薄云的天空里
在岛屿上方
在日子里

只有一天一天日子的
力量

最简单
又最难

9

“随着关注的深入，一个人同
他们，大众，的距离是否也增加”
我知道，我当然知道，我没有别的地方可去

我是他们中的一员，只有用常人思考的方式
用一种他的话语，用发生在我身上的事情
创作诗歌

想象那片沙滩
为了众人眼里的那一瞬间

纯粹的个体

个体的
尘世之外的纽带

作为失事船只上明亮的灯火的个体

10

或者，在那灯火下，新的艺术！酒神的赞美歌一般，读者-作为-艺术家们！
但我要倾听一个人讲话，我要倾听一个人讲话，该我说
我就说，尽管他会失败，我也会失败。
但是我要听他讲话。人群拖着脚步走来走去算不了什么——
是啊，算不了什么，我们只是数量多，但不算什么。

城市艺术，各个城市的艺术，城市里青年人的艺术——
那与世隔绝的人死了，他周围的一切枯竭了

他要失败了！他要失败了，那沉思的人！况且他们确实
不能“忍受”这个。

11

正是那光芒
到处渗透，照亮不同的时代

在光辉里建筑物
矗立在低洼的地上，它们的山墙
刚刚高过海湾

完全静止不动，

空荡荡，等着派上用场，哪座大楼你都能进
你从哪个窗户观望都行
一个人可以在帝国大厦的顶上
向自己挥手——

讲话

如果你能

讲话

菲利斯——不是新一古典主义
姑娘名叫菲利斯——

有了第一份工作刚刚下班
在公交车上光秃秃的供市民乘坐的车厢里
在人群中，狭小的门
这个夜里在马路牙子边敞开
她告诉我，她的心因为快乐突然一紧——

一幅不起眼的图景，
马路牙子上有一点光亮，这贬低不了我们

我也在那儿恋上了纵横的街道
和人行道上方形的石板——

谈论这房子还有邻近的地方和这些船坞

它不是“艺术”

12

“在这些解释里人们认为一个实践的
主体就是一次机会，是人对真实世界的一次敏感的反应。”

雨一直在下
已经很久没下了
世界没有变

。 。 。

他们做了些小物品
木头的鱼骨头的
还有石头的。他们谈着话，
家人们谈着话。
他们聚在一起商议
讲着话，手里拿着些物品。
他们容易相信别人
他们的东西在树林子里熠熠发光。

他们曾对这个世界
有耐心。
这将永不复返，永不，
除非他们到了自己的极限

他们将从头再来，就是说，
一遍一遍地来。

13

无法开始
在开始的时候，幸运者
发现手头已样样不缺。他们是购物者
挑选者，裁判；。。。在这儿野蛮的人
断子绝孙，走投无路。

他们展开
辩论就为了能发言，他们变得
虚幻，虚幻，生活不再
牢靠，失去了广度，棒球是他们的游戏
因为棒球不是游戏
而是一场辩论，意见的分歧
成就了一场场赛马大会。他们是威胁一个人灵魂的

鬼魂。闻起来不新鲜的
空气里
事物在变化，他们将走到一个时代的
尽头
先是全民族的人
而后一个人可以体面地保持他的距离
如果他愿意

14

如今要我
和这些人完全脱离
我做不到

和他们一起我站在炮台上，帐篷搭成的军队食堂里，
医院和棚屋里，国家一片废墟
公路被炸，我们藏身于公路上炸弹炸成的深沟里，

在他们当中很多人
比我有能力——

穆伊库特和名叫希利的
中士
还有那个中尉——

怎么能忘了这个？怎么能远远地
谈论“人民”

他们是
来自城墙里头的
那股力量

在那里他们的车子

响声回荡像历史一样
驶过砌着墙的大道
车里谁也不能讲话。

15

齐声唱道（雌雄同体）：“找到我
好让我生存，找到我的肚脐
好让它生存，找到我的乳头
好让它们生存，找到我肚子上的每一根

毛发，我是善（或我是恶）
找到我。”

16

“。。。不劳者不能食，
只有经历过纷扰的人才能得到安息
只有下了阴司的人才能救回自己的爱人
拔刀杀子，以撒方得以归还。
不劳者不能食。。。
但是放手一干的人将让他的父辈重生。

17

词语的根源
在地下通道里变得黯然

疯狂在
一群活着的人当中
“一种物质的状态”

这儿没有别人，只有我们这些鸡崽

反-实体论——

他想说
他的生活是真实的，
没有人能说出为什么

很难讲述

口中喋喋不休地念叨，在大庭广众面前

无根无据的话语

18

是实施暴行的气氛
事情寻常得
像当总统一样

一股烟升起，远处也能看见
人们在其中燃烧。

19

如今直升飞机里那漫不经心的愿望

骇人听闻

处在高处的疯狂
如果这是真的，我们必须做这些事情
我们必须割开我们的喉咙

瓶子里的苍蝇

疯狂，疯狂的苍蝇

它，在城市上方
是失事船只上明亮的灯光

20

——他们等待着
战争，听到的都是战争的消息

一如既往

活力或许流淌在他们身体里
尽管不能依靠这活力

在这个世界上
发生了许多重大的事情，它们让这个世界有了历史，行走着的
军队和衣衫褴褛的人群，那一种死亡才具有的
激情。可是谁逃过了
死亡

在这些坐地铁的
人中间，

现在他们和我一样
都知道

失败和失败产生的
愧疚感。
如同哈代为圣诞创作的诗歌里说的那样

我们可能抱着一半的希望找寻着一个国家
它棚屋下的牲畜
在午夜屈膝而跪，

耕庄稼的牲畜
干重活的牲畜，用来屠宰的畜牲
因为这意味着他们已经将我们忘记
或者我们都无足轻重，
二者其实是一回事情。

21

在砖砌的墙上
会有一块砖
眼睛挑选了出来

多么安静的一个星期天
这儿有这么一块砖，你生下来的时候
它就在这里等待

玛丽-安。

22

清晰

从一目了然的意义上讲
我不是说大多数都能解释得清楚。

是从沉默意义上讲的清晰。

23

“一半是自由自在
一半是疯狂”
坐飞机到处度假的阔佬们已经到来。
四十年代的词汇
让位给捷特思特雷姆公司
还有媒体，姆斯汤牌轿车
和一桩桩交易
人们还会变。

在土壤底下
在看不见的压力里
大块的隆起，
物质的
本质
也在变化。

在二十四个房间里，
二十四个公寓
舞会过后
姑娘们
忙无目的地
盯着天花板，她们尽情享乐
然后上床睡觉。

24
在这个国家里
从某种意义上讲
是我们的家园。契约！

约定的是
各民族将共存。

25
奇怪的是我认识的最年轻的人
却住在最古老的建筑里

散布在城市各处
在过去的漆黑的
房间里——移民，

黑魆魆的
长方形的移民们住的
建筑。

他们是中产阶级人家的孩子。

“纯美国制造——”

花费了精力
这些古老的建筑
你推我挤

在这行将遗忘的事物中，那桩沉闷的事儿。
这堵中国墙。

26
用自暴自弃的方式
他们给本土的东西
做了一个结论。

我们想捍卫
限度
却不知道怎样捍卫。

诗人不应该在诗人圈子里过日子
只说这话的人
是愚蠢的。

他们失去了属于未来的
形而上的感觉能力，他们觉得自己
是所有生命之链的
终点，个体的生命
而我们知道生命
乃是个体的

无法捍卫
那形而上的部分
在那里保留着

我们之间距离的
界线
我们想说

“常识”
却不能。我们踞于对

死亡的拒绝
死亡曾为城市铺平道路，
为城市曾铺平了道路

一代
又一代，道路
像警察局的走廊一样
肮脏。

一个人如何了解一代人，新的一代人？
决不是看他们身上露水般剔透的东西！大地最为破碎
伤口无人料理，人声惶惑的地方
有些人在挪动的行列前头

如果他们找不到

属于他们的时代
便在医疗室里衰亡

而补给仓库，补给着
毫不相干的物品。

在晴朗的夜里
街灯一动不动地照在停放的轿车上

诚然，伟大的像矿石一样的宁静
颤动着，哼唱着，一个使自己日臻完整的过程

其中看得见的是
汽车风档的雨雪刷。

思想的力量
思想的
力量和分量
还不够，和大自然
相比

它不足挂齿，无能为力，
庞然大物，白鲸，野兽
他们会说，不如野兽，
这攸关生死的石头

是这个世界——

啊如果街道
看起来足够明亮
一褶一褶远去的住宅。。。

或者透过水
清楚地观看沙滩上的
石子儿
透过水，从细浪里
淌来，清晰
一如既往

27
现在很难谈论诗歌——

有的讲述了一些人，他们意识到自己的选择范围，有的则讲述了另一些人他们过的生活从生下来就没有变过——。准确地讲这不是深奥不深奥的问题，而是按不同顺序对待人生经历的问题。有的人会讲述人的一生中发生的事情，出现的各种各样的选择，对我们而言什么是世界，随着时间的推移世界都发生了什么，在人的一生中什么是思想，由此得出艺术是什么，以及现实事物的彼此孤立

我想谈论这些房间，谈论从房子里往外看见的东西，谈论地下室，粗糙的墙壁上有一个个框架留下的痕迹，水泥里木头的旧痕，那种我们所熟悉的孤寂——

还有打扫过的地板。有个人，身边像领着个工匠体会着自己身边那特殊的词语，就像声名狼藉的父辈扫过这孤独的地板，这深深地被藏起来的地板——那种我们所熟悉的孤寂。

一个人决不能感觉他手头有一千根长线，
他应该多少看见一样东西；
这是艺术的高度
还有其他很多的高度
但是艺术的高度只有这一个

28

合起来的书，紧闭的书，一页书贴着另一页
书页里透出的光
揭开新的一天，
日出前
这狭窄的，令人恐惧的光芒。

29

我的女儿，我的女儿，关于活着
我能说些什么？

我不能对它做出判断。

我们好像一起困在
现实里，我可爱的
女儿，

我有一个女儿
但已不再稚幼

准确地讲
我们给自己许诺过的
不全是幸福；

我们说幸福，幸福，并不
满足。

尽管在城市低洼的地方
那座房子

抓住了晨辉

我能告诉自己的，我告诉自己的
不过是我们都信以为真的
东西。

在时光
突然形成的空白里。。。

。。。难道
不是在恐惧中根紧紧向下

深攫
孕育出

令人困惑的父与子的
等级

如同叶子
在高高的细枝桠上它们蔽护着我们

远离时间，远离彼此敞开胸襟的
时间

30
小树林
在他们的屋子后头，在后院的走廊后头。
她有时步入林中
等待着鸟群和小鹿。

抬起头她看见枝桠上头
湛蓝而明亮的天空。
倘若一个人曾降生于此
他怎能相信这是真的？

31

因为已知和未知
相互接触，

有人见证——。
要是一个人这样想
他将变得高尚。

要是认识事物是高尚的

明晓这个道理将让人变得高尚。

32

只不过它应该是美丽的，
只不过它应该是美丽的，

哦，美丽

红绿蓝——湿润的嘴唇
笑着

或者白色贝壳上的螺旋

还有女人的美貌，皮肤底下
完美的肌腱，完美的生活

在横流的欲望面前也能
扭曲

不是真理而是彼此
鲜亮，鲜亮的皮肤，她的双手在她惊人的欲望面前
颤抖着

33

这欲望也是我们的，这欲望是我们自身，
这是我们的欢庆
崇高，悠久如同诚实的品质
永远照亮着我们的语言

34

像林中的风和行进队伍中的
铃声一样——

空气多轻啊
还有大地

孩子和草
在风中，还有男人和女人的说话声

在日光下久久地回荡

夹杂在微风一个个美丽的细节当中
人行道上被风吹散的那些文稿

“。。。一个女性特有的愿望，要把
最显眼不过的上帝藏在丛林中。。。”

显然，无穷无尽是这个世界上最清楚明白的事情

自己肩负每一份愚昧的重担
这就是女人的勇气吗

承载生命的
入侵者，年轻的女人们

承载着生命
臂腕没有人搀扶
在大街上，因为需要的太多且又琐碎
而变得虚弱

生命似乎依赖着女人们，她们肩负重担
绝望
一如既往

35

。。。或者准确地描述
除了拯救贫瘠以外
人还是什么，弄清楚
整座城市

在我们能再次面对

森林和大草原
之前。。。

36

尽管这世界
满是显而易见的东西，看到的
和不能预见的，
这些一个人不可能
看不到

这些有的人率先已经
看到了——

对于我们大家
还有每个
男人或者女人
知识
在跟前
尽管那可能是正午
本身的空虚

——连疯子们也只谈论阴谋
和说话的人——

如果头脑里的
那些路
不会中断

它不是这个世界的狂野的亮光
尽管人们在这个世界上消亡。

37

“。。。走近窗口似乎是想看看。。。”

百无聊赖 把一切都
吐露无遗——

我本该写写，不是十九世纪某一天的
雨，而是空中的
尘埃，灰尘

还在这里。

我们都争论了什么？我们做了些什么？

让空气更加浓重？

空气里弥漫着神话，不幸
和好运这样的词

在空中飘荡。。。

要“关注”它们？

不。

或者关注尘埃，一个铁罗网，条条纽带
连接着后果

依然，在大脑的一端
密切相关

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你将是最后一个
了解他的人
护士。

不是了解他
他是一个老人
一个病人，
人们怎么能了解他？

你将是最后一个
看到他
或者触摸他的人，
护士。

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发生了，既不是“为自己
也不是为真理”

令人感到遗憾和惊奇的万千事物

在最难以置信的环境里，
暴风雨或猛烈的轰炸里

或者一位上了年纪的老人住的房间里

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惠特曼：“一八六四年四月十九日
后来国会大厦逐渐博得了人们的喜爱，特别是而今人们在它顶部搭建了一座雄伟的雕像，你一眼就能清楚地看到它。那是一座宏伟的青铜雕像，我想是叫自由的护神吧。向晚的时候，它看起来美极了。我喜欢常去看看它。太阳快落下去的时候，光芒照在那头盔上，头盔耀眼而闪亮，宛若一颗巨大的星辰：它看起来

很奇怪。。。 ”