# JOSEPH NOBLE

## GEORGE OPPEN'S DISCRETE SERIES: THINGS AMONG OTHERS

George Oppen wrote his first book, *Discrete Series*, in the early 1930s, and it was published in 1934 with a foreword by Ezra Pound. The period preceding *Discrete Series* was one of personal and, to a certain extent, political discovery for George and Mary Oppen. They met at college in Corvallis, Oregon, but because they spent a night together, Mary was expelled and George was suspended. This was the beginning of their long relationship together and discovery of each other. Much of the early life of the Oppens was spent trying to achieve their own independence, especially from George's father and stepmother who were both wealthy. They spent time in San Francisco, George working in one of his father's theaters, but left to hitchhike cross-country when they found out George's father was due back in town. Of this period of discovery, Mary Oppen writes,

> We were in search of an esthetic within which to live, and we were looking for it in our own American roots, in our own country. We had learned at col-lege that poetry was being written in our own times, and that in order for us to write it was not necessary for us to ground ourselves in the academic; the ground we needed was the roads we were travelling. As we were new, so we had new roots, and we knew little of our own country. Hitchhiking became more than flight from a powerful family—our discoveries themselves became an esthetic and a disclosure. (68)

They ended up in Texas for a while, but when Mary became sick, they moved back to the San Francisco Bay area. George again worked in one of his father's theaters, but his father's world did not suit them, so they traveled cross-country again, hitchhiking to Detroit and then sailing via Lake Erie and the Erie Canal to New

York City. There they were exposed to avant-garde modernism and the poetry of Pound, Williams, Zukofsky, and Reznikoff. They met and became friends with the latter three. After another year in San Francisco, the Oppens went to France where they lived from 1929 to 1932. In Europe, they met Pound and other writers and artists. But besides their artistic consciousness, they were also discovering their political consciousness: "We had visited Ezra Pound and heard him speak of Mussolini as 'The Boss'; we had been alerted to the dangers of fascism when we saw Jews fleeing Hitler's Germany, and we had been present at a fascist demonstration in Italy" (Mary Oppen 150).

*Discrete Series* is a book very much influenced by the imagist and modernist aesthetic of Pound, and also the poetry of Williams, Zukofsky, and Reznikoff. Parataxis and ellipsis are the order of the day in the book, written in a lean, sinewy style. There is a fresh and sparkling quality to the images found in the series. The book is one of discovery; in it, in nascent form, we find many of the concerns Oppen was to think and write about for the rest of his life: technology, modern urban life, social milieux, and, above all, relationships, whether between person and person, person and world, or person and self. Mary Oppen writes of the importance of their relationship and how the "strength of our intelligences, our passions and our sensibilities [were] multiplied by living our lives together." With George, she encountered a "world in which I would find conversation, ideas, poetry, peers" (65), echoing his own statement that "I mean to be part of a conversation among honest people" (*Selected Letters* 55). *Discrete Series* is the literary beginning of this conversation.

The title of *Discrete Series* is significant for the type of poetry Oppen was to write throughout his life and for the points I will be trying to make about his work. Let us first examine two statements he made about this work and its title, the first taken from his unpublished papers and subsequently printed in *Ironwood*, the second taken from his interview with L. S. Dembo.

> Each term of a purely mathematical series is derived by a rule or a convention from the preceding term. A discrete series, to the mathematician, is a series of which each term is empirically true. The problem of poetry, circa 1929–1933, was, I thought, the problem of honesty and of intelligence: and to construct *meaning*, an adequate vision. ("Adequate" 31)

> My book, of course, was called *Discrete Series*. That's a phrase in mathematics. A pure mathematical series would be one in which each term is derived from the preceding term by a rule. A discrete series is a series of terms each of which is empirically derived, each one of which is empirically true. And this is the reason for the fragmentary character of those poems. I was attempting to construct a meaning by empirical statements, by imagist statements. (174)

Both passages define what a discrete series is for Oppen: a series where each term is not derived from the preceding one but rather is empirically derived or true. Here we find that impulse in Oppen's work of "letting-be," of treating each thing as a discrete being. This way of treating things is described as "honest" and "true" and is connected to technique, to constructing meaning by empirical and imagist statements, so that, in Poundian terms, we see "technique as the test of a man's sincerity" (Pound 9). But what's more, technique becomes "an adequate vision," a way of looking at and talking about things, a metaphysics. "I'm trying to describe how the test of images can be a test of whether one's thought is valid" (Interview 175). The technique, the images, become the means of testing not only our sincerity but also our thought, our metaphysics.

Yet even if a discrete series is a group of discrete elements that are not derived from preceding elements, a series of any kind is still a grouping of things related in some way, even if it is by the fact that none is derived from the other, by the fact of their difference. This kind of grouping can be seen as similar to Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of community where beings are defined by difference and finitude, or even, for that matter, to Sassure's notion of language where each word is defined by what it is not. Nancy says that

> Community is revealed in the death of others; hence it is always revealed to others. Community is what takes place always through others and for others. It is not the space of the *egos*—subjects and substances that are at bottom immortal—but of the *I*'s, who are always *others* (or else are nothing). . . . It is not a communion that fuses the *egos* into an *Ego* or a higher *We*. It is the community of *others*. (15)

There is no fusion in community, and the only bond that we can know is the one of our finite, multiple existences existing in common

through our finitude. "Being *in* common has nothing to do with
communion, with fusion into a body, into a unique and ultimate
identity that would no longer be exposed. Being *in* common means,
to the contrary, *no longer having, in any form, in any empirical or
ideal place, such a substantial identity, and sharing this* (narcissistic)
'*lack of identity.*' This is what philosophy calls 'finitude'" (xxxviii).[1]
Nancy's idea of community might also be compared to Oppen's
"conversation" among honest people.

The notion of discreteness is seen not just in the way the individ-
ual poems of *Discrete Series* are grouped, but also in the nature of
Oppen's use of language itself in the poems, a modus operandi that
was to be with him throughout his career. The words and phrases
themselves, as we shall see, become discrete quantities placed one
beside the other in paratactic manner. This is part of his self-avowed
nominalistic sensibility. In addressing L. S. Dembo's observation that
*Discrete Series* seemed cubist in approach, Oppen says,

> I'm really not sure what troubles the cubists had, but I had trouble with syn-
> tax in this undertaking and, as a matter of fact, I still have trouble with verbs.
> It's not exactly trouble; I just didn't want to put it too pretentiously. I'm really
> concerned with the substantive, with the subject of the sentence, with what
> we are talking about, and not rushing over the subject-matter in order to
> make a comment about it. It is still a principle with me, of more than poetry,
> to notice, to state, to lay down the substantive for its own sake. I don't know
> whether that's clear. (Interview 174)

So there is a technique in Oppen's poetry of setting poems, syntacti-
cal groupings, and even just nouns, side by side, of letting them coex-
ist, of letting-them-be separately together. As Dembo puts it nicely,
things are "joined mosaically rather than integrated organically"
(174). Oppen's technique, therefore, is the palpable dramatization of
his metaphysics, of his thought, a "principle" with him "of more than
poetry . . . to lay down the substantive," the thingness of the thing,
"for its own sake," so that he shares Heidegger's marveling at the fact
that things that are *are*. Yet Oppen is also attempting to dramatize not
just metaphysics, but also experience, the experience of encounter-
ing each thing in the world, one by one, on its own terms: "I was,
even in 1929 (discrete series) consciously attempting to trace, to re-
produce, the act of the world upon consciousness" ("Adequate" 30).

However, this last quotation also reveals a tension in Oppen's work between presenting the thing and presenting our experience of the thing, between what he called the "figures of perception" and the "figures of elocution" (*Selected Letters* 81).

Looking at the first poem of *Discrete Series*, we find a character named Maude separated from the world by a window through which she looks at the world, in order to find out, as the poem says, what is "really" going on. In the very first poem, a subject–world relationship is established, but not one characterized by subject–object relations because, though Maude is depicted looking at the rain, road, and world, it seems to me that she is not objectivizing them since equals, rather than nonequals, "share." I quote the poem in its entirety:

> The knowledge not of sorrow, you were
>     saying, but of boredom
> Is——aside from reading speaking
>     smoking——
> Of what, Maude Blessingbourne it was,
>     wished to know when, having risen,
> "approached the window as if to see
>     what really was going on";
> And saw rain falling, in the distance
>     more slowly,
> The road clear from her past the window-
>     glass—
> Of the world, weather-swept, with which
>     one shares the century.
>         (*Complete Poems* 3; *New Collected Poems* 5)

Neither Maude nor the world dominates the other; both occupy and share the same time. Time, of course, brings in the notion of beginnings and endings, of mortality, of finitude, and here we see in this concept of sharing time a connection with Nancy's notion of the sharing of finitude.

But Maude is not the only character in the poem. Who is the "you" addressed in the first line? We're not sure who it is (possibly it's Mary Oppen), but what is more important is this action of immediately setting up a relationship with another in the very first line of his first book.[2] So we can observe three people in the poem: the speaker, the "you," and Maude. Maude is simply a character in a story by

Henry James that the speaker uses in this passage addressed to some-one else. But who's saying what here? "The knowledge not of sorrow, *you* were / saying." So is the whole poem simply a retelling by the speaker of what the "you" has said, trying to clarify it by repeating and rephrasing it? Is the whole poem a quote of sorts? Or is the speaker merely reiterating at the beginning of the poem the type of knowledge the "you" had spoken of, that not of sorrow but of bore-dom, and going on himself from there to develop the topic from line three, "Is—aside from", through the end of the poem? We can't really know this since the information we are given isn't detailed in that way. Yet the way in which the poem is detailed is significant in that it shows us how, in a conversation between two people, the lines become blurred as to who exactly comes up with what thought, how a symbi-otic weaving together of thoughts takes place between collocutors.

Yet there is not just a relationship set up between the speaker and the "you"; there is also a correspondence and relationship set up between the "you" and Maude: they both wish to know the same knowledge. An interesting aspect of the poem is that we actually know more basic, quotidian facts about Maude than we do about the two collocutors. Yet there is an additional fourth presence here: Henry James. Maude Blessingbourne and the paraphrased line in quotes are taken from James's story titled, significantly enough, "The Story in It." Here we see Oppen making a connection with an older writer established in the tradition already, as if Oppen were picking up the thread of a conversation, so to speak, as if Henry James were the "you" who was "saying." This is a more literary version of that establishing of a dialogue with a community of co-respondents that Oppen talks about later in his career, more than twenty-five years later, in some of his letters. This also begins a practice of quoting from others in his poems that continues throughout his career, mak-ing his poetry very much a "part of a conversation among honest peo-ple" (*Selected Letters* 55). Rachel Blau DuPlessis refers to Maude's approaching and looking out the window as "a talismanic gesture for Oppen" (*Selected Letters* 408n15). This gesture demonstrates a kind of Heideggerian transcendence, a standing apart from something in order to understand it, yet I would also say that the gesture of quot-ing from another and bringing that person and his ideas into the con-versation is also a talismanic one for Oppen.

But to return to Maude, Oppen writes that "Heidegger's statement that in the mood of boredom the existence of what-is is disclosed, is my Maude Blessingbourne in *Discrete Series* . . . who in 'boredom' looks out the window and sees 'the world, weather-swept, with which/one shares the century'" ("Adequate" 14–15). Yet there is also something in Maude's gesture of Heidegger's notion of *Verfallen* where we find "Dasein . . . entirely concerned and occupied with the 'world' of its care . . . lost itself in the publicity of the 'one like many' and in the 'world' which belongs to its Being" (*Existence* 42). So the *Verfallen* has a double edge to it. On the one hand, boredom with this world helps one disclose or reveal this world again to oneself, is the agent that helps one see more clearly the world, one's relationship with it, and the sharing of that relationship. The "reading speaking / smoking" are things about which Maude seems to want to know. Possibly, they are activities, meditative or participatory, that are looked on as revealing the world. But on the other hand, the "reading speaking / smoking" could also be symptoms of the uninstructive side of the boredom, activities, investigative as they may be, that are designed to counteract the boredom and keep one occupied, and which are still part of the "care" of one's world. The preoccupation that these activities exert can be seen in the fact that there are no commas between the three words, so that the reader gets a sense of one activity leading into another. This latter interpretation of "reading speaking / smoking" would pose these activities as simply more symptoms of the *Verfallen*, of the self lost in the activity and "sorrow" of the world, rather than as activities that help reveal the world to us.

I would not have put so much importance upon the window glass were it not for the fact that this image appears a number of times in other Oppen poems. In this poem, Maude stands in a room, separated from the world by the walls of the house and, most importantly here, the window glass. What is a window but something man-made that we have invented to protect ourselves from the "weather-swept" world while at the same time allowing ourselves to see it? It is a part of our technology, in Heidegger's terms, a *zuhanden*, part of our world of care that, while separating us from the world and even enabling a subject–object relationship, a gaze upon the world, at the same time helps us to see the world with which we share the century.

The figure of the window is even mirrored in the grammar of the poem. A semicolon occurs in the middle of the poem and syntactically separates Maude from what she sees, like the window. It also acts as a syntactic pause, a stasis, the space, the silence, between the looking and the seeing.

Looking at other grammatical and syntactical elements of the poem, we can ask, What of the dashes and the incompleteness of the last phrases? The last dash seems to allow the last phrases to function as summations of the two preceding lines (in my reading here, I am dividing the poem up into seven long lines that fit on two lines each, rather than as fourteen separate lines). The incompleteness and syntactical surprise of the last line makes it come across like a flash of realization. Also, the dash connects with the two dashes that occur earlier in the poem and allows us to connect these last phrases with the first ones: "The knowledge not of sorrow, you were / saying, but of boredom / Is—— . . . / Of the world, weather-swept, with which / one shares the century." This knowledge that we get through boredom is a knowledge of the world, in other words, a knowledge gleaned from the world, and it is also a knowledge *about* the world. And it is the knowledge that we share our century, our time, with this world, combining both time and space here. In fact, a certain portion of the poem seems to be a kind of suspension, a metacognitive stasis of realization characterized by the figures of elocution, as opposed to many of the other poems in the series that operate more in the midst of an engagement with the world and are characterized more by the figures of perception. And if we use the dashes to elide the material between "Is——" and "—— / Of the world," we break the poem up into a semantic organization where the "meta" material, the material that discusses, that is knowledge *about* the world, bookends at the beginning and end of the poem the middle material that talks about what actually is going on in the world. Here we see dramatized in the organization of the first poem of *Discrete Series* the suspension of the figures both of perception and of elocution.

Many of the poems in *Discrete Series* that follow this first one dramatize Oppen's notion of discreteness; in imagist fashion, they give us pictures and experiences of the world of the 1920s and early 1930s. In the second poem (*Complete Poems* 3; *New Collected Poems* 6), numbered "1" and the first of a pair with the poem that follows it,

we find a cubist picture of an elevator. The poem moves carefully and methodically, if in abstract manner, through a description of the inside of an elevator from the handle that controls the elevator to the floor. It's almost exclusively a picture of a piece of modern technology. The lever that controls the elevator moves around the numbers of the building floors, the "fixed / Alternatives," an interesting phrase that combines both choice and lack of choice. And though the poem seems to be ostensively "objective" in the presentation of its material, there seems to be an implicit value system at work. The "stone floor" at the end of the poem seems to ground and weigh things down, but not necessarily in a negative sense since it is described as "quiet" rather than, say, as soundless, a word that qualitatively subtracts. An implicit solidity and dignity seem to characterize the description and placement of the stone floor in the poem. Also, though it still had to be quarried and placed in the elevator or building (it's unclear of which one this is the floor), the stone floor is the only thing with any nonmechanical qualities. Whereas the elevator "arm" is described not even as steel or metal but rather more geometrically and mechanically as

> White.    From the
> Under arm of T
>
> The red globe.
>
> Up
> Down.

the floor is described as "quiet" and made of "Stone."

This implicit opposition in poem two between the mechanical and the natural, with some valorizing of the latter, becomes much more explicit in the next poem (*Complete Poems* 4; *New Collected Poems* 7), which is numbered "2." In this third poem of *Discrete Series*, twentieth-century "big-Business" is seen as being prudish because it "Hides the // Parts" of its machinery. In addition, our actions in working with this machinery, "soda-jerking," are described as prudish. Oppen uses an interesting sense of obscenity here. In this poem, something is prudish when it removes itself from the sphere

its actions effect; "big-Business" is prudish because it doesn't want to dirty itself by getting too close to the common life its actions control.

We encounter three types of removal in poem three. First, we see the removal of the parts of the machinery from view. Second, we witness a removal of man through his own tools from a certain type of act and a certain way of being; "soda-jerking" with the machinery of "Frigidaire" is seen as removing us from the "private act // Of / Cracking eggs." This situation has some connections to the one Heidegger describes when commenting upon the concepts of nearness and remoteness in the modern world. With modern technology, the world is supposedly growing closer together, things are supposedly becoming nearer, but actually there is only a flattening of distance:

> What is least remote from us in point of distance, by virtue of its picture on film or its sound on the radio, can remain far from us. What is incalculably far from us in point of distance can be near to us. Short distance is not in itself nearness. Nor is great distance remoteness. . . . Today everything present is equally near and equally far. The distanceless prevails. But no abridging or abolishing of distances brings nearness. (*Poetry* 165, 177)

But true nearness also preserves and respects what is far as being far: "Nearness brings near—draws nigh to one another—the far and, indeed, *as* the far. Nearness preserves farness" (177–78). For Heidegger, the technology of modern communications brings about a leveling of distance, a "dominance of the distanceless" (181). For him, nearness is inextricably wrapped up with the thing as thing. The world is brought nearer to us truly when we realize the thing as thing and not as object; the thing as thing presences and nears the world to us. "If we think of the thing as thing, then we spare and protect the thing's presence in the region from which it presences. Thinging is the nearing of the world" (181). Through recognizing the thingness of things, we come nearer to the world. For Heidegger, the essential nature of the thing can even be seen in the etymology of the word *thing*, in the older meaning of the word as "gathering, and specifically a gathering to deliberate on a matter under discussion, a contested matter" (174). "The thing things. Thinging gathers. Appropriating the fourfold [earth, sky, mortals, divinities], it gathers the fourfold's stay, its while, into something that stays for a while: into this thing, that thing" (174). So, the particular nature of each

thing manifests the nature of the world, but only through each thing's own particularity and in its own particular way.

It is interesting to see how the thing itself becomes a site for dialogue, an aspect that is even exhibited in its etymological meaning, between man and the world. But for Heidegger, science makes things into nonentities through its type of objectifying: "Science always encounters only what *its* kind of representation has admitted beforehand as an object possible for science" (*Poetry* 170). Objects in science are always at the service of man and exist only by means of a very narrow definition. Though the situations that Oppen and Heidegger are talking about are very different in many ways, each situation shows a technology designed to help man as actually creating distance between himself and what he is connected to, one by creating the illusion of nearness, which only heightens the remoteness of what is supposedly brought closer, and the other by removing one from one's own private acts. Also, both scenarios show skepticism towards, in Heidegger's case, the advancements of science and, in Oppen's case, technology.

Jean-Luc Nancy's space of community is also applicable to the discussion here. When dealing with other beings, there will always be the distance of separation that comes from finitude, a difference that marks distance. Nancy speaks of "the modern experience of community as neither a work to be produced, nor a lost communion, but rather as space itself, and the spacing of the experience of the outside, of the outside-of-self" (19). Through difference, community creates space. Being-in-common does not mean that all are united in one, but, as Heidegger says, "Nearness brings near—draws nigh to one another—the far and, indeed, *as* the far. Nearness preserves farness" (*Poetry* 177–78). In community, distance and difference are both preserved in the space of being-in-common. The tension between being-in-common and separation that we saw in Heidegger's "thing" gathering and manifesting the world through the thing's own particularity is articulated with a somewhat different emphasis by Nancy:

> [T]he mode of existence and appropriation of a "self" (which is not necessarily, nor exclusively, an individual) is the mode of an exposition in common and to the in-common, and . . . this exposition exposes the self even in its "in

itself," in its "ipseity," and in its own distinctiveness, in its isolation or in its solitude. Only a being-in-common can make possible a being-separated. (xxxvii)

Another contrast between the "soda-jerking" and the "private act // Of / Cracking eggs" will throw some light on this discussion of distance and connect it with the concerns of the poem at hand. The contrast I am speaking of is that between the uniformly mechanical and the idiosyncratically human. Oppen does adopt a humanist ethos in his poetry at times. The act of soda-jerking is seen as always being the same while cracking eggs is different every time, humanized because of each act's difference and imperfections, all plain to the eye since the parts of its action are not hidden. The irony is that though cracking eggs is a "private" act, all of its motions are easily seen, whereas the public act of soda-jerking hides the parts and motions of its machinery. In addition, the idiosyncratic act of cracking eggs opens up a "private" space in the public sphere of the "Plane of lunch, of wives." The act creates its own difference, its own separation, but not a separation like that of "big-Business," above and away from the public sphere, but a separation, among other separate acts and beings, within the public sphere. "Only a being-in-common can make possible a being-separated."

But this removal of Frigidaire, of "big-Business," to a place "Above the // Plane of lunch, of wives" is a third and more insidious type of removal. The "Plane of lunch, of wives" and of "the private act // Of / Cracking eggs" is opposed to the prudery, not because of shame, but more because of "Business" and the remoteness of "big-Business" and its machinery, which in turn institutes a removal of man from closer contact with his world. Dwelling in close contact with one's world, one is inevitably, as they say, going to crack some eggs. "Big-Business" and its machinery are portrayed as wanting to smooth over these cracks and establish *its* domain, rather than the domain of each of the world's beings. The poem, and indeed *Discrete Series* in general, mimetically dramatizes the struggle against this leveling of the world by reinserting the cracks through the use of jagged line endings. In addition, the structure of the poem emphasizes the inaccessible remoteness of "big-Business" since, by suspending the identity of the agent of the state of things described in the poem until the very

end, the structure becomes a grammatical dramatization of the removal of that agent from the state of things it has itself created. "Big-Business," whose technology has removed man from his actions, also removes itself from the world of common, everyday interaction that goes on in places like diners, removes itself perhaps to the top of the elevator shaft depicted in poem two. "Big-Business" is morally indicted by Oppen not only for separating man from his actions, but also for removing itself from the scene of that alienation, and thereby from any implication in or connection to that alienation.

A way, already hinted at, in which poems two and three are connected and parallel is in the way they end. Both end on what can be seen as a ground of the things depicted in the poems. The stone floor in poem two can be read as the ground floor of the building in which the elevator operates; here the ground is a simple physical fact. But in poem three, "big-Business" is the socioeconomic ground from which springs the activities that are depicted there. The irony, of course, is that in poem two the physical ground base is located where a ground usually is, in this case, in the floor, whereas in poem three part of Oppen's condemnation of "big-Business" is the fact that it is a ground base removed from and above its area of concern, pulling the strings of people and activities with which it has no actual contact. In poem three, "big-Business" is a kind of reversed, negative ground.

An interesting tension exists in these two coupled poems between, on the one hand, the attempt on the poet's part to be imagistically removed, seen more strongly in the first poem of the pair, and, on the other hand, the ethical involvement and commitment implicit in the value-laden condemnation of "big-Business" in the second of the paired poems. This dramatizes Oppen's ambivalent attitude towards technology and, indeed, toward civilization itself and its man-made, or *zuhanden*, implements, or at the very least the way in which they are used. This is one of the main tensions in Oppen's poetry, and it is seen again in the fourth poem (*Complete Poems* 4; *New Collected Poems* 8) of the series in the lines: "Nothing can equal in polish and obscured / origin that dark instrument / A car." On the one hand, Oppen has the modernist's fascination with technology and, at the very least, the imagist's desire and impulse to let things be and

attempt to depict them with the least amount of metacognition. *Discrete Series* contains many imagist and cubist passages with isolated, sharp images so obscurely abstract that we don't know exactly what Oppen is describing unless we come upon his gloss in an interview or some of his manuscript pages. This is part of Oppen's sense of wonder that what-is *is*, which is part of the realization that what-is is ultimately impenetrable. Talking to L. S. Dembo about the world, he says,

> Ultimately, it's impenetrable. At any given time the explanation of something will be the name of something unknown. We have a kind of feeling—I described doubts about it—but we have a kind of feeling that the absolutely unitary is somehow absolute, that, at any rate, it really exists. It's been the feeling always that that which is absolutely single really does exist —the atom, for example. That particle of matter, when you get to it, is absolutely impenetrable, absolutely inexplicable. If it's not, we'll find something else which is inexplicable. (Interview 176)

The qualification at the end is important: it's not so much the case that the thing examined actually is impenetrable and absolutely single; it's more the case that we somehow need to have something that we think and feel is impenetrable and inexplicable, something, maybe, that is blocked off and resistant to our ministrations, that will hit us smack in the face with its otherness and that almost cries out for imagist treatment, for the use of the figures of perception. Yet, on the other hand, the figures of elocution are already evident in Oppen's strong ideological, political, ethical, and philosophical standpoints that influence the way in which he uses his clear, sharp-edged images.

In fact, this tension between the two figures is seen again in poem nine (*Complete Poems* 6; *New Collected Poems* 13), which also discusses a car. This poem is quintessential objectivist rumination, starting from imagist description that focuses almost exclusively on the car, but moving further to a more philosophical and ethical evaluation. The car is described at rest as a "Closed car—closed in glass— / . . . Unapplied and empty." Though the words *closed*, *Unapplied*, and *empty* might be interpreted as loaded with a kind of condemnation, in these first six lines of the poem they can simply be seen as neutral: the car doors are closed, and no one is sitting in the car or

driving it. The car is simply "A thing among others / Over which clouds pass and the / alteration of lighting."

However, the last seven lines throw a different light on this first half of the poem. Now we learn that the car is an "overstatement," more than needs to be said, certainly not a positive attribute for a writer like Oppen who prizes economy and understatement. I think we can be fairly certain that it is the car that is an overstatement, not the lighting, since most of the poem is in apposition to the car. But the next statement exhibits the inscrutability that Oppen's writing can sometimes have. The car is an overstatement that is "Hardly an exterior." This might make more sense in the light of the rest of the poem and Oppen's comments themselves on this poem. In the rest of the poem, we learn that when the car is moving it is "less strange," possibly because it is then seen as actively having some purpose and use. But there is still a qualification: "Tho the face, still within it" sits surrounded by the car's glass. Though this is a moving car, it is seen as a "place, over which / time passes" like the alternating light in lines five and six. There is obviously some irony in the fact that the moving car is seen as a place over which time passes, or, to put it another way, which time passes by. What is going on here can be illuminated further by Oppen's comments on this poem to Dembo in which he describes his sense of the car having "a feeling of something false in overprotection and over-luxury—my idea of categories of realness" (Interview 181). Since the car is a kind of overprotected cocoon, closed on all sides by glass, there is, as in poem three, a sense of removal again here, a stasis out of time, a stillness though the car is moving. "I felt that somehow it was unreal and I said so—the light inside that car. . . . The car . . . is detached from emotion, from use, from necessity—from everything except the most unconscionable of the emotions" (180–81). Even the word "detached" here echoes the removal we found in poem three. And what seems to be "unconscionable" to Oppen is this removal from engagement through a desire for "overprotection and over-luxury." The car's light, therefore, the light inside the overprotection and luxury of the car, is seen as a false light, as opposed to the "lighting" of the sun in line six, which alternates and, consequently, moves and changes. The dynamic dimension of the sun's light can even be seen in the more active verbal form of "lighting" as opposed to the more static "light."

Now we can go back to that inscrutable line, "Hardly an exterior," and make a little more sense out of it. The car is an "overstatement," which goes along with the sense of its overprotection and overluxury: it is too much in excess, which for Oppen seems to be a kind of obscenity. However, though it is an "*over*statement," the car is "Hardly an exterior"; though it is in excess, is *over*, in so many ways, it is not *overt*; it does not place itself out in the world as an exterior. In fact it is the overluxurious and overprotected *interior* that the car's being seems to stress. And, again, one of the important facets of the car is that it removes the person from his reality, whether that reality be one of "emotion" or "use" or "necessity." Once again, we have a piece of man's technology coming between him and both his world and himself. In this way, Oppen is much more skeptical when it comes to technology than William Carlos Williams, and more in line with the ethics of someone like Wordsworth. Williams too has many poems in which cars figure, but for him cars become vehicles of the poetic process, a new way of observing the world, a moving, modern, technological vantage point.

But to return to Oppen, we see in this poem three things that he objects to: excess, removal, and stasis. Through its excesses of over-protection and overluxury, the car removes the person from the world, both physically and metaphysically, and through this removal creates a stasis in which the person exists metaphysically, though physically he is moving, or, more accurately, the car is moving with him "*still* within it" (emphasis mine). In this poem and in poem three, Oppen seems to be arguing for a way of being in the world that is one of engagement, on the "Plane of lunch, of wives," and on the unluxurious street.

We have also seen how, though this poem starts out as a seemingly neutral imagist poem, it moves on to the larger philosophical and ethical ramifications of the "thing" Oppen is describing. Respecting "things" for what they are does not necessarily mean having no quar-rel with them; it means looking at them for what they are and what they do and grappling with that which is their nature at that time.

Poem ten (*Complete Poems* 7; *New Collected Poems* 14) depicts, for most of the poem, a man at work in a steam shovel, giving us a picture of man and technology interacting. Oppen represents this relationship

as one of action–reaction; the man slides levers, and the parts of the machinery "Remotely respond to the gesture before last / Of his arms fingers continually—." It's hard to assess the poem's attitude towards the machinery here. It is seen as responding to the man's gestures, so man and machine are cooperating and working together, but the man is controlling the machine, moving the levers that move the "running cable." The machinery responds, but it responds "Remotely" and to the "gesture before last," rather than to the man's immediate gesture, so that the machine's motions are seen as something of a stuttering echo of the man's gestures. Hence there is a little slippage; the two don't necessarily work seamlessly together. On the other hand, certain elements in the poem do seem to suggest a cooperation between man and machine, such as the way the verb *Lift* is used in line eight: who exactly is doing the lifting here, the man or the steam shovel? Certainly, in some sense, both. And there are the opening lines: "Who comes is occupied / Toward the chest." Who is the "Who" here: man, machine, or the two moving and working together? In an interview with L. S. Dembo conducted at the same time as the one included in *The Contemporary Writer* but published later in *George Oppen: Man and Poet*, Dembo comments how "this poem is written very 'discretely,'" and Oppen says that the poem is "a sort of 'montage,' because there's just the city and I'm jumping around like the fashionable camera of that time" ("Oppen on His Poems" 201). In this reading, the first four lines are distinct from the middle section on the man and steam shovel, and describe "simply a crowd of men coming straight towards you, a stranger, trying to get the experience of a city" (200). Oppen's own explanation of these first four lines points out one of the first instances of the singular–numerous dichotomy to occur in his poetry, that of the "Who" in the "crowd."

Yet if we read the "Who" as being the man in the steam shovel, we hook up again with the man–machine interrelationship. The elliptical and confusing nature of the poem does I think allow for confusion concerning who the "Who" is and certainly for alternate readings.[3] The shovel operator is part of a "crowd" opposite to the speaker, most probably standing out and above in his construction vehicle. The man in the steam-shovel cab coming toward the

speaker is "occupied" with his work, and the main part of his activity
takes place "Toward the chest" where his arms move the levers. Yet
since it is the man who is occupying the steam-shovel cab, the shovel
can then be seen as being "occupied." Or is the machine here
anthropomorphized, seen as a "Who," maybe because of its close
relationship with the man, responding to and becoming part of his
gestures, even taking on human physical characteristics, so that the
cab is looked at as if it were the machine's chest? And the man and
the machine do play off each other and cooperate, if somewhat
jaggedly, so that not only did the steam shovel respond to the man,
but when it turned, the man also "Turned with the cab." And the
form of the poem itself dramatizes the interweaving of the two's
actions. The sentence that forms lines five to eleven shows the mate-
rial of the poem concerned with the man ("In firm overalls / The
middle-aged man sliding / Lever in the steam-shovel cab" [5–7] ". . .
Turned with the cab" [11]) before and after the material about the
steam shovel (8–10). Do the outer lines determine the meaning of
the inner lines, or vice versa? Who is pulling the levers here? Yet I
again must point out that the concepts of removal and separation
found in poem three recur here in the steam shovel's "[r]emote[]"
responding to and echoing of the man's gestures.

    And then what are we to make of the poem's ending? In the last
five lines, we find the edge of the asphalt, a horse, and a streetcar
with its electric flash. How do these lines affect and comment upon
the preceding? "The asphalt edge" is "Loose on the plateau"; crum-
bling perhaps, or simply torn up because of the construction going
on that the steam shovel is a part of? The fact that the "Horse's clas-
sic height" is "cartless" is contrasted with the streetcar moving by.
How do we take this? Are we meant to mourn the horse's "cartless"
situation, seeing it now as cast off because of the streetcar's advent on
the scene in an "electric flash"? Or is the horse able to reach its "clas-
sic height" because of its newfound freedom from the drudgery of
carting around people and goods? Is it now, in a certain sense, free
to be "Loose on the plateau"? In this poem, the attitude toward tech-
nology and its changes seems much more ambivalent than in poem
three. A change has occurred in the life depicted here, but the poem
does not seem to come down in favor of one side or the other. "The
fall is falling from electric burst" ostensibly refers to the sparks falling

from the "electric flash of streetcar," but the fall of the world of the horse also comes from that same "electric burst." So how are we to regard the ambivalent position towards technology that the poem takes? Is this contradicting the position taken in poem three, is it simply a different attitude towards a different piece of machinery, or is it simply another position or point of view that the series exhibits, especially given the fact that this is a *discrete* series? This latter option seems to make the most sense, and though this polyphony of viewpoints will be spelled out more explicitly in one of the two poems at the end of the series that deals directly with the activity of writing, poem ten already shows us how the series in practice allows many differing views to exist side by side, without each necessarily contradicting or growing out of the others.

This poetics of polyphony through which *Discrete Series* operates can be paralleled with what Christopher Fynsk has to say about Nancy's notions of communication and *logos* in community:

> The *logos* accedes to its essence and thereby "speaks" (as the speech of essence) in singular acts of speaking that divide it out irreducibly. . . [T]he *logos* of the community exists only in its communication, in the singular acts by which Dasein sets out difference in the accomplishment of its freedom. Every free act communicates or "speaks" in that it answers to the *logos*. And insofar as Dasein *is* in and by the free acts in which it defines its being (each time, and each time differently—but always in relation), we may say that when Dasein communicates, when it "says" or articulates difference, it communicates itself. It communicates itself as an opening to alterity. This is the always singular, always different opening of the *logos*. (xxii–xxiii)

The relationship here between the self and the other, where "when Dasein communicates, when it 'says' or articulates difference, it communicates itself," echoes a paraphrase of Maritain with which Oppen prefaces his second volume of poems, *The Materials*: "We awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things" (*Complete Poems* 16; *New Collected Poems* 38). The only way we know ourselves is through difference and the other. And through its polyphony of viewpoints, *Discrete Series* "communicates itself as a opening to alterity."

Poem eleven, "Party on Shipboard" (*Complete Poems* 8; *New Collected Poems* 15), deals with the sea, as do many of Oppen's poems,

not just in this series but throughout his entire oeuvre. This poem depicts both humans and the sea, their relations with one another, and how one sheds light on the other. "Party on Shipboard" treats the sea and the people on board interchangeably, putting parts and qualities of one in place of the other. This modus operandi starts immediately with the first line: "Wave in the round of the port-hole." At first, one can take the wave to be of the sea, seen as one looks out of the porthole. It is seen to be active, in that it "Springs," and momentary, in that it is "passing." But then we receive one of Oppen's classic dashes: "—arm waved." So now the wave has crossed boundaries from sea to man and become the wave of an arm. The wave is both part of the "Party on Shipboard" and part of the sea that causes some in the party to be "unbalanced by the motion." So an identification between the people and the sea is played out dramatically in the poem's tropes even before Oppen declares that the shipboard people are "Like the sea incapable of contact / Save in incidents."

*Incident* is an interesting word choice here because of its ambiguity. On the one hand, the word can mean a separate unit of experience, an occurrence, which would be seen as very much in line with the whole nature of the *discrete* series. Along with this, there is the meaning of incident as a chance occurrence. The word also carries overtones of gravity and violence, when an incident leads to serious consequences, as in "border incident," or of something out of the ordinary or conspicuous, as in "creating an incident." In addition, *incident* can connote relation, as of an incident occurring casually in connection with something else, sometimes in minor capacity. And something can be thought of as incident or dependent on something else. Etymologically, *incident* comes from the Latin *incidere*, which means "to fall into" or "befall" and itself comes from *in + cadere*, which means "to fall." The overtones of falling connected with the word "incident" echo the last line of the previous poem, "The fall is falling from electric burst," adding, through a kind of reverse gloss, a dimension of chance to that earlier line.

This tension between the discrete and the related, seen in "Party on Shipboard" in the word *incident*, operates on the levels of both the people and things involved in the incidents and the incidents themselves. "[T]he sea is not / water," something "Homogeneously

automatic," but is made up of many, momentarily existing waves: "a green capped / white is momentarily a half mile / out—." The people on shipboard too are seen as isolated and capable of coming together only by chance or force, possibly even only by the physical force of the sea whose motions may catch them momentarily "unbalanced." Both are incapable of contact save in incidents. But as with everything in this poem, and in the series for that matter, these readings last, in the words of the poem itself, only "momentarily," since the image of the isolated "green capped white" is followed by the lines "The shallow surface of the sea, this, / Numerously," which again gives a collective image of the sea. If the people are like the sea, then the same interrelation and grouping that characterize the waves would also characterize the people. The word *Party* itself serves to point out their group relation. But this sense of the people acting "Homogeneously automatic" brings with it a sense of them dumbly going through their motions, en masse and automatically. We have already seen this side of being in Heidegger; there is always the possibility that man will live his life lost in the *Verfallen* and the publicity of the world, and this possibility is one of the dangers of existing relationally.

The way the lines "The sea is a constant weight / In its bed" are read seems to turn for the most part on the words *constant weight*. Is there a sense of the sea grounding things here as is the case with the stone floor in poem two, but not so with "big-Business" in poem three? Or is the sea imprisoned in its constant weight, stuck and weighed down by itself? And for that matter, how is "bed" read here? As a place of rest and/or generation, or of death and stillness? The way these lines are read partially depends upon and also partially determines the following lines, "They pass, however, the sea / Freely tumultuous," which turn on the words *pass, however*, and *Freely tumultuous*. The "however," of course, signals that what is talked of in these lines is in contrast to the preceding line. If the sea grounds, then the people's passing over it can be seen as tumultuously ungrounded and their freedom as "shallow" as the "surface of the sea." But if the sea kills, stills, and pulls things down into it, then their tumultuousness is seen as freeing them and enabling them to live their lives. It is my contention that both readings are correct and

dramatize Oppen's desire here to get beyond these polarities, to get beyond morality and ethics. Oppen was interested in a justification for life beyond ethics, which he felt could change, certain ethics even being abandoned after they are no longer useful, as, for example, with the "morality of altruism," which includes a "dependence on the poor to confer value" who "might one way or another disappear" (Interview 177). For Oppen, an "ethic isn't permanent and it isn't going to answer the problems. However one names that problem—the outcome of the process of humanity—it won't solve it" (178). The language in this poem, and in many others like it by Oppen, is too indeterminate to allow us to choose one or the other interpretation. What we see here is a dialogue of meanings, a polyphony of meanings. The conversation that Oppen wishes to have among honest people also takes place in the poems themselves, between the different positions and points of view they present.

In poem seventeen (*Complete Poems* 9; *New Collected Poems* 21), a so far implicit concern of the series becomes explicit: history. Here we have another very short poem (6 lines) that depicts a scene, but this poem is a little different from some of the other more standard imagistic treatments. Here, the scene portrayed is in a photograph, a Civil War photograph, so the poem self-consciously frames the scene as an artifact. In fact, the poem is as much interested in the artifact, the photo, and in the idea of the photo, as it is in the Civil War scene that the photo presents. Though we glimpse a snapshot of American history through this photograph, it is through our recognition of how the photograph frames its content that we see how we learn about our past, through the vehicle of artifacts like this photo. This is a much more self-conscious and metacognitive poem than most of the others so far and on that level has more in common with the first poem of the series.

After zooming in on the photo and what it depicts, the poem them pulls back with the lines "The cannon of that day / In our parks." In the poem, we have come to know the Civil War, of which these cannon are part, through the focusing lens of the photograph, but we now step away from that lens and into the contemporary landscape. This pulling back makes the reader aware that the poem itself is an artifact and is framing the information that we receive just as the

photograph does. The poem thereby demonstrates to us how much of the historical knowledge we obtain is framed and contextualized for us through artifacts.

But there is also the cultural, ideological dimension to artifacts such as the cannon; being in our parks, they frame not just how we look at our past, as signs of the blood shed for our liberty or unity perhaps, but also how we look at our present and future, as signs of the blood we may yet have to shed for that same liberty or unity. Isn't that after all why cannon from older wars are put in our parks, as reminders not just of our people's past actions but also of their present and future duty? So in a way, the cannon are shown to be national, ideological weapons used on the populace they are meant to defend. The poem shows us how we relate to our past through texts, how we relate different times to each other through these texts, and how ideology becomes aestheticized in texts that are used to control public beliefs.

Poem eighteen (*Complete Poems* 10; *New Collected Poems* 22) also deals with time and history, but on a more personal level:

> As I saw
> There
> Year ago——
> If there's a bird
> On the cobbles;
> One I've not seen

Here we have another short imagist poem that, like the previous poem, goes beyond the imagist presentation of a thing or scene. The poem deals with the speaker's experience of looking at the same scene twice and seeing, or possibly seeing, a bird there each time. The poem starts by signaling a comparison: "As I saw / There / Year ago——." But then what the past is compared to, which we receive after the dash, is articulated within a conditional construction, "If there's a bird." This structure, in which the first half of a comparative construction is completed with the first half of a conditional one, gives the poem a feeling of contingency, which comes only partially to rest on the more declarative last line. We seem to be overhearing

someone in the process of thinking something through out loud but only saying the essential words needed to delineate the matter at hand. This is not a jewel box poem, finely finished so that the lid fits nicely, but is more an overheard scrap of thought, abbreviated and articulated in shorthand, an excerpt from an ongoing process of thought.

Seeing and not seeing are the issue here. The poem seems to be saying that as the speaker saw a bird in this place a year ago, if there's one there now it is one he's never seen, which presumably was the case earlier too. In one reading of the poem, we can say that he saw birds both times, but both times they were birds he's never seen before. So in the midst of the familiar and recurring, "As I saw / There / Year ago," there is also the new and unfamiliar. In addition, the poem maintains a tension between the experience of seeing, found in the first line, and not seeing, found in the last line. These two experiences enclose the rest of the poem by their positions at the beginning and end, yet, as they exclude each other, there is certainly not a sense of closure. In fact, their contradiction does quite the opposite, leaving a space for the reader in which to wonder. Add to this the fact that the earlier bird sighting is compared to the later incident where there might not in fact be a bird present, "If there's a bird," and the reader is thwarted from a conclusion even more. The reader is left with a conundrum: two birds are compared though there is no second bird. This situation is like the joke: Question: "How are Calvin Coolidge and Abraham Lincoln similar?" Answer: "They both had beards, except for Coolidge." Also, if you're not sure there is a bird on the cobbles, how can you know that it's one you haven't seen before? This seemingly simple, short poem finally reveals itself to us as a mystery since its semantic logic does not agree with its syntactic logic. The poem is seen to be just as "impenetrable" as Oppen says the world is (*Complete Poems* 94, 148; *New Collected Poems* 114, 164; Interview 176). In addition, one point of the poem may be to complicate what a poem is, to show that as a part of the world the poem is necessarily incomplete as it is only part of the conversation in which one engages, while the language we use to engage in that discussion is shown to be a tool that determines to a certain extent how and what we think.

A further understanding of the incomplete nature of poem eighteen can be gleaned from Jean-Luc Nancy's ideas on *logos*, sharing, and incompletion.

> *Logos* means many things. But one of its meanings is this: something (that one can at times determine as "language," at times as "reason," and in many other ways as well) whose only worth lies in being exposed (among other ways, as when a face lights up, opening), that is, in being shared. (xxxviii)

But Nancy explains how sharing can never be complete in community:

> [T]here is no entity or hypostasis of community because this sharing, this passage cannot be completed. Incompletion is its "principle," taking the term "incompletion" in an active sense, however, as designating not insufficiency or lack, but the activity of sharing, the dynamic, if you will, of an uninterrupted passage through singular ruptures. That is to say, once again, a workless and inoperative activity. It is not a matter of making, producing, or instituting a community[.] (35)

As I pointed out above, this poem is not a jewel box, a made product, but is rather a singular rupture involved in the "activity of sharing," with "incompletion" as its principle.

In poem nineteen (*Complete Poems* 10; *New Collected Poems* 23) we find three images of things that exist within something else; the first two are man-made, the last occurs in nature. The first image supports and brings together: "Bolt / In the frame / Of the building—." The second steers, is immersed in water, and is the pivotal instrument between the ship and the water, negotiating the ship's way through the water.

> A ship
> Grounds
> Her immense keel
> Chips
> A stone
> Under fifteen feet
> Of harbor
> Water——

As the bolt holds the building together, so the keel holds something a little more intangible together: the ship's course. The keel is also seen as much more active than the bolt since it moves through the water and even chips the stone. The third main element in the poem, the tree's "fiber," is more difficult to isolate because it is more an integral part of its surroundings—the "tree" itself. As the bolt runs through the frame of the building and the keel through the water, so the fiber runs through the tree, "Running into the / Branches and leaves / In the air." But a point of contact exists not just between the fiber and the rest of the tree, but also between the "Branches and leaves" and "the air." What we have throughout poem nineteen is a picture of structure, of the way things hold together and negotiate their relations with their surroundings, the way they connect themselves with or brush up against other things.

There is a difference between the bolt and keel on the one hand and the fiber on the other since the former two are man-made while the latter one occurs in nature, but the poem doesn't seem to set up a culture vs. nature antagonism, portraying one as better than the other. Yes, the fiber of the wood is seen as "live wood," and it is presented last in the poem, but most of the poem's language and presentation is so neutral that no one element appears in a better light. What we have in this poem is an imagist picture of these three elements stabilizing, steering, sustaining—participating in fairly pivotal roles in their own peculiar but parallel relationships with their surroundings. The poem respects and lets-be each of the three things and their relations. Each element is discrete but connected, and with the last image of the tree's fiber, one can't help but think of Yeats's poem "Among School Children," at the end of which we find the lines, "O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer, / Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?" (217). The bolt, keel, and fiber are all presented in their integrity, but what is a bolt outside of the building, a keel unattached to the ship, the fiber without the bark, branches, and leaves?

Poem twenty (*Complete Poems* 10; *New Collected Poems* 24) has almost no classic imagist qualities but is rather a discursive poem that talks about interpersonal relations in the context, again, of time. In the first two-line stanza, the speaker conflates time and space, "thinking toward" the person he is addressing from a "distance" and stating

that "Time is recession." The concern with "distance" is picked up
in the next stanza, where the speaker states that any movement
means nothing if it does not encounter this other person. Time,
space and movement are all thought of in relation to this "you." The
last two lines are somewhat obscure and difficult, but seem to be pre-
senting an exception to the exception, saying that the "Movement"
is "of no import" that doesn't encounter "you // Save the pulse cumu-
lates a past." This is the first of two occurrences in two consecutive
lines of the word "pulse." What does it mean in this first instance? In
the context of what has preceded it, "pulse" would seem to refer to
the "Movement" that is of no import if it does not encounter the
other person. Since this movement is already at least partially con-
flated with time, could this pulse be the pulse of time? Since a
human pulse is the movement of the lifeblood through the body, a
movement that is mirrored by the pulse of the hands on the clock, a
movement that ends when one's personal time is up, there is already
a cultural association between pulse, time, and body. And this "pulse
cumulates a past." A past, a body of experience, is accumulated as
one lives; this pulse, this movement through time, is what accumu-
lates one's past. This is the only movement that is of any "import,"
that one moves through time, or that time moves one through one's
life. In light of Oppen's self-avowed trouble with verbs, and the mod-
ernist/imagist practice of elliptical writing, "And your pulse separate
doubly" can be read as "And your pulse is separate doubly." The
pulse, the actual blood pulse taken synecdochically here as repre-
sentative of one's movement through time, separates oneself both
from one's own past, the person one was, and from others, one's pulse
being the mark and reminder of one's mortality, one's finitude, and,
as Nancy says, one's separation from others, though of course this
separation is what binds one with others.

Poem twenty-one (*Complete Poems* 11; *New Collected Poems* 25)
deals with people dwelling in a locale and with the tension between
the locale as an archetype and as a specific place. In the first two
lines we find out that the poem is concerned with "a town," not *the*
town, so there is an indefinite quality here, as if we were reading
about a town like any other. However, the second line, "But loca-
tion," brings in the notion of the specific locale of a town. Then as
we read on, we again see that this is a town like any other, "Over

which the sun" moves, "Which cools . . . during the night," and which has "houses and lamp-posts" and "roads." A tension between the specific and the archetypal is established here at the beginning and continues throughout the poem. In fact, the particulars here, the particular town and its individual inhabitants, don't operate in this poem at the level of the particularities of history, with specific names and events, as in, say, a work like *Winesburg, Ohio*, but are particular instances of an archetype. The archetypal is filled with the habitual: the man going to work is seen "in the morning," "in the afternoon," though the morning is seen as "his morning," and the town is filled with "People everywhere, time and the work / pauseless." However, the particulars we discover as we read through the poem are not historical or even local particulars, since we don't know even the name of the town or the man, but are the particular archetypical dimensions of this town.

Heidegger's thoughts on dwelling can help us understand Oppen's use of the habitual and the archetypal in this poem. For Heidegger, building and dwelling are related; in fact, "The Old English and High German word for building, *buan*, means to dwell. This signifies: to remain, to stay in a place" (*Poetry* 146), or, in the context of our poem here, to locate oneself, to dwell in a location. Heidegger goes on to discuss how *buan* not only tells us how "to build" means "to dwell," but also "gives us a clue as to how we have to think about the dwelling it signifies":

> Where the word *bauen* still speaks in its original sense it also says *how far* the nature of dwelling reaches. That is, *bauen, buan, bhu, beo* are our word *bin* in the versions: *ich bin*, I am, *du bist*, you are, the imperative form *bis*, be. What then does *ich bin* mean? The old word *bauen*, to which the *bin* belongs, answers: *ich bin, du bist* mean: I dwell, you dwell. The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling. (147)

But building also means cultivating, preserving and nurturing on the one hand and constructing on the other, and these are its two most commonly understood meanings. These are the commonly used meanings of building behind which the meaning of dwelling recedes.

> Building as dwelling, that is, as being on the earth, however, remains for man's everyday experience that which is from the outset "habitual"—we inhabit it, as our language says so beautifully: it is the *Gewohnte*. For this reason it recedes behind the manifold ways in which dwelling is accomplished, the activities of cultivation and construction. These activities later claim the name of *bauen*, building, and with it the fact of building, exclusively for themselves. The real sense of *bauen*, namely dwelling, falls into oblivion. (147–48)

For Heidegger, because of this process of forgetting, "dwelling is not experienced as man's being" (148). What we see in poem twenty-one is this very process of forgetting the meanings of *building* as dwelling and being through preoccupation with the word's foreground meanings of cultivation and construction. However, Heidegger does not discount these latter meanings. What he is saying is that "[b]uilding as dwelling unfolds into the building that cultivates growing things and the building that erects buildings" and that "as long as we do not bear in mind that all building is in itself a dwelling, we cannot even adequately *ask*, let alone properly decide, what the building of buildings might be in its nature" (148). When we lose the meaning of building as dwelling, we become lost in the *Verfallen*, in the publicity of and care for the world. The activity of building becomes work rather than being in dwelling: "People everywhere, time and the work pauseless."

One may ask, "Building means dwelling; so what?" Heidegger again refers us to language:

> The Old Saxon *wuon*, the Gothic *wunian*, like the old word *bauen*, mean to remain, to stay in a place. But the Gothic *wunian* says more distinctly how this remaining is experienced. *Wunian* means: to be at peace, to be brought to peace, to remain in peace. The word for peace, *Friede*, means the free, *das Frye*, and *fry* means: preserved from harm and danger, preserved from something, safeguarded. . . . To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature. *The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing and preserving.* It pervades dwelling in its whole range. That range reveals itself to us as soon as we reflect that human being consists in dwelling and, indeed, dwelling in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth. (*Poetry* 148–49)

Dwelling is not just being, it is letting-be, letting each thing be that which it is.

The tension in the poem at hand from *Discrete Series* between the specific and the archetypal dramatizes some of Heidegger's thoughts on dwelling. Much in the poem is in danger of not being recognized for that which it is: the town could be any town, the houses and lampposts could be just any houses and lampposts, the man just any man, the people just "people everywhere." They are in danger of not being recognized as the specific, historical beings they are. Yet the man inhabits not just "the morning" but "his morning"; "a white powdered face" emerges from "a crowd" and awaits "locally—a date." Yes, this could be just any woman awaiting her date, but she is a particular woman in this "locale" waiting for a particular date. In addition, there is the sense that she, as archetype, awaits "a date" "locally," awaits a particular time and place and her particular being that dwells then and there.

How does one arrive at one's particular time and place and being? By moving "between reading and re-reading." On one level, this line simply means that with all the hubbub, the "time and the work / pauseless," one is so distracted that one must read and reread in order to understand. In this realm of the *Verfallen*, nothing is solid and the "shape is a moment." Yet as one pulls back from being lost in the world and reads the world as a text, in the same way in which one pulls back from the photo and the poem itself in poem seventeen, one realizes that, though the "shape is a moment," it is only through the particular and momentary shape, locale, and "date" that we come into our being and can even share the archetype. In fact, the mortality inherent in the fact that the "shape is a moment" connects with Heidegger's "dwelling in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth" and is another instance of Nancy's notion that our finitude both separates and binds us.

An interesting difference between Heidegger and Oppen comes up in the context of Heidegger's idea of the essential meaning of words. For Heidegger, "That language in a way retracts the real meaning of the word *bauen*, which is dwelling, is evidence of the primal nature of these meanings; for with the essential words of language, their true meaning easily falls into oblivion in favor of foreground meanings" (*Poetry* 148). On the other hand, Oppen isn't necessarily concerned with the way the essential meaning of words

recede from them; he is more concerned with the fact that there are
some words more "essential" than others. Speaking of his faith that
"nouns do refer to something" (Interview 176), Oppen says,

> I realize the possibility of attacking many of the things I'm saying and I say
> them as a sort of act of faith. The little words that I like so much, like "tree,"
> "hill," and so on, are I suppose just as much a taxonomy as the more elabo-
> rate words; they're categories, classes, concepts, things we invent for our-
> selves. Nevertheless, there are certain ones without which we really are
> unable to exist, including the concept of humanity. (175)

It could simply be that Oppen believes these particular words are
closer to their "essential" meanings than others; it is hard to tell. But
Heidegger and Oppen both seem to believe that there are some
words more essential than others, though Heidegger is more con-
cerned with the recession of their essential meanings, while Oppen
is more concerned with the fact that they *are* more essential.

Moving from poem twenty-one to twenty-two (*Complete Poems* 11;
*New Collected Poems* 26), we move from the social to the personal.
This poem is one of the several portraits of women that occur in *Dis-
crete Series*; however, this one deals more with the relations between
the woman and the speaker. It addresses on the personal level some
of the concerns that come up in the previous poem and also Nancy's
notion of the finitude of beings in the context of lovers. The issue of
nearness and distance that is raised in poem three is also addressed
again. How close does the lovers' touching, both physically and emo-
tionally, bring them to the boundaries of ecstasy, ek-stasis, and com-
munity? "Love at the pelvis / Reaches the generic, gratuitous." As the
people in the previous poem were in danger of being lost in the *Ver-
fallen*, the lovers here are in danger of loving in a way that is general
and superfluous. They too are in danger of becoming only arche-
types without any specificity to their being. A way out of this situa-
tion, a way that could also trap them, is suggested in the second
stanza. Their emotions are not the same, are not as one in com-
munion, but are "Parallel." They "slide in separate hard grooves" and
in coupling at "bent loins" are "Self moving." Though they touch
and couple physically, emotionally they never do and at best are only
parallel to each other. Yet this seemingly tragic and desperate situa-
tion between lovers can be turned around and their separateness can

be what they share and the bond of their sharing. In this situation, the lovers define the limit of community:

> Lovers expose, at the limit, the exposition of singular beings to one another and the pulse of this exposition: the compearance, the passage, and the divide of sharing. In them, or between them—this is exactly the same thing— ecstasy, joy *touches* its limit. Lovers touch each other, unlike fellow citizens (unless, once again, in the delirium of a fanaticized mass or in the piling up of exterminated bodies—wherever it is a matter of a work). This banal and fairly ridiculous truth means that touching—immanence not attained but close, as though promised (no longer speech, nor gaze)—is the limit. (Nancy 38–39)

In Nancy's community, there is no communion, no immanence, not even between lovers. Even in a relationship we might think of as the most intimate in which we can engage, there is still distance. Touching defines the limit and separation of lovers, but their separation is what they share. And only through realizing their separation can the lovers share it and, therefore, touch. This realization on the lovers' part of their shared bond of separation takes them out of the desperation of a different kind of separation, of being lost in the *Verfallen*. And the reason for the indeterminate tone of the poem, especially in the second stanza, stems from the fact that both the separation within community and the separation within the *Verfallen* are possible ways of reading the lovers' relationship. There is no real condemnation of the lovers, yet there is no real celebration of them either. They seem to exist suspended on the line between the possibilities of losing or living their being.

I would like to take a moment to discuss Oppen's free-verse prosody; this discussion is sparked by my reading in the preceding paragraph of line eight, "Self moving." Ostensibly, since there is a comma at the end of the immediately preceding line and none after the line itself, "Self moving" would seem to modify "Moon" instead of the "We," the lovers, in the previous lines. However, the forward movement of the discussion of the "We," along with the fact that the line preceding "Self moving" does not end with a period but only a comma, thereby allowing the possibility that the line in question is in apposition to the preceding material, all contribute to the reading I have used which connects "Self moving" to the lovers. I do not

deny the reading that connects line eight with "Moon"; in fact, that ostensibly is the primary reading. However, Oppen's prosody in *Discrete Series*, as I have pointed out numerous times above, utilizes an indeterminacy that allows certain words and phrases to be suspended between two or more meanings. In this particular case, that suspension is brought about by the way Oppen breaks up the lines. Writing in free verse, Oppen does not utilize the tools of strict rhythm or rhyme to create and emphasize his meanings. Instead, he uses line endings as one of his main prosodic organizing tools, along with dashes, although these latter to a much lesser extent. When asked by Dembo whether he had "any special ideas on prosody" (179), Oppen replied,

> Yes. Well, I do believe in a form in which there is a sense of the whole line, not just its ending. Then there's the sense of the relation between lines, the relation in their length; there is a sense of the relation of the speed, of the alterations and momentum of the poem, the feeling when it's done that this has been rounded. I think that probably a lot of the worst of modern poetry, and it would be true of some quite good poetry, such as Creeley's, uses the line-ending simply as the ending of a line, a kind of syncopation or punctuation. It's a kind of formlessness that lacks any sense of line measure.
>
> The meaning of a poem is in the cadences and the shape of the lines and the pulse of the thought which is given by those lines. The meaning of many lines will be changed—one's understanding of the lines will be altered—if one changes the line-ending. It's not just the line-ending as punctuation but as separating the connections of the progression of thought in such a way that understanding of the line would be changed if one altered the line division. (Interview 180)

The particular points that I would call attention to here are Oppen's "sense of the relation between lines," and his belief that the "meaning of a poem is in the cadences and the shape of the lines and the pulse of the thought which is given by those lines." How the lines are shaped and the relation between the lines determines their meaning. So, separating and suspending the modifier "Self moving" between two subjects that it could modify allows "the pulse of the thought" to go in both directions. The lovers can be seen as "Self moving," which in turn could be interpreted as "Parallel" or "separate," or the moon can be seen as "Self moving," which also in turn could be interpreted as independent and parallel to man or antagonistic and part of what

Oppen at times calls the "stone universe" (*Selected Letters* 33).

In poem twenty-nine, "Drawing" (*Complete Poems* 14; *New Collected Poems* 33), we find the poetics of *Discrete Series*. This poetics is dependent upon the way in which the series was originally printed (and is printed in *NCP*): one poem per page. Tom Sharp has described this design:

> In the book's original form, each poem, however small, was printed on a page, and had a single poem facing it on the opposite page. Each leaf turned revealed two new pages. The book unfolded not organically, "by growth," but mechanically, by "drawing," as of cards from a deck, an induction and an accumulation. (288)

I think Sharp rightly points out that the structure of *Discrete Series* is not one of growth, and the analogy with drawing cards from a deck helps retain the sense of each poem's discreteness. Yet "Drawing" also denotes "picture." The book as a whole is like a series of pictures, not just in its imagist qualities, but also in the way it is taken in, the way it was originally printed on the page, one poem at a time, each discretely. By presenting one full poem on each page, the original book augmented poetry's usual dimension of temporality with the dimension of space. In the original form of the book, one is struck by the discrete space each poem occupies. It is the turning of each "Paper" in space that "contains / This entire volume."

The movement of *Discrete Series* "Not by growth" brings up the distinction Joseph Conte makes between sequence and series:

> The series is determined by the discontinuous and often aleatory manner in which one thing follows another. In an age of instant telecommunications and the motley of metropolitan life, the series accommodates the rapidly shifting contexts and the overwhelming diversity of messages that we now experience as part of our daily routine. Serial form offers itself as a distinct alternative to the organic sequence—a product of romanticism—whose development reflects the more leisurely pace and unitary quality of the nineteenth-century British house and garden or mountain-lakes resort. (3)

Our examination of *Discrete Series* has certainly shown the book to exhibit the qualities of the series rather than the sequence as defined by Conte here. In the series as a whole, Oppen was trying to coun-

teract a developmental paradigm and instead construct one of discrete beings/existences coexisting side by side. Though there are recurrent concerns and topics in *Discrete Series*, and the poems may interrelate, intersect, or parallel each other, they do not develop or grow out of each other, as per Oppen's own definition of what a discrete series is.

What we have in *Discrete Series* is a paradigm of relations rather than development. Tom Sharp addresses this very well when he argues that

> [t]he form of the poem expresses the epistemological and social realizations which were the conditions of its creation.
>
> The awareness of form that registers "the sense of the whole line, not just its ending," and "the sense of the relation between lines," also registers the sense of the page and the relation between pages. That this series is discrete does not mean that its terms are unrelated; it means that they are as related as are their counterparts in the real world. (287)

The relations between the particular poems dealing with cars, for instance, echoing back and forth to each other their concern with technology, is paralleled by the formal relations of the poems to each other.

Poem thirty (*Complete Poems* 14; *New Collected Poems* 34) is one of the most inscrutable of the whole series. It is broken up into two stanzas and starts with a rather apocalyptic line, "Deaths everywhere—," which is then followed by the very enigmatic line "The world too short for trend is land—." This line seems to me so obscure that I can only take a stab at what it could mean. Coming immediately after the first line talking about death everywhere, the second line seems to continue the theme of mortality. There is so much death that even the existence of the world that is the land is too short for any kind of trend to take hold. Is this a depiction of an agricultural or geological exhaustion, or of a more general kind of exhaustion, a picture of a kind of wasteland? The meaning becomes even more enigmatic with the next two lines: "In the mouths, / Rims." Are these lines talking about the dried-up mouths of rivers that are only rims, or the parched, speechless mouths of those who inhabit this desiccated land? It seems to me that both readings apply to what has been established so far, the depiction of a wasteland.

Then in the second stanza there is a dramatic shift in perspective with the telescoping into "this place," a very particular place with a "you" and a "he," that has "two geraniums / In your window-box." What we now see developing in the poem is a situation in which large and small scale are contrasted, the macrocosmic "world" of the first stanza with the microcosmic "window-box" of the second stanza. The window, which we first encountered with Maude Blessing-bourne in the first poem and which recurred in other poems such as the one about the closed car, recurs here again in the penultimate poem. And it is through this window's geraniums that "his" eyes get their life. The window again is a vehicle for knowledge, experience, and even sustenance. Also, the grandly apocalyptic dimension of the first stanza contrasts with the quiet, small scale of the second stanza, which, nonetheless, ironically has its large scale in the fact that the two geraniums affect his whole life, "Are his life's eyes." The small, as we have seen in Oppen's poetry, is never to be discounted or dismissed. In fact, the small here seems to be the holdout realm of sanity compared with the stridency and exhaustion of the world found in the first stanza. And just as each poem is placed side by side in the series, these two realms are placed in the same kind of relationship, one macrocosmic, one microcosmic, one general, one particular, without any connectives, for us to read their relationship. We can easily see the reader-intensive nature of Oppen's poetry. Yet there is something disruptive about poem thirty, coming as it does between two poems about poetics. It's as if Oppen wanted to thwart any developmental movement in the series, even here at the end.

The last poem, poem thirty-one (*Complete Poems* 14; *New Collected Poems* 35), deals, as I have intimated, with the topic of poetics again. Art and nature are compared: "Written structure, / Shape of art" is "More formal / Than a field would be." Then we read the strange parenthetical line, "(existing in it)——." Is Oppen talking about a "Shape of art" existing in a field or a field existing in a "Shape of art," and how would either affect the status of an art structure as being more formal than a "field"? It is obvious that a "Shape of art" existing in a field would be recognized as being more formal than the field, but how can a field existing in an art structure, a poem for instance, be less formal than the poem? The field existing in the poem is part of the poem and is, therefore, just as formal as the

poem. Perhaps Oppen is attacking and trying to break down the transparency of the illusionistic type of poem that attempts to recreate a field in the mind, keeping the poem's artifice and technique hidden. The fact that, here at the end of the series, poems are not clearer but even more puzzling seems understandable when we think about the "Written structure" of *Discrete Series* as a whole, since the book does not work by development, moving by growth towards a denouement in which all becomes clear, but rather by discrete relations in which the last poem is not the fruition of all that has come before, but is simply another poem that could just as well have come third, or fourteenth, or twenty-first. Perhaps we can even think about this line, "(existing in it)——," as we thought of the previous poem, as somewhat disruptive. Or maybe we can take a hint from William Carlos Williams's essay "The Poem as a Field of Action" (280–91) and take the line as pointing to the poem as a "field" of battle where the questions of structure are fought out.

To move further on in the poem itself, we see that the figure of the woman occurring at different points in *Discrete Series* reappears: her pleasure is "Looser." Then we find two quotations: "'O—' // 'Tomorrow?'—." Is the "'O—'" the inarticulate, nonlinguistic expression of her pleasure? Does it demarcate the ecstatic boundaries of the lovers? And what of the question "'Tomorrow?'—"? This would seem to point to some idea of continuity, maybe of the pleasure, or the lover's relations? Each word is in separate quotes, so it would seen that we have two separate people talking here. The notion of the continuity of relations through time is dealt with further in the last stanza: "Successive / Happenings / (the telephone)," which echoes the issue of the series' successive structure presented in poem twenty-nine. But this poem, besides dealing with the form and relations of written structure, also concerns itself with the added dimension of people relating, "(the telephone)." The first half of the poem is concerned with art and nature, the second half with people interacting in time. But one of the things this last poem is saying is that both the book as a whole and the relations among the people here described are parallel in that both consist of "Happenings," "incidents" as "Party on Shipboard" put it, that unfold successively, "Not by growth," but, rather, discretely, each with its own being.

NOTES

1. Throughout this essay, when I discuss community, I am using Nancy's notion of it.

2. Sometimes it seems to me that there never was a more deliberate poetic career. "There were also those twenty-five years of silence. I knew more or less what I was going to try to write in the three books....A great deal of what is said in *Of Being Numerous* represents thinking over those twenty years. . . . It's not a revelation of that moment to me" (Oppen and Oppen 50).

3. About this poem, Oppen, in his second published interview with Dembo, himself said "The real question is simply, whether the poem is successful or not, and I can't quite make up my mind" ("Oppen on His Poems" 200).

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