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Speaking Beyond Words

George Oppen's Late Poetry as an Exploration of Cognition

Duncan MacKay

PhD Poetry: Text, Practice as Research
2017

Abstract

The Creative component of this submission is a poem series entitled [*Happenstance*]. Written within the frame of the middle period of the research process at a rate of approximately one per week for a year, each poem focuses on the research preoccupations of the moment as they infiltrate daily life. They have the deliberate intent of mixing literary critical with cognitive scientific language as content, of blending these discourses with the everyday, and of balancing the spontaneity of conversational tone with a deliberation of poetic language, all within an open field format. The focus is on writing as an enactment of cognition, the process made manifest, a practice that parallels the later work of American poet George Oppen. The gripe that Oppen expressed against 'poems with too much point' is explored, being both subverted and validated through the speculatively propositional²

The Analytical component focuses on the poetry of Oppen's last three collections: *Seascape* *Needle's Eye* (1972), *Myth of the Blaze* (1975), and *Primitive* (1978); alongside his published correspondence, his published notes, and the opinions of his principal literary critics. The discussion seeks to identify the evidence for, and consequences of, Oppen's preoccupation with matters of cognition in the final decade of his writing life. Correlations are sought between Oppen's own understanding of the relationship between experience, meaning, and language, and the insights gleaned into these processes from the subsequent four decades of research in cognitive linguistics, cognitive psychology, and the neurosciences. Oppen returned to writing in the late 1950s under the influence particularly of ideas gleaned from Jacques Maritain. To these were added the phenomenological influence of Martin Heidegger and Georg W.F. Hegel's reflections on speculative thinking. Also of significance in initiating Oppen's inward turn in poetic process was the disruptive emotional impact of his Pulitzer Prize recognition of 1969. Oppen's experience suggests that where cognitive studies and poetics meet may be ground in which new conceptual and aesthetic possibilities for poetry emerge. At its simplest we may ask whether Oppen's personal insights as recorded through his poems, notes and correspondence remain valid in the light of modern day cognitive sciences, rather than merely for their historical interest and, if the former, what they might continue to teach a contemporary poet such as myself.

Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

- NCP* Oppen, George. *New Collected Poems*. Ed. Michael Davidson. Manchester: Carcanet, 2003.
- UCSD* George Oppen Papers, the Mandeville Special Collections, University of California at San Diego, MSS 16. Citations by collection number, followed by box and file numbers.
- RV* Refers to the selection of transcripts from the Oppen papers published as Appendix B 'The Romantic Virtue' UCSD 16, 31, 16 (in five sections) in Peter Nicholls *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007.

Part One

[Happenstance:]

"Too often ... reason has been shown to work in profoundly irrational ways, certainties have bred fractious conflict, authority has been revealed as the mask of intolerance & oppression, and directions have been confounded in a maze of dead ends." Tim Ingold (2007) *Lines: A Brief History*, 167.

[Happenstance:] Nuts & Bolts

I'm going to set my timer a talk within talk in Kat's front room
 Sam is under the piano with his reverb gizmos
 as if any of us are really prepared
 it is (after all) in the timing

counter to this everything is up for grabs
the separations artificial how dull the intention merely to describe

counter to that the details & their imprecisions delight

 perhaps it is that Gertrude Stein had the secret
 rather than only (in Skinner's words) an involuntary reflex
 the mutterings of an *unread and unlearned mind*

 you can imagine her blunt response
I achieve by [e]xtra consciousness, [e]xcess
 a mind unconstrained by a behaviourist's nightmare

as for /mʌɪ'self/
etymology tells us
to read from the Anglo-Saxon *rædhan*
giving-receiving advice or counsel

which by way of solving a riddle became explaining something obscure

 having read that situation
 having taken due counsel
this singular subjective first personal pronoun is ready.

[Happenstance:] This One That

Point & purpose of course
as a collector caught in the British Library
with a razor blade

poems cannot live alone

nor going back
keep breathing
break a line
cut a line
'make each line
cut itself'
Jack's breath as one measure

mid the spurious reference the argument
my lemon ('this one that one') MNLatex style file v2.2
exploration & retreat

lift the discourse out of context (that's two don'ts for Ben)
drop it in some other bucket
see what gives

one supposes this surrenders preconception
bias
prejudice back of the mind
a Duchamp unto myself
pits life against art
in the decisive
moment

while the academic demands
its premise inference conclusion in support of a proposition
writing is writing

boldly stated this script argues its work the etching compliant with the plate
if an old grey donkey can arrange three sticks on the ground

but let's get on
each interjection a reminder of improvised disobedience

simply put upon the page deftly
but without [*e*]xcessive frontal forethought
three-quarters of the pleasure

far below this cabin window Fiennes at the third attempt
let the line go for its walk.

[Happenstance:] TP Atten

Among aficionados of systematic chance
rip it up start again

Shakespeare previewed a play or two in Prescott Merseyside it seems
nothing is now off the table in this
reality on the ground

lacking top & bottom twirly bits
capitals proportioned after Trajan's column
Klee said eyes see eyes feel
though a voice in a typeface seems hard to credit

occasionally or perhaps more often
it's hard to say
unlike the questionable decisions of Parliament

we are exploring parallel events
as we walk where we walk
as if a reordering of text
& seek the first connecting tissue of causes

in consequence of airport shut down
rail link closure over Yuletide
we begin to doubt lexical weight
hence change suffix add helping word change helping word shuffle order
Mac Low: it's mainly a simple judgement of taste

more than I can put into exact words
imagine a poem that thinks
its own algorithm

as if protest on the streets of Bucharest over regulation of sheepdog numbers
or a clock ticking on Mourinho

meaning floats between this economic & this resonant
or in 'practically everything I was reading'
& between us
day-to-day definitely
a sound-filled distance between lines
spatial temporal each in correspondence

those activities locations
under the soundtrack of new regimes

while piling on the runs in a Southern African warm-up
clocking up the syllables in absentia san serif
better contact TextPref.com.

[Happenstance:] What Matter If

And what of play
the play's the thing
where thought & expression have revealed their limitations
there remains a simple pleasure
let us unravel & reassemble
let the old authoritative texts be subject to the same indignities
they after all must prove their case
as must 'chips & egg with lots of bread & butter'
to be a way of happening is to be elaborately this
while puzzling how a cooperation (a coalition even) should be so easily dismissed
the fact is of the unrealized making things happen
our rearrangements of the line
our alchemies of transformation
& now an emergence of the Left
pilloried for positing more optimistic worlds
where does authenticity fit
does the pleasure lie in this simplicity
at a precise psychological moment
in which a language grows as you speak
out of the past after all with one or two perhaps perfectly imperfect poems
she loves bare facts
something uncompromisingly itself
yet which reverberates
an old man startled in the mirror
& by poems with too much point
hearing mostly noise
a static between stations
but having that raw astonishment
with best fit parameters to quantify errors
finally names in conversation
not the subtle suggestion of those
chosen so carefully
but a fixed outline that delineates.

[Happenstance:] She Being Brilliantly Mad

What are the chances
 sitting as we do
 walking as we do
 mostly not noticing

your delivery as counterpoint to the tappity-tap-tap (of Effie Perine)
 this aged radiator feet on sill the open sash window

 hardly Corbyn in rockabilly mode

 begin again with the insistence of an aunt
 with her kosher countdown of festive treats

carpet gives way to stone at the head of the staircase

 you have the sonority of analogue plus
 as buttoned-down a solo
 & as now as anyone can get

 in the face of such revenge music
 the passive aggressive turned art form

 & while keeping shtum
 tossing it idly
 (some things don't ever sink in)
time to uninstall

an iron gate clanks two flights below we go down by the stairs

 what are the chances we will notice
 an event so large.

[Happenstance:] Outside Eye

Make no mistake

into the great divide a PM's pledge must fall
even Mourinho now is gone

wrap up
remember the impact of Xerox on the availability of information

left with no real choice
but blessed with a fortunate convergence of voices
why struggle alone

being rooted in a point of time & placed at an Olsonian confluence
to compute an answer is not to understand

at the roadside perhaps one iota of clarity
the particular problem of a loose connection
clouds that trace wind solutions that fail

what language is doing all the time

one hopes
it's not a case of which is worse
nor changing tack
each variant drifting off

but look what they do

wary of perverse political logics to fit the sensibilities of now
if Bowie can get more radical with age
why not the rest of us take a few chances

in this explosion of the present moment
Mina Loy's arrangements by rage of human rubble
are still with us seventy-five years later

midnight still empties selected streets.

[Happenstance:] Early Doors

No getting through certain hours without serious reassessment

while absolutely certain of the factual & expository
the individual allusion as component of a hinterland of reference
perhaps not

like a Cornell dream shoe-horned into the wrong box
events can seem exceptional
especially other people's
the experience of strangers so much more promising
their futures deferred to our present

it is said that pilgrimages are on the rise
with Nanao time walked in the wind

not every problem is complex

bootleg booze with its screen-wash & anti-freeze
dancing with versus dancing at
even freshwater pearls in the River Ythan consigned to history

like a genome wave from the Pontic-Caspian steppe
times move on

while 9,356 people in the UK watch only black & white TV
mine relative to yours
theirs to somewhere else
each is inexorable
(& it turns out Bowie knew his number was up)

with poor data & a fresh arrest the Shanghai Composite slumps again

I'm thumbing through a Moleskin(e) weekly
a Malden organiser
a monochrome pocket
planning futures in spite of the market

while Zuckerberg sends Free Basics to India Deutsche Bank offloads

in fact since footfalls on the High Street (according to Springer) are lower this year
I am encouraged into town
where in my first-half spell woodwork is struck twice
(no getting through to you in this mood)

in this absence of homospatial thinking Candlemas comes & goes
doing my bit for the RSPB count the small birds arrive first

& from imitation to emulation to steal being to possess where being given
is to take responsibility

no chance of copyist-to-master in a month *à la* Picasso June 1901
no stripped-down design ethos on the lines of those eleven lithographs

though we reduce to enhance flavour
when awake when asleep it happens it cannot be forced

in thinking a million miles away in breaking loose the stubbornly rusted
in joining dots for a first time ever

I try to make the work mean what you mean
the spools quietly folding
unfolding upon themselves

shall we transgress the limit of a single sitting.

[Happenstance:] Not Proven

It sounds convincing
getting a grip on where we are a touch closer though still far off

so what is offered

a narrow alley between high fences
a claim on our attention
the pursuit of a single logic versus an impinging flux
the trip is the thing

against a charge of laziness (not so m'lud)
(Simon's subtle defence a tactical sacrifice)
not proof but failure to prove

we make no pretensions
but a box Brownie puts possibility into everyone's hands

& far from those Cagean snapshots of St Ives by systematic instamatic chance
memory still sneaks through the viewfinder
plants us all into dubious compositional space

rain hanging in the street as mist late afternoon

fending off a localised accumulation of wintry worries
the boy on the platform fooling about
the prospect of gall bladder removal on credit

in refining a hierarchy of truths
live versus live recording versus studio
spotting a problem is not the problem

in this machine for living
meaning circulates inside speech outside
(the signs that mock me as I go)
are we only to dress old words new
spend what is already spent

in H3 a coal fire offers its dismal heat where a poker asserts alternatives

what I'm trying to translate is less certain
given pixels are not sent passively to the brain
since December 1910 it's all change
the eye not enough one needs to think

now I am pleased to be a work in progress

wrestling a waterproof sheet across a soft-top
while the PM in his Hunters wades through shallow water
(the locals less than impressed)

nothing stays difficult forever

let the tape-recorder speak for itself
its educated guesses as good as any.

[Happenstance:] Seeing Red

Hardly able to believe . . . the subtlety . . . of fingers on keys (Marcin)
strings (Slawomir)
sticks & skins (Michal)

it's January . . . the way one thing finds its place with another
like Paul B. I've been leaving my heart everywhere

so it goes
this temporal succession
this spatial redistribution

without semantic consequence cars along the kerb pull in pull out

what fits fits

only in our heads are we . . . skating on thin ice . . . suffering
a cyber-sickness of the soul

I'm not the enemy here
so what are you
a day of confusion criticism still no reshuffle

in the question of balance
multiple inputs are in disagreement
seeing movement but not feeling it

an inversion of the familiar
an absence of intent

headlights flicker through gusted branches
a couple of co-codamol & the selected works

in natural response to an unnatural environment
like Wilson running a Bolshevik revolution with a Tsarist Cabinet

one thing follows another no matter what.

[Happenstance:] XIX (It Don't Mean)

Café soundscape . Ella in the back

one book is open one closed
the half-read
discoveries yet unmade
how it really is

here in the sum of my mistakes
easy to criticise

another suspect Briton in security lapse
to Syria via Paris by coach

forward backward going forward really going forward
for the years going – enough let us restore the transparency of the code

you walking you arriving
remaining impenetrable marvellously obscure abstract on the wall the wall

*

To make matters even more complicated
reality doesn't trickle in one smell at a time

Paul's Amsterdam full of sun, long window, narrow room
my Leiden taxi to Huygens Dalgarno in the back smiling at banter

but wait it gets worse
it is a parsing problem & a binding inexplicable from the bottom up
a cacophony of cells bound into unified perception who is looking down

or how at any moment shuttling between & separating

what makes people cross that line
slugging it out with yourself at the Copper Box Arena

add a dash of subjectivity some contextual clues & the sensory verdict shifts to ambiguous inputs

in contrast parmesan cheese & vomit (butyric acid pungent top note sweetish linger)
we deceive ourselves

what we taste is an idea what we hear see . just to understand one note
memory frames the moment . at a certain point on the road . an illusion of autonomy

(you've got to fake it to be real) it seems
a cheap Burgundy better than a cheap Bordeaux

before you can taste it you have to judge it.

*

So what does get yelled before reaching for the wires

perhaps the health risk of loneliness even poor old Otzi had a stomach ulcer

the Romans acquired tapeworm eggs through fish-paste
not to mention hot baths breeding faecal-oral whipworm

knowledge being power

now it seems we need the Taliban on our side

 experience apparently to modulate sensitivity
the brain feeding-back
 never too late to become a gourmet

 under this peripheral plasticity I like to take my experience half-seriously
no theory no formula better

my brain is not your brain . being is irreducible . if it works it's true

in this street wet from last night's rain

 where Paul finds the news from a leftover newspaper March 1968
it's eight in the morning . you on the next chair.

[Happenstance:] Tightrope

Concerning Jack Spicer's two a.m. walk from Gino & Carlo's Bar to a basement apartment in Polk Gulch in 1964.

Opening the hatch the words with which we hold on
 even a programmatic touch
(take a couple of inconsequential A plus B that combine to equal consequential C)

 she speaks of the dark side of yoga

 & having been found out
having found out
 I'm not falling for this line

finger to lip lip to finger mirror to mirror
 a metonymic adjunct to our relationship
 this finger's syllable upon the lip

 all very well it is to reject syntactic inversion
 (& redundancy) for straight talking

yet I cross the street against the flow shoelace in a deliberate muddled knot
 Jack's high wire act drags this real into his poem untethered
 celluloid capturing a tactile graininess

 let us sit upon the floor as we used to sit in the street
 toast farewell to our musical Stalinist grand-daddy
 those nights at the Roundhouse Ligeti's tea tray

alternatively take a poetry as brain-game
download the app
 protect against age-related decline
until Lumos Labs buy us out for billions

 dodging life's tripwires for the unwary in ineffective detox
 I am reluctant to concede to a hard exit
 float my stake in Alibaba

George & Mary answered for one another
 finished sentences the other had begun
occasionally spoke the same words in unison

you & I have our own telepathic connection
 it gets tricky

 a fluorescent tube in Jack's room flickers on & off
gives glimpses of lumps & chunks of morpheme phoneme grapheme

 & then an early morning sky
tornadoes in the clouds
an urban garden standoff between species over scraps

 the boss was at home in Barbados
 perhaps we expect too much
 from health screening
 from budget surplus based on small-beer revisions

do we need to know the referential object of the verbless poem
 to know what is said is to make (it) redundant
better what is (its) existence

in rejecting the hit-single opt for the album
particulars met & connected but particulars

Pound's scientist-poet identifies the empirically valid
each morning a clearing of ash before placing
a small paraffin block kindling offcuts ovals a log

out of a shape of each moment
there is the encountered & the implied whole

tooth by tooth day's gears mesh.

[Happenstance:] XIII

"The danger is of the chess-board: on which everything has already been named."
George Oppen

It didn't quite
nothing can
knight to queen four in the precision of placement

this weld rail to rail
you & I inexplicable each to the other

I repeat I'm not falling for your lines
not as common audit of the day

if itself an object consonant with
perhaps

successive happenings
correlations
face-timing with the south of France
(strolling down that highway)

Tim steps out
reminds us
nothing compares

ignoring the tawdry eulogies
every stick-&-poke tattooist knows it's not what he spent his life working for
any more than a plaque on a bandstand

ask Sinclair
driving into Gloucester Massachusetts at night in the rain
I liked him right off
write to me

& who handles what well
you have mistook me all this while
this ego this habit of mind

drop another shilling in the metrical meter
(enough, no more/ 'Tis not so sweet now as it was before)

let us defend against the unsubstantiated vigorously
my dog is a mongrel as I am

in Steep Street among the well thumbbed
winter rain on glass

functions touch mutate reconfigure
factors fall towards a solution

in this calculation as collage
the operator resonant as a tram ticket
(strips pasted around the edge)f

we may wonder at the cheek of inaccessible form
versus that which
constrained by the hour
standard issue
is easily disassembled

old arguments resurface
clogs to clogs in three generations

(let us open the map of the fullness of thought & its movement).

[Happenstance:] Double-Edge

Yes but even can't quite

 this grasp (gasp) of reason

cell by cell we make ourselves thought by thought

while the immaculate spirals (unexpectedly) hold

 let us restore the transparency of code

 unpick the irrational

 as if by percolation of the word

 come into my paragram

Tim's up there adapting to zero gravity

Gary's down here on hands & knees with a leaky gate-valve

 decentre the subject to foreground the artifice of verbal process

bogus claims given a byte

 transcriptions of resistance

 problematic poetic properties

 processed & packaged between weighty & witty

 (shall we avoid the tele-bio-sketch)

Simon's puzzle is the transcendental

 (ignoring for a moment those theory boys)

mine a fumbled bread knife

 sucking up the early morning mountain air

 watching distant smoke its convolutions

I might just accept differences in obligation

 a bilingual edition

 chairs that wait under the trees

 this poem as transducer

beyond a grasp of reason . . . what is a word really

 (at a certain corner, suddenly)

on se retrouvait là

a nail gun on a distant roof

 spuggies come to call among the little round tables

 with its major program of improvement

 this is the best time for work to be done

 call me now with your disclosure of the sensitive

words fall (fail to fall) into place

in the, exquisite;

morning.

[Happenstance:] XXIV

So it goes
tum-ti-tum

no east no west where then is north & south
(am I in it)

it is a metonymic passage
in my head an enclosed mathematical system
hypotheticals
without necessary correspondence
to actuals

call it a poetic slice (London cut)
a facet of the hour
stuck in strips
this cubist reality in a single plane

here & there that tappity-tap-tap marks the flow of attention

among rumours of increased longevity in mice
the *reportage* of Lucan now deceased
those wrinkly look-alikes in far off corners of the globe set adrift

watching a typography that floats across the glass
comme si Braque
the cup that sits

there are few extractable propositions that could be ascribed as endorsed positions of the author

of course we are being used
by language
the muddy prints of a night time visitor
from item to item
anything & everything won't do
they are not the same
the same that always changes
I make my carefully random choice

a van pulls out the bike goes under
moments that turn without malice
why fudge issues of irreplaceable loss

we are in conversation
waves lap
umbrellas flutter

it is a metonymic passage
through rain the road a next service station
these are old discoveries deserving of reminder.

[Happenstance:] Addendum – Of Indeterminacy

Epecially apt| to release a string| implicit & directly perceived

BY MEASURE A MOVEMENT OF SPEECH

shape & meaning at a single glance

**three rhythms between fixity & flux
the very life**

Quotation Reference ALLUSION TITLE TAG short sharp long list catalogue all – SWEEP UP

Rimbaud's rhythm is much more exclamatory and fragmented; short phrases pile up and sentences having normal subject-predicate word order do not follow one another so as to form a coherent discourse.

“ by asking

‘what does this mean ?’

they express a wish that eveRything

is understandable. but if onE does not

reject the mystery, oNe has quite

a different responsE. one asks

other things. ”

BACK IT COMES OF FLUID & CHANGING UNDECIDABILITY

text is our first anomaly| of a telegram again & again| known because needing to be said
in careful placement as between the two

BEYOND ABOVE A STEP THAT SKIRTS wide enough for one

neither edge nor convexity to stem the flow

In painting over and behind his numbers, using brushstroke to create broken, textured surface, dissolves the distinction between figure and ground; aware of the flatness of picture plane as well as the non-functioning of number.

that jostle| us| have seen| insistently

we can after all| after all go or to| **knowing who one**| On The Shallow Screen

IN OVER-THINKING FORGETS THE WIND & THE WAY| OF GOING(S) & PAUSING(S)

[Happenstance:] XXV

The focus of each falls variously

a language worn more loosely
call it a calculated risk

in response to a point of inflexion in every game
(a stand-in sparing Van Gaal's blushes)
forms of frontal grammar in verbal planes fill the billboard field as poetic space

we bump along
without access to a drone when short on facts
chit chat on Reddit
spiking the infectious
blindsiding the emotional

by turns
across this field of reference
poems planar
horizontal viewed full face

while Apple snaps up SwiftKey
ChemChina snaps up Syngenta
nothing is off limits

with unrealistic expectation Wetherby is not alone in lockdown
in my take-five box with all that misshapen fruit & veg
ten grams of iridium-192 are on walkabout from Basra

given this late bloomer in arch-funk playlist ignored ego set aside
the truth (doo-da-doo-da-di-da) if anywhere is up there

the week's whistle-blower is left again in the lurch
while out & about playing a game of zones
bulldozers move into the Jungle

from this whetstone & loom-weight we graduate to a wheel in Fenland mud

these the joys of hacking back
Monty's big dreams in small spaces
planning for Spring

this (is a) logic (not) displaced roll the die question answered

so to speak.

[Happenstance:] Resist

Where to go . what to know

East-Asia's best kept secret
(& what's a bounded bowser anyway)
those words as ghosts . And so on

cup aslant
non-referentiality takes a break

within this bundle of unresolved stresses resolutions balances old hat harmonisations
to speak of the world as a two-way street flawed words & stubborn minds in a mould

take no sides but offered dire warning
face the irrefutable dualistic formulas that clog (up) debate

get your bearings

mad Mary Lou gets 48% for the Texas Board of Education
Trump still trumps
the Swiss back out of a universal income

we're all back-tracking

on our street each line is conjured by dynamic pricing
intelligibility a function of demand
occasional nudging down that stimulates a poethic market

I could provide answers but who wants to be misconstrued
(it's a cock-up I perfectly accept that)

to resist or to evade
rumours of a plot
heading for a drubbing . Now that is

(going nowhere we take a ride touch down)

resist.

[Happenstance:] 3# Format

Nothing off limits

no jaded script low key low price

after the predictable drama
stand-up goes back on the road without prompt
as a front moves in with warnings of exposure to vaping

what it was & it was
easy to blur the lines
a lot of people didn't know bits of this a bit of that
it just happened
she was the boss I wasn't

we watched as the switch was flicked that dying eye round & round
the clouding over the foggy obscuration

of course the jury's out
whatever Neanderthal interbreeding for the unlucky four percent

the reader will note
a historicist account of the work of new pragmatists
an ongoing project for viola
tonal colours that wash across

what is the possibility
(she read it rolled her eyes couldn't make it up if she tried)

my recommendation keep track-dotting until you can afford smart luggage

nothing off limits no jaded script low key low price.

[Happenstance:] Dox (99.9), or How It Means

"The impotence of human language to generate poetic truth is clearer than ever where it rages most unanswerably after it." Keston Sutherland 'Sub Songs versus the subject', 141 (2014)

How it means by taking not making in avoiding doubt For example

no frame no phenomenology
so many many words to set against the quiet

I am breathing the line as requested
transcriptions cognisant of the cornerless mystery of thought

Sajid picks up the phone to Beijing finds it engaged

living this epidemic of overload
drifted H3
mutated H3N2
blocked GSK-3

the Cuban heels of Cartesian ego are swapped for sandals

by metric measure as the movement of perception
threading a fidelity of form through the eye of the arc of feeling
surely a dialectics of nature must feature

finicky bits of business
memorizing zone one

perhaps simply along this tideline of paragrammatic play
the sedimentation of verbal phonemic graphemic traces

where constraint is left to speak for itself
our account being exactly what isn't
no single line emerges

as we move
(a pause, a rose, something on paper)
dancing to the rhythm of cognition

& not to solve difficulty to formulate meaning to paraphrase

it's all a matter of redress of rebalancing knowing where the frame is
then that cough in an empty room

as for Engel's book of the same
in crooked streets young voices cry
rehashing tromboranga big hooks jagged rhymes

shall we also launder dodge evade
as advised by Mossack Fonseca my money is
my poems are under the mattress

picking a self off the shelf of personal identity
a ready-to-wear little red number
nothing quite so destroys post-modernist whimsy as brute reality
a flick of the thumb
what it was
a whole new slant on bailing out

at this point a whumpf of tinder ignites
sleight of hand & misdirection from the outset

in these wee-hours nu-disco duos with stage invasions
to good times & small talk at Hackney's OSLO
Zaventem's missing man in a hat outlives radical Max passing on at 81

you were there or not
that's what's magical (as critical realism goes)
forget the skimpiness of narrative across a frenzied night in Berlin
the logistics are of making it
Papusza in an old Tarkovsky movie

where the subject has been exceeded
misdirection from the outset
whoever knows how & why it means.

[Happenstance:] Riff (self-edit) for pianist & two

Outside Charly's counting SWAG soak it up
talk of forgotten things among the rich
on the couch or a little flea-market barter
Bertlmann steps off the pavement pink sock leading

scansion tells us little
the essential ingredient in any iced beverage is ice
though short-changed is it possible your angry sentiment is deliverable with delicacy

ignore the spiky polyrhythms
let the FTSE take a dive
given this day's essay in chaos as stonking street drama
in the wake of deconstruction let Antofagasta plummet
they'll still be racing camels in Divonne

it is this late expression with its intermissions left blank
tottering along the ledge of language in rag & bone mode
ducking the logic of coercion that provides no explanation

is this news that stays news
weedy speech that lasts
the urgent wave of verse

let us enter that text-space with its non-local non-causal connections
where the recognisable malingers between unreadable extremes
disintegrates into sub-lexical acoustic noise

this will be it

Travis packing out Sauchiehall Street
getting on a bit but still writing to reach you

in a zone of itself a place translated
where we all go into the subfusc
heavyweight billing notwithstanding
melody breaks out re-rendered

under the thumb of the ergonomically inept
make no claim take no credit
a syntagmatic sleight of hand in a paradigmatic precinct
wedged between

while under a car park marked R(eserved)
(& now the League) we grab it as it passes
step out in denial of red lines crossed
double yellow white no stopping nobody tells me
Abbot insists as if tips to top up wages

let's X-ray the spine of our inquiry
in a can or on a plate
avoid the option of eyeball injection by Google

while still flightless in Italy hardly a ham sandwich
deep-fried cubes of cheesy tapioca
never mind six degrees we are two stops away
engrossed in the moment of long-form story-telling
a one-act opera set in a toilet
refusing the risk of personal opinion as only a taut three-hander can

[Happenstance:] To Begin With

(of Awlad Shawarea, Cairo, 12.5.16)

As if to those art school Roxy nights
paper & print punkzines at the ICA
gloss over the samplescapes
the old routine paranoia
we had a voice
further down the line
an occasional glance at a passing world
a walk-on necessary to plot but insubstantial
stand up & spit
nothing can replace this

by doodling as if spoken by wandering through a rationality of sentences
in a café
on a train
talking to a friend
a juxtaposition is enacted

take the stance of subject as panoptic
of syntax as controlling interest
shall we anticipate the delayed gratification of completion

stalls are strung out in polyphony of indecision a chordal resonance of contradiction

what marks are these
as the formless present flows through which this personal pronoun stumbles
one more variable among those equations of emotion
consider how this 'next to' works in a world of alterity

drop it get over it move on
fake out of necessity
get by
else be toughened up by a different narrative
tunnels in Gaza
the swim to Lampedusa

published April '31 new edition January '71
& speaking of formative influence she made me feel certain in seeking
to create along paths other than it was possible

Rembrandts could be faked in those days
when opposition was everything
risk the every day
liabilities turned to assets

write on through the rubble with an aesthetic of accumulation
no logic links the figures
more a flight of mosquitoes
observe how the author recedes into the text.

[Happenstance:] Give It Up

Of cuts & dissolves framed in series detailing Frank's thoughts

digging in the rubble of impenetrable verbal surface
this undercut this opposing note of counterfactuals

if I shall as if they will

where are the whens the befores & afters

shifts signalled *spatial temporal referential*

those melodic graphs of poetic perception

with their hung out strung out articles & demonstratives

the intimate conversations that invite participation

discretion being the better part

talking of forgotten things

our Chinese friend with his present participles

learns to name drop without naming

(re-orientation is so good for the soul)

but if too hip too square lost without a tribe ignoring the lot of them crank it up

like on the ferry coming over

the experience of pairing down outweighs the paired down

deep image deep heat garbage in whatever we're after

to hell with the aesthetics of attention just go on your nerve

spilling the beans into deaf lines

you just run.

[Happenstance:] Best Ride Ever

As if a Baconian frame frames it
broken by the weight of being
no glam
down in subterranean Epic Dalston

I'm hunkered down with my 奢硕 (qí shí *old scholar* JHP) box-set the yellow brick
Tim is back
with the hangover of all time
among Parrot drinkers joined at the hip
confirmation that nothing bad has happened to Greenland
beyond a punch in the face a language to think in
not every scholar signs away his soul
the disturbing & dotty queasy & quirky mingle with the cannily pitched
keep taking the tablets
a cure for the delusional is your donation away
in this state of radical emptiness
as itself & on its own
in the space we try to hold open
it is the least said short of saying nothing
precisely elusive
singular questions are fed into typescript
making the transition not my poem Mr Steinway's
but having been hung out
what is it about *alfresco* drama that *matinée* in Regent's Park
which of many algebraic conundrums illustrates this emotional *impasse*
while out to lunch with Frank in New York
in doubting a continuous progression of insight let's jump
allusive in style (first half nerves) clues are laid
key moments for the second
the angularity of a Threepenny Opera
at 2.15 in keeping time of squandered moments
lines of melodic coherence in inexplicable syntax
& sole witness of what is said
I have a back-of-the-envelope estimate of the irreducibility of song
yet who takes that logic bus to the end of the line gets out walks the beach.

[Happenstance:] FOXP2

"Everyone wants to be Cary Grant. Even I want to be Cary Grant." Archie Leach

In delight of this pursuit referral
call it a soft strip demolition of linearity by the line
the taut wire the play of difference
patterns of signification

in this attentive waywardness
with its encounters
in few words if I should be plain
much mischief not checked & exposed

we had hoped to pass on all of this
waiting again outside the double doors
wanting that past to happen again but better

no umbrage seems adequate

but enough of insidious intent let us go
confronted by the text's irreplaceability we cannot bear witness for the witness

beyond proto-scene mediate that spatial relation
trajector exterior to covert landmark
turn left at George Street over lunch inexplicably coded
let us both configure & function
watch for another cracking line-up of wickedly limber expat Jacobites
exporting the Enlightenment

trawling these coffee shops of Edinburgh for the right preposition
in all that unpredictable & incalculable inventiveness
the train finally in
clocked on she still being ill-defined
makes herself up again afresh for the Fringe
with a first tattoo

determined by words the brave let go
as monks disguised on a ride
& from a vantage point

on a morning such as this
as words might invent
a shoreline upcoming tide sun bleached breeze
walking barefoot (into that reality)
where grasses engender their dance & the wind
its gentle conspiracy (sudden as her curiosity)

with that effacement of ego
components cell-like assemble & divide mutate reconfigure
knowing but not quite placing

how it is
right now here
awash across the bright page.

[Happenstance:] Ghiogha

Suppose it was not so

stitched each to each
sole witness of what was said

'Ere. I know exactly

faint lines of background melody multi-tracked
(our phone 415 from Bolinas we'd like to see you)

each of us returns to try again even the over-coached

feet under the table chipped cup

knowing the possible is more important than the perfect

as for that inherent & premeditated quality crucial to the rationale of literary evaluation

That's what you're sayin' to yourself, I know it

contrapuntals bobbing & weaving

the lisible turned scriptable

bounce me back co-writer of the text

permit the fickle & quixotic intrusion upon learned scrutiny

let run the montage of syntactic & semantic discontinuity

calm & cuddled love in her gear *You wicked lot*

what needs fixing gets fixed

by an inspired if sometimes accidental trick

details may disappear into details

through each fissure in the subject

the more the meaningless is probed the less nonsensical

that which we are we are

The sort of people that get me a bad name

amid the intermittent pulse of silences

whatever the null result the augmented reality with its tagged data

this is the place

f. L cognitio cheap wine on a discount shelf

poems double rectified

each closed bottle its own ecosystem

nothing changes everything changes

You're wrong but I know what you're sayin'.

[Happenstance:] On Friday, with 80.

In the lyric moment to resist
between a here & there moments that compel attention

branded bewildering & bonkers decoherence in continual play
units of discourse wander about tracking a life

complicit with the intermittent listener
from the Falstaff by Pound & Knotts Lanes
such circuitous mapping proceeds by contiguity
through the unreal city by Thesis to Mrs Jones' Kitchen

mind grapples takes its chance keeps its head as best it can above water

under a street lamp a choice of particulars
at first short & simple – about Jack
until details do disappear into details
& Jack's work as neither beginning over & over

nor appearance but reappearance
as above Palmyra's broken skyline
a Perseid high point follows a shift in the debris stream

we are eight ledger lines above the stave
hardwired to trigger for nostalgia
being where & seeing what
who most resembles & which
one minute gone (that timer)
each thing finds its place with another
in succession that draws a turn of page

even without the juddering handheld observations in pulsating meter
for some a desirable patina accumulates while others gather only dust

still we don't have to like it all
bounced between affiliations with no time to pick holes
under a rolling boogie scrubbed & scuffed
a sprawling grunge of semantics trapped in whiskery arpeggios

the poem fumbles its opportunity Earth overshoots.

*Under the same sky with barrel-bombs: Abu Majed, Ahmad Mujahid, Ayman abu Al-
bara'a, Abu el-Izz, & all at the Fajr Library, Daraya; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily except
Fridays.*

[Happenstance:] By Itself About

the wet street an impatience to be there
begin again be in that place

conversations tangential meetings discrete
within a walled garden roofed with vine
morning air

(go ahead explain yourself)
/glæs/ & glass
the sign that cannot explain nor even name
which leaves its watermark
(Banksy without a point)

coffee unwinds in the cup (closed system of relations)
that irreducible minimum means

in cupboards kitchens pubs train journeys
with automatic adjustment of focus by context
strange but may be

while screaming into traffic
hold tight
it's only a poem
things have only just begun.

[Happenstance:] Addendum – Poetry as Word-System

ROOFTOPS RIGEL SITS ABOVE & FIRST BELOW A QUARTER MOON

a blockchain for our chatter secretes the meaning

yet against *the drearily literal by action word or gesture only the one exists*
(back in the '70s we all matched Stein's verbal art to Cubist painting)

again & again but not | all these slippery terms | our odd uncertainties that test consistency

you read of no coherence questioned by contradictory clues

AMBIGUITIES IMPOSSIBLE TO RESOLVE

shall we point or go about our business

ordinary vocab | verbal planes | no pulse to put your finger on

From Middle English weyfaren, originally in participle form weyfarand, from Old English wegfarende (“wayfaring”), equivalent to way + faring. Cognate with Danish vejfarende (“wayfaring”), Swedish vägfarande, Icelandic vegfarandi (“wayfaring”).

From Middle English wei, wai, from Old English weg (“way; path”), from Proto-Germanic *wegaz, from Proto-Indo-European *wegh-. Cognate with Saterland Frisian Wai (“way”), West Frisian wei, Dutch weg, Low German Weg, German Weg, Danish vej, Swedish väg, Norwegian Bokmål vei, Norwegian Nynorsk veg, Latin vehō, Albanian udhë.

From Middle English fare, from the merger of Old English fær (“journey, road”), a neuter, + faru (“journey, companions, baggage”), feminine, from Proto-Germanic *fara, *farō (“journey, fare”), from Proto-Indo-European *por- (“going, passage”).

Sound six emphatic beats by a tripping & a counterturn

embedded diphthongs in hard stops & aspirants

whose pots underscores this vats FROM IAMB TO IAMB

IF ONLY this were all | but words as even & the only

to not pretend | to take | their usual | & among them | **or more accurately**

code can just as easily be

& when (after all again) for that matter much

we can accordingly gracefully (thE TRICK OF | LET Me not) *what seems to be*

supports this (or the other) reading

OBSERVE THAT THE POEM MOVES

Other each around orbit in holes black two; exist binaries hole black that known is it. Another one into spiral and energy lose both, radiation gravitational of emission the given. Horizon event single a with one into coalesce suddenly two the and point breaking to pushed is relativity general, spiralling of stages later the in. Universe visible the in stars the all in light the all than more potentially, staggering is merger the in released energy the. Light of speed the at Universe the across propagate which, spacetime of curvature the in ripples, waves gravitational into dumped is this of most.

[Happenstance:] Her Words His

Few we are & fall from each other
 dust on the shelf as dust
among the self-effacing typed scraps photos black & white
 of string & tape
 (Honeysuckle Weeks who was lost is now found)

 of deeds dates documents
this scholarship of particulars within a thicket of close commentary
 enough

 beyond reasoned discourse mute contention
life in the cadence & shape of line

it is the seeming contradictions
displacements of faulty memory
 that lightness in the options that belies what lies outside the box

in transposition we refigure the word
 as soundtrack of the time
 ride that bus to Cambridge Station
 archive Boltanski's own heartbeats

imagine we establish a corridor & keep our word

in this & only
of what only can be sung
rearrangements of equal status neither peak nor trough
 for the wave that waits

 of this all things.

[Happenstance:] 15. *ibid.*, 25

"It's in the linkages." Tolstoy

Breath stutter logic locks plug to socket

off screen a circular saw that strains
to make this radio rewrite clearly

in a mind steeped & dyed that flows between what is & through

of breakers & a crescent strip of beach
pronouns tripped
picked up by perception & put back

across fitful tracings taking this from that
muddled & muddled in putting the out in & back again

words work because
& only

as if an eloquence of wind of rain those trees

distinctions elude the blurred & abandoned
Friday night in the Five Bells
a day rethought unbalanced by irrational optimism
such non-existent bias betokens assent
& of what accuracy the world
making that turn to language

which logics link the breaths.

[Happenstance:] Monk Playing Umbrella

Irascible gestures apart
as if slang defines a tribe
between ecolation promession & resomation
a handful is left
of the intransigent
(plus a little hydroxyapatite residue)
call it late style
leaving the contradictions
looking fore & aft
alert to those hasty presumptions
ten strings & a goatskin
with reservations unresolved doors left open the single emotive note
it is a gritty retelling
at once scrupulous & pledged to slow down
isolate
a test which entails
as on a sea steering the sea pulling
this ambiguity of direction
in a text as transparent as a Voynich tome (circa 1912)
clock cloud timer are now set
whether it is or not
simply
of so many exquisite so rare so young delicate eyes & fingers
what's said in a bar stays
compressed & vital truths as clues
as if by breeze through the house
a thin mist comes up valley
among conjectured Eastern hills
an umbrella of oiled paper under a quiet rain
outside the parameters of propositional form
grammatical
philosophical
we have (perhaps)(or not) this (speculative) inseparability
let us deploy against immediate logic.

[Happenstance:] Not I

alone shall we find a thinking that comprehends
To & about us being

it will have happened texts for nothing at a speed of thought
while that which is always a breath away

in difficulty
of course it's personal
(every word) I pass you in the street
when it comes to the line
the marvellous play on the nerves spills out

under the inauspicious too wise to hope
sceptical of false poses
witness to the best now in retreat

where evidence engenders the idea where is your evidence

in simple matters whether
why else
in a serious world come home to roost
hunt the snark
it all comes down to you

wandering across that field of possibility
falling back on benign violation
wherein the implication
within the seed
a world in a grain of proposition

Trump gets an easy ride
(About Aleppo. And what is Aleppo?)
it's a whydunnit
predictably ridiculed while scoring big at the box-office
best not to over-think these things (or not)

in Water Lane with Sam we plot
imagine our once again imagining
(what social maturity might mean)
what means beyond a narrow notion of lucidity
shooting the breeze

of the linguistic instrument
of what a mind might make within our grasp

endlessly dissatisfied by demand & adjustment
confronted with such pains & pleasure
what are the lies evasions in smoking out the phoney

let us articulate the provisional
stymied by a taut ascetic
start over
breathe

conjure a logic of how not why & whether plausible
this local language common lore in conversation
(go on)

والد الزهور يميل إلى ابنه the father of flowers tends to his son.

[Happenstance:] *topian* notations

Waylaid by feints & reversals
breezing along it's easy to forget

any old five clue cryptic in dub funk verse
with a spreadsheet to follow the plot

who tells the truth on line
& never just one answer line by line

time to sit still
take note of place moment mind's particular

bundled up in weight & measure without mimicry
thought's early imprint in syntax that duplicates a process
a rain that breaks

jack up your pots
three seeds each in a frost-free store
no way of knowing what weather

words weather whatever winter has to offer.

*

So here we are (adv. n. prn. v.) doing something else
brief but intense
which sight of a single word has prompted

in contributing one additional facet
uncomfortable at best lost
in translation (&
code) FlowMachines takes us on a stroll unmediated.

*

In brief a flash crash fat-finger error stops tripped
whether with a single stylus or a rake
lines broken leave their trace
our passing through this tangle of the world

crossing on the corner of Hawks Lane
making a morning
of a world which weaves itself through us

out of a past that gnaws into now
a guiding hand
guide line for what may yet

it is these deictic gestures that fix the mark
depiction in notation turned to script
where we are apt to forget the luminous detail

your diathesis just a table away.

[Happenstance:] XXXII

Not exactly & yet
we do know

Magrelli's notebook of words in the dark
the morning's quiet road down to the shore

might poetic intervention counter a mad world
(rejigged Hawking calculations perhaps)

Hey George brave young man whada'ya think?

anything you ask we asked you answered
coming back to that tied to the world coming to a moment

with oxytocin levels through the floor stuck with the lesser getting even
even Bob's gone missing (didn't anybody think to ask)

knowing the knowing from doing
in the air in the text as by word of mouth a moving edge

down familiar streets

unable to find a way home *brave old man*
piling up pieces of paper

can't you tell from this chatbox
that every smartpoem is now under pressure
random access memory prices are rising
each dissatisfaction a cliché
even the unfinished

[Happenstance:] All About

Glass roof light that spills in wrought iron table

wild flowers

knowing this the pen moves on

1. direct meeting
2. not remaining
3. remaining

knowing other

a door that swings

shall so few carry such burden (jnana yeshe gnosis)

the shock & stroke of it

where Marlowe gets fresh credit

terracotta in pale cool shadow

flat-packed surrealism turns up in a box

egg crates

ivory

stone

we all seek the sculptor's note

bobbins balanced as birds on a perch

having the pieces

~~I can stick it together for you~~

watching

listening

waiting in the rain

a door swings.

[Happenstance:] 10.41

Regathering
super-Mooning the local hour with a Lumix
taking again that night train
post-Moorgate Metropolitan from Marcin Wasilewski
busting through the week's madness

in our concurrent flights from reality
a deliveroo of the frantic with truths off the peg
it's cheap as chips this off-radar premium mixer
a Moscow Mule remake of vodka ginger-beer & lime

toss out a bottle to the hapless helpless track 5 platform 12
(wipe a hand across your mouth & laugh)
we are the incomplete the unfinishable
following the footprints of the Hadzabe
with our multiple parsings & resoundings of the rearranged & retraced

reboot with a pumped-up pulse of thought
prosody of raw data
a refusal.

[Happenstance:] Fizzles

By steady progression of syntactic order
wandering & still

we begin each case with a number
the thing itself
as between figure & ground distinctions dissolve

most confusing are the stars
two bright nails beside a Moon a line rises falls across a circle

unable to locate you with certainty I wait
ash & willow at a river's edge frame & sill carafe & cacti in multiple pots
dial we discover on a spool what is the end
I think I shall refuse to cohere

as if by trial & error
elements which make up the object fail to take its shape

our negotiations are complex
stripped trees re-aligning in the wind
putting uncertainty into the distance (construal theory if not myopia)
as you hesitate placing your cup precisely before speaking
green point not to red but to point again

this getting along with 90% accuracy
prefrontal cortical executive guesstimates
it's all simulation

talk not of logics in the brain to make choices
give me the chronic unease of the cheery soul
a muddied river running full
Bob fished from the tub in the nick of time (London '66).

[Happenstance:] Original Acetate Copy

Wired up connected
every suggestion a suggestion
call it neuro-talk (aka neuro-truistics) & of anarchy in the UK
as Jo Corr e burns his punk memorabilia (all five million quid's worth
tho' not a patch on Drummond Jura '94)
that's the way at first light
of the authentically logical as the absorbing puzzle

maybe the plots mislead
other thought slips in by the back door
in such composition by explanation
every move a rearrangement
forget appearance notice the manner of reappearance
you will see no evasion here
the writer's heart is on the flyleaf back flap page 52 line 21
why expect other

at certain expendable points the demarcation of planes is checked
wandering in her ways
direct questions of feeling receive no answer.

*

In just doing it sanitised sucked out
bubble-punk squalls dream of indie-pop to alt-rock
is it false news fake poems outsourced for the savvy
grown up glitter making a comeback finely milled over bigger specks of sparkle

where Kiefer's White Cube bad teeth collection (betting on a burning or an auction shortly)
is truly *gesamtkunstwerk* it's all but fact.

*

The fact is not just any voice can be displaced
words without
heard but baffled subverted
by a text of this & that but not

try jumping the gap a bungee free-fall off a bridge of expectation
between A & the apple or B & the orange
our language of inquiry proceeds
by songs of degrees
poetics of indeterminacy
an east wind nothing more
than that which may be logically we go when it departs

these moments that shape
you ask what mattering was like
go back observe the hesitations
however we splice it it bears the imprint from this point on.

*

From which instant it seems I am my brain
as if this bizarre attachment were mere cortical function

can we conjure a credible case
make it & it is
attention grabbing foot by foot.

[Happenstance:] Banish Learning, No More Grief.

When lost go back to point one

(hang on a sec the tape's stuck OK go again)

feeling it out back in the band

finding the bum note that's the trick

always this possibility of quiet over disquiet in a complex dialogue of pauses

something unsayable opens up & lets through

use me quiet without lett or stoppe

just us musos hanging out

intention's the limitation Cage & all that to find a speaking sound

such as making the simple awesomely simple

& like a painting's point of entry

what catches the eye a finest trace tiny crack

helpe me to seke

try friends & curious people

what's that it's a plan to exhibit for after you finish no before I start

of those long smoke-tinted days

having the mind of a fool the very way of thinking a world

to be still hearing

sounding

specific to its nature

as if this was & that not rather than but trusting to good verse

perhaps by rule of thumb or luck (*OK we're done with rehearsal*)

we shall feel it (passing here Zukofsky went)

blunt fact of being the pleasure of escapade.

[Happenstance:] It's Alright, Panjo.

Partial & particular
this impress
on permanence of paper for printed library materials
each commodity peddled by tone diction scissored syntax

imagine a 3-D printing of poetic truth
place to place moving as a random walk minus the random
leaving room for only (more) thought
deliberation's discontinuity
hardly a match for social media

yet neither signpost nor blueprint
entering our field of reference
both vague & vagary made tangible
out of a 589 nanometre fog
we cannot tell
character & plot now gone
leaving a serial music of shifting viewpoint
(Duchamp's figure heads for the stairs)

of the indefensible while perfectly reasonable & no justification for a refusal to think
the observer pans away
screenscape receding
as we risk crossing that line & intervening

is there still a place for slow-core minimalists
currency in the elektrobank for knotty riffs & acid blasters with melodic pep

might the boards we tread still save
(no fear no envy no meanness).

[Happenstance:] Still Making Matters

Here's the thing
it's a mismatch (despite what's said & done) I admit it
& why not
not that I would mislead you whereas

without syntax cadence takes over
inflections of moments that matter
modulations of the embodied

Gabryska's body (tbl#30 chk#21)
sways gently to Bechet does she also wonder what is
this thing called love (Salle Pleyel '52)
gut's grief that lies long hidden

among fibrillations of phrase that make a life
where the incompatible rubs up against the irrefutable
it's the differences that engage
in plotting stop to stop

no doubting determined
daily by chance in populist times
might poetics be as politics by other means

immersed in a collective racket of continual surprise
let's be happily bracketed off
out of the loop
necessarily involving error & habits of misrepresentation
a shape shift of epistemology without portfolio

how did we do today
(10% off if you use this unique code)

it's a map but not the map
where the unexpected coalesces into occurrence
words wedged.

[Happenstance:] Wassailing

Say what you like
if it happens it happens
nothing is out of category (whatever prototypical planet you call home)
perk up
trawling Skoobs for energies of ambiguity
chordal patterns serial scannings permutations of attention

no amount of heady stomping in tearaway DIY punk can compensate
whatever brokerage of time & place
recorded mixed mastered it's emotional not technical

not unreasonably worried
these become our economies of engagement
fiddling with a passage in hand
undermining main clauses

by semblance & resemblance multiple monologues begin to converse
yet how is it possible such resonance so long in the mind

with no squeak in the word spool
why not speed check
from dislocation & disruption to syncopated pause & rhythmic cue
tune up.

[Happenstance:] Her Brief Hours

Spin networking the graph of day
node to node syntactic bits that please
it's the edges that resonate rough winds untrimmed

your disappearance up the street as lacuna left into Westgate
where traces persist & such language
of perception fools no one

tweaking these cognitive mechanics
Logical Form as forgiving engine gets us home somehow
whatever bewildering negations

damped down in differing ways your figure still fading endures

shift or zoom I'm easy
stumbling about this cluttered array of resonant space
to every star (you are) that bark

blobs to a granularity of each against a bounded background
(Matvei scoffs at the infinitely divisible).

[Happenstance:] If Talk This

Ease it back
mindful of orientation
shared attention
in any machine for thinking
the vigilance of reader against writer may be rarely matched

& of that rain on glass operator as tram ticket the loading of inconsequentials
being all about density against disposition

bumbling phonoaesthetics apart
whose attentional blink will blink first
in this game of poetic chicken

half a second's blind spot blurs us into indistinction
measures of a life mostly missed

try a three-part repetition followed by a fourth iteration that breaks the pattern
emerging from the embedded in the relative clause
elements of oncoming disruption

along perception's scale rain now runs in the gutter
where we cross transitional moments in inappropriate footwear
caught out lulled by predictable edges
daytime starlight bounces off a wet street

an end-point of every vector being its sense
I have left the final two lines
absolutely it's a listening proposition
why not
rooting through an unreal time improvisation
picking out the right errors

of all the bars in all the world
this water drips from this awning.

[Happenstance:] Sit Crooked, Think Straight

Back of Jewry Lane by the Sally Army drop-in
a street dance of posture gait gesture
as with vocal qualities of pitch tone timbre

it's a text piece for three voices
of the embodied shaping subject
call it an easy psychophysical tempo
between a couple of drunks & a referee

after four measures of the first & so on writing instalments
(actors per line forty-three or less)
transcripts of talk scramble across breathings swallowings

no answer to such questions
as if one plus one plus one doesn't add up

but being Thursday it is the sort of thing that happens
feel free to infer meaning
take that medicine
Lit Crit talk heavy on the Crit
(minor cut & paste surgery might fix it)

while the boys in the Choc Café are patching up their world

it is a syntax still until you ask
how can I know what'll be said
writing follows its own bloodied nose.

[Happenstance:] Addendum – What Seems

HERE| *Neolithic soul drone collectives get a hearing*| 3 fans (3 blades each) out of sync | THE PULSE THAT PRESSES ON| fiddle cello digital| *in the pocket of living & breathing* |

Now| **space as amorphous container disappears**| a fabric of neighbouring relations| GONE THE INERT FLOW ALONG WHICH EVERYTHING UNFURLS| forget the place *IN* & the succession *IN*| *we are simply counting interactions*| a billion distinct dances| Intrinsic To The World|

'istorin| The writer wished to re-signify history as story in order to recover the legitimacy of personal experience of finding out for oneself. This would then constitute one individual human cosmos (the 'kosmos inside' any of us) among all other human *cosmoi*.

Visceral Poetics (Veg Box Café)
Overdrive Harpists (Mrs Jones' Kitchen)
Violin Anarchists (Water Lane Coffee House)

These mutations can more productively be explored as recalibrated throwbacks to a multifaceted and prior cosmology.

COMPOSITION SIGNED WITH INITIALS & DATED '27

Provenance: Max Moos, Geneva; a gift to the present owner.

Literature: Lamberto Vitali, Milan 1977, vol.II, no.638.

Telex: 24454 SPBLON-G **The highest bidder shall be the buyer at the hammer**

words that write WORDS THAT READ.

Acknowledgements

"The poem said in any other way is not the poem." Charles Bernstein

6 Nuts & Bolts

Charles Bernstein, Leslie Scalapino.

7 This One That

Jack Spicer, John Cage, Philip Whalen, Mallarme, Paul Klee.

8 TP Atten

Jackson Mac Low.

9 What Matter If

Steve Spence, David Caddy, Mina Loy, George Oppen, John Cage, Simon Smith, Jim Hunter.

10 She Being Brilliantly Mad

Dashiell Hammett, Andy Gill, Emily Jupp.

11 Outside Eye

Ed Dorn, 'Riverside Interview' 1981; Alice Jones 2015; Simon Kelner 2015; Mina Loy.

12 Early Doors

Hunter on Stoppard, 1982; Nanao Sakaki, 1980; Gary Snyder on Nanao, 1980; Allen Ginsberg, 1980.; John Berger, 1972; Pablo Picasso; Will Gompertz, 2015; Albert Rothenberg; Tom Stoppard, 1972; Edgar Allan Poe.

14 Not Proven

Hunter on Stoppard, 1982; J. Christopher Jones, Architectural Assoc. Quarterly, 1980; Raymond Chandler, 1953; James Joyce, 1918; Ashley Kahn, 2000, quoting Miles Davis, March 2nd 1959; Shakespeare (Sonnet 76); 'word' (ci) Shuowen Jiezi, 2nd century CE; Paul Cezanne; Jonah Lehrer, 2007; Miles Davis, 1973.

15 Seeing Red

Paul Blackburn, 1969; John Cage, 1967.

16 XIX (It Don't Mean)

Paul Blackburn, 1968-69; Jonah Lehrer, 2007.

18 Tightrope

Jack Spicer, Language, 1964; Joseph M. Conte, 1991 quoting WCW & Robert Creeley; George Oppen, 1968.

20 XIII

George Oppen, 1934, 1969; Joseph M. Conte, 1991; William Carlos Williams, 1967; Charles Bernstein, 1968.

21 Double Edge

Cummings, 1922, 1924, 1957; Perloff 1992; Steve McCaffery.

22 XXIV

Benjamin Hoff, 1992; Murray Gell-Mann, 1964/69; W.S.Graham; Joseph M. Conte, 1991; Paul Blackburn, 1969; Peter Middleton.

23 Addendum – Of Indeterminacy

Gertrude Stein, Marjorie Perloff.

- 24 XXV**
James Grady 1974; Lyn Hejinian 2000.
- 25 From A-G to H**
Marjorie Perloff.
- 26 Resist**
Bruce Andrews; Cleanth Brooks; Wallace Stevens; George Oppen.
- 27 3# Format**
Emily Dickinson.
- 28 Dox (99.9), or How It Means**
e.e.cummings 1926; Janette Wolf 2016; Jessica Barrett 2016; Keston Sutherland 2014; Charles Olson 1950; Allen Ginsberg 1961; Marjorie Perloff 1991; Lyn Hejinian 1992; John Cage; Andy Gill 2016.
- 30 Riff (self-edit) for pianist & two**
John Bell; Andy Gill; Homer; Abigail Lang; Lorine Niedecker; Marjorie Perloff; Ezra Pound; Jeremy Prynne; Will Shakespeare.
- 32 To Begin With**
Ian Sinclair.
- 33 Give It Up**
Frank O'Hara; Marjorie Perloff; W.B.Yeats.
- 34 XXII (Kind Of Blue)**
Geoffrey Chaucer; Maram Al-Massri; Frank O'Hara.
- 35 Best Ride Ever**
Timothy Clark 2005; Ezra Pound.
- 36 Spontaneous Particulars**
Susan Howe.
- 37 FOXP2**
Thomas Wyatt.
- 38 Ghiogha**
Alfred Tennyson; DylanThomas; Max Miller; Marjorie Perloff.
- 39 On Friday, with 80**
Gertrude Stein 1912; Marjorie Perloff 1981; John Cage 1981; Robin Blaser 1975; Charles Altieri 1984.
- 40 By Itself About**
William Carlos Williams 1931; Joseph Conte 1991; Umberto Eco 1979; Robert Creeley 1965, Charlie Brooker.
- 41 Addendum – Poetry as Word System**
Perloff on Beckett, Yeats on Pound, Wiktionary.org
- 42 Her Words His**
Susan Howe; Umberto Eco 1979; John Peck 1981; George Oppen 1975.
- 43 15. ibid., 25**
George Oppen; William James; Lyn Hejinian.
- 44 Monk Playing Umbrella**
George Oppen; Peter Nicholls; Alan Watts; Ausonius; Nietzsche; Rachel Blau DuPlessis.

45 Not I

Lisa Dwan; Samuel Beckett; Hegel; George Oppen; Ian Hacking.

46 *topian* notations

Susan Howe; Marjorie Perloff/Gertrude Stein; Leslie Scalapino; Margaret Atwood; Henri Bergson 1911.

47 XXXII

George Oppen, Mary Oppen.

48 All About

Ezra Pound; George Oppen.

49 10.41

Marcin Wasilewski.

50 Fizzles

Marjorie Perloff, Samuel Beckett, William Carlos Williams.

51 Original Acetate Copy

Lyn Hejinian, Marjorie Perloff, John Taggart, Sex Pistols, Gertrude Stein, William Gass, William Carlos Williams.

52 Banish Learning, No More grief.

Laozi, David Bowie, Charlie Mingus, Thomas Wyatt, Luc Tuymans, Robert Creeley.

53 It's Alright, Panjo.

Charles Bernstein, Peter Brook, Bob Dylan.

54 Still Making Matters

John Cage, Eliot Weinberger, Charles Bernstein, Marcel Duchamp.

55 Wassailing

Peter Stockwell, Charles Bernstein, Samuel Beckett.

56 Her Brief Hours

William Shakespeare, Peter Stockwell, René Magritte.

57 If Talk This

I.A.Richards, Elizabeth Spelke, Peter Stockwell.

58 Sit Crooked Think Straight

Bertolt Brecht, G. Downey, Thelonius Monk, John Cage, Marjorie Perloff, David Antin, Gertrude Stein, Marcel Duchamp, T.S. Eliot, Charles Altieri.

59 Addendum – What Seems

Reitha Pattison, Robbie Robertson, Carlo Rovelli.

Part Two

Speaking Beyond Words: George Oppen's Late Poetry as an Exploration of Cognition.

Introduction: The *Happenstance* of Oppen

Blowing A Phrase¹

"No limit to the possible permutations [...] and that is precisely why poetry is so valuable."

Wang Fuzhi (1619-1692)

I came to George Oppen first through Robert Creeley, having read Creeley's *Poems (1950-1965)*² a couple of years after its publication. This reached me through Compendium bookshop in Camden Town, along with Zukofsky's collected shorter poems, *All (1923-1958)*,³ but I knew nothing of Oppen at that time. I read Creeley's *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes & Essays (1970)*⁴ twenty years later, which in turn led me to Creeley's 'Introduction' to his *George Oppen Selected Poems (2003)*⁵ and thus to Oppen's work. Around the same time, Eliot Weinberger's *American Poetry Since 1950* (published in 1993)⁶ struck me as the first anthology to do justice in gathering together those innovative American poets I most admired up until that point in the twentieth century. It included an otherwise un-anthologised Oppen. Weinberger would go on to 'Preface' Michael Davidson's Carcanet edition of Oppen's *New Collected Poems* (also in 2003).⁷ Importantly for my thinking towards both the creative and the analytical components of a possible PhD, Creeley's selection of Oppen included Oppen's essay 'The Mind's Own Place' and 'Twenty-Six Fragments', as well as a chronology of Oppen's unusual life which began to intrigue me. In his 2003 'Introduction', Creeley also highlights the fact of Oppen and Zukofsky working "from the premise that poetry is a function of perception" – as Oppen puts it himself in 'The Mind's Own Place': "the *act* of perception" [my italics]. Creeley also paraphrased William Carlos Williams in referring to Oppen's "complex 'thinking with his poems'"; and "Oppen is trying all his life to think the world, not only to find or to enter it, or to gain a place in it – but to realize it, to figure it, to have it literally in mind."

With a background in astrophysical research, I have long been familiar with the experience of thinking out a problem through mathematical calculation. The thinking is done through the mathematics; the latter is not a subsequent reiteration of the former but rather its means of materialization. I realised that that was what Oppen was doing with words in his later poems, and that this accounted for their apparent oddity; they tend not to be about an obvious single subject, nor to present a completed or closed end

product. They are Oppen exploring on the page both his being and thinking through his language. Oppen thereby offered a link with the interest I had in certain cognitive and neuro-scientific inquiries in our own time. The first decade of the twenty-first century had seen concepts from cognitive studies in linguistics and psychology emerging from the professional journals: ideas such as embodied cognition, conceptual metaphor, and image schema, along with myriad neuroscientific observations on brain activity and its relation to experiential response or behaviour, each with implications for Oppen's kind of writing and my own which explore those transitions between experience, meaning, and language. The cognitive exercise in which Oppen appeared to engage in his late writing also presented additional correlations with an earlier life of mine, in which I had studied what was then called 'movement psychology' under Yat Malmgren at the Drama Centre in London (1969-71).⁸ This was an analytical transposition for actors of the work of Rudolf Laban and William Carpenter, retrospectively redolent of ideas now associated with embodied cognition, being an analysis which explored the links between motor-sensory experience and the meaning-language interface, a quintessentially late Oppen preoccupation .

The question of connection between my own and Oppen's late work is thus partially explained in that shared motivation. However, I made the decision that in [*Happenstance:*] I would avoid too obvious a stylistic link to Oppen in order to avoid the criticism of imitation or simplistic derivation, let alone pastiche. In spite of the preference for the short intense lyric as a form in the poems I had written immediately prior to beginning the [*Happenstance:*] series, and a fondness for the fragmented line and the syntactically challenging – all of which had attracted me to Oppen in the first place – I nonetheless opted for something in longer form, superficially conversational, while aiming for language that is relatively tight and deliberate at the phrase level, targeting a balance between spontaneity and deliberation. For subject focus, I would take the research process itself, a plotting of the research preoccupations in the middle period of the PhD, when my reading of Oppen (poems, notes, correspondence) had segued into my reading about Oppen (critical commentary and selected literary theory: Heller, Taggart, Nicholls, Perloff, Middleton, Clark). This reading ran in parallel with my continued reading in the cognitive sciences and their correlations with the literary field (for example, Andrea Tyler and Vyvyan Evans on the cognitive semantics of prepositions; Peter Stockwell on cognitive poetics). Much of this material in language and ideas would be played with in [*Happenstance:*], and some of the unexpected political madness of 2016 also made its inescapable appearance. Oppen's political stance was always left of centre. His affiliation with the communist party before 1939 put him at odds with the post-war political climate and, as described in Mary Oppen's account, drove George and his family into a decade-long Mexican exile.⁹ In the more liberal climate to which he returned and in which he flourished as a writer in the 1960s and 1970s, he continued to be politically anti-establishment, evident in his direct participation in the anti-Vietnam war movement,

much of his correspondence, and the social empathy readily identified in such writing as 'Of Being Numerous'. Being left of centre in my own political views, while *[Happenstance:]* is not a political commentary, yet my disappointment at the anti-Jeremy Corbyn climate of late 2015 and throughout 2016 in the British media undoubtedly makes an oblique appearance. Also, the anti-European politics with its paranoia against diversity and multiculturalism that culminated in the 23rd June 2016 Brexit vote, and the isolationist, populist, self-interest in the USA culminating in President Trump's election in November 2016 also inevitably take their place in the writing. The only significant break in my composition of the *[Happenstance:]* poems came in the weeks following Trump's election when, frankly, a recovery of positive energy took a little time. Through all of this also runs the intractable chaos of the Syrian civil war, the barbarism of Daesh, and the misery of the migrants, and *[Happenstance]* references each of these in a measured way.

From the start, for *[Happenstance:]* I chose a journal-esque format for a number of reasons. Firstly, given the necessary cohesive argument of the dissertation component of the PhD towards which I was working, my instinct was to run a more flexible creative component in parallel. There is a relief and a pleasure to be had in 'writing as writing'. I'll return to the distinction between 'series' and 'sequence' in this context in a moment but, given the formalism of the convention that is the academic dissertation, the reality of day-to-day experience that I chose to reflect in the creative component follows Lyn Hejinian's echo of William James: "in the transitions as much as the terms connected."¹⁰ The 'incomplete' and open contrasts with the 'complete' and closed and, just like the later Oppen, it's the open-ended that seems to me most 'alive', to most readily engage the attention so critical to the reader's experience. That centrality of 'attention' to the mechanics of the writing and reading experience is something I consider more closely in the dissertation in reference to Oppen's own work. Given the opportunities for inclusion of all conceivable varieties of language material in my intended poetic journal, I nonetheless sustained throughout what in retrospect appears a rather conservative format stylistically. While playing with more obtuse forms as it were 'on the side', I chose to include only three short examples as 'Addenda', almost as intermissions in the *[Happenstance:]* flow, pointing perhaps to future possibilities.

As a series of journal-esque entries at a rate of approximately one each week, the length and duration of each poem was then delineated by simple practical constraint. Within that, I adopted three principles in which I framed the writing. Firstly, that there be a balance between spontaneity and deliberation, having defined for myself a spontaneity of tone that would be conversational in its inclusion of everyday language, alongside a deliberation that requires precision and concision with no extraneous use of language. Secondly, that the phrase and typed line relationship be conventional, essentially one semantically (and usually syntactically) coherent phrase per line. Thirdly, however, that neither syntactic nor semantic convention need connect each line, indeed the sense

gleaned will depend in part on the discordant juxtaposition of those phrasal components. This is part of the desire to open not close semantic possibilities throughout [*Happenstance*].

Being conversational in a manner derived from my rereading of Jack Spicer, Frank O'Hara, and Paul Blackburn, the open field format also felt appropriate. As Tyler Doherty puts it in *For the Time Being* (a selection, history, and critique, of the poetic journal genre): "Not that these pieces aren't carefully crafted – they clearly are – it's just that the act of writing isn't seen as preparatory to something else. In a very real sense, there is nothing else. *This* is it."¹¹ Paul Blackburn's 'Journal' poems from the last years of his short life presented me with an open field format that was both spatially relaxed and potentially concise. Nonetheless, while Blackburn's 'Journals' fit the more usual diary-based poetic journal template, my own focus remained on writing directly out of the research material I was exploring as much as any day-to-day reflection.

Oppen's late work focuses extensively on the one or two-word unit or, at least, the minimal group of words, rather than the larger-breath prosody characteristic of Blackburn, O'Hara or Spicer. I concentrated most on concision and precision of language at the phrasal level. Oppen's example of deliberation in language selection would be mine also but my prosody, my voice, would seek distinctiveness initially through composition with units at this phrasal scale. I hoped to use my scientific background in order to comfortably mix the discourses of literary and scientific scholarship with the conversational and the personal, the social, the political, as they arose, but the attention was on the 'writing as writing', that is of language and prosody following its own nose, drawing liberally from its mental surroundings, rather than constrained by much consciously predetermined direction. In matters of concision and precision one can argue that my own scientific-background proclivity for accuracies in a 'fake news' environment, is itself a political gesture. Oppen's late writing also attracts me because of its struggle to be accurate, also a political response to a world in which Oppen identifies a debasement of language and therefore thought. What Oppen attempts in recording his motor-sensory experience and its relationship to his imagination and intellect is itself also to be seen as a resistance against what he felt deeply to be the overwhelming odds of experiential life against the individual's ability to grasp it. Oppen's desire for non-rhetorical accuracy in identifying the actuality of the world conflicted in practice with his political imperatives during the 1930s and led to his abandoning poetry at that time. Oppen would remain absolutely opposed to all vacuously rhetorical writing throughout his life. A journal-esque record of 'what (actually) is' in the mental landscape also runs counter to much contrivance of rhetoric and that has been my aim in [*Happenstance*]. As Peter Middleton has put it, there's nothing wrong with assertions but "affirming them without reserve is".¹² So it is that I've sought to balance the propositionally assertive with the speculative, as did Oppen, and his grumble over 'poems with too much point' resonates with me. Life

isn't like that, and in so far as I enjoy writing that reflects realistic aspects of life, I tend always to favour question over answer, perhaps also the inclination of a scientific disposition. I therefore sought to pursue the inquisitively incomplete across a range of scales, building from phrase to couplet to stanza to poem to Series. Middleton's discussion of the speculative poetic proposition came to loom large among my interests and will emerge again in the dissertation.¹³

Another link to Oppen is that [*Happenstance:*] is a 'discrete series'. I take a series to be a succession not a development; in mathematical terms it is a summation, an accumulation of effect. It is in the Poundian tradition of juxtaposition without connectives, what has been called the 'ideogrammatic' poetic tradition.¹⁴ Oppen's own *Discrete Series* of 1934 makes that point. Each component in the series is free-standing. There may be correlations and cross-connections one can make in reading and shuffling the component poems but there is no intentional 'sequence'. This was my objective. The temporality of succession in a 'journal' is one inescapable narrative but it is not a straightjacket if the temporality remains low key. So, for example, none of the poems in [*Happenstance:*] are dated. It is not a sequence in which a deliberate, we might say 'organic', thread leads linearly from A to G to H and so on. As with Robert Duncan's *Passages*, for example, another clear series in contrast to a sequence, there is no necessary beginning, middle, or end to a series such as this.

As for reading [*Happenstance:*], we have open form. This classically offers a score in which line length guides the breath, space indicates the pauses, and indentation suggests the relative emphasis or perhaps tone. Apart from explicitly showing the alternative of "make each line / cut itself" (a quote from Jack Spicer) in 'This One That' (the second poem of [*Happenstance:*]), there is generally one coherent phrase per line. This deliberately presents an intelligibility of successively coherent lines, characterised perhaps as resonant fragments although often in dissonant assembly, and which intelligibility may or may not be, at times, illusory. Uppermost in my mind, as I've already mentioned, are the pleasures of the speculative, albeit balanced by the occasional assertion. As for pace in reading, the deliberation of Oppen's late work reminds us that slow reading frees up the spaces between words and lines that allows the mind with all its memory and imaginative invention to enter into the moment, to bring much more to the words spoken than may be immediately apparent. The spaces between lines in [*Happenstance :*] are also deliberate and ubiquitous, as are variants in the manner of Blackburn in which quadruple spacing between [*Happenstance :*] phrases echo the 'starred' separations in some of Blackburn's work. In the attention-grabbing process that is writer signalling to reader, these devices are used selectively.

The 3rd century BCE Chinese scholar Mencius suggested: "Words that speak of things near at hand but with far-reaching import are good words."⁹In his use of 'near at hand'

words, Paul Blackburn is often deliberately ‘off-hand’, his apparently casual record of the day in fact too often rather contrived. This is less so in his later work when living a more resolved life with wife and child, and subsequently in facing life with the inoperable cancer that eventually killed him, but it is the everyday quiddity of what surrounds him that he does record and which intention he shares with Oppen. Through a much sparser lexical and syntactic deliberation, Oppen records that ‘whatness’ of being around him. Oppen wrote to friend and fellow Objectivist Charles Reznikoff: “Write/in the great/world small”¹⁶, which (I agree with Tyler Doherty) implies ‘small’ meaning “a humble willingness to let things (finally) alone and think *with* (not for) them on their own terms.” Lyn Hejinian also refers to the difference between ‘knowledge’ and ‘acknowledgment’,¹⁰ and it is in the latter that Oppen presents us with the world, reminding us *that* the world is, not telling us *what* the world is (again to paraphrase Doherty’s interpretation). I hoped to pitch my own deliberation of language and tone between the two, Blackburn and Oppen; recognising that the more abstract subject material of [*Happenstance*:] is necessarily largely removed from the ‘thinginess’ of later Oppen’s raw experiential material, while also more ‘serious’ in scholarly intent and degree of ‘intellectualisation’ than Blackburn’s usual conversations.

The research process by definition is an exploration. The writing of [*Happenstance*:] evolved as an inquiry out of its own times, places, and preoccupations, without excessive preconception. The analytical component of this submission will show Oppen’s late poetry equally arising as his own pursuit of what Middleton has called that “poetic right of experiment and inquiry”¹⁰; for, as Lyn Hejinian puts it so clearly: “The language of poetry *is* a language of inquiry [my italics]”,¹¹ and nowhere is this more evident than in the late work of George Oppen.

¹ Jack Kerouac refers to a jazz tenor saxophone player, especially when improvising, as “drawing in a breath and blowing a phrase...til he runs out of breath, and when he does, his sentence, his statement’s been made [...] sentences, as breath separations of the mind.” Jack Kerouac, *Paris Review* 43 (1968).

² Robert Creeley, *Poems 1950-1965* (1966). London: Calder & Boyars

³ Louis Zukofsky, *All: the collected shorter poems 1923-1958* (1966). London: Jonathan Cape.

⁴ Robert Creeley, *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes & Essays* (1970). San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation.

⁵ George Oppen, *Selected Poems*, ed. Robert Creeley (2003). New York: New Directions.

⁶ *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators & Outsiders*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (1993). New York: Marsilio.

⁷ George Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Davidson (2003). Manchester: Carcanet.

⁸ Janys Hayes, *The Knowing Body: Yat Malmgren’s Acting Technique* (2010). Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag.

⁹ Mary Oppen, *Meaning A Life* (1990), Santa Rosa, CAL: Black Sparrow Press.

¹⁰ Lyn Hejinian, *Language of Inquiry* (2000). Berkeley, CAL: University of California Press, 2

¹¹ *For the Time Being: The Bootstrap Book of Poetic Journals*, eds. Tyler Doherty & Tom Morgan (2007). Lowell, MASS: Bootstrap Press, 14.

¹² Peter Middleton, ‘Open Oppen’, *Textual Practice* 24:4, 623-648 (2010)

¹³ Peter Middleton, ‘Open Oppen’, 626.

¹⁴ Laszlo Géfin, *Ideogram*, (1982, 2012). Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press

¹⁵ Mencius, *Mencius*, trans. D.C. Lau.(2003) London: Penguin,164.

¹⁶ George Oppen quoted in *For the Time Being*, 16.

¹⁷ Peter Middleton, *Physics Envy* (2015). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 13.

¹⁸ Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 2-3.

Chapter 1

Introduction: 'At the nail's point'

1.1 Old Salt Survivor^{1.1}

He said "I try to describe the sense of existence." Rachel Blau DuPlessis

In the thirty-two years since American poet George Oppen's death in 1984, scholarship across a range of key Oppen issues has been undertaken by Peter Nicholls, Michael Heller, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and John Taggart, to name just a few of the principals. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis recently put it (on the occasion of the 2008 centenary of Oppen's birth) in the context of recollections of her personal relationship with George and Mary Oppen: "Peter Nicholls emphasizes Oppen as the *isolato*. Oppen is viewed as a singular, heroic, struggling figure in dialogue with philosophers and critical theorists", while she remembers him also for "the sociality [...] his relations with others (as dramatized in the letters), the intense familial connections." As she says, for her: "It's odd to be at a moment when one may have different Oppens — it appears as if a purely spiritual one may be forming too (a sort of Michael Heller, John Taggart kind of Oppen), only grazing lightly on the philosophical and resisting the political/ internationalist."^{1.2} In this dissertation, I wish to suggest a further facet of Oppen for our cubist portrait, through a strand of Oppen's poetics of inquiry evident in his later work. This later poetry was, to quote Peter Nicholls, a "poetry of being"^{1.3}, immersed to a significant degree in the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger. It was also a "poetry of conjecture" (to steal a phrase from Charles Altieri referencing the distinctly different conjectural stance of Robert Creeley).^{1.4} Oppen was, in his generation, a rare example of a poet much concerned in later life with the root process of understanding experience and its translation into language, equal to and perhaps more than his preoccupation with conventional subject content, even though he wrote his fair share on the subjects of fear, death, poverty, injustice, and belief, in his last three collections (*Seascape: Needle's Eye* 1972, *Myth of the Blaze* 1975, *Primitive* 1978).^{1.5} Other poets of the post-WWII generation (Oppen himself straddling both the before and after) certainly took an interest in the modernist issues of form and process as much as content but none seems to have focused on what we would now term questions of cognition quite as determinedly. The post-WWII poets were all, however, inheritors of what Peter Middleton has called that "poetic right of experiment and inquiry"^{1.6}, a right first claimed for poets by Ezra Pound in his pre-First World War London days, but a philosophy hardly explored by subsequent poets until Charles Olson rediscovered it after WWII. Oppen's insistent preoccupation with the testing of 'poetic

thinking' in his work was undertaken within an ontological and epistemological framework that is readily recognisable from a 21st century perspective – ours being one in which the cognitive sciences conjure fresh evidential insight and theoretical conjecture on a regular basis. Where cognitive studies and poetics meet may be ground in which new conceptual and aesthetic possibilities for poetry will emerge. At its simplest we have to ask whether Oppen's discoveries as recorded through his poems, notes and correspondence, remain valid in the light of modern day cognitive sciences and, if so, what they might teach a contemporary poet such as myself.

1.2 Clues To The Labyrinth¹⁷

"The net exists to catch fish." Zhuangzi

The American poet, essayist, personal friend and long-time critical champion of George Oppen's poetry, Michael Heller, has written: "Poems and poetries no longer successfully enter into our lives as wisdom...but as occasions and registrations of being wise or unwise, lucky or unlucky, within time and event. Our poems require a resemblance to instantaneously gathered 'sensibilia', contradictory and competing *gestalts*, perspectives, apprehensions in time"¹⁸. In short, poems seem to arise out of a moment's complex mix of thought, meaning and language, and not least the understanding we have of what we are and of what we may be capable of knowing and expressing. Understanding the nature of that consciousness and its associated cognitive process has been addressed in the 20th century by philosophers of mind and experimental psychologists, and increasingly in the 21st century by an ever-widening range of cognitive- and neuro-scientists. The very notion of the individualized consciousness and its relationship to its world continues to be redefined. There has been both congruence and disagreement over issues of attention, perception, memory, and the links to language; of personal identity and the self; of the unconscious and the preconscious; of metacognition; and the validity generally of dualistic and reductionist analyses of individual experience set against more phenomenological perspectives. Hypotheses of embodied cognition, conceptual metaphor, image schemas, and what have been called languages of thought, have a direct bearing on what poetry might be capable of encapsulating and of precisely how personal meaning melds into the thought that translates into language. Just as literary scholarship has long felt comfortable in identifying a philosophical or psychological context to a literary work, so now it is appropriate to glean insight and information from the available cognitive sciences as we comment on and, in this case interpret, aspects of Oppen's late poetry, the better to appreciate his achievement.

This, of course, involves an inter-disciplinary approach. In this, we may be moving outside professional comfort zones. Nonetheless, given the literal primacy of a PhD in 'Poetry: Practice as Research' remit with its explicit identification of a modernist inheritance of poetry as inquiry^{1.9} – this could be considered both an unavoidable and a welcome step. The languages of distinct academic discourse can be very different and, indeed, depend much on a background grasp of fact and convention, more than one can bridge in a short dissertation such as this. But while supplementing the essential factual argument with appropriate subsidiary notes, I shall endeavour to integrate the different traditions of literary scholarship and scientific analysis as seamlessly as possible in my discussion, mindful always that my study is a literary one whose raw material is the scholarship arising from a close reading of Oppen's late poetry, his own correspondence, notes, and commentaries upon it, and the critical opinions of leading scholars.

It became a Modernist cliché, but is nonetheless fundamental for that, that 'process' – indeed, the *experience* of process – is as significant to many a poet as product. As Oppen himself said: "We don't really know what Reality is made of"^{1.10} but "clarity means, among other things, to know how the words come to meaning...to *experience* how the words come to meaning"^{1.11}. Process for Oppen meant more than the mechanics, the modernist techniques of putting words together on the page. He dug deep into the process of how his own language seemed even to relate to his experience and what that experience meant to him. If we are to tread between the particularity of the arts and the generality of the sciences, there is a balance to be struck. One of the critics of what has been seen as an overly-reductionist approach among many contemporary neuroscientists to the study of consciousness and cognitive process, John Briggs, has championed the role of meaning in poetry "as an on-going process and perception rather than meaning as the conclusion of knowledge"^{1.12}; and of poetry thus "*moving the mind beyond its conceptual confines* [my italics]"^{1.13}. We may also be reminded of writer and essayist Brian Phillips's remarks in the face of post-modern critiques and what, as a result, he called "taste's instability" in our contemporary poetry culture, and "the uncertainty that pervades our aesthetic experience"^{1.14}. Phillips was led to the following conclusion: "I have written as though the problems facing the poetry culture were a long way off from the aesthetic difficulties facing individual writers, and I think this is true in the sense that the issue of *what kinds of aesthetic experience are conceptually possible* [my italics] precedes the issue of what kinds of aesthetic experience poets are actually attempting to create."^{1.14}

Defining that 'conceptual possibility' and how mind might move beyond the 'confines', as revealed by research in the cognitive sciences; its relationship to poetic potential (that is, the potential for so-called poetic, rather than scientifically verifiable, knowledge); each of these, through the example of George Oppen's late poetry, are the core objectives of this study. My thesis is that Oppen's poetic preoccupations indeed both extend and prefigure ontological and epistemological discussions in his own time and the decades that followed his death. As a result, I believe his late poetry presents us with creative inquiries at the edge of conceptual possibility that were not only radical in his own day, but are poetic explorations that remain cogent half a century later.

1.3 First Taste

"Let us not mince words – the marvelous is always beautiful." André Breton

"In a lively little work called *A Dissertation Concerning the Perfection of the English Language and the State of Poetry*, published by Leonard Welsted in 1724, Welsted argues that the beauties of poetry are "rather to be felt, than describ'd"; that they lie "too retir'd within the Bosom of Nature" to be explained by "mechanic Laws". But he insists at the same moment that poetry is objective, is "a Science of Reason" differing from the other sciences only in that, in order to perceive its truth, one must be endowed with a special perceptive power – which he calls "Taste or a Faculty of Judging". The quotation is from an article of 2007 in *Poetry*, the magazine of The Poetry Foundation (Chicago), by writer and critic Brian Phillips. Phillips reflects on the notion of 'taste', defining its role in the contemporary vocabulary of aesthetics as that which "allows us to feel the beauties of poetry and to glimpse their hidden order at the same moment; it allows us to unite the subjective with the objective in a single perceptive act."^{1.15} He is emphasizing a juggling of dual aspects, whether surface and sub-structure in poetic form, or of individual versus collective perception. The notion of 'taste' in the aesthetic sense in fact seems inherently contradictory: "Spoken of as a kind of personal preference, taste seems to imply an impenetrable subjectivity, our acknowledgement of the obscurity in which our likes and dislikes originate...[yet] spoken of as a kind of collective preference, taste itself becomes the norm"^{1.16}. Phillips is concerned over the notion precisely because it was one of the few conceptual yardsticks by which aesthetic judgement has been applied both individually and in some kind of collective sense. In our contemporary context we would, however, question its usefulness as a critical measure with any kind of objective validity. Nonetheless, it is of relevance to our discussion to follow in that its adoption into

the language of aesthetics marks the historical moment when mental processes were first coming under the analytical scrutiny of the Enlightenment.

“In its role as [a] concept describing aesthetic preference”, taste began to “glimmer into steady existence” around the start of the 18th century, at a moment when the idea of aesthetic value was undergoing significant change. Phillips argues there was a challenge to “classical precepts and God-derived hierarchies as the key to studying beauty”^{1.16}. He cites writers such as Hutcheson, Hume and Burke, influenced by the empiricism of Locke, who “began to speculate about the actual operation of the mind in the midst of aesthetic experience”. No longer was the question: what are the qualities that make the artwork beautiful? The new way asked what qualities of *mind* made the artwork *appear* to be beautiful. “Beauty experienced a rapid inward turn.” In 1712, when Joseph Addison wrote about “the pleasures of the imagination”, Phillips suggests the idea was considered strikingly new. In contrast, by 1757, he argues that David Hume was repeating a familiar axiom when he wrote that beauty “is no quality in things themselves; it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them” and “each mind perceives a different beauty.”^{1.17} Phillips quotes Kant who, in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), even wrote that if an experience “is [only] beautiful to me”, it cannot be considered an aesthetic experience at all because the personal restriction annuls the idea of the beautiful. But the 18th Century seemed not prepared to give up the conviction that there was some fixed point, some common element of our aesthetic experience that, as Phillips says, “would make it possible to discuss the attributes of aesthetic value as though they existed outside our private experience.” Do we not equally share the feeling that beauty transcends ourselves; that it is indeed something universal? Certainly this conviction underpins Romanticism, and the personal lyric is ‘nat dede’ precisely because this conviction remains.^{1.18}

Phillips’s thesis is that what arose in practice was an intellectual compromise, pragmatic but based on a fuzzy demarcation which remains to this day. The idea of ‘human nature’ operating in essentially the same way, then that similarity could give aesthetic judgement a functional objectivity. In Phillips’s words: “Beauty would exist inwardly, but...within a mental order whose consistency from one mind to the next would give it an abstract character, ensuring that it was experienced in largely the same way by everyone.”^{1.17} Phillips suggests that writers such as Hutcheson and Shaftsbury felt able then to speak of a “sense of beauty”, drawing an analogy between aesthetic perception and the physical senses, just

as they would for, say, sight. The mind might perceive beauty as the eye perceives colour or the ear pitch. Beauty could remain subjective, as a sensation, a phenomenon of perception; but it would also have an objective existence, because the sense was assumed to operate in the same way in everyone, thereby retaining a presence outside the individual self. The idea of subjective perception having an objective existence takes us immediately to the modified 'objectivism' which the later Oppen will explore.

In our own time, we consider 'beauty' as just one among a number of aesthetic criteria by means of which we might delineate the pleasures that poetry offers. The perhaps difficult to define notions of interest and pleasure surely remain the twin pillars of our enjoyment of poetry, persisting in the face of what Philips describes as "the uncertainty that pervades our aesthetic experience"^{1.14} in contemporary poetic culture, and even as 'pleasure' itself as a sensory-motor-cortical response responding through a rich chemical cocktail in the brain is increasingly subjected to scientific analysis. To stretch claims of understanding and of knowledge to logics beyond the analytical typical of scientific study is to court accusations of imprecision. Nonetheless, a persistent modernist and post-modernist hypothesis has promoted the notion of 'poetic knowledge' as a legitimate extension to that identifiable only through scientific procedure. The validation of such subjective experience will be part of our discussion to come.

If we are able to accept that conceptual possibilities are determined by the cognitive process as it links experience to meaning to language, we can suggest that it does so nowhere more incisively than in the concision and precision of poetry. Oppen's collection of 1975, *Myth of the Blaze*, contains the following:

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 lilly

is sweet but this

'Who Shall Doubt' NCP 259

No full-stop closes this lyric. Within the mild complexities of syntax and semantics, the later Oppen is juggling with the actuality of experience of which consciousness is the gatekeeper, while also brimful with intense emotion towards the sheer beauty of that experience, which translates as all the more intense for being so sparingly expressed. In such a poem we are witness to that very difficulty that arises, and on which this study will hinge, where conceptual possibility meets linguistic challenge as experienced by both writer and reader, and where poetry such as Oppen's aspires to engender genuinely new awareness of that experience.

^{1.1} Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'Oppen from seventy-five to a hundred, 1983–2008'. Originally prepared for SUNY, Buffalo: George Oppen Conference, delivered April 24, 2008 (Oppen's 100th birthday). In revised form, delivered at the University of Edinburgh, Oppen Conference, November 15–16, 2008. Published in *Jacket 36* (2008) <http://jacketmagazine.com/36/open-duplessis.shtml>; "old salt" survivor, paragraph 17.

^{1.2} Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Jacket 36*, paragraph 74.

^{1.3} Peter Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (2007), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2.

^{1.4} Charles Altieri, *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (1984), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 103.

^{1.5} George Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Davidson (2003), Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd.

^{1.6} Peter Middleton, *Physics Envy* (2015), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 13.

^{1.7} Peter Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (2007), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 120: "clues to the labyrinth of [Oppen's] own thinking."

^{1.8} Michael Heller, *Conviction's Net of Branches* (1985), New York: Spuyten Duyvil, 98.

^{1.9} Duncan MacKay, 'Eliot's Scientific Tendencies', *PN Review* 230 (2016), vol.42 no.6, 25.

^{1.10} George Oppen, 'Fragment No.3', *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*. ed. Stephen Cope (2007), Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 232.

^{1.11} George Oppen, 'Fragment No.9', *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*. ed. Stephen Cope (2007), Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 235.

^{1.12} John Briggs, 'Reflectaphors: The Implicate Universe as a Work of Art', *Quantum Implications (Essays in Honour of David Bohm) Chpt 5*. Eds. Basil Hiley & David Peat (1987), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

^{1.13} John Briggs, 'Where's the Poetry? Consciousness as the Flight of Three Blackbirds', *Advances In Consciousness Research* 37 (2001), John Benjamins Publishing.

^{1.14} Brian Phillips, 'Taste In Poetry', *Poetry* (Sept 2007) Chicago: The Poetry Foundation, 11. Interestingly, in Robert Creeley's Preface to Louis Zukofsky's *A Test of Poetry* (2000 edn.) Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, viii, Creeley quotes Ezra Pound: "Damn your taste! I want if possible to sharpen your perceptions after which your taste can take care of itself" – an amusingly pertinent remark in view of Oppen's late preoccupations.

^{1.15} Brian Phillips, 'Taste', 3.

^{1.16} Brian Phillips, 'Taste', 1.

^{1.17} Brian Phillips, 'Taste', 2

^{1.18} There is a question in relation to Oppen and the notion of 'transcendence' here. The American critical tradition looks to the transcendent in poetry that goes back to a particular interpretation of Thoreau and is traced as evident, for example, as a pillar of Wallace Steven's aesthetic through to the work of John Ashbery. The pre-Enlightenment experience of the sublime, and the revelatory belief thereby instilled, is challenged by the emergence of Kantian rationality. For all of Charles Olson's referencing of the scientific, for example, it can be argued he simply seeks the transcendent experience embodied in the historical and geological landscape. In contrast, in Oppen's Objectivist days, he was clearly an heir to Ezra Pound's essential *imagisme* (that of 'In a

Station of the Metro') rather than the fuzzy imagist reincarnation under Amy Lowell's umbrella. In other words, he was heir to the concision and precision but most particularly to the 'thinginess' of things. Oppen doesn't lose this. While his return to writing was more a restart from a significantly different perspective, and his later work which this dissertation considers offers quite distinct characteristics to the central body of work of the preceding decade, that attention to things in themselves remains inescapably at the core of Oppen's ontology. Oppen is a rationalist in the post-18th century tradition in which transcendent revelation plays no part. Oppen makes no acknowledgement in the written record of the fundamental distinction between 'dualistic knowing' and 'non-dualistic knowing', the latter being the philosophical ground of the transcendent. Nor does he relate it to the phenomenological corollary of 'knowing as being' as an intellectual concept. Nonetheless, the former distinction is implicit in the dual self he picks up from the Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain and the latter he absorbs from the phenomenologies of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Certainly the sublime experience is central to Oppen's experience, yet not for its transcendental implications. He is rather firmly in the dualistic-knowing camp with, perhaps, an unspoken longing for non-dualistic knowledge out of which it emerges. The 'thinginess' of things is fantastic and barely communicable in itself; the cumulative effect of those things is the wondrous summative and synergetic object which is the cosmos with the poet as part of it; but Oppen gives no credence, as far as the later poems are our evidence, to belief in any thing or non-thing beyond nature, no metaphysical intimations, let alone any conviction regarding a First Cause.

Chapter 2

'To isolate the words'^{2.1}

2.1 Awakening

"If we still possessed the word 'is', there would be no need to write poems." George Oppen

George Oppen's return in the late 1950s to "a meditation on the nature of poetic thinking"^{2.2} that, in Peter Nicholls's words, would determine the whole shape of his subsequent poetic career, began in significant part with his finding a book on aesthetics by Jacques Maritain called *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. As Mary Oppen recalled: "When we were first thinking of approaching coming back to the United States, and George was approaching beginning to write again, we picked up, at I suppose the American Library in Mexico, Maritain's book, and we were immensely impressed and we discussed it a lot."^{2.3} As Oppen wrote in a letter to his cousin, the painter and writer Ethel Schwabacher, in 1962: "There seems to me no problem for an artist more difficult than that of separating the brute ego, the accidents of the ego, from the self which perceives. Maritain says something of the sort, and I agree."^{2.4} Nicholls has argued that Maritain's text "provided [Oppen] with many of the core ideas of his mature poetics"^{2.5}, and Oppen used a statement from Maritain to preface his return collection of poems, *The Materials* (1962): "We awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things" (*NCP*, 38). We can focus on the fact that Maritain made a key distinction, with which Oppen seems to have agreed, between a 'creative self' and the 'self-centred ego'^{2.6}. To quote Maritain: "at the root of the creative act there must be a quite particular intellectual process, without parallel in logical reason"^{2.7}. His conception is of poetry as "an activity of the intelligence which is fundamentally distinct from that of 'logical reason'"^{2.8}, placing its origin in a "preconscious" carefully distinguished from an "automatic" or Freudian unconscious.^{2.9} In Nicholls's words: "Maritain attributes to art the expression of that 'radiance or clarity', generated by the 'illuminating image', which liberates us from the 'autonomous' unconscious which, he says, is 'deaf to the intellect, and structured into a world of its own apart from the intellect'"^{2.10}. 'Clarity' was already a key word for Oppen given his Objectivist inheritance, and he would refocus on its significance in this second phase of his writing life. Charles Altieri identified the limitations of the pre-WWII Objectivist stance in the following terms: "insisting on objectivity establishes a pressure that easily leads to collapsing the energy of poetry into an energy of description, with no room for the full play of human emotions."^{2.11} In 1969, Oppen himself referred to his then development as "to construct a method of thought from the imagist technique [...] from the imagist intensity

of vision.”^{2.12} Since: “Whatever may be doubted, the actuality of consciousness cannot be doubted” and “consciousness in itself, of itself carries the principle of actualness,”^{2.13} words we have already seen echoed in ‘Who Shall Doubt’ (NCP, 259). What developed was what Altieri called Oppen’s “phenomenological poetics”.^{2.11}

In 1981, Marjorie Perloff wrote: “The very titles of Oppen’s volumes [...] express a concern for cognition: the poem, Oppen implies, is the only way to reconcile one’s disparate and contradictory perceptions of the external world, for here the recurrence of sound can mitigate against the undecidability of experience.”^{2.14} In the same essay collection, Norman M. Finkelstein suggests that “Consciousness, rather than mere perception, grows in importance” in Oppen’s writing as it evolves.^{2.15} He quotes from ‘Route’ in the *Of Being Numerous* (1968) collection (“Tell the life of the mind, the mind creates the finite”, NCP 199), adding: “As the poetry comes into full maturity, the objects of experience are subsumed into the subjective consciousness, even as consciousness, at the beginning [*Discrete Series*, 1934], seems lost among objects.” This, for an Objectivist, he asserts, is “a process [that] has come full circle.”^{2.15} Equally important to ‘the creative self’ for Oppen would be Maritain’s sense of “poetic emotion” being not a “*thing* which serves as a kind of matter or material in the making of the work”, but as “*form* which, being one with the creative intuition, gives form to the poem, and which is *intentional*, as an idea is, or carries within itself infinitely more than itself.”^{2.10} For Oppen, this new found inspirational attention to an origin for poetic thinking, and even perhaps a process for poem making, must have resonated with his earlier aspirations (those which for him had foundered over the political imperatives of the 1930s, which the Imagist-inspired Objectivist poetics seemed unable to accommodate).

Maritain writes: “creative emotion, losing its original state, objectivises itself in some respect”.^{2.16} Nicholls argues that the idea of objectification is Maritain’s “bulwark against mere imitation, on the one hand, and abstraction, on the other”, enabling Oppen to “discern a kind of ‘materialism’” in the “instantiating power of ‘Things’”^{2.17}. According to Nicholls: “All of Oppen’s subsequent speculations about the nature of poetry and the poetic world would stem from [the] process of ‘awakening’ as a very special kind of ‘knowledge’, one for which, as Maritain put it, ‘there is no goal, no specifying end’, and which aspires to the condition of ‘onotological simplicity’, following the example of the child ‘who seems simply astonished to be and condemns all our interests and their futility’”^{2.18}. Although Oppen came afresh to poetry after a twenty-year self-exile, it is clear that there was a strong correspondence

between his earlier aspirations and the new found perspective that Maritain offered. With this, Oppen was brought to a radically fresh engagement with meaning and language. As he wrote at the time: “[I] must get back to what does exist...the language which can confront, can stand [...] [as if] a poem may be devoted to giving clear meaning to [just] one word”.^{2.19}

2.2 Origin & Function

“Back into the mind of my times.” Gary Snyder

We will reflect in due course on current understanding within cognitive psychology of ‘meaning’ as a mental construct based on ‘coherent organized knowledge’, prior to the attachment of verbalized (natural) language. In reflecting first on the earlier insights into cognition that were emerging in Oppen’s time, we ought also to consider the dominant hypothesis on the origin, acquisition, and (most pertinent to the objective of this dissertation) the function, of natural language as more than merely a tool of shared communication.

The most influential school of linguistic theory over the past half century has been founded on the work of Noam Chomsky, long-time Professor of Linguistics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He championed the view of a ‘universal grammar’, literally the structure of relationships within which language will hang, as innate (arising from the genetically governed development of a child both pre- and post-birth) rather than its being acquired in childhood as a learned behaviour. Chomsky’s challenging of the ‘behaviourist’ school of psychologists, represented by figures such as B.F. Skinner, was part of the linguistic and anthropological hypotheses that came to underpin structuralist thinking in the late 1950s and 1960s. The same conference (in September 1956 at MIT) at which Chomsky deconstructed the established behaviourist theory of linguistics as simply a combinatorial statistics which had considered each word in a sentence as generated from the previous word (noun causing verb causing noun, for example), also saw the birth of practical ‘artificial intelligence’ (based in computational code that translates the language of philosophical logic, making possible the solution of complex problems) by Allen Newell and Herbert Simon; as well as George Miller’s identification of the limits of short-term ‘working’ memory (a maximum of seven bits).^{2.20} With these innovations, what became known as the ‘cognitive revolution’ (although not named as such until 1969) took off. We’ll consider the evidence for George Oppen’s possible awareness of these developments, as they emerge coincidentally with his return to poetry, shortly.

In considering the origin of language as a distinctive characteristic of *homo sapiens*, Chomsky's simple assertion is: "I cannot think of a coherent alternative to the idea that [evolutionary genetic] mutations take place in individuals, not communities, so that whatever rewiring of the brain yielded the apparently unique properties of language ... would therefore have taken place in an individual, and only later been used among individuals who had inherited this capacity."^{2.21} The evidence suggests that with climate change about 4 million years ago, our forest dwelling primate ancestors were edged on to the savannah. By 3.5 million years ago, *Australopithecus* was walking on two legs. By 2.5 million years ago another upright ancestor, *Homo Erectus*, was additionally putting its hands to demonstrably good use making stone hand-axes. Whatever the potential advantages for such a social, hunting, tool-making, population that language might have conferred, there is no evidence in the angle of jaw bone to suggest necessary changes in larynx position, nor brain and spinal cord development necessary for the more sophisticated control of breathing required in speech. These changes only become evident in *Homo Sapiens*, appearing just some half million years ago. Current research has just a few hundred AMH (anatomically modern humans: the sub-species *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*) emerging from north east Africa about 195,000 years ago.^{2.22}

Language acquisition was among the issues addressed beyond linguistic academic circles to the wider intellectual community in Chomsky's essay collection *Language and Mind*, published in 1968. It seems highly likely that Oppen would have known of Chomsky not least as an anti-Vietnam War activist with a growing political profile from the mid-1960s on. Up until mid-February 1967, the Oppens were living in New York and engaged in selected anti-War activities (for example, the march on Washington in February 1966). Chomsky published his essay "The Responsibility of Intellectuals" in a *New York Review of Books* special supplement on 23rd February 1967, which attracted much attention, and which he expanded during 1968 into book form as *American Power and the New Mandarins*, published in 1969.^{2.23} Taking the idea of language function further, to quote Chomsky again: "If the rewiring of the brain... took place in an individual, not a group ..., then interaction must have been a later phenomenon. Language would have evolved first as an internal object, *a kind of language of thought* [my italics], with externalisation (hence communication) an ancillary process...There are ample reasons why having a language of thought would confer selectional advantage: the [individual] so endowed could plan, interpret, reflect, in ways

denied to others. If that advantage is partially transmitted to descendants, at some later stage there would be opportunity for communication, and motivation to develop a means of externalising the internal language of thought – a process that might not involve evolution [further genetic mutation] at all; perhaps it was a matter of problem solving using available cognitive mechanisms. This is, of course, speculation, like all talk about the evolution of language. But it is the minimal assumption... The conclusion, quite plausible I think, is that while language can surely be used for communication (as can much else), communication probably has no special role in its design or evolution.”^{2.24} In a further succinct restatement by Chomsky pertinent to Oppen’s poetic objectives: “The quality of language that makes it unique does not seem to be so much its role in communicating directives for action or other common features of animal communication, but rather its role in symbolizing, *in evoking cognitive images* [my italics], in moulding our notion of reality and yielding our capacity for thought and planning, through its property of allowing infinite combinations of symbols and therefore *mental creation of possible worlds* [my italics].”^{2.25}

2.3 Mind’s Place

“Who’s that?” Jack Kerouac

In Oppen’s case, Chomsky’s positing of language’s role in the ‘mental creation of possible worlds’ comes sharply into focus. Oppen had a very particular concern to burrow down into the experientially and conceptually ‘possible’, and therefore also its obverse, the ‘impossible’, and then into the transposition of meaningful experience into language. In his short essay ‘The Mind’s Own Place’, Oppen wrote that: “the emotion which creates art is the emotion which seeks to know and to disclose”^{2.26} He then puts his own individual mental pursuit of ‘knowing’ and ‘disclosing’ into the context of his wider poetry culture. He refers to the origin of modern American poetry beginning “with the determination to find the image”, which he also calls “the thing encountered” and “the thing seen every day whose meaning has become the meaning and color of our lives”. In reaction against the “rhetoric of exaggeration, of inflation”, he asserts that verse “was to the modernists a skill of accuracy, of precision, a test of truth”. He quotes from Denise Levertov’s poem ‘Matins’, which begins with the words “The authentic!” and goes on to define the events of a domestic morning: the steam rising in the radiators and the family breakfast, to the moment when, the children being sent to school, “cold air/comes in at the street door”^{2.27}. These are “as poetry intends”, both “clear pictures of the world” and opportunities “to make it possible to grasp” and “to hold the insight”, which is “the content of the poem”^{2.28}. ‘Mind’s Own Place’ was written in

1963. In *Daybook II:I*, “papers bound into a small makeshift book”^{2.29}, dating from 1963-66, Oppen also writes: “I do not think that a poem can be filled with meaning by being filled, like a bag or a jug, with words”^{2.30}. Oppen is coming at language from a perspective in which “the structure of meaning is that which restores the words to clarity”^{2.30}. The meaning precedes the language which in major respects then fails to catch it. “The word is the burden [Oppen’s underlining], the words are the burden, of the line which it must [‘bear’, he crosses out, replacing with...] *lift* [his italics] up into meaning”^{2.30}. While assessing these possibilities and impossibilities inherent in language as Oppen found them in the mental creation and expression of possible worlds, we will explore current research opinion on the nature of perception, and of the brain’s pre-linguistic mental creations that encapsulate meaningful experience.

From a 21st century perspective, in examining the link between Oppen’s thought and language as he described it, we can adopt what linguists today would consider both a cognitive and an experientialist approach. Cognitive linguists Andrea Tyler and Vyvyan Evans, for example, refer to their study of prepositions as: “It is cognitive in that we assume that meanings do not match up with a mind-independent objective reality. Rather, ‘reality’ is determined by the nature of our bodies and our neuro-anatomical architecture, as well as the physical world we inhabit. Hence the meanings encoded in language relate to and reflect our conceptual system, which constitutes our ‘representation’ of reality.”^{2.31} Equally, the approach is experientialist, since “we acknowledge that our representation of reality is contingent upon a world out there, which in turn is meaningful, precisely because it, and our interactions with it, have non-trivial consequences for our survival.”^{2.31} Tyler and Evans explore the semantics of selected English language prepositions, examples of some of those ‘small words’ that Oppen took so seriously and to which we will be returning; in their case, examples of prepositional small words that reflect our conceptualisation of spatial relations in language. This is an insight to which we will return in more detail when considering the ‘image schema’ hypothesis that was developed in relation to theories of embodied cognition.

The symbolic representation of reality which is our ‘conceptualisation’ of it, having Chomsky’s likely evolutionary origin and the individual advantage of mental creativity we now take for granted, is now also embedded in shared externalised language and cultures of communication which put constraints on semantic extensions of that language. Words,

phrases, whether spoken or written, are embedded in larger lexical segments as well as linked through myriad connotative allusions to the wider world, in other words they are contextualized. Cognitive linguists would say that “language itself radically underdetermines the rich interpretations regularly assigned to naturally occurring utterances.”^{2.32} Therein, of course, is the later Oppen’s dilemma: “utterances serve as prompts for the elaboration of cognitive structure, which includes the interlocutors’ knowledge ... and their prior experiences of the world, including their prior experience with language.”^{2.32} Oppen wants to express what can seem deeply inexpressible in his own experience and share it with his reader. He is therefore obliged to stay within intelligibly normative language forms while stretching those limits of a shared grammar and syntax beyond the norm in order to find additional, communicable, semantic possibilities. Every time we come to a close-reading analysis of later Oppen poems, we might recognise in Oppen’s work that which Tyler and Evans refer to as a ‘principled polysemy model’ in the study of meaning, “the way meanings are systematically extended”^{2.33} and “the nature of semantic polysemy networks”^{2.33} so engendered. The methodology both identifies primary semantic senses among multiple possibilities and distinguishes between “senses which are instantiated in memory and those which are constructed on-line for the purposes of local interpretation of a lexical item as it occurs in context.”^{2.34} We can read an Oppen word-phrase-sentence, acknowledge its varied semantic possibilities, identify the ‘obvious’ and the more ambiguous among them, and begin to appreciate the possibilities of interrelationship in a network of additional reference and allusion to which the simple signifiers can only prompt – knowing that, for Oppen, this is a deliberate strategy built into the form of his work. For example:

world *the fog*
coming up in the fields we learned those
 rural words later we thought it was ocean the flood
 of the ocean the light
 of the world help me I am

of that people the grass
 blades touch

and touch the small

distances the poem
 begins

‘The Natural’, NCP 281

We can recognise that, as with all discrete ‘completed’ units of prosaic or poetic text (phrase, sentence, stanza, paragraph, poem), the semantic completion may arise out of, if not despite, more polysemic fragments. In contrast, where the segment examined is less than a

conventional whole, there is an opportunity for the wayward, the semantically *off-piste*. Small clues are suggestive not conclusive. Assertive propositional answers are absent on the partial scale. This is what Oppen offers us by cutting up even his short phrases into bits, the one-word or two-word lines, the suspended line endings, the pauses in the spaces between words and between lines. If we read his poems slowly, giving attention to the isolated words and partial phrase, to the semantic possibilities which have room in the spaces to emerge in our memory and imagination, an apparently slight assemblage of, say, thirty words becomes a gateway to substantial experience beyond the immediate horizon.

2.4 I Have Seen My Own Cranium^{2.35}

"Reality leaves a lot to the imagination." John Lennon

We can look more closely at the conceptual nature of meaning in linguistic semantic studies, if we accept 'meaning' to be the "conceptual structures encoded in language."^{2.36} It is then no longer tenable to assume meaning refers directly to the world. Language references concepts which themselves arise from re-formulated percepts – a percept being a mental construct that follows a sensorimotor experience or perhaps an internal emotional response. The percepts are the raw data, the stimuli, from which our brains conjure conceptual structures. It is our cognitive processing which constructs the patterns and organization we call reality, and which mediates between the external world and our perception of it. These are changes to "the organization of our perceptions, by mental operations to which we do not have conscious access."^{2.37} As linguist and philosopher Ray Jackendoff puts it: "We have conscious access only to the projected world – the world as unconsciously organized by the mind."^{2.38} An interesting contemporary description of this from the evidence of cognitive and neuroscientific studies is 'global workspace theory', a model which proposes a "momentarily active, subjectively experienced" event in working memory, the "inner domain in which we can rehearse telephone numbers to ourselves or in which we carry on the narrative of our lives. It is usually thought to include inner speech and visual imagery."^{2.39} As for language, "Semantic structures [meanings] are conceptual structures established by linguistic convention – the form which thoughts must assume for purposes of ready linguistic symbolization. Thus, semantic structure is conventionalised conceptual structure."^{2.40} We may ask: if the conceptual determines the semantic, then, as poets juggling the semantic structure of language, may we not in turn, by feed-back, influence conceptual structure in the receptive reader? Changes to one might surely contribute to redefining the other and here would be that mental creation of possible worlds.

By the final decade of his writing life, Oppen's questions seem naturally to arise out of his uncertainties. As Eliot Weinberger puts it in his Introduction to the *New Collected Poems*: "[Oppen] no longer had any answers, and struggled with the precise articulation of his uncertainties."^{2.40} Uncertainties about what? For the Oppen of the 1970s there are certainly the conventional anxieties, even fears, which accompany advancing age – the opening poem of his last collection, *Primitive* (1978), is an obvious example with its "sad and hungry // wolf walks in my footprints" (NCP 265). The *Selected Letters* alone show something of the detailed assimilation of experience at the biographical level, which by the 1960s and 1970s included continuing social and political concerns (such as anti-Vietnam War and Civil Rights issues), as well as intellectual and literary debate. However, aside also from reflections on his traumatic wartime experience and post-war political exile, Oppen is preoccupied in his later writing with the relationship between outer and inner worlds, what today we would term questions of cognition, which lie at the root of what it is to be a reflective human being. While the following chapters trace the cognitive issues in relation to Oppen in more detail, it is clear that Oppen's inward turn which led first to the writing he would call 'Needle's Eye' arose in significant part from the emotional upheaval which followed his being awarded the Pulitzer Prize in May 1969. I have therefore traced the biographical facts and emotional impact as it resonated in Oppen through his correspondence and have included this as 'A Simple Realism' in Appendix One: Oppen's Crisis of Confidence.

^{2.1} George Oppen, UCSD 16.16.11.

^{2.2} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 32.

^{2.3} Peter Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (2007), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 32; Dennis Young, 'Conversation with Mary Oppen', *Iowa Review*, 18/3 (1987), 18-47; quoted in Peter Nicholls 'George Oppen in Exile: Mexico and Maritain (For Linda Oppen)', *Journal of American Studies*, 39 (2005), 1-18, doi:10.1017/S0021875805009229.

^{2.4} George Oppen, 'Letter to Ethel Schwabacher', *Selected Letters*, 56-7.

^{2.5} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 31.

^{2.6} Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1955), New York: Meridian Books, 105; quoted in Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 35.

^{2.7} Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, 29.

^{2.8} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 34.

^{2.9} Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, 67.

^{2.10} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 34; quoting Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, 67, 123 & 167.

^{2.10} Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, 87.

^{2.11} Charles Altieri, *Sense and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (1984), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 98.

^{2.12} George Oppen, 'Interview', *Contemporary Interview 10* (1969), 161.

^{2.13} George Oppen, *Selected Letters*, 290.

^{2.14} Marjorie Perloff, 'The Shape of the Lines', *George Oppen: Man & Poet* ed. Burton Hatlen (1981), Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 223.

^{2.15} Norman M. Finkelstein, 'Syntax and Tradition', *George Oppen: Man & Poet* ed. Burton Hatlen (1981), Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 429.

- ^{2.16} Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, 256.
- ^{2.17} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 35.
- ^{2.18} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 36; quoting Maritain *Creative Intuition*, 131 & 267.
- ^{2.19} George Oppen, *Daybooks*, 78
- ^{2.20} Jonah Lehrer, *Proust Was A Neuroscientist* (2011), Edinburgh: Cannongate Books, 158-160.
- ^{2.21} Noam Chomsky, 'Human Nature & The Origins Of Language', *Radical Anthropology* 23 (2008), 2.
- ^{2.22} The three competing hypotheses for their subsequent dispersal or appearance are Replacement, Multiregional Evolution, and Assimilation. Replacement has AMH leaving Africa and occupying the Middle East and Europe, and still 50,000 years ago living alongside earlier *Sapiens* such as *Neanderthal*, while spreading to occupy the rest of Asia. Multiregional Evolution, as its name suggests, has AMH evolving from diverse earlier ancestors scattered about Europe and Asia, with 'gene flow' preventing long-term reproductive isolation while retaining evolution of distinct regional species. Assimilation suggests emergence out of Africa but also interbreeding among older local populations. (D. O'Neil, Anthropology Tutorials (2014), <http://anthro.palomar.edu/homo2/default.htm>).
- ^{2.23} Chomsky's fifty-plus years of notoriety began with the critical reception of his first book on *Syntactic Structures* (1957), his review of Skinner's *Verbal Behaviour for Language* in 1959, and the range of books he produced in the 1960s, including his assessment of *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory* in 1964, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* in 1965, *Topics in the Theory of Generative Grammar* in 1966, *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*, also in 1966, *Language and Mind* in 1968, and (with Morris Halle) *The Sound Pattern of English* (1968). His very public crusade against the Vietnam War, recorded in the pages of the *New York Review of Books* (1967) and assembled in *American Power and the New Mandarins* (1969), his on-going critique of American foreign policy, his analyses of the Middle East and Central America, his long-standing local and international activism, and his studies (sometimes with Edward Herman) of how media functions in contemporary society, have combined to provoke some very strong feelings, positive and negative, about him and his work. (See Robert Barsky, 'The Chomsky Effect: Episodes in Academic Activism', University of Western Ontario & Université du Québec; <http://www.mit.edu/%7Esaleem/ivory/ch6.htm>).
- ^{2.24} The evolution of language seems likely to have been well advanced by the time of any AMH exit from Africa. However, repeated mutations of a similar but not identical kind are statistically possible among diverse population groups, if that were the scenario, such that Chomsky's assertion would still hold up, even were language to develop in separate communities. This contrasts with the idea that language evolved from a collective need within social groups and in particular that language developed foremost as a means of shared communication.
- ^{2.25} Noam Chomsky, 'Human Nature', 2.
- ^{2.26} George Oppen, *Daybooks*, 30.
- ^{2.27} Denise Levertov, 'Matins', *The Jacob's Ladder* (1961), New York: New Directions; "a poem for which Oppen had a great regard" (Rachel Blau Duplessis, *Selected Letters*, 404).
- ^{2.28} George Oppen, *Daybooks*, 32.
- ^{2.29} Stephen Cope in Oppen, *Daybooks*, 64.
- ^{2.30} George Oppen, *Daybooks*, 69.
- ^{2.31} Andrea Tyler & Vyvyan Evans, *The Semantics of English Prepositions: Spatial scenes, embodies meaning and cognition* (2003). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, x.
- ^{2.32} Andrea Tyler & Vyvyan Evans, *Semantics*, 229; referencing the work of Green (1989), Grice (1975), and Gumperz (1982).
- ^{2.33} Andrea Tyler & Vyvyan Evans, *Semantics*, 237.
- ^{2.34} Andrea Tyler & Vyvyan Evans, *Semantics*, 231.
- ^{2.35} Guillaume Apollinaire, 'L'esprit Nouveau et les Poetes', *Selected Writings*, trans. Robert
- ^{2.36} Shattuck (1971), New York: New Directions, 32.
- ^{2.37} Andrea Tyler & Vyvyan Evans, *Semantics*, 19.
- ^{2.38} Ray Jackendoff, *The Architecture of the Language Faculty* (1997), Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 29.
- ^{2.39} Ronald Langacker, *Concept, Image and Symbol* (1991), Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 108-9.
- ^{2.40} Andrea Tyler & Vyvyan Evans, *Semantics*, 20.

Chapter 3

'It's there. It's true.'^{3.1}

3.1 Ask the Typewriter

"How are the poem's possibilities to be released?" The Enthusiast

Oppen's late 'poetry of conjecture' is focused, as we shall see, on speculative proposition rather than assertive argument. In 1984, the year of Oppen's death, Charles Altieri was writing in just such conjectural terms of the poet Robert Creeley's work, and we might apply aspects of that analysis to the later Oppen in being "an appeal to locate the place of poetry and poetic logic in the dialectical possibilities that arise when we reflect upon our own processes of thinking and writing."^{3.2} The difference in Oppen's case is that his attention is largely focussed on his responses, both emotional and intellectual, to an impinging external world, rather than the inner emotional landscapes characteristic of Creeley. This is to simplify both poets, of course, and we shall explore the subtleties of Oppen's approach, but the basic point is that Oppen, Objectivist to the end, never loses his interest in the sensory nature of 'external' material experience. Three years earlier, as already mentioned, Norman Finkelstein had also written specifically in connection with Oppen's mid-career collection *This In Which* (1965), of Oppen's poetry as "an astonishingly fruitful outgrowth of Modernism", that being a movement almost obsessively concerned with 'process' and a resistance to 'closure'.^{3.3} As an outgrowth, Finkelstein identifies in Oppen's work "the object of the poem [that] allows for subjective statements while simultaneously calling for a scrupulous interrogation of the subject that deigns to speak." This is Oppen's test of truth, a poetry "resolved and not resolved".^{3.4} As Oppen described it himself: "The nouns do refer to something; that it's there, that it's true, the whole implication of those nouns; that appearance represent reality, whether or not they misrepresent it: that this in which the thing takes place, this thing is here, and that these things do take place."^{3.5} Against this, as Finkelstein puts it, a poem might "[call] attention to the distance between reality and language" which "emphasizes the disparity between what is and what is known."^{3.6} The conjectural in later Oppen is a specific attention to the difficulties encountered in the relation of these, sensory experience to mental meaning and thence to linguistic expression. Finkelstein emphasized what he found in Oppen as: "To experience immediate events directly is to preclude the possibility of language, which by its very nature is a mediating power." Hence "the philosophical *impasse* that Oppen encounters again and again is built on the contradictory experiences of language and of immediate reality. Although Oppen's

faith is predicated upon what he conceives to be ontological and epistemological verities, it is still merely a matter of faith, of the belief that the ways in which we know and describe the world correspond to what actually is.”^{3.7} Such assertions that constitute knowledge, for all their acknowledged limitations, nonetheless are free to be speculatively notional. In making sense of experience we may find more than one possibility for ‘what is’. We may have a spectrum of possibilities between direct assertions regarding experience and tentative assertions that experience equally engenders. To match language to this spectrum from fully to partially coherent conceptual structures that contribute to knowledge, especially where we hope to keep more than one ‘simultaneously’ open to consideration, brings us to such literary devices not only of the ‘luminous detail’ and *le mot juste* but of the unresolved metaphor and the speculative proposition, the latter being so evident in Oppen’s late work and to which we will return.

Michael Heller recalled first meeting Oppen and his wife in New York in 1967.^{3.8} In a subsequent exchange of letters Oppen talked of “the act of writing” as all that should “and can sustain discussion”. This echoes Zukofsky’s ‘writing is writing’, and Heller and Oppen discussed “the absence of prescription, the refusal to impose a stylistics or mode...[placing] the poem back, nakedly, with its maker”.^{3.9} Who or what is this ‘maker’ that makes a poem? In Oppen’s words: “Is it a poetry that one writes? Don’t answer/ Is it a poetry that one writes? alright: one’s typewriter and one’s desk could answer this.”^{3.10} Before considering Oppen’s use of any literary device such as the speculative proposition, let’s be sure that current thinking in the cognitive sciences tallies with the overview that Oppen seems to assume of ‘percept-to-concept-to-expression’, in a conceptual world that at least correlates with ‘what actually is’, as a valid model of the ‘maker’.

3.2 Grounded Cognition & Simulation

“The man who cannot visualize a horse galloping on a tomato is an idiot” Andre Breton

Brain imaging studies have revealed that saying just one single word causes a unique pattern of neural activity to ripple across the cortex.^{3.11} Particular words will ‘light up’ particular areas of the brain. For example, “screwdriver” will typically activate the motor cortex which is heavily involved in controlling bodily movement. It is difficult not to draw the conclusion that the word is triggering memories of handling a screwdriver in that part of the brain. This is known as embodied cognition and the kinaesthetic is but one modal area (the others being sight, touch, hearing) in which brain activity, memory and language (including perceptual,

pre-linguistic conceptual, and verbalized, languages) “seem all to be interconnected.”^{3.12} While ‘embodied’ cognition is the commonly used term, researchers in the field prefer the term ‘grounded’ reflecting the fact that cognition can be grounded in other ways (for example, by simulation, social interaction and the environment) in addition to bodily action. Grounded cognition emphasizes that conceptual processing relies heavily on modality-specific simulations to represent ‘experience’ and that the same type of representations underlie both perception and conception.^{3.13} The rather static ‘concept’ label has thus been relabelled by some researchers as ‘simulator’ and is envisaged as a distributed neural mechanism that constructs a set of specific simulations to represent a category, property or relation, dynamically.

The notion of simulation in fact lies at the core of grounded cognition and takes us even closer to what we might call the representation of meaning. The premise is that the conceptual system of any individual brain contains all of that person’s knowledge of the world. In reductionist terms, it represents components of experience: settings, objects, people, actions, events, mental states, properties and relations. These are, as yet, mental representations that precede transcription into natural, and therefore shared, language. Nonetheless we might feel the substructure is echoed in Oppen’s use of natural language which has been described as “raw and unformed”; his language “pared down to the most basic essentials: what can be said poetically by other poets in five words, Oppen will say in three.”^{3.14} And as for what he ‘knows’, for what holds ‘meaning’ for him: “His view of the world that surrounds him is presented through the most basic elements from which that world is made up: grass and trees, stone and rock, sea and ocean, sunlight and shadow.”^{3.15} There is little reason to suppose a gross distinction exists between the mental representation of the concept ‘stone’ that is implied by the natural language signifier that is ‘stone’, while we also recognise the gross approximation that is the signifier ‘stone’ when we reflect on the details of one individual example against another. Since the underlying mental representations are ‘symbolic’, conceptual knowledge supports a wide variety of cognitive operations on those representations including: categorization, inference, the manipulation of propositions, and the “productive creation of novel representations”^{3.13} – in other words, the ability to speculate and imagine through new combinations. These basic operations then support the spectrum of more complex cognitive activities that includes high level perception, attention, memory, language, thought, and socio-cultural cognition.

In the case of language, as the outward product of underlying structure and process, the essential ingredients of any theory of language based on empirical evidence include symbolic operations, statistical processing, and grounding. The requirement for symbols is self-evident and, for dynamic operations between them, unavoidable. The statistical distribution of word senses has been shown to contribute to ambiguity resolution during syntactic analysis.^{3.16} Indeed, statistical distribution of argument structures and their instantiations have been shown to contribute to sentence processing.^{3.17} And then grounding is shown to be central to comprehension since, to comprehend a text, research shows we construct simulations to represent perceptual, motor, and emotional content. The motor system influences cognition as cognition influences the motor system. The sense is of a conceptual system that doesn't just record inputs, it interprets. Interpretation requires as a prerequisite the ability to 'categorize'. Categorization means the alignment of individual perceptions to a bank of memorized experiences. Interpretation then supports the production of inference, taking cognition beyond perceptual input. So it is interpretation as a simulation that supports the formulation and manipulation of propositions, where a proposition is a representational structure enabling the recognition of distinctions. In short: "Interpretation is productive, supporting the construction of complex conceptual representations from simpler ones."^{3.18} As an experience occurs (e.g. sitting down on a chair), the brain captures states across the modalities and integrates them with a multimodal representation stored in memory (e.g. how a chair looks and feels, the action of sitting, introspections of comfort and relaxation). Later, when knowledge is needed to represent the category 'chair', multimodal representations captured during experiences with its instances are reactivated to simulate how the brain represented perception, action, and introspection associated with it: "The presence of simulation mechanisms across diverse cognitive processes suggests that simulation provides a core form of computation in the brain."^{3.19} The outcome is part of the rich creation of possible worlds evident in Oppen, a writing through of the precision of his pro-active imag(e)-ination. The grounded cognition hypothesis is well established and, arising from it, cognitive linguists have proposed an 'image schema' basis to mental processing in moving from experience to the manipulations of meaning and language. It is therefore instructive to consider image schemas and their relation to the speculative proposition as it appears in much of Oppen's later work, but first the propositional itself.

3.3 The Poetic Proposition

"The line may find it impossible to mean just what it says." Peter Middleton

A simple assertive proposition such as 'the cat sat on the mat' becomes simplistically more speculatively propositional in 'the cat may have sat on the mat', which is but one point on a spectrum that could include a variety of cats which may or may not have sat on any particular mat, all the way to the cat in question being both (or is it neither?) dead and alive but hovering in a superposition of states in a Schrodinger box, which might or might not even have a mat in it. Peter Middleton has referred to the retreat from assertive propositional form in the later Oppen: "Opacity and semantic uncertainty...is not only disruptive in the zone of reference, it also fractures intentionality, propositionality, affirmation, and truthfulness, features of language use which are notoriously difficult to conceptualise and hence contentious within literary theory."^{3.20} A detailed examination of Oppen's relationship to Hegelian philosophy and the 'speculative proposition' in relation to the opening poem of *Seascape: Needle's Eye*, has been made by Peter Nicholls^{3.21}, and commented upon by Middleton.^{3.22} Without offering a précis of those studies, I wish to emphasise a couple of key points. Robert Duncan's criticism of Oppen in the 1960s (part of the reason that his and Donald Allen's revisionary anthology *New Writing in the USA* (1967) failed to include him) was of "a tin ear and a slow foot", insufficient to offset his asset of "earnestness".^{3.23} If there was "too little music, too much assertion"^{3.24} in Oppen's poetry of that decade, a time when Duncan concedes that there were inescapable social and political opinions for any thinking individual "to bear witness to"^{3.25}, by *Seascape: Needle's Eye* (1972) the sonority and subtlety of meaning were in better balance, and the propositions less assertive and more speculative.

Peter Middleton has made reference to a brief commentary on Oppen by Language poet Charles Bernstein in which the propositional features.^{3.26} In Middleton's terms, Bernstein objects to "resolution by the closing statement" in which "a proposition ... makes claims on the reader." Oppen's avoidance of this in his later poetic practice is partly through the use of what Bernstein calls a 'hinge': "a special use of the line break or carefully managed varying interval hovering between cut and continuity that crucially forgoes the propositional wrap."^{3.26} Middleton reminds us that "hinges are devices for controlling the opening and closing of spaces"; while Oppen "may not be engaged in the opening of the field", he does develop this "control device for the opening up of the proposition."^{3.26}

We might note the example of the opening poem in *Myth of the Blaze*, 'Latitude, Longitude' (NCP, 237), a title suggestive of taking bearings, identifying one's position, defining place, with its closing proposition indeed as that which "defines poetry", no less. The proposition might seem assertive and yet Oppen draws back to something more tentative through his 'hinge' technique. The proposition opens: "...if we could // find all / the gale's evidence ..." – if we could, what then? – "what message / is there for us in these / glassy bottles...". The answer seems clearly unambiguous: "the Encyclopedist was wrong", except Oppen writes it "the Encyclopedist // was wrong...", with a double line break casting momentary pause in the reading, momentary doubt of the apparent absolute. Nonetheless, "was wrong" is followed immediately on the same line by "was wrong", repeated seemingly for emphasis or is it as hesitant question; and then straight into why: "was wrong many things / too foolish / to sing / may be said...". The Encyclopedist gathers facts but draws no principle from his or her collection; putting his or her evidence in those glass bottles, those poems, as the lepidopterist pins butterflies and puts them in their neat rows under glass. "What message / is there for us..." – Oppen answers it is not mere collection. What then is it? Does he know? What he does know, or what he strongly *feels*, is "many things / too foolish / to sing". Is it foolish to sing? What things could be so foolish, too foolish? Or is it so clear, where "many things" is followed by a line break, with "too foolish" then standing alone, almost as a question; and then "to sing" thrown out also in its own small line. Why? Is there a necessary conventionally syntactic thread here, or do the breaks between, the separations, the 'hinge' between each assertion, imply something more, something far less certain than the superficially propositional statement? While too foolish to sing, they yet "may be said..." is a prosaic assertion of a prosaic alternative. Read prosaically: "many things too foolish to sing may be said" is a straight assertion of the effectiveness of the Encyclopedist's methodology – of course so much may simply be said and why not? And yet "to sing" stands out and sings in our ear, so that when Oppen concludes with "this matter- / of-fact defines" we are left wondering whether it is what "may be said" that defines or the singing that is the matter of fact and which itself does the defining – for the facts prosaically spoken may define the activity "poetry" by inclusion, or they may actually define it by exclusion, putting the poetic *outside* those 'matters- of-fact.' Perhaps wisdom sings while all that is merely 'said' is foolish.

It's interesting to note that Oppen pursues the very questions he has set up in the first poem in the opening of the second in this collection (NCP, 238). It is not a coincidence that so deliberate a poet as Oppen should open immediately with "what do you want / to tell...",

and not 'tell the world' but "tell while the world // speaks". Through the prosaic noise of a world speaking, what is the poet's identifiable signal? What it certainly is not, in the mind of the later Oppen, is "an advanced form of rhetoric."^{3.27} In full, he says: "the poet's business is not to use verse as an advanced form of rhetoric, nor to seek to give political statements the aura of eternal truth".^{3.27} Propositional assertions become claims to eternal truths too easily in egocentric verse. As Middleton comments: "Statements in themselves are not the problem; affirming them without reserve is."^{3.26} What Oppen offers is aspects of reservation. So what Middleton refers to as Oppen's lacunary poetic structure, with its blanks and hiatuses, successfully distances writer and reader from the conventions of prosaic syntax and the assertive propositional forms that such syntax delineates. In Nicholl's words, therefore: "Oppen's new [1970s] work might be read as a search for ever more extreme ways of recovering that 'is' of being by freeing language from the closure of predication and from the pitfalls of 'political generalisation'".^{3.28}

3.4 Poetic Singularities

"my piece of being" George Oppen

Nicholls goes on to describe this preoccupation in Oppen's late work as "the grammatical conditions of poetic singularity,"^{3.29} meaning the conditions in which a reader might identify poetic isolation from outside contextual, let alone overarching, cultural reference – part of Oppen's desire to express his own exclusive direct experience.^{3.30a} Oppen seeks to step outside what literary critic Timothy Clark identifies as the "general narratives (*à la* Lyotard)"^{3.31}, the metanarratives characteristic of modernism. Interesting that Oppen's explorations predate the identification by Lyotard in 1979 of what he called the "postmodern ...incredulity towards metanarratives"^{3.30b} – those many 'language games' identified, not least, by Wittgenstein. The postmodern, poststructuralist, question which Lyotard put concisely is: "Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?"^{3.30} For Oppen, the answer in his writing of that decade had been in the speculative identity that was himself as poet in relation to the poem made, assembled in what Veronica Forrest-Thompson on the opposite side of the Atlantic was concurrently referring to as the product of poetic 'artifice'.^{3.32}

Occasional intertextual references apart, Oppen's later work leans mostly on his direct apprehension of sensory experience and its relationship to expression, both immediately apprehended and as coloured by memory. While the artefact that is the poem is

distinguished in Oppen's thinking from any 'stream of consciousness' or 'automatic' writing – he is far too deliberate a poet for that – nonetheless, it is the 'process' of translating experience into language that determines both the form and the dominant content of the poems themselves. To characterise this in literary theoretical terms, separate from any specific stylistics analysis, is to clarify a working methodology in a post-structuralist stance in which we cannot trust language systems to convey particular truths, therefore any truth is unreliable (even those we deliberately construct). In semiotic terms, we cannot trust the sign = (signifier + signified) formula; there is too much uncertainty in that sign-signifier relationship. So language systems are thoroughly inadequate for exchanging 'meaning'; which leaves us only with a conceptual instability that Jacques Derrida called 'freeplay'. This, of course, represents a move away from assertive or didactic forms in literary language as having any validity, which is a stylistic change coincidentally reflected in Oppen's post-1970 poetry.

If the Oppen of the early 1970s is writing on that cusp of the structuralist/post-structuralist transition in literary and cultural conversation, and unconsciously reflecting elements of both analyses, the 'singular' interpretation of his work seems no less valid. Literary singularity as it arose as a concept in the work of Heidegger, Gadamer and Blanchot, is considered to be (in Clark's words): "a mode of singular inventiveness in language, one which, while necessarily based on given conventions and rubrics, may at times exceed being understood in terms of any pre-given norms of understanding or morals. Its singular and untranslatable texture may render literary language an 'event', i.e. something that cannot be fully understood theoretically, but which, by engaging the reader in its specific performance (word by word or line by line in the unfolding text) comes to project the reader suitable to it in ways that could not have been foreseen. It may also, if only in a small or fleeting way, transform the person who 'understands it', and may be capable of transforming the conventions and understanding which made up its initial readability."^{3.33}

If we were to 'define' the later poetics of George Oppen, this element of self-containment would surely contribute. His poems undoubtedly have what Gadamer and Blanchot would call (post-structurally) uncertain status as modes of knowledge,^{3.34} evident in the ambiguity and author-acknowledged 'unreliability' of their language as signs. However, they also express what Derrida would call a claim (a 'truth-claim') in the structuralist manner to be saying something valid beyond Oppen's own culturally-conjured conscious persona.^{3.35}

Oppen appears to believe in the integrity of his own triad of experience, conceptual system,

and language of expression, as a mental coherence and a 'truth' worth exploring, a truth about human experience shared with others. The construct that is 21st century cognitive psychology in fact makes the same assumption.

This dissertation is neither an exposition of post-structuralist thought nor an analysis of Oppen's later work from any one literary critical theoretical viewpoint. I have taken Marjorie Perloff's sceptical but scholarly stance regarding literary criticism, in which affiliations too often "draw on theoretical/historical paradigms rather than on actual literary works. [...] I've always felt sceptical toward such allegiances – largely, no doubt, because the adoption of a theoretical model always puts the literary work in a secondary position – a position where the poem can be no more than an example of X or a cultural symptom of Y."^{3.36} The 'singular' nature of Oppen's later work seems to me to offer positive, if singular, knowledge, in the sense that it explores aspects of an objective mental reality that is less well-served by textual explanation through other critiques, such as historical placement or politics of identity. This is not to say that it's not of its time – riding the wave of a cognitive revolution, albeit unacknowledged – nor entirely without aspects of aged, white, Jewish, male, bourgeois, identities we might ascribe to it. But the artefacts that are Oppen's later poems are in many ways singular in themselves and my literary critical methodology is to treat them as such, in the manner of a scholarly, if somewhat reductive, scientific analytical approach through which we may identify interesting parallels with the discoveries of cognitive science. As Martin McQuillan put it in 2005 : "theory has now entered the mainstream of humanities;"^{3.37} however, theory in the context of the humanities and literary criticism in particular is exactly that – theory as hypothesis, as interpretation, which will always be limited essentially to opinion, however well-informed that opinion. Such hypotheses are, in comparison with those of the natural sciences, unfalsifiable, and therefore forever lack a confirmed generality that typically turns hypothesis into, at least provisional, fact. Belief systems and the knowledge or 'truth-claims' that underpin them are all positioned on the spectrum having extreme subjectivity at one end and absolute objectivity at the other; structuralist and post-structuralist standpoints must also take up their positions variously on that judgmental scale. However, the positive point that recommends all interpretations, whether all-encompassing schools of thought or more localised scholarship on aspects of interest, is that they assist in our understanding and appreciation of a literary work.

While the disciplines of cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics that we are considering aspire to a degree of deterministic character typical of the discourses of the natural sciences,

we should be mindful of the fact that the dominant methods of literary criticism in our own day (those that define works in terms of their cultural politics) typically aspire also to offer broadly deterministic (albeit unfalsifiable) interpretations – everything written being ‘determined’ by the conditions of its making. To treat something alternatively as ‘singular’ is to see it as, in Clark’s words: “irreplaceable, sole witness of what it says, an example only of itself, and thus ‘free’ in the sense of not being fully intelligible in the broadly deterministic categories which strive to explain all in terms of social location.”^{3.38} As readers we are also free to challenge assumptions and render interpretations. The singular case, the ‘particular’ which is the focus of all literary creations, is always potentially exceptional. As Clark puts it, echoing Hannah Arendt, the uniqueness of every individual offers the ‘capacity to create new realities’^{3.39}, and “for every new reader ... it is still a first time.”^{3.40} Beyond the speculatively propositional phrase we may have the speculatively propositional poem as an assemblage of speculatively propositional components, a technique I have explored in my own [*Happenstance*] series. Indeed, in late Oppen, it is often at the scale of each poem, ‘discrete’ in the series which is always an Oppen collection, that the speculatively propositional presents itself as a device. In the words of Language poet Lyn Hejinian, writing in 1990, “words work” only because “people agree on what they mean”.^{3.41} This is the inherently arbitrary nature of language, identified early in the 20th century by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and a central tenet of French structuralist thinking of the 1960s and 1970s. If “anything made of words – including a literary work – is socially constructed and socially constructing”^{3.42}, there is a generative capability within it, and this is where Oppen’s aspirations for his own poetic process lie. It’s presumably also where he hoped his readers’ interest would be grasped. Oppen challenges himself to identify chosen meanings from a polysemic reality, but he doesn’t wish to restrict the possibilities of detail that memory might conjure in a reader, nor limit his own wealth of allusion that, of necessity, he must distil into single words. At times he identifies a precise subject but reaches for the words that might express it. At other times he seems uncertain of a precise subject because his response to his experience is complex and multi-faceted. In that case the language, however precise the words, at a phrasal or stanzaic level is more complex, multi-dimensional rather than linear; it reaches out to offer multiple possibilities. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, as witness, has described Oppen in action: “Hunting. George searches the orts and scraps for a palimpsested poem in the dark house and comes into the soft kitchen mumbling in one or another line no this won’t do so that the contestation enters cadence; poem articulated and questioned he disappears into the darkness.”^{3.43}

3.5 The Cognitive Context

“[a] literary equivalent of the scientist [...] not the entertainer” George Oppen

Oppen’s poetry of the late 1960s and 1970s was written at a time when early cognitive studies ranged across aspects of psychology, anthropology and linguistics, and the nascent fields of artificial intelligence, computer science and the neurological sciences. Coincident with Oppen’s later writing, as philosopher Peter Strawson expressed it in 1969: “the semantic and syntactic rules or conventions [that determine] the meanings of sentences” was the dominant research project in linguistics.^{3.44} For Chomsky, the objective was further “to discover the principles of universal grammar that lie beyond particular rules or conventions.”^{3.45} In emerging cognitive psychology the concern was, as Jerome Bruner put it, with the “effort to establish meaning as the central concept of psychology [...] Its aim was to discover and to describe formally the meanings that human beings created out of their encounters with the world, and then to propose hypotheses about what meaning-making processes were implicated.”^{3.46} Oppen’s struggle with his own experience (how to understand it and how to express it) can almost be seen as his informal contribution to these evolving fields of study. In this, Oppen on his mid-life return to poetry, fits into a second-wave modernist poetry context, one characteristic of which was that the more self-consciously innovative 20th century poets were readily receptive to scientific influence, not merely as content but as research process. Ezra Pound had initiated this interest (from his own 19th century antecedents, such as Walt Whitman and the painter J.A.M. Whistler) by identifying the ‘exploratory’ practice of science and the ‘provisional’ nature of its knowledge. Both these facets could be transferred to poetic practice, without any necessary regard for scientific subject matter. Between First and Second World Wars, plenty of English and American poets were influenced by scientific facts, ideas, and language,^{3.48} but perhaps only Pound seemed seriously to pursue an explicit research project in his *Cantos*. It took Charles Olson’s rediscovery of the research principle after WWII, to be taken up by others such as Robert Duncan, before Middleton’s ‘poetic right of experiment and inquiry’ took flight. Over two decades later, by the time of Oppen’s last published collection in 1978, it would be the Language writers initiating texts assembled as questions and tentative answers in the manner of “the inquiring scientific intelligence”^{3.49}. As Lyn Hejinian would later describe it:

“the language of poetry is a language of inquiry”^{3.50}, a poetry having “rigor, patience, thoroughness,”^{3.51} descriptive terms strongly characteristic of George Oppen’s later work.

Beyond the conjectural nature of his poetic inquiry, it is clear that Oppen was working in an intellectual climate in which scientific information was readily available and very much ‘in the air’, as Pound had earlier in the century referred to such influences.^{3.52} We have no way of knowing the extent to which Oppen was or was not in any sense a regular reader of such journals as *Scientific American*, a journal that Peter Middleton has used as “an authentic glimpse of unfolding scientific research ... as it happen[ed]” in his recent study of mid-century Cold War American poetry.^{3.53} However, Middleton does identify direct referencing of this journal’s contents by some of Oppen’s fellow poets: Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Ed Dorn, and Jackson Mac Low, specifically during the 1960s.^{3.53} He also argues for its significance in “create[ing] a context for poems” by Gary Snyder, Amiri Baraka, and in the specific case of ‘Of Being Numerous’ of Oppen himself. Middleton refers to Oppen “being as curious as Mac Low, Duncan, and Armantrout about what the scientists were publishing about their work”,^{3.54} and references Oppen’s 1960s’ *Daybook* comments on the ‘epistemological naivety’ of student understanding of the ethics and politics behind the various knowledge discourses, including the scientific; as well as Oppen’s *Daybook* criticism of a generally inadequate recognition of the etymological distinctions between terms such as ‘reality’, ‘nature’, and ‘physical existence’.^{3.54} In September 1965, a *Scientific American* special issue focused on social scientific responses to problems of city living (e.g. land use, transportation, services). Referring to Oppen’s ‘Numerous’ poem in the 1968 collection, Middleton argues for Oppen’s interest in exactly these sociological issues, with his attention to Hegel’s ‘speculative concept’ (the speculative proposition) as a “counter [to] a positivist sociology as well as a rigidly Marxist one. Philosophy was a form of social theory for him [Oppen].”^{3.55} Through the example of the ‘Cities’ edition of *Scientific American*, Middleton relates the “preoccupations of Oppen’s poem” as “a reminder of just how attuned Oppen was to the intellectual debates of his time.”^{3.55} Having identified “strong verbal resonances” between the poem and one particular journal article, as well as the journal’s “pervasive use of terms that appear in his poem”, Middleton acknowledges that we don’t know “whether Oppen read the cities issue ..., whether he heard about its contents from friends or family, or whether he was simply aware of it”. The evidence is circumstantial, yet compelling.

While acknowledging the fact that we have no evidence of a direct Oppen-*Scientific American* link in regard to his post-1968 work either, it is interesting to note that September 1972 saw a special issue of the journal focused on ‘Communication’ (including cellular, animal, verbal, visual, IT, AI, social, political) written by a range of distinguished academic figures. Included was an article by John R. Pierce in which Chomsky’s work and its influence on linguists and psychologists was featured, as was discussion of the “mixture of surprise and the search for meaning in a familiar context” that underpins “our [linguistic] straining towards some ...extraordinary context or meaning”, even illustrated with a “computer-produced ‘poem’” by Marie Borroff – a poem “not so much out of this world as enticingly on the fringes of it.”^{3.56} The closing paragraph of another article, this one by linguist and literary theorist Roman Jakobson, entitled ‘Verbal Communication’, carried the by-line: ‘The ability of human language to convey an infinite number of messages and to form and develop new concepts is based on the unique and universal properties of the verbal code’. Jakobson goes on to argue for the value of the ‘connotative’ qualities of language (over the purely lexical) and the final paragraph includes the following: “the analysis of grammatical transformations and of their import should include the poetic function of language, because the core of this function is to push transformations into the foreground. It is the purposeful poetic use of lexical and grammatical tropes and figures that brings the creative power of language to its summit.” Whether Oppen read any of this or even ‘tuned in’ to any conversation arising from it while holidaying on Little Deer Island, Maine, or when back in San Francisco in the late summer of 1972, we’ll probably never know; yet it is, coincidental to his preoccupations, in the intellectual air.

What we do know is that Oppen dipped in and out of texts which, with particular reference to their influence on his later poetry, included the philosophical works through which he explored his own poetic experience. In a letter to Michael Heller in November 1975, Oppen makes clear: “yes: read quite a bit of Merleau-Ponty [...] More moved by Maritain [...] and Heidegger.”^{3.57} As already mentioned, Nicholls’s ‘Appendix A’ summarises the Heidegger readings and in Chapter 5 of *The Fate of Modernism* he also considers Oppen’s debt to Hegel. To date, we have little information on Oppen’s reading of Merleau-Ponty. On the issue of Heidegger’s texts in particular in which Oppen took an interest, Michael Heller makes the point which Nicholls reiterates, that Oppen “read not for omnivorous knowledge of a subject but to find a passage or even a phrase which would show him an opening or a way out of intellectual, emotional or even philosophical impasses.”^{3.58} Nicholls adds: “Rather like

Heidegger himself, Oppen was often fascinated by a single phrase or sentence which seemed to promise illumination, and possible access to another world of thought."^{3.59}

To summarise our emerging thesis: Oppen's late work is in part an exploration of cognition – not a record of his reading or thinking about cognition, but his process of writing poems itself as a research study, a working through, a thinking through of cognitive questions in relation to the experiences that meant most to him. One question we are asking is whether Oppen's understanding as recorded in both his prose and poetry is valid in the light of modern day cognitive science, and therefore whether we can read Oppen as both a genuinely contemporary voice (as opposed to that of literary historical interest only) and as a source from which to extend our contemporary poetic aspirations for conceptual renewal.

^{3.1} George Oppen, 'The Objectivist Poet: Four Interviews', *Contemporary Literature* 10 (1969), 163.

^{3.2} Charles Altieri, *Sense and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (1984), Cambridge: Cambridge University, 104.

^{3.3} Norman M. Finkelstein, 'Syntax and Tradition', *George Oppen: Man & Poet* ed. Burton Hatlen (1981), Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 359.

^{3.4} Norman M. Finkelstein, *Man & Poet*, 360.

^{3.5} George Oppen quoted in Finkelstein, *Man & Poet*, 364.

^{3.6} Norman M. Finkelstein, *Man & Poet*, 364.

^{3.7} Norman M. Finkelstein, *Man & Poet*, 365.

^{3.8} Michael Heller, *Speaking the Estranged* (2012), Bristol: Shearsman Books, 166.

^{3.9} Michael Heller, *Speaking*, 168.

^{3.10} George Oppen, *Selected Letters*, 231.

^{3.11} Neurons (brain cells) remained unidentified as discrete entities until the 1960s at which point electron microscopes began to provide magnifications up to 80,000 in scale. Although extremely close together, the 100 billion neurons in the human brain are separated by a small gap at the point of contact called a synapse, typically 200,000th of a millimetre across. Each neuron has a central cell body with up to 100,000 wiry branches called dendrites. It is the dendrites which receive the incoming signals from neighbouring cells and pass these on into the cell body. Since many incoming signals enter the cell body at any one time down the numerous dendrite routes, each is either amplified or suppressed by others, rather as in-phase waves amplify one another whereas out-of-phase waves cancel one another out. If a coherent signal results from the converging input, the cell triggers its own signal out via a specific exit route along an 'axon'. While dendrites are tapered at their ends like true branches, axons are of constant diameter and each neuron has only one. Axon lengths vary enormously but at their ends all divide into a number of small finger branches, each with a tip like a mushroom. The signal between neurons is passed in electrical form by the axon, across a synapse of one to a dendrite of another. The electrical signal arises from the tiny electrical potential across the division between inside and outside the cell (typically 1/80,000 of a volt), generated by counter flows of sodium and potassium ions. So the signal (so-called 'action potential') arises from the transient exchange of ions from inside and outside the cell and the resulting change in potential difference (voltage). Each signal process takes between 1 – 2 milliseconds. Action potentials jump their way along the axon at 250mph. At the synapse junction the potential meets a liquid medium containing 'neurotransmitter' molecules, typically between 10,000 and 100,000 being available. The conversion of electrical signal to chemical one has been described as akin to swapping a car for a boat and the neurotransmitter diffuses across the synapse. Reconversion to an electrical signal in the form of ion flow completes the synaptic transmission process as the signal travels to the new cell body. There are tens of thousands of inputs converging on the cell body via the many dendrites. These in turn are 'averaged' into a single output, an action potential that becomes just one of tens of thousands of inputs converging on the next neuron. Neuroscientists now have the technique of 'voltammetry' in which mini-electrodes can detect the release of neurotransmitters on a scale almost equivalent to single neurons and, at a detection rate greater than ten readings per second, on a timescale comparable to the speed of synaptic transmission. We now know that although we are born with almost all the neurons we will ever have, about 100 billion, many of the connections between neurons have yet to be made until later development. The number of dendrites and thus the inter-neuron connectivity continues to grow rapidly as we grow into adulthood, providing remarkable flexibility in the brain's ability to adapt to an individual's

life experience. We now also know that the brain has a 'plasticity', that is the ability to develop further connections throughout adult life in response to stimulation.

- ^{3.12} Susan Greenfield, *Brain Story* (2000), London: BBC Worldwide, 187.
- ^{3.13} Lawrence W. Barsalou, 'The Human Conceptual System', *The Cambridge Handbook of Psycholinguistics* eds. Spivey M.J., McCrae K., & Joanisse M.F. (2012), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 239.
- ^{3.14} Lyn Graham Barzilai, *George Oppen: A Critical Study* (2006). Jefferson, N. Carolina: McFarland & Co Inc., 201.
- ^{3.15} Lyn Graham Barzilai, *George Oppen*, 202.
- ^{3.16} Trueswell JC. 1996. 'The role of lexical frequency in syntactic ambiguity resolution' (1996) *J. Mem.Lang.* 35:566–85; quoted in Lawrence W. Barsalou, 'Grounded Cognition', *Annual Review of Psychology* 59, (2008), 617.
- ^{3.17} McRae K, Hare M, Elman JL, Ferretti TR, 'A basis for generating expectancies for verbs from nouns' (2005) *Mem. Cogn.* 33:1174–84.
- ^{3.18} Lawrence W. Barsalou, 'Human Conceptual', 240.
- ^{3.19} Lawrence W. Barsalou, 'Grounded Cognition', 3.
- ^{3.20} Peter Middleton, *Open Oppen*, 623.
- ^{3.21} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 110-135.
- ^{3.22} Peter Middleton, *Open Oppen*, 623-636.
- ^{3.23} Robert Duncan, 'Letter to Denise Levertov, May 7th 1963', *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, eds. Robert J. Bertholf & Albert Gelpi, (2004), Stanford: Stanford University Press, 401; quoted in Peter Middleton, 'Open Oppen', *Textual Practice* 24:4 (2010), 625.
- ^{3.24} Peter Middleton, *Open Oppen*, 625.
- ^{3.25} Robert Duncan, *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov* (2004). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 404.
- ^{3.26} Peter Middleton, *Open Oppen*, 626.
- ^{3.27} George Oppen, 'Mind's Own Place', *Daybooks*, 182
- ^{3.28} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 118-119.
- ^{3.29} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 119.
- ^{3.30a} At its simplest, perhaps: "of that which cannot be said in any way but its own" (Clark, *Poetics of Singularity*, 158). More elaborately: "To read a text solely as itself and on its own terms [...] not to make the text an example of some social or cultural point, nor a facet of some theory of poetics but merely to affirm in it in itself and as it is [...] the reading attains a space in which the text is felt to project itself so specifically that the terms of any mode of interpretation one might want to apply begin to be felt as inadequate (Clark, *Poetics of Singularity*, 9). In 2010, writing in response to Peter Nicholls's study of Oppen published three years earlier, Peter Middleton noted "a substantial history of literary criticism and theory on which to draw" in considering critical discussions of 'the poetic proposition' (Middleton, *Open Oppen*, 636-7). He includes Wittgenstein's 'pseudo-statement' and I.A. Richard's co-opting of this as poetic 'pseudo-proposition'. He continues with Gerald Graff's critique of the 'heresy of paraphrase': "on the grounds that paraphrase is by definition approximate [and] not a perfect simulation" (Graff, *Poetic Statement*, 167).
- ^{3.30b} Timothy Clark, *The Poetics of Singularity: The Counter-culturalist turn in Heidegger, Derrida, Blanchot and the later Gadamer* (2002). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- ^{3.31} Jean-Francois Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne* (1979). Paris : Les Editions de Minuit., 7
- ^{3.32} Veronica Forrest-Thompson, 'Irrationality and Artifice' (1971) ; 'Necessary Artifice' (1973) ; 'Rational Artifice' (1974) ; *Poetic Artifice : A Theory of Twentieth Century Poetry* (1978). Manchester : Manchester University Press.
- ^{3.33} Timothy Clark, *Poetics of Singularity*, 159.
- ^{3.34} Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (2nd edn 1958), Chicago : Chicago University Press, 200.
- ^{3.35} Timothy Clark, *Poetics of Singularity*, 160.
- ^{3.36} Marjorie Perloff, 'Writing Poetry/Writing about Poetry: Some Problems of Affiliation', *symploke vol. 7 no.1/2* (1999). University of Nebraska Press, 24; URL www.jstor.org/stable/40550488, accessed 17.5.2015.
- ^{3.37} Martin McQuillan, 'Series Editor's Preface' in Timothy Clark, *The Poetics of Singularity*, vii.
- ^{3.38} Timothy Clark, *Poetics of Singularity*, 159.
- ^{3.39} Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (2nd edn 1958), Chicago : Chicago University Press,, 200.
- ^{3.40} Timothy Clark, *Poetics of Singularity*, 160.
- ^{3.41} Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (2000). Berkeley: University of California, 170.
- ^{3.42} Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds, Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye & Albert Reidlinger, trans. Wade Baskin. London: Peter Owen.
- ^{3.43} Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'Oppen from seventy-five to a hundred, 1983–2008', paragraph 73. Originally prepared for SUNY, Buffalo: George Oppen Conference, delivered April 24, 2008 (Oppen's 100th birthday). In revised form, delivered at the University of Edinburgh, Oppen Conference, November 15–16, 2008. Published in *Jacket* 36 (2008) <http://jacketmagazine.com/36/open-duplessis.shtml>.
- ^{3.44} P.F. Strawson, *Meaning and Truth*, Inaugural Lecture, University of Oxford, Nov.5th 1969 (1970), London: Oxford University Press.
- ^{3.45} Noam Chomsky, *Reflections on Language* (1976), London: Fontana-Collins, 79.
- ^{3.46} Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (1992 edn.), Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2.
- ^{3.47} Peter Middleton, *Physics Envy* (2015), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 13.

- ^{3.48} For example, William Carlos Williams, Archibald MacLeish, Louis Zukofsky, William Empson, W.H.Auden, Herbert Read, Hugh MacDiarmid, Michael Roberts, John Rodker, Louis MacNeice, C.Day Lewis, Wallace Stevens, took a largely positive view. More cautious or openly hostile were poets such as Robert Frost and E.E.Cummings.
- ^{3.49} Peter Middleton, *A Concise Companion to Twentieth Century American Poetry* ed. Stephen Fredman (2005), Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 223.
- ^{3.50} Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (2000), Berkeley: University of California Press, 3.
- ^{3.51} Lyn Hejinian, 'The Person: Statement', *Mirage: The Women's Issue*, 3 (1989), 24-5.
- ^{3.52} Ezra Pound, 'I Gather the Limbs of Osiris, II', *The New Age* X,6 (1911), 130.
- ^{3.53} Peter Middleton, *Physics Envy*, 197.
- ^{3.54} George Oppen, *Daybooks* 167.
- ^{3.55} Peter Middleton, *Physics Envy*, 225. Oppen also makes a passing reference to having seen "one of those sociologists' charts of which-way and so on" in referring to group relationships (specifically the Objectivist poets as a group) in the June 1973 National Poetry Festival discussion, now in the Pennsylvania University Sound Archive: www.writing.upen.edu/pennsound/x/Oppen.php Part1, 3.
- ^{3.56} *Scientific American*, vol.227, issue 3 (Sept. 1972); www.scientificamerican.com/magazine/sa/1972/09-01
- ^{3.57} Georg Oppen, *SL*, 311.
- ^{3.58} Michael Heller, 'Knowledge is Loneliness Turning: Oppen's Going Down Middle-Voice', *Ironwood* 26 (1985), 53.
- ^{3.59} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 76.

Chapter 4

'On the sea, steering, the sea pulling'

4.1 The Moving Edge

"The thing in the mind before the words." George Oppen

In a discussion of the *Seascape: Needles' Eye* collection, Peter Nicholls identifies the significance of the 'needle's eye' to Oppen as the poetic representation of 'the intelligence [that] comes to rest'^{4.1}; and then 'the complex elegiac register; the fear of ageing; the sense of being a survivor; the 'intermittent rejections of poetic language' and 'eloquence' [rhetoric]; before considering "a certain 'candour' which is in turn allied to a form of verbal opacity."^{4.2} In Oppen's view: "The peculiar attribute of words is that they spring spontaneously in the mind, they flow continuously in the mind. They provide, if not hope, at least opacity."^{4.3} Nicholls identifies the "unexpected association" of 'candour' with 'opacity' but suggests it is "indicative of Oppen's attempt to make a resistant verbal texture the register of the world's 'impenetrability'."^{4.2} He continues: "To be 'candid' is to allow the words to speak for themselves with a minimum of authorial intrusion." For Oppen no "histrionics"^{4.4}, no rhetoric, no "staging"^{4.5} As for the opacity, the impenetrability, an 'impoverished' language (*NCP*, 220) according to Nicholls "can approximate" the world.^{4.6} The experience in Oppen's understanding of cognition precedes the words that flow in the mind: "Poem [] *the thing in the mind before the words* [my italics] [] to be able to hold it even against the language."^{4.7} He avows a "wordless sphere of the mind"^{4.7} from which the prefigured 'poem' emerges most closely into language when syntactic and grammatical constraints are ignored in favour of the "less smooth, less bound"^{4.8}, producing a written poem that coheres most closely to the 'thing in the mind' by being "not 'too perfect'"^{4.8} The "transparency" akin to "inaudibility" (of "social tone") which Oppen refers to in seeking "the simplest language"^{4.9} may seem at first sight at odds with the 'opacity' of the world. However, Oppen refers to "the white space of the paper becom[ing] part of the poem"^{4.10} in which silence becomes a 'transparency' as, in Nicholl's phrase, "the means by which to disclose the real."^{4.11} Oppen's ontology and epistemology (cognitive and experientialist as we have described them) emerge clearly through these discussions, as the percept to grounded concept to symbolic correlate are seen as emerging into language.

At the heart of the act of reading a later Oppen poem, the reader is confronted by a deliberation of tone and a 'direction' of passage which may, to use Oppen's favourite

pastime as analogy, be with a following wind, an oblique wind or a head wind. In other words, start to finish may not lead us along any prosaic, landlubber's, metalled highway. The components of the poem are likely to present multiple semantic and musical possibilities from which the reader is free to draw a variety of semantic senses, especially since Oppen favours 'postulation' over 'argument'.^{4.12} The absence of punctuation, the broken lineation, the collagic juxtaposition of words and phrases, added to what Peter Middleton calls "the diminished reference" and frequent "unintelligibility",^{4.13} allows a freedom to vary one's reading (visually and orally). Variations prompt both sensory and semantic alternatives. The relationship between the way one reads and what this prompts in our recollections of time, place, thought and emotion, as well as the factual or the imagined – the 'subject matter' of understanding and allusion – is at times barely amenable to analysis given Oppen's opacity, yet is itself a real-time experience to each of us. To read is to think and feel while the world that is conjured, however initially 'incoherent', however speculative, belongs exclusively to the reader in that moment, never to be repeated in the same way. Oppen said, in a letter to John Taggart in September 1974, "I have of course – as you have too – some reserves about a doctoral thesis which must seem to absorb the poem into itself, into the thesis. For the poem is of course not that, the poem is the moving edge, whereas the doctorate knows no time and the substance cannot live."^{4.14} No poem is set in stone. Each reading is in the variable context of a lifetime of circumstance that constantly changes. The poem moves with us at the edge, the front, between an immediate present and an immanent future. To dissect is to partially anatomise, to identify the structural skeleton but without the flesh of living action or the electricity of nervous engagement. The language patterns of *Seascape*, *Myth*, and *Primitive*, are first and foremost interesting and pleasurable to read whether or not one 'gains' a 'satisfactory' meaning or somehow 'fully coherent' interpretation, in any particular reading at word, phrase, or larger composite, level.

As readers who are conscious of contemporary insights arising from cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics, we could explore a 'cognitive poetics' reading of Oppen's poetry, in the manner typified by such texts as Peter Stockwell's *Texture* (2009). At its simplest, for example, in deciphering the complex possibilities of such writing, we might consider the 'image schemas' identified in recent years as hidden within, for example, the simplest prepositional signifiers. These are the smallest of Oppen's small words, with cognitive roots now envisaged as deeper than that of which Oppen was aware. Take the second of 'San Francisco Poems' in *Seascape*: "On the bed in the white room" presents Mary Oppen's body on top of the bed which is inside the room. In the image schema hypothesis, both on and in

are spatial particles with ‘containment’ associations, one ‘bounded’ the other perhaps not. Containment schemas, it is thought, are learned early in life by children putting in and taking out, pouring, filling, inverting, emptying, themselves entering and leaving spaces; these all establish a distinction between entities (including oneself) that can go inside, be contained within, another distinctively separate entity (so-called trajectory-landmark relationships) – a dualistic concept of action and motor-sensory relation, a symbolic representation initially independent of a language label. When the poem continues in line 9 with “Turn inward”, we have a conceptual metaphor in which the containment schema has been translated from a concrete to an abstract context in which “Her naked eyes” metaphorically look ‘inside’ the vessel of mind or imagination or self. Line 21 “Tamalpais in cloud”, and line 24 “Local knowledge/ In the heavy hills”, return us to the concrete (or as Oppen would say the ‘material’) world, even though the containment nature of in is stretched in both cases. In the first the reality of interaction between Tamalpais and cloud is simplified to a straight ‘surface separation’ distinction between the two. In the second the abstract ‘local knowledge’ is placed ‘within’ a hilly locality, an abstract within a material as conceptual metaphor. Whereas mist sitting “over” farmlands in line 22 is a simple spatial particle ‘orientation’ schema, the loose waves that “move landward” in line 25, and the trees that bend “along the length of coast” in line 28, defining position and direction, add a dynamic sense. Oppen again adopts a familiar containment-base use of in for lines 23 and 25 where both waves and trees are “in the wind” and “in the continual wind”, respectively. The point is that the relationship between definable experience, definable requiring just such dualistic relationships between discrete entities (however arbitrarily delineated, such as ‘wind’), initially material, subsequently available to abstraction, lie at the root of percept-to-concept and signified-to-sign cognitive processes.

A basic tenet of cognitive linguistics is “that the meaning associated with an individual lexeme is conceptual in nature. That is, the meanings associated with words are instantiated in semantic memory not in terms of linguistic or semantic features, nor as abstract propositions, but rather meaning prompted for by symbols [...] [which] constitutes a redescription of perceptual information, at some level related to sensorimotor experience.”^{4.15} In the sensation of handling a small sailing boat (“George on the sea, steering, the sea pulling”)^{4.55} the experience translates first into symbolic representation of component parts and dynamic relationships between them. We might imagine a prelinguistic ‘label’ for hand, tiller, rudder, wave, wash etc and prelinguistic ‘simulations’

(‘motion’ concepts) – push, pull, twist, roll, rise, fall etc – between them. The translation then into language (the poem functioning as, in Oppen’s words: “process of thought”^{4.16}) is Oppen bringing the embodied experience out into the choice of language, the dynamics of the phrasing, “the shape of the line”.^{4.17} When Oppen speaks of the “test of truth”^{4.4} as “To slow down, that is, to isolate the words”^{4.18} he recognises “we know of an actuality[...] prior to that which is consciousness’ self-knowledge.”^{4.19} As Rachel Blau DuPlessis puts it: “The poem is then George on the sea, steering, the sea pulling: the poem changes force and weight at every word but moves continuing forward. The syntactic sense then of a tension-filled linearity, not an argument to exercise or control the force and gravity of the pulls but rather to honor and allow them to be propelled by the intensity of the vectors. [] And then he took [the tiller] back. He showed me — this is sailing. This is the ambiguity of direction; this the gravity of forces.”^{4.1} The embodied echoed in the writing is deliberate in discarding the “deluge of speech”,^{4.20} the “clatter” and “chatter”^{4.21}, the poetic “histrionics”,^{4.1} expression being instead focussed on the ‘direct’ experience in both its descriptive and generative possibilities.

Of course, we reduce in order to understand. We diminish: this is the reductive process, subdividing an integrated whole into spatially and temporally arbitrary parts – the bee from the flower – losing our sense of the interconnections and the dynamics along the way. The understanding that this presents is inescapably a partial and rather static one, the parts being typically deemed intelligible through the linear, prosaic, syntactic structure of incremental analysis. The reality that Oppen seeks to glimpse in linguistic reconfiguration is the poet’s unique opportunity. By subverting the prosaic he reminds us of the reality of experience beneath the words, the partiality of prosaic knowledge, the possibility of a fuller ‘poetic knowledge’ to be realized through the page. Peter Middleton has reminded us that: “Fragmentation, disjunction, parataxis, collage, diminished reference, unintelligibility, or ‘lacunary structure’: modernist poetry boasts its proximity to the leading edge of modernity by displaying visible disruptions of normative linguistic structures. Torn, unfinished sentences whose suspended incomplete syntax produces unresolved semantic uncertainty, and orphaned sentences with no adjacent narrative or sequentially implicated sentences and hence unintegrated into larger textual communications, appear everywhere in modernist and avant-garde poetry from *The Waste Land* to contemporary magazines such as *Jacket*.”^{4.13} These are the devices that seek to break beyond detached knowledge into the more directly experiential.

4.2 The Danger of the Chess Board^{4.21}

"Like others, I have pondered notations." George Oppen

In discussing subject-predicate syntax or the speculative proposition, what applies to the grammarian's sentence applies equally to the poet's phrase. In identifying Oppen's increasing preoccupation with what we have already referred to in Nicholls's words as "the grammatical conditions of poetic singularity", Nicholls highlights Ernest Fenollosa's study *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* as "an important intertext."^{4.22} Ezra Pound edited the essay from Fenollosa's manuscript which is critical of the generalising and impersonal tendencies in the Western language tradition. Philosopher Theodor Adorno called this 'identity thinking', in which the abstract concept seems to displace the uniqueness of all individual experience. Classical Chinese poetic language, on the other hand, is immersed in what has been called "the physicality of the pictographic script"^{4.23} (almost a phenomenological consciousness at work, certainly a grounded pre-conscious), using its characters to label nouns and verbs only. There are no personal pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, except on rare occasions. In what is essentially a flow of descriptive images, the reader gleans sense from custom, finds nothing missing but the subtleties that were deliberately inferred, and with space left for the reader's imagination to fill.^{4.24} As Nicholls points out, Fenollosa emphasised what he felt to be the contrived conversational function of pronoun use, its misguided egocentricity, and his preference for the Chinese engagement with the verb as the subjective voice of phenomena.^{4.22} Encased in subject-predicate relationships, the "activities in things" (for example, the tree that 'greens' itself) is lost to objectification and cause and effect distinctions. Nicholls discusses Oppen's relationship with Pound's rhetorical and solipsistic poetics (not to mention "totalitarian ethics") which seemed to evolve as a misdirected response to Fenollosa's 'natural' grammar, in contrast to "an accident of man as a conversational animal".^{4.25} Where Fenollosa asserted that "the verb must be the primary fact of nature, since motion and change are all that we can recognise in her"^{4.26}, Oppen chose not to adopt the resulting syntactic ideal with its linguistic and conceptual rigidity. It is interesting that Oppen's adherence to the noun as much as the verb, as central to poetic language, is true to Pound's original notion of the 'image' as energetic vortex and conceptual knot with both fluidity and focus. Oppen criticised Pound's "argument" as "game of thought", conscious that "the danger is of the chess-board: on which everything has already been named."^{4.21} To quote Nicholls: "It may seem odd that Oppen should fault the elliptical and fragmented modes of *The Cantos* for being an 'argument', but his choice of that word points up a significant divergence between his

poetics and Pound's. At issue are not merely the argumentative habits of the older poet's work and the hectoring tone of the late stages of his poem but, more importantly, what Oppen sees as a tendency there to closure and solipsism. The two are, for him, closely connected and together characterize a discourse that must always fall short of the genuinely 'poetic.'^{4.27}

Peter Nicholls identifies in detail the more important counter influence of philosopher G.W.F. Hegel on Oppen^{4.28}, especially Hegel's notion of the inseparability of the thinking process from its content. We can ask how the phenomenon of the 'speculative proposition', in which Nicholls notes that Oppen took a deep interest from his reading of Hegel, might be seen to clearly engender a move of "the mind beyond its conceptual confines". Peter Middleton has referred to a commentary on the preface to Hegel's *Phenomenology* by Yirmiyahu Yovel in which Yovel calls speculative propositions "rather rare and enigmatic".^{4.29} They don't pop up in conventional prosaic syntax or 'mainstream' poetry, since grammatically correct forms typically present description, argument, and comment, the natural language of both reasoned analysis and conventional representation. As described by Gillian Rose, the speculative proposition, in contrast, starts with "an empty name, uncertain and problematic, gradually acquiring meaning as the result of a series of contradictory experiences."^{4.30} As Middleton expands this: "the poem can enlist the reader's labour to develop meaning gradually through a reading back and forwards."^{4.31} As Yovel then puts it: "no single sentence can capture the process of speculative thinking."^{4.29} Indeed the sentence, by definition, being subject and predicate (inescapably commenting) cannot avoid assertive propositions. Middleton suggests that as a "single statement" the speculative proposition cannot exist ("effectively non-existent, though perhaps hovering on the far edge of possible existence like the snark."^{4.31}). Where such a singular proposition which is hardly a proposition at all, has yet to become "a passage of writing"^{4.31}, it is what Yovel calls a 'lever' or 'means of transmission'^{4.32} to "open the way to an extended process of further thought".^{4.33} "The speculative proposition heightens the sense of dissatisfaction we get from the subject/predicate proposition, and urges our thinking to go beyond it – not to another form of proposition but to the complete process of dialectical thinking, which no single sentence of any form can express."^{4.32}

Integral to the syntactic-semantic relationship, as Middleton makes the point, for any proposition made in verse "the prosodic form in which it is stated will be an integral part of its significance."^{4.34} This contrasts with the conventionally prosaic in which the words chosen

may be changed while the core proposition remains constant. The particular attraction for a poet such as Oppen is “that a poetic statement is not an open or shut proposition whose truth can be evaluated at once. Inside the speculative poetic proposition is the potential for endlessly drawing out, or making explicit, all sorts of implications contained within its seed.”^{4.34} As Middleton also notes, in Nicholls’s analysis of Oppen’s poem ‘From a Phrase of Simone Weil’s and Some Words of Hegel’s’, which opens the *Seascape: Needle’s Eye* collection, “the reader is invited to ‘follow the lines of association that the poem most clearly offers’”.^{4.35} Without reiterating Middleton’s analysis, we can note he makes the point that “these suspended phrases [he references ‘interrupted predicates’ and ‘unconsolidated propositions’] invite readers to attribute such intimated statements to the poem while making evident that the onus is on the reader to justify this attribution.”^{4.35} Middleton refers to the apparent series of “self-corrections” by Oppen in this poem, and how “we are still left wondering how we might offer even the most approximate paraphrase of what is being said, because the absences of grammatical closure leaves us with only an impression that a statement is being prepared”.^{4.35}

Initially, Middleton seems not persuaded of the efficacy of speculative propositional form. Early in his analysis he cautions: “But the poet would be forgetting that this may be a snark”^{4.34} and (quoting Lewis Carroll directly) “the Snark was a Boojum”.^{4.31} He subsequently uses Eliot’s *Prufrock* to voice “the problem of the poetic proposition” as “It is impossible to say just what I mean”, which he transmutes into “the line may find it impossible to mean just what it says.”^{4.36} Of course, if we confine ourselves as poets in meaning only what it is possible to say, we are staying within the constraints of the conceptual status quo, rather than pushing at its edges. Whatever legitimate reservations we might have over the particular example that Middleton selects from Oppen’s work, we ought not to deny the potential of the speculative form, especially used selectively alongside the more usual predicates, in stretching possibilities. Where Middleton is, however, persuaded is in the poem as “a song of inquiry” (in his case through the example of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*) in which “the inquiry (or research) is taking place at the site of the poem.”^{4.37} A preference for the assertive proposition is, of course, the basis of analytical reasoning. Quoting Simon Jarvis on Wordsworth, Middleton recognises that where existing philosophical (in the sense of ‘natural philosophy’ i.e. scientific) “vocabularies break down” in poetry, “contradictions and antagonisms are revealed”^{4.37} and “the possibility of new thinking is glimpsed”^{4.37}. For Jarvis, the ‘reasoning’ in Wordsworth’s *Prelude* is “itself a kind of cognition”^{4.37}. For Middleton, “the

cautious qualification 'a kind of' signals that these are tentative claims, and also that we might want to extend our concept of what constitutes cognition if we are adequately to understand the nature of the reasoning [...] since cognition, strictly speaking, although it encompasses all kinds of knowing, excludes volition [consciously willed choices] and affect [felt responses]." He continues: "The possibility of 'new thinking' [...] matters because it pushes beyond what is known, and this why it is so disappointing that [Jarvis writes] 'the criticism of aesthetic artefacts is understood as salutary demystification'. Critique loses sight of the possibility that the literary work might also be able to contribute to the work of concepts, reasoning, and observation, and collaborate with the world of critical inquiry, rather than being solely subject to its gaze."^{4.37}

Middleton then references the account of Susan Stewart in which she asserts two significant traits of poetry as "states of extreme intensity in which judgement disappears and the desire to see the unseen", referring to this as characteristic of 'Orphic poetry'. This, of course, is precisely not Oppen's way. Oppen is the most deliberate and 'judgemental' of poets in selecting every word he uses; there is no question of judgement disappearing. In addition, Oppen would doubtless assert that far from a pursuit of the unseen (the transcendental to which we have earlier referred in note 1.18), his attention is determinedly on the observable, that material reality very much before our eyes. That's not to say that we couldn't accommodate Stewart's "endless play between the senses and abstraction" in discussing Oppen's work, or perhaps "the necessity to express in visual terms", but we must reject "going beyond the confines of material experience".^{4.38} In discussing Jarvis's detailed analysis of a passage from Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Middleton qualifies his own concern over the speculative – while affirming his focus as critic in "making explicit" a given text – identifying the subjective nature of attributing intentionality to a writer. Where Simon Jarvis associates 'philosophic song' with the aspiration "to obstruct, displace or otherwise change the syntax and the lexicons currently available for the articulation of such experience"^{4.39}, Middleton points out that "talk of syntax and lexicons returns us to the problem with cognition, the over-valuation of a certain type of propositionally-based knowledge".^{4.40} As he suggests, Charles Altieri hits the nail rather better on the head: "there are needs, drives, and felt modes of attentive interest, connection, and satisfaction that seem inchoate and inarticulate and so not dependent on the forms of understanding provided by a specific culture".^{4.41} For Middleton these "as yet inarticulate states" put "pressure on intelligibility so that it alters."^{4.40}

Peter Middleton was writing in 2010. Having looked at the relative extremes of non-assertive propositional form in selected poems of Robert Duncan and Susan Howe, Middleton suggested that literary critical study is in a “process of reassessing its commitments to certain understandings of language, reasoning, and mind that for several decades provided epistemological and ontological axioms whose role as guarantors of argument tended to be overlooked, and whose authority was therefore hard to engage with, let alone challenge.” In other words, notwithstanding the contributions of Wittgenstein (‘pseudo-statements’), I.A. Richards (‘pseudo-propositions’), Gerald Graff (a critique of the ‘heresy of paraphrase’), Paul de Man (distinctions between grammar and rhetoric), Charles Altieri (‘assertions’ and ‘cognitive intensity’), Middleton makes clear that there is no current theory that offers analytical enlightenment “about how to conceptualise the relation between linguistic fragmentation and propositionality.”^{4.43} Whether the stylistics approach that is cognitive poetics will contribute to such a theory remains to be seen but I have taken a closer look at its approach in Appendix Two: To Each Other We Will Speak.

4.3 You Could Call It Youthful Or You Could Call It Old.^{4.42}

“On average, people with Alzheimer’s disease live for around 8 to 10 years after they start to develop symptoms.” The Alzheimer Society

It is not my intention to discuss aspects of post-*Seascape* Oppen poetry that have been covered elsewhere. Nicholls, for example, notes that “questions of survival and mortality were uppermost in the poet’s mind”^{4.44} and he closely examines these as subject content in Oppen’s later poetry in the final chapter of his book.^{4.45} What concerns me here is the syntactic structure through which, as Nicholls also puts it: “Oppen managed again to find that ‘first light’ in which the world might still be encountered as if for the first time.”^{4.44} There is in Oppen’s final poems, most evident in *Primitive*, almost a reversion to what we might term a ‘language of thought’, profoundly detached from everyday language. The poems are not a burst of words from the unconscious but a very deliberate, in that characteristically intensely deliberate way of Oppen’s, emergence into the light of a coherence struggling to be. Whatever symbolic language constitutes and functions as pre-conscious thinking, it must find a way to transcribe an approximation of itself into the natural language of conscious thought. This is the place of Oppen’s obsession. Oppen would speak in 1975 (the year of *Primitive*’s publication) of “the motion, and the emotion that creates language [...] that I must find again in each poem the subject [...] Must ‘find’ it for the reader”^{4.46}; and “[to] speak

of experience, speak to experience, the cadence, the sound the form"^{4.47}. To Robert Duncan (who was responding to poems in the *Collected Poems* published that year) he writes: "You were saying the recent poems are incomprehensible? I don't really think so. And was not thinking of that which cannot be said in language – of that indeed silent however unwillingly [...] do, however, think of that which cannot be said except thru poem. Nothing very wild about this: the line-break is as much a part of the language as the comma the period the paragraph?"^{4.48} He goes on: "it is true there has been a remarkable silence about those poems. And R Blau [Rachel Blau DuPlessis], whose opinion I also respect, wrote simply that they made her dizzy. Bit troubling, yes. But I thought I was simply pointing to things – and clearly enough or accurately enough Perhaps not [...]I point: it is true I don't think everything has already been named."^{4.48} "My spontaneous feeling is that I *look*."^{4.49} As for this language of thinking: "a form of doodling --- going backward and forward in a poem that won't form"^{4.50}, where "meaning/ is the mind among/ things indeed/ that is/ lived [...] the poem that won't form. Probably the poem knows best."^{4.51} Oppen is always trying to peer through and beyond an excessively self-conscious steering of a poem in the making, while engaging his characteristically deliberate attention to the focus on words and prosody as they seem to emerge of themselves.

The poems which would be published as *Primitive* didn't start life easily. In late 1975 Oppen was writing to Harvey Shapiro of not having publicly read his own work anywhere since June 1973, "unable to bring myself to do so [...] AND trouble with my work, unable to be sure of it."^{4.52} It's an interesting echo of his post-Pulitzer retreat from 'recognition' (charted in Appendix One): "I fall down dead in the role [of David, let alone Goliath] [...] even the miniscule 'recognition' of the last few years [...] it's too much for me --- it's not the drama I can sustain. Just can't do it. I really am in trouble with this damn neurosis, trouble with my work [...] But this neurosis in fact was my escape from the poor little rich boy, and the basis of my adult life I have to protect it, let the Shrinks fall where they may."

It seems clear that the poems Oppen was writing at this time that would appear in the *Primitive* collection might legitimately be associated with the early onset of Alzheimer's that would come to seriously impair Oppen in a few short years. The same letter to Harvey Shapiro speaks of some obvious health difficulties^{4.53}. However, to glance at the letters in the Oppen archive of the next few years to realise that Oppen's mind remained active and stimulated by his many correspondents in spite of a failing short-term memory, to which he openly refers in a letter of August 1976 to John Martin, editor of *Black Sparrow*

Press who published *Primitive*.^{4.54} We would be mistaken in failing to recognise Oppen's final work as a legitimate progression, rather than some symptomatic aberration, within that post-Pulitzer context of his reflections on experience and language that we have been considering in detail. Oppen writes to his niece a few months before the completion of the *Primitive* manuscript: "Yes, I think you are right: a change in the tone in the new poems – I no longer have time, time, time to force the meaning, the statement on the reader. Time to argue. I must trust him, her, to know where we are. To TRUST himself, herself: to TRUST me: to say yes. To say yes, we know, we are also here 'possibly more youthful,' you suggest. It may be. You could call it youthful or you could call it old. To complete the circle."^{4.42}

^{4.1} George Oppen, UCSD 16.9.6

^{4.2} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 137-8 & 151.

^{4.3} George Oppen, UCSD 16, 15, 11.

^{4.4} George Oppen, 'The Mind's Own Place', *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers* (2007), Berkeley: University of California Press, 32.

^{4.5} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 152, note 48.

^{4.6} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 154.

^{4.7} George Oppen, *SL*, 236.

^{4.8} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 138, note 10.

^{4.9} George Oppen, UCSD 16, 22, 58 & UCSD 16, 15, 6.

^{4.10} George Oppen, UCSD 16, 34, 2.

^{4.11} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 161.

^{4.12} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 123.

^{4.13} Peter Middleton, 'Open Oppen: linguistic fragmentation and the poetic proposition', *Textual Practice* 24:4, 645 (2010), DOI: 10.1080/0950236X.2010.499649.

^{4.14} George Oppen, *SL*, 289.

^{4.15} Andrea Tyler & Vyvian Evans, *The Semantics of English Prepositions: Spatial scenes, embodied meaning and cognition* (2003). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 30.

^{4.16} George Oppen, UCSD 16, 15, 9

^{4.17} George Oppen, *SL*, ???

^{4.18} George Oppen, UCSD 16, 11, 11.

^{4.19} George Oppen, UCSD 16, 31, 16.

^{4.20} George Oppen, UCSD 16, 16, 12

^{4.21} George Oppen, "the danger is of the chess-board: on which everything has already been named." UCSD 16, 16, 9; Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 120, note 36.

^{4.22} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 119.

^{4.23} David Hinton, *Mountain Home: The wilderness poetry of ancient China*, trans. David Hinton (2007), London: Anvil Press, xviii.

^{4.24} I have explored this in detail elsewhere: Duncan MacKay, 'Reading a Poem', *The Net & The Fish* (2015), Canterbury: Wandering Scholars Press, 43-47.

^{4.25} Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* ed. Ezra Pound (1969), San Francisco: City Lights Books, 11.

^{4.26} Ernest Fenollosa, *Chinese Written Character*, 19.

^{4.27} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 120.

^{4.28} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 121-135.

^{4.29} Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Hegel's Preface to the Phenomenology of Spirit: Translation and Running Commentary* (2005), Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 182-3.

^{4.30} Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (1981), London: Athlone Press, 49.

^{4.31} Peter Middleton, 'Open Oppen', 629.

^{4.32} Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Hegel's Preface*, 183.

- 4.33 Peter Middleton, 'Open Oppen', 626.
- 4.34 Peter Middleton, 'Open Oppen', 630.
- 4.35 Peter Middleton, 'Open Oppen', 631.
- 4.36 Peter Middleton, 'Open Oppen', 632.
- 4.37 Peter Middleton, 'Open Oppen', 642.
- 4.38 Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (2002), Chicago: Chicago University Press, 256.
- 4.39 Simon Jarvis, *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* (2007), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 4; Peter Middleton, 'Oppen Oppen', 643.
- 4.40 Peter Middleton, 'Open Oppen', 644
- 4.41 Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (2003), Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 215.
- 4.42 George Oppen, *SL*, 339.
- 4.43 Peter Middleton, 'Open Oppen', 636.
- 4.44 Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 3.
- 4.45 Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 162-193.
- 4.46 George Oppen, *SL*, 417, note 8; UCSD 11, 17, 11.
- 4.47 George Oppen, *SL*, 296.
- 4.48 George Oppen, *SL*, 300.
- 4.49 George Oppen, *SL*, 301.
- 4.50 George Oppen, *SL*, 301-2.
- 4.51 George Oppen, *SL*, 302.
- 4.52 George Oppen, *SL*, 308.
- 4.53 George Oppen, *SL*, 310.
- 4.54 George Oppen, *SL*, 319: "Little can be expected from my memory since I become confused so easily even in the narrative present."
- 4.55 Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'Oppen from seventy-five to a hundred, 1983-2008', Jacket 36 (2008), 95; jacket magazine.com/36/oppen-duplessis.shtml.

Chapter 5

'Speaking into a wind'

5.1 The Instant of Meaning^{5.1}

"All the spoken of and the numbers (i.e. how to form them ...)" George Oppen

When we look at Oppen's often "densely encoded"^{5.2} later poems there are undoubtedly recurrent subject motifs, including anxiety, fear, guilt, the indifference of "earth turning, that great // loneliness" (*NCP* 265), and the self as 'survivor'. In other words, there are aspects of conventional subject coherence that present themselves for ready interpretation, even if they may sit alongside, or within, a less than obviously assertive syntactic surrounding. The focus of this dissertation is less on the subject material than in the exceptional, speculative, prosody *through which* Oppen seeks to speak, since this is his thinking in practice, the process made manifest whatever its semantic guise. The human brain is a great pattern finder and as receptive readers of Oppen's late work we may in some way be able to come close to what lies almost below what is articulated, feeling the pattern of meaning beneath the words. In late Oppen poetry the speculative and the unresolved move us through successive lexical steps, momentary haltings for reflection on a solitary word, a broken phrase, a torn couplet. We think we understand "...the nerve // the thread / reverberates // in the unfinished // voyage..." (*NCP* 265). We do understand, but it's the 'music', in fact the total of prosodic effects (intonation, stress, tempo, rhythm, pause) that communicates beyond semantics. What then are the blunt mechanics of this speculatively propositional style in a late Oppen poem that emerges with its polysemic suggestiveness?

5.2 Syntax: f. Gk *σύν syn* together & *τάξις taxis* an ordering.

Firstly, we have the simple absence of syntactic constraint: "I try to avoid all this grammar," said Oppen^{5.3}. "I half-hear, in the poems, where the transition could be less smooth, less bound by syntax", such that the poem is "not too perfect". For example:

awaiting the
light to speak
of the present which is
life to say to say to point
to requires a vividness music a
sound Swim for what wood
what iron what plastic what ink
of the poem will come
ever here to this
shore to this sea

'The Shore', *NCP* 339

This succinct late lyric was unpublished in Oppen's lifetime^{5.4} but it incorporates a number of key facets of his speculative syntax. A prosaic reading, in which a pattern of conventional grammar is identified, would find the first 'stanza' (lines 1-6) as pivoted on the active verb 'requires', with 'awaiting the light to speak of the present' followed by the supplementary clause 'which is life to say to say to point to' on one side of the fulcrum, and 'a vividness music a sound' on the other. This is a simple structure requiring only a semantic interpretation along the lines of you can't say what you want to say until some aural prompt comes along. The second 'stanza' (lines 6-10) equally can be identified in conventional terms, opening with an instruction or invocation to 'Swim', followed by the reason – essentially, if you don't search it out the poem certainly won't come to you. The whole point of Oppen not writing a poem such as this in a conventional manner is because he doesn't want us to read it as we would if obviously patterned in prosaic grammar. His choice of lineation, of cuts to a phrase, of the hanging adjective or adverb, the accentuated spaces, speak to a re-evaluation of each component as we proceed. The result is that we read, in this poem for example, 'awaiting the/ light to speak' as just that, with a moment to ponder ('awaiting') and then of confronting the possibility of light speaking, before we meet 'of the present which is' with its suggestion of present immediacy. The impulse that Oppen exploits is our habitual separation of semantic sense where lines are separated. Therefore, we look to the separate potential meanings of light speaking and an immediacy of the present moment before we refer back and merge the two lines into a light that speaks of the present. This is how the poem proceeds. As we move from word to phrase to line, at every turn we are offered the possibilities of alternative interpretation, even though a prosaic skeleton of the whole in this case can be identified. Of course there are images, not least the jetsam of wood and plastic, the shore and the sea to be swum, seemingly clear analogies – but the iron? And why not the 'ink of the poem will come' rather than 'what ink will come ever'? Oppen means to hang his thought on this prosody, those intonations, tones, stresses, rhythms of how the poem reads, blending sound with sight as well as sense, and 'To say to say to point /to' is a metrical device conveying its own 'extra-semantic' component. "Each word," Oppen said, "is a stance, each word is also a question never answered."^{5.5} Michael Heller called this Oppen's "micro-management" of words,^{5.6} "a poetics of the word", far from what Oppen himself referred to as the alternative "instant archaeology" of words immediately tamed to concepts and categories before their freshness and strangeness can be experienced^{5.7}. Instead, this is Oppen seeking to present words in the moments *before* they take on familiar trappings.

Given syntactic structure at the heart of our semantic knowledge, this all but pre-linguistic algorithm of a poem is the reality of an emergent consciousness.

The result is that Oppen invokes an intensity of reading experience in which question and answer, speculation and assertion, clarity and opacity, ebb and flow before us. We are drawn into the process of translation precisely because the language is only part understood, the 'point and purpose' of the poem less than immediately intelligible. "I would like to get to the first moment, the crucial moment in which one has not yet formed terms, and has for the moment stopped the noise in one's head."^{5,8} In other words, before the pre-linguistic has congealed into recognisable signified and signifier and before that mental clutter of a brain that churns out parcelled and packaged 'thoughts' in endless strings – good, bad, useful, useless (not to mention the clutter of cultural, historical, and literary, association attached to each) revs up. "Words cannot be wholly transparent. And that is the 'heartlessness' of words" ('Route' 4, *NCP* 194). The transparency Oppen really seeks is the direct sight as if piercingly *through* the word to its experiential source. Once the conceptual network has become word, it takes on all those associations that separate it from its original stance. Oppen wants "the first moment". He believes "each word must have some reason for existing in *itself*" [his emphasis]. Since the separation of word from its associations is an unattainable ideal, as Heller puts it, Oppen uses syntax to both "strategically emplace a word at the same time as it is being isolated and forced to bear not only the polyvalent meanings words have but a grammatical polyvalence which keeps tension and ambiguity at a high level"^{5,9}:

of draftsmanship zero
that perfect

circle

of distances terrible
path

thru the airs small very
small alien

on the sidewalks thru the long
time of deaths

and anger

of the streets leading
only ...

from 'Strange Are The Products', *NCP* 282.

5.3 Enjambment: f. OFr *enjamber* to straddle.

The line in poetry can be as syntactically end-stopped or abruptly incomplete as any printed text. Oppen's later poems show predominantly the latter, making use of frequent enjambment out of which there is no easy resolution of sense. By definition, enjambment presents "the mixed message produced by the pause" and "the delay in meaning that creates a [semantic] tension"^{5.10} Michael Heller asserts, in consequence, that: "One feels the word-by-word adventure" in these poems in which neither poet nor reader is "quite sure where the poem is going".^{5.11} It is "something the poet must have felt as his thought and his observations intermix themselves in its construction. Every word in the poem is likely to reveal new depths or aspects of itself."^{5.11} The style is a "word percussive"^{5.12} one in which words take precedence over phrase; words are not "[subsumed] within the larger phrase or sentence".^{5.12} As Oppen put it: "I do not know why. Perhaps we may call it music. The word, the right word, it seems to stand outside of us...I suppose it is music. There is a mystery: the mystery is that the ear knows"^{5.13}:

of this
all things
speak if they speak the estranged

unfamiliar sphere thin as air
of rescue huge

pin-point

cold little pin unresisting
small pin of the wind and the rayne

in the fields the pines the spruces the sea and
the intricate

veins in the stones and the rock
of the mountains wandering

stars in the dark their one
moral in the breeze

of wherever it is history
goes breaking the courses and breaking

High seas of history...

from 'The Little Pin: Fragment', *NCP* 254.

Oppen admitted to "piling up pieces of paper to find the words".^{5.14} Repeats, re-soundings, re-contemplations, are common to his work. His manuscript pages in the archives of the Mandeville Collection at the University of California, San Diego, show "cut-outs of word and

phrase stuck on to pages, with the smears left by old rubber cement and scrawled-over passages..."^{5.15} Words are recast into different arrangements; fragments "even whole sections" of poems are repeatedly "rearranged and retraced"; and they appear in Oppen's successive work, "...all taken together forming snapshots in time of Oppen's constant moving and remaking of the poem's language".^{5.15} Oppen wrote: "if word A must be next to word B 'GET it there",^{5.16} and "I try one word and another word and another word, reverse the sequence, alter the line-endings, a hundred two hundred rewritings, revisions – This is called prosody: how to write a poem. Or rather, how to write *that* poem."^{5.13} "If one revises and revises and revises – perhaps weeks and months and years and cannot revise, then there is something wrong with what you are trying to say. The ear knows, and I don't know why. It is, perhaps, partly as we hear it in the voice – no matter how one attempts to manipulate his voice. All must speak, and speak in its own voice – every 'and' and 'but' – the word *is* – The word in one's own mouth becomes as strange as infinity – even as strange as the finite, strange as things. Primarily and above all and note by note the prosody carries the relation of things and the sequence: the poet learns almost everything from his own verse, his own prosody."^{5.17}

5.4 The Intransitive: f. L *intransitivus* not passing over.

Talk is cheap. Words in common conversation become debased by imprecision, by disconnection from the experience they signified to each of us on first encounter. As Nicholls describes it in referring to the word 'is': "We do not possess the word 'is' in the full plenitude of presence, and we are in that sense forever plagued by a lingering sense of anteriority, of perceiving what-is-not in the splendour of its disclosure but in a degraded state of already-having-been"^{5.18} Heller has made the point that Oppen often invokes children in his poems, as if to represent consciousness not yet exposed, unaware, unaffected by language's "debasements".^{5.19} We will look at the total immersion in impinging experience of the child in due course.^{5.20} Heller has observed that Oppen's radical use of syntax "while bordering on the disjunctive effects of much experimental poetry never quite loses, never seems to want to lose, coherence. Rather, it is a constant struggle for coherence mounted against dispersal and disintegration".^{5.21} He has argued that the spatial disjunction on the page and the syntactic leaps "disrupt discursive thought", especially sequential thought "set in motion by either semantic coherence or imagistic chains of association" but that, operating at the frontier of "differing linguistic modes", Oppen seeks to "lead us through our subtle evasions and duplicities into clarity". He asserts that Oppen's poetry "is a constant movement of such moments of clarification. They carry us from the unknown to the known, from silence into articulation."^{5.19}

In short, as John Taggart puts it: Oppen builds “tentative structures that remain tentative”.^{5.22} Incomplete sentences are the stuff of poetic invention. To the grammarian, elements will be missing, or they will say the element is ‘latent’ in the construction. The phrase may be described as elliptical. “Any utterance is in some sense incomplete...”^{5.23} There is always something which the speaker might in principle have said, or might in principle have said more precisely, had it been necessary. The ‘idea in my head’ – inherently dualistic: thing (idea) ‘inside’ thing (head), not to mention possessive thing (‘my self’): language and the semantics that underpin its normal structure are both the product and the determinant of our conceptual understanding. As a result, correlations too easily become conceptually causal connections in a subject-verb-object dominated syntax, and too readily promote exclusively linear, sequential, dualistic assumptions. One clear syntactic step away from a prosaic recuperable form is the use of intransitive verbs. Nicholls makes the point that, in contrast, the use of transitive verbs “can only endlessly reaffirm the subject-object dualism which, in Oppen’s view, it is poetry’s function to overcome”.^{5.24} Nicholls goes on to quote an Oppen complaint: “The fact that things and people BE. This is the major subject of thought and feeling. It is almost impossible to say to most readers. They regard the verb as all but meaningless, perhaps because it is intransitive: it is not an action of one thing on another”.^{5.25} As Heidegger succinctly put it: “Being is not a product of thinking...Thinking is an occurrence of Being”.^{5.26} What Oppen really seeks is: “The fusion of subject and object where all is acted upon”^{5.27}:

...I don’t know how to say it
needing a word with no sound

but the pebbles shifting on the beach the sense
of the thing, everything, rises in the mind... from ‘Two Romance Poems’, *NCP* 261

and:

...the sources

the wells the poem begins

neither in word
nor meaning but the small
selves haunting

us in the stones and is less
always than that... from ‘If It All Went Up In Smoke’, *NCP* 274.

The pebbles themselves are shifting; it’s what pebbles do, to themselves; to be a pebble *is* to shift. Just like the Earth “turning” (*NCP* 265), it’s what Earth does; like “sands dazzling”

(NCP 268); “of things in us burning [...] Tyger still burning [...] in the night sky burning” (NCP 270); “of rails in the night” shining (NCP 271); and of “waking who knows” (NCP 273). The intransitive seems to open up wider conceptual possibilities.

5.5 Masonry: f. OFr *masson*, *maçon* stone mason.

Another syntactic trick Oppen uses is to stack noun-upon-noun and phrase-upon-phrase without transitive or intransitive verb intervention at all – what Taggart has called “stone mason poetry”^{5.28}:

In back deep the jewel
The treasure
No Liquid
Pride of the living life’s liquid
Pride in the sandspit wind this ether this other this element all...

from ‘A Phrase Of Simone Weil’, NCP 211.

Taggart asserts: “The advantage of near-verbless poetry is solidity”, but notes there is the risk of its getting “stuck”.^{5.29} Oppen escapes getting stuck in a “voiceless box” by his insistent bringing to bear “as much pressure/compression” as possible, “so that the image may be revelation – a problem or situation literally revealed in its parts and their connections, but not necessarily ‘resolved’”. He concludes that a verb would “hurry” this process too much and precipitate “the image’s weight to fall” too soon^{5.29}; and to close, to complete, its assertion. Nicholls also makes the point that Oppen viewed smoothness and rhetoric as routes to “an illusory success in fluency and certainty”.^{5.30} Oppen sought: “To slow down, that is, to isolate the words. Clatter, chatter is extreme rapidity of the words”.^{5.31} The overall impression from Oppen’s poetry is of a plain-speaking but complex one. There is suggestion and intermittent description; there are the speculative statements; there are unanswered questions. But there is neither rhetoric nor literary ‘histrionics’: “Rhetorical, it means a flowing of speech, it means a deluge of speech”.^{5.32} Far better “to make the words hit rock bottom, to find words that will lie in bedrock, not suspended in a mesh of syntax”.^{5.33} The aim is to reveal thought in Nicholl’s terms “as embodied in the irreducible spatio-temporal ‘thereness’ of the poem, with its phonic echoes and silences, its syntactical shape and typographical layout”.^{5.34} Oppen’s fascination with the ‘little words’ can be said to show “that this in which the thing takes place, this thing is here, and that these things do take place”.^{5.35} As Nicholls points out, the “studied repetition of ‘this’ ...points up that word’s status as the ‘canonical deictic’”^{5.34} (that is: ‘context’). It points, it shows, it is demonstrative. The ‘taking place’ is the event (“or advent”^{5.34}) of the poem. “I do not mean to prescribe an opinion or

an idea, but to record the experience of thinking it”, writes Oppen.^{5.36} As Nicholls says, this is Oppen’s final “objectification” of the poem, “as thought becomes present to itself as ‘being’”^{6.34}, with “thinking...that requires the poem”.^{5.37}

It is evident today from published studies already mentioned (such as Andrea Taylor’s and Vyvyan Evans’s *The Semantics of English Prepositions* and Peter Stockwell’s *Texture: a cognitive aesthetics of reading*) that the study of meanings we invest in, and glean from, language can be closely linked to cognitive and psychological theories of embodied learning and image schema at the root of human conceptualization. Examining the semantics, syntax and current usage of even those smallest of words that Oppen so valued reveals the subtleties of our spatial (‘locational’) conceptual mappings of experience and understanding. The syntactic arrangement of the smallest combinations of words both echoes and “prompts for meaning construction”.^{5.38} The ‘semantic polysemy network’ (the mix of meaningful components) is taken to model an individual’s lexicon “in terms of a radiating lattice structure” reflecting “a mental co-ordinate system”,^{5.39} but firmly based in “the complex interaction between real-world experience and conceptual processes which create and organize this experience in meaningful ways”.^{5.40}

5.6 Space for the Mind

“What seems linear suddenly goes spatial.” Michael Heller

An obvious facet of Oppen’s ‘mechanics’ and patterning is the placing of words on the page. Heller refers to Oppen’s “spaciousness” and the later poems “looking as though they have been shredded or blown apart, scattered across the page, gathered into seemingly dismembered clusters of text”^{5.41}. For him the “wide irregular areas of white space suggest the dictation of someone speaking into a wind” – an image which he identifies as a favourite in Oppen’s work. In his turn, Taggart finds “gaps of white space” which he regards as “silence”.^{5.28} He writes: “A gap is a flaw, is the space of the mind, is somehow the essential thing about persons, the essential human thing”.^{5.42} A gap is a flaw “as it disturbs, disrupts the syntax of a line or the overall pattern of anything”.^{5.42} As our earlier consideration of perception and its ‘attentional’ dependence suggested, in tune with the holistic notions of a descriptive *Gestalt* psychology, we are accustomed (Taggart asserts “nearly desperate in our drive...”) to perceive “the world in terms of wholes, coherent patterns”.^{5.42} Oppen works

against that out of a desire always to question. Indeed, his devices syntactically evolved during his writing life from the momentary pause of comma, then dash, then ellipse and ultimately in the late work to the full-on silence of spaces. “I take gaps to be Oppen’s signs for the space of the mind, the space made by the mind, the space made by the mind for itself”, and “such a space allows for consciousness”,^{5.43} or we might suggest an emergent pre-consciousness. “When space is not silence, the matrix of silence, it is chatter, noise”.^{5.44} Further *Daybook* entries include: “the world stops in silence but is illuminated”, and “temporary pauses, stops – moments of vision”.^{5.45} Words represent the opacity of experience, spaces the clarity. For Taggart, almost paradoxically “the poems are kept in motion by the gaps and lack of end punctuation...not allowed to come to rest...the process, a constant encounter with uncertainty is never over, never allowed to come to rest”.^{5.46} We have earlier commented that the brain generates thoughts in the form of ceaselessly sporadic assemblies of concepts, ‘processed and packaged’ in verbal guise, but in effect noise from which we learn to select particular signals. Neuroscientist Susan Greenfield describes consciousness as learning to selectively sustain particular dominant neuronal ‘constellations’. Oppen also observed that words flow continuously through the mind,^{5.47} and Taggart asserts that “steady deliberation” stops language.^{5.48} The neuroscientific observation is that brain activity (in the so-called ‘default mode network’) increases when not focused on specific tasks^{5.49} – flexible rather than direct attention seems the key to generative (‘creative’) thinking. How appropriate therefore that “by the use of gaps Oppen provides a sanctuary space for the mind against the constant weight of being... provides us with temporary pauses, which make a counterpoint of silence against the opacity of words, the poem’s words, a counterpoint against the pull of syntax”.^{5.48} There is a correlation between this personal and poetic inclusion of silence in Oppen and the reflective focus of a zennist-style management of consciousness – a meditative methodology on the flow of existence which Oppen chose not to relate to his own writing, although ‘in the air’ of the 1960s and 1970s, and which is surely a deep presence in the ‘meditative thinking’ of Maritain and Heidegger.

In speaking of the *Seascape* collection (1972), although applicable equally to many poems in *Myth of the Blaze* (1972-75) and *Primitive* (1978), Taggart comments on how many of the poems “close very quietly”. It is as if Oppen had seen so much and “knowing the odds against anyone’s vision being whole” had yet chosen to “hazard a statement however qualified and tentative”.^{5.29} Taggart concludes: “It is no accident that none of the final lines for these

poems has end punctuation". After all, Oppen is so well aware that all such things "could end differently"^{5.29}.

5.7 Prosody: the pulse of thought^{5.50}

"repeating the spell [...] throwing down [...] bits of bone and stone" Michael Heller

If we put all of Oppen's devices together: the broken lines, the fragmented phrases, the enjambments, the isolated words, the carefully placed spaces; and to them add the aural possibilities of stress, pitch, and intonation; and add to this the semantic uncertainties and multiple possibilities mixed in with scatterings of those small, more-certain words; we have what Oppen referred to as his prosody, the poem's prosody, *that* poem's prosody. If we are to believe that the pre-conscious language of Oppen's thinking is somehow reflected, if not literally manifest, in his verse, emergent through its making, we must acknowledge that none of the above components can express anything other than a speculative correlation between pre-verbal concept and natural language label, but that the integrated whole of prosody might just give us an intuited sense (for which read 'prior to conscious articulation') of what lies behind. By way of illustration, we can acknowledge that Oppen loved his small-boat sailing and spent weeks, often months, on the water in almost every year of his adult life apart from the Mexico years. He wrote little directly 'about sailing', and yet we can surely detect that experience so essential to his life reverberate through the prosody of many poems as a direct reflection of his embodied cognition. By way of example, we might describe the pre-verbal embodied experience of being at the tiller, hand on wood, hand, arm, torso, feeling the push and pull of wave and trough, the pressing and pausing of wind in the sail, the lifting and falling, everything of wind and water that surrounds and impinges in all the ways that those words imply; the experience is felt and identified unconsciously so that the hand on the tiller can ease the boat smoothly, obliquely, through both in an unspoken, unconscious, call and response of boat moving upon, riding, the sea; rhythms and sensations evident in the cadence of subsequent word and line. Feeling the nature of the poem before it comes to words was central to Oppen's late writing process.^{5.51} He knew also a poem was done only when he felt it to be so and not before. This is not an objectively analytical process but an intuited one. Intuited because he sought a sense, for which read 'motor-sensory' (indeed 'embodied') attuning as close as he could possibly make it to the first experience of which he became consciously aware and out of which the poem would grow.

The choice of word as sound, even feeling, may precede its semantic sense in selection. A juxtaposition of two words determines a meter of the moment. A composite assembles. The favoured rhythms of phrase could directly reflect a physical experience, the embodied memory, such as of being under sail. Do we not find a particular suggestion of going and pausing, rising and falling, for example, in: "her long quiet hands/ sometimes it seems// almost strange it seems// sometimes the almost fifty years/ has been a dream I hear sometimes those others// voices voices ... ['Mary', NCP 350]? The language of Oppen's thinking is surely imbued with a 'music', a prosody, which feels right to him precisely because the thinking and feeling process determines the flow which no fixed meter could accommodate:

never
the chess game

the checker game
in which the pieces

have already been named

rather *inward*
and *outward*

under the sky.
This is the sky. 'The Poem', NCP 348-9.

In poems such as these, the sense we understand is as much through the sensation of our physically reading as in the semantic calculus of each line:

for sometimes over the fields astride
of love? begin with

nothing or

everything the nerve

the thread
reverberates

in the unfinished

voyage loneliness

of becalmed ships and the violent men

and women of the cities'
doorsteps unexpected ...

'A Political Poem', NCP 265.

It is this harmony between pre-conscious and conscious made manifest which strikes us as truth. There can be few more authentic poetries of being than this late work of George Oppen.

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- ^{5.1} George Oppen, *Daybooks*, 49.
- ^{5.2} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 143.
- ^{5.3} George Oppen quoted in Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 138 notes 9&10.
- ^{5.4} This poem is one from a number of 'Selected Unpublished Poems' that editor Michael Davidson included in his *George Oppen: New Collected Poetry* (2003). Of its textual value, Davidson states: "My selection has been based on those poems [among Oppen's archived papers] for which there is evidence of sustained work or in which a title or marginal comment indicates some intention to include them in a given volume." [Davidson, 'A Note on the Text', *NCP* xxxviii].
- ^{5.5} George Oppen, 'The Circumstances', *Sulfur* 25 (1989), 15.
- ^{5.6} Michael Heller, *Speaking the Estranged*, 104.
- ^{5.7} George Oppen quoted in Michael Heller, *Speaking*, 104: "in one of his letters", no citation.
- ^{5.8} George Oppen, *SL*, 115.
- ^{5.9} Michael Heller, *Speaking*, 107.
- ^{5.10} Peter Lewis Groves, 'Run-on Line, Enjambment', *The Literary Encyclopedia*. (01 November 2001; last revised 11 February 2005). <http://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=338>, accessed 26 September 2016.
- ^{5.11} Michael Heller, *Speaking*, 109.
- ^{5.12} Michael Heller, *Speaking*, 110.
- ^{5.13} George Oppen, *Daybooks*, 47.
- ^{5.14} George Oppen quoted in Michael Heller, *Speaking*, 110: "in his notes", no citation.
- ^{5.15} Michael Heller, *Speaking*, 111.
- ^{5.16} George Oppen, *Daybooks*, 45.
- ^{5.17} George Oppen, *Daybooks*, 48.
- ^{5.18} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 69.
- ^{5.19} Michael Heller, *Speaking*, 100.
- ^{5.20} In Chpt.6.3: Phenomenal Consciousness
- ^{5.21} Michael Heller, *Speaking*, 103
- ^{5.22} John Taggart, *Songs of Degrees* (1994). Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 134.
- ^{5.23} P.H. Matthews, *Syntax* (1981). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 39.
- ^{5.24} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 71
- ^{5.25} George Oppen, UCSD 16.16.8.
- ^{5.26} Martin Heidegger, *Existence & Being*, 387.
- ^{5.27} George Oppen, UCSD 16.17.1.
- ^{5.28} John Taggart, *Songs of Degrees*, 9.
- ^{5.29} John Taggart, *Songs of Degrees*, 10.
- ^{5.30} Peter Nichols, *Fate of Modernism*, 138.
- ^{5.31} George Oppen, UCSD 16.16.11.
- ^{5.32} George Oppen, UCSD 16.16.12.
- ^{5.33} George Oppen, UCSD 16.14.9.
- ^{5.34} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 72.
- ^{5.35} George Oppen, interviewed by L.S.Dembo, 'The Objectivist Poet: Four Interviews', *Contemporary Literature* 10/2 (1969) 163.
- ^{5.36} George Oppen, UCSD 16.19.4.
- ^{5.37} George Oppen, *Daybooks*, xxx[quoted in Nicholls, 72]
- ^{5.38} Andrea Taylor & Vyvyan Evans, *Semantics*, 16.
- ^{5.39} Andrea Taylor & Vyvyan Evans, *Semantics*, 31.
- ^{5.40} Andrea Taylor & Vyvyan Evans, *Semantics*, 36.
- ^{5.41} Michael Heller, *Speaking*, 107.
- ^{5.42} John Taggart, *Songs of Degrees*, 229.
- ^{5.43} John Taggart, *Songs of Degrees*, 230.
- ^{5.44} George Oppen quoted in Taggart, *Songs of Degrees*, 230; original not cited.
- ^{5.45} George Oppen quoted in Taggart, *Songs of Degrees*, 231; originals not cited.
- ^{5.46} John Taggart, *Songs of Degrees*, 231.
- ^{5.47} George Oppen quoted in Taggart, *Songs of Degrees*, 233; as "the series 2 Daybook entries".
- ^{5.48} John Taggart, *Songs of Degrees*, 233.

- ^{5.49} Broyd, Samantha J.; Demanuele, Charmaine; Debener, Stefan; Helps, Suzannah K.; James, Christopher J.; Sonuga-Barke, Edmund J. S. (2009). 'Default-mode brain dysfunction in mental disorders: A systematic review'. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*. **33** (3): 279–96. doi:10.1016/j.neubiorev.2008.09.002. PMID 18824195.
- ^{5.50} George Oppen, UCSD 16.14.3.
- ^{5.51} George Oppen, *SL*, 236.

Chapter 6

'Well, nevertheless, nevertheless.'

6.1 We Make Our Meanings and They Mean

"Let us take up this creative doubt from another angle." Michael Heller

In October 1974, Oppen wrote in a letter to critic and poet David McAleavey: "This merging of the poetic and the philosophic: their epistemologies are inseparable [...] (their ontologies inseparable. Their ethic indistinguishable) [...] tho the letters of the alphabet become gibberish well, nevertheless, nevertheless, we make our meanings and they mean."^{6.1} Let us refocus on our earlier phrase: the 'forms of understanding' – the 'intelligibility' that Oppen as poet is trying though the pressures of 'partially articulate states', as Peter Middleton puts it, to alter, to enhance, both for himself and for his reader. This is the field of 'poetic knowledge', the subjective insight that fails the evidential tests of conventional knowledge criteria, but which nonetheless probes ontologies (what might be understood) and epistemologies (our understanding of that understanding) through its "interrupted predicates and unconsolidated propositions".^{6.2} At a conscious level, while we have no answer to the so-called 'hard problem' (our inability to account for the subjective sense of consciousness, our self-awareness), we have previously identified meaning within the conceptual structures encoded in language. This is the current understanding of cognitive science. "We only have access to our conceptual systems. Words (linguistic elements) reference concepts. Concepts are not, however, unrelated to the 'world out there'."^{6.3} Concepts arise from re-described percepts, which derive from both our sensorimotor experience and our internal states, and all of which are filtered through our specifically human physical and neurological architecture.^{6.4} "These percepts are the raw data which, when reanalysed, form the concepts to which we have direct access."^{6.5} When Oppen refers to an object or event he perceives in the world 'out there', he refers us to a mediated percept "re-described into a format accessible to our conceptual system" and subsequently "assigned a linguistic label".^{6.5}

If the unconscious management of the percept to concept re-expression is inescapably inaccessible to us, nonetheless, cognitive studies do have something to say about the necessary nature of such processing, and this edges us into the essential ground of Oppen's apprehension. Oppen said: "The peculiar attribute of words is that they spring spontaneously in the mind, they flow continuously in the mind."^{6.6} From what do they

spring? The 'image' they conjure is "not an image *of* something, but the content of consciousness";^{6.7} that is, it comes out of something as yet more amorphous, as yet more subjectively experienced, less objectified, less objectively defined. We might suggest the 'content of consciousness' prior to its emergence into words is what Oppen identified as "[The Poem] before anything was said."^{6.9} It correlates perhaps with the components that constitute the image schema hypothesis at the roots of preconscious and pre-verbalised understanding: a pre-linguistic level of meaning that must be, in its way, encoded prior to rising to the surface through the codes of concept and then of language. Oppen suggests: "we know of an actuality other than, prior to that which is the consciousness'[s] self-knowledge"^{6.10}: 'knowing', presumably, as an intuited, pre-linguistically labelled, sense of coherence. He described that actuality [these phrases in upper case emphasis to himself in his notes] as: "The image, the spatial dimension, the temporal dimension: without this there seems no proof, no recognition, no conviction...the poem must conceive the world or it is argument, chatter".^{6.11} So Oppen envisages the apprehension of reality at an unconscious and pre-verbalized level which spontaneously triggers the flow of image and words in consciousness and which authenticity he as poet is determined to capture as "the primacy of subject"^{6.12}, in preference to a subsequent, *post hoc*, intellectualisation.

6.2 Languages of Thought

"True only by becoming true." Quentin Lauer

An Oppen *Daybook* entry (according to Stephen Cope: "Likely [...] after the completion of the manuscript for *Of Being Numerous*"^{6.13}) states: "I mean my work to be a process of thought. Which means I am the literary equivalent of the scientist not [...] the entertainer,"^{6.14} which we may take to mean scientist as serious researcher, mindful of Middleton's 'poetic right of experiment and inquiry'. The research study of what was called a 'language of thought' was first formalised forty years ago among philosophers of mind as a Language Of Thought Hypothesis (LOTH), notably by Jerry Fodor in his 1975 book of that name, coincident with Oppen's publication of *Primitive*. It has developed since alongside the research of neuropsychologists.^{6.15} LOTH asserts that thought and thinking take place in a 'mental language' and that this language consists of a system of representations that is physically realized in the brain of thinkers. LOTH philosophers opt for a restricted range of applications for their hypothesis, having in mind primarily simple propositional relations between concepts, typically expressible in the varieties of propositional logic (also called predicate calculus). Their picture is clearly, in the words of Murat Aydede, of "a syntactic engine driving

a semantic one”^{6.16} as we have earlier stated, and in line with structuralist thinking in cognitive linguistics. We can, however, separate Chomsky’s generalized notion of the ‘language of thought’ from this specific LOTH. The latter is a rigorous schema operating within strict philosophical logic. However, the ‘softer’ notion remains a perhaps more usefully suggestive hypothetical tool in cognitive science, even where the actual ‘mechanics’ of the formation of structures of understanding (if such reductionist terminology proves appropriate), and which must include those such as image schema simulations, remain unknown. We have considered the significance of grounded cognition in the formation of mental representations, such that information from all the sensory modalities is potentially involved. While LOTH is silent about the nature of some mental phenomena (qualia, sensory processes, visual and auditory imagination, sensory memory, perceptual pattern-recognition capacities, dreaming, hallucinating), there is strong evidence that consciousness exploits an image-like representational medium in many of these kinds of mental tasks. “Whether sensory or perceptual processes are to be treated within the framework of full-blown LOTH is again an open empirical question. It might be that the answer to this question is affirmative. If so, there may be more than one LOT realized in different subsystems or mechanisms in the mind/brain. So LOTH is not committed to there being a single representational system realized in the brain, nor is it committed to the claim that all mental representations are complex or language-like, nor would it be falsified if it turns out that most aspects of mental life other than the ones involving propositional attitudes don’t require a LOT.”^{6.17}

In the well-established Chomskian idea of ‘deep structure’ in natural language formation, we have specifically the study of the syntax of generative (also known as transformational) grammars. A generative grammar of language attempts to give a set of rules that will correctly predict which combinations of words will form grammatical sentences. So in this picture a sentence is a ‘surface structure’ that has been derived from a deeper one, with an additional lexical form obtained from processing that surface structure subsequently. Chomsky has noted that by separating deep from surface structure, one could understand ‘slip of the tongue’ moments (where someone says something unintended) as instances where deep structures have not translated fully into the intended surface structure.^{6.18} The notion of underlying structure has been taken up in areas of research other than linguistics and typically deep structures have been thought of as representing meanings while surface structures have been taken as the expression of those meanings, but this is not the complete

concept of deep structure favoured by Chomsky or the majority of researchers in the field. The interplay between levels is, in their opinion, subtler and more complex in both syntactic and semantic terms and we are at risk of over-simplification.

Whatever conceptual shuffling is, however, active at pre-conscious 'levels', current reductionist research thinking supports the understanding of that transition from unarticulated perception to pre-linguistic labelling as involving a minimal conceptual unit, a morpheme equivalent from which a conceptual component of an image schema, for example, is built.^{6.19} The view is of a 'mental representation' which the brain uses to denote received experience in symbolic form.^{6.20} Within this schema, any coherently organized knowledge such as that of an in-out containment schema must be based on individual pieces of minimal conceptual coherence. It also assumes mental states are ultimately physical states; that mental changes and physical changes (neural correlates) are concurrent.^{6.21} While correlates are far from being necessarily causal, many are. So we might hypothesize a mental representation in the brain as a consequence of neural activity in which memory comparison, categorization and inference, have resulted. Even in the relatively simple case of sight, it seems we see as much through our brains as our eyes. Our visual experience is a mixture of information coming in from the eyes with much prior association evident in transient neural activity in the visual cortex. For every neural connection carrying information from retina to cortex, there are at least ten going in the opposite direction. Research also shows the same brain areas in use for vision as for our visual imagination.^{6.22} Information from the retina is insufficient and we use our imagination to fill in the gaps, converting an inadequate image from the eyes into something detailed and precise in the brain. These concepts will be "denoted by symbol or group of symbols."^{6.23} We know the brain is buzzing with local constellations of neural networks, operating below the level of consciousness. In each moment what may be called 'net consciousness' (which we might envisage as some kind of composite of grounded simulations which themselves are composites of many mental representations) consists of the transiently recruited assemblies of neuron activity, both sensory-stimulated and triggered by association. Those mental representations which constitute coherent concepts allow us to draw inference about our experiences; to categorize, remember, make decisions, and learn. We have already discussed how abstract concepts can arise from the transformation of concrete concepts derived from embodied experience, and how "the mechanism of transformation is that structural mapping, in which properties of two or more source domains are selectively

mapped onto a blended space.”^{6.24} In short, it is proposed that a mental representation is an internal cognitive symbol, or set of symbols, representing the brain’s experience of ‘external reality’. If this seems rather static, the representation is also, of course, a mental *process* making use of such symbols.^{6.25} The mental imagery will be of things not currently seen or sensed by the sensory-motor system: objects, events and situations. Through mental representation we may not actually see and smell but we can imagine in any of the sensory modalities. We can even imagine things we have never seen or done before.^{6.26}

6.3 Phenomenal Consciousness

“Subjective experience is a slippery fish” Anil Ananthaswamy

A focus on the brain as an organic biological entity that grows and develops as the organism does is a prerequisite to a neurally-plausible theory of how image schemas might structure pre-linguistic and subsequently fully verbal languages. “Convergent evidence from the cognitive neurosciences is establishing a neural basis for image schemata as dynamic activation patterns that are shared across the neural maps of the sensorimotor cortex.”^{6.27} Numerous experimental studies on fully-functioning individuals, coupled with neurological studies of patients with brain injury coupled to language deficits, have established that “the sensorimotor cortices are crucial to the semantic comprehension of bodily action terms and sentences.”^{6.27} There is active investigation of the neurobiologically plausible bases for image schemas, by tracing the cognitive and neural development of such schemas through both animal neuroanatomical and human neuroimaging studies. In addition, recent fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) and ERP (event related potential) experiments show that literal and metaphoric language stimuli activate areas of sensorimotor cortex consonant with the image schema hypothesis. “These emerging bodies of evidence seem to show how image schematic functions of the sensorimotor cortex can and probably do structure both metaphorical understanding and linguistic expression.”^{6.27 6.28}

The phenomenologist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (whom Oppen acknowledged having read^{6.29}) said that “science manipulates things and gives up living in them.”^{6.30} In other words, the discourse that is science typically functions through a subdivision and conceptual manipulability of objectified phenomena, studying the world as it were from the ‘outside’, as opposed to subjectively ‘experiencing’ it. This is merely a statement of fact, of the constraints inherent in the methodology of scientific analysis. However, where the phenomena are inescapably subjective, such as the elements of our conceptual knowledge,

what conscious *scientia* can we expect to grasp? Heller suggests that the poetic cannon falls foul of the generalizing and abstracting procedures of science in the categorizing of authorship in terms of its “repertoire of devices and effects”, rather than following Zukofsky’s identification of authors as articulated mind-body states with “capacities to ‘tune in’ on the ‘human tradition’.”^{6.30} And further, that “this tradition, a response to felt needs, to ‘keeping time with the pulse of existence’, and not to the representations of the classroom or writing workshop, is what informs an individual poetic talent.” Heller has put this in terms of the “writer [as] not a user of the tool ‘language’ but [as] a kind of idiom (Merleau-Ponty’s formulation) or a genre.”^{6.30} The poet isn’t using the tool of language to express but, from the phenomenologist’s perspective, the poet and the language are one, and the language is using the poet as much as vice versa. In fact, to dismiss the dualistic identification altogether is to assert that the poet is the language and the language the poet, and the poem merely one aspect of that speaking-reflecting interchange that is the language-mind entity called poet.

Neuroscientific research casts an interesting focus on this. “To be aware enough of a stimulus to reflect on it and talk about it” is to have what’s called “access consciousness”.^{6.31} But researchers take this as just one end of the spectrum ranging from completely unaware to fully aware. Around the midpoint of this would be ‘phenomenal consciousness’, the subjective experience of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling or touching. Experimentally there are many examples in which subjects demonstrate awareness of a lot more than we put into words. For example, in vision observers of a complex scene while focused on just a part of it are subsequently able to demonstrate conscious recall, of an unconscious awareness, of much that surrounds the focus, even in visual scans lasting no more than a few hundred milliseconds.^{6.32} While children show the pattern-finding capabilities characteristic of the human brain that we have previously noted, they are less good at focusing attention on particulars and shutting out peripheral ‘interference’. Adult control of attention is likened to a spotlight, in contrast to the lamplight of the child “shedding diffuse light on everything around”.^{6.32} As a result, young children may experience the world as ‘total immersion’. Alison Gopnik, a psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley, describes this as akin to an adult’s total immersion in an engrossing movie: “You are not in control, your consciousness is not planning, your self seems to disappear...Yet the events in the movie are very very vivid in your awareness”.^{6.33} As Oppen struggles to express it: “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.”^{6.34} Similarly: “The prosody and the ‘philosophy’ cannot be separated [...] but I can speak of the process of poetry, and poetry has come from everywhere [...] and everything we know or think we know.”^{6.35} Linking the two in a Daybook entry: “Actualness is prosody, it is the purpose of prosody and its achievement, the instant of meaning, the achievement of meaning and of *presence*, the sequence of disclosure which comes from everywhere.”^{6.34} Typically, for ‘convenience’, a cognitive scientist today might say (inheriting directly from the dualism of early modern thinkers such as Descartes and Locke) that perception, imagination, intellect and the will, are Kantian ‘representations’, or ideas *in the mind*.^{6.36} This is the dualistic mental representational language we have used in exploring image schemas and conceptual metaphor. As Taylor Carman clarifies Locke’s original formulation, ideas were taken as *objects* of consciousness; “we are aware *of* them; they are what our attitudes... are *about*.”^{6.36} The phenomenologist’s criticism of this dualistic conceptualisation scheme is that we don’t know how we manage to be aware of anything. We don’t understand our own awareness of our ideas. Do we need a further layer of ideas beneath those ideas which yet fail to explain our awareness of an external world?

6.4 Conclusion: The Shadows of Water^{6.37}

“the singing was and is” George Oppen

Oppen’s “fastidiousness”^{6.38}, as Michael Heller points out, led him “deeper into uncertainty”.^{6.39} The world became ever “more mysterious to him [...] Instability, uncertainty, these were the atmospherics and risks of enlarging freedom. The poet who followed out their dictates and pressures was that ‘unacknowledged legislator’ of reality.”^{6.39}

John Taggart has written that “the poetics of a major poet throws everything into question.”^{6.40} Where “good” poets, “even interesting poets”, question, they do so “within their generation’s understanding.” In contrast, major poets “continue to consider all answers and their assumptions [...] open up the range of what the poem might be [...] by putting everything in doubt [...] make the poem always possible.”^{6.41} He reiterates the fact of words as “two things” which “fulfil two functions”. They are “the means by which things ... are brought to conscious definition” and they are “things in themselves.” Then, in talking of Oppen’s poetry and its historical absence from anthologies, Taggart writes: “The poem which at every point radiates process, often in jagged hesitating manner, frustrates expectations fed on ‘finished’ verse”.^{6.42} He continues: “Oppen’s poetry is a continual, if quiet, opposition to the whole conception of rhetorical completion”. Referring to one exemplar he writes:

“The poem hesitates...the poem hesitates but moves on...the poem moves on...the poem ends quietly”.^{6.43} “The more and more scrupulous exercise of attention produces further isolation and knowledge that more and more knows itself to be provisional.”^{6.44}

We began this discussion with the objective of exploring Oppen’s late poetics in relation to our current knowledge of cognition and its expression as language. We have looked at Oppen as a major 20th century example of a poet searching for meaning at the most fundamental level of self-conscious speculation available to the reflective individual. He knew nothing of the brain’s functioning that we now know from the neurosciences. He seems to have taken no great interest in the emerging cognitive psychology of his day. Yet he did read amongst the works of ‘philosophers of mind’, specifically Maritain, Heidegger, Hegel and Merleau-Ponty; and he exchanged ideas with many friends and fellow poets, each with their fingers to some degree on the intellectual movements and cultural pulse of their times. We have made the point that Oppen was a poet and not an academic. While the possibilities for reflective exploration of consciousness, perception and meaning, were available to him not only in the psychological sciences and philosophies of mind into which he took some selective interest, there were also perennial Eastern philosophies with their foci on consciousness, its deeper relationship to experience, and its suspicion of over-intellectualisation, which he might have pursued but did not.^{6.45} Nor does he seem to have taken any overt interest in the evolving academic studies of linguistics and semantics. Oppen was an outsider and an individualist in all senses of the word. Yet his calling was to work through some of the deeper questions of the self in its consciously analytical and intuitively preconscious conditions; questions of what it means to ‘experience’; to know deep emotion and to connect it with the directly impinging world. His calling was to work through these questions with, and in, words; to go deep and somehow re-emerge with language; to take words, matching their inadequacies just sufficient to put them on the page as they arose, pondering long and hard on the use of each, habitually revising and redrafting, ‘worrying away’ at them unceasingly, reusing them over and over, as if somehow to get them by attrition to encapsulate just some iota of authentic being:

...to say what one knows and to
limit oneself to this...

from ‘The Lighthouses’, *NCP* 256.

What cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics give us today is a conceptual framework of grounded cognition, image schema and conceptual metaphor, and tentative models for languages of thought, with which to describe and interpret this struggle for authenticity. We

might or might not echo Michael Heller's assessment that "of all contemporary poets, none has more searchingly investigated, through poetry, the attempt to mean, to examine how language is used and thus to account for the very vocabulary of our modernity".^{6.46} Heller was writing in 1985 and thirty years of continuing innovation have passed. Nonetheless, while Peter Nicholls commented in 2007 on the growing regard for Oppen over 'the last decade'^{6.47}, still Michael Heller was writing in 2008 that Oppen, "as a poet whose language is spare and whose sentiments are uncommon", certainly "would, at any time, be difficult to put into focus or to place into an academic category".^{6.48} This difficulty to categorise (beyond, that is, the obvious Objectivist stance of his early adult years) is perhaps the greatest compliment we can pay George Oppen and most certainly applies to his late work considered here. No poet appreciates categorization alongside others; each poet hopes for individuality in their work; to be different is to be oneself and the product of one's own struggles rather than the product of the clichés of one's time. Oppen certainly escaped those clichés.

If our original question was to ask whether or not correlations between the later Oppen's preoccupations and our current cognitive scientific insights exist, then the evidence of this dissertation suggests an answer in the affirmative. The point, of course, was to support the notion of an exploratory poetics in pushing at the boundaries of conceptual, and hence aesthetic, possibility. The significance of Oppen's later poetry for second-decade 21st century poets lies, therefore, in Peter Middleton's "putting pressure on intelligibility so that it alters".^{6.49} If we were to take Oppen's individual struggle for clarity as, among other things, a one-man experiment in the exploration of phenomenological ideas applied to poetic practice, then we could say he was indeed stretching our conceptual boundaries. His is a 'philosophical poetics' and a 'poetics of being'. His very questioning of the cognitive process, of what may and what may not be expressible, what meant, what truly meaningful if recoverable at all from pre-conscious apprehension, reminds all subsequent poets of a 'bottom line' of silence from which to begin (or, perhaps, to not begin). As poets we might focus a little more on silence before we speak, thereafter to differentiate between what can be spoken, what should be spoken, and what our speaking contributes, such that we might simply but legitimately speak of our contribution to poetic knowledge as Oppen did: "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" [*Of Being Numerous No.9*, NCP 167].

[...] shall we
say more
than this I can
say more there it
is I can
say more we have already begun
to speak walk the round
earth for dark
truths and blazing
truths are the same they
move waver almost
stand in my
mind continually
in our dreams like the shadows
of water
moving if
in time we see
the words fail this
we know this
we walk in and is all
we know we
will speak

to each
other we
will speak

from 'Neighbors', NCP 284.

6.5 Finally: Beyond Oppen

"It is a good moment for the possibilities of the poem" The Enthusiast

We can place this thesis in its wider context. The formalism and cliché of early 20th century English language verse had been replaced by the adoption of *vers libre* and the radical form and content of Eliot's 'Prufrock' and 'Waste Land', as well as by Pound's *Imagisme* (in its pristine, pre-'Amygism', form). In both, the concision and precision of language (*le mot juste* and the 'luminous detail') informed a prosody which moved beyond exclusively semantic sense alone, incorporating aspects of the 'concrete', the dissonant, and the juxtaposed, that were emerging in other art forms at the time. We might loosely equate an exclusive attention to the purely semantic in poetic language with the purely representational in the visual arts; while the non-semantic aspects of language parallel abstraction in the visual. The avant-garde modernist aesthetics which continued to evolve during the 20th century included this disruption of prosaic semantic sense: in the extreme as Dada-esque attention to the visual and the aural 'materiality' of language; in the more moderate as a balance between semantics (including etymologically layered polysemy) and that materiality. At the turn of the twenty-first century, critic Marjorie Perloff expressed a view of early modernism as "far from being irrelevant and obsolete", in fact "the aesthetic of early modernism has provided the seeds of the materialist poetic which is increasingly our own."^{6.50} She described the 'new poetics' arising out of "Language

poetry and related avant-garde” practices in its radical distinction from ‘the true voice of feeling’ or ‘natural speech’ paradigm “so dominant in the 1960s and 1970s.” Donald Davie has spoken of the readership that prefers “nothing difficult”, characterised by others as ‘the cult of Larkin’.^{6.51} Fifteen years after Perloff’s essay collection, the authorial voice, that “laureate poetry – intimate, anecdotal, and broadly accessible”^{6.50} thrives anew, not least under the guise of widely popular performance poetics among a younger generation already familiar with lyric and rap. At the same time, the experimental engagement with “the technological and formal inventions of modernism at its origins” has kept its course, thriving among a smaller audience through magazines and online sites. This is Perloff’s ‘second wave’ modernism. She quotes Velimir Khlebnikov: “the roots of words are only phantoms behind which stand the strings of the alphabet.”^{6.52} She quotes Wittgenstein: “To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.” Oppen’s materiality of both that life and language is here. Perloff’s essay collection goes on to explore modernism at the millennium, identifying innovative threads that connect present day experimentation to the aspirations of those radicals of one hundred years ago; aspirations prematurely nullified by the First World War and the two major totalitarian regimes that followed, and by a second World War and a Cold War that followed.

Among the ‘second wave’, the goal of defining ‘conceptual possibility’; of “moving the mind beyond its conceptual confines”;^{6.53} and the relation of that to the “kinds of aesthetic experience poets are actually attempting to create”,^{6.54} with which we introduced this dissertation’s research question, does seem to be a poetic research project that is very much alive and well. Part of that, in Peter Middleton’s recent words, “re-invites the timely reopening of an old debate around the validity of [all] propositions in poetry.”^{6.55}

Middleton invites us to focus on “the complexities that arise when we start to ask questions about just what lines such as those opening [Oppen] lines [of the first poem of *Seascape: Needle’s Eye*] could possibly be saying, and the possible directions in which we would need to go to find conceptual assistance.” He continues: “The urgencies felt in Oppen’s poem underline the value of understanding the semantics of syntactic breakdown; this is not a poem that wants us to settle only for the pleasures of opacity.”^{6.56} Rather, as Simon Jarvis puts it: “where vocabularies break down [...] the possibility of new thinking is glimpsed.”^{6.57} In such “multi-phasic or polyphonic” readings, as Heller refers to his examination of poems from *Myth of the Blaze*, “[none] is contradictory or cancelling; rather they tend towards some cumulative or doubling quality that simultaneously produces distance and possession [...] the poem gathers up these strands of thought.”^{6.58}

Middleton's concern is for the development of a literary criticism that can encompass the issues of this linguistic fragmentation and speculative propositionality. Writing in 2010, he felt the discussion to be "premature because literary studies is in the process of re-assessing its commitments to certain understandings of language, reasoning, and mind that for several decades provided epistemological support and ontological axioms whose role as guarantors of argument tended to be overlooked, and whose authority was therefore hard to engage with, let alone challenge."^{6.59} One evolving literary critical approach which explicitly recognises the developments in cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics to which this dissertation refers is the stylistics focus known as cognitive poetics.^{6.60} I have added a short Appendix on the subject to this dissertation. As a descriptive and analytical approach, cognitive poetics adopts the premise that a poem-text exists as co-written in the mind of the reader and, in accounting for the relationship between stylistic choices and cognitive processes in that text, seeks to integrate the experiential realism of linguistic, literary and cognitive studies. The cognitive poetics approach logically extends a long-standing close-reading strand of literary critical tradition. The cognitive origins and consequences of linguistic fragmentation and speculative propositionality as highlighted by Middleton may yet prove tractable through approaches such as this. However, while critics struggle to interpret, the practicing poet must get on with the job of putting pressure on intelligibility."^{6.61} In that vein, George Oppen's late work offers a direct route into those issues of cognition as they relate to the aesthetic possibilities of poetic knowledge - a corpus of unique importance in the 20th century innovative poetic canon.

6.1 George Oppen, *Selected Letters*, 293.

6.2 Peter Middleton, 'Open Oppen', 631.

6.3 Andrea Tyler & Vyvyan Evans, *Semantics*, 19 note 8.

6.4 The somatosensory cortex straddles the brain like a hairband, toward the centre of the head and just behind the corresponding area of motor cortex. Signals relating to touch, pain, and temperature, arrive first in this area of cortex, having been relayed from sensors in the skin, up the spinal cord, via either of two ascending pathways and subsequently via the thalamus [Greenfield, *Private Life*, 228 note 21]. There is a point-for-point correspondence between many specific points on the central nervous system and points on the primary somatosensory cortex. The cortex is typically represented as a sensory homunculus, on which the orientation of the specific body part is related to its location upon it. Areas which are finely controlled (e.g. the fingers) have larger portions of the somatosensory cortex, whereas areas which are coarsely controlled (e.g. the trunk) have smaller portions [Dorland's *Medical Dictionary*]. The integration or coupling of sensory and motor systems within the cerebral cortex is not a static process. For a given stimulus, there is no one single motor command. "Neural responses at almost every stage of a sensorimotor pathway are modified at short and long timescales by biophysical and synaptic processes, recurrent and feedback connections, and learning, as well as many other internal and external variables." [Saladin, *Anatomy and Physiology*, 541] The built-in flexibility of feedback options results in the sensorimotor system influencing cognition, as cognition influences the sensorimotor system. A very simple example is that of the link between muscular action in the face and cognitive performance. Research shows that when we smile we understand 'pleasant' sentences faster than 'unpleasant' ones. Equally, engaging facial muscles in a frown increases the time it takes to comprehend pleasant sentences [Havas & Glenberg, 'Emotion simulation during language comprehension']. Research has also extended embodied cognition to specifically link language with perceptual distinctions, for example between near and far. When asked to identify 'this' objects, participants typically select objects close by. Conversely when asked to identify a 'that' object, they typically choose an object further away [Borghi & Pecher, *Embodied and Grounded Cognition*, 793]. This may seem simplistically obvious and yet to link a physically realized perception demonstrably to an unconscious interpretation of language is a fascinating step. The embodied poet communicating through unconsciously delivered linguistic clues comes into view; prosody as individual voice 'an integral part of its significance'.

6.5 Andrea Tyler & Vyvyan Evans, *Semantics*, 19

6.6 George Oppen, UCSD 16.15.11 (quoted in Nicholls, *Fate*, 151)

6.7 George Oppen, UCSD 16.24.2 (quoted in Nicholls, *Fate*, 154)

6.8 Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 154.

6.9 George Oppen, *Daybooks*, 115.

6.10 George Oppen, RV, 3.

6.11 George open, RV, 4.

6.12 George Oppen, UCSD 16.15.9.

6.13 Peter Nichols, *Fate of Modernism*, 141.

6.14 Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, 156.

6.15 Murat Aydede, 'Language of Thought', 1.0.

6.16 Murat Aydede, 'Language of Thought', 5.2.

6.17 Murat Aydede, 'Language of Thought', 3.0.

6.18 Noam Chomsky, 'Human Nature and the Origins of Language', *Radical Anthropology* 23 (2008).

6.19 The 'images' in image schemas are cross-modal, neither exclusively kinaesthetic nor visual. In its broad neurocognitive sense of mental imagery, the term 'image' covers all sensorimotor possibilities. We have a felt sense of our own body image which we use. We might imagine wanting to reach for a book from a high shelf behind the desk at which we sit. How do we know it cannot be 'reached' without actually reaching for it? How do other people sitting in the room also know that we cannot reach it without themselves also having tested that reach? The answer is we have a perceptual cross-modal schema based on felt experience, on the experience of moving arms and gauging their extension, subsequently translated into a visual schema. The professionals say that that coherent body image in our head is a 'somatotopic neurocortical map' of where our arms and hands are and how they can move, as well as there being neurocortical maps marking the location of objects in our visual field. We plan motor movements thousands of times each day, constantly re-evaluating the extent of our graspable space given our current bodily position. With a few discontinuities, the body image in the primary sensorimotor cortex is somatotopic, with adjacent neurons mapping largely contiguous sections of the body: the ankle is next to the lower leg, and that to the knee and upper leg and so on. Similarly, the premotor cortical maps are also fairly somatotopic; e.g. neural arrays mapping hand motions are adjacent to those mapping wrist and arm motions. "This topology is highly sensible, given that we need to

use our hands and wrists in close coordination for tasks such as turning [a] pencil in a pencil sharpener.” [Rohrer, ‘Image Schemata’ 169].

^{6.20} Eric Margolis & Stephen Lawrence, ‘Concepts’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014) ed. Edward N. Zalta; URL=<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/concepts/>; S.Carey, *The Origin of Concepts* (2009). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

^{6.21} Daniel Stoljar, ‘Physicalism’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2009) ed. Edward N. Zalta; URL =<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/physicalism/>; G. Murphy, *The Big Book of Concepts* (2002). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

^{6.22} Kosslyn quoted in Susan Greenfield, *The Question of Meaning*, 48.

^{6.23} Eric Margolis & Stephen Lawrence, *Concepts: Core Readings*, 76.

^{6.24} Gilles Fauconnier & Mark Turner, *Metaphor & Symbolic Activity* (1995) vol.10 no.3,183.

^{6.25} D. Marr, *Vision: A Computational Investigation into the Human Representation and Processing of Visual Information* (2010). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

^{6.26} R.J. Sternberg, *Cognitive Psychology 6th Edn* (2011). New York: Wadsworth.

^{6.27} Tim Rohrer, ‘Image Schemata in the Brain’, *From Perception to meaning: Image Schema in Cognitive Linguistics*, eds. Hampe & Grady (2005). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 165.

^{6.28} The neurobiological generation of this facility remains uncertain. It may be that as the organism develops from foetus to adult, over time, the population-growth dynamics and migration of the neuronal groups creates yet another emergent property: neurons array themselves into physical patterns which map the sensory modalities. This use of physical space within the brain to re- represent environmental stimuli yields the incipient primary topographic spatial neural maps of the various sensory modalities. Auditory areas develop maps indicating increasing pitch and volume; later, tactile areas develop somatic maps for pain and touch along the limbs; still later yet, somatomotor maps develop for muscles distributed across the limbs. These formative neural maps are probably enough to sustain some rudimentary cross-modal image schematic patterns, particularly between the tactile and auditory modalities. But the competition between neuronal groups does not end there. As different ‘neurally degenerate’ neuronal groups are crowded out by the more successful groups mapping primary topographic stimuli, the intermediately successful groups hang on by mapping different, more abstractly topological aspects of the sensory stimuli. Although all this activity begins before birth, much of the on-going development and refinement of these maps awaits the much stronger reinforcement of the increase in environmental stimuli that comes with the infant’s first movements, cries and sights [Rohrer, ‘Image Schemata’]

^{6.29} George Oppen, SL, 311. 6.30 Michael Heller, *Convictions Net of Branches* (1985). New York: Spuyten Duyvil, 101].

^{6.31} Anil Ananthaswamy, ‘Into the Minds of Babies’, *New Scientist* vol.223 no.2983 (2014), 40.

^{6.32} Anil Ananthaswamy, ‘Into the Minds of Babies’, 41.

^{6.33} quoted in Anil Ananthaswamy, ‘Into the Minds of Babies’, 42-3

^{6.34} George Oppen, *Daybooks*, 49.

^{6.35} George Oppen, *Daybooks*, 50.

^{6.36} Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty* (2008). London: Routledge, 15.

^{6.37} from ‘Neighbours’, NCP 284.

^{6.38} George Oppen, *Daybooks*, 84.

^{6.39} Michael Heller, *Speaking*, 128.

^{6.40} John Taggart, *Songs of Degrees* (1994). Tuscaloosa & London: University of Alabama Press, 123.

^{6.41} John Taggart, *Songs of Degrees*, 123-4.

^{6.42} John Taggart, *Songs of Degrees*, 136.

^{6.43} John Taggart, *Songs of Degrees*, 136-139.

^{6.44} John Taggart, *Songs of Degrees*, 140

^{6.45} Oppen made clear his lack of interest in perennial philosophies as influencing post-WWII American poetry in his essay ‘Mind’s Own Place’ (Published in *Kulchar* 3, no.10, Summer 1963): “I fear the present pilgrimage to Japan and the exotic arms of Zen. I feel quite sure, to begin with, that Hemingway has expressed Zen to the West about as well as is likely to be done.” In placing himself in an older generation however, he does acknowledge: “But this may be because I belong to a generation that grew more American – literally at least – as it approached adult state: we grew up on English writing – and German fairy tales – as I think no American any longer does.” (*Kulchur*. 33). I have found no subsequent reassessment among Oppen’s published work.

^{6.46} Michael Heller, *Convictions Net of Branches*, 73.

^{6.47} Peter Nicholls, *Fate of Modernism*, (2007), cover notes.

- ^{6.48} Michael Heller, *Speaking the Estranged* (2008). Bristol: Shearsman, 14.
- ^{6.49} Peter Middleton, 'Open Oppen: linguistic fragmentation and the poetic proposition', *Textual Practice* 24:4 (2010), 644; DOI: 10.1080/0950236X.2010.499649; <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2010.499649>.
- ^{6.50} Marjorie Perloff, *21st Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics* (2002). Malden MA: Blackwell, 3.
- ^{6.51} Donald Davie, *Under Briggflatts: A History of Poetry in Great Britain, 1960-1988*, (1989). Manchester: Carcanet Press; quoted in Robert Hampson & Peter Barry, *New British poetries: The scope of the possible* (1993). Manchester: Manchester University Press, 3.
- ^{6.52} Marjorie Perloff, *21st Century Modernism*, 6.
- ^{6.53} John Briggs, 'Where's the Poetry? Consciousness as the Flight of Three Blackbirds', *Advances in Consciousness Research* 37 (2001). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.
- ^{6.54} Brian Phillips, 'Taste in Poetry', *Poetry* (Sept 2007). Chicago: The Poetry Foundation.
- ^{6.55} Peter Middleton, 'Open Oppen', 624.
- ^{6.56} Peter Middleton, 'Open Oppen', 624-5.
- ^{6.57} quoted in Peter Middleton, 'Open Oppen', 642.
- ^{6.58} Michel Heller, *Speaking the Estranged*, 72 & 74.
- ^{6.59} Peter Middleton, 'Open Oppen', 637.
- ^{6.60} The term itself originated with Reuven Tsur (1983) and then broadened to take in cognitive grammar (Langacker 1987 , 1991), conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980 and Lakoff and Turner 1989), conceptual integration theory or blending (Fauconnier and Turner 1994 , 2002), text-world theory (Werth 1999 , Gavins 2005) and cognitive stylistics (Semino and Culpeper 2002)." Nancy Gaffield, 'Seeing Through Language : the poetry and poetics of Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian , and Rosmarie Waldrop ', PhD submission Nov.2014, University of Kent, 15. See also Peter Stockwell, *Texture: a cognitive aesthetics of reading* (2012), Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press.
- ^{6.61} Peter Middleton, 'Open Oppen', 644.

Appendix One: Oppen's Crisis of Confidence

'A simple realism'^{A.1}

A.1 Wounds I Didn't Know I Had

"People visit and I am shaken." George Oppen

Oppen completed *Of Being Numerous* early in 1966, although the collection would not be published until March 1968. In a subsequent Daybook note to himself in June 1966, Oppen described his reading of Heidegger's *Essays on Metaphysics: Identity and Difference* (translated by Kurt F. Liedecker, published in 1960, and borrowed from Brooklyn Public Library by Mary Oppen) and his response to it. "I had been reading the first essay, 19 pages long, without being able to understand it clearly. Tho I was reading with great excitement and effort [...] That night I sat up late, very carefully reading the essay, and after many hours felt I had understood it."^{A.2} He adds that having "turned it over and over in my mind for a long time, unable to accept the [idealist] assumption, but convinced that a part of the statement was of crucial importance to me, of such importance as *to alter the subjective conditions of my life, the conditions of my thinking, from that point in time.*"^{A.2} I italicize the final phrases because they are so significant a statement. While Oppen will take time to absorb this alteration to his thinking, it is the moment that marks the turn away from the predominantly assertive poetry of social and political comment to one in which he will explore a more personal boundary between external and internal, subjective, realities. The evolution of Oppen's being in a state of doubt, in questioning mode, about himself and the world, including certain ethical uncertainties (which he would write about to his daughter in the same month) is evinced in a letter he wrote to poet John Crawford several months earlier (January 1966). He refers to his wartime experience and a pacifist dream-based conviction of the time that "[I] shouldn't be trying to kill people". Bearing in mind the turmoil of American cultural and political life in 1966 (after a month-long pause in the bombing of North Vietnam, bombing would be resumed on 31st January 1967 and the Oppens would join the anti-war demonstration to Washington in response) he nonetheless could say: "I don't know that I know absolutes, and can't imagine knowing absolute values, even in dreams. I am sure, in fact, I don't."^{A.3} In discussing dreams, superstitions, and theological implications (which Oppen refers to as "unexamined presuppositions"), he admits that "I don't find it too difficult to be rather constantly aware that I don't know."^{A.4}

Following their annual summer months' sailing holiday on the coast of Maine, the Oppen's decided to move from New York to San Francisco, a move which they completed in mid-February 1967. The change of location would also mark the change of emphasis, indeed 'direction', in Oppen's writing. In a letter to Frederick Will in late April/early May 1967, Oppen will write: "Having no German at all, much less Heideggerian German, I am dependent on translations, therefore my knowledge of H. is sharply limited."^{A.5} Nonetheless, he attributes the insight expressed in 'Route'('13', *NCP*, 201) which relates directly to the question of conjectural poetics, to his even earlier readings of Heidegger: "Substance itself which has been the subject of all our planning / And by this are we carried into the incalculable."^{A.6} As for the poetic practicalities of writing the incalculable, in an undated letter (probably from early 1968) written to his philosopher son-in-law Alexander Mourelatos, Oppen reveals his difficulties in moving on from the poems written for *Of Being Numerous*: "I am having trouble getting beyond it, I find myself making cadences I don't need, making cadences I've used before only because I did use them before – 'imitating myself', unable to get clear – or back in the world."^{A.7} In trying to pin down what does count

in a poem, he tells Mourelatos: "a poem is really about myself. It is an instance of 'being in the world' Yes: an admission of 'what is autonomous in us' or 'in the genes'; it could even refer to Kant, you see; the limits of judgement, the limits of pure reason." Quoting his own poem – "All this is reportage" ('Route 10', *NCP*, 199) – he adds: "An account of being in the world, to stick to H [Heidegger]." Perhaps the descriptive reportage is no longer sufficient; its objectivity as detached. He acknowledges Heidegger's role in drawing him into a phenomenological perspective on the world in which he has yet to find (to steal Pound's phrase) a language in which to think, let alone write. Oppen often added comments to his Daybook notes at a later time, and a typed addition to the handwritten note of June 1966 probably dates from this

later time. In it he

suggests there is "nothing in this [Heidegger] that does not permit one to speak of 'the unconscious mind'. Only it is hard for me to think of whatever mind that was as real unconscious! – and that is not what I was thinking that morning – the word had not occurred to me."^{A.8}

Immediately prior to publication of *Of Being Numerous* in March 1968, Oppen had read at a couple of universities (San Francisco State in February; Wisconsin in April) and given an extended interview to L.S. Dembo on 25th April. The Oppens then went via New York to Maine for their usual sailing holiday, staying there until the start of September. The summer was stormy and the sailing less satisfactory than usual. In letters of July and November (to David Ignatow and Eliot Weinberger, respectively), the creative difficulty was echoed: "He

spoke several times of the difficulty of “getting beyond” *Numerous*”.^{A.9} The start of 1969 then saw negotiations begin over publication of a *Collected Poems* with the UK’s Fulcrum Press, which was to prove protracted and ultimately abortive and would cause Oppen a good deal of frustration over the coming two years. Around this time (late 1968/early 1969), Oppen exchanged letters with poet Robert Duncan, following publication in 1968 of Duncan’s *Bending the Bow* collection. Oppen was extremely complimentary: “temporarily overwhelmed [...] it is very far beyond what has been done.”^{A.10} Oppen sent Duncan “a selection of Heidegger [] ‘early’ and ‘late’ periods.” He also comments, referencing his own writing in contrast to Duncan’s, that “I mean to find, not create, the handholds.” He recognises Duncan’s difference: “And am troubled now to witness your leap, the leap also in the music [] my dedication to ‘realism’, to the proof in the image rather than the creation of image for the first time, I feel, challenged [] and yet, finally, I feel we must *find* [] We are native, hopelessly native . . . Hopelessly *included* . But you’ll find yourself closer to H[Heidegger]’s *Dasein* than I am.” In spite of a firmly established phenomenological stance by this stage, Oppen remains rooted in the materialism of his objectivist principles, yet ‘troubled’ and ‘challenged’, indeed deeply anxious, in his searching for a way to evolve ‘beyond’.

On the up-side, the move to San Francisco had begun to contribute an impetus to new work, first in some of the ‘San Francisco Poems’ that Oppen would include in *Seascape: Needle’s Eye* (1972). In letters to his niece, Diane Meyer, and to his friend Harvey Shapiro (poet and editor of the *New York Times Book Review*), Oppen refers to their ongoing composition. In the Shapiro letter he even states: “I’ve been working over it all these months. And in fact, more: I had notes and scraps of it written on our exploratory trip last year.”^{A.11} While Oppen can say “it is blazingly beautiful in and about San Francisco, a great deal more beautiful than perhaps the poem manages to say”, he is conscious of political events: “Difficult again to believe in the importance of poetry. The army tightens up, some kids surely will be shot soon. Art becomes (again) more and more a struggle *against* the artworld, the art-attitudes . . . and against little else”^{A.11} – Oppen presumably feeling again the social and political echoes of the 1930s’ turmoil in which poetry did indeed fail him, and then the intolerant politics of the early Cold War years which drove him, and his family, into exile in Mexico. Nonetheless, the move ‘beyond’ will be in the offing as Oppen turns progressively towards the more speculatively propositional in his use of language in what would become the *Seascape* and

subsequent collections, but not before the most unsettling twelve months of his later life which was about to fall upon him.

On 6th May 1969 Oppen was awarded the Pulitzer prize for *Of Being Numerous*. Oppen's letters of that month, for example to Harvey Shapiro and L.S. Dembo, reflect a disorientation that followed the recognition. He speaks of the prize as "in view of the record, a questionable compliment" but "On the other hand, I needed it badly"^{A.12} [SL 195]. He reflects on being "at sixty-one, the self-confident unknown is awkward - - - I mean *gauche*, a *gaucherie*, I commit *gaucheries* at parties"^{A.12} It seems Oppen has been taken out of his social comfort zone and what he observes in himself as inadequacies are revealed ("I picture myself as a flustered infant"^{A.12}). To his sister, June Oppen Degnan (publisher of *San Francisco Review* and a key organiser for both McCarthy's and McGovern's Democratic presidential campaigns), he writes "I don't quite know what I've done in and thru this book (with the slightly embarrassing help of a deceased newspaper publisher [Pulitzer]) Something. Something done far more directly in the teeth, the orthodontures, of the poetic taste, the artistic sniggers and nervous ticks of the moment than I knew"^{A.13} His analysis "on that level of gossip [referencing a *Strand* magazine review] to understand [...] to analyse the formation and deformation of taste, fighting a battle of taste - - - I'm licking wounds I didn't know I had: [] trying to take pride in valors I was unaware of having possessed."^{A.13}

A.2 Reasons To Love

"Only one mistake, Ezra!" George Oppen

The following month Oppen met Ezra Pound for the first time since 1937, quite by chance, in the offices of New Directions Publishing. As he described it: "Jay Laughlin [founder and editor] and two or three other people of New Directions in the room. Pound enters with Olgar Rudge. Pound silent. Olgar and the rest chatter to cover situation. I didn't want to chatter, and stood up to leave. Jay says to Pound: give George a copy of your book."^{A.14} Pound says – uninflected, low voice: How do I know he wants it. I walked over to Pound and held out my hand and said, I want it. I had stood close, so that Pound would not need to reach out. But Pound stood up, and that brought us touching, or nearly touching each other. Pound took hold of my hand, and held on. I began to weep Pound began to weep. We cried over each other – by that time neither of us could speak, so I took the book, and left. I don't know, perhaps neither of us knew what we were crying about ---- or, of course, I do know. Every

sincere or serious person who ever met Pound has reason to have loved him. I write this out simply for the sake of the facts, the historical facts."^{A.15}

In mid-summer 1969, George and Mary were in Maine on their annual sailing holiday based at Little Deer Island, and sailing a boat he characterized subsequently as "very small, very precarious and very cozy, very innocent" – being, presumably, a return to a hands-on innocence of familiar activity and security of location. Picking up the poetry, however, proved difficult and the inexorability of the Vietnam War and the political and social fall-out pressed hard on him. Writing to George Johnson, a translator and professor at Ottawa University: "The young seem to me magnificent, but I am aware that it is largely that they are young [] Must be admitted, however, that so far their courage has held, and perhaps ours will too."^{A.16} On their way back from Maine in September, the Oppens spent two weeks in Brooklyn before heading home to San Francisco. Oppen may have read at one or two events in San Francisco in late September and early October, the evidence is unclear, but on 16th October he cancelled the reading tour of eight universities planned for October, November, and February, due to begin on 22nd October. As he explained to Elizabeth Kray (the American Academy of Poets organizer) in an apologetic telegram: "It would seem I can't go into business as a famous man -- or half-famous either. [] I didn't know that about myself, or had forgotten [...] I can no longer hear my poetry, I will never be able to write another line, I will never know myself again [...] The books will have to fend for themselves [] I lack a public character: [] I am afraid I am incapable of it."^{A.17}

Handling recognition after a lifetime of relative neglect by the academic and literary publishing worlds might be one factor in Oppen's withdrawal.^{A.18} More deeply, Oppen as a young man had stepped boldly away from the confines of his family's values and made a social, cultural, and political life for himself and Mary which put him at odds with the prevailing establishment for at least thirty years. War service in the infantry, for which he had volunteered, brought its share of traumatic experience and then he returned to his home country to find himself labelled subversive for his pre-war Communist affiliations in spite of that war service; a decade-long exile in Mexico for himself and his family followed. The post-war Oppen seems often to display aspects of personality we might today readily identify as facets of post-traumatic stress which we now know one never gets truly over but simply learns to live with. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis put it: "all the scarring, emotional stress, guilt, sorrow and survivor's luck make, according to veterans, a very fraught minefield."^{A.19} There is a brittleness, a severity, perhaps a desire to 'control' in both his personal life and his

writing. DuPlessis adds that “Oppen is Oppen, with flaws, annoyances, blind spots, needs, repeated anecdotes, a sometimes annoying, unanswerable bluntness.”^{A.20} Yet this was mixed in with a generosity of spirit and a dry humour to which many friends and correspondents have attested. Nonetheless, Oppen was an outsider whom the Pulitzer Prize suddenly brought in from the cold. It brought him, and indeed he and Mary as a couple, to a crisis of self-confidence, of identity, and an insistence on his part of not needing the notoriety. When 1970 saw the failure by Fulcrum in London to ensure publication of his *Collected Poems* (which fell instead to New Directions in 1975), in a letter to poet Philip Booth he speaks of “little stability gained in being 62.”^{A.21} He and Mary had undertaken their customary summer sailing holiday, but Oppen says of it: “I’ve been shaken somehow or other this last year, Phil [] which is somehow or other, I suppose, responsible for our failing to get to Castine again [one of their familiar sailing destinations], tho I forget the details of that – Bad weather once, I remember, we turned back – But we’ve been doing odd things -- -- the ‘world’ of poetry: too much for our sense of who we are and who and whatever we are not.”^{A.21}

In July 1970, Oppen wrote to his sister June Oppen Degnan of the now established move from New York to San Francisco and “the NY poem [*Of Being Numerous*] [being] intellectual and philosophic”, whereas the SF poems are “atmospheric”.^{A.22} He added: “I am fascinated by the thought of a ‘philosophic’ poem about a small and beautiful city – to be able to say what a small and sophisticated city means. [...] the meaning of sophisticated small cities – ‘atmospherically’ at least.” Earlier in 1970, writing to Harvey Shapiro, Oppen elaborates: “My own work thins, is what’s happening, thins in the influence of the California skies and the seascape [] Something happening to the solidity of objects and the sense of city [] Those islands, those things which seem at the same time uncompromisingly to exist and to be lost still in my mind but the emphasis shifts for me to the thing they are lost in – [] Well, there we are: [] This In Which, which I seem to have spoken of before, but the centre of the picture changes for me...”^{A.23} Oppen’s new found vision seems also well expressed in the following, from an October 1970 letter to poet Philip Booth (author of *Letter from a Distant Land* collection): “that distant land, the world one slowly wakes to [] *Always* wakes to And always slowly at each waking. [] The sea that makes us islands [] The margins”.^{A.24} While Oppen retains some residual anxiety – that “little stability gained in being 62”^{A.24} – by the end of the year he is able to tell Harvey Shapiro that “finally, -- last couple months – I’m able to write lines without absurd and self-destructive labour.”^{A.25} The ‘San Francisco Poems’ were fully drafted by this time and included in the Fulcrum *Collected* proofs, although *Seascape*

would not be published until the end of 1972 and the New Directions *Collected*, as we've said, not until 1975. Unaware of the delays to come, in April 1971 Oppen writes to L.S. Dembo: "a new book, after long false starts and confusion now beginning to take on shape (San Francisco coloring everything, an obsession I can't break if I wanted to. And SF is not my idyllic childhood of boats and etc nor my adulthood but a lost adolescence^{A.26} which he also characterizes as a work "with its meaning for me, autobiographical, and, I think, a more historical meaning – This distance, this edge of the country, [] and the thing beyond or outside the sense of metropolis." He would elaborate this several years later in an interview with Charles Tomlinson at the BBC, during a visit by invitation to the Modern American Poetry Conference at the Central London Polytechnic in May 1973: *Seascape: Needle's Eye* as a title he refers to "the scene, it is the edge of a continent, and it's a bare edge of a continent. You come - - you stand on a little beach, you can stand on one little rock and look out - - if you saw far enough you'd see Honolulu. There's nothing between. It's a bare, bare edge; it's a metaphysical edge. What happens there - - the symbol of the needle's eye is the horizon, the horizon at sea, in which dimensions close, coincide. The ... the detail, the objectivism in the sense it was usually understood, and the sky, the unlimited space, the unlimited. At that point almost touch leaving a needle's eye."^{A.27} Back in 1969, in a letter to his sister, he had referred to himself as "this clumsy camel face to face with the unblinking needle's eye" [SL 196] and Oppen's description indicates his move away from the exclusively material world in these poems towards 'a metaphysical edge' and 'the unlimited'. The *Seascape* collection was finally published in December 1972 by Sumac Press and in response to a Michael Heller comment, Oppen writes: "I think you say correctly, speak accurately of some change in the language [] the language 'rises' a little? [] etherealizes a little, so imminently confronted by one's temporality --- even a camel might peak thru at that point, a camel or an old gent - - -"^{A.28}

While the 'Horizon' collection (as he referred to *Seascape*) finally reached publication, Oppen had moved on: "a few poems since Horizon [] Few, but they're steps. Gain a line at a time"^{A.29}, poems that would eventually be collected as *Myth of the Blaze* (1972-75). Having passed through the post-Pulitzer crisis of confidence, Oppen is able to write of his insecurities of self and of knowing what one wants: for example, to Harvey Shapiro: "Can't bear much fame, can't bear much neglect [] Your very self injured by fame, the poems insulted and injured by neglect [] (to put a lot briefly; [] 'the poems' means in part to have spoken and not been heard, to have said and not been heard)[] Nothing seen from prominence, too much seen in the ditch."^{A.30} He speaks of being "unsure of the work, very

unsure” over the writing of what became ‘Of Hours’ in the *Seascape* collection: “And the early versions very faulty. Been slow. [] Been almost unwilling. [] Sense of helplessness now and then [...] yes and one doubts poetry. Not, for me, the fact that no ‘ordinary’ person reads it --- I don’t really think about that. But one says so little ---- one knows so little [] we know so little before and after we have read George Oppen.” He concludes his letter with “And hard to talk of the question you raise: what one wants, to know what one wants, to move towards it --- What is it? Fear of loss of oneself as one knows himself, is familiar with himself? ? ‘Fusion of subject and object’ where all is acted upon? [] I don’t know [] I suppose fear’s a great part of our lives [] I don’t know.”^{A.31}

Out of the post-Pulitzer turmoil comes a readjustment in Oppen’s thoughts and feelings about subject, object, and how to write about them. To L.S.Dembo he writes: “I am trying to write [...] about the benevolence of the real”^{A.32} (a phrase he had used in ‘Route’ 13). “If there’s a benevolence, however, it is the real which is benevolent.”^{A.33} His emphasis is on “the limit of what one *knows* acknowledged, the inaccuracies of knowledge” and the fact of words as “a mode of being [...] The words distort, but are our mode [...] I keep thinking a single word, any word, holds all of the actual [] And then in typescript [] they don’t.”^{A.33} Then in the summer of 1972 he writes a marvellously evocative letter to his niece, Diane Meyer, describing the sailing in Maine but including an insight into the Oppen’s lifelong ‘outsider’ experience, even though here in later life his and Mary’s circumstances have changed: “We play with loneliness, I suppose: [] always have, suffering loneliness almost painlessly, there being two of us [] But not without fear [] Extremes of loneliness, in a way, metaphysical loneliness, there being two of us [] And yet it is surely the breath or is it the ether of life to us”^{A.34} – phrases echoed in ‘The Book of Job and a Draft of a Poem to Praise the Paths of the Living’ which will appear in the *Myth of the Blaze* collection in 1975 (NCP, 240)^{A.35}. Oppen’s letter to Michael Heller of December 1972 in which he spoke of a “change in language” is interesting for its record of Oppen’s being “puzzled” by the reaction to his work: “[the books] mean to say [] *Being* [] I had supposed myself to be speaking with dazzling clarity.”^{A.36} The draft to this letter in the Oppen archive is illuminating: “I begin to understand that the earlier books [*The Materials* (1962), *This In Which* (1965), and *Of Being Numerous* (1968)] have been taken to be a simple realism – I was in these books speaking of Being: I had thought I could arrive at the concept of Being from an account of experience as it presents itself in its own terms – Needle’s eye is perhaps more familiar, more personal, or seems so --- a man more immediately and individually facing the fact of his own temporality

----- It will be taken as less than I meant it to be if it is not taken in the light of the previous books [...] I was sure I had said, managed to say ----- *Being* – [quoting from the opening poem of *Seascape*, NCP 211] ‘the most obvious thing in the world’ (sic) ‘ob via [] the obvious’, a simple realism.^{A.37} It is in this letter that Oppen makes his most well-known assertion: “if we still possessed the word ‘is’, there would be no need to write poems.”^{A.38}

A.3 ME – a cornerstone

“*Tell’em I told you to.*” William Carlos Williams

In January 1973, a month after the publication of *Seascape: Needle’s Eye*, Oppen writes twice in quick succession to Robert Duncan, commenting initially on a reprint of a Duncan essay published that month, and including that remark: “But consciousness itself – self-consciousness in itself, by itself carries the conviction of actuality.”^{A.38} In the second letter, Oppen repeats: “Consciousness in itself, and of itself, (I think Descartes might have said) establishes the fact of actualness, for it, itself, is undoubtedly actual. And so we have the fact of actualness. Which is the miracle.”^{A.39} In the first letter he also says: “The word in my mind is above all ME – a cornerstone [...] despite ‘what happened’ [“I am bound by some things that happened.”], various poundings on that stone [] Not chosen [] Was chosen.”^{A.40} Then, in the same month, to Michael Heller: “the direct feel of living [] replacing the abstract ‘soul’.[...]The love of the world. [] could one imagine, as the first moment in history of the sacred, not personification of the known, but the imagination of the first moment at which object (sic) becomes object: [] among sensations,”^{A.41} The Cartesian separation of body from soul is implied in the exchange with Heller, with Oppen on the side of the embodied physical experience (“the direct feel of living”) as prime, filtered through the conscious self, even though the second Duncan letter has Oppen struggling through repetition to somehow suck the experience of reality into the inadequacy of the word ‘actual’. We might note that in the contemporary ‘global workspace’ model of consciousness, conscious (but not non-conscious) information is rapidly and widely distributed across the brain, provoking synchronized brain activity that accompanies and is, therefore, the physical evidence for, conscious processing. Neuroscientific studies identify conscious visual perception, for example, with this increase in communication frequencies across different brain areas. The global workspace model suggests that conscious awareness of such visual information requires three conditions: a primary processor i.e. a neuronal network such as the primary visual cortex that processes incoming visual signals; additionally, sufficient time for this representation to be picked up by the secondary systems across the brain’s cortex,

specifically the prefrontal cortex as major site of information processing; and thirdly, the sustained ‘amplification’ of both the ‘bottom-up’ input and the ‘top-down’ assimilation to engender “a state of reverberating, coherent activity among many different brain centers.”^{A.42} This is consciousness conjectured on the basis of experimental evidence and the example of visual perception is pertinent to Oppen, who writes to Donald Davie also early in 1973: “My ‘proofs’ are all images. My proof is the image. ‘The common place,’ ‘that which we cannot NOT see,’ etc, I don’t think I’ve proposed anything but that we commit ourselves to that mystery in fact I think we must, I think we do.”^{A.43}

^{A.1} George Oppen, *Selected Letters*, 410 Note 29: “Being – ‘the most obvious thing in the world’ [sic] ‘ob via the obvious’, a simple realism.” UCSD 16,5,8.

^{A.2} George Oppen, *SL*, 136.

^{A.3} George Oppen, *SL*, 126.

^{A.4} George Oppen, *SL*, 127.

^{A.5} George Oppen, *SL*, 156.

^{A.6} Peter Nicholls has summarised what is known of Oppen’s reading of Heidegger’s work through two decades from the early 1950s in ‘Appendix A’, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 194-6; and, in particular, he refers to Oppen’s response to Heidegger’s *Essays on Metaphysics: Identity and Difference* on pages 77-82.

^{A.7} George Oppen, *SL*, 177.

^{A.8} George Oppen, *SL*, 136-7.

^{A.9} George Oppen, *SL*, 172; & 397, note 2.

^{A.10} George Oppen, *SL*, 138.

^{A.11} George Oppen, *SL*, 187.

^{A.12} George Oppen, *SL*, 195.

^{A.13} George Oppen, *SL*, 196.

^{A.14} Ezra Pound, *Drafts & Fragments of Cantos CX-CXVII* (1968) New York: New Directions.

^{A.15} George Oppen, *SL*, 259. Mary Oppen also quotes George as saying: “though the madness was real, it was not in him, it seemed – but somehow there;” and as she put it herself: “It was the sudden intrusion of a madness, for no man has ever been more pure or more generous than Pound.” (Mary Oppen, *Meaning A Life* (2nd printing 1990). Santa Rosa, CAL: Black Sparrow Press, 136.)

^{A.16} George Oppen, *SL*, 198.

^{A.17} George Oppen, *SL*, 203.

^{A.18} George Oppen wrote to L.S. Dembo in May 1969 and spoke of the deeper neglect of his fellow Objectivist Charles Reznikoff (*SL* 194).

^{A.19} Rachel Blau Duplessis, ‘Oppen from seventy-five to a hundred, 1983–2008’, Originally prepared for SUNY, Buffalo: George Oppen Conference, delivered April 24, 2008 (Oppen’s 100th birthday); Jacket 36 (2008) <http://jacketmagazine.com/36/oppen-duplessis.shtml>, paragraph 14.

^{A.20} Rachel Blau Duplessis, ‘Oppen from seventy-five to a hundred’, 66.

^{A.21} George Oppen, *SL*, 214.

^{A.22} George Oppen, *SL*, 210.

^{A.23} George Oppen, *SL*, 403.

^{A.24} George Oppen, *SL*, 216.

^{A.25} George Oppen, *SL*, 216.

^{A.26} George Oppen, *SL* 404 note 1; 22nd May 1973, BBC Radio 3, prod. George MacBeth.

^{A.27} George Oppen, *SL*, 249.

^{A.28} George Oppen, *SL*, 234.

^{A.29} George Oppen, *SL*, 230.

^{A.30} George Oppen, *SL*, 230-1.

^{A.31} George Oppen, *SL*, 241.

^{A.32} George Oppen, *SL*, 242.

^{A.33} George Oppen, *SL*, 243.

^{A.34} *Myth of the Blaze* (1975) never appeared as a separate collection but as the final section of Oppen’s *Collected Poems* (1975). New York: New Directions Books, 231-256.

^{A.35} George Oppen, *SL*, 248.

- A.³⁶ George Oppen, *SL*, 410 note 29.
- A.³⁷ George Oppen, *SL*, 249.
- A.³⁸ George Oppen, *SL*, 251.
- A.³⁹ George Oppen, *SL*, 412, note15.
- A.⁴⁰ George Oppen, *SL*, 252.
- A.⁴¹ George Oppen, *SL*, 253.
- A.⁴² Robinson R. (2009) 'Exploring the Global Workspace of Consciousness'. PLoS Biol 7(3): e1000066.doi:
10.1371/ journal.pbio.1000066.
- A.⁴³ George Oppen, *SL*, 257-8

Appendix Two: A Cognitive Poetics Perspective

'To each other we will speak'

"Meaning and understanding are not predetermined or fixed in any way, they are continually evolving concepts, negotiated by all those involved in the discourse world."

Joanna Gavins. *Text World Theory: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2007, 20.

The Language writers became the dominant American poetic movement of innovation by the time of George Oppen's death in 1984, and their influence remains long after. What characterised their practice was an explicit attention to language experimentation in light of the accumulating advances in linguistics. Having identified correlations between Oppen's personal interest in cognition and developments in cognitive science, it is interesting to feed-back certain emerging practices of present-day literary analysis, in a branch of stylistics known as cognitive poetics, that are rooted in the relationships between cognitive studies and reader experience. This extends our brief discussion of Chapter 4.1.

In so far as a writer and a reader share a common cognitive mechanics rooted in a pre-linguistic image schematics that persists into adulthood and which consists of common basic conceptual sets of relations; and in so far as they share a common language as extension of that embodied perception and physical experience; then so-called 'textuality' has been identified as the exchange engendered by a text, the felt experience that links reader and writer. Further, the notion of 'texture' is taken to be that "experienced quality of textuality."^{AA1} In appealing to the ever-evolving evidence and insights of cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics, cognitive poetics as a branch of stylistic analysis both exploits a systematic approach and claims interdisciplinary corroboration. Among its advocates, Peter Stockwell (*Texture*. 2009) has categorised an aesthetics of textuality, collating the cognitive insights into attention, conceptual grammar, and psychological identity, upon which we might draw in considering a reader's experience of textuality and texture. The subjective acquires elements of objective description and analysis backed by the cognitive sciences informing traditional literary categories such as resonance, intensity, sensation, empathy, and voice.

Consider first the issue of readerly attention from a neurological and linguistic perspective. For instance, there is a poet's use of the definite article (*the*) and the determiner (*this, that, these, those*), or indeed the possessive form (*my, your etc.*) as indicators of so-called 'Given' information (the term that discourse linguists use for information already shared by writer

and reader). However, their use may more subtly also ‘position’ the reader in relation to the poem’s speaker, for example in establishing context or backgrounding facets of the text’s conceptual construct as functions of attentional focus. If definite articles, determiners, and possessives anchor a reader semantically within the context of a text world, indefiniteness marked by the use of *a*, *an*, *some*, and *any*, for example, when not referencing generic information, typically introduces new, previously unshared, information, both targeting and projecting a new aspect within an established background. In Nancy Gaffield’s words: “indefinite reference is used to assert rather than to presuppose.”^{AA2} She continues: “Literary communication, unlike face-to-face communication, does not rely on a specific given situational context. Thus, writers create a sense of shared context by various linguistic means— deictic reference and definite reference being two important ways [...]. Deictics and determiners then can be employed to construct a non-factual possible world. Furthermore, definite reference does not simply rely on or imply shared knowledge, it can produce shared knowledge.” As Elena Semino also puts it: “This is because definite articles carry in themselves a presupposition of the unique existence of referents of the noun phrase they introduce.”^{AA3} “In other words, the use of definite reference helps the reader to imagine a world in which the specific context evoked exists, and to identify with it.”^{AA4}

Oppen clearly does use definite articles to background a scene (the presupposition being we share understanding of that context) with indefinite article as the foreground (asserting an attentional focus, an attractor, without presupposition). For example, in the opening poem of the *Myth Of The Blaze* collection, ‘Latitude,Longitude’, which we have already considered (Chpt. 4.3), Oppen writes: “climbed from the road and found/over the flowers at the mountain’s/rough top a bee...” (NCP 237); and “a bee”, that bee (indefinite but particular) is the focus of the first two stanzas of the poem, its “thin legs crookedly/ a-dangle”. The definite articles lay the generalised ground of road, flowers, and mountain top, before that something particular is identified. To apply a cognitive poetics reference to attentional focus, we can then recognise that the poem goes on to foreground a question (“if we could/ find”) and link it to a shared frame of knowledge in “all/ the gale’s evidence”. As we previously discussed, the contention of this poem centres on what “defines// poetry”. What Oppen has clearly done in the poem’s structure is to define a location, then draw us in to a detail within it, and from this construct his argument, albeit it a proposition in which his fragmented syntax is more speculatively suggestive than assertive. Distinctions between definite and indefinite denote Oppen’s own perceptions of these elements and their status in the text world he is creating. From a cognitive perspective, we can suggest those perceptions for the

duration of the poem's making reflect the psychophysical, the embodied, conceptual framework through which Oppen is seeking to understand and to speak. The *poiesis*, the process, the act, of Oppen's making the poem is a manifestation of the mental question and coherence that is Oppen's experience in those moments, with his language an extension of that embodied perceptual to conceptual construct.

We need not suppose that Oppen is consciously engaged in conjuring what today we would call discourse schemas with his reader. Yet in a 'text world' as opposed to a face-to-face 'discourse world' there are no necessarily automatic personal, spatial, or temporal, contexts that are shared between authorial voice and recipient, even though both may share possible cultural experiences, and certainly share the conceptual knowledge encapsulated in image schemas. In the case of the latter, as Stockwell puts it: "the most important principle in cognitive science ... is that there are common aspects of humanity so that claims made about one group of people and their cognitive capacities must also be true of all people. Of course, this is not to deny cultural, ethnic, racial, gendered, geographical, historical, ideological or other myriad differences across humanity, but the broad window of human possibilities is constrained by the common way in which our minds work and our bodies interact with reality."^{AA5} Language is a manifestation of mind, and there are continuities: "between how you understand phonemes and how you understand syntax; between the way you learn to manipulate physical objects in spaces and the way you learn to use language to have effects on other people; between finding your way around a room and finding your way round a text [...] language and cognition are not separate, literature and natural conversation are on a continuum with each other."^{AA5}

In referencing 'text world' and 'possible world' approaches, Nancy Gaffield states: "When the writer, the reader and the text come into 'collision or collusion,' [...] meaning is negotiated and a text world is constructed, as if it contained actual people, places and events."^{AA6} In reading a poem, we unconsciously identify correspondences between signifiers we recognise from the actual world (chronological, physical, taxonomic, for example; see Ryan, 1991^{AA7}) with those from which we equally unconsciously conjure a text world. There are shared linguistic devices which act as attentional and conceptual stimuli and from which a reader conjures meaningful responses. The cognitive scientific assumption is that higher level mental functions such as those associated with reading and interpreting a later Oppen poem are elaborations of more basic cognitive mechanisms. One much studied mechanism with obvious import is that of visual perception. The brain translates an impinging perceptual field of flat, undifferentiated, images into useful visual information.

What were once the merely descriptive theories of Gestalt psychology now correlate as neuro-scientifically validated explanations, for example, of foreground-background perceptual processing. Stockwell has taken these neuroscientific facts and produced a list of what he considers “the typical features of good textual attractors”, stylistic devices that “cut across traditional linguistic matters” in blending grammatical and experiential notions equally to capture and keep reader attention.^{AA8}

Oppen’s later poems display one immediately evident attention-grabbing practice grounded in a fundamental neurological response to visual perceptual phenomena known as ‘inhibition of return’ (IOR). This denotes the disengagement of brain-eye focus from overly static objects; the preference being for a rapid visual search of surroundings along with IOR’s disinclination to return attentional focus to the preceding locus. Not only is movement of more interest to mental processing than stasis, novelty over familiarity prompts the same diversion of attention. Oppen’s late work is, of course, filled with the disjunctions that shift the reader abruptly to what Stockwell calls ‘currency’, that is “the present moment of reading [being] more attractive than the previous moment.”^{AA9} The reality of a collagic juxtaposition of components is to zig-zag the reader’s attention, keeping it repeatedly refreshed by the unexpected. One of the simplest lyrics in Oppen’s *Primitive* collection serves as the simplest of examples: “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.” (“Waking Who Knows, *NCP* 2008, 273). The mechanics of the poem’s stylistic structure that operate on a reader’s attentional interest are straightforward. Having established the urban images, in line four we cut from ‘the streets’ to ‘the seed’. The seed of what? As what? The break from the linear semantic sense of the preceding lines certainly refocuses our attention. As possible explanation, Oppen continues “is a place”, but again cuts the semantic continuity of the seed as a place with “the stone”, and then the stone also as “a place”, before “mind” cuts in to “burn the world down”. As we digest and interpret the meaning of this, the unexpected recurs in the suggestion of mind not only “alone” (which may itself be a less obvious descriptor than first sight suggests, something indeed to be questioned within the tone established by the poem to that point) but “transparent”. Then the attentional reinforcement of repetition “will burn the world down” is qualified (rather than cut here) with “tho” and the image of “starlight” as “part of ourselves”. The disjointed and the fragmentary as a style has a ready capability to catch a reader’s eye and mind, whether or

not Oppen intends this as a deliberate ploy or, as is much more likely, simply putting his own mental reasoning with its linear and non-linear characteristics into practice.

As visual attractors, it is perhaps not surprising that research shows that human figures attract greater unconscious perceptual attention than their surroundings, in the first instance: “Familiar objects in the visual field are more readily resolved as figures, since a conceptual template is already available.”^{AA10} Translate that to the literary setting and reader attention will be attracted as first impulse towards what Stockwell terms “empathetic responsibility”. Envisaged speaking humans in particular combine both familiarity, immediate empathetic potential, and movement, as unconscious attractors to the reader. The later Oppen poems undoubtedly display both personal experience and authorial opinions (albeit often speculative). As readers, we are drawn to the first person presence even where it is understated: “‘out of poverty/ to begin// again’ impoverished// of tone of pose that common/ wealth// of parlance Who/ so poor the words// world with and take on substantial// meaning handholds footholds// to dig in one’s heels sliding// hands and heels beyond the residential/ lots the plots it is a poem// which may be sung/ may well be sung” (‘Song, The Winds Of Downhill’, *Seascape: Needle’s Eye*, NCP, 220). As readers, we are likely to ‘identify’ with Oppen here, where he transmutes a physical experience of desperation into a metaphor for the struggle to match language to meaning.

We will return to ‘identification’ shortly. Before doing so, as two last attention-focusing devices (and there are others, as Stockwell elaborates), consider the perceptual attraction to ‘brightness’ and ‘fullness’ in Oppen. One of the impressions that *Seascape: Needle’s Eye* as a collection conveys is of San Francisco as a city under a bright sky and beside a vast blue ocean; with Moon and stellar night sky also repeatedly in contrast to that, and themselves changing the ocean from myriad daylight colours to darkness: “Climbing the peak of Tamalpais the loose/ Gravel underfoot// And the city shining with tremendous wrinkles/ In the hills and the winding of the bay...” (NCP, 231); “...the wave belly-lovely/ Glass of the glass sea [...]/On the open water [...]/... the outer/ Limit of the ego ” (NCP, 211); “In the starlight [...]/[...] and the tide running/ Strong as a tug’s wake shorelights’// Fractured dances across rough water [...]/[...] A wind blowing out// And out to sea [...]/The small mid-ocean/ Moon lights the winches” (NCP, 213-214); “... the waves’/riot/ Brilliant as the world/ [...]/ This is the seaboard [...]/ In the great bays and the narrow bights” (NCP, 216); “A city street/ Leads to the bay//[...] The great loose waves move landward/ [...]/ Along the length of coast in the continual wind/ The ocean pounds [...]” (NCP, 222-223); “The sea and a crescent strip of beach [...]” (NCP, 224); “[...] As tides drop along the beaches in the thin wash of/

breakers//[...]” (NCP, 226); “[...] of the tide/ brimming// in the moon-streak/[...]” (NCP, 228); “[...]that face// More blinding than the sea[...]” (NCP, 230).

It’s worth returning to what cognitive mechanics has to say about our unconscious recognition of movement in a little more detail. By coincidence, we have already noted Oppen’s use (in a letter to John Taggart in 1974) of the phrase “the moving edge” in referring to the ever-changing contextual position of his poems, both over time and in the face of new readers.^{AA11} The phrase echoes a cognitive mechanics notion regarding ‘figural edges’ in which, in the visual cognition context, it’s the processing of edges that defines objects and figures (or indeed in defining an absence, a lacuna). In detecting an object crossing the visual field, the brain-eye notes changes between foreground and background planes, identifying advancing edge occlusion of background and trailing edge re-emergence of background, and thus a relative movement-versus-stasis relationship. In reading, we experience correlates of motion both directly through active verbs and by inference through changing spatial relations. This relates to attentional changes known as ‘shift’ (apparent translational motion) and ‘zoom’ (apparent changes of scale).^{AA12} Whether zoom or shift, these attentional changes posit one entity (e.g. foreground) in relation to another (e.g. background), so the brain-eye must look from one to the other, which is sequential and therefore time-dependent. Even a stationary object has been through that comparative examination, and the correlation with the literary reading process is that the reader must go through an equivalent mental ‘observation’ between object, figure, or space, and surroundings in order to establish apparent motion. As Stockwell puts it: “reading involves the dynamic apparent or actual motion of figures across a ground. This can be regarded as a psychological basis for the common description of reading as a journey and the perception that texts are dynamic and motive, when in fact it is the reading that gives it this apparent relative motion.”^{AA13}

In a later Oppen poem such as the second section of ‘The Book of Job’ from *Myth of the Blaze*, we see this cinematic tracking (as Stockwell neatly refers to it): “the long road/ going north// on the cliffs small/and numerous// the windows// look out on the sea’s simulacra/ of self-evidence meaning’s// instant wild-/ eyed as the cherry/ tree blossoms// in the fanatic glass from our own/ homes our own/rooms we are fetched out [...]” (NCP, 241-2). The active verbs here dominate the action in going north, looking out, fetching out. However, we can also refer to the image schemas that emerge out of motor-sensory experiences that we all share and their implications for, for example, perceived movement. Such cognitive grammars derive from the work of Langacker^{AA14} in which linguistic forms are considered to be based on extensions of embodied perceptions. As we’ve discussed it already, the pre-

linguistic spatial schematics are taken to persist into adulthood as image schemas. Importantly these are not mental picture ‘images’ but representations of conceptual sets of relations. Our earlier reference to the exemplary work of Tyler and Evans^{AA15} showed that in a spatial schema the foregrounded ‘trajector’ (the primary attentional focus) moves towards, or into, or through, the backgrounded object or field, called the ‘landmark’. We don’t understand dynamic prepositions such as *through*, *by*, *on*, *under*, *over*, *etc* except through movement schemas. These schemas can be seen to underlie clausal structures in the form of ‘action-chains’, clauses with noun-phrase referents and predications.^{AA16} Imagined as an energy transfer along an action chain of clauses, the schema may compound itself into line, sentence, even stanza scale cohesion. Beyond active verbs, the adverbial and often the preposition alone suffices: “by car” (*NCP*, 238); “in the green storm” (*NCP*, 238); “beyond the blunt towns” (*NCP*, 239); “in the veins” (*NCP*, 240); “of the sea’s surf [...] of the world [...] of the land” (*NCP*, 240); “wave upon wave” (*NCP*, 241); “on the cliffs [...] on each other” (*NCP*, 241-2); “over the glass lens” (*NCP*, 243), and so on. The image schema hypothesis and its conceptual metaphor elaboration have been ideas ‘arising’ (vertical orientation schema) ‘out of’ (containment schema) cognitive research frequently ‘applied’ (force schema) to literary texts, and so I will not ‘labour’ (conceptual metaphor) them here.

Having picked a key insight from cognitive linguistics, let’s select one from cognitive psychology in returning to the sticky issue of identity. *The Handbook of Self and Identity*^{AA17} lists sixty-six different terms for aspects of self and identity,^{AA18} highlighting the complexity of social, psychological, philosophical, and neuroscientific interpretations and perspectives. Within cognitive poetics, identity and identification by a reader with the ‘figurative’ contents of a text are associated with the psychological facets of “empathy, sympathy, attachment and engagement in various overlapping ways.”^{AA19} While narrative fiction with its typical cast of characters will be the place in which text-world characterisation meets a reader’s pallet of experience, self-awareness, and insight into the human condition, a late Oppen poem also solicits a direct response from reader to poet. The feelings elicited by us as readers are most likely qualitatively the same as those we experience in day-to-day life, the difference being one only of degree.^{AA20} The cognitive sciences can inform, as we have seen, the ‘informational content’ of a poem, but they may also inform our aesthetic, including emotion-based, responses. Oppen’s late poems are often ‘I and you’ dialogues, but with significant narrative elements to them. At its simplest, in the ‘Latitude, Longitude’ example already discussed, the climbing from the road to discover a bee is followed by a conversation in which we the reader are invited into Oppen’s confidence, to share with him what message

is there 'for us'. In contrast, in 'The Book of Job' Oppen moves from place to place (mostly in narratives of remembrance), in this case often invoking a 'we' which does not include the reader, placing himself instead within a group 'not beaten' or 'the greasers' or 'survivors' or those who 'forget'. The reader observes these, detached from but potentially drawn to them if the attentional attractors are effective. Reading such a poem has been described as "both a test (of identification) and an ordeal (of syntax)."^{AA21} A 'real world' reader 'maps' his or her self on to a 'text world' counterpart (the you, we, or us, of the poem), the extent of switching between worlds depending upon whether the reader identifies particularly with their text counterpart. As readers, we are modelling the mind, the personality or personhood, of the identities on the page in all the complexity and fluidity of identity with which we are familiar in the real world, recognising 'prototypical' situations and characteristics but also able to modify and accommodate differences.

The cognitive poetics approach is an interesting application of cognitive scientific ideas and discoveries, an open-minded and inquisitive transplantation seeking something of the analytical rigour sometimes lacking in literary critiques. The roles of writer, reader and critic, are different and we cannot know how George Oppen would react confronted with these developments. I have no doubt, however, that he would have considered the matter with his customary deliberation, determined always (to quote from his penultimate published poem) that "...we/ will speak// to each/ other we/ will speak"(NCP 285).

^{AA1} Stockwell, Peter. *Texture: a cognitive aesthetics of reading*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009, 191.

^{AA2} Gaffield, Nancy. 'Seeing through Language: the Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian and Rosmarie Waldrop'. PhD Thesis. Canterbury: University of Kent, 2014, 48-9.

^{AA3} Semino, Elena. *Language and World Creation in Poems and Other Texts*. London: Longman, 1997, 21.

^{AA4} Gaffield, Nancy. *Seeing Through Language*. 2014, 47-8.

^{AA5} Stockwell, Peter. *Texture*. 2009, 3.

^{AA6} Gaffield, Nancy. *Seeing Through Language*. 2014, 41.

^{AA7} Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

^{AA8} Stockwell, Peter. *Texture*. 2009, 25-26.

^{AA9} Stockwell, Peter. *Texture*. 2009, 25.

^{AA10} Stockwell, Peter. *Texture*. 2009, 24.

^{AA11} Oppen, George. *Selected Letters*. Ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis. N.Carolina: Duke University Press, 1990, 289.

^{AA12} Carstensen, Kai-Uwe. 'Spatio-temporal ontologies and attention', *Spatial Cognition and Computation* 7 (1), 2007, 8.

^{AA13} Stockwell, Peter. *Texture*. 2009, 40.

^{AA14} Langacker, Ronald. *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar, Vol I: Theoretical Perspectives*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987.

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^{AA15} Tyler, Andrea & Evans, Vyvyan. *The Semantics of English Prepositions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 2003.

^{AA16} Stockwell, Peter. *Texture*. 2009, 170.

^{AA17} *The Handbook of Self and Identity*. eds. Leary, Mark, & Tangey, June. New York: Guildford press, 2003.

^{AA18} Baggini, Julian. *The Ego Trick*. London: Granta, 2011, 5

^{AA19} Stockwell, Peter. *Texture*. 2009, 138; referencing Bray, Joe. 'The effects of free indirect discourse: empathy revisited', *Contemporary Stylistics* eds. Lambrou, Marina & Stockwell, Peter. London: Continuum, 2007, 56-67.

^{AA20} Stockwell, Peter. *Texture*. 2009, 139.

^{AA21} Stockwell, Peter. *Texture*. 2009, 151.

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