

An Act of Being: The Thinking Poetics of George Oppen with Robert Creeley and
Nam Le in Response

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Abstract

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The aim of this thesis is to examine the poetics of George Oppen as an embodiment of thinking and phenomenology, and how the poetry of Robert Creeley and Nam Le responds to Oppen with a similar interest in the failure of language and the intersubjectivity of being in the world. A close reading of these poets reveals intersections with the philosophy of Maritain, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein. This thesis seeks to examine how Oppen's political poetics is made possible by his interest in phenomenology and philosophy of language. The poems surveyed are as follows: *Discrete Series*, "Psalm," "Street," and *Of Being Numerous* by George Oppen, "For Love" by Robert Creeley, and *36 Ways of Writing a Vietnamese Poem* by Nam Le. In order to achieve a poetics that highlights the contradictions and limits of language and perception, these poets utilize craft elements including fragmentation, juxtaposition, enjambment, multiple voices, subtle soundplay, and disjunctive linearity.

I. Introduction

I found myself reacquainted with George Oppen's poetry while working overseas in rural Akita, Japan. I had returned to the country of my adolescence to find a disorienting sense of both familiarity and estrangement. In the school office I was left to my own devices— and I read poetry. It was in that same office that I witnessed two earthshaking events through the lens of a laptop screen and the television: the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the assassination of prime minister Shinzo Abe.

I distinctly recall refreshing the news for the latest updates on Putin's invasion and the implications for global fallout, and the event of Abe's death shown over and over on the office TV— his interrupted speech, the flat crack of the gunshot, and his sudden jerk down as if merely ducking to avoid a soccer ball. And despite the chaotic implications of these events, life in the office continued like clockwork. The most extreme reaction I witnessed amongst my peers was a solemn shake of the head and eyes glued to the television.

Oppen's thinking poetics deals directly with this felt experience of alienation from others and witnessing atrocity from a distance. What does it mean to be a member of society, a bystander, and an artist among others in a post-nuclear society? What are the ethics contingent upon a poetics which seeks to address the unspeakable? Witnessing these acts of horror from a distance in my office, I was both insider and outsider. It was in Oppen's poetry that I found some solace, if not clarity, in his halting hesitations and process of thought, his utterances, his silence and expatriatism, and a common experience of both familiarity and estrangement from the phenomena of the world.

It is the very nature of the world today and its existential threats which necessitate a poetics that confronts the ontology of being and perception, and the power and limits of language to communicate the pain of ourselves and others. Such philosophical examination is not superfluous in these times, but is a vital practice. As Wittgenstein answers in *Philosophical*

Investigations, “What is your aim in philosophy? To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle” (*Philosophical Investigations* 87). Rather than being an elevated act removed from lived experience, philosophy has the ability to free us from the limits of language and perspective. However Wittgenstein also declares in the last proposition of the *Tractatus*, “About things we cannot speak of we must keep silent” (181). As we will discover through an analysis of his poetics, silence and unspeakability was also an aspect of both Oppen’s poetry of fragments and his life. What we find in the intersection with Oppen and these philosophers is that the problems they encounter are inherently problems with language, which leads them to address the constraints of our speech as a liberating act that goes to the root of experience.

While each philosopher is highly complex and each deserves a separate essay in their own right, in brief, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty are also concerned with re-examining philosophical problems through the ontological roots of human experience and the primary act of *perception*, while Wittgenstein’s most famous works concerned the primary act of language. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is an intersubjective act, our consciousness is shaped by the act of perception which is inextricable from our bodily experience moving through the world. To M.P., we live among objects subject to our control and yet are disconnected from them. However M.P. sees living in this dialectical world of subject and object as not solely a limiting element of our existence, but also as an opportunity to see with uplifting clarity towards the world, “The momentum of existence towards others, towards the future, towards the world, can be restored as a river unfreezes” (*Phenomenology* 165).

Oppen was aware of all three of these thinkers and more, including pre-Socratic and modernist ideas, which leads his poems to enact this philosophical concern with language and perception. His poetics embodies the process of thinking through his prosody of fragments, enjambment, sound, a disjunctive progression of juxtaposed image and abstracted ideas, and a speaker among multiple voices and subjectivities.

To my reading, as well as for many others, Oppen's poetics provides just this opportunity to attempt a sense of clarity and transparency towards the world. As Oppen states in section 22 in *Of Being Numerous*:

Clarity

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

Clarity in the sense of silence. (*NCP* 175)

The poetry of Robert Creeley and Nam Le, descended from Oppen, responds to his work by means of shared poetic technique and an interest towards direct perception, lived experience, and the limits of language. This demonstrates Oppen's ongoing poetic relevance, the timelessness of his verse, and the enduring necessity of philosophical poetics in the midst of mass atrocity and hysteria.

I. Oppen and Objectivist Origin

Poetic silence was not just an element of Oppen's work but a chosen fact of his life. His first book *Discrete Series* was published in 1934, and his subsequent book *The Materials* marked his return to poetry in 1962 after a quarter century of artistic silence. Unable to reconcile himself with the inefficacy of his own and others' poetry at that time to meet the moment of the Great Depression and rising fascism, Oppen chose to prioritize political organizing and to live a more engaged life with the world first. Oppen elaborated in an interview with Burton Hatlen on how he and his wife Mary sought to escape an isolated life:

"... we didn't know enough from the poetry that was being written; from the poetry we had written. And when the crisis occurred we knew we didn't know what the world was and we knew we had to find out so it was a poetic exploration at the same time as it was an action of conscience ... I thought most of the poets didn't know about the world as a life—so that I fairly easily gave up on a great many poetic friends" (*George Oppen* 25).

For Oppen, one's lived and direct experience went hand in hand with the act of writing poetry. When asked whose poetry he thought of as being inadequate, Oppen answered, "Pound— the

position that he took. Williams was a populist, but he really didn't know what he was talking about. Ah, Eliot, Yeats." (25). George's wife Mary Oppen also commented on how they were seeking a life of direct action, and not one simply directed by group affiliation:

"We had no particular leanings toward the Communist party—we were looking for someone who was active and who was doing something right now, and was something we could join. But we looked at the poets, we looked at the writers and we did not think that was any kind of art ... we couldn't enter into that sort of artistic world. It was propaganda art." (*George Oppen* 33).

Just as George and Mary Oppen often found themselves uncomfortable within the party structure of CPUSA, they were also uncomfortable with political artwork that was didactic or saw itself as a tool of political organization. As George stated, "It's a narrow public for poetry. It always will be. We didn't dream of addressing the crowds with poetry. And we distinguished, as I said, between poetry and politics" (33). Oppen's poetics was particularly conscious of his own position in the world, the difficulty of navigating politics, and the importance of direct engagement with the world. It took a quarter century of creative silence in order for Oppen finally to feel up to the task of writing poetry again after the Great Depression, as he stated, "It took 25 years to write the next poem. And it was a difficult poem to write" (26).

As recounted in Mary Oppen's biography *Meaning a Life*, George ceased writing poetry in 1936 to organize with the Communist party, where he and Mary canvassed door to door in New York City to organize riots and collective action on the issues of rising evictions and advocacy for workers' rights. George was even arrested once after a confrontation with the police. In 1942 the Oppens became disillusioned with CPUSA and as World War Two began, George was in his early 30s and worked in a defense plant building airplanes. He left this job on Long Island and moved to Detroit, as his Mary writes, "He went to Detroit, giving up his draft exemption—if a worker changed jobs, he was drafted into the armed forces" (*Meaning* 169). Mary and their child Linda followed him to Detroit, and Mary states that it was George's intention to be drafted, "George wanted to go to war. The enemy was fascism, and we agreed that

the war must be fought. It seemed to us that the lives of all Jews were endangered by fascism ... when he went to war he fought for himself and Linda and me ... although it now seems a foolhardy and even meaningless decision, it was the experience of manhood in those times” (173).

After returning from World War Two, Oppen and his family fell victim to McCarthyism and were repeatedly visited and questioned by federal agents on their contacts within the Communist party, which led them to seek a life of exile in Mexico until 1959.

Given how closely Oppen’s life and his poetics run in concert with each other, it is essential that we recognize the connections between his background and his chosen poetics. The opening poem in *Discrete Series* notably points toward Oppen’s life and his poetics of phenomenology:

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

What is immediately apparent in Oppen’s poetry is the difficulty inherent to his rejection of linearity and how the speaker’s emotion is secondary to the primary perceiving act, lying beneath the images and the ideas. To read Oppen’s poetry is to perpetually feel as though something is being left out between bursts of thought and observation, and what is left unsaid within these silences and leaps is often just as important as what *is* said. This poem enacts a pattern of thinking that is fragmented, enjambed and non-linear, beginning with a rumination “The

knowledge not of sorrow, you were / saying but of boredom / Is— aside from reading speaking / smoking—” feels like an incomplete thought that jumps to a new association in mind, “of what, Maude Blessingbourne it was, / wished to know when, having risen, / ‘Approached the window as if to see / what really was going on’;..” Maude Blessingbourne is a character in a Henry James short story called “The Story in It,” and the line of her approaching the window is quoted directly from this story. In a letter to L.S. Dembo, Oppen comments on this homage to Henry James, “I wanted James in the book—secretly, superstitiously, I carved his initials on that sapling book ... I argued, shortly after *Discrete* was printed, that James and not Hemingway was the useful model for ‘proletarian’ writers” (*Thinking Poetics* ix, x). While we don’t know the full extent of Oppen’s reasoning for referencing James, the preface to the collection of essays on Oppen entitled *Thinking Poetics* states, “... we might guess that [Oppen] appreciated James’s insight into social forces, the vagaries of class, and the pervasive operation of ‘cultural contradictions’” (TP x). Therefore as a poet interested in class issues, Oppen was rejecting a common feeling at the time that leftist poetry had to resemble plain prose, and instead embraced the difficulty of James as a means of subtlety and complexity that was still conscious of perception and cultural contradictions.

Here Oppen also engages with the act of sight and perception, of grasping the world as it really is through a window, which arises in the sense of boredom. Here ‘boredom’ also refers to Heidegger’s essay *Identity and Difference*, which posits boredom as the key opportunity contingent on directing us towards a heightened awareness of the world. Forrest Gander writes that Oppen scrawled in his notebooks, “Heidegger's statement that in the mood of boredom the existence of what-is is disclosed, is my Maude Blessingbourne in *Discrete Series* who in 'boredom' looks out the window and sees 'the world, weather-swept, with which / one shares the century.'” To Oppen the mood of boredom is the moment of opportunity that discloses knowledge of perceived objects and their relation to each other in the world, and this first poem

anticipates that the consecutive poems in *Discrete Series* will become even more concerned with perception.

Looking out the window and wanting to see “what really was going on” was also a prime motivation in George and Mary Oppen’s lives. The very title of Mary’s autobiography *Meaning of Life* alludes to their search on how to live a good life and discover themselves. Mary writes, “We wanted to see a great deal of the world ... and learn our life by throwing ourselves into it” (*Meaning* 76). With the character of Maude Blessingbourne at the window, there is a similar feeling of throwing yourself at the frame of perception, of a gesture towards an authentic and direct experience with the world, which given that Oppen wrote this poem not long after Mary and he had eloped on their cross-country trip across a Depression stricken America, feels especially relevant to Oppen’s heightened social awareness.

At the end of this poem we see a juxtaposition of image and idea, of the concrete and abstract statement, “The road clear from her past the window- / glass— / of the world, weather-swept, with which / one shares the century.” We get a clear image of the road in these lines, which through a fragmentary line break with “glass” creates a double meaning leading into “of the world.” The world is both viewed through the window glass, its unseen reality implied through the road going forward, and the glass is *of* the world itself, ending on a philosophical statement “with which / one shares the century.” The surprising juxtaposition of images versus abstract ideas is a recurring element in Oppen’s poetry, as well as his close attention to sound, which provides forward momentum for his shifting syntax— note the subtle alliteration in “of the world, weather-swept, with which.” These short lines provide our first taste of Oppen’s phenomenology, which seeks to reveal the relationships between seen objects and subjectivity.

Discrete Series was first published through Objectivist Press, a short-lived press started in 1933 by William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, Charles Reznikoff, and printed by Oppen himself. While the term *objectivism* was first applied to poetry by Williams, Zukofsky further

defined “Objectivist” poets in the February 1931 issue of *Poetry*, which was solicited as an edition of Objectivist work. The term Objectivist was also later extended to the poetry of Lorine Niedecker, Carl Rakosi and Basil Bunting. However the approach, style, and subject matter of these poets varies widely in some areas, which is why I caution against any view of these poets being a strict aesthetic school.

In a discussion at the National Poetry Festival at Thomas Jefferson College in 1973, Carl Rakosi remarked that critics attached too much significance to the term Objectivist, saying, “the term itself was an accident.” Rakosi recalled that in forming the Objectivist Press as editor, Zukofsky hated the idea of “naming” a collection which was merely composed of poets he admired. Oppen sparked laughter in the room with his own comment, “It is a fact that none of us strongly objected to each other’s work, to say the least, and in that period there were comparatively few people whose work we didn’t object to, which you might say unified us.” This exchange paints a picture not of a formal school but of a group of friends and peers, many of whom with shared Jewish heritage, who were united in forming a new American poetics in response to the Romantic literature they grew up with.

Reznikoff goes on to clarify their shared Objectivist poetics:

“... my own belief is to name and to name and to name, and to name in such a way that you have rhythm. Since music, and I think George Oppen would agree with me, is also part of the meaning. If you try, for an example, to express what you see from the roof of a building, chimneys and so on, the rhythm should convey your sense of depression without you saying ‘what a horrible sight’ ... By the term Objectivist I suppose a writer may be meant who does not write directly from his feelings, but about what he sees and hears”

This description conveys the crux of Objectivist poets and provides context for how Oppen’s fragmentary syntax is driven by its own inner ear and sound, and prioritizes direct perception of the world over stating the poet’s feelings directly. However it must be stressed that the sentiment behind *objectivism* for these poets is not that the poetry should be objective in a logical or rational sense, but that the poem *itself* is an object. For Oppen, an object of perception.

Reznikoff then admits that “what we were reacting from was Tennyson. We were anti-Tennysonian. His kind of poetry didn't represent the world we knew: the streets of New York or East Rutherford, or Paterson where Williams came from.” This invocation is in line with the poetics of *Spring and All* by Williams, which presents manifesto-like declarations for a new form of poetry, “Today where everything is being brought into sight the realism of art has bewildered us, confused us and forced us to re-invent in order to retain that which the older generations had without that effort ... Invention of new forms to embody this reality of art ... must occupy all serious minds concerned” (35-36). In *Spring and All*, Williams navigates the difficulty of achieving realism in art, arguing that realism is not found through its perfect representation or objectivity, but through the *imagination* which is the human force behind the act of naming, “... it is that life becomes actual only when it is identified with ourselves. When we name it, life exists ... To repeat and repeat the thing without naming it is only to dull the sense and results in frustration” (41-42). The Objectivist ambition for clarity and form following the inner music of the poet, undoubtedly finds its origin in *Spring and All*. Williams’ *naming* is echoed in the earlier quote by Reznikoff, as the Objectivists sought to be precise in their descriptions of seen objects. The idea of life “becoming actual” only when objects are identified with ourselves, also foresees Oppen’s future poetics of phenomenology and the “self among things,” which seeks to reveal humanity through our perception of objects and their interrelationships, as part of an ontological investigation of the failures inherent to language and subjectivity.

In *The Mind’s Own Place*, Oppen’s only published essay, he outlines a debt to Williams and the American modernists:

“They meant to replace by the data of experience the accepted poetry of their time, a display by the poets of right thinking and right sentiment, a dreary waste of lies. That data was and is the core of what ‘modernism’ restored to poetry, the sense of the poet’s self among things. So much depends upon the red wheelbarrow.”

Early 20th century American modernism provided the basis for Oppen's poetics as he belonged to the next immediate generation, his first book being published in 1934 and the bulk of his work emerging in the late 1950s to the 70s. Therefore Oppen wrote and published within a unique experimental generation and timeframe— in the 30s he was younger than the first-wave modernists past their zenith, and to the Beatniks and poets of the 60s, he was an older poet of an entirely different era.

Oppen also expresses a distrust of metaphor, writing, “It is possible to find a metaphor for anything, an analogue: but the image is encountered, not found; it is an account of the poet’s perception, the act of perception; it is a test of sincerity.” Oppen had very strong feelings about language and the sincerity of poetry, and its potential risk of becoming political propaganda. For him, poetry served as a *test* of truth, a process of thinking, not an absolute truth that uses its own materials to justify an agenda:

“It is a part of the function of poetry to serve as a test of truth. It is possible to say anything in abstract prose, but a great many things one believes or would like to believe or thinks he believes will not substantiate themselves in the concrete materials of the poem. It is not to say that the poet is immune to the ‘real’ world to say that he is not likely to find the moment, the image, in which a political generalization or any other generalization will prove its truth.”

This concern with the limitations of language and questioning the roots of experience and a *real* world, is ultimately what sets Williams and Oppen apart. As a test of truth, Oppen’s poetics enacts the process of thinking through experience and concrete materials, and expands from the new forms introduced by modernism. This difference is found in the radical sparseness of *Discrete Series*, which is the foundation that will later develop Oppen’s more clearly approachable and philosophical poems later on.

II. *Discrete Series* as Postmodern Poetics

I will now examine two poems in *Discrete Series* which demonstrate Oppen’s poetics of perception and the phenomenology of the poet’s self among others. In a 1968 interview with L.S. Dembo, Oppen expresses a mature distance from these early poems, “I don’t feel as if I wrote

them, and yet I can so easily guess that I had because the themes are familiar” (*George Oppen* 200). Written when Oppen was 24, these poems are strongly characterized by their use white space, juxtaposed fragments, and the “little words” he loved so much. We’ll begin with the poem “Who Comes is Occupied”:

Who comes is occupied
 Toward the chest (in the crowd moving
 opposite
 Grasp of me)
 In firm overalls
 The middle-aged man sliding
 Levers in the steam-shovel cab, ---
 Lift (running cable) and swung, back
 Remotely respond to the gesture before last
 Of his arms fingers continually—
 Turned with the cab. But if I (how goes
 it?)—
 The asphalt edge
 Loose on the plateau,
 Horse’s classic height cartless
 See electric flash of streetcar,
 The fall is falling from electric burst. (NCP 14)

Here the speaker is observing to a microscopic level. We start off with lines juxtaposing ideas and images, “Who comes is occupied / Toward the chest” describing someone moving toward him in a crowd. And then through indentation, the observation pans to a different man, a different association in thought, a worker in “firm overalls” operating a steam shovel cab. The next three lines track the movement of this machinery, and the worker responding to it, “Lift (running cable) and swung, back / Remotely respond to the gesture before last / Of his arms fingers continually— / Tuned with the cab.” Then the speaker attempts to interject themselves, but with doubt in their own ability to observe, “But if I (how goes / it?)--” the enjambment creating a halting hesitation in the speaker’s voice. This distance between the speaker and the observed world is also evident in the beginning of the poem, the crowd is moving *opposite* “Grasp of me).” The observed world is moving of its own accord regardless of the speaker’s

place in it, which he cannot totally grasp. As Oppen's poetics is notably concerned with, any interjection of the ego upon this observed world is made difficult and questioned.

The "asphalt edge" lines followed by "Horse's classic height cartless" feels very obscure in its meaning, but this obscurity comes late in the poem after a series of precise images, and the alliterative soundplay propels the lines forward into the final, arresting image, "See electric flash of streetcar, / The fall is falling from electric burst." Again the abstractness of the final lines is offset by its imagistic beauty and the soundplay. The last two lines on the streetcar seem to reconnect to the poem's concern with machinery and movement in an abstract manner, while also surprising the reader by breaking the poem's own rules of dealing only with concrete materials.

These abstract lines juxtaposing a worker, machinery and a horse to ideas of the "classic" are also what make Oppen different from Williams, who was interested in the universality of things. Williams would never create disjunctive sequences of images that seemingly do not connect logically or cohere to a larger whole. Randolph Chilton writes that William's poetics sought "the universality of things" while in contrast, Oppen appreciated the impenetrability of things, "Instead of saying 'No ideas but in things,' Oppen declares 'things explain each other,/Not themselves'" (*George Oppen* 101). Chilton notes that in this poem "Oppen's image of the classic is divorced from, not present in, the particulars that surround it. Furthermore, the difficulty of that climactic image seems only intensified, not resolved, by the final line" (*George Oppen* 107). Oppen's fragmentary imagism in this poem resembles Williams in its naming of the everyday experience, but by refusing universality, questioning the subjective voice and highlighting its failure, and the contradictions between images, Oppen's poetics questions what truth *is*— a different ontological field that Williams did not engage in.

In the interview with Dembo, Oppen confirms that this poem was engaging in an act of movement and disjunctive montage, moving from one perception to the next, "It's a sort of a 'montage,' because there's just the city and I'm jumping around like the fashionable camera of

that time” (*George Oppen* 201). As a young man Oppen worked in his father’s cinema, and these early poems respond to this new technology through the imagism established by Ezra Pound, who wrote the preface to *Discrete Series*. Pound wrote in a paternal tone that these poems are undoubtedly obscure and yet are original, descending and also departing from Williams, “I see the difference between Mr. Oppen and Dr. Williams, I do not expect any great horde of readers to notice it ... they will coagulate their gelatinous attention on the likeness” (*NCP* 3). Recounted by Mary Oppen in *Meaning a Life*, George Oppen and Pound split apart in the mid-30s, shortly after *Discrete Series* was published. This split was due not only to Pound’s economic and fascist theories finding sharp disagreement to Oppen’s Marxism, but also because of his misogynistic treatment of Mary during their visit in Europe. Oppen was undoubtedly influenced by the imagist ideas that Pound pioneered, though as Pound himself indicates in this preface, Oppen’s development as a writer is more so owed to the work of Williams, and his philosophical poetics never resorted to the modernist elitism and political argumentation of Pound.

Another aspect that sets Oppen apart from the first-wave modernists as well as his fellow Objectivists, is his interpretation of phenomenological poetics, introduced in the next poem “Party on Shipboard”, which he stated to Dembo contains the conceit of his later book *Of Being Numerous*:

Wave in the round of the port-hole
 Springs, passing,—arm waved,
 Shrieks, unbalanced by the motion—
 Like the sea incapable of contact
 Save in incidents (the sea is not
 water)
 Homogenously automatic—a green capped
 white is momentarily a half-mile
 out—
 The shallow surface of the sea, this,
 Numerously—the first drinks—
 The sea is a constant weight
 In its bed. They pass, however, the sea
 Freely tumultuous. (*NCP* 15)

Again we observe movement in this poem, the wave in the port-hole leads to direct present tense verbs “springs, passing, —arm waves” and people shrieking, unbalanced by the motion of the boat. Here the speaker encounters the ocean as a phenomenological emblem of the barely perceivable *whole* viewed through direct subjective incidents— the sea is “incapable of contact / Save in incidents (the sea is not / water).” Here, the sea is perhaps a particular incident in its own right, separate from the idea of water as a whole. Again, this abstract philosophical thought about the sea is heightened through enjambment, as if the speaker is considering or weighing the idea in their head. The reader anticipates further inquiry at the end of an enjambed line. The “green capped” and white sea is constantly moving here, the speaker stating that a distant wave is only “momentarily a half-mile / out.” Dwarfing the party on shipboard, the sea is massively numerous and a “constant weight in its bed.” The poem ends without resolution or reconciliation of humanity towards this landscape, the ocean simply *is there* and juxtaposed with the party onboard, “They pass, however, the sea / Freely tumultuous.” The use of *however* implies that the ship simply moves on— humanity encounters the sea through its waves and goes on without resolving the philosophical ideas of an ocean that is inconceivable in its totality. Enjambment also creates a double meaning, the shrieking party and the ocean are both “freely tumultuous.”

Oppen elaborates on this poem, “I really was remembering a send-off party on a ship ... you see the separate waves but somehow there is *the sea*, just as you see people and somehow there is, or could be found, *humanity*” (George Oppen 201). *People* and *the waves* to Oppen are the phenomenological objects of direct experience, they are the only true “incidents” in which we can perceive grander concepts like humanity or water as a whole, through identifying them with ourselves. Oppen connects this to his poetics of naming:

“The waves are the individual person. Humanity can’t be encountered as an incident or something that has just happened. But all one has is “this happened,” “that happened”; and out of this we try to make a picture of what a man is, who these other people are, and even, what humanity is. Actually, it is from the hills that people speak of ‘the sea.’ When you’re in the sea, there’s this wave and that wave and that breaker and the other breaker” (George Oppen 201)

This poem conceptualizes the ocean not through a grand Romantic statement of a sublime landscape or by offering a form of transcendence, but rather it returns us to direct encounters with the particularities and objects of experience. To Oppen, these particulars and incidents are contingent on subjective positionality and *where* you are viewing the world. Oppen concludes his thoughts on “Party on Shipboard” by stating that this poem “records the failure of that perception of the sea ... I left it as a contradiction, that I know there is such a thing as ‘the sea,’ the whole. But the poem doesn’t manage to see it, and it records the poet’s—my own— inability to see it. So that it leads directly to what I’ve told you about my giving up poetry” (*George Oppen* 202). In this way Oppen’s poetics enacts the inability of human thought to wholly conceive the world, through constantly juxtaposing and mediating the abstract and the concrete, the knowable and the unknowable. This failure of art ultimately becomes existential for Oppen, as he states this poem was the last one he wrote for *Discrete Series*, his “first attempt,” and it took twenty-five years of silence for him to return to these ideas later with *Of Being Numerous*, which he claims “contains the whole of ‘Party on Shipboard’” (George Oppen 201, 202).

Oppen defines the origin of the name “Discrete Series” during the Dembo interview, and how its poetics attempts an empirical process of phenomenology:

“That’s a phrase in mathematics. A pure mathematical series would be one in which each term is derived from the preceding term by a rule. A discrete series is a series of terms each of which is empirically derived, each one of which is empirically true. And this is the reason for the fragmentary character of those poems. I was attempting to construct a meaning by empirical statements, by imagist statements ... The poems are a series, yet each is separate, and it’s true they are discrete in that sense” (Dembo 10).

Using the mathematical concept of a discrete series as analogue, Oppen was attempting to create a fragmentary poetics which enacted a thinking process of empirical thought, and like the objects of a phenomenological world, the poems in *Discrete Series* are interrelational, they are both serially a part of the whole, and yet are separate. Hejinian points out that although Oppen was not yet reading Heidegger at this time, he was already subliminally invoking his ideas and will

encounter his philosophical problems of the subjective voice encountering things in time, “Like Heidegger, Oppen intuited that being is always a being-in-time, and that things are always things-of-time: ‘Her ankles are watches’ says Oppen, offering a case in point” (*T.P.* 58). And like Marx, who Oppen *was* reading at the time, he is viewing the world as part of a dialectical process, a serial unfolding of ideas that exposes contradictions in the world; his poems disclose objects and thoughts and flit from one to the other “like the fashionable camera of the time” (which can be viewed as a technological symbol of the early 20th century modernity), and so highlight conflict and contradictions through a direct and materialist experience of the world.

III. The Phenomenology and Politics of “Psalm,” “Street,” and *Of Being Numerous*

Oppen decided to return to poetry in 1958 after interpreting a dream about his father. In the dream he was going through his papers after his death; Mary Oppen writes, “In a file marked miscellaneous was a paper entitled ‘How to Prevent Rust in Copper.’ George thought, ‘My old man was a little frivolous perhaps, but he certainly knew that copper does not rust.’ He shook the bed with his laughter but I did not find the dream funny” (*Meaning* 201). Laughing the whole way, Oppen visited their psychiatrist who was also in consultation with his wife Mary, and the psychiatrist demurred that George was dreaming that he did not want to rust. On the way home, “George stopped and bought a pad of paper and some pencils and started to write *The Materials* (*Meaning* 202). For the previous eight years, George and Mary Oppen had lived in Mexico not by choice but because it was the only country they could go to, given that passports were denied to them. They had worked hard to make extra money and raise their child Linda in a bourgeois lifestyle outside of Mexico’s poverty, and in that time the demands of life denied them a creative life. After nearly two decades of harsh living experiences: politically organizing in New York City, serving in the army, and then living in exile, George and Mary longed to return to the United States. And with the end of McCarthyism, it was once again possible for them to receive

This was the very first poem I ever read by Oppen and what instantly draws you in is its surprising, reticent imagery and turns of phrase which enact a sense of wonderment toward the natural world, an encounter as simple as spotting deer in the forest. The epigraph is taken from a statement by Aquinas, “*Veritas sequitur esse rerum*,” which translates as “truth follows upon the existence of things.” This statement of seeking ontological truth from the perception of things surely resonated with Oppen, but instead of copying it in full he chose to cut it down for this poem into “*Veritas sequitur*”--- truth follows, as if the truth was following the existence of this poem, the moment of witnessing the deer in the forest.

Unlike other poems which more resemble the kinetic and material motion of *Discrete Series*, the lines in “Psalm” have an almost lyrical rhythm that carries through without very jarring fragments or juxtaposition. The opening three lines all flow together and establish a heartbeat that is subtly iambic, “In the small beauty of the forest / The wild deer bedding down— / That they are there!” This first stanza evokes a set rhythm through an anapeste with “in the small” and a feminine ending with “of the forest.” This recurrent use of rhythm continues into the next two lines, with the image of “The wild deer” being the only place the iambic rhythm blurs into an unstress and two stresses, before ending on “That they are there!” which is a perfect iambic line. These lines seem to cohere with each other, unlike the abstract fragments of *Discrete Series*, but still move from one perception to the other, from the small beauty of the forest, to the deer, and to this philosophical gesture of pointing, of naming, “That they are there!”

The short indented lines which begin the next three stanzas are straight-forwardly iambic, “Their eyes ... The roots of it ... Their paths” until the final stanza breaks the iambic pattern with its first line “The small nouns.” All of these opening lines appear to carry the eye from stanza to stanza through the act of perception from thing to thing, panning from the eyes, to the roots, to the paths, and then the surprising distillation of the deer into “the small nouns”--- a spondee which breaks the prior iambic rhythm. Within all of these stanzas the everyday

encounter with nature is made unfamiliar through its diction, “the alien small teeth . . . scattering earth in the strange woods . . . The small nouns / Crying faith” all of which evoke the speaker’s wonderment. The philosophical gesture of pointing repeats through the poem, from “That they are there!” to “They who are there”, which are the final lines of the first and third stanzas, again invoking a subtly formal structure. Philosophical language then points us into the final image with alliteration “In this in which the wild deer / Startle, and stare out.” Soundplay propels us into the sparking of a beautiful final image in a way that is peak Oppen. One should note that the phrase “This in Which” is also the title of the book in which this poem appears. This penultimate vision of the wild deer captures the very moment of them startling and staring at the speaker. One has to imagine this as a frozen still image of the deer right before they leap away— which denies us resolution or a cathartic, unifying encounter. Nature’s whole is just out of reach.

Like the whole of the ocean and the incident of waves in “Party on Shipboard,” this poem struggles to perceive nature through a particular and fleeting incident— seeing wild deer in a particular and small slice of the woods right before they escape our sight. And the strange use of “small nouns” and “crying faith” to describe the deer leads the reader to a more abstract, philosophical state of mind, one that points toward a more elemental use of language identified with ourselves in “the small nouns” and the abstract ambiguity of “crying faith” that leaves you pondering the spirituality of the poem. “Psalm” is complicated by the epigraph, which is quoted from Aquinas. It invokes faith and yet escapes the mold of many religious poems in the Romantic tradition by refusing a universal catharsis or mode of transcendence, whether into another world or further into the self, and in this sense the poem embodies contradiction.

Peter Nicholl’s essay entitled “Oppen’s Heidegger” is useful for understanding how Oppen’s poetics was influenced by the philosophers he had read in the past two decades of creative silence, including Jacques Maritain and Martin Heidegger. Oppen read Maritain’s *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1954) and used a quote from it as an epigraph in *The*

Materials: “We awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things” and perhaps saw the philosophy of Heidegger as an intensification of Maritain’s “awakening.” Heidegger’s concept of *dasein* presented a thinking toward being that valued poetry as an essential and privileged mode of thinking. Oppen interpreted this philosophy into a poetics that was strongly concerned with perception and awakening to the existence of things— his poems sought to create the *event* in language of being in the world.

Nicholls writes that the final lines of “Psalm” display “an insistent use of what in linguistics are termed shifters or deictics, those ‘little words’ that derive their meaning purely from the occasion in which they are uttered: ‘They who are there,’ ‘this in which,’ and so on. As Oppen put it in a late interview, “what I’m doing is making that Heideggerian gesture of ‘pointing’” ... an allusion, perhaps, to the account of ‘saying’ in *On the Way to Language*” (*TP 101*). This systematic use of pointing towards the occurrences of perception causes the poem to disclose a process of thinking. It seeks to create the event of perception and being in time through poetic language.

Oppen also read Merleau-Ponty, as he would later directly quote him in *Of Being Numerous*, which we will later discuss. Rather than directly quoting Heidegger, M.P. seems to provide a more complex vision of intersubjectivity that Oppen found insightful. Forrest Gander sums up M.P.’s phenomenology as being more concerned with the sensory-motor act of perception, rather than assuming a universal mystic system of *dasein* as Heidegger did:

“Our bodies, in dialogue with the world from the get-go, shape our thinking ... we see the things of the world as familiar objects isolated from us but subject to our control. We find ourselves caught in a dialectical world of subject and object where everyone and everything is independent, disconnected. But, MP exclaims, ‘The momentum of existence towards others, towards the future, towards the word can be restored as a river unfreezes’” (*T.P.* 122)

Nicholls then states that the poem “Psalm” enacts this very event of the subject jubilantly seeing and reconciling themselves to the Other, as MP sought, “Oppen remains astounded to find that his ‘Self=presence,’ as MP has it, ‘is presence to a differentiated world’ ... of beings and things.

Astonished simply ‘That they are there!,’ Oppen places his faith in words, ‘the small nouns,’ that they might communicate something of the feeling of being present” (TP 124). Here Oppen is departing from both Pound and Williams’ interpretations of imagism, and attempting to communicate the act of being among objects and thinking within his poetics.

Oppen has already differentiated himself from Williams here, but it is also through interpreting and enacting these philosophies that enables Oppen to escape the political egoism of Pound’s imagism and modernism, as Nicholls explains:

“This type of modernism Oppen now saw as characterized by ‘ego,’ by an agonistic relation of subject and object, and by a masculinist sense of aesthetic form as something won from struggle with a recalcitrant ‘other.’ It was not surprising that Maritain’s idea of ‘connatural knowing,’ of subjectivity awakening to itself only by simultaneously awakening to things, gestured in the direction of a fundamental recasting of modernism that now seemed disastrously complicit in the waves of violence that had engulfed the twentieth century” (TP 93)

Oppen may have been grateful for the older poet’s endorsement before the rise of fascism, but at this time he was now interrogating Pound’s errors, “the failures of his economic and political theories and the apparent futility of a poetry committed to an ideology of knowledge. ‘Pound,’ he remarked, ‘never freed himself from argument, the moving of chess pieces’” (TP 92). It is because of this that Oppen’s political poetics never attempts to crystallize an ideology or argument, but to express a process of thinking, a social awareness of the world which is directly experienced.

A poem that displays this sentiment very clearly is “Street,” also found in *This in Which*:

Ah these are the poor,
These are the poor—

Bergen street.

Humiliation,
Hardship . . .
Nor are they very good to each other;
It is not that. I want

An end of poverty
As much as anyone

For the sake of intelligence,
 ‘The conquest of existence’—

It has been said, and is true—

And this is real pain,
 Moreover. It is terrible to see the children,

The righteous little girls;
 So good, they expect to be so good . . . (NCP 127).

Here Oppen once again begins a poem with the gesture of pointing, “Ah these are the poor, / These are the poor—” as if ruminating on the concept that the poor are a “whole” idea to be encountered at a distance, just as we encounter the whole of the sea or nature as subjects of intellectual thought to be considered. Separated by white space the second stanza is a monostich, “Bergen street,” which provides a specific particular to this whole, the incident of our encounter with the idea. The third stanza is stated simply with the facts of poverty, “Humiliation / Hardship . . .”. One could argue that Oppen is not being as precise as he usually is, but here he does not try to make a picturesque, imagistic diorama of the humiliation experienced in poverty— it is simply stated directly as humiliation and hardship. Referring to the poor from a distance in this way makes Oppen conscious of his own positionality in the world and as the perceiver. Oppen grew up in a wealthy family and ever since he dropped out of university to hitchhike with Mary across a Depression-stricken America, he was very conscious of his own class upbringing and struggled with the guilt of that experience. Stating “these are the poor” is therefore a philosophical gesture and an act of witnessing, an awakening towards the event of being.

Louise Glück, who closely read this poem at the Philoctetes Center in 2007, remarked that the “Nor” of the fourth stanza negates the implied thoughts occurring in the white space between the third and fourth stanzas. Amidst the silence of the white space a reader may reach the association that humiliation and hardship brings a sense of unity and camaraderie amongst the poor. The poem denies this, “Nor are they very good to each other.” Glück remarks that one

way to approach the difficulty of Oppen's fragments is to read what *isn't* there, to fill in the gaps contained within the poem's leaps with what associations of thought leap to mind. The poem itself struggles with all of the thoughts implied by these loaded, sensitive words. Glück states in an essay on Oppen in her *Proofs & Theories*, "I love white space ... and find oddly depressing that which seems to have left out nothing. Such poetry seems to love completion too much, and like a thoroughly cleaned room, it paralyzes activity ... George Oppen is a master of white space; of restraint, juxtaposition, nuance" (Glück 29). It is within the white space of Oppen's spare and reticent verse that this activity of a thinking process arises.

The poem negates itself again after this line "It is not that. I want / An end of poverty as much as anyone" the speaker almost arguing with themselves through the enjambment, and then invoking higher ideals in this motivation to see poverty ended "for the sake of intelligence / 'The conquest of existence' — / It has been said, and is true." However the poem denies a conclusion on these rhetorical, higher ideals— it acknowledges that they are true and hold merit, but instead ends on the specific encounter, pointing to the real pain that exists, "And this is real pain, / Moreover. It is terrible to see the children / The righteous little girls; / So good, they expect to be so good." This alone, the poem seems to say, is most important and what should spur humanity to action, not for sake of the ideals but for sake of children who *expect* to be so good and yet are denied that reality. Glück notes, "This is why the place should rouse us to something beyond civic shock. It's that they [the children] will not be allowed to be good ... it shows you the impossibility of rising out of certain circumstances." And all of this is achieved through Oppen's precise, reticent poetics.

Of Being Numerous extends the phenomenological social awareness introduced by *This in Which* through an examination of the Vietnam War and the post-nuclear era, and shows that any moment of authentic awakening towards the world will inevitably be dashed by its reality. In its meditation on the futility of speech, and how the egocentrism of language prevents us from

reaching any moment of clarity or awakening in our relationship with the world, *Of Being Numerous* is enhanced by its direct references to Wittgenstein's philosophy of language as well as to Heidegger's phenomenology.

Oppen wrote the bulk of *Of Being Numerous* in 1965 using the poem "A Language of New York" from *This In Which* as a point of expansion. The book starts in section one with the quote by Maritain "There are things / We live among 'and to see them / Is to know ourselves'" (NCP 163) which establishes the poem's phenomenological conceit. The next section places us firmly in the urban, specifically New York City, "A city of the corporations / Glassed / In dreams / And images— / And the pure joy / Of the mineral fact" (NCP 164). Instead of creating the jubilant joy of seeing in nature as shown in "Psalm," the lyrics in *Of Being Numerous* show a world where this pure joy is "glassed in dreams," artificially created by a corporate urban landscape. In section 6 Oppen gives a particular for this "language of New York" by embodying language as a crowded populace, "We are pressed, pressed on each other, / We will be told at once / Of anything that happens / And the discovery of fact bursts / In a paroxysm of emotion / Now as always. Crusoe / We say was / 'Rescued'. / So we have chosen" (166). This claustrophobic, simulated landscape creates an environment where discovery of fact leads not to clarity but a "paroxysm" of emotion, an emotion I don't think Oppen sees as uplifting, but as an ironic red herring. This is through the enjambed lines leading to Crusoe, the titular character in the 1719 novel *Robinson Crusoe*, who was "rescued" from his isolation and brought back to English civilization while feeling nostalgic for the life he had lost; eventually leaving home again after attaining riches but losing his wife and family. George seems to question the idea of rescuing and juxtaposes Crusoe with the American populace, who exist within a claustrophobic and simulated urban environment, "glassed in dreams." It is a capitalist reality that "we have chosen." I find these beginning sections to be incredibly timely for the modern era we continue

to live in, where the digital age has created such claustrophobic interconnectedness, and yet fosters emotions that do not rescue us but rather worsen our strandedness.

This alienation of a late-stage capitalist population is expanded on in section 13 with allusions to Heidegger:

unable to begin
At the beginning, the fortunate
Find everything already here. They are shoppers,
Choosers, judges; . . . And here the brutal
Is without issue, a dead end.

They develop
Argument in order to speak, they become
unreal, unreal, life loses
solidity, loses extent, baseball's their game
because baseball is not a game
but an argument and difference of opinion
makes the horse races. They are ghosts that endanger

One's soul ... (170)

This stanza argues that the nature of humanity becoming “shoppers, choosers, judges” is preventing them from confronting the brutal reality of war, “And here the brutal / Is without issue, a dead end.” Instead of reaching an authentic, real awareness of their relationship with the world, life “loses solidity” and inflated arguments emerge as a distraction, that nonetheless stimulates our need for argument and capacity for language, “They develop / Argument in order to speak, they become / unreal.”

This stanza illuminates an inauthenticity towards the world that Nicholls reads as being distinctly Heideggerian, as *Of Being Numerous* labels this world as an anti-ontology (TP 104). Heidegger speaks against the illusions of a collective awareness in *Being and Time* and argues for a freedom beyond it, “an impassioned freedom toward death—a freedom which has been released from the Illusions of the ‘they’, and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious” (*Being and Time* 311). Nicholls connects this idea to this stanza, “Oppen’s shoppers, choosers,

and judges, however, are still caught up in the unreality of the ‘they,’ where everything is ‘already here’ and the hopes of any authentic new beginning already dashed” (*TP* 104).

In section 14, Oppen negotiates himself as a thinking subject among others, a whole *they* whom he cannot project his own ego upon and yet is connected to. Drawing from his service in World War Two, he acknowledges that other people encapsulate themselves independent of his own control and possess knowledge he doesn’t, “I cannot even now / Altogether disengage myself / From those men / With whom I stood in emplacements ... Among them many men / More capable than I— / Muykut and a sergeant / Named Healy,” (NCP 171). In this section Oppen gives specific, particular people to this experience, and continues to ruminate on the futility of speech in generalizing a whole people, “How talk / Distantly of ‘The People’ / Who are that force / Within the walls / Of cities / Wherein their cars / Echo like history / Down walled avenues / In which one cannot speak” (171). This line where Oppen implies a situation “in which one cannot speak” echoes the quote by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, where he states, “About things we cannot speak of we must keep silent” (*Tractatus* 181), reinforcing Oppen’s ideas that a thinking subject of the world must be aware of its own subjectivity and interrelationships with others, and the known and the unknown, and the ethics and futility of speech.

John Lowner writes that Oppen was exposed to Wittgenstein in the early 60s after being introduced to his work by his son-in-law, the philosopher Alexander Mourelatos (*TP* 150). And his knowledge of Wittgenstein becomes more directly apparent in section 19 where he gives a more direct image of the Vietnam War:

Now in the helicopters the casual will
Is atrocious

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

The fly in the bottle

Insane, the insane fly

Which, over the city
Is the bright light of shipwreck (NCP 173).

As pointed out by John Lowney, the “fly in the bottle” is taken directly from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, “What is your aim in philosophy? To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle” (81). Lowney refers to Oppen’s *Selected Letters*, noting he attributed this quote from Wittgenstein to his son-in-law, “I think of the phrase ... as a quotation from you, not as a quotation from Wittgenstein ... Whatever our differences, we are not those insane flies” (*TP* 150, 151). And what are the insane flies in this section? They are juxtaposed with the helicopters where “the casual will / is atrocious,” showing the United States dispensing atrocity with abandon. It is an insanity “in high places” and Oppen states poignantly that to believe in these actions is to make yourself not only complicit but to require your own experience of pain and death, “If it is true we must do these things / We must cut our throats.” This leads seamlessly into the invocation of Wittgenstein “the fly in the bottle,” as Wittgenstein also meditated on the problems with language to reconcile the pain of ourselves and others. Separated by white space, the isolation of “The fly in the bottle” enacts the very feeling of isolation, distance and estrangement from the atrocity being committed in “high places.” Lowney states, “The ‘atrocity’ of the war, which takes the problem of separation to a deadly, dehumanizing extreme, is embodied in ‘the insane fly’: ‘fly’ can be read as both a verb and a noun, as act and the reified subject of the act” (*TP* 151). Just as Heidegger’s call to free yourself from the illusions of the *they* is dashed, Wittgenstein’s call to free the fly from the bottle is denied through the juxtaposing images of a fly in the bottle and the flying helicopters of war. The juxtaposition of helicopters to flies also resonates imagistically— with bulbous, glassy eyes and insect-like appendages and whirring sound.

Developing a poetics that speaks to the unspeakable is no easy feat and risks much in regard to communicating sincerity and clarity towards its subject matter. But Oppen's ceaseless sensitivity towards the lived subjects of his experience and his embodiment of philosophy as a thinking poetics allows him to approach the political not as a totalizing, didactic narrative, but through a new form that exposes the very failures of language, highlighted through fragment, white space, enjambment, and intersubjectivity. Although *Of Being Numerous* received the Pulitzer in 1969, it came close to never being written at all— as Oppen wrote in his notes while composing the book, “I perhaps cannot write poetry in war time. I couldn't before, and perhaps cannot now. I become ashamed, I become sick with shame ... If we launch that ‘general war in Asia,’ I think I will have to give this up again. What will one do when the troop trains start shipping young men off to their deaths? Shall one write poetry?” (TP 144). Oppen was distinctly aware that his poems could not directly alter the civic reality which shipped young men off to their deaths or slaughtered innocents in Vietnam, and very nearly resorted to a mode of silence, just as he did in the 1930s. Instead, perhaps due to his quarter century of exile, he finally found something to say in *Of Being Numerous*. Oppen shows us how mediating a socially aware poetics is always a question of *what one is to do* about atrocity, which is something that should concern all of us as working artists and members of American society, in these unfolding 21st century crises which are corollary to the Vietnam war, a post-nuclear and digitized age, and climate change.

IV. Robert Creeley's “For Love” as Thinking Poetics

A younger poet in the consecutive generation that followed Oppen is Robert Creeley, who was associated with both the Beatniks and the Black Mountain poets. Creeley notably continued a form of thinking poetics that is Oppen-esque through his use of fragment and enjambment and direct references to modernist philosophers such as Wittgenstein. This provides us with a specific case of how Oppen was influential to many younger poets of the time, after the

literary community's sudden awareness of him in the 50s and 60s. Michael Palmer recalls that Creeley was introduced to the Objectivists in 1955 by Robert Duncan, and actively read their work up to 1963, when he recommended Zukofsky and Oppen to Palmer (*Active Boundaries* 228). Creeley would even go on to write the introduction to Oppen's *Selected Poems* in 2002.

In tracking this Objectivist influence Palmer emphasizes, "I do not at all intend ... to construe some specious patriarchal lineage or filiation, but rather to give a sense of the tenuous threads of an 'outside' literary community that existed, and the difficulty of discovering ... poets for the most part ignored and in some instances systematically excluded by the cultural arbiters of both the Left ... and the Right" (228). Oppen's poetry, characterized by his period of silence and refusal of the politically didactic, falls into this obscure category, and at that time was being discovered by younger poets like Creeley. As a poet who primarily writes more about personal and domestic relationships than the political, Creeley develops a thinking poetics that interrogates how perception and the mind shape emotion, particularly with his acclaimed poem "For Love."

Before we begin an analysis of "For Love" I would like to reference Heather McHugh and Marjorie Perloff who provide us with a structure of approach in their readings of *Echoes* and *Away* respectively. In her reading of *Echoes*, McHugh describes the effect and usage of lineation in Creeley's poetics, "the line-breaks place in the inquirer's way precisely the kinds of tour and detour that keep an inquiry moving (McHugh 10). This can be applied across Creeley's whole body of work, as his style can be characterized solely on its heavy use of enjambment and line breaks. Like Oppen, Creeley's line breaks provide movement and create the event of an inquiry taking shape, its tours and detours. Thinking for Creeley is also intrinsically linked to language and the encounter with the particular. As McHugh says, "Characterically [Creeley] highlights not the right way, but the right OF way: the grounds on which language 'places' things, the claim it stakes, the way a saying is incumbent on a seeing, and so on— that road along which things are

seeable or saying at all. And in Creeley's eye, that road itself is moving" (11). This poetics feels incredibly poignant as a descendant of Oppen; Creeley highlights the ontological grounds of perception upon which language names objects, and that ground is always shifting through the use of line breaks as a movement of inquiry.

Marjorie Perloff uses Creeley as an example of a Wittgensteinian poetics that calls attention to language in her book *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*. Creeley's book *Away* opens with an epigraph from Wittgenstein's *Zettel* and Perloff tracks how Creeley is heavily inspired by Wittgenstein's arguments on the limits of language, "'The limits of language,'" Wittgenstein writes in a notebook entry 'is shown by its being impossible to describe the fact which corresponds (is translation of) a sentence, without simply repeating the sentence ... Creeley isn't conveying a set of prior ideas that could be said in a number of ways; rather, the saying itself, words and their syntax *is* the poem" (Perloff 199). Like the Objectivists, Creeley's prosody of sound, the utterance and the fragmented form itself creates the meaning of the poem. Perloff explains how Creeley enacts the limits of language through his abstract use of small words and line breaks, "lineation, Creeley's special signature, plays a major role in this process. Units like 'Let her / sing it / for herself' ... force the reader to put weight on every single word" (197). The intentional and radical use of line breaks in Creeley's poetics therefore calls attention to the units of language and the utterance, and so serves its philosophical concern with thinking as it takes shape. Perloff reflects that for like-minded writers, "Creeley's minimalism can be understood as a new kind of realism, a tacit understanding that, in Wittgenstein's words, 'Ordinary language is all right'" (191). Oppen also likely would have appreciated Creeley's use of the "little words."

"For Love" displays all three of these elements: ordinary language, highlighted through line breaks, and a questioning of language and perception as the grounds of romantic emotion:

Yesterday I wanted to
speak of it, that sense above

the others to me
important because all

that I know derives
from what it teaches me.
Today, what is it that
is finally so helpless,

different, despairs of its own
statement, wants to
turn away, endlessly
to turn away.

If the moon did not . . .
No, if you did not
I wouldn't either, but
what would I not (*For Love* 159)

Creeley immediately presents the amorous as a problem with language, “Yesterday I *wanted* to / speak of it, that sense above” which gives us the feeling that the speaker wants to speak of love and is only just now gathering the thoughts to do so. The *it* in this poem we can assume from the title is love itself. In the second and third stanzas love becomes helpless and “despairs of its own statement” as if love is despairing from its own language, of stating its own existence. Love becomes a thing of distancing, “wants to / turn away, endlessly / to turn away.” Then Creeley does one of his motifs which is to put a twist on lines that resemble the cliché of a pop ballad, but then breaks that expectation, “If the moon did not . . . No, if you did not / I wouldn't either, but / what would I not.” The circular, self-questioning voice echoes Oppen in this debate with itself, and the idea of a romantic whole or ideal, ironized through the symbol of the moon is redirected into the particular subject— the you and the I, which leads the poem to question the thinking subject's ability to control others separate from them. The fifth stanzas carry over this enjambed inquiry:

do, what prevention, what
thing so quickly stopped
that is love yesterday
or tomorrow, not

now. Can I eat
 what you give me. I
 have not earned it. Must
 I think of everything

as earned. Now love also
 becomes a reward so
 remote from me I have
 only made it with my mind.

Here is tedium
 despair, a painful
 sense of isolation and
 whimsical if pompous

self-regard. But that image
 is only of the mind's
 vague structure, vague to me
 because it is my own. (159, 160)

Love becomes a thing “quickly stopped” and ephemeral, fluctuating from yesterday to tomorrow but “not now.” And the line breaks emphasize small, elemental words, *eat*, *I*, and *must* which feel banal, but nonetheless force the reader to consider their weight. Then Creeley engages in the philosophical act of pointing with “Here is tedium / despair, a painful / sense of isolation,” evoking Oppen’s use of deictics, *here*, *these* and *there* and his use of abstract terms for states of being in “Street.” But Creeley complicates these terms with other humorous and self-aware adjectives, “whimsical if pompous / self-regard.” Creeley interrogates love as a construct in these stanzas, a vague image of the mind vague because “it is my own.” It is fleeting and any effort to encapsulate it reaches the limits of language, and the futility of the ego.

The next four stanzas communicate the futility of speech even more, “Love, what do I think / to say. I cannot say it. / What have you become to ask, / what have I made you into, / companion, good company, / crossed legs with skirt, or / soft body under / the bones of the bed.” The speaker questions the particular things which place the *you* as the romantic other, the speaker had named the companion into “companion, good company, crossed legs with skirt” and the stanza ends with subtle alliteration, “soft body under the bones of the bed.” The next two

stanzas demonstrate more feelings of alienation and fear in loving someone, but it is the last three stanzas I'd like to focus on next:

Let me stumble into
not the confession but
the obsession I begin with
now. For you

also (also)
some time beyond place, or
place beyond time, no
mind left to

say anything at all,
that face gone, now.
Into the company of love
it all returns. (160)

In order to resolve the contradictions of speaking toward love, Creeley's halting and stuttering line breaks literally "stumble" into "not the confession but / the obsession I begin with / now. For you." The abstract whole idea of love here is grounded into the particular you. "For Love" is rephrased into "For you." This is modified with "also (also)," a parenthetical doubling which may refer to the shared experience of the romantic other, and also alludes to the abstract expanse in the next lines, "some time beyond place, or / place beyond time, no / mind left to / say anything at all." This obsession with the *you* reaches toward an abstract, higher state of being where there is no mind or face or life at all with which to even speak. And "into the company of love / it all returns." Creeley transcends into a higher state of being or perhaps merely to a simpler state where speech is unneeded, but this is achieved only through a rigorous and disjunctive process of thought, partaking in a philosophical mode of poetics that resembles Oppen, where the abstract is constantly balanced with particular perceptions and small words and ordinary language.

V. Nam Le and the Intersubjectivity of Language and Identity

Nam Le's debut book of poetry *36 Ways of Writing a Vietnamese Poem* was released in 2024, and while attending his reading at Elliot Bay Book Company in Seattle, I noticed that he referenced Oppen by name in one of his poems. I approached him after the reading and Nam Le remarked that he had included a few other "Oppen easter eggs" in the book, notably the image of the "girder in the rubble" which originated in a poem by Reznikoff and was later repeatedly referred to by Oppen as a poetic touchstone. This led me to reread and analyze *36 Ways* for how its poetics confronts language and intersubjectivity, resembling an Objectivist work of lived experience, and speaking to the problems that arise in the process of writing towards an experience of diasporic identity under an established canon of white authors.

In an interview with the magazine *Service95*, Nam Le states that he doesn't seek to communicate an absolute truth, but *a* truth, which is informed by lived experience and perception. On the subject of identity, he asks, "How is this descriptor [of identity] applied, by whom, to whom, in what circumstances? What does non-identity-driven work look like?" (*Service95*). As a lawyer-turned-author, formerly accepted to the Supreme Court of Victoria in Australia, it seems apt that the shifting nature of truth and identity would be of interest to Nam Le. Charles Reznikoff, a founding Objectivist, also worked within the courts of law and informed his poetics from that experience. It seems that the poetics of Nam Le seeks to highlight how language is the vehicle upon which identity and our phenomenological experience of the world is shaped, shown through his use of multiple and polysemous voices in *36 Ways*.

As we will see in our close reading of several of these poems, Nam Le shares the interests of Oppen in pursuing a poetics of inquiry that is constantly moving and exposing contradiction, "I'm after a kind of writing that feels true to how I feel, which is always in flux; which is complicated and often contradictory. The audience, and the object of criticism, isn't fixed: it's me, it's you, it's them, sometimes all at the same time." (*Service95*). Utilizing his lived experience of emigrating to Australia as a child refugee and encountering systemic racism in

diaspora, Nam Le's poems are very conscious of who they are speaking to and where they are speaking from, and that language constantly shifts the ground of *what* is being spoken and *who* is allowed to speak, showing an affinity for Oppen's socially conscious poetics of language and positionality.

Ideas of language and polysemous voices are formulated all throughout *36 Ways*— some poems of crucial concern to language being “[1. Diasporic],” “[15. Dire critical],” and “[19. Oral-metaphorical].” And as for polysemous voices, contradiction, and power shaping language, “[33. Euphemistic],” “[12. Communist],” and “[14. Standpoint Epistemological]” should all be of prime interest. However for the purposes of this essay, the poems most applicable for analysis in their relationship to Oppen and Objectivist poetics are [13. Eastern-epistemological] and [22. Logographic].

[13. Eastern-epistemological] reads as follows:

(Nine White Masters Sitting in a Tree)

So I'm reading Heaney on Yeats on 'entire
sincerity' — sincerity in life
correlating to quality in poetry — thinking
how this couldn't have been unshadowed by
what his father had written him re Blake's
poetry — 'revolting and desiring' — being
his whole true self, how this then shadowed
what I'd been reading in Hass on Oppen
on Zukofsky about sincerity being
the first question of poetry, shading even
into truth, how this even worked, if
truth contained in verb or noun, image
or action, all this, of course, after Pound,
after Fenollosa saying that nature
hosted no true nouns, wherein he, Pound,
composed an ideogram tree, sang sunrise
through its higher branches and through
its shade lanced sunlight down to just the
spot where word's made perfect, and the
word's — the word is, that is — the word
is 'sincerity'. (*36 Ways* 22)

Coinciding with a larger conceit in the book, the epigraph of this poem plays with and finds humor in a reclamation of stereotypes the Western world often perpetuates about the East, the monkeys in a tree as an orientalist vision of an Eastern folktale become the “nine white masters sitting in a tree.” And in other poems Nam Le plays with the character of Confucius dispensing wisdom, repeating the line, “Confucius say ...” All of this points to an interrogation of how the West inauthentically creates an “epistemology” of the East through stock characters and symbols.

The nature of thinking in this poem is shown through its being one long, enjambed, run-on sentence, and its use of prepositional phrases that blur into each other, “His whole true self, how this then shadowed / what I’d been reading in Hass on Oppen / On Zukofsky about sincerity being / the first question of poetry, shading even / into truth, how this even worked, if ...” The enjambment carries the inquiry further and the use of “*in Hass*” and “*on Oppen*” and “*on Zukofsky*” enacts this feeling of a lineage of white masters reading each other and thinking through them all. Ending the tenth line on “if” places emphasis on it as a qualifier and carries the observation to the point of hesitancy that frames the proposition “truth contained in verb or noun, image” which forces the reader to consider this statement not as an absolute but as an object of interrogation.

There is a central image of shade and shadow in this poem which structures the poem’s argument. The question of sincerity is “shading even into truth”, reading Heaney and Yeats and relating it to Hass on Oppen is equated to being “shadowed” and “unshadowed,” and this all culminates into the final crux of the poem, Pound “lancing sunlight” through the shade of the tree to a precise spot in order to form the “perfect” word *sincerity*. And the precision of Pound’s imagism is giving a violent connotation with the word “lancing.”

It should be noted that this poem seems to inaccurately conflate Oppen with other white poets whom he sharply deviated from, both in style and in politics, and that the lineage between Heaney and Yeats to Pound is much more apparent. However I believe that in conflating all of

these poets together, Nam Le seeks not to draw a specific linear connection between them, but to highlight how a diasporic nonwhite speaker must reconcile themselves towards poets they both admire and are discomfited by, and how whiteness affords canonical white authors the privilege of poetic interiority. Nam Le expressed these very feelings during his 2024 reading in Seattle, and how this book seeks to communicate a certain struggle— that he cannot separate his simultaneous admiration and discomfort with these poets from the realities of racial violence and the violence of language. This idea hinges on a central interrogation of Pound.

It feels as if this poem is moving through the entire lineage of the nine white masters in order to reach the origin of its conceit against an Eastern-epistemology, its origin being Pound, the founder of modernist imagism. Pound himself possesses power in this poem— he “composed an ideogram tree” (perhaps symbolizing Pound’s famous imagist poem “In the Station of the Metro” which contains the lines “petals on a wet black bough”), he sings sunrise through higher branches, and through the image of a tree formed in an almost heavenly light, creates the imagistic “perfection” of what sincerity in poetry means. One imagines that Nam Le is thinking through and questioning how Pound’s imagism not only created an inauthentic epistemology of image-based Eastern poetry, but how modernism established beliefs in poetry about what is and what is not sincere— the most sincere poetry being the white masters who are afforded power in their use of language.

Nam Le comments on this poem in an interview with Tin House:

“I think that there is a hierarchy of interiority. I think writers like Oppen, like Zukovsky ... I recorded a full scope of interiority, whereby they can speak in multi-layered, polysemous ways about sincerity and be accorded that full-spectrumed complexity ... and their whole body of work speaks to itself ... I think that writers from the outside or the other have to fight and kick and scream to be accorded this interiority, to be accorded like the full bandwidth, the full spectrum, the full constellatory vista of what there is in order to countenance these questions. So for a writer such as that from the outside or the other to be sincere, I think is almost a different thing in kind and not degree from a writer like Oppen, Yates, or Heaney are speaking about sincerity. (*Tin House*)

This quote was enlightening to me in showing how this poem exposes a hierarchy of interiority, and for explaining how a central driver in Nam Le's work is to communicate how those of diasporic or minority identities have been systematically not afforded the same consideration of complexity. The way in which Nam Le seeks sincerity in poetry must fundamentally be different to Oppen's sincerity. But for Nam Le this poetics isn't coming purely from a place of spite or conquest against these canonical white writers, as he states that it presents an opportunity for thinking, "... it's almost never about the answer, it's only ever about the attitude toward which one turns one mind to the question ... I have enormous admiration for each of those nine white masters that I facetiously stick into the meter of the monkeys in a tree as the subtitle, because I believe that there's a heuristic-ness in their work that does quest towards something genuine." This is a feeling that Nam Le expressed during his reading at Elliot Bay Books as well; that as a poet who must speak to his lived experience of Vietnamese identity, he felt an intense, inward struggle of push and pull between his love for these canonical writers and his need to question them. I would argue that this was a necessary and fundamental requirement for thinking through truth and sincerity in poetry. And all of this comes from a shared interest to clarify thought and to make a more complete, heuristic understanding of the world, as Nam Le concluded, "I want to reserve the right of my mind and hopefully, others as well, which feel as atomized, distracted, and dispersed to yet have a complete experience of things" (Tin House)

While this poem questioned the legitimacy of Pound, Nam Le's direct reference to Oppen seems to expand and respond to his ideas of language, not undermine them, as demonstrated in the "girder in the rubble," found in [22. Logographic]. The poem opens with an image of the Chinese character for "south," which I can only guess perhaps symbolizes Nam Le's family emigrating south from Vietnam to Australia or perhaps South Vietnam. The title "logographic" seems to represent how a logographic character in linguistics means it is a symbol for an entire

word or meaningful unit, rather than just a sound or syllable as in Western languages. The stanzas of interest are as follows:

For what will come (will come).
 This is concrete fact.
 Storm — bomb — glacial drag —
 Time and waters —
 Fire, grinding syntax

When the character becomes its sound —
 One continuous-present blast —
 And is now the girder in the rubble
 In mute aftermath
 Ringing still with inward tension.

This poem contains elements of language being an instrument of violence and control, and abstract ideas of words and syntax are emblemized through symbols of power, “storm — bomb — glacial drag —.” The event of a character becoming sound is phrased as “one continuous-present blast —” evoking the blast of a bomb or glacial movement, the “mute aftermath” resembling the silence following great destruction or upheaval. As if it was our ears which were “ringing still with inward tension.” The character used in language, in the utterance, becomes the girder in the rubble. The intentional inclusion of the word *bomb* also points towards Oppen’s personal connection to the “girder in the rubble.”

Oppen repeatedly returned to the girder in the rubble as a touchstone of his poetics, particularly during a traumatizing, near-death experience he had in World War Two. Kristin Prevallet writes that in 1945 Oppen’s truck came under artillery fire and he and two other men jumped into a foxhole, where a 88mm shell exploded directly above them. The two other men died, and Oppen alone lived and was forced to watch them die, unable to drag them to safety under the enemy shelling. He dug his dog tags into the ground in order to hide his Hebrew identity, in case he was captured, and waited for hours until the shooting stopped. In that time, Oppen wept and turned to poetry. He recalled poems by Zukofsky, Sir Thomas Wyatt, and Charles Reznikoff’s short poem with the line, “Among the heaps of brick and plaster lies / a

girder, still itself among the rubbish.” He returned to this line by Reznikoff throughout his life and misremembered, or perhaps re-wrote, *rubbish* into *rubble*, and for Oppen it symbolized catastrophe and humanity lingering amongst ruin, “[that] line about the girder was with me through that war and every time I thought it I wept and wept, I don’t know what about, just that it was so beautiful ... and it was rubble or it was very close to rubble. It was very close to catastrophe” (TP 134). For someone who was so concerned with action and civic responsibility and the inefficacy of poetry to meet political ends, it is profound to see Oppen in a moment face to face with death and trauma turn to the restorative power of poetry. Prevallet concludes, “But what Oppen did in transforming Reznikoff’s line was more than an etymological word game—it was the realization of a reconciliation between ‘poetry’ and ‘the world’” (TP 139, 140).

And so Nam Le carries on this tradition by transforming the image of the girder into his own meditation on language, violence, and catastrophe. The next stanzas read:

The fragment keens its whole.
Even as the void knows
There was no whole,
It was always broken
From larger incompleteness

And deepest sound and sense
Lies beneath the wreckage.
Beneath mangled Linnaean trees
And ink-black lithic strata
Perfect language

In its perfect white idea.
And character is wholly corruption,
Brain mania, marking (of) body
Time. Nothing more — or less —
Than reave and smear. (*36 Ways* 39)

In a phenomenological sense, the fragment of language itself is the broken particular of the whole, and is the encountered object of experience, “the fragment keens its whole.” And the very existence of a whole is questioned “There was no whole, / it was always broken / From larger

incompleteness.” Nam Le seems to express the idea that a primal origin of sound and sense is unreachable, that it “lies beneath the wreckage. / Beneath mangled Linnaean trees,” the image of the trees referring to Carl Linnaeus who invented binomial nomenclature, the system of naming organisms. Therefore the act of naming becomes a corruption. A “perfect language” is equated with white supremacy, “in its perfect white idea” and the poem concludes that the form of expression, a character, falls short of its perfection through violent action, “and character is whole corruption.”

In this stanza language is a violent “marking (of) body” and the enjambment into the next line “Time, Nothing more — or less —” evokes a phenomenological understanding of being and bodies in time. Language here is a thing of marking that affects the body moving through time and space, which is a violent act, a “reave and smear.” This section feels Oppen-esque in that it focuses on fragments and particulars versus the whole, in order to meditate on an abstract idea of language and the act of being in time. It ultimately leads not to resolution but to failure and a reckoning with pain and the pain of others. I think that the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and his ideas of embodied perception are perhaps connected to Nam Le’s poems of embodied identity. In *The Lived Body as Pre-Reflective Consciousness: Merleau-Ponty on the Cogito*, Aguiar writes that MP sought to challenge an intellectualist and transcendental understanding of subjectivity through Kantian reason, and that MP saw intersubjectivity and our meaningful recognition of an *other* as being central to finding ontological truth— a kind of pre-reflective awareness or primordial sense of truth (Aguiar, Chapter 3, 1). To MP, an embodied perception of the world undercut an *objective* world with an experienced world of an *other*. Therefore, as Nam Le’s poems reject an elite intellectualism and transcendence of identity and fixed subjectivity, the poems embody an *other* by inhabiting multiple voices of Vietnamese identity, which highlights a phenomenological awareness of intersubjectivity and speaking amongst multiple bodies and voices in search of ontological truth.

Relating language to violence and ethics also places Nam Le in conversation with Oppen, as Michael Davidson writes on the meaning of the girder, “It is not the Imagist ideal of a transitory moment caught by the artist between juxtaposed images and removed from time. It is the poem in time, part of the rubble and yet ‘still itself,’ unchanged by the synthetic imagination” (TP 134). Rejecting the elitist representation of the Poundian image, *36 Ways of Writing a Vietnamese Poem* inhabits a kind of being in time, as it constantly navigates how language shapes a subject’s being in the world and is shaped by power and perception, something that is of direct concern to the diasporic experience.

Lastly, I would like to examine the final poem in *36 Ways*, “[37. *Post-racial / -glacial*].” Nam Le displays irony in finally giving us 37 ways of writing a Vietnamese poem, not 36. We should also note the blank page between the prior poem and this one; as the white space suggests silence or a long passing of time. Nam Le stated during his Elliot Bay Books reading that this poem holds a lot of personal importance to him, and that if he could end a book with any poem, it would be this one. Therefore a reading of *Post-racial / -glacial* may offer us an ars poetica for Nam Le’s thinking poetics.

By titling the poem “post-racial” Nam Le seems to be making a barbed or ironic play on neoliberal ideology, whose arguments at times intersect with the idea that racial identity can be transcended. Here I refer to neoliberalism as the ideology inherent to the “End of History” argument posited by Francis Fukuyama in the late 20th century during the fall of the Soviet Union. In brief, this theorized that liberal democracy and capitalism were inextricably tied and that liberal democracy would flourish around the world without its dialectical opposite in Soviet communism, and it simultaneously ran in concert within the neoliberal economics of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. Some believe neoliberalism to intersect with post-racialism, the idea that racial identity can be transcended through capitalist, liberal democracy. As President Barack Obama himself stated in 2012, his policies are “so mainstream ... in the 1980s I would be

considered a moderate republican” (Swanson). To many in the Western world the Obama presidency represented a “post-racial” era where race was transcended and the Democratic administration upheld neoliberal Reaganite economics after the 2008 recession— while racism against Obama’s presidency continued and undoubtedly grew to be a major factor in the 2016 election. This sociopolitical history appears to be the context of “post-racialism” that Nam Le’s poem title responds to.

In Nam Le’s 37th poem, by subverting the term “post-racial” he shows us how racial identity is inescapable and is constantly in flux and conflict, much like the natural processes of a glacier that is constantly changing and deconstructing from the climate catastrophes humanity has caused. Rather than presenting a static and resolute “end of history” in itself, Le shows that a diasporic racial identity is constantly shaped and in tension with history, personal experience, and the natural world. The glacier also represents a powerful authority through an address of *You*, which previously in the book has been addressed to a white hegemony and ideas of perfect language. The reality that Nam Le envisions in confronting this glacier isn’t an apocalyptic world-ending one either— it is an encounter with power and shows that the realities of race must constantly be reckoned with in the present. By the end of this poem, the speaker is empowered into assuming the position of a glacier, and with the necessity of poetic work.

In this last poem, the 37th poem in *36 Ways*, the diasporic self is identified within a glacier in an outwash plain:

If I must be something
 let me be outwash plain
 lowland
 past glacier’s margin, glacier’s edge
 thaw and drift convene
 breathtaking arguments of light
 over me
 where what matter has argued
 has long evaporated (36 Ways 62)

After struggling to form a sense of self through the violence of language and history throughout the book, the self is now embodied within “outwash plain / lowland / past glacier’s margin, glacier’s edge.” As the self is turned into the natural object, conversely the glacier is given the human quality of language, the “thaw and drift” of the glacier forms “breathtaking arguments of light,” which connotes a beautiful image perhaps of aurora borealis. This is a place where “where what matter has argued / has long evaporated.” The human matter of language and physical matter has evaporated into the processes of nature.

In the next stanza we get more of the sense that a diasporic self is viewed as a form of sediment, being collapsed upon by the glacier, “Let what’s left be / Left on me / spill spoil residue / sweat & naked chill.” It feels as if the glacial spillage is falling onto the speaker and covering them up, and we have the fragments of the speaker shown in “sweat” and the “naked chill.” Here the speaker is a subject that has been “loomed / over overwhelmed / and left and still.” This seems to point towards how those of a fragmented and diasporic identity are “loomed over” and subject to the overwhelming systemic forces of white hegemony.

In the third stanza, we get an echo of Nam Le’s ideas in poem 22 on perfect language and the perfect white idea, “Here where the perfect thing’s / been and gone away / let me stay / I will accept anything,” and the speaker becomes not a distinct self through language but an extension of the glacier, “I am an open mouth for Your waste” (36 Wats 63). A Poundian elite and perfect concept of language isn’t being referenced, but rather the glacier becomes the node of authority. The direct address of *You* is used throughout *36 Ways*, mostly to refer to whoever holds power in language or an implied white hegemony. But now this *You* is directed towards the glacier, which is noticeably a large, powerful and *white* thing, “Glad I am O Lord Glacier / of Your leavings / fast-hold sediments scoria / sequences of laminae.” There is a tinge of defiance in personifying the glacier as a “Lord” and perhaps a subtle and mocking tone even as the

speaker is briefly showing themselves to be subservient to the glacier in this stanza, but this subservience does not remain by the end of the poem

The following stanza goes on to name close particularities of the glacier, showing the speaker's close familiarity with the landscape, which is unnamed yet invokes geologic terms. Names abound: *sediments*, and *scoria*, and *laminae*, and *rhytmite* beds. *Scoria* refers to fragments of dark lava, and *rhytmite* refers to sedimentary rock which is deposited in a repeated pattern, while *laminae* is defined as "thin layers" of sedimentary rock. The section of interest in this stanza reads as follows:

fast-hold sediments scoria
 sequences of laminae
 all that long-held deep-time till
 moved by Your own weight
 You lay Your burden down instead
 in slow flow / throe
 on rhytmite beds (36 Ways 63)

In naming a *You* and these very specific geological terms with reticent syntax and caesuras, Nam Le's poem resembles the Objectivist act of naming. And because this poem is highly geological in its concerns, it reminds me of the Objectivist poet Lorine Niedecker, notably her book *Lake Superior*. In her book Niedecker names the landscape of Lake Superior using very precise geological words identified with living things and intermingled with her personal encounters with nature. Her poem begins with the lines "In every part of every living thing / is stuff that once was rock / In blood the minerals / of the rock" (Niedecker 1). And her poem goes on to utilize geological terms with short line breaks that wield a similar effect to the pauses and silts of Nam Le's caesuras:

Ruby of corundum
 lapis lazuli
 from changing limestone
 glow-apricot red-brown
 carnelian sard

Greek named

Exodus-antique
 kicked up in America's
 Northwest
 you have been in my mind
 between my toes
 Agate (Niedecker 4)

Here Niedecker uses highly specific geological words and addresses the natural objects and place as a “you.” This addressed *you* is “Greek named” and “Exodus-antique” which shows its age and is “kicked up in America’s / Northwest” and is encountered by the speaker as agate “between my toes.” Given that Nam Le expressed to me his close familiarity with Objectivist poetry, it does not seem accidental that this landscape poem in *36 Ways* resembles Niedecker’s *Lake Superior*—in his address to nature as a *You* and in his intermingling of the personal with geological naming. This stanza in the 37th poem also utilizes soundplay and alliteration in “sediments / scoria / sequences of laminae” and the sound and subtle rhyme propels the reticent lines forward, “in slow-flow / throe / on rhythmite beds.” Much like the soundplay of Oppen and Zukofsky and other Objectivist works described earlier in this essay, the sound of Nam Le’s poem makes the meaning and uses the fragmented objects of perception. The use of caesuras and enjambment also carries the leaps of thinking and perception, which is characteristic of prior Objectivist work. However this Objectivist technique is given a further depth and meaning with the themes of race and diasporic identity in *36 Ways*.

Nam Le commented at Elliot Bay Books that he relishes returning to this landscape in order to return to the processes of nature that are larger than ourselves, and to remind himself of nature’s continuity despite our self-induced destruction and climate change. This glacial drag is a sedimentary and metamorphic event that will subsume all thinking subjects, and it is a lingering force that is constantly in flux and must be reckoned with. In the next stanza the diasporic speaker resists order and embodies flux and entropy, “I can be entropy mine the cross- / reasons counter-actions the erring / (dis)orders of erosion” (36 Ways 64). Here the process of erosion is made complex. By putting the *dis* in a parenthetical, the idea of order is shown as both

ars poetica for Nam Le, and reflects how this natural landscape is one of restoration for his poetics of diaspora and identity.

Both Nam Le and Oppen offer a radical and phenomenological poetics that challenges former poetic ideas, the strictly Romantic or the Imagistic. Rather than dwelling in a heightened state of awakening, they immerse themselves in the failure of language and enact the poem itself as an object of language existing in time with direct experience and the act of naming. We are given no clear resolution in *36 Ways*. Nature is shown to be in flux and the 37th poem leaves us with the continuous process of writing to the speaker's sense of self. What we are left with after reading the poetry of both Oppen and Nam Le is the character itself, the utterance, and the lingering silence that exists between their lines and outside the page. And in an age of reaction and political extremes, perhaps silence and speaking to the unspeakable is a necessary part of reconciling oneself towards change and our place in nature, as it is through silence that we can open ourselves to multiple voices and ways of being. Nam Le echoes Louise Glück on his love for Oppen and his silence, "I have so much respect for Oppen's silence, I have so much respect for silence in general as potentially the most polysemous strategy, the greatest and most multifarious resistance" (Tin House).

VI. Conclusion

The thinking poetics of George Oppen, Robert Creeley and Nam Le offers more than a means of writing towards the intensely personal and the political, but a poetics of what it means to live an intentional life in awareness of others. It does this through a widespread use of fragment, juxtaposition, and polysemous voices. But most importantly, it offers no absolute answers or convenient narratives of absolution; their poetics places itself precisely within the fragments of failure and catastrophe where beauty shines out most, and an opportunity for more authentic being arises. What one is to do with this moment is for each themselves to discover and decide.

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