Philosophical poetry in a time of crisis: reading post-war American poetry in relation to twentieth- century continental philosophy

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Philosophical Poetry in a Time of Crisis

Reading Post-War American Poetry in Relation to Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy

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After the Second World War, continental philosophy became increasingly influential on the American literary left. In particular, the philosophy of Martin Heidegger had a profound effect on the Objectivist poet, George Oppen, in the 1950s and 1960s, and less than a decade later Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy was crucial to the Language poet, Ron Silliman. Each poet turned to philosophy in response to the social and political crises of post-war America. Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies have since become dominant frameworks for reading Oppen's and Silliman's poetry, and for reading twentieth-century poetry more generally.

Such readings, however, risk reducing a poet's work to the passive reflection of contextual materials. In contrast, this thesis proposes a combination of 'faithful' and 'unfaithful' reading, interpreting a poet's work from both within and without the parameters set by its context. Faithful reading responds to and unfaithful reading questions the hold that context currently wields over interpretation. This thesis argues that, while philosophical influence is important to any understanding of Oppen's and Silliman's poetry, faithful reading alone often neglects the ways in which poetry is meaningful in relation to competing philosophies.

The thesis also argues that, despite the great differences between Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Oppen and Silliman use philosophy to create poetry that responds directly to a time of historical and cultural crisis. Heidegger's philosophy helps Oppen to seek a phenomenological experience like that which Heidegger conceives of as *Ereignis*, the event of Being's disclosure. For Oppen, this experience is capable of resisting the ideologies behind capitalist culture and war-time atrocity. At the same time, however, the experience resists the language that is used to express it. In turn, Wittgenstein's philosophy helped Silliman respond to the same crises. Wittgenstein demonstrates that language's meanings are social, determined within specific 'forms of life'. This allows Silliman to emphasise, politicize, and trouble at the intersection of language's meanings with the forms of life from which they emerge. This contention with what Wittgenstein calls the 'grammatical criteria' of meaning works actively to disclose the crisis to which the poems respond.

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Presentations Arising from the Thesis

‘Albany: George Oppen, Ron Silliman, and the poetics of Enframing’, at the 2016 *Australian Modernist Studies Conference* held at the University of New South Wales.

‘Ron Silliman’s “Albany” and the Question of Exemplarity’, at the 2016 *Historical Poetics Symposium* at Western Sydney University.
‘Wittgenstein and the Grammar of Poetic Excess’, at the 2015 *Reason Plus Enjoyment Conference* held at the University of New South Wales.

‘The Literary Network as “Primary Cultural Project”’, at the 2015 *Literary Networks Convention,* organised by AULLA, ASAL & AAL, at the University of Wollongong.

‘Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein in American Modernism’, at the 2014 *British Association for Modernism Studies conference.*

‘“Unable to begin / At the beginning”: George Oppen and the problem of temporality’, at the 2014 *SAM Postgraduate Symposium.*

‘Martin Heidegger, George Oppen, and Lyric Poetry’, at the 2013 *Australasian Society of Continental Philosophy Annual Conference*.

‘The New Sentence, Change, and Innovation in Ron Silliman’s “Ketjak”’, at the 2013 *SAM Postgraduate Symposium*

‘“And one may honorably keep / His distance / If he can”: George Oppen, Martin Heidegger, and the Ethics of Attention’, at the 2013 *FASS Postgraduate Conference*.

List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used throughout the thesis, and are given in parenthetical citations within the text.

A	Silliman, Ron. *The Alphabet*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2008.
AOH	Silliman, Ron. *The Age of Huts (Compleat)*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2007.
NCP	Oppen, George. *New Collected Poems*. New York: New Directions, 2008.
PI	Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Oxford and Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
PPF	Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 'Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment' in *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Oxford and Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
SL	Oppen, George. *Selected Letters of George Oppen*. Edited by Rachel Blau du Plessis Durham: Duke University Press, 1990.
T	Silliman, Ron. *Tjanting*. Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2002.

Introduction:

Heidegger and Wittgenstein in America

By the beginning of the 1960s and 1970s, America had endured an extended series of crises: the First World War had lead into the Great Depression, and then into the Second World War, which spawned the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and a number of other conflicts. Through all these developments, capitalism rose to ever greater socio-cultural dominance. In response, the anti-capitalist left surged and then shattered upon the counter-surge of the political right, with its persecutions of left-aligned artists. Scholarship has shown just how many of America's twentieth-century poets were caught up—some quite directly and materially, and some simply thrown about in the ideological winds—in the fortunes of the left.[1] At the same time, the American literary left proved a hospitable environment for many of the major European philosophies that had made their way to the United States. Prominent among the philosophies that thrived in America in the post-war decades were those of Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Martin Woessner's *Heidegger In America* shows how vigorously these philosophies took hold in the American intellectual landscape. Those 'refugee scholars, writers, and artists lucky enough to have found a way out of Nazi- and fascist-occupied lands[, and who] made their way across the Atlantic', he writes, 'brought with them intellectual traditions and techniques that would go on to enjoy long and often profound afterlives in the New World'.[2]

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[1] See, for instance, Christopher Nealon, *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2011) and Ruth Jennison, *The Zukofsky Era: Modernity, Margins, and the Avant-Garde* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012), amongst others.
[2] Martin Woessner, *Heidegger in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 40.

This thesis argues that when the American post-war literary left came into contact with these philosophies it resulted in new and complex poetic responses to the historical moment. The Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian intellectual traditions were so different, however, as to suggest opposing philosophical positions. Heidegger's philosophy appealed to those who sought new grounds for poetic speech beyond the confines of late-capitalist ideologies. Wittgenstein's appealed to those who, in later decades, sought ways of resisting the control that capitalism wields over language—and thus over both society and thought—from inside language's limits.

In the period in question Heidegger was both celebrity and controversy. His fame, Woessner notes, 'had skyrocketed after the 1927 publication of his *Sein und Zeit*, a book that sparked a discussion that has yet to end'.[3] At the same time, 'Equally discussed by the start of World War II […] was Heidegger's very public embrace of Nazism', a controversy recently revivified by the publication of *The Black Notebooks*.[4] Despite being divisive, Heidegger's influence was enough for Richard Rorty to say, in an interview published in *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* in 1995, that 'We won't be able to write the intellectual history of this century without reading Heidegger'.[5] This is at least partly because 'during the 1950s and 60s, Heidegger managed to grab hold of the imaginations of all the interesting people in Europe'—and, we might add, many of those in the United States.[6] Wittgenstein's analytic philosophy was similarly prominent if less publicly controversial. It not only 'displaced pragmatism and all other rivals' in American philosophy, Woessner notes, but went on to become 'the dominant

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[3] Ibid., 41-2.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Richard Rorty, 'Richard Rorty: Toward a Post-Metaphysical Culture', *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* Spring (1995). Also quoted partially in Woessner, *Heidegger in America*, x.
[6] Rorty, 'Richard Rorty: Toward a Post-Metaphysical Culture', 63.

philosophical tradition in the United States in the years after World War II […] with astonishing alacrity'.[7]

In this intellectual environment, some poets found themselves casting around for philosophical tools with which to oppose the pervasive sense of crisis. A recent article by Duncan Large provides a useful survey of some of the post-war poets who show Heidegger's influence.[8] These include Hugh MacDiarmid, who 'incorporated extensive, multilingual Heidegger references and commentary into the extraordinary found poetry of *Lucky Poet*', W.S. Graham, and R.S. Thomas in Britain, and then a number of post-war American Poets including Hayden Carruth, Norman Dubie, Jorie Graham, Maxine Kumin, Sandra McPherson, Armand Schwener, and Anne Waldman.[9] To this list we must add George Oppen, Heidegger's influence on whom Peter Nicholls has amply demonstrated and, to a small extent, Robert Duncan, to whom Oppen leant his copies of *Existence and Being* and *Being and Time* in 1969.[10] Charles Bernstein's early essay, 'Wittgensteiniana', similarly outlines those of his contemporaries whose work shows the direct influence of Wittgenstein's philosophy. Amongst these he counts W.W. Bartley, Alan Davies, Bruce Duffy, Steve McCaffery, Tom Mandel, Rush Rhees, Keith Waldrop, Rosmarie Waldrop, and Ron Silliman.[11] To this I would also add Lyn Hejinian, whose *My Life and My Life in the Eighties* refers both to the philosopher and

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[7] Woessner, *Heidegger in America*, 193.
[8] Duncan Large, '"Part Woodcutter and Part Charlatan": Tom Paulin's Heidegger', *German Monitor*, no. 77 (2013). 26 or 27
[9] Ibid., 27.
[10] Peter Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 194.
[11] Charles Bernstein, 'Wittgensteiniana', *Fiction International* 18, no. 2 (1990), 72-3.

to his ideas.[12] For some of these poets the philosophical influence was sufficient for it to shape, in some cases event to dominate, critical understanding his or her work.[13]

Both Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's prominence within the greater intellectual environment has also been sufficient that even writers for whom no biographical influence can be demonstrated have increasingly been read according to their philosophies. Recent collections, such as *Phenomenology, Modernism, and Beyond* edited by Carole Bourne-Taylor and Ariane Mildenberg, argue for 'the kinship of method and concern between phenomenology and aesthetic production in selected works of […] high modernist writers' such as Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, and Samuel Beckett.[14] Arguments for Heideggerian—or otherwise phenomenological—analyses on the basis of 'kinship' proliferate in academic presses and journals. Heidi Storl's 'Heidegger in Woolf's Clothing', for example, reads Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* in relation to Heidegger's *Being and Time*.[15] It does so on the basis that 'a clarification of the presuppositions underlying the modern understanding of human *being* and *doing* served as a focal point for Heidegger and Woolf's respective writings'.[16] The philosopher and the novelist, Storl suggests, are involved in fundamentally similar forms of thinking about one's being-in-the-world. In

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[12] Lyn Hejinian, *My Life and My Life in the Nineties* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 51.
[13] For just one example, in Bonnie Costello, 'The Big Hunger', *New Republic* 206, no. 4 (1992), Costello reads Jorie Graham's work the light of her Heideggerian influence. She argues that 'The influence of the late Heidegger is especially strong, giving the poems an all too discursive and derivative character, despite the poet's suspicion of meaning' (38). Heidegger's influence on Graham is sufficient also for Mark S. Burrows to use Graham's poem 'Covenant' as an example of Heideggerian thinking in Mark S. Burrows, 'Raiding the Inarticulate: Mysticism, Poetics, and the Unlanguageable', *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 4, no. 2 (2004): 175.
[14] Ariane Mildenberg, 'Openings: *Epoché* as Aesthetic Tool in Modernist Texts', in *Phenomenology, Modernism, and Beyond*, ed. Carole Bourne-Taylor and Ariane Mildenberg (Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, New York, and Wien: Peter Lang, 2010), 43.
[15] Heidi Storl, 'Heidegger in Woolf's Clothing', *Philosophy and Literature* 32, no. 2 (2008).
[16] Ibid., 303.

a similar fashion, Simon Critchley has used Heidegger to frame Wallace Stevens's work in *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens.* There Critchley makes a connection between Heidegger's criticism of 'the entire realism / anti-realism debate' and Stevens's statement that 'Realism is a corruption of reality'.[17] Imaginative phenomenological engagements, both Heidegger and Stevens argue, might do less violence to an understanding of being than commitment to a realist position that does not account for the imaginative and lived phenomenological dimensions involved in one's relation to the world. More recently, Charles Altieri has also read Stevens in relation to the Heideggerian concept of world.[18] Responding in particular to Stevens's lines 'I am a native of this world / And think in it as a native thinks', Altieri writes that Stevens is 'able to project a plausible state where one can feel native in the world and, more important, feel that status earns the possibility that thinking need not stop with the satisfactions of providing accounts of states of affairs'.[19] He adds that, as a result, Stevens's work 'can focus on eliciting the many senses of what it means to dwell in this native condition and so be in a position to reflect on its role in attributing value to what emerges'.[20] Stevens's poetry, in other words, offers a way of thinking about what dwelling within one's world means for one's ability to value the constituents of that dwelling, rather than only acknowledging states of affairs.

These three examples are only a snapshot of the far greater proliferation of Heideggerian interpretations. For each of these three, also, the basis of 'kinship' is

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[17] Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 28.
[18] Charles Altieri, *Wallace Stevens and the Demands of Modernity: Toward a Phenomenology of Value* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013).
[19] Ibid., 10.
[20] Ibid.

slightly different. For Storl it is a phenomenological understanding of being and doing, for Critchley it is the violence of unreflective 'realist' representations of the world, and for Altieri it is the evaluative possibilities that arise from a sense of one's native dwelling within a world. For each, however, the common foundation afforded by a Heideggerian reading is that a close relation between poetic and philosophical thinking makes poetic (and otherwise literary) thought a source of the sort of phenomenological insights Heidegger advocated. The basis of interpretive kinship in such moments is thus implicitly formed from the notion of thinking that Heidegger articulated and which poems are regularly taken both to disclose and to demonstrate.

Similarly, readings conducted in terms of a Wittgensteinian poetics have proliferated, initially linked to Ordinary Language Criticism but given new momentum in recent decades by Marjorie Perloff's *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*.[21] For Perloff, the analogies that can be formed between Wittgenstein's philosophy and the authors she examines vary, but centre on the ability to challenge assumptions about language-use, and to interrogate and play with the rules that determine language's functioning. Perloff writes that it is possibly Wittgenstein's 'contradictoriness, [his] refusal to stay in one place, that has made Wittgenstein so appealing'.[22] She adds that his example for writers like Ingeborg Bachman and Samuel Beckett—'(who insisted that he hadn't read any Wittgenstein until the late fifties, long after he had completed such "Wittgensteinian" works as *Watt* and *Waiting for Godot*)'—'is that he never gave up the struggle, both with himself and with language, never allowed himself to accept this or that truth statement or totalizing system as *the*

[21] Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).
[22] Ibid., 8.

answer'.[23] Further readings of modernist and post-modernist writers according to various articulations of a Wittgensteinian poetics have also responded to perceived similarities between Wittgenstein's philosophy and twentieth-century literature. In a 2003 article titled 'Autonomy and Privacy in Wittgenstein and Beckett', Gary Kemp argues for a likeness between the two figures on the basis of a common challenge to the solipsistic understanding of the individual.[24] For both Wittgenstein and Beckett, Kemp writes, 'Cartesian Dualism […] was a picture, or perhaps a jumble of pictures, that is repeated to us time and again […] by our art, religions, folk theories, [and] morals'.[25] A 2005 article by David Sparti outlines similarities between Wittgenstein and Primo Levi. Both Wittgenstein and Levi, Sparti argues, demonstrate how our capacity to see things according to what Wittgenstein calls grammatical 'aspects' depends on the way in which those things are articulated within our public grammar.[26]

Finally, if attempts to read literature through Wittgenstein have been less rampant than those that read literature through Heidegger, nevertheless Wittgenstein's critical currency is on the increase. A recent collection titled *Wittgenstein and Modernism,* edited by Michael Lemahieu and Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé, brings Wittgenstein's philosophy into contact with a number of major modernist figures, including Samuel Beckett, Saul Bellow, Walter Benjamin, Henry James, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Wallace Stevens, and Virginia Woolf. The basis of such readings is the argument that, as the editors put it, 'Wittgenstein appears to represent a modernist figure

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[23] Ibid.
[24] Gary Kemp, 'Autonomy and Privacy in Wittgenstein and Beckett', *Philosophy and Literature* 27, no. 1 (2003).
[25] Ibid., 165.
[26] Davide Sparti, 'Let Us Be Human: Primo Levi and Ludwig Wittgenstein', *Philosophy and Literature* 29, no. 2 (2005).

par excellence—the philosophical counterpart to poets, artists, and composers the likes of Stein, Picasso, and Schoenberg'.[27] The drive is thus to bring Wittgenstein's philosophy into relation with these major writers, artists, and composers under the umbrella of a shared cultural moment. '[T]he category of modernism', the editors write, is able to 'inform our understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophy', and in return 'Wittgenstein's philosophy [can] elucidate the category of modernism'.[28]

Again, the grounds of analogical kinship for these examples—only a representative selection from a much larger field—are not identical. However, the common interest of all these critics is Wittgenstein's interest in the public criteria that determine language-use, and the effects of those public criteria on the language-user, as key focuses of literary thinking. Unlike the Heideggerian readings, however, this is a conception of poetry that values it for its ability to interrogate and denaturalise the ways in which language typically functions within the public domains that establish its criteria. Literary language is, in this sense, valued for its capacity to do philosophical work and to carry that work out upon itself. Also interesting for the light it sheds on claims to literary-philosophical kinship is the fact that writers claimed as examples of Heideggerian forms of literary thinking or practice often also appear on lists of Wittgensteinian writers. For example, Stein and Becket appear both in the Bourne-Taylor and Mildenberg anthology as phenomenological poets and in Perloff's *Wittgenstein's Ladder*.

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[27] Michael LeMahieu and Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé, eds., *Wittgenstein and Modernism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 1.
[28] Ibid.

The situation in question is therefore complex. Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies were prominent amongst those that thrived in the post-war American intellectual environment. To some these two philosophical projects were fundamentally opposed. Rudolph Carnap, a philosophical ally of Wittgenstein's, describes Heidegger's 'What is Metaphysics?' as constituted by 'metaphysical pseudostatements of a kind where the violation of logical syntax is especially obvious'.[29] Heidegger himself attacks the sort of 'meta-linguistics' characteristic of Carnap's branch of continental philosophy as a symptom of the greater process of enframing, part of the contemporary historical form of the forgetting of being.[30] Heidegger and Wittgenstein were also far from alone in their influence, of course. Over the decades they would be joined by thinkers like Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Theodor Adorno, to name only a few. Nonetheless, Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophical presences were strong and wielded direct influence over many poets. Moreover, Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies have also become prominent interpretive options currently making possible different sorts of critical attention towards and evaluation of not just those poets who were directly influenced by these philosophies but of modernist and post-modernist poetry more broadly. In order to investigate this large and complex situation, this study turns toward two American poets, from the second half of the Twentieth Century, who show the direct influence of either Heidegger's or Wittgenstein's philosophies.

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[29] Rudolf Carnap, 'The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis', in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 69. [Originally published in German in 1932].
[30] Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (New York: HarperOne, 1971), 58.

George Oppen and Ron Silliman

The poets George Oppen and Ron Silliman present an opportunity to interrogate the relations between Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies and the poetry composed under their influence. The Objectivist Oppen published his first collection in the 1930s but did his major work in the 1960s, largely either in California or New York, influenced by Heidegger's phenomenological ontology. The Language poet Silliman worked from the mid-'60s onwards in the San Francisco Bay Area, informed by post-structuralist philosophy, and especially that of Wittgenstein. Both poets were politically active in different periods of the American left. Oppen famously gave up poetry for political action after his 1934 collection, *Discrete Series*.[31] This took place in a historical moment in which, he writes, 'the catastrophe of human lives […] seemed to me to put poetry and the purposes of poetry in question'.[32] When he returned to poetry in the late 1950s it was not because 'the catastrophe of human lives' was significantly less. Rather, it was because he had found a way of directing his poetry towards the ongoing sense of crisis, where previously he had only been able to think of poetic production as avoiding the responsibilities such a crisis imposed. For his part, Silliman was very active in his local political counter-culture in the 1960s and 1970s. In a letter to Bernstein from 1975 he writes of how his [Quote text removed for Copyright

[31] Oppen's poetic 'silence' following the publication of *Discrete Series* is discussed in a number of locations. For example, Peter Nicholls describes this period of Oppen's career in *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*. Rachel Blau du Plessis describes Oppen's move from poetry to political action as one moment within a greater commitment to 'silence' in Rachel Blau DuPlessis, '"Uncannily in the Open": In Light of Oppen', in *Blue Studios* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2006), 188. In a letter to Julian Zimet from 1968, Oppen himself describes this period of his life as shaped by his commitment to action on behalf of the 'Woiking class': George Oppen, *Selected Letters of George Oppen*, ed. Rachel Blau du Plessis (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 181. Oppen's life during his period of 'silence' is also described in Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'Oppen from Seventy-Five to a Hundred, 1983-2008', *Jacket Magazine* (2008), http://jacketmagazine.com/36 /oppen-duplessis.shtml, and a number of other places.

[32] Oppen, *Selected Letters of George Oppen*, 186.

reasons] (UCSD 519, 58, 10).[33] In the group memoir of Language writing, *The Grand Piano*, he writes also of the depth of his involvement in resistance to the Vietnam War, and of his work on behalf of prisoners' rights undertaken as an alternative to war service.[34] For both Oppen and Silliman, poetry offered a way of responding to the challenges of their historical moment, and—as I will show in coming chapters—the very different philosophies that they seized upon helped to produce their very different responses.

Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's influence is clear to see in Oppen's and Silliman's poetry. While much of the coming study is dedicated to understanding the particular forms these influences take, it is worth briefly noting their intensity. In his first appendix to *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, Peter Nicholls documents the poet's prolonged involvement with Heidegger's philosophy.[35] For instance, Nicholls notes Oppen's claim, in a 1973 interview, to have encountered Heidegger as early as 1950, and also outlines how this encounter with Heidegger 'began an interest which would colour Oppen's thinking throughout the sixties and on into the early seventies'.[36] Nicholls notes also that 'Oppen seems to have kept up with translations of Heidegger as they appeared'.[37] Alongside such archival evidence, Heidegger's influence manifests in Oppen's poems and their paratexts. For example, Oppen famously quotes Heidegger on the fly-leaf to his 1962 collection, *This In Which*: '…the arduous path of appearance' (*NCP* 92). The phrase comes from a point in Heidegger's *An Introduction to*

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[33] This reference refers to the shelf, box, and file locations of material held in the Mandeville Special Collections Library at the University of California, San Diego.
[34] Rae Armantrout et al., *The Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography, San Francisco, 1975-1980* (Detroit: Mode A/This Press, 2006-2010), v2, 50-54.
[35] See also Peter Nicholls, 'Oppen's Heidegger', in *Thinking Poetics: Essays on George Oppen*, ed. Steve Shoemaker (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2009).
[36] Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 194.
[37] Ibid.

Metaphysics where the philosopher outlines the path to 'superior knowledge' that is open to the 'truly sapient man'.[38] Like many of Heidegger's formulations, the arduous path of appearance represents a synthesis of opposites. Here it is an opposition between having known both 'the buoyant storm on the path of being', and knowing 'the dread of the second path to the abyss of nothing'.[39] The unity of these opposites is found in the man who 'has taken upon himself the third way, the arduous path of appearance'.[40] Presented thus by Oppen, it represents a call to a form of phenomenological work wherein, as both Matt Ffytche and Nicholls emphasise, one chooses the difficult task of attending to the fact of being as a corollary to one's own being-there.[41] Having such a quotation at the opening of the collection suggests that when we read 'A Language of New York' in that collection, for example, and encounter lines about 'the pure joy / Of the mineral fact' (*NCP* 114), what we encounter is an attempt to find words for that way of attending.

Silliman's engagement with Wittgenstein was similarly intense. In letters to Bernstein, Silliman writes of reading Wittgenstein and of composing poems under the heading 'ordinary language' (UCSD 519, 58, 10). In his seminal essay 'Wittgensteiniana', Bernstein himself describes Silliman's work as following the philosopher's model for 'the contemporary prose poem'.[42] Further, in Silliman's essay

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[38] Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 113.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] For more on Oppen's use of this quotation see Matt Ffytche, '"The Arduous Path of Appearance": Phenomenology and Its Uncertainities in the Work of George Oppen', in *Phenomenology, Modernism and Beyond*, ed. Carole Bourne-Taylor and Ariane Mildenberg (Oxford, Bern, Berling, Frankfurt am Main, New York, and Wien: Peter Lang, 2010), 195, Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 64, and L. S. Dembo, 'The Existential World of George Oppen', *The Iowa Review* 3, no. 1 (1972): 65-66.
[42] Bernstein, 'Wittgensteiniana', 79.

'The New Sentence', Wittgenstein is presented as particularly significant for 'how close some of his [Wittgenstein's] later work comes toward a type of discussion that surrounds the new sentence'.[43] This closeness occurs in the context of a question that Wittgenstein grapples with in his *Philosophical Investigations*: why does the phrase 'bring me sugar' make sense, whereas the phrase 'milk me sugar' does not? (*PI* §498). What we encounter in this difference between sense and nonsense, Wittgenstein argues, is not a feature of the words themselves but rather a feature of how particular phrases fit into what he calls the 'grammar' of what is sayable in particular contexts. The new sentence, Silliman implies in his essay, is similarly concerned with how language is legible to us in particular ways given particular contexts. This becomes the basis of Marjorie Perloff's early assessment of Silliman's work in *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*. His is, she argues, a poetics of the limits of sense and meaning. Silliman's poetry, she writes, is committed to 'testing the boundary between the "sense" of "Bring me sugar" and the "non-sense" of "Milk me sugar."'[44] What the new sentence forces us to confront, in other words, is both our mastery of and dependence on the public grammar that allows us to make sense.

Given the situation described above—the influence of Heidegger's philosophy on Oppen, and of Wittgenstein's on Silliman, as well as the two philosophers' broader prominence within current and recent criticism—it is perhaps only natural that Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies have emerged as dominant frames for interpreting Oppen's and Silliman's poetry respectively. As noted above, Nicholls's *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* emphasises the phenomenological aspects of

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[43] Ron Silliman, *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof Books, 1989), 70.
[44] Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, 201.

Oppen's work, particularly the Heideggerian. This followed prior readings that had used Heidegger's philosophy to interpret Oppen's poems, such as Paul Kenneth Naylor's 'The Pre-Position "Of": Being, Seeing, and Knowing in George Oppen's Poetry'. Nicholls's book has paved the way for further use of Heidegger in interpreting Oppen, such as Ffytche's '"The Arduous Path of Appearance": Phenomenology and its Uncertainties in the Work of George Oppen'. For Silliman, the seminal Wittgensteinian interpretation of his work was conducted briefly in Bernstein's survey of contemporary Wittgensteinian literature, 'Wittgensteiniana'. This was followed by Perloff's *Wittgenstein's Ladder* which has itself paved the way for further such readings of Silliman's work. These include more of Perloff's own readings, such as 'The Portrait of the Language Poet as Autobiographer: The Case of Ron Silliman', and Andrew Epstein's discussion of Silliman's 'Wittgensteinian meditations' in '"There Is No Content Here, Only Dailiness": Poetry as Critique of Everyday Life in Ron Silliman's Ketjak'. A more detailed discussion of this scholarship for both Oppen's and Silliman's work appears in the relevant chapters of this thesis. Such an account of the literature most usefully prepares for the Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian readings that take place within those chapters.

With the above critical and historical context, many readers would be unlikely to challenge the argument that interpreting Oppen requires a Heideggerian conceptual vocabulary, or that interpreting Silliman requires a Wittgensteinian vocabulary. The philosophical contexts seem to determine the need for these particular hermeneutic responses. Recent scholarship has reflected this apparent requirement and established the philosophies that influenced Oppen and Silliman as necessary and natural frames for interpreting their poems. My objective with this study is not to challenge outright the

usefulness of reading a poet according to his or her immediate philosophical context. Indeed, this thesis is motivated by a real and pressing desire to get even more to grips both with the ways that Heidegger and Wittgenstein influenced Oppen and Silliman in their attempts to respond to their historical moments. A second motivation is the drive to understand what Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies, as interpretive frameworks, can tell us about Oppen's and Silliman's poetry. However, if Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies have become dominant frames for interpreting Oppen's and Silliman's poems respectively there is nonetheless reason to be suspicious of the capacity of those philosophies alone to fully account for what is taking place in the poems. This suspicion reflects a larger debate currently prominent within the academy. It is a debate about the relation between text and context within interpretation.

Context and Interpretation

The context of a literary text's production can seem to determine how it ought to be read. A knowledge of context, more precisely, and a commitment to its importance for interpretation, can make it seem as though particular methods and vocabularies are necessary for a proper critical accounting. In Yopie Prins's recent call for a 'historical poetics', for instance, a text is said to require particular forms of historically recuperative contextualisation in order to be properly understood.[45] This is not because context merely illuminates poems, Prins argues, but because the historically specific 'discursive arrangements' that we can identify as their contexts are what 'made [the] poems possible'.[46] In his recent forays into historical poetics, however, Simon Jarvis has

[45] Yopie Prins, 'Historical Poetics, Dysprosody, and *the Science of English Verse*', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 123, no. 1 (2008).
[46] Yopie Prins, '"What Is Historical Poetics?"', *Modern Language Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (March 2016): 37.

argued that a gap exists between the context of a poet's production and the actual 'verse thinking' of the poems themselves.[47] In 'What is Historical Poetics?' Jarvis argues that such thinking 'is usually both more and less than what happens in the statements made about it by poets and readers'.[48] He argues that the materials that are used to produce a scholarly understanding of a historical context—such materials as 'Gossip, correspondence, manuscripts, printing, editing, reviews, [and] metrical theories'—'remain liable to be exceeded or corrected by what happens in that verse-thinking itself'.[49] In other words, while a work's historical context provides the resources for poetic thinking, and while it thus suggests that particular materials and vocabularies are necessary to interpretation, it might nonetheless still fail to explain a work's particular thinking.

There is thus a tension between the way the context of a literary text's production seems to determine how it ought to be read and the possibility that texts might resist or exceed such context-specific explanations. This tension intensifies when, as with Oppen and Silliman, that context includes a direct philosophical influence. Again, Jarvis provides a helpful example. In his introduction to *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song,* Jarvis thinks through his attempt to interpret the sort of philosophising that Wordsworth's poems might be capable of 'singing'.[50] In doing so, he argues that the philosophy that Wordsworth claimed at times to be using—specifically, a totalising 'system of philosophy' transmitted to him from Coleridge—fails to adequately account for the 'philosophic song' that actually emerges in

[47] Simon Jarvis, *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 101.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.

Wordsworth's practice.[51] Jarvis argues that Wordsworth's poetry is not the expression and reflection of a systematic philosophy. Rather, he argues that Wordsworth's 'verse is itself a kind of cognition, with its own resistances and difficulties'.[52] He adds that Wordsworth's poetry is philosophic song 'in so far as [it is] driven […] to obstruct, displace or otherwise change the syntax and the lexicons currently available for the articulation of such experience'.[53] As such, a reading that approaches the poem in terms that reproduce its context—that read a philosophy back into the poetry that it influenced—would produce a fundamental misrecognition. The success of critical recourse to philosophical context might also be its failure, for the risk is that the philosophy accounts *too* fully for the text and thus robs it of its difference.[54]

In her analysis of readings of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw,* Shoshana Felman outlines another version of this interpretive risk. Felman notes that, in its ambiguous dramas of innocence and cruelty, James's novel seems to call for a psychoanalytical response.[55] It is, she writes, as though the text's ambiguities, and its ambiguities around sexuality in particular, 'called out for a "Freudian" reading'; they seem to 'call forth an analytical response'.[56] Moreover, the work's historical context, which included the rise of psychoanalytical thought as a method and as a general philosophical vocabulary, made it seem to psychoanalytical critics as though the text required the explanatory powers of psychoanalytical methods. However, Felman also

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[51] Ibid., 2-3.
[52] Ibid., 4. See also Simon Jarvis, 'What Is Historical Poetics?', in *Theory Aside*, ed. Jason Potts and Daniel Stout (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), and Simon Jarvis, 'Superversive Poetics: Browning's *Fifine at the Fair*', *Modern Language Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (March 2016).
[53] Jarvis, *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song*, 4.
[54] Ibid., 3.
[55] Shoshana Felman, 'Turning the Screw of Interpretation', in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).
[56] Ibid., 104.

argues that while the capacity to master a text with a psychoanalytical vocabulary 'may indeed be satisfying to psychoanalytical theory, it often leaves dissatisfied the literary critic, the reader of a text, who feels that, in this frame of relationship, literature is in effect *not recognized* as such by psychoanalysis'.[57] Psychoanalytical readings in general, Felman suggests, take psychological processes and structures as the essential context of literary production and yet leave out what is specific to literary thinking: the text's capacity to generate its own forms of agency.[58] As such, when she turns to *The Turn of the Screw,* Felman argues that James has set a trap for his readers. If the text seemed to 'call' to them for psychoanalytical interpretation it nevertheless actively resists explanation in psychoanalytical terms.

Felman's argument represents a related but distinct interpretive challenge from Jarvis's. For Jarvis, if an identifiable philosophical influence on a poet also influences how critic's read that poet's work, those critics often overlook the difference between philosophy and poetry's own form of cognition. Felman addresses the forms of 'kinship' suggested by Bourne-Taylor and Mildenberg. These forms of kinship, as determined by the broader cultural context, can make it seem as though the text itself required a particular mode of reading. Jarvis and Felman thus represent different justifications for a philosophical reading. A reading that responds to direct influence seems more grounded, more reasonable we might say, because the influence is assumed to be (often deliberately) encoded into the literary work itself. The context in this case is concrete and specific: direct influence. The context is far more broad for readings conducted according to kinship. At times it is something like *indirect* influence, as in

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[57] Shoshana Felman, ed. *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University press, 1982), 6. [All italicisations in Felman's work are her own].
[58] Ibid.

Lemahieu's and Zumhagen-Yekplé's justification for Wittgensteinian interpretations of multiple modernist writers based on the larger cultural moment in which he participated. At other times, a philosopher and a writer are taken to have arrived independently at a shared form of thought in response to a common contextual element: for instance, the nature of human phenomenological experiences in Storl's Heideggerian reading of Woolf.

While these two foundations for a philosophical reading differ, they share important similarities. For both types of reading the contextual relation between the literary work and the philosophy is taken as the source of the resemblances between them, leading to the philosophy being privileged as the best means to interpretive mastery of the literary text. Jarvis argues, however, that the forms of agency to be found in poetic thinking mean that poetry is not reducible to the materials of context and, specifically for this thesis, that those forms of agency produce differences between a poet's work and the philosophy that influences it.[59] The coming chapters of this thesis test this possibility. For the moment, we can note that, if this proves to be true, then a philosophical influence is not so much coded into a text as subject to a greater multiplicity of potential relationships. Poems are as likely to exceed, diverge, or even negate the influence in question as not. The relationship between a contextual philosophical influence and a poetic work produced under that influence is thus potentially more like kinship than replication or adherence. For this reason, if a philosophical reading that responds to direct influence seems more reasonable than a reading based on kinship, the difference may not be so great as it appears. Both

[59] See Jarvis's articles on historical poetics ('What is Historical Poetics?' and 'Superversive Poetics: Browning's *Fifine at the Fair*') as well as *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song*.

foundations for reading, moreover, run the same risk either of failing to properly recognise a text as literary, or of failing to properly articulate the use a text makes of its context. The danger for both Jarvis and Felman is that criticism's recourse to contextual materials can damage the object of interpretation, the text, by treating it as too passive a replication of its context or too similar an object of kinship. At its heart this is a dilemma in critical method. What, we might ask, does the critical use of contextual material—for this thesis the application of early-twentieth-century continental philosophy to the late-twentieth-century poetry composed under its influence—do to the object of study? How sufficient is such a way of reading to the complexity and distinctness of the poetry?

In the coming thesis I look in detail at the relation between Oppen's and Silliman's poetry and Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies. I show how the poets make use of, respond to, and at times resist the philosophy that influenced their work. At the same time, however, I argue that criticism needs to oppose the seeming naturalness of reading these poets according to the terms of those philosophical influences. To work through these problems, I perform what I call 'faithful' and 'unfaithful' readings; I read each poet's work from both within and without the interpretive horizon determined by influence. The chapters which follow thus probe two sets of relations, first between poetry and philosophy, and second, between text and context. This approach originates from the conviction that a reading which holds strictly to the terms of a philosophical influence does not fully exhaust or capture the poetry's response to its historical moment. Indeed, stepping beyond the interpretive horizon set by influence allows for new understandings of Oppen's and Silliman's poetry that are

both enlightening as critical insights into the poetry, as well as allowing for critical reflection on the horizon of faithfulness itself.

Poetry and Philosophy

Before discussing the methods of faithful and unfaithful reading in more detail, I need to address a further critical context that, though rich, has only a subordinate presence in this thesis. This is the history of attempts to formulate the difference between poetry and philosophy, either as essentially distinct forms of thought or as historically distinct sets of cognitive, verbal, and behavioural practices. In the Western tradition, the question of poetry's relation to philosophy originates when the two split from an earlier, unified discourse. In *Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*, Marcel Detienne argues that prior to the divergence of poetic and philosophical forms of thought and speech, there were forms of sung speech that were neither entirely poetic or philosophical as currently understood. These forms constituted rather a power at once poetic (being sung), religious (founded in *Mnēmosynē*) and political (praising or blaming individuals and glorifying rulers).[60] The functions of praise and blame were characterised by the presencing power of *alētheia*, frequently translated as 'truth', which was the opposite of the oblivion of *lēthē*.[61] Thus, as with Parmenides and later with Heidegger, poetic-philosophical speech grants being to that which, without it, would fall into oblivion.[62]

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[60] Marcel Detienne, *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 43-50.
[61] Ibid., 49. Heidegger famously makes much of this opposition in his formulations of poetry as a form of disclosure: Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).
[62] Thus, as Benjamin Jowett notes in his introduction to Plato's *Parmenides*: 'The paradoxes of Parmenides seem trivial to us, because the words to which they relate have become trivial; their true nature as abstract terms is perfectly understood by us, and we are inclined to regard the treatment of them in Plato as a mere straw-splitting, or legerdemain of words. Yet there was a power in them which fascinated the Neoplatonists for centuries afterwards. Something that they found in them, or brought to them—some echo or anticipation of a great truth or error, exercised a wonderful influence over them': Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett, 5 vols., vol. 4 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1875), 134.

The philosophies of Socrates and Plato mark a point at which both philosophical and poetic speech had separated from speech's prior disclosive power. In the *Republic* Plato's goal is not solely to establish the capabilities of philosophers to reach truth discursively, but at the same time to show that poetry is unable to access philosophic truths. In Book 10 Plato gives the famous mirror analogy. What seems like *alētheia* [truth], the dialogue argues, is in reality *apatē* [deceit].[63] The poet's activity as a 'maker' is, at this point, separated from truth as the province of philosophy.

Thinking about the nature of the distinction between poetry and philosophy has continued more or less unabated to today. Many thinkers, including Heidegger himself, have attempted to formulate the relation. Heidegger, indeed, inverts the distinction set up by Plato and Socrates, such that poetry becomes the only source of *alētheia*, with philosophy given the difficult task of identifying and preserving it.[64] Some philosophers and critics have also worked with Wittgenstein's claim, in *Culture and Value*, that 'Philosophy ought really to be written only as a *form of poetry.* [*Philosophie dürfte man eigentlich nur* dichten].[65] Precisely what Wittgenstein means by this statement, how seriously he means it, and what implications it ought to have are still matters of debate. More recently, Alain Badiou has made a distinction between poetry and philosophy that recalls Plato's essential distinction between the forms. In 'What is a Poem?, Or,

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[63] Detienne, *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*, 79.
[64] Heidegger's inversion of the Platonic prioritisation of philosophy over poetry is performed in multiple of his essays and lectures. It has a particularly clear formulation, however, in 'On the Origin of the Work of Art', in Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*.
[65] This is the translation of Wittgenstein's phrase as Perloff gives it in *Wittgenstein's Ladder*. The 1998 Peter Winch translation renders it as 'Really one should write philosophy only as one *writes a poem'*: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch, 2nd ed. (Massachussets, Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 28. As Perloff points out, however, Winch's reference to 'a poem' rather than poetry is misleading. Indeed, she argues that a better translation may be 'poetic composition': Marjorie Perloff, 'Writing Philosophy as Poetry: Literary Form in Wittgenstein', in *The Oxford Handbook of Wittgenstein*, ed. Oskari Kuusela and Marie McGinn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 279, fn.6.

Philosophy and Poetry at the Point of the Unnamable', Badiou argues that philosophy represents a form of thought inhospitable to poetry: 'discursive thought, *dianoia*'.[66] '*Dianoia*', Badiou writes, is 'the thought that traverses, the thought that links and deduces', whereas poetry is 'an offering, a lawless proposition'.[67]

Recent critics also grapple with the distinction between poetry and philosophy. Jarvis's arguments for a form of cognition specific to poetry are an ongoing part of this debate, seen from the perspective of literary criticism.[68] Alternatively, in *Wallace Stevens and the Demands of Modernity*, Charles Altieri writes that 'Even though poets typically are not primarily concerned with producing arguments, they constantly test in imagination the consequences of an intellectual world shaped by the arguments of others'.[69] As a result, he writes, 'we look to philosophical poets […] to construct speculative situations that articulate and struggle with the consequences of dominant beliefs'.[70] Though Altieri does not specify here a form of 'verse thinking' native to poetry in the way that Jarvis does, the distinction is otherwise quite similar. The 'philosophical poet' tests, speculates, and struggles with philosophical material rather than simply reproducing it in poetic form.

This thesis deals directly with the distinction between poetry and philosophy only in those cases in which it becomes relevant to the poets themselves or to the

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[66] Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 17.
[67] Ibid.
[68] In 'Why Rhyme Pleases', for instance, Jarvis advocates for 'a musical or a prosodic thinking, a thinking which is not simply a little picture of, nor even a counterpoint to, that more familiar kind of thinking whose medium is essentially semantic and syntactic, but whose medium, instead, is essentially prosodic: a kind of thinking in tunes?': Simon Jarvis, 'Why Rhyme Pleases', *Thinking Verse* 1 (2011): 24.
[69] Altieri, *Wallace Stevens and the Demands of Modernity*, 1.
[70] Ibid., 1-2.

question of interpretation. In Chapter 3, for instance, it is discussed as part of Silliman's probing of the topic in his poem 'The Chinese Notebook'. But there the distinction is a matter of genre, discussed in Wittgensteinian and Marxist terms, and is primarily social, historical, and economic rather than ontological or cognitive. A Heideggerian formulation of the distinction between poetry and philosophy is also a provisional premise for the readings conducted in the following chapter, in which Silliman's poetry is read in relation to Heidegger's philosophy. Throughout the bulk of this thesis, therefore, my approach to the relationship between poetry and philosophy is limited either to understanding the influence that Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies have had, or to the forms of critical reading that these particular philosophies can inspire.

Suspicion and Fealty

This thesis began by observing the prominence of Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies as influences on late twentieth-century American poetry, as well as on current criticism. The initiating question can be phrased: how should we understand the poetry that was produced under these influences? This question has a dual motive. It aims to discover the sorts of poetry produced under these different philosophical influences, but at the same time it aims to test what these philosophies offer as ways of reading. Oppen and Silliman provide an opportunity to investigate these questions because of their very similar political, temporal, and geographic contexts, their very different philosophical contexts, and the current critical tendency to read their works in terms of those philosophical influences. This thesis seeks to question that common critical practice. The desire to come to grips with these influences thus provokes a

further question: are the vocabulary and other materials derived from a contextual discourse the best resources for understanding the text's relation to that very discourse? I argue that this is not the case. Instead I endorse a critical method designed to test the limits of contextual discourse by bringing a competing, non-contextual discourse to bear on the work of the poets in question. To this end I have drawn the ideas of 'faithful' and 'unfaithful' reading from recent criticism in order to differentiate between opposing relations to contextual materials.

The terms 'faithful' and 'unfaithful', and the methods of reading that they entail, have multiple points of origin in both current and prior debates over the nature of interpretation. One of these is Paul Ricoeur's identification of what he called 'the hermeneutics of Suspicion' in *Freud and Philosophy* (1965). Ricoeur argues that this hermeneutics emerged in opposition to a prior form that acted as the 'recollection of meaning'.[71] This previous hermeneutics, he writes, was 'the manifestation and restoration of a meaning addressed to me in the manner of a message, a proclamation or as is sometimes said, a kerygma'.[72] It is the form taken, he suggests, by Biblical hermeneutics, where the task is to understand what is being said by a speaker or by the greater configuration of the *logos*. The hermeneutics of suspicion, conversely, is 'a demystification', 'a reduction of illusion'.[73] It takes language not as something that speaks clearly, or that speaks to man in the manner of a theological *logos*, but as covering meaning over: a concealing. Ricoeur's exemplars are Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. All three, he argues,

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[71] Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), 32.
[72] Ibid., 27.
[73] Ibid.

> create with the means at hand, with and against the prejudices of their times, a mediate *science* of meaning, irreducible to the immediate *consciousness* of meaning. What all three attempted, in different ways, was to make their 'conscious' methods of deciphering coincide with the 'unconscious' *work* of ciphering which they attributed to the will to power, to social being, to the unconscious psychism.[74]

Meaning for these masters of suspicion is no longer something to be understood, but something to be interpreted in order to gain access to the '*work* of ciphering' that had gone into its creation. They are suspicious, he writes, of 'the illusions of consciousness' and 'proceed to employ the stratagem of deciphering'.[75] Or, as John B. Thompson puts it, suspicious hermeneutics 'is animated by […] suspicion of the given' and 'look[s] upon the contents of consciousness as in some sense false'.[76] What is relevant to the present chapter is that the hermeneutics of suspicion promotes an interpretive paradigm in which the object for interpretation lies not in the expression itself—not, we might say, in the text, be it a literary work, a commodity, or the record of a dream—but in the ciphering processes that had worked upon and through it. Because the meanings of a text can no longer be trusted, we might say, the object setting the terms of interpretation becomes a contextual element of the text's creation, structuring its apparent but deceptive meanings.

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[74] Ibid., 34.
[75] Ibid.
[76] John B. Thompson, *Critical Hermeneutics: A Study in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 46.

Ricoeur's diagnosis of modern hermeneutics has been revived periodically, as in Eve Sedgewick's famous opposition of 'paranoid' and 'recuperative' reading in 1997.[77] The most recent revival has been carried out by Rita Felski, who argues that suspicion dominates the forms that criticism currently takes within the academy.[78] In 'Suspicious Minds' she describes suspicious hermeneutics as driven by the conviction 'that appearances are deceptive, that texts do not gracefully relinquish their meanings, that manifest content shrouds darker, more unpalatable truths'.[79] In *The Limits of Critique*, Felski argues that this ethos is the dominant characteristic of contemporary critical thought.[80] Whether or not we agree with Felski on the overwhelming contemporary dominance of suspicion, her assessment is useful. It offers a way of assessing the parameters that philosophical influence seems to set for critical response. This is because at the heart of suspicious criticism, as Felski describes it, lie arguments for the terms by which interpretation should be conducted.

Felski argues that 'While suspicion can manifest itself in multiple ways, in the current intellectual climate it often pivots on a fealty to the clarifying power of historical context'.[81] Very generally speaking, according to such a diagnosis calls for history as *the* necessary context for a proper critical account—be they Fredric Jameson's exhortation to 'always historicize' or Prins's recent calls for a historical poetics—are manifestations of a drive to retrieve the hidden or 'non-obvious' meanings

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[77] Sedgwick's essay is collected in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), but appeared in an earlier form as 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You', in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1997).
[78] This takes place in both Rita Felski, 'Suspicious Minds', *Poetics Today* 32, no. 2 (2011) and Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).
[79] Felski, 'Suspicious Minds', 216.
[80] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 33.
[81] Rita Felski, '"Context Stinks!"', *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (2011): 574.

from texts.[82] In suspicious historicism, Felski argues, 'the text is held to be symptomatic of social conditions that it seeks to repress but to which it nevertheless unwittingly testifies. Like the hysterical patient, the text is not fully in control of its own discourse'.[83] This is perhaps more appropriate as a criticism of Jameson's approach, for which, Felski would say, the text's hysteria makes it an unwitting conduit for context. Even for historicist readings like Prins's, where the text is not necessarily an 'unconscious' conduit, understanding the poetic thinking going on in a poem still requires that the critic turn to 'the clarifying power' of its context and its discourses. If the text doesn't hysterically repress and express its context, historical distance nonetheless hides its meanings such that the critic must seek contextual materials as a way of accessing what Ricoeur called the '*work* of ciphering' that had gone into its creation.

Again, we needn't agree entirely with Felski's assertion that a hermeneutics of suspicion is the dominant mode of modern criticism. We might also want to add caveats to the suggestion that any text, when conceived of historically, necessarily 'unwittingly testifies' to context. For example, we may agree that Jameson's calls for the historicisation of a political 'unconscious' in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* take a text as 'not fully in control of its own discourse'.[84] However, we might also argue, as Christopher Nealon does in 'Reading on the Left', that the symptom as Jameson conceives of it is more complex than the concept of

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[82] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), 9. Prins, 'Historical Poetics, Dysprosody, and *the Science of English Verse*'.
[83] Felski, 'Suspicious Minds', 223.
[84] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 9.

hysteria might suggest.[85] Nonetheless, what I would like to take away from Felski's resuscitation of Ricoeur is her argument that the current critical climate tends to privilege readings that 'pivot on a fealty to the clarifying power' of context, however conceived. The notion of 'fealty' to context is particularly striking. The text, it seems, is not properly legible to suspicion without a commitment to context. Suspicion, we can then say, generates fealty in the form of 'faithful' readings.

Recent debates over the task of historical poetics represent attempts to identify the proper grounds of such fealty, or faithfulness. So too does the ongoing debate between surface reading and depth of symptomatic reading, as well as the preceding history of the 'theory wars' and smaller battles over deconstruction, and the seemingly perennial debates between historicist and formalist perspectives.[86] As Ben Saunders notes, despite the fact that criticism has for some time been 'at least superficially comfortable with the idea that interpretation involves an element of creative projection' it nonetheless continues to 'invoke the protocols of the interpretive community and/or the limitations of historical context to contain or constrain the more perverse and wilful readerly responses'.[87] In other words, self-consciousness has not curtailed suspicion's ability to enforce particular critical behaviours. The result, Saunders argues, is disagreement over the most appropriate terms of fealty.[88]

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[85] Christopher Nealon, 'Reading on the Left', *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009).
[86] One example is the current debate over the nature of 'surface reading'. See Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations*.108, no. 1 (2009): 1, Emily Hodgson Anderson, 'Why We Do (or Don't) Argue About the Way We Read', *The Eighteenth Century* 54, no. 1 (2013): 126, and Bruce Holsinger, '"Historical Context" in Historical Context: Surface, Depth, and the Making of the Text', *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (2011): 600. For more on the debates between notions and forms of theory see, for instance, Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982). See also Marjorie Levinson's discussions of historicism and formalism in Marjorie Levinson, 'Reflections on the New Historicism', *European Romantic Review* 23, no. 3 (2012).
[87] Ben Saunders, *Desiring Donne: Poetry, Sexuality, Interpretation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2006), 4.
[88] Ibid., 5.

That suspicious criticism tends to produce readings centred on 'fealty to the clarifying power' of a particular context is not itself necessarily pernicious. It becomes so, however, when such ways of reading either take themselves to be answering for the text, or to be a full accounting of the text. In *Desiring Donne*, Saunders sums up the suspicious position by saying that it has 'made us wary of saying that the text "speaks for itself"'.[89] To this he adds the observation that 'the profession has been more reluctant to consider some corollary positions. For if the text does not speak for itself, it follows that at some level we must make it speak for us'.[90] Saunders's argument is that uncritically suspicious criticism ventriloquises its object as a puppet of its own motivations. Felman's analysis of psychoanalytical readings of *The Turn of the Screw* offers a useful model for how this sometimes takes place. As we have seen, context for Felman was able to make it seem as though a text 'called for' a psychoanalytical interpretation. And for Felman this happens when 'literature is considered as a body of *language*', while the mode of suspicion—in her example, psychoanalysis—'is considered as a body of *knowledge*, whose competence is called upon to *interpret*' that body of language.[91] In other words, she writes, psychoanalysis 'occupies the place of a *subject*, literature that of an *object*; the relation of interpretation is structured as a relation of master to slave, according to the Hegelian definition'.[92] The text, as a body of language assumed to be without its own agency, is seen to require decoding: only then will the hidden contextual elements be revealed. This is why particular forms of hermeneutic mastery seem necessary. The text is thus bound to respond to an interpretation in that interpretation's terms. Felski's description of this effect is less

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[89] Ibid., 4.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Felman, *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, 5-6.
[92] Ibid., 5.

restrained: 'The cudgel of context', she writes, 'is commonly wielded to deprive the artwork of influence or impact, rendering it a puny, enfeebling, impoverished thing'.[93] In the case of either direct contextual influence or a broader notion of contextual kinship, the interpretive discourse can thus deny agency or 'thinking' to literary works. As discussed above in relation to Jarvis's and Felman's critiques of philosophical readings, it can seem as though the literary work 'is in effect *not recognized* as such' by a reading that reduces that work to being the product of a philosophy, raw material for philosophical work, or both.[94]

We need to be careful to not over-extend the implications of Felski's description of suspicious criticism *for* criticism, however. While she is clearly troubled by its dominance, Felski doesn't advocate the wholesale abandonment of suspicion. Rather, she is concerned to 'de-essentialize the practice of suspicious reading by disinvesting it of presumptions of inherent rigour or intrinsic radicalism—thereby freeing up literary studies to embrace a wider range of affective styles and modes of argument'.[95] Felski is not opposed to suspicion so much as to the way in which suspicion seems to insist that certain forms of criticism are the only legitimate forms. She writes that 'for many scholars in the humanities, [critique] is not one good thing but the only imaginable thing', and that her 'objection is not to the existence of norms as such—without which

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[93] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 162.
[94] Felman, *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, 6. Jarvis's introduction to *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* represents his attempt to resist this effect of 'reductive' philosophical readings by returning to poetry its own form of agency in 'verse thinking'. Moreover, we can think of the discussion of how to read Wordsworth's philosophical influence as an extended interrogation of different possibilities for what counts as a faithful reading. The reductive, 'metaphysical or epistemological readings' that trace 'Wordsworth back to some set of epistemological or metaphysical sources' can be understood as having asserted a particular ground for interpretation and thus for 'faithful' reading (3). Their founding assumption is that Wordsworth's philosophical context provides the interpretive means by which he might be properly understood. For Jarvis, however, the epistemological or metaphysical sources are a kind of malignant growth; something 'superimposed' upon an essentially different object (3).
[95] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 3.

thinking could not take place—but to the relentless grip, in recent years, of what we could call an antinormative normativity: skepticism as dogma'.[96] Sedgewick takes a similar attitude in her earlier essay. There she challenges both the assumption that suspicion and its disclosures are politically powerful, and the prevalence of suspicion's 'wide-spread critical habits', which are 'perhaps by now nearly synonyms with criticism itself'.[97] The problem, as Saunders puts it, arises if we choose to 'forget' that readings are partial; if we forget, as Jonathan Culler and Harold Bloom have both argued previously, that 'all readings are misreadings'.[98]

Faithful and Unfaithful Reading

Both Felski and Sedgewick call for a degree of freedom from the sort of critical work that suspicion, as a dominant critical culture, imposes. They suggest that even readings committed to 'fealty to the clarifying power' of context do not exhaust the useful ways of interpreting literary texts. This position finds a further ally in a strand of recent scholarship that addresses precisely this question of interpretive faithfulness, and the potential fruitfulness of 'unfaithful' ways of reading.

In *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge describes a form of deliberately 'unfaithful' reading, which he also calls 'creative' reading. Attridge proposes unfaithful or creative reading as a way of understanding texts as simultaneously produced within and distinct from contexts. 'It is a reading', Attridge writes, 'that is not entirely

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[96] Ibid., 9.
[97] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 124.
[98] Saunders, *Desiring Donne*, 188. Harold Bloom, 'The Necessity of Misreading', *The Georgia Review* 29, no. 2 (1975). Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

programmed by the work and the context in which it is read, including the psychological character of the reader, even though it is a response to […] text and context'.[99] Such a reading does not attempt to find the true meaning of the work according to some object of faith, but to respond to a text in such a way that the absence of a true meaning would be always open to view. 'In this sense', he writes, 'it might be called a necessarily unfaithful reading'.[100] The unfaithful reading is thus for Attridge one that, while responding to 'text and context', resists being 'programmed' by that context. The description implies that a degree of automation is at work in contextually 'programmed' readings. Such 'programmed' reading is thus implicitly likened to the dull application of a method.

Both Saunders and Lucas Harriman have recently built upon Attridge's distinction. In his discussions of criticism as a potentially ethical enterprise, Harriman uses the idea of a 'faithful' interpretation to describe a reading that repeats or replicates a feature perceived to be essential to its object. The 'faithful' interpretation is marked, Harriman writes, by its 'adherence to authorial intention, the cultural context of the work's production, or any other decoding methodologies that attempt to render a univocal, fixed meaning of the work'.[101] Each of these possibilities—'intention', 'culture', or other decoding methodology—acts as a potential horizon for interpretation. What we refer to as 'faithful' reading, Harriman suggests, is reading dedicated to interpreting in appropriate contextual terms. In opposition to such reading, Harriman then proposes what he calls a creative 'betrayal' of text and context that is analogous to

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[99] Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 80.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Lucas H. Harriman, 'The Russian Betrayal of G.K. Chesterton's *the Man Who Was Thursday*', *Comparative Literature* 62, no. 1 (2010): 42.

Attridge's notion of 'unfaithful reading'. Such a betrayal seeks new insights into texts without having to adhere to the interpretive horizon set by context. In a recent work combining criticism of John Donne with thinking about the nature of critical interpretation, Saunders also uses the idea of 'faithful' reading as a way to think about how a reading might conceive of itself as responding to context. All readings, he argues, involve 'making truth claims and often further claims regarding the omission or blindspots of earlier readings'.[102] As such, 'Each subsequent interpreter (re)declares his or her faithfulness to the object' despite having to admit, Saunders writes, 'that certain aspects of the text will of course escape consideration (so that even the newest readings are not *entirely* faithful)'.[103] To declare faithfulness, as Saunders describes it, is to declare the genuine—at times the exclusive—appropriateness of one's way of reading, often with the accompanying declaration or implication that all prior readings have been in some way 'unfaithful'.

The concepts of faithful and unfaithful reading provide useful tools for approaching the task of interpreting Oppen's and Silliman's poetry in the context of their philosophical influences. Building on Attridge, Harriman, and Saunders—as well as the work by Felski, Felman, and others, described above—we might identify two features of a 'faithful' reading. The first is the identification of a contextual element as the determining factor for interpretation. For faithful reading, as Harriman describes it, attention to an element of context (intention, culture, methodology, etc.) is crucial to attending properly to the text itself. The second feature is a reading's will to declare itself to be an appropriate interpretive act, and often exclusively so. Indeed, Saunders's

[102] Saunders, *Desiring Donne*, 188.
[103] Ibid.

analysis suggests that faithfulness is less a characteristic of a reading than a feature of the critic's ability to position a reading as faithful. As such, a 'faithful' reading is not one that correctly responds to a text through faithfulness to its context so much as one that takes itself as doing so: a reading operating according to a *perceived* parameter by which a work's meaning can be properly accessed. In this sense, the parameters of faithfulness and unfaithfulness, as with the notion of fealty described by Felski, cannot be said to exist *a priori*. Rather, they are critical constructs. It is only as a product of scholarly work, for instance, that the fact of Heidegger's influence on Oppen and the fact of Wittgenstein's influence on Silliman can count as contexts for further reading. In the current critical context, using Heidegger's philosophy to interpret Oppen's poems counts as a 'faithful' reading, for example, because scholarly work has argued for and established Heidegger's importance for reading Oppen's poetry.

Attridge's formulation of an 'unfaithful' way of reading, however, suggests that it is possible to respond 'to text and context' while simultaneously resisting the sort of control that such contexts typically wield over critical reading. As such, and building on this, Harriman and Saunders argue for unfaithful ways of reading that are not only not determined by the interpretive horizon set by context, but also resist the practice of declaring one's own readings as necessarily faithful. Such a reading would be 'unfaithful', in having a 'creative' rather than 'programmed' response to text and context. It would resist the seeming naturalness of centring one's reading of Oppen's poetry around Heidegger's philosophy, even while recognising Heidegger's influence. Moreover, Attridge and Harriman suggest that such an unfaithful reading might in fact be the more illuminating option. The same is true for the relationship of Silliman's poetry to Wittgenstein's philosophy. A faithful reading of Silliman's poetry would be

one that employed a Wittgensteinian vocabulary or methodology in reading Silliman's poems, and an unfaithful reading one that resisted doing so.

Importantly, unfaithful readings remain suspicious readings, in that they seek to illuminate otherwise hidden aspects of texts by responding to text and context, but they resist the terms of faithfulness that suspicion normally puts into place. Harriman's use of the term 'betrayal' to indicate a form of unfaithfulness highlights this aspect of that form of reading. Harriman argues that such reading refuses the demands of 'correct' and faithful interpretation, and that in so doing it is able to force the text to betray itself, to give itself away:

> These multiple meanings of betrayal—an act of disloyalty, to be sure, but also a revelatory translation of the unknown, a boundary-crossing 'handing over' from one sphere to another—are all present in each usage of the word, and each factors into my discussion of readings that betray their objects.[104]

The combination of disloyalty and revelation suggests the ethos of the unfaithful readings that I am seeking. So, too, does Harriman's claim that in such a reading the 'elements of the work that have been deadened by a multitude of faithful readings are reactivated'.[105] In this, unfaithful reading resembles Sedgewick's notion of 'recuperative' reading.[106] Further, in being premised by the argument that all readings are to some extent misreadings, the unfaithful reading promises a form of fidelity to the potential of texts to exceed the explanatory powers of context.

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[104] Harriman, 'The Russian Betrayal of G.K. Chesterton's *the Man Who Was Thursday*', 44.
[105] Ibid., 51.
[106] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*.

Approaching George Oppen and Ron Silliman

It is with the productive possibilities of both faithful and unfaithful reading in hand that this study approaches Oppen, Silliman, and the question of how to interpret their work in light of their philosophical influences. In doing so I remain within the bounds of suspicion. At the same time, however, I hope to test the demands of faithfulness by producing both faithful and unfaithful responses to their poems. My motivation for performing both kinds of reading is twofold. First, and most important, is the belief that poetry cannot entirely be accounted for by the critical application of the philosophy that influenced it. A Heideggerian reading of Oppen's poems, for example, does not fully account for those poems—or 'solve' them, to use a term employed by both Felman and Felksi. Of course, a faithful reading does offer insight into the poetry in question, and its findings have a validity. But such a reading does not exhaust interpretation's ability to illuminate the works in question. Rather than jettison the insights that might be gleaned from faithful reading I propose that faithful reading be met with unfaithful reading. The contribution of both forms of reading provides a new basis for understanding Oppen's and Silliman's poetry, and for understanding what these alternative ways of reading offer to criticism. Second, in the specific cases of Oppen and Silliman, interpretations that use the method or vocabulary of the philosophical influence fail to fully account for the poetry partly because, as shall be clear in the coming chapters, both poets self-consciously produce a gap between their poetry and the relevant philosophical vocabularies.

Precisely what this means for each of the two poets will become apparent in the coming chapters, but it is worth noting here that Silliman and Oppen produce that gap

through the use of what I will be calling 'meta-poetry'. By 'meta-poetry' I mean what Alfred Weber has referred to elsewhere as 'self-reflexive' poetry, or poetry about poetry. Oppen's and Silliman's poems repeatedly refer to the production of poems, and in so doing actively provoke suspicion of their own gestures.

Meta-poetry has taken various forms over the long history of poetry. We might include as examples Horace's *Ars Poetica*, Pope's 'Essay on Criticism', and even the many moments from Shakespeare's plays wherein a character addresses the audience about the nature of the play currently underway. Meta-poetry has a strong presence in twentieth-century poetry also. We can think for instance of Marianne Moore's 'Poetry' ('I, too, dislike it'),[107] Wallace Stevens's 'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction' or the last of Ezra Pound's cantos: 'I have tried to write Paradise'.[108] Each of these examples functions differently, and not surprisingly meta-poetry takes very different forms in Oppen's and Silliman's very different oeuvres. For both Oppen and Silliman, however, the meta-poetry tends toward the sort of effect suggested by J. Hillis Miller in *The Linguistic Moment*. The meta-poetic poem, he writes,

> already contains signs and other signs interpreting those signs, both the textual origin and the commentary on that origin, so that the critic's work is already done for him, just as a manhole cover with the words *Manhole Cover* cast in its metal (I have seen such a one in London) does not seem to need our labelling to have a name. […] Words in such a poem about poetry perform a double function. They are both text and commentary. The words are both the manhole

[107] Marianne Moore, *Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 36.
[108] Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1950), 822.

> cover and the words *Manhole Cover*. The poem constantly pulls the rug out from under itself, so to speak, blows its cover. It constantly deprives itself of that origin or ground with which it seems at the same time to provide itself.[109]

What is striking about Miller's formulation is not just the complex self-reflexivity it describes, but that here meta-poetry has already taken on the task of self-interpretation. The self-reflexivity of meta-poetry thus makes the poem an object for interpretation and simultaneously makes that poem into an interpretive agent. This is true of both Oppen's and Silliman's uses of meta-poetry. For Oppen, meta-poetry enables him to establish ontological goals for his poetry while at the same time allowing him to think through the poetry's failure to achieve those goals. For Silliman, meta-poetry allows him to show the relationship between the poem and the act of reading it as socially constituted, while also allowing him to challenge essentialist understandings of poet, reader, or their relation. Both poets thus use meta-poetry to produce different degrees and forms of ironic distance between the poetry and its philosophical influences. The meanings of this distance change depending on how the poetry is being read. What this means for the coming study is that, given the ironic distance established by meta-poetry, Oppen's and Silliman's relationship to the philosophies of Heidegger and Wittgenstein can never be one of simple duplication or naive adherence. Any attempt to read the influence of those philosophies in the poetry must be alert to the forms of interrogation, antagonism, or play involved in their active engagement with the solutions that the philosophies presented.

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[109] J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), 4.

This relationship between Oppen, Silliman, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein makes these poets particularly useful as case studies of the relationship between post-war American poetry and twentieth-century continental philosophy. They also make an excellent focus because—more so than other Objectivists like Louis Zukofsky and Lorine Niedecker, or other Language poets like Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, or Bob Perelman—Oppen and Silliman engage with their philosophical influences directly and make them central to their thinking. Each of the chapters to come makes its own argument about either Oppen's or Silliman's poetry. These individual arguments are formed from the relationship between the poetry in question and the philosophy being used as a frame for interpretation. More broadly, however, this thesis argues that, despite the great differences between Heidegger and Wittgenstein, both Oppen and Silliman use philosophy to create poetry that responds directly to a time of historical and cultural crisis. Oppen seeks a phenomenological experience that is like Heidegger's concept of *Ereignis*, the event of being's disclosure, because he believes that this experience can resist the ideologies behind capitalist culture and American war-time atrocity. For Silliman, Wittgenstein's philosophy demonstrates how language's meanings are dependent on its purposive social uses and on the 'forms of life' determined by such uses. This allows Silliman's poetry to emphasise, politicize, and to critique the intersection of everyday language and everyday life. By contending with what Wittgenstein calls the 'grammatical criteria' of meaning, Silliman's poetry discloses in new and powerful ways the political antagonisms of his time. Further, this thesis argues that while reading Oppen's and Silliman's poetry in terms of their philosophical influences produces an intensified image of the text's relation to its contextual discourse, it often neglects the ways in which a poem might be meaningful within competing discourses beyond the poet's understanding or intention. Therefore,

reading poetry composed in relation to one philosophical discourse requires also reading from outside the terms of that discourse in order to find alternate understandings.

Demonstrating these broader conclusions casts new light upon the type of philosophical influence at work in American poetry in the second half of the twentieth century, especially for Oppen and Silliman. They also have implications for the relations between philosophy and post-war American poetry, and, more broadly, between philosophy and modern literature. As we have seen, Heideggerian or Wittgensteinian readings of Woolf, Stein, Stevens and Beckett (as just a few prominent examples) tend to be launched upon claims of 'kinship' between the poetic or literary thinking taking place in the works and the philosophical thinking taking place in the philosophies.[110] Given the preceding discussion of faithful reading, we are justified I think in testing the limits of reading according to 'kinship'.

In order to address these questions, this study reads the poetry of Oppen and Silliman in light of the philosophies of Heidegger and Wittgenstein. Each philosophy thus serves as the means to both a faithful and an unfaithful reading according to its relationship with the poetry in question. First I read Oppen in terms of Heidegger (faithful) and in terms of Wittgenstein (unfaithful). Turning the tables, I then read Silliman in terms of Wittgenstein (faithful) and in terms of Heidegger (unfaithful). There is, in addition, a third co-ordinate or influence: the political-economy of Karl Marx. While Marx is not used as the dominant vocabulary for a reading of either Oppen or Silliman, his impact on both poets informs all four attempts to articulate philosophical understandings of their works. I have declined to offer a specifically

[110] Mildenberg, 'Openings', 43, 45-6.

Marxist reading, however, because, in being held in common by both poets, Marx's influence does not allow an unfaithful reading of either poet. As such, part of the challenge undertaken by the coming chapters is to see how Marx's influence is affected by the competing perspectives offered by Heidegger and Wittgenstein.

Answering these questions also requires that something be said about the concepts of Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian reading. In describing academic uses of theory, Felski writes that

> While accounts of literary theories typically center on their big-picture claims (about power, desire, society, language), such theories translate into quite specific—and highly regulated—ways of speaking, writing, and thinking tied to genre and milieu (the unspoken rules of the seminar, the scholarly article, the conference talk). And here it is often a matter of practical rather than abstract knowledge; the student learns by imitating the teacher, adopting similar techniques of reading and reasoning, learning to emulate a style of thought. Academic fields are shaped by what Howard Becker calls 'tricks of the trade'—a shared pool of tried-and-tested techniques that are deployed to make arguments, read texts, or solve problems.[111]

There is a hint of accusation in Felski's description of how critical practices are handed down. As with suspicion itself, however, the pattern that Felski observes is not necessarily pernicious. We could as easily understand the dynamic she describes as effective pedagogy, as learning from the experiments—both the successes and the

[111] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 25.

failures—of one's predecessors. Nonetheless, Felski's comments highlight the fact that ways of reading are institutionally produced and guided by an extended community of practitioners. Felski's is concerned here with suspicious hermeneutics, but the same holds for what we call 'Heideggerian' or 'Wittgensteinian' ways of reading. While there is a body of work by both Heidegger and Wittgenstein that must be attended to, and which I make use of in the coming chapters, the two philosophers themselves offer little guidance about how their philosophies can, let alone *ought to*, be used in a critical, interpretive context. We might ask, for instance, whether Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies are best served by an imitation of their approaches to texts (poetic or otherwise), or by the critical application of the conclusions that they draw from those approaches?

Whatever one's decision, both the Heideggerian and the Wittgensteinian readings represent a negotiation between previous critical work done in each philosopher's name, and the interpretive constraints and possibilities suggested by the philosophies themselves. Near the opening of this introduction I indicated some of the common threads running through critical uses of Heidegger and Wittgenstein. Each of these threads was premised on an ongoing discussion of potential analogies between forms of poetic practice and philosophical thinking. The situation is more intense for poets like Oppen and Silliman, since scholarly investigation of their philosophical influences has already produced terms by which a faithful reading might be carried out. Performing a Heideggerian reading of Oppen or a Wittgensteinian reading of Silliman may thus mean conforming to precedents set by a community of critics who have worked to interpret the 'meaning' of each philosophy and to determine the critical practices that properly result from it. Or performing such a reading may mean opposing

those precedents, finding a different meaning in the philosophy and arguing for different ways to make use of it. In my faithful readings of Oppen and Silliman I have sought to show the forms that the philosophies take in current critical deployments. I have, however, also sought out ways of extending these understandings with new possibilities for interpretation drawn from renewed attention to the thinking of both philosophers.

In the first chapter I perform a faithful reading of George Oppen, reading the poetry from the period of his most intense engagement with Heidegger's philosophy according to the interpretive possibilities that Heidegger's philosophy makes available. I show how, from this perspective, Oppen's poetry appears to stage an antagonism between, on the one hand, the desire to represent authentic phenomenological attention to being and, on the other, the problems that language itself poses to his ability to do so. I then argue that Heidegger allows us to conceive of this antagonism in the terms of 'formal indication': a method of indicating phenomenological content within a language considered insufficient to the task. In the second chapter I return to Oppen's work, this time with Wittgenstein's philosophy in hand as an interpretive framework. Reading through this deliberately unfaithful perspective, I show how Oppen's work seems less concerned with phenomenological insight and its communication than with how poetic analogues to phenomenological insight are produced through grammatical experiences of particular words in particular configurations. In a reading of Oppen's poem 'Of Being Numerous', I then argue that this allows him to stage an antagonism not between phenomenology communication, but between the competing demands that different forms of language-game have over his poem's compositional energies. In a brief interchapter I reflect upon the different understandings that the faithful and unfaithful readings of Oppen's poetry offered. I argue that the unfaithful reading was particularly

well suited to illuminating the antagonism in Oppen's poetry between Heidegger's philosophical influence and the poetry's capacity to accomplish its goals. I also argue that while a faithful reading that interprets poets' works according to their philosophical influences may be 'correct' given the evidentiary criteria established by the critical discourse of faithfulness, so too may be an unfaithful reading working with different criteria.

In the third chapter I perform a faithful reading of Ron Silliman's poetry according to Wittgenstein's philosophy. I show how Silliman uses new-sentence parataxis to test one's cultural literacy. I then extend this reading by arguing that this testing forms part of a larger interest in what Wittgenstein calls 'the life of the sign'. This 'life of the sign' is the experience of the sign's ability to mean within purposive contexts, an experience that ties the sign to its (often problematic) social involvement. In the fourth chapter I perform an unfaithful reading of Silliman's poetry, reading him according to Heidegger's philosophy. I argue that, from this perspective, Silliman's poetry comes into view as a deliberate poetic disclosure of his specific historical moment. Particularly I show how Silliman's work discloses the transience, withdrawal, and the enframing at work in late-capitalist America. In the conclusion I reflect on the understandings that the faithful and unfaithful readings have produced. I show that not only are both approaches able to illuminate different aspects of Oppen's and Silliman's poetry, but that the combination of faithfulness and unfaithfulness is particularly well suited to showing the differences between their poetry and the philosophies. I suggest that Heidegger's and Wittgenstein' s philosophies do not produce practices of adherence or duplication in post-War American poetry so much as complex forms of inspiration, antagonism, irony, and poetic testing in relation to the possibilities that the philosophies

would seem to make available. Finally, I suggest that one reason that Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies remain influential on criticism is because they represent two broad forms of response to contemporary modernity that remain relevant within our current, late-capitalist era.

'So spoke of the existence of things': George Oppen, Martin Heidegger, and the Poetics of Being.

> Thus the term 'phenomenology' expresses a maxim which can be formulated as 'To the things themselves!' It is opposed to all free-floating constructions and accidental findings; it is opposed to taking over any conceptions which only seem to have been demonstrated; it is opposed to those pseudo-questions which parade themselves as 'problems', often for generations at a time.
>
> —Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.50.

Obscurity and the Poetics of Being

In 1934, George Oppen published his first collection of poems, *Discrete Series*, which was to be his last for nearly three decades. It was a slim volume, only thirty-one pages, but already packed with Oppen's characteristic density, difficulty, and concern with the everyday materials against which we continually measure and understand our humanity. The collection was published with a preface from Ezra Pound, in which Pound compares Oppen's poetry to that of Keats.[112] 'The charge of obscurity', Pound writes,

> has been raised at regular or irregular intervals since the stone age, though there is no living man who is not surprised on first learning that KEATS was

[112] George Oppen, *New Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 2008), 3.

> considered 'obscure.' It takes a very elaborate reconstruction of England in Keats' time to erect even a shaky hypothesis regarding the probable fixations and ossifications of the then hired bureaucracy of Albemarle St., London West.[113]

By 1934 Keats had been dead for 113 years, and the Romanticism of which he was a part had become so much part of the culture that no one then living could remember a time in which Keats's lyrics were 'obscure'. Time has rendered them legible, implicitly even to the bureaucrats of Albemarle St., London West. Pound's analogy is characteristically optimistic. It suggests that Oppen's obscurities are like those of Keats, if not in form or content then at least in being the outcome of a poetic avant-garde, and if the Albemarle St. bureaucrats can assimilate Keats's obscurities, their future equivalents will assimilate Oppen's as well.

Today Oppen's readers might object to the analogy for two reasons. First, despite Pound's support of Objectivism, and his hopes for what he seems to have considered an extension of imagist poetics into a new generation,[114] Oppen's Objectivist poetry has never entered the cultural mainstream to the degree of Keats's. A more fitting object for Pound's hopes might have been his old friend, William Carlos Williams, who has achieved more mainstream recognition partly as a poet of the American vernacular. Oppen's is not the same Objectivism as Williams's, and his is especially not a poetry of the vernacular. Nor is his a poetry of the voice, and poetry of the voice is the direction in which the mainstream of American poetry was headed. Much of Pound's short

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[113] Ibid.
[114] Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas, 'What Were the "Objectivist" Poets?', *Modernism/Modernity* 22, no. 2 (2015).

preface to *Discrete Series*, however, is dedicated to asserting the difference between the obscurity of Oppen's poetry and that of Williams's. Looking back on the preface in 1962, Oppen is struck by the perspicacity of Pound's assessment ([Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (UCSD 16, 1, 65)).

The second objection that one might raise to Pound's analogy is that Oppen's 'obscurities' are not simply a matter of his being on the avant-garde, or of being new. In a letter to Michael Heller looking back on his collections of the 1960s, Oppen writes that

> They mean to say *Being* I had supposed myself to be speaking with dazzling clarity The lumps, the chunks, that which one cannot not see[.] (SL 248)[115]

Though Oppen supposes himself to be 'speaking with dazzling clarity' he writes in the poem 'Route', in *Of Being Numerous*, that

> One man could not understand me because I was saying
> simple things; it seemed to him that nothing was being
> said. I was saying: there is a mountain, there is a lake[.] (*NCP* 197)

[115] I have kept as closely as possible to the punctuation and spacing of Oppen's. Where Oppen has made alterations or corrections I have abided by the corrected or altered form. In some cases, I have used block-quotations for quotations where the large gaps between words seem important to Oppen's meaning. Where the gaps did not seem to add to the meaning of Oppen's sentences they have been omitted or incorporated into the sentence.

On one level Oppen is decrying a charge of obscurity similar to that of which Pound spoke in his 1934 preface. He seems to feel, at least, as though difficulty of comprehension were simply a matter of unfamiliarity. At another level, however, there are 'obscurities' in Oppen's work—we might also want to call them 'difficulties'—that are particular to him, and which are the product of a poetics committed to highlighting the perceived obscurity of those objects around us in the world. This commitment was increasingly a part of Oppen's thinking, especially after his return to the United States and to poetry in the late 1950s. In a letter to his sister, June Oppen Degnan, c.1963, Oppen writes:

> [Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (UCSD 16, 1, 4).

This struggle to 'find the words' for an 'intuition of existence' accounts for much of Oppen's characteristic intensity. He sought a means of expressing this fundamental intuition in a manner that would do justice to the actuality of the existence of things; which he would bring in under Zukofsky's concept of 'sincerity' and which he would himself call the poem's 'test of truth'.[116] For Oppen, finding the words for one's intuition of the existence of things includes also the necessity of finding a way of expressing what we might call, in keeping with our terms so far, the 'obscurity' of the things amongst which one exists. He writes elsewhere that [Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (UCSD 16, 13, 7) and that [Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (UCSD 16, 16, 1). Oppen never gives up this notion that the 'things', and the experience of those things, are other to the language that we use to speak of and to apprehend them, and need not be used in poetry as symbols of anything other than

[116] George Oppen, 'The Mind's Own Place', *Kulchur*, no. 10 (1963).

existence itself.[117] What we might call the 'excess' of reality over language, in the moment in which the poet tries to be faithful to his 'intuition of existence', makes each utterance an encounter with an ineradicable obscurity.

While this aspect of Oppen's thinking and writing was particularly prominent after his return to poetry in the 1960s—intensified by his reading of philosophers such as Maritain, Heidegger, and then Hegel—it is already present in his earliest poetry. For example, in the ninth poem of *Discrete Series*, untitled as so many poems of that collection are, we read:

> Closed car—closed in glass—
> At the curb,
> Unapplied and empty:
> A thing among others
> Over which clouds pass and the
> alteration of lighting[.] (*NCP* 13)

Oppen is not yet employing a philosophical vocabulary in his work, but here nonetheless is already that attempt to find a verbal register for a thing's existence and, in this period of Oppen's intensifying Marxist commitment, its place within the social whole. This entire first stanza is given over to bringing out a form of uncanny actuality.[118] The first two lines name and locate the car, with a combination of em

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[117] Nicholls provides an excellent account of Oppen's reading of particular philosophers in *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*.
[118] Indeed, Rachel Blau du Plessis introduces the term 'uncanny' for Oppen's poetry in '"Uncannily in the Open": In Light of Oppen'.

dashes and line-breaks isolating the phrases that describe and locate it. There is an oddness in the syntax, however, that gives a particular form to the car's status as 'A thing among others'. Oppen holds off the moment of predication, denying the car the verb that would make it the subject of a proper main clause. Verbless, the car is as syntactically passive as it is 'Unapplied and empty'; an object 'Over which clouds pass'. Though passive, the car is nonetheless a source of fascination, actual and thing-like but also strange, a collection of reflective surfaces. It is as though its being 'closed in glass', reflecting the sky and idle at the curb, has allowed a form of uncanniness to enter Oppen's perception. It is only when it is given a verb in the next stanza, when 'Moving in traffic', that 'This thing is less strange' (*NCP* 13). As with the moments of intuition that Oppen would talk of later in his life, the car is apprehended as emphatically thing-like because its removal from normal activities has allowed for a new form of perception.

If we were to interpret this moment in the poem in the manner of late-Heideggerian philosophy, we might say that Oppen's poem works as a poetic disclosure of the thingly aspect of the car. Normally as a piece of equipment, Heidegger might say, the thingly nature of the thing is hidden from view, hidden by its readiness-to-hand, for instance, legible primarily in terms of its utility.[119] The activity of the artwork, then, is what enables us to think the car's thingliness without reducing it to its utility. But, of course, *Discrete Series* was written prior to Oppen's engagement with Heidegger, and a faithful reading of this particular work runs in a different direction. As many of Oppen's

[119] This is a central line of thought in 'The Origin of the Work of Art' in Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Edward Robinson John Macquarrie (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008). See also David Nowell Smith, *Sounding/Silence: Martin Heidegger at the Limits of Poetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 29.

readers have pointed out, the poems of *Discrete Series* were composed during a period of global economic crisis to which Oppen was particularly sensitive. It was in 1935, soon after the publication of *Discrete Series*, that George and Mary joined the Communist Party and became active in its local efforts on behalf of the jobless and otherwise dispossessed.[120] Written in 1934, Oppen's 'intuition' of the existence of the car is joined by a desire to locate the object within the sphere of commodity production. As Nicholls points out, Oppen's concern in this early volume is for the '"sense of the poet's self among *contemporary* things" [...] for the world of *Discrete Series* contains no wheelbarrows and agricultural implements (or indeed petals and fountains) but elevators, fridges, cars, steam-shovels, and tug boats'.[121] The interesting tension for Oppen in 1934 is that the object suddenly seen for its existence is a newly produced outcome of factory mass-production; if it is seen intensely and uncannily it is also at the same time a potential nexus for false consciousness. The light that reveals it in motion is, at the end of the poem, 'a false light' (*NCP* 13) of the sort found in cities, its actuality co-opted by the alienation that surrounds it.

This poem was written in the early days of Oppen's career, but it nonetheless presents in microcosm the challenge that would continue to face him for the remainder of his career. If the aim is to find the words for that intuition of existence, and which to him seems to precede language itself, part of the challenge lies in the need to nonetheless honour the contemporary moment in which that intuition occurs and which makes it necessary.

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[120] Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 17-18.
[121] Ibid., 7.

As such, a crucial context setting the parameters for a faithful reading of Oppen's poetry is that sense of historical crisis from *out* of which the poems were composed. Mary Oppen recalled that in 1934 New York had 'an air of disaster' to it.[122] The Depression, George said, 'almost cost us our reason; we could not bear the sight of what had happened. It threw us into twenty years of political frenzy'.[123] It was this 'political frenzy' that famously led to what has been referred to as Oppen's 'silence', a period of approximately twenty-five years in which he wrote next to no poetry and published none. 'I stopped writing perhaps you know for some twenty odd years', Oppen wrote in 1969; 'the catastrophe of human lives in the 'thirties […] seemed to me to put poetry and the purposes of poetry in question'.[124]

It is difficult to interpret this period in Oppen's career, for nearly all of Oppen's accounting for it comes much later and often represents ongoing attempts to either figure out or to justify what had taken place. In this way, however, Oppen participates in his own discourse of faithfulness, establishing certain terms for what a faithful reading of his poetry could look like. The sense that the poetry ought to be interpreted in terms of historical crisis, for instance, continues to hold a strong sway over interpretation, even if quite what that crisis was and means has shifted. However, if Oppen writes that poetry seemed frivolous in the face of the immensity of human suffering in the 1930s and the direct political action it seemed to demand, he would elsewhere endorse Hugh Kenner's impatient assertion that, after *Discrete Series,* it had simply taken twenty-five

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[122] Mary Oppen, *Meaning a Life: An Autobiography* (Boston: Black Sparrow Press, 1976), 151.
[123] George Oppen, *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2007), 91.
[124] Oppen, *Selected Letters of George Oppen*, 186. I have replicated the spacing and punctuation as it appears in the original letters, or in du Plessis's reproductions in the *Selected Letters*, as closely as possible. References to the *Selected Letters* have been preferred over material from the UCSD archive except where no equivalent in the published material exists.

years to write the next poem (*SL* 181). Both positions might be true to some extent. Oppen certainly found himself diverted into political action instead of poetic production, but at the same moment there is something lurking in Oppen's silence, in his hesitation to speak in certain moments, that continues into his later poetry.[125]

Indeed, when Oppen did return to poetry it was not so much a matter of conquering the sense of crisis that had previously diverted him and Mary into their 'frenzy', but rather of finding a way of speaking within such periods of crisis. A number of critics have noted the degree to which Oppen's career has been defined by periods of crisis.[126] The Depression passed into the Second World War, in which Oppen saw military service and was seriously wounded during an attack in the Vosges Mountains. As Nicholls records, an '88 mm shell' landed in Oppen's foxhole, and 'Of the three [soldiers present], only Oppen, his body pitted with shrapnel, would live to be haunted by the attack, and haunted, too, by feelings of guilt for his inability to carry a wounded comrade to safety'.[127] When the Oppens were both back on American ground they were persecuted for their communist activities by the increasingly watchful government, which eventually lead to a decade of self-exile in Mexico.[128] In the 1960s, when the Oppens had returned to the US and to poetry, the crisis of American culture and history had hardly lessened, even if its economic character had changed shape. In a letter from

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[125] DuPlessis makes this argument herself in '"Uncannily in the Open": In Light of Oppen': 'But beyond that almost twenty-five years of not talking to the page (1934-58), Oppen's later poetry seems continuously to be stopping at virtually every line, at every porous white-space caesura, and then picking up the commitment again to go on' (188).
[126] See, for instance, G. Matthew Jenkins, 'Saying Obligation: George Oppen's Poetry and Levinasian Ethics', *Journal of American Studies* 37, no. 03 (2003): 33, and Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*. Michael Davidson is very good on this also in the introduction to Oppen's *New Collected Poems*. See also Robert Baker, *In Dark Again in Wonder: The Poetry of René Char and George Oppen* (Notre Dame, IN: University Of Notre Dame Press, 2012).
[127] Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 20.
[128] See both *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism,* and Eric Hoffman, 'A Poetry of Action: George Oppen and Communism', *American Communist History* 6, no. 1 (2007), for information on this period of Oppen's life.

1965, Oppen refers to his horror at the actions taking place in Vietnam ('dropping burning gasoline on people from helicopters'), as well as the need for a form of direct political action that he predicted would not take place.[129] As Oppen puts it in 'Of Being Numerous', 'They await // War, and the news / Is war // As always' (*NCP* 174). The poem is threaded through with the aura of destruction: 'It is the air of atrocity', Oppen writes, in 'An event as ordinary / As a President. // A plume of smoke, visible at a distance / In which people burn' (*NCP* 173).

The Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the assassination of President Kennedy all contributed to Oppen's renewed sense of cultural crisis, as though the fabric of the United States' cultural and social body were at the point of tearing open and falling apart. Against such circumstances, as we shall see in this and the next chapter, Oppen emphasises being itself, conceived as a kind of (often mineral) substantiality, as an ontological limit to ideological and historical processes. If, in the poem from *Discrete Series* quoted above, the sudden apprehension of the car 'closed in glass' as a 'thing among others' is tempered by the need to consider its commodity status, in later poetry the reverse need will become more and more crucial. For each object encountered in its contemporary social presence, it will become increasingly important to Oppen to have his poem register the being of that thing, particularly the fact of its substance, as a site of resistance to his culture and its crises.

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[129] Oppen writes: 'I think the people should march on Washington and arrest the president. And I think they should do so immediately -- tomorrow. […] Whereas, on the contrary, they are going to get used to this war. The power of the fait accompli. And it is indeed -- and horrifyingly -- impossible to attempt a stand of moral indignation, or to talk of atrocity. I am not actually able to say that I am opposed to dropping burning gasoline on people from helicopters. It is by now a method of war, and will be used until something more terrifying is developed' (*SL* 111-2).

In this way, just as crucial a context determining the parameters of a faithful reading of Oppen's later poetry is his engagement with philosophy, particularly the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. As with the historical context, Oppen's own comments on his life and his poetry already work to establish the terms with which they should be interpreted. Oppen claimed to have read Heidegger as early as 1950, and he continued reading the philosopher's work through the 1960s into the 1970s.[130] His personal writing and correspondence from this period emphasise Heidegger's importance. For instance, in a note written in 1966, he writes

> I had been reading, the day before and perhaps that afternoon, Martin Heidegger's *Essays on Metaphysics: Identity and Difference*, […] borrowed from the Brooklyn public library by Mary. I had been reading the first essay, 19 pages long, without being able to understand it clearly. Tho I was reading with great excitement and great effort. […]
>
> That night I sat up late, very carefully reading the essay, and after many hours I felt I had understood it -- It was very difficult for me to grasp the extreme idealist assumption on which it was based. When I had grasped it, I turned it over and over in my mind for a long time, unable to accept the assumption, but convinced that a part of the statement was of crucial importance to me, of such importance as to alter the subjective conditions of my life, the conditions of my thinking, from that point in time. (*SL* 135)

[130] Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 194. See also: Ffytche, 'The Arduous Path of Appearance', 192.

Oppen is vague about exactly what in that first of Heidegger's essays, 'The Principle of Identity', was of such importance to him. It was important enough, however, to exert its influence despite Oppen's inability, perhaps his unwillingness, to accept 'the extreme idealist assumption' on which the essay was based. Heidegger's writing was important enough, indeed, for him to quote a fragment from Heidegger's *An Introduction to Metaphysics* ('…the arduous path of appearance') on the fly-leaf of his 1965 collection *This In Which*. There are many other instances in Oppen's letters and notes in which Heidegger is used as a key conceptual touchstone. In 1968, for instance, he writes that 'a poem is really about myself. It is an instance of "being in the world" […] An account of being in the world, to stick to H[eidegger]' (*SL* 177). In another letter Oppen makes Heidegger's importance even more emphatic. 'Of the Heidegger', he writes, 'thinking of the poets I know, I believe this may be the most useful of the essays to get into poets' hands at this moment, the most likely to move things most sharply forward now' (*SL* 156). Similar comments occur throughout Oppen's correspondence.

A number of studies have responded to Oppen's reading of Heidegger and his comments about its importance by arguing for the centrality of Heidegger's philosophy to Oppen's later poetic thinking, as well as the importance of Heidegger as a framework for a faithful reading of Oppen's poems in general. Especially prominent is Nicholls's *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, which traces the development of Oppen's poetics and practice across his career. In the section of this work devoted specifically to Heidegger's influence, Nicholls notes that 'The importance of Heidegger to Oppen's thinking has often been acknowledged', but adds that 'the intensity and breadth of his engagement with the philosopher's writings has yet to be properly gauged'.[131] Part of

[131] Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 64.

Nicholls's larger project is thus to show how Oppen's attempt to 'speak of "Being"' in such works as *This In Which* 'is closely bound up with his intensive and often idiosyncratic reading of Heidegger in the early sixties'.[132] Indeed, one of the great strengths of Nicholls's study is the effort to which he has gone to chart, as precisely as possible, the idiosyncrasies of that reading and its effects on Oppen's thinking and composition.

Nicholls addresses the manner in which Oppen's ongoing concern with the relation between the individual and the things of his or her world becomes a particularly philosophical poetics. He does so in terms that are particularly useful for this thesis. Oppen's is a poetics, Nicholls argues, that takes the ethical concerns of Oppen's earlier 'silence' as a matter to be negotiated within poetic speech rather than something that requires the choice of political action over poetry. He writes that '*This in Which* (1965), a volume seen partly in the "light of the miraculous" […] announced a poetics of being derived partly from the philosophy of Heidegger, whose own understanding of beginnings underpinned an influential notion of poetic thinking'.[133] 'Heidegger', Nicholls writes, 'offered [Oppen] a response to those terrors of the new atomic age that had haunted *The Materials*, and he did so by making the retrieval of a certain poetic or "meditative" thinking a pressing necessity'.[134] This meditative thinking 'has the capacity to release its object from instrumentality', moving into a 'cadence of disclosure' that 'is not a matter of articulating a thought already had, but rather of

[132] Ibid., 63-4.
[133] Ibid., 2.
[134] Ibid., 66.

deploying the resources of writing to disclose the texture of thinking as it takes shape'.[135]

The phrase I would like to emphasises at this point is 'poetics of being'. Nicholls uses the term in passing, but I would like to re-deploy it as a name for Oppen's attempts to find the words for that intuition of existence that was fundamental to his thinking from the beginning. Nicholls writes, for instance, that 'already in *Discrete Series*, the syntax wants "is-ness" to register itself not as passive existence but as some kind of emergence in the world'.[136] The syntax wants to register existence in a specifically phenomenological way. In other words, poetry's capacity to grant presence, to give being and beings a channel by which they might be present, becomes central to Oppen's poetic thinking. In this, the idea of a poetics of being offers a unifying label for the faithful reading of Oppen's poetry. It would be a reading that seizes on the understanding of poetry and poetic thinking that Heidegger's philosophy made possible for Oppen, while simultaneously allowing that work and its thinking to respond to its historical moment. As we will see in the coming chapter, this sense of a poetics of being also underlies much of the 'obscurity' that characterises Oppen's poetry. It is a necessary feature of such a poetry—and as such the necessary grounds for a faithful reading—for it to strain to disclose an image of the obvious, that intuition of existence.

Although Nicholls's *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* used the term 'poetics of being' in 2008, in so doing it suggested a name for a focus of scholarly work that had been developing along these lines for some time. In 'The Pre-Position "Of":

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[135] Ibid., 72.
[136] Ibid., 15.

Being, Seeing, and Knowing in George Oppen's Poetry', for example, Paul Kenneth Naylor urges that Oppen's poetry is not 'merely Heidegger done over in modernist verse', and notes that 'Oppen seems to identify Heidegger as more of a fellow traveller along a similar "path" than as a philosophical mentor'.[137] Nonetheless, he writes that 'it is undeniable that an understanding of Heidegger's basic ontological claims animates a great deal of Oppen's poetry'.[138] The phrase 'Heidegger's basic ontological claims' is important. Many of the best readers of Oppen's relationship to Heidegger have taken pains to note how his use of the philosopher's thinking tended to reduce, alter, or misinterpret Heidegger's ideas.[139] Nevertheless, Naylor is right to note that Heidegger can usefully be used to understand what is at work in Oppen's poetry, particularly those 'basic ontological claims' like the intuition of the existence of things. Naylor investigates 'Of Being Numerous' and other poems from Oppen's most Heideggerian period for the forms of expression that assert ontological relations. Particular grammatical forms such as prepositional phrases and deictic pronouns, Naylor argues, act as 'demonstrations' locating objects or entities within space and time, or, as with the preposition 'of' that is the focus of his article, they indicate the 'prepositionality' of being itself.[140] The outcome, Naylor argues, is that Oppen's turn to the actuality of things is closely tied to language itself. His poetics makes 'words' themselves that which we live 'among'.[141]

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[137] Paul Kenneth Naylor, 'The Pre-Position "Of": Being, Seeing, and Knowing in George Oppen's Poetry', *Contemporary Literature* 32, no. 1 (1991): 102.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Nicholls' general argument is repeated, for instance, in David Herd, '"In the Open of the Common Rubble": George Oppen's Process', *Textual Practice* 23, no. 1 (2009).
[140] Naylor, 'The Pre-Position "Of"', 104.
[141] Ibid.

In a review essay addressing three books on Oppen's poetry, David Herd writes that Oppen 'works through philosophy to arrive at poetry, taking from systematic discourse the materials which might permit disclosure'.[142] As with Naylor's argument, the image Herd gathers is of Oppen carrying philosophical attitudes over into poetic speech. Herd writes that 'In his reading of philosophy Oppen arrives at resources—words—which enable him to go back into the language and in so doing to begin again to worry at the roots of things'.[143] This is the competing force within the gesture described by Naylor. If in Naylor's assessment being is carried over into language, the reciprocal gesture Herd notes is Oppen's carrying of that language back to the question of being. Matt Ffytche has further presented a strong and nuanced reading of Oppen's Heideggerian poetics in '"The Arduous Path of Appearance": Phenomenology and its Uncertainties in the Work of George Oppen'. He locates Oppen's turn to Heidegger within a broader trend in American poetry, writing that 'Just as Heidegger extracted from Husserl a return "To the things themselves!", so modernist American poetry, at a similar time, developed its own refusal of discursive and rhetorical encumbrances, and a return to the simple evidence of things'.[144] In particular, Ffytche writes that Oppen 'looked to philosophy to corroborate this weighty presentiment of "seeing" as the source of ontology, as well as an ethical task'.[145] He also suggests that Oppen's

> consideration of the integration of light, thinghood, ontology and revelation has parallels with Heidegger's description of phenomena as 'the totality of what lies in the light of day or can be brought to the light'. For both writers the very

[142] Herd, 'In the Open of the Common Rubble', 149.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ffytche, 'The Arduous Path of Appearance', 189-90.
[145] Ibid., 196.

> unadorned notion of seeing something [...] acts also as an ontological statement about the subsistence of entities within a wider frame of reference than that of immediate perception.[146]

Locating Oppen's particular phenomenological poetics within a broader trajectory of twentieth-century philosophy and poetry, Ffytche aims to show that Oppen falls into similar traps in his attempts to align ontological insight, taking sight as a model for the revelation of being, with poetic speech. Like the philosophers, Ffytche argues,

> The poets, too, make their own turn to a pre-discursive or naïve realm of truth. In statements of poetic theory, Oppen held to the notion that the poem precedes discourse. [...] That is to say, there is a primary object that the poet apprehends, outside of the words he uses to convey it.[147]

If in Ffytche's assessment, Oppen's ontology implies an epistemology predicated on a 'naive' form of experience, he nonetheless sees in Oppen's poetry that drive to find a way of putting ontological insight into language, to find a poetics capable of doing it justice and bearing the weight of its (perhaps 'naive') reality. At the same time, if disclosure in language is an ideal, it is not necessarily the case that Oppen's poetry achieves it. Ffytche's pleasing scepticism about the degree to which Oppen's poetry might be said to achieve its ontological promises provides a model for the next chapter, in which Wittgenstein's philosophy is used to perform an unfaithful reading, antagonistic to Oppen's own rhetoric of a poetics of being.

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[146] Ibid., 195.
[147] Ibid., 201.

There are too many scholars who have written along similar lines to deal with each here in detail.[148] Suffice it to note that a persistent perspective on Oppen's poetry of the 1960s, the period in which Heidegger was most prominent in his thinking, is that it attempts to reconcile what Ffytche calls that 'pre-discursive' intuition of existence with the capacities of language, especially poetic language. It is, in more Heideggerian terms, the attempt to test the capacity of poetry's disclosive powers, its intervention in that 'between' wherein the *logos* always already determines one's capacity to speak, in the face of a moment of insight not necessarily compatible with language.

Within this broad position are different ways in which one might choose to relate Oppen's poetic language and the intuition of existence. Wilkinson, for instance, writes that Oppen finds in Heidegger 'a vocabulary enabling him to sidestep the contradiction between object truth and representational truth, by transfiguring the object into the blaze of its standing-forth, in truth's objectified self-disclosure'.[149] In such a reading Oppen has a very Heideggerian notion of poetic language, as that which is alone capable of conferring to being any sort or degree of phenomenological presence. Michael Heller, like Naylor, writes that Oppen 'seems to want to dissociate one word from another as though to restore their Heideggerian Dasein, to give them back to the natural world from which they might have arisen'.[150] For Heller, Oppen's is a Heideggerian poetics

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[148] See also Henry Weinfield, *The Music of Thought in the Poetry of George Oppen and William Bronk* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), 39-40, Piotr Parlej, 'Testing the Image: The Double Interrogative in the Poetry of George Oppen', *Sagetrieb* 10, no. 1-2 (1991): 75, Lyn Graham Barzilai, *George Oppen: A Critical Study* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2006), 6, 63, and, Susan Thackrey, *George Oppen: A Radical Practice* (San Francisco: O Books, 2001), 33-45.
[149] John Wilkinson, 'The Glass Enclosure: Transparency and Glitter in the Poetry of George Oppen', *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 2 (2010): 223.
[150] Michael Heller, 'Speaking the Estranged: Oppen's Poetics of the Word', *Chicago Review* 50, no. 2/3/4 (2004): 140.

attempting to bring to poetry the sense of ontology present in Heidegger's thought, including his desire to renew the ontological richness of particular terms and ideas, but one not committed to Heidegger's precise ontology of language. Poetry is not necessarily the 'truth' of being's disclosure, but is an attempt to enact in poetic form some sense of the intuition of being that has occurred outside of language itself. Others have argued along similar lines. Parlej, for instance, writes that 'The ontological interests of Heidegger's philosophy (concentration on "what-is") parallel Oppen's own "testing" of existents in poetry'.[151] I stand closest to Heller's position. Oppen's poetics of being is not entirely consonant with Heidegger's philosophy, particularly his later understanding of the role of the *logos* in the emergence of being into presence even outside of actual acts of speaking. Rather, Oppen's Heideggerian thinking resembles aspects of the philosopher's early thinking, where philosophical language seeks a form of textual analogue capable of indicating the direction in which a fundamental 'intuition of existence' might lie.

There are of course those who take the ontological and phenomenological perspective on Oppen as too dominant in the critical discourse. Xavier Kalck has argued that 'the poet's pursuit of a poetics of being has remained too much of an overall philosophical theme to his readers, trying to reconcile metaphysics with the insistence on the detail of reality in American modernist poetry and especially in Objectivist poetics'.[152] Similarly, Rachel Blau Du Plessis has written that

[151] Parlej, 'Testing the Image', 75.
[152] Xavier Kalck, 'Silence "Even against the Language": George Oppen's Poetics of Infant Joy and Infant Sorrow', *Études Anglaises* 62, no. 1 (2009).

> Peter Nicholls is quite well-versed in European philosophy, and this is the Oppen he creates; it is both a new and a welcome one. And Oppen clearly did work through his reading of the key philosophers whom Nicholls so precisely identifies [...] However, the sociality of Oppen, his relations with others (as dramatised in the letters), the intense familial connections also important to his poetry and poetics are underplayed (not absent, but underplayed) in Nicholls' interpretation. For in addition to the theoretically intense Oppen, the letters and even some of the working papers suggest a ready, if sometimes acerbic, challenging sociality with a group of people whose presence was important, perhaps crucial, to the formation of his second career.[153]

Du Plessis's comments reflect a broader contest between what had been a prevailing Marxist position and the more recent phenomenological position. Both positions have strong claims on the parameters of interpretive faithfulness. If Du Plessis resists Nicholls's privileging of the phenomenological over the sociality and communitarian nature of Oppen's practice, she nevertheless acknowledges the point at which her preferred aspect of his poetics enters into those privileged by Nicholls:

> If this activity [corresponding in letters] was self-instructive for George, it provided a tain-thick mirror in which he could see his own opacity, his own capacity, his own thinking […] Oppen began proposing complex thought through writing—thinking with himself dialogically on the page; setting down propositional insight at the extreme, even propositions and feelings that almost contradicted each other; talking back to and through certain key texts of

[153] DuPlessis, 'Oppen from Seventy-Five to a Hundred', par. 74.

> contemporary philosophy and theory (as Peter Nicholls has incisively shown); and engaging seriously with poetics and politics in letters.[154]

Though she doesn't mention the philosophers, Du Plessis's invocation of 'propositional insight' as a factor of Oppen's 'thinking with himself' begins to shade into the image of Oppen's poetics offered by Nicholls. Nonetheless, it is certainly true that Oppen's poetry is not reducible to its Heideggerian content. As suggested by the introduction to this thesis, the purpose of this chapter is not to argue that Oppen's poetry can be entirely explained by its relationship to Heidegger's philosophy alone. The aim, rather, is to test how Oppen's poetry is understood, or the image of Oppen's poetry that is created, when one reads him through a Heideggerian framework.

In this chapter I look at Oppen's 'Poetics of being' in detail. It is not possible in a single chapter such as this to present anything near a complete set of ways in which Oppen might be compared to or read in terms of Heidegger's philosophy. Rather, this chapter represents one way of reading Oppen according to that influence. In it I argue that interpreting with Heidegger's philosophy in hand presents an image of Oppen's poetry wherein it is defined by the two forms of 'obscurity' discussed above. The poetry forms an attempt to find a poetic means of registering that otherness, that obscurity of the substantive thing, that is characteristic of Oppen's moments of insight. I argue that this attempt to register the obscure otherness of the substantive required of Oppen a concept of the poem founded in the inability, and often the unwillingness, to speak properly of its object.

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[154] Ibid., par. 22-23.

One consequence of this approach is a need to recognise the fact that what counts as a Heideggerian reading in this chapter aligns with the critical tradition of reading Oppen's work in relation to Heidegger's philosophy, rather than with the model of reading that Heidegger himself provides. In Heidegger's 'elucidations' [*Erläuterungen*], the task of thinking is to submit to the originary saying, the happening of truth, taking place in the poem. Poets are those who have ontological experiences that take form in their works as a striving, dynamic unity of earth and world.[155] Once the work exists, thought responds to its newly created truth by submitting to it and thus preserving it. This way of reading is explicitly opposed, Heidegger writes, to those who, reading from 'aesthetic' paradigms, have already decided the nature of the experience to be had, or what is to be discovered in that experience.[156] Criticism that reads in relation to Heidegger thus opposes the sort of reading Heidegger himself performed, for the forms of its explanations are already present in Heidegger's own writings. If this seems odd, it nonetheless constitutes the majority of Heideggerian readings. As with the examples from Naylor, Parlej, Heller and Ffytche above, the task is generally perceived to be the elucidation of the effect that Heidegger had on Oppen's thinking and the form his poetry took, rather than to investigate Oppen's poetry for the ontological insights they are able to provide. In my reading of Oppen's Heideggerian poetry I both follow and test this critical tradition.

I argue that from a Heideggerian position Oppen's poetry resembles Heidegger's method of 'formal indication'. In order to demonstrate this, this chapter is divided as follows. The first section below looks at how Heidegger's influence on Oppen led to his

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[155] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 67-69.
[156] Ibid., 25, 73.

development of an ontology centred on substantivity, and the forms of poetic utterance aimed at disclosing this aspect of being. The second section then shows how, in Oppen's poems, this substantive ontology is in tension with the failure of the mind, and particularly of poetic thinking, to contend with or to understand that substantivity. The final section of this chapter then argues that Oppen's poems, aware of this tension, are like Heidegger's 'formal indicators'. They produce forms of expression and enquiry meant to direct one towards a phenomenological experience that they cannot communicate. What this chapter attempts to perform, in other words, is what this thesis has introduced as a 'faithful' reading of Oppen. That is, a reading that follows the line of critical thought seemingly required by the contexts surrounding the composition of Oppen's poetry. In the subsequent chapter, having performed this reading, the theoretical orientation will be reversed and I will show that what appears as formal indication from a Heideggerian perspective appears, from a Wittgensteinian perspective, to be an attempt to direct readerly attention toward a 'grammatical' experience of particular words.

'the motes / In the air', Ereignis

Towards the opening of *Being and Time,* Heidegger explains that phenomenology is not the object of his enquiry, but the method.[157] It is the way one works his or her understanding towards being, towards '*that which shows itself in itself*, the manifest', without capitulating to received understandings.[158] Phenomenology is positioned as a means of accessing 'the things themselves' in a way that bypasses the false images of

[157] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 50.
[158] Ibid., 51.

being presented by 'free-floating constructions', 'accidental findings', and 'pseudo-questions'.[159] It is, thus, 'primordially […] rooted in the way we come to terms with the things themselves' and 'removed from what we call "technical devices", though there are many such devices even in the theoretical disciplines'.[160] Phenomenology is primordial, that is, so long as it doesn't take on the methods of those modes of enquiry that interpose technical devices between the enquirer and the object of enquiry, and which detour one away from a primordial encounter.

The opening of this chapter showed how, even in *Discrete Series,* Oppen was concerned with things in the world. He took a particular interest in, and concentrated closely upon things like the 'Frigidaire' (*NCP* 7), the boat whose 'Sail flattens […] beneath the wind' (*NCP* 12), and that car which, 'closed in glass', was uncannily seen for its being one 'thing among others' (*NCP* 13). In Oppen's later poetry, following his reading of Maritain, Heidegger and others, this became a deeper ontological concern for the status of things in the world. As Ffytche puts it, for Oppen things, or 'simple presences[,] form the fundamental basis of human existence, the grounds for an ontology of life'.[161] Lyn Barzilai writes also that 'Like the philosopher Martin Heidegger (whose Theory of Being appealed to Oppen and was reflected in his work), Oppen believed in the independent existence of basic entities—they are "just there"'.[162] While, as Nicholls points out, the shape of Oppen's thinking on this is initially taken from Maritain, in the period in which he was reading Heidegger most intensely the role played by such 'things' becomes particularly pronounced. As such, Oppen's thinking

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[159] Ibid., 50.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Ffytche, 'The Arduous Path of Appearance', 197.
[162] Barzilai, *George Oppen: A Critical Study*, 6.

about things in the world forms the first pole of the torsional poetics of being I will trace in Oppen's poetry, between those 'things' that are objects of perception and the poem as a form of thinking.

The 37th section of Oppen's 'Of Being Numerous' provides a useful entry into this aspect of his poetry. It begins as follows:

> '. . . approached the window as if to see . . .'
> The boredom which disclosed
> Everything—
>
> I should have written, not the rain
> Of a nineteenth century day, but the motes
> In the air, the dust
>
> Here still. (*NCP* 186)

The quote that opens this section of the poem is from Henry James's 'The Story in It'. This story concerns the character Maud Blessingbourne, who

> when she lowered her book into her lap, closed her eyes with a conscious patience that seemed to say she waited; but it was nevertheless she who at last made the movement representing a snap of their tension. She got up and stood

> by the fire, into which she looked a minute; then came round and approached the window as if to see what was really going on.[163]

Blessingbourne has only a fragmentary presence in the poem, however. Oppen doesn't give any sense of her character, nor of the scene from which the phrase fragment emerges. It is, instead, a kind of prompt, a thing in itself standing in ambiguous relation to the succeeding stanzas.

There is a marvellous openness about this section of Oppen's long poem. In the first stanza of the ninth poem from *Discrete Series*, about the car closed in glass, each phrase leads into the next. Indeed, the withholding of the verb in that poem creates a form of suspense, pulling one onward through the logic of opposition at play across the stanzas. Here the opposite is true. The opening quote and the succeeding phrase about boredom are not syntactically joined; they sit alongside each other in suggestive but non-binding parataxis. If the em dash after 'Everything' suggests that what follows breaks into the poem as a kind of intrusive or parenthetical thought, possibly the author's, it is never closed. Lacking a return or syntactical closure, that em dash merely provides another, weaker form of paratactic motion. If we know in reading that the opening fragment is from James's story, we might make something of the 'rain / Of a nineteenth century day', but it is still a cryptic relation.

Only the final, two-word stanza in the section quoted above carries the syntax and energies from the preceding stanza across the break. The momentum of the sentence

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[163] Henry James, 'The Story in It', in *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (Soho Square London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1964), 308. Oppen writes in a letter to David Antin, in 1965, that the quotation, 'to see what really was going on', was 'from Henry James' (*SL* 116).

lands on 'Here still', emphasising both words and implicitly asserting the turn to existence as the outcome of boredom. There is a satisfying sense of culmination in this moment also, offering as it does the first point of syntactical completion. It is as though the dust's being here, and being here still, were the crystallisation of a thought that, until this point of completion and rest, had remained largely formless. This sense is only enhanced by the pun on the word 'still', which suggests that the dust not only remains, but is at rest, the completion and accumulation of the motion of the motes in the manner in which, syntactically, it brings the phrase to rest.

What are we to make, however, of the voice that breaks in to say what it 'should have written'? In this 37th section of 'Of Being Numerous' we are returned to Oppen's beginnings, to the first poem in *Discrete Series*:

[Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (*NCP* 5)[164]

As in the later poem, Oppen's initial concern is with boredom. There is no mention however of disclosure, nor of an 'Everything' to be disclosed. It is, instead, boredom that the character wishes to know *of* when, in the version of James's story that Oppen gives, Maude Blessingbourne turns to the window and looks out upon the rain, the road outside, and the world 'with which / one shares the century'. For Oppen in 1934 boredom drives Blessingbourne beyond her self-involvement and opens her, momentarily, to participation within a larger expanse of human time. The self-critical 'I should have written' of the later poem disavows the earlier approach. Boredom in 1968 has *disclosed,* and disclosed 'Everything'. Furthermore, this 'Everything' no longer

[164] Oppen adds an 'e' to the end of 'Maud' in his poem.

exists beyond the window in an external world of rain, roads leading into imagined distances, and the nineteenth century. What becomes relevant through boredom in 1968 lies now *inside* the room; it is 'the motes / In the air, the dust'. Really, we find, the fragment given in the later poem was as much Oppen's quotation of himself from 1934 as it was a quotation of James's story. Its message is not solely about boredom, but the rejection of his prior thinking about what it is that boredom does.

The notion that boredom discloses, and that what it discloses is 'Everything', is a particularly Heideggerian inheritance on Oppen's part.[165] In *What is Metaphysics?*—later reworked in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*—Heidegger describes what he calls the fundamental attunements [*Grundstimmung*] possible for *Dasein*. In its normal daily existence *Dasein*, the type of being possessed by humans, is absorbed by its concern for itself, its activities, its involvement in society, in particular things, and so on. In *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger likens this to a state of sleep, or not-being-there [*Nicht-Da-sein*], as opposed to the consciousness of being-there [*Da-sein*].[166] Even in our waking experience, he tells us, there are often times when we are simply 'not there', and indeed that it 'is an essential characteristic of man's very being that indicates *how* he is, so that a human being—insofar as he or she exists—is, in his or her being there, also always already away in some manner'.[167] Our waking being also includes some element of sleep, some turning away from being, such that the attunements are an awakening.[168]

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[165] Dembo, 'The Existential World of George Oppen'. Oliver Southall, '"Thus / Hides The": Discrete Series and the Spectre of Oppen's 1930s', *Textual Practice* 29, no. 6 (2015).
[166] Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 63.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Ibid.

But this, of course, is not quite correct. Heidegger quickly analyses his own conception and discovers that, really, attunements are always with us, they are essential to our being, and so it is not a matter of becoming attuned and awakening to being, but rather of changing attunements. Some attunements work to conceal being from us, but others work to awaken us, to disclose being to *Dasein*.[169] It is in 'Profound boredom' that Heidegger discovers a powerfully disclosive attunement.[170] 'Profound boredom', he writes, 'drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog, removes all things and men and oneself along with them into a remarkable indifference'.[171] This indifference, Heidegger writes, 'reveals beings as a whole'.[172] We find ourselves struck by the capacity of things to bore us, and thus find ourselves confronted by the priority of being over *Dasein*, in the midst of beings.

The moments in which one's attention is suddenly turned toward beings as a while, and for Oppen particularly toward the fact of being, are what Heidegger would come to refer to as '*Ereignis*', the 'event' of being's disclosure. What the term *Ereignis* points to, Thomas Prufer argues, is a complicated multi-valence within the experience of being.[173] 'The ordinary sense of *Ereignis* is event', he writes, but the word takes on two further meanings in Heidegger's use of it. The first

> returns to the root of the word *Ereignis*: *Auge*: eye. *Ereignis* is indeed derived from *Er-äug-nis*, be-eye-ing, although today no German hears that root in the

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[169] Ibid., 63-9.
[170] Ibid., 74.
[171] Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to the Task of Thinking (1964)* (San Francisco, California: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 99.
[172] Ibid.
[173] Thomas Prufer, 'Glosses on Heidegger's Architectonic Word-Play: Lichtung and Ereignis, Bergung and Wahrnis', *Review of Metaphysics* 44, no. March 1991 (1991): 609-10.

> word; the relation to *Auge*, eye, is a sunken etymology. But Heidegger charges the word *Ereignis* with another, second unusual meaning, hearing in the word, against all etymology, the root *eigen*, own, so that the meaning different from the ordinary meaning, event, is ambivalent: the extraordinary meaning is not only eyeing but also owning. Heidegger approves *appropriement* […] as the French translation of *Ereignis:* appropriation, coming into its own or taking itself as its own.[174]

If *Ereignis* has an analogue in sight it thus also has an ontological essence in owning. To see, in this sense, is thus not to set up an object for appropriation by knowledge in a subject-object relation but to be appropriated by the event of appearing. Martin Travers further emphasises the dual charge of *Ereignis* that takes up the event of 'the happening of truth' as a kind of presencing and, simultaneously, the way in which this event 'appropriates us.[175] As Travers puts it, 'When we are aware of this appropriation, we have an *Ereignis* "experience"'.[176] This experience of suddenly apprehending—or finding oneself appropriated by—the fact that 'there are beings at all', rather than 'nothing' , is central to 'What is Metaphysics?' as well as to a great many other of Heidegger's writings.[177] Indeed, Dominic Griffiths argues that the different stages in Heidegger's philosophy can be understood as successive attempts to account for those moments in which being is suddenly, and often inexplicably, apprehended:

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[174] Ibid.
[175] Martin Travers, 'The Happening of *Ereignis*: The Presence of Greek Ritual in Heidegger's Concept of Enowning', *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* 51, no. 1 (2015): 2.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 110.

> Heidegger developed his notion of *Ereignis* gradually, his thought falling into three discernible stages: the early work, from 1919 until after the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927, explores the term phenomenologically; some of the middle works, especially *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, written between 1936 and 1938, attempt an evocation of *Ereignis* in florid, ambitious, and ultimately unsuccessful pseudomystical language; and finally the later thought, which emerges about 1943, looks for the meaning of *Ereignis* in the poetry of those more poetically talented than himself.[178]

Heidegger would eventually arrive at a point in which works of art, particularly the poem as that closest to the authentic speaking of language itself, becomes the site of the event through which being discloses itself. Poetry becomes the site of investigation, indeed, because as Griffiths also notes, poets are those most in tune with the language, that *logo*s through which being gives itself to our understanding. For the period of Heidegger's thinking that Oppen encountered, however, *Ereignis* is still something to be understood phenomenologically.[179] It is an aspect of *Dasein's* being to be encountered in its particular modes, such as those attunements that either turn *Dasein* toward or away from being. As such, Oppen's poems approach *Ereignis* and the intuition of existence not as the product of poetry but as the outcome of an experience that poses problems for poetry because it takes place, as we will see, partially outside of poetry's domain.

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[178] Dominic Griffiths, 'Looking into the Heart of Light: Considering the Poetic Event in the Work of T.S. Eliot and Martin Heidegger', *Philosophy and Literature* 38, no. 2 (2014): 352.
[179] See also Alexander S. Jensen, 'The Influence of Schleiermacher's Second Speech "On Religion" on Heidegger's Concept of "Ereignis"', *The Review of Metaphysics* 61, no. 4 (2008): 816, and Joseph J. Kockelmans, *On the Truth of Being: Reflections on Heidegger's Later Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 59-60.

Disclosure and Substance

Despite the fact that Oppen had read no Heidegger when composing the poems of *Discrete Series*, in a letter from 1966 he retroactively found Heidegger's concept of the disclosing power of boredom in his 1934 poem:

> 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'. (*SL* 133)

Oppen had something of a superstition regarding his Blessingbourne poem and Heidegger's 'What is Metaphysics?' lecture:

> Having no German at all, much less Heideggerian German, I am dependent on translations, therefore my knowledge of H. is sharply limited. But I have a superstition concerning my relation to H. The poem which happens to be printed as the first poem in Discrete Series -- my first book -- was written in 1929. That, I've learned, was the year in which H. was giving his Inauguration Speech in which he spoke of the mood of boredom (in the translation I have) which leads, again in the translation I have, to 'the knowledge of what is.' The poem -- I don't know if you have the book -- begins with 'the knowledge of boredom' and ends with 'the world, weather swept, with which one shares the century.' And

> Boredom was an odd word to use. I am touched by superstition remembering my hesitation over that word and the sense of having been given it. (*SL* 156)

Although Oppen wanted to find the Heideggerian disclosure of 'beings as a whole' in the earlier poem, there are obvious differences between the Blessingbourne poems of 1934 and 1968. In *Discrete Series,* Blessingbourne's attention turns to the window, and then moves beyond it. The things that her attention picks out are increasingly immaterial. The first is the 'rain falling' and then 'the road', with a moment's pause to attend to the 'window- /glass' that allows the act of seeing beyond the room to take place, but these lead to abstractions, to 'the world, weather-swept' and 'the century' (*NCP* 5). In 'Of Being Numerous', having declared that this is what he should have written previously, attention remains inside the room, turned upon those 'things' of which the immediate world is composed. Oppen's authorial intrusion into that past scene is to say that rather than turning to the 'the rain / Of a nineteenth century day' he should have taken this disclosure of beings as a whole towards 'the motes / In the air, the dust'. The poem has also changed syntactically. Where, in *Discrete Series* the lines had run on in a single Jamesian sentence, in the later poem lines (often fragments of sentences) float in tenuous relation to each other; not disconnected, but less subordinate to a larger syntactic and conceptual thrust. Where the single sentence of the earlier poem presented a 'world' of thought, in the later poem the sentence has fragmented into 'motes'.

What boredom discloses for Oppen is most like what he refers to elsewhere as 'substance'. While Heidegger attends to the material presence of beings (which he would use the term 'earth' to designate in his later philosophy), the revelation of 'beings as a whole' [*das Seinde im Ganzen*] is not focused on of the fact of materiality. For

Heidegger, boredom turns one towards 'beings as a whole' by forcing one to confront the relation between the particular beings in one's proximity and the fact of the wholeness of Being as that which makes each particular being possible. He writes that

> As surely as we can never comprehend absolutely the whole of beings in themselves we certainly do find ourselves stationed in the midst of beings that are revealed somehow as a whole. In the end an essential distinction prevails between comprehending the whole of beings in themselves and finding oneself in the midst of beings as a whole. The former is impossible in principle. The latter happens all the time in our existence.[180]

What boredom reveals is not the entire existence of each or any thing, but the totality of existence of which the beings that one finds oneself amidst form a part. As Nicholls also points out, however, the fact of the particularly *material* existence and presence of things seems to have been central to Oppen in his understanding of the Heideggerian notion of *Ereignis*.[181] This is apparent in Oppen's recurrent motif of mineral objects such as bricks, stones, or steel girders. In 'Coastal Strip', for example, Oppen writes of 'the earth' and '*The sea that made us / islands'* (*NCP* 73). In 'Chartres' he writes of 'the stones' of the great cathedral, which 'Stand where the masons locked them' (*NCP* 77), and in 'The Mayan Ground' we are told of tires that leave 'a mark / On the earth, a ridge in the ground' (*NCP* 138). If poetry discloses for Heidegger, what it aims at for Oppen is disclosure within a particular form of *Ereignis.* In this form, one's appropriation by

[180] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 99.
[181] Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 80, 81. See also Barzilai, *George Oppen: A Critical Study*, 6.

the experience of the presence of beings tends toward the fact of the existence of substance as an analogue to being as such and the fact that things are rather than are not.

The materiality of such things in such moments makes them important to Oppen, because their materiality means that they simultaneously demand our attention and resist our conceptual domination. At the same time, their materiality becomes the ground of further significance. In a letter written in 1967 Oppen writes that 'There are things for each of us around which meaning gathers',

> The mission is to hold them, to be able to keep them in his mind, to try again and again to find the word, the syntax, the cadence of unfolding […] A matter of being able to say what one is and where one is. And what matters. (*SL* 161)

The images of stone and soil matter to Oppen. Meaning 'gathers' around them, partly because (as we will see further below) they resist conceptual penetration. As such, a core meaning that gathers around them is a refusal of or withdrawal away from meaning, an otherness to its demands. In the face of this, the poem's 'cadence of unfolding' turns not toward expressing the meaning of those things but, first of all, to 'what one is and where one is' in the midst of beings as a whole. The meaning of things is first the possibility of understanding oneself as a being amongst them. We might say, also, that the experience of the gathering of meaning around things is, like the *Ereignis* experience, one of being owned by being's disclosure. If meaning's gathering around things turns poetry toward something like one's own being in the world, it also requires unfolding 'what matters'. This suggests an ethical dimension to being-there, if we take 'what matters' to be what is centrally important to an individual confronting their

presence amongst meaningful things. At the same time, intentional or not, the pun on 'matter' is suggestive. Appearing under the aegis of a form of disclosure, 'matter' raises the possibility that the significance of 'things' that gather 'meaning'—the fact that they matter—lies somehow in the fact that they are 'matter'.

Both the possibility of the disclosure of things and of their capacity to become sites for meaning are tied to the fact of their substance as the embodiment of actuality. In the essays collected in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (and elsewhere in his later writings) Heidegger reformulates his conception of being such that those things that appear do so as a configuration of the fourfold of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals. Earth is the materiality of which things are formed, and also the ground of being to which meaningful things are drawn as they fall into non-meaning.[182] Sky is, in a sense, space, aboveground as it were, but as such also exposure to the elements.[183] Divinities are the hints of the gods in the physical realm, that other against which humans, the mortals, establish and measure their own being through ceremonies and feasts, and in physical manifestations of the gods (as in temples and statues).[184] The particular manner in which these are configured, the way in which they manifest things in presence, reflects what Heidegger calls the historical unity of 'those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being'.[185] This he calls 'world'. World only has presence because it can give shape to the earth such that it has meaning. Earth is only encountered insofar as it is part of (the) world.

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[182] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 176.
[183] Ibid.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Ibid., 41.

While Oppen does not seem to have read the later essays collected in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, his description of those 'things around which meaning gathers' is similar to Heidegger's formulation, though simpler. Material actuality grants things presence. That materiality makes it possible for meaning to adhere to the objects as elements within one's world. At the same time, however, the 'earth' of which they are made remains partly distinct from its worldly meaning. The earth is always a kind of abyss, always withdrawing from presence. The things matter because they are matter, but their materiality is also always in the state of resisting our acts of making them matter.

Poetry's unfolding of these things is thus a difficult task. That which matters to one struggles against its materiality. This difficulty is echoed in Oppen's use of the term 'substantive'. In an interview with L. S. Dembo Oppen states that he is 'really concerned with the substantive, with the subject of the sentence, with what we are talking about, and not rushing over the subject-matter in order to make a comment about it'.[186] The term 'substantive' is grammatically ambiguous. While Oppen goes on to clarify that he is talking about 'the subject of the sentence', it is not immediately clear whether he is using 'substantive' as an adjective or a noun. This ambiguity has an etymological basis. While 'substantive' now primarily means 'noun', its origin in English was with the sense of 'having an independent existence', and was close its current adjectival meaning.[187] Interpreting 'substantive' adjectivally, Oppen means that

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[186] Richard Swigg, ed. *Speaking with George Oppen: Interviews with the Poet and Mary Oppen, 1968-1987* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2012), 10.
[187] 'Substantive', ed. Angus Stevenson and Christine A. Lindberg, 3 ed., *New Oxford American Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2010), http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093 /acref/9780195392883.001.0001/m_en_us1295391.

he is concerned with the thing in the sentence that has 'a firm basis in reality'.[188] That thing may be a material particular, or it may be an abstraction, or any other thing that has its basis, in some way, 'in reality'. In any case, it describes the subject matter itself. Oppen is then concerned with the thing that the sentence is about. If 'substantive' is being used as a noun, however, then it simply means 'noun', without necessarily implying that it has its basis 'in reality'.[189] In this case, Oppen's use of 'substantive' refers not to the subject matter of the sentence but to the act of naming any thing with the use of a noun. Both of these interpretations are plausible. Oppen certainly prizes the actuality of his subject-matter—note also, again, the buried recurrence of 'matter' as a part of 'subject-matter'—but he also prizes nomination over predication or judgement, and existence over the subordination of things to relations.

The ambiguity in Oppen's use of 'substantive' reflects a deeper complexity in his commitment to both substantive actuality and to the use of nouns in poetry. Later in the interview with Dembo, Oppen connects his concern for the substantive to the 'small nouns' referred to in his poem 'Psalm'. By 'substantive' he does mean the noun as a means of referring. At the same time, however, he means

> that it's there, that it's true, the whole implication of these nouns; that appearances represent reality, whether or not they misrepresent it: that this in which the thing takes place, this thing is here, and that these things do take place.[190]

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[188] Ibid.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Swigg, *Speaking with George Oppen*, 11.

In other words, he means that the substantive, the noun, testifies that 'this thing is here', and that 'these things do take place'. The substantive cries its faith in the substantive, the noun cries faith in reality and in the fact that 'this thing is here'. Oppen's use of the term 'substantive' thus combines its adjectival and nominal meanings. Indeed, the conceptual movement for Oppen is from the nominal to the adjectival meaning of the substantive. Any number of things can be named, and many of those things may not be able to be substantiated as being substantive. Oppen's drive, as he puts it, is to test the substantive (the noun) to see if one can find substantivity within it:

> I'm trying to describe how the test of images can be a test of whether one's thought is valid, whether one can establish in a series of images, of experiences ... whether or not one will consider the concept of humanity to be valid, something that is, or else have to regard it as simply being a word.[191]

Oppen's concern for 'the substantive, with the subject of the sentence, with what we are talking about, and not rushing over the subject-matter in order to make a comment about it' is, in the end, a concern with making the poetic use of the noun a test of the nature of that which it names.[192]

Again, to a certain degree this resembles Heidegger's descriptions of poetic speech. For Heidegger, the poet has an originary experience of being from within the open, the *logos*, that makes being's appearing possible. When the poet speaks newly and singularly from out of that experience, he or she gives a new configuration of the

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[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid., 10.

open, sets a new figuration of the world into its own being such that it might be encountered and preserved by others.[193] The gesture is one of wresting a new speaking out of, and, in some ways against, the already existing language that makes the act possible. The being that Oppen discloses in this faithfulness to 'subject-matter' is particularly material. As in Heidegger's formulation, the articulation of this fact in poetry is not easy. It is not an experience that anyone might have at any time, and not an experience anyone might easily disclose.

As we will see later in this chapter, however, Oppen differs significantly from Heidegger in his conception of what a successful poetic speaking accomplishes. For the later Heidegger, poetry is itself the happening of truth because it is only in the poem that the world is set newly and singularly into the earth of language's presencing power.[194] For Oppen, there is some equivocation about how poetry relates to *Ereignis*. Having had contact mostly with Heidegger's early writing, Oppen does not have the later Heidegger's sense of the poem's 'first' making the world and the earth encounterable as such. The gesture that he likens his poetry to is one of 'pointing'.[195] The fact of being when experienced in its meaningful materiality (its mattering) always lies somewhere beyond the poem for Oppen, rather than in it. It is not disclosed so much as indicated on the basis of its disclosure to the poet. As such, poetry does not disclose for Oppen so much as hold faith to the *Ereignis* experience in the belief that a sincere poetic pointing will prove its truth.

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[193] See, for instance, Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*: 'The nature of art is poetry. The nature of poetry, in turn, is the founding of truth. […] Founding, however, is actual only in preserving' (72).
[194] Ibid., 167-9.
[195] Swigg, *Speaking with George Oppen*, 100.

Nonetheless, *Ereignis* remains central to Oppen, and it remains tied to the intimacy of significance and materiality. This poses particularly difficult problems for Oppen when the 'thing' that matters and which he wants to 'unfold' is not itself a single particular, such as 'humanity'. As in his interview with Dembo, in a letter from 1965 Oppen writes that he is trying 'to get again to humanity as a single thing, as something like a sea which is a constant weight in its bed' (*SL* 111). Oppen wants to conceive of humanity as a 'single thing', and not just the singular person. But as Nicholls notes, Oppen doesn't want the term 'humanity' to be an abstraction such that it names nothing. Rather, the term must recognise the plurality, the unity, and at its base the substantiality of what it names.[196] 'Even as we think the condition of "humanity," then', Nicholls writes, 'the collective reveals itself as a collection of singularities, and our only way out of a static ambiguity is to map the constant oscillation between these two conditions, their constant fading into each other'.[197] This recognition is central to 'Of Being Numerous', where Oppen turns the challenge of phenomenological perception upon historically-thought humanity and the capacity of the individual to be both singular and numerous, both shipwrecked and social. Humanity 'matters' to Oppen partly because its historical existence produces the ethical crisis of his contemporary era. An ethical response to the other, to individuals, must thus be tempered by a sense of the collective material and ethical 'weight' of humanity as a thing in the world.

The challenge is one of conceiving the movement from part to whole, and is analogous to the phenomenological drive to see 'beings as a whole' as a result of contact with one's being in the midst of beings. Oppen's desire to think 'humanity' is

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[196] Peter Nicholls, 'Of Being Ethical: Reflections on George Oppen', *Journal of American Studies* 31, no. 2 (1997): 162-63.
[197] Ibid., 163-64.

thus tied to that 'intuition of existence' in which a particular thing is apprehended both in itself and synecdochically manifesting being's actuality. Indeed, the intuition of the existence of the particular can help structure and bring immediacy to the larger, more abstract challenge. This is a particular feature in Oppen's poem, 'A Narrative':

[Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (*NCP* 151-2)

Oppen is describing the town of Albany, New York. If Albany is an 'enclave' filled with its inhabitants' lives, they nonetheless 'disperse / Into their jobs'. As factory workers, or as workers in stores or offices, the work is alienating. They 'lose connection / With themselves' even as they reside in the world where they are inhabitants, where the planets circle on such a grand scale as to make the small circles of daily survival seem insignificant. If the grand scale of the planets seems inhuman to us, Oppen suggests that it is rather in the cities, in 'the suburbs, stores // And offices' that we 'will lose / Humanity', 'In simple / Enterprise'. Following this he writes:

I saw from the bus,
Walked in fact from the bus station to see again
The river and its rough machinery
On the sloping bank—I cannot know

Whether the weight of cause
Is in such a place as that, tho the depth of water
Pours and pours past Albany
From all its sources. (*NCP* 152-3)

We might read this poem as an attempt to find a poetic form capable of breaking out of the circumscriptions of normal experience, into that moment of *Ereignis* in which being is apprehended. This lies behind the opposition of work's effect on humanity to those great elemental substances, the planets circling and the river flowing. Albany might then be rescued from the effects that work has on its inhabitants' consciousnesses by some apprehension of the fact of being, in its actuality, as the ground that underpins their existence. The soft form of parataxis that we see taking place in the first quote, hesitantly straddling Oppen's tercets, sees the assertion of community lead to its dispersal, but is then met by the grand scale of the planets, which is itself met with the loss of humanity in enterprise, and in the places of enterprise. In that first section, however, the estrangement of humanity from its mineral, substantial underpinning is conceived of in abstract terms; every entity appears as a plurality, humanity hovering in lost circumscription over its unregarded mineral ground. This might seem an appropriate poetic form for the challenge of thinking through the economic geographies of Albany, but the apprehension of the collective substantives is only able to articulate the poles of an opposition without producing any line of flight from the logic of humanity's 'circles' in which its constituents 'lose connection'. The poem turns then to a singular perspective, a specific moment of seeing, and to an 'I' voice capable of attending to the immediacy of 'what one is and where one is' (*SL* 161). The result is that the preceding ontological dialectic of humanity and earth ultimately finds synthesis in a first-person, phenomenological lyric encounter that asserts the particularity of the 'sloping bank' and, within it, the unknowable 'weight of cause'. The moment of vision presented in the second quoted section, in fact, restates the opposition of machinery (and its metonymies of production) to elemental substance (the river and its banks), but

in such a way that the opposition is contained by the capacity of the speaker to render it as a single visual encounter. Thinking of humanity and of material being as greater wholes produces the most powerful insights, it seems in this section of the poem, when the poem returns to a small moment in the midst of being that offers the possibility of conferring a new ontological value on particulars.

'The eye sees!': Insight and Vision

The importance of a situated moment of perception to the sort of value that Oppen can ascribe to ontological insights is reflected in his turn to sight as model of and metaphor for the phenomenological apprehension of being. In an interview with Dembo, Oppen talks of 'the life of the mind':

> I mean the awareness—I suppose it's nearly a sense of awe, simply to feel that the thing is there and that it's quite something to see. It's an awareness of the world, a lyric reaction to the world.[198]

Oppen's awareness of 'the thing', and the 'sense of awe' he feels in response to existence, are tied to sight as a primary way of experiencing actuality. That 'the thing is there' makes it also 'something to see'. At the same time awareness of the world is also 'a lyric reaction to the world'. Awareness takes the form of reaction, and is lyric in the fact that its situated speaking represents an attempt to manifest the subject through his or her encounter with the world in the act of using language.

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[198] Swigg, *Speaking with George Oppen*, 12.

One of the most common metaphorical topoi of Oppen's Heidegger-influenced poetics is thus the association of physical sight—with its phenomenological and epistemological connotations—with *Ereignis,* the 'intuition of existence'.[199] This was an aspect of 'A Narrative', as was just shown. It is also a recurrent feature of 'Of Being Numerous', where we read such declarations as:

> Not to reduce the thing to nothing—
>
> I might at the top of my ability stand at a window
> and say, look out; out there is the world. (*NCP193*)

To indicate that one might look is implicitly to indicate also that there is something to be seen. The act of vision comes to stand for that phenomenological appropriation that establishes the joining of being and *Dasein* in mutual enowning. Vision also provides the possibility of an ethical phenomenological relation to things, because its way of knowing neither penetrates nor interferes with its object. As Weinfield puts it, 'One aspect of Oppen's project […] is to see the world anew and, as far as possible, in its simplicity, without the social, historical, and philosophical projections with which it is habitually encumbered'.[200] Vision, in other words, suggests the possibility of a naive epistemological encounter that, we might decide, vision does not actually possess. In this respect, Ffytche compares Oppen to Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty: 'Oppen's turn to "seeing" as an originary site of human truth is pitted against degraded features of

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[199] See both Ffytche, 'The Arduous Path of Appearance', 194, and Randolph Chilton, 'The Place of Being in the Poetry of George Oppen', in *George Oppen: Man and Poet*, ed. Burton Hatlen (University of Maine at Orono: National Poetry Foundation, Inc., 1981).
[200] Weinfield, *The Music of Thought in the Poetry of George Oppen and William Bronk*, 42.

objectification in the contemporary world'.[201] While Heidegger is not likely to have thought of vision as epistemologically naive—given the priority of historical language over being's first appearing in presence—Oppen does seem to have sought a kind of naivety, or firstness, in vision.

Vision also offers a pathway to unifying the particular and the abstract substantive. In Oppen's interview with Dembo, awareness of 'the thing' is, in the next moment, also 'an awareness of the world'.[202] In 'Of Being numerous', the speaker looks out the window but sees 'the world' again. The movement from the implicit sight of particulars to the indication of an apprehension of the material being consonant with 'beings as a whole' recurs throughout Oppen's work. It traces a motif of phenomenological transition from implied physical sight to its invocation with visionary, almost prophetic, intensity. We see this, for instance, in 'Time of the Missile'. There, a declaration of sight acts as the hinge between a moment of historically situated seeing and a projected futurity:

> I remember a square of New York's Hudson River glinting between warehouses.
> Difficult to approach the water below the pier
> Swirling, covered with oil the ship at the pier
> A steel wall: tons in the water,
>
> Width.
> The hand for holding,

[201] Ffytche, 'The Arduous Path of Appearance', 196.
[202] Swigg, *Speaking with George Oppen*, 12.

> Legs for walking,
>
> The eye *sees!* It floods in on us from here to Jersey tangled in the grey bright air!
>
> (*NCP* 70)

The poem begins in memory, with the Hudson River and its warehouses mediated in the first line by recollection. The grammar of the following three lines is odd, however. One might expect something like 'It was' to come before the word 'Difficult' in order to locate the difficulty in the past experience. As it is, the phrase 'Difficult to approach the water below the pier' has an ambiguous temporality, possibly belonging to either past or present. This ambiguity is reinforced with 'Swirling' at the opening of the next line. It modifies 'water', and thus carries the possibility of belonging grammatically and actually to the past, but its emphatic isolation at head of the line emphasises also its grammatical presentness. This temporal ambiguity is matched by the syntactic ambiguity. As the lines shift focus, from water to oil to pier, the sentence changes, but without syntactically completing any of its phrases. The result is a sense of phenomenological roaming where each element of the scene appears both in itself but at the same time as part of a greater unity. The stanza continues, emphasising the temporally ambiguous status of the pier, the water, and the ship which, after the stanza break, becomes sheer 'Width'. Cumulatively, and although the objects are mediated by recollection, the pastness of the initial encounter bleeds into the present. This produces a form of atemporality where the pastness of the encounter mediates an atemporal unity of facts of things.

This same atemporality similarly (in)forms the bodily apparatus through which the encounter takes place. 'The hand for holding' and 'Legs for walking' both bring the

objects of their gerunds into a continuing present, and at the same time turn both into abstractions. The eye, however '*sees!*'. Though it is similarly abstract it is active. It '*sees!*', and with its active seeing the poem's ambiguous temporality steps into a clear present moment in which 'It floods in on us from here to Jersey tangled in the grey bright air!'. Oppen does not name what the 'it' is here that floods in. It is perhaps being itself or the intuition of it, or it is perhaps the 'Time of the Missile' itself in which cold-war anxieties grip many millions of lives, or it is perhaps simply light. Whatever floods in when the eye sees, however, brings with it a new understanding that changes the object of thought:

> My love, my love,
> We are endangered
> Totally at last. Look
> Anywhere to the sight's limit: space
> Which is viviparous:
>
> Place of the mind
> And eye. Which can destroy us,
> Re-arrange itself, assert
> Its own stone chain reaction. (*NCP* 70)

The poem becomes more clearly apostrophic, though the other with whom the poem's 'I' is endangered—the 'love' who can also be destroyed by the 'stone chain reaction'—is not named. Something has changed, however, something has 'flooded in' with the eye's seeing, such that apostrophe becomes the mode of address. Space is now the

'Place of the mind / and eye', the site of pure encounter. Within this pace 'We are endangered', and the call is to 'Look', to look 'Anywhere', such that one might see not only that 'space' is 'viviparous'—either giving birth to life or giving birth to more space—but also that it can destroy them by asserting 'Its own stone chain reaction'. The fact that Oppen must stress the verb 'sees' with italics, however, suggests that the true significance of seeing lies beyond the word itself, or in an aspect of the word that common usage does not capture. Moreover, the content of vision has shifted from concrete substantives like 'pier', 'water' and 'ship, and so on, to 'the sight's limit' where the fact of one's being endangered becomes apparent.

We saw above how, in his interview with Dembo, Oppen referred to his poems as 'lyric reactions' to the world. Reaction is an appropriate term here, for if the second half of the poem springs from an ontological encounter it does so in the form of apostrophe. In this it is significant that the poem shifts from its opening situation in memory—a present remembering of a past seeing—to a present tense embodiment, to present imperatives, to a projected future manifest in present possibilities. Jonathan Culler notes that apostrophe 'makes its point by troping not on the meaning of a word but on the circuit or situation of communication itself'.[203] What apostrophe typically calls attention to, in other words, is the act of speech itself. He writes also that in apostrophe the poet establishes his or her universe as 'a world of sentient forces' and himself or herself as one capable of invoking them. Oppen's apostrophe configures both world and poet differently. Rather than making the world one full of sentient forces, the apostrophe implicitly positions 'my love' alongside the 'I' in the remembered moment and capable of responding to his speech. This other, this 'love', is called upon to look.

[203] Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 135.

In so doing the poem establishes this person as one who, like the poet himself, might achieve a moment of *Ereignis* in which he or she apprehends her or his endangered state. If you only look, it says, you too will see that we are endangered. We are endangered, moreover, not because the world is full of sentient forces, but because it simply is, a cause and space of our existence which can destroy us in a chain reaction so indifferent as to be 'stone'. In this situation, Oppen's apostrophe does not establish him as one who has great animating powers, in the manner of the romantics that Culler describes, but as one whose speech refrains from such powers in favour of a vision of 'sight's limit' and the insights that an encounter with those limits can offer.

The Naming Power of the Word

If a poem like 'Time of the Missile' can seem to indicate something of the structure of *Ereignis,* in its move from sight to ontological insight in mutually implicating awareness, Oppen is also intent on thinking through the manner in which such disclosure takes place poetically. As David Nowell Smith writes, for Heidegger the poem's ability to itself be a 'happening of the truth of beings' depends on its engagement with its medium:

> Truth is the truth of medium: the work will only transform, as though for the first time, the presencing of the 'light of day' because it has brought forth, for the first time, the modes of presencing proper to stone, rock, metal, color, sound, and word.[204]

[204] Nowell Smith, *Sounding/Silence*, 20.

A poem can disclose the presencing and absencing motion within beings only through the being of its own medium, the capacity of the word to both name and to withdraw into itself. To say that the word both names and withdraws is to say, as Krzysztof Ziarek puts it, that concealment 'lies at the essence of language'.[205] 'As thought thinks Being', Ziarek writes,

> it breaks into language paths or tracks (*Bahnen*), along which signification becomes possible. However, with the appearance of words, the tracks are immediately covered, obliterated by the production of language. This covering of the language tracks, the inevitable overflowing and otherness and inaccessibility constitutes its concealment from man.[206]

As language acts as the channel for being's appearing, it simultaneously distorts and obscures the paths of thought that made language's speaking possible. Nowell Smith emphasises how, for the later Heidegger, this strife in the essence of language becomes the essence of the work of art itself. 'The artwork internalizes into its own modes of meaning the "strife" between earth and world', Nowell Smith explains, and as such, the poem sets the truth into itself as a structure.[207] This structure is what Heidegger calls *'figure, shape, Gestalt',* the manner in which the presencing of the world in the earth and the earth in the world brings both into the open as a particular work.[208] Central to this notion is the priority that the artwork has over disclosure.[209] The configuration that

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[205] Krzysztof Ziarek, 'Poetics of Disclosure in Stevens's Late Poetry', *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 46, no. 1 (1990): 59.
[206] Ibid.
[207] Nowell Smith, *Sounding/Silence*, 40.
[208] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 62.
[209] This is a particularly prominent theme in 'The Origin of the Work of Art' in *Poetry, Language, Thought*.

comes to shine forth in the artwork is not a representation, but a founding. It is an originary event disclosing a new ontological truth.

As I have mentioned above, however, Oppen did not quite share the later Heidegger's sense of the artwork's priority over the happening of truth. Instead, the artwork's task was to hold faith with an experience occurring elsewhere. It is a fine distinction, especially given the nuances of Heidegger's description of the artist's production of the artwork, but it results in Oppen's having a sense that the poem remains always inadequate in relation to an experience different from itself. The difficulty for Oppen is more akin to the covering-over of the paths of thought by language than to the founding truth of the poem described in Heidegger's later thinking. Moreover, it produces a sense in Oppen's comments about poetry that the poem on the page is in danger of damaging and being unfaithful to the poem 'in the mind' before words. He writes, in a letter to the poet and novelist Dan Gerber, of the

> Poem: the thing in the mind before the words to be able to hold it even against the language (*SL* 236).

If poetry is capable of disclosing or indicating the experience of being it is thus also a danger to that experience. The experience is disclosed not solely through language, but almost in spite of it. The challenge posed for poetry is thus not to disclose the truth but rather to be a 'test of truth', as Oppen puts it in his essay 'The Mind's Own Place':

> The distinction between a poem that shows confidence in itself and in its materials, and on the other hand a performance, a speech by the poet is the

> distinction between poetry and histrionics. 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 in 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.[210]

In this definition poetry is opposed to 'abstract prose' not just in form, but also because its 'concrete materials' resist 'generalization'. It is possible that the generalisations are not likely to be proved true in Oppen's formulation because they lack a truth to prove. It is also possible, however, that these generalisations possess a truth, but that 'their truth' lies outside of poetry's capacity to prove it. In either case, it is clear that Oppen believes that whatever 'truth' political or other forms of generalisation may possess, poetry's images deal with something else.

Oppen returns to this notion of testing in his interview with Dembo. There he makes it clear that poetry's testing is a testing of actuality, of substantivity, brought about through contact with the limits of what poetry's 'concrete materials' will 'substantiate'.[211] Quite what Oppen means by this is not clear in 'The Mind's Own Place', though it appears to hinge on a peculiar ontology of the poetic image:

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[210] Oppen, 'The Mind's Own Place', 4.
[211] Swigg, *Speaking with George Oppen*, 83.

> 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, of the act of perception; it is a test of sincerity, a test of conviction, the rare poetic quality of truthfulness.[212]

If the metaphor works by analogy, in other words, the image cannot rest on comparison and difference. The image is, rather, something found in the world that the poet tests by bringing it into the poem in a test of his own poetic language. For Oppen, the truth of the poem is predicated on an appearing of being already apparent elsewhere.[213] The image precedes the poem; its truth lies prior to the poem as a challenge to the poet's sincerity and conviction.

Nouns and other forms of nominalisation thus become important to Oppen because their nature as substantives, held in relation to each other in images, tests the speaker's ability to speak of them sincerely. Oppen writes that [Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (UCSD 16 13 7). In a later letter he writes:

> The nouns the things and the nouns which are their names: they matter and they matter above all because of, in view of 'the benevolence of the real' […] I am trying to write, is maybe the right phrase about the benevolence of the real Sometimes called salvation[.] (*SL* 241)

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[212] Oppen, 'The Mind's Own Place', 3.

[213] In 'The Mind's own Place' Oppen writes also that 'These are, as poetry intends, clear pictures of the world in verse which means only to be clear, to be honest, to produce the realization of reality and to construct a form out of no desire for the trick of gracefulness, but in order to make it possible to grasp, to hold the insight which is the content of the poem' (4).

Nouns are particularly important for Oppen because they seem able to refer to the reality of the 'thing' named—the actuality of which offers the possibility of salvation. This is important, for instance, in a section from 'A Language of New York' that recurs in 'Of Being Numerous':

> There can be a brick
> In a brick wall
> The eye picks
>
> So quiet of a Sunday.
> Here is the brick, it was waiting
> Here when you were born,
> Mary-Anne. (*NCP* 117-8, 174)

The section stages an opposition, almost line-by-line, between the substantive object and the perceiving mind. The first two lines assert the brick as a possibility, as though the fact that 'There can be a brick' owes itself to that ontological moment in which being gives itself over to world, and thus to phenomenological presence. The poem does not ask why there can be a brick in a brick wall, but only notes that such things are possible. The brick is also both individual and part of a greater multiplicity. As 'a brick / In a brick wall' the brick appears as both a substantive entity in itself and a constituent of a larger entity, the wall. The wall is like Oppen's concept of 'humanity', a meaningful 'thing' in itself but formed of other things that are themselves material and meaningful. To say that 'There can be a brick / In a brick wall' is therefore not only to posit the possibility of a being's appearing, but also the way in which beings appear in

dialectical relation to larger unities. In doing this, Oppen repeats the motion that takes place in his use of the term 'substantive'. When the word 'brick' first appears it is as a noun naming a discrete object. When it occurs as part of 'brick wall', however, it is as an adjective, describing the sort of material from which the wall is made. Not only is the brick brought into relation to a larger multiplicity, therefore, but its syntactical presence moves from its nominal to its adjectival functions as the poem brings 'brick' into more material presence. If these lines summon the possibility of a brick into the poem, however, it is a tenuous opening moment. Little else is summoned, and so the possibility of the brick arises as a possibility yet to resolve into the definite 'the brick' of the second stanza. The brick's initial presence is hypothetical, given by the indefinite article.

Like the 'motes' from section 37 of 'Of Being Numerous', the noun 'brick' also protrudes slightly into the blank space around the poem as though the reality and contingency of both beings, both the potential brick and the word, were emphasised by the nothing, or the space, that surrounds them. The third line in the opening stanza, however, inverts the formulation. Suddenly the potential bound up in the word 'can' belongs not to the brick itself, but to the act of perception. There can be a brick that the eye picks, and it is no longer the brick's existence that is in question but the phenomenological act itself, which may or may not pick out a brick for scrutiny on a quiet Sunday. Again, a form of boredom turns the mind, idly, towards substantive being, to a brick that may have remained just part of a wall if not for a moment in which its uncanny actuality within the larger structure were noticed. If the brick is an object of perception, however, the next two lines re-assert the brick against the eye's domination. 'Here is the brick', the brick is no longer a possibility but a fact named using the

definite article, and if it is found and picked out for attention it is nonetheless something that exists, and its existence precedes the eye that selects it: 'it was waiting / Here when you were born'. Suddenly the eye's picking out the brick, one thing amidst a wall of existents, does not confer reality to the brick, but simply encounters that reality. This progression thus stages two key processes of Oppen's poetics of being. The first is the reassertion of substantivity within the substantive. The word 'brick' starts as a noun, becomes an adjective describing and emphasising substance, and then is re-deployed as a noun in 'Here is the brick'. In 'Here is the brick' not only does the noun 'brick' now recall its adjectival meaning within its naming gesture, but the indexical 'Here' locates it even more firmly within the world. The second process is Oppen's location of the intuition of existence prior to language. The ontological possibility of the brick's existence precedes the fact of its ontic existence. This precedes the speaker's encounter with that brick, which itself precedes his or her indication of it to another ('Mary-Anne').

Moreover, the noun, like the brick, is itself brought into the poem as something to be encountered. This is a consequence of the relation Oppen hopes to establish between substantives and the things to which they refer. In a letter to Aubrey Degnan-Sutter, c.1964, Oppen writes that 'I believe we can't be astonished by any hallucination whatever. Whereas we are totally astonished by daylight, by any brick in a brick wall we focus on' (*SL* 105). Within the broader context of Oppen's poetics and his polemics, this is a call for Objectivism, for sincerity and objectivity, as opposed particularly to symbolist or surrealist practices.[214] Phenomenologically we are forced to choose between hallucination and astonishment. Astonishment is the more honest option for

[214] DuPlessis, 'Uncannily in the Open', 188.

Oppen because it recognises existence without seeking to interpret or to replace. It can also only take place in response to something more actual than a hallucination. The hallucinations are like the generalisations that cannot be proven by poetic images, the fact that they are insubstantial robs them of impact and, for Oppen, denies them a role in poetry.

If poetry's province is that which might 'prove its truth' in poetic images, Oppen thus calls upon nouns to carry the sort of weight against which astonishment might be an appropriate response. Recall the reciprocal motion between substantivity and perception figured in the part of 'Of Being Numerous' that turns to the fact that 'There can be a brick / in a brick wall'. There the word 'brick' acts as a constant, the substantive other against which the move from the possibility of perception, to perception, to the individuation and communication experience occurs. Indeed, the word acts as an object to be encountered in itself and with such repetitive invocation that it seems to want its own fixity to testify to the actuality of the brick in opposition to the ongoing flux of thought. In repeatedly encountering the word 'brick'—as in reading the declaration that 'The eye *sees!*'—we find that the word seems both to testify to the existence of its signified and, at the same time, to draw attention to its capacity to so testify.

In this they recall 'the naming power of the word' as Heidegger describes it in 'The Origin of the Work of Art'. There Heidegger writes that in the open of the work of art,

> The rock comes to bear and rest and so first becomes rock; metals come to glitter and shimmer, colors to glow, tones to sing, the word to speak. All this comes forth as the work sets itself back into the massiveness and heaviness of stone, into the firmness and pliancy of the wood, into the hardness and luster of metal, into the lighting and darkening of color, into the clang of tone, and into the naming power of the word.[215]

It is the nature of the work of art, for Heidegger, that it discloses its own materiality. Sculpture and painting do not just represent things, for example, but also display and disclose the nature of the elements of which they are made. Poetry's material is 'the naming power of the word', and part of poetry's task is to disclose this power as its own essential matter.[216] Language's naming offers a conditioning possibility, a material event in which a phenomenological open is projected and through which beings come to presence. As Heidegger puts it in 'The Nature of Language', this naming is a relating:

> This relation is not, however, a connection between the thing on one side and the word that is on the other. The word itself is the relation which in each instance retains the thing within itself in such a manner that it 'is' a thing.[217]

The naming links thought to thing phenomenologically. It creates and determines an open space in which the thing might be apprehended as itself.[218] Even in the absence of

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[215] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 45.
[216] Nowell Smith, *Sounding/Silence*, 72-3.
[217] Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 66.
[218] Nowell Smith, *Sounding/Silence*, 73.

the actual entities named, the naming power of the word calls them into a form of nearness.

In 'The Nature of Language', Heidegger writes that 'Only where the word for the thing has been found is the thing a thing. Only thus *is* it. Accordingly, we must stress as follows: no thing *is* where the word, that is, the name is lacking'.[219] The name not only shapes the manner in which beings come to presence, but it is the manner in which this occurs. As Heidegger puts is in the *Elucidations*, 'the name makes known'.[220] Naming is thus not simply the presence of a noun, but the ability of language more generally to act as that relation between *Dasein* and beings within the open. A Heideggerian reading of Oppen's noun-use would be that he focuses this naming power onto the general capacity of the noun to make beings present to *Dasein*. The noun or name becomes the site of substantivity against which the other forms of language might act as a thinking with or in response.

Oppen, as we have seen already, however, had a somewhat less totalising conception of language's relation to being than did Heidegger, even after his period of most intense engagement with Heidegger's writings. Oppen writes that:

> One can always go back, the thing is there and doesn't alter. One's awareness of the world, one's concern with existence -- they were not already in words --- And the poem is not built out of words, one cannot make a poem by sticking words into it, it is the poem which makes the words and contains their meaning.

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[219] Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 62.
[220] Martin Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, trans. Keith Hoeller (Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 2000), 215.

> One cannot reach out for *roses* and *elephants* and *essences* and put them into the poem ------ the ground under the elephant, the air around him, one would have to know very precisely one's distance from the elephant or step deliberately too close, close enough to frighten oneself. (*SL* 123)

If the noun is important for Oppen in its capacity to name it is not entirely responsible for being's appearing. There is still a pre-discursive moment in which 'one's awareness of the world' is not yet a matter of language. If this is the case, however, the noun and its naming nonetheless carries within it an ethical burden consonant with poetry's role as a 'test of truth'. In a letter to Rachel Blau du Plessis, Oppen writes that 'If the word *elephant* gets' into your poem,

> you have to measure the force and meaning and contexts and solidity of the thing and what it was actually doing there, not as ornament or shocking pendent of your poem but as itself and whatever brought it into your poem, compelling thought. Compelling a commitment.[221]

So, while Oppen draws a distinction between the words and the being's appearing, the link the poem forges between them carries an ethical imperative to respect things to the extent that one must respect even the use of their names in poetry.[222] In an interview with Kevin Power in 1975, Oppen offers a formulation of his use of Heidegger:

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[221] DuPlessis, 'Uncannily in the Open', 190.
[222] See also Heller, 'Speaking the Estranged'.

> what I'm doing is pointing. That's a Heideggerian gesture. […] Again I wasn't arguing epistemology. […] it's the Heideggerian gesture, the "pointing" to say it's there. "It's there" is not meant to be Dr Johnson kicking the stone and saying, "By God, sir, that."[223]

The gesture is one of indication. What 'pointing' indicates, however, is not solely the thing itself but also the capacity of language's saying to bring beings to forms of presence. Oppen adds also that such a pointing might be something that can only happen in poetry, which uses line-breaks and other formal elements in order to say that 'It's there'. Nonetheless, nouns are core to the 'naming': they are crucial objects of the sort of 'pointing' that Oppen imagines. The noun is thus a kind of enigma, or a paradox, within the poem, both ethically and phenomenologically responsible for the substantial thing and dangerously other to that thing. The noun is, finally, a declaration, an assertion that 'it is' which assumes no responsibility for that 'is-ness'. It is the obverse of that declaration that 'the eye *sees!*'.

These elements come together in the poem 'Psalm' from *This in Which*. 'Psalm' is often read as an example of Oppen's Heideggerian poetics, though Heidegger's influence is here filtered through Maritain and Thomism. The poem opens with a quote from Thomas Aquinas, '*Veritas Sequitur . . .', 'truth follows',* part of the phrase '*Veritas Sequitur esse':* 'truth follows [the] existence [of things]'.[224] The quotation could act as a motto for Oppen's ontology in general, though it applies especially well to the role that Heidegger's thinking played in his poetics. Existence (or Being) is primary, and only

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[223] Swigg, *Speaking with George Oppen*, 100.
[224] In *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (73), Peter Nicholls notes that Oppen most likely came across Aquinas's phrase in Maritain's *Existence and the Existent.*

afterwards do we find ourselves able to *speak* in terms of 'what-is', or able to write poetry in which things are participants. The truncation of the quote is telling, however. 'Truth follows…' and we might ask ourselves what it is, in this case, that precedes truth. After the quote, 'Psalm' opens with a sort of ontological pastoral:

> In the small beauty of the forest
> The wild deer bedding down—
> That they are there! (*NCP* 99)

The truth of being, for Oppen in the 1960s, seems to be that things *are*. In some ways the deer are like the bricks in the brick wall. They can be named in the poem, and the indication performed in the naming moves Oppen to further assert existence, 'That they are there!'. Implicit in these lines is the capacity to encounter and rejoice in their existence. 'Psalm' is an appropriate title for this moment, what we might recognise as the 'lyric response' to existence that Oppen noted above. It is a type of religious exuberance.

The speaker's astonishment at, and reverence for, the presence of the deer persists through the next two stanzas:

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

The roots of it

Dangle from their mouths

Scattering earth in the strange woods.

They who are there. (*NCP* 99)

At the end of the third stanza we reach an echo of the earlier exclamation: 'They who are there'. If we imagine the emphasis lies on the word 'there', then it returns as a reminder of the fact of presence apprehended against what may be a tendency to ignore the everyday. If we put the emphasis on 'They', however, we might read it as emphasising their presence in contrast to the speaker's absence. There is no 'I' in this poem, after all. If the deer are seen, the seeing is ambiguous and implicit. It is more useful perhaps to say that the seeing is not taking place in the poem, but that the poem constitutes a kind of seeing taking place in the naming. The 'there-ness' of the deer is thus partly manifest through the capacity of language to implicitly recognise them as such.

Oppen thus uses nouns in 'Psalm' to stress the 'is-ness', and the 'thereness', of a thing. Enjambed lines isolate noun from adjectives and verbs. The nouns, indeed, hang for a moment at the line ends, presences that are only subsequently rendered 'effortless' or shown to 'nuzzle' or to 'tear'. Much of the substantivity of the nouns relies on the way that they hang upon prepositions that posit the reality in which they participate. For instance, we begin 'Psalm' with 'in' ('In the small beauty') and 'of' ('of the forest') (*NCP* 99). In the third line, the exclamation of the speaker's awe begins similarly with 'that' ('That they are there!'). 'That' functions here much like the prepositions function; implying the larger phrase: '*the fact* that they are there'. 'That they are there' operates as

an assertion of fact. Following Naylor's lead, we may say that these constructions posit a bare facticity present in their ontic being.[225] 'In', 'that', and especially 'of', all predicate or imply a prepositional being that is the condition for the particularity of Oppen's 'things'. In many lines these prepositions combine with the pronouns 'they' and 'their' to link this precedence to the indexicality and multiplicity of unspecified being ('That they are there', 'they who are there'). They open up and assert a space of being within which the naming both emerges and withdraws.

The apprehension of the fact of being recognised in the presentation of deer and grass is thus constituted by a turn to the role that language plays in their disclosure. If, as Naylor argues, the possibility of the apprehension of substantivity is registered in prepositions for Oppen, in the poem's final stanza the deer suddenly transfigure so that they are not solely objects pointed toward by the poem, but also sites that reveal the act of pointing that gives them presence:

> The small nouns
> Crying faith
> In this in which the wild deer
> Startle, and stare out. (*NCP* 99)

The deer are 'small nouns', and these small nouns cry 'faith', in the continuous present, in a 'this in which' that is at once the world of the deer and the poem itself. The poem, as a collection of utterances, indicates the fact of existence by crying faith in it (that thing at which the poet can express his astonishment). The speaker expresses his

[225] Naylor, 'The Pre-Position "Of"'.

astonishment, but after doing so the substantives are themselves named as 'small nouns'. That is, the poem's substantives now name the noun itself rather than the deer, the grass, or the trees of the forest. In this, if they had previously cried faith in the things they named, the substantives now name themselves as things that so cry faith. The self-reflexivity of this gesture makes the nouns themselves their own objects of faith. It is in the poem and in the image formed from its substantives, as much as it is in reality itself, that the wild deer 'Startle / And stare out'. The presence of the substantive thing in the poem is shown to depend on the grammatical substantive, the noun. If 'truth follows the existence of things' as the quote at the beginning suggests, there is thus a double meaning in the formulation. The 'things' that truth follows are the things in the world, but they are also the words that the poem uses. 'Truth follows' only in so far as the relation of thing and noun makes a 'crying' of faith possible. The poem's image, as a 'test of truth' owes itself to the reality of what it names, but at the same time its substantives, arranged in its image of the deer in the forest, confers a new presence to that which they name.

Oppen describes a version of this duality in an interview with Charles Tomlinson in 1973. He names:

> Two sincerities. One is to the poem which is a thing. The other sincerity is to the things of the world, the other things of the world. Because the words are objects, the poem is an object, but the poem is ineluctably transparent. Also it refers to those things.[226]

[226] Swigg, *Speaking with George Oppen*, 59.

The poem is both transparent, showing the things of the world, and at the same time it is an object and its words 'refer to those things' in the world. Oppen reformulates the poem itself as a kind of ontologised signifier, a form of being that recognises its own actuality and insufficiency as a way of testifying to the actuality and self-sufficiency of the signified. Oppen puts it plainly when he writes in one of his notebooks that [Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (UCSD 16, 14, 1). 'Psalm' thus performs a double-take. What appears at first to be a straightforward disclosure of the experience of apprehending the fact of the deer becomes, by the end, a disclosure rather of poetry's own simultaneous presencing and withdrawing motion.

'The fatal rock': Substance, Obscurity, and the Mind

Near the opening of this chapter I looked at a poem from *Discrete Series* in which Oppen presents a car, 'closed in glass', as uncannily actual. Though Oppen's poetry changes significantly in form between his first collection and his return to poetry in the 1960s, the dual obscurities indicated in that poem—those of formal difficulty and the theme of the difficulty of relating to the things in one's immediate world—remain prominent as concerns. When a comparable image appears in 'Of Being Numerous', for instance, we find that the problems of the obscurity of actuality and of poetry's means of conveying that obscurity are just as pressing:

Street lamps shine on the parked cars
Steadily in the clear night

It is true the great mineral silence

Vibrates, hums, a process

Completing itself

In which the windshield wipers

Of the cars are visible. (*NCP* 179)

As in *Discrete Series*, the actuality of the cars is emphasised by their being objects of external illumination. Light, like the act of vision itself, operates across Oppen's body of work as a conceptual short-hand for the possibility of the intuition of existence. The light here is from a street-light, however, and so we might interpret it as another 'false' light. It is after all a product of machine production and an operational element within the problematic and 'numerous' city-space of 'Of Being Numerous'. Indeed, once the cars are illuminated the 'great mineral silence' arrives as if in opposition to both cars and streetlight. Its minerality, its obscurity as an undefined 'process', and its oddly silent 'hum' all suggest an oblique opposition to the manufacturedness, the social involvement, and the stillness of the preceding objects. But rather than furthering these oppositions, the third stanza draws the poles together. It is within the 'great mineral silence' that the cars are visible; the light the lamp casts creates the possibility of their being perceived. The challenge is not only to see the difference between an intuition of existence and everyday apprehension, but to see the general within the particular, being (as a substantive whole) underpinning beings in particular, the silent hum of the mineral world in the light shed from the street lamp onto the automobiles. In one of his many notebooks, Oppen writes that

[Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (UCSD 16, 13, 2)

Oppen understands ‘reality’ as something that is both seen and obscured through abstractions. It is only for the speechless infant that it is possible to see ‘reality, being’ prior to its differentiation into objects like tables. The reality that the infant sees is also implicitly not the atoms that compose the table but the actuality from which abstractions differentiate it. To find the concrete, in this context, is implicitly to re-attain the speechlessness of the infant and to find the concrete in spite of the precedence that abstractions attain through language. Like Heidegger, Oppen seeks to find the things themselves by shedding away the detritus of received methods. As we saw earlier, even substantive abstractions like ‘Humanity’ are difficult for Oppen because they must be sought out through an encounter with the concrete actualities of which they are made.

The section of ‘Of Being Numerous’ quoted above thus also works to ‘find the concrete’. Perception of the cars and the street lamp brings the ‘great mineral silence’ into the poem as the fact and possibility of their existence. Their concreteness arrives in a moment of syntactical ambiguity, however. Without periods in places where sentences might be expected to end, each two-line stanza can be read both as its own unit and as running on into the next. The adverb ‘steadily’ at the head of the second line most obviously belongs to the shining of the street-lamps, but is also tied awkwardly to the vibrating and humming of the mineral silence. If this is only a vague sense in the first stanza break, a hint at syntactic ambivalence for the steadiness, it is more definite in the next. Once the ‘great mineral silence’ is deduced, perception returns to the automobile. Again, syntax serves to interpolate the windshield wipers back into the ‘great mineral silence’. ‘In which’, one of Oppen’s favourite arrangements of ‘small words’, sends the phrase spinning implicitly back into the abstraction from which it is just emerging. It is

a neat piece of performative syntax, completing the dialectic it describes, arriving, simultaneously new and unchanged, at its point of completion. The difficulty of finding the concrete poses new challenges, however, for the otherness of that great mineral silence threatens the poet's ability to make meanings:

> The power of the mind, the
> Power and weight
> Of the mind which
> Is not enough, it is nothing
> And does nothing
>
> Against the natural world,
> Behemoth, white whale, beast
> They will say and less than beast,
> The fatal rock
>
> Which is the world— (*NCP* 179)

In *Discrete Series* the encounter with the thing in the world implicitly affirms the reality of the consciousness capable of perceiving it. While the same is certainly true here, the objects' reality now contains a fundamental otherness that poses particular challenges to thought. The mind can neither penetrate nor contain 'the natural world'.

This inability does not represent the mind's failure, however, so much as stone's form of presence within the phenomenological open. We saw above how Oppen's use of

a version of *Ereignis* in the 'intuition of existence' tends to focus on minerality. This underpinned the manner in which things matter to one within the world. Here the phenomenological encounter with such materiality continues to recognise its withdrawal from the meanings that gather around it. In 'The Origin of the Work of Art', Heidegger writes that we cannot know a stone and its heaviness by calculating its weight. Calculation changes heaviness into something other than itself.[227] In 'Discourse on Thinking', Heidegger writes that

> whenever we plan, research, and organize, we always reckon with conditions that are given. We take them into account with the calculated intention of their serving specific purposes. Thus we can count on definite results. This calculation is the mark of all thinking that plans and investigates. Such thinking remains calculation even if it neither works with numbers nor uses an adding machine or computer. Calculative thinking computes. It computes ever new, ever more promising and at the same time more economical possibilities. Calculative thinking races from one prospect to the next. Calculative thinking never stops, never collects itself. Calculative thinking is not meditative thinking, not thinking which contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is.[228]

The sort of thinking that increasingly characterises the modern era, in other words, is one that interrogates its object in the terms of a pre-determined outcome. It knows in

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[227] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 47.
[228] Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York, London, Toronto and Sydney: Harper Perennial, 1966), 46.

advance that it will get results as an outcome of its method, and investigates solely in order to reach those particular ends. As Nicholls puts it:

> we are enmeshed in the representational thinking of logic which, says Heidegger, entails 'letting something take up a position opposite to us, as an object'. The subject-object relation which has dominated Western thinking thus entails a fundamental violence to the world.[229]

Instead, the stone as earth appears 'openly cleared as itself' only, Heidegger writes, when it is encountered 'and preserved as that which is by nature undisclosable, that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up.[230] Heidegger's 'meditative thinking', and poetic *aletheia*, are thus opposed to the calculative. Indeed, in 'The Origin of the Work of Art' it is the art-work specifically that has the capacity to show the undisclosable withdrawing of stone.

While Oppen had only limited access to Heidegger's writings, the recurrent turns in his poetry to forms of minerality and substance as the objects of the intuition of existence also carry within them a version of earth's withdrawal from penetrative and calculative thinking; figured above as the opposition of 'The fatal rock' to 'the / Power and weight / Of the mind'. Something of this was indicated also in section 37 of 'Of Being Numerous'. The implicit turn away from the 'nineteenth century day' and 'the world' towards the 'motes / In the air' indicates a new drive to encounter the world's material actuality as a form of otherness, something to be indicated, 'pointed' towards,

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[229] Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 68.
[230] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 47.

but not dominated by understanding.[231] There, interestingly, the motes allow this material otherness to permeate the air of the room, bringing a new sense of alienation to the Maude Blessingbourne character. We have also seen how in response to the obscurity and otherness of the world Oppen's deployment of nouns becomes particularly torsional. His nouns attempt, that is, to disclose the reality of the thing named while simultaneously indicating that its reality lies beyond naming's boundaries, in a form of encounter not quite accessible by poetic language.

If section 37 of 'Of Being Numerous' relies on boredom to disclose 'Everything', the present encounter with the 'fatal rock' relies on a different fundamental attunement, something closer to anxiety. Indeed, a number of critics have noted the degree to which Oppen's notion of the subject-object encounter—his separation of language from the poem itself and, we can now add, the otherness of the earth to the power of the mind—is permeated by a deep anxiety about mediation in both language and thought. Ffytche writes, for instance, that

> As well as opening up a constant exchange between concrete detail and metaphysical suggestion, the poems allow Oppen to be agonistic and dialectical, but also disturbed, tentative and contradictory, in ways that the phenomenological writings, whose tactics the poems appear so often to parallel, try to preserve themselves against.[232]

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[231] Barzilai, *George Oppen: A Critical Study*, 63 and following, for more on how, in Barzilai's words, Oppen treats 'the paradox of language (how it can and cannot convey experience)'.
[232] Ffytche, 'The Arduous Path of Appearance', 208.

Wilkinson argues more explicitly that Oppen's poetry betrays a fundamental anxiety about the mediation of experience:

> Indeed, George Oppen's seeing is often mediated doubly; for instance, the tiny poem starting 'Bad times' finishes 'A man sells post-cards'—a nice reflexive touch.
>
> Oppen's anxiety about the mediation of perception is not confined to seeing. In *Discrete Series* paving, asphalt, decks, cobbles, and a stage intervene between observer and earth, while the final stanza of the book runs 'Successive / Happenings / (the telephone)'.[233]

Oppen is thematically anxious about mediation and he thinks through the forms of mediation at work in his poems or in the culture more broadly. At the same time, Oppen regards his own mediating speech. He is 'agonistic', 'tentative and contradictory', trying to work his way away from the mediations of others. As Nicholls notes, even more provocatively, the period in which Oppen was writing 'Of Being Numerous' was also the period in which he was 'reading Heidegger and pondering the philosopher's account of anxiety and 'Being-toward-death'.[234] We can now add that this anxiety finds a particularly strong focus in Oppen's sense that while there 'are things around which meaning gathers', the meaning they attain as part of a world is in strife with the withdrawal from meaning of the earth of which they are made. Where the later Heidegger would use such a conflict to position poetry as a material channel for

[233] Wilkinson, 'The Glass Enclosure', 225.
[234] Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 85.

disclosure, Oppen's reading of the early Heidegger produced a much more fraught and anxious relation.[235]

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes that *Dasein* does not have or produce knowledge of that which makes it anxious, and that anxiety cannot have or be given any particular orientation in regards to its cause.[236] Rather, the phenomenon of '*the world as such is that in the face of which one has anxiety*'.[237] Heidegger explains: 'What oppresses us is not this or that, nor is it the summation of everything present-at-hand; it is rather the *possibility* of the ready-to-hand in general; that is to say, it is the world itself'.[238] What *Dasein* is anxious about is the world itself, encountered and anxiously held in its generality, and so it is this that *Dasein* it is thrown back upon. In his discussion of the disclosures of anxiety, Nowell Smith explains that for Heidegger, at one point in *Being and Time,* what

> anxiety discloses [is] not the world as the meaningful context of our engagement with other beings, but rather its breakdown into meaninglessness. The resultant disclosure does not, as in the case with the circumspective understanding, grasp a being 'as' such-and-such, but 'brings one back to the pure "that-it-is" [*Dass*] of one's ownmost individualized thrownness' […]. What is disclosed is the sheer fact, and facticity, of our being-in-the-world, whose scope we cannot gauge but which pervades our every encounter with other entities. We are 'being-*in*-the-world,' at home in the world and 'familiar' with the context of circumspective

[235] For instance, Oppen read Heidegger's arguments, in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, that although 'Everyone speaks and writes away in the language, without hindrance and above all *without* danger […] only a very few are capable of thinking through the full implications of [the] misrelation and unrelation of present-day being-there to language' (51).
[236] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 231.
[237] Ibid.
[238] Ibid.

> understanding, and yet, we are 'in' the world uncannily: thrown into the world, we are 'thrown into uncanniness [*Unheimlichkeit*]'.[239]

If boredom discloses existence, anxiety makes the attuned encounter with the world not a matter of meaning, but rather of meaninglessness. Uncanniness offers an affective register for that experience. At the very point that *Dasein* is brought into the alienated grasping that anxiety is able to produce, the environment breaks down into 'meaninglessness'. Something of anxiety's attunement also permeates authenticity more generally. As Wrathall puts it,

> Authentic contact with the world, of which we are all capable, is decidedly not cut to the measure of what we are able to say about the entities we encounter. Thus, in *Being and Time,* he [Heidegger] argued that in authentic experience, we are reduced to silence or reticence in the face of the world.[240]

This is the fatality, we might say, of the fatal rock, the natural world against which the power of the mind is nothing. The power of the mind is nothing because the moment of intuition in which being is apprehended in its astonishing actuality can be the same moment, or lead to a moment, in which one's capacity to speak, and thus generate meaning in relation to that encounter, is annulled. To have an encounter with the 'things around which meaning gathers' thus also includes an encounter with the break-down of the world in anxiety. To be able to experience and endure this break-down, however, offers the possibility of thinking beyond it.

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[239] Nowell Smith, *Sounding/Silence*, 30-31.
[240] Mark A. Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment: Truth, Language, and History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 123.

The challenge thus posed for Oppen's poems is real and difficult. Twitchell-Waas gives a particularly good explanation: 'The axiomatic given of the real', he writes,

> its thereness that the poem must register, persistently threatens the poem and humanity with mere meaninglessness, its impenetrability, even while the acknowledgment of the real is necessarily a recognition of the self which holds out the promise of meaningfulness and being with others. The poem's task, then, is to enact this sense of presence or conviction in the face of its negation.[241]

To return to 'Of Being Numerous', then, the assertion of the actuality of the car within consciousness emphasises its otherness to consciousness and its active resistance to epistemological domination. The momentary purpose is simply to register this fact, the fatality of the 'rock' that is actuality. The emergent challenge negotiated in other of Oppen's poems, however, is to find a way of thinking appropriate to this state of affairs. As Twitchell-Waas observes, this way of thinking must be capable of attending both to the actuality and impenetrability of substance and to the mind in its encounter with the 'fatal rock'.[242] It is an encounter, moreover, that not only resists the mind's penetration—and we recall Oppen's word 'impenetrable' for the substantive—but also somehow works back upon the mind, casting it into uncanniness, meaninglessness, and silence.

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[241] Twitchell-Waas, 'What Were the "Objectivist" Poets?', 327.
[242] Ibid., 326-28.

Falling or Keeping Silent

Silence is the term I would like to single-out for further discussion, for from the above anxiety emerges a poetics of silence that accompanies Oppen's poetics of nominalisation and presencing. Typically, Oppen gives a meta-poetic formulation of this poetics of silence. Directly following the section of 'Of Being Numerous' in which we read that 'There can be a brick / In a brick wall', we read the following lines:

> Clarity
>
> In the sense of *transparence*,
> I don't mean that much can be explained.
>
> Clarity in the sense of silence. (*NCP* 175)

It is a beautiful, and beautifully ironic moment. Oppen voices his idea of clarity in terms that are both hesitant, thoroughly mediated and mediating, and sonorous, with rhymes on 'sense', 'transparence' and 'silence', and with alliterations in 'mean that much' and 'sense of silence'. The motion is like that encountered in 'Psalm'. The opening 'Clarity' seems at first like a simple and straightforward nominalisation. Clarity must surely be a self-evident notion, even in its immateriality and abstraction. But no sooner is the idea named than Oppen must qualify it. It is clarity 'In the sense of *transparence',* a particular notion of clarity as clearness, in the way a window-pane is clear. Again, though, this explanation proves insufficient, as Oppen finds he must distinguish it further from other notions of transparence. What he does *not* mean is that clarity makes

something transparent to language; it is not 'that much can be explained' because everything is 'clear' to the speaker. As a result, the concept of clarity as transparence becomes itself insufficient. It requires a second formulation, 'Clarity in the sense of silence'. What Oppen means by 'clarity', it turns out, is not conveyed solely by 'the sense' of the word 'transparence' but also requires the concept of 'silence'. Rather than being self-evident, the type of clarity that Oppen imagines is something that must be fought for, wrested from a language that has needed two different senses in order to describe it. The word 'clarity', then, is ironic as a mediator, naming a type of clarity that is like transparence and silence, calling it to presence, but also indicating that it is an ideal that has only an uncomfortable presence in language. As he writes in 'Route', 'Words cannot be wholly transparent. And that is the "heartlessness" of words' (*NCP* 194).

The call for clarity, therefore, is also a recognition of the fact that an ideal clarity lies beyond the means at Oppen's disposal. This meaning is also present in Oppen's naming of clarity as a kind of silence. Voicing this definition is necessary for apprehension, but at the same time serves to make it less like silence itself. Oppen repeatedly invokes and re-invokes this paradox, this object of intense anxiety, in his separation of the concept of the poem from the language in which the poem is formed. We have already read, for instance, Oppen's definition of the poem:

> Poem: the thing in the mind before the words to be able to hold it even against the language'[.] (*SL* 236)

Even in this brief thought we are treated to two of Oppen's characteristic gaps, or pauses within the body of the sentence, that suggest something of the silence he advocates elsewhere. They do not so much name or speak as direct one towards an experience that is in tension with the language around it.[243]

This tension has its own Heideggerian parallel. For Heidegger, 'In "poetical discourse" the communication of the existential possibilities of one's state-of-mind can become an aim in itself, and this amounts to a disclosing of existence'.[244] It brings beings out into an open in which they can shine and give themselves over to thought. Opposed to such disclosive language, however, is that other comportment that—more typical of *Dasein*—covers beings over and closes them off from thought. This is the fallen chatter, the 'idle talk' [*Gerede*] of circumspective understanding. This form of speech also opens up a world and reveals beings, but it does so in ways that typically hide being from us, particularly our own being-towards-death.[245] 'Idle Talk' is thus not entirely negative, but it is a form of speech that belongs to the masses, to the 'they', as Heidegger puts it.[246] Moreover, the idle talk has already done the work of interpreting being, thus closing off the chances of a real encounter: 'Proximally, and within certain limits, Dasein is constantly delivered over to this interpretedness, which controls and distributes the possibilities of average understanding and of the state-of-mind belonging to it'.[247] This always being-given-over to average interpretedness enables us to be with each other in society. It spreads, Heidegger writes, through '*gossiping* and *passing the*

[243] For more on this see DuPlessis, 'Uncannily in the Open', 188-9.
[244] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 205.
[245] Ibid., 208.
[246] Ibid., 244.
[247] Ibid., 211.

word along' such that it 'is something that anyone can rake up'.[248] If this is the case, however, it also 'releases one from the task of genuinely understanding', and 'develops an indifferent kind of intelligibility, for which nothing is closed off any longer'.[249] In other words, it blankets all of being with an indifferent understanding that mutes any desire to tackle a *genuine* understanding. It is this other form of language, this chatter, that threatens all speech, and which Oppen seems particularly to fear in his poems. His statements about clarity 'in the sense of silence', and the distinction between the poem and its own language, make it seem as though the danger of such a circumspective language threatens to drive him into total silence.

A number of critics have by now written on Oppen's interest in silence.[250] It is Kalck, however, who I think puts it best when he links Oppen's silence to a 'poetics of infancy'; that is, to the poetics of a state before speech.[251] Such a reading recalls Oppen's pre-discursive poem, and the infant's capacity for sight. Oppen writes:

> I think of form as immediacy, as the possibility of being grasped. I look for the thinnest possible surface.-- at times, no doubt, too thin : a hole, a lapse. […] There is no point in defending lapses-- but that is, of all risks the one I plan to live with. I am much more afraid of a solid mass of words. (*SL* 40)

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[248] Ibid., 212, 13.
[249] Ibid., 213.
[250] See, for instance, Oren Izenberg, 'Oppen's Silence, Crusoe's Silence, and the Silence of Other Minds', *Modernism/modernity* 13, no. 1 (2006), Kalck, 'Silence "Even against the Language"', Burt Kimmelman, 'George Oppen's Silence and the Role of Uncertainly in Post-War American Avant-Garde Poetry', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 36, no. 2 (2003), and Tom Fisher, 'A Political Poetics: George Oppen and the Essential Life of the Poem', *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 65, no. 2 (2009).
[251] Kalck, 'Silence "Even against the Language"'.

We might call this a declaration of a poetics of silence or erasure explicitly posed against a poetics of chatter. We saw in a prior section how Oppen's notion of the poem as a test of truth posed a 'poetry' concerned with images and 'its materials' against a 'histrionics' concerned with 'speech'. This distinction similarly reflects a Heideggerian tension between a disclosive poetry and one only capable of fallen chatter. The difficulty is perhaps even more extreme for Oppen, for his description of a pre-discursive moment of apprehension is alien to speech as such, and not just to that language that falls outside of the poetic test of truth. If the poem is the 'thing in the mind before the words', the poetic surface is both other to the phenomenological content and also the material, limiting channel through which that content is made present. If the phenomenon is pre-discursive, the poem's language must nonetheless project an open space in which it might be encountered by others. And so, in his anxiety of mediation, Oppen seeks the 'thinnest possible surface', the least necessary interference between the new, singular experience of the open and the poem's projective saying.

This conflict between speech and silence leads to practices of silencing or minimisation more broadly. In 'Part of the Forest' from *The Materials*, for example, we read:

> There are lovers who recall that
> Moment of moonlight, lit
> Instant— (*NCP* 80)

The opening mediation through recollection resembles the opening of 'Time of the Missile', and as with many of Oppen's poems the prior, mediated experience has taken place in isolation from society. Here it is in the woods, though it is just as likely to take place on a boat, or looking out to sea from the coast. This becomes the dominant, though abstracted, theme of *Seascape: Needle's Eye*. Isolation, or aloneness, is a regular feature of Oppen's poems, and is a dominant feature of ontological insights in 'Of Being Numerous' where it is repeatedly linked to the concept of 'shipwreck'. 'Part of the Forest' tells us that 'There are lovers who recall' a 'lit instant'. Having said this, however, the poem hesitates. An em dash installs a strange lacuna, not just a gap but a moment of transition. When the next stanza begins it is with a new thought:

> But to be alone is to be lost
> Altho the tree, the roots
> Are there[.] (*NCP* 80)

This second stanza responds to the first. Being 'alone' and being 'lost' contrast with the togetherness of the 'lovers', and with their being within a 'Moment of moonlight'. The forest, as a setting for being alone, contrasts with the moonlight as a setting for that 'lit instant' shared by the lovers. Indeed, the poem mentions that 'the tree' and 'the roots / Are there' in an almost offhand way, even though only the poem's title has so far done anything to tell us that there may be a forest nearby. While these formal parallels are clear, however, the movement from one state to the other is obscure. It is as though the em dash marked a space where an intermediary thought had been skipped, or perhaps has been erased. For why does being 'alone' equate to being 'lost'? What sort of moment has the em dash appeared in order to deny us?

In an interview with both George and Mary Oppen, conducted by Kevin Power in 1975, the conversation touches upon *The Materials*, and on this poem. Power asks about Oppen's statements that he '*found it easier in a way to make contact with humanity when it was night, with the abstraction, with the idea*'.[252] Mary links this to Camus, suggesting that at the root of poems like 'Part of the Forest' lies 'A vision […] of night, of looking out into what's out there, and returning, but in isolation'.[253] George interrupts at this point, however, saying

> But I *am* speaking of plain existence. The difference from Sartre is that I don't in the least dislike the world, really. This isn't the horror of the roots, the horror of its being there to be at all, and I think it's very definite in the poem.[254]

To this Mary adds that 'I find it much closer to Heidegger than I do to Sartre'.[255] The distinction is, perhaps, between two notions of isolation. One of which is a Sartrean estrangement from the world, a negative estrangement characteristic of, amongst other things, the nausea of *La Nausée*. The other is the Heideggerian mode. Given the context in which Mary and George Oppen put it, I take it this is not the alienation from being that characterises fallen *Dasein*, but rather that breakdown into meaninglessness, into infant speechlessness, that comes with some forms of attunement to being. This suggests a way of reading the odd, and interrupting em dash at the end of the first stanza of 'Part of the Forest'. If the isolation that is named in the following stanza, the

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[252] Swigg, *Speaking with George Oppen*, 100.
[253] Ibid., 101.
[254] Ibid.
[255] Ibid.

aloneness and lostness found amongst the trees and their roots, is Heideggerian, I would argue that the em dash marks a moment of falling-silent, or of keeping-silent, in the that instant in which being is encountered. The next stanza does not describe that moment, but responds to it with a new thought.

This keeping or falling silent also has a basis in Heidegger's discussion of idle talk. Such silence, he writes, is only possible when the possibility of speech and discourse is present.[256] It means nothing, in other words, to be silent when there is nothing to say:

> Keeping silent authentically is possible only in genuine discoursing. To be able to keep silent, Dasein must have something to say—that is, it must have at its disposal an authentic and rich disclosedness of itself. In that case one's reticence [Verschweigenheit] makes something manifest, and does away with 'idle talk' ['Gerede'].[257]

Oppen's reticence in the above moment would thus, from Heidegger's perspective, also mark a point at which one has both achieved the sort of ontological insight desired, come to some understanding of oneself and of being, together, and manifest that understanding in a refusal of 'idle chatter'. For Heidegger this is a particularly rich moment because the apprehension of being that is possible is a product of the projected open that the *logos* makes available for and as part of *Dasein*'s being. For Oppen it is slightly different: the pre-verbal moment he imagines saps silence of some of its

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[256] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 208.
[257] Ibid. For more on this, see also Krzysztof Ziarek, 'Reticent Event: Letting Things Happen', *Textual Practice* 25, no. 2 (2011): 245-46.

ontological richness. At the same time, however, it fills it with a different significance. Oppen's silence, that is to say, is full of the alienness of speech to intuition while at the same time capable of refusing the idle and averaging talk of the 'they'. Further, it marks a place in which the two anxieties identified above come together: on the one side the anxiety experienced in the face of being, in which meaning is difficult to achieve, and on the other the concomitant anxiety of the poet who faces the ethical dilemma of creating meaning in the face of one's anxious attunement.

Oppen's poem presents further challenges. Even though it is concerned with, as he put it in 'The Mind's Own Place', 'the sense of the poet's self among things', 'Part of the Forest' seems to resist any pull toward the representation of interior experience.[258] Here, and as in 'Time of the Missile', the recollected moment provides the ground for another moment of ontological perception that has only a shadowy presence in the poem. In 'Time of the Missile', the idea of seeing was emphatically present, but the experience of seeing itself was hidden from view. Sight as a metaphor for ontological insight was, rather, largely contained in the apostrophe that sprung from it. In 'Part of the Forest', the moment of seeing is also hidden from view, and rather than provoke apostrophe the poem avoids representation by a lacunary gap in both the language and the implied thinking behind it. This avoidance is multiplied by other forms of mediation at work in the poem. The lit-instant occurs in recollection, for instance, a recollection that the poem then represents. This suggests that the poem is neither attempting to fully represent the ontological encounter nor to represent the recollection itself. Rather, it is as though the poem were trying to think through the

[258] Oppen, 'The Mind's Own Place', 4.

consequences of recollection for its understanding of the larger world and as a test of truth for its own language.

Referring to his practice of fragmentation, and specifically of not completing his phrases syntactically, Oppen asks himself if it is [Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (UCSD 16, 17, 1). It is as though he feels that non-closure erases something of the ego's domination over its object that normally takes place in the act of speech, and that in so erasing that domination he finds residence within the language that he seeks to resist. Nicholls is more direct. 'This deliberate lack of closure', he writes, is 'a primary instance of poetry's difference to politics, placing the poem within [an] indeterminate space […] The lack of totalization here thus seems to suggest that poetry, in contrast to political discourse, can open relations which precede ideology and morality'.[259] It is worth repeating Oppen's comment from his interview with L. S. Dembo: 'I'm really concerned with the substantive, with the subject of the sentence, with what we are talking about' he writes, before adding 'and not rushing over the subject-matter in order to make a comment about it'.[260] Silence, manifesting as it does here as syntactical hesitation and non-closure—the inscription of a limit to speech—is in essence the practice of 'not rushing over the subject-matter'.[261]

Ziarek emphasises how reservedness or reticence is itself a type of attunement, a state of preparedness conducive to *Ereignis*.[262] For Heidegger this reticence, which he called *Verhaltenheit*, is characterised by 'an active yet reserved relating'.[263] As Ziarek emphasises puts it, when 'reservedness' or silence comes into to language, that which is

[259] Nicholls, 'Of Being Ethical', 166-7.
[260] Swigg, *Speaking with George Oppen*, 10.
[261] See also Barzilai, *George Oppen: A Critical Study*, 62-4.
[262] Ziarek, 'Reticent Event: Letting Things Happen', 248.
[263] Ibid.

said is 'the event' [*Ereignis*].[264] For Oppen this reticence is bound to his particular thinking about predication. The problem, as Nicholls puts it, is that predication renders 'up the singular—the "is-ness", as Oppen calls it (SL, 89)—to the universal', and that in so doing the thing spoken of 'becomes something that was already-there'.[265] As a result, Ma writes, 'Oppen's objectivist poetics of vision is characterized, first and foremost, by a removal from the I-eye configuration of the component of the subject as the predator of predication, purging vision of its underlying ego-system'.[266] It is the domination inherent in the act of predication itself that is to be broken, through reticence, by breaking the phrase syntactically. Parlej similarly notes that Oppen disrupts predication, offering 'not a true predication but a true placement of his consciousness as it attempts a predication'.[267] The incomplete syntax would thus represent or enact the incompleteness of the thought itself. It is a thought in process, and Parlej identifies it specifically with a Heideggerian model 'developed in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*', which does not necessarily predicate itself, but creates 'by a sort of a perpetual *receding into its own interiority,* the space necessary for a predicative transaction to occur'.[268] Middleton also examines what he calls Oppen's 'interrupted predicates and unconsolidated propositions'.[269] 'Each predicate', he writes 'is linked to some tangible feature of this landscape (even that most ontologically suspect substance, ether) and also to a chain of historically shaped cultural associations'.[270] But at the same time, he argues, 'Oppen's poem is unusually open about its suspension of postulation', and its 'very awkwardness

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[264] Ibid.
[265] Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 15.
[266] Ming-Qian Ma, *Poetry as Re-Reading: American Avant-Garde Poetry and the Poetics of Counter-Method*, Avant-Garde & Modernism Studies (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 65.
[267] Parlej, 'Testing the Image', 73.
[268] Ibid., 75-6, 77.
[269] Peter Middleton, 'Open Oppen: Linguistic Fragmentation and the Poetic Proposition', *Textual Practice* 24, no. 4 (2010): 631.
[270] Ibid.

[…] lays bare the mechanisms and existential investments' that postulation carries.[271] The suspension or interruption of predication and postulation thus leaves phrases still capable or registering 'some tangible feature of the landscape' while refusing to rush on, or indeed 'over' the features they register.

At times, however, Oppen's avowed poetics of silence and clarity finds itself in competition with his desire to bear witness to historical, political, and international crises. The poem 'Route' provides arguably the most extreme example in Oppen's oeuvre, calling as it does upon his wartime experiences:

> In Alsace, during the war, we found ourselves on the edge of the Battle of the Bulge. The front was inactive, but we were spread so thin that the situation was eerily precarious. We hardly knew where the next squad was, and it was not in sight—a quiet and deserted hill in front of us. We dug in near a farmhouse. Pierre Adam, tho he was a journeyman mason, lived with his wife and his children in that farmhouse. (*NCP* 194-5)

Oppen's desire to bear witness to wartime experiences has led him into a wholly different form; beyond verse into prose, into reportage or autobiography. Pierre, the French mason, then recounts a set of facts to Oppen—further mediating the representation—of how the German army had forcefully recruited the men of Alsace, and how those who had not wanted to go would dig themselves holes to hide in, sometimes for years (*NCP* 194-6). Those who wish to escape the violent eruption and clash of ideologies find themselves huddling amongst dirt, hidden literally within that

[271] Ibid., 632.

matter which was, for Oppen, so suggestive of ontological alienness. At the same time, however, the need to remember and present the facts has lead him beyond the radical ablation of the poetic surface, away from silence. As a result, when Oppen returns to verse in the next section of 'Route', he finds himself self-consciously ruminating on the prose. He must, he finds, rescue his recollections from becoming simple moralisations:

> We are brothers, we are brothers?—these things are
> composed of moral substance only if they are untrue. If
> these things are true they are perfectly simple, perfectly
> impenetrable, those primary elements which can only be
> named. (*NCP* 197)

If the facts are true, then the representation is not ideological or moral propaganda, but simply the recognition of an impenetrable other, of a 'primary element' that can only be 'named' and, implicitly, not run over with language.

Nonetheless, Oppen remains self-conscious and anxious about such representations, leading to an almost obsessive brooding over the need to speak of such things, and the accompanying sense of insufficiency, or transgression. The anxiety is best registered in 'Of Being Numerous' itself, where in Section 14, having worked through the opening dialectic between the 'shipwreck / Of the singular' and 'the meaning / Of being numerous', Oppen laments:

> I cannot even now
> Altogether disengage myself

> From those men
>
> With whom I stood in emplacements, in mess tents,
> In hospitals and sheds and hid in the gullies
> Of blasted roads in a ruined country[.] (*NCP* 171)

He finds that he cannot disengage himself, and wants to bear witness still to the 'mess tents', the 'hospitals', and the 'blasted roads in a ruined country'. Presented in such complete phrases, memory and predication run the risk of 'running over' the subject of the utterance. What is this, and what was the memory of Alsace in 'Route', but that 'solid mass of words' of which Oppen is afraid, more afraid than of a 'lapse' or 'hole'? And so, Oppen again starts to brood over his own speaking, and in a manner that registers his anxiety about the generation of meaning:

> How forget that? How talk
> Distantly of 'The People'[.] (*NCP* 171)

'How forget', 'How talk'; the questions are strained, deliberately awkward. They are also rhetorical, meant to draw our attention to the problem of talking rather than suggest solutions. Bodily they turn Oppen away from the solid mass of words towards the more ethical failure of the lapse or hole. What has been elided in the question, most potently, is the 'I', the subject. It is not 'How could I forget?' nor 'How might I talk?', nor is it even 'How might one talk?' or 'How does a person talk?'. It is, instead, 'How talk', and the 'lapse' into abbreviated phrasing re-opens that space between reality and language that the poem was in danger of rushing over as it might rush over the subject of those

who make up 'The people'. It doubles what is already a hesitation manifested in the act of questioning itself. Though Oppen starts with memory and his inability to 'disengage' himself, he finds at the end that he is able to at least break free of the sort of speech they seem to demand.

Oppen and Formal Indication

As Oppen attempts to use language to register the actuality of things in the world and wants that language to be as 'clear' as possible, he finds that language itself gets in the way. It trips, as it were, over its own feet. And Oppen must as a result draw attention to the medium in order to indicate its insufficiency in the face of an experience and understanding to which it is ostensibly in service. In this, section 14 of 'Of Being Numerous' offers a variation on a greater theme. In 'Psalm' he turns to the 'small nouns', which are found to cry an untethered but sincere 'faith' in the 'this in which' they are embedded, both poem and world. The withdrawal within the act of disclosure was found in the noun itself. In 'Time of the Missile' and 'Part of the Forest', the difficulty of representing ontological insight in recollection leads to the elision of the insight itself in favour of the actualities that surround and provoke it. In the 14th section of 'Of Being Numerous', the grammatically broken question becomes a site of self-interrogation that demonstrates the historical and affective excess of the people—as well as the hospitals and the war—over the poem's capacity to bear witness without 'rushing over' the reality of events. It is, again, a matter of

> Two sincerities. One is to the poem which is a thing. The other sincerity is to the things of the world, the other things of the world. Because the words are objects,

> the poem is an object, but the poem is ineluctably transparent. Also it refers to those things.[272]

Communication of the intuition of existence upon which the poem is built is mediated by a language of which Oppen is deeply suspicious, and in which the need to disclose the content of that intuition is only partially met. Unlike the later Heidegger, who will find a poem's ontological significance in its engagement with its earth, Oppen finds in his medium a necessary failure to disclose.[273] Or, to put it another way, he finds in the poetic medium something that is inherently antithetical to what is poetic in the *Ereignis* experience. As a result, he reformulates the poem as an indicator of the actuality and self-sufficiency of the something other to itself.

In his torsional understanding, then, of language as something necessary for disclosure, and in his anxiety over the mediation and the dangers inherent in using language at all, Oppen's unusual Heideggerian poetics produces gestures that come to resemble Heidegger's method of formal indication. Put at its simplest, formal indication is a method by which philosophy might make definitions without either over- or under-determining its object. As Daniel Dahlstrom explains,

> in the summer of 1930 [Heidegger] acknowledges that, as soon as philosophizing is committed to words, it is exposed to an 'essential *misinterpretation of its content*.' That essential misinterpretation is precisely the

[272] Swigg, *Speaking with George Oppen*, 59.
[273] See Nowell Smith's *Sounding/Silence* for more on the Later Heidegger's writing on the ontological significance of poetry.

> view that everything, insofar as it has been articulated, has to be taken for something present-at-hand.[274]

If the object of enquiry defies accurate description, and even committing one's philosophy to language misinterprets the essence of its object, formal indication is

> a revisable way of pointing to some phenomenon, fixing its preliminary sense and the corresponding manner of unpacking it, while at the same time deflecting any 'uncritical lapse' into some specific conception that would foreclose pursuit of 'a genuine sense' of the phenomenon.[275]

The language of being is in ruin, and so Heidegger must find a way of philosophising, both thinking and writing, that nonetheless offers a way into being.[276] Formal indication opens up such a way, a preliminary, provisional open that self-critically refuses to fix its object in place. Heidegger, in the section of *Being and Time* dedicated to thinking towards the possibility of *Dasein's* 'being-a-whole' and 'being-towards-death', sketches out the shape of formal indication. Having gone through a process of thinking through 'the ontological possibility of getting death into our grasp', Heidegger finds that certain 'substructures' of being, 'thrust themselves to the fore unnoticed'.[277] He is forced to consider the phenomena of 'the End', and of 'Totality', and so he writes that

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[274] Daniel O. Dahlstrom, 'Heidegger's Method: Philosophical Concepts as Formal Indications', *The Review of Metaphysics* 47, no. 4 (1994): 779.
[275] Ibid., 780.
[276] Matthew I. Burch, 'The Existential Sources of Phenomenology: Heidegger on Formal Indication', *European Journal of Philosophy* 21, no. 2 (2013): 259.
[277] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 285.

> Within the framework of this investigation, our ontological characterization of the end and totality can only be provisional. To perform this task adequately, we must […] set forth the *formal* structure of end in general and totality in general[.][278]

We must, that is, provisionally set forth the formal categories of end and totality before we can discover what phenomenological content ought to be located within them. And so, Heidegger writes,

> Keeping constantly in view the existential constitution of Dasein already set forth, we must try to decide how inappropriate to Dasein ontologically are those conceptions of end and totality which first thrust themselves to the fore, no matter how categorially indefinite they may remain. The rejection [Zurükweisung] of such concepts must be developed into a positive *assignment* [*Zweisung*] of them to their specific realms.[279]

Reflection, that is to say, has brought to the investigation into *Dasein* two key forms that make up its being. The forms are there, and can be indicated with terms like 'the End' and 'Totality', but they are not yet understood. And so Heidegger must proceed with his investigation into those forms by using these formal indicators to keep open a non-determined and formal concept of these aspects of Dasein. Thus Burch writes that formal indication 'is the "counter-ruinant" […], nonobjectifying, reflective method that

[278] Ibid.
[279] Ibid.

accentuates life's own mode of self-awareness in order to articulate the meaning structures that make everyday experience possible'.[280]

Part of what makes this possible is the fact that *Dasein* is its own object of enquiry. In the beginning of *Being and Time*, for example, Heidegger makes his case that the inquiry into being, 'as a kind of seeking, must be guided beforehand by what is sought. So the meaning of Being must already be available to us in some way'.[281] 'Thus', he writes,

> to work out the question of Being adequately, we must make an entity—the inquirer—transparent in his own Being. The very asking of this question is an entity's mode of *Being*; and as such it gets its essential character from what is inquired about—namely, Being. This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term '*Dasein*'.[282]

Dasein is that being amongst others that asks the question of being. Heidegger thus founds his investigation in *Being and Time* as an investigation into that being capable of asking of itself its own status as a being.[283] As Shockey elaborates, the 'impersonality of the term [Dasein] can induce us to forget that it is we, as individuals, who ask the question of the meaning of being […] The investigation of *Dasein*, in other words, is

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[280] Burch, 'The Existential Sources of Phenomenology', 264-5.
[281] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 25.
[282] Ibid., 27.
[283] R. Matthew Shockey, 'What's Formal About Formal Indication? Heidegger's Method in *Sein Und Zeit*', *Inquiry* 53, no. 6 (2010): 528-9.

always an investigation of *me* by *me'*.[284] As such, if one cannot get beyond one's already-fallen status as investigator, one can nonetheless reflect upon the fact that one is able to ask the question 'what is it to be?' or 'what am I?'. And so, Shockey writes,

> the question 'what am I?' itself implies a way of beginning to come up with an answer to it. For without knowing anything else about what I am beyond my ability to ask the question of my being, I can still look at *the question itself* to see what it shows about me as the one asking it and let that give a direction to any further analysis of what I am.[285]

The ability to ask the question of being indicates something of the form of the object of enquiry, an object that is also the one asking.

That which is indicated through Heidegger's philosophising are therefore often 'forms' rather than specific content. 'This analysis brings to light the basic, constitutive structures of *Dasein'*, Shockey writes, 'principal among which are, as Heidegger works them out, being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-Sein*), care (*Sorge*; the being of *Dasein*), and temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*; the meaning [*Sinn*] of the being of *Dasein*)'.[286] Such terms, like *Ereignis,* are formal indicators, they indicate the structures that are the outcomes of the formal inquiry into the form of phenomenological ontological experience, but they are themselves contentless.[287] They are common to 'any' enquirer and thus abstract, but also meant to indicate, as Griffiths puts it, 'something in the nature of existence'.[288]

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[284] Ibid.
[285] Ibid., 531.
[286] Ibid., 532.
[287] Dahlstrom, 'Heidegger's Method', 782.
[288] Griffiths, 'Looking into the Heart of Light', 352.

They are capable only of directing the reader or listener towards a particular type of encounter, or aspect of an encounter, that cannot be conveyed.

While Oppen's poems reflect a different mode of inquiry to Heidegger's philosophical phenomenology, in taking place within the language of being they face that same challenge addressed by Heidegger's turn to formal indication. Oppen finds himself similarly having to indicate the forms within ontological insight rather than its explicit and specific content. Which is to say that Oppen's confrontation with the limitations of communicating phenomenological content, and his desire to reflect upon his own means of poetic communication, are deployed in order to indicate something of the forms of being—its substantivity and excess over language, and the phenomenological challenges of insight and clarity. These forms lie beyond the poems' ability to capture them fully. This is a feature specifically of Oppen's own understanding of Heidegger's philosophy. Another might approach Oppen's poem 'Psalm' with the argument that it successfully discloses the dark and withdrawing presencing of beings within the event of disclosure. For Oppen, however, it seems as though this remained insufficient, because the experience of the word nonetheless still mediated and thus damaged the experience of the withdrawing otherness of a thing itself. Inherent in this problem are two versions of that challenge noted by Heidegger. To put one's experience into language is to either reduce existence to its manageable familiarity in 'things'—for Oppen, particularly words themselves—or to abstract one's thinking away from actuality (for instance, as is the problem with the phrase 'The people'). Both issues recognise that to use words—which have as Oppen tells us 'run mad / In the subways / And of course the institutions / And the banks' (*NCP* 116)—is to fundamentally mis-represent that of which one speaks.

An initial mode of indication is present in Oppen's turn to sight as a trope for the phenomenological encounter. His will to declare that 'the eye *sees!*' in 'Time of the Missile', and thus to manifest in speech one's position as witness to existence, not only indicates the world of existence but stands in as the form of encounter itself. To speak of things, as we have seen, runs the risk of taking them as delimited, controllable and foreclosed. To speak of sight is to indicate something of the form of the ontological encounter, the lighted open, outside of the representation of content. Fundamental to Oppen's ontology, prior to the encounter of any specific thing, is thus the fact of the possibility of apprehension. One *can* encounter the world, just as Heidegger found himself able to ask the question: what does it mean to be the being that can ask the meaning of being? This fact of the possibility of encountering the world is something that can be asserted in the poem independent of the particular content of that encounter, and independent of the difficulty of registering in language the reality of the encounter or of that which is encountered.

Another version of this formal indication of the possibility of encountering reality is also indicated by the 'small nouns' of 'Psalm'. Oppen starts 'In the small beauty of the forest' with 'The wild deer bedding down' and, as with the declaration that 'the eye *sees!*', uses an emphatic declaration to indicate the moment of encounter: 'That they are there!'. Oppen then refocuses his attention upon

The small nouns

Crying faith

In this in which the wild deer

Startle, and stare out. (*NCP* 99)

It is not the ontological content of the noun, those 'wild deer', but the capacity to name that Oppen is concerned with in naming the small nouns themselves. The poem's ability to attend to the prepositionality inherent in phrases like 'this in which', or in the preposition 'of' as Naylor writes, itself indicates something of the form of that which is encountered.[289] Its actuality is bound up with, and formally indicated in, the capacity of language to speak of it. The noun's actuality seems to indicate something of the actuality of the thing named without being identical to it. This is why Oppen turns to 'small nouns' as an object for reflection, for like Heidegger's formal indicators they are thus made provisional and contentless. So made, the small nouns do not pre-determine the actuality of the thing named as a particular being, but name the space of that being's appearance while retaining the sense of provisionality, the capacity to be named, that their undecidedness brings.

At the same time, the capacity of the poem to be 'of' being, to be about a thing and to run the risk of shaping, or 'foreclosing', one's understanding indicates the possibility of thought and speech 'rushing over' its subject. One might hesitate to speak, and speak one's hesitation as an indicator of the otherness of the incommunicable actuality, or one might rush over it and show the possibility of failing to do justice to that actuality. What is indicated most fundamentally is just that otherness of being to language. If Oppen's poetry cannot achieve the phenomenological clarity it desires, it can at least be faithful to itself in indicating the ontological forms with which its language is in tension, 'the thing in the mind before the words' (*SL* 236). And so, in 'Psalm', Oppen uses the poem as a form of encounter with that otherness, and refocuses

[289] Naylor, 'The Pre-Position "Of"'.

his attention upon the language he is using in order to indicate something of the form of the encounter that is occurring 'in the mind before the words'. The cluster of shifters and prepositions at the beginning of the third line of the final stanza, 'In this in which', opens that provisional space of 'beforeness'. It clusters those 'contentless' words (not names but the language that relates named things to each other) in order to indicate the capacity to be spoken 'of' that is manifest in the existence of a thing even 'before the words'. If one of the categories formally indicated by Heidegger is the 'mineness' inherent in *Dasein*, for Oppen there is the 'beforeness' of the open, that nearly 'naive' moment of vision, indicated in the preposition and the shifter. Indeed, this 'beforeness' seeks, in its own way, to be antagonistic to Heideggerian 'mineness'.

There is also something indicated in the gaps, and the fragmentation of syntax, that has been noted in many of Oppen's poems. If Oppen's prepositions and shifters indicate a phenomenological 'beforeness', his fragmentation and lacunae indicate not only the ontological otherness of things to the names given to them, but the phenomenological 'effacement of the ego' that is the result of a direct confrontation with that otherness. In 'Part of the Forest', for instance, I discussed how Oppen uses the em dash to indicate that point at which talk about the encounter with being reaches its limit in the recollected experience of that encounter. We read of 'that / Moment of moonlight, lit / Instant—' (*NCP* 80), in which the failure to speak indicates the form of the encounter: its annihilation of meaning. A similar moment in 'Psalm', also in a forest, is given a slightly gentler form:

> In this in which the wild deer
> Startle, and stare out. (*NCP* 99)

We are confronted by the word ‘Startle’, coming as it does at the head of a new line and after the suspension of action built up in the preceding line. Oppen then pauses on the comma after ‘Startle’. The comma enforces the pause, a gap between one action and the next, such that it is perhaps also we who ‘startle’ in that moment. But the comma, and the pause it creates, are the formal indicators here. They make a space within the poem that is not grammatically necessary, but which, when we experience it, directs us to that moment of non-speech, and hesitation in the face of an otherness and an alien intelligence. This is a moment that by its nature cannot be described. But it can be indicated in the poem as a gap, a provisional openness, from which something other might ‘stare out’.

‘The bulk of it’: A Wittgensteinian Reading of George Oppen’s Poetics of Being

> In the triangle I can now see *this* as apex, *that* as base—now *this* as apex, *that* as base. — Clearly the words ‘Now I am seeing *this* as the apex’ cannot so far mean anything for a learner who has only just met the concepts of apex, base, and so on. […]
>
> Only of someone *capable* of making certain applications of the figure with facility would one say that he saw it now *this* way, now *that* way.
>
> The substratum of this experience is the mastery of a technique. [290]
>
> —Ludwig Wittgenstein, ‘Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment’, §222.

‘Speak // If you can’: Oppen and Wittgenstein

In the eleventh section of ‘Of Being Numerous’ Oppen tries to articulate a distinction between how one speaks in a moment of insight that intuits existence, and the speech one might have with another person:

[290] Wittgenstein regularly used dashes of varying lengths as a way of emphasising the sense that multiple points of view were in dialogue: extending upon, interrupting, or contradicting each other. Because the precise nature of the dashes is not material to my arguments, I have standardised these as em dashes in all cases. However, I have maintained Wittgenstein’s practice of having spaces either side of the dash in those instances where the dash comes at the beginning of a sentence and seems to be introducing a new voice or perspective. I have removed the spacing around the dash when the dash sits within a sentence.

it is *that* light

Seeps in anywhere, a light for the times

In which the buildings

Stand on low ground, their pediments

Just above the harbor[.] (*NCP* 168).

It is a complex, doubled moment. The italicised '*that*' in '*that* light' reaches both back to 'the bright light of shipwreck' from a preceding section—with its confession that the 'I' articulated therein cannot have both his moment of insight and remain one of 'the people'—and at the same time outward to the fact of light's seeping. In contact with '*that* light', the fact of its shining both isolates the individual and at the same time frames them in relation to 'the times'. This doubleness, this difficulty, becomes a particular challenge:

Speak

If you can

Speak

Phyllis—not neo-classic,

The girl's name is Phyllis— (*NCP* 169)

The poem has turned to second-person address, and for a moment it is as though we are challenged to speak, if we can. At the same time, the 'you' addresses the poet self-reflexively. The lines demonstrate both the necessity and the difficulty of speaking 'If you can'. As the imperatives arrive the gaps between the short, almost stammering lines indicate the difficulty of such a speaking. Why is it so difficult to speak? What sort of speaking does the poem call for?

In §335-337 of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein interrogates the question of the relationship between thoughts and expressions, in a manner particularly useful for our continuing inquiry into Oppen's poetry:

[Quote text removed for Copyright reasons]

As with much of Wittgenstein's dense but elliptical philosophy there is enough in these three sections of the *Investigations* to occupy a whole chapter if one chose. In general, however, as James Guetti elaborates in *Wittgenstein and the Grammar of Literary Experience*, the passage critiques the common assumption that 'language is secondary to "thought", that thought is somehow more real or more pure than the "expression of it"'.[291] Such a critique is appropriate for the task at hand, for I would like to begin this chapter by pondering the problems that Wittgenstein's thinking raises for the discussion that ended the previous chapter: the problem of language expressing phenomenological content, and the possibility of formal indication as a solution.

[291] James Guetti, *Wittgenstein and the Grammar of Literary Experience* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 41.

There are times in which a thought *may* come to us in advance of the words; in which the thought is 'already there' and 'we merely look for [its] expression'. This might offer an appropriate description of something that one does in certain cases, though not in every case that we refer to as expressing one's thoughts. However, as Wittgenstein goes on to demonstrate, just because this is what we might *do* in certain instances does not mean that the thing we write in such circumstances will be the *expression* of that thought or feeling in some essential manner. If I 'surrender' to a mood, as Wittgenstein says, and a phrase comes to me, does this phrase *express* my mood? In what way? If it does, it is surely not the same thing in this case as it would be if I were to find the right words to *describe* my mood. But mightn't we also sometimes call such a description the expression of my mood, my feelings, or even of my thoughts? Is it possible that the difficulty of speaking that Oppen describes in 'Of Being Numerous' somehow relates to what speaking is called upon to accomplish?

The challenge that Wittgenstein poses to the notion that language conveys phenomenological content, however, is greater still. Wittgenstein's anecdote of the French politician suggests that one often thinks in the forms of one's language, according to the criteria that structure it. The problem resembles that described by Heidegger wherein the particular open of one's own language shapes and determines the manner in which beings show themselves to *Dasein*. Early Heidegger argues that one might get around such a problem through originary experience or formal indication. Later he will argue that one does so through poetry and its originary saying. Wittgenstein argues that even to find oneself intending to put one's thoughts into a particular language is to capitulate to that language's grammar, and thus to the social

and material world outside of oneself that makes that intention legible. Language and intention, in other words, are similarly tied to the form of life that contextualises them.

This relation to a form of life, and thus to the social already-there-ness of our language, means that our words will not necessarily mean what we experience privately when we use them, and also suggests that we will think and experience the world on its terms. Moreover, it means that even our intention to put an experience into words is founded in the fact that we already understand our behaviour in terms of the grammar of particular language-games and their criteria. (This is not necessarily to argue that language determines thought entirely, just that they cannot be so neatly separated.) This is such a central part of our experience of language that we may not notice it, such that it seems *odd* to us that we might think in the grammar of the language in which we speak. Guetti, an acute reader of Wittgenstein, puts it well when he writes that when we try to understand things like 'meaning', 'understanding', and even 'thinking', 'these "inward looks" are really outward':

> they are appeals and responses not to what is going on inside us but to the presupposed expressive probabilities of the cases in question. In these 'introspective reports,' to put this more simply, what we say plays determinedly to what we suppose we ought to say—plays, therefore, to the presumed rules of the particular 'introspective' situation, to the conventional implications of the concept being scrutinized. In this way, what appears to be a type of 'phenomenological' inquiry—looking into oneself or at one's 'internal' behaviour in order to see what one is doing, 'essentially' what one is doing—is, as Wittgenstein has shown time after time in his investigations, rather a *logical*

> one, for what is important is what the *grammatical* probabilities allow or even urge one to conclude.[292]

Even to act as a philosopher or poet, therefore, and to ask oneself by reflection of the nature of one's own being is an act embedded in a 'particular "introspective" situation' that has a public aspect determining the grammatical possibilities of what one might conclude. How, we might ask, does 'formal indication' fit into this structure? We might ask this question differently: how might we read Oppen's attempts to have language direct us towards certain phenomenological forms within experience? What are we to think of the 'small nouns' in 'Psalm' or the 'of' in 'Of Being Numerous'?

The choice of Wittgenstein's philosophy as the frame for a second stage in interpreting Oppen's Heideggerian poetics has three bases. First are the broader concerns towards which this study is directed. I began by noting the importance of Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies to post-war American poetry, as well as to recent critical modes for interpreting this and other poetry. I asked what these parallels denoted; what alternate possibilities were opened up for the poets by these philosophies and, similarly, what forms of criticism these philosophies offered. From this perspective, criticism on Oppen is one example of the broader prominence of Heidegger's philosophy within late-modernist poetry and its criticism. As such, Oppen presents an opportunity to see just what solutions and understandings Wittgenstein's philosophy opens up in contradistinction to Heidegger's. What, that is to say, might a deliberately *unfaithful* reading of Oppen's poetics offer to our understanding? How

[292] Ibid., 148-9.

might we find Oppen's poetry exceeding the capacity of Heideggerian philosophy to explain its forms and its gestures?

Secondly, and following this possibility, a Wittgensteinian lens allows us to shift our critical focus away from phenomenological outcomes towards how the Heideggerian imperatives manifest, as well as to how particular poetic utterances fit within larger structures of meaning. Indeed, Wittgenstein becomes specifically useful for reading Oppen because his philosophy—particularly from the period of the *Philosophical Investigations*—doesn't just draw attention to forms of language-use, but also helps us see that those procedures are only made meaningful by our public participation in a system of signification that is sustained by lived experience.

Thirdly, and most importantly, this frame has been chosen because Wittgenstein allows us to re-frame the question without abandoning what we have so far discovered. It allows us to shift focus from the manner in which a poetic utterance might relate to phenomenological experience to how this relation is composed in and of a language structured by the shared, social domain of purposive use.

The basic gesture of Wittgenstein's thought is to question the assumptions we make about the nature of meaning in language and, as a consequence, the sorts of 'philosophical pictures' of language by which we are normally entranced. Heidegger's position, as we have seen in his early philosophy, is instead to locate authentic speech in an originary phenomenological experience and to decry the manner in which this becomes inauthentic 'chatter' [*das Gerede*] in fallen social speech. Oppen's 'poetics of being' has seemed to us intent on testifying directly to an experience whose reality tests

language's ability to testify to it: that reality is the non-linguistic ground of language's meaning. The goal, in Oppen's own words, was to find those 'things' around which 'meanings gather' (*SL* 161). Wittgenstein's position denies such a ground. Particularly, he denies that private experience, even primordial phenomenological experience, is the cause or ground of linguistic meaning—even of changes in linguistic meaning. In so doing, he denies the possibility of that pre-discursive epistemological experience implied in Oppen's phenomenology, and he denies, should such an experience exist, that it would be important for us in understanding language. Language is always prior to 'meaning' for Wittgenstein. Or, as Guetti puts it, meaning is social, it takes place

> on public ground and may be recognized and measured by 'outward criteria.' To the extent that they are meaningful, our 'intentions' must be 'embedded' in 'situations,' for example; and 'obeying a rule' is not *thinking* that one is doing so, but consists in the actual and particular application of the rule; and our 'mental experiences' of words—our attendant 'associations,' perhaps—are never necessarily relevant to or restrictive upon the meanings they constitute and accomplish, which depend upon communal institutions and practices.[293]

For Wittgenstein, private phenomenological experiences might be real, and privately very important, but are never necessarily important to the meaningful use of language. Thus Wittgenstein writes that in investigating language we often 'feel as if we had to *see right into* phenomena' but that this is a mistake (*PI* §90). Investigating language isn't an investigation into phenomena, for that is not where meaning originates. Instead, Wittgenstein directs his investigation 'not towards *phenomena*, but rather, as one might

[293] Ibid., 4.

say, towards the "*possibilities*" of phenomena. […] we call to mind the *kinds of statement* that we make about phenomena' (*PI* §90).

I should also begin by noting that in order for us to ask how formal indication works at all, a number of things must already have taken place. Most tellingly, we must already have convinced ourselves that a problem exists for which formal indication is a potential solution. To be strictly Wittgensteinian, in the way suggested particularly by Stanley Cavell, we might find ourselves wanting to argue that if this has happened to us it is because we have already led ourselves into error, the kind of philosophical error which Wittgenstein's philosophy sought to remedy. In 'Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy', Cavell argues that 'This is the sort of thing that happens with astonishing frequency in philosophy':

> We impose a demand for absoluteness (typically of some simple physical kind) upon a concept, and then, finding that our ordinary use of this concept does not meet our demand, we accommodate this discrepancy as nearly as possible. Take these familiar patterns: we do not really see material objects, but only see them indirectly; we cannot be certain of any empirical proposition, but only practically certain; we cannot really know what another person is feeling, but only infer it. One of Wittgenstein's greatest services, to my mind, is to show how constant a feature of philosophy this pattern is: this is something that his diagnoses are meant to explain ('We have a certain picture of how something must be'; 'Language is idling; not doing work; being used apart from its ordinary games'). […] This much, however, is true: If you put such phrases as 'giving the meaning,' 'giving a paraphrase,' 'saying exactly what something

> means (or what somebody said),' and so on, into the ordinary contexts (the 'language games') in which they are used, you will not find that you are worried that you have not really *done* these things.[294]

Such demands are versions of the fly-bottle traps into which Wittgenstein found philosophy constantly leading itself. To paraphrase Cavell, both philosophy and literary criticism finds itself interrogating a type of linguistic gesture for which they posit an ideal. Finding that ideal impossible, philosophy or criticism then decides that the gesture is impossible. As Cavell argues, however, this is a self-imposed impossibility, brought about by one's ability to imagine an ideal that differs from what we would call the practices of 'ordinary language'. For we find, there, that such things as paraphrase are entirely possible, so long as we make certain of what we mean.

And so, we might want to ask ourselves, as newly committed Wittgensteinians, whether the challenge of thinking through Oppen's 'formal indication' were itself an example of this sort of fly-bottle trap. The challenge of 'fitting the words' to a pre-discursive encounter would certainly seem to fit the case Cavell describes. The impossibility of representing and re-articulating such experiences might seem to us like an impossibility either we ourselves or we together with Oppen have imposed on his poetry. If we take the act of describing our internal states to each other as something that occurs in ordinary language every day, mightn't we find that the problems—imposed by the desire that this gesture in some way *really* communicate that content—melt away? The simple answer to this is that, while the problem itself may be a form of

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[294] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 77.

philosophical illusion from a Wittgensteinian perspective, and while it may melt away if looked at it in the right manner, it is nonetheless a real aspect of Oppen's thinking. Oppen describes a poetic task beyond the capacities of poetic speech, and so if we are to understand his poetics of being from a Wittgensteinian position rather than immediately dissolve it in Wittgensteinian therapy, we must follow Oppen at least part of the way into his philosophical picture of language. We must, that is, move with him some way into the fly-bottle of ontological speech.

What we might then ask is: how are such attempts to meet the challenge Oppen sets himself made legible to us? According to what criteria might we say they do or do not succeed? In answering these questions this chapter argues that Oppen's attempt to render private phenomenal experiences relies on the removal of language from the sorts of purposive use that, for Wittgenstein, give it meaning. It argues also that this removal is guided by a meta-poetic rhetoric that attempts to condition our reading of the poetry's onto-aesthetic gestures, and that this poetry is aware of its failures at precisely the limits that a Wittgensteinian frame suggests it must fail. Finally, this chapter then argues that we cannot properly read the poetry without putting its Heideggerian aspects into contact with its competing Marxist aspects, because each relies on the other for its greater legibility within the poem's ongoing thinking.

What it means to approach a reading of Oppen's poetry with Wittgenstein's philosophy in hand, however, is an open question. Burton Hatlan provides a rare and early example of an explicitly Wittgensteinian reading of Oppen's poetry. His 'Zukofsky, Wittgenstein, and the Poetics of Absence' makes a compelling case for thinking of Oppen through a Wittgensteinian lens, tracing an indirect Wittgensteinian

influence through Oppen's ties to Louis Zukofsky, and Zukofsky's engagement with Wittgenstein in his critical-theoretical work *Bottom*.[295] Because of the nature of Zukofsky's engagement with Wittgenstein, Hatlan's reading turns specifically to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* for its philosophical model, whereas this chapter and the next are almost exclusively interested in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, most notably the *Philosophical Investigations*. Nonetheless, Hatlan provides a basis for how we might think of Oppen's poetics of being in terms of the way it problematises its own speech. Outlining a 'poetics of absence', Hatlan writes that Oppen

> is still in love with the immediacy of 'things.' But if the seeable is by definition unsayable, then language, rather than giving us Being in its fullness, must reconcile itself to the more difficult task of enacting our endless and endlessly frustrated struggle *towards* Being.[296]

I, too, have found such a 'struggle *towards*' in Oppen's poetry, though I have so far used Heidegger as an explanatory framework. In this chapter I return to this feature of Oppen's poetry. Here, however, the Wittgensteinian framework helps us understand not that Oppen's poetry *is* a 'struggling *towards*' an unsayable content, but the way in which such a struggle is made legible to us as a particular type of language-use.

Another example of a Wittgensteinian reading of Oppen's work appears in Oren Izenberg's *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life.* Izenberg constructs

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[295] Burton Hatlen, 'Zukofsky, Wittgenstein, and the Poetics of Absence', *Sagetrieb* 1, no. 1 (1982).
[296] Ibid., 76-7.

a 'hypothetical Wittgensteinian Oppen' specifically to interpret Oppen's 'silences'.[297] Behind this approach is the notion that small but suggestive moments in Oppen's poetry indicate that Wittgenstein's philosophy influenced his thinking, and that therefore Wittgenstein's philosophy provides an important context requiring interpretive faithfulness. Beyond the associations that Hatlan lays out, there is a moment in 'Of Being Numerous' that implies a Wittgensteinian influence. While meditating upon the atrocities of current historical events in the poem's nineteenth section, Oppen writes of 'The fly in the bottle // Insane, the insane fly' (*NCP* 173). The line seems a clear allusion to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and his description of philosophy's task as that of showing 'the fly the way out of the fly-bottle' (*PI* §309). The argument could certainly be made for aligning Oppen's post-Mexico poetry with Wittgenstein's notion of 'therapy'. This section of Oppen's poem is mentioned also by Longenbach, who uses it to argue that Oppen shows a 'willingness not only to interrogate his own convictions but to suffer their collapse as well'.[298] While I agree with Longenbach's reading of Oppen's willingness to 'suffer' the 'collapse' of his convictions, I disagree with the centrality given to the 'insane fly' as a marker of the deliberate use of Wittgenstein's ideas. While Oppen recognises this as a Wittgensteinian concept in a letter from 1968, he nonetheless considers it more of a quotation from his philosopher step-son Alexander Mourelatos (*SL* 177). Certainly, Oppen showed in Wittgenstein nothing like the sustained interest he showed in Heidegger.

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[297] Oren Izenberg, *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 94.
[298] James Longenbach, *The Resistance to Poetry* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 82.

The above examples represent attempts to constitute a Wittgensteinian reading of Oppen as a faithful act. Though Hatlan's is by far the strongest, each is weak in the ties it can make between the critical image of Oppen, his influences, and Wittgenstein's philosophy. The difficulty of arguing any influence or resemblance between Wittgenstein and Oppen as a grounds for faithful reading is reflected in the extreme rarity of Wittgensteinian interpretations of his poetry. Heidegger obviously makes far stronger claims upon interpretive faith. Under the license of unfaithful reading, however, not only does the need to argue and establish such a ground for a Wittgensteinian reading fall away, but the possibilities for what might constitute a Wittgensteinian reading in relation to a poet like Oppen open up.

Even armed with the licence of unfaithfulness, however, the question of what it means to read in relation to Wittgenstein's philosophy is vexed. As Perloff puts it in her introduction to *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, 'one does not […] go to Wittgenstein for a systematic poetics'.[299] Wittgenstein has famously had very little to say about poetry, for the most part containing his statements about art—such as those collected in *Culture and Value*—to music. Nonetheless, there are some precedents for a Wittgensteinian reading of poet like Oppen. *Wittgenstein's Ladder* provides a useful foundation, taking up, as it does, poets contemporary with his career. Perloff outlines a Wittgensteinian poetics based on three broad points that she applies to a number of twentieth-century authors.[300] Most of the authors that Perloff discusses, however, aren't already committed to an opposed philosophy, in the way that Oppen is, or they are committed to deliberately non-sensical language use and so are more amenable to a Wittgensteinian

[299] Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, 11.
[300] Ibid., xiv.

reading. While certainly a model of good, textually-based Wittgensteinian scholarship, Perloff's criticism is of limited use for a reading of Oppen in particular. Nevertheless, she does suggest three aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy that make up a plausible Wittgensteinian poetics. First, Wittgenstein is involved in what I call—following Bernard Harrison—a 'double-investigation', a language about the world that always also includes itself amongst its objects of scrutiny.[301] Second, concerned as he is with actual use, Wittgenstein maintains a fierce focus on the every-day, on quotidian content. Third, and developing from these, Wittgenstein is concerned with interrogating the limits of meaning and sense-making as they condition the ordinary language-use that is the object of the double-investigation. A Wittgensteinian reading as Perloff models it, therefore, is one that shows how a text constitutes itself self-reflexively according to its ability to interrogate and disrupt the meaning-making conditions that render its existence possible and its formal gestures either meaningful or not.

Some other sources have also proved useful for understanding how one might apply Wittgenstein's philosophy of language in a poetics context. A number of essays on Wittgenstein's possible uses for literary criticism were collected in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, edited by Joan Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer. The essays by Garry L. Hagberg, Cavell, and Joachim Schulte provide specific models of how Wittgenstein's thinking might be applied in a literary context. Cavell and Schulte demonstrate how Wittgenstein's philosophy can open up new dimensions of the specifically literary experience of language-use that are illuminated by their active turning-away from daily

[301] Bernard Harrison, 'Imagined Worlds and the Real One: Plato, Wittgenstein, and Mimesis', *Philosophy and Literature* 17, no. 1 (1993).

language-games.[302] James Guetti's *Wittgenstein and the Grammar of Literary Experience* outlines Wittgenstein's philosophy with admirable clarity, and also performs some excellent readings of modernist poetry and prose. In particular, Guetti suggests a number of ways in which literature can trope upon its apparent separation from the language-games to which it refers, and the sorts of attention to language this allows it to encourage in readers. Stanley Cavell's writing on Ordinary Language Criticism in the domain of aesthetics takes a different tack. In *Philosophical Passages*, Cavell provides a strong and articulate sense of what it might mean for a self-reflexive thinker to show something that is at once not hidden, but at the same time not commonly seen.[303] Wittgenstein's philosophy, Cavell asserts, 'has no facts of its own. Its medium […] lies in demonstrating, or some say showing, the obvious'.[304] Cavell then argues that this aspect of Wittgenstein's method 'bears comparison' to Heidegger's characterisation of phenomenology in *Being and Time*: 'to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself'.[305] The common question, Cavell suggests, 'is unavoidable: How can the obvious not be obvious? What is the hardness of seeing the obvious?'[306] Oppen struggles with this problem, with the charges of 'obscurity' from which Pound defended him in the introduction to *Discrete Series*, and with the concept of 'clarity' in poems like 'Of Being Numerous' and 'Route' (*NCP*

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[302] Garry L. Hagberg, 'Autobiographical Consciousness: Wittgenstein, Private Experience, and the "Inner Picture"', in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. Wolfgang Huemer John Gibson (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Stanley Cavell, 'The Investigations' Everyday Aesthetics of Itself', in *The Literary Wittgenstein*., ed. Wolfgang Huemer John Gibson (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Joachim Schulte, '"The Life of the Sign": Wittgenstein on Reading a Poem', in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. Wolfgang Huemer John Gibson (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).
[303] Stanley Cavell, *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA Blackwell, 1995). See also, Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*
[304] Cavell, *Philosophical Passages*, 138.
[305] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 58.
[306] Cavell, *Philosophical Passages*, 138.

194). A Wittgensteinian reading of Oppen must, to some extent, deal with this problem of 'seeing' and 'showing' 'the obvious'.

Walter Jost's *Rhetorical Investigations* builds upon Cavell and Guetti, along with others whom he locates within a tradition of 'ordinary language criticism'.[307] Jost, as his title suggests, approaches the issue from the tradition of rhetoric, and argues for understanding poetry, using Robert Frost as his paradigmatic example, through its legibility and participation within particular communities of practice and features of ordinary language.[308] Finally, Charles Altieri's *Reckoning With The Imagination: Wittgenstein and the Aesthetics of Literary Experience*, builds on the recent history of Wittgensteinian interrogations of aesthetic issues. Altieri's broad concern is with how one situates literary practice socially, and with the practice of making judgements about literary works, in order 'to show how specific experiences of made objects can modify sensibilities and cultivate habits of judgement that go beyond the particulars'.[309]

These sources suggest that a Wittgensteinian reading ought to, or at least can, attend to the following things. Firstly, that in self-reflexively attending to its own disruptive or meaning-making capacities the poem contends with the sorts of attention to language that it is able to both perform and elicit in others. This means attending also to the difference between poetic language-use and ordinary language-use. Second, that this sort of attention is capable of revelatory work, albeit with the difficulty of 'showing the obvious'. Third, that literary works and the sorts of attention bound up with them

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[307] Walter Jost, *Rhetorical Investigations: Studies in Ordinary Language Criticism* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2004).
[308] Ibid.
[309] Charles Altieri, *Reckoning with the Imagination: Wittgenstein and the Aesthetics of Literary Experience* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015), 2-3.

can be returned to, or promise meaningful returns to, the quotidian domains from which literature turns away. To see what each of these points might mean in reading Oppen's poetry, however, requires that we turn to that poetry itself and put these possibilities to the test.

The Sense of Ontology

I opened this chapter with the character of Phyllis from the eleventh section of 'Of Being Numerous'. There, we recall, the poem seemed to pose a challenge to 'speak', but in such a way that the act of speaking of '*that* light', and of the fact '*that* light / Seeps in anywhere, a light for the times', seemed anything but simple. The unfaithful turn to Wittgenstein's philosophy helps to illuminate the difficulties posed by that light. We might notice that when the poem turns to the girl Phyllis, there is something awkward in it. The em dashes interrupt her introduction with an explanation ('not neo-classic'). Moreover, the explanation interrupts what appears to be an apostrophe to Phyllis and speaks directly to the reader. We are reminded that while this is poetry, it is a poetry of the actual as opposed to a neo-classical, constructed virtuality. The apostrophic gesture had addressed a real girl and her 'name is Phyllis':

> Coming home from her first job
> On the bus in the bare civic interior
> Among those people, the small doors
> Opening on the night at the curb
> Her heart, she told me, suddenly tight with happiness— (*NCP* 169)

Phyllis's emotion, the poem goes on to tell us, is an admirable one. The speaker is also 'in love down there with the streets / And the square slabs of pavement' (*NCP* 169). It is a positive emotion, even if we might want to agree with Perloff that this is not so much a moment of solidarity as it is a recognition of shared survival against the urban setting, and that Oppen's concern is more for the streets themselves than for the other human present in this moment of the poem.[310] Nonetheless, what is significant is that in contrast with Oppen the poet—or Oppen the implied 'speaker' if such a thing might be posited—Phyllis has no trouble talking about her inner experiences: 'Her heart, she told me, suddenly tight with happiness'. Certainly Phyllis doesn't seem to have the same difficulties as Oppen. For sure, this is reported speech, but if that is the case it doesn't seem as though Oppen has had any difficulty understanding her. This is especially apparent given that the speaker goes on to say that his inner experiences match hers: 'I too am in love down there with the streets' (*NCP* 169).

Wittgenstein would have found this situation perfectly agreeable. The doubt that we sometimes have that one can express or communicate inner experiences is a doubt that we create for ourselves. Which is to say that the sort of Cartesian skepticism which states that no one can ever know the inner experiences of another depends on a deliberate and active separation of one's inner life from one's outer life. Indeed, one of the misunderstandings Wittgenstein wishes to clear away is the notion that our private experiences somehow precede and thus provide a ground for the things we say about them. In reality, Wittgenstein argues, the things we say are part of the way in which we

[310] Marjorie Perloff, 'The Shipwreck of the Singular; George Oppen's "Of Being Numerous"', *Ironwood*, no. 26 (1985).

both *have* and *express* our private experiences. Of the experience of being horrified, for example, he writes:

> Suppose that the feelings are produced by *gestures* of horror: the words 'it horrifies me' are themselves such a gesture; and when I hear and feel them as I utter them, this belongs among the rest of those feelings. Now, why should the wordless gesture be the ground of the verbal one? (*PPF* §6)

In other words, the subjective experience of horror is not necessarily the ground for the expression of horror. Rather, the expression might help to constitute the subjective experience of being horrified. From this perspective Phyllis has no trouble telling us about her 'heart' being 'suddenly tight with happiness' because there is no gap between the inner experience and the outer report. To speak of one's heart being tight with happiness is a part of experiencing the 'love' that Oppen also finds, at times, in his own experience of the streets. If there is an ease of communication in this moment, however, it is opposed to the trouble Oppen has in communicating his own intuition of existence as it takes place under '*that* light'. As was shown in the preceding chapter, Oppen wants to understand his experience of the existence of being, and the sorts of astonishment and anxiety that it produces, as difficult to accommodate in ordinary language. Further, he feels compelled to resist certain forms of speaking about those experiences. He might, for example, explicitly refuse to speak of the experience of being in the way that Phillis speaks of her 'love' of the city; that is, with inherited terms or publicly legible sentiments. He is certainly, later in 'Of Being Numerous', unwilling to participate entirely in the sorts of public language-games that make up the speech of cities. 'It is

not easy to speak', he tells us, in the face of 'A ferocious mumbling, in public / Of rootless speech' (*NCP* 173).

Wittgenstein's distinction between meaning and sense—between meaningful uses of language and the grammatical experience of language—helps us to understand what is taking place in Oppen's poetry, in those moments when the normal language-games for expressing or describing inner experiences seem insufficient to the task. These are those moments when Oppen's poetry turns to a certain use of language—what I have so far called formal indication—as a substitute for the essentially grounded speech that is his unreachable ideal. Indeed, Oppen's poetic gestures, which from the Heideggerian perspective appear like formal indication, from the Wittgensteinian perspective appear like nothing so much as a deliberate invocation of language in its grammatical state, untethered from the sorts of meaningful deployment evidenced in Phyllis's utterance. To show this we might turn again to 'Psalm', a now-familiar *topos* within Oppen's Heideggerian poetics.

'Psalm' opens, we recall, with seemingly uncomplicated acts of reference. Sincere utterance testifies to an encounter with substantive otherness:

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

Their eyes
Effortless, the soft lips

Nuzzle and the alien small teeth

Tear at the grass[.] (*NCP* 99)

In Wittgenstein's terms these lines are 'empirical': about the world rather than about their own signifying power. Clarity, as Oppen says elsewhere, becomes a test of truth: the ontological reality of the deer and their world is embodied in the sincerity of the indication. As the poem moves on, however, sincerity strains against form. The poem isolates nouns at line endings, and in so doing, though it emphasises their content and what we have previously called its 'is-ness', it also stresses the fact that what one is experiencing is *words*. The poem cannot give its terms linguistic emphasis without emphasising them as articles of language, and thus as dependent on the grammar of a language whose senses and meanings exceed the individual utterance, or the individual speaker. This is particularly the case at the end of the poem where, after testing its ability to reveal being through sincere indication mixed with formal emphasis, it suddenly turns upon itself and takes note of just how contingent this revelatory sincerity is upon the grammatical form of the utterance:

Their paths

Nibbled thru the fields, the leaves that shade them

Hang in the distances

Of sun

The small nouns

Crying faith

In this in which the wild deer

> Startle, and stare out. (*NCP* 99)

Reference becomes self-reference and the 'small nouns', considered as articles of language, come to the surface and obscure the object. We find ourselves within a new experience of language that is suddenly strange. This is the obverse to the uncanny experience of actuality described in the preceding chapter: an uncanny experience of language in which the act of nominalisation is itself suddenly encountered in a strange light. The lack of punctuation at the end of the fourth stanza emphasises the effect, for we pass over the stanza break as if we were continuing the description but find ourselves, without preparation, within a meta-poetic, meta-linguistic doubled-vision of the poem's nominalistic gesture. In the place of *concrete* or substantive content we are given the grammatical sites that provide a space for its possibility. Oppen has begun attending to his language outside of purposive deployment. Taken out of purposive use, however, the words no longer *mean* in the Wittgensteinian sense—they no longer participate in the uses that give them their meaning; such as naming and pointing—but are experienced for their grammatical sense as naming and pointing.

This is an action that Wittgenstein argues is characteristic of philosophy. In §253 of the *Investigations* he writes of a discussion in which he took part concerning whether one can know the pain of another:

> I have seen a person in a discussion on this subject strike himself on the breast and say: 'But surely another person can't have THIS pain!' — The answer to this is that one does not define a criterion of identity by emphatically enunciating the word 'this'. Rather, the emphasis merely creates the illusion of a

> case in which we are conversant with such a criterion of identity, but have to be reminded of it. (*PI* §253)

In his gesture the other philosopher has been misled by his experience of the grammar of the word '*this*'. Emphasising the word in this way, emphasising its 'this-ness' as he strikes his body to create the sensation the word is meant to indicate, 'creates the illusion' that such an utterance indicates a particular experience within a known language-game. In actuality, Wittgenstein suggests, the experience of the word 'this' is being emphasised in place of the experience of pain. 'The confusions which occupy us', Wittgenstein tells us—i.e., grammatical confusions—'arise when language is, as it were, idling, not when it is doing work' (*PI* §132). That is, language is not being deployed in purposive situations but is singled out as an object of enquiry, uttered, attended to, and repeated such that we think we must be able to find our way to the *essence* of it. The philosopher in the example above wanted to put the experience of his own pain into the grammatical 'this-ness' of the word 'this' as its essence. This is the grammatical experience of language in which we are embroiled, Wittgenstein writes, when we ask

> the question of the *essence* of language, of propositions, of thought. […] For it sees the essence of things not as something that already lies open to view, and that becomes *surveyable* through a process of ordering, but as something that lies *beneath* the surface. Something that lies within, which we perceive when we see *right into* the thing, and which an analysis is supposed to unearth. (*PI* §92)

The grammatical illusion, in other words, is not only that language has an 'essence', but also that it is somehow hidden. Wittgenstein gives an example in the verbal and bodily gesture of 'pointing to':

> we do here what we do in a host of similar cases: because we cannot specify any *one* bodily action which we call pointing at the shape (as opposed to the colour for example), we say that a *mental*, *spiritual* activity corresponds to these words.
>
> Where our language suggests a body and there is none: there, we should like to say, is a *spirit*. (*PI* §36)

Wittgenstein's phrase 'we should like to say' occurs often in his writing. It marks a space in which he gives voice to a commonly held illusion, in this case that 'we should like to say' that the grammar of the act of pointing is its essence, that in the place of a single thing that is named by the word 'this' there is instead an essence of 'this-ness'. Such an 'essence' is an illusion, however, and only becomes visible as such when language is no longer being put to use. Of this, Guetti's writes that

> What Wittgenstein constantly struggles with and exposes […] as he pursues these dynamics of meaningfulness in language, is a set of verbal conditions that may be seen as opposite to those that yield meaning. In these conditions, language is not doing any work; it is 'idling'. One's attention is drawn to it as language, and so it no longer functions as a foundation or vehicle or background for meaning, but is itself foregrounded and dominating. And it is here—with language in this relatively inactive and self-isolated condition—that the 'mental'

> or 'imaginative' *experience* of words comes into play, both as a philosophical problem and as the very substance of certain forms of literary expression.
>
> This is language in its 'grammatical' state, in which its effects are generated and governed not by local or particular application but only by a language-wide system of verbal possibilities.[311]

What I would like to argue is that, considered from a Wittgensteinian perspective, Oppen's poetics of being depends on provoking an experience of just this non-meaningful type of language-use. In turning suddenly to the 'small nouns', Oppen switches perspectives, jerking his reader away from the meaningful use of language into an experience of language as such that emphasises its underlying grammar.[312] On this basis the small nouns are described in just this grammatical aspect: 'crying faith' in the reality they are meant to nominate. In *Philosophical Grammar,* a preparatory text for the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein describes symbols as seeming unsatisfied, as though they called out to a reality just by their very nature (*PG* §85). Such a feeling, Wittgenstein implies, tends to lead us to misconceptions about the nature of meaning. When we experience symbols in this way, he is saying, really we are experiencing them grammatically, as pure signification requiring a signified.

This experience lies behind Oppen's description of the small nouns. Recall the sorts of non-meaningful utterance that Wittgenstein and Guetti point towards:

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[311] Guetti, *Wittgenstein and the Grammar of Literary Experience*, 4.
[312] Ibid., 12.

> When in Wittgenstein's accounts a philosopher holds up his hand in front of his face and declares, 'This certainly is a hand,' or when another stares fixedly at a tree and says, 'That is a tree; I *know* that,' both, I would claim, are engrossed by an 'experience of words'.[313]

In a phrase like 'This certainly is a hand', the philosopher's attempt to understand the nature of certainty and meaning by uttering such phrases to himself or herself has become confused. The philosopher wants to think that the experience of one's certainty in language were an epistemological foundation, and that one's ability to assert an inner state is meaningful simply because one's experience during the assertion seems so heavy with certainty. Really, Wittgenstein suggests, what is experienced and expressed in the utterance is simply the *grammar* of certainty. The philosopher is 'engrossed' in the experience of saying he or she is certain, or of saying that one means something, independent of certainty or of meaning. As Guetti goes on to explain, words removed from purposiveness—as in Oppen's sudden turning of attention to the small nouns in 'Psalm'—have 'grammatical possibilities, their roots of implication, still attached to them as both residue and potential'.[314] Potential is crucial here, for we feel the possibility of indication and location as a deeper experience than any particular indicative or locative act. 'Words', Guetti writes, 'thus separated from but still containing their employment may seem magical'.[315] He writes also that 'the danger of language in this grammatical mode is that, precisely because of its evident independence from particular situations, it seems extraordinarily "sayable," apt, and immune from the critical judgements to which words in particular applications are

[313] Ibid., 3.
[314] Ibid., 70.
[315] Ibid.

susceptible'.[316] Words like 'this', 'in', 'of', and even just the naming of names in 'small nouns', come into Oppen's poems dangling the sense they have in their quotidian deployments. If the word 'this' is used to indicate in daily use, in 'Psalm' it is abstracted from use into a moment in which language looks at its own capacity to say 'this' and mean something: the word is emphasised as a pure grammatical possibility that displaces and replaces the experience of ontological insight. What we experience is not the thing, or even the form of the thing itself, but the potential for the (or any) thing to be 'meant' by this word.

In this sense, then, what appears as formal indication from the Heideggerian perspective appears as something quite different from the Wittgensteinian. The forms that seemed, from the Heideggerian perspective, to be lurking within being—able to be indicated but not properly communicated, but nonetheless inherent *as* forms within one's experience of being—appear from a Wittgensteinian perspective to be experiences of language; that is, of grammar or language as such. And so, what had seemed counter-ruinant now seems as though it might be a capitulation to a no less 'ruined' grammatical experience. It is as though Oppen runs the possibility of being himself trapped in the fly-bottle, dazzled by the greater power that such language obtains when it is abstracted away from daily purposive deployment and experienced instead in the potency of its grammatical sense. 'A *picture* held us captive', Wittgenstein writes in §115 of the *Investigations*, 'and we couldn't get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably'. In other words, the idea that language can be used to point to the experience had when the word was used is one of those philosophical pictures that might hold us captive.

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[316] Ibid., 5.

Later in this chapter it will become clear that this is not entirely the case, and that even from the Wittgensteinian perspective Oppen is a far cannier poet, a cannier dweller within grammatical experience, than this initial analysis suggests. First, however, we must ask ourselves what a grammatical reformulation of formal indication means for the two major Heideggerian features picked out for analysis in the previous chapter: the recognitions of substance and the limitation of the observing ego in the face of it.

Formal Indication as Grammatical Experience

If Oppen's 'formal indication' is, from the Wittgensteinian perspective, a matter of making explicit a grammatical experience of language, this ought not to be read as something aberrant or particular to Oppen alone. As Guetti and Jost have both argued, much of what occurs in literary language-use cannot be said to be meaningful in the strict manner Wittgenstein describes. Guetti argues that 'certain forms of literary expression are not meaningful if as Wittgenstein insists we restrict the scope of meaning to purposive use'.[317] In literature, that is, we use language like the philosopher who says 'this certainly is a hand'. 'When we do', Guetti writes:

> what we produce, rather than propositions of any sort, are undirected verbal displays, shows of signifying power that seem the richer precisely because they

[317] Ibid., 44.

> have no immediate relevance, and whose weight derives from the unlimited authority of grammar.[318]

In other words, much of what we might want to call the richness of literary language results from the 'authority of grammar' experienced when language as such is on display.

Oppen has a particular form of such display, and his recognitions of substance and the failure of the mind in the face of the 'fatal rock' might both now be re-cast with such an understanding in mind. Again, Wittgenstein offers a guide to our thinking:

> But how about this: when I read a poem, or some expressive prose, especially when I read it out loud, surely there is something going on as I read it which doesn't go on when I glance over the sentences only for the sake of information. I may, for example, read a sentence with more intensity or less. I take trouble to get the tone exactly right. Here I often see a picture before me, as it were an illustration. And may I not also utter a word in such a tone as to make its meaning stand out like a picture? A way of writing might be imagined, in which some signs were replaced by pictures and so were made prominent. This does actually happen sometimes, when we underline a word or positively put it on a pedestal in the sentence.[319]

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[318] Ibid., 6.
[319] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), §1059.

This, I argue, is the manner in which Oppen's poetics of being operates. Oppen does not underline, but in other ways he puts certain words, or groups of words, 'on a pedestal' such that their grammatical sense is emphasised. Because of their isolation from normal language-games this sense is experienced as particularly strong, particularly present.

To see this in action we might return to the poem 'Chartres' in *The Materials*, which begins with a dense cluster of gestures meant to prompt a grammatical experience of language:

> The bulk of it
> In air[.] (*NCP* 77)

We begin with the definite article, and then at the end of the first line the lineation forces 'it' to jut out into the page's white space. In this way 'It' is emphasised at the line ending and for a moment the phrase hovers between purposive and grammatical possibilities. Part of us is drawn on to the next line, to 'in air' and thus the completion of the phrase in 'Is what they wanted' (*NCP* 77), but another part wants to pause on 'it', to feel that 'The bulk of it' is in some way also the grammatical bulk of the word 'it'; that the bulk of *things* was somehow also there in the 'it-ness' of 'it' experienced grammatically. Oppen's lineation here is a form of that putting words 'on a pedestal' Wittgenstein describes. Wittgenstein was thinking initially about reading a poem aloud or to oneself, and it is worth noting that the emphasis described above is signalled in Oppen's recorded readings. In recorded readings, Oppen pauses at the end of his lines, even at the end of enjambed lines, isolating each line as its own unit and giving to each

the solemnity and weight of a slow, deliberate utterance.[320] This, too, is an attempt to draw the audience into experiencing the phrases in their grammatical sense. Reading the poem on the page, however, it is the lineation that turns our attention to the grammatical sense of the words. We start to see the ontological 'bulk of it' in the grammar underpinning the proposition. As the poem continues we also encounter phrases that, as with other of Oppen's poems, emphasise the substantiality of mineral objects: 'that a stone / Supports another', and 'That the stones / Stand where the masons locked them' (*NCP* 77). The opening halves of these phrases ('That a stone', 'That the stones') are separated from the rest of their phrases by line-breaks, and are not immediately subsumed by the purposiveness that a complete statement might suggest. They only become part of a description or nominalisation when the lineation has lead them to their syntactical completion. This is one of Oppen's key techniques for asserting words or phrases grammatically, particularly the substantives that 'matter' most to him: lineation isolates parts of phrases as momentary fragments, encouraging us to experience the lines grammatically before returning them to the purposive forms that give them their grammar. The experience in the reading is of a brief dalliance with grammatical sense that then turns back towards a more recognisably purposive form of utterance. When the phrase returns to a more recognisably purposive form, however, the grammatical sense still adheres to our experience, and so the 'it-ness' of 'it' or the substantiality of 'that a stone' as ontological preconditions seem to haunt the larger assertions. It is *this* capacity of lineation that I think Oppen is thinking of when he says in his 1975 interview with

[320] The recordings of Oppen reading were made in multiple locations on different dates. The readings to which I am referring accompany the *New Collected Poems*, the details of which are given on page 425 of that volume.

Kevin Power that 'there are things which can only be said in poetry […] The line-break is as much a part of language as the period, the comma, the parenthesis'.[321]

If Oppen's use of lineation in this way seems recognisable to us as readers of poetry, it might be because this is a regular part of our experience of specifically poetic language-use. We are accustomed to having our attention turned not towards the function of poetic language but towards the language itself. Oppen gives this experience a specifically ontological twist. In the *Blue and Brown Books,* a collection of preparatory notes for the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes that

> The question 'What is length?', 'What is meaning?', 'What is the number one?' etc., produce in us a mental cramp. We feel that we can't point to anything in reply to them and yet ought to point to something. (We are up against one of the great sources of philosophical bewilderment: a substantive makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it.)[322]

Our experience of the grammar of a substantive, that is, makes us feel as though there *ought* to be something to correspond to it. It is, he says elsewhere, as though the word were a ruler one wants to lay against reality (*PG* §85). If one can't point to 'length' itself, nor can one point to 'actuality' itself, except to say, as Oppen does in many ways, that a thing exists. If, as Wittgenstein asserts, the grammar of these terms, or the grammar of such assertions that a thing exists, makes us feel that something corresponds to the terms themselves, Oppen makes something of the reverse process: he

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[321] Swigg, *Speaking with George Oppen*, 100.
[322] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the 'Philosophical Investigations'* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 1.

starts with the intuition of actuality, and thinks that there ought to be something in *language* that acts as a ruler for its reality. In the previous section of this chapter I noted how Oppen finds one version of this correspondence in the grammar of prepositions (such as 'of' and 'in'). Another place that Oppen finds this is in the noun, as well as in indexicals and shifters.

Looking again at section 21 of 'Of Being Numerous' we read:

[Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (*NCP* 175)

We might profitably read this section of the longer poem in a similar manner to how we read of the shaped stones of the cathedral in 'Chartres'. Lineation interferes with our reading; or, as Giorgio Agamben would put it, the opposition between 'a prosodic pause' and 'a semantic pause' disrupts our experience of the semantic unit of the phrase.[323] The result is that what might otherwise be an empirical declaration is opened up to an experience of its grammatical sense. The opening two lines in particular are suspended between the declaration of the actuality of substance and the assertion of the line as that which we experience specifically for its power to declare the ontological possibility that 'there can be a brick'. Again the experience of a form of deixis stands in for ontology conceived *as such*, and is dissociated from any particular being. It is not that 'there is a brick', but that 'There *can be* a brick' [my emphasis] that bears the weight here, for the subjunctive mode posits the possibility of ontological manifestation within the grammatical experience even more deeply. When we say 'there can be a brick', that is, we do not necessarily posit something empirically, but we can become

[323] Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 109.

engrossed in our experience of language, in the possibility of words having this ontological sense of existence independent of the actual existence of 'a brick'.

This effect is compounded by Oppen's use of repetition. Using Ernest Hemmingway as an example, Guetti describes a way in which repetition may be used to suggest that something is, in his words, 'utterly, wholly there'.[324] He writes that 'A few simply verbal elements cycle through varying syntactical constructions, functioning as figures against the ground of those variances', and that

> At the same time, the repetition itself—the fact that these terms *are* the same—is disguised by the varying grammar, cloaked, at least momentarily, so that each repeated occurrence comes as the sort of surprise one feels at a 'discovered check' in a game of chess. It is something that was there all along, but still now suddenly there.[325]

This seems apt as a description of the twenty-first section of Oppen's 'Of Being Numerous'. As with Hemmingway's prose, Oppen's stanzas are almost banally repetitive. The two words most repeated are the noun 'brick' and the indexical 'here'. These terms act as a ground around which the syntax varies, such that one comes upon these terms as a kind of bedrock, their reassuring reality confirmed by their persistence within varying syntactical locations. If repetition of such terms is used, as Guetti says, to suggest that a scene or some part of it is 'utterly, wholly there', 'what is "there"', he goes on to argue, are 'the words themselves'.[326] This means that this form of repetition

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[324] Guetti, *Wittgenstein and the Grammar of Literary Experience*, 69.
[325] Ibid.
[326] Ibid.

emphasises the words' presence, and the sense of emphatic presence itself suggests a form of inevitability and actuality. The 'there-ness' of the word in the sentence, to put it another way, displaces and replaces the 'thereness' of the thing that the poem is imagining. The experience of the sense of the words, brought out by Oppen's prosody, acts as a kind of substitute for the experience of ontological intuition. This combination of gestures lends grammatical weight to both nouns and indexicals.

A large portion of Wittgenstein's *Investigations* is given over to interrogating misconceptions around naming, including misconceptions around how it is that names function in ordinary language. He writes, for instance, that 'we call *very different* things "names"; the word "name" serves to characterize many different, variously related, kinds of use of a word—but the kind of use that the word "this" has is not among them' (*PI* §38). Wittgenstein wants to distinguish the uses of names, and the different uses of things called 'names' in ordinary language, from the use of shifters like 'this'. In particular, the word 'this' and the name of some specific object, though they might take each other's places in different contexts, have very different uses in the language-games in which we encounter them, and thus very different grammars. We might *confuse* them for each other if we attend to them as philosophy does, however, outside of the uses to which they are ordinarily put. In such cases, Wittgenstein writes,

> Naming seems to be a *strange* connection of a word with an object. — And such a strange connection really obtains, particularly when a philosopher tries to fathom *the* relation between name and what is named by staring at an object in front of him and repeating a name, or even the word 'this', innumerable times. For philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday* [*feiert*]. And

> *then* we may indeed imagine naming to be some remarkable mental act, as it were the baptism of an object. (*PI* §38)

Experienced in this way the noun and the shifter do seem to adhere strangely, both to each other and to the world. It might seem as though the grammar of the act of naming were like the gesture of pointing with the word 'this'; as though one's attending to the object and saying its name were the same as indicating 'this object' to another person in conversation.

Section 21 of 'Of Being Numerous' is like the philosophical consideration Wittgenstein describes. Oppen deploys the name 'brick', for instance, in a way that emphasises its capacity to name, and thematically he wants the brick to itself be a kind of symbol of actuality. Its being is in a way indexical, a trope upon the possibility of being itself. We might like to say, then, that in this section of the poem Oppen brings the noun to a point where it can operate *like* the word 'this'. That is, Oppen wants the noun 'brick' to take on the same indicating power that the philosopher experiences when he regards himself pointing and saying 'this' or 'here'. This is not to say that the noun becomes a shifter, but that the use of the noun 'brick' is brought into proximity with the grammar of situated indication. This is not the case with the first use of the word 'brick' in 'There can be a brick', however. As the section begins 'brick' is simply a noun. Indeed, the use of the indefinite article in 'a brick', and the brick's hypothetical status, emphasise that this is an act of positing rather than of indicating a thing. When the word 'brick' recurs in 'brick wall' it is as an adjective naming the substance of the wall. And so, while the word 'brick' has started to transform into a place where one may 'look for

substance', as Oppen puts it in 'The Building of the Skyscraper' in *This In Which*, this is as yet only the beginning.

In the second stanza, however, Oppen switches from a hypothetical encounter with 'a brick' to a sequence of indexicals. If 'So quiet of a Sunday' is still partly hypothetical, the next two lines assert a specific location by putting the word 'Here' at the beginning of two succeeding lines. We are not told where the 'Here' is, however, only that both the brick and the speaker are 'Here'. The poem turns to a concrete moment in time, and gives the brick a material and definite existence in 'the brick'. At the same time, however, it makes the moment itself indexical. The speaker thus calls not upon a real place, but upon the experience of saying 'Here', the experience of *meaning* 'Here'. The brick's materiality then arrives as an aspect of that 'Here'-ness. To say 'the brick' in this context thus takes on something of the grammar of the shifter, implying a physical proximity that makes the experience of the grammar of the phrase 'the brick' resemble that of 'this brick', this brick 'Here'. A similar effect takes place in Oppen's naming of the 'small nouns' in 'Psalm'. There, too, he transforms the noun into a kind of pointer, as though the essence of the noun were its ability to point at any particular, substantive thing that one might gaze upon.

This thinking about nouns is reflected in Oppen's statement, in the 1975 interview with Power, that 'what I'm doing is pointing. That's a Heideggerian gesture. […] it's the Heideggerian gesture, the "pointing" to say it's there'.[327] The grammar of indication is fundamental to Oppen's thinking about the role of poetic language-use in general, even the use of nouns like 'brick'. We might connect this also to Oppen's claim

[327] Swigg, *Speaking with George Oppen*, 100.

that [Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (UCSD 16, 14, 1). In the previous chapter this aspect of Oppen's poetry lead me to argue, in a Heideggerian fashion, that Oppen's poetry acts in the manner of formal *indication*. The grammar of indication is clearly primary. From the Heideggerian perspective it was as though language were trying to indicate that which cannot be communicated. It could, that is, suggest forms within the experience of being but not the content, so that the sense of 'pointing' summoned in 'this' and in nouns were drawing us to see the 'this-ness' of things and the 'is-ness' of nouns as bare ontological potential. Wittgenstein's understanding of grammatical sense, however, suggests that these (formally indicated) forms come not from one's experience of being itself, but from the grammatical sense of the words we use in our ordinary language. 'This', for instance, only has its grammatical sense because of the manner in which it is deployed in daily use. Similarly, to 'say it's there'—the formulation Oppen gives in his interview with Power—is grammatically structured by the 'pointing' that takes place in ordinary language, language not tied solely to moments of the intuition of existence. I am therefore bound to say that, reading with Wittgenstein's philosophy as a guide, the forms of formal indication appear as *grammatical* forms. As Wittgenstein suggests it must, the grammar and thus the public criteria of 'this-ness' precedes the ontological experience.

If this is the case, however, it suggests that another procedure is necessarily taking place around and within the sorts of gesture described above, in which verbal forms are put 'on a pedestal'. The attention to grammar that Oppen's poems encourage is, in other words, directed toward indicating the sort of strangeness, or uncanny actuality, that Oppen describes. If the grammatical forms precede the sense of strangeness, or even the 'astonishment', which Oppen claimed to feel in the face of

ontological intuitions, then that sense must also have a basis in grammar. Hagberg summarises the appropriate part of Wittgenstein's thinking as follows: §428 of the *Investigations*, he notes,

> begins with the interlocutor's sentence 'This queer thing, thought,' and that misled remark only heightens the sense of mystery of first-person content and the sense that such thought is the private maker of the hidden Schopenhauerian world of the other. But the mature Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations* counters '—but it does not strike us as queer when we are thinking. Thought does not strike us as mysterious while we are thinking but only when we say, as it were retrospectively: "How was that possible?"'[328]

This is part of what Oppen accomplishes by putting his words up on a pedestal for grammatical attention. Thinking, or, in Oppen's case, encountering objects in thought and in the world, does not seem strange to us until we turn it into a grammatical experience and interrogate it in ways outside of our daily language-games (which don't normally take experiences of objects as strange). Oppen takes this step, implicitly asking 'how was that possible' of the brick itself, and of the experience of the brick. In so doing he installs a form of strangeness in ordinary experience. Rather than 'how was that possible?', however, we might say that the implicit question within Oppen's poems is 'How *is* it possible?' or, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, 'this queer thing, being'.

[328] Hagberg, 'Autobiographical Consciousness', 239. See also Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 5-7.

A sense of the strangeness of being was noted in the previous chapter, but it is worth noting some examples. In 'World, World—', the last poem in *This In Which*, Oppen writes that 'The self is no mystery, the mystery is / That there is something for us to stand on' (*NCP* 159). In 'Alpine', in the same collection, the poem turns, after a dream experience, to the present moment in which 'the will cowers / In the given' (*NCP* 134). 'Of This All Things …' ends with 'Not comforts // But vision / Whatever terrors / May have made us / Companion / To the earth, whatever terrors—' (*NCP* 129); and at the end of 'Guest Room' we read:

[Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (*NCP* 109-110)

Again, as seen in the previous chapter, the recollection of sight frames the moment of ontological intuition. The two forms of vision are particularly marked. Implied sight of hills and coves becomes an intense vision wherein existence is posited as a 'Happening, filling our eyesight'. Oppen comes close here to offering a description of his ontological intuition. That happening and its fullness present a sense of being that is at once still and in flux, both total and also an object of vision. At the same time, however, that intuition is cut off from its object. These 'things / That happen' are 'Signs, / Promises'. The poem is only able to give us being after its first interpretation, where it seems to point toward a greater totality. And, framed in recollection, the lines grope towards the past intuition. 'Nothing begged or was unreal', we are told. Everything was actual, one assumes, and Oppen tries to give us a sense of this actuality by again emphasising definite substantives at the ends of lines: 'the large hills', 'the very small coves', 'the things', 'the thing', 'the sky', and 'the moving sea'. But the actuality and its sense are grammatical. The reality falls away even as Oppen testifies to it, for the need to testify

with signs interrupts the reality of the signified. What Oppen is able to give us, finally, is not so much the content of his vision but the sense of awe it provoked. The exclamation and the stammering, self-interrupting syntax signal the excess of the phenomenological experience of being over the utterance's ability to represent it. Lineation emphasises elements of the semantic units, or interrupts the flow of speech. The effect is to render the content of sight strange, to make the breathlessly presented image of the coast somehow miraculous, such that when line and sentence finally properly coincide at the end of the poem, in the otherwise mundane phrase 'And the moving sea', it is with a sense of strained repose.

We saw something similar in the emphatic declarations of awe in 'Psalm': 'They who are there' and 'That they are there' express astonishment at the strangeness of the fact of being. We might recall also those moments noted in the last chapter where the poem finds itself falling silent in the face of the experience of being. Yet these sit on the same continuum of grammatical experience. The effect of these and the many other similar moments is to do as Wittgenstein notes above of philosophy. It is to take as strange something that is not strange in ordinary experience. The goal, in other words, is to make visible the very *problem* of being.

The Grammar of Falling Silent

Though Oppen does not ask of being 'how is it possible?' in those exact words, he is committed to bringing out the strangeness of being to thought and to language in ways that carry their own grammatical baggage. Oppen seems anything but naive to the fact that he is deploying words in such a way—putting them on a pedestal—so as to *make*

the experience of being retroactively uncanny and strange for his reader. A particular experience of language, which brings with it the philosophical problem of the strangeness of being, is precisely the Heideggerian point. As was discussed in the previous chapter, however, this strangeness challenges speech as soon as it is acknowledged: this challenge specifically relates to the difficulty of communicating what Wittgenstein interrogates as various forms of 'private' experience and its relationship to what can and cannot be said. Indeed, one of the most prolonged and engaging gestures in Wittgenstein's *Investigations* is his challenge to, and interrogation of, the problems posed by philosophical skepticism. The sceptical position, as Wittgenstein paraphrases it, would ask 'In what sense are my sensations *private*?', and then answer its own question by saying 'Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it' (*PI* §246). Against this Wittgenstein points out that clearly we do in fact manage to talk about our private experiences. This is true even though, as is also perfectly clear, the things we say do not necessarily *mean* those experiences in the ways we might sometimes imagine. Even if I cannot, through language, experience what it is another person sees when he or she sees something 'blue', or what he or she feels when in pain, we nonetheless talk to each other perfectly well, and we *know* what pain is in another person, and that he or she *is* in pain (*PI* §246). It makes no sense, in other words, to say that we do not know what the other means when they say they are in pain, or that we do not know that they are in pain when they exhibit signs of being in pain. As Wittgenstein argues both in the *Investigations* and in *On Certainty*, these are situations in which we need no grounds for certainty, but in which we would require significant grounds for doubt.[329]

[329] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1975). §3

One part of Wittgenstein's larger point is that it does not make sense to say something like 'I believe I am in pain', as though there were the possibility of being wrong in one's belief. To speak in this way, as Hagberg points out, is to drive 'a wedge between ourselves and our embodied experience'. 'How', Wittgenstein asks, 'can I even attempt to interpose language between the expression of pain and the pain?' (*PI* §245). This statement comes after a longer section in which Wittgenstein interrogates the relation of language to sensations:

> How do words *refer* to sensations? — There doesn't seem to be any problem here; don't we talk about sensations every day, and name them? But how is the connection between the name and the thing named set up? This question is the same as: How does a human being learn the meaning of names of sensations? […] Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, natural, expressions of sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour.
>
> 'So you are saying that the word "pain" really means crying?' — On the contrary: the verbal expression of pain replaces crying, it does not describe it. (*PI* §244)

Again, there is no necessary gap for Wittgenstein between the inner sensation and the outer expression. Indeed, the outer expression in Wittgenstein's example precedes, and comes at times to replace, all other attempts or means of communicating a sensation like

pain. Logically this must be the case, for if our expression of sensation weren't based on external criteria, then there would be no means of conveying sensation at all.

It is this situation, however, that seems so dangerous to Oppen. What does it mean, he might ask, that we are able to talk about such experiences—to indicate and to speak of an experience of 'blue', or of pain, or even of the intuition of existence—without the utterance needing to convey anything *particular* or individual about the experience? What does it mean to express pain in ways inherited from and determined by public criteria? Why, in fact, can we all nod and say that we know what Phyllis means in 'Of Being Numerous' when she talks of her heart being 'suddenly tight with happiness'? Thinking with Wittgenstein, we might find ourselves now inclined to say that Phyllis's behaviour is 'happiness-behaviour', similarly learned from adults or, at least, from the public grammar of happiness. But, is this not the idle chatter Oppen deplores? the speech that has 'run mad'?

From the Wittgensteinian perspective the opposite is the case. For example, Wittgenstein argues that to simply use the name 'tree' within a language-game, or to point to a tree and say '*that* tree' or '*this* tree', is to treat it with a kind of certainty. It takes the tree, that is, as something that it is unnecessary to doubt at all, let alone doubt with the kind of sceptical rigour characteristic of Descartes and other like-minded philosophers. The same is true, he argues, for inner experiences like sensations. Wittgenstein's hypothetical interlocutor, in §303 of the *Investigations*, counters that 'I can only *believe* that someone else is in pain, but I *know* it if I am', to which Wittgenstein replies

> Yes: one can resolve to say 'I believe he is in pain' instead of 'He is in pain'. But that's all. — What looks like an explanation here, or like a statement about mental processes, in truth just exchanges one way of talking for another which, while we are doing philosophy, seems to us the more apt.
>
> Just try—in a real case—to doubt someone else's fear or pain! (*PI* §303)

This argument depends on the idea that our 'inner' experiences are to some extent outer experiences; that there is no Cartesian divide between our private and our public self. To install a differentiation between knowing and believing in another's pain is, he says, only something that happens in philosophy. The problem for Oppen, of course, were he to be participating as one of Wittgenstein's interlocutors, is that when we simply indicate the tree we do not necessarily attend with any reflection upon our awareness of the tree. What we certainly do not do is take it as an astonishing fact, or part of that 'intuition of existence' that seems to him to confound our attempts to talk about it. And so, the sort of easy certainty that characterises ordinary language use is, we might say, the wrong *type* of certainty. Oppen wants to find a way of showing that it is—in the words of 'Parousia', the fourth of the 'Five Poems About Poetry'—'Impossible to doubt the world', that 'it can be seen', but also that 'It cannot be understood' (*NCP 103*). This is again that image of the strangeness of being carried through Oppen's poems, presented here as what we might call the grammar of ontological intuition.

And so, Oppen emphasises various lacunae within the text in ways that are antagonistic to the above type of certainty in speech. He does this in an attempt to find a way of drawing attention to the otherness of language to the experience of substantial being or, as we also saw in the last chapter, of historical crises. We might, for an

example, take up again the problematisation of both thought and speech that occurs in the twenty-sixth part of 'Of Being Numerous':

> The power of the mind, the
> Power and weight
> Of the mind which
> Is not enough, it is nothing
> And does nothing
>
> Against the natural world,
> Behemoth, white whale, beast
> They will say and less than beast,
> The fatal rock
>
> Which is the world— (*NCP* 179)

This is a preliminary moment in Oppen's poetics of silence, as we saw in the last chapter. That is, it lays out the problem to which his forms of poetic 'silence' are responses. The problem, Oppen tells us, is that the power of the mind is nothing in comparison to that 'fatal rock // Which is the world'. The speaker then encounters one of Oppen's terminal dashes, signalling his momentary silence. At the beginning of the immediately subsequent section of the poem, Oppen again articulates the problem, this time in terms of what he cannot do:

> [Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (*NCP* 180).

Oppen has moved into prose, which seems to signal that we have stepped out of the language-game of poetry, or at least entered a different poetic language-game wherein one might describe a possible poem. But this is itself an illusion. We are still within the same language-game: Oppen's em dashes, his references to 'the isolation of the actual', to 'rooms' and 'what they look out on', and to the materiality of wood and concrete all indicate that we are still within the poetics of being. Nonetheless we are now, as it were, at one degree of remove from the attempt to express the experience of being itself. Oppen is talking of what he 'would want to talk of', were it not 'difficult now to speak of poetry' and difficult to even write the poetry he imagines writing.

To understand this as a meaningful move within a language-game, we might ask ourselves: in what situations would I, in normal usage, find myself wanting to articulate the fact of my falling silent? Is this a way of communicating, perhaps, the excess of an experience over my ability to talk? We might, in the face of a deep emotional experience, or of a grand natural scene, or of a great work of art that moves us deeply, say that we cannot say how we feel or how it affects us. We can imagine situations in which we might need to declare our inability to speak as a way of communicating an emotional or intellectual excess over language. Or, we might think of this as akin to Wittgenstein's model of talking about pain. We can imagine a situation in which it might make sense to say 'I am in pain'; if, for instance, one were paralysed and unable to exhibit pain in other ways. And so, we might interpret the above section of Oppen's poem along similar lines. Confronted by an inability to *express*, implicitly because of the failure of the mind in confrontation with the 'fatal rock' and the sort of silence it

produces, Oppen finds himself having to tell us that he is currently being silent *about* something.

Ordinarily, however, one does not say that one is in pain in this way, any more than one says 'I know that is a tree'. Rather, one exhibits pain. So, too, the things one says when one is horrified are not reports on the emotion but are part of its composition. And so one would also not ordinarily report on one's inability to speak. One would simply fall silent. This is what takes place, or at least seems to take place, in the em dash after 'The fatal rock // Which is the world—' (*NCP* 179). We see this falling or keeping silent that we also see performed in a number of Oppen's poems. A small, domestic version of the gesture occurs in the poem 'California', from *The Materials*:

[Quote text removed for Copyright reasons][330] (*NCP* 83)

Certain features of these opening two stanzas ought by now to be recognisable. Oppen's speaker—and given the reference to Mary I think we are justified in calling this Oppen himself, or at least a version of Oppen—locates himself in the world ('At Palos Verdes', 'I am sitting in an automobile'), and then, during an act of vision ('And I look down at the Pacific') falls silent in a moment of consideration of the elemental, natural world ('An area of ocean in the sun—'). Some other parts of the scene are immediately recognisable also. The meditation upon nature, the fatal rock, takes place in 'an automobile' which, if it has been thought of in *Discrete Series* as 'a thing among others'

[330] It is possible that the last line at the end of the first the first line of the second stanza were intended by Oppen to be run-on lines, constrained only by the width of the page. However, in the *New Collected Poems*, the prior *Collected Poems*, and in the original first edition of *The Materials,* the line breaks appear as shown. I have chosen in this case to duplicate the lineation rather than to assume that these were run-on lines.

(*NCP* 13), is here opposed in its artificiality to the naturalness of 'the Pacific' and the 'headland' that 'towers over ocean'. The implied moment of intuition and that which is thought of are also both 'in the sun', again troping upon light as a form of pre-discursive revelation.

Some elements are less recognisable. Unlike other poems I have looked at, this moment is narrated as a record of the present rather than a recollection, and so its speech within the moment of sight seems more immediate. The self-comparison to the Romantics is also particularly telling. Oppen claims here not to know how 'the Romantic stood in nature', and his subsequent line about sitting in an automobile makes this a self-deprecating joke about physical posture when poetically contemplating the natural world. The Romantic, an abstraction of romantic poets and artists in general, perhaps stood like the figure in Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, in bold confrontation with a sublime view. If Oppen's view in Palos Verdos is arguably no less naturally sublime, his poetic posture is far removed; sitting in a car, looking out the window while his wife 'buys tomatoes from a road side stand'. The differences are interesting, for rather than seeking out the moment of enlightening subject-object encounter it occurs here in passing. If the subject-object encounter is 'Romantic' in a number of ways, it also has roots in modernism. We might liken it, for instance, to those poems of William Carlos Williams's wherein emotionally infused encounters with the natural world occur in pauses during car journeys, such as in 'By the road to the contagious hospital'. In both of those cases, however, the subject's encounter with the natural world provokes speech. For a romantic like Wordsworth, it is the contemplation of one's own subjectivity as it is motivated by the encounter with the sublime other. For Williams, it is a far more visual engagement with the details of a small slice of the

natural world. For Oppen, however, the immediate natural world is oddly effaced by the em-dash. He does not go on to describe it in exquisite detail, nor to describe his feelings in looking at it. Rather, he falls silent for a moment, before continuing. When he does continue it is with one image in mind, the tree 'streaming' in the wind before the waves of the ocean; the harmony of motion between the two indicating the sort of one-ness that had implicitly just made Oppen fall momentarily silent.

This is something we encounter regularly with Oppen. The limits to speaking brought about in moments of phenomenological insight are themselves a move in a hypothetical language-game. They take the experience of an intuition of existence as a given, something that is experienced bodily and which cannot be doubted, and the failure to speak acts as a gesture that brings the inner experience into a coded social outwardness. It is a type of utterance in the shape of a silence. As both Guetti and Schulte have pointed out, however, and as discussed above, poetry is not exactly like the language-game of giving information or, in this case, of being overwhelmed by an experience. It is a behaviour that even if it does attend to an actual experience, narrated in the present, finds its final shape after the fact, under its own set of conditions and conventions (one example of which is given in Wordsworth's notion of poetry arising from 'emotion recollected in tranquillity').[331] Oppen's poems of phenomenological insight, in other words, cannot represent quite the same game as the moment in which the insight occurs in the forest, or in that 'lit instant', even when presented in the present tense.

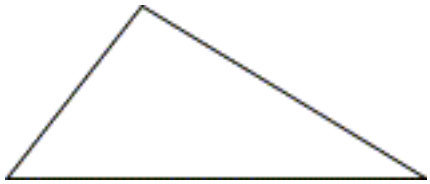
[331] William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Michael Mason (London and New York: Longman, 1992), 82.

What we encounter in the poem, then, cannot be the actual, purposive falling-silent in the face of being but rather a grammatical display of the sense of falling silent in such moments. Like the nouns and shifters, these moments of keeping silent or falling-silent are put on a pedestal, and can be put on a pedestal precisely because they are no longer governed by the language-games from which they are drawn but by the language-game of poetic speaking. Oppen is thus able to make the lacunary moments ontologically legible—to convey what Hagberg calls 'a hint of metaphysical depth' and what Guetti calls a feeling that these moments are 'magical'—by finding within them a grammar that gives sense to silence, that can act as a companion to the grammatically experienced sense of nouns and prepositions.

Aspect Seeing and Meta-Poetry

In the above reading of Oppen's poetics of being two features have been apprehended through the Wittgensteinian perspective. The first is that the forms, which from a Heideggerian perspective had been assigned to being, appear from the Wittgensteinian to be grammatical forms drawn from the language, conditioned by the criteria of ordinary language use. The poetics of being is, from this perspective, a poetics of the grammatical experience of language taken as such. Second, however, is the fact that if this act on Oppen's part is not dissimilar from literary language more broadly, Oppen is unusual in wanting to give this grammatical experience a particular ontological significance. This means that one cannot solely experience a word like 'is' or 'it' grammatically, but that one should also to some extent experience the grammatical sense of 'is-ness', for example, as in some way ontological. This requires that one see the words that Oppen puts on a pedestal in one *aspect* of their grammatical potential.

‘Aspect seeing’, or ‘noticing an aspect’, is something Wittgenstein dwells on with interest in the *Investigations,* particularly in ‘Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment’. In §113 of ‘Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment’, Wittgenstein writes that ‘I observe a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I *see* that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience “noticing an aspect”’ (*PPF* §113). One is looking at something, and then without any change in the thing itself one suddenly *sees* it differently. It is as though the *meaning* of the face suddenly changed in front of one’s eyes. Wittgenstein gives another example in the form of a triangle:

> Take as an example the aspects of a triangle. This triangle
>
> 
>
> can be seen as a triangular hole, as solid, as a geometrical drawing; as standing on its base, as hanging from its apex; as a mountain, as a wedge, as an arrow or pointer, as an overturned object which is meant, for example, to stand on the shorter side of the right angle, as a half parallelogram, and as various other things. (*PPF* §162)

One can see the triangle in different ‘aspects’, and as one does so the object itself seems to change. This sensation seems to suggest that the *meaning* of the sign (here a triangle) must in some way be tied to one’s interior experience. If I can see the triangle at one

point as ‘a mountain’ and at another point as ‘an arrow or pointer’, then surely the meaning of the sign must in some way depend on my interpretation of it. But again, Wittgenstein wants to make clear that this ability to see aspects is predetermined by outward criteria. In the section following the example of the triangle he writes

> ‘You can think now of *this*, now of *this*, as you look at it, can regard it now as *this*, now as *this*, and then you will see it now *this* way, now *this*.’ — *What* way? There is, after all, no further qualification. (*PPF* §163)

Wittgenstein shows how little is communicated by the word ‘this’ when used emphatically. In order to say in which aspect you see the triangle, for instance, that aspect must in some way have a public existence that can be indicated. One must already have absorbed the public grammar of mountains, of holes, of wedges and pointers, and so on, in order to say that you see it in such a way. And so, implicitly, one must also have such an ability before one can *interpret* the triangle in such ways (*PPF* §164). Wittgenstein writes:

> In the triangle I can now see *this* as apex, *that* as base—now *this* as apex, *that* as base. — Clearly the words ‘Now I am seeing *this* as the apex’ cannot so far mean anything for a learner who has only just met the concepts of apex, base, and so on. — But I do not mean this as an empirical proposition.
>
> Only of someone *capable* of making certain applications of the figure with facility would one say that he saw it now *this* way, now *that* way.
>
> The substratum of this experience is the mastery of a technique. (*PPF* §222)

Which is to say that, one's ability to experience the sign in a certain way requires one to have mastered a particular practice, a particular technique, of seeing things in such an aspect. By extension, therefore, to experience the grammatical sense of the word as like an ontological experience is similarly dependent on the poet's and the reader's shared and publicly determined ability to put the words 'on a pedestal', both in composition and in consumption. What counts as a 'correct' reading in such a state would be the ability to see the words so emphasised in a particular ontological 'aspect'.

In '"The life of the sign": Wittgenstein on reading a poem', Schulte describes literary language use in general as a kind of 'quotational' deployment. It is as if the language being used in literature, particularly poetry, were at times a kind of quotation of ordinary language use; as it were, pulled out of the discourse for attention. In order to consider this sort of employment, Schulte too looks to that moment where Wittgenstein talks of poetry's ability to put words 'on a pedestal'. He then writes that

> The fact that one can take trouble to get the tone exactly right shows that here there is something one can try to do *well*, something which one may fail to do well. This suggests that getting it right is something one may be able to learn, something involving certain techniques which can be taught, comprehended and acquired and which some people are better equipped to acquire than others.[332]

This, as we have seen, is Wittgenstein's point in 'Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment'. Schulte wants to make it clear that the sort of experience that poetry can

[332] Schulte, 'The Life of the Sign', 156.

compel, and which for Oppen I am calling a kind of aspect seeing, depends on the 'mastery of a technique' based on outward criteria.[333] Part of mastering such a technique is, as Wittgenstein has argued, mastering the ability to interpret in certain ways—to read tones of voice, certain combinations of words, certain bodily and linguistic gestures, and so forth.

In Oppen's poetry, therefore, I want to say not only that his poetry emphasises the grammatical sense of certain words and phrases, but also that it relies on the reader interpreting that experience in a particular way: as ontological. On their own, however, Oppen's gestures are difficult to interpret, for they are themselves made meaningful by the contexts and the imperatives that motivate and situate their use. Or, to put this in another way, for the grammatical possibilities of language-as-such to be encountered as ontologically meaningful a link must be forged between the particular grammatical experiences Oppen conjures and the ontological implications that he wants them to have for his readers. That this is not automatically the case is evident in those moments wherein Oppen laments those who misunderstand his poetry, claiming for himself a particular clarity that others struggle to experience.

As a result, Oppen's poetics of being, understood as various poetic strategies for indicating the experience of being ontologically, is regularly accompanied by a meta-poetic voice that attempts to guide the reader's interpretation. Above I looked at section 21 of 'Of Being Numerous', which employs nouns as emblems of presentness—both as names and as 'pointers' with something of the grammar of pointing—and emphasises

[333] Ibid.

them through repetition and isolation. In the preceding chapter I discussed how this section of the poem is directly followed by another which lays out the ideal of

> Clarity
>
> In the sense of *transparence,*
> I don't mean that much can be explained.
>
> Clarity in the sense of silence. (*NCP* 175)

It is no coincidence that this invocation of clarity immediately follows the declaration that material substance may be acutely perceived. The invocation of clarity as a concept does not simply reflect upon the prior image of the brick in the wall but makes the brick's sudden intrusion into the poem retrospectively legible within the poem's ongoing meditation. What we are dealing with, we are being told, is 'clarity', though a form of clarity that we may not recognise. As discussed in the previous chapter, Oppen invokes this issue again in 'Route':

> One man could not understand me because I was saying
> simple things; it seemed to him that nothing was being
> said. I was saying: there is a mountain, there is a lake[.] (*NCP* 197)

Oppen raises this problem also in a letter to Michael Heller, where he writes of 'the minor impact of [his] books', which 'mean to say *Being* I had supposed myself to be speaking with dazzling clarity' (*SL* 248). What Oppen laments is a horizon of sense

that separates his particular utterances from those of other language-games. In fact, he runs up against the public illegibility of the ontological meaning he invests into his emphases of grammar. His 'clarity' has only its residual meaningful relationship with the language-games of ordinary, purposive language use, and does not vanish into purposiveness in a way that is necessarily recognisable by his audience. If it seems nonetheless, as it does to me, a powerful experience of language for its evocations of the often unregarded but important senses of words like 'this', 'it', 'of', and so forth, this is not on its own an ontological experience. Part of the reason for this is the fact that, while Oppen seems to assume it at times, his deployment of clarity *as a problem* is itself made meaningful only within the horizon of sense that the poetics of being establishes.

Wittgenstein himself notes the problem with developing, as Oppen does on the basis of Heidegger, what is essentially a private language-game. He writes that 'If I were to talk to myself out loud in a language not understood by those present, my thoughts would be hidden from them' (*PPF* §317). Or again, 'If a lion could talk, we wouldn't be able to understand it' (*PPF* §327). The point is the same one that Wittgenstein makes over and over again in his *Investigations*: that 1) meaning is constructed and construed according to public criteria, independent of mental processes, and 2) these public criteria are based on a common form of life, which humanity does not share, for example, with lions. This is helpful for reading Oppen's Heideggerian poetics, for the 'intuition of existence' that takes place in a pre-discursive moment is, at least in its theoretical construction, initially a private experience. This is perhaps a necessary aspect of a phenomenology so deeply invested in separation from mass consciousness as is the lonely anxiousness of authentic *Dasein*. Oppen's poetics of being deliberately takes up this privateness. It physically and ideologically separates

itself from the social world and seeks its insights in encounters that are, at their most populous, made up of two people. If the language of social involvement is deeply suspect for Oppen, as we saw in the last chapter, it is nonetheless the only language that is 'meaningful' in the manner Wittgenstein outlines. The language of the intuition of substantive actuality, removed both physically and grammatically from social purposiveness, is therefore necessarily one that struggles to be understood. He struggles in that moment of after-the-fact recollection in which the poem is written.

In order for Oppen's poetic ontological gestures to be more easily legible to readers they would need to master the poetics of being as a kind of technique for speaking, writing, and reading; in other words, as a particular language-game.[334] This explains the persistent meta-poetic voice that runs through Oppen's post-Mexico poetry. Take, for instance, 'The Building of the Skyscraper' from *This In Which*:

> The steel worker on the girder
> Learned not to look down, and does his work
> And there are words we have learned
> Not to look at,
> Not to look for substance
> Below them. But we are on the verge
> Of vertigo. (*NCP* 149)

This poem is meta-poetic, offering a description of the relationship to language upon which it and other poems are founded. At the same time, it is at least partly directed

[334] See also Guetti, *Wittgenstein and the Grammar of Literary Experience*, 49.

towards making the *problem* of ontological clarity legible. Like the steel worker, we stand on a self-made structure that distances us from the ground. The steel worker, however, has 'Learned not to look down'. We, standing on language, do look below us and recognise the lack of 'substance'. The use of the word 'substance' is not accidental. It is, of course, the substantivity of the real—its concreteness—that the poetics of being wants to recover for language, and that substantivity is the ideal 'meaning' of language from Oppen's Heideggerian perspective. The second stanza clarifies the imperative:

> There are words that mean nothing
> But there is something to mean.
> Not a declaration which is truth
> But a thing
> Which is. It is the business of the poet
> 'To suffer the things of the world
> And to speak them and himself out.' (*NCP* 149)

Our words must mean 'something' but this something is not modelled after 'a declaration which is truth' but after being. The 'meaning' that Oppen desires is 'a thing / Which is'. The business of the poet, therefore, is to 'suffer the things of the world'—to partake in what Heidegger on the fly-leaf to Oppen's collection calls 'the arduous path of appearance'—'And to speak them and himself out' (*NCP* 92, 149). Again, the torsional heart of the poetics of being is clear. The poet must speak the *things* out, with those things posited as other to language, but the gestures within this speech remain linguistic, and emphatically so for the task is to 'speak' even if its content is a 'thing'. Oppen's imperative to speak *things*, however, is heavily reliant on forms of speech that

don't themselves contain a specific content but instead suggest the space in which ideas of substance may take up residence: 'something' to 'look at', 'a thing / Which is'. This all depends in turn upon the assertion that 'there are' such 'things'. Each of these utterances depends on its grammatical sense to conjure a potential that might be experienced as powerful self-assertion. That is, the experience of these phrases grammatically becomes the content of the assertion of faith in the ability to speak 'things', just as it is an assertion of faith in the existence of the things themselves. What is *most* crucial here is that the meta-poetic discussion of what Oppen wants poetry to be and to do influences one's likelihood of taking the grammatical experience of the phrase 'a thing / Which is' (again emphasised by the line break) as a type of ontological intuition.

In the final stanza, however, the poem turns towards a form of visual clarity as a way of resolving the contradictions within the imperative to join the word 'thing' as we experience it grammatically with the actual thing that is the object of perception. It is a fascinating moment, for it begins ironically with a performative lyric (and pseudo-romantic) 'O':

> O, the tree, growing from the sidewalk—
> It has a little life, sprouting
> Little green buds
> Into the culture of the streets. (*NCP* 149)

The description gestures towards a form of visual clarity, but its opening 'O' draws attention to the lyric artifice of the enunciation. Even as living substance emerges into

and against the 'culture' of the streets, offering an extra-ideological object for attention and for speech to bring into being, the poem emphasises its own poetic constitution. It undermines its own speech as a place where we might look 'for substance', offering the experience of substance as something tenuously and perhaps only illusorily manifested in the 'thingness' of words themselves.

Clarity within speech is established, therefore, not just as an imperative but as a *problem* with which Oppen's poetry must grapple. Clarity, we are being told, as a function of language ideally deployed, is not just the substance of Oppen's poems, but more fundamentally the problem that generates their speech, the point of contact between the politico-ethical imperative to sincerity and the ontological imperative to authenticity. The meta-poetry, therefore, guides us not only towards experiencing parts of the poetry grammatically as a stand-in for the forms of phenomenological encounter it cannot conjure, but also towards contextualising that experience itself in a meaningful way. Noting similar features of Oppen's poetry, though on different terms, Charles Bernstein argues that Oppen 'uses clarity as a tactic':

> That is, at times he tends to fall back onto 'clarity' as a self-justifying means of achieving resolution through scenic motifs, statement, or parable in poems that might, given his compositional techniques, outstrip such controlling impulses.[335]

There are two forms of clarity here: clarity as a quality of speech, the direct depiction of the sorts of 'scenic motif' that characterise the world of the substantive and the

[335] Charles Bernstein, *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 193.

experience of their ontological reality relegated to the sense of a fragmented but assertive grammar; and the catch-cry of 'clarity' that runs through Oppen's meta-poetic moments as both imperative and problem. What we might say now is that the former depends on the latter for just the sort of 'resolution' that Bernstein questions as an adequate aesthetic gesture. The calls for 'clarity' as a poetic goal (aesthetic, philosophical, and political)—both in 'Of Being Numerous' and as 'the most beautiful thing in the world' in 'Route' itself—are what allow the visual or conceptual clarity to operate as moments of thematic resolution. As such, we need to include Oppen's meta-poetry within our understanding of the poetics of being: not as serving the same role as the gestures of naming, indicating, or silencing, but alongside such gestures as the manner in which the poems tell us about the way that their procedures function and how we ought to understand them. To return to §222 of the *Investigations*, one's ability to experience scenic clarity as ontological clarity—one's ability, that is, to see Oppen's gestures in such an aspect—depends on the 'mastery of a technique'. Oppen' meta-poetry tries to guide us towards this technique.

It is also clear, however, that part of the mastery of the technique of interpreting Oppen's gestures ontologically is the ability to register the *failure* of Oppen's poetic language to do what he would like it to do. In the example above, for instance, Oppen makes the problem of ontological clarity legible not just by saying that we experience vertigo and that there is something to mean, but by making the experience of the grammatical capacity of the words being used and the artificiality of the utterance plain to the reader. The attempt at lyric vision at the end of the poem is made legible as a failed moment of ontological vision because we have been primed by the preceding meta-poetic imperatives to seek something within that utterance that it fails to provide.

Similarly, while we see the declaration that there is 'something to mean' and that it is 'a thing / Which is', the counter-factual nature of this sort of meaning makes the ontological sense brought out in the grammatical experience of these phrases a clear *substitute* for the absent 'thing / Which is'. If the final, lyric section then acts, as Bernstein suggests it might, as a kind of thematic resolution, it is nonetheless a resolution that rests in a kind of insufficiency. It is a resolution of the metaphysical tensions within Oppen's notion of an ideal form of speech not because it achieves its goals, but because in its failure it indicates the direction in which the intuition of existence might lie. This is less an actual act of formal indication than the recognition of what formal indication might accomplish.

We may look, for instance, at a portion of 'A Language of New York':

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

Caught up in the chatter [*Das Gerede*] of the social world, ordinary language-use has drifted away from its origin and 'run mad'.[336] The Heideggerian task in this situation is not to find new words, but rather to refill our current language with an originary meaning, and it is this task that Oppen poses for the nameless 'one' of his poem:

> If one captures them
> One by one proceeding
>
> Carefully they will restore
> I hope to meaning
> And to sense. (*NCP* 116)

The verb 'restore' is deliberately unresolved. With no direct object we might read this as meaning that the words will be restored to meaning and to sense, but we may also read it as saying that thus capturing language will restore us, we human language-users, to meaning and sense. It is a properly charged term and the phrase's grammatical incompleteness again encourages us to experience the possibility of such mutual renewal in the ambiguity of the verb's grammar. Following the untethered verb 'restore' we run hard up against the expression of 'hope' that starts the next line. The speaker's hope—that capturing the words will restore both the words and those who use—is his or hers alone. It is not a 'we' that hopes, but an 'I'. Indeed, the 'I hope', is critical, for it talks of a future restoration of language that has yet to come to pass. 'If one captures them' they '*will* restore' [my emphasis]. Oppen's gestures are performed in relation to

[336] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 296-7. See also John Wilkinson, 'The Glass Enclosure: Transparency and Glitter in the Poetry of George Oppen', *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 2 (2010): 232, for an interesting analysis of this sense of being against the common discourse of the city of New York.

this counterfactual, conditional state. If we do this, language may be restored to sense, and may thus restore us. In this usage, the 'hope' of the poem's speaker is similar to the 'faith' that we encounter in 'Psalm'. Both moments cry faith, or voice hope, in the renewal of speech, and make gestures that attempt to render such a speech legible so that it may be experienced as such. In so doing, however, both moments make it clear, in different ways, that the fact of a truly deployable, ideal poetics of being is currently out of reach. Like the meta-poetry, the counter-factuality of the language the poetry sets up as an ideal *in* such meta-poetic moments is part of what makes the poetics of being as a language-game legible to the reader. Its non-existence, in other words, is part of its legibility.

Heidegger and Marx

In his *Investigations*, as he thinks further about the nature of the meaning of a word and its relationship to seeing aspects, Wittgenstein tells us that a thought has just struck him. 'Here it occurs to me', he writes,

> that in conversation on aesthetic matters we use the words: 'You have to see it like *this*, this is how it is meant'; 'When you see it like *this*, you see where it goes wrong'; 'You have to hear these bars as an introduction'; 'You must listen out for this key'; 'You must phrase it like *this*' (which can refer to hearing as well as to playing). (*PPF* §178)

There are situations in our ordinary language-games about aesthetics, that is, in which we ask each other to experience something in a particular aspect. I have demonstrated

above how what I am calling Oppen's meta-poetry is doing just this, suggesting ways in which the reader might interpret—or see—the gestures and forms in the poems being experienced, or in those that accompany in the collections. I have argued also that this meta-poetry guides Oppen's reader not only towards an ontological experience of certain grammatical forms, but also to seeing how the failure of those forms to be more than a grammatical experience itself indicates the direction in which the ideal form of expression, and its attendant ontological intuition, lies.

There is a further aspect of Oppen's poetry to be discussed, however, in connection with his attempt to direct which aspects of his poetry readers experience. Specifically, I would like to end this chapter by demonstrating the manner in which the poetics of being as a language-game depends upon and responds to the language that emerges from the sense of historical crisis that contextualises Oppen's turn to Heidegger. I argue that, in 'Of Being Numerous' particularly, Oppen asks his reader to see his words at different points in different aspects: sometimes in what we might call a Marxist aspect of historical determination within ontic processes, and sometimes in the Heideggerian 'intuition of existence' that seeks to free the poetic subject from such entrapment. The poetic subject is here implicitly Oppen himself, but in being part of that multiplicity that makes up humanity, it is also implicitly the modern subject more broadly, the one who is subject to 'the meaning / Of being numerous' (*NCP* 166).

Near the beginning of the previous chapter I noted in passing the way in which Oppen's poetry, like his biography, is shaped by many of the crises of the twentieth century. The first of these was the Great Depression, which famously launched George and Mary Oppen into a period of political activism. As many critics have shown, this

period of activism was also a period of intense engagement with the thinking of the radical left, and the writings of Marx in particular. Eric Hoffman, Nicholls, Du Plessis, Jennison, and others, have shown how this leftist (what would become Marxist) commitment is evident both in the theme and the form of Oppen's poetry, particularly the early poetry of *Discrete Series*.[337] In the previous chapter I showed a similarity between the thinking that takes place in *Discrete Series,* and the later Heideggerian thinking that comes under the heading of a poetics of being. Here I would like to say that the Marxist thinking present in the early poetry is sustained in the later poetry also, though in a different form. In particular, it takes the form of a certain type of thinking about Oppen's historical moment and about the sort of entrapment within the historical progression of a mass social will that this moment entails. In the thirteenth section of 'Of Being Numerous', for example, Oppen bemoans the problem of history: 'unable to begin / At the beginning' he writes,

> the fortunate
> Find everything already here. They are the shoppers,
> Choosers, judges[.] (*NCP* 170)

This is a delicate and interesting moment, Oppen is able to maintain a dual attitude towards what he is describing. He is clearly searching for a way to 'begin / At the beginning' in his poetry. At the end of the preceding section, indeed, Oppen had ended with what might now be thought of as a problematic image of primitivism and the sorts

[337] See, for instance, Burton Hatlen, 'Objectivist Poetics and Political Vision: A Study of Oppen and Pound', in *George Oppen: Man and Poet*, ed. Burton Hatlen (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1981), Jennison, *The Zukofsky Era*, John Lowney, *History, Memory, and the Literary Left: Modern American Poetry, 1935-1968* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), and Longenbach, *The Resistance to Poetry*.

of authenticity it might allow. My reading of what follows is that, unlike those people who 'gathered in council' and whose 'things shone in the forest', for modern Americans

> This will never return, never,
> Unless having reached their limits
>
> They will begin over, that is,
> Over and over[.] (*NCP* 170)

To begin 'Over and over' gestures at the type of Heideggerian primordiality that Oppen is seeking. At the same time however, Oppen notes that those who experience the opposite, who 'find everything'—ourselves, the things around us in the world, other people, and particularly our language—'already here' are, in fact, 'the fortunate'. They are fortunate, I argue, because though they are trapped in their historical circumstances they nonetheless find themselves trapped *with things*, with a population of fellows, with institutions of justice, and so forth. Their circumstances could be much worse.

Nonetheless, we are unable to begin at the beginning because *the* beginning is always bracketed off from us. We come to speech in this condition, already involved in the world, everything already here, and Oppen neatly makes this point by beginning this section of the poem mid-phrase. However, if Oppen is nuanced about this fact, he is nonetheless still moved by the problem of existing in his historical moment. The opening section of the poem tells us that 'There are things / We live among', and that this takes place as an 'Occurrence', as 'a part / Of an infinite series' (*NCP* 163). He also tells us, however, that 'Of this was told / A tale of our wickedness' (*NCP* 163). In

sections eighteen and nineteen of the poem Oppen gives examples of what this might mean. 'It is the air of atrocity', he writes:

> An event as ordinary
> As a President.
>
> A plume of smoke, visible at a distance,
> In which people burn. (*NCP* 173)

Oppen was writing during the Vietnam War, and these lines condemn the present moment, the historical moment, as atrocious. The air is of atrocity. The air is full of the smoke rising from burning bodies. Perhaps, we may say, of napalmed bodies. Very probably, these are also the bodies of Holocaust victims, rising from the past into this present moment where America has inherited the horrors of its past enemy. The next section begins

> Now in the helicopters the casual will
> Is atrocious[.] (*NCP* 173)

If it is 'the fortunate' who find everything already there for them when they arrive in the world, within the 'already there' is something atrocious. The social being of the multiplicity of Oppen's society is one capable of bombing other countries and using napalm. The 'casual will', the public will I would like to say, is atrocious. This is the contemporary crisis to which Oppen is responding in 'Of Being Numerous'. Like the Great Depression, the modern crisis has its economic aspects and, like in *Discrete*

Series, it shows itself in certain physical objects. The helicopters and the smoke shown above are two such objects, bearing as they do a great deal of the contemporary social-symbolic weight. So too are the dwellings Oppen meditates upon when he writes of

> their dwelling
> For which the tarred roofs
>
> And the stoops and doors—
> A world of stoops—
> Are petty alibi[.] (*NCP* 165)

The stoops are, for Oppen, an enduring social container for a population that flows through the city over time. The people are born and die against its backdrop. Unlike the moments in which stone is seen as an emblem of existence, the stoops are a symbol of social continuity. That is, they are here emblems of something different, the space within which the flow of people is formed into the 'casual will'.

This idea is at least partly shaped by Oppen's connection with the American political left of the 1930s and '40s, and with the writings of Marx in particular. Lawrence Hemming describes the situation in a way that is useful for my investigation:

> Karl Marx opens the *Grundrisse* with the heading 'the object before us, at the outset, *material production*. Individuals producing in Society—hence the socially determined production of individuals is naturally the point of departure.' The participle—*produzierende* (producing)—introduces an emphasis in German

> that we could almost overlook in English: we could translate this as 'socially producing individuals' to capture the ambiguity. At one and the same time, individuals produce only in society (indeed, Marx follows this immediately with a critique of the individual hunter as an example of the 'unimaginative fantasies of the 18th-century Robinsonades,' among whom he counts Smith and Ricardo), and at the same time the object they produce is society itself.[338]

Women and men, Marx is quick to point out, are not like Robinson Crusoe. We do not produce ourselves in isolation nor replicate society on our own. Our psychological and material constitution is produced by a society of producers. Produced by society, the individual produces socially, and produces the society itself.

The notion that society is made up of a collection of socially producing individual [*in Gesellschaft produzierende Individuen*] is not itself pernicious.[339] For Marx it is pernicious under capitalism because the conditions of production both feed off the bodily life of the worker and lead to individuals confronting commodities in the marketplace as alienated products of abstract human labour. As we have seen, the conditions of production under capitalism are a problem for Oppen also. This is both because of that 'catastrophe of human lives' that he had experienced and fought against during the depression, and because, as he puts it in 'A Narrative', as the people 'disperse / Into their jobs', they 'lose connection / With themselves'. The capitalist conditions of production are both materially and ontologically alienating.

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[338] Lawrence Paul Hemming, *Heidegger and Marx: A Productive Dialogue over the Language of Humanism* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 220.
[339] Hemming discusses this aspect of Marx's thinking in *Heidegger and Marx.*

The notion that the relation between socially producing individuals takes on a problematic configuration under capitalism has an immediate synchronous aspect. It represents a state of affairs to be responded to in the present moment. At the same time, however, it has a diachronous aspect wherein social production is also social re-production. Part of the trouble as Oppen perceives it is that the synchronous state of affairs seems to be self-perpetuating. This is something that Louis Althusser discusses in his essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)'. In the first section of that essay, 'On the Reproduction of the Conditions of Production', Althusser recalls Marx's statement that 'a social formation which did not reproduce the conditions of production at the same time as it produced would not last a year'.[340] Of this he writes that 'The ultimate condition of production is therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production'.[341] The mechanism of this self-reproduction, Althusser writes, 'leads to a kind of "endless chain"' built upon self-perpetuating ideologies that sustain the conditions of production.[342]

The sense of being caught within a self-perpetuating chain is a theme that runs throughout the length of 'Of Being Numerous'. The singularity of ontological insight is most meaningful for Oppen as it relates to the counter-meaning of 'being numerous', part of 'the people'. In sections three and four of 'Of Being Numerous', Oppen introduces the notion of a city's numerousness, its population as a kind of 'flow'. In section three he writes that 'A populace flows / Thru the city' (*NCP* 164), and in section four, that 'the people of that flow / Are new, the old / New to age as the young / to

[340] Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1977), 123.
[341] Ibid.
[342] Ibid., 125.

youth' (*NCP* 164-5). This flow of people recalls that of the river in 'A Narrative'. The historical flow of people is also a material flow, but its channel is not the banks of the river, but history, and the means of production that the 'circles' within which the people 'lose connection / With themselves'. In section 14, the notion of thinking of a populace historically, as a flow through a city, returns as the challenge of speaking

> of 'The People'
>
> Who are that force
> Within the walls
> of cities
>
> Wherein their cars
>
> Echo like history
> Down walled avenues
> In which one cannot speak. (*NCP* 171)

The 'flow' of the population has been replaced with a different image of movement. Here cars 'Echo like history' through the city, their movement through space being also a marker of their movement through time. The human 'flow' is now a mechanical progression that is difficult to speak of and which itself silences speech.

As 'Of Being Numerous' continues, the challenge of thinking the relation between singularity and numerousness extends to include the difficulty of thinking of human

lives as both a synchronous collection of lives and a flow of lives over time. In the 26th section this comes to a head as Oppen writes that the

> denial
> Of death that paved the cities,
> Paved the cities
>
> Generation
> For generation and the pavement
>
> Is filthy as the corridors
> Of the police. (*OBN* 178)

In the twenty-ninth section of the poem the speaker reaches out from within this condition, apostrophically, toward others:

> My daughter, my daughter, what can I say
> Of living?
> I cannot judge it.
>
> We seem caught
> In reality together my lovely
> Daughter[.] (*NCP* 181)

On its own, being 'caught / In reality together' may seem an ahistorical condition. As part of the poem's progression, however, both the social conditions that make up the culture and the fact of the problematic 'flow' of humanity through cities make this also a temporal, historical entrapment. If Oppen seems to be surrendering to his involvement in the world and all it might contain, however, it is in this and similar moments that he nonetheless finds a remedy in a figure of time capable of resisting both the synchronous and diachronous aspects of his 'entrapment':

> Tho the house on the low land
> Of the city
>
> Catches the dawn light
>
> I can tell myself, and I tell myself
> Only what we all believe
> True
>
> And in the sudden vacuum
> Of time… (*NCP* 181)

Looking out on 'the house on the low land' that 'catches the dawn light' a space opens up between inclusion in a social consciousness capable only of reiterating 'what we all believe / True'—including despair and sorrow for 'those men' from his war experiences—and a 'vacuum / Of time' that resists restatement by marking its own limits as an utterance.

This is a particularly Heideggerian gap for Oppen to open, not only because the cessation of poetic speech is used to mark the limit of the human subject in the face of ontological insight, but also because in the 'vacuum of time' we encounter a moment in which time is untethered from the notions of history against which Heidegger's philosophy is posed. Against 'historiographic' [*historisch*] thinking, as he calls it—a comportment towards being that treats history and temporality as metaphysical—Heidegger poses an alternative image of temporality. This, if still 'historical' in the ontological sense Heidegger desires (capable of grasping itself as thrown-projection within its broad, epochal existence), is nonetheless untethered, an originary re-beginning. As George Pattison puts it,

> As Heidegger sees it, each new epoch, though not unrelated to its predecessor is, in a sense scarcely acceptable to Hegel, a distinctive, novel and 'other' destining of Being. A new epoch does not so much emerge as the resolution of the conflicts of the old, but, in a more radical sense, is a new beginning, issuing from a movement within Being itself, initiated from and therefore only comprehensible in relation to a dimension of Being that is not revealed on the plane of concrete historical becoming itself.[343]

The authentic disclosure of being, the experience of *Ereignis* or what Heidegger would come to refer to as '*aletheia*', becomes the manner in which such originary re-beginning occurs, at least at an individual level. This is what Heidegger finds in the origin

[343] George Pattison, *Routledge Philosopy Guidebook to the Later Heidegger* (New York Routledge, 2000), 68-9.

[*Ursprüng*] made possible by works of art.[344] With art, 'whenever there is a beginning', Heidegger writes,

> a thrust enters history, history either begins or starts over again. History means here not a sequence in time of event of whatever sort, however important. History is the transporting of a people into its appointed task as entrance into that people's endowment.[345]

It is a leap out of the past history into its present historical moment in a way that re-grounds human existence in its authentic historicity. Heidegger thus describes the possibility of a moment in which one apprehends the reality of the world, opening up the possibility not of going back to *the* beginning, but of beginning anew within current circumstances. To begin anew is to deny the ontic, historical progression that Oppen problematises control over present and future.

Mutual Legibility

Oppen's turn to Heidegger in 'Of Being Numerous', I would like to say, is only properly legible to us as readers when we attend to how it responds to the sense of historical crisis that motivates the poem overall, and which is given specific voice in the poem as what we might call a Marxist language-game. Indeed, I argue that the turn to the poetics of being as a language-game for suggesting ontological phenomenological experiences only makes sense as such when positioned against the sort of Marxist

[344] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 75.
[345] Ibid., 74.

thinking-in-language described in brief above. It is, I would like to say, a matter of demonstrating the circumstances that provoke a certain type of response. Here it is the demonstration of how a Marxist critique of history and the individual's conditioning by social circumstances provokes a desire for an idealised form of language-use that is out of reach. Cavell's account of the experience of reading through Wittgenstein's *Investigations* might help us to understand what is at stake. '*Philosophy, on such a view of the process as Wittgenstein's',* he writes, *'has no facts of its own. Its medium—along with directing the emptiness of assertion—lies in demonstrating, or some say showing, the obvious'*.[346] For Wittgenstein, showing the obvious was a matter of persistence: one uses example after example, and approaches a concept from direction after direction, until the grammar of the situation and the illusion one is beholden to both become clear. It is a matter of bringing to attention something that lies, as it were, under the nose but unregarded.

What I would like to show in the remainder of this chapter is that the conflict at work in 'Of Being Numerous' between what I am broadly calling Marxist and Heideggerian language-games, is aimed at showing something that is 'obvious'. That is, that the desire for a Heideggerian type of authentic speech, and indeed for one that goes further with Oppen into a pre-discursive experience that is alien to speech, is a direct response to a type of entrapment within speech that too often goes unregarded. The particular sort of conflict and mutual legibility at work in 'Of Being Numerous' isn't at work in Oppen's other collections. But, it is a particularly pure concentration of the dynamic that is more broadly applicable, where it is necessary to talk of being at all, and to say that one does so with the aid of 'small nouns'.

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[346] Cavell, *Philosophical Passages*, 138. [Italics in original]

At the beginning of 'Of Being Numerous', the mutual legibility of the Marxist and Heideggerian types of language-game is not yet clear. Oppen has not yet explicitly established them as different ways of speaking. As the poem opens, therefore, Oppen makes his political-historical perspective cohere with the potential for phenomenological insight:

> There are things
> We live among 'and to see them
> Is to know ourselves'. (*NCP* 163)

To 'live among' things and to know oneself through them could represent either the Heideggerian notion that the phenomenological encounter with ontic things is how one comes to understand one's own being as a being. Or, it may also refer to the Marxian notion that an encounter with the things of our social milieu is an encounter with the concrete manifestations of social processes and, thus, of ourselves. Or it may recall the Marxist argument that people become things under capitalism. This richness of different possibilities extends to the experience of the language itself, for if we approach it as Heideggerians then this meta-poetic moment directs us towards ontological form, what we might call the 'givenness' of the given into which *Dasein* is thrown. In such an interpretation, the opening statement that 'There are things' is immediately emphasised. It is a dramatic ontological statement in the very first line of the poem and it indicates an irrefusable fact of existence. It is, again, 'things' that exist, and we might be tempted to take the words of the poem themselves as things also, and so the lines would assert an irrefusable existence within which they themselves take part while also directing us in its direction. It is in this light a self-reflexive sort of formal indication, including itself

in its gaze. Reading as Marxists, however, we find that these lines suggest a contradiction around one's existence and the sorts of knowledge one is capable of forming. The things we live among are socially produced, and thus reflect the means of production and the forms of thought that result from those means. As such, to live among things and to know oneself through them is to come to self-knowledge in terms of the current means of production, and thus also to take part in the historical chain of the reproduction of the conditions of production. To experience this cycle explicitly voiced in the poem, however, is to see in it a further manifestation of the dilemma of history; for it seems to manifest in language the problem of historical involvement against which we struggle, but over which we have little control. Our experience of language in this view might then be the experience of language not ontologically, but materially, as another of those things that is socially produced and which shapes our self-knowledge, but which even self-knowledge cannot escape.

The difference between these two interpretations of the opening three lines is a matter of aspect seeing. If one is so primed one might see this statement as either a Heideggerian or a Marxist thought. But what is interesting to us here is not that we might 'see' (or experience) either interpretation, but that our ability to do so is contained within the ambiguity of the thing itself, the stanza. Which is to say that, the 'meaning' of the symbol, the meaning of Oppen's stanza, is not determined either by its physical properties alone, or entirely by the interpretation that a reader brings to it, but by the way that it is being used. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, one may see it like *this,* or like *this*, but to do so Oppen must in some way tell us which readerly 'technique' is appropriate. As this is the opening stanza, however, no such signals have yet been given. One of the few clues we have is the title, which serves only to heighten the ambiguity.

As with the opening stanza, we might choose to read the title 'Of Being Numerous' with the interpretive emphasis either on being or on numerousness.

My sense is that this is a deliberate ambiguity on Oppen's part. This short opening section of the long poem seems powerful precisely because it is ambiguous. In this opening, perhaps more than anywhere else in the poem, language is 'on display', to use Guetti's term, or 'on a pedestal', to use Wittgenstein's. The quotation in the second and third lines of the first stanza emphasise this. We are within an experience of language in which the stakes are immediately set high, but of which the consequences are not immediately apparent. And so what is most clearly demonstrated at the opening is the grammatical potential for language to be present to us at all as a mode of encounter, or, at least, as something that we as readers might encounter in varying aspects.

The ambiguity continues as we move on to an 'Occurrence', 'part of an infinite series'. These can fall out both spatially and temporally depending on whether one wants to read the infinite series as a historical progression of occurrences or as a spatially conceived array of ontic beings against the backdrop of ontological possibility. In the extended prose quote at the end of that first section the speech is clearly historicised, within memory and directed towards 'those times', but at the same time it opens up the Heideggerian awareness of the otherness of the earth that is only obscured by 'the Spring' (*NCP* 163).

As this ambiguity continues, the sense that language is on display also continues. It is like the philosopher who says 'this certainly is a hand'. Of course,

Oppen has things he does want to say that are more directed than the sorts of 'verbal displays' by which philosophers are sometimes mesmerised, but at the same time he is nonetheless caught up in thinking about what language might contain within it. It is, in Guetti's words, a show of 'signifying power', of the type 'that seem[s] the richer precisely because [it has] no immediate relevance, and whose weight derives from the unlimited authority of grammar'.[347] This power initially brings the poem to motion, but increasingly separates into distinct language-games. Or, it might be better to say, into a language-game of competing poetic gestures. It is this, for instance, that propels the opening of the second section:

> So spoke of the existence of things,
> An unmanageable pantheon[.] (*NCP* 163)

In the absence of reference to specific things we might be tempted to experience this moment grammatically, as language again revelling in its power to speak 'of'. The absence of any pronoun in these two lines emphasises this further by not tying the speaking to any particular person or group of persons. It might be the poet who, in past poems, 'spoke' of such 'things' and their existence, or it may be the other person quoted in that first section, who speaks of 'that old town', 'those times', and 'the earth'. Or, it might be the 'they' who appear in the following two lines that speak. If that is the case, however, who are the 'they', here? If a 'they' speak, and thus speak in some kind of social plurality, we cannot be sure how to construe the sociality of the speech. From this we turn to

[347] Guetti, *Wittgenstein and the Grammar of Literary Experience*, 6.

[Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (*NCP* 163-164)

The poem has begun to waver back and forth from its title's ambiguity, between the poles of an increasingly articulated opposition. Articles and nouns divide between plurality and singularity. 'The corporations' with their plural 'dreams' behind glass and (plural) 'images' are met by the singularity of 'the pure joy' of 'the mineral fact'; 'It is impenetrable', as impenetrable as 'the world'. Similarly, the corporations are 'glassed', whereas the mineral fact just 'is'. The 'of' in 'the city of corporations' is de-emphasised mid-line, turning the whole phrase into a description where the fact that it is a city of corporations rather than a city of people is marked. In contrast, the 'Of' in 'the pure joy / Of the mineral fact' is given emphasis at the start of the line. 'Of', indeed, comes to mean radically different things as the language-games begin to separate out. One is an 'of' of description, used to indict the city after it is named. The other is the 'of' of being, experienced grammatically in order to assert what in the last chapter I called 'beforeness' as an ontological form.

The poem is starting to have slightly different vocabularies for talking about the socially and historically determined matter and about ontological encounters with things. Moreover, elements of these vocabularies are now receiving very different types of emphasis. The ontological encounters with matter, which produce what I have called a poetics of being, emphasise words like 'Of' not in isolation, but in direct opposition to the lack of emphasis that the word is given in more circumscribed, socially aligned utterances. If the poetics of being emphasises things like the preposition 'of', what I have been calling the Marxist strand of thinking within the poem emphasises plurality, both in speaking positions and in the populations under consideration. We see this in the

third section of 'Of Being Numerous' where we read that, in the context of 'the city', 'We are not coeval / With a locality / But we imagine others are' (*NCP* 164). We encounter this again in the sixth section:

> 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. (*NCP* 165-6)

The repeated pronoun 'We' makes the speaker part of the larger social group, a group that has chosen to interpret Crusoe's fictional return to society as a form of 'rescue'. Though the pronoun is emphasised by its prominence at the heads of stanzas and lines, that emphasis falls on the purposive use to which it is being put. 'We', here, is not experienced grammatically but purposively. It is part of a collectivising gesture, rather than attended to for the experience of the grammar of its collectivisation. This non-grammatical experience of language contrasts with section five of 'Of Being Numerous', which immediately precedes it:

> The great stone
>
> Above the river
>
> In the pylon of the bridge[.] (*NCP* 165)

Three nouns end the three lines, and each indication or location of a noun is given its own line as a semi-autonomous syntactical unit. In this tercet, indeed, there is a kind of grammatical accumulation. Each line read on its own is a fragment, in the manner we have seen for the cathedral in 'Chartres' for example, and so it is emphasised grammatically in its capacity to posit the existence of the things named in the nouns. The nouns at the ends of the line are emphasised by the lineation, and so their grammatical noun-ness seems to stand out as a sense of 'is-ness', and the echo of syntactical forms across the three lines further emphasises a sense of being what I quoted from Guetti as 'utterly, wholly there'.

These gestures are obviously distinct from those in the neighbouring sections of the poem, in which social 'we-ness' is invoked. Most importantly, these two aspects of the poem—Marxist social plurality and Heideggerian ontological being—can be understood as different aspects *because* of their proximity to each other and because of the work that Oppen has undertaken in developing them out of an initially unified grammatical authority. Most importantly, the persistence of two types of verbal gestures, suggesting origins in two types of language-game for talking about the world, provides a sort of mutual legibility that is at once empowering and limiting. The possibility of talking about the social 'we-ness' inherent in 'numerousness' is constrained by the 'they' who talk of the 'existence of things' as 'arid' (*NCP* 163) and who, later in the poem, are the 'shoppers, / Choosers, judges' who also cannot 'begin /

At the beginning' (*NCP* 170). The poem's ability to conjure this sense is, if not made possible, at least substantially aided by the co-presence of an opposed language-game in which that sense of plurality is not present. Similarly, the possibility of indicating the direction in which ontology might lie through particular uses of nouns, repetition, lineation, prepositions and so on, is heightened by the co-presence of a language-game in which such practices are not found, but for which the grammatical sense of ontology is an appropriate counterpoint. This, as much as the presence of the meta-poetry, is what leads us towards 'mastery' of the 'technique' of interpreting Oppen's poetics of being.

Interchapter:

In 'Turning the Screw of Psychoanalysis', Shoshana Felman makes an observation about the sort of 'truth' that can result from contextually motivated forms of reading: the question, she writes, cannot be whether a reading—such as a Freudian reading of *The Turn of the Screw*—'is true or false, correct or incorrect'.[348] 'It is no doubt correct', she writes, but nor is it necessarily more correct than other readings.[349] Indeed, to ask if such a reading is true or false, correct or incorrect, is to miss the most important point: 'what', she asks, 'does such "truth" (or any "truth") leave out? What is it *made to miss?* What does it have as its function to overlook? What, precisely, is its residue, the *remainder* it does not account for?'[350] The scepticism with which Felman frames the concept of 'truth' recalls the similar arguments made by Culler, Saunders, Sedgwick, Felski and others: that all readings are misreadings, that all readings are always partial. This argument, which Felman makes in the context of psychoanalytical interpretation, suggests a way of thinking about the faithful and unfaithful readings of Oppen's poetry conducted in the previous two chapters. For Felman, 'The Freudian reading is no doubt "true," but no truer than the opposed positions which contradict it'.[351] I would say that a faithful Heideggerian reading of Oppen's work as structured like Heidegger's notion of formal indication is 'true', but that so, too, is a Wittgensteinian reading of Oppen's poetics of being as a self-reflexive language-game concerned with its capacity to evoke particular experiences of grammar. Both are true to the extent that they offer a reading of Oppen's poetry that responds to the text and its context, to use Attridge's terms.[352]

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[348] Felman, *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, 117.
[349] Ibid.
[350] Ibid.
[351] Ibid.
[352] Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*.

When we use Heidegger's philosophy to read Oppen's poetry, that poetry appears to manifest two contradictory forces: the desire to find a poetic form capable of registering the actuality, the opacity, and the obscurity of things in the world, and the drive to eradicate the poetic surface, to fall or to keep silent in the face of those things' fatal otherness to thought and to the language in which thought must find form. I argued that we find a Heideggerian form for uniting these opposites in the method of formal indication, which promises to lead the mind towards a phenomenological content it can only indicate. Reading Oppen's work with Wittgenstein's philosophy in hand, the image of Oppen's poetry changes shape. It appears in this light to be less the attempt to formally indicate phenomenological structures than to find grammatical experiences of language capable of acting as analogues to ontological experiences. It appears, moreover, to actively condition this sort of experience by drawing the reader into seeing these grammatical experiences according to particular aspects.

What is telling is that, from the Wittgensteinian perspective, it seems as though Oppen's ontological gestures aren't only anxious about their capacity to both disclose and obscure their objects of attention but are relying on their failure as part of an ontologically powerful poetics in order for their gestures to be at all legible. Their difficulty, in other words, appears from this perspective to not just belong to the oddness of the gesture of pointing to a mountain, or to a lake, but to the difficulty of seeing how the failure of such a pointing might itself indicate a utopian linguistic potential in competition with commitment to social and historical concerns. And so, reading with Heidegger and Wittgenstein, we can understand Oppen both as a searcher for forms of poetic authenticity in tension with poetic language, and as one for whom the struggle for authenticity is privileged over that authenticity of which it is otherwise ostensibly in

search. The complexity of this image is only made available by an interpretive method outside of the horizon of faithfulness seemingly determined by Oppen's philosophical influences.

The unfaithful, Wittgensteinian reading of Oppen's poetry helps us to understand how the committed but vexed, at times antagonistic, relationship that Oppen had with Heidegger's philosophy, and which is a context central to critical approaches to his writing, produced a form of philosophical poetics seemingly at odds with many of Oppen's own claims about it. This is particularly the case with Oppen's meta-poetry. The Wittgensteinian reading suggests that Oppen's claims to transparency and silence do not so much articulate a consistent poetics as provide a framework within which the poetry is legible as a struggle towards an unreached ideal. As such, while the fact of Oppen's divergence from Heidegger is already apparent from the Heideggerian perspective, the Wittgensteinian perspective suggests that this divergence is not solely a product of Oppen's mis-readings of Heidegger or his divergent ontological assumptions. It suggests that Oppen's attempt to negotiate between an image of the poem as a 'test of truth' and an image of the poem as a space in which the meaningfulness of such a test needs to be established and defended, produced a gap between philosophical context and poetic practice.

A way of understanding this gap is suggested by Altieri's introductory discussion of Wallace Stevens as a 'philosophical poet' in *Wallace Stevens and the Demands of Modernity*:

> Even though poets typically are not primarily concerned with producing arguments, they constantly test in imagination the consequences of an intellectual world shaped by the arguments of others. For we look to philosophical poets […] to construct speculative situations that articulate and struggle with the consequences of dominant beliefs. We also look to them to extend the world of the lyric by bringing imaginative vitality and multiple rhythmic densities to traditional modes of discursive thinking.[353]

In Altieri's idea of the philosophical poet, the poet produces a difference between her or his practice and a philosopher's by testing the 'world shaped by the arguments of others'. The word 'testing' takes on a double meaning for us here. It resonates first with Oppen's notion of the poem as a test of truth. The philosophical poem, in Altieri's formulation, tests the world through a test of its own capacity to think and to speak about that world. This test is necessarily performed with one foot in a world not of the philosopher's making, however, for the second meaning of this 'testing' is that it tests not just the world but more particularly the world as understood by others. For Oppen, this is a testing of an idea of the world influenced by Heidegger, and this testing is carried out through his own sense of what it means to sincerely speak about it. Such a testing requires an ironic distance, as we have seen with Oppen's meta-poetry. As his poems attempt to sincerely register things in the world they also become their own objects for interpretation. That interpretation, as we have seen, forms an ongoing part of the poem's thinking; their testing continues to evolve in response to what they have been able to, or have failed to, achieve.

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[353] Altieri, *Wallace Stevens and the Demands of Modernity*, 1-2.

This gap also recalls arguments made by Jarvis in *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* and 'What is Historical Poetics?'. Jarvis argues that poetry not only often exceeds its contextual materials and discourses through active antagonism, but also thinks in ways that are fundamentally its own. The Wittgensteinian reading helps us to see that Oppen similarly 'struggles' with Heidegger's arguments. Instead of taking Heidegger's argument for the disclosive powers of poetic speech as given, Oppen finds rather that the sort of ontological vision Heidegger suggested needs to be wrested from the language, not as disclosure so much as a sincere testimony that is also an act of faith. Rather than making beings properly present in the open, Oppen's poetry indicates that it strives toward a form of presencing currently beyond its reach. As Altieri suggests, this is enriched by Oppen's use of the sorts of emphasis, density, and semantic linkage and ambiguity made possible by poetic form to enact his struggle with ontological insight in ways particular to poetic thinking. This is most apparent in Oppen's use of lineation and word placement to give specific words specific emphases. This, combined with the forms of erasure and isolation noted in the prior two chapters, helps Oppen to wrest analogues to ontological insight out of the language, even against his own suspicion of poetry's disclosive powers. Further, as seen in the prior chapter and as Jarvis and Altieri suggest above, this wresting is also enriched by poetry's ability both to call upon and to disrupt the public forms in which quotidian acts of recognition find their home. That is, from the Wittgensteinian perspective, the self-reflexivity of Oppen's poetic form predicates its own capacity for disclosure on the publicly available grammatical forms within which poetry's difference to ordinary language is legible.

We might hazard the conclusion, then, that the Heideggerian reading struggles to account for the influence of Heidegger on Oppen's poetry. It struggles because it

involves not only structuring and responding to the conditions in which Heidegger's influence is legible, but also a form of poetic thinking-through of that influence that is not entirely reducible to its terms.

There are two things to keep in mind following this summary of the image of Oppen's poetry offered by the faithful and unfaithful readings. First, it is important to emphasise that describing the faithful and unfaithful readings as I have above is not to argue that the faithful reading was not useful, nor that it was incorrect. Borrowing the terms quoted from Felman above, the Heideggerian reading of Oppen's poetry was 'true' insofar as it allowed us to grasp the poetry as a response to its historical moment. The image of Oppen's poetry that the faithful reading suggested was compatible with the contexts within which and in response to which the poetry was produced and within which it framed itself. If it had a failing, it was in the degree to which a Heideggerian reading of a Heideggerian influence struggled to account for Oppen's vexed relationship to Heidegger's philosophy.

Second, it is important to resist the temptation to conclude that the unfaithful reading that Wittgenstein's philosophy has helped to produce is the true manifestation of suspicion. That is, it is tempting to overemphasise the insights of the unfaithful reading and to say—reflecting suspicious hermeneutics' attitude towards its object more generally—that the Heideggerian discourse of, and within, Oppen's poems constitutes a false surface which Wittgensteinian philosophy allowed us to see through, revealing instead the true meaning, the true '*work* of ciphering', that had produced it.[354] To make such an argument would be to allow suspicion to draw us back into unreflective habits,

[354] Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 34.

for it would imply that a Wittgenstein-like linguistic and philosophical apparatus underlay Oppen's poetry and constituted the true grounds of hermeneutic faithfulness. To make such a claim would be to forget that all readings are only ever partial. What Wittgenstein's philosophy allows us to see of Oppen's Heideggerian poetics does not constitute the finally-uncovered truth of his poetry but simply *a* 'truth' also open to contradiction and displacement.

Just as the unfaithful Wittgensteinian reading does not constitute the finally-uncovered truth of Oppen's Heideggerian poems, the fruitful use of Wittgenstein's philosophy to read a Heideggerian poet does not yet prove the value of unfaithful reading. While a Wittgensteinian reading was able to find a grammatical experience of language in Oppen's Heideggerian phenomenological poetics, it is possible that this is simply a matter of the relation between the Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian philosophies. Wittgenstein's was, after all, concerned with interrogating the nature and the logic of language's relation to private experiences. It is at times explicitly aimed at showing how the language of private experience is often indifferent to the reality of that experience, owing its content to a public set of grammatical criteria rather than fidelity to one's experiences when sensing the world or using language. As such, the fruitfulness of reading Oppen unfaithfully in the manner conducted above may lie in the capacity of Wittgenstein's philosophy to worry at the roots of phenomenological philosophy and its problems. For the value of the unfaithful reading to lie in the excess of the poem over contextually-determined interpretive frameworks, we need to show how a Heideggerian reading may fruitfully uncover new material about a Wittgensteinian poet. In the coming two chapters I thus turn the same method of faithful and unfaithful reading upon the Language poet Ron Silliman. I ask how Silliman's

poetry appears when read faithfully through the lens of Wittgenstein's philosophy. I then use Heidegger's philosophy as the basis of an unfaithful reading in order to ask what it is that a Wittgensteinian reading leaves out, or fails to see of Silliman's poetry. What seemingly contradictory yet equally 'true' images of Silliman's poetry might such readings produce?

'Actual Life' and 'the life of the sign' in Silliman and Wittgenstein

> It seems that there are *certain definite* mental processes bound up with the working of language, processes through which alone language can function. I mean the processes of understanding and meaning. The signs of our language seem dead without these mental processes; and it might seem that the only function of the signs is to induce such processes, and that these are the things we ought really to be interested in.
>
> —Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 3.

Forms of 'Life'

In Silliman's 'Ketjak' the ideas of life, of a lifetime, and of living recur repeatedly, often in ways seemingly at odds with each other. This is particularly apparent in the following section:

> [Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (*AOH* 83-4)

There are at least three ideas of 'life' at work in this excerpt. References to sex, to illness, and to forms of phenomenological experience all suggest life as bodily life: the fact of being alive. At the same time, references to 'This life', to condos, water towers,

'a lifetime of fighting', gainful employment, and so on, call upon an idea of life as something that one experiences across time; as one might produce a memoir of a life, or speak of living a lifetime's worth: a life as a sequence of events. These two senses of 'life' which we might summarise as 'being alive' and 'having a life' (or bodily and social life) cohere in a third sense, what we might call a 'way of life': the synchronous, material conditions and the concomitant behaviours of living that help to determine the diachronous life that one has. So, if one is alive, and one lives a life either of 'decisive struggle' or gainful employment, or both, one does so as an instance of a way of life. Here it is a way of life that involves 'Water towers with happy faces', 'chemical irritants', 'Allied Gardens', the 'slight planes' of 'Iowa clay', helicopters that hover 'over backyards', and listening to records 'repeatedly'. The different senses of 'life' are intertwined in the poem but, centrally for Silliman, they are also often at odds with each other. Being alive does not seem quite compatible with the sort of life that people have as a consequence of their way of life.

These ideas of life are at odds in a way that a Marxist reader would find sympathetic. Marx uses gothic images and concepts throughout *Capital Volume 1*, for example, in order to emphasise the argument that the profit the capitalist enjoys is a result not just of bodily expenditure by the worker in the form of value-producing labour, but also bodily harm.[355] This is evident particularly in those sections dealing with the working day and the intensification and extension of labour time. In the section on 'The Working Day', Marx quotes from 'Dr. J. T. Arledge, senior physician in the North Staffordshire Infirmary' who writes, of the 'potters as a class': they 'are, as a rule, stunted in growth, ill-shaped, and frequently ill-formed in the chest; they become

[355] Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 134.

prematurely old, and are certainly short-lived'.[356] As workers turn their lives into commodities through labour time, the unregulated working day has negative effects on their bodily life. Indeed, the link runs deeper, for Marx finds that unregulated labour is not only a harmful by-product of the form of production, but that the consumption of human bodily life is the core of the commodity and of capitalist production. The capitalist consumer feeds upon the bodies and the bodily life of the workers, whose very viscera (nerves, fibre, sinews, etc.,) are consumed in the process of production. The capitalist is figured as vampire and cannibal, while the worker's bodily labour and suffering are congealed into the commodity as the *Gallerte* [the gelatinous congelation of animal matter] of abstracted human labour.[357] As Keston Sutherland has observed, it is precisely this antagonism (amongst other things) that the fetish character of the commodity hides from view.[358] The commodity form hides its origins in the 'living hands, brains, muscles and nerves of the wage labourer' which, Sutherland notes, are for Marx 'mere "animal substances," *ingredients* at the feast of the capitalist'.[359]

In this way, the bodily life of workers is at odds with their way of life under capitalism, especially the means of production in which it is involved. The above section of 'Ketjak' is indirect, as most of Silliman's new-sentence poetry tends to be, but the keywords that Silliman sprinkles throughout are not covert in their implications. References to 'exchange value', to revolutionary struggle, to 'need in the abstract' and even to those 'chemical irritants' used as a means of crowd control ('CS' gas), all suggest a Marxist antagonism between bodily and social life. The opposition of these

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[356] Ibid., 235.
[357] See Keston Sutherland, 'Marx in Jargon', *World Picture* 1 (2008).
[358] Ibid.
[359] Ibid., 8.

ideas of life inheres even in those moments in which the terms seem to re-cohere, such as 'They live in condos'. 'Life' here is the verb 'live', not simply something that someone has, but a thing that one does. Here the idea of having *a* life is inseparable from being alive, such that one's material economic conditions produce the shape in which one lives a life. The same is true in the recognition that revolution means 'a lifetime of fighting and transformation'. The way of life, we might say, determines this life which I am. In these moments the antagonism between bodily life and one's life under capitalism is not elided so much as alloyed in an image of late-capitalist modernity. As such, while the term 'life' and its cognates recur throughout the passage, for Silliman any easy identity between their senses is complicated by their antagonism under capital.

The antagonism between bodily life and one's way of life is a concern specific to particular moments in Silliman's poems, but it is a manifestation of a larger interest in what Silliman calls 'actual life'. This will be my focus throughout this chapter. Most crucially, this concern with 'actual life' is in tension with poetic language. 'Ketjak' continues to be an example. There is a tension at work in the poem between language's capacity to register the antagonism of 'having a life' to 'being alive' in Silliman's historical moment, and the forms of ambiguity, polysemy and pleasure produced by or being taken in the words themselves. How, we might ask, are we to relate a potential reference to 'Necrotizing laryngotracheobronchitis' to Silliman's clear relish in presenting these words? How do we relate it, indeed, as well as the other apparent recognitions of human life and living in the passage quoted above, to the forms of rhyme and alliteration throughout ('consequent of a chemical', 'sick, strict, slick', 'thousand threads', 'air in its fair', and so on)? How, in other words, do we understand

the relation between an attempt to show something of the world as it is revealed by a word's many senses and a fascination with the medium in which those senses are held?

In works such as *The Blue and Brown Books*, *Philosophical Grammar*, and *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein muses upon another circumstance in which we might be inclined to use the idea 'life'. This takes place in our experience of signs, both linguistic and pictorial, when the forms of attention which we turn upon them might incline us to say that they are either alive or dead. When we experience signs as meaningful, in other words, we sometimes mistake that experience for a kind of life animating the sign, and deplore its absence as a kind of death. 'Frege ridiculed the formalist conception of mathematics', Wittgenstein writes,

> by saying that the formalists confused the unimportant thing, the sign, with the important, the meaning. Surely, one wishes to say, mathematics does not treat of dashes on a bit of paper. Frege's idea could be expressed thus: the propositions of mathematics, if they were just complexes of dashes, would be dead and utterly uninteresting, whereas they obviously have a kind of life. And the same, of course, could be said of any proposition: Without a sense, or without a thought, a proposition would be an utterly dead and trivial thing. And further it seems clear that no adding of inorganic signs can make the proposition live. And the conclusion which one draws from this is that what must be added to the dead signs in order to make a live proposition is something immaterial, with properties different from all mere signs.[360]

[360] Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 4-5.

The image is of an essentialist dualism: we sometimes want to say that the meaning of the sign is separate from its material body, as the sort of life that a body has is perceived as different from the body itself. This image encourages us to treat the sign as somehow alive, and alive by virtue of a meaning that animates it. Importantly for Wittgenstein, whether illusory or not, this seeming to have life is not solely metaphorical but also phenomenologically real. Signs can *seem* alive to us, and his question is, in brief, 'why is this so?' Much of the coming chapter is dedicated to understanding how, in Silliman's poetry, forms of bodily and social life relate to and become the sort of life that Wittgenstein suggests we might experience in signs. By way of *precis*, however, we might say that from a Wittgensteinian perspective, language's primacy over our public, social lives is so intermeshed with our being alive that to call upon the language of our lived experiences is to recall both forms of life into the experience of the sign. Above I have used the term 'way of life' to speak of the point at which bodily and social life intersect, but the standard translation of Wittgenstein's phrase for this relation is 'form of life'; in German: *Lebensform.* The term implies both senses of 'life' as bodily and social; it is the overall structure of those activities that constitute a living person's going about their daily life.

In the coming chapter I argue that, from the perspective of a Wittgensteinian faithful reading, Silliman's poetry is concerned with experiencing the relations between both bodily and social life—including antagonisms like that noted above—and the life of the sign and the sorts of fascination that it can exert. I address this in line with current critical understanding by performing what I have called a faithful reading of Silliman's Wittgensteinian poetics and showing the importance of Wittgenstein's philosophy to Silliman's formulation of politically oppositional forms. In the first section of the

chapter I present a conceptual and critical background to Silliman's Wittgensteinian poetry. In the second section I extend this background into a specific conceptualisation of Silliman's new-sentence. In the third section I show how a Wittgensteinian understanding of the relationship between social and linguistic forms—between language and 'actual life'—places intense political weight on what is sayable in any given situation. In the fourth section I show how this question of what is sayable can offer a new way of thinking about what is taking place in Silliman's poems. In the final sections of this chapter I then use Wittgenstein's notion of 'the life of the sign' to offer new aspects to our understanding of some of Silliman's major poems.

Language Poetry and Actual Life

In the first volume of *The Grand Piano*, poet Ted Pearson describes the historical moment in which Language poetry emerged:

> the period in question began at the end of the postwar 'economic miracle' and at the onset of a long and devastating recession, deepened by the astronomic debt and social misery that resulted from the pursuit of imperial ambition, if not yet, as is now clear, overtly global hegemony—a pursuit that barely paused to reload when Saigon 'fell.' Thus […] in the wake of Vietnam, and the many revelations of governmental villainy, and the brutal effects of a faltering economy—'The culture we lived in was fragmented, ugly, and incoherent…. There was no money, and few agreeable jobs.'[361]

[361] Armantrout et al., *The Grand Piano*, v.2, 21-22.

The description recalls the sense of the crisis that also contextualised Oppen's poetry. Like the elder Oppen, and converging as a literary movement only a few of years after the 1968 publication of *Of Being Numerous*, the Language writers found a desperate contemporary culture faltering upon a 'villainous' recent history—particularly the violence of Vietnam—and sudden economic crises.[362] Also, like Oppen, the Language poets were troubled by the control that this culture wielded over the means of representation. Another of the Language writers, Lyn Hejinian, adds that 'While the 60s may have foreseen the ending of the Cold War, they also mark the point from which global capitalism as we know it began its momentous surge'.[363] She recalls that while the 'left political counterculture was bent on bringing alternative practices into the American socio-political experience' it was met by the upward surge of corporate America, which 'soon discovered the means to coopt, commercialize, and mainstream the signifiers and signifying systems of the counterculture'.[364] 'Indeed, before long', she writes, 'representation itself was seized by corporate powers, to become a province over which it continues to exercise subtle but maximal control'.[365]

Silliman was a core member of the Language group, and a key flag-waver for its claims to immediate cultural urgency. Silliman was also a product of the American left—though his is a leftism of the more desperate and divided 1960s rather than the pre-war, occasionally utopian activism with which Oppen had engaged.[366] Silliman's poetic response to his historical moment emerges within that left political

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[362] See Jerome J. McGann, 'Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes', *Critical Inquiry* 13, no. 3 (1987): 625. for more on the cultural shifts taking place in relation to 'the post-1973 poetry'.
[363] Armantrout et al., *The Grand Piano*, v.7, 56.
[364] Ibid.
[365] Ibid.
[366] For more on both see Armantrout et al., *The Grand Piano*. See also Ron Silliman, *Under* Albany (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2004), Hoffman, 'A Poetry of Action', and Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*.

counterculture.[367] He was, amongst other things, a conscientious objector to the war in Vietnam and spent nearly 6 years in different stages of appeal to the draft (between 1965 and 1971).[368] Silliman became even more deeply involved in political work when he was eventually granted I-O status. Not only did he work for prisoners' rights as part of his alternative to war service, but he also spent his weekends campaigning for local political causes. In a letter to Charles Bernstein from the 10th of May, 1975, he writes: [Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (UCSD 519, 58, 10).

Although Silliman and Oppen were both personally invested in a leftist opposition to American capitalism, the war in Vietnam, and the complicity of the social whole in governmental atrocities, their poetic responses turned in radically different directions. In a notebook from 1975 Silliman writes that [Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (UCSD 75, 19, 1). Such a situation, real or imagined, is directly opposed to the world-language relation that founded Oppen's poetics of being. As we saw in the previous chapters, the gap between world and language posed problems for Oppen, but also offered cures for ideological entanglements and historical inertia. And so, if the sense of historical crisis was common, the two poets' philosophical poetics were markedly different.

We might turn, in this light, to a small section from Oppen's book-length poem, *Tjanting*:

[367] See Armantrout et al., *The Grand Piano*, and Silliman, *Under* Albany, for more information.
[368] Armantrout et al., *The Grand Piano*, v.2, 51.

> Against the flesh the feel of new sox, new shorts. Light remains only in one corner of the yard. The blight in these trees is cultural. & tomorrow there will be a new job in a windowless basement room. You find your friends phoning less often. All this seems a bit much for just an ingrown eyelash. From here you can hear cannons. Leaves are beginning to clog the gutters. Either we are at the edge or the middle. Amid buses & bustle, the fog burning off diffusing light, the withdrawn glances of people barely awake yet on their way to the day's labor. Thus paths crossed still another time. These eight trees grew sullenly in the shadow of the law school. His beard had the natural attribute of appearing trimmd. So she read her works quickly & 'not without cause' he murderd his wife. This was this is. (*T* 51)

Where Oppen had sought to maintain an ethical and phenomenologically restrained poetic voice with forms of erasure and silence, Silliman, here and elsewhere, privileges the proliferation of language in paratactic sentence-units. On the page, the effect is at times overwhelming, for the extended units of prose-poetry fill the space with a mass of words. Within that mass, however, each sentence suggests a moment of attention. In each sentence, that is, we might feel drawn towards some facet of lived experience; there are, for instance, moments of noticing that 'Leaves are beginning to clog the gutters', of musing that 'Either we are at the edge or the middle', of the sensation, experienced, recalled, or simply named, of 'the feel of new sox'. Behind all is the presence of a poet whose interferences with sentence and spelling ('trimmd', 'murderd', etc.) draws us constantly back into awareness that this is language. Language, in other words, is the material through which all of these potential moments must be sought. The reader is thus caught in a cycle, back and forth between the density of language

presented on the page and the capacity, and perhaps too the desire, to push through for a phenomenological content constantly being undercut by parataxis.

In his introduction to the 1981 first edition of *Tjanting*, Silliman's fellow Language poet, Barrett Watten, writes:

> Errors disappear; idiosyncrasies arrive. Idiosyncrasies are the mediating terms of the text. Peripheral information, life in the suburbs further out, the deformations of habit leave 'ghosts of evidence' in the perception of mass. In this area of language incompletion can be eliminated by simply being named. Trivia and language-about-itself work to coopt false boundaries of the self; abstraction can be stated in such a way that it assumes the neutrality of a fact. In the impulse and the thing being looked at are the result. 'We awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things.' The deconstructive activity of the text finds the destroyed centers of other lives. Idiosyncrasy is the central term of an assertion of faith in the part of writing to construct.[369]

The argument of this part of Watten's introduction is that the deconstructive methods of Silliman's form of Language writing do not just fall into a meaningless mass of language, an impenetrable density, but generate new forms of understanding. 'Errors' disappear in favour of 'idiosyncrasy' because error implies a form of authorial control that idiosyncrasy does not. Rather, idiosyncrasy situates poetic production as reflection, or perhaps recognition, of that 'mass' no longer separated from 'the self' by 'false boundaries'. It is for this reason that some have picked out as critically significant a line

[369] Ron Silliman, *Tjanting* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 1981), 7

that occurs repeatedly in Silliman's 'Ketjak': 'Attention is all'.[370] Attention, privileged over a produced subjective unity, results in a form of subjective positionality only as the result of the interpenetration of 'the impulse and the thing being looked at'. This allows Watten to bring a quote by Jacques Maritain into his analysis, one that appears also on the fly-leaf of Oppen's *The Materials* from 1962: 'We awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things'.[371] The phrase had been useful to Oppen in the 1960s as a catchphrase for the centrality of a poet's being amongst things to his poetics of being. In Watten's introduction it suggests that the mutual dependency of the phenomenological subject and the phenomenological object constitutes poetic attention—the resultant manifestation of the impulse to 'look'. In context, the quotation downplays the role of language in that mutual dependency, a particularly strange implication in relation to a poet like Silliman who, as we saw above, asserts a post-structuralist cultural situation where language is 'already the model of the world'. What does it mean to say, in this context, that 'we awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things'? How, in other words, do we relate a phenomenological being-in-the-world to a post-structuralist being as a product of language?

Clarification comes in the 2002 introduction to the second edition of *Tjanting*. Here Watten re-states his earlier claims for 'the generative force of negation' in the production of thought. There is an important difference in the second version, however: '"We awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things" [Wittgenstein].'[372] The

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[370] The phrase appears in Ron Silliman, *The Age of Huts (Compleat)* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2007), 13, and is picked out for attention by Andrew Epstein, '"There Is No Content Here, Only Dailines": Poetry as Critique of Everyday Life in Ron Silliman's Ketjak', *Contemporary Literature* 51, no. 4 (2010): 738.
[371] Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, 92.
[372] Ron Silliman, *Tjanting* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2002), 2.

quote from Maritain has been misattributed to Wittgenstein. The phenomenological has been relabelled as linguistic self-investigation and grammatical deconstruction. Given the context, the misattribution could be a deliberate irony on Watten's part. If errors disappear in Silliman's writing perhaps misattribution disappears in Watten's, becoming simply the product of a way of 'looking' that is less concerned with internal self-consistency than with what language can construct. To misattribute, therefore, would be simply to configure the world anew. We might then understand this section of Watten's preface to *Tjanting* in a different way. Rather than asserting a phenomenological image consonant with Oppen's pre-discursive intuition, we might understand it as primarily an awakening to the manner in which language makes possible the subject-object relation. To say that one awakes to things in a world in which the boundaries of the self are false, and recognised as false because of language's ability to speak about itself, re-textualises both what awakes, and what it awakes to. Alternatively, as Wittgenstein puts it in §5.6 of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world'.

A good deal of work has already shown that Wittgenstein influenced the core Language writers and their circle in the 1970s and '80s.[373] The elaboration of this influence has been a particular project of Perloff's, who both outlines a broad Wittgensteinian poetics and also shows the philosopher's direct influence on the Language writers. She points out, for instance, that

[373] For more detail, see Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, Bernstein, 'Wittgensteiniana', Marjorie Perloff, 'The Portrait of the Language Poet as Autobiographer: The Case of Ron Silliman', *Quarry West* 34 (1998).

> Bernstein had studied Wittgenstein with Stanley Cavell at Harvard, and his notion that 'there are no thoughts except through language,' is a version of Wittgenstein's '*The limits of language* mean the limits of my world' […], that 'Language is not *contiguous* to anything else['.][374]

Bernstein himself gathers a number of writers, including Silliman, under the aegis of a Wittgensteinian poetics in his article 'Wittgensteiniana'.[375] We know also, from material held at the University of California, San Diego, that Silliman was engaging with Wittgenstein at least as early as 1973. For example, a short poem from this year titled 'The Image' reads:

> [Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (UCSD 75, 17, 2)

In a typically self-observing moment, Silliman's speaker finds Wittgenstein and Quine somehow already present in the page itself in the moment of composition. It is as if the implications of a social, exterior, and determining linguistic medium force the composing mind back upon itself immediately as it attempts to reach out through utterance or inscription.

Silliman first reads the early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. He writes in another notebook (the 'aRb notebook') that [Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (UCSD 75, 19, 1). The distinction between simples and primitives was made in the *Tractatus*, and was later rejected. By the mid-1970s at the

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[374] Marjorie Perloff, 'Avant-Garde Tradition and Individual Talent: The Case of Language Poetry', *Revue Française D'études Américaines* 103 (2005): 126.
[375] Bernstein, 'Wittgensteiniana'.

latest Silliman had moved on to the later Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*.[376] In a letter to Bernstein in 1975, for instance, he writes that he is [Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (UCSD 519, 58, 10). Even more significantly, 'The Chinese Notebook', written also in the mid-1970s, structures itself like Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, and when Silliman uses Wittgenstein in his essays 'The New Sentence' and 'Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World' he calls upon the *Investigations*.[377] If we can trace the influence back at least to 1973, with the likelihood that it preceded even this, we can also see Wittgenstein's philosophy influencing much later works. In a manifesto for Language poetry, written by Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steven Benson, Bob Perelman, and Barrett Watten in 1988, we read that 'It would be as much philosophical nonsense […] to say that language precedes the world as it would be to say (as Wittgenstein so thoroughly deconstructed) that the world precedes language'.[378] Even more recently, in Silliman's paratactic autobiography, *Under* Albany, from 2004, there appear the sentences: 'If a lion could speak, it would talk very slowly. Civilization constructed of complex nouns for which no exact equivalent in nature can be found'.[379] The sentence references Wittgenstein's statement that 'If a lion could speak we would not understand him' and comes at the head of a short section on the relation of language to the self, and to things like the economy. The section also muses on the name 'Language poetry' for such a diverse group of writers as those who have fallen under that label.[380] If this sentence

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[376] Nonetheless, Silliman seems to have remained struck by the imagery of the earlier text, and the intense declarative language that constituted it. In poems from *The Age of Huts* and *The Alphabet* Silliman regularly plays with Wittgenstein's opening line from the Tractatus that 'The world is all that is the case', and in 1976 Silliman picked up the ladder image from that book again, writing 'Not as tho hung over / But as stunned / I sit in my room all morning / And stare at the ladder, / Every rung' (UCSD 75, 18, 1).
[377] Perloff, 'The Portrait of the Language Poet as Autobiographer', Silliman, *The New Sentence*.
[378] Ron Silliman et al., 'Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto', *Social Text*, no. 19/20 (1988): 266.
[379] Silliman, *Under* Albany, 79.
[380] Ibid.

imitates Wittgenstein's for comic effect, it also recalls Wittgenstein's argument. The difference in forms of life that would obstruct communication with a lion also problematises the easy identification of poets from different places with different ways of life. By this point, it seems that Wittgenstein is so familiar to Silliman that his arguments are readily at hand.

Wittgenstein's philosophy also colours a moment in which Silliman establishes the centrality of the concept of 'life' with which this chapter opened, now under the term 'actual life':

> Actual life—or maybe as my old comrades in the anti-Stalinist left would have put it, 'actually existing life'—is, after all, what it's all about. The mind/body problem doesn't exist without breath, without dance, sex, digestion, anxiety, colonoscopies, smelling flowers, blinking, drinking OJ straight from the container, scrunching your nose, stumbling over small objects, you name it. My interest in what others call Language poetry has always been because of the access this writing gives me, as poet & reader, to all the world that is the case. That is my focus of attention.[381]

Language poetry is of interest because of the access it offers to 'actual life'. Actual life, as Silliman describes it, emphasises bodily life—blinking, drinking, sex, digestion, colonoscopies, stumbling, etc.,—but it does this by making them emphatic components of a way of life; one that includes dancing, smelling flowers, drinking orange juice, and the like. Silliman's reference to 'the anti-Stalinist left' in this context not only

[381] Armantrout et al., *The Grand Piano*, v.6, 20.

emphasises the sort of activities involved in his own way of life, but also the kind of actuality bound up in the term 'actual', and it recalls the mutual implication of bodily and social life interrogated in 'Ketjak'. Silliman's greater gesture is the refutation of those who would take Language poetry as abstract, as disembodied and disinterested in people's bodily and social lives. Moreover, Silliman's claim for Language poetry's interest in and access to 'actual life' includes a paraphrase of Wittgenstein. '[A]ll the world that is the case' echoes Wittgenstein's claim in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that 'The world is all that is the case'.[382] Where in the *Tractatus* 'all that is the case' has a vaguely inhuman feel to it—a product of Wittgenstein's interrogation of the vocabularies of object-focused logic—Silliman redeploys it with a far more human energy. His is, emphatically, a world where what 'is the case' is human-centric.

If Silliman's Language writing is concerned with access to 'all the world that is the case' as it thus composes 'actual life', it is also intensely critical of how such a concern might manifest itself in both poetry and prose. Silliman thus interrogates the semantics and social relations underpinning the sort of access to 'actual life' that writing might offer. He writes in the preface to *In The American Tree*, for instance, that Language poetry's

> complex call for a projective verse that could, in the same moment, 'proclaim an abhorrence of "speech"'—a break within a tradition in the name of its own higher values—proved only one axis of the shift within writing that became manifest with the publication of *This*. The other, specifically Watten's

[382] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. B. F. McGuinness D. F. Pears (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2001), §1.

> contribution, lay in the title, a pronoun of presence which foregrounds the referential dimension of language.[383]

Silliman abhors the sort of 'speech' upon which prior claims to poetic access to the world had been predicated. The specific object of attack for Silliman, as with other Language writers, is the lyric poem and the poetics of self-expression taught in writing courses.[384] At the same time, and in almost the same moment, Silliman declares a shared fascination for the capacity of language, independent of a speaker, to refer. Hence, as he points out, Watten's choice of the word 'this' as the name for a Language-poetry magazine is apropos. In the same preface, Silliman writes that in the Language poets' hope that their work 'might offer readers the same opacity, density, otherness, challenge and relevance persons find in the "real" world' the group turned towards 'the invocation of the specific medium, language itself'.[385] To bring the two together, he writes, involves not an opposition to speech or reference as such but to 'the implicit "naturalness" of each, the simple, seemingly obvious concept that words should derive from speech and refer to things'.[386] The turn toward the real is also a turn towards language, but in rejection of preceding norms for experiencing that relation.

Silliman's most famous interrogations of this relationship come in the essays collected in *The New Sentence*. In 'Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World', Silliman discusses the manner in which economics has influenced modes of language use, particularly the idea and the act of representation. The process through

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[383] Ron Silliman, *In the American Tree* (Orono: University of Maine at Orono, 1986), xv-xvi.
[384] See, for instance, Armantrout et al., *The Grand Piano*, v.1, 60-61, and Silliman et al., 'Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry'.
[385] Silliman, *In the American Tree*, xvi.
[386] Ibid.

which words '*become* commodities', he writes, leads to language being taken as a conduit to reality wherein its material features are erased in favour of representative, referential realism.[387] Language is simultaneously effaced and fetishised (implicitly in a Marxist sense of the word, which I will look at in more detail later in this chapter). After this, 'Freed from recognition of the signifier and buffered against any response from an increasingly passive consumer', Silliman writes, 'the supermarket novelist's language has become fully subservient to a process that would lie outside of syntax: plot'.[388] The problem with this, as Silliman understands it, is that this results in language reifying the state of the world that it represents. Fictional realism, he writes, as not just a literary genre but an ideology of language, creates 'A world whose inevitability invites acquiescence; capitalism passes on its preferred reality through language itself to individual speakers'.[389] This aspect of Silliman's Marxism echoes a comment made by Adorno that 'The realistic principle in poetry duplicates the unfreedom of human beings, their subjection to machinery and its latent law, the commodity form'.[390] In the collection's eponymous essay, Silliman extends this analysis of the representational logic by which language is deployed in the current historical moment to a more detailed consideration of prose form. In prose fiction, he asserts, the external and material features of language and form are minimised in favour of 'the syllogistic leap, or integration above the level of the sentence, to create a fully referential tale'.[391] In reflection upon this, Silliman states first that '*The sentence is the horizon,* the border

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[387] Silliman, *The New Sentence*, 8. [Silliman's italics]
[388] Ibid., 14.
[389] Ibid., 8.
[390] Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature, Volume 2* (New York, Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1992), 127. George Hartley writes on the connection between 'the political claims of the Language poets, especially Silliman' and Adorno's writings in George Hartley, 'Realism and Reification: The Poetics and Politics of Three Language Poets', *Boundary 2* 16, no. 2/3 (1989): 317.
[391] Silliman, *The New Sentence*, 79. See also William Watkin, 'The Materialization of Prose: Poiesis Versus Dianoia in the Work of Godzich & Kittay, Shklovsky, Silliman and Agamben', *Paragraph* 31, no. 3 (2008): 355.

between two fundamentally distinct types of integration', and then offers parataxis, a model for which he finds in2 Stein's sentences, as an alternative to the logic of hypotaxis.[392] This is the form that Silliman identifies in the poetry of his local San Francisco Bay Area as 'the new sentence'. In such a use of sentences, he writes, the 'Sentence structure is altered for torque, or increased polysemy/ ambiguity'; 'Syllogistic movement is: (a) limited; (b) controlled'; and 'The limiting of syllogistic movement keeps the reader's attention at or very close to the level of language, that is, most often at the level of the sentence or below'.[393]

If Silliman's Language writing is concerned with access to 'actual life' and 'all the world that is the case', it thus also seeks a formal oppositionality that might extend political activism into the aesthetic domain. That is, poetry might be in a position to direct the chain of cause and effect backwards, through language, upon actual life and 'all that is the case'. In *The Grand Piano*, Lyn Hejinian sums up the overall Language-writing ethos:

> We wanted to believe that our critiques of syntax (linguistic, in the case of the Language writers, musical in the case of Rova) were tantamount to critiques of social structures, and that the deconstruction and reinvention of syntax would result in new (and better) social semantics. Bruce thought that art could be transformative in just the way direct political action (protest marches, and so on) can be, and he insisted that art should transform its audience.[394]

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[392] Silliman, *The New Sentence*, 87. [Silliman's italics]
[393] Ibid., 91.
[394] Armantrout et al., *The Grand Piano*, v.7, 74.

There is a glimpse of the movement's strained idealism in Hejinian's retrospective phrase 'We wanted to believe'. The phrase brackets some ambiguity around the sort of oppositionality that was hoped for and suggests a degree of failure. Another Language poet, Bob Perelman, is just as unflinching in his later evaluations, critiquing the failure of Language poetry forms not only to change social structures, but to resist co-option into mainstream capitalist aesthetics.[395] Nonetheless, at the time in which Silliman was writing his most intensely Wittgensteinian poems, such oppositionality was a pressing concern, the rhetorical and theoretical core of many essays. This oppositionality structured the way Silliman formed a poetics capable of interrogating (or, in Hejinian's word, 'critiquing') the relationship between language and actual life.

Relatively little work has been done on Silliman's poetry alone. Those studies that have addressed Silliman as part of Language writing more generally have tended to focus on the claims to socio-political oppositionality. This is particularly true of the studies that came out of the 1980s and '90s. In 1987, for instance, Jerome McGann distinguished Language writing as one strand of oppositional poetics—opposed to a poetics of 'accommodation'—where

> a conscious attempt has been made to marry the work of the fifties' New American Poetry with the post-structural work of the late sixties and seventies. As Frost, Yeats, Auden, and Stevens are the 'precursors' of the poets of accommodation, Pound, Stein, and especially Zukofsky stand behind the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers. Oppositional politics are a paramount concern,

[395] Bob Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 62.

> and the work stands in the sharpest relief, stylistically, to the poetry of accommodation.[396]

Within this larger group, attention to Silliman in particular has reinforced this preoccupation. 'As a writer', McGann argues, Silliman's 'struggle against these exploitive social formations appears as a critique of the modes of language which produce and reproduce the "reality" of a capitalist world and history'.[397] The same is true of an early article by George Hartley, who notes 'Silliman's equation of realism and reification' and how Silliman makes this equation the basis of the idea that 'poetry, as a language practice, plays a role in ideological production and is an indicator of the social assumptions about language'.[398] Peter Middleton further notes the Language writing claims that 'A poetics can be based on the possibility of making us aware of the pretence of natural order that ideology creates, by interrupting its smooth transitions and confidently beckoning references. Syntax can be halted, words slowed, broken and exploded'.[399] Such concerns were Language poetry's first attraction for criticism, such that Keith Tuma writes dismissively, in an essay from 1989, that Silliman 'aligns the work of these poets with a radical political critique, and it is this fact that seems to be making his work of particular interest to many academic literary critics'.[400]

These, and similar early readings of Language writing as anti-realist and otherwise oppositional, further tended to produce an image of the movement as being

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[396] McGann, 'Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes', 626.
[397] Ibid., 640.
[398] Hartley, 'Realism and Reification', 320.
[399] Peter Middleton, 'Language Poetry and Linguistic Activism', *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 250.
[400] Keith Tuma, 'Contemporary American Poetry and the Pseudo Avant-Garde', *Chicago Review* 36, no. 3/4 (1989): 44. For a further summary of early critical reception of Language writing, see David Arnold, *Poetry and Language Writing: Objective and Surreal* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007).

uninterested in the actualities of the real world and the ways of life it contains.[401] In a more recent article, Andrew Epstein has recalled how 'Detractors of Silliman's brand of writing have long characterized the work, for the most part wrongly, as a kind of antiliterary word salad—nonreferential, self-enclosed, overly theoretical and formalist, deliberately obscure and elitist, cut off from or disdainful of the "real," and so on'.[402] Against such an understanding of Language writing, Epstein proposes that Silliman's poetry is in fact interested in 'the real', and that his work 'not only brims with sharply sketched images of the daily but also mounts a compelling self-reflexive inquiry into the importance of form, and formal innovation, in any attempt to render everyday life legible'.[403] Epstein's article reflects a growing critical desire to bring Language writing and the poetry of Silliman—as a chief theorist of its oppositionality—back into contact with the 'real' and with that 'everyday life' from which its 'anti-realist' poetics had seemed previously to separate it.[404] Nasser Hussain takes this investigation of the text further, writing that with 'Ketjak' in particular, 'Silliman proposes that the fragmented, disjunctive world-view produced by such consumer-friendly snippets of poetry is actually subject to a much larger unity, one that takes into account the co-extensivity of language with the world that it names'.[405]

Perhaps as a legacy of the early critical situation outlined above, however, criticism which deals with Wittgenstein's influence on Silliman's poetry has tended to focus more on Language poetry's concern for destabilising language as a

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[401] See, for instance, Marjorie Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1985).
[402] Epstein, 'There Is No Content Here, Only Dailines', 741.
[403] Ibid., 739.
[404] On this, see also Lee Bartlett, 'What Is "Language Poetry"?', *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 4 (1986).
[405] Nasser S. Hussain, 'Performing *Ketjak*: The Theatre of the Observed', *Postmodern Culture* 20, no. 1 (2009). [No page number given]

representational medium than on its concern for actual life and the 'real' world to which it is tied. This is true even for a critic like Perloff, who has spearheaded the development of a Wittgensteinian poetics and its application for poets like Silliman. Perloff recognises Silliman's concern with the everyday, and indeed, makes 'dailyness' a central aspect of her Wittgensteinian poetics. Her readings of 'The Chinese Notebook' and 'Sunset Debris' in *Wittgenstein's Ladder* emphasise the way language writing interferes in the language of daily life. In the Wittgensteinian understanding language takes its grammars from everyday use. From this, Perloff argues that Silliman's poetry is concerned with transgressing and testing the limits of meaningfulness and sense within those grammars. Thus 'syntactic indeterminacy', she writes, 'plays with the reader's expectations and forces him/her into submission'.[406] 'Sunset Debris' in particular, she writes,

> takes ordinary language and everyday events—eating, working, talking, making love—and, by means of the seemingly simple rhetorical device of turning statement into question, creates a verbal vortex that becomes increasingly explosive as the reader becomes increasingly disoriented.[407]

Perloff doesn't further develop this reading of Silliman in *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, except to add that the 'vortex' does violence both to the scene—'There are, it seems, no more romantic sunsets, only "sunset debris"'—and to the poet-reader relationship.[408] In other words, Silliman disrupts preceding practices in order to force readers into an awareness of the syntactical systems to which they are already, perhaps unknowingly, subject. It is

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[406] Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, 204.
[407] Ibid., 205.
[408] Ibid.

in this argument that Perloff deploys the three main tenets of the broader Wittgensteinian poetics that were described in the introduction to this thesis. These were a concern for forms of identity between poetic and theoretical practice, a concentration on quotidian content (what Perloff calls 'Dailyness'), and relentless self-interrogation. In Perloff's reading, Silliman's interrogation of the limits of sense brings his poetics into consonance with Wittgensteinian theory in the manner of the double-investigation, and, as with Wittgenstein, the material to be interrogated is the poetry's own language, drawn from every-day use. It is this theoretical-poetic interrogation of the sense of one's own language that initiates the 'vortex' Perloff describes.

Perloff's readings leave two further questions to be addressed, however. Christopher Nealon identifies the first in his 2011 book *The Matter of Capital*: *Poetry and Crisis in the American Century*. Nealon notes that critics like Perloff were 'at the forefront of the expansion of the poetic canon to include more experimental writing in the 1980s', and that Perloff 'made it possible to see that collage forms […] were part of a legitimate poetic tradition'.[409] Nonetheless, he writes, she does not address the degree to which Language writing's formal experiments, including Silliman's were brought about by a need to respond to the specific historical moment.[410] As a result, Nealon argues for the need to return the understanding of Language poetry to a more immediate connection with its historically specific, politically motivated oppositionality. What is at issue is a particular historical moment in which poetic 'matter' forms part of a larger response to capital. He writes that when Silliman 'describes [Jack] Spicer admiringly as "flooding the text with a surfeit of incommensurable meanings"' he is also offering a

[409] Nealon, *The Matter of Capital*, 4-5.
[410] Ibid.

phrase that 'is particularly illuminating as a self-description of Language writing practice, not least the working of the "new sentence"'.[411] Such a flood, he argues, offered Silliman 'a formal means' by which to 'meet the encroachments of mass culture and its attendant forms of political control'.[412]

In identifying Language writing with the practice of 'flooding the text with incommensurable meanings', Nealon re-joins Language writing as an aesthetic practice to politically engaged relations with a specific cultural moment. This echoes a gesture made by Silliman's fellow poet Bob Perelman. Perelmen sought for a long time to align these aspects of Silliman's work, writing that the seeming 'opposition [of aesthetics and politics] is compactly expressed in *Tjanting*: "This is how we came to resume writing, that we might free ourselves of literature."'[413] Of this Perelman writes that

> 'Literature' here is the hierarchical, bureaucratic sum of school, anthologies, curricula—what I am calling literary history; 'writing' (for which I am reading 'language writing') is both practice and utopia. But I find these two arenas impossible to disentangle: the literary arena, which finally means the social arena, surrounds and constitutes each act of writing.[414]

Language writing's aesthetic practice cannot be disentangled from its historical moment because the literary and social arena in which writing takes place 'surrounds and constitutes each act of writing'.[415] Other recent critics have similarly sought to make

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[411] Ibid., 126.
[412] Ibid., 128.
[413] Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, 14.
[414] Ibid.
[415] Ibid.

such a gesture, while nevertheless continuing Perloff's attention to the group's philosophical leanings. William Watkin and Barrett Watten, for example, have both sought to understand the way in which Silliman's poetic form connects with socio-political oppositionality on the one hand and philosophy and theory on the other.[416] Watkin writes that 'Throughout *The Chinese Notebook*, Silliman blurs the difference between two heterogeneous vocabularies, poetry and philosophy, but at no stage does he lose sight of poetry's specificity'.[417] Like Perloff, Watkin aligns this practice with opposition to inherited poetic forms, and he extends this oppositionality to its critique of commodity culture. He writes in another article, that 'It is not enough for [Silliman] to write according to chance and vocabulary', and that Silliman must instead 'move beyond those factors to a more intentional interaction with the forces that rein in chance and impose vocabularies upon us'.[418] It is Andrew Epstein, however, who in his article on attention to daily life in Silliman's work best develops Perloff's Wittgensteinian framing. Epstein writes first that Silliman's is an epic of the everyday, and that 'To truly tell the tale of the tribe, poets must talk of things like "lint"'.[419] As part of this goal, Epstein writes, in 'The Chinese Notebook' and in 'Ketjak' 'Silliman engages in a Wittgensteinian meditation on how repetition affects meaning', a meditation grounded first in that double-investigation in which 'He seems to be thinking through the implications of his own use of repetition'.[420] For Epstein—or at least implicit in his formulation—the political-aesthetic act of telling 'the tale of the tribe' is made possible

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[416] See Watkin, 'The Materialization of Prose', William Watkin, '"Systematic Rule-Governed Violations of Convention": The Poetics of Procedural Constraint in Ron Silliman's "Bart" and "The Chinese Notebook"', *Contemporary Literature* 48, no. 4 (2007), and Barrett Watten, 'Presentism and Periodization in Language Writing, Conceptual Art, and Conceptual Writing', *Journal of Narrative Theory* (2011).
[417] Watkin, 'Systematic Rule-Governed Violations of Convention', 524.
[418] Ibid., 526.
[419] Andrew Epstein, '"The Rhapsody of Things as They Are": Stevens, Francis Ponge, and the Impossible Everyday', *Wallace Stevens Journal* 36, no. 1 (2012): 738.
[420] Ibid., 761.

through a Wittgensteinian meditation on the act itself. These precedents suggest that a Wittgensteinian reading of Silliman's work need not be blind to its historico-political dimensions, as Nealon argues has been the case with Perloff's readings. It further suggests, as the obverse of this possibility, that Wittgenstein's relatively apolitical philosophy of language need not have had a depoliticising effect on Silliman's poetry; indeed, it may have been a vehicle for furthering his political thinking.

The second point that criticism of Silliman has neglected springs out of the first, and concerns the degree to which Silliman's Wittgensteinian poetics allows his concern for 'actual life' to persist beyond the point at which new-sentence parataxis disrupts the reader's capacity to interpret his sentences according to practices of lyric self-expression or prose realism. What I mean by this is that the sort of joining implicit in Epstein's argument—in which a Wittgensteinian form of attention to language helps Silliman to make the act of repetition itself meaningful within his concern for everyday life—also makes that concern for 'actual life' a part of how Silliman attends to the written sign. That this is the case constitutes the main argument of this chapter. A major context for this argument lies in the degree to which negative assessments of Language writing often make such a connection impossible. For instance, in *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life*, Oren Izenberg writes that 'the effort to immerse oneself in Language poetry'

> produces the sensation that language as Language poetry imagines and manifests it has neither affect nor tone, and that poetry as Language poetry imagines and manifests it demands neither articulation nor, precisely, attention. Imagine language, in effect, without a speaker. […] under these conditions, indifference

> and inattention to the specifics of what is being said is not only a plausible response; it is the strong response that such writing demands.[421]

For Izenberg, the effect of poetry like Silliman's is that it posits a language without a speaker. This language is, he claims, indifferent to aesthetic qualities on the one hand and to specific instances of language-use on the other.[422] Indeed, Izenberg claims, Language poetry's effect is to draw one to consider language as that which predicates 'the very possibility of social life'.[423] If Language poetry helps one to see language as it predicates social life, for Izenberg, it is simultaneously devoid of life: it has neither 'affect nor tone'. Nor does it seem to require attention to anything other than its abstracted lifelessness. Such a reading denies Language poetry its access to 'actual life', offering instead only the possibility of a lifeless language predicating it.

Though Izenberg's is a recent example, this form of reaction to Language poetry is not new. As early as the first Anthology, *In The American Tree*, Silliman felt the need to make the following claim about the movement's critical and public reception: 'Much, perhaps too much', he writes,

> has been made of the critique of reference and normative syntax inherent in the work of many of the writers here, without acknowledging the degree to which this critique is itself situated within the larger question of what, in the last part of the twentieth century, it means to be human.[424]

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[421] Izenberg, *Being Numerous*, 142.
[422] Ibid.
[423] Ibid., 162.
[424] Silliman, *In the American Tree*, xix.

It is a passing moment in a longer introduction meant, above all, to stage a polemic in which Language writing might be seen as a legitimate and, indeed, urgent literary movement. It is on this basis that Silliman writes, 'It is intriguing that an art form be perceived as a threat, a curious verification that poetry remains important business'.[425] We saw in the opening of this chapter, however, that this sense of what 'it means to be human' for Silliman is not solely the product of the predicative power of one's linguistic capacities, but a far more embodied and immediate sense of what is involved in 'actual life'. Silliman's defence of Language poetry is a concentrated self-defence. He argues that, far from nullifying or being opposed to what 'it means to be human', Language writing's general 'critique of reference and normative syntax' is meant to offer entry into such ideas. At the same time, however, we have already seen how Silliman's concern for such things sometimes seems at times to be at odds with his concern for the written sign itself and the sorts of fascination and pleasure it can produce.

This concern for the written sign is also the focus of Jameson's comments on Language writing in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. After identifying a 'waning of affect' in postmodern cultural production, Jameson writes that this waning is also 'the end of much more'; it is also 'the end, for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brush stroke'.[426] This becomes, he writes, a 'liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject [which] may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no

[425] Ibid., xix-xx.
[426] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 15.

longer a self present to do the feeling'.[427] Within this larger waning of affect, however, Jameson makes an observation particularly relevant to Language writing. Jameson uses the Lacanian notion of schizophrenia to explain how, in freeing itself from the affective and expressive structures of past periods, postmodern literature produces a particular relationship to the sign. With 'the schizophrenic breakdown of the signifying chain', he writes, 'the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time'.[428] From this he argues that

> This present of the world or material signifier comes before the subject with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge or affect, here described in the negative terms of anxiety or loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity.[429]

The affective relationships normally built in texts, waning in the postmodern period, seem to have reformed into an intense affective relationship to the sign itself, one that is potentially 'anxious'—and we will recall that anxiety over the sign was particularly the case for Oppen—but also potentially characterised by 'euphoria' and 'an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity'.[430] It is at this point that Jameson turns to the literary movement formed around 'so-called Language Poetry or the New Sentence'. These poets, he writes, 'seem to have adopted schizophrenic fragmentation as their fundamental aesthetic'.[431] Jameson's example is a poem by Bob Perelman, but his point

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[427] Ibid.
[428] Ibid., 27.
[429] Ibid., 28.
[430] Ibid.
[431] Ibid.

is applicable to all of the writing he identifies with this schizophrenic style. 'I mainly wanted to show', he writes,

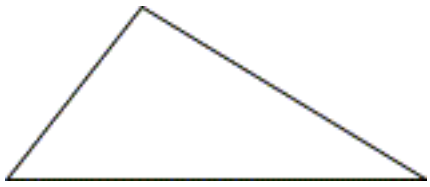
> the way in which what I have been calling schizophrenic disjuncture […] ceases to entertain a necessary relationship to the morbid content we associate with terms like schizophrenia and becomes available for more joyous intensities, for precisely that euphoria which we saw displacing the older affects of anxiety and alienation.[432]

And so, while Jameson's reading pre-empts Izenberg's, his observations about affective relationships to signs offer more fruitful possibilities for further enquiry. Where Izenberg found only indifference as the dominant affect of Language writing, Jameson finds space for euphoria and other 'joyous intensities'. If these intensities have seemed to some to be at odds with other ways in which Language writing responds to the question of 'what it means to be human', we can turn to Wittgenstein's philosophy for a way of thinking of these intensities as bound up with the intensities of 'actual life'.

The New Sentence as a Test to 'Literacy'

I would like to return to a point in Wittgenstein's philosophy that was important in reading Oppen's formal indication:

[432] Ibid., 29.

> Take as an example the aspects of a triangle. This triangle
>
> 
>
> can be seen as a triangular hole, as a solid, as a geometrical drawing; as standing on its base, as hanging from its apex; as a mountain, as a wedge, as an arrow or pointer, as an overturned object which is meant, for example, to stand on the shorter side of the right angle, as a half parallelogram, and as various other things. (*PPF* §162)

It is possible to experience the image of the triangle in multiple ways. This might seem like a simple observation, but it is an important moment in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Like the duck-rabbit image to which it is closely linked (*PPF* §118), the triangle exemplifies the interpretation of signs. Wittgenstein aims to clarify the relationship between our private experience of a sign and the meaning of the sign. It is true that we can see the triangle in multiple ways, and in this it is true that in some way the triangle does change depending on the way we look at it. But it is also true that the triangle does not change, and so it seems as though the experience of the triangle is being shaped by our capacity to interpret it. Recognising this, Wittgenstein then asks,

> But how is it possible to *see* an object according to an *interpretation*? — The question presents it as a strange fact; as if something had been pressed into a mould it did not really fit into. But no squeezing, no pressing, took place here. (*PPF* §164)

Wittgenstein immediately recognises that the question itself threatens to lead him into error. To ask 'how is it possible' already frames aspect seeing as strange, as though 'seeing' had been forced into the shape of 'interpreting'. But Wittgenstein asserts that this is not the case. If the two words suggest two activities, it is nonetheless true that when we experience something like the triangle, we are already interpreting it; we already see it *as* something particular. Wittgenstein spends a great deal of energy interrogating different cases in which such seeing-as may occur. In doing so, and in thinking over the example of portraiture in this context, Wittgenstein makes the following observation about his own experience:

> I could say: a picture is not always *alive* for me while I am seeing it.
>
> 'Her picture smiles down on me from the wall.' It need not always do so, whenever my glance lights on it. (*PPF* §200)

Like the triangle, it is possible to see a portrait in multiple ways. In an earlier section Wittgenstein asks in what circumstances one sees a portrait, painted or photographic, *as* the person depicted and in what circumstances one might see it otherwise, as a representation or as patches of colour. 'We could easily imagine people', he writes, 'who did not have this attitude to such pictures. Who, for example, would be repelled by photographs, because a face without colour, and even perhaps a face reduced in scale, struck them as inhuman' (*PPF* §198). And yet, we do often look at a photographic or a painted portrait *as* a person. When we do, Wittgenstein suggests, it may seem to be 'alive' to us.

In §222 Wittgenstein returns to the example of the triangle, aiming now at certain conclusions:

> In the triangle I can now see *this* as apex, *that* as base—now *this* as apex, *that* as base. — Clearly the words 'Now I am seeing *this* as the apex' cannot so far mean anything for a learner who has only just met the concepts of apex, base, and so on. — But I do not mean this as an empirical proposition.
>
> Only of someone *capable* of making certain applications of the figure with facility would say one say that he saw it now *this* way, now *that* way.
>
> The substratum of this experience is the mastery of a technique. (*PPF* §222)

One may be able to see the triangle in multiple ways, but the possibility of each depends on one having mastered the public grammar of triangles. Thus Wittgenstein writes that 'Only of someone who *can do*, has learnt, is master of, such-and-such, does it make sense to say that he has had *this* experience' (*PPF* §224). If the experience depends upon the mastery of a technique, the opposite is also true. We might only feel inclined to say that a person is experiencing the triangle in a particular way if his or her behaviour demonstrates a mastery of the grammar of triangles. At this moment one of Wittgenstein's ventriloquised interlocutors objects: 'But how odd for this to be the logical condition of someone's having such-and-such an *experience*! After all, you don't say that one "has a toothache" only if one is capable of doing such-and-such' (*PPF* §223). Wittgenstein replies: 'From this it follows that we cannot be dealing with the same concept of experience here' (*PPF* §223). Guetti clarifies this distinction between types of experience. It appears that 'seeing an aspect seems an "experience" but at the

same time depends upon "thinking" or "interpretation"'.[433] What we discover, he argues, is that in aspect seeing 'this "thinking" is past, a "knowledge" or "competence" that has already been established and which can come into play in perception'.[434] It is for this reason that Wittgenstein uses the term 'experience' [*Erleben*: '*er habe* das *erlebt*'], for he wants to make it clear that what is taking place in such moments is not a matter of coming to knowledge or understanding, but specifically an experience predicated upon a prior learning. The word 'experience' is thus both appropriate and, at the same time, a trap: it makes our interpretive relations and competencies, forms of acts, seem the same as the experiences of things like pain.

Soon after, however, Wittgenstein makes an important statement, though it may seem cryptic in context: 'We talk, we produce utterances', he writes, 'and only *later* get a picture of their life' (§*PPF* 224). Guetti points out that in this moment Wittgenstein implies a distinction between two types of linguistic behaviour (which can occur in response to either type of experience named above). One is the sort of purposive use to which meaningful language is bound, in which 'we talk' and 'produce utterances' without self-consciousness about our experience.[435] The other is one in which, in very rare circumstances, we attend to our experience of understanding.[436] In moments where we experience our capacity to understand language it may seem to have, as Wittgenstein says here, a kind of 'life' [*Leben*]. Wittgenstein does not elaborate on this behaviour in this part of the 'Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment', but he makes it clear that there are times in which language may seem to have a kind of 'life' within it: when we

[433] Guetti, *Wittgenstein and the Grammar of Literary Experience*, 49.
[434] Ibid.
[435] Ibid., 50-52.
[436] Ibid.

turn to look at our experience of language we may find ourselves inclined to say that it is in some way 'alive'. Following Wittgenstein, Schulte, and others I call this an experience of 'the life of the sign'.[437]

It is from this perspective that I choose to approach a Wittgensteinian reading of Silliman's poetry. Such an idea not only offers a way of extending the Wittgensteinian understanding of his poetry, but also appears to produce a kind of contradiction. It seems as though, in its oppositional aesthetic form, Silliman's work was directly trying to emphasise the life of the sign at the expense of representing and dealing with the forms of 'actual life' that we might otherwise seek in poetry and prose: either the living subjective unity of lyric (particularly confessional) poetry or the representations of daily-life so commonly the subject of realist prose.

Take, for instance, the following string of sentences from 'Ketjak':

[Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (*AOH* 82)

The poem is representative of Silliman's new-sentence poetics. Parataxis connects a sequence of seemingly disconnected sentences. In so doing, the poem avoids accumulating conceptually into the forms of scenic representation, character, or narrative that Silliman associates with prose realism. It also avoids implying a stable, unified lyric subject for whom the sentences would represent an inner state or stream of

[437] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford and Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). Schulte, 'The Life of the Sign'. Edward Minar, 'The Life of the Sign: Rule-Following, Practice, and Agreement', *The Oxford Handbook of Wittgenstein* (Oxford Handbooks Online2012), http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199287505.001.0001/oxfordhb9780199287505-e-13.

consciousness. Instead, parataxis suggests expansiveness beyond the unities of such forms. This aspect of the passage is seemingly recognised by its final sentence, 'One could propose […] the inclusion of anything'. What is immediately clear, however, is that the 'things' included in Silliman's poem aren't all included there by means of reference or representation. We might interpret the clause 'Familiar odor of the dentist's' as a referential phrase bound to a real experience, but whose experience is it? Perhaps it is Silliman's, but there is just as much reason to treat this as a piece of found language. We might ask ourselves then whether what is being included here is the odour of a dentist's office or a form of referring to such an odour. This is the interpretation Nealon suggests when he talks of the proliferation of sentences in Silliman's poem, and quotes Silliman's description of Jack Spicer as 'flooding the text with a surfeit of incommensurable meanings'.[438] What Silliman's parataxis allows, in other words, is not a surfeit of things in paratactic relation but a surfeit of meanings. Some of those things may be referential, and thus momentarily bring the reader into contact with odours, with objects, and with places, but these are present as an effect of language. What a reader might find himself or herself attending to, in other words, is the way that even a contextless reference still carries within it the grammatical sense of referring. In the terms raised above, we might say that the parataxis takes up the language of actual life, but turns one away from the experience of that life toward the experience of the language separated from it.

Similar arguments can be made for other, non-referential sentences, such as the seemingly nonsensical 'Eye is spine' or the assertion that 'The words will have more force if you use a Crayola'. For the first we might ask what context would make this

[438] Nealon, *The Matter of Capital*, 126.

utterance meaningful; for the second we might ask in what context such an assertion would be true. What do we encounter in reading 'Eye is spine'? How are we to interpret, and on what grounds do I feel compelled to doubt, the assertion of the compelling force of Crayola? One way of interpreting 'Ketjak' would be as an exercise in aspect seeing. That is, one's ability to understand such sentences depends on having mastered specific techniques, specific grammars. Such mastery would allow one not just to experience the *sense* of isolated words or phrases, such as 'Eye is spine', but to experience the sentence as meaningful within a particular language-game, the techniques of which would have to be a part of one's own form of life. If one can include anything, then what has been most emphatically included is the recognition of a grammatical provisionality within language-use itself, the effect of which is to repeatedly test one's capacity to interpret within the limits of one's own form of life.

This is the opposite gesture to that which we encountered in Oppen's poetry. Wittgenstein offered a way of interpreting Oppen's poetics of being as trying to help his readers see the grammatical aspect of his language as analogous to ontological experiences. In contrast, Silliman initially seems to present sentences in a kind of aspect-free state, as though what is most important about his parataxis is not a forced readerly movement from aspect to aspect, from language-game to language-game in dizzying succession. Instead, it would be the meta-capacity to see, in the ongoing rush of sentences, the need to experience a sentence in an aspect, dependent on one's 'being capable' of making and understanding certain applications of words. What is at stake is a kind of literacy, where the ability to interpret a particular phrase draws attention to a broader linguistic and social competence already structuring one's experience. Nealon thus refers to Language writing's 'investigation of scale-shifting and juxtaposition of

language as tests of literacy'.[439] Such testing, he argues, 'freights "literacy" with both aesthetic and political meanings' because it calls upon the social constitution of the reader's ability to interpret.[440] Perloff writes that Silliman's production of 'syntactic indeterminacy plays with the reader's expectations and forces him/her into submission'.[441] And so, we might say that the immediate effect of 'Ketjak' is to force readers to confront the sense that still adheres to language when it is removed from purposive use. Furthermore, it does so in such a way as to make the experience of the sense a challenge to the socially determined interpretive capacities of the reading subject.

If Silliman's parataxis brings his readers up against the socially produced limits of their 'literacy', this is not its only effect. Just as immediately, the parataxis is also committed to interfering with the way in which, in a capitalist context, the materiality of language, particularly prose, vanishes in favour of its utility. I touched upon this briefly in the preceding section of this chapter, but it is worth returning to. In the very first essay in *The New Sentence*, 'Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World', Silliman declares that

> Under the sway of the commodity fetish, language itself appears to become transparent, a mere vessel for the transfer of ostensibly autonomous referents. Thus, as Michael Reddy has documented, contemporary English is a language

[439] Ibid., 133.
[440] Ibid., 135. See also Altieri, *Reckoning with the Imagination*, 77, for a similar but broader discussion of Wittgenstein's utility for aesthetics.
[441] Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, 204.

with no less that 141 metaphoric constructions in which communication itself is posed as a conduit. In Wittgenstein's formulation

> A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.

This social aphasia, the increasing transparency of language, took place in English over a period of not less than 400 years. Its most complete expression is perhaps the genre of fictional realism, although it is hardly less pervasive in the presumed objectivity of daily journalism or the hypotactic logic of normative expository style.[442]

With commodity fetishism [*Warenfetischismus*], the commodity's embodiment of relations between people, and between forms of labour and their value, is ignored in favour of economic relations amongst objects. The concept is derived from Marx, who writes in *Capital, Volume 1* that

> the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [*dinglich*] relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life

[442] Silliman, *The New Sentence*, 11.

> of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.[443]

Keston Sutherland has shown how, for Marx, fetishisation is not solely one aspect of the commodity, or one way of thinking about it, but the very core of the commodity itself. At the same time, he has recalled how Marx's use of the idea of the fetish here constitutes a radical *détournement* of Charles de Brosses's use of the concept of the fetish in relation to supposed 'primitive' cultures.[444] If Marx is using the term 'fetish', and the attendant notion of 'life' with a certain literary metaphoricity, as Sutherland notes, it is not a metaphoricity that Marx would choose to discard. The seemingly autonomous commodity seems to have a life of its own because we ignore the degree to which commodities are the products of our own bodily lives. Silliman appropriates the concept of the fetish to the domain of language, and in so doing he drops the literary allusion with which Marx deploys it. For Silliman, this fetishisation is at work in the form of language-use most dominant in his historical moment. This fetishisation produces two forms of autonomy. As the word 'vanishes' it confers autonomy to its referent, thus reifying a state of affairs. For Silliman, this is capitalism itself, which both produces a 'transparent' notion of language and is reified by it. As he puts it elsewhere in the same essay, fictional realism creates 'A world whose inevitability invites acquiescence'.[445] As such, 'capitalism passes on its preferred reality through language

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[443] Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, 165.
[444] Sutherland, 'Marx in Jargon', 11.
[445] Silliman, *The New Sentence*, 8.

itself to individual speakers'.[446] The autonomy granted to the referent, however, reflects upon the word itself. Rather than being taken as a socially produced and determined method of communication between individuals, Silliman suggests, language comes to seem transparent, as though it naturally embodied a channel to the 'ostensibly autonomous referents'.

Silliman's disruption of prose form in poems like 'Ketjak', and his attempts to emphasise what he calls the 'tangibility' of language, are therefore oriented against the illusory autonomy of language when used in a 'realist' representational mode. It is thus oriented against the sense, as Marx puts it, that the products of capitalism (both word and world) are 'endowed with a life of their own'. Marx's use of the term 'life' is compelling, resonating as it does with the concepts of 'life' already under discussion. The life that the commodity seems to have is the congelation of human bodily life transferred into it through the worker's labour power. In resisting the disappearance of the word, Silliman thus recruits, for political ends, Wittgenstein's statement that 'A *picture* held us captive. And we couldn't get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably' (*PI* §115). What language repeats in this instance is both the capitalist world represented in genres like 'fictional realism' and, more insidiously, the seeming naturalness of the methods of representation that sustain such systems, particularly when language is taken as an autonomous thing in itself conferring autonomy to its referents. Interestingly, Jameson makes a similar observation about Wittgenstein, in *The Political Unconscious*, when he notes that although Wittgenstein 'is so often numbered among the ideologues of the Symbolic', perhaps as a result of his early philosophy, his later work 'may also be read in the very

[446] Ibid.

different sense of a critique of just this conceptualization of language as a thing in itself'.[447] This seems, indeed, to be the way in which Silliman interpreted Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein offered Silliman a way to critique the seeming autonomy of the sign, its relation to referents, and its seeming to have a 'life' of its own. Silliman does this by turning both towards a social understanding of the sign and towards a close attention to its sense of autonomous life.

The Civic Status of a Contradiction

It might seem as though Silliman's opposition to the sway that the commodity fetish wields over language means that he must also be opposed to that moment Wittgenstein describes in which Language, experienced in a particular way, may seem to have a 'life' of its own. While it is true that Silliman is highly suspicious of the 'life' of the sign, as we will see, it is also true that he attends to it as a way of interrogating the sort of autonomous 'life' produced by the fetish relation. In a way, it is a question of forms of attention. The life Marx describes is most present in our understanding of objects when we attend to them in the terms that fetishisation provides for us. The illusory and autonomous 'life' of such objects appears as a form of forgetting, or ignoring, their social character. The same is true of language under the sway of the commodity fetish in Silliman's formulation. Its most powerful manifestation and effects come when it is ignored; when the word, in Silliman's terms, 'vanishes' from view.

Interestingly, while Silliman calls upon Marxist thinking in many essays that theorise his poetic opposition to language under the commodity fetish, he calls also

[447] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 63-4.

upon Wittgenstein's; and it is Wittgenstein's philosophy that models, for Silliman, how a critique might take the form of prose-poetry. As we have seen, Wittgenstein's interrogation of the experience of using language suggests ways of intervening, at least theoretically, in the effect that the commodity fetish has on language-use. This is because it breaks the cycle between two forms of forgetting. When we purposefully deploy words in everyday situations we may not consciously think of them as 'alive'. Certainly, Wittgenstein's argument implies, we do not normally think or say this to ourselves. It would most likely only occur to us to say that we have such an experience when called to turn our attention to the sort of experience of signs that we are having. When, in other words, we are doing philosophy. Nonetheless, we certainly would notice if the signs seemed dead to us; for instance, if they were words in a language that we did not speak. Our capacity to have and to report on that experience of the sign as somehow 'alive' is thus predicated on something like the literacy discussed above, on the degree to which the sign is already alive to us even when not experienced as such. Our ability to feel the illusory life of the sign is thus a condition of our social mastery of language-use. When we use language purposefully we forget that it is alive to us; when we experience that it is alive we forget that it is social and purposive.

Wittgenstein's philosophy demonstrates the unity underlying the difference between the two, in a way that resonates with Marx's analysis. For both Marx and Wittgenstein the seeming autonomous 'life' of the thing—commodity and sign—is an illusion that masks an underlying relation to social and bodily life. The commodity's seeming autonomy is the product of a capitalist social way of life wherein the means of production produces also a particular relation to objects. For Wittgenstein, a person's way of life [form of life, or *Lebensform*] sets the parameters by which a sign may seem

alive. We can see how these two are linked for Silliman by looking at how 'The Chinese Notebook' works through the relationship between social life and one's literacy within certain ways of using language, and then at how 'Sunset Debris' performs a direct interrogation of the experience of the life of the sign.

'The Chinese Notebook' is written as a series of numbered sections arranged into a loosely investigatory logic, in direct imitation of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*. As with many of Silliman's poems, 'The Chinese Notebook' is a long work, with 223 numbered sections. It begins:

> 1. Wayward, we weigh words. Nouns reward objects for meaning. The chair in the air is covered with hair. No part is in touch with the planet. (*AOH* 149)

The first sentence expresses the aim of the piece. Its goal is, in a sense, to 'weigh words'. Alliteration interferes with the expression of the concept, however. A poetic insistence upon, and enjoyment in, the sound and materiality of the language threaten to distract attention away from the investigation. Enjoyment in language explicitly resists the utility and instrumentality of the language in which philosophical inquiry is typically conducted. As such, it is 'wayward', unpredictable, but also resistant to the demands of intellectual or representational clarity. If the next sentence states that 'Nouns reward objects for meaning', the next again destabilises its claims with an instance of referential meaning where the rhyming of the now-focal nouns brings new possibilities for meaning to both nouns and objects ('The chair in the air is covered with hair').

By the seventh section of the poem this implicit antagonism has become explicit:

> 7. This is not philosophy, it's poetry. And if I say so, then it becomes painting, music or sculpture, judged as such. If there are variables to consider, they are at least partly economic—the question of distribution, etc. Also differing critical traditions. Could this be good poetry, yet bad music? But yet I do not believe I would, except in jest, posit this as dance or urban planning. (*AOH* 149)

The first sentence in this section asserts the work's status as poetry, and the next argues that the ground for that assertion is the capacity of an 'I'—implicitly an authorial 'I'—to set the terms by which a text might be received. Making this claim, however, brings the text back into proximity with the philosophy it claims not to be. It is, after all, implicitly making a theoretical argument about the role of the author in determining its interpretations. This is complicated by the fact that the 'variables' that one might consider, economic and discursive, recall Silliman's theoretical writings about the economics of poetic production and the relations reified in different poetic forms. By the time we have reached the question of whether 'this [can] be good poetry, yet bad music?', the confidence that asserted the work's status as poetry and assumed the right to label it as such has been partly given over to what we might call the public grammar of generic categories. As a result, it might seem as though either the poem's claim to be able to determine the way it is read is not absolute, or that the claim made regarding its status as poetry is in fact in service to its actual status as philosophy.

If 'The Chinese Notebook' suggests, perhaps facetiously, that it might also be interpretable as 'painting, music, or sculpture', it nonetheless also indicates a limit to what is sayable about it. In section 92 we read:

> Perhaps as a means of containing meaning outside of the gallery system, the visual arts have entered into a period where art itself exists in a dialectic, in the exchange between worker, critic and worker. Writing stands in a different historical context. Fiction exists in relation to a publishing system, poetry to an academic one. (*AOH* 160)

Whether 'The Chinese Notebook' is poetry or philosophy perhaps has less to do with the claims made in and by the text than with the system of production and consumption in which it is embedded. The earlier claim that 'This is not philosophy, it's poetry' is then at once true and false. It may be that much of what determines the genre of a work like 'The Chinese Notebook' is to be sought in the socio-economic context of the work's production and consumption. At present the work counts as poetry because it appears in a collection of poems that Silliman describes in the preface to *The Age of Huts* as part of 'a single poem, which I call *Ketjak*'.[448] But, one might equally imagine this work being published elsewhere, such as alongside the essays collected in *The New Sentence*.

This problem is a formal and thematic feature of 'The Chinese Notebook', but it is of current interest because it connects questions of literary form, as well as language-

[448] Silliman, *The Age of Huts (Compleat)*. [Silliman makes this statement in the preface to the collection, which does not have a set page number.]

use more generally, to the realities of 'actual life'. The question of interpreting the genre of 'The Chinese Notebook' is, by the end of the poem, as much a question of how one produces and consumes written works as of traditional forms. The work therefore aims not to resolve the question of genre, but to demonstrate the conflict taking place across the poem's form and in its social status as a work of poetry. This is a variation upon the effect encountered in 'Ketjak'. There the absence of context for interpretation makes each sentence a challenge to one's cultural 'literacy', and this draws attention to the social constitution of the subject and the political weight of such capabilities. In 'The Chinese Notebook', what is at work is less a test of the literacy resulting from one's social-linguistic constitution and more a provocation to one's capacity to resist a type of literacy in which one is assumed to be already too literate, as for instance the ability to see a work of as poetry or philosophy and to consume it appropriately.

Again, Wittgenstein's *Investigations* offers some ideas for how this provocation may be performed. Each numbered section intrudes upon the overall progression of thought, questioning what has preceded it, returning to old ideas for new challenges, or changing the direction of questioning. For both Wittgenstein and Silliman, the effect is of a marked instability and provisionality at all levels. The reader is left neither with stable categories nor even stable questions, but an object of interrogation refracted through what one is, in any particular stage of thought, capable of saying or is even just simply inclined to say. Wittgenstein relates this method to what he refers to as 'the business of philosophy':

> It is not the business of philosophy to resolve a contradiction by means of a mathematical or logico-mathematical discovery, but to render surveyable the

> state of mathematics that troubles us—the state of affairs *before* the contradiction is resolved. (And in doing this one is not sidestepping a difficulty.)
>
> Here the fundamental fact is that we lay down rules, a technique, for playing a game, and that then, when we follow the rules, things don't turn out as we had assumed. So that we are, as it were, entangled in our own rules.
>
> This entanglement in our rules is what we want to understand: that is, to survey. […] The civic status of a contradiction, or its status in civic life—that is the philosophical problem. (*PI* §125)

Wittgenstein's example is mathematics, and in particular the logico-mathematical systems in currency at the time of his writing, but his argument is directed at the discipline of philosophy as it attempts to understand language more generally. Philosophy's job, he asserts, is not to resolve the contradictions that it notices when it attempts to explain language by means of rules, but to show how the rules themselves contradict the way that language is actually used. The final sentence is crucial, for Wittgenstein makes it clear that what appear to be formal or linguistic contradictions derived from language's imagined autonomy are, in fact, taking place 'in civic life'. This resembles Silliman's comment about contradiction in 'Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World'. There he argues that a gestural poetics that does not hide the tangibility of language itself stages 'a contradiction, often invisible, in the social fact', and 'continues to wage the class struggle for consciousness'.[449] Such poetry, in other words, reveals the contradiction between assumed societal norms for the transparency and autonomy of language and the sociality and tangibility of language not shaped by such an ideology. A contradictory form, in this context, is politically oppositional

[449] Silliman, *The New Sentence*, 12.

because of its capacity to make the materiality of the signifier newly apparent within 'civic life'.

Silliman also attempts to demonstrate this in 'The Chinese Notebook'. The poem's attempts to set terms around its own genre status come into contact with the 'civic status' of genre as a publicly determined set of language-games and grammars with a social, rather than either essential or arbitrary, set of conditions. At the same time, the poem is in contradiction with whichever generic label one chooses for it, and the genres themselves are in contradiction with each other, each grasping the same stretch of language as its own. The demonstrative power of a 'civic' contradiction is also called upon in sections three and four:

> 3. Chesterfield, sofa, divan, couch—might these items refer to the same object? If so, are they separate conditions of a single word?
>
> 4. My mother as a child would call a pot holder a 'boppo,' the term becoming appropriated by the whole family, handed down now by my cousins to their own children. Is it a word? If it extends, eventually, into general usage, at what moment will it become one? (*AOH* 149)

Section three notes how multiple nouns might apply to the same object and asks what differences in object the various words would recognise. The question is only provisional, and section four immediately recasts it. A mother—possibly Silliman's own—has invented a new term for a pot holder. In the context of the works' series, the question would then be: what 'condition' of a pot holder is named when one calls it a

‘boppo’? The new question is immediately absurd, and the provisionally proposed rule that different nouns respond to different aspects of an object is contradicted by the specific case. The attempt to discover an explanatory rule for the proliferation of nouns is confounded by a real-world situation where the actual use of nouns is unambiguously real, lived, and contrary not to any particular rule, but to the requirement for a rule as an explanatory device.

The implications of this relation are most politically pointed for Silliman in those moments where local vocabularies—such as the domestic vocabulary described above—suddenly become the horrific languages of military atrocity, or hypothetical languages of the Manson family, the SLA, and Hitler:

> 31. ‘Terminate with extreme prejudice.’ That meant kill. Or ‘We had to destroy the village in order to save it.’ Special conditions create special languages. If we remain at a distance, their irrationality seems apparent, but, if we came closer, would it? (*AOH* 152)

> 32. The Manson family, the SLA. What if a group began to define the perceived world according to a complex, internally consistent, and precise (tho inaccurate) language? Might not the syntax itself propel their reality to such a point that to our own they could not return? Isn’t that what happened to Hitler? (*AOH*, 153)

In these two sections, Silliman confronts the relation between social being and language-use. In the first, the ‘special conditions’ create a ‘special language’ tailored to their needs. These needs are problematic, however, requiring speakers to both elicit and

excuse extreme violence. Outside of its 'special conditions', Silliman notes, the language itself seems irrational in a way that it may not when the facts of actual life bring it into immediate relevance. In the case of the Manson Family and the SLA, however, Silliman wonders whether the opposite might also be true. Perhaps an irrational language could propel the undertaking of irrational behaviour. Changes in what is sayable in a particular situation, in other words, might lead directly to changes in the subject and what they find doable.

In 'The Chinese Notebook', Silliman thus stages an antagonism between the capacity for civic life to determine what is sayable in a particular situation, and the capacity of what is sayable to determine the forms of that civic life. In the terms used earlier in this chapter, it is an antagonism between a way of life and the life of the sign that comes about, for Silliman, because of the control that the sign is capable of having over what is sayable, and thus what is possible, in one's way of life. One's capacity to resist the conditions determining a work's genre—to resist, in other words, having to decide whether 'The Chinese Notebook' is poetry or philosophy—is thus found to be similar to one's capacity to resist a language that would make the phrase 'We had to destroy the village in order to save it' acceptable. What is immediately at stake turns out to be one's experience of language and one's literacy within its terms. As 'The Chinese Notebook' calls particular discourses into doubt, the relation between one's position within the text and the linguistic and cultural contexts conditioning it are made immediate, if difficult, objects of attention. In staging this conflict, the poem becomes a space in which social form (as embodied in grammatical limits) and subjectivity (as formed in dialogue with and within those limits) are brought into close but uneasy proximity, such that non-traditional aesthetic forms might have political effects. In this

context, Wittgenstein's philosophy acts as a kind of fulcrum for Silliman's poetics, allowing Marxist imperatives to have direct aesthetic implications, and allowing aesthetic forms to be directly socially oppositional.

'Sunset Debris' and the Experience of the Sayability of Sense

Silliman uses 'The Chinese Notebook' to think through the relation between one's form of life and one's literacy within the language-games bound to it. Literacy, as we have seen, becomes a suspect form of social mastery, signifying submission or complicity as much as the freedom of control. Sayability, as the capacity for expression within the terms of one's literacy, describes a horizon within which one's form of life crystallises into actual life (into social and bodily life). Silliman's poem 'Sunset Debris' is particularly interesting in the light of these relationships. This is not only because it appears immediately before 'The Chinese Notebook' within *The Age of Huts*—a puzzle setting the stage for the less frenzied reflections of 'The Chinese Notebook'—but because in its combination of new-sentence parataxis with the specific sentence form of the interrogative. That is, 'Sunset Debris' turns the reader's attention to the experience of the particular grammar of the interrogative and its affective richness.

One of the first aspects of 'Sunset Debris' that one might notice is that it is full of invisible but affectively charged bodies. In this poem, the interrogative marks the place at which the socially binding linguistic milieu encroaches upon the physical world, way of life upon social and bodily life:

> Did you see the fat man in the bow tie smile a gleam that spread across the folds of his face like the waves in a pond after a pebble drops in? Isn't morning a bitch? Doesn't that carry a specific, negative social connotation? Why do you say things like that? Why are you so fucked up, fucked over, fucked? What makes you think we need you? Why do you bother? What drives you? Don't you feel like an intruder? Don't you feel like a fool? Why are you reading this? What makes you think that's what it's for? Can't you hear us snickering at you anyway? Is that light too bright? Is that how you get to the zoo? (*AOH* 128)

The bodies are invisibly present, rarely referred to directly but often implied by the interrogatives: 'Did you see that fat man[?]', 'Can't you hear us'?, 'Is that light too bright?'. These phrases reach out to interlocutors, implying a physical and temporal proximity within a shared space that is sustained, for the most part, only for the duration of individual sentences. As such, each suggests a relation that the parataxis breaks. If the unities of hypotactic logic are broadly denied, however, small overlaps sustain brief stretches of relation. A micro-scene forms, for instance, across the sentences 'Why do you say things like that? Why are you so fucked up' (*AOH* 128). The two sentences could belong together in a single diegesis. Such moments are not sustained long, however. As parataxis proliferates such unities come and go, giving brief flashes of possible scene or narrative that quickly fade, leaving only their contingency as linguistic effects.

The surface implications of this process are the same as those noted in response to 'Ketjak'. A paratactic arrangement of sentences both provokes and resists our capacity to arrange them into hypotactic structures and thus subordinate them to a

meaning attributable to the text. What ultimately structures Silliman's run of interrogatives, here as with the new-sentence more generally, is what he calls the 'secondary' logic of form and association:[450]

> Will we stop soon? Will we continue? […] Is it necessary? Is it off white? Is a legitimate purpose served in limiting access? Will this turn out to be the last day of summer? Will you give up, give out, over? (*AOH* 107)

Stripped of consistent context, similarity within the 'tangibility' of the interrogatives structures the sentences' progression. 'Will' leads to another will, the 'is it' to a further 'is it', and so on. To this extent, then, the progression of interrogatives is not concerned with the production of scenes, narratives or speakers. It is concerned rather with what variations in similar forms of interrogative allow one to ask. If small scenes form unities across multiple interrogatives, then this may be read as a product of the fact that similar interrogatives may belong to the same or similar language-games within particular forms of life. The sayability of the interrogative, again, signals its production within and by a form of life.

In Perloff's assessment of 'Sunset Debris', she writes that, 'by means of the seemingly simple rhetorical device of turning statement into question, [the poem] creates a verbal vortex that becomes increasingly explosive as the reader becomes increasingly disoriented', adding that 'There are, it seems, no more romantic sunsets, only "sunset debris."'[451] She aligns this vortex with what she refers to as Silliman's

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[450] Ibid., 91.
[451] Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, 205.

'testing the boundary between the "sense" of "Bring me sugar" and the "non-sense" of "Milk me sugar."'[452] Like Wittgenstein, Silliman wants to draw attention to the socially determined grammatical limits of sense. While Perloff rightly observes the effect that Wittgenstein had on Silliman's thinking about the nature of sense, the nature of the 'debris' and its origins within the actuality of past 'sunsets' is less straightforward. For instance, Perloff interprets the poem's 'sunsets' as primarily 'romantic'.

'Romantic' has two connotations in this context. It might refer to interpersonal romance, and the poem's erotic energy at its beginning would certainly seem to signal this. However, 'romantic' might also refer to romanticism and the collection of ideologies of the self, the world, and the poem that characterise that period. I am more inclined to the latter of these options. Perloff is right in finding a form of romance, or at least eroticism, in the poem's opening—'Can you feel it? Does it hurt? Is this too soft? Do you like it?' (*AOH* 105), etc.,—but this tone is quickly matched by others—'Do you prefer ballpoints? […] Do you hear a ringing sound? […] Does he need to have a catheter?' (*AOH* 105)—that are sustained alongside the opening erotic energy. We can thus extend Perloff's assessment by suggesting that what is under interrogation in 'Sunset Debris' is not romance as such, but a certain relationship between language and human intimacy. At the same time, 'Sunset Debris' certainly does signal the collapse of romantic sunsets if we take that to mean that the poem is opposed to—and actively dissolves—things like the lyric subject, the notion of the poem as emanating from the speech of a unified lyric subject, and the subject-world relation normally associated with speech-centred poetics.

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[452] Ibid., 201.

With either interpretation, 'Sunset Debris' calls attention to human intimacy's, and human subjective agency's, existence in and through grammatical forms. The further political implication is that our selves are only accessible through the sunset debris—the linguistic debris, that is—in which they have to find form. What is most instinctively personal is itself constructed in the medium of the social milieu, language received from society, historically created in its (grammatical) possibilities by the uses of others. The debris, that is, of other and others' sunsets. If we express anything when using interrogatives it is the grammatical possibility that is open to us in the language, made possible by the uses to which language is put. And so, if we hope to be intimate with others or relate to the world—be that relation romantic, wry, angry, awkward, concerned, etc.—linguistic forms enforce a social form.

In an interview with Tom Becket from 1985, which Perloff quotes in *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, Silliman makes the following remark: 'My idea with Sunset Debris', he writes,

> was to explore the social contract between writer and reader. As sender and receiver do not exist in vacuums, any communication involves a relationship, an important component of which is always power. […] It was this aspect of intersubjectivity which caused me to introduce so much explicitly sexual language […] Every sentence is supposed to remind the reader of her or his inability to respond.[453]

[453] Ibid., 202.

We might say that a question typically requires two people, constituting a relating and purposive social act. Silliman suggests that the reader, when confronted with an interrogative in the poem, is called to respond as though they were involved in a situation from which the question might plausibly be drawn, and at the same time, is refused the ability to so respond. However, the questions brought together in 'Sunset Debris' are not being deployed in the purposive contexts from which they might have been drawn. Their ability to call one to respond is muted by the fact that they are presented paratactically and in a poetic context. As a result, the effect is closer to what Wittgenstein refers to as the examination of '*objects of comparison*':

> Our clear and simple language-games are not preliminary studies for a future regimentation of language—as it were, first approximations, ignoring friction and air resistance. Rather, the language-games stand there as *objects of comparison* [*Vergleichsobjekte*] which, through similarities and dissimilarities, are meant to throw light on features of our language. (*PI* §130)

Wittgenstein's gesture, in other words, isn't to deal with an abstraction of language but with its particular forms. In this way, the thinker does not stand in front of an interrogative, when taken as an object of comparison, and feel called to respond to it. Rather, he or she is called to attend to it in its 'similarities and dissimilarities' to the others.

This posture produces its own problems. For if the language-games—for Silliman the many similar forms of the interrogative—produce objects of comparison, they simultaneously risk drawing us into error. This is because the problems that

philosophy deals with, and which Wittgenstein seeks to dissolve, 'arise when language is, as it were, idling, not when it is doing work' (*PI* §132). When a philosopher says something like 'I know that is a tree' or 'this certainly is a hand' language is idling, attended to in its grammatical rather than purposive existence. The objects of comparison that trouble Wittgenstein are objects idling in grammatical states. Guetti calls these verbal or grammatical 'displays', wherein what is at work in the use of language is a non-purposive display of its signifying power.[454] These are particularly prevalent in literary language-games. '[C]ertain kinds of literary expression', Guetti writes, 'are not meaningful if as Wittgenstein insists we restrict the concept of meaning to purposive use'.[455] Rather, in literature we generally use language like the philosopher who says 'this certainly is a hand', and

> when we do, what we produce, rather than propositions of any sort, are undirected verbal displays, shows of signifying power that seem the richer precisely because they have no immediate relevance, and whose weight derives from the unlimited authority of grammar.[456]

This, I would like to say, is something that Silliman finds particularly striking, and especially so in 'Sunset Debris'. The primary Wittgensteinian effect of new-sentence parataxis is to immediately separate a potentially meaningful utterance from the context that gives it its meaning and its sense. This done, we encounter every sentence as grammatical, but also full of the capacity for meaningful use. Each interrogative thus acts as a verbal display not in itself meaningful, but drawing attention to the 'signifying

[454] Guetti, *Wittgenstein and the Grammar of Literary Experience*, 6.
[455] Ibid., 44.
[456] Ibid., 6.

power' of the interrogative form and its ability to draw subjects into meaningful relations.

'Sunset Debris' also makes plain that even outside of the social situations in which the interrogatives would receive and enforce their grammar, the questions still seem to carry within them the mood, the energy, and the life of the language-games that they suggest. In 'The Chinese Notebook', Silliman had—through a thematic and performative antagonism between civic life and linguistic/generic forms—brought the political aspect of sayability to the surface of his poem. The implications of that series of investigations are present in 'Sunset Debris'—in the way in which the interrogatives implicate the reader in a multitude of potentially intimate social contexts determined by the grammar of the interrogative—but in the new-sentence parataxis a different antagonism has come into play. There is a new contradiction between parataxis's ability to remove sentences from their purposive, meaning-giving contexts and the ability of the sentences to nonetheless still seem powerful to us. They still seem to make demands (of someone if not of us), and to carry with them tones of joy, of concern, of desire, and of all of the affective and purposive contexts in which they may be deployed. This ability is a powerful aspect of language experienced grammatically.

We can contrast these interrogatives, which are the bulk of 'Sunset Debris', to another form of interrogative interwoven amongst them:

> What makes you think we need you? Why do you bother? What drives you? Don't you feel like an intruder? Don't you feel like a fool? Why are you reading

> this? What makes you think that's what it's for? Can't you hear us snickering at you anyway? (*AOH* 128)

Meta-poetic interrogatives thread through the poem alongside those others showing the grammar of human intimacy: 'What is the context of discourse?' (106), 'Will it further class struggle?' (106), 'Are the rules of association fixed or fluid?' (115), 'Is there a better way?' (117), 'How many ways can that question be taken?' (118), and so on. These meta-poetic sentences bring the poem into a problematic present such that the poet and reader are mutually implicated in a shared linguistic moment which, as in 'The Chinese Notebook', calls into question both the production and consumption of the text. Why does the text need a reader? Why do you bother reading it? What drives you? These questions put one in touch with the political and ideological contexts of poetry in general, and particularly of the poem currently being read. They make the reader aware, if only in passing, of the political structures of production and consumption that produced the poem as well as the subjectivity reading it. Why does one read a poem? What networks and discourses of artistic production are manifest in this decision? We find ourselves oddly self-conscious of our readerly presence. Do I feel like an intruder? Do I feel like a fool? Perhaps I do, if only because the question has been asked.

These meta-poetic moments speak on a different level to the other questions in the poem. The decontextualised new-sentence interrogatives are neither necessarily experienced as speaking to readers directly nor, I would argue contrary to Silliman himself, as calling for a personal response. The meta-poetic questions, however, do start to speak to readers directly in the moment of their reading. This is because the poem provides both a context and an object for their questioning. They are not

decontextualised, and thus the meta-poetic questions about form invite a considered response. To ask 'why are you reading this?', or any of the other meta-poetic questions, is to call readers to answer, and thus to call them into question as those who must respond not only to the demands voiced in the text, but to the demands of the text. The meta-poetic questions seem to involve us as readers in a way that the other questions do not. When we encounter those other questions, what we are experiencing is not the demand of the interrogative upon us as individuals, but the capacity for an interrogative to make demands or to draw us into forms of relation that would require our participation. As such, if the meta-poetic interrogatives speak to us directly, the bulk of the poem's interrogatives do not. However, in still possessing the grammar of the demand, and in still carrying with them affects, contexts, and connotations, they act rather like what Wittgenstein calls 'illustrated turns of speech'.

In §295 of the *Investigations* Wittgenstein describes the effect of encountering the seemingly 'magical' quality of language experienced grammatically. Even if a phrase has been removed from purposive, meaningful use, he writes,

> Even if it gives no information, still, it is a picture; and why should we not want to call such a picture before our mind? Imagine an allegorical painting instead of the words.
>
> Indeed, when we look into ourselves as we do philosophy, we often get to see such a picture. Virtually a pictorial representation of our grammar. Not facts; but, as it were, illustrated turns of speech. (*PI* §295)

In 'Sunset Debris', the picture we encounter over and over again, freighted along in the flux of affect and intimate relations simultaneously asserted and denied to us, is a picture of the interrogative itself as something not only potentially meaningful, but also powerful in its own right. This effect is inseparable from the readings of Silliman's new-sentence poetics presented previously—both Nealon's concept of 'literacy', for instance, and Perloff's notion of submission to sense's limits—but at the same time it is to be found on the other side of the limits to meaning that these other readings take as the principle dynamic. My argument is that, as much as 'Sunset Debris' is concerned with the linguistic constitution of the subject, and as much as it is concerned with the political implications of literate in the grammars of actual life, the poem is just as concerned with the power of the verbal displays that Silliman's gestural, new-sentence poetry is able to make. In other words, it is concerned with the fact that the sayability of the interrogatives persists beyond the grammatical limits that make them meaningful.

As Guetti points out, 'Words […] separated from but still containing their employment may seem magical'.[457] Wittgenstein indicates this when he says that the claim that 'Language (or thinking) is something unique' is 'a superstition' rather than a 'mistake' (*PI* §110). Moreover, it is a 'superstition' that is 'produced by grammatical illusions' (*PI* §110). Language and thinking can seem unique when the experience of the grammar of an 'idling' sentence produces a sense of autonomy. Guetti suggests that 'the danger of language in this grammatical mode is that, precisely because of its evident independence from particular situations, it seems extraordinarily "sayable," apt, and immune from the critical judgements to which words in particular applications are

[457] Ibid., 70.

susceptible'.[458] Silliman registers a similar impression. 'If there is a myth in language-centred writing', he writes, '(and how could there not be, even though it is my own, therefore very attractive, myth?)',

[Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (UCSD 75, 19, 1)[459]

The concept of confronting a word is telling and here has two aspects. The illusory autonomy of the word that Silliman locates under 'the sway of the commodity fetish' is a precondition of the experience of language. Words are experienced first in an autonomous aspect which must then be counteracted. At the same time, in isolating and disrupting elements of language as he does, Silliman produces an encounter with language, a confrontation, liable to make it seem autonomous in its grammatical authority. Silliman's description of 'language-centred writing' thus resembles the sort of verbal displays Wittgenstein describes, as when, for instance, a philosopher like Moore says 'This certainly is a hand'.[460] Importantly, Silliman is both attracted to and wary of this 'myth' of language-centred writing. The attractive, seemingly autonomous existence of the word must be countered by an understanding of the forces that create it.

I would like to say that in 'Sunset Debris', Silliman thus makes a problem out of the life of the sign. A problem, that is, out of the way in which confrontation with language in non-purposive contexts not only manages to maintain an untethered affective charge, to suggest intimate relations, but also to fill it with that seemingly

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[458] Ibid., 5.
[459] Jackson Mac Low also recognises the danger of this sense of autonomy in Jackson Mac Low, 'Language-Centered', *Open Letter: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Issue* 5, no. 1 (1982).
[460] See the opening pages of Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*.

‘magical’ authority and autonomy that Wittgenstein notes of the ‘illustrated turn of speech’. As with Wittgenstein’s model, moreover, Silliman is not attempting to solve the problem of the life of the sign, but to again make it surveyable, to bring it to view through many objects of comparison.

This gesture resonates with ‘The Chinese Notebook’. In ‘The Chinese Notebook’, the phrase ‘we had to destroy the village in order to save it’ was problematic precisely for the form of life and the language-game that would make it sayable. Sayability there was found to mark the place in which a form of life coalesced as a moment within bodily and social life. In ‘Sunset Debris’, sayability marks the same nexus. But rather than turn it upon the form of life that renders a phrase sayable, ‘Sunset Debris’ isolates and regards the experience of sayability itself. Indeed, ‘Sunset Debris’ not only resonates with the concerns of ‘The Chinese Notebook’ but directly precedes it in *The Age of Huts*. In making my argument I have dealt with these poems in reverse order, but within the logic of the collection the narrative runs the other way. ‘Sunset Debris’ makes a perspicuous problem out of the seemingly autonomous, ‘mystical’ life of the sign to which ‘The Chinese Notebook’ then responds, offering up the sociality of generic labels, and then the politically problematic sayability of particular language-games within horrific forms of life, as further explication and complication.

What was also apparent from the reading of ‘Sunset Debris’ is that the power of language experienced in its grammatical mode exists specifically because of its isolation from the usual contexts of use. Further, if a grammatical utterance carries its sense within it still it is not yet clear why that sense should seem so powerful. How might we further understand the power of the verbal display that is the new sentence and its

relationship to the uses of 'actual life'? Having worked through some of Silliman's major poems we might now look again at Wittgenstein's idea of 'the life of the sign'.

The Life of the Sign

Wittgenstein is 'disposed', Guetti writes, 'to draw analogies between words and human physiognomies and figures, and to suggest from time to time that language under these conditions has its "life"'.[461] One of Wittgenstein's most sustained engagements with this experience comes close to the beginning of 'The Blue Book', where he interrogates one of the misunderstandings that philosophy has about language and the sort of 'life' that it may at times seem to have: 'If I give someone the order "fetch me a red flower from that meadow", how is he to know what sort of flower to bring, as I have only given him a *word*?'.[462] To paraphrase, the question at hand is: how might we understand the relationship between language as a set of written and spoken signs and the experiences we have while using them? For Wittgenstein, philosophy tends to imagine that something other than the spoken or written sign alone is essential to following the order to fetch a flower. Clearly, a philosopher might say, one must 'interpret' the signs of the order before one can follow it, to which Wittgenstein responds:

> Now you might ask: do we *interpret* the words before we obey the order? And in some cases you will find that you do something which might be called interpreting before obeying, in some cases not.

[461] Guetti, *Wittgenstein and the Grammar of Literary Experience*, 90.
[462] Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 3.

> It seems that there are *certain definite* mental processes bound up with the working of language, processes through which alone language can function. I mean the processes of understanding and meaning. The signs of our language seem dead without these mental processes; and it might seem that the only function of the signs is to induce such processes, and that these are the things we ought really to be interested in.[463]

The fact that '*certain definite* mental processes' accompany our use of language gives us the sense that these processes are the essence of language-use; that what language really does is call upon such processes in order to induce in us certain effects and actions.

This seems to be the case, Wittgenstein notes, because 'the signs of our language seem dead without these mental processes'.[464] Wittgenstein finds another example of this experience and its attendant assumptions in Frege's thinking:

> Frege ridiculed the formalist conception of mathematics by saying that the formalists confused the unimportant thing, the sign, with the important, the meaning. Surely, one wishes to say, mathematics does not treat of dashes on a bit of paper. Frege's idea could be expressed thus: the propositions of mathematics, if they were just complexes of dashes, would be dead and utterly uninteresting, whereas they obviously have a kind of life. And the same, of course, could be said of any proposition: Without a sense, or without a thought, a proposition

[463] Ibid.
[464] Ibid.

> would be an utterly dead and trivial thing. And further it seems clear that no adding of inorganic signs can make the proposition live. And the conclusion which one draws from this is that what must be added to the dead signs in order to make a live proposition is something immaterial, with properties different from all mere signs.[465]

The organic-inorganic distinction is clear here. Wittgenstein's Frege recognises that although 'the propositions of mathematics' might seem 'just complexes of dashes', 'they obviously have a kind of life'. And so, the assumption goes, if the signs are an inorganic, material element, what gives them their organic life must be something both 'immaterial' and organic. For this need, Wittgenstein claims, Frege proposes the immaterial but organic matter of 'sense' and 'thought'.

Wittgenstein does not dispute that a language that could not induce '*certain definite* mental processes' in us is a language that would seem 'dead', but he does dispute the fact that the processes themselves are what give language its sense of being alive. 'We could perfectly well, for our purposes', he writes, 'replace every process of imagining by a process of looking at an object or by painting, drawing or modelling; and every process of speaking to oneself by speaking aloud or by writing'.[466] We could, in other words, replace every mental process with a gestural one—replace imagining with drawing an image, for example—and we would still be able to use language to do such things as follow orders. He presents the same argument a second time, almost immediately: 'If the meaning of the sign (roughly, that which is of importance about the

[465] Ibid., 4-5.
[466] Ibid., 4.

sign) is an image built up in our minds when we see or hear the sign', he writes, 'then first let us adopt the method we just described'.[467] He then suggests

> replacing this mental image by some outward object seen, e.g., a painted or modelled image. Then why should the written sign plus the painted image be alive if the written sign alone was dead? — In fact, as soon as you think of replacing the mental image by, say, a painted one, and as soon as the image thereby loses its occult character, it ceases to seem to impart any life to the sentence at all. […] The mistake we are liable to make could be expressed thus: We are looking for the use of a sign, but we look for it as though it were an object *co-existing* with the sign.[468]

When we imagine our mental processes to be the source of the 'life' of the sign, in other words, what we really do is imagine that one sign or image occurring in our experience of language were the source of the life we experience in a completely different, 'co-existing' sign. It is here that Wittgenstein offers his counter-claim to the nature of the life of the sign: 'But if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign', he writes, 'we should have to say that it was its *use*. […] As a part of the system of language, one may say, the sentence has life'.[469]

The simplicity with which Wittgenstein states that the life of the sign is its use belies the concept's complexity. He has already told us that the life of the sign cannot be the mental processes that accompany the use of language, but he has also already

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[467] Ibid., 5.
[468] Ibid.
[469] Ibid., 4,5.

conceded that without such processes the language will seem 'dead' to us. And so, if the life of the sign is its use 'As a part of the system of language', it is nevertheless bound to the mental processes that make up the experience of being a language user.[470] The situation is clarified if we compare Wittgenstein's statements in 'The Blue Book' with his comments about the life of the sign in the *Investigations*. There, we will recall, he shows first that our capacity to see signs according to aspects depends upon a past-learning that produces a present competency in the techniques of language-use (*PI* §222-4). It is then that he writes, 'We talk, we produce utterances, and only *later* get a picture of their life' (*PPF* §224). Schulte's discussion of this aspect of Wittgenstein's thinking is particularly useful for understanding this point. 'The question "Is the sign dead or alive?"', he writes,

> does not present itself when one is using language to articulate thoughts or intentions. It only arises if one begins to ponder and actually ponders the question of why sentences and what they are used to express do not normally appear dead.[471]

In other words, we only find ourselves inclined to say that the sign is 'alive' when we pay attention to our understanding of our experience of language. It may not ever occur to the quotidian language-user to think this, but it does, Wittgenstein and Schulte suggest, occur to philosophers who asks themselves how we are able to follow the instruction to 'fetch me a red flower from that meadow'.[472] If that life is its use, however, the experience of the life of the sign might be said to be our experience not of

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[470] Ibid., 5.
[471] Schulte, 'The Life of the Sign', 150.
[472] Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 3.

the meaning of a word or phrase, nor of its grammatical sense, but of the *currency* of that sense within our forms of life.

This understanding of the life of the sign helps us to further understand what is at play in poems like 'Ketjak', 'Sunset Debris', *Tjanting* and the majority of the poems in *The Alphabet*. Silliman clearly wants to make his readers aware of the socially constituted grammar of sentences, but at the same time seems interested—perhaps even against his own better judgement—in displaying the life that the sentences contain when removed from quotidian contexts. Take, for example, another excerpt from 'Ketjak':

> Talking heads of television. A world of routines, of returns to small forms, insistently. As astronauts enter the outer air. Get aboard. Symbols cramp the temple. It was a summer of few hot nights. Zoo caw caw of the sky. Time was real to him, but not linear, more a sensation of gravity, of falling from some precipice forward until, thousands of feet above the valley floor with its chalked concentric circles, acceleration approximated weightlessness. Garbage mind pearl diver. It was his smaller toes that hurt. Wittgenstein and the moon. Look at that white room, filled with fleshy babies. Attempt, between poems, to be charming. The words, as in a boat, float. Any project large enough to capsize. Peach pits. Endless intimate detail ultimately bores. (*AOH* 50-1)

The prevalence of meta-poetry is striking. If the parataxis makes each sentence a test to literacy, many of the sentences turn us towards the experience of language itself rather than toward our ability (or not) to imagine the sentences within our own form of life. The form of literacy at stake is as much our capacity to think and to speak about

language as it is to use language within quotidian contexts. As such, while we might read sentences like 'Talking heads of television' and 'Get aboard' according to purposive techniques of language-use within our own or within hypothetical forms of life, meta-poetic sentences—such as 'The words, as in a boat, float', 'Endless intimate detail ultimately bores', and even 'Symbols cramp the temple'—direct our attention toward the experience of the language in the poem. Meta-poetry enforces a double-investigation posture similar to Wittgenstein's own practice. What is under investigation may not be our capacity to make sense of a sentence so much as our ability to see, within the sentence, the capacity for meaning. As such, alongside sentences that make reference, exclaim, or perform other gestures from meaningful use, there are others that present verbal Rorschach tests, asking us to search within them for the possibility of a meaningful aspect.

This particular effect is magnified by the overall structure of the poem. 'Ketjak' is structured as an expansion, with each stanza repeating the previous one and adding new sentences in between those repeated. As this is done, repeated sentences are also occasionally altered. The effect is that one is constantly encountering sentences that one has read before, but each time the sentences produce a slightly different impression. Take, for instance, the following set of repetitions from early in the poem:

> Silverfish, potato bugs. What I want is the gray-blue grain of western summer. The nurse, by a subtle shift of weight, moves in front of the student in order to more rapidly board the bus. (*AOH* 4)

> Silverfish, potato bugs. A tenor sax is a weapon. What I want is the gray-blue grain of western summer. Mention sex. The nurse, by a subtle redistribution of weight, shift of gravity's center, moves in front of the student of oriental porcelain in order to more rapidly board the bus. (*AOH* 4)
>
> Silverfish, potato bugs. We stopped for hot chocolate topped with whipped cream and to discuss Sicilian Defense. A tenor sax is a weapon. The Main Library was a grey weight in a white rain. What I want is the gray-blue gain of western summer. Subtitles lower your focus. Mention sex, fruit. Drip candles kept atop old, empty bottles of wine. The young nurse in sunglasses, by a subtle redistribution of weight, shift of gravity's center, moves in front of the black student of oriental porcelain in order to more rapidly board the bus home, before all the seats are taken. (*AOH* 6)

Each of these three excerpts is open to a number of interpretations according to the ways in which the sentences connect with discourses of domesticity, poetry, race, and so on. And the repetition and alteration of these connections similarly lies open to any number readings. What I would like to draw attention to here is that the combination of repetition and change makes every act of interpretation provisional. This is particularly the case for the sentence about the nurse that ends each of the above excerpts. Each of the iterations might make sense to us, but each also suggests slightly different class, and then race, dynamics within the form of life being invoked. The changes repeatedly call on us to see the phrase in a different aspect, as differently alive, and the changes cumulatively call us to attend to the capacity for seeing the sentence 'as' such and such a situation that is the life of its signs.

This, indeed, was the substance of a very early reading of 'Ketjak' performed by David Antin in a private letter to Silliman from 1978. Antin writes that at first glance 'Ketjak' seems very static. '[T]he grid out of which it moved, the system of expansions from more or less fixed points or rather fixed lines', he writes, 'irritated me because of their decisive notational character' (UCSD 72, 2, 3). It was, Antin suggests, like a person on a boat throwing out lines of attention toward a pier hoping to grab hold. But the boat passes and re-passes, and

[Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (UCSD 72, 2, 3)

The effect, Antin notes, is of the kind of provisionality noted above. It

[Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (UCSD 72, 2, 3)

The provisionality that repetition and change generates within the experience of the new sentence in 'Ketjak' brings one into an 'unknown relation' that is like those other 'relations holding together the minds of others'. Antin is experiencing what I (working with Wittgenstein in hand) am calling the life of the sign. In the experience of that life we are brought into contact with the way in which language, and what is sayable, structures human life according to public grammars. The provisionality of the sayable in 'Ketjak' reflects the capacity for a subject's entry into life amongst the lives of others.

The life of the sign also offers another way of thinking about those micro-scenes that at times accumulate across runs of multiple interrogatives in 'Sunset Debris':

> Can sentences tell us how we change? Are those words not stored or hidden in the ink? Do you see those two women, sunning themselves, sharing a joint? How does the day form? Is that her on her way back? Are those the sounds of seals? What is the smell of summer? Why did you bring a flag? What is the origin of the emotions? Can I repel you? Can I reveal you? Can I define you? Can I set you up for a hit? Can I make you cry? Can I make you choke? Can I name you? Can I fuck you, casually and without emotion? Can I put my cock in your mouth? Can I push it to the back of your throat? How hard do you want it? Is this the chronicle of our turning and turning away? Is this going to get me somewhere? Will this make collective life any easier? (*AOH* 138)

At the beginning of this excerpt the poem is progressing paratactically, not accumulating into any unified scene but, as noted previously, regularly suggesting potential unities through which short runs of sentences might be interpreted. As the passage begins, however, a formal unity starts to impose itself. The run of interrogatives starts to seize upon the word 'can' as a beginning to a question: 'Can sentences tell us how we change?' Soon, this 'can' dominates the progression: 'Can I repel you? Can I reveal you?', 'Can I set you up for a hit?' Strikingly, the 'can' has now been paired with the singular pronoun 'I'. The questions are no longer abstract or academic, as they were in the opening 'Can sentences tell us how we change?', but are now immediate and far more physical. If 'Can I make you choke?' already seemed violent to us, it may, three sentences later, retroactively seem sexually violent when we encounter 'Can I put my cock in your mouth?' and 'Can I push it to the back of your throat?' More, it seems, is occurring here than a test of one's 'literacy' by means of parataxis. Rather, in this moment the poem's parataxis has been overwhelmed by the life of the sign. As the

sentences fall into a pattern of formal similarity in 'Can' and then 'Can I' questions, the life of the form, the capacity to see the sense of such questions in the terms of particular uses in a form of life, comes to the surface and starts to structure the sequence such that it builds more than usually to a unified scene. The life of the sign, in other words, starts to resist and, indeed, to alter the way in which parataxis relates the sentences to the form of life from which they are drawn.

Two things are then apparent. One is that this self-assertion of the life of the sign makes it clear that what is sayable in a particular situation may, indeed, structure what is doable in that situation. The life of the sign, in the case above, has after all seemed to direct the poet into a certain chain of thoughts. The other is that, if Silliman's new sentence parataxis critiques the social constitution of the subject through a language determined by external criteria, it is a loving critique full of that 'life' that language carries into itself from 'actual life'. Though he finds the power of language to seem autonomous in this way obviously very suspect, I argue that Silliman is as interested in its 'life' as much as he is in the critique of its political ramifications. Hence, poems like 'BART', where language maps thought during a journey on the Bay Area Rapid Transit, and 'Albany' where what is sayable in memory structures a form of paratactic autobiography.

The life of the sign is also under interrogation in other of Silliman's poems that either deploy the new sentence in verse form or break down the syntactic integrity of the sentence itself. For an example of the first we might look at a section of the poem 'Hidden' from *The Alphabet*:

[Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (*A* 80)

The sentence to sentence relationship is the same as in the prose poems, but now the extra elements of lineation and stanza breaks interfere in the sentences' integrity. The content of the parataxis resembles what we have seen in 'Ketjak'. The opening sentence speaks of Dan White, a man who perpetrated a political assassination in San Francisco in 1978, and is followed by the image of 'Sleeping pigeons / atop a power line'.[473] The following run of sentences is similarly referential, bringing the poem into contact with a 'roofer's truck', 'a woman / in nurse whites' carrying 'three purses', a truck, and then the face itself. After this run of reference, Silliman turns to more abstract, meta-poetic sentences, and here these sentences seem to comment on the poem's form. The phrase 'Between terms / thought moves through a process / of distraction' has a particularly performative quality. As the line breaks divide up the sentence they interfere with our ability to smoothly absorb the sense of the sentence, acting as the 'process / of distraction' that the sentence names. Thus it is that Silliman follows the above, in another meta-poetic gesture, with the observation that 'Syntax slides // over a rough surface'.

As such, there are two antagonistic forces at work in 'Hidden'. On the one hand, the new sentences tap into the system of signs, the context of their use, that gives them their sense. We experience them, as grammatical displays, making present their currency within that form of life. On the other hand, and at the same time, the lineation and stanza-breaking interfere with the unity of the sentence and so with our capacity to

[473] Special to The New York Times, 'Dan White Gets 7 Years 8 Months in Double Slaying in San Francisco', *New York Times* Jul 04, 1979.

interpret the sentences and thus see them as full of life. If, as Silliman asserts, 'language-centred writing' is drawn towards the 'myth of the word' as somehow 'inexplicably' present', the lineation counters that inclination by further emphasising language's tangibility.

This antagonism is even more emphatically present in '2197' from *The Age of Huts*. In a 1982 interview where Silliman addresses the repetition and progression of sentences in his poems, he describes the particular form of '2197'. He tells the interviewer that he wanted each 'recurring sentence' to be 'radically rewritten so as to appear distorted, broken, artificial', and that 'this was accomplished by superimposing the vocabulary of one sentence onto the syntax of another'.[474] The effect is of a strangely eloquent form of nonsense, such as in this excerpt:

> Fog rain forms is high for low tide.
>
> Locating prior concept atop difficulty.
>
> Blind talking about color.
>
> This is the hang-up between handguns
>
> and sex.
>
> Poem is an end.
>
> There are warrior song within a kite.
>
> The long we read into the page, the
>
> less certain it did it does.
>
> Here the cells are sickling.

[474] Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, eds., *Alive and Writing: Interviews with Ameican Authors of the 1980s* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 253.

Noise on the bus on their way to this.

We went fill through the loomy forms.

We arrived at the small fishing

sensitivity just as the language worked its

way over the information.

The loud inventory of an old ontology. (*AOH* 183)

It is possible to read this sequence, and the poem at large, as another test of literacy, at least in that its base challenge is to our capacity to make sense of the syntactically rearranged sentences. If one way of interpreting a poem like 'Ketjak' is as a test to one's broader cultural literacy, with the political implications that such a test brings, here we are tested on our capacity to experience a phrase as 'alive'. Earlier in this chapter, Wittgenstein was quoted as drawing an analogy between the capacity to see a sentence as alive and the capacity to see a portrait of a person as similarly alive (*PPF* §200). An extension to this analogy might be to ask: to what extent could you alter a portrait of a person until you were no longer able to see in it the sort of life that the person himself or herself possesses? At some point distortion and brokenness will interfere with your ability to experience the portrait in this way. The same is true for the sentences Silliman presents and then distorts.

What is remarkable, however, is the degree to which life still seems to adhere to the sign after even its grammatical sense has been taken away. This is particularly striking in the third- and second-last sentences. Even without a paraphrasable meaning, the sentence 'We went fill through the loomy forms' continues to sound like a meaningful sentence. 'The loomy forms' offers a distant of echo Lewis Carrol's "The

Jabberwocky', where nonsense language is able to convey a degree of sense through the suggestive sound of its nonsense words. 'Loomy forms' chimes with 'loony forms', for instance, as though the poem's form were somehow insane. More suggestive, however, is the sense that 'loomy' also means something akin to 'loom-like'. In this sense, the form is less insane than it is processual. The shuttling back and forth across line and line-break is, in this context, the method that produces the poem's textual body. The possibility of interpreting 'loomy' in these ways reflects the life within the word. Even though 'loomy' has no precise, definite meaning in its context in the poem, it nonetheless still seems capable of meaning under the right circumstances. Even if we interpret 'loomy' as 'loom-like', however, we are left still wondering what it means to 'fill through the loomy forms'.

The sentence as a whole also *sounds* as though it will make sense given the appropriate conditions. 'We went fill through the loomy forms' conjures the ghosts of possible purposive uses. Just as crucially, however, it conjures a recognisable sound of meaningfulness. For instance, the sentence can take on a number of emphases. We might put the emphasis on 'We', such that we would be stressing that it is *we* who 'went fill through the loomy forms'. We might put the emphasis on 'fill', such that we emphasise that what the 'we' did to the loomy forms, in particular, was 'fill through' them. Or, alternatively, we might stress 'loomy', such that it is the *loomy* forms that we went 'fill through'. This is to say that the sentence carries the cadence of a meaning, a rhythm and a melody, of sorts, that we recognise as part of purposive language use. Even without being able to assign a precise meaning to the words, we can understand a variety of meanings within the sentence as a whole based on possible emphases. This suggests that what is experienced in the life of the sign is at least partly produced by the

sound of language as well as its sense. Indeed, Guetti makes this argument when he notes that the sound of language plays a large role in understanding its meaning: think of the difference between a proper noun being used as a nominative and its being used as a cry for help. Guetti also notes that 'Even if some were to grant that voice and its presence might have nothing to do with the meaning of language, few, I believe, would claim that voice was not a matter of their living experience of words'.[475] He bases this argument on some very interesting claims made by Wittgenstein about the relation of sound and meaning, such as in §527 of the *Investigations*: 'Understanding a sentence in language is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one might think'. Understanding a sentence, in other words, might mean understanding the order of the sounds of its words as much as the words themselves. Sounding out Silliman's sentences might thus be enough to give them some degree of life. Alongside this is the fact that while the words have been moved around in '2197', the sentences are structured according to the syntax of other sentences. And so not only can they be sounded out, but they also still resemble sentences even if they convey little to no sense. This, it seems, is enough for life to adhere.

This adherence would risk the return of that sense of autonomy characteristic of language 'under the sway of the commodity fetish' were we to forget its foundation in the language-games of a form of life. Against this, the sentences in '2197' are emphatically tangible. The process of distortion has so disrupted their utility, and thus their potential transparency in realist contexts, that their materiality as signifiers stands out in opposition to the capacity for prose to vanish into transparency. This creates a dissonance between the capacity to experience them as somehow alive and the

[475] Guetti, *Wittgenstein and the Grammar of Literary Experience*, 92.

impossibility of using them in meaningful, purposive contexts. What we experience of them is the public nature of the criteria for grammatical sense in their capacity to mean within contexts of purposive use. As such, rather than a form of autonomy, the experience of life within the distorted sentences is dependent on the absent contexts whose limits have been radically transgressed.

The final assertion of this chapter, then, is that from the Wittgensteinian perspective Silliman's fascination with the life of the sign makes the sayability of new sentences indicate their involvement in and dependence on purposive social action rather than their status as autonomous acts of reference. Sayability thus makes new sentences embody social relations. Sayability becomes interpretable as the experience of an often problematic social constitution, and as such, it is able to make surveyable the seeming naturalness of those notions of language that privilege autonomy and transparency. For instance, at the beginning of this chapter I noted two intersecting antagonisms in Silliman's 'Ketjak'. One was the antagonism between one's way of life under capitalism and one's bodily and social life. The other was an apparent antagonism between Silliman's concern for this state of affairs and the pleasure that he seemed to take in forms of linguistic play while articulating it. The sentence 'Necrotizing laryngotracheobronchitis, consequent of a chemical irritant, CS' (*AOH* 83)—from the excerpt from 'Ketjak' quoted at the beginning of this chapter—unifies these antagonisms.

CS gas is used in tear gas as a 'crowd control' agent. Silliman links the gas to Necrotizing laryngotracheobronchitis and thus makes the illness not just a consequence of a 'chemical irritant', a phrase that might seem banal, but a consequence of social

antagonisms that erupt in the form of riots and protests against institutional forms of power.[476] For instance, CS gas was used against rioters on the University of California, Berkeley campus in 1969, the university near to where Silliman grew up in Albany, California.[477] Silliman also worked on behalf of prisoner's rights at San Quentin State Prison.[478] In 1970, tear gas was used against what a newspaper article from the time claims was 'Nearly a thousand inmates at San Quentin' who had 'staged a strike […] to protest the shifting of court proceedings to the prison'.[479] The gas is also alleged to have been used by the American government as a part of the war in Vietnam.[480] CS gas is thus a tool of state power helping to maintain the structures that enforce a way of life in antagonism to bodily life. Silliman's deliberate use of the difficult phrase, however, stages its own political eruption.

We recall that in 'Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the world' Silliman writes that 'Under the sway of the commodity fetish, language itself appears to become transparent, a mere vessel for the transfer of ostensibly autonomous referents'.[481] The effect of capitalism on the means of representation, in other words, leads to language increasingly asserting the autonomy of that which it represents. As we have seen, for Silliman the commodity fetish also produces the seeming autonomy of

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[476] Richard Rennie, 'Cs Gas', *A Dictionary of Chemistry* (2016), http://www.oxfordreference.com /view/10.1093 /acref/9780198722823. 001.0001/acref-9780198722823-e-1137. See also Elizabeth Martin, 'Cs Gas', *Concise Medical Dictionary* (2015), http://www.oxfordreference.com /view/10.1093/acref/9780199687817.001.0001/acref-9780199687817-e-2326.
[477] Lawrence E Davies, 'Shotguns, and Tear Gas Disperse Rioters near the Berkeley Campus', *New York Times* 1969, May 16.
[478] Silliman, *Under* Albany, 8.
[479] Earl Caldwell, 'Striking San Quentin Prisoners Routed by Tear Gas', *The New York Times* 1970, Aug 26: According to Mr. James Park, the prison's associate warden, tear gas was used on the prisoners 'to force the inmates back to their cells'.
[480] There are many articles on this in periodicals from the Vietnam era. For one example see John W. Finney, 'Pentagon Scored on Chemical War: Vietnam Tactics Decried by New York Representative', *The New York Times* 1969, Apr 22, 2.
[481] Silliman, *The New Sentence*, 11.

words themselves. Of this, Silliman quotes Wittgenstein's *Investigations*: 'A *picture* held us captive. And we couldn't get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably' (*PI* §115).[482] Language, as what Silliman elsewhere refers to as a 'picture of the world', can hold us captive with its seemingly transparent representations of inevitable states of affairs and thus obscure the social constitution of both the social order and social language-use. While Silliman then argues that this effect finds its 'most complete expression' in 'the genre of fictional realism', he writes also that it 'is hardly less pervasive in the presumed objectivity of daily journalism or the hypotactic logic of normative expository style'.[483] Normal exposition, and we would have to include in this the expositions of medical practice and study, also confers an illusory autonomy to that which they name.

In a practical medical context or in a medical journal, the phrase 'Necrotizing laryngotracheobronchitis' would thus possess the sort of transparency and autonomy that Silliman challenges. In this understanding, the phrase's sayability treats both the disease and its name as autonomous entities. The illusion that holds us captive in this understanding is that this particular illness is an autonomous (potential) aspect of bodily life, an illusion that hides the illness's origin in the relation between bodily life and its way of life, in America, and under capitalism in a particular moment in history. This is particularly stark in the case of Silliman names in 'Ketjak': the disease is a 'consequent' of the use of CS gas. In this it resembles the phrase 'we had to destroy the village in order to save it' from 'The Chinese Notebook'. The phrase's sayability presumes a form of life that includes the use of CS gas as a method of crowd control. To disrupt this

[482] Ibid.
[483] Ibid.

sayability is thus implicitly to disrupt the form of life that renders it sayable. As a result, rather than simply describe the situation that necessitates the use of the medical term, or describe the illness itself, Silliman emphasises the phrase's difficult materiality in a poetic context by presenting it alongside the alliteration of 'consequent of a chemical', and in juxtaposition with other, easier phrases. Therefore, the difficulty of the phrase for those not immersed in medical language, and the suddenness of its arrival in the poetic context of 'Ketjak', put the phrase in a position to oppose the very act of transparent naming it performs in other contexts.

Previously it had seemed as though Silliman's use of the phrase reflected an antagonism between the author's pleasure in the life of the sign and the nature of the bodily life to which it refers. Now, however, we can see that both the phrase performs a gesture in relation to the political nature of sayability. The sayability of the phrase is a political problem within a way of life, one that might be at least partly opposed by making visible the social constitution of the phrase and the disease it names. It is this sort of gesture, perhaps, that Silliman is thinking of when he that 'The social role of the poem places it in an important position to carry the class struggle *for* consciousness to the level *of* consciousness'.[484] What Silliman makes plain is how much of one's own bodily and social life is bound up in the life of the sign.

[484] Ibid., 17.

‘If the function of writing is to “express the world”’: Silliman, Heidegger, and Disclosure

> The danger consists in the threat that assaults man’s nature in his relation to Being itself, and not in accidental perils. This danger is *the* danger. It conceals itself in the abyss that underlies all beings. To see this danger and point it out, there must be mortals who reach sooner into the abyss.
>
> —Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 115.

‘Albany’

In ‘Albany’, the first poem in Silliman’s *The Alphabet*, we find the new sentence hard at work:

> If the function of writing is to ‘express the world.’ My father withheld child support, forcing my mother to live with her parents, my brother and I to be raised together in a small room. Grandfather called them niggers. I can’t afford an automobile. Far across the calm bay stood a complex of long yellow buildings, a prison. A line is the distance between. They circled the seafood restaurant, singing ‘We shall not be moved.’ My turn to cook. (*A* 1)

The frequency of first-person pronouns is telling. As with the repeated interrogatives of 'Sunset Debris', we might suspect that the sentence forms of first-person, autobiographical utterance are being brought to the fore so that their content can be evacuated in favour of attention to the grammar of self-description and self-assertion. We might then read Silliman's poem as performing a degree of obsessive attention to the life of the pronoun. This would be analogous to how 'Sunset Debris' attends to the life of the interrogative. What Silliman is concerned with in 'Albany', we might say, is the degree to which the first-person pronouns seem to produce the position of an expressive subject (that is, they reflexively indicate their conventional uses). In such a reading we might argue that what is important about 'I can't afford an automobile' and 'My turn to cook' isn't the economic or domestic situations implied so much as the capacity of the pronouns to imply those situations as sites of subjective expression.

However, the opening, fragmented sentence implies a question: *If* the function of writing is to 'express the world', it seems to ask, *then* in what way does this poem fulfil such a function? We might argue that to give voice to the life of the sign is in some way to 'express the world'. This would be true inasmuch as the life of the sign is found by staging an encounter between the reader and the senses of a word as they can be felt to engage the limits of meaningful expression present within one's world. But other possibilities beckon. To 'express the world' might seem to us to blend together the ideas of mimesis or realism (description of the world) and post-romantic and confessional notions of the lyric (expression of the self). If this is what it means to 'express the world', however, it presents its own problems. Mimesis was problematic for Silliman because it reifies the relations it recreates by conferring autonomy on its referents. Lyric self-expression was problematic because such speech locates language's origin within a

speaker whose reality is affirmed by that speech, and whose reality, in turn, confirms the authenticity of the utterance.

Self-expression and prose mimesis come together in the concept of autobiography, however. In 'Albany' the sentences refer back, each in different ways, to Silliman's childhood in the town of Albany, California. Silliman and his brother *were* raised by their mother in an oppressive household shared with their grandparents.[485] Silliman also worked for a period with an organisation devoted to prisoner welfare and rights.[486] The gaze across the bay at the yellow prison buildings is, in this light, as much Silliman's own moment of contemplation as it is a view for Albany in general.[487] The image of a protest around a seafood restaurant might be drawn from any period in Silliman's political activity. In her reading of 'Albany', Perloff argues that if new-sentence parataxis resists attempts to project a coherent lyric subject at the centre of the poem, there is still something authorial and autobiographical taking place.[488] 'Autobiography' is the term Perloff uses, attempting to reclaim expression and representation for reading Silliman, and doing so in opposition to a critical tradition (partly of her own making) of reading Language poetry as an emphatic refusal of such forms. To this end she quotes Silliman himself from their private correspondence:

> In a letter to me (10 January 1998), Silliman comments, '[…] The whole premise of Albany (or at least a premise) was to focus on things that were both personal and political, so when Gale called it seemed like the right place to

[485] Accounts of Silliman's living situation as a child are given in portions of Armantrout et al., *The Grand Piano*, as well as in Silliman, *Under* Albany.
[486] Silliman, *Under* Albany.
[487] Silliman specifies that the prison in question is San Quentin in *Under* Albany, 8.
[488] Perloff, 'The Portrait of the Language Poet as Autobiographer'.

> begin. *That poem always has been my autobiography, so to speak*'[.][489]
> [Perloff's italics]

For Perloff the autobiographical aspect of 'Albany' is a matter of voice. Authorial voice, resulting from authorial control, replaces the centrality of the lyric subject but is arguably no less 'dominant' over the poem and its language than are traditional practices of lyric expressivity.[490] The poet 'expresses', with the result not being (for Silliman) the representation of a self but the accumulation and collation of her or his (linguistic) 'world': 'one "expresses"', Perloff writes,

> not by putting oneself at the center of the universe, but by following Wittgenstein's precept that 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.' 'The subject,' says Wittgenstein, 'does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world' […] The function of writing, it quickly appears, *is* to 'express the world,' at least, with the Wittgensteinian proviso, 'the world as I found it.'[491]

Considered in this way, expression is a form of mimesis. One expresses by identifying oneself with the world-as-language, but at the same time the world that emerges is 'the world as I found it'. Perloff uses the 'Wittgensteinian proviso' in order to make Silliman's reference to 'autobiography' a matter of de-centred but nonetheless unified collation. The poet operates as a set of limits making up a decentred but recognisable

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[489] Ibid., 175.
[490] Jennifer Ashton also makes a version of this argument in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). She writes that, contrary to critical claims that Language poetry 'repudiates intention', the language poets themselves argue that they 'reclaim intention' (21).
[491] Perloff, 'The Portrait of the Language Poet as Autobiographer', 175.

'world' of utterances. From the Wittgensteinian position developed in the preceding chapter we might describe this process as follows: sayability marks the intersection between a way of life [or form of life, *Lebensform*] and one's 'actual life'. Because of this, the collation and curation of what is sayable produces an 'autobiographical' representation of one's 'actual life' *within* one's way of life. For this Perloff uses the Wittgensteinian formulations, 'my world', or 'the world as I found it'.

If this is Silliman's goal, however, the question remains as to why he chose this particular poetic form for its 'expression'. What does it mean that this 'autobiography' takes the form of a specifically poetic and paratactic encounter with sayability? This question comes into the foreground when one notices that the poem's autobiographical function was supplemented, or even supplanted, by Silliman's prose autobiography, *Under* Albany. *Under* Albany takes the sentences from 'Albany' in the order they appear, and for each provides a prose accompaniment. Sometimes this prose accompaniment is expository, adding more detail to a fragmentary glimpse. 'I can't afford an automobile', for instance, is followed by a description of the young Silliman's financially precarious life as a conscientious objector working without salary for the Committee for Prisoner Humanity & Justice:

> With barely enough money to afford my $50-per-month rent in a large communal flat opposite the Panhandle in the Haight, I often hitchhiked the seventeen miles north over the Golden Gate Bridge to work and back. Later, as funds became more plentiful and my need to be reasonably on time grew, I chose to ride the Golden Gate Transit buses out, hitching back in the evening rush. […] Often the bus was quieter and more private than my home. I would

> read or stare out the window and increasingly I began to use the time in order to write.[492]

A first-person sentence, presented paratactically in the poem, is elaborated upon with a series of detailed and hypotactic paragraphs that culminate by circling back to the acts of writing that produced the original sentence. For another sentence quoted above, 'Grandfather called them niggers', the accompaniment in *Under* Albany also adds detail, but such that the autobiographical glimpse in the originating poem is undercut: 'So that I was surprised at how many elderly African American men, all, like my grandfather, members of the Veterans for Foreign Wars (VFW), came to his funeral' (6).[493] What does this contradiction indicate? Was 'Albany' somehow incomplete or otherwise insufficient as autobiography? Or, is this simply the difference between two autobiographies composed years apart, where time had allowed for more generous reflection?

If *Under* Albany presents an autobiographical text lying somehow under the poetic text, the difference between the two should give us pause. We can apply the term 'autobiography' to 'Albany', as Perloff does, in order to challenge the idea that Language poetry rejects mimesis and expression outright, but we ought to attend to the difference between the 'autobiography' of 'Albany' and the autobiography of *Under* Albany. If *Under* Albany represents the world through the practices of hypotactic prose—with scene, narrative, character, etc.—'Albany' refuses them. Even arranged in response to the sequence of the original poem, the length of the prose paragraphs in

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[492] Silliman, *Under* Albany, 7.
[493] Silliman, perhaps accidentally, changes 'of' to 'for' in his reference to the 'Veterans Of Foreign Wars' (6).

Under Albany is opposed to the brevity of the poem's new sentences. The poetic text, whether or not we consider it in terms of autobiography, maintains its difference to the non-poetic text. 'Albany', for instance, draws attention to language in a way that *Under* Albany does not. We might ask, then, what the poetic 'autobiography' achieves in its refusal of the paragraph-building forms that characterise the prose autobiography. Why is it important that in the poem 'Albany' the 'expression' of the life of the poet should be closely bound up with attention to the life of the sign?

To approach the poem with such questions goes against some prior readings of Language poetics, and particularly of Silliman's work. Again, a recent exemplar is Oren Izenberg's reading of what he calls Silliman's attempt to capture a 'universal grammar:'

> Language poetry produces the sensation that language as Language poetry imagines and manifests it has neither affect nor tone, and that poetry as Language poetry imagines and manifests it demands neither articulation nor, precisely, attention. Imagine language, in effect, without a speaker. I will suggest that under these conditions, indifference and inattention to the specifics of what is being said is not only a plausible response; it is the strong response that such writing demands. Our indifference to 'actually existing' Language poems, in other words, is not a form of contempt, but a recognition that these poems do not mean to be well understood, do not ask to be revisited with devoted care, do not even seek to be finely perceived.[494]

[494] Izenberg, *Being Numerous*, 163, 42.

Izenberg argues that indifference to the poem on the reader's part is a natural reaction to its own indifference to the reader. The only interest Izenberg can muster is for 'the rigor with which' the poem 'can adhere to the fact that the universal grammar'. The poems are concerned not with

> a speaker, but rather a competence to speak. In its strong form, which is perhaps to say, its notional form, Language poetry neither embodies nor inculcates disinterest, it is uninteresting, and not just to the uninitiated but on principle. Only insofar as it was really appealing to no one could it succeed in exemplifying everyone.[495]

Izenberg thus aligns the poem with a philosophical or theoretical regard for language as such, and any concern for its poetic deployment of language, for an experience with the life of the sign, or for an experience with that way of life that contends with the sign and (for Wittgensteinian thinking) produces its grammatical horizon, is jettisoned.

Silliman was quite aware that his style and the scale of this poems posed difficulties for readers, or at least he was aware of the criticisms they tended to produce. The challenge to readerly attention was woven into 'Ketjak' as a theme of its meta-poetic sentences. These give the appearance of a poet quoting his detractors: 'No individual sentence given particular attention' (78), 'Endless intimate detail ultimately bores' (99). Each of these sentences, moreover, is repeated as the stanza-paragraphs themselves repeat. Having looked at 'Ketjak', 'Albany', and others of Silliman's poems in the previous chapter of this thesis, such meta-poetry seems ironic given the care with

[495] Ibid., 162.

which Silliman constructs his paratactic sequences. Nonetheless, Silliman's poems are difficult, both conceptually and in terms of scale. As each sentence projects its own singular affect, the ongoing experience of the poem threatens to blur them together into a unified flatness, the sort of 'indifference' that Izenberg argues is a natural and principled characteristic of Language poetry in general. I would counter this with the suggestion that Silliman's poetry neither requires nor produces 'indifference' as such. However, it does challenge one to attend to how language (as a determining social competency) relates to the sort of 'world' that can be the subject of something like autobiography.

In the preceding chapter I considered one way in which the world relates to language-use in Silliman's poetry: the life of the sign. I showed how Silliman's poetry relates itself to this life and how it emerges from and at the same time exerts control over what one does socially. This constituted a 'faithful' reading, following a line of inquiry suggested by the context of Silliman's engagement with Wittgenstein's philosophy. In the present chapter I ask what a deliberately unfaithful (here a Heideggerian) reading of Silliman's Wittgensteinian poetics might add to our understanding. To return to Heidegger means returning to our original co-ordinates in a new way, and picking up with Silliman what was put down with Oppen. It means moving from grammar, and questions around our different experiences of meaning and sense, to poetry considered as something very particular in relation to our fundamental experience of (the) world. I return to Heidegger first, therefore, because of the co-presence of the Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian philosophies in the poetry and the criticism of post-war America. We have seen already that the grammatical poetics of the Wittgensteinian frame was capable of opening up a new and enlightening image of

Oppen's Heideggerian poetry. This reading showed that Oppen stages his ontological poetics within the grammatical experience of language abstracted from purposive use. To turn from Silliman's Wittgensteinian poetics back to the possibilities offered by a Heideggerian poetics is to complete the circle and to find out what a poetics of disclosure can reveal about an already politicised grammatical poetics. Most importantly, however, I return to a Heideggerian poetics as a way of reading Silliman's work because such a position allows us to see facets of Silliman's work that exceed or escape a Wittgensteinian perspective.

In performing a Heideggerian reading of Silliman's poetry this chapter looks again at the antagonisms inherent in life under late capitalism, and at his poetry's ability to disclose those antagonisms. It argues that, rather than simply examining its own obsession with the life of the sign, or solely critiquing the utilitarian nature of language 'under the sway of the commodity fetish', Silliman's poetry discloses the nature of his historical moment and the 'actual life' that it contains. It does so, moreover, in a way that Heidegger's philosophy helps us to understand.

This chapter argues that Silliman draws attention to his own language-use and to his poetic forms in order to show the modes of presencing and withdrawal taking place both in the poetry and in the world. In doing this, I argue, Silliman discloses a situation comparable to what Heidegger called the 'enframing' taking place in technological, capitalist modernity. Enframing is a process that Heidegger finds at work within the ongoing modern relationship between humanity and being. It is, in its briefest formulation, a configuration of being in which in which being is increasingly framed off, circumscribed, and predetermined by utility. The overwhelming effect of this, for

Heidegger, is that 'nearness is withheld'; being no longer appears in nearness but only in presence.[496] Following this, I look at Silliman's poems 'Albany' and *Tjanting* and show that each reveals different but related aspects of an 'enframed' culture. I argue that Silliman's new-sentence parataxis in 'Albany, characterised by a simultaneous continuity and discontinuity, brings out an analogous simultaneity of continuity and discontinuity in the geographical and social relations in the town of Albany, California. I then show how the continuity and discontinuity at work in the poem 'Albany' is extended in *Tjanting* as a profound sense of anonymity and transience. *Tjanting*, I argue, not only discloses the prevalence of geographic and economic transience in the San Francisco Bay Area as Silliman knew it, but also the withdrawing of being from naming in an enframed era—for Silliman, under capital. That is, Silliman shows the withdrawal of the experience of being within an enframed world by bringing forth the forms of earthly withdrawal native to the new sentence. I argue that Silliman uses parataxis to disrupt the representational methods of hypotaxis in order relate the formal, quantitative measure of the poem, the sentence, to the overarching, qualitative measurelessness of what Heidegger calls the 'destitute' enframed era.

Following this, I turn to a much more recent poem, *Revelator*, wherein Silliman has overtly started to think of his poetry as a site for revelatory disclosures within a historically shaped open. I show that in relating his poem's revelatory powers to the forms of presence and withdrawal, especially the historical finitude, of beings in the world, Silliman discloses both the advance of enframing within that world and the historical temporality shaping being's entry into and withdrawal from presence. Where

[496] Graham Harman, *Heidegger Explained: From Phenomenon to Thing* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2007), 138.

most of Silliman's prior poems had been concerned with ontic disclosures, I argue that *Revelator* ends by bringing forth an ontological poetic disclosure where historical presence and withdrawal merges with a form of the *Ereignis* experience centred on bodily life.

A Heideggerian Reading

As this thesis noted at its outset, there are many precedents for reading twentieth-century poetry in relation to Heidegger's philosophy.[497] Broadly speaking, such readings tend to rely on points of similarity between Heidegger's thinking and the theory and practice of a particular poet.[498] An example is Terrence Wright's reading of Seamus Heaney in 'Heidegger and Heaney: Poetry and Possibility'. There a 'fundamental relationship is revealed through an analysis of their thinking on time'.[499] Wright refers to Heidegger's analysis of the temporality of *Dasein* as thrown projection. He argues that Heaney similarly presents his poetic speaking as full of the recollections of the past but capable of anticipating a future projected from but not bound to their trajectory.[500] In doing this, he writes, 'Heaney articulates how individuals come to recognize and know themselves through the poet's consideration of a common past'.[501]

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[497] See also Large, 'Part Woodcutter and Part Charlatan', 26-7, and Joseph N. Riddel, 'From Heidegger to Derrida to Chance: Doubling and (Poetic) Language', in *Early Postmodernism: Foundational Essays*, ed. Paul A. Bové (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 211, for more detail on trends in Heideggerian criticism in the late twentieth century.
[498] This is true even of Ziarek, who is very precise in drawing out the Heidegger-like thinking about being present in the authors he writes about. See, for instance, Ziarek's discussion of the quasi-metaphoricity of both Heidegger's and Wallace Stevens's conceptions of language in 'Poetics of Disclosure in Stevens's Late Poetry'. See also his comparison of Heideggerian thinking about silence and reticence to the 'reticent event' as a feature of the work of Gertrude Stein, Susan Howe and Myung Mi Kim: Ziarek, 'Reticent Event'.
[499] Terrence C. Wright, 'Heidegger and Heaney: Poetry and Possibility', *Philosophy Today* 38, no. 4 (1994): 390.
[500] Ibid., 393.
[501] Ibid., 395.

There is a double relation to Heidegger here. Heaney, Wright claims, both articulates an ontological notion similar to the temporality described by early Heidegger, and at the same time discloses something of the nature of poetry articulated by the later Heidegger.

Wright's form of Heideggerian reading is common, and is based in an analogy between philosophical and poetic thinking. In this, the critical usage of Heidegger is distinct from Heidegger's own use of literature in his philosophy. For Heidegger, the task of thinking was to perform what he called *Erläuterungen*: elucidations or 'soundings-out' of poems.[502] This meant following the path of thought begun by the poem's speaking. In approaching the poem, Heidegger asserts, one should not try to know in advance what outcomes one is likely to find. At the same time, as Pattison puts it, we must

> resist being seduced into merely marvelling at the beauty of a poem as a product of culture […]; nor is a poem to be 'explained' by reference to its historical context, nor even by comparison with parallel citation from the author's own work, since this is in each case to presuppose that we understand what the poem itself is about. However, only the poem itself can teach us what it is about.[503]

In this, the model of Heideggerian reading-by-analogy would seem to fail Heidegger's own challenge. It would seek to 'explain' the poem according to a pre-existing schema that, in already being understood, pre-explains the poem's contents and short-circuits its possible 'firstness'. As Nowell Smith summarises, in 'technical or hermeneutic analysis,

[502] Nowell Smith emphasises this interpretation of *Erläuterungen* throughout *Sounding/Silence*.
[503] Pattison, *Routledge Philosopy Guidebook to the Later Heidegger*, 169.

the poem's "thrust into the extraordinary is captured by familiarity and connoisseurship"'.[504] What Heidegger seeks instead, Nowell Smith argues, is a way of turning toward the '"unfamiliar" in poetry without familiarizing it, explaining it without explaining it away'.[505] Thus, in his essay on 'The Origin of the Work of Art', Heidegger describes his preferred mode of reading:

> the more purely the work is itself transported into the openness of beings—an openness opened by itself—the more simply does it transport us into this openness and at the same time transport us out of the realm of the ordinary. To submit to this displacement means: to transform our accustomed ties to the world and to earth and henceforth to restrain all usual doing and prizing, knowing and looking, in order to stay within the truth that is happening in the work.[506]

The artwork positions itself in the region between humanity and being and is transported into its own openness. To read or encounter a poem means not explaining it, not mastering it according to a pre-existing competency, but submitting to its strangeness—the strangeness of a happening of truth that is the artwork, a strangeness capable of transforming our ties to world and earth. Heidegger calls this submission 'preserving'. This is the reciprocal motion in which a work's createdness gives itself over to thinking. Reading a poem, in this sense, is a thinking that submits to the happening of truth in the work.[507]

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[504] Nowell Smith, *Sounding/Silence*, 2.
[505] Ibid.
[506] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 64.
[507] Ibid., 66.

The difference between Heidegger's own mode and the critical use of his philosophy indicates two competing models for a 'Heideggerian' reading of Silliman's poetry. One fits within the dominant critical tradition and arguably makes up the majority of 'Heideggerian' readings. In this it is perhaps more identifiable *as* a reading of poetry than the other, which fits within a philosophical tradition.[508] In the first sections of the chapter I follow the critical-Heideggerian tradition. I interpret Silliman's work by bringing the poems into relation with elements of Heidegger's philosophy. However, when I turn to *Revelator* in the final section of the chapter I reduce my reliance on extended comparisons in order to seek further insight into the poem's originary disclosures.

Silliman and 'the Heideggerian project'

While there are no critical precedents for an extended Heideggerian reading of Silliman's poems, there is nonetheless some critical work that indicates where such a reading might begin. William Watkin, for example, uses the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben, who was influenced by Heidegger, to re-think the 'materialization' of line and paragraph in Silliman's *Tjanting*.[509] Watkin focuses on the mechanisms by which Silliman refuses prosaic transparency. His approach, while it offers little for a specifically Heideggerian reading, points toward the possibility of a phenomenological investigation of Silliman's poems. Silliman's self-conscious thinking-through of the problem of the poem's ending, Watkin argues, resembles the situation described by

[508] This point is often made by those who object to Heidegger's way of reading. See, especially, Adorno, *Notes to Literature, Volume 2*.
[509] Watkin, 'The Materialization of Prose'.

Agamben in 'The End of the Poem'.[510] Silliman struggles, he suggests, with the need to bring his work to an end, and thus both performs and tropes upon the nature of prose-poetry as it works towards its increasingly necessary ending.[511] Silliman's array of metaphors for *Tjanting*'s ending ('the turn of the tide, the weariness of the canal's linearity and the downward press of the momentum of any text towards its completion'), Watkin writes, bring the poem toward a 'theory of the interrupted cohesion of the paragraph' that results 'in a radical restatement of the semiotics of prose'.[512] Watkin's article represents a phenomenological reassessment of Silliman's Wittgensteinian procedure. It suggests that one phenomena that the poem turns toward is itself: the poem unfolding or proceeding in front of its own eyes.

Where Watkin focuses on the experience of language and form in Silliman's poetry, Perloff addresses the access such an experience offers to 'everyday life'. In 'Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman's Albany, Susan Howe's Buffalo', Perloff refers to 'the phenomenology of everyday life characteristic of Silliman'.[513] She leaves this concept undeveloped, however, wanting only to contrast the identifiable authorial unity of 'Albany', already discussed above, to the less unified fragments of other poets. What Perloff refers to, however, is likely tied closely to what some refer to as a specifically Wittgensteinian phenomenology.[514] Nicholas Gier writes that, in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Remarks,* we encounter 'the identification of phenomenology and grammar'.[515] For readers like Gier, this is prominent in

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[510] Ibid., 358.
[511] Ibid., 360.
[512] Ibid.
[513] Marjorie Perloff, 'Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman's Albany, Susan Howe's Buffalo', *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 3 (1999): 420.
[514] Nicholas F. Gier, *Wittgenstein and Phenomenology: A Comparative Study of the Later Wittgenstein, Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981).
[515] Ibid., 92.

Wittgenstein's writing about colour. Wittgenstein writes that 'a colour "*shines*" in its surroundings [*Umgebung*]. (Just as eyes only smile in a face)'.[516] Of this Gier writes that 'any optical physicist would be completely baffled by Wittgenstein's remarks here, but Wittgenstein warns us that he is doing a phenomenology, i.e. a grammar of colours and not a physics of colours'.[517] Wittgenstein's question is not to ask what colour is, or what we can know or believe about colour necessarily, but rather how the activities of daily life give sense to colour, respond to colour's logic, and shape or contradict what is said about colour. Wittgenstein describes a situation in which

> In my room I am surrounded by objects of different colours. It is easy to say what colour they are. But if I were asked what colour I am now seeing from here at, say, *this* place on my table, I couldn't answer; the place is whitish (because the light wall makes the brown table lighter here) at any rate it is much lighter than the rest of the table, but, given a number of colour samples, I wouldn't be able to pick out one which had the same coloration as this area of the table.[518]

As elsewhere, Wittgenstein undermines a theoretical, abstract understanding by exposing its contradiction within practical situations. If I can say that the table is brown, but not that any particular point on the table is brown, or white, then what am I doing when I call that table brown? Moreover, why can still refer to it as such?

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[516] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe, trans. Linda L. McAlister and Margarete Schättle (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 9.
[517] Gier, *Wittgenstein and Phenomenology*, 124.
[518] Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, 28.

Wittgenstein's phenomenology thus differs from Heidegger's in crucial ways. Most fundamentally, Wittgenstein's phenomenology is not concerned with the question of being. While he differentiates between situations in which colour might 'shine' he does not ask, as Heidegger might, in what ways colour gives itself over to thought. Nor does he ask whether a colour's shining in a certain environment is the result of a particular attunement to being (perhaps such an experience brings one into awareness of beings as a whole, for instance), nor whether such a moment of shining breaks the object in question out of its involvement within certain forms of relation. Is it, for instance, less likely to be equipmentally 'ready-to-hand' in such moments? Instead, Wittgenstein's phenomenology investigates how sayability relates to and emerges from purposive situations.[519] If Perloff's naming of a 'phenomenology of everyday life characteristic of Silliman' does not therefore tell us what Silliman's poetry might be capable of disclosing about being, or how Heidegger's philosophy helps us to understand it, it does suggest that Silliman's renegotiation of the semiotics of prose and his other disruptive formal innovations engage with a phenomenological experience of 'everyday life'. The experience of one, that is to say, necessarily turns us toward experience of the other.

The possibilities of a phenomenology of the poem and a phenomenology of 'everyday life' come together in a review essay by Steve McCaffery. In reviewing Jennifer Ashton's *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century*, McCaffery makes a provocative gesture towards a specifically Heideggerian reading of Silliman's Language poetry—both its formal features and its approach to 'everyday life'. While overall praising Ashton's work, McCaffery takes

[519] Gier, *Wittgenstein and Phenomenology*, 94.

issue with Ashton's definition of Language poetry: he argues that to align Language poetry, as Ashton does, with

> the two features of indeterminacy and openness[,] is to aestheticize the work at the expense of its political mandates. […] A contrived textual indeterminacy was but a single facet of Language poetry, a facet alongside a critique of voice and authenticity, an embrace of artifice, a laying bare of the method of production, a preference for heteroglossia over monoglossia while at the same time rejecting narrative modalities, and a general critique of instrumental language under capitalism, mass mediation, and the consciousness industry.[520]

In McCaffery's counter definition, Language poetry's aesthetic features are inseparable from its political motivations.[521] McCaffery's recurring term is 'critique', and he aligns critique with a gesture resonant with suspicious hermeneutics: 'laying bare'. For McCaffery, the critique enacted by Language poetry's aesthetics aims at 'laying bare […] the method of production'. Poetic creation moves into the domain of political action such that the two are, in an important sense, the same. The previous chapter of this thesis interpreted the intimacy of Silliman's poetry's aesthetics with its political ambitions according to Wittgenstein's philosophy of the language-game. This included language's relation to forms of life, and how this relation takes further form in the life of the sign. This reading was motivated by the influence of Wittgenstein's philosophy on Silliman's poetry and on Silliman's theorisation of the Language movement as a

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[520] Steve McCaffery, 'Autonomy to Indeterminacy', *Twentieth-Century Literature* 53, no. 2 (2007): 215.
[521] This argument echoes many of Silliman's own claims about his writing, for instance: 'My politics and my aesthetics are essentially different faces of the same argument': McCaffery and Gregory, *Alive and Writing*, 245.

whole. In his own attempt to put Language poetry's unification of political and aesthetic praxis into a larger theoretical trajectory, however, McCaffery turns to the other of post-war America's great philosophical influences. '[F]ragmentation, disjunction, grammatical transgression, and catachresis', McCaffery writes,

> are not only modernist tactics reincorporated in a different historical moment to render meaning purely reaction, and effective instruments in promoting indeterminacy for readerly engagement, they are also central to Heidegger's broader call to linguistic emancipation first raised in his 1947 'Letter on Humanism'.[522]

In other words, Language poetry's main techniques of aesthetico-political oppositionality not only appropriate 'modernist tactics' to new ends, but also are also part of Heidegger's critique of language's relation to human being.

In making this claim, McCaffery turns to a section of Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism' in which the philosopher discusses the relation between 'thinking', 'Being', and 'man'. Thinking, Heidegger writes, 'lets itself be claimed by Being so that it can say the truth of Being'.[523] Thinking thus approaches both the 'enowning' characteristic of *Ereignis* and the 'happening of truth' that Heidegger identifies with the originary nature of the work of art. In his attempt to express the shape of thinking in 'Letter on Humanism', however, Heidegger finds that the language he must use risks leading him and his readers into a problematic metaphysical formulation. He writes that 'Thinking is

[522] McCaffery, 'Autonomy to Indeterminacy', 215.
[523] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 218.

'l'engagement par l'Être pour l'Être [engagement by Being for Being]', but notes also that 'the possessive form "*de l*" . . .' is supposed to express both subjective and objective genitives'.[524] Of this, Heidegger writes that

> In this regard 'subject' and 'object' are inappropriate terms of metaphysics, which very early on in the form of Occidental 'logic' and 'grammar' seized control of the interpretation of language. We today can only begin to descry what is concealed in that occurrence. The liberation of language from grammar into a more original essential framework is reserved for thought and poetic creation.[525]

McCaffery quotes this passage, and emphasises 'poetic creation'. If for Heidegger poetic creation is the event in which language might be liberated from a problematic grammar then, McCaffery argues, 'Language poetry truly seems to complete, or at least continue, the Heideggerian project'.[526]

It is worth noting that the point that Heidegger makes in this part of the essay partly resembles Wittgenstein's argument that our language, and particularly its grammar, makes us subject to 'pictures' that we struggle to escape: 'A *picture* held us captive. And we couldn't get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably' (*PI* §115). As with Heidegger's argument in the 'Letter on Humanism', Wittgenstein finds false 'pictures' of things like meaning, knowledge and certainty similarly in place in the language. There are important

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[524] Ibid.
[525] Ibid.
[526] McCaffery, 'Autonomy to Indeterminacy', 216.

differences, however. For Wittgenstein the pictures within language that held him and others captive were only a problem for philosophers. The pictures within language aren't a problem when language is being used, that is, but when philosophers try to explain language to themselves. Wittgenstein believed that philosophy's job was expressly *not* to intervene in everyday language use.[527] For Heidegger, however, while philosophy certainly struggles with the metaphysics concealed within grammar and logic, that metaphysics is dangerous because of its presence in everydayness. It is dangerous because it is part of the *logos* that shapes a historical people's relation to being. Therefore, for Heidegger, the metaphysical structures within language were something one might ideally 'escape'. Moreover, the possibility of escape is reserved for 'thought and poetic creation'.

This difference between Wittgenstein and Heidegger echoes a difference between Silliman's poetry (and that of the Language poets more generally) and Wittgenstein's philosophy. Wittgenstein argues that an investigation of ordinary language use ought to have only descriptive and not interventionist ambitions (*PI* §124). Silliman and the Language poets, conversely, overtly sought to intervene in ordinary language use and, through this, in society at large. In the previous chapter I quoted Hejinian statements, in *The Grand Piano*, that she and the other Language poets

> wanted to believe that our critiques of syntax (linguistic, in the case of the Language writers, musical in the case of Rova) were tantamount to critiques of

[527] See, for instance, §124 in the *Philosophical Investigations:* 'Philosophy must not interfere in any way with actual use of language, so it can in the end only describe it'.

> social structures, and that the deconstruction and reinvention of syntax would result in new (and better) social semantics.[528]

To this extent, then, if Language poetry 'continues' the Heideggerian project according to McCaffery, it is partly because, like Heidegger, Silliman and the other Language poets find problematic relations to the world concealed within and enforced by ordinary, daily language use. Moreover, and as Watkin and Perloff also note, they see poetry as a privileged site of resistance.

Earth and World

Heidegger's philosophy thus offers a way of thinking about how Silliman's poetry might both intervene in language instrumentalised under capitalism and, as Perloff suggests, also provide 'a phenomenology of everyday life'. To say this is not to identify Silliman as a Heideggerian, but rather to approach Silliman's poetry with Heidegger's philosophy in hand as an illuminating conceptual framework and vocabulary. To begin such a reading we can start with Heidegger's notion of the poem. In 'The Origin of the Work of Art' Heidegger argues that the artwork is the founding of the truth of being, what he also calls *aletheia*.[529] The poem founds truth by joining and setting in place the dynamic motions of world and earth, a dynamic interplay of clearing and concealing. Of the temple at Paestum, one of his chief examples, Heidegger writes that

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[528] Armantrout et al., *The Grand Piano*, v. 7, 74.
[529] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 74-5.

> It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world of this historical people.[530]

The work gathers a unity that is 'the world' of a 'historical people'. This is not 'world' as Wittgenstein describes it in the *Tractatus*, as 'all that is the case'.[531] Nor is it simply a matter of what is materially present reduced to its presentness. Rather, it is world as the historical and shared ontological unity of a people—their affects, aims, desires, decisions, etc.—historically borne along in the open of the *logos*. World is that which shapes *Dasein* in its historical being, and which gives form to things, to equipment, to dwelling and being upon the earth. At the same time, Heidegger writes, in an artwork the 'earth' of which it is composed does not 'disappear', as it does in other configurations of earth and world, but rather 'come[s] forth for the first time […] into the Open of the work's world'.[532] In the work,

> The rock comes to bear and rest and so first becomes rock; metals come to glitter and shimmer, colors to glow, tones to sing, the word to speak. All this comes forth as the work sets itself back into the massiveness and heaviness of stone, into the firmness and pliancy of the wood, into the hardness and luster of

[530] Ibid., 41.
[531] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §1.
[532] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 45.

> metal, into the lighting and darkening of color, into the clang of tone, and into the naming power of the word.[533]

In the artwork we attend to materiality in a way that we do not with mere things or with equipment.[534] That the poem is made out of words becomes newly apparent. The 'naming power of the word' here means the ability of the word to call being into nearness, to grant being within the open. Moreover, 'by speaking the essential word, the poet's naming first nominates beings as what they are', Heidegger writes in his *Elucidations*.[535] 'Thus they become known *as* beings. Poetry is the founding of being in the word'.[536]

Thus, the fundamental structure of the artwork is the dynamic relation between earth and world.[537] As the world worlds it draws the earth into itself, gives it shape within the open. Against this, the earth strives to collapse back, to withdraw, always exceeding the capacity of world to make it intelligible.[538] 'World and earth', Heidegger writes,

> are essentially different from one another and yet are never separated. The world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts through the world. […] The world, in resting upon the earth, strives to surmount it. As self-opening it cannot endure

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[533] Ibid.
[534] Ibid.
[535] Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, 59.
[536] Ibid.
[537] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 61.
[538] Ibid.

> anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there.[539]

In the artwork the strife or conflict between these two aspects of being shapes disclosure. In staging the strife [rift, *Riß*] between world (unconcealing) and earth (concealing) the artwork sets into itself an intimacy between the two forces that is its figure or structure. 'The strife that is brought into the rift and thus set back into the earth and thus fixed in place is *figure, shape, Gestalt'*, Heidegger writes.[540] The 'Createdness of the work means: truth's being fixed in place in the figure'.[541] It makes the world present to us as world by setting into itself the structure of the disclosing struggle of world over and in earth. 'This composed rift [*Riß*]', Heidegger goes on to say, 'is the fitting or joining of the shining of truth'.[542] 'Setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work is the fighting of the battle in which the unconcealedness of beings as a whole, or truth, is won'.[543]

Crucial to the createdness of the artwork is what Nowell Smith emphasises as the 'firstness' that both earth and world achieve in the act of disclosure. The word 'first' is an important aspect of Heidegger's descriptions. The temple at Paestum gives a particular shape to the open it creates. The god is brought into it and established; the stone is set into itself around the god. The temple becomes a precinct in which the god might be encountered for the first time by a particular historical people. It is an encounter with the world of the people, Heidegger explains, that is not possible without

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[539] Ibid., 47.
[540] Ibid., 61-2.
[541] Ibid., 62.
[542] Ibid.
[543] Ibid., 54.

the temple-work's bringing-together 'the unity of those paths and relations'. At the same time, it is only in encountering the art-work's earth as it is brought into the world that we encounter its materiality: the heaviness of stone, the shining of pigment, the naming power of the word, and so on. Nowell Smith writes that

> What is at issue in the work's firstness is the work's status as a 'happening of the truth of beings'; that is, the work projects an open region in which beings enter into unconcealment (*aletheia*) in a singular way, thus appearing as though *for the first time*. And this unconcealment is dependent on a prior firstness: the work can 'bring forth the light of day' because, in its use of its 'work-material', or medium, 'the rock comes to bear and to rest and so *first* becomes rock; the metal comes to glimmer and shimmer, the colors to shine, the sounds to ring, the word to say' […] Truth is the truth of medium: the work will only transform, as though for the first time, the presencing of the 'light of day' because it has brought forth, for the first time, the modes of presencing proper to stone, rock, metal, color, sound, and word.[544]

The poem can thus only disclose the world by bringing forth the mode of presencing proper to the word. One only comes to *first* see the world newly as world in a poem by seeing how the naming power of the word first makes the poem itself possible. In its bringing forth of the naming power of the word, then, the poem attends to the configuration of presencing, and thus also of withdrawal, at work in poetic speaking.

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[544] Nowell Smith, *Sounding/Silence*, 20.

Heidegger's formulation of the work of art provides a way of approaching Silliman's poetry. There is an important difference for Heidegger between ways that language is used. When language is conceived of equipmentally it is not attended to in its naming power. In this, it is like the stone or metal of a piece of equipment. It is used up in its uses, rather than standing forth in the open.[545] This contrasts with poetic language use, where it shines forth in its naming power. The distinction resembles that for which Silliman argues in 'Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World'. There, we recall, everyday language was not encountered as such, not as a socially produced and producing medium. As a result its invisibility reified its referents, and reified also its own means of referring. Silliman opposed this to a gestural poetic language-use that would reassert language's signifying function and its sociality. From the perspective of a Heideggerian poetics, therefore, Language poetry's politically oppositional forms resist the instrumentalisation of language under capitalism by bringing forth language's 'naming power'. This is not to strip language of its crucial sociality for Silliman, but to think this sociality in a new way. Language's naming power originates in the *logos* of a particular historical people. To speak is to enter into *die Sage*, or the *logos*, the 'gathering' by which intelligibility is made possible as itself, by way of one's language.[546] As such, though the naming power is ontological, its character within actual utterances is historical. Read in this way, Language poetry can be said to continue 'the Heideggerian project' not solely because it sees poetry as a privileged point of resistance to an equipmentalised, or instrumentalised, language, but because it does so by bringing out and setting forth language's historical naming power.

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[545] For more details, see pages 44 to 45 in Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, as well as other locations in the same essay.
[546] Nowell Smith, *Sounding/Silence*, 15.

To see what this means concretely we can turn to Silliman's *Tjanting*. Take for instance a set of repeated phrases, the first iteration of which reads:

> I surface at the center of the pool. A dress shirt halfway between pink & lavender. Tautness of the warp while on the loom. Each sentence is itself. (*T* 23)

These sentences appear towards the beginning of the poem and are relatively unambiguous. At first encounter they seem unproblematically denotative. A speaker surfaces at the centre of a pool in present time. A dress shirt has a particular colour that is the mixture of two others. Another sentence refers to the specific tautness of a working loom. The final, meta-linguistic sentence, 'Each sentence is itself', then asserts the singularity of each of these sentences. Eleven pages later, however, we read:

> I surface at pool's center. This room, these people, determine these words. The dress shirt midway between lavender and pink. Her hair layerd, her eyes heavy. Warp taut while on the loom. Working in a restaurant just to get by. Sentence itself is each. Walking slowly home at dawn. (*T* 34)

Each of the sentences repeated from earlier in *Tjanting* has been altered, but for the most part in ways that don't significantly alter the meaning. Only the sentence that had previously asserted the singularity of sentences has been altered beyond sense. The sentences repeat again 31 pages later:

> At pool's surface I center. A hand reaches out to pull the door shut. These words, this room, determine(s) these people. Slowly, we invent the house. The lavender

> pink midway between dress & shirt. Lightning over Bernal Heights. Her hair heavy, her eyes layrd. The quantification of dance into figures of chance surfaces in time as a theory of rhyme. Taut loom while on the warp. A vessel in the jaw expanded to twice its size. Just in the restaurant to get by working. Excess milk in scrambld eggs means a runoff. It sentence self is each. Codeine knots the stomach. Dawn slowly walking at home. (*T* 65)

Disruptions in syntax start to interfere with the original sentences' capacity to name. The emphasis on language as syntactical, as a contingent entry into the *logos* now untethered from naming power, threatens to let the world fall into the earth. As the original sentences change, however, other sentences pop up between them, generating their own sequences of disruption. 'Her hair layerd, her eyes heavy' has become in its next iteration, 'Her hair heavy, her eyes layrd'. 'Walking slowly home at dawn' has become 'Dawn slowly walking at home'. Each sentence first appears with its naming power, bringing forth a configuration of world, and is then increasingly disrupted until its naming fails. As this happens, other sentences appear, name, and withdraw from intelligibility.

Withdrawal is a key term for understanding *Tjanting*. It takes place in relation to two motions at work in the poem's repetitions. It takes place within the experience of repetition and variation, and it takes place within the sentences' related and resultant syntactical breakdown into meaninglessness. I quote again Ziarek's excellent summary:

> As thought thinks Being it breaks into language paths or tracks (*Bahnen*), along which signification becomes possible. However, with the appearance of words,

> the tracks are immediately covered, obliterated by the production of language. This covering of the language tracks, the inevitable overflowing and otherness and inaccessibility constitutes its concealment from man.[547]

Each time one of the repeated sentences enters the poem it marks a new path of signification. In so doing it excludes the other iterations for a moment by marking its own singular trail. As we encounter these repetitions, however, they accumulate in our memory and in the poem. As a result, while the appearance of each version marks the withdrawal of the others, they cumulatively co-habit the poem. Each sentence becomes legible as the site of the others' withdrawal. At the same time, as the sentences iterate they break down syntactically. As a result, they increasingly move from something close to a transparent, instrumentalised utterance toward an increasingly de-instrumentalised utterance, while the sentence as a unit remains whole. The sentence remains as a site of meaning while meaning itself withdraws.

It would be a mistake to align these changes in syntax with Heidegger's notion of fallenness in language. This isn't simply a matter of poetic language being taken 'out of tune' with being, as with Heidegger's metaphor of the mountain bell given at the beginning of the *Elucidations*.[548] Nor is it a matter of an essential or authentic speech falling into idle chatter through social circumscription, as Heidegger outlines in *Being and Time.*[549] The effect is more positive than negative; the sentences become arguably less 'fallen' the less easily they are subsumed into utility and as their withdrawal is itself brought forward. In the breakdown of the sentences, Silliman seems to be prying

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[547] Ziarek, 'Poetics of Disclosure in Stevens's Late Poetry', 59.
[548] Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, 22.
[549] For instance, Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 164-66.

meanings away from the naming power of the sentence as a syntactical unit. In doing so, he brings forth language: 'at whatever time and in whatever way we speak language', Heidegger writes,

> language itself never has the floor. Any number of things are given voice in speaking, above all what we are speaking about: a set of facts, an occurrence, a question, a matter of concern. Only because in everyday speaking language does *not* bring itself to language but holds back, are we able simply to go ahead and speak a language, and so to deal with something and negotiate something by speaking.[550]

There is nonetheless a moment in our daily usage of language, Heidegger writes, where language does 'speak itself as language'. This is 'when we cannot find the right word for something that concerns us, carries us away, oppresses or encourages us'.[551] In moments when our reaching out into the between—that space between speaking [*Sprechen*] and *logos* [*Sagen*]—finds the word itself missing, we attend then to the language itself as itself: 'Then we leave unspoken what we have in mind and, without rightly giving it thought, undergo moments in which language itself has distantly and fleetingly touched us with its essential being'.[552] This reticence, the leaving unspoken of what we have in mind, signals the hesitation of thought in front of language's naming power. That naming power is encountered only through its and thought's hesitation.

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[550] Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 59.
[551] Ibid.
[552] Ibid.

If for other poets the earth of language is brought forth in poetry through more traditional prosodic means, such as metricality and rhyme, one form in which Silliman's poems emphasise and bring forth the earth of language is thus through a tearing-away of language from its uses by a historical people. This is a tearing-away of the poem's sentences from the collective open of post-war America. From a Heideggerian perspective, this sequence within *Tjanting* brings forth a relation between unconcealing, or worlding, and its withdrawal into the earth of language. In other parts of Silliman's poem, the withdrawal within naming is balanced out by the worlding also at work. In these repeating sections of *Tjanting*, however, withdrawal dominates over disclosure. Every sentence is confronted, repeatedly, by the other possible disclosures presently closed off. Moreover, as naming breaks down through the disruption of the syntactical unity of the sentence, naming withdraws into contingency and indeterminacy. The world withdraws even as the sentences remain present. The effect thus contains an ironic counter-movement. While world withdraws from the earth of language, that withdrawal is itself brought into the open in a way that shows the sentence's material and limiting presence shorn of its naming power.

Disclosure and Destitution

The motion within *Tjanting*'s sentences reflects Silliman's critique of post-war American everyday life more generally. In Heideggerian terms, the simultaneous presencing and withdrawal within the poem's sentences, and the domination of withdrawal, traces out a crisis of withdrawal within the culture at large. The procession of syntactical break-down and contingency in *Tjanting*'s sentences is only one (though extreme) example of how Silliman interferes in the naming power of the sentence to

disclose forms of withdrawal native to both language as such and to his culture's historical being. Before showing this, however, it is necessary to turn to Heidegger's understanding of the particular historical task confronting poetry. This is because, if poetry's essence lies in the struggle between world and earth, for Heidegger the modern era in which he lived and we live is characterised by a crisis of withdrawal. As Graham Harman puts it,

> Truth is the 'sending' of being in different forms by being itself, which gives us a series of different epochs of the history of being, each with its own special features. Humans are distracted by whatever is visibly present. Being and truth are both forgotten, since both withdraw from human access and leave us only with what is present. The era when the withdrawal of being reaches completion is the era to which we now belong: the epoch of enframing.[553]

In the present era both being and truth are 'forgotten'. The human relationship to being is currently such that while particular beings are 'visibly present', being is not 'unconcealed' or disclosed in truth. As Harman notes, both being and truth 'withdraw from human access', leaving only 'what is present'.[554] This presence becomes a substitute for the forms of withdrawal present to and within being in other epochs.[555] This situation has implications for poetry. As shown above, Silliman traces a similar motion within his sentences. More immediately, however, we might ask how can it be

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[553] Harman, *Heidegger Explained: From Phenomenon to Thing*, 139.
[554] Ibid.
[555] Katrin Froese, 'Momentary Encounters in Heidegger and Linji', *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 41, no. 3-4 (2014): 472.

possible that, within this present era of withdrawal into mere presence, poetry could ever occur as disclosure and thus as the founding of truth?

When Heidegger writes about the present era in his essay 'What Are Poets For?', he gives the problem a far more theological configuration than is suggested in Harman's description:

> '. . . *and what are poets for in a destitute time?*' asks Hölderline's elegy 'Bread and Wine.' […] The word 'time' here means the era to which we ourselves still belong. […] Not only have the gods and the god fled, but the divine radiance has become extinguished in the world's history. The time of the world's night is the destitute time, because it becomes ever more destitute. It has already grown so destitute, it can no longer discern the default of God as a default.[556]

The current era is 'destitute', Heidegger writes, because the ground [*Grund*] of our human being is absent; it fails to appear for us. As such, we stand over an abyss [*Abgrund*], disconnected from the sorts of relational belonging that characterise authentic being.[557] The ground fails to appear because the gods have fled from our world. There is no longer a divine aspect to our dwelling in the world—what Heidegger would call the divinities, in his fourfold of earth, sky, mortals and divinities—and so we have lost that essential other against which we measure ourselves in our humanity and ground our being. Our time is destitute, then, because it is devoid of those gods whose immortality measures our mortality, whose immanence gives meaning to human

[556] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 89.
[557] Ibid., 90.

presence.[558] It is Rilke, Heidegger writes, who among the modern poets 'comes to realise the destitution of the time more clearly'.[559] What Rilke's poetry reveals, in fact, is that the destitution of the age runs deeper than the absence of the gods. In our loss of measure and of authentic dwelling, humanity loses touch even with its own being as being-towards-death.

In sounding-out what Rilke's poem discloses about the destitution of the time, Heidegger extends his understanding of its destitution in terms that are useful for a Heideggerian reading of Silliman's poetry. Thinking forward from the line, 'As Nature gives the other creatures over', Heidegger writes that 'The ground of man is not only of a kind identical with that of plant and beast. The ground is the same for both. It is Nature, as "full Nature"'.[560] Of this he writes that

> We must here think of Nature in the broad and essential sense in which Leibniz uses the word *Natura* capitalized. It means the Being of beings. […] This is the incipient power gathering everything to itself, which in this manner releases every being to its own self.[561]

Thus 'Nature' or '*Natura*' is not 'the natural world' or 'human nature', though both are bound up in it. It is instead something closer to being or, as Heidegger puts it 'the Being of beings': that by which they are as they are. Heidegger continues:

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[558] Ibid., 213.
[559] Ibid., 94.
[560] Ibid., 97, 98.
[561] Ibid., 98.

> What Rilke calls Nature is not contrasted with history. Above all, it is not intended as the subject matter of natural science. Nor is Nature opposed to art. It is the ground for history and art and nature in the narrower sense. In the word Nature as used here, there echoes still the earlier word *phusis*, equated also with *zoe*, which we translate 'life'. In early thought, however, the nature of life is not conceived in biological terms, but as the *phusis*, that which arises.[562]

Nature as 'life' has two connotations. It is that *phusis*, the arising to being within beings, but it is also the sort of being that humanity itself is: 'Rilke calls Nature the *Urground*, the pristine ground, because it is the ground of those beings that we ourselves are. This suggests that man reaches more deeply into the ground of being than do other beings'.[563] Nature as life, in this sense, is not solely being, but being in the world, being amongst beings. Humanity reaches most deeply into this form of being because it encounters beings through language and, implicitly, encounters Nature as the life and being of beings.

Nature is thus *phusis*, the arising of beings into being. At the same time, it is 'called "Life"'.[564] For Humanity, as Heidegger puts it, this means that

> Being is the venture pure and simple. It ventures us, us humans. It ventures the living beings. The particular being is, insofar as it remains what has ever and always been ventured. But the particular being is ventured into Being, that is,

[562] Ibid., 98-99.
[563] Ibid., 99.
[564] Ibid.

> into a daring. Therefore, beings hazard themselves, are given over to venture. […] The Being of beings is the venture.[565]

Venture is, in the sense Heidegger uses it here, exposure to existence. To be in this way is to risk annihilation, a risk that is particularly pressing for human being. Nature as both appearing and as 'life' are ontologically conceived. It means appearing within and exposure to the *Urground* of 'those beings that we ourselves are'.[566] To be alive, in other words, is to encounter a dangerous exposure within 'the Being of beings'. In participating within this Nature or life, moreover,

> Everything that is ventured is, as such and such a being, admitted into the whole of beings, and reposes in the ground of the whole. The given beings, of one sort or another, *are* according to the attraction by which they are held within the pull of the whole draft.[567]

Nature, that is to say, is itself a greater whole, a draft, that gives meaning to beings, including human being. Beings 'are' in their relation to 'the whole draft'. This 'whole draft' is what Heidegger, working from Rilke, later calls 'the Open'. It is 'the great whole of all that is unbounded', or, in other words, it is the ontologically conceived relational 'world' in which Nature appears and is visible.

Rilke's time and our present era are 'a destitute time', however. And so, this encounter with the 'whole draft' by which we 'are' as living beings, is itself 'destitute'.

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[565] Ibid.
[566] Ibid.
[567] Ibid., 103.

That is, the destitution of the gods that Heidegger names at the opening of the essay is also a destitution of Nature, or, moreover, of the way in which Nature ('the Being of beings')[568] is encountered within the open:

> Man places before himself the world as the whole of everything objective, and he places himself before the world. Man sets up the world toward himself, and delivers Nature over to himself. We must think this placing-here, this producing, in its broad and multifarious nature. Where Nature is not satisfactory to man's representation, he reframes or redisposes it. Man produces new things where they are lacking to him. Man transposes things where they are in his way. Man interposes something between himself and things that distract him from his purpose. […] By multifarious producing, the world is brought to stand and into position. The Open becomes an object, and thus twisted around toward being. Over against the world as the object, man stations himself and sets himself up as the one who deliberately pushes through all this producing. […] The willing of which we speak here is the putting-through, the self-assertion, which purpose *has already* posited the world as the whole of producible objects. This willing determines the nature of modern man, though at first he is not aware of its far reaching implication[.][569]

This process, in which 'man' takes the open as an object and manipulates it such that is '*has already* posited the wold as the whole of producible objects', is what Heidegger elsewhere calls 'enframing'. Enframing is both source and symptom of the withdrawal

[568] Ibid., 98.
[569] Ibid., 107-08.

of being from the experience of beings. In the *Question Concerning Technology* and 'What are Poets For?' enframing is said to show itself in the essence of technology. 'What threatens man in his very nature', Heidegger writes,

> is the view that technological production puts the world in order, while in fact this ordering is precisely what levels every *ordo*, every rank, down to the uniformity of production, and thus from the outset destroys the realm from which any rank and recognition could possibly arise.[570]

The ontological essence of technology, which is itself 'nothing technological', produces a calculated, and calculable, uniformity of being in which all beings are made part of a 'standing reserve' [*Bystand*].[571] The same essential process, Heidegger claims, is observed in modern science where the early stages of the space race represent an 'all-out challenge to secure dominion over the earth' that 'is making a desert of the encounter of the world's fourfold—it is the refusal of nearness'.[572] It is also present for Heidegger in much contemporary thinking, such as in the work of analytical philosophy which, he claims, 'is aiming ever more resolutely at the production of what is called "metalanguage."'[573] This not only resembles metaphysics, but

> *is* metaphysics. Metalinguistics is the metaphysics of the thoroughgoing technicalization of all languages into the sole operative instrument of

[570] Ibid., 114.
[571] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 332.
[572] Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 105.
[573] Ibid.

> interplanetary information. Metalanguage and sputnik, metalinguistics and rocketry are the Same.[574]

The processes of both science and analytic philosophy reflect a fundamental metaphysical position in which the earth and its constituents are framed and brought forth as a resource for purposes that, while they involve us, are not our own.

In this way, for Heidegger the destitution of the gods as a qualitative measure for man is also, via Rilke, a corresponding destitution within man's relation to Nature. The essence of this destitution is enframing:

> human willing too can be in the mode of self-assertion only by forcing everything under its dominion from the start, even before it can survey it. To such a willing, everything, beforehand and subsequently, turns irresistibly into material for self-assertive production. The earth and its atmosphere become raw material, which is disposed of with a view to proposed goals. […] Modern science and the total state, as necessary consequences of the nature of technology, are also its attendants. The same holds true of the means and forms that are set up for the organization of public opinion and of men's everyday lives.[575]

I quote this second description of enframing because, within it, the term 'life' reappears in a way that brings us even closer to Silliman's poetry. Enframing takes shape in the

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[574] Ibid., 58.
[575] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 109.

production of capitalist relations to the world (it converts 'The earth and its atmosphere' into 'raw material […] for self-assertive production'), and at the same time shapes 'men's everyday lives'. Capitalist relations and the control of everyday lives thus participate in the Heideggerian conception of the age's destitution. They do so, moreover, as part of a greater breaking up of 'Nature', of being and 'Life', as a measure and ground for human being and, thus, for human lives.

In response to this situation, Heidegger proposes poetic creation as the only hint of a turn away from enframing and destitution. The 'essence of poetry', Heidegger writes,

> is joined to the laws which strive to separate and unite the hints of the gods and the voice of the people. The poet himself stands between the former—the gods—and the latter—the people. He is the one who has been cast out—out into that *between*, between gods and men.[576]

The poet is the one who thinks beyond the confines of his received language. For Heidegger this means thinking towards the holy, but it is also very simply a standing out into the venture of life or nature in an attempt to think it otherwise than enframing would determine it. The capacity to put this being-between into words makes a poet a poet, and the structuring of this between as the meeting and contestation of earth and world constitutes poetry as truth. Further, it is 'in this between [that] is it decided who man is and where his existence is settled'.[577] Poetry reaches into the danger, into the

[576] Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, 64.
[577] Ibid.

abyss, and ventures to think a return. For Heidegger this is the return of the gods. 'In the age of the world's night', Heidegger writes, 'the abyss of the world must be experienced and endured. But for this it is necessary that there be those who reach into the abyss'.[578] In this formulation, therefore, poetry remains the site of truth's shining forth, but the world that it discloses lacks certain key measures by which human dwelling upon the earth might be primordially grounded. Rilke is a key poet of the destitute time because his poetry realises that destitution. It offers, therefore, the possibility of encountering and enduring the abyss in which humans live.

'Albany' and Enframing

For Heidegger the destitution of the present era is characterised by the absence of the gods as a measure for man. This absence, however, heralds a more profound absence within humanity's relation to being. Because of enframing's ongoing processes, being no longer enters into unconcealment, it only withdraws in and from our daily lives leaving bare presence. This is a failure to encounter the being of being, both presencing and withdrawing, in the face of the mere presence of enframed, technologised, and predisposed objects. Heidegger's description of modernity's destitution thus offers us a way of turning again to the forms of presencing and withdrawal taking place in Silliman's Language poetry. This is not because Silliman conceives of his time as characterised by the problematic absence of the divine, or as a failure to conceive of being as such or ground himself within beings as a whole, for he certainly does not. Rather, it is because Silliman's poetry, in its thematic and formal thinking about the nature of its historical moment under capitalism, sees, like Heidegger, the increasing

[578] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 90.

impossibility of relating the experience of objects and people to larger measures that would secure their meaning and their lives. Though he does not think of it in these terms, Silliman's poems therefore reflect the 'abyss' of being that Heidegger helps us to understand. For Silliman, I argue, this abyss is characterised by forms of transience that mark a crisis of withdrawal within post-war America.

We might recall Pearson's and Watten's description of the era in which Language poetry emerged:

> the period in question began at the end of the postwar 'economic miracle' and at the onset of a long and devastating recession, deepened by the astronomic debt and social misery that resulted from the pursuit of imperial ambition, if not yet, as is now clear, overtly global hegemony—a pursuit that barely paused to reload when Saigon 'fell.' Thus, as Barrett has noted—in the wake of Vietnam, and the many revelations of governmental villainy, and the brutal effects of a faltering economy—'The culture we lived in was fragmented, ugly, and incoherent…. There was no money, and few agreeable jobs.'[579]

The reference to an advancing 'overtly global hegemony' recalls Heidegger's description of 'enframing', in which human relation to being at the large scale is structured by a hegemonic uniformity reflected in technology, production, and the social order. At the same time, Pearson and Watten feel the effects of the enframing personally. No jobs, a faltering economy: they feel the effect of being themselves turned into a standing reserve of intellectual labour that has no space for them outside of its

[579] Armantrout et al., *The Grand Piano*, v.1, 21-2.

calculating limits, and little space for them within. A characteristic of enframing is that the possibilities of one's encounters with objects in the world are predetermined by processes that close off all but the immediate, calculable forms of presence. Trees, for instance, become quantities of wood, people degrees and kinds of labour. Economic recession as Pearson and Watten experience it marks the point at which enframing, in its economic processes, is felt in their everyday lives. Further, Heidegger's description of the domination of man as a resource for technological processes at times echoes and reformulates Marxist critiques of capital:

> Not only does it [enframing] establish all things as producible in the process of production; it also delivers the products of production by means of the market. In self-assertive production, the humanness of man and the thingness of things dissolve into the calculated market value of a market which not only spans the whole earth as a world market, but also, as the will to will, trades in the nature of Being and thus subjects all beings to the trade of a calculation that dominates most tenaciously in those areas where there is no need of numbers.[580]

Enframing lies behind the transformation of 'things' into producible objects. The processes of production, in their control over the lives of those involved, change consciousness and reinforce enframing's grip on being's appearing. The crisis, for both Marx and Heidegger, lies at least partly in the difficulty of overcoming technological and capitalist modernity's domination.[581]

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[580] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 112.
[581] See also Hemming, *Heidegger and Marx* for more on the connections between Heidegger's and Marx's thinking on these issues.

Again, I do not mean to argue that Silliman shares precisely the same sense of ontological crisis that Heidegger describes. If Heidegger's notion of enframing's destitution lies in humanity's relation to being and, centrally, in the absence of the gods, the Language poets' sense of their time as 'destitute' is primarily ontic, conceived in political and economic terms. The United States government seeks an increasing hegemony at the same time that a 'faltering economy' reduces even American culture's fragmentation and ugliness to a matter of there being 'no money, and few agreeable jobs'. Such an experience of the historically specific, ontic characteristics of enframing lies behind Language poetry's response to its time, and Silliman's poetic measures are particularly well suited to disclosing the 'destitution' and 'measurelessness' of the era.

We can begin to see this by turning back to the opening lines of 'Albany':

> If the function of writing is to 'express the world.' My father withheld child support, forcing my mother to live with her parents, my brother and I to be raised together in a small room. Grandfather called them niggers. I can't afford an automobile. Far across the calm bay stood a complex of long yellow buildings, a prison. A line is the distance between. They circled the seafood restaurant, singing 'We shall not be moved.' My turn to cook. (*A* 1)

Reading these eight sentences a second time, what emerges as most immediate is not solely that the grammar of self-expression asserts itself against the absence of the *genre* of self-expression, but that some form of 'expression', beyond the limit of the single sentence, still seems to occur even in the absence of broader generic frameworks. Though not hypotactically presented, the vocabulary of family—father, mother,

grandfather—build familial relations. Similarly, an inability to afford an automobile connotes socio-economic status, and opens up the procession of sentences from the enclosed family unit the larger structures of social relations. These are then symbolised by the view of the prison-buildings, a place of work for the local working-class, but also a space charged with the political inequalities of that same system. At the same time the prison is a metaphor for the oppressive family unit just constellated. It is an ironic metaphor given that in offering a place of work as an alternative form of war-service the prison actually offered Silliman himself a degree of freedom from family and from war, as well a motive for movement within his local area. The image of political protest emerges as a unifying agent, bringing together personal investment in the immediate political-social-economic locale and the broader social problems to which poverty and the prison-buildings relate.

Parataxis, in resisting scenic realism through hypotaxis, thus provides other forms of relation. Perelman describes its effects well: 'New sentences imply continuity and discontinuity simultaneously, in an effect that becomes clearer when they are read over longer stretches'.[582] Some of the continuities that Perelman speaks of are largely formal, such as the progression of similar interrogative forms in 'Sunset Debris'. Others are conceptual: the strained unities of family and geography. Both kinds are present in the above excerpt, and the joint continuity and discontinuity of its new sentences reveal a similar quality within the subject at hand. Continuity and discontinuity: the sentences articulate in strained relation the strained familial relations of Silliman's childhood. Such relation itself is perhaps simply a product of proximity and the social currency of words and roles: 'father', 'mother', and 'Grandfather'. Geography works similarly. Not

[582] Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, 67.

only are prison and home thematically and ironically juxtaposed, but the simultaneous continuity and discontinuity of their sentence-to-sentence relation seems to emphasise the geographic relations. The prison is both intimately inside the everyday experience of the area, but also closed off: a kind of circle marking a special and separate district. In this it is like the circle established by the protest march. It is similar also to the home, both connected and disconnected from its socio-economic, geographic environs. Both are open to the world and, at the same time, oppressively closed-off. Silliman's poem thus discloses the world it speaks of: in this time and place both people and geographic areas relate to each other in the simultaneous continuity and discontinuity of an intimate estrangement.

Silliman's form, here the new sentence, is thus central to disclosing the forms of relation at work within the world. Further into the poem Silliman turns this simultaneity of connection and disconnection toward a more explicit disclosure of the enframing at work within the culture and its socio-economic relations:

[Quote text removed for Copyright reasons] (*A* 1-2)

The landlord's control over his or her tenants exemplifies the effects of enframing, as does the fact that gardens are considered a luxury. Both sentences suggest that these spaces emerge not as dwellings, nor as spaces to be encountered in their configuration of being, but as forms of space, living-space and recreational space, framed off from each other. Both 'living' and 'recreation' are predispositions for how the world might be encountered. They are framed relations. Moreover, both are implicitly distinct from work-time. If recreation and living are enframed relations to the world, both are in

service to the work that makes them possible and makes them meaningful as non-work frames. Thus even the act of framing a garden space off from the broader geography of work sustains the relations characteristic of enframing. This is repeated in the image of the rest home as a form of prison. At the end we encounter the department store, which itself acts upon the consciousness in an attempt to determine the manner in which one encounters the world. While the layout of the department store leaves one fragmented and off-balance, Silliman writes in *Under* Albany, it is not itself fragmented. It is, he writes, rather an elaborate narrative that predisposes one's relation to the world in its own terms: the last sentence is always, '*you buy*'.[583]

Enframing also takes on far more violent aspects throughout the poem. Amongst the sorts of sentence mentioned above, other sentences act as points of crisis in enframing's relation to the town's population. 'Not just a party but a culture', for instance, may refer to the communist and socialist parties of which Silliman was a member. Not just a political party, but a culture, a community, and one founded in direct opposition to the effects of enframing on working-class lives. One sentence asserts a culture of work producing commodities—'42 years of Fibreboard products'—and another recognises the marks of those years upon the body: 'Her lungs are heavy with asbestos'. If the police, given the task of sustaining the status quo, hide their faces and call their clubs batons, the people fashion their social organisations as clubs. The punning brings out a political and often, if not always, suppressed violence within the social ordering, making the social club a form of weapon of resistance against the power of the baton. Even that Sunday on which 'Henry's father murdered his wife' resists the broader socio-economic frame conjured in other sentences. It marks a point of radical

[583] Silliman, *Under* Albany, 63.

break-down, an extremity that draws attention to the dominant ideology even while it does not itself resist the process or effects of enframing. Enframing, we might say, becomes particularly visible in 'Albany' when its totality breaks down locally in violent encroachments on people's bodies within their way of life. Ontic destitution, as violence and poverty, traces out destitution's ontological basis, as it were, behind the scenes.

The withdrawal thus at work in 'Albany', both the poem and the town, is the loss of any ground that would counter this enframing. In his reading of Rilke in 'What Are Poets For?', Heidegger laments the loss of 'Nature', an understanding of the greater 'Being of beings', as a part of human being in the world. The discontinuous aspect of the new sentence emphasises this. Experience remains, as Silliman says of the experience of the department store in 'Albany', 'fragmented' and 'off balance' (*A* 2). However, while the new-sentence parataxis closes off the possibility of relating any of the everyday human lives mentioned within it to a greater sense of being in relation to 'Nature' or 'Life', it does allow for a larger poetic disclosure of Albany's enframed socio-economic relations. Rather than 'the Being of beings' or 'Nature', that is, enframing itself becomes the destitute ground within which the poem operates and which it discloses.

Key to Silliman's disclosures is therefore the fact that, in many of his poems, paratactic discontinuity suggests a non-scenic mode of relational co-ordination. Perelman describes this combination of intimacy and estrangement in relation to 'Ketjak':

> In the following juxtapositions—'Fountains of the financial district spout soft water in a hard wind. She was a unit in a bum space, she was a damaged child' (3)—we have switched subjects between sentences: the child and the fountains need not be imagined in a single tableau. This effect of calling forth a new context after each period goes directly against the structural impatience that creates narrative. It's as if a film were cut into separate frames. But in a larger sense, girl and fountain are in the same social space. Throughout the book, Silliman insists on such connections as the one between the girl and the wider economic realities implied by the corporate fountains. The damage that has been done to her has to be read in a larger economic context.[584]

Parataxis produces 'separate frames', but their narrative separateness is unified by a larger 'social frame' that renders their separation, their diegetic discontinuity, legible as a form of usually invisible, problematic social continuity. Parataxis, it seems, is equipped to 'insist' on connections between objects within a social and economic context precisely because it is not limited by traditional structures of hypotactic realism.[585] What we see in 'Albany' and what Perelman observes of 'Ketjak' suggest that Silliman is attempting to show his reader something particular about the world he lives in—what constitutes actual or everyday life in general for people in this time and place and what constituted, in Albany, his actual life in particular. Silliman's poetic form is clearly crucial not only to how this takes place, but to what is shown of world and life. In Perelman's example, for instance, the social continuity between girl and fountains is important precisely because it is at odds with their scenic discontinuity.

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[584] Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, 67.
[585] Ibid., 66.

Apprehension of the socio-economic problem of the 'bum space' frame is dependent on the capacity of new-sentence parataxis to disclose it in and through opposition to its habitual invisibility in discontinuity. This understanding of the world is, in other words, intimately a product of poetic form.

This has implications for any political assessment of Silliman's poetry. As Perelman has pointed out, the Language poets imagined that their forms—paratactic and even 'schizophrenic', as Jameson puts it—would counter the reification of capitalist relations effected by other forms of prose and poetry.[586] However, '"The Chinese Notebook" and the essays in *The New Sentence'*, Perelman writes,

> were written in the seventies, when faith in the rebirth of modernist ambitions and of the cultural centrality of poetry was easier to maintain than in the nineties. Today parataxis can seem symptomatic of late capitalism rather than oppositional. Ads where fast cuts from all 'walks of life' demonstrate the ubiquity and omniscience of AT&T are paratactic. This similarity between the new sentence and current media practice has been pounced on rather gleefully by critics of language writing.[587]

If we take Language poetry's claims to political oppositionality at face value, we might thus be drawn into thinking that the similarity between late-capitalist aesthetics and Language poems indicates the failure of Language poetry as a movement. However,

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[586] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 27.
[587] Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, 62.

when we approach poetic form as the earth of a disclosure of actual or everyday life, the similarity (if not identity) between the two seems no longer coincidental.

To reflect late-capitalist aesthetics in poetry might be a product of tracing out the forms of disclosure and withdrawal at work within late capitalism. This is what we have begun to see 'Albany', what Perelman implicitly recognises of 'Ketjak', and what takes place also in *Tjanting*. 'Albany', specifically, shows the enframing at work within the everyday lives and socio-economic relations of the town of Albany. In so doing it shows how that enframing leaves no possibility for encountering being as Nature. Such a possibility has retreated before the advance of enframing, leaving only the frames themselves, the work and rest spaces, and the violence within enframed relations, reducing beings to violent presences.

Tjanting*, Withdrawal, and Measure*

Silliman's sense of what Heidegger calls the destitution of modernity is predominantly ontic. He identifies it with the *presence* of capitalism and its effects, rather than with the absence of a divinity or other ontological measure—although this is, for Heidegger, an absence that capitalism's processes both reflect and produce. Despite this difference, both 'Albany' and *Tjanting* disclose the forms of withdrawal that are reflected in and produced by enframing. In 'Albany' we saw this as the absence of any measure that might counter the intensity and violence of enframed relations to people and to space. In reading the repeating passages from *Tjanting*, we saw how the worlding function of language, its naming power, withdrew as the sentences advertised their own contingency and semantic limits. The disclosure of enframed relations, and the way that

this disclosure depends on a thinking-through of the new sentence as a poetic unit, come together in other sections of *Tjanting*.

We can start by looking at the following passage:

> These hotels were built quickly after the earthquake in order to house tourists coming to the Panama Pacific Exposition, 1915, old brick, unreinforced concrete. Flat old brown cat chooses to sit atop paper bag. Mooch City. Fine blahs since pharmaceutical blah. Sitting in a hot cloud of MSG. Someone to clean up mouse noun puke, cat filth, utter verb parts. No one is watching the tortillas. Tobacco smell of his skull burned right into his shirt, hair & eyes. For a living she stands naked on a turntable carpeted lavender, while men in small latched booths deposit quarters for windows to gawk thru, to the sound of course of disco music. (*T* 169)

Though paratactic, these sentences are unified by the concept of social alienation and economic compulsion, for which the hotels for tourists are both symptom and symbol. The first sentence tells us of hotels that were erected quickly in order to accommodate tourists. They are not dwellings but spaces for housing people: a resource both alienated from authentic dwelling within the city and itself alienating. If the sentence simply recalls a fact of the city's history, it is the history of a relation predicated upon enframed economic-residency, transience, being a 'tourist'. The earthquake named in the first sentence marks a rupture in the city's historical being. The space of tourism has entered through that rupture, carrying with it the advance of enframing. If the 'flat old brown cat' intrudes paratactically with something potentially more intimate, it is itself inhuman

and transient. We are immediately returned to 'mooch city' with its connotations both of loitering and of begging. The people then mentioned are anonymous, as transient as tourists even in their own city. Who is sitting in the 'hot cloud of MSG'? Does the next sentence name or seek a 'someone' to help clean up as the sentence crumbles? Who is or isn't watching the tortillas? The 'Tobacco smell' of whose 'skull burned right into his shirt, hair & eyes'? And who is the woman who 'for a living […] stands naked on a turntable' so that anonymous men can watch through small windows?

The passage develops dual sequences. On the one hand, forms of economically enframed transience accumulate in sequence. Spaces and people are, again and again, reduced to their transient economic presence in the midst of indifferent spaces. On the other hand, the passage continually narrows down the material frames in which that presence exists. As a result, as the sense of transient presence accumulates, the material frames become ever more immediate and particular. The passage begins with hotels, but by the end the 'she' of the final sentence is doubly framed on a lavender turntable seen through small windows. As the sentences proceed, also, the anonymity of the people they name becomes more and more pronounced. There is an immense loneliness in this sequence. Its ephemeral figures lack even that intimacy that might be offered by the sustained attention of hypotactic scene-building. If part of the 'earth' of language for Heidegger is the naming power of the word, what is named here is, paradoxically and deliberately, an intense namelessness. A namelessness and transience that belongs (at least) to this historical moment, the historical being of this place in America at this point in time. This namelessness, combined with the frames in which it is located ('small windows', 'a hot cloud of MSG', etc.), conjures the destitution that Heidegger diagnoses. Rather than appearing in their shining forth, rather than being given over to

their own being, these people appear only within these frames, namelessly. They are visibly present but not unconcealed to each other. Something has withdrawn from and in their being-in-the-world. In 'What Are Poets For?' this is a withdrawal of 'Nature', 'the Being of beings', as the measure for human being in the world.

Nowell Smith argues that a poem's formal features 'attain "ontological" weight insofar as they are concerned with tracing these relations between presencing and absencing as these countermovements inhere in their medium'.[588] In *Tjanting*, Silliman discloses the crisis of withdrawal within post-war America by tracing the passage of that withdrawal through his medium. The poem's sentences bring individuals and things into a presence that withdraws into the pronoun and into paratactic runs of anonymity. Presented in simultaneous continuity and discontinuity, the presence of individuals is constellated as a mass withdrawal, and collective individuation as nameless alienation. In a destitute time, the poem calls its contents not into nearness or intimacy, but into distance, a near distance, a presence that is a palpable absence. Crucially, no measure is given for the anonymous figures other than a disjunctive material history of economic and social alienation. Without a sense of being in the midst of beings as a whole, humanity appears only as a resource for exploitation, bodies for watching, booths for watching from, hotels for visiting, in a 'mooch city'.

This withdrawal is also temporal. Take another section of the poem:

> Woman's face pale as her nurse whites. For a brief instant the lone cloud in the sky turnd into a rainbow. Sun lit the water's surface, beneath wch I swam,

[588] Nowell Smith, *Sounding/Silence*, 6.

> lungful breast-strokes. A second later there was no cloud left there at all. Constituting her assemblage. She walkd, carrying her sandals in her hand. Moon lit room light. I lie awake, hearing foghorns. Ump no pook—beware rubbish. Night sky is not without its changes. In the middle words differ. The taste one wakes with. Rope wire thread. These words jump around like fleas. The white church was no longer surrounded by green scaffolding. (*T* 44)

In this passage the poem fixates on moments of transience, on experiences that fade away as they occur or are encountered here as the memory of something already gone. 'For a brief instant', the cloud makes a rainbow of the sky; a speaker pictures himself beneath water for a moment; a cloud has gone; and so on. As the sequence progresses the problem of language as a medium returns. The words 'differ'—from the things themselves, perhaps, or from each other. They jump around like fleas. This is not the same repeating and emphatic alienation and anonymity discussed above. Here, small moments offer something almost consoling, glimpses that approach intimacy or pleasure. If the words jump about like fleas, however, the reader is left grasping after these brief moments as they vanish each into the next.

The poem's parataxis traces out the manner in which being's withdrawal takes the form, in Silliman's age, of a fragmented and transient presence. It suggests contact without the duration that would grant intimacy or disclosure. Perelman suggests something like this when he writes that

> Parataxis of a more thorough and disorienting kind than anything the old handbooks could cite is the dominant if seemingly random mode of our time. It

> is hard to imagine escaping from atomized subject areas, projects, and errands into longer stretches of subjectively full narrative—not to mention a whole life. As targets of the media we are inundated by intense bursts of narrative-effect: a few seconds of heart-jerk in a life insurance ad […], blockbuster miniseries four nights long.[589]

What this moment in *Tjanting* allows us to see, in other words, is the manner in which brief but intense moments of non-narrative affect form a new basis of human being, an abyssal groundlessness. Small, enframed moments of affect supplant dwelling with an intense fragmentation. It is the power of Silliman's poetry that what is, at the micro-level, a failure to encounter the 'Being of beings', becomes poetic disclosure when experienced from the outside, across a greater sequence of paratactic continuity and discontinuity. Disclosure, in this case, takes the form of setting the withdrawal, the fragmentation, alienation, and transience of human being, into the presencing and withdrawing structure of the artwork such that the world that forms them is brought into unconcealment. This is a disclosure of the experience of the historical, post-war open as such, a singular configuration in which its presencing-withdrawing motion becomes a barrage of withdrawal.

In *Under* Albany, Silliman explicitly ties the social and economic crisis of his era to a particular form of temporality: the temporality of prisons. He writes that

> The joint has a discourse and logic that took years to learn. There are a variety of ways people can avoid telling you what exactly they've done to warrant

[589] Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, 60.

> incarceration. Even harder for an outsider to fathom is the sense of time as urgency without future. The sense was not the continuous present of modernism, but rather a perpetual one in which every moment was new, in formation. This proved ultimately to be [a] more important lesson than anything I had learned in college. Twenty-one years after leaving CPHJ, it still governs the function of time in my writing.[590]

Having worked for years on projects dedicated to prisoner welfare, the prison experience is central to Silliman's diagnosis of post-war America. He construes the temporality of prisons in the 1970s as a particularly post-modern temporality, characterised by perpetual brevity in constantly urgent moments of intensity. Absence of measure is again crucial, for prisoners are explicitly deprived of temporal measures that might rescue them from an ongoing barrage of presentness. McGann has discussed this aspect of Silliman's writing, especially as it appears in *Tjanting* (though not in Heideggerian terms).[591] 'Silliman's text commits itself', McGann writes,

> to a productivity that starts over and over again. […] if the work is oriented toward 'the future,' toward 'what comes next,' it firmly grounds itself in both the present and the past: what it denominates, in its first two sentences, as the 'this' and the 'then.' The chief effect is a brilliant sense of immediacy which is not, however, fixed or formalized. The text is restless in its presentness, restless in a

[590] Silliman, *Under* Albany, 33.
[591] In Watten, 'Presentism and Periodization in Language Writing', 129-30, Watten argues for a form of anti-narrative in Silliman's writing that also suggests a complex form of presentness.

> presentness which at all points vibrates with its relations to the past and its commitments to the future.[592]

As a result, McGann writes, readers 'confront time, or the sequence of eventualities, in a highly pressurized state'.[593] The meta-poetic self-negation of *Tjanting*'s opening 'Not this' becomes, in this light, part of the disclosure of a greater temporal withdrawal within the experience of a formal 'presentness' within flux. 'These obsessive spasms of narrative', writes Perelman, 'are symptoms of just how divided the present is'.[594] Such a 'presentness' cannot help but be intimately tied to the disavowal of the lyric subject, of prose and poetic verse, and of the forms of temporality which conventionally constitute the measure of textual subjectivity.

The temporality of 'the joint' that informs Silliman's poetry seems more like the one 'prevalent since Aristotle', time 'as a series of "nows"', than Heidegger's notion of being as temporal.[595] As Nowell Smith notes, the temporality of *Dasein* is an 'originary temporality made up of three "temporal ecstases," having-been, presencing, and futurity, which structure the way in which Dasein can first understand itself as being-in-the-world'.[596] The temporality of the joint is a fragmented and fragmenting series of 'nows'. As Katrin Froese puts it, enframing 'turns a blind eye to time, as a process of movement, turning it instead into a calculable interval and demands that everything be

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[592] McGann, 'Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes', 639.
[593] Ibid., 640.
[594] Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, 60.
[595] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 473-74.
[596] Nowell Smith, *Sounding/Silence*, 51.

immediately available'.[597] It is opposed to the duration Heidegger requires for poetic dwelling in a non-destitute age. Mortals, he writes,

> would never be capable of it if dwelling were merely a staying on earth under the sky, before the divinities, among mortals. Rather, dwelling itself is always a staying with things. Dwelling, as preserving, keeps the fourfold in that with which mortals stay: in things.[598]

'Poetically man dwells on the earth', Heidegger writes.[599] Dwelling poetically, however, requires not a fleeting, intense present but 'a staying with things'. The new sentence denies this staying and preserving. Heidegger writes also that 'Man's relation to locations, and through locations to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, strictly thought and spoken'.[600] In *Tjanting*, however, no dwelling is to be found in the temporality of 'the joint'. Beings appear and vanish almost immediately, they are held out and at the same time withdraw in a way that grants no duration. They withdraw into the earth of language, but they also withdraw into the destitution of mere material enframed presence encountered in a fragmented, intense, and self-perpetuating series of 'nows'. Silliman's sentences thus show the failure of temporal dwelling as part of the destitution of the age: or, as Perelman puts it, they show 'just how divided the present is'.[601]

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[597] Froese, 'Momentary Encounters in Heidegger and Linji', 473.
[598] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 149.
[599] Ibid.
[600] Ibid., 155.
[601] Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, 60.

There is thus something significant in Silliman's use of the new sentence as the formal poetic measure through which being's withdrawal, the lack of qualitative measure or *Grund*, is disclosed. Heidegger writes in '…Poetically Man Dwells…' that '*Poetry* is a measuring':

> In poetry there takes place what all measuring is in the ground of its being. Hence it is necessary to pay heed to the basic act of measuring. That consists in man's first of all taking the measure which is then applied in every measuring act. In poetry the taking of measure occurs. To write poetry is measure-taking, understood in the strict sense of the word, by which man first receives the measure for the breadth of his being.[602]

For Heidegger, poetry previously measured man against the gods or, as in Rilke's disclosure of 'Nature', it took another qualitative measure that might ground and establish humanity's being amongst beings as a whole. Even in the absence of such a qualitative measure, poetry remains as a measuring, and poetic form still works as the quantitative measure in which such measuring might be sought. The form, the shape and the material measure of things like the stanza and the line are the material channel and condition of poetry's qualitative, ontological measuring of humanity.

I have argued above that Silliman's poems show what he considers to be the destitution of post-war America. I have argued that this destitution is, for him, primarily characterised by capitalism's fragmentation of geography, inter-personal relations, and temporality. This destitution thus constitutes a fragmentation and transience that blocks

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[602] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 219.

one off from access to the being of beings that would ground one in the world. In the new sentence, Silliman brings the measurelessness (which is also the groundlessness) that he perceives in his historical moment into the experience of his poetic form. He does this such that the absence of ground as measure is disclosed, but also such that the enframing involved in hypotactic forms is simultaneously revealed.

A hint toward this is given in Silliman's titles for the poems 'Ketjak' and *Tjanting*. 'Ketjak', for instance, takes its title from a Balinese ceremony that involves a large number of individuals collectively repeating the same chants and gestures.[603] Within the ceremony, as the chants build and vary, the gods are invoked and their stories narrated.[604] Part of the appeal of this title for Silliman lay with the way the Ketjak ceremony models a form of social speaking in which each individual is moved by the chant's forms while being also responsible for producing them.[605] Just as telling, however, is the idea of repeating forms as the space in which gods are disclosed. In using 'Ketjak' as a title, Silliman invests his own iterating form with the notion of the repeating unit as the poetic space of divine encounter. The same constellation of concepts is present in the title *Tjanting*. The pun with 'chanting' is clear and again suggests a measure for speech which calls upon the gods. Thus, while *Tjanting* and 'Ketjak' disclose the absence that marks enframing's withdrawal of measure, and within this the withdrawal of being, their titles invoke the notion of the poem as the province of divine measuring. The implication of the titles is thus that Silliman's modes of

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[603] Kendra Stepputat, 'Performing *Kecak*: A Balinese Dance Tradition between Daily Routine and Creative Art', *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 44 (2012).
[604] Ibid.
[605] In McCaffery and Gregory, *Alive and Writing*, Silliman claims that '"Ketjak" itself is a musical form—it's the Balinese version of the Ramayana myth, with as many as two hundred singers. It's essentially a choral form, and I was interested in the concept of cumulative effort' (247).

procedural generation, with their repeating forms, assert a space in which godly invocation and the possibility of a godly measurement for man might be established. We have seen, however, that the sentences themselves resist such measuring by denying the sort of qualitative, ontological measure such an invocation would produce. His sentences instead show the opposite, the absence of ontological measure taking up presence within the form in which it might be expected to be encountered.

In so doing, and in making the sentence rather than the paragraph the formal measure for poetic disclosure, the new sentence seizes upon this absence of ontological measure. It makes it possible for us to encounter the absence of a ground as measurelessness, a possibility otherwise hidden by the seeming 'naturalness' of hypotactic prose. Returning to 'The New Sentence' we might recall that it is a kind of enframing that Silliman objects to in contemporary capitalism's effect on the means of representation. Language-use under capitalism, as Silliman describes it in 'Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World', is specifically language not encountered as such, but as a resource for communication. Its autonomy is simultaneously an invisibility that marks its emergence into presence, as the absence of the being of language. The 'fetishised' word, sentence, and paragraph, for Silliman, embody an enframing that frames itself while hiding from view its status as enframed. Hypotaxis, in building scene and narrative, offers in particular a formal substitute for ontological measure by making primary logic, scene, character, and narrative the enframed material condition for human action. New sentence parataxis offers no such substitute: its disclosures always include the absence of greater measure. At the same time, hypotaxis's enframing is, importantly, one that must be broken in order to be seen. Only by attending to new-sentence parataxis, the argument might run, do we see the

enframing present in forms of hypotaxis. This disclosure is thoroughly post-modern. For Silliman, a poet of post-modern America (or late-capitalist America as Frederic Jameson would say), his paratactic form is opposed to the notions of subject, of society, and of poetic form that had sustained previous eras. Rejection of the 'lyric' signals the rejection of the manner in which the illusion of an authentic measure for human being enters into the text by formal means.

Having approached Silliman as a poet in a destitute time we see that, like 'Albany', *Tjanting* seems to represent an experience of the crisis of withdrawal that Heidegger locates at the heart of Western modernity. If 'Albany' sought this disclosure by turning to the violent effects of enframing on working-class culture, and did so partly through the joint continuity and discontinuity of the new sentence as a frame, *Tjanting* does so by turning to a broader namelessness and measurelessness made present in flashes of transience and anonymity. In both, the new sentence acts as the poetic measure—the material space of disclosure—for ontological measurelessness as well as constituting a refusal of preceding aesthetic means of constructing the self and subject as a measure for experience. To put this in different Heideggerian terms, the poem discloses the destitution of the world in the present age, and does so partly through contact with its own material limits.

The Language Poem as Origin

Having worked through 'Albany' and *Tjanting*, we might now recall the problem with which this chapter began: how can we reconcile the autobiographical aspects of Silliman's poetry, particularly 'Albany', and the sense that it must in some way 'express

the world', with the disruptive, non-representative nature of the new sentence?[606] Or, what is it that poetic 'autobiography' achieves in refusing the forms that characterise the non-poetic autobiography?

A Wittgensteinian response would be, in brief, that poetic form produced 'autobiography' by making the experience of sayability indicate the linguistic world determining the literacy of the language user within his (here, Silliman's) way of life. To take 'Albany' as autobiography in these terms, however, is to take it as fundamentally mimetic. This is not the same as the mimesis of *Under* Albany, a referential realism, but is nonetheless mimesis in terms of the poem offering a re-creation in language of the objective world. From such a Wittgensteinian perspective, the poem's mimesis is simply displaced from hypotaxis to parataxis, from scenic unity into social linguistic totality. In this, the poem's poetic body becomes an image of an already understood crisis, the explicitly socio-political problem being interrogated in and for its presence in the language of the poem. The poem thus advertises its ability to re-present the world by structuring itself according to the purposive relations that structure language. Such a reading thus values Silliman's poems to the degree that they can formally embody social wholes, and thus represent the exterior and already-experienced logic of social forms. Therefore, if Wittgensteinian criticism takes Silliman's poetry as 'grammatical', this 'taking as grammatical' reintroduces a metaphysical and mimetic conception of the poem. The poem is modelled upon that which its language ostensibly problematises, be it society, interpersonal relations, or subjective unity. Grammar here simply mediates mimesis: any deployment of language considered in itself becomes a mimetic image of the world from which it emerges.

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[606] Ron Silliman, *The Alphabet* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2008), 1.

Heidegger's philosophy helps us to see how, in fact, such a formulation presupposes a metaphysical and mimetic conception of the poem. The poem would only be able to critique social structures if that critique were posited in advance of the formal procedure that generates the poem.

In 'Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World', Silliman writes that

> The social role of the poem places it in an important position to carry the class struggle *for* consciousness to the level *of* consciousness. It is clear that one cannot change language (or consciousness) by fiat: the French Academy has only succeeded in limiting vocabulary. First there must be a change in the mode and control of production of material life.[607]

Silliman's thinking in this comment is indebted to Marx. Changes in the 'mode and control of production of material life' must prefigure changes in thinking. Material conditions, in Marxist terms, determine ideas. If a poem emerges from those material conditions, however, reading a poem like 'Albany' as simply mimetic would strip it of its historical and social oppositionality. The Heideggerian reading of Silliman's poetry conducted above has suggested an alternative image of the Language poem. The work of art is itself an origin. The etymology of the German term for origin [*Ursprung*] is important for Heidegger:

> Art, founding preserving, is the spring that leaps to the truth of what is, in the work. To originate something by a leap, to bring something into being from out

[607] Silliman, *The New Sentence*, 17.

> of the source of its nature in a founding leap—this is what the word origin (German *Ursprung*, literally, primal leap) means.[608]

Art as a happening of truth occurs because, out of its nature as a worked confluence of earth and world, art's createdness leaps into being and originates (both leaps and founds) a new singular disclosure. This originating springs from its earth, which for poetry is 'the speech of the people'.[609] In this we hear the sound of art's firstness. It is the work of art that first allows one to encounter a new and singular configuration of the open. Of this Heidegger writes that

> The truth that discloses itself in the work can never be proved or derived from what went before. What went before is refuted in its exclusive reality by the work. What art founds can therefore never be compensated and made up for by what is already present and available. Founding is an overflow, an endowing, a bestowal.[610]

As such, the firstness of the work of art signals the emergence into the open of a new truth to be preserved by thinking. If the poem can hand the singularity of its worlding over to preservation, then the destiny of a historical people might be altered. Silliman claims the poem is capable of bringing the class-struggle for conscious to the level *of* consciousness, but it may do so in ways other than that passage suggests. In experiencing the withdrawal of humanity into anonymity, and of dwelling into transience, something new is brought into the open. The poems discussed above each

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[608] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 75. [Editor's insertion]
[609] Ibid., 42.
[610] Ibid., 72-73.

work to disclose the enframing, alienating withdrawal of 'the Being of beings' in and from the open. In this, Silliman's poems are like the temple at Paestum. They need not 'portray' the destitution of the time in order for it to be brought to consciousness. Nor need they 'argue' discursively for it.[611] Rather, they emerge as a leap into the destitute moment, into the commodity culture of the Bay Area and of the United States more broadly, gathering forces and relations into themselves and bringing those forms and relations into a new configuration. The hotels built after the earthquake are present in a new image of transience that was not part of their appearing prior to the poem. The girl who is 'a unit in a bum space' shines in a new way because of the poem's speaking in simultaneous continuity and discontinuity. The enframed withdrawal of temporality into a series of nows, the time of 'the joint', appears in the fragmented presencing made encounterable by new-sentence parataxis.

Poetry and Historical Being in Revelator

I have suggested a Heideggerian way of rethinking Silliman's claims for 'the social role of the poem' as bringing 'the class struggle *for* consciousness to the level *of* consciousness'. Silliman was not himself thinking of his poetry in this way in the period in which 'Ketjak', *Tjanting*, 'Albany', and other poems from *The Alphabet* were written. In a much more recent poem titled *Revelator*, however, Silliman does think about his poetry in a way that approaches Heidegger's notion of poetic disclosure. *Revelator* was published in 2013 and is the first part of a proposed 360-part work called *Universe*. In a 2014 interview Silliman names 'John the Revelator' as the intentional object of the title's allusion. However, his meaning in using the term is broader, he says,

[611] Ibid., 40.

referring 'to the whole oral preacher tradition' and 'The ability to tell who is good and who is evil'.[612] The picture on *Revelator*'s cover shows Silliman reading on the street in San Francisco, in a place often occupied by street preachers. 'I'm really interested', Silliman says, 'in what is unseen or simply not noticed or not commented upon'.[613] In the same interview he names the global economic crises of the previous few years, America's continued international conflicts, and looming environmental catastrophe as specific issues provoking and conditioning his work: 'Poetry', he says, 'is clearly one form of witness, as is any of the arts'.[614]

As with 'Ketjak' and *Tjanting*, *Revelator*'s religious connotations are partly ironic. While the title raises the spectre of religious forms of speech, Silliman is clearly not thinking of his own poetry as theologically motivated, or as disclosing the divine. Rather, the tradition of religious speech and of divine revelation are summoned in order to suggest a form of secular poetry concerned with speech's relationship to witnessing and revealing. If the word 'witness' implies a metaphysical, subject-object relation, Silliman's other comments put a different spin upon it. Witnessing is at once discerning (that is, telling 'who is good and who is evil') and also revelatory (showing 'what is unseen or simply not noticed or not commented upon').[615] To witness is thus not just to observe but also to disclose. Indeed, the concept as Silliman uses it resembles Heidegger's redeployment of *aletheia.* In its pre-socratic usage *aletheia* meant bringing something into being within the *logos*, the commonly held, spoken world of a society.[616]

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[612] BookThug, 'The Bookthug Video Interview with Ron Silliman, Author of Revelator', bookthug.ca, http://bookthug.ca/videos/author-video-interviews/the-bookthug-video-interview-with-ron-silliman-author-of-revelator/.
[613] Ibid.
[614] Ibid.
[615] Ibid.
[616] Detienne, *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*, 10-11.

To witness, in this sense, might thus also be to establish something within the *logos*, as something that can be spoken about. For Silliman in *Revelator*, it has a close tie with naming. As we will see, this is partly akin to the Heideggerian notion of language's naming power, but it is also for Silliman the more particular naming bound up in proper nouns, in the names of people and places.

Revelator involves two further similarities to Heideggerian thinking that are worth mentioning. First, as with Language writing's descriptions of the era from which it emerged, the things that require witnessing in 2013 also bear the imprint of enframing. Indeed, the problems that Silliman names in the 2014 interview almost repeat those that Pearson and Watten name as conditioning historical factors for Language writing's first emergence. Only the threat of environmental calamity enters newly into *Revelator*, presenting its own apocalyptic possibilities. Second, the idea of poetry as 'one form of witness' not only positions the poem as a site to which others might look for an encounter with something otherwise not seen, but in suggesting sight also recalls the etymology of Heideggerian *Ereignis* as seeing (as noted in the first chapter of this study): '*Er-äug-nis*, be-eye-ing'.[617] Silliman identifies this experience with poetic speech through the figure of John—one who sees prophetically and discloses that prophecy to others—and through the image of his own reading in the place of street-preaching on the book's cover.

As such, though Silliman's constellation of poetic speech and revelation is not identical to Heidegger's thinking of the poem as a happening of truth, we might approach Silliman's poem as Heidegger himself approached Stefan George's 'late,

[617] Prufer, 'Glosses on Heidegger's Architectonic Word-Play', 609-10.

simple, almost songlike' poem 'The Word' in 'The Nature of Language'.[618] There Heidegger writes that the poet is having an experience with language. It is an ontological experience that the poem then discloses to thinking and for preservation.[619] The task of thinking is thus to approach the poem for an encounter with the experience it sets into itself such that it might be preserved. So, too, and although Silliman is not a Heideggerian, we might encounter his poetry for its experience of language and of the 'revelatory' power of poetry as it is handed over to the vicissitudes of historical being. For Silliman, this means thinking through the capacity of poetry to disclose the forms of presence and withdrawal at work within the historically shaped being of late twentieth-century America. It does this by also thinking through the forms of presencing and withdrawal inherent to its own being. The encounter with poem and world become, by the end, the ontological disclosure of historical presence and withdrawal, what we can call a historically thought tension between unconcealing (*aletheia*) and oblivion or concealment (*lēthē*). At the same time, the hinge between these forces is also ontologically disclosed as centred on bodily life.

These are the opening eight lines:

Words torn, unseen, unseemly, scene
some far suburb's mall lot
Summer's theme: this year's humid
– to sweat is to know –
pen squeezed tight yields

[618] Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 60.
[619] Ibid., 60, 65.

ink as blood or pus

so the phrase scraped, removed

offending thine eye: ‘Outsource Bush’[.] (9)

The poem opens by noting that words, or some words, have been ‘torn’. Though the opening phrase is ambiguous, the final phrase suggests that these words are literally torn; perhaps as part of a poster that has been torn from a wall. If this is the case, the words are also torn from the open, in what we might suppose is an attempt to render them illegible. They are or were implicitly ‘unseen’ and they are or were ‘unseemly’. The ‘scene’ is historical but ambiguous: ‘some far suburb’s mall lot’ in a humid summer. As the poem starts, this could be any mall lot in any summer, but again the final phrase brings greater specificity. Though the words are in some sense gone (‘torn’, ‘scraped’, ‘removed’), they nonetheless leave enough of a trace behind for the poet to read ‘Outsource Bush’. This is a specific historical summer, after Bush’s presidency, but not too long after. Discovering this gives a new spin to the phrase’s removal. We might suppose that one of the reasons that the words were scraped away was because history has moved on. In 2013 the phrase’s sentiment is no longer relevant. At the same time, however, the words were possibly scraped away because they were on a poster pasted to a public wall. The politically motivated graffiti offends the eye of the business owner, who perhaps prefers the uncompromised aesthetics of the ‘mall lot’.

This opening begins a poem primarily concerned with the ongoing interplay between language, history, and disclosure. As Jessica Smith puts it in her review of

Revelator, 'Time, which eats its own children, wants to pull everything in'.[620] As historical time progresses it brings new things into being in the world, and new language for dealing with them, but at the same time old things and redundant language fall back into the earth, leaving only traces. Silliman's concern for dual motion manifests most clearly in forms of transition, a reconfiguration of the 'transience' of earlier poems, which is played out both as theme and in the experience of the poem's form:

> highway 1, south toward Darlington
> country store, a few churches
> the fire house brand new
> but all volunteer, what else
> but sell antiques, old world's
> evaporating, not yet new commuters
> & a Wal-Mart to transform
> these farms into subdivisions, demanding
> better schools, a non-laughable cop
> to stop emergent crime[.] (27)

There has been a significant change in Silliman's poetic form here. Sentence-to-sentence parataxis in prose poetry has become clause-to-clause parataxis in verse form.[621] The change from periods to commas as a means of separating phrases produces

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[620] Jessica Smith, 'Against Apocalypse: A Review of Ron Silliman's "Revelator"', *Jacket2*, https://jacket2.org/reviews/against-apocalypse.
[621] A nearly identical form appears in Silliman's poem 'BART', and has similar effects. 'BART' was collected with other of Silliman's poems in *Silliman, The Age of Huts (Compleat).* 'BART', however, was a relatively isolated case until the re-emergence of verse in Silliman's later poetry.

a greater degree of conceptual continuity. The progression now resembles a stream of consciousness, implying lyric (self-)expression. The introduction of the five-word line as a new measure, borrowed from Zukofsky, is perhaps meant to substitute lineation for the loss of that more radical break between sentences and concepts present in new-sentence parataxis by adding an extra dimension of disruption and dis-unity into the clause-to-clause movement.[622] Nonetheless, and though still paratactic, the clauses and their phrases bleed into each other. Where new-sentence parataxis worked to disperse the illusion of subjective unity, *Revelator*'s single sentences return to the subject. At times this is a matter of voice, an implicit speaker unified by the utterance, and at times a specific reference presents an 'I' composing the poem being read.

Revelator thus displays a markedly different sense of temporality than was seen in the harder parataxes of *Tjanting*. The presence of an implied lyric subject and the softer form of parataxis together mediate and unify the 'barrage' of formation noted in the earlier, less centred poems. The reader is now implicitly present alongside the poet-subject's attempt to make sense of cultural fragmentation and transience. Here, transience belongs to two sources. One is the enframed transience of things like the 'fire house' and the 'evaporating' old world—a historical transience—and the other is the transience of a poet-subject who is himself transient, journeying or recalling a journey through geographical space, and thus until the end of the poem transiting and alienated from his locations. The poet's endurance of this transience, however, gives him a privileged means of encountering and thinking about the historical transience of places like Darlington. In the passage above, Silliman is able to see Darlington as transient, as

[622] Silliman claims that the five-word line is an allusion to the ending of Zukofsky's '*A*', in the same interview: 'The Bookthug Video Interview with Ron Silliman, Author of Revelator'.

the remnant of an old world about to turn into one that contains commuters and Wal-Mart stores. He sees also the socio-economic forces governing its historical transitioning: particularly the commuters who require and are attracted to new subdivisions, and who 'demand' things like schools and effective police forces.

Silliman's disclosure of this transience leads him to consider his own transience, and in particular how time's passage relates to his poetry:

how

many words have I left,
use them wisely, sparingly, each
could outlast me, to what
purpose but this compulsive record
forward from the age of
a small midcentury lad, sitting
cross-legged on my bed, scribbling
anything to be free, anything
to make sense – (32)

Silliman was in his 60s when *Revelator* was written, and to describe it as part of a project like *Universe* is to knowingly start a work he will likely die before finishing. Against this termination, the act of poetic creation is both diminished and intensified. It is 'a compulsive record' by 'a small midcentury lad', and it is also a freedom, the capacity to 'make sense'. This capacity to make sense, however, produces a degree of anxiety. Silliman's words may outlast him and, given the finitude of his capacity to

write, the words he uses demand a degree of responsibility. What Silliman is concerned with is again the trace. Like the incompletely removed graffiti from the opening eight lines, and like the 'evaporating' old-world of Darlington, Silliman's scribbled sense integrates a complex interplay of disclosure and withdrawal. As something is produced it takes presence in the earth and becomes legible in the world. This is as true of Silliman and his poems as it is of the antique stores. Both configure earth and world, and both, for Silliman, are transient. As they persist into the present, however, and as they 'outlast' the world that produced them, the world starts to withdraw from them. They become traces of something past, both holding on to the last elements of their world—like the fading relevance of 'Outsource Bush' in the 'mall lot'—but also withdrawing as historical time progresses. In Heideggerian terms, the beings disclosed within the poem are shown as inhabiting their temporal limit, their finitude within the open, and then their complex continuation in presence.[623] The implicit risk is that some form of enframed cultural change will turn Silliman's poems into enframed entities: that is, that his words will be 'torn' away from their historical moment and become mere linguistic presence no longer disclosing or participating in (the) world.

While this is more immediately obvious in the streets of Darlington than in the meditations upon his notebook pages, Silliman turns repeatedly to the historical withdrawal within language and within his poetry:

family myths

arc over generations, John Franklin

Tansley could not have known

[623] Nowell Smith, *Sounding/Silence*, 50.

telling any who would listen

that yes the explorer yes

his own grandfather yes but

the grandson Richard goes back

a century later, looks up

finds the marriage record yes

John Franklin yes married Jane[.] (33)

Disclosure within the present is likened to the recording of names. In a way the names grant some degree of being to the named, even though the names have little meaning to others and conjure little of ontic relevance. It is Silliman who can still look back at the old records, see the family history, and recall the family myths. Their ontological relevance lies in the listing itself. The words mark a history, and history is clearly the ground to which Silliman wants to draw attention. The listing of names, and the mortality of the people named, trace out the twin trajectories of presence and withdrawal within historical time.

Moreover, as was the case in the passage on Darlington, though only subtextually, history turns out to be made up also of human lives. Each of the names marks a life, and the names cumulatively make up a sequence of life-times within the transitioning presentness of different historical ways of life. The Darlington passage marks the transition from one way of life to another within a single geographical location. The passage on Silliman's own mortality, and the number of words that he has left, brings the poet's own transient life-time into the equation. Here it becomes part of

its own historical sequence. Silliman is revealed as himself part of a chain of transient presence and his writing part of a heritage of familial literacy.

Silliman's meditation upon names brings a new form of attention to what was called 'the life of the sign' in the previous chapter. The name—particularly place-names, but also the names of people—starts to resonate with the historical transience and contingency that Silliman emphasises. This is no longer the 'life of the sign' as grammatical life. Rather, this is the life of the name as a presencing and relating power that can be addressed in the world, simultaneously brought into intimacy with the historical transience of naming:

how soon

technology catches you out
these keys enact a surveillance
that will only sink deeper
over time, what you sink
'bout that, from comma to
coma to commerce to con
versus sub jugation the root
marks language's route across form
surname in the family now
just four generations, but literacy
not more than six, so what
arrogance am I then enacting
weaving ink into paper, stains

> of a history already blanching
>
> in the light[.] (34)

In 2013 Silliman is struck both by the way that technology's recording of key-strokes—like the writing down of names in records—means a form of surveillance that 'will only sink deeper / over time'. What is surveilled is a place where one's being intersects with the world's language. Names and poems about names, like etymologies, mark a trail of presence across history in the words used. At issue again is the trace, which I use here with the dual-meaning of both the remnant and the act of surveilling. The trace maintains something of the presence of the thing written about, and it provides a small degree of worldly being that allows things to be tracked historically. In so doing, however, it involves one in a history that can be burdensome within everyday life. Silliman writes now with a sense of the arrogance of the act. Further, as his poetry thinks about the act of naming in language, and brings the historical and the personal dimension of this form of presencing into the poem's thinking, it does so with the idea that the language used is already disintegrating within and because of its own being. His 'making sense', his 'weaving ink into paper', is likened to 'stains / of a history already blanching / in the light'. Here the interplay of disclosure and withdrawal within historical time is likened to the same process taking place materially and ontologically within his own poetry. As soon as his writing appears it starts to 'blanch'. It begins, we might now say, the process of turning from a historically embedded gesture into a trace that, though it immediately begins to blanch, also may persist beyond the poet's self. This persistence is again double. It maintains some world-disclosing power, but it increasingly withdraws from worldly relevance.

In this, the fact that Silliman's poem takes the form of a single sentence is important. It suggests a train of thought during a journey, or recalling a journey. It is a train of thought that involves digressions into speculation, memory, and imagination. The attempt to 'make sense' is thus construed as a negotiation of greater stretches of temporality within a transiting present moment. As the poem produces this single train of language and thought the words tumble across the line-breaks, from one thought to the next. This grants each line its own momentary, transient presence. The world, and the thought disclosed within it, fades as the journey and time proceed past. It is only in the poem considered as an object rather than as an experience, in the material words on paper, that the disclosures taking place to and within the poet's thinking are given a more permanent form and are handed over for potential preservation. In this, the poem's materiality sets language's naming power into an earthly presence. To consider the poem this way, however, is to reduce it to mere presence as an object. While we might then consider it as a commodity, and predispose our relationship to it, this short-circuits its possible disclosure. Moreover, Silliman suggests, the materialisation of the poem only delays the fading away of its disclosure and its record. Even if literacy remains, and readers continue to preserve the poem's thinking, the ink stains, woven with 'arrogance' into the paper, are already 'blanching / in the light'. Therefore, like the words experienced within the train of thought, the both the poem's materiality and its disclosures start to fade away as soon as they appear.

The other problem disclosed in the above passages, alongside the historical 'blanching' of Silliman's poetic revelation, is an enframing that presses forward with its own apocalyptic vision and with the processes that force the withdrawal of being into mere presence. This was hinted at already in Silliman's passage through the town of

Darlington. There Silliman described the town as being on the cusp of transformation, from an old-world town into one that contains a Wal-Mart and, tragicomically, an efficient 'cop'. Even though this transformation hasn't taken place, the town is already enframed. The capacity to see sub-divisions latent in the farms, for instance, suggests that the town is already encountered in the terms of enframing. It is already encountered, at least for some, as a resource for the expansion of markets and urban populations. That the town has not yet been transformed totally only marks its current condition as a latent resource for those expansions: the site of a Wal-Mart waiting to happen.

Silliman brings this out in the following passage:

history

is anxiety, breathe here, futures
merge, mock, migrate, mesh, markets
more powerful than Marx imagined,
new forests for old, scattered
brick, metal, you can see
where the garage exploded, compost
everything, at the end of
the Age of Man[.] (36)

History is anxiety, and anxiety patterns the lines with a quick succession of alliterated words. The alliteration builds such that the sequence of single words in the second line seems to arrive inevitably at 'markets', whose excess heralds 'the end of / the Age of

Man'. The markets are also tied to 'new forests for old', which we might take both as a metaphor for capitalism itself—a new capitalism has replaced the old—and as a metonym for it. That is, as with the immanent replacement of Darlington's farms by residential subdivisions, old-growth forests are cut down and industrially managed tree-farms are put in their place. The enframing is explicit: trees grown to be quantities of wood replace nature. As it tells us this, the poem also alliterates, drawing attention to the non-signifying materiality of language.

It is at this point that the poet's desire to 'witness' what is unseen returns to the fore, with the poem's form re-emphasised as a means for disclosing enframing within the historically and materially transient present:

> I saw Lost River briefly
> but then it was gone
> again, blue tail juvenile skink
> skitters across the deck, wind
> chimes indoors still without fan,
> the farms for sale, how
> soon the vast plain of
> McMansions[.] (38)

The opposition is neatly compact. The aptly named 'Lost River' is soon to be converted into 'the vast plain of / McMansions'. The vastness of the plain of McMansions is shocking when it is named in the poem. Though its imminence makes this a future condition, it seems more present in the poem than the current 'Lost River'. This is

because the transience of Lost River and its contents is a part of the poet's way of speaking of them. Lost River, while present in the world, is only seen 'briefly' before it is 'gone'. Animals also appear briefly and are gone, as do the still indoor chimes. When 'the vast plain of / McMansions' arrives in the imagination it is oddly solid in contrast to what is supposedly materially there. Tellingly, only 'the vast plain' is given a definite article in this small passage. The lineation also brings its own sense to the experience of seeing. The sentence slips in and out of coherence as the line-breaks interfere with sense. This is analogous to how the speaker must hold on to the thought of Lost River even while its current being slips from view and from the world.

Witnessing is thus construed as an attempt not only to disclose the experience at a historical moment, but also to show how the old world is being homogenised, in the present, by the enframed and enframing advance of McMansions. Witnessing therefore takes on something of the temporal three-fold of 'having-been, presencing, and futurity'.[624] These, Nowell Smith notes, 'structure the way in which Dasein can first understand itself as being-in-the-world'.[625] Poetic witnessing, we might now say, is ontologically disclosed in the poem as made of these same three 'temporal ecstases'. The poem's soft parataxis and its type of journeying allow it to carry its pastness, its having-been, within itself as it contends with the having-been of the places it encounters. As it does so, it is struck by a futurity that arrives in the form of visions, turning the poem's speaking into a temporally three-fold disclosure of presencing, in the present.

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[624] Ibid., 51.
[625] Ibid.

As the poem continues, these same obsessions repeat in variation. Silliman's desire to compulsively record things in the world and to 'make sense' of and within that record is continually in tension with the fading-away of people and things from the world and from history, and with the disclosed advance of enframed transformations of the world. The poem is in tension, just as critically, with the fading-away of the language that discloses and makes sense of the material entities and the uncovered Heideggerian 'world' in and amongst which historical humanity exists. As it progresses, however, the sense that the poet is recalling a journey becomes even more emphatic as its naming of names, its recording and presencing of things, builds to a crescendo:

> gibbous moon
> waxing large guides us thru
> Samuel P. Taylor Park, redwoods
> right at road's edge, bridge
> back into the East Bay,
> hills full of lights, high
> up the grade at Marin
> (San Quentin, as we pass
> is yellow, blending into hills[).] (59)

Such listing passages bring a curious tension into the poem. It is as though Silliman's desire to witness has again brought him to the point of simply recording glimpses of the present, as was the case in some earlier poems. Having gone through *Revelator*'s prior meditations upon naming and historical transience, however, every thing now named in the present carries the sense of its ongoing transience and future withdrawal. A place-

name recorded as part of the singular journey, such as 'Samuel P. Taylor Park', might one-day name of something that no longer exists. The park is one, in this sense, with those redwood trees that, not being inside the park's frame, were cut down for the road to pass through. Both are reflected in the prison, San Quentin, which is a symbol of the greater culture of enframing. It is a closed off, predisposed and alienating space, but it also blends 'into the hills', as just another enclosing frame. The effect is therefore striking. Rather than bring beings into the poem to be encountered, to stand forth in unconcealment, the nouns themselves appear as a sign of the withdrawal of being from the name. Historical transience, mixed with the ongoing and futural advance of enframed relations, has led to naming without presencing. As with *Tjanting*, the contingency of language's naming comes to the fore in unconcealment as a sign of the present era.

The poem concludes some pages later, however, with a particularly lyrical moment of subjective unity. This moment transforms the preceding disclosures into an encounter with the poem's revelatory motion through the poet's being-in-the-world. In so doing it tries to call an alternative experience of presence into the poem:

I close

my eyes just to listen

laughing jay, distant train, feel

instead air over hair, back

of my hand, its taste

palpable in nostrils, eucalyptus, tea

hummingbird responds to jay, jets

echo heading east, sounds create

(first sprinkler, bottle on table)

sense of my own body

high in the Berkeley hills. (75)

It is a lyric moment centring again on the idea of making sense. But here the priority is reversed. Phenomenological contact with the world makes sense of, and gives sense over to, the poet. Eyes closed, the speaker experiences himself listening to the 'laughing jay' and the 'distant train', he feels 'air over hair' on 'back / of my hand', and smells 'eucalyptus' as a 'hummingbird responds to [the] jay'. Historical thinking has given over to an experience of the present. Having witnessed the world throughout the poem, the poet ends by turning his senses upon themselves as he experiences them experiencing. Sensations thus register beings in presence. These sensations are recorded in the poem, in the form of those 'ink stains' that 'make sense' of the senses, and thus they are brought also into the poem's open.

Language both precedes and follows this experience of the world. Only the already-present open of the *logos* allows these experiences to come to the speaker in presence at all. Only that capacity granted by language makes them discernible as birdcalls, feelings of air, and scents of trees. It is the poem's particular language, however, the speaking that responds to the *logos*'s saying, that brings them into the work's open. To have the speaker pause, then, and attend to his experience, is to have that speaker attend to the way that the open is experienced and takes form in poetry. In other sections of *Revelator* there is a tension between naming's presencing of beings and their withdrawal from phenomenal and poetic presence. Here the poem discloses a

different tension. On the one hand it shows the necessary precedence of the *logos* and the open over the ability to encounter beings at all. On the other hand, it stresses the poem's role in bringing being and beings into its own singular open. As the poem closes, and the experience of the open becomes a 'sense of my own body / high in the Berkeley hills', the precedence of the open over the poet in his making of the poem brings the poet into close identity with the open itself. In its coming to rest in its open the poem seems to have reached a conception of itself as disclosure. We can thus call it the experience of *Ereignis*, but where the visual etymological root of the experience ('*Er-äug-nis*, be-eye-ing') is diffused across the other bodily senses.[626]

In this, poetic revelation is found at the poem's end to move through the poet's bodily life. The bodily life that experiences the open and reinscribes it into poetry, disclosing a transient way-of-life in the process, is still part of that series of lives that make up one lineage within historical time. It is also consonant with the three-way temporality of being-in-the-world. That life, manifesting here in the capacity to experience and make sense within the open in poetic creation is importantly not at odds with historical time. The beings that Silliman refers to—things like the jets, the train, the sprinkler, and the bottle on the table—also put the poet into relation with a historical and ontic world. Further, these man-made things are intermixed with 'natural' things like the 'laughing jay', the eucalyptus, and the hills. The man-made things, like the prison San Quentin, cannot be easily distinguished or separated from the 'natural' world. Both are part of Silliman's actual life, and both are encountered by the senses of his bodily life. There is thus a form of solace in *Ereignis*, in the experience of being enowned 'high in the Berkeley Hills', that is both historical and poetically generative.

[626] Prufer, 'Glosses on Heidegger's Architectonic Word-Play', 609-10.

The present that it arrives at in the end is unified, lyric, and scenic. It is markedly at odds with the temporality of ‘the joint’ that had characterised Silliman’s previous writing. It is held out in opposition to the fragmentation and the anxiety of enframing. In this it constitutes a deliberate attempt to inscribe unity into the open. It is distinct from the rejection of hypotaxis in prior poems, however, where parataxis reveals the enframed nature of lyric unity and scenic representation. The unity on which the poem ends is one it has struggled to achieve. It has wrested its presence and its duration out of the encounter with the open and its forms of withdrawal.

Conclusion:

Both Martin Heidegger's and Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophies were important influences on post-war American poetry, having risen to prominence in the wake of the Second World War. Heidegger's thinking appealed to those poets who, like George Oppen, sought new grounds for poetic expression—even if, at times, the search was conducted against the felt difficulty of the goal's attainment. Wittgenstein appealed to those who, like Ron Silliman, found the battle for authenticity already lost, and a late capitalism that could be opposed only from the inside. Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies thus provided very different means by which poets might respond to their historical moment. Currently, these philosophies are also prominent within criticism as ways of reading poetry composed under their influences, as well as for reading twentieth-century poetry more generally.

In approaching situation, this thesis has used the methods of faithful and unfaithful reading to illuminate different aspects of Oppen's and Silliman's poetry. In the Heideggerian reading, Oppen's poetry revealed a tension between, on the one hand, the desire to find a poetic form capable of registering the actuality of things in the world and, on the other hand, the anxious need to silence the poem in the face of the otherness of those things. I argued that, as an outcome of this tension, Oppen's poetry approached the Heideggerian notion of formal indication. Reading with the aid of Wittgenstein's philosophy, however, Oppen's poetry seemed instead to search for grammatical experiences that could offer analogues to ontological experiences, but at the same time to be acutely self-conscious of the potential impossibility of that ambition. Finally, both the faithful and unfaithful readings allowed us to understand Oppen's philosophical

poetic response to his historical moment. The Heideggerian reading suggested that Oppen's poetry responds to its historical moment by using poetry's images to test the truth of what may be believed and said. This truth was construed as an 'intuition of existence', an apprehension of material actuality. This intuition lies outside of the meanings characteristic of social numerousness under late capitalism, in opposition to a culture that includes things like smoke from burning bodies. Through poetry's testing, therefore, poetic matter becomes the site at which one's speaking indicates a path of flight away from problematic social involvement within specific historical crises. The Wittgensteinian reading, conversely, suggested that Oppen's poetry does not indicate a way beyond that social involvement. Rather, it suggested that Oppen responds to his historical moment by staging its own simultaneous desire to and failure to escape socially-problematic language. It does so, moreover, by making the drama of that failure a feature of the experience of language's different aspects.

A similar degree of difference was seen between the faithful and unfaithful readings of Silliman's poetry. Reading Silliman's work with the help of Wittgenstein's philosophy produced three successive insights. New-sentence proliferation was initially found to challenge one's literacy within certain verbal forms and thus, by extension, within different forms of life. This testing of literacy was brought to light as an interrogation of the (often politically problematic) intimacy between literacy—what one finds 'sayable'—and one's way of life—particularly what one is capable of doing. I argued then that the nexus between a way of life and sayability lay within the life of the sign, and the manner in which one might experience the currency of particular forms of sense. The meaning of Silliman's new-sentence parataxis thus changed as the Wittgensteinian reading progressed. New sentences at first seemed to proliferate

meanings, and to challenge one's capacity to imagine these meanings within a way of life. This proliferation was turned on its head, however, so that a sentence's sayability indicated a problematic rather than accomplished form of literacy. In the final turn, however, this ambivalence towards one's literacy made Silliman's poetry appear to direct the reader toward an experience of the life of the sign. The proliferation of meanings experienced at the beginning was, by the end, the proliferation of signs wherein one's capacity to see them as 'alive' indicated a simultaneously fascinating and problematic social embeddedness.

Read from the Heideggerian perspective, Silliman's poems have come into a very different light. It became apparent that Silliman's new-sentence parataxis was able to disclose aspects of the modern, enframed historical moment. This was shown, through the sentences' iterations, in the experience of language itself as the movement from unconcealing to withdrawal. This, combined with the simultaneous continuity and discontinuity of the new sentences, disclosed the similar form of relation at work within socio-spatial relations, and the forms of transience and fragmentation characteristic of late capitalism. Rather than a challenge to literacy, then, from a Heideggerian perspective the new sentence discloses the historical being of its moment. As this being is marked by a profound measurelessness and withdrawal that results from the historical progression of enframing, the poem was brought newly into view as itself a poetic measure tracing the withdrawal of ontological measure from human being in the world. I then argued that a more recent poem, *Revelator*, demonstrates that Silliman himself has come to think of his poetry as revelatory, and in particular a revelatory form of witnessing. This form of witnessing relates bodily sensation to the experience of the

open, as *Ereignis,* the disclosure of which emerges from within the poem's prior disclosure of historical being and the historical advance of enframing.

Some conclusions emerge from these readings. The first reconfirms an argument made by Shoshana Felman in *Literature and Psychoanalysis*. If a seemingly faithful reading is 'correct' (or 'true') given its particular evidentiary and discursive criteria, so too is a contradictory reading with different criteria.[627] Both readings are true, we may say, but neither is exhaustive. Second, it is now also apparent that the capacity of an unfaithful reading working with different criteria to produce 'correct' readings is not due to the particular qualities or merits of the philosophy in question. That is, it seemed possible that the power of the Wittgensteinian reading of Oppen resulted from a Wittgensteinian vocabulary's suitability to show the grammatical underpinnings of a phenomenological language. Performing a Heideggerian reading of Silliman's poetry, however, it becomes clear that a phenomenological model can find ontological disclosure at work within a poetry composed under the aegis of grammatical self-interrogation. This means that the usefulness of unfaithful reading as an alternative form of suspicion does not depend on the particular capacity of one method of suspicion to unmask the hidden workings of the other. We must again resist the temptation to take the unfaithful reading as the newly decided truth of the texts, the property of a newly discovered, newly faithful exclusionary suspicion. Instead, the capacity of the unfaithful reading to produce new and valid interpretations of a text indicates that the drive to account for a text and its context need not be confined to forms of reading seemingly determined by context.

[627] Felman, 'Turning the Screw of Interpretation', 117.

Alongside the need to retain the provisionality of both forms of reading, we must be careful not to imply that the excess of a text over the explanatory powers of context belongs to the text alone. Unfaithful reading's ability to show the excess of texts over fidelity originates also in the nature and the limitations of interpretation. In this thesis I have called 'faithful' reading that which takes itself to be performing the sole act of interpretive fidelity to textual complexity. In such an understanding, the 'faithful' reading constitutes an attempt to establish the meaning of the text by mastering it with a seemingly necessary vocabulary. Unfaithful reading is the countervailing attempt to respond to text and context by freeing interpretation from the belief that any one interpretation can master a text. The primary difference between faithful and unfaithful reading is thus that the unfaithful reading responds to what I take to be the undecidable nature of literary works. Like faithful reading, it does this by articulating an understanding of the text and by bracketing relativity and provisionality around its methods and conclusions. The unfaithful reading does not eradicate the faithful interpretation, but goes beyond it in order to do justice to the excess of the work over determinability as such.[628] The success of unfaithful reading is therefore also owed to this excess of texts over determinability.

The division between faithful and unfaithful readings at work throughout this thesis requires a further meta-critical act. In the opening of his book on Shakespearean comedy and romance, *A Natural Perspective*, Northrop Frye takes a moment to lay out a meta-critical foundation: when one is concerned with a 'complex theory and the

[628] As Attridge puts it, an unfaithful reading 'is not one that overrides the work's conventionally determined meanings in the name of imaginative freedom but rather one that, in its striving to do full justice to a work, is obliged to go beyond existing conventions': Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, 80.

enjoyment of a complex experience', he writes, it is often good to 'begin with some large simplifying device, like a dichotomy':[629]

> We are told, by Coleridge, that all philosophers are either Platonists or Aristotelians; by Gilbert, that all girls and boys are either liberals or conservatives, and, by popular rumour, that all human beings are either girls or boys. These statements are clearly oversimplified, and are rhetorical rather than factual: they are designed to give us some perspective on the shape of a big subject, not to tell us the truth about it. In the same way, and subject to the same reservation, I shall begin with a similar dichotomy about literary criticism. I may express it, in the manner of Coleridge, by saying that all literary critics are either Iliad critics or Odyssey critics. That is, interest in literature tends to center either in the area of tragedy, realism, and irony, or in the area of comedy and romance.[630]

Philosophical, critical or theoretical work tends to divide the world up into dichotomies, not as a naive reflection of oppositions thought to already be in place, but as a heuristic device useful in its clarifying simplicity but at the same time oversimplifying. We might ask now whether the clarifying distinction between faithful and unfaithful reading itself contains an oversimplification and so must now be discarded, much like the ladder that is kicked away in the progression through Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

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[629] Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective; the Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romancer* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 1.
[630] Ibid.

To the extent that faithfulness and unfaithfulness are not something that a reading actually possesses in its approach to a text's undecidability, the distinction is a clear reduction of a complex array of forms and motivations for reading into two broad categories. At the same time, however, the proposal for unfaithful reading sprang from the current state of literary criticism, in which the rhetoric of faith was found to be prominent. Under the guidance of suspicious hermeneutics, the rhetoric of faith already determines what sort of accounting can be taken to answer properly for the work of poets like Oppen and Silliman. Unfaithful reading was proposed as a means of countering the seeming naturalness of faithful ways of reading, and the seeming naturalness of faithfulness as such. In this it has constituted a pathway, or a ladder, to a recognition of the insufficiency of faithful acts of interpretation to critical understanding. Unfaithful reading is thus a concept that might be discarded once the excess of texts over interpretation, and the excess of 'correct' or 'true' interpretations over the horizon of interpretive faithfulness, has been more broadly recognised. Without a rhetoric of faith, in other words, there would be no need for a counter-rhetoric of unfaithful acts.

The rhetorical opposition in which some readings are conceived of as faithful, exclusively so in opposition to a necessarily far broader array of implicitly unfaithful ways of reading, is thus a product of the manner in which suspicion generates the need for forms of fidelity. As Felski has suggested, 'If we conceive of interpretation as a retrieval of non-obvious or counterintuitive meaning', the capacity to retrieve the 'non-obvious' depends on particular methods whose power to unmask matches the text's power to obscure.[631] While the desire to retrieve the non-obvious is not itself pernicious,

[631] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 33.

as I have argued in my introduction, the particular manner in which the non-obvious is conceived has the effect of predetermining and limiting what the non-obvious might be and the faithful manner of retrieving it. To the extent that such a rhetoric of faithfulness exists, then, the presence of unfaithful reading as its opposite constitutes a direct counter-movement, not only an oversimplification, but also a gesture towards the excess of the text and the limitations of interpretation. In this, unfaithfulness to context represents a form of faith in the capacity of literary works to exceed critical accounting. As such, it is not a particular method, vocabulary, or framework by which interpretation might be carried out. It is, rather, an ethos for interpretation, one that gives licence to forms of reading that respond to text and context while encouraging new and revitalising interpretive possibilities.

Unfaithful reading has thus allowed for insights into Oppen's and Silliman's philosophical poetry that would otherwise have remained unavailable. Importantly, we now see that the work of both poets resists precisely reproducing the terms of their philosophical influences. Whether or not this is always true of what we call literature, both Oppen and Silliman have troubled, and at times ironic, relationships with their contextual materials. For Oppen, indeed, whether his poetic relationship with Heidegger's philosophy appears as simply troubled or as deliberately ironic has depended on whether one was reading from a Heideggerian or a Wittgensteinian perspective. Within the Heideggerian reading, Oppen's attempt to craft a poetry fit for *Ereignis* was troubled by his refusal to locate the happening or appearing of being within the poem itself, making the poem instead a gesture of faith toward an experience taking place prior to the poem's speaking. In contrast, a Wittgensteinian reading of Oppen's poetry reveals a deeply ironic posture, wherein Oppen was at once sincere in

his desire for a poetic approach to the event of *Ereignis* and at the same time aware of the seemingly utopian futurity of a poetry capable of doing so.

Silliman's relationship to his contextual materials is also ironic, to varying degrees. In a minor way, his use of Wittgenstein's philosophy is ironic. This is true both in his use of the philosophy as a model for poetic form (as in 'The Chinese Notebook') and in the use of Wittgensteinian ideas (such as interrogation of the criteria determining the separation of the sense of 'bring me sugar' from the non-sense of 'milk me sugar'). This is because the self-interrogative posture involved in such use makes the influence itself an object of Silliman's poetic interrogation. Because the doubleness that results from this posture belongs to Wittgenstein also, however, it does not produce a gap between text and context so much as a heightened form of self-consciousness. The deeper antagonisms within Silliman's poetry instead lie within the new sentence itself, and they too take on different forms depending on which philosophical frame is in place. In the Wittgensteinian reading, the new sentence was found to provoke an experience of the life of the sign in which the Wittgensteinian revelation of the source of that life (the forms of life from which language emerges) had to be constantly opposed to the seeming autonomy of the sign. Fascination with that sense of autonomy seemed to strive energetically against the exposure of the sign's social origin. Moreover, Silliman's desire that poetic form itself critique and oppose the dominant capitalist aesthetic paradigm seemed at odds with a Wittgensteinian reading that would fill the new sentence with the life of late-capitalist language-use. In response, the Heideggerian reading suggested that this difference between the poems and their avowed political and philosophical contexts and motivations actually reflected a more profound oppositionality at work within poetic disclosure.

Therefore, in an echo of Jarvis's arguments in *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song*, neither Oppen's nor Silliman's poetry can be reduced to simple identity with or repetition of its contextual materials.[632] Nor is the thinking that takes place in the poetry always identical to the poets' own programmatic statements. If this suggests the hoary critical observation that poets often struggle to articulate what is taking place in their work it also means that, for both Oppen and Silliman, using philosophy to respond to the crises of their close historical moments also involved responding to their own means of response. Further, the differences between the philosophy and the poetry, the context and the text, are at once central to the poetry and difficult for a faithful application of the philosophy to access. For both poets, the faithful reading seemed to benefit from an unfaithful reading capable of articulating an ironic relation, or simply a gap, between context and text.

While we cannot know in advance whether the same or similar dynamics will be found in the work of other philosophical poets in the post-war United States, the examples of Oppen and Silliman suggest that post-war American poetry's relationship to its philosophical influences was anything but naive. The desire to use a Heideggerian poetics to find a route toward being, or toward things in themselves, or to find new ways of poetically thinking one's being-in-the-world, was perhaps more a matter of testing the possibilities opened up by the philosophy against the experiences offered by poetry than of simply working those possibilities into poetic forms. Similarly, a desire to use a Wittgensteinian poetics to think through or examine poetry's own claims to authenticity or worldly access, or to highlight poetry's grammatical foundation within the experience of poetic language, might be a matter of testing such a sense of language

[632] Jarvis, *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song*, and 'What Is Historical Poetics?'.

against its emergence from everyday life. In both cases, Oppen's and Silliman's examples suggest that a philosophical poetics would manifest in its own singular negotiation between philosophical and poetic possibilities.

Further, if the nature and the meaning of Oppen's and Silliman's poetic responses to their historical moments change depending on how you read them, this suggests that the nature and the meaning of those responses do not emerge from the poem but from the reading. We might put this another way by saying that critical recognition is, as noted in the introduction to this thesis, always partially a mis-recognition. It brings a poetic (or otherwise literary) text into its own discursive vocabulary. Criticism, in this sense, is always a translation, and so for the poem's response to its historical moment to be anything other than the poem itself (for the poem, that is, to undergo any explanation whatsoever) is for it to be altered and brought into an alien sphere. This is therefore not to say that a philosophical poem cannot itself be thought of as a situated response to a historical moment. Quite the opposite: a poem can work as a historical response in many ways, perhaps most immediately through the effects that it prompts—the linguistic, cultural, affective, aesthetic and/or prosodic relations it produces for a reader. However, such an experience ought not to be confused with critical interpretation or explanation. Explanation requires alteration; hermeneutics is always a translation. This being the case, the critical question cannot be 'is this explanation correct?', but, rather, how does this explanation allow us to think, to value this poem or this poetry, or to propose responses to the world? That is, what way of thinking about poetry's relation to the world or to history does such a reading sustain? And what (perhaps hidden) ideologies accompany it? We might then ask, what ideas of

poetry, what ways of valuing poetry, are brought into play when Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies are used as ways of reading?

Having read Oppen's and Silliman's work with the aid of Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies it is tempting to frame the opposed ways of reading as the poles of an essential and unavoidable dichotomy. Framed in such a way, Heideggerian criticism would be the flagship for a more general trend in which poetry is read for what it discloses both through and beyond its own material limits. In strong Heideggerian terms, a poem may disclose being, beings, or humanity's relationship to being. This might also include poetry's role in shaping these disclosures. As the flagship for a more general trend, however, poetry would be a way of thinking of or with some central object of interest, perhaps the only way of thinking of or with it. Wittgensteinian criticism, on the other hand, would be the flagship for those who wish to read poetry as fundamentally concerned with itself, with language and its limits, with the discursive practices and capacities of poetic expression as they intersect with social language-use. The 'Wittgensteinian' idea of the poem would again be a simplification of a broad category of approaches into the image of an utterly self-conscious linguistic act.

In the introduction to *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens*, J. Hillis Miller argues that these different ways of thinking about poetry 'are not modern inventions'.[633] Indeed, he suggests a three-way distinction between poetry as 'imitation, *mimesis*, analogy, copy', poetry as 'unveiling, uncovering, revelation, *aletheia*', and poetry as 'creating', wherein 'there is nothing outside the text', 'a metapoetry, a poetry

[633] Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment*, 5. For further discussion of Miller's categories, see Ziarek, 'Poetics of Disclosure in Stevens's Late Poetry', 52-3.

of grammar, in which what counts is the play of words among themselves'.[634] Hillis Miller's three-way separation complicates any neat distinction between Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian ways of reading. It suggests that while Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies represent different ways of thinking about poetry, they are not the poles of an absolute dichotomy. Moreover, if the distinction between thinking about poetry as *aletheia* and thinking about it as grammatical metapoetry seems to match our distinction between Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian ways of reading, it is also true, Hillis Miller argues, that these different forms are not absolutely separate, not as ways of reading and especially not within poems themselves. Even in Aristotle's time, he notes, the notion of poetic mimesis could not be separated from the notion of poetry as *aletheia.*[635] 'The three theories', he writes, 'are not alternatives among which one may choose', but forms of thought constantly interacting, intermixing, and including each other.[636]

Whether or not we accept Hillis Miller's tripartite and trans-historical categorisation, his thinking helps us to see that to propose an essential opposition of Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian ways of reading is to simplify a far more radical multiplicity. Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies don't represent essentially opposed positions, even if they do have many important differences, and even if they do loom very large in recent criticism. Heidegger was perfectly capable of thinking about poetry's interest in poetry, for instance, as in the disclosive powers of the poetic word, just as Wittgenstein was at least partially interested in language's relation to phenomena, as with the phenomenology of colour underlying the use of language about

[634] Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment*, 10.
[635] Ibid., 6.
[636] Ibid., 6, 5.

colour. Rather, Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies offer two options, two ways of reading poetry developed in the last century, and which continue to be useful to criticism. They sit alongside ways of reading drawn from other thinkers more or less distant on the spectra of history and thought—Marx, Adorno, Benjamin, Coleridge, Aristotle, and so on—and amongst other methods of interpretation broadly distinguished as historicist, formalist, symptomatic, close, distant, surface, theoretical, and so on. Moreover, the faithful and unfaithful readings of Oppen and Silliman have shown that the Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian approaches are insufficient even in reading poetry that would seem to have been influenced by Heidegger and Wittgenstein.

The continuing prominence of Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian ways of reading, however, suggests that these philosophies represent more than neutral ways of responding to the contexts of a text's composition. I suggest that they constitute also a means by which contemporary criticism itself responds to its historical moment. Criticism, that is, shows Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's influence as much as does the poetry it seeks to understand. As such, rather than a privileged site of hermeneutic mastery, such criticism also represents situated forms of response. One reason for this is perhaps the continuing presence of the issues that caused poets to reach to Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies in the post-war period. To some degree we are still within their late-capitalist moment, subject to the same or similar problems of historical and social involvement, 'villainous' recent national histories, and the antagonisms at work between our bodily lives and our ways of life under capitalism. If Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophies continue to offer attractive ways of understanding twentieth-century poetry, then, they do so because we still value the kinds of response they prompt. We want poetry to be capable of what Oppen and Silliman sought within

it: a way of disclosing our being in the world and the being of the things around us, and a way of liberating poetry from the forms of language-use in which we are ‘held captive’ in our everyday lives.

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