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**Modernist Objects / Objects under Modernity:  
a Philosophical Reading of *Discrete Series***

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*for the degree of* Doctor of Philosophy  
University of Sussex

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I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

28.05.2015

## Summary

This thesis is the first book-length treatment of the poems in George Oppen's *Discrete Series* (1934), providing a counterbalance to critical readings of Oppen's work which have to date focused on work published after his return to poetry (i.e. from 1962 onwards). It is a philosophical presentation of the work which argues that the poems are themselves philosophical presentations of objects, and by those objects and that presentation, of the historical circumstances of those objects and the poems themselves.

Its method is Adornian in three senses: first, it holds that literature is not only subject-matter for a (sub)subset of philosophy but a potential mode of participation within it; second, the philosophical writing with which the thesis puts the poems into dialogue is not a single authorship nor strictly aesthetic, but a broad range of writings by Kant, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche (with a special emphasis on Hegel); and third, continual recourse is made to Adorno's own writings on art and objecthood.

After a brief account of the pre-history of Objectivism, of Oppen's connection with Ezra Pound, and the circumstances of the work's production and appearance, the poems are analysed in depth alongside more thoroughly institutionally validated works by, among others, Pound and T.S. Eliot. The main focus of these readings is on the physical objects represented: their nature, type, consistency, and the fact and manner of their presentation. These objects are characterised by their resolute materiality – their distinctive hardness and their uniform impenetrable surfaces. These properties are analysed from literary-historical, historical and philosophical perspectives, i.e. in the contexts of modernist hardness and its precursors; industrial production and the individual; and the causes and consequences, in thought, of the experience of bare materiality that the poems present.

Finally it considers how the poems, as well as registering a particular mode of object experience, themselves seek to produce it.

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*for Stuart Hercock and Tora Olsson*

## Contents

### Introduction

- 0.1 Methodology p. 1
- 0.2 Objects in *Discrete Series* p. 10

### Chapter 1: The preface & preface poem

- 1.1 The Collection, its Preface, and the Wider Poundian Context p. 16
- 1.2 The Opening Poem: ‘what really was going on’ p. 28
- 1.3 Critique, Self-critique, Contact with the World  
(Bourgeois Art and Bourgeois Thought) p. 48
- 1.4 Objects and the Opening Poem’s True Prefatory Function p. 76

### Chapter 2: Industrial Objects and Industrial Perception

- 2.1 Uniform Impenetrable Surfaces  
(a Prehistory of Modernist Hardness) p. 83
- 2.2 The Local History of Hardness p. 90
- 2.3 Externalisation and Relief: Objects Do Not Think p. 94
- 2.4 ‘Closed car’ (an overstatement) p. 111
- 2.5 The Local History of ‘Closed car’ p. 131
- 2.6 Craft vs. Industry p. 140

### Chapter 3: The Object in Thought and Words

- 3.1 Silence and Non-Feeling:  
The Semi-Appropriateness of Hegel’s *Aesthetics* p. 150
- 3.2 Facticity? p. 164
- 3.3 Sense Certainty: Hegel on ‘Thisness’ p. 177
- 3.4 Rocks, Sand, and Unrimmed Holes p. 185

### Bibliography p. 199

Poetry is the universal art of the spirit which has become free in itself and is not tied down for its realization to external sensuous materials; instead it launches out exclusively in the inner space and the inner time of ideas and feelings. Yet, precisely at this highest stage, art now transcends itself, in that it forsakes the element of a reconciled embodiment of the spirit in sensuous form and passes over from the poetry of the imagination to the prose of thought. (Hegel, *Aesthetics*)

I noticed I still lacked something essential, something that in my long metaphysical studies I, as well as others, had failed to consider and which in fact constitutes the key to the whole secret of metaphysics, hitherto still hidden from itself. I asked myself this question: What is the ground of the relation of that in us which we call “representation” to the object? (Kant, *Correspondence*)

Introduction to *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* [delivered 1823-26, collected in German 1842] trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), Vol 1, p. 89

Letter to Marcus Herz, Feb. 21 1772. *Correspondence* ed., trans. Arnulf Zweig (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 133

## Introduction

### 0.1 Methodology

This thesis is a philosophical presentation of a series of poems: George Oppen's *Discrete Series* (1934).<sup>1</sup> It argues that those poems are themselves philosophical presentations of objects, and by those objects and that presentation, of the historical circumstances of those objects and the poems themselves. Both the collection – in its self-knowledge – and the thesis – in its reconstruction of that self-knowledge – are written in the wake of Hegel's diagnosis, a century beforehand, of the capacity of artworks to think about themselves, which he gives in almost the same breath as he announces the end (in certain respects) of the possibility of art:

In all these respects art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our ideas instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place. What is now aroused in us by works of art is not just immediate enjoyment but our judgement also, since we subject to our intellectual consideration (i) the content of art, and (ii) the work of art's means of presentation, and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of both to one another. The philosophy of art is therefore a greater need in our day than it was in days when art by itself as art yielded full satisfaction. Art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A note on dating: Based on private communication with the author and others Rachel Blau DuPlessis concludes that a complete manuscript was in circulation as early as 1930. *Selected Letters of George Oppen* ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990) [hereafter *Selected Letters*], p. 371 n.6. The belatedness of the work's publication would seem to be confirmed by the fact that in the Fulcrum edition (London: Fulcrum, 1972) the collection is dated 1929-1933 (p. 7), whereas the other collections are given their date of first publication rather than composition. In the New Directions *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1975) the contents page reads 'Discrete Series (1932-34)'. In the last poem of his last book Oppen refers back to *Discrete Series*: 'writing / / thru the night (a young man, / Brooklyn, 1929) I named the book // series empirical / series all force.' 'Til Other Voices Wake Us' in *New Collected Poems* ed. Michael Davidson (London: Carcanet, 2003) [ hereafter: *NCP*], p. 286.

<sup>2</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics* Vol I, p. 11. The 'respects' Hegel refers to here are a) the loss of religious satisfaction in art and b) that 'the development of reflection in our life today has made it a need of ours, in relation to both our will and judgement, to cling to general considerations and to regulate the particular by them with the result that universal forms, laws, duties, rights, maxims, prevail as determining reasons and are the chief regulator.' p. 10.



It is not that art's 'invitation' to think about 'what art is' is punctual – it is not an automatic instruction to the viewer/reader/hearer to think about that regardless of the work's particularity – but rather that art invites such consideration as a participant in a conversation: the work invites us to think about what art is or might be with respect to *this* work, its circumstances of production and the circumstances in which it is received; that is, that the works under consideration do some of that thinking themselves. I make frequent recourse throughout to another text written in the wake of Hegel's identification of art's 'invitation to philosophical consideration', and one which is also the richest source of thinking on art and objecthood: Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. There, in a pointed passage on the philosophy of – and in – art (the philosophy of which criticism should be the recovery) he writes that

[t]he truth content of artworks is the objective solution of the enigma posed by each and every one. By demanding its solution, the enigma points to its truth content. It can only be achieved by philosophical reflection. This alone is the justification of aesthetics. [...]

And shortly afterwards he puts it even more strongly:

Aesthetic experience is not genuine experience unless it becomes philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

I show in Chapter 3.1 that there is something anti-philosophical about objects – something paradoxical about their 'use' in philosophy – so it may follow that there is something paradoxical about the whole endeavour, both their employment in what I am asserting to be philosophical poems and my presentation of that use as philosophical. Despite that contradiction the fundamental justification for the philosophical treatment of these poems is that I think the poems in the collection *themselves* assert that 'aesthetic experience is not genuine experience unless it becomes philosophy'. My work with them and on them is thus an attempt to show how they make manifest the truth of this remark by Adorno; that they anticipated it – which is also to say that they are the kind of works which inspired it and to which it is a reaction – and confirm it. J.M Bernstein is surely right to identify 'Adorno's philosophy as a whole, and his aesthetic theory in particular' as 'irrevocably bound

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<sup>3</sup> *Aesthetic Theory* [1970] trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 169, p. 172 (emphasis added).

to the tradition and achievements of high modernism' and this thesis is partly an attempt to show how *Discrete Series* belongs to that formation.<sup>4</sup> If it is the case that the poems themselves give evidence of this philosophical necessity then there seems no other way of treating them: no way of doing justice to them except for philosophically. I thus make frequent reference to canonical texts from philosophy (including Nietzsche's, whose canonicity, discussed in Chapter 1.3, is complicated); both texts which bear explicitly on the theme of the aesthetic and some which do not.

This is because the poems seem not just to require, but also to be participating – and the mode of participation may be indirect, disruptive etc. – in philosophy; engaged with ideas which may properly be called philosophical (knowledge and its conditions, freedom, subjecthood, and so on) and testing the fundamentally linguistic mode of critical thought itself. If it remains true that 'the establishment of this [philosophical] relation to art obviously poses the greatest' – or at least some substantial – 'difficulties', then I think it also remains true that 'without this relation art's truth content' – or at least the value and interest of this work – 'remains inaccessible.'<sup>5</sup> Through its focus on the literary historical and historical contexts of the collection's production, and what it is, historically, that the poems make visible, this thesis also shares Adorno's conviction that art – and perhaps especially poetry – can be 'the means through which certain aspects of sociohistorical development could become apprehensible in the first place', or more clearly or more economically apprehensible.<sup>6</sup> Frequent recourse is made to Adorno's own writings on art and objecthood, but it is in this sense – because it applies Kantian, Hegelian, Nietzschean, Marxian thought to aesthetic texts and their relation to history – rather than insofar as it asks 'What Would Adorno Think' (of x or y), that the thesis is, I hope, an exercise in Adornian thinking.

Oppen is a poet undergoing a process of demarginalisation. There are some relatively objective markers of this process which also help us broadly to date it. For example Oppen is wholly omitted from the volume resulting from an ambitious

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<sup>4</sup> 'Readymades, Monochromes, Etc.: Nominalism and the Paradox of Modernism' *Diacritics* 32.1 (Spring, 2002) 83-100, 83.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Kaufman, 'Frankfurt School' in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 4<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. Roland Green et al. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 518.

WPA project, *Literary Writings in America: a Bibliography*, the purpose of which was ‘to construct a complete listing of creative American literature written between 1850 and 1940’ – i.e. encompassing the era of *Discrete Series*.<sup>7</sup> In a later reference work, the *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Poets Since World War II* (1980),<sup>8</sup> Michael Adams’ article on Oppen is four-and-a-half pages long, and Jeffrey Peterson’s article in the 1996 update is nineteen pages long.<sup>9</sup> Even so, in ‘Canon and Loaded Gun’ Marjorie Perloff notes how little the Objectivists, including Oppen, were anthologized even in the ‘new’ anthologies of the 1980s despite Oppen having won the Pulitzer prize for poetry in 1969.<sup>10</sup> That there has been a posthumous increase in critical attention (Oppen died in 1984) is supported by the fact that there are eleven page references to Oppen in the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, from 2012, compared to only one, in the entry for Objectivism, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (1993). Finally, a phenomenal, rather than textual, mark of his growing renown is the fact that since 1985 there has been an annual ‘George Oppen Lecture’ at the Poetry Center of San Francisco State University.

I am not the first to note this process of demarginalisation, nor to attempt loosely to date it. In his 2009 review of a new substantial monograph on Oppen Mark Scroggins writes that ‘[p]oets have taken Oppen's work very seriously indeed for some *four decades now* [...] Peter Nicholls's *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, one hopes, is a sign that the American and British academies have begun to take Oppen seriously as well’ (emphasis added).<sup>11</sup> He further lists some of the most significant published work on Oppen in the years leading up to Nicholls’s work:

On the heels of Michael Davidson's beautifully edited and revelatory edition of Oppen's *New Collected Poems* (New Directions, 2002), the past two years have seen the publication of Lyn Graham Barzilai's *George Oppen: A Critical Study* (McFarland, 2006), Michael Heller's *Speaking the Estranged: Essays on the Work of George Oppen* (Salt, 2008), and Stephen Cope's

<sup>7</sup> (Millwood, NY: KTO press, 1977) Vol I, vii.

<sup>8</sup> *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Poets Since World War II* ed. Donald J. Greiner (Detroit: Gale, 1980).

<sup>9</sup> *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 165: *American Poets Since World War II* ed. Joseph Conte (Detroit: Gale, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), pp. 31-53, p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> [<http://www.bigbridge.org/BB14/OP-SCR2.HTM>].

edition of Oppen's *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers* (University of California Press, 2007).

To Scroggins' list we can today add the sustained (if not exclusive) attention to Oppen's poetry in recent works by Oren Izenberg, Ruth Jennison and Robert Baker – *Of Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life* (2011);<sup>12</sup> *The Zukofsky Era: Modernity, Margins and the Avant-Garde* (2012)<sup>13</sup> and *In Dark Again in Wonder: The Poetry of René Char & George Oppen* (2012)<sup>14</sup> respectively and the exclusive attention his work is accorded in six new essays in a recent issue of *Paideuma*.<sup>15</sup> One of these – Duncan Dobbelmann's "A Ferocious Mumbling, in Public": How George Oppen Came to be Canonized' – provides a detailed account of Oppen's recent reception.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the process of demarginalisation and Oppen's 'canonization' Oppen's works have not yet, I would argue, been the subject of very sustained philosophical attention, and this is especially true of *Discrete Series*. Alongside the many references to philosophical writings from 1750-1900 I make frequent reference throughout this thesis to poems by other authors and in doing so I advance an argument by performing it – since it can only be justified in performance – which is that the poems in this slight collection by a relatively marginal author (his canonization far from complete) *can* support and repay the kind of careful philosophical reading – a mode of reading that trusts they will repay the effort – in the same way that the more institutionally validated works alongside which I read it (most often works by Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot) have so thoroughly been shown to in the short century since their composition.<sup>17</sup> There is an understandable wish and need to assert that criticism springs directly from an experience of the object which is under consideration at that moment, in that monograph or in that paragraph.

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<sup>12</sup> *Of Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> *The Zukofsky Era: Modernity, Margins and the Avant-Garde* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> *In Dark Again in Wonder: The Poetry of René Char & George Oppen* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Vol 40 (2013) 157-326.

<sup>16</sup> 191-210.

<sup>17</sup> I also read the poems of *Discrete Series* alongside writing by, for example, Théophile Gautier, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Henry James and James Joyce, but Pound and Eliot are the most frequent and sustained analogues.

Despite this monadic pressure, which has its basis in the model of presenting an object more faithfully and in greater detail by absenting other objects and mediating phenomena, I adopt here a comparative procedure here which allows and encourages the text to generate its meaning in dialogue with others. A non-trivial proportion of the work, then, is discussion of works not by Oppen; of poems not from *Discrete Series*, but this is, I think, justified theoretically. Whatever claims are made for the work (the novel, poem, play, painting, sculpture, event etc.), the vocabulary and the conceptual framework in which those claims are made depend for their validity, their continued existence and continued comprehensibility on their applicability, and on their having been applied, to *other works* (and to other extra-aesthetic phenomena). Other works, possible and actual (the poems that this poem is not), inhere in them. Thierry de Duve expresses this intrinsic intertextuality very succinctly, via his claim that art is a proper name (though it does not depend on the validity of that claim):

The question about proper names, Kripke says, is that of their reference, not that of their meaning. To what are you referring, as art lover, as critic, or as historian of tradition, when you show your appreciation of anything whatever in saying ‘this is art’? [...] Certainly not to *this* the designated thing, for then the phrase would be tautological. You are referring to all the other things equally designated by you, in other circumstances, by use of the same phrase. [...]. This is why aesthetic judgements are always comparative.<sup>18</sup>

As Oppen put it:

[...] events  
 Emerge on the bow like an island, mussels  
  
 Clinging to its rocks from which kelp  
  
 Grows, grass  
 And the small trees  
  
 Above the tide line  
 And its lighthouse  
  
 Showing its whitewash in the daylight  
  
 In which things explain each other,  
 Not themselves<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 59.

<sup>19</sup> from ‘A Narrative’ in *This In Which* [1965], *NCP* p. 151.

Poems, that is, like lighthouses, do not illuminate themselves, and one's experience of the 'grass' of one poem is mediated by one's prior experience of the 'kelp' of another. Or, as Nietzsche puts, it – perhaps wilfully misunderstanding Kant's 'thing-in-itself' as 'thing-by-itself':

The properties of a thing are effects on other "things":  
if one removes other "things," then a thing has no properties,  
i.e., there is no thing without other things,  
i.e., there is no "thing-in-itself."<sup>20</sup>

To justify these dual multiplicities – of philosophical and literary analogues – I would suggest, first, that none of the individual philosophical authorships are capable of answering to what I think happens in the poems of *Discrete Series* and similarly, second, that no single literary authorship (i.e. Pound's, Eliot's, Henry James's or Oppen's own) is by itself capable of fleshing out the concept of art that *Discrete Series* speaks to and requires.

Despite the comparative procedure and the philosophical focus, this thesis remains, or rather is also, about *Discrete Series*. It is, in fact, the first book-length consideration of the collection.<sup>21</sup> So why *Discrete Series*? As Mutlu Konuk Blasing writes in her study of works by Eliot, Pound, Stevens and Anne Sexton, the 'choice of poets' – or in my case 'poet' (and I would prefer 'work') – 'is neither inevitable or entirely arbitrary'.<sup>22</sup> Which is to say, of course, that the choice *is* partly arbitrary. Again and again we hear assertions of the irreplaceability of the work under consideration; writers obey a critical version of the categorical imperative in which the text will be used as an end, never just a means. Whatever the argument being developed, no critic wants to make the poem, painting or performance merely an example and the example 'just an external, passive resource which enable[s] us to

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<sup>20</sup> *Will to Power* ed. Walter Kaufman, trans Kaufman & R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), §557 [1887], p. 302. For a counterview, with regard to the explanation (or 'instruction') of literature, Pound declares that '[y]ou can **prove** nothing by analogy. The analogy is either range-finding or fumble. [...] [I]t leads mainly towards useless argument.' *ABC of Reading* [1934] (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 84.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Noble's unpublished doctoral dissertation 'The Person, the Poem, the World: The Early Poetry and Poetics of George Oppen' (Stony Brook: State University of New York, 1998) includes *The Materials* (1962) among Oppen's early poetry, and as the title suggests much of the work is concerned with Oppen's life rather than his work.

<sup>22</sup> *Lyric Poetry: the Pain and Pleasure of Words* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 17

give plastic expression to our thought'.<sup>23</sup> They are correctly wary not only because of the demand voiced by many artworks that attention be paid to them distinctly; in their individuality, or because even the most general literary theory ('this is how literature generally functions, internally and externally'; 'this is what aesthetic experience is like'; 'this is what it is capable of') would not make sense without discrete objects or experiences to which it could point for justification and verification, but also because of a more general worry that 'philosophical aesthetics' – even a less flattening-universal version than those just cited – 'tends to reduce works of art to the role of [...] examples of its own general tenets'. We might put it more contingently and say that it *can* tend to do so.<sup>24</sup> Adorno even promotes this respect for the particular (work or oeuvre or mode) to a guiding principle of his philosophical thinking,<sup>25</sup> when, of his 'models' in *Negative Dialectics* he writes:

they are not examples; they do not simply elucidate general reflections. [...] [T]hey seek simultaneously to do justice to the topical intention of what has, initially, of necessity, been generally treated—as opposed to the use of examples which Plato introduced and philosophy repeated ever since; as matters of indifference in themselves.<sup>26</sup>

This is all justified, epistemologically, since care with regard to the applicability of the arguments made should mean that the critical process will be all the stronger. Nobody wants to be the critic who puts the poem on to what Robert Savage calls the 'Procrustean bed' of his or her interpretative paradigms, i.e. who chops or stretches the textual evidence to make it fit his argument – although this is what literary criticism inevitably consists in: focusing on quoted extracts or moments from long-works or expanding on short works which are quotable in their entirety – not only because it sounds like a horrible thing to do, but also because it will produce bad

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<sup>23</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 40.

<sup>24</sup> Simon Jarvis, glossing Schlegel's aphorism 'Philosophy of art usually lacks one of two things: either the philosophy or the art' *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), p. 91.

<sup>25</sup> There is also, of course, a historical and social motive for the honouring the non-identical in artworks: that if they are more than tautologically different from each other and from themselves they offer formal resistance against the treatment of human beings as fungible; expungeable: 'What the sadists in the camps foretold their victims, "Tomorrow you will be wriggling skyward as smoke rising from this chimney" bespeaks the indifference of each individual life, which is the direction of history. Even in his formal freedom the individual is as fungible and replaceable as he will be under the liquidators' boots.' *Negative Dialectics* p. 362. By this line of argument the key factor would not be that the Nazis considered the Jews, Slavs, Romani, the mentally ill, trade unionists and so on as *different* (difference is being valorized) but rather that they treated them as *other*; as subhuman.

<sup>26</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, p. xx.

conclusions. Verifying that there is a strong relation between the evidence and the conclusions – that one’s work is not a conceptual meat-grinder in which ‘the copula through which synthesis is effected remains indifferent to whatever it happens to be synthesizing’<sup>27</sup> – is the only way of checking the validity of the process. It is the only way of ensuring that one does not end up, like the boy in the story tasked with drawing a picture of what he can see in the lens of a microscope, drawing one’s own eye;<sup>28</sup> that one does not merely reproduce prior prejudices (be they individual or socio-historical or, inevitably, both) regardless of the ‘matter’ cited in support of the conclusions; on which they are said to depend. The danger of any ‘method’, is that it becomes – or always already is – something ‘which can be always and constantly be used because it divests itself of any relation to things, i.e. to the object of knowledge’ and the specificity of works under discussion is rightly invoked against this.<sup>29</sup>

And yet, as Blasing intimates, if it were only possible to make the arguments in a critical study with reference to the works under consideration, and if they followed as closely from them as we are required to believe and to attest, they would only be true of them. This antinomy is much more rarely addressed. This thesis is about *Discrete Series*, then, because I thought the poems worth thinking about at length, and because I thought it was possible to make these arguments with them, from them, about them (which is partly why they are worth thinking about at length). They partly suggested the possibility of these arguments, and my claim is always that the arguments partly inhere in them. But they cannot wholly inhere in them, and the poems themselves do not in fact make any claim to paramount virtuosity which we might then chiasmically claim to honour in a reading. I show how, for example, their object poetic and its formal embodiment is distinctive, of course, and yet they seem to know themselves as *exempla* (this is distinctive enough in itself). The form

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<sup>27</sup> Savage, *Hölderlin After the Catastrophe: Heidegger, Adorno, Brecht* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2008), p. 119.

<sup>28</sup> The story, from a work by James Thurber, is recounted by Fredric Jameson *The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 207. Jameson uses the story to support the necessity of contextualizing one’s own historical position (i.e. we should draw our own eye, as well) but there is a non-historically specific hermeneutic aporia: the microscope (our regulating ideas about aesthetics) is in fact the only way we have of verifying what is under the microscope.

<sup>29</sup> *Against Epistemology: a Metacritique* [1956] trans. Willis Domingo (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 11.



which their knowledge of themselves takes includes knowledge of themselves as members of a category; as dissident members of a complex category. Though it is difficult to establish this under the conditions of contemporary aesthetic ideology (which seem to me to be resistant to modernism and somewhat ineffective when confronted with it) these poems even seem to embrace their individuality as inevitable rather than as something that has been strived for and achieved.

## 0.2 Objects in *Discrete Series*

I, too, have a sense--I hesitate to say it because I have no way of defending it--of the greater reality of certain kinds of objects than of others.<sup>30</sup>

A major focus of this dissertation is on the physical objects which are represented in *Discrete Series*: their nature, type, consistency, and the fact and manner of their presentation. I intermittently consider the validity of the various and sometimes contradictory definitions of the category under whose sign the works were first published, 'Objectivism', both with regard to *Discrete Series* and to other works to which the term has been or might be applied. In so doing I make reference to the assertions and performances of its meaning in the writings of some of the core 'Objectivists' themselves and to the discussions of its meaning in those by the leading critics of the group or movement. Zukofsky would later warn against this kind of attempt at hypostatization: 'I don't like any of those isms. I mean, as soon as you do that, you start becoming a balloon instead of a person. And it swells and a lot of people go mad chasing it.'<sup>31</sup> Since 1980 an increasing number of critics have addressed the subject of what Objectivism might be or might have been and in my 'chase' for such a definition with respect to *Discrete Series* reference is made to the work of L.S. Dembo, Charles Altieri, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Michael Davidson, Michael Heller, John Wilkinson, Peter Nicholls, Oren Izenberg, Ruth Jennison, and

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<sup>30</sup> George Oppen, in an interview with L.S. Dembo 'The "Objectivist" Poet: Four Interviews', *Contemporary Literature* 10.2 (Spring 1969) 155-219, 167.

<sup>31</sup> 'The "Objectivist" Poet: Four Interviews' 203.

others. In the course of the process of demarginalisation referred to above, the list of writers concerned with Objectivism generally and Oppen in particular is getting longer. Nevertheless, the space accorded to critical discussion of poems from *Discrete Series* (rather than from Oppen's post-war work) remains small. It remains true, as Rocco Marinaccio wrote in 2002, that 'the sequence has received relatively little critical attention, most of it in introductory remarks to lengthier discussions of Oppen's later work.'<sup>32</sup> For instance in his *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* Peter Nicholls dedicates chapters to four of the later books by name, and another chapter which is largely concerned with *The Materials*, is called 'Materials'.<sup>33</sup> This fact alone would not prove that *Discrete Series* is neglected or less central a focus – one can imagine another book with the same structure which read each later collection against *Discrete Series*; a book in which *Discrete Series* was too important for it to be limited to a dedicated chapter – but in fact there are only a few pages of readings from the collection, before 'their' chapter (the introduction) is occupied by an account of the Oppens' political engagements in the 30's and their time in Mexico (1950-1960). Furthermore, *Discrete Series* is argued to be secretly in the tradition of what came after:

The lightness of touch and the epigrammatic brevities of some of the poems in *Discrete Series* tend to conceal the extent to which these early works actually contained the germ of a large-scale dissociation of Oppen's own work from modernism broadly conceived. (p.15)

Similarly, in his 230 page book which is divided more-or-less equally between discussion of René Char and George Oppen, Robert Baker quotes Oppen talking about a poem from *Discrete Series* (p. 96) and quotes him again on the 'Marxism' of the collection (p. 111), but Baker does not read, in detail, a single poem from the short collection which was Oppen's whole output for most of his mature life – in fact Baker does not quote even a single line from the work. This thesis is, together with two recent essays by Kathleen d'Angelo and Joseph Noble – one of which I engage with in detail in Chapter 2.6 – a corrective to this tendency.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> 'George Oppen's "'I've Seen America' Book": *Discrete Series* and the Road Narrative' *American Literature* 74.3 (September 2002) 539-569, 540-541.

<sup>33</sup> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> Kathleen d'Angelo, ' "The Sequence of Disclosure" The Truth Hidden in Things in George Oppen's *Discrete Series*', *Paideuma* 40 (2013) 157-189 and Joseph Noble's 'George Oppen's *Discrete Series*: Things Among Others', *ibid.* 255-293.

Initially I work with a broad and minimally objectionable definition of the sign under which *Discrete Series* was published: that Objectivism is the self-conscious practice of the idea that

the poem, like every other form of art, is an object, an object that in itself formally presents its case and its meaning by the very form it assumes.<sup>35</sup>

i.e. that it was a product of

the poets' recognition of the necessity of form, of the objectification of the poem.<sup>36</sup>

Even this is potentially problematic for a maximally orderly chase insofar as the consequences of thinking with a concept of an art-‘object’ might be radical – threatening to the very institutions of literary production, transmission and reception (and thus also to literary criticism and literary history which are partly an account or reconstruction of those processes) insofar as those institutions depend, fundamentally as well as merely pragmatically, on categories such as ‘poem’ or ‘novel’. The contingent realism of those terms (how they imply belief in the existence of a category or set of objects with historically definable, if not fixed, attributes) is contested by the implicit nominalism of the attribute-free ‘object’ (especially one which seems to present ‘its case and its meaning’ without reference to that set, in its own terms). In fact just after the above definition Williams confirms that an important aspect of Objectivism was the drive to free itself from the content which inheres in previous forms or genres, in order to create something ‘consonant’ with the present:

For past objects have about them past necessities—like the sonnet—which have conditioned them and from which, as a form itself, they cannot be freed.

The poem being an object (like a symphony or cubist painting) it must be the purpose of the poet to make of his words a new form: to invent, that is, an object consonant with his day.<sup>37</sup>

Still, ‘like every other form of art’ also – and syntactically *mainly* – suggests something more modest, akin to a levelling of the playing field: ‘we are only asking

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<sup>35</sup> William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 264.

<sup>36</sup> *Selected Letters*, p. 139.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p. 265.

for poems to be treated as art-works in other media' – like a symphony or a cubist painting – 'already are'. In the above definition there is a latent tension between process ('presents') and finished product ('form' is by definition unchanging), and the same tension is manifested in another clear and broad definition which speaks of the poem as a

*rested* totality [which] may be called objectification—the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object [...] writing [...] which is an object or affects the mind as such [emphasis added].<sup>38</sup>

This tension resonates with Adorno's conception, in *Aesthetic Theory*, of the artwork as that 'in which a process of development is objectivated and brought to an equilibrium'; which 'is both the result of the process and the process itself at a standstill'.<sup>39</sup> Latent threats, tensions and resonances notwithstanding, both of these broad definitions invoke the idea of the poem as object. 'People assume it [objectivism] means the psychologically objective in attitude', Oppen would tell an interviewer, '[i]t actually means the objectification of the poem, the making an object of the poem.'<sup>40</sup>

How then do we have access to this 'object', to these 'objects'? For contemporary readers there were possible points of contact with some of the thirty-one poems which make up *Discrete Series* outside of the collection itself, though not many. Two were published under the title '1930'S' [*sic*] in the "Objectivists" issue of *Poetry* (February 1931) and another, also given the title '1930'S'<sup>41</sup> in *An*

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<sup>38</sup> Louis Zukofsky 'Sincerity and Objectification with Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff' *Poetry* 37.5 [special issue ed. Zukofsky] (February 1931) 272-85, 274.

<sup>39</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 360, p. 237.

<sup>40</sup> Dembo, 'The "Objectivist" Poet: Four Interviews' 160.

<sup>41</sup> While the upper-case 'S' where we would have a lower-case 's' may be due to difficulties with the typewriter or the typesetting, it also – in its awkwardness – reminds us that the practice of thinking through historical (social, cultural, economic) experience via named decades (the 'twenties', 'thirties', 'forties' and so on) was in its infancy. *OED* cites the first examples of the practice in the 1880's. Confusingly it cites Dylan Thomas in 1933 as the first instance of 'nineties' – thirteen years after Pound's use with regard to literary expression in the 'Life and Contacts' section of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* ('Accept opinion. The "Nineties" tried your game / And died, there's nothing in it.'). 'Nineties' also appears in the citation for 'Twenties' which is from Kipling writing in 1898. The first citation of 'thirties' to mean the 1930s is not until 1963, so Oppen may be said to be the first to use the concept with reference that decade.

“*Objectivists*” *Anthology* which Oppen’s press published the next year.<sup>42</sup> One of the poems from the collection was published, along with three others which do not appear, under the group title ‘Discrete Series’ in *Poetry* (January 1932), and four of them, along with one other which would be dropped, appeared in Britain in Faber’s *Active Anthology* (1933, see below).<sup>43</sup> The collection is thus a relatively stable textual artefact. Objectivist poets and their critics routinely employ the concept of craft as analogue or cover-concept for their poetic practice,<sup>44</sup> as for example in the following poem by Basil Bunting (a poet whom Oppen ‘subsum[es] under Objectivism’):<sup>45</sup>

Nothing  
substance utters or time  
stills and restrains  
joins design and

supple measure deftly  
as thought’s intricate polyphonic  
score dovetails with the tread  
sensuous things  
keep in our consciousness.

Celebrate man’s craft!  
and the word spoken in shapeless night, the  
sharp tool paring away  
waste and the forms  
cut out of mystery!

[...]

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<sup>42</sup> *Poetry* 37.5 (February 1931) 256-7. *An “Objectivists” Anthology* ed. Zukofsky (New York, Le Beausset: To Publishers, 1932) / facsimile edition with appendix (London: Folcroft Library Editions, 1975), p.43.

<sup>43</sup> *Poetry* 39.4 (January 1932) 198-199.

*Active Anthology* ed. Ezra Pound (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), pp. 211-219.

<sup>44</sup> Zukofsky emphasizes the preindustrial aspect of craft, and the independence it assures the craftsman when, playing on ‘woodsman’ he calls the poet a ‘wordsman’: ‘The objectivist, then, is one person, not a group, and as I define him he is interested in living with things as they exist, and as a “wordsman” he is a craftsman who puts words together into an object’. L.S. Dembo, ‘The “Objectivist” Poet: Four Interviews’ 205. Pound calls Oppen ‘a serious craftsman’ in his preface to *Discrete Series* (see below). The recourse to ‘craft’ goes beyond objectivist poets – for example Eliot’s dedication of ‘The Waste Land’ which salutes Pound as ‘*il miglior fabbro*’ (the best ‘maker’), and Woolf’s essay ‘Craftsmanship’ (BBC Radio broadcast, April 29th, 1937). Woolf finds that because of the tendency of words to ‘shuffle and change’ and to ‘become unreal’, ‘talk of craft in connection with words is to bring together two incongruous ideas, which if they mate can only give birth to some monster fit for a glass case in a museum.’ *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life: Selected Essays* Vol II ed. Rachel Bowlby (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), pp. 137-143, p. 137 It seems to me that the association with craft appears with higher frequency in objectivism than elsewhere in modernist poetics, and is pursued with greater diligence.

<sup>45</sup> *Selected Letters*, p. 146.

This poem, later collected as ‘15’ in ‘The First Book of Odes’, was initially published in *Poetry*’s ‘“Objectivist” ’ issue (where it was called ‘The Word’) alongside Oppen’s first published poems, of which one is the first poem in *Discrete Series*.<sup>46</sup> The importance of the invocation of a primarily pre-industrial mode of manufacture as an analogue for poetry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by mainly urban, mainly North-American poets will be assessed below, in Chapter 2.6; for my purposes here I merely note that craft always involves the production of an object via combination (e.g. weaving) or reduction (e.g. whittling) of materials – Bunting’s poem emphasizes both combination *and* reduction; the ‘dovetails’ and the ‘paring-away’. So while the main focus of the thesis remains the qualities of and the presentation of the objects in the context of the individual objects which are the poems of *Discrete Series*, because of the collection’s textual stability and the invocation of craft (and thus combination) I begin by assessing the aggregate object which houses the poetic objects, for most readers, i.e. the collection. This allows me to give a brief presentation of the pre-history of Objectivism, Oppen’s connection with Ezra Pound, and the circumstances of the work’s production and appearance. In light of Objectivist attention to a piece of writing’s ‘*appearance* as an object’ (emphasis added) – i.e. its actualization or emergence as an object (the beginning of the process), as well as its object-like outward aspect (a synchronic picture of the whole process of experiencing that object) – and the way the piece of writing ‘affects the mind’, I begin my assessment of the collection with a reading of that with which most readers begin an experience of that object and those objects (and this despite the license to free oneself from a sequential reading granted by the series being described as ‘*Discrete*’): the preface and the opening poem.

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<sup>46</sup> *Poetry* 35.5, 256 / *The Complete Poems* ed. Richard Caddel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 93.

## Chapter 1: The Collection and the Opening Poem

### 1.1 The Collection, its Preface and the Wider Poundian Context

*Discrete Series* is a short collection of short poems. Roughly two-and-a-half pages of this thesis contain as many words as the collection.<sup>47</sup> In the *New Collected Poems* published by New Directions (2002/2003) – which unlike the earlier *Collected Poems* follows the original in according each poem its own page – the collection is thirty-three pages long, including the preface; it comprises less than one tenth of pages the book devotes to the poems. In the Fulcrum *Collected Poems* (1972) the compressed mise-en-page means that they occupy just twelve pages. The longest of the thirty-one poems in terms of the number of lines (beginning ‘Bolt’) is sixteen lines long, though the longest of those lines contains only five words (‘The fiber of this tree’).<sup>48</sup> The shortest poem is eleven words long, and the longest eighty-six, with a median length of just twenty-nine. They rarely extend into the bottom half of their individual pages, and the lines are run-over more promptly than in Oppen’s later work – this may have been due to professional and period typographic limitations; I follow later editions and critics in reproducing the line divisions as they occur in the original – so they are divided from each other by a clear field to the right-hand margin and to the bottom of the page. Oppen’s commitment to slightness compared to his peers is illustrated in the fact that the poem mentioned above which appears in *The “Objectivists” Anthology* which begins

White.            From the

is ten lines long; the longest line composed of four words, while in the same collection Louis Zukofsky is represented by forty-two pages from “A”, and Kenneth Rexroth (now little discussed in connection with the Objectivists) by two poems

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<sup>47</sup> The poems contain 1095 words; the average page of this thesis 424.

<sup>48</sup> *NCP*, p. 23.

totalling thirty-four pages. The brevity of some of the shortest poems, for example the following:

The edge of the ocean,  
The shore: here  
Somebody's lawn,  
By the water<sup>49</sup>

could reasonably engender comparison with Ezra Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro' (1913) which has become a cornerstone for discussions of Imagism and, more broadly, of poetic economy under modernism, and which is one word longer than Oppen's untitled poem. Articulating Oppen's Objectivism does, in fact, require determination of the nature of its ambiguous relation to Imagist poems (such as 'In a Station of the Metro') and precepts (see Chapter 3.1 for a brief comparison).<sup>50</sup> That ambiguousness is shown by how, in an interview conducted in 1968 – when his view on the relationship might have been expected to have settled, Oppen would say, on the one hand, that it was '*against* the romanticism or even the quaintness of the imagist position' that he learned 'the necessity for forming a poem properly, for achieving form' and, on the other, that the point was 'to construct a method of thought *from* the imagist technique of poetry, *from* the imagist intensity of vision' (emphases added).<sup>51</sup> But whatever the valences of the influence of Pound's poetry and ideas (Imagist and non-Imagist) on Oppen's the biographical connection is strong. They met, and corresponded, and published each other's work,<sup>52</sup> and Pound provided a preface for the original edition of *Discrete Series*.

In the preface Pound expresses concern about the reception he anticipates for the book. He attempts to defuse critical reactions by articulating them and showing them to be unsound. The first reaction he foresees is of unfulfilled expectations leading to negative appraisals: 'reviewers so busy telling what they haven't found in a poem (or

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<sup>49</sup> *NCP*, p. 18.

<sup>50</sup> For a more detailed reading of this poem – one which relates it to a particular poem by Pound – see Chapter 3.1.

<sup>51</sup> L.S. Dembo 'The "Objectivist" Poet: Four Interviews' 160, 161.

<sup>52</sup> For their extant correspondence see *Selected Letters* pp. 3-6, 71-2. The difficult quality of their first meeting in Rapallo is emphasized on the opening page of *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*. Nicholls here gives the year of the meeting as 1933, though in another essay, 'Beyond the *Cantos*: Pound and American Poetry', he gives it as 1930. *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound* ed. Ira B. Nadel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 135-160, p. 145. Mary Oppen records it as the winter of 1931-32. *Meaning a Life: an Autobiography* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1978), pp. 131-32. They subsequently met in Paris (*Meaning a Life*, p.135). For their publication of each other's work see below.



whatever) that they have omitted to notice what is.’ He does not, however, counter this tendency by giving positive examples of what the reader might expect to find (and then actually find) in *Discrete Series*. Instead he gives two further instances of ‘[b]ad criticism’ which the collection might, he thinks, provoke. Firstly he anticipates that the ‘charge of obscurity’ which ‘has been raised at regular or irregular intervals since the stone age’ will be raised again. He counters this by stating that even ‘KEATS was considered “obscure”’. He implies that though we all in the today of 1934 read and recognize the greatness of Keats (and there is a secondary implication that Keats’ poetry is somehow over-simple), the unfulfilled interpretative expectations of his contemporary critics which Pound calls the ‘fixations and ossifications of the then hired bureaucracy of Albemarle St.’<sup>53</sup> have fallen away. The second charge that Pound anticipates is almost the opposite: concerned with the difference or lack of difference between Oppen and his immediate predecessors, he constructs a spectrum of relative ‘originality’, though without giving *Discrete Series* a fixed location on it. Rather than ‘obscurity’ and the incomprehensible distance to previous models which that suggests, the problem Pound anticipates is rather that *Discrete Series* will be seen to be insufficiently novel or distinctive, and the ‘other’ from which he fears Oppen’s work will fail to distinguish itself, or at least will fail, by readers, to be distinguished, is William Carlos Williams. Pound claims that though he himself sees ‘the difference between the writing of Mr. Oppen and Dr. Williams,’ he does ‘not expect any great horde of readers to notice it.’ They will instead, he predicts ‘concentrate’ – before (characteristically scornful of others’ critical capabilities) changing the word to ‘coagulate’ – ‘their rather gelatinous attention on the likeness’. Though the preface ends with a fulsome-sounding ‘salute’ to ‘a serious craftsman’ whose ‘sensibility [...] has not been got out of any other man’s books’ the lingering sense is of an unsettled ambiguity, as if Pound recognizes that *Discrete Series* defies easy classification and association – and that this is a strength as well as a danger for its reception – but because of this defiance cannot go further than shielding it from some potential misreadings.

The preface’s forthright but curiously enigmatic first line

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<sup>53</sup> i.e. those of John Murray and the *English Review*.

We have ceased, I think, to believe that a nation's literature is any-one's personal property.<sup>54</sup>

is retained as an epigraph to *Discrete Series* in the Fulcrum *Collected Poems* of 1972, i.e. after the war, and Pound's disgrace, but while Oppen was still alive to give or refuse his consent.<sup>55</sup> There is further evidence that despite Oppen's Jewish identity and his activist Marxism, his estimation of Pound's importance to himself and others survived the war (in which he fought), Pound's anti-Semitism, and George and Mary's political exile to Mexico (1950-1958) intact.<sup>56</sup> In 1962 Oppen wrote to Pound, then out of St Elizabeth's and back in Italy:

I suppose if we should take to talking politics to each other I would disagree even more actively than all those others who have disagreed, but there has been no one living during my life time who has been as generous or as pure as you toward literature and toward writers. Nor anyone less generously thanked.

I know of no one who does not owe you a debt.<sup>57</sup>

Oppen owed Pound for the preface to *Discrete Series*, but he also owed him a specific para-literary debt prior to that: it was Pound who convinced Harriet Monroe to allow Zukofsky to edit the special issue of *Poetry* in which Oppen's poetry would first appear to the public and in which the notion of 'Objectivism' was born. Monroe insisted that the special issue of the magazine should showcase a 'movement' or 'group' and Zukofsky was anxious about this requirement, asking in a letter to Pound why the issue should not, instead, be based on

a date or a region or a tendency—Poets, 1931, or The Twelve, or U.S.A. 1931, or 606 and after. Or what do you suggest? Or Objectivists, 1931, or The Third Decade, or The States? Objectivists or the equivalent minus the philosophical lingo is what it shd. be, that is the poems will be such as objects. Or Things.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Enigmatic because it generates questions that can only be answered with difficulty, if at all: who was it that used to believe this, along with Pound? Whose property did they (or 'we', if the contemporary reader if included) believe the literature of a nation to be? When and why did they (or we) stop thinking this? Are the literatures of nations still distinct even though they are now public property (or perhaps not property at all)?

<sup>55</sup> p. 7.

<sup>56</sup> Introduction to *Selected Letters*, xvi-xvii.

<sup>57</sup> Letter identified as dating from 'September-October? 1962' in *Selected Letters*, pp. 71-72.

<sup>58</sup> Letter dated November 9<sup>th</sup> 1930, *Pound/Zukofsky: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky* ed. Barry Ahearn (New York: New Directions, 1987), p. 69.

He was reassured about the inevitable arbitrariness and semi-fictionality of such movements in Pound's foreful reply: 'How the hell many points of agreement do you suppose there were between Joyce, W. Lewis and yrs truly in 1917, or between Gaudier and Lewis in 1913, or between me and Yeats etc.'<sup>59</sup> Pound's involvement in the preparation of the issue was extensive and committed – he wrote fourteen pages worth of letters to Zukofsky as soon as he heard from Monroe that the issue was to go ahead. He offered that if there were contributors whom Zukofsky wanted to include but couldn't 'get directly' then he, with his greater fame 'might be of use in raking them in' and he drew up detailed schematic plans for the contents.<sup>60</sup> Pound's name does appear in the issue – Zukofsky lists *XXX Cantos* as one of the works 'absolutely necessary to students of poetry' and quotes Pound writing in support of Emanuel Carnevali (whose translations of Rimbaud also appear) – but his involvement in the production, indeed, in the very existence of the issue is not visible in the finished product (whereas editors Harriet Monroe and Morton Dauwen Zabel *are* thanked).<sup>61</sup> Zukofsky's masking of the extent of Pound's influence on the issue included, in his own words, 'plagiariz[ing]' from Pound a quotation about being open to the possibility that in some eras there is no artistic production at all (openness to this possibility would be another reason for being suspicious of the call to organize a 'movement', whether for its own sake or for the sake of sales, because such a call presupposes the belief that there will always be significant literary production to be brought under the movement's sign). Zukofsky writes:

Implied stricture of names generally cherished as famous [...] is prompted by the historical method of the Chinese sage who wrote, "Then for nine reigns there was no literary production."

None at all. [...] <sup>62</sup>

This weak-Hegelian sense that art might be, in a given historical era, absent is the same as that which haunts Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (albeit with a stronger-Hegelian sense that that era, after Auschwitz, after the culture industry, after the

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<sup>59</sup> Cited by Mark Scroggins in *The Poem of a Life: A Biography of Louis Zukofsky* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2007), p. 106.

<sup>60</sup> *Pound/Zukofsky* pp. 45-58, these references p. 45 and p. 58. Zukofsky declined to use Pound's schema.

<sup>61</sup> 'Program: "Objectivists" 1931', *Poetry* 37.5 (February 1931) 268-272, 268 and 269.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.* Pound provided the quotation in a letter of 18<sup>th</sup> November 1930 (*Pound/Zukofsky*, p. 74) and Zukofsky announces he is to plagiarize it in a response from December 12<sup>th</sup> (*Pound/Zukofsky*, p. 82).

development of art's immanent antinomies to crisis-point, or after art's recruitment to Stalinism, could be our own and could be permanent) from the first page:

It has become self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the whole, not even its right to exist.<sup>63</sup>

to near the end:

This tendency [the thesis of the projective character of art] which would like to render artworks impossible through their deaestheticization, cannot be arrested by insisting that art must exist: Nowhere is that chiselled in stone.<sup>64</sup>

But Harriet Monroe – the legitimacy of her position as editor, like that of the poets' themselves, threatened by such a possibility – minimized the seriousness of such speculation, characterizing it as 'the arrogance of youth' (when the Objectivists are more mature, she implies, they will retreat from such positions):

There we have it. With one grand annihilating gesture the young exponent of "new movement" sweeps off the earth the proud procession of poets whom, in our blindness and ignorance, we had fondly dedicated to immortality.

Though sounding a little piqued, she gallantly cheers them on:

If we cannot go all the way with Mr. Zukofsky and his February friends [...] we can at least cheer them on. They may be headed for a short life, but it should certainly be a merry one.<sup>65</sup>

Perhaps Zukofsky's disdain, later in life, for 'chasing' the origin or definition of 'Objectivism' stems in part from the strength of Pound's influence, and from this beginning, wherein Harriet Monroe demands the creation of a movement (apparently) in order to be able to thrillingly titillate *Poetry*'s readers with its discovery and with the daringness of the 'young exponent[s]', even while reassuring them that their ideas are not genuinely threatening. Literary production, she seems to say, in fact has never ceased and will never cease; our received ideas about what it constitutes literary production and who produced it are viable – we can (safely) 'cheer them on'. This could at worst be described as dishonest (though the dishonesty at least partially outs itself in the double-service that the quotation marks

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<sup>63</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 1

<sup>64</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 348.

<sup>65</sup> 'Comment: the Arrogance of Youth' *Poetry* 37.6 (March 1931) 328-333, 329, 333.

around “new movement” are forced to do), and at best as extremely well stage-managed, involving ‘craft’ in its other sense of ‘deceit’ or ‘guile’.

Pound’s absence, in spite of his presence, meant that he was able to give the movement a further – and also slightly fraudulent – boost, ‘cheer[ing] them on’ in a gushing review to the editors via telegram which they printed in their round-up of the (mixed) correspondence the issue had provoked.<sup>66</sup> The result was that the group cohered at least minimally, and *Discrete Series* would eventually be published by Objectivist Press – a loose collective of writers led by Oppen and Zukofsky who had been represented in the special issue. These writers mostly knew each other before the special issue came out, but its appearance and success (Williams’ contribution ‘Botticellian Trees’ won the magazine’s Guarantor’s Prize) is likely to have encouraged them to pursue their publishing project which would eventually be the venue for *Discrete Series*.<sup>67</sup> Oppen repaid Pound’s indirect favour: in 1929-30 he had used his inherited wealth to found To Publishers, whose paperbacks included *The “Objectivist” Anthology*, also edited and introduced by Zukofsky (he was the salaried editor of the firm), William Carlos Williams’ *A Novelette and Other Prose, 1921-1931* and then, in 1932, Pound’s *How to Read*. Pound encouraged Zukofsky to follow *How to Read* with an edition of his collected prose, with the promise of the opportunity of publishing the *Cantos* as a sweetener:

Re Oppen. Bendictus, benedictus inter hominibus. IF he wants to do the collects of E.P. he had better have the How to Read also and at once. [...] Whoever does the prose with decent assurances and on decent basis of FINISHING the job; wd. as a plum get the first cheap edtn. of the Cantos. [...] Oppen can take position that IF he satisfies me as to prose he wd. get the Cantos; which (judging from sales of Personae) I suppose are a sure payer.<sup>68</sup>

To Publishers folded, partly because the depression greatly diminished the value of Oppen’s inheritance, and partly – with echoes of the case of Brancusi’s *The Bird in Space* – because of disputes with customs and booksellers over the question of the

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<sup>66</sup> ‘Send me four more copies—this is a number I can show to my Friends. If you can do another eleven as lively you will put the mag. on its feet.’ The editors bashfully added that they feared that ‘that would’ instead ‘put it on its uppers’. ‘Correspondence: the February Number’, *Poetry* 38.1 (April 1931) 51-58, 58.

<sup>67</sup> Williams reports having won the prize in a letter of October 19<sup>th</sup> that year. *The Correspondence of William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky* ed. Barry Ahearn (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), p. 105. Hereafter: *Williams/Zukofsky*.

<sup>68</sup> Letter of 25<sup>th</sup> December 1930 in *Pound/Zukofsky* pp. 101, 103.

nature (the sufficient distance from the taxable realm of everyday life) of the objects they produced: books in the new paperback form were assumed by customs officials and booksellers to be magazines, which attracted a higher rate of excise.<sup>69</sup> The house thus never published ‘the collects’ or the *Cantos*, and given his emphasis on sales and income Pound was never likely to publish with its successor venture the Objectivist Press, which required financial support from its authors.<sup>70</sup> However five of Oppen’s poems, including four from the as-yet-unpublished *Discrete Series*, appear alongside extracts from the *Cantos* in *Active Anthology* (1933, edited by Pound) where Pound marks Oppen as one to watch. The volume presents, he says

an assortment of writers, mostly ill known [sic] in England, in whose verse a development appears or in some case we may say “still appears” to be taking place, in contradistinction to authors in whose work no such activity has occurred or seems likely to proceed any further.<sup>71</sup>

The differences between the *Cantos* and *Discrete Series* are clear enough. They are, in a sense, objective: by 1930 the *Cantos* were already nearly one hundred and fifty pages long; its pages full of text and, from the first page, its text full of names – Circe, Perimides, Eurolychos, Tiresias. By contrast there are in total two names in the thirty-one pages of *Discrete Series*; ‘Maude Blessingbourne’ (see below) and ‘Fragonard’. Even the titles of the two works are in tension: to Anglophone ears ‘Cantos’ suggests not just metaphorical song, or the divisions of *The Divine Comedy*, but, as in *bel canto*, the flowing of song (though we do not have to believe that the rhematic descriptor-title is accurate,<sup>72</sup> and in fact it is quite hard to do so).<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Meaning a Life*, p. 131 and *Selected Letters*, p. 46, p. 83 For a recent account of the trial of Brancusi’s *Bird* see Anna C. Chave ‘The Object on Trial: The Bird and the Base in Space’ in her *Constantin Brancusi: Shifting the Bases of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 198–249.

<sup>70</sup> For example Williams ‘supported’ the publication of his *Collected Poems 1921–1931* with \$200 of his own money, and limited the length of the collection so that he did not have to pay more. *Williams/Zukofsky*, p. 169.

<sup>71</sup> *Active Anthology*, p. 5. The collection includes work by Bunting, Williams, Marianne Moore, Zukofsky, E.E. Cummings [sic], Eliot and Hemingway. Leavis called the selection of verse ‘too ridiculous in its irresponsibility to be seriously discussed.’ ‘English Letter’ *Poetry* 44.2 (May 1934) 98–102, 101.

<sup>72</sup> I use the term ‘rhematic’ in the sense originated by Gérard Genette, who borrows the term from linguistics to designate, ‘in opposition to the *theme* of a discourse, the discourse considered in and of itself’. His example is Baudelaire’s *Petits poèmes en prose* – rhematic because ‘it specifies not the object of the collection, like *Le Spleen de Paris*, but what it is [i.e. a collection of short prose poems]’. *Fiction & Diction* trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 22.

<sup>73</sup> Bunting’s description of the *Cantos* as ‘alps’ implies many things: remoteness; loftiness; difficulty of access; danger, but insofar as they are mountains known for their jagged (i.e. undifferentiable) forms, it also acknowledges this contradiction: ‘There are the Alps [...] Who knows that the ice will

‘Discrete Series’ on the other hand, suggests mathematical *discontinuity*: the graph of the function of the ‘Series’ discontinuous or non-differentiable; not smooth (the same disclaimer applies, with the addition of a tension *within* the would-be rhematic title – the discontinuity between continuity, via ‘Series’, and discontinuity, via ‘Discrete’).<sup>74</sup> I nevertheless begin my reading of the first poem in Oppen’s slight *Series* by comparing it to the opening lines of Pound’s enormous one. This is because, despite Pound’s role as behind-the-scenes promoter and would-be organiser of ‘Objectivism’ the contrasts between Oppen’s muted poem and the bombastic poetry of Canto I could hardly be stronger or more numerous.<sup>75</sup>

Such a cross-reading of the beginning of the *Cantos* and the beginning of *Discrete Series* is further encouraged by the evidence that both poets thought openings to be important. Now it may be the case that all poets or poems evidence a belief in the importance of beginnings (except those poems which assert the position and order of their constituent units to be genuinely aleatoric: radically arbitrary, and those works we know to be genuinely fragmentary; for which and from which an unfragmented version cannot be reconstructed). If so this belief is a consequence of the concentratedly high pressure romantic and post-romantic theories of aesthetics put on each and every *part* of a work. For example Friedrich Schlegel claims that ‘[i]n poetry [...] every whole can be a part and *every part really a whole*’<sup>76</sup> (emphasis added), and Hegel says that the high value of the part is ‘the most general thing which can be said in a merely formal way about the ideal of art’:

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have scraped on the rock it is smoothing’ (from ‘On the Fly-lead of Pound’s *Cantos*’ [1949] *Complete Poems* p. 114). Oppen himself emphasized their fragmented nature – ‘I suspect we all admit to ourselves -- or I will admit for myself [sic] that I read the cantos in fragments as fragments [sic]. Despite the challenges of the scholars’. Letter to James Laughlin, December 1972, *Selected Letters*, pp. 249-50.

<sup>74</sup> In his paper on ‘Beckett and Mathematics’ at the conference *Moving Modernisms* (Oxford, March 2012) Steven Connor suggested that under modernism ‘there is no discontinuity between continuity and discontinuity’.

<sup>75</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes (correctly, I think) that ‘the objectivist poetics of the late 20s and early 30s was, [...] directly and irrevocably Poundian, inspired by Pound’s criticism and his manifestos, and fascinated by the extension of his ambitions into *The Cantos*’. She reads the poets’ works alongside each other, asking ‘[w]hat then is it like to read *The Cantos*, to read Oppen’s *Collected Poems*’ but all the poems by Oppen cited in that essay are from his post-war works. ‘Objectivist Poetics and Political Vision: A Study of Oppen and Pound’ in *George Oppen: Man and Poet* ed. Burton Hatlen (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1980), pp.123-148, these references p. 128, p. 139.

<sup>76</sup> *Critical Fragments* [1798-1800] No. 14, *Lucinde, and the Fragments* trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 144.

on the one hand, the true has existence and truth only as it unfolds into external reality; but, on the other hand, the externally separated parts, into which it unfolds, can so combine and retain in unity that now *every part of its unfolding makes this soul, this totality, appear in each part* [...] Art makes every one of its productions into a thousand-eyed Argus whereby the inner soul and spirit is seen at every point. [emphasis added]<sup>77</sup>

So unlike in the case of a novel, the opening of a poem, and especially a short poem, is important qua opening – the first impression, as in a novel, and the determination of the work’s relationship to the non-textual world via its first interface with it – but also, and in addition, as load-bearing part of the work (since there are no parts which bear no load, and in fact, in the more idealist expressions of these theories, all parts are implied to bear the whole). Nevertheless Pound made the case for the importance of an opening especially forcefully, and explicitly: when Zukofsky sent him news that ‘Marianne Moore returned [i.e. refused to publish] the first two movements of “A” ’ (Moore cited their ‘distemper’) Pound responded – though he had been asked how he liked the first two, rather than how he thought a poem should begin – that

Thurr are sevrul techniques: one is getting OFF the mark at the start. [ ] IF you want the pome “A” to be read, you’ll have to sweat like hell on the first three pages.’<sup>78</sup>

One way of ‘getting OFF the mark’ is to take as an opening something from later in a work, and this perhaps avoids some of the ‘sweat’ insofar as the extracted and moved work will not have suffered the debilitating pressure Pound describes and prescribes. In any case, against Pound’s emphasis on writing the beginning in full knowledge that it is the beginning, both poets adopted this method and thus implicitly and formally make the case for the importance of an opening. Despite later writing that the poem only ‘*happens* to be printed as the first poem in *Discrete Series*’ (emphasis added), Oppen moved it to its initial position: in February 1931 the poem below appeared as section ‘II’ of ‘1930’S’.<sup>79</sup> Likewise the passage which

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<sup>77</sup> *Aesthetics* Vol. I, pp. 153-54. Compare Gertrude Stein’s claim: (about *Three Lives*): ‘You see I tried to convey the idea of each part of a composition being as important as the whole. It was the first time in any language that anyone had used that idea of composition in literature.’ ‘A Transatlantic Interview 1946’ in *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein* ed. Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1971), pp. 11-36, p. 15.

<sup>78</sup> 24<sup>th</sup> December 1928 *Pound/Zukofsky*, p. 25.

<sup>79</sup> Letter dated April-May 1967, *Selected Letters*, p. 156. What was section ‘I’ of ‘1930’S’ (beginning ‘The lights, paving—’) is now the third poem of *Discrete Series*, part ‘2’ to the second poem in the collection’s ‘1’. In the wake of the publication of the letters (1990) and the *Selected Prose, Daybooks and Papers* ed. Stephen Cope (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008)



now opens the Cantos first came first in *A Draft of XVI Cantos* (1925), while in ‘Three Cantos’ as published by *Poetry* in June, July and August 1917 it had come at the end of Canto III.<sup>80</sup>

The opening poem’s persistent complexity, condensed into a few apparently straightforward and muted lines is a manifestation of the Objectivist desire to create a poetic ‘object which [...] affects the mind as such’ i.e. to produce a text which, while graspable in a way that the *Cantos*, at this stage, already was not (it would be surprising to hear the alps described as an object), demands continued and repeated attention. In his essay largely concerned with texts representational and non-representational, with represented and non-represented, Heidegger notes that

Beethoven’s quartets lie in the storerooms of the publishing houses like potatoes in a cellar.  
All works have this thingly character.<sup>81</sup>

Here he seems to me to be noting precisely the same thing as the Objectivists: art-works are objects. But, as he goes on to acknowledge, the question is a more complicated than that ‘crude and external’ conception allows for. The text of each poem in *Discrete Series*, like all short writings in both a language and a type-settable alphabet which were in world-wide use, was at its moment of composition and publication easily transmittable and reproducible. Its transmittability and reproducibility, and the global reach of that language, have only increased in the time since it was written. It thus looks, from a naïve perspective, likely to persist,

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which are overwhelmingly from the period of Oppen’s return to poetry a quarter century after *Discrete Series*, recent criticism has tended to trust the capacity of the extra-poetic materials to illuminate and frame the poetry appropriately. This seems to be the case even where, as here, there is relatively concrete evidence to contradict Oppen’s implicit assertions.

<sup>80</sup> Myles Slatin ‘A History of Pound’s Cantos I-XVI, 1915-1925’ *American Literature* 35.2 (May 1963) 183-195, 193. In *A Draft of XVI Cantos* (Paris: Three Mountains Press, 1925) Canto I begins with the passage subsequently renumbered as Canto II (with ‘Robert Browning’ inserted):

Hang it all, there can be but one *Sordello*!  
But say I want to, say I take your whole bag of tricks  
[...]

Conversely Pound appears to have placed little importance on the end of poems; in 1933 Williams reports that he ‘drops his voice at the end of a poem when he is reading it so that no-one can hear the last three lines’. If Williams is exaggerating for comic effect then what he describes may have been a strategy on Pound’s part to force his audience to pay close attention – see my emphasis on the storytelling aspect of *The Cantos*, below. Letter dated June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1933, *William/Zukofsky*, p. 160

<sup>81</sup> ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ [1935-7, 1950] in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp.17-87 (p.19).

object-like, in any case: to be available for human attention in the same way an object remains available in the absence of human attention. For though the iterability of a written text initially appears *un-objectlike* (the text can be in multiple places at once), in fact we recognize objects as objects, rather than as arbitrarily grouped aggregations of mass *because* of their repeated instantiation: apparently monadic objects are quickly subsumed under a class or declared not objects at all.<sup>82</sup>

Nevertheless precisely as a text, i.e. a piece of written language among – in competition with – countless others (whose uncountability has also continued to intensify), it is in danger of being ignored (of remaining in the ‘storerooms’ or being cleared from them), which for a text means much the same as disappearing or never having existed at all. ‘Substance’, as Kant notes, ‘is that which persists’,<sup>83</sup> and the textual substance of a poem – that which remains the same despite the changes the poem undergoes in each interpretation and how it appears altered in circumstances far removed from those in which it initially circulated – could be said to be the only way in which the poem is truly object-like (for Kant metastatic changes in form are ‘mere determination[s]’). But against Kant’s schema, in which it would seem difficult to distinguish one text from another, since all share the same textual substance – and this is fundamental to the concept of ‘a poem’; that it is not *a different* poem – the characteristics and complications I describe below: how the poem appears other, but not so thoroughly other as to forbid or escape the subject’s attention; the way it demands repeated attention, and especially that it appears to offer resolution and yet persistently criticizes its own representation of resolution, also seem to exist in order to secure object-like persistence.

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<sup>82</sup> Though in purely abstract terms a monadic object could be said to evidence a strong kind of objecthood insofar as it is not any kind of object (and thus does not have any qualities which would detract from its primary object-ness), this is largely an example of *petitio principia*. Further, this thesis, like *Discrete Series* itself, is concerned with actually existing objects, and the actually existing phenomena (poems and art works) which may or may not validly be said to be objects.

<sup>83</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason* [1781] ed., trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) A182/B224, p. 299: ‘All appearances contain that which persists (substance) as the object itself, and that which can change as its mere determination, i.e. a way in which the object exists.’

## 1.2 The Opening Poem: ‘what really was going on’

The poem which opens Oppen’s collection is as follows:

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

Canto I begins

And then went down to the ship,  
 Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and  
 We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,  
 Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also  
 Heavy with weeping, so winds from sternward  
 Bore us out with bellying canvas  
 [...] <sup>84</sup>

Both poems begin *in medias res* but the content of diegesis into which the reader is introduced-without-introduction – ‘plunged’ seems much too strong for Oppen’s poem, and it is characteristic of a poem in *Discrete Series* that it from the outset makes us interrogate our critical vocabulary and thereby uncovers interpretative commonplaces – is on the one hand a conversation situation in which reprise and response (‘you were saying’) is possible; an anonymous day and a situation within it which we feel will endure while the rain keeps the subject or subjects indoors, and on the other the departure of a ship whose ‘sheep’ remind us that this is a kind of migration; the favourable winds (from ‘sternward’) underlining that there will not be a second ship for a reader who tarries (with, say, questioning responses). Pound’s comment in the preface that Oppen’s ‘sensibility’ has ‘not been got out of any other

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<sup>84</sup> *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1996), p. 3. Many editions, including this one, begin each canto with a huge initial (which I am unable to reproduce) whereas the annunciatory portentousness of an outsize or dropped capital would be singularly inappropriate for *Discrete Series*.

man's books' is a little ironic, for here in the opening poem, on the page facing that line in the preface, there is a line taken from another man's books.<sup>85</sup> There may possibly be a repressed allusion to Byron's *Manfred* in which, as here, knowledge and sorrow are put into relation, likewise as part of the scene-setting:

[...] grief should be the instructor of the wise;  
Sorrow is knowledge: they who know the most  
Must mourn the deepest o'er the fatal truth,  
The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life.<sup>86</sup>

But the main authorial presence in Oppen's poem is not Byron, nor, as in the extract from Pound, 'poor old Homer' (as he is referred to in Canto II) – oral poet twenty-five centuries dead and filtered through his renaissance translator Andreas Divus. It is, rather, Henry James, and the particular reference is to 'The Story in It' from 1902. That is, where Pound reprises an action-filled episode from a world-famous epic (the Nekyia passage, *Odyssey* XI) Oppen refers to a relatively obscure story, albeit also one by a famous author, centred on a secret affair, whose major themes are the possibilities and proprieties of literature.<sup>87</sup> The most significant non-discursive events of James's story are: the arrival of Colonel Voyt to the house where Maud (Oppen misspells her name) is staying; the conversation between Voyt, Mrs Dyott and Maud about literature, over tea; Voyt's departure, and finally a non-event: his failure to re-appear when next expected.<sup>88</sup> Oppen's poem concerns the quality and content of 'a look', and the primary relevance of the reference to 'The Story in It' is that there particularly James performs his belief that '[i]t is an incident' – i.e. an event of sufficient dramatic interest for literature – 'for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on the table and look out at you in a certain way'.<sup>89</sup>

This neo-classical trope, with its echoes of the figures frozen on Keats' 'Grecian Urn', is of human stasis invested with circumstantial significance which is at the

<sup>85</sup> *NCP*, p. 4. In the original edition there is a blank page between the preface and the first poem.

<sup>86</sup> *Manfred* [1817] *The Complete Poetical Works* ed. Jerome J. McGann, Vol. IV (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1986), p. 53.

<sup>87</sup> Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 1.

<sup>88</sup> 'The Story in It' in *The Complete Tales of Henry James* ed. Leon Edel Vol. 11: 1900-1903 (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1964), pp. 307-326.

<sup>89</sup> 'The Art of Fiction' [1884, revised 1888] in *The Art of Criticism: Henry James on the Theory and the Practice of Fiction* ed. William Veeder and Susan M. Griffin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 165-196, this reference p. 174.

same time relatively *devalued* as mere pretext for a formal exercise – the representation of a ‘pose’ – and an exercise in which the circumstance is product of, rather than pretext for the ‘look’. This is to say that in this trope we understand the significance of the circumstances through the intense and uncommon character of the look rather than vice versa. Here, in stark contrast to the banal or flat mood of many of the poems of *Discrete Series*, a particular part – and not, as in Schlegel, *every* part – of a work stands for and celebrates the capacity of the whole work (and other works) to prolong and reproduce emotional states which are marked, in lived experience, by their rarity, their brevity and their status as produced, mostly, by a phenomenon outside the subject (they cannot, in general, be produced by solitary contemplation, whereas the viewer is, in a compromised yet still-valid sense, ‘alone’ with a work). The trope persists into ‘fully-fledged’ modernism in, for example, Eliot’s ‘La Figlia che Piange’ with its instruction to ‘Stand’, and the conceit of the prioritization/de-prioritization of diegetic context – the look produced by the circumstances and/or produced by the author in order to reveal the importance of those circumstances – is exposed in Veronica Forrest-Thompson’s ‘l’Effet du Réel’. There, the prehistory of the poem which the poem is an account of includes the will to write a poem:

[...]

& we step  
over its sill  
the doors &  
sills of light

So would you mind just standing in the café doorway  
For a minute longer against the sun because I’m  
Writing a poem about intersections (the doors & sills of light)<sup>90</sup>

Insofar as the self-presentation of Oppen’s poem pre-history ends with an act of aestheticization it could be said to acknowledge the same thing, i.e. that the true

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<sup>90</sup> *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Barnett (Exeter; Lewes: Shearsman; Allardyce, 2008), p. 110. The conceit of Eliot’s poem is a reversal: as in James the incident (the manner in which the departing female ‘stands’) is of sufficient interest for literature and felicitously it is also the very act traditionally required for portraiture, but finally the incident’s interest to literature is secondary to the idea that literature (in the form of lyric poetry preserving a moment in connection with a person) *is* this very attempt to fix and preserve the situation; to prevent the person from fleeing. In Forrest-Thompson’s poem there is a sense, too, that the writer-voice might wish the body leaving the café doorway to remain for longer than a minute, as well as an implicit acknowledgement that the departure (even if wholly fictional; imagined) is necessary for the generation of the poem.

prehistory of all poems, a version of which the reader is invited to reconstruct in the poem, is always (or at least inevitably includes) the will to write a poem, whether or not the version we are invited to reconstruct includes this. Thus where, via its opening invocation of Homer, *The Cantos* presents itself as an *ur*-poem in the sense of a mythical aetiology of Europe, Oppen's poem (when read via Forrest-Thompson's) can be said to be an *ur*-poem insofar as it exposes the pre-history of all poems: the revelation that every poem is the product of the will to produce a poem may be banal but it is not quite tautologous or without content. 'Every work is an occasional work [...], each work has a beginning', writes Blanchot, 'since without it the work would have been only an insurmountable problem, nothing more than the impossibility of writing it'.<sup>91</sup> Not every work, however, turns and addresses – however obliquely – this fact.

James later takes his idea of stasis and translates it from the objects represented – always bodies; texts rarely command already static things to remain static<sup>92</sup> – to the medium of representation, i.e. language. He believes – or entertains the idea by means of claiming to believe – that written expression is not in any way inferior to non-linguistic action, and in fact that it is, in its more reliable fixity, superior:

[...] the whole conduct of our life consists of things done [...] we recognize betimes that to put [i.e. express; write] things is very exactly and responsibly and interminably to do them. Our expression of them and the terms on which we understand that, belong as nearly to our conduct and our life as every other feature of our freedom; these things yield in fact some of its most exquisite material to the religion of doing. More than that, our literary deeds enjoy the marked advantage over many of our acts, that, though they go forth into the world and stray even in the desert, they don't to the same extent lose themselves.<sup>93</sup>

Oppen's poem – I hesitate to elevate its first line to summarizing theme by giving it as the poem's title (I think that the function of the titlelessness of the overwhelming majority of poems in the collection is to engender this hesitation) – is just such an exercise in highly-focused 'putting' and an investigation of the 'terms on which we

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<sup>91</sup> 'Literature and the Right to Death' [1949] trans. Lydia Davis in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction & Literary Essays* ed. George Quasha (Barrytown: Station Hill, 1999), pp. 359-99, p. 363.

<sup>92</sup> Watt's difficulty with the painting in Beckett's *Watt* [1953] is an exception, as is Kafka's 'The Cares of a Family Man' [1919]. Both stories feature a subject attempting to fix what is already fixed (a painting and a spool-like object).

<sup>93</sup> Preface to *The Golden Bowl* (1909) in *The Art of Criticism*, pp. 376-424, this reference p. 391.

understand that' ('putting', i.e. the nature and fact of the expression) but to read it is also, on the other hand, to witness the poem 'lose itself' in the sense of escaping from interpretative fixing.<sup>94</sup> In Chapter 3 I argue that this loss or dissolution is one of the ways in which these poems can be thought of as 'compromised objects', but for the moment I note that James' emphasis on the consequences of the activity of the transformation of events into language and the fixity of the resulting product resonates with Objectivist and Adornian focus on process and object.

Oppen's poem refuses a title, then, to escape the limitations of summary, and because of the fear that, as with subsumption under a formal or generic mode, e.g. sonnet or ode, subsumption under a title imparts 'necessities' (see the quotation from Williams at p. 12, above) which will 'condition' the poem and from whose determinations it 'cannot' – or, to put it more cautiously, might not be able to – 'be freed'. The body of the poem may fulfil, fail to fulfil, subvert or even appear to ignore the title and the expectations the title creates, but in any of these cases the text's autonomy as object; its ability to establish *itself*, formally, as an object, will be diminished. It is to these expectations and to this inescapable relation that Frank O'Hara refers by calling so many of his poems 'Poem',<sup>95</sup> and to these that Zukofsky points when he writes a 'Poem Beginning "The"' (i.e. rather than with its title).<sup>96</sup> The object's autonomy is diminished insofar as the reader's 'first' task with regard to a titled-text (after reading and, inevitably, assessing, the title, as it were in isolation, and anticipating what kind of poem or play or novel might follow) is then not to delineate the text; to establish what kind of an object it is, but to define it in relation to the title – a title which is, in a messily *unobject*-like way, simultaneously part, and not part, of the object: it forms part of the poem/title system we call 'the poem', and yet also merely refers to it. Choosing not to title a work could substantially increase the impact of an opening line, and an opening by launching the reader more forcefully into the *media* of the *res* without the lubrication, or preparation (or space

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<sup>94</sup> Of the thirty-one one poems two have descriptive titles ('Party on Shipboard' and 'Drawing'). Four are introduced by the numbers which divide them into pairs, i.e. '1' (beginning 'White. From the', p. 6) and '2' (beginning 'Thus', p. 7) and '1' (beginning 'The three wide', p. 10) and '2' (beginning 'The lights, paving —', p. 11).

<sup>95</sup> 66, according to *The Collected Poems* ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>96</sup> This appears to be the first poem by Zukofsky that Oppen encountered, in Pound's *Exile 3* (Spring 1928). *Meaning a Life*, p. 85.

for preparation) afforded by a title. Oppen in fact removed the thematic title of a poem which I read at the end of this thesis; the poem beginning ‘The mast / Inaudibly soars’ which, when it appeared in *Poetry* in 1932, was called ‘Cat-Boat’.<sup>97</sup> But here the opening line, even without the lubrication of a title is not forbidding. It is rather the first manifestation of a poetic tentativeness. By contrast the impact of Pound’s opening is unmistakeable, and largely aural; an attempt to match Homer’s ‘ear, ear for the sea-surge’ (Canto II). Just as the ship overcomes the breakers, the accentual, alliterative verse overcomes the marked caesurae in lines 2, 4 and 5.

In the whole of *Discrete Series* there is no poetic effect – no locus of heightened correspondence or contrast between form and content – as clear and unambiguous as this. The minimal sonority of Oppen’s opening poem is important insofar as it is the first strand in the development of a poetics of *a*-sensuousness: a refusal (though not a histrionic refusal) of Hegel’s hard-to-escape definition of the work of art as a ‘sensuous expression’ – *sinnliche Schein* – of x or y.<sup>98</sup> ‘Sensuous expression’, in this context, must mean more-than-arbitrarily sensuous, because, barring the possibility of genuinely immediate, mind-to-mind communication (in which case how would one know that there were two distinct minds?), the production and reception of any ‘expression’ or ‘appearance’ involves the mediation of the senses, and any art-object involves, as Hegel puts it, ‘actual external configurations’. Similarly elsewhere he notes that: ‘all art [...] needs an external medium for its expression’.<sup>99</sup> ‘The universal and absolute need from which art (on its formal side) springs’, he says,

has its origin in the fact that man is a thinking consciousness, i.e. that man draws out of himself and puts before himself what he is and whatever else is. Things in nature are only immediate and single, while man as spirit duplicates himself.<sup>100</sup>

As with Heidegger’s observation about the potatoes in the cellar, Hegel seems to me to be noting just the same thing as the Objectivists, notwithstanding the relatively weak sonority in this poem (there is little pursuit here of that way of achieving physicality): that art-works are objects. In order to be able to see, and to return to that which man has ‘put before himself’ it must be set down, externalized, given material

<sup>97</sup> *Poetry* 34.4 (January 1932) 199.

<sup>98</sup> For example ‘the sensuous expression of the Absolute idea’. *Aesthetics* I, p. 70.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, p. 281, p. 81.

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 30-31.



form. Though the situation is more complicated with regard to processual media such as music and drama – it is not self-evidently the case, as Heidegger claims, that Beethoven's works *exist* 'in the storerooms of the publishing houses like potatoes in the cellar'<sup>101</sup> – this is really only to say that some works (*not* so obviously processual ones) in some media, like literary texts or paintings must, even before the Objectivists insist on their objecthood, take stronger object form: it belongs to their concept that they are in some sense already an object. The metaphor of the objecthood of a poem, then, should be tempered by the realization that it is not only a metaphor, and that this is sometimes best made visible by avoiding an expected vector of sense-relation with the object (i.e. sonority).

The 'a-sensuous' strand – an aesthetics of inaesthetics – develops, later in the collection, into a noumenal, rather than a phenomenal, quality to the objects in (and the objects which are) the poems and I trace this development in Chapter 3.4. It is an aesthetics of inaesthetics, in the sense that it contradicts the etymological and still widely dominant sense of aesthetics as a discourse of feeling or sensation – *aesthesis* – and the concomitant binding of 'feeling' (sensation) with 'feeling' (inward, emotional, affective response).<sup>102</sup> But here in the opening poem, when read against Pound's verses, the absence of 'effect' (in the sense of formal correspondence or counterpoint between form and its other, which is only accessible via form) is already a critique of the compromised or limiting nature of a successful effect when it comes to staging a *process* i.e. a sequence of events, like the launching of a ship, whose outcome must at some – at at least one – stage be in doubt in the sense that if the sequence is halted the result will not result. Thus the difficulty of overcoming the

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<sup>101</sup> Hegel in fact regretted that processual works should have this 'thingly character' and the bifurcated existence (in performance and in private reading; on the stage and on the bookshelf) that it makes possible: 'in my opinion, no play should really be printed but should remain, more or less as the case was in antiquity, in manuscript for the theatre's repertory and get only an extremely insignificant circulation' *Aesthetics* Vol II, p. 1184.

<sup>102</sup> Alain Badiou's work on 'inaesthetics' and in particular his *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Albert Toscano (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) initially seemed relevant, but I find his definition of a possible 'inaesthetic' remains quite aesthetic (to do with *aesthesis*): 'even presuming the existence of a thinking of the poem, or that the poem is itself a form of thought, this thought is inseparable from the sensible' (p.19) and quite aesthetic-ideological (he subscribes to the Hegel-Schlegel 'argus' complex in which every part is of a work is a whole): 'This is after all, why the artwork is irreplaceable in all of its points: once left to its own immanent ends, it is as it will forever be, and every touch up or modification is either inessential or destructive' (pp. 10-11). The poems of *Discrete Series* challenge both of these ideas.

breakers can be staged in the prosody, but the success of the effect (its allegory-like indexicality) ultimately limits the sense of difficulty; limits and perhaps even erases the possibility of the ships *not* succeeding as the poem succeeds, which is what, I would argue, the effect is supposed to dramatize. There is something rhetorically manipulative about the success of the breaker-effect and the way in which the reader – who is elevated in Romantic and post-Romantic poetics to a level of rich linguistic and emotional sensitivity comparable to the poet's – is reduced to the sensitivity of a mechanism, switched off or on (in this case on). And as I.A. Richards notes of 'stock responses', this secure and expected response happens in 'quasi-independence of the poem which is supposed to be its origin or instrument': the poem is acknowledged as that which produced the effect but the effect (its execution and the response engendered) is prioritized above it, and there is nothing to return the reader to the text which seems to have exhausted itself in the effort.<sup>103</sup> In aesthetic-historical terms, the comparative paucity or weakness of poetic 'effect', in Oppen's poem – at least until the last line, which is the focus of the second half of my reading – can be thought of as a kind of renunciation, the first of many in *Discrete Series*. To borrow a term first applied to the visual arts, it is specifically a renunciation of what Adorno, himself borrowing the term from Walter Benjamin, called 'exhibition value'<sup>104</sup>, insofar as Pound's line about 'breakers' is a double invocation of an exchange process. First the formal effect demands and receives the approbation of the individual reader, then this local success is ready to be added to the sum of achievement in the whole (unfinished) poem for weighing against other works and their known, accountable effects.<sup>105</sup> By contrast the tentative and conversational tone

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<sup>103</sup> *Practical Criticism: Study of Literary Judgement* (London: Kegan Paul, 1930) p. 15. The objection to overly secure conceits or effects is not only that it diminishes the presence of objects; it is wider than that and connected to the reader's sense of self-worth as capable of interpreting without direction and desire to be free from what can feel like manipulation. As Keats notes 'We hate poetry that has a palpable design on us [...]. How beautiful are the retired flowers! How would they lose their beauty were they to throng into the highway, crying out, "Admire me, I am a violet! Dote on me, I am primrose!"' Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds [February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1818] *Selected Letters of John Keats* [Rev. Ed.] ed. Grant F. Scott (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 86-88, this reference pp. 86-87.

<sup>104</sup> 'The "exhibition value" that, according to Benjamin, supplants "cult value" is an *imago* of the exchange process.' *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 56.

<sup>105</sup> Though it is not a musical effect, Pound's caesuras are susceptible to a negative judgement similar to that which Adorno makes of Swinburne or Rilke. He writes approvingly that Kafka 'treated the meanings of spoken intentional language as if they were music' and that this 'contrasts sharply with the "musical" language of Swinburne and Rilke, with their imitation of musical effects and their remoteness from true musicality.' *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Music* [1968] trans Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1998), p. 3.

of the bulk of Oppen's poem, with its parenthetical insertions ('aside from [...]') and phatic confirmations ('it was') appears substantially less ends-directed, or at least any ends, and what it is we are supposed to be impressed by, are much less immediately apparent. This in itself might be thought of as an effect; present in order to make the ontological conclusion all the more surprising and persuasive, but the relative shunning of effect and the related renunciation of exhibition value can thus both be thought of as ways in which the poem endeavours to make the reader return to it; to persist in her attention to it *in itself* rather than the effects it produces even if this resistance to the process of effect reception and identification is, as Pound finds in his preface, somewhat frustrating.

It is naturally harder to justify a claim of absence of effect than one of presence. Since every reader is, *prima facie*, a legitimate member of the community of readers who in aggregate determine what qualifies and what does not as a valid, legible effect, any claim that this or that formal aspect of a work produces this or that effect must be listened to. On the other hand, an assertion of absence may always be discounted as mistaken: the reader having failed to register what, for some other reader, is adequately (or unmistakably) present. Nevertheless I claim that there is a relative paucity of effect, here; relative to Pound's opening but also to some more general expectation about the ways in which a poem might employ, or noticeably refuse to employ, lineation, meter, vocabulary, rhetoric. Compare, for instance, the high concentration of formal effect in the opening of Marianne Moore's 'Camellia Sabina' which appeared alongside poems from *Discrete Series* in the *Active Anthology* and which includes, since this part of the poem is about strategies of preservation and authorship (of plums), the implicit demand that the reader actively consider the ways in which the world has been preserved and presented in the poem.

and the Bordeaux plum  
from Marmande (France in parenthesis) with  
A.G. on the base of the jar—Alexis Godillot—  
unevenly blown beside a bubble that  
is green when held up to the light; they  
are a fine duet. The screw-top for this graft-grown  
    briar-black bloom      on black-thorn pigeon's-blood  
is, like Certosa, sealed with foil. Appropriate custom.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> *Active Anthology*, pp. 189-191, p. 189.

No such demand is presented in Oppen's poem. The paucity of what can be positively identified, in Oppen's poem, as poetic effects (until the last line) is also the first evidence in the collection of the strikingly modernist anti-aesthetic possibility alluded to in the epigraph to this thesis, from Hegel: the 'forsak[ing]' of 'the embodiment of spirit in sensuous form', i.e. the forsaking, by art objects, of that of which, for Hegel, art actually consists. The comparative weakness of poetic effect seems to say that the stronger methods of embodiment of subjective states such as 'sorrow',<sup>107</sup> and perhaps those states themselves, have become stale, limiting, arbitrary, hollow, automatic, reified: any of these implies they are empty of the authenticity and necessity that they claim as affective states and expressions or products of those states.<sup>108</sup> It is as if, as Hegel says has happened in the case of religion, the embodiment (in this case of urgent, emotional/affective content) 'degrades the content into a historical pictorial idea and to an heirloom handed down by tradition [and it is] only the purely external element [...] that is retained.'<sup>109</sup>

Oppen's rejection of 'sorrow' as basis for poetic knowledge is thus an example of one of the impulses to modernism, wherein, according to Jameson's convincing account, the problem is not

the oldness of the older emotions as such, but the conventions of their expression; not the disappearance of this or that kind of relationship but rather the intolerable commonplaces with which it has become so intimately associated as to be indistinguishable.<sup>110</sup>

On the other hand boredom initially seems unlikely to produce any new knowledge: its very (inaesthetic) concept is one of failure to respond much to any stimulus or find any stimulus much worth responding to, and stimulus and response are

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<sup>107</sup> Hegel is clear that the 'spirit' he writes of in connection with Romantic art is not universal – 'the absolute idea in its genuine actuality' (*Aesthetics* Vol. I, p. 92) – but (suspending their dialectical entanglement for the moment) individual, 'inward': 'at this third stage the subject-matter of art is *free concrete spirituality*, which is to be manifested as *spirituality* to the spiritually inward. [...] This *inner* world constitutes the content of the romantic sphere and must therefore be represented as this inwardness and in the pure appearance of this depth.' *ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>108</sup> Charles Altieri notes that the idea that modernist poetry is characteristic and distinct in, as he puts it 'resisting their culture's standard procedures for interpreting events and attributing values' and 'open[ing] less clotted and moralized paths' is an old story, but not for that reason necessarily invalid. 'The Fate of the Imaginary in Twentieth Century American Poetry' [<http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~altieri/manuscripts/fate.pdf>].

<sup>109</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit* [1807] trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 466.

<sup>110</sup> *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 127.





different kinds difficulty, from the verbose (decipherable with the aid of a serious dictionary):<sup>119</sup>

Argute, deaurate, investite, lucktifick, excandescence,  
Galbanate, effrenate, dicaculous, pavonine, torose  
Hybristick, gingilism [...] <sup>120</sup>

to the enigmatic (not so easily decipherable)

Scraps of heard, of seen things, in  
Ward a thousand and one,

day-nightly  
the Bear Polka:<sup>121</sup>

– ‘at least seems to have the virtue of making our consumption of artworks present to ourselves as such’.<sup>122</sup> While none of the poems in *Discrete Series* undertake such ‘presencing’ with the stridency of the lines by MacDiarmid – which reminds us of our consumption by almost choking us – and the opening poem is relatively temperate among them (its ‘impediment’ not strongly pronounced), there is sufficient mistrustfulness of fluidity to give a picture of the poem as not just *representing* but *in itself* a sequence of events whose outcome, unlike with the example of the ship, must at some stage be in doubt, and via this doubt it seeks, in a temperate way, to make our reading of the poem ‘present to itself’.

The distinction in aural intensity between the two openings is extended to the situation in which this speaking and hearing is taking place: rather than being interpellated as a participant in a conversation as in Oppen’s poem, via the elision of reader and addressee in ‘you were saying’, Pound’s reader is invited – almost co-

<sup>119</sup> Few would now assent to Hegel’s contrasting view that ‘repelling’ difficulty is ‘the hypochondria of the artist’ who, eschews a ‘free, easy, serene exposition of the thing’ and instead ‘deliberately intends to make things difficult for the spectator’. *Aesthetics* Vol. II, p. 620.

<sup>120</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, from ‘In Memoriam James Joyce’ [1955] *Complete Poems of Hugh MacDiarmid* Vol II (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 739.

<sup>121</sup> Paul Celan, (untitled) from *Lichtzwang* [1970] *Selected Poems* trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 295.

<sup>122</sup> ‘Belabored: Style as Work’ *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 53.1 (Spring 2012), 47–64, 58. The difficulty of *Discrete Series* is not that the poems are straightforwardly difficult (complex, enigmatic, cryptic, forbidding – though they are sometimes those things) but that they are on the whole simple and yet remain difficult – it proves hard, even in an extended reading of a single poem (like the one which follows) to give a satisfactory account of what happens there (one which satisfies the expectations of contemporary literary criticism or the interpretative expectations the poem appears to produce).

opted – to listen, quietly, as an audience-member to a story-teller, and to note the skill with which the tale is told (it aspires to *be*, at this moment, the kind of art-work – an oral epic – which might populate the world it represents). In keeping with this conversational narrative situation Oppen's prosody is much more tentative; the line lengths and stress-pattern more varied. It begins in iambic mode, with each alternate stress – those that fall in 'knowledge', 'sorrow', 'saying', and 'boredom' – weighted above the intermediate stresses ('not of', 'you were', 'but of'). The length of each section which can be scanned as iambic, and the security with which they can be thus excerpted and scanned gradually diminishes – 'the knowledge not of sorrow but of boredom' (11 syllables, feminine ending); 'aside from reading, speaking, smoking' (8 syllables, feminine ending); 'Of what Maude Blessingbourne it was' (8 syllables); 'approached the window' (5 syllables, feminine ending); 'as if to see' (4 syllables). After the half line 'what really was going on' the predominant pattern, though it predominates rather lightly, is of slow, spondee-like adjacent stresses: 'saw rain falling' ('saw' is questionable); 'road clear'; 'world, weather'. Although the final words of the poem 'with which one shares the century' could be heard as a return to the iambic mode of the beginning, the intervening spondees transfer to them a sense of import and slow finality. The subordinate clause 'as if to see | what really was going on' is thus prosodically, as transition point, at the centre of the poem, though as a transition point its centrality is nodal; unostentatious. It is also the modest peak of dramatic expectation: the reader waits to see what it is Maude sees and thereby to find out the nature of her yearning and whether or not her expectation will be fulfilled.

The overall syntax of the poem displaces this line from its central position: the anaphora in the structure 'The knowledge [...] of boredom | Is [...] | Of what Maude it was [...] | Of the world...' makes the description of what it was Maude was doing when she was doing the wishing to know secondary. The line is, however, back at the centre of the poem insofar as the closing of the quotation marks is the locus of a pathos-effect, and the centre of a network of related effects. The scene which is invoked – not only in the diegesis of this poem but invoked wherever this effect (the closing of a quotation and its content escaping or running over into the unquoted world) appears – is of the closing of a book, the lifting of the eyes to the non-literary, non-represented world and an accompanying sense of wonder. Unlike



with Pound, then, at the beginning of the sequence we find the atmosphere of the end, rather than the beginning, of a story, and a text which – even as it quotes from a (fictionally) literal speech-act (it is plausible that the ‘you’ is said to be ‘saying’ this whole poem) – emphasizes its status as written (not oral) discourse. The wonder in this imputed scene is at the quasi-shamanic ability of the dead text to speak to the live world and yet remain fixed: paradoxically only capable of speaking *through* its fixed materiality; its pastness; its inevitable ignorance of the future meaning-contexts in which it and all texts are required to operate.<sup>123</sup> Its pathetic aspect is deepened insofar as the excerpted ‘speech’ already contains the germ of the same quasi-shamanic live/dead-real/artificial relation: it has plausible verisimilitude (there are people who speak like this in the today of 1931, whereas no-one says ‘swart’ any longer) but also captures and conveys a relatively complex subject position in a deftly economic way, thus giving away its artifice (as with the ‘swart’ archaism, only fictional texts speak like this). The subject position therein expressed resonates with the subjects of the diegesis of the poem (‘you’, and the implied ‘I’) and the physical aspects of the room, house, and external world which Maud Blessingbourne occupies are strongly, though not definitively, migrated into the world of the subjects. Likewise ‘reading, speaking, smoking’ – in which the endless variety of potential in the first two practices (one might read or speak a sermon, a list, a curse, a sonnet, a correction, a confession) is reduced to the repetitive appetite-satiation (or habitual comfort) of the third and these exhausted practices bound up with the ‘knowledge’ sought – are the actions of ‘you’ and ‘I’ rather than Maud(e) or Colonel Voyt. This migration of activity, thought and circumstance is made clear if the reader tries to imagine the ‘saying’, and the delayed response which is the speech-act of the poem, happening in an open field; the ‘weather’ bright sunlight. Finally, there is a discernable – though, again, also deniable – suggestion of *mise-en-abîme*: the reader

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<sup>123</sup> My use of ‘shamanic’ here is influenced by Stephen Greenblatt, who in one of the founding texts of New Historicism writes: ‘I begin with the desire to speak with the dead. This desire is familiar, if unvoiced, motive in literary studies, a motive organized, professionalized, buried beneath thick layers of bureaucratic decorum: literature professors are salaried, middle-class shamans.’ *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) p. 1. One major problem with the recent transmigration of New Historicist practice into modernist studies is that, as well as displacing analysis of modernism’s philosophical engagements, in seeking to ‘speak with the dead’ the ‘New Modernist Studies’ tends to neglect modernism’s articulation of its dialectical historical status: the knowledge that it will be sedimented and the knowledge that it partially controls the terms of that sedimentation. That is, it tends to kill modernist poems in order to bring them all the more impressively back to life – as Adorno puts it ‘[t]o be a revenant means that you first have to have died’. *Quasi una Fantasia*, p. 10.

of this poem might well have some ‘knowledge of boredom’, and be reading this poem in a book in a room with windows, and is thus perhaps invited to look up from her copy of *Discrete Series* and either a) experience the same frisson at the quasi-shamanic, and/or b) to look out the window and to find that the world, weather-swept, is still there.

In this complex line – ambivalently central to the movement of the poem and central to the poem’s overall ambivalence – Oppen once again misquotes, changing James’s ‘what was really going on’ for ‘what really was going on’. The inversion may or may not have been accidental. Peter Nicholls tracks how Oppen was fairly free in adapting words and phrases by other writers, and this was true even of lines which were vitally important to him, personally and poetically; even lines which, one poem records ‘were running thru my mind / in the destroyed (and guilty) Theater / of the war’.<sup>124</sup> Interpretative conclusions which depend or appear to depend on the intentionality of Oppen’s alterations, such as ‘til other voices wake us / *or* we drown’ (emphasis added) seem in this light to be on decidedly shaky ground.<sup>125</sup> With one exception, Oppen’s critics have thus far ignored the inversion in the quotation from James. Steve Shoemaker recognizes that it is a quotation, but not that it is an altered one (he writes that ‘the line is quoted directly from James’).<sup>126</sup> Peter Nicholls, Oren Izenberg and Ruth Jennison likewise overlook the change (Jennison notes a change in the name but identifies ‘Blessingbourne’ rather than ‘Maud’ as the altered part, while Izenberg calls James’s tale ‘The Story of It’).<sup>127</sup> Nicholls even projects

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<sup>124</sup> *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, p. 124 (of a line from Hegel). Kristen Prevallet ‘One Among Rubble: George Oppen and World War II’ in *Thinking Poetics: Essays on George Oppen* ed. Shoemaker (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), pp. 131-142. She quotes Robert Francioisi: ‘he literally rewrites Reznikoff’s Girder poem to accommodate his own personal and social ethos.’ p. 134.

<sup>125</sup> Michael Davidson finds that these lines from *Primitive* [1978] ‘celebrate[ ] the sustaining value of other voices against J. Alfred Prufrock’s solipsistic worry that these voices might “wake us, *and* we drown”’ (*NCP* xliii) – he fails to note that Oppen also changes ‘human’, in Eliot, to ‘other’ which might suggest a differing conception of the mermaid-dream voices (inhuman rather than subconscious and thus still part of the same human self), or might merely be a mistake. Jeffrey Peterson puts the case for willed transformation of these lines more strongly still: “Oppen revises [‘Prufrock’] with an ironic turn: replacing an ‘and’ with an ‘or’ [...]”. ‘George Oppen’ in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 165: *American Poets Since World War II* ed. Joseph Conte (Detroit: Gale, 1996), pp. 188-206, 201. Finally, in another (this time explicit) instance of such dependence, Stephen Cope writes ‘Oppen misappropriates (purposefully) the famous lines from John Donne’s “Meditation 17”’ *Selected Prose, Daybooks and Papers*, p. 247n.13.

<sup>126</sup> Preface to *Thinking Poetics*, ix.

<sup>127</sup> Izenberg: *Of Being Numerous*, p. 83. Jennison: *The Zukofsky Era*, p. 73.

Oppen's alteration back into his quotation of the passage from James<sup>128</sup> and, presumably reading in the other direction, Rocco Marinaccio reproduces the poem without the alteration, as it would be if it were a simple quotation.<sup>129</sup> But as only Harold Schimmel (writing before Nicholls et al.) recognizes, and even then in passing, there is an inversion.<sup>130</sup> The original magazine publication, the original editions which collect the story – Scribner's in New York and Methuen in London – and their successors all have the line and the passage which leads up to it as follows:

Nothing had passed for half an hour — nothing, at least, to be exact, but that each of the companions occasionally and covertly intermitted her pursuit in such a manner [Maud is reading, Dyott writing letters] as to ascertain the degree of absorption of the other without turning round. What their silence was charged with, therefore, was not only a sense of the weather, but a sense, so to speak, of its own nature. Maud Blessingbourne, 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.<sup>131</sup>

Do these oversights matter? Do they show anything beyond the fact that even in this relatively historicist and positivist critical moment – and even where the critics are among the first to provide detailed readings of a collection – scholars are not as careful as they might be? In one sense they might not matter much (and in the case of Jennison and Izenberg's name/title mistakes I would say not at all), for the supply or correction of textual and historical detail is not always critically productive, as when, in an essay on Oppen, John Wilkinson rebukes Barrett Watten for 'seek[ing] to arrogate William Carlos Williams and Vladimir Mayakovsky as dialectically linked forefathers for Language Poetry' while being 'ignorant of the two poets' meeting in an apartment on East Fourteenth Street in Greenwich Village on 19 September 1925'. Though Wilkinson reports that it was 'a profound experience' for Williams personally, he estimates that its 'influence cannot be discerned' in Williams' poetry.<sup>132</sup> We might disagree, and find instead that the explosive impulse

<sup>128</sup> *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, p. 59.

<sup>129</sup> 'Discrete Series and the Road Narrative', 545.

<sup>130</sup> Schimmel notes only that there is 'a shift of emphasis with the inversion', '(On) *Discrete Series*', *George Oppen: Man and Poet*, pp. 293-324, p. 298.

<sup>131</sup> *Anglo-American magazine* 7 (January 1902), 2 *The Complete Tales* Vol. 11, p. 308.

<sup>132</sup> 'The Glass Enclosure: Transparency and Glitter in the Poetry of George Oppen' *Critical Inquiry* 36 (Winter 2010) 218-238, 237, 238.

in Williams has been depoliticized and domesticated (for example by relating it to Emerson)<sup>133</sup> but knowledge or ignorance of their meeting, its date and location, indeed, whether it happened at all; these change none of the evidence for the putative influence or its discernibility. As Pound bitinglly put it in a rebuke, ‘anybody being a friend of anybody has nothing to do with literary criticism’.<sup>134</sup> In fact Oppen’s carelessnesses, or deformations, or liberal alterations – the ways in which he sometimes fails, in James’s words, to put things ‘very exactly and responsibly’ – function as a nice rebuke to a kind of scholarship which assumes that accuracy is all, i.e. that textual, contextual and historical detail is the substance, rather than (at most) a precondition, of critical interpretation. Recording the fact of the alteration is only of critical interest if it has interpretative consequences. So does the alteration to the line matter? Again, perhaps not much, insofar as the complex pathos effect I outline above would likely have been diminished, but not destroyed, if the quotation from James were accurate. But the alteration does have interesting and complicated consequences with the regard to the relation between the poem, its concluding thought-act and the context that the poem supplies for itself. These consequences are by definition unavailable in Shoemaker, Izenberg, Nicholls or Jennison’s analysis.

Paul Christensen, unlike the other critics, neglects that it is a (mis)quotation at all, and reads it as a pastiche of Jamesian style. He describes the line as ‘low-grade fin-de-siècle romanticism’; in his reading it is ‘the “really” ’ which ‘gives it away’.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> See Ian D. Copestake, *The Ethics of William Carlos Williams’ Poetry* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011). Copestake also asserts the importance of Williams’ Unitarian upbringing on his work and his understanding of it. Perhaps anticipating this domestication of influence Williams wrote ‘My eyes have been so unfailingly directed toward Europe, toward what has come out of Paris especially, that I had little interest in anything else. You may be surprised to hear a man who has so identified with American beginnings say this’ – and Williams himself participated in this identification, for instance in the prologue to *Kora in Hell* (1917) – ‘but it is so.’ Unpublished letter cited by A. Walton Litz in ‘Williams and Stevens: the Quest for a Native American Modernism’, *The Literature of region and Nation* ed. R.P. Draper (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 180-193, 181. My attention was drawn to this by Peter Nicholls who cites it (and more) in ‘Modernising modernism: from Pound to Oppen’ *Critical Quarterly* 44.2 (Summer 2002) 41-58. Williams would later insist on ‘American’ as factual geographical designator as against its use as a description of content that ties the work to a native tradition: ‘As to the use of the term American when attached to a work of art, I confess it is of no importance unless it is intended to signify that excellence has no particular locale.’ *A Recognizable Image: William Carlos Williams on Art and Artists* ed. Bram Dijkstra (New York: New Directions, 1978), pp. 175-76.

<sup>134</sup> *The Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941* ed. D.D. Paige (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 311. Worse still, Pound asserts that ‘[y]ou can spot the bad critic when he starts by discussing the poet and not the poem.’ *ABC of Reading*, p. 84.

<sup>135</sup> ‘“To hunt for words under the stones” ’ *Jacket* 11 (April 2000) [<http://jacketmagazine.com/11/whalen-christensen.html>].

And, despite the unfocused use of ‘romanticism’ he is near the mark in his judgement which is only available to him due to error. The transposition of the ‘really’ avoids the accidental, prosodically plodding force of the more common ‘what was really going on’. This shift prevents the reader from mistakenly understanding that the subject of Maud’s enquiry is something prosaic, plot-like, easily resolved by the supply of a missing but straightforward piece of information (e.g. ‘what was really going on was that the children were throwing coins against the window’), but in avoiding the interposition of the adverb into the compound verb it also avoids that which might have been perceived as a grammatical solecism, and thus economically confers an arch quality. Since this is how Maud herself might describe the quality of her ‘look’ the transposition also in effect retroactively transforms James’s narratorial reporting of the quality of Maud’s look into free indirect discourse: neither live speech (of a fictional actor), nor the dead (objective) speech of an extradiagetic narrator – the poem seems to impute that the French novels Maud reads, whose propriety is partly the subject of James’s story, may well be by Flaubert. The pathos-effect described above is thus heightened and sustained (though naturally to unpick it as I am doing is to kill it; to expunge its generative potential in outlining it) in that where it once seemed to depend only on the power of quotation, it now seems underwritten by the practice of *not* quoting or finally assigning speech to a subject. Whereas before we at least knew who or what it was that had stopped speaking (the text), now our confidence regard to *who* is compromised.

The tone of ‘what really was going on’, which is in large part the product of the transposition, is of self-consciously deliberate expression whose deliberation is self-consciously lightly worn: more Jamesian than James itself; this is what Schimmel means by saying that Oppen has ‘out-Jamesed James’.<sup>136</sup> Christensen finds that Oppen’s inclusion of what he takes to be a pastiche is quite barbed satire in that it is intended to ‘embody all the corruptions of egotism from the last half-century’. The imputed world-view is, he claims, ‘an alien metaphysic’ which ‘the new poetry must oppose’, and Oppen’s poetic pastiche a ‘calculated slight’ on it. His assessment of

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<sup>136</sup> Schimmel, ‘(On) *Discrete Series*’, 298.

the kind of investment the poem has in the words in quotation marks is plausible.

But Christensen finds that after the close of the quotation

the narrator leaps in to “see” the rain, and breaks through the solipsistic prose by letting the eye travel outward to note such things as rain “in the distance,” how it falls “more slowly.”<sup>137</sup>

That is, for him ‘the new poetry’ begins, in clearly demarcated fashion, after the quotation, and the rest of the poem is a rejection of the world-view and the mode of linguistic expression which embodies it. In similar fashion Stephen Cope describes the Objectivists as seeking ‘a remedy to what they perceived as the heightened rhetorical platitudes of nineteenth-century writing’<sup>138</sup> and the Jamesian version, if under attack, would be just such an instance of the rhetoric to be rejected.

Developing Christensen’s reading of the decisive break in the poem we might surmise that here Oppen follows Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky et al., who wished to ‘[t]hrow Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, etc. etc. overboard from the Ship of Modernity’, and that the close of the quotation marks the point where, having given (slightly rigged) evidence which shows him to merit his punishment, he adds James to their number.<sup>139</sup> I find, on the other hand, that the negative judgement – produced in the poem, intensified by the transposition – can be extended to the rest of the poem, i.e. that part which is less complicatedly ‘by’ Oppen (and as I have shown the membrane between the Jamesian world and the world of the poem is distinctly permeable). For example a similar negative judgement could be applied to the ready lyricism of ‘weather-swept’, and, indeed the line which contains it:

Of the world, weather-swept, with which  
one shares the century.

In this reading the act and mental-state described – the subject’s ontological reflection produced by looking out of the window at rain – and the representation of that process are available for the kind of modernist critique (and rejection)

Christensen invokes on both literary and epistemological grounds.

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<sup>137</sup> “‘To hunt for words under the stones’” (unpaginated).

<sup>138</sup> Introduction to *Selected Prose, Daybooks and Papers*, p. 3.

<sup>139</sup> David Burliuk, Alexey Kruchenykh, Vladimir Maykovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov, ‘Slap in the Face of Public Taste’ [1912] trans. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle in *Manifesto: a Century of Isms* ed. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), p. 230.

### 1.3 Critique, Self-critique, Contact with the World (Bourgeois Art and Bourgeois Thought)

Some of these grounds are quite abstract and theoretical. The first (and most straightforward) literary objection would be that the line involves a decorously muted sublime: the view through the window of the rain and sweeping weather distantly invokes the aspect of aesthetic experience which depends on safety and distance, i.e. the sublime, but the threatening aspect of ‘cliffs, thunder clouds [...] volcanoes [...] hurricanes’ and ‘the boundless ocean’ is not proportionally reduced (its quality preserved) but rather deleted (its quality removed or thoroughly altered) in the reduction of the natural phenomenon from which the observer is protected from thunder / lightning / cliffs / ocean to ‘rain’ falling ‘slowly’ (with an implication of appearing to fall softly) and ‘in the distance’.<sup>140</sup> This reduction is in Kantian terms invalid insofar as the sublime always depends on the qualitative effect of magnitude, i.e. that scale itself does not scale, and a humanized sublime is no sublime at all: it is in respect of the sublime that Kant develops the idea, later taken up by others, that quantity, in the sense that it is not a discretely isolatable property of a phenomenon, *is* quality.<sup>141</sup>

Secondly, rather than a ‘technical exploration’ of the representational function of language, how it represents, what the fact of the representation means and so on – one which, via its line endings or otherwise, ‘separat[es] the connections of the progression of thought’ – the lyric shorthand here seems comfortably secure in its coverage of the concepts. It evidences a confidence that its audience shares a set of expectations, which includes deftly lyrical expression, and that the poem, in its concluding line, has fulfilled them.<sup>142</sup> As well as celebrating the possibility *in* a work

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<sup>140</sup> *Critique of the Power of Judgement* [1790/93] ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), Analytic of the Sublime B. On the Dynamically Sublime in Nature § 28. On nature as a power. p. 144.

<sup>141</sup> Kant: ‘If, however, we call something not only great, but simply, absolutely great, great in every respect (beyond all comparison), i.e., sublime, then one immediately sees that we do not allow a suitable standard for it to be sought outside of it, but merely within it. It is a magnitude that is equal only to itself.’ *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (Analytic of the Sublime A. On the mathematically sublime § 25 Nominal definition of the sublime), p. 133. Though this idea gains exponentially in fields of relevance in the era of mass literacy and industrialization (among the others who take up the idea are Engels, Nietzsche, Benjamin and Stalin) it considerably predates these phenomenon. It is, for example, the basic (satirical) compositional principle of Swift’s *Tale of a Tub* [1704].

<sup>142</sup> The ‘ruling cliché’ of modernism: that ‘painting, music, dance and literature become modern when artists divert their attention from the objects of representation [...] and devote themselves to a

of bringing the process *of* a work to a ‘standstill’, Adorno names the function of the art-objects he champions as ‘putting the process of production in place of the results’, once more echoing tension in definitional statements on objectivism between process and product. But here, though the conditions of the process (boredom, 19<sup>th</sup> century room-space) are sketched, the results (a changed understanding of the mind-world relation) are presented as a *fait accompli* and the stages of the process conveyed as a vanishing transition moment; left unarticulated.<sup>143</sup> The line containing ‘weather-swept’ is not only itself an instance of a smoothly functioning representational system, it is in fact a representation of a smoothly functioning representational system: a representation of an act of aesthetic-perceptual resolution which is also – we infer, because this is a poem, and certainly according to the aesthetic model developed in this poem – the material for such an act. In the harshest, most polemical reading this glossing over of the stages of the process, and the neatness of its self-presentation (controlled, non-abyssal *mise-en-abîme*) might amount to ‘dissimulation’, but the terms of that harsh reading are provided by Oppen’s then fellow-Objectivist Basil Bunting, who in the same year as the publication of *Discrete Series* wrote in praise of Williams’ ‘mosaic’ style:

On inspection the separate stones are very distinct, the cement undissimulated [...]: that is, either there is confessed cement or no cement at all.<sup>144</sup>

Bunting’s positive valorization of space and separation, and of the distinct presentation of distinct entities was shared with Pound who wrote to Harriet Monroe, praising (or given his involvement, perhaps justifying) the arrangement of the works in the ‘Objectivist’ issue of *Poetry*:

Different facets shd. be presented with as much separation as possible, so as to show what they are, not merely partly boiled legumes in the soup.<sup>145</sup>

This separation of (‘discrete’) moments of thought is the justification of the compositional principle of *Discrete Series* as a whole – the space on the page given

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technical exploration of representation itself’. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *Language Alone: the Critical Fetish of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 5.

<sup>143</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 135.

<sup>144</sup> ‘Carlos Williams’ Recent Poetry’ *Westminster Magazine* 23.2 (Summer 1934) 149-54, repr. in *William Carlos Williams: the Critical Heritage* ed. Charles Doyle (London: Routledge, 1980), pp. 134-38, p. 136. I would like to thank Dr Alex Pestell for drawing my attention to this passage.

<sup>145</sup> *The Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941*, p. 311.



over to *no* poem, the attempt to preserve the poems from elision into a relatively singular poetic or philosophical orientation. It is a wider problem for the work's general reception and my work on it here that literary critical and historical analysis and contextualization of a work paradoxically demands just that which the work resists (i.e. elision into a relatively singular poetic or philosophical orientation), but for the moment I note that this Objectivist principle, wherein the work seeks to put pressure on a particular perception and its expression – to 'separat[e] the connections of the progression of thought' is an epistemological, even quasi-positivist one, and it is a principle that the final line of the opening poem violates.<sup>146</sup>

To use a distinction borrowed from another medium – this is, in a sense, to make use of the licence afforded by the precepts of Objectivism which compare the treatment of poems with the treatment of works in other media – and in light of Bunting's visual-pictorial 'mosaic' analogy, we might say that both the represented objects and the style of their representation in the opening poem (the 'rain falling, in the distance, more slowly') remain impressionistic, whereas what Bunting celebrates in Williams is a literary fauvism in which the joins between the elements of the work are foregrounded and undisguised. The work's status as construction, i.e. an arrangement of elements, is thereby announced rather than glossed over. And if the terms of this critique are supplied by Bunting, they are confirmed in the sustained interest evident in other poems in *Discrete Series* in isolating moments of interaction (joins) between objects *and* between mind and world; things which are 'Like the sea incapable of contact | Save in incidents [...]'.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> For reasons of brevity and simplicity I refer here to Herbert Marcuse's straightforward definition of positivism rather than Adorno's much more knotty, polemical and contested one: '(1) the validation of cognitive thought by experience of facts; (2) the orientation of cognitive thought to the physical sciences as a model of certainty and exactness; (3) the belief that progress in knowledge depends on this orientation. Consequently, positivism is the struggle against all metaphysics, transcendentalisms, and idealisms as obscurantist and regressive modes of thought.' *One Dimensional Man* [1964] (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 176. Despite the contestation over the definition of positivism – for which see *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* [1969] (London: Heinemann, 1976) – Marcuse's version is a good candidate for a definition likely to achieve maximum consensus, since it is in close agreement with others, for instance J.M. Bernstein's who describes how, under positivism '[p]hilosophy is to be an underlabourer to the natural sciences, in the triple sense that it should underwrite [...] the naturalist and materialist vision of the world that, above all, mathematical physics projects; that it should secure the methodological procedures of natural science as the sole rational procedures for securing knowledge of the world; and that it should in its own practices [...] embody the very methodologies of natural sciences that it secures.' *Against Voluptuous Bodies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 81-82.

<sup>147</sup> 'Party on Shipboard' *NCP*, p. 15.

The virtue of the ‘shore’, for Oppen (‘The edge of the ocean, | The shore: here’),<sup>148</sup> ‘the sea’ which is a ‘constant weight / In its bed’, and ‘the harbor’ as opposed to marshy deltas or estuary floodplains, is that there is, in those contexts, no ‘cement’ or ‘dovetailing’ between land and water. The preference for clearly visible, isolatable moments of interaction between entities which develops later in the collection is a kind of scientistic-modernist schematism<sup>149</sup> – i.e. an act of schematization but also a preference for objects and phenomena which are ‘schematizable’ without remainder – and is in clear contradistinction to the dominant textual architecture of James, who described the plotting of his fictions precisely as a matter of the artful concealment of joins:

Half the dramatist’s art, as we well know [...] is in the use of *ficelles* [i.e. strands which join]; by which I mean in a deep dissimulation of his dependence on them.

The *ficelle* character [...] is artfully dissimulated [...] with the seams or joints [...] taken particular care of, duly smoothed over, that is [...].<sup>150</sup>

In this poem, however, while the final lines celebrate aesthetic clarity and affirm that seeing clearly (making clean visual distinctions) generates a more general species of historical and ontological knowledge, the ‘joints’ or stages of that process of generation remain hidden. And this complexity and subtleness is likely what Oppen refers to when, many years later, he justifies the inclusion of the corrupted line from James, repeating the inversion and the misspelling, and introducing three commas into his own work as he does so. ‘Hemingway’s style’ – i.e., we infer, his much bolder, less subtle style – ‘the model of all left-wing writers of the thirties’ is, he says, ‘an essentially and incorrigibly right-wing style’ (he also connects Pound’s anti-Semitism with ‘the idea of being “macho”’)<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> *NCP*, p. 18.

<sup>149</sup> Bunting re-iterates this preference in a letter to Zukofsky: ‘The value of Pound’s preaching of Confucius does not lie in Confucius, whose wisdom seems to me to be mixed with the usual quantity of bunk, some of it quite as unpleasant as anything in St. Paul: but in the fact that Pound has not isolated a set of precepts but developed a *pervading stress on the immediate, the particular, the concrete*; distrust of abstractions; shrinking from even the suspicion of verbalism; from the puns and polyvalencies in which mystics delight. It is not unspeculative but sceptical. *It will build with facts, but declines to soar with inevitably unsteady words*’ (emphases added). ‘Open Letter to Louis Zukofsky’ in *Basil Bunting Man and Poet* ed. Carroll F. Terrell (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1980), p. 242.

<sup>150</sup> ‘Preface to *The Ambassadors*’, p. 322, p. 323.

<sup>151</sup> ‘Mary Oppen: ‘That book [the *Cantos*] also had the blacked out phrases and so on that Jay would not print—the unspeakable and anti-Semitic...’ George Oppen: ‘I think Pound was caught I the idea of being “macho” though the word didn’t exist at the time. He was going to be a pounding poet, the

whereas H James [*sic*], the very symbol of ‘snobbery’ to such writers, displayed a style and sensibility which made possible a political and social critique. In acknowledgement of this, I placed on the first page of *Discrete Series* the quotation from James: ‘Maude Blessingbourne, it was’ –and then the quotation, ending: ‘As if to see what, really, was going on’<sup>152</sup>

Oppen thus gives an account of the inclusion of the words from Henry James substantially different to the one suggested by Christensen (a ‘slight’; a ‘pastiche’) which I am following here. One can speculate that what Oppen is getting at, here, is the picture of James as a writer whose careful prose description of human and object world (his realism) allows a detailed, nuanced picture of society to emerge – ‘as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen’.<sup>153</sup> One cannot, on the other hand, determine whether Oppen meant that such a social laying bare was merely mooted as a possibility, by the inclusion of the line from James, or if he thought that it was actually realised in this poem or any other from *Discrete Series* (I cannot see much evidence that it is). On the other hand, there is a sense in which the idea of complexity echoes Brecht’s affirmation of the possibility of a realism, where (echoing Marx) ‘[t]o be a realist means: to discover the causal complexes of society / unmasking the dominant viewpoints as the viewpoints of the dominant groups [...] focusing on the concrete and allowing for abstractions.’<sup>154</sup> Only rather than endorsing Jamesian ‘style and sensibility’ this would give us a James against James. ‘Deep dissimulation’ of x, y, or z in or about an art-object would be quite counter to Brecht’s aesthetics, and that on display in the poems of *Discrete Series*.

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masculine poet.’ Burton Hatlen and Tom Mandel, ‘Poetry and Politics: a Conversation with George and Mary Oppen’ in *George Oppen: Man and Poet*, pp. 23-50, p. 26. The connection Oppen draws between Fascist politics and a masculine ideal of acting rather than thinking is shown to be correct if we consider the name of the French far right movement *Action Française* and the name of the journal of the British Union of Fascists, *Action*.

<sup>152</sup> Dennis Young, ‘Selections from George Oppen’s Daybook’, *The Iowa Review* 18.3 (Fall, 1988), 1-17, 10. Oppen wrote in a letter to L.S. Dembo that he had ‘argued, shortly after *Discrete* was printed, that James and not Hemingway was the useful model for “proletarian writers” — and realized, in the ensuing discussion [...] that I must stay away from left-wing “cultural workers”’. *Selected Letters*, p. 241.

<sup>153</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ [1917] *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber, 2004), p. 16.

<sup>154</sup> ‘Against Georg Lukács’ [1967] trans. Stuart Hood in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 68-85, p. 82. Brecht is echoing *The German Ideology* [1846/1932] trans. W. Lough: ‘The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force.’ (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974), p. 64.

The epistemological grounds for the critique of the final line

Of the world, weather-swept, with which  
one shares the century.

(or rather – since the preference for ‘confessed cement or no cement at all’ is already nascently epistemological – the *purely, non-literarily* epistemological grounds) would be an assertion of bad philosophical faith in the implicit but incomplete identification of essence. The difference between world and weather is implicitly metaphor for the difference between on the one hand what is essential – true by virtue of its revealed permanence – which the subject seems to have identified without naming, and on the other the ephemeral or metastatic: the weather, which is not given its dialectical due as that which makes possible the distinction (insofar as it does this distinguishing it remains conjoined to the essence from which it has been separated – ‘nothing transcends without that which it transcends’).<sup>155</sup> The bad faith of the identification is also evident in the self-undoing of its claim to totality: the distinction between permanent and transient is presented – especially in the manner of its searing revelation or *kairos* (visual fact suddenly transformed into unvoiced historical/ontological knowledge) – as itself permanent. But, having introduced the topos of weather and erosion, the poem invites the critical (if possibly literalist and thus anti-aesthetic) observation that the distinction is in fact transient and temporary; valid only for a duration determined by human life and observation. The ‘road’ and the other outdoor objects in the visual field are, from a longer (i.e. closer to permanent) perspective only that which has not yet been eroded; that they are ‘weather-swept’ asserts their permanence but also reminds us that they are only that which the ‘weather’ has not yet ‘swept’ away. Of another poem in the collection Nicholls writes that

There is a deliberate awkwardness in the writing which prevents us from ‘resolving’ the poem into a single image or emotion; this is indeed ‘the poet’s self among things’ rather than at a contemplative remove from them [...].<sup>156</sup>

And this is true of many of the poems in *Discrete Series*, but here at the outset there is very little awkwardness, the poem appears to resolve into a single act of resolution (of the difference between essential and non-essential), the presentation is precisely

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<sup>155</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 365.

<sup>156</sup> *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, p. 15.

of ‘contemplative remove’: observation of the weather from a sheltered, safe space is what allows the act of resolution, and the imprecision of the ontological result is evidence of the limited analytic freedom and limited freedom to range thematically we associate with ‘contemplation’. There is little (if any) evidence in the poem that suggests the final act of resolution – despite being an instance of the aesthetic sententiousness that according to Christensen and Nicholls Oppen avoids – is presented satirically or insincerely, as the voice from James (notwithstanding Oppen’s own justification) feels as if it might be.

As well as being susceptible to this modernist critique (the one Christensen implies it *fully* participates in after the close of the quotation marks), and to the anti-aesthetic, inhuman-duration one (which, insofar as the incorporation of what is elsewhere considered anti-aesthetic into aesthetic practice is a signature of modernism could also be described as modernist), the opening poem is also vulnerable to an *antimodernist*, political critique; one focused on what life-conditions and consciousness (political) are like during the anthropic duration (neither infinitely short/*kairotic* nor geological) in which the poem situates itself. Writing in the *New Masses* in September 1930 Michael Gold – the ‘literary commissar of the CPUSA’<sup>157</sup> of which Oppen would become a member in 1935/1936<sup>158</sup> – launched a polemical argument in favour of ‘proletarian realism’ which included, in passing, a Lukácsian attack on literary experiment, describing its ‘verbal acrobatics’ as ‘only another form of bourgeois idleness.’ At least part of this poem, in the reading provoked by Christensen, is not even *another* form, it is the original form and its ‘precious silly little agonies’ would be all the more ‘precious’ and ‘silly’ for being founded in boredom (dead emotion) rather than, as with James’s and Eliot’s incidents, in interpersonal drama (high emotion – significant to the participants, even if not to critics such as Gold). These agonies would, in Gold’s view, be reminiscent of Proust, ‘the master-masturbator of bourgeois literature’ (perhaps more of

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<sup>157</sup> Burton Hatlen ‘A Poetics of Marginality and Resistance: Objectivist Poets in Context’ in *The Objectivist Nexus: essays in cultural poetics* ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), pp. 37-55, p. 43.

<sup>158</sup> Lyn Hejinian cites 1935 as the date (‘Preliminary to a Close Reading of *Discrete Series*’, p. 51). Mary Oppen writes that that was the year the couple ‘decided to work with the Communist Party’ (*Meaning a Life*, p. 151). Eric Hoffman cites an FBI report recording them as joining, officially, in 1936. ‘A Poetry of Action: George Oppen and Communism’ *American Communist History* 6.1 (2007) 1-28, 7.

Musil).<sup>159</sup> Other poems in *Discrete Series* do fulfil some of the formal and political criteria Gold establishes: they have a strong (though not always explicit) ‘social theme’ enacted in ‘as few words as possible’, though neither they nor the opening poem are an answer to the call for ‘swift action, clear form, the direct line, cinema in words’. Many poems in the collection are concerned with a kind of precision akin to that which Gold calls for; aiming economically to describe a phenomenon or scene with a minimum of aestheticization:

Tug against the river—  
Motor turning, lights  
In the fast water off the bow wave:  
Passes slowly

and in so doing are concerned to ‘restimulate perception’.<sup>160</sup> In this instance the poem makes its readers look again at the phenomena of the boat as it goes about its work; how it is connected to the water and to us; the language we use to describe, or conceive of the phenomenon, and the available frames of reference for the presentation of a phenomenon (the boat moves fast enough to create a bow wave which remains static in relation to the boat, but slowly from the point of view of a distant observer). Neither the precision nor the awakening of perception, however, nor their readily extractable social content make them an answer to John Dos Passos’s call, in the wake of Sacco and Vanzetti, for writing ‘so fiery and accurate that it will sear through the pall of numb imbecility that we are again swaddled in after the few moments of sane awakening that followed the shock of the executions.’<sup>161</sup> Although three poems depict working-age men (at work, out of work and in the street, seen from a train) it almost seems redundant to observe that neither

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<sup>159</sup> This essay is cited in Daniel Aaron *Writers on the Left* [1961] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 208, and by Izenberg, p. 78. Oppen himself emphasizes the connection between indirect language in a poem which associates a range of refrigerators (and thus individual refrigerators) called ‘Frigidaire’ and onanism (*NCP* p. 7) I think this is a reference to real refrigerators and not to the use of the word in Pound’s ‘Homage to Sextus Propertius’.

<sup>160</sup> Connecting the political with the (apparently only) aesthetic Fredric Jameson describes the modernist ‘vocation of art to restimulate perception, to reconquer a freshness of experience back from the habituated and reified numbness of everyday life’ *Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 121.

<sup>161</sup> ‘Sacco and Vanzetti’, *New Masses* 3 (November 1927) 25. Militant anarchists (and Italian immigrants to the US) Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti had been executed on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August despite a confession by Celestino Madeiros and an international campaign for their freedom (‘Sacco and Vanzetti Put to Death Early This Morning’ *New York Times*, 23 August 1927). Failing to answer Dos Passos’s call for ‘sear[ing]’ words, I argue below that the presentation of objects in the poems can be read as an expression of ‘numb’ness or absence of feeling, if not imbecility.

the opening poem nor the poem which features the tug-boat are *about* Sacco and Vanzetti or the allied labour struggles in a less than thoroughly indirect way.

However the fuller version of Michael Gold's critique of art-works which show bourgeois subjects merely behaving in bourgeois settings – the critique for which 'bourgeois' as aesthetic style and content-epithet rather than strictly socio-economic designation of art's producers and consumers remains shorthand – is actually a composite of the literary/epistemological and the political; it relies on their interdependence.<sup>162</sup> It is that despite the acknowledged triumphs of just this kind of painting, drama, novel or poem, and despite the continuities between modernist works in these genres and their predecessors, the bourgeois work is always already internally incoherent in at least two ways. The first is that in its realist instantiations the represented world is taken for an accurate picture of the world – a representative, disinterested selection or a selection chosen for its 'human' interest rather than its ideological content, implicitly denying the historical and ideological construction of that which we are interested in and that which we consider to constitute 'natural' human interest – despite always being a picture of the world as its consumers would wish to see it. Whether or not these two coincide is – epistemologically if not politically – beside the point. Its critical potential and its self-reflection are in many cases extensive: we might think of the representation of conspicuously rich and detailed textiles from Rembrandt to Vuillard which disrupt the narrative work of the painting with destabilizing questions such as: what would a whole painting of this textile (i.e. one in which the textile filled the entire canvass) be like?<sup>163</sup> Is the textile

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<sup>162</sup> With regard to my use of the category 'bourgeois' as cover concept – it is beyond the scope of this thesis to give an account of the reasons for which literary critics are today reluctant to employ it. Some of those reasons are covered in the introduction to Franco Moretti's *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (London: Verso, 2013) where he notes that while 'capitalism is more powerful than ever [ ] its human embodiment seems to have vanished' and quotes Max Weber who in 1895 declared 'I am a member of the bourgeois class, feel myself to be such, and have been brought up on its opinions and ideals' (p. 1). My justification is thus simply historical – that it was a category of people, behaviours and objects to whose existence people in the period of these texts subscribed. Our contemporary wariness of it may be founded in historiographic carefulness which is suspicious of the term's capaciousness; its wide historical scope and its mixture of economic, social, political and intellectual elements (which refuse to be disentangled). Nevertheless the consequence of our wariness is anti-historical insofar as it denies, for example, that there was a context against which (and from within which) Flaubert could write his *Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues*, and means that we are embarrassed when confronted with declarations such as Weber's.

<sup>163</sup> I am thinking, in particular, of Rembrandt's *'De Staalmeeesters'* ('The Sampling Officials' or 'The Syndics of the Drapers' Guild') [1662] and Vuillard's *'The Reader'* [1896] (which seem to articulate these questions) as the beginning and end – markers of the historical possibility and impossibility – of bourgeois art.

or its representation the greater achievement? Does the painting resent its ancillary status as status symbol: vehicle for display of expensive material and as an engaging, skilful representation thus likely an expensive object itself? Would you, the viewer, like to touch the textile whose existence the painting offers the possibility of (you may not, unless you are its owner) or to touch the represented textile as represented (you may not, whatever your economic relation to it)? What is the difference between the knowledge and labour required to produce the textile, and that required to produce the painting? Can the textile be said to embody a judgement of any kind, or a sedimentation of a worldview, as the painting seems to?<sup>164</sup>

In celebratory-myopic fashion endemic to post-romantic aesthetic criticism we tend to focus on works such as these which demonstrate an exceptionally high level of critical and self-critical potential, works which are, insofar as they strongly manifest the qualities we define as valuable, by definition *unrepresentative*. But a performed claim to constitutive literarity, such as a poem, does not operate in relation only to the most exceptionally valid and problematic previous instances of such claims, but rather to all those claims which have or might have been considered sufficiently convincing, or merely plausible.<sup>165</sup> That is, the ‘conventions’ described by Michael Fried in relation to painting, those ‘which, at a particular moment in the history of the art, are capable of establishing [a] work's nontrivial identity as painting’<sup>166</sup> also exist in the literary field (as Oppen wrote, ‘who would write poetry if a poem had never been written?’)<sup>167</sup> and there too they are established by the aggregate of works,

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<sup>164</sup> According to Roger de Piles Rembrandt himself insisted on the differences between the work of the artisan – producer of textiles – and that of the artist: ‘*Et comme on lui reprochoit un jour la singularité de sa manière d’employer les couleurs qui rendoient les Tableaux raboteux* [rough, not harmonious]; *il répondit*, qu’il était Peintre, & non pas Teinturier.’ (emphasis added) *L’Abrégé de la vie des peintres, Avec des reflexions sur leur Ouvrages, Et un Traité du Peintre parfait* ... [1699] (Paris: Jacques Estienne, 1715), p. 424.

<sup>165</sup> My thinking here is again influenced by Professor Thierry de Duve and especially his *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp’s Passage from Painting to the Readymade* trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) where he writes of, Manet’s *Déjeuner sur l’Herbe*, that ‘whatever strategic pictorial innovation [it] contained addressed itself equally to both Salons: it is one and the same strategy that “desires” the refusal of the official Salon and participation in the Salon des Refusés.’, p. 27.

<sup>166</sup> ‘How Modernism Works: a Reply to T.J. Clark’ *Critical Inquiry* 9.1 Special Issue: *The Politics of Interpretation* 217-234, 227. He further notes that there is a feedback effect: ‘significant new work will inevitably transform our understanding of those prior conventions and moreover will invest the prior works themselves with a generative importance’ (*ibid.*). My argument – that unexceptional works also contribute to the establishment of these conventions – is in fact in opposition to Fried in the sense that for him the ‘essence’ of painting ‘is largely determined by the *vital* work of the recent past’ (*ibid.*, emphasis added).

<sup>167</sup> *Selected Letters*, p. 47.



exceptional and unexceptional. Because of the role of institutions (museums, universities, salons) which propagate this bias for the exceptional in the mediation of art and its conventions, the further the historical distance to the works which establish those conventions the more the exceptional will come to dominate (as regards the distant and genuinely fragmentary past the works which dominate may be those that survived for more-or-less arbitrary reasons). In the near past and the present, however, the aggregate of works which partly establishes the current version of those conventions will be truly aggregate, since it cannot yet be known which of the works recently produced/being produced will be elevated to representative status because of their exceptionality.<sup>168</sup> It is in large part in relation to *this* set of conventions – which includes within itself and is informed by all previous sets – that a work's claim is subtended (if this were not the case Pierre Menard's 'version' of *Don Quixote* would be merely plagiarism). It is thus fair when assessing the circumstances of aesthetic attention to ignore, or at least to temper the significance of the limit cases; to set aside the questions raised by Rembrandt and Vuillard, or indeed any 'masterwork' and to consider the objects which populate the *Salon* – and actual salons – as well as the *Salon des Refusés*.<sup>169</sup> We can thus legitimately describe the critical potential of bourgeois works as, in aggregate, always secondary and we can agree with the performed charge of works like Oppen's which offer a more thoroughgoing challenge: that bourgeois works challenge their consumers for the most part only in ways they would wish to be challenged.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Jeffrey Insko correctly notes that all 'contemporary' works are in truth 'historical' not only in the expected sense of belonging to a particular moment which is distinctive and will be able to be assigned to some or other historiographical era, but, literally speaking, from the near past, rather than from the present: 'In fact, isn't it the case that, strictly speaking, by the time it reaches its audience every work is a past work?' 'The Prehistory of Posthistoricism' in *The Limits of Literary Historicism* ed. Allen Dunn and Thomas F. Haddox (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011), pp. 105-123, p. 108.

<sup>169</sup> See note 164 – and this while granting the claim to the status of 'art' of the works in the *salon*, rather than following the tendency of recent cultural criticism to deny that status by eroding the boundary between a class of objects, texts or events thought of as 'art' (paintings, poems, plays) and a class of objects, texts and events not previously given such extensive attention (diary entries, notebooks, newspaper articles).

<sup>170</sup> This would not be the case for the realism prescribed by Lukács where the 'goal is to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society' – then to conceal them in the work such that we can 'observe the *whole* life in all its essential determinants.' 'Realism in the Balance' [1938] trans. Rodney Livingstone, *Aesthetics and Politics*, pp. 28-59, these references pp. 38-39. I nevertheless take the view that existing 'realism' is distinguished by a view of the relation between art and life which is more like George Eliot's than Lukács: art as 'the nearest thing to life and it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellowman, beyond the bounds of our personal lot' rather than a 'richer, more diverse, complex' and 'cunning' dialectic which 'firmly [...]

Many years after *Discrete Series*, in a passage from his daybooks, Oppen sounds frustrated at how the political half of this composite modernist/anti-bourgeois critique falls away; frustrated with artists who, he thinks, have forgotten that the term ‘bourgeois’ is a politico-economic signifier (i.e. a class of economic actors and their political wing) as well as shorthand for a bankrupt aesthetic epistemology:

I am tired of anti-bourgeois manifestos by people who don’t know what the word means or have deliberately forgotten. Bourgeois—the city man, the merchant and the manufacturer, the beneficiary of ‘free enterprise’. If they are anti-bourgeois, they want to terminate industrial production, or socialize production, or? or? They must mean something. Or they mean simply that they want to go their own way. Well, so do I. And I intend to do it. But that inconveniences the bourgeois very little, so far as I know.<sup>171</sup>

And there is no doubt that in the era of his return to poetry he no longer shared (if, outside of his poems, he ever had) Williams’ confidence about the role of poetry in establishing ‘an imaginable new social order’, as expressed in a review of *Discrete Series* where Oppen’s work is implicitly cited as an example of the kind of poetry by whose ‘sharp restriction to essentials, the seriousness of a new order is brought to realization’ (though we note that Williams does not think that writing or reading a poem will *itself* usher in the millennium of justice, but will rather model it formally by realizing its seriousness).<sup>172</sup> Nevertheless Oppen’s frustration, above, is entered in the daybooks between two other passages, one of which dates the entry to the time of the ‘March to Washington’ (August 28, 1963) and both of which mention LeRoi Jones (who had not yet adopted the name Amiri Baraka). Rather than a generalized statement of mistrust at the possibility that there might be any connection between poetry and the politico-economic system and how it is understood or misunderstood in a given historical moment, it should perhaps instead be read as a specific rejection of the position advocated by Jones/Baraka in ‘How You Sound’, his contribution to the ‘Statements on Poetics’ section of *The New American Poetry* (1960). In it Jones cites Pound and Williams as influences, and echoes Objectivism’s nominalist

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grasps hold of the living contradictions of life and society’. Eliot, ‘The Natural History of German Life’ [1856] in *Essays of George Eliot* ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 266-99, this reference p. 270, Lukács *Aesthetics and Politics* p. 39.

<sup>171</sup> from ‘Daybook II:IV’ in *Selected Prose, Daybooks and Papers*, p. 101.

<sup>172</sup> ‘The New Poetical Economy’ *Poetry* (July 1934) 220-225, 223. This is a distinction found in Hegel, for whom the ‘ideal world situation which, in distinction from prosaic actuality, art is called upon to present, constitutes [...] only spiritual existence in general and therefore only the possibility of individual configuration, *but not this configuration itself*.’ *Aesthetics* I, p. 197 (emphasis added).

rejection of previous forms: ‘I’m not interested in writing sonnets, sestinas or anything...only poems.’ But he goes on to reject the control implied in the Objectivist model of crafting an object, preferring instead, as Oppen disparagingly puts it, to ‘go his own way’ with open forms: ‘I *must* be completely free to do just what I want, in the poem. “All is permitted” [...] The only “recognizable tradition” a poet need follow is himself.’<sup>173</sup> In this heroic individualism Jones, who had been discharged from the army for suspected communism, echoes anti-communist emblem Howard Roark, the architect in Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead* who is expelled from architectural school for refusing to execute the historical stylistic exercises required of him (rather than write sonnets or sestinas he is required to design ‘a Tudor chapel’, ‘a French opera house’ and a ‘Renaissance villa’).<sup>174</sup> ‘I inherit nothing’, Roark declares, ‘I stand at the end of no tradition. I may, perhaps, stand at the beginning of one.’<sup>175</sup>

Or, if the passage is not specifically directed against Jones/Baraka and the danger of avowed leftists such as Jones accidentally adopting a heroic-individualist metastasis of the rejection of tradition which seems no different to a right-wing one, Oppen’s frustration in 1963 may be partly directed at what he now sees as the political naïveté of his former poetics: the poems of *Discrete Series* would then seem to him to be anti-bourgeois insofar as they take aim at bankrupt system of aesthetic epistemology but crucially lacking in an explicit attack on the existing political economy. In any case it remains open to us to believe in the possibility mooted by Proust and de Man, that ‘poets and novelists [...] including Sainte Beuve [...] write their main works “contre Sainte Beuve” ’ i.e. that literary works are not merely indexical reflections of the lives and professed beliefs of their authors and that a philosophical position deduced from or expressed or embodied in a poem or novel cannot always be gainsaid by a live speech act or biographical fact.<sup>176</sup> In fact we are methodologically

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<sup>173</sup> *The New American Poetry* ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1960), pp. 442-25.

<sup>174</sup> *The Fountainhead* [1943] (New York: Scribners, 1986), p. 10.

<sup>175</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>176</sup> *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 6. For Proust see *Contre Sainte-Beuve ; précédé de Pastiches et mélanges ; et suivi de Essais et articles* [first. pub. 1954] ed. Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Paris: Gallimard, 1971). T.J. Clark may be one of few critics writing today who hold this to be the case:

Of course I relish the fact that Clyfford Still supported McCarthy, or that Pollock was a “Goddamn Stalinist from start to finish” in much the same way that I like to know Manet was a frightful Gambettist and Renoir believed that “siding with the Jew Pissarro is

justified in believing this, in this instance, since, like I.A. Richards's experiments in practical criticism which divorced poems from their authorships, the idea of poems as objects – discrete things with their own qualities, potentials, paths of circulation, ability to persist – serves to isolate them from biographical facts about their producers and from the author's other speech acts which would, by an extension of the same logic, be considered other (discrete) objects.<sup>177</sup> Like titles, the idea of an author ties the text to an external system and mediates access to it in a messily *unobject-like* way – the author's name and reputation simultaneously part, and not part, of the object: we are always reading both *Romeo and Juliet* and also, as Baz Luhrmann's film version appeared to call it, *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*. We are also justified in reading the collection this way (and giving the practice of reading *contre Sainte Beuve* greater credence than the currently dominant mode of professional literary historicism suggests we should) practically; immanently, insofar as the objects in the poems which make up the rest of *Discrete Series* are of a type and are presented in such a way as to demonstrate the validity of the composite critique whose composite status Oppen here seems to regret: as we shall see they are an attempt to show the world not as the consumers of the art-object would wish to see it *but as it is*, and in bringing to light, in poems, the discrepancy between these two they assert that the work of poems which instead *confirm* the reader's pre-existing picture of the world and the modes by which that picture is constructed is thoroughly political.

The second way in which the bourgeois relation to art is internally incoherent does not depend on a distinction between unexceptional – uninterrogating and therefore uninterrogated works – and limit cases, and it escapes the kind of doubts Oppen expresses in the passage from his daybooks. It is reasonable to assume that, aside

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revolution". But I know my interest does not count for much in understanding what any of the four did as painters.

'In Defense of Abstract Expressionism' *October* 69 (Summer 1994) 22-48, 45.

<sup>177</sup> In *Practical Criticism* Richards simply states at the beginning '[t]he authorship of the poems was not revealed, and with rare exceptions it was not recognized' (p. 3). He does not justify or directly address what seems to me the major methodological fact of his study until his 'Summary', where he notes how productive it has proved, and how it has enabled a revision of hitherto existing interpretative practice: 'The attempt to read without this guidance [the authority of a poet's name] puts a strain upon us that we are little accustomed to. Within limits it is a salutary strain. We learn how much we are indebted to the work of other minds that have established the tradition at the same time that we become aware of its dangers. And we discover what a comparatively relaxed and inattentive activity our ordinary reading of established poetry is.' (p. 316).

from the opportunity it affords for expressing or supporting social distinctions and hierarchies, culture is (or, perhaps, was) amongst the highest bourgeois values precisely because the arts are a field of knowledge of the world and achievement in the world outside of the sphere of production and reproduction of the means of survival.<sup>178</sup> A psychoanalytic model might posit the valorization and enjoyment of a field of practice paradoxically distanced from brute reality and yet existing in – made of – brute reality (paint, words, pre-existing concepts), as a way of staging the contradiction of the owner or manager's real (non-aesthetically mediated) life which is both lived at some distance from the field, the factory and the pit, and yet also very closely connected to them, in terms of his control over them and the fact that his wealth, and indeed his continued existence, also depend on them: there is no value in owning a factory if the factories are not producing (even the value of the building as material will be severely diminished if the plants capable of processing it are not in use), nor is there much long term value even in money if the farms are not producing food. This contradiction still expresses, though, an aristocratic or utopian will to distance oneself from – even wholly to escape from – the sphere of work and industry; to organize something other than transformations and displacements of material arbitrarily determined by possibility and demand distantly mediating necessity; to enjoy the product of free, unalienated labour (the muse instead of the foreman directing the subject's efforts) and thus to have more direct and truer – because freer – contact with the world (albeit paradoxically mediated via a reflection on, or 'false' copy of, the world).<sup>179</sup> This contact would be closer and truer, too, because in comparison to the way any economic system mediates material necessity, a thought or reflection (on the world as on another thought) seems to be characterized by a very immediate necessity. *Forcing* oneself to think or believe something; to react cognitively in a certain way is intuitively, experientially

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<sup>178</sup> This is not an argument about the more general or transhistorical instinct to produce and consume objects in the category art (or to have such a category which covers the production, distribution and consumption of certain objects) – Hegel attempts such an argument and says that all forms of art 'bring to consciousness [...] the absolute' (*Aesthetics* I, p. 101) though it is hard to see how such a claim could be evidenced – but rather an argument about the particularly high value placed on art and art-knowledge in bourgeois culture: the specific 'inner necessity of such a need *in connection with the other realms of life and the world*' in that context (*ibid.*, p. 95, emphasis added).

<sup>179</sup> My analysis here is in communion with Bourdieu's in *Distinction* [1979] trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 2010) but concerns the wider question of why aesthetics should be one of the prime fields of social distinction at all (i.e. beyond the fact that consumer choices and formal/stylistic variation naturally afford the opportunity to communicate implicitly; to mark oneself as inside or outside a given socio-economic group).

incoherent, and while one might be able to train oneself to think a certain way about a certain phenomenon, once that process was complete those cognitive reactions would appear necessary and immediate; if they did not it would be evidence that one did not actually think *x* about *y*. But the consumption of this culture – proof that one is not a philistine – is the very definition of philistine in the sense of *not* in contact with the world (with some truer version of it): it is the act of one who, in Nietzsche's characterization

perceives around him nothing but needs identical with and views similar to his own; wherever he goes he is at once embraced by a bond of tacit conventions in regard to many things, especially in the realms of religion and art: this impressive homogeneity, this *tutti unisono* which no one commands but which is always ready to break forth, seduces him to the belief that a culture here holds sway.<sup>180</sup>

Looking up and out, to see the world made up of rain and road and glass is an attempt to escape from the homogeneity of cultural experience (reading, speaking, smoking); the act of one no-longer secure in the belief that 'a culture here holds sway', but the poem rests relatively secure in its (self-) assessment of the value and importance of its concluding perception, all doubts assuaged. For Nietzsche this dynamic of self-satisfaction, of doubts which are quickly assuaged, illustrated above in the figure of the philistine, is not just an unfortunate flaw in religion, art and other unnamed fields of human activity, nor a failing in the character of a small or large number of people. It is, rather, symptomatic of a fundamentally flawed way of understanding the world – of satisfying ourselves that we understand anything at all – which characterizes the use of our most important tools of understanding, including reason:

If someone hides something behind a bush, looks for it in the same place and then finds it there, his seeking and finding is nothing much to boast about; but this is exactly how things are as far as the seeking and finding of 'truth' within the territory of reason is concerned.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* [1873-76] ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 8. This passage is a key salvo in what Paul Tillich describes as Nietzsche's 'grand and tragic war against the spirit of his age; the spirit of bourgeois society.' 'Nietzsche and the Bourgeois Spirit', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 6.3 (June 1945) 307-309, 309.

<sup>181</sup> from 'On Truth and Lying in a Non-moral Sense' [1873] in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings* ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Spiers, trans. Ronald Spiers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 141-53, this reference p. 147.

and logic, which is

the attempt to comprehend the actual world by means of a scheme being posited by ourselves; more correctly, to make it formulable and calculable for us.<sup>182</sup>

Nietzsche's position in these statements is one of radical self-scepticism, or more precisely scepticism of schematics as – against their very concept of being a neutral, non-distorting representation of real distinctions and categories – founded in the self and not the world.<sup>183</sup> There is a temptation to pathologize, by individualizing, such positions in Nietzsche; to dehistoricize them (from the history of ideas as from material history) by chalking them up as the unique productions of an exceptional and dysfunctional psychology. This is partly because of the doubly aphoristic status of much of his philosophy – that a large part of it is written in the form of paratactic aphorisms, even if the aphorisms are often somewhat overlong (*Beyond Good and Evil; Human, All Too Human*) and that even in its more systematic instantiations it contains readily extractable aphorisms –, partly because there are sections with frankly untenable claims to philosophical (rather than historical or biographical) interest, like the section of *Beyond Good and Evil* on the badness of women's cooking,<sup>184</sup> and partly because of the biographical fact of his madness in late life.<sup>185</sup> This temptation is less strong when it comes to other philosophers: despite their numerical division which attest to a sense of logical arrangement and of progression, the units of the *Tractatus* are not always securely or any more than intimately connected to their neighbours in the sequence, but Wittgenstein does not suffer from a similar pathologization. There are passages in Kant's writing which are to the contemporary Western system of values similarly alien and exceptionable – for example in his early work on the use of the (hitherto only) mathematical concept of

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<sup>182</sup> *The Will to Power* §516 [1887], p. 280. This passage is discussed in Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture* [1991] (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 95.

<sup>183</sup> A further example of this position: 'We have arranged for ourselves a world in which we are able to live - by positing bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content; without these articles of faith no one could endure living! But that does not prove them. Life is not an argument; the conditions of life might include error.' §121 'Life Not an Argument' *The Gay Science* [1882] ed. Bernard Williams trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 117.

<sup>184</sup> §234

<sup>185</sup> In this sense we are in danger of treating Nietzsche no better than the visitors who paid his sister for a chance to see the spectacle of the mad old philosopher.

negative magnitudes in metaphysics, where he calculates the ratio of pleasure and displeasure in a mother who learns that, though her son fought bravely in battle, he was subsequently killed – but the temptation does not exist with those passages because the content of such passages is made secondary to their formal work by their status as staging points in an argument; the analysis of the bereaved woman's emotional make-up is merely an 'example' demonstrating the usefulness of a concept of negative magnitudes outside of mathematics; it merely asserts the validity of the transmigration.<sup>186</sup>

Against this temptation to individualize and thus to historicize out of philosophical history, with regard to Nietzsche, I note that there is a diametric contrast with Kant on this point: though Nietzsche does not present these positions as participating in a responsible and scholarly (i.e. more-or-less self-tracing) philosophical discursive relay with each other, let alone with Kant, they nevertheless constitute a response and a rejection of Kant's position on the same issue.<sup>187</sup> In some places at least Kant is explicitly comfortable with the self-positing aspect of reason. For example, implying that his discoveries about knowledge and its acquisition will be as universal and a-temporal as the laws discovered by Galileo and Torricelli, he specifically cites, as his precedent, that those physical scientists

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<sup>186</sup> 'Suppose that news is brought to a Spartan mother that her son has fought heroically [...] in battle. An agreeable feeling of pleasure takes possession of her soul. She is thereupon told that her son has died a glorious death in battle. This news diminishes her pleasure a great deal, and reduces it to a lower degree [...]. Let the pleasure which is produced by the news of his attested valour accordingly be = 4a; and let the pleasure that remains, once the displeasure produced by the announcement of his death has taken effect be = 3a; it follows that the displeasure is = a [...] and hence the value of the resulting balance of pleasure is  $4a - a = 3a$ .' 'Attempt to introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy' [1763] 2:180-181 *Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770* ed. and trans. David Walford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 219-220. This essay was written immediately after 'The only possible argument in support of a demonstration of the existence of God' [1763], commonly reduced to its Nietzschean short-title 'The Only Possible Argument'. I am grateful to Michelle Ty (University of California, Berkeley) for drawing my attention to this passage.

<sup>187</sup> Elsewhere Nietzsche does respond directly to Kant, for instance on the question of whether synthetic *a priori* judgements are possible, though he responds with another question: 'Why is the belief in such judgements necessary [sic]' *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* [1886] ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), §11, p. 13.



comprehended that reason has insight only into what it itself produces according to its own design; that it must take the lead with principles for its judgments according to constant laws and compel nature to answer its questions, rather than letting nature guide its movements by keeping reason, as it were, in leading-strings [...].<sup>188</sup>

This is the very basis of his self-described ‘Copernican turn’ wherein, in order to escape from the deadlocked ‘mere groping [...] among mere concepts’ that has been metaphysics up to that point, he suggests we

try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the requested possibility of an *a priori* cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us. This would be just like the first thoughts of Copernicus [...].<sup>189</sup>

All of which is to say that Nietzsche is not here as a proto-Modernist provocateur: his function is not para-literary, but properly philosophical (his provocations on the topic of the – for him bogus – propriety of philosophy notwithstanding). And despite Oppen’s political excoriation of unthinking assent to castigation of ‘bourgeois’ ideas or works, the critique of bourgeois art and its failure to produce or record contact with the world (even where that contact is its *raison d’être*), founded in a Nietzschean suspicion of the self-posed, is one which many of the poems in *Discrete Series* participate.

This critique – a version of it is expressed by the idea that the interpretative challenge posed by modernist art is designed to *épater* the *bourgeois* – may be a cliché, though no less valid or necessary for that. Indeed, if it is a cliché, it is not because it is very frequently articulated (it is partly this shorthand, the *lack* of fuller articulation, which infuriates Oppen), but, as with the description of the function of difficulty quoted above, because we understand so deeply that this challenge to the ‘bond[s] of tacit conventions’ is, contra Michael Gold, always at least potentially made by works which demand a surface hermeneutic (what is this work doing? why is it doing it? why is it refusing to display the required attributes of a ‘poem’?). This

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<sup>188</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason* ‘Preface to the Second Edition’ B xiii, p. 108-09. My use of ‘physical scientists’ as a distinction is slightly anachronistic since Kant himself wrote essays on physical dynamics, geology, geometry, and meteorology (see Martin Schönfeld, ‘Kant’s Philosophical Development’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*) though his successors like Hegel did not.

<sup>189</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason* B xvi, p. 110.

challenge is always potentially made, that is, by formally experimental work under modernism. With this understanding we understand also that the conventions supported by aesthetic production, reception and theorizing are not distinct from the conventions governing thought and the organization of the rest of society: they are the same. It is irrelevant, in this context, whether, as Raymond Williams puts it, ‘Modernism quickly lost its anti-bourgeois stance, and achieved comfortable integration into the new international capitalism’ – if it were not for the *potential* challenge there would be nothing for passages like these to be disappointed about, no countervailing thorn for them to describe the system accommodating and absorbing.<sup>190</sup> The poems of *Discrete Series* demand this surface hermeneutic. They ask those questions, and the potential epistemological critique of the self-positing is especially clear insofar as they also – within and as part of this interpretative challenge – stage a confrontation with physical objects in which the objects refuse to ‘conform to our cognition’ and in which, as in the following poem, objects are presented in problematic relationship to the totality:

Bolt  
In the frame  
Of the building——  
A ship  
Grounds  
Her immense keel  
[...] <sup>191</sup>

And which are *themselves* such objects: they arrest the process of consumption by which the reader first recognizes the poem as alien then absorbs it, pleased that it is ‘formulable and calculable’ for her:

[...]
   
Homogeneously automatic—a green capped
   
white is momentarily a half mile
   
out—
   
The shallow surface of the sea, this,
   
Numerously [...] <sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> *Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* [1989] (London: Verso, 2007), p. 35. As Adorno rather dogmatically puts it: ‘in spite of the summary verdicts passed on it everywhere by those who are politically interested, radical modern art is progressive, and this is true not merely of the techniques it has developed but of its truth content’. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 238.

<sup>191</sup> *NCP*, p. 26.

<sup>192</sup> from ‘Party on Shipboard’, *NCP*, p. 15.

These lines which present a process of perception in which a subject attempts to account for the waves; to make them formulable and calculable ('a half mile out') are challenging to the reader and they challenge themselves. In what sense is the kind of breaking wave known as a 'white' (which is actually green) 'homogeneously automatic'? Waves are, presumably, heterogeneous, each naturally occurring wave differing in shape from every other wave (though since the phenomenon is as old as the sea, there must be some non-trivial probability of a wave having occurred which was exactly similar to another). They are easily schematized by a wiggly line, but the homogeneity referred to here is the way they seem self-driven, how they appear to an observer without visible external cause. They appear, to defective human perceptive schematics to be homogeneous, i.e. uniform, but are not, and yet they are in the sense that their *genos* (race, stock, kin) implies common birth, i.e. a common set of originating phenomenon which they do in fact share. The individual wave is 'momentarily a half mile out' but by the time these considerations have got off the ground it is somewhere else, replaced by another or subsumed back into the undifferentiated sea. The process of perception is overtaken by reality and then cut off by – and this is rare in *Discrete Series* – a relatively fully achieved effect: a deadpan rejoinder that what (sea) waves have in common is that they are a phenomenon of the 'shallow surface of the sea'. Waves lend themselves, the poem seems to say, to aesthetic representation in a way that the 'surface of the sea' does not. They are thus implied to have been chosen as an 'object' for reasons which have more to do with the perceiving subject and what can be said about them (the ways in which they 'conform to our cognition') rather than because of any attention claim originating in the phenomenon itself. If we really wanted to know about them then rather than congratulating ourselves on our poetic consideration of them (or testing out a consideration which might end in acclamation), we might ask more difficult and less aesthetically rewarding questions about their depth (are they a phenomenon of the shallow surface? how shallow is the surface? how can the surface break?) and numerousness, and origin.

Some of the grounds for the critique of the opening poem here built out of Christensen's comments are much more concrete. They can be uncovered without reference to philosophy for as with the doubts concerning waves, above, they are immanent to the poem itself (as Adorno puts it: 'critique is not externally added to an

aesthetic experience, but is rather immanent to it') and once more the words misquoted from James are of central importance.<sup>193</sup> The line which is the summation of the knowledge gained by the subject in his or her ontological experience (and, excepting the possibility of satire, is the encapsulation of the knowledge we might gain from the poem)

Of the world, weather-swept, with which  
one shares the century.

is directly self-indicting, not only in terms of the aesthetic of the rest of the collection, but on the terms established in the poem itself. By 'self-indicting' I mean that it exhibits a dynamic akin to that diagnosed by Adorno in the kind of epistemology he characterizes as non-dialectical (immediately speaking, Husserl's) when he says that it 'is untrue according to the measure of scientificity which is its own', i.e. it establishes a founding position and procedure from first principles (position and procedure are equally legitimate and legitimate one another), it then applies the procedure and, in attempting to develop and support it, contradicts the founding position and thus undermines the procedure itself.<sup>194</sup> This is the case here insofar as the transposition of 'weather-swept' directly parallels the inversion in the misquoted line from James. Though this is certainly not the poetic orientation we can deduce either from *Discrete Series* as a whole or from Oppen and his Objectivist collaborators' contemporary writings, the parallel suggests a model of poetry as *only* fineness of expression: 'only' because this line is the summation of the poem's ambition, and because, as access point to the collection it appears to announce the kind of seeing and thinking – and the connection between the two – which is to be played out in the rest of the collection. Because of the frayed but not unbroken connection to James – to both the represented worlds and their modes of representation – this fineness of expression seems to reflect a fineness of mind which is offered as simultaneously product and evidence of a materially refined upbringing. The poem then, which as 'poem' invokes an idea of non-teleological operation (again, notwithstanding the contradiction that poems are still in our literary-critical vocabulary supposed to work via quite teleological effects), and which casts itself as

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<sup>193</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 353.

<sup>194</sup> *Against Epistemology*, p. 25.

vehicle for (ontological) knowledge appears, in the very harshest reading, somewhat akin to a ‘personal ad’:

If in keeping with bourgeois standards it is chalked up as a special merit that someone has feeling for nature—which is for the most part a moralistic narcissistic posturing as if to say: What a fine person I must be to enjoy myself with such gratitude—then the very next step is a ready response to such testimonies of impoverished experience as appear in ads in the personal column that claim “sensitivity to everything beautiful”.<sup>195</sup>

Which is to say that insofar as the final line is a claim to have preserved, reproduced and put to work (in the extraction of ontological knowledge) an experience of nature, it is an example of how ‘[n]atural beauty is ideology’ – and precisely the kind of bourgeois ideology the poem sought to escape – ‘where it serves to disguise mediatedness as immediacy’.<sup>196</sup> The claim of sensitivity to everything (‘the world [...] with which one shares the century’) reveals itself, perhaps predictably, insensitivity to everything, including the very particulars which are the basis of the claim.

I have described the relation between the two inversions as an ‘echo’, which suggests that the second iteration of a phenomenon is a diminished (and displaced, perhaps distorted) version of the first. But the amplitude of the second iteration – and thus the convincingness of its status as aesthetic conclusion to the poem, spoken in the voice of the poem rather than in ambiguous quotation – is actually substantially greater than the first, and this is due to the resonance, or its fulfilment of a possible pattern, whose possibility is established by the first iteration.<sup>197</sup> The concluding ‘knowledge’ is thus presented as the product of a revelatory, kairotic process (absence of intermediary stages) with contingently universal consequences (they apply either to all ‘with [whom] one shares the century’ or to all who share their century, whatever it is, with the object world, i.e. *all* in a very strong sense). This presentation is in contradiction with the inversion in the first line which, insofar as it is an attack on

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<sup>195</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 89.

<sup>196</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>197</sup> This is an ungainly description, but it is possible that our understanding of the governing dynamics of poems and poetry is distorted by the fact that we prefer to read and write readily available, universally comprehensible and thus more elegant formulations, e.g. those, like *echo*, borrowed from the description of the natural world, or like ‘parallel’ borrowed from basic mathematics (usually geometry rather than, say, algebra or statistics: no-one speaks of logarithmic relationships or Poisson distributions with regard to poetry).

that mode of expression, attacks it for being motivated and constructed with a social purpose, both of which characteristics disbar it from being either revelation or universal.

One way in which the presentation of the experience of nature in literature is always thoroughly mediated is by the many other such presentations, which may resemble the presentation at hand in either their tenor – the terms of reference and the outcome described (this could be emotional, intellectual, ontological) – or their vehicle (here the weather, of which there are not infinite varieties). Thus in considering the subject's consideration of 'rain falling, in the distance more slowly' alongside analogues outside of the poem itself – outside of the one, Maud Blessingbourne, that the poem itself supplies – we might think of the description which ends Joyce's 'The Dead', of

[...] snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.<sup>198</sup>

Here Gabriel (or the text's free-indirect-discourse strong narratorial focalization of Gabriel) matches the unnamed subject/speaker of Oppen's poem in the ontological quality of his reflection – the difference between being dead and alive rather than the (closely related) difference between being a subject and a thing – and in the avoidance of solecism (repetition of 'falling faintly': a poetic rather than social solecism) in his expression of it. Or we might equally think of the uncertain, lyric/constative (and yet certainly lyrical) passage in the otherwise dramatic and didactic Canto XLVI:

Snow fell. Or rain fell stolid, a wall of lines  
So that you could see where the air stopped open  
and where the rain fell beside it  
Or the snow fell beside it. [...]<sup>199</sup>

where the consequence of the aesthetic perception is less emphatically voiced but the structure of the perception is the same: a visual schematic for the reader focalized via a subject witnessing and describing it, the intra and extra-diegetic moment of revelation coinciding: as it is described happening *in* the text it is supposed to be

<sup>198</sup> 'The Dead' in *Dubliners* [1905/1914] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 225.

<sup>199</sup> *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, p. 231.

reproduced in the reader (though as before, at the very beginning of Canto I, Pound deploys a much stronger aural / prosodic effect than Oppen insofar as the line ending represents and reproduces the limit, or stop, between the section of seen sky in which the rain – ‘or the snow’ – falls and the section where the ‘air stop[s] open’). However the prosodic shift in Oppen’s poem (from iambic to spondee preponderance) has an equal formal claim to be the marker of when this moment of ‘vision’ and knowledge production actually happens, and it is not in the final line, but at ‘what really was going on’. Thus despite the aesthetic sententiousness, even ponderousness, of the final line which aims to convey that it represents a coincidence (in the mathematical sense) of perception (experiential and cognitive) and expression, the line also indicts itself in the sense that it returns us to an earlier point in the poem, and in the represented sequence, and casts itself as summary, rather than vehicle, of the moment of perception.<sup>200</sup>

Given parallels such as these to other, loosely contemporary, works we might register the end of the poem, taken as a whole, as an example of the trope which generated the homology: of attuned perception of natural phenomena, and the intercession of that moment of perception into another, usually every-day, sequence that might be represented, as in Joyce, or textual, as in Pound, or both, as in Oppen’s poem. The final line, in its generality (‘weather’, instead of rain or sleet or snow), might even be understood as not just an example *of* but a summarizing commentary *on* that trope. However because of its ‘echo’ of the word transposition, the final line functions not as contribution to the stock and commentary but as immanent condemnation of the trope, including of itself as example, because of how, in light of the transposition, lyric weather observation – the expression of an examination of mundane phenomena which functions as a transfigurative escape from the mundane (including the social) world – appears to require fineness of expression and the social content it brings with it. Via the social content the moment of perception and its expression are firmly rooted in – rather than interrupting – the everyday (the lived

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<sup>200</sup> In light of the fact that the poem presents an interpretation of what might be described as a ‘reverie’ (Maud’s) and a transmigration of that reverie into the world of the subjects of the poem, it is worth considering I.A. Richards assertion that ‘the idle hours of most lives are filled with reveries that are simply bad private poetry’ (*Practical Criticism*, p. 320). The sententiousness here consists in that the claim seems to me to be made that this particular subject’s reveries are, happily, *good* private poetry – worth making public.

experience and reproduction of the social, the economic). This is quite a powerful effect for a poem whose slightness persists: it seems initially slight, and continues to seem so. As Peter Middleton notes, Oppen's poems can feel 'thin [...] not just in quantity of pages, but also in scope and impact.'<sup>201</sup> But the process of submitting the work to what Adorno calls 'the work's own discipline' leads to submitting other works and even a widespread literary trope to that same discipline.<sup>202</sup>

If in this poem Oppen *is* following Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky and throwing James off of 'the Ship of Modernity', then in the final line he is in danger of throwing himself with him, insofar as in his 'echo' of the tone of naturalized-self-conscious-deliberation he has produced what he would later condemn as 'a "picture" intended for the delectation of the reader who may be imagined to admire the quaintness and ingenuity of the poet'; a poem in which the poet 'find[s] himself as a charming conversationalist.'<sup>203</sup> The conversation, in this instance, serves to convince the reader that 'a culture here holds sway'. The somewhat corrosive implication of the parallel is that the poem's interest in larger philosophical themes such as ontology, objecthood or materiality may, like the 'picture', also be a readerly expectation that the poem fulfils so as to convince the reader, or to allow her to convince herself, that 'a culture here holds sway' (here, in this thesis, and in other readings of the poem); that the Nietzschean-epistemological challenge to bourgeois modes of aesthetic production and engagement may only be a way of producing new and more refined Bourdieuan distinctions for readers and critics to dress themselves in: ways of reproducing those modes once they are no longer acceptable.<sup>204</sup> Such theoretical concern about the motivations and circumstances of our reading strategies may itself be a way of producing *still more refined* distinctions: distinguishing

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<sup>201</sup> Middleton is describing how the poems might have seemed to editors of 60s anthologies, but the point stands. 'Open Oppen: linguistic fragmentation and the poetic proposition' *Textual Practice* 24.4 (2010) 623-48, 625.

<sup>202</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 345.

<sup>203</sup> *Selected Letters*, p. 146. In the excoriating Adornian reading of the use of nature the poet here would be a conversationalist who seeks a fellow conversationalist, with GSOH, etc. for ends imputed to be sexual, social and economic rather than intellectual.

<sup>204</sup> Bourdieu's aim in *Distinction* – his work which reintegrates '“culture” in the restricted, normative sense of ordinary usage [...] into “culture in the broad, anthropological sense’ – is to desubliminate the 'social categories of aesthetic judgement' (emphasis added). His analysis of the 'economy of practices' of aesthetic judgement seeks to show how aesthetic judgements 'enable social oppositions to be expressed and experienced in a form conforming to the norms of expression of a specific field'. These references pp. 100, 97, 493-94.



ourselves socially (if not economically) by anticipating and refuting objections that our critical observations are surrogate social claims; anticipating and refuting objections that those anticipations and refutations are also super-surrogate social claims, and so on. Following Jonathan Culler's idea that the most ironic loci in fiction are those which *produce* ironies and destabilize the security of a reading rather than being most clearly and stably their seat, we might say that the poem is most strongly self-indicting in that it indicts our reflections on its procedures of self-indictment.<sup>205</sup>

And if on balance the poem *is* as much subject to these critiques as performance of them, this is one of the ways in which, though it has been called 'the real' preface to the collection, it is not a reliable indicator of the predominant moods and modes of expression in the poems of the rest of the collection.<sup>206</sup> In the poems that follow the challenge to the procedures of bourgeois aesthetic ideology tend to be presented in a much more direct and forceful way (the tendency falls short of becoming a rule, and the force is never as nakedly displayed as in the lines quoted above from Hugh MacDiarmid). The other ways in which this poem is exceptional include length and completeness of syntax, the inclusion of named psychological states ('sorrow'; 'boredom') and the way in which, via the *mise-en-abîme* of reading James / reading the poem it can be said to teach the reader how to use the poem. In the poem which begins:

Deaths everywhere——  
The world too short for trend is land——<sup>207</sup>

the reader is confronted with an object whose use is more radically in question. In spite of the generalized anti-utilitarian or anti-instrumentalist taboo on inquiring about 'uses' for individual works, or genres, or the super-genre of 'art' we are somewhat licensed to do so by the insistence that the Objectivist poem be thought of as an object, perhaps because of the word's second sense, emphasized in *objective*

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<sup>205</sup> 'To dismiss the sentence and our critical labours as futile and uninteresting does not deny irony because a sentence which so exercises us without yielding positive results is still, and precisely for that reason, highly ironic.' *Flaubert: the Uses of Uncertainty* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 188.

<sup>206</sup> Lyn Hejinian, 'Preliminary to a Close Reading of *Discrete Series*'. p. 48.

<sup>207</sup> *NCP*, p. 34.

and in Zukofsky's citation of the word's use in military terminology to mean 'that which is aimed at'.<sup>208</sup> Objects, in contradistinction to the unsynthesized manifold of the world (the experiential sense-data before its processing into objects), are that which we are already aimed at (because to know them is to have processed, i.e. aimed our attention at them), and once the object is grasped, since it cannot be consumed without remainder we 'carry' the momentum of that aim and attempt to direct the object at something else.

One of the questions the opening poem asks, but does not definitively answer, is whether, as object, it succeeds in avoiding resembling – and in our 'use' of it, even becoming – one of the objects which likely populate the room sketched in the poem: never truly 'aimed at' but rather taken for granted, not troubling processes of signification but rather put to use doing straightforward work of social signification in confirming to others as to the object's owners that *they are not philistines*. These might be finely crafted objects, like those celebrated in Bunting's poem 'The Word' (above), but they would be ones whose skilful production ultimately serves a self-congratulating social purpose in marking its users/owners as *not* craftsmen, *not* labourers. Or, if they are craftsmen and/or labourers, for instance poets, then it is by choice rather than economic necessity. This would be a difficulty for the poem given the impulse to escape the room; to have more meaningful contact with objects – and to go where expressions of that meaning are not in bad faith – that the poem expresses and celebrates. Of course, insofar as the poem provokes this question it escapes the condition of a decorative object intended to confirm to its owner that 'a culture here holds sway' – voicing such questions in more than 'rhetorical' fashion is not characteristic of bourgeois art-objects. Nevertheless it is hard to avoid the conclusion that, in comparison with the poems which follow it, and even as it participates in its own critique, the poem as a whole, via its final line, remains decorative.

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<sup>208</sup> 'Program: "Objectivists" 1931', *Poetry* 37.5 (February 1931) 268. The taboo is instinctive: we simply don't know what to do with a poem or a painting as securely as we do with a spoon or a shoe. It is inscribed in Kant's definition of aesthetic experience and the play of purposive and purposelessness, though of course critics as diverse as Nietzsche, Matthew Arnold, Bertolt Brecht have described the social orientation of poetry and drama in terms which can be translated, without too much violence, as 'uses'.

#### 1.4 Objects and the Opening Poem's True Prefatory Function

Once more, against the grain of Oppen's later assertion that the poem only '*happens* to be printed as the first poem in *Discrete Series*' (emphasis added) its position as access-point to a linear experience of the object which is the collection is, in light of these differences, worth considering.<sup>209</sup> A biographical reading might explain the poem's liminality as a legitimization of Oppen's upbringing which was bourgeois in the economic sense. Mary Oppen details how much of Oppen's family's time was consumed in making sure that they were dressing, travelling, speaking, behaving in a manner appropriate to their class, i.e. working hard to produce an effect of effortlessness and to make these modes of dress or speech appear natural, unaffected:<sup>210</sup>

Seville [Oppen's step-mother]'s day began with breakfast in bed, brought to her by a maid at nine-thirty. At ten the masseur arrived to give her a massage. She then discussed with her maid the clothes she would wear that day. She returned to bed to conduct the business of the house: dinner invitations, engagements of all sorts arranged by telephone, interviews with the cook and housekeeper concerning the dinner that would be served to a full table of guests almost every night, and a talk with the gardener if necessary'.

The continuities between the Jamesian gesture/language complex and its critique would then constitute a defensive assertion that the radical poetics which emerge more strongly in other poems in *Discrete Series* are not undermined by that background; the inclusion of bourgeois idleness would then be a pre-emptive defence against Gold's accusations of bourgeois idleness. And, in fact, its distinctive failure to set the tone for the rest of the collection makes it a paradoxically 'good' preface for a 'discrete' group of works: Oppen glossed the title in contradistinction from 'a mathematical series [...] in which each term is derived from the preceding term by a rule', suggesting that each term (i.e. poem) would be self-derived.<sup>211</sup> And yet like them the first poem develops a distinctive complexity as an object for interpretation, as we have already seen via its thorough-going immanent self-critique. And alongside the process of self-indictment via the misquoted line from

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<sup>209</sup> See n.77, above.

<sup>210</sup> *Meaning a Life*, p. 74.

<sup>211</sup> Dembo, 'The "Objectivist" Poet: Four Interviews' 161.

James, as in many of the other poems the foregrounding and forestalling of interpretative strategies also goes via the physical objects presented.

Two dissenting objects in the poem can be seen as also making the critique of the incompleteness of ‘the knowledge’ acquired in the diegesis of the poem, and once more the method is immanent rather than external. They are, in a sense, the only ‘objects’ (discrete, tangible things) in the poem: ‘road’ and ‘glass’. The ‘road’ is ‘clear’ for the room-bound window-gazer in the sense of empty of cars or other traffic, but it is also ‘clear’ in that it is seen distinctly and this clarity of perception is transferred to the ontological from the literal (the minimally symbolic) gaze.

However it is, importantly, a ‘road’ rather than a street: not a public thoroughway but rather an extension of the house – ‘clear *from* her’. This quietly suggests the road to be suburban, if the house is really at the end of it, and betrays a class anxiety about property and status. The kinds of houses which have roads leading directly to and from them are, in the period, in the English speaking world, either a) farmsteads, which would be out of keeping with Oppen’s experience and with the life-world represented in this poem – for example by ‘reading, speaking, smoking’ or by the non-threatening, distanced character of the weather – and in the rest of the collection, or b) owned by aristocratic (land-owning) members of society, or c) owned by means-of-production-owning captains of industry imitating them. And if the road and house are *suburban*, it is because the wealth that supports the ‘reading, speaking, smoking’ and the ontological reflection which follow from it is the product of cities (and modern cities, including their suburbs, are likewise the product of that mode of production). The poem’s concluding perception could be described as a kind of late pastoral (it rains, of course, in cities, but the visual schematic distinction relies on – sets up – a vista not usually available in the foreshortened field of industrial city vision) and thus turns its back on the aesthetic potential of the industrial world which the poems that follow investigate. Or, even if we find that such fleshing-out of the story-world of the poem – the situation of the house in relation to an unmentioned city, the economic position of its owners and inhabitants and so on – is unwarranted by the relatively spare presentation of objects and individuals, the road presents a problem in that in failing to give a dual perspective of the road leading both to and from the house (as all roads do), or even an acknowledgement of the partiality of the single view (and even if that failure is common in non-literary life), the

subject/viewer nevertheless implicitly makes a possession of the road. Either way this undermines and limits the sense of ‘sharing’: ‘one’ shares the century with the world; this realisation and its ineffable content is the product of contemplation of the road, but the road goes on to remind us of the incompleteness of the contemplation, that one also shares the century with strangers who are for the moment excluded from the subject’s vision. The ontological focus of the first poem thus misses, and shows itself to miss, the category of the social which is so strong an aspect of other poems in the collection.

The ‘glass’ further disrupts the account of successful knowledge acquisition. A thematic account of the poem might readily understand the ‘window-glass’ as merely empty synecdochic circumlocution for ‘window’; a way to avoid the repetition which would result if the synecdoche were absent. The framing-function of the window is what allows the poem’s subject (via Maud/e) to do the visual schematizing; to make the clear distinction between road and rain which, given an axial turn, is spur for consideration of the distinction between self and world; the ontological gap which is, the poem claims, bridged by recognition of ‘sharing’. The perspectival report of the rain falling (that is; appearing to fall) more slowly in the distance – this is the perception in which Christensen finds the poem is wholly invested – extends this schematizing into three dimensions, and invokes the sense of window-as-painting. The window is thus a condition for the operation which is the argument of the poem, but the window as (only) ‘window’ fails to give an account of its centrality. As I have argued above, the character of the thought that is the product of the poem is conveyed as revelatory: the product of (and interruption of) everyday activity and seeing (albeit in particular circumstances and by particular people), rather than deliberative projection or construction. In this sense the window deletes itself from the aesthetic schema, and, insofar as it is a relatively common domestic architectural feature it denies its function – how else, we might ask, could a subject who finds him or herself indoors see the weather conditions which are material for the poem? However in naming the ‘glass’ rather than just the window the poem insists that we think about the conditions of such thinking, and the degree to which the upshot is self-positing: we are reminded at once of the plane in which the visual field exists in painting, where the elements are arranged and the painting constructed only by the intervention of the painter, and of the plane in which the content of the

subject's 'vision' is likewise organized and elevated into ontological signification. And via the repetition of 'window' and the emphasis on 'glass' we are reminded, too, of the frame (the other part of the glass/frame pair which is a necessary condition of 'window') which marks the limit between the part of the world organised by the painter, even if the (representational) painting makes a claim that it is a selection which preserves part of the un-organised world; as if it were a window. This is to say that the painting is itself an *object* rather than a portal,<sup>212</sup> and should 'affect the mind as such'. Rather than joining the gazing-subject in looking only *through* the window, we are also required to look *at* its glass, just as we were required to look at words which are the medium of the poem's construction, in particular the detailed structure and changed function of the extract from James. Finally – once again undermining the claim of successful/authentic/unmediated contact with the world – the glass also emphasizes the insulated, cocooned, even anaesthetized atmosphere of the poem: where the functions associated with 'window' are the transmigration of light (and, if open, air), the glass emphasizes the window's function as barrier.

If the poem's relationship to James's novels confirms Adorno's observation that 'works are also critics of one another',<sup>213</sup> the way in which the two objects

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<sup>212</sup> This is essentially the same argument Clement Greenberg makes in 'Abstract, Representational and so forth' and 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture' [both 1948] collected in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965). It was also made by William Carlos Williams, at mid-century:

Alanson Hartpence [...] had one of the gallery's best patrons there looking at a picture. The estimable lady admired one of the paintings and seemed about to buy it-or at least she was leaning that way. But Mr. Hartpence, she said, what is all this down here in the left-hand lower corner? (I have told this story often but it bears repeating.) That, said Hartpence, leaning closer to inspect the place, that, Madame he said, straightening and looking at her, that is paint.

He lost the sale.

But that is the exact place where for us the first virus bit in. That is the exact place where for us modern art began. For that is the essence of Cézanne, the first break in the medieval defences—and the old walls started to crumble. It is exactly there that we begin to say that it is no longer what you paint or what you write about that counts but how you do it: how you lay on the pigment, how you place the words to make a picture or a poem.

*A Recognizable Image*, p. 218.

<sup>213</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 45: 'The truth content of art-works is fused with their critical content. That is why works are also critics of one another. This, not the historical continuity of their dependencies, binds artworks to one another; [...] the unity of the history of art is the dialectical figure of determinate negation.' This observation is itself a diminution in intensity of Friedrich Schlegel's claim that '[p]oetry can *only* be criticized by way of poetry'. *Critical Fragments* 117 (emphasis added). *Lucinde and the Fragments*, p. 157.

undermine the unified reading of the poem – even as they also contribute to it – illustrates his conception of the ‘immanent critique of individual works’.<sup>214</sup> Here ‘immanent’ means not just that the terms of the critique are supplied by the work, or that the commentary includes critical inhabitation of the ideological position expressed or assumed therein, but that the critique follows from – is a (paradoxically) continuous part of – the experience of the object: that works are critics of themselves. This internal criticism, and indeed the identification of ‘form’ as the element ‘through which artworks appear self-critical’<sup>215</sup> (e.g. the echoed transposition, or ‘window-glass’ in place of ‘window’) was recognized in Objectivist accounts of poetic possibility insofar as it can be considered an example of the constructivist aspect of *Discrete Series* William Carlos Williams highlights in his review of the collection. He notes how, at its best, a poem ‘compel[s] recognition of its mechanical structure’ (though with regard to the first poem we might wish to temper the strength of ‘compel’).<sup>216</sup> That is, with regard to both the objects and the echo between the two word-order reversals we are witness to the poem, as ‘machine’, working, and also to the undoing or dismantling of its operation. We are given a dialectical view of both product and process (which is itself the product), or as Adorno puts it, ‘the result of the process and the process itself at a standstill’.<sup>217</sup> In his review Williams also gives us a model of his model work which will be

first and last a poem facing as it must the dialectical necessities of its day.<sup>218</sup>

And it is this notion of dialectical temporality which most deeply justifies the prefatory position of the first poem. It demonstrates that while the poetic of the poems which follow is a new and necessary corrective to the Jamesian world-view, they are not to be understood via the metaphysically outlandish – even theological – notion of pure historical rupture, even if rupture is a model of aesthetics and the production of ontological knowledge endorsed, in its kairotic structure, by the poem itself. The ‘boredom’ which the first poem seeks to break out of – but also

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<sup>214</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 396.

<sup>215</sup> *ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>216</sup> ‘The New Poetical Economy’ *Poetry* 44.4 (July 1934) 220-225, 221.

<sup>217</sup> Williams is quite literal in his mechanical analogies, elsewhere making two ‘bald’ statements: ‘There’s nothing sentimental about a machine, and: A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words.’ ‘Introduction’ to *The Wedge* [1944] in *Collected Poems Vol II, 1939-1962* ed. Christopher MacGowan (London: Paladin, 1991), pp. 53-5, p. 54. For Adorno see n.39, above.

<sup>218</sup> ‘The New Poetical Economy’ 223-24.

dialectically acknowledges as the condition of the breaking out – is presented in three ways. Firstly as an aspect of individual or joint psychology; joint because its recognition is the product of a conversation and shared social and personal milieu, and individual because the poem asserts that the transformation of ‘knowledge’ as experience (of boredom) to knowledge qua knowledge (of the world) requires the intervention of a lyric subject capable of producing aesthetic particularities such as ‘weather-swept’. It is secondly, as I have outlined, presented as a product of localized social and economic circumstance; it is not the boredom of the dole-queue or the imprisoned. The third – and most important – context for the boredom is historical: the poem not only a personal micro-history of a moment of revelation; of vague thought precipitating into pointed expression (if perhaps still ultimately vague in terms of content), but also a record of historical circumstance on the widest scale. As Jameson notes, it is

only in the most completely humanized environment, the one the most fully and obviously the end product of human labour, production, and transformation, that life becomes meaningless, and that existential despair first appears as such in direct proportion to the elimination of nature, the non- or anti-human, to the increasing rollback of everything that threatens human life and the prospect of a well-nigh limitless control over the external universe.<sup>219</sup>

The poem is a record of the way in which reading, speaking, smoking, staring produce a desire for contact with something ‘non- or anti-human’; something definitively not self-positing. It is in this way that the opening poem gives the lie to Herman Spector’s contemporary assertion that Objectivism (he is reviewing a poem by Reznikoff) is ‘not co-ordinated in any way with a dialectical comprehension of the life-process’.<sup>220</sup> But it is in the poems which follow that the desire for contact with something ‘non- or anti-human’ – for an experience of the rigorous alterity of the object – is not just recorded but pursued. The moment of experience which is

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<sup>219</sup> *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act* [1981] (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 240-241. Jameson’s observation is a sympathetic voicing of historical experience (it *appears* that existential despair ‘only’ appears in the most ‘humanized environment’) rather than a historical truth-claim (such despair really does ‘only’ appear in the industrialized world). This can be shown by how expressions of the sentiment that life is meaningless – ‘a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing’ – considerably predate the industrial era (though since the world has tended to become more humanized rather than less almost every era is, in its own eyes, the ‘most’ humanized). My thanks to Professor Keston Sutherland for highlighting the relevance of the quotation from *Macbeth*.

<sup>220</sup> Homberger ‘George Oppen and the Culture of the American Left’, p. 190.



glossed-over in ‘the world, weather-swept’ is what the poems I read in the following chapter freeze and expand upon.

## Chapter 2: Industrial Objects and Industrial Perception

*If the world is matter, it is ~~not~~ impenetrable absolutely. The recognition of impenetrability houses the hope of intelligibility (Oppen).*<sup>221</sup>

### 2.1 Uniform Impenetrable Surfaces (a Prehistory of Modernist Hardness)

What are these ‘certain kinds of objects’ which populate *Discrete Series*, and which provoke Oppen’s sense of their ‘greater reality’? Here is a selection:

‘The red globe’            ‘the quiet / stone floor’            the ‘car’  
                                  the ‘sphere’ on which ‘she walks’    ‘water in a glass’  
                          the ‘Funnels raked aft’            the ‘paving’            ‘the curb’  
 the ‘wall’                    the ‘deck’ on which ‘sun / Slants dry light’  
                          ‘the lens’                    the ‘Closed car—closed in glass’  
                          the ‘Levers in the steam-shovel cab’  
 ‘the asphalt edge / Loose on the plateau’            ‘the glass of windows’  
                          ‘The shore: here’            ‘The cannon of that day’  
 ‘the cobbles’            the ‘Bolt’            the ‘frame / Of the building’  
                          the ‘immense keel’            ‘A stone’            ‘the fibre of this tree’  
 ‘the roads’                    the ‘houses and lamp-posts’            ‘a train’  
                          the ‘separate hard grooves’            the ‘elbow on a car-edge’  
 ‘the elevated posts’    the ‘rope on the steel deck’            ‘the mouths, / Rims’

The objects above – most of the objects in the collection – have various properties in common. Not all of them have all of the properties, but most of them have most of them. In aggregate, then, they are simple, human-scale, tangible, inorganic, non-mimetic, manufactured, smooth-surfaced and solid. The primary property I consider

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<sup>221</sup> Daybook II:IV, *Selected Prose*, p. 108.

– that which I consider to be their primary property – is their hardness; their stubborn or resistant materiality. Many of them – the stone floor, the steel deck, the glass in which the car is closed, the lens – present a special kind of hardness in the form of their uniform, homogenous, impenetrable surfaces. In this sense they respond to Zukofsky's 'Program: "Objectivists" 1931', the earliest published description of what Objectivism might entail:

*An Objective: (Optics) —The lens bringing the rays from the object to a focus. (Military use) —That which is aimed at. (Use extended to poetry) — Desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars.*<sup>222</sup>

Their homogenous surfaces mean that if the poet's function included 'bringing the rays from the object to a focus' it would be somewhat redundant insofar as the surfaces of these objects are always already in focus – there is no depth of field from which a single focal point, at the expense of any others, could be chosen. Of course, the extent or outline of these surfaces could still be said to be blurred, and the objects thus *unfocused*, if they were presented in such a way as to require resolution into a correct identification, by the reader, of the object which these surfaces combine to create. But they are, on the whole, named rather than coyly described and it seems wrong to describe the reader as 'recognizing' or 'identifying' the words and the objects represented by the words 'rope', 'cobbles' or 'lamp-posts' (though this will not always be the case: we can speculate that since we live in an era of tarmac road-surfaces, and since this era looks likely to persist, the word 'cobbles' will one day set off a process of hermeneutic identification or require use of esoteric knowledge and processual, rather than instantaneous, recognition). With the exception of the 'Civil war photo' which shows a 'Man in the field / In silk hat', and the postcard whose representational content we cannot know, they are not – unlike Keats' urn or Homer's (Achilles') shield – themselves representational objects.<sup>223</sup> There is, then, no further hermeneutic work to do; no 're'construction or working out of what is happening on the shield or urn, and the objects presented are present via relatively

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<sup>222</sup> *Poetry* 37.5 (February 1931) 268.

<sup>223</sup> *NCP*, pp. 21, 30. The poem beginning 'Fragonard' invokes his paintings but does not present any particular one of them, instead generalising them and invoking their atmosphere and commonplaces: 'Your spiral women / By a fountain' (p. 27). The 'postcard' is an interesting example insofar as it is presented *stripped* of representational content, the emphasis instead on its function as an object to be bought and sold.

direct ekphrasis. They are thus, in their uniformness as in their contentlessness, also a response to Pound's earlier call for 'direct treatment of the thing' for these are things which, in their refusal of depth, pattern, coloration or other possible formal complication among which a poet could establish a ground at the expense of another part of the object, and in their relatively direct 'naming', cannot but be 'treated' – or at least, approached – directly.

In terms of their surface uniformity, and their hardness to which that uniformity is causally connected – glass and polished steel are plain when they are undisguised; functional rather than decorative, so uniformity is in a sense an expression of the production processes which give rise to their hardness – this aesthetic orientation signals an end to the mode of

Glory be to God for dappled things –  
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow  
[...]<sup>224</sup>

and its organicist object-panegyric which is explicitly-or-implicitly humanist. This orientation is humanist in that it celebrates of the aesthetic object or revealed-to-be-aesthetic object *as* (i.e. because it is, or insofar as it displays itself as) the product of processes that are recognizably human, traceable to an individual subjectivity, with implicit accompanying pathos that the object and the traces of the creator persist in the absence or anonymity of its creator.<sup>225</sup> This is the very opposite of the will to experience something 'non- or anti-human'. Hopkins' poem alloys this mode of celebration of artifice (in the sense of 'having-been-created' rather than 'disassembling'; doing away with the Platonic assertion of the identity of the two meanings) as distinctively human with the celebration of the world as *God's* artwork,<sup>226</sup> and he does so without assigning priority such that the reader can say with

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<sup>224</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Pied Beauty' [1877/1918] *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* ed. W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 69-70.

<sup>225</sup> It would be possible to make an argument that the mode of aesthetic attention I am describing in *Discrete Series* should be seen as a continuation of the Hopkins mode insofar as it too is a recognition (rather than celebration) of the connection to the history of production of objects but for me this would be a homological stretch too far, for reasons to do with a) theology and b) the role of human agency in industrial production, as I discuss below.

<sup>226</sup> [...]  
All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;

real confidence that one side of the equivalence is handmaiden to the other. The poem thus attempts to create a self-generating upwards spiral (a figure which might itself have theological intent): man's dappled work, including the poem itself, is celebrated, but falls short, not least in scale, of God's dappled work (one side of the spiral is lower than the other, as it must be) which, however, elevates man's work ('And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.') in the association. This organicist orientation – to which the industrial surfaces treated in the poems of *Discrete Series* would have been anathema – is given fuller theoretical articulation in Ruskin, where he advises us to

accept this for a universal law, that neither architecture nor any other noble work of man can be good unless it be imperfect [...].<sup>227</sup>

For Ruskin and, implicitly, for Hopkins

nothing that lives is, or can be, rigidly perfect; part of it is decaying, part nascent [...] in all things that live there are certain irregularities and deficiencies which are not only signs of life, but sources of beauty.<sup>228</sup>

In forming an assessment of the function of hard objects in *Discrete Series* it is worth noting that in light of this Victorian (neo-Gothic) worldview which equates imperfection with 'signs of life', and thus regularity and perfection with death, the strain of thinking that connects modernist interest *in* and production *of* uniform hard surfaces with an individual or collective death-drive – notwithstanding that this is a strain of thinking that exists within modernism itself, e.g. in Gaudier-Brzeska's contributions to *Blast*<sup>229</sup> – comes to seem less a reactive analysis of, and

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He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
Praise him.

However this emphasis on natural artifice is not necessarily theistic, and can be rather deistic or pantheistic as in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* [1855]:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars,  
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,  
And the tree-toad is a chef-d'oeuvre for the highest,  
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven.  
[...]

*Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), p. 57.

<sup>227</sup> from 'The Nature of Gothic' in *The Stones of Venice* Vol II [1853]. *The Genius of John Ruskin: Selections from his Writings* ed. John D. Rosenberg (London: George Allen & Unwin 1964) pp. 170-195, p. 184.

<sup>228</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> He embraces the aesthetic of uniform hard surfaces: 'I SHALL DERIVE MY EMOTIONS SOLELY FROM THE ARRANGEMENT OF SURFACES, I shall present my emotions by the ARRANGEMENT OF MY SURFACES, THE PLANES AND LINES BY WHICH THEY ARE

engagement with, modernism (its works and their worldview) than a defensive continuation of pre-modernist aesthetic, philosophical and theological values. This strain of thinking is also a kind of un-analytic ‘picture-thinking’ in the sense that some uniform hard surfaces – for instance those of the laboratory, the hospital or the kitchen – may be associated with death but concretely extend life, through their ability to be cleaned, to suppress the spread of bacteria, to isolate biochemically active substances and prepare accurate doses of medicinal compounds etc. So while the presentation of objects in the collection and the choice of objects both involve inertness – and thus, associatively, deadness (rather than liveliness) – it does not follow that this should be seen as a pathological or self-destructive trait. It is also worth noting, with regard to the possible association of resistant material with death, that the opposite of life, mutability, and penetrability, even remaining within 19<sup>th</sup> century English literature, was not always death. The speaker of Shelley’s ‘Mont Blanc’ agrees with the commonplace equation of life with change.<sup>230</sup>

The works and ways of man, their death and birth,  
And that of him and all that his may be;  
All things that move and breathe with toil and sound  
Are born and die; revolve, subside, and swell.

Revolving, subsiding, swelling – things pertaining to life are never still. But in that poem the things placed in opposition to human life and change, things which are distinctively still, are said to do important work, if one pays attention to them:

Power dwells apart in its tranquillity,  
Remote, serene, and inaccessible:

(the industrial objects in *Discrete Series* which offer a similar experience of tranquil power are much more accessible; to be found in many large cities)

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DEFINED’ and also the deaths that the war would bring about (including, shortly after this was written, his own): ‘THIS PALTRY MECHANISM, WHICH SERVES AS A PURGE TO OVERNUMEROUS HUMANITY. THIS WAR IS A GREAT REMEDY. IN THE INDIVIDUAL IT KILLS ARROGANCE, SELF-ESTEEM, PRIDE. IT TAKES AWAY FROM THE MASSES NUMBERS UPON NUMBERS OF UNIMPORTANT UNITS, WHOSE ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES BECOME NOXIOUS AS THE RECENT TRADE CRISES HAVE SHOWN US’. ‘Vortex Gaudier Brzeska (written from the trenches)’ *Blast* ‘War Number’ (July 1915) 33-4, 34, 33.

<sup>230</sup> The refusal of the implied equation of perfection/stasis with death is likely the product of the visit to the glacier after which ‘Mont Blanc’ was written, and the experience of a scene in which, though frozen (literally made of ice) ‘everything changes, and is in motion [...] it breaks and bursts forever’. *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour* (London: T. Hookham Jr., 1817), pp. 166-67.

And *this*, the naked countenance of earth,  
 On which I gaze, even these primeval mountains  
 Teach the adverting mind.<sup>231</sup>

The teaching that this same ‘countenance’ – the ‘great Mountain’ – precisely because of its enduring, inhuman qualities is to do (Shelley hopes) is world-changing political work (i.e. work affecting human lived experience): the function of its ‘voice’ is

[...] to repeal  
 Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood  
 By all, but which the wise, and great, and good  
 Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.

Interpreting, or making felt, or deeply feeling then – acts which Hopkins and Ruskin would likely agree to be literary or aesthetic acts, even if they would condemn the aims (certainly the atheistic ones) to which they are here put – are not only realizable in the topos of the lively/dying, dappled, penetrable, or imperfect.

The same fundamental understanding as in Hopkins is at work, though without the upward spiral dynamic, in the instances of the weather in the opening poem – this is another way in which that poem is only a complex and unfaithful preface to the collection – and in the examples from Joyce and Pound. There, within the diegesis, the (notionally unrepresented, real) landscape is transformed, by forces outside of human agency (climate), in such a way as to appear like a monumental-scale aesthetic representation. As with the ‘couple-coloured’ skies, the things represented in those texts – a) that which, in ‘The Dead’ (Dublin/Ireland/all of humanity) is about to be covered in snow (i.e. painted white); b) the divided skies in Oppen’s

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<sup>231</sup> P.B. Shelley, ‘Mont Blanc: Lines written above the Vale of Chamouni’ [1817] *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour*, pp. 175-83. Shelley said of the poem that it ‘rests its claim to approbation on an attempt to imitate the untameable wildness and *inaccessible solemnity*’ (emphasis added), i.e. not just far away; tiring, expensive or dangerous to reach but also an object resistant to approach and engagement, which qualities, in proto-modernist fashion, the poem attempts to ‘imitate’. “Preface”, *ibid.*, p. vi. Despite the claims here and in ‘Mont Blanc’ for the importance of geographical inaccessibility, he (somewhat satirically) notes how these scenes – like the objects in an early 20<sup>th</sup> century city – ‘are now so familiar to our countrymen’, p. iii – satirical because though the alps may be familiar to a high proportion of young people of sufficient wealth for whom they have become a popular destination, no longer exotic, that group makes up a tiny proportion of his countrymen, and further because even those people, it is implied, are not awe-struck or if they are it quickly subsides, and the mountain which speaks, it is claimed, to Shelley, becomes naturalized and becomes an everyday object for them.

opening poem and c) the divided skies in Canto XLVI – all bear the marks of agency in the absence of a human agent.<sup>232</sup> But in its focus on industrial surfaces *Discrete Series* gives a literalist twist to this question of transformation: focusing not on how the landscape appears when it appears to have been transformed by some agent-like but non-subjective – natural or divine – process. Instead it focuses on how the appearance of the world (the world ‘with which’ an urban, North-American or European ‘one shares the century’) actually has been transformed by the industrial processes of which these uniform, hard surfaces are the clearest expression. This is to say that the ‘world, weather-swept’ is revealed in the rest of the collection not to be permanent, but to have drastically changed. It thus captures those surfaces and those objects in the process of their naturalization, of losing their distinctive newness which might cause an observer to consider, like Gabriel watching snow falling, the motivation and prehistory of the scene. Whatever the symbolic and aesthetic status of object ‘perfect[ion]’ (Ruskin) or ‘desire for what is objectively perfect’ (Zukofsky) – i.e. its status with regard to life or death (literal or metaphorical) and beauty or any other discursive formation – the selection of objects in *Discrete Series* performs a documentary function in registering the increasing proportion of the industrializing world taken up with objects which appear ‘rigidly perfect’. But leaving aside, for a moment, the social, economic, historical contexts of these objects; their pasts (their history of production and its visibility), presents (their circulation, reception, naturalization) and futures (the uses to which they might be put, their continued existence or the changes they might undergo, the symbolic charge they might acquire as historical – in the sense of outmoded – objects), we can say that in their uniform hardness, their rigid perfection – and this is why they are of interest to an ‘objectivist’ poet – they present, as do a cobble or a steel-deck in non-represented life but a brindled cow does not, a pure kind of objecthood, and also that which is the precondition for objecthood: the fact of their material existence.

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<sup>232</sup> Now (in 2014) that technology is sufficiently advanced artists continue to engage with this dynamic by playing God (instead of imagining that man or God is playing God) and making the weather – see Olafur Eliasson’s ‘Weather Project’ (London: Tate Modern, 2004), Random International’s ‘Rain Room’ (London: Barbican, 2013) or Berndnaut Smilde’s exhibition ‘Antipode’ (London: Ronchini Gallery, 2014) which ‘create’ the sun, rain and clouds respectively.



## 2.2 The Local History of Hardness

In ‘Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art’ T.J. Clark asks, in a provocative aside, ‘but why should matter be resistant?’ He affirms that the idea it should be is ‘a modernist piety with a fairly dim ontology appended.’<sup>233</sup> If by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – Clark’s aside is adjacent to comments on works by Jackson Pollock – or by the 1980s, when the article was written, interest in matter’s resistance had become automatic, in 1934 I think it had not.<sup>234</sup> For if, as Kant says, extension should be understood as a fundamental property of matter (and this seems to me reasonable on the larger-than-quantum scale),<sup>235</sup> and if hardness, where the extent of a material thing is marked by a distinct, barrier-like interface, can be considered simple and resolute expression of extension, then it is natural enough that hardness should be an important strand in modernity’s materialist bent. We have already seen, in quotations from contemporary works, expressions of a preference for hardness over softness: Pound describes the kind of critical attention he repudiates as ‘coagulation’; durability and the interaction of surfaces is implicit in Williams’ discussion of a poem’s ‘mechanical structure’ (for instance it is the homogeneity and durability of the surfaces of cog-teeth which allows for the geared transfer of power), and Bunting approvingly compares the parts of a poem by Williams to ‘stones’. And in focusing on the qualities of glass, stone, steel and polished wood *Discrete Series* participates in a wider cultural and philosophical turn to hardness in Europe and North America in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For example (what follows is a non-exhaustive list) in 1924 T.E. Hulme, who ‘prophes[ied] that a period of dry, hard, classical verse is coming’ propounded a

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<sup>233</sup> *Critical Inquiry* 9.1 Special Issue: *The Politics of Interpretation* (September 1982) 139-56, this reference 152-53.

<sup>234</sup> Clark acknowledges an ambivalent relationship to the high moment of modernism’s reception represented by Greenberg’s essays of the late thirties: ‘I should admit straight away that there are several points in what follows where I am genuinely uncertain as to whether I am diverging from Greenberg’s argument or explaining it more fully’ (p. 141). His contestation of matter’s affinity to resistance and alterity is a clear point of divergence, and this divergence marks the beginning of a critical traverse by the end of which (and again, I think, provocatively) Clark speaks of modernism’s ‘antiquity’ and describes ‘its vision of history’, in particular, as ‘more lost to us than Uxmal’ (the Mayan city). ‘Introduction’ to *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 2, p. 6.

<sup>235</sup> ‘That a body is extended is a proposition that is established *a priori*, and is not a judgement of experience.’ *Critique of Pure Reason* B12, p. 142.

theory of anti-Romantic modernism in which the rejection of Romanticism is founded on a metaphor of an impermeable surface:

The concepts that are right and proper in their own sphere are spread over, and so mess up, falsify and blur the clear outlines of human experience. It is like pouring a pot of treacle over the dinner table. Romanticism then, and this is the best definition I can give of it, is spilt religion.<sup>236</sup>

The point here is not the validity of Hulme's characterisation of Romanticism but rather the figuring of what it is that Romanticism is temporarily spoiling as something flat and hard – if Hulme's neo-classical ideal were figured instead as an atmosphere, a carpet, or a patch of soil rather than a table there would be no hope of mopping up the spilt religion/treacle. For Hulme modernism is thus not distinguished by novelty or innovation but rather pictured as the discovery or rediscovery of a relatively trans-historical ground – durable and plain – which Romanticism had spoiled and obscured. In the *Tractatus* (1921-22) Wittgenstein had had the world made up of 'facts' – discursive formations with a particular relation to real objects and their arrangement – rather than objects, but in the later *Philosophical Investigations* the 'common order' that makes world and facts possible has a hard, objective cast (though 'facts', too, in their asserted unarguability, in their claim to be independent of their enunciation, already have a proto-materially resistant quality: one's physical engagement with a sufficiently hard object will make little difference to its physical properties; one's discursive engagement with a fact will make little difference to its truth-bearing properties):

This order [of possibility, common to thought and world] must be *utterly simple* [...] no empirical cloudiness or uncertainty can be allowed to affect it—it must rather be of the purest crystal. But this crystal does not appear as an abstraction; but as something concrete, indeed, as the most concrete, as it were the hardest thing there is.<sup>237</sup>

In the second issue of *Blast* (i.e. in 1915) Wyndham Lewis celebrates 'powerful and definite forms' and praises

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<sup>236</sup> 'Romanticism and Classicism' in *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art* [1924] ed. Herbert Read (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 111-140, p. 118.

<sup>237</sup> *Philosophical Investigations* [from the first part, i.e. pre-1945] ed., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), §97, p. 44e.

the artist who has passed the test of seriousness in weeding sentiment out of his work, and has left it hard, clean and plastic<sup>238</sup>

In a 1917 issue of *The Egotist*, and thus also during the war which confronted so much pliable flesh with so many hard objects, and so many hard objects with each other, H.D. described poems by Marianne Moore somewhat paradoxically as, ‘frail, yet as all beautiful things are, absolutely hard’.<sup>239</sup> And in contrast to the strange brittleness implied in H.D.’s figuration, in the winter of 1932-33 Edmund Husserl’s former student Edith Stein used the example of a block of granite to illustrate her lecture on world spirit, focusing on

its consistency, its hardness, its mass, the fact that it presents itself in enormous blocks and not in granules or shards.<sup>240</sup>

Or we might think of Adolf Loos, whose self-designed gravestone (he died in 1933) was just such a ‘smooth, unornamented granite block’.<sup>241</sup> In his repudiation of ‘ornament’ (which softens and complicates surfaces) Loos marries these clinical/industrial aesthetics to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century socio-scientific discourse of degeneracy.<sup>242</sup> The vitreous impenetrability of Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917) contributes to its irony: in the museum the object no longer needs the physical characteristics which made it a functioning (or potentially functioning) object, except insofar as they are required for the viewer to recognize it, and yet one of those characteristics – hardness – works as a performed pun on the way spectators unused to industrial, sanitation-related, functional, non-representational objects as art-objects might well find it impenetrable. There are many other examples, some of which, such as Max Weber’s figuration of the inescapable and internalized work- and life-conditions under capitalism as an ‘iron cage’ (or a ‘shell as hard as steel’), have

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<sup>238</sup> ‘A Review of Contemporary Art’, *Blast: Review of the Great English Vortex* 2. *The War Number* (July 1915) 38-47, 40, 43.

<sup>239</sup> *Egoist* 3 (August 1916) 118, quoted by Helen Carr *The Verse Revolutionaries: Ezra Pound, H.D. and The Imagists* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), p. 830. The same strange brittleness appears in Frank O’Hara’s poem ‘Today’ [1950]: ‘Oh! Kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas! / You really are beautiful! Pearls, / Harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins! [...] They / do have meaning. They’re strong as rocks.’ *Collected Poems*, p. 15.

<sup>240</sup> Angela Ales Bello ‘Husserl’s Question of God as a Philosophical Question’ *Analecta Husserliana* 98 (2009) 25-61, 47.

<sup>241</sup> *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays* trans. Michael Mitchell (London: Ariadne, 1998), p. 10.

<sup>242</sup> For an account of the political/socio-biological ‘degeneracy phenomenon’ see Daniel Pick’s *Faces of Degeneration: a European Disorder c.1948 - c.1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

become more-or-less dead metaphors.<sup>243</sup> An extremely literal instance of the trend of embracing hardness is Marinetti's work *Parole in Libertà* which was published as a metal book by Tullio d'Albisola and Vincenzo Nosenzo in 1932.<sup>244</sup> Marinetti and his publishers thus echoed Mussolini's contemporaneous description of the 'hard, metallic name' of his first political (and paramilitary) organization, the *Fasci Italiani di Combattimento*.<sup>245</sup>

In her book *Flint on a Bright Stone* Kirsten Blythe Painter notes that this cultural concern with hardness (confining herself to poetry she does not discuss its philosophical or political analogues) 'echoes' Théophile Gautier's stipulation that poetry should be 'hard stone', and also how one of the figures most consistently concerned with hardness was Pound.<sup>246</sup> From his essay 'The Hard and the Soft in French Poetry' to his characterisation of the (regrettable) 'slushiness and swishiness of the post-Swinburnian line'<sup>247</sup> and his prediction that the poetry of the next decade (he is writing in 1917) would be

harder, saner [...] 'nearer the bone'. It will be as much like granite as it can be [...] At least for myself I want it so, austere, direct, free from emotional slither.<sup>248</sup>

<sup>243</sup> *The Protestant Ethic and the History of Capitalism* [1905 (German)/1930 (English)]. For the choice between 'iron cage' and 'steel shell' see Peter Baehr's essay 'The "Iron Cage" and the "Shell as Hard as Steel": Parsons, Weber, and the Stahlhartes Gehäuse Metaphor in *The Protestant Ethic and the History of Capitalism*', *History and Theory* 40 (May 2001) 153-169.

<sup>244</sup> (Rome: Edizione futuristi di Poesia, 1932). See Vincent Giroud's *Marinetti's Metal Book* (Berkeley: Codex, 2012). Pictures of the book's pages are available at [[http://www.ubu.com/historical/marinetti/Marinetti\\_Metal-Book\\_Parole\\_1930s.pdf](http://www.ubu.com/historical/marinetti/Marinetti_Metal-Book_Parole_1930s.pdf)].

<sup>245</sup> 'I dubbed the organization Fasci Italiani di Combattimento. This hard metallic name encapsulated the whole program of Fascism as I dreamed it, willed it, and carried it out!' from Benito Mussolini (in collaboration with Giovanni Gentile), 'Foundations and Doctrine of Fascism' [1932] in *A Primer of Italian Fascism* ed. Jeffrey T. Schnapp, trans. Jeffrey T. Schnapp, Olivia E. Sears, and Maria G. Stampino (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), pp. 46-74, p. 65.

<sup>246</sup> *Flint on a Bright Stone: A Revolution of Precision and Restraint in American, Russian, and German Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 62. Blythe Painter further confines herself to 'tempered modernism' and thus does not discuss Duchamp or Marinetti.

<sup>247</sup> Letter to Felix E. Schelling, 9<sup>th</sup> July 1922, *The Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941*, p. 249.

<sup>248</sup> This negative assessment of Swinburne is made in 'A Retrospect' originally in *Pavannes & Divisions* [1918, though the passage is signed 1917] repr. in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* ed. T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1985) pp. 3-15, p. 12. 'The Hard and the Soft in French Poetry' [1918], *ibid.* pp. 285-89. In including Gautier in her genealogy Painter is following Pound himself who in this essay recommends Gautier as one of the indispensable French poets evidencing hardness, and cites him approvingly as an originator: 'Gautier's way of thinking about these things was at bottom his own' (p. 286). Pound also cites Gautier as one of the authors through whom the metamorphosis of English verse writing may be traced. *ABC of Reading* p. 173. He further recommends him on pp. 78-79, and, with particular emphasis on *Emaux et Camées*, in 'How to Read' which Oppen's firm 'To Publishers' published in 1932 (see Chapter 1.1, above). *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, pp. 15-40, p. 33.

Hardness, he says, is ‘a quality in poetry which is nearly always a virtue’, but he concedes that he is using ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ as ‘semetaphorical terms’. And in most of the above instances, too, the recourse to ‘hardness’ appears at least semi-metaphorical (excepting the case of sculpture or the readymade where ‘hardness’ as a metaphorical aesthetic ideal can have a perfectly literal execution: the pre-modernist history of statuary is of attempts to overcome this coincidence in producing hard objects representing objects of *various* material qualities and levels of resistance: flesh, textile, leaf). Though modernist poetry has been defined as ‘the liberation of poetry from concreteness’,<sup>249</sup> where concreteness is, like hardness above, metaphorical: to be opposed to abstraction, *Discrete Series* presents its readers with objects which are made of glass, stone and steel (and sometimes concrete) and its interest in an experience of resistant materiality is preponderantly literal. Not ‘hardness as ‘a [semetaphorical] quality in poetry’, then, but hardness (via hard things) *in* poetry.

### 2.3 Externalisation and Relief: Objects Do Not Think

Following Pound and Painter in taking Gautier to be an originator of this cultural turn to hardness is useful insofar as the poem quoted by Painter (*‘l’Art’*) goes on to exhort the artist to ‘fix’ or ‘seal’ the vision in the material by means of a heroic physical – or, since the object being created stands allegorically for the poem, mental – effort:

*Sculpte, lime, cisèle;  
Que ton rêve flottant  
Se scelle  
Dans le bloc resistant!*<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Wolfgang Iser, preface to *Immanente Ästhetik, ästhetische Reflexion: Lyrik als Paradigma der Moderne: Kolloquium Köln 1964* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1966). ‘Wie verhält es sich mit der auffallenden Befreiung der Dichtung von einer ihr vorausliegenden Gegenständlichkeit? Ist der Verzicht auf den abbildenden Bezug ästhetisch zu begreifen.’ p. 10. My thanks to Dr Felix Lang (University of Marburg) for this translation.

<sup>248</sup> From ‘l’Art’ in *Emaux et Camées* [1852] *Poésies Complètes* (3 Vols) (Paris: A.Z. Nizet, 1970), Vol III pp. 128-130. Norman R. Shapiro’s translation gives, for these lines: ‘Sculpt, chisel, file, and let / Your flotsam dream, wind-blown, / Be set, / In the resisting stone.’ *Selected Lyrics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 267.

*Discrete Series*, on the other hand, presents its readers with objects already fixed or sealed; objects which – despite Williams’ mechanical claims which would imply that machines represented in poems can be read as stagings of the workings of the poem – are not such ready metaphors for the work itself. The poems are instead, as Oppen would later put it ‘concerned with a fact they did not create’.<sup>251</sup> At the other end of the ‘effort’ spectrum from Gautier’s poem is the *in potenza* fantasy suggested by Michelangelo, in which ‘every block of stone has a sculpture inside it, and [...] the task of the sculptor [is] to discover it’.<sup>252</sup> But the *in potenza* conceit is itself an externalisation of the model of externalisation: it asserts the necessity of understanding of a material and the capacity to assess what forms can and cannot be produced from it, but the model also functions as a faux-humble transferral of the potential (the genius) from the artist to the material, or from conscious to subconscious, and it constitutes an assertion that the process is not articulable (this is what one does to produce a sculpture), but rather ineffable (if one is like Michelangelo one merely finds the right piece of marble and obeys *its* instructions).<sup>253</sup> It thus remains a (negative) example of a theory of subjective externalisation and dependent on the existence of that theory: the claim is that the artist (still the artist) is a vehicle (for the revelation of the latent forms), which is not the same as claiming, in good faith, that the artist disappears at the beginning of the artistic process only to reappear once the forms – having been revealed by some other force or agent – are complete, i.e. that she has a genuinely arbitrary and unknowable relation to the object and its production. The focus in *Discrete Series*, on the other hand, on forms and materials created by industrial processes; by processes in which the worker’s autonomous agency actually does disappear or in which its limits are severe and formalized, and on objects like cobbles which cannot

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<sup>251</sup> Letter to Serge Faucherau, *Selected Letters*, p. 140.

<sup>252</sup> Cited by John Russon in ‘the project of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*’ in *A Companion to Hegel* ed. Stephen Houlgate and Michael Baur (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011) pp. 47-67, p. 48. See also ‘In every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action’ (*ibid.*). In *Michelangelo’s Theory of Art* Robert J Clements notes that this conceit has much older origins, for example ‘In lapide est forma Mercurii in potentia’ from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (New York: Gramercy, 1961), p. 23.

<sup>253</sup> Hegel took a scathing view of this kind of conceit, calling it ‘the false aspect’ of the idea of genius/inspiration: ‘namely that in artistic production all consciousness of the artist’s own activity is regarded as not merely superfluous but even deleterious. In that case production by talent and genius appears as only a *state* and, in particular, a state of *inspiration*. To such a state, it is said, genius is excited in part by an object, and *in part can transpose itself into it by its own caprice* [this emphasis added], a process in which, after all, the good services of the champagne bottle are not forgotten.’ *Aesthetics I*, p. 27.

be transformed by manpower (at least, not transformed into anything more meaningful than dust) is a *renunciation* of the theory of externalisation, whether heroic struggle or effortless process directed (it is claimed) by the material itself. We might add to Oppen's formulation, then, and say that the poems are concerned with facts they did not create, and which did not create themselves either. And where Gautier's artist is exhorted to overcome the alterity of the object – to make it register, record, and in representing, secure his 'dream' – and whereas in Michelangelo's model there exists no evidence of alterity at all, many poems in *Discrete Series* are concerned to register, or preserve, that alterity. So one function of the hardness of objects in *Discrete Series* is to register a kind of relief at no longer having to do the strenuous work of overcoming resistance to externalisation – a resistance recognized in the *in potenza* in the form of a wishful assertion of its opposite.<sup>254</sup>

This relief, product of the non-plasticity and impenetrability of the objects presented, matches the sense of reassurance – in contrast to the relatively *uncertain* dynamic of the examples of the weather – offered by the solidity, uniformity, and certain presence of those objects. Once the resistance no longer needs to be overcome, it seems, it can provide a kind of support. The uncertainty over the ascription of agency in those texts is reflected in the temporary and unstable nature of the divisions and transformations posited; 'skies of couple colour' are skies in transition, and likewise none of the other situations will endure – not the distinction between the 'clear' (and implicitly rainless) foreground and the 'rain falling, in the distance more slowly' in Oppen, nor the location and existence of the place at which the 'air stopped open' in Pound, or Dublin's cover of snow in Joyce. In another intercessionary lyric passage, in Canto XX, Pound presents a moment of perception ('così Elena vedi') which takes in

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<sup>254</sup> I borrow the formulation from Paul de Man, who writes: 'Literature [...] is the only form of language free from the fallacy of immediate expression. All of us know this, although we know it in the misleading way of a wishful assertion of the opposite'. 'Criticism in Crisis' [1967] in *Blindness & Insight* (London: Routledge, 1983), pp. 3–20, p. 17. Another way of reading the contrasting models presented by Gautier and Michelangelo is by brute historicization: Michelangelo's fantasy makes sense in a largely unmechanical world where most of the transformative productive power is supplied by humans, whereas Gautier's expresses the desire to match the power of machines by 'stamping' ('sceller') something subjective in the surfaces they produce and in which they consist.

[...] the sunlight, gate cut by the shadow;  
 And then the faceted air.  
 Floating. Below, sea churning shingle.  
 Floating [...].<sup>255</sup>

If we compare the second poem from *Discrete Series*:

[...]  
 Up  
 Down. Round  
 Shiny fixed  
 Alternatives  
  
 From the quiet  
  
 Stone floor<sup>256</sup>

it is as if the struggle to fix the distinctions between air and air amidst the ‘churning’ distractions of other, competing and overlapping topoi and physical states (the gate, the beach, one part of the air like water in that it is floating) is *set aside* upon the discovery of real division, i.e. the real alterity offered by uniform hard surfaces. Rather than leaving the subject ‘[f]loating’, these somewhat paradoxically, given their impenetrability, offer the possibility of grounding. So too do the other clear divisions presented, even those without an industrial quality: that between ‘[t]he limp water’ and the ‘boat’s round sides’ (p. 12), between the sea and its bed (p.15) and between ‘your elbow’ and ‘a car-edge’ (p. 28). And rather than (or as well as) the epistemological value of distinct interfaces, discussed in Chapter 1.3 with regard to Bunting’s ‘stones’, here the value of distinct, impenetrable and enduring surfaces is an ontological one.<sup>257</sup>

The surfaces presented by a ship’s ‘immense keel’ (p. 23) or ‘the quiet / Stone floor’ are comparatively impoverished with regard to depth and complexity – compared, that is, to the richness, plurality and contradictoriness of sensory data in Canto XX,

<sup>255</sup> *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, p. 92.

<sup>256</sup> *NCP*, p. 6.

<sup>257</sup> It is also quasi-logical – Hegel was keen to maintain a clear boundary between the operation of poetry and ‘the clear-cut distinctions and relations of the Understanding, the categories of thought [...] when these have discarded all perceptible imagery’ because, he thought, ‘all these forms transport us at once out of the province of imagination on to a different field’ (*Aesthetics* Vol. II, p. 1007).



to the dappled objects in Hopkins and to the weather examples.<sup>258</sup> In fact, in *Discrete Series*, after the opening poem the changeable weather largely disappears, and where it does reappear it offers inertness, uniformity and continuity rather than fecundity, pattern and change:

The evening, water in a glass  
Thru which our car runs on a higher road.<sup>259</sup>

Over what has the air frozen?  
[...]<sup>260</sup>

[...] Sun  
Slants dry light on the deck.  
[...]<sup>261</sup>

It brightens up into the branches  
And against the same buildings

A morning:  
[...]<sup>262</sup>

That the 'air' has 'frozen' fixes the objects in their places and current conditions and this freezing is itself metaphor for the disappearance of changeable weather in the collection. The 'dry'-ness of the sunlight suggests a uniform brightness, without 'facet[s]' or 'shadow', and in the final example even though the meteorological and lighting conditions are shown to change, the regularity of those changes mean the phenomenon has become as predictable as the fact of the building.<sup>263</sup> But precisely because of the inertness and sensory poverty of the objects represented, and the stillness and stability of the manner of their presentation (this poetic is also that over which the air has 'frozen') they offer continuity of availability for perception and experience.

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<sup>258</sup> Though the surface of a ships keel could present a high concentration of sensory data when looked at closely – the bubbled or peeling surface of the paint; rust; barnacles; beards of sea-weed etc. – but here the object is presented in its schematic aspect and thus offers size, shape, a uniform surface, and a singular datum: the fact of its presence and existence. As so many thinkers have noted (see Chapter 1.3, above): quantity is quality.

<sup>259</sup> *NCP*, p. 8.

<sup>260</sup> *NCP*, p. 8.

<sup>261</sup> *NCP*, p. 12.

<sup>262</sup> *NCP*, p. 31.

<sup>263</sup> The repetitiveness (and in the long term, predictability) of the weather – light, dark; hot, cold – is an image taken to its extreme by Beckett in *The Lost Ones* [1971] where these alternatives are absolutely (rather than only loosely) fixed and the oscillation between them accelerated.

This is, again, a kind of strong or resolute objecthood, which makes absent the variation in conditions that could make an object appear other than itself, and the kind of relief it offers is a straightforward expression of the concept ‘object’ in that it offers relief from the confusions and complications of the experiencing, cognizing, expressing subject. The inhabitation or subtenion of those confusions in the examples from the opening poem and from Pound may *itself* be a way of taking refuge, in this case from the depredations of objecthood into subjecthood: the cross-application the laws of (classical) physics which seem to limit thought’s potential when adopted as model, i.e. when what is falling must be either snow *or* rain; in which it would be simply a category mistake to describe the air as faceted, even if that is how it appears or if that seems a useful image. This depredation which is the product of the commonsensical understanding that concepts ought to behave like objects, is what Nietzsche calls the ‘sensualistic prejudice’ (‘prejudice’, here does not mean that it is a character trait; rather that it is a mistaken mode of operation and a historical development: concepts are required to behave like objects in order to do justice to the object world and to do work in it, which is, in the age of secularisation and the conceptualization of work, increasingly their main function).<sup>264</sup> As well as a way of taking refuge from this limiting ‘prejudice’ the confusion presented in the weather examples and the opening poem may also be merely mimetic: if subjecthood involves complications, contradictions and confusions then so, perhaps, should poems.

But *Discrete Series* seeks relief from these complications and confusions, and in doing so the collection seems to adopt a version (a less melodramatic or ironic version) of the position of Molloy in Beckett’s *Molloy*:

you would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins [...] To restore silence is the role of objects.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Nietzsche: ‘Here reigns the coarse sensualistic prejudice that sensations teach us truths about things-that I cannot say at the same time of one and the same thing that it is hard and that it is soft. (The instinctive proof "I cannot have two opposite sensations at the same time"-quite coarse and false.) The conceptual ban on contradiction proceeds from the belief that we are *able* to form concepts, that the concept not only designates the essence of a thing but *comprehends* it.’ *Will to Power* §516, p. 280.

<sup>265</sup> *Molloy* [1950/1959] in *Trilogy* (London: Calder: 1994), p. 13-14.

(these texts are not silent or obliterated, though of course neither are Beckett's), or even that of Bam in *What Where*: 'Make sense who may / I switch off', though without wholly switching off – maintaining or seeking to maintain only the minimal (binary) cognition that recognizes objects for objects.<sup>266</sup> The impenetrability of the objects then comes to represent the impossibility of 'switching off' cognitive processes, of more deeply crossing over to the side of the object; evidence of what Adorno described as

an obsession with the concept of concreteness joined with the inability to reach it in thought.<sup>267</sup>

In light of this impossibility the position adopted is perhaps more like that desired by Kafka when he asked of himself, in his diary, likewise seeking refuge from complicated questions of subjecthood, identity and difference:

What have I in common with the Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself, and I ought to stand quietly in a corner, content that I can breathe.<sup>268</sup>

Forms of identity are here cast off as a confusing burden – they consist in a claim to mark something essential about a subject or object (e.g. I *am* Jewish; they *are* Jews), and yet seem extraneous (if they were so essential why would they need expression?) and, perhaps, to be disguising some ulterior motive for ascribing or not ascribing them. Similarly in the poem which begins 'Town, a town,' Oppen refuses the 'town' a name, the identity marker which in ordinary discourse determines both the place and its inhabitants: I am from Buffalo; the town I am from *is* Buffalo. The poem emphasizes instead the structural, unarguable similarity between all towns: they are made up of houses, lamp-posts, roads; they are warmed by the sun in the day and grow cool at night. The divisions which might more conventionally be made among the inhabitants (men and women, young and old, rich and poor etc.) are asserted to be quite arbitrary, as the viewer takes up another category (place of birth) which was hotly contested in the period,<sup>269</sup> and shows that from an exterior, schematic perspective, it too looks quite irrelevant.

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<sup>266</sup> [1984] *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), pp. 467-76, p. 476.

<sup>267</sup> *Negative Dialectics* [1966] trans. E.B. Ashton, (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 75n.

<sup>268</sup> Entry for January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1914. *The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 1914-1923*, ed. Max Brod (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949), p. 11.

<sup>269</sup> See, for instance the case of the supposed kidnappers of the Lindbergh baby in March 1932.



expresses its uniform quality with sufficient rigour, as it holds corrections, confusions, and contingencies at bay, at least provisionally. This is one of several poems which ends without a punctuation mark; confident that the finality of the encounter with the undifferentiated materiality of the window will transfer to the poem (it also, like the quotation marks in the opening poem invites the reader to reproduce this experience in the non-represented world; it refuses to fully frame these windows as represented windows with a particular aesthetic purpose, now fulfilled).

The seeking of this relief – of perception without conception – is an anti-aesthetic orientation since art-objects, as that in which man ‘duplicates himself’,<sup>272</sup> and as a class of objects which characteristically invite (or are understood to invite) the observer to ‘interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel’ promote the tracing and reproduction of the confusions, misprisions and complications that subjectivity is subject to; they inevitably do so, whatever their form, style or representational content. This is a deeper anti-aestheticism than that with which modernist cultural production is commonly credited: Adorno notes that ‘art has the power to harbour its own opposite without slackening its longing’ and that the process, with regard to, for instance, the category of the ugly is – by way of something akin to conceptual judo – of the ‘transformation of what is hostile to art into art’s own agent’.<sup>273</sup> We could adduce a similar dynamic with regard to other ‘opposites’ such as functionality, boredom, dullness, arbitrariness, naivety of expression, explicit commerciality. Here, however, the seeking, via presentation of a pure kind of objecthood, to pare down experiential knowledge to recognition of objects *qua* objects threatens to go much further than those recuperations, and to render the field of aesthetics – at least non-processual aesthetics – pointless. This is because that field not only relies on but *consists in* the demarcation of a certain kind or class of objects as *art*-objects: every account of an aesthetic experience begins with the implication that this or that is (or is like) an art-work (as Clement Greenberg put it: ‘I just point’).<sup>274</sup> Every account of a literary text must assume that the text under consideration is worth the pain of treating it differently to the words on a sign, in a text-book or on a medicine bottle

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<sup>272</sup> Hegel, see n.98, above.

<sup>273</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 65.

<sup>274</sup> Thierry de Duve *Clement Greenberg Between the Lines: Including a Debate with Clement Greenberg* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 128.

(even if the words are the same as those found on signs, in text-books or on medicine bottles).<sup>275</sup> The presentation in *Discrete Series* of cobbles, decks or the industrial surfaces of a car seems to offer the riposte, to every instance of such demarcation (and to the process of demarcation that the poems themselves promote and here undergo) that while  $x$  or  $y$  may be said to be art-objects (they might offer a certain kind of experience, afford a certain kind of knowledge, though this knowledge and experience will always involve contradiction and possible confusion), a cobble, a ‘quiet / Stone floor’ and a ‘Closed car’ are more emphatically, more certainly objects (and the experience and knowledge they offer are more closely coincident, and truer, and free from contradiction and confusion).

The account of hardness in art-objects I am giving here – from Hopkins’ and Ruskin’s rejection of it to the largely metaphorical modernist embrace of it and Oppen’s preponderantly literal preoccupation with it – matches closely the sketch offered by Adorno, of

[t]he liberation of art from the heteronomy of the material, especially of natural objects, as well as the right to take every possible object

– such as a curb, a cobble or a lens –

as an object of art.<sup>276</sup>

He describes this process as that which ‘first made art master of itself [...]’. But the fundamentally anti-aesthetic mode which promotes the experience of objecthood *via* a specific class of non-art objects *above* whatever experience may be offered by them, and which promotes the minimal cognition thereby provided above any other external or internal experience, is perhaps one way in which, as he notes, ‘the course of this progress’ can also be described as ‘a course of devastation’.<sup>277</sup> Stylistically, though (i.e. still within the realm of the aesthetic – forcing the anti-aesthetic

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<sup>275</sup> It might well be worth reading the words on a sign, in a text-book or on a medicine bottle more carefully than they appear to ask to be read, as semiotic and New Historicist methodologies urge, but that this is an expansion of aesthetic modes of reading rather than a final transcendence of the category of the aesthetic (and its boundaries) can be shown by the observation that it hardly seems worth reading the words of a poem as if they were dosage instructions, indeed it is not clear to me that such a reading would be possible, and the attempt would be a form of art production rather than reception.

<sup>276</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 82.

<sup>277</sup> *ibid.*

orientation back into that realm), the seeking of solidity, clear distinctions and divisions – the ‘immense keel’ which cleaves the water, air, or ground; the walls which make up the corner in which Kafka sees himself standing – could be thought, following the same lines as T.E. Hulme, as a kind of neo-classicism (either neo-neo classicism or a return to the same neo-classicism). We would then cite, as further evidence, perhaps, the economy of the asyndeton in ‘The evening, water in a glass’<sup>278</sup> and the line’s confident universalization in referring to ‘The’ rather than ‘This’ or ‘That’ (it also economically invites us to inhabit the atemporal frame of the perceiving subject as s/he lives or relives the experience and collapses the distinction between the two, and is thus also still mimetic-realist; claiming to invoke a particular evening rather than universal evening-ness). This neo-classicism which perpetuates or reanimates the concept of ‘actual’ classicism (or rather, actual Greco-Roman art) Hegel describes as

the free and adequate embodiment of the Idea in the shape peculiarly appropriate to the Idea itself in its essential nature.<sup>279</sup>

But the content of the ‘Idea’ of which these forms (e.g. ‘a cobble’, ‘the steel deck’, ‘the asphalt edge’) could be the ‘adequate embodiment’ is vanishingly small, almost nothing. In my reading the vanishingly small content of the ‘Idea’ is permanent and self-evident, close to ‘analytic’ in the Kantian sense (it is an expression, not a development or application, of its concept), and transhistorical: objects can offer relief from the complications and entanglements of subjecthood because objects do not think.<sup>280</sup> Whatever is meant ‘when it is said of Spirit that it *is*, that it has *being*, is

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<sup>278</sup> *NCP*, p. 8.

<sup>279</sup> *Aesthetics* I, p. 77.

<sup>280</sup> It would be worth considering the orientation I am ascribing to the poems in the light of Kant’s theory of the transcendental unity of apperception:

The *I think* must be capable of accompanying all my presentations. For otherwise something would be presented to me that could not be thought at all [B132]

Kant thinks that valid experience of an object world presupposes the representation of a stable (coherent, not-confused) self to itself. It is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis, and my research to date, to do so. From a more-or-less strict Kantian perspective, in any case, the question of limiting knowledge of objects to the maximally simple registration of their existence or apparent presence is fruitless, and anything more fruitful involves a greater degree of complexity (‘combination’) than the orientation in *Discrete Series* allows for:

Thus the mere form of outer sensible intuition, i.e., space, is as yet no cognition at all; it provides only the manifold of a priori intuition for a possible cognition. Rather, in order to cognize something or other---e.g., a line-in space, I must draw it; and hence I must bring

a *Thing*' – 'by saying that the *being of Spirit is a bone*', here a bone – or rather a cobble, a lens, the keel of a ship – in fact produces this relief insofar as it is *not-spirit*.<sup>281</sup>

They are the not subject to – they offer relief from – the relentless conceptual dynamic which Hegel describes in terms which make it akin to torment:

Every expression whatsoever is a product of reflection, and therefore it is possible to demonstrate in the case of every expression that, when reflection propounds it, another expression, not propounded, is excluded. Reflection is thus driven on and on without rest [...].<sup>282</sup>

For Hegel it is not an experience of resolute materiality that can offer respite from this process, instead what 'check[s] this once and for all' is recognition of the external reality of the dialectic:

what has been called a union of synthesis and antithesis is not something propounded by the understanding or by reflection but has a character of its own, namely, that of being a reality beyond all reflection.<sup>283</sup>

It may be that there is something undialectical about *Discrete Series*' drive to take refuge in an experience of materiality – an as it were naïve belief that this is possible and is not itself a conceptual reflection – though there is likewise something undialectical about Hegel's situation, here, of the dialectic in some transcendent space 'beyond all reflection'. How, we might well ask, would we have access to or knowledge of it except for via reflection (though the unavoidable schema of reflecting on x or conceptualizing y *also* externalizes the object of thought)?

This relief also consists in the knowledge that even if, as Hegel elsewhere puts it

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about synthetically a determinate combination of the given manifold, so that the unity of this act is at the same time the unity of consciousness. [B138]

*Critique of Pure Reason* [1781/1787] trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), p. 177, p. 181.

<sup>281</sup> 'When *being* as such, or thinghood, is predicated of Spirit, the true expression of this is that Spirit is, therefore, the same kind of being that *a bone is*.' *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 207 'Only the Notion is the truth of this idea', Hegel says, for without thinking it 'in its infinitude', i.e. when we think this 'as a fixed proposition' it is impossible, of course, to maintain: 'the self fixed as self, the thing fixed as thing, and yet each is supposed to be the other.' (p. 210).

<sup>282</sup> 'Fragment of a System' trans. Richard Kroner [1800] in *On Christianity: Early Theological Writings* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), pp. 309-320, p. 312.

<sup>283</sup> *ibid.*



‘philosophy recognizes the Concept in everything’, it is possible to experience resistance to this imperious process of conceptualization – the mastery of objects which ends in destroying the category, as that which exists outside of subjects, altogether: ‘by being this totality’, he says ‘the Concept already contains everything that reality as such brings into appearance’.<sup>284</sup> Hegel’s ‘recognition’, though it puts itself forward (*qua* recognition) as only a passive reception of something about an object or system (some aspect or relation) and a faithful reconstruction in language of that revealed aspect, in fact constitutes a claim to have found the essence of an object, even if it is a paradoxically local, contextual essence (local and contextual because the relentless driving on of conceptual activity would, he recognizes, produce new identifications of essence). The emphasis on surface and impenetrability is thus a kind of prophylactic against this ‘recognition’ process which threatens the spread of confusion, misprision, and further appropriation:

[...]  
Up  
Down. Round  
Shiny fixed  
Alternatives  
  
From the quiet  
  
Stone floor<sup>285</sup>

There is nothing that can be recognized, revealed, or extracted from the ‘quiet / Stone floor’: it is in this sense that it is quiet (as ever with the caveat that this assertion is itself a claim to have recognized, revealed or extracted something from the represented ‘Stone floor’, from the ‘ “quiet / Stone floor” ’). If these paths – ‘Up’, ‘Down’ or ‘Round’ – are understood as conceptual vectors as well as real-world orientations it is notable that, on taking one of them one would be able easily to return to the initial position, unlike in ordinary thought: reflection would *not* then be dialectically driven ‘on and on without rest’. It does not affect this possible operation of the vectors and the floor in the poem that the image apparently had a real-life counterpart; that it was based on the then-common sign above a set of lift-

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<sup>284</sup> *Aesthetics* I, p. 100, p. 109.

<sup>285</sup> *NCP*, p. 6.

doors to indicate whether the lift car was travelling upwards or downwards.<sup>286</sup> In fact it might limit the interest of the poem to a reader if this real-life counterpart is the first thing to be revealed or extracted. If we are interested, as Dan Beachy-Quick is, in the fact of the sign having been rendered difficult to identify, or if we are interested in the real-life semiotics of a (presumably polished) stone floor rather than a wooden or dirt one, then the possibility of these objects refusing the depredations of 'the Concept' has already been foreclosed (even though only a presumably polished stone floor, rather than a wooden or a dirt one offers this possibility).<sup>287</sup> So where Joseph Noble reads the poem as a 'cubist picture of an elevator' and finds that there is an 'implicit opposition in the poem between the mechanical [the lift] and the natural [the stone floor], with some valorizing of the latter' I find, rather, that they are, in their opposition to free, contradictory and chaotic subjectivity, in sympathy with each other, and with the other resistant objects in the collection.<sup>288</sup>

Once again following the Nietzschean critique of the self-positing set out in Chapter I, the representation of these impenetrable objects is also a challenge to the potential bad faith in the ascription of (the claim to have identified, stabilized, extracted) an essence:

The essence of a thing is only an opinion about the 'thing'<sup>289</sup>

[Artists, orators and philosophers] are supposed to possess a kind of miraculous eyeglass with which they can see directly into 'the essence of the thing'!<sup>290</sup>

It is ironic that this knowledge – that objects do not announce their own essences – is produced via the presentation of objects which in their simple expression of their

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<sup>286</sup> Letter to Charles Tomlinson, *Selected Letters*, p. 90.

<sup>287</sup> 'The Honest Conversation: On Reading George Oppen' *Southern Review* Spring 2004 669-383. Beachy-Quick reads the elevator as a metaphor for Oppen's 'metaphysical investigation [...] the vehicle that carries one from the lowest floors of commerce, of mere habituation, to the high north of sincere thought' (370). The biographical and psychologizing focus (on the 'real' lift doors and their rendering), however, is in competition at least, with what the process produces, which is the possibility of 'the poet not as a private person, not with his psychology or his so called social perspective but with the poem as a philosophical sundial telling the time of history.' Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', [1957] *Notes to Literature* Vol. 1 trans. Sherry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 37-53, p. 46.

<sup>288</sup> 'George Oppen's *Discrete Series*: Things Among Others' 263.

<sup>289</sup> *Will to Power* §556 p. 302. Despite this Nietzsche continually makes recourse to the metaphor of essence, in this work as elsewhere.

<sup>290</sup> *Human all too Human: a Book for Free Spirits* [1878] trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) §162, p. 86.

qualities (hardness, plainness etc.) *could* be said to announce their own essential quality, even if that essence is surface. We do not have to agree that ‘valuation’ i.e. the choice of this or that aspect of a phenomenon and its presentation as essential ‘is only [...] will to power’<sup>291</sup> but the strong emphasis in *Discrete Series* on impenetrable surfaces nevertheless chimes with Nietzsche’s warning that we should be suspicious of the unannounced motives, presuppositions or procedures leading the selection of this or that aspect as ‘essence’; as the true content that the surface of an object is merely there to give expression to:

“Essence,” the “essential nature,” is something perspective [*sic*] and already presupposes a multiplicity. At the bottom of it there always lies “what is that for me?” (for us, for all that lives, etc.)<sup>292</sup>

We are in some sense forbidden to ask these questions of these objects, in any case: they are distinctively not for us. In fact these poems could be said to go further, for where Nietzsche still celebrates multifarious appearance:

Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live: what is needed for that is to stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin; to worship appearance, to believe in shapes, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance!<sup>293</sup>

Oppen ‘stops bravely’ at the impenetrability of a surface; the ‘polish and obscured origin’ of ‘that dark instrument / A car’ (p. 8), and in the emphasis on solidity and impenetrability (rather than ‘the whole Olympus of appearance’ which would include other sensory qualities) can be said to refuse the distinction between appearance and essence which Nietzsche, emphasising appearance, still upholds. Registration of the brute fact of an object’s existence does not.

The knowledge (or claim) subtended in poems like that ending ‘Stone floor’, then, is that objects exist, do not think, and thus offer some relief from problems originating in thought – problems such as thought’s difficult externalisation into artworks; the relentlessness with which thought works over its objects (including, especially,

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<sup>291</sup> *Will to Power* §675, p. 356.

<sup>292</sup> *Will to Power* §556 p. 302. This is another diametrically anti-Kantian statement by Nietzsche. For Kant a concept of essence is itself essential: it is ‘the first inner principle of all that belongs to the possibility of a thing.’ ‘Preface’ to *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* in *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*), p. 183.

<sup>293</sup> ‘Nietzsche contra Wagner: from the files of a psychologist’ [1888] in *The Antichrist and other writings* pp. 263-82, p. 282.

where its object is itself or itself-made-object); the imperiousness of conceptual ‘recognition’ of the material world (and the instability of ascriptions of essence) – and from the unavoidable ubiquity of thought itself.<sup>294</sup> This knowledge (or claim) is, despite its small content, thoroughly ahistorical: it must be possible – if not plausible or necessary – to think this at almost any time and in almost any context in human history. And yet – answering the inevitable question of why this ontological reassurance appears necessary here and now, there and then – it is also thoroughly historical. The unyielding, unshifting and resolute materiality (its ‘Idea’ refuge from ideas) seems to offer instead (instead because it is in this sense a response to contemporary conditions rather than an assertion of transhistorical ground) a sense that, despite the

[c]onstant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation

it is not literally the case that ‘all that is solid melts into air’.<sup>295</sup> The comfort that this experience of solidity offers against material, economic and social flux may be small (reassurance that a metaphor remains a metaphor; a reminder that metaphors and descriptions of systems in flux still require a real world to refer to) but is not for that reason alone insignificant. Those objects, however, as I have noted, are only able and available to offer such solidity because of that revolutionizing of production.

In 1938 architect Walter Behrendt would recognize that the aesthetic potential of the materials coming to dominate architecture and the plastic arts (especially plate-glass and steel – the same materials which, while they do not wholly dominate, nevertheless stand out in *Discrete Series*) was closely connected to their industrial origin:

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<sup>294</sup> Hegel: ‘We cannot ever give up thinking; that is how we differ from the animals. There is a thinking in our perception, in our cognition and our intellect, in our drives and our volition (to the extent that they are human).’ *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* trans. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), p. 10.

<sup>295</sup> Marx & Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* [1848] trans. Samuel Moore [1888] (New York: Norton, 1988), p. 58. A contemporary translation has (for ‘Alles Ständische und Stehende verdampft’) the more accurate, if also more prosaic ‘everything feudal and fixed goes up in smoke.’ *Marx: Later Political Writings* ed. and trans. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 4. This translation also rationalizes the described or prescribed event, since feudal and fixed things do burn (if not all of them), whereas they much more rarely ‘evaporate’ or ‘melt[ ] into air’.

## LACK OF ORNAMENT

Modern building, on its way toward a definite form, is very likely to develop a sort of technical style, a style which accepts, both practically and imaginatively, the qualities inherent in materials; a style which consciously utilizes for its forms the cultivated beauty of finished materials, the visual surface values of steel, glass, ceramics, and so forth; values achieved by an intensive process of technical refinement. *Modern building, since it relies on the work of machine and industrial technique rather than on the work of craftsmen, cannot have ornament.* But what it loses in this respect, it regains manifold by the charm and expressiveness inherent in its refined materials, the exactitude of its technique, and the precision of its forms. [emphasis added]<sup>296</sup>

Take the example of glass, as a material both functional and with an aesthetic history, and which appears multiple times in *Discrete Series*. Where Behrendt recognizes this connection, and whereas schools such as the Bauhaus were striving to overcome the disjunction assumed between materials in an artistic context and materials in an industrial or lived context, others strive to maintain it:

A history of glass will naturally concern itself chiefly with the artistic forms into which the material is fashioned, and will disregard the purely functional glass made in the service of science and technology

though with little success once they are forced to confront the evidence of the influence of industrial forms and industrial development on the very aesthetic history whose purity they attempt to protect:

About the year 1930 came universal appreciation for the new style in glass, which delighted in a thick undecorated metal. In order to give the actual material its best expression, austere, massive forms with a certain tension of line were favoured.<sup>297</sup>

Although *Discrete Series* does not evidence as much hope as Behrendt's essay about the continued flourishing of still-aesthetic engagement with objects in the era of industrial dominance ('it regains manifold'), it nevertheless shares the sense that the interest of the materials is their distinctiveness (if not exactly 'charm and expressiveness') and that that distinctiveness is due to the alterity of their industrial origins. In order to consider further the historical and philosophical causes and

<sup>296</sup> *Modern Building: Its Nature, Problems, and Forms* (London: Martin Hopkinson, 1938), p. 174.

<sup>297</sup> Fritz Kämpfer and Klaus G. Beyer *Glass – a World History: The story of 4000 years of fine Glass-Making* trans., rev., Edmund Launert (London: Studio Vista, 1966), p. 9, p. 16.

Unlike the opening poem, which seems comparatively even-tempered, the likewise untitled ninth poem of the thirty-one in the collection consists of nine short lines, and two much longer ones at lines 5 and, finally, 11:

I once again focus on a nodal point near the middle of the poem: instead of the inversion in the words ‘what really was going on’, my reading of the above poem hinges on the pause or break between the line ending ‘lighting’ and the line ‘An overstatement’.

From the outset the poem presents us with our exclusion from the object. The poem begins with an adjective which introduces an object. The adjective is minimally descriptive, ascribing the object one of two binary positions, and of those two the position chosen shuts the subject out from some deeper or more engaged experience of it. Thus, from the start, instead of a *rêve flottant* seeking grounding and expression

by manipulation of a (metaphorically tangible) material object as in the externalisation examples, the voice of the poem which presents itself as recording the viewing experience here remains external to the solid object – the car which, as an industrial product and consumer good is finished: unlike a lump of marble it does not require the intervention of an artist-maker to transform it. This is the clearest example in the collection of the fulfilment of the desire expressed in the opening poem as I outlined it above: this externality allows the subject to at least hope that this experience is not self-satisfied projection, but rather an experience of something not ‘self-posed’. As with any text recording or recreating a plausibly life-like visual scene (one which we can believe to have a rough counterpart in the non-represented world), the author can be said to have arranged the ‘composition’ and thus to have ‘posed’ the encounter, but the scene chosen here – a car parked, a car moving – was and remains publically available to many living in urban centres in the industrialized world, and in the United States particularly: approximately 43 million passenger cars were sold in the U.S. between 1900 and 1930, and by 1935 drivers had over a million miles of surfaced road available to them.<sup>298</sup> The poet is not responsible for these facts; if he or she lives in a large North American city in 1934 s/he is confronted with them.<sup>299</sup> The subject is quotidian – not staged – then, but also quite arbitrary, democratic, and modern. As Wyndham Lewis put it, mocking the persistence of conventional objects for artistic consideration now being addressed in bold new visual languages (highlighting the mismatch between these):

HOWEVER MUSICAL OR VEGETARIAN A MAN MAY BE, HIS LIFE IS  
NOT SPENT EXCLUSIVELY AMONGST APPLES AND  
MANDOLINES<sup>300</sup>

Outdoor, urban, western life, from the early twentieth century onwards, is, on the other hand ‘SPENT’ almost ‘EXCLUSIVELY AMONGST’ cars.

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<sup>298</sup> My calculations are based on figures taken from *The Statistical Abstract of U.S.*, 1967 cited in Nathan Rosenberg’s *Technology and American Economic Growth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 114-115.

<sup>299</sup> These ‘facts’ are, however, still new enough to be perceptible as facts – the car in industrialized societies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has tended to naturalize itself; determining the layout of dwellings, neighbourhoods, whole cities and even determining where cities are situated – they might thus stand out less as facts in 1964 or 1994, or 2014.

<sup>300</sup> ‘A Review of Contemporary Art’ *Blast* 2, ‘The War Number’ (July 1915) 38-47, 41.

It will become apparent to the reader once she reaches the long fifth line which is curtailed by what appears to be self-correction or self-admonition, that, despite the ‘finish’ or closedness of the object presented the poem makes no claim of superlative clarity of thought and expression. In that line

Over which clouds pass and the  
alteration of the lighting

with its slightly distracted phrasing and attention – the viewer’s gaze wandering from the object to the sky and/or the effect of what might be man-made light (‘lighting’) playing on the object’s surface (the Hopkins aesthetic persists, though it will be cut off) – an atmosphere of self-acknowledged dullness or *stupeur* predominates, similar to that described in the stanza from Wallace Stevens’ ‘Botanist on Alp (No. 1)’ first published in the same year:

For myself, I live by leaves,  
So that corridors of clouds,  
Corridors of cloudy thoughts,  
Seem pretty much one:  
I don’t know what.<sup>301</sup>

Whereas the appreciation of natural beauty in the poem which opens *Discrete Series* was of the type that Adorno condemns as akin to a ‘personal ad’ – self-admiration rather than appreciation of something other than the self – the confusion here pertains, as Stevens notes, to the natural world (formally as well as referentially) and without making a social claim. And where the aesthetics of the natural world seemed, in the suburban version presented in the opening poem – even though that presentation was of an unarguably natural phenomenon (rain) – to have been hollowed out, and the otherness on which the ontological knowledge depended to be ultimately inaccessible, the spectre of natural beauty now returns, via the presentation of a subject perceiving thoroughly *inorganic* material: the closed surfaces of the car. The possibility of this somewhat ironic reversal and the aesthetic experience of nature returning via a thoroughly human object (transparent glass, for instance, exists nowhere in nature) is partly due to the object’s simultaneous alien

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<sup>301</sup> First published, under ‘Two Poems’ in *Direction I* (October 1934), then in *Ideas of Order* [1935] – Eleanor Cook, *A Readers Guide to Wallace Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 98. *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 115.



inhumanness (see Chapter 2.6 below) and partly due to the way in which human history – and artifice – counter-intuitively inhere in the apparently ahistorical experience of nature (the opposite of the artificial/artefactual).

In natural beauty, natural and historical elements interact in a musical and kaleidoscopically changing fashion. Each can step in for the other, and it is in this constant fluctuation [...] that natural beauty lives. It is spectacle in the way that clouds present Shakespearian dramas, or the way the illuminated edges of clouds seem to give duration to lightning flashes. While art does not reproduce those clouds, dramas nonetheless attempt to enact the dramas staged by clouds [...].<sup>302</sup>

The word ‘lighting’ rather than ‘light’ intimates that the subject may be witnessing the interaction of man-made and natural phenomena, then – clouds and the light thrown from passing cars or street-lamps, perhaps – and *also* that they are always already intermediated. It follows that even if the scene is only illuminated by natural phenomena (sunlight filtered by and reflected from clouds) it is impossible not to consider it as in some sense staged by and for a human subject; as if the scene had been artificially lit; as if it were, or were represented in, a work of art. The confusion here instantiated thus, rather than fuzzily failing to represent, succeeds in conveying the confusion and contradiction that the representation of a visual scene involving ‘natural’ phenomena is always subject to.<sup>303</sup>

But if the fifth line of Oppen’s poem is *itself* a ‘corridor[ ] of cloudy thoughts’ (this may be a virtue rather than a deficiency, though a complicated one, since its clear expression and our secure identification of it will always be somewhat paradoxical) it is already apparent by the third word of the poem, or rather, before the third word, in the dash which cuts off any lyric predication, that the ambition of the poem is not to *clearly* appraise the object, and to clearly communicate both it and the meaning of

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<sup>302</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 92-93: ‘Art does not reproduce those clouds’ primarily means that a successful work is not successful because of its faithful or felicitous figuration of, say, clouds, nor primarily related to the natural world because of that figuration, but because, even in the case of a work which cannot figure clouds, such as a drama, it invokes the dynamic effects that cloud-play also produces. Nevertheless, in light of this assertion it seems worth pointing out again that contemporary visual/installation art does ‘reproduce’ the weather (see end of Chapter 2.1).

<sup>303</sup> This reading of ‘fuzziness’ in Oppen is quite sharply distinct from that suggested by Lyn Barzilai who also distinguishes it from a lack of clarity but who finds it fundamentally mystical, when she writes (of ‘The Forms of Love’ from *This in Which* [1965]) ‘The fog, usually a symbol of lack of clarity (in T.S. Eliot’s “Prufrock” for example) here becomes the medium for a blurring of boundaries, inducing an undefined state where mystery and awe take over.’ *George Oppen: A Critical Study* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), p. 60.

that appraisal which might be personal, private, emotional, historical, public, political, or philosophical. There is no neat closure in this poem to match the rested resolution – albeit a resolution which includes anticipation of other sights, other experiences – of the end of the opening poem. In retrospect the possibility of a clear and secure appraisal had been foreclosed even earlier than the dash, before the poem had started at all, by the absence of an article, definite or indefinite, a deictic marker, or a word of address which would situate the object in relation to a lyric subject and its world. This car, then, though first anchored to the kerb then moving along predetermined vectors (in traffic) is, in relation to a poetic subject, somewhat adrift.

This part of ‘the world, weather-swept’, though selected for poetic attention, is not elevated to the status of lyric object. The procedure of elevation commonly proceeds with an identification of an object as unique (which is the inevitable consequence of apostrophe: even if an address has plural targets, speech cannot plausibly be addressed to *all* objects in a certain category, absent or not yet existing) even if it is picked to be representative:

*Thou* still unravished bride [...] <sup>304</sup>

Hail to *thee*, blythe spirit [...] <sup>305</sup>

I hear  
*These* waters, rolling from their mountain-springs  
 [...] and view  
*These* plots of orchard ground, these cottage tufts <sup>306</sup>

Thus *thou*, Ravine of Arve—dark, deep Ravine-  
 Thou many-colored, many-voicéd vale <sup>307</sup>

In Oppen’s poem the object is picked out without apostrophe or article, and appears, in this sense, as a ‘thing among others’ – rather than elevated from among them or

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<sup>304</sup> Keats, ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ [1820].

<sup>305</sup> Shelley, ‘To a Skylark’ [1820].

<sup>306</sup> Wordsworth, ‘Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey’ [1798].

<sup>307</sup> Shelley, ‘Mont Blanc: Lines written above the Vale of Chamouni’ [1817]. If my imposition of italics in the examples from extremely famous lyric poetry seems to do violence to them as objects – and I think it does – it is somewhat licenced by the fact that Shelley himself draws attention to the latently insistent deictic quality of this tendency when he italicizes his own ‘this’, in Mont Blanc:

And *this*, the naked countenance of earth,  
 On which I gaze, even these primeval mountains

put into a more clearly defined relation with the speaking subject – even before it is named as such.<sup>308</sup> But the dash and the first, deadpan, instance of self-correction nonetheless remains important. It seems to say: ‘when I – or we – call this a “closed car” we are using shorthand. We fail to note that it is closed in a different material to the rest of its surface – glass (which is ‘open’ to light); that it is not always closed to us, if we are its possessors or temporary occupants, and yet its closure – the resistance offered by its finished surfaces – is resolute’. This dash is a good example of the ‘stuttering’ of which Oppen was accused (see Chapter 1.2, above) – one of at least three in this poem, the others being between ‘lighting’ and ‘An overstatement’ and the dashes in the final two lines – and of the concentration of meaning that the stutter economically makes possible. And it is at this first self-correction that we realise most immediately (i.e. what the dash *also* says is) that the poem does not itself aim to reproduce the ‘finishedness’ or closure of the object presented: it is characteristic of functional objects, and especially ones exhibiting a kind of uniformity, that they do not correct themselves: though they may participate in a semiotic economy they tend to do so with singular transactions (this is partly the definition of functionality).<sup>309</sup>

There are thus, as with the opening poem, competing ‘centres’, here. The first dash or the space before the first word where an article or word of deixis might be would make decidedly off-centre centres but should not be ruled out for that reason. And again, as with the opening poem this text concludes with an image which parallels the end of the opening poem in the general nature of its terms (‘place’ instead of ‘world’; ‘light’ instead of ‘weather’; ‘time’ instead of ‘century’). It can likewise be seen as seeking to be a concluding resolution of the work of the rest of the poem and if it does unite the earlier strands this too might be said to be a centre, though rather

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<sup>308</sup> It is also ‘thing among others’ in that there is no special possessive attachment: it does not appear to belong to the speaker of the poem: the many millions of cars in circulation are nonetheless ‘closed’ to vastly more many millions of people: they may not enter them as owners.

<sup>309</sup> At least, true functionality: it is a hallmark of the transition to post-modern consumer capitalism that the functional has turned into a pastiche of its concept, and become merely a ‘look’ among others. As an industrial designer related to me: ‘People who buy functional products want other people to know that they buy functional products, and therefore stylists are employed to make stuff look more functional than need be’ (private conversation, June 2014). Thus exchange value (something looks functional so it is desirable, priced more highly; the owner finds herself ‘worth’ more for owning and endorsing it) overtakes use value (preference for functional objects, in, for instance, Bauhaus thinking, was supposed to be a prioritization of use value over exchange value, even though insofar as ‘choices’ like these are always – if they are free choices – social signifiers it instantly became – always already was – also an invocation of exchange value).

than confidence in having acquired or divined some new ontological knowledge (the prior parts of the poem working as stages in the argument or proof) this poem evidences strong doubt over what has been achieved or witnessed, even within the proto-conclusion, with its ‘false light’. Nevertheless, as with ‘what really was going on’, the crux of the poem (the ‘part’ which *is*, contra Hegel and F. Schlegel actually more important than others, though of course what it is and does is in large part determined by those others) is near the middle of the lines, when read from start to finish – a formally centred centre. Between these two lines:

Over which clouds pass and the  
alteration of lighting  
An overstatement

the poem cuts itself off as it is in the process of reaching a perceptual resolution regarding an object (and as we have seen the object in question is somewhat adrift, compared to an object seized by a more straightforwardly lyric address). This is *non-dramatic*, extradiegetic aposiopesis – the voice which ‘speaks’ this poem is much less fully dramatized than that of the opening poem – and it communicates that the poem is not seeking to secure objecthood in terms of its own fixity (and therefore endurance which depends on fixity and stability): this is not a finished piece of monologue for a reader to read and return to admiringly; to cite for others to admire as a succinct statement recording an interesting or remarkable worldview that is also interestingly or remarkably expressed. Its memorability, if it is memorable, is not of the mnemonic kind. This lack or want of dramatic and formal finish serves as a reminder that many of the most famous and frequently reproduced passages of poetic modernism in English are – notwithstanding the challenges they may otherwise present – notable for their relative voiceability (i.e. that they are propositional; dramatically plausible): ‘Rose is a rose is a rose’ rather than ‘Pussy pussy pussy what what’, ‘Ink of paper slightly mine breathes a shoulder able shine’ or ‘Push sea push sea push sea push sea push sea [...]’ (all also from ‘Sacred Emily’);<sup>310</sup> ‘April is the cruellest month’ rather than ‘If there were rock / And also water / And water’ or ‘Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop’ (also from ‘The Waste Land’);<sup>311</sup> ‘So much

<sup>310</sup> ‘Sacred Emily’ [1913/1922] in *Writings 1903-1931* ed. Catherine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman (New York: Library of America, 1998), pp. 387-396, p. 395, *ibid.*, p. 392, p. 387.

<sup>311</sup> ‘The Waste Land’ in *The Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 61, p. 72, p. 73.

depends [...]’ rather than ‘Crustaceous / wedge / of sweaty kitchens’ or ‘lu la lu / but lips too few / assume the new—marruu’ (also from *Spring and All*).<sup>312</sup>

The Parnassian celebration of the distinctive hardness of an art-object by Gautier in Chapter 2.3 ends by translating the value of endurance from the object to the text itself:

Les dieux eux-mêmes meurent  
Mais les vers souverains  
Demeurent  
Plus forts que les airains.<sup>313</sup>

and I would argue that Stevens’ lines (‘For myself I live by leaves’) still perform a claim of ‘sovereignty’ in their tight formal effect and relative musicality, which, if it exists in the first half of Oppen’s poem (it is at least possible to hear some emphatic force in ‘Closed car—closed in glass— / At the curb, / Unapplied and empty’) is almost extinguished by the time we reach the final, stuttering lines, and in them:

This is less strange—  
Tho the face, still within it,  
Between glasses—place,

Insofar as Gautier’s poem explicitly announces an ambition to persist and exist over a long timescale, and insofar as Stevens’ poem wears that ambition implicitly, each participates in the same traditional conceit as Henry James in his remarks on fixity, and Shakespeare in sonnet 65 when the poet/lover notes that not ‘brass’ (cf.

Gautier’s ‘*airain*’) ‘nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea’ can escape transformation (by death – ‘mortality’). We might describe this conceit as pre-Objectivist Objectivism. The ‘voice’ of Shakespeare’s insistently *written* sonnet goes on to note that even though

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<sup>312</sup> *Spring and All* [1923], *Collected Poems* ed. A. Walton Litz & Christopher MacGowan Vol. I, 1909-1939 (London: Paladin, 1991), pp. 175-236, p. 211, p. 223.

<sup>313</sup> Shapiro’s translation has:

The gods themselves die; still,  
Princely, poems shall reign  
And will  
Stronger than brass remain.

[...] rocks impregnable are not so stout,  
Nor gates of steel so strong

as to be able to resist time's erosional effects (again, really the effects of weather and other forces of decay which can only happen 'in' time) he is nevertheless confident that his 'black ink' will do its work of faithful representation, persuasion, memorability: that a) its reproducibility i.e. its identity across different instantiations, and b) some aspect or effect it produces that persuades readers that it *should be reproduced*, will combine to secure its better-than-object-like persistence. The longevity of discrete bits of language is a common theme: Virginia Woolf quite dogmatically asserts that 'the only test of truth is length of life,' and

since words survive the chops and changes of time longer than any other substance, therefore they are the truest. Buildings fall; even the earth perishes. What was yesterday a cornfield is today a bungalow. But words, if properly used, seem able to live for ever.<sup>314</sup>

So Shakespeare, Gautier, James's works and – despite its claim to vacillation – Stevens' all assert and celebrate their finishedness (allowing that this is always a contradictory assertion, since texts require outside help to reproduce them and, in a sense, to produce them in reading, and are in that sense *unfinished* – '*Die Kunst ist im Vollzug*').<sup>315</sup> They invite us to think of them as instances of words 'properly used'. Oppen's poem, on the other hand, relinquishes the claim to sovereignty and invites us to think of the poem itself not as some exceptional quasi-object which will outlive Gods and the most durable physical objects, but, following its assessment of the car, as likewise, perhaps, 'a thing among others'. If we continue with this mode of reading which allows the poem to describe itself, it recognizes the risk that it will remain 'unapplied' (i.e. unread) and 'empty' – this is in sharp contrast to the confidence of James, Shakespeare et al. – and that even if it is motivated and put to work in a detailed reading such as this one it might, disappointingly, prove 'less

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<sup>314</sup> 'Craftsmanship', p. 139.

<sup>315</sup> 'Art lies in its fulfilment' – H-G. Gadamer in 'Word and Image – so true, so full of being' [1992] quoted by J.M. Baker, Jr. 'Lyric as Paradigm: Hegel and the Speculative Instance of Poetry in Gadamer's Hermeneutics' *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 143-166, p. 143. See also the emphasis in Arthur C. Danto's writing, on how 'an artwork is constituted in relation to an interpretation; the interpretation does not [...] come into play only after the fully formed artwork arrives'. Jonathan Gilmore, 'Foreword' to *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), x.

strange', as the car does when put to work: unexceptional. The exposure of this possibility – that the poem may not be read, and even if read may not prove very exceptional – is quite radical, as it makes manifest once again (by refusing to accept) the received idea of an art-object as a potentially exceptional quasi-object.<sup>316</sup> The poem suggests that a contemporary industrial object is also exceptionally interesting from a philosophical and historical point of view, perhaps more so, and that a poem may not be able to do it justice. This is not representational anti-foundationalism which doubts that language can represent a subject's engagement with reality at all; of 'experience being immediately compromised the moment you say anything about it' (which as Paul de Man goes on to note, is 'a pseudoelegiac theme which, despite its assumed hostility towards language, has generated even more words than the wars of Troy')<sup>317</sup> but rather of the experience of material immediacy – of some minima of mediation – being straightforwardly incapable of translation without being raised above and away from that minima.

It suggests, too, that the idea of art 'doing justice' to objects *qua* objects; to the objecthood of objects is problematic, and perhaps has always been so, since it would likely be difficult to show that any previous instance of ekphrasis – any description of an object in the world was not also 'an overstatement' in this sense: any literary text which goes beyond the minimum gestures of identification of an object could thus legitimately cut itself off mid-way through, as this poem does. It does not, however, propose any ways in which we might do without these ideas: the exceptionality of art-objects and their capacity to present objects (where that is what they do) in lively or engaging ways; ways which are truthful insofar as they do not *add* to the object presented rather than translating, showcasing or reproducing it. This lacuna is itself suggestive: if art-objects assert themselves to be constitutively exceptional (worthy of interest because of this or that about them), they are nevertheless – in contradiction to that constitutive claim which would have them prove their worth; earn their exceptional/aesthetic status – always institutionally and in advance accepted as exceptional (i.e. that *a priori* or for some institutional reasons they are taken to be of interest) and their fulfilment of the constitutive rubric

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<sup>316</sup> See my discussion of the text on a medicine bottle in Chapter 2.3.

<sup>317</sup> 'Appendix B: Literature and Language: a Commentary' in *Blindness & Insight*, pp. 277-190, p. 289.

will only even be tested if they are accorded provisional aesthetic status (i.e. of already having fulfilled it). Two quite radical propositions, then: that aesthetic contemplation might be quite pointless compared to object contemplation and that poems, including this one, might not, in any case, reward that contemplation and activation.

There is, here, a paradoxical confidence which is the product of *lack* of confidence in the institutions of aesthetics and in the poem itself as poetic act – compare the overt (absolute) confidence in Gautier’s poem or the relatively manifest confidence in the lyric performance of Stevens’ poem. These works, their other merits notwithstanding, do not raise such far-reaching possibilities. Though both Gautier and Stevens present a moment of aesthetic experience (production for Gautier, perception for Stevens) neither enacts to the degree that Oppen’s poem does, here, that aesthetic experience is supposed, according to the most influential definition, to involve a *failure* rather than a success of language:

[...] by an aesthetic idea I mean that representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it, which consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible.<sup>318</sup>

The moment of failure here, between ‘lighting’ and ‘An overstatement’ is thus in dialogue with Kant: it appears to present an instance of visual experience ‘[to] which [...] no language fully attains’ – we must assume that the poem is asserting that *no* language attains, otherwise it would be a much weaker problem, irrecoverably banal: if *these* words are an overstatement, but some others would adequately cover the object and convey the experience, then why not just find those, or leave poetry to someone who can? And it does not just assent to Kant’s description of aesthetic experience, but extends it, since the view of a car in the street, or even of clouds passing over its reflective surfaces, is not one that Kant, if he could have imagined it, would likely have accepted as within the purview of the aesthetic. But this moment of failure *also* demonstrates how modernism (if we allow that this failure is

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<sup>318</sup> Kant *Critique of the Power of Judgement* §49 ‘On the faculties of the mind that constitute genius’, p. 92.



distinctively modernist)<sup>319</sup> participates in reflective modernity, the essential fact of which, according to Stanley Cavell's powerful definition

lies in the relation between the present practice of an enterprise and the history of an enterprise, in the fact that this relation has become problematic.

And for him this 'repudiation' begins in Kant:

For it is in Kant that one finds recognition that the terms in which the past is criticized are specific to one's own position, and require justification from within that position.<sup>320</sup>

This is the same story as told by Clement Greenberg:

I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant [...] the essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself [...] <sup>321</sup>

and 'An overstatement' can, I think, be thought of an instance of just such self-criticism within the discipline itself.

If the poem does not propose any solutions or alternatives, it does implicitly propose the Hegelian possibility given expression in the Objectivist issue of *Poetry* and in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*: that 'art [...] is a thing of the past';<sup>322</sup> that the production of poems such as the one that would be produced if the line ending 'lighting' were not cut off is no longer validly possible. It seems to say that his mode of relating to the world has become unignorably problematic. A fuller, though still quite succinct version of the epistemological account of modernism alluded to by Cavell is given by Arthur Danto, for whom (though not only for him):

*Modern art* is not a temporal indicator, meaning what is happening now [...] No: 'Modern Art' refers to a stylistic period, like Mannerism or Baroque. But the shift into the period it names is not just another shift to a new period: it is a shift to a new kind of period. It marks a kind of crisis. [...] [T]here is a stage in the history of each of us when we become objects for ourselves, when we realize we have an identity to inquire into: when we see ourselves

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<sup>319</sup> Working with a capacious definition of modernism, not extracting the avant-gardes from the matrix, as some influential accounts such as Peter Bürger's do. *Theory of the Avant-Garde* [1974] trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>320</sup> *Must We Mean What We Say* [1969] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), xix.

<sup>321</sup> 'Modernist Painting' [1960] in *The Collected Essays and Criticism* Vol 4 ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 85-93, p. 85.

<sup>322</sup> See note 2.

rather than merely see the world. But we also recognize that becoming conscious of ourselves as objects is not like becoming conscious of just another object: it is a new kind of object, a whole new set of relationships, and indeed all the old relationships and objects are redefined. In modern art, art became an object for itself in this sense or something like it.

Art, through its own internal development, reached a stage where it contributed to the internal development of human thought to achieve an understanding of its own historical essence. When that happened, one could no longer think of art as one had thought of it before: *but neither could one practice it as one had practiced it before* [...].<sup>323</sup>

This is, I think, the best account we have for the operation and enduring interest of modernism, and it is one to which I return in Chapter 3. What is significant, here, however, is that the gap at the end of the line ending ‘lighting’ is a place where the impossibility of continuing to practice is made relatively clearly visible.

These instances of self-correction are of further philosophical relevance insofar as they are also evidence that the poem is not (despite the above) following the Hegelian aesthetic-idealist claim described in Chapter 1.1, in which all the parts of a work are load-bearing, and every part the right part in its right place: evidently there is something *wrong* with where the line ending ‘lighting’ was heading in order for the poem to correct itself, and ‘the process of unfolding’ (Hegel) in that part of the poem – that that part of the poem *is* – is arrested. Contrast a stanza of verse known to all British schoolchildren, which, its other possible impacts and effects notwithstanding, gives two very secure syntheses of phenomena (action and visual *qualia*) into meaning:

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.<sup>324</sup>

How did ‘I’ wander? Like a cloud (embodying freedom, I presume, though without much agency). How did the daffodils appear to the observer? Like a ‘crowd’, like a

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<sup>323</sup> *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* [1986] (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) pp. 204-5

<sup>324</sup> Wordsworth, *Untitled* [1804].

‘host’ (i.e. human, or para-human; angelic); as if they were untethered (‘fluttering’) and were choosing to move thus, according to a rhythm sent from elsewhere (‘dancing’). How, by analogy, did the ‘clouds’ and the ‘lighting’ reflected in the surface of the car appear to the observer? We never find out, precisely because the poem mistrusts the security of this kind of routine poetic synthesis, and because the poem seeks or has found an experience of materiality whose importance consists in its bareness; its frustration of meaning.

It is as if the poem itself performs the ‘penetrating analysis’ imagined by Adorno, not of an actually existing work (I am not arguing that the work is secretly about any poem by Wordsworth or anyone else), but instead performs it of the work that would result if the ‘unfolding’ continued, and in doing so

turns up fictions in its claim to aesthetic unity, whether on the grounds that its parts do not spontaneously cohere and that unity is simply imposed on them, or that the elements are prefabricated to fit this unity and are not truly elements.<sup>325</sup>

So when the developing lyric response to the object

Over which clouds pass and the  
alteration of lighting

cuts itself off, and seems to condemn itself and its anticipated continuation as ‘An overstatement’ it finds, with Adorno, ‘aesthetic reconciliation’ to be ‘aesthetically specious’: contrived, incoherent, inauthentic.<sup>326</sup> If there is, in the poem, a ‘desire [to be] objectively perfect’ – to bring about a kind of reconciliation – as well as a ‘desire for what is objectively perfect’ (Zukofsky) then it is a thoroughly frustrated desire.<sup>327</sup> This is, I think, an exceptionally interesting dynamic, and thus a ‘virtue’, but again a complicated one. The complication consists in that asserting that there is a problem here; that this is a poetic rather than a dramatic breaking off – that the poem does not know what to do with itself – instantly resolves the problem and makes its expression successfully mimetic and dramatic. The poem then appears to know exactly what it is doing. The poem’s internal dissatisfaction is, furthermore, difficult

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<sup>325</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 138.

<sup>326</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>327</sup> see Chapter 2.1.

to sketch in our close-reading vocabulary which, even this long after the modernist embrace of failure, still finds it easiest to relate the units of a poem to the whole in terms of ‘success’ or ‘achievement’, and thus to assert that the poem *is* objectively perfect; ‘a thousand-eyed Argus whereby the inner soul and spirit is seen at every point’ and so on, or at least as good as it can possibly be (as indeed it must be, since a better work would be another work, and not this one). In fact to discuss the poem’s achievement inevitably turns the breaking off into a rhetorical effect, such as that described by Nietzsche – implicitly diagnosing the motivation for his own aphoristic style – as ‘the effectiveness of the incomplete’:

Just as figures in relief produce so strong an impression on the imagination because they are as it were on the point of stepping out of the wall but have suddenly been brought to a halt, so the relief-like, incomplete presentation of an idea, of a whole philosophy, is sometimes more effective than its exhaustive realization [...]

The incomplete as artistic stimulant. - The incomplete is often more effective than completeness, especially in the case of the eulogy: the aim of which requires precisely an enticing incompleteness as an irrational element.<sup>328</sup>

It is to turn the work of the poem into an effect just where the poem is maximally suspicious of visual and poetic effects; to make the line-break into an ‘artistic stimulant’ just where the poem seeks to break the expectation of aesthetic stimulation.

As we have seen, this poem does not aim to stand, object-like, through its finish, craft, or memorability. Where the voice of the sonnet crows that even the toughest stuff around is weaker than the power of the poem’s language, in another poem (cited in Chapter 1.2) Oppen cedes the competition, recognizing that, in fact,

Nothing

– and perhaps least of all a poem –

can equal in polish and obscured  
origin that dark instrument  
A car

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<sup>328</sup> *Human, all too Human*, pp. 178, 199.

Nevertheless, for all that it is condemned as having failed, as leading away from the object and towards becoming a poem or the kind of poem that the poem asserts it does not want to be, the line

Over which clouds pass and the  
alteration of lighting

*is* still in the poem – the poem can only cut itself off within the poem, and what was to be cut off can only be disavowed in the poem. As with the (mis)quotation from James at the beginning of the collection the poem here stops short of entirely, explicitly forbidding the reader from reading the line as if it were poetically invested. It thus seems necessary to attend to it, partially, as if it were. As well as a kind of ‘fuzziness’ there is a variegated quality in the line. Changeability is evidenced in the play of light(ing) and is performed in the prosody where the long, slow, stressed vowels of ‘clouds pass’ are balanced but also developed in the quick combination of stressed and unstressed syllables of ‘alteration of lighting’. It could be said that in this variegation and the choice of development rather than stasis the Hopkins/Ruskin aesthetic persists, or that its persistence is hinted at, before the poem stops itself. Hopkins and Ruskin are not the first to theorize the superiority of imperfection and the play it affords over a mathematical kind of perfection. The cautious embrace of perfection (rather than its rejection) here; the recognition that the aesthetic transformation of it misrepresents it and falls short of representing its ‘essential’ quality and the ontological experience it offers, also makes visible that the notion of ‘perfection’ in aesthetics (in aesthetic objects and in their reception) is usually some way short of literal: where someone speaks of a ‘perfect face’ or a ‘perfect painting’ or a ‘perfect line’ they are appealing to a quasi-Platonic ideal and speaking from a subjective point of view, i.e. this face or painting *fits* (some pre-existing model) perfectly rather than figuring the universal/mathematical concept of perfection. Kant, in fact, agrees with Hopkins and Ruskin, and worse than deathly, he considers perfection to be boring:

All stiff regularity (whatever approaches mathematical regularity) is of itself contrary to taste: the consideration of it affords no lasting entertainment, but rather, insofar as it does not expressly have cognition or a determinate practical end as its aim, it induces boredom.<sup>329</sup>

And he is right: the poem beginning ‘Closed car’; the reaction in poetry to its close-to-perfect surfaces could be said to induce boredom – at least incipiently, given its short length – and to fail to induce more affective and expected reactions in various ways. It could be described as merely a presentation of a car parked and a car moving (one which fails to find the distinction between the two as remarkable as it seemed it was about to); it could be described as a presentation of the fairly straightforward perception that glass is both penetrable (one can see the ‘face, still within it’) and impenetrable (the glass can legitimately be said to complete the closure of the car). In the most hostile reading it could be said to be an excruciating, and perhaps accidental pun on ‘hardly’: glass can *scarcely* be said to be an ‘exterior’ since one can see through it, and it is the whole of its object (the interior of the car is not the interior of the glass) but it does, like more solid, three dimensional objects offer hardness; resistance to the senses. And though I have described the breaking off as exceptionally interesting, if we take the poem in a more representationalist sense; one that sees it as an authentic or would-be authentic record of a moment of unreflected experience, it could instead be described as simply a failure to find the right words, or a failure to find a moment of perception in which the right words are found in order to represent that moment. I think it is important to preserve this possible aspect of weakness and failure in the poem (not heroic, exemplary, and therefore successful failure, but rather more muted and philosophically unremarkable failure) but the reason for which at least this last ‘boring’ reading cannot be right is the two words over the line; the words, in fact, which do the cutting off.

There, too, there is a pun: the first sense of the pun is that what has just happened is an ‘over’-statement in that it can readily be figured as – by analogy with the light which falls on the object and is reflected – an attempt to cover the car: to wrap the real in words: to match and map the contours of the object as closely as possible, and/or to take a mould of it into which the reader can pour his or her readerly plaster. When broken we will be left with an accurate picture of the represented object, or,

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<sup>329</sup> *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, p. 126.

one level up, of the meaning which the fact of representation, correctly interpreted, is supposed to produce (and the mould will be unbroken, ready for another reader to fill). The second sense of pun is, as with the possible play on ‘hardly’ a somewhat pedantic and agonizing observation, i.e. that there has been an overstatement in the sense that it is not strictly accurate – it is putting it somewhat too strongly – to say that the car is closed; that the glass truly closes a volume of space. The enclosed space, after all, is still accessible to air circulations and to humans when the door or windows are open (the appearance of the ‘face still within’ the car shows this to be the case). This kind of literalist, even nit-picking correction with regard to the employment of descriptive language is counter to most conceptions of what a poetic orientation to the world and the description of it should be.<sup>330</sup> It is almost a *reductio ad absurdum* of the received idea that poems are instances of carefully chosen words – the words ‘Closed car’ are shown not to have been chosen carefully enough. The production of a response that finds some possible interpretations of a poem ‘excruciating’ and ‘agonizing’ is a species of bathos. There is thus a literary history in which we could situate it, and, counter to the principle of bathos as those instances where a piece of literature falls short of a literary register (the approbation of bathos is always counter to its own principle in this way) this would legitimate it as properly literary. Nevertheless I think the literalist/punning possibilities are – as with idea that the claim to aesthetic status of an object is boring or misplaced compared to the investigation of an object’s more literal objecthood – quite difficult to recuperate into an account of the object as still successfully aesthetic.<sup>331</sup> And yet those possibilities are, without too much interpretative strain, visible, and they do some theoretical work insofar as they make the reader aware that the received account of poetry as ‘carefully chosen words with some added sensuous factor’ in fact has some hidden content: it excludes words chosen with such a high degree of care that they cannot be

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<sup>330</sup> It is somewhat reminiscent of Bartleby in Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener* [1853] who, when he responds to every request that he perform his contractual tasks, leave the office when it closes for the day, etc. by refusing is functionally a literalist: he is only able to refuse because societal and economic demands are *framed* as questions, and he thus shows that they have a force somewhat stronger than a genuine request or inquiry.

<sup>331</sup> When Irvin Ehrenpreis – a scholar of Swift who must have had some experience of the mode – writes of how Oppen ‘risks bathos’ it is certainly not praise: ‘sparseness has little power by itself. When Oppen rejects the common privileges of a poet he not only adds little excitement to his language; he also risks bathos. The elliptical character of his style barely distinguishes it from the cryptic.’ ‘The State of Poetry’ *New York Review of Books*, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1976, p. 4, cited in Michael Adams: ‘George Oppen’ in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol 5: *American Poets Since World War II*, Part 2: L-Z ed. Donald J. Greiner (Detroit: Gale, 1980), pp. 129-133.

accused of carelessly misstating facts about the object; ‘care’ must mean something other than rigour and security with regard to meaning.

The third and most important sense of the pun is, as I have outlined above, that the words ‘an overstatement’ pass negative judgement on either the description of the light playing on the car’s surface or on the elevation of the car-experience complex into more canonically literary meaning which was about to happen via a relational operator like ‘like’ or ‘as if’ or ‘making’ or ‘such that’. It is not, I think, unreasonable to half-expect such an operator; among the first things we teach children about poetry (this is not to say that the teaching necessarily bears close relation to the work they are asked to do by the poems themselves, but even if there is a huge and irreconcilable difference there might be truth-content in the disparity) is that it has to do with similes and metaphors (and especially the difference between them) and attention to the world; the artful use of language describing the object world either to put objects into dialogue with each other in a formally pleasing (because absurd but still plausible?) way in order to structurally reveal something true and unknown or unexpected or hitherto unenunciated about human life and experience; to make us see the world anew. T.E. Hulme gives voice to this received idea:

I shall maintain that wherever you get an extraordinary interest in a thing, a great zest in contemplation which carries on the contemplator to accurate description [...] there you have sufficient justification for poetry. It must be an intense zest which heightens a thing out of the level of prose.<sup>332</sup>

and Hugo von Hofmannsthal gives the dynamic a modernist turn by extending the range of objects in which the artist might take ‘extraordinary interest’:

it is something that has never been named and that is probably impossible to name which manifests itself to me at such moments, taking some object from my everyday surroundings and filling it like a vessel with an overflowing torrent of higher life [...] [a] watering can, a harrow left abandoned in a field, a dog in the sun, a poor churchyard, a small farmhouse – any one of these can become a vessel for my revelation.<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> *Speculations*, p.136.

<sup>333</sup> *The Lord Chandos Letter* trans. Michael Hoffman (New York: NYRB, 2005), p.10.



have to say (about poetry and knowledge) is that

Language becomes a measure of truth only when we are conscious of the non-identity of an expression with that which we mean.<sup>334</sup>

## 2.5 The Local History of ‘Closed car’

The ‘Closed car’ on which I have put so much weight in my reading may be said to be an example of something ‘the poet did not create’ in a second, less aesthetically and philosophically significant sense: Oppen may have borrowed the phrase from ‘The Waste Land’. As with the contrast between the opening of *Discrete Series* and that of Pound’s *Cantos*, the differences between the works are stark and instructive, and I end my reading by comparing the respective employments of the term ‘Closed car’ and considering the differences between the wider object poetic in ‘The Waste Land’ and that in *Discrete Series*.

In Eliot’s poem the ‘closed car’ is straightforwardly presented as existing for its prospective users, one of whose speech is marked by a ‘Jamesian’ inversion similar to that witnessed in the opening poem of *Discrete Series*:

What shall we ever do?  
[...]  
                                    The hot water at ten.  
And if it rains, a closed car at four.<sup>335</sup>

The voice of the poem here inhabits the position of someone who can comfortably imagine making the transition from outside to inside the car and back again; who does not find its transformation from static to moving object noteworthy, let alone arresting. This is something that these voices (albeit sharply distinguished from the working-class voices of the pub closing-time section that follows) share with ‘The Waste Land’ as a whole: though some subject is distracted by ‘the sounds of horns and motors’, and despite how we are that told the ‘human engine waits / like a taxi throbbing waiting’, the poem’s object sympathies are with the natural world (the

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<sup>334</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, p. 111.

<sup>335</sup> *Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 65.

‘dead land’, the river, the ‘hyacinth’, the ‘red rock’) and the human body or human remains (Lil’s unpurchased false teeth, the ‘broken finger-nail’, the bones ‘rattled by the rat’s foot’) rather than industrial artefacts. ‘The Waste Land’ is concerned with inertness, but with inertness as absence of possible fecundity: ‘sterile thunder without rain’ is sterile from the point of view of human, animal, or plantlife needing water, but from the point of view of the storm it is merely infertile. And while Highbury and Richmond are certainly no Siena or Maremma (‘Trams and dusty trees / Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew / Undid me [...]’), the observation that they are not contains the grain of the suggestion that they should be, and even that under the correct conditions could be. Conversely *Discrete Series* presents the inertness of steel or stone as a permanent condition or property in a strong sense: polished steel is truly ‘sterile’. The object-gaze of ‘The Waste Land’ avoids, except for very occasionally, looking at the machines whose existence is what created the industrial city in the first place; which determine (via a long chain of multiple, partial determinations) the difference between renaissance cities and suburban districts of 20<sup>th</sup> century cities of similar size in terms of population.<sup>336</sup>

That the importance of ‘The Waste Land’ is how it distils and performs some signal aspects of modern/urban experience (it figures modern experience *as* urban): how it forms part of Modernism’s function as ‘*our* art’ (emphasis added); ‘the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos’ is well attested to in English-language literary history (since ‘The Waste Land’).<sup>337</sup> This account is so widely accepted as to almost

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<sup>336</sup> The Census of 1921 gives the Metropolitan Borough of Richmond a total population of 35, 639 [via Online Historical Population Reports: [http://www.histpop.org/ohpr/servlet/PageBrowser?path=Browse/Census%20\(by%20geography\)&active=yes&mno=169&tocstate=expandnew&display=sections&display=tables&display=pagetitles&pageseq=12](http://www.histpop.org/ohpr/servlet/PageBrowser?path=Browse/Census%20(by%20geography)&active=yes&mno=169&tocstate=expandnew&display=sections&display=tables&display=pagetitles&pageseq=12)]. In *A Medieval Italian Commune: Siena under the Nine 1287-1355* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) William M. Bowsky gives a figure of 50,000 for the city’s total number of inhabitants in 1328, i.e. a few years after Dante’s death in 1321 (p. 19). Since this was a period of ‘building, expansion and growth’ we can be confident that the population was somewhat lower in the era of Dante’s maturity, circa 1300 (Bowsky, ‘Impact of the Black Death upon Sienese Government and Society’, *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 39.1 (January 1964) 1-34, 8). He notes that other estimates of the city’s population are a little lower: ‘25,000 within the city walls and another 12-13000 in surrounding communities’ (‘Impact of the Black Death’, 5).

<sup>337</sup> Malcolm Bradbury and John McFarlane, ‘The Name and Nature of Modernism’ in *Modernism, 1890-1930* ed. Bradbury and McFarlane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978) p. 27. Ástráður Eysteinnsson, who quotes this passage in *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 22, rightly describes this model as ‘mimetic’, from which description we might note the similarity to the dynamic visible in the association of perfection with death: a return of pre-modernist values (faithful, holistic figuration) in the guise of responsive engagement with modernist practice (refusal of holistic figuration).

constitute a fact on which we base other theories in our accounts of the functioning of modernist poetry:

the fragmentation and disconnection of modern consciousness had repeatedly been displayed from *The Waste Land* [onwards] [...] stylistic features of the text – syntactical discontinuity, fragmentation, juxtaposition of the heterogenous, banality – represent similar qualities in experience.<sup>338</sup>

and it is an account offered, in one of its earliest forms, by Eliot himself:

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.<sup>339</sup>

This possibility – of the poem as formal ‘rehearsal’ or staging of social experience – is certainly realised in ‘*The Waste Land*’, and the clear and virtuosic execution of this possibility in ‘*The Waste Land*’ and other works – and Eliot’s explicit description of it – causes critics to realise that it is a possible way of understanding poems; that this might be something that poems and other art objects do, under modernism, and might have been doing all the time. For example J.M Bernstein writes that

art was traditionally [i.e. *always* was] the cultural space in which we collectively rehearsed the experience of society as an expressive empirical order in its force and fragility [the disappearance of this order is what modernism is said to register]<sup>340</sup>

but it is not easy to find accounts like this of the relation between art and society (from the point of view of art) which pre-date modernism; accounts in which the work’s object of understanding is the self or subject in society at a particular historical juncture and how its mode of understanding itself and its context is thereby determined. In this way ‘*The Waste Land*’ has achieved the version of ‘objecthood’ I discussed above with regard to the complexity of the opening poem: its demand that we return to it is successful. Indeed it goes much further and – going beyond this

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<sup>338</sup> *A History of Modern Literature* quoted in Jennison, *The Zukofsky Era*, p. 2-3.

<sup>339</sup> from ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ [1921] in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1950), pp. 241-250, p. 248.

<sup>340</sup> *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 99.

version of the object metaphor – it has become the lens or ‘objective’ through which we consider contemporaneous and subsequent poems (perhaps denying them the opportunity to establish themselves as distinctive, discrete objects; limiting their ability to demand new and distinct kinds of attention).

Nevertheless Oppen goes further than Eliot with regard to the represented object world and the object world in which both poems were written and published. We might summarise this difference in the treatment of objects in the observation that ‘The Waste Land’ is interested by the fact that the typist’s food comes in tins, but not, as *Discrete Series* would be, by the fact of tin. It is in its fragmentation and its social gaze (the pub, the typist) an object ‘consonant with its day’. This was one of the prime Objectivist imperatives: it belongs to the Objectivist poet to

make of his words a new form: to invent, that is, an object consonant with his day.<sup>341</sup>

but ‘The Waste Land’ is not an object much interested in representing what the ‘day’ looked like, nor the connection between the signal objects which distinguish London in 1922 from London in 1822, 1722, or 1622 and the dominant mode of production. It thus makes sense that in a recent collection dedicated to assessing the relationship between *T.S. Eliot and our Turning World* there are sections on ‘Eliot and Innocence/Experience’, ‘Eliot and Philosophy’, ‘Eliot and the Other Arts’ ‘and Popular Culture’ ‘and Anti-Semitism’, ‘and Contemporary Criticism’ but not ‘Eliot and Industrialization’.<sup>342</sup>

On the other side, that of the represented subjects and the subject-positions into which the poems interpellate their readers, there are strong similarities in terms of the alienation of the represented subjects from themselves and each other. Thus the sexual encounter (a moment of experience in which embodied subjects register their objecthood and which, from the point of view of the subject-as-object promises the production of new subject/object beings) in ‘The Waste Land’ is one without the psychological eventhood that the word ‘encounter’ promises – that this promise inheres in the concept is recorded (negatively) in a poem from *Discrete Series*:

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<sup>341</sup> Williams, *Autobiography*, p. 264.

<sup>342</sup> ed. Jewel Spears Brooker (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001).

Movement of no import  
Not encountering you<sup>343</sup>

Sex in 'The Waste Land' thus strongly resembles how the subjects of another poem in *Discrete Series* experience 'love at the pelvis' but are said to 'slide in separate hard grooves' (the poem may be asserting that *all* coitus, rather than only this represented instantiation, promises the dissolution of individual subjectivity but does not fulfil its promise).<sup>344</sup> But it should be noted that though Eliot's subjects are alienated they remain conscious of their alienation. Thus where Eliot's typist's 'brain' *still* 'allows one half-formed thought to pass' the subjects in a later poem in *Discrete Series* are more thoroughly stripped of their subjecthood in the experience, not 'brains' but only bodies (stripped of human feature) and clothes:

[...]  
Man and wife, removing gloves  
Or overcoat. Still faces already lunar.

Returning to the side of more thorough-going (non-human) objects, the 'closed car' as it exists in 'The Waste Land' is not an object which demands analysis and engagement; it does not even refuse it. It serves conveniently to transport the speaker and his or her companions as they continue to wait for something – and a human-agent-event rather than an object – to puncture their restless ennui (Eliot has promoted those with 'lidless eyes' from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'hell' to purgatory):<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> *NCP*, p. 24.

<sup>344</sup> *NCP*, p. 26. This separation is sharply distinguished from Milton's vision of angel sex and its total interpenetration of 'pure with pure' which makes even prelapsarian sex between humans ('flesh to mix with flesh, or soul with soul') seem – as in Oppen and Eliot – tragically mediated and incomplete; relying on 'conveyance[s]', i.e. expression, vehicles, form:

[Raphael:]	Whatever pure thou in the body enjoyest (And pure thou wert created) we enjoy In eminence; and obstacle find none Of membrane, joint, or limb, exclusive bars; Easier than air with air, if Spirits embrace, Total they mix, union of pure with pure Desiring, nor restrained conveyance need, As flesh to mix with flesh, or soul with soul.	[ <i>Paradise Lost</i> VIII, 622-29]
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<sup>345</sup> Although the possessors of the lidless eyes in the earlier work are literally described as 'in hell', Eliot is in fact continuing the dynamic already at work in Rossetti's poem of de-differentiating the

[...] if it rains, a closed car at four  
And we shall play a game of chess,  
Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.

In Oppen's poem, on the other hand, the car, or rather the fact of its more resolute closedness, is *itself* that 'knock upon the door'. There is, in light of Oppen's poem, something dingy about the figuration of ennui and expectation via its dramatic, literal counterpart: something dingy and limiting about the representation of dinginess, and for all of the slightness, modesty, and tentativeness of the poetic of *Discrete Series* – compare the hymning of the industrialized world in Hart Crane or Mayakovsky:

I stare  
I seize on it  
Brooklyn Bridge —  
That's quite a thing!

as an Eskimo gapes at a train,  
as a tick fastens to an ear.  
yes

346

– there is nevertheless the hope that the contemplation (or, contemplation minus its placid and self-satisfied associations) of the actually existing world can produce something other than despairing recognition of stasis and limit, even if the poem remains mistrustful of what it is that the act of perception and its expression has

spheres of the afterlife, seeing them as merging in social life on earth under modernity. The poem ends:

May not this ancient room thou sit'st in dwell  
In separate living souls for joy or pain?  
Nay, all its corners may be painted plain  
Where Heaven shows pictures of some life spent well;  
And may be stamped, a memory all in vain,  
Upon the sight of lidless eyes in Hell.

'Inclusiveness' from *The House of Life* [1881]. *Collected Writings* ed. Jan Marsh (London: J.M. Dent, 1999), p. 307.

<sup>346</sup> 'Brooklyn Bridge' [1925] trans. Max Hayward and George Reavey *Writing New York: a Literary Anthology* ed. Phillip Loate (New York: Library of America, 1998), pp. 479-484, p. 483.

produced. This might be thought a little harsh on ‘The Waste Land’, if we consider that the poem does venture beyond claustrophobic rooms: from the ‘Hofgarten’ and the sledding-hill at ‘the archduke’s’ to ‘Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London’. One speaking subject accords itself a vista of the ‘Undead city’, but the crowd on the bridge who might offer animation turn out to be dead; incapable of intersubjective engagement (‘And each man fixed his eyes before his feet’: they are on their way to work) and the cities listed are described as ‘Unreal’; available to thought but not experience. The objects in *Discrete Series* on the other hand, are not just available to modern urban experience, but next to unavoidable, and the experience of them offered in the poems is likewise subtended as a possibility to the collection’s modern, urban readers. Oppen’s collection actually picks a man from the crowd and follows him to his place of work where he is operating machinery: unlike the modes of human activity in ‘The Waste Land’ – tobogganing; having sex; clairvoyancy; lingering by a river; drinking; inducing abortion – which are relatively timeless, his activity is distinctly modern:

Who comes is occupied  
Toward the chest (in the crowd moving  
                    opposite  
Grasp of me)  
                    In firm overalls  
The middle-aged man sliding  
Levers in the steam-shovel cab,——  
Lift (running cable) and swung, back  
                    [...] <sup>347</sup>

Even the most apparently modern activities in ‘The Waste Land’ – the occupations of the typist and of the crowd flowing over the river to work; the fact that the typist lives alone and can have sex outside of marriage – are in fact the *product* of the existence and generalisation of this worker’s activity; they are determined by the active relation to the material world presented in *Discrete Series* (rather than the philosophical relation) – the activity which both requires and produces the uniform impenetrable surfaces which are the primary object of the collection’s gaze.

Notwithstanding these instructive contrasts between the respective employment of the words ‘closed car’ in *Discrete Series* and in ‘The Waste Land’, and the object

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<sup>347</sup> *NCP*, p. 14.



poetic that develops from them in each case, Oppen's taking up of the term can also be thought of as a response not (or not only) to Eliot, but to the use of the term as it circulated more widely in the English-speaking world in the period. Corpus analysis shows that, after first registering significantly in the 1880s there was a sustained peak in its written employment around 1930, at a level six times higher than in 1910, and twice as high as the late 1940s (by the end of the century its frequency of appearance had diminished to the level of 1910).<sup>348</sup> As the poems of *Discrete Series* were being written the term was thus both relatively new and in relatively common use to distinguish the new kind of automobile, precursor of those which so massively predominate today, which protect both the driver and the occupants from precipitation, cold, dust or apparent wind by means of glass windows and a glass wind-screen (corpus analysis for 'windscreen' and 'windshield' show a similar pattern of rising frequency from 1880-1930, but where 'closed-car' drops off 'windscreen' and 'windshield' fall modestly, then rise again and continue to rise until the present day).<sup>349</sup>

Within the frame of a single language, and with the exception of poems including many archaisms (which can be considered would-be anachronistic objects), the overwhelming majority of poems work with the vocabulary historically available to them: a poem might try to coin a word or might borrow its words from an uncommon and inaccessible corpus, but no poem can be made of words not yet coined, and a poem made of words whose meaning has been lost – for example a poem which chooses its words from an as yet undeciphered ancient language (the choice would necessarily be somewhat arbitrary with regard to meaning) – would be so thoroughly inaccessible to even the most diligent and perceptive of readers that it would be difficult to describe, or even recognise, as a poem. The vast majority of poems, then, are made of contemporary language. But Oppen's poem beginning 'Closed car' is not only – passively – further evidence of this self-evidently true observation. Rather it turns and addresses, if not quite this fact, at least that this new

<sup>348</sup>[[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=closed+car&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct\\_url=t1%3B%2Cclosed%20car%3B%2Cc0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=closed+car&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cclosed%20car%3B%2Cc0)].

<sup>349</sup>'windshield': [[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=windshield&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct\\_url=t1%3B%2Cwindshield%3B%2Cc0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=windshield&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cwindshield%3B%2Cc0)]  
'windscreen':

[[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=windscreen&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct\\_url=t1%3B%2Cwindscreen%3B%2Cc0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=windscreen&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cwindscreen%3B%2Cc0)].

term, alongside this new object, has entered the language and thus also entered the list of possible materials for poetry and thought. In its economical gloss ('closed in glass') it explores the functioning of the new coinage in its ordinary use, as well as putting philosophical pressure on the first half of it. So as well as registering the newness of the *object* and its material qualities, the poem here performs a kind of *linguistic* documentary and investigative function.

Which is to say that 'Closed car' is also merely how people refer to motorcars in the period – even the *words* from one perspective refuse to be motivated by an account of the importance or interest of their having been chosen, and are themselves 'things among others'. This is a reading that some Oppen scholars might resist. Michael Heller, for instance, emphasizes the struggle pertaining to choice in Oppen's 'unique "poetics" of the word'. For him Oppen wants to 'dissociate one word from another as though to restore their Heideggerian *dasein*' and the 'compactions' of words in his compositional daybooks' – and by extension in the poems produced from them – ss are 'authentic ingatherings of the flux of existence, formulations won from dissolution and even despair'.<sup>350</sup> But the virtue of the account I offer here, which stresses their arbitrary rather than their urgent ontological nature, is that it allows the poems to have a public rather than private function. It allows us to see how, as Marx notes, rather than being 'the product of an individual'

Language itself is [...] the product of a community, as in another respect it is the existence of the community: it is, as it were, the communal being speaking for itself.<sup>351</sup>

Language itself then, if not its objectivation/objectification-into-a-poem, is, like the material for objectivist poetry, a 'fact' that the author did not create. It is a special product, however; quite unlike most of the types of property to which Marx is making it analogous; one that can be employed to interrogate the conditions and fact

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<sup>350</sup> *Speaking the Estranged: Essays on the Work of George Oppen* (Cambridge: Salt, 2008), p. 82, p. 85, p. 92.

<sup>351</sup> 'Notebook V, January 22, 1858 – Chapter on Capital. Continued' trans. Jack Cohen [<http://marxistsfr.org/archive/marx/works/1857/precapitalist/ch01.htm>]. I would usually cite a printed text in the first instance, but in the leading scholarly edition this 'being' [*Dasein*] is rendered less emphatically: 'Language itself is the product of a community, just as it is in another respect the presence [*Dasein*] of the community, a presence which goes without saying' *Grundrisse* [1857-58] trans Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 490.

of its dialectically collective production (dialectical because though ‘language as the product of an individual is an absurdity’ any language-system requires vast numbers of individual instantiations or speech acts to support and sustain it).<sup>352</sup> The community cannot, in fact, speak, or cannot speak in such a way that we can quote it directly, but a poem, as here, can arrest the speech at the moment of introduction of a new possibility and mark both a) that the change in available vocabulary has happened and b) by implication, that this vocabulary is what partly determines what it is possible for society and the individual to think about itself, and each about the other.

## 2.6 Craft vs. Industry

The car itself: the actual car, as it were, rather than its representation, is not only ‘a fact that the poet did not create’ but ‘a fact’ that no single person created. It is, by definition (unless it is a very special, very early vehicle) created by an organized concentration of capital, normally a corporation, with the power to dispose the activity of many men into discrete actions, according to a plan created elsewhere which must be carefully followed and not modified. I earlier wrote of the Objectivist habit of comparing the production of a poem to – describing it as – ‘craft’ (Chapter 0.2), and also noted Williams describing, in a review of *Discrete Series*, a poem as a ‘machine’ (Chapter 1.3; this is one of several occasions on which he does so). There is a contradiction here, in the descriptions of poetic production or operation, that is part of a wider contradiction being worked out in *Discrete Series* between craft and industrial production. Firstly there is, as I sketch above, no such thing as a ‘craft’ car. So when I earlier described the Ruskin/Hopkins ‘organicist object panegyric’ in which the celebration of the aesthetic object or revealed-to-be-aesthetic object depends on the object’s status *as* (i.e. because it is, or insofar as it displays itself as) the product of processes that are recognizably human, traceable to an individual subjectivity, I had in mind that the ‘Closed car’, the ‘steel deck’, the ‘glass of

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<sup>352</sup> Marx is not making an argument primarily about language, but rather about the private property form: ‘Language as the product of an individual is an absurdity. But so also is property.’ *ibid.*



critics of Objectivism up to the present day. For example (these are chosen more-or-less at random) Charles Altieri writes that ‘there are objectivists [...] because the poets share only a sense of the necessity and value of sincerity and a concern for the attention to craft [...]’.<sup>355</sup> Robert Franciosi interprets Zukofsky’s praise for the ‘care for significant detail and precision’ in Reznikoff as ‘a sign of his [Reznikoff’s] devotion to craft’.<sup>356</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis glosses one of the key statements of Objectivism – ‘desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars’ – as the idea that

when a poem is “objectively perfect” – built from sincerity and the crafts of articulation toward that end – then it will of necessity embody or present some recognizable direction in life as we know it.<sup>357</sup>

Whereas, in fact, though crafts may *aim* for production of an ‘objectively perfect’ thing, unlike industrial processes they rarely achieve it: the concept of perfection implies singularity – that this instance of x or y is the best and any variation from it will be by definition worse – the concept of craft that variety is acceptable, and inevitable. Describing what he sees as Oppen’s motivation for returning to poetry Eric Mottram cites Laura Riding’s description of ‘the creed and craft of poetry’; the ‘craft tying the hope to verbal rituals that court sensuosity [*sic*] as if it were the judge of truth’.<sup>358</sup> And Theodore Enslin describes how Oppen ‘plays a dangerous game, particularly in the marked repetition of words and phrases, but his craft is so sure that it is a dazzling triumph each time.’<sup>359</sup> Literal crafts, however – the practices for which the description ‘craft’ is not metaphorical at all – do not usually end in ‘dazzling triumphs’, which would normally be in the purview of the fine arts, or cinematic spectacle.

These critics do not question the choice of ‘craft’ [of poetry] over say, ‘practice’, ‘art’, ‘work’ or even ‘profession’ – after all, poets in the Anglophone world, before the introduction of MFAs and BAs in creative writing had no more of the trappings of a traditional craftsman (familial and regional specialization, guild-membership

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<sup>355</sup> ‘The Objectivist Tradition’ in *The Objectivist Nexus*, pp. 25-36, p. 29.

<sup>356</sup> ‘Reading Reznikoff: Zukofsky, Oppen, and Niedecker’, *ibid.* pp. 257-274, p. 262.

<sup>357</sup> ‘Objectivist Poetics and Political Vision’, p. 127.

<sup>358</sup> ‘The Political Responsibilities of the Poet’, *George Oppen: Man and Poet*, pp. 149-168, p. 163.

<sup>359</sup> ‘Of What Is Prime and Primal: Considerations of George Oppen’s *Primitive*’, *George Oppen: Man and Poet*, pp. 445-451, p. 447.

etc.) any more than they had the credentials (licenses, diplomas) of a profession. There are some ways in which the practice of writing poetry does loosely resemble a craft – ways in which the habit of referring to it in that way is unremarkable: it is in general a solitary affair; it is assumed that the requisite tools will be minimal and portable (brain, hands, writing instruments; leaving aside the possibility that a library or community or poetic tradition may also be considered necessary); the object remains in front of the producer until it is deemed finished (there are famous exceptions, of course, such as Pound’s editorial pruning of ‘The Waste Land’) – it does not move on a conveyor belt towards some other worker, and, inexorably, its consumer; the practice of poetry is presumed, like a craft, to require special aptitude and patient practice (otherwise everyone would be making poems all the time). But still: why describe writing poems in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as craft, when, for example, painting – a mode much more apt for such description insofar as it was in its past regulated by guilds and career progression within it was via apprenticeship – is much less frequently described that way. On the one hand it can be seen simply as an assertion of the independence, dignity and status of the producer, outside of the wage-relation, once more with the muse rather than foreman directing one’s efforts (or if the muse is still too aristocratic a figure, given the class overtones of ‘craft’, one’s talents). And the context of the assertion of this dignity by Oppen and Bunting as by their contemporary critics – the assertion that the subject still has control over her productions – is that of a generalized loss of control in the labour process. Modern capitalism, Marx rightly notes, is marked by

*Dissolution of the relations in which he [the worker] appears as proprietor of the instrument. Just as the above form of landed property presupposes a real community, so does this property of the worker in the instrument presuppose a particular form of the development of manufactures, namely craft, artisan work.*<sup>360</sup>

But it is not just a question of the dominant mode of production and the limited self-determination accorded to the industrial worker compared to under craft conditions, but also of the *products* of that mode of production: the interest of the metaphor

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<sup>360</sup> From NOTEBOOK V 22 January 1858 - Beginning of February 1858, *Grundrisse*, p. 497. I’m grateful to Charles Sumner, who in his essay ‘The Turn Away from Marxism, or Why We Read the Way We Read Now’ – *Diacritics* 40.3 (Fall 2012) 26-55 – alerted me to the importance of this section of the *Grundrisse* to models of aesthetic production and objecthood.

derives from the contrasts with the objects in the industrialised world and with the characteristics that the division and mechanisation of labour enable, among them the uniform impenetrable surfaces which preoccupy the poems of *Discrete Series*.

Some twenty-five years later, Roland Barthes also looks at a new kind of car, and also highlights the alien quality of the car's reflective surfaces:

The new Citroën manifestly falls from heaven insofar as it presents itself first of all as a superlative *object* [...] [I]n this object there is easily a perfection and an absence of origin, a completion and a brilliance, a transformation of life into matter [...] and all in all a *silence* [...].<sup>361</sup>

Despite the rapturous quality of Barthes' description which is quite counter to the address of *Discrete Series*, there is a similarity between the perception that he gives voice to and the orientation of the poems in the collection and their sense of the material object's superlativeness and the difficulty in accounting for it:

Nothing can equal in polish and obscured  
origin that dark instrument  
A car  
[...] <sup>362</sup>

Considered in light of the tension between process and product in Objectivist accounts of poetry (see Chapter 1.1) the car appears to be a product without a visible process. It cannot possibly have been made by a human: it lacks the distinctive traces of human activity celebrated by Hopkins and Ruskin. It is in this sense that its 'origin' is 'obscured'. But what does this mean? Short of literally ascribing it extra-terrestrial origins, as Barthes whimsically does (he is partly voicing what the car *wants* us to believe – owning an apparently extra-terrestrial object is an attractive prospect), or thinking that the objects origins are ultimately unknowable, it means that it can only have been made by a humans working in industrial conditions. The obscurity serves a purpose: it would not be appropriate for the object in its commodity aspect to remind the potential purchaser too explicitly of his or her own labour conditions, and this is something hinted at in another poem, one concerned with objects as commodities:

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<sup>361</sup> *Mythologies* [1957] trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 169.

<sup>362</sup> *NCP*, p. 8.

Thus  
 Hides the  
  
 Parts—the prudery  
 Of Frigidaire, of  
 Soda-jerking—  
  
 Thus  
  
 Above the  
  
 Plane of lunch, of wives  
 Removes itself  
 [...] <sup>363</sup>

The poem is relatively cryptic but in the bourgeois context of ‘the / Plane of lunch, of wives’ the importance of ‘the prudery’ of ‘Soda jerking’ is that the consumer can perform, or see performed, exactly the same motion as is performed in the production of the refrigerator – the amplification of force by a lever which operates a machine (one which stamps metal rather than carbonating liquid) and the consumption and/or branding of the experience (a ‘Frigidaire’ rather than a refrigerator) forbids him from seeing it.

These objects, then, which offer an experience of the ‘non- or anti-human’ *are also* testament to the concerted efforts of thousands of humans; to human ingenuity in the partial replacement of human with machine power (to moments of ingenuity after which the opportunities for imaginative engagement with the material in the labour process are sharply restricted) and to the system which concerts their efforts. Barthes’ answer to the question of *why* the ‘new Citroën’ looks like that – what it is that makes the look of the Citroën DS possible and why that seemed to its creators necessary – is by comparison historically blind. And despite the initial similarity of the ‘readings’ (how both are struck by the apparent alien-ness of the object’s origins), Barthes’ analysis of the production history of the object is almost the opposite of the one legible in these poems:

I believe that the automobile is [...] the almost exact equivalent of the Gothic cathedrals: I mean a great creation of the period, passionately conceived by unknown artists [...]. We are now confronted with a humanized art. <sup>364</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> *NCP*, p. 7.

<sup>364</sup> *ibid.*, p. 169, p. 170.



*Discrete Series* makes visible that the impenetrable surface of the car, the ‘bolt’, the steel deck are emphatically ‘creation[s] of the period’ *because* they covertly attest to their production history, which is to say their collective production by machines, operated by workers, not artists.

In one of the best readings of *Discrete Series* – perhaps the only one fully to recognize that these ‘difficult poems whose fragmented forms challenge the reader’s interpretative struggles’ are largely concerned with ‘understanding [one’s] relation to modern materials’<sup>365</sup> – Kathleen d’Angelo seeks to uncover how

Oppen’s approach to objects, and his creation of poetic things [...] models a stance of inquiry that invites critical consideration of the ideologies ordering existence, and, ultimately, shaping our relationship to the materials we encounter.<sup>366</sup>

As coordinates for her discussion d’Angelo supplies, among other things, both Marx’s analysis of the commodity-as-fetish and an important statement Objectivism; Zukofsky’s idea that it consists in ‘thinking with the things as they exist’.<sup>367</sup> ‘As they exist’, that is, not only in the sense of not distorting them or representing them according to some set of tired conventions, but also *presenting* the objects which are currently in the world: things which are distinctively modern both in appearance and insofar as they are testament to the mode of production and mode of existence. Its presentation of the ‘things as they exist’ is one of the clearest ways in which *Discrete Series* can be said to be an Objectivist text and the implicit analysis of the social content embedded in the apparently impenetrable surfaces – the way in which the poems expose a fundamental antinomy of industrial object relations; that the objects are for us, and by us, but nevertheless alien to us (for and by capital) – necessitates, perhaps, a shift of emphasis: what we witness in the collection is *thinking* with the things as they exist.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> “‘The Sequence of Disclosure’”, 163

<sup>366</sup> *ibid.*, 158.

<sup>367</sup> ‘Sincerity and Objectification’ 273, cited by d’Angelo, 165.

<sup>368</sup> Neatly, this is exactly the opposite shift in emphasis that Oppen himself proposes to be required, in a letter to his daughter in 1966: ‘A Catholic philosopher, name of Gilson, has a very nice sentence: ‘Philosophers’ – and he could have said poets – think about *things*.’ With or without the italics, a very nice sentence. I would teach it in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, with a shift of emphasis: Poets and philosophers *think* about things. And with the PhD diploma, I’d tell them: Poets and philosophers think about *things*.’ *Selected Letters*, p. 132.

It is in this light that the habit of describing poetic practice as ‘craft’ looks especially peculiar. In light of the implicit analysis of concealed origins the assertion of craft appears even more strongly to be an attempt to recover control over production (even if it is only the production of poems) that is denied to us under capitalism. *Discrete Series* both represents (in the objects presented) the end of the possibility of ‘craft’ and also, in, for example, the radical self-corrections in the poem beginning ‘Closed car’, embodies it. There is a kind of pathos, though, since the assertion of craft in this context illustrates that to *claim* the status of craftsman is always – not only in New York or London circa 1930 – paradoxical, or catachrestic: the fact of claim illustrates the impossibility of its truth.<sup>369</sup> Blacksmiths are traditionally blacksmiths’ sons, but they are only genuinely blacksmiths in a society which requires blacksmiths. If you choose to be a blacksmith (or a poet) because you see it as a craft (rather than at most choosing it amongst other crafts) it is already much too late, and if you can see the tradition you are by definition outside it. As Jameson puts it

the question about value – about the reason for pursuing this or that life task, in this or that fashion – is short-circuited by the classic reply of all traditional societies: Because it was always done that way.<sup>370</sup>

What Jameson means here, is that the historical development of the means of production forces the question of why one does things in a certain way: the costs and benefits (to capital) of producing something in one way or in another way, or of producing a different thing altogether, are by definition calculated in advance. So the epistemological breaking point, or break-through, described by Danto (in which art-objects seem to come to knowledge of themselves) is not just a product of the Hegelian self-development of the spirit, as he asserts (‘[a]rt, through its own internal development, reached a stage where it contributed to the internal development of human thought’) but also correlated with material conditions of existence, and the structural organization of their reproduction. Which is to say that my stated aim of exploring the function of hardness in the collection from literary-historical and

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<sup>369</sup> This is again reminiscent of Cavell’s description of Kantian modernity, wherein ‘the relation between the present practice of an enterprise and the history of an enterprise, in the fact that this relation has become problematic’.

<sup>370</sup> *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 238.

historical perspectives (i.e. separately, in their distinct aspects) is unfulfillable: they are intrinsically connected. As another Adornian critic writes, noting the correlation between economic and aesthetic modernity:

Under the conditions of industrial production, that aesthetic surplus which breathed life into the products of craftsmanship appears obsolete, as if any aesthetic surplus inevitably rang false in industrially manufactured utility objects, or else degenerated into illusionistic decoration.<sup>371</sup>

And, indeed, the assertion of the continued existence of that aesthetic surplus in an *era* of industrially manufactured utility objects, and in texts, like these, which are concerned with them likewise appears obsolete. It seems likely that the Hopkins/Ruskin aesthetic was an early reaction to this predicament – an assertion that craft was still possible and necessary in an industrializing era; that it did not, in fact, ring false. Or, it could equally be seen as a discursive act of resistance against this predicament and industrialisation itself: it is worth remembering that even Marx demonstrated this resistive tendency in his wish that the mass movement of population from the countryside to the cities could halt and be reversed.<sup>372</sup> Other, later reactions are more positive, embracing the historical impossibility of an instinctual, traditional relationship to aesthetic materials. ‘Weep not!’ writes Adolf Loos, ‘[s]ee, therein lies the greatness of our age, that it is incapable of producing a new ornament.’<sup>373</sup>

Objectivism, perhaps, falls between these stools. Objectivist poets and their critics claim ‘we are still capable of craft’ (and it need not involve ornament), but among their works the poems of *Discrete Series*, at least, show that this is not the case, and why. They do not do this programmatically, seeking clearly to demonstrate the end of the possibility of craft, rather it is the difficulties in the poems, their hesitations and self-corrections, the limited nature of what they feel can be said fully (once again the ease and resolution of first poem make it an unfaithful preface) which make it clear that ‘craft’ has become historical in the ordinary sense: a thing of the

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<sup>371</sup> Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics and Postmodernism* trans. David Midgley (London: Polity, 1991), p. 96.

<sup>372</sup> He argued for the ‘[c]ombination of agriculture with manufacturing industries; gradual abolition of all the distinction between town and country by a more equable distribution of the populace over the country.’ *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 75.

<sup>373</sup> ‘Ornament and Crime’ trans. Michael Bullock in *Programs and Manifestoes on 20<sup>th</sup>-century Architecture* ed. Ulrich Conrad (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 19-24, p. 20.

past.<sup>374</sup> It is in this sense – because these conditions still obtain – that we remain contemporary readers of the collection.<sup>375</sup>

But, what I noted above with regard to vocabulary is also true of objects: any literary work that represents actually existing objects has a choice of all objects known to the artist and his or her culture, including the newest, the hardest, the plainest. There is, then, *prima facie*, no philosophical – rather than historical or literary historical – upshot to the choice of preponderantly contemporary objects such as these, and such a choice would seem to leave wide open the question of what then happens in a work of art, what is done to those objects, and why. There would seem to be no indication that the answers to these questions with regard to *Discrete Series* would necessarily have anything to do with philosophy. Or – to put it another way – why does *Discrete Series* present us, in this poem as elsewhere, with the fact of our exile from the object; with the fact of the poem's failure? What are the consequences in thought?

### Chapter 3: The Object in Thought and Words

The need for philosophy can be determined more precisely in the following manner. As feeling and intuition the spirit has what is sensible for its object; as fantasy, it has images; and as will, purposes, etc. But the spirit needs also, in antithesis to, or merely in distinction from these forms of its thereness and of its objects, to give satisfaction to its highest inwardness, to thinking, and to make thinking into its object.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> The ordinary sense is an anti-Hegelian one; it ignores the contradiction between the present stemming from; depending on the past, and also being distinctive and detached from it.

<sup>375</sup> There are many other good reasons for thinking that we remain contemporary readers of Modernism; for thinking that that we are still within modernism's horizon of expectations, and it within ours – the fact that its contexts (secularization, industrialization, colonization etc.) and their close offspring are still the ones which dominate our lived experience; the fact that Modernist art-objects test out some pretty unsurpassable limits (minima, maxima) and the fact that the claim that the move to the post-modern constitutes an authentic epochal break (which is anyway the sort of thing post-modernism normally claims not to believe in) is just much less convincing than when that claim is made of modernism itself – but the experience of industrial products presented is, I suggest, the strongest reason for thinking this of *Discrete Series*.

<sup>376</sup> Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic* [1817/1830] trans. Geraets, Suchting, Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991) §11, p. 35.

### 3.1 Silence and Non-Feeling: the semi-appropriateness of Hegel's *Aesthetics*

According to Kant impenetrability is simply what marks extension:

Impenetrability is the fundamental property of matter whereby it first reveals itself as something real in the space of our external senses [and] is nothing but matter's capacity for extension.<sup>377</sup>

That extension is necessarily and self-evidently a property of matter is for him scarcely worth remarking on – some possible philosophical contexts for the collection exclude themselves pretty directly – except as a way of clearing the conceptual decks for the more important business of time and space (the preconditions for the experience of an extensive object):

That a body is extended is a proposition that is established *a priori*, and is not a judgement of experience.<sup>378</sup>

But, *Discrete Series* appears to say, it is in fact possible to experience hardness/extension, and this experience is one worth dwelling in, whether or not it turns out to produce any judgements. To assess the philosophical import of the presentation of hard objects in these poems (to site it in some relevant philosophical discourse and demonstrate the relevance) it helps – alongside the refusal to single out the 'closed car' by writing 'the', 'a', or 'this', 'closed car' (or 'thus *thou*, closed car') – to note an opposite tendency to strongly deictic expression which can be seen in the following excerpts:

The three wide  
Funnels raked aft, and the masts slanted  
[...] <sup>379</sup>

The lights, paving——  
This important device

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<sup>377</sup> *Metaphysical Foundation of the Natural Sciences* [1786] trans. James W. Ellington in *Immanuel Kant: Philosophy of Material Nature* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), p. 56. Michael Friedman's translation gives 'is nothing but the expansive power of matter.' *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781* ed. Henry Allison and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 220. Indeed, in opposition to the static solidity of objects I emphasize in this chapter Kant gives a dynamic account of what it is to be material (for him extension is arrested expansion): 'Matter fills its space through the repulsive forces of all its parts, that is, through an expansive force of its own [...] Matter fills space only through a moving force, a force resisting the penetration (that is, the approach) of others.' p. 211.

<sup>378</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason* B12, p. 142.

<sup>379</sup> *NCP*, p. 10.

[...] <sup>380</sup>

This land:  
The hills, round under straw  
[...] <sup>381</sup>

This tendency is perhaps above all visible in the poem, already cited for its brevity, which begins as follows (and concludes almost as soon as it has done so):

The edge of the ocean,  
The shore: here  
Somebody's lawn,  
By the water <sup>382</sup>

Indeed, even aside their interest in that which Kant finds uninteresting (extension) it is hard to see what kind of judgement such deictic half-propositions (free of predicates) could produce (for Kant judgements are the minimal units of meaningful experience), <sup>383</sup> as the poem refuses to assign a meaning to the experience of boundary, of limit. In its refusal of predicates this poem serves as a kind of warning about the interpretative process of assigning predicates (this poem *is this* or *does that*) and attests to the value of delaying the heuristic transformation of the text from 'this object' into 'this or that kind of object'. <sup>384</sup> Establishing the poem as the kind of poem which is or does this or that, after all, is to create a new set of expectations just where objectivism was supposed to escape them, or at least hold them at bay (to describe a poem as 'this kind of poem' is to hypostatize a category for it which presupposes the possible existence of other members of the set; it is also to make manifest that the reader either expected, or now expects in the wake of this poem, that poems can do this or that). Just as Pound's preface and the opening poem figure, and warn against, certain critical responses – that the poems are too obscure or

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<sup>380</sup> *NCP*, p. 11.

<sup>381</sup> *NCP*, p. 16.

<sup>382</sup> *NCP*, p. 18.

<sup>383</sup> As glossed by Maurizio Ferraris: 'As against the rationalists, Kant has grasped that concepts are not the minimum unit of meaning, which arises only when a judgement is formulated, that is to say, when a subject is connected with a predicate. "Dog," "runs," and "black" mean nothing; meaning begins when we say "the dog runs" or "the dog is black".' *Goodbye, Kant!: What Still Stands of the Critique of Pure Reason* [2004] trans. Richard Davies (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), p. 78.

<sup>384</sup> Geoffrey Hartman uses the idea of a 'delay' as justification for his 'guiding concept' of indeterminacy, which 'does not merely *delay* the determination of meaning, that is, suspend premature judgements and allow greater thoughtfulness. *The delay is not heuristic* alone, a device to slow the act of reading till we appreciate [...] its complexity. *The delay is intrinsic* [...]' (emphasis added). *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 269-70.

insufficiently distinct from Williams; that the poem should function epistemologically and sociologically as a decorative object in the represented room-space might function – this poem, too, figures a tempting, though fruitless, critical response which would mimic its insistent deictics and, in the literary-critical equivalent of pointing, merely reproduce it:

The edge of the ocean,  
The shore: here  
Somebody's lawn,  
By the water

In this reading the poem is not just short, but also extremely laconic; refusing to speak further than what it says. If we consider the list of potential poetic objects cited by von Hofmannsthal (things which might 'become a vessel [for] revelation'); a list which already takes a measure of pride in the disparity and apparent inappropriateness of the objects:

[a] watering can, a harrow left abandoned in a field, a dog in the sun, a poor churchyard, a small farmhouse<sup>385</sup>

then this the poem seems to take (or seems to be an account of taking) something *singularly* inappropriate; 'earth' or 'the idea of limit' – something much too large or too abstract – as such a lyric 'vessel' and in so doing it produces a sense of dullness, deadness, but also solidity in the reader's experience of the poem precisely because it fails to go on to translate this (strange, poorly chosen) 'object' into an extractable meaning.

Adorno described the 'enigma' of works which 'say this and only this, and at the same time whatever it is slips away'.<sup>386</sup> But nothing even seems to 'slip[ ] away', here: the work says 'this (shore)', 'this (lawn)' and, to borrow Oppen's own analogy which figures the received model of critical interpretation as a conversational exchange (it is one which he rejects), we might note here that a poem-interlocutor saying 'this and only this' (and only this) is hardly a 'charming conversationalist'.<sup>387</sup> It is difficult, in a literary critical account of a work to preserve and convey this will

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<sup>385</sup> *The Lord Chandos Letter*, p.10.

<sup>386</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>387</sup> See n.20,1 above.

to refuse speech – it is expected and required that a literary analysis will make the object under consideration speak, indeed it cannot proceed any other way since in its very concept it is understood as an analysis of what it is that the work says, over and beyond its propositional content (if, like this poem, it has some, and thus also has an innately dialectical mode of existence in which that content determines what we think the poem is trying to say, and, we inevitably infer, is determined by – chosen in order to express – that other meaning) and also how it says it.<sup>388</sup> Thus any analysis beyond reproducing it and recording that it refuses predication will motivate the work and make it say more than the poem seems to wish to say. Adorno also notes that '[a]rtworks say that something exists in itself, without predicating anything about it',<sup>389</sup> perhaps intending that this is the *first* thing that, via their material existence, representational and non-representational works say: they are a reminder that the world itself exists. The message of this work – and not the 'message' in the sense of the most persuasive interpretation according to the most apt interpretative criteria, nor what the work 'seems to want to say', but what the work actually says; the thought which it attempts to quote – is that something, or some thing, exists.

As with the dash and the other instances of self-correction in the poem beginning 'Closed car' there is also – counter to the laconic, recalcitrant interpretation just outlined – great concentration of meaning, here: it is possible (and indeed necessary) to ascribe meanings to the experience of limit presented (though this is one sense to fail to follow the direction of the poem). So the moment of perception represented in the poem could be understood to have as its content a) the fact that the land, though it can also be described according to other mutually determining concerns such as ownership or use-characteristics ('somebody's', 'lawn'), in its most basic aspect extends to 'here' beneath the subject's feet and then no further: the subject is *not land* and the land is *not subject* b) that the water also seems somewhat diametrically

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<sup>388</sup> i.e. what criticism is trying to voice, when faced with a discursive object, is 'the meaning in the meaning', as Heidegger puts it when he writes that 'λόγος as discourse really means rather the δηλουν: to make manifest what one is 'talking about' in one's discourse.' *Being and Time* p.30/32 – the translation by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson translation provides the German original which preserves the sense of 'discourse in the discourse' or 'meaning in the discourse': *offenbar machen das wovon der Rede in "die Rede" ist* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), p. 56.

<sup>389</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 100. However 'the fact that artworks exist signals the possibility of the non-existing. The reality of artwork testifies to the possibility of the possible' (p. 174).



to be *not land*,<sup>390</sup> just as the experiencing subject is strongly *not-land*, and yet the two are also distinct: these two recognitions of non-identity do not combine to produce identity. Or, another possible reading which finds the poem less recalcitrant and less rebarbative, less critically and theoretically oriented, we might see its hard-deictic mode as an extension of (and thus in *dialogue* with; in some sense continuous with) the dynamic of reduction and of formal simplification evident in Pound's exercise in *chinoiserie* 'Liu Ch'e':

The rustling of the silk is discontinued,  
Dust drifts over the courtyard,  
There is no sound of footfall, and the leaves  
Scurry into heaps and lie still,  
And she the rejoicer of the heart is beneath them:

A wet leaf that clings to the threshold.<sup>391</sup>

But we would then have to note that Oppen's poem is a version or performance of imagist practice which works according to – and by developing and extending – the logic of imagism, and in doing so, breaks it. We need not, however, be shackled by the choice between continuity and rupture in the relation between *Discrete Series* and its predecessors: the question of whether this is or is not (still) an imagist poem will not be answerable with any serious finality, or irrefutably, but we are also freed insofar as it is possible, and perhaps necessary, to adopt a different – less categorical, more dialectical – model of development, even if this dialectical overlaying is exactly the kind of formal confusion the object poetic of the poems in *Discrete Series*, including this one, seeks to escape:

The bud disappears in the bursting-forth of the blossom, and one might say that the former is refuted by the latter; similarly, when the fruit appears, the blossom is shown up in its turn as a manifestation of the plant, and the fruit now emerges as the truth of it instead. These forms are not just distinguished from one another they also supplant one another as mutually incompatible.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> It seems pedantic and counter to the spirit of this poem to observe that we can actually think of the physical object being experienced here as either 'that part of the earth's crust not covered by liquid water' or as merely 'the earth's crust' which produces the observation that in fact the former definition, accepted in this poem, is consensual, partial, 'land-centric'.

<sup>391</sup> *Lustra* [1916] in *Personae: Collected Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), p. 118.

<sup>392</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 2.

It is hard to imagine (inhabiting for a moment the position of a reader in 1934) where this process – if it is continuous, if this is not an endgame – will go next (what the ‘fruit’ will develop into), but then it likely also seemed impossible to imagine, reading Pound’s *Lustra* in 1916 (the blossom), that imagist practice would lead to hardly any recognizable image at all; to Oppen’s bare, insistent deictics.

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As well as participating in a local poetic dialogue with Imagism – one that ends, in some poems, in an apparent endgame – and as well as making sense when read alongside works like Eliot’s, *Discrete Series*, like much modernist practice, participates in an ‘extra-literary’ context, that of philosophy.<sup>393</sup> This is a context in which Oppen himself placed his works in a revealing (and somewhat grandiose) letter to William Bronk, as he constructed (and placed himself in) a community of philosophical authors and a community of philosophically aware readers:

We [...] *we* meaning those who-have-been-alive-at-any-moment [...] I just mean: we who have read Gödel and Heisenberg, we who have read Nietzsche, we who have read Sartre, we who have read Beckett and Thomas Hardy and Kafka (and George Oppen) - - I ask you to talk, as you talk here, to US.<sup>394</sup>

He ends the letter with a quotation, albeit a relatively banal one, from Hegel.<sup>395</sup>

Another way of describing the object poetic I have been describing so far is to say that, after the opening poem, the poems of *Discrete Series* refuse to enact what, to borrow the title of Arthur C. Danto’s book on art in the post-Hegelian era, is a near-universal vocation of artistic production: the ‘transfiguration of the commonplace’. Or, if we understand that representation of objects in a poem is inevitably a kind of

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<sup>393</sup> For reasons of space I cannot begin to give an account of the history of the debate over the questions of the literarity of philosophy and the philosophical status of literature.

<sup>394</sup> *Selected Letters*, p. 168.

<sup>395</sup> The quotation is ‘“Disagreement indicates where the subject matter ceases, it is what the subject matter is not.”’ (p. 169). Nicholls traces this sentence to the introduction of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and specifically to the Walter Kaufmann translation in *Hegel: Reinterpretation, Texts, and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1965). This is a shame since in the A.V. Miller translation the phrase (also traced there by Nicholls) has ‘difference’ rather than ‘disagreement’ and in its materiality is more consonant with the object-poetic I am sketching in *Discrete Series*. *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, p. 122.

transfiguration or transformation – as Adorno notes ‘when Brecht or William Carlos Williams sabotages the poetic and approximates an empirical report, the actual result is by no means such a report’<sup>396</sup> – the poems of *Discrete Series* maximally resist it. Cars and clouds are commonplace, but the vision of clouds seen in the surface of the ‘Closed car’ ultimately refuses transformation into a stable, reportable meaning-event. The experience of being near the shore must be commonplace enough but the experience of limit given voice in the poem beginning ‘The edge of the ocean’ demonstratively refuses predication. The Hegelian background is once again important here, because, although some critics have asserted that it is a mistake to think of the predominant poetic orientation of *Discrete Series* as distinctively modernist,<sup>397</sup> in its resolute focus on bare materiality – its attempt to convey what we might call ‘purely sensuous apprehension’ – the poem beginning ‘Closed car’ seems determined to overturn a received definition of the function or signal aspects of the art object in thoroughly modernist fashion. It specifically seeks to overturn a definition articulated by Hegel, for whom ‘purely sensuous apprehension’ (and we are talking about apprehension here: the process prior to the expression discussed in Chapter 1.2) is

[t]he poorest mode of apprehension, the least adequate to spirit [...]. It consists, in the first place, of merely looking on, hearing, feeling, etc., just as in hours of spiritual fatigue (indeed for many people at any time) it may be an amusement to wander about without thinking, just to listen here and look round there, and so on.<sup>398</sup>

Hegel’s perhaps sarcastic parenthesis shows that his is, in this respect at least, a Romantic conception of art and of what he takes to be the necessary preconditions and prehistory of an art-object. Though he also (and at the same time) uses the term romantic to mean all post-Classical, Christian art, here he is referring to contemporary or near contemporary literary production. He says as much, insofar as he explains that it is ‘the appearance of a genuinely living poetry’ and ‘the recognition of a special kind of art—Romantic Art’ which means that ‘it has become

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<sup>396</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 163.

<sup>397</sup> For example Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain talk about ‘the “Objectivists,” in contradistinction to [the] modernists (Pound, Williams Eliot) [...]’ ‘Introduction’ to *Objectivist Nexus*, p. 17. Kathleen d’Angelo rightly argues that ‘to date, Oppen’s work has not been widely read through traditional narratives of modernism.’ “‘The Sequence of Disclosure’” 162.

<sup>398</sup> *Aesthetics I*, p. 36.

necessary to grasp the Concept and nature of the beautiful', i.e. which caused him to embark on the project of his *Aesthetics* in the first place: to describe the present (historical and philosophical) functioning of the aesthetic as it was already performed in Romantic art-works, as well as proposing theories of its historical functioning in the modes which, for him, lead to the Romantic and especially to Romantic poetry.<sup>399</sup> His later accounts of romantic production are more like radically expansionary accounts of what romantic art might be capable of than definitions of what it 'is' (despite his choice of the present tense), for instance the idea that

the new content [... is ...] not tied down to sensuous presentation, as if that corresponded to it, but is freed from this immediate existence which must be set down as negative, overcome and reflected into the spiritual unity. In this way romantic art is the self-transcendence of art but within its own sphere and in the form of art itself.<sup>400</sup>

This (non) self-transcendence is difficult to stabilize and identify as a generic marker. As process or dynamic which must be readable in static, objective works it is reminiscent of the unstable relation between product and process sought by the objectivism, in Williams' and Zukofsky's accounts. Indeed the dialectical devaluing of the form of a work (it is still valued as that which brings about the devaluing) is echoed in Frederic Jameson's attempts contingently to define modernism, rather than romanticism, when – with the use of Hegelian capitalizations – he writes of texts in which

the idea of the work, its conception, drifts apart from its impossible execution [...] henceforth the sheer time, or dimensions of the work are unrelated to the Idea of which it is no longer exactly the execution, but, as it were, the latter's marker, its reminder or place-holder<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> Hegel suggests further, and complementary, explanations for the project, for example that art is 'one of the three realms of absolute spirit' which 'differ only in the *forms* in which they bring home to consciousness their object, the Absolute' (so an *Aesthetics* is part of the full historical and contemporary exposition of 'the Absolute') and that an *Aesthetics* is a necessary part of a full phenomenological system since, for him, 'Art liberates the true content of phenomena from the pure appearance and deception of this bad, transitory world, and gives them a higher actuality, born of the spirit.' *Aesthetics* I, p. 101, p. 9.

<sup>400</sup> *Aesthetics* I, p. 80.

<sup>401</sup> 'The Poetics of Totality' [1993] in *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 3-44, p. 17. The parallel is even stronger in the following, discussed below: 'Thereby the separation of Idea and shape, their indifference and inadequacy to each other, come to the fore again, as in symbolic art, but with this essential difference, that, in romantic art, the Idea [...] is not susceptible of an adequate union with the external, since its true reality and manifestation it can seek and achieve only within itself.' *Aesthetics* I, p. 81.

or when Blanchot – whom Jameson is echoing here ([t]he work disappears, but the fact of disappearing remains and appears as the essential thing')<sup>402</sup> – gives his account of modernism's dream of 'meaning detached from its conditions, separated from its moments'.<sup>403</sup> Robert B. Pippin notes this consonance – modernism's Hegelian aspect or Hegel's modernist aspect – when he writes that

[m]odernism would then look something like what Hegel prophesied after romantic art: "the self-transcendence of art but *within its own sphere and in the form of art itself*" [sic]

I agree – this is what modernism looks like – but as the full quotation unmistakably shows ('romantic art is'), this is not a 'prophes[y]' but a description of what Hegel thinks happens, or can happen, within 'romantic' art.<sup>404</sup>

These expansions notwithstanding, the idea of artistic practice as the *opposite* of 'merely looking on [...] listen[ing] here and look[ing] round there' is stably Romantic, and certainly not proto-modernist, insofar as Hegel here specifically requires the relation which Geoffrey Hartman summarizes as the idea that 'the poetical genius should reflect the genius loci'<sup>405</sup> – or more simply that there should at least be a) 'poetical genius' and b) 'genius loci'. The deictic emphasis in the examples of romantic lyric poetry above – *this, these, here* – should be read, then, as emphasizing that the potential bearer of poetical genius actually is in the locus, ready to receive and record inspiration. In *Discrete Series*, by contrast – at least, after the first poem in which the circumstances are emphasized as necessary, but not sufficient conditions for the production of aesthetic/ontological knowledge and in which it is implied that there has also to be a receptive viewing/expressing subject/vehicle (the model of genius, like that of *in Potenza* elevates, but also eliminates, the subject) – there is no claim to genius. The modes of apprehension represented in *Discrete Series* are, as Hegel says, available to anyone whether

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<sup>402</sup> 'Literature and the Right to Death', p. 365.

<sup>403</sup> *ibid.*, p. 386. Hegel features quite heavily in Blanchot's essay.

<sup>404</sup> 'What Was Abstract Art? (From the Point of View of Hegel) *Hegel and the Arts* ed. Stephen Houlgate (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), pp. 244-262, p. 262.

<sup>405</sup> 'Romantic Poetry and the Genius Loci' [1962] *Beyond Formalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 311-336, p. 317. In this sense – the matching of genius to topos – Hegel also has a Romantic conception of philosophy insofar as the other 'inducement for taking up the essence of art [...] in a profounder way' is Hegel's own genius, or, as he puts it 'the fact that the Concept, aware of itself as the thinking spirit, has now recognized itself on its side, more deeply, in philosophy'. *Aesthetics* I, p. 20.

insistently pointing to something and saying ‘This land’ or ‘The shore: here’ without predication, or picking ‘a thing among others’ as an object for poetic presentation, rather than a thing especially well-suited to perform a signifying function.

There is, in many of the poems, no performed claim that the poem constitutes, as it does, for example, for Shelley, an ‘observation’ of ‘inspired moments’ which is a ‘record of the best and happiest moments of’ – and by definition *by* – ‘the best and happiest minds’ where happiest can mean most felicitously suited to use in art (which could mean saddest, most surprising, strangest etc.).<sup>406</sup> Indeed, as I have emphasized, this is a short collection of short poems, which fact might lead one to expect, from an external perspective, that these will be especially rigorously selected moments. But just when the poem beginning ‘Closed car’ seems likely to *produce* a record of the moment (albeit a moment presented as neither best nor happiest) – just where it seems ready to frame a moment and its encapsulation as worthy of recording – it cuts itself off. Hegel agrees with Shelley, at least in this respect, that this is what constitutes the best poetry, and in the section of the *Aesthetics* where he sets out to give ‘a more precise definition’ of artistic ‘genius’ (to set it apart from its use with regard to ‘kings and military commanders, as well as the heroes of science’) he emphasizes how

[i]n order to achieve the interpenetration of the rational content and the external shape, the artist has to call in aid (i) the watchful circumspection of the intellect, and (ii) the depth of the heart and its animating feelings. [...] Through this feeling [...] which penetrates and animates the whole, the artist has his material and its configuration as his very own self, as the inmost property of himself as a subjective being.

But the ‘feeling’ which ‘penetrates and animates’ *Discrete Series* is non-feeling – there are in fact at least two distinct types of *non*-feeling in the collection; two ways in which the material observed and the material produced (the poem) are presented as something other than ‘a configuration of [the poet’s] own self’ as a subjective, feeling being. First there is strain in *Discrete Series* that is ‘objective’ in its ordinary sense, i.e. of having an orthogonal, non-distorting, faithfully representative

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<sup>406</sup> Shelley ‘A Defence of Poetry’ [1820/1840] *Shelley’s Prose, or, the Trumpet of a Prophecy* ed. David Lee Clark (New York: New Amsterdam, 1988), pp. 275-97, these references p. 294.

relationship to some adequately representative reality, and some of the poems have the public and unemotional quality of documentary:

Bad times  
The cars pass  
By the elevated posts  
And the movie sign  
A man sells post-cards<sup>407</sup>

The man selling post-cards can be seen as a figure for the vignette imagist poetic *Discrete Series* rejects (while also depending on) – ‘a “picture” intended for the delectation of the reader’<sup>408</sup> But, in these ‘Bad times’ (the depression) he is also ‘literally’, as it were, selling postcards, implied to be an un- or under-employed man of working age reduced to what is likely seen as an undignified but most of all a poorly paying job. He is thus an example of the people for whom Oppen gave up poetry, and the poem is already doing implicit political work insofar as it presents him near the structure of an ‘elevated’ train track, used to transport people to work and near a movie sign – which like a poem demands attention be paid to certain key words – attached to a movie theatre whose offerings most likely do not represent this lived reality. It is also a deceptively complex poem which can be seen as condemning itself for aestheticizing the scene of poverty (making a postcard-like vignette of it) even where it aestheticizes very minimally indeed, but I would argue that it is an indication of Oppen’s imminent retirement from writing poetry, and also, in the relative directness with which it addresses social themes, unrepresentative of the collection. The dearth of ‘feeling’ in the documentary strain seems to assert that the poem is not creating this figure for poetic purposes: that even if he does not ‘really’ exist (even if this is not a maximally faithful reconstruction of a scene lived by Oppen – in any case how would we verify this) nevertheless many men like him do exist. This documentary tendency could be explored with reference to the *neue Sachlichkeit*, to the photographs of Robert Atget and theories of photography and to Walter Benjamin’s critique of the aestheticization of poverty, but, aside from being less representative of the collection as a whole, I also find this tendency to be less philosophically productive than another distinctive lack of ‘feeling’ in the collection, where the same dearth of feeling is stronger and more difficult to explain as

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<sup>407</sup> *NCP*, p. 30.

<sup>408</sup> *Selected Letters*, p. 146.

motivated by a sociology-of-the-present engagement (which is, in all but its most purely scientific instantiations at least distantly motivated by feeling for those living in the society described). For example, in the poem which runs

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

and likewise in the poem quoted before which looks at hills, a house, and windows:

This land:  
The hills, round under straw;  
A house

With rigid trees

And flaunts  
A family laundry,  
And the glass of windows<sup>409</sup>

there seems to me to be evidence of a *failure* to feel: the poems appear to be both product and expression of that failure. Hegel says that the principle of art is to make real that 'familiar saying "*nihil humani a me alienum puto*"':

Its aim therefore is supposed to consist in awakening and vivifying our slumbering feelings, inclinations, and passions of every kind, in filling the heart, in forcing the human being, educated or not, to go through the whole gamut of feelings which the human heart in its inmost and secret recesses can bear, experience, and produce, through what can move and stir the human breast in its depths [...].<sup>410</sup>

For him art should be exactly the opposite of that which *fails* to 'move and stir the human breast'. Non-feeling, like that described and produced in the poem beginning 'This land' is the one feeling which is excluded from 'the whole gamut of feeling'. And objects which would be invested with the poet's 'spontaneous overflow of

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<sup>409</sup> *NCP*, p. 20, p. 16. There is also, here, at least some feeling: an intimation of the socialist-national-Romantic response to the Great Depression which can be heard in Woody Guthrie's 'This Land is Your Land' [1940/44].

<sup>410</sup> *Aesthetics* I, p. 46.



powerful feelings’ – the objects into which those feelings would be transferred as well as into the poem, according to Hegel – seem rather to be missing. Their absence is acknowledged (‘If there’s a bird [...] it is...’ One I’ve not seen’) but rather than determine whether this constitutes a refusal or an inability to ‘feel’ sufficiently or to locate (and produce) an appropriate object-vehicle for feeling (I think this is beyond determination) I merely note that there is an absence: no feeling, no claim to genius.

Nor is there a *genius loci*: inhabited largely by commonplace objects of industrial origin, as we have seen the generic urban setting of many of the poems is voiced in one of them as ‘Town, a town’. Even the sailing-boat which features periodically – more exotic than other scenes and modes of transport such as a bed; a road; the ‘elevated’; ‘A house / With rigid trees’; ‘the movie sign’ – is lent an unexpectedly arbitrary and workaday quality by the knowledge George and Mary Oppen simply liked sailing: they lived in and travelled the coasts and canals of the U.S. first in a small ‘cat-boat’ then in a converted lifeboat, both of them simple, easy to sail and unluxurious.<sup>411</sup> Rather than continuity – even identity (the configuration of the material *as* the artist’s ‘very own self’) – between the artist and his or her material, the material of the poem (in the sense of *that which it organizes* rather than the words from which it is made) is public (e.g. a car in the street) and to a large extent remains public. ‘Genius loci’ is very often implicitly understood to invoke the symbolic objects liable to be found in a particular locus. It is not, after all, a reference to geographical co-ordinates, even though these may well partly determine the climate and thus the flora of, for example, the English lake district or the Russian steppe. By a long chain of multiple, partial determinations the geographical co-ordinates *do* impact on the possible symbolic objects and the possible cultural moment they symbolize, and in which they do their symbolic work. For example the climate and flora partly determine the level of population; this combined with the mineral deposits and their accessibility partly determines whether an area is industrialized or not, which also depends on which – and what kind of – nation state the area finds itself in, if it is in one, which is itself partly determined by

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<sup>411</sup> *Meaning a Life*, p. 79: ‘We arrived at Detroit, on wide and lovely Lake St. Clair. The wind was free and George could sail, and when we examined our road map we saw that we could sail to New York.’ In a sense, then, Oppen and his wife Mary merely liked boats, and, for all my work on the ‘Closed car’, it could likewise be argued that it features in the collection because George was merely interested in; concerned with cars.

geographical features, and so on. Nevertheless the idea of a ‘genius loci’ registers that the poet is a participant (modes of participation may include resistance or *détournement*) in this process of symbolization rather than in an account of its geographical determination: the determination of the possibility of that process. In its dual attention to ‘craft’ and industrial objects *Discrete Series* comes close to the latter kind of analysis of the historical determination of individual objects, but in a rebuke to the historically dominant poetic mode of selecting objects for ekphrasis due to their exceptionality – this is part of the meaning of ‘genius’ and can encompass their exceptional capacity to represent the ordinary – this poem would have us understand that the ‘Closed car’ is merely ‘a thing among others’. While the car’s static ‘thinghood’ might be expected to function as a foil for its surprising mobility – that is, we might expect the car to have been chosen because it is exceptional in its capacity to embody the combination of inertness and activity – when it moves off it is, conversely, described as ‘less strange’ (emphasis added) and the sense of ‘a semi-arbitrarily selected thing among others things which might equally have been chosen’ persists.

After calling ‘purely sensuous apprehension’ the ‘poorest mode of apprehension’ Hegel goes on to say that ‘Spirit’ (for which authentic art is the vehicle) ‘does not stop at the mere apprehension of the external world by sight and hearing’. This is what Kant would call an ‘analytic’ proposition: if the artist (in Hegel’s schema the vector for spirit) stopped at apprehension there would be no art object, and hence nothing called art, nor the possibility of discussing it in lectures like these. Instead, ‘it [spirit] makes it [sensuous apprehension] into an object for its [spirit’s] inner being which then is itself driven, once again in the form of sensuousness, to realize itself in things, and relates itself to them as *desire* [sic].’<sup>412</sup> This desire in the direction of the objects of the prehistory of the art object perseveres as the source of the imperative common to Eliot’s ‘Stand’ and Gaultier’s ‘*Sculpte, lime, cisèle*’. But Oppen seems determined to ‘stop’ (as far as possible, while still producing something which can register this determination to stop) at the moment of sensuous apprehension; to register its content-free, pure factuality. The hope to remain content-free is always-already compromised, since what Adorno notes of empirical

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<sup>412</sup> *Aesthetics* Vol I, p. 36.

language in poetry (that the sabotage of the poetic is still poetic) is true also of the most arbitrary speck of matter in the plastic arts: nothing in an object-for-interpretation can escape interpretation's meaning-attribution, because nothing in the work can refute it, and this is partly the message of Malevich's *Black Square* or *White on White*.<sup>413</sup> In one essay Adorno attributes this discovery to Beckett, when he describes his 'culling of aesthetic meaning from the radical negation of metaphysical meaning'. The upshot of this 'culling', according to Adorno, is that

the principle of form is in itself, through the synthesis of what is formed, the positing of meaning even when meaning is substantively rejected.<sup>414</sup>

The determination, in *Discrete Series*, to arrest the transformation of the resistant object and the experience of that resistance into a symbolic narrative – i.e. to make of them 'an object for [spirit's] inner being' and to make the process reconstructible in the finished object – is much less 'radical' than Beckett or Malevich. We might describe it as a will to slow or minimize meaning-formation, rather than 'substantively' to reject it, but it nevertheless uncovers this paradox, even as it does what it must logically do, i.e. to resist it.

### 3.2 Facticity?

What then is the correct context for understanding the work with objects, here? Following Peter Nicholls use of the term with regard to Oppen's later poetry, and the title of Peter Quartermain's recent book, I initially thought that the right cover concept under which to consider the various resistances offered by the objects in *Discrete Series* I have been describing – resistance to touch, to recording the humanity of their human makers, to poetic motivation and transfiguration – was 'facticity'.<sup>415</sup> The word appears in Adorno as a possible counter to ontology; a possible way of being 'non-ontological' (for Adorno ontologies are always

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<sup>413</sup> *Black Square* [1915] or *White on White* [1918]. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 163.

<sup>414</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 351.

<sup>415</sup> *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism; Stubborn Poetries: Poetic Facticity and the Avant-Garde* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2013).

ontologies of ‘the right state of things’ and are by definition uncritical of; by definition justify existing conditions).<sup>416</sup>

In criticizing ontology we do not aim at another ontology, not even at one of being non-ontological. If that were our purpose we would be merely positing another downright ‘first’ – not absolute identity, this time, not the concept, not Being, but nonidentity, facticity, entity. We would thus be hypostatizing the concept of non-conceptuality and thus acting counter to its meaning.<sup>417</sup>

In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno does use it to mean involving form; present to the senses and to consciousness; actually existing:

What appears in artworks and is neither to be separated from their appearance nor held to be simply identical with it – the nonfactual in their facticity – is their spirit.<sup>418</sup>

I would suggest that the reason that Adorno doubts its usefulness in *Negative Dialectics* – thinks it incapable of holding to non-conceptuality rather than participating in making a concept of it – is that ‘facticity’ is primarily Heideggerian terminology.<sup>419</sup> The process he wishes to avoid has already happened. *Faktizität*, for Heidegger, rather than registering any (even provisional) alterity,

implies that an entity ‘within the world’ has being-in-the-world in such a way that it can understand itself as bound up in its own ‘destiny’ with the being of those entities which it encounters within its own world<sup>420</sup>

Even though Heidegger has a lecture-series, later collected as a book, with ‘facticity’ in the title – *Ontology: the Hermeneutic of Facticity* – there is no account there (or anywhere else in his work that I know of) of registering an encounter with an

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<sup>416</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, p. 11.

<sup>417</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, p. 136.

<sup>418</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 114.

<sup>419</sup> Heidegger is not the originator of the term, however, for he adopted it from neo-Kantian usage, as Scott M. Campbell describes:

[I]n the framework of neo-Kantian epistemology, facticity had a temporo-historical sense which was set against supra-temporal logicity (*Logizität*). As such it meant temporal, individual, concrete, unique, non-repeatable.

*The Facticity of Life and Language in the Early Work of Martin Heidegger* (Unpublished Dissertation, Boston College, 1999).

<sup>420</sup> *Being and Time* [1927] trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), p. 56.

object's bare materiality before the material is motivated or organized by an interpreting agent:

When looked at from the side of its "object," hermeneutics – as this object's presumed mode of access – clearly shows that this object has its being as something capable of interpretation and in need of interpretation and that to be in some state of having-been-interpreted belongs to its being.<sup>421</sup>

This is the object's 'destiny' in Heidegger; hermeneutics is the 'presumed mode of access' for every object and there is no interest in presenting or producing objects which might resist the hermeneutic approach. Indeed, the very problem for him is that the 'inadequacy of ontology in the tradition and today' is how, *exactly* like Oppen in *Discrete Series*, it seeks to know 'the objectivity of definite objects [...] or a material being-an-object for the particular sciences of nature and culture concerned with it'. Ontology (and this is what Heidegger seeks to correct) thus fails to see the object 'as it is from out of its being-there for Dasein'.<sup>422</sup> All of which is to say that there is no genuine alterity in Heidegger. Or, if to speak of 'genuine alterity' or absolutely resistant materiality is, as Adorno fears, to collapse the dialectical relation between mind and material which is the only context in which material has any coherence as a concept,<sup>423</sup> we might say instead that Heidegger is not concerned to 'linger' with the concept of non-conceptuality, with objects which seem to resist penetration and conceptualization.<sup>424</sup> In 'The Essence of Ground', he demonstrates how a contrast – a state of affairs in the world like the hard distinctions sought in *Discrete Series* – is only a projection of another possible arrangement of things, in which there is identity rather than difference:

Κόσμος ούτος [the world/universe as it exists] does not therefore designate this domain of beings as delimited from another, but this world of beings as distinct from another world of the same beings [...].<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>421</sup> *Ontology: the Hermeneutic of Facticity* [lectures given 1923, publ. 1988] trans. John van Buren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 11.

<sup>422</sup> *ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>423</sup> Again, this only holds on the non-quantum level.

<sup>424</sup> For Heidegger we only engage, aesthetically, with that which engages with us, which 'takes us in, as if it were the lingering that makes us linger'. From *Country Path Conversations* cited by Alexander García Düttman, 'Judging in Art', *Frakcija* 64/65 'The Art of the Concept' 38-47, 40.

<sup>425</sup> 'On The Essence of Ground' (elsewhere translated as 'The Principle of Reason') trans. William McNeill in *Pathmarks*, ed. McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 97-135, p. 111.

An attempt to say something about a specific state of affairs, here, depends on imagining an ‘ordered universe’ in which the difference that is source of that specificity is annihilated, and there is nothing that would forbid us, the poet, or the diegetic experiencer from, on experiencing the ‘quiet / Stone floor’ or the ‘Closed car’, simply reflecting that, after all, there is another world of beings in which the car is not closed to us, the floor not made of stone.

Despite this apparent fundamental inappropriateness with regard to the object poetic of *Discrete Series* Heidegger has become a relatively common resource in readings of Oppen’s poetry, in readings which focus on, for instance, the connection between Heidegger’s use of boredom and its appearance in the opening poem, noted by Oppen himself:

I wrote that in 1929 [...] the same moment that Heidegger was speaking of the mood of boredom as a philosophic concept in his acceptance speech at the University.<sup>426</sup>

The connection Oppen draws to Heidegger is stronger than a comparison, or even an analogical claim, and in a letter of 1966 the relation is portrayed as one of identity (‘is’):

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 of the window and sees the world, ‘weather-swept / with which one shares the century’<sup>427</sup>

This simultaneity which seems, to later Oppen and some critics so remarkable, is less so if we consider that boredom – as concept, if not the word itself – appears in *The Concept of Time* written in 1924:

[Dasein] grows weary in the ‘what’, weary to fill up the day. Time suddenly becomes long for Dasein as being-present, for this Dasein that never has time.<sup>428</sup>

Even the fact of Oppen and Heidegger having been interested in the same phenomenon or mood at broadly the same time seems less striking when we consider that a later poem by Oppen and the English translators of Adorno are both interested

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<sup>426</sup> ‘George and Mary Oppen: An Interview By Michel Englebert And Michael West’, *The American Poetry Review* 14.4 (July/August 1985) 11-14, 12.

<sup>427</sup> Letter to Charles Hanzlicek, May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1966. *Selected Letters* p.133.

<sup>428</sup> trans. William McNeill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p.16e.

in not just the same broad phenomenon, but a rather more specific one, and both address it in exactly the same form of words:

What is inexplicable  
Is the “preponderance of objects,” The sky lights  
Daily with that predominance.<sup>429</sup>

And

#### *THE OBJECT’S PREPONDERANCE*

Carried through the critique of identity is a groping for the preponderance of the object. Identitarian thinking is subjectivistic even when it denies being so.<sup>430</sup>

And yet no critic has investigated this possible connection, or used it to justify a reading of Oppen’s poetry alongside anything by Adorno, or vice versa. I pass over this particular resonance, despite its neatness, because accounting for it would require a discussion of what ‘preponderance’ might mean for each and a long discussion of the development of – or rupture in – the object poetic and the implied view of poetic possibility between *Discrete Series* and Oppen’s later collections – I pass over it except to say that this thesis *is* concerned with the preponderance of a certain kind of object in *Discrete Series*, and the collection itself concerned with their apparent preponderance in the world. Whereas when it comes to Heidegger Peter Nicholls, for example, invokes his concept of withdrawal (*Zurückziehung*) with reference to *Of Being Numerous* (1968), and, among many others, Randolph Chilton and Susan Bernstein read Oppen’s poetry with reference to Heideggerian concepts and vocabulary.<sup>431</sup> And this is quite reasonable, since Oppen’s later works themselves license critical development of the Heidegger connection, for example when he takes a phrase from *An Introduction to Metaphysics* – ‘the arduous path of experience’ as epigraph to his collection *This in Which* (1965).<sup>432</sup> And likewise, in his ‘daybooks’, Oppen makes some profoundly Heideggerian statements, perhaps the

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<sup>429</sup> From ‘Leviathan’ in *The Materials* (1962), *NCP*, p.89.

<sup>430</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, p. 183. ‘Vorrang’ could have been translated as ‘precedence’ or ‘priority’ or ‘pre-eminence’. I cannot find the text Oppen’s poem appears to quote from, so it could be that E.B. Ashton read *The Materials* and picked up the phrase from Oppen’s book.

<sup>431</sup> ‘Oppen: of Being Ethical’ in *Objectivist Nexus*, pp.240-253 (p.248); Chilton ‘The Place of Being in the Poetry of George Oppen’ in the same collection, pp. 89-112; Bernstein ‘Conference Call: Ronnell, Heidegger, Oppen’ in *Reading Ronell*, ed. Diane Davis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), pp. 49-59.

<sup>432</sup> Identified by Susan Thackrey. ‘George Oppen: A Radical Practice (excerpt)’ *Thinking Poetics* pp. 228-254, p. 238.

strongest of which is the following: ‘If to speak of art, we will, as we should, use one word only, the word is *disclosure*’ – both the idea of the correct attitude to art depending on the unfolding of a single term and the choice of that term are resolutely Heideggerian.<sup>433</sup> Heidegger is, perhaps, in danger of becoming the *only* philosopher for Oppen: in his bracing list of pairs of philosophers who ‘play an important role for the work of major modernist and post-modernist writers’ and the writers for whom they play that role, Tyrus Miller appears to elevate Heidegger to the role of indispensable thinker for a philosophical reading of Oppen’s work. He suggests

Hegel for Stéphane Mallarmé, Henri Bergson and F.H Bradley for T.S. Eliot, Nietzsche and Oswald Spengler for Hart Crane, R.W. Emerson and George Santayana for Wallace Stevens, William James for Gertrude Stein and Lyn Hejinian, John Dewey for W.C. Williams, Martin Heidegger for George Oppen and Paul Celan and Ludwig Wittgenstein for a number of avant-garde writers [...].<sup>434</sup>

If we were to follow this route, we might, for example read the ‘lighting’ in the poem beginning ‘Closed car’ as Heidegger’s *Lichtung* and the experience presented there as representation of industrial *aletheia* (*Lichtung* means ‘clearing’ as well as lighting, and hence provides Heidegger with an analogue for his model of truth),<sup>435</sup> even though this would be counter to the poem itself wherein that which the ‘lighting’ brings about is devalued, implied to be false, and in a sense non-existent since the reader never finds out what it is. Heidegger claims, in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ that his aim is ‘to come to know the thing-being (thingness) of the thing’,<sup>436</sup> but his attempt to think the character of objects as alien to subjecthood (or to preserve that aspect, provisionally), via the concept of ‘facticity’ falls far short of Oppen’s,

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<sup>433</sup> Dennis Young, ‘Selections from George Oppen’s Daybook’, p. 11. On this and surrounding pages Oppen quite astutely interrogates the ‘right-wing’ politics of Hemmingway’s style and the bases of Pound’s fascism but passes over Heidegger’s politics (lived and implicit) entirely.

<sup>434</sup> ‘Philosophy and Poetry’ in *Princeton*, 1033-1038, 1037.

<sup>435</sup> see, for instance *Being and Time* §28 ‘The Task of a Thematic Analysis of Being-in’:

When we talk in an ontically figurative way about the *lumen naturale* in human being, we mean nothing other than the existential-ontological structure of this being, the fact that it *is* in such a way as to be its there [sein Da zu sein]. To say that it is “illuminated” means that it is cleared in itself *as* being-in-the-world, not by another being, but in such a way that it *is* itself the clearing [Lichtung]. Only for a being thus cleared existentially do objectively present things become accessible in the light or concealed in darkness. (p. 129)

<sup>436</sup> *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 20.



and as well as lacking a rigorous concept (or anti-concept) of alterity he relies on essences: ‘To use’ Heidegger says

means, first, to let a thing be what it is and how it is. To let it be this way requires that the used thing be cared for in its essential nature – we do so by responding to the demands which the used thing makes manifest in the given instance<sup>437</sup>

As I outlined, after the first poem implicitly claims to have achieved a successful (though vague) identification of essence (which it nevertheless undermines), *Discrete Series* is, in its preoccupation with visual qualia, much more Nietzschean in epistemological outlook – ‘what know I of essence, I see only appearance’. And indeed, in its preoccupation with substance, mere extension, it refuses the binary distinction (that subtends the possibility of distinguishing) that Nietzsche, even while apparently refusing ‘essence’, still accepts. So there is no question, in *Discrete Series*, of ‘caring for an object in its *essential* nature’: it is not essential to, but rather a necessary condition of an object’s existence as object – part of its concept – that it offers some material resistance. Heidegger, on the other hand, is eminently comfortable with essence as a metaphor and with the search for the essence of some object, system or governing idea as the proper name for the procedure of his philosophical enquiry (and, for him, all philosophical enquiry): witness *The Essence of Reasons*, *On the Essence of Language*, *The Essence of Truth*, and *The Essence of Human Freedom: an Introduction to Philosophy*.<sup>438</sup> And notwithstanding Oppen’s later interest and investment in Heidegger, and the parallels that might be developed with other aspects of Oppen’s poetry, there is a fundamental antagonism between Heidegger’s position and the position of *Discrete Series* with regard to the philosophy of objects. The mode of the opening poem may well be comparable to Heideggerian ‘Being’ disclosing itself: Burton Hatlen rightly describes the

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<sup>437</sup> *What is Called Thinking* [1954] trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 191.

<sup>438</sup> *Reasons* [1929] trans. Terrence Malick (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969); *Language* [1939/1999] trans. Wanda Torres Gregory and Yvonne Unna (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004); *Human Freedom* [1930/1982] trans. Ted Sadler (London: Continuum, 2002); *Truth* [1931-2/1988] trans. Ted Sadler (London: Continuum, 2002). The question of whether the English (Latinized) ‘essence’ adequately covers the meaning of the German ‘Wesen’ can, of course, be asked. However despite the valences of its employment within and across these works, it is, I think, valid to take *Wesen* to mean the essence or inner principle of something. For example Heidegger indicates three levels of the ‘characteristics of essential knowledge’: ‘1. determination of what-being, 2. determination of the inner possibility of what-being, 3. determination of the ground of the inner possibility of what being.’ *The Essence of Human Freedom* §19, p. 126.

‘overtones of [its] final lines’ as ‘existential, proleptically [...] Heideggerian’.<sup>439</sup> In it we witness anticipation; undifferentiated attention to the world and a sudden (relatively contentless) revelation which could fairly be said to concern the ‘worldhood of the world’. This is why it was important to spend so long uncovering its contradictions: if we accept its surface reading and follow the Heideggerian direction it sets we would be in a poor position to understand the object poetic of alterity and resistance in the rest of the collection. Anticipating his later attack on the ‘Jargon of Authenticity’ Adorno is scathing about this mode he identifies in ‘Husserl and his followers’ and ‘the style of the Marburg school’ (i.e. Heidegger) calling it ‘the Ontologization of the Factual’ and asserting that

[the] question of absolutely primary being, the predicate-free and noematic core, leads to nothing other than sheer thought functions.<sup>440</sup>

For Adorno, then, Husserl and Heidegger seem not even to be trying; their treatment of objects (always already ready to be interpreted) merely confirming the sovereignty of the phenomenological subject; a philosophical illustration of Nietzsche’s philistine self-satisfaction. So to be added to the critiques I offered of the end of the opening poem, and the critiques it seems to make of itself, is that in its embrace of ‘absolutely primary being’, and even while it pretends to knowledge of ‘the world’, or what ‘really’ is going on outside the window and outside human discursive frameworks, it finally serves to confirm the sovereignty of the individual subject.

Again and again in Heidegger, alterity and resistance are offered only to be shown to be ephemeral: appearances which, though they may help in the appearance of Being are to be set aside just as ‘Being’ had to be set aside in order to experience ‘that’ something ‘is’.

We shall call this character of being of Dasein which is veiled into its whence and whither, but in itself all the more openly disclosed, this “that it is,” the *thrownness* [*Geworfenheit*] of this being into its there; it is thrown in such a way that it is the there as being-in-the-world. The expression thrownness is meant to suggest the facticity of its being delivered over [*Uberantwortung*]. The “that it is and has to be” disclosed in the attunement of Dasein is not the “that” which expresses ontologically and categorically the factuality belonging to objective presence; that latter is accessible only when we

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<sup>439</sup> ‘Oppen and the Unspeakable’ *Paideuma*, 40 (2013) 211-254, 232.

<sup>440</sup> *Against Epistemology*, pp. 132, 169.

ascertain it by looking at it. Rather, the that disclosed in attunement must be understood as an existential attribute of *that* being which is in the mode of being-in-the-world. *Facticity is not the factuality of the factum brutum of something objectively present, but is a characteristic of the being of Dasein taken on in existence, although initially thrust aside.* The that of facticity is never to be found by looking.<sup>441</sup>

In contrast whatever is discovered in the poems of *Discrete Series* is precisely found by looking: looking is what they are an account of, from the outset, and ‘looking’ (in the sense of close reading and relating) is what they demand. ‘*Facticity is not the factuality of the factum brutum*’, Heidegger writes, in an instance of what Adorno called his ‘allergy to all things factual’.<sup>442</sup> In its banishment of concreteness as resistance (the ‘brutum’ of ‘factum brutum’) and the prioritization instead of the ability of the subject to work on objects and with them, but in a strong sense without them (this is the alternative to ‘looking’ here: to think or feel something about them without regard to its validity) Heidegger, and the Heideggerian position of the opening poem is basically still phenomenological: it still invokes the founding gesture of phenomenology, Husserl’s *Epochē*:

We perform the epochē – we who are philosophising in a new way – as a transformation of the attitude which precedes it not accidentally but *essentially* [emphasis added] namely, the attitude of natural human existence which, in its total historicity, in life and science, was never before interrupted [...] What must be shown in particular and above all is that through the epochē a new way of experiencing, of thinking, of theorizing, is opened to the philosopher; here, situated *above* his own natural being and *above* the natural world, he loses nothing of their being and their objective truths and likewise nothing at all of the spiritual acquisitions of his world-life or those of the whole historical communal life; he simply forbids himself – as a philosopher, in the uniqueness of his direction of interest – to continue the whole natural world performance of his world-life; that is, *he forbids himself to ask questions which rest upon the ground of the world at hand* [emphasis added], questions of being, questions of value, practical questions, questions about being or not-being, about being valuable, being useful, being beautiful, being good, etc. [...] This is not a ‘view’, an ‘interpretation’ bestowed upon the world. *Every view about ‘the’ world has its ground in the pregiven world* [emphasis added]. It is from this very ground that I have freed myself through

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<sup>441</sup> *Being and Time* § 29 Dasein as Attunement, pp. 131-132. In what might be understood to be a reply to this very passage Adorno writes: ‘There is no entity whose determination and self-determination does not require something else, something which the entity itself is not; for by itself alone it would not be definable. It therefore points beyond itself. [...] Yet Heidegger seeks to hold onto that which points beyond itself, and to leave behind, as rubble, that beyond which it points.’ *Negative Dialectics*, p. 102.

<sup>442</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, p. 100.

the epochē; I stand *above* the world, which has now become for me, in a quite peculiar sense, a *phenomenon*.<sup>443</sup>

One can see, here, why Adorno described the phenomenological method as ‘a repudiation of any content as unclean’,<sup>444</sup> but one can also see why the fundamental phenomenological position – ‘situated above the world’, ‘forbid[den]’ from asking ‘questions which rest upon the ground of the world at hand’ and confident that “‘the” world’ offers only false ground, that it is truly grounded in another ‘*pregiven*’ world – is fundamentally at odds with the position adopted with regard to objects in *Discrete Series*. Indeed Oppen ‘forbids himself to ask’ any questions *other* than those ‘which rest upon the ground of the world at hand’. The short poem I continually make recourse to

The edge of the ocean,  
The shore: here  
Somebody’s lawn,  
By the water

freezes the experience in the moment of experience: it refuses to delete the actuality of this part of world by seeing it as merely epiphenomenon of a *pregiven* world, or by transforming it into merely the basis for another kind of knowledge (aesthetic, personal, historical) which could be equally true of another moment of experience, another part of the world. Even if the knowledge produced is limited the poem nevertheless seeks to track its production in ‘the world at hand’. Part of the philosophical ‘use’ of this gesture is that it helps to show that the epochē, in making ‘a phenomenon’ of the world effectively destroys or refuses the distinction between phenomenon and epiphenomenon: the poem, in its commitment to the experience of limit is thus more phenomenological than Heideggerian phenomenology.

But doing justice to the objecthood of objects – the dynamic which is nascent in the opening poem, despite its Heideggerian tendencies, and expanded upon in the rest of *Discrete Series*; the aim which phenomenology (at least phenomenology which takes seriously the epochē) cannot fulfil since it begins with the banishment of the non-conceptual – is something which Adorno I think correctly identifies as a difficult,

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<sup>443</sup> *The Crisis of the Human Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* [1936 – theory developed as early as 1906] trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970) pp. 151-52.

<sup>444</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, p. 7.

perhaps impossible thing to do, involving ‘a paradox which seems [...] extremely characteristic of the whole of metaphysics’:

There are two predominant conceptions of ἀρχή [origin], or πρῶτον [first] running through the whole history of philosophy. On one side is the idea that what is directly given, the immediate facts of consciousness, should be posited as primary; from the connections between them the subjectively oriented form of epistemology sought to construct the quintessence of that which is. On the other side, however, primary status is given to the pure concept, which always stands at the origin or rationalistic versions of epistemology. Epistemology has worn itself out trying to reconcile these two notions of the primary, which exclude each other, so that you might have reason to doubt the validity of the whole approach which posits some absolutely primary thing.

[...] The exclusivity of both moments is untenable since both can be refuted by simply asking: which of them is absolutely primary? The only possible answer is that each of these principles – if I can call them that – always implies the other, or that, in Hegel's language, the two principles are mediated by each other.

I should add here that to call them principles is an improper use of language, since in the strict sense one can only speak of principles rationalistically, when dealing with purely mental entities, whereas what is immediately given, which ultimately means sensations, is something non-conceptual and therefore cannot be a principle. But you may be able to recognize here something of the ‘misère de la philosophie’, in the fact that even this non-conceptual element, this non-principle, which nevertheless is constitutive of, and inherent in, all philosophy, cannot appear within that realm – which heavens knows, can only operate with concepts – except in the form or a concept. It is therefore not merely a piece of terminological pedantry to say that philosophy, through its very form, contains a pre-judgement in favour of principles. This means, in general, that if we want to give primacy to the sensible moments of knowledge we cannot simply, so to speak, put forward ‘green’ as a given entity – or we *can* do so, but it won't take us far philosophically.<sup>445</sup>

So it is not just that – as the poems remind us – objects do not think, but that we cannot ‘think’ objects, even though we can and must in order to maintain a distinction between subject and object that the concept ‘thinking’ presupposes (thinking is one of a small group of activities, whose other members such as feeling or speaking are more contested, which can claim to be distinctively the business of subjects). This is not a dialectical relation that Heidegger has access to, since his conception of a philosophy of Being announces itself as *prima philosophia*, and

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<sup>445</sup> *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems* trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 42-3.

gives priority not to sensible moments of knowledge but rather to the condition (Being) of their possibility. Adorno describes this object/concept predicament as a possible *misère de la philosophie* but it does at least provide useful terms for describing the project of *Discrete Series* as I am outlining it: ‘to give primacy to sensible moments of knowledge’ but to mistrust the (self-)presentation of those moments because of their inevitable linguistic-social-historical mediation, to acknowledge that

this non-conceptual element, this non-principle, which nevertheless is constitutive of, and inherent in, all philosophy, cannot appear within that realm[.]

– neither the realm of philosophy, that is, nor that of poetry. This passage fundamentally suggests that there is something strongly paradoxical – unavoidably giving rise to immanent antinomies or aporias – about the philosophy of objects. Philosophy, Adorno shows, is the philosophy of concepts, and *Discrete Series*’s philosophical presentation of objects and the creation of poems to be treated as objects, is likely to give rise to aporias rather than conclusions; to aposiopesis (the poem breaking off) rather than apostrophe (the poem establishing a dialogue which it defends as the substance of the poem).

Objects do not think, then, and we cannot ‘think’ objects, even though we can and must in order to maintain a distinction between subject and object that the concept ‘thinking’ presupposes. But perhaps it should rather be said that objects do not think and we cannot think objects *except* for in the realm of aesthetics, where what ‘man draws out of himself’ and sets down in object form is returned to him altered by the choices that form forces on (would-be) content, and by the fact of having been set down at all: hence Blanchot, in Hegelian mode, finding that when Kafka writes something as banal as ‘he was looking out the window’ – not ‘he was looking out the window and saw the world, weather-swept, with which one shares the century’; merely ‘he was looking out of the window’ – that ‘the sentence is perfect’, and that it can reward aesthetic attention.<sup>446</sup> It would then be best to think of artworks, even where their objecthood is vociferously asserted as with the poems here, under the sign of Objectivism, as *paraobjects*; compromised objects. When Adorno writes that ‘[i]t is essential to artworks that they be things, it is no less essential that they negate

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<sup>446</sup> ‘Literature and the Right to Death’, p. 363.

their own status as things'<sup>447</sup> he does not mean that it is necessary, in order for a work to fulfil the requirements of art, that it should do both of these but rather that artworks *cannot help* having – it belongs to their essence that they have – a contradictory and compromised relationship with their own objecthood.

All of this shows, I hope, the inappropriateness – perhaps the *singular* inappropriateness – of the Heideggerian ‘facticity’ as a cover concept for the object relations presented in *Discrete Series*, both insofar as it fails to cover the alterity of the objects presented and insofar as, assuming a universal readiness for interpretation, it has no access to the ways in which works like *Discrete Series* forestall, resist and remain mute in the face of interpretation. Within the context of the object relations presented in the poems, though, the innate difficulty of philosophical engagement with objects suggests another reason – on top of those given by Williams, Zukofsky, and Oppen himself, and on top of those I have just suggested – why one might want to insist on the objecthood of the poem itself, which is the following. If the poem as discursive presentation or record of a moment of object encounter is always bound to fail and fall into its opposite, it might nevertheless be able to reproduce that encounter in a stronger sense: to *create* an encounter (with the poem) which resembles an encounter, in the world, with a cobble, or a deck, or the keel of a ship and thus to perpetuate the quality of these industrial objects beyond the end of the process of their naturalization (the completion of industrialization). This possibility, and its execution in the poem beginning ‘The mast inaudibly soars’ is the topic of my final chapter (3.4), but before then I want to propose an alternative for ‘facticity’, as cover concept, which is ‘Sense Certainty’.

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<sup>447</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 230.

### 3.3 Sense Certainty: Hegel on ‘Thisness’

It is no accident that in his succinct account of the contradictions of object philosophy which provides useful terms for describing the project of *Discrete Series* Adorno mentions Hegel, and mediation. Even if, as we have seen, *Discrete Series* tends to work against rather than work with the account of aesthetic perception in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, there is nevertheless a passage in Hegel’s writings which joins the ‘impoverished’ apprehension of objects (their sheer being rather than their sheer Being) with an exploration of deictics.<sup>448</sup> Like the Oppen of *Discrete Series*, but unlike Kant, Hegel does have a sense that the experience of extension; of material resistance, is an experience worth dwelling in, and the work in which he considers an experience akin to that of resistance and impenetrability presented in the collection is not the *Aesthetics* but the *Phenomenology of Spirit* – this reveals something, I think, about the ambition of modernist works to escape the confines which the notion of an ‘aesthetic’ object imports.<sup>449</sup> The passage in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* to which I wish to relate the general attitude to objects in *Discrete Series* is one which is highlighted by Peter Nicholls, though negatively, when he notes how

Oppen’s abbreviated version of the Hegelian ‘journey’ is inextricably bound up with his concurrent reading of Heidegger [...] Oppen seems not to have read on into the *Phenomenology*, thereby missing Hegel’s chapter on ‘Sense-Certainty’ [...]<sup>450</sup>

Nicholls may be right in his speculation that Oppen never read the passage (he may of course have read the passage and found it incomprehensible or tedious or instantly forgettable). As I have said I think there are good methodological reasons for reading Objectivist poetry ‘contre Sainte-Beuve’ (see Chapter 1.3, above) and while Nicholls is tracing an allusion to Hegel in a poem from *Seascape: Needle’s Eye* (from 1972) there is, in fact, no parallel way of knowing what Oppen was reading in 1929-34: the weight of biographical material relating to Oppen overwhelmingly relates to the period of his return from exile and his return to poetry. For instance the contents

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<sup>448</sup> Adorno elsewhere claims that the idea of ‘such Something pure and simple’, because of the ‘minimal trace of non-identity’ of which it reminds us, ‘is unbearable to Hegel’ (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 135). In the passage I am referring to I think such ‘Something’ is borne by Hegel, at least for a while.

<sup>449</sup> Hegel’s *Aesthetics* radically expands, as well as describes these confines, see Chapter 3.1, above.

<sup>450</sup> *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, p. 129.



page of the *Selected Letters* shows the paucity of evidence-sources from this era quite starkly:

1931-34	1
1958	7
1959	18
1960	35
1961	44
1962	55
1963	76 <sup>451</sup>

The first available private para-literary material is not of help, here, either – the first of Oppen’s compositional ‘Daybooks’ date from 1963-4.<sup>452</sup> So where Nicholls is able to trace this via a letter contemporary with the poem’s composition that is not possible with regard to *Discrete Series* – which I would describe as something like a ‘Hegelian journey’ – even if it were desirable.<sup>453</sup>

Whether Oppen ever read the *Phenomenology* beyond the preface or not, the congruence between the object poetic of *Discrete Series* and the chapter on sense certainty is striking. It is striking because the formal similarities are so strong but also for as it were external reasons: not only a) that the poems are consonant with a section of the *Phenomenology* rather than fulfilling the possibilities mooted for poetry in the *Aesthetics* – testament to modernism’s philosophical ambitions; or b) that there is a preference for ‘sheer being’ in the Hegelian sense rather than Being in the sense explored by Heidegger and in light of which the poems are more commonly read, or even c) that this slight collection of poems is consonant with a

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<sup>451</sup> *Selected Letters*, v. There are plausible reasons for this absence of consultable material from the war and from the post-war period that Oppen and his wife Mary spent in Mexico; we can imagine that the atmosphere amongst American political exiles was tense, and not conducive to extensive written communication and Nicholls recounts how the Oppens felt compelled to hide their potentially inflammatory books (based on private communication with Oppen’s daughter Linda, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, p. 20). The preponderance of extant correspondence from the 60s and onwards can be attributed to Oppen’s growing public recognition; for example the Pulitzer prize won for *Of Being Numerous*. But whatever the reasons for it, the fact of this absence encourages critics who rely on the support of a writer’s letters or interviews or contributions to colloquia to view *Discrete Series* through the prism of Oppen’s later poetic. On the other hand it also frees critics from the constraints of close intellectual biographical-narrative readings of *Discrete Series*, since these are not possible.

<sup>452</sup> *Selected Prose, Daybooks and Papers*, p. 53.

<sup>453</sup> *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, pp. 131-32.

quite abstract section of a highly abstract work, one which sees itself as the general prehistory of thought and which exists within a sprawling and difficult philosophical *oeuvre* (*The Philosophy of History*, *The History of Philosophy*, *The Encyclopaedia*, *The Philosophy of Right* and so on),<sup>454</sup> but most of all, counter to the expectation that poetry should achieve its goals by formal embodiment, d) that direct, immediate apprehension is the very last thing we might expect poetry to be able to offer: there is nothing unmediated about a poem's production or reception since it can only be written or read in the context of a conviction that something called 'poetry' or 'a poem' (which involves certain determinations) can or might be able to exist. Any substantial claim about an individual poem must involve the mediation of the barest facts about its existence by interpretation, and, in fact – perhaps Heidegger was writing about the facticity of aesthetic rather than non-aesthetic worldly objects – a poem only exists as the (possibility of the) motivation and reconstructive interpretation of these facts.

Actually, the metaphor of the two works being in 'dialogue' does not adequately cover the nature of the relation between these texts because it promises productivity: some kind of Socratic discursive advance (even if ordinary dialogue so seldom delivers on this promise). Rather, I think that these two texts should be read alongside each other because they appear to *say the same thing*. In this section of the *Phenomenology* Hegel is undertaking a thought experiment into the possibility of immediate knowledge; what he calls 'Sense Certainty'. Robert Pippin describes how, in 'assuming that there is no self-mediated, conceptual component required for experience' he is 'assuming the contrary of his own ultimate position',<sup>455</sup> but Hegel nevertheless takes the task of developing what would or could follow from such immediate experience (or believing in its possibility) seriously, and he entertains such a possibility at some length. Given this length, and the variety of ways in which he approaches the topic, and given that I have already established that the interest of the uniform impenetrable surfaces in *Discrete Series* is in part based on their resolute materiality and its capacity to offer relief from the mediation of thought, it is

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<sup>454</sup> Pippin notes that there is 'nothing remotely resembling a consensus about the basic position of Hegelian philosophy', that, despite his being 'one of the most lionized and vilified philosophers in history' it is also 'widely believed that no one really knows what he was talking about'. *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfaction of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 3.

<sup>455</sup> *Hegel's Idealism*, p. 117.

simplest to demonstrate the consonances by interspersing extracts from this section of the *Phenomenology* with lines taken from the collection in which the connection is most clearly embodied, with only a little commentary on the very strangest passage.

90. The knowledge or knowing which is at the start or is immediately our object cannot be anything else but immediate knowledge itself, a knowledge of the immediate or of what simply is.

*No interval of manner  
Your body in the sun*

Our approach to the object must also be immediate or receptive; we must alter nothing in the object as it presents itself. In apprehending it, we must refrain from trying to comprehend it.

*Over which clouds pass and the  
alteration of lighting  
An overstatement*

91. Because of its concrete content, sense-certainty immediately appears as the richest kind of knowledge, indeed a knowledge of infinite wealth for which no bounds can be found, either when we reach out into space and time in which it is dispersed, or when we take a bit of this wealth, and by division enter into it.

*Nothing can equal in polish and obscured  
origin [...]*

Moreover, sense-certainty appears to be the truest knowledge; for it has not yet omitted anything from the object, but has the object before it in its perfect entirety. But, in the event, this very certainty proves itself to be the most abstract and poorest truth. All that it says about what it knows is just that it is;

*The edge of the ocean,  
The shore: here*

and its truth contains nothing but the sheer being of the thing [Sache]. Consciousness, for its part is in this certainty only as a pure 'I'; or I am in it only as a pure 'This', and the object similarly only as a pure 'This'. I, *this* particular I, am certain of *this* particular thing, not because I, *qua* consciousness, in knowing it have developed myself or thought about it in various ways; and also not because of the thing of which I am certain, in virtue of a host of distinct qualities, would be in its own self a rich complex of connections, or related in various ways to other things. Neither of these has anything to do with the truth of sense-certainty: here neither I nor the thing has the significance of a complex process of mediation; the 'I' does not have the significance of a manifold imagining or thinking; nor does the

‘thing’ signify something that has a host of qualities. On the contrary, the thing *is*, and it *is*, merely because it *is*.

*This land:*  
*The hills, round under straw*  
*A house*

It is; this is the essential point for sense-knowledge, and this pure being, or this simple immediacy, constitutes its truth. Similarly, certainty as a connection is an immediate pure connection; consciousness is ‘I’, nothing more, a pure ‘This’; the singular consciousness knows a pure ‘This’ or single item.

*On the water, solid—*  
*The singleness of a toy*

92. But when we look carefully at this pure being which constitutes the essence of this certainty, and which this certainty pronounces to be its truth, we see that much more is involved. An actual sense-certainty is not merely this pure immediacy, but an instance of it.

*Like the sea incapable of contact*  
*Save in incidents [...]*

Among the countless differences cropping up here we find in every case the crucial one is that, in sense-certainty, pure being at once splits up into what we have to call the two ‘Thises’, one ‘This’ as ‘I’ and the other ‘This’ as object. When we reflect on this difference, we find that neither one nor the other is only immediately present in sense-certainty, but each is at the same time mediated: I have this certainty through something else, viz. the thing and it, similarly, is in sense-certainty through something else, viz. through the ‘I’.

In the next section Hegel continues to unravel the concept of sense certainty; to draw out its inner contradictions, and in this section there are fewer possible analogues between his text and *Discrete Series* whose dynamic is not that of the Hegelian movement-of-the-concept: in *Discrete Series* there is only occasionally, rather than constantly, this slippage of inner contradiction, diremption, self-supersession, sublation and so on. Subsequently one of the ways in which Hegel (says that he) shows that immediate knowledge is not immediate – or that if it is immediate it is not knowledge – is via a writing experiment:

95. It is, then, sense-certainty itself that must be asked: ‘What is the This?’ If we take the ‘This’ in the twofold shape of its being, as ‘Now’ and as ‘Here’ the dialectic it has in it will receive a form intelligible as the ‘This’ itself is. To the question: ‘What is Now?’ let us answer, e.g. ‘Now is Night.’ In order

to test the truth of this sense-certainty a simple experiment will suffice. We write down this truth; a truth cannot lose anything by being written down, any more than it can lose anything through or preserving it. If now, this noon, we look again at the written truth we shall have to say that it has become stale.

There is something charmingly naïve about this remark: that the written statement ‘Now is Night’ does not remain true if read at noon. It could also, in Nietzschean fashion (i.e. this is both how Nietzsche would read it and how it would be understood if it were written by Nietzsche) be read as existing at the borders of sanity. And yet the same thought seems to make up part of the interest of writing something as bare as ‘The edge of the ocean, / The shore: here’ which, in reading, instantly becomes untrue (another futile critical response this poem triggers is the urge to take it back to the asserted shore-of-composition, if it exists, and to see if reading it there makes a difference). Reading this passage in the light of *Discrete Series* suggests that what is written in Hegel’s thought experiment, for all its asserted staleness, is something akin to a modernist poem – one which recognizes that it will appear true or false depending on the circumstances of its interpretation; which understands that this gives the text ‘event’ status and which makes thematic this polyvalence.

96. The Now that is Night is preserved, i.e. it is treated as what it professes to be, as something that is; but it proves itself to be, on the contrary, something that is not. The Now does indeed preserve itself in the face of the Day that it now is, as something that also is not Day, in other words, as a negative in general.

*Town, a town,  
But location  
Over which the sun as it comes to it;  
Which cools, houses and lamp-posts,  
during the night, with the roads–*

This self-preserving Now is, therefore, not immediate but mediated; for it is determined as a permanent and self-preserving Now through the fact that something else, viz. Day and Night, is not. [...] So it is in fact the universal that is the true [content] of sense-certainty [...]

108. The Here pointed out, to which I hold fast, is similarly a this Here which, in fact, is not this Here, but a Before and Behind, an Above and Below, a Right and Left. [...]

*Up*  
*Down. Round*  
*Shiny fixed*  
*Alternatives*

The Here, which was supposed to have been pointed out vanishes in other Heres, but these likewise vanish. What is pointed out, held fast, and abides, is a negative This, which is only negative when the Heres are taken as they should be, but, in being so taken, they supersede themselves; what abides is a simple complex of many Heres. The Here that is meant would be the point; but it is not: on the contrary, when it is pointed out as something that is, the point-out shows itself to be not an immediate knowing, but a movement from the Here that is meant through many Heres into the universal Here which is a simple plurality of Heres, just as the day is a simple plurality of Nows.

109. [...] This is why the natural consciousness, too, is always reaching this result, learning from experience what is true in it; but equally always forgetting it and starting the moment all over again. It is therefore astonishing when, in the face of this experience, it is asserted as universal experience and put forward, too, as a philosophical proposition, even as the outcome of Scepticism, that the reality or being of external things taken as Thises or sense objects has absolute truth for consciousness. To make such an assertion is not to know what one is saying, to be unaware that one is saying the opposite of what one wants to say. [...] Every consciousness itself supersedes such a truth, as e.g. Here is a tree, or Now is noon, and proclaims the opposite: Here is not a tree, but a house; and similarly, it immediately again supersedes the assertion which set aside the first so far as it is also just such an assertion of a sensuous This.<sup>456</sup>

– ‘To make such an assertion is not to know what one is saying, to be unaware that one is saying the opposite of what one wants to say’. Hegel is clearly, as Pippin notes, trying to demonstrate the ‘specific insufficiency of this model of experience’ and hoping that that demonstration will ‘provide initial, indirect support for [his] eventual position’.<sup>457</sup> Still, not knowing what it is that one is saying is for Hegel often a fertile mode; inevitable even, since it is for example the condition, he says, of all (universalizing) philosophical thinking: ‘When I say ‘I’ I mean me as this one excluding all others; but what I say (‘I’) is precisely anyone [...]’.<sup>458</sup> And, characteristically, the would-be immediate moment of thought is not dismissed as simply wrong: in his movement towards a better model Hegel ‘preserves’ the sensuous moment of sense certainty as it is sublated into perception (this is one of

<sup>456</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 58-65.

<sup>457</sup> *Hegel’s Idealism*, p. 117.

<sup>458</sup> *The Encyclopedia Logic* §20, p.51.

the moments at which Hegel defines *aufhebung*).<sup>459</sup> But its sufficiency or validity is not relevant here: the object thinking in *Discrete Series* is not an attempt to establish this relation to objects as an adequate model of consciousness, or to establish its internal logical consistency, but rather to give evidence of its desirability: to show that imagining such a relation is possible, or desirable, or necessary. It succeeds.

So it is not that Oppen and Hegel reach the same conclusions; I do not find that *Discrete Series* reaches any strictly philosophical conclusions at all about the general nature of experience (for instance the suspicion of self-positing experience and self-confirming accounts of it is at once social, historical, philosophical). Its conclusion is rather more limited: that for various reasons the experience of sense-certainty, via the uniform impenetrable surfaces of physical objects is one worth dwelling in. In my final reading from the collection I turn to a poem which offers both sense certainty and its opposite; in which the objects, so resolutely present in the collection (they often seem to be the only thing present) seem to disappear; in which they appear in order to disappear. This is also, I think, the poem most elicitive of the work of philosophy; and which speaks most strongly to Adorno's thought that 'Aesthetic experience is not genuine experience unless it becomes philosophy.'

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<sup>459</sup> §113 '[...] the sense element is still present, but not in the way it was supposed to be in [the position of] immediate certainty: not as the singular item that is 'meant' but as a universal, or as that which will be defined as a *property*. *Supersession* exhibits the twofold meaning which we have seen in the negative: it is at once a *negating* and a *preserving*.' *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 68.

In Philosophy the determinations of Knowing are not considered one-sidedly only as determinations of things but as, at the same time, determinations of the Knowing to which they belong in common at least with things. [...] <sup>460</sup>

The poem comes before the midpoint of the collection, on the page facing the poem beginning ‘Closed car’, but it has an air of lateness, or even finality. It is as follows:

The mast  
Inaudibly soars; bole-like, tapering:  
Sail flattens from it beneath the wind.  
The limp water holds the boat's round  
sides. Sun  
Slants dry light on the deck.  
Beneath us glide  
Rocks, sand, and unrimmed holes.<sup>462</sup>

This is a poem, I wish to claim, in which nothing happens. There is a strong stability and security to its representational gestures – we know we are on a sailing boat moving through limpid water; we can guess that the number which makes up the ‘we’ is probably pretty low, almost certainly two. Despite the movement of the boat there is a general feeling of stasis. The mast soars at the beginning and is still soaring at the end, the limp water holds throughout and the sun slants and the ‘Rocks, sand and unrimmed holes’ glide throughout: stasis-in-movement is what ‘to glide’ means; to move without, uncannily, the smaller multi-directional movements that usually accompany motion and are its signature (they are records of how it is produced; of the friction and resistance which are usually vital). There is none of the contradiction we saw in the opening poem – no dissenting objects or speech in which the investment of the poem is acutely contested. There is none of the hesitation or self-

<sup>462</sup> *NCP*, p. 12.



correction or self-mistrust we saw in the poem beginning ‘Closed car’ and there is none of the sharp recalcitrance of the poem beginning ‘The edge of the ocean, / The shore: here’. In fact rather than *nothing* happening there is one single event or happening in the diegetic space of this poem. That one event, whose ‘reality’ is not in doubt, is the sail regaining tension in the wind; a tightening or a becoming taut. Even so, if someone asked the occupants of the boat ‘what happened during the period represented in the poem’ a reasonable answer would be ‘nothing happened’. There are events reported in both of the other two poems from the collection I have read at length: one of the subjects sketched in the preface poem might likewise agree that nothing happened during the time-span represented there (there was ‘reading, speaking, smoking’; the rain continued to fall) but there was nevertheless a puncturing transformative act of perceptual understanding based on seeing the division in the rain. In the poem beginning ‘Closed car’ the car is first still at the kerb then ‘Move[s] in traffic’ and, also, as I have argued, the material fact of the car is a kind of event; a ‘knock upon the door’ of consciousness. Here there is nothing, or almost nothing. The gaze of the poetic subject – the gaze we can infer from the reporting of facts and their strictly visual content – does move, but very smoothly, and in a single downwards sweep. First the top of the mast (where it tapers) and the air in which it ‘soars’, then to the sail, to the deck of the boat and finally through the water and to the sea/lake/river bed. It is easy to sweep down with the implied movement of the eyes which take in almost the whole of what is a relatively simple scene; one in which the parts imply each other, since, for example, if the weather were different (less serene) the boat’s movement would be different and the mast might cut the wind audibly instead, and it would be more difficult, perhaps impossible, to see the rocks and sand and so on. In any case the inert atmosphere certainly survives the movement of the gaze and the one event; the minor transformation in the shape of the sail from less flat to more flat. This inertness is the first sense in which, rather than *representing* an encounter with a uniform impenetrable surface – which the poem also does, via the ‘deck’ on which ‘sun slants dry light’ – it aims to *reproduce* the experience of resolute materiality in the reader’s experience of the poem. The reader can return to this poem as the viewer can to the ‘quiet stone floor’ or the ‘glass of windows’ and ask ‘wait, what is happening here?’. As with the confrontation with those objects the answer is very little; almost nothing.

Prosodically the poem is difficult to parse. D.P. Tryphonopoulos notes that ‘though metrical residues’ or “‘The Ghost of Meter’” can be found in free verse, he does not find them (it) in Oppen.<sup>463</sup> Certainly the residues are relatively faint here – perhaps only present where there are three or more short words which all seem to have a good claim to require stress: ‘boat’s round sides’; ‘sun / slants dry light’; ‘glide / Rocks, sand’ although even if ‘glide’ seems to demand a stress it cannot be accorded one in a voiced reading, since that would put it in the imperative rather than the indicative mood (glide, rocks!). The lines of the poem, except for the first, are comparatively long. There is little of the emphasis via truncation we find in the rest of the collection –

Bad times  
The cars pass  
[...]<sup>464</sup>  
or  
  
[...]  
The world too short for trend is land—  
In the mouths,  
Rims<sup>465</sup>

– nor the ‘stuttering’, discussed in Chapter 1.2, which is moderately often a feature of the poems of *Discrete Series*. There is, within these long lines, a pattern of high concentration of elements which cause a reader to pause (the punctuation in the second line) then low concentration (the mostly uninterrupted lines beginning ‘Sail’, ‘The’ and ‘Slants’) and then high concentration again in the final line. There the function of the potential pauses has changed from meaning-determining to merely separating objects; we might say that the space marked by the punctuation there is emptier, that meaning has been voided during the course of the poem. In fact the dispersal of the words of the poem into lines seems somewhat arbitrary – not random, which would suggest some long lines, some very short (which there are) and some of medium length – but rather without force or strength of will. For example it seems important that the line beginning ‘Slants’ should begin ‘Slants’ but it is hard to say why. There is, possibly, a performance of non-orthogonality

<sup>463</sup> ‘The Prosody of Oppen’s Poetry’ *Paideuma* 40 (2013) 311-324, 323n2.

<sup>464</sup> *NCP*, p. 30.

<sup>465</sup> *NCP*, p. 34.

(slanting) in the distance across, and down, between the word ‘sun’ and the description of the direction of its shafts (‘slants’). But this is, I think, a possibility that does not assert itself very forcefully. Perhaps the placement of this line-break merely keeps the emphatic weight off the word ‘dry’, which contributes to the naturalization of the quality of the light – it de-emphasizing the descriptor ‘dry’ and attempts to convey that this quality of the light belongs to the phenomenon rather than drawing attention to the fact of it having been described thus, and it therefore de-emphasizes the function of the poet. There is something peculiarly unsensuous, too, about the lineation. It is hard, of course, to prove a negative; to show conclusively that a reading which emphasized the potentially sonorous aspects of the poem would be misguided, or to refute that what is happening is that that potential aspect of poetry (sonority) is dialectically valued by its absence here. The message of the work in the latter reading would then be that if only there were, or it were possible for there to be, some *poetry* on the boat then the situation would be dramatically different, and better, although the question is then raised: why not write something which is more clearly the kind of poetry – positively vibrant with sonority and embodied effects – which could enliven the situation? And the answer could come that the poem would then not demonstrate the *want* of poetry in the world; it would fill up the silence and absence it (in that reading) diagnoses.

Such claims have been made, in general terms, about modernism’s various refusals to play along. J.M. Bernstein suggests a neat encapsulation for ‘modernist painting’:<sup>466</sup> that it ‘paints the impossibility of painting in order to hold open the possibility of painting’, either because of its ‘objective uselessness’ in the age of the photograph and the motion picture or because of the felt historical ‘impossibility of continuing to practice’ in the same way – cf. Danto, above – *within* the boundaries of painting.<sup>467</sup> This more general claim is a plausible account, I think, of the anti-poetic gestures in *Discrete Series* I have discussed so far: the breaking off in the poem beginning ‘Closed car’; the refusal of predication in the poem beginning ‘The edge of the ocean / The shore: here’ and the general confrontation elicited between a

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<sup>466</sup> Though I assume the commensurability of terminology and theories of aesthetics between media generally, I think borrowing from an essay about painting is licensed particularly by the painterly quality of the poem.

<sup>467</sup> ‘Readymades, Monochromes, Etc.: Nominalism and the Paradox of Modernism’ *Diacritics* 32.1 (Spring, 2002) 83-100, 90.

possible experience of immediacy via uniform impenetrable surfaces and the always already mediated form of poetry in which that possible experience is presented. But it is not a plausible account of what happens in this poem where the strength of the anti-poetic gesture is much feebler. Paraphrasing Hegel on externalisation, Bernstein elsewhere writes that art is ‘spirit in the alien form of the sensuous’.<sup>468</sup> *Discrete Series*, as we have seen, focuses on this alienness – the possible alienness of objects generally is explored and given concentrated expression in the objects represented in the poems. In this poem however the ‘matter’ of the form of art which is poetry is peculiarly unsensuous, and the poem achieves its substantiality through this very unsensuousness. So although it is possible to agree with William Carlos Williams who praised the ‘craftsmanlike economy of means’ here, (presumably he means the succinct style of representing the visual world of the boat)<sup>469</sup> the reasons for the formal decisions here seem weak – not in the sense of *bad* reasons, but in the sense of not strong. These are not the ‘craftsmanlike’ product of the internalisation of years of practice and experience which would, one imagines, give the gestures strength, confidence, precision. And yet despite that weakness the somewhat arbitrary dispersal into lines is vital for the text produced if we imagine a prose ‘version’ is pointlessly rather than suggestively mute:

The mast inaudibly soars; bole-like, tapering: sail flattens from it beneath the wind. The limp water holds the boat’s round sides. Sun slants dry light on the deck. Beneath us glide rocks, sand, and unrimmed holes.

An important part of the work’s objectification, then, is its lineation, but how to describe this fact of having been divided into lines? The impression is not of forming and shaping of language into a craft object whose economy of means and record of human contact we can enjoy, nor the construction of a machine, determinately inhuman. Rather the effect is to promote the simple subtension-for-consideration of these words and the scene they present, the application of a frame around this bit of language which frames it just as the concept ‘object’ frames and separates the aggregation of matter which is thereafter known as an object. In connection with the concepts of design and conceit I earlier quoted Keats (see note 102) who observed in a letter to a friend who had sent him some poems that what we demand of a poem is

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<sup>468</sup> *Hegel and the Arts*, p. 217.

<sup>469</sup> ‘The New Poetical Economy’ *Poetry* (July 1934) 220-225, 225.

that it should hide the fact that it is subtended-for-consideration (and admiration – there is perhaps an implicit rebuke to the act of having offered the poems):

We hate poetry that has a palpable design on us [...]. How beautiful are the retired flowers! How would they lose their beauty were they to throng into the highway, crying out, “Admire me, I am a violet! Dote on me, I am primrose!”<sup>470</sup>

The poem here seeks to avoid the fate of Keats’ speaking flowers: it demands attention be paid to it as an aesthetic object, due to the fact of its lineation, but without crying ‘dote on me’, or claiming any strong relation to beauty either represented or produced. It succeeds, though this effect is likely to be dependent on the contrast with other less arbitrary, more emphatic poems; with poems in which something rather than nothing happens. I do not find, then, that it holds out much hope for the continued possibility of poetry, *pace* Bernstein, and this is the source of the poem’s air of finality.

The textual deadness is also produced by the resonance between the final line of the poem and the final line of Wordsworth’s poem about death or the appearance of death, or the experience of the appearance of death – about becoming an object – ‘A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal’

No motion has she now, no force;  
She neither hears nor sees;  
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,  
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Although the boat and its occupants are in Oppen’s poem detached from the objects which move beneath them (rather than ‘Rolled round’ with them) there is nevertheless a strongly alienating inhuman (though not industrial) aspect to the movement in both poems, notwithstanding the invitation to quite lively interpretative play in Wordsworth’s poem – for example the word diurnal contains ‘dial’, a way of measuring this rotation; urn, in which the human body may end up and suggests a nocturnal region to which this rotation leads – and notwithstanding that the poem, in sum, amounts to a puzzling contradiction. It first asserts that ‘she’ has no motion (in the sense of autonomous motor ability) before using (earthly) motion as a marker of

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<sup>470</sup> *Selected Letters of John Keats*, pp. 86-87.

her deadness. Immanently, though, another way in which the poem produces this sense of deadness is the development in the poem from process – action and reaction; interaction of objects with each other, or with phenomena – to objecthood. By a relatively complex dynamic process the wind pushes against the sail which twists and transfers the force into the boat, generating a forward motion through the water. The sun generates light which falls to earth and the deck of the boat and the deck moves with the rest of the boat through the water making the objects appear to glide. There is also the conceptual rather than physical action-and-reaction processes by which the subject understands, and we with the subject, that the gliding of the rocks etc. indicates the movement of the boat and the boat-borne subject. But the apparent motion of the ‘Rocks, sand, and unrimmed holes’ is, I think, arrested by their position at the end of the poem, by their remaining in the poem and not, somehow, being swept past it.

So, quite a lot appears to be happening, if we take my account of the poem, above, as guide, and this unavoidable conceptual complexity in exegesis is just the sort of thing the poems, including this one, seek relief from in their pursuit of an experience of sense certainty: one of the virtues of the scene presented (the ‘dry light on the deck’) is that it holds at bay the complications needed to account for its presentation and power. Or rather, quite a lot of thinking must happen in order to outline how it is – and this is what I want to maintain – that nothing happens in the poem; how it achieves a condition of textual deadness and manages somehow to reproduce the experience of the resolutely material object (the cobble, the steel deck, the quiet stone floor) in its linguistic performance. And I would go further and say that it is not just that nothing happens in the poem, but, by and in the final line, that *nothing even exists*. The objects in the final line diminish in objecthood as the list proceeds: ‘Rocks’ are almost paradigmatic objects; their extent defined – they are graspable in a way that ‘rock’ is not – and their material resistance substantial. ‘[S]and’, or the sandy lake/river/sea bed provides some resistance, but is a quasi-object through its aggregate composition (many tiny grains which are hard to grasp). ‘[U]nrimmed holes’ are almost the opposite of an object: they escape even being the negative outline of an object – its Other – that a hole, or absence, which was clearly defined (‘rimmed’), would be. All of these ‘objects’ also, however, appear to lose altogether,

and all at the same time, whatever grip on representational reality they had in the first place.

I want to show what I think happens to the objects, here, by drawing a parallel with some lines written by another philosophically oriented artist; one who like Oppen gave up his art, though for chess rather than political activism (and there is always the suspicion, as there is not with Oppen, that the ceasing of artistic production was in some way still an artistic gesture). In 1914 Marcel Duchamp noted the following on the back of a canvas:

*Nominalism* [literal] = No more generic specific numeric distinction between words (tables is not the plural of table, ate has nothing in common with eat). [...] The word also loses its musical value. It is only readable (due to being made up of consonants and vowels), it is readable by eye and little by little takes on a form of plastic significance; it is a sensorial reality a plastic truth with the same title as a line, as a group of lines.

This *plastic* being of the word (by literal nominalism) differs from the *plastic being* of any form whatever (2 drawn lines) in that the grouping of several words without significance, reduced to literal nominalism, is *independent of the interpretation* i.e. that: (*cheek, amyl, phaedra*) for example has no plastic value in the sense of: these 3 words drawn by X are different from the same 3 words drawn by Y. —These same 3 words have no musical value i.e. do not draw their group significance from their order nor from the sound of their letters. —One can thus *speak* them or *write them* in any order; at each reproduction, the reproducer *presents* (like at each musical audition of the same work) once again, without interpretation, the group of words and *finally* no longer expresses a work of art (poem, painting, or music).<sup>471</sup>

Duchamp is asking us to imagine a hard upper limit of arbitrariness – to imagine, which is hard, that ‘tables’ has nothing to do with ‘table’, that a word is equivalent to a group of lines which do not combine to form a representation. It is likewise hard to imagine presenting a work without interpretation, especially since the analogy is musical, and the execution of a piece of instrumental music, its very existence, is, as Adorno points out more than once, called in most European languages ‘interpretation’. It is even harder to imagine a word with ‘sensorial reality’ but with no semiotic function – it belongs to the concept ‘word’ to have *both* of these things. But I think that this also what Oppen’s poem obliquely asks for: for its flatness or banality to be preserved, for it not to be made into a performance, or for this

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<sup>471</sup> Cited in de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism*, p. 126.

inevitable tendency to be minimized. The action of the poem is the drive towards redundancy; the production of a radical estrangement effect in spite of the production of a stable, identifiable diegetic world. It asks us to hear, in ‘Rocks, sand, and unrimmed holes’ not – or not only – Wordsworth’s ‘Rocks and stones and trees’ but something like ‘*cheek, amyl, phaedra*’. In this reading the only thing that happens in the poem, the sail flattening beneath the wind, does not even happen in the sense that it comes to seem like an analogy for this radical transformation, or for its own apparent arbitrariness.

The idea of such referential disappearance has proved attractive not just to modernist artists and poets like Duchamp or the Oppen of *Discrete Series*, but also to many theorists of literature writing in the wake of modernism, writers whose texts are the product of what Paul de Man identified as the movement of modernist energy beyond the confines of aesthetic production and into ‘the field of literary theory and criticism’.<sup>472</sup> Thus Blanchot writes of a process in which

[t]he work disappears, but the fact of disappearing remains and appears as the essential thing.<sup>473</sup>

And of a poem by Mallarmé de Man himself writes, somewhat approvingly, of how one critic (Karlheinz Stierle)

came to the conclusion that, at least in certain lines of the poem, the sensory elements have entirely vanished.<sup>474</sup>

That is, both the sensory elements in the poem’s language and the would-be sensory elements in the represented scene (clouds and rocks at Verlaine’s tomb) seem to have disappeared. In his approval he is working his way towards his later account (produced by glossing a passage from Kant) of what the vision of the world made available in artworks is like more generally:

The language of the poets therefore in no way partakes of mimesis, reflection, or even perception, in the sense which would allow a link between

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<sup>472</sup> ‘Literary History and Literary Modernity’ [1969] in *Blindness & Insight*, pp. 142-165, pp.143-44. Jameson notes the same thing; that ‘all the great new and original modern philosophies since Nietzsche swim in the great stream that carries aesthetic modernism forward[.]’ *A Singular Modernity*, p. 137.

<sup>473</sup> ‘Literature and the Right to Death’, p. 365, quoted above in Chapter 3.1.

<sup>474</sup> ‘Lyric and Modernity’ [1969] in *Blindness & Insight*, pp. 167-186, p. 175.



sense experience and understanding, between perception and apperception. Realism postulates a phenomenalism of experience which is here denied or ignored. Kant's looking at the world just as one sees it ("wie man ihn sieht") is an absolute radical formalism that entertains no notion of reference or semiosis.<sup>475</sup>

Adorno has a model in which (great) art works 'perish' in their interpretative execution, in which their achievement is to negate their own achievement:

Artworks stand in the most extreme tension to their truth content. Although this truth content, conceptless, appears nowhere else than in what is made, it negates the made. *Each artwork, as a structure, perishes in its truth content*; through it the artwork sinks into irrelevance, something that is granted exclusively to the greatest artworks.<sup>476</sup>

And Oppen himself entertained such a vision, lamenting in one of his daybooks that

The poem replaces the thing, the poem destroys its meaning— — I would like the poem to be nothing, to be transparent, to be inaudible, not to be.<sup>477</sup>

— that is, like Duchamp he would like the poem 'no longer [to] express[ ] a work of art'. I want to say that this desire is here achieved — the desire to make the world disappear or to record its disappearance — and also to say that the opposite desire — to achieve the kind of substantiality that is presented via the surfaces of the objects in the rest of the collection — is *also* achieved. The claims seem initially hard to reconcile, and yet this latter effect — pure surface or an impenetrable resistance effect of the text — is what is achieved if it is true that the rocks and sand and unrimmed holes lose their referential content and come to seem as alien as '*cheek, amyl, phaedra*': the poem achieves substantiality — and no little pathos — through the disappearance of the objects it represents. In order to make sense of this we need to turn one final time to Hegel, who, in propaedeutic deadpan mode warns us not to mistake 'life' in artworks for real human spirit; as it were living life. He is emphasizing that the 'ordinary way of looking at things' ranks the art-product 'below the product of nature' because it is dead. For Hegel it in fact 'stands higher' insofar as it is able 'to present the divine Ideal', but he characteristically acknowledges the

<sup>475</sup> 'Kant's Materialism'[1981] in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 119-128, p. 128.

<sup>476</sup> *Aesthetic Theory* p. 173-74, (emphasis added).

<sup>477</sup> From a daybook in the Oppen archive at the University of California, San Diego. Cited by Nicholls in *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 56.

truth in the naïve or ‘ordinary’ way of looking at things; that works are indeed dead objects before they are vehicles for ‘spirit’:

[T]he work of art is not through and through enlivened, but, regarded as an external object, is dead. [...] What is alive in nature is, within and without, an organism purposefully elaborated into all its tiniest parts, while the work of art attains the appearance of life only on its surface; inside it is ordinary stone, or wood and canvas, or, as in poetry, an idea expressed in speech and letters.<sup>478</sup>

Let us admit this more deeply, this poem seems to say; let us arrest the relentless torment of thought by producing something impressively dead; something that preserves the deadness of the materials, rather than giving evidence of ‘the baptism of the spiritual’. Hegel gets the implicit syllogism wrong, though: if the stone of a statue and the canvas of a painting are, to the animation they appear to generate, as **x** of a poem is to the animation that *it* appears to generate, then **x** is necessarily words (or, by analogy with the canvas; the page) not ‘the idea’. The achievement of this poem is to remind us of this, and thereby that anything it is possible for a poem to do or be (including, as here: nothing) is only possible because of the (compromised) materiality of language. This is what allows the poet to create something external to her; what allows the prepoetic knowing ‘to make an object of itself, i.e. of the Knowing. [...]’. This is what makes poetry always (potentially) philosophy.

Poetry ‘makes an object of itself’ in two senses: firstly in the sense that *framing* a thought or experience in words, as with the lineation here, makes reflection on that thought or experience, and on its formal transformation, which is the only way we have access to it, unavoidable. Like philosophy poetry always has itself – the fact of having been written at all – as content, whatever else it may be said to do or to be about, whatever else is its ‘object’. Secondly, whether or not pre-linguistic thought exists (and whether or not, if it exists, it may be losslessly translated into language and into paraphrase), the unavoidable objectification of poetry in words – the fact that linguistic art involves ‘actual external configurations’<sup>479</sup> – reminds us that language and thus interpretation are unavoidable when it comes to thinking *about* thinking. Philosophy is ‘thinking about thinking’ by definition, but history and

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<sup>478</sup> *Aesthetics* I, p. 29.

<sup>479</sup> *ibid.*, p. 281.

literary history are also accounts of what it is or was possible to know or think about anything in a given context (including our own). An account of what was done or written without any account of 'why', of what else might have been done or thought, and why it should be of interest to us would be very curious indeed, and under such a regime it is hard to imagine events or texts in a meaningful sense at all. Events and texts would refuse even to cohere, appearing instead as the visit of the piano-tuners appears to Watt in Beckett's *Watt*:

[It] gradually lost, in the nice processes of its light, its sound, its impact and its rhythm, all meaning, even the most literal. [It] ceased very soon to signify for Watt a piano, an obscure family and professional relation, an exchange of judgements and so on, if indeed it ever had signified such things, and became a mere example of light commenting bodies, and stillness motion, and comment comment.<sup>480</sup>

Faced with this transformation of experience into what is practically a definition of de Man's 'absolute radical formalism that entertains no notion of reference or semiosis'<sup>481</sup> it is not surprising that Watt feels a general flattening of experience, that he

had experienced nothing, since the age of 14 or 15, of which in retrospect he was not content to say, That is what happened.<sup>482</sup>

In this sense – if we are to avoid our understanding of texts and events being as limited as Watt's experience of his life – history and literary history, including history and literary history of the present must be understood as exercises in 'thinking about thinking'. Whether or not they grasp or think they can grasp their objects with any great security they are nevertheless *linguistic* exercises. This is true in a trivial sense – there may be 'mute inglorious' Marxes, Hegels and Adornos, even ones who surpass those authors in range and power, but if they did not write down or tell anyone what they were thinking they cannot participate in the system called 'philosophy', 'history' or 'literary history'. But it also follows from the linguistic, reflective existence of those practices (from their objectification in language) that they are capable of reflecting on their own procedures (on their

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<sup>480</sup> (London: Calder, 1994), pp. 69-70.

<sup>481</sup> See note 475 above.

<sup>482</sup> *ibid.*, p. 69.

objectification in language), which capability also functions as an imperative to do so. The philosophical importance of aesthetics, Bernstein notes, is that it

concerns the sensible conditions of knowing and meaning, which is to say, sensuous or material meaning: the sensuous element of perceptual claims, and the perceptual element of objective conditions.<sup>483</sup>

Rather than ‘sensible’ and ‘sensuous’ *Discrete Series* suggests we think of these conditions as ‘objective’, and speaks not just to ‘perceptual claims’ in a narrow sense, but reminds us that all knowing and meaning beyond the possible experience of bare materiality involves interpretation and selection. The collection pessimistically suggests that notwithstanding this object aspect knowing and meaning also inevitably involves confusion, misprision and contradiction. But the thrust of the collection is fundamentally in keeping with Bernstein’s Hegelian defence of art, here: the transformation of ‘Rocks, sand, and unrimmed holes’ into ‘*cheek, amyl, phaedra*’, as with the emphasis on the ‘making an object of the poem’, is a salient reminder that meaning is, due to its linguistic existence, material. The disappearance of the objects in Oppen’s ‘final’ poem and the poem’s simultaneous achievement of substantiality thus offers a double gloss on Adorno’s motto, which, I suggested at the beginning of this thesis, the poems of *Discrete Series* confirm. ‘Aesthetic experience is not genuine experience unless it becomes philosophy’ insofar as a full experience of works like these – works written in the wake of ‘the end of art’ and art’s self-knowledge – requires articulation of the thinking they are doing (or perhaps given the deadness of the boat poem, *not* doing) – but the experience ‘becomes philosophy’, here as with *Watt*, because it offers some salient reminders about the procedures of thought. Valid reflection on philosophy’s conditions and procedures must surely be considered part of philosophy.

In this thesis I have considered the poems of *Discrete Series*, their work with objects and with themselves as objects, in literary-historical, historical and philosophical contexts. I do not think that in my consideration I have grasped them with any great security. I have emphasized and evidenced Oppen and Objectivism’s debts to Pound, both literary and ‘real’. I have shown that the poems can be read alongside – and in

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<sup>483</sup> *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 83.

the same way as – works such as the *Cantos* or ‘The Waste Land’ whose ability to be productively read in philosophical terms is taken as given. I have managed to give an account of the collection’s specific participation within a wider cultural and philosophical turn towards hardness in the early twentieth century, and outlined the thinking that they do with regard to industrialization and to human experience of a resolutely object world – and shown that this thinking is much more Hegelian than Heideggerian. Nevertheless they have also, and at the same time, appeared to elude my grasp. With regard to the opening poem there were complicated procedures of contradiction and self-indictment to be outlined; the poem beginning ‘Closed car’ seemed to evince dissatisfaction with what it is possible for poetry to do with regard to an industrial object and more generally; the poem beginning ‘The edge of the ocean’ seemed to refuse speech and to forestall the expansion of that refusal into literary meaning. As Pound notes in his preface, the poems frustrate critical approaches, and, I would add, they make for somewhat frustrating critical exegeses. This may be a virtue – as I have noted it forces us to reflect on our interpretative methods and expectations and it shows at least that criticism is not, as Harold Bloom asserts ‘as much a series of metaphors for the acts of loving what we have read as for the acts of reading themselves’.<sup>484</sup> These poems are difficult to love, but still worth engaging with at length. It may also be a virtue for readers invested in the importance and relevance of modernism insofar as it shows that, as long as they are productively rather than pointlessly frustrating – their difficulties aesthetic and epistemological rather than historical – they remain within our historical horizon and we within theirs. In participating in the process of Oppen’s demarginalisation – and within that process attending exclusively to *Discrete Series* – I hope to have shown that the marginal, uncanonized, unread existence of this collection was an injustice not *per se* but because of the collection’s aesthetic and philosophical achievements – and problems, for these are one and the same – that were thereby obscured.

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<sup>484</sup> *Figures of Capable Imagination* (New York: Seabury, 1976), p. 103.

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### Online Resources

#### *Online Historical Population Reports*

[[http://www.histpop.org/ohpr/servlet/PageBrowser?path=Browse/Census%20\(by%20geography\)&active=yes&mno=169&tocstate=expandnew&display=sections&display=tables&display=pagetitles&pageseq=12](http://www.histpop.org/ohpr/servlet/PageBrowser?path=Browse/Census%20(by%20geography)&active=yes&mno=169&tocstate=expandnew&display=sections&display=tables&display=pagetitles&pageseq=12)]

#### *Google 'N'grams*

'closed car':

[[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=closed+car&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct\\_url=t1%3B%2Cclosed%20car%3B%2Cc0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=closed+car&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cclosed%20car%3B%2Cc0)]

'windshield':

[[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=windshield&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct\\_url=t1%3B%2Cwindshield%3B%2Cc0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=windshield&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cwindshield%3B%2Cc0)]

'windscreen':

[[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=windscreen&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct\\_url=t1%3B%2Cwindscreen%3B%2Cc0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=windscreen&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cwindscreen%3B%2Cc0)]