Journal of American Studies, **43** (2009), 3, 477–495 © Cambridge University Press 2009
doi:10.1017/S002187580999082X

Oppen's Pragmatism

LEE SPINKS

This article offers a revisionist reading of the aesthetic of the American modernist poet George Oppen. It seeks, in the first instance, to supplement those established readings of Oppen that have concluded that his work is most profitably understood in the discursive contexts of American literary modernism and modern European Continental philosophy by arguing that such approaches overlook a key indigenous intellectual influence upon his corpus: that body of philosophical inquiry and cultural self-reflection that has come to be known as American pragmatism. The article attempts to rectify this omission by making two simultaneous and complementary suggestions: first, that pragmatic thought opens up a number of formal and semantic questions – indeed, a number of questions about the relationship between form and meaning – that have been too little considered in recent work on American poetry; and second, that something crucial to Oppen's poetry remains unthinkable without sustained attention to the questions and claims that pragmatism places at the very heart of its endeavour. While the relationship between pragmatist thought and Oppen's poetics helps to illuminate a set of concerns that lies at the very core of his aesthetic, the paper will argue, it also reciprocally exposes the limitations of an influential genealogical vision of American literary modernism. To support this contention it examines the ways in which a certain literary version of American intellectual history has reinterpreted the pragmatism of William James in the image of an Emersonian linguistic scepticism in order to establish the historical centrality of a broadly Romantic genealogy of American modernism. The paper concludes by suggesting that a renewed attention to the specific forms and modalities of Oppen's poetry demonstrates not only the inadequacy of this version of literary history to a particular tradition of American poetics, but also promises to recover the force and distinctiveness of the American pragmatist inheritance for succeeding generations of writers.

A century after his birth, the reputation of the American modernist poet George Oppen is entering a period of critical consolidation. A slow but steady stream of scholarly articles has identified and elaborated key aspects of his aesthetic practice, a handsome new edition of his collected poems has recently been published, and the first critical monograph to survey the entirety of his literary career appeared last year.[1] Although it remains true that, notwithstanding the award to Oppen in 1969 of the Pulitzer Prize for his volume *Of Being Numerous*, he continues to be a somewhat indistinct and

University of Edinburgh.

[1] See *George Oppen: The Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Davidson (New York: New Directions, 2002); and Peter Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press

marginal figure in the eyes of the general reading public, his work has managed to evoke certain consistent lines of critical response. Certainly it is now possible to speak in relatively assured terms of an "Objectivist" Oppen, a "phenomenological" Oppen, a "Heideggerean" Oppen, and an Oppen whose work is in many ways consonant with the broader intellectual movement of the American political left.[2] Yet while these readings have been crucial to the recuperation and revival of Oppen's poetic reputation, I want to argue that their common conviction that his work is most profitably understood in the context of American literary modernism and modern European Continental philosophy overlooks a key indigenous intellectual influence upon his work: that body of philosophical inquiry and cultural self-reflection that has come to be known as American pragmatism. In the pages that follow I wish to attempt to rectify this omission by making two simultaneous and complementary suggestions: first, that pragmatic thought opens up a number of formal and semantic questions – indeed, a number of questions about the relationship between form and meaning – that have been too little considered in recent work on American poetry; and second, that something crucial to Oppen's poetry remains unthinkable without sustained attention to the questions and claims that pragmatism places at the very heart of its endeavour.

The relationship between pragmatist thought and Oppen's poetics is crucial to my argument in a number of ways. Two aspects of this conjunction should be stressed at the outset: if, in one sense, the copula Oppen and pragmatism helps to illuminate a set of concerns that lies at the very core of his aesthetic, it also reciprocally exposes the limitations of an entire and influential genealogical vision of American literary modernism. My chief contention here will be that in order to establish the historical centrality of a broadly Romantic genealogy of American modernism, a certain literary version of American intellectual history has reinterpreted the pragmatism of William James in the image of an Emersonian linguistic scepticism that has little in common with Oppen's own pragmatic poetics. Against this view, a renewed attention to the specific forms and modalities of Oppen's poetry

[2] For an "objectivist" reading of Oppen see Marjorie Perloff, "The Shape of the Lines': George Oppen and the Metric of Difference," in *idem*, *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1985), 119–34; for a "phenomenological" reading of Oppen see Paul Kenneth Naylor, "The Pre-position 'Of': Being, Seeing and Knowing in George Oppen's Poetry," *Contemporary Literature*, 32, 1 (Spring 1991), 100–15; for a "Heideggerean" reading of Oppen see Nicholls, 62–82; and for a reading of Oppen as an artist of the American political left see Eric Homberger, "George Oppen and the Culture of the American Left," in Burton Hatlen, ed., *George Oppen: Man and Poet* (Orono, ME: University of Maine Press, 1981), 181–93.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press

demonstrates not only the inadequacy of this version of literary history to many of the "pure products of America," but also promises to recover the force and distinctiveness of the American pragmatist inheritance for succeeding generations of writers.[3]

I want to begin to develop a few of these points by way of momentary recourse to a text that is, for reasons good and ill, central to recent critical work upon the relationship between pragmatism and American literary modernism: Richard Poirier's *Poetry and Pragmatism*. Poirier's book is famous, some might say notorious, for fashioning an image of pragmatism (he hovers tellingly between the terms "pragmatism" and "Emersonian pragmatism" for reasons that will quickly become apparent) as a variety of linguistic scepticism that became a generative principle for a particular line of American poets whose work involved a recognition that "language, if it is to represent the flow of individual experience, ceases to be an instrument of clarification or of clarity and, instead, becomes the instrument of a saving uncertainty and vagueness."[4] While acknowledging that William James's 1898 Berkeley lecture "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results" is credited with launching the philosophical movement called "pragmatism," Poirier's revisionist narrative idiosyncratically recasts James as the mere point of transmission of a series of incipiently pragmatic ideas that first flowed from Emerson into the work of literary figures like Thoreau, Whitman, Frost and Stevens by means of a brief and unexpected detour thorough the modernism of Gertrude Stein. Poirier turns so definitively to Emerson because he detects in Emersonian linguistic scepticism a paradigm that "significantly shapes those aspects of pragmatism which get expressed in the work of those great twentieth-century figures."[5] What we see in Emerson, Poirier explains, is an "unrelenting flexibility of language" wherein "meanings are emplaced only to be edged out by alternative ones, and where the human presence already implicit in the sounds of words can, through the very gestures that dissolve that presence, be refigured and affirmed."[6] Poirier's term "linguistic skepticism," it soon becomes clear, is designed to capture the constitutive play of creation and de-creation that makes it possible to reveal linguistic resources in the words and phrases we use that "point to something beyond skepticism, to possibilities of personal and cultural renewal."[7] Such possibilities, he continues, were eagerly seized upon by the thinker who believed, like Emerson, that the heroic is perforce dedicated to action and whose

[3] William Carlos Williams, *Collected Poems I: 1909–1939* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), 217.
[4] Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (London: Faber, 1992), 3–4.
[5] Ibid., 5. [6] Ibid., 10–11. [7] Ibid., 11.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press

famous definition of the cognitive process ("The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action") ascribed crucial quantities of activity to the becoming-conscious of the subject itself.

Before pausing to consider both the curiousness of Poirier's strategic re-invention of pragmatism as Emersonian linguistic scepticism – a move that has not passed unremarked within the philosophical and the wider intellectual community – and its implications for our understanding of American literary modernism, it is worth emphasizing the pragmatic dividend he accrues by reconfiguring what has been bequeathed to us as a Jamesian inheritance in explicitly Emersonian terms.[8] The first, and perhaps pre-eminent, benefit is that it enables him to underscore what we might call the genetic element or quantity of will-to-power that lies at the heart of life and characterizes life as a mode of perpetual becoming. "Nothing," as Emerson remarked in "Circles," "is secure but life, transition, the energising spirit." To envisage the real value of life as an energising spirit that is always also a mode of transition is to renounce those merely fixed or entrenched parts of our linguistic and cultural vocabulary that rigidify imagination into doxa and perception into cliché.[9] To put this another way, the power and potency of lived experience inheres in the transition between states of being, serving the interests "not of any settled condition (the interests, say, of a determined self) but rather those of the tendencies-in-realization latent in any given condition."[10] Viewed in this light, the enigmatic and self-scrutinizing progress of Emerson's syntax seeks simultaneously to establish and exceed the substantive or fixed points in our experience by presenting them as an always transitional movement between two different perceptions of life. Because the meaning of our experience is at once present and prospective, it has no ultimate purpose or goal; instead we should try to develop the productive potential of our every insight by setting it to work within the continuous stream of our experience. By releasing the flow of individual experience, in Poirier's words, from the control of "any conventional or imposed or already timed narrative sequence," existing realities are both encountered in their material exigency and perceived as radically open to change.[11] Here, in this gesture of renunciation that also doubles as the point of transition to new

[8] Stanley Cavell expresses some of his reservations about the identification of Emerson as a "pragmatist" in his essay "What's the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist" in his *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, ed. David Justin Hodge (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 215–23.

[9] Emerson, "Circles," in Poirier, 28.

[10] Jonathan Levin, *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), ix.

[11] Poirier, 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press

possibilities of living and thinking, we seem to receive an uncanny intimation of William James's famous representation of the "pragmatist" as one who

> turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power … It means the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretence of finality in truth.[12]

This sense of anticipation or premonition is only accentuated by reading James's work on pragmatism in the light of Emerson's essays. Thus in each corpus we discover a shared insistence that immediate experience is, to echo James T. Kloppenberg's helpful triad of terms, always relational (it never exists in absolute isolation but as part of a broader experiential field), creative (it does not passively register sense data but engenders truths by establishing relationships between perceptions) and imbued with historically specific cultural values (it is, that is, never blandly "human" or universal, but always personal and particular in its emphasis).[13] Both thinkers also display an extreme scepticism about any form of foundationalism, understood here as the attempt to establish permanent and unchanging grounds for different forms of knowledge, while accepting the necessary contingency of every system of truth. Indeed, thinking is born for Emerson and James from that perception of contingency and limitation that acknowledges that there is no absolute origin or end that will function as a ground for truth and which asks us to fashion a world of sense for ourselves from the press of material contingencies. Crucially, both men see thinking and writing as modes of activity that expose us to the differential forces that compose our nature and encourage us to act and judge differently in the world around us. As James put the matter, in an arresting and overdetermined phrase, we must set each word we use to work within the stream of our experience in order to realize its "practical cash-value" and conceive new ways in which existing realities might be changed.[14]

Both the provoking resemblances and the profound differences between the modalities of Emersonian linguistic scepticism and Jamesian pragmatism are illuminated by Emerson and James's reflections upon the relationship between language and experience. The apparent, and, by James, unacknowledged, continuities between their respective positions appear to be

[12] William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Dover, 1995), 20.
[13] James T. Kloppenberg, "Pragmatism: An Old Word for Some New Ways of Thinking," *Journal of American History*, 83, 1 (1996), 100–38, 102.
[14] James, 21.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press

crucial to the arguments they wish to establish. When Emerson writes in "Self-Reliance" that "Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim," and in "Circles" that "There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees," he underscores a fundamental distinction between a vitalist power of superfluity and self-becoming that his vision of "life" expresses and a cultural "idea" about life that seeks to locate difference and becoming within a ground that might provide a secure foundation for knowing the world.[15] The same insight is given a potentially utopian gloss in "Circles":

> Our globe seen by God is a transparent law, not a mass of facts. The law dissolves the facts and holds it fluid. Our culture is the predominance of an idea which draws after it this train of cities and institutions. Let us rise into another idea; they will disappear.[16]

One place, of course, where this cultural "idea" about life is distributed and enforced is in the very structure of our language, which privileges predication and communicable meaning over the tissue of connectives that make predication meaningful in the first place. For us to remain faithful to the Emersonian dream of reposing in the aboriginal power of transition, then, we must at all costs resist the unchecked expenditure of transitives in substantive terms and cash out our conjectures within a different linguistic economy. Emerson, like several of his successors, identifies the conditions for such an economy in the power of literature to tear perception from its human home and offer us an experience of life that is not already enclosed within an established idea about what life should be or mean. The singularity of literature for Emerson is that it exhibits to an extraordinary degree the implicit role of all language in the active production of truth, knowledge and sense. One reason why the figure of the "poet" occupies such a privileged position in Emerson's cultural taxonomy is that he reminds us that to make sense of ourselves is necessarily to engage in that struggle in and with language where sense is continually created and reconfigured by the circulating energies of words. Emerson draws our attention to exactly this transitional role in the making and remaking of sense when he celebrates the poet as he who "unfixes the land and the sea, makes them revolve around the axis of his primary thought, and disposes them anew."[17] Just as the exorbitance of poetic vision reveals the transcendent promise of every moment of perception,

[15] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Carl Bode (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 153 and 229. [16] Ibid., 229. [17] Ibid., 35.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press

the superfluity of literary language recalls us to the transitional possibilities of every linguistic event before it is absorbed into the regime of representation or the carapace of the concept.

James's sensitivity to the transitional possibilities of the linguistic event went to the heart of his work on consciousness and the creation of sense. He displayed this sensitivity in an instructive passage in his *Principles of Psychology* where he offered a brief analysis of the simple sentence "Columbus discovered America in 1492."[18] Reflecting upon the fact that most readers variously identify Columbus, America or 1492 as the topic of the sentence, James observes that "it is a vicious use of speech" either to "take out a substantive kernel from its content and make that its object" or to "add a substantive kernel not articulately included in its content, and to call that its object." The entire implication of the thought involved in this formulation can only be expressed, James counters, in the unfolding relation of the hyphenated sequence "Columbus-discovered-America-in-1492." In order to express the "delicate idiosyncracy" of the unfolding relations of these words as we perceive them, he counsels, we must "reproduce the thought as it was uttered, with every word fringed, and the whole sentence bathed in that original halo of obscure relations, which, like an horizon, then spread about its meaning."[19] What James calls here the "horizon" of the sentence is reciprocally constituted by the "fringe" or "halo of obscure relations" that governs in turn the transitions between its constituent parts. Crucially, the "meaning" of the sentence cannot be subtracted from these relations because it is itself nothing more than a momentary stabilization of the dynamic effects these relations are capable of producing.

In his efforts to establish an analogy between the transitive rhythm of our language and the "wonderful stream of our consciousness," James suggested a distinction between a "substantive" and a "transitive" state of mind.[20] The substantive parts of our thinking, he explained, are the "resting places" of thought where nouns (or "named mental states") and ideas are able to hold "sensorial imaginations" before the mind "for an indefinite time." Conversely the transitive parts are the "places of flight" within the stream of our thinking that are filled with "thoughts of relations, static or dynamic, that for the most part obtain between the matters contemplated in the periods of comparative rest." Now the principal problem in thinking about thinking, James insists, is to "hold fast and observe the transitive parts of thought's

[18] William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Volume I, ed. Frederick H. Burckhardt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 265. I am indebted to Jonathan Levin for his reading of this passage; see *The Poetics of Transition*, 48.

[19] James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 266.

[20] Ibid., 236.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press

stream" before they are swallowed up by the conclusion (the idea, noun or achieved mental state) that exalts itself as the object of thought itself. Traditional responses to this problem have taken two dominant forms: sensationalism, which, unable to discover substantive feelings "corresponding to the innumerable relations and forms of connection between the sensible things of the world," has denied that such states exist and made a fetish of transitive sensations; and intellectualism, which, unable to discover a productive relation between mental states and the "subjective tissue out of which sensations and other substantive conditions of consciousness are made," has eliminated any perception of transition by elevating thought to the realm of the pure idea.[21] The only proper response, James concluded, to this baleful division of thought against itself is once more to recall its relational and transitional origins:

> There is not a conjunction or a preposition, and hardly an adverbial phrase, syntactic form, or inflection of voice, in human speech, that does not express some shading or other of relation which we at some moment actually feel to exist between the larger objects of our thought. If we speak objectively, it is the real relations that appear revealed; if we speak subjectively it is the stream of consciousness that matches each of them by an inward cooling of its own. In either case the relations are numberless, and no existing language is capable of doing justice to all their shades.
>
> We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*. Yet we do not: so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use.[22]

Before concluding these remarks on some key tendencies in pragmatist thought, it is worth noting an important tension, or at least difference in emphasis, between Emersonian linguistic scepticism and Jamesian pragmatism. Poirier's observation that "the democratic impulse shared by Emersonian pragmatists also involved a recognition that language, if it is to represent the flow of individual experience, ceases to be an instrument of clarification or of clarity and, instead, becomes the instrument of a saving uncertainty and vagueness" perfectly expresses this mode of linguistic scepticism while advancing a claim ("ceases to be an instrument of clarification or of clarity") that James could never endorse. Language, for James, could never cease to be an instrument of clarity and clarification: meaning, he insists, requires a necessary and discrete determination at the level of the word, image or concept for the transitional energies that sustain it to be recognized. Our experience of the world may be pluralistic all the way down,

[21] Ibid., 237.

[22] Ibid., 238.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press

but thought only realizes itself in the objectification of a network of relations that will always exceed it. As he famously put the matter,

> Pent in, as the pragmatist more than anyone else sees himself to be, between the whole body of funded truths squeezed from the past and the coercions of the world of sense about him, who so well as he feels the immense pressure of objective control under which our minds perform their operations?[23]

For those of us interested in the forms and phases of American literary modernism, James's remarks on the relationship between "the coercions of the world of sense" and the "pressure of objective control" have a suggestive resonance. They appear curiously to anticipate the "Objectivist" turn in American poetics propounded by Louis Zukofsky in which "objectification" named a concern with the "shape" of the poem and the "resolving of words and their ideation into structure."[24] The object of objectification for Zukofsky was the poem itself, which resolved its internal constituents into the "clarity of image and word-tone."[25] Or, as Zukosky himself expressed the matter, "The rested totality may be called objectification – the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object."[26]

I want to explore the relationship between pragmatist thought and American literary modernism by examining two very different poems by George Oppen, Zukofsky's friend, sometime collaborator and occasional antagonist. Oppen's well-attested differences with objectivist practices will not detain me here, although something of their quality may be glimpsed in a 1960 letter he wrote to Cid Corman on the subject of poetic form:

> In any case I believe you are thinking more positively than I am of a certain solidity of surface. I think of form as immediacy, as the possibility of being grasped. I look for the thinnest possible surface – at times, no doubt, too thin: a hole, a lapse. It is that what you mean by a "slackening of language." There is no point in defending lapses – but that is, of all the risks the one I plan to live with. I am much more afraid of a solid mass of words.[27]

What interests me here is that poetic form for Oppen is anything but Zukofsky's "rested totality."[28] Instead of "a sort of solidity of surface," he

[23] James, *Pragmatism*, 90.
[24] Louis Zukofsky, "Sincerity and Objectification," *Poetry*, 37, 5 (Feb. 1931), 273, 274.
[25] Ibid., 272. [26] Ibid., 274.
[27] George Oppen, *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 40.
[28] It should perhaps be noted that recent scholarship upon Zukofsky has tended to emphasize his consciousness of both the fluidity and the dialectical possibilities of poetic form at the expense of any notion of a "rested totality" of objectified particulars. Thus Tim Woods in his reading of "A" suggests that Zukofsky's "strategy of writing" in that poem is "a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press

looks for "the thinnest possible surface," a notion of form that at certain points takes the form of a "hole, a lapse." Intriguingly, moreover, form is conceived transitively as both "immediacy" and "the possibility of being grasped."

In the space remaining to me I want to consider how Oppen's remarks on form, conceptuality and sense might illuminate key aspects of his poetry while shedding a certain light on their intellectual background and history. So let us begin by examining a short poem from Oppen's 1934 collection *Discrete Series*:

She lies, hip high,
On a flat bed
While the after-
Sun passes.

Plant, I breathe –
O Clearly.
Eyes legs arms hands fingers,
Simple legs in silk.

This is, on the face of it, a rather unassuming poem. Yet despite its simplicity of diction and quietness of tone, it nevertheless confronts us with some of the difficulties that inflect much of Oppen's writing. The first difficulty the poem presents, if we can use so singular a term for so pervasive a problem, involves the need for the type of pragmatic decision that goes to the very heart of every encounter with certain types of poetic language: how are we to secure a degree of narrative sense from a style of writing that simultaneously respects and flouts the protocols of subject–predicate grammar? This question leads quickly in turn to other questions. Which part of speech, to put the matter more narrowly, would need to be aligned with which other part of speech for the subject of this particular poem to come into focus? And what common semantic ground, in a poem which seems both presently and retrospectively absorbed with the finding of common ground, can be found between two present-tense narrative declarations that share the same subjective origin while extending very different poetic images of their shared subjective world?

That Oppen was perfectly aware of the difficulties poems like these presented to his readers is clear from a 1969 interview in which he expounded

means by which fragments can combat totality by insisting on negativity and yet can maintain an informing process of 'comprehensive' social interrelations." Tim Woods, *The Poetics of the Limit: Ethics and Politics in Modern And Contemporary American Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 60.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press

briefly upon the phrase "discrete series" that gave his first volume its title in terms that shed an oblique light upon the enigmatic and fragmentary character of its contents:

> My book, of course, was called *Discrete Series*. That's a phrase in mathematics. A pure mathematic series would be one in which each term would be derived from the preceding term by a rule. A discrete series is a series of terms each of which is empirically derived, each of which is empirically true. And this is the reason for the fragmentary character of those poems. I was attempting to construct a meaning by empirical statements, by imagist statements.[29]

My attention is held here by the implicitly pragmatic nature of this methodological statement. Oppen is at pains in this extract to establish a clear connection between empirical discretion ("A discrete series is a series of terms each of which is empirically derived, each of which is empirically true"), truth, and what he calls "the fragmentary character of these poems." Certainly the "truth" of the terms that his poem puts into play appears entirely dependent upon this notion of empirical discretion. The meanings of these terms are not enclosed within, or determined by, an already existing rule; the rules that govern the production of aesthetic truth are precisely what the poetic scene – the collection of empirical statements that make the poem a "poem" – is there to establish. For Oppen here, as for pragmatist thought more generally, truth is not a merely interior or stagnant property within an idea or perception: truth is a pragmatic mode of *becoming*; truth is something that *becomes* true; truth, indeed, is something that is *made* true by events. To establish the truth of something by empirical statements is, to venture tentatively for a moment into the future anterior tense, to see truth as an event, as a mode of transition, as a way of productively linking perceptual instants and particulars, a way, that is, of leading us towards that which in a discrete instance or event it will be useful to have known.

The pragmatic problem of how to construct a meaning from a discrete series of perceptual particulars is accentuated by Oppen's dramatic mode of presentation which thrusts us directly into the midst of a poetic scene without any formal sense of the way that this scene is expected to develop. We need to be a little circumspect here: the "problem" occupying my attention is not, in a primary sense, a matter of narrative detail, but rather a detail of the passage *between* narrative details that discloses something of the enigma of our experience (or, if you prefer, the "worlding" of our world). The poem opens abruptly upon the scene of what seems to be an erotic tryst: a woman

[29] L. S. Dembo, "The Objectivist Poet: Four Interviews," *Contemporary Literature*, 10, 2 (Spring 1969), 155–219, 161.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press

lies "hip high" upon a bed, her legs sheathed in what are presumably "silk" stockings, while the sun sets upon an afternoon of desultory lovemaking. Yet if the erotic subject of the text can be quite simply stated – and Oppen will return with ironic deliberateness to the adjective "simple" in the poem's final line – the relationship between its two poetic sentences so crucial to its meaning remains persistently opaque. The origin of this opacity lies in the lexical transition between the untroubled predication of the establishing statement "She lies, hip high, / on a flat bed" and the scrambled syntax of the second sentence "Plant, I breathe – / O clearly," where, contrary to the speaker's emphatic declaration, nothing now is particularly clear except the expression of a sexual urgency that comes to dominate the scene at the expense of the discretely perceived subject who first provoked it. Transposing the eight lines of the poem into prose, as Marjorie Perloff has demonstrated, makes matters no clearer: even after successive readings the two prose sentences "She lies, hip high, on a flat bed while the after-sun passes. Plant, I breathe – O clearly, eyes legs arms hands fingers, simple legs in silk" resolutely resist summary explication.[30]

The fragmentary character of Oppen's poem consists in this instance, then, in the way the second of these two empirical statements disorders the syntactic expectations established by its precursor. What also needs to be recognized is that the profound disjunction between these statements establishes a set of linguistic conditions that have a necessary pragmatic entailment for each of the poem's readers. This pragmatic consequence may be presented in the following terms: if there no longer exists a rule or convention beyond the discontinuous parts of speech that constitute the two stanzas before us – no shared grammatical or prosodic expectation, that is, that enables us to pass securely from one stanza to the other – we are bound to see the poem (and the world that the poem portrays) as the interpretative effect of the series of links and transitions that underpin the structure of their own poetic field. To see the poetic field in this way is to understand with renewed clarity why Oppen professed such enduring faith in the "small words" that, he insisted, govern the transition between, and the limits of, our modes of worldly experience. In order to develop this line of thought for a few moments, I want briefly to focus upon the poem's deployment of four small words and a curiously hyphenated compound phrase. My reading is guided throughout by one basic principle: notwithstanding those points in the poem where our hope of syntactic continuity appears destined to be

[30] Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect*, 124.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press

frustrated, close attention to the modulated transitions of meaning expressed by the poem's pattern of sounds reveals crucial elements of its semantic structure. Reading the poem aloud, for instance, the ear is caught by the phonemic chiming of the low central vowel-sound "ay" in "lies," "high," "while" and "I." My impression that this pattern of assonantal echoes and associations is crucial to the poem's development is reinforced by the way it draws together a noun and an adjective that denote the physical and spatial disposition of the desired female subject, a conjunction that works to underscore our sense of the continuous present in which the speaker's awareness of this subject unfolds, and a pronoun that brings the speaker's own subjectivity initially into view. The significance of this sonic configuration can now be put in summary terms: as we trace the progress of the "ay" vowel through the various stages of the poem, we are afforded a tentative glimpse of the way the speaker constructs an image of himself as a discrete and observing subject from the active flow of life. A glance plays across a raised expanse of sunlit flesh, the perception in turn provokes an affective response which is subsequently recomposed by the time of contemplation ("while the after- / sun passes") as the ground for the distinct sexual subjectivity that then attempts to narrate the experience to its readers.

Yet to describe the poem's mode of disclosure in such unhesitating narrative terms is only to tell half of its story. Because our images of experience are continually figured and reconfigured by the flow of perceptual instants and particulars they contain, they remain inherently stable and open to change. Something of this sense of a poetic image simultaneously forged and reconfigured in the transition between perceptions is expressed by the curious adjectival construction "after- / sun" in which the singularity of the common noun "afternoon" is suddenly divided from within itself by the apprehension of a time to come (presumably twilight, a period in which we are simultaneously within and beyond the hours of daylight) in its difference from which the experience of afternoon derives elements of its meaning. Precisely the same oscillation between transitive and substantive states of being is caught in the poem's two concluding lines where the relation between sexual subjects once so explicitly and triumphantly proclaimed ("O clearly") abruptly dissolves into the series of affects and perceptions from which it was originally composed. One reason why, in Marjorie Perloff's words, an initial narrative paraphrase of the poem's contents "makes no sense" now suddenly becomes clear: each of the two halves of the poem derives its pragmatic rules of engagement from the empirical situation in which it finds itself implicated, and these two situations describe two very

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press

different stages in the process of subject formation that the poem seeks to unfold.[31]

A recurrent, and recurrently crucial, feature of Oppen's later poetry is its extension of these reflections upon the phenomenology of perception and the complexities of subjective self-constitution into a more general meditation upon the fundamental ground or foundation of ethical and political life. The poems collected in *The Materials*, *This in Which* and *Of Being Numerous* return consistently to the question of whether or not any unchanging or a priori postulates or commitments may be established prior to our ongoing cultural conversation about the nature of our norms and values that might constitute a universal ground for these norms and values. Although Oppen's poetic examination of the fundamental ground of knowledge and value takes a variety of forms, it is remarkable how often his work presents the desire for an absolute foundation for action and judgement as the motor of social and political division. We might, if we were so minded, discern in this anti-foundationalist tendency of Oppen's poetry an echo of William James's conviction that, in Jonathan Levin's words, "Life is not modelled on a thing or a condition, but rather on a dynamic process" in which we "are most alive in the transitions that link past and future, in a continuation that is also a transformation."[32] However, while Oppen's writing reproduces James's attentiveness to transition and the active dynamic at the heart of life, it also gives it an emphatically material dimension: no proposition, truth or value, it suggests, may be thought to have any meaning whatsoever outside the structure of relations that constitute the ground for particular propositions, truths and values to function within a determinate social and historical context. A signal advantage of exchanging the phrase "structure of relations" for the more narrowly phenomenological ascription "mode of transition" is that it enables us to grasp the thickly materialist residue of Oppen's pragmatic attachments in which the relations between words and things always retain the impression of the collective human contexts that produce them, and which, in our era of advanced technological instrumentality, may also bring them to a final end.

Oppen's enduring fascination with the structure of relations that precede and exceed our ethical and epistemological foundations receives rich and complex expression in "Leviathan," the poem that concludes his second volume *The Materials*:

> Truth also is the pursuit of it:
> Like happiness, and it will not stand.

[31] Ibid., 124.

[32] Levin, *The Poetics of Transition*, 45.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Even the verse begins to eat away
In the acid. Pursuit, pursuit;

A wind moves a little,
Moving in a circle, very cold.

How shall we say?
In ordinary discourse –

We must talk now. I am no longer sure of the words,
The clockwork of the world. What is inexplicable

Is the "preponderance of objects." The sky lights
Daily with that predominance

And we have become the present.

We must talk now. Fear
Is fear. But we abandon one another.

To read this poem is directly to encounter one recurrent aspect of the style of Oppen's middle period in which a series of propositional (one might, indeed, say foundational) statements are simultaneously asserted and placed radically into question. This stylistic vacillation between declaration and dissembling is apparent from the enigma posed by the poem's extraordinary opening sentence. One thing, at the very most, is clear: in order to make rudimentary sense of the declaration forcefully proposed in these first two lines, we need to determine both the proper relationship between noun, verb and pronoun in the statement "Truth also is the pursuit of it" and the nature of the semantic work performed by the colon that seeks to establish a contiguous relationship between the two principal clauses of these lines. Yet it is precisely the character of these types of relationship – and, indeed, the relations between semantic units more generally – that the poem consistently refuses to resolve. This refusal is indicated by Oppen's introduction of a semantically undetermined and place-holding pronoun at the end of line one which appears designed to drain the rhetorical relationship between noun and verb of positive content, an effect reinforced by the redeployment of exactly the same pronominal manoeuvre in the concluding phrase of line two. This state of semantic dubiety is further intensified, rather than expunged, by the quasi-prepositional use of the adverb "like" at the beginning of the second line, the implied sense of which ("the pursuit of truth is like happiness") ushers in a number of supplementary questions ("how is 'truth' *like* 'happiness'," for example) that gradually unsettle the declarative foundations of the entire proposition.

The claim I want to make here is that the syntactical and semantic complexities of Oppen's mode of disclosure, a mode that expresses itself by a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press

convulsive troping or twisting of the apparently already given into something at once deeply familiar and persistently strange, are crucial to his formal explication of his pragmatic inheritance. If poetic form for Oppen offers a way of materializing or capturing the movement and texture of thought, it does so by suspending us momentarily within the structure of relations that constitute and delimit the pragmatic ground of our every constative utterance. Oppen's scrupulous sense of the event of thought as a reciprocal play between structure and relation can be glimpsed in the poem's opening line. It appears with particular force in the teasing equivocation between noun-phrase and pronoun at the heart of the declarative proposition that seeks to constitute the poem's discursive foundation. Despite our deeply held desire to locate the essence of truth (its iterability, if you will) in an already existing rule, truth, the opening noun-phrase suggests, is never just one thing. Truth, it tells us, *also* is this: if the adverb "also" is to have any meaning, it lies in the implication that truth is always already doubled, at least always opens itself to the possibility of being doubled or pluralized, and this supplementary force or resonance can be traced both in the transition between substantive positions and in the movement towards (or "pursuit" of) an unspecified, because ultimately unreachable, destination. Truth-effects, in this sense, are produced in the search for their own ground and their own legitimation; they suspend themselves between nouns and actively express themselves in the detour through verbs that propels us towards the interpretative future of our own utterances. Neither a Platonic form nor a determined historical essence, truth remains an ongoing pursuit; like happiness it will not "stand" as either the unchanging regulative principle of a body of knowledge or the absolute moral foundation of a polity or people. But should we wish it to? If something "in" truth is incalculable and heterogeneous at the source, if part of the meaning of truth arrives from the future contexts in which it will be refashioned and contested, is not something of its potency and promise lost in the exigency of a present determination? Momentarily reversing the terms of the second line, is not the affect produced by the realization that the truth "will not stand" as an absolute foundation or ground *like happiness* an experience of loss that always also extends the possibility of potential plenitude in a poem otherwise preoccupied with acid, clockwork motion and an apocalyptic intimation of the end of the historical sense?

The self-questioning beginning of "Leviathan" illustrates a defining feature of the pragmatic gambit central to the poem's unfolding, which is to embrace a radical sense of limitation upon one level (the loss of a stable epistemological ground for rhetoric and reference) in order to evade it at another (the enclosure of the possibilities of sense within a determinate

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press

historical horizon). To this end, the poem plays off two very different senses of limitation in the trope "pursuit, pursuit" which juxtaposes the groundless ground of pragmatic deliberation to the dominant political metanarrative of Cold War discourse. It does so in order to confront us once again with the implicit challenge laid down both by its self-reflexive opening and by the self-reflexive beginning of the revolutionary American settler discourse of self-discovery and self-legitimation: to what extent are we still capable of responding to the emancipatory promise of those extraordinary injunctions "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" within the "ordinary discourse" that defines our days? What makes this response at once crucial to attempt and difficult to sustain is that this "ordinary discourse" has been contaminated by the binary logic and self-consolidating protocols of Cold War rhetoric. So profound has this contamination been, Oppen's poem suggests, that it has transformed our thinking about nature and culture alike: the very words that compose "Leviathan" and the foundational document it reconfigures are being eaten away by the "acid" currently coursing through the veins of the American body politic, while a "very cold" wind encircles its dull and featureless landscape. Crucially, the corrosive effects engendered by Cold War discourse upon our habits of life and thought are reproduced at a very basic level in the words we use which have become denuded of subtlety, shorn of nuance – cogs in the mere "clockwork" of the world. "For pluralistic pragmatism," William James remarked near the conclusion of his brief survey of the subject,

> truth grows up inside of all the finite experiences. They lean on each other, but the whole of them, if such a whole there be, leans on nothing. All "homes" are in finite experience; finite experience as such is homeless. Nothing outside of the flux secures the issue of it. It can hope salvation only from its own intrinsic promises and potencies.[33]

Half a century later, at the end of the 1950s, James's vision of the "homeless" flux of potential experience is already being relocated and rationalized in Oppen's poem by an ideological matrix that works to redefine the promise and potency of futurity upon its own political terms. This idea of a disturbance or abbreviation of our sense of future time is a persistent motif in the poem. Something, indeed, has occurred to shake the foundation of any thought of a possible future (and any possible future of thought) by subjecting life to the apocalyptic armoury of our political masters. "What is inexplicable," Oppen reminds us with melancholy understatement halfway through the poem, "is the 'preponderance of objects,'" a tense and impacted

[33] James, *Pragmatism*, 100.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press

little phrase that has nevertheless the scope to encompass memories of the nuclear arms race of the 1950s. We live, here, now, beneath an "inexplicable" preponderance of objects: such "preponderance" is inexplicable because the potential devastation it prefigures is unthinkable in political terms, but also because the detonation of any one of these objects appears likely to bring the business of thinking to an ultimate end. In the darkness cast by the nuclear shadow, then, objects lie before us (or are *pre*ponderant) in a double sense insofar as they exist both as material for contemplation and as an image of life already determined by the calculation of its own political end.

To read the poem in this way, in which the "preponderance" of objects gradually assumes the appalling majesty of a sky lit daily by the "predominance" or premonition of its eschatological freight, is to arrive at a melancholy and seemingly inexorable conclusion about human capacities and hopes. Such a conclusion is supported, rather than unsettled, by the poem's laconic and airless final lines, with their talk of compulsion, fear and abandonment. But in these closing remarks I want to suggest that "Leviathan" also offers a much more positive, and pragmatic, vision of human potential, a vision consonant with Richard Poirier's insistence that "If pragmatism works, then it works the way poetry does – by effecting a change of language, a change carried out entirely *within* language, and for the benefit of those destined to inherit the language."[34] This supplementary reading would begin by echoing once again William James's description of the "pragmatic method" as a mode of invigilation in which we "bring out of each word its practical cash-value" and "set it at work within the stream of our experience" so that it appears "less as a solution … than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities can be *changed*."[35] It would develop by teasing out the ways Oppen's poetic style, wherein supple shadings of tone and idiom emplace meanings only for them to be edged out or contested by alternative ones, restates and reaffirms the possibility of a life other than this one at the very moment such a possibility seems upon the point of eclipse. It would attend once more to the complex economy between truth, pursuit and groundlessness that the poem initially sets into play, examine those phases of its argument where the transition between substantive positions leaves an excess or residue of meaning ("A wind moves a little") unaccounted for by those positions, scrutinize those moments of rhetorical obstruction or blockage ("*What* is inexplicable / *is* the 'preponderance of objects'") that challenge the smooth flow of narrative rationalization, and consider how far the emphasis Oppen

[34] Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, 132.

[35] James, *Pragmatism*, 21.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press

places upon the becoming or political constitution of a mode of life ("And we have become the present") allows us to dream of another mode of life unconstrained by the "preponderance" of objects or the reflexive platitudes of political self-regulation and conformity ("We must talk now").

Rather like the three abstract nouns whose enigmatic provocation still radiates from the core of the "Declaration of Independence," a poem such as "Leviathan" bequeaths us a complex and demanding legacy. But as Jacques Derrida reminds us, "If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it."[36] Although these complexities and this demand will, I hope, long detain us, something in them comes clear when we recognize that there is at the heart of Oppen's lapidary, self-questioning and "objectivist" poetics an aesthetic response to the pragmatist notion of truth as "something essentially bound up with the way in which one moment in our experience may lead us towards other moments which it will have been useful to have been led to."[37] We might make this connection in another way. At the very end of *Pragmatism* William James quotes a Greek epigram that admirably crystallizes for him an irreducible element of the human (and pragmatic) imagination:

> A shipwrecked sailor, buried on this coast,
> Bid you set sail.
>
> Full many a gallant bark, when we were lost,
> Weathered the gale.[38]

Pragmatism, James concludes, begins from the need to respond to this experience of flux and transition; it envisages the absolute or the sacred as a potential, not an origin; it sees us shipwrecked upon a planet whose meaning is never merely given to us; and it challenges us to begin from this experience of shipwreck, loss and abandonment while treating this experience as the positive precondition for the vision of another possible world. Obsessed and bewildered as he was by what he called "the shipwreck / of the singular," Oppen's response to this pragmatic imperative remains one of the still-to-be-examined foundations upon which his reputation will eventually rest.[39]

[36] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 16.
[37] James, *Pragmatism*, 79.
[38] Ibid., 114.
[39] George Oppen, *George Oppen: New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Davidson (New York: New Directions, 2002), 166.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187580999082X Published online by Cambridge University Press