

Selections from George Oppen's *Daybook*

It is necessary to have some stance outside of Literature: it is necessary to be disconnected with literature.

Of those on whom the force of the times has fallen unmediated, few have written poetry. And this is reflected in 'the Tradition' (cf Davie)

Most and almost the whole of modern art is influenced by surrealism. It means to produce art not out of the experience of things, but out of the subjectivity of the artist. 'Most' means to exclude, among others, myself. My work is produced from the experience of things.

Neruda: I cannot accept so broad a figure of the poet—and yet I feel strongly that it would be an excellent occurrence if Neruda should replace Pound—not to mention Eliot and his symbolists—as the center of the canon of “modern” poetry

Imagism, insofar as I think of the word in connection with my own work, means: to establish *space* in the poem by creating an instantaneous relationship

Imagism: in poem becomes a landscape

The nature of the image is the nature of the dream: not thinking, but a thought placed into the mind

Clarity for my sake. That I may remember my life.

The images: small narratives within the poem

* Oppen's *Daybook* (collected from the Archive for New Poetry at the University of California, San Diego) consists of hundreds of undated sayings and statements, some quotations, separately transcribed and often taped on his wall. These were referred to by Mary Oppen in the interview below (p. 25). In making our transcription from his papers, we have preserved idiosyncracies of punctuation, often the lack of punctuation, and spacing. At the same time, we have corrected silently several misspellings when they seemed disconcerting and obvious.

discrete series—I was at the time unable to handle a larger number of words in verse—to shape a poem out of a larger number of words

(tho the image too required that compression) to experience the image i.e., the experience, not the words, not the argument.

discrete series: established certain points—dots—of meaning

my conviction, my experience, is not of something in me, but of something brought to me

WHAT ONE MUST ADD TO 'THE TRADITION' IS CONVICTION. ONE'S OWN

I cannot be patient with poetry which, employing the most elaborate devices as identified by desperate and clever theoreticians, manages perhaps or almost to achieve significance if you give it the benefit of a thousand doubts. as an example, Gary Snyder's poem of 'circumambulating' the mountain: debasing faiths, imitating faiths, play acting in the mountains But one admired the energy, a new energy which can use whole mountains for play-acting—Something may come of that aspect of the thing.

“avant garde”: I have no liking for the word and no need of it One does not need the word, it is obvious enough that there is little use in repeating what has been adequately said before. I am concerned with 'thinking' (involuntary thoughts) that requires the poem, the verse. The turn and the turn

thinking within the poem truth comes forth?

Thinking within the world.

Directions of space, of distance give meaning to life

'avant-garde'—the distinction between the avant garde and anything I could wish to be is the distinction between writing stylishly and the attempt to say with lucidity some part of what has not been said—but to be anti-avant garde is what? to write Yeats over again?

It is ridiculous to stick words into a poem One can always go back, the thing is there and doesn't alter and the poem is NOT built out of

words, one cannot make a poem by sticking words into it, it is the poem that makes the words and contains their meaning

when a vowel or a consonant or a cadence cannot be altered without making a hole or a blot in the poem, the prosody is OK
and you believe what you're saying

truth perhaps reached by going down, a sinking down, into the contradiction

I would like the poem to be transparent, inaudible

SERIAL POEM—SPACE, SILENCE The serial poem permits the use of space, of silence

Because I am not silent the poems are bad

because there is something we cannot say, cannot grasp, the poem is an attempt to work it out, to find its form

This seems no time to argue poetic technique or poetic principle. That has all been done. We know by now we must find our own—the poem is an attempt to see, perhaps an attempt to see thru— The poet discloses the hidden (and this answers the problem he presents) The hidden the hidden the hidden, not the invented for the world is the greatest thing in the world

I THINK THAT IF WE FOLLOW VERY SCRUPULOUSLY THINGS AS WE FIND THEM, WE ARE DRAWN BEYOND OLD CONCEPTS AND, PERHAPS, BEYOND THE POSSIBILITIES OF CONCEPTS

The poem revises the word. Blake's Tyger in the small words. They burn. The nouns are the visible universe, the night sky burning

We are consuming the language, and it is only by great labor that one can restore a word

IT IS NECESSARY TO STUDY THE WORDS YOU HAVE WRITTEN — FOR THE WORDS
HAVE A LONGER HISTORY THAN YOU HAVE AND SAY MORE THAN YOU KNOW
THEY SAY TOO MUCH: ASSERT TOO MUCH

WHOLE is *HOLY*

IT IS ALSO *HALE* AND *HEALTH*
(IT MAY ALSO BE *HEAL*)

LOVE OF THE WORLD IT IS NOT MERELY A SUNNY DAY IN THE COUNTRY: IT IS
THE LOVE OF FATE

I believe too that one might say ‘So love the world . . .’ And that the world
is worthy of love

We speak of existence as the primary fact Or: we speak of existence before
we speak of essence.

We do not sit outside of reality, think abstract thoughts of setting our-
selves problems about reality which is somehow visible to us On the
contrary, life has led us into the subject matter itself (final phrase derived
from Hegel)

Being: that which we see (and feel) when we are not looking at anything

If a man looks about him at all, which is to say, if he appears to be as a new
poet at all, he is bound to be in some sense local

I said I was the contrary of Williams . . . my direction, purpose, is the con-
trary: the place I want to get to is not the dance or the measure, I would
rather be anywhere else, I would rather even sit still

Release us from the fictions let us save ourselves escape
at any cost for we can no longer bear them

(LEFT) I am really very pro-Left except that I know better.

Both the Eastern and Western religions are filled with hatred of the world
I don't share that.

“What is God” is a useless question. For we have already said God. Ask: what is?

Eastern thought; necessarily within the Western, and in fact, the Christian tradition at least since Plotinus. And in fact much earlier. The Vedantas are not an esoteric revelation to the Westerner who has read Western philosophy. The point is rather the Heideggerian idea that all peoples burst into history with these thoughts. And that all peoples, all persons, reaching any profundity of thought, are aware of these things . . . ‘A flight of the alone to the Alone’ Plotinus. Soul is indivisible, all is in the soul i.e., the one and indivisible soul. The soul neither comes into being or perishes One wouldn’t assume that god can take care of himself? sutra = thread (from Sanskrit)

when we say ‘humanity’ we are saying ‘us’ That ‘us’ includes the not yet born. . . . Artists I think are people who want humanity to get wherever it is that it is going

It is absolutely necessary to be able to forget what one knows of ‘the act’; to be able to begin each poem from the beginning.

the poem is never a rule of thumb — and not always an epigram. It exists in reality, and tends to disperse into that — the air around it . . . it becomes a part of the air around it

argument, the empty ego — one form of it — Pound never freed himself from argument, the moving of chess pieces.

to find the world in a grain of sand or the flower is all I set myself to It is the temper of my mind, I cannot alter it, or *want* to.

We have lost our innocence. The world is the explosion of one’s own mind, or even oneself sitting at a desk doodling. But the fact, perhaps the grim fact is, the world won’t end. And they will ask themselves again sometime what the world is since it didn’t end. And I will be relevant in such a discussion.

the 'philosophy' of the poems. . . . The account of a life. They say, as poems say, that love of life is the love of truth—and the experience of lucid minds.

We think the world because we have experienced it

The poem is a proof

To the young poets: It is necessary—it is essential—not to talk about poetry all of the time.

truthfulness is far from a social virtue—but it is poetic IT IS THE EXTREME LIMIT OF THE POETIC IMAGINATION

Rezi's [Reznikoff's] poems are not complex Because Rezi takes profundity for granted He sees profoundly

There are all sorts of 'needs,' and there is poetry which is a necessity of thought. Not the argument of thought, nor even the argument of the I, but the argument of consciousness.

Consciousness in itself and of itself carries the principle of actualness
for it itself is actual.

to be able to conceive thought as something other than planning other than a game of thought

Marx in paraphrase: What a man loves he sees as that without which he cannot be himself.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE ASTONISHED I do not care for "systems," what concerns me is the philosophy of the astonished.

The measure of our success is our ability to live with consciousness

The true question of philosophy lies not in what he says, but why he says it.

Intelligence is the ability to experience value

I don't believe in the polarization of the sexes.

George, all I know is some people want to live and some don't
That's all I know about politics

whether any system is not mystification, whether it is not necessary to remain open to what happens whether the thought of the actual is not the most profound thought we may experience whether system is not—even, perhaps, always—an attempt to escape that thought because the actual is very great

The act of writing is pleasure
Yet saints and sages have long since held it in awe.
For it is Being created out of the void
And sound wrung out of silence.
In a sheet of paper is contained the infinite,
And, evolved from an inch-sized heart, an endless panorama.
Lu Chi

Parse the word carve the word into its elements. We always feel we can make a book of what we know: we cannot. If we stick to the thing, keep our minds on the thing and not the word, we—and the reader—learn a great deal as we write. No one knows enough to make a book before he writes the book. The writing is a test and a discovery: test and discover word by word as you go WORD BY WORD We must force the words to mean something. Because we know there is something to mean

the 25 year gap: there are times when poetry—or my poetry, the poetry I can write seems hopelessly inadequate

the best of Japanese art seems bluntly assertive and therefore leaves everything in total mystery

Poetry is a non-tactical art. The poem works out the statement; it is not involved in the tactics of communication. Or of dramatization. This is the fault in Frost; he is too often being tactical

IT IS OBSERVABLE THAT THOSE WHO CONVINCED THEMSELVES THAT THEIR CONCERN IS COMFORT AND OBVIOUS PLEASURES HAVE DIFFICULTY IN BEING SURE THAT THEY EXIST

ON WRITING A POEM; NOT TO MAKE NOISE: TO KEEP ONE'S ATTENTION OUTWARD TOWARD SILENCE

Poetry speaks of the Will it seeks to find what we truly WANT
Poetry tends therefore to come into conflict everywhere with an established morality for a morality must be based on the will, on what we WANT We Even a revealed morality must speak, I think, of a conversation of the will of a redemption of the will But a morality cannot be based on an end which we do not WANT

Surrealism: It won't work for when we have seen other things other things will seem 'rational'

Surreal: he wants to find something "strange" as if there were anything that is not strange

POETRY: Openness:: it opens

On teaching poetry: I think all one would need in order to have entered the area of poetry, the region of non-epigrammatic poetry, is the Book of Thel

the serious artists are enemies of art
Always

That the writing or the revising of a poem consists in trying to understand what you meant

Because I start *by looking*, or experiencing — not by having set myself a problem. Frequently one realizes only after long thought: that's the sea! or, that's a city! or: what I actually see is not that it is a city, but that it is a *crowd* in a city — —

I am sure that what is needed to save, to restore art, to renew art, is not a public respect for excellence or any disciplinary reform, but a great artist —

a truly great artist. The minor artists exist and have meaning within the meaning created by one, or a few, of the truly great—they exist in the meaning which has been given to art.

And the difficulty now becomes very great

Not however that art need produce a final declaration of meaning—I should not have seemed to say so. For no one but he who is dying is at the end of his rope. People move, as long as they live, constantly deeper into life, and find in art a part of the means by which they move consciously, as humans. So we seek not a meaning of existence, but of this period, a meaning of what we are now doing, of what we are now experiencing ‘to speak’ just as they say ‘for his time’

We must know *what is happening*

We must feel *what is happening*

Beckett: the logical and mathematical universe become real, the universe we inhabit. His characters handle with extreme calm the situation which the naive K found incomprehensible

but the fact is I distrust mass cultures, I am not convinced that distrust is snobbery. The words are used up, drained, the more completely drained the more completely draining the more they are employed. And the more unreserved the emotional response to them

Adam and Eve and the sin of intellectual pride. They are the Titans who devoured god

Marxism. Very much more in it than people at this moment are willing to know—the basic question is the question of ‘socialist man’ Or, more simply, the question of elitism or, more simple, what we mean by humanity—Most simply what we want. And that frightens one, because we are speaking of the will. And what determines or what justifies the will?

Art vrs entertainment
increasingly confused

The distinction is not clear to the entertainers—it is entirely clear to the artist

For the artist:

what we have is Things and the self It is this that we find entertainment one must grant that entertainment ameliorates human life; art means to make human life possible

It is perhaps art which created 'life' as we understand the word

There are, simultaneously with Vietnam, 'many Vietnams,' and there have been many Vietnams long before Vietnam. Cuba, Santo Domingo, Guatemala . . . these cannot "be" explained as the result of the military and the State Department merely going about their traditional business. Is there behind the Keynesian pseudo-science, a necessity never named by the Keynesians, but which was named by Marx? What else, despite the Keynesians, can explain the viciousness unleashed at critical moments, such violence as was unleashed by the Democratic Party leaders to secure the nomination of Humphrey at the Chicago Convention?

My temperament in fact forces me to the left: I cannot wish to go backward But moreover the direction of history is leftward, and to attempt to talk of the conservative Parties is like an attempt to talk of the future of a man in his 90s He does not have a future. If one is to talk to him, one must speak of the Other World— And if one is to speak to professional Republicans and devoted Democrats, one must attempt to make clear to them the existence of the other world

The eternity of things astonishes a brief duration

Form as immediacy, the possibility of being grasped

Hemingway's style, the model of all the left-wing writers of the thirties, an essentially and incorrigibly right-wing style, — Whereas H James, the very symbol of 'snobbery' to such writers, displayed a style and a sensibility which made possible a political and social critique. In acknowledgment 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'

Pound's "treason" which is what has made his political opinions a matter of public discussion if not public fury—assuredly cannot have injured his

poetry. His fascist opinions are another matter. The lines based on an expression of such attitudes are vicious and ugly lines. As are those of Eliot and Cummings, for example, and many others—Eliot's 'the Jew squats in the window' doesn't seem to me a very handsome line . . . the whole body of the poetry is however injured by the posture which caused the fascism—as Eliot before the quartets, insofar as he was Prufrock, was prufrock thru a vulgar kind of snobbery, and Cummings at his most stupid, at his most self congratulatory and his most contemptuous was being the right-wing cummings

Pound's fascism was not rooted in brutality or viciousness tho it lead him consciously, Pound trying to be a good party member or as tough as his friends—vicious and brutal lines here and there. But the root was surely not viciousness. No one could read his poetry—the mass of the poetry—and think so. . . The root of his fascism is remoteness, self hatred In fact his literariness an operatic quality a vision of history rooted in no real sense of time and the sense of his own presence on a mineral world, but a swirl of heroes and words in his mind—

and the silly exiles concept of masculinity which can produce a poem as silly as the Goodly Fere, which is surely sillier than any YMCA secretary ever managed— — or rotary club

Pound's poetry is assuredly injured, the whole body, not individual lines, is affected not by the fascist opinions, but what lies under them.

Perhaps the last handful of people in the world, if there should be such a situation, will determine to be kind to each other, will determine not to add to each other's suffering, will make this their single resolution . . . which will be the sign of despair. And tho we have history before us, we might embrace a pacifist attitude, a resolution to overcome suffering, a resolve that there shall be no more violence, that there shall be no death in the world— We well might set ourselves to that one thing if it were possible, if it could be accomplished. Since it cannot, that is not our purpose. It is not that we have some other purpose. To get further, to get onward At, in fact, any cost. Herein somehow is our purpose our purposes

If, to speak of art, we will, as we should, use one word only, the word is *disclosure*.

The absolutely incomprehensible, which pierces any possible structure of the mind: will not be confined in language.

The poems: I put forward a primitive and an extremely dramatic philosophy. : that the world is there, that infinity is the most obvious fact in the world.

I would say 2 things To begin with, the thing is actually there! and the fact of finding oneself alive, finding oneself in this place terrifying? at least vertiginous? And—certainly there is such a thing as the vertical consciousness — — —write an honest image and you'll see its true—

Lawrence in the poems sometimes a man addressing a crowd, a somewhat nervous man, a blind man, he talks—is talking—too fast in the last poems they carry their sound deeper

There cannot be a MODEL of prosody when one encounters anything of importance: that which is of great importance carries its own sound its music The poet's skill is to speak, to stay alive no other 'skill' His skill is like anyone else's: to stay alive

A Texas politician with a very questionable record becomes vice-president the president is assassinated—in Texas.

A startling offensive of a perfectly unified right-wing in the Republican Party results in Johnson's election

Johnson adopts the foreign policy of the extreme right.

Is the obvious explanation possible? Is it possible that this happens without a possible explanation?

'There is change in an air
That smells stale, they will come to the end
Of an era—' We have learned
From Johnson
That the most ordinary
Is atrocity.

— not that he is unintelligent. But that he does not know what thinking is. Calculation, argumentation is worrying, a nervous habit, self assertion, competitiveness, but it is not thinking. Thinking begins with silence—the simple awareness of the world and oneself in it

My fear that nothing will be said bluntly enough if I don't say it

'above all, a revolution *thinks* itself into being' (Genet)

Pop art to rescue the self-love of the people. The characteristic of pop art, and therefore the rock singers, is that it must say what the audience already agrees to. It is incapable of saying anything which its audience does not believe in advance. TO SHOW, TO PERFORM, TO PUBLISH WORKS WHICH WILL CREATE A SELF-LOVE OF THE MILLIONS — A PEOPLE'S ART. (you may dance and dance to the most popular band of the moment until you go mad with cliché and sentiment and lies and self-love)

The event does not take place in the word. A different event takes place in the word. The word must dissolve to reveal the event.

Sandburg, etc: they accepted the language as they found it, and were carried into sentimentality, having no where else to go. Essentially no way to find value. Therefore sentimentality (sentiment substitutes itself for *value*—it is a virtue which does not act and does not discover)

art is not the exercise of taste, but the experience of vision

the words must be slowed down—there is much misunderstanding about this. Students have been told that the poem must move rapidly. what is meant is that the thought must move rapidly:

If the words chatter, the poem moves slowly: if the words chatter the poem may take pages upon pages to say almost nothing.

The words must move with almost equal emphasis on every word: as much emphasis on *is* and *but* and *and*. 'is' is a little word, isn't ?? Or is it? It is really the most tremendous word—*is* or *the*—

And Eliot, roughly to this effect: no one continues to write poetry beyond the age of twenty-eight who does not acquire a sense of history
Unfortunately not quite true: some do

Where were the poets? Pound! well, Pound.
But Eliot? Stevens? even Williams? and the men of my generation:
The academics!
That when Lidice was destroyed and Oradour,
That when the bomb fell on Hiroshima
and when the villages of Korea were burned
Wave following wave of planes dropping napalm,
Wave after wave to render retreat useless impossible—
Few spoke at all. And of those who did
Many were jailed, and more were destroyed.
All that in the calm of Truman
And ended finally in the simplicities of Eisenhower
Without apologies to the jailed, the black-listed, the exiled—

somewhere half-way between the fact of being singular and the fact of being numerous is the fact of being Jewish

what is needed now is to show that shadows on the wall of the cave are shadows of *something*—rather than to spread the admiration of mere non-existence, mere non-world

I choose to believe in the natural consciousness, I see what the deer see, the desire NOT TO is the desire to be alone in fear of equality
I see what the grass (blade) would see if it had eyes

Like Blake to appreciate both the masculine and the feminine
Not like Hemingway, Cummings, Pound to see meaning only in the masculine—and not certainly to see gesture, life-style, masculine or feminine, as the meaning of life
Not like Blake to hold that the human gesture creates the world: (not like so many men of the previous generation to disregard the world or treat it as (perhaps) a worthy opponent or a usable opponent, rather—

Women's liberation the most dramatic and the most to be loved of all
the political 'movements' —
but the organized arguments, organized attitudes of women's liberation is
not the 'bare hands' of poetry ?
this problem — the political — again.
What to say? or why say: each must choose for herself. but I think the
poetry is always the most basic: we *know*, we all know the full humanity
of women when we read a line of Sappho, any line. Whatever we may
say or do, we know.

I don't mean that the poetry will serve as politics: I know it will not.

Jane: the enslavement of women has been an agony to men

all words become strange in the crucial moments

Philosophy, love of truth, love of existence
Philosophy: I do not dislike the world

To humanize the universe (David Ig.) God help us if we do. Manhattan is
a simple model of a humanized universe. The only thing more terrifying
than the void is the absence of void

It is true a poem must be a poem, having the form, the substance of a
poem, not the form or the substance of life, of reality. It is true. What is
wrong is that we have accepted that, that we are proud of it, that we con-
gratulate ourselves that we are proud of this failure

Duncan's copiousness: almost the meaning of the work That so many
words are present for him. In mere honesty I have had to make a virtue of
the contrary — few words are present for me.

The world would exist without the poem. I often feel that humanity
would not — and of course I am mistaken. And surely the world would ex-
ist without the poem. The poem is in the world, the poet is in the world
The poem is made of the world, the poem is made because of the world.
Enough, enough, perhaps everyone knows this. (Why don't they say it?)

THE SUBJECTIVE IS NOT OUTSIDE OF NATURE, IT IS INCLUDED IN NATURE, IT IS INCLUDED IN THE WORLD

'Let it be as the snake disposes,' demonic world, or not, let it be as the snake disposes, let us be

the difficulty of 'political or moralistic' poetry:

in a poem the question must be put in such a way that the questioner is involved in the question

poetry—a poem—succeeds in meaning what the words have never meant before—and this creates a strangeness of words

what he does actually think the world is. — not tricks, not stylishness.

There isn't very much the universities or the poetry clubs or the poetry groups can do for this. One is pretty much on his own, and he probably needs silence more than he needs anything else.

He needs to establish his life; to push his way in and out of a number of paper bags—which however should not be too damn papery—and to encounter choices and to acquire himself. And what he does care about and what he doesn't

I mean to imply that he must NOT at least stake himself on becoming famous. There isn't any way to guarantee it and in any case if he is really serious it will be a long long time to wait. Now as always.

he must not find himself living in a day dream of impersonal fame, dreaming of himself as being anything but what he knows he is — I do recognize that there are people whose ability to write poetry depends on a kind of remoteness, a kind of non-existence—dislocation, distortion, arbitrariness— —but I simply don't value that too much. I'm stating this attitude so that you can know that what I say is based on that

taste , so that you can accept or reject what I am saying according as you agree or disagree . . .

If you cannot find the image, you never thought it, you never believed it, there was not an instant in which you believed it in which you thought it true

If you cannot find the cadence, if the cadence is a sloppy music, a sentimental music, or merely busy argumentation which will not resolve itself, which has no place to rest, to return to— then you do not believe what you had thought to say

The thing flashes in the mind

The effort is not to write good poetry: the only effort is to try not to write bad poetry

What the poems demonstrate is that if one has the emotional power to think beyond platitude and to feel beyond sentimentality, the result is not without drama. It is not less dramatic than the results of a derangement of the senses

poetry is free-er than prose (it's law, it's unbreakable law, is freedom) It is free to cause the words to mean what they had not meant before tho that meaning is ours A simple law of poetry is that it be revelatory as if the poem were made by discovering it; so it seems, it seems to be so.

I am concerned with a thinking that requires the poem in order to be tight it is not a thinking outside of language: the linebreak is as much a part of language as the comma, the period, the paragraph

a poem is written to test, salvage, restore—two or three words.
Or one word. More likely one word.

The spacing is a part of the drama of the poem
(visible as much as audible)

Truth follows the existence of this which is Thomas Aquinas
or we think the world because we have experienced it, or we think because we are here

or Maritain, a phrase I quoted somewhere: we awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things.

Therefore the metaphysic of the moment, the metaphysic of the instant
And therefore also it is absurd to versify what you already know THE
POEM IS AN INSTRUMENT OF THOUGHT, OR IT IS A NUISANCE It follows that
the words will not make a poem, the poem must make the words—and
this is versification this is cadence this is line structure this is the whole
thing—there is a moment in which you thought something, believed,
knew something there is a moment when you knew it or else you never
thought it never believed it THERE ARE MANY THINGS WE BELIEVE OR
WANT TO BELIEVE OR THINK WE SHOULD BELIEVE WHICH WILL NOT SUBSTAN-
TIATE THEMSELVES IN THE CONCRETE MATERIALS OF THE POEM AND THIS IS
WHAT THE POEM IS FOR I think