

Conversation with Mary Oppen · Dennis Young

"The quickest way to learn any subject is to make private contacts with those who know it best and get them talking."

Saul Bellow

More Die of Heartbreak

DY: What do you like most about George's poetry, or what do you think is most distinctive about it?

MO: Well, I find it very lyrical, and I very much enjoy the very strict structuring of it.

DY: I especially like the poems he writes for you. I took a class about two years ago that focused on George *and* Mary Oppen, not just George Oppen. I thought it odd at first that we would be focusing on the two of you, because I can't recall any other time the whole time I've been studying literature that we focused on the life and wife of the poet along with the collected works. What is it that made that relationship "two"? I mean "two" in every way. You were *with him*. As he says, your words are "entangled inextricably among my own."

MO: Right. They were. For me as well as for him. I think it came from . . . really, you know we lived together from the time we were eighteen, and we wished the best for each other and helped each other and it was just a joint life.

DY: What's the secret? (laughter) Is there any secret?

MO: I don't know, we had an awful lot of fun.

DY: You did. Whoever gets to write the biography of George and Mary Oppen is going to have a good time, I think. After reading your autobiography, it seems more exciting than the lives of any of the other poets.

MO: I think so. (laughter)

DY: In *Meaning a Life* I noticed that you mention sailing and the sea a lot. At one point you say: "This experience is one which holds our world together."

MO: The boat was very central and very important to us. We always had some kind of a little boat. And we could get just clear away and a part was

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really the silence. I mean there isn't anything like being clear outside of everything, or at least where there aren't people. And to be together was somehow . . . it was better than being alone because, after all, solitude really is the human condition, and George and I didn't suffer an awful lot from that. I think most people do. I meant we could just be alone even though we were together. Somehow it was possible. . . . And I usually painted; I painted more than I wrote. And George was a night person, and I'd go to bed early and wake up early. So for years we lived in one room . . . with a suitcase. And I could work in the mornings . . . and in the evenings he would work. We were both good sleepers.

DY: What about the early years?

MO: I came down here [San Francisco] and then we started hitchhiking. We went to Texas.

DY: Oh really. That's back when you could hitchhike and get rides easily.

MO: There were no other women on the road—or girls—but there really never was any danger either out there. And there were all sorts of people hitchhiking and we were very well treated and it was just great. You know, we got to see the country and began to understand something outside of our families.

DY: That seems to be the start of the "Oppen scenario." George talks about it in the last collection, *Primitive*. He says, "Finding a home away from home."

MO: Right.

DY: Doesn't that really sum it up—what was going on at that time?

MO: Yes. But I think we were always at home wherever we were . . . the house . . . I have a house now, I enjoy it very, very much, and I have a real kitchen for the first time and I enjoy it very much, but it's not very important and it was of really almost no importance to him and to me where we lived . . . and we didn't collect stuff very much. We could do all these things; we remained quite free to move around. We certainly did move around a lot.

DY: Did you keep in contact with Reznikoff most of the time while you were in New York?

MO: Yes. But not when we were political. When we joined the party we felt it wouldn't be right to continue our previous acquaintances, because they might feel endangered. And during the McCarthy period they cer-

tainly would have been. So we decided, well, if they want to keep up the relationship after they found out that we'd become leftists, that's really up to them, and the only person who followed us was George's younger sister, who was a little girl, and she always visited us. She'd have to bail us out of jail or something like that.

DY: Was that June Oppen?

MO: Uh-huh. June Degnan. She was a very devoted little sister. . . . But when we returned from Mexico and George was writing again, before we came back we decided, well, the politics were pretty much behind us and the activist sort of role and that we would look up everybody. So we looked up ancient uncles and aunts and leftists and previous friends, Zukofsky and everybody whom we had ever known. We looked them up, and in some cases resumed a friendship. With Zukofsky it was always an on and off affair, because he was very difficult.

DY: What was it like in Mexico? Were you painting there?

MO: Yes, I did.

DY: And George was working as a mechanic?

MO: No, he had a carpentry shop. In Mexico the labor laws were very strict and we were not violating any laws because we were after all living there. A foreigner can only own 50% or 49% of a business. George had a quite wonderful partner, a really wonderful mechanic. He managed the workers, and George did the designing and delivery and other things.

DY: What kind of carpentry was he doing—boats, houses?

MO: No, it was furniture.

DY: That reminds me of an interview you had in APR, where George makes an analogy between writing—making a poem and making a piece of furniture: “If it's perfect, you're not in it.” And he writes many poems about carpentry, for example, “Carpenter's Boat.” Do you think he found a sense of creating a poem much like his sense of craftsmanship in carpentry?

MO: Yes, I think so. You see, George came from an upper middle-class, bourgeois, Jewish family that had never (at any rate, with any history that I ever heard anything about) done anything with their hands. And George was told as a child that he was not good with his hands, and it was all aimed towards following your father's footsteps into your father's enterprise or business or whatever it was, and certainly not becoming a poor peddler Jew or something like that. So George set himself to test himself—

and he did. He got a top rating in the machinist union working with metal and he was a very fine carpenter, a cabinet maker. And in the Army he joined the infantry and he wouldn't accept advancement. And all these things were a test, as Sherwood Anderson says, "to see if he was any good out there." He was always testing himself, he was not in any way willing to fall into that other pattern of the pure intellectual who didn't know the workings of the world. And I think the twenty years in the Communist Party was an explanation for both of us. The experience was important, to get to know those people. How else do you get to know those people? In the 1930s, I tell you, you did get to know an awful lot of people who came from every walk of life, and certainly an awful lot of them who had worked for a living and were starving.

DY: Another problem George had was reconciling the poetry and the politics, and he found the proletariat writers inadequate.

MO: When we came back [from Europe] we were shocked about the 1930s. It's hard to explain what a shock it was. So we did a lot of poking around. We went and listened to Socialists and Socialist Labor Party people and Trotskyites and we read all the literature avidly, and meanwhile people, our fathers, you know, were on the street. There was no work and they were starving and furniture was piled on the sidewalks, and the United States was about umpteenth down the line on any sort of social services. We were very, very backwards. Everything was forward, you know, go forward and sacrifice—the poor Chinese or the poor Irish worker or whatever—but get upward and onward fast. Mexico, for instance, had very, very much more advanced social labor laws than we did, and so did, of course, Europe and most other places. There was absolutely nothing privately donated and funds from charity gave out immediately, churches and places like that. People were really up against it, and it was a matter of changing the laws, I suppose. Something had to be done. I mean, were we going to disregard this? We found the position of the Socialist Labor Party sort of ludicrous. They gave us a big spiel. They worked on us. They were all eager to have members, and the whole pitch was that we will prepare ourselves educationally and after the revolution we will be prepared. And they did nothing. And the Trotskyites, their method was break a window, show blood and everybody would go to jail. Nothing much happened.

In effect, I think what the role the Communist Party played was the re-

form of Capitalism. I think certainly that's what, whatever George and I did, I think that's what its effectiveness was. We got petitions, we got people active. People would come out on issues. In a way less likely now, with all the welfare and all the other things which one would not do without. People aren't up against it in the same sense *at all*. It's bad now, but it isn't desperate. The people were more active and more easily activated. You go into an apartment building where the father doesn't show up because he is ashamed and can't bring home money. The wife and the children are there and the children are clamoring for the food. My friend and I, an elderly Jewish woman, would go into a neighborhood that hadn't been visited or touched, and we would go through an apartment house and start at the top and knock at every door, and we'd say, "Look, it *isn't your fault*. Why don't we do something about it? Why don't you come down and we'll go to the mayor or the relief bureau or whatever and ask for what we need. If enough of us go something will happen." It always did. We'd get a little bit of money for this or that, and everybody would see that you did. It was so simple. It was very direct.

You couldn't really do that now. I went on the streetcar to this place that we took next door to the relief bureau (we rented a store, this older Jewish woman and I) and I used to ride to work every morning with the head of the relief bureau. (laughter) And she would try to understand me and try to understand what in the world I was doing, and why I wasn't on her side of the family.

DY: So you and George could have had a comfortable bourgeois life?

MO: The secret is, and it's something that George and I kept very, very quiet to protect ourselves, George had received an inheritance and we very seldom touched that money. But we were secure, you know, it didn't much matter to us if we went to jail or if our work record was smirched or something like that. It didn't have the same penalty, and it was a kind of guilty secret that we kept to ourselves. But it enabled us to live the kind of life that we wanted to live, which I don't think we would have if we had gone in as benefactors or something like that.

DY: After Mexico, were you at all involved in any left-wing activities?

MO: In Mexico we were utterly, utterly passive politically. I think it was necessary. We had a young child, and we were utterly and most completely uninvolved in whatever went on in Mexico. Interested, yes, and we knew leftists, but we were absolutely just silent. Nevertheless, we

were used a great deal in the newspaper as Communist Jews who were responsible for something that was going on in Mexico, and we would all have to leave town for a few days, weeks. Difficult for a child. I think it was hard on the children. But no, we were not political.

DY: Later in the sixties?

MO: We went on peace marches to Washington and so on, but we were inactive. I think we put in our time. He read for causes, but we were no longer politically active, we never joined anything else or took an active role at all after the 1950s.

DY: The politics in his poetry is just so much more sophisticated than any of . . .

MO: Trying to get at the real business of what do you do about “them” and “us” or “me” and “you”?

DY: Yes, he’s political in a broader sense—the individual’s relationship to other people.

MO: Uh-huh. And that’s why he was interested in Wittgenstein and Heidegger.

DY: And what about Jacques Maritain?

MO: When we were first thinking of approaching coming back to the United States, and George was approaching beginning to write again, we picked up, at I suppose the American Library in Mexico, Maritain’s book [*Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*], and we were immensely impressed and we discussed it a lot. It was very important to us. After one’s read such things, you digest what’s in it, and it doesn’t seem to me very interesting now. But at the time it was very important.

DY: Did he read Heidegger at all?

MO: Yes he did. We both did.

DY: Did you ever reconcile Heidegger’s politics?

MO: No. I think that was a real problem. But it was important to George that the dates when George first began thinking seriously and when he published that first little book [*Discrete Series*] and Heidegger’s first book [*Being and Time*] were about the same time—around 1927. And it was arrival at a very similar sort of thinking.

DY: Right. He mentions the congeniality of Heidegger’s thought to his own. He begins his first poem: “The knowledge not of sorrow, you were saying, but of boredom . . .” Heidegger mentions something very similar in his acceptance speech. And “awe” is in Heidegger. But George arrived

at this independently of Heidegger. He couldn't have read Heidegger, could he? Did he know German?

MO: No, we didn't know German. I don't know how he first picked up Heidegger. But then our son-in-law is a pre-Socratic philosopher, and he began to give us whatever new translations were around, so we had a look at and read a great deal of Heidegger.

DY: Was George interested in the pre-Socratic philosophers too?

MO: Yes. But neither of us were scholars. I mean we read really what came to hand and then pursued it. And it wasn't for the purpose of solving the problem of that philosophy. But the existential quality in Heidegger appealed to me very much. That there's a place to stand was very important to George. You hear that, see it a lot in his poetry.

DY: There's one poem ["World, World—"] where he says: "The self is no mystery, the mystery is / That there is something for us to stand on."

MO: Right.

DY: But he also says in that same poem: "Soul-searchings . . . are a medical faddism . . ." It seems almost anti-metaphysical, but perhaps it is a re-orientation of metaphysics. Where is the soul in George's work? He speaks of the "mineral fact," a place to stand and to dwell and to be, but where is the soul? That's kind of a complicated question, I know.

MO: Well, George felt what he *saw*. He wasn't a solipsist.

DY: Another interesting thing I noticed is George's affinity to Blake. He mentions "The Tyger" of course throughout.

MO: Yes. Blake was enormously important to him. Not to me. I never felt very sympathetic to Blake. But he was certainly extremely important to George.

DY: I think Blake's line, "To see the world in a grain of sand," describes George's poetics, because he's always focusing on the minute, on "the needle's eye" and the small, the "small ones to be born." I'm almost tempted to call him a visionary, because he's always emphasizing "seeing" and "clarity." When he says, "Clarity, clarity, surely clarity is the most beautiful thing in the world," he is stating his poetic credo. But it's not visionary in the sense of . . .

MO: No, it isn't . . . I don't know, where is the soul in me? But I certainly believe that I am.

DY: He has some wonderful lines that I picked up in the Daybook. To paraphrase, he says, "Most religions reveal a basic hatred of the world. I

don't share that." But he also says in a poem: "Surely infiniteness is the most evident thing in the world," once more revealing an ambiguous perspective. I could find a quote by a mystic that would sound very similar to that, but he's not mystical.

MO: No.

DY: And then we find a poem, "To Memory" (after Buddhadeva Bose), written to "the goddess."

MO: But you see that was Bose's poetry, and George worked it over a little bit because Bose wrote it in English and his English was Hindu Indian English, and it was a little bit awkward. So George loved several of Bose's poems. Bose came to visit one time, so he asked Bose, he said, "I really feel that you might be insulted, I don't know how you'd feel about it, but I've taken your poetry and I've re-written it." Bose was prepared to be quite angry and said, "But do you like it?" George said, "I love it!" And Bose said, "I give it to you." (laughter) But those are Bose's poems. In his native Bengali he must have been a really great poet—and still is.

DY: It's kind of an unusual poem, don't you think?

MO: Well, he was a fine, fine poet. Allen Ginsburg went to visit them on his trek to India, and I think perhaps he was trying to get a rise out of Mrs. Bose. These were extremely humanist and warm and friendly and funny people. At any rate, he said, how would she feel about him going naked, that he saw all the people naked? She told him, she said, "I thought about it." She said, "Well, everybody's naked under their skin." She said, "Go ahead, be naked." (laughter)

DY: I went to San Diego [to The Archive for New Poetry at U.C.S.D., La Jolla] last year and found the Daybook quite interesting. I like the way George nailed his notes to the cross. (laughter)

MO: When we vacated that house, when I moved out of that house [on Polk Street in San Francisco], his room, which was a very, very tiny little room, was just plastered with little bits of things pasted up. Some of them were wonderful, so I worked and worked at them and got them all down and put them with other papers, with those papers you looked at.

DY: I've been reading George's poetry for about two years and I'm still discovering something new every time I read it. It's that rich. But it is not a prolific output of poems. His entire output was less than 300 pages—including poetry and essays.

MO: So you see that if there's a lot in it of course it's hard to understand

on first reading. But what kind of poetry do you understand with one reading that you go on using and remembering all your life? I mean the poetry that's most important to me is poetry that's been important to me for most of my life. I want to go back to it, and I find new things in it. So it's kind of inconsequential, the criticism that it's difficult.

DY: Well, "The Waste Land" is certainly hard to understand on the first reading too. And Pound is much more difficult than George, but in a different way.

MO: Yes.

DY: But George, even though he comes out of that modernist group of Pound, Eliot, Williams, Zukofsky and so forth, seems to be working against those "modernists." He is consciously trying to separate himself from the other modernists to create his own voice. A lot of the other poets were under the shadow of Pound and Eliot . . .

MO: What George had to say, his thought, was what was more important to him than this technique or that technique. And he wasn't really out to impress anybody. He was trying to *say* what he was trying to *discover*, and it was hard. Like you asked me: "Where was his soul?" Where's my soul? What is a soul? It isn't anything that you can . . . that's tangible. What's mine?¹

DY: But he says that he is living "the life of the mind." What does it mean to live "the life of the mind"?

MO: The life of the mind—where it is and what's the center and where soul is. You could do without the word soul quite well.

DY: I've thought that George is trying to "de-center" the self. He's getting away from that self-confessional poetry in a way, although he's confessing himself . . .

MO: He's confessing his thought. He's trying very, very hard to find out what it is that he *thinks* and he doesn't know what he thinks when he starts. And I found that to be true in a much lesser sense, but nevertheless true. I didn't know what I was trying to say when I wrote that autobiography [*Meaning a Life*]. I thought I had some idea of finding out some-

1. "George often quoted the Zen story of the disciple searching for himself: after studying for years with the Master the final years in near silence he asks, 'Who am I?' The Master answers, 'Who asks?' I think that's George's definition of soul." Linda Oppen Mourelatos in a letter to Dennis Young.

thing about my father, but that wasn't the content of the book as it turned out.

DY: So you discover what you want to say in the act of writing?

MO: Well, my daughter said to me, she said: "You always talk about your father." She said, "Really, I do think really it's a myth." She said, "I don't think you really know much about your father." And I said, "Well that's probably true." He died when I was very young, I was very wound up with him, the whole family was, and I wasn't old enough to have had very great discussions with him, because he had cancer by the time I became an early adult. And my brothers knew him much . . . in a different sort of way than I did. So I thought, well, I'll write it. So then I wrote it, and what came out is quite different.

DY: It's wonderfully written, so clear.

MO: Well, I'm glad you liked it. Some people ask me to read occasionally, and I usually read from the autobiography rather than from the poetry. I was re-reading the poetry, and I like it, but it's so heavily taken from the Bible that an awful lot of it is just really re-interpreting Bible poetry . . . for myself. And by now I don't know exactly where I took it from. But when I wrote it I was really deeply involved in the Prophets and Psalms and so on.

DY: Speaking of the Bible, I remember a line from the Daybook, where George says: "My poetry is close to the Old Testament. Miracles would show in it."

MO: Uh-huh. He thought a lot of things were miracles. The way we met . . . really *was* a miracle. I mean, what else can you say?

DY: (Showing Mary an excerpt from a letter) Remember this: "Me and Mary: I don't know Don't know how to say it. I'm overwhelmed by the impossible luck, I'm overwhelmed by the impossible Mary, a miracle's a miracle they say, but it isn't."

MO: Yes.

DY: "A miracle becomes the world."

MO: It does. But something that was so profound about our meeting and what we made of it, and then when I look back and think, "We were only eighteen years old" — what did we know? But we had a very good . . . we were moving along on a very strong presumption that we knew what we were doing. And we were pretty fierce about it too. I mean, we really held off George's family, which is a powerful and rich family. We really held

them off. We went the way we wanted to go. . . . And George loved his father, I think. He never really admitted it, but I'm sure his father loved him and it was very difficult. With so many fathers and sons it's a difficult relationship. Which left me in a very strange position. Here I was the Gentile who came into this very established, very wealthy Jewish family. Before they saw me I'm sure they were all ready to cast me out, but they didn't, and I thought later about it. They were such a threat, I didn't know what was going to happen or what they were going to do and what move they were going to make next. So they were a threat, but actually after they accepted me they just accepted me entirely, and this is my family. I have my own family I really know very little about now. I know they're there, but I really don't have much to do with them. And that's really very impressive. But it took me a long, long time to understand it, or, in the first place, to permit them to accept me.

DY: You say in the autobiography that they tried in a way to use you to manipulate George.

MO: Yes. I'm sure they did. Oh they did. And then again, looking at George's father, who was a very difficult man to understand, but a very kindly man . . . anything I say has its opposite which would be equally true, but it's hard to state directly. He didn't know, as we already knew, that there was a very friendly world out there and it was friendly toward us. We tested it. We put in our foot and found the water was pleasant. And he didn't have any notion that a Jewish boy could survive out there. He still had fears of anti-Semitism. He'd grown up in a New York world and probably had felt a lot of anti-Semitism. First World War, he'd been a young man; he was German, or he had a German name. He changed the name about 1917 from Oppenheimer. George's grandfather was rather hurt that George's father changed the name. Oppenheimer is a grand old name.

DY: When did George's father die?

MO: He died just around 1950. Rachel DuPlessis has worked endlessly on a chronology. She's now all set to write on the letters, and she's worked and worked on this chronology. And I found out I had very dim . . . I wasn't very clear about a lot of things. But I'm pretty sure George's father died before we went to Mexico, which was 1950, the beginning of the McCarthy trials.

DY: What exactly happened to you during the McCarthy period?

MO: Well, very many people in the Communist Party, the Hollywood Ten (you've probably heard of that), and other groups were picked up and prosecuted—labor groups, very many different categories were picked up and vilified and categorized as leftist fellow travelers by Joe McCarthy in these hearings. In 1950 the Hollywood Ten had already served their year in federal prison. They had been found guilty. It was utterly illegal that they were found guilty, but nevertheless they'd gone to jail. And we were about the next echelon which was due to be picked up. A friend of ours from Hollywood came down to visit us (we were living in the southern part of Los Angeles), and said, "I don't know what you'd think of me but," he said, "I just wanted to come and tell you that I'm leaving tomorrow." And we said, "Well, we also didn't want to broadcast it, but we're leaving next week." And this was the way people . . . you'd sort of . . . the vibes would tell you when you had to go. Because we had a child by then, and there was no longer any point in going to prison—to prove what? Because many people had already gone to jail for usually a year.

DY: What encouraged you to come back after ten years?

MO: We could get a passport. We decided not to come back until we could get a passport.

DY: And it was only in '58 or so that you could get a passport?

MO: Yes, when we came back. We had applied regularly for a passport and had the most insolent treatment at the Consulate in Mexico City. I preserved some of the correspondence and it's really ludicrous, the positions they took. But finally, other people were getting passports and we still didn't, so we felt they really felt they had a really hot case, or a lot of pieces of paper about us in that black book, and so Boudin the lawyer, who's still a well-known name around here, a lawyer who defends leftists and other persecuted cases, let it be known that anybody who was having trouble getting a passport get in touch with him. So George wrote him a letter and the next day we had a passport and then we came back. But they just did that sort of thing. It was already . . . the proscriptions had already been lifted, and yet this terrible woman, whose name doesn't come to me, who was running the passport department, just procrastinated and just made it difficult, and didn't give you whatever you had a right to.

DY: I was just thinking of George's father . . .

MO: He didn't understand him. No, he really didn't. He was completely puzzled . . . I don't think he understood anything about us. . . . We were building a house, and we were building it bang-bang, you know, we were building it ourselves. And he came down to visit. And we had horses, and we had a haystack that was much bigger . . . it was as big as this house. It was cheaper that way, so we bought an enormous load of hay. Four horses eat an awful lot. So here was this enormously big stack of hay, and we were building this house and it was only painted up about this high [five feet or so] all the way around and other things weren't finished. The roof wasn't on, things like that. So when he got home he said to June, his younger daughter, he said, "June, why do they have so much hay?" And she said, "Well, they have four horses, and they got a good buy on it." Alright, he accepted that. He said, "Why is the house only painted up so high?" She said, "That's as high as Linda [the Oppens' daughter] can reach." (laughter) He just didn't understand that we were doing it ourselves.

DY: How did he feel about George writing poetry? But he only had one book out, so . . .

MO: But he took that book, and he had it under his arm when he went to his club. He lived that sort of life here in San Francisco. And some old compatriot of his or a rich playing companion or something said, "What's that you've got there?" And he said, "Oh, it's my son's book. He writes poetry." And the guy took it and looked at it and said, "Poetry! You know what I'd do if my son wrote poetry?" And George's father said, "What would you do?" And he said, "I'd shoot the bastard!" (laughter) But George's father took it to the club. He didn't know what to make of it but he was proud of George. But he never knew how to say it.

DY: There's a poem in *Myth of the Blaze* called "The Lighthouses" (To L.Z.) [Louis Zukofsky], that's about fathers. "To all fathers I want to say yes." "To all fathers." What does he mean by that?

MO: He means Pound and he meant Zukofsky and Blake and others.

DY: And his father?

MO: No, he didn't mean that.

DY: He didn't mean it to his own father?

MO: Probably not. Or if he did, he again couldn't say it really. It was very, very hidden. I just deduced, thinking about it fairly recently, I think

the two men loved each other, and as in so many cases they just never somehow worked out how to make a move.

DY: He writes quite a few poems where his father figures—"Guest Room," for example. Which I surmised that you went back to stay in their house. It's quite a moving poem, I think. He talks about their "embattled and despairing" lives. But then the ending of the poem is a "moment of awe" where you go back out on the hills of San Francisco, and it's a "moment of conviction" after leaving the house. Which is almost in miniature the whole Oppen "scenario."

MO: His father didn't live here anymore when we returned.

DY: Oh, he didn't. Where did he live?

MO: He lived in Monte Carlo. No, we wouldn't have returned if they'd been still here. We met occasionally or we visited them or they visited us, but very, very gingerly. June, the younger sister, was always with us when they were visiting, and came to see us regularly.

DY: Something I've noticed in George's poetry is the repetition. If someone should do a motif index or a word index of George's poetry, because words are repeated, well, whole poems are repeated . . .

MO: Yes. *Primitive*, for instance, has a lot of repetition in it.

DY: He repeats words, phrases, and motifs all the way through, perhaps more so than, I think, any other poet I've come across. Repeating whole poems in later collections, and even in one collection there are two nearly identical poems.

MO: Yes, he does.

DY: That seems very distinctive.

MO: Well, I suppose it was developing thought. He had done it in a way that worked, and he uses it again.

DY: What do you think is the effect of taking "A Language of New York" and placing it in *Of Being Numerous*?

MO: Sometimes he took pieces, put them . . . and made them into a longer series, discovered that they worked and used them that way.

DY: Why do you think he was drawn to the serial mode, the sequence mode of composition, where I think he is probably most powerful . . . poems like "A Narrative" and others.

MO: I think he wasn't really very sympathetic with just an actual epic sort of form or taking on something so grandiose. I guess it just worked better, it was something that worked better, probably.

DY: I am almost tempted to call *Of Being Numerous* a “minimalist epic.”

MO: Yes, well, you could.

DY: When he compares it to “The Waste Land” . . .

MO: I remember many, many years ago John Crawford, who was very close at that time, discussed with George that several small pieces worked well together. I don’t know, I guess his thought went something like that. And I think really it was built that way, it was really built out of these blocks. It wasn’t just a set piece which he then set out to do all at once.

DY: I was thinking of the repetitions in a psychological way, where he talks about . . . that sense of repetition as a way of holding oneself together, a way of remembering, because it’s like a tapestry with recurring patterns, recurring words, very, very repetitive. It must have served a psychological function or . . .

MO: No, I think the thought went that way. It did. He just really worked so hard on trying to find out what it was that he really thought, and usually when the poem was finally finished, then he could see, and he hadn’t known at the beginning where it was going to lead him. He had something which he hung on to, which he said he never lost, that started him and it could keep him going and that he had there as a central thing, and I think he’s just developing that. . . . Olson was amusing once. Duncan and George read here at a poetry reading, and they read and then there was a video of I think O’Hara and another one of Olson, and Olson was very interesting. He was quite drunk when this video thing was going on. He had a big sort of chart on the wall with all kinds of pieces of paper and sayings pinned to it. And he’d talk about this (it was Gloucester) and he was talking about writing, I guess about Gloucester, and he said, “And look,” he said, “It means something!” (laughter) I love that! He was amazed, you know.

DY: I guess that’s a poet’s great discovery—that it means something.

MO: But *what* you mean.

DY: George says in “Ballad”: “Difficult to know what one means, / —to be serious and to know what one means.”

MO: Right. It certainly is.

DY: He’s trying . . . I guess that’s it when he says, “Poetry is a test of truth.”

MO: And you try to find out *your* truth and *your* meaning, and he found

it writing poetry. Because he didn't *work* at it as a philosopher does, or someone else, hammered and hammered and hammered or logic or math or something like that. He used the poem, his own poem.

DY: Poetry as a way of thinking.

MO: Uh-huh. A test of truth and sincerity. Find out what he thinks. . . . I always find soul a sort of soft word. I don't use it much.

DY: Maybe he's interested in en-souling the world. Or the term "world" as in the poem "World, World—" It can be a noun or a verb. To world.

MO: Uh-huh. To world the world.

DY: To world the world. So it's just a different orientation entirely. He's not interested in "inventing" but in "reporting," as he puts it, and he's anti-metaphorical. Although metaphors occur, he's not creating a metaphorical world, he's not creating a mythical world in the manner, say, of Duncan.

MO: No. With Duncan that's a way of being sincere. He was brought up in a mysticism. It was very different to him, and I think Duncan's a great poet. And I was surprised how much valuation and love for Duncan George showed in many of his writings. If I'd had the energy I would have excerpted them to take them to show to Duncan because he's in a bad way these days. And I'm sure Duncan doesn't know that George felt that way about him, but I think it was unspoken really. I love Duncan, and I'm sure George did too, but it would have been nice to do that for Duncan. Somebody may do it. George comparing his own way of thinking, his own way of writing with Duncan and so on and giving Duncan a great deal.

DY: Well, he did say: "Duncan's materials are familiar in another sense (myth). Mine in another (pavement, houses, the sun rising)" [*Ironwood* 26, p. 15].

MO: Uh-huh.

DY: And that's what I mean by the "actual."

MO: Right.

DY: George takes that objectivist stance from the '30s and makes it his own.

MO: Uh-huh.

DY: And he's quite different from Reznikoff and Zukofsky.

MO: Oh, very. Very different.

DY: And he thought that Zukofsky used obscurity as a tactic in his poetry.

MO: Zukofsky was difficult. He was so important to both of us, and really essential to George when we first went to New York. He was a little bit older and very educated, very erudite and at that time very much a man of his world and very much in that world. Very different from the way he ended up. And open and lovely and immensely generous and just doing anything at all that he could do for ever so many young people and young poets. He was about four years older than George, but it seemed as though he were older because he had this position already in a minute little poetry world. He was in correspondence with Pound, and he was already preparing to edit that issue of poetry that became important [*Poetry* February 1932]. And he was in a lively correspondence with Pound trying to get people placed and publicized and money and publishing and all these problems. So when we showed up it was just already a place for George to step into. George was very lucky that way, and when he returned to writing the same thing was true. There was just a place for him. But when we went to New York as 18- or 20-year-olds, it's really, looking at it now, you can't tell some other kid, "Well, go to New York, they'll treat you this way," but we were treated that way. We were just treated with open arms everywhere we went. And Zukofsky was responsible. He introduced us to ever so many people. He was dabbling, trying to figure out something about politics, and we met all these people with him. And we met people who were writing music and listened to music, which we had never done before. I would say that he gave us the molding of our lives. George was already writing, but very romantic and very, very useful poetry. So that Zukofsky occupied an enormously important place for George. But when George began to be successful, Louie asked George at several . . . at three different moments in their very difficult relationship, "Do you like your poetry better than mine?" And what was George to say? So he said, "Mine!" If he didn't, why would he write it. If he liked Louie's best, well, then that was already . . . And then Louie wouldn't speak to us for years.

George didn't believe . . . he thought there were some falsities in Zukofsky, which he at least wrote to himself and spoke about occasionally, but to himself and his writings you find it there very clearly. He felt Zukofsky was using obscurity as a tactic and felt that he was in many ways ruined by that. You see, it's just really true about Zukofsky. He was born to poverty. He could have been a teacher, he could have gone . . . and he was a

professor and earned money that way all his life. But Louie *really* wanted to be supported. He really wanted to be just like an old time poet with a patron so that he could then be free to write. Well, who doesn't? But George was in this enviable position, and I think really it was an assumption. Duncan has talked to us a lot about this, and he probably was right about a lot that he told us. He said, "Zukofsky *believed* that George was going to support him for the rest of his life." Well, we didn't know that he thought that. We couldn't have. I don't think we would have. We did for a while when that publishing venture was going on, but I think it would have probably ruined Louie. I mean, you can't do that for someone. He couldn't possibly have married and had a child and gone ahead and had a life if he'd been just supported by somebody. Nevertheless, it was a flaw in his character. It was. A little bit of ego-mania. He had terrible fears of the world. He didn't feel that the world was . . . you know, the way George and I felt about the world.

DY: I wanted to ask you about a phrase George repeats: "*amor fati*," "love of fate." What was that fate?

MO: Well, everything that happened to us we really welcomed. When you look back, what would you change in your life? You wouldn't be yourself if you wanted to wipe out something, even an unpleasantness or unhappiness.

DY: He speaks both of the happiness, the awe, the wonder of the world; but he also speaks of "the horror." In fact he quotes you in "A Narrative": "The river at night / She said again / Is horrible."

MO: Uh-huh.

DY: He must quote you all the way through. In fact, in "Inlet" he quotes you again about the theologians. "So brave / In the wilderness she said."

MO: Well, I was spending a lot of time with the church fathers and the Prophets and so on, and we were out at sea. It was a turbulent sea, and we were talking about that.

DY: Being at sea though . . . I mean, that image, the whole image of the sea is such an ambiguous image for him too. "We chose the sea." And you say: "It's what held us together."

MO: Well, George had his own little boat when he was five years old. His father was not a great sailor, but he had a boat. And George was a better sailor as a little tiny child than his father was, and he had this love of boats. And when we went hitchhiking, we hitchhiked to Detroit and we

had a car and we sold it because when we got to Portland from San Francisco (this was the second trip out across the country), we found that we were deprived of contact with the people that we had when we were hitchhiking. It was a much richer experience, and we got a great deal more from it. Well, we were just getting an education. So we sold the car in Portland and gave somebody there the money to hold for us and hitchhiked, and when we got to Detroit we had a road map. George looked at it; he said, "You know, we could sail to New York." Well, I'd never sailed. I'd rowed a boat, but I hadn't ever sailed. So we bought a boat. We got the money. It was \$200. We bought this boat, a little Great Lakes catboat and the guy gave us an old camp stove and an old outboard motor. He was kind of worried about us. George took the boat out for a sail, and it heeled. I didn't know it was going to heel, and I was terrified! I sat in the bottom and cried! But I learned how to sail. I was a good navigator. George really was always a much better sailor than I, but I was a good navigator. So boats became central in our lives. We did sail to New York. DY: And there's that recurring motif of the "shipwreck." Again that's both a positive and a negative. What exactly does he mean by that? It's both good, it's "bright light of shipwreck," but it's also . . . you don't think of a shipwreck as positive. It's some kind of disaster. He was so conscious of disasters. You get the feeling that he thinks the world is doomed. MO: But he was never negative. I'm much more negative and pessimistic than he was. But I tell you, if I could put it in sailing terms, several times we were in very real danger. But we came through it, and it was an *immense* experience. Just twice were we really in any sort of danger, but I tell you it's an *immensely* powerful and, in a way, very isolating experience, because the power is the sea, the power is the wind. And you'd never come up against it unless it really is that kind of life-threatening force and you realize. And we did come through it, and it is immensely exhilarating to be working through one of those moments. A hurricane, say, at sea, my god, it's really something! You know, this tiny little . . . you know, your boat becomes a cockle shell and you have to trust it and give it a chance to take you through.

DY: It works as a wonderful image, but it's not really a metaphor because he did it.

MO: Yes, he did it.

DY: It's a real feeling. But he has that poem, "Population": "Like a flat

sea, / Here is where we are, the empty reaches / Empty of ourselves." So empty of ourselves.

MO: He tested this over and over and over again in the war. He doesn't really go into the specifics of being wounded and the whole experience, but it was an incredible experience to come through. His unit was one of those that liberated part of a prison camp. Her certainly saw those horrors firsthand.

DY: Did he join?

MO: No, he was drafted. Well, he wanted to go. He felt that a Jew who didn't go was a pretty despicable creature. And so we agreed that he should go, but he wanted that machinist rating. We were on Long Island, and it was a plant which had miserable labor relations. He was never going to get a machinist rating in that shop. So he wanted to go to Detroit and work in the airplane industry there and get his machinist rating, because he really wanted that. And when he came out after the war he had it. It meant immediately that he would be drafted, because if you gave up a war-time job and moved you were draftable. George was also the father of a child, he was thirty-six years old, he was overage for the draft, but he wanted to go. So he went to Detroit (I followed out there) and he was drafted, etc. He did get his rating. It was important to him, I don't know why. Later it didn't seem very important, but at the time it did. . . . He went in as a responsible Jew, who someone was trying to wipe out and he was not going to stand still. . . . Right after we left France a friend of ours, a very close friend of ours, set up a refugee camp for children in Paris. Fascism had happened in Italy. Nazism had happened in Germany. We still have the effects. We didn't go into Germany, but German officers were flirting with me, calling me "mein Taube." Mussolini's troops with these cock feathers, you know, flaunting around. We were aware what it meant.

DY: Were you corresponding with Pound during this time? That must have been a serious exacerbation of the relationship.

MO: Well, by that time . . . we joined the Communist Party in 1934. That was the time of the People's Front in France and the building of the trade unions in the United States. There was a rather defunct AF of L, and the CIO unions hadn't yet been built. And the Communists played an enormous organizational role doing the absolute leg work, you know, the beginning leg work and all of that union work. And those were our times.

. . . We came home in 1933 early Spring. Roosevelt had been elected in 1932. This progression of events is really fast. We were active Communists until . . . the war. I was active during the war. When George came home he was still a little bit active, but we were very uncomfortable with the whole situation, and I was very ready to leave the Party. But it was no joke trying to get out of the Communist Party, because by that time it was your whole surroundings in life. Always, as I said, only George's sister followed us as a friend or an acquaintance or an intimate during those Communist years. All our acquaintances were the Communist Party acquaintances and friends, and you make friends. They were remarkably intelligent. Remarkable group of people. And that becomes . . . you know, everything that's around you. . . . It's very hard to get out. And then for years . . . and then with the McCarthy period, to try to get out you were immediately nailed as a witness and asked to name names, so that you couldn't get out. So the ten years in Mexico and several years before that, there were certainly thirteen or so years in which we couldn't make a move. We were no longer willing to be Communist Party members, and we weren't doing anything about it, and then ten years we were refugees and turning around, bringing up a child.

DY: Why did you change your mind about the Communist Party?

MO: Well, George and I used to come home from just doing ordinary organizational work, and we chose the Communist Party because they were active and they were doing these things, and when you needed advice and help they were there to help. We mostly worked pretty much on our own in neighborhoods. George and I were very Americanized, we were very at home, very comfortable in the United States. The Communist Party in New York state was mostly Jews, people who had come from Europe or whose parents had come from Europe, and if there was acculturation, it was pure New York, which is still very extreme, a very extreme way of being somebody. And George and I could get out on the street, we were comfortable, we were at home, we were accepted, we had an immense advantage organizationally, and they knew and they made all kinds of concessions. We joined on the impetus of what they call the United Front, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, you know, joining hands to defeat fascism. That was the basis of our being Communists. I think the projects that we worked on, there wasn't any spying or anything like that. They were getting swimming pools, they were getting housing, they were get-

ting food, they were electing trade union officials to city council or something like that. It was really very reformed. In general, the Communist Party was taking orders from Moscow, but the actual work that we were involved in was doing things which should have been done by liberals, and I think nowadays a “liberal” would pretty much describe what we were then.

DY: What did George think of the New Left in the '60s? Was he much involved with that?

MO: I haven't understood it nor known anybody in it. I knew two young people who came to visit us up in Maine in the early 1970s one time, who told us, after we got to know them a little bit, that they'd been in the Socialist Labor Party, and they had a terrible, violent episode in their own inner goings on down in Washington D.C. And these two young people had held positions of responsibility, and they had just got out—they were scared. But those were the only two people we met or knew. Then the hippie movement was interesting. We went out to visit some communes and we knew some people and took looks at it, but we were like their grandparents. And I think that there are still a few nice, good things that remain from that, but when the drugs took over it wasn't such a pretty sight anymore, the prostitution, so much going on with such young kids.

DY: I guess George was kind of the father poet in the '60s for people like Antin, Rothenberg and especially for some of the Jewish poets.

MO: Uh-huh.

DY: He never was too much associated with the San Francisco poets?

MO: No, when we came out here we really didn't know anybody. It took time. We still have more friends in New York I guess than here. And our New York friends are still close. That would be Heller and Antin and Rothenberg and Harvey Shapiro and others. Those are New York Jewish poets. It's also remarkable how many Jewish poets there were in that early period that we're talking about.

DY: George was never really a devout . . .

MO: His grandfather, we asked his grandfather and he said, “My branch of the family has not been in a synagogue for almost,” I forget, “200 years.” Something like that. German Jews were part of the Enlightenment, and they of course felt that the world would become enlightened and they were given a very enlightened role in Germany at that period.

George's grandfather was a very lovable, nice man and came to New York when he was about fourteen. They were not religious; they were part of a very liberal group. George's grandfathers on both sides of his ancestry were philanthropists, and they helped to found the Ethical Culture Society and a school in New York, which usually had a Gentile head. Orphan's homes, settlement houses, they were that kind of enlightened Jews. And what's interesting is that George's and my life together was the first exogamous relationship in all of his family connections. And as others came along after us, most of them were exogamous, but I think that was partly why I was so welcomed, and I didn't understand it then. They were very alienated, would like to have been totally at home, but never felt quite at home. Anywhere Jews don't very much feel at home.

DY: He mentions it in the poetry a few times. "Semite, to find a way for myself."

MO: Uh-huh. Yes. How to be a Jew.

DY: "Neither Roman nor Barbarian."

MO: Uh-huh.

DY: He's conscious of it.

MO: Oh very conscious of it. So was his father. His father was an immensely successful man socially and was in all the social circles, and wasn't politically active ever about anything that I ever heard of. But he would combat anti-Semitism wherever he met it quite militantly.

DY: Did you ever go to Israel?

MO: Yes. We were invited there by the mayor of Jerusalem. We were given some lovely housing. We were there for two months.

DY: When was this?

MO: I think it was 1975, during the war with Egypt, a brief war, and there were smiles on everybody's faces. It was a peace that's lasted the longest.

DY: I think he mentions that in the Daybook, that he got off the plane and felt this kind of unusual feeling.

MO: Israel now is such . . . It was very interesting, and we met poets of course. And we stayed a few days on a kibbutz. It was immensely interesting. Many young poets. The one I like the most is Kovner, who lives on a kibbutz. He's a man our age. He and his wife were in the Vilna ghetto, and his wife looked Gentile, and she went out and laid the bombs that exploded the first trains of Nazis coming in. And they *both* were lucky to

come through it alive. He's a wonderful, loveable man. He has some wonderful poetry too. Shirley Kaufman, who is a friend who lived here and now lives there, she's translated a lot of Hebrew poetry, and she's translated some of his poetry. There is a new edition just out.

DY: When George stopped writing in 1980 or thereabouts, did he write anything his last four years?

MO: Well, *Primitive* was the last. And he couldn't get that ready for the publishers. And he finally said, "If you can do this, please do it." He said, "I can't do it." So I had to put them together and get the typescripts presentable, and probably lots of things he'd have done differently. He felt that he had done it. He didn't feel there was anything more.

DY: There's a sense of an ending in that book. The last poem looks back to "a young man, / (Brooklyn 1929) I named the book / series empirical." But he's always looking back. You get the feeling that this is it, not writing anymore. This is "my final statement." But he's also . . . I'm puzzled by a few lines where he says, "Help me." You feel like he's falling apart . . . like a boat that's got holes in it.

MO: Yes, well, he says that. Well, you know, the Alzheimer's is a very insidious disease, and we didn't know what was wrong with him. By the time I knew what was wrong with him, he was no longer able to be really mentally competent. It really would have done no good anyway. It's a very insidious disease, and who knows when it really started. People ask me, "When did you notice?" Well, I'm absent-minded, George is absent-minded, and who knows when things really began. But certainly it runs quite a long course.

DY: The later poetry really is a lot different. There are gaps, and the line-breaks.

MO: And repetition.

DY: More so than in the earlier works.

MO: Well, he just gave up finally on it. I thought the repetitions were good. I thought it worked. . . . But he'd ask me at times, he said, "Am I losing my mind?" And I'd say, "Well, but it's Alzheimer's disease, and we don't know very much about it." He was very distressed. But he did realize something was distressing.

DY: It's hard to imagine writing under such conditions.

MO: Well, it hadn't developed to the stage where he couldn't write, I guess is how you'd have to say it.

DY: It's still so clear. It didn't seem to have affected his development.

MO: Well, and then at some times it did. He had something to do and things to accomplish, and certainly had things he wanted to get done. And he worked desperately to get those last things done. He said, for a long time he said, "I have no more poetry to write. I've written it." It's funny. He said, "You know, when I started back to writing, I *knew* these books, I knew and I just did them." And he just worked as hard as he could work. He got up in up in the morning and answered correspondence and then worked. And come hell or high water, he preserved those work habits. He hadn't been that kind of methodical person, really. He could work in a disciplined manner, but he'd never written that way before.

DY: This is the later poetry?

MO: Yes, this is from 1958 when he started writing again. And there are nine books, something like that.

DY: Do you still read his poetry?

MO: Yes, sure. I get it down and look at it.

DY: Do you have any that you particularly like? Anything that really draws you?

MO: I'm very fond of *Primitive*.

DY: I call the love poems "Mary poems." (laughter) He says in the Daybook, "When I say love I mean Mary. . . ." I think those writings are full of gems. It's like a gold mine.

MO: The writings are wonderful.

DY: There's some great philosophy in the Daybook. Some of the aphorisms remind me of Nietzsche or Camus. I noticed you were interested in Camus.

MO: Yes, I like Camus. George never did like him very much, but I was very interested in Camus.

DY: I thought there was a similarity between Camus' return to Tipasa from his essay, "Return to Tipasa," and your return to the United States. What he says in that essay . . . I thought, George and Mary must have felt like this when they returned from Mexico. You must have felt release, a new life, when you came back to San Francisco.

MO: No, New York was home to George. Even when we had moved here, he yearned for New York, and we couldn't live there anymore. It was just too difficult, the dangers were difficult. No, New York was his town. And he wrote poetry out of San Francisco, but in that piece that's in

Conjunctions you will see the difficulty that he and his older sister had. It was the second marriage, and coming to San Francisco, and away from everything that had been in New York that had surrounded him with security, it was just completely withdrawn from both of these two kids. He was sent to a boarding school, his sister was sent to a convent. It sounds just absolutely crazy, and it was. He was vindictive. He and his sister both felt that they were being destroyed, and it was willful destruction. They didn't *blame* his father, but it was as much his father's fault as much as it was his stepmother's fault. They were disposed of. And it was quite ruthlessly done, and his memories of San Francisco were always connected with that. Whereas the family in New York when we first went there, on our second pilgrimage across the country we finally got to New York . . . and George's uncle, who was about eleven years old when his oldest sister married George's father, he had been sort of the favorite uncle; he was eleven or fifteen or something when George was born. So he was an uncle who was very affectionate and very close to both of us. And he said, "You know, you're Elsie's² children." And he said, "George, your father took you away from us."

DY: Why did you stay in San Francisco the last twenty-odd years?

MO: Well, it became necessary to get away from New York. We were spending winters elsewhere, because, I don't know, George had had pneumonia several times and he had very advanced emphysema. And it wasn't safe, the stores were all being robbed and people killed, and taxi people wouldn't take us home to our neighborhood at night from the city. It was just a place to get away from. We were of an age to get away. So I thought about it a lot. He was just working; he wasn't giving it any thought. I said, "Well, we're the oldest ones. Let's go back to San Francisco." (laughter) "The older ones are all dead. Let's go back and let the young ones worry!" So he was willing, and we came back here.

DY: Which one of you two was more level-headed? Were you both pretty level-headed?

MO: Well, we usually discussed whatever it was that was the problem for I suppose considerable discussion, but as far as I remember I was the one who said, "Now we're going to do it." And it's often the woman's

2. "George's mother, this uncle's sister, Elsie Rothfeld Oppenheimer." Linda Oppen Mourelatos in a letter to Dennis Young.

role, I've noticed looking around at other relationships. We were in agreement, but I said "Now we're going to do it." In a sense then it was my decision, but it really wasn't, because we agreed. And some of them were hard decisions for me, some were a little bit hard for George. For George to go into the army was hard. He felt *very* guilty about it afterwards, just terribly guilty about it. But we agreed, and he did it.

DY: In some of the later poems the word "guilt" comes up quite a bit.

MO: Yes, he felt very guilty towards the women in his family, because for his younger sister, for his niece Andy, for our daughter, for me, *he* was the man, he was the male, he was *the* one. That's a terrific responsibility, and he always felt it very much. His older sister too, but she died. And he was the *one* male for all of these women. That was a tremendous responsibility. They had other men in their lives, but it never mattered. It had been his father, and George just inherited that position. The one man who they really could trust and love and accept. None of them ever had successful marriages. It's a complicated family history, but it left George with a tremendous responsibility which he accepted.

DY: It's interesting that he was with you so long and had all these responsibilities, that, especially in the later poems, he speaks of loneliness, feeling alone.

MO: This is the human condition.

DY: He wasn't actually alone, but he was alone in an existential sense.

MO: Yes, we all are. There is no way to . . . you know, between the individual and the masses, there is . . . It's forever that.

DY: Well, I've just about asked all my questions, but I really didn't have much of a set plan.

MO: That's probably the best way to do this. The other is usually not good at developing into a conversation.

DY: There are so many little questions, but it's more interesting just to hear you reminisce.

MO: You certainly get immersed, don't you?

DY: Completely.

MO: Well I think that George would not have consented to any of this.

DY: Really?

MO: No, he would not. He didn't give his papers, but he didn't destroy his papers. So the decisions were left to me and Linda. And the way the poetry world works these days is that it's the academic community which

keeps alive this kind of writing. It wouldn't be viable five years later if it weren't for the academic community. George used to say "We poets are the seam from which the academy mines its ore." Linda and I discussed it a great deal, because George wouldn't have. But there Linda and I are with this decision to make, and so we've decided that people that we can understand and be sympathetic with and respect and have confidence in the work that they're trying to do, that we are just going to say yes. That it's important, and George's poetry thus will be read more. And we'll do it; and otherwise I think not.

DY: I don't think he had a high opinion of critics.

MO: Well, he never read them very much. He hadn't ever felt the need for them really. And it was a different world he came out of and that I came out of, because in the 1920s there wasn't that kind of world for poets of the moment. And you know the difficulties that Pound and Williams had being recognized or published or known at all.

DY: Was George concerned with recognition and fame and that aspect of writing?

MO: He felt . . . George was very lucky, because these things came very, very easily. And he felt that he had sufficient recognition, he felt satisfied with the recognition that he had. But he never felt that he was writing for the masses.

DY: Was it hard for him to write?

MO: Yes, I think he worked very hard, but I think it was something that he knew what he was going to do and he did it. And he knew it was hard work, and he did the hard work. The only thing comparable . . . I don't write that way, but I can compare it to making pictures. I have a notion, and I sort of keep this notion in my mind for a while, and then when I get started on it, it's both very exhilarating and an awful lot of work. But I want to do it. And sometimes it comes off and sometimes it doesn't. But that's how I work. And it's very satisfying and exhilarating to be doing that work. I think George felt that. . . . He had an extremely good mind, and he wanted terribly to find out what was in this mind.

DY: I've often thought that the poems of *Discrete Series* are "rocks."

MO: (Laughter) They certainly are tiny.

DY: They're like gems. And they're just hard to get to. And they're like sculptures; he cuts away the excess words.

MO: He cuts away and cuts away until there's just about nothing.

DY: But they're so beautiful. They have such strength and impact, because there's not much said. The longest one's barely half a page.

MO: He felt that was all that he was capable of, and he felt he had to live more, that he had to feel himself more in the world and do what he had to do, do all these things that we did.

DY: The writing comes out of his experience, but it's not confessional.

MO: In the present day there's an awful lot of just confession, which really should be called something else. Really, it would do better in a novel or something like that, in my opinion. I find it a little embarrassing. But it sort of went with the times, you know, all of this huge predilection for all sorts of therapy and groupie-sharing and all that stuff. Very different.

DY: He's so amazing in his persistence, in that he was able to go against the trend. So many poets were imitating the Beats or the Confessional poets. He is like an island. He just did it himself with such resilience.

MO: Yes. He felt that he had something in this mind of his, and that he wanted to get it out.

DY: Why was he drawn to poetry instead of, say, fiction or drama?

MO: He said that Robert Louis Stevenson was the first poet for him when he was a little boy. And his sister was interested in poetry. His father . . . it's hard to know. His mother committed suicide when he was four, and his father brought them up, and his father read to them widely. But he himself was a very lightweight dilettante, a very successfully handsome man. And a very great success socially in the world he lived in. He had these children cared for properly, but he spent a lot of time with them himself, and he had every book and so on that was around. It was available to these kids, and he did a lot of reading to them and had fun with them. Until he remarried it was sort of an idyllic life with these children. By that time George was nine or ten years old and his sister was thirteen or fourteen. And then he married again, and it was abruptly cut off and it was a terribly traumatic experience and the oldest girl really never came through. She was always a very troubled and terribly unhappy young girl and later a woman. But that's the miracle of George and me meeting. My father had just died and my life had pretty much closed down. There was really nothing that my family was offering me in a little lumber town up in Oregon. So that it was a most remarkable experience to go to college, which I did on my own. My mother was fairly opposed and nobody else was interested. The county agent came around and rounded up a bunch of

us in 4-H clubs and explained to us how we could go to college. So I did. We cooked fudge and we made money and we went up there two weeks with her. She demonstrated what the college was, what you could do. And that's how I got there. And George was living by himself near his sister, who had married down in Pasadena. And he'd met a young man (George was going to a prep school, because he had left high school), and he was getting ready to go to college. And he met an older boy there, who was about three or four years older than he was, who was preparing to go to Oregon Agricultural College which is now Oregon State. He was going to become an entomologist. But at any rate, this young man was going to do this. So George said, "Well, I'll go with you." So there they were at this prep school, and this friend, Don Edwards, had a car. And they went up to Corvallis; I went up to Corvallis. And there was this teacher from Berkeley, who loved poetry, and there we were sitting . . . George sitting right on the front row ahead of me. He introduced us to poetry of this moment. It was a Conrad Aiken anthology. He was just . . . his eyes, he had beautiful, big blue eyes. Otherwise, he was a very ugly man. But he was *young* and he was just out of Berkeley. He didn't have a Ph.D.; he just had a Masters, but he'd gone up there on his first job. And he was just *electric* with all his excitement about poetry, and he got us all writing poetry and he asked several of us doing best to come to his house. Oh my goodness, it was just wonderful! Also, I had gone to the University a few months the year before and I didn't make it through, I had to go home. But at the first assembly for freshman, the first speaker was a man who explained fascism in Italy. He had been in Italy and had observed Mussolini's march on Rome. Well, you know, I never had heard of politics before, and it was electrifying, I mean, to go to college . . . something! And the next assembly was Sandburg with his guitar singing and reciting his poetry. You know, "The fog came on little cat feet." These are songs my mother sang. Oh my goodness, what a vision of America! These were American poets! It was electrifying!