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George Oppen's Substantives: The Noun as Heideggerian Formal Indicator and Grundwort

When Objectivist poet George Oppen published his first collection, *Discrete Series*, in 1934 it included a preface in which Ezra Pound defended him against “The charge of obscurity”. This charge, Pound writes,

has been raised at regular or irregular intervals since the stone age, though there is no living man who is not surprised on first learning that KEATS was considered “obscure”. It takes a very elaborate reconstruction of England in Keats’ time to erect even a shaky hypothesis regarding the probable fixations and ossifications of the then hired bureaucracy of Albermarle St., London West.¹

Pound’s statement suggests that, even in its own moment, a historical perspective is needed in order to properly grasp the significance of Oppen’s collection. It takes “a very elaborate reconstruction” of Keats’s England in order to understand Keats’s past obscurity. Similarly, Pound implies, if we are to understand Oppen’s obscurity in 1934 we must recognise a distance between the contextualising poetics of a mainstream audience and the poetics of an avant-garde. Obscurity is, in Pound’s assessment, simply a by-product of a form of difference inherent to the drive to “make it new”.

This obscurity belongs as much to the poems’ forms as it does to their content. As in the third poem in the collection, beginning “Thus / Hides the / Parts—the prudery / Of Frigidaire” (*NCP* 7), the poems of *Discrete Series* regularly launch from a particular fascination with the quotidian. They do so in such a way, however, that the lyric address is often obstructed by the presence of what is, both materially and linguistically, already there. In this context, the prudery of Frigidaire presages a revelation of the Frigidaire’s insinuation into domestic

¹ George Oppen, *New Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 2008), 3. Further references to this edition will be made in the text.

consumption, but in such a way that the social language of commodities and their production (“soda-jerking” and “big-Business”) partially constitutes the domestic “plane” of “Cracking eggs”. If the prudish Frigidaire hides its mechanical parts behind its smooth surface, the commodity object also prudishly conceals its “big-Business” origins within its domestic functioning. In responding to such an understanding of quotidian objects, the obscurity of many of the poems of Oppen’s first collection often lies in his re-configuration of the poetic subject’s lyric encounter with the world as a hesitant attempt to deal with found things and found idioms.

Even in his early collection, however, Oppen’s poems also include forms of “obscurity” beyond the difficulties of syntax fragmented around found materials, an early-Objectivist reconfiguration of the lyric, or a Marxist eye for the commodity.² The objects in Oppen’s world often trouble the lyric subject’s attention in the very act of being revealed by it. In the ninth poem of *Discrete Series*, for example, we read:

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

Oppen has not yet started applying the philosophical vocabulary that becomes prominent in his later work, but here already is an attempt to find a verbal register for a thing’s existence and, in this period of Oppen’s intensifying Marxist commitment, its place within the social whole. This entire first stanza is

² Burton Hatlen and Peter Nicholls both argue for the continued influence of Oppen’s Marxist commitments on his later poetry, despite Oppen’s own claims about the incompatibility of politics and poetry. See Burton Hatlen, “Objectivist Poetics and Political Vision: A Study of Oppen and Pound”, in *George Oppen: Man and Poet*, ed. Burton Hatlen (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1981): 124-48, and Peter Nicholls, “Of Being Ethical: Reflections on George Oppen”, *Journal of American Studies* 31.2 (1997): 153-70 (156-7).

given over to evoking an uncanny actuality.³ Even as the first two lines name and locate the car, the syntax complicates the car's status as "A thing among others". Oppen holds off the moment of predication, denying the substantive "car" a verb that would make it the subject of a properly correct clause. Without a verb, the car is as syntactically passive as it is "Unapplied and empty"; an object "Over which clouds pass". Though passive, the car is still a source of fascination, actual and thing-like but also strange, a collection of reflective surfaces. It is as though its being "closed in glass", reflecting the sky and idle at the curb, has brought uncanniness into Oppen's perception. It is only when it is given a verb in the next stanza, when "Moving in traffic" and thus reintegrated into social purposiveness, that "This thing is less strange" (*NCP* 13). On its own, however, the car is initially apprehended as emphatically thingly, in excess of its social function as an automobile, and apprehended as such because its brief removal from normal activities has allowed the poem to bring a new form of perception to bear upon it. If, as Pound suggests, this poem was potentially "obscure" to readers in 1934, the difficulties of Oppen's form belong also to his desire to bring his poetry close to the uncanny "obscurity" of the thing when perceived in separation from its ordinary everydayness.

In a letter to his sister, June Oppen Degnan, ca. 1963, Oppen shows the centrality of such an experience to his poetics:

There is, in some places, at some times, for some people — the simple intuition of existence. Of one's own existence, and in the same instant the intuition, the pure intuition, of the existence of things, absolutely independent of oneself, and, in some form, permanent . . .

— On words, by the way: it is that intuition first of all which is assuredly "a thought" and which does not occur in words. In fact, as you see clearly above one can't really find the words. It simply springs into

³ Rachel Blau du Plessis introduces the term "uncanny" for Oppen's poetry in Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "'Uncannily in the Open': In Light of Oppen", in *Blue Studios* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2006): 186-208 (198).

the mind: you find yourself trying to fit words to the model of what is already in the mind —⁴

Oppen's description of the "intuition of existence" that precedes language is characteristically strained. It names an experience superficially simple as to what is intuited: "existence". At the same time, though, the description falters at the edges of the intuition itself, falling into ellipsis as it approaches a content "which does not occur in words". Characteristically of Oppen, also, this faltering turns the poet back toward self-reflection and the communication of his own failure to "fit words to the model".

Addressing this relation between poetry and things, Oppen writes:

One can go back, the thing is there and doesn't alter. One's awareness of the world[,] one's concern with existence — they were not already in words — And the poem is not built out of words, one cannot make a poem by sticking words into it, it is the poem which makes the words and contains their meaning. One cannot reach out for *roses* and *elephants* and *essences* and put them into the poem — the ground under the elephant, the air around him, one would have to know very precisely one's distance from the elephant or step deliberately too close, close enough to frighten oneself.⁵

Oppen argues for a pre-discursive moment in which "one's awareness of the world", one's apprehension of things as different from each other as roses and elephants, is not yet a matter of language.⁶ In speaking about these things, then, and attempting to bring one's pre-discursive awareness of them into the realm of poetry, one must in some way respect this otherness and the demands that it

⁴ George Oppen to June Oppen Degnan, c.1963, George Oppen Papers, MSS 16, box 1, file 4, Mandeville Special Collections Library, The University of California, San Diego.

⁵ George Oppen, *Selected Letters of George Oppen*, ed. Rachel Blau du Plessis (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 123. All further references to Oppen's *Selected Letters* (*SL*) will be given in the text.

⁶ Matt Ffytche has written an excellent treatment of this aspect of Oppen's poetics in Matt Ffytche, "'The Arduous Path of Appearance': Phenomenology and Its Uncertainties in the Work of George Oppen", in Carole Bourne-Taylor and Ariane Mildenberg, eds, *Phenomenology, Modernism and Beyond* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010): 189-214 (197-8).

places on one's speaking. This has a particularly strong impact on Oppen's treatment of the noun.⁷

In a letter to Rachel Blau du Plessis, again using the example of elephants, Oppen writes that "If the word *elephant* gets" into your poem,

you have to measure the force and meaning and contexts and solidity of the thing and what it was actually doing there, not as ornament or shocking pendent of your poem but as itself and whatever brought it into your poem, compelling thought. Compelling a commitment.⁸

To use a noun as an "ornament or shocking pendent" is to sap the thing named of its reality and force.⁹ In a letter to Aubrey Degnan-Sutter, ca. 1964, Oppen writes that "I believe we can't be astonished by any hallucination whatever. Whereas we are totally astonished by daylight, by any brick in a brick wall we focus on" (*SL* 105). Phenomenologically we are forced to choose between hallucination and astonishment. Astonishment is the more honest option for Oppen because it recognises existence without seeking to interpret, aestheticise, or to replace.¹⁰ If one does not use a noun with respect to "the force and meaning and contexts and solidity of the thing", then one is within the realm of insubstantial hallucination, detached from a meaningful relationship with the actual world.¹¹

⁷ For more detailed discussion of the impact of this "pre-discursive moment" on Oppen's treatment of nouns, see Oren Izenberg, "Oppen's Silence, Crusoe's Silence, and the Silence of Other Minds", *Modernism/modernity* 13.1 (2006): 787-811 (805-7); Xavier Kalck, "Silence 'Even against the Language': George Oppen's Poetics of Infant Joy and Infant Sorrow", *Études Anglaises* 62.1 (2009): 86-100 (91); Burt Kimmelman, "The Philosophy and Poetry of Gelassenheit, and the Language of Faith", *Jacket* 2 37 (2009): <http://jacketmagazine.com/37/kimmelman-oppen-heidegger.shtml>; and Peter Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 91-3.

⁸ DuPlessis, "'Uncannily in the Open'", 190.

⁹ DuPlessis, "'Uncannily in the Open'", 188-90. DuPlessis specifically recalls Oppen's antipathy to surrealist poetic practices.

¹⁰ See Kimmelman, "The Philosophy and Poetry of Gelassenheit".

¹¹ DuPlessis, "'Uncannily in the Open'", 190.

Such a relationship to the world, however, breeds its own obscurity. If poetic language must respect and, in some way, maintain “the force and meaning and contexts and solidity of the thing”, for Oppen this increasingly means grappling with the otherness of the thing to thought and knowledge.

Oppen and Heidegger

The question of the nature of Oppen’s obscurities pertains to an ongoing reappraisal of his poetics, and particularly to the role of continental phenomenology in both Oppen’s conception of the poem and how criticism might read Oppen’s poetry.¹² Peter Nicholls’s 2008 work, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, has had an enormous impact on the study of Oppen’s poetry and provides a foundation for what follows. Nicholls not only traces the narrative of ambitions and conceptual changes within Oppen’s poetics throughout his career, but it also emphasises the importance of Oppen’s engagement with the work of Jacques Maritain, Martin Heidegger, and Hegel.¹³

In both Nicholls’s assessment and Oppen’s own, Heidegger’s philosophy looms the largest.¹⁴ Oppen claimed to have read Heidegger as early as 1950, and he continued reading the philosopher’s work in translation throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s.¹⁵ His personal writing and correspondence from this period

¹² In “Of Being Ethical”, Nicholls refers to Oppen’s “linguistic impenetrability or opacity”, a feature that “contemporary poets have discerned” in Oppen’s work of the 1950s and 1960s (169-70).

¹³ Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*.

¹⁴ Nicholls notes, for instance, that the “importance of Heidegger to Oppen’s thinking has often been acknowledged”, but adds that “the intensity and breadth of his engagement with the philosopher has yet to be properly gauged” (*George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 63).

¹⁵ Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 194. Nicholls’s excellent “Appendix A: Oppen’s reading of Heidegger” details Oppen’s specific contact with Heidegger’s writing (194-6). Earlier Nicholls comments: “Oppen’s reading during the Mexico years had an important part to play in his return to writing, and the little information we have about this indicates that philosophical works came high on his agenda” (30). See, also, Ffytche, “The Arduous Path of Appearance”, 192: “The early 1960s was the time in which key phenomenological texts were published in translation, including Heidegger’s *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1959) and *Being and Time* and Merleau-Ponty’s *The Phenomenology of Perception*, both in 1962”.

emphasise Heidegger's importance.¹⁶ In looking at this influence, Nicholls traces the development of Oppen's thinking across his career in great detail. Two stages in this development are relevant to this essay:

Oppen's way with his "materials" tends to emphasise the intractability to any discursive or narrative scheme. [...] As we saw in the case of *Discrete Series*, the moment of existence or "isness" is at once simple and complex, constituting an instance of apparently powerful immediacy but one that is actually mediated through an often difficult and indeterminate syntax.¹⁷

As I indicated above, Nicholls notes that Oppen begins by privileging the fact of existence, or "isness". In doing this, Oppen makes that which "is" "intractable" to our means of containing its "isness" in language, while at the same time mediating existing things and their intractable "isness" through language. This, Nicholls argues, is reflected in a second stage in which Oppen's reading of philosophers like Heidegger allowed him to respond "to those terrors of the new atomic age [...] by making the retrieval of a certain poetic or 'meditative' thinking a pressing necessity".¹⁸ This meditative thinking "has the capacity to release its object from instrumentality", moving into a "cadence of disclosure" that "is not a matter of articulating a thought already had, but rather of deploying the resources of writing to disclose the texture of thinking as it takes shape".¹⁹ What Nicholls refers to as Oppen's "poetics of being", in other words, responds to the otherness, intractability, and obscurity of things to a poem's mediating gestures. Poetry becomes a "meditative" thinking that resists dominating its objects of scrutiny with forms of language use that would make this mediation seem easy or untroubled.

¹⁶ For instance, in a note written in 1966, Oppen writes not only that he "had been reading, the day before and perhaps that afternoon, Martin Heidegger's *Essays on Metaphysics: Identity and Difference* [...] with great excitement and great effort", but also that he was "convinced that a part of the statement was of crucial importance to me, of such importance as to alter the subjective conditions of my life, the conditions of my thinking, from that point in time" (*SL* 135).

¹⁷ Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 51.

¹⁸ Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 66.

¹⁹ Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 72.

Nicholls argues that “it was his [Heidegger’s] work above all which seems to have conditioned Oppen’s notion of poetic thinking” in relation to the obscurity of things that had been part of his thinking from the very beginning.²⁰ However, while Nicholls acknowledges Heidegger’s importance to Oppen in this period, he and others also emphasise the degree to which Oppen deviates from the philosopher’s model. Oppen had an idiosyncratic reading of Heidegger’s philosophy, especially regarding questions of how phenomenological experience might relate to language, and what it reveals of the nature of being. First, while it is unclear whether Heidegger himself allows for extra-linguistic experiences in his early writings, Oppen certainly makes extra-linguistic experience the ground of his phenomenological thinking in the late 1950s and in the 1960s. Second, as a number of critics have indicated, Oppen tends to reduce Heidegger’s notion of being as it can be experienced phenomenologically to the sheer intuition of material presence.²¹

The question of Oppen’s idiosyncratic reading of Heidegger has been a fixture in Oppen-criticism for some time. In 1991, Paul Kenneth Naylor argued that while Oppen is not “merely Heidegger done over in modernist verse” it is nonetheless “undeniable that an understanding of Heidegger’s basic ontological claims animates a great deal of Oppen’s poetry”.²² The notion of “basic ontological claims” is useful, for if we were to name a Heideggerian inheritance for Oppen’s poetics we might do so by indicating the philosopher’s and the poet’s shared conviction of humanity’s situation as a being amongst beings, of the difficulty (linguistic and otherwise) of accessing that situation phenomenologically, and of the possibility that poetry might reveal something of that situation. Naylor examines the third of these convictions, as demonstrated in Oppen’s turn to particular grammatical forms either as “demonstrations” locating objects and entities within space and time, or as indications of something in the formal nature of being itself.²³ The outcome, Naylor argues, is that Oppen’s turn to the

²⁰ Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 60.

²¹ Nicholls is particularly clear on this. See Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 79-82. See, also, Kimmelman, “The Philosophy and Poetry of Gelassenheit”.

²² Paul Kenneth Naylor, “The Preposition ‘Of’: Being, Seeing, and Knowing in George Oppen’s Poetry”, *Contemporary Literature* 32.1 (1991): 100-115 (102).

²³ Naylor, “The Preposition ‘Of’”, 104.

actuality of things is disturbed by language. Oppen's poetics, Naylor suggests, makes "words" the specific "things" that "we live among and encounter".²⁴ For Naylor, Oppen wields language with such a sense of their ontological weight that being seems to take up residence again within the words, phrases, and forms that he uses. Obscurity, in such a reading, reflects the difficulty that emerges from an ontological notion of poetic form. Naylor's argument provides a model for my own. Oppen, he argues, employs grammatical relations like prepositionality as analogues to ontological relations. Unlike Naylor, however, I maintain that this gesture within Oppen's poems reflects not the ontologisation of poetic language (that is, not "language become being", as Naylor puts it), but rather language's estrangement from ontology (existence) as it is experienced phenomenologically.

The sort of relation that Oppen posits between language and the disclosure of being has been central to Heideggerian readings of his work. John Wilkinson, for instance, writes that Oppen finds in Heidegger "a vocabulary enabling him to sidestep the contradiction between object truth and representational truth, by transfiguring the object into the blaze of its standing-forth, in truth's objectified self-disclosure".²⁵ In such a reading Oppen has a very Heideggerian notion of poetic language, as that which is alone capable of conferring to being any degree of phenomenological presence. Michael Heller, like Naylor, writes that Oppen "seems to want to dissociate one word from another as though to restore their Heideggerian Dasein, to give them back to the natural world from which they might have arisen".²⁶ For Heller, Oppen's is a Heideggerian poetics attempting to bring to poetry the sense of ontology present in Heidegger's thought, including his desire to renew the ontological richness of particular terms and ideas, but one not committed to Heidegger's precise ontology of language or of the poem. Others have argued along similar lines. Piotr Parlej notes that the "ontological interests of Heidegger's philosophy (concentration on 'what-is') parallel Oppen's own 'testing' of existents in poetry".²⁷ In a review essay

²⁴ Naylor, "The Preposition 'Of'", 111-14.

²⁵ John Wilkinson, "The Glass Enclosure: Transparency and Glitter in the Poetry of George Oppen", *Critical Inquiry* 36.2 (2010): 218-38 (223).

²⁶ Michael Heller, "Speaking the Estranged: Oppen's Poetics of the Word", *Chicago Review* 50.2/3/4 (2004): 137-50 (140).

²⁷ Piotr Parlej, "Testing the Image: The Double Interrogative in the Poetry of George Oppen", *Sagetrieb* 10.1-2 (1991): 67-82 (75).

addressing three books on Oppen's poetry, David Herd writes that Oppen "works through philosophy to arrive at poetry, taking from systematic discourse the materials which might permit disclosure".²⁸ Herd writes that in "his reading of philosophy Oppen arrives at resources—words—which enable him to go back into the language and in so doing to begin again to worry at the roots of things".²⁹

In each of these readings, the capacity of poetic language either to disclose or to test reality must be reconciled with the pre-discursive nature that Oppen ascribes to experiences of being. In "'The Arduous Path of Appearance': Phenomenology and its Uncertainties in the Work of George Oppen", Matt Ffytche turns specifically towards this aspect of Oppen's poetics. Ffytche locates Oppen's turn to Heidegger within a broader trend in American poetry, writing that just as "Heidegger extracted from Husserl a return 'To the things themselves!'", so modernist American poetry, at a similar time, developed its own refusal of discursive and rhetorical encumbrances, and a return to the simple evidence of things".³⁰ In particular, Ffytche writes that Oppen "looked to philosophy to corroborate this weighty presentiment of 'seeing' as the source of ontology, as well as an ethical task".³¹ A pre-discursive experience of things, drawn from an implicit epistemological and phenomenological privileging of sight as an (illusorily) extra-ideological sense, thus founds a pre-discursive experience of existence that can only be reconciled with the capacities of language, especially poetic language, with great difficulty. In this way, poetic language is always estranged from experience, partly because the philosophical and counter-cultural trend that Oppen was involved in requires such estrangement as, amongst other things, a political escape from the ideologies of the present.

Within this situation, then, Oppen is caught in something of a double-bind. He is both committed to a poetics of actuality, particularly the experience of the actuality of "things", and at the same time finds his way there by means of a

²⁸ David Herd, "'In the Open of the Common Rubble': George Oppen's Process", *Textual Practice* 23.1 (2009): 141-50 (149).

²⁹ Herd, "'In the Open of the Common Rubble'", 149.

³⁰ Ffytche, "'The Arduous Path of Appearance'", 189-90.

³¹ Ffytche, "'The Arduous Path of Appearance'", 196.

philosophical position that estranges actuality from the sorts of philosophical or poetic discourses that would normally provide a means to communicate that experience. Critics have noted this difficulty and the problems it poses.³² Many, also, have shown how this double-bind reappears as calls for transparency and silence in Oppen's poetry of the 1960s, and in *Of Being Numerous* in particular.³³

While the above readings agree on the general shape of Oppen's Heideggerian poetics, there is a deeper disagreement. For some, Oppen's work is committed to disclosure by means of a re-ontologisation of the word, and for others the word, as an obscuring material mediator, is deployed by thinking as a "test" of "existants" or as a way to "worry at the roots of things". To speak very generally, the disagreement is over whether Oppen's poetics is itself *aletheic*—that is, whether it primordially discloses in the way Heidegger describes—or whether it is instead mimetic, though mimetic in such a way as to nonetheless revivify the word as a means of relating thought to materially substantive being. My position is that, for the most part, the second of these options is the most accurate description of Oppen's Heidegger-inspired poetics. But I also want to argue that the distinction itself is complicated by Oppen's treatment of nouns.

As with Naylor's early example, much critical work has focused on those "small words" that, as Oppen puts it in a letter to some friends in 1962, feel as though "they are in immediate touch with reality, with unthought and directly perceived reality" (*SL* 62).³⁴ Nicholls, Heller, and others have further shown the important place that nouns in particular hold in Oppen's thinking. In "Of Being Ethical: Reflections on George Oppen", Nicholls writes that naming for Oppen—and

³² See, for instance, Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 89, 93-4, 103; DuPlessis, "'Uncannily in the Open'", 198-200; Burt Kimmelman, "George Oppen's Silence and the Role of Uncertainty in Post-War American Avant-Garde Poetry", *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 36.2 (2003): 145-62 (148); Oren Izenberg, *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 84; and Heller, "Speaking the Estranged", 144.

³³ See, for instance, Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, 175.

³⁴ Michael Heller reflects on this idea of "small words" in "Speaking the Estranged" (140). See also the concluding paragraph of Naylor's "The Preposition 'Of'" (114).

here he means both the noun and the pronoun—“entails ‘an act of faith’ which testifies in turn to the ‘simplest’ of theologies”.³⁵ This “theology” is “the equation of ‘truth’ with a non-moral impenetrability” that “exists prior to social codes and prescriptions”.³⁶ In other words, Oppen’s naming is an act of faith in the impenetrable presentness of that which is named, a presentness “prior to” and other to political ideology and even to poetry. If nouns so testify, however, they thus also become obscure. Heller argues that Oppen’s “small nouns” have a doubled existence: they exist “not as sign and signified but as pointer and mystery (its ‘in itself’)”. For Oppen, this is “the key to poetic effect, to the achievement of ‘actualness’ or conviction”.³⁷ Oppen’s poetic effect is, in this assessment, at least partly tied to the way that the “small nouns”, upon which he focused so much energy, pointed towards the mysteriousness of the thing named. What the noun names for Oppen, in Heller’s assessment, always includes a fundamental otherness to the naming that gives his poetry and its attempt to speak towards (rather than over) things its particular energy and intensity.

In the remainder of this essay I extend upon the work of Naylor, Nicholls, Heller, and others, to argue that Oppen’s poetry from the 1960s uses poetic language in a way that resembles both Heidegger’s early method of formal indication, and the notion of *Grundworte* [fundamental words] that develops out of formal indication in Heidegger’s later philosophy. I first lay out the structure of what Oppen referred to as the “intuition of existence”, and which formed the basis of many of his most ontologically oriented poems. I show how this experience begins in an intuition of the substantivity of material things, but includes also the need to bring that substantivity into contact with the substantive as a grammatical category. Second, I briefly introduce both formal indication and the idea of *Grundworte*, a philosophical means for speaking about that which in phenomenological experience is damaged by being spoken about. Third, I show that these aspects of Heidegger’s thinking help us to understand the ways in which Oppen uses nouns by looking at a section of “A Language of New York” and at the poem “Psalm” from *This In Which*.

³⁵ Nicholls, “Of Being Ethical”, 167.

³⁶ Nicholls, “Of Being Ethical”, 167.

³⁷ Heller, “Speaking the Estranged”, 144.

The Intuition of Existence

In the opening of this essay I suggested that, even in *Discrete Series*, Oppen was concerned with what I am calling the “obscurity” of things in the world. He took a particular interest in, and concentrated closely upon, things like the “Frigidaire” (*NCP* 7) and the car which, “closed in glass”, was uncannily seen for its being one “thing among others” (*NCP* 13). The particularly *material* existence of things is central to Oppen, as seen in the recurrent motif of mineral objects such as bricks, stones, or steel girders.³⁸ The materiality of things in such moments makes them important to Oppen because their materiality allows them to simultaneously demand our attention and resist our conceptual domination. In “Of Being Numerous”, a paradigmatic example from Oppen’s corpus, materiality makes things potentially other to the ongoing flow of humanity, as well as to human ideologies that perpetuate wartime atrocities and capitalist processes. There we read of things like “The great stone / Above the river” (*NCP* 165) and “a brick / In a brick wall” (*NCP* 175). Both forms of stone are instances of being’s actuality within humanity’s made environment. Although they are cut, worked, and placed within built structures, they are also potential sites for “the pure joy / Of the mineral fact” which is “impenetrable // As the world, if it is matter, / Is impenetrable” (*NCP* 164). In being impenetrable they are other—not separate, but nonetheless other—to the “world of stoops” and “satirical wit” which “flows / Thru the city” as part of the temporal flow of its human population (*NCP* 165, 164).

The materiality of material things becomes the ground of further significance. In a letter written in 1967, Oppen observes that there “are things for each of us around which meaning gathers”:

The mission is to hold them, to be able to keep them in his mind, to try again and again to find the word, the syntax, the cadence of unfolding [...]

³⁸ Nicholls makes this point very clearly and emphatically, noting how Oppen seems to have reduced Heidegger’s sense of being to the fact of material or substantial presence (*George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 80-81). For examples in Oppen’s poetry, see “Coastal Strip”, where Oppen writes of “the earth” and “*The sea that made us / islands*” (*NCP* 73); “Chartres”, where he writes of “the stones” of the great cathedral, which “Stand where the masons locked them” (*NCP* 77); and “The Mayan Ground”, in which we are told of tires that leave “a mark / On the earth, a ridge in the ground” (*NCP* 138).

A matter of being able to say what one is and where one is. And what matters. (*SL* 161)

The images of stone and soil matter to Oppen. Meaning “gathers” around them, precisely because they resist penetration by the intellect. As such, a crucial meaning that gathers around them is a refusal of meaning, an otherness to meaning’s demands. In the face of this, the poem’s “cadence of unfolding” first turns not toward expressing the meaning of those things but to “what one is and where one is”. The meaning of things is, first of all, the possibility of understanding oneself as being amongst other beings that are fundamentally other to oneself. If meaning’s gathering around things turns poetry toward something like one’s own being in the world (“what one is and where one is”) it also requires unfolding “what matters”. This recalls the ethical dimension to Oppen’s sense of being-there if we take “what matters” to be what is centrally important to an individual confronting their presence amongst meaningful things. At the same time, intentional or not, the pun on “matter” is suggestive. Appearing under the aegis of a form of disclosure, “matter” raises the possibility that the significance of “things” that gather “meaning”—the fact that they matter—lies somehow in the fact that they are “matter”.

Both the possibility of the disclosure of things and of their capacity to become sites for meaning are tied to the fact of their substance as the embodiment of actuality. In his later writings, Heidegger reformulates his conception of being such that those things that appear do so as a configuration of the fourfold of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals.³⁹ While Oppen does not seem to have read these essays until after the publication of *Poetry, Language, Thought* in translation in 1971, his description of those “things around which meaning gathers” is similar to Heidegger’s formulation, though simpler.⁴⁰ Material actuality grants things presence. That materiality makes it possible for meaning to adhere to the objects as elements within one’s world. At the same time,

³⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 148.

⁴⁰ Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 195. Indeed, it is worth reiterating that Oppen’s relation to Heidegger isn’t one of direct shaping influence. Rather, Oppen seems to have found in Heidegger a fellow spirit capable of illuminating his own attempts to think an originary experience with being in relation to poetic speech.

however, the “earth” of which they are made remains partly distinct from its worldly meaning. The earth is always a kind of abyss, always withdrawing from presence. The things matter because they are matter, but their materiality is also always in the state of resisting our acts of making them matter. Poetry’s unfolding of these things is thus a difficult task. What matters struggles against its materiality.

The difficulty of this task is echoed in Oppen’s use of the term “substantive”. In an interview with L. S. Dembo, Oppen states that he is “really concerned with the substantive, with the subject of the sentence, with what we are talking about, and not rushing over the subject-matter in order to make a comment about it”.⁴¹ The term “substantive” here is ambiguous. While Oppen goes on to clarify that he is talking about “the subject of the sentence”, it is not immediately clear whether he is using “substantive” to name the grammatical form or to name a quality defining a class of things in the world: substantivity. This ambiguity has an etymological basis. While “substantive” now primarily means “noun”, its origin in English was as an adjective with the sense of “having an independent existence”, and this is close to its current adjectival meaning: “having a firm basis in reality”.⁴² Interpreting “substantive” in line with an adjectival root suggests that Oppen means that he is concerned with the thing that has this firm basis in reality.⁴³ That thing may be a material particular, or it may be an abstraction, or any other thing that has its basis, in some way, “in reality”. In any case, the word refers to the subject matter itself. Oppen is concerned with the thing that the sentence is about. However, if “substantive” is being used as the name of a type of word, then it simply means “noun”, without necessarily implying that the word or its referent has its basis “in reality”.⁴⁴ From this perspective, Oppen’s use of “substantive” suggests not the subject matter of the sentence but the act of naming with a noun. Both of these interpretations are

⁴¹ Richard Swigg, ed., *Speaking with George Oppen: Interviews with the Poet and Mary Oppen, 1968-1987* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2012), 10.

⁴² “Substantive”, *New Oxford American Dictionary*, ed. Angus Stevenson and Christine A. Lindberg, 3 edn (Oxford University Press, 2010), <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195392883.001.0001/m en us 1295391>.

⁴³ “Substantive”, *New Oxford American Dictionary*.

⁴⁴ “Substantive”, *New Oxford American Dictionary*.

plausible. Oppen certainly prizes the actuality of his subject matter—note also, again, the buried recurrence of “matter” as a part of “subject-matter”—but he also prizes nomination over predication or judgement, the existence of things over the subordination of things to relations.

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

that it’s there, that it’s true, the whole implication of these nouns; that appearances represent reality, whether or not they misrepresent it: that this in which the thing takes place, this thing is here, and that these things do take place.⁴⁵

For Oppen, the substantive, the noun, testifies that “this thing is here”, and that “these things do take place”. They testify to that fact, however. They do not replace it. The substantive cries its faith in the substantive; the noun cries faith in reality and in the fact that “this thing is here”. The ambiguity noted above within the term “substantive” emerges also in Oppen’s idea of the poem. The conceptual movement for Oppen is from the grammatical to the ontological implications of “substantive”. Any number of things can be named, and many of those things may not be able to be substantiated as being substantive. Oppen’s drive, as he puts it, is to test the grammatical substantive (the noun) to see if one can find ontological substantivity within it:

I’m trying to describe how the test of images can be a test of whether one’s thought is valid, whether one can establish in a series of images, of experiences ... whether or not one will consider the concept of humanity

⁴⁵ Swigg, ed., *Speaking with George Oppen*, 11.

to be valid, something that is, or else have to regard it as simply being a word.⁴⁶

Oppen's concern "with the substantive, with the subject of the sentence, with what we are talking about, and not rushing over the subject-matter in order to make a comment about it"⁴⁷ is, in the end, a concern with making the poetic use of the noun a test of the nature of that which it names, such that something more substantive might emerge as a result.

This structure of seeking within the grammatical form for the being or experience that it testifies to brings Oppen's poetics of the substantive into close proximity with Heidegger's notions of formal indication and philosophical or poetic *Grundworte*.

Formal Indication and Grundworte

In his "Letter on 'Humanism'", Heidegger writes that thinking "lets itself be claimed by Being so that it can say the truth of Being".⁴⁸ The phenomenological subject does not take possession of being as a knowing agent, but is rather grasped, or taken up, by being's presencing. In expressing this idea, however, Heidegger finds that the language he must use risks leading him into a problematic metaphysical formulation. "Thinking", he writes "is '*l'engagement par l'Être pour l'Être* [engagement by Being for Being]'", but he notes also that "the possessive form '*de l' ...*' is supposed to express both subjective and objective genitives".⁴⁹ Heidegger then writes that "In this regard 'subject' and 'object' are inappropriate terms of metaphysics, which very early on in the form of Occidental 'logic' and 'grammar' seized control of the interpretation of language".⁵⁰ Heidegger finds that his attempt to represent the essential relation of

⁴⁶ Swigg, ed., *Speaking with George Oppen*, 11. For a fine discussion of Oppen's notion of humanity, see, also, Nicholls, "Of Being Ethical", 163-4.

⁴⁷ Swigg, ed., *Speaking with George Oppen*, 10.

⁴⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 218.

⁴⁹ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 218.

⁵⁰ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 218.

human being [*Dasein*] to being itself requires something other than the inherited grammatical structures that express and shape man's relationship to being. In order to approach thinking, therefore, Heidegger finds that he must to some extent misspeak, or at least qualify his utterances as provisional and inaccurate, as he attempts to think his way closer to thought itself.

The method of formal indication is Heidegger's initial response to this situation. As Daniel O. Dahlstrom explains, formal indication is

a revisable way of pointing to some phenomenon, fixing its preliminary sense and the corresponding manner of unpacking it, while at the same time deflecting any "uncritical lapse" into some specific conception that would foreclose pursuit of "a genuine sense" of the phenomenon.⁵¹

It therefore opens up a provisional space within a term such that it self-critically refuses to fix its object in place. In the section of *Being and Time* dedicated to thinking towards the possibility of *Dasein*'s "being-a-whole" and "being-towards-death", for instance, Heidegger finds that certain "substructures" of Being "thrust themselves to the fore unnoticed". "Within the framework of this investigation", writes Dahlstrom,

our ontological characterization of the end and totality can only be provisional. To perform this task adequately, we must [...] set forth the *formal* structure of end in general and totality in general[.]⁵²

The drive is toward a means of thinking and speaking that does not "ossify"⁵³ its object but rather, as Burch puts it, "accentuates life's own mode of self-

⁵¹ Daniel O. Dahlstrom, "Heidegger's Method: Philosophical Concepts as Formal Indications", *The Review of Metaphysics* 47.4 (1994): 775-95 (780).

⁵² Dahlstrom, "Heidegger's Method", 780.

⁵³ R. Matthew Shockey, "What's Formal About Formal Indication? Heidegger's Method in *Sein Und Zeit*", *Inquiry* 53.6 (2010): 525-39 (528).

awareness in order to articulate the meaning structures that make everyday experience possible".⁵⁴

This is possible partly because *Dasein* is its own object of enquiry.⁵⁵ It is in the nature of *Dasein* to be that being amongst all others that asks the question of the meaning of being. Heidegger thus founds his investigation in *Being and Time* as an investigation into that being capable of asking of itself its own status as a being.⁵⁶ Therefore, if one cannot get beyond one's already-fallen status as investigator, one can nonetheless reflect upon the fact that one is able to ask the question "what is it to be?" or "what am I?" A formal indicator for Heidegger is thus like a (nominal) substantive, indicating something within experience that is fully accessible only to one who has already had experience of the same. The essence of the object of enquiry is not to be found in the substantive (the noun) itself. The forms named by formal indicators are common to "any" enquirer and thus abstract, but formal indicators are also meant to indicate, as Griffiths puts it, "something in the nature of existence".⁵⁷ They are capable only of directing the reader or listener towards a particular type of encounter, or aspect of an encounter, that cannot be unproblematically conveyed.

As Heidegger's thinking developed, however, he came to argue that thinking always apprehended being, and was taken up by it, from the ground of the *logos* that shapes being's appearing to *Dasein*. "Language is the house of being", as Heidegger puts it in the "Letter on Humanism", because it structures both how thinking works towards being or is taken up by it, and the means by which language makes being present to *Dasein*, as it does in works of art or philosophy. This meant that the loci of formal indication, the terms that pointed toward a phenomenological experience like place-holders, became increasingly important

⁵⁴ Matthew I. Burch, "The Existential Sources of Phenomenology: Heidegger on Formal Indication", *European Journal of Philosophy* 21.2 (2013): 258-78 (264-5).

⁵⁵ At the beginning of *Being and Time*, for example, Heidegger makes his case that the "Inquiry" into being, "as a kind of seeking, must be guided beforehand by what is sought. So the meaning of Being must already be available to us in some way" (25).

⁵⁶ Shockey, "What's Formal About Formal Indication?", 528-9.

⁵⁷ Dominic Griffiths, "Looking into the Heart of Light: Considering the Poetic Event in the Work of T. S. Eliot and Martin Heidegger", *Philosophy and Literature* 38.2 (2014): 350-67.

in themselves as objects where etymological and interpretive work might look for insights into thinking the meaning of being.

Heidegger's *Grundworte* [fundamental words] are thus very similar to his formal indicators, in that they provide a path for thinking towards more fundamental aspects of being. Unlike the formal indicator, however, *Grundworte* emphasise the possibility that an experience of being might be sought within an interpretive experience of the written sign. This makes the sort of thinking bound up in words paramount, as Miles Groth lays out:

Just as when we listen to a composer's music we are provided with access to the composer's thought, when we read or listen to a thinker's (or poet's) words, we have in them the means of approach to his way of thinking, even if it is our own way of thinking we are attempting to penetrate.⁵⁸

Because, as Groth adds, "thinking leaves traces [...] of itself in written and spoken words [*Worte*]", words provide the possibility of following them back towards the thinking they reflect.⁵⁹ Some words are more fundamental than others, however, and *Grundworte* are those that provide a lynchpin of insight into the essence of the historical thinking present in another's language-use. Heidegger suggests that authentic entry into another's thinking involves finding and responding to these fundamental words, and that this entry provides a basis for translation and interpretation. As such, Groth writes,

Much of Heidegger's work returns thoughtfully to the sources of Western philosophy in the pre-Socratics, in order to recover in their fundamental words an original experience of thinking. He attempts this by way of radical translations of those words into German and, in the process, effects a fresh experience of the German language as well.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Miles Groth, *Translating Heidegger* (New York: Humanity Books, 2004), 149.

⁵⁹ Groth, *Translating Heidegger*, 20.

⁶⁰ Groth, *Translating Heidegger*, 19.

Not only do these fundamental words offer access to the thinking of another, but the translation of fundamental words from another language into his own reveals, for Heidegger, something of the historic thinking of the German people and, thus, the historical thinking of being of which it is capable.

Grundworte are found terms, uncovered from another's thinking or from within one's own language, and one might seek to find the originary experience present but obscured within them. Groth explains that *Grundworte*, rather than being provisional and contentless,

may be compared to a seed, the hard surface of which protects its dormant content but at the same time makes it difficult for an outside force to penetrate its core, in this case, the way of thinking of which the word bears traces. Because of their sturdy husks, fundamental words are vessels of thinking, which they protect.⁶¹

Following this trace of a dormant originary content through the *Grundwort* is a focus of much of Heidegger's thinking, and lies behind his idiosyncratic obsessions with etymological roots. *Grundworte* promise the possibility of an originary experience with thinking in a manner potentially capable of circumventing the historical forgetting of the meaning of being, rather than antagonistic to it. What *Grundworte* offer, in other words, is the possibility of an originary experience, through language rather than in spite of it. In this, *Grundworte* are also not provisional. Rather they are a *Grund* in themselves inseparable from the *Grund* which being itself provides. It is partly the potential estrangement of the *Grund* of language from the *Grund* of being that will characterize, in "What are Poets For?", the destitution Heidegger diagnoses in his own age, an *Ab-grund* or abyss of meaning.

In turning back to Oppen's poetry, I want now to argue that he combines the logic of the formal indicator with the logic of the *Grundworte*, at least in his use of and statements about the noun.

⁶¹ Groth, *Translating Heidegger*, 190, n. 10.

Crying Faith

Nouns are important for Oppen because they seem uniquely able to indicate the reality of the thing named while maintaining their distance from it. Oppen's overall method is to approach the noun not as a signifier for the thing itself in all of its phenomenological richness, but rather for the much starker formal relation that binds the fact of being to the capacity for phenomenological encounter, and which might bring one towards that "intuition of existence" that apprehends a being's "is-ness".

This is seen, for example, in a section from "A Language of New York" that recurs in "Of Being Numerous":

There can be a brick
 In a brick wall
 The eye picks
 So quiet of a Sunday.
 Here is the brick, it was waiting
 Here when you were born,
 Mary-Anne. (*NCP* 117-18, 174)

This section of the two poems stages an opposition, almost line-by-line, between the substantive object and the perceiving mind. The first two lines assert the brick as a possibility, as though the fact that "There can be a brick" owes itself to that moment in which being gives itself over to world, and thus to phenomenological presence. The poem does not ask why there can be a brick in a brick wall, but only notes that such things are possible. The brick is also both individual and part of a greater multiplicity. As "a brick / In a brick wall" the brick appears as both a substantive entity in itself and a constituent substance making up a larger entity, the wall. To say that "There can be a brick / In a brick wall" is therefore not only to posit the possibility of a being's appearing, but also the way in which beings appear in dialectical relation to larger unities. In doing this, Oppen repeats the motion that takes place in his use of the term "substantive". When the word "brick" first appears it is as a noun naming a discrete object. When it occurs as part of "brick wall", however, it is as an adjective, describing the sort of material from which the wall is made. Not only is the brick brought into relation to a larger multiplicity, therefore, but also its

syntactical significance moves from its grammatical to its ontological aspects as the poem brings “brick” into more material presence. If these lines summon the possibility of a brick into the poem, however, the brick has a tenuous first appearance. Little else is summoned initially, and so the possibility of the brick arises as a possibility yet to resolve into the definite “the brick” of the second stanza. The brick’s initial presence is hypothetical, given by the indefinite article.

The third line in the opening stanza, however, inverts the formulation. Suddenly the potential bound up in the word “can” belongs not to the brick itself, but to the act of perception. There can be a brick that the eye picks, and it is no longer the brick’s existence that is in question but the phenomenological act itself, which may or may not pick out a brick for scrutiny on a quiet Sunday. A form of boredom turns the mind, idly, towards substantive being, to a brick that would have remained just part of a wall if not for a moment in which its uncanny actuality within the larger structure was noticed. If the brick is an object of perception, however, the next two lines re-assert the brick against the eye’s domination. “Here is the brick”: the brick is no longer a possibility but a fact named using the definite article, and if it is found and picked out for attention it is nonetheless something that exists, and its existence precedes the eye that selects it: “it was waiting / Here when you were born”. Suddenly the eye’s picking out the brick, one thing amidst a wall of existents, does not confer reality on the brick, but simply encounters that reality. This progression stages two key processes of Oppen’s poetics of being. The first is the reassertion of substantivity within the substantive. The word “brick” starts as a noun, becomes an adjective describing and emphasising substance, and then is re-deployed as a noun in “Here is the brick”. In “Here is the brick” not only does the noun “brick” now recall its adjectival meaning within its naming gesture, but the indexical “Here” locates it even more firmly within the world. The second process is Oppen’s location of the intuition of existence prior to language. The ontological possibility of the brick’s existence precedes the fact of its ontic existence. This precedes the speaker’s encounter with that brick, which itself precedes his or her indication of it to another: “Mary-Anne”.

In such moments, Oppen calls upon nouns to carry the sort of weight at which astonishment might be an appropriate response. Here the word “brick” acts as a

constant, the substantive against which occurs a movement from the possibility of perception, through actual perception, to the individuation and communication of experience. In repeatedly encountering the word “brick” we find that the word seems both to testify to the existence of its signified and, at the same time, to draw attention to its capacity to so testify. In an interview with Kevin Power from 1975 Oppen says that

what I’m doing is pointing. That’s a Heideggerian gesture. [...] Again I wasn’t arguing epistemology. [...] it’s the Heideggerian gesture, the “pointing” to say it’s there. “It’s there” is not meant to be Dr Johnson kicking the stone and saying, “By God, sir, that.”⁶²

This “pointing” is not reducible to the use of nouns simply as signifiers, nor is it an epistemological gesture towards self-evidence. It is a matter rather of making signification an ontological rather than solely a linguistic gesture, one that simultaneously recognises and seeks to transcend the cut between signifier and signified. Oppen adds that such a pointing might be something that can only happen in poetry, which uses line-breaks and other formal elements in order to say that “It’s there”. Poetry is, in this formulation, an explicitly indicative gesture for Oppen, one that holds itself distinct from that which is indicated while nonetheless responding to the existence, the “It’s there”, of its object. The formal indication of the noun is here its “pointing” towards existence.

There are differences between Oppen’s and Heidegger’s formal indications, however. The formal indication taking place within Oppen’s poem is not located in the naming of a specific formal relation, even provisionally, but embodied in the grammatical function of the noun itself as a kind of pointer. While Heidegger names forms like “the End” and “Totality”, their presence is nominal rather than grammatical. In his search for a means of representing the intuition of existence as a primary ontological experience, however, Oppen regularly seeks to indicate the same formal relation (pre-discursive and primary is-ness) with multiple different, though related, substantives. The capacity of the noun to point towards is-ness is, as a result, often sought within nouns that name particularly substantive material objects. Actuality is indicated in the form of noun-ness as

⁶² Swigg, ed., *Speaking with George Oppen*, 100.

such, which is brought into proximity with the particular substantivity characteristic of bricks and other stony objects. “Brick” thus acts like a *Grundwort* as well as a formal indicator. It allows Oppen both to seek to represent “isness” in the form of being native to the noun, and to seek a form of the intuition of the experience of the ontologically substantive within the grammatical substantive. This is emphasized above by the move from the nominal to the adjectival form of that substantive (“brick”).

In the poem “Psalm”, from *This In Which*, Oppen turns specifically towards the complex nature of his substantives. The poem opens with a quote from Thomas Aquinas, “*Veritas Sequitur...*”, “truth follows”, part of the phrase “*Veritas Sequitur esse*”, “truth follows [the] existence [of things]”.⁶³ This might act as a motto for Oppen’s ontology in general, though it applies especially well to the role that Heidegger’s thinking played in his poetics. Existence (or being) is primary, and only afterwards do we find ourselves able to *speak* in terms of “what-is”, or able to write poetry in which things are participants. After the quote, “Psalm” proceeds with a sort of ontological pastoral:

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

The truth of being, for Oppen in the 1960s, is that things *are*. In some ways, the deer are like the bricks in the brick wall. They can be named by poetry, and Oppen is moved, beyond naming, to enthusiastically assert their existence: “That they are there!” The speaker’s astonishment at, and reverence for, the presence of the deer persists through the next stanzas:

Their eyes
Effortless, the soft lips
Nuzzle and the alien small teeth
Tear at the grass
The roots of it

⁶³ Nicholls notes that Oppen most likely came across Aquinas’s phrase in Maritain’s *Existence and the Existent* (Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, 73).

Dangle from their mouths
 Scattering earth in the strange woods.
 They who are there. (*NCP* 99)

The end of the third stanza echoes the earlier exclamation. Coming after two stanzas of description, this echo works against any tendency to ignore the deceptively quotidian fact of existence. At the same time, it reminds us of the gap between that “intuition of existence” and the attempt to fit it into words. It reminds us, that is, that what we read is a reaction, an exuberant exclamation addressing a thing other to itself. In this way, Oppen again uses nouns as both formal indicators of, and *Grundworte* suggesting an approach towards, the “is-ness” of the substantive. Enjambed lines isolate nouns from adjectives and verbs. The nouns hang for a moment at the line ends, presences that are only subsequently rendered “effortless” or shown to “nuzzle” or to “tear”. Much of the substantivity of the nouns relies on the way that they hang upon prepositions that posit the reality in which they participate. For instance, we begin “Psalm” with “In” (“In the small beauty”) and “of” (“of the forest”) (*NCP* 99).⁶⁴ In the third line, the exclamation of the speaker’s awe begins similarly with “That” (“That they are there!”). “That” functions here much like the prepositions; it implies the larger phrase: “*the fact* that they are there”. “That they are there” operates as the subject of an assertion of fact. Following Naylor’s lead, we may say that these constructions indicate the facticity of being. “In”, “That”, and especially “of” all condition the existence of Oppen’s “things”. Together with the pronouns “they” and “their”, these prepositions often combine the precedence of being over particular beings with the indexicality and multiplicity that Oppen finds in the grammar of substantive being (“That they are there”, “they who are there”). Prepositionality provides the ground on which the nouns emerge as particularly substantive, but substantive specifically *as* nouns.

The apprehension of the fact of being embodied in the deer and grass is then explicitly met by a turn to the role of nouns in mediating and re-presenting the speaker’s implied encounter. If the possibility of the apprehension of substantivity is registered in language by prepositionality (as Naylor argues), the deer’s presence in the poem is transformed also. The poem shifts from treating

⁶⁴ For an excellent discussion of this, see Naylor’s “The Preposition ‘Of’”.

the deer as objects of attention (something that the poem is “pointing” towards) towards self-reflexively drawing attention to

The small nouns

Crying faith

In this in which the wild deer

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

They are “small nouns”, and these small nouns cry “faith”, in the continuous present, in a “this in which” that is at once the world of the deer and the poem itself. These nouns are now used to self-consciously name a referential space that is both tied to the fact of “existence” as such—at which the poet can express his astonishment—and at the same time the identification of that space with the words that are referring to it. This self-reflexive “pointing”—both indication beyond and introspective self-examination—brings the noun, and indeed the poem itself, into proximity with Heidegger’s concepts of the formal indicator and the *Grundwort*. In wanting it to indicate a fundamental is-ness, Oppen wants the noun to act partly like a formal indicator for an experience of existence occurring outside of the current experience of language. However, in testing the grammatical substantive for the experience of ontological substantivity that it may prove, the nouns are also like *Grundworte*. The poem takes the substantive as a site where one might look for an experience of substantivity somehow concealed within the grammatical substantive’s material body.

The duality of Oppen’s understanding of language as both capable of registering actuality and estranged from actuality thus returns, in this framing, as a newly-formulated double-binding. On the one hand, the logic of formal indication would take Oppen’s nouns in the direction of mediation and referential mimesis. On the other, treating Oppen’s nouns as *Grundworte* would allow them to be the sites, themselves, where one might search for traces of an originary experience of substantivity.

Oppen himself raises this duality in an interview with Charles Tomlinson in 1973. There he speaks of

Two sincerities. One is the poem which is a thing. The other sincerity is to the things of the world, the other things of the world. Because the words are objects, the poem is an object, but the poem is ineluctably transparent. Also it refers to those things.⁶⁵

The poem is transparent, showing the things of the world, and thus implicitly it allows one to engage with its language as a means of entry to its pre-discursive content. In this the poem itself resembles a *Grundwort*, the form poetry takes in some of Heidegger's later essays, for its bodily container of words and form is taken as the guardian of an essential content buried within, one that can be brought out by sufficient and interpretive attention.⁶⁶ At the same time the poem is an object, and its words "refer" to things in the world. The poem is thus like a formal indicator that recognises its own actuality and insufficiency as a way of testifying to the actuality and self-sufficiency of an object of enquiry that lies outside rather than within itself. Oppen reiterates this formulation when he writes elsewhere that the "poem's own reality as thing, reflects the reality of all it speaks of".⁶⁷ This dual formulation of the poem as both like a *Grundwort* and like a formal indicator lies at the heart of Oppen's poetics.

This resemblance to two closely related Heideggerian concepts nonetheless also reveals Oppen's divergence from Heidegger's philosophical commitments. Oppen's many statements in which he carefully and deliberately formulates this complex sense of both the noun and the poem suggest that this is not an accidental or incidental aspect of his poetics. Rather, his desire to respect the otherness of material things to language and, simultaneously, to shape the poem as "a test of [the] truth" of its materials is central to his post-Mexico thinking. This otherness of language to the experience of being runs contrary to Heidegger's philosophy, which increasingly saw poetic language in particular as a crucial ground for the experience of being itself. As such, if Oppen's poetry finds kinship with Heidegger's philosophy in the role that language plays in

⁶⁵ Swigg, ed., *Speaking with George Oppen*, 59.

⁶⁶ See, for instance, Heidegger's discussion of the Greek *physis* in "The Origin of the Work of Art", and of "Nature" in "What are Poets For?", in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 41, 99-100.

⁶⁷ George Oppen Papers, MSS 16, box 14, file 1, Mandeville Special Collections Library, The University of California, San Diego.

one's thinking towards an originary experience, the two break off in their conception of that experience itself. Oppen persisted in reformulating a Heideggerian ontology as essentially mineral and in conceiving of ontological experiences as beyond language. This move away from Heidegger was nonetheless generative of the sorts of fascinating obscurity characteristic of Oppen's work from this period. The things that his poems name are not only regularly apprehended from within moments of uncanny intuition of existence. They are also encountered in poetic deployments where the otherness of the thing—and the openness of that otherness to phenomenological encounter—is woven into the use of the noun itself as both an indicator of, and a ground for, even the capacity to speak.