Notes on Speculative Poetics
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In his 1982 essay “Towards an Open Universe,” Robert Duncan distinguishes between two potential orientations of the consciousness toward the world: “The order man may contrive or impose upon the things about him or upon his own language is trivial beside the natural order he may discover in them” (81). This distinction, between order imposed and order discovered, corresponds to another made nearly 150 years earlier by Coleridge, in terms of mechanic and organic form: “The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a predetermined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material . . . The organic form, on the other hand, is innate, it shapes as it develops itself from within” (471). In the mechanic model, form is a precondition, a predetermined and active force shaping the poem’s inert materials. In the organic model, Coleridge theorizes a realization of the poem’s materials through the perfection of its outward form; this art is the union of nature with the exclusively human—or, the object and the mind, the external and the internal.

In 1913’s “A Few Don’ts from an Imagiste,” Ezra Pound famously defines the Image as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time . . . It is the presentation of such a ‘complex’ instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits.” His seminal Imagist poem, “In a Station of the Metro,” appears alongside the manifesto; having been edited down to fourteen words from thirty lines, the brief poem exemplifies the economy of language and precision of imagery Pound seeks to impart from Eastern literature, as he understands it, to American verse. In the years immediately following, Pound would acquire and edit Ernest Fenollosa’s The Chinese Written Character As a Medium for Poetry. For Pound, Imagism is reinforced by Fenollosa’s theory of the Chinese written character as a kind of primitive pictorialism. He believes that the Image is implied in Fenollosa’s Ideogram and would develop it as the basic structure for the Cantos.

Though the most readily identifiable work of William Carlos Williams may be an inheritor of Imagism’s precision in language and direct treatment of the thing, it fundamentally rejects the metaphoric, allusive, and mythic poetics of his contemporaries, as well as the overt subjectivism (Eliot’s and Pound’s increasingly rhetorical religiosity and politics, for example) they inevitably engender; these undercut the immediacy and accuracy of contact to which he aspires. In this way, Williams’ work in Spring and All and Descent of Winter is transitional, more “objectively correlative” than Eliot’s: sets of objects, situations, chains of events “which present like a miniature drama the emotions, ideas, the judgments of a poet without comment.”
Williams is concerned with what the poem is, not says. The poems in *Spring and All* do not simply describe the physical landscape—they monitor the act of perception, the apprehending of a landscape by an intelligence. We follow this intelligence, along the various phenomena it encounters, into an entrance and union with the physical environment. Severe enjambment insists on each line as a discrete unit structured by the ongoing process of sensory reception, not the syntax of the sentence. The resulting fragments remake both the sentence and scene uniquely, highlighting their separate yet interrelated components.

Enlisted to these dynamics of receptivity, Williams’ image is not “liberated from time limits and space limits,” but is rather beholden to the temporal and spatial contingencies of America, locale of his poetic sensibilities. In its effort to revitalize contact with the earth, the poem resists being in terms of ideas in favor of the thing itself.

It is in this “determination to find the image, the thing encountered, the thing seen each day whose meaning has become the meaning and the color of our lives” that George Oppen discerns the beginning of modern American poetry. In his essay “The Mind’s Own Place,” he distinguishes between the poem that “shows confidence in itself and in its materials, and on the other hand a performance, a speech by the poet that is the distinction between poetry and histrionics.” For Oppen as well as Williams, Pound’s Image, conformed to the subjective ego, is excessively mediated, a construction of the poet and not the world.

Instead the Objectivists seek, per Louis Zukofsky’s 1918 polemic “Sincerity and Objectification,” “writing which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist” (194). Note here Zukofsky’s emphasis on the detail over the mirage, the preposition “with” not “of,” the rigor of the Objectivist vision—not emotional or reflective candor, but just use of the materials at hand, in terms of immediacy of moment and form. Rejecting any conception of the poet as a consciousness coterminous with the world, the poem is determined by occurrence, not ego. The image encountered, not found.

Hallmarks of Objectivist style: inversions, indeterminate pronouns, emphasis on “minor” parts of speech, all of which subvert anticipated speech and create an unresolved, semi-obscure atmosphere that places the poet among things as they are, not at a remove. In doing so, the impersonality proscribed by Eliot in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is fulfilled and extended: “The poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways . . . The emotion of art is impersonal.”

Oppen has no personality or persona to express because any “attitude” toward an object (therefore, reality), any willed performance, lacks rigor. His ongoing perception of the
materials at hand, as a process, tests the integrity of poetic structures; the poetry he sees as characterized by an agonistic relation between subject and object—by an aesthetic egotism necessarily forged in opposition to some thing—is no longer viable.

As he states in an interview with L.S. Dembo, “Pound's ego system, Pound's organization of the world around a character, a kind of masculine energy, is extremely foreign to me” (170).

The aleatory, as Oppen’s method, and the series, as his sometime form, is an orientation toward occurrence, toward ongoing process and means. If one, wary of the egotistic subjectivity that seems complicit in the modern world’s violence, disestablishes “meaning” and asserts that it does not exist as substance—that it is as unstable an entity as the process of arriving at meaning—then one must necessarily emphasize process in its own right. This disposition, in which the ego is subordinate to errant intuition, is fundamentally pre-Socratic; it privileges the question over the answer, rejecting Aristotelian determination of the beginning by the end.

In Oppen’s serial works, the beginning is already now, and the consciousness is immediately and perpetually engaged. It does not suspend itself until it arrives at what it’s waiting for. The reader must enter the work line by line and trust that its unity is open, or speculative.

This development in American poetry, if we take it to begin with Spring and All and evolve in Oppen’s Discrete Series, is contemporaneous with Martin Heidegger’s development of existential phenomenology as a critique of modern subjectivity—a poetry utterly attuned to Heidegger’s distinction between calculative and meditative thinking. The former, based in the will, sees the world as a resource to be manipulated and exploited, while the latter is imbued with a Freedom: “Freedom for what is opened up in an open region lets beings be the beings they are. Freedom now reveals itself as letting beings be” (125). Heidegger refers to this process as the Greek aletheia, or unconcealment.

As a writer with an enduring interest in Heidegger, this is the explicit intention of Oppen’s early work: “I was in these books speaking of Being: I had thought I could arrive at the concept of Being from an account of experience as it presents itself in its own terms” (Interview 169).

As Peter Nichols notes, the line connecting Imagism’s subject/object dualism and Objectivism’s fundamental revision of traditional modes of being is one of adjacency rather than descent. Against the idea of a distanced subject intent on manipulating the objects before it, Heidegger and Oppen posit “an elision of thinking with being” (Nichols 98). They deal not in representation, symbols, or metaphors, with “letting something take up a position opposite
to us, as an object,” but with a revealing of the world in which things come into their own rather than present themselves as fodder for human use. In this way, the Objectivist poem is not so much an act of self-expression as a medium for receptivity. Oppen’s objectification of the poem itself entails not just the elimination of the subject ego, but a redefinition of thinking as an errant, speculative process in search of disclosure, with no determining object as its end.

The poetic series, defined by its relations, expresses this provisional sense of being. It takes its shape from the potentially infinite ways in which items combine and recombine, undetermined by mechanical, external organization, or even a beginning or an end. These recombinations acknowledge the world’s temporal and spatial contingencies—the mind is not focused on a few significant features, but is rather presented continually with its full texture.

As such, Oppen can only be a practitioner of free verse. His notion of verse is a judicious deployment of language, determined not by the poet himself but by things themselves. Objectivist free verse profoundly violates a western tradition in which the poet had to subordinate insight to meter; here, the poet’s consciousness, his attunement to materials, creates the line, and that lineation startles the mind into recognition.

Oppen’s series of unnumbered fragments, in their absolute tendency towards words as material, as objects, must be trusted for their overall integrity; the kinetic force that forms their outward arc is derived from points of unity, the metonymic correspondences within them. His process is seriality and fragmentation as a corrective to “meaning” that cannot be verified.

WORKS CITED


