George Oppen's Now: Lyric Immediacy in "Psalm"

di Christopher Spaide

If you know anything about the American poet George Oppen (1908–1983), you probably know two things: he wrote, and for almost as many years, he wrote nothing. Oppen the poet started early, matured rapidly. By his mid-twenties, he had established himself as the youngest of a cohort of second-generation modernists known as the Objectivists—so named, under duress, by Louis Zukofsky, who guest-edited the February 1931 issue of *Poetry* that first assembled the poets in print. With the publication of his first book, the assured if enigmatic *Discrete Series* (1934), Oppen was handpicked, apparently, to inherit the modernist toolbox from the previous generation. "I salute a serious craftsman," wrote Ezra Pound in a preface both brief and, somehow, extremely digressive; William Carlos Williams, reviewing the book, located Oppen's poetry "on the bedrock of a craftsmanlike economy of means."[1] Instead, in 1935, with his wife and collaborator in all things, Mary—their lifelong relationship being the *third* thing everyone knows about this poet—Oppen took a sharp leftist turn, setting art aside and joining the Communist Party. He spent the decade organizing rent strikes and eviction protests in Brooklyn, shepherding a milk strike upstate, working as an industrial patternmaker and machinist, and not writing poetry. Drafted at 34, he served in World War II, almost dying from shellfire that killed his fellow infantrymen. In 1950, after being hounded by the FBI for their Communist affiliations, the Oppens fled to Mexico, where George supported Mary and their daughter Linda by working as a carpenter and furniture-maker—a far handier craftsman than Pound and Williams ever knew.

Coincidentally or not, in 1958, the first year the Oppens could revisit a marginally more welcoming United States, George returned to poetry. Once again, after a quarter-century hiatus, his craft was writing, and for Oppen that meant laborious and genuinely experimental *rewriting*. "I try one and another word and another word, reverse the sequence, alter the line-endings, a hundred two hundred rewritings, revisions—This is called prosody: how to write a poem. Or rather, how to write *that* poem," he explained in a posthumously printed "Statement on Poetics."[2] Between 1962—which saw his second book, twenty-eight years after his first—and his final book *Primitive* (1978), he published abundantly, winning the Pulitzer Prize for *Of Being Numerous* (1968). Throughout this extended second act, he kept makeshift journals known today as his "daybooks," in which he collected quotations, reminiscences, on-the-fly musings on literature and politics, and fragments in verse, alongside shopping lists, addresses, and other evidence of everyday life. Drafts were pasted directly over earlier drafts, the pages thickened with second thoughts; daybooks were held together with staples, pipe cleaners, even a single nail hammered into a block of wood. Before his death from complications of Alzheimer's disease, he had papered his desk and study walls with twenty-six

scrawled notes. Archivists titled them "The Last Words of George Oppen," and you can see why, even if their exact dates of composition are unclear. Any number of them sound like homemade epitaphs, on the life or the work: "Being with Mary: it has / been almost too wonderful / it is hard to believe"; "These ordinary words / come to mean / everything // In a way I live on words, forget words."[3]

Rereading Oppen for this issue, I was dismayed to discover that none of the quick, easy clichés we've developed for reassessing modern poets seemed to apply. In retrospect, poetic achievements tend to recede into the distance, shrinking from careers to single books, books to crucial poems, poems to quotable lines, then a few phrases, a word or two, a blip dropping off the horizon—not Oppen's. Book by book, the work seemed neither ahead of its time nor behind it, neither overvalued nor direly underestimated. Nor was it obvious how his many years with the Communist Party affected the two decades of austere, ambivalent poetry that followed—a question that riddles his readers to this day. Instead, I was overcome by how many of his poems were happening *now*, anew, with a gripping immediacy the poems brought freshly into being every time I reread them. That miraculous conjuring of a present moment, a sense of now-ness, is an effect that his critics are only recently learning how to describe. Peter Nicholls, one of the most sensitive, writes that the poems "seek to make their own spatio-temporal occasion equivalent to the disclosure of this world of being."[4] Each poem, Nicholls suggests, is an instance of what Oppen, in "The Occurrences," calls "the creating / *Now*" (144).[5]

In the twenty-first century's extensive debates over lyric poetry—over lyric's characteristics and its limits, its transhistorical continuities and its successive re-fashionings—few modernists have been better served than Oppen.[6] But with that phrase "the creating / *Now*," Oppen sounds less like a midcentury poet in need of a critic than like a lyric theorist *avant la lettre*, entranced by the genre's unique relation to time. "The fundamental characteristic of lyric," as Jonathan Culler identifies it in his *Theory of the Lyric* (2015), "is not the description and interpretation of a past event but the iterative and iterable performance of an event in the lyric present, in the special 'now,' of lyric articulation." Culler finds examples of lyric's "here-and-now of enunciation," the poem "presenting itself as an event in time that repeats," throughout the Western lyric tradition and as early as Sappho's Ode to Aphrodite.[7] James Longenbach goes a step further—as he explains in *The Lyric Now* (2020) and publicizes with its title, he holds a manufactured presentness to be as fundamental to lyric as the speaker or so-called lyric "I": "*the lyric now*: whether written in 1920 or 2020, a poem creates the moment as we enter it. The poem is happening now."[8]

What Oppen contributes to a millennia-old lyric tradition is his peculiar flavor of *now*, wedding an undeniable sense of immediacy to a thoroughly weighed complexity. Paradoxically, Oppen's *now* can seem both instantaneous and out of time, at once like a first glance and like a gaze for all eternity. His *now* resembles, if anything, the palimpsests he glued into his daybooks: adhesive yet hardened, densely layered with revisions and reconsiderations, extending perpendicularly from the page, all on a canvas portable enough to slip into a suitcase. On the surface, his *now* may be the *now* of moment-by-moment observation, but right under lies the *now* of prolonged meditation, the *now* of the day's politics, the *now* of the historical epoch. When, in the first poem of *Discrete Series*, one Maude Blessingbourne looks out the window "'to see / what was really going on,'" Oppen depicts local weather, "rain falling, in the distance / more slowly," and, behind it, a stage set for world-historical changes: "the world, weather-swept, with which / one shares the century" (5). (There's a literary-historical *now* here, too; Blessingbourne and the quoted phrase come from a 1902 short story by Henry James—a proto-modernist text on which Oppen pastes his emendations.)

In both acts of his poetic career, Oppen consistently favors the present tense, the mainstay not only of lyric but of riveting oral storytelling, where we find, in his words, "the past raised into the present, the past *present* in the present."[9] And it is the tense for the impersonal assertions and equations of philosophical discourse, one source for his distinctively flattened sentence-sounds: "There are things / We live among 'and to see them / Is to know ourselves'" (163).[10] (So opens *Of Being Numerous*. What first line could be humbler, less controvertible, than "There are things"?) Magnetizing our attention to this unassuming word, that overlooked phrase, he heightens immediacy even further with his unmistakable free-verse line—deliberate, undecorated, typically short, often enticingly *too* short. Never metrical, his lines are

instead metered out, emitted at unpredictable intervals, obliging readers to cling to every line-ending. Maximizing immediacy is not Oppen's only aim, of course. There is also the Objectivist aim, as he articulated it in a 1969 interview: "the objectification of the poem, the making an object of the poem."[11] In his poem "From Disaster," he encapsulates these competing aims in a richly oxymoronic phrase, "lyric valuables" (50). To be as melodic, as stirringly felt, as a lyric, yet as durable and widely appreciated as a family's or culture's valuables: those are the polar objectives Oppen sought to achieve in poem after poem.

One word whose semantic trajectory has closely mirrored lyric's is *psalm*. Both genres trace their names to Greek words related to instrumental song: lyric from *lyra*, lyre; psalm from *psalmos*, a plucking of harp-strings. Over the centuries, both words have broadened beyond religion, music, and literature, such that any act of praise could be a small "psalm," and everything from prescription drugs to SUVs can be advertised as "lyrical."[12] And yet both genres have proven transhistorical staying power. Contemporary poets convincingly write in both genres; the oldest lyrics and psalms endure today, works anyone can reactivate in the present, with every new recital. One of Oppen's best-loved poems—and a primer for his poetics of immediacy—is called, simply, perhaps deceptively, "Psalm." *Veritas sequitur…*, reads its epigraph, cutting short Aquinas's *Veritas sequitur esse rerum*, "Truth follows upon the existence of things." Why leave "the existence of things," a phrase weighty as reality itself, unsaid? Because Oppen would rather sing things into existence, portraying each in all its wondrous particularity. The faith of this secular "Psalm" is a faith in the sung, spoken, written, dependable word:

> In the small beauty of the forest
> The wild deer bedding down—
> That they are there!
>
> Their eyes
> Effortless, the soft lips
> Nuzzle and the alien small teeth
> Tear at the grass
>
> The roots of it
> Dangle from their mouths
> Scattering earth in the strange woods.
> They who are there.
>
> Their paths
> Nibbled thru the fields, the leaves that shade them
> Hang in the distances
> Of sun
>
> The small nouns
> Crying faith
> In this in which the wild deer
> Startle, and stare out. (99)

Few masterpieces can be paraphrased with two words, but with "Psalm," one could do worse than "Look, deer!" Conceivably, Oppen spoke just those words upon first spotting whichever deer inspired the poem. But—among other deficiencies—that snippet of speech has none of the "objectification" that Oppen and his peers labored over, nor the breathtaking immediacy of an accomplished lyric poem.

"Psalm" strives for both finish and immediacy in its very first sentence. After a scene-setting line that names an aesthetic response ("In the small beauty") and a natural habitat ("of the forest"), Oppen stares squarely at the deer, a subject without a predicate, with a line that counterbalances estrangement ("wild") and doting anthropomorphism ("bedding down"). Then, with only an em-dash as warning, comes an exclamation for "the existence of things," for simply being, right now: "That they are there!" This must be among the oddest exclamations in all of American poetry, and the most minimal. *That*, *they*, *are*, *there*: these are the eighth, twenty-sixth, second, and thirty-eighth most common words in English-language writing, according to the Oxford English Corpus; all four restrict themselves to the same six-letter palette: *a-e-h-r-t-y*.[13] Which English speaker doesn't use these workhorse words constantly—and who but Oppen would ever arrange them in just this order? "They are there" would be the plainest present-tense noticing, perfectly conceivable to say, though comprehensible only in context (who are "they"? where's "there"?). Adding "That" and an exclamation mark, Oppen elevates noticing into lyric cry, one whose high, vibrating tone hovers somewhere between bare recognition, awed disbelief, and giddy exaltation.

What sort of psalmist speaks this way? Typically for Oppen, "Psalm" has as its lyric subject not a well-defined "I" (that pronoun never appears) but a cinematic eye, from whose trustworthy movements we infer a mind's steady motions. His first two stanzas, as high-

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definition as nature-documentary close-ups, zoom in on the deer as they eat: deer → eyes → lips → teeth. The next two, taking in the deer's environment, pan from local terrain to the farthest cosmic "distances": unearthed roots → path-nibbled fields → shade-giving leaves → sunlit backdrop. If the atomic unit of Oppen's meaning-making is the reliable word, each one adding its incremental observation, then the complex molecules are his fragmentary free-verse lines, not one of which could be extracted as a full, freestanding clause. It would be easy to "fix" these lines, shuffling Oppen's words about, aligning sound and syntax. With apologies to Oppen, his second stanza could have read:

> Their eyes? Effortless
> The soft lips nuzzle
> And the alien small teeth tear at the grass

This perceptual checklist retains Oppen's Imagist juxtapositions of texture and gesture: soft lips and hard teeth, effortlessly gliding eyesight and strained grass-tearing. But it discards the well-timed hesitations of his enjambments, which recreate the split-second experience of searching for the aptest word for something and, just in time, discovering it: the only adjective for those eyes is [*!*] "Effortless," what lips do, gently, is [*!!*] "Nuzzle," while teeth forcibly [*!!!*] "Tear." And fled is that music Oppen orchestrates for his continual wonder: the line-ending spondees—"Théir éyes," "sóft líps," "smáll téeth"—that mimic a mind briefly tensing in concentration, and the stresses surprising him with each new line, in progressively shrinking words. *Éffortless*, *núzzle*, *téar*: three syllables, two, one.[14]

To resolve "Psalm"—both its argument and its music—Oppen calls attention to how parts of speech, no matter how "small," can unite in choral, reverential harmony. "The small nouns / Crying faith / In this"—where the deictic *this* could point to *this* natural scene, *this* moment monumentalized in words, *this* power of language, when properly ordered, to refer with precision. (From the daybooks: "We have a degree of faith in the substantives which seem to have a one to one relationship to things out there.")[15] "Psalm" lives by its words, its own "small nouns" chosen with such faultlessness that one has to conclude Oppen is in cahoots with the English language itself. In the neatly divided hemispheres of the poem's diction, words for everything abstract—*beauty*, *distances*, *faith*, even *nouns*—derive from Romance languages, while the simple names for every tangible or visible thing—*deer*, *teeth*, *grass*, *earth*, *sun*—are consonant-crammed mouthfuls of Anglo-Saxon roots. The modulation from lines 1 to 9, of the French-derived "forest" to the Germanic "woods," replicates in miniature the whole poem's descent from the abstract realm of "small beauty" to the grit and grounding of "earth."

Not that nouns are Oppen's only indispensable parts of speech. Adjectives alternate ambivalently, now flagging the scene's nonhuman foreignness (*wild*, *alien*, *strange*), now modestly appraising it (*effortless*, *soft*, approachably *small*). Tug anywhere on the poem's dense web of pronouns, adverbs, and prepositions, and the nouns shake accordingly, tensely interconnected. (From that syntactic tissue, of all places, Oppen drew the title phrase for the 1965 collection where "Psalm" appears, *This in Which*.) And what persistently renews the poem's immediacy—what shocks "Psalm" out of the generic realm of scripture, transforming minimalist scene into captivating event—are the verbs. For much of the poem, Oppen generates an illusion of timelessness, favoring present participles (*bedding down*, *scattering*, *crying*), stative, steady-state verbs (*are*, *dangle*, *hang*), and frequentative, perpetual-motion verbs, distinguished in English by the suffixes *-er* and *-le*. But in an astonishing last line of two alliterating verbs, that illusion sharply shatters. Oppen has said twice, in ritualistic iteration, that the deer "are there," in a vivid but unbounded present tense. His last line heaves the poem's entire weight onto a single instant, the lyric *now* of enunciation, as the deer abruptly "Startle, and stare out." Following a fleetfooted enjambment on "the wild deer" (a phrase from the second line, brought full circle to the second-to-last), "Startle" startles: the human observer's eye, heretofore unhindered in its drift down the poem, meets the deer's eyes. The moment arrests both human- and deerkind; "Startle" works both intransitively—the deer are startled—and transitively—the deer startle their observer. When "Startle" settles into its soundalike double, "stare out," looking looks at looking. Oppen finds a reciprocating gaze, a last-second reversal that stuns his "Psalm" into silence.

No poem, not even one this well-constructed, was built to be dismantled one word at a time. Still, reading "Psalm" microscopically reveals Oppen's numerous resources—generic, morphological, imagistic, formal,

rhythmic, etymological, syntactic—for making a lyric happen *now*, whether that's a *now* contemporary to the poem's composition, the unimaginable-to-Oppen *now* of our present, or the unimaginable-to-us *now* of the future.[16] If the poems' renewable immediacy accounts, in part, for his continued appeal to contemporary lyric poets like Louise Glück and Carl Phillips, then it also explains his longstanding significance for another loyal audience: readers and writers of the left who celebrate Oppen for his aesthetic and ethical scrupulousness. Those readers have had difficulties, understandably, in finding the imprint of his Communism on his poems, which are not always explicit about current events, often elliptical about politics, and generally too skeptical or downcast to set down any hopeful illustration of an ideal free society. But even in a poem as remote from social relations as "Psalm," we can see the thin but vibrant outline of Oppen the radical activist, who is always adamant in alerting us to our collective duty to the present, unpostponable moment. The poems at once manifest a compelling *now* and, line by line, probe its breadth and depth; they ask us, in turn, to see *now* for what it is, for all it is, and to respond immediately. "And we have become the present," he writes in "Leviathan," titled after Thomas Hobbes's 1651 treatise of political philosophy. The present, that poem concludes, could amount to our mutual tragedy: "We must talk now. Fear / Is fear. But we abandon one another" (89). Or it could be our common comedy, as in the later poem "Quotations": "'We're having the life of our times'" (140).

The strangest side effect of rereading Oppen today is the frequent impression that his lyrics not only suit "the life of our times" but are somehow *more true*, more topical and more terrifying, now than when he wrote them. "Route," from *Of Being Numerous*, culminates with a montage of apocalypses: European colonization, the Vietnam War, a global "cataclysm" in the plainly foreseeable future. "Strange to be here," Oppen writes—a review of humanity's time on earth, maybe, or else our epitaph. "[S]trange to be man, we have come rather far":

> We are at the beginning of a radical depopulation of the earth
>
> Cataclysm…cataclysm of the plains, jungles, the cities
>
> Something in the soil exposed between two oceans (201)

For their first readers, these prophecies, brazenly cast in an already-underway present tense, must have sounded uncharacteristically dour—extreme coming from anyone, let alone a poet famed for his spareness and clarity. Read now? These lines sound like the news. Their lament for the present is the negative image of the praise resounding throughout "Psalm"; they are what happens when the ecstasy of "That they are there!" plummets into the realization that nothing is there for long. Wonder in the everyday is one legacy of Oppen's lyric immediacy; the vulnerability of *now*, his *now* or ours, is another. Two poems over from "Route," that legacy receives an unintentional epitaph of its own, as true now as ever: "And it is those who find themselves in love with the world / Who suffer an anguish of mortality" (205).

Note

1 Ezra Pound, "Preface," in *New Collected Poems* by George Oppen, ed. Michael Davidson (New York: New Directions, 2008), 4; William Carlos Williams, "The New Poetical Economy," *Poetry* 44, no. 4 (July 1934): 225.

2 George Oppen, *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 47.

3 Ibid., 232, 238.

4 Peter Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 74–75.

5 Page references to Oppen's poems, here and hereafter given parenthetically, refer to his *New Collected Poems*.

6 See Peter Nicholls, "Modernism and the limits of lyric," in *The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations*, ed. Marion Thain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 177–94; Matt Kilbane, "An indexical lyric," *Jacket2*, 9 December 2016, https://jacket2.org/article/indexical-lyric; and Jacob McGuinn, "Saying 'we': George Oppen's and Kant's lyrical 'common sense,'" *Textual Practice* 34, no. 10 (2020): 1751–68. For a comprehensive review of twenty-first-century debates over lyric, see Jahan Ramazani, "Epilogue. Lyric Poetry: Intergeneric, Transnational, Translingual?," in *Poetry in a Global Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 239–50.

7 Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 226, 16.

[8] James Longenbach, *The Lyric Now* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), ix.

[9] Oppen, *Selected Prose*, 49.

[10] Both Culler and Longenbach have written on lyric's present tense; see Culler, *Theory*, 283–95, and Longenbach, *The Virtues of Poetry* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2013), 141–58.

[11] L. S. Dembo, "George Oppen," *Contemporary Literature* 10, no. 2 (Spring 1969): 160.

[12] In the United States, the antiepileptic drug pregabalin is sold under the brand name Lyrica. In 2022, Cadillac will release its first electric SUV, the Lyriq.

[13] See "Most common words in English," *Wikipedia*, last modified 21 September 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Most_common_words_in_English.

[14] A spondee, a line break, a sudden stress—a tapping too insistent to pass for slackened American speech rhythms—is this psalm's signature rhythmic motif: "stránge wóods. / Thév"; "Théir páths / Níbbled"; "smáll nóuns / Crýing"; "wíld déer / Stártle."

[15] Oppen, *Selected Prose*, 175.

[16] In a longer essay, I would have explored yet another resource of Oppen's: allusion. I am grateful to an anonymous reader who recalls the rich allusive resonances of "grass," extending from the Old Testament ("All flesh is grass") to *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman, a poet never far from Oppen's thinking. Jahan Ramazani hears further verbal echoes of a range of precursors—biblical (Psalm 42), Romantic (Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind"), and modernist (Wallace Stevens's "Of Mere Being"). See *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 162–65.