

A black and white photograph of a sculpture made of car parts, resembling Rodin's 'The Thinker', in a museum setting. The sculpture is constructed from various automotive components like gears, belts, and metal pieces, intricately woven together to form a human figure in a pensive, seated pose. The background shows a museum floor with other large-scale sculptures, including a prominent white letter 'A' on the right. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures and metallic surfaces of the sculpture.

Absorbing the Machine

MATERIALITY, TECHNOLOGY, AND
MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

For my parents whose love is 'pervasive Paradigm' and 'imaged Word.'

And with deepest gratitude to Olga, Maria, Paulchen, Neo, Filimon, Natalia, and Alexander.

My (partially furry) discrete series. Thank you for helping me cross the bridge. I love you.

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List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used for often-cited sources:

- CPSL* Crane, Hart. *Complete Poems and Selected Letters*. Ed. Langdon Hammer. New York: Library of America, 2006. Print.
- GOMP* Hatlen, Burton, ed. *George Oppen: Man and Poet*. Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1981. Print.
- NCP* Oppen, George. *New Collected Poems*. Ed. Michael Davidson. New York: New Directions, 2008. Print.
- OR* DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. ed. *The Oppens Remembered: Poetry, Politics, and Friendship*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2015. Print.
- SL* *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*. Ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1990. Print.
- SP* Oppen, George. *Selected Poems*. Ed. and with an introduction by Robert Creeley. New York: New Directions, 2003. Print.
- SPDP* *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*. Ed. Stephen Cope. Berkeley: U of California P, 2007. Print.

Introduction

The writing of the poem is the process of finding out what I mean, discovering what I mean. (Oppen qtd. in Nicholls 39)

Language has built towers and bridges, but itself is inevitably as fluid as always. (Crane, *CPSL* 164)

In 2016 literary critic and poet Stephen Burt (since 2017 Stephanie Burt) sparked a thought-provoking discussion about the status of American poetry when his essay “Is American Poetry Still a Thing?” appeared in the pages of *American Literary History*. Taking the title “from the transatlantic cultural critic John Oliver, whose television show asks ‘How is (Columbus Day, Daylight Savings Time, Televangelism, etc.) still a thing,’” Burt raises the question “whether ‘American poetry,’ as a category and a concept, might be obsolete, and whether the term and the set of works to which it has pointed no longer cohere” (271). The question “are poems something we make, or is poetry something we do” drives Burt’s text and results in the author’s observation that there is a gradually widening chasm between thinking of “poetry as a process” and thinking of “poetry as a thing, or a set of things” (271, 279). Defining “American poetry [as] a more or less diverse collection of representations—some apparently trivial, some almost holy—around shared events, chosen and brought into shared spaces, where they might be shining for a century or a day,” Burt diagnoses after a few insightful excursions, where he cites from Cary Nelson, Marjorie Perloff, John Ashbery, and Albert Gelpi, among others, that “we are on the way to seeing it [American poetry] as a process. Poets of the twentieth century who seem more important than they did 20 or 40 years ago tend to ask us to focus on process, on how or even where the writer made what she made” (276-77). According to Burt, the “view of poetry as event, as process” has become the dominant model in the twenty-first century (280): “But a sense of the history of poetry as the history of a situated process, a sense that poems ask to be understood as ongoing processes, not as complete objects seems inescapable now, as it did not before” (279). At the end, however, even if models of process supersede the “way of seeing American poetry as one thing, one national project” (Burt mentions Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, Charles Olson, and Joel Barlow as proponents of this view),¹ Burt still advocates for

¹ Calling attention to material details that will be important to this study, Meredith McGill in her response to Burt’s essay puts focus on “Joel Barlow’s extraordinary insistence that his epic *The Columbiad* (1807) broadcast its nationality down to the last detail of its material incarnation, constructed as the volume was out of American paper, typefaces, and illustrations” (292).

“retain[ing] a frame in which we see poems as real, separable, bounded, even collectible things, alongside the more obviously historicist frame that sees poetry as a series of events or a process” (282). In the final paragraph of his essay, he emphasizes that “we can go on, in some ways we must go on, treating individual American poems as transmissible, durable, interpretable, appreciable, plural things” (284).

The process-object dilemma appears to be one of the most urgent topics in American poetry with currently more questions asked than answered. As Oren Izenberg mentions in his response to Burt’s essay, “the question of object vs. process is a global question” (324). Indeed, Burt’s essay provoked several responses published in the same *ALH* issue by renowned poetry scholars (among them such authoritative poetry critics as Meredith McGill, Peter Nicholls, and Jahan Ramazani). Some of the respondents note that Burt’s query seems a bit odd since in 2014 Burt as “[o]ne of the coeditors of an ambitious new collection of essays surveying the history of American poetry from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century” had seen the gargantuan book *The Cambridge History of American Poetry* into print (McGill 288). Nicholls, for instance, writes that the existence of “the 1300 pages of this new *Cambridge History of American Poetry* indicate that someone [the editors Burt and Alfred Bendixen at least] must think” that American poetry is still a thing (296). In his reply, Nicholls, whose monograph *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (2007) revealed invaluable nuggets from the archive on which this study builds (such as the one used as the first epigraph), also criticizes that Burt “tends to use ‘things’ and ‘objects interchangeably.” Like Izenberg, he points to Timothy Morton’s essay “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry” for “[a] sharper demarcation between” the terms (298). These weak spots notwithstanding, Burt addresses pertinent issues for the study of modern American poetry at and as a process-object crisis. Yet, as McGill highlights, Burt’s object-thing obscurity goes hand in hand with a neglect of materiality: “Much more is bound up in Burt’s use of the word ‘thing’ [...] but suffice it to say that his insistence that poems are ‘things made of words that we can hand on’ finesses the relationship between the materiality of the text and the materiality of handwriting, print, or screen—the means by which poems are recorded and transmitted” (292).

In his TED Talk from 2014, Burt enthusiastically introduces the audience to this thing called poetry. With more than 260.000 clicks on YouTube at the time of writing, the thirteen minutes of Burt’s talk address the titular question “Why People Need Poetry.” After a few etymological remarks, Burt declares that “poetry does seem to be

especially good at certain things” and makes a case for poetry as a powerful supportive form even in the face of existential truths: “For example,” he says and continues after a dramatic pause, “we are all going to die. Poetry can help us live with that. Poems are made of words, nothing but words.” While it is hard to argue with Burt’s first claim, the statement that poems are made of nothing but words does not do justice to the materiality of the poems and will be contested in the following pages. Surprisingly, Burt repeats this idea in his “Is American Poetry Still a Thing” essay which suggests that he believes in its validity. “It is in their ways of beings things,” Burt writes, “that poems distinguish themselves from most other objects of cultural and historical analysis—they are, or can be, peculiarly durable things made of nothing but words. It is in what they do to and for us as things, to be reread, memorized, scrutinized from the front and behind, that poems might justify the attention that we have historically given them” (282). Words matter. Words are matter.

This dissertation juxtaposes two American poets who have never been read alongside each other and whose work, in a way, straddles the process-made-thing-divide: Hart Crane (1899-1932) and George Oppen (1908-1984). The consensus among readers and critics is that the work of both poets is dense, demanding, and difficult in terms of their reception history. This declaration of truth, however, seems to be the only connective between the two American poets at first glance. With reference to the alcoholic genius Crane whose suicide has often been read as proof of poetic failure, Burt, for example, writes that “if you are already a critic of modern poetry, you might not need yet one more piece of evidence that midcentury critics were not sure what to make of Hart Crane, whose reception history is also a history of ‘modern’ and ‘American’ as categories” (274). In the final pages of the last chapter of *The Cambridge History of American Poetry*, Burt takes stock of “American Poetry at the End of the Millennium” by narrating stories from the past which “call for ways of reading that only the future can know” (1163). Intriguingly, Crane is the poet with which the chapter and the behemoth book ends. In Burt’s words, “if we want to find a modernist writer whose work anticipates the 1990s, containing within himself both the line of Romantic lyric and the desire to be fractured, without a single voice, we can no longer overlook Hart Crane” (1159). While in the twenties of the twenty-first century I would not go so far to say that Crane has been overlooked (several books about him have been published in the last couple of years, most recently Francesca Bratton’s 2022 *Visionary Company: Hart Crane and Modernist Periodicals*), Burt’s praise of the troubled gay poet as “at the least

a bridge, if not indeed *the* bridge, between Emerson and C. D. Wright, Whitman and J. F. Herrera, and Emily Dickinson and D. A. Powell” is warranted and timely (1162). In the final sentences of the chapter, Burt even professes that “Crane stands for the modern and the contemporary as continuations-with-a-difference of what came before. Crane has for some later poets thus come to stand for the American poet generally” (1161). The author of *The Bridge* as bridge-poet?!

The analysis of Crane’s and Oppen’s work is grounded in an in-depth reading of the poets’ letters and theoretical writings which are still underexamined. While carefully edited volumes of their epistolary output and, in Oppen’s case, his interviews and archival working papers are accessible in print, most scholars have failed to siphon commensurately from these primary sources. Enriching Oppen scholarship, new primary material has been made available in recent years, including poems lifted from the archive (*21 Poems*) and previously unpublished letters (*The Oppens Remembered*). In this study, these new publications will be analyzed in depth and brought in relation with Oppen’s established work for the first time. As will be shown, freshly unearthed poems like “Lobby” reveal that the effect of the machine on human life, what Crane calls “[t]he encroachment of machinery on humanity” (*CPSL* 441), was on Oppen’s mind even before the publication of *Discrete Series* with its “cryptic, condensed, precisely detailed, and often asyntactic sections, printed one to a page, flicker[ing] like frames shot from the window of a moving streetcar, train, or automobile, the porthole of a steamship, or deck of a tugboat” (Morris 670-71). Additional letters and anecdotes collected in *The Oppens Remembered: Poetry, Politics, and Friendship*, carefully edited by Rachel Blau DuPlessis whose work on George and Mary Oppen is exceptional, shed light on the Oppens’ years in exile in Mexico from 1950 until 1958. This period of their life is still relatively shadowy in terms of biography. Light will be cast, among other things, upon Oppen’s Mexican woodwork.

This study also adds another layer to the processual model: the publishers’ editing process supplanting the original publication. As it turns out, the way in which the material content of Crane’s and Oppen’s books is reproduced in later versions or collections significantly warps the original material constellation. In *The Bridge*, this material distortion shows in absence. Readers encountering Crane’s American “epic of the modern consciousness” today will presumably not be cognizant of the fact that the first edition of the long poem published in Paris in 1930 included three photographs by Walker Evans (*CPSL* 557). The intricate publication history and Crane’s transnational

networking strategy involving Joseph Stella, Harry and Caresse Crosby, Eugene Jolas and the magazine *transition* are still overlooked facets in *The Bridge's* genesis. Disregarding the bibliographic actuality that Evans's photographs were an integral part of *The Bridge* and, albeit not as three prominent markers within the poem, accompanied even the "first American edition [...] issued in March 1930 with yet another image by Evans as frontispiece" before "in a second printing, still another view replaced the earlier frontispiece, which now appeared on the cover of the dust jacket" eclipses the original intention and reading experience (Trachtenberg 185-86). Of course, first editions are hard to get by and expensive. But there are online resources available which can help. In her response to Burt, McGill rightly laments that the "essay completely ignores the dizzying impact on poetry of new media: both the vast amount of poetry from the past that has been made readily available through the digitization of once-rare or ephemeral print, and the increasing importance of digital media as a vehicle for the circulation of poems" (292-93). "We suddenly have access on our laptops to PDF images," she continues, "that convey the wide range of print formats crucial to the circulation of poetry (including broadsides, newspapers, magazines, sheet music, pamphlets, as well as many different kinds of books). This vast swath of remediated print makes the anthologies through which we have for the most part studied and taught American poetry look fussier and narrower still" (293). While I agree with McGill's observation, it should be noted that even the best "remediated print" and the most accurate PDF scans cannot fully recreate the graspable palpability of "the / Paper, turned" as Oppen writes in "Drawing" from *Discrete Series* (NCP 33). Nonetheless, my analysis of the first edition of *The Bridge* benefited immensely from the fact that the University of Florida has made a zoomable digitized version of the hand-set Paris publication available online. Together with bibliographic books such as Kenneth A. Lohf's *The Literary Manuscripts of Hart Crane* and Joseph Schwartz and Robert C. Schweik's *Hart Crane: A Descriptive Bibliography*, the form, format, and material sequence within the book can be better understood.

The disappearance of Evans's photographs is also deplorable because it detracts from Crane's interest in and appreciation of photography as a modern medium capable of "mechanical perfectibility." Crane became fascinated by Alfred Stieglitz's photography when he saw his photographs for the first time in 1923. The poet's reaction to the photograph *Apples and Gable* and the ensuing correspondence, which Crane started by writing an essay (never finished) on Stieglitz's successful pursuit of "ultimate

harmonies” and in the course of which he shared early drafts of “Atlantis” with the older artist, attest to the photographer’s influence on *The Bridge* (CPSL 332). Furthermore, the camera machine impacted Crane’s belief that poetry needs to “absorb the machine” in order to “fulfill its full contemporary function” as he writes in “Modern Poetry,” a still insufficiently examined Crane essay (171). Providing the first half of this study’s title, Crane’s machine-absorbing poetics “demands [...] an extraordinary capacity for surrender, at least temporarily, to the sensations of urban life” (171). Seven years earlier in a 1923 letter, Crane not only deemed himself “quite fit to become a suitable Pindar of the dawn of the machine age,” but also expounded his conviction that “[t]he modern artist needs gigantic assimilative capacities, emotion,—and the greatest of all—vision” (*O My Land* 137). Crane saw this visionary quality in Stieglitz and Evans.

In his medium poetry, he invented and argued for “the organic principle of a ‘logic of metaphor’” as the technique to unlock “the implicit emotional dynamics of the materials used” (CPSL 163). Favoring “the so-called illogical impingements of the connotations of words on the consciousness” over denotation, the “dynamics of metaphor” or “this *inflection* of language,” as Crane called his principle in “A Letter to Harriet Monroe,” left many readers, reviewers, and editors of periodicals dumbfounded (165-66). Famously, Monroe, the founder and editor of *Poetry* magazine, wrote Crane after he had submitted “At Melville’s Tomb” to *Poetry*, asking him to clarify the poem’s “mixed metaphors” (qtd. in CPSL 803). Confused but curious, she epitomizes the prevailing ambivalence towards Crane’s poetry at the time. Burt goes even further in the final paragraph of the last chapter in *The Cambridge History of American Poetry*. For Burt, “Crane’s projects and his reputation may even have become a synecdoche for literary inheritance in general—unpredictable, ramifying, unfinished if not forever unfinishable, and often unsettling too.” According to the poetry critic, Crane “is at once a bearer of orphic modes and a cause for continued skepticism, hard to pin down as to where he stands, what he can mean: his verse seems both to summarize and surpass American literary history, and hence to call for ways of reading that only the future can know” (1163). This study aims to present one such way of reading.

Importantly, Crane’s logic of metaphor is open to and, in a way, primed to absorb changes or disruptions caused by technological progress. As will be argued based on preparatory readings of Crane’s view of the machine in art and life, his “dynamics of inferential mention” evolve into an in/organic principle of a technologic of metaphor in *The Bridge*. The incorporation of the machine into the material skeins or, architecturally

more precise, suspension cables of *The Bridge* is most distinct in sections concerned with mechanized vehicles of transport (the subway system in “The Tunnel,” aeronautics and power plants in “Cape Hatteras”). The machine-absorbing impetus, however, can be traced throughout the long poem. I will do so by investigating bird/bridge metaphors and metamorphoses culminating in a pivotal moment of Native American ritual in “The Dance” where Crane in a glaringly daring anachronism juxtaposes the eagle symbolizing space with the mechanical device of a turbine and thus an instrument of modern technology.

This anachronistic usage notwithstanding, the “encroachment of machinery on humanity” materialized most tangibly in modern cityscapes (441). In her useful essay “Minding Machines/Machining Minds: Writing (at) the Human-Machine Interface,” Adalaide Morris addresses this formative aspect and hints at the machine’s influence on poetry:

As machines increasingly dominated American life and culture in the period between the two World Wars, the experiences of space, time, and subjectivity shifted to meet the needs of an increasingly urban industrial economy. In the period known as America’s Machine Age, elaborate systems of rails, cars, and planes reconfigured local, regional, and national geographies; scientific management studies by Frederick W. Taylor and his disciples synchronized workers’ movements and paced their days to meet the demands of the machinery they serviced; and vertical cities laid out in grids that were, as George Oppen dryly notes, ‘More formal / Than a field’ [...] replaced meandering horizontal villages. (662)

Urban structures with skyscrapers “building high” in perpendicular thrust shaped a metropolis like New York City where Crane and Oppen lived and wrote during their lives (*CPSL* 33). In fact, in the final poem of Oppen’s last book *Primitive* (1978), which the poet stricken with Alzheimer’s disease completed “with the secretarial help of Mary” (*SP* 197), he timestamped and contextualized the construction of *Discrete Series*. In “Till Other Voices Wake Us,” an allusion to the final line of T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” he recalls “writing // thru the night (a young man, / Brooklyn, 1929) I named the book // series empirical / series all force” (*NCP* 286). Eliot’s influence as the high modernist poet par excellence will be discussed especially in relation to Crane who conceived of *The Bridge* as an optimistic response to “the pessimism of *The Waste Land*” and endeavored to “apply as much of [Eliot’s] erudition and technique as [he could] absorb and assemble toward a more positive, or [...] ecstatic goal” (*CPSL* 310, 308).² Oppen grappled with *The Waste Land* and the “current of American poetry [...]

² Burt also draws parallels between Eliot’s and Crane’s Janus-faced epics of modern poetry in his concluding essay in *The Cambridge History of American Poetry*. “Like T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, to

deriving from Eliot and Auden and including—a bit remotely—Stevens” as well (*SL* 386). Referring to himself after his return to poetry as “me, the unaudenzed and diselioted” (*SL* 31), Oppen half-jokingly, half-seriously described himself in 1960 as “the oldest promising young poet in America” (37).

Even if Crane’s preoccupation with Eliot and the older modern poet’s way of poetically coming to terms with modernity is more pronounced as evidenced by Crane’s letters, it is important to note that Oppen likewise set his poetry in relation and contrast with Eliot and his work. In 1964, for example, he wrote his niece: “I haven’t, I’m afraid, written a *Wasteland* [sic], haven’t written a decisive expression of a period” (*SL* 108). Three years earlier, providing explanatory remarks about what Objectivism meant, Oppen dissociated himself from a tradition deriving from Eliot. The poets commonly referred to as Objectivists “were all very much concerned with poetic form, and form not merely as texture, but as the shape that makes a poem possible to grasp.” According to Oppen, “‘Objectivist’ meant, not an objective viewpoint, but to objectify the poem, to make the poem an object. Meant form. [...] I thought of Eliot as a sort of enemy at the time” (47). This resistance to getting pigeonholed shows also in two jottings from Oppen’s working papers. A snippet excavated by Nicholls reads: “I did not feel myself inherent in a tradition, to inhere in a tradition. I felt myself to be as I found myself” (qtd. in Nicholls 8). Nicholls also unearthed the following compelling scribbling: “There cannot, apparently there cannot, be a Whitman of the factories / have tried and I cannot” (84). In another jotting, Oppen left this note to himself: “I believe I am ‘modern’ only in that the things I want to say are extremely difficult to say” (“The Anthropologist” 148). Still, Oppen’s letters show that his conception of modern poetry differed from high modernists “looking to the past” with Eliot as prime mover (Morris 662). In a 1959 letter to his half-sister June Oppen Degnan, who as publisher of *San Francisco Review* helped immensely in restarting Oppen’s writing career, he cites lines from Eliot’s “Burnt Norton” and confesses “I know positively that I’ve not written anything that good.” He then maintains that “To be a good poet is to add *something*” (*SL* 21). In an important passage which Crane would have applauded, Oppen later in the letter writes:

Poetry has to be protean; the meaning must begin there. With the perception. Eliot of course is consistent; he would not agree. He thinks of himself as deliberately finding the

which it attempts an optimistic answer,” Burt writes, “*The Bridge* becomes a cyclopedia of verse forms, among them cut-up conversational free verse, Dickinsonian ballad stanzas, blues, sheet-music-era popular song, quasi-Homeric unrhymed hexameters, and variations on the heroic quatrain” (1160). This reading of Crane as a poet whose verse is all-encompassing leads Burt to the judgment that “*The Bridge* invites readers to claim the whole of poetry (not only American poetry) for ourselves” (1161).

‘objective correlative’ to substantiate a body of thought which he accepts. [...] A poem has got to be written into the future. I don’t mean something about the admiration of posterity (from where I sit, posterity looks like a bunch of damn kids) but simply that it’s something that is not the past. (22)

Protean poetry does not shun away from incorporating what Crane calls “surface phenomena of our time” into a poem’s materiality (*CPSL* 162). Poems “written into the future” absorb the machine. Technological progress leaves its mark on poetic technique. Like Crane, Oppen did not straight out “condemn [...] the truncation of life at the human-machine interface” (Morris 662). As he wrote the British poet Donald Davie in 1973, “it is true that I do not, as the most popular of American poets *do*, believe that The Way is to be found in the pre-industrial” (*SL* 256).

In the final paragraph of his review essay “George Oppen and the Limits of Words,” Burt, rightly claiming that “Nicholls’s volume suggests further avenues and arguments,” posits questions which future studies might address. “What if someone looked not—as Nicholls has looked—at Oppen’s antecedents in Continental philosophy,” Burt asks, “but at Oppen’s specifically poetic antecedents [...]” (564)? Burt points to quotations from Yeats, Donne, and Shakespeare in Oppen’s poetry. The many references to Eliot make the author of *The Waste Land* a suitable candidate as well. Crane, however, is the modern American poet I think is worth looking at. Bringing together Crane and Oppen in the pages of this study might seem odd if not preposterous on the surface. After all, no references to Crane can be found in Oppen’s letters and due to Crane’s early death there were only a few years of possible published poetic overlap (1929-1932). But there is one reference, possibly the only and certainly an overlooked reference, in a 1978 interview conducted by David McAleavey during which Oppen mentions that the scene in “Deaths Everywhere,” the penultimate poem of *Discrete Series*, is “a little like the methods of *The Bridge*.” Remarkably, Oppen’s surprising comparison stems from the poem’s implied urban setting: “Saying it badly, he comes to life or recognizes his life as he sees these geraniums in the city there. I was taking city for granted in an awful lot of this. I think it’s a little like the methods of *The Bridge*” (*Speaking with George Oppen* 158). Oppen expert DuPlessis, whose correspondence with the Oppens brought to light invaluable details and inspired discussions about poetics (Oppen used the phrase ‘the vertical dimension’ for the first time in a letter to DuPlessis), was kind enough to thoroughly respond via e-mail to questions I had in 2018. Asked about Oppen’s standpoint towards Crane and whether he owned a copy of *The Bridge*, DuPlessis replied:

My best guess is that he read *The Bridge* once upon a time, but never owned or kept a copy. Why? Because the poem probably didn't matter to him. Crane's baroque poetics had no interest for Oppen. Crane's American mythopoetic narrative of *The Bridge* probably felt like it was straining. [...] Oppen did not keep books around that he didn't care about. I also asked Linda Oppen on your behalf. She reminded me that at Mary Oppen's death, there were only a few books among Oppen's possessions. These are in the San Diego Archive. She also guesses—no Crane. (e-mail communication to author, July 2018)

Even if Oppen probably disapproved of “Crane's American mythopoetic narrative of *The Bridge*,” he, like Polonius, discerned method(s) in it.

While I do not want to suggest that Oppen was directly influenced by Crane, who had committed suicide two years prior to the publication of *Discrete Series*, I propose that the parallels which Oppen mentions in an interview from 1978 while discussing his poems from the 1930s are rooted in a common ground of poetics which thinks the material aspects of poetry together with phenomena of the Machine Age. The aim, then, is not merely to disclose that Oppen was familiar with Crane's poetry and that he should be added to the canonical list of modern poets and forebears (such as Pound, Eliot, Williams, Stevens) with whom any American poet intending to write poetry in the wake of high modernism had to quarrel. I argue that both poets, in their own way, absorbed the machine into the skeins of their poetry. They took note of what Crane calls the “surface phenomena of our time” and did not biasedly disregard these modern devices as harbingers of sorrow (162). In contrast to Morris who states that “[h]igh modernists and Left poetry—one looking to the past, the other to the future—converge in condemning the truncation of life at the human-machine interface” (662), I aim to show that this simplification prevents one from seeing the similarities in poetic methods which lie deeper, below what Jerome McGann designates as “linguistic code” (*The Textual Condition* 13). The similarities need to be excavated from the material fact of the poetic product, that is, the printed book of poetry in its original publication venue. In the close readings in the following chapters, I will focus on the nexus of technological progress and the material components of poetry, which I want to break down to three interdependent levels of materiality:

- 1) the materiality of the word (e.g., punctuation marks, typographical devices, etymology)
- 2) the materiality of the page (e.g., page arrangement, the line sense, white page-space)

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- 3) the materiality of the book (e.g., bibliographic code, print culture, original vs. reprints)

This tripartite structure suggests a gradual dimensional expansion from small-scale to large-scale, from the particular to the more general, from close-ups to long shots, from detailed focus to bigger picture. Like the terms in Oppen's definition of a discrete series and like the poems in Oppen's *Discrete Series* ("a series in which each term is empirically justified rather than derived from the preceding term" [SL 122]), each level or layer of materiality can stand solidly on its own. But considered collectively instead of independently, these discrete units transcend their singular status and work together, constructing a platform from which it is possible to survey the panoramic scene of poetry's materiality. Investigating how these three levels of materiality reciprocally influence each other will gesture towards a concept of material poetics which motivates the work of modern poets like Crane and Oppen: poets who do not fit smoothly into the rigid categories and labels like 'high modernists' or 'Leftist poetry' which still dominate literary scholarship today. The close readings of both the linguistic and bibliographic codes of Crane's and Oppen's poetry will support the idea that the work of poets like Crane and Oppen gestures towards an alternative mode of modernism which focuses on the nexus of poetic materiality and the Machine Age's technological progress, not only "thinking with the things as they exist," in Zukofsky's famous dictum, but also thinking with the materials with which they construct their poems ("Sincerity and Objectification" 273).

Conceptually speaking, *The Bridge* can be read as a discrete series as Oppen understood the phrase. The poems spread out over its eight sections are somehow connected, as Crane believed and outlined in his letters, but not "derived by a rule or convention from the preceding term" as in "a purely mathematical series" ("An Adequate Vision" 31). Oppen's definition as uttered in his interview with L. S. Dembo is at least partially applicable to how Crane conceived of *The Bridge*: "My book, of course, was called *Discrete Series*. [...] A discrete series is a series of terms each of which is empirically derived, each one of which is empirically true. And this is the reason for the fragmentary character of those poems. I was attempting to construct a meaning by empirical statements, by imagist statement" (174). In Crane's case, the adjectives 'empirical' and 'imagist' might not fit the bill entirely, but the general idea of parts and their elusive and allusive relation to the whole buttresses the construction of *The Bridge*. In a crucial letter from 1927 to Otto Kahn, German-born patron of the arts

who supported Crane financially during his work on *The Bridge*, Crane provided an outline of his project which touches upon the serial aspect. Postulating that his goal is to “show [...] the continuous and living evidence of the past in the inmost vital substance of the present,” he elaborates that in “handling [...] the Myth of America” he “had to do a good deal of pioneering” since “[t]housands of strands have had to be searched out, sorted, and interwoven.” His explanation of the sections’ process-object status rings a bell:

For each section of the entire poem has represented its own unique problem of form, not alone in relation to the materials embodied with its separate confines, but also in relation to the other parts, *in series*, of the major design of the entire poem. Each is a separate canvas, as it were, yet none yields its entire significance when seen apart from the others. One might take the Sistine Chapel as an analogy. (*CPSL* 554-55, original emphasis)

I venture to suggest that this understanding “of the major design of the entire poem” called *The Bridge* comes very close to Oppen’s definition of discrete series and *Discrete Series*. While I do not want to speculate whether Oppen at some point chanced upon this letter or other Crane letters (the Kahn letter is included in Brom Weber’s *The Letters of Hart Crane: 1916-1932* published in 1952), I argue that Oppen sensed and appreciated this method of poetic construction in *The Bridge* even if “Crane’s verbal pyrotechnics hurtl[ing] us into and through the frantic machine age” ran counter to his own approach to the materiality of words (Wolf 104). Whereas Crane believed that “[o]ne must be drenched in words, literally soaked with them to have the right ones form themselves into the proper pattern at the right moment” (*CPSL* 257), Oppen wrote DuPlessis that “[w]hen the man writing is frightened by a word, he may have started” (*SL* 123). While Crane acted upon the conviction that “one needs to *ransack* the vocabularies of Shakespeare, Jonson, Webster (for theirs were the richest) and add our scientific, street and counter, and psychological terms” (*O My Land* 17), Oppen recorded in “A Language of New York” from *This In Which* (1965) that it is

Possible
To use
Words provided one treat them
As enemies.
Not enemies—Ghosts
Which have run mad
In the subways
And of course the institutions
And the banks. If one captures them
One by one proceeding

Carefully they will restore

I hope to meaning
And to sense. (*NCP* 116)

Despite differences in approaching words, both Crane and Oppen valued them as material building units which they often defamiliarized, for example, by coining neologisms (Crane's 'curveship' or 'transmemberment') or by isolating words via peculiar line breaks and white page-space ("White. From the / Under arm of T" [*NCP* 6]). This intentional defamiliarization of the materiality of poems, I argue, emanates from a method of poetically coming to terms with technological progress and modern machines like elevators, revolving doors, airplanes or "the subways."

Significantly, in a letter to DuPlessis from 1965, Oppen specified his definition of the title of his first book or, rather, bemoaned that he had not used a New York City system of mechanized transport to clarify the meaning of "a series in which each term is empirically justified rather than derived from the preceding term." In parenthesis which fittingly lacks the discrete yet serial closing bracket, Oppen adds in his synopsis of his books: "(I thought too late—30 years too late—that the flyleaf should have carried the inscription 14, 28, 32, 42 which is a discrete series: the names of the stations on the east side subway. The Materials: to restate the themes: solidly" (*SL* 122). "For certain New Yorkers," Craig Dworkin notes, the numerical series "would have clarified the mathematical term Oppen took for his title [...] since the series of numerals are fixed, verifiable, and do not derive from the preceding terms. Although the series could be reversed, heading downtown toward City Hall, the terms could not be in another order, and each is empirically justified by the crosstown street of its station stop" (79). While the fact that Oppen belatedly thought of subway stations as a good example of a discrete series ties in with (Crane's) machine-absorbing poetics ("But you find yourself / Preparing penguin flexions of the arms,— / As usual you will meet the scuttle yawn: / The subway yawns the quickest promise home" [*CPSL* 67]), Dworkin's discreet point (pun intended) that "the terms could not be in another order" is of crucial importance. If the poems in *Discrete Series* "form a discrete series of discrete series of discrete series" because "[t]hey contain recurrent images of emphatically separated, distinct, and individual assemblages of parts in broken, paratactic lines" (Dworkin 79), their arrangement on the page and their deliberate order within the book call attention to the materiality of the objectified poetic work. *Discrete Series* in the original Objectivist Press edition substantiates "process models of poetry [...] and made-thing models" in its pages (Ramazani 309). In a twist on Burt's response to his respondents, "[a]ny poem worth the time it takes to read [...] can" not only "be read as a durable object or as a

process” (4). Oppen’s poems in *Discrete Series* are durable objects and they are processes.

I was fortunate enough to get hold of a copy of Oppen’s 1934 *Discrete Series*. Painstakingly leafing through the pages of the original book “in a light sea-green cloth binding” (Schimmel 294), one gets a feel for what Oppen means when he talks about his “attempt to construct meaning, to construct a method of thought from the imagist technique of poetry—from the imagist intensity of vision” (“Interview with Dembo” 161). Each poem rests on a separate, discrete page. As Schimmel, apparently the only scholar who has used *Discrete Series* in its original setting for his analysis, notes “[o]ne cannot but regret the penny-wise economy of its reprinting in the *New Directions Collected Poems*. The serial aspect of the meticulously elegant *Series* is all but lost” (294). Schimmel broaches a topic which deserves more scholarly attention, namely, the potential damage wrought and meaning warped by inconsiderate reprintings. Josephine Park, though with reference to versions of poems circulating helter-skelter on the internet, points to this “problem of reception” and “the malleability of the poem” in her response to Burt. As she rightly observes with respect to Marianne “Moore’s radical revisions,” especially for teachers it is a challenge to address the arbitrariness of nothing but words “when students seem to find suitable online versions of virtually every poem on the syllabus” (306). Indeed, presentations of print poems on the internet seldom reproduce, in Ramazani’s words, the “poem as crafted thing, an arrangement of words that has a potential durability” with line breaks, intervallic white spaces, and other material phenomena as manifest in the original publication (310). Reprintings of *The Bridge*, *Discrete Series*, and, I argue, also *The Materials* reveal flaws in the respective publication history. Oppen, for example, was attentive to and utilized the arrangement of pages and poems meaningfully. Given the title of his first book and his persistent diligence with words, this appreciation of discrete units arranged in a series should not come as a surprise. Yet, the material fact that Oppen enacts dialectical thinking such as coming to terms with extremes like life and death (especially in *The Materials* published in 1962 after a long hiatus and traumatic experiences which will be discussed in relation to his poetry) has escaped even renowned Oppen scholars who prepared the poems for collected editions.

Oppen uses page arrangement as a meaningful tool to place oppositions or contrary perspectives next to each other within the same environment of double pages, bringing poems into conversation in and through the material components of his poetry.

This aspect has unfortunately not been sufficiently discussed outside of Oppen's *Discrete Series*. One reason for this scholarly lacuna might be that readers nowadays encounter Oppen's poems and books of poetry mostly ensconced in a larger, collective volume such as the most recent *New Collected Poems* edited by the prolific Michael Davidson. Useful as it is and despite the editor's laudable decision to recuperate the one-poem-per-page format of the 1934 *Discrete Series*, Davidson's book obfuscates important details of the original design regarding material components. In fact, the reciprocal effect is significantly diminished in the *New Collected Poems* which physically separates poems that were originally meant to be read and to be seen facing each other on the same papery arena. For example, the rearrangement of "Solution" and "Travelogue," two short poems that face each other on opposite pages in *The Materials* and fit on one page respectively without any overlap in Oppen's first post-exile book, illustrates how faulty poem and page arrangements can twist the meaning behind the intended order and potentially disrupt the dilemmatic interconnectedness between pairs. Editorial interventions into Oppen's careful arrangement of poems can be detrimental to grasping how his poetic thinking materializes on the (double) page. "We may discuss poems in groups," Burt maintains in "Is American Poetry Still a Thing," "but we read them—if we really read them—one at a time" (280). In Oppen's case, the reader benefits from letting the eyes wander since "[o]ne moves between reading and re-reading, / The shape is a moment" (*NCP* 25). As an Objectivist poet for whom "[t]he writing of the poem is the process of finding out what [he] mean[s]" (qtd. in Nicholls 39), Oppen approaches the poem as what Morris defines in her response to Burt as "a moving target, an experimental site, a coming-into-and-going-out-of-being, a compound process and object" (319). In Oppen's work, in a way, the "process models of poetry (also known as 'open form,' 'performative,' 'raw') and made-thing models (aka 'closed,' 'formalist,' 'cooked')" come together (Ramazani 309). Recovering the original sequence and paying attention to the palimtextual working papers, then, are crucial for expediting our understanding of how Oppen and other materiality-conscious poets worked with the building materials at hand. The analysis will zoom in on typographical minutiae, breaking open calcified reading methods and extending the focus to different levels of materiality instead of myopically discussing linguistic code.

In contrast to the weighty bulk of books and monographs on Oppen which have undoubtedly enriched Oppen scholarship in recent years (especially since 2008 when Oppen would have celebrated his hundredth birthday and which saw the publication of

seminal texts such as the books by Nicholls and Shoemaker), I do not rush through Oppen's oeuvre in linear fashion in a futile attempt to cover all his volumes of poetry. Such an approach, though favored by most scholars who tend to devote one chapter to one book of poetry respectively (cf. Barzilai, Swigg, Nicholls), turns a blind eye on deeply rooted, overarching themes of Oppen's poetry and only scratches the surface. While it is understandable that scholars organize their readings of Oppen's overall manageable oeuvre chronologically, compartmentalizing his poetic output into the readymade rubrics of his book titles does not touch upon the core of his poetics. Meticulous forays into the actual materials Oppen used are lacking. By means of investigating linkages across his volumes of poetry and especially between *Discrete Series*, *The Materials* and the recent *21 Poems* and by taking his non-poetic work into account, this study opens new avenues of reading Oppen's approach to materiality. His concept of the vertical dimension and the line sense carry over into his woodwork and materialize in his palimtextual working papers. Oppen employs the compositional method of "[p]iling up pieces of papers to find the words" (Hatlen 44), as will be argued, to achieve "the objectification of the poem, the making an object of the poem" quite literally by building three-dimensionally in his working papers ("Interview with Dembo" 160). Oppen, true to the often-quoted initial lines from *Of Being Numerous* that "There are things / We live among 'and to see them / Is to know ourselves'" (NCP 163), was sensitive to the material aspects of his surroundings. This respect for what he calls in "Route" "[t]he purity of the materials" also shows, albeit less thickly or three-dimensionally, in the arrangement of his pages and the construction of his books (194).

Taking my cue from Davidson's materialist, palimtextual approach to Oppen's archive and Stephen Cope's fine edition of Oppen's writing outside of his published poetry, I extend this reading strategy by focusing on the material components of the actual printed product. If his archival corpus with its myriad aphorisms, jottings, and notes resembles the place where the sights of construction become visible, Oppen's perceptive work with pages and the arrangement of pages in his books suggests parallels to the image of construction sites. Davidson hints at this widening of the analytical angle in the second chapter of his lucid book *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word*. In "Palimtexts: George Oppen, Susan Howe, and the Material Text" (republished with minor changes in 2009 as "Palimtexts: Postmodern Poetry and the Material Text" in *Thinking Poetics: Essays on George Oppen* edited by Steve Shoemaker), he concludes the first paragraph with the following three pertinent

questions: “How does the materiality of the page interact with the materiality of social forms beyond the archive? What happens when the writer foregrounds manuscript and archive in the final published version? What is on the surface of the page?” (64). This study addresses these questions by implementing what might, for lack of a better term, best be called a dis/close reading strategy that reads the material page and bibliographic phenomena in tandem with linguistic code and palimtextual vestiges.

This analytical trajectory is indebted to Davidson’s excellent archival work and the stringent terminology of the ‘palimtext’ which he develops from his findings, and which is predicated on his claim that “writing is archeological, the gradual accretion and sedimentation of textual materials, no layer of which can ever be isolated from any other” (“Palimtexts” 27). Davidson is the scholar who discusses the material aspect of Oppen’s compositional method most vigorously, though with a strong emphasis on what he calls “‘palimpsestic’ manuscripts: pages of individual poems onto which new lines or stanzas have been glued so that the revised draft seems to rise vertically off the page in a kind of thick, textual impasto” (34). Since he was the “curator of the Archive for New Poetry [at the University of California, San Diego]” when “Oppen’s papers in their pristine state” were sorted and categorized (33), Davidson’s insights into the transformative wanderings of pages from manuscript to printed book are invaluable for every Oppen scholar. Davidson again and again addresses Oppen’s respect for “the poem’s materiality, its existence as writing” and mentions Oppen’s “emphasis on the materiality of language [which] is duplicated in his compositional method” (*Ghostlier* 66; “Introduction” xl). Oppen described this method in letters and interviews. In a letter from February 9, 1959, for instance, he tells his half-sister about his compositional method: “I write stacks and stacks of notes—literally stacks of paper—and mull them over, and sometimes wonder what I meant, and switch them around—and so on” (*SL* 24). In Davidson’s words, Oppen “would build his poems vertically off the page, gluing revisions on top of previous text, [...] creating a textual pile, often dozens of layers thick” (“Introduction” xl, xlv). Oppen’s idiosyncratic technique of stacking as well as cutting and pasting is grounded in the physical materiality of paper. For Oppen, the material instantiation of text cannot be separated from the papery surface into which words are inscribed. The pieces of paper with which Oppen works are hence not only meaningful as “a canvas of white” (*SL* xxvii), offering innumerable possibilities of how to use “the white space of the paper [which] becomes part of the poem” (qtd. in Nicholls

161). As stackable, palpable components of meaning, they epitomize the vertical dimension on the most concrete, material level.

Oppen scholars and textual archivists have pointed to this bulky, three-dimensional, shape-shifting quality of Oppen's manuscripts. DuPlessis, for example, who edited three selections from Oppen's working papers (the term she prefers over Davidson's 'daybook' and which I will use as well), regards the manuscripts as "a kind of composting towards poems or statements of Oppen's poetics" where "[p]hrases recur, travel nomadic from page to page, are rewritten, recopied until some of them are located in or settle into a poem" ("The Anthropologist" 136). She also resorts to the image of the palimpsest to characterize Oppen's technique of pasting corrections on top of other pages. According to DuPlessis, this technique "achieves a clean copy without retyping a whole page" and often results in "an extraordinary paper maché palimpsest" (164).³ In describing the materiality of the Oppen papers, Davidson goes even further and looks beyond the layers of manuscript pages. He, in fact, zeroes in on some of the household items with which these pages are held together: "Oppen used a variety of fasteners—from safety pins, pieces of wire, and pipe cleaners to ring binders" (*Ghostlier* 77). This observation alone, interesting as it is, is not the primary reason why Davidson's perspective features so broadly in this study. Davidson's materialist approach is crucial because he reveals that these little objects contribute semantically to Oppen's word-page assemblages. He, for instance, exposes that "[t]he manuscript for the poem 'The Little Pin' is held together, appropriately enough, by a little pin" and, after divulging that "[a]nother batch of pages is held together by a nail driven through the upper left-hand corner into a piece of plywood," states in straightforward fashion: "A better definition of Objectivism cannot be imagined" (77). According to Davidson, "[t]he pipestem cleaners, metal clasps, and glue are visible representations of those 'little words' that Oppen liked so well, the basic materials of a daily intercourse" ("Palimtexts" 34).

Indeed, Oppen's unique way of constructing manuscripts by making use of materials which one would not necessarily render crucial to the writing process epitomizes his definition of the Objectivist aim to make an object of the poem. Louis Zukofsky's famous claim that by adhering to the key criterion of sincerity "writing

³ Oppen, in a remarkable passage from a 1975 interview, delineates how he corrects his manuscripts: "I have a technique. I paste. I make corrections by pasting. Without this it would be impossible for me. I would spend all my time typing if I retyped the poem. What I do is I paste in the correction or change it until the sheet becomes so thick it is no longer malleable. Then I copy it out straight. So that it may be two hundred versions, three hundred versions" ("George and Mary Oppen: An Interview" 11).

occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist” quite literally materializes in Oppen’s archival palimpsests (273). As will be shown in the final reading, Oppen’s three-dimensional thinking with the things as they exist stretches beyond the page. Recollections by the ones who had access to Oppen’s work room after the poet’s death (his wife Mary and DuPlessis) reveal that his sense of arrangement and the leitmotif of clarity carried over into the physical place where he thought and wrote, “a very, very tiny little room [which] was just plastered with little bits of things pasted up” (“Interview with Dennis Young” 245). Fragments were pasted, among other spots, on the window in the room or, more precisely, on its glass. With rays of light entering the room through the window and illuminating Oppen’s words without the poet’s interference, the threshold between the outside and the inside is breached. The objectified fragment gleams and “the world stops, but lights up” (*SL* 146).

In his response to Burt’s essay, Ramazani imagines pathways for poetry critics to bridge the process-object chasm. “With the help of critics like Burt,” he writes, “we can hope that poetry studies will develop ways of thinking about poems as both processual and thingly, performative and made, the well-wrought urn and the ashes that overflow it” (310). The current study aims to pick up the gauntlet—to sensitize the reader to anachronistic language which Oppen and Crane employ in their machine-absorbing poetics—which Burt and Ramazani flaunt in their “call for ways of reading that only the future can know” (1163). In juxtaposing Crane and Oppen, this dissertation heeds the call for innovative readings of poets whose work upholds the object-process tension, whose poetics bridge the white lacunary space between ‘discrete’ and ‘series.’ Absorbing the machine and incorporating technology into their poems’ materiality, Crane and Oppen stand out as modern American poets whose work acclimatized the changes and challenges of modernity objectively. They wrote and conceived of their poems as processual objects and objectified processes.

1 Hart Crane's Technologic of Metaphor and Poetic Form

Can poetry be forced to establish itself outside of what surrounds it, to ignore the magnificent exuberance of life which the activities of men are adding to nature and which allow the world to be mechanized in an incredible fashion? (Apollinaire 82)

[T]o fool one's self that definitions are being reached by merely referring frequently to skyscrapers, radio antennae, steam whistles, or other surface phenomena of our time is merely to paint a photograph. (CPSL 161-62)

The year 2011 saw two major events in Hart Crane scholarship. 79 years after the poet's suicidal leap into the Gulf of Mexico, James Franco's black-and-white film *The Broken Tower* and John Irwin's book *Hart Crane's Poetry: "Appollinaire lived in Paris, I live in Cleveland, Ohio"* were released in homage to Crane and his work. Based upon Paul Mariani's biography and starring Franco as the poet, *The Broken Tower* received mostly negative reviews. Upon release, the movie was criticized for its lack of a narrative arc and seemingly aimless scenes and long shots of Crane walking around in silence. Given that Franco wanted to recreate the texture of and find a cinematic equivalent to the poet's difficult poetry (cf. Franco "Interview"), this criticism does not come as a surprise. Introducing the movie with a central quote from Crane's theoretical writing, Franco hints at similarities between his film and Crane's poetics: "[T]he motivation of the poem must be derived from the implicit emotional dynamics of the materials used, and the terms of expression employed are often selected less for their logical (literal) significance than for their associational meanings" (CPSL 163). If *The Broken Tower* does not succeed in conveying its own "emotional dynamics" to the majority of (re)viewers, the strong focus on poetry makes the film a central text in Crane scholarship. Franco recites four poems in their entirety in his movie and thus introduces a larger audience to the actual material of Crane's poetic language.⁴ In spending more than ten minutes on the reading of "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen," Franco challenges his audience to take in and open up to Crane's verbal dynamics. As a consequence, the biopic sparked interest in the poet's versification and, in fact, led to

⁴ Strangely enough, Franco misquotes twice in his recital. In the reading of "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen," he forgets to mention "the height" in the line "Blamed bleeding hands extend and thresh the height" (CPSL 23). In "To Brooklyn Bridge," he misreads "*momently*" as 'momentarily' (33).

higher sales of Irwin's publication which provides a comprehensive reading of Crane's intricate poetry (cf. Satran).

Praised by such prominent figures in Crane criticism as Langdon Hammer, Harold Bloom, and Mariani, Irwin's book has been hailed as the apotheosis in studies of Crane's verse. In *A Festschrift for John Irwin*, published in the spring 2016 issue of *The Hopkins Review*, a contributor even recommends: "Having read a shelf of earlier Crane criticism, I'd say: burn the library, for their wisdom is in this book" (Moleworth et. al. 160). The Crane study to end all Crane studies? Irwin analyzes *The Bridge* (1930), *White Buildings* (1926), and "The Broken Tower," Crane's last major poem published after his death, from various perspectives. The scope of Irwin's book is immense as the critic siphons from sources ranging from "art history, history of ideas, biography, psychoanalysis, classical literature, philosophy, mythology, and so on" (Irwin, *Poetry* xi).⁵ This overload might be one reason why Irwin resorts to a universal and rather unspecific thesis in his preface: "What this reading of Crane's work aims to show is that *The Bridge* is the best twentieth-century long poem in English and that it is the best not by a little but by a lot" (xi). As meticulous, discerning, and seminal as Irwin's book is, there are key factors and figures that significantly influenced Crane's composition which he mentions only briefly or not at all. The following chapters will focus on three of these: the machine, Alfred Stieglitz's photography, and T. S. Eliot.

Irwin does not discuss the impact of technological progress on the poet's writing; the "Machine" in Machine Age does not show up in his analysis. This is surprising since "machines increasingly dominated American life and culture in the period between the two World Wars," as Morris puts it in her brilliant essay "Minding Machines/Machining Minds: Writing (at) the Human-Machine Interface." She characterizes "America's Machine Age" as a period in which "the experiences of space, time, and subjectivity shifted to meet the demands of an increasingly urban industrial economy." Besides mentioning "elaborate systems of rails, cars, and planes [which] reconfigured local, regional, and national geographies," she also lists a variety of specific mechanical devices and products of technological progress: "Streamlining the flow of people, taxis, buses, trucks, trains and boats, [...] lampposts, traffic lights, curbs, bricks, ironwork,

⁵ Irwin subdivides his analysis of *The Bridge* into 26 paragraphs. The title of the tenth paragraph shows, for example, that there are too many topics which the author wants to cover. He spends only fifteen pages in dealing with "§ 10 Fantasies of Return to the Womb and the Primal Scene; Three Dimensions Reduced to Two as a Sign of Body Transcendence; the Triple Archetype; Goethe's *Faust*; Plato's Cave Allegory as a Sublimated Womb Fantasy; Helen as Mother; the Influence of Williams and Nietzsche; Demeter, Korē, and the Amerindian Corn Mother" (87).

girders, cables, and bridges became the structures Gertrude Stein called ‘the composition in which we live.’” “Machines” thus “became part of twentieth-century industrial, clerical, financial, and artistic life” (662). The fact that Irwin does not analyze the influence of the machine on Crane’s “artistic life” is even more surprising because the sentence that serves as his subtitle appears in a passage where the poet explicitly talks about modern surface phenomena. Indeed, the three sentences preceding Crane’s remark that he is an American writer from “Cleveland, Ohio” carry more weight than his precise localization or his recurrent misspelling of Apollinaire’s name (cf. Irwin, *Poetry* xiii):

All this talk from Matty [Matthew Josephson] on Appolinaire—about being gay and *so* distressingly and painfully delighted about the telegraph, the locomotive, the automat, the wireless, the street cars and electric lamp post, annoy me. There is no reason for *not* using them—but why is it so important to stick them in. I am interested in possibilities. Appollinaire lived in Paris, I live in Cleveland, Ohio. (*CPSL* 276)

Like Crane’s statement employed as the second epigraph, this passage with its enumeration of technological and mechanical devices makes clear that the machine was on Crane’s mind and that uncritically mentioning “surface phenomena of our time” in poetry did not appeal to Crane (162). It is important to note that, while Crane would have agreed with Apollinaire that poetry cannot “establish itself outside of what surrounds it,” his approach in poetically dealing with the machine does not depend on references to specific mechanical devices nor is it grounded in admiration of the machine’s “magnificent exuberance” (Apollinaire 82). As will be shown, Crane aimed to evaluate the machine by acknowledging both its positive and negative aspects and its “possibilities” for poetic creation. He incorporated the machine as one crucial element of modernity into the materiality of his poetry on multiple levels through a process of familiarization or, in his terminology, absorption and acclimatization.

Crane employs the image of “paint[ing] a photograph” to visualize the superficiality of frequent references to the machine. This juxtaposition implies that photography can represent modern surface phenomena more authentically. The idea also points to the second major influence that Irwin does not discuss: Stieglitz and his photography. As will be argued, Crane saw in the interplay of this photographer and the camera the perfect fusion of artist and medium and, by extension, a harmonious relationship of man and machine. A close reading of Crane’s unfinished essay on and his letters to Stieglitz will show that the poet aimed to take similar steps in his medium toward what he sensed in the photographer’s art as “ultimate harmonies” and a “timeless vision” (*CPSL* 332, 341). This focus on Crane’s view of Stieglitz’s work is promising

since it reveals that the poet acknowledged photography, in contrast to other modern poets like Ezra Pound, as an art form (cf. Trotter 252). Indeed, Crane's appreciation of the medium can be read side by side with Walter Benjamin's remarks on photography in his 1936 essay "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit." Benjamin takes photography as his second example to show that technological reproducibility affects and alters man's conception of art. Drawing parallels between film and photography, he states that the question "*ob Photographie eine Kunst sei*" should have been preceded by the preliminary question "*ob [sich] nicht durch die Erfindung der Photographie der Gesamtcharakter der Kunst [...] verändert habe*" (22). The notion that technological innovation changes aesthetic perception together with Benjamin's statement that "[d]ie wichtigen, elementaren Fortschritte der Kunst sind weder neuer Inhalt noch neue Form – die Revolution der Technik geht beiden voran" are at the core of this study (qtd. in Auerochs 107).

Crane's theoretical writings contain passages which anticipate one of Benjamin's central claims, namely that artistic creation needs to keep pace with technological progress. In "General Aims and Theories," for instance, he acknowledges that "[n]ew conditions of life germinate new forms of spiritual articulation" and continues that "the voice of the present, if it is to be known, must be caught at the risk of speaking in idioms and circumlocutions sometimes shocking to the scholar and historians of logic" (164). In this light, a passage in Crane's defense of "At Melville's Tomb" in "A Letter to Harriet Monroe" appears to be applicable to both "instruments" photography and poetry:

Hasn't it often occurred that instruments originally invented for record and computation have inadvertently so extended the concepts of the entity they were invented to measure (concepts of space, etc.) in the mind and imagination that employed them, that they may metaphorically be said to have extended the original boundaries of the entity measured? This little bit of "relativity" ought not be discredited in poetry now that scientists are proceeding to measure the universe on principles of pure *ratio*, quite as metaphorical [...] as some of the axioms in Job. (169)

The extension of original boundaries shows in Stieglitz's and Crane's use of their respective media. As will be shown, vision is the basis for this extension and the common denominator of their artistic creation. The logic of metaphor becomes the principle for the fusion of vision and verse in Crane's poetry. This principle is also essential for the incorporation of the machine into poetry.

The central body of the Crane chapters will elaborate the concept of Crane's logic of metaphor by analyzing passages in *The Bridge* where "this *inflection* of language" embraces technology and mechanical elements (166). More specifically: By tracing the

metaphoric interplay of bird imagery, organic flight, and (e)motion throughout *The Bridge*, the analysis will show that ambivalent notions associated with avian images become an integral part of Crane's discussion of machinery, mechanized flight, and technological invention. In sections like "The Dance," "Cape Hatteras," and "Atlantis," the "organic principle of a 'logic of metaphor'" evolves into an in/organic principle of what will in the following emerge as the concept of a technologic of metaphor (163). Absorbing the machine into poetry, as Crane puts it, extends the concept of his logic of metaphor, leaving an imprint on poetic form and the materiality of the printed page. The approximation of bird and bridge, a motif which begins and ends Crane's long poem, presents the reader of *The Bridge* with the ultimate harmony of the organic and the inorganic. The technologic of metaphor thus becomes a key component of Crane's poetic technique on which his method of absorbing the machine and adjusting it to poetry depends. Consequently, this study will also complicate Morris's statement that "[h]igh modernist and Left poetry—one looking to the past, the other to the future—converge in condemning the truncation of life at the human-machine interface," which she defines as "the site of interactivity, [...] the point at which two diverse entities—organic and inorganic—are imaginatively and materially reconfigured" (660). Crane and, as will be shown in later chapters, Oppen do not fit into this generalization as they think technological progress, materiality, and modern poetry together. They thus eschew clear-cut classifications into static literary periods and work towards a form of modernism which literally minds the nexus of the machine, materiality, and poetry—a trajectory which still energizes poems and poetics of today. In Crane's case, his way of dealing with the human-machine compound clearly distinguishes his poetry and poetics from fellow modern writers such as Eliot, "the most important twentieth-century influence [...] on Crane's poetry" (Irwin, *Poetry* 249).

A glance at Crane's poetic conversation with Eliot exemplifies how different the younger poet's approach in coming to terms with the Machine Age was. Since Eliot was the go-to poet even for Oppen, such a turn to the author of *The Wasteland* is called for and functions as a linchpin within this book. Close readings of Crane's letters dealing with Eliot show that ideas of absorption and adjustment were on the poet's mind even before he put his machine-absorbing theory into words in 1930. Absorbing influential factors (the machine) and figures (Eliot) of his time is central to Crane's versification. What he meant when he employed the term 'absorb' becomes clearer if one considers passages of his letters in which he uses this metaphor. Tellingly, the fact that these

examples range from the early 1920s to his last months in Mexico in 1931 proves the significance of this idea. In 1921, for instance, he tells his friend Gorham Munson of Dostoyevsky's effect on his reading schedule: "When I get 'Dosty' more cleared out of the way I intend to get more poetry reading again, but just now he is all-absorbing, and somehow his offering is such a distinct type of itself that one doesn't want to mix any other kind of reading with it" (242). The adjective "all-absorbing" in combination with the phrase that Crane "doesn't want to mix any other kind of reading" with the novelist's work makes clear that Dostoyevsky completely occupied Crane's mind. In a similar way in 1927, while working intensively on *The Bridge*, he writes his financial patron Otto Kahn, to whom he would dedicate his magnum opus (fig. 1). "I am taking for granted your continued interest in the progress of *The Bridge*, in which I am still absorbed, and which has reached a stage where its general outline is clearly evident" (553). Absorbed into his own creation, Crane dwells in his materials. His work thus progresses. Even during less creative periods of his career, while living in Mexico, Crane resorts to this image to point to the positive aspects of his stay: "At least I feel that I am living fully

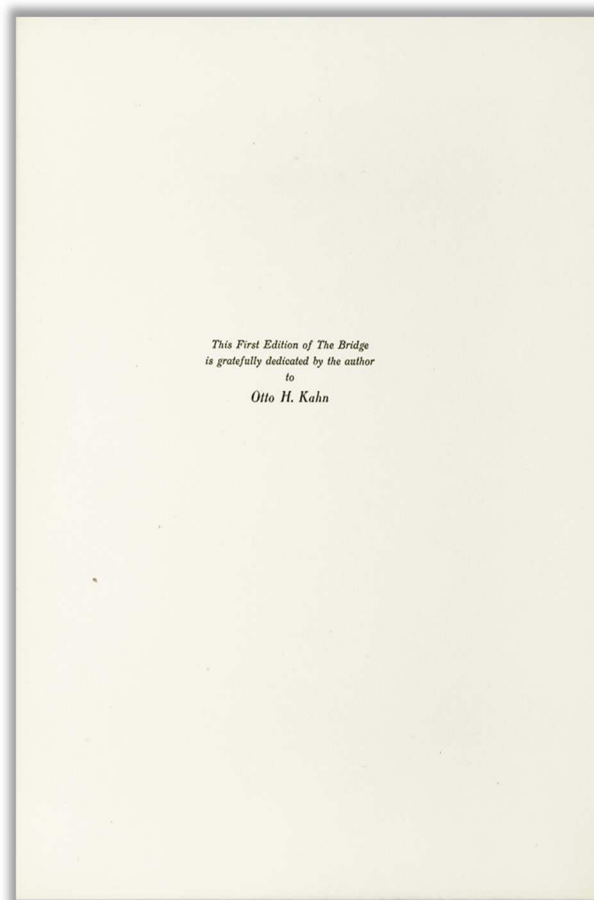


Fig. 1: Crane's dedication to Otto Kahn in the 1930 Paris Black Sun Edition.

and absorbing a great deal, whatever else” (704). As these examples show, Crane associates absorption with an act of completely taking in, swallowing influences and outside impressions.

Closely connected to this physical aspect of the metaphor (etymologically ‘absorb’ means ‘to suck up, swallow’) is the image of digestion which Crane employs in his first enthusiastic outline of *The Bridge* in 1923. Telling Munson that *The Bridge* “concerns a mystical synthesis of ‘America’” whose “form will be symphonic,” he not only refers to “the treatment of mechanical manifestations of today as subject for lyrical, dramatic, and even epic poetry” but also points out that “[t]he field of possibilities literally glitters all around one with the perception and vocabulary to pick out significant details and digest them into something emotional” (321-22). The combination of “mechanical manifestations” and the striking visceral metaphor of digesting impressions “into something emotional” extend the idea of swallowing. A process of re- and transforming small or, to use Oppen’s adjective, discrete parts (“significant details”) follows absorption. Crane pairs the same metaphor with inorganic and organic images in a 1927 letter to Yvor Winters. After having commented on numerous of Winters’ poems, he turns to his own work and lets the poet-critic know: “I must always write from the standpoint of Adam,—or rather, I must always fool myself that Adam ‘felt the same way about it.’ And you have granted me the feat at least of digesting machinery as successfully as nightingales” (526). The abrupt transition from the first human in the Book of Genesis to the paradoxical phrase “of digesting machinery as successfully as nightingales” suggests that Adam’s original, name-giving privilege also applies to Crane. This poetic freedom, which is in Crane’s case grounded in a process of absorbing, digesting, and fusing, allows juxtapositions of machinery and organisms such as seemingly paradoxical combinations of the machine and birds throughout *The Bridge*.

1.1 Crane and the Machine

If you can't abuse a machine, why have it! Machines are made for abuse. . . . Fool-proof! Human beings were never jetted, conceived, articulated, ejected, nursed, spanked, corrected, educated, harangued, married, divorced, petted, emasculated, loved and damned, jailed and liberated, besides being plastered, frightened and mangled, pickled and strangled—THEY were never meant to be abused! (*CPSL*, "Supplication to the Muses on a Trying Day" 129)

As a preliminary reading before discussing Crane's theoretical and poetic writings, it is useful to discuss what Crane treated as machines and which characteristics he attributed to them. For this purpose, a few short but significant examples from his letters will be examined which show that the 'machine' and its connotations played an important role in Crane's life even prior to his poetic engagement with machinery. Such a biographical reading is helpful, because it introduces the connection and/or opposition between the organic/inorganic, man/machine, and poet/typewriter. These binary pairs are essential elements in passages where Crane poetically addresses "[t]he encroachment of machinery on humanity" (441); they also recur as key factors in the following close readings. Taken from primary texts which have so far been neglected by critics, the following excerpts yield important insights into Crane's relationship to the machine and his method of machine-minding.⁶

In a March 1920 letter, Crane writes Munson about an inspiring "spectacle of a good prize-fight" which lifted his negative mood and let him temporarily forget the familial distress caused by his mother and grandmother. His description of the fight links man and machinery explicitly:

Of course, many matches are boresome, but provide two sublime machines of human muscle-play in the vivid light of a "ring,"—stark darkness all around with yells from all sides and countless eyes gleaming, centered on the circle,—and I get a real satisfaction and stimulant. I get very heated, and shout loudly, jump up from my seat etc. and get more interested every time I go. [...] There is something about the atmosphere of a ring show that I have for so long wanted to capture into the snares of a poem. (225)

⁶ The term "machine-minding" as employed here and in later chapters is adapted from Morris. The hyphenated compound word is meant to denote both taking the machine into consideration (as in 'mind the gap') as well as making the machine an animate actor (give a mind to machinery).

In metaphorically depicting the prize-fighters as “two sublime machines of human muscle-play,” Crane attributes features of ‘the machine’ to the boxers. He does not, however, elaborate on these mechanical features with expectable terms nor does he specify them in detail. Instead of using adjectives like ‘precise,’ ‘fast,’ or ‘energetic,’ which one might equally associate with machinery and boxers, Crane qualifies the “machines” as “sublime.” Frequently adapted and refined since Longinus’s *On Sublimity*, this adjective and the associations evoked by it hark back to a long tradition of critical debates about the concept of the sublime. With regard to Crane’s poetry, critics often base their analyses on Leo Marx’s idea of the “technological sublime” (Marx 195), especially when dealing with the “Cape Hatteras” or “Atlantis” section of *The Bridge*.⁷ While it is likely that Crane did not employ this loaded adjective to enter philosophical debates but rather to evoke notions of grandeur, awe, and power, his way of describing the boxers and “the atmosphere of a ring” is crucial, as it anticipates Crane’s metaphoric discussion of the organic-inorganic opposition in his poetry.

Crane’s metaphor is complex. By attributing the “sublime” to the machines, Crane modifies the vehicle of his metaphor. The human boxers as the tenor, on the other hand, figure in his reminiscence as a synecdoche. The poet breaks the organic body down to “human muscle-play” and, in the same breath, exalts the inorganic objects. In this way, the underlying metaphor, ‘boxers are machines,’ shifts in favor of the machines; the vehicle of the metaphor gathers momentum and becomes literally sublime. The boundaries between tenor and vehicle, between man and machine, blur. The metaphor converges to a phrase that comes closer to something like ‘sublime muscle machines.’⁸ Poetic phrases like “vivid light,” “stark darkness,” and “countless eyes gleaming, centered on the circle” further add to the vitality of this human-machine fusion. As Crane’s reaction to this spectacle reveals (“real satisfaction and stimulant,” “very heated,” “shout loudly,” “jump up”), the “sublime machines of human muscle-play” excited and strongly impressed the poet. It does then not come as a surprise that the

⁷ Gordon Tapper traces this idea of the technological sublime through “Cape Hatteras.” He differentiates it from other forms of the sublime by stating that “[w]hereas other forms of the sublime entail a powerful sense of human limitations, the technological sublime undercuts the idea of limits because it presupposes the idea of progress, the ability of civilization to generate an unending series of mechanical innovations” (156). For a discussion of this concept focusing on “The Tunnel,” see Stalter 71-73.

⁸ For an excellent discussion of how Crane’s metaphors work and what they expect from the reader, see Irwin’s essay “Hart Crane’s ‘Logic of Metaphor.’” His analysis is also applicable to Crane’s machine-man comparison: “Characteristically, in Crane’s verse the metaphoric relationship ‘A is B’ takes by ellipsis the form of a complex word or phrase ‘AB,’ and this complex word or phrase becomes in turn part of the metaphoric relationship ‘C is AB,’ and so on, with mounting complexity” (209).

metaphoric approximation of the organic and the inorganic infuses Crane's poetry as well.

As three short passages from Crane's letters show, the poet did not only project features of the machine on other human beings but considered himself as working in tandem with and sometimes against the machine. In a 1919 letter to his mother, Crane refers to his typewriter as a machine that makes his writing cumbersome.⁹ In the penultimate sentence of this letter, he asks his mother to "discount misspelled words, etc., this machine is at times quite balky and at others quite exuberant" (209). The adjectives which Crane employs here are significant since they point to the ambivalence inherent in the machine. The typewriter, the mechanical device indispensable for Crane's creation of poetry, can fail to do what Crane wants it to do; but it can also, and more often so in Crane's case, be profusely verbose. While it is easy to find mechanical explanations why a typewriter could be called "quite balky,"¹⁰ Crane's phrase "quite exuberant" poses more questions. After all, the typewriter is passive until fingers strike its keys. The literally digital moment when fingers touch keys, buttons or other mechanical parts is decisive. Morris calls this site where the inorganic and organic meet "the interface, the site of interactivity, the join that complicates the compound 'human-machine' by simultaneously separating and linking its components, [...] the spot where a machine is minded or, from the opposite perspective, a mind machined" (660). The machine, then, is dependent on the human stimulus to become exuberant and thus inextricably linked to the human apparatus. As the epigraph for this subchapter paradoxically suggests, use and abuse of the machine are interchangeable terms insofar as they depend on the writer's mood. It is the cooperation of typewriter and writer which leads to an elaborate or excessive output. Crane's word choice "quite exuberant" then evokes associations of inorganic-organic reciprocity and hints at a harmonization of machine and man.

This intricate human-machine relationship becomes more explicit in a letter to Waldo Frank from June 19, 1926. Written in a desperate mood, the letter contains a

⁹ A 1920 letter to Munson makes clear that this machine sometimes even forces him to resort to handwriting: "Yes my writing is quite Dada,—very Dada (I like the term as applied) and yet you must put up with it again as my machine has suffered another relapse" (244).

¹⁰ For instance, if a key is jammed and thus keeps the typebar from hitting the ribbon, as it appears to have happened in Crane's letter with "alterate" instead of 'alternate' (206). Other misspelled words in the letter are "quite," "obcession," and "deceidely" (206, 208).

sentence that is especially significant for the following discussions.¹¹ Feeling that his poetic endeavors hinge on an “emptied vision,” Crane resorts to the realm of the impossible: “At pres- I’m writing nothing—would that I were an efficient factory of some kind!” (464). As an “efficient factory of some kind,” he would not have to worry about the lack of a “sustained vision” but simply produce lines or, rather, streamlines of poetry. Given the efficiency of factories, his output would be quick, regulated, and accurate; his writer’s block would be replaced by mechanical productivity. While a similar wish has probably crossed the mind of many writers facing a crisis in literary creation, Crane’s word choice is striking, as his wished-for inorganic equivalent works on a macroscopic level. Crane, after all, does not say that he would like to be an efficient machine, the term he employs as the vehicle of his metaphor in his remembrance of the prizefight. Instead, he aims higher because a factory usually consists of a set of buildings in which a plethora of machines are at work. It is worth noting here that Crane was quite familiar with the interior of factories. His father, the inventor of Life Savers candy, employed Crane in his candy manufacturing business when the poet’s financial troubles were most urgent (cf. Fisher 115-16). In “The River,” Crane alludes to these biographical episodes: “Behind / My father’s cannery works I used to see / Rail-squatters ranged in nomad rallery” (*CPSL* 42). Similarly, in “Episode of Hands,” Crane inscribes himself into the poem when he speaks of “the fingers of the factory owner’s son, / That knew a grip for books and tennis / As well as one for iron and leather,—” and begins the last stanza by stating: “And factory sounds and factory thoughts / Were banished from him” (115). In wishing that he were an industrial site, Crane hints at literary mass production with the help of mechanical devices such as, with his writer’s block in mind, exuberant typewriters.

If the previous two examples have shown how Crane referred to the machine in his personal and literary life, an important passage in a November 1923 letter to Jean Toomer conveys that the poet also participated fervently in contemporary debates about the machine. In the letter, Crane mentions passionate discussions of previous nights with William Slater Brown and Edward Nagle: “The three of us got drunk on the wine filched last night from the private cellar of the owner of this house. Great defense of the

¹¹ Together with another letter to Frank written on the next day, this document reveals Crane’s temporary loss of faith in his visionary project, *The Bridge*. Crane, for example, thinks “that the artist more and more licks his own vomit, mistaking it for the common diet. He amuses himself that way in a culture without faith and convictions—but he might as well be in elfin land with a hop pipe in his mouth. . . . No, the bridge isn’t very flambouyant [sic] these days” (464).

MACHINE by Brown opposed by Crane and Nagle. Went furious to bed. The night before it was Marinetti, John Brown, KKK and Jesus Christ” (358). The topics discussed by Brown, Nagle, and Crane cover a large and diverse range of figures and phenomena. Despite, or rather because of, their inebriation, the three men jump in time from “Jesus Christ” to 1920s topics of interest. For this study, “the MACHINE” and “Marinetti” are especially important. As Crane’s reaction to Brown’s “defense of the MACHINE” shows, the poet was immersed in and agitated by their controversy. Unfortunately, it remains unclear which features of “the MACHINE” they were arguing about in detail, and it is also not said which Marinetti texts they had on their minds. Still, although Crane does not specify the Marinetti discussion, it is conducive to read some key declarations of the 1912 “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature” side by side with “The Revolution of the Word Proclamation,” a manifesto issued by Eugene Jolas which was published in *transition* in 1929 and signed among others by Crane:

1. One must destroy syntax and scatter one’s nouns at random, just as they are born. [...]
5. Every noun should have its double; that is, the noun should be followed, with no conjunction, by the noun to which it is related by analogy. Example: man-torpedo boat, woman-gulf, crowd-surf, piazza-funnel, door-faucet. [...] Still better, one should deliberately confound the object with the image that it evokes, foreshortening the image to a single essential word. [...] One must – people say – spare the reader’s capacity for wonder. Nonsense! Let us rather worry about the fatal corrosion of time that not only destroys the expressive value of a masterpiece but also its power to amaze. (Marinetti 57-58)

In 1929, then, Crane subscribed to the following declarations evocative of some of Marinetti’s points (fig. 2):

6. The literary creator has the right to disintegrate the primal matter of words imposed on him by text-books and dictionaries.
7. He has the right to use words of his own fashioning and to disregard existing grammatical and syntactical laws. [...]
10. Time is a tyranny to be abolished. [...]
12. The plain reader be damned.

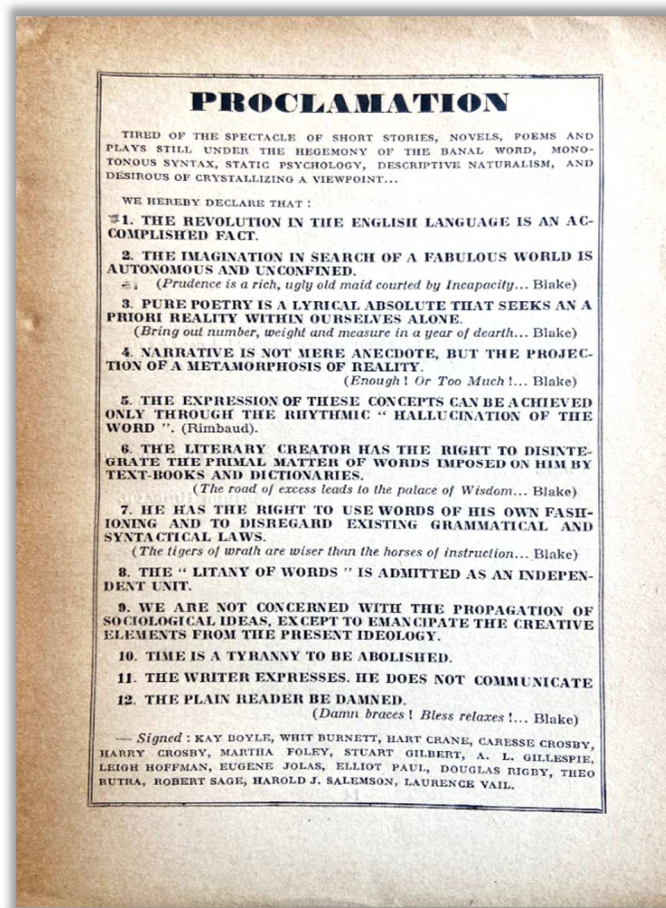


Fig. 2: "The Revolution of the Word Proclamation" in *transition* signed by Crane (13).

The prolific publishing network between the signatories Crane, *transition* editor Jolas, and Harry and Caresse Crosby (who founded the Black Sun Press which printed the first edition of *The Bridge*) will be examined in more depth later. For now, suffice it to say that Marinetti, who spearheaded the Futurist movement, as well as the machine were subjects of debate in two subsequent nights. This biographical actuality demonstrates how influential and intellectually challenging these disruptive factors were for Crane in the 1920s.

That Crane was well acquainted with his friends' ambivalent opinions on the influence of machinery shows also in his stance toward Frank's work. An important passage which blatantly visualizes the encroachment of machinery can be found in Frank's *Our America* from 1919. According to the author,

[t]he average New Yorker is caught in a Machine. He whirls along, he is dizzy, he is helpless. If he resists, the Machine will mangle him. If he does not resist, it will daze him first with its glittering reiteration, so that when mangling comes he is past knowing. He says he is too busy, and wonders why. He means, that all preference to act is gone from him. (172)

This invasive, threatening, and paralyzing aspect of the machine might have been one major reason for Crane's statement that "Waldo Frank's book IS a pessimistic analysis! The worst of it is, he has hit on the truth so many times" (*CPSL* 219). But even Frank's attitude to the machine was not restricted to such negative impressions. In *The Re-Discovery of America*, published in 1929, he would write that the machine might develop into "a means towards achieving wholeness, of fusing man's control over nature with his control over self. At once, it would be a symbol of growth" (qtd. in Wood 24).¹² Against this backdrop of wavering judgments and various opinions, Crane attempted to evaluate the machine, acknowledging both its negative and positive features. In the essay "Modern Poetry," he promotes his theory and method of embracing the machine thoroughly and explicitly.

1.2 Crane's "Modern Poetry"

(Inside the sure machinery
Is still
And curdled only where a sill
Sluices its one unyielding smile)
(*CPSL*, "Lachrymae Christi" 14)

In 1930, the same year in which *The Bridge* was published, Crane's brief essay "Modern Poetry" appeared in *Revolt in the Arts: A Survey of the Creation, Distribution and Appreciation of Art in America*. As editor Oliver M. Sayler stated in the preface of the book, the basic "[r]ealization that all of the arts have a common fountain-head in the human imagination and that whatever profoundly influences one of them is likely to affect the others" gave rise to the survey which includes essays by contributors working in various fields of art such as theater, film, and painting (vii). In "Modern Poetry," Crane sets out to analyze and define both the role and function of poetry in a time in which "the shifting emphasis of the Western World away from religion toward science" continually poses new challenges to the poet. In doing so, Crane elucidates his approach to come to terms with modernity and the "Machine Age" (*CPSL* 171). After two

¹² Unsurprisingly, Frank, to whom Crane dedicated his first book of poems *White Buildings* (1926), would be one of the first critics to emphasize the importance of the machine in Crane's life and poetry. In "An Introduction to Hart Crane," he mentions the machine with reference to Crane, his bridge, and mankind in general: "He loved machines, the earth-tang of the workers;" "In 'Proem,' the poet exhorts the object of his choice—the Bridge. It shall synthesize the world of chaos. It joined city, river and sea; man made it with his new hand, the machine;" "The Tunnel gives us man in his industrial hell which the machine—his hand and heart—has made; now let the machine be his godlike hand to uplift him;" "From a machine-made entity, the Poem makes the Bridge into a machine. But it has beauty" (127-31).

paragraphs dealing with the question whether modern poetry is still in a state of rebellion or revolution, Crane provides his definition of poetry: “For poetry is an architectural art, based not on Evolution or the idea of progress, but on the articulation of the contemporary human consciousness *sub specie aeternitatis*, and inclusive of all readjustments incident to science and other shifting factors related to that consciousness” (170). Crane’s architectural analogy does not come as a surprise. As the titles of his two books of poetry, *White Buildings* and *The Bridge*, as well as the title of his last major poem “The Broken Tower” demonstrate, architectural constructions energized Crane’s versification throughout his career.¹³ Lee Edelman even goes so far and qualifies a typical Crane poem as “a structure fabricated by the poet’s architectural deployment of language” (26). As will be discussed in the Oppen chapters, the author of *Discrete Series* would comply with such a palpable, in his case, palimtextual approach to the materials of poetry.

The second half of Crane’s statement requires more explanation. Crane dismisses “the idea of progress” as the foundation of poetry, which sets the tone for his later discussion of “the machine.” Instead, he sees poetry grounded in the expression of the “contemporary human consciousness” under the aspect of eternity (past, present, and future) and, significantly, inclusive of the influences which external, “shifting factors” exert on this consciousness. By stressing these three components, Crane not only harks back to his 1925 essay “General Aims and Theories” but also highlights his central aim to achieve simultaneity of the past and the present in poetry. This concept of fusing is essential for Crane’s poetics and particularly important for *The Bridge*. In “General Aims and Theories,” Crane explains that it was his “intention to embody in modern terms (words, symbols, metaphors) a contemporary approximation to an ancient human culture or mythology” in “For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen,” in a way the poem in *White Buildings* which contained the conceptual seed of *The Bridge*. The poet considers this process of connecting the present, the past, and modern readjustments as “really building a bridge between so-called classic experience and many divergent

¹³ Given that Crane “punned freely and often on both the words *heart* and *grace* [his mother’s first name]” (Barbarese 424), it might not be too far-fetched to assume that the poet punned on his surname as well. As a machine for lifting, lowering, and transporting heavy materials, a crane is, of course, one major mechanical instrument necessary for the successful completion of architectural projects. In this light, the fact that Crane asked *The Dial* editor Marianne Moore for a change in “To Brooklyn Bridge” of “‘Towers blot the drowning west in sporing steam’” to “‘All afternoon the cloud-flown derricks burn’” (the final version has ‘turn’ instead of ‘burn’) is noteworthy. This change seemed superior “as far as [Crane’s] personal intentions in the poem matter” (CPSL 481). It is likely that Crane’s “personal intentions in the poem” coincide with a sophisticated pun (derrick/crane) on his surname.

realities of our seething, confused cosmos of today” (160). Less theoretical and more to the point, Crane’s remarks on the same poem in a February 1923 letter to Frank read: “The whole poem is a kind of fusion of our own time with the past. Almost every symbol of current significance is matched by a correlative, suggested or actually stated, ‘of ancient day’” (316). Even more succinct than these prose explications, two words “of the [oxymoronic] fury fused” in Crane’s “To Brooklyn Bridge” summarize this leitmotif: “condense eternity” (34). These passages, however, primarily exemplify Crane’s wish to merge the past with the present. The “readjustments incident to science and other shifting factors related to that consciousness” fall short here. That Crane ranked the growing influence of machinery among the most challenging as well as promising “shifting factors” becomes apparent in the final paragraph of a 1926 letter to Frank.

Having regained his faith in *The Bridge*, two months after he had confided in Frank that “[t]he form of my poem rises out of a past that so overwhelms the present with its worth and vision that I’m at loss to explain my delusion that there exist any real links between that past and a future worthy of it” (467), Crane closes his letter as follows:

I have never been able to live *completely* in my work before. Now it is to learn a great deal. To handle the beautiful skeins of this myth of America—to realize suddenly, as I seem to, how much of the past is living under only slightly altered forms, even in machinery and such-like, is extremely exciting. So I’m having the time of my life, just now, anyway. (484)

As Crane’s enthusiastic statements illustrate, machinery belongs to modern phenomena which can be utilized to display the continuity of the past in the present. As challenging as these “comparative influences of science, machinery, and other factors” are, they have to be dealt with and poetically appreciated to bring about an authentic, “complete synthesis of human values.” Without readjustments, without the absorption of the machine, “the articulation of the contemporary human consciousness *sub specie aeternitatis*” will be inchoate (171-72). Convinced that the machine provides insights into “the continuous and living evidence of the past in the inmost vital substance of the present” (554), Crane elaborates these ideas in more detail in “Modern Poetry” and delineates a pivotal aspect of his poetics which most critics have neglected.

After claiming that “[t]he function of poetry in a Machine Age is identical to its function in any other age” and that machinery’s “only menace lies in its capacities for facile entertainment,” he asserts that the machine’s “firm entrenchment in our lives has already produced a series of challenging new responsibilities for the poet” (171). His

following theoretical remarks are crucial for this study (and its title) and pivotal for understanding Crane's poetics:

For unless poetry can absorb the machine, i.e., *acclimatize* it as naturally and casually as trees, cattle, galleons, castles and all other human associations of the past, then poetry has failed of its full contemporary function. This process does not infer any program of lyrical pandering to the taste of those obsessed by the importance of machinery; nor does it essentially involve even the specific mention of a single mechanical contrivance. It demands, however, along with the traditional qualifications of the poet, an extraordinary capacity for surrender, at least temporarily, to the sensations of urban life. [...] Machinery will tend to lose its sensational glamour and appear in its true subsidiary order in human life as use and continual poetic allusion subdue its novelty. For, contrary to general prejudice, the wonderment experienced in watching nose dives is of less immediate creative promise to poetry than the familiar gesture of a motorist in the modest act of shifting gears. I mean to say that mere romantic speculation on the power and beauty of machinery keeps it at a continual remove; it can not act creatively in our lives until, like the unconscious nervous responses of our bodies, its connotations emanate from within—forming as spontaneous a terminology of poetic reference as the bucolic world of pasture, plow, and barn. (171-72)

It is Crane's conviction that "the machine" must not be disregarded in poetic creation. If poetry cannot integrate the machine, it will have "failed of its full contemporary function." The poet needs to familiarize himself with the machine by taking it in entirely ("absorb") and adapting it ("*acclimatize*") "naturally and casually" to his repertoire of poetic materials and figures of speech. Importantly, Crane defines this process against "any program of lyrical pandering to the taste of those obsessed by the importance of machinery," that is, against any kind of fetishizing of the machine, technology, or science as in Futurist literature. Not even the "specific mention of a single mechanical contrivance" is necessary in this process.¹⁴ But it is crucial that the poet accepts and gives in to "the sensations of urban life," so that the routine in (poetically) engaging with machinery will make him see beyond the overwhelming phenomenon and reveal the machine's "true subsidiary order in human life."¹⁵ Merely marveling at the sensational

¹⁴ This qualification harks back to Crane's stance toward Apollinaire's poetry. Besides the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Crane mentions specific mechanical devices in another letter while discussing Josephson's exuberant praise of Apollinaire: "And,—just *why* is Appolinaire so portentous a god? Will radios, flying machines, and cinemas have such a great effect on poetry in the end?" (271).

¹⁵ Crane's phrase that the poet needs "an extraordinary capacity for surrender" is strongly reminiscent of Eliot's diction and appears to build on key ideas in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Crane seems to have adapted some of Eliot's statements to his machine-absorbing text. For example: "What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career. What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. [...] The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together. [...] And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to

aspect of machinery, as in an air show where spectators experience wonderment “in watching nose dives,” will prevent the machine from becoming an integral part of life, will keep “it at a continual remove.”

Crane’s counterexample, “the familiar gesture of a motorist in the modest act of shifting gears,” underscores the difference between “watching nose dives” and physically engaging with the machine. The “act of shifting gears” is “the interface, the site of interactivity” between man and machine (Morris 660). For Crane, this point of contact is more promising than “mere romantic speculation on the power and beauty of machinery,” as the act of shifting gears presupposes knowledge of and experience with the machine. Through routine (“familiar gesture”) man has internalized the necessary steps of shifting gears, has thus absorbed the machine. Therefore, the actual process does not require much thought anymore. The machine has been acclimatized to “the unconscious nervous responses of our bodies:” it has been minded.

The fact that Crane employs the word combination “shifting gears” in “Cape Hatteras,” the section of *The Bridge* dealing with the invention of mechanical flight, reveals that this sensation/familiarization dichotomy energized Crane’s conception of his long poem as well. In “Cape Hatteras,” the critical rhyming couplet reads: “A flash over the horizon—shifting gears— / And we have laughter, or more sudden tears.” Here, the image of planes flying through the “blind crucible of endless space” fuses Crane’s two examples of approaching the machine. Framed by dashes, the phrase “shifting gears” is connected to and, at the same time, separated from the aviator and the spectators. As the pilot shifts gears, so the audience shifts emotionally from “laughter” to “sudden tears.” It seems that, while pilots pick up speed, the audience gazing detachedly at this show can only think in binary pairs and expect extremes: “Seeing himself an atom in a shroud— / Man hears himself an engine in a cloud!” (CPSL 55). As “an engine in a cloud,” man has, in fact, been absorbed by the machine. Energizing Crane’s “Modern Poetry,” these lines then suggest that the boundaries between absorbing the machine and being absorbed by the machine are unstable; or, in Morris’s terminology, the boundaries between minding the machine and machines machining minds are in flux.

In the last paragraph of “Modern Poetry,” Crane subsumes this ambivalence under “the American *psychosis*.” Identifying in Walt Whitman the “most typical and

know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living” (958-61).

valid expression” of this split, he mentions Whitman’s “faults as a technician and his clumsy and indiscriminate enthusiasm” but also enunciates that he “was able to coordinate those forces in America which seem most intractable, fusing them into a universal vision” (171-72). Like the idea of “shifting gears,” the older poet figures prominently in “Cape Hatteras” which stresses the connection between Whitman and the motif of technological progress and mechanical/poetic flight.¹⁶ Despite his flaws in poetic technique,¹⁷ Whitman managed to come to terms with shifting factors and forces of the nineteenth century. He incorporated modern phenomena such as “[t]he gigantic dredging machines” or “the locomotives rushing and roaring” in “Passage to India” into his all-encompassing vision (Whitman 532).¹⁸ In this way, Whitman becomes the paradigm of “poetic prophecy” which, as Crane defines it, “in the case of the seer has nothing to do with factual prediction or with futurity. It is a peculiar type of perception, capable of apprehending some absolute and timeless concept of the imagination with astounding clarity and conviction” (172). The poet-prophet perceives more in the present, sees more of the past in the present, and apprehends even in seemingly futuristic phenomena “some absolute and timeless concept of the imagination.” Crane’s semantic distinction between words associated with sight (“seer,” “perception,” “apprehension”) and what he subsumes under the timeless quality of vatic insight shine forth more lucidly if one turns to Crane’s correspondence with Alfred Stieglitz. As Crane’s letters make clear, the photographer not only epitomized the clairvoyant aspect of seeing. He also exemplified how the artist can utilize (absorb and acclimatize) the machine as an instrument of “mechanical perfectibility” (332).

¹⁶ “Cape Hatteras” contains direct quotations from and allusions to Whitman’s works: “—Recorders ages hence’—ah, syllables of faith;” “that span of consciousness thou’st named / The Open Road” (55, 60). Crane mentions the central role of the older poet in a 1927 letter to Kahn in which he states that “Cape Hatteras” “will be a kind of ode to Whitman” (557). Even prior to his work on *The Bridge*, Whitman was on his mind: “The more I think about my *Bridge* poem the more thrilling its symbolical possibilities become, and [...] I begin to feel myself directly connected with Whitman” (327).

¹⁷ Whitman’s “faults as a technician” are, for Crane, opposed to “Mr. Eliot, superior technician that he is” (311). It thus seems likely that Crane aimed at absorption of Eliot’s technique and acclimatization of Whitman’s “universal vision which takes on additional significance as time goes on” (173).

¹⁸ It does then not come as a surprise that Crane uses a line from “Passage to India” as his epigraph for “Cape Hatteras:” “The seas all cross’d, weather’d the capes, the voyage done” (538). Additionally, lines like “Singing the great achievements of the present” and “For what is the present after all but a growth out of the past?” must have appealed to Crane (531).

1.3 Alfred Stieglitz's Camera Machine and Mechanical Perfectibility

And just so, as you see me here
 (Though kodaked somewhat out of focus,
 My eyes have still the proper locus)
 I'm flashing greetings to your pier.
 (CPSL, "With a Photograph to Zell" 123)

Ah, these interesting photographers. (287)

On April 14, 1923, Crane met Stieglitz and saw his photographs for the first time at an exhibition at the Anderson Galleries in New York. The encounter proved to be a revelatory and conducive one for both artists and resulted in a long-lasting correspondence, which was sparked by Crane's reaction to Stieglitz's photograph *Apples and Gable*. On seeing the photograph, Crane is reported to have exclaimed, "That is it. You've captured life" (qtd. in Greenough 233); a statement of insight to which Stieglitz in a letter two days later responded: "The moment before the Apples and Gable will remain with me for all time.—There was never truer seeing" (qtd. in Unterecker 294). Crane was so impressed by Stieglitz ("Dear great and good man, Alfred Stieglitz") and his photographs that he decided to flesh out his "short verbal definition of [Stieglitz's] works and aims in a fairly comprehensive essay." Motivated by the photographer's affirmation that he had verbalized "the only absolutely correct statement [...] thus far heard concerning [Stieglitz's] photography" (CPSL 331), Crane started writing his essay right away. Unfortunately, he never finished it.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the piece of prose which Crane quotes in his first letter to the photographer—besides praising "the clairvoyance of Stieglitz's photography" (332)—shows that the poet deemed the harmonious interplay of Stieglitz and the camera paradigmatic for successfully coming to terms with the challenges of modernity. In it, Crane introduces his interpretation of the camera as 'machine,' sheds light on essential elements of his own poetics, and highlights the importance of concepts like motion-in-stasis and "the moment made eternal" which become key elements in his poetic discussion of machinery.²⁰ The fact that Crane draws

¹⁹ In his letter one day after their meeting, Crane excuses himself for "not accompanying Mr. Munson this afternoon" to meet Stieglitz. The reason for his absence is, as he states, "that I want to get into certain explanations of your photographs about which, now, I feel a certain proud responsibility" (331).

²⁰ As a July 1923 letter shows, Crane thought of his work on Stieglitz as complex, time-consuming, and substantial: "In the meantime there is a long essay that I hope to write on the photography of Alfred Stieglitz. I ought to have about two weeks for that away from everything, when I could shut myself up somewhere and not have my mind taken away from it for a moment. In it I shall have to go very deep,—

parallels between his “own medium, poetry,” and Stieglitz’s camera work and speaks of “all the truth” which he “was able to share [...] with another man who had manifestly taken many steps in that same direction in *his* work” renders the following statements on photography even more enlightening for his poetic agenda (331):

The camera has been well proved the instrument of personal perception in a number of living hands, but in the hands of Alfred Stieglitz it becomes the instrument of something more specially vital—apprehension. The eerie speed of the shutter is more adequate than the human eye to remember, catching even the transition of the mist-mote into the cloud, the thought that is jetted from the eye to leave it instantly forever. Speed is at the bottom of it all—the hundredth of a second caught so precisely that the motion is continued from the picture infinitely: the moment made eternal.

This baffling capture is an end in itself. It even seems to get at the motion and emotion of so-called inanimate life. It is the passivity of the camera coupled with the unbounded respect of this photographer for its mechanical perfectibility which permits nature and all life to mirror itself so intimately and so unexpectedly that we are thrown into ultimate harmonies by looking at these stationary, yet strangely moving pictures.

If the essences of things were in their mass and bulk we should not need the clairvoyance of Stieglitz’s photography to arrest them for examination and appreciation. But they are suspended on the invisible dimension whose vibrance has been denied the human eye at all times save in the intuition of ecstasy. (331-32)

Right from the beginning, Crane sets Stieglitz apart from other photographers. While they have succeeded in utilizing the camera as “an instrument of personal perception,” Stieglitz’s mastery of the camera, both as medium and machine, captures and simultaneously reveals “something more specially vital—apprehension.” Crane’s semantic differentiation between “perception” and “apprehension” requires some explanation, because thesauri usually list both words as synonyms; while the etymology of perception is more closely linked to the senses, apprehension signifies more than sensorial registration.

The *OED* lists three definitions of “apprehension,” all of which play into Crane’s distinctive terminology: apprehension is (a) an anxiety or fear that something bad or unpleasant will happen, denotes (b) understanding or grasp, and can also signify (c) the action of arresting. In the first sense of the word, apprehension figures as a synonym of suspicion. In Crane’s essay, adjectives and adverbs such as “eerie,” “baffling,” “strangely,” and “unexpectedly” point to this peculiar aspect and unsettling effect of Stieglitz’s photography. These verbal hints at strangeness and foreboding primarily describe the audience’s reaction to “the clairvoyance of Stieglitz’s photography,” but the photographs are also the result and representation of Stieglitz’s own apprehensions

into, perhaps, some of the most delicate problems of art in the future” (345). In other words, Crane wishes to isolate himself to absorb Stieglitz’s art completely.

(b). Before taking a picture, the photographer himself feels “a sense of awe and wonder” in observing external phenomena such as clouds, trees, skyscrapers, or his lover’s hands (qtd. in Norman xiii-xiv). He sees beyond these appearances into the “essences of things” and then arrests (c) this momentous revelation by pressing the shutter-release button. It is this photographic process which, by way of comprising all three definitions of apprehension, distinguishes Stieglitz’s work. Due to his and his camera’s ability to apprehend, photographs originate which capture “the invisible dimension whose vibrance has been denied the human eye at all times save in the intuition of ecstasy.” As Crane claims, this capture “even seems to get at the motion and emotion of so-called inanimate life;” (e)motion which Stieglitz’s *Apples and Gable* exemplarily shows.

The photograph (fig. 3), which initially triggered Crane’s interest in Stieglitz and continued to fascinate the poet,²¹ visualizes the apprehensive qualities arrested by this photographer/camera interplay. The apples, especially the two in the lower half, are



Fig. 3: Alfred Stieglitz, *Apples and Gable* (1922).
11.5 x 9.2 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

suspended on tenuous boughs ominously directed downward. Ripe, round, and sprinkled with glistening beads of moisture, these apples seem to be too heavy a burden for the boughs. Crane seems to allude to this frailty in a later letter to Stieglitz. His introductory sentence there reads: “The imagination dwells on frangible boughs!” (346). Given Crane’s immense admiration for *Apples and Gable*, it is suggestive to equate “imagination” with the apples in the photograph in his exclamatory remark. In Stieglitz’ captured moment, the fall of both apples and rain or dew drops appears to be impending. This imminent motion is further accentuated

through the peak of the gable and the pointed paneling of the house. The white, scale-like panels point both upward and downward, while the lower edges of the lowest set of

²¹ On Independence Day, 1923, Crane writes Stieglitz: “I shall go on thinking of you, the apples and the gable, and writing you whenever I can get a moment” (342).

grey panels are straightened, creating a tilted horizontal line. The almost horizontal line bisecting the window supports this impression. Motion and emotion coincide.

Stieglitz's chosen perspective not only captures but also adds to the effect of slight incongruity and impending fragility. The lowest-hanging apple, for instance, could have been positioned entirely in the upper half of the window. Stieglitz and his camera eye, however, make the apple overlap with the window frame in the background. This shift away from symmetry reinforces the idea that something is awry, is likely to fall out of place. The apprehension of the fall—seen, grasped, and captured by Stieglitz and his camera—is then photographically remembered. Essential for this apprehension is that the camera allows Stieglitz to see and capture both the foreground and the background. This simultaneity of seeing distinguishes the lens from the human eye, as we can only focus sharply and attentively on one level, one site/sight at a time. Stieglitz's photograph thus apprehends more than the human eye can naturally perceive. In this way, the picture exemplifies one key element of what Benjamin subsumes under "technische Reproduzierbarkeit:" "Sie [die technische Reproduktion] kann, beispielsweise, in der Photographie Ansichten des Originals hervorheben, die nur der verstellbaren und ihren Blickpunkt willkürlich wählenden Linse, nicht aber dem menschlichen Auge zugänglich sind, oder mit Hilfe gewisser Verfahren wie der Vergrößerung oder der Zeitlupe Bilder festhalten, die sich der natürlichen Optik schlechtweg entziehen" (12). It is this possible perfection of sight through the machine that Crane designates as "mechanical perfectibility." Again, Crane's distinctive word choice is significant. The camera/machine alone does not yield perfection but is capable of perfecting ("perfectibility") the moment of insight which the photographer has grasped. It follows that the camera's "mechanical perfectibility" is dependent on the human apparatus of perception. A symbiotic connection between "the passivity of the camera" and the photographer is indispensable to capture the moment of apprehending the "essences of things" and "to arrest them for examination and appreciation." The eyes and hands of the photographer need to cooperate with the machine, need to release the camera's "mechanical perfectibility" (*CPSL* 332). This necessary interplay of machine and man, then, results in what Crane calls "ultimate harmonies" or a "photographic synthesis of life" (341). It is only by harmonizing the camera with the photographer, the mechanical with the organic, and the medium with the artist that "new penetrations and syntheses of vision" can be accomplished (355). Vision is key to such a harmonious cooperation.

Crane often employs the word ‘vision’ in his correspondence with Stieglitz and it shows up repeatedly in his theoretical statements. One month before writing the essay on Stieglitz, Crane, for instance, lets Munson not only know that he feels himself “quite fit to become a suitable *Pindar* for the dawn of the machine age” but also claims that “[t]he modern artist needs gigantic assimilative capacities, emotion,—and the greatest of *all—vision*” (328). In his essay, Crane does not use the word explicitly. Yet the fact that Crane directly links Stieglitz to William Blake at the end of his remarks makes clear that he regards Stieglitz’s photographs as the epitome of visionary insight. In fact, the semantic distinction between perception and apprehension as well as its relation to Crane’s poetics can be better understood if one takes into account Crane’s strong interest in Blake’s poetry.²² According to Crane, “Alfred Stieglitz can say to us today what William Blake said to as baffled a world more than a hundred years ago in his ‘To the Christians:’ ‘I give you the end of a golden string: / Only wind it into a ball,— / It will lead you in at Heaven’s gate, / Built in Jerusalem’s wall’” (332). The perplexing qualities in their work (“as baffled a world”), however, are only minor similarities which Crane senses in both artists. More importantly, Crane’s comparison insinuates the clairvoyant aspect in Stieglitz’s and Blake’s work. As the following crucial passage from his letter to Stieglitz from July 1923 clarifies, Crane also ranks himself among their “visionary company” (*CPSL*, “The Broken Tower” 106):

I am writing you perhaps very egotistically, but you will understand that I am always seeing your life and experience very solidly as a part of my own because I feel our identities so much alike in spiritual direction. When it comes to action we diverge in several ways,—but I’m sure we center in common devotions, in a kind of timeless vision. In the above sense I feel you as entering very strongly into certain developments in *The Bridge*. May I say it, and not seem absurd, that you are the first, or rather the purest living indice of a new order of consciousness that I have met? We are accomplices in many ways that we don’t yet fully understand. “What is now proved was once only imagined”, said Blake. I have to combat every day those really sincere people, but limited, who deny the superior logic of metaphor in favor of their perfect sums, divisions and subtractions. (340-41)

Crane feels himself closely connected to Stieglitz as they “center in common devotions, in a kind of timeless vision.” For Crane, this “timeless vision,” which harks back to Crane’s essay where the shutter catches “the thought that is jetted from the eye to leave

²² Quotations from Blake’s poetry frequently appear in Crane’s prose and letters. All three major theoretical texts, “General Aims and Theories,” “A Letter to Harriet Monroe,” and “Modern Poetry,” contain references to the eidetic poet. Blake also enters *The Bridge* through “The Tunnel,” which begins with an epigraph from Blake: “To Find the Western path / Right thro’ the Gates of Wrath” (see Crane 67; 162-63; 167; 172). It should also be noted that the ‘Revolution of the Word’ proclamation quoted earlier in this chapter springs from and is backed by six Blake quotations.

it instantly forever” resulting in pictures in which “the moment [is] made eternal,” is the common basis from which both artists set out to transform the “great energies about us [...] into a higher life.” Although their media differ, Crane sees himself and Stieglitz as “accomplices” or rather, considering his panegyric rhetorical question, pioneers of a “new order of consciousness.”²³ Against this backdrop, the inserted Blakean “Proverb of Hell” is perfectly appropriate. In contrast to “those really sincere people” who feel comfortable in “merely catch[ing] up with some predetermined and set boundaries” (341), Stieglitz and Crane work toward a transcendence of these limits. Their imagination overreaches until, as Blake’s proverb imparts, their visions become commonly accepted facts (“What is now proved”) or, as Crane puts it in his inaugural poem “Legend” in *White Buildings*, “[u]ntil the bright logic is won” (3).

Diverging from most people who cling to a mathematically verifiable logic (“in favor of their perfect sums, divisions and subtractions”), Crane and Stieglitz, with Blake as the visionary paradigm in (Crane’s) mind, aim to liberate in and through their respective media the latent potentialities around them. Crane puts it as follows: “[O]ur work is self-explanatory enough, if they could ‘see’ it. I nearly go mad with the intense but always misty realization of what *can* be done if potentialities are fully freed, released. I know you to feel the same way about your camera,—despite all that you actually *have* done with it already.” Again, Crane closes ranks with his artistic accomplice (“our work”) and enunciates the dilemma that their creative achievements, though “self-explanatory enough,” are not grasped by the majority. As the italics in this quotation indicate, the poet regards Stieglitz’s camera work as a groundbreaking step in the right direction, a creative path which he aims to follow in his medium. In pursuing this way in poetry, Crane cannot utilize Stieglitz’s photographic technique as such. Instead, he comes up with his poetic technique, “the superior logic of metaphor” (341), which he explains in “General Aims and Theories” and “A Letter to Harriet Monroe.” In his definition of “the organic principle of a ‘logic of metaphor,’” phrases like “the implicit emotional dynamics of the materials” or “the genetic basis of all speech, hence consciousness and thought-extension” which “demands completely other faculties of recognition than the pure rationalistic associations permit” are reminiscent of the way in

²³ How important the word “consciousness” was to Crane becomes explicit in an alcohol-inspired 1922 letter to Munson. Reminiscing about a “thrilling experience” in the dentist’s chair “under the influence of aether and *amnesia*,” he tells his friend that his “mind spiraled to a kind of seventh heaven of consciousness” and that “something like an objective voice kept saying [...] ‘You have the higher consciousness—you have the higher consciousness. This is something that very few have. This is what is called genius.’” He concludes by saying, “O Gorham, I have known moments in eternity” (281-82).

which Crane characterizes Stieglitz's photography (163, 166).²⁴ If these similarities in diction point to similarities in technical considerations of poet and photographer, another passage in "General Aims and Theories" underscores the idea that Crane's, Stieglitz's, and Blake's work share visionary elements.²⁵

Contrasting his poetic approach "with the impressionistic method," Crane quotes two lines from Blake's "Auguries of Innocence": "We are led to believe in a lie / When we see *with* not *through* the eye." Blake's prepositional change, which Crane stresses by italicizing "with" and "through," epitomizes both poets' qualification of eyesight.²⁶ The remarks following this quotation are not only conducive for an explanation of Crane's poetics but also support a comparative reading of Crane's and Stieglitz's respective media. According to Crane, seeing with instead of through the eye results only in "[a] kind of retinal registration" which is sufficient for the impressionist who "is really not interested in the causes (metaphysical) of his materials, their emotional derivations of their utmost spiritual consequences" (162). This impressionistic way of seeing with the eye resembles the method employed by most photographers. They use the camera as an "instrument of personal perception" and, in a kind of mediated retinal registration, see with the eye and document with the camera. Stieglitz, in contrast, sees/apprehends through the eye and through the camera. This visionary aspect of seeing, then, transcends retinal registration and penetrates inanimate materials.

In a similar way but through the logic of metaphor, Crane aims to see deeper in his medium, poetry. Against the backdrop of these parallels between photographer and poet, a central passage of "General Aims and Theories" can be read as a complementary text to the Stieglitz essay:

It is my hope to go *through* the combined materials of the poem, using our 'real' world somewhat as a spring-board, and to give the poem *as a whole* an orbit or predetermined direction of its own. I would like to establish it as free from my own personality as from any chance evaluation on the reader's part. [...] Such a poem is at least a stab at a truth, and to such an extent may be differentiated from other kinds of poetry and called

²⁴ Resonant phrases in Crane's praise of Stieglitz's work are: "the motion and emotion of so-called inanimate life," "new order of consciousness," and "suspended on the invisible dimension" (332, 341).

²⁵ Crane composed "General Aims and Theories" as an outline of his poetics in 1925 and referred to the essay as "a hasty bundle of notes written at [Eugene] O' Neill's request for what angles they might suggest to him in writing a foreword for my book [*White Buildings*]" (439). In his poem "Hart Crane," Stephen Rodefer poignantly mentions the problems involved in the writing of the foreword: "Boni-Liveright would accept *WHITE BUILDINGS* only if accompanied / By an introduction by Eugene O' Neill. When Gene couldn't get it done, / Allen Tate agreed to supply one and allow O' Neill's name / To be attached to it. This was modernism" (13). "General Aims and Theories" was not published during Crane's lifetime.

²⁶ In "Hieroglyphic," one of his last unpublished poems written in 1932, Crane formulates his version of Blake's couplet when he asks: "Did one look at what one saw / Or did one see what one looked at?" (144).

‘absolute.’ Its evocation will not be toward decoration or amusement, but rather toward a state of consciousness, an ‘innocence’ (Blake) or absolute beauty. (163)

Key words and ideas abound in this crucial paragraph of Crane’s theoretical writing. The italics accentuate the difference between Crane’s and the impressionistic method, as he creates through the eye, that is, sees beyond and goes “*through* the combined materials of the poem.” By doing so, the poem becomes an entity with “an orbit or predetermined direction of its own.” Ideally, this “predetermined direction of its own” makes the poem of visionary insight autonomous, “free from [the poet’s] own personality.” It is this “stab at a truth” that Crane apprehends in Stieglitz’s “stationary, yet strangely moving pictures” (332). As will be shown in later chapters, Oppen subscribed to this pursuit of truth in poetry. Through a strong focus on the “materials of the poem” and the poem’s materiality, poets can achieve, in Oppen’s words, “the objectification of the poem, the making an object of the poem” (“Interview with Dembo” 160). In Crane’s text, the parallels between the poet’s and the photographer’s method of creating are further accentuated through the reference to Blake, the common denominator of their work. The idea that such an absolute poem will call forth a “state of consciousness” moreover echoes Crane’s characterization of Stieglitz as “the purest living indice of a new order of consciousness” (341); “a new order of consciousness” which their art evokes. As the camera machine becomes an instrument of apprehension in the hand of a visionary, so poetry becomes through the logic of metaphor a medium of visionary apprehension and disclosure. These similarities strongly suggest that Crane’s engagement with Stieglitz’s photography influenced his quest of creating ultimate harmonies in poetry.

Crane’s correspondence with Stieglitz continued, even though he did not complete the promised essay to which he only added a title, “the wires of the Acropolis” (348). In the 1920s, the poet frequently attended Stieglitz’s exhibitions and followed the development of the photographer’s *Equivalents*, a series of cloud and sky pictures. In January 1924, for example, he had “seen the new Stieglitz clouds” (367). Their artistic conversation was, however, not limited to photography. Crane sent Stieglitz an early version of the “Atlantis” section and the photographer attended Crane’s poetry reading in November 1924, which reveals that both visionaries thought highly of each other’s work and judgment (cf. 342, 403). Crane’s own attempts in photography were limited to taking pictures for “personal perception,” as the first epigraph of this subchapter shows. Included in a slight poem which Crane deemed “not so bad for a piece of pure invention” and which he sent with a photo of himself to his godmother (400),

the lines rhyming “focus” and “locus” point to the imperfection of his photo in contrast to the proper vision of his eyes. While a similar idea can be sensed in “Cape Hatteras,” where “time clears / Our lenses, lifts a focus, resurrects / A periscope to glimpse” (54), the immediate influence of the camera on *The Bridge* is marginal, except for the original photographs of Brooklyn Bridge by Walker Evans which have unfortunately disappeared altogether in later reprintings. Still, key ideas like getting at “the motion and emotion of so-called inanimate life,” making the moment eternal, and penetrating “the invisible dimension whose vibrance has been denied the human eye” play a crucial role in Crane’s “epic of the modern consciousness” (557). Although Crane would say, after he had finished his work on his long poem and decided to include three photographs by Evans in the 1930 Paris edition, “that Evans is the most living, vital photographer of any whose work I know” (635), it is Stieglitz’s photographic method that informs Crane’s construction of *The Bridge* on the conceptual level. Attempts to inoculate mechanical perfectibility into poetry shape Crane’s poetics and leave an imprint on the materiality of his poems.

2 The Power Plant of Language: The Technologic Dynamics of *The Bridge*

Crane's predilection for metaphors of flight and ascent can be traced throughout his oeuvre.²⁷ In *The Bridge*, this combination emerges most conspicuously as a connective trope. Various birds, synecdochic wings, and (legendary) flying creatures crop up and arise in Crane's long poem. In their analyses of Crane's epic, critics tend to focus primarily on the image of the seagull since this bird appears in "To Brooklyn Bridge" and "Atlantis," *The Bridge*'s first and last poem. Irwin, for instance, connects seagulls with upward movement in his discussion of "Atlantis" and rightly stresses the symbolic role of "a bird's soaring flight." Yet he does not analyze avian flight as the leitmotif of *The Bridge*. His remarks are nonetheless crucial, since they provide a conceptual foundation for the following analysis of flight as the metaphoric bridge between living and mechanical constituents. Irwin states that

Crane several times associates the bridge (the tallest man-made structure in the New World when it opened in 1883) with a bird's soaring flight in order to convey notions of freedom, vision, and discovery. [...] Flight as a figure of bodily transcendence through knowledge is, of course, a familiar Faustian motif, and the visionary ability to see farther in both space and time [...] was for Crane the essence of discoverers like Columbus [...] and the Wright brothers, the inventors of powered flight. (*Poetry* 207-08)

These observations ring true and are instructive, but Irwin does not provide enough examples from *The Bridge* to demonstrate that avian flight "convey[s] notions of freedom, vision, and discovery." His general comment that "Crane several times associates the bridge [...] with a bird's soaring flight" calls for more evidence from Crane's primary text. Through a focus on the connection between vehicles of flight, predominantly vertical movement, and notions associated with avian imagery, Crane's method of incorporating the machine into poetry so that "its connotations emanate from within" becomes clearer (*CPSL* 172). In order to apprehend how Crane harmonizes the leitmotif of flight, most organically emblemized in bird imagery, with technology and the machine, I will first examine Crane's distinctive use of bird imagery in *The Bridge* and then turn to sections—especially "Cape Hatteras" and "Atlantis"—in which the

²⁷ For instance, in "The Moth that God Made Blind," an unpublished poem composed in Crane's teenage years, the eponymous moth "learn[s] of that span of wings" which "took the climb" toward the sun. Similar to the story of Icarus, the sun ends this flight abruptly, leaving "his wings atom-withered,—gone" (112-13). Examples of ascents from *White Buildings* include key lines in Crane's poetic corpus like "Frosted eyes there were that lifted altars" ("At Melville's Tomb" [24]) or "The seal's wide spindrift gaze toward paradise" ("Voyages II" [25]).

boundaries between the organic and the inorganic, the whole and its parts, the non-technological and the mechanical blur.

2.1 In Organic Flight: The Logic of Metaphor in “To Brooklyn Bridge”

The Bridge begins with an epigraph from the Book of Job: “From going to and fro in the earth, / and from walking up and down in it.” This quote—Satan’s answer to God asking where he comes from—points out from the start that the concept of motion in *The Bridge* is not restricted to ascents. Movement, whether horizontal or vertical, and wandering set the tone for Crane’s epic. Not surprisingly then, the individual poems constituting *The Bridge* (Crane’s discrete series in a way) frequently oscillate in time and space. The proem “To Brooklyn Bridge” comprises this oscillation and is, in fact, a microscopic, condensed version of the entire poem.²⁸ Its first stanza introduces the concept of flight, the image of “[s]hedding,” and the *pars pro toto* figure of speech as key elements. As will be shown, these topoi play a crucial role in Crane’s gradual perforation of the slash in the inorganic/organic binary pair.

The poem opens at daybreak (“*How many dawns*”) with an image of avian flight. A seagull rises from the New York harbor waters “[s]hedding white rings of tumult, building high / Over the chained bay waters Liberty—.” It is important to note that Crane, right from the start, emphasizes the relationship of parts to the whole since the seagull, “chill from his rippling rest,” is propelled toward the sky by its wings: “*The seagull’s wings shall dip and pivot him*” (33). This initial juxtaposition of the whole (the organic body) and its parts (wings as *partes pro toto*) is significant on multiple levels.²⁹ With regard to *The Bridge*’s entirety, this word combination epitomizes the relationship between the poem as a whole and its individual sections. The eight sections and the fifteen poems of *The Bridge* are supposed to interlock and, as Crane’s proclivity for the word ‘organic’ suggests, generate a self-sustaining and self-contained whole through their interconnection. Significantly, in a diction that would chime with Oppen’s notion

²⁸ As a July 1926 letter to Frank elucidates, Crane ranked “To Brooklyn Bridge” among his best poetic achievements: “That little prelude, by the way, I think to be almost the best thing I’ve ever written, something steady and uncompromising about it” (473-74).

²⁹ In “Forgetfulness,” a poem not included in his books of poetry, Crane also juxtaposes bird and wings and employs the image to visualize the abstract idea of oblivion: “Forgetfulness is like a bird whose wings are reconciled, / Outspread and motionless,— / A bird that coasts the wind unwearyingly” (96).

of discrete seriality, Crane would write his financial patron Otto Kahn in an important letter outlining his vision in 1927:

What I am after is [...] a more organic panorama, showing the continuous and living evidence of the past in the inmost vital substance of the present. Consequently I jump from the monologue of Columbus in “Ave Maria”—right across the four intervening centuries—into the harbor of 20th-century Manhattan. And from that point in time and place I begin to work backward through the pioneer period, always in terms of the present—finally to the very core of the nature-world of the Indian. What I am really handling, you see, is the Myth of America. Thousands of strands have had to be searched out, sorted and interwoven. In a sense I have had to do a great deal of pioneering myself. It has taken a great deal of energy [...] until my instincts assured me that I had assembled my materials in proper order for a final welding into their natural form. For each section of the entire poem has represented its own unique problem of form, not alone in relation to the materials embodied within its separate confines, but also in relation to the other parts, *in series*, of the major design of the entire poem. Each is a separate canvas, as it were, yet none yields its entire significance when seen apart from the others. One might take the Sistine Chapel as an analogy. (554-55, original emphasis)

In the poem, the “organic panorama, showing the continuous and living evidence of the past in the inmost vital substance of the present” finds expression already in the first stanzas or, more precisely, in the swift shift from flight to quotidian fights and “*panoramic sleights*.”

In addition to reading the “*seagull’s wings*” as a macroscopic metaphor for poetic coherence, the bird/wings imagery and whole/parts combinations in general are key motifs in many individual poems of *The Bridge* (“Each is a separate canvas, as it were, yet none yields its entire significance when seen apart from the others”). This juxtaposition of parts and the whole becomes especially recognizable in Crane’s therio- and mechanomorphic depiction of airplanes in “Cape Hatteras.” On the level of meter, the line placement of the avian image of flight in the first stanza reveals a recurrent linguistic element in Crane’s poetry. Due to the regular pattern of the iambic pentameter, the first two stresses fall on the ‘sea’ in “*seagull’s*” and on “*wings*.” By pronouncing these two words accordingly, the ‘s’ signifying the possessive form resonates in and into the “*wings*.” The finite verb ‘swings’ is thus implied by sound.³⁰ While some critics have pointed to similar instances in Crane’s poetry where sounds blend into subsequent linguistic units, a more detailed analysis of soundplay and onomatopoeia is lacking.³¹

³⁰ That swinging is a central motif in *The Bridge* becomes most apparent in the last line of the entire poem: “Whispers antiphonal in azure swing” (74). Another important passage occurs in “The Tunnel:” “if / you don’t like my gate why did you / swing on it, why didja / swing on it / anyhow—’ / And somehow anyhow swing—” (68). Note also that Edgar Allan Poe’s “head is swinging from the swollen strap” (69).

³¹ In an illuminating analysis, Paul Giles, for example, mentions the slant soundplay “How many dawns”/harmony dawns which “punningly anticipate[s] the dawning of harmony in ‘Atlantis’” (101).

As will be argued, such an emphasis on formal minutiae is the most promising approach to do justice to Crane's macro- and microscopic composition, to shed light on his poetic technique, and to reveal how the acclimatized machine enters his poetic structure.

The seagull's flight establishes the connection of upward movement and freedom ("*building high / Over the chained bay waters Liberty*"). This initial ascent, however, is ephemeral. The seagull's wings quickly disappear ("*with inviolate curve, forsake our eyes*"), the glimpse of freedom vanishes "[*a*]s apparitional as sails that cross / *Some page of figures to be filed away.*" Coinciding with the turn to the sphere of business and daily work, a downward motion sets in ("*Till elevators drop us from our day . . .*"). Accompanied by words and images associated with speed and evanescence (for instance, "*sleights*," "*flashing scene*" punning on 'seen,' "*Never disclosed, but hastened to again*"), this descent prevails from the second until the sixth stanza ("*Down Wall*") but hits rock bottom in stanza five where "[*a*] *bedlamite speeds to thy [the bridge's] parapets.*" The ensuing suicidal jump off the bridge ("*Tilting there momentarily, shrill shirt ballooning, / A jest falls from the speechless caravan*") marks the (e)motional low point of the poem.³² At this moment, the liberating vision of the seagull's ascent appears to be completely swept away, submerged in the "*chained bay waters*" under the bridge (33).

The seagull and its wings as vehicles of flight do not return in organic form in "To Brooklyn Bridge." Yet the first mention of the bridge, both as concrete and symbolic construction, echoes the characteristics of this central avian image. Introduced in the accusative case with an archaic pronoun as the second object of the poet-speaker's thought process ("*I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights / [...] And Thee, across the harbor*"), the bridge is said to contain movement in its structure in stanza four:

[...] *silver-paced*
As though the sun took step of thee, yet left
Some motion ever unspent in thy stride,—
Implicitly thy freedom staying thee! (33)

These lines point out that movement is the essential feature of and within the suspension bridge; its motion is fountain-like ("*ever unspent*"), implied ("*Implicitly*"), and stabilizing

See/listen also to Brian Reed's excellent 2007 talk in which he dismantles Crane's "Cape Hatteras" line "Where spouting pillars spoor the evening sky." Employing Garret Stewart's concept of "transegmental drift," he points out that the phrase "pillars spoor" works on multiple metaphoric levels. According to Reed, the words "spoor," "spore," and "pour" all play into this image of smoke coming out of factory chimneys.

³² Yingling accordingly concludes his analysis of the poem's first half by declaring that "[t]he modern world is, in the first half of this poem, an altogether alienating prospect" (192).

(“*staying thee!*”).³³ But the aspect of motion is not the only feature which links the first to the fourth stanza and thus the organic bird to the inorganic and inanimate bridge. The word combination “*freedom staying thee*” is also strongly reminiscent of the oxymoronic phrase “*the chained bay waters Liberty*” in the first stanza. In both cases, liberty and freedom are paradoxically and simultaneously associated with restraint (“*chained,*” “*staying thee*”) and movement (“*dip and pivot,*” “*building high,*” “*yet left / Some motion*”). Closely connected to each other through similarities in diction, both stanzas depict these oxymoronic combinations in organic (first stanza) and in inorganic (fourth stanza) form.³⁴ As these parallels suggest, the seagull soaring above the Statue of Liberty has its inanimate and structural counterpart in the bridge.

This connection between the seagull’s upward movement and motion as well as freedom inherent in the bridge is upheld in the second half of the poem. At the halves’ juncture, at the transition from line 22 to 23, the bridge becomes an active construction: “*All afternoon the cloud-flown derricks turn . . . / Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still.*” The verb which Crane chooses here in the last line renders the site of superb engineering animate and vital. The bridge’s cables “*breathe,*” which presupposes that the structure has lungs. The logic of metaphor thus intimates that the bridge has at this point transcended its status as a motion-containing object and undergone a metamorphosis into an organic subject. Taking in the air of “*the North Atlantic*” and letting it out again, the bridge becomes much more than a structure which connects Manhattan to Brooklyn by spanning the East River: it becomes a living organism.

Given that the bridge is said to “*breathe the North Atlantic still,*” the now-animate structure also appears to have changed its geographical position. It does not only inhale and exhale “*bay waters*” and harbor air but rather seems to be located on the ocean itself. Crane’s phrasing, then, suggests that the bridge evolves into a kind of animate ship. Crane seconds this interpretation of metaphoric transformations in “To Brooklyn Bridge” and *The Bridge* as a whole when he states in a letter that “[t]he bridge in becoming a ship, a world, a woman, a tremendous harp (as it finally does) seems to really have a career” (431). Fundamental as they are for Crane’s poetics, the metaphoric

³³ Ickstadt succinctly captures these characteristics by defining the bridge’s status as “*ruhende Bewegung, gestaute Dynamik*” (85).

³⁴ Lewis’s terminology for these oxymoronic concepts in *The Bridge*/the bridge is convincing. He writes: “For Crane, the qualities of freedom-in-restraint and motion-in-rest, attributed to the bridge, blend with the quality of force-within-form as the defining attribute of poetry: imaginative energy controlled by all the formal elements employed, by meter, rhyme, stanzaic structure, and by the larger rhythmic sweeps of consciousness that give the epic such ‘design’ as it possesses” (249).

steps which the bridge takes in the poem are worth keeping in mind: the structure incorporates the seagull's movement and ideas of freedom (stanza four), becomes a breathing organism, and turns into a ship (stanza 6). It is important to note that in this process, which Crane alternatively designates as "the organic principle of a 'logic of metaphor,'" "dynamics of inferential mention," (164) and "dynamics of metaphor" (166), the connotations of words "and their combinations and interplay in metaphor" accumulate and do not supersede each other (165). In his defense of "At Melville's Tomb," Crane explains how this logic of metaphor operates. In a passage which is helpful for the current stage of metaphoric flux in "To Brooklyn Bridge," he mentions the paradox inherent in the dynamics of metaphor:

Its paradox, of course, is that its apparent illogic operates so logically in conjunction with its context in the poem as to establish its claim to another logic, quite independent of the original definition of the word or phrase or image thus employed. It implies (this *inflection* of language) a previous or prepared receptivity to its stimulus on the part of the reader. [...] The logic of metaphor is so organically entrenched in pure sensibility that it can't be thoroughly traced or explained outside of historical sciences, like philology or anthropology. This "pseudo-statement" [...] demands completely other faculties of recognition than the pure rationalistic associations permit. (166)

This dense explanation of Crane's poetic method suggests at the very least that the "context in the poem" is decisive for the revelation of "another logic" which cannot be sensed by relying on "pure rationalistic associations." Pertaining to the bridge's metaphoric metamorphoses in the poem, the point of disclosure and the fusion of connotative meanings ("this *inflection* of language") culminate in the last line of "To Brooklyn Bridge." Crane's neologism "curveship," provoking the reader's "previous or prepared receptivity," unites the notions analyzed above.

In his final invocation to the bridge—Crane's muse and central, unifying symbol "[v]aulting the sea, the prairies' dreaming sod"—the poet asks the deified structure to "descend / And of the curveship lend a myth to God" (34).³⁵ Coined by Crane, "curveship" condenses the bridge's metaphoric career into a single word. Both constituents of the word make sense in the context of the poem. Needless to say, critics have discussed this neologism and have identified parallels to the seagull's "*inviolat*

³⁵ The bridge's sacred and redemptive aspect, implied in phrases like "*Vibrant reprieve and pardon,*" "*harp and altar,*" "*prophet's pledge,*" "*Prayer of pariah,*" and "*night lifted in thine arms,*" reemerges in "Atlantis" (33-34). Corresponding most conspicuously in diction and imagery with the poem, the last poem of *The Bridge* echoes these divine qualities: "Forever Deity's glittering Pledge, O Thou," "Of thy white seizure springs the prophecy," "Deity's young name / Kinetic of white choring wings ... ascends" (74).

curve” of stanza two.³⁶ The second syllable ‘-ship’ has mainly been read as a suffix. In fact, the way critics interpret the ‘-ship’ morpheme is reminiscent of Morris’s brilliant phrasing in her discussion of codework, one of “three forms of writing (at) the human-machine interface that demonstrate contemporary variants of ‘minding the machines’” (674). She interweaves programming language in the form of “*.fect” into her text and provides some possible substitutes for the asterisk: “*.fect—that is to say, perhaps, simultaneously *affect*, *effect*, *infect*, and *perfect*” (679). In a similar way, Crane’s “*curveship*” could be changed by replacing the “*curve*” with an asterisk. The form “*-ship” would then simultaneously evoke words like ‘*worship*,’ ‘*courtship*,’ ‘*friendship*,’ and, another of Crane’s coinages, ‘*twinsip*.’³⁷

While it is likely that Crane played with and punned on such connotative meanings of the suffix “-ship,” the free-standing, unhyphenated word fits into the context of the poem as well. “The bridge in becoming a ship” via metaphor becomes in Crane’s neologism a ship as a linguistic unit. The phrase “*of the curveship*,” which Hammer qualifies as “meaning both derived from the bridge [...] and partaking of it” (“Lecture”), combines the notions associated with the seagull’s flight and its wings’ “*inviolat curve*” (vision/freedom/movement) with the bridge’s metamorphosis from an inanimate structure to an animate ship. In this way, “*the curveship*” becomes a totalizing metaphor totalizing metaphors. The image presents the reader with the purest, most crystallized form of Crane’s logic of metaphor. Positioned in the last line and embraced by the internal rhyme “*descend/lend*,” the word emerges as the poem’s “single, *new* word, never before spoken [...] but self-evident as an active principle in the reader’s consciousness” (163). Interestingly, another Cranian neologism equally rife with multiple possible meanings which cannot be pinned down to one all-encompassing interpretation can be found in the penultimate line of “Voyages III.” Providing Edelman

³⁶ Christopher Beach’s analysis, for instance, is accurate when it comes to the “*curve*” in “*curveship*.” In discussing the last four stanzas of “To Brooklyn Bridge,” he writes: “In the previous seven stanzas, Crane has introduced the two major symbols of the poem: the seagull flying ‘with *inviolat curve*’ over the New York harbor and the bridge itself, standing high above the river. The gull and the bridge are opposites – one a part of nature and the other a human creation – and yet they are closely associated in visual and symbolic terms: the shape of the bridge reproduces the curve of the seagull’s flight, and like the bird the bridge serves as a mediating link between the mundane world of the city and the transcendent realm of artistic or imaginative freedom. [...] The word ‘*curveship*,’ Crane’s own coinage, contains within it the shape of the bridge, building on the ‘*inviolat curve*’ of the seagull and forming part of the circle (‘white rings of tumult’) delineated by the gull’s wings. At the same time, the suffix ‘-ship’ suggests both the majesty of the bridge (‘*lordship*’) and its sacredness (‘*worship*’)” (70).

³⁷ Crane employs the word “*friendship*” in the “Quaker Hill” section and “*twinsip*” in “Cape Hatteras” with reference to the Wright brothers: “We, who with pledges taste the bright annoy / Of *friendship*’s acid wine” (64); “There, from Kill Devils Hill at Kitty Hawk / Two brothers in their *twinsip* left the dune” (56).

with the title of his seminal 1987 study, the line of iambic pentameter reads: “The silken skilled transmemberment of song” (26). Both “transmemberment” and “curveship” expand the limits of language and thus create a metaphoric logic which depends on the context of the poem as well as on the reader’s receptivity and capacity of fusing seemingly illogical (word) materials. This “active principle in the reader’s consciousness” also pervades the subsequent sections of *The Bridge*. Based on the previous analyses of Crane’s logic of metaphor, of how the seagull’s organic flight and its associations become essential constituents of the bridge’s inorganic/organic fusion in “*curveship*,” the following dis/close readings will trace these key elements through various poems in *The Bridge*. A strong focus will be laid on bird imagery, as the concepts of flight, freedom, and vision intrinsic to the white seagull and its wings emerge as crucial factors in Crane’s depiction of mechanized flight in “Cape Hatteras.”

2.2 Birds, Wings, and Sails in “Ave Maria,” “Cutty Sark,” and “The Harbor Dawn”

Moving back in time to 1493, “Ave Maria,” the first section of *The Bridge* and the poem immediately following Crane’s dedication to Brooklyn Bridge, connects the Old to the New World through the figure of Columbus. Throughout the poem the discoverer soliloquizes aboard his ship on his way back to Spain from “where our Indian emperies lie revealed.” Crane’s gloss note inserted on the right-hand side of the first stanza helps the reader navigate the setting of the poem: “Columbus, alone, gazing toward Spain, invokes the presence of two faithful partisans of his quest ...” (35).³⁸ Convinced that he has found Cathay (“The word I bring,” “I bring you back Cathay”), he recalls the disbelief and the difficulties he encountered “that doubtful day” prior to his setting sail for “[t]he Chan’s great continent.” At the transition from the third to the fourth stanza, he reminisces about the natives’ reaction when he and his crew, “[h]earing the surf near,” approached the coast:

I, wonder-breathing, kept the watch,—saw
The first palm chevron the first lighted hill.

³⁸ The gloss notes are among the last textual bits Crane added to *The Bridge* prior to the Black Sun publication. He was at first hesitant about helping the reader with marginalia: “I’m trying to write a gloss—but it’s not easy to be consistent about it, as the poem is developed not on narrative lines nor dramatic—in the sense of any consistent theme, like the ‘Ancient Mariner’. Shall we try to help the poor public or not? That’s the question!” (620). Finally, however, he was happy to have the glosses in the book: “I have kept them narrow as that seems to be the custom—and we don’t want to crowd our margins. [...] I can’t help thinking them a great help in binding together the general theme of Powhatan’s daughter. As for the Columbus note, it simply silhouettes the scenery before the colors arrive to inflame it” (626). In the original Black Sun edition, the marginal material notations were printed in red.

blends the image of white sails building high into the sky with the blue of the ocean. This blending of color is highlighted by the regular iambic tetrameter which grants each of the four nouns one stressed syllable. Recurrent images such as white sails (“baronial white”) and blue of both sea and sky (“lucky blue”) thus extend the motifs laid out in the poem, add to the logic of metaphor, and particularly inform “Ave Maria” with its ships-as-white-birds analogy. Before continuing the analysis of this analogy in Columbus’s prayer, it is important to note that “Cutty Sark” also contains a reference to an avian body part. Implied in the name of the sailor’s ship, the pun on the Latin word *ala* adds to the sails/wings and ship/bird similitude: “‘It’s *S.S. Ala*—Antwerp—now remember kid / to put me out at three she sails on time” (51). As Irwin rightly observes, the palindrome ‘ala’ is “the Latin word for ‘a bird’s wing” (*Poetry*, 162), thus a synecdoche for the organic whole.⁴⁰ In combination with the verb “sails” in the next line, the image picks up the seagull’s wings fading out of sight “[a]s apparitional as sails” in “To Brooklyn Bridge.” “Cutty Sark” thus resumes the leitmotif of flight and elaborates the whole-part relationship by adding the color blue as well as verbal ambiguity to the material mix.

The combination of sails, the color of the ocean, and Latin puns surfaces at two prominent positions in Columbus’s monologue. Immediately after his remembrance of the first encounter with the natives, the explorer turns to “Madre Maria” for help and guidance through the storm-tossed sea:

(O Madre Maria, still
 One ship of these thou grantest safe returning;
 Assure us through thy mantle’s ageless blue!)
 [...]
 For here between two worlds, another, harsh,
 This third, of water, tests the word; lo, here
 Bewilderment and mutiny heap whelming
 Laughter and shadow cuts sleep from the heart. (35-36)

Traditionally swathed and portrayed in blue gowns, Mother Mary is aptly invoked here in the phrase “through thy mantle’s ageless blue!” Notably, Giles identifies an avian pun in “mantle,” which he links to “The Great White Birds:” “And it is also apposite that

⁴⁰ As a brief tangent, given Crane’s fondness of polyglot puns which Giles exemplifies by dissecting the word “mere” in the poem (see Giles 232), it is likely that Crane punned not only on Hart/heart but also on the Latin equivalent for heart, that is, ‘cor.’ Although Crane does not employ the word in its monosyllabic form in *The Bridge*, homophonic words and word units hint at the heart/cor pun. Investigations into this field might focus on words and phrases from *The Bridge* like “cordage” (36, 72, 74), “Combustion at the astral core” (54), and “O Corsair” (57). The most prominent example of this Latin pun figures in “The Broken Tower:” “Have you not heard, have you not seen that corps / Of shadows in the tower” (106).

Mary's blue cloak or *mantle* of Catholic iconography should pun on *mantle* as 'in birds, the back together with the folded wings.' Crane's pun once more equates Christianity with the 'White Birds' of pagan anthropomorphism, and produces an ontological ambivalence" (77). In addition to the invocation of Virgin Mary, whose name Crane also employs in juxtaposition with blue in "Virginia,"⁴¹ the polysemy of the word "Maria" fits into the mid-ocean context of the poem: in Latin, 'maria' is the plural form of 'mare' (sea) in the nominative or accusative case. Given this polyglot pun, the prayer meaning of "Ave Maria" which carries on into "Madre Maria," can also be read as 'hail to the seas.' Both meanings of the word play into the section's title and merge most forcefully in the twice repeated Latin line "Te Deum laudamus" (37). Incorporating the religious as well as the oceanic aspect, the world of water—the bridge between the Old and the New World ("—perhaps / Tomorrows's moon will grant us Saltes Bar—/ Palos again,— a land cleared long of war" [36])—becomes for Columbus the entity which "tests the word" but also verifies that his vision has been accomplished:

Inquisitor! incognizable Word
Of Eden and the enchained Sepulchre,
Into thy steep savannahs, burning blue,
Utter to loneliness the sail is true. (36-37)

Rich in alliterations ("Inquisitor! incognizable," "steep savannahs, burning blue"), these lines link "blue," "the sail," and truth ("true"). Interestingly, Crane employs the word "sail" here, even though the context of this passage as well as the frequency of words associated with utterances in "Ave Maria" might have rather suggested the rhyming word 'tale.'⁴² Yet this word choice makes sense on the level of Crane's logic of metaphor: the sail as synecdoche for Columbus's ship is analogous to the "*seagull's wings*," the vehicle carrying the vision forward into the future while, at the same time, epitomizing the vision itself ("the sail is true"). This latter, more abstract connotation of "the sail" becomes clearer if one considers the similarities between "Ave Maria" and the

⁴¹ Focusing on Mary, the third archetypal female figure mentioned in "Southern Cross" ("Eve! Magdalene! / or Mary, you?" [61]), "Virginia" is the last of Crane's "Three Songs." Waiting on Mary, the speaker addresses his object of desire in a diction which starts out from the realistic and culminates in the idealistic realm of fairy tales: "Keep smiling the boss away, / Mary (what are you going to do?);" "O blue-eyed Mary with the claret scarf, / Saturday Mary, mine!," "O Mary, leaning from the high wheat tower, / Let down your golden hair!," and, finally, "Out of the way-up nickel-dime tower shine, / Cathedral Mary, / shine!—" (63). The phrase "blue-eyed Mary with the claret scarf" reworks Columbus's invocation. It is moreover reminiscent of the mother's invocation in "Indiana:" "O, hold me in those eyes' engaging blue" (50).

⁴² Examples of words and lines in "Ave Maria" that denote articulation and verbalization include: "The word I bring," "no perjured breath / Of clown nor sage can riddle or gainsay," "And record of more," "tests the word," "thy parable of man," and "Elohim, still I hear thy sounding heel" (35-37).

stanzas of “To Brooklyn Bridge” that depict vision of flight as well as the ephemerality of vision. For this comparison, “*apparitional as sails*” is the key phrase.

In addition to the passage quoted above, the word ‘sail(s)’ appears two more times in “Ave Maria.” The second mention of the word reverberates most audibly the diction and the motifs established in “To Brooklyn Bridge:”

White toil of heaven’s cordons, mustering
In holy rings all sails charged to the far
Hushed gleaming fields and pendant seething wheat
Of knowledge,— (37)

Besides the “sails charged to the far,” the “[w]hite toil of heaven’s cordons” here echoes the “*white rings of tumult*” of the proem’s first stanza. This verbal echo is intensified in these lines through the twice repeated linguistic unit ‘ring:’ the noun in its lexical form appears in the second line (“In holy rings”), the word evoked by sound and meter resonates in the last foot of the first line (“mustering”). In the line, the regular series of iambs stresses the last part of “mustering.” Incontestably, the word “mustering” is constituted of three syllables which would be separated as follows: “mus-ter-ing.” Phonologically, then, the ‘r’ in the word is the coda of the second and not the onset of the last syllable. However, like the possessive ‘s’ of “seagull’s” drifting into “wings” in the first stanza of “To Brooklyn Bridge,” the sound of the letter ‘r’ carries on into the next linguistic unit, creating the auditory pun on “ring.”⁴³

Prominently positioned at the end of the line, the “ring” thus anticipates the actual word following in the second foot of the next pentameter. Against the backdrop of Crane’s cyclical structure, the roundness of rings fits into the larger context of *The Bridge*. In fact, Crane uses the word four times at the terminal position of his lines. In “Ave Maria,” the world is addressed as “This turning rondure whole, this crescent ring” (36), a line which underscores the importance of circularity and fullness. That Crane also employed the homonymic form of “to ring” as associated with sound and made use of both meanings in the same poem shows in “National Winter Garden,” the second of the “Three Songs:” “Always and last, before the final ring / When all the fireworks blare;” “Her silly snake rings begin to mount, surmount / Each other” (62). In “Atlantis,” the word “ring” concludes an enjambed line twice and, significantly, rhymes with the last word of *The Bridge*: “White tempest nets file upward, upward ring / With silver terraces the humming spars, / The loft of vision, palladium helm of stars;” “Is it Cathay,

⁴³ For a brilliant discussion of such and similar phenomena, see Stewart.

/ Now pity steeps the grass and rainbows ring / The serpent with the eagle in the leaves . . . ? / Whispers antiphonal in azure swing” (72, 74). The reference to Cathay and the word combination “azure swing” in the final stanza of the epic recall imagery established in the proem and “Ave Maria.” Given such blatant similarities in vocabulary, it is likely that notions associated with these recurring terms also correlate. The fact that words like ‘white,’ ‘ring,’ and ‘sails’ echo words and images employed in the first two stanzas of the proem suggests that “notions of freedom, vision, and discovery” infuse “Ave Maria” and “Atlantis” as well (Irwin, *Poetry* 207).

The natives’ cry “The Great White Birds!” along with Columbus’s reminiscence “I thought of Genoa; and this truth, now proved” are the pivotal phrases in “Ave Maria” which support this assumption, because they bring together both the diction and ideas established in the proem (35). Most likely triggered by the whiteness of the sails, the analogy between “The Great White Birds” and “the Great Navigator’s” ships accentuates the whole-part relationship introduced through the approximation of wings and sails in “To Brooklyn Bridge” (55). Wings and sails are both synecdoches, vehicles of movement, and necessary parts of transportation. True to the literal sense and etymological root of the word ‘metaphor,’ they carry over or transfer weightier meaning. If one accepts this correlation, it follows in logical extension: if sails are wings, ships are birds. As the seagull’s wings evoke key ideas of freedom, movement, and flight, “The Great White Birds” intimate similar notions. Undeniably, these notions mostly coincide with Columbus’s subjective point of view. After all, Crane has the explorer quote the indigenous people. Moreover, Columbus (over)emphasizes the ‘I’ in his reminiscence and enunciates that it is his vision which he brings back to the Old World.⁴⁴ The freedom implied in the “White Birds,” then, is primarily a freedom of vision which applies to the navigator and later settlers rather than to the Indigeneous people. The danger of losing the record of this vision, however, is omnipresent. As a comparison of the proem’s third and fourth stanza with Columbus’s remembrance shows, the ephemeral aspect of vision plays into both poems.

After the vision of the seagull’s flight has vanished, the poet-observer calls to mind images of impermanence and thus implicitly compares the previous moment of vision with the momentariness of movie scenes: “*I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights*

⁴⁴ It does not surprise, of course, that the first-person pronoun occurs frequently in a soliloquy. But the placement of ‘I’ (beginning a line twice) and ‘me’ (terminating a line once) in Columbus’s recollection stands out: “I thought of Genoa,” “That made me exile in her streets, stood me,” and “I, wonder-breathing, kept the watch” (35).

/ *With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene / Never disclosed, but hastened to again, / Foretold to other eyes on the same screen*" (33). In a similar way and diction, Columbus remembers the problems he encountered in Genoa when people did not believe in his ambitious project: "I thought of Genoa; and this truth, now proved, / That made me exile in her streets, stood me / More absolute than ever—" (35). In both passages the vision is evoked in the parallelism "*I think of cinemas*" and "I thought of Genoa." In Columbus's case, the vision is translated into "this truth, now proved,"⁴⁵ because the discoverer is certain that he has found a western "passage to the Chan" (37). Setbacks have only made him more determined ("stood me / More absolute than ever"). Whereas the "*multitudes bent toward some flashing scene*" congregate in cinemas to see flickering visions "*on the same screen,*" Columbus's vision is, as Crane's word choice suggests, reliable and permanent. In this way, it resembles the enduring vision inherent in the bridge: "*Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!*" (33). As it is, the bridge's "*freedom staying thee*" and the "truth, now proved" staying Columbus correlate. Nonetheless, the mention of "The Great White Birds" indicates that it is still possible to forfeit the manifestation of vision, the "record of more" (36). This risk of loss comes into sight on the page when Columbus, who ultimately did not find a shorter route to Cathay which would render his initial vision false, starts praying immediately after recalling the white bird metaphor.

Similar to the abrupt turn toward the mundane sphere of business after the seagull's wings have disappeared in the proem ("—*Till elevators drop us from our day*" [33]), Columbus breaks off his reminiscence and shifts focus. Anxious that the word he brings might be claimed by the destructive forces of storm and sea, he invokes "Madre Maria" as his authority to guide him and his word of vision through "athwart lanes of death and birth" (36). With the previous discussion of "To Brooklyn Bridge" in mind, this spontaneous reaction appears less random. As vehicles of flight and emblems of freedom and vision, (white) birds evoke positive associations. Yet they are, as the proem shows and "Ave Maria" suggests, also prone to fade quickly out of sight. Consequently, the possibility of losing vision and freedom is inscribed into bird metaphors. In fact, this ambivalent aspect figures prominently in "Cape Hatteras" where it evolves into binary oppositions of success/failure and ascent/descent.

⁴⁵ This way of phrasing is highly reminiscent of Blake's proverb "What is now proved, was once only imagined," which Crane quotes, as has been shown above, in a letter to Stieglitz. Columbus seems to belong to Crane's order of visionary predecessors.

As important as this ambivalence is, it needs to be stressed that in the first three poems of *The Bridge* notions of freedom and vision prevail whenever birds are mentioned. Accordingly, the bird image in the penultimate stanza of “The Harbor Dawn,” the first poem of the “Powhatan’s Daughter” section following “Ave Maria,” circles back to the first stanza of the proem and reaffirms the idea of liberation contained in avian flight: “From Cyclopean towers across Manhattan waters” / —Two—three bright window-eyes aglitter, disk / The sun, released—aloft with cold gulls hither” (39). In concord with the liberated sun (“The sun, released”) gulls ascend into the dawn sky, which Crane, acting upon his logic of metaphor, depicts as a “[c]ool feathery fold” (38).⁴⁶ The adjective “cold” harks back to the phrase “*chill from his rippling rest*” and “aloft” echoes the seagull’s wings “*building high / Over the chained bay waters Liberty—*” (33). As the similarities in diction and ideas here suggest, the seagulls’ ascent in “The Harbor Dawn” coincides with and mirrors the visionary flight in “To Brooklyn Bridge.” The next cycle begins in the form of a voyage back in time to four visions of the American continent in “Van Winkle,” “The River,” “The Dance,” and “Indiana.”

The image of the seagull occurs only once more in the final section of *The Bridge*. In “Atlantis,” the poet-quester’s “eyes, like seagulls stung with rime— / Slit and propelled by glistening fins of light— / Pick biting way up towering looms” (72). Throughout the poems leading toward “Atlantis,” the absence of this initial symbol of freedom is compensated by references to various other birds. While these avian vehicles—physical vehicles of flight as well as vehicles of the metaphor (wings of) birds represent ‘freedom/ascent/vision—reflect the seagull’s daily resurrection, there are also passages in which Crane addresses the lack of birds or deficiency of flight. Importantly, these instances coincide with downward movements and, in “The Tunnel,” mark the beginning of a descent into the mechanized world.

2.3 Flightless Birds and Fright in “Cutty Sark” and “The Tunnel”

“Cutty Sark” contains references to sails and, in the drunken sailor’s speech, avian body parts. Equally important is that the seaman’s remembrance leads him back to specific places where he spent time working:

⁴⁶ “The Harbor Dawn” is less obscure in its metaphoric meandering. Given the context of sleep with harbor noises coming through the window, Crane employs words and images that are associated with fabrics, softness, and weaving: “white surplices,” “beshrouded wails,” “veils,” “Soft sleeves of sound,” “the pillowed bay,” “Cool feathery fold,” “sheath of pallid air,” and “stealthily weave us into day” (38).

“I ran a donkey engine down there on the Canal
 in Panama—got tired of that—
 then Yucatan selling kitchenware—beads—
 have you seen Popocatepetl—birdless mouth
 with ashes shifting down—?”

and then the coast again . . .” (51-52)

The Mexican volcano and the way in which Crane makes the sailor characterize the “Popocatepetl” are crucial here. In referring to the volcano’s crater as a “birdless mouth / with ashes sifting down,” the “old and oaken” ex-whaler (to use two fitting adjectives from the Melville epigraph set at the beginning of “Cutty Sark”) stresses the desolate habitat which this rupture in the surface of the earth has created.⁴⁷ Not even birds can be found there. If, as Lawrence Kramer points out, this metaphoric rendering alludes to Eliot’s “[d]ead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit” (63), Crane extends the older poet’s lack-of-water imagery by specifying the sterility of the “mountain mouth” as birdless emptiness, a dreary place where life, flight, and song are absent. In addition, Crane connects this motif with a downward movement, “with ashes sifting down.” The remains of volcanic eruptions drop down, intensifying the impression of an infernal forlornness and formlessness. Antithetical to the seagull’s ascent over the Statue of Liberty in the proem, this barren space stands also in stark contrast to the last image evoked by the sailor: “—that spiracle! he shot a finger out the door . . . / ‘O life’s a geyser—beautiful—my lungs— / No—I can’t live on land—!’” (52). The intermittent eruption of “a geyser” is here opposed to the volcano’s inactivity. The upward discharge of water, which the words “spiracle” and “shot” imply, is compared to life and breathing (“my lungs”), rendered “beautiful,” and contrasted to living on land (“No—I can’t live on land”). It follows that the absence of birds in and around the volcano’s crater evokes notions of barrenness, lack of inspiration (etymologically ‘inspiration’ derives from the Latin word for ‘breathing in’), and (e)motional decline, whereas the presence of water associated with life and breath (as in the bridge-ship’s “*cables breath[ing] the North Atlantic still*) insinuates notions of freedom and vision. These features, hinted at by the drunken sailor whose “eyes pressed through green glass” and who “lunged up Bowery

⁴⁷ As so often in Crane’s body of work, the image of the volcano surfaces again in a later section. In “Quaker Hill,” in the fifth stanza introduced with “This was the Promised Land, and still it is / To the persuasive suburban land agent,” radio broadcasts bring news to the suburb: “Fresh from the radio in the old Meeting House / (Now the New Avalon Hotel) volcanoes roar / A welcome to highsteppers” (65). Crane designates “Quaker Hill” as a supplementary section in a December 1929 letter: “I am hastily enclosing the final version of ‘Quaker Hill,’ which ends my writings on the *Bridge*. [...] ‘Quaker Hill’ is not, after all, one of the major sections of the poem; it is rather by way of an ‘accent mark’ that it is valuable at all” (634).

“retells an infernal subway ride” (128). The fact that it was Eliot who accepted “The Tunnel” for publication in *The Criterion* is one major reason why some critics read it side by side with *The Waste Land*.⁴⁸ With the knowledge that Crane wanted to write an “epic of the modern consciousness” (557), the poem delineates a descent into the underworld, a crucial episode in epic poetry.⁴⁹ In the course of “The Tunnel,” the speaker encounters various forms of fragmentation, whether in overheard snippets of conversation or in Edgar Allan Poe’s decapitated head “swinging from the swollen strap” and his “eyes like agate lanterns—on and on / Below the toothpaste and the dandruff ads” (69). Although this subterranean atmosphere does not hint at avian imagery, Crane weaves birds into “The Tunnel.” He thus expands his already elaborate logic of bird metaphors.

Two specific birds are mentioned in “The Tunnel,” the penguin and the pigeon. Both birds enter “The Tunnel” as metaphor or, in the case of the pigeon, as simile: “like a pigeon’s muddy dream” (68).⁵⁰ For a discussion of avian imagery, the concept of flight, and the role of machinery in this associational process, the image of the penguin is more important, especially because the inclusion of this aquatic bird does not seem to fit at all into the portrayal of a New York subway ride. Initially undecided whether to ride the subway or walk home across the bridge spanning “the River that is East” (70), the poet-commuter finally ends up “walking down” since “[t]he subway yawns the quickest promise home” (67). The image of the penguin appears before the quester enters the subway:

Or can’t you quite make up your mind to ride;
A walk is better underneath the L a brisk
Ten blocks or so before? But you find yourself
Preparing penguin flexions of the arms,—
As usual you will meet the scuttle yawn: (67)

The line mentioning the “penguin flexions” is hardly ever discussed as an important element in “The Tunnel.” In a 2010 article, Sunny Stalter analyzes this image with two

⁴⁸ For such a reading, see Lensing who states that Crane “was conscious of the Eliotic overtones of the poem and expected Eliot to perceive the same” (21).

⁴⁹ In a September 1927 letter to Kahn, Crane mentions Virgil’s *Aeneid* as the epic poem that comes closest to what he is attempting: “*The Aeneid* was not written in two years—nor in four, and in more than one sense I feel justified in comparing the historic and cultural scope of *The Bridge* to that great work. It is at least a symphony with an epic theme, and a work of considerable profundity and inspiration” (558-59).

⁵⁰ The phrase “like a pigeon’s muddy dream” is included in an overheard conversation whose style mirrors the fragmentation of pastoral suburbia. Crane employs the word “pigeon” once again in “Virginia” as an image of crowding: “It’s high carillon / From the popcorn bells! / Pigeons by the million—” (63).

sentences and focuses on the onomatopoeic aspects of the line. According to her, “[t]he image of the penguin and the sputtering alliterative ‘p’ sounds give the commuter’s arm movements a jerky feel. Additionally, ‘flexions’ are movements specific to muscles, which indicates that Crane is breaking down actions to their smallest component parts” (74). In her essay, Stalter concentrates on the relationship of parts/fragments to the whole and traces this idea convincingly through “The Tunnel.” In this light, her second interpretation makes sense. But her remark that the penguin in combination with three ‘p’ sounds gives “the commuter’s arm movements a jerky feel” does not go deep enough.

The image of the penguin is multilayered. On the first level of the metaphor, the fact that penguins waddle on land—a gait evoking notions of slowness and clumsiness⁵¹—fits into the context of this passage, as cramped and huddled crowds push at intervals through turnstiles in “The Tunnel.” Providing entrance into “subways, rivered under streets / and rivers” (68), these turnstiles demand compactness and force commuters to “[b]e minimum, then, to swim the hiving swarms / Out of the Square” (67). Furthermore, the countershading plumage of penguins adds to the efficacy of this image, because the setting prior to the descent into the subway system (“Up Times Square to Columbus Circle;” “nightly sessions, / Refractions of the thousand theatres;” “watch the curtain lift” [67]) hints at a multitude of theatergoers dressed in white and black with many men most likely suited up wearing tuxedos. While these associations play into the image of “penguin flexions of the arms,” the metaphor is even more significant in the broader context of *The Bridge*.

Bearing the notions of bird imagery established in previous sections in mind, it is pivotal that penguins belong to the species of flightless birds. Their wings are vestigial. On land they serve primarily as body parts enabling the penguin to maintain a balanced stance. Perfectly adapted for aquatic life,⁵² the flippers are incapable of propelling the penguin up into the air. The bird is thus limited to horizontal or downward and diving movements. Upward flight is impossible. In the context of the chthonic subway ride, this

⁵¹ This interpretation seems more convincing than Kramer’s annotation that “the motion suggests an allusion to the characteristic walk of Charlie Chaplin’s film persona, the Little Tramp” (114). The penguin’s cumbersome gait on land, in fact, can be compared to the eponymous albatross in Baudelaire’s poem; a poem which Kramer mentions twice but not with reference to the penguin (cf. Kramer 1, 134). Having been caught by sailors (“les hommes d’équipage”), albatrosses, awkward and ashamed (“maladroit et honteux”), waddle clumsily along the deck. Their great white wings (“leurs grandes ailes blanches”) are of no use to them in this unfamiliar place (Baudelaire 24).

⁵² According to Crane’s logic of metaphor, images surface in “The Tunnel” which point to the penguin’s agility in water and the natural habitat of this flightless bird: “swim the hiving swarms,” “And repetition freezes,” “Taking the final level for the dive / Under the river,” and “Here at the waters’ edge the hands drop memory” (67-70).

limitation in motion chimes with the monotonous descent into the abyss. Crane stresses the stupefying combination of downward motion, monotony, and repetitive rhythm in a dazzling passage resonant with onomatopoeic or, rather, materially automatopoeic ‘o’ sounds: “In the car / the overtone of motion / underground, the monotone / of motion is the sound / of other faces, also underground—” (68).⁵³ In the avian context of *The Bridge*, the motional restraint suggests that the notions associated with the seagull’s flight are out of place in “The Tunnel.” Crane’s prose statements about the section support this idea. In a progress report sent to Kahn, Crane outlines “The Tunnel” section as “[t]he encroachment of machinery on humanity; a kind of purgatory in relation to the open sky of [the] last section” (441). And in a 1926 letter to Frank, he qualifies this demonic work (“Daemon, demurring and eventful yawn!” [70]) as “rather ghastly, almost surgery—and, oddly almost all from the notes and stitches I have written while swinging on the strap at late midnights going home” (484). As these two passages indicate, the omnipresence of the machine in “The Tunnel” (“subway,” “turnstile,” “phonographs of hades,” “intent escalator,” “levers,” “caught like pennies beneath soot and steam” [67-70]) coincides frequently with fragmentation, restriction, and horror. The subway ride through the mechanized purgatory or purgatorial machinery confines commuters spatially, makes them passive (“you find yourself” [67]), and forces them to encounter (body) fragments: “a serenade / Stilly / Of shoes, umbrellas, each eye attending its shoe;” “The gongs recur: / Elbows and levers, guard and hissing door. / Thunder is galvothermic here below” (69). The image of the penguin—in its physical form clumsy, awkward, and vulnerable on land—thus mirrors the commuters’ limitations and out-of-placeness in the mechanized tunnel. In logical extension, the image is also emblematic of mankind’s alienation through the overarching influence of the machine.

Crane was aware of his rather dismal depiction of machinery in “The Tunnel.” As a 1927 letter to Winters shows, he was particularly “anxious about [...] the first page of the ‘Tunnel’” and admitted that “it savors a little of Eliot and his ‘wistfulness’” (539). Already in the next sentence, however, he congratulates himself for “drop[ping] off the Eliot mood quite ways before Chambers Street.” The line “For Gravesend Manor change at Chambers Street” then literally captures this change of mood. Indeed, less limiting images prevail after “[t]he platform hurries along to a dead stop” (69). Having completed

⁵³ For a discussion of similarities between “The Tunnel” and Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro,” see Stalter 78-80.

“the dive / Under the river,” the train emerges on Brooklyn’s “waters’ edge;” an ascent that is supported by images of resurrection: “And yet, like Lazarus, to feel the slope, / The sod and billow breaking,—lifting ground.”⁵⁴ It is important to note that Crane employs the word ‘wing’ twice in the transition from downward to upward movement when he states that “[n]ewspapers wing, revolve and wing” (70). Even though the newspapers move “[t]oward corners of the floor,” the repetition of the word in “The Tunnel” is as surprising as it is meaningful. It suggests that even in the mechanized underworld movement and flight are possible. This becomes more explicit if one considers previous sections of *The Bridge*. In “Van Winkle,” for example, the poet-quester remembers “the monoplanes / We launched—with paper wings and twisted / Rubber bands” (40). Although rudimentary and limited in time of flight, these paper planes are capable of upward movement. This potential then also carries into the phrase “[n]ewspapers wing.” In “The River,” the natural counterpart to “The Tunnel,” a movement back in time complicates the combination of industrialized space, flight, and bird imagery.

2.4 Bird W(h)it and the Eagle as Symbol of Space in “The River” and “The Dance”

Alas, there is so little time,
the world moves by so fast these days!
(CPSL, “The Great Western Plains” 103)

“The River,” the second longest poem of *The Bridge* and the third poem in the “Powhatan’s Daughter” section, begins with what Crane himself calls “an intentional burlesque on the cultural confusion of the present—a great conglomeration of noises analogous to the strident impression of a fast express rushing by” (555-56). The poet-quester finds himself on a train “going west” watching advertisement billboards, “*the din and slogans of the year*,” as Crane’s marginal gloss reads, passing by rapidly. As the express accelerates, the signboards blend into each other resulting in seemingly haphazard snippets of announcements such as “Minstrels when you steal a chicken just / save me the wing for if it isn’t / Erie it ain’t for miles around a / Mazda—” (41).⁵⁵

⁵⁴ An echo of “*the prairies’ dreaming sod*” in the final stanza of “To Brooklyn Bridge” can be heard here.

⁵⁵ For a smart cinematographic rendering of and excellent comments by Derek Walcott on the first 21 lines of “The River,” see *Voices and Visions*. For the advertising background and the fast-paced sequence of commercials, see Baker.

Continuous enjambments increase the speed of both train and meter and are finally stopped by a question mark: “breathtaking—as you like it . . . eh?” After the train has “roared by and left,” the focus shifts to “three men, still hungry on the tracks” who are representatives of “[r]ail-squatters ranged in nomad raillery” (41-42). In stark contrast to the speed of the express, they are said to “take their liquor slow—and count / [...] The river’s minute by the far brook’s year” (42). Closely connected to nature and the body of the American continent,⁵⁶ these “ancient men” are the bridge between the “20th Century” (41) and the Indian world depicted in the next section, “The Dance.”

This link is highlighted through significant phrases with which Crane characterizes these “wifeless or runaway / Hobo-trekkers that forever search / An empire wilderness of freight and rails.” Prior to another sketch of overheard conversation, Crane stresses the natural aura surrounding the hobos:

Time’s rendings, time’s blendings they construe
As final reckonings of fire and snow;
Strange bird-wit, like the elemental gist
Of unwall’d winds they offer, singing low
My Old Kentucky Home and *Casey Jones*,
Some Sunny Day. (42)

Against the backdrop of time’s ambivalent influence captured in the rhyme pair rendings/blendings and paralleled in natural imagery “of fire and snow,” the hobo-trekkers appear as figures uncorrupted by the challenges of technological progress. Tramping along “[u]nder a world of whistles, wires and steams,” they have a deep understanding (“elemental gist”) of and intimate connection to the landscape. Independent and unrestrained (“unwall’d winds”) as they are—characteristics which they share with “The River,” the Mississippi—the hobos evoke notions comparable to the ones associated with avian flight. Crane clarifies these similarities when he designates the hobos’ grasp of the American body as a “[s]trange bird-wit.”

In contrast to previous poems, Crane does not mention a specific bird here but rather implies avian key characteristics, such as flight, song, and migration, in the umbrella term ‘bird.’⁵⁷ Like birds migrating to warmer regions to obtain food, the

⁵⁶ As the title of Crane’s second section signals, the poet sees the body of the American continent symbolized in Pocahontas. In an early outline of *The Bridge*, Crane sketches this section as “Pocahontas—The natural body of America—fertility” (440). More than a year later, he tells Kahn that “Powhatan’s daughter, or Pocahontas, is the mythological nature-symbol chosen to represent the physical body of the continent, or the soil. [...] The five sub-sections of Part II are mainly concerned with a gradual exploration of this ‘body’ whose first possessor was the Indian” (554).

⁵⁷ Against the backdrop of hobos who “go ruminating through / Ohio, Indiana—blind baggage— / To Cheyenne . . . Maybe Kalamazoo,” the migratory aspect constitutive of many species of birds is the feature

migratory workers follow their instinct or intuition (to use a word more appropriate for human wit) to find better working chances somewhere else. Singing is another aspect that supports the metaphor “bird-wit,” as Crane stresses the wanderers’ musicality by saying that they, “singing low,” give utterance to popular songs. In fact, more song titles are referenced in later stanzas of “The River.” In rhyming couplets and equivocal phrasing Crane writes: “—As though the waters breathed that you might know / *Memphis Johnny, Steamboat Bill, Missouri Joe.* / Oh, lean from the window, if the train slows down, / As though you touched hands with some ancient clown, / —A little while gaze absently below / And hum *Deep River* with them while they go” (43-44). Crane thus likens the vagabonds’ singing to the intrinsic instinct of birds to communicate with sound. In this light, the word combination “[s]trange bird-wit” fits into the context of the tramps’ wanderings and the Mississippi’s incessant, free-flowing mean-dering. Furthermore, in the broader context of *The Bridge*, the “bird-wit” anticipates the intricate combination of Whitman, technological progress, and flight in “Cape Hatteras.” Significantly, in the fourth stanza of “Cape Hatteras,” Crane turns directly to Whitman and addresses him in a way that is evocative of the hobos’ bird-wit:

‘—Recorders ages hence’—ah, syllables of faith!
 Walt, tell me, Walt Whitman, if infinity
 Be still the same as when you walked the beach
 Near Paumanok—your lone patrol—and heard the wraith
 Through surf, its bird note there a long time falling . . .
 For you, the panoramas and this breed of towers,
 Of you—the theme that’s structured in the cliff,
 O Saunterer on free ways still ahead! (55)

Even if one does not accept the pun wit/Whit-man which the “bird note” insinuates, the fact that Whitman is associated with lonesome walking (“walked the beach,” “your lone patrol,” “O Saunterer on free ways still ahead!”) highlights the parallels between the older poet and “[r]ail-squatters ranged in nomad raillery” (42). Like the men in “The River,” Whitman knows the American soil and the borderlines between land/earth (“beach / Near Paumanok”) and sea/water (“heard the wraith / Through surf”). He belongs to the species of wanderers; “bird-wit” links them to the American continent and, as the course of “The River” shows, to the Amerindian past as well.

which supports Crane’s metaphor the most (42). The first two lines of the penultimate stanza of “Atlantis” hark back to and emphasize this image of movement through a landscape (de)formed by “[k]een instruments, strung to a vast precision” (41): “Migrations that must needs void memory, / Inventions that cobblestone the heart,—” (74).

In “The River,” the portrayal of the hobos or, as Crane suggests, childlike men (“Each seemed a child, like me, on a loose perch, / Holding to childhood like a termless play” [42]) leads into a description of the female body of the continent. In this transition, the close connection between the vagabonds and the land they are traveling upon is presented in bodily terms and gradually linked to the Indian world.⁵⁸ Beginning with the statement that they “touch something like a key perhaps,” that is, symbolize more than wandering and naturalness, the passage that bridges the poet-quester, the “[y]oungsters with eyes like fjords, old reprobates / With racetrack jargon,” and “redskin dynasties” contains several references to knowledge and intimacy. The hobos are said to “know a body under the wide rain” and to “lurk across her, knowing her yonder breast” in the same way in which the speaker has come across the land (“O nights that brought me to her body bare,” “I heard / Wail into distances I knew were hers,” “—Dead echoes! But I knew her body there”). This process of reminiscence leads the reader as well as the speaker back in time to indigenous peoples (“Papooses crying on the wind’s long mane / Screamed redskin dynasties that fled the brain” [43]) and culminates in two lines that are essential for *The Bridge* as a whole and its machine-absorbing poetics in particular.

Having imaginatively arrived at the starting point of the continent’s/body’s exploration, the poet-quester depicts the original state of the continent as follows: “But I knew her body there, / Time like a serpent down her shoulder, dark, / And space, an eagle’s wing, laid on her hair” (43). For the first time in *The Bridge*, Crane here introduces the metaphoric pairs time/serpent and space/eagle.⁵⁹ The serpent as symbol of time and the eagle as symbol of space become crucial images in the following poems and, in fact, occur twice in close vicinity and in almost identical diction at prominent positions in *The Bridge*: the last line of “The Dance” reads, “The serpent with the eagle in the boughs” (48) and the penultimate line of the entire epic has “The serpent with the eagle in the leaves” (74). The importance of these animal symbols shows even more

⁵⁸ In a 1927 letter, Crane stresses the vehicle status of the hobos: “What I’m trying to do is tell the pioneer experience of our forefathers in terms of the present, and finally via the hobos get back to an entrance into the original world of the American Indian, symbolized by Pocahontas. The hobos are really just ‘psychological ponies’ to carry the reader along without mention of mares and prairie schooners, etc. I think I do it pretty smoothly, so that the reader is really led back to the primal physical body of America (Pocahontas) and finally to the central pulse and artery, the Mississippi” (548-49).

⁵⁹ Crane uses the metaphor of time as serpent already in “The Wine Menagerie,” a poem included in *White Buildings*: “What is it in this heap the serpent pries— / Whose skin, facsimile of time, unskeins / Octagon, sapphire transepts round the eyes” (17). The shedding of the serpent’s skin appears here as a way of measuring time. Shedding and sloughing are key motifs in *The Bridge* and emerge as images of metamorphosis, for instance, in “The Dance:” “Dance, Maquokeeta! snake that lives before, / That casts his pelt, and lives beyond;” “O, like the lizard in the furious noon, / That drops his legs and colors in the sun, / —And laughs, pure serpent, Time itself, and moon / Of his own fate, I saw thy change begun!” (47).

explicitly in Crane's statements on the role of time and space in the modern world. In a November 1926 letter to Winters, Crane, in discussing the feasibility and potential of modern epics, claims that

there are certain basically mythical factors in our Western world which literally cry for embodiment. Oddly, as I see it, they cannot be presented completely (any of them) in isolated order, but in order to appear in their true, luminous reality must be presented in chronological and organic order, out of which you get a kind of bridge, the quest of which bridge is—nothing less ambitious than the annihilation of time and space, the prime myth of the modern world. (496)

In addition to key words like “organic” and “bridge,” the forceful phrase “annihilation of time and space” is exceptional here. As the strong word “annihilation” suggests, Crane is convinced that modernity goes along with a complete destruction of temporal and spatial boundaries. This is “the prime myth of the modern world” and, in logical extension, also what he aims to do in *The Bridge*. Yet the lines in *The Bridge* which mention the serpent and the eagle do not hint at annihilation but rather at a reconciliation and union of time and space. It then does not come as a surprise that Crane omits the noun in a letter to his father from June 21, 1927. One month after Charles Lindbergh's solo non-stop flight over the Atlantic, Crane writes in response to the ubiquitous fascination with aviation sparked by this success that “the world is quite mad” and that “it will take months for people to get their eyes out of the sky and their necks uncrooked and back to their stomachs.” Crane's initial skepticism, then, gives way to his personal interpretation of and poetic interest in Lindbergh's accomplishment: “Time and Space is the myth of the modern world, however, and it's interesting to see how any victory in that field is heralded by the mass of humanity. In a way my Bridge is a manifestation of the same general subject. Maybe I'm just a little jealous of Lindy!” (548). Crane here not only highlights the importance of “Time and Space” by capitalizing the first letters of both words but also makes clear that these concepts are inextricably connected to each other; the combination of time and space “is the myth of the modern world.”⁶⁰ Against the backdrop of Crane's assertion that *The Bridge* “is a manifestation of the same general subject,” the serpent-and-eagle lines gain prominence.

It is important to note that the first mention of these animal symbols in “The River” suggests spatial limitation when the Native Americans possessed “the pure

⁶⁰ Accordingly, Crane sees these mythical factors also at work in “Cutty Sark” and “Atlantis:” “The green eyes, the drums, the Rose theme, precursor of the Atlantis theme which closes the poem on the pure Mythos of time and space. In a way, the calligramme, the regatta is the ‘sublimation’ of the ‘raw article’ as seen personified in the bar-cafe” (497).

mythical smoky soil.” Then and there, space is not symbolically rendered as a full-grown eagle but appears only as “an eaglet’s wing.” The smallness, immaturity, and inexperience of the young eagle emblemize the lack of spatial expansion in the earliest times of the American continent. In the next passage in which Crane employs this bird image as word and symbol, however, the eagle strikes as a fully-fledged, intrusive, and forceful bird. In “The Dance,” the poem following “The River,” the poet-quester becomes “identified with the Indian and his world before it is over” and witnesses the eponymous dance of “Pocahontas, bride” and “*her chieftain lover*” Maquokeeta (556). Introducing this pivotal moment of Native American ritual, Crane in a blatant anachronism inserts an instrument of modern technology into “The Dance” and juxtaposes the eagle with the mechanical device of a turbine (45):

A cyclone threshes in the turbine crest,
Swooping in eagle feathers down your back;
Know, Maquokeeta, greeting; know death’s best;
—Fall, Sachem, strictly as the tamarack! (46)

By anachronistically mentioning “the turbine” in this quatrain, Crane shows that his intention is not to write a diachronically coherent historical epic of America, but that he is appealing to his Machine Age audience to re-experience the conquest of the Indian world in modern terms. Apparently impressed by the efficacy of this image, the poet quotes the first two lines in a letter to Winters to show “how much of the past is living under only slightly altered forms” (484). Crane writes: “I may exaggerate, but why did I really *have* to employ mention of the turbine engine to really describe the warrior’s headdress? Etc. Of course the head could have been elaborated in prose, but the psychic factor would have been lost via a delayed delivery” (496).⁶¹ What Crane anticipates here is the absorption and acclimatization of the machine.

The phrase “the turbine crest” triggers a “psychic factor” and contributes to the vividness (“cyclone”) and motional force of the image (“threshes,” “swooping [...] down”) in the readers’ mind. In “Modern Poetry,” Crane would rephrase this “psychic factor” which machinery can stimulate and claim that the machine “can not act creatively in our lives until, like the unconscious nervous responses of our bodies, its connotations emanate from within—forming as spontaneous a terminology of poetic reference as the

⁶¹ Given this explanatory letter, it is almost cynical that Winters quotes the first two lines of this stanza in his devastating review of *The Bridge* and claims: “These lines, though they are perceived with great precision, have no evident connection with the theme except as they are a part of the natural landscape, and that connection is inadequate for art” (108). The “psychic factor” of the turbine—essential for Crane’s machine-absorbing poetics—did not appeal to the New Critic apparently.

bucolic world of pasture, plow, and barn” (172). The turbine and its connotations elicit in Crane’s Machine Age audience a strong and spontaneous reaction that is based on the readers’ familiarity with the machine. This paradoxical fusion, then, extends the logic of metaphor and eclipses the anachronism in “The Dance.” By fusing the metaphoric cluster of natural images like “a thunder-bud—it grew,” “the heart’s hot root,” and “threshes” with technological lingo as in “siphoned” and “the turbine,” Crane reinforces the logic of metaphor with the prefix ‘techno-.’ In combination with imagery evocative of a gathering thunderstorm (“distant cloud,” “the padded foot / Within,” “cyclone” [46]), “threshes” emerges as the pivotal word in this process because it encapsulates the technological and the agricultural (threshing machine) as well as the (e)motional force of these images. It is in this way that Crane’s logic of metaphor evolves into a technologic of metaphor.

If the connotations of the turbine (such as rotation, energy, power, and speed) are more important than the anachronism in this quatrain, the juxtaposition and simultaneity of this mechanical device and the primitive eagle-symbol moreover point to the intricate correlation of machinery and the concept of space. Indeed, the power of the turbine, which infuses the dance between Pocahontas and her first possessor (“A birch kneels,” “The oak grove circles in a crash of leaves,” “Dance, Maquokeeta: Pocahontas grieves” [47]), hints at the industrialization of the American continent. Unsurprisingly, the growing influence of machinery coincides with the conquest of space. This connection becomes more explicit through the personal pronoun shift from ‘we’ to ‘I’ and back to ‘we’ again. Crane frames the poet-quester’s voyeuristic surveillance of and final participation in the dance (“I gained the ledge,” “I heard it,” “I, too, was liege,” “I could not pick the arrows from my side” [46-47]) with modern-day remarks on the continent’s history by including the word ‘we’ and employing “Now” twice at the beginning of lines: “Mythical brows we saw retiring—loth [...] Now lie incorrigibly what years between” and, in the final stanza, “We danced, O Brave, we danced beyond their farms [...] Now is the strong prayer folded in thine arms” (45, 48). According to Crane, this cycle from a contemporary perspective in “The River” to zooming into the Indian world and returning through “Indiana” to the present results in the “metamorphosis of Pocahontus” and “her absorption into our ‘contemporary veins’” (631). In this process, the eagle-space motif evolves from the “eaglet’s wing” in “The River” through the pairing with “the turbine crest” in “The Dance” into the paramount theme in “Cape Hatteras.” Mechanized flight and the conquest of space are here inextricably connected.

2.5 Walker Evans's Photographs in *The Bridge* and Transition to "Cape Hatteras"

Passage to more than India!
 Are thy wings plumed indeed for such far flights?
 O soul, voyagest thou indeed on voyages like those?
 (Whitman 539)

Years of the Modern! Propulsions toward what capes?
 (CPSL 59)

"Cape Hatteras" is the longest section and individual poem in *The Bridge* and belongs to the last pieces which Crane finished and added to his epic. Crane struggled considerably with this poem. Nonetheless, as his work on the section progressed, he deemed it essential for *The Bridge*. In a February 1928 letter to Winters, Crane admitted that "[t]here is a certain lack of synthesis" in "Cape Hatteras" and referred to the poem as "a bundle of smoldering notes, no more" (575). One and a half years later in August 1929, however, he told Harry and Caresse Crosby, who had agreed to publish *The Bridge* in their Black Sun Press, that he was "anxious to add more—the 'Cape Hatteras' sections, at least—before you bring it out. This is now being worked out rapidly, and the aeronautical sections which you so much admired have been improved and augmented considerably" (627).⁶² In early September he could write that the poem "look[ed] pretty good" and that "according to [his] ideas in the *Bridge* this [Paris] edition wouldn't be complete or even representative without it" (629). Significantly, Crane's ultimate approval of "Cape Hatteras" coincided with his decision to have *The Bridge* printed with three photographs by Walker Evans, "a young fellow here in Brooklyn who is doing amazing things" (636). Before continuing with crucial analyses of Crane's technologic of metaphor in "Cape Hatteras," it is imperative to shift gears for a moment and focus on these photographs and the publication considerations preceding Evans's input. As it is, the photographs as material facts in the first edition of *The Bridge*, which were finally picked over Joseph Stella's painting of Brooklyn Bridge, have virtually faded into oblivion. Like with Oppen's *Discrete Series*, as will be show in the following chapters, disregarding the original publication site with its unique materiality potentially curtails

⁶² A few months earlier, Crane had written Harry Crosby, "heir to all the Morgan-Harjes millions and [...] owner of a marvelous de luxe publishing establishment" in the poet's words (612), that he will "try to add a few more paragraphs to the flying machine, scream awhile, dream awhile" (613). Since Crosby was fascinated by powered flight and, in fact, learned to fly solo "paying four hundred dollars for a course in pilot training" (Wolff 261), Crane knew that his affluent friend would be looking forward to these aeronautical sections.

meaning. Readers who chance upon *The Bridge* today will most likely not know or come across the photographs by Evans whom Crane considered “the most living, vital photographer of any whose work I know.” Significantly, Crane’s next sentence in the letter to Caresse Crosby reads: “More and more I rejoice that we decided on his pictures rather than Stella’s” (635). Deprived of this publication information, readers cannot grasp or, as Crane might have said, cannot fully apprehend the materiality of *The Bridge*. Unaware of the original printing situation, readers lack essential material facts. They read *The Bridge* abridged.

At the end of December 1929, having decided where to position Evans’s three photographs of Brooklyn Bridge, Crane instructed Caresse Crosby “that the middle photograph (the one of the barges and tug) goes between the ‘Cutty Sark’ Section and the ‘Hatteras’ Section. That is the ‘center’ of the book, both physically and symbolically” (634). The symbolic importance of “Cape Hatteras,” which has not convinced many critics, will be discussed after this tangent. On the most basic level, the physical centrality of the poem is justified by its position as the fourth of eight sections. The placement of “the middle photograph (the one of the barges and tug)” gives prominence to the photo-poetic center of the book on a material level. As demanded, the photograph in question was printed between “Cutty Sark” and “Cape Hatteras” (fig.4).

Like the other two photographs which are placed at the beginning and end of *The Bridge*, the middle photograph “was covered with a glassine sheet affixed by wrapping around and gluing along the inner edge of the leaf; a second glassine sheet was inserted loose between the fixed glassine sheet and the illustration” (Schwartz 13). In the first edition, the photographs were, as Alan Trachtenberg notes, “each treated as an artwork in itself, printed in gravure and given the space of a page interleaved with protective tissue” (185).⁶³ Gordon Grigsby goes into more detail when he writes: “Despite the oversize



Fig. 4: Evans’s middle photograph taken from Brooklyn Bridge and placed between “Cutty Sark” and “Cape Hatteras.”

pages, the photographs are small and unobtrusive, black and white. One to a page, they are centered, surrounded by white space, and presented with complete directness and simplicity.” For Grigsby, “the Evans photographs are hard, somber, finely arranged compositions, almost classical in the clarity and restraint of their aesthetic” (5). It is the

⁶³ Trachtenberg is, in fact, the only scholar I could identify who is quite explicit when it comes to the disappearance of the photographs (five in total with the two 1930 American editions): “In sum, five photographs by Walker Evans accompanied *The Bridge* in its three distinct printings in 1930, the only publications of the poem during Crane’s lifetime. None of these photographs has reappeared in any of the later editions. The excision of Evans’s contribution to the poem is more than unfortunate; the poem is seriously misrepresented when read without at once seeing the bridge, and seeing it especially in the strong, distinct, and original way of Evans’s pictures. They are integral to the text, and should be restored” (186). Especially from a material perspective, I could not agree more.

fine arrangement of these three photographs and particularly the middle one within the discrete series of *The Bridge* which deserves more scrutiny.

When Crane wrote his friends Charlotte and Richard Rychtarik in February 1929 about the “things [that] have happened” since he arrived in France, he was especially excited about the prospect of having *The Bridge* published by “a marvelous de luxe publishing establishment” under the auspices of Harry Crosby whom he had met “[t]hrough Eugene Jolas, editor of *transition*.” Crosby, Crane continues, “is so enthusiastic about the *Bridge* that he is going to bring it out here before it is published in America, as soon as I can finish it” (612). While whole-heartedly indulging in lascivious debauchery at the millionaire’s “old mill (16th century) out on the ground of the chateau of the Comte du Rochfocauld at Ermenonville” (“Oysters, absinthe, even opium, which I’ve tried, but don’t enjoy”), he remained passionate about the promised printing of his epic: “Meanwhile, I dream of how fine they’ve promised to publish the *Bridge*—on sheets as large as a piano score, so none of the lines will be broken—and they have already sent to the Brooklyn Art Museum to have the Stella picture of the *Bridge* copied in color for reproduction as a frontispiece!” (612).⁶⁴ Whereas the Stella frontispiece would eventually not become a reality, as will be discussed later, the luxuriousness in print “on sheets as large as a piano score” materialized in the Black Sun publication. The book was “printed in two colors (red and black) on oversize, heavy paper” (Grigsby 5). Furthermore, the Crosbys (after Harry died in a double suicide with his mistress, Josephine Bigelow in December 1929, Caresse saw *The Bridge* through the press) accepted Crane’s wish to change the page size so that some of the excessive lines of “Cape Hatteras” would remain intact.⁶⁵ In the version of “Cape Hatteras” which Crane

⁶⁴ In a letter to Cowley, Crane described the intoxicating circumstances in France which literally left an imprint on *The Bridge*: “Have just returned from a weekend at Ermenonville (near Chantilly) on the estate of the Duc du Rochefoucauld where an amazing millionaire by the name of Harry Crosby has fixed up an old mill (with stables and a stockade all about) and such a crowd as attended *is* remarkable. I’m invited to return at any time for any period to finish the *Bridge*, but I’ve an idea that I shall soon wear off my novelty. Anyway, Crosby [...] is going to bring out a private edition of the *Bridge* with such details as a reproduction of Stella’s picture in actual color as frontispiece. He’s also doing Lawrence, Cummings, and Kay Boyle. It takes a book to describe the Crosbys—but it has (I mean the connection) already led me to new atrocities—such as getting drunk yesterday and making violent love to nobility” (608).

⁶⁵ Even before Harry’s death, the Crosbys complied with Crane’s eccentricities. In fact, they had proposed to publish *The Bridge* much earlier. Crane rejected their offer and justified his procrastination in a letter from April 1929: “Your suggestion about immediate [sic] publication for the *Bridge* is very generous, indeed inspiring. I’m so glad to know that it strikes you as being already so organic as to satisfy the requirements that its general form demands. [...] Suppose, then, that I agree to turn the thing over to you by the first of September, regardless of my success in the meantime? By that time we’ll possibly be all in Paris (I may be much before) and can see the thing through the press together. If you like I’ll give you my word about the matter, especially as I know you run your press on business principles and like to know your schedule sometime in advance. As you say, there can always be a second edition incorporating

considered printable, “the line-lengths are longer than in any other section—so long, in fact, that to preserve them unbroken across the page I think we ought to change our plan regarding page size and use, instead of the previously-agreed on Perse book for a model, your *Mad Queen* volume—even better looking in other respects, too, I think” (627). Despite this change toward larger page size, the photographs were not scaled proportionally. In the context of material page-space, then, the photos stand out in their smallness.

As has been noted by Trachtenberg, “the photographs work subtle effects upon the poem itself” by “call[ing] attention to the bridge itself as a physical object, as a palpable presence in the poem” (185). Indeed, the photographs reinforce the poetic text across the page. Or, as Oppen would put it with reference to poems on a double page, the photographs and text “immensely deepen in meaning as they reflect on each other and join each other” (*OR* 33). Trachtenberg is right when he states that “[e]ach of the three images in the Black Sun edition has an unambiguous point of view” and that “[t]he photographs take their lead from the poem, and yet they also stand as an independent visual conception, especially when viewed in sequence: a composite work of art in their own right” (191-92). The photographic triptych, in fact, traces the poet-quester’s journey spatially. What could be called an image-text map has been discussed by only a few Crane scholars who make use of the first edition of *The Bridge*. Grigsby, for instance, notes that “[t]aken from a point on the bank beneath the span” the first “picture shows the East River in the foreground, some tugboats in the middle distance, and a low city Skyline in the background” and is “thus explicitly related to the lines in the ‘Proem’ identifying the poet-protagonist’s angle of vision at the beginning of his symbolic journey through space and time” (6-7). Indeed, the first image chimes with the initial perspective of the lyrical I (fig. 5).

additions. For all I know, the *Bridge* may turn into something like the form of *Leaves of Grass*, with a number of editions, each incorporating further additions” (*CPSL* 614-15).



Fig. 5: The image-text double page at the beginning of the original *The Bridge*.

Positioned underneath the bridge (“Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;” “Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend”), the speaker would have likely seen something like the constellation depicted in the photograph. The eye, like the photograph, “first looks up at the steel underside of the bridge floor, and across the river toward Manhattan” (Trachtenberg 192). Similarly, in the last poem of *The Bridge*, the photograph “presents a view of the Bridge from a point analogous to the protagonist’s position in the center of the span,” revealing “a net of vertical and diagonally sweeping cables, one dark lamp-post, and one of the massive towers with its twin gothic arches” (Grigsby 9). The final photograph is placed on the right-hand side and thus physically marks the end of the epic (fig. 6). The abstract image visually chimes with images evoked in the lines from the final stanza of “Atlantis” where “the orphic strings, / Sideareal phalanxes, leap and converge” and “Whispers antiphonal in azure swing” (*CPSL* 74). Lines from the rhapsodic “Atlantis” resonate with the picture as “the bound cable strands, the arching path / Upward” poetically metamorphose into “arching strands of song” and the “choiring strings” of the Aeolian “harp” in “To Brooklyn Bridge” (72, 34).

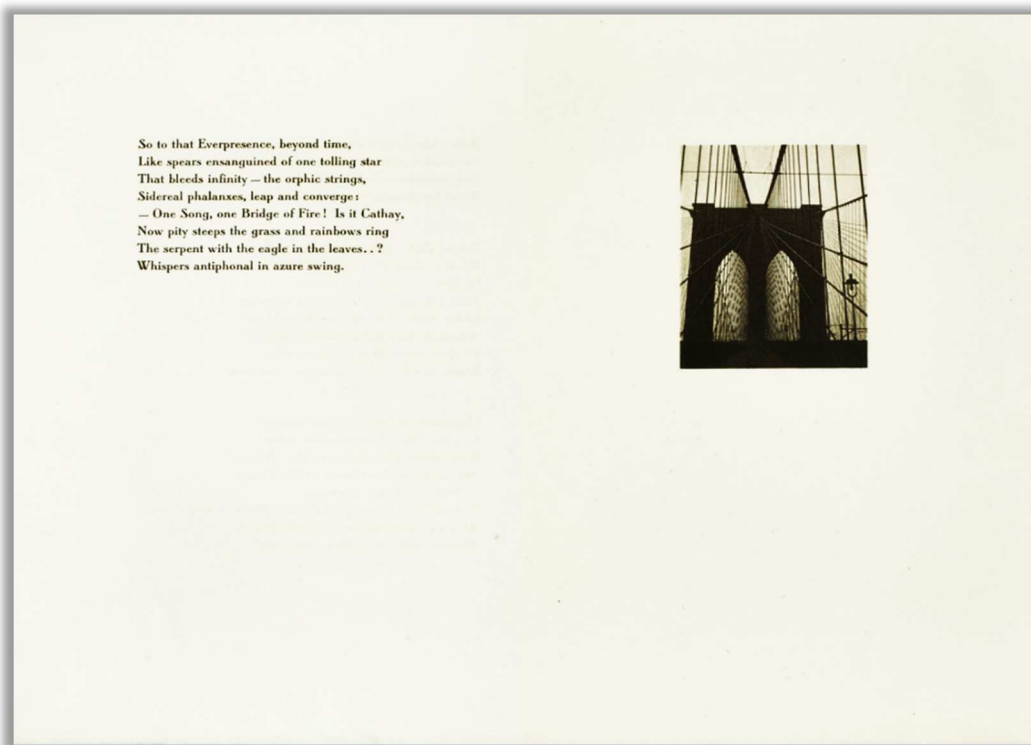


Fig. 6: The text-image double page at the end of the original *The Bridge*.

In fact, the key term “strings,” which connects the metaphoric cluster of musical instruments (“Transparent meshes—fleckless the gleaming staves”), rigging of a ship (“White tempest nets file upward, upward ring”), printing press and weaving loom (“towering looms that press / Sidelong with flight of blade on tendon blade”), and poetry with its lines strung together (“O Choir, translating time / Into what multitudinous Verb”), appears three times at pivotal moments in the final poem as the last word of a line (72-73). In the first stanza, “the flight of strings” transports “Sibylline voices” which “flicker, waveringly stream / As though a god were issue of the strings” (72). In the last stanza, fittingly the only textual unit facing the Evans photograph, the cordage and network of cables become “the orphic strings, / Sidereal phalanxes, leap and converge: / —One Song, one Bridge of Fire!” (74). With the photograph occupying the same space of a double page, the lines’ “[w]hispers antiphonal in azure swing” forth multidimensionally. “Artistic achievements in themselves, yet wedded to the larger work of which they form a part,” Grigsby rightly points out, “they [the photographs] add

a major dimension to the meaning of the poem, enriching and qualifying it in ways fully intended by the poet” (10-11).

Indeed, the placement of the three photographs within *The Bridge* was intended by Crane and Evans, one should add, as was the way in which they should appear on the page. After all, in the letter to Caresse Crosby, Crane explicitly mentions “Evans” who “is very anxious, as am I, that no ruling or printing appear on the pages devoted to the reproductions.” In this regard, it is crucial to take a closer look at the barges-and-tug photograph which Crane wanted to have “between the ‘Cutty Sark’ Section and the ‘Hatteras’ Section” (634). As it turns out, the physical centrality of this photograph and the concrete material positioning of the reproductions in *The Bridge* have not been read closely enough. This oversight shows in material minutiae. Grigsby, for example, states in his otherwise succinct and perceptive essay that “‘Cutty Sark’ ends with the protagonist standing on the Bridge looking down at a procession of beautiful but phantom ships on the river, old clipper ships and ‘apparitional sails’ like those of *Cutty Sark* herself. Placed on the facing page, the photograph is taken from approximately the same point of view” (7-9). While Grigsby describes the setting within *The Bridge* and the speaker’s position on Brooklyn Bridge correctly (“I started walking home across the Bridge” [53]), he gets the actual placement of the photographic material wrong. In fact, the photograph is not “[p]laced on the facing page” of the final lines of “Cutty Sark.” Rather, and in contrast to the images at the beginning and end, the picture is “surrounded by white pages on either side, midway between two sections of *The Bridge*” (Brunner, “Illustrated”). While Grigsby’s faux pas in reading the page might seem minor, the material arrangement of the image, which is separated from the past-oriented “Cutty Sark” and future-oriented “Cape Hatteras” by a blank page on both sides, highlights the central position on three levels or dimensions:

- a) the poet-quester standing in the middle of Brooklyn Bridge (physically-symbolically)
- b) the reader’s midway position in the material environment of the book *The Bridge* and its pages (physically)
- c) modern America between the past and the future, between “the navies old an oaken” and “Years of the modern! [Mechanical] Propulsions toward what capes?” (symbolically [51, 59])

The two white pages framing the image of the tugboat and the coal barges put this middlemost moment into relief. The picture itself emphasizes this juncture.

“The second image,” Trachtenberg writes, “frames the coal barges and tug boat in a diagonal, cutting composition that counterpoints the poet’s elevated fantasy of clipper ships with a subtle irony that registers throughout the poem” (193). By identifying irony at this point, Trachtenberg reiterates Grigsby’s reading of the text-photograph combination. According to Grigsby, the second photograph “sees modern realities” and “is therefore an ironic comment on the reality-vision conflict of ‘Cutty Sark’ and ‘Cape Hatteras’ and, by extension, of the whole poem” (9). While I would agree with the notion of a “reality-vision conflict” in *The Bridge*—the poem ends with a question, “Is it Cathay, / Now pity steeps the grass and rainbows ring / The serpent with the eagle in the leaves ...?” (74)—the focus on irony seems misplaced. “The airy regatta of phantom clipper ships seen from Brooklyn Bridge on the way home is,” as Crane proudly writes, “quite effective,” but the tugboat and the barges seen from above contribute to the meaning of *The Bridge* on a larger scale as well. As in Stieglitz’s *Apples and Gable*, the photograph apprehends movement so that the tugboat’s and the cargo ship’s “motion is continued from the picture infinitely: the moment made eternal” (331). Since tugs often and speedily change direction especially in harbors while in the process of maneuvering ships from one place to another, potential motional shifts are captured in the picture. The smaller vessel tugs and tows larger boats; the part adds value to the whole; a discrete unit effectuates shifts. It is most likely this part-impacts-the-whole quality which Oppen appreciated in the tugboats he mentions in *Discrete Series*: “Tug against the river— / Motor turning, lights / In the fast water off the bow-wave: / Passes slowly;” “On the water, solid— / The singleness of a toy— // A tug with two barges” (*NCP* 19, 32). Placed at this specific moment in the poem in this material spot between two white pages and two sections, the second image accentuates *The Bridge*’s materiality. The eight sections of the poem, like the separate coal containers being moved by barges to be finally brought to port by tugs, encapsulate movements through time and space which, Crane hoped, collectively navigate his “epic of the modern consciousness” to shore (557).

In this endeavor, the original photographs by Evans act as central material stays of meaning. In the poetic architecture of *The Bridge*, the two photographs positioned at the beginning and end of *The Bridge* function as the photographic pylons of the bridge turned poem. At least, this final metamorphosis and absorption of Brooklyn Bridge into *The Bridge* was what Crane intended which becomes clear in “Atlantis.” In this final poem which Crane, however, finished first—a fact he as poet-builder of *The Bridge* liked since

bridges are built from both ends at once (cf. Dickie, and Hammer, “Lecture”)—a line like “New octaves trestle the twin monoliths” point to the poetic-material fact of lines on the page. The final poem of *The Bridge* consists of twelve octaves. The line thus points self-referentially to the poem’s materiality. At the same time, the reference to “twin monoliths” gestures to “To Brooklyn Bridge,” which is composed in quatrains and directs the reader’s gaze, in the Black Sun edition most clearly, to the start from below the bridge. Undoubtedly, the absence of these photographs in later editions severely distorts the original meaning.⁶⁶ Similar to inaccurate reprintings of page-space in Oppen’s *Discrete Series*, *The Bridge* suffers from this privation. In Crane’s case, the complicated publication history of non-textual elements in *The Bridge* furthermore discloses the intricate poet-editor-patron nexus at work in getting the book published in France. Importantly, Crane in editorial accord with Jolas and the Crosbys had originally intended to publish *The Bridge* with a Joseph Stella painting as frontispiece to *Brooklyn Bridge*. Even though Crane would finally take pleasure in the fact that “we [he and Caresse Crosby] decided on [Evans’s] pictures rather than Stella’s” (635), the Stella debate cannot be disregarded. While I argue that the tripartite sequence of photographs fits into Crane’s architectural planning of *The Bridge* most harmoniously, it is important to note that the materiality of the original poem could have easily been changed if Stella’s famous painting would have been affordable and unproblematically printable in color. My assumption is that Crane was not too unhappy about the fact that Stella’s painting could not be reproduced adequately, because the colorful reprinting as frontispiece might have overshadowed the poetry. As it was, the first publication of *The Bridge* “also marked the first appearance of the work of Walker Evans,” therefore, an artist whose work was less known than Stella’s New York paintings (Trachtenberg 185). Still, as will be shown in the following, Crane benefited from the transnational connection with Crosby and Jolas and, in a way, capitalized on Stella (whose work he must have known) by translating the painter’s rendition of Brooklyn Bridge into transnational networking material for *transition*.

⁶⁶ It needs to be noted here that the two 1930s New York trade editions by Horace Liveright included photographs by Evans as well. The three photographs of the first edition, however, were not reprinted then nor in later publications. As Brunner writes: “Photos by Evans, in fact, appeared in not only the deluxe limited edition released in March from the Paris-based Black Sun Press (directed by Harry and Caresse Crosby) but also the trade edition published in New York in April by Horace Liveright and reprinted in a second impression in July. Moreover, each of these printings had its own exclusive photos or photo” (“Illustrated”).

3 Absorbing Transition, Transitioning Absorption

On 27 March 1927, Crane wrote two letters to two of his most trusted friends whose critical acuity and poetic knowledge he held in high regard: Allen Tate and Yvor Winters. Varying in length and style, both letters dwell on the arrival of *transition*, a literary magazine founded and edited by Eugene Jolas in Paris in 1927. The first issue of *transition* contained Crane's poem "O Carib Isle!", but this was not the only reason why the American poet was excited about this postal item from abroad. As his remarks reveal, he regarded this new periodical as a pivotal platform for transnational publication: "A copy of transition #1 has reached me—and I'm enthusiastic about it," he told Tate. "By all means send Jolas some poems—and why not your article on Marianne Moore? It doesn't spoil re-sale of ms over here, you know. *transition* has some weak contribs, of course, but the majority is respectable. Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Williams, Winters, Laura, Larbaud, Gide, MacLeish, Soupault, etc. It's a wedge that ought to be used [...] and it seems to have a proofreader!" (CPSL 534). Winters was briefed in more detail about *transition's* material and transnational qualities:

The first issue of *transition* arrived yesterday. It is far better constructed—physically and 'spiritually' than I expected. I have the vague conviction that it is going to live the superhuman term of at least a year. And it so intrigues me that I'm going to send Jolas a number of things—regardless of payment—which is negligible especially in view of the fact that being printed in France one can still market here and England also, from all I know. The magazine somehow bespeaks a larger audience for our kind of work than I had suspected despite the fact that *transition* includes a number of soft spots and 'softies'—but you can't say more for any U.S.A. periodical that I know of. The New Republic poetry is controlled by a male Miss who won't even take tea because it's too 'stimulating'—and The Dial is so 'nice'—well! But they've just taken P[owhatan]'s D[daughter]. (4 pages) and Aunt Harriet has just taken Cutty Sark—so I'm not in half the rage today that I've been possessed of for so long. But I think *transition* is a good wedge to use. (Parkinson 73-74)⁶⁷

The snide remarks at "soft spots" and editors of American periodicals aside,⁶⁸ it is curious that Crane employs the metaphor 'wedge' for *transition* in both letters.

⁶⁷ The editors considered the physicality of the magazine less important than the material they wanted to publish in its pages. In the inaugural issue, they let their readers know that "[t]he physical aspect and administrative machinery of <TRANSITION> are purposely modest in order to insure its regular appearance. The editors desire that its appeal shall result from the quality of its contents and will concentrate their efforts in that direction particularly. It will greatly facilitate distribution if readers wishing to receive the magazine subscribe promptly and directly through the Paris office" (155).

⁶⁸ In the twelfth issue of *transition*, Jolas and Elliot Paul would point to this editorial lassitude. In "A Review" after the first year of *transition*, they would write: "One of the principal reasons why *transition* became necessary was the prevailing tendency among the editors of American magazines to clutter up the entire book with articles about dead or dying writers and to use verses to fill odd bits of pages. We resolved to print first-hand and undiluted prose and poetry, as much as we could find of it, and to suspect critical

Moreover, he pairs this tool with the verb ‘to use’ twice which raises the question: How did Crane intend to use a European periodical with the border-crossing prefix ‘trans-’ in its name as a tool, an instrument, a machine to improve his and *The Bridge*’s marketability?

3.1 The Revolution of the Word and Transnational Network Authorship in *transition*

As will be shown in the following analysis, Crane took his metaphoric rendering of this periodical quite literally and used, or, to put it more provocatively, tweaked *transition* as a tool to promote his long poem *The Bridge* which, one should remember, was first published by Harry Crosby’s Black Sun Press in Paris in 1930. Crosby, whose obsession with aeronautics Crane would gratify poetically in “Cape Hatteras,” contributed regularly to *transition* and, in fact, defended the American poet against charges of unintelligibility within its pages. Importantly, Crosby also agreed to publish Joseph Stella’s “picture of the *Bridge* in color [...] as a frontispiece” (612). Seemingly, the main reason why this plan finally fell through were high costs: “About the Stella reproductions,” Crane wrote the Crosbys:

I’ve been over twice to the Brooklyn Museum, talked with the director and curator, and secured permission to have the picture featured any way we like. But when I came to question engraving companies on the cost of the necessary five plates for color reproduction I was surprised at the cost. At least \$200 would be involved, it seems. Now I’m assuming that to be too steep for any of us, and, instead, am going to send a good photographer over to the museum to get a good, clear picture. Then I’ll send that to you. The plate for this can be made in Paris cheaper and possibly better than here. It may look better, even without color—if we get a good photo and a sharp, clear half-tone. (627-28)

While it is worth speculating whether the “good photographer” whom Crane wanted to send “over to the museum to get a good, clear picture” of the Stella painting was Evans, which might then have led to the decision to have his original photographs in *The Bridge*, I will focus on Crane’s role in soliciting material for *transition*’s June 1929 “Revolution of the Word” issue and trace webs of relations through the physical structure of this magazine. Tellingly, Crane had orchestrated Stella’s contribution to this specific number. *transition* provided Crane with a transnational network that helped him to strategically advertise his poetry and see it into print on two continents.

contributions in proportion to their elegance of style. [...] We wish to destroy the traditions of language and we welcome its decomposition” (143-44)

Shortly after his arrival in Paris on January 7, 1929 (“I left there [London] on the 7th of January, and life has been like a carnival ever since—here in Paris” [611]) and after he personally met Jolas and Crosby, Crane contacted the Italian-American modernist painter Stella. Claiming that he saw “a copy of [Stella’s] essay on Brooklyn Bridge and the marvelous paintings of the Bridge [and] other New York subjects” for the first time before he left for France, Crane requests permission to his “editor friend [Jolas] [...] to “reproduce The Bridge, The Port, and The Skyscrapers,” reprint [Stella’s] essay and “use this material in the next number” of *transition* (605-06). In the next paragraph, Crane’s part as quasi-official advisory editor fuses with his role as active self-promoter of his own work:

I have also a private favor of my own to ask you. I should like permission to use your painting of the Bridge as a frontispiece to a long poem I have been busy on for the last three years—called *The Bridge*. It is a remarkable coincidence that I should, years later, have discovered that another person, by whom I mean you, should have used the same sentiments regarding Brooklyn Bridge which inspired the main theme and pattern of my poem. (606)

Crane’s emphasis on the “remarkable coincidence” that Brooklyn Bridge inspired both artists is interesting in this passage, as Crane must have been familiar with Stella’s work for many years. As Weber notes, “Crane could not have avoided being acquainted with the work of one of the most important American artists” simply because “criticism and reproductions of [Stella’s] work were featured in many of the advance-guard literary and art magazines which Crane regularly read” (317). Indeed, Crane undoubtedly read magazines which featured Stella’s art and, at times, even appeared in the same pages. In addition to Stella work published in *Broom*, Weber points to the special issue of *The Little Review* from August 1922 and rightly states that this “entire issue [...] was dedicated to Stella, and sixteen of his paintings, including ‘Brooklyn Bridge,’ were reproduced in its pages; the same number contained a letter by Crane, and there is good reason to suppose that Crane would have read the whole issue” (318). It is true that readers of this Stella number would not only have encountered a black-and-white reproduction of Stella’s cubist painting “Brooklyn Bridge” but would have also come across Crane’s letter to Jane Heap, editor of *The Little Review*, printed on the same page with Heap’s response. What is more, the next *Little Review* issue even contained a satirical sketch by Crane which proves that he actively read and participated in periodical cultures of the time.

Did Crane in his letter, then, try to disingenuously cover up the fact that he had been aware of Stella’s bridges for years? Or, as Stella expert Irma Jaffe puts it: “Can we

conclude that Crane's memory is not to be entirely trusted in this connection, and that even the original stimulus [for *The Bridge*] had been somehow forgotten?" She, at least, "is strongly persuaded that Stella's soaring *Bridge* did play an inspirational role in the genesis of Crane's poem" (104). In any case, why would Crane solicit Stella's material just at that time in Paris and why specifically for the next number of *transition*? If one takes a closer look at the content selection and material arrangement of this very next number, potential answers and networking traces occur. It seems likely that the Stella contribution which Crane arranged was the most important piece in a promotional enterprise spearheaded by the American poet with editorial and publishing support by Jolas and Crosby to publicize *The Bridge*.

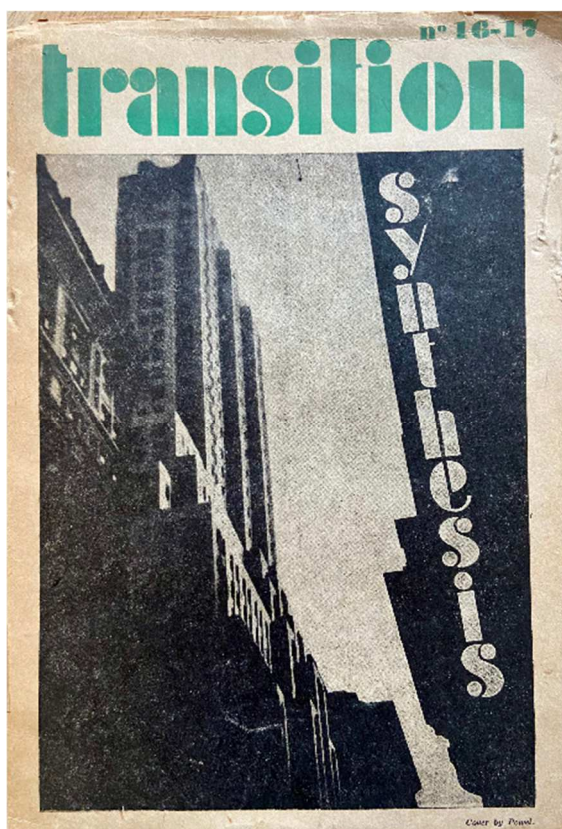


Fig. 7: The cover of the Spring-Summer *transition* number published in June 1929.

transition 16/17 opens with a cover photograph by Gretchen Powel of a Manhattan skyscraper which faces the word 'synthesis' on the right-hand side (fig. 7). This initial juxtaposition of image and word and the idea of fusion—seminal to Crane's poetics—leads into the 'Revolution of the Word' manifesto. As has been sketched before, Crane signed this controversial proclamation and thus subscribed to such polemical statements as: "The literary creator has the right to disintegrate the primal matter of words imposed upon him by text-books and dictionaries." Cranian neologisms like 'transmemberment' or 'curveship' attest to the poet's endorsement of this claim. Additional

photographs of Manhattan architecture appear under the banner of "Manhattan: 1929" and visually chime with images evoked in Crane's poem such as in stanza 6 of "To Brooklyn Bridge:" "Down Wall, from girder into street noon leaks, / A rip-tooth of the sky's acetylene" (CPSL 33). These photographs, then, give way to Stella's contribution, "Brooklyn Bridge: Text and Painting," which Crane had successfully solicited. Stella's grandiose visualization of Brooklyn Bridge in both text and painting clearly reverberates

wih Crane's vision of this architectural landmark. In fact, Crane could not have agreed more with most of Stella's sentiments and sentences such as:

Meanwhile the verse of Walt Whitman—soaring above as a white aeroplane of Help—was leading the sails of my Art through the blue vastity of Phantasy, while the fluid telegraph wires, trembling around, as if expecting to propagate a new musical message, like aerial guides—leading to Immensity, were keeping me awake with an insatiable thirst for new adventures. I seized the object into which I could unburden all the knowledge springing from my present experience—“THE BROOKLYN BRIDGE.” (87)

If Whitman, aerial flight, and the idea of “a new musical message” emerge as leitmotifs most prominently in “Cape Hatteras” and “Atlantis” (sections which will be discussed later), the crucial (color) cluster of “white,” “sails” and “blue” as well as the creative course of action to compress “all the knowledge springing from [the artist's] present experience” into Brooklyn Bridge, finally addressed as “O Thou steeled Cognizance” (*CPSL* 73), should by now ring a bell. The similarities are striking and, as George Knox puts it, “the parallels in their emotions and imagery show a remarkable influence of stimuli from the milieu. Stella's vision and Crane's were panoramic and needed ‘visionary’ surfaces” (703).

Even though there is no reference to and obvious trace of Crane's agency behind the procurement of the Stella material, the poet's name appears several times in one of the longest articles of this *transition* number. In Crosby's “Observation-Post,” the founder of The Black Sun Press defends Crane against charges of obscurity leveled by Max Eastman in “The Cult of Unintelligibility” published by Harper's Magazine in April 1929. In Crane-like diction rife with wordplay, Crosby hails him as “dynamic energy, concentration, fresh vision, a migratory crane flying above the worn-out forest of the poetic phrase, above the false and stagnant pools of artificiality.” Calling out “Marlowe and Coleridge and Whitman and Rimbaud” as Crane's ancestors, he goes on to confront the reader with the poem “O Carib Isle!” to exemplify Crane's genius. Reprinted in its entirety and framed by Crosby's praise, “O Carib Isle” harks back to the first issue of *transition* in which Jolas had used the same poem to introduce the American poet to *transition's* audience. Jolas, in fact, had solicited “O Carib Isle” from Crane for the inaugural number and even translated it into French for an anthology in 1927. Fittingly for a ‘Revolution of the Word’ issue, another pun on the poet's name rounds off Crosby's tribute to Crane: “Yet Mr Eastman includes Hart Crane among his Unintelligibles. No doubt he is afraid of Hurricranes” (201-02).

This editorial advocacy for Crane's poetry becomes material product placement in the form of an advertisement in the magazine's closing pages. Written in boldface and capital letters on a double-page spread, The Black Sun Press announces forthcoming deluxe editions by authors whose names any reader of this *transition* number would have known by now (Powel, Crosby, Joyce, Jolas). Tellingly, Crane's *The Bridge* is the first entry on this list (fig. 8).

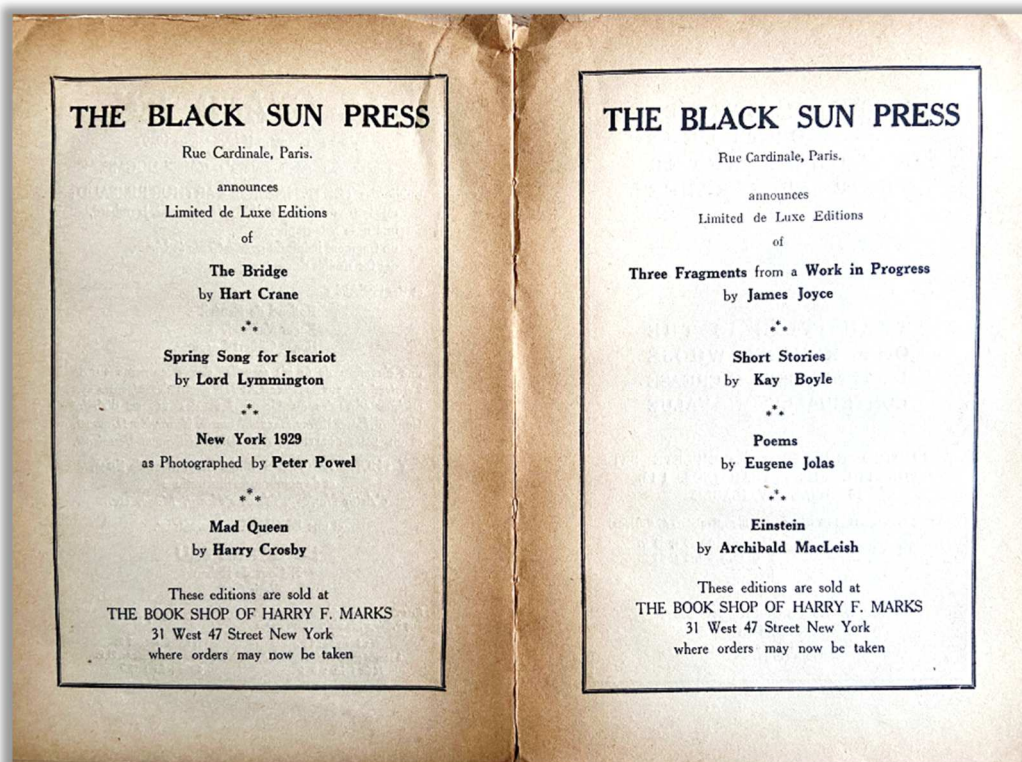


Fig. 8: A double page of announcements for Black Sun Press publications as advertised in *transition* 16-17.

Given that Crane's poetic project resonates throughout the pages of the entire issue, it is hardly surprising that his *The Bridge* ultimately occupies such a prominent place. As this quick tour through one issue of *transition* suggests, Stella's contribution which Crane arranged played a central role in a larger promotional endeavor to publicize *The Bridge* planned by the network of Jolas, Crosby, and Crane—a web of relations and a publishing triumvirate literally on the same double page in this final ad. While the question to what extent this editorial collaboration was triggered by sheer financial necessity to cater to the taste of Crosby whose financial support guaranteed the survival of the magazine in 1929 calls for further research, it is worth noting at this point that *transition* “became a major supporter of Crane's work; of the nineteen poems published in 1927, eight appeared in *transition*.” Parkinson adroitly points out that “this [wedge] would be

important to him as ingress to the Parisian expatriates when he spent his difficult period there in 1929” (72).

Upon publication of *The Bridge* and despite their long-lasting and poetically conscientious correspondence with Crane, both Winters and Tate wrote harsh and in Winters’ case devastating reviews of Crane’s ambitious epic. Crane reacted to their criticism by defending his poetic project in elaborate letters. The phrasing in one central paragraph of his letter to Tate, though not explicitly referring to the periodical *transition*, epitomizes the crucial function which this magazine had: “I shall be humbly grateful if the *Bridge* can fulfill the metaphorical inferences of its title. You will admit our age (at least our predicament) to be one of transition. If the *Bridge*, embodying as many anomalies as you find in it, yet contains as much authentic poetry here and there as even Winters grants,—then perhaps it can serve as at least the function of a link connecting certain chains of the past to certain chains and tendencies of the future” (646). Even if critics impugned *The Bridge*’s “metaphorical inferences of its title,” which originate from circumstances of transition (the fact of modernity), the magazine *transition* served as such a link for Crane. It truly was a useful networking tool, a wedge, a bridge. Within its pages, Crane whetted Crosby’s palate. “Cape Hatteras” was ready for take-off.

3.2 Inorganic Flight: The Technologic of Metaphor in “Cape Hatteras”

Hastily completed with Crosby’s obsession with aeronautics in mind to “meet the schedule of the Paris printer,” “Cape Hatteras” is the poem Crane rewrote and edited the most. After the original Paris publication, Crane, in fact, “made the most changes in this section for the New York edition” (Schwartz 23). Arguably, the most significant change was that Evans’s three photographs and their meaningful placement in *The Bridge* disappeared entirely. Crane called attention to these photographs in a letter from January 1930 to Winters who would receive a copy of the poem’s first edition not only for the sake of reviewing:

But here the thing is, now—very much larger than I had originally planned it, and at long last, something of a satisfaction, at least to me. I have asked Mrs. Crosby to send you a copy of the Paris edition for review—not that you actually need review of it, but that I want you to have a copy of what is physically one of the most beautiful libros I know of. You ought especially to appreciate the three photographs therein, taken by Walker Evans, a young fellow here in Brooklyn who is doing amazing things. (636)

Ironically, in his negative review of *The Bridge* published in *Poetry*, Winters would not mention the photographs at all. In Crane’s long and understandably embittered letter to

Winters after the critic's condemnation of *The Bridge* ("with Mr. Crane's wreckage in view" [165]), Crane posits that his former friend's "own special notions about the author's personality" caused the "wide discrepancies between [Winters'] public and private opinions." In reading the troubled poet's biography into and instead of "the text before you on the printed page," the critic is biased from the start. According to Crane, the actual poetic material is tarnished by such "a biographical (or is it autobiographical?) approach to poetry" (641). With reference to "Cape Hatteras," Crane believes, that the section's "acknowledgment of Whitman as an influence and living force [...] discolored the entire poem in [Winters'] estimation" (643). Indeed, Winters saw sentimentality at work in Crane's affirmative embrace of the older gay poet. The aspect of "living force," which Evans's photographs and the in/organic flight machines epitomize in "Cape Hatteras," apparently eluded Winters. He was not alone. The symbolical centrality of the poem, which picks up after the photograph-white-page sequence, was lost on most critics.

Weber, for example, claims that the "section is a failure, both as complete poem and as a contributory part of *The Bridge*" (365). In his crushing review, Winters considered "Cape Hatteras" "too vague in detail and chaotic in form" and "in its attitude toward Whitman [...] desperately sentimental" (163). In the same vein, Tate criticized "the merely personal passages, which are obscure, and the lapses into sentimentality" (118). Certainly, the passages dealing with Whitman ("*Panis Angelicus*," "Our Meistersinger," "O joyous seer" [*CPSL* 59-60]) are sentimental, especially the final lines where Crane asserts his connection to the past by clasping hands with the "Vedic Caesar" ("no, never to let go / My hand / in yours, / Walt Whitman— / so—" [59-60]). Sentimentality prevails, even though Crane qualifies his praise by addressing Whitman as "Not greatest, thou—not first, nor last,—but near" (59). Tellingly, this is the line he quotes back at Winters to show that Whitman was "an influence and living force" but also a flawed poetic seer (*CPSL* 643).

What critics tend to overlook is the centrality of the invention of mechanized flight, how bird imagery becomes a part of technological innovation and vice versa, and how Crane incorporates modern force into the lines of his poem. Against the backdrop of the notions evoked by avian images throughout *The Bridge*, "Cape Hatteras" shows the ambivalence of movement, flight, and vision most blatantly. In the poem, the opposition between 'in organic' and 'inorganic' flight blurs. The conquest of space becomes a question of "[t]owards what" progress is headed. Animal-machine creatures

in the stage of metamorphosis reveal that the absorption of the machine is not complete yet (56).

Out of the ten times Crane employs the word ‘space’ in *The Bridge*, the word occurs nine times in “Cape Hatteras.” Space is the overarching theme of the section which is further stressed by the twice repeated image of the eagle, the symbol of space introduced in “The River” and extended in “The Dance.” The fact that the speaker of the section, a sailor “return[ing] home to our own / Hearths,” designates the American continent not only as “our native clay” but also as “red, eternal flesh of Pocahontas [...] surcharged / With sweetness below derricks, chimneys, tunnels” emphasizes this link back to previous sections (54). In the third stanza of “Cape Hatteras,” then, Crane writes: “Now the eagle dominates our days, is jurist / Of the ambiguous cloud. We know the strident rule / Of wings imperious . . . Space, instantaneous, / Flickers a moment” (55). This combination of “eagle,” “wings,” and “Space” symbolizes, on the one hand, mankind’s strong interest in overcoming space (“dominates,” “jurist,” “rule,” “imperious”). But more importantly, these lines metaphorically approximate the symbolic bird of prey with man and, more specifically, with airplane and pilot (“O Corsair,” “pilot, hear,” “O Skygak” [57]). Man as “an engine in a cloud” has “splintered space” (55, 57). His “soul, by naphtha fledged into new reaches / Already knows the closer clasp of Mars” (56). As the ambiguous phrase “closer clasp of Mars” here suggests, the man-machine has made significant advancements in “marathons new-set between the stars” and has thus come closer to the planet Mars. Yet, since “Mars” is also the Roman god of war, technological progress has moreover brought about new and more devastating forms of warfare (“fierce schedules, rife of doom apace,” “War’s fiery kennel,” “rancorous grenades whose screaming petals carve us / Wounds” [56]). This aspect of war, which Crane connects to ancient epics (“Iliads glimmer through eyes,” “Tellurian wind-sleuths,” “Each plane a hurtling javelin of winged ordnance” [56-57]), causes a fatal descent of both pilot and plane.

In contrast to onomatopoeic elements which reverberate in the sixth stanza dealing with the beginnings of manned flight (“O sinewy silver biplane, nudging the wind’s withers,” “Warping the gale, the Wright windwrestlers veered / Capeward” [56]), calligraphic elements mirror the crash of a fighter plane in stanza ten.⁶⁹ Hit by “the

⁶⁹ The ambivalent aspect of manned flight, which the Wright brothers’ 1903 success symbolized to Crane (“There, from Kill Devils Hill at Kitty Hawk / Two brothers in their twinship left the dune” [56]), is highlighted through a verbal echo of a passage in “Van Winkle:” “Remember, remember / The cinder pile at the end of the backyard / Where we stoned the family of young / Garter snakes under . . . And the monoplanes / We launched—with paper wings and twisted / Rubber bands . . .” (40). The paper

squadron becomes “the dragon’s covey—amphibian, ubiquitous,” a “Cetus-like [...] Dirigible” suggests a monstrous whale in flight, “convoy planes” turn into “moonferrets,” and fighter planes appear as “scouting griffons ris[ing] through gaseous crepe” (56-57). These creatures emblemize strangeness and monstrosity. The hybrid form of “griffons,” mixtures of lion and eagle in mythology, points to the composite qualities of pilot/man and plane/machine. Tapper rightly defines these forms as “new animal-machine hybrids” and characterizes them as “simultaneously futuristic and prehistoric” which “lend[s] this unfamiliar modernity of large and powerful machines the authority of the archaic and mythic past” (153). These hybrid forms are, however, not only “fantastic animal-machines” that “signal a new phase in human evolution because they radically extend the ability to overcome barriers of time and space” (156); these flying creatures are, on a less abstract level, man-machines. In this light, the hybridity of pilot and plane symbolizes the dichotomy of man absorbing his creation and man being absorbed by his creation. While such an imperfect absorption might result in crashes, Crane—reaffirmed through “a pact, new bound / Of living brotherhood” with Whitman (58)—tellingly concludes his depiction of mechanized flight with images of resurrection: “And now, as launched in abysmal cupolas of space, / Toward endless terminals, Easters of speeding light— / Vast engines outward veering with seraphic grace” (59). As these angelic machines suggest, “[y]ears of the Modern” will grant man as “atom in a shroud” and “engine in a cloud” a reconciliation of “space” and “seraphic grace” (59, 55).

If the fusion of man and machine is still under way, the approximation of the organic and the inorganic is already more advanced. Crane’s technologic of metaphor underscores this idea. In the first four lines of the eighth stanza, the dual aspect of the word “wings” connects mechanized and organic flight:

Wheeled swiftly, wings emerge from larval-silver hangars.
Taut motors surge, space-gnawing, into flight;
Through sparkling visibility, outspread, unsleeping,
Wings clip the last peripheries of light . . . (56)

Crane here adds the pivotal image of larvae to his depiction of airplanes leaving hangars and taking off into “sparkling visibility.” As this natural image suggests, the individual parts of planes (“wings,” “motors”) underwent metamorphoses in hangars, that is, in protective structures, in modern-day cocoons. The mention of “silver” contributes to the vividness of the metaphor, because it denotes both the color of larvae and, as a transition metal, points to the metallic construction of hangars. The juxtaposition of the organic

with the inorganic in the metaphor “larval-silver hangars” makes clear that man-made flying machines evolve, like insects or amphibians, through phases until the metamorphosis from parts to the whole is complete. Given the high number of avian images in close vicinity to these lines (“heaven’s plumed side,” “downy offings,” “fledged as the Pleiades” [56-57]), Crane’s technologic of metaphor grows and develops in a similar way. In addition to the initial metaphor, which builds on the approximation of airplane wings with insect wings, the phrase “space-gnawing” (as though the surging motors had teeth) and the verb “clip” add an aggressive undertone to this organic/inorganic pair. On this level of Crane’s metaphor, the images echo the eagle’s “wings imperious.” At the same time, the repetition of “wing” anticipates Crane’s praise of Whitman’s poetic prophecy: “Our Meistersinger, thou set breath in steel; / And it was thou who on the boldest heel / Stood up and flung the span on even wing / Of that great Bridge, our Myth, whereof I sing!” (59). Moreover, the vision of “outspread, unsleeping” wings ascending into night is evocative of the “*seagull’s wings*.” Yet, the decisive difference is that the seagull rises with and into dawn in the poem. As dawn symbolizes in Crane’s poetry “visionary illumination” (Irwin, *Poetry* 40), the planes’ “unsleeping” ascent suggests earliness and prematurity of vision. The connotations evoked by avian imagery hence also play into these lines. In a more condensed form, this connection of bird imagery and technological progress fuels Crane’s verbose description of a power plant where the poet’s machine-absorbing method resounds most vociferously.

The entire fifth stanza of “Cape Hatteras” describes the outer and inner workings of a “gigantic power house.” In sixteen lines, Crane fuses technological (“spouting pillars”), animalistic (“nasal whine of power,” “spoor the evening sky”), and poetic power (“sharp ammoniac proverbs,” “Power’s script”) into a bombastic cauldron made of effervescent lines. This forceful combination ushers in “[n]ew verities, new inklings in the velvet hummed / Of dynamos, where hearing’s leash is strummed” (55). Gradually zooming into the power house, the last ten lines of the stanza convey most impressively how Crane’s logic of metaphor embraces and incorporates technological elements:

Power’s script,—wound, bobbin-bound, refined—
Is stropped to the slap of belts on blooming spools, spurred
Into the bulging bouillon, harnessed jelly of the stars.
Towards what? The forked crash of split thunder parts
Our hearing momentwise; but fast in whirling armatures,
As bright as frogs’ eyes, giggling in the girth
Of steely gizzards—axle-bound, confined
In coiled precision, bunched in mutual glee

The bearings glint,—O murmurless and shined
In oilrinsed circles of blind ecstasy! (55-56)

Verbally excessive and surcharged with repetitions of sounds, this passage has triggered various interpretations. Lewis considers it “*a very deliberate and conscious self-parody*, and as such [...] brilliantly successful” (331), Albert Gelpi regards it “as the most extreme and successful attempt at Futurist poetry in America” (413), and Irwin ranks these ten lines “among the most energetic and lyrically risky in the poem” (*Poetry* 112). The most denigrating criticism appears in Herbert Leibowitz who designates Crane’s language in this description of a power plant as “ridiculous huffing and puffing” (264) and Philip Horton who qualifies Crane’s rhetoric here as “flashy and empty” (263). As regards content, recent Crane critics also diverge significantly in their analyses. Reed, for example, states that “Crane projects bestial, blind, raw Eros onto machinery in a factory” (“Victrola” 108), which elaborates Mariani’s concise interpretation of this stanza: “Energy as erotic dynamo” (333). Tapper sees/hears “the impact of technology on the human senses” and “a movement from abundant and cacophonous noise to silence” in these lines (168). The focus on sound, in fact, appears to be the most promising approach to acclimatize “Crane’s verbal pyrotechnics hurtl[ing] us into and through the frantic machine age” to the poet’s machine-absorbing theory (Wolf 104). Crane’s lines confront the reader-listener viscerally with the technologic of metaphor. Onomatopoeia and phases of transition are here key to understanding how Crane absorbs the machine into formal features of poetry.

In the last ten lines of the stanza, exuberant alliteration—especially the repetition of plosives and fricatives (“bobbin-bound, “belts on booming,” “bulging bouillon;” “stropped to the slap,” “spools, spurred;” “giggling in the girth / Of steely gizzards”)—and “the unusually high concentration of words that contain double letters” create an onomatopoeic sound pattern (Tapper 171). The noise of metal melting in cauldrons, evocative of the “blind crucible of endless space” in the third stanza (*CPSL* 55), blends with the bubbling of heated materials (the boiling broth in “bulging bouillon”). This fusion of sound and motion chimes with Crane’s overarching, overboiling meter. Beginning with the internal rhyme “wound, bobbin-bound,” Crane’s verse gathers speed. A regular sequence of iambs appears to be too slow, too precise, too “confined” for a depiction of this generating station: “Power’s script [...] / Is stropped to the slap of belts on booming spools, spurred.” This acceleration, to which the spondee “spools, spurred” together with the following enjambment add force and speed, then mirrors the

conversion of energy—or “change / Of energy—convulsive shift,” as the first stanza has it—inside the power plant on the level of form.

This attention to formal details is crucial since Crane realizes the technologic dynamics even through minutest linguistic materials. Focusing on the inner workings of machinery, Crane shifts back to his preferred metrical line, the iambic pentameter. Coinciding with a change from cacophony to silence (“murmurless”), this return to metrical order (“coiled precision”) is further accentuated through the alternating rhyme in the last four lines: “giggling in the girth / Of steely gizzards—axle-bound, confined / In coiled precision, bunched in mutual glee / The bearings glint,—O murmurless and shined / In oilrinsed circles of blind ecstasy!” Like mechanical parts, the rhyme pairs “confined/shined” and “glee/ecstasy” interlock. What is more, “confined/shined” redirects the reader back to the word “refined,” positioned in the last foot of the “Power’s script” line. Through these sonic repetitions, through what Tapper rightly calls “the technology of poetic language” (171), Crane links and, at the same time, distinguishes “the velvet humm[ing] / Of dynamos, where hearing’s leash is strummed” and “[t]he forked crash of thunder part[ing] / Our hearing momentwise.” Crane’s lines resonate with the impact of mechanical power on the reader’s hearing. His verse has absorbed the machine and poetically converted the mechanical perfectibility which he admired in Stieglitz’s photography.

Interwoven into this literal web (“looming stacks,” “bobbin-bound,” “booming spools”), the “frogs’ eyes” and “steely gizzards” surface as (techno-)organic metaphors. At first sight, these images do not seem to fit into the context of the stanza. But given the broader context of “Cape Hatteras,” the inclusion of these amphibian and avian body parts makes sense. Crane links these animal images to ball bearings, but he delays the mention of the machine element, the tenor to the “frogs’ eyes” metaphor, by adding adjectives and participles along the way to disclosure (“giggling,” “axle-bound, confined,” “bunched”). The out-of-placeness of the natural images thus increases. In the penultimate line, Crane divulges that glinting bearings are “[a]s bright as frogs’ eyes.” In addition to the circularity of bearings, which corresponds with the large protruding eyes of frogs, words associated with features of this animal that is itself defined by metamorphosis are scattered throughout the section. Examples like “amphibian,” “larval-silver hangars,” and “O, something green” add to Crane’s techno-organic metaphor (56, 59). Therefore, this far-out image conjoins ideas of organic metamorphosis with mechanical parts. In employing the organic synecdoche “frogs’

eyes” as vehicle, Crane extends his logic of metaphor and approximates the organic and the inorganic. The juxtaposition of the adjective “steely” and bird bowels (“gizzards”) further highlights this process and progress of amalgamation.

The image of “steely gizzards” in the interior of “the gigantic power house” is perplexing. With the blatant alliteration of the letter ‘g’ preceding the image in mind (“giggling in the girth”), one assumes that Crane employed this paradoxical word combination to emphasize the predominant sound pattern. But the actual meaning of the word also adds to the efficacy of the metaphor. According to the *OED*, the word denotes the part of a bird’s stomach which grinds food into smaller pieces. The organ is muscular and thick-walled. These organic features play into the image of bearings (“oilrinsed circles”) making bubbly noises (“giggling”) in packed (“bunched”), “steely” thick-walled containers. Besides harking back to “the slap of belts,” the image of the “girth” supports this fusion of natural and mechanical parts, as it implies roundness like the words “eyes,” “coiled,” and “circles.” Moreover, the gizzards hint at the breaking up of mechanical components into smaller parts. As hybrid forms, “steely gizzards” blend technological and natural components. In this way, Crane challenges the reader to perceive and accept similarities between the inorganic and the organic world. His technologic of metaphor makes the connection of paradoxical terms like “steely gizzards” if not plausible than at least less bizarre. With the bridge as “steeled Cognizance” resurfacing in “Atlantis,” the metaphoric interplay of bird imagery and technological power becomes an active principle in the reader’s mind.

3.3 The Bird in the Bridge and *The Bridge* as Bird in “Atlantis”

[T]his single change,—
 Upon the steep floor flung from dawn to dawn
 The silken skilled transmemberment of song.
 (*CPSL*, “Voyages III” 26)

If it took Crane more than three years to come up with the “Cape Hatteras” section as included in *The Bridge* (cf. Mariani 332), the composition history of “Atlantis” is even more complex. In fact, the first draft dates back to 1923. Although “Atlantis” is the eighth and last section of Crane’s long poem, it “was the first part of the poem to be written—and that in a kind of three-days fit,” as Crane tells Winters in a 1927 letter (539). In the same letter, Crane mentions that he “later discovered that [“Atlantis”] contains a number of things like aeronautics, telegraphy, psychoanalysis,

atomic theory, relativity, and what not!" He concludes by professing that "'Atlantis' stands or falls as [his] synthesized vision of the poem as a Whole" (539). Fittingly, since bridges as architectural structures are built from two ends at once, "Atlantis" is both starting point and conclusion of the quest. It incorporates central images and ideas, beginning with the Plato epigraph which establishes music as the key element of the section: "*Music is then the knowledge of that which relates to love in harmony and system*" (72). Given Crane's constant revision of "Atlantis," the poem also contains readjustments and verbal echoes of previous sections.⁷¹

Crane included the chronologically first "last lines" in a 1923 letter to Wilbur Underwood. Leading into the quotation which starts "midway on that structure" by stating that he is "bringing much into contemporary verse that is new," he announces that he is "on a synthesis of America and its structural identity now, called *The Bridge*." Most of the words and images employed in the original draft do not show up in the final version. But interestingly, Crane held on to the words "wings" and "Kinetic" which appear in the final four lines of this early sketch: "And smooth and fierce above the claim of wings, / And figured in that radiant field that rings / The Universe:—I'd have us hold one consonance / Kinetic to its poised and deathless dance" (325). In fact, the final version of "Atlantis" has these two key terms in the same line and associates them with the bridge: "Deity's young name / Kinetic of white choiring wings . . . ascends" (74). Significantly, each word in the last line here has its counterpart in "To Brooklyn Bridge" ("Kinetic/*cinemas*," "white/*white*," "choiring/*choiring*," "wings/*wings*," and "ascends/*descend*"). The combination of movement, whiteness, music, and flight is thus the foundation on which Crane's first and last poem, the poetic pylons of *The Bridge*, rest. In "Atlantis," then, bird imagery becomes an integral part of mechanical construction. Crane's technologic of metaphor comes to a rhapsodic climax and the vision of organic flight transforms into the structural manifestation of this vision, the physical suspension bridge as well as the material book *The Bridge* as structure spanning time and space.

In the eighth stanza of "Atlantis," the technologic of metaphor infuses the bridge with organic imagery. Regarded by Bloom as "the single most central stanza of [Crane's]

⁷¹ Weber, for instance, points to parallels between Crane's difficult diction in "Atlantis" and "Cape Hatteras:" "As in 'Cape Hatteras,' Crane's tendency toward ethereal verbosity reaches a peak which strains the reader. Ideas hover on the verge of expression, then float away in a mist of inexactitude" (375). He fails to mention that central ideas do not "float away in a mist of inexactitude."

life and work” (24), the octave brings together images of avian flight, singing, and (in)organic metamorphosis:

O Thou steeled Cognizance whose leap commits
 The agile precincts of the lark’s return;
 Within whose lariat sweep encinctured sing
 In single chrysalis the many twain,—
 Of stars Thou art the stitch and stallion glow
 And like an organ, Thou, with sound of doom—
 Sight, sound and flesh Thou leadest from time’s realm
 As love strikes clear direction for the helm. (73)

Four identical apostrophes to the bridge (“Thou”) are compressed into this octave, emphasizing the speaker’s reverence for and intimate connection to the architectural structure. As in most stanzas of “Atlantis,” the addressee transcends its status as an inanimate object. Numerous capitalized names given to the bridge in this section affirm this aspect of animation. In the sixth stanza, for example, the “Bridge, lifting night to cycloramic crest / Of deepest day” becomes “Tall Vision-of-the-Voyage,” “O Choir,” “Psalm of Cathay,” and, with a powerful alliteration in the last line, “O Love, thy white, pervasive Paradigm.” In the eighth octave, the speaker addresses the bridge as “O Thou steeled Cognizance,” a phrase which metaphorically connects the solid structure (“steeled”) with knowledge through experience (“Cognizance”). This hybrid construction becomes an active principle “whose leap commits / The agile precincts of the lark’s return.” The “hyperbolic extension of language” (Yingling 221) in these iambic pentameters has led to various interpretations ranging from Giles’ reading of this passage as “another covert description of sado-masochistic practice”⁷² (179) to Hammer’s more convincing claim that “the eighth stanza of ‘Atlantis’ concerns the permanent renewal, the perpetuation of the senses through song” (*Janus-Faced* 197). But what critics seem to have overlooked so far—even Giles who senses and identifies puns virtually everywhere in *The Bridge*—are the verbal and metaphorical dynamics which “the lark’s return” and the general emphasis on sound in these lines usher in.

In his otherwise perceptive study, Hammer interprets “[t]he agile precincts of the lark’s return” in a way which does not do justice to Crane’s soundplay. He states that “[t]he oxymoronic constitution of these ‘agile precincts’ [...] points to a structure-in-motion, in such a way as to efface the distinction between Crane’s tenor and vehicle.

⁷² For Giles, “[t]he ‘precincts’ and ‘encinctured’ pun on ‘cincture’ as a belt, from the Latin *cingo*, to gird. A lariat is a lassoing rope. A sweep [...] is an old word for whip. And chrysalis – ostensibly a pleasant image of new life burgeoning in the spring – carries as its more sinister underside ‘cry/salis,’ a cry from the whip, ‘salis’ punning on Latin *salix*, willow” (179).

[...] [T]hese ‘precincts’ are the container both to and in which the lark returns; in another sense, the bird’s return itself constructs its ‘agile’ domain” (196). While this interpretation acknowledges Crane’s metaphorical complexity and ambiguity, it does not note the essential role which phonetic units play in this stanza. Although Hammer rightfully designates Crane’s excessive alliteration of the consonant cluster ‘st’ (“Of stars Thou art the stitch and stallion glow”) as the poet’s “most willful and outlandish assertions of a connection between words simply [...] on the basis of a shared sound” and approves of “[t]he auditory splendor of this line,” he fails to mention the fourtimes repeated homophonic punning on ‘sing.’ In the first four lines, the words “precincts,” “encinctured,” “sing,” and “single” all contain and voice this sound unit. Phonemically, /sɪŋ/ reverberates through the first half of the octave. This aural echo (trans)muted in linguistic material is further intensified through the regular sequence of iambs in the poem’s metrical pattern: All stresses in “encinctured sing / In single” fall on the syllables ‘cinc,’ ‘sing,’ and ‘sing.’ This stylistic device bears similarities to onomatopoeia. Yet it is not the exact sound of the lark’s song which the words imitate here, but rather the lexical term ‘sing’ made audible. The lark’s song and singing are literally hidden in the material structure of the stanza, in the bridge’s “lariat sweep.”

The ‘sing’ sound in “precincts” and “encinctured” cannot be heard without recitation. The reader needs to pronounce these lines to disclose the homophonic qualities latent in the morphological composition of these words.⁷³ If pronounced and stressed according to the iambic pattern, singing resounds. In this indispensable process, the syllables metamorphose from the visual to the audio-visual stage. The solid structure (“steeled”) gets minded (“Cognizance”). This metaphorical, transformative act is suggested and supported by words and images associated with change located in close vicinity to these homophonic units. In particular, the “single chrysalis” emerges as the pivotal motif of this stanza. Elaborating the image of “larval-silver” from “Cape Hatteras” (56), the chrysalis becomes the paradigmatic image of metaphorical transformation.

On the level of sound, the word “chrysalis” continues the assonance that accentuates the homophonic punning on ‘sing.’ Two short ‘i’ vowels harmonize with the predominant sound pattern of the first four lines (“Cognizance,” “commits,” “precincts,” “Within,” “encinctured sing / In single”). As an integral part in this resonant structure, the chrysalis, “an ancient symbol of rebirth to a higher form of life” (Irwin,

⁷³ Crane mentions this need for pronunciation in “O Carib Isle!”: “So syllables want breath” (77).

Poetry 101), is key to understanding Crane's "dynamics of inferential mention" (*CPSL* 164). The natural image embodies metamorphoses. In the context of "Atlantis," the line "In single chrysalis the many twain" hints not only at the "organic unity-in-metamorphosis of a butterfly" but also points to the stages of poetic and imaginative transformation in Crane's logic of metaphor (Hammer, *Janus-Faced* 197). On this level, the transitional state of the "single chrysalis" symbolizes the flux and the multiplication of metaphors which make Crane's poetry so intricate.⁷⁴ With the topos of rebirth established in previous stanzas of "Atlantis" and explicitly stated in the last line of stanza seven ("The vernal strophe chimes from deathless strings!"), the chrysalis epitomizes the idea of revival in the spring on a less abstract level. Not yet fully transformed, it stands for future change but is also the product of previous transformations, namely from egg to pupa to chrysalis. Thus, the image supports ideas of renewal, rebirth, and reemergence which are key elements in the Atlantis myth.

Sunk back into the sea, the island of Atlantis promises to reemerge in Platonic myth to a redeemed community. This notion of Atlantis surfacing again is central to *The Bridge*. Irwin even goes so far and sees in it "the symbolic goal of the protagonist's quest in *The Bridge*—the ultimate reemergence of an Atlantis-like submerged world, the hoped-for revival or resuscitation in the lives of modern Americans of an original vision of their land's promise and possibilities" (*Poetry* 163). It is important to note that the first mention of the island links the "Atlantis theme (that of eternity)," as Crane puts it in a 1927 letter, to music and ambiguity (557). In "Cutty Sark," the last fragment of the song "Stamboul Nights" reads: "*ATLANTIS ROSE* drums wreath the rose, / the star floats burning in a gulf of tears / and sleep another thousand—" (52). Literally capitalizing the motif of ascent, Crane here anticipates the final upward movement in "Atlantis" ("upward, upward ring," "biting way up," "up planet-sequined heights" [72-73]). Furthermore, he plays with the homonym 'rose' as both the past tense form of 'to rise' and the rose flower, "a traditional mystic symbol of perfection and cosmic harmony" (Kramer 64). This pun harks back to earlier lines of the song where "*O Stamboul Rose—dreams weave the rose*" becomes "*O Stamboul Rose—drums weave*" (51). Through consonantal and slant rhyme ("*wreath the rose*") and by means of slight

⁷⁴ Comparing Shelley's, Swinburne's, and Crane's exuberant use of metaphor, Garrick Davis resorts to metaphoric language himself when he writes that "Crane was certainly intoxicated by words, but not in the same sense that Swinburne was, whose words lost their denotative force. Rather, he shares with Shelley a general tendency: the almost cancerous multiplication of metaphors. Images lose their proportionality, and become vague in their profusion."

changes in linguistic units causing ambiguity, Crane points to the metamorphic qualities inherent in (poetic) song. As in the epigraph above, “this single change” of verbal components as in “silken skilled” (where the placement of the ‘k’ brings about change) transforms or, to conjugate Crane’s coinage, transmembers song. This transformative aspect also applies to metaphors as figures of speech. As Jay Parini puts it, “[m]etaphor represents metamorphosis” (77). In Crane’s case, metaphoric metamorphoses break up the boundaries between tenor and vehicle and fuse the machine with the organic. In doing so, the poet creates and simultaneously identifies himself with “some white machine that sings” (52). On the first level of the metaphor, the “white machine that sings” in “Cutty Sark” is the “nickel-in-the-slot piano [that] jogged / ‘Stamboul Nights’” (51). But in placing the “machine” between images of singing and whiteness (recall the white pages framing Evans’s photograph), Crane anticipates key features of the bridge which shine forth in white splendor in “Atlantis.”

Crane employs the word ‘white’ six times in his last section. The first time the word occurs harks back to “Ave Maria” and “Cutty Sark” since the metaphor “[w]hite tempest nets file upward, upward ring” suggests white sails building high into the “loft of vision, palladium helm of stars” (72). As has been shown, sails and wings evoke similar associations. They are synecdochic vehicles of flight. This correlation enforces the metaphoric metamorphosis from “[w]hite tempest nets” into the bridge as being “[k]inetic of white choiring wings” (74). Repeatedly linked to whiteness in “Atlantis” (“white, pervasive Paradigm,” “With white escarpments swinging into light,” “Of thy white seizure springs the prophecy,” “whitest Flower” [73-74]), the bridge here becomes a hybrid form containing energy (“Kinetic”), music (“choiring”), and potential for flight (“wings”). The fact that the word combination “choiring wings” echoes by rhyme the “choiring strings” of the bridge as “*harp and altar*” in the proem reveals that the harp is the pivotal instrument representing the bridge. (34). Crane stresses this metaphoric pair in a 1926 letter to Frank in which he states that “[t]he bridge in becoming a ship, a world, a tremendous harp (as it does finally) seems to really have a career” (431). In the same letter, Crane also mentions that the “BRIDGE-Finale,” as he called “Atlantis” then (Weber 430), “is symphonic in including the convergence of all the strands separately detailed in antecedent sections of the poem” (CPSL 430). Throughout the twelve octaves of “Atlantis,” phrases and images point to the bridge’s status as “a tremendous harp” (“As though a god were issue of the strings,” “O arching strands of song,” “orphic strings” [72-74]). In this light, it is striking that the bridge is compared to “an organ” in

the eighth stanza. Crane's simile "like an organ, Thou," evokes a grander and more powerful musical instrument ("with sound of doom" [73]). It also ushers in a clerical undertone which chimes with earlier phrases like "O Choir" or "Psalm of Cathay." In addition to these one-dimensional associations, the context of organic metamorphosis together with qualifications of the bridge as "multitudinous Verb" and "pervasive Paradigm" in the sixth stanza suggests that the polysemy of the word 'organ' plays into this comparison as well.

While it is true that both "organ" passages in *The Bridge* are linked to music (in "Van Winkle" the "grind-organ" is mentioned [40]), the image of "flesh" in the next line as well as the inclusion of organisms like "lark," "chrysalis," and "stallion" hint at the anatomic meaning of the term. This multilayered reading is supported by the fact that Crane almost obsessively emphasizes the word "organic" in his letters and theoretical writings. In a 1919 letter, for instance, he announced that it is "the total denial of the animal and organic world which [he] cannot swallow" (210). During the most prolific phase in his writing of *The Bridge*, in August 1926, he told Frank that "[t]he organic substances of the poem are holding a great many surprises" and informed Kenneth Burke that the "particular organic incorporation of concepts has been a very conscientious pursuit" for him (485-86). The centrality of organic construction, of creating a vital harmony between parts and the whole, shows even stronger in Crane's "General Aims and Theories." Discussing the poetic potential of "surface phenomena of our time," he claims "that what is interesting and significant will emerge only under the conditions of our submission to, and examination and assimilation of the[ir] organic effects on us." Otherwise, "an organic expression" will not be possible (162). Crane employs this idea in his definition of the logic of metaphor as well: "the entire construction of the poem is raised on the organic principle of a 'logic of metaphor,' which antedates our so-called pure logic, and which is the genetic basis of all speech, hence consciousness and thought-extension" (163). The obscurer the poem seems on the surface level, the more "[i]t must rely [...] on its organic impact on the imagination to successfully imply its meaning" (164). With these passages in mind and given that the logic of metaphor is "so organically entrenched in pure sensibility" (166), the bridge-as-organ evolves in "Atlantis" into the manifestation of "the organic principle of a [techno]logic of metaphor." The man-machine-made construction becomes organic. This metamorphic process is most visibly traceable in earlier versions of the section. These drafts show that Crane conceived of his bridge as a specific organism: a bird.

From the early drafts, worksheets, and versions that Weber lists in an appendix under the title “The Development of ‘Atlantis’” (cf. 425-40), the lines which Crane sent to Frank in January and August 1926 come closest to the “Atlantis” section published in *The Bridge*. The essential line with ‘kinetics,’ for example, appears in both versions and differs only slightly in word order. The January line reads “Kinetic choiring of white wings . . . ascends” (432), whereas the August version is identical to the final line of the section’s tenth stanza: “Kinetic of white choiring wings . . . ascends” (439). Significantly, these early texts help the reader to untangle the “bridge/white choiring wings” metaphor. As it is, the importance of the archive and the notion of the palimtext are fundamental in readings of Oppen’s poetry and will be discussed in depth in the following chapters. In contrast to Oppen, selections of Crane’s working papers or collections of his heavily emended drafts are not accessible in comprehensive and carefully edited print volumes. For Crane scholars interested in the development of the poet’s conception of *The Bridge*, Weber’s appendix is indispensable. In both versions which Crane sent Frank in 1926, the last four lines of the ultimate stanza are identical and read:

—One song, O bird of fire! Is it Cathay,—
Now pity steeps the grass and rainbows wind
The serpent with the eagle in the leaves . . . ?
Whispers antiphonal in azure swing. (440)

Crane’s changes in the “Atlantis” finale of *The Bridge* are meticulous and essential:

—One Song, one Bridge of Fire! Is it Cathay,
Now pity steeps the grass and rainbows ring
The serpent with the eagle in the leaves . . . ?
Whispers antiphonal in azure swing. (CPSL 74)

The most meaningful change shows in the first line. The apostrophe “O bird of fire” has been transformed into “one Bridge of Fire.” In including the “bird,” Crane explicitly calls up the image of white wings. He thus elaborates on his metaphor: the bridge has wings because it is a bird. Refraining from using this avian image in the final version, Crane challenges the reader to apprehend the connection between wings and the bridge in lieu of a direct referent. In fact, the metaphor is more complex because the connective verbal vehicle is missing. In Crane’s 1930 lines, “one Bridge” then incorporates the missing link and absorbs, so to speak, the bird. With “one” repeated and a capitalized, fully-fledged “B,” the phrase “one Bridge” becomes the totum to the bird’s wings. That the first four letters of ‘bridge’ are an anagram of ‘bird’ might add to this idea of fusion. If such an interpretation might seem far-fetched at first sight, it should be noted that

Crane employs the word and the idea of anagrams in “O Carib Isle!” where “zigzag fiddle crabs / [...] shift, subvert / And anagrammatize your name” (77). A few lines later, the first five letters of the adjective “nacreous” contain an anagrammatized pun on the author “Crane.” Making much of the anagrams “niggers and singer” (“A liquid theme that floating niggers swell;” “Atlantis,—hold they floating singer late!” [44, 74]), Irwin mentions that “[p]laying anagrams was a favorite parlor game among the Cranes when Hart was a child” (*Poetry* 74). As has been shown in the close reading of Crane’s *transition* connection, the like-minded Crosby appreciated such wordplay and revolutionary word rearrangements as well.

It is thus suggestive that the initial approximation of seagull (“*seagull’s wings*”) and the bridge (“*descend / And of the curvship lend*”) is reinforced in “Atlantis” with the return of the seagull image (“like seagulls stung with rhyme”), with “the lark’s return,” and with “white choring wings . . . ascend[ing].” The notions evoked by avian images (vision, freedom, flight, discovery, song) enter the architectural structure as they enter the poetic work that is *The Bridge*, both bridges praised as “Vision-of-the-Voyage,” “Answerer of all,” and “Everpresence” (73-74). If Crane does not mention the ‘bird’ explicitly, he implies it in the bridge. This implication presents the reader with the purest form of Crane’s technologic of metaphor. Notions of in/organic flight are absorbed into the in/animate site of Brooklyn Bridge which had been constructed through a harmonization of man, machine, and technology roughly forty years prior to the publication of Crane’s book. “One Song, one Bridge of Fire” becomes the manifestation of the vision glimpsed in the seagull’s flight in “To Brooklyn Bridge.” *The Bridge* thus not only becomes a macroscopic version of the “white machine that sings:” it metamorphoses into a great white bird that sings and soars: “The serpent with the eagle in the leaves ...? / Whispers antiphonal in azure swing” (74). Replacing “Cathay” with an emblematic bird felicitous for an American epic, one might wonder: “Is it” the fully-fledged American bald eagle with its typical white head as symbol for the United States which Crane absorbed into the bridge?

3.4 Absorbing T. S. Eliot

The Masters

Their brains are smooth machines that colonize
 The sun,—their eyes are atoms of a split hereafter.
 They must explain away all moan and laughter,

 Elaborate all, divided school by school (*CPSL* 126)

It might seem strange to end a discussion of Crane's absorption of the machine with a reading of the younger poet's coming to terms with T. S. Eliot. After all, Eliot as the modern poet par excellence created with the same mechanical instrument (the typewriter) and in the same medium (poetry) as Crane, whereas Stieglitz, Evans, or Chaplin excelled artistically in different media and with the help of different machines. Even if the fragmentary epigraph was not explicitly written as an allusion or response to the author of *The Waste Land*, the fact that Crane especially in letters while finishing the third part of "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" frequently refers to, praises, and critically discusses Eliot and his poetry, and that his word choice in this poetic discussion anticipates the diction of his machine-absorbing poetics render this extension of analysis conducive. In the following reading, the aim is neither to show that Crane regarded Eliot as one of the "sublime machines of human [intellectual] muscle-play" nor to claim that Crane considered the elder poet one of the masters characterized in the epigraph (225). Rather, the following transition will highlight the similarities in influence which Eliot and the machine exerted on Crane's poetry. This reading is fundamental for an understanding of how Crane conceived of himself as a poet, dealt with paramount poetic figures and phenomena of the Machine Age, and modeled these looming influences into his poetry. It also gestures towards Oppen.

Eliot as a poetically "efficient factory" was the modern poet who influenced, inspired, and challenged Crane the most (464). Prior to the publication of *The Waste Land*, Eliot's poems written before 1922 left their mark on the younger poet's versification. Grouped with Ezra Pound as another major authority when Crane was in his early twenties ("Pavannes and Divisions, T. S. Eliot, Maupassant and the *L.R.* [*Little Review*] have been my steady companions" [216]; "More and more am I turning toward Pound and Eliot and the minor Elizabethans for values" [221]), Eliot explicitly emerges as the principal model

for Crane during the composition of “Chaplinesque.” In a 1921 letter to Munson, Crane includes a version of this poem and explains its major symbol by quoting from Eliot. Crane writes: “Here you are with the rest of the Chaplin poem. I know not if you will like it,—but to me it has a real appeal. I have made that ‘infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing’ of Eliot into the symbol of the kitten” (252). Building upon lines from Eliot’s “Preludes” and excerpting them as an explanatory cue to his own poem, Crane makes clear that the author of *Prufrock and Other Observations* energizes his poetic work. Apparently aware of this growing and potentially overpowering influence, he emphasizes that imitation is not what he is striving at in his poetry in another letter to Munson: “I don’t want to imitate Eliot, of course,—but I have come to the stage now where I want to carefully choose my most congenial influences and, in a way, ‘cultivate’ their influence” (257). Intriguingly, a few sentences later in the same letter, Crane bewails that he has “never, so far, been able to present a vital, living, and tangible,—a positive emotion to my satisfaction.” “Oh! It is hard,” he continues in his lament, but “[o]ne must be drenched in words, literally soaked with them to have the right ones form themselves into the proper pattern at the right moment” (257). Finally claiming with a nod to Kant “that the ‘Ding an Sich’ method is ultimately the only satisfactory creative principle to follow,” Crane acknowledges Eliot’s influence but also hints at points of departure. As it is, Eliot belongs to the “most congenial influences” which Crane wants to cultivate, that is, heed and develop. The agricultural term ‘cultivate’ is important here, as it denotes improving the growth of something that is already there. For a satisfactory and successful outcome of such a cultivation process, labor and minute attention are basic requirements. With these crucial features in mind, the word correlates with the verbs “absorb” and “acclimatize” which Crane employs in his discussion of poetry and the machine. Embracing and then adjusting “the ultimate influence of machinery” as well as the influence of fellow modern poets are central characteristics implied in all three terms (171).

Similarities in Crane’s approach to the machine and paradigmatic figures like Eliot show most plainly in his letters to Tate. Initiated by Crane after having read and highly approved of Tate’s poem “Euthanasia,” this correspondence contains several references to and characterizations of Eliot’s poetry. Ironically, the controversy over Eliot would turn out to be one major reason which led to domestic struggles while Crane was living in the same house with Tate and his wife Caroline Gordon. Tate’s letter written after one such severe argument mentions their literary differences:

Briefly, the difference lies in the point I indicated the night we were discussing the ‘negativity’ of Eliot, when I said you could not possibly see things divorced from the

satisfactions of your own ego; ergo, negativity is simply the term you apply to any force not directly sympathetic to your own personal aims; and these aims include, incidentally, your poetry as well as your merely moral situations. [...] Our difficulty doesn't lie in a mere difference of ideas; it lies in the very structure of your mind. (qtd. in Crane 819)

Before this imbroglio occurred, Crane's letters to Tate bear witness to his upfront deliberation of Eliot's poetry. The letters, in fact, lend weight to a critical reading of Crane's machine-absorption. Albeit predating the publication of "Modern Poetry" by eight years, in a pivotal letter from June 12, 1922, Crane tells Tate of his experience in reading Eliot's work. Mentioning that he has found a way of diverging from "our divine object of 'envy,'" he writes:

What you say about Eliot does not surprise me,—but you will recover from the shock. No one ever says the last word, and it is a good thing for you, (notice I congratulate myself!) to have been faced with him as early as possible. I have been facing him for *four* years,—and while I haven't discovered a weak spot yet in his armour,—I flatter myself a little lately that I have discovered a safe tangent to strike which, if I can possibly explain the position,—goes *through* him toward a *different* goal. You see it is such a fearful temptation to imitate him that at times I have been almost distracted. (278)

Eliot appears here as a figure which needs to be faced and tackled (the word "armour" metaphorically hints at conflict or battle) but also as a kind of medium to be utilized to depart "toward a *different* goal." Indelible and technically flawless,⁷⁵ Eliot's poetic achievements cannot be disregarded in this process of departure. Instead, Crane aims to engage with Eliot's work in a way which anticipates his method of composing through the eye, and which predates his theories about absorbing the machine. As has been discussed in the reading of Stieglitz's influence, Crane speaks in "General Aims and Theories" of his "hope to go *through* the combined materials of the poem [...] and to give the poem as a whole an orbit or predetermined direction of its own" (163). In both passages, Crane italicizes the preposition "*through*." By doing so, he not only stresses the substance of the poetic material but, more importantly, emphasizes his conviction that going through the material like going through Eliot will result in poetry that is "at least a stab at truth" and inclusive of "certain spiritual events and possibilities" (163, 308). To master such an approach, a complete understanding of the material (poem) or the paradigmatic figure (Eliot) is necessary. This is precisely where the idea of absorption comes into play.

⁷⁵ In his letter to Louis Untermeyer, in which he advertises his "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" as a response "to the pessimism of *The Waste Land*," Crane explicitly acknowledges Eliot's mastery of poetic technique: "Simply, then, I regard my poem as a kind of bridge that is, to my way of thinking, a more creative and stimulating thing than the settled formula of Mr. Eliot, superior technician that he is!" (310-11).

Besides mentioning which Eliot poems he has read over and over again (“I must have read ‘Prufrock’ twenty-five times and things like the ‘Preludes’ more often” [278]), Crane refers to Eliot in a diction that approximates the older poet with an object, an instrument, a machine in the course of his letter. According to Crane,

Eliot presents us with an absolute *impasse*, yet oddly enough, he can be utilized to lead us to, intelligently point to, other positions and “pastures new.” Having absorbed him enough we can trust ourselves as never before, in the air or on the sea. I, for instance, would like to leave a few of his “negations” behind me, risk the realm of the obvious more, in quest of new sensations, *humeurs*. These theories and manoeuvres are consolatory,—but of course, when it comes right down to the act itself,—I have to depend on intuition, ‘inspiration’ or what you will to fill up the page. Let us not be too much disturbed, antagonized or influenced by the *fait accompli*. (279)

It makes sense to read this passage side by side with the machine-passage in “Modern Poetry,” as the similarities between the texts, though written at completely different stages in Crane’s career, are dazzling. To highlight these parallels in word choice and concepts, the most resonant sentences of Crane’s 1930 essay will be quoted again:

For unless poetry can absorb the machine, i.e., *acclimatize* it as naturally and casually as trees, cattle, galleons, castles and all other human associations of the past, then poetry has failed of its full contemporary function. [...] This presupposes, of course, that the poet possesses sufficient spontaneity and gusto to convert this experience into positive terms. Machinery will tend to lose its sensational glamour and appear in its true subsidiary order in human life as use and poetic allusion subdue its novelty. (171)

Key words in Crane’s Eliot-absorbing rhetoric are “utilized,” “absorbed,” and “negations.” These terms show up in similar forms in his machine-absorbing text: “Machinery [...] in its true subsidiary order,” “absorb the machine,” “convert this experience into positive terms.” While the first two elements in both enumerations correlate (“utilized;” “subsidiary order,” “use”) or are identical except for their grammatical tense (“having absorbed;” “can absorb”), the opposition of the last pair (“negations;” “positive terms”) pinpoints the major difference in Crane’s stance toward Eliot and signifies their diverging approaches of coming to terms with modernity. The binary opposition positive/negative emerges as Crane’s major point of contention with Eliot and carries on into his rendering of the machine. Not surprisingly, *The Waste Land*,⁷⁶ “the era’s most celebrated poem” (Morris 662), intensified Crane’s critical engagement with Eliot and fine-tuned the development of his own poetics.

⁷⁶ Crane misspells the title of Eliot’s poem frequently. As adding ‘[sic]’ each time this happens would impede the reading flow, it is hereby clarified that the following misquotations of ‘*The Waste Land*’ are to be blamed on Crane.

If negation is what Crane strives to leave behind, the 1922 publication of Eliot's *The Waste Land* with memorable phrases like "Son of man, / You cannot say, or guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images," "I will show you fear in a handful of dust," and "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (*Poems* 61, 75) presented Crane with the epitome of negation and pessimism. Crane first communicates his wish to abandon the Eliotic "poetry of negation" and instead to create something new which embraces paradoxes in a May 1922 letter to Tate: "The poetry of negation is beautiful—alas, too dangerously so for one of my mind. But I am trying to break away from it. Perhaps this is useless, perhaps it is silly—but one does have joys. The vocabulary of damnations and prostrations has been developed at the expense of these other moods, however, so that it is hard to dance in proper measure. Let us invent an idiom for the proper transposition of jazz into words! Something clean, sparkling, elusive!" (275). Crane's emphatic statement that "one does have joys" and his exclamatory enumeration of paradoxical word combinations like "proper/jazz" or "clean/elusive" develop into major constituents of his poetics. As it is, this development is intricately connected to Crane's processing of Eliot's work. Crane's positive attitude towards the possibilities of modernity is already evident from the first letter in which he mentions Eliot's modernist poem. Writing to Munson in November 1922, he is interested in his literary friend's opinion on *The Waste Land*: "What do you think of Eliot's *The Wastelands*? I was rather disappointed. It was good, of course, but so damned dead. Neither does it, in my opinion, add anything important to Eliot's achievement" (298). Crane's characterization of the poem as "so damned dead" permeates his subsequent discussions of Eliot and culminates in a comprehensive statement in another letter to Munson from January 1923. Conceding that his "work for the past two years (those meager drops!) has been more influenced by Eliot than any other modern," Crane sets out to distinguish himself and his poetry from the older poet in a way which is strongly reminiscent of his machine-absorbing diction:

There is no one writing in English who can command so much respect, to my mind, as Eliot. However, I take Eliot as a point of departure toward an almost complete reverse of direction. His pessimism is amply justified, in his own case. But I would apply as much of his erudition and technique as I can absorb and assemble toward a more positive, or (if I must put it so in a sceptical) ecstatic goal. I should not think of this if a kind of rhythm and ecstasy were not (at odd moments, and rare!) a very real thing to me. I feel that Eliot ignores certain spiritual events and possibilities as real and powerful now as, say in the time of Blake. Certainly the man has dug the ground and buried hope as deep and direfully as it can ever be done. He has outclassed Baudelaire with a devastating humor that the earlier poet lacked. After this perfection of death—nothing is possible in motion but a resurrection of some kind. Or else, as everyone persists in

announcing in the deep and dirgeful *Dial*, the fruits of civilization are entirely harvested. Everyone, of course wants to die as soon and as painlessly as possible! (308)

Several strands of previous analyses come together in this significant passage. As in earlier letters, Crane begins by expressing his esteem for the editor of *The Criterion* but then—as though *The Waste Land* had made him see more clearly—quickly proceeds to qualify his poetic endeavors “as a point of departure toward an almost complete reverse of direction.” Against the backdrop of Eliot’s “pessimism,” which Crane regards as the pervasive mood leading to the “perfection of death” in *The Waste Land*, he claims that “nothing is possible in motion but a resurrection of some kind.” In this light, the ascent of the seagull in the first stanza of “To Brooklyn Bridge” can be seen as the emblem of this change in (e)motion. The seagull’s daily resurrection (“How many dawns” or harmony dawns) together with the unifying and stabilizing symbol of Brooklyn Bridge are two inaugural images visualizing Crane’s “point of departure,” while “London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down” in *The Waste Land* (Eliot 74). Like in his correspondence with Stieglitz and, once again, with reference to Blake, Crane contends that “certain spiritual events and possibilities” exist and that “a kind of rhythm and ecstasy” resonates in the modern wasteland.

Importantly, Crane’s method of working “toward a more positive, or [...] ecstatic goal” is not grounded in indifference to or negligence of Eliot’s poetic achievements. Rather, it evolves from a critical evaluation of the older poet and a utilization of Eliot’s “erudition and technique.” As in his letter to Tate and his 1930 discussion of the machine, Crane uses the word “absorb” to visualize his approach in coming to terms with Eliot. He wants to “absorb and assemble” Eliot’s technical mastery, that is, he wants to take it in entirely, inoculate it with his “more positive” attitude toward the modern world, and then apply it to his own poetry. That this final, practical aspect was most important to Crane is evident from the last two sentences of the letter dealing with Eliot: “All I know through very much suffering and dullness (somehow I seem to twinge more all the time) is that it interests me to still affirm certain things. That will be the persisting theme of the last part of my ‘F and H’ as it had been all along” (308). Crane’s shift to his own poetic work clarifies that his engagement with Eliot is not merely theoretical. Moreover, the turn to the third part of “For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen” shows that Crane’s wish to “affirm certain things” existed before *The Waste Land*. This affirmation is not only clear from Crane’s word choice in the letter to Munson (“persisting theme [...] as it had been all along”) but becomes more explicit in a letter written two weeks later to Louis Untermeyer.

Responding to a critical article by Untermeyer on Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Crane first mentions his "genuine and deep admiration for Mr. Eliot's work" but then introduces his "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" as "an answer to something that apparently both of [them] have been demanding for some time" (310). Statements in Untermeyer's review which might have sparked Crane's response include the qualification of *The Waste Land* as "a pompous parade of erudition, a lengthy extension of the earlier disillusion, a kaleidoscopic movement in which the bright-colored pieces fail to atone for the absence of an integrated design" (151). Other noteworthy remarks coinciding with Crane's poetic beliefs abound in the last paragraph: "As an analyst of desiccated sensations, as a recorder of this age, Mr. Eliot has created something whose value is, at least, documentary." Untermeyer's postulation that "[f]or an ideal-demanding race there is always one more God – and Mr. Eliot is not his prophet" (153), must have appealed to Crane. Considering the three sections of "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" "a single structure," Crane declares that in combination the parts "are designed to erect an almost spiritual attitude toward the pessimism of *The Waste Land*, although the poem was well finished before *The Wasteland* appeared." The fact that Crane had first intended to enclose only the last part of his poem as an example "that ecstasy and beauty are as possible to the active imagination now as ever" illustrates that he regarded his depiction of war and its aftermath as particularly representative of his aim for affirmation (310).⁷⁷ Indeed, key lines in the third part of Crane's long poem before *The Bridge* express his "cry for a positive attitude" which distinguishes his poetry from "Eliot and others [who] have announced that happiness and beauty dwell only in memory" (312). After the depiction of World War I fighter planes ("corymbulous formations of mechanics") bombing cities ("rifts of torn and empty houses," "Repeated play of fire"), Crane states in a diction that is compelling with its prosaic clarity and plain style: "We did not ask for that, but have survived, / And will persist to speak again" (22-23). This resolution "to speak again" in face of all the damage and misery which mankind has caused ("We even, / Who drove speediest destruction / [...] spouting malice / Plangent over meadows") is what Crane calls "the acceptance of tragedy through destruction." This persistence makes the third part "Dionysian in its attitude." If "the creator and the eternal destroyer dance arm in arm," devastation is not the end of it all (317). Crane's "conscript dust" is not a means to wastelandishly "show [us] fear in a

⁷⁷ In the postscript to his letter, Crane writes: "On second thought I have decided to send you enclosed the first and second parts, also. This will enable a reading in just sequence" (311).

handful of dust” but rather the substance for future creation (23). It is, as Crane puts it in the first part of his poem, “inventive dust” (20).

Accordingly, the last stanza of “For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen” concludes with a strong and affirmative declaration:

Distinctly praise the years, whose volatile
Blamed bleeding hands extend and thresh the height
The imagination spans beyond despair,
Outpacing bargain, vocable and prayer. (23)

Despite bloodshed (“Blamed bleeding hands”) which the “eternal gunman” has wrought with modern machines of destruction, the imagination continues to offer reprieve and is worthy of praise since it “spans beyond despair.” This aspect of affirmation, which the imperative in these lines emphasizes, is what Derek Walcott calls Crane’s “marriage of machinery and myth.” While Crane “admired the power and tried to represent the power of contemporary machinery,” he believed, according to Walcott, that “the Faustian part of modern man, the doomed part of man is the machine” (*Voices and Visions*). It is this unembellished or, in Crane’s words, “more positive” view of modernity which he offers as a response to Eliot’s “pessimism” (308). Instead of shoring fragments of the past, Crane builds on fragments of the present. As a February 1923 letter to Frank shows, this approach is grounded in “a consciousness of something more vital than stylistic questions and ‘taste.’” Distinguishing this vital constituent from fellow modern writers, Crane tells Frank that “it is vision, and a vision alone that not only America needs, but the whole world. We are not sure where this will lead, but after the complete renunciation symbolized in *The Wasteland* and, though less, in *Ulysses* we have sensed some new vitality” (326). *The Bridge* was then Crane’s vehicle to convey this “new vitality,” to renounce “the complete renunciation” of Eliot’s epic.

In the process of writing *The Bridge*, Crane continued to absorb and acclimatize Eliot’s poetry. His iambic pentameter in “Cape Hatteras,” “Man hears himself an engine in a cloud,” for example, can be read as an adjustment and restatement of Eliot’s famous lines in “The Fire Sermon,” where “the human engine waits / Like a taxi throbbing waiting” (*Poems* 68). The looming influence of Eliot on Crane’s versification shows also in the fact that Crane frequently compared his long poem to *The Waste Land*. In his letters, Crane initially stresses that “*The Bridge* is already longer than the *Wasteland*,—and it’s only about half done” (481). But the more his work progressed, the more he emphasized the difference in mood: “It will be a book by itself. And in it I shall incidentally try to answer all my friends who have for three years, now, sat down and

complacently joined the monotonous choruses of *The Waste Land*" (491-92). Even in his responses to (mostly negative) reviews of *The Bridge*, which cascaded down on Crane in 1930, he cited his experience in reading *The Waste Land* as an example that it takes time to absorb and digest complicated poems. In an April 1930 letter, he tells Herbert Weinstock "that with more time and familiarity with the *Bridge* [he] will come to envisage it more as one poem with a clearer and more integrated unity and development than was at first evident." Crane bases this assumption on his "own experience in reading and re-reading Eliot's *Wasteland*," as it "took [him] nearly five years, with innumerable readings to convince [himself] of the essential unity of that poem." Qualifying his poem as "at least as complicated in its structure and inferences as the *Wasteland*—perhaps more so" (640), Crane suggests that it might take even more time to decipher the coherence of *The Bridge*, to absorb and understand it in its entirety.

This characterization of *The Bridge* against the backdrop of Eliot's poetry harks back to Crane's remarks in a 1926 letter to Munson. In a crucial passage, he designates the work on his epic as "a test of materials as much as a test of one's imagination" and defines it against the last lines of Eliot's "The Hollow Men." Crane asks Munson if "the last statement sentimentally made by Eliot, 'This is the way the world ends, / This is the way the world ends,— / Not with a bang but a whimper' is [...] acceptable or not as the poetic determinism of our age?!" Unsurprisingly, Crane "can say no [...] and believe it." He was, however, aware that this opinion was not shared by many: "But in the face of such a stern conviction of death on the part of the only group of people whose verbal sophistication is likely to take an interest in a style such as mine—what can I expect?" (435). Early reviews of *The Bridge* show that Crane could, indeed, not expect much. With most critics closing ranks with Eliot, Crane's poetic agenda was for the most part dismissed as "Whitmanian inspiration" (Winters 165). Critics had not fully absorbed and digested Crane and his poetics then.

4 George Oppen's Poetics of the Vertical Dimension

In an interview with George and Mary Oppen conducted by David McAleavy on January 12, 1978 at the Oppens' home in San Francisco, George Oppen, asked to explicate some poems from *Discrete Series* (1934) and to shed some light on his compositional method, refers to the work of a modern American poet whose poetic technique and oeuvre seem to be incommensurable with his own: Hart Crane's *The Bridge*.⁷⁸ The allusion appears in a passage of the interview in which McAleavy cumbrously tries to elicit comments from Oppen on "Deaths everywhere," the thirtieth and penultimate poem of *Discrete Series*:

Deaths everywhere——
The world too short for trend is land——
 In the mouths,
 Rims

In this place, two geraniums
In your window-box
Are his life's eyes. (*NCP* 34)

Displaying characteristics that are typical of Oppen's early poems (elliptical word constructions, preference for nouns over verbs, extra-long dashes and spacious indentations), "Deaths everywhere" seemingly baffled McAleavy more than other poems in the book: "*You see my wondering here—phrasing that question—two geraniums in your window-box are?; "Is that pronoun substitution? That's a question about what a reader can do."* Oppen responds to the interviewer's awkward questioning with commentary that gestures beyond this individual poem: "Saying it badly, he comes to life or recognizes his life as he sees these geraniums in the city there. I was taking city for granted in an awful lot of this. I think it's a little like the methods of *The Bridge*" (*Speaking with George Oppen* 158). In his reply, Oppen moves briskly through the poem and provides the common denominator that establishes the connection between "Deaths everywhere" and "his life's eyes" by placing the scene "in the city there." This emphasis on the urban landscape appears to have triggered Oppen's measured simile "a little like the methods of *The Bridge*." Indeed, the scenery of modern cities with New York City as the paradigmatic site of the Machine Age features heavily in the poems of both *The Bridge* and *Discrete Series* (for instance, in the line "*The City's fiery parcels all undone*"

⁷⁸ The interview is only available as a transcript of the original recording and was published in *Speaking with George Oppen: Interviews with the Poet and Mary Oppen, 1968-1987* edited by Richard Swigg.

in Crane's poem "To Brooklyn Bridge" and in the twenty-fifth poem of Oppen's *Discrete Series* which begins with "'O city ladies'" [CPSL 34; NCP 29]). Still, Oppen's allusion to Crane and especially the use of the plural in "the methods of *The Bridge*" comes as a surprise from someone who, at least at the beginning of his writing career, belonged to the coterie of Ezra Pound and subscribed to the basic tenets of Pound's Imagism.⁷⁹ Unfortunately, the interviewer did not follow up on Oppen's unexpected comment. Hence it remains unclear which methods Oppen meant exactly and saw at work in the making of *The Bridge*. To make things even more challenging, neither *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, superbly edited by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, arguably the most knowledgeable Oppen scholar, nor other interviews with George Oppen, comprehensively collected in *Speaking with George Oppen: Interviews with the Poet and Mary Oppen, 1968-1987*, contain references to Crane. The reference in the interview is unique and has so far gone undetected.

A cursory glance at the oeuvre of both poets might explain why Crane and Oppen have never been discussed together. Ostensibly, their poetic work does not suggest any noteworthy parallels in their poetics. On the contrary, their approach to poetry appears to be diametrically opposed to each other. While Crane intended to write *The Bridge* as an "epic of the modern consciousness" and consequently employed a style which continues to dazzle his readers and critics with its verbosity, exuberance, and obscurity (557), Oppen's often-quoted predilection for "small words" that shape his poems frequently results in word constellations which are surrounded by white space and constituted by gaps on the page. This scarcity in Oppen who parsimoniously earned his words ("Unearned words are [...] simply ridiculous" [SL 123]) is in stark contrast to Crane who wrote in a letter to Munson of the need "to *ransack* the vocabularies of Shakespeare, Jonson, Webster (for theirs were the richest) and add our scientific, street and counter, and psychological terms" in order to truly be a "modern artist" (CPSL 328). In an earlier letter, Crane, prone to intoxicating bouts of alcohol-induced inspiration, emphasized the physically engulfing qualities of words as inebriating building

⁷⁹ It is worth noting that Pound, the high modernist whose stamp of approval facilitated careers, was scornful of Crane's poetry. In a remarkable reaction to the publication of Crane's "In Shadow" in *The Little Review* in 1917, Pound, then the magazine's foreign editor, rebuffed Crane and harshly rejected his poetry ("this sort of stuff"): "Lover of Beauty is all very egg; there is perhaps better egg, but you haven't yet the ghost of a setting hen or an incubator about you." A year later he wrote the editor of *The Little Review*, Margaret Anderson: "I have writ Crane a line. Don't publish him" (*Pound / Little Review* 185). In a similar yet more surprising way since Williams and Crane corresponded on equal terms, Williams was harsh and at times vulgar in his judgment of the "Hart Crane-Josephson group—to hell with them all" (*Selected Letters* 104). In the same 1928 letter to Pound he crudely states "that the Crane school is made up of cock suckers—why mince words" (*Pound/Williams* 93).

components of poetry: “One must be drenched in words, literally soaked with them to have the right ones form themselves into the proper pattern at the right moment. When they come, [...] they come as things in themselves; it is a matter of felicitous juggling” (257). This exuberance runs counter to Oppen who followed an ethics of weighing words accurately and meticulously and who noted in his papers that “it is necessary to be afraid of words, it is necessary to be afraid of each word, every word / miracle on the small page” (“The Circumstances” 17). Crane’s exuberance and Oppen’s paucity with regard to words notwithstanding, the fact that their poetic work is consensually described as difficult, obscure, and impenetrable intuits a common denominator which goes beyond the unit of the word. The shared aspect of obscurity and impenetrability (one of Oppen’s favorite words as Nicholls rightly observes in his excellent book *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*) is key to understanding how both poets dealt with “the encroachment of machinery on humanity” (CPSL 441). Against the backdrop of challenges posed and changes instigated by the Machine Age, both poets appear to have come to the same conclusion that disregarding contemporary phenomena is not an option for modern American poets.

Asked about Oppen’s opinion on Crane and whether he owned a copy of *The Bridge*, DuPlessis responded in a private e-mail communication that it is likely that Oppen “read *The Bridge* once upon a time, but never owned a copy [...] because the poem probably didn’t matter to him.” According to the editor of Oppen’s letters, “Crane’s baroque poetics had no interest for Oppen. Crane’s American mythopoetic narrative of *The Bridge* probably felt like it was straining” (e-mail communication to author, July 2018). Indeed, DuPlessis points to two aspects which Oppen would have disliked about Crane and Crane’s writing practice: first, the roaring boy’s (in Malcolm Cowley’s words) riotous and excessive, “baroque” style both in life and verse; second, Crane’s idea of narrating “the myth of America” in epic fashion (484). Excess, noise, the narrative mode, and mythic glamorization are antipodal terms for Oppen who, as he writes in one of his letters, “fight[s] automatically and fiercely against the derangement of the senses” (SL 105) and whose all-caps advice “ON WRITING A POEM” in his papers reads: “NOT TO MAKE NOISE: TO KEEP ONE’S ATTENTION OUTWARD TOWARD SILENCE” (“Philosophy of the Astonished” 215). With regard to the “mythopoetic narrative,” Alan Golding writes that Oppen “is too much the skeptic to offer new myths or resuscitate old ones, as do Eliot, Crane, Williams, Pound, H.D., and Olson” (86). Oppen himself doubted the usefulness of narrative linearity and, despite

the fact that he called one of his longer poems “A Narrative” (which, according to Golding, “has none of the traditional features of narrative” [92]), told Kevin Power that “narrative, the question of narrative, has always been almost unfaceable for me. I have all sorts of doubts about it, and it violates [...] my sense of the poem and these moments, the ‘moments of conviction’” (Power 187). All these comments by Oppen and Oppen scholars suggest that the differences between the two poets cancel out any similarities. Still, the fact remains that Oppen touches on parallels in their methods; methods whose similarities either seem to be so vague or latently connected below the textual surface that scholars of modern American poetry have not gone in search for them.

Oppen’s comment and this scholarly blind spot pose several questions to readers interested in Crane’s and Oppen’s work and their contribution to the dynamics of modern American poetry: What are “the methods of *The Bridge*”? What are the methods of Oppen’s poetry? Where do these methods converge and is there a common ground from which they spring? If the modern cityscape is one central theme and setting for both poets, how does such a paradigmatically urban, Machine Age site as New York City impact the material writing process and the production of poetry? Searching for answers to these questions by means of investigating the unprecedented Crane-Oppen combination promises groundbreaking discoveries that will reveal similarities in the poetic thinking of two modern American poets who published their first poems in the 1920s and 1930s. Despite apparent contradistinctions in theme and style, the working assumptions of both poets are deeply grounded in an objective appreciation of the modern cityscape as a formative fact which must not be disregarded by poets but which, in fact, needs to be incorporated into poetic form. Even though Oppen did not elaborate on the task of the poet to pay attention to the contemporary “Successive / Happenings” (to quote from the final poem of *Discrete Series*, *NCP* 35) in a comprehensive essay like Crane, statements in his letters gesture towards this future-oriented trajectory. In a 1959 letter to his half-sister, he expresses his belief that “[t]o be a good poet is to add *something*” and continues with the maxim: “Poetry has to be protean; the meaning must begin there” (*SL* 21-22). At the end of the letter, he returns to these themes when he claims that “[a] poem has got to be written into the future;” a statement which Crane would have applauded (22).

In zooming into and out of the three levels of materiality (the word, the page, the book), I will concentrate on the dimensional aspect and conceptualize, elaborate, and test a term which Oppen introduces in his letters, “the vertical dimension” (*SL* 316). The

importance of this key term has so far been overlooked or ignored by most Oppen scholars.⁸⁰ As I will argue in the following, the idea of the vertical dimension strongly informs and is, in fact, key to understanding Oppen's poetic thinking. Exemplifying the surface-depth tension which permeates Oppen's poetry, verticality can be found in each of the three levels of materiality. As will be shown, the vertical dimension can even be detected in Oppen's non-literary work which he produced while living in exile in Mexico. Ranging from the first available letters and poems to the final years of his life when Oppen was suffering from Alzheimer's disease, the concept of the vertical dimension comes to the fore as an indispensable element of Oppen's creative output. If Crane's credo that poetry must "absorb the machine, i.e., *acclimatize* it as naturally and casually as trees, cattle, galleons, castles and all other human associations of the past" finds its expression in the principle of a technologic of metaphor in *The Bridge* (CPSL 171), Oppen's way of dealing poetically with being "[g]eared in the loose mechanics of the world," as he writes in "The Image of the Engine" (NCP 40), centers on his undergirding and guiding principle of the vertical dimension. Both principles are crucial elements of their poetic methods, key to their approach of absorbing the machine, and the result of the poets' search for a poetic method which does justice to the material permutations arising at the juncture of poetry and modern technology. The parallels in their methods are grounded in their sincere respect for the material components used in the compositional process.

Against the backdrop of scholarly inattention to the Crane-Oppen nexus and the resulting lack of secondary literature in this field, it is up to scholars to turn to the primary texts and deduce the corresponding methods from close readings of poems and the poets' prose comments on their work.⁸¹ The poetry of both Crane and Oppen, and in Oppen's

⁸⁰ The only scholar besides DuPlessis who has touched upon the aspect of verticality in Oppen's poetry is Richard Swigg. In his *George Oppen: The Words in Action* (2016), a thoroughly researched book with a strong analytical focus on "the voice of the text and its intimate connection with the world of physical fact" (1), he chooses the title "Voice, Line, and Verticals: The Later *Seascape* Poems and Beyond" for his ninth chapter and proceeds to analyze some of Oppen's later poems. Swigg spends only thirteen pages on this chapter which is unfortunate since he draws from a promising array of primary texts, sometimes even texts that have completely escaped the attention of Oppen scholars. In the course of the chapter, he, for example, quotes from a fascinating 1973 interview between Oppen and Eric Homberger which is surprisingly not included in *Speaking with George Oppen*, the selection of interviews which Swigg himself edited. Strangely enough, however, he squeezes all the relevant text passages in which Oppen ponders the vertical dimension into one turgid endnote and introduces these important statements curtly and half-heartedly: "The 'vertical' idea recurs" (201). Apparently negligent of the importance of verticality, Swigg leaves his readers with nuggets to mine and mind.

⁸¹ The only literary critic I could find who juxtaposes Crane and Oppen is Joseph M. Conte in *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry*. He identifies parallels in the poets' representation of New York

case especially the poems he wrote in the late 1920s and early 1930s, can only be comprehensively understood if one considers the original context and version of their publication. In the Crane chapters, such an approach has already brought to light Crane's poetic concept of a technologic of metaphor and his belief in mechanical perfectibility which shows in his machine-absorbing, innovative combination of text and photography in the first edition of *The Bridge*. The photographs of Brooklyn Bridge by Walker Evans are essential material components of *The Bridge* and fulfill a pivotal function in the book. Their absence in later editions, whether in reprinted books or in anthologized form, diminishes the original meaning and obliterates Crane's astute arrangement of the three photographs. The fact that Crane closely monitored the editing process and was adamant in his judgment that "no ruling or printing appear on the pages devoted to the reproductions" of the photographs is simply not visible anymore for readers who do not have access to the 1930 version (634). A similar intervention of reception history obfuscates the original intention behind Oppen's *Discrete Series*, his first book of poetry published by the Objectivist Press in 1934. As will be shown in the following analysis, Oppen's acute sense of how to charge material components semantically in the writing process appears equally distorted in later editions. In encountering *Discrete Series* couched between the covers of Oppen's *Collected Poems*, the reader experiences the minimalistic poems considerably differently compared to the original 1934 version. The slimness of the volume is swallowed up in the entirety of Oppen's poems. Crucial material aspects of the original version such as (interstitial) white space, the thought-out arrangement of poetic pairs facing each other on opposite pages, and typographical idiosyncrasies are lost in later reprintings.

4.1 Dimensional Thinking and the Line's End

Before delving into the labyrinthine manuscripts of the Oppen archive and *The Selected Letters*, it makes sense to take a closer look at the poem which sparked Oppen's allusion to Crane's poetic methods. Such a preliminary reading is helpful as "Deaths everywhere" in its position on the material page and within the series is indicative of the methods and techniques at work in Oppen's poetry. Locus is essential in "Deaths everywhere," which the thrice-repeated preposition of place "In" insinuates. Denoting an enclosed space, this preposition fulfills, in a sense, the function of a zoom from the

City but cuts this route of investigation short after just once sentence: "For Crane as well as Oppen, the enormous metropolis offers itself to the individual view only in discrete parts" (123).

universal to the particular, as the following words become more and more specific (“In the,” “In this,” “In your”). The anaphoric sequence thereby supports the poem’s progression from general claims in the first half (note the use of plurals in “Deaths,” “mouths,” and “Rims”) to detailed observations in the second half (“two geraniums”; “your window-box”; “his life’s eyes”).⁸² The prepositional series is only interrupted by the word “Rims” which is located at the center of the poem. Spaciously indented, “Rims” singlehandedly marks the fourth of seven lines. The isolated word “Rims” and the white space that follows below it divide the poem into two halves. In fact, if one counts the total number of words in the poem and considers the hyphenated formation “window-box” as an interdependent compound of two equally emphasized words that could stand separately and meaningfully on their own (in a way, a microscopic version of the titular *Discrete Series*), the word “Rims” as the fourteenth out of twenty-seven words functions as the fulcrum and pivot of the entire poem. In its extraordinary position, the word holds the two stanzas together and bridges the “Rims,” so to speak, of the first and the last line, of “Deaths” and “life’s eyes.”

As with all poems in *Discrete Series*, it is necessary to read “Deaths everywhere” side by side with the poem facing it on the recto of the double page. In this case, such an approach is even more promising since the poem which the reader “cannot / Not see” (*Of Being Numerous* 38) on the opposite page is the final poem of the slender volume which appropriately enough begins with the line “Written structure.” Its first four lines immediately point to aspects of structure and form which are essential for both writing and cityscape architecture: “Written structure, / Shape of art, / More formal / Than a field would be.” In the following lines, the structure and shape which writing can provide collide with more direct, communicative means in the form of snippets from a conversation on the Machine Age device of “(the telephone): “Her pleasure’s / Looser; / ‘O—’ // ‘Tomorrow?’—.” Similar to the slant rhyme ‘Rims/geraniums’ on the verso,

⁸² Oppen explains some of the connotations which the words in “Deaths everywhere” are meant to evoke in a letter from October 15, 1976 to Serge Fauchereau who translated many Oppen poems into French: “‘too short for trend ---’ *Trend*, tendency, direction of forces (that about the ship’s cable might enter a nautical reader’s mind So much the better. It derives from the same meaning --- the angle of the cable indicates the direction of forces – tide and wind. I think you can translate as *tendance* tho this loses the *earth* some feel of the earth, the land, in *trend* --- No such earthiness in French as far as I know since Villon – let it be *tendance* the ‘mouths’ are human. The Rims (of eyes)—a vividness, (of the human) a brightening, and then the geraniums, small, local, vivid, his life’s eyes -- -- this has been said over and over again in *Discrete Series*” (*SL* 326-27). In the same letter Oppen also concedes that “the poems of *Discrete Series* cannot *really* be translated” (327). The Fauchereau-Oppen correspondence, which lasted for more than a decade, is an important source as it reveals how meticulously Oppen thought and worked with words. The correspondence has not garnered enough scholarly attention so far (see “Three Oppen Letters with a Note” in *Ironwood* 5).

the long vowels that reverberate and rhyme in “‘O—’/ ‘Tomorrow?’—” straddle the white divide between the two words in quotation marks. The phonetic qualities of the ‘o’ sound also resonate in the last line of the poem, the final words of the entire volume: “(the telephone).”⁸³ It is worth noting here that the last line of the final poem does not end with a period. Instead of extensive dashes or a period, which provides closure at the end of “Deaths everywhere,” the modern device of “the telephone” in parenthetical embrace concludes the poem and the book. The lack of a terminal punctuation mark suggests that more “Successive / Happenings” are about to occur. The discrete series/*Discrete Series* is open-ended and extends, in a way, into the white space of the page.

In “Deaths everywhere,” the pontificating effect of the word placement of “Rims” gains additional emphasis from the white space that separates the word from the following line. In her editorial comments on *The Selected Letters* and with reference to Oppen’s epistolary style, DuPlessis calls this Oppen’s “use of expressive space” (xxv). As it is, some of her remarks about the textual idiosyncrasies she encountered while editing Oppen’s letters apply to his unconventional way of writing poems as well: “Sometimes words in a sentence were framed by surrounding them with white space. Any letter by Oppen generally had plenty of open space. [...] Oppen used space between words as a form of punctuation with openness” (xxv, xxvii). Space and the whiteness of the page are crucial features of Oppen’s poetry. This chapter will show how Oppen makes use of these material devices as key criteria of his compositional method and will tie it to the concept of the vertical dimension. The “material page” (25), to quote George Bornstein whose book *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* is seminal to this study, becomes in Oppen’s hands a construction site which reveals sights of its construction if one factors in the palimtextual gradations of his working papers. In one important note from the archive, Oppen pinpoints the significance of the material

⁸³ Oppen’s penchant for the open-mouthed ‘O’ sound has not eluded the attention of his readers which becomes apparent in one exchange of letters between him and DuPlessis in 1981. Providing background for Oppen’s response, DuPlessis writes in a footnote that in “a class discussion she had conducted about ‘The Little Hole,’ #2 from ‘Five Poems about Poetry’ [...] someone noticed all the ‘o’ sounds—those open o’s like hole, exposed, close, compose, home, alone, and so. That’s a lot for such a small poem. And we were wondering about the presence of sound in poetry, and the level of consciousness or self-consciousness that a poet has about the presence of those sound patterns” (fn. 16, *SL* 424). Oppen replied: “When I was in high school or possibly earlier, I drew up a scale of the sound of words. i.e.: the word *down* happens to be lower in pitch than the word *he*. And I am still amazed – and still bothering Mary by asking in annoyance why on earth people write *poetry* if they disregard the sounds of the words they use: [...] If the ‘O’ sound is tremendous: it is almost a world” (*SL* 352). The fact that this is one of the last letters we have from Oppen shows impressively his respect for “the sounds of the words” which informed his poetry throughout his life. His “‘O’ sound is tremendous” and comes full circle here.

components which contribute to the poem when he writes that “the white space of the paper becomes part of the poem” (qtd. in Nicholls 161). Oppen here reiterates the importance of “white space” and, remarkably, charges “the white space of the paper” rather than ‘the page’ with meaning. What this jotting from the archive shows is that Oppen was aware of the physical qualities of the materials with which he worked. If Oppen “regarded the page as a site for many kinds of writing” (“Introduction” xlvi) and thought of “the page as a compositional field” (Davidson, “Palimtexts” 27), he also incorporated the papery quality of the page, its white space and its horizontal and vertical orientation, into his poetic thinking.

Oppen uses the phrase “the vertical dimension” for the first time in a letter to DuPlessis from April 13, 1976. In this letter, he puts the project of poetry in a nutshell and gives DuPlessis, whose first book of poetry *Wells* would be published in 1980, poetic advice:

Dear Rachel:

to occupy the ‘idea’; to live in it – this is simply and precisely the undertaking of poetry

there is no prescription for the doing

Talk in the poems as if speaking to divinity ... does this phrase help? Speaking to divinity – i.e., the vertical dimension ---

‘vertical dimension’: one of the things the line-break is for

(when one is not in the vertical dimension, when one is talking only to the reader, the lines *lengthen*. (SL 316)

Exhibiting idiosyncratically typographical features of Oppen’s poems such as expressive punctuation marks and white space surrounding text, this paragraph gradually zooms in on and specifies what “the vertical dimension” might mean in poetry. Oppen transitions quickly from the metaphysical dimension of “speaking to divinity,” a religious practice grounded in sincerity and usually directed vertically toward a higher sphere, to basic and essential units of poetic creation: the line and “the line-break.” Oppen does neither guide the recipient of his letter nor the reader of *The Selected Letters* through his thinking process from the abstract to the concrete. Yet his emphasis on particular words, visually highlighted by italics in DuPlessis’ carefully edited book, make clear that communication (“*Talk* in the poems”) is the connective between these two spheres and that the line as essential unit of poetic creation fulfills a crucial function in this communicative process (“the line-break is *for*). Breaking the line at the right moment directs the reader’s gaze downward on the page. Bracketed but without a closing parenthesis, a typographical feature not unusual in his poems and writing in general, Oppen’s last sentence emphasizes that the vertical dimension is a material phenomenon

which can be traced on the two-dimensional plane of the page. In this dimensional understanding, “the line itself, the material practice of poetry” (“Uncannily” 217), in DuPlessis’ succinct words, reveals meaning horizontally in length and vertically in depth.

The idea that the line is pivotal as both marker of linear stoppage and pointer to vertical flux was, however, not entirely new to Oppen’s poetic thinking. Ten years prior to his claiming that “when one is not in the vertical dimension, [...] the lines *lengthen*,” Oppen had written Serge Fauchereau, who was engaged in translating some of Oppen’s poems at the time, that “[t]he line sense, the line breaks, and the syntax are intended to control the order of disclosure upon which the poem depends” (*SL* 141). This, I believe, is one of the most central sentences in Oppen’s letters as it contains terms such as the umbrella concept of the line sense that are fundamentally important to the poet’s thinking.⁸⁴ Most importantly for this material reading of Oppen’s work, Oppen stresses that the horizontally oriented lines and the fact that they can be broken vertically are powerful tools for the poet “to control the order of disclosure,” that is, to organize by means of material, poetic devices how and when the meaning of the poem reveals itself.

Oppen echoes the revelatory function of the line in a plethora of letters, but the most straightforward and clear-cut statement can be found in his jottings from the archive. In “The Philosophy of the Astonished,” for instance, Oppen provides a pertinent definition of “the lines” when he writes: “the lines: the vertical structure of the poem” (218). Set apart by white space above and below the text and emphasized by the gap after the colon, this definition makes clear that the notion of verticality is inextricably linked to the linearity of Oppen’s lines. The line functions as the organizing principle of both the words on the page and the directionality of the page. In his insightful interview with L. S. Dembo, Oppen stresses this idea in a long comment which will be quoted in full given the importance of his theoretical remarks for his poetry:

I do believe in a form in which there is a sense of the whole line, not just its ending. Then there’s the sense of the relation between lines, the relation in their length; there is a sense of the relation of the speed, of the alterations and momentum of the poem, the feeling when it’s done that this has been rounded. I think that probably a lot of the worst of modern poetry, and it would be true of some quite good poetry, such as Creeley’s, uses the line-ending simply as the ending of a line, a kind of syncopation or punctuation. It’s a kind of formlessness that lacks any sense of line measure. The meaning of a poem is in the cadences and the shape of the lines and the pulse of the thought which is given

⁸⁴ Appropriately, the phrase also appears in one of his letters in which he recapitulates what he valued in fellow ‘Objectivist’ poets: “And surely I envy still Williams’ language, Williams’ radiance; Rezi’s lucidness; and frequently Zukofsky’s line-sense” (*SL* 83).

by those lines. The meaning of many lines will be changed—one's understanding of the line will be altered—if one changes the line-ending. It's not just the line-ending as punctuation but as separating the connections of the progression of thought in such a way that understanding of the line would be changed if one altered the line division. And I don't mean just a substitute for the comma; I mean with which phrase the word is most intimately connected—that kind of thing. (167)

Oppen repeats his faith in “the shape of the lines,” his respect for the line sense, and his conviction that alterations to the line units impact the meaning of the poem as a whole in his jottings as well. In one entry from the archive he writes: “One revises a line, one alters a word, then one revises the punctuation, and then alters the line division—after altering the line, one restores the original punctuation... In all that, who tells you what is right? Who is there??” (“The Circumstances” 14). Oppen does not provide an answer to the question “who tells you what is right.” Yet, interestingly, on the same page in the archive where he defines the lines as “the vertical structure of the poem,” Oppen notes that he as a poet is also inevitably involved in this search for the right word and lineation, a search which oscillates in up-and-down motion: “I can't climb UP; I am trying to climb DOWN—to the bottom of things” (“Philosophy of the Astonished” 217). Highlighted by capital letters, the directional prepositions “UP” and “DOWN” evoke the concept of the vertical dimension and, in the environment of the page on which the words appear, gesture towards the “vertical structure of the poem.” Quite tellingly, Oppen in this jotting concedes that the way down “to the bottom of things” is what he is after. This downward motion permeates his poetic thinking, carrying over into the semantically related ideas of going-into, penetration, and disclosure. In a remarkable note among his manuscripts, he continues this thought when he claims that “the undertaking of the poems (and of all I have done: [...] To go down, to go into” (203). Still, the question remains how the concept of the vertical dimension materializes on the two-dimensional plane of a sheet of paper.

To illustrate how the vertical dimension might look on the page it makes sense to return to the letters Oppen sent DuPlessis and consider the original context in which the concept developed. Oppen's musings on verticality were triggered by “Voyaging,” a poem by DuPlessis which she had dedicated to and shared with Oppen. This poem impressed Oppen significantly and occupied his mind for a long time (“I am moved by the poem --- and can't keep my hands off it” [*SL* 317]). In fact, he followed up his first letter to DuPlessis, partially quoted above, by another letter from April 29, 1976 to which he appended what DuPlessis calls a “revision-by-excision” of her poem (fn. 4, *SL* 420). Aware that his sharply edited version might cause “indignation” on DuPlessis' part, he

includes explanatory remarks on what motivated his changes. In a syntactically jerky way, he writes: “The principle not, I think, any scheme of prosody, but – that the words – an attempt to connect each word, as nearly as I could in a hurry connect *each* word AT BOTH ENDS --- connected at the beginning and the end of the word – which *is*, perhaps, ‘*the vertical dimension*’ (which phrase you accepted)” (SL 316). Oppen’s emphases in the form of capitalizations, italicized words, and repetition make clear that the principle of “*the vertical dimension*” materializes on the page through the adequate connection of “*each* word AT BOTH ENDS.” This strong focus on the basic constitutive parts of each word, in a way, grounds the metaphysical idea of “speaking to divinity” which Oppen had equated with the vertical dimension in his first letter and shows that the concept can be applied quite concretely to the material components of poetry. Convinced that “narrative itself must at certain points STAND STILL” (316), Oppen advocates for a compositional method that does justice to the expressive qualities of such formal details and devices as the line-break and the Janus-faced characteristics of words. These rather abstract and theoretical claims require substantiations and need to be tested and investigated practically in poetic examples. In order to understand how lines, words, and the connection of words across lines create meaning and depth, it is helpful to conduct a comparative close reading of Oppen’s rendering of DuPlessis’ poem.

DuPlessis, as Swigg observes, refrained from working Oppen’s suggested changes into “Voyaging” so that the poem published in *Wells* in 1980 does not show any obvious marks of Oppen’s interference with the text.⁸⁵ Still, the fact that Oppen’s version of “Voyaging” was published as well—though after his death and thus without his approval—allows for an illuminating comparison of the two versions. In fact, a comparative reading of only a few lines reveals how the interplay of line sense and word connection creates and, at the same time, helps experience the vertical dimension. In DuPlessis’ poem, the speaker addresses a “Boatman // bearing us / over the water / to the island,” an occurrence of voyaging which the Oppens often shared with DuPlessis, and asks a question before continuing with the description of the scene:

Remember the steadying beat
over the bay?

A ladder rises up from the rock shoreline.

⁸⁵ Asked about her refusal to work in Oppen’s suggested changes, DuPlessis wrote the author in an e-mail from July 2018: “I had taken a bit of advice from Oppen about poems on maybe 2 other poems that are in print in *Wells* [my first book]. I didn’t want to do this advice-taking with “Voyaging” because I thought he’d cut too much. The poem might have been immature (or something—whatever?) in his view, but it was my immature, and I was sticking with it” (e-mail communication to author, July 2018).

Lithe, the boy climbs
 down to the surface of waters lapping
 His feet balance on that clean boat briefly (56)

In Oppen's revision, the question and the question mark disappear alongside with the period after "shoreline." The capital letters at the beginning of DuPlessis' lines shrink to lower-case in the leveling rhythm of "the water lapping" (not "waters lapping"):

[...] remember
 the steadying
 beat of the boat
 over the bay, a ladder rises
 from the rock
 shoreline and lithe the boy
 climbs
 down to the surface
 of the water lapping
 his feet balance
 on that clean boat
 briefly (qtd. in Swigg 136)

Just by looking at the two versions of "Voyaging," one notices a difference in (line) length and depth. Whereas DuPlessis describes (Oppen would say 'narrates') the scene of a boy climbing down a ladder from a boat to a watery surface in six lines, Oppen spends twice as many lines without adding linguistic materials except for the word "boat" and one "and" between "shoreline" and "lithe." This results in a downward flux on the page in his version which the white space between the stanzas supports and intensifies. The lines in DuPlessis' "Voyaging" are oriented horizontally, while Oppen's rearrangement by means of line-breaks and the removal of punctuation (except for a substitution of a comma for a question mark) generates a vertical directionality. DuPlessis' lines lengthen, Oppen's lines deepen. This is not to say that Oppen's version is better or objectively more to the point than the original text. In fact, it is quite ironic that the older poet reworks a poem dedicated to him ("for George Oppen") into a poem which is, in a way, "for[med by] George Oppen." What is essential though is that Oppen's incision into the length of lines and the repositioning of words immediately and noticeably effect how the poem looks on the page. His editorial interventions change the material qualities of words and the page into which the words are inscribed. It is thus useful as a preliminary close reading to analyze how Oppen works with and through

DuPlessis' poem as this reworking of the original text is emblematic of his mode of poetic and vertical thinking.

The words employed in the two versions are identical for the most part, but the changes made by Oppen are revelatory insofar as they show what his "attempt to connect each word [...] AT BOTH ENDS" entails. The most striking excision is that Oppen gets rid of the prepositional deictic "up" which DuPlessis had coupled with the verb 'rise.' Cutting this word might make sense because upward movement from a lower position is already contained within the correlating verb. Thus, the preposition 'up' could be said to impede through redundancy the connection of the word 'rise' at both ends. By excising the preposition, Oppen does justice to the second principle of Pound's Imagist theory, namely "To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation" ("A Retrospect" 3). Adhering to his own dictum that "[e]ach word must have some reason for existing in itself" ("The Circumstances" 15), Oppen underscores the immanent meaning of DuPlessis' words by carefully positioning them on the line and by utilizing white space. In contrast to DuPlessis who places the verb 'rise' close to the middle of a sentence, thereby adding to the narrative tone which Oppen reprimanded, Oppen grants the word an elevated position at the line-end. In combination with the following chasm between the lines, he emphasizes and, in a way, discloses the inherent qualities of the word, allotting it the necessary space to rise visually on the page as well as acoustically if pronounced with the required respect for the pauses and silences which the white gap signifies. The same technique is even more prominently at work in the boy's downward climb. Although both poets sever "climbs / down" by breaking the line, this division is more accentuated and perspicuous in Oppen's version. He isolates "climbs" and sets it visually and vertically apart from the correlating preposition "down" by making use of the white space below the verb. The action of climbing down is thus stressed on the page, as both words are positioned like rungs of a ladder one below the other. The effect of this line-break is less palpable in DuPlessis' version where the reader, spurred on by the narrative tone, might skip the division of lines and try to connect the words horizontally. Oppen's choice deepens the lines and thereby sheds light on the core of words and their connections. The line-break is an essential poetic device in this process of disclosure.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ In Oppen's poetry, the division of lines functions like prepositional markers such as "above" and "below," pointing to the oscillating movement along the vertical axis on the page. These markers underscore the fundamental quality of writing on surfaces which the German philosophers Sybille Krämer and Rainer Totzke define with a few succinct sentences in their conceptual synopsis of 'Schriftbildlichkeit': "Schriften nutzen das Räumliche als ein Medium der Artikulation;" "die

Oppen repeats his compositional ethics of gradually and carefully placing words on a line on a page and emphasizes the crucial function of the line-break in his working papers as well. In Dennis Young's "Selections from George Oppen's 'Daybook'" one reads, for example, that "poetry is free-er than prose [...] It is free to cause the words to mean what they had not meant before tho that meaning is ours / A simple law of poetry is that it be revelatory as if the poem were made by discovering it" (17).⁸⁷ Oppen continues that he is "concerned with a thinking that requires the poem in order to be tight / it is not a thinking outside of language: the linebreak is as much part of language as the comma, the period, the paragraph." Just a few sentences later in the same daybook he adds the aspect of spacing to this revelatory equation when he states that "[t]he spacing is a part of the drama of the poem (visible as much as audible)" (17).⁸⁸ As these remarks clarify, for Oppen, a carefully constructed constellation of linguistic materials such as words and punctuation marks combined with expressive typographical features restore meaning to words and help to facilitate the revelation of "the real // That we confront" through poetic form (*NCP* 202).

For DuPlessis, the vertical dimension as "a statement in poetics" is "something about the line break mainly and also a kind of spiritual impact being registered in the form of the poem." According to her, when Oppen introduced the phrase to her in 1976, "Oppen was well into his spacious, much-white-space poems at the time of that letter." She continues that Oppen "had a way of hinging between lines via line break that kept the poem striving and reaching" and that "[a] number of people have written about this use of line break as hinge—not just between two horizontal units that lay on the page within the same syntax, but between two units that really seemed to change course when they were joined" (e-mail communication to author, July 2018). Indeed, the metaphor

topologischen Relationen von oben/unten, rechts/links, zentral/randständig werden auf der Schreibfläche und in der Schreibszene als eine Matrix bedeutungstragender Anordnungen genutzt;" "Jede Schrift nutzt die Vertikale und Horizontale;" "beschriebene Flächen haben eine Ausrichtung" (16); "ohne leere Fläche keine Insription: jedes Schriftbild beruht auf Lücken und Leerstellen" (17).

⁸⁷ Oppen reiterates this "simple law of poetry" in his correspondence: "'I think that poetry which is of any value is *always* revelatory. Not that it reveals or could reveal Everything, but it must reveal something (I would like to say 'Something') and for the first time. The fusion of 'must not mean but be' comes from this: it is a knowledge which is hard to hold, it is held in the poem, a meaning grasped again on re-reading" (*SL* 133). Just a few weeks later, he would state it more succinctly: "I believe that a poem, if it is indeed poetry, is always revelatory" (*SL* 139).

⁸⁸ In a 1975 interview with Kevin Power, Oppen reiterates his respect for the line-break and punctuation marks: "The line-break is as much part of the language as the period, the comma, or parenthesis, and it shows that there are things that can only be said as poetry" (195).

of the hinge for Oppen's usage of the line break was first articulated by Charles Bernstein in *Ironwood* 26 in 1985.

In this special Oppen issue, published one year after the poet's death, Bernstein writes in a short piece that concludes with an acrostic poem that Oppen's "poems [...] were created by a sort of collage or cut-up technique involving innumerable substitutions and permutations for every word and line choice." According to Bernstein, Oppen's "method [...] is paratactic, even if often used for hypotactic ends." It is at this juncture where Bernstein introduces the metaphor of the hinge: "This tension, which can produce the kinetic, stuttering vibrancy of some of Oppen's most intense poems, is at the heart of his use of the line break as hinge [which] allows for a measure of intervallic 'widths' of connection/disconnection between lines." Concluding his paragraph on "Oppen's hinging," Bernstein rephrases the idea of "the kinetic, stuttering vibrancy" when he contends that "[a]t its most riveting, this hinging taps into a horizontally moving synaptic/syntactic energy at the point of line transition" (241). Energetically charged, the moment of transition at the end of lines simultaneously connects and disconnects and propels the poem across the interval of white space.

While Bernstein's adroitly coupled adjectives "synaptic/syntactic," separated by a slash but chiming in assonance, fittingly capture the idea of holding something together, his emphasis on the horizontal dimension along which the synergetic discharge travels fails to acknowledge the conceivably more formative vertical aspect "at the point of line transition." The image of the hinge, albeit helpful for the sake of visualizing the jointedness of Oppen's lines and "the constructedness of syntax," is hence imprecise (240). The turning motion immanent in the device of a hinge is not fully sufficient for describing the actual effect at the end of a line. Instead of a hinge which makes it mechanically possible to swing something open and shut, a more accurate image for Oppen's use of the line break can be taken from the semantic field of climbing. The process of climbing entails both upward and downward movement. In this vertical movement, the lines function like rungs of a ladder as they provide temporary stability before one ascends or descends to the next one. As Oppen writes in the uncollected, unpublished poem "The Stony Brook," lines ensure secure footing: "the hand holds, the foot holds / To dig in one's heels // Nothing else / In the line sense." Significantly, this physical image of line as foothold enters the poem "Traditional Red Sign," recently discovered and published along with seven other poems and three new letters in 2020. The poem's central word and sign in all caps "DANGER" is framed by a turn

“From the quiet / Stone floor” in *Discrete Series* to “bare foundations” in *The Materials* to “the clean ground under the trees” in “Primitive” (to provide just a few examples from his poetry), Oppen revisits the trope of the ground throughout his career and, as will be shown in the next chapter, investigates the ground-surface relation even in his non-literary work (*NCP* 6, 45, 133).⁹⁰ Quite tellingly, Oppen repeats the central notion that the poem is “a method of thought” with reference to the materiality of the line in his working papers. He applies his often-quoted conviction that “THE POEM IS AN INSTRUMENT OF THOUGHT,” which he would alter slightly in his letters (“I’ve said too often by now that I think a poem is itself a process of thought, a means of thought” (fn. 12, *SL* 388),⁹¹ to poetic lines as well. His working papers contain this carefully revised statement:

the lines are an instrument
of thought, ~~powerful~~
^{^powerful^} as the tools
of ~~the mathematician~~ *mathematics*
or they are distraction

Immediately after these lines, which could have well made it into a poem, Oppen repeats the idea in prosaic form: “the lines being an instrument of thought, one cannot ~~always~~ foresee conclusions, as the mathematician cannot foresee the result of his work” (*SPDP* 118). As with all tools, instruments, or methodologies, the thing one aims to produce in using these means becomes the more accomplished the better skilled and the more familiar the creator is with the tools he has at hand. Because the line sense is such a crucial component in a poet’s material repertoire which facilitates disclosure, it is obligatory to be acquainted with the subtleties of lineage.

Unsurprisingly, Oppen would revisit the key concept of the line sense throughout his career and mention it in all kinds of text genres. For example, a note from his working

⁹⁰ It is worth noting that Mary Oppen uses some of the same vocabulary so central to her husband’s poetry when she writes in her autobiography *Meaning a Life* of their travels through America as a young couple: “We were in search of an esthetic within which to live, and we were looking for it in our own *American roots*, in our own country. We had learned at college that poetry was being written in our own times, and that in order for us to write it was not necessary for us to ground ourselves in the academic; *the ground we needed was the roads we were travelling*. As we were new, so we had *new roots*, and we knew little of our own country. Hitchhiking became more than flight from a powerful family—*our discoveries themselves became an esthetic and disclosure*. The people we met, as various and as accidentally met as thumbing a ride could make them, became the clue to our *finding roots*” (68, emphasis added). The cluster of key terms like “roots,” “ground,” and “esthetic and disclosure” coupled with the conviction that reality must be perceived and experienced reappears in Oppen’s work and permeates his poetry.

⁹¹ Other variants of the same idea can be found in Oppen’s daybooks: “I rather think of verse as a tool of thought, perhaps comparable to the tool of mathematics” (*SPDP* 136); “I mean my work to be a process of thought. Which means I am the literary equivalent of the scientist. not of the [...] entertainer” (156).

papers, which was probably jotted down while Oppen was writing “Three Poets” for *Poetry* in which he reviews Allen Ginsberg’s *Kaddish and Other Poems* alongside with books by Michael McClure and Charles Olson, reads as follows: “had I seen Ginsberg’s Kadish [sic] in the making, I would have wanted to strike out almost every phrase, almost every line. It is the poem that justifies the line, not the lines that justify the poem. It is the poem that justifies the words” (*SPDP* 128). Even though Oppen did not criticize Ginsberg’s treatment of the line that blatantly in the published review, his strong opinion that the line is inextricably linked to the motivating idea behind the poem manifests itself in his response to the Beat poet’s preference for breath as the measuring unit of a line. As becomes clear in a remark Oppen made in a conversation with Eric Homberger in 1973, Oppen considered the spatial aspects of lines on the page more important than their immanent, latent potential for being voiced. Affirming that he is very conscious of how his writing “looks to the eye,” he elaborates his understanding of the material, visual qualities of lines: “The eye and the consciousness, you might say. Space. The consciousness of space. Of how soon, *where* it happens. There’s a left- and righthand side of the lines, and most poets don’t know it. They talk so much about the breath. A line is a line. It’s not just a line-ending. [...] The line has a lefthand side and a righthand side.” Oppen’s emphasis on the spatial fact that lines have two sides anticipates his meditation on the vertical dimension which he would discuss with DuPlessis three years later. Pursuant to his call for connecting “each word AT BOTH ENDS” (*SL* 316), Oppen’s conviction that poets must understand that “[t]here’s a left- and righthand side of the lines” is grounded in dimensional thinking. Accordingly, he advised Dan Gerber, who had asked for Oppen’s feedback on some of his poems, to “[h]ave some sense of the openness, some sense that one’s lines might insist on an openness, a movement from left-edge of the line to right edge, not a stasis or standing-on” (*SL* 261). With “movement from left-edge of the line to right edge” established as a central feature of the line sense, the notion of openness gestures towards a broader scope of “[t]he consciousness of space.” As it is, this “sense of the openness” which Oppen advocates finds its expression in his own poems, especially in his poems of the 1970s, not only in intervallic white spaces within his lines. Openness is moreover a quality which the crucial device of the line break facilitates. After all, the line break always impacts two lines, as it effectuates a repositioning of linguistic material usually from, in the Western way of reading and

writing, the upper-right to the lower-left.⁹² In Oppen's poems, this vertical movement and opening of the line to the page space is often enacted across extra gaps on the page and through enjambments at the juncture of line division.

It is crucial to note that, even though a single poetic line is organized laterally, the constellation and connection of lines on the two-dimensional surface of the page creates a vertical thrust. Through the meticulous and deliberate placement of words on the laterally oriented lines, Oppen reinforces this up-and-down directionality and constructs vertical connection. Conversely, the longer the lines are, the more obfuscated the meaning of the individual words on their respective lines become. Lines lengthening horizontally overshadow the direction downward on the page. In his working papers, Oppen underscores this quality of the line sense which is less concerned with sound than with sight: "my lines and the division of lines is not meant merely as a cadence of sound. It is an essential element of the syntax" (*SPDP* 120); a new syntax of disclosure, one might add, given that Oppen's cleaving of lines frequently ruptures conventional syntactical structures in order to bring to light the disclosive force of words, word-order, and white space. One central note from the archive condenses this key method of working the materials of poetic composition into a form of unfolding: "A new syntax is a new cadence of disclosure" (qtd. in Nicholls 15). The fact that Oppen articulated this idea throughout each decade of his career attests to its significance and centrality to what Shoemaker calls Oppen's "poetics of disclosure" (80). In a 1964 letter to his niece, for example, he fleshes out the jotting and even applies this key term to grammatical particularities when he writes: "If one is to move to experience further one needs a syntax, a new syntax A new syntax is a cadence of disclosure, a new cadence of logic, a new musical cadence A new 'structure of space'" (*SL* 97). Of all the phrases starting with 'new,' it is the final item of the list with its emphasis on the "structure of space" which resonates particularly with the concrete materiality of poems printed on paper and chimes with Oppen's call for respecting the "'space in the poem, space on the page: NOT breath—not manner, when space is not silence, the matrix of silence, it is chatter, noise" ("Philosophy of the Astonished" 216).

In 1975, eleven years after the letter in which Oppen advocated for a variety of novelties, he repeats his important principle of the line sense which is grounded in a spatial understanding of poem and page in a letter to fellow poet Robert Duncan. In

⁹² Susan Thackrey captures the importance of word placement on Oppen's lines when she succinctly states: "Word placement at the beginning and end of lines investigates disclosure" (18).

response to Duncan, who had apparently written that Oppen's "recent poems are incomprehensible," he defended the look of his poems collected in *The Myth of the Blaze* by stating that he "was not thinking of that which cannot be said in language." Rather, he was "think[ing] of that which cannot be said except thru the poem. Nothing very wild about this: the line-break is as much part of the language as the comma the period the paragraph." If Oppen, here, repeats his understanding of "the line-break" almost verbatim compared to comments in his working papers and interviews quoted above, he introduces deixis as a crucial feature of what the line division engenders in the final paragraph of his letter: "((it is true there has been a remarkable silence about those poems. And R Blau, whose opinion I also respect, wrote simply that they made her feel dizzy Bit troubling, yes. But I thought I was simply pointing to things—[...] ((Mary, reading this, reminds me that you mentioned Heidegger. Yes, I see. I point: it is true I don't think everything has already been named, yes it's true" (SL 300). Remarkably, Oppen couples the deictic qualities inherent in his principle of the vertical dimension and the line sense with his reading of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. In an interview conducted in the same year, he corroborates this connection when he reiterates that "what I'm doing is pointing" which he designates as "a Heideggerian gesture" (Power 195).⁹³ As Nicholls rightly observes, the action of pointing is firmly rooted "in the irreducible spatio-temporal 'thereness' of the poem, with its phonic echoes and silences, its syntactical shape and typographical layout" (72). In addition to this focus on the materiality of the poem, Oppen's reference to Heidegger's writing and terminology accentuates "the cadence of disclosure" which the interplay of these material components of poetic writing generates (SL 97). In an earlier letter, Oppen calls this "[t]he part of poetry which is a realizing, a revealing of the world" and declares ("O, that's something else") that this revelatory potential of poetry "is more often than not unconnected with print. Or even with typescript" (SL 138). As *Discrete Series* attests, this interconnected cluster of ideas which revolve around the key terms of the vertical dimension, the line sense, and deictic disclosure can be traced in Oppen's early work

⁹³ In the interview with Power, Oppen directly addresses Duncan's letter when he says: "Duncan took it I was attempting to say what can't be said in language. What I wrote Duncan was that I'm not disagreeing about that concept but that, quite simply, there are things which can only be said in poetry, and that isn't at all the same thing. The line-break is just as much a part of language as the period, comma, or parenthesis, and it shows that there are things that can only be said as poetry" (195). Interestingly, Oppen here adds "parenthesis" to his list of material marks where he had mentioned "paragraph" in his letter to Duncan. As will be shown in the following closes readings, Oppen often used brackets in his poems and charged them with meaning.

even prior to his reading of Heidegger's texts and before he verbalized the principle of the vertical dimension.

4.2 The Vertical Dimension and the Knowledge of Boredom

Nothing more real than boredom— (*NCP* 194)

The very first poem of *Discrete Series* already toys with this central idea of vertical movement and the revelatory act of pointing at and looking into things by means of word-order, line break, and white space. It thus sets the tone for the entire series. In “The knowledge not of sorrow” this key aspect of Oppen's poetics does not only show in the prominently positioned phrase “having risen” but more importantly albeit implicitly in the word “boredom” at the end of the second line.

The knowledge not of sorrow, you were
saying, but of boredom
Is—aside from reading speaking
smoking—
Of what, Maude Blessingbourne it was,
wished to know when, having risen,
“approached the window as if to see
what really was going on”;
And saw rain falling, in the distance
more slowly,
The road clear from her past the window-
glass—
Of the world, weather-swept, with which
one shares the century. (*NCP* 5)

Virtually every Oppen scholar discusses this poem in varying length and establishes that Oppen's “Maude Blessingbourne” and the quotation at the center of the poem are taken from Henry James's story “The Story in It.” These observations are as correct as the facts that Oppen added an ‘e’ to the first name of James's protagonist and that the poem was first published in the Objectivist issue of *Poetry* in February 1931. For the purposes of this chapter the latter aspect is more important since the format changes from magazine to book publication disclose how Oppen's notion of line sense and line arrangement carries meaning.

In the original publication context, the poem appears under the title “1930'S” and is preceded by the Roman numeral “II” (256). It is squeezed onto the same page with another Oppen poem, “Thus,” which is introduced in *Poetry* by the Roman numeral

“I” but would become the third poem of *Discrete Series*.⁹⁴ If the idea behind this cramped and crowded typesetting was to publish both Oppen poems in their entirety on the same page, the undertaking failed dramatically since the final two lines of the poem—which in their reference to “the world, weather-swept, with which one shares the / century” (in the strange line division of the *Poetry* version) hark back to the Depression era title of the “1930’S”—are severed from the rest of the poem and placed at the top of the next page. In addition to this regrettable text separation, the line breaks appear to be rather arbitrary compared to how the poem looks in the 1934 book. Swigg points to this typesetting flaw in a footnote when he writes that the four indented lines in *Poetry* seem to be “merely the original typesetter’s continuation of turned-over lines.” His concluding observation that in the book version “Oppen has so rearranged the overruns that they no longer appear fragmentary but have the look of alternate lines in their own right, completing the effect of a formalized symmetry on the page” is also correct and convincing (190). Yet there is more to be said about the “formalized symmetry on the page” which the poem in the book creates.

Like in his revision of DuPlessis’ “Voyaging,” Oppen deepens his lines in the book version. This method results quite banally and concretely in a larger number of lines on the page. Instead of eleven lines in *Poetry*, “The knowledge not of sorrow” consists of fourteen lines in *Discrete Series*. The fact that the poem is made up of fourteen lines, even though some of the lines are constituted by only one word and a dash (“smoking—”; “glass—”), evokes the sonnet form. While I do not necessarily want to argue for a reading of the poem as a sonnet with all its traditional associations and conventions, the formal composition of this poem is striking as it jars with how all the following poems look on the page. Oppen indents all the even-numbered lines and thus gestures towards the “Written structure, / Shape of art” with which the last poem of the series begins (*NCP* 35). This ordering principle goes along with a strong emphasis on the final and first words on alternating lines. The most compelling discrepancies between the versions regarding line sense shine forth in the transition from the second to the third and the eleventh to the twelfth line. The key phrases and pairs are, for the sake of visualization without line breaks, “boredom Is” and “window-glass.” The version in the special Objectivist issue isolates “boredom” on its second line and inserts, for reasons unknown, a comma that separates the word from “Is,” the first word of the next line.

⁹⁴ In the book version, as a matter of fact, the poem appears under the number “2” and is thus clearly paired with “White,” preceded by number “1,” on the left-hand page. As with “The knowledge not of sorrow,” both format and typographical features of “Thus” are butchered in the magazine publication.

This erroneous separation runs counter to the meaning of the poem in which the knowledge of boredom (ex)“Is”(ts) and is the revelatory mode of grasping “what really [is] going on.”

What is equally distorting is that the emphasis on this two-lettered word, so crucial to Oppen’s and, of course, to Heidegger’s thinking, softens because of the interceding little word “of” between “Is” and the em dash in the third line: “Is of—.” In *Discrete Series*, the erasure of “of” visually highlights the compound of word and punctuation mark “Is—” and thus underscores the conjugated verb form at the capitalized line-start. The smooth transition “boredom / Is—”, unimpeded by commas and accentuated by the placement on the lines, gains in prominence and directs the reader’s gaze more effectively towards what Oppen calls in one of his letters “the seed phrases” (*SL* 102). In this interplay of enjambment and pause, the line sense and line break here truly “control the order of disclosure upon which the poem depends” (*SL* 141). In this poetic pursuit of “disclosure,” one key criterion of Oppen’s poetics,⁹⁵ “the lines [are] the vertical structure of the poem” and lead the way downward and upward in their meticulously woven arrangement (“The Philosophy of the Astonished” 217).

Oppen connects the seed phrases ‘boredom,’ ‘Is,’ and the idea of disclosure in a striking passage of a 1972 letter to Michael Heller. Having established that his earlier books “mean to say *Being*” and, as he notes in a draft of the letter, that he “was in these books speaking of Being” (*SL* 248; 410), Oppen turns to a semi-etymological discussion of “the first objects to become *object* to living consciousness” (248). In the final paragraph of the letter, he combines these ideas when he writes that “bored by objects to wish to convert them to symbols of interior sensations, interior movements—is boredom indeed! / if we still possessed the word ‘is,’ there would be no need to write poems / One inch above, one inch below what has already been said—the world opens up” (*SL* 249). This central passage abounds with interesting phrases and notions, yet it is Oppen’s awareness of the root meaning of “bored” and “boredom” which is most fascinating as this etymological trajectory helps to explain the key concepts of oscillation between “above” and “below” and the concomitant idea of “open[ing] up.” As the repetition of the adjective “interior” suggests, the word “bore” retains vestiges of its meaning as a verb in Oppen’s thinking. The act of boring through, of perforating surfaces, of making holes, reverberates in Oppen’s usage of the word and is, in fact, one

⁹⁵ In one telling sentence among his working papers, Oppen even goes so far as to declare the idea of disclosure the essential category of art: “If, to speak of art, we will, as we should, use one word only, the word is *disclosure*” (“Selections” 11).

major factor in the strive for disclosure. As with the concept of 'Being,' Heideggerian undertones resonate throughout the vocabulary here as well. This philosophic grounding that circulates in this passage around Heidegger's key term 'Entbergen' and Oppen's general high regard for Heidegger's philosophic thinking become obvious in several interviews the poet gave together with his wife and life-long partner Mary Oppen.⁹⁶

In 1975, for instance, the Oppens ricochet back and forth in their excursion into the meaning of boredom. George sets the tone when he tells the interviewers Michel Engelbert and Michael West that "[t]he use of the word 'boredom' [...] is part of our history" and that "[t]he first poem in the *Discrete Series* describes the mood of boredom, and the sense of the world which occurs in the mood of boredom" (12). As in other statements, he expresses his surprise that he "wrote that [poem] in 1929 and [...] that this was the same moment that Heidegger was speaking of the mood of boredom as a philosophic concept in his acceptance speech at the University [of Freiburg]" (12).⁹⁷ Mary, then, continues his train of thought and elaborates how they interpret Heidegger's use of boredom: "When Heidegger speaks of boredom he allies it very closely with that moment of awe in which one's mind begins to reach beyond. And that is a poetic moment; a moment in which a poem might very well be written" (13). Her phrase that in moments of boredom or of awe "one's mind begins to reach beyond" and think poetically applies to the first poem of *Discrete Series* where "Maude Blessingbourne," paradoxically impelled by her wish to know what the knowledge of boredom might disclose, rises and looks through the "window- / glass" and becomes part of "the world, weather-swept, with which / one shares the century." George rephrases this abrupt shift

⁹⁶ References to Heidegger appear frequently in Oppen's prose statements. Examples include but are not limited to remarks in interviews such as the following one: "Ideas like Heidegger's have been important to me for a long time, as early as the first poem in *Discrete Series*. It says, 'The knowledge not of sorrow, you were saying, but of boredom / Is ... Of the world, weather-swept with which one shares the century.' The word 'boredom' is a little surprising there. It means, in effect, that the knowledge of the mood of boredom is the knowledge of what *is*, 'of the world, weather-swept.' But these phrases I use here to paraphrase the poem are phrases from Heidegger's Acceptance Speech made in 1929, the year I was writing the poem. And the words 'boredom' and 'knowledge' are, in their German equivalents, the words he used. So I feel I have a natural sympathy with Heidegger—that he should use as a philosophic concept a mood of boredom. And the word is rather strange in the poem, too. The statements are identical" ("Interview with L. S. Dembo" 169).

⁹⁷ In a letter from 1967, Oppen shares his amazement that he used the concept of boredom roughly at the same time as Heidegger who mentions 'Langeweile' in his Acceptance Speech of the Chair of Philosophy at Freiburg in 1929. Oppen writes that "[t]he poem which happens to be printed as the first poem in *Discrete Series*—my first book—was written in 1929. That, I've learned, was the year in which H. was giving his Inauguration Speech, in which he spoke of the mood of boredom (in the translation I have) which leads, again in the translation I have, to 'the knowledge of what-is.' [...] And boredom was an odd word to use. I am touched by superstition remembering my hesitation over that word and the sense of having been given it" (*SL* 156).

to the global perspective in the final two lines of the poem in his reaction to his wife's musing on the "poetic moment" in the interview with words that resonate with the etymological meaning of boredom: "But boredom *can* be a sense of the world. The sense of the expanse. Which is a penetration; the first penetration, probably" (13). The "sense of the world" here echoes the mood evoked at the start of *Discrete Series* and the pair "expanse" and "penetration" points to what the mode of boredom might achieve. The process of boring involves a moment of "penetration" which results in an opening up of whatever has been bored into. Boredom opens up and thus brings to light what was hidden below the surface. It is this process which Shoemaker designates as Oppen's "poetics of disclosure" or, in the preface to the excellent essay collection *Thinking Poetics*, "the poetics of exposure [...], of making what is hidden visible" (80; xxiii).

The cluster of key terms which all in varying degrees gesture towards the revelatory aspect of boredom resonate with some key Heideggerian terms and concepts. Scholars have traced parallels in Oppen's and Heidegger's thinking and their endeavors have been supported by several references to the German philosopher in Oppen interviews. In the Dembo interview, he concludes the discussion of the first poem in *Discrete Series* by emphatically stating that he "was referring to one of the major concepts in the Acceptance Speech: the mood of boredom and the recognition of what is" (169). As Oppen writes in a 1967 letter, he knew "no German at all, much less Heideggerian German" and hence had to rely on English translations of the speech (*SL* 156). Despite this professed lack of German language skills, it is helpful to read the German original alongside with the translation Oppen used. True to his meticulous and prolific researching ethos, Nicholls provides the relevant text passage from the 1949 "paperback edition owned and marked by Oppen" (60), whereas, for example, Davidson quotes from a later translation in the endnotes of his *New Collected Poems* which differs quite significantly from the version Oppen perused (cf. *NCP* 359). In Heidegger's speech "Was ist Metaphysik?" from 1929, the philosopher mentions "Langeweile," the German equivalent to 'boredom,' only in one short but crucial passage which deals with the question if there are moments in everyday life in which we can get a glimpse of our "Sichbefinden inmitten des Seienden im Ganzen" (33). Heidegger writes:

So aufgesplittert der Alltag erscheinen mag, er behält immer noch das Seiende, wengleich schattenhaft, in einer Einheit des 'Ganzen.' Selbst dann und eben dann, wenn wir mit den Dingen und uns selbst nicht eigens beschäftigt sind, überkommt uns dieses 'im Ganzen,' z.B. in der eigentlichen Langeweile. Sie ist noch fern, wenn uns lediglich dieses Buch oder jenes Schauspiel, jene Beschäftigung oder dieser Müßiggang langweilt. Sie bricht auf, wenn 'es einem langweilig ist.' Die tiefe Langeweile, in den

Abgründen des Daseins wie ein schweigender Nebel hin- und herziehend, rückt alle Dinge, Menschen und einen selbst mit ihnen in eine merkwürdige Gleichgültigkeit zusammen. Diese Langeweile offenbart das Seiende im Ganzen. (33)

In the English translation, which Oppen owned and annotated, the passage focusing on “der eigentlichen Langeweile,” what Oppen calls in a 1973 interview “the mood of boredom or the fact of boredom,” reads:

Real boredom is still far off when this book or that play, this activity or that stretch of idleness merely bores us. Real boredom comes when ‘one is bored.’ This profound boredom, drifting hither and thither in the abysses of existence like a mute fog, draws all things, all men and oneself along with them, together in a queer kind of indifference. This boredom reveals what-is in totality. (qtd. in Nicholls 60)

What is striking and even visible to the non-German reader here is the change of adjectives that specify “Langeweile/boredom” respectively from “eigentliche/real” to “tiefe/profound.” It is precisely in the latter pair where the etymological meaning of the English word ‘boredom’ and the revelatory effect of Heidegger’s philosophical concept merge. In the mood of boredom, the mind digs deep and might encounter and experience the profundity of “what-is in totality.” Interestingly, the temporal aspect of this concept in the German word ‘Langeweile’ is supplanted or rather supplemented with the spatial dimension inherent in depth.

More Heideggerian key terms which would preoccupy Oppen’s poetic thinking throughout his career can be found in close vicinity to the passages discussed above. For instance, “[das] Erfassen des Ganzen des Seienden” carries over into his poetics in the form of some of his favorite words like ‘grasp,’ the homophonic ‘hole/whole’ pair, and Being or the little word ‘is.’⁹⁸ In Heidegger’s speech, the philosopher posits the “Grundstimmung der Angst” as another fundamental mood in which the interdependence of “Nichts” and “Seiendes” is disclosed: “Die Angst offenbart das Nichts. [...] In der hellen Nacht des Nichts der Angst ersteht erst die ursprüngliche Offenheit des Seienden als seines solchen: daß es Seiendes ist—und nicht Nichts” (35,

⁹⁸ Oppen’s working papers and letters brim over with discussions of and references to “the concept of Being.” A few representative examples include: “I begin to understand that the earlier books have been taken to be a simple realism—I was in those 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” (*SL* 410); “A poem must not mean but be” (78); “The words must move with almost equal emphasis on every word: as much emphasis on is and but and and / ‘is’ is a little word, isn’t?? Or is it? It is really the most tremendous word—is or the—” (“Selections” 13). “The fact that things and people BE. This is the major subject of thought and feeling. It is almost impossible to say to most readers. They regard the verb as all but meaningless, perhaps because it is intransitive: it is not an action of one thing on another” (UCSD 16, 16, 8; qtd. in Nicholls’ “Oppen’s Heidegger” 99); “I DO NOT WANT TO DISCUSS MINOR PUZZLES; WHAT WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND, AND WHAT WE DESIRE TO UNDERSTAND, IS THE MEANING OF *IS*” (“An Adequate Vision” 11).

37). Oppen condenses this notion in his working papers when he writes: “Boredom and dread: The consciousness of co-existence with the world” (“Meaning” 197). In a 1973 interview with fellow poet and friend Charles Tomlinson, he recapitulates the centrality of these moods for Heidegger’s philosophy and, once again, highlights that the philosophic concept of boredom can be detected in the first poem of *Discrete Series*: “I was startled on encountering Heidegger sometime round 1950. The mood of boredom or the fact of boredom, the state of boredom and the mood of dread which are central to a part of his thinking. It’s a strange term as a philosophic term. So in this poem is boredom” (“Interview with Charles Tomlinson” 58). For both thinkers, the moods of boredom and dread open pathways to existential truths, to “is-ness” as Oppen calls it in a 1963 letter (*SL* 89).

These Heideggerian concepts are all inextricably linked to semantically related ideas of “Offenbarung,” “Enthüllen,” and “Entbergen” which influenced Oppen’s writing substantially. He adopted these terms from Heidegger, varyingly translated them as either ‘disclosure,’ ‘revelation,’ or ‘openness,’ and employed them both in his prose and poetic writing. In his working papers, he, for example, states that “[o]ne moment of sincerity threatens to disclose everything,” thereby juxtaposing “sincerity” as one key criterion of the Objectivist program with the concept of disclosure (“Philosophy of the Astonished” 208). In Oppen’s poetry, from the first poem of *Discrete Series* onwards, the mood of boredom evolves into a revelatory mode of boredom. Quite fittingly, then, Oppen repeats this idea of boredom as a vertical force of disclosure in more existential terms in his later work such as in the poem “Route:” “Nothing more real than boredom” (*NCP* 194). Furthermore, in a compositional move that would become typical of Oppen’s versification (“quoting, as is my wont, myself” [*SL* 171]), he harks back to this key poem and its leitmotif of disclosive boredom in *Of Being Numerous*. In the thirty-seventh section of “Of Being Numerous,” the eponymous poem of the volume, Oppen quotes himself verbatim and conceptually connects his first book with the work that would win him the Pulitzer Prize in 1969:

‘...approached the window as if to see...’

The boredom which disclosed
Everything—

I should have written, not the rain
Of a nineteenth century day, but the motes
In the air, the dust

Here still. (*NCP* 186)

In this revisiting of the threshold scene in Maude Blessingbourne's room, Oppen valorizes the knowledge of boredom that is central to the first poem of *Discrete Series* by articulating explicitly the all-encompassing potential of boredom as a powerful force ("disclosed / Everything"). Moreover, he bemoans in hindsight that his poem focused on the outside only and disregarded "what was really going on" in the present interior of the room: "the motes / In the air, the dust // Here still." In this way, the return to this early poem signifies on the interconnectedness between Oppen's poems even across volumes and brings to light the tension between inner and outer, the movement from the interior outwards and vice versa, which are typical features of his poetry.

Notably, the mode of boredom does not only materialize in poems Oppen wrote after *Discrete Series* and thus after a hiatus of twenty-five years. The nodal leitmotif also carries over into the poems of his first volume, albeit implicitly, and leaves its mark on the two following poems which the reader encounters upon turning the page. While the connection between the poem "Of a nineteenth century day" and the elliptical poems "White" and "Thus" is not obvious on the surface, the principle of the vertical dimension and the experience of "boredom as being aware of—of what is" ("Oppen on Literature and Literary Figures and Issues" 125), as Oppen defines his understanding of the mood, point to deeper connections that center around moments of revelation and awareness; disclosive moments which take place in the vertically oriented cityscape and which the poems enact as material facts on the page.

While I concur with the idea that the vertical dimension originates from Oppen's line sense, I want to suggest that this interpretation does not go deep enough. Aware of the risk to blow the concept of the vertical dimension out of proportion by applying it to areas other than the line sense, I contend that this key principle of Oppen's poetics transcends the materiality of the line. Moreover, I believe that the principle was present in Oppen's poetry from the start and did not abruptly burst into existence shortly before his seventieth birthday. The vertical dimension, I argue, is also a key criterion in Oppen's idiosyncratic way of absorbing the machine into the material components of his poetry and in poetically coming to terms with the verticality of modern American cityscapes. More precisely, the Machine Age phenomenon of the skyscraper with mechanical devices such as the elevator and the revolving door operating inside the structure are incorporated into Oppen's poems, impacting and shaping the poem's materiality.

4.3 The Vertical Dimension of the Cityscape

In his discussion of “Deaths everywhere,” which triggered Oppen’s unique allusion to Crane’s *The Bridge*, the poet of *Discrete Series* posits “the city there” as the primary site from which his poems stem: “I was taking city for granted in an awful lot of this [*Discrete Series*]” (*Speaking with George Oppen* 158). Indeed, many of Oppen’s poems and particularly his early poems are set in the prototypically modern, urban site of New York City and deal with ubiquitous phenomena of the Machine Age such as elevators, cars and streetcars, or “(the telephone),” the device which concludes *Discrete Series* as the final line of the book (*NCP* 35). It is hence beneficial and crucial to read Oppen’s poems against the backdrop of the rapid and technology-induced changes that shaped America’s cityscape. In this regard, investigating the vertical dimension proves additionally fruitful since the idea of up-and-down directionality from a level surface was an omnipresent actuality during America’s Machine Age with skyscrapers and high-rise buildings dominating and drastically changing the urban topography.

The period which Oppen subsumed under the title “1930s” in magazine publications of some of the *Discrete Series* poems was particularly incisive with what Julian Murphet designates as a “long series of abrupt media-technological intrusions” (14). Morris defines “America’s Machine Age” as an era in which “machines increasingly dominated American life and culture” and when “the experiences of space, time, and subjectivity shifted to meet the demands of an increasingly urban industrial economy” (Morris 662). City dwellers were most powerfully confronted with phenomena of spatial expansion “in the rigid geometry of the American city: in the verticals of its smoke stacks, in the parallels of its car tracks, the squares of its streets, the cubes of its factories, the arc of its bridges, the cylinders of its gas tanks,” as Louis Lozowick puts it in “The Americanization of Art” published in the 1927 *Machine-Age Exposition Catalogue* (18). As has been widely noted, New York City was the hub of modernity and the paradigmatic place where these changes materialized most visibly: “While skyscrapers and low-rise buildings in the setback modernistic idiom rose across the country in the late 1920s and the 1930s, most of the important activity centered in New York” (Wilson 154). The skyscraper is the architectural structure which most concretely epitomizes the vertical dimension. Arising from the asphalted streets of

Machine Age cities, this paradigmatic “icon of modernity” radically transformed cityscapes in the early 20th century (Newcomb 98).⁹⁹

In New York City, the skyscraper impressed itself most palpably on human vision and imagination as “the very emblem of modern technology’s transformation of the human environment” (Shoemaker 69). Monumental in scale and awe-inspiring by their perpendicular grandeur, these great buildings directed the gaze of city dwellers upwards. John Timberman Newcomb captures the vertiginous quality of these “new vertical monuments of the city” (Wilson 30) when he notes: “The skyscraper’s ability to blur fundamental spatial distinctions between vertical and horizontal, between earth and heavens, gave it an uncanny liminal force” (Newcomb 110). Newcomb here points to three central aspects of the modern phenomenon of the skyscraper: it causes spatial confusion, leaves the onlooker as well as the people inside the structure with an eerie sense of vertigo, and thus epitomizes a threshold position “between vertical and horizontal, between earth and heavens.” Naturally, such qualities of skyscrapers and, in general, the overall modernization of the cityscape which combined with a massive influx of people migrating to metropolitan spaces influenced modern poets as well.

A cursory glance at the most canonical text of modern poetry, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (a poem with which both Crane and Oppen grappled and which Oppen called “a decisive expression of a period” [SL 108]), suffices to see that the trope of the “Unreal City” and the theme of urbanized life where “the human engine wait[s] / Like a taxi throbbing waiting” was pervasive in poetic expression in the first half of the twentieth century (68). For the poets commonly and collectively subsumed under ‘Objectivists,’ this appreciation of the material culture of their time and thinking with “the direction of historic and contemporary particulars” (45), as Zukofksy famously wrote in “Program: ‘Objectivists’ 1931” which appeared alongside his essay “Sincerity and Objectification” in the February 1931 special issue in *Poetry*, were crucial elements of their poetic approach to modernity. According to Zukofsky, in adhering to the criterion of sincerity, “writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody” (273). This Objectivist focus on perception as well as a variation of the dictum “of thinking with the things as they exist” reappear

⁹⁹ According to the authors of *The Machine Age in America, 1918-1941*, a crucial resource which accomplishes to show “that the machine in all its many manifestations was the defining force in America during the years between the two great wars” (16), “the skyscraper as a building form can be traced back to the 1870s, [but] the period after 1910 and especially in the 1920s is when the skyscraper came to be considered, in the words of the historian Thomas Tallmadge, ‘the most important architectural achievement of America’” (30).

more than thirty years later in “The Mind’s Own Place,” Oppen’s only essay on poetics published in a magazine. In this essay, he stresses that “the act of perception [...] is a test of sincerity, a test of conviction, the rare poetic quality of truthfulness” and claims that this sincere “account of the poet’s perception” is dependent on “the sense of the poet’s self among things” (*SPDP* 31-32). As these remarks make clear, the actual existence of things and material phenomena in the world was an essential fact which poets like Zukofsky, Reznikoff, and Oppen aimed to incorporate into their poetic thinking and into the materiality of their poetry. For Oppen, who insistingly reminds himself in his papers that “a poem should not mean but be” and to “FIX THE MIND ON THE EMPTY SPACE [as] THE POEM BEGINS HERE” (“The Anthropologist” 152-53), the things among and with which he works necessarily include “the concrete materials of the poem” (*SPDP* 32). In the following analysis of “White,” the material quality of Oppen’s poems in *Discrete Series* will be discussed in relation to its context-dependent referent and the white space of the page.

“White” is the second poem in *Discrete Series*. In contrast to “The knowledge not of sorrow,” the poem shares the space of a double page with another poem, “Thus” (fig. 9). Notably, this was not the case for both poems in their original publication venue.

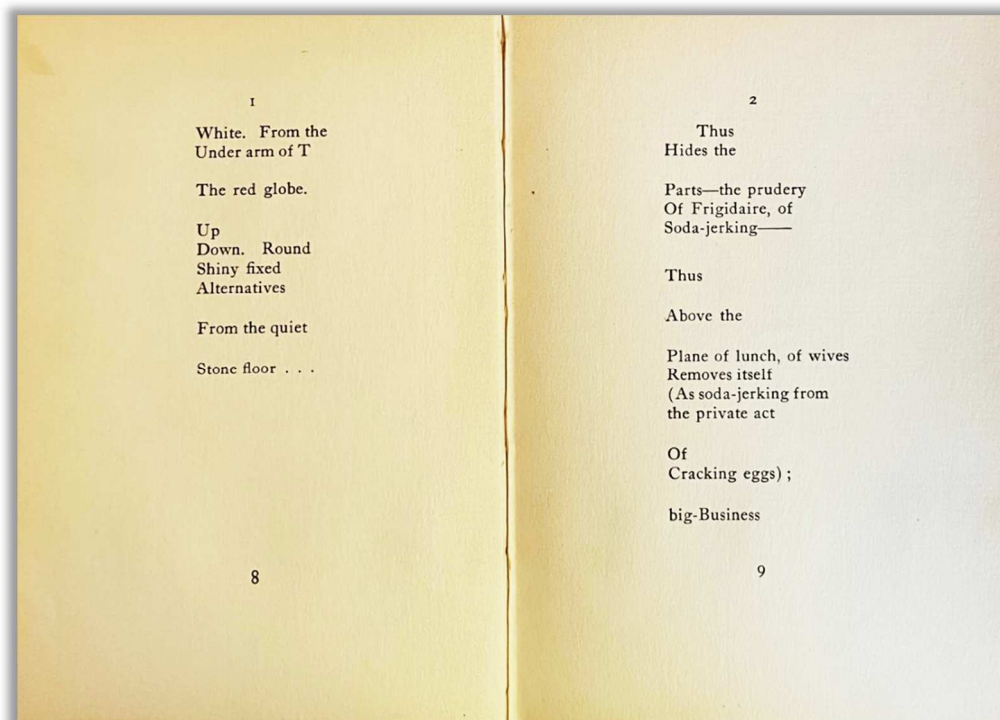


Fig. 9: The double-page view of “White” and “Thus” in the original 1934 *Discrete Series*.

Whereas “Thus” appeared without indentations and without white space between the lines together with “The knowledge not of sorrow” under the heading “1930’S” in the

Objectivist issue of *Poetry* in February 1931, “White” was first published in 1932 under the title “1930’s” in *An “Objectivists” Anthology*. Zukofsky, who edited both Objectivist publications, decided to place “White”, Oppen’s only poem in the book, in the epic section of the anthology which is remarkable given that the poem is anything other than epic in scale when it comes to the sheer amount of linguistic material in the poem. Yet, since Zukofsky attributed the epithet ‘epic’ to “poetry which recognizes the poetic value of the facts around us, contemporary or historical particulars, be they things or events” (Sharp 282), placing the poem in that category is plausible. After all, Zukofsky gave fellow Objectivist Carl Rakosi, whose poems appear in both publications as well, his take on the content and value of Oppen’s contribution to the anthology. In a letter from October 1931, Zukofsky describes Oppen’s poem as “a short poem presenting the modern skyscraper—the sense of being inside it” (qtd. in Sharp 282).

While this synopsis usefully “calls attention to the materiality of both the world and the word” (3), as DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain define one key feature of Objectivist poetics in their introduction to *The Objectivist Nexus*, it is at least questionable whether readers who chance upon the poem for the first time would come up with Zukofsky’s interpretation since the poetic construct looks and reads like this:

White. From the
Under arm of T

The red globe.

Up
Down. Round
Shiny fixed
Alternatives

From the quiet

Stone floor . . .

How and where, the reader might justifiably ask, does this enigmatic poem display “the modern skyscraper” and “the sense of being inside it”? As a matter of fact, “[w]e never get the referential, substantive noun” in “White,” as Joseph Conte observes in his nuanced reading of Oppen’s *Discrete Series* (125). Understandably, then, the elliptical poem has dazzled readers and literary critics ever since its first publication. Oppen scholars have variously interpreted the poem as, for example, depicting a female nude (cf. Schimmel 299) or a milk-dispensing machine (cf. Chilton 93). Monique Claire Vescia fittingly calls “White” a “poetic Rorschach blot” (70). This wide and wild array

of interpretations is not surprising since the poem contains neither an easily identifiable referent nor a verb, leaving the reader dumbfounded regarding its point of reference. This lack of “the referential object” prompts Conte to disregard any reading method which “reduces the poem to a riddle that one declares satisfactorily ‘solved’ when one has ‘discovered’ the referent” (124; fn. 30, 297). Conte’s target here is Tom Sharp who writes in his discussion of “White:” “On the newer elevator portals in Manhattan in the late twenties was a decorative device shaped like a ‘T’ and under its ‘arms’ were two shiny round globes, one white and one red, which lit to signal the direction of the passage of the elevator, up or down. With this knowledge, the poem gains for the present reader total clarity” (281). Sharp’s last sentence is, at least, dubitable. Even against the backdrop of the time-specific, architectural context, the poem’s elliptical form forecloses “total clarity.” If “total clarity” was the poet’s goal, why would he get rid of the title pointing explicitly to the 1930s under which the poem appeared in its magazine publication? It is likely that this defamiliarizing gesture which makes the poem cryptic was intended by Oppen. Indeed, it could be argued that the way in which the poem is crafted signifies on Oppen’s method of absorbing the machine into the material components of poems on the page: the vertical dimension of the elevator is grounded in and built into the material fact of the page.

Charles Tomlinson appears to be the first scholar who finally put forward which object Oppen’s poem was meant to evoke. In his “Introductory Note on the Poetry of George Oppen,” published in *Ironwood 5* in 1975, he identifies the device as an “elevator” which “delimits human and cultural possibilities with its warning red and its single track” (13). Ironically, however, Tomlinson’s first interpretation of the poem’s verbal and visual cues was quite different. In his review of *The Materials* for the *New Mexico Quarterly* Tomlinson had read the “Up / Down” movement as “the up-down motion of a child bouncing a ball” (Swigg, “Addressing”). Quoting the poem in full, Tomlinson reads “[a] child (?) bouncing a ball” into the poem, claiming that this playful scene “is qualified by the physics of the act and by the things around the act” (“Review” 108). As the question mark inserted in brackets suggests, Tomlinson was not entirely convinced of who does the bouncing, but he clearly did not associate the “Up / Down. Round” with the mechanical device of an elevator. In his correspondence with Tomlinson, which the British poet initiated in 1963, Oppen acknowledged the charm of this interpretation (“Your version of the child and the ball—up, down, up down—is a gift, and a good one. I accept” [Swigg, “Addressing”]) but revealed “by providing a

sketch showing a T-shaped design, with two globes below each of the cross bars, one indicating ‘up’ and the other ‘down’” that the “Under arm of T” referred to an elevator door (*NCP* 359). Right after sketching “the contrivance,” Oppen continues with additional explanatory remarks: “So familiar at the time that I don’t think anyone was puzzled at the time. Printed c 1930 in *Poetry*. The office building evoked by its lighting effects in those dim days. And its limited alternatives, the limited alternatives of a culture” (*SL* 90).¹⁰⁰ Against the backdrop of Oppen’s anchoring of the poem’s context in the material culture “in those dim days” of the Great Depression, it makes sense that the poem was entitled “1930’s” when it first appeared in *An “Objectivists” Anthology* in 1932. Looking back at the historically specific object, Oppen realizes that the original meaning “is lost—it so happens—in the mists of architectural history. And cannot be restored to the consciousness of any reader without a red crayon. And a two-color print job, which is prohibitively expensive” (*SL* 90).

What Oppen’s remarks here make clear is not only that Tomlinson did not arrive at the ‘correct’ interpretation on his own. More importantly, it shows that Oppen chose a modern phenomenon like the elevator, a vehicle facilitating vertical transport inside office buildings and skyscrapers, to transition poetically from the 19th-century to the 20th-century. Zukofsky’s synecdochic reading of the poem as “presenting the modern skyscraper” where the elevator portal and the “Up / Down” buttons substitute for the entire architectural structure is hence legitimate but needs to be specified when it comes to the second half of the explanation. As it is, the place within the skyscraper can be rendered more precisely. Rather than just “the sense of being inside” the skyscraper, the poem presents the sense of standing in front of an elevator door, awaiting the modern device without which the business within skyscrapers would be slowed down significantly.

In his insightful essay “*Discrete Series* and the Posthuman City,” Steve Shoemaker writes with reference to the elevator poem that “the modern skyscraper/machine would not have been possible without the invention of the passenger elevator. The elevator is what makes the skyscraper work” (70). This remark, as banal as it might seem, is crucial and especially important to Oppen’s modern poetry of the

¹⁰⁰ In a joint interview with Sharp from 1978, the Oppens provide further information on how the contrivance worked: “MO: You punched a button and it came up or down, showed up or down on the great globe, and it was like a T—there were two bulbs underneath the overhang, or whatever it was—was the way I remember it—but it was the underarm, you see.” George adds: “And I was working in an office building and—Up and down—Those were the alternatives. It could go up in that building and it could go down in that building” (215).

“1930’s” as the relationship between the mechanical contrivance of the elevator and the bigger structure of the skyscraper in which it operates epitomizes the part-whole nexus of *Discrete Series* and exemplifies the vertical dimensionality both in “representational relationship with the world” and as manifestation on the page (Conte 125). As a mechanical device of vertical transport, the elevator evoked by the central binary pair of “Up / Down” with “Down” appropriately enough positioned exactly below “Up” on the page “points us to the poem’s contemporary context, its modernity” (Shoemaker 68). The poem’s sociohistorical context is more pronounced in Zukofsky’s anthology where the era-specific title posits the poem as concerned with and, in a way, representative of the situation during the Great Depression. Yet even without the indicative title, the poem—through its position within the 1934 book as successor to “The knowledge not of sorrow” and as numbered partner “1” to “Thus” printed under “2” on the opposite page—retains its status as both product and object of the time when Oppen wrote the series. In this regard it is quite telling that Oppen in an overlooked note from his working papers added to his definition of “*Discrete Series*” as “a series of which each term is empirically true” that “[t]he problem of poetry, circa 1929-1933, was, I thought, the problem of honesty and of intelligence: and to construct *meaning*, an adequate vision” (“An Adequate Vision” 31).¹⁰¹ Constructing “White” and constructing meaning into “White” in the way Oppen did, then, emblemizes the poet’s honest, intelligent, and adequate response to the reality of “1929-1933” when the “fixed / Alternatives” of rise and fall swiftly and devastatingly gravitated towards “the quiet // Stone floor” in the aftermath of the stock market crash.

The image of the elevator inscribed into “White” bears further scrutiny because Oppen refers to this device in a letter from 1959 in which he addresses the connection between poetry and emotion. Stating at the onset that “poetry [...] is only understandable emotionally,” he provides short examples from “the simplest poems of the easiest writers” like Alfred Tennyson and Robert Burns (“‘My love is like a red, red rose’—nonsense unless we have a reaction to roses”) to prove his point that readers know how to react to seemingly illogical images because “it’s literarily well established what our responses should be or are supposed to be” (*SL* 23). As Oppen claims, poems like

¹⁰¹ In a letter to DuPlessis he reiterates this definition by slightly rephrasing it and provides an example of a discrete series, notably taken from the prototypically modern device of transportation: “Discrete Series—a series in which each term is empirically justified rather than derived from the preceding term. Which is what the expression means to a mathematician, as I gather you know. (I thought too late—30 years too late—that the flyleaf should have carried the inscription 14, 28, 32, 42 which is a discrete series: the names of the stations on the east side subway” (*SL* 122).

Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar" "are obvious largely because we don't have to *notice* our emotional responses to those images" (23). Images like 'rose' or 'sunset' have grown so familiar to the reader of poetry that it is difficult for poets "to say anything very specific by comparison to a rose today," that is, to trigger fresh and unfiltered emotional reactions to the image. Notably, Oppen ends his paragraph by turning to the modern contrivance of the elevator: "People surely do have reactions to things in their lives, but I do think they are upset and distracted if you ask them to realize not how they feel about a rose, but how they feel waiting for an elevator" (24). If the metaphor of "a rose" fails to elicit uncommon responses "because the sentiment has been generalized to include too much," the image of the elevator and, more concretely, the experience of "waiting for an elevator" promises more immediate and less established emotional reactions (24). Despite the likelihood that people might feel "upset and distracted" if asked about their feelings while waiting for the elevator to arrive, this line of questioning, Oppen suggests, yields more authentic reactions to what he calls in one of his letters "unthought and directly perceived reality" (62).

How, then, does one "feel waiting for an elevator?" Or, as Shoemaker puts it, "[w]hat is it like to be inside the machine" (69)? In his accurate reading of "Oppen's *Discrete Series* as mapping an early moment in our evolution toward the posthuman condition, by means of a poetic strategy that is thoroughly grounded in an engagement with the urban modernity of the 1930s" (63), Shoemaker discusses "boredom" as "an emotion typically associated with the scene 'waiting for the elevator'" (69). In concentrating on "the experience of boredom" as "revelatory of our modes of being in the world" (69-70), he usefully hints at links between "White" and "The knowledge not of sorrow" and prepares the subsequent shift towards his theoretical reading of "Heideggerian boredom and Benjaminian distraction" (71). His main argument, however, primarily revolves around and circles back to what he calls "a technomorphic interpenetration or entanglement of human and machine, flesh and steel" and "the dilemma posed by the posthuman crisis of embodiment" (64). Thus, Shoemaker designates the "mundane experience of 'waiting for the elevator'" as the "primal scene of human/machine interface" (70). What he seems to disregard, however, is that any kind of human agency is invisible if not absent in "White." There is no lyrical I or eye present in the poem. Even if one reads "the / Under arm" as a bodily image that "subjects us to a weird state of dis/embodiment" (71), as Shoemaker does, the human, corporeal aspect is hidden away like the "Parts" in the poem on the opposite page. While his

nuanced reading of “disorienting interpenetrations of subject and object” in *Discrete Series* is convincing for the most part (78), Shoemaker’s argument would have benefited from a stronger focus on how “the thick and tactile materiality of life among modern ‘things’” (72) as well as the disorienting interpenetrations “substantiate themselves in the concrete materials of the poem” (*SPDP* 32).¹⁰²

The quotation concluding the last paragraph is taken from “The Mind’s Own Place,” Oppen’s most extensive discussion of poetics. In a central passage of this essay in which he ponders the relation between poetry and “the ‘real’ world,” Oppen employs several key terms discussed above and retrospectively observes “what ‘modernism’ restored to poetry” (32):

It is possible to find a metaphor for anything, an analogue: but the image is encountered, not found; it is an account of the poet’s perception, the act of perception; it is a test of sincerity, a test of conviction, the rare poetic quality of truthfulness. They [early modernists like Williams, Pound, and Eliot] meant to replace by the data of experience the accepted poetry of their time, a display by the poets of right thinking and right sentiment, a dreary waste of lies. That data was and is the core of what ‘modernism’ restored to poetry, the sense of the poet’s self among things. So much depends upon the red wheelbarrow. The distinction between a poem that shows confidence in itself and its materials, and on the other hand a performance, a speech by the poet is the distinction between poetry and histrionics. It is a part of the function of poetry to serve as a test of truth. It is possible to say anything in abstract prose, but a great many things one believes or would like to believe or thinks he believes will not substantiate themselves in the concrete materials of the poem. (*SPDP* 31-32)

Several claims here are of utmost importance to Oppen’s understanding of modern poetry. Among the most pertinent ones is Oppen’s conviction that “the act of perception” is key to disclosing “the rare poetic quality of truthfulness” immanent in “the data of experience.”¹⁰³ Importantly, that data includes “the thing seen each day,” “the day-to-day experience” (30, 31). According to this logic, contemporary phenomena influence “the poet’s self among things” as well and, consequently, challenge poets who refuse to write poetry merely for the sake of ostentation and instead aim to use “the concrete materials of the poem” as tools for achieving clarity (“to serve as a test of truth”). In his discussion of this passage, Nicholls perceptively inserts the adjective ‘contemporary’

¹⁰² A remark in a footnote suggests that Shoemaker was aware of this analytical shortcoming. Outlining an “argument [he] hope[s] to make at greater length at a future date,” he claims “that poetry is more resistant to ‘dematerialization’ than information is; poetry insists on having a body” (fn. 26, 85). By paying close attention to the materiality of poems, my dissertation fills the void which Shoemaker identified and authenticates his claim through dis/close readings of poetry’s material body.

¹⁰³ Oppen rephrases this key principle of poetry in a letter: “I do not look for the color of romance in others’ poetry or in my own, but for the rare poetic quality of truthfulness. [...] And I do think that poetry is a test of truth. A test, at least, of conviction. I think it has no other usefulness” (*SL* 79).

between “poet’s self among” and “things,” correctly observing that “the world of *Discrete Series* contains no wheelbarrows and agricultural implements [...] but elevators, fridges, cars, steam-shovels, and tug boats” (7). Indeed, industrial machinery populates the poems of Oppen’s first book, creating “an urban network of roads, lampposts, construction sites, and skyscrapers, the ‘Up / Down. / Round / Shiny fixed / Alternatives’ of vertical and horizontal motion, streaks of light against structures of wood, stone, and steel, the gleam of machined commodities and flash of ‘city ladies’” (Morris 671). In weaving Machine Age contrivances rather than roses into the skeins of his poems on the page, Oppen defamiliarizes the reading experience and makes us “notice our emotional response.” In this process, the “poem that shows confidence in itself and its materials” comes closest to being an authentic and sincere object of truthfulness.

This approach is reminiscent of Crane’s machine-absorbing poetics and echoes some of his “technical considerations” which he outlines in his theoretical texts (163). In “Modern Poetry,” Crane discusses the “emotional stimulus of machinery,” claiming that the poetic process of absorbing the machine “demands [...] an extraordinary capacity for surrender, at least temporarily, to the sensations of urban life” (171). This idea that the cityscape, brimming with the sound of various machines which both poets scrutinized,¹⁰⁴ impresses itself on the poem’s materiality chimes with Crane’s conviction that “the motivation of the poem must be derived from the implicit emotional dynamics of the materials used, and the terms of expression employed are often selected less for their logical (literal) significance than for their associational meanings.” But whereas Crane focuses on “metaphorical interrelationships” in this process, famously declaring that “the entire construction of the poem is raised on the organic principle of a ‘logic of metaphor’” (163), Oppen eschews metaphorical circumlocutions in favor of making use of the materials as they really present themselves to the poet, stripped off pompous verbiage.¹⁰⁵ In contrast to Crane who, for example, places the word “turbine”

¹⁰⁴ In a long letter addressed to Julian Zimet shortly after his return to the US, Oppen explains what made and still makes him like machines and mechanisms so much: “You remember just before you left for Europe puzzling over why I liked ‘Things’ and mechanisms. You looked at me pretty suspiciously there. Said you’d never known a decent person who liked such things. Well, I like cars and such. I like them when they’re handled beautifully. I like the things that people have wrested out of the idiot stone” (*SL* 32-33).

¹⁰⁵ In a letter to John Crawford from 1966 Oppen distinguishes the qualities of “those materials” with reference to poems by Cid Corman: “Sensitive and often delicate, as you recognize, his materials are exotic, but they are often corrupt. [...] Those materials which force themselves upon one, those materials which crash into one’s life from atomic space and the historical space which is one’s own—they can be crushing—one can almost certainly fail—but they are not corrupt” (*SL* 143).

anachronistically in a setting of Indian ritual, hoping to elicit powerful reactions from his Machine Age readership, Oppen absorbs the machine such as the elevator in “White” by way of how the material components of the poem are arranged and how they constellate on the two-dimensional surface of the page.¹⁰⁶ If, as Jennison notes, “[t]he poem’s literally vertiginous surge formally reproduces the elevator’s mechanical movements” (79), “White” also reenacts the thinking process that might occur in the mind of someone waiting in front of an elevator door for the machine to arrive, experiencing “the mood of boredom and the recognition of what is” (Dembo 169). “White” can thus be seen as an example of how it is to “feel waiting for an elevator” in poetic form.

In addition to harking back to the revelatory mode of boredom in “The knowledge not of sorrow,” “White” also points to the adjacent poem with which it shares the space of a double page.

Thus
Hides the

Parts—the prudery
Of Frigidaire, of
Soda-jerking——

Thus

Above the

Plane of lunch, of wives
Removes itself
(As soda-jerking from
the private act

Of
Cracking eggs) ;

big-Business

¹⁰⁶ Interestingly, Oppen makes use of a similarly jarring conceit in the fourth poem of *Discrete Series*. Zooming in on “that dark instrument / A car” and its “obscured / origin,” the poem ends enigmatically without a closing parenthesis, without a period: “(Which. / Ease; the hand on the sword-hilt” (*NCP* 8). In this 20th century car poem, the anachronistic word “sword-hilt” seems as out of place as the ‘turbine’ in Crane’s poem. In combination with the defamiliarizing arrangement of linguistic material on the page, this image can be said to elicit emotional responses by the reader according to Crane’s logic of metaphor. The associational meanings of “sword-hilt” instead of the more logical word ‘gear shift’ on which the driver’s hand seems to rest easefully emphasize the obscurity and potential danger of a car “run[ning] on a higher road.”

Fittingly, this poetic pair which appears under the number 2 in *Discrete Series* begins with a gap of white space preceding the titular and only word on the first line “Thus.” “Thus” is thus indented and stands out as “an ambiguous pointer” (Shoemaker 73). Indeed, the semantics of this adverb are Janus-faced since ‘thus’ functions as a deictic which either relates to what has been stated before (synonymous with ‘in this manner’) or points ahead with a focus on the consequential effect (synonymous with ‘accordingly’). Accentuated by white space, this ambiguity is intended and reinforced through the arrangement of the two poems on opposite pages. As a visual and typographical cue, the white space which precedes the first “Thus” harks back to the first word of “White” which is itself set apart from “From the” by an interstitial gap. The initial indentation of poem 2, an indentation which is strangely enough absent from the magazine publication, puts emphasis on “Thus” and redirects the reader simultaneously back to the poem and word “White” on the left-hand page. I understand that such a minute and meticulous reading of white space on (double) pages can easily fall prey to criticism which might claim that typesetting is meaningless since the poems look different in other publications anyway. Yet, especially in Oppen’s case, it is crucial to note and cannot be ignored how much he valued and was eager to control the way in which poetic material manifested itself in print throughout his career. As a matter of fact, even prior to the publication of *Discrete Series*, Oppen puts weight on typographical features when he worked as publisher for To Publishers, a short-lived press established by Zukofsky and Oppen in 1931.

After having published Williams’s *A Novelette and Other Prose*, Oppen addresses the “looks of the book” and pinpoints “regrettable flaws” in a letter to Williams: “I was fairly pleased with the looks of the book myself, aside from one or two obviously regrettable faults (the printer regularly acts contrary to instructions at the last moment, and is careless intermittently). [...] The round characters I thought were good with the text—in fact, I like it better in typescript (which means also that the type should have been more widely spaced, which we couldn’t afford)” (SL 1-2). Oppen, as this passage from an early letter makes clear, was keenly aware of the effect which seemingly non-poetic details have on the poetic text. It then does not come as a surprise that more than forty-five years later he emphasizes the merit of hand typesetting whilst thinking back to ‘the good old days’ in an interview with Sharp: “GO: Space was extremely important to me. *Discrete Series*, as it was printed, I could do that, because you could get printers who would set by hand. [...] And now Laughlin and everybody concerned

said that they can't do it now. When Jay agreed to publish [...] the *Discrete Series* in the *Collected* [...] he couldn't reproduce the print that we'd had in the old one. It wasn't set by hand anymore. [...] I used spacing as well as line-breaks a very great deal. I can't do so now, but I would if I could, and do as far as I can." Even in 1978, then, Oppen reminiscing about his first book of poetry would still prefer to set poetic material by hand so that "spacing as well as line-breaks" and with it the whiteness of paper and the materiality of the page could shine forth meaningfully. A few years earlier in 1973, annoyed by the way *Discrete Series* had been bungled in reprints before, Oppen had given clear directions on how to print "the poems of *Discrete Series* in the Anthology [Jerome Rothenberg was] undertaking" when he gave permission for the reprint with the following caveat: "Do give me as much space as possible between the poems. If you cannot give sufficient space to make clear that the poems are, indeed, discrete, use dots. 'bullets' is the printer word? But obviously they must not be too heavy and unsightly [...] But give as much space as possible: the poems could be seriously distorted by seeming to be paragraphs" (*SL* 265). Oppen like Crane knew how external editorial interventions could mangle meaning. In contrast to Crane who was at times financially inclined to agree to suggested changes, Oppen was quite adamant about the way in which his poems should be printed.¹⁰⁷ As this cursory glance at Oppen's bibliographic musings suggests, he valued the interplay of text and non-textual phenomena throughout his career. Consequently, the key to understanding this intricate interplay is to return wherever possible to the original source, especially when the authors had a say in how the work was printed.

To return to the poems facing each other on a double page: That "White" and "Thus" belong together and are meant to be read alongside each other is not only evident from the numbers 1 and 2 under which they appear respectively. The similarities of "White" and "Thus" extend to the way both poems look on the page with "minimalistic lines sparsely dropped across large white page-spaces" (Swigg 7). Moreover, the

¹⁰⁷ The most striking example of Crane accepting significant revisions of his poems by magazine editors due to financial problems occurred in 1925 when *The Dial* editor Marianne Moore bought Crane's "The Wine Menagerie" but published the poem with severe changes under a new title "Again" in her magazine. Crane complains about this "happy mixture" concocted by Moore, "the Rt. Rev. Miss Mountjoy" in Crane's words, in a letter to Charlotte and Richard Rychtarik: "The *Dial* bought my "Wine Menagerie" poem—but insisted (Marianne Moore did it) on changing it around and cutting it up until you would not recognize it. She even changed the title to 'Again'. What it all means now I can't make out, and I would never have consented to such an outrageous joke if I had not so desperately needed the twenty dollars" (462, 421). He was even more disgruntled in a letter to Winters: "I was obliged to submit to her changes, not only because I was penniless at the time, but because I owed money to others at the time equally penniless. When I saw that senseless thing in print I almost wept" (*O My Land* 284).

numbered poems complement each other in terms of content. If the “Up / Down” binary at the center of “White” evokes the vertical movement of an elevator, while simultaneously making the reader aware of the materiality of the page, the poem on the recto, in a way, depicts the possible stops along the elevator’s path inside a skyscraper (“Thus // Above the // Plane of lunch, of wives”). The elevator’s “fixed / Alternatives” blend into the hierarchical structure inside a high-rise office building where “big-Business” is conducted upstairs on a higher level compared to the “Plane of lunch” which “wives” share with soda-jerks and refrigerators (“Frigidaire”).¹⁰⁸ The key lines in this “Up / Down” continuation are “Thus // Above the // Plane” which catch the eyes of the reader right in the middle of the poem. Abrupt line-breaks in combination with in-between white spaces isolate the second “Thus” and accentuate the definite article “the,” a typographical phenomenon which Oppen uses twice in “Thus” (“Hides the;” “Above the”) and once in “White” (“From the”). As in “White,” directional markers (“Above the”) and dis/orienting pointers (“Thus”) gesture to the material constellation on the actual papery surface and enact on the page the spatial confusion between vertical and horizontal positions endemic to Machine Age cities. In “Thus,” this confusion manifests itself in the delayed disclosure in the final line which points backwards, that is, upwards on the page to the elliptical three-word stanza “Thus / Hides the.”

The final line “big-Business” illustrates this vertical reversal in condensed form as any attempt to paraphrase what this poem describes would quite literally be based on “big-Business.” Without the text set off typographically by dashes and brackets, a prosaic rendition might read: Big-business thus hides the parts; big-business thus removes itself above the plane of lunch, above the plane of wives. Read this way in reverse sequence, the alliterative, hyphenated compound at the end of the poem functions, grammatically speaking, as the subject of the linguistic construct. Positioned at the bottom of the page and surrounded by white space without any terminal punctuation, “big-Business,” the supposed referent of the poem,¹⁰⁹ is confusing to the

¹⁰⁸ As Marjorie Perloff notes in her seminal book *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*, “[t]he early 1930s [...] were the years in which the Frigidaire or General Electric refrigerator became a secular icon” (80).

¹⁰⁹ Perloff mentions other nouns that could also be said to function as the subject which “Hides the / Parts” and which “Removes itself.” Stating that “Oppen characteristically omits the subject noun or pronoun” in “Thus” (80), Perloff asks several questions as to what the subject might be in this jerky sentence: “Is it the Frigidaire itself, whose exterior ‘prudery’ (its white walls and door) hides its motor [...]? Or are the hidden parts the delectable food items placed in the refrigerator? Or do the lines refer to the soda-jerk who prudently cracks the eggs ahead of time and behind the scene (a ‘private egg’) so that his performance will appear more streamlined? Or to the ‘big-Business’ of the last line, that hides by removing itself [...] from its own production as from the ‘Plane of lunch, of wives’ below?” (81-82). Indeed, the poem’s inscrutability invites numerous possibilities of reading into the void. Yet, I argue, all such interpretations

eye in the same way in which an upward glance from below at a multi-level office building can be dizzying. This effect is intensified by another striking, typographical anomaly in the last line. Oppen departs from his usual method of capitalizing the first letter of a line. As Eliot Weinberger observes, “[u]ntil very late, and unusually for an avant-gardist, [Oppen] capitalized the first letter of every line: poetry was too powerful to trivialize with lower case” (xvi). This observation holds true for most Oppen poems throughout his entire writing career which is why any exception to the rule stands out more emphatically. In “Thus,” Oppen plays with the meaning of ‘big’ by shrinking the initial letter of the adjective to lowercase, transferring the capitalized letter ‘B’ to “Business” which appears or arises after the hyphen. Miniscule capitalism? This typographical shift from lowercase to uppercase from the left to the righthand side of the poetic line jars against reading expectations, pointing the reader to the materiality of verbal units made visible on the page. Detached from the rest of the poem by white space and by the semicolon at the end of the penultimate line, “big-Business” emerges as the key phrase in the poem and the key actor in “[a] city of the corporations / Glassed / In dreams // And images” (*NCP* 163-64).¹¹⁰

4.4 “Lobby” and “The Building of the Skyscraper” in the Rubble of Translation

If “White” and its accompanying poem “Thus” on the adjacent page depict the inner workings of skyscrapers with elevators transporting people “From the quiet // Stone floor...” to higher planes inside the building (“Above the / Plane of lunch, of wives”), the ninth poem in *21 Poems* displays the “Successive / Happenings” in the lobby of a building where most likely “big-Business” happens.¹¹¹ Interestingly, the notion of obsolescence which surfaced in Oppen’s comments on the elevator poem’s

would benefit from reading the minutest, material units of the poem closely and from considering the poem’s position within the series.

¹¹⁰ The arrangement of words interspersed with white gaps in these early poems are in line with some objectives Oppen scribbled on notes decades later: “To slow down, that is, to isolate the word. Clatter, chatter is extreme rapidity of the words” and “To make the words hit bottom, to find words that will lie in bed rock, not suspended in a mesh of syntax. The image. The impress” (Oppen qtd. in Nicholls 138). While Oppen’s lacunary style is most conspicuous in later books beginning with *Seascape: Needle’s Eye* (1972), the isolation of words that are “not suspended in a mesh of syntax” was a crucial element of his versification from the start.

¹¹¹ *21 Poems* was published in 2017 after David Hobbs had found this “early Oppen manuscript” in Yale University’s Beinecke Library. As Hobbs writes in his introduction to this enriching addition to the corpus, “these poems” are “precursors to *Discrete Series* in theme and approach” (11). So far, Hobbs appears to be the only scholar who has discussed some of these recently excavated poems in print (cf. Hobbs 2022).

historical context infuses this early poem as well but with a more critical perspective on what Morris calls “the truncation of life at the human-machine interface” (662). As the ninth poem of *21 Poems* discloses, Oppen was aware and critical of the effect which technological progress might have on human agency. Albeit not included in *Discrete Series*, the poem with its depiction of the ground floor of an office building relates thematically to the elevator-skyscraper pair of poems in Oppen’s first book. On the typescript page, Oppen crossed out the title “Lobby,” but the word appears prominently at the end of the first line, thus incorporating the setting into the textual body of the poem.

The revolving door swings load after load into the lobby;
 There is a sound of secrets,
 A scattering of feet, a crossing, recrossing.
 But now, with the sudden weight of prophecy.
 Incredibly caught stillness,
 The carpet level to the door. From outside,
 Short clatter of a street-car— a policeman’s whistle
 Barely heard.
 Now first visible,
 Steadily back and forth,
 Past and past the newsboy (straining, silent),
 Unvaryingly waiting, overcoated,
 Walks the doorman. As in a dark house
 A wicker chair cracks suddenly in the attic. (27)

The first line of the poem introduces a modern device which orchestrates and regulates the coming and going at the threshold of an office building: “The revolving door.” Interestingly, Crane also refers to “the still relatively new revolving doors (first patented in Philadelphia in 1888)” in *The Bridge*, as Jo Gill briefly mentions in her 2022 article “Hart Crane: The ‘Architectural Art’” (Gill 21), when theatergoers on their way “Out of the Square” are advised to “Avoid the glass doors gyring at your right, / Where boxed alone a second, eyes take fright” (*CPSL* 67). “Although conceived as a way of keeping inclement weather out of buildings,” Gill writes, revolving doors “soon became indispensable for allowing large numbers to easily access skyscrapers” (21). In Oppen’s poem, this latter purpose takes center stage. Right from the start, the mechanical contrivance of “[t]he revolving door” is endowed with agency as its swinging motion catapults “load after load into the lobby.” While it remains unspoken what kind of dehumanized “load” the door moves into the building, the combination of “a sound of secrets, / A scattering of feet” in the following two lines intimates that people enter “From outside.” The notion of repetitive movements (“load after load into”) continues

in “a crossing, recrossing” with the added prefix ‘re-’ signaling a streamlined back-and-forth. This atmosphere of anonymity, monotony, and passivity is momentarily (“But now”) disrupted from line four to the first half of line six when the revolving motion achieves “stillness,” when “[t]he carpet [is] level to the door.” Words and phrases associated with astonishment pave the way towards this revelatory moment which finally allows people to exit the revolving door and to enter the lobby of the building: “But now, with the sudden weight of prophecy, / Incredibly caught stillness.” With the repetition of “door” Oppen ends the depiction of how it might feel being inside the liminal space of a revolving door in the middle of the sixth line. A period after “door” marks this stoppage, this “stillness.”

As in “White,” Oppen uses intervallic white space in addition to interpunctuation to simultaneously emphasize and set apart compositional units. The move from the interior of revolving door and lobby to the “outside” world is channeled on the material surface of the page in the white gap between “door.” and “From outside,.” Notably, this transition occurs on the same line, visually enacting the level relation between carpet and door. The palindrome ‘level’ emphasizes this balanced placement on the line in the material poem as well as in the scene evoked since the letters of the word spell out the notion of equilibrium in both directions, read “back and forth.” If the atmosphere inside the transitional space of the revolving door is one of portentous silence (“sound of secrets,” “weight of prophesy,” “Incredibly caught stillness”), the cityscape intrudes with muffled noises from a street. Yet, the enclosed space of the lobby, insulated in a way from what happens outside, tones down the sound so that the “clatter of a street-car” and “a policeman’s whistle” are only “Barely heard.” The depiction of this exterior/interior threshold is reminiscent of the ninth poem from *Discrete Series* where a “Closed car—closed in glass,” parked “At the curb, / Unapplied and empty” turns from “A thing among others / Over which clouds pass” into an occupied interior “place, over which / time passes” on the grounds that “Moving in traffic / This thing is less strange” (*NCP* 13). In the poem from *21 Poems*, the observer of the scene remains anonymous, that is, ‘I-less.’ As a seemingly neutral perceiver, he or she, presumably positioned close to the liminal spot which offers a panoramic point of view, reports what is audible and what is—anticipated and highlighted by an emphatic, large indent in line nine—“Now first visible.”

Interestingly, Oppen syntactically delays the disclosure of what or who can at this point in the poem be seen for the first time from the observer’s perspective. In fact,

he intersperses three and a half lines before the subject of both the sentence and the poem finally appears: “Steadily back and forth, / Past and past the newsboy (straining, silent), / Unvaryingly waiting, overcoated, / Walks the doorman.” It is “the doorman,” then, whose movement is described with the telling adverbs “Steadily” and “Unvaryingly,” eminently positioned at the capitalized beginning of two lines. Whereas the revolving door “swings” people “into the lobby,” the job of the doorman entails, as the wording suggests, a slower and steadier process of ushering. What is more, the doorman is physically involved as he “Walks” during the process of opening and closing doors “back and forth.” The poem thus concentrates on two entities, the mechanical contrivance of the revolving door and the doorman as human employee, both of which are in a way designed to function and fulfill their role of letting people in and out of buildings. Another interstitial white space after “the doorman.” underscores the relation between these operational systems, as both “the door” as well as “the doorman” are highlighted by Oppen’s choice to use the white paper of the page as a meaningful compositional tool. As Hobbs rightly observes, this “earlier poem theatrically reveals its textual materiality” (36). Extra tabs on the typewriter create pauses on the page. The repetition of this visual cue right at the middle of the poem’s penultimate line points the reader back to the first use of this typographical phenomenon, stressing the transition from “door” to “doorman” within the poem. Moreover, the replicated void hints at the sociohistorical changes which the growing presence of technological phenomena like revolving doors, emblematic icons of “the encroachment of machinery on humanity,” triggered in the Machine Age. As the finale of this recently discovered Oppen poem intuits, the widespread presence of new devices that facilitate people’s everyday life often goes along with the obsolescence of traditional forms and habits of (inter)action.

On his back-and-forth walk, the doorman passes “the newsboy.” Significantly, their encounter is framed by adverbial line starts and introduced by another repetition: “Past and past the newsboy.” One “past” would have sufficed to indicate that the doorman walks by the newsboy’s stand again and again. The repetition of this key term goes beyond the motional aspect intrinsic to the verb ‘to pass’ and includes the temporal meaning of the noun. The doorman, whose job is on the line and threatened by the mechanical device of the revolving door, walks past the newsboy, but he is also, in a way, already out of sync with the present, that is, “past.”¹¹² This alternative reading of

¹¹² This interplay of ‘to pass’ and ‘past’ can also be traced in poems from *Discrete Series* with examples ranging from the very first poem where Maude Blessingbourne sees “The road clear from her past the window- / glass,” to the interior of a “Closed car” as a “place, over which / time passes,” and instances

the homonym 'past' is supported by the surprising simile at the end of the poem. If the phrase "From outside" zoomed out of the lobby, the last sentence "As in a dark house / A wicker chair cracks suddenly in the attic" widens the focus even more, breaking the contextual frame of the setting "by insisting upon the world's breadth" (Hobbs 37). While there is no immediate reference point of comparison to the conjunction 'as,' an associative reading suggests that the fate of the "wicker chair," hidden away from sight "in the attic," might metaphorically lie in wait for "straining, silent" workers whose professions as doormen or newsboys are susceptible to being rendered obsolete by the growing influence of machinery. The final image of the poem harks back to the "sudden weight of prophecy" ("suddenly") and thus to the sense of wonder at the sight of the machine's accuracy and efficiency. However, the tone in the final lines is much darker, ominously uncanny, comprising verbal ingredients of a Gothic setting ("dark house, "cracks," "the attic"). Just as the unexpected, unsolicited cracking sound of an old, outdated piece of furniture sends shivers down one's spine while reminding one that the wicker chair is still there, the presence of human labor in an environment shaped by machinery feels odd. If the wicker chair, disposed of in the attic, is replaced by a newer, more comfortable and stable model, the same fate dawns for the doorman whose working rhythm, the poem suggests, might just be too slow for the speed required by "big-Business."

In the final reading of this chapter, I want to turn to a later Oppen poem which comprises many aspects discussed above. "The Building of the Skyscraper" illustrates Oppen's poetics of the vertical dimension and points to Oppen's material-crossing method of constructing meaning through building with the basic raw materials of (poetic) craftsmanship (words, paper, wood, page-space, the surface texture of page and wooden sculpture). While the latter quality of Oppen's work with materials will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, it makes sense to briefly zoom in on a poem which was published thirty years after *Discrete Series*. "The Building of the Skyscraper" shows how fundamental tenets of Oppen's poetic thinking persevered despite his twenty-five-year-long hiatus and how the tropes of construction and manufacture which evolved during Oppen's years away from poetry became an integral part of his creative endeavors.

where things such as waves, tugboats, or cars pass ("They pass, however, the sea / Freely tumultuous;" "Passes slowly;" "While the after- / Sun passes;" "Bad times: / The cars pass"). Hobbs correctly calls these puns by their literary names when he states that in the poem some "repetitions are antanaclases, forcing the reader to think of the several connotations carried by single words" (36).

THE BUILDING OF THE SKYSCRAPER

The steel worker on the girder
 Learned not to look down, and does his work
 And there are words we have learned
 Not to look at,
 Not to look for substance
 Below them. But we are on the verge
 Of vertigo.

There are words that mean nothing
 But there is something to mean.
 Not a declaration which is truth
 But a thing
 Which is. It is the business of the poet
 'To suffer the things of the world
 And to speak them and himself out.'

O, the tree, growing from the sidewalk—
 It has a little life, sprouting
 Little green buds
 Into the culture of the streets.
 We look back
 Three hundred years and see bare land.
 And suffer vertigo. (NCP 149)

This poem, which is included in *This In Which*, Oppen's third book of poetry published in 1965, displays the motional oscillation along a vertical axis particularly outspokenly. In its three stanzas, the poem fuses the ideas and concepts broached in this chapter since it is concerned with a city scene of (poetic) construction sites and dizzying verticality. On the level of form and the materiality of its poetic building blocks, the poem exemplifies Oppen's principle of the line sense and showcases his understanding of the word as a material entity. In his working papers, Oppen turns to this quality of the material word as physical fact and phrases this note in a way which is evocative of central lines from "The Building of the Skyscraper:" "Parse the word carve the word into its elements. [...] The writing is a test and discovery: test and discover word by word as you go WORD BY WORD. We must force the words to mean something. Because we know there is something to mean" ("Selections" 7).¹¹³ Though originally published in the December 14, 1964 issue of *The*

¹¹³ In another note from a different daybook, Oppen reiterates this notion of the word as a physical entity and adds the aspect of depth when he writes: "to come down is the way in Parse the word, drive the word into its elements. [...] Each word must have some reason for existing in *itself*. Something like the 'image'—the moment when you thought these things, knew these things, that moment in its actualness"

Nation and thus thirty years after *Discrete Series*, the poem echoes themes and challenges of ‘building’ which were on Oppen’s mind from the start and which he traced and faced throughout his career. As it is, the poem does not only hark back to the early poems of the 1930s with its setting of “girder,” “sidewalk,” and “the culture of the streets” but addresses issues of linguistic creation and the conceptual triad of word-line-page materialities.

The title of the poem with its precise wording already hints at the significance of accuracy and sets the tone for the following lines. The word ‘building’ is ambiguous as it remains unclear whether it is meant to be read as a gerund form deriving from the infinitive ‘to build’ or as a proper noun synonymous with a word like ‘edifice.’ While the grammatical difference might seem trivial, the homonymic pun is, in fact, key to the poem since Oppen wanted to condense both the processual as well as the completed character of “The Building of the Skyscraper” into the word. That such a focus on verbal subtleties is more than a scholar’s obsessive toying with language becomes clear if one consults one of Oppen’s letters in which he discusses the title of the poem. In a letter from July 1966, he comments on some of the translations into French which Serge Fauchereau had sent him and, after calling the “translations an excellent job,” poses a “few queries” (SL 141). In the first query he gives insightful feedback on “La Construction du gratte-ciel,” the French caption Fauchereau had chosen for “The Building of the Skyscraper.” Oppen writes: “My word, the *Building*, has a more direct reference to the action; it has also some sense of ‘the creation,’ it is a word that might be used of the ‘building of one’s life.’ It gains something in this way, and has even a very slight unexpectedness in a reference to a sky-scraper because of the non-Latin root, the homeliness of the word” (141). Oppen’s remarks here not only reveal his meticulousness in working with words but also his acute awareness of etymological meanings. In contrast to “La Construction,” a word derived from the Latin verb ‘construere,’ Oppen’s “*Building*” absorbs and incorporates, in a way, the double meanings of “the action” and “the creation” and retains in its crystallized, condensed form both possible meanings.¹¹⁴ The poet’s word choice, then, is on the etymological

(“The Circumstances” 15). The materiality of the word and the surface-depth relation will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

¹¹⁴ The way in which Oppen employs the word here is reminiscent of Crane’s usage in the first stanza of “To Brooklyn Bridge:” “How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest / The seagull’s wings shall dip and pivot him, / Shedding white rings of tumult, building high / Over the chained bay waters Liberty—” (33). The word, of course, also appears prominently in Crane’s first book of poems, *White Buildings* (1926). In an interesting aside, Harold Schimmel notes possible similarities between Crane’s early book, Willem de Kooning’s painting style, and “the flickering two-way tension” in Oppen’s poems: “His fascinating

level significant through the simultaneity inherent in the “non-Latin root” of the word and, on a more directly perceivable level, visually expressive on the page since the everyday usage of “*Building*” with its ubiquitous suffix ‘-ing’ recreates a standard scene of architectural normalcy in modern cityscapes (“the homeliness of the word”). Apparently worried that his detailed excursions into the root meanings of words might be a nuisance to his translator, Oppen self-consciously qualifies his approach to words and their roots as “snobberies and reverse snobberies” which might not be translatable into French (*SL* 141). Nonetheless, he would add more queries concerning Fauchereau’s translation in the same letter which speak to Oppen’s goal of achieving sincerity, clarity, and, as he writes in a 1960 letter, “grasp-ability” even on the level of the word unit (*SL* 43).

While Oppen admits that his “French is far too rudimentary” (142), he nonetheless has quite specific suggestions for improvement when it comes to individual French words. A case in point is the first line of “The Building of the Skyscraper” which Fauchereau translates as “‘Le charpentier sur les poutrelles.’ Understandably, the use of the word “charpentier” felt wrong to Oppen who had worked as a craftsman and who was, in fact, remembered by fellow exiled Americans primarily as “a taciturn American carpenter and furniture maker who would later win a Pulitzer for poetry” (qtd. in Nicholls 25n72). Accordingly, Oppen raises the question: “Would this man call himself a charpentier? the men who worked on the Tour Eiffel for instance? Is it as strange to the French ear as it is to mine to hear of a charpentier assembling steel?” (142-43). “The steel worker on the girder” operates on higher platforms and with different materials than a carpenter. In questioning the accuracy of Fauchereau’s translation of the word, Oppen demonstrates his knowledge of craftsmanship and makes clear that each word is important to the poetic building process and needs to be weighed fastidiously. “Unearned words are,” Oppen writes in a letter, “simply ridiculous” (123). Wrong words can potentially destabilize the poetic construct and twist the poem’s meaning. As a note from the archive shows, this applies even to the smallest, to “those simplest or at least most commonest words” (*SL* 62). In the entry from his papers, Oppen jots down his indignation against an anonymous 1967 review of *This In Which*. Evidently aggravated by misquotations, Oppen refers to instances in three of his poems (“The Building of the Skyscraper;” “World, World—;” “Giovanni’s *Rape of the Sabine Women* at

tenacious structures—surely it was in this sense Crane used the phrase, ‘white buildings’” (Schimmel 312).

Wildenstein's") where the reviewer's sloppiness tampers with the materiality of words and thus with the meaning of the poems:

The review in Lillabulero becomes an exposure of the reviewing-business, the posture? The metaphor is of a steel worker looking down from the structure. If, in that context, I had written 'A tree growing from a sidewalk' instead of 'the sidewalk,' I would shoot myself; if I had written, 'the self is not mystery' as he quotes, instead of 'the self is no mystery' I would hang myself, and if I had written, as he quotes, 'the long hopelessness / of those who will remain in it' instead of 'long helplessness' I would never write another line of poetry.

But the reviewer, mis-quoting, discloses that he would have written these lines? and yet is competent to judge and censure or approve? ("The Anthropologist" 157)

Oppen's harsh and determined reaction to what might seem—to readers who perfunctorily scan and skim a text—insignificant misquotations caused by lapses of concentration on the reviewer's part attests to the poet's "peculiar faith in small words" which has existential proportions (*SL* 62). For Oppen, linguistic minutiae—no matter how subtle and inconspicuous—carry meaning so that the dual change from the definite article 'the' ("O, the tree, growing from the sidewalk") to the indefinite article 'a' ("O, a tree, growing from a sidewalk") drastically distorts the specific perspective which unfolds in the poem right from the distinct title with its double 'The' to "the experience of the the," in the turn toward nature in the last stanza ("Meaning" 200). On the same page in the archive Oppen condenses the difference between "the and a" in one succinct line: "there are many a's; there is only one the." For Oppen, these little words are not only meaningful articles but "impenetrable particles" which demand to be meticulously scrutinized. In treating them as interchangeable materials, small words like 'the' and 'a' or 'no' and 'not' gradually lose their semantic weight. From Oppen's and the steeplejacks's downward point of view, "the tree" and "the sidewalk" are concrete and definite in their actualness which the definite articles hit home.¹¹⁵ Each noun is "a thing / Which is."

¹¹⁵ It is interesting that the image of "[t]he steel worker on the girder" features in *The Bridge* as well. As Gill notes, the "sky's acetylene" from the proem evokes "the shower of sparks that fall from welder's torches as they erect the steel beams and girders that structure the architecture of the modern city" (18). In "Cape Hatteras," the flight-Whitman section concerned most with the double-edged sword of technology, Crane sets the fighter pilot ("O Corsair of the typhoon,—pilot, hear," "Falcon-Ace") side by side with the construction worker scaling buildings and welding aloft whom he addresses as "O Skygak" (57). Kramer annotates this "misspelling of 'skygack,' pronounced 'skyjack'" as another Crane neologism and quotes from a letter in which the giddy poet-builder compares himself with steelworkers: "Crane's coinage on the model of 'steeplejack' to mean a worker or builder aloft; in a letter (to Waldo Frank, August 12, 1926), Crane says of his work on *The Bridge*. 'I skip from one section to another now like a sky-gack or girder-hack'" (Kramer 79n49).

In another note, which expresses Oppen's "distrust [of] mass cultures," Oppen reinforces this notion: "The words are used, drained, the more completely drained the more completely draining the more they are employed. And the more unreserved the response to them" ("Selections" 9). The reviewer's imprecision, Oppen's strong reaction suggests, is paradigmatic of a general indifference to language. Still, and this increases Oppen's anger, the reviewer has and executes the power "to judge and censure or approve" even though he has apparently neither grasped the words nor the form of the poems. Accordingly, in "The Building of the Skyscraper," Oppen's poetic precept "to write carefully, lucidly, accurately, resisting the temptation to inflate" shows not only in the choice of adequate words (*SL* 73). Moreover, on a larger level, the construct of words placed horizontally on lines which are constellated vertically on the page and the way in which the poem is shaped reveal that Oppen utilized formal tools of poetic 'building' to make the material composition on the two-dimensional surface of the page graspable. In keeping with his principles of sincerity and objectification, he builds with "the lines: the vertical structure of the poem" ("Philosophy of the Astonished" 218).

Quite unusual for an Oppen poem, the lines in "The Building of the Skyscraper" are compressed into a fairly regular, stanzaic form. Each stanza consists of seven lines and is separated from the following one by the same amount of white space. This formal harmony is undoubtedly fitting for a poem whose title suggests structure and geometric design. The poem is built vertically on and into the page with the tripartite structure of the stanzas metaphorically resembling the floors of the title's skyscraper. The poem's structure thereby helps to accentuate the deictic quality of Oppen's poetry as his formal choices and his line divisions point the reader to connections, breaches, and pauses on the page. In the opening stanza, the poet-observer, who appears to speak for a wider audience ("we"), draws parallels between "[t]he steel worker on the girder" who "Learned not to look down" from his elevated stance and a collective "we" and our handling of "words we have learned." It might be surprising to discontinue the quote right after 'learned' since the ensuing anaphoric line starts "Not to look" arguably specify what "we have learned." Yet the line break decelerates the flow and fractures or, at least, delays the connection between "learned" and "Not to look at." The line break thus creates a simultaneity and ambiguity because the meaning that is established at the end of the third line still lingers on when the reader encounters the negative phrase in the following line. Momentarily held in uncertainty between the two lines, the reader is made aware of the discrepancy between and dual nature of learning and unlearning. The

line break invites both readings and, in a way, reenacts the process of first taking something at face value—even such seemingly negligible things as words—and then questioning what one sees and ultimately asking what lies below.

As in Oppen's early poems, prepositional phrases direct the movement of the reader's eye through their prominent placement on the line ("Not to look for substance / Below them"). A similar effect is achieved by abrupt line breaks and enjambments. In "The Building of the Skyscraper," the word 'verge,' for instance, is appropriately positioned at the end of the sixth line, severed by an enjambed line break from the prepositional phrase "Of vertigo" to which it relates. This placement exfoliates the meaning of 'verge' which literally materializes on the edge of the horizontally oriented line and encourages the reader "to look down" to what follows on the page. Through this spatial arrangement of words on the lines Oppen recreates the sense of vertigo which the first line and hence the one at the top of the page insinuates, reinforcing parallels between the work of "The steel worker on the girder" and the poet's dizzying task of restoring meaning to words since "there is something to mean." As Oppen notes in his working papers, even recuperating the meaning of one word can justify the writing of a poem: "a poem may be devoted to giving clear meaning to one word" (*SPDP* 78). The line break as well as the isolation of words, then, are crucial tools which the poet has at his disposal to slow the reader down and to point the onlooker to, at times, unstable and syntactically normative connections between words. As one entry from the archive reads, Oppen's goal is "[t]o slow down, that is, to isolate the words. Clatter, chatter is extreme rapidity of the words." Since, as Oppen also jotted down, "[i]solated words [are] making possible the audibility of minds and parts of minds which have been inaudible in print" (Oppen qtd. in Nicholls 138).¹¹⁶

Given the deictic nature of Oppen's line sense, it does not come as a surprise that the act of looking is highlighted throughout "The Building of the Skyscraper." The key verb 'look' undergoes slight but significant modulations. Preceded by negations, the verb appears in its infinitive form with three different prepositions attached to it in the

¹¹⁶ If Oppen condemns using words for "[c]latter, chatter," he finds even more fault in poets who "believe they can throw words into the poem, stringing them on the most ordinary syntactical structure, and with the words they believe [...] the words will fill the poem with meaning." His immediate targets in this rant in the archive are "[t]he French moderns—merely abominable poetry" who, according to Oppen, "think that a poem can be filled with meaning by being filled, like a bag or a jug, with words." "On the contrary," for Oppen, it "is the poem, the structure of meaning which restores the words to clarity. The word is the burden, the words are the burden, of the line which it must ~~be~~ ^{lift} up into meaning." Since "words of themselves carry only the most conventional, that is, the most generalized meanings," Oppen is adamant that "[i]t is the proper purpose, or the first purpose of the poem to restore the meaning of words" (*SPDP* 68-69).

first stanza: “not to look down;” “Not to look at;” “Not to look for.” The final stanza, then, shifts the focus with an exclamatory apostrophe to the natural phenomenon of “the tree” and turns to the ground level (“O, the tree, growing from the sidewalk——”). This shift away from the structure of the skyscraper which is in the process of being built to the tree coincides with an emphasis on small-scale, natural building processes as the tree “has a little life, sprouting / Little green buds / Into the culture of the streets.” With this redirection of focus, typographically accentuated by the extra-long dash after “sidewalk,” the first-person plural “we” reappears and the negative infinitives of the first stanza are transformed into the straightforward statement “We look back / Three hundred years and see bare land. / And suffer vertigo.” In contrast to the previous ‘to look’ phrases, this final “look back” is a temporal one and results in a moment of insight (“see bare land”). This look back in time to see what was there when the building of the skyscraper was not a pervasive phenomenon, when “bare land” dominated the landscape, extends the poem’s microscopic focus on words to “the things of the world” which surround and continue to shape us.

The realization that three centuries have wrought enormous changes on the land is awe-inspiring and bewildering. It makes us “suffer vertigo.” More than a critique of modernization, the poem finally circles back to the feeling of “vertigo” which can be conjured by spatial as well as temporal disorientation. This emphasis on the vertiginous quality of life is supported on the level of form, as the word ‘vertigo’ concludes the final stanza of the poem. Through this prominent position at the end of the line the key term establishes a delayed rhyme with the stanza’s initial ‘O’ and harks back to the final line of the first stanza which ends with “vertigo” as well. The sense of vertiginous verticality thus materializes on different levels, providing the reader with material markers on the page. In the downward movement on the two-dimensional page, the eyes of the reader are confronted with various perspectives on the “look for substance / Below” and encounter vertigo as “a thing / Which is” both spatially and temporally. This reading of formal features as invaluable conveyors of meaning is supported by notes and jottings pilfered from Oppen’s manuscripts. On a manuscript page that bears the title “An epigrammatic post-script” in holograph, Oppen uses a quotation from Charles Olson’s 1950 essay “Projective Verse” to contemplate the meaning of form in poetry: “‘Form is never more than an extension of content’ / It had better not be an extension! *perhaps a*

compression / Form is / what makes the poem graspable (“Meaning” 199).¹¹⁷ The words highlighted by Oppen reveal that he thought of form as a physical and tangible means to grasp the poem in its entirety.

In “The Building of the Skyscraper,” the carefully orchestrated form in combination with the fast sequence of enjambed lines makes the poem graspable in the sense in which Oppen thought of the term. Remarks made by Oppen in letters and jottings bring together key terms and compositional tools which he deems essential for the process of objectifying the poem and for refining its “grasp-ability” (*SL* 43). The final passage of a section boxed in crayon, for instance, reads as follows: “Form IS WHAT MAKES THE THING GRASPABLE SO YOU CAN KNOW WHAT IS BEING SAID AND WHY IT WAS SAID AND HOW IT WEIGHS Until it takes form you haven’t written it” (“The Anthropologist” 150). In this emphatic passage with its preponderance of capital letters and gaps of white space, Oppen replaces ‘the poem’ with “THE THING,” thus highlighting the physicality of the objectified entity. Notably, Oppen explicitly connects the concept of form with the process of writing. Writing requires form and formal features are grounded in the material components with which and on which writing takes place. In the process of writing a poem, material devices compress content into form (“*perhaps a compression*”) and facilitate what is most aptly captured in ‘Dichtung,’ the German word for ‘poetry,’ which would contain some derivative form of ‘dense’ in its literal translation. The idea that form condenses meaning and “makes the poem graspable” is central to Oppen’s poetics and shows up repeatedly in his writings.

Oppen emphasized the material process of writing not only in his private, preparatory notes. In fact, he spoke for this aspect of his poetics in letters as well. In providing commentary on poems by Jane Cooper in a letter from 1969, for example, Oppen posits aspects which he deems conducive to rendering poems graspable: “form,

¹¹⁷ Olson takes this dictum from Robert Creeley: “the principle [...] is this: FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT. (Or so it got phrased by one, R. Creeley, and it makes absolute sense to me, with this possible corollary, that right form, in any given poem, is the only and exclusively possible extension of content under hand). There it is, brothers, sitting there, for USE” (289). Creeley would later comment on his claim in an interview: “Well, content is never more than an extension of form and form is never more than an extension of content. They sort of go together is the absolute point. It’s really hard to think of one without the other; in fact, I don’t think it’s possible. What I meant, whatever that means, is that what’s coming to be said [...] that need, that impulse, that demand, is what I would call the content’s finding a form for its own realization, recognition, substantiation” (*Jacket* 25). Interestingly, Creeley edited *George Oppen: Selected Poems* (2003). In his introduction he writes that by listening to Oppen’s voice (“quite deep, poised, reflective in its movement, without aggressive emphasis”) “one listens to his thinking, the slowly secured phrases, the syntax taking each step,” thus linking voice and sound with syntax (xv).

music, as that which makes the poem graspable, the music itself, and every note, for the sake of the *thing* grasped. But above all, and most amply, the silences: the breaking of rhythmic obligations” (*SL* 199). In this important statement, Oppen introduces the concept of silence as a crucial criterion which promotes graspability and couples it with the idea of “breaking rhythmic obligations.” The typographical spacing between the phrases illustrates how silence and the freeing of rhythm can be conveyed on paper. The interstitial white space functions as a typographical marker of silence and rupture. As DuPlessis has shown, this “use of expressive space” is a trademark quality of Oppen’s “poetics of letters” (xxv). “Oppen,” she writes, “used space between words as a form of punctuation with openness” (xxvii). Oppen himself characterized his “epistolary style” as “something about breaking the words, the sentences, the locutions *open* to make some room for ourselves / Here among the subatomic fragments” (*SL* 227).

Notably, the cluster of related key terms such as (line) breaking, silence/openness, and space/room go beyond his epistolary style and are indeed essential to Oppen’s material method of making poems. Numerous jottings from his working papers make clear that these terms impacted Oppen’s understanding of poetry as a graspable thing. To provide a small sample size from different daybooks: In “The Philosophy of the Astonished,” Oppen talks to himself on the page when he notes: “just feel opening and the poem will come to you / or the place of the poem the place of / the poem will come to you, and that is the beginning” (216-17). In “Selections from George Oppen’s ‘Daybook,’” two short but crucial entries read as follows: “Thinking begins with silence—the simple awareness of the world and oneself in it” (13); “POETRY: Openness:: it opens” (8). Similarly, in “The Anthropologist of Myself” Oppen reminds himself to “[b]egin with the empty space” and further down on the same page he elaborates in all-caps and imperative mood to “FIX THE MIND ON THE EMPTY SPACE THE POEM BEGINS HERE” (153). Consequently, these principles enter Oppen’s poetic work. In the eponymous poem “Of Being Numerous” from the book which won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1969, he famously defines the key concept of clarity in section 22: “Clarity // In the sense of *transparence*, / I don’t mean that much can be explained. // Clarity in the sense of silence” (*NCP* 175). With the terms “transparence” and “silence” added to Oppen’s “poetics of disclosure” or “poetics of *translucence*” (Shoemaker 80, 62), the following proclamation which Nicholls unearthed from the archive makes all the more sense: “The poem replaces the thing, the poem destroy its meaning—I would like the poem to be nothing, to be transparent, to

be inaudible, not to be—I felt that most strongly writing *Discrete Series*“ (qtd. in Nicholls 56). While he does not explicitly mention his first book, Oppen hammers home this sentiment in another notebook entry: “I would like the poem to be transparent, inaudible // SERIAL POEM—SPACE, SILENCE

The serial poem permits the use of space, of silence // Because I am not silent the poems are bad // because there is something we cannot say, cannot grasp, the poem is an attempt to work it out, to find its form” (“Selections” 3).

Oppen brings together numerous key terms and approximates “the empty space” with the concept of silence in another jotting. Contemplating where his poems originate from, he writes with characteristic pauses, white space between words, and jerky punctuation:

i do not hear the rhythm as the poem forms – the beginning, the seed of the poem – rather it is a shape, in fact a silence The shape silently forms as if ‘above’ me – the effort of the writing, the finding of the cadence is the care not to shatter this presence – tho often it must be shattered and only then restored. (“Meaning” 200)

Oppen’s sequence of modifications here is telling. The quick transition from rhythm to form to the beginning to seed to shape to silence to cadence to presence and, finally, to the shattering and subsequent reassembling of “this presence” by formal means demonstrates how interconnected these key terms are for Oppen. The juxtaposition of nouns generally thought to refer to something material (“a shape”) with nouns that suggest immateriality (“a silence”) reveals that Oppen was eager to find a way to substantiate in the concrete materials of poetic composition the wordless place where “the seed of the poem” lies. A central criterion of Oppen’s poetics, this idea resurfaces in his working papers: “the feeling is that the poem already exists. The effort is to find the sounds, the words and the syntax which will allow the poem to be heard—above all that the words shall not be too heavy, too pretentious: that there shall be an area of silence; there the poem lives if it lives” (“Philosophy of the Astonished” 211). Interestingly, Oppen also refers to the concept of silence as the quality he approves of in *Discrete Series* and links it to the idea that “the poem already exists” before the words arrive. In a 1972 letter to Dan Gerber, Oppen speaks of the “Poem” with a capital ‘p’ as “the thing in the mind before the words” and goes on to appraise the poems of *Discrete Series*. Claiming that he “really wanted to write about what one knows but could not have said before the poem,” Oppen appreciates the “raggedly done” poems for their silences: “On the whole, I respect their silences: if I’m saved the silences saved me.” As with the remarks from his working papers, Oppen here points to the relation between

the poem preexisting in “the wordless sphere in the mind” and silence as the poetic device which harks back to this mental “place without the words” (*SL* 236).

One question which arises from the dilemma of rendering something immaterial material is: How does immateriality manifest itself in concrete form without losing all its links to the original impetus spawned by silence? Or, as the poet-speaker asks in “The Gesture,” the first of “Five Poems about Poetry” from *This In Which*: “How does one hold something / In the mind which he intends // To grasp” (*NCP* 101). For Oppen, the answer lies in the concrete materials of poetic construction or, more precisely, in the poet’s sincere and meticulous work with these materials. If form is what makes the poem graspable and if elements such as space, shape, and silence contribute to the graspability of the poem, the material qualities of the building bits (such as word, line, page, and paper) function as fundamentally meaningful instruments for the process of making an object of the poem. This focus on materiality consequently emerges in Oppen’s definition of the Objectivists’ common ground. In letters shortly after his return to the United States, he, for instance, writes that the poets commonly subsumed under the category ‘Objectivists’ “meant to base poetry on the clarity of human vision and of emotional grasp, which was not everywhere regarded as an important part of poetic equipment” and that they “were all very much concerned with poetic form, and form not merely as texture, but as the shape that makes a poem possible to grasp” (*SL* 47). The idea of shaping as a prerequisite for objectifying poems permeates the poet’s working papers as well. A fascinating sheet of writing in the “Notes, Jottings, etc.” section of the UC San Diego archive makes this point abundantly clear: “Shaped, shaped, the poem must be shaped, yes, even its form on the paper, for this vividness, this actualness which is the contrary of dreariness” (“The Circumstances” 15). In a boxed section on the same page Oppen couples the thrice-repeated ‘shaped’ with his understanding of the Objectivist agenda: “objectivism: it means to experience the shape of the poem” (16). This emphasis on the physical act of shaping which affects the poem’s “form on the paper” reverberates in another note from Oppen’s working papers where he argues, with a disapproving nod to Olson and his breath-preferring poetics, for using “‘space’ in the poem, space on the page: NOT breath—not manner, when space is not silence, the matrix of silence, it is chatter, noise” (“Philosophy of the Astonished” 216). These notes are testament to Oppen’s thinking with and utilization of the materials at hand (“form on the paper;” “shape of the poem;” “space on the page”) for the purpose of achieving

“this vividness, this actualness” within the poem. These aspects are worthy of deeper investigations and will be discussed in more detail in the next chapters.

The fact that Oppen employed poetic devices like the line break, the line sense, and the spatial arrangement of words on the page to construct meaning even thirty years after the publication of *Discrete Series* and that he did so in a poem which has the emblematic process of vertical construction as its title indicates that Oppen stayed true to his poetics of the vertical dimension despite the twenty-five-year-long hiatus away from poetic composition. Oppen’s explanatory comment that Fauchereau’s “La Construction” as the translation of “The Building” failed to convey “the homeliness of the word” notwithstanding, the cluster of recurrent key terms associated with processes of poetic craftsmanship suggests that the conceit of construction work is usefully applicable to Oppen’s compositional method. He constructs with and makes use of various materials. The verb ‘construct,’ in fact, emerges as the nodal metaphor which spans the divide between Oppen’s publications. In one short jotting, for example, Oppen comments on parallels and differences between *This in Which* and *Discrete Series*: “This in which—I tried to construct more than in *Discrete Series*, but not to blur things with connectives” (“The Anthropologist” 154). In a boxed section from a different daybook, Oppen records what he wishes to accomplish with writing: “To construct with language something other than language” (“Meaning” 206). This linguistic construction is predicated on other material components. As will be shown in the following, Oppen manufactures words into shape and uses the material page as a construction site. His idiosyncratic, palimtextual way of “piling up pieces of paper to find the words” discloses insights into his method of construction. Furthermore, Oppen’s experience as carpenter and craftsman during his years in exile in Mexico and thus his work with wood carried over into his compositional method when Oppen recommenced his career as a poet.

5 Interval: Bibliographic Code in the Original *Discrete Series*

Before extending the analysis to Oppen's wordwork and woodwork, it is helpful to take stock of some bibliographic phenomena which contribute to the absorption of the machine into the materiality of Oppen's first book. This excursion into editorial practice is called for at this point since the deliberate placement of the first three poems of *Discrete Series* illustrates how Oppen highlights and extends meaning via arranging his page-poems and utilizing white space. In the previous close readings several physical features such as white space, page layout, and typographical details have been mentioned, elements which Jerome McGann subsumes under the term 'bibliographic code' in *The Textual Condition*. While McGann usefully introduced the term, in my reading of *Discrete Series*' bibliographical code I want to consult George Bornstein's theoretical chapter in *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* which bears the telling title "How to Read a Page: Modernism and Material Textuality." Bornstein maintains that "the literary text consists not only of words (its linguistic code) but also of the semantic features of its material instantiations (its bibliographic code). Such bibliographic codes might include cover design, page layout, or spacing, among other factors" (6). Combining McGann's notion of bibliographic code which "can include features of page layout, book design, ink, and paper, and typeface" with Walter Benjamin's concept of the 'aura' (7), Bornstein shows that "any material page on which we read any poem is a constructed object that will encode certain meanings even while placing others under erasure" (31). Convinced that "examining modernism in its original sites of production and in the continually shifting physicality of its texts and transmissions results in alternative constructions very different from current ones," he introduces the "notion of material textuality." Material textuality, for Bornstein, comprises "both the physical features of the text that carry semantic weight and the multiple forms in which texts are physically created and distributed" (1). As the strong emphasis on "the physical features of the text" in Bornstein's definition suggests, a more comprehensive close reading strategy which does not "set the text free from its original time and place" consequently needs to fuse both linguistic and bibliographic code and address the "material page" as a crucial component of meaning (7).

With these notions in mind, it is crucial to note that Oppen directly oversaw the printing process of *Discrete Series*. He was hence capable of arranging page-space and had some say in typographical implementations. In an unpublished transcript of an interview between Sharp and the Oppens in 1978, George, providing useful insights into

his writing method, explains: “Space was extremely important to me. In *Discrete Series*, as it was printed, I could do that because you could get printers who would set by hand. [...] I used spacing as well as line-breaks a very great deal. I can’t do so now, but I would if I could, and do as far as I can.” Apparently, manual typesetting was infeasible for the publication of *Discrete Series* within New Directions’ *Collected Poems* in 1975: “He [Jay Laughling] [...] couldn’t reproduce the print that we’d had in the old one. It wasn’t set by hand anymore.” These remarks, overlooked by Oppen scholars, call for a reading of Oppen’s early work with a strong focus on the original levels of materiality, including typographical phenomena which manual typesetting made possible. Against the backdrop of Oppen’s comments, scholars are required to pay attention to the smallest details of bibliographic code and the materiality of the page as compositional space.

Oppen’s poems need to be experienced on the page and analyzed as constellations. The poet supports this reading of the poem as most effective in its manifestation on the page in a letter: “I think I’ll continue to justify print well: let’s hope so. I cannot go performing. Not the place for me (my sense of the matter – unlike the young, the television generation – is that the poem is primarily on the *page*” (330). Similarly, Sharon Olds asserts in her remembrance of discussions with the Oppens about poetry readings in the 1970s that Oppen “didn’t enjoy readings much because he preferred to read the poem on the page—he felt he wasn’t really getting it by ear.” She goes on quoting Oppen: “It’s probably because I haven’t been *trained* to *hear*—we haven’t had formal education, [...] but I need to see a poem *on the page*,” with Olds adding that he gave prominence to the final statement “with a physical gesture of holding paper, holding it down on the table” (78). Oppen’s wordwork quite literally built on the material quality of paper and the tactility, malleability, and concreteness of the pliable page.

The page offers white space on which dimensional thinking can materialize. Because Oppen thinks of the page as a central unit of meaning not only in his letters but also and more importantly so in his books of poetry, the basic qualities of the page and its materiality need to be considered. One essential feature of the page which Oppen uses creatively and innovatively to convey meaning is white space. In the same interview in which he mentions that the original *Discrete Series* was “set by hand,” he foregrounds the material relation between the page and white space when he states: “Space, the white space. I paid a lot of attention to white space. [...] I pay *some* attention to the way it looks on the page—for example, a short or a long poem—to make a difference.” Both

the whiteness and the spatiality of the page are key components in the process of writing. Effectuating and affecting the principle of the line sense, these bibliographic elements support the transfer of Oppen's dimensional thinking onto paper.

As has been shown in the discussion of the vertical dimension, Oppen aimed for a deepening instead of a lengthening of his lines. This deepening of his lines shows not only in the movement towards the bottom of the page but also in the gaps and spaces between the lines. The white space of the page makes the words, the lines, the poem shine forth. Instead of "talking only to the reader" by means of, for instance, predictable rhymes or artificial and inauthentic end-stopped lines, Oppen favors interaction with both the text and the page on which the words appear. DuPlessis adroitly captures this compositional technique when she writes that Oppen was "talking to the page" or, more elaborately in her most recent essay on Oppen, that he was "talking out complex thoughts through writing—thinking with himself dialogically on the page" (*OR* 196). The page talks back. This idea chimes with her equally clear and true but cautiously phrased statement in the introduction to "The Philosophy of the Astonished," the final selection of Oppen's working papers edited by DuPlessis, that "the page seems to be a unit of meaning" (202). Indeed, the page as "a large multidimensional space symbolizing one's reality inside the real" is a key criterion of Oppen's compositional method (*OR* 197). Oppen, "a poet of the page" (Davidson, "Introduction" xlvii), uses page-space on an equal footing with linguistic materials as a tool for the construction of meaning.¹¹⁸

Unsurprisingly, several scholars have discussed Oppen's propensity for lacunae as constitutive devices of his poetry. Susan Thackrey, for example, claims that in Oppen's poetry "white spaces are gaps in any presumed continuous flow of perception and feeling" (18). Eliot Weinberger, in drawing parallels between D.W. Griffith's cinematographic technique of "*parallel cutting*" and Oppen's poetics, speaks of "the story or poem projected forward through the elimination of transitions, a meaningful blank space between the shots or lines" (131). According to Davidson, "[i]n materializing the world as object [...], Oppen calls attention not only to language as structure but to the spaces that words are presumed to fill" ("Introduction" xl). DuPlessis seems to be the only scholar who addresses the "large amount of unconventional space

¹¹⁸ Interestingly, a note from Oppen's working papers specifies that he considers the serial poem as most suitable for this endeavor: "SERIAL POEM—SPACE, SILENCE The serial poem permits the use of space, of silence" ("Selections" 3). Space is also pivotal in Oppen's specific understanding of Imagist poetry: "Imagism, insofar as I think of the word in connection with my own work, means: to establish space in the poem by creating an instantaneous relationship // Imagism: in poem becomes a landscape" ("Selections" 1).

between individual words, between paragraphs, and in indentation of paragraphs” in detail (“Introduction” xxvi). She calls this technique Oppen’s “particular scoring of the page which offers both connection and gap, continuation and surprise” (*SL* 369). Yet DuPlessis mentions these aspects only with reference to Oppen’s epistolary style. This focus is understandable given that she as the editor of Oppen’s letters had to come to terms with and find a way to reproduce his “deeply imbedded syntactic, structural, and philosophic rejection of closure, finality, or absolutes [...] in its textual manifestation” (xxvi). But many of the textual and typographical phenomena which DuPlessis identifies in Oppen’s letters are essential elements of his poetry as well. “White” and “Thus” do not only exemplify the duality of vertical movement on the semantic level as well as visually on the two-dimensional plane of the page. They also symbolize “both connection and gap, continuation and surprise” through their juxtaposition on a double page rife with white spaces. On a material level, then, “White” sensitizes the eye of the reader to the whiteness of the page on which the poems of *Discrete Series* are printed.

Most poems of *Discrete Series* are sparse and short, leaving at times large amounts of white space visible on the page. In an exemplarily striking way, this insistence on white space as a crucial component of composition results in a double page right in the middle of *Discrete Series* where two poems (“The edge of the ocean” and “Tug against the river—”) face each other, both of which contain only four short lines (fig. 10). The whiteness of the pages thus dominates and overwhelms the printed text like “the water” and “the fast water” washing up against “[t]he shore” in the poems. Oppen’s use of whiteness, however, is not restricted to the poems themselves being surrounded by white space. In its most visible form, whiteness manifests in *Discrete Series* on a blank page which is juxtaposed with the very first poem of the series.¹¹⁹ The transition from the Maude Blessingbourne poem and thus from Henry James and the 19th century to the elevator poem and the 1930s is not enacted on a double page.

¹¹⁹ White spaces frequently appear within the structure of Oppen’s poems and show even in the in-between of words. This lacunary style impacts the shape of Oppen’s poems most formatively in his late poems from *Seascape: Needle’s Eye* to *Primitive*. DuPlessis pinpoints this aspect of “Oppen’s later poetry” when she writes that it “seems continuously to be stopping at virtually every line, at every porous white-space caesura” (“Uncannily” 205).

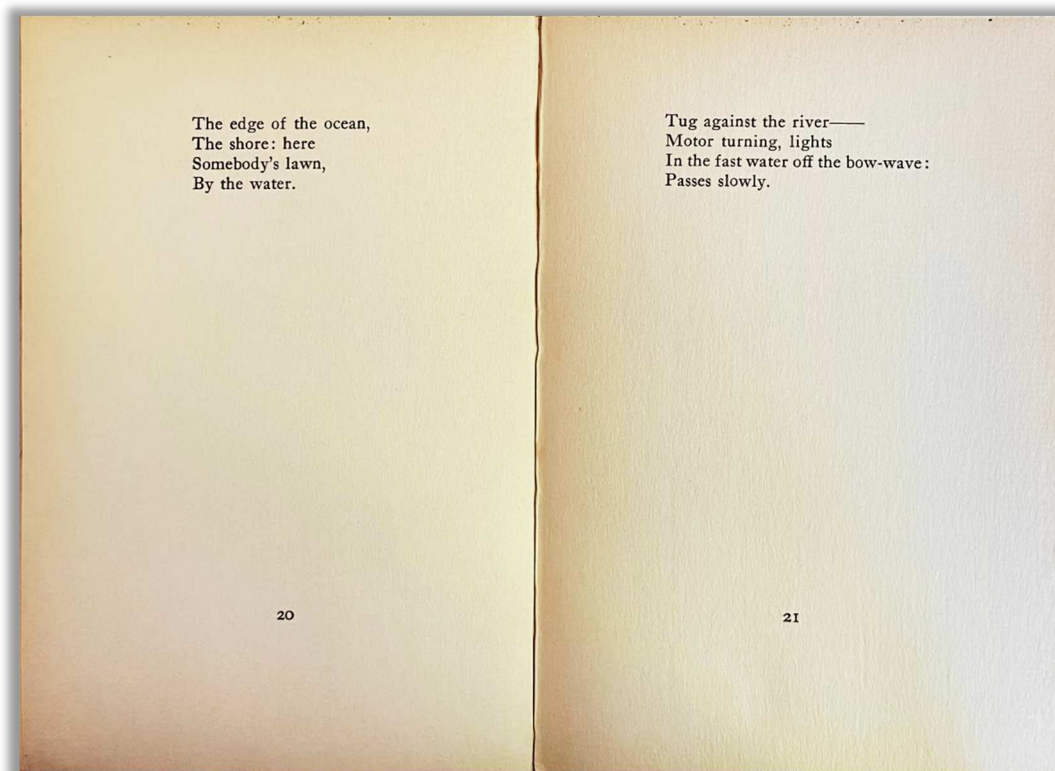


Fig. 10: Two four-line poems facing each other and percolating across the page in the original publication from 1934.

In fact, “The knowledge not of sorrow” is the only poem in the book which does not have an accompanying poem on the opposite page. The reader only encounters “White” and “Thus” in what Oppen would call “the ‘certainty and bright light of poetry’” by turning the page (*SL* 239). In the original publication the poem is positioned on the right-hand side and faces a blank- page. As a result, in encountering the “The knowledge not of sorrow” and before moving on to “White” and “Thus,” the reader’s eyes rest—if only briefly—upon a white sheet of paper. This stand-alone position has led critics to maintain, for example, that the poem functions as a second and “real ‘Preface’ to *Discrete Series*” (Hejinian 48) or that the absence of an immediate partner should be rectified by coupling the poem with the final poem of *Discrete Series*, its “long-range partner,” as Swigg puts it (19).¹²⁰ But what happens if one reads the blank page, untouched by any printed material, as a meaningful module in itself? As a turn towards the original 1934 version shows, the blank page facing “The knowledge not of sorrow” not only anticipates the central role of white space as a meaningful device of poetic

¹²⁰ Hejinian, in fact, claims that “the opening poem” is “written of course by Oppen but partially in the words and very much in the mood and mode not of Ezra Pound but of Henry James” (48).

construction. Ingrained in its and the book's pages, the paratextual detail of a watermark appears which contributes to the trope of pairs and discrete seriality.

Since "paying attention only to the words in reprintings erases other meanings" (31), as Bornstein puts it, it is necessary to take a closer look at first editions whenever possible or, at least, turn to literary critics who had access to the original artefact. Harold Schimmel is among the few Oppen scholars who consult the 1934 Objectivist Press edition of *Discrete Series* ("in a light sea-green cloth binding bleached apple-green at the edges" [294]) rather than analyzing the poems in later versions such as *The Collected Poems* (1975). In "(On) *Discrete Series*," Schimmel's contribution to the seminal volume *George Oppen: Man and Poet*, the author provides a lucid explication of Oppen's first book and does so by "titl[ing] the poems by their page referents of 1934" (297). Aiming "[t]o restore the air, order and relationship of the original discrete series of thirty-one short lyrics" (296-97), Schimmel begins his analysis by sharing with his readers what he sees on the pages immediately following Pound's preface: "The poem—page 7—faces a blank page with the watermark, 'Utopian' and hanging scales in a circle, all but visible in the grain of the paper" (297). Indeed, the watermark combination of text and hanging scales is also not fully "visible in the grain of the paper" in the 1934 book I own. Yet the watermark shines forth partially if one holds the page to the light. To better illustrate this granular detail lost in later reprints and disregarded by critics, I include an image of a page/poem where the watermark is fully transparent (fig. 11).

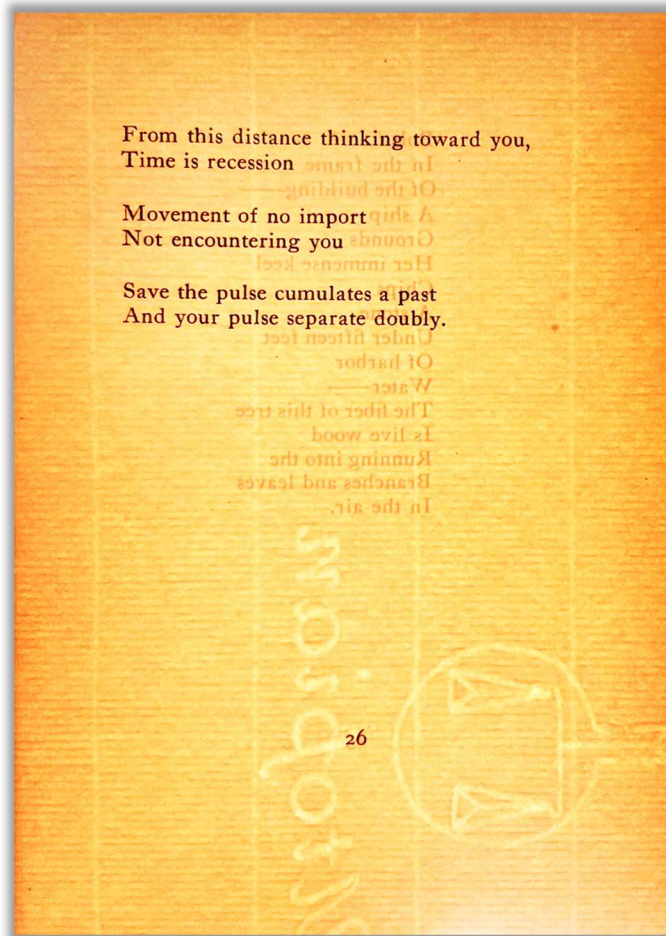


Fig. 11: The translucent image-text watermark as visible in Oppen's 1934 book.

Schimmel's focus on the pages' material quality and the constellation of "proem" vis-à-vis "a blank page" sheds some light on aspects of Oppen's first book which have so far been overlooked. The watermark with its "hanging scales in a circle" shining through "in the grain of the paper" with the scales harmoniously balanced are more than appropriate for a book published by Oppen's Objectivist Press. After all, Zukofsky, the co-founder of the publication venue, famously advocated for achieving "rested totality" in the Objectivist issue published in *Poetry* in February 1931: "This rested totality may be called objectification—the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object" (274).¹²¹ Which symbols could be more adequate to emblemize ideas of rest, totality, and equilibrium other than balanced scales and a

¹²¹ As Sharp notes in his short history of "The 'Objectivists' Publications," "[t]he name [Objectivist Press] was suggested by Zukofsky to capitalize on the publicity that the 'Objectivists' issue of *Poetry* had given them." Sharp continues that "Zukofsky's elaborate prospectus had been reduced to a statement proposed by Reznikoff: 'The Objectivist Press is an organization of writers whose work they think ought to be read.' The 'advisory board' consisted of Pound and Williams, with Zukofsky as secretary" (47).

circle hinting at closure? With the word “utopian” appended to the image of harmony, the watermark enacts the tension and paramount question of coming to terms with modernity.

It needs to be noted that the Objectivist Press as a publication venture originated from “an agreement [...] reached by Zukofsky, Williams, Reznikoff, and Oppen in the Oppen’s Brooklyn apartment in September 1933” and that “[t]he members of the group agreed to pay for the publication of their own books, except for the first, Williams’ *Collected Poems 1921-1931*, which had a preface by Wallace Stevens, and which sold out, bringing a small profit” (Sharp 47). Oppen hence had to finance the publication of *Discrete Series* and “paid for himself” (Vescia 63). The nexus of editorship and financial responsibility for one’s own work suggests that the poets could influence the different stages of the publication process more closely and authoritatively than in other more strictly monitored venues. It then does not seem too absurd to speculate that the Objectivist watermark was the product of a consensus among the group members, epitomizing what they understood as concrete visualizations of objectification.

In addition to the recovery of the watermark in Oppen’s original *Discrete Series*, Schimmel’s observation that “The knowledge not of sorrow” “faces a blank page” establishes a material fact which is preserved in the 1966 Mother/Asphodel Press facsimile edition of *Discrete Series* but lost in the *New Collected Poems*.¹²² In the volume edited by Davidson the final two-and-a-half sentences from Pound’s preface are printed on the left-hand page facing the first poem of the series. Vescia verifies the original vis-à-vis of blank page and proem and provides her interpretation of this particular arrangement in her insightful book *Depression Glass: Documentary Photography and the Medium of the Camera Eye in Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen, and William Carlos Williams*: “In the 1934 edition of *Discrete Series*,” she writes, “the text was laid out one poem to a page, making the arrangement of white space an essential

¹²² As Brad Haas rightly observes, the Mother/Asphodel Press reprint “is the best setting of the poems outside of the first edition.” Since “[t]he rare Objectivist Press edition of *Discrete Series* is virtually unobtainable for the general reader” (*FlashPoint*), this is also the physical copy with which I worked for the most part before I got hold of the original 1934 edition. The book is “in black printed mustard colored wrappers with nice quality laid vellum paper, printed in dark blue/violet ink.” In contrast to the formatting of *Discrete Series* in *New Collected Poems* (2008) where “the page size is quite large, and the poems are pushed to the left margins,” the Mother/Asphodel edition keeps the text, written in bold type throughout, centered so that “the poems sit very well on the page.” The only issue which Haas has with the reprinted volume is that “it does omit the Preface by Ezra Pound which is included in *NCP*.” Indeed, Pound’s prefatory stamp of approval is absent from the 1966 book. For understandable reasons, the original watermark is missing as well.

element in the presentation. The prefatory poem ('The knowledge not of sorrow') appeared on a verso, facing a blank page, suggesting that the stage has been swept clean ('weather-swept') for what follows" (69). While Vescia does not mention the translucent watermark of the original volume here, she nonetheless substantiates the actual material sequence or, to use Oppen's words, "the order of disclosure" which the juxtaposition of blank page and poem facilitates. For her, the "initial poem is intentionally set off from those that follow" (80). Vescia's emphasis on "the arrangement of white space [as] an essential element in the presentation" and her interpretation of the "blank page" as a papery equivalent to the "world, weather-swept" are useful first steps towards an understanding of how Oppen charged the material components such as the whiteness of the page semantically in the compositional process. In her reading of the second poem of *Discrete Series*, the elevator poem, Vescia consequently focuses on "the ambiguity of blankness" inherent in the first word "White." Claiming that Oppen "forces us to dwell on the individual textual components," she writes that "'White' imprints itself on the mind's eye as a sequence of perceptual fragments regulated by white space" (70). As Schimmel and Vescia in their return to the original format make clear, Oppen used bibliographic elements as building materials for the construction of meaning. What follows is that editorial interventions such as rearranging page-space or tampering with other units of composition in later versions twist the poet's original intention. While there are many reasons why editors might decide to change certain elements of the original material object (copyright issues, space restrictions, limited access to first-hand printing materials), each choice to diverge from how the original book as an assemblage of several material constituents looks and is formatted inevitably inhibits or, at worst, distorts the reading experience.

But how exactly does this excursion into "material textuality" help us with our reading of Oppen's poetry? Can a superficially banal phenomenon such as white page-space really carry and convey meaning? Without a doubt, it is a pity that Evans's photographs have vanished from today's reprintings of *The Bridge*. But is it not far-fetched to hint at parallels between the publication history of Crane's magnum opus and the placement history of blank page-space in Oppen's *Discrete Series*? Needless to say, such and similar questions and articulations of doubt are legitimate, especially if uttered by readers or critics who believe that poems stand and speak for themselves and do not require any contextual anchoring in material pages. Yet in Oppen's case such a meticulous focus on "alternate material components of meaning" is required for at least

two reasons in addition to the fact that he paid for the book himself (Bornstein 31). First, Oppen repeated in interviews that for him “the poem is primarily on the page” and that he “use[s] spaces as carefully as [he] can, with a great deal of thought” (Power 109; Homberger). Asked by Eric Homberger in a fascinating interview which is available as a sound recording on PennSound whether “the space gives [him] a sequence, a length of time, in reading a line,” Oppen reiterates the importance of the page when he responds: “Right, it does, and yet I think of it on the page essentially. I think of it as a space rather than time.”¹²³ Oppen’s emphasis on page-space blends into the second guiding principle and key jotting which Nicholls found among the poet’s working papers. In an aphoristic note, Oppen accentuates the material qualities of the space he uses in the process of composing a poem: “the white space of the paper becomes part of the poem” (qtd. in Nicholls 161). In this pivotal jotting, Oppen, in a way, digs deeper into the materiality of the page by specifying two of its essential features: pages are usually white and made of paper. Notably, Oppen explicitly mentions “the paper” instead of ‘the page’ here. Another exemplary entry from his working papers attests that the papery quality of the surfaces on which he wrote was indeed central to Oppen’s poetic thinking. In “Selections from George Oppen’s Daybook,” Young includes a passage in which Oppen ponders the claim that “The act of writing is pleasure.” With reference to the Chinese poet Lu Chi, whose name appears at the end of the paragraph, Oppen jots down explanations for this hypothesis: “For it is Being created out of the void / And sound wrung out of silence.” This creation out of the void is, for Lu Chi and for Oppen, inextricably and materially connected to paper: “In a sheet of paper is contained the infinite / And, evolved from an inch-sized heart, an endless panorama” (7).¹²⁴

Remarkably, Oppen molds these reflections about the papery quality of the page into poetry. In some of the poems from *Discrete Series* he deliberates the materiality of the book and the page metapoetically (“One moves between reading and re-reading, / The shape is a moment” in the twenty-first poem; “Written structure, / Shape of art, More formal / Than a field would be” in the last poem). Most famously, the twenty-ninth

¹²³ In a conversation with Burton Hatlen and Tom Mandel that took place at the Oppens’ house in San Francisco in 1980, Mary starts explaining that “George almost never uses punctuation or he uses it very sparingly, and this use of the line and the way one is directed to read because of the use of the line accomplishes, much more powerfully it seems to me, than the use of punctuation...” at which point George interrupts her: “Yes, I use space” (38).

¹²⁴ The idea of the generative void, which Oppen adopted from Lu Chi, was apparently so important to the poet that he used it as an epigraph. The poem “Route,” the second serial poem in *Of Being Numerous*, is introduced by these words from “the *Wen Fu* of Lu Chi:” “the void eternally generative” (NCP 192).

poem of *Discrete Series*, “Drawing,” deals explicitly with the book’s materiality. One of only two titled poems in the series, the poem reads:

Drawing

Not by growth
But the
Paper, turned, contains
This entire volume

As the deictic “This” in the final line of this short poem clarifies, “Drawing” points back to the material fact of the actual “entire volume” of *Discrete Series* to which this individual poem contributes alongside with other pages of “the / Paper, turned.” In his explication of this poem’s “sense of form,” Sharp strengthens his analysis by reading the poem like Schimmel and Vescia in “the book’s original form” with “each poem, however small, printed on a page, and [...] a single poem facing it on the opposite page.” According to Sharp, *Discrete Series* “unfolded not organically, ‘by growth,’ but mechanically, by ‘drawing,’ as of cards from a deck, an induction and accumulation,” as “[e]ach leaf turned revealed two new pages” (287-88). Interestingly and as in the duo of “White” and “Thus,” the disclosure of “two new pages” goes hand in hand with the revelation that these poetic pairs, in a way, talk to each other on the double page. In this couple, each poem lacks a closing period (fig. 12). This material fact on the page visualizes through absence, the processual open-endedness, and the interconnections within this small-scale discrete series as well as within “[t]his entire volume” of *Discrete Series*. The final line-end of the left-hand poem—diacritically shoreless—flows beyond and is pulled into the companion poem beginning with the tug-like word “Drawing” which can be read as “a participle on the move” as well as a verbal noun (Swigg 19). As the title “Drawing” echoes back to “Coiling,” the harbor scene of “[a] tug with two barges” resonates with the verb forms “turned, contains” on the right-hand side. Like tugboats tugging and pulling cumbersomely navigable containerships towards “the shore,” each page exerts its pull on the papery entirety of the volume, drawing the units together in their discrete seriality.

Swigg elaborates the process of unfolding and reveals the intriguing detail that Oppen had, in fact, opted for a different title and a different placement of the “Drawing”

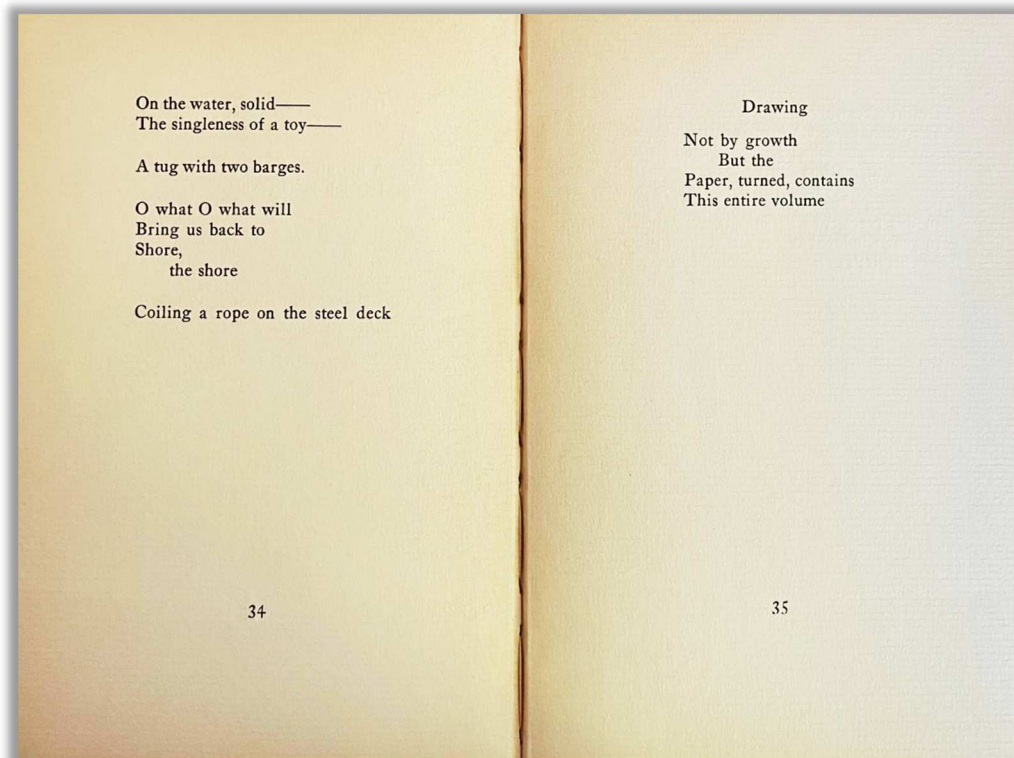


Fig. 12: Two poem-barges tugging and pulling across the white space of the double page.

poem in an earlier version which he sent to Charles Reznikoff. Swigg notes that “Drawing” was “once known by the comprehensive title of ‘Folio’ (a single sheet but also a volume of sheets)” and that it “originally concluded the book in [Oppen’s] earlier manuscript” (18). For Swigg, the poem under the title “Folio” in “its all-inclusive, final position” in the Reznikoff typescript “suggests the instantaneous folding into itself of all the poems that once preceded it in the book” (18). “Folio” with its reference to the terminology of book production and its etymological meaning of ‘in a leaf’ would have been an apt title for a poem which ends with the lines “Paper, turned, contains / This entire volume.” Yet, as Oppen wrote Pound in a letter from February 8, 1934, upon receiving Pound’s review of *Discrete Series*, he “need[ed] a poem to end the book which will not get an emotional extra-ness by being the last in the book” (fn. 13, *SL* 372).

Swigg offers some convincing readings of companion poems in the “entire volume,” but in his analysis of how “individual pairs of poems [...] illuminate each other, side by side” he adjoins two poems which do not go together. Right after his neat discussion of both title and position change of “Folio” and “Drawing” (“it is appropriate that the actual last poem of the book, ‘Written structure,’ should offer, as ‘Drawing’ could not, ‘Successive / Happenings’”), he claims that “it is more profitable to consider the end poem not on its own, or even coupled with the poem which directly precedes it,

but as the long-range partner of the poem which begins the book, ‘The knowledge not of sorrow’” (19). Swigg’s reasoning behind this coupling of the first and last poem remains vague and unconvincing. It seems that he could not make sense of the fact that the proem faces white space on the opposite page, whereas all other poems in the volume have an immediate counterpart on the neighboring page. But to the contrary it is exactly the whiteness of the immaculate page which prepares a clean sweep and pairs well with the shift from proem to “White” and the following poems all of which are written in the present tense. The blank page insinuates the transition from the 19th century to the 20th century.

This effect is highlighted on the level of form by the abrupt change from the first poem to the second. The regular lineation of the proem, with its even-numbered lines all consistently indented, appears in stark contrast to the sparse, elliptical “White” which quite literally materializes before the reader’s eyes upon turning the page. The proem’s fourteen lines, even though none of the lines are written in iambic pentameter and none of them rhyme, evoke the sonnet form, thus harking back to a century-long, convention-loaded tradition of this verse form. By turning the page, the reader is confronted with text that is significantly different from what he or she might have expected after encountering “The knowledge not of sorrow.” Directing the reader’s gaze horizontally from left to right by alternating non-indented lines with indented ones, the proem, albeit syntactically convoluted, at least provides some guidance of how to read this Jamesian scene of seeing “past the window- / glass.” An abundance of verb forms, many of them prominently positioned (for instance, “were / saying,” “Is,” “reading speaking / smoking,” “having risen”), help the reader to find the way through the poem, which consists of only one meandering sentence.

In “White,” these anchoring devices disappear. Lineal brevity in combination with what Vescia calls “descendental words of foundation and origin” such as “From,” “Under,” “Up / Down,” and “Stone floor” directs the reader’s eyes downward on the page. Notably, the poem accomplishes this ushering gesture along a vertical axis without any verb and predicate. Prepositions and unconventional line breaks do the job instead, highlighting relations between words on the two-dimensional surface of the page (such as “Up” which is placed directly above “Down”).¹²⁵ In contrast to the inaugural poem, “White” leaves gaps between several of its lines, visually prefiguring the look on the

¹²⁵ Davidson summarizes Oppen’s method of working with language on the page in a succinct sentence: “Prepositional phrases, parenthetical remarks, and noun phrases detached from predication atomize all linear sequence” (xxxix).

page of later poems in the series. While such a way of separating text is obviously a common poetic device of creating stanzas, in “White” and a number of other poems in the series this lacunary style frequently results in the isolation of a single line (“The red globe,” “From the quiet” and “Stone floor”) or even a single word (for example, “Thus” in the next poem or “the” in the sixth poem) for which the term ‘stanza’ seems to be inadequate. As the title “White” indicates, the white spaces between the lines of actual text are at least as meaningful as the printed words. In addition to stanzas of printed text, then, Oppen uses stanzas of white page-space. This usage of the page’s papery materiality, its whiteness and two-dimensionality, substantiate Oppen’s respect for “the purity of the materials” and his belief that “the white space of the paper becomes part of the poem.”

In a fascinating snippet from the archive, Oppen reiterates his trust in the material minutiae of poetry including “white space” when he notes: “Of all arts, poetry has the simplest technical means—a pencil. One needs no technique at all except to know what word, what punctuation mark, what white space must come next” (“The Circumstances” 15). In addition to the unit of the word and white space as central building elements channeling Oppen’s thought process, he includes punctuation in his list of devices with which poets construct. In assigning meaning to a “punctuation mark” and its position within the sequence of word and white space, Oppen makes clear that even the most microscopic typographical symbols matter and contribute to the entire construction on the page. That Oppen was partial to expressive punctuation has so far primarily been shown with respect to his epistolary style. But many of the textual and typographical phenomena which DuPlessis identifies in Oppen’s letters such as “expressive white space” are essential elements of his poetry as well.

What DuPlessis calls “rejection of closure” materializes, for example, in some of his poems in the form of “exfoliating parentheses” which DuPlessis fittingly describes as “petal- or wavelike signs on the page” (xxvi). The last two lines of the fourth poem in *Discrete Series*, for instance, zoom into the interior of “that dark instrument / A car” which the authors of *The Machine Age in America, 1918-1941* deem “[t]he machine that most changed American life” since “[b]y 1920 [...] the automobile existed everywhere” (26).¹²⁶ In the poem which commences with “The evening, water in a glass,” the mystery

¹²⁶ References to cars are scattered throughout Oppen’s poems. In fact, *Discrete Series* mentions the word ‘car’ explicitly six times in five different poems. In addition to the line “A car” quoted above, Oppen writes: “our car runs on a higher road;” “Closed car—closed in glass—;” “See electric flash of streetcar;” “Pointedly bent, your elbow on a car-edge;” “Bad times: / The cars pass.” The high number of references in Oppen’s first, slim volume can partially be explained by turning to statistical data: “From fewer than

of the car's inner workings, hidden "in polish," is reenacted typographically at the end of the poem. With white space to the left due to indentation, the penultimate line reads: "(Which." This minimalistic composition of white space, parenthesis, capitalized relative pronoun, period, and line break recreates the vagueness and inexplicability of the car's "obscured / origin." Importantly, the parenthesis remains open in the final line: "Ease; the hand on the sword-hilt" (8). The surprising metaphor of "the hand on the sword-hilt," quite possibly referring to what Crane calls "the familiar gesture of a motorist in the modest act of shifting gears" in the paragraph of "Modern Poetry" where he champions poetry's necessity to "absorb the machine" (171-172), stretches away into the open white space of the page without any punctuation providing closure at the end of the line. Interestingly, in this 20th century car poem, the anachronistic word "sword-hilt" seems as out of place as the 'turbine' in Crane's "The Dance". In combination with the defamiliarizing arrangement of linguistic material on the page, this image can be said to elicit emotional responses by the reader according to Crane's logic of metaphor. The associational meanings of "sword-hilt" instead of the more logical word 'gear shift' on which the driver's hand seems to rest easefully, in fact, emphasize the obscurity, slipperiness, and potential danger of a car "run[ning] on a higher road."¹²⁷

In addition, Oppen's intentional rejection of closure (after all 23 out of 31 poems in *Discrete Series* end with a period) accentuates the connection between the car poem and the one on the opposite page which introduces two peculiar metaphors within the parallel structure of its first two lines.

500,000 cars and trucks in America in 1910, nearly 10 million were registered in 1920, over 26 million in 1930, and 32 million by 1940" (Wilson et. al. 26).

¹²⁷ It is worth noting here that six weeks before his graduation in 1925 Oppen was actively involved as "the driver in a serious car accident in which one youth was killed" (SL xi). Hoffman elaborates that Oppen was actually "drunk at the wheel" (26). As DuPlessis dryly notes, "[t]he Academy expelled him for drinking (xi). Oppen's life-long interest in cars or "the image of the car" is broached in the last interview before his death with friend and novelist Paul Auster in 1981. In it, Oppen agrees with Auster that "[t]he car is a central part of American life in this [the 20th] century" and goes on to say that the car "turned up in my life over and over again, including the army where they made me a non-com on the strength of it. It was a motorized unit. I was in charge of some of it" (Swigg, "No Form in Mind").

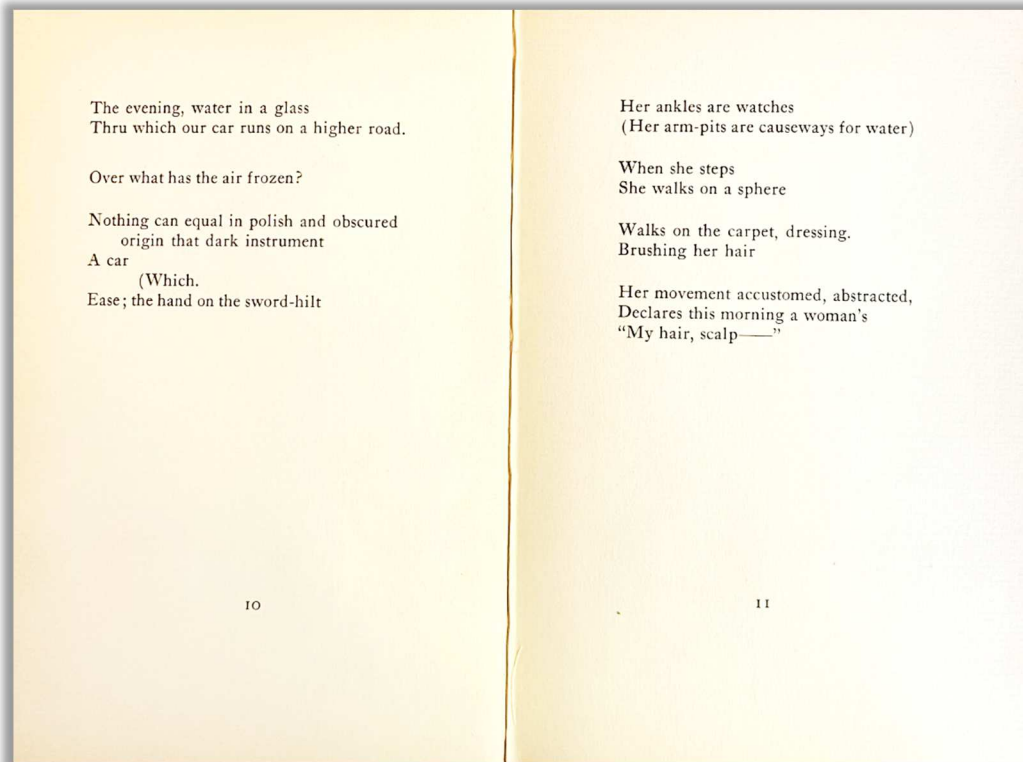


Fig. 13: The complex machine of a car paired with corporeal “movement accustomed” on a double page in *Discrete Series*.

The close vicinity of “Ease” and “hand” smoothly carries over into the accompanying poem on the right-hand side which, right from the start, picks up the bodily component, metaphorical diction, and parenthetical peculiarity (fig. 13): “Her ankles are watches / (Her arm-pits are causeways for water).” As in the car poem, the image of water sets the adjacent poem in motion. The lack of terminal punctuation at the end of the poem on the left-hand side thus suggests flux and connection across the page. Attuned to this kind of unpunctuated transfer across the page, the reader might here echoes of the “Ease; the hand on the sword-hilt” in the woman’s “movement accustomed, abstracted.” In a similar way, Oppen’s “extensive dashes of varying lengths” which, according to DuPlessis, “mark pulse and notate a startled interior listening” in his letters populate his poems as well (xxvii). Prominently positioned for the most part at the end of lines (sixteen poems in *Discrete Series* contain at least one emphatic dash), these extra-long dashes function as typographical markers of both pause and flow, directing the reader onward while pointing horizontally backwards at the same time. Near the end of *Discrete Series*, the poem facing “Drawing” on the opposite page, exemplifies how extensive textual marks on the page cleave (that is, connect and sever simultaneously) the dimension of reading:

On the water, solid——
 The singleness of a toy——

A tug with two barges.

Like expressive strokes in a drawing these punctuation marks draw attention to the material configuration on the page.

In “White,” Oppen also uses punctuation marks and white space as tools for refining and reinforcing meaning. The gaps within the body of the poem have already been discussed. Notably, this use of white space is not limited to the vertical dimension. Oppen sets words apart from the following word twice by intervallic white space. Right after the word-period compound “White.,” a more spacious gap appears (fig. 14). Similarly, after “Down.” a larger white space creates a visual pause before “Round”

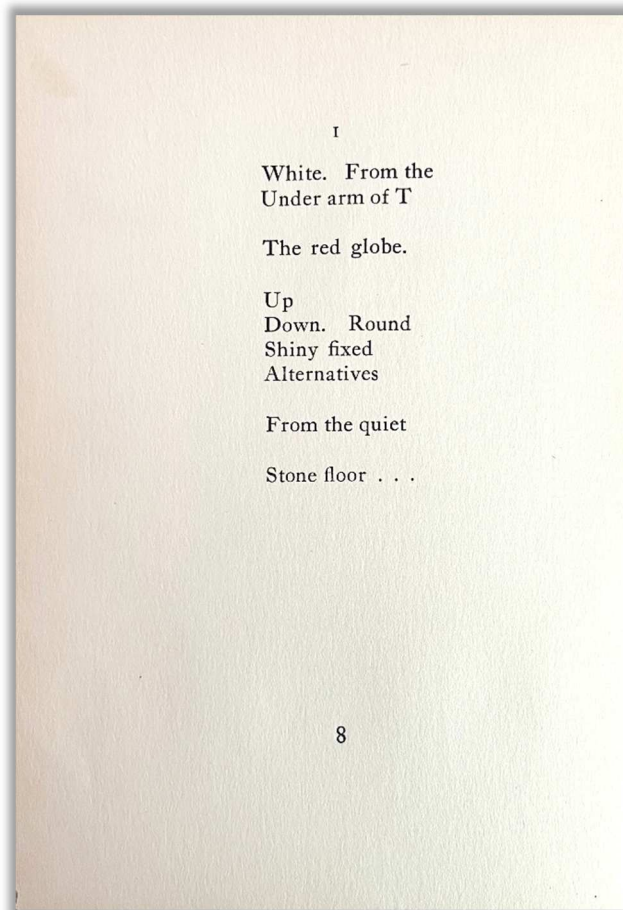


Fig. 14: “White” as printed in the original 1934
Discrete Series.

concludes the line. In both instances, the normal spacing in-between the words extends beyond the whiteness that occurs when the spacebar on a typewriter is pressed once only. These additional spaces highlight key terms and pivotal concepts of Oppen’s poetics such as the “Up / Down” binary. The white space following horizontally after “White”

and the large amount of whiteness in the interstices in general make the reader conscious of and attune her to the materiality of both page and paper.

If the poems in *Discrete Series* prove that Oppen paid attention to “what white space must come next” from the start of his poetic career, the final three dots with which the elevator poem concludes present another example of non-verbal but expressive punctuation marks like parentheses and extra-long dashes: “From the quiet // Stone floor . . .” (6). Literally levelling the final line, these dots provide closure and solidity to the poetic construct. The series of periods on the baseline rhymes visually with the preceding compound “Stone floor,” typographically grounding the poem’s vertical thrust at “the rock bottom basis of the poem, the bedrock” (“Meaning” 192). Organized linearly like dashes, the triad of punctuation marks additionally speaks to the elliptical nature of the poem. At the same time, the dot-dot-dot instantiation on the page indicates some sort of unfinished business through its prominent placement at the end of the last line. True to their typographical status as full points, the final marks of “White” point towards the neighboring poem which, as has been noted before, fittingly begins with an indent of white space preceding the deictic “Thus.” In this way, bibliographic and typographical phenomena complement, reinforce, and even expand the meaning of linguistic code. Since Oppen cooperated with the printer who set the 1934 *Discrete Series* by hand and was in control of arranging the poems in the way he intended both on the page as well as sequentially in the series, he could utilize the materiality and dimensionality of his pages in all facets.

Against the backdrop of Oppen’s preference for semantic spacing and expressive typographical devices, it is suggestive to extend the close reading of bibliographic code even further by zeroing in on one typographical phenomenon in the original edition which has disappeared in all reprintings of *Discrete Series* except for the 1966 facsimile version. As it is, one subtle yet meaningful alteration in letterform becomes apparent if one examines the very first letter of the first word in the first poem of the 1934 volume. Readers who encounter “The knowledge not of sorrow” today, either in collected or anthologized form, are very probably unaware of the fact that the first word of *Discrete Series*, “The,” is set in a different type font and that the “T” quite literally initiates the poem as a drop cap in the 1934 book as well as in the *Mother/Asphodel* reprint.

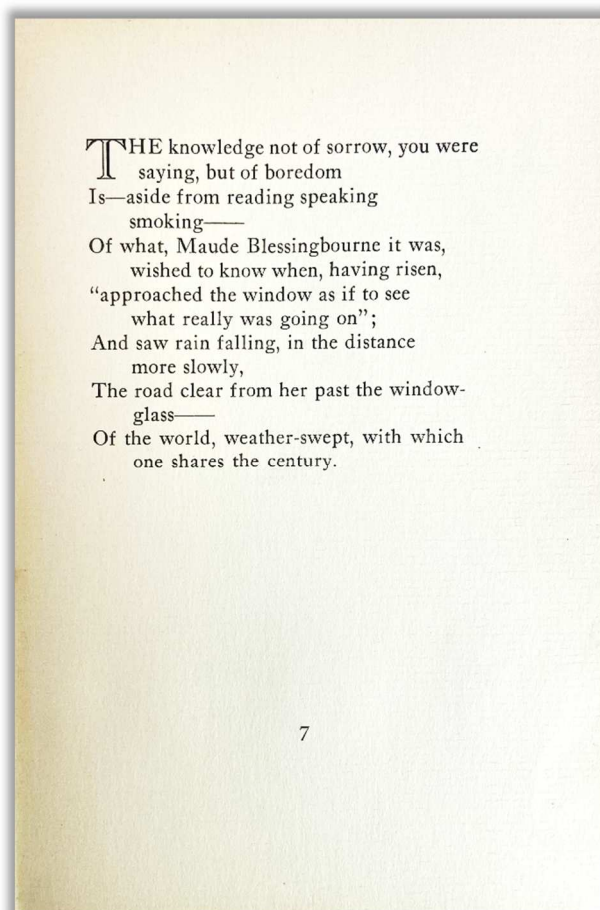


Fig. 15: The first poem of *Discrete Series* with the initial “T” typographically making its mark on the page.

In both cases, the stem of the letter “T” reaches down, its bilateral serifs aligning with the baseline of the second line (fig. 15). The horizontal bar of this dropping initial aligns, typographically speaking, with the capline of the poem’s first line. Its heightened ‘arm’ in letterform anatomy is visually highlighted by the following majuscules “H” and “E” which stand out prominently since all the subsequent letters placed on the first and second line are in lower case. As a visual cue, the initial ‘T’ marks the beginning of both the poem and the book, in a way catering to the reader’s reading experience and expectation.

Moreover, Oppen’s deliberate choice to typographically showcase the letter ‘T’ as well as the word ‘The’ sensitizes the reader both to the significance of the definite article ‘the’ and directs attention to the shape and materiality of the smallest building blocks of language.¹²⁸ With the knowledge that the poet was himself responsible for the

¹²⁸ It is interesting to speculate whether Oppen’s fondness for Zukofsky’s “Poem Beginning ‘The’” shaped his own poem. As jottings from the archive reveal, the semantics of the definite and indefinite articles undoubtedly bothered Oppen. He writes: “poetry; the experience of the the, the experience of the a [...]”

publication of his first book of poetry and that he chose a printer who set by hand so that Oppen's intention of how the compositional units should look could actually materialize in print, it might not be too far-fetched to draw connections between the initial 'T' of "The knowledge not of sorrow" and the "Under arm of T" in the poem which the reader encounters upon turning the page. After all, it is curious that a single capitalized letter prominently positioned at the end of a line becomes an integral part of a poem. Is it plausible to read the individual letter and its material form as signifying outwards to the historical context of the design of a 1930s elevator door while at the same time acknowledging the T-shaped referent as a material entity of its own which exhibits its typographical features noticeably and sizably right from the book's initial initiation? Or, to put it more provocatively, can we read the sequence of prepositional phrase ("Under"), corporeal entity ("arm"), and alphabetical grapheme ("T") as referring quite concretely to the materiality of the large drop cap "T" with which Oppen's series begins? Such a focus on typographical details is not meant to disregard the predominant reading of "White" as an elevator poem. Rather it can extend both context-based and text-based readings, shedding light on aspects of composition which facilitate the process of absorbing the machine into the material components of poetry. While Conte, for instance, dispenses with the image of the elevator altogether in his analysis of "White," Shoemaker integrates the "poem's contemporary context" into his discussion, claiming that "the 'poem as object' exists *in conjunction with* a historical impulse committing the poem to a full engagement with its sociohistorical context." In what he calls "another mode of reading," Shoemaker on the one hand usefully turns to "the poem's first appearance in print," making much of the title "1930'S" in Zukofsky's *An "Objectivists" Anthology* (68). On the other hand, in his interpretation of the image of the "Under arm of T," he moves too swiftly to reading a "subject/object confusion" into the text by stating that "'under arms' are usually associated with people rather than with elevator indicators" (71). What both Conte and Shoemaker fail to take into consideration is that the capitalized letter "T" points to its own materiality on the page, that is, its typographical anatomy.¹²⁹ Given the poem's inscrutable thingness which invites several

there are many a's, there is only one the [...] the and a, the impenetrable particles which fall apart in their [scientists'] hands as in ours" ("Meaning" 200).

¹²⁹ As a matter of fact, it is astonishing and inexplicable that "White" is reprinted without any white spaces between the lines in Shoemaker's essay. Instead, the lines are cramped together which runs counter to Oppen's original intention. This is shocking because Shoemaker cites the *New Collected Poems* as the source from which he picked the poem. In the *New Collected Poems*, however, Davidson replicates the white gaps within "White." Since the poem's bibliographic features are completely ignored in the

wide-ranging interpretations, it is helpful to disassociate oneself temporarily from the prefabricated notion of the poem as an elevator poem and look at the work afresh in the context of the book publication.

Such an approach does justice to Oppen's respect for and faith in the material components of poetic composition. Reading the "Under arm of T" as a self-reflective comment on the physicality of letterform type widens the analytical lens, suggesting that the discrete connections between poems extend to phenomena of print culture. If one accepts this close reading of bibliographic code, the anatomy of the grapheme 'T' insinuates that what follows below the horizontal bar constituting the top of the capitalized letter at the start of the series is "White"/white in at least two ways: denotatively, white as in the whiteness of the paper's materiality and, connotatively, white as in the ambiguous associations and "hermeneutic possibilities" evoked by the adjective which Vescia pinpoints as follows: "White can be a void, or like white light, may contain all colors of the spectrum" (70). Such an original reading, in both senses of the word 'original,' would also raise questions concerning the image of "The red globe" which materializes as the third line of "White," highlighted by white space above and below. Sure enough, Oppen's explication of the signified referent helps to make sense of the white/red dualism and readers who are acquainted with the material culture of the 1930s might automatically decode the "globe" as a synonym of a round button at an elevator portal. Still, coupled with the symbolic adjective "red," the noun "globe" might also evoke grander, indeed more global and politically colored associations. While I do not want to pursue this suggestive line of argument any further here, I believe that paying attention to nonverbal elements in close readings of text can bring to light deeper layers of poetic thinking and disclose new multimodal routes of reading. Even if one refuses to embrace such a reading strategy, even if one deems such an angle of analysis unpersuasive, it is obligatory to at least ponder the question whether it is just coincidental that the first letter of the first poem of *Discrete Series* is handset as an initial "T" in the 1934 book and that Oppen makes use of "T's" physical shape in the subsequent poem to construct meaning both figuratively and literally.

Unfortunately, neither the 1931 magazine publication in *Poetry* nor any reprinting of the poem in later Oppen collections, except for the aforementioned 1966 facsimile edition, has the initial 'T' at the line-start. Instead, these versions, although

reprinting in Shoemaker's "*Discrete Series and the Posthuman City*," it is not surprising that he does not address typographical issues.

identical regarding linguistic code, shrink the large capital initial to standardized size and level the following capitalized letters “H” and “E” to lowercase. As a consequence, the word “The” appears in the same type font as any other word in the series. Readers without access to the original form and format of the letter-word-page triad are left in the dark about this typographical subtlety. If the material culture referent of “White” has disappeared “in the mists of architectural history” (*SL* 90), the print culture phenomenon of the “The” set by hand on “The knowledge not of sorrow” page has been lost in the mists of publication history. In the same way in which architectural developments supersede earlier constructions, thereby making ornamental devices like the elevator buttons obsolete, reprintings of texts in different material venues potentially obfuscate nonverbal agents of meaning which are set in dialog with linguistic code in the original version. In Oppen’s case in particular, readers deprived of such relevant bibliographic information lose a pertinent tool for making sense of Oppen’s use of materials, for understanding his meticulous method of composition in which each discrete element counts.

Oppen was keenly aware of and paid attention to the effect which typographical nuances achieve on the page. Decades later in his 1969 review of Armand Schwerner’s *Seaweed*, one of only a few published prose texts by Oppen, he touches on poetic aspects which are formative of his own work: “A number of experimental poems, largely experiments in the isolation of words, a radical exploration, depend on space and organization of the page which cannot be displayed in brief quotation but achieves in the book a remarkably pure lyricism of word and silence and of skepticism” (*SPDP* 40). For Oppen, “space and the organization of the page” are interdependent tools, grounded in the materiality of the page, with which he constructs and refines the poem as “AN INSTRUMENT OF THOUGHT” (“Selections” 17). As a crucial element in all phases of the writing process, white page-space can facilitate a shining forth of “pure lyricism of word and silence” as well as, one might add, typographical minutiae. The method of isolating words in order to restore meaning to words which Oppen lauds in Schwerner’s poetry is a key component of Oppen’s poetic repertoire as well. In one jotting from his working papers, Oppen, for instance, leaves a note to himself: “Isolated words making possible the audibility of minds and parts of minds which have been inaudible in print” (qtd. in Nicholls 138). What is more, the procedure of creating room for words merges the material compositional units of the word, the line, and the page. Oppen outlines the effect which the combination of these material elements achieves in entries from his

working papers. In “Selections from George Oppen’s Daybook,” for example, Oppen jots down his definition of writing just a few lines after claiming that “In a sheet of paper is contained the infinite:” “The writing is a test and discovery: test and discover word by word as you go WORD BY WORD. We must force the words to mean something. Because we know there is something to mean” (“Selections” 7). This poetic technique of proceeding word by word echoes Oppen’s concept of the line as “a place to stand” which makes it “possible to take another step” (“Circumstances”16). The accurate stringing together of words contributes to the structure and shape of the lines on the page. Naturally, such a gradual “*process* of writing the poem,” which Oppen calls “prosody: how to write a poem” in his posthumously published “Statement on Poetics” (SPDP 47), takes time and requires stubbornness and patience on the writer’s part. Oppen emphasizes this time-consuming quality of writing poetry as “a test of sincerity, a test of conviction” in his letters and working papers (SPDP 31). After admitting that he “know[s] how hard it is to earn a poem,” he concludes one letter with the following statement written in all-caps: “IT TAKES YEARS SOMETIMES TO FIND ONE LINE” (SL 226).¹³⁰

While precision and perseverance are needed to produce clarity, any exaggerated poetic practice of isolating words and employing typographical devices excessively can have a negative effect. Oppen addresses this flip side of versification as “radical exploration” in comments on Michael McClure’s book of poetry *Dark Brown* which he reviewed alongside with Allen Ginsberg’s *Kaddish and Other Poems, 1958-1960* and Charles Olson’s *Maximus from Dogtown* for *Poetry* in 1962. Informing the reader that *Dark Brown* “is printed in a handset edition of 750 copies,” Oppen proceeds to the literally gritty details of the “longest poem in the book” which “is a description of seven or eight successful performances of sexual acts” (SPDP 27). With an acute eye on the (typographical) details of the poem’s “very ejaculatory nature,” Oppen writes that the poem is “set off by a blank page facing [...] and contains twenty-five printings of the word *Oh*, forty-three exclamation marks, occurring singly and in clusters, and 286 words printed in capitals” (27). Unsurprisingly, Oppen who professes in his poems repeatedly

¹³⁰ In another letter from the 1970s Oppen couples the idea of finding lines with the undergirding principle of aiming for perfection: “ANY problem of the poem can be solved. Any vowel you need you can get, any structure, any order of phrase that you need. Occasionally lines write themselves, but a line may take weeks or months to write, and sometimes very much longer. But there is no reason why every syllable should not be perfect. Of course you must test each syllable for yourself—one must certainly not be thinking about what other people may or may not have got away with. You just have to make EVERY syllable perfect. But that’s ALL there is to it. EVERYBODY knows that except the poets—” (SL 415, fn. 28).

that his “motive of poetry / [Is] to achieve clarity” and strives to accomplish such “Clarity // In the sense of *transparence*” and “Clarity in the sense of silence” by employing “a substantial language / Of clarity, and of respect” is skeptical of such bombast in the Beat poet’s work (*NCP* 193, 175, 156). Still, by counting the number of “exclamation marks, capitals, and typographical devices” and by calling them “pure printed exclamation,” Oppen reveals how aware he was of the semantic potential of typography. The fact that Oppen takes the time to count each capitalized word suggests that meticulous close readings of bibliographic code are as crucial as decoding the meaning from the actual text, the poem’s linguistic code.

6 The Materiality of Oppen's Words and Works

“The Building of the Skyscraper” shows that such key principles as the vertical dimension, the line sense, and deictic page-space materialize in Oppen’s later work. Oppen’s insistence on the importance of little words (‘a tree’ vs. ‘the tree’) and his emphasis on the poem’s meaningful shape and “form on the paper” hark back to his poems from the 1930s. Although Oppen reused ideas and fragments from his early poetry in later works (as has been shown regarding the key concept ‘boredom’), critics are wary of diagnosing conceptual connections between Oppen’s volumes of poetry. As a matter of fact, there are renowned poets and critics who assert that Oppen’s work changed profoundly after *Discrete Series* and thus during the twenty-five years while Oppen refrained from writing poetry. In a 1981 essay, Language poet Ron Silliman, for example, divides the literary movement of Objectivism into three phases and states that “Oppen’s works, from *The Materials* to the present, are decisively different than *Discrete Series*, his first phase volume” (86). Susan Thackrey contends even more vigorously that “[t]here is no doubt that the poems in *The Materials* were different from those of *Discrete Series*, or that Oppen’s technique had changed in some respects” (19). While it is not my intention to claim that Oppen wrote the same book over and over again, I believe that the concept of a ‘discrete series’ applies to his oeuvre as a whole. His volumes of poetry stand on their own, but they are also conceptually interconnected. In arguing this position, I side ranks with Eliot Weinberger who writes in his preface to the *New Collected Poems* that “all of Oppen’s work [...] seems to belong to a single continuing poem” (xvii) and follow Paul Auster’s direction who rightly observes of Oppen’s poetry that “all his work is of a piece—interconnected, issuing from a single source, each poem strengthened by the presence of the others. The language is almost naked, and the syntax seems to derive its logic as much from the silences around words as from the words themselves” (49). Oppen himself suggests such a reading in some of his letters after his return to poetry. For example, he tells Serge Fauchereau in 1966 that once the French translator will have read *Discrete Series* “off-set by Asphodel Press” he will “easily discern a thirty-year difference but [...] will also be aware of a continuity” (*SL* 140). This continuity, I argue, is based on his poetics of the vertical dimension and dimensional thinking. Moreover, all his work including his work with wooden materials gives evidence of his respect for and meticulous collaboration with the materials at hand. Oppen’s undergirding principle, his poetic ethos of respecting the materiality of his building units, shows throughout all stages of his life and career.

To be clear: this is not to say that the extraordinary and traumatic events which Oppen experienced in the period from 1934-1959—when he “made a choice,” “did not write ‘Marxist’ poetry,” and “[s]topped, for the crisis, writing” (*SL* 277)—did not impact the poems he wrote after the hiatus. After all, how could such formative experiences as involvement in Leftist activities during the Great Depression (the Oppens joined the Communist Party in 1935 and helped organize strikes), war (Oppen fought in the Second World War and was severely wounded in a foxhole when his cohort was hit by direct shell fire on April 22, 1945), and exile (fearing harassment by the FBI under McCarthyism, the Oppens chose voluntary exile in Mexico from 1950-1959) not leave marks on the family and Oppen’s work? Thematically, his books of poetry from the 1960s and in particular *The Materials* (1962), the first volume after *Discrete Series*, deal with these influential experiences and are imbued with existential questions about, in the most extreme form, life and death. Nicholls rightly observes that “*The Materials* is a troubled and anxious volume, overshadowed by the threat of atomic catastrophe and by the spectre of an alien ‘stone universe’” (36). Oppen works the wartime experience of “the mud, the terrible ground” into *The Materials* and counterpoises anxiety and fear of destruction (“Rubble of our roots”) with images of birth and creation (*NCP* 81, 42). Materially, he frequently visualizes this dialectical thinking by making use of the double page as a place where oppositional perspectives reflect on each other. As in *Discrete Series*, he uses page-space both vertically and horizontally to create poetic pairs.

If war and the image of rubble influenced Oppen’s post-exilic writing both thematically and conceptually, the experience of working as a craftsman also carried over into his poetry. More significantly, working with wooden materials and in particular the creative activity of producing bas-relief sculptures, I suggest, provided Oppen with a distinctly material compositional method which he adopted when he started writing poetry again. This relief quality (in both senses of the homonym) becomes manifest in his archived working papers many of which have by now been made available to the public through edited selections. First and foremost, Michael Davidson’s excellent archival work deserves to be mentioned here. My analysis of Oppen’s note-stacks builds on Davidson’s stringent terminology of the ‘palimtext,’ a key term he develops from his archival research. The close readings of Oppen’s working papers in the course of this chapter are indebted to Davidson’s sentiment that “writing is archeological, the gradual accretion and sedimentation of textual materials, no layer of which can ever be isolated from any other” (“Palimtexts 27”). Taking its cue from

relief sculpture, Oppen's method of "[p]iling up pieces of paper to find the words" results in a multilayered artefact the construction of which is predicated on a surface-ground nexus (Hatlen 44). In both reliefs, depth grants different angles of perception. Oppen's three-dimensional note-stacks retain vestiges of prior phases of thinking which can be traced by dismantling the paste-up layers. If in his wood carvings Oppen starts by making incisions into the topmost layer, gradually chiseling and honing his idea into form, in his paper reliefs he aims to get to the bottom of things by adding layer upon layer onto the base page, by creating a textual pile which makes the thinking process and the development of thought tangible and graspable.

Put simplistically, Oppen builds his poems three-dimensionally by amassing material on top of other layers. Paradoxically, this method of vertically accreting material is key to grasping the ground on which the ensemble of paper and text rests. The more layers he adds, the more solid the bedrock of the poem and the clearer his understanding of the ideational foundation become. The principle that something fundamental can only be approached by a downward movement along a vertical axis no matter how recalcitrant and impenetrable the surface might be ("Difficulty, the refusal of things to work out, forces one deeper, that is, deep enough" [SL 240]) lies at the heart of Oppen's creative work. Surface-depth relation is essential in this process and deepening, as has been shown with regard to the line sense, is a key criterion of Oppen's compositional method. Many examples can be found in Oppen's correspondence where he stresses depth as a crucial dimensional category. A small sample size of aphorisms from his letters demonstrates that depth is pivotal in all stages of writing: "I think, have always thought focus, depth, what the painters once called aerial perspective – change, control / understanding of depth, of focus is crucial" (fn. 11; SL 406); "Depth, the possibility of learning from one's own poem" (229); "the poems plunge to such depths!" (169). Significantly, Oppen aimed for depth also in the material building blocks of poetry such as page-space, words, and even syllables: "My little words rattle sometimes / his [Duncan's] syllables are whole, are deeper, are whole" ("Meaning" 202); "I'm not sure I ever visualize anything but depth... Or a point, a detail so sharply defined that I'm shaken by the implication of space" (SL 221). This focus on depth also shows in the non-poetic creative work Oppen produced in the interim years between *Discrete Series* and *The Materials*.

Virtually every Oppen scholar dwells on the fact that he stopped writing poetry for twenty-five years after the publication of *Discrete Series*. In explaining the huge

temporal gap between his publications, Oppen liked to repeat Hugh Kenner's famous aperçu that it basically took him twenty-five years to write the next poem. "I was explaining, by request," Oppen writes in a letter, "'the twenty-five year silence' to Hugh Kenner — critic and of the far right politically. I rather enjoyed explaining baldly, but Kenner found it painful and interrupted to say: 'In brief, it took twenty-five years to write the next poem' which perhaps is the correct explanation" (*SL* 181). Unsurprisingly, then, this reading of Oppen's hiatus, this explanation of his self-imposed poetic silence, has prevailed and has become the dominant narrative among Oppen scholars.¹³¹ Yet Oppen also provides more complex reasons for his choice of abandoning poetry: "I stopped writing perhaps you know for some twenty odd years. To begin with," he lets George Johnston know, "the catastrophe of human lives in the thirties which seemed to me to put poetry and the purposes of poetry in question" caused this discontinuation (*SL* 186). In the Hatlen-Mandel interview, Oppen elaborates that a lack of world experience prompted the Oppens' decision to engage in politics: "[W]hen the crisis occurred we knew we didn't know what the world was and we knew we had to find out so it was a poetic exploration at the same time that it was an act of conscience" (*GOMP* 25). Relevantly, he also emphasizes that the transition from his first book of poetry to political activity was logical for him. As he writes in a letter to John Crawford in all-caps, "FROM DISCRETE SERIES TO THE MARXISM WAS NOT A 'BREAK'—BY ANY MEANS" (*SL* 255). As this emphatic linkage of poetry and life choices indicates, Oppen was aware of continuities between his work as a poet and his work as a Marxist activist. He understood political activity as "a poetic exploration." The same sense of continuity, I venture to propose, can also be traced in the way in which Oppen constructed with such different materials as paper and wood.

As it is, critics have so far either entirely overlooked or skimmed as negligible biographical information that Oppen did work during his absence from poetry while in exile in Mexico. Oppen's poetics of the vertical dimension did not simply dissipate. Rather, he adapted his compositional method and applied it to a different mode of creative expression: the carving of wooden bas-reliefs. Oppen continued to adhere to

¹³¹ Understandably, this overly simplified explanation was not accepted by everyone. DuPlessis mentions in a footnote that Henry "Weinfield had criticized Kenner for his remark about the gap in the writing career." According to Weinfield, "Kenner was disregarding the real process at work" (fn. 15; *SL* 423). Shoemaker touches on the "real process at work" when he writes about Oppen's poetic silence: "If there was a turn away from art (and of course there was, since poetry was not, in fact, being written), there was also, apparently, a 'turn back' already in mind, already in preparation—as well as a sense that poetic 'activity' was being carried on even if actual writing was not" ("Preface" xx-xxi). As I want to argue, Oppen's poetic activity carried on quite materially in his creative work with wood and paper.

this basic principle but shifted the focus from working with linguistic materials on leaves of paper to the honing of materials with a more concretely palpable quality. The general belief that boring into the surface and piercing the layers below—no matter how thick they are—will result in the disclosure of the ground, the bedrock, the “bare foundations,” can be traced in Oppen’s creative work as wood carver as well as in his multilayered working papers (*NCP* 45).

As regards the debated question whether Oppen’s technique changed after *Discrete Series*, it is interesting to note that references to dimensional thinking can already be found in Oppen’s sparse pre-exile documents. Although he verbalized the principle of the vertical dimension more than forty years after the publication of *Discrete Series*, the issue of how to convert multilayered poetic thinking onto the two-dimensional plane of the page without utterly irritating the reader occupied Oppen’s mind from the start. In fact, the very first letter in *The Selected Letters of George Oppen* contains a reference to “the dimension of reading” (*SL* 2). In this letter from early 1932 to William Carlos Williams, whose *A Novelette and Other Prose* Oppen had published through his publishing firm TO, Publishers in France, Oppen thanks the older poet for feedback on his own poems: “I was very pleased—naturally—with what you say of my work” (2). Oppen then excerpts a quote from Williams’ letter (“they will not think it aesthetic, but—”) which is the incentive for the following self-critical remark about the poems he had shared: “(what the poems do lack, I think, is the dimension of reading—the direction in which one reads; that is to say, they do not and are not really intended to create an environment, so that if reading is to ‘fill time’—enuf to matter—I can see that they are not very desirable)” (2). Unfortunately, it is not clear which of his early poems Oppen had sent Williams who was at that time relaunching *Contact* as co-editor.

David Hobbs, who found *21 Poems* among the Ezra Pound Papers Addition in the Yale Collection of American Literature at the Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, reprints the same letter as an appendix to *21 Poems* and surmises in his introduction to these poems that Oppen was “discussing the printing of Williams’s *A Novelette and Other Prose* as well as *21 Poems*” (13). The fact that *Discrete Series* was published two years after Oppen wrote Williams about “the dimension of reading—the direction in which one reads” which his poems lack makes this conjecture indeed plausible. It is notable in this regard that four of the *21 Poems* were published in the January 1932 issue of *Poetry*. As Hobbs rightly points out, “the second, fifth, sixteenth, and twenty-first poem were originally published together as four sections of a different

‘Discrete Series’” (11). Oppen thus clearly thought of the poems he composed in the late 1920s as belonging to a collection of poems which he subsumed under the title ‘Discrete Series.’ Even though only one poem from the 1932 *Poetry* issue finally made it into *Discrete Series* (“The Mast” which bears the title “IV Cat-Boat” in *Poetry* and which concludes *21 Poems*), the fact that the idea of a discrete series was on Oppen’s mind prior to the publication of his first book and found expression in magazine publications as well as in typescripts which he circulated among his poet friends (Reznikoff, Zukofsky) suggests significant parallels in style, form, and vertical thinking. The recovery of these early texts hence truly “evinces a larger, more dynamic body of work” (Hobbs 11); work which stems from the same ideational source, and which consequently poses similar problems to the reader. When Oppen concedes that “what the poems do lack [...] is the dimension of reading—the direction in which one reads,” he admits to a feature of his poetry which is endemic to *Discrete Series* as well.

The poems in *Discrete Series* are not meant to ““fill time,”” that is, they do not offer a narrative arc or some easily decipherable syntax which might comfortably usher the reader towards some aesthetically pleasing moment of closure. Reading Oppen’s poems is not necessarily a leisure activity. Unlike other texts and genres which “create an environment,” Oppen’s “jagged-edged, sketchy poems” in their fragmentary, elliptical, and enigmatic appearance on the page challenge the reader to find his or her own way through the verbal construction site (DuPlessis, “George Oppen” 65). This demand on the reader at times resulted in frustration or downright repudiation. Some reviews of *Discrete Series* attest to this disavowal and disapproval on the reader’s or at least some reviewer’s part. William Rose Benét famously wrote a brief but brutal review published in *The Saturday Review of Literature* on 24 March, 1934 which culminates in his claim that “Mr. Oppen’s offering exhibits that extreme parsimony of words that is taken today to imply infinite profundity. I don’t believe it implies anything of the kind. Most of Mr. Oppen’s observations fail to impress me. His writing is like listening to a man with an impediment in his speech” (580). In an equally hostile and derisive tone, Geoffrey Grigson condemned Oppen’s poems in a June 1934 review as ““anti-poems” born not of a ‘poetic womb,’ but ‘an isolated, dried-up bladder’” (qtd. in *GOMP* 464). Williams’s benevolent and sincere remarks, which will be discussed in the following, published in July 1934 in *Poetry* probably mitigated the sharp criticism which Oppen and his book received. Nonetheless, as evidenced from his letters, Oppen pondered the (negative) reception of his early work even decades later.

In a letter from 1973, he touches upon the novelty of *Discrete Series* when he tells John Crawford that “some poems of Discrete [were] written 1928” and that “[i]f you look at the anthologies of the time, you’ll see it was avant garde alright / Primarily because I could not have expressed what I felt in the old forms / Perhaps I *had* some sense of historical movement” (*SL* 254). In an earlier letter, Oppen states that he “hadn’t thought the Discrete Series ‘bad’” but admits that “the poems require the help, the very great good will of the reader” (82). In 1972 he asks: “Discrete Series? I still don’t think it difficult” and declares that he is “still a little troubled by the accusation” (236). His frustration that many of his readers could not make sense of his dimensional thinking and did not accept its concrete manifestation on the page blasts forth in a 1975 letter to Michael Heller: “the experience of Discrete Series, the insistence that it COULD not be understood, leaves me in danger of weeping for friendship, in companionship” (310). Oppen has by now certainly found many companions in scholars who have helped to make his work more accessible and understandable. Still, *Discrete Series* holds an exceptional position in Oppen’s oeuvre. According to Heller, the recipient of the 1975 letter and author of the important essay collection *Conviction’s Net of Branches*, “[n]othing resembling the poetry of *Discrete Series* had previously been seen in American Poetry and Pound’s emphasis on the work’s uniqueness was entirely correct” (*Speaking the Estranged* 11). Nicholls agrees and points to the fact that the volume is still puzzling: “*Discrete Series*, with its enigmatic and syntactically compacted brevities, looked deliberately out of joint with most of the poetry of its period and remains a problematic work” (2). Shoemaker even goes so far as to label *Discrete Series* a “‘postmodern’ book:” “All of Oppen’s books have their difficulties, their ‘arduous’ approaches to the materials at hand, requiring and rewarding effort on the part of the reader. But in this early, strikingly ‘postmodern’ book, Oppen was at his most avant-garde” (Shoemaker 8). Burton Hatlen, editor of the seminal book *George Oppen: Man and Poet* and renowned Oppen scholar, affirms the exceptional position of *Discrete Series* in the modernist canon when he calls it “that most radical of modernist texts” and claims: “If *Discrete Series* still seems one of the most radical texts produced by an American modernist, however, the reason lies less in its deconstruction of the connectives between things than in its deconstruction of syntax itself” (*GOMP* 325, 330). In spite or maybe because of *Discrete Series*’ uniqueness, when Oppen started writing again, he frequently returned to his early poems in which he discerned the source of his later work.

After his return to poetry and to publishing in the 1960s, Oppen was often asked about his opinion on *Discrete Series* and possible continuities between this first book and his post-hiatus volumes of poetry. Tellingly, he often posits his first book of poetry as the work which contains the kernel for his later poetic writing. In letters from 1968 to Jerome Rothenberg to whom he had sent “a facsimile of *Discrete Series*,” Oppen explains that “[i]n the later books [he] struggled to broaden the statement beyond the nouns,” professing that “*Discrete Series* is not concerned with predicates” (*SL* 179). In order to avoid any misunderstanding, he sent another letter (“I wrote hurriedly. Too hurriedly.”) in which he clarifies his appreciation of *Discrete Series*: “I meant NOT to protest the ‘noun series’ / I am for further reducing the mechanism of predicate which ‘marks where the subject matter ends.’ [...] And adduced *Discrete* [...] as my own attempt toward the primacy of subject as against predicate” (180). Accordingly, looking back at his first book of poetry almost fifty years after its publication, he succinctly responds to the question in the seminal 1980 interview with Hatlen and Mandel whether he disowns *Discrete Series*: “I think it’s great!” At this point, Mary picks up the thread and specifies that “the seeds of all of the ideas in the metaphysics are all there in the *Discrete Series* which later developed into the other poetry” (*GOMP* 30). These remarks by the Oppens make clear that connections and continuities exist in his work which span the temporal divide between publications. Notably, George focuses on syntactical elements in his revisiting of his “noun series” (“the primacy of subject as against predicate”), whereas Mary approaches her husband’s first book of poetry from a broader perspective identifying it as the conceptual origin of his later work. George zeroes in on small building materials of his poetry and the materiality of words which he charges with meaning. He appreciates his early work for “reducing the mechanism of predicate,” a detail-oriented method he intends to pursue in his post-exile poems. Interestingly, in using the word “mechanism,” he resorts to a semantic field which critics and reviewers have found apt to characterize Oppen’s compositional procedure with. Williams, with whom Oppen had shared his concerns about the “dimension of reading” in 1932, employs the same metaphor in his review of *Discrete Series* in 1934 and fleshes out Ezra Pound’s famous ovation of Oppen as “a serious craftsman.”

6.1 Carpentry, Poetic Carving, and Craftsmanship

While Oppen scholars cannot seem to agree on whether his technique changed from *Discrete Series* to the publications after his return to poetry, there is a consensus among them when it comes to the metaphors they employ to describe his work. It is indeed remarkable how many scholars resort to metaphors of craftsmanship and construction when they try to make sense of his poetry. Notably, this figurative approximation is not limited to specific poems or volumes but crops up in discussions of his idiosyncratic writing style and ranges across his entire oeuvre. A plethora of passages can be found in which critics, for example, claim that Oppen's poems "show the chisel marks of their construction" (Davidson xix), in which they compare his compositional method to masonry ("Oppen constructs a poem as a mason builds a wall" [Weinberger 133]), or where renowned scholars identify parallels to carpentry as is most conspicuously the case in the title of Hugh Kenner's review of Oppen's *Collected Poems*: "Poems made like a chair, each part joined and tested" (260).¹³²

Schimmel, who reads and analyzes *Discrete Series* in its original 1934 form and format and thus brings to light fascinating aspects concerning the book's materiality, goes even so far as to claim that "the young Oppen erects temples (little paestums) on the page." According to him, "*Discrete Series*, at least, is all condensation, all composition—or if composition can be said to be a habit of the eye, then *Discrete Series* is all construction" (294-95). By designating Oppen's first book of poems as "all construction," Schimmel posits craft and construction as trademark qualities of Oppen's poetic work; qualities which his poems exhibit from the start of his publication career. In establishing connections between manual craftsmanship and the making of poems, literary critics hark back to the very first reviews of *Discrete Series* by Pound and Williams who, adjudicating from the highest echelon of modern poetry, lauded Oppen's "craftsmanlike economy of means." Their appraisal set the tone for Oppen's career and

¹³² In the same review of Oppen's *Collected Poems*, Kenner points to cornerstones of Oppen's career ("[Oppen] later kept going by manual craftsmanship" and "has been among other things a tool and die maker, and a furniture designer in Mexico City"), mentions Oppen's "wariness about the language itself," the "clean-cut silences framing the words," and his "distrust of inherent fluency," and explains the simile of the review's title in the following way "In one important way a poem does resemble a chair. As the wood acquires its meaning from the craftsman, [...] so the poem, according to Oppen, isn't the sum of virtuous words but is what confers upon the words their virtue" (260).

heavily influenced the direction in which Oppen scholarship developed.¹³³ Before turning to the material unit of the word with which Oppen constructs and before investigating the materiality of the (double) page as the primary site on which construction takes place, it is useful to trace the development of these tropes and their connection to Objectivist poetics.

After some digressions dealing with the “charge of obscurity” and “the cry for originality,” Pound closes his preface to *Discrete Series* with a laudatory final sentence: “I salute a serious craftsman, a sensibility which is not every man’s sensibility and which has not been got out of any other man’s books” (*NCP* 4). The epithet “serious craftsman” with which Pound endows his younger compatriot is appropriately chosen as Oppen himself frequently emphasized the importance of both sincerity—“preoccupation with the accuracy of detail in writing” as Louis Zukofsky puts it in his seminal essay “Sincerity and Objectification”—and objectification which Oppen defines in the 1969 interview with L.S. Dembo as “the objectification of the poem, the making an object of the poem” (160).¹³⁴ This poetic principle of making something (the etymological root meaning of ‘poetry’) by paying meticulous attention to the smallest subtleties and minutest details of the materials with which one operates is applicable to the work which a “serious craftsman” carries out. Pound’s concise salute in 1934, then, hit the nail on the head and the metaphor employed by “the pounding poet, the masculine poet,” as Oppen called Pound in one of his last interviews, evolved into a more elevated conceit because reviewers, scholars and, most importantly, the author of *Discrete Series* himself added descriptors which support the poet-craftsman analogy (*Speaking with George Oppen* 220).

In the Dembo interview right after he provides his definition of ‘objectivist,’ Oppen sketches the fundamentals of his poetic thinking, sets it apart from “the sloppy American imagism descending out of Amy Lowell and a thousand others,” and repeats the Latinate verb “construct” four times in two short paragraphs:

¹³³ DuPlessis succinctly stresses the weight and significance of these two documents: “The ‘Preface’ by Ezra Pound and the review in *Poetry* by William Carlos Williams of Oppen’s *Discrete Series* became talismanic documents for Oppen’s future literary career” (xiii).

¹³⁴ Oppen elaborates his definition of ‘objectivist’ in a letter from 1961 since the apparent misconception and misunderstanding of what the group label meant demanded clarification: “We were all very much concerned with poetic form, and form not merely as texture, but as the shape that makes the poem possible to grasp. (would we have all thought that a satisfactory way to put it?) ‘Objectivist’ meant, not an objective viewpoint, but to objectify the poem, to make the poem an object. Meant form. Louis’ essay discussed sincerity on the one hand and objectification on the other. And sincerity—very brilliantly, it seems to me—as the epic quality” (*SL* 47).

The other point for me, and I think for Louis, too, was the attempt to construct meaning, to construct a method of thought from the imagist technique of poetry—from the imagist intensity of vision. [...] [T]here is a moment, an actual time, when you believe something to be true, and you construct a meaning from these moments of conviction. [...] I was attempting [in *Discrete Series*] to construct a meaning by empirical statements, by imagist statements. (161)

The repetition of “to construct” might superficially be dismissed with reference to the immediacy of the interview situation and its format which does not grant too much time for any polishing of phrases. Yet the fact that Oppen attaches the infinitive construction thrice to “a meaning” and once to “a method of thought” and hence to abstract concepts which one would not necessarily expect to be juxtaposed with ‘to construct’ suggests that, etymologically speaking, the aspect of putting together parts in proper order and building or erecting something is an essential part in Oppen’s poetic thinking. For Oppen, then, the making of meaning in poetry depends on the appropriate and accurate composition of parts that will collectively come closest to the idea of wholeness, truth (Oppen refers to this method as “a test of truth” and “a test of sincerity”) or “rested totality,” as Zukofsky labels the ideal outcome of an objectivist poem: “This rested totality may be called objectification—the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object. [...] its character may be simply described as the arrangement, into one apprehended unit, of minor units of sincerity—in other words, the resolving of words and their ideation into structure” (274). In order to successfully pursue this strategy of constructing and arranging, which both Oppen and Zukofsky emphasize as key to the objectification of a poem, the poet-worker needs a high degree of technique and skill.

In “The New Poetical Economy,” Williams’s 1934 review of *Discrete Series*, the older poet fleshes out this semantically related compound of ‘serious craftsman,’ ‘construction,’ and technical finesse. Claiming at the outset that “Oppen has given us thirty-seven pages of short poems, well printed and well bound, around which several statements relative to modern verse forms may well be made,” Williams directs his focus on the entity of “the poem” and differentiates between “what the poem says” and “what the poem *is*” (220-21). Like Oppen, Williams favors the latter, stating that “[t]he importance lies in what the poem *is*.”¹³⁵ He continues by introducing two central adjectives, ‘technical’ and ‘mechanical’ to this discussion:

¹³⁵ Interestingly, this emphasis on the ‘what-is’ question echoes the second programmatic statement in Pound’s preface: “Bad criticism emerges chiefly from reviewers so busy telling what they haven’t found in a poem (or whatever) that they have omitted to notice what is” (*NCP* 3). Williams mentions Pound’s

[The poem's] existence as a poem is of first importance, a technical matter, as with all facts, compelling the recognition of a mechanical structure. A poem which does not arouse respect for the technical requirements of its own mechanics may have anything you please painted all over it or on it in the way of meaning but it will for all that be as empty as a man made of wax or straw. It is the acceptable fact of a poem as a mechanism that is the proof of its meaning and this is as technical a matter as in the case of any other machine. Without the poem being a workable mechanism on its own right, a mechanism which arises from, while at the same time it constitutes the meaning of, the poem as a whole, it will remain ineffective. (221)

Williams here not only anticipates his often-quoted, memorable statement from his introduction to *The Wedge* (1944) that “[a] poem is a small (or large) machine made of words” and that in a poem “there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant” (54). Given that Williams delineates his understanding of what a poem should be in a review of Oppen’s first book of poetry, he also implies that “mechanical structure” holds the poems from *Discrete Series* together. Williams identifies “respect for the technical requirements of [a poem’s] own mechanics” in Oppen who aims to produce poetry as “an object sharply defined and without redundancy.” It is essential to note the ambivalence of “the poem being a workable mechanism on its own right” in Williams’s remarks, as the mechanism must paradoxically fulfill a double function in this construction of meaning. The way in which Williams phrases this hypothesis mirrors in its convoluted sentence structure the complex operations of the poem as “a mechanism which arises from, while at the same time it constitutes the meaning of, the poem as a whole.” As both origin and result of meaning-making, the “poem as a mechanism” requires a perceptive builder who needs to be aware of his materials’ intricacies and exhibit what Williams calls “technical excellence” in his handling of these materials: “The term, technical excellence, has an unpoetic sound to most ears. But if an intelligence be deeply concerned with the bringing up of the body of poetry to a contemporary level equal with the excellences of other times, technique means everything.” Apparently, Williams saw exactly these qualities in Oppen’s *Discrete Series* which, as the reviewer’s turn to the “contemporary level” indicates, is a timely book of modern poetry.

In the course of his review, Williams laments the ignorance of other reviewers who “haven’t the vaguest notion why one word follows another, but deal directly with

preface explicitly only once and disparagingly: “The preface seems to me irrelevant. Why mention something which the book is believed not to resemble?” (221).

meaning themselves.”¹³⁶ In disregarding the sequential quality of words and the significance of word order, these reviewers fail to see that Oppen valued, namely, the semantic potential inherent in each of his building materials. “Oppen has moved to present a clear outline for an understanding of what a new construction would require,” Williams writes and continues:

His poems seek an irreducible minimum in the means for the achievement of their objective, no loose bolts or beams sticking out unattached at one end or put there to hold up a rococo cupid or concrete saint, nor either to be a frame for a portrait of mother or a deceased wife. The words are plain words; the metric is taken from speech; the colors, images, moods are not suburban, not peasant-restricted to serve as a pertinent example.

Oppen’s words are not inflated (“plain words”), his poems are neither decorative nor ostentatious, the themes are grounded in modernity. As a prime example of a poet whose work “rests on the bedrock of a craftsmanlike economy of means,” Williams recommends, “you should use the man as you would use any other mechanic—to serve a purpose for which training, his head, his general abilities fit him, to build with—that others may build after him. Such service would be timely today since people are beginning to forget that poems are constructions.” Williams supports the pervasive tropes of craftsmanship, mechanism, and construction when he bemoans that “[o]ne no longer hears poems spoken of as good or bad; that is, whether or not they do or do not stand up and hold together.” *Discrete Series*, on the other hand, as a product of meticulous construction work contains poems whose mechanical structure makes them “stand up and hold together.” Everything, Williams suggests, is efficient and at its right place in (most of) Oppen’s poems. Like Pound, Williams concludes his remarks about *Discrete Series* by commending Oppen’s achievement: “[G]ood work, such as that shown among Mr. Oppen’s poems, should be praised” (220-25).

Interestingly, the idea of connection and holding together finds expression in Oppen’s own craftsmanlike understanding of “the poem as a tool designed to do a job” (Morris 668). In one entry from his working papers, he jots down in capital letters: “I THINK THAT A POEM SHOULD BE THE WORK OF A MAN WHO REALLY MEANS TO DRIVE A NAIL—NOT TO POSTURE OR TO SHOW OFF—AND WHO KNOWS FROM CHILDHOOD—HOW A HAMMER SHOULD BE HANDLED”

¹³⁶ This snide remark at reviewers might have been directed at William Rose Benét’s devastating review in the *Saturday Review of Literature* from March 24, 1934. In choosing the title “A Serious Craftsman,” Benét sneeringly quotes from Pound’s preface and mocks Oppen’s writing style when he comments: “Mr. Oppen’s offering exhibits that extreme parsimony of words that is taken today to imply infinite profundity” (580).

(*SPDP* 191). In discussing this passage, Morris focuses on the “interaction between human and nonhuman parts,” claiming that “the hammer is an extension of the arm” for someone “who has handled it from childhood.” Correct as this interpretation is, it is worth noting that the interaction and relation between the “inorganic components” of hammer and nail are also crucial in this creative effort as “the act of driving a nail” with a hammer results in stability and cohesion. That this particular aspect of “the poem as an instrument in use” was on Oppen’s minds is evident from another archival note (Morris 668). Triggered by his contemplation of other people’s eagerness to receive feedback on their poems from him (“I am afraid to tell anyone how little whole warehouses full of contemporary poetry actually matters to me”), he compares the myopic focus on a solitary poem to the relation between hammer, nail, and wood:

someone drives a nail. I look at it consciously: ‘Yes, I say, there it is, in the wood. Hasn’t bent at all, there are no hammer marks left on the wood itself’ Perfect—I would say, Perfect. Congratulations—

I might perhaps add—tentatively—:perhaps, now, or have you thought of putting one piece of wood under another, so that the nail might go thru BOTH pieces of wood, and in that way it would, one might say, hold them together—? (“The Circumstances” 13)

The act of driving a nail through wood might be perfectly executed (“no hammer marks left on the wood itself”). Similarly, one poem might be accurately hewn. Yet, as Oppen’s indented continuation makes clear, the real challenge is to go beyond “[t]he singleness of a toy,” as one line in *Discrete Series* reads (*NCP* 32), putting the pieces together dimensionally so that they interconnect. In the case of the manufacturer, “the nail” which “might go thru BOTH pieces of wood” and “hold them together” functions as the connective tool. In composing a series of discrete poems, this connection can be said to be non-materially rooted in a conceptual common ground. On the material level, the binding of a book which holds the pages together provides cohesion. As Oppen’s extended comparison illustrates, he himself thought of the act of writing poetry, true to the etymological root of the word, as the making of a (manufactured) object. The notes from the archive thus reiterate the Objectivist aim of “making an object of the poem” and, furthermore, attest to Oppen’s personal knowledge of carpentry; a craft in which “putting the pieces together,” as Oppen summarizes his organizational method in the last interview which Paul Auster conducted in 1981 (“No Form in Mind”), is as pivotal as it is in the act of constructing poetry.

Against the backdrop of this consensus regarding Oppen’s craftsmanlike approach to the materials of poetry, the lack of investigations into how exactly such

metaphoric renderings translate onto paper and the page is startling. Strangely enough, critics tend to stop short of pursuing the rightful observation that Oppen was a poet-craftsman any further and fail to test whether the actual material manifestation on the page substantiates their attempt to explain his technique metaphorically. If Oppen's "poems are constructions" which "stand up and hold together," as Williams maintains, what are the materials Oppen uses, piles up and puts together, and with which he builds on his pages? How does a carpenter of words work with his materials? Which transformations occur in this process of shaping the word as "manufactured part" (*NCP* 136)? Since, as Davidson writes, Oppen "whittled and refined his poems into tough, recalcitrant lyrics that would endure the test of time" and did so by employing a "compositional method" of "embed[ding] poems in the midst of a kind of *textual* rubble," it is necessary to take a closer look at both the construction site of the printed work, Oppen's work on paper, and his working papers which provide insights into the construction processes of his poems ("Introduction" xix-xx).

It is especially the archival space in which the three-dimensional, material quality of Oppen's thinking and the ethos of creating with the things as they exist stand out. In Oppen's working papers, Davidson avers, it is "often difficult to discern where the poem ends and the 'rubble' begins. Prose quotation is often transformed into line verse; new lines are pasted on top of earlier lines and stick off the page like a relief map" (xx). Davidson's simile "like a relief map" is indeed appropriately chosen. Another mode and mold of craftsmanship, relief sculpture precisely captures "the peculiar nature of Oppen's compositional method" which he described in an interview as the "[p]iling up pieces of paper to find the words" (Hatlen 44). It is beneficial to dwell on the 'relief map' comparison and establish bas-relief sculpting or, in Oppen's case, carving as a formative technique which Oppen converted into poetic practice. As will be shown in the analysis of Oppen's work with wooden materials, the bas-relief technique which Oppen employed in his non-poetic creative effort while living in Mexico is traceable in his working papers which Oppen amassed when he returned to the United States and resumed his career as a poet.

Given Oppen's meticulous approach to the materials of life and poetry, which critics emphasize in the variety of their metaphoric renditions, it makes sense that Oppen decided on *The Materials* as the title of his second book, published in 1962 and thus twenty-eight years after *Discrete Series*. Despite the long hiatus between the publications, Oppen hints at thematic linkages between the works: "The Materials: to

restate the themes: solidly” (*SL* 122). In the final phase of finishing the manuscript of *This In Which* (1965), Oppen points to the connection between *The Materials* and the materials when he notes in his working papers that “I have by now clearly got a step, or half a step, beyond *The Materials* perhaps beyond the materials” (qtd. in Nicholls 62). According to Samuel Klonimos, Oppen “affirmed” that the title of *The Materials* “was taken direct from Whitman: ‘I will make the poems of materials for I think they are to be the most spiritual’” (27).¹³⁷ Interestingly, the blurbs on the back cover of *The Materials* also point back to *Discrete Series* while also expanding upon the tropes of solidity and construction with materials.

There are two quotations on the back cover of the 1962 book, one by Pound and one by Williams. After a paragraph listing some of the periodicals in which Oppen’s work appeared, the final sentence from Pound’s preface to *Discrete Series* is reprinted which salutes Oppen as “a serious craftsman.” This earlier quotation leads into an updated praise by Williams who “writes of *The Materials*: ‘Now . . . these clean constructions move me again. They fulfill what he has promised to do with the poetic line, to keep it clean and succinct. He has never varied in his direct approach to the word as the supreme burden of the final poetic image’” (fig. 16).

¹³⁷ Oppen was neither convinced of Whitman the poet nor of his poetry. In a letter from 1960, he tells Williams: “People who are afraid to talk won’t produce much poetry. Tho Whitman has been no use to me. Perhaps arriving after you I didn’t need him. I always feel that that deluge and soup of words is a screen for the uncertainty of his own identity” (*SL* 39).

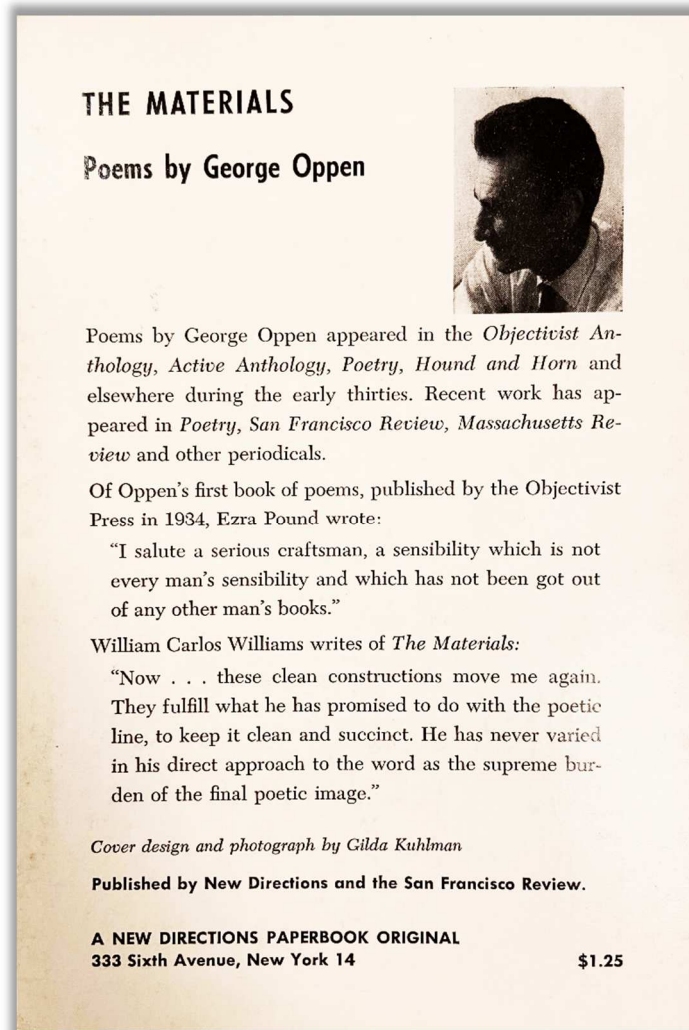


Fig. 16: The back cover of Oppen's *The Materials* with blurbs by two prominent modern American poets.

Williams here reaffirms his analysis of Oppen's early poems, resorting to some of the same vocabulary he used in his 1934 review ("clean constructions;" "clean and succinct;" "direct approach to the word"). As in his earlier text, Williams puts emphasis on Oppen's sincere use of "the word." The unit of the word indeed provides a good starting point for investigations into Oppen's work with the concrete materials of poetry. As will be shown, his approach to the material word mirrors his way of working with the double page as a place where the reader is confronted with oppositional perspectives almost simultaneously.

6.2 Wordwork

Because the words are objects, the poem is an object, but the poem is ineluctably transparent also. (“Interview with Charles Tomlinson” 59)

To have seen the space (which is the world) between the words (*SL* 305)

Oppen’s poetic thinking is deeply grounded in his respect for and faith in words. In his manuscripts, letters, interviews, and poems, references to ‘the word’ as the basic unit of language abound. Whether he refers to them metaphorically as “[t]he clockwork of the world” as in “Leviathan,” the last poem of *The Materials* (*NCP* 89); whether he confesses his often-quoted predilection for the “little words” and “[a]ll the little nouns” as in the seminal interview conducted by Dembo in 1969 (162); or whether he qualifies this penchant in his manuscripts when he writes, quoting himself, “‘the little words that I love so much’ // they are the most profound, the most frightening words—we must deal with them. Such words as *and*” (“The Anthropologist” 146): words constantly weighed on Oppen’s mind and challenged him in his writing style. Oppen thought of words as three-dimensional objects, as articulated in the fascinating statement from the archive (cf. Nicholls 161) and an interview used as the first epigraph. As material instantiations on the page, they might seem to be static and superficial. Yet, in Oppen’s thinking, “words are objects” and have roots which reach downward to the ground.¹³⁸ Oppen considers the word with all its constitutive parts (each individual letter with white space both inside and surrounding the letter) as a unit of meaning which can be approached vertically as well. In his working papers Oppen often employs the verb ‘parsed,’ which denotes a penetrative force of cleaving, for this practice. “Parse the word,” he exhorts himself on one page, “carve the word into its elements” (“Selections” 7). Slightly differently phrased, another entry reads: “to come down is the way in / Parse the word, drive the word into its elements [...] Each word must have some reason for

¹³⁸ This understanding of words as multilayered objects shows, for instance, in Oppen’s predilection for etymology. Oppen was fond of and often contemplated the root meanings of words. His intensive engagement with the origin of words manifests in unfiltered form in his working papers. Examples of etymological thinking can be found in each of the published working papers. In “The Philosophy of the Astonished,” a snippet reads “thought also possesses great energy: one must say, emotion, which is emotion, motion outward” (207). More elaborately, in “Meaning Is to Be Here,” Oppen writes after defining “the undertaking of the poems” as “To go down, to go into” in capital letters that “PEOPLE DO (DESPITE THEMSELVES) USE THE WORD ‘RELIGION’ IN ITS ETYMOLOGICAL SENSE (AS IN FACT WE ALL AND ALWAYS *use words* DESPITE OURSELVES RELIGION MEANING A BOND. [...] *But I write of the metaphysical, on the threshold / of the metaphysical. The subliminal. Wherein meaning lies*” (203).

existing in *itself*" ("The Circumstances" 15). Words, for him, are building blocks with physical, tangible qualities. Yet, they remain mysterious: "Each word is a stance, each word also a question never answered ("The Anthropologist" 149). More extremely, they can become dangerous if one does not keep an eye on words. Since, for Oppen, "relevant thought begins with the distrust of language" (SPDP 181), words are suspicious entities. Resorting to military diction, he notes: "Words are a constant enemy: the thing seems to exist because the word does" (53). In "A Language of New York" from *This In Which*, he fleshes out this soldierly conceit in poetry:

Possible
 To use
 Words provided one treat them
 As enemies.
 Not enemies—Ghosts
 Which have run mad
 In the subways
 And of course the institutions
 And the banks. If one captures them
 One by one proceeding

Carefully they will restore
 I hope to meaning
 And to sense. (NCP 116)

If Oppen's traumatic experience of fighting in World War II expresses itself in this word-enemy comparison ("yes, a word makes a mark, a wound, it impresses itself" [SPDP 58]), his aptitude and practice as carpenter and craftsman shows in his approach to material words as well. The multilayered quality of words and the aspect of carving and dissecting materialize in Oppen's poems, for example, in the cutting away of conceivably unnecessary graphical material. Like the carpenter, who appears in Oppen's poems again and again, the poet has familiarized himself with the qualities and subtleties of the materials he shapes. The poet as workman carves, hews, and hammers words and verbal components into form so that they fit together accurately and adequately.

The way in which Oppen manufactures the little words 'though' and 'through' in his writing illustrates his economical technique on the most basic and visible level on the page. In his letters and in his poems during each stage of his literary career, Oppen chisels away the negligible or dispensable components so that 'although,' 'though' and 'through,' for example, are reduced to 'altho,' 'tho' and 'thru.' DuPlessis is among the few critics who point to this idiosyncratic shortening. In *The Selected Letters* she explains in her editorial comments that she "retained Oppen's versions [of spelling] as

much as possible” and provides a striking example in the corresponding footnote when she states that the adherence to the original version would “give such forms as [...] ‘thot’—the twentieth-century poet’s respelling of ‘thought’” (xxvii; fn. 13, 370). While Oppen does not use this particular word, shrunk to its skeletal basics, in his poems, he consistently cuts away the ‘ogh’ and ‘ugh’ cluster of letters which are inessential to the pronunciation of ‘through/thru’ and ‘though/tho.’ This method of trimming epitomizes Oppen’s compositional strategy and is emblematic of his meticulous approach to the materials of poetry.¹³⁹

Oppen adheres to this standard in each volume of poetry so that, for instance, the fourth poem of *Discrete Series* (1934) begins with “The evening, water in a glass / Thru which our car runs on a higher road” (*NCP* 8). His last published poem “Till Other Voices Wake Us” in *Primitive* (1978) does not only invoke T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” but refers to the period in which Oppen composed the poems of *Discrete Series* “writing / thru the night (a young man, / Brooklyn, 1929)” (*NCP* 286). What is interesting is that this textual phenomenon was even replicated in the original publication context of his poems in magazines. In the January 1960 issue of *Poetry*, for example, the second stanza of Oppen’s poem “Part of the Forest” reads the same way as it would in the book publication of *The Materials* two years later: “But to be alone is to be lost / Altho the tree, the roots / Are there” (43; *NCP* 80). The fact that *Poetry* editor Henry Rago refrained from conventionalizing the spelling suggests that Oppen intended this exact usage.

Oppen’s frequently employed method of negating the meaning of words by adding the prefix ‘un-’ or variants thereof like ‘in-’ is another striking example of how Oppen shapes his word materials. Oppen seems to have used this grammatical device of reversal or negation most persistently in the recently discovered *21 Poems*. Hobbs frames the history behind this “unbound sheaf of typewritten poems varying dramatically in voice and style, one per page, with the heading ‘21 Poems by George Oppen’ handwritten in pencil on the first page” with two letters by Louis Zukofsky from 1930 (7). In both letters addressed to Pound, Zukofsky stresses that Oppen “handle[s] a kind of void in a way all his own” and that this innovative angle “excuses the posited negatives, the occasional Cummings and confused perceptions” which Zukofsky

¹³⁹ In a conversation with Young after her husband’s death, Mary Oppen describes George’s compositional method of *Discrete Series* in one sentence: “He cuts away and cuts away until there’s just about nothing” (262). While she is not explicitly referring to truncated word forms here, the cutting away of graphemes contributes to the elliptical nature of the series.

identified in Oppen's poems. Apparently, Pound did not react after receiving the Oppen poems from Zukofsky ("No noos from you re-Geo. Oppen's poems") which is why Zukofsky highlighted the poems' innovative presence-absence interplay in another letter to Pound from June 18, 1930: "Shd. have mentioned his contribution of 'everything brightly not there' in all his poems" (8). By mentioning "everything brightly not there" and by positing this paradoxical aspect as a highly original contribution to modern poetry, Zukofsky refers to the fifteenth poem in the collection and thus points Pound to concrete examples which illustrate his observation. If he had quoted correctly and adhered to Oppen's line sense, Zukofsky might have convinced Pound of the collection's originality more quickly. As it is, the last four lines of poem "XV" read:

Round clouds above;
Between,
Everything very brightly
Not there. (33)

In addition to important details such as the prepositional transition from "above" to "Between" (a typical gesture in Oppen's poetry), the capitalized line starts throughout, and the word "very" which Zukofsky left out in his letter to Pound, it is the indicative breaking of the lines which underscores the effect of the seemingly paradoxical final two lines. The enjambment after "brightly" simultaneously connects and separates the elliptical sentence so that the reader, who "moves between reading and re-reading" as Oppen fittingly states in a poem of *Discrete Series* (NCP 25), pauses briefly at the end of the penultimate line and then encounters the negation "Not there" with more emphasis.

The line break here truly "control[s] the order of disclosure upon which the poem depends" (SL 141). At the end of the penultimate line, the reader, in a way, crosses the threshold and enters another stage of what DuPlessis calls "meaningful sequencing." As she writes in "Social Texts and Poetic Texts: Poetry and Cultural Studies," "[a]ll art objects in words [...] use meaningful sequencing: they have an arrangement of parts, order, a pace of disclosure, unrolling in imagined time (and in reading time). These modes have in common the potential for hyper-saturations of verbal plenitude and for linguistic, sonic, grammatical intricacy." Based on these observations, she goes on to answer the question "what *fundamentally* distinguishes a poem as a construction" and states: "Simply put, *a poem is a formed object of/in language in lines and segments that is culturally received as a poem.*" In this oversimplified definition, the aspect of "segmentivity" as the "basic feature of the poetic text" is central to DuPlessis. For her,

“poems are formed by their uses of segments—gaps at the turn of every line break; segments counted as regular rhythm; caesura or the intralinear use of page space; gaps between stanzas; leaps and gaps in the grammatical ordering; interesting clashes when sentences (one kind of segment) articulate across lines (another kind of segment)” (61). The excerpt from this early Oppen poem illustrates various “interesting clashes” on the level of word and lines.

The surprising juxtaposition of linguistic material and the slightly delayed, segmented negation along the vertical axis of the page confronts the reader with ideas of presence and absence. The proximity of “Everything” and “Not there” in this elliptical sentence is further highlighted by the placement of these words at the beginning of the lines. As a result of Oppen’s choice to segment his language materials through line breaks, the final two words of the poem “Not there” are placed directly below “Everything.”¹⁴⁰ This visible closeness on the spatial plane of the page accentuates the revelatory effect towards which the line break gestures. Through the combination of these poetic techniques Oppen achieves “the objectification of the poem, the making an object of the poem.” Quite tellingly, Oppen outlines what he understands as “the objectification of the poem” in entries from his working papers and couples this key concept of his poetry with essential features of his poetics when he notes that “Objectification is creation” and, emphasized by capital letters, “OBJECTIFICATION [...] creates a simultaneity, the simultaneity of vision, a simultaneity of statement” (“Meaning” 148; “The Anthropologist” 148).

Oppen’s recently discovered poems, published as *21 Poems* in 2017, are especially abundant with what Zukofsky first identified as “posited negatives.” In fact, the very first poem of the collection, uncharacteristically long compared to other early Oppen poems and thematically remarkable as it “dramatizes the experience of giving birth” (Hobbs 12), contains seven words with negative prefixes: “ungroping,” “unmoved,” “unremarkably,” “unhesitating,” “untaut,” “unsuspended,” and “irrevocably” (16-17). Some of these word formations like “ungroping” or “untaut” come close to being neologisms and present the attentive reader with questions of

¹⁴⁰ That Oppen attached great importance to the purposeful placement of words in relation to other words on lines immediately above or below is apparent from his reaction to Serge Fauchereau’s French translation of “O Western Wind” from *The Materials*. Admitting that it is “[d]ifficult, as you know, for me to judge the French,” Oppen maintains that “[i]n the English, the noun ‘eyes’ directly above ‘across all my vision’ gives immediacy to the poem—gives reality to the poem. Would it be as effective in the French?” (*SL* 147). Apparently, the French translator had not adhered to the word arrangement of Oppen’s third stanza which reads: “Beautiful and wide / Blue eyes / Across all my vision but the glint of flesh / Blue eyes / In the subway routes, in the small rains / The profiles” (*NCP* 74).

(poetic) language. What exactly does “ungroping” mean? Why not use ‘loose’ instead of “untaut”? In the context of this poem, which depicts stages of parturition from “[r]ound muscles in the damp womb / Move” to “Born!” and “Life irrevocably bright,” the oscillation between absence and presence, from “the dark wholly” to “no dark pool of comfort,” is quite aptly reflected in these newborn compounds of negative prefixes and words which one would expect to stand on their own. After all, the adjectives “untaut, unsuspending” retain traces of the familiar, unadulterated words ‘taut’ and ‘suspended.’ The meaning of the defamiliarized, negated forms is predicated upon the prefixless word. By utilizing negative prefixes to shape his word materials, Oppen enacts the interplay of presence and absence on a verbal level.

This compositional strategy is not limited to the first poem of the sequence but materializes frequently in the following, much shorter poems. The eleventh poem, for instance, depicts a scene inside an aquarium (“Drift of shining small fish;” “eel-like fish;” “Minnows (silent)”) and focuses on “[t]hree shadowless and accurately finned huge fish” at the center of the poem. These “mysteriously / suspended” creatures are characterized *ex negativo* in a series of adjectives which reflect the strangeness of the aquatic setting through their own unfamiliar, verbal shape: “untouched, unadventurous, / Drift untwitching above the / Minnows (silent)” (29). It seems that the mysterious, ineffable behavior “at the tank’s top” can only be approached poetically by grasping what these fish are *not* doing and by what is *not* happening under water: the “accurately finned huge fish” do not twitch, they are “untwitching.” Apparently, there exists no better, more accurate, or more adequate word (to use two of Oppen’s favorite adjectives which he employs in this poem as well) to express the drifting, “untouched” movement of these inscrutable beings “with noses held to // Adequate, dissolving points” (29). This lack of a better word, however, does not pose insurmountable language problems to the poet. Quite to the contrary, since “[w]ords cannot be wholly transparent” (*SL* 144), it makes sense to address “the ‘heartlessness’ of words” by a different route (*NCP* 194). Or, as Oppen notes in all capital letters in his working papers, “IN FAILING, THE WORDS REVEAL IMPORTANT TRUTHS” (“Meaning” 197).

In the fourteenth poem of the collection, then, Oppen uses so many negative prefixes that one cannot help but notice how the poet is actively shaping language and linguistic material to convey meaning. Already in the first line, a sequence of four peculiar words sensitizes the reader to the void “in the square rooms of a city during night” which the poem will address: “The light unadvancing thru unregainable

unterraced heights” (32). With no commas impeding the flow of the line, the ‘discrete series’ of defamiliarized adjectives together with the chiseled form “thru” overwhelm the reader right from the start with unusual word formations. This sense that something is awry and twisted continues in the following lines and finds its expression especially in strange, adjectival concatenations such as “the old renewed grey tunnels of the air” or, with a dazzling redundancy at the end of the line, in “clamp down harder your long skinny strong strength” (32). In the course of the poem, more negations appear. In addition to the by now well-established negative prefixes ‘un-’ (“unstreaming,” “unblossoming”) and ‘in-’ (“insufficiently,” “inagility”), Oppen makes use of the suffix ‘-less’ to further signify the lack of rootedness and orientation in “[a] private world, insufficiently filled.” In this world, “the trees are rootless and too suddenly dead” and “[m]en stumble in the dark / On blindness or on sourceless streams of sight.” Against this backdrop of isolation and alienation which the “square rooms of a city during night” evoke, it makes sense and underscores the impression of presence-absence simultaneity that this city poem with the most reversals and negations faces the poem which ends with “Everything very brightly / Not there;” the lines which Zukofsky quoted to convince Pound of Oppen’s originality.

It is striking that the technique of negation, the idea of capturing absence and presence in the material transformation of verbal units, permeates Oppen’s earliest poems so consistently. In addition to the examples mentioned above, more instances can be found where, in emblematic lines from an unpublished Oppen poem, “[l]ight grows, place becomes larger or deepens, the familiar / Becomes extreme” (*NCP* 332). In the eighteenth poem, the reader needs to find his way through negations in two bracketed lines which read: “(Not the slight building tops unclasped mid-high in the incoherent / Day, nor globular stars shall margin it).” The parenthesis makes it here even more complicated to untangle and grasp the negative sequence “unclasped” and “incoherent” which is framed by the negatives “Not...nor.” By enclosing these two lines with brackets and thus insinuating that the expression could also be removed from the poem, the curved marks in themselves fulfill a similar function as the negative suffixes since they evoke presence and absence at the same time. This presence-absence (con)fusion carries over into the next poem on the opposite page which is by far the shortest in the *21 Poems* collection. In the three lines of this haiku-like poem, both thematically and formally reminiscent of Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro,”

The pigeons fly from the dark bough unleaved to the
 window ledge. There is no face
 There visible. (37)

Notably, as Davidson points out, Oppen had at one point included this poem in an unpublished typescript of *Discrete Series* which he sent to Charles Reznikoff.¹⁴¹ Despite the fact that Oppen decided to cut the poem when he edited *Discrete Series* for publication and deemed it “a failure, or inadequate,” it is telling that he had an idea of where to place the poem in the book. “I do remember working on that poem in our Brooklyn apartment,” he recalls in a letter from 1976 and continues, “I see again it is inadequate, but I feel that I might well have included it nevertheless. Perhaps the poem should have been on the page following the poem beginning ‘burns’” (*SL* 319). Oppen here refers to the seventh poem in *Discrete Series*. More precisely, he points to the second half of this poem which reads as follows: “Burns / Against the wall. / He has chosen a place / with the usual considerations, / Without stating them. / Buildings” (*NCP* 11). Read alongside this passage which Oppen quotes in full at the end of his letter, the pigeons’ flight “to the / window ledge” mirrors the (homeless) man’s decision to rest “till morning” at a sheltered place in a city. Familiarity (“the usual considerations”) with the cityscape (“Buildings”) is the motivating force behind both flights. If Oppen had included the pigeon poem in *Discrete Series* and positioned it “on the page following the poem beginning ‘burns’” and concluding with the final word “Buildings,” the thematic and spatial connection between the two poems set in the city would have been accentuated.

Interestingly, the version in *21 Poems* quoted above differs slightly but significantly from the one Davidson prints in the ‘Selected Unpublished Poems’ section of the *New Collected Poems*. Davidson, who reprints this poem from a 1989 selection of unpublished Oppen poems which DuPlessis edited for *Sulfur* magazine, gives the lines thus:

The pigeons fly from the dark bough
 unleaved to the window ledge;
 There is no face. (“The Circumstances” 21; *NCP* 313)

¹⁴¹ DuPlessis provides some interesting information about this early version and “unique copy of *Discrete Series*, carbon typescript on 3-hole 6 x 9 paper, bound in a shiny brown cover to make a small book.” According to DuPlessis, “[s]ome of the poems are in a slightly different order and some are slightly different from the 1934 version; there is a strong sense of poems placed one against the other on facing pages” (*SL* 420; fn. 10).

The most striking difference between the two versions is the additional “There visible” in the recently discovered collection. On the level of form, the altered line breaks stand out as well. Whereas the poem in the so-called Reznikoff typescript stresses the three nouns ‘bough,’ ‘ledge,’ and ‘face’ at the end of the lines, the line sense in the *21 Poems* version insinuates flux or, in the context of the poem more fittingly, flight through the uninterrupted run-on lines. This subtle change in the arrangement of words puts emphasis on the additional deictic at the start of the final line and stresses the tension between presence and absence: “There is no face / There visible.” In both three-liners, the unusual word “unleaved” appears and in both cases it comes after “the dark bough.” In this position, the word functions as an adjective which modifies the bough retrogressively. The bough is “dark” and “unleaved.” But if ‘unleaved’ is indeed supposed to mean ‘leafless,’ the reader may start wondering why Oppen opted for this specific word. No matter how adequate the word or the entire poem might be—Oppen himself was not convinced of the poem in the 1930s—the strangeness of the word and the mixture of negations and pointers make the reader aware of language’s potential for creating simultaneity and for compressing oppositions into the smallest building materials.

Notably, in the only poem from *21 Poems* which made it into *Discrete Series*, “The mast,” another curious adjective with the prefix ‘un-‘ catches the reader’s eye. In *21 Poems*, the sailboat poem concludes the collection, whereas it is placed on the left-hand side of a double page one quarter into *Discrete Series* where it faces “Closed car.” As in the pigeon poem, both versions differ slightly in layout. The final two lines, however, are identical. After a spacious indent in the penultimate line, the text reads as follows: “Beneath us glide / Rocks, sand, and unrimmed holes” (40; *NCP* 12). The poet-observer’s camera-like downward glance from “The mast” to “the deck” to “the boat’s round sides” here pierces the surface of “The limp water.” While one can effortlessly imagine “Rocks” and “sand” passing by below the sailboat, the neologism “unrimmed” in combination with “holes” cannot be fathomed that easily. What exactly are “unrimmed holes?” If holes do not have rims can one still call them holes? Would it not make more sense to call them ‘wholes’ instead?¹⁴² While it is not my intention to delve into philosophical discussions which such questions might trigger, it is worth noting the defamiliarizing effect which this poetic practice achieves. Confronted with such word

¹⁴² In the environment of *Discrete Series*, the word ‘unrimmed’ can also be said to anticipate the isolated noun “Rims” in the penultimate poem which stands out sharply in the middle between the margins of both the poem (the first and last line) and life: “Deaths everywhere——;” “Are his life’s eyes.”

formations, the reader is incentivized to become language-conscious and to come to terms with the fact that words are both abstract and concrete.

In addition to the unorthodox usage of the prefix ‘un-’ which alters the materiality of the words and enacts the presence-absence dilemma in condensed form, the last two examples also illustrate the concept of interconnectedness both between poems and volumes of poetry and point to the unit of the page as a material site for meaningful organization. The page functions as a compositional space on which materials are arranged. At the same time, the page is itself a building unit. Its materiality contributes to the meaning of linguistic code and can purposively be combined with other leaves of paper so that poems enter a conversation within a shared space. Oppen’s comment on the pigeon poem shows that he valued page arrangement for its semantically reinforcing potential. Even if the individual poem is inadequate as a discrete unit, it can still succeed in illuminating aspects of its partner poem with which it shares the environment of a double page. Likewise, the juxtaposed poem reflects on the ‘failed’ poem and might thus cast a different light on it. The meaning of two poems in combination potentially exceeds the meaning of each poem in isolation. Oppen facilitates this reinforcement by making use of the double page as a material site where alternative standpoints meet, where poems reinforce each other.

Since this aspect of page arrangement has been broached with reference to *Discrete Series* and since scholars like Swigg have discussed poetic pairs in Oppen’s first book, I will direct the focus from Oppen’s early work to the semantics of poem arrangement in *The Materials* in the following. Still, before turning to this post-exile work and before discussing two major factors which find expression in and shape *The Materials* (Oppen’s experience as soldier and craftsman), it is useful to mention that Oppen communicated his predilection for the accurate placement of poems and pages already in the 1930s. In fact, Oppen’s acute sense for the impact which the material constellation on pages has already shines through in a letter he wrote Pound in February 1934. In this letter, one of only five available in print from the 1930s, Oppen responds to the preface Pound had written for *Discrete Series* and sent the younger poet with some questions in advance. After thanking Pound for his generous effort, Oppen writes that the “book’ll be named *Discrete Series*. Tricky, but I want a name out of statistics for ‘Party Aboard’ and some others particularly, and the term describes my hon. Intentions pretty accurately.” While he was obviously fond of his poem ‘Party Aboard,’ which appears under the title “Party on Shipboard” in *Discrete Series*, Oppen was critical of

the poem beginning “This land” which follows immediately after “Party on Shipboard” upon turning the page. Glossing the last two lines of the poem, he tells Pound: “‘The glass of windows and a family laundry’—Yes, I mean laundry on a line. [...] Not so good a poem—put it in because it emphasizes the discreteness of the series—since when I write straight description (there should be a better word for it) it has the same tone as the more argumentative works [sic]. And goes into the book just there” (*SL* 4). The last two sentences are crucial here. Doubting the quality of the poem as with the pigeon snapshot, Oppen nevertheless believes in its relevance and function as an integral part of the book as “it emphasizes the discreteness of the series.” Even if the poem as such in its “straight description” of “This land” fails, even if its meaning as a single poem on a single page remains vague, its placement “just there” within the series justifies its inclusion.

Like clothes hanging on a laundry line to dry on which each item is separate yet connected to the others via a shared thread, each poem in *Discrete Series* is loosely strung to the neighboring one but maintains what Joseph Conte fittingly calls “the separate validity” or, in Golding’s words, the “separate, self-contained quality” (139; 90). Oppen’s well-known definition of what he understands as his *Discrete Series* makes this tension of being a part and being apart even clearer: “A discrete series is a series of terms each of which is empirically derived, each one of which is empirically true. And this is the reason for the fragmentary character of those poems. I was attempting to construct a meaning by empirical statements, by Imagist statements. [...] The poems are a series, yet each is separate” (*Speaking with George Oppen* 10). While one poem on its own might be insignificant, it helps to create a bigger picture as a module within the series. Oppen underscores the vital role of “This land” by using the spatial deictic “just there” in his letter which emphatically highlights the poem’s place in the physical space of the book. Like Crane who instructed Caresse Crosby shortly before the Black Sun edition of *The Bridge* was published that “Quaker Hill,” the last poem he finished, “is rather by way of an ‘accent mark’ that it is valuable at all” and that Evans’s “middle photograph (the one of the barges and tug) goes between the ‘Cutty Sark’ Section and the ‘Hatteras’ Section” since this “is the ‘center’ of the book, both physically and symbolically” (634), Oppen was astutely aware of the potential for conveying meaning by the sophisticated juxtaposition of poetic materials on his pages. The method of meaningful arrangement accordingly applies to both the material unit of the word and the material unit of the page.

Significantly, the interaction of word and page plays a crucial role in Oppen's poetics. More precisely, Oppen often contemplates the moment when words de facto materialize on the page, labeling this occurrence in material form as something miraculous. In his letters and papers, he speaks of a sense of astonishment once the right word forms in the mind and then shines forth on the page. In a remarkable passage in his papers, which DuPlessis dates back tentatively to the "Late 1960s?", Oppen traces the mysterious steps towards finding words or, in a modification of the Heideggerian epigraph to *This In Which*, following "the[ir] arduous path of appearance" on the page (NCP 92). Two boxed sections which appear one below the other highlight the revelatory effect which comes along with the discovery of the right word. In the first section, Oppen reminds himself of the poetic objective "to rescue a word or two—the word, when you have found it, brings into the poetry more than you knew you knew."¹⁴³ The second statement continues this crucial idea that poetry is an epistemological instrument of thought but focuses on the search and the immediacy of the moment of disclosure: "You search & search—suddenly the word comes to [sic]. You write it into the poem and then it sits on the page, unbelievable, unbelievable meaning! There it is, it stays there—" ("The Anthropologist" 146). The sense of wonder and awe is here more pronounced than in the first quotation. The repetitions "search & search" and "unbelievable, unbelievable meaning" accentuate the decisive juncture when, after the poet's arduous search for the right word, "suddenly the word comes." Notably, the author's role is subordinate to the agency of "the word" and "the page." In an inexplicable, untraceable way the right word appears "suddenly," and the poet, astonished by this moment of epiphany, makes it visible if not graspable by inscribing the word into the surface of the page. As a material fact written "into the poem," the word is then visible and static; it "sits on the page" and "stays there." Importantly, in this process "the page" is the material foundation which anchors the word. In Oppen's own terminology, at the end of this process "the word" will have been rescued, restored, or salvaged so that it "brings into the poetry more than you knew you knew." "I write in order to know," Oppen fittingly declares in a note among his working papers, "As action and process" (qtd. in Nicholls 72).

¹⁴³ The idea that one gains knowledge primarily during the process of writing and that the poem itself bodies forth as "a cognitive technology, a way of knowing, a probe" motivates Oppen's poetic thinking (Morris 668). He articulates this idea again and again in his working papers and letters. For example, another boxed section from Oppen's working papers reads: "To construct with language something other than language" ("Meaning" 206). In a letter from 1973 he tells his friend and fellow poet Robert Duncan that "the one essential tie" in their work is "that we do not know before we complete the poem. Neither of us writes what we already know, and of course that's the essential life of the poem" (SL 270).

Oppen articulates this belief that words can and should go beyond what one already knows since “it is absurd to versify what you already know” repeatedly in his writings but states it most extensively in a longer passage among his working papers. Noting that “a poem is written to test, salvage, restore—two or three words. Or one word. More likely one word,” Oppen proceeds to highlight one of his trademark convictions in capital letters, namely that “THE POEM IS AN INSTRUMENT OF THOUGHT, OR IT IS A NUISANCE” (“Selections” 17). The idea that “a poem may be devoted to giving clear meaning to one word” resurfaces in slightly altered guises in Oppen’s working papers. In a 1971 letter, he comments on poems he received and writes in a tone bursting with conviction that “the words will NOT make the poem: the poem must make, remake, restore the words They must be earned, at the very least” (*SL* 225). Similarly, he writes DuPlessis in 1965 in a section of a letter with the quizzical title “Notes on Prosody?” that “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” (123).

For Oppen, then, the quasi-magical appearances are rooted in the material world and word. As Oppen writes at the start of *Of Being Numerous* in the very first stanza of the first section: “There are things / We live among ‘and to see them / Is to know ourselves’” (*NCP* 163). Importantly, these things also encompass the basic materials of (poetic) writing. Oppen stresses this notion of the metaphysical in the physical in his letters and daybooks.¹⁴⁴ For instance, he writes DuPlessis in 1965 that *This In Which* is concerned with “the achievement of form; that the materials in achieving solidity, form, appear in the light of the miraculous” (*SL* 122). With a more direct reference to a particular section of *Of Being Numerous*, Oppen admonishes an editor to omit explanatory footnotes in a reprinting: “Please let the miracle shine forth even on my small page. Without footnotes” (*SL* 420, fn. 13). Tellingly, the phrase “miracle on the small page” appears twice on one sheet of paper in “The Circumstances: A Selection from George Oppen’s Uncollected Writing” as well (17). In both instances Oppen highlights the sections by drawing boxes around them and juxtaposes the “miracle on the small page” with references to words and, on the bottom of the page, clarity: “Words frighten me, and forgetting, and remembering / It is necessary to be afraid of the poem, and of words, each word [...] miracle on the small page / the essential clarity—is the poem” (17-18). The poem is the material entity which provides clarity, brings back

¹⁴⁴ In a 1963 letter to his half-sister June Oppen Degnan, the poet of *The Materials* defines “Metaphysics” as “a language that talks *about* physical fact” (*SL* 84).

meaning to words, and makes the “miracle on the small page” happen. In successful poems, something magical is felt. “I do think,” Oppen declares in a 1964 letter to William Bronk, “a poem must be no less than magic” and fleshes out this belief a few sentences later: “I explained my critical methods to someone lately. I said that when I read a poem and am unable to speak for several minutes thereafter, and read the poem twenty times and find that I cannot control my voice—I regard it as a good poem” (*SL* 104).

In order to establish “THE DIRECTION OUTWARD, THE MIRACULOUS DIMENSION” in verse (“An Adequate Vision” 16), the poet-builder needs to be aware that “the words must be slowed down.” As Oppen reminds himself in a jotting, “there is much misunderstanding about this [because] [s]tudents have been told that the poem must move rapidly // what is meant is that the thought must move rapidly: If the words chatter, the poem moves slowly: if the words chatter the poem may take pages upon pages to say almost nothing.” True to his poetics of sincerity and respect for particularities, he goes on to emphasize that “[t]he words must move with almost equal emphasis on every word: as much emphasis on is and but and and // ‘is’ is a little word, isn’t?? Or is it? It is really the most tremendous word—is or the—” (“Selections” 13).¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ Oppen ponders the importance of “[t]he little words that [he likes] so much” (Swigg 10), which entail, as “Psalm” famously has it, “The small nouns / Crying faith / In this in which the wild deer / Startle, and stare out” (*NCP* 99), in his preparatory writings in depth: “I do not write a learned poetry—picking up tag ends of other people’s knowledge. I write only of things that have been central to my life / the older discoveries of science have come to be part of our vision, of our experience / poetry; the experience of the the, the experience of the a / within what we thought was the the, they have shown us a billion a’s / there are many a’s; there is only one the / science also is a vision of the universe—perhaps more straight liney in that it has told us more than we had known—and could not see / I believe we claim too much for poetry, and grant too little to science / we don’t know what scientists say to themselves: they insist they are not frightened, and we know they must be lying // They speak of the the, they speak of a—the and a, the impenetrable particles which fall apart in their hands as in ours” (“Meaning” 200).

6.3 Bas-Relief Relief

And skills, so little said of it. (*NCP* 60)

Presses were busy enough
With no help from me
For twenty five years

Perhaps I was dealing nevertheless
With the essence of literature

To get down
Never the effort to go up (“An Adequate Vision” 23)

In her autobiography Mary Oppen spends only twenty pages to recount the “California & Exile” years from 1946-1958. Of these twenty pages, only eight deal with the formative years in Mexico. Despite this scarcity, it is clear from these pages that both Mary and George produced creative work during their time in exile. Interestingly, Mary juxtaposes their manufactural work in Mexico with the fact that they did not talk to friends about their career as poets and publishers earlier in the US: “I began to paint, and George and I both attended an art school in Mexico City. [...] He sketched and carved in wood while I sketched the model and worked in clay and paint, but we did not talk to our friends about poetry, our publishing venture in France, or our connection to the poets” (*Meaning A Life* 199-200). Fellow exiles who spent time with the Oppens in Mexico mention their creative activity as well. Jean Rouverol, for example, recalls that “George still did a little wood sculpture in addition to his cabinetwork, and Mary was still painting, but they didn’t seem to be trying to achieve anything with this work; they merely pursued it because they enjoyed it. It was *living* they were skilled at” (Rouverol 176). Fascinatingly, she also describes the Oppens’ apartment which showed traces of their artistic work everywhere:

George and Mary Oppen [...] were true bohemians, perhaps the first we had ever met. Their apartment, off a stairway next to the San Angel post office, was a rambling series of rooms that may once have been separate dwellings but were now strung together one flight up from a small back courtyard where one of the neighbors kept chickens, I remember. Their front door, off the landing, opened into George’s woodworking shop, a confusion of worktables and a lathe and tools and bits of raw lumber and, since George was studying wood carving at a Mexican arts center (on money from the GI Bill of Rights), several half-finished portrait carvings of his friends in bas-relief, looking down at us from the walls, or, here and there, a bust on a pedestal amid the clutter. Mary also had work space, though this tended to be in whichever room could currently accommodate her easel and painting supplies and elderly sewing machine and photography equipment. (57)

Whatever the Oppens did, they did it with sincerity and accuracy. While it is easy to agree with Rouverol's claim that the Oppens were skilled at living, reducing their work to a mere pastime activity which "they merely pursued because they enjoyed it" fails to acknowledge the importance of this creative output. On the most basic level, simply the fact that George "studied wood-carving on the GI Bill at the Escuela Esmeralda de Pintura y Escultura" shows how deeply invested he was in woodwork (Nicholls 22). If one takes a closer look at how and what Oppen created ("several half-finished portrait carvings of his friends in bas-relief"), similarities in technique and his approach to materials—be they wooden or papery—emerge. Rouverol's catchy claim that "George Oppen the poet had been replaced by George Oppen the woodworker" does not dig deep enough (Rouverol 177).

Having established Oppen's poetic methods and key criteria to which he adhered throughout his career, I want to widen the focus in a reading of his work which might seem far-fetched at first but will shed some new light on the family's still widely neglected exilic years in Mexico. Although he was not writing poetry in exile, Oppen, I argue, in keeping with his undergirding poetic principles produced woodwork, more precisely bas-reliefs, which reveal the poet's idiosyncratic technique of shaping materials with a strong emphasis on the surface-ground relation along a vertical axis. The way in which Oppen created these carvings perpetuates his work with verbal materials. Three-dimensional bas-relief sculpture can be seen as continuation of Oppen's poetic method. The carving style resembles his approach to the materials of poetry. In both visual art forms, Oppen manufactures the building blocks with a focus on depth, yet without losing sight of the surface. A central statement from his letters after the family's return to the US, albeit concerned with poetic creation, is applicable to Oppen's general method of composition, his compositional poetics. In a 1966 letter, after restating his belief that "[w]ords cannot be wholly transparent" and that "this is the 'heartlessness' of words" (cf. "The Route" in *Of Being Numerous*, NCP 194), he goes on to reprimand those poets who "[i]n despair [...] turn to the 'machine of words' and arrive, if anywhere, at the Hermetic."¹⁴⁶ For Oppen, this handling of words is limiting

¹⁴⁶ A few paragraphs down in the same letter, Oppen returns to Williams's phrase from *The Wedge* when he writes: "As against the 'machine of words' which resolves everything --- until one steps out the door. where it becomes like all machines a kind of poisonous frenzy, the mind locked in its cage" (145). In his working papers, Oppen returns to and revises Williams's famous statement: "a poem is a machine made of words to carry the poet where he is going" ("The Circumstances" 16); "A poem is a machine of words to rescue the poet—who else in prison lies [...] The poem: it speaks of truth but does not remain outside its material" ("Philosophy of the Astonished" 210).

and does not do justice to his ethos of valuing each individual word. Instead, condensing the technical cornerstones of his poetics into a short paragraph rife with key terms, he outlines the necessary steps poets and, more generally, artists need to take to avoid “the Hermetic:”

More simply: the need to be able to shift focus, depth of focus, with precision, to control distance, real distance, I mean visual distance and audible distance and get at the crucial moments right on top of the thing, an inch from the thing; at that moment, no quotes, no references—at that moment, something near transparence after all. [...] —to let one’s hand be forced by what is MOST CENTRAL, and by nothing else. (144)

By paying attention to focus, depth, and precision, the artist narrows the distance between himself and “the thing” and comes even physically closer to “what is MOST CENTRAL,” to a quasi-epiphanic moment of clarity and truth. It is at such revelatory junctures when “the world stops, but lights up” (*SL* 146).¹⁴⁷

The story why and how Oppen finally started writing again has been told many times. Virtually every Oppen scholar recounts the famous ‘How to Prevent Rust in Copper’ dream which Oppen told a Mexican psychiatrist. Naturally, the most authentic account of this formative episode appears in Mary’s autobiography. Divulging that in the final year in Mexico she “was disturbed” and “needed help” (“My need was for a psychiatrist, but to even say that word was admitting weakness”), she narrates that she opened up to her husband since the “need was finally desperate” and finally “convinced him that [she] needed help from outside [their] private world, from which [she] could not now find [her] way forward” (200). Mary psychoanalyzed her dreams and fears (“I was full of fear;” “I was paralyzed;” “I was suffering anxiety”) with the help of “a Mexican psychiatrist” who “asked to see George and Linda” (200-201). In her memoir, she then abruptly switches to George’s dream:

George had a dream: he and his sister were going through his father’s papers after his father’s death. In a file marked ‘miscellaneous’ was a paper entitled ‘How to Prevent Rust in Copper.’ George thought, ‘My old man was a little frivolous perhaps, but he certainly knew that copper does not rust.’ He shook the bed with his laughter, but I did not find the dream funny. Dreams that seem funny are, in my experience, the ones to watch out for; they are the jokers. Sometimes the dream is saying what is so deeply hidden that one’s reaction of laughter protects one from understanding what the meaning

¹⁴⁷ In his working papers, Oppen reiterates this moment of clarity and surrounds it on the same space of the page with images of disclosure: “the feeling is that the poem already exists. The effort is to find the sounds, the words and the syntax which will allow the poem to be heard—above all that the words shall not be too heavy, too pretentious: that there shall be an area of silence; there the poem lives if it lives—[...] To feel oneself at the very beginning of language. [...] Everything IS REVELATORY. EVERYTHING IS REVELATORY. / But never reveals everything [...] In meaning the world stops, but is illumined / Everything is here, everything is open and visible [...] the poem begins without the words / Or with one word or with any word” (“Philosophy of the Astonished” 211-12).

is. But George tells of driving on Avenida Insurgentes in Mexico City, weaving the truck from side to side, laughing at the dream of rust in copper that he was going to discuss with the psychiatrist. When he sobered and drew up to the curb, he said to himself, 'I'll kill myself driving this way,' and drove the rest of the way carefully. When he told the doctor the dream, laughing again at its ridiculousness, the doctor stopped him. 'You were dreaming that you don't want to rust,' he said. On the way home George stopped and bought a pad of paper and some pencils and started to write *The Materials*" (201-02).

George elaborates in an interview with David McAleavy from the late 1970s that this "decisive dream" reinitiated his writing career ("Brought me back to poetry"), admitting that his frantic laughing fit almost got him killed on his way to the appointment: "[E]arly morning after the dream, I got in our truck and started driving to keep the appointment, still laughing, absolutely uncontrollably and driving, I think, 50 or 60 miles an hour down Insurgentes, which is a dangerous boulevard if you're not going 60, and finally realized that, well, I'd better make a stop and get hold of myself, because this is close to suicidal." In George's rendering, the therapist's analytical verdict was that he was "not going to write" after which the poet-carpenter "went home, and bought a ream of paper, and started to write" (311).

In her introduction to the *Selected Letters*, DuPlessis provides her own psychoanalytical reading of this episode. For her, "the dream's punchline [...] and Oppen's strained, even suicidal, hilarity [...] formed a complex depth charge that unblocked the poet. The association of 'copper' with 'Oppen' (and perhaps even with communist Oppen and Poppa) is very suggestive" (*SL* xvii). If the idea put forward in DuPlessis' latter sentence remains speculative at best, there is no doubt that the paradoxical dream reignited Oppen's creative work with pencil and paper. In this regard it is crucial to note that Oppen goes into more depth in his musing on the dream in his working papers. One entry in "The Anthropologist of Myself" refers entirely and explicitly to "That dream" which "contained also:"

- 1) That the paper was filed under 'miscellaneous'—something filed as of no probable use, or of no definable purpose, something most likely to be lost or forgotten
- 2) it was AMONG the papers: stored in my mind, tho under miscellaneous? or a reference to Discrete Series, actually paper? or to the fact of *paper*, to work ON PAPER. The paper itself 'to prevent rust in copper, etc'
- 3) AND; June could lead me to that—June escorting me—as to a heritage, my father's papers (144)

DuPlessis, who edited this selection of Oppen's papers, focuses on the third point of the list, emphasizing "the importance of June Oppen Degnan, his [half-]sister, who had some crucial roles to play in his poetic career" (164). Indeed, his half-sister helped

Oppen immensely upon his return to the US in 1959. As co-editor of the *San Francisco Review*, she published Oppen's *The Materials* (1962) and *This In Which* (1965) in a joint imprint with New Directions. Oppen also discussed and defended many of his poetic beliefs and technical considerations in their long-lasting correspondence. Still, the second point of the list, I argue, is equally if not more important to Oppen's return to poetry or, more precisely, to the materials of poetic composition.

The text following the numbered point "2)" stands out not only because Oppen highlights particular words through capitalizations or italics, but also because of two question marks which show that the "fact of *paper*" was troublesome yet invaluable for Oppen. Why, Oppen seems to have asked himself, was the pamphlet 'How to prevent rust in copper' filed away "AMONG the papers," that is, why was "[t]he paper itself" part of a bigger pile of paper? In his dream, the document did not present itself right away as a separate piece of paper. In a way, Oppen chanced upon it as an item within a discrete series. This occurrence, it seems, redirects his line of thinking back to his first book of poetry ("a reference to *Discrete Series*") and away from the general term "papers" to the concrete material "fact of *paper*" ("actually paper," "paper itself"). That Oppen's associational thinking links *Discrete Series* with the materiality of paper does not come as a surprise since "Drawing," the twenty-ninth poem of the series, explicitly addresses the idea that "the / Paper, turned, contains / This entire volume" (*NCP* 33). A compositional tool and inscribable surface, paper creates and is simultaneously part of the book of poetry. Oppen's emphasis on "work ON PAPER" indicates that he interpreted his dream in retrospect as a wake-up call to return to the actual material, the papery ground of poetry to foreclose any rusting process.

Implied in this return to the roots of poetic creation is that Oppen worked on and with other materials during his years of exile. This biographical facet gains evidential backing by the sparse accounts of how the Oppens lived in Mexico. DuPlessis mentions in a footnote that "Oppen made bas-reliefs out of wood during his time in Mexico" and goes into more depth in the chronology which she compiled for *George Oppen: Selected Poems* edited by Robert Creeley. Under the year "1951" she writes: "Oppen enters into a furniture building partnership and attends art school—Escuela Esmeralda de Pintura y Escultura—in Mexico City under the G.I. Bill. He does wood carvings in bas relief. He is apparently not writing poetry" (194). Eric Hoffmann, whose thoroughly researched book *Oppen: A Narrative* comes closest to a comprehensive Oppen biography since he had access to the FBI files on the Oppens, adds further background information about

the art school, “a school for painting and sculpture in Coyoacán, where Oppen was taking classes,” and, notably, quotes from an FBI report stating that Oppen was “actually studying this pursuit” (87). Hoffmann continues that George, in addition to attending art school, “busied himself with his woodcarving—a private, artistic pursuit—and with the operation of his furniture-making business” which he had established “in association with a Mexican named Carlos Ayala” because “Mexican law prohibited foreigners from manufacturing any objects” (88). The description of the furniture they crafted is evocative of Oppen’s work with words. According to Hoffmann, “Oppen’s austere furniture, made-to-order for a mostly upper-class clientele, often thick-grained with unfinished surfaces, was decidedly minimalist and functional.” DuPlessis concurs when she writes in a footnote that “Oppen designed furniture which was spare and modern in style—Shaker or Bauhaus in influence” (*SL* 367). Oppen pursued his interest in woodwork earnestly which recollections of friends confirm. Hoffmann, for example, cites Stephen Schneider, an old friend of the Oppens who visited them in Mexico, who “recalls seeing shavings all about, a big wood-lathe, raw wood on the floor, Oppen covered in sawdust” (88). As such reminiscences make clear, the Oppens put effort into their non-literary work, decorating their Mexican home with artistic products they created. If adjectives such as “austere,” “spare” or “minimalist and functional” could easily be employed in descriptions of Oppen’s poetic ethos, the “unfinished surfaces” mentioned by Hoffmann point to deeper parallels between Oppen’s verbal craftsmanship and his wooden craftsmanship.

Against the backdrop of Oppen’s preoccupation with craftsmanship and his intensive work with wooden materials, it makes sense to take a closer look at what he produced and which techniques he employed. This medium-expanding comparison hints at similarities at the core of Oppen’s artistic creation. While the materials with which he worked changed, the underlying conception and crucial features of his compositional method persevered even during his years in exile. Oppen, “a carpenter/cabinetmaker” (Rouverol 46), carved bas-reliefs out of wood as a personal endeavor. This sculpting technique is characterized by a low projection of the sculpted figure or design from a flat surface. *The Oxford Dictionary of Art* classifies reliefs “[a]ccording to the degree of projection,” that is, “as high (*alto rilievo*), medium (*mezzo rilievo*), or low (*basso rilievo* or bas-relief)” (413). In bas-reliefs, then, the low sculpture appears as only slightly raised from the surrounding background. As in all forms of sculpture, this effect can be achieved by either adding material on top of the surface or by cutting and chiseling into the surface.

In Oppen's case, he carved away wooden material from smooth surfaces, forming elements by subtracting others. In bas-reliefs, the distance between background and projection is small, the surface-depth relation is not as prominently visible as in high relief where sculptures, at times, seem almost detached from the background plane. In the process of producing bas-reliefs, the woodworker creates the impression of superficial depth. The surface from which the sculptured objects seem to rise remains visible. The vertical incision into the wooden layers causes a three-dimensional effect grounded in a surface-depth tension. As will be shown in more detail later in this chapter, Oppen adapted this technique in dealing with his working papers after his homecoming to poetry. For now, it is crucial to note that the tension between surface and depth carried over into Oppen's work with words and paper. In letters written in the transition years between leaving Mexico and "return[ing] permanently to the United States, settling in Brooklyn Heights" in 1960 (*SP* 195), Oppen refers to the image of the surface and connects it to the building units of the words. In letters to Cid Corman, poet and editor of the magazine *Origin*, he responds to Corman's take on some of the poems that would be published in *The Materials*:

I believe you are thinking more positively than I am of a sort of solidity of surface. I think of form as immediacy, as the possibility of being grasped. I look for the thinnest possible surface. —at times, no doubt, too thin: a hole, a lapse. It is that you mean by 'a slackening of language' [...] I am much more afraid of a solid mass of words. [...] I think that poetry, if we are to bother with it, must be made of the clarity of the perceptions, of emotion as the ability to perceive. The problem of diction seems to me that the poem must contain its words entirely. Where it fails—yes of course it fails. I have a belief that some of the poems, as they complete themselves, heal the diction. Where that happens it seems to me very good. And I am involved with things; with 'the light of things.' (40-41)

Key ideas of Oppen's poetics abound in this passage which have been whetted by his life lessons in carpentry. In search for "the thinnest possible surface" and "afraid of a solid mass of words," he is aware that "a hole, a lapse" can occur. "Well, a hole between the words," he mentions in another letter and admits that "it is a failure if control" and "a failure of craft, evidently" when there is "lack of clarity in the poems; lack of basic clarity" (42). Still, as in the craft of carving bas-reliefs, the poet-carpenter is "involved with things; with 'the light of things' which both art media can bring into view. Oppen elaborates this point with reference to physical and spatial aspects of his poetic thinking: "My concern with the things, the materials in the poems are that they *are*. [...] What I want of the poem is that it contain space, that it remain at rest to contain space, the space of meaning; that the form give not '*heightened* emotion' but grasp-ability" (42-43). The

existential trajectory “that [the materials] *are*” anticipates the often-quoted lines from “Psalm:” “In the small beauty of the forest / The wild deer bedding down— / That they are there! / [...] The small nouns / Crying faith / In this in which the wild deer / Startle, and stare out” (*NCP* 99). The strong focus on space and “grasp-ability” partially stems from and reveals vestiges of the carving technique.

Strangely, Oppen’s non-literary artwork has not been discussed by critics. If mentioned at all, the fact that Oppen created wood carvings is broached as a curious side note, woven into the biographical rag rug that is the exile in Mexico. While scholars tend to mention Oppen’s work experience as carpenter and craftsman which he himself professed in letters (“I built tool and dies, houses, furniture” [*SL* 66]), there is a blatant blind spot when it comes to the way in which this occupation influenced his poetic thinking and entered his poems. This scholarly lacuna is surprising since Oppen often employs metaphors of craftsmanship when he discusses poetry in his letters and papers. For example, he writes Donald Davie in 1972 that he appreciates his fellow poets’ work as “a poetry of wit unafraid in the moral landscape and perfectly carved” (*SL* 244). In the same year, he used the word “carved” twice in his reply to L. S. Dembo who had identified that “Maud[e] Blessingbourne,” the bored lady looking out of the window in the first poem of *Discrete Series*, “is a character from a minor work by Henry James, ‘The Story in It’” (Nicholls 59): “of course you are right about the Henry James: [...] I wanted James in the book—secretly, superstitiously, I carved his initials on that sapling book. [...] glad I carved his initials” (*SL* 241-42). Oppen also refers to the semantic field of woodwork in sharing his thoughts on how not to write verse:

You have to have a reason [...] Don’t put in any word you don’t WANT don’t strike any key of the typewriter that won’t make a mark that is part of THAT poem THAT music THAT movement and that meaning (change or get rid of the sense of audience) (Put in nothing that isn’t useful to YOU to have written down) [...] Don’t put in anything you think some friend will admire—They’ll admire—as they admire amateur carpentry ‘My, did you make that yourself!’ But if they saw it in Sears Roebuck they wouldn’t admire it much. (243)

The startling comparison of poetry ostentatiously written to cater to what “some friend will admire” with “amateur carpentry” which fails to impress in objective settings like department stores (“Sears Roebuck”) appears less surprising with Oppen’s background as woodworker in mind.

Similarly, and with a nod at Wallace Stevens, Oppen jots down in his working papers: “a blurring of the distinction between subjective and objectives—There has been no instant in my life when such a blurring was possible for me / for one thing: too

much a carpenter: I know what a blue guitar is made *of*” (“Philosophy of the Astonished” 209). By putting emphasis on the preposition “of,” Oppen reminds himself that knowledge of the materials with which one works and sincerity towards the material which one addresses in one’s work are fundamental. In sculpture as in poetry, the process until something is “perfectly carved” takes time and multiple revisions/incisions are necessary (“Revise, revise, it is a search for what one meant, what one means [...] Revision to find what you meant” [“Meaning” 198]). As he writes Michael Heller in 197, “[o]ne revises and revises again: if it CANNOT be made right, there is something wrong with what one has said, has thought to do” (*SL* 232). Consequently, revised lines accrue and pages pile up. Notably, Oppen resorts to the image of the surface when he tells his half-sister that the landscape of Little Deer Island in Maine inspires but also overwhelms him: “Been so involved by this place [Maine]—My whole childhood pours back over me, and swamps me. I have several hundred lines of verse—and no sign of the surface yet. Maybe I’ll get something coherent yet” (*SL* 88). The cluster of metaphors here brings forth associations of downpour and inundation. Flooded by memories and impressions, Oppen works himself upwards to “[t]he shallow surface of the sea” which “is a constant weight / In its bed,” as he writes in “Party on Shipboard,” by means of “several hundred lines of verse” (*NCP* 15). As his bas-reliefs attest, the sea and the surface materialized in his non-poetic efforts as well.

Unfortunately, there are only three photographs of wood carvings done by Oppen available in print. In the *Selected Letters*, these pictures are interspersed on a double-page spread in the section of letters written in 1958. Two of the images depict a woman’s bust, the third one shows a sailor standing in a boat looking out to sea. As DuPlessis notes, “Mary Oppen was the model for the heads” (*SL* 12), and indeed the austere crafted contours resemble features of his wife’s face (fig. 17).

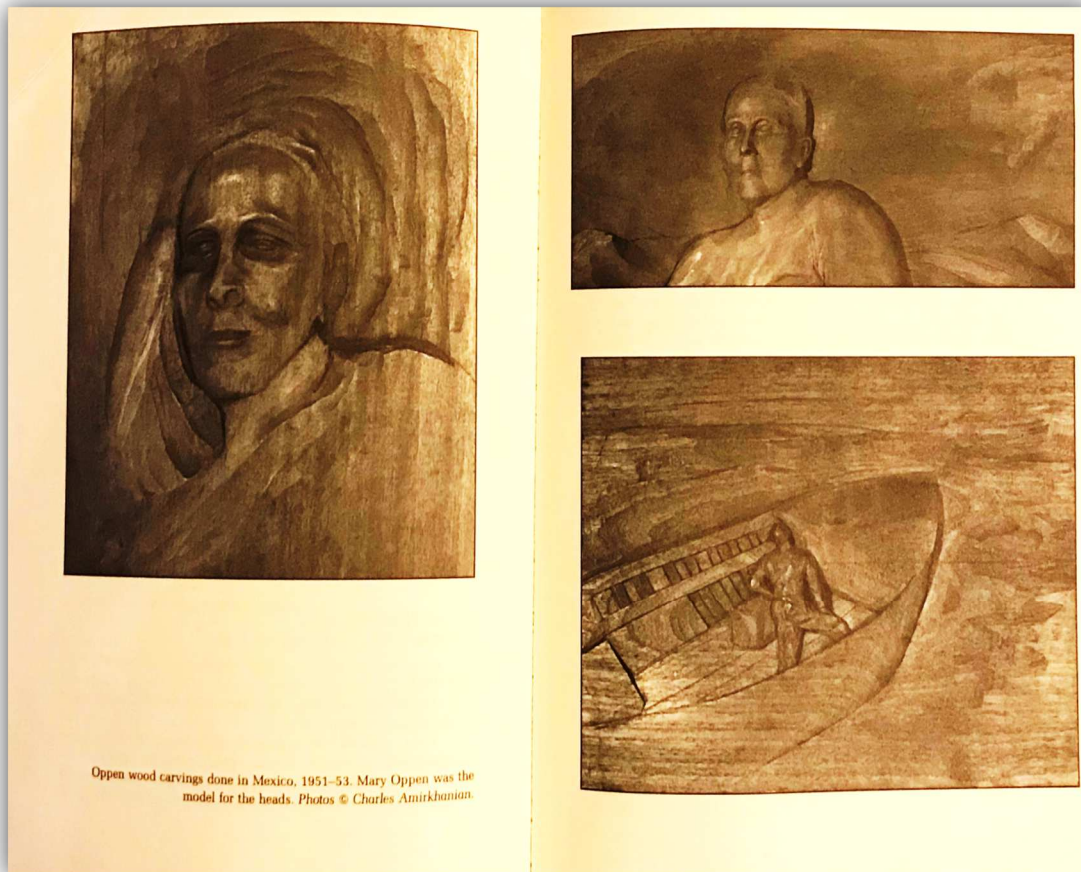


Fig. 17: Photographs of Oppen's Mexican relief woodwork as reproduced in *The Selected Letters* (12-13).

The themes and figures which Oppen carved into wood were, as this small sample size suggests, dear to him.¹⁴⁸ This becomes even more obvious in a warm-hearted letter to his daughter Linda from November 1, 1958. Shortly before visiting Linda who “had entered Sarah Lawrence College in September” in the United States (7), Oppen responds to her request to bring along one of his wood carvings. Interestingly, Oppen offers bas-reliefs immediately after telling her that he is “terribly bored by the pictures of abstract artists.” He writes:

¹⁴⁸ Sailing and the (bodily) experience of the sea were central to the Oppens throughout their lives. George mentions the importance of boats and the sea in a number of letters: “Boats have played a very large part in my life beginning in childhood, or in fact in infancy, and a large, tho intermittent part in our lives, Mary's and mine We've sailed fairly ponderous boats on fairly ponderous voyages” (197); “a childhood of nurses, butlers and what not – (it's why I know how to sail)” (207); “But my childhood was the sea” (238); “My childhood was the sea the inescapable myth of the sea” (251). Not surprisingly, many references to boats, ships, and water can be found in Oppen's poetry as well, ranging from “Party on Shipboard” in *Discrete Series* to the last published poem “Till Other Voices Wake Us” in *Primitive*. Significantly, in “Product,” a poem in *The Materials* which begins with the line “There is no beauty in New England like the boats,” Oppen coins the term “boatness” for the action of floating on water: “Once someone / Put a bowl afloat / And there for all to see [...] / Was boatness” (24). In this neologism, the materiality of word and world synthesize.

I was thinking the other day that tho I don't (naturally) object to abstract pictures, I am terribly bored by the pictures of abstract artists. [...] I mean I don't like the artist to be abstract – all the art I really remember is like Williams, Reznikoff, Rembrandt – you know who and where and what the artist is

and, what picture of mine (how very nice of you to ask) shall I bring. (sure it won't be a fire hazard) The adolescent with books under his arm is the best carved but what a subject!! The small one of a carpenter? The one who's sort of built himself into a trap – the stained wood. The tree is too big – the Carlos too big. Probably the carpenter, no? Sad tho he is. Or which do you want. Linnerpinner darling, just say the wordee. (11)

Even without the actual, handcrafted objects as visual proof in front of one's eyes, the figures Oppen carved into wood (“The adolescent with books,” “a carpenter,” “The one who's sort of built him into a trap”) emblemize and articulate what appears to have occupied his mind during the time in Mexico. The woodwork is graspable, and its maker concerned with the real like “Williams, Reznikoff, Rembrandt.” The reference to Williams and Reznikoff in this artistic triumvirate makes sense because Oppen praised these two older poets and their work repeatedly and openly (in re Williams: “The work is so open and so frank and so solid” (*SL* 61); in re Reznikoff: “I think the sound perhaps is more skillful, the poems more consistently whole than in the early [Reznikoff] word and the underlying implication more solid, more complete. It is strange to hear the same voice again, and the poem form after it ends” (34). In a letter from 1963, he even admits to feeling envious: “And surely I envy still Williams' language, Williams' radiance; Rezi's lucidness; and frequently Zukofsky's line-sense” (83).

As a Dutch visual artist who lived three hundred years earlier than Oppen and his coevals, Rembrandt (1606-1669) seemingly does not fit the bill. Yet, Oppen speaks up for Rembrandt and explains what he sees at work in the painting “Old Woman Cutting Her Nails” in a 1967 letter to Ethel Schwabacher:

I noticed [...] that you are disturbed if not angered by Rembrandt
Heavy, insistent, terribly concerned with the real, the mystery not in the brown shadows but in the lit surfaces, the old woman cutting her nails in slant light! Slant light! the light also aslant on canvas of course which makes the canvas the world, as he wanted it to be I recognize that the complexity of the internal is almost unlimited; the fact, for me, should not hide that reality in which it exists.

What one feels about a thing, and the thing. The second is the major fact thru which we will reach wherever we are going

So that for me too Rembrandt is one of the truly important artists. (*SL* 153)

With key terms of Oppen's poetics of sincerity scattered throughout this letter (“terribly concerned with the real,” “the mystery [...] in the lit surfaces,” “the canvas the world,” “that reality in which it exists,” the change from “a thing” to “the thing”), it becomes obvious why Oppen lists the 17th century Dutch master alongside with the two modern

poets among “the truly important artists.” They share what Oppen calls in his working papers an “*Open-ness to the world // Fidelity to fact*” which finds expression in the artwork. In poetry, this “Open-ness to the fact” materializes “in the poem:” “it is reality / a force // force / as of light.” Continuing with imagery of light as in the Rembrandt letter (“slant light!”), Oppen declares on the same page in the archive that “Such poems bring the world / to light—and the / people to life” (“Meaning” 207). Notably, Oppen reworked his close reading of Rembrandt’s painting into a poem, “Rembrandt’s Old Woman Cutting Her Nails,” which remained unpublished during the poet’s lifetime. In fact, the poem was excavated from the archive by Davidson who begins his excellent essay “Palimpsests: Postmodern Poetry and the Material Text” with a short analysis of this poem: “An old woman / As if one saw her now / For the first time, cutting her nails / In the slant light” (NCP 320). More precisely, Davidson focuses on “the page itself, in its wandering and questioning” on which the four lines are written. Shedding light on “the poem’s materiality, its existence as writing,” he zeroes in on “its written environment” when he uncovers that Oppen wrote the following “prose remark, typed in caps” below the poem: “WE HAVE A LONG TRADITION OF CONTEMPT FOR MATTER, AND HAVE CEASED TO NOTICE THAT ITS EXISTENCE—AND ONLY *ITS* EXISTENCE—REMAINS ABSOLUTELY UNEXPLAINED.” As Davidson points out accurately, “this prose extends the poet’s meditation on Rembrandt’s design but shifts the emphasis from the painting’s subject—the old woman—to its materiality” (24). What this brief excursion into Oppen’s thinking with “MATTER” and “lit surfaces” shows is not only that often ideas propounded in letters gradually hatch to material poems in his working papers. It also rationalizes the abrupt transition from “Williams, Reznikoff, Rembrandt” to the carvings he offered to his daughter to choose from. No matter the medium, matter matters.

In his epistolary deliberation on which woodwork might be best, Oppen tellingly suggests “the carpenter” whose sadness, it seems, can be read autobiographically. What shines through in his rumination in his letter to his daughter Linda is that Oppen took his wood carving seriously. He pursued this form of creative work as self-critically (“too big”), meticulously (“best carved”), and material-consciously (“the stained wood”) as he wrote and would write poetry. Apparently, Oppen busied himself with carpentry and wood carving as means to artistically come to terms with the situation he found himself and his family stuck in, that is, trapped in Mexico, working as a carpenter in a furniture shop, his adolescent daughter leaving for college in 1958. These biographical readings

of Oppen's non-literary artwork bear further scrutiny. For the purposes of this chapter, which aims to bridge the hiatus and establish Oppen the poet and Oppen the carpenter as Oppen the poet-carpenter, it is intriguing to focus on the parallels in technique and method that lie at the heart of and infuse what Oppen calls "[t]he manufactured part" in "Debt" from *The Materials* (NCP 60). His talent and deftness regarding craftsmanship notwithstanding, Oppen realized that he was still better skilled in poetry. In a late 1976 letter to his niece Diane Meyer, he recalls the decisive and troubled year of 1958 ("Not an easy time;" "Every now and then in hiding"). In retrospect, two events in particular stand out for him: "also (1958) Linda had started college. Very nearly lost her Did, somewhat, lose her / Also (1958) that I confessed to myself that I possessed a marked ability—and that it wasn't carpentry / Not an easy time of one's life" (SL 315). The "marked ability" was, as his return to "work ON PAPER" signifies, poetry.

Despite his realization that he was more talented in working with words than in working with wood, the experience as craftsman and carpenter impressed itself so much on Oppen that he resorted to the semantic field of wooden materials when he characterized poet-friends like Reznikoff. Reminiscing about visits in the 1930s to Reznikoff whose "honesty as a poet" he admired (SL 14), Oppen writes that "Rezi," as he calls him, "would always rush out and buy a very big – an enormous bottle of cream soda. He knew where to get them." Pondering this ritualist gesture, Reznikoff's "symbol off unstinted hospitality," Oppen continues that the fellow Objectivist "knew everything about New York – including where to buy cream soda – but the way a woodman knows about the woods." By comparing Reznikoff's familiarity with New York to a woodman's knowledge of the environment in which he works and walks, Oppen neatly captures the sense of feeling at home in places where others might easily feel or get lost. Their intimate relationship with and understanding of their surroundings unite the woodman and the poet of the city. According to Oppen, the reason for Reznikoff's profound knowledge of New York's cityscape lies in the fact that "he walked everywhere." It then does not come as a surprise to Oppen that Reznikoff directly perceived developments as well as repetitions occurring in the city on his walking tours and that he worked these detailed encounters into his poems: "He knew where the milk horse stopped, and where the grocer gathered his eggs. [...] He addressed a milk horse once in a poem: 'Horse, how are your cousins, the centaur and the unicorn?' And he noticed in one of those filthy vacant lots 'a girder, still itself among the rubble'" (14). Notably, the Reznikoff lines quoted by Oppen are central to two very short poems which

were first published under the collective title “A Group of Verse” in the special Objectivist number of *Poetry* in February 1931. This issue, edited by Zukofsky, also contained in addition to two Oppen poems the guest editor’s seminal essay “Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff” and thus a constellation of texts which were formative to the Objectivist program and, for Oppen personally, a constant source of inspiration even in times of despair. As will be discussed later, especially the image of the girder which remains “still itself” despite being surrounded by fragments and signs of destruction impressed itself on Oppen’s mind so much so that the Reznikoff poem, in a way, transformed into a talismanic object to which Oppen clung while fearing for his life. If Oppen’s comparison hints at parallels between human actors and does not focus on the materiality of wood, that is, the primary material Oppen used while living and working in Mexico, this concrete aspect of working with wood and Oppen’s practical experience in handling wooden texture, influences and can be traced in his writings and most patently in *The Materials* as well.

Immediately after the therapeutic session at the psychiatrist’s, Oppen started writing again. As DuPlessis notes, “his first work was ‘Blood from the Stone’ (then titled ‘To Date’). When he typed up this and a few other completed poems in January 1959, he poignantly dated that one, in a slip, January 1949” (xviii). The misremembered time stamp, after all a lapse of a decade, hints at a continuity of poetic thinking during the expatriate years in Mexico. In the first section of “Blood from the Stone,” the lyrical I exclaims: “O! / Everything I am is / Us. Come home.” With the poet’s bas-relief work in mind, it is suggestive to hear a homonymic echo in the second section of this first poem which Oppen wrote after his prolonged silence and where he returns to the political climate of

The Thirties. And
A spectre

In every street,
In all inexplicable crowds, what they did then
Is still their lives.

As thirty in a group—
To Home Relief—the unemployed—
Within the city’s intricacies
Are these lives. Belief?

The idea of homecoming and the word “home” are put into relief with the turn to “Home Relief” as a welfare program for “the unemployed” whose number increased massively

in the aftermath of the 1929 stock market crash. Both born in 1908, the Oppens were active members of the Communist Party in “[t]he Thirties” and engaged in political action “[a]s thirty in a group.” In fact, in 1938 Mary and George “organize[d] the Farmer’s Union around Utica, New York, forming a united front of radicals, liberals, trade unionists, leftists and recent immigrants” and “help[ed] the Farmer’s Union” in “a milk strike to protest monopoly control of prices” (*SP* 193). “Blood from the Stone,” then, is rife with biographical experiences. The slightly delayed rhyme ‘Relief/Belief’ punningly adds to this reading and lays the groundwork for further references in *The Materials* to, for example, “[t]he woodwork” and “the carpenter’s [..] culture / Of fitting, of firm dimensions, / Of post and lintel” (*NCP* 49, 62).

The homonym “relief” finds entry into Oppen’s second book as concrete word and as autobiographical trace of Oppen’s non-verbal craftsmanship. In the adequately named poem “Return,” Oppen himself (“Mary, / Mary, we turn to the children;” “And Linda five, / Maybe six”) remembers “a city gone / Among old streets / [...] where Petra beat / A washpan out her window gathering / A crowd like a rescue. Relief, / As they said it, The Relief” (*NCP* 48-49). In the final lines of the poem, he then focuses on concrete objects made of wood and clay, that is, materials which Oppen used after his return from war and before his return to poetry:

But how imagine it
Of streets boarded and vacant where no time will hatch
Now chairs and walls,
Floors, roofs, the joists and beams,
The woodwork, window sills
In sun in a great weight of brick. (*NCP* 49)

Significantly, the experience of working as a craftsman in the years away from poetry is not the only skill and facet of his life which Oppen processes in the books after *Discrete Series*. As the following reading will show, Oppen’s life-shaping experiences as a soldier fighting in World War II and a father who shared with Mary both the miracle of birth (“O small ones, / To be born!” [*NCP* 39]) and the grief of suffering “unsuccessful pregnancies, including still-births” find form in *The Materials*. “Mourning is parturition,” Oppen notes to himself, “another birth into another world” (“Meaning” 196). As it is, Oppen touches upon this stark binary opposition in “Blood from the Stone.” In this crucial poem, the third section begins with two words: “And war.” Set apart by white space, the following lines equate the corporeal body of a soldier with “a great weight of brick:”

And war.

More than we felt or saw.
 There is a simple ego in a lyric,
 A strange one in war.
 To a body anything can happen,
 Like a brick. Too obvious to say.
 But all horror came from it. (NCP 53)

Adding to the high number of delayed or slant rhymes in the poem (“come home,” “Relief/belief,” “war/saw”), lines in the fourth and final part juxtapose images of death and life:

Blood from the stone, life
 From a stone dead dam. Mother
 Nature! because we find the others
 Deserted like ourselves and therefore brothers. Yet

So we lived
 And chose to live

These were our times. (NCP 54)

The sequence “life/Mother/others/brothers” condenses central themes of birth, separation and comradeship. Interestingly, it is the existential fact of birth to which Oppen resorts when he describes the time “when a workman wasn’t alienated, when he still made the object.” In a 1976 interview, he exclaims: “And then, there it is! You can’t believe it. It looks as though someone else made it. And the strange thing is—we could use that word Objectivism which haunts us so much—that if it’s perfect, you’re not in it at all. Which is also a tremendous experience. It may be a more emotional experience than the mark of the maker which is often talked about. Because you *did* do it, and yet it’s not oneself. It’s closer to giving birth” (114-15). Tremendous experiences—etymologically speaking occurrences which make one tremble—such as birth, moments of perfection, and (fear of) death shape *The Materials* and the poems, trademark Oppen from *Discrete Series*, frequently negotiate these topoi across the space of a double page.

It is remarkable and of great interest to scholars interested in the nexus of Oppen’s poetic and non-literary work that the poet-craftsman’s experiences as carpenter and woodcarver are worked into *The Materials*. The time away from paper influenced Oppen’s post-exile work with the materials of poetic creation and honed his faith in and respect for “the manufactured part.” In “Debt,” Oppen withholds a predicate when he writes about “a skill / Of benches and the shock / Of the press where an instant on the steel bed / The manufactured part—”. Breaking the syntactical sequence as well as the

line after the em-dash, Oppen creates a suspenseful pause which is further intensified by the blank space below the line. The next one-word line “New!” thus stands out in clear-cut contours just like the crafted piece of manufacture. As “New!” (a single word plus exclamation “mark of the maker”) clarifies, the return to poetry entails a new beginning or rather a “Beginning Again,” as Nicholls names the first chapter in his excellent monograph on Oppen (*NCP* 60).¹⁴⁹ In the bas-relief passage from the letter to his daughter quoted above, the reference to “[t]he adolescent with books under his arm” who “is the best carved but what a subject” suggests, albeit implicitly, that the former medium of Oppen’s artistic creation was on his mind even while he busied himself with woodcarving. A 1965 letter addressed to fellow poet John Crawford reveals that Oppen drew parallels between working with wood and working with paper even years after his return to writing poetry. In this letter, he advises Crawford to “remember that any carpenter can build a table. That you can do so also is a surprise only to your friends and instructors who know or think they know that you are not a carpenter. And it’s your own piece of paper. I am not, in that sense, a friend. I know you’re a carpenter” (*SL* 120). Meant as an encouraging remark for Crawford to stay true to his own poetic voice, Oppen’s advice is grounded in his experience and expertise as poet-craftsman. With the knowledge that Oppen had not only “learned a little carpentry from the Butler” but worked as a craftsman and “built tools and dies, houses, furniture” (*SL* 310, 66), the enigmatic transition from the sphere of carpentry to the “own piece of paper” is not as surprising as it might seem at first. Oppen identified similarities between what he calls in “Solution” in *The Materials* “the wooden texture” and the material qualities of a “piece of paper.” When his “work ON PAPER” resumed (“The Anthropologist” 144), conceptual vestiges of woodwork remained.

The notion of revival for Oppen the poet resonates in *The Materials* in the leitmotif of ‘birth’ which sets the tone right from the first poem in the book. In “Eclogue,” the idea of hopeful nascency despite and in sight of atrocity (“The men

¹⁴⁹ Intriguingly, Oppen admits in the interview with Michel Engelbert and Michael West that the poem “Debt” from *The Materials* and “Rationality” from *This In Which* “are the same poem, yes. That’s why I call it ‘Debt.’ It was the poem I couldn’t write. It was about working. The carpenter working in the factories—which means a great deal to me. And suddenly that meaning disappeared. I was writing it too late. It was also a defense of the mechanic sense. Mechanics; empiricism; as against the various mysticisms and solipsisms. It was a defense of the rational. The excitement of the young worker. I mean, the thing’s made! You do it the way you’re supposed to, and there it is!” (114). Surprisingly, “Debt” is the only poem in *The Materials* which Oppen deemed replaceable in a collected work of his poems. After the publication of *The Materials* and while already deeply ensconced in writing *This In Which*, he informed his half-sister: “If I should consider – or if I were considering – a collected works, I would feel that all of the *Materials* could bear reprinting with the exception of Debt” (98).

talking / Near the room's center. [...] / Pinpointing in the uproar / Of the living room // An assault / On the quiet continent") is not only contained in the titular allusion to Virgil's prophetic Fourth Eclogue addressed to a newborn boy, "*Parve puer*" as Oppen quotes in the fifth of "Five Poems About Poetry" from *This In Which* (NCP 39, 104). Quite concretely, in the emphatic final lines of the poem, the poet fixates on "small / Vegetative leaves / And stems taking place // Outside—O small ones, / To be born!" (NCP 39). As a matter of fact, already the first epigraph taken from Jacques Maritain insinuates such a reawakening. The quote which Oppen picked for the volume reads: "We awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things" (NCP 38). This trope of birth and growth energizes *The Materials* and resurfaces in several poems as the theme of entire poems ("Birthplace: New Rochelle" with its "world of things") and memorable lines such as "Labor before her birth, her twisted / Precarious birth and the men / Laborious, burly" (NCP 55, 67). But true to his dialectical thinking, Oppen does not focus on ideas of birth and new life myopically. In *The Materials*, he negotiates beginnings against the backdrop of apocalyptic fears of extinction which were justified in times of the nuclear arms race where "We are endangered / Totally at last," as Oppen writes in the "Time of the Missile" (70). The concrete threat of atomic warfare or, as Oppen puts it in "The Crowded Countries of the Bomb," the fact "That we can destroy ourselves / Now" is equally a part of *The Materials* as the fact that "[c]ell by cell the baby made herself, the cells / Made cells" (78, 51).

The existential binary pair life/death, which Oppen had observed and located in "the city there" in his allusion to the methods of *The Bridge*, is so closely connected in Oppen's thinking that the dualism manifests itself, at times, in paradoxical juxtapositions. In "Population," for instance, the eponymous mass of people ("A crowd, a population") includes "those / Born, those not yet dead" (43). In "Time of the Missile," the sudden turn in the penultimate stanza to the possibility of nuclear annihilation carries over into a remarkable coupling of "space / Which is viviparous" and the

Place of the mind
And eye. Which can destroy us,
Re-arrange itself, assert
Its own stone chain reaction.

The viviparous "space" and the potentially destructive "Place of the mind / And eye" resonate with each other in a deferred rhyme across the white space between the two final stanzas of the poem. While the fission of materials in bombs can cause disaster in nuclear chain reactions, the fusion of materials as in the construction of "Chartres" can

also bring about “structure” where “a stone / Supports another” and “the stones / Stand where the masons locked them” (77). This sense of ambivalence pervades *The Materials* and finds its expression on the level of the book’s materiality in double page-space. The book, then, is concerned with “[t]hose materials which force themselves upon one, those materials which crash into one’s life from atomic space and the historical space which is one’s own—they can be crushing—one can most certainly fail—but they are not corrupt” (SL 143).

Unmistakably, Oppen’s emphasis on the nitty-gritty is evident from the title he chose for his second book, *The Materials*. In his working papers, he defines “[t]he materials” as “the commonplace” (“Philosophy of the Astonished” 216). The title of the volume, as another remark in the archives makes clear, incorporates both the materials with a lower-case ‘m’ and a capital ‘M:’ the concrete building materials as well as the, at times, ineffable experiences that proved hard to grasp: “I have by now clearly got a step, or half a step, beyond *The Materials* perhaps beyond the materials” (qtd. in Nicholls 62). With his return to the United States, Oppen reignited his poetic endeavors, contacting publishers and poets with whom he had been in touch in the 1920s and 1930s such as James Laughlin, Williams, and Henry Rago. More importantly though, he wrote poems again, “writing steadily,” as he tells his half-sister in an early letter from 1959, “trying to get thru a back log of things I’ve wanted to say” (SL 18). As his phrasing suggests, a plethora of ideas and impressions had crowded in on his mind while he was away from typewriters, finally demanding to be spoken of and written down on paper. The sheer number of things that Oppen had stored away in the back of his mind made him write persistently so that on March 7, 1959 he could offer James Laughlin “some twenty or twenty five poems written in these last six months, after that gap of twenty years” (27). While Oppen was “banging this silly typewriter every day” (26), he stayed true to his writing ethos and practice of sincerity, weighing each word carefully and thus “writ[ing] terribly slowly—a world’s record” (18). Despite his slow pace, Oppen was surprisingly productive, seeing three books of poetry into print in the 1960s (*The Materials* in 1962, *This In Which* in 1965, and *Of Being Numerous* in 1968). As some of his letters attest, he was at times impatient to get through the “back log of things” and wanted to be quite literally done with poems some of which, as he writes in 1962, “should have been written ten years ago” (55). In fact, Oppen was so adamant in getting poems out of the system in order to move on that he shelved the printed poems physically away immediately after submitting the manuscript of *The Materials* to *New Directions*

and the San Francisco Review: “I am desperate right now to get this [*The Materials*] behind me, and get on. The folders will do tho: I will put them away, lock them away, and try to go *ahead*. I mean, not to rewrite these same poems” (55). In another letter to June, he reiterates the same notion when he writes about the poems collected in *The Materials*: “The important thing for me is to get this group out, away, finished, off my mind. I’m having trouble getting further—and these *should* have been written in 1940” (379, fn.1).

Oppen articulates the creative need to release poems belatedly and hence to relieve the burden they posed for years when he began working on his second book. Commenting on the quality of his early poetry and distinguishing it from what he set out to do in *The Materials*, Oppen claims “[t]he early poems just have to stand as is—Some of them come up against the limit of my understanding at the time, and sort of break to pieces. Those that stay solidly within what I had grasped seem to me good. But I am starting now as if from scratch to write of things I knew nothing about when I was twenty. I just have to say it as best I can” (26). Oppen, however, would qualify the idea that in writing *The Materials* he was “starting now as if from scratch” in a letter from 1965 in which he defines the project of each of his three books published by then: “The Materials: to restate the themes: solidly” (*SL* 122). The broader themes have not changed and the search for “the lyric valuables” is still of utmost importance (*NCP* 50). In a note to himself, Oppen points out that he “was, even in 1929 (discrete series) consciously attempting to trace, to re-produce, the act of the world upon the consciousness” (“An Adequate Vision” 30). What did change in the interval between *Discrete Series* and *The Materials* is that Oppen learned and experienced things some of which were traumatizing and required release and relief in poetry.

6.4 Raw War

... and my wife reading letters she knew were two weeks late
and did not prove I was not dead while she read (*NCP* 196-97)

The Materials is replete with images characterized by immanent and irrepressible potential for growth. In fact, several poems in the volume contain references to paradigmatic images such as ‘the cell’ (“Sara in Her Father’s Arms”), ‘the seed’ (“Return”), ‘the child’ (“Sunnyside Child”) and, non-organically, ‘the brick/the stone’ (“Blood from the Stone;” “Chartres”). To the same extent, however, images of destruction and disaster abound in the book as well. In fact, the existential dilemma of life and death and of passivity and activity (“When the thing stops, / Is stopped”) motivates *The Materials* to a large degree and enters the book through references to the horrors of war which Oppen experienced firsthand (*NCP* 40). The second epigraph to the volume, adapted from a poem by William Butler Yeats, already articulates the aspect of savagery which war begets: “They fed their hearts on fantasies / And their hearts have become savage” (*NCP* 38). This theme of raw force and brutality resonates in many poems. In “Eclogue,” the first poem of *The Materials*, “The men talking / Near the room’s center” are, for example, also “Pinpointing in the uproar / Of the living room // An assault / On the quiet continent” (39). This potential act of aggression is rendered concrete in “Survival: Infantry” in which the attack debated in the safe, interior space “Of the living room” has been launched, wreaking havoc on the natural world: “And the world changed. / There had been trees and people, / Sidewalks and roads // There were fish in the sea. // Where did all the rocks come from? / And the smell of explosives” (*NCP* 81). In this devastated landscape, the foot soldiers who survived the assault are forced to find their way “in mud,” left, in the etymological sense of the word, humiliated, “crawl[ing] everywhere on the ground without seeing the / earth again.” The speaker of the poem is part of the group of soldiers, confessing that “We were ashamed of our half life and our misery: we saw / that everything had died.”

The setting and, more importantly, the emotional turmoil in the aftermath of a shelling which some comrades survived while others died make this poem a highly autobiographical, confessional account of war experiences. Oppen, as has been noted many times, was severely wounded on April 22, 1945 “[i]n Alsace, during the war” where, as he writes in a powerful prose section of “Route,” published in *Of Being Numerous*, “we found ourselves on the edge of the Battle of the Bulge. The front was

inactive, but we were spread so thin that the situation was eerily precarious” (*NCP* 194). Hit by heavy artillery fire, Oppen leaped into a nearby “hole which had been dug out by a previous artillery blast” (“The Oppens” 309). The horror he experienced in this “ready-made foxhole” traumatized Oppen. As McAleavy writes in “The Oppens: Remarks Towards Biography,” another “American soldier jumped in on top of him,” desperately seeking shelter from direct fire. This soldier “was followed by an artillery shell which landed close enough to send shrapnel through the one soldier into George.” McAleavy continues:

George knew he was wounded badly, but that the man on top of him was in even worse shape; however, George’s guilt, which he evidently felt all his life thereafter, centered on the fact that he did not attempt to drag or carry the badly wounded soldier above him to safety or himself attempt to find medical attention, even though either course would have been mortally foolish. In fact, George lay there, bleeding, watching this other man die—and knowing, he claimed, that there was a moment when the man realized that George was not going to go after help, and grew accusatorily, desperately, hostile. In any case, the other soldier did die, and George stayed in the foxhole a number of hours, until there was no longer any danger of further artillery or sniper fire. [...] Evidently, this occurred in Alsace [...] and doubtless, this was the foxhole in which he buried his dogtags which incriminated him as being Jewish. (309)

This terrible experience of being trapped in a hole without any chance of finding help for himself and his comrade, of witnessing the slow death of the soldier lying on top of him, scarred Oppen both physically and mentally. Hoffmann states that “Oppen’s wounds were extensive” because “shrapnel had penetrated his back, chest and face (65). In fact, as Oppen told McAleavy, shrapnel had perforated his flak jacket to such an extent that when he went to reclaim it after leaving the hospital the “attendant who went to get it came back saying that the serial number he’d been given must have been wrong, since [...] *this* jacket belonged to someone who had died. Evidently no one with such severe shrapnel wounds would have been expected to survive” (310). Moreover, Oppen’s hearing was gravely impaired “[b]ecause of the close proximity of shell-fire” which caused “a bilateral ruptured right eardrum” (65). These wartime injuries left obvious marks on Oppen’s body and became visible part of him. Stephen Schneider even remembers Mary telling him in the 1960s that “[t]iny bits of shrapnel [...] are still coming out” (*OR* 21). Still, the emotional and psychological inflictions, what one would probably diagnose as post-traumatic stress disorder today, haunted, frustrated, and infuriated Oppen even longer after his return to the US. Remarks by Mary (“George returned to a civilian life that knew nothing of the dangers and the horrors of war on home soil. G.I. patience was limited” [*Meaning* 180]), his daughter Linda (“I was aware

of his nightmares" [OR 227]), and close friends ("George was often violent" [OR 23]) coalesce into a picture of a traumatized, irritable, "physically disabled" veteran who "was frustrated by incompetence and unjustifiable protocols" and "plagued by nightmares which kept him up at night" (Hoffmann 67). A deeply felt sense of guilt and shame, as "Survival: Infantry" suggests, contributed tremendously to Oppen's state of mind. He dealt with the dilemma of guilt that lay at the heart of joining the war in a short essay under the title "Non-Resistance, etc. Or: Of the Guiltless" that was published in 1974. In a pertinent passage of the text, he alludes to the traumatic episode of what he calls in the poem "our half life and our misery:" "If I fought, and fought to kill, I would suffer guilt, the guilt of guilt AND the guilt of fear, the desire to run, the guilt that I've told of, the guilt of that foxhole [...] If I killed, I would suffer guilt. If I did not, I would suffer I don't even know a word, a name for what I would suffer" (SPDP 46). No matter which decision he would have made, there would have always been a catch, some ineffable suffering. Accordingly, the sixth section of *Of Being Numerous* asks: "Wars that are just? A simpler question: In the event, will you or will you not want to kill a German. Because, in the event, if you do not want to, you won't" (NCP 196). That the harrowing hours in the foxhole haunted Oppen his entire life is also evident from an autobiographical note among the "Twenty-Six Fragments" which "consists of a series of notes scrawled by Oppen on envelopes and other small pieces of paper found, after his death, on or near his desk or pasted to the wall of his study" (SPDP 231). Circled for emphasis, the fragment remembers "The middle class boy to die / in a foxhole like a / dog" (SPDP 238).

Oppen describes his sense of helplessness in a previously unpublished passage from a letter to Schneider, made available in *The Oppens Remembered*: "They knew their shell had hit us in our hole. The logical next thing was a bayonet charge. I realized it was impossible to even lift one arm. There was absolutely no way in which I could defend myself" (OR 26). Oppen meditates on this feeling of being totally helpless, lost, and in imminent danger combined with the question why the "bayonet charge" was not executed by the enemy, why he survived, especially in poems published after *Of Being Numerous*. In the third poem of "Some San Francisco Poem" from *Seascape: Needle's Eye*, for instance, the poet-veteran affirms "We have suffered fear, we know something of fear / And of humiliation mounting to horror // The world above the edge of the foxhole belongs to the flying bullets, leaden superbeings / For the men grovelling in the foxhole danger, danger in being drawn to them" (NCP 224). In the eponymous poem

“Myth of the Blaze,” he seemingly still shell-shocked wonders “why had they not // killed me why did they fire that warning / wounding cannon only the one round [...] in the destroyed (and guilty) Theatre / of the War” (*NCP* 247). And in “Of Hours,” an often-quoted poem from *Seascape: Needle’s Eye* in which Oppen famously recalls meeting Ezra Pound again (“why did I weep / Meeting that poet again”), he remembers the dehumanizing aspect of fighting in World War II:

Crevasse	Fought	
No man		
But the fragments of metal		
Tho there were men there were men	Fought	
No man but the fragments of metal		
Burying my dogtag with H		
For Hebrew in the rubble of Alsace		

I must get out of here

Father he thinks *father* (*NCP* 218)

The large white spaces separating “Fought” from the left-hand side of the lines typographically recreate the meaning of the word “Crevasse.” Oppen uses the blankness of the page and employs white spaces to visually indicate a fissure, a gap, a hole between purely linguistic units. Through its materiality the white page as compositional tool contributes to the predominant imagery of disintegration.

In addition to the shocking fact that Oppen buried his dogtag so that he would not be identified as a Jew had German soldiers captured him, the image of “rubble” mentioned in this poem from the 1970s is very important as it materializes as a key term merging biography and poetry. The word, for Oppen, is inextricably linked to a two-line poem by Reznikoff whose poetry he admired. Most strikingly, this Reznikoff poem was among the texts which ran through Oppen’s mind while he was hiding in the foxhole.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ In addition to “an amended version of Charles Reznikoff’s short poem,” Prevallet lists lines by Zukofsky (“How shall I—Her soles new as the sunned black of her grave’s turf, / With all this material / To what distinction”) and by Sir Thomas Wyatt (“They Flee from Me, That Sometimes Did Me Seek”) which Oppen repeated silently in the foxhole (133). As Oppen writes in a late letter, “trapped in a fox-hole [...] I waited, I think, some ten hours, and during those hours Wyatt’s little poem – ‘they flee from me...,’ and poem after poem of Rezi’s ran thru my mind over and over, these poems seemed to fill all the space around me and I wept and wept” (338). In the important interview with Hatlen and Mandel, he connects the emotional power of the image with the idea of beauty: “And then the line about the girder was with me all through the war and every time I thought of it I wept and wept, I don’t know what about, just that it was beautiful” (*GOMP* 44). Oppen, moreover, works this experience of clinging to poetry in a perilous impasse into his poetry as well. “Myth of the Blaze” contains the lines: “because of this lost to be lost Wyatt’s / lyric and Rezi’s / running thru my mind / in the destroyed (and guilty) Theatre / of the War I’d cried” (*NCP* 247).

The poem in its first publication in the special ‘Objectivists’ issue of *Poetry* appears as the third poem of “A Group of Verse” under the Roman numeral “III” and reads: “Among the heaps of brick and plaster lies / A girder, itself among the rubbish” (2529). Notably, the word “still” was added to the second line in the 1934 publication of the poem in *Jerusalem the Golden* which appeared under the imprint of The Objectivist Press. One can only speculate whether Oppen recommended the insertion of this important small word, but it cannot be ruled out since Oppen oversaw the publication venture and met and corresponded with Reznikoff. The revised version with the capital “A” shrunk to lowercase and “still” interspersed after the comma completes the fifth foot of the iambic sequence: “a girder, still itself among the rubbish” (*CP* 107). As has been noted by scholars like Robert Franciosi or Kristin Prevallet, Oppen misquoted the last line whenever he wrote about and praised Reznikoff’s short poem. In Oppen’s rewritten version the girder line, “one of the most powerful lines in poetry,” reads: “The girder, still itself among the rubble” (*GOMP* 29). Oppen substitutes the article at the beginning of the line and changes Reznikoff’s ‘rubbish’ to ‘rubble’ at the end of the line. Franciosi convincingly interprets what these subtle changes effectuate when he claims: “Whereas ‘rubbish’ suggests a casting aside of objects as without value, ‘rubble’ implies the breaking down by outside forces of something still useful. Reznikoff’s line expresses a spirit of endurance, of persistence in the face of neglect, where Oppen’s rewriting suggests a spirit of resistance, of holding to one’s convictions in the midst of destructive forces” (257). Through the change from the indefinite article “a” to the definite article “the” Oppen underscores this impression of the supporting device of the girder as a concrete, self-sustained, and stable entity “in the midst of destructive forces.” Still, the transformation of the last syllable alters the meaning of the imagistic poem to a larger extent than the grammatical shift. Rubble results from destruction or, with a nod to literary theory, from deconstruction. The fragmented nature of rubble, “the heaps of brick and plaster” echo the famous phrase “A heap of broken images” from *The Waste Land*, still holds the potential for construction. At times, indeed, it is necessary to demolish in order to rebuild. It might, in fact, be obligatory to reduce something to rubble so that new structures and arrangements can emerge. The girder staying true to itself amidst fragmented shards of former or future construction sites is thus a key word and key image in Oppen’s poetic thinking.

The silent recital of poetic lines “in moments of danger (the fox-hole) oneself looks in as well as out the looking in is fearful as vacuum,” as Oppen notes in his working

papers, kept him sane, distracting him from picturing the scenario of an attack which would have surely killed him (“The Anthropologist” 161). Oppen’s powerful emotional response to lines of poetry that were in the concrete situation in the foxhole detached from any material grounding but deeply rooted in memory epitomizes “the objectification of the poem, the making an object of the poem” (“Interview with Dembo” 160). The key principle of objectification materializes in this extreme moment “[i]n the same mud in the terrible ground” when poetry prevents one from succumbing to despair (*NCP* 81). With reference to “Survival: Infantry,” Oppen specifies the horror of “the smell of explosives / Iron standing in mud” in a long letter to Julian Zimet from 1959: “I said the rest of it is just stone, and the enemy. And death, which is a victory of stone. And the mud, and the terrible ground. The half-life ground” (*SL* 32). Like objects attributed with talismanic qualities, lines of poetry have the power to anchor someone in life, sheltering him or her from sinking even deeper into “[t]he half-life ground.” Memorized lines mesmerize. This objectified quality shines through most forcefully in life-threatening situations, in moments when one is confronted with bare and grim reality. In these moments, poetry reveals truths: “Imagine a man in the ditch, / The wheels of the overturned wreck / Still spinning— // I don’t mean he despairs, I mean if he does not / He sees in the manner of poetry” (*NCP* 198). For Oppen, Reznikoff’s poems in general and the girder-poem in particular capture “Being from an account of experience as it presents itself in its own terms” (*SL* 410, fn. 29). Quoting the two lines in a letter to his half-sister, he asks “how other than with this image could he put into your mind so clearly the miracle of existence—the existence of things. It is only because the image hits so clear and sudden that the poem means what it means” (*SL* 24). In the foxhole, Oppen painfully experienced “the miracle of existence” and encountered “the existence of [lines of poetry as] things.”

Oppen would continue to praise Reznikoff for his skill “to write // in the great / world small,” as the final lines of the poem “In Memoriam Charles Reznikoff” describe it (*NCP* 306). The poem appeared “on the back cover of Charles Reznikoff, *Poems 1937-1975: Volume II of the Complete Poems*” for which Oppen provided the foreword (*NCP* 408). In this “prose thing,” Oppen builds his commendation on the line with the girder. Importantly, he also ascribes girder-like qualities to the lines themselves:

That line of Reznikoff’s, in the poem of which it is a part, and line upon line of his perfect poems have been with me for the forty-eight years since I first came upon them. If we had no other poetry, I think that we could nevertheless live by virtue of these poems; these lines, these small, precise, these overwhelming gentle iron lines, and the

image of all that is and our love and pride and our small life, which is immeasurable, as these lines which are still themselves among the rubble. (*Speaking* 119)

The number of adjectives used to describe “these lines which are still themselves among the rubble” (“small, precise,” “overwhelming gentle iron,” “immeasurable”) makes clear that Oppen considered Reznikoff as a poet who valued the materiality of “line upon line.” In their respective “perfect poems,” the lines are girders. “Given a line,” Oppen writes, “one has a place to stand, and goes further” (*SL* 123). It is worth noting that Reznikoff’s girder poem was substantial for both Mary and George. In their conversation with Hatlen and Mandel, the couple applies the image of the girder “still itself” to their own situation in the Depression years, in the period between the world wars: “Quoting Rezi, too, ‘We wanted to be ourselves among the rubble’ which held us half in and half out of political doings. And that line to me is one of the most powerful lines in poetry [...] and we recite that line over and over to ourselves—and we meant to be ourselves among the rubble—and it was rubble or it was very close to rubble. It was very close to catastrophe, you know, not only close but was catastrophe because a world war is catastrophe, after all” (29). In crises, the Oppens found solace and “substantial // meaning handholds footholds” in the poem as objectified exemplar of endurance and tenacity (*NCP* 220).

Franciosi is correct when he states that Oppen’s “rewriting of Reznikoff’s poem tellingly registers his own personal and social ethos” (258). Indeed, the change from “rubbish” to “rubble” can be explained biographically, but this reading pursued by Prevallet and Franciosi only scratches the surface. Both scholars refer to Davidson’s valuable introductory remarks to “An Adequate Vision: A George Oppen Daybook” that the “much admired line of Reznikoff’s [...] could usefully [not ‘easily’ as Franciosi misquotes] stand for the governing ethos in Oppen’s poetics” (5). Given the scope of this claim and since Davidson as editor of the *New Collected Poems* is among the most versed Oppen scholars, it is useful to present his insightful explanatory remarks in full. The Reznikoff line, he continues,

defines those enduring products of human labor that exist despite and yet within the ‘rubble’ of modern history. In a metaphoric sense, the line describes those ‘small words’ upon which Oppen’s aesthetic rests and for which Reznikoff’s poetry so often became the model. It is not the Imagist ideal of a transitory moment caught by the artist between juxtaposed images and removed from time. It is the poem *in time*, part of the ‘rubble’ and yet ‘still itself,’ unchanged by the synthetic imagination. Reading through the thousands of pages in the Oppen archive one feels that the poet’s main goal was to interrogate (not fix) this girder in language. The process is dialogic, often taking the form of letters to friends or arguments with himself. (5)

What both Prevallet and Franciosi in focusing on the meaning of girder and rubble for Oppen's biography ("Oppen is himself the girder which remains in the midst of the rubble, in the midst of catastrophe of war" [Prevallet 135]) overlook, is the significance which Oppen ascribes to the actual, material arrangement of the two lines on the page. While both critics turn to Davidson's introduction to his selection from the archive and adopt the useful term 'ethos,' they ignore the twenty-five pages of Oppen's primary notes which follow right after his comments. This is surprising since Davidson mentions that the girder line is "quoted often in this selection" (5). If they had taken a closer look at the "selection of unpublished poems, drafts of letters, epigrams and other prose jottings found among the papers of George Oppen," they would have chanced upon an important passage where the poet explicates the syntactical sequence of the two lines. Oppen writes:

SYNTAX; here a two line poem in which the syntax is arranged to control the order of disclosure upon which the poem depends (Rezi's Girder). It is simply an inverted sentence. The inversion and the prosody place an emphasis on the word 'girder' without which the poem would have no discernible meaning.

syntax: a careful packing of a poem to avoid mere shuffling, a deadening, to avoid destroying a word by its relationships. ("An Adequate Vision" 29)

Oppen's close reading of the poem's materiality shows that he admired not only the girder/rubble image but the syntactical construction of the distich. "Rezi's Girder" is a prime example of a poem made object where "[t]he line sense, the line breaks, and the syntax [...] control the order of disclosure upon which the poem depends" (*SL* 141). To "find the word, the syntax, the cadence of unfolding" (*SL* 161), "a careful packing of a poem" is required "to avoid destroying a word by its relationship." Through Oppen's slight but meaningful revision and reshaping of the poem by means of swapping the article in front of 'girder,' by inserting "still," and by changing the last syllable and sound of the final word ('rubbish' to 'rubble'), the words 'girder' and 'rubble' gain emphasis and shine forth in their radiance and "cadence of disclosure" (*SL* 161). For Oppen, the life-saving lines thus achieve perfection as "each syllable has been carefully considered and carefully placed. —meaning acquired by cadence, form, radiance" ("Philosophy of the Astonished" 219).

Tellingly, the word 'rubble' appears in one of the first poems Oppen wrote after his return to work with the page. The fifth part of "The Image of the Engine," the second poem in *The Materials*, focuses on the cityscape and, more precisely, on the nexus of "beautiful bony children," "The streets of stores," and "worn and squalid toys in the trash" (*NCP* 42). The sense of loss and desolation evoked by "The lost / Glitter of the

stores!” and “lumps, chunks” that are “left behind” permeates the urban setting on a larger scale: “And every crevice of the city leaking / Rubble: concrete, conduit, pipe, a crumbling / Rubble of our roots.” The anaphoric positioning of “Rubble,” additionally highlighted by the capitalized line start and double enjambment, underscores the importance of this image, suggesting that Oppen’s passionate reaction to and meditation on Reznikoff’s poem bore on him so much so that he employed it as a leitmotif in his poetry and poetic thinking. Likewise, the image of the ‘girder’ reappears in Oppen’s writing as well. In “The Building of the Skyscraper,” as has been shown in the previous chapter, “the girder” occurs already in the first line as the platform on which the steel worker stands: “The steel worker on the girder” (*NCP* 149). In the poem from *This In Which*, the girder provides footing and stability in lofty heights, whereas Reznikoff’s girder is located “Among the heaps of brick and plaster” and “among the rubbish.” In Oppen’s recasting of the image, the girder becomes an indispensable, horizontally oriented device in the architectural process of vertical construction. Importantly, the semantic field of architecture from which the girder image derives is, as scholars have suggested, also applicable to Oppen’s making of poems. Prevallet, for instance, claims in her contribution to *Thinking Poetics* that “there is an architecture at work in Oppen’s poetics. Words in his poems work quite literally as girders” (138). According to her, “Oppen wants to be as material as possible, using words to provoke different definitions and layers of meaning.” In concordance with the trope of architecture, she calls these material words “girder words” and identifies ‘rubble’ as one exemplary “girder word falling in vertigo” which “appears over and over again in the poems and letters, revealing a little more about its meaning and significance each time” (139). Prevallet’s terminology is illuminating and chimes with what Oppen calls “the seed phrases” in a letter to June Oppen Degnan from 1964 (102). While it seems at times that she gets carried away in metaphorically labeling things as girders in her essay, her observation that “[t]he concept and experience of war itself is a girder that supports and connects many of the poems in Oppen’s various writings, though references to it are sporadic and never isolated” is valid and bears further scrutiny. If references to war as “an organizing—or disorganizing—principle in Oppen’s work” are “never isolated” (141), this is because Oppen thinks dialectically on paper and uses the environment of the double page as a material site where poems engage in dialogue across the page. As has and will be shown in more detail, Oppen already applied this method in his poems from the 1930s. Significantly, as with *Discrete Series*, the poems cannot fully convey their

dialogic meaning since reprintings warp the carefully arranged sequences. As it is, *The Materials* like *Discrete Series* can best be understood if one quite literally considers their “order of disclosure” in the original publication.

7 In Sight of the Double Page: Oppen's (Dis)Ordered Arrangement of Space

Oppen was keenly aware of the role which the arrangement of pages and poems plays within a book. He was attentive to the effect which the placement of print on pages has on the reader-looker. His deliberate choice of where to place poems in a volume creates pairs of poems on opposite pages which enter a conversation with each other. Such pairs, materialized on double-page spreads, resemble a microscopic discrete series of its own, as Oppen understood the title of his first book. Strangely enough, Oppen's perceptive sense of arrangement and design has hardly been taken into consideration by scholars. There have been justified complaints about the unfortunate reprinting of *Discrete Series* in the 1975 *Collected Poems* in which poem follows upon poem without any clear-cut marker of beginnings and endings. Schimmel rightfully bemoans these botched-up reprintings in his innovative essay "(On) *Discrete Series*" published in *George Oppen: Man and Poet*: "One cannot but regret the penny-wise economy of its [*Discrete Series*] reprinting in the New Directions *Collected Poems*. The serial aspect of the meticulously elegant *Series* is all but lost. The considered, faced pages no longer exist, but most seriously, in this for-the-most-part untitled mode, it is impossible to tell where a poem ends and where a new poem begins" (294). Similarly, Lyn Hejinian criticizes "New Direction's space-saving decision in 1975 to run the poems continuously" which "all but suppressed the dialogical character and dialectical theme of the work" (47).¹⁵¹ Such comments are usually followed up by the conciliatory remark that the *New Collected Poems* published by New Directions in 2002 and then again with a CD of Oppen readings in 2008 remedied and rectified the matter by granting each poem its own page and white space as intended by the poet. This return to the original layout helps to fathom the ordering, undergirding principle of Oppen's books. Yet, the original slimness of *Discrete Series* vanishes in the *New Collected Poems* which collects the entirety of all of Oppen's poems that have so far been lifted from the archive and from other sources except for *21 Poems*. In encountering *Discrete Series* couched between the covers of today's go-to edition, the reader experiences the minimalistic

¹⁵¹ That the Oppens were themselves not pleased with the reprinting of *Discrete Series* in the *Collected Poems* becomes explicit in Mary Oppen's sharp reaction to discussions of unity in her husband's books in a conversation with Hatlen and Mandel: "Well, *Discrete Series* suffered terribly in the way this was printed. Jay Laughlin just got a little too Scotch and wouldn't give a whole page to each poem and the way they've been reprinted makes some people think that if there are three little bits on a page, that's one poem, whereas that wasn't the way the *Discrete Series* was printed" (41).

poems significantly differently compared to the original 1934 version. As has been shown, certain typographical features have not been recuperated in later reprintings. Similarly, the order of the materials/*The Materials* is erroneous in Davidson's otherwise superbly edited book.

A cursory glance at the two titled poems in *Discrete Series* rebuts Hejinian's statement that "the only feature of the Objectivist Press edition that the New Collected version doesn't replicate is the blank page separating Ezra Pound's 'Preface' from the opening poem" (47). In the *New Collected*, both "The Party on Shipboard" and "Drawing" are set apart from the poems they introduce by a big gap of white space between title and first line and by the fact that the titles are written in all-uppercase boldface letters. Spacing and typeface of these two titles thus differ significantly from the original layout. The material distances vary. While this imperfection could be regarded as a minor glitch, the negligence speaks to a broader issue of editorial practice. Understandably, the way in which books of poems were first published cannot be reproduced exactly in the material form and format of the original. Yet, it remains unclear why editors did not at least stick to the original poetic pairs, that is, the poems Oppen wanted to face and face off across the double page. Since Oppen was appreciative of and saw semantic potential in the careful arrangement of poems within a volume of poetry, any deviation from the order and placement he envisioned diminishes the meaning he inscribed into the materiality of the book in its original form. If one takes Oppen's belief seriously that sincerity can reveal 'the real,' then the reader's encounter with not only one but two poems on a double page within volumes of poetry needs to be taken into consideration. In those cases where two poems, each discrete and complete on its own page, join each other on the same dimensional plane, the double page takes on characteristics of a diptych. In fact, the horizon of analysis widens considerably if one considers two poems facing each other on opposite pages as a discrete series, as individual parts that coalesce into a more comprehensively understandable whole once they have been scrutinized independently.

That Oppen valued a deliberately executed idea of order is evident from his own work, but also shows in some of his comments made in letters about other authors. He, for instance, shares his opinion on the current state of William Bronk's manuscript *The World, the Worldless* with his half-sister who would publish the book together with New Directions in 1964. Involved in the process of selecting poems for his friend's book, Oppen acknowledges that "the collection could be injured by lowering the average of

the work thru the addition of more poems less powerful than the very best in it” and approves of “[t]he order of poems” which he “thought very well arranged.” According to Oppen, “[t]he first and last poem add to the impact of the book by their position, and there is fine modulation thru the book” (*SL* 76). Unsurprisingly, Oppen was keen on preserving a “fine modulation” throughout his own books as well by means of respect for space and order. This shows specifically in letters he wrote to editors who planned to publish his work in anthologies or whom he contacted himself as in the case with his final book *Primitive* which was published by the Black Sparrow Press in 1978. In response to Jerome Rothenberg’s inquiry whether he could include *Discrete Series* in his 1974 anthology *Revolution of the Word: A New Gathering of American Avant Garde Poetry 1914-1945*, Oppen granted his “permission for the re-printing of the poems of *Discrete Series*” but requested an editorial favor in return:

Do give me as much space as possible between the poems. If you cannot give sufficient space to make clear that the poems are, indeed, discrete, use dots. ‘bullets’ is the printer word? But obviously they must not be too heavy and unsightly. The point is to arrive at some design solution which will make clear that the dots are not dots of omission. A correspondence on this might be near-endless: and your design sense is as good as mine. But give as much space as possible: the poems could be seriously distorted by seeming to be paragraphs: ‘pensées.’ (265)

Oppen’s clear-cut instructions reveal his “design sense” and attest to his conception of his earliest volume of poetry as both “discrete” and serial at the same time. The reference here to “dots” and “dots of omission” are in fact quite concretely connected to his first book of poetry. In one jotting from the archive, Oppen declares: “discrete series: established certain points—dots—of meaning” (“Selections” 2). As has been noted above, the first *Collected Poems* indeed “seriously distorted” *Discrete Series* by not providing adequate space for each individual poem. Rothenberg, however, tried to do justice to Oppen’s suggestions and inserted rules between poems to indicate where one poem ends and another begins. In an endnote, Rothenberg explains that “[t]he rules above have been inserted for purposes of space here to mark long spaces, or discreet pagination between poems in earlier versions of the ‘Series’” (189).

In a similar example of editorial participation if not intervention and in what would be one of his last correspondences, Oppen wrote John Martin, the editor of Black Sparrow Press, that in *Primitive* he saw no reason “to number the pages in the book.” Yet, if Martin intended to number the pages of the book, Oppen would “go over the ms carefully, and make final decisions as to the order of the poems.” The process of deciding on the placement of poems within the book, Oppen admits, “can take a great deal of

time.” But he is eager to wait and wishes even “to see the poems in type before committing myself” since “the weight of the thing falls slightly differently in type.” Encountering and proofreading the poems in typescript might influence his choices as to the organization and arrangement of the poems: “the sequence of poems might involve or suggest slight revisions” (*SL* 344). Implying potential differences between manuscript and typescript versions, Oppen’s remarks illustrate that he valued the semantics of bibliographic code even in the final stages of his life and career. His focus on the way in which the writing appears in print and on the place where poems materialize inside the volume speak to the fact that such print phenomena as type and page arrangement, which literary critics usually do not factor into their close readings, were crucial and meaningful compositional tools for Oppen.

Oppen often uses the material space of a double page to initiate a conversation between two poems. In these cases, both poems are short so that they begin and end on the page on which they rest. In *Discrete Series* this holds true for each of the thirty-one poems, none of which spatially extends beyond one page. As has been shown, the brevity of most of the poems in *Discrete Series* does not mean that the sequence is arbitrary. The *Series*’ poem-per-page modules are not interchangeable. They are not meant to be rearranged. There is an organizational logic behind their placement on the page and their sequence in the book and Oppen’s books in general since this holds true for *The Materials* and later volumes as well. It is curious to note that Oppen places emphasis on this aspect of arrangement in a previously unpublished letter now accessible in the *The Oppens Remembered*. Quoting from a 1965 letter, Samuel Klonimos recalls Oppen’s firm belief that “poems will join each other, they’ll immensely deepen in meaning as they reflect on each other and join each other. This happens: it need not be planned” (*OR* 33). The repetition of “each other” in combination with verbs associated with connection (“join;” “reflect on”) hammer home the message that poems, for Oppen, are interconnected. As microscopic ‘discrete series,’ his poems surpass their status as single entities and “immensely deepen in meaning” when they constellate in “a new ‘structure of space’” (*SL* 97). Placed in the same environment, they reinforce each other, accentuating aspects which the individual, discrete poem might not fully convey.

Despite his claim that this symbiotic relation between poems “need not be planned,” Oppen’s use of the (double) page as construction site supports the poet’s sense of order and the reciprocal deepening of meaning through material juxtaposition. If poems, originating from one poet’s mind, will naturally reflect on each other, the poet

can amplify and materialize the synergetic effect by means of arranging the poems in such a way that the deepening of meaning takes place on adjacent pages. Situated next to each other, poems confront the reader-beholder with two discrete yet spatially related constructs. Since readers are accustomed to encountering text on double pages, the literal dilemma plays out in a familiarized setting. Intriguingly, in claiming that this joining of forces “happens,” Oppen grants his poems a mysterious power of their own. He attributes agency to the poems themselves. In this metaphysical realm of poetic thinking, the poems act. In a letter from 1964, Oppen rephrases this understanding of poems as actors when he writes, with white space channeling his development of thought, that poets “[n]eed to be reassured now and then that a poem that’s perfect will do Will do Act” (*SL* 275). The highlighted verbs underscore the potential for agency that will manifest itself in “a poem that’s perfect.” The key word “perfect” here, however, clarifies that the objectification of the poem needs to be intact and absolute so that the poem becomes an active force. The perfection of the poem is predicated upon the material perfectibility—to adapt Crane’s idea of mechanical perfectibility—of the poem’s compositional elements. These elements include concrete materials such as the unit of the papery page as bedrock of white space and vertical and horizontal construction site.

In her otherwise lucid reading of Oppen’s *Discrete Series*, Vescia misses the point of the page and poem arrangement when she falsely claims: “While we encounter, in our reading, the parts of Oppen’s series in the particular order in which he has presented them, their potential for recombination acknowledges that meaning does not adhere in one particular arrangement” (92). This misreading of “the particular order” disregards Oppen’s strong sense of meaningful arrangement on the level of the page. Vescia’s misinterpretation is additionally surprising since Oppen himself often emphasized this quality of ordering. In one seminal interview with Hatlen and Mandel, for instance, he describes the process of organizing his poems as both crucial and time-consuming. With reference to *Discrete Series* and *The Materials* he states: “I arrange the poems very carefully. [...] I put it together very carefully which means I spent a long time moving them around” (*GOMP* 41). While it is true that each of the thirty-one poems in *Discrete Series* shares formal features and contributes to creating a sense of the 1930s, the carefully planned arrangement of poetic pairs on opposite pages generates a small-scale series in which two parts, in Swigg’s words, “come together in mutual revelation.” Swigg is the only scholar who zooms in on Oppen’s organizational principle. In “Parts,

Pairs, Positions: A Reading of *Discrete Series*,” the first chapter of his elucidative *George Oppen: The Words in Action*, Swigg does justice to the titular triad by claiming in the very first sentence of the chapter that “there is a pattern in Oppen’s poetry: individual parts tied together by their separation from each other. Discrete entities make a series.”¹⁵² The title of Oppen’s first book of poetry is testament to this seemingly paradoxical pattern of connection through disjunction. For Swigg, “the poems of *Discrete Series* can be spelled out both as isolated singularities and as pairs in a chain of perception.” In his analysis of the poems, Swigg adheres to the “face-to-face” juxtaposition of poetic pairs, usefully integrating page space and typographical phenomena such as indentations or dashes into his interpretation (7).

In *Discrete Series*, several examples of poetic pairs can be found where Oppen places two poems on opposite pages so that they enter a dialogue. Oppen intensifies this dialectical method by, for example, employing oppositional terms in the two halves of the poetic pair respectively. In “The Mast” and “Closed car,” for example, the gradual downward movement in the sailing poem on the verso (“Sail flattens beneath it from beneath the wind;” “Beneath us glide / Rocks, sand, and unrimmed holes”) is contrasted with an emphasis on ‘over’ in the cityscape poem (“A thing among others / over which clouds pass;” “An overstatement;” “place, over which / time passes”). Prepositions thus strengthen the contrast between the openness and naturalness of sailing and the sense of closure and insulation which the city induces. Accordingly, this discrepancy also shows in “the / alteration of lighting” within the poems. Whereas “Sun / slants dry light on the deck” in the sailboat poem, “the face” of the person sitting in the car (“still within it, / Between glasses”) appears as “a false light” in the automobile poem. By positioning the poems next to each other, Oppen confronts the reader with contrastive points of view (fig. 18).

¹⁵² Naturally, other critics have commented on the importance of both ‘discrete’ and ‘series’ and posited “the problem of connection” as one main concern which Oppen addressed. “Throughout his canon,” Alan Golding writes, “both stylistically and thematically, Oppen foregrounds the problem of connection: of word to word, of word to phrase and sentence, of image to image, of singular to numerous, person to group—and of part to part and part to whole in his poetic series” (96).

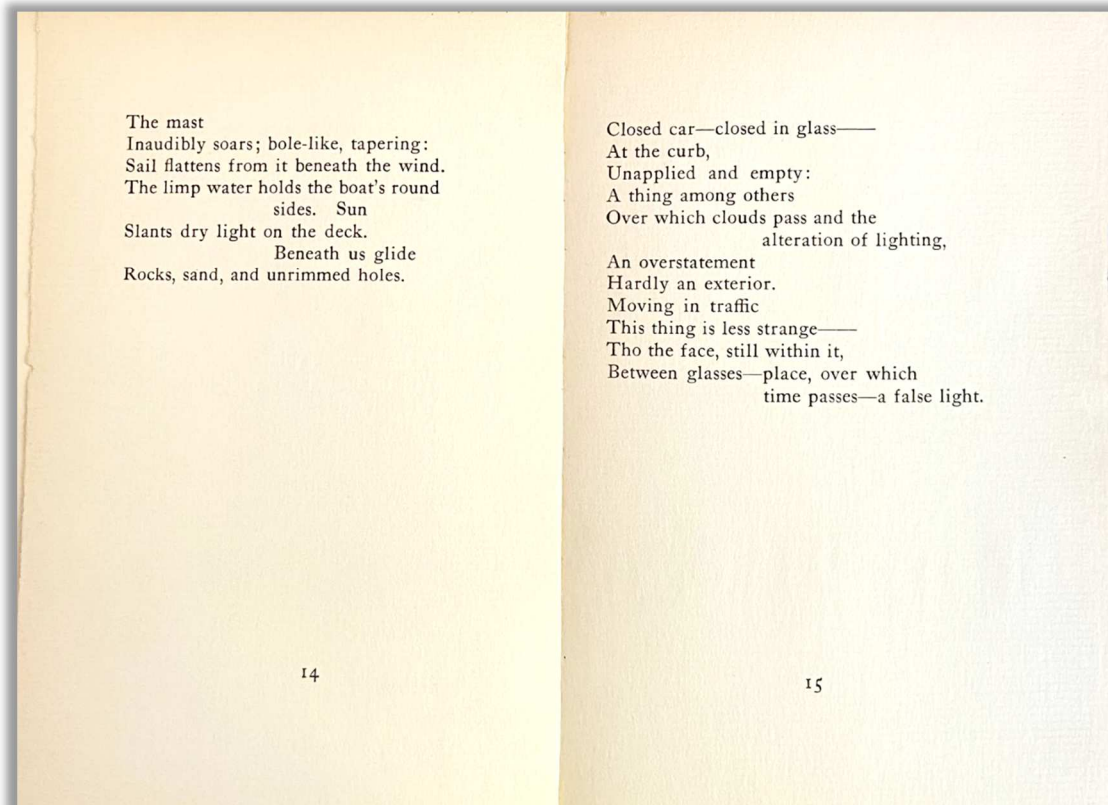


Fig. 18: Prepositional dialectics of “beneath” and “over” in dialog within the space of a double page.

More important than a reconciliation of the opposing perspectives is the fact that the reader encounters the contrast if not entirely simultaneously still spatially on the same plane because the poems, in a way, interact across the page. The contrast between poems facing each other is not as sharp in other tandems as in this pair. In some cases, the repetition of a particular word opens the field of vision, insinuating connections between seemingly unrelated themes.

The juxtaposition of “Who comes is occupied” and “Party on Shipboard” illustrates another cross-fertilizing poetic pair. Since both poems have been amply analyzed, I want to briefly point to instances where the vis-à-vis of the poems on the double page—or, rather, stage—meaningfully play off each other. The pair of poems demonstrates Oppen’s constructivist method and his sense of arrangement exemplarily well. The poems face each other on a double page one third into *Discrete Series* (fig. 19). Both poems are, as one superficial look at their manifestation on the pages clarifies, almost equal in length. “Party on Shipboard,” the poem on the recto, is one of only two titled poems in *Discrete Series*. Remarkably, its title, set off from the first line in boldface in the *New Collected Poems*, does not stick out from the rest of the poem by virtue of its typeface but is printed in the same type and font as the body of the poem.

Notably, “Party on Shipboard,” was the last poem Oppen wrote before abandoning the writing of poetry for twenty-five years. It is also the poem in which “the whole of “Of Being Numerous was contained” (*Speaking* 25).

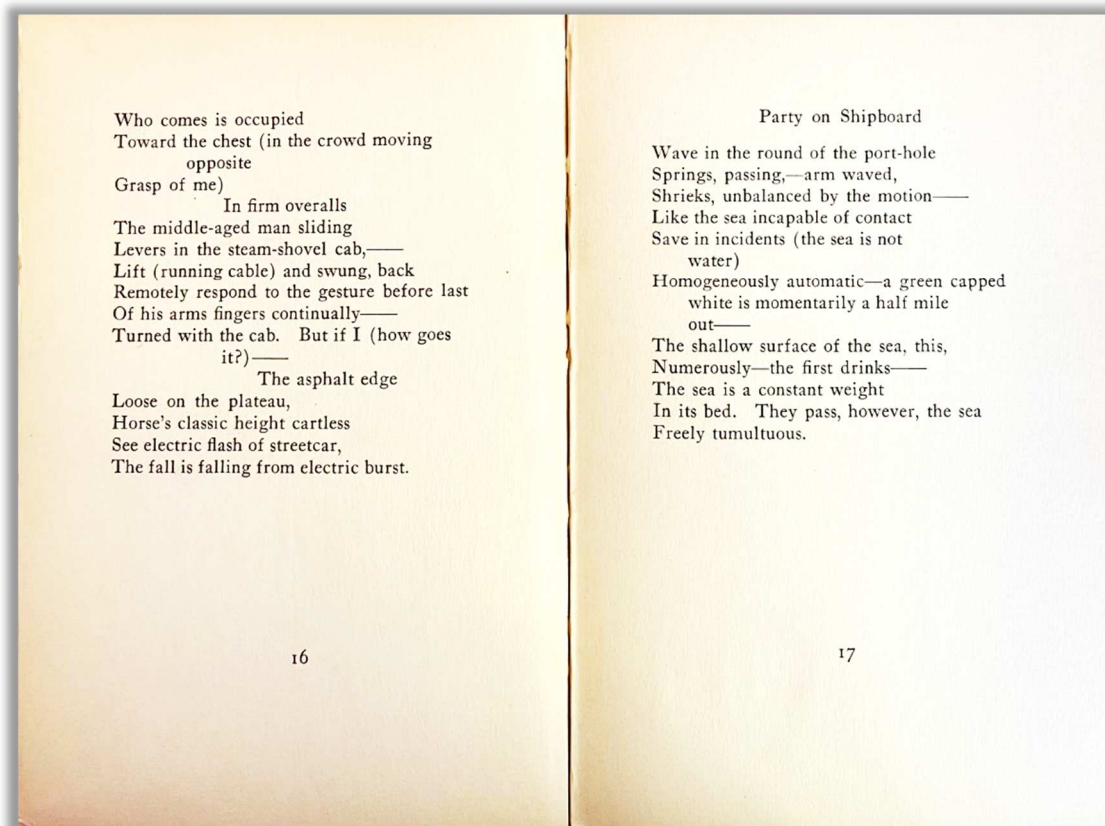


Fig. 19: Cityscape and seascape reaching out across the page as “Homogenously automatic” poetic facts.

“Who comes is occupied” is supposedly set on a street in close vicinity to a construction site in the midst of a city. The poem has been discussed by many Oppen scholars and has been interpreted from various angles. The wide range of interpretations is not surprising given the fact that the poem refuses to flow smoothly. Ellipses, enjambments, parentheses, and em-dashes are some of the devices responsible for the jerky feel of the poem. Starts and halts alternate. Like the person who enters the city and who “is occupied / Toward the chest,” the reader who starts reading the poem is immediately overwhelmed by the erratic syntax and the back-and-forth of lines and indentations. After the informative interview with L.S. Dembo, in a follow-up discussion of some of the poems in *Discrete Series*, Oppen sheds some light on the meaning of this poem. Criticizing some of the lines in the poem as “messed,” he nonetheless trusts that “the confusion of the city” is well portrayed in the poem and “the cadences of the man working the levers of the cab [are] fairly well done” (*GOMP*). As it is, the phrase that

would aptly fit as a descriptor of the construction site scene and the mechanical movement of man and machine appears halfway through the poem on the opposite page: “Homogeneously automatic.” In “Party on Shipboard,” the juxtaposition of these words, atypical for Oppen due to their polysyllabic constitution and foreign origin, captures the free-flowing fluctuation of waves. Automatic movement is also—maybe even more so—key in the human-machine entanglement on the left-hand page where bodily gestures trigger mechanical responses in the middle part of the poem:

The middle-aged man sliding
Lever in the steam-shovel cab,——
Lift (running cable) and swung, back
Remotely respond to the gesture before last
Of his arms fingers continually——
Turned with the cab.

In the same way in which the undulating motion of a wave “(Springs, passing”) causes a reaction on the “Party on Shipboard” (“arm waves, / Shrieks, unbalanced by the motion”), the operator’s movement “Of his arms fingers continually” has effects on the mechanical parts he sets in motion by “sliding / Lever in the steam-shovel cab.”

This passage and the poem per se operate equally as jerkily as the man-machine compound. Morris discusses this poem in her essay “Minding Machines/Machining Minds: Writing (at) the Human-Machine Interface” with a strong emphasis on its “syntax which switches along the lines of force to couple man-levers, then levers-lift, then lift-swung: each thing responding, in an endless chain, ‘to the gesture before last’” (671). The poem thus syntactically enacts the yoking of man and machine, confronting the reader with a sense of confusion, simultaneously recreating “the strangeness of the city” as Oppen tells an interviewer (*Speaking* 156). The enmeshment is not smooth yet. Man and machine have not been fully homogenized, but their inextricability gathers momentum. If the movements of man and machine are still slightly out of sync in the poem on the left-hand side of the double page, movement in opposite directions (“moving / opposite”) is crucial and, in fact, a paradigmatic phenomenon in Oppen’s early poems. DuPlessis correctly identifies this gesture as a key component of Oppen’s poetry, using the etymologically motivated meaning of “di-lemma or two propositions” for this technique (“What do we believe to live with” 63).

Motional reversal also feeds into the microscopic discrete seriality of these two poems. The decisive moment in the poem on the left arrives when the lyrical I/eye, having observed the site with “the crowd moving” and the turning of “the steam-shovel cab,” enters the scene and asks: “But if I (how goes / it?——.” After the poet-observer’s

interjection, the focus shifts away from the “scene of technological enclosure” (Shoemaker 79):

The asphalt edge
Loose on the plateau,
Horse’s classic height cartless
See electric flash of streetcar,
The fall is falling from electric burst.

In addition to the contrastive juxtaposition of means of transport with the “cartless” horse and the “streetcar” echoing in the sound of words, the final two lines are pertinent as the homophonic qualities of “See” and “fall” resonate into “Party on Shipboard” in the same way in which phrases from the poem on the righthand side reflect on the neighboring poem. The unorthodox repetition in the final line of the poem (“The fall is falling”) brings together the motional as well as the seasonal aspect implied in the word ‘fall.’ This downward movement complements the various turnings and ascents triggered by the “technomorphic interpenetration or entanglement of human and machine, flesh and steel” (Shoemaker 64). Yet, Oppen also makes use of the homonymic qualities of the word ‘fall.’ As he mentions in an interview, “I probably doubt the line, but in my mind the sparks do fall down, and it’s like a change in the season. Again, the city contrasted to the open air” (*Speaking* 156).

This seasonal impression is underscored at the beginning of the second line in “Party on Shipboard” when the upsurge of the “Wave” is typographically and positionally mirrored in the capitalized line-start “Springs.” In the context of the individual poem, the word makes sense as its multiple meanings fit the scene. The sudden leap of the wave setting the ship in motion, in a way, springs a surprise on the guests who “unbalanced by the motion” emit “Shrieks.” The aquatic undertones of the word also resonate with the setting. If “the sea is not / water” but “a constant weight / In its bed,” it is also the ideational source of the poem, providing the key analogy between the relation of waves to the sea and individual human beings to humanity: “Like the sea incapable of contact / Save in incidents.” “You see the separate waves,” Oppen elaborates in the Dembo interview, “but somehow there is *the sea*, just as you see people and somehow there is, or could be found, *humanity*.” “The waves,” he continues, “are the individual person. Humanity can’t be encountered [save] as an incident or something that has just happened. But all one has is ‘this happened,’ ‘that happened’; and out of this we try to make a picture of what a man is, who these other people are, and even, what humanity is” (*Speaking* 25-26). The actual experience of the sea/humanity is

overwhelming as particularities crash onto the one who is going in search for the essence of the general concepts: “When you’re in the sea, there’s this wave and that wave and that breaker and the other breaker” (*GOMP* 201).

Prominently positioned at the beginning of the penultimate line, the verb “See” seems strikingly out of place. Grammatically speaking, there is no immediate subject in close textual vicinity which corresponds with and necessitates the verb form. This observation might not be too shockingly surprising as the entire poem exhibits “syntactical disjunction and incompleteness” (Nicholls 16). As is typical of the poems in *Discrete Series*, ellipses, obstructive punctuation or the lack thereof (“arms fingers continually”), and syntactical non-sequiturs make it difficult to derive any straightforward meaning from the textual elements. Instead, as Auster rightly observes, in Oppen’s poems “the syntax seems to derive its logic as much from the silences around words as from the words themselves” (49). In a letter to John Taggart from 1970, Oppen calls this arrangement of words on lines “a syntax or some equivalent of a syntax sufficiently ‘locked,’ sufficiently *simultaneous*—” (208). Left without obvious connective markers, the reader is forced to dwell on the material fact of the word “See” on the page. The indeterminate stance of “See” within the poem gains footing if one considers it as a material entity with inherent phonemic and linguistic features and quite literally sees across the page.

What I want to suggest is that the acoustic qualities of the three-lettered word resound in the neighboring poem through its repetitive use of “the sea” as the pivotal trope of “Party on Shipboard.” The penultimate line of the poem on the verso begins with the word “See,” the penultimate line of the poem on the recto ends with the word “sea.” This cross-page reading is supported by the obvious pun on the homonym ‘wave’ in the first two lines of “Party on Shipboard.” The first line of the poem introduces the word “Wave” as noun, thereby ascertaining the setting of the poem “on Shipboard.” The undulating movement of the wave has an immediate effect on the people/“Party,” resulting in a bodily response to the rise and fall:

Wave in the round of the port-hole
Springs, passing,—arm waved,
Shrieks, unbalanced by the motion——

Oppen arranges his words here in such a way on the page that, grammatically speaking, the subject of the first sentence is placed directly above the predicate: “Wave [...] / Springs.” What is more, in a perfect example of the efficacy of Oppen’s “line sense,” he positions “Wave” and “waved” at the most prominent places on the lines, thus

highlighting their similarities concerning their morphological constitution, their etymological roots, and their semantic associations. As Schimmel rightly observes, such playful and meaningful homonymic “shifts keep us on our toes, keep us language-conscious” (309). By positioning “Wave” as the initial word on the left-hand side of the first line and by placing “waved” as the final word on the second line, Oppen compels the reader’s attention to the materiality of words and their interconnectedness as such. Critics have pointed to this quality of Objectivist writing. DuPlessis, for instance, states in her essay on Objectivist poetry published in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Poetry*:

Objectivist poetics is not only about the material world as such. Their materialist orientation has another important and complicating aspect—attention to the materiality of the medium (rhythms, diction, syntax, visual/sonic text, the substance of the language, historical discourses, conventions of representation and their ideologies). Thus the materialism of the word itself is expressed as a realist poetics. Ruptures of language and syntax and ruptures of conventional discourses have homologies with ruptures of consciousness based on critique of ideology. (98-99)

Tellingly, Oppen resorts twice to the homophonic pun ‘see/sea’ in his notes on “the materiality of the medium” and “the substance of language.” On one page in the archive the following words are written: “—he steps into water With the word, we know it is the sea, we see the sea / we create order and it cannot contain us” (“Philosophy of the Astonished” 216). In another jotting, he elaborates this conceit: “Language is poetry in that it creates reality, or that it makes it visible. We say we hear, tho we hear confusedly, but we do not say that we see if we are dazzled, dazed, *confused*—At a certain point we step into water. With the word, we know it is the sea, we see the sea. *From outside it. //* Without the word, we can feel as if from the inside. The taste of an apple, the sensation of sunlight—With the word, we see, *we see from outside*” (“Meaning” 187). In the environment of the double page, its seascape as it were, “we see the sea.” The two poems which share visible space in *Discrete Series* point to each other and reach out: “Like a flat sea, / Here is where are, the empty reaches / Empty of ourselves” (*NCP* 43).

Utilizing (double) page space as a tool then is a crucial feature of Oppen’s compositional method. Significantly, this aspect of page arrangement is not only traceable in *Discrete Series* and did not simply vanish after 1934. It seems that DuPlessis in her first essay on Oppen published in *Ironwood* in 1975 is the only scholar who points to this quality of Oppen’s work in later books. Claiming “that formally his poetry constantly expresses [...] di-lemma or two propositions” (63), she proceeds to analyze Oppen’s “disjunctive, perspectivist syntax” which he developed “to express opposing or

radically separate points of view simultaneously” (66). While she posits this focus on “syntactic distortion” as a key criterion of Oppen’s *Discrete Series*, she identifies a different method of bringing “alternative points of view, formally and thematically” together. “In later books,” she writes, “it is not rare for poems taking opposing positions to face each other across the page, set in a perpetual dialogue.” To provide a case in point she turns to Oppen’s second volume of poetry: “‘Chartres’ and ‘The Crowded Countries of the Bomb’ (in *The Materials*) are one such pair—the one a poem of people who are craftsmen of their lives, building community and continuity with the past and future; the second poem sees people as their own victims and destroyers” (67). DuPlessis here perceptively points out that Oppen’s sense of poem and page arrangement found expression even after *Discrete Series*. The exemplary pair (fig. 20) is aptly chosen as the face-to-face and page-to-page placement of “Chartres” and “The Crowded Countries of the Bomb” gives prominence to the binary opposition of ‘construction’ on the left-hand page (“But that a stone / Supports another // That the stones / Stand where the masons locked them”) and ‘destruction’ on the right-hand page (“That we can destroy ourselves / Now”). The poems’ vis-à-vis reenacts this dilemma and adumbrates that creation and

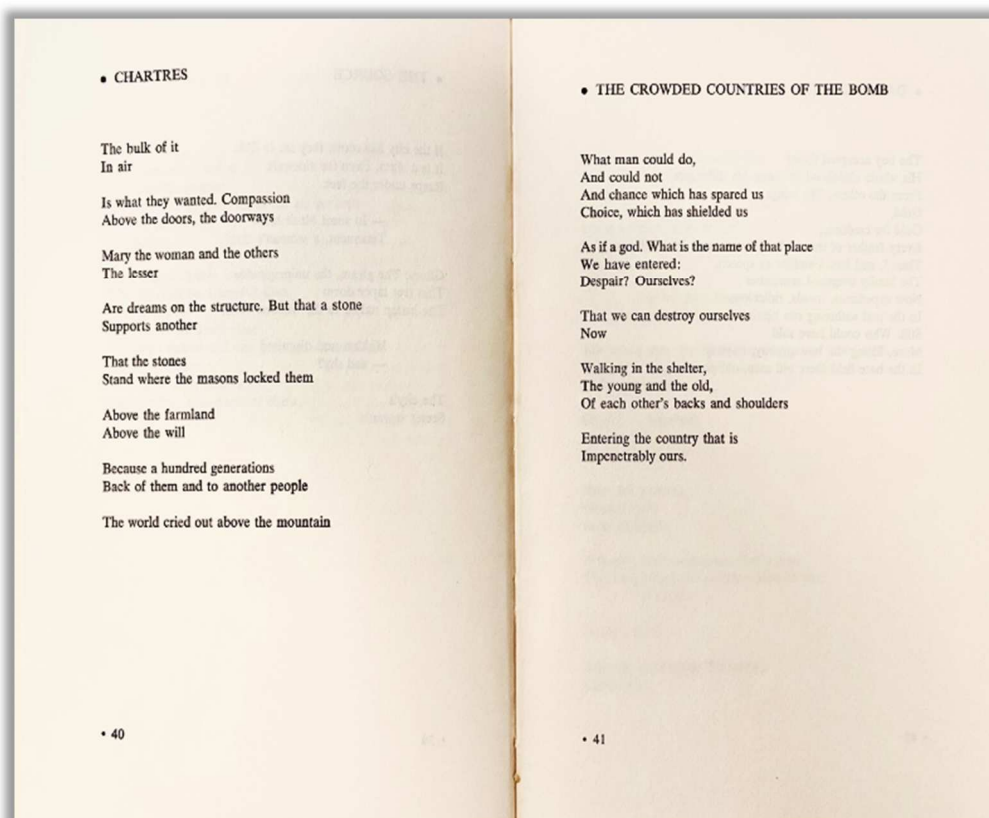


Fig. 20: Oppositional facts of construction and potential acts of destruction facing each other on a double page in the original publication of *The Materials*.

ruin are not too far away from each other. As diametrically opposed as the two poems appear on a thematic level, reading them in the same environment on a double page suggests that there is indeed a common denominator which could take the first line of “The Crowded Countries of the Bomb” as its caption: “What man could do” (*NCP* 78).

It is worth noting that the *Ironwood* issue with DuPlessis’ essay in it also bears evidence of the fact that Oppen’s preference for harmonious and expressive page arrangements was not limited to the design of his own books. He was highly appreciative of and took delight in the carefully planned orchestration of pages by others. For instance, in a letter from March 1975 he praised Michael Cuddihy’s editing skills of *Ironwood*’s special Oppen issue and used the cover as well as a double-page spread as examples to illustrate Cuddihy’s “love of poetry” and “labor of love:” “what shines even from the cover of the book is your love of poetry, I become almost dizzy to find myself playing a part in it and another step into beauty beyond belief with the photo on the page where Mary’s eyes look across the page to Mary’s prose, eyes and prose in the

same light, reflecting the same light, everything becomes clear at this moment. The light that *matters*” (*SL* 299). The cover of this special issue probably appealed to Oppen with its sparse coloring (fig. 21). The minimal amount of text, varying in font and typeface, is held in white and appears to be grounded in the blackness of the front cover, back cover, and spine of the issue.

The all-encompassing blackness quite literally highlights the text and functions as the ground from which the words luminously rise. Oppen’s word “shines” is hence more than appropriate as the composition in black-and-white attracts the reader’s eye to the white light of the issue. The second example of perfectly arranged pages (“another step into beauty beyond belief”) can be found in the very same issue on

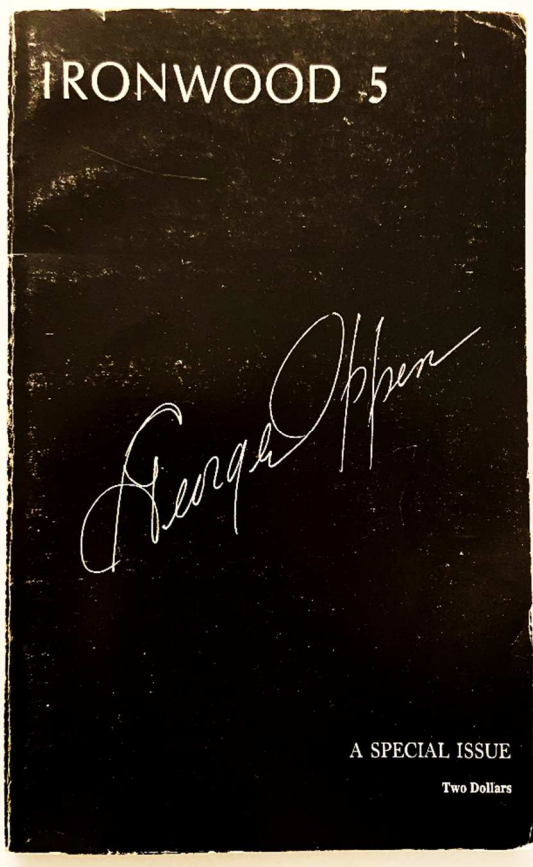


Fig. 21: The cover of the 1975 *Ironwood* special issue which Oppen admired in its black-and-white clarity.

pages 50 and 51. Here, two photographs occupy the verso, while Mary's prose account of their time in "France 1930-1933" is printed on the recto (fig. 22).

In his letter to Cuddihy, Oppen refers to the photograph on the upper half of the left-hand side and focuses on "Mary's eyes look[ing] across the page to Mary's prose, eyes and prose in the same light, reflecting the same light, everything becomes clear at this

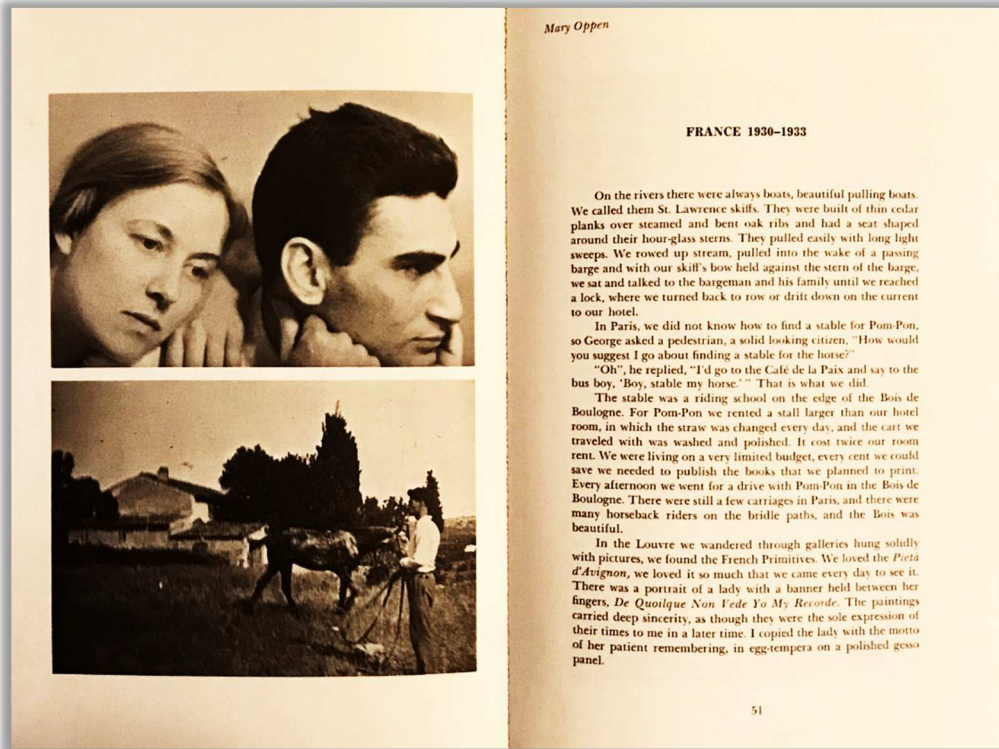


Fig. 22: The Oppens looking towards Mary's text about their time in France in a deliberate image-text arrangement within *Ironwood 5*.

moment." Her eyes indeed are directed diagonally to the text, creating the visual impression that she is reading what she wrote. This deliberate placement illuminates and harmonizes image and text. What Oppen does not mention in his reading of Cuddihy's material page arrangement is that he is part of the picture as well. As it is, Oppen's eyes, looking to the right, also face the text on the opposite page. He is an inseparable and integral component of the image-text *mélange* and also appears in "[t]he light that matters."¹⁵³

Interestingly, when DuPlessis wrote her essay she consulted *The Materials* in its original 1962 edition. An early version of Oppen's *Collected Poems* had been published by Fulcrum Press in England in 1972, but this version did not place the two poems she

¹⁵³ Oppen might have added that the second photograph depicting George Oppen with his back to Mary's text and their horse named "Pom-Pon" has a compositional counterpart on the last page of Mary's prose. On page 58, the editor of *Ironwood 5* positioned another photograph of poet and animal, this time though with George sitting in a carriage and with his eyes directed towards the left side.

discusses on adjacent pages. Rather, the reader encountered the destructive side of “What man could do” only upon turning the page on which “Chartres” appear. The reader thus did not see both poems at the same time, the two poems do not enter a “perpetual dialogue” on the same plane in the Fulcrum version (67). In October 1975, a few months after the special George Oppen issue of *Ironwood* had appeared, New Directions published *Collected Poems*. While this collection butchered *Discrete Series*, it surprisingly presents the poems of *The Materials* in the original order so that “Chartres” and “The Crowded Countries of the Bomb” face each other across the page. The 1975 *Collected Poems* remained the standard edition until New Directions published the *New Collected Poems* in 2002 (reprinted in 2008 with a CD of Oppen reading his poems). Although the virtues outweigh the flaws of the book, the *New Collected Poems* duplicates the Fulcrum Press mistake as it departs from the original pairing of poems in Oppen’s later work. In its reprinting of *The Materials*, “Chartres” and “The Crowded Countries of the Bomb” are split. This departure from the original arrangement might not seem like a big deal and was most likely caused by pragmatic reasoning on the publisher’s part. Then again, the fact that it was possible to restore the setting and sequence of *Discrete Series* in the *New Collected Poems* (one-poem-per-page and fifteen pairs after “The knowledge not of sorrow”) raises the question why the same attention was not paid to the poem-page arrangement in Oppen’s post-exile books.

One probable answer is that the importance of spatial arrangement and dimensional thinking outside of *Discrete Series* simply escaped the editor or the publishing house. Davidson might just not have thought about the discrete seriality enacted on double pages while editing the *New Collected Poems*. Conceivably an unintentional editorial lapse, the separation of pairs such as in *The Materials* alters the reading experience. Breaking the order of poetic pairs and pages, that is, deviating from Oppen’s organizational principle, obfuscates the originally intended *modus legendi*. While the individual poems remain intact, the dialectical nature of Oppen’s poetic thinking fades out of sight once complementary pairs do not illuminate and interact with each other across the page. Such unhinging is likely to interfere with—or, at the worst, manipulate—the deepening of meaning which poems in combination can bring to pass.

7.1 Carpentered Pairs in *The Materials*

The spatial separation of poetic pairs is a major and unnecessary flaw in the *New Collected Poems*. In contrast to the gradual disappearance of Evans's photographs from Crane's *The Bridge*, the diminishment of semantic potential is here not caused by a loss of any material compositional element. After all, the entirety of *The Materials* is reproduced in *New Collected Poems*, the amount of poetic text is the same compared to the original stand-alone volume. Still, the erroneous rearrangement of page-poems in the by now definitive book collection of Oppen's poetry takes away from the original impetus and meaning that is grounded in the materiality of the (double) page. Since nowadays most Oppen readers who want to study his poems in print will probably encounter his work through the *New Collected Poems* and less so via the original books the costs of which significantly exceed the price of the collected volume, a reading strategy which recuperates the intended order is required. Such a restorative close reading of bibliographic code brings aspects of Oppen's poetic thinking to light which are concealed and materially out of place in most reprinted versions. Investigating the semantically reinforcing potential of poetic pairs deepens our understanding of Oppen's compositional method. Such a return to poetic pairs in the original versions helps to illuminate Oppen's dialectical thinking which he rendered manifest by means of carefully arranging his poems within the book.

Quite tellingly, this misrepresentation of pairs is not limited to the example chosen by DuPlessis. As a comparative reading of *The Materials* in its original version and in the *New Collected Poems* reveals, Oppen's sense of meaning-exponentiating arrangement is concretely visible in the 1962 version but dematerializes in the book edited by Davidson which has become the standard work. Like with the untethered "Chartres" and "The Crowded Countries of the Bomb," the *New Collected Poems* severs several pairs which face each other in the original book. Two of such instances are particularly illustrative. In *The Materials*, Oppen couples "Solution" (page 8 on the verso) and "Travelogue" (page 9 on the recto). Later in the volume he makes "Product" (page 24) and "Workman" (page 25) share the space of a double page. In *The Materials*, then, both pairs are visible at the same time once the book is opened at their respective double page. This is not the case in *New Collected Poems*. There, this material fact is deferred if not lost because the poems are spatially disconnected: the reader encounters the poems originally placed on the recto only upon turning the page. In the *New Collected Poems*, this displacement results in a mismatch within *The Materials*' discrete

series, as “Solution” (on the recto) is juxtaposed with “Resort” while “Travelogue” (on the verso) faces the long poem “Return” which stretches across two and a half pages. Similarly, both “Product” and “Workman” appear separately and are thus set in dialogue with other poems (“Product” with “Debt” and “Workman” with “The Undertaking in New Jersey”). Given that Oppen valued the semantic potential of sequencing and respected even the most basic of poetry’s building materials such a distortion of the ordering principle is not a triviality. In order to gain a deeper understanding of how the poems interact, it is hence critical to recalibrate the pairs and to read them dialectically across the page.

“Solution,” as the title implies, is concerned with closure. In the context of the poem, the eponymous solution refers to the process of solving a jigsaw puzzle. Right from the start, the reader is made aware of the fact that the pieces have been put together: “The puzzle assembled / At last in the box lid.” This initial sense of harmony chimes with the depicted landscape. The finished puzzle presents “a green / Hillside, a house / And wife and children, / All of it polychrome, / Lucid, backed by the blue / Sky.” In this landscape of colorfulness, clarity, and orderliness, the idyllic setting is in sync with family life. The images on the puzzle pieces fit together harmoniously, creating a bigger picture of peace once “[t]he puzzle is complete.” This coordinated interlocking is mirrored on the level of form in the first half of “Solution.” Fairly regular lines and the sequence of nouns associated with pastoral family life mirror the idyllic setting which the interlocking puzzle pieces portray (“a house / A barn and man / And wife and children”). The repetition of the conjunction ‘and’ connects the family members syntactically on equal terms. The lulling, monotonous sound of this polysyndetic sequence supports the feeling that harmony prevails “in the picture.” In the same way in which the family members fit in with their surroundings and in the same way in which the individual puzzle pieces match, grammatical particles correspond with the structure of the lines in the description of what is visible on the surface. With the shift to the materiality of the actual “jigsaw of cracks,” Oppen zooms out of the picture and problematizes the myopic perspectivism (*The Materials* 8). As he writes about the “poem beginning: the puzzle assembled / at last in the box-lid.... the puzzle is / complete now” in a 1974 letter, it “describes the refusal to think outside a field, a set of rules, of definitions ---- Whereupon ‘it’ becomes a complete puzzle” (*SL* 281).

Oppen highlights the colorful lucidity of the scene/seen and illustrates the trope of connection through the prominent placement of words at the beginning and at the end

of lines: “All of it polychrome, / Lucid.” More strikingly, he positions the vivid adjectives “green” and “blue” at the end of lines two and seven respectively, separating them from the nouns they describe by emphatic enjambments: “showing a green / Hillside;” “backed by the blue / Sky.” By breaking the line at exactly these moments when one might expect connection instead of division, Oppen not only emphasizes particular words but also points to the loose congruity and, in a way, arbitrary dependence of parts, be they grammatical or material entities. The run-on lines thus propel the reader’s eyes forward, that is, downward on the page while simultaneously generating momentary pauses at the juncture of the line break. This stop-and-go feel materializes in the surprising period after “Sky,” the first word of and on the eighth line. Abruptly bringing the description of the rural scenery to an end, the word-punctuation compound marks the moment of a perspectival shift. From the surface depiction of what the assembled puzzle shows, the poet-observer turns to the more concretely palpable and visible effect which the interlinking of puzzle pieces causes: “Sky. The jigsaw of cracks / Crazes the landscape but there is no gap, / No actual edged hole / Nowhere the wooden texture of the table top / Glares out of scale in the picture, / Sordid as cellars, as bare foundations.” The number of negatives is striking in these lines. Superseding the descriptive tone of the first half of the poem, they illustrate the absence-presence binary which “the refusal to think outside a field” establishes. In leaving no room for any “actual edged hole,” the assemblage creates the impression of a solid whole.¹⁵⁴ Still, by pinpointing the absence of what is under the surface and by attributing one entire line to the ground level (“Sordid as cellars, as bare foundations”), the poem confirms the existence of basic elements. After all, “the wooden texture of the table top” is essential for the solution of the puzzle since the table top’s stability and polished surface makes it possible to assemble the pieces smoothly in the first place. “Solution” thus oscillates between presence and absence, investigating the slash between the homophonic pair ‘whole/hole’ and tracing the movement from “Nowhere” to ‘Now here’ (“Now” stands out as the first word in the final line of the poem).

It is important to note that the pieces have been assembled “in the box lid” which provides just the adequate amount of space for the completion of the puzzle. Tightly locked next to each other inside the hermetic box lid with its geometrically rigid margins and clear-cut boundaries, the pieces cover the ground on which they rest so that nothing

¹⁵⁴ In his working papers, Oppen rephrases the whole-part relation which is central to the puzzle-solving process as well as to his poetics: “I want to find the whole, I want to find the part. The ‘part’ becomes multiple, it scatters—a part, the uncuttable, would disclose—everything” (“Meaning” 204).

is visible below the assemblage. Since “[t]here is no piece missing,” “there is no gap, / No actual edged hole.” Even if the irregular, zigzag shape of the individual puzzle pieces shows in the interstitial spots where they interlock (“The jigsaw of cracks / Crazes the landscape”), the fact that all the pieces fit creates a superficially homogeneous whole without rifts. The puzzle’s superficiality and solidity cover what lies below: “Nowhere the wooden texture of the table top / Glares out of scale in the picture.” The puzzle “complete / Now in its red and green and brown” inside the box lid depicts and resembles a closed environment which directs the solver’s gaze away from the outside world with its gritty, primitive material constituents. Yet such basic components as “wooden texture” or the fundamental parts at the bottom of things (“cellars,” “foundations”)—albeit invisible “in the picture”—actually exist and are essential to and, in material fact, inseparable from the bigger picture that is reality. Once one zooms out of the ready-made box and, in Oppen’s terms, “think[s] outside a field, a set of rules, of definitions,” the perspective shifts and the field of vision expands. In allowing this openness, one perceives a more complex scene which cannot be solved and grasped as smoothly as a jigsaw puzzle.¹⁵⁵ Significantly, Oppen enacts this widening of scope within the space of the double page as “Travelogue” acts as a counterbalance to the fixity of any prefabricated solution.

¹⁵⁵ Interestingly, Oppen also refers to other pastime activities as counterexamples of openness. In one entry from his papers, he notes in all-caps: “I WAS SAYING LIVE THE THING: THAT IS TO SAY, POSSESS A SOUL AND A WORLD I MEAN POSSESS A SOUL NOW AND HERE AS AGAINST THE CHESS GAME THE CHECKER GAME WHATEVER IT IS THAT SO MANY ARE PLAYING AND IN WHICH THE PIECES HAVE ALREADY BEEN NAMED” (“Meaning” 188).

Oppen's poetic method of expressing alternative points of view transcends the individual poem of "Solution" and carries over into "Travelogue," the poem on the opposite page which presents an alternative reading of the relationship between man and nature (fig. 23). If the final two lines of "Solution" come full circle to the initial idea of

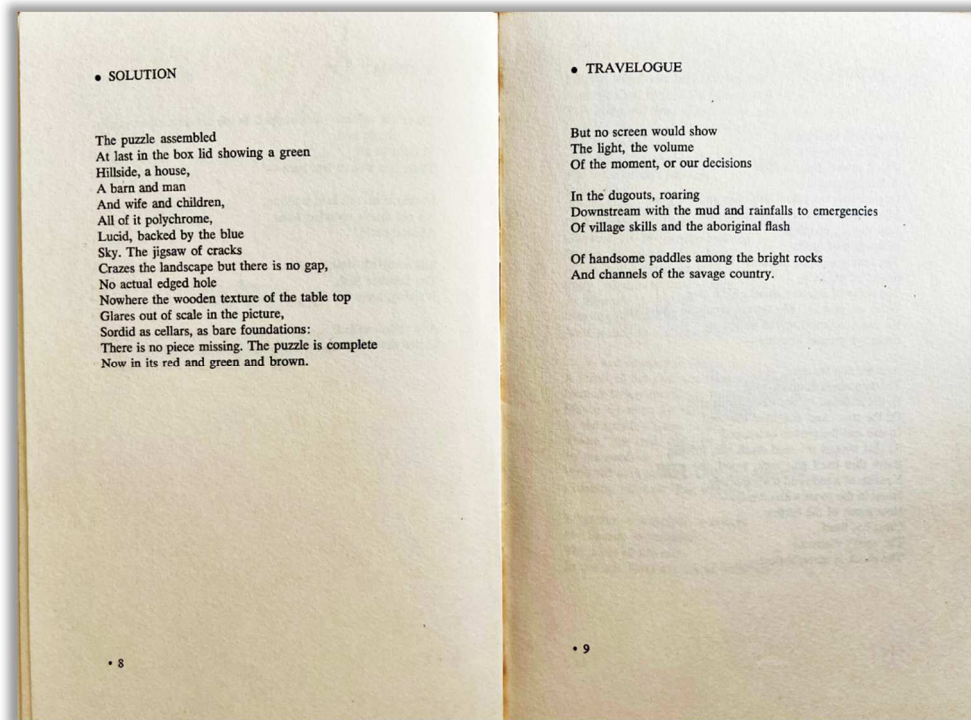


Fig. 23: Closure and flow put in dialog reciprocally as poetic pair on a double page in the original *The Materials*.

completion ("There is no piece missing. The puzzle is complete / Now in its red and green and brown"), "Travelogue" dissolves the rigid boundaries of thinking inside the box. The title already hints at movement which continues in the body of the poem where images of water accrue ("In the dugouts, roaring / Downstream with the mud and rainfalls to emergencies;" "channels of the savage country"). "Travelogue" begins *medias in res* with a surprising conjunction: "But no screen would show / The light, the volume / Of the moment, or our decisions // In the dugouts" (9). Since the poem itself does not provide the contrasting element which the "But" presupposes, the link is either missing or needs to be looked for somewhere else. As Oppen's sense of arrangement suggests, the conjunction and the poem as a whole talk to the poem on the left-hand side (like the indented "Thus" in *Discrete Series*). The conjunction "But," which typically connects ideas that contrast, redirects the reader back to "Solution." This connection is accentuated through the repetition of "showing/show," the echo of "no," and the cross-page rhyme of "green" and "screen:" "showing a green" and "But no screen would

show.” If what the assembled puzzle shows is superficially complete and coherent but dismissive of the deeper layers of life, “Travelogue” targets this myopic point of view by shedding light on actual, “Of the moment” experiences.

Juxtaposed with “Solution,” “Travelogue” stands out more conspicuously in its thematic and formal openness. In “Travelogue,” all lines except for the final one are enjambed which materializes the flow on the level of form. This effect is further intensified through the white spaces between its stanzas which stand in contrast to the opposing poem’s linear coherence. In “Solution,” there are no gaps between the lines, a formal feature which mirrors the interconnectedness of the puzzle pieces. The harmonious but static puzzle solution/“Solution” is contrasted with the dynamic and tumultuous setting of “Travelogue” (“roaring;” “aboriginal flash;” “savage country”). The puzzle’s polychrome lucidity is in opposition to “the mud and rainfalls” through which the dugout canoes speed “roaring / Downstream.” Whereas the landscape in the picture which the pieces form in the puzzle poem is bucolic and peaceful (pun intended), “Travelogue” recounts the collective speaker’s (“our decisions”) adventures in “the savage country.” If “the wooden texture of the table top” is hidden from sight “in the picture,” if the reality of “bare foundations” lurk below the surface, in “Travelogue” the grittiness and raw naturalness shine forth in “the aboriginal flash // Of handsome paddles among the bright rocks.” Arranged side-by-side according to Oppen’s original intention, the poems enter a conversation and interact. Oppen’s way of ordering interrogates the message of each individual poem. As is the case with this pair, Oppen uses the space of the double page in *The Materials* to confront the reader with the sharp contrasts in content, tone, and perspective between “Solution” and “Travelogue.” In encountering the poems in the same space, the reader is thus in a way invited and incentivized to come to terms with opposing positions, asked to step out of the comfort zone and ponder the alternative perspectives together. In this concrete example, “Travelogue” quite literally muddies the waters, challenging the readymade solution of thinking inside “the box lid.” By placing “Travelogue” next to “Solution” in *The Materials*, Oppen widens his and the reader’s field of vision and outlook on the world, complicating the idyllic portrayal of the polychrome puzzle by juxtaposing it with a far less solid and static scene. Set in dialogue across the page, both poems “immensely deepen in meaning as they reflect on each other and join each other” (OR 33).

In the original version of *The Materials*, this key component of Oppen's material-conscious and material-conscientious compositional method also shows in the juxtaposition of "Product" and "Workman." As with "Solution" and "Travelogue," this pair is unfortunately split in the *New Collected Poems*. As a result, the collected volume withholds and meddles with the poems' dialogic nature. In contrast, in the 1962 book as a self-contained artefact, the poems are positioned on their own discrete page but staged in the ensemble of a double page. Facing each other halfway through *The Materials*, "Product" and "Workman" fit together not only due to their semantically related titles (fig. 24). After all, a workman produces something with his own hands. The poems, moreover, complement one another in shedding light on the steps and tools of the

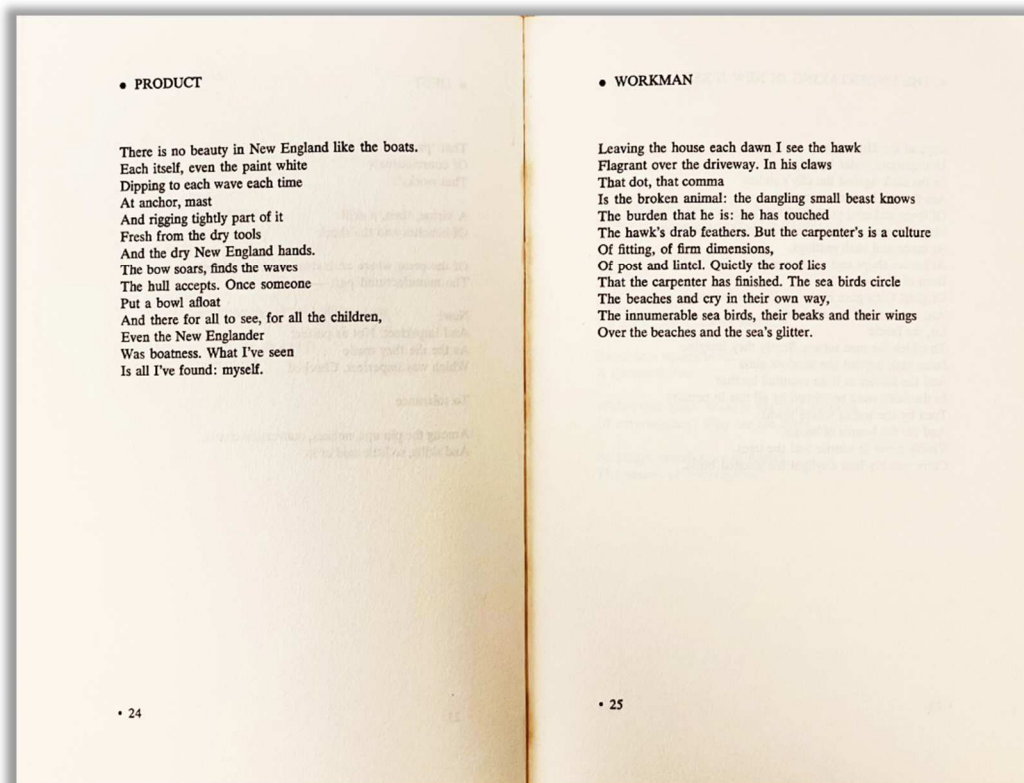


Fig. 24: "Product" and "Workman" as Oppen originally arranged the poetic pair in *The Materials*.

working process and progress that connect the workman and the product he manufactures. More concretely, both poems deal with the production of a carpentered piece of handiwork: boats in "Product" ("There is no beauty in New England like the boats. / Each itself") and the roof of a house in "Workman" ("Quietly the roof lies / That the carpenter has finished"). Both poems mention the required and productive interplay of hand and tool in the act of creation. In "Product," the poet-speaker observes the "mast / And rigging" appear "Fresh from the dry tools / And the dry New England hands,"

while in “Workman” the poet-craftsman comments right at the center of the poem that “the carpenter’s is a culture / Of fitting, of firm dimensions, / Of post and lintel.” Interestingly, in both poems the speaker inserts himself into the scene/seen. “Product” ends with the lines “What I’ve seen / Is all I’ve found: myself” and “Workman” picks up the personal voice in its first sentence: “Leaving the house each dawn I see the hawk / Flagrant over the driveway” (*The Materials* 24-25).

In both poems, the first-person observer sees through lyrical eyes, perceives poetically, which becomes clear in the speaker’s poetic and metaphoric language usage. In the poem about the beauty of boats on the verso, the poet-speaker coins the term “boatness” in a creative attempt to condense into one word the quintessential qualities of the phenomenon ‘boat:’ “Once someone / Put a bowl afloat / And there for all to see, for all the children, / Even the New Englander / Was boatness.” While this neologism seems not as obscure and indecipherable as the words ‘curveship’ or ‘transmemberment’ which Crane molded, the coinage of ‘boatness’ appears to have been motivated by a similar impetus, namely, the poetic drive to capture in language as comprehensively as possible the essence and meaning of a phenomenon which, in a way, ineffably exceeds the standard repertoire of linguistic means. In the accompanying poem “Workman,” the poetic quality of creating something with language materializes not in the form of a neologism but rather in the surprising metaphoric rendition of “the broken animal” caught in the claws of “the hawk / Flagrant over the driveway.” In a sudden shift of register, “the dangling small beast” is described as “That dot, that comma.” The fact that this exact constellation of linguistic material constitutes the third line of the poem emphasizes the oddity of the comparison in the context of the poem.

The shortest line in the poem, “That dot, that comma” seems out of place. Even if one accepts that the prey which “has touched / The hawk’s drab feathers” and which dangles from “his claws” can be said to look like the typographical character of particular punctuation marks (with the part of the comma descending below the baseline resembling the hanging body part of “the broken animal”), incorporating verbal signifiers of punctuation marks into the body of a poem in which “sea birds circle / The beaches and cry in their own way” stands out and defamiliarizes the reading experience. In the same way in which the neologism ‘boatness’ makes the reader language-conscious, the surprising third line of “Workman” alerts the reader to the smallest materials of textual creation. Like its counterpart on the left-hand side, “Workman” does not only offer an alternative point of view regarding carpentry and craftsmanship (boats

on water, roofs in air). In their metatextual reference to linguistic material, both poems gesture outwards to another “culture / of fitting, of firm dimensions, / Of post and lintel,” namely, the poet’s work of producing poems as objects by paying attention to both the linguistic and bibliographic code of text. Reflecting on each other from adjacent pages, the carpentered pair of “Product” and “Workman” jointly suggests that the poet is a workman as well and the poem his product. The poems’ immediate synergetic effect, however, is “there for all to see” only in the first publication of *The Materials*. It is in the original editions of Oppen’s poetry where his “culture of fitting” parts and poems together shows in its purest form.

7.2 Palimtextual Paper Objects

down the words / rise // afresh afresh the base the desolate
there (“Philosophy of the Astonished” 207)

To make the words hit bottom, to find words that will lie in
bed rock, not suspended in a mesh of syntax. The image. The
impress” (Oppen qtd. in Nicholls 138)

Oppen’s method of working with material components of poetry as well as the continuities between his work as carpenter and poet-craftsman show most impressively and physically in the way he used, assembled, and thought with “stacks of notes” and “stacks of paper,” as he calls these jottings and pages in a 1959 letter (24). Thousands of such pages comprise the Oppen archive which is housed in the Archive for New Poetry at Mandeville Special Collections Library at the University of California, San Diego. The immensity of the archive could have been even bigger if the Oppens had not “lost *all* [their] papers in 1950,” a fact which George bemoans as “[a] bad blow” in a letter from 1975 (298). Despite this unfortunate loss of pre-exile material, the archive is unfathomably rich. Thanks to the efforts of conscientious Oppen scholars who edited selections from the archive and made them available to the public, readers interested in the writing process lying at times quite literally at the bottom of Oppen’s poems can trace the poet’s thinking and the genesis of poems by turning to editions by Davidson, DuPlessis, and Stephen Cope whose *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers* was published in 2007. Among the many interesting jottings from the archive which Cope provides and helpfully annotates, the final two entries (“Daybook V” and “Twenty-Six Fragments”) stand out and are particularly intriguing for the purposes of this chapter. The document Cope designates as “Daybook V” but which can be found under the titles

“Christ Note-Stack” and “New Year: Pasted Daybook” in the archive is different from the other daybooks insofar as the stack of notes is tremendously thick due to Oppen’s idiosyncratic technique of “cutting of phrases from one sheet of paper and pasting them on another, often to depth of several leaves” (*SPDP* 207). Accordingly, Cope in a textual apparatus note introduces a “thick rule” for this multilayered document “to signal text pasted by Oppen over other text or onto a given page” (20). Naturally, the complex, “uniquely spatial nature” of this papery construct cannot be grasped fully through a transcription and reproduction of the text fragments. The three-dimensional quality of the artefact itself, its thickness and materiality as a document “bound tightly at the left by glue or paste” (207), is lacking despite Cope’s editorial choice to indicate those instances on the pages where Oppen pasted text over other text by ruling and by repeating writing that is visible through multiple layers of piled up pages. To illustrate how Cope converts the multilayered nature of the document into a horizontally oriented page-to-page transcription, it is helpful to take a closer and comparative look at both the image of the layered note-stack and the sequence of transcribed text.

In addition to the processes of stacking notes and switching them around (“I write stack and stack of notes literally stacks of paper and mull them over, and sometimes wonder what I meant, and switch them around and so on” [*SL* 24]), there is another compositional component which was arguably even more conducive to Oppen’s revising and reconstructing towards a clean copy: cutting and pasting. In his final interview conducted by Auster in 1981 which is not included in *Speaking with George Oppen*, the Oppens jointly respond to Auster’s question how George corrected and revised. George, who described his mental condition by then as “very like senility” (*SL* 349), was in fact suffering from Alzheimer’s disease and was more dependent than ever on Mary’s help. In the last interview three years prior to his death, Mary often answers first with George continuing her train of thought: “George has a strange way of working which I learned from him, and was very useful, of covering a line that wasn’t right with the correction and of pasting on a different handwritten tape on top of it. And sometimes George’s piece that he was working on would get to be very thick, but underneath he would have all the other versions, or whatever the pages were.” At this point, George chimes in, vehemently affirming the importance of this technique: “I discovered it was absolutely necessary to my writing poetry. If I hadn’t thought of this idea of just pasting on, it would have gone on absolutely forever, the number of corrections I made. [...] It was absolutely essential.” Both remarks assert the central role which quotidian, material devices such

as adhesives like tape and glue played in Oppen's construction of poetry. Interestingly, the element of cutting, which Cope and other scholars highlight, became less crucial in the final phase of Oppen's career. In the seminal 1980 interview with Hatlen and Mandel, Oppen had confessed: "Frankly I paste without cutting. What I actually do is every correction I just paste on top of the poem as it was, and I paste it loosely so I can tear it out, try another route" (*GOMP* 40). The cut-and-paste collage is representative of Oppen's technique which scholars have described in various ways.¹⁵⁶ Davidson, for instance, whose descriptions can be trusted as his expertise regarding the Oppen archive is profound and unique, calls "George Oppen's page [...] only one slice through a vast, sedimented mass that quite literally rises off the page, carrying with it traces of prior writing," a page which "is part of a much larger conversation for which the published poem is a scant record" ("Palimtexts" 27).

As a visual introduction to each daybook, Cope provides an image of one page that is part of the document. In most cases these exemplary images depict pages that are located somewhere in the middle of the textual heap. The image that precedes the transcription of Daybook V, however, shows the very first page and on it Oppen's numerous modes of revising and revisiting texts and ideas. The visual lure of Oppen's crossing-outs, circled passages, or handwritten additions to the page notwithstanding, there are two aspects visible in this image that are especially important as they illustrate Oppen's craftsmanlike work with paper and text: the typewritten text on the page shines through from below the initial page and is semi-legible; the writing at the top of the page forms the title or refrain, so to speak, of the entire stack as it catches the eye of the reader on more than one page. In Cope's horizontal flattening of the document's vertical thickness, the phrase "OBJECT in the poem: its function is to burst" appears four times as the heading of four different pages (207, 209, 210, 214). Cope's explanatory note on this phenomenon is illuminating: "The first eight pages of the present text [Daybook V] consist of a single 'note-stack' or 'palimtext.' The first 'page' [...] records the topmost

¹⁵⁶ Eliot Weinberger, for instance, writes that "Oppen's poems represent the struggle [for clarity] itself, and he continually rewrote them, cutting out and pasting words on top of other words, as though he were a mason building a brick wall" (xvi). Interestingly, Norbert Lange, who translated the poems of *The Materials* into German, addresses this characteristic in his "Nachwort:" "Zieht man die Manuskripte Oppens hinzu, wird seine Suche nach Kippmomenten besonders deutlich: Stellen, an denen Worte von mehreren Wortschichten überklebt sind, zeugen von dem hohen Bearbeitungsgrad und dem Palimpsestcharakter der Gedichte. Ein akribischer Arbeiter, schreibt sich Oppens Wortfindung auf der Suche nach einem Surplus an Bedeutung derart in das Blatt ein, je weiter er die Erforschung seines Themas treibt. Dass diese Suche bis zu einem Punkt gehen kann, an dem eine Zeile einander ausschließende Lesarten erlaubt, bedeutet daher keinen unbeabsichtigten Nebeneffekt, es ist die besondere Spezialität des Dichters Oppen" (129).

leaves of the stack, with each successive ‘page’ revealing text that was pasted and/or taped over by Oppen. As ‘OBJECT in the poem’ appears on the base page, it appears here more than once” (268, fn. 2). The cluster of inverted commas here epitomizes Cope’s and, in general, Oppen scholars’ struggle to find the appropriate term for the material object or thing at hand. Even calling the sheets of paper pages is, according to Cope, problematic and understandably so since the standard two-dimensionality of the page is lifted by Oppen’s compositional method of “[p]iling up pieces of paper to find the words.” Notably, however, Cope calls the papyry surface at the bottom of the stack “the base page.” This term is indeed useful since the lowest layer functions as the ideational foundation and material ground from which Oppen’s textual thinking rises. The bottommost leaf marks the material starting point of the palimtext, an appropriate term coined by Davidson.

By borrowing the neologism “palimtext,” Cope employs a helpful term to make sense of the material process and material fact of poetic composition. Taking Oppen’s method of composition as his case in point, Davidson stringently argues for an analytical approach that respects “the poem’s materiality, its existence as writing;” writing which includes earlier stages of composition on manuscript pages (25). The material fact of the poem’s developmental stages hence features heavily in Davidson’s definition of the palimtext:

I would like to retain post-Structuralism’s emphasis on writing as trace, as inscription of an absence, but emphasize the material fact of that trace, an inscribing and reinscribing that, for lack of a better term, I have called a ‘palimtext. By this word I mean to emphasize the intertextual—and interdiscursive—quality of postmodern writing as well as its materiality. The palimtext is neither a genre nor object, but a *writing-in-process*. As its name implies *the palimtext retains vestiges of prior writings out of which it emerges*. Or more accurately, it is the *still-visible record* of its responses to those earlier writings. (*Ghostlier* 67-68, emphasis added)

Against the backdrop of some of the features Davidson attributes to the palimtext (with the ones in italics especially pertinent), it makes sense that Cope draws on Davidson’s terminology to come to terms with the material (arte)fact that is Daybook V. In order to exemplify this palimtextual method of composition, I will focus on the development or, rather, emergence of the phrase that appears at the top (two-dimensionally) of the topmost layer (three-dimensionally). The “OBJECT in the poem” palimtext consists of several layers of writings and pastings. As Cope notes, the bottom layer of the stack has the phrase at the top of the page and functions as the ground from which the multilayered construct grows. Against the backdrop of this bottom-up thickening of ideas, it makes

sense to concentrate on this specific phrase and trace its alterations through the different layers of the vertically expansive document “as if with a scalpel, disclosing what is there” (*SL* 77).

What is clearly legible at the top of the page in the image provided by Cope is: “OBJECT in the poem:” (206). It goes without saying that the capitalized initial word “OBJECT” had been and still was extremely formative for Oppen as well as for fellow ‘Objectivists.’ Although Oppen does not get tired of repeating in letters and interviews that there was no such thing as an Objectivist manifesto, he admits that he valued the term if used with the intended meaning in mind. He delineates what the word meant for him and “the members of this group” in a short paragraph from a 1961 letter: “We were all very much concerned with poetic form, and form not merely as texture, but as the shape that makes a poem possible to grasp. [...] ‘Objectivist’ meant, not an objective viewpoint, but to objectify the poem, to make the poem an object. Meant form” (*SL* 47).¹⁵⁷ In capitalizing the key term in the multi-layered daybook and in repeating “OBJECT” with slight but meaningful alterations throughout the papery pile, Oppen makes the objectification of the poem concrete and graspable. Moreover, he illuminates the polysemy of the word (as synonymous of ‘thing,’ of ‘purpose,’ and of ‘target’) in the document’s vertical structure. This testing of language is already transparent on the topmost page where the continuation after the colon shimmers through.

One layer below the topmost leaf the phrase recurs, this time with additional text after the colon: “OBJECT in the poem: its function is to burst // historical religion” (209). According to Cope’s transcription, the phrase “historical religion” appears on the same snippet of paper as the repeated line and can thus be read, grammatically speaking, as the direct object to the infinitive “to burst.” While it is obviously difficult and not the purpose of my analysis to deduce a definite meaning from the text given the elliptical and enigmatic nature of the fragment, the concrete effects which Oppen’s cut-and-paste technique achieves are worth pondering as they illustrate key features of what Oppen understood as objectification. In one jotting from his papers, he writes “Objectification is creation” (“Meaning” 202). In another entry, he attributes creative potential to the concept of “OBJECTIFICATION” itself which, as he notes, “creates a simultaneity, the

¹⁵⁷ In a later letter he elaborates: “Several dozen commentators and reviewers have by now written on the assumption that the word ‘Objectivist’ indicated the contributors’ objective attitude to reality. It meant, of course, the poet’s recognition of the necessity of form, the objectification of the poem. The point may seem rather obvious today, but it was not an unimportant stance as against the liquidation of poetry into the sentimentalism of the American so-called Imagists of the late twenties and early nineteen-thirties” (139).

simultaneity of vision, a simultaneity of statement” (“The Anthropologist” 148). It is exactly this idea of simultaneity which becomes visible and palpable in the “thick, textual impasto” of the archival artefact (Davidson, “Palimtexts” 34). As addition to the phrase as it appears on the topmost layer, the text after the colon, “its function is to burst // historical religion,” expands the meaning of the fragment, literally disclosing a different route of reading, another root of Oppen’s thinking. Read in conjunction with and on the same snippet as the ‘burst’ phrase, “OBJECT” exfoliates as a synonym of ‘aim,’ although it remains ambiguous whether the possessive pronoun “its” refers back to “OBJECT” or “the poem.” Similarly, the constellation on the same scrap of paper suggests reading “to burst” as a transitive verb which, albeit spatially separated from the following phrase by white space, affects “historical religion.”

The phrase appears for the third time on the next layer. Compared to the version on the layer above, the phrase is reduced to the first line: “OBJECT in the poem: its function is to burst” (210). In the absence of a direct object, the powerful verb form “to burst” materializes on this level as an intransitive verb. The phrase “historical religion” has at this stage of Oppen’s thought process not been added, has not been pasted on top. In this way, the prominent placement at the end of the line underscores the eruptive force which is implicit in the word. It is worth noting at this point that the idea of bursting and the effects associated with the action of the verb were important to Oppen. As Nicholls has uncovered in his meticulous analysis of Oppen’s reading of Heidegger, the semantics of ‘burst’ were, for Oppen, indeed connected with the revelatory potential inherent in objects. Nicholls, who had access to Oppen’s library, points out that Oppen had circled the words “essent being” in the following passage of his edition of Heidegger’s *Introduction to Metaphysics*: “It is through the work of art as essent being that everything else that appears and is to be found is first confirmed and made accessible, explicable, and understandable as being or not being” (qtd. in Nicholls 71). Oppen annotated this specific Heideggerian phrase with “‘i.e. as an object,’” as Nicholls observes, “thus linking objectness to the disclosive force of being rather than making it a condition of subservience to subjectivity” (71). It is this idea of “the disclosive force of being” which reverberates in the act of bursting and which, we might recall, the mood of boredom can bring to light. Tellingly, then, Oppen marked another passage in the same book in which “Heidegger speaks of ‘the preponderant power of being [which] bursts in its appearing.’” As Nicholls rightly points out, the lines “What is inexplicable / Is the ‘preponderance of

objects” from Oppen’s “Leviathan,” the final poem in *The Materials*, were probably inspired by this phrase.

The second half of the Heidegger sentence (“bursts in its appearing”) which Oppen highlighted is at least as important as the aspect of preponderance. Both terms are connected and, as Oppen’s multi-layered construct in the archive suggests, crucial to his poetic thought process. The moment of appearance coincides with a forceful unveiling, a shining forth of essential truth. Yet, the path towards appearance and disclosure is, as the second epigraph to *This In Which* taken from Heidegger expresses, arduous: “. . . the arduous path of appearance” (*NCP* 92). Interestingly, in a recently published passage from a 1965 letter to Samuel Klonimos (with whom Oppen had also shared his conviction that poems will “immensely deepen in meaning as they reflect on each other and join each other”), Oppen employs the image of bursting as well in giving advice on how to proceed “when correcting, rewriting.” Klonimos quotes from this personal Oppen letter:

Move, like pushing one organ-key at a time, from the sea to the road to the language very slowly, very carefully—If one is moving as slowly and as intently as possible, where the language bursts into a phrase, it will burst of its own force—it’ll happen, it is not *that* one need worry about. My description of this is sloppy, but it doesn’t in the least matter because you will see that that happens. (*OR* 33)

Significantly, Oppen here attributes language with the potential “to burst of its own force.” The sequence of words associated with meticulousness (“very slowly, very carefully;” “moving as slowly as intently as possible”) contrast with the sudden shift to the powerful verb ‘burst.’ What shines forth in this passage, then, is Oppen’s belief that weighing words carefully and spending enough time on the process of revision will eventually result in a revelatory moment “where the language bursts into a phrase,” when everything falls into place.¹⁵⁸ Patience pays off, revision is mandatory. Or as Oppen puts it in a section of his working papers where he talks to himself on the page:

finding the poem—the thing happens, the word appears in the room we do not need haughty or sly language—the thing happens, stands in the room As the cadences are found the poem enters the room—it is not speech. Something else: the poem enters the room Revise, revise, it is a search for what one meant, what one means-- The change

¹⁵⁸ In a letter to his grandniece from November 1973, Oppen provides concrete examples of how sincere writing can come to fruition: “If one tries to force the writing, it’s like flexing a muscle without knowing the purpose—and so it seems mere showing-off, or you’re not sure if it is or if it isn’t and no way to find out the way to do it is: make notes, jottings, scratch note book, however you want, but KEEP it—Later it falls into place, later you know what you meant—” (267).

of a syllable, and - - - - -. we have thought our way into what we wanted to speak of. Revision to find what you meant” (“Meaning” 198).¹⁵⁹

The transformations which the “OBJECT” fragment undergoes in the paste-up document are paradigmatic of Oppen’s poetics of revision. If, as Shoemaker correctly states, “the archive shows us the full extent of Oppen’s dialogic, processual, materialist method of writing” and presents us with “the literal enactment and physical record of [his] thinking” (7), the thickness of this particular note-stack epitomizes the density of his poetic thinking about the disclosive relation of ‘object’ and ‘poem.’

On the base page of the three-dimensional palimtextual bulk, ‘to burst’ is used as a transitive verb: “The OBJECT in the poem: its function is to burst / the boundaries of the poem” (214). As this is the text which appears on the bottommost layer of the stack, the specific way in which the fragment is phrased quite literally lays the ground for the successive layers of revision which “stick off the page like a relief map” (Davidson “Introduction” xx). Notably, in the original version which marks the beginning of his deliberations, Oppen appends the definite article “The” to “OBJECT.” Moreover, he makes clear that questions of poetic writing sparked his rumination when he lets the first line ending with ‘burst’ transition into “the boundaries of the poem.” In contrast to the second transitive use of the verb on a higher layer (“to burst // historical meaning”), ‘to burst’ is not set off from its direct object by white space on the page which presents the starting point of Oppen’s thought process. The run-on line accentuates the tension between the dynamics of breaking something apart like “the breaking of rhythmic obligations” and the static nature of “boundaries” (*SL* 199). Paradoxically, this rupture of “the boundaries of the poem,” Oppen’s initial draft suggests, occurs within the poem. More precisely, the process of making an object of the poem brings about this shattering of limitations. Once objectified, the poem transcends its generic boundaries and approaches the condition of transparency. One entry from his notebooks expresses this wished-for status particularly well: “The poem replaces the thing, the poem destroys its meaning—I would like the poem to be nothing, to be transparent, to be inaudible, not to be—I felt that most strongly writing

¹⁵⁹ Oppen gives additional advice on this revelatory technique in his letters: “The proof is this: a syllable wrong, a consonant or a vowel, and it has not been said—The ear tells one One revises and revises again: if it CANNOT be made right, there is something wrong with what one has said, has thought to do” (*SL* 232). In a later letter, he instructs: “Don’t put in any word you don’t WANT don’t strike any key of the typewriter that won’t make a mark that is part of THAT poem THAT music THAT movement and meaning (change or get rid of the sense of audience) (*Put in nothing that isn’t useful to YOU to have written down*))” (43).

Discrete Series” (qtd. in Nicholls 56). In order to achieve this goal of transparency, each component that will eventually make it into the poem-object needs to be carefully considered. For Oppen, who believed that “the writing of the poem is the process of finding out what I mean, discovering what I mean” (qtd. in Nicholls 39) and who was convinced that “the thinking occurs at the moment of the poem, within the poem” (“The Anthropologist” 160), “piling up pieces of paper to find the words” is an, or rather, *the* essential feature in his epistemological writing practice.

By taping or pasting snippets of paper and text over earlier writings, Oppen develops, tests, and refines his thinking. The sedimented mass of textual material which stems from this examination is crucial as it allows Oppen to retrace the stages of his thought process. Constructing palimpsests makes it possible to oscillate between surface and ground without losing sight of the bigger picture. Their three-dimensionality and surface-depth structure are reminiscent of relief sculpting. In the same way in which different angles of vision bring to light aspects of relief sculptures which are at other moments hidden from view, Oppen’s multilayered construction provides insights into different stages of the creative process. In Oppen’s paper reliefs the diaphanous texture of the surface page yields glimpses into successive layers. What lies underneath shimmers through. Nicholls neatly pinpoints this peculiar quality of Oppen’s “[p]oetic thinking” when he writes that it “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.” “The aim,” Nicholls continues, “is to reveal thought as embodied in the irreducible spatio-temporal ‘thereness’ of the poem, with its phonic echoes and silences, its syntactical shape and typographical layout” (72).

Before thought manifests in print and thus becomes present “in the irreducible spatio-temporal ‘thereness’ of the poem,” a sustained phase of preparatory writing is required. This writing is inextricably linked to the material fact of paper. Compared to the vertical dimension which Oppen originally localized in the line sense, the principle of verticality palpably manifests and is embodied in the stacks of his working papers. As the investigation of “The OBJECT in the poem” phrase has shown, Oppen’s bottom-up thickening of thought enables him to experiment with different perspectives and explore the polysemy of words. In accumulating leaf upon papery leaf, he illuminates the multilayered nature of individual words. As the phrase develops from the ground up, the capitalized word “OBJECT” is tested. The definiteness of “The OBJECT” on the base page blurs since the definite article vanishes from sight as the pile rises. The

presence of the article on the bottom layer affirms the status of “OBJECT” as a noun. In the first half of the line preceding the colon, then, “The OBJECT” and “the poem” appear as equal in weight. The combination of article and noun gives prominence to the meaning of ‘object’ as a material thing, insinuating that the possessive pronoun ‘its’ might indeed refer to “The OBJECT.” On the deepest level of the palimtext, it is thus suggestive to read “The OBJECT” as the entity whose “function is to burst / the boundaries of the poem.” The elliptical nature of the fragment renders this alternative mode of reading the capitalized key word at least feasible. The “uniquely spatial nature” of the document hence creates an implicit simultaneity; the perspective expressed on each individual layer lingers even though material is pasted on top of the leaves.

In the final transformation of the phrase which is legible on the surface of the palimtext, “OBJECT in the poem” could potentially be read as formulated in the imperative mood. Read as a verb, “OBJECT” changes its meaning and stands out as a synonym of ‘to oppose.’ This root/route of the word thus points to the nature of the poem as a space in which alternative points of view can be put in opposition. I am aware that such readings might appear far-fetched especially given that it is virtually impossible to render the physicality of the actual pile in words and I do not claim that these interpretations are set in stone by any means. What this multilayered reading of verbal transformations is meant to show is how Oppen’s material method of inching closer to the essential meaning of words manifests itself in concrete form in this preparatory stage of the poetic process. A poet-craftsman, Oppen chisels and refines, revisits and revises, his building materials. After the base page has been laid, layers of scraps and textual fragments are added on top. As a result, the pile of paper grows vertically. Relevantly, however, this bottom-up method is predicated on the realization that the layers are interconnected. In varying the phrasing by adding or reducing linguistic material, Oppen gradually shapes and materializes his thinking. The material, palimtextual object under scrutiny reenacts the creative processes that lie at the heart of bas-relief sculptures and resembles, to some degree, the qualities of Oppen’s wood carvings. In both products of creative endeavor, verticality and depth are important. More specifically, the relation between ground and surface becomes a crucial means of measuring the distance between idea and its manifestation.

Naturally, there is more to the note-stack than the phrase at the top of the page which undergoes slight alterations from the uppermost leaf to the bottom of the pile. The “OBJECT” phrase is not the only fragment which is worth analyzing in this stack and I

understand that by singling it out I disregard the conversations the phrase potentially enters with other text snippets appearing on the same layer. But the phrase and the fragment are special as they alone reoccur in the pile. What is more, they always appear on the top of a leaf in each manifestation. In one jotting among the paste-up construction, Oppen professes: “I build with the materials at hand, or enter combat with David’s sling-shot” (225). What is particularly interesting in respect to Daybook V and the date which Cope conjectures (“produced roughly between 1969 and 1972”) is that Oppen even in this late accumulation towards poetry summons up *Discrete Series*. More accurately, he mentions “Party on Shipboard” and thus the last poem he wrote before abandoning poetry for twenty-five years. On the second deepest layer of the daybook, Oppen explicates the pivotal images of this seminal poem:

Party on Shipboard:
like the waves, the people, appearing as
individual, are accidents of the single
mass, a single body

—and a Party on ~~Shipboard~~
shipboard is a farewell (226-27)

Not only does Oppen here recapitulate that the poem marked “a farewell” for him biographically. He also returns to the central trope of connection and relation between parts and the whole (waves-sea; people-humanity; individual-mass). The paste-up composition of the bound document is a concrete example of this interdependence. Tellingly, this revisiting of the leitmotif seems to have triggered a contemplation of the poet’s stance as “a single body.”¹⁶⁰ Arguably, the focus in this passage on singularity (“individual,” “single / mass,” “single body”) finds its continuation at the bottom half of the same sheet of paper. In a self-reflective move, Oppen directs his attention to his own solitary position in the work room:

Sitting in the work room, over the typewriter or the
desk there comes suddenly the sense of being absolutely
alone It is then that the line arrives. (*SPDP* 227)

¹⁶⁰ Given the layered nature of Oppen’s poetic thinking and the physical record of that thinking in form of his palimpsests, it is just another proof of their interconnectedness that Oppen glued the following snippet onto the page above the “Party on Shipboard” exegesis: “The music of a poem / is wave after wave / of meaning. The wave / must be perfect. Each / wave as perfect as the wave of pitch, / perfect as the wave of rhythm” (226). The image of the waves is here used metaphorically in the context of poetry-making, while the same image one layer below is emblematic of “the people.” The repetition of the image on successive layers hints at associational connections.

For Oppen, solitude is vital to the appearance of poetry. In another note, Oppen reiterates this idea “of being absolutely / alone” as the necessary condition of writing: “The need to feel absolute solitude, to being absolutely alone, while the poem is being written— But I am too timid, too dishonest” (qtd. in Nicholls 141). Facing this self-induced loneliness is demanding, as Oppen’s honest self-analysis after the dash conveys, because the poet is confronted only with himself and the things that surround him “in the work room.” In a poem from the 1970s, Oppen, in fact, points to the threatening and destructive tendencies of an awry piece of furniture: “something wrong with my desk
the desk / the destroyer, the desk is the enemy” (*NCP* 261).

This isolated situation, however, is conducive to generating what Oppen calls a poetic moment of “sinking *in* ((into-the-thing-before-the-words))” in the same letter to DuPlessis in which he mentions the vertical dimension for the first time (316). Isolated in the room, the poet experiences the mood of boredom which is potentially revelatory. Indeed, the passive constructions in both notes suggest that the poet is bored by his surroundings (“It is then that the line arrives;” “the poem is being written”). In giving in to feeling “absolute solitude,” the poet delegates his agency in a way to some external force of inspiration. In this meditative state of mind, “the line arrives” of its own or, as Oppen writes in yet another note, “the thing happens, the word appears in the room” (“Meaning” 198). Still, this metaphysical perception of “finding the poem” is grounded in the physical reality of the work room. As it is, the dimensional nature of Oppen’s poetic thinking does not only materialize in his palimpsests. He also integrated the spatial arrangement and the materiality of the actual room in which he worked into his compositional method.

The spatial component of Oppen’s writing, that is, his idiosyncratic method of using the material qualities of page and paper creatively both by working on the two-dimensional surface of the page (its vertical and horizontal orientation) and with the three-dimensional note-relief becomes even more prominent if one moves away from the working papers in the archive and turns to the actual place where Oppen wrote and revised his poetry: the desk on and the room in which he constructed. While no pictures are available to the public of how Oppen’s work room looked, remarks made after his death by his wife Mary and trusted friends like DuPlessis who saw the room on Polk Street in San Francisco before it was vacated provide intimate glimpses into the poet’s material thinking and working method. Three years after George’s death, in an interview conducted by Young in 1987, Mary describes her husband’s room as “a very, very tiny

little room” which “was just plastered with little bits of things pasted up. Some of them were wonderful,” she continues, “so [she] worked and worked at them and got them all down and put them with other papers” (*Speaking* 245). Cope, who designates the scribblings as “Twenty-Six Fragments,” elaborates that these notes “found, after [George’s] death, on or near his desk or pasted to the wall of his study” were “[e]ntitled by archivists, in collaboration with Mary Oppen, ‘The Last Words of George Oppen’” (231). Davidson adroitly posits that “these sheets of paper [pasted] to the wall of his study” function as “a kind of mnemonic enclave of significant quotations, observations, and ruminations” (Davidson, “Introduction” xlv). Mary’s active role in saving George’s final written words shows in the fact that in addition to “the original documents, composed in Oppen’s hand” the archive also contains her “numbered and sequenced transcription” of the fragments. Interestingly, in some cases her transcription differs from George’s handwritten jottings. In this way, George’s dedication to his life-long companion in the 1975 *Collected Poems* becomes concrete: “For Mary whose words in this book are entangled inextricably among my own.”

One such change is particularly representative of Oppen’s faith in and respect for words as basic materials of poetry and life and the life of poetry. In fact, the change of only one word in fragment 19a speaks to his understanding of words as existential objects. The change occurs in the final line of the fragment which begins in both versions with: “These ordinary words / come to mean / everything.” White space ensues before the final line appears which reads in Oppen’s hand: “In a way I live on words, forget words.” This is the version which Cope chose for his book in editing the archival fragments and with which he deviates slightly but significantly from Mary’s transcription. As he writes, “George Oppen’s ‘live’ replaces Mary Oppen’s ‘look’ in fragment 19a” (231). Although both verbs consist of four letters and start with an ‘l,’ George’s “live on words” clearly strikes a more existential tone than Mary’s “look on words.” While the act of looking on words is undoubtedly an essential facet of any poet’s work, it is seldom that poets emphasize the existential quality of words as the nourishing foundation of life. For Oppen, however, who considered “the words, / The clockwork of the world” (*NCP* 89), words sustained him throughout his career. Transcending the common understanding of poems as rooted in the two-dimensional surface of the page, the constellation of materials in Oppen’s workspace illustrates that the poet’s dimensional thinking went well beyond the word-line-page triad. Oppen thought with the things and materials around him, utilizing them in a way which is reminiscent of

installation art as means for the objectification of his poetic thought process. Dimensional thinking and the use of space remained pivotal elements of Oppen's creative work. Surrounding himself with the building materials of his poetry, he looked and truly "live[d] on words."

7.3 Writings on the Wall, Writings on the Windowpane

My god, you should see me in this patched-up work room
talking like this! (SL 108)

in the certainty and bright light of poetry (SL 239)

a whole life and it speaks again on my desk (SL 351)

DuPlessis' prose-poem memoir "On the Island," written as a tribute to Oppen for the celebration of his 75th birthday in April 1983, sheds some light on the concrete space and place where Oppen wrote. More importantly, her description of the room illuminates that Oppen arranged not only words, poems, and pages into meaningful constellations but that he also integrated and made use of the materials and things at hand in order to achieve revelatory moments of clarity, transparence, or lucence—three related key terms associated with light at the core of Oppen's poetics.¹⁶¹ In an often-quoted passage from "Route" in *Of Being Numerous*, for example, Oppen claims emphatically that

Clarity, clarity, surely clarity is the most beautiful
thing in the world,
A limited, limiting clarity

I have not and never did have any motive of poetry
But to achieve clarity

In "Of Being Numerous," the eponymous long poem of Oppen's Pulitzer-winning volume, the short section 22 is exclusively concerned with the leitmotif of "Clarity // In the sense of *transparence*, / I do not mean that much can be explained. // Clarity in the sense of silence" (175). In his letters, Oppen extends and elaborates this call for and pursuit of clarity, positing the key term as a principle which the poets who founded The

¹⁶¹ Oppen discusses the ordering principle of arrangement in his letters. In 1973, he tells Dan Gerber that it is "[a]llways possible to *arrange* cadence into the words, or *arrange* the words into cadence" (SL 260). In his reading of "Sandburg's destructive sentimentality," he states that "the words of the poem fall absolutely evenly, each word at the same volume: the slightest possible modulation of pitch from word to word—which saves the poem perhaps— [...] the fall of the words—, arrangement— [...] Have some sense of the openness, some sense that one's lines might insist on an openness, a movement from left-edge of the line to right edge, not a stasis or a standing on" (261).

Objectivist Press heeded even prior to writing their poems. In 1960, for instance, he concluded a letter to Williams by stating he “thought from the beginning that we must make poetry out of the clarity of the human vision—or just let the whole thing go” (38). One year later he used the same first-person plural when he wrote Mary Ellen Solt that “we [the poets commonly known as Objectivists] meant to base poetry on the clarity of human vision and of emotional grasp, which was not everywhere regarded as an important part of poetic equipment” (46). Oppen here adds the crucial terms “vision” and “emotional grasp” as prerequisite features for converting “the clarity of the human vision” into “a substantial language / Of clarity, and of respect” (*NCP* 156). Notably, Oppen uses the same terms when he discusses potential parallels between Imagism and the objectivist approach in a 1966 letter. According to Oppen, “the strength of Imagism [is] its demand that one actually *look*.” “Its strength, in the poem,” he continues, rests on the fact “that the world stops, but lights up. That lucence, that emotional clarity, the objectivists wanted, and by that they are related to Imagism” (146). The key phrase “the world stops, but lights up” is indeed applicable to Oppen’s poetry. Significantly, he ties this idea to meaning-making in his working papers when he notes: “In meaning the world stops, but is illumined / Everything is here, everything is open and visible” (“Philosophy of the Astonished” 212). Or, as another entry from the archive has it, “Clarity does not mean short sightedness, or not to see at all It means to look thru clear air” (“The Anthropologist” 153).

The implied simultaneity of standstill and “the sudden illumination of a poem” echoes what Oppen had written DuPlessis in his explication of the vertical dimension, namely that “narrative itself must at certain points STAND STILL” (*SL* 117). Furthermore, it factors in the elements of lucence and disclosure which the actual material object, that is, the poem on the page can achieve. In fact, Oppen returns to this trope of lighting up and “emotional clarity” several times and often in direct reference to his poetry and criticism thereof. This latter aspect holds especially true for Oppen’s response to letters by Cid Corman with whom he had shared drafts of poems that would eventually become part of *The Materials*. In his reply to comments made by Corman in 1960, Oppen delineates his material way of thinking with the concrete ingredients of poetic composition. After briefly and derogatively commentating on “Olson’s concept of ‘projective’ (“I think that what there is to that concept was said more accurately some time ago by Zukofsky in speaking of sincerity and of objectification”), Oppen counters Corman who had sensed ““a slackening of language”” in Oppen’s poems:

I believe you are thinking more positively than I am of a sort of solidity of surface. I think of form as immediacy, as the possibility of being grasped. I look for the thinnest possible surface.— at times, no doubt, too thin : a hole, a lapse. It is that you mean by ‘a slackening of language’. There is no point in defending lapses-- but that is, of all the risks the one I plan to live with. I am much more afraid of a solid mass of words. [...] I think that poetry, if we are to bother with it, must be made of the clarity of the perceptions, of emotion as the ability to perceive. The problem of diction seems to me that the poem must contain its words entirely. [...] I have a belief that some of the poems, as they complete themselves, heal the diction. Where that happens it seems to me very good. And I am involved with things; with ‘the light of things.’ (SL 40-41)

This passage is rife with key terms which coalesce to form a bigger picture of Oppen’s poetic thinking. What is interesting for the current analytical focus on clarity and translucence is that Oppen objects to the notion of “a sort of solidity of surface” and even fears “a solid mass of words.” Instead, he admits to his search for “the thinnest possible surface” which implies that whatever lies underneath the surface shimmers through, gleams, and coruscates. This idea of the translucent surface chimes with Oppen’s claim that he is “involved with things; with the ‘light of things’” and, as a matter of fact, is traceable in his compositional method which relies heavily on the relation between ground and surface.

Reflections by Oppen on some concrete examples from *The Materials* testify to his awareness that clarity might get lost in the process of flattening the palimpsest to a poem that will eventually rest on the two-dimensional plane of a page. In another letter addressed to Corman who found fault with the form of Oppen’s poems, Oppen concurs that at times “a failure of control” on his part results in a “lack of clarity in the poems; lack of basic clarity” (42). Oppen explains these moments of “shabbiness” in his poems where the reader comes across “a hole between the words” by “a failure of craft, evidently.” Yet he also emphasizes that his understanding of poetic craftsmanship and his conception of form is different from Corman’s: “My concern with the things, the materials in the poem are that they *are*. [...] What I want of the poem is that it contain space, that it remain at rest to contain space, the space of meaning; that the form give not ‘heightened emotion’ but grasp-ability” (42-43). The first sentence with the emphatic “*are*” at the end expresses what Auster calls Oppen’s trademark “awe of the physical world, [and] wonder in the sheer this-ness of things,” sensations which carry over into his poems (116). This sense of astonishment at “the simple fact of presence,” which was intensified by Oppen’s extensive reading of Heidegger, as Nicholls and others have shown, pervades Oppen’s thinking and writing. Oppen’s philosophical musings on “the concept of Being” (410), “the simple intuition of existence” (88), and

“‘is-ness’” (89) carry over into his poetry. This shows most impressively in famous lines from “Psalm.” In the poem from *This In Which*, the speaker of the poem articulates his or her sense of wonderment in the first stanza before turning with a sudden shift of focus to the basic materials of language and poetry in the final stanza:

In the small beauty of the forest
The wild deer bedding down—
That they are there!

[...]

The small nouns
Crying faith
In this in which the wild deer
Startle, and stare out. (*NCP* 99)

The exclamation “That they are there!” which is initially triggered by the actualness of deer and which reappears in modified form in the final line of the third stanza “(They who are there)” carries over into the bewilderment at the sight of “The small nouns / Crying faith.”

Close to the end of her tribute, DuPlessis recalls entering Oppen’s work room in “maybe 1982 or 1983,” as she retrospectively dates this episode in “Oppen from Seventy-Five to a Hundred, 1983-2008.”¹⁶² Reminiscing, she writes:

I stand in a little space.
It is his now half-used room
scraps
sayings
tacked up, taped on the wall
a nest of horizon lines
each one enough tangent for a lifetime tears in my eyes
I have certainly invaded a space

A line another line small ropes dangle off (117)

In her revised version in 2008, DuPlessis intersperses two additional lines here which explain her emotional reaction and provide an appropriate segue to the following examples of Oppen’s writing on the wall and the window: “my grief because he was

¹⁶² DuPlessis revised “On the Island” which was originally published in *Sagetrieb* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1984) twice and embedded it in a larger, “mixed-genre temporal-emotional-intellectual meditation:” in “Oppen from Seventy-Five to a Hundred, 1983-2008” published in *Jacket* 36 in 2008 and in 2015 in “Dialogues with Oppen: Appropriation and Gender” published in the *The Oppens Remembered: Poetry, Politics, and Friendship* edited by herself. As her revisions add interesting facets to each version, I draw from all of them in my analysis.

now virtually incapable of working / and yet the work shone forth in this space.” Interestingly, DuPlessis eliminates the isolated line “a line another line small ropes dangle off [from “George’s wall]” which appears in the original “On the Island” in both revised versions and continues instead with one of the most strikingly concrete examples of Zukofsky’s dictum of “thinking with the things as they exist:”

One saying is pasted flat on the window
When light streams thru the paper
the half decipherable phrase stroked in the paper is gleaming

As the cadences are found, the poem stands
in the room (seen on George’s window)

By positioning “the half decipherable phrase stroked in the paper” on the window, Oppen integrates the outside world into the poetic process of materializing the meaning of words. Only when rays of light fall (the etymological meaning of ‘cadere’) on the window-glass, the lines of the poetic fragment are clearly visible and legible so that “the poem stands / in the room.” This deliberate constellation of materials in the three-dimensional space of the room where each component harmonizes with each other illustrates Oppen’s perceptive sense of spatial arrangement and speaks to his dimensional thinking.

DuPlessis’ remembrance of this specific pasting on the window also reveals that the meaning behind and the associations evoked by the material entities of ‘window’ and ‘glass,’ which feature prominently in the very first poem of *Discrete Series*, go beyond the frequent use of these images in Oppen’s poetry. Given the amount of references to “the glass of windows” and similar phrases in his oeuvre, it is hardly surprising that many scholars have discussed, in Schimmel’s words, “Oppen’s glazierly preoccupations” (310).¹⁶³ With the knowledge that Oppen used the window in his work room as a meaningful, compositional element of his writing, Davidson’s remarks on Oppen’s “emphasis on the materiality of language” and the importance of “the image of glass” are particularly interesting:

In materializing the world as object (and the poem as ‘palimpsest’ of other writings) Oppen calls attention not only to language as structure but to the spaces that words are presumed to fill. He often figures this state by the image of glass, a substance that, depending on the light, may become translucent one moment, opaque the next. It is an image of modern society’s insulation of itself within walls, even as it occasionally

¹⁶³ For the most detailed analysis of the little word ‘glass’ in Oppen’s poetry, see John Wilkinson’s article “The Glass Enclosure: Transparency and Glitter in the Poetry of George Oppen.”

provides access to a world of vivid particulars. Glass functions as a frame for viewing poetry's refusal of presence, not for mirroring a more valid reality. (xl)

The lines pasted to the window concretely exemplify Oppen's striving toward translucence and objectification. The three-dimensional constellation of quotidian materials in Oppen's work room is, in a way and with a motional reversal, reminiscent of Maude Blessingbourne's movement toward the window. Whereas bored Maude Blessingbourne "approached the window as if to see / what really was going on' and "saw [...] past the window- / glass," the window with the written fragment pasted on it, which requires light from outside to stream through the paper in order to be somehow legible ("translucent one moment, opaque the next"), has a mysterious agency of its own and functions as the liminal space which facilitates a revelatory moment within the room. The writing on the windowpane, "stroked in the paper," shines forth and manifests itself in the room once rays of light from the outside pierce the material assemblage.

If the spatial constellation in Oppen's work room with the windowpane as threshold between inside and outside orchestrates the leitmotif of clarity, another fragment with which George surrounded himself in his final years of life and which was found in his room shifts the focus back to the basic materials of poetic construction: words and their essential meaning. In Cope's fusion of Mary's and George's versions, the ninth fragment reads:

~~Poetry must be~~

Clarity means, among
other things, to know
how the words come to
meaning

to experience how the
words come to meaning (*SPDP* 235)

It is exactly in this field of tension between the crossed-out definition of poetry which could stand on its own and "must be" and the underlined emphasis on experience where meaning comes into existence. In moments of brightness, phenomena of disclosure and clarity occur. In these revelatory moments of epiphany, "the poem enters the room:" When the interplay of harmoniously arranged materials and "the light of the word" produce "the sudden illumination of a poem," when poetry comes to light and life.

Conclusion

An able text, more motion than machines
 Have levers for,—stampede it with fresh type
 From twenty alphabets—we're still unripe!
 (CPSL, "By Nilus Once I Knew . . ." 88)

The light
 Of the closed pages, tightly closed, packed against each other
 Exposes the new day,
 The narrow, frightening light
 Before a sunrise. (NCP 181)

On 30 September 1974, Oppen wrote a letter to John Taggart who was at the time engrossed in completing a dissertation on Objectivist poetics. "I have of course—as you have too—," the letter begins, "some reserves about a doctoral thesis which must seem to absorb the poem into itself, into the thesis . . . For the poem is of course not that, the poem is the moving edge, whereas the doctorate knows no time and the substance cannot live. [...] A ghost is haunting the doctorate" (SL 289). Oppen here pinpoints a quandary which is, in a way, reminiscent of the process-object dilemma as sketched in the introduction. Eager to finish what one wishes to become "a bounded, finished work" (Burt, "Still a Thing" 278), the doctorate can never fully do justice to the processual quality of a poem. As "moving edge," it naturally escapes the confines of a PhD "*thesis frozen in its chains as it must be on a spinning planet*" (SL 289). Indeed, as I experienced firsthand while writing this dissertation, it is virtually impossible and, at times, frustrating to try to "to absorb the poem into itself, into the thesis." The poetic work, whether it is *The Bridge* or *Discrete Series*, surpasses analytical boundaries. Still, studies with a strong emphasis on dis/close readings and a focus on the poems' materiality like this one can, I believe, reveal facets of "the moving edge" that have been adrift in a sea of publication history which often overwhelms the material fact of the original version. Still afloat, Crane's and Oppen's machine-absorbing and materiality-minding work suggests and gestures towards further original (in both senses of the word) ways of reading that can also be applied to poetry produced in the digital age.

Crane's conviction that poetry needs to incorporate the machine to fulfill its contemporary function governs his theoretical as well as his poetic writing. Ideas of absorption, acclimatization, and apprehension are essential for this process of machine-minding. In combining these ideas, the artist can reveal the creative potential that comes with the encroachment of the machine on human life. As the analysis of Crane's

correspondence with Stieglitz has shown, a symbiotic interplay of man and machine yields deeper insights into what Crane calls the “seething, confused cosmos of today” (*CPSL* 160). In the hands of a visionary familiar with the materials he uses, the medium becomes an instrument of perfectibility. In Stieglitz’s case, the combination of the photographer’s “unbounded respect” for the camera’s “mechanical perfectibility” and his own apprehensive qualities creates art which captures the “essences of things” (332). Crane’s method of achieving ultimate harmonies in his medium is based on the poetic principle of a logic of metaphor. This concept facilitates the incorporation of the machine into Crane’s poetry, as a detailed analysis of the metaphoric dynamics of avian imagery, in/organic flight, and (e)motion has disclosed. The gradual approximation and final fusion of organic and inorganic elements through this principle, culminating in the bridge/*The Bridge* as bird and vice versa, signifies that the prefix ‘techno-’ becomes an integral part of the logic of metaphor. It is via this technologic of metaphor that Crane absorbs the machine into the materiality of his poetry.

Undeniably, the principle of a technologic of metaphor needs to be tested and analyzed in more Crane poems other than the ones contained in *The Bridge*. “The Air Plant,” a poem which Crane had intended to include in his third book, is just one example that suggests itself for such a reading. Playing with the ambiguity inherent in the verbal constituents of the title, Crane extends the meaning of the air plant as an “enterprising bit of vegetation [...] flourishing where nothing else will grow” (Brunner, *Splendid Failure* 209). Organic imagery prevails in the first three stanzas (“tuft,” “thrives,” “octopus,” “bird,” “lizard’s throat,” “cactus”). Images associated with wind and breath add to this surface level (“pulmonary,” “wind that jars,” “bloated,” “fly,” “Balloons,” “air’s thin talk”). In the first line of the last stanza, then, the machine enters the poem: “Angelic Dynamo! Ventriloquist of the Blue!” The inclusion of the “Dynamo” here exposes the homonymic quality of the word ‘plant:’ the technologic of metaphor generates a power plant. The air plant’s “apotheosis, at last—the hurricane” is thus anticipated through and associated with mechanical power (*CPSL* 84). The poem evolves into “[a]n able text, [containing] more motion than machines / Have levers for” (88). A power plant of language.

Building on this study, further investigations into the interdependent nexus of poet/artist, machine, and materiality are called for. Crane’s literary corpus, for instance, offers more material for intermedial, machine-minding readings. Particularly, 1920s cinema provides at least as rich a field for analysis as Stieglitz’s and Evans’s

photography. Crane was enthusiastic about Charlie Chaplin and his movies. As several letters demonstrate, the poet eagerly followed Chaplin's career. "[M]y greatest dramatic treat," he wrote Munson in 1921, "was recently enjoyed when Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid* was shown here. Comedy, I may say, has never reached a higher level in this country before" (CPSL 250). Two years later, after a surprise visit by Frank and Chaplin ("a most pleasant-looking, twinkling, little man in a black derby") and an ensuing long night out and about with them, Crane would write his mother that the movie star was approachable and amiable (350). Recounting that their "talk was very intimate," Crane discloses that "[a]mong other things Charlie told us his plans (and the story of it) for his next great film. [...] He doesn't act in it. But he wrote the story, directed and produced it entirely himself. [...] *A Woman of Paris* it's called. I haven't seen it yet" (350-51). In a postscript of a 1928 letter, he informed Samuel Loveman that he "[r]ecently saw Chaplin in 'The Circus'. Hope you like it as much as I do! I met him one evening in a Hollywood café [...] and had a few words with him. White hair, the old flashing smile—a strange luminosity about him as always" (573). Three years later and after publication of *The Bridge*, he was eagerly expecting Chaplin's newest picture: "I'm looking forward to Chaplin's *City Lights*," he wrote Lorna Dietz, "wishing however that you were to be seated beside me. I don't get the full delight of such spectacles without good company" (662). Crane's fascination for Chaplin is not only evident from the poem "Chaplinesque" from *White Buildings* which he wrote as "a sympathetic attempt to put into words some of the Chaplin pantomime, so beautiful, and so full of eloquence, and so modern" (251). More importantly, it shows in the fact that Crane regarded Chaplin as a representative of modern poets. In 1921, Crane "put Chaplin with the poets (of today)" and drew parallels in their way of responding to modernity: "Poetry, the human feelings, 'the kitten', is so crowded out of the humdrum, rushing, mechanical scramble of today that the man who would preserve them must duck and camouflage for dear life to keep them or keep himself from annihilation" (255).

Since Chaplin's filmmaking and the cinema machine in general attracted masses—the "*multitudes bent toward some flashing scene*" (33)—focusing on this popular phenomenon is promising as it places Crane into a larger cultural context. Benjamin regards this aspect as one major consequence of technological reproducibility: "*Die technische Reproduzierbarkeit des Kunstwerks verändert das Verhältnis der Masse zur Kunst. Aus dem rückständigsten, z.B. einem Picasso gegenüber, schlägt es in das fortschrittlichste, z.B. angesichts eines Chaplin, um*" (32-33). Against the backdrop

of Crane's and Benjamin's statements, Chaplin's art might be the connective between poetry and the machine's "capacities for facile entertainment" (*CPSP* 171). Cinema also proves a fruitful ground for further investigations since other modern poets, especially high modernists like Pound and Eliot, dealt with this phenomenon differently. Crane, for example, did not share Eliot's "aversion to cinema" (Chinitz 210).¹⁶⁴ Given that Crane renders the bridge in "Atlantis" as "Deity's young name / Kinetic of white choiring wings" (74), it is likely that he did not concur with the statement in Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" that "[t]he 'age demanded' chiefly mould in plaster, / Made with no loss of time, / A prose kinema" (549). Crane should be included in a discussion of what Susan McCabe designates as "cinematic modernism" (1). Oppen, who "spent most of his youth in the San Francisco area, where his father owned several movie theaters," was acquainted with cinema as well (Hobbs, "Brief Introduction" 1-2). As scholars like Weinberger have noted, Oppen's poems bear traces of cinematic techniques: "the *close-up* and the *iris*, the isolation of the particular in the panorama of history or of a culture; and parallel cutting, the story or poem projected forward through the elimination of transitions, a meaningful blank space between the shots or lines, the play and acts of redefinition that occur through the juxtaposition of similar or opposite images" ("Little Heap" 131). Both poets, in more than one way, absorb the machine into the materiality of their poems.

If Crane's technologic of metaphor posits him as a verbal engineer and an architect of verse, Oppen's approach to poetry can best be understood by resorting to the semantic field of carpentry and craftsmanship. Oppen's constructions are grounded in the principles of the vertical dimension and the line sense which shape his poems. This effect on the poems' materiality is strikingly apparent in *Discrete Series* and especially in the original 1934 book. Page-space and the whiteness of the paper, on which the separate but connected poems sit, are tools which Oppen wields to construct meaning in the age of the machine where "Up. / Down" movement was omnipresent (*NCP* 6). As carpenter of words, Oppen carved, cut, and chiseled the material components of his work to gradually achieve clarity and "a cadence of disclosure, [...] a new 'structure of space'" (*SL* 97). This revelatory impetus becomes manifest in Oppen's woodwork with which

¹⁶⁴ For an instructive reading challenging Chinitz's view, see Trotter. As a 1926 letter illustrates, Crane even resorted to cinematic images to express his state of mind: "Insomnia seems to have settled on me permanently—and when I do 'sleep' my mind is plagued by an endless reel of pictures, startling and unhappy—like some endless cinematograph" (*CPSL* 503).

he occupied himself while in exile in Mexico. Even if he did not write poems during that time, his poetics of depth persisted in the reliefs he carved. This dimensional quality of his poetic thinking is literally graspable in the stacks of notes and drafts Oppen amassed after his return to writing. The papery layers fastened to each other by various workaday materials, ranging from pins to glue to nails driven through the pages into pieces of plywood, objectify poetic thinking in material form. In Oppen's case, this craftsmanlike work with the materials at hand includes and makes use of the physical room and its inventory. The posthumously assembled fragments written on the wall or pasted on the windowpane in his working room substantiate Oppen's thinking with the things as they exist, including the vitreous threshold of the window where the "shifting of perspectives between inside and out" takes place (Shoemaker 81). With a nod from "past the window- / glass" to Maude Blessingbourne who "wished to know [...] what really was going on" in the first poem of *Discrete Series* (NCP 5), room has been made for future studies concentrating on the material surroundings in and with which poetry happens.

This study might build a bridge to other still underexamined American poets who make the condition of modernity and its material footing the matter of their poetry. Muriel Rukeyser is a case in point. In *The Life of Poetry*, a book of essays first published in 1949 in which the author speaks out against the fear of poetry, Rukeyser emphasizes the importance of arrangement and draws parallels between poetry and film: "One characteristic of modern poetry," she writes, "is that arrangement of parts which strikes many people as being violent or obscure. It is a method which is familiar enough on the screen; when you see the picture of a nightclub, and then see the heroine's face thrown back as she sings, you make the unity without any effort, without even being conscious of your process" (18). This meaningful "arrangement of parts" encompasses the smallest units of linguistic material. In a passage on "Silence and Punctuation," she claims: "Punctuation is biological. It is the physical indication of the body-rhythm which the reader is to acknowledge. [...] Space on the page, as E. E. Cummings uses it [sic], can provide roughly for a relationship in emphasis through the eye's discernment of pattern; but we need a system of pauses which will be related to the time-pattern of the poem" (117). Like Oppen, Rukeyser focused on typographical minutiae including spacing as building blocks in the construction of meaning. Rukeyser even "had a rubber stamp made—'Please believe the punctuation.'" As she mentions in an interview, stamping this plea onto poem or manuscript submissions helped her "very much in dealing with printers" (Packard 126). In the same interview, stating that she "care[s] very much about

the air and the silence let into a poem,” she advocates for collaboration “with other poets on ways of making this [absence] visual.” Even if “the placement of a poem on the page can do most of it,” according to Rukeyser, “many readers do not take that meaning to be what it is, a metric rest.” While she has “tried to work out a visual form for rest,” she admits in the interview that “it clutters the line very badly” (126-27).

After reading Oppen, one might assume that he would have borrowed Rukeyser’s stamp. Would he, who cherished “[c]larity in the sense of silence” and appreciated the poems of *Discrete Series* for their silences (*NCP* 175), have worked together with Rukeyser in her pursuit to declutter the line? At any rate, it is worth noting and bears further scrutiny that both somehow unconditional and untraditional poets refer to the same Chinese source in their meditation on space on paper. “In a sheet of paper,” Rukeyser cites in *The Life of Poetry*, “is contained the Infinite, wrote Lu Chi, in his *Essay on Literature* [...] and from Lu Chi to I. A. Richards, the power of space waiting to be filled is demonstrated” (178). In Oppen’s working papers, the paper-infinity sentence is preceded by the lines: “For it is Being created out of the void / And sound wrung out of silence” (“Selections” 7). Notably, Rukeyser mentions I. A. Richards in her reference to “the power of space waiting to be filled.” Richards addressed the connection and tension between science and poetry in his 1924 *Principles of Literary Criticism* and introduced the term “pseudo-statement” in poetry “as a form of words which is justified entirely by its effect in releasing or organizing our impulses and attitudes” in a 1926 essay published in *Criterion* (60). Crane admired this essay and mentioned it in his letter to Harriet Monroe in his clarification of “At Melville’s Tomb.” Making a point for his “logic of metaphor [which] is so organically entrenched in pure sensibility that it can’t be thoroughly traced or explained outside of historical sciences, like philology and anthropology,” Crane correlates his innovative principle with Richards’ concept: “This ‘pseudo-statement,’ as I. A. Richards calls it in an admirable essay touching our contentions,” Crane writes, “demands completely other faculties of recognition than the pure rationalistic associations permit.” Turning towards Monroe’s criticism of his poem, Crane makes clear that “there is much great poetry of another order which will yield the reader very little when inspected under the limitation of such arbitrary concerns as are manifested in your judgment of the Melville poem, especially when you constitute such requirements of ordinary logical relationship between word and word irreducible” (*CPSL* 166).

The relationship between the materiality of the word and the poetry-technology nexus promises a rich or, rather, charged field for further research. Rukeyser, who believed that “[t]he relations of poetry are, for our period, very close to the relations of science” and that poetry can provide “a meeting-place between all the kinds of imagination,” deserves more scholarly attention. “Poetry depends on the moving relations within itself,” she writes in “A Note from the Author” which leads into *The Life of Poetry* (xi). Variations and specifications of this statement are scattered throughout this underexamined book. A few examples should suffice to hint at points of comparison to the materiality-minding work of Crane and Oppen. Having attended a graphics workshop, Rukeyser pinpoints “the impact that a combined form may have when picture and text approach the meaning from different starting-places. In this combination of an image and a few words, there are separables: the meaning of the image, the meaning of the words, and a third, the meaning of the two in combination. The words are not used to describe the picture, but to extend its meaning” (137). This extension of meaning is reinforced by one key tool at the poet’s disposal: arrangement. For Rukeyser, the “gathering-together of elements so that they move together according to a newly visible system is becoming evident in all our sciences, and it is natural that it should be present in our writing” (19). Significantly, Rukeyser referred to the scientist and physicist Willard Gibbs in emphasizing the importance of arranging parts meaningfully. “Truth is, according to Gibbs,” Rukeyser writes in a section titled “The Arrangement is the Life,” “not a stream that flows from a source, but an agreement of components. In a poem, these components are, not the words or images, but the relations between the words and images. Truth is an accord that actually makes the whole ‘simpler than its parts;’ as he [Gibbs] was fond of saying” (167). It is worth noting that Rukeyser wrote a biography of the scientist. Her approach to writing poetry, in fact, changed due to her preoccupation with the physicist. In an interview, she acknowledged that the language in her pursuit to “getting past impossibilities by changing phase” ultimately derived from Gibbs: “The reason I think that I came to Gibbs was that I needed a language of transformation. I needed a language of changing phase for the poem. And I needed a language that was not static, that did not see life as a series of points, but more as a language of water, and the things are in all these lives that I try to see in poems” (132).

Traces of Rukeyser’s “language of transformation” and “language of water” can already be found in her books of poetry from the late 1930s. Her “The Book of the

Dead,” originally published in the volume *U.S. 1* in 1938, is a good example and worth investigating, especially since new material has been added to the living archive. For example, photographs from the Hawks Nest tunnel disaster in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia have been made available as well as name lists and death certificates of mostly African American migrant workers who died from silicosis because they dry drilled the tunnel without respiratory protection and were thus exposed to silica dust which caused lung disease. In her documentary work, Rukeyser uses a variety of forms and mixes, for example, transcripts from congressional hearings with powerful lyrical passages stemming from witness testimonies. She also makes use of the materiality of the white page and the leitmotif of “white glass” to highlight racial and social injustices (“hundreds breathed value, filled their lungs full of glass;” “O proud O white O water rolling down” [70-72]). In “The Disease,” the whitening of a lung is indicated by absence of “the X-ray picture” and by white space between anaphorically arranged Oppen-esque deictics:

This is a lung disease. Silicate dust makes it.
The dust causing the growth of

This is the X-ray picture taken last April.
I would point out to you : these are the ribs,
this is the region of the breastbone;
this is the heart (a wide white shadow filled with blood). (82)

The seemingly oxymoronic image of “white shadow” recurs in “George Robinson: Blues,” the next poem in the sequence. With a prominent ‘night/white’ rhyme, the account of the black mine worker ends with the following blinding lines: “As dark as I am, when I came out at morning after the / tunnel at night, / with a white man, nobody could have told which man was / white. / The dust had covered us both, and the dust was white” (87). Rukeyser’s language of transformation adds another important layer to issues of absorption, the machine, and materiality, namely, the potential within black-and-white print culture to accentuate questions of race and racial inequality even in the digital age.

The analytical trajectory of this study allows and calls for further investigations into the interdependence of materiality and technology in contemporary poetry. There are several connecting factors such as erasure poetry, for example, by indigenous Chamorou Craig Santos Perez or Nisga’a writer Jordan Abel. In their work, vestiges of (post-)colonial past and present remain visible in palimpsestual material form on the page, whether in struck-through but still legible words or layered scraps of linguistic material

excised from source texts which, thus conceptually processed, then visually illuminate different perspectives and readings of history. Yet, I would finally like to point to two Black poets and visual artists whose work is deeply grounded in the materiality of the page, bibliographic code, and contemporary print technology: Douglas Kearney and giovanni singleton. In Kearney's visual poems like the ones in *The Black Automaton* from 2009, linguistic materials cascade down and across the page in boldface, italics, and flowchart-like diagrams creating an "optic subwoof," the title of Kearney's latest book published in 2022. In January 2011, as featured blogger for The Poetry Foundation's *Harriet*, he wrote of "repetition and revision as [his] compositional strategy" and the subsequent "need to amass bits of language with a capacity to say more" ("MASS"). Accumulation is key and gives rise to typographically expressive masses of black ink on white paper in many of Kearney's visual poems. For him, his preferred "mode of repetition" functions "as a means for physicalizing language in a poem. Perhaps language is already the poem's meat; yet repetition, through its sonic and visual persistence, can make for meatier meat" ("MAST"). The meat metaphor becomes brutally concrete in "Swimchant for Nigger Mer-Folk (An Aquaboogie Set in Lapis)" where Kearney samples music, animated film, and snippets from modern poetry to create typographical dynamics with black letters tumbling across the white space of the double page, thus visually replicating "the most violent trope of Middle Passage narratives—sharks devouring cast-off Africans" ("MAST"). As Kearney writes in his notes in *The Black Automaton*, this tableau "uses Parliament, 'Aquaboogie (Psychoalphadiscobetabioaquadooloop'; Sebastian (from *The Little Mermaid*), 'Under the Sea'" and "then snaps up Eliot and shanghai Hayden" (93). In one of his blog post comments on the poem, he hints at parallels between the method of amassing and sampling: "Like the notion of repetition as mass, this poem creates a landscape of words, making the reader aware of text as bodies in space. From the mast-head acting as a mast marking the blank sheet of sky to the ghostly whisper at bottom" ("MAST"). His work with language deserves more scrutiny.

Likewise, giovanni singleton's "works on paper," which is the lowercase subtitle after the all-caps "AMERICAN LETTERS" in the title of her book of visual poems published in 2018, calls for more attention. Like Kearney but with more emphasis on the whiteness of page and paper, singleton interrogates whiteness, blackness, and race in often minimalistic poems. In "CHAPTER 1: *exhibits*," she explains the method behind three visual poem-exhibits ("American Prose," "American Poetry," and

“American Letters”) all of which are dominated by white space: “*In an attempt to document a lineage of African American and African Diasporic avant-garde / experimental / oppositional writing, I have constructed these three poems (a flag, a cross, and a blank page) using the Library of Congress card catalog numbers (archival finds) for works that in one way or another exemplify just such a lineage*” (12). Since she could not find any entry for “*this lineage within the context of so-called ‘American Letters’ which at times has denied its existence, rendered it invalid, and / or relegated it to the margins,*” “EXHIBIT C / American Letters” is a blank page (15). In material fact, her book breaks this spatial silence at times by zooming in on individual letters as in “CHAPTER 12: *eye of the be/holder (Take 2)*” (91). On the shared space of a double page, the ninth letter of the alphabet is set side by side with itself in majuscule and miniscule instantiation. As a homophone of the palindrome “eye,” the multifaceted letter insinuates sight (‘beholder’) and simultaneously implies existence as a first-person pronoun (‘eye of the be’). Moreover, the letterform of the two ‘i’s’ (‘Take 2’) gestures towards another layer of meaning “via the visual ordering,” as singleton calls her technique (12). Typographically in equilibrium, the capital “I” is firmly anchored on the left-hand side. The lowercase ‘i’ with its diacritic dot and the serif extending like an outstretched arm towards the left appears to look across the page. In a way, the small letter seems to hold out a hand to the ‘I’ which holds firm on the page (‘be/holder’). Minimalistic typography, large issues on paper. While it is easily possible to get lost in material minutiae, I believe that a focus on the smallest particles of language is necessary for clarity, revelation, and sincerity. A lineage, I venture to suggest, can and should be traced from Oppen’s “White. From the / Under arm of T // The red globe” to singleton’s “eye of the be/holder (Take 2).” Colors and letters on the same page.

“Crane,” Giles rightfully asserts, “was one of the most radical verbal engineers (119). Oppen was one of the most radical verbal craftsmen. But as the older poet, who died prematurely, already postulated in an early review of photographic work published under the title “A Note on Minns” in the September-December issue of *The Little Review* in 1920: “[M]y appreciation can begin only where the fundamental pedagogics of the camera leave off;—at the point where the craftsman merges into the artist,—where the creative element becomes distinct” (*CPSL* 153). “Language,” the last sentence of Crane’s “General Aims and Theories” reads, “has built towers and bridges, but itself is inevitably as fluid as always” (164). This paradoxical combination is not only constitutive of Crane’s technologic of metaphor but of machine-minding and

materiality-minded American poetry in general. In constructing vital American poetry, as Crane puts it, “[o]ne can go only so far with logic, then willfully dream and play—and pray for the fusion.— *When* one’s work suddenly stands up, separate and moving of itself with its own sudden life, as it must” (497). As working papers, as works on paper. Object. Process. Still a thing!

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