Against Transparency: From the Radiant Cluster to the Word as Such

The transformation of the speech model which was my subject in chapter 2 goes hand in hand with the changing status of the Image in poetic discourse. Let me begin with a representative passage from Ezra Pound's early Cantos:

Great bulk, huge mass, thesaurus;
Ecbatane, the clock ticks and fades out
The bride awaiting the god's touch; Ecbatane,
City of patterned streets; again the vision:
Down in the siete stradai, toga'd the crowd, and arm'd,
Rushing on populous business,
and from parapet looked down;
and North was Egypt,
the celestial Nile, blue deep,
cutting low barren land,
Old men and camels
working the water-wheels. . . .

Compare this to the opening of Clark Coolidge's poem At Egypt (1938):

I came here. I don't know you here.
I say this. I have lost such.
Plain at the gate. Slant on missing heights.
Where if I see you glow. Where no one.
Here a sun. That the moon.
Black black, and be sure of it. There is little sure.
It was a coming which was done.3

In Pound's canto, the role of syntax is characteristically subordinated to that of Image, the Image which is famously defined as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time," a "radiant node or cluster . . . from which, and through which, and into which, Ideas are constantly rushing," "Great bulk, huge mass, thesaurus; / Ecbatane"—Pound juxtaposes "charged"3 nouns and noun phrases so as to define his desired "instant of time," the instant when the ancient citadel Ecbatane, Pound's ideal "city of patterned streets," becomes, in the poet's imagination, the place where Danaë receives Zeus in a shower of gold: "The bride awaiting the god's touch."4 The paratactic mode of the canto locates us in a continuous present: "the clock ticks and fades out," "the bride awaits, the crowd, 'toga'd' and 'arm'd,'" is seen "Rushing on populous business," and so on. As in the case of film montage, the canto's technique is to produce, as line 4 puts it, "again the vision"; elsewhere, Pound calls it "the method of Luminous Detail" and explains that it is such "Luminous details which govern knowledge as the switchboard the electric circuit . . . they gather the latent energy of Nature and focus it on a certain resistance. The latent energy is made dynamic or 'revealed' to the engineer in control, and placed at his disposal."

Luminous detail is regularly associated with two other words: precision and accuracy. "By good art," writes Pound, "I mean art that hears true witness. I mean the art that is most precise." Whereas, "Bad art is inaccurate art. It is an art that makes false reports."5 But in Pound's practice, the two don't necessarily go together. "And north was Egypt / the celestial Nile, blue-deep, / Cutting low, barren land"—the images are precise but hardly accurate: on the map Egypt is southwest rather than north of Ecbatane (Hamadan). In the context of the canto, however, it hardly matters. Egypt and Ecbatane, the "celestial Nile and the celestial citadel": the juxtaposition is entirely apt, the Image functioning, in W. J. T. Mitchell's words, as "a sort of crystalline structure, a dynamic pattern of the intellectual and emotional energy bodied forth by a poem."6 In the textual field of the canto, such precise "data" (Pound's term)6 as the images of the "blue deep" Nile, "cutting low barren land," and the "Old men and camels / working the water-wheels," have the authority of presence. "Your Cantos," Marshall McLuhan told Pound in 1948, when he was writing The Mechanical Bride, "I now judge, to be the first and only serious use of the great technical possibilities of the cinematograph. Am I right in thinking of them as a montage of personae and sculptured images? Flash-backs providing perceptions of simultaneities?"

Such "perceptions of simultaneities"—Pound's famous ideogrammic method—are notably missing in Clark Coolidge's At Egypt. The cited stanza has neither celestial Nile nor old men and camels, neither a "city of patterned streets" nor Zeus coming to Danaë in a shower of gold. Such Egypt-traces as appear—the gate, the "missing heights," the sun and moon—are little more than ciphers, the Image now being neither "accurate" nor "precise," and, in any case, subordinated to what the Russian Futurists called the "word as such." The very title defies our expectations: not "in" or "to" or "from" Egypt, all of which would make
good sense, but "at Egypt," a construction that would be marked incorrect on an elementary-school grammar test, unless of course "Egypt" were the prepositional object of an active verb, as in "I am shooting at Egypt."

The opening lines carry on this odd syntactic and verbal momentum. "I came here. I don't know you here. / I say this. I have lost such. We cannot specify "you," "this," and "such," perhaps not even "here," but the abrupt disjunctive declarative sentences convey a sense of disorientation, anxiety, and hyperactivity. In line 3, each of the two short phrases is syntactically and semantically indeterminate: "Plant at the gate" might mean "I saw you planted at the gate," "I planted myself at the gate," "There was a large plant at the gate," and so on; "Slant on missing heights" might refer to the sunlight slanting on the distant "heights," "What I saw me a new slant on the missing (because dark!) heights," and so on. The one thing of which we can be sure is that "Plant" rhymes with "slant," a rhyme further heightened by the consonance of t's ("at," "gate," "heavens"), the incantatory rhythm here enacting the "otherness" of Egypt even as the words themselves refuse to constitute its image. In any case, "Where" now picks up from "here" without specifying that "here" any further. Does the line mean that I'm in a place where, if I see you, I can observe your glow? In this case "you" might be a mountain. Or again, the line may mean "where you (a lover?) glow (light up) if I see you." Even a "simple" set of phrases like "Here a sun. That the moon is made strange by the faulty parallelism. Not "Here a sun. There a moon," but "That the moon," which like the title At Egypt, allows for a number of constructions, e.g., "Here's the sun. That light must be from the moon"; or again, "That the moon" may be the opening of a sentence like "That the moon will shine tonight is not sure." Indeed, the next line confirms the possibility of such a reading, "Black black, and be sure of it," followed by the qualification, "There is little sure." The stanza concludes "It was a coming which was done." The poet's coming to Egypt, now "done" (completed). A Second Coming of some sort, perhaps referring to Yeats's poem with its Egyptian setting? A "cold coming," as in Eliot's "Journey of the Magi"? A sexual coming?

Coolidge's lines, I want to suggest, are neither more nor less "difficult" than Pound's but their momentum is certainly different. In the Cantos, the images do the work: jostled side by side, juxtaposed, cut, fragmented, especially in the later cantos, the images, precise, allusive, often recondite, create a tightly woven collage surface. In At Egypt, such montage of "data"—of luminous details—is replaced by a kind of Wittgensteinian language game. Ordinary words in ordinary construc-

tions—I came here, I don't know you, I say this, if I see you, be sure of it—are denaturalized, decontextualized, so that we must puzzle out their relationships within the given language field. In the case of Pound, we read image against image—in what way is the "great bulk" of the citadel like a "thesaurus"?—whereas in the Coolidge poem, the focus is on the "redundancy" introduced into the information channel itself. For although what Pound calls an "emotional complex" is certainly conveyed, what, if anything, does this stanza "tell" us?

Toward the end of At Egypt we read "Egyptian though, Egyptian thought / Egyptians thought when they died / Egyptians thought they died then went / into sky to the east" (AE 73). "Though" (adverb) plus t produces an entirely unrelated abstract noun ("Egyptian thought") and then two verbs, the first intransitive ("thought when they died"), the second transitive ("thought they died"). No radiant node or cluster, no directness of presentation, no precision or lucidity. Yet the movement from "though" to "thought," the latter repeatedly bearing a new meaning, displays a concentration, a discrimination among words, that fits Pound's own definition of poetry as language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree. It is the nature of the charge that has so radically changed.

Why, to begin with, no recourse to the "clear visual images," Eliot, writing of Dante, found so central to poetry? Why is the natural (or even the unnatural) object no longer the adequate symbol? Or to come closer to the present, what has happened to the advocacy, on the part of the "Deep Image" poets of the late fifties and early sixties, of a lyric in which, to cite Robert Bly, "everything is said by image, and nothing by direct statement at all. The poem is the images, images touching all the senses, uniting the world beneath and the world above."

Reductive as this late version of the romantic image may be (Bly has actively denounced imagism, restricting the meaning of "image" to the "deep image" that wells up intuitively from the recesses of the poet's subconscious), the assumption that an image-free lyric would necessarily be the lyric of "direct statement" has haunted our poetry from the late eighteenth century to the present. From Blake and Holderlin to the Surrealists and beyond, the image, in its various incarnations as pictorial representation, metaphor, symbol, or Poundian ideogram, has been understood as the very essence of the poetic. It is by no means my object here to trace the history of the concept of the poetic image, a whole library having grown up around the subject, but to suggest that the current suspicion of "imageful" language, on the part of the more radical poetries, has a good deal to do with the actual production and dissemination of images in our culture.
The paradigm shift I wish to describe occurs, so far as American poetry is concerned, sometime in the early sixties, and can be measured by reading George Oppen's *The Materials* (1962), his first book of poems in twenty-eight years, against another book published in the same year, William Carlos Williams's *Pictures from Brueghel*. The poems in this collection, covering the decade of lyric produced after Williams suffered two debilitating strokes, are among his most famous—the title poem, "The Desert Music," "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower." But what is often glossed over by Williams's critics is that these poems turn their back on the very principles that made Williams a central figure in twentieth-century poetics. Take a poem of the thirties like "Nantucket":

```
Flowers through the window
lavender and yellow
changed by white curtains—
Smell of cleanliness---
Sunshine of late afternoon—
On the glass tray
a glass pitcher, the tumble
turned down, by which
a key is lying—And the
immaculate white bed
```

As in the case of Canto V (although its images are not drawn, as are Pound's, from disparate realms), "Nantucket" foregrounds images arranged in simple syntactic units: noun phrase (sometimes followed by short adjectival and participial modifiers) plus noun phrase in paratactic sequence, the poem's camera eye moving with fine precision from the flowers seen "through the window"—a distance shot—to the white curtains that link inside to outside, to the items inside the room—glass tray and glass pitcher, tumble turned down, the key tantalizingly described as "lying down"—and finally zooming in to the "immaculate white bed," on which no one is lying. There is neither direct commentary on the part of the subject nor discursive elaboration, the implication being that the images of sight and smell, taste and touch can reveal their own being. But—and here Williams is perhaps closer to Clark Coolidge than to Vorticist poetics—in the course of the poem, the image-bearing noun phrases—"Flowers through the window," "Smell of cleanliness," "Sunshine of late afternoon"—are increasingly absorbed into the ordinariness of the little connecting words, as in line 8 ("turned down, by which") and line 9 ("a key is lying—And the"). As Williams put it in an essay on Gertrude Stein, written the same year as "Nan-
tucket," "everything we know and do is tied up with words, with the phrases words make, with the grammar which sustains. . . . it's the words we need to get back to, words washed clean." 17

Williams might well have followed this Steian precept but the fact is that, increasingly, he didn't. As early as 1936, in a poem like "Perpetuum Mobile: The City," we get passages like the following, from the opening:

```
—a dream
we dreamed
each
separately
we wo
of love
and of
desire—
that fused
in the night. (WCWP 1:130)
```

Despite their elegant visual layout, these lines display a distrust of the image as bearer of revelatory power, of presence. "A dream we dreamed, each separately, we two, of love and of desire that fused in the night"—here the words, far from being "washed clean" or "Unlinked . . . from their former relationships in the sentence" (SE 116) seem to function as mere counters, as part of the conventional vocabulary of love song and romance. Increasingly, Williams was to become a poet of direct statement so that, in the lyric of his last decade, we read:

```
Of asphodel, that greeny flower,
like a buttercup
upon its branching stem—
save that it's green and wooden—
I come, my sweet,
to sing to you.
We lived long together
a life filled,
If you will,
with flowers. So that
I was cheered
when I came first to know
that there were flowers also
in hell.
Today
I'm filled with the fading memory of those flowers
that we both loved. . . . (WCWP 2:310–11)
```
“There is no need to explain or compare,” Williams had insisted in a diary of 1927 in which he typically attacked “the bastardy of the simile.” “Make it and it is a poem” (SE 68). Yet in “Asphodel,” the proper name is immediately followed by a characterization (“that greeny flower”) and then by a simile (“like a buttercup / upon its branching stem”) and a qualification (“save that it’s green and wooden”).

Whether or not we admire this late style, we cannot help but recognize it as a marked departure from Spring and All or The Descent of Winter, from the Objectivist lyrics of the thirties and early forties, or even from the prose-verse splicings of Paterson. Many explanations for the change have been offered, the most obvious one being the biographical. The Williams who wrote the three-step poems of the fifties was a terribly sick man, having suffered two paralyzing strokes followed by months in a mental hospital for treatment of extreme depression. He now wanted, not to experiment but to explain himself as clearly as possible, to set the record straight, as it were. Or again—and this is the account given by Williams’s biographer Paul Mariani—“Asphodel” represents a movement beyond Imagism, beyond Objectivism to a new depth, the depth of rumination in which the flower “without odor” leads the poet through his own hell of memory, a hell in which he must come to terms with his past, especially his frequent adulteries for which he now apologizes to his wife. Robert Lowell, who was in the audience at Wellesley College when Williams, “one side partly paralyzed, his voice just audible, and here and there a word misread,” read “Asphodel” to a rapt audience of female students, called the poem a “triumph of simple confession.”

But a “triumph of simple confession” can also, of course, be interpreted as a retreat from complexity, from poetic challenge. And what I want to suggest here is that this retreat, psychologically motivated as it no doubt was, given the facts of Williams’s situation, was also culturally motivated. Indeed, from our vantage point three decades later, we can perhaps see that the poems in the Journey to Love sequence, of which “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” is the most famous, represent a moment in our history when the image as “intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” had become discredited, even as the poetic modes that “the age demanded” had not yet gathered force.

II

A “triumph of simple confession” (or what Hillis Miller calls “the quiet mastery of supreme attainment”) is, in any case, a problematic response to the “pressure of reality” (Wallace Stevens’s phrase) associated with the verbal/visual world of the late fifties and early sixties. By 1962, the year Pictures from Brueghel was published, there were fifty million television sets in the United States (more TVs than bathtubs) and 500-odd stations on the air twelve to eighteen hours a day. It was the era of slapstick comedy (Sid Caesar, Jackie Gleason, Lucille Ball), of the celebrity host-show (Andy Williams, Johnny Carson, Jack Parr), and of war drama like The Gallant Men (the Fifth Army slugging its way to Rome), Combat (an infantry platoon on D-Day and after), and McHale’s Navy (with Ernest Borgnine as the sloppy, if happy, commander of PT-73, anchored off an idyllic South Sea island named Taratupa). TV advertisements, not yet eclipsed by the VCR technology of the eighties, received enormous attention; indeed, advertising in general spawned a world of riveting images made for and by the affluent society in the heyday of its love affair with, as one New York discount house was called, Buy-Wise.

Compare, for example, two Listerine ads (figs. 3.1 and 3.2), the first from 1931 and typical of the predominance of text over image in the magazine ads of the prewar period when radio, and hence the spoken word, still dominated the media. Here the visual image—a drawing rather than a photograph—of an attractive woman fondling her Pekinese dogs takes second place to the “story,” a kind of true romance cum cautionary tale about the “minor fault” that can “alter a person’s life” as it did in the case of “Miss Nickerson.” We learn that “After her debut in June 1904, it seemed almost certain that she would marry a titled young English army officer whom she had met on the Riviera, when the Nickerson yacht had been in foreign waters.” But “Nothing came of it,” or of any of the other young men who “paid court” to Miss Nickerson. Now past forty with a streak of gray in her lovely black hair, Miss Nickerson lavishes on her little dogs the love that should have been bestowed on her children, had she married! And why didn’t she marry? Because—dirty little secret—she has the “unforgivable social fault”: halitosis. If only she had used Listerine, all would have been well. And now there’s a little still-life of the Listerine bottle, etched against those “bad breath” items—an onion and a fish.

By the early sixties, such moral tales had given way to the second sort of image, a blow-up in triptych of an attractive woman, glass of Listerine in hand. It is a contrast that appears again and again: consider two ads for washing machines (figs. 3.3 and 3.4), the first, a 1916 ad for the Gainaday Washer-Wringer, advises the middle-class housewife to stop waiting for the proverbial Mary, Ann, or Maggie to “show up” (the racist drawing in the upper left shows the frustrated white housewife waiting for the black laundress, who is only now, presumably behind
What she really wanted was Children

Don't guess about your breath.

gargle LISTERINE and be sure


Stop Waiting for the Wash-Woman

...and it pays off every washday


schedule, coming up the walk!), and buy her own washer-wringer, depicted here in a small image at the center. In the 1962 Westinghouse ad, text is minimal, the ejaculatory image of coins flying out of the washer (using a Westinghouse "pays back") into its owner's waiting lap—is supposed to say it all. Or, to take a third example, compare an early Post Toasties ad (fig. 3.5), with its conventional drawing, again subordinated to moral tale ("How much of a man's fortune depends on his breakfast") to the sixties version (fig. 3.6), which has almost no text at all (23 words plus the title Post Toasties Cornflakes) but a striking image of two hands shucking a beautiful fresh ear of corn from which, miraculously, Post Toasties emerge and dribble down the page. The same transformation is found in soap ads: a 1940 ad for Lifebuoy Soap, complete with "scientific" chart and little human interest stories (fig. 3.7), would take about five minutes to read in full, whereas the 1962 Lux Beauty Soap ad (fig. 3.8) subordinates a fairly bland text "Lux—You're Wonderful...!" to a ten-inch square color image of a "beautiful" young woman, provocatively gazing at the viewer through the soap suds. The pink flower in her wet hair, which matches her pink lipstick, is cropped at the top as if to say that the girl who uses Lux soap is ready for the taking.

There is another aspect of early sixties imaging that is relevant. In the typical magazines of the period like Look, it is almost impossible to tell advertising layout from the rest of the magazine. An image of a palm tree, for example (fig. 3.9), bears the caption "California: a promised land for millions of migrating Americans." It looks for all the world like an ad from the California State Tourist Association or perhaps for Sunkist Orange Juice but it’s the lead page of the feature of the month which is called "California." Further along in this feature spread, we come to a page (fig. 3.10) captioned "Design Talent Blooms in the Wasteland," which spotlights a lady in a beautiful long gown, silhouetted against a dune, on top of which (or behind which) stands her male companion in evening clothes. The copy below tells us in boldface that her dress is a James Galanos design. Is it an ad for Galanos? No, just part of a spread on California fashion. Is there a difference? Not really, as an ad for a gold brocade Dynasty dress in a 1962 New Yorker testifies (fig. 3.11). The subtext, it appears, is that the supposedly informative documentary article about "the California dream" and the ad for a specific dress designer are simply two sides of the same coin—the word coin being used here advisedly. Indeed, it is amusing to note that whereas the man in the Dynasty ad is a tailor, the Look photograph man an elegant gentleman-escort, in both cases, the men are subordinated to that which really counts: not the man, not the woman, but the dress!

3.5 Post Toasties ad, 1912; in Atwan, p. 198.
Science now tells you what causes nervous B.O. (nervous body odor) and no one is free from the workings of his nerves.

- And no one is free from the workings of his nerves.

Lifebuoy health soap — its crisp odor goes in a jiffy. Its protection lasts and lasts.


3.7 Lifebuoy health soap ad, 1940, in Atwon, p. 274.


Inevitably, such exchange between image as subject matter and image as sales material has played a major part, not only in the visual arts, where its role has been a commonplace since the advent of Pop art, but in literature as well. I am not talking here about subject matter—the novel or poem “about” consumer culture and commodification—but about the way poetry, for one (and a similar study could be made of fiction or drama), has responded to what we might call the videoing of our culture. It is by no means, we should note, just a case of the “sensitive” poet reacting against the “vulgarieties” of the media; indeed, this “sensitivity” scenario is itself, in large part, a media creation. What really happens, however, is more indirectly channelled.

Consider, for a moment, William’s references, in “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,” to what we might call current events, references that are quite untypical of Williams’s earlier poetry. In book 2 we read:

The poem
   if it reflects the sea
   reflects only
its dance
   upon that profound depth
   where
   it seems to triumph.
   The bomb puts an end
to all that.
I am reminded
   that the bomb
   also
is a flower
   dedicated
   howbeit
to our destruction.
The mere picture
   of the exploding bomb
fascinates us . . . . (WCWP 2:321–22)

It is as if Williams, having seen, as who at the time could not, countless photographs of the famous atomic mushroom cloud (fig. 3.12), feels that he should assimilate this image into his discourse about love (“There is no power / so great as love / which is a sea / which is a garden”) and thus tries to make the connection between forms: “the bomb / also / is a flower (WCWP 2:322). Or again, he brings in the image of the “death / incommunicado / in the electric chair / of the Rosenbergs,” observing that “It is the mark of the times / that though we condemn / what they stood for / we admire their fortitude” (WCWP 2:323).

3.12 Photograph of atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki, 9 August 1945. The Bettmann Archive.
jet”—the epiphemic moment when “some form grows radiant”—by the early sixties, when “radiance” had itself become a product sold by most cosmetic firms and soap manufacturers, the image had become a problematic poetic property. The most common reaction, not surprisingly, was what Robert Pinsky has wittily called “a kind of more-imaginistic-than-thou attitude.” as in the short barded lyric of Robert Bly:

I am driving: it is dusk; Minnesota.
The stubble field catches the last growth of sun.
The soybeans are breathing on all sides.
Old men are sitting before their houses on carseats
In the small towns, I am happy.
The moon rising above the turkey sheds."

The tone of such poems is self-consciously, indeed aggressively naive, as if to say that if the poet can only verbalize his or her actual sensations, authenticity (the antithesis of the media image) is guaranteed. Hence the present tense, the simple declarative sentences, the reductive “childish” vocabulary. Nature—“the stubble field [catching] the last growth of sun,” “the soybeans . . . breathing on all sides,” “the moon rising above the turkey sheds”—would seem to exist in its pristine state, at least in the more rural parts of Minnesota. Yet—and this is one of the ironies of the present situation—the context of such poems is not the “real” wilderness of pastoral America but such reading venues as Bill Moyers’ Journal, which featured Robert Bly on 19 February 1979, the program later published in a 1985 collection called Transmission: Theory and Practice for a New Television Aesthetics.

The TV format makes it possible for Bly to be photographed on what Moyers calls “his home ground,” namely, “on the shore of Kabeko Lake in Minnesota, and at a farm four hours further south.” As Moyers explains: “There’s a rhythm to [Bly’s] life now. Two weeks a month he spends with his four children near the family farm in southern Minnesota. Four or five days a month he supports himself, barely, by giving poetry readings at colleges and in community forums like Cooper Union in New York. The rest of his time is spent here among the lakes and pines of the north country, where he translates poets from abroad and writes most of his poetry. Robert Bly thinks the best poets finally come home” (CRB 236).

Notice what we might call the telenostalgia of this account, the vice-
ated nod toward a simpler, pastoral age when, presumably, poets were bards wandering among the lakes and pines and composing their epiphemic lyrics. Indeed, Moyers’s little tele-bio-sketch is hardly more “authentic” than the Listerine story about poor Miss Nickerson, the deb
who didn’t marry because she had halitosis. Who, one wonders, takes care of those four children (and is there a wife?) the other two weeks of the month? And what does it mean to write nature poems that are renumerate only when one descends into the city to read them at colleges and community forums? How does one reconcile these two modes of living?

Moyers, speaking from the TV studio, is especially keen on talking about “the parts of us which grow when we’re far from the centers of ambition” (CRB 237). He likes phrases—and Bly helps him along—like “journey into the interior,” “peak experiences,” and “discovering that third part” “in order to become human” (CRB 239, 240, 245). Along the way, Bly comments on the “grief” caused by the Vietnam War, the horrors of industrialization, and even the “passivity” induced by TV. The program ends with Bly reading a translation of Rilke (“It’s a joy to walk in the bare woods.” The moonlight is not broken by the heavy leaves”) and the Moyers sign-off: “From Kabekona Lake in Minnesota and Cooper Union in New York, we’ve been listening to Robert Bly. I’m Bill Moyers” (CRB 259). Time, evidently, for the home audience to go to bed.

Much of what goes by the name of poetry today is processed and packaged in this form. Distinguished from other forms of writing by the sheer weight of their images as well as by the series of breath pauses that signal lineation, “poems” are embedded in what are alternately weighty and witty anecdotes that serve to keep the audience more or less awake and geared up for their next poetic shot. At the same time, the more radical poetries have turned to the deconstruction of image. There are three main ways in which this has occurred: (1) the image, in all its concretion and specificity, continues to be foregrounded, but it is now presented as inherently deceptive, as that which must be bracketed, parodied, and submitted to scrutiny—this is the mode of Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery, more recently of Michael Palmer and Leslie Scalapino and Ron Silliman; (2) the image as referring to something in external reality is replaced by the word as Image, but concern with morphology and the visualization of the word’s constituent parts: this is the mode of Concrete Poetry extending from such pioneers as Eugen Gunringer and Augusto de Campos to John Cage’s mesostic works, to the visual texts of Steve McCaffery, Susan Howe, and Johanna Drucker; and (3) Image as the dominant gives way to syntax: in Poundian terms, the turn is from phanopeia to logopoiea. “Making strange” now occurs at the level of phrasal and sentence structure rather than at the level of the image cluster so that poetic language cannot be absorbed into the discourse of the media: this is the mode of Clark Coolidge with which I began and of Lyn Hejinian, Charles Bernstein, Rae Armantrout, and Bruce Andrews—among others; it comes to us from Gertrude Stein, from whom image was never the central concern, via Louis Zukofsky and George Oppen. And this brings me back, finally, to The Materials of 1962.

III

Oppen’s famous twenty-five-year silence (he published no book between Discrete Series [1954] and The Materials [1962]) has often confounded readers: what can it mean, is it asked, to abandon one’s chosen art for a quarter of a century? And did the poet’s political activism (he worked for Communist party causes on and off for some twenty years) and his years of exile in Mexico reinforce or interfere with his poetics? For my purposes here, the psychology of Oppen’s silence is less important than what I take to be its paradoxically positive effect on the poetry. When Oppen resurfaced, Rip Van Winkle—like, in 1958, first in New York and later in San Francisco, he had missed the protracted controversy about the awarding of the Bollingen Prize to Pound for the Pisan Cantos in 1948—a controversy that triggered the larger debate about the relationship of poetry to knowledge, of the raw versus the cooked, of Olson’s projective verse versus the “closed verse” of the “genteel” tradition. Largely detached from the various schools and having, in the intervening years, read more philosophy (especially Heidegger) than the poetry of his contemporaries, Oppen may well have had less difficulty than, say, Williams, in coming to terms with a world increasingly characterized by what Charles Bernstein has called “imaginabortion”—the “im-position of the image on the mind” from without. And indeed, judging from the various essay collections devoted to his work, Oppen’s later books—The Materials, This in Which (1965), Of Being Numerous (1968)—have tended to speak to poets who were at least two, sometimes four, decades younger: Bruce Andrews, Donald Davie, Louise Gluck, Robert Hass, Michael Heller, Sharon Olds, Michael Palmer, John Peck, Rachel Blau duPlessis, Robert Pinsky, Ron Silliman, Gilbert Sorrentino, John Taggart, Eliot Weinberger.

But then Oppen, even in his early poetry, displayed little predilection for “direct treatment of the thing,” for the image as “radiant node or cluster.” # Consider the third poem in Discrete Series:

Thus
Hides the
Parts—the prudery
Of Frigidaire, of
Soda-jerking—
Thus  
Above the  
Plunge of lunch, of wives  
Removes itself  
(As soda-jerking from  
the private act  
Of  
Cracking eggs):  
big-Business

The early 1930s, when Oppen wrote this little poem, were the years in which the Frigidaire or General Electric refrigerator became a secular icon. "As a protector of health through the prevention of spoilage," writes Roland Marchand, "it served as a benevolent guardian of the family's safety. As the immediate source of a great variety of life-sustaining foods, it acquired the image of a modern cornucopia. No open refrigerator door in an advertising tableau ever disclosed a sparse supply of food. The gleaming white of the refrigerator's exterior suggested cleanliness and purity." Indeed, "the visual cliché of the entrancing refrigerator," wife and husband (the husband was never seen in the vicinity of a refrigerator without his wife), or wife and guests, rapturously contemplating its well-stocked shelves (fig. 3.14), became, says Marchand, a "moment of secular epiphany."

Oppen's little Frigidaire poem deconstructs such moments, not by writing a critique of the consumer culture that produces Frigidaires—that would be much too easy and uninteresting—but by rupturing the very sentence and phrasal units in which the image appears. Indeed, we never "see" the Frigidaire or the soda-jerk or the wives having lunch at the ground-floor soda fountain while big business is presumably conducted in the offices upstairs. "Thus / Hides the / Parts," the poem begins oddly. "Thus," as Harold Schimmel points out in his excellent essay on *Discrete Series*, surprises the reader by its formality, its "uncolloquial nature"; reappearing in line 6, again in isolated position, "Thus" functions, Schimmel notes, as an arrow, road sign, or mathematical symbol, that points us in a particular direction. It is not a signifier pointing toward a particular signified but a relational term.

But what is it that "Thus / Hides the / Parts"? Oppen characteristically omits the subject noun or pronoun. Is it the Frigidaire itself, whose exterior "prudery" (its white walls and door) hides its motor (cf. "All the mechanism is in here" in the GE ad)? 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 be-
hind the scene (a “private act”) so that his performance will appear more streamlined? Or to the “big-Business” of the last line, that hides by removing itself (line 9) from its own production as from the “Plane of lunch, of wives” below? The poem invites all these readings, but not to make a didactic point. For the poem itself “Hides / the parts,” aligning words so as to create paragraphs. “Parts—the prudence” suggests, by its alliteration and word placement that prudence has something to do with hiding one’s parts. “Of Frigidaire” provides the brand name with a frame that seems to limit its power. The line “Above the” sits above “Plane of lunch, of wives” as if the poet himself were stationed somewhere on the balcony, and “lunch” and “wives” are not properly nouns in apposition. The capitalization of “Plane” points back to the capitalized “Parts” (notice that Oppen doesn’t automatically begin a line with a capital letter), and the lower-case “big” in “big-Business” forces us to look hard at that particularly hackneyed phrase.

However one interprets the poem, it is, finally, the “Thus” of lines 1 and 6 that remains most enigmatic. For Oppen never does explain how the “parts,” whether of Frigidaire or of soda jerking or of manufacturing, are “hidden.” His interest is not to produce a clear visual image of a particular scene, a description of lunch at the office building soda fountain, but, on the contrary, to see how words, taken out of their normal syntactic contexts, can assume new meanings. “Thus / Hides the” in that “thus” contains and obscures the meaning of “the.” “Thus / Above the” points to the hierarchy of words within the poem. The apposition of “Cracking eggs” and “big-Business” suggests that the act / Of / Cracking eggs is a big business. And so on.

Syntax, writes Oppen in his “Daybook” (the entries are undated): “a careful packing of a poem to avoid mere shuffling, a deadening, to avoid destroying a word by its relationships.” Which is to say by the wrong relationships. “Those who are not very concerned with art,” writes Oppen, “want poems or pictures to record for them something they already know—as one might want a picture of a place he loves” (DBK 29). But, as he puts it, again in his “Daybook” (DBK 25), preparatory to its incorporation in the poem “Route”: “Words cannot be wholly transparent. And this is the ‘heartlessness’ of words” (GOCP 186). “Heartless” in the sense of being uncompromising, unwilling to engage in rituals of transcendence, of otherness. It is interesting to compare Oppen’s refusal of transparency, his repeated insistence that “the word is a solid” (DBK 25), to Pound’s 1915 definition of Image:

> The Image can be of two sorts. It can arise within the mind. It is then ‘subjective’. External causes play upon the mind, perhaps; if so, they are drawn into the mind, fused, transmitted, and emerge in an Image unlike themselves. Secondly, the Image can be objective. Emotion seizing upon some external scene or action carries it intact to the mind; and that vortex purges it of all save the essential or dominant or dramatic qualities, and it emerges like the external original.”

“Purged” by the vortex, the Image, as Pound said elsewhere (LE 33), “stands clean,” a substitute, as it were, for the “external original,” which it resembles. It is this still Modernist faith in the image as analogy that Oppen calls into question in the poems of the sixties that begin with The Materials. “Image of the Engine,” one poem is called, but its descriptive Whitmanian opening soon dissolves into phrases like “What ends / Is that” (GOCP 20). In another poem (no. 21 of “Of Being Numerous,” GOCP 162) that starts out as a quintessentially Objectivist lyric with its emphasis on thingness, on “the brick / In a brick wall / The eye picks / So quiet of a Sunday,” Oppen abruptly “drops” the brick and, pointedly avoiding the pictorial or tactile, skips a line and places, all by itself, a proper name that may or may not be the “you” of lines 5–6:

> Here is the brick, it was waiting
> Here when you were born
> Mary-Anne.

The ordinary name Mary-Anne, three syllables bearing two short a’s surrounded by white space, has an odd opacity. For we don’t know any more about Mary-Anne than we do about the brick: the name evokes no image, tells no story; indeed the address to Mary-Anne seems to interrupt the poet’s rumination about the past and leave its meaning suspended. What relatedness there is exists on the level of sound rather than meaning; Mary-y picks up the sound of “There” in line 1 so that anaphora brings us full circle: “There”—“Here”—“Here”—“Mar-y.”

From Image to the “‘heartlessness’ of words”: consider now what happens in a short poem from The Materials deceptively called “The Hills”:

> That this is I,
Not mine, which wakes
To where the present
Sun pours in the present, to the air perhaps
Of love and of
Conviction.

As to know
Who we shall be. I knew it then.
You getting in
The old car sat down close
So close I turned and saw your eyes a woman’s
Eyes. The patent
Latches on the windows
And the long hills whoever else's
Also ours. (GOCP, 54)

The title “The Hills” leads us to expect some sort of description—an image, perhaps, of how the “hills” of childhood have changed (“Tintern Abbey”) or of where the poet is stationed (“I stood tiptoe / Upon a little hill”), or of the relationship of the hilly landscape to the speaking subject, as in H.D.’s “The Helmshorn”:

We wandered from pine-hills
through oak and scrub-oak tangles
we broke hyssop and bramble,
we caught flower and new Bramble-fruit
in our hair: we laughed,
as each branch whipped back,
we tore our feet in half buried rocks
and knotted roots and acorn-cups.

In Oppen’s poem, such concretion is notably absent: the only adjective used to describe the “hills” is found in the penultimate line and it is hardly very descriptive: “the long hills.” But then the whole poem has only four adjectives—“long,” “present,” “old,” and “patent”—and no more than twelve nouns; it is composed primarily of deictics, the “little words I like so much” as Oppen called them,27 as in that first unspiring and flaccidly monosyllabic line, “That this is I,” followed enigmatically by the disclaimer “Not mine.”

“That this is I, / Not mine, which wakes”—here the possibilities of syntax rather than of image or metaphor are put into play. In line 1, the dependent (dependent on what?) clause challenges the reader to fill in the gaps. For instance:

I know that this is I.
I can’t believe that this is I.
How strange that this is I.
How ironic that this is I.

And the next line can be read as follows:

It can’t be mine, this world which is now waking up to the morning sunshine.
It is not mine, this household now coming to life in the morning sunshine.
It is not mine, the “I” which the sun awakes; I have no control over my self.

And so on. This is not to suggest, however, that Oppen’s lines don’t “say” anything. For however one chooses to read these opening words, they convey a tone of extreme disorientation, as if their speaker were cut off, not only from others but from his own inner being. “That this is I”—four syllables with four stresses: like a monotonous drumbeat that demands to be heard, and which, for that matter, the poet instantly seems to retract with the words “Not mine.” The abruptness of the opening suggests that the speaker is waking up in a strange place and that he has momentarily lost all sense of self and of bodily weight. The “present / Sun pours in the present”: the repetition is not gratuitous, stressing as it does the recognition that this is indeed the light of common day, the harsh and full daylight. Nor is what awaits at all certain: the “air” is only “perhaps” (the word coming at the end of the long fourth line is emphatic) the air “Of love and of / Conviction.” And anyway, love does not necessarily insure conviction or vice versa.

The opening of the second visual unit (“stanza” seems too strong for this irregular block of type) is almost as enigmatic. “As to know / Who we shall be” can mean “I am not so presumptuous as to know / Who we shall be.” Or again it may be a question: “Who is so wise as to know / Who we shall be?” These deictics, in any case, now give way to a more traditional image: a memory, evidently, of the poet’s beloved (or, more specifically, as we know from the other poems, his wife Mary) in the early days of their courtship, getting into his “old car” and sitting close / So close I turned and saw your eyes a woman’s / Eyes.” The scene is hardly remarkable: one thinks of a dozen old films in which a lovely young woman gets into a man’s car and looks into his eyes: Claudette Colbert, for example, flagging a ride with Clark Gable. Or the standard sixties ad (fig. 3.15), in which the beautiful couple (the man of course at the wheel) is seen, driving their new Thunderbird through the green and verdant hills of a luscious America.

But just when the reader settles into the romance plot, something jars. The “woman’s / Eyes” (the line break oddly separates the eyes from the rest of her person) are now placed in apposition to “The / patent / Latches on the windows.” What sort of collocation can this be? Latches are what lock the windows; patent latches are inscribed with their brand name; “patent” also connotes patent leather which is black and shiny. Thus the line “Eye. The patent” oddly relates Mary’s eyes to black and shiny little machine parts with a brand name, parts that shut the speaking subject inside the machine itself. Somehow, although we don’t know how, the memory has a painful edge; when the poem concludes, “And the long hills whoever else’s / Also ours,” the pleasure of return (here are the familiar hills!) remains muted.
If one knows Oppen's biography, "The Hills" can be read as an elegiac poem recounting the poet and his wife's return, after many years, to the hills of San Francisco where they had been young, a return that is bittersweet and fraught with memories of early love but also of constriction. But "The Hills" is not so much "about" this return as it is about the despair of not knowing what one once thought one knew. Just when "the little words" seem to be pointing toward things—"You getting in / The old car sat down close"—the syntax undermines their momentum. "The patent / Latches on the windows": suppose "patent" is read as a noun, "latches" as a verb. How, then, do we characterize the remembered car ride?

"The question 'What is a word really?'" says Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*, is analogous to 'What is a piece in chess?' In following the Wittgensteinian precept that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (PI 43), that "naming" is at best "a queer connexion of a word with an object" (38), Oppen's work suggests that perhaps we have had, at least for the moment, a surfeit of luminous detail. Consider, for example, the transformation of a topos like the cat poem from Christopher Smart's *Jubilate Agno* ("For I will consider my Cat Jef- fery") to Baudelaire's mysteriously erotic *Les Chats* to Williams's brilliant tracking (1950) of the cat's movement as it climbs over "the top of/ the jamcloset / first the right / forefoot / carefully / then the hind" and "step[s] down / into the pit of / the empty / flowerpot." By the sixties, the image of the cat had become a popular logo. Take the widely disseminated image used to advertise Lanvin's My Sin (fig. 3.16). This ad juxtaposes the image of a black furry cat, shaped like a large black ball (no paws visible), staring with "mysterious" green eyes into the middle distance. Silhouetted against the big cat-ball, whose shape it replicates, is the circular concave Lanvin perfume flask on whose surface is the silhouette, Greek-verse style, of a giant robed person (perhaps a goddess?) putting hands on a much smaller androgynous figure who is evidently the sinner. "My Sin," reads the caption, "a most provocative perfume.

What dark secret love, one wonders, lies behind this pseudo-stroy?

Increasingly, so far as the media are concerned, the image is supposed to say it all. Here (fig. 3.17) is a two-page spread from a 1989 *New York Times Magazine*, nostalgically depicting the adult's idealization of what young boys should be like—two lads in tweeds and caps, at home, or at least visiting, at a beautiful farm. The whole ad has only five words, "Polo / Ralph Lauren / for Boys." But the reduction of verbal text goes hand in hand with the increasing complexity of image-making. The Ralph Lauren "picture" immediately connotes New England and hence elegant East Coast country living, the Ivy League, and so on. But
look again. The trees behind the barn look like California cypresses, with eucalyptus to their right: the photograph was probably shot in Northern California. But then again the landscape is so generalized it could be any part of the country. New England, that is to say, can belong to all of us. Then, too, the Polo boys, far from riding horses around the corral or picnicking next to a gorgeous waterfall as in this 1962 Salem cigarette ad (fig. 3.18), simply sit on what seems to be a front or back stoop of an ordinary clapboard house. The storm door behind them seems to have a little hole in it—as storm doors of ordinary houses often do. Ralph Lauren clothes, the image tells us, are within anyone's reach.

From here it is just a step to the ingenious Nissan ad for the new Infiniti luxury car (fig. 3.19), an ad often spread across two or even three pages. Here there is only one word—the name "Infiniti" (i not y in that this is a special version of the larger thing)—and no car at all, only boundless fields and fences, with the open forest behind them. The text, "scientific" and informative, comes on a separate page and is meant to be read only after one is hooked on the image. But the image of what? What does the absent signifier, the Infiniti car, have to do with these miles of fenced pastures? Evidently the automobile, once a large noisy machine that spluttered and roared, took up space and polluted the environment, is now an invisible magic carpet, by means of which we fly across those fields, jumping whatever fences get in our way. Driving the
Salem refreshes your taste — "air-softens" every puff

A moment of fresh delight.

10 years with such Salem cigarettes... for us to achieve refreshment you.

Salem's own special softness refreshes your taste:
- Menthol fresh
- Rich tobacco taste
- Modern filter, too.


Infiniti, says the ad, will make you feel a part of Nature, pure and simple. No crowds, no traffic, no roadblocks, no mean streets to negotiate-only an empty paradise.

Such powerful images challenge poetic discourse to deconstruct rather than to duplicate them. They prompt what has become an ongoing, indeed a necessary dialectic between the simulacrum and its other, a dialectic no longer between the image and the real, as early Modernists construed it, but between the word and the image. Here, for example, is the first poem in Rae Armantrout’s Precedence (1985). Its title is “Double,” and its “hills of home” are not even, like Oppen’s “long hills,” “Also ours”:

So these are the hills of home. Hazy tiers
nearly subliminal. To see them is to see
double, hear bad puns delivered with a wink.
An untoward familiarity.
Rising from my sleep, the road is more
and less the road. Around that bend are pale
houses, pairs of junipers. Then to look
reveals no more.39

“To look / reveals no more.” In that case, it is time, as Armantrout suggests, to let the words themselves “see double.”

4. Signs Are Taken for Wonders:
The Billboard Field as Poetic Space

Now the letter and the word which have rested for centuries in the flat bed of the book’s horizontal pages have been wrenched from their position and have been erected on vertical scaffolds in the streets as advertisement. —Walter Benjamin, “Central Park”40

It is the highway signs, through their sculptural forms or pictorial silhouettes, their particular positions in space, their inflicted shapes, and their graphic meanings that identify and unify the megatexture. They make verbal and symbolic connections through space, communicating a complexity of meanings through hundreds of associations in a few seconds from far away. Symbol dominates space... Architecture defines very little: The big sign and the little building is the rule of Route 66.

—Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, and Steven Izenour, Learning from Las Vegas41

4.1 From Learning from Las Vegas, p. 5

In the billboard culture of the late twentieth century, the “successful” text is one that combines high-speed communication with maximum information. Here, for example, is what the Venturis call the “heraldry” of the Las Vegas Strip (fig. 4.1), with its promise of food, shelter, gasoline, and even, in the spirit of Brecht Mahagonny, “free aspirin” to complete the nocturnal cycle. “Free aspirin” is followed by the words “Ask us anything.” and, in much smaller letters, the signature of “Jay G. Manning, Union Oil Dealer.” Ask an oil dealer “anything”; it is a prospect that, to say the least, gives one pause.

Learning from Las Vegas appeared in 1972; since then, the more billboards, highway signs, advertising posters, and media spreads that have come to compete for our attention, the more “subtle” these minitexts have become. Here is a recent Parliament cigarette ad from the New York Times Magazine (fig. 4.2), which depicts an attractive young couple, silhouetted against an Ionic column on a breathtakingly gor
this poet’s extreme artifice—an artifice that became acceptable only in the past decade or so. The Double Dream of Spring (1970), Three Poems (1972)—these were written against the grain of sixties “authenticity.”


32. See Donal Carbaugh, Talking American: Cultural Discourses on “DON-AHUE” (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Co., 1988), p. 3. According to Carbaugh, the show “airs in more than 200 markets, including Alaska, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico” and has won several awards including Emmys for “best show,” “best host,” and “outstanding achievement for a creative technical craft.”


42. Philip Levine, Don’t Ask, Poets on Poetry, ed. Donald Hall (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), p. 101; ellipses are Levine’s as recorded by the interviewer, Calvin Bedient. This text is subsequently cited as DA.


44. For a typical view, see Robert S. Miola, “Philip Levine,” in James Vin-
5. In "How to Read," LE, 15–40, Pound says (p. 23), "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree."
6. For the account of the building of Ecbatana (now Hamadan, in Iran) by Darius, the first king of the Medes, see *Herodotus, History*, Book I, "Cito," pp. 40–41. The circular citadel with its seven concentric terraces, each of a different color, was designed to correspond to the circuit of the seven planets; for Pound, according to the *Companion to the Cantos*, "Ecbatana is archetypal as a concept of perfect human order, a reconciliation of nature and civilization, as paralleled, in other cantos, by Ithaca, Troy, Mt. Segur, Thebes, Rome, Wagada, and later Trinovant (London);" Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*, vol. I: Cantos 1–71 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), p. 14.
8. Pound, "The Serious Artist" (1913), LE 43–44.
12. T. S. Eliot, "Dante," Selected Essays (London: Faber & Faber, 1953), p. 242. "The style of Dante," writes Eliot, "has a peculiar lucidity—a poetic as distinguished from an intellectual lucidity. The thought may be obscure, but the word is lucid" (p. 239). And again, "Dante's is a visual imagination... It is visual in the sense that he lived in an age in which men still saw visions" (p. 243).
16. Interestingly, as early as the 1920s, the Russian Formalists had argued that, in the words of Viktor Shklovsky, "The material of poetry is neither images nor emotions, but words... Poetry is a verbal art"; and Roman Jakobson suggested that poetry could, in fact, dispense with "images" completely, using sound or syntax as the poetic differentium; see Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine*, 4th ed. (The Hague, Paris, and New York: Mouton, 1980), pp. 174–76, 230–32.
17. For a superb recent treatment of theories of the image and of representation, both in the verbal and the visual arts and with respect to ideology, see W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*.
House, 1987), pp. 201–3. I would now add that, from a feminist perspective, the treatment of the poem’s “you” (Floss Williams) is irritatingly condescending. Throughout the poem, the conflict is Williams’s, the difficulty is Williams’s, whereas Floss appears as, so to speak, the Woman Without Qualities, the unmovable object rather than the worthy antagonist of the poem’s speaker. “Listen,” he tells her, “while I talk on / against time,” and his wife has no choice but to do so, to learn that “Love / to which you too shall bow / along with me . . . shall be our trust / and not because / we are too feeble to do otherwise / but because / at the height of my power / I risked what I had to do” (WCCP 2:317–18). And the poem’s final image is of Floss the bride, “a girl so pale / and ready to faint / that I pitied / and wanted to protect you,” a “sweet-scented flower . . . poised [that] for me did open” (WCCP 2:336).


23. This tripartite division is by no means hard and fast; I merely want to suggest possible emphases. Charles Bernstein, for example, could also be included in the first group; see chapter 6, where I so group him with Ashbery. And McCaffery could just as well be in the third group, his experiments with syntax being among the key examples of this mode. And, since my focus here is on image, I say nothing of the prosodic innovations which are the subject of chapter 5.


25. This in Which (1965) has an epigraph from Heidegger, “. . . the arduous path of appearance.” Oppen has commented on the importance of Heidegger, and particularly of Being and Time, in various interviews; see L. S. Dembo, “George Oppen: An Interview,” Contemporary Literature 10 (Spring 1969): 168, subsequently cited as LSD; and Burton Hatlen and Tom Mandel, “Conversation with George Oppen,” GOMP 34–35. For an excellent discussion of the Heidegger-Oppen relationship, see Randolph Chilton, “The Place of Being in the Poetry of George Oppen,” GOMP 89–112.

The influence of Kierkegaard and Maritain on Oppen has also been noted, and in recent years we have become more aware of the interesting relationship to Wittgenstein. See, for example, David McAleavy, “Clarity and Process: Oppen’s Of Being Numerous,” GOMP 392–95; Burton Hatlen, “Zukofsky, Wittgenstein, and the Poetics of Absence,” Saegutrie 1 (Spring 1982): 63–93. Although, as the title indicates, this essay deals with Zukofsky rather than Oppen, the discussion of the Wittgensteinian refusal to relate words to things applies neatly to Oppen as well.


27. See the following: Ironwood (ed. Michael Cuddihy, Tucson, Arizona) has had three special Oppen issues: 5 (1975), 24 (1981), and 36 (1988). Pae deuma (ed. Carroll F. Terrell, Orono, Maine) has had a special Oppen issue: 10, no. 1 (Spring 1984): this was followed by Burton Hatlen’s George Oppen: Man and Poet (1981), which includes only a few of the Pae deuma contributors and has extensive notes and annotated bibliography. The Ironwood issues are subsequently cited as IR; Pae deuma is cited as P.

28. In “The New Political Economy,” Poetry 44 (1934): 220–25; rpt. in GOMP 267–70, Williams praises the technical excellence of Oppen’s poems in Discrete Series and comments on the poet’s “plain words” and his “metric . . . taken from speech” (pp. 269–70). But the tone of the review, which sidetracks into a general attack on those who judge poetry according to its subject matter, suggests a certain perplexity on Williams’s part, as if he wanted very much to praise the younger poet but didn’t quite see what he was getting at. See, on this point, my Dance of the Intellect (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 119–34.

29. George Oppen, The Collected Poems (New York: New Directions, 1975), p. 4. This text is subsequently cited as GOC.


33. “As for Imagism” (1915), in SPR 374–75. In “George Oppen, Discrete Series, 1929–1934,” GOMP 271–92. Tom Sharp cites this passage as evidence that Oppen’s is best understood as the second or objective image (see pp. 272–73).


There can be a brick in a brick wall
The eye picks
So empty on a Sunday.
The silent signs.
Quiet Sunday
On the flat of the table
The match box, there as much as anything.
Handling baggage in leather gloves,
A few years out of high school,
A young man furious. The new wine.

Note that Oppen revises in the direction of ellipsis, abstraction, less figurative language and that “Mary-Anne” does not appear in the more imagistic early version at all.

35. See, on this point, the interesting discussion in Burton Hatlen, “Opening Up the Text: George Oppen’s ‘Of Being Numerous,’” IR 85:274–75.
37. See LSD 165. In the poem “Psalm,” which Oppen cites in this passage, we find the lines “The small things / Crying faith / In this in which the wild deer / Stare out”; see CP 78. This poem is frequently cited as evidence of Oppen’s faith in the “small things,” but the fact is, that as Oppen remarks in a number of places, nouns, like verbs, pose a problem for him. See, for example, Oppen, DBK 13: “Not sure I can count further on the nouns in an open voyage.” And on the same page, we read: “the verbs, which I have never been able to handle,” “the verb, the act of things—even as I say it, it seems to me that that necessarily involves failure.”

Chapter 4

2. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, and Steven Izenour, Learning from Las Vegas (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1972), p. 10. Since it is too cumbersome to cite all three authors each time, I refer collectively to “the Venturis.” The book is subsequently cited in the text as LL.
3. Ironically, when the Venturis make analogies to the other arts, for instance poetry, they invariably cite writers committed to “high art.” Thus they write: “Perhaps a fitting requiem for the irrelevant works of art that are today’s descendants of a once meaningful Modern architecture are Eliot’s lines in ‘East Coker’:

That was a way of putting it—
not very satisfactory
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
Leaving one still with the
intolerable wrestle
With words and meanings.
The poetry does not matter.” (LL 58, 60)

Eliot would, I think, have been very surprised to find his “intolerable wrestle / with words” applied to the Las Vegas strip.
5. See Michael Compton, “In Praise of the Subject,” in Marcel Broodthaers, catalog for the exhibition at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, organized by Marge Goldwater and Michael Compton (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center; New York: Rizzoli, 1989), pp. 42–43, and see plates 44, 45, 136, 137. This catalog is subsequently cited in the text as MB.
11. The imagery here recalls John Ashbery’s “‘They Dream Only of America,’” The Tennis Court Oath (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1962), p. 13:

And hiding from darkness in barns
They can be grownups now
And the murderer’s ash tray is more easily—
The lake a lilac cube.

Ashbery’s narrative alludes to a murky conversation about a key, a slow move into the bedroom, a falling against a living room table. These elements, in radically fragmented form turn up here too.
12. The relationship of McCaffery’s work (together with that of other Cana-