

The Crooked Timber of Humanity

George Oppen, *New Collected Poems*. Carcanet, £14.95

"In spite of the name", Andrew McAllister writes in the introduction to his 1996 anthology *The Objectivists* (reviewed in *Metre* 1), "there was no such thing as Objectivism". As a collective enterprise, Objectivism was very much a passing phenomenon of the early 1930s, but a survey of the American scene at mid-century, and more recently too, confirms how right McAllister was. If its practitioners weren't sure if Objectivism existed, other people had no such doubts: it didn't. Critical honest brokers don't come more honest than Marianne Moore, but a trawl through her *Complete Prose* yields two passing references to Louis Zukofsky and none to his comrades. Jarrell didn't write about them, unless we count his attack on Muriel Rukeyser, that author of "good girl" poems that are "after all, dying for the people". Lowell, Bishop and Berryman give every sign of being unaware of their existence. They were too early for the chronology of Donald Allen's *New American Poetry*, slip through the cracks of Donald Hall's *Modern American Poetry*, and never get within shouting distance of Helen Vendler's *Faber Book of Contemporary American Poetry*. Even today they are entirely absent from Houghton and Mifflin's widely used anthology *Contemporary American Poetry*.

Oppen hitched a ride on the Objectivists issue of *Poetry* edited by Louis Zukofsky in February 1931, though very much on the running board, represented as he was by four short poems. Resuming her editorship the following month Harriet Monroe professed herself repelled by her stand-in's "Arrogance of Youth" and "barbed-wire entanglements". The world was safe once more for readers of E.A. Robinson and Edgar Lee Masters, and three years later Oppen's *Discrete Series* came and went without much to-do, despite its endorsement by Pound ("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"). The paradox of Oppen's title is that a mathematical series, composed of discrete numbers, "can at the same time represent a kind of seamless flow of progressions and accumulations, a pathway of enlargement from some penetrating and transforming principle", as Paul Christensen puts it. The book's opening poem, for all its Jamesian sinuousness, emphatically rejects pre-war æstheticism and the drawing-room world in which Hugh Selwyn Mauberley swooned his way to the end of "Yeux Glauques" before expiring of hyper-cultivation:

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.

"As if to see/ what really was going on": this is one lady who won't be selling postcards like the man under the movie sign in "Bad Times". What Oppen was sharing the century with in 1934 was the Depression, and in its miniaturist way *Discrete Series* sets itself the task of stripping away the filters of "as if" and bearing witness plain and direct to that terrible period. In the words of the child in "Quotations", these poems are "having the life of our times". In his insistence on laying bare the thing-in-itself Oppen establishes a powerful counterpoint with the political forces that make the thing what it is, as at the end of poem number two:

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.

Oppen didn't live to experience the emoticon, that ideogram for the email generation, but the punctuation of the penultimate line comes as close as dammit to a frown and a wink before unveiling that final "big-Business". *Discrete Series* practises a conscientious art of self-improvement, extrapolating from the concealment of the fridge's workings to the division and alienation of labour, and sniffing out the workings of capital in the hermetic separation of egg-cracking wives and the soda-jerk. The refusal to elaborate on that closing "big-Business" both exemplifies and vindicates the poverty of means to which Oppen has bound himself.

Oppen is as far as could be from a sloganeer or a pastoralist of Depression-years America, unlike many of his contemporaries on left and right. In *Meaning a Life* Mary Oppen remembers Ezra Pound pointing to the sea in Rapallo and declaring "From there came the Greeks". She decides against telling him that he is pointing the wrong way, but by this time Pound was pointing very much the wrong political way for the solidly left Objectivists. Wallace Stevens' was an aesthetic of opulence if ever anyone's was, and when the vagrant poor of the Depression years feature in his work he is not above harnessing them to fitting emblems of his own prosperity, to misquote Yeats, as in the fatalist strains of "Idiom of the Hero": "This chaos will not be ended./The red and the blue house blended,// Not ended, never and never ended,/the weak man mended..." Oppen differs from Stevens in blocking the perspective from which the weak man obligingly provides the material for such improving allegories. Oppen *is* the weak man, the laureate of those for whom "It is an entirely terrible life", as he writes of the workers in "The Amalgamated". He would be

one "Who/ so poor the words/ *would with and* take on substantial/ meaning" ("Song, the Winds of Downhill"). He updates Whitman in "Myself I Sing" with a fine pronominal uncertainty: "I think myself/ Is what I've seen and not myself." If he employs the collectivist "we" this offers no comfort in itself, beyond the solidarity of helplessness. As he puts it in his silence-breaking 1950s poem "Blood from the Stone", with its scraps of what might be questions or might be answers:

As thirty in a group—
To Home Relief—the unemployed—
Within the city's intricacies
Are these lives. Belief?
What do we believe
To live with? Answer.
Not invent—just answer—all
That verse attempts.
That we can somehow add to each other?

—Still our lives.

Oppen's second book, *The Materials*, did not appear until 1962. Pondering the gap between *Discrete Series* and *The Materials* Hugh Kenner put the obvious explanation to Oppen—that it took him twenty-five years to write the next poem. What this fails to catch, though, is Oppen's willed divorce from poetry during the long years of his Communist Party activism and Mexican exile, not to mention his laudable failure to produce a single line of Stalinist apologetics. Oppen renewed relations with his muse in a remarkable decade and a half of productivity, whose fruits included the Pulitzer-winning *Of Being Numerous*, the opening of whose title poem situates Oppen just where he liked to be, simultaneously in the poem and in the world:

There are things
We live among 'and to see them
Is to know ourselves'.

Occurrence, a part
Of an infinite series,

The sad marvels;

Of this was told
A tale of our wickedness.
It is not our wickedness.

Like Lorine Niedecker, Oppen insisted on the distinction between sequences and series, the latter rather than the former forming a backbone to many of these later books ("Five Poems about Poetry", "A Language of New York" and "A Narrative" in *This in Which*, the title poem and "Route" in *On Being Numerous*, "Some San Francisco Poems" in *Seascape: Needle's Eye* and "The Book of Job and A Draft of a Poem to Praise the Paths of the Living" in *Myth of the Blaze*). As an organising principle he disdains the simile, its vulgar come-ons and viscosly insisted on connections, and isn't too keen on unhealthy proliferations of metaphors either. "We are concerned with the given", he writes with a firm insistence at the beginning of "Power, the Enchanted World". He looks at the world, but it looks back at him through "the little hole in the eye" which leaves us "exposed", "naked/ to the world// and will not close." The truth of appearances and the plain sense of things do not come without cost, however. Contemplating a man tortured in the second world war (and Oppen, we might remember, is the only major American poet to have seen active service in either first or second world wars) he refuses to hector with righteousness or to set up a chasm between such a world and that of his readers: "There is not this world and that world.// The price of truth is ruinous. Rather redeem life, we mean rather to redeem life." Writing of his own experiences in France in "Route" he cuts to the moral quick more quickly than anything in *The Pisan Cantos*:

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.

It would be a pleasing idyll if Oppen could turn aside from the deforming ideologies of the day for the simple pleasures of imagistic indulgence, but Oppen is one of those writers who never lower their guard, his mind forever on the lookout against itself. As he writes in "Language of New York": "Possible/ To use/ Words/ Provided one treat them/ As enemies." And yet the lasting impression of these poems could not be further from belliger-

ence. If words are given to men, as de Tocqueville said, to conceal their thoughts from them, Oppen succeeds in calling their bluff not through the pseudo-nihilist tantrum-throwing of a Różewicz or the nominalist waffle of a William Bronk, too busy dematerialising the object before his eyes even to notice what the object is. No, what sustains Oppen is his patience, stolidity and cussedness, his endless surprised discovery that poems continue to function and carry out their small acts of salvage by “the bright light of shipwreck”.

Many of Oppen’s finest poems arise from his lifelong peripatetic habits, whether in Mexico, Europe, within the United States or on a more imaginative journey, as in “The Tugs of Hull”:

Carrying their deckhands’ bicycles
On deck beside the funnels,
Coming alongside in falling snow
As we had moved thru areas of falling snow
In shrunk northern curvatures
Of seas that are not East nor West— Was it there you told
of the man and the water of the Ganges,
The man with the domestic pitcher pouring the Ganges
Back? We imagined the Ganges
The warm belly of a girl swelled
Like India under the slacks. One might think himself Adam
Of the edges of the polar mist until the small black tugs of
England
Came to fetch us in.

The tugs of Hull rein in the flight of fancy that transports the poet to the Ganges, without ceasing to represent the sovereign imagination at the same time. If this is an art of poverty, as I suggested earlier, it is poverty of a uniquely well-appointed kind. In the hands of Charles Olson the insistence on one perception leading directly and luminously to another, such as we find here, will harden into dogma rather than (as I take it to be in Oppen’s case) idiosyncratic principle, yet never so hard-and-fast a principle that a passing North Sea current cannot bear him off course. Blown off course somewhere between the end of high modernism and the emergence of Projectivism, the Beats and the New York School, Objectivism is where the heroic energies of the American avant garde most valuably took refuge, and where we in turn are best

advised to seek them out. In a series of “Twenty-Six Fragments” written by Oppen in the last, Alzheimer’s-clouded years of his life, he wrote: “I am not sure whether or not/I would like to live altogether/ In the forest of poetry// Its mystery and its clarity.” Whatever the poet’s misgivings, this book demonstrates triumphantly the mystery and the clarity with which his poetry inhabited him.

New Collected Poems replaces the *Collected Poems* of 1975, augmenting it with sixty pages of uncollected and unpublished material and abundant apparatus. One of the plates reproduces a manuscript page, showing Oppen’s quasi-archæological method of pasting layer upon layer of corrections over his original texts (not to mention scribbling laundry lists in the margins), often amassing a brick-like palimpsest of variant readings before the poem came right. Grounds for complaint—and a fault shared by Lowell’s *Collected Poems*—is the absence of a proper contents page. An index of titles isn’t enough: any intelligent reader will want to see the shape of the individual books mapped out in the poem titles, in order of appearance. In “The Speech at Soli” Oppen addresses his old comrade and sponsor Pound with a rebuking echo of Canto CXVI: “sunlight it will not// cohere it will not”. Oppen’s work coheres all right. What is a canon of twentieth-century American poetry that relegates him to the cultist fringes? Not worth having. From the crooked timber of humanity carpenter Oppen’s noble poems carve both straight and true.