

Numerousness and Its Discontents: George Oppen and Lyn Hejinian

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A striking feature of Lyn Hejinian's recent work has been her development of a series of terms which permeates both her poetic and critical writings: words such as 'incipience', 'border', 'reason', 'dilemma', 'context', 'aporia', and 'occurrence' are deployed to create a terminological matrix in which ideas from theorists such as Hannah Arendt, Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida are loosely interwoven. In long poetic works such as *A Border Comedy* and in essays that include 'Reason' and 'Barbarism' (both collected in *The Language of Inquiry*), Hejinian has been exploring the possibilities of what might be called a phenomenology of the social. I want to suggest in this essay that in addition to the major theorists I've named, George Oppen has had a particular importance to this project as a poet who explored many of the problems that currently interest Hejinian.

In proposing this association I am in part merely tracing out connections that the poet herself has acknowledged. Objectivism, of course, has always been a key point of reference for her, and in an unpublished draft of her 1994 George Oppen Memorial Lecture, she goes so far as to speak of herself as 'a poet influenced more by the Objectivists than by any other group of writers.'¹ In her notes for the lecture, Hejinian

¹ Quoted from the collection of Lyn Hejinian's papers held at the Mandeville Special Collections, University of California at San Diego Library, MSS 74, Box 44, Folder 35. The note continues by attributing to the Objectivists '[t]he sense of scientific method; discontinuities; experiential and

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dates her interest in Oppen back to 1968, and it's clear from this material that she returned to a concentrated study of his work in the early nineties.² The lecture, called originally 'O's Affirmation' and subsequently retitled 'The Numerous', remains unpublished, but in 1998 Hejinian produced two other essays, 'Barbarism' and 'Reason', which also take Oppen as a major point of reference for her own meditations on philosophical and phenomenological conceptions of community or 'numerousness', to use Oppen's term.³ His work continues to act as a primary touchstone for Hejinian, as was clear at the 2002 Modernist Studies Association conference in Madison when she gave a paper titled 'George Oppen and the Space of Appearance'.

In recent years, Hejinian's fascination with Oppen's work has focussed increasingly on his long serial poem 'Of Being Numerous' (she gave a whole course at the University of Iowa based around this text in 1997). This was the title poem of the volume which brought Oppen the Pulitzer prize in 1969 and it remains, for most readers, his best known work. 'Of Being Numerous', which builds upon an earlier poem called 'A Language of New York', has many interrelated concerns: in forty short sections it ranges over life in the contemporary metropolis, it considers the possibilities of the new 'urban art', and it also recalls Oppen's wartime experience in Alsace, powerfully connecting this to the current horrors of the Vietnam war – 'the news / Is war // As always', he writes.⁴ This is, then, a poem with strong political themes, though the extent to which it can be satisfactorily read through any conventional political frame remains questionable. Indeed, Oppen once observed that 'Of Being Numerous' was 'An account of being in the world, to stick to H[eidegger]';⁵ one remark among several which suggests in fact that the poem situates its concerns somewhere at the interface or border between the political and the philosophical.

I want to emphasise the importance to both Oppen and Hejinian of this

empirical attention. More than any other poets, involved with ethics, but neither dogmatic nor moralistic nor instructional. To a large extent, they were unable to solve the ethical dilemmas they witnessed – for historical rather than for artistic reasons.'

² Hejinian also engaged in periods of intensive study of Zukofsky's work in the seventies and eighties – see Kate Fagan, "'Constantly I Write This Happily": Encountering Lyn Hejinian', unpublished DPhil dissertation (University of Sydney, 2002), 115.

³ *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2000), 318-54.

⁴ *George Oppen: New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Davidson (New York: New Directions, 2002), 168, 174 (hereafter cited as *NCP*).

⁵ *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, ed., Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), 177 (hereafter cited as *SL*).

idea of a 'border', an intermediary zone, where a clash of opposing concepts cannot be resolved but is supplanted by a lived experience of what Hejninian calls after Derrida 'impasse' or 'aporia'. In her Oppen Lecture, Hejninian glosses section 9 of 'Of Being Numerous' with a series of observations sponsored by Derrida's *Aporias*. The 'experience of the aporia', she says, is "a passage, both an impossible and a necessary passage," which is to say it is both a passage and an impasse, and it is so in being an experience simultaneously of border as limit and of border as limitlessness.⁶ The contradictory nature of the 'border' in this sense situates it in the realm of experience rather than in that of the concept; glossing section 23 of the poem, Hejninian speaks of 'an aporia, which will allow us to go beyond the limits of any one viewpoint and remain there.'⁷

In the thirties, Oppen had resolved the conflict between politics and poetry by a single-minded commitment to social action, but when he returned to poetry at the end of the fifties after almost a decade of enforced political silence, it was partly at the instigation of Jacques Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, a work which evoked an existential world in which the boundaries between politics, philosophy and poetics seemed to acquire a new permeability.⁸ It is quite wrong, I think, to argue that 'When Oppen put pen to paper again, it was...as an existentialist, not as a socialist.'⁹ For Oppen, as for Jean-Paul Sartre, the insights of Marxism and existentialism came to be regarded not as incompatible but as complementary, not least because, as Fredric Jameson notes in his account of Sartre, each called in question the priority of thought over being ('existentialism with the principle that existence precedes essence, Marxism with the determination of consciousness by social reality'¹⁰); in this sense, as Sartre would argue in *Search for a Method* (1960; English translation 1963), existentialism was a necessary supplement to a post-War Marxism which had grown mechanical and economistic. In Oppen's case, his in-

6 'The Numerous', UCSD 74, 44, 35 (the inset quotation is from Derrida's *Aporias*). Cf. 'Barbarism', *The Language of Inquiry*, 327: 'The border is not an edge along the fringe of society and experience but rather their very middle – their between; it names the condition of doubt and encounter which being foreign to a situation (which may be life itself) provokes – a condition which is simultaneously an impasse and a passage, limbo and transit zone, with checkpoints and bureaus of exchange, a meeting place and a realm of confusion.'

7 Ibid.

8 For a detailed discussion of Oppen's time in Mexico and of his reading of Maritain, see my 'George Oppen in Exile: Mexico and Maritain', *Journal of American Studies* (forthcoming: April 2005).

9 L. S. Dembo, *The Monological Jew: A Literary Study* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 137.

10 Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 206.

volvement with the Left since the thirties had made him similarly aware of a tendency in Marxist practice to privilege ideology over experience, and it is clear that during the period in Mexico the Oppens suffered a growing disenchantment with the communist world, both in terms of Party practice and the policies of the Soviet Union. Their experience demonstrated that political thought had become remote from Maritain's 'existential world' of being and making, that it had degenerated into a universalising form of knowledge whose idiom was increasingly that of conspiracy and surveillance.¹¹ As Burton Hatlen correctly notes, Oppen never repudiated his Communist past,¹² though he was inevitably critical of Party manoeuvring: 'Communism and our communism – the 15 years or more: many lies, absurdities, cruelties, self deception --- and yet were we wrong even for ourselves?'¹³

Maritain's claim that 'poetry has its source in the pre-conceptual life of the intellect' offered what must have seemed a highly attractive alternative to the degraded knowledge that was now 'politics',¹⁴ but most importantly for Oppen it opened a way back to politics grasped as experience rather than as 'ideas'. This would also be the main point of Sartre's *Search for a Method* which aims

to engender within the framework of Marxism a veritable *comprehensive knowing* which will rediscover man in the social world and which will follow him in his *praxis* – or, if you prefer, in the project which throws him toward the social possibles in terms of a defined situation. Existentialism will appear therefore as a fragment of the system, which has fallen outside of Knowledge.¹⁵

In their different ways, Sartre and Oppen were each looking for a means of articulating together forms of interiority and exteriority so as to avoid the 'idealist' dichotomy of subject and object and to recover instead 'the unsurpassable opaqueness of

11 Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), 159-60, and 316 n.14: '...in the field of art, the mind does not have to know, but to make' (his emphasis).

12 Burton Hatlen, "Not Altogether Lone in a Lone Universe": George Oppen's *The Materials*, in Hatlen, ed. and introd. *George Oppen: Man and Poet* (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, Inc., 1981), 331 (hereafter cited as *GOMP*).

13 Oppen papers in the Mandeville Special Collections, University of San Diego (referred to by collection number [16], followed by box and file numbers), UCSD 16, 17, 9. This note seems to have been written in the early seventies.

14 Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, 3.

15 Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel Barnes (1963; New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 181. Cf. Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith, ed. Jonathan Ree (London: NLB, 1976), 40: 'Our extremely slight dissociation of ourselves from the letter of Marxist doctrine (which I indicated in *The Problem of Method*) enables us to see the meaning of this question as the disquiet of the genuine experience which refuses to collapse into non-truth.'

the lived experience.¹⁶ Sartre, for example, would name as the 'crucial discovery' of dialectics that 'man is "mediated" by things to the same extent as things are "mediated" by man';¹⁷ Oppen hit on Maritain's similar if more poetic formulation that 'creative subjectivity awakens to itself only by simultaneously awakening to Things'.¹⁸ In each case, this way of *situating* the subject emphasised the irreducibility of experience to knowledge and, for Oppen, made poetry as its privileged embodiment the source of a kind of generative opacity within political thinking.¹⁹ In that sense, Oppen seems to have associated poetry with the acknowledgment of a certain indeterminacy and resistance that might save politics from ideology and mere 'argument'. It is in this context that we should understand his earlier refusal, as he put it in 1959, 'to write communist verse. That is, to any statement already determined before the verse. Poetry has to be protean; the meaning must begin there. With the perception'.²⁰ This is a poetry in which 'the thinking occurs at the moment of the poem, within the poem'; a poetry in which 'the image is encountered, not found'.²¹

The alternative to the 'statement already determined' seems to to be a new 'clarity' generated by the poem, as we learn in section 22 of 'Of Being Numerous' where Oppen writes:

Clarity

In the sense of *transparence*,
I don't mean that much can be explained.

Clarity in the sense of silence. (175)

This paradoxical 'clarity' is not the measure of intelligibility (as it is for the Thomist Maritain) but rather the illumination produced by what Oppen calls elsewhere 'the

¹⁶ *Search for a Method*, 9 n.6.

¹⁷ *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, 79.

¹⁸ Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, 159. Oppen's version of the phrase provides the epigraph for *The Materials* (1962): 'We awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things.' See also Oppen's 1962 essay 'The Mind's Own Place', reprinted in Robert Creeley, ed., *George Oppen: Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 2003), 175 on modernism and 'the sense of the poet's self among things'.

¹⁹ See, for example, UCSD 16, 18, 1: "in everything that is real there is an irreducible element" of an hallucination, the irreducible element is that you experienced it. I have not traced the source of Oppen's quotation.

²⁰ *SL*, 22.

²¹ 'The Anthropologist of Myself: A Selection from Working Papers', ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Sulfur*, 26 (Spring 1990), 160; 'The Mind's Own Place', 175; 'The Mind's Own Place', 175.

absolute glare of the real'.²² The function of the poem, then, is not to impose meaning but to allow the world, as it were, to 'shine' through it; Oppen writes in one of his notebooks, '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 --'.²³ Yet if absolute transparency is impossible, these lines do suggest some limit to expression, a 'silence' chosen by the poet as a defence against the cacophony produced by (as he puts it in section 13) 'shoppers/Choosers, judges.... They develop/Argument in order to speak' (170).

So we are invited to weigh the political implications of 'numerousness' without descending into 'argument' and 'explanation'. This aim, which of course accords with Oppen's earlier claims in 'The Mind's Own Place' for a poetry lacking in deliberate ideological purpose, may account for readers' very different understandings of 'Of Being Numerous'.²⁴ Burton Hatlen, for example, in one of the best readings of the poem, views it as an extended meditation on what he calls "the ontology of the human collectivity":

at bottom, Oppen's vision of the world remains stubbornly political rather than philosophical, in one key respect: 'truth' for him exists, if it exists at all, neither in 'nature' nor in the splendid solitude of the reflective mind, but only in the collective, ongoing life of the people 'en masse' (as Whitman liked to say), as they collectively make through their labor the only world we can know.²⁵

Compare now Marjorie Perloff's contention that 'what is projected in the poem is less the wish to transform the social order than an acute distaste for people. "We have chosen," says Oppen bravely, "the meaning / Of being numerous", but it is not a "meaning" he can bring himself to accept'.²⁶ Where Hatlen finds a celebration of 'the people "en masse"', Perloff reads the sequence as what she calls a calculated 'withdrawal from human contact'. The disagreement is striking, and certainly exceeds the difference between these critics' respective political orientations. There is, we must conclude, something at work in the poem which doesn't merely obscure the

²² UCSD 16, 17, 7. Cf. 16, 18, 1 on 'the courage of clarity, but NOT the "clarity" of argument.'

²³ UCSD 16, 14, 5.

²⁴ 'The Mind's Own Place', 176: '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.' Note Oppen's deliberately equivocal presentation of 'belief' here.

²⁵ *GOMP*, 331

²⁶ Perloff, 'The Shipwreck of the Singular: George Oppen's "Of Being Numerous"', *Ironwood* 26 (1985), 199

issue but which actually calls in question the very terms of the disagreement. The idea of 'numerousness' is, in fact, loaded with such ambivalence for Oppen that it triggers a kind of indeterminacy in the writing, a studied uncertainty of tone and inflection which does indeed make 'clarity' the index of a kind of 'silence' or reserve.

We may detect this indeterminacy even in the much earlier *Discrete Series*, where the poem called 'Party on Shipboard' broaches the basic conceptual problem of 'numerousness' but does so in a characteristically oblique way:

Wave in the round of the port-hole
 Springs, passing, -- arm waved,
 Shrieks, unbalanced by the motion --
 Like the sea incapable of contact
 Save in incidents (the sea is not
 water)
 Homogenously automatic -- a green capped
 white is momentarily a half mile
 out --
 The shallow surface of the sea, this,
 Numerously -- the first drinks --
 The sea is a constant weight
 In its bed. They pass, however, the sea
 Freely tumultuous. (NCP 15)

The poem enacts a 'tumultuous' motion in which the only pronoun -- 'They' in the penultimate line -- refers with equal plausibility to the passengers and the waves. Their conjunction, however, occurs only 'in incidents' and the emphasis here on contingency and unpredictability suggests a certain scepticism about collective identification which is underscored by the spectatorial distancing in the last two lines, the people and waves seen at some remove as 'They pass'. That the concerns broached in this early poem were ones to which Oppen would return in 'Of Being Numerous' is clear from some unpublished comments written soon after the completion of the later poem in which he observes that 'I think I'll be a long time starting again. I've come to the end of what was attempted in *Discrete Series*. ... Put the seeds of all of it in *Discrete*.'²⁷ He then refers to 'Party on Shipboard' where, as he puts it in another unpublished note, 'like the waves, the people appearing as individual, are accidents of the single mass, a single body.'²⁸ In 1965, he again recalls

²⁷ UCSD 16, 19, 12.

²⁸ UCSD 16, 19, 13.

the earlier poem in which, he says, 'I try to get again to humanity as a single thing, as something like a sea which is a constant weight in its bed...'²⁹

This attempt to see humanity as 'single' runs through Oppen's poems before 'Of Being Numerous', acquiring a certain Heideggerian pathos, for like Being, 'humanity' as a collective entity seems constantly to elude articulation and to 'withdraw' into individual beings. 'Of Being Numerous', he says in one interview, 'asks the question whether or not we can deal with humanity as something which actually does exist.'³⁰ Tellingly, the poem does not use the word 'humanity', preferring instead 'populace' and 'people(s)' which with their root connection to an idea of 'commonness' seem to offer an alternative to what Oppen calls elsewhere 'the metaphysical concept of humanity', 'a single figure, A monster'.³¹ Yet against this particular 'singleness' which offers a false ideal of a social unity without division there is the equally problematic notion of 'singularity'. While numerousness leaves us, as he puts it in the poem, 'pressed, pressed on each other' (165), it is also a condition we seem to have chosen for ourselves:

Obsessed, bewildered
 By the shipwreck
 Of the singular
 We have chosen the meaning
 Of being numerous (166)

The motif of shipwreck, linked here to the tale of Robinson Crusoe, runs through the poem and section 26 seems to allude also to *Moby Dick* with its talk of 'Behemoth, white whale' (179).³² On the face of it, Oppen's meaning is clear enough: as he says in section 6, the fact that we speak of Crusoe as having been 'Rescued' shows that 'We have chosen the meaning / Of being numerous' (166). In his various comments on this part of the poem, Oppen speaks of 'a dead end, the shipwreck of the singular',³³ and of 'the concepts evolved from the fact of being numerous, without

²⁹ SL, 111.

³⁰ L. S. Dembo, 'The "Objectivist" Poet: Four Interviews', *Contemporary Poetry*, 10. 2 (Spring 1969), 8.

³¹ Oppen, "'The Philosophy of the Astonished': Selections from the Working Papers", ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Sulfur*, 27 (Fall 1990), 214; SL, 190. Cf. UCSD 16, 22, 58: 'The word/ Populace, not humanity/ Which cannot be given meaning. But the sense/ Of populace/ Necessary'.

³² An early draft of section 12 (UCSD 16, 22, 58) incorporates a quotation from Owen Chase's *The Shipwreck of the Whaleship Essex*, Melville's principal source, suggesting that Oppen may at one time have intended to expand this set of allusions.

³³ SL, 116

which we are marooned, shipwrecked.³⁴

This theme had appeared in some of his earlier poems: in 'From Disaster', for example, the shipwreck was associated with the social 'disaster' of the thirties (NCP, 50), while in 'Myself I Sing' a man marooned sits down near a sand dune and 'finds himself by two' (NCP, 56), meaning, as Oppen noted elsewhere of the poem that 'we find ourselves, conceive ourselves by reaction to some other existence'.³⁵ Only if such singularity is imagined to have 'unearthly bonds', as he puts it in section 9, only if individualism acquires some false metaphysical sanction, can 'the shipwrecked singular and his distance from them, the people' appear in anything but a negative light.³⁶ And curiously enough, such 'light' gives more than merely metaphorical illumination, for Oppen now speaks of 'the bright light of shipwreck' (167, 173) and toward the end of the sequence of 'The narrow, frightening light / Before a sunrise' (181). The illumination is, to say the least, ambiguous, at once 'frightening' and apocalyptic, while also promising a certain enlightenment.

That positive sense of the image comes across strongly in an unpublished poem which begins 'beautiful as the sea / and the islands' clear light / of shipwreck', a light that here 'prove[s] us part / of the world not fallen / from it' and that embodies what Oppen calls 'conviction forceful / as light' (NCP, 301).³⁷ The implication is that shipwreck, as in the tale of Crusoe, must prove to us that value resides ultimately in numerousness. But there is a further twist to this logic which Oppen confirms in a letter of 1973:

'The shipwreck of the singular' I wrote. We cannot live without the concept of humanity, the end of one's own life is by no means equivalent to the end of the world, we would not bother to live out our own lives if it were - - - -

and yet we cannot escape this: that we are single. And face, therefore, shipwreck.

And yet this, this tragic fact, is the brilliance of one's life, it is 'the bright light of shipwreck' which discloses - - - - - 'all'.³⁸

344 SL, 121.

35 UCSD 16, 17, 12.. Cf. the reference in 'The Speech at Soli' to 'Friday's footprint' (NCP, 239).

36 UCSD 16, 14, 6.

37 Cf. 'Two Romance Poems' (NCP, 261): 'bright light of shipwreck beautiful as the sea'.

38 SL, 263

Here 'humanity' is apparently rehabilitated, but only, we note, as a 'concept' or horizon which we need to live out our individual lives. As in the passage cited earlier from 'The Mind's Own Place' (see note 24), the syntax is elliptical and tentative – 'and yet...and yet' – and suggests the impossibility of establishing 'humanity' as a collective, material presence. For the fundamental truth remains that 'we are single' and this recognition roots the aporetic relation of individual to society in the very condition of human finitude. Both singularity and numerousness, it turns out, are sustained by fantasies of oneness and separation. There may be echoes here of a contemporary concern with American individualism and conformism voiced in classic works of the time such as David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950); but more specifically this line of thought may have been triggered by one of William Bronk's poems, 'Not My Loneliness But Ours', which, said Oppen, expressed 'The loneliness not of the individual, but of the group'.³⁹ Part of the poem reads: 'The human loneliness / is the endless oneness of man. Man is one; / man is alone in his world. We are the one...'⁴⁰ Bronk's poem reminds us too that the ironies of such social 'oneness' were very much a matter of debate at the time Oppen was writing 'Of Being Numerous'. Saul Bellow in his 1964 novel *Herzog*, for example, has his hero negotiate a subway turnstile:

He dropped his fare in the slot where he saw a whole series of tokens lighted from within and magnified by the glass. Innumerable millions of passengers had polished the wood of the turnstile with their hips. From this arose a feeling of communion – brotherhood in one of its cheapest forms.⁴¹

Oppen notes similarly in 'Of Being Numerous' that 'The shuffling of a crowd is nothing – well, nothing, but the many that we are, but nothing' (NCP 168). In other words, we must resist the ersatz feeling of oneness – what Bellow calls 'potato love' – while at the same time eschewing a compensatory fetishism of the other oneness that is our singularity. And that, perhaps, is the meaning of the passage in Oppen's 1973 letter where he says that "'the bright light of shipwreck"...discloses ----"all", for it is only in the harsher light of our mortality – in our living-toward-death – that we

39 SL, 77: "The purport of the poems, of course, is the solipsist position....I don't think I have ever before heard the statement in Not My Loneliness But Ours: once said, as it is here said, it seems inescapable. The loneliness not of the individual, but of the group.' The poem appeared in Bronk's *The World, the Worldless* (1964) which Oppen had been reading in manuscript in 1963, the year of this letter.

40 William Bronk, *Life Supports: New and Collected Poems* (Jersey City, NJ: Talisman House, 1997), 44.

441 Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (1964; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), 183.

may grasp the concept of 'humanity' in its authentic form, as the sum of those who live on after us. This is, indeed, to arrive at 'the *meaning* of being numerous' and it perhaps explains why the strongest affirmation of numerousness in the poem stresses proximity to others rather than identification with them:

For us
Also each
Man or woman
Near is knowledge
Tho it may be of the noon's
Own vacuity (185)

These lines may echo section 4 of Whitman's 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' – 'The men and women I saw were all near to me; / Others the same – others who look back on me, because I look'd forward to them' (196) – but Oppen's end in equivocation, the syntax deliberately eschewing Whitman's easy assurance and making of 'nearness' a borderline space which resists precise designation.

Oppen's tentative and elliptical comments in these lines and in the 1973 letter remind us that such thoughts are caught up in what Sartre calls 'the opaqueness of experience' and must remain difficult to think if the poet is to avoid mere at-titudinising.⁴² Accordingly, 'Of Being Numerous' stakes out a shifting, liminal space where a constant oscillation between numerousness and singularity is enacted in the very grammar of the poem. Such movements are especially clear in the handling of pronouns which constantly propose distinct identities only to show them becoming permeable with others. Even the idea that 'we' reckon with 'our' mortality, as I put it in the previous paragraph, might be seen to unravel in light of Heidegger's insistence that 'By its essence, death is in every case mine, in so far as it "is" at all.'⁴³ And this statement itself reveals an aporia, as Derrida observes:

If death...names the very irreplaceability of absolute singularity (no one can die in my place or in the place of the other), then all the *examples* in the world can precisely illustrate this singularity. Everyone's death, the

442 Compare the rather lame expression of a similar idea in William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 19: 'connectedness to a future that stretches beyond my life and our lives provides me with pride in the present and consoles me somehow about the end that awaits me.' The uncertainty here ('somehow') seems purely rhetorical.

443 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 284.

death of all those who can say 'my death', is irreplaceable.⁴⁴

Numerous *and* singular, again, and this 'and' marks the border or aporia which is not the condition of a blocked 'argument' but rather of the experience of *living between* these two possibilities (much as, for Heidegger, death is not a final event but 'a way to be'⁴⁵). So Derrida asks, in a passage which Hejinian quotes as a gloss to section 9 of Oppen's poem: 'Can one speak – and if so, in what sense – of an *experience of the aporia*? An *experience of the aporia* as such? Or vice versa: Is an experience possible that would not be an experience of the aporia?'⁴⁶ Numerousness and singularity begin to come into existential relation once we grasp the inherence of death in existence, for, like Heidegger, Oppen regards the acceptance of death as some sort of opening to the future, though unlike Heidegger he seeks to define that opening in terms of a numerousness ('humanity') that will survive the individual.⁴⁷

If 'Of Being Numerous' neither celebrates some ideal collectivity nor seeks to withdraw from human contact, as Hatlen and Perloff respectively propose, it's because in a curious way the acceptance of some ultimate singularity makes the individual supernumerary. I draw this idea from a suggestive passage in Eric Santner's recent book *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*:

To 'count' as singular one has to be, as it were, supernumerary, to persist beyond the logic of parts and wholes, beyond cultural systems of exchange, distinguished not by this or that trait but rather by *being left over*, by *remaining* once all particularities have been accounted for. It is death that first endows existence with this kind of singular density....⁴⁸

The singular, then, 'persist[s] beyond the logic of parts and wholes', most obviously, perhaps, in the survival of shipwreck, but also, as Hans Blumenberg reminds us in his study of the metaphors of shipwreck, as a *spectator* of the disaster. Like the party on shipboard, Oppen's 'bright light of shipwreck' is something seen from afar, the very emblem of, as Blumenberg puts it, 'the insoluble dilemma of theoretical distance versus living engagement'.⁴⁹ This separateness marks an acceptance of

444 Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 22.

445 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 289.

446 Derrida, *Aporias*, 15.

447 Cf. James M. Demke, *Being, Man, and Death: A Key to Heidegger* (Lexington, Ky: Kentucky University Press, 1970), 3: 'Death leaves man "open", or necessarily pointing to something beyond himself, ultimately to being itself.'

48 Eric L. Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 72.

49 Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* (Cambridge,

finitude which may lead either to a defeated sense of what Oppen calls 'the closed self'⁵⁰ or, more positively, to the initiation of what section 26 of the poem defines as 'the metaphysical sense of the future':

They have lost the metaphysical sense
Of the future, they feel themselves
The end of a chain

Of lives, single lives
And we know that lives
Are single

And cannot defend
The metaphysic
On which rest

The boundaries
Of our distances
We want to say

'Common sense'
And cannot. We stand on
That denial of death that paved the cities...(NCP, 177-8)

A culture which 'stands on' a 'denial of death' while casually meting it out to others, as in section 18's 'A plume of smoke, visible at a distance / In which people burn' (173), such a culture is 'without issue, a dead end':

Unable to begin
At the beginning, the fortunate
Find everything already here. They are shoppers,
Choosers, judges; ... And here the brutal
Is without issue, a dead end.
They develop
Argument in order to speak, they become
unreal, unreal, life loses
solidity, loses extent, baseball's their game....(170)

MA: MIT Press, 1997), 67.

50 Letter to June Oppen Degnan, *Ironwood* 26 (Fall 1985), 223.

The emphatically distanced 'they' of both passages recalls the 'they' of *Being and Time* where Heidegger speaks of 'an impassioned freedom toward death – a freedom which has been released from the illusions of the "they", and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious.'⁵¹ Oppen's shoppers, choosers and judges, however, are still caught up in the unreality of the 'they', where everything is 'already here', the social interpellations already in place and the possibilities of power withdrawn.

The 'dead end' which Oppen signals in these lines might recall Claude Lefort's famous account of the 'empty place' within democracy:

The legitimacy of power is based on the people; but the image of popular sovereignty is linked to the image of an empty place, impossible to occupy, such that those who exercise public authority can never claim to appropriate it. Democracy combines these two apparently contradictory principles: on the one hand, power emanates from the people; on the other, it is the power of nobody.⁵²

Lefort highlights the tendency in democratic and in totalitarian systems to 'dissolve the subject, wherever it can express itself, into an "us"', to constitute numerousness, we might say, in a fiction of what he calls 'the People-as-One'.⁵³ Such is the primary discontent of numerousness, a discontent which plays itself out in Oppen's struggle to 'test' the pronouns which circulate throughout his poem. So, for example, the false experience of the 'they' in section 13 draws the conclusion that 'one may honourably keep/ His distance/ If he can' (170-1), and the slippage here from generic ('one') to singular ('he') leads to a personal recollection of Oppen's wartime experience:

I cannot even now
Altogether disengage myself
From those men. (171)

Such experiences suggest some way of giving substance to the otherwise empty pronouns of collective identity. So it is through 'The baffling hierarchies/ Of father and child' (182) and 'the beauty of women' (183) that the 'we' finds a voice 'Which is ours, which is ourselves,/ This is our jubilation/ Exalted and as old as

51 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 311.

522 Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986) 279.

53 *ibid.*, 290.

that truthfulness/ Which illumines speech' (183-4). Yet it is the achievement of Oppen's poem to see such 'jubilation' against a background which shows up the very fragility of this sense of 'ourselves'. As the starkly moving section 38 reminds us, human finitude must ultimately compel the inclusive pronouns of authentic numerousness toward objectification and division:

You are the last
Who will know him
Nurse.

Not know him,
He is an old man,
A patient,
How could one know him?

You are the last
Who will see him
Or touch him,
Nurse. (187)

The reiterated 'him' is the final condition of singularity, the patient no longer a person to be known, but just 'an old man' who can only be seen and touched. But the very 'transparency' of the diction here and the studied impersonality of its pronouns also affirm "the bright light of shipwreck" which discloses -----"all", a disclosure which, paradoxically, makes this absolute singularity the unsentimental ground of what is truly held in common.

Oppen's attempt to negotiate some middle way between monolithic constructions of self and community is surprisingly close to the work of recent post-Heideggerian theorists who have sought at the interface of politics and philosophy a way of talking about sociality while acknowledging division and singularity.⁵⁴ I

54 See, for example, Jean Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) and *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*, trans. Chris Turner (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997); Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Station Hill Press, 1988); Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Alain Badiou, *L'Être et*

have suggested elsewhere that Jean-Luc Nancy's attempt to think what he calls 'being-in-common as distinct from community' might provide some kind of analogy with Oppen's thinking and with the sense they both have of Being as at once divided and shared.⁵⁵ It may be, too, that Nancy's idea of 'The retreat of the political [as] the uncovering, the laying bare of being-with' echoes the Heideggerian cast of 'being' in 'Of Being Numerous'.⁵⁶ At the same time, though, Nancy's recently translated *Being Singular Plural* from which these quotations are drawn also exhibits a level of rhetorical abstraction that reminds us that, for the poet, such formulations must, as Oppen had put it in 'The Mind's Own Place', 'substantiate themselves in the concrete materials of the poem'. Here the closing lines of a poem called 'World, World ---', written a little before 'Of Being Numerous', give us a preliminary sense of what that might involve:

The self is no mystery, the mystery is
That there is something for us to stand on.

We want to be here.

The act of being, the act of being
More than oneself. (159)

The radical simplification of the idiom in these lines along with the emphasis attaching to the deictic 'here' make the principal object of reference – 'being' – coincide with the poem's own occasion. To put it another way, thought embodies itself in the spatio-temporal 'hereness' of the poem, with its phonic echoes and silences, its syntactical shape and typographical layout. Says Oppen, 'I do not mean to prescribe an opinion or an idea, but to record the experience of thinking it'.⁵⁷ Far from the act of 'Find[ing] everything already here', what is sought in the poem is what Oppen calls 'a new cadence of disclosure',⁵⁸ a phrase which quite deliberately

l'événement (Paris: Seuil, 1988)

55 See my 'Of Being Ethical: Reflections on George Oppen', in Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain, ed., *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 240-53.

56 The quotations from Nancy are from *Being Singular Plural*, 24, 37. Nancy remarks of 'being-with' that 'This coessence puts essence itself in the hyphenation – "being-singular-plural" – which is a mark of union and also a mark of division, a mark of sharing that effaces itself, leaving each term to its isolation and its being-with-the-others' (37).

57 UCSD 16, 19, 4.

58 SL, 97: 'A new syntax is a new cadence of disclosure, a new cadence of logic, a new musical cadence. A new "structure of space"... Cf. UCSD 16, 14, 3: 'Prosody: the pulse of thought, of consciousness, therefore in Heidegger's word, of human *Dasein*, human "being there".'

recalls Heidegger's way of contrasting the Greek sense of the 'unconcealedness' of truth (*aletheia*) with the modern logos as 'something-already-there....something handy that one handles in order to gain and secure the truth as correctness.'⁵⁹ Oppen's emphasis on disclosure is designed to counter any reification of either numerousness or singularity, making the poem instead an opening of a world which situates man not as a distanced observer, but as one being amidst others and in that sense 'more than oneself', in the words of the poem.⁶⁰ The idea of having 'something to stand on' may allude to and qualify a passage in one of Pound's late Cantos where he complains that 'the lot of 'em, Yeats, Possum and Wyndham / had no ground beneath 'em // Orage had.'⁶¹ The 'ground' referred to here, of course, signifies economic understanding, but in contrast Oppen's lines emphasise once again that it is not concepts that are at stake, but rather the contradictory experience of being between numerousness and singularity, an experience which alone can materialise the collective pronoun 'we' in the powerfully stressed 'here'.

Lyn Hejinian has remarked that 'Like George Oppen, I am aware that poets work in the context of "being numerous,"⁶² and her recent work might be read in terms of an engagement with just this set of questions. Of especial interest here is the way in which Hejinian incorporates Oppen's poetics of disclosure into the particular 'phenomenology' she developed in her early work from Gertrude Stein and Merleau-Ponty. As I've suggested elsewhere, the importance of Stein to Hejinian is not that her scepticism about knowledge and memory produces a simply autonomous poetic language, but rather that her resulting rejection of an instrumental language of means and ends makes possible a new kind of encounter with, and address to, a world that exceeds the self.'⁶³ The 'phenomenology' Hejinian

59 Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1959), 189.

60 Cf. Joan Brandt, *Geopoetics: The Politics of Mimesis in Poststructuralist French Poetry and Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 228 on Nancy: 'As the relational ground out of which being emerges, community cannot be thought in terms of political ends or origins, nor can it be seen as a common substance or being; it should be thought instead as the means by which being is made manifest, as a network or interweaving of singularities that brings being into existence by placing it in relation both to itself and to others in the movement of its "exposure" to the outside world.' Nancy's thinking is, of course, deeply coloured by his reading of Heidegger. Oppen's acquaintance with *Being and Time* would have made him familiar with similar propositions, as, for example, when Heidegger argues that (152) 'a bare subject without the world never "is" proximally, nor is it ever given. And so in the end an isolated "I" without Others is just as far from being proximally given.'

61 Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 685.

622 *The Language of Inquiry*, 4.

63 See my 'Phenomenal Poetics: Reading Lyn Hejinian', in Michel Delville and Christine Pagnoulle, eds., *The Mechanics of the Mirage: Postward American Poetry* (Liège: University of Liège, 2000), 241-

evolves from Stein thus exhibits a number of features that resonate with Oppen's poetics as I have described them so far: there is Hejinian's recurring emphasis on perception rather than on knowledge, on evaluation and 'testing' rather than on the pursuit of 'truth', on the idea of 'description' as phenomenal rather than taxonomic, on an openness to contingency and unpredictability, and, finally, on what she calls a pervasive 'doubt' which, in formal terms, 'hovers' so that words, as she puts it in the early poem *The Guard*, achieve 'the inability to finish // what they say.'⁶⁴ Just as we have seen Oppen resisting the tendency to 'Find everything already here', so Hejinian attempts to reformulate the concept of 'reason' (in the essay of that name) as the measure of an encounter in which something new occurs which cannot simply be inserted into a pre-existing frame of reference: 'Something which wasn't here before is here now; it appears and it appeared to us, and it is acknowledged by the sensation *this is happening*.'⁶⁵

The terms of this argument are indebted to Lyotard's *The Differend*, but leaving aside that connection, suggestive as it is, we can see how close in principle this also is to Oppen's association of an open poetic form with ideas of 'encounter' and social connection. In her MSA talk, Hejinian observes that

This is not a poetry of single moments, however – Oppen's singularities may be impenetrable but they are not transcendent, they can't be removed from their own history nor from the fact that they share it with other singularities. Oppen's is a poetry of combination, a poetry with little interest in universality and enormous interest in heterogeneity.'⁶⁶

Hejinian's position here endorses Oppen's refusal of any simply binary relation of numerousness to singularity. Like Oppen, she has attempted in a sequence of works to expand a phenomenology of perceptual experience to one of collective relationality. She too understands phenomenology by way of Heidegger, as directed toward a conception of politics as something lying beyond specific institutions and as grounded instead in a being-in-common, to use Nancy's phrase, which moves ceaselessly *between* an experience of sameness and difference, of numerousness and singularity, without ever rigidifying into the false oneness claimed by either

52. The essay considers Hejinian's reading of Lyotard in some detail.

64 *The Cold of Poetry* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1994), 20.

65 *The Language of Inquiry*, 343. On the relation of Hejinian's '*this is happening*' to Lyotard's '*is it happening?*' in *The Differend*, see my 'Phenomenal Poetics', 248-9.

66 'George Oppen and the Space of Appearance', typescript of unpublished paper given at the Modernist Studies Conference, Madison, Wisconsin, October 2002, 3. I am grateful to Lyn Hejinian for providing me with a copy of this paper and for allowing me to quote from it.

term in isolation. Hejinian in her MSA talk catches precisely this movement in 'Of Being Numerous':

Oppen proceeds from the initial vantage point of his individual singularity to an encounter with similarity and thence numerousness, and suddenly he and we are no longer in the terrain of sameness but in that of difference, which invites (one hopes) interest, tolerance, a sense of self and singularity open to alternatives and correctives and readiness for yet another horizon shift.⁶⁷

What, arguably, this account doesn't acknowledge is the importance attaching to death and human finitude in Oppen's poem, though in her gloss on Section 39 she writes (after Lyotard):

To sense the antiquity of the realization that *this is happening* alerts one to the perennial presence of the immediate, an immediate in which one has always participated in the anticipation of death. It is in the phrase *this is happening* that the presence of death is acknowledged.⁶⁸

At the same time, Hejinian's response to 'Of Being Numerous' is strongly shaped by her reading of Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, and Arendt, of course, substitutes for Heidegger's philosophy of mortality a philosophy of what she calls 'natality', a philosophy of birth and beginning. 'Men, though they must die,' writes Arendt, 'are not born in order to die but in order to begin.'⁶⁹ Rudiger Safranski, Heidegger's most recent biographer, notes that Arendt's philosophy 'knows the mood of anxiety, yet it also knows the jubilation of arrival in the world',⁷⁰ and it is this 'jubilation', the 'happiness' of Hejinian's recent volume *Happily*, that is the condition most frequently sought in her current work.⁷¹ 'Arrival', 'beginning', 'incipience': these are some of the words Hejinian now uses to define a poetics of 'appearance', and 'appearance' in exactly the sense of Heidegger's formulation 'Appearing is the very essence of being'.⁷² In other words, 'appearance' is not what is traditionally set over

67 *ibid.*, 5

68 UCSD 74, 44, 35, p.89. Cf. Lyotard, *The Differend*, xv on 'the question: *Is it happening?*'

69 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 246.

70 Rudiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 383.

71 'Jubilation', as Hejinian notes in her Oppen lecture, also marks the recovery of an authentic plural in Oppen's poem: 'Which is ours, which is ourselves, / This is our jubilation' (NCP 183).

72 *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 101.

against the real, but the event in which being is disclosed. Oppen observes similarly in one of his notebooks that 'Reality is *apparent*: to appear is fundamental to its reality'; and his third collection of poems, *This In Which*, takes as one of its epigraphs Heidegger's reference to 'the arduous path of appearance' in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*.⁷³

For Hejinian, Gertrude Stein's writing, with its commitment to 'beginning again and again',⁷⁴ embodies the same recognition: Stein, she says, 'invented a mode of iteration to indicate not recurrence but phenomenological *occurrence*, the perpetual coming into being through accumulated instances of the person that is'.⁷⁵ 'Occurrence', of course, is one of Oppen's key words, providing the title for two poems (NCP 144, 212) and figuring in a series of terms disclosive of 'being' which includes 'event', 'marvel', 'miracle' and 'adventure'.⁷⁶ In the draft of her Oppen lecture, Hejinian also glosses Section 39 with several passages from Lyotard's *The Differend*, including his penultimate proposal that 'there is not "language" and "Being", but occurrences', the latter word elsewhere said to be synonymous with 'the event, the marvel, the anticipation of a community of feelings'.⁷⁷

It's clear from her most recent essays that Hejinian's principal aim is now to find in poetic form a means by which to articulate that 'coming into being' that she has also discerned in Oppen's concept of 'disclosure'. The ambition is to grasp this concept as a means of seeing numerousness not just as, in Oppen's phrase, 'the mere number of us' (NCP, 157), but, as Nancy puts it, 'a singular-plural constitution or configuration that is neither the "community" nor the "individual"'.⁷⁸ It is here that Hejinian's reading of Arendt's *The Human Condition* seems to offer some linkage between a poetics of 'disclosure' and a conception of the political which is here traced back to the Greek *polis*: 'The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be'.⁷⁹ This space, which is, crucially for

73 UCSD 16, 19, 7; NCP, 92.

74 *The Language of Inquiry*, 102.

75 *Ibid.*, 289.

76 See SL 419 n.52 and SL, 259. Compare the following unpublished comment (UCSD 16, 13, 17): "'the world" we think of the world as that which makes it possible for things to be (the "place" of occurrence, the "place" of being).'

77 Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases In Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 181, 178.

78 Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 74.

79 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 198.

Hejinian, named by Arendt as 'the space of appearance' is 'the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate beings but make their appearance explicitly.'⁸⁰

In her MSA paper, Hejinian speaks of Oppen's 'Of Being Numerous' as 'a space of appearance' in just this sense, and in another recent piece called 'Continuing Against Closure' she explains the implication of Arendt's concept for her own writing:

What has come to be of increasing interest to me over the past few years is not so much consciousness itself but the sites of consciousness. And by sites of consciousness I do not mean heads or brains but places in the world, spaces in which an awakening of consciousness occurs, the spaces in which a self discovers itself as an object among others (and thus, by the way, achieves subjectivity). My notion of these sites of consciousness, these zones of encounter, derives much from Hannah Arendt's elaboration of what she termed 'the space of appearance', where human and world come into being for and with each other.⁸¹

But what might be the result of splicing together Arendt's concept of the 'space of appearance' as the public realm of thought and action with the poetics of Stein and Oppen? Arendt's book is, of course, neither playful in Stein's manner nor brooding in Oppen's; and Hejinian has remarked too that *The Human Condition* has no place for dreams and art, whereas she 'would argue that one of the functions of art is to bring dreams and other works of the imagination into the space of appearance.'⁸² For Hejinian, as for her friend Kit Robinson, whose essay on dreams is named as one of the 'sources' for Book 1 of *A Border Comedy*, the dreamwork offers a particularly vivid instance of 'appearance' and one that suggests a 'grammar' that exceeds merely semantic interpretations of dreams. As Robinson puts it, 'The possibility of a grammar of dreams leads away from the consideration of the dream as a code for the analysis of the individual psyche toward a more general view of dreams as problems in perception and description, that is, as problems for writing.'⁸³ Hejinian's 'space of appearance' is, then, less Arendt's arena of public

⁸⁰ Ibid, 198-9.

⁸¹ Hejinian, 'Continuing Against Closure', *Jacket*, 14 (July 2001): e-journal available at <<http://jack-etmagazine.com/14/hejinian.html>>

⁸² Ibid, 3.

⁸³ Kit Robinson, 'Time & Materials: The Workplace, Dreams, and Writing', *Poetics Journal*, 9 (June 1991), 32-3. Robinson argues that Freud's method of interpretation is limited because 'by concentrating on the semantic dimension it leaves out the syntactic, horizontal dimension' (32). For the

action than it is the text itself which, like the dream, is a medium of ceaseless and unexpected change. Another of Hejinian's 'sources' for Book 1 of *A Border Comedy*, Osip Mandelstam, speaks of Dante's work as 'a continuous transformation of the substratum of poetic material' which demonstrates 'a peculiarity of poetic material which I propose to call its convertibility or transmutability.'⁸⁴ Like the condensation and displacement of the dreamwork, the open form of the poem allows thought to be grasped as something 'happening', as an unpredictable event which constitutes a 'zone of encounter' because it interpellates 'us' as co-present (compare Lyotard's 'anticipation of a community of feelings'). Hejinian's recent work thus strives to grasp numerousness as a condition of 'comedy' because 'laughter always implies... confu-/ sion – a process of joining, a desire for sharing.'⁸⁵ 'Joining' and 'sharing', then, but always with the proviso that poetry, like comedy, makes its real capital out of difference and heterogeneity. As Hejinian puts it in *Happily*:

Perhaps there were three things, no one of which made sense
of the other two
A sandwich, a wallet, and a giraffe
Logic tends to force similarities but that's not what we mean
By 'sharing existence'⁸⁶

'Happiness' is thus allied with contingency and difference, linked etymologically to 'hap', 'happenstance', 'haphazard' and, perhaps most importantly, to 'happen'⁸⁷ -- happiness is things happening, then, things beginning rather than repeating themselves;⁸⁸ or as Hejinian puts it in her essay 'A Common Sense', 'Happiness is a complication, as it were, of the ordinary, a folding in of the happenstantial.'⁸⁹ And happiness, unlike *unhappiness*, which is tied to loss and privation, is 'complete unto itself; it is atelic, goal-free, aimless'.

essay as one of Hejinian's avowed 'sources', see *A Border Comedy* (New York: Granary Books, 2001), 213.

⁸⁴ Osip Mandelstam, 'Conversation about Dante', in *The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, ed. Jane Gary Harris, trans. Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1979), 414. The essay is listed as 'a source' in *A Border Comedy*, 213.

⁸⁵ *A Border Comedy*, 61 (my ellipsis).

⁸⁶ *Happily* (Sausalito, CA: The Post-Apollo Press, 2000), 15.

⁸⁷ See Marjorie Perloff's lively account of these word plays in her 'Happy World: What Lyn Hejinian's Poetry Tells Us About Chance, Fortune and Pleasure', *Boston Review* (February/March 2000), available at <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/perloff/articles/hejinian.html>.

⁸⁸ See *The Language of Inquiry*, 361 where Hejinian quotes a long passage from Stein on 'the beginning of knowing what there was that made there be no repetition' and adds: 'And it is what here I am going to risk calling happiness.'

⁸⁹ *The Language of Inquiry*, 370.

If we seem to have moved a long way from the philosophy of action in the public realm that Arendt derives from Greek thought, that is because (so Hejinian argues in this essay) Arendt's conception of the 'space of appearance' undervalues the everyday, household sphere. Yet it is here, with the commonplace, that for Hejinian the political ultimately has to 'appear'. The commonplace, as she puts it, 'is the totality of our commonality; it is meaningful as that, as the place where we know each other and know we are together.'⁹⁰ For Hejinian, as for Oppen, it is within the poem as 'a space of appearance' that this knowledge is tested and the grammar of numerousness compelled to disclose its ambiguities.

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⁹⁰ Ibid, 365.