

The Oppens: Disability, Disease, and the Authorship of Late Work

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Every artist has their last works, but not all are “late works,” as theorized by Edward Said. By revisiting George Oppen’s late poems, I challenge established preconceptions about late-life creativity that have typically emphasized social withdrawal, despair, and finality in his work. Emphasis placed on lateness, I argue, obscures material conditions of textual production, particularly coauthoring literary activities. The Oppens work together to shape a social poetics and model of authoring beyond the normative ideals of self-reliance, especially with *Primitive*, published when Alzheimer’s disease had all but prevented George from working. The poems and archival evidence of Mary Oppen’s editorial work describe the couple’s journey through illness and the work’s posthumous reinvention as a stylistic artefact.

George Oppen (1908–84) is best remembered for the 1968 extended poem sequence “Of Being Numerous.” The sequence attempts, among other things, a summons of the American people: “...in this nation / Which is in some sense / our home. Covenant! // The covenant is / There shall be peoples,” Oppen writes.¹ The “in some sense” modifies this bombastic sentiment by introducing doubt and scepticism to the theme of American manifest destiny. Everywhere the poem marks how modernity interferes on an ontological level with any interpersonal potential for social consciousness in the modern subject’s daily life: “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 ...” reads section 26; “We want to say // ‘Common sense’ / And cannot.”²

The case for a politics of form has been convincingly made about the “Objectivists,” a loose association in the 1930s of writers with a left-wing cultural agenda, with Oppen and Louis Zukofsky at the group’s centre.³ But as

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¹ George Oppen, *New Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 2003) (hereafter *NCP*), 176. ² *Ibid.*, 178.

³ See Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, *Literatures of Memory: History, Time and Space in Postwar Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Tim Woods, *The Poetics of the Limit: Ethics and Politics in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry*

Alan Golding argued, it is the shifting series poem in which Oppen is most inventive.⁴ The poem's speaker cannot settle for longer than is permitted by a fragmentary and mutable numbered section. More than any other poem of his, "Of Being Numerous" strives for a sense of dispersal and nonlinearity that might outline the nature of being, not as an ideal, but as it might become: "We are not coeval / With a locality / But we imagine others are, // We encounter them," reads section 3. With this, the poem retains the imagination for a poetics of the social in the potential aggregate of its cryptic propositions, which are in tension with any party-political poetry Oppen had forsworn. It is up to the reader to assemble the sequence anew, to continue the argument, as Oppen once described, "without arriving at a conclusion."⁵

Still, the slight anticlimax of "Of Being Numerous" and its author's own sense of the poem's failure gives a feeling of arrested development that is typical of how the countercultural optimism of the 1960s turned out.⁶ The volumes that follow are changed things, increasingly hermetic and closing off the potential earlier work found in the social. "Populist," from Oppen's last volume, *Primitive* (1976), among such titles as "A Political Poem," ostensibly makes a reprisal on a theme of social poetics and instead takes a sinister turn. It is coloured with suspicion and fatalism: "I dreamed myself of their people, I am of their people, / I thought they watched me that I watched them / watched the sun and the clouds for the cities / are no longer mine," before reflecting that "the light / in the rear-view mirror is not / death but

(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain, eds., *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999); and Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006); John Lowney, *History, Memory, and the Literary Left: Modern American Poetry, 1935–1968* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006). For recent work see Oren Izenberg, *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of the Social Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Jacob McGuinn, "Saying 'We': George Oppen's and Kant's Lyrical 'Common Sense,'" *Textual Practice*, 34, 10 (Oct. 2020), 1751–68.

⁴ Alan Golding, "George Oppen's Serial Poems," *Contemporary Literature*, 29, 2 (1988), 221–40.

⁵ "The argument of course goes on in 'Of Being Numerous.' In fact, that's what the poem consists of—is that argument. Again, without arriving at a conclusion." George and Mary Oppen interviewed by Tom Sharp, 10 Nov. 1978, *Speaking with George Oppen: Interview with the Poet and Mary Oppen, 1968–1987*, ed. Richard Swigg (London: McFarland & Co., 2012), 198.

⁶ "I had known for a very long time that I meant to get to Of Being Numerous. I was not sure I could do it at all, I still carry some elation that I wrote it, that there was—again—time. tho it ends with retraction, question, fails, if that's failure, of a conclusion I am not so confident as to have sounded that I will write another book." George Oppen to John Taggart, *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 209.

the light / of other lives.” The multitude of other beings, previously a font of inspiration, appears instead as an apparition, something near death but refracting away from it, recalling his earlier puzzling imagery of “the bright light of shipwreck.” The end point of a world of social alienation against which Oppen’s poem warned is now encountered here on the road that leads to populism: “driving / northward the populist / north slowly in the sunrise the lapping / of shallow / waters tongues ...”⁷ Where there once was promise in signalling to the horizon, the bright light of shipwreck, now there are the beguiling yet shallow waters of populism.

Despite this pessimistic scene, this article seeks to recover hope in the last years of Oppen’s writing life. I find overlooked potential in writings which have typically been given as examples of the poet’s syncretic and formalistic late mode and the accompanying disillusion with any poetics of the social. This scenario is mirrored in the story often told of the poet’s dwindling powers in old age at the mercy of his poor health. His wife Mary would date the start of George’s Alzheimer’s disease to about the time of *Collected Poems* from 1975, even if it went undiagnosed until 1978. The work during the 1970s tends to be read as preoccupied with endings and finality. The expressions of doubt and vulnerability in the work cannot be overlooked, nor can the preconception of Oppen’s disease, which is culturally understood as an experience of deterioration, loss, and retreat.

Within this context, I argue two things: first, that Mary had a heightened literary significance in the last years of her husband’s writing life. This extends to how the work was composed, arranged and published, which has implications for discussions of authorship, disability, ageing, gender and the material conditions of poetic practice. And second, within *Primitive* and supported by extratextual interviews, the writings intimate a poetics of togetherness, memory, vulnerability and a lifetime of experience that gives a different shape to Oppen’s poetics. One finds tangible practices of near-collaborative authoring and sense making that directly inform the significance of the poems from the period.

The Oppens’ last years reveal ideas of authorial self-reliance and auteurism, to which poetry can mount a challenge. To be sure, Mary’s editorial input is often hidden or private, preserving in public the ideal of a single author to overcome her husband’s debilitating illness. This is exemplified in an anecdote from Michael Heller. While attempting to make what would become Oppen’s final recording, Heller describes how the poet had to rest in a bed between takes, with Mary at his side. “He could read no more than a dozen lines at a time, and we had to stop frequently, sometimes even to remind him where he was in the poem,” Heller writes; “there was a touch of fear in his

⁷ *Ibid.*, 276.

eyes, and already one sensed he was peering into the very incalculables that his poetry had so assiduously courted.” The work was eventually made legible by splicing the tape so that the recording resembled an intact recital. Heller, meanwhile, “assumed we had put the poet back together.”⁸ These activities, and Mary’s hand in them, sustain the myth of an independent and able-bodied author uninhibited by his age-related disability and fit for public consumption. On the one hand, this passing for wellness denies the lived reality of Oppen’s illness; on the other, it perpetuates the logic that the man had come to embody the unknowable difficulty of his work. The anecdote describes an ideology of ability and disability in responding to poetic form, which governs both Mary’s actions and Heller’s commentary: “one feels that the poet is groping within his own uncertainty,” Heller concludes, “trying to resolve his own state of being as he reaches for that which cannot be articulated in language.”⁹

Criticism can today bring to the surface the states and modes of literary production that were really at work in this artist’s *oeuvre*, especially those hidden by prejudices about disability and gender roles and theories of art making in old age given to making claims like the ones above. I argue that because his most crucial reader will help him compile, edit, and promote his work like never before, Oppen’s last work is not a poetry of exhaustion or despair but is founded on the faith in the reader to come.

To make these arguments, I suggest one must better understand how an artist’s late work is often viewed and draw parallels with a cultural understanding of dementia, both then and now. Before analysing the particulars of Oppen’s later poetics, some theoretical grounds for my reading need to be established, including addressing the quite different world of poetic practice in the United States in the 1960s that Oppen rejoined after his twenty-five-year sabbatical, especially the increased significance of performance and audience and, by extension, the expanded field of literary production in late modernism. This is an approach to literary writing rooted in the American late modern period and in the particular event of the poetry reading, as Peter Middleton’s work describes. It was this poetry scene that Oppen entered as a mature and older poet. The article will then explore the overlapping territory of late style, disability and disease, which have much leverage in how we read Oppen’s last works. I will detail how the nature of Oppen’s Alzheimer’s disease is associated with the same characteristics of “withdrawal from the present,” “dissociation,” “fissure” and “fracture” often attributed to an artist’s late style.¹⁰ Because the critical mode of late style gets ageing wrong,

⁸ Michael Heller, *Speaking the Estranged: Essays on the Work of George Oppen* (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2012), 171–72.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁰ Scott Burnham, *Rethinking Schuman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

I argue, it is an insidious component of criticism that has been euphemistic about disability. Late style paradoxically obscures impairment and reveres it as a trope. Instead, I make interlocking arguments which approach Oppen's cognitive impairment from age-related disability in a new way: to understand disability, one must recognize the gendered roles of care that enable, empower and support others. I will then read *Primitive* closely, focussing on several poems to consider afresh the interpersonal reliance in which the Oppens were engaged and expressed in the work. In so doing, a model for subjectivity can be glimpsed in the archive the couple left behind. Their example expands a notion of poetic authorship that includes the work of others, especially the labour of care needed to continue writing, publishing and promoting poetry. I conclude the article by putting the case for the emergence in Mary Oppen of a considerable literary intellectual, one otherwise concealed by extant notions of disability and ability and by authorship and gender roles in literary studies. I discuss moments where we can reliably grant her the recognition she deserves.

OPPEN IN CONTEXT

The sense of an unfinished and reoccurring event with myriad possible iterations is a framework for reading modern poetry that I borrow from Peter Middleton. Middleton draws attention to the unplanned interactions between audience and reader during poetry performances, events that had become essential to a mid-century poet's professional life and whose improvisational and unpredictable nature Middleton contrasts with the poem as a fixed text. The poem, like all writing, nevertheless retains a sense of futurity in awaiting new scenes of reading, and is a "probably unfinished, and even possibly interminable, business, and in that will be its value and pleasure, a continuing struggle, a renewing music."¹¹ Conversely to Heller's feeling of reassembling a canonical text, a recital always undoes the notion of a self-identical poem. A poem's radical changeability is an important point to grasp: "to conceive this dimension of the poem requires poetics to make a temporal turn in order to acknowledge that texts can predict their reading forward in time, attempting to anticipate and thereby negotiate their possible reception."¹² Because actions that retroactively give meaning to dormant texts can be anticipated but never predetermined, there is a kernel of unpredictability and futurity activated in acts of reading. This future-orientation denatures authorial

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹² Peter Middleton, *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry* (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 2.

sovereignty because it is necessarily conducted by readers who are multiple and whose responses cannot be entirely governed by the poet.

Nevertheless, readings can coalesce into predictable patterns, which the poet can sometimes plan for in advance. Acknowledging the conditions of literary production becomes increasingly important to poetic subcultures in late modernism whose members self-identify with specific presses, publishers and communities of readers. As Libbie Rifkin established in *Career Moves*, the work of a poet in late capitalism includes the dissemination, publicity and sociability of the literary work within these communities.¹³ More recently, Christopher Grobe has argued that the public persona of a poet in the United States was permanently expanded in the mid-century by a culture given to mediation and the commodification of artifice on the stage.¹⁴ Even if a poet writes for a coterie, poets in the latter half of the twentieth century encounter their works anew with each performance, in an increasingly public-facing poetic practice that is audience- and reader-centred and process-driven. Oppen's later work coincides with a trend in the 1970s for a deferred or constrained semantics that resisted the idea of a poem as canonical self-identical text. The abstraction of the syntax and the repetition of splintered, incomplete phrases in his last works fit an established practice of prioritizing opacity and indeterminacy and resisting referentiality. His work echoes the syntactical experiments of the younger generation, particularly the poets who, in a sense, his example made possible. "[I]n a certain light everything I write is set against his uncompromising sign," says Rachel Blau DuPlessis, while Michael Davidson describes Oppen as an "inimitable model," and Lyn Hejinian writes in correspondence, "Yes, Oppen is a lodestar for many of us."¹⁵ Nevertheless, as Michael Heller's example illustrates, it is all too easy to rely on the tropes of the artist in old age as exceptionally unfathomable, difficult and uncertain. I will argue that Oppen is in control of his material and understands his critical reception almost to the last. When he can no longer do this, he passes responsibility to Mary.

With this as a point of departure, I suggest that important themes from Oppen's early work can be followed through to the last. Oppen understands well that a recital of "Of Being Numerous" means something quite different in

¹³ Libbie Rifkin, *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Christopher Grobe, *The Art of Confession: The Performance of Self from Robert Lowell to Reality TV* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

¹⁵ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work* (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 186; Michael Davidson, "Introduction," in *NCP*; Lyn Hejinian, email to Michael Cross, 1 April 2006, Mandeville Special Collections, University of California at San Diego (hereafter UCSD), 74, 138, 25.

1975 than it does in 1968, not least of all because of his increasingly unstable sense of self as he ages. Even so, I argue that the last poems have the potential to be radically transformative through new models of interpersonal reliance and collaboration that they enable, even as their author struggles to control his material. Mary, meanwhile, by offering up in an interview a posthumous narrative of how to understand her husband's work, adds to the expanded persona that poets in late modernism were expected to maintain. She takes on this role with an understanding that has not been well recognized.

DISEASE, DISABILITY AND LATE STYLE

Alzheimer's disease is a physical and mental change in the brain's normal functioning over time with the degenerative cognitive dysfunction common to all dementia. This illness, poorly understood by medicine in the mid-1970s and even less so by the wider public, drastically affected Oppen's capacity to function, eventually rendering it impossible for him to perform as a poet altogether.¹⁶ I will give a brief overview of the critical literature on the topic before touching on how disability and literary studies can create new critical pathways to follow. I will then carry the discussion into where I find it intersecting with a theory of late style, made popular by Edward Said because here I find much of Oppen studies relying on notions of art making in old age limited when addressing tricky questions of disability and illness.

During the progression of Alzheimer's disease, brain function is permanently changed, and cognitive capabilities progressively degenerate. Suzanne Cahill offers this summary: "Conventional thinking (the standard paradigm) has constructed dementia as a cognitive brain disorder the symptoms of which include impairments in memory, thinking and learning, comprehension, communication, calculation, language and judgement – deficits arising due to the death of brain cells."¹⁷ Cahill does not deny the biological origins of impairment, only adds the "biopsychosocial model" that situates the health paradigm in its contexts, precisely the context of social stigmatization. Understanding that some conditions carry a social stigma is to understand that families suffer alongside the person with the illness.

Recognizing the person beyond preconception is at the forefront of the rights-centred approach in disability scholarship, which understands that much of the damage done to those living with Alzheimer's, sometimes

¹⁶ Julian C. Hughes, *Thinking through Dementia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁷ Suzanne Cahill, *Dementia and Human Rights* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2018), 44. See also Ruth Bartlett and Deborah O'Connor, *Broadening the Dementia Debate: Towards Social Citizenship* (Bristol: Policy Press 2010).

living for many years, is because of misconceptions and intolerance resulting in social isolation. As Tom Shakespeare *et al.* demonstrate, “Dementia, like disability in general, is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, and requires a response that addresses different aspects, including clinical, psychological, social and political.”¹⁸ As these studies have shown, personality is not made obsolete by dementia, and the notion of a single trajectory to personality loss is offensively inadequate. Memory loss, personality change, and loss of physiological function vary considerably over time and within a broad range. Nothing is inherent or predetermined about the scope of a patient’s participation in their formally active lives; nothing is inevitable about the social death they are made to experience.¹⁹ This is not to argue that the social realm is the only place where disability is negotiated, only to say that its influence over lived impairment is critical and is often left in the hands of representations made by others.

For Rüdiger Kunow, the impacts of Alzheimer’s disease are always informed by social and cultural conditions alongside impairments. “[O]ne of the most highly ‘visible’ diseases of our time,” says Kunow, “tends to make those affected by it invisible, relegating them to the margins of the social and cultural order.”²⁰ This mismatch of highly visible cultural representation without a corresponding self-determined cultural production is significant. Because those with an advanced stage of the disease cannot communicate their condition, this has made for deep injustices of misrepresentation. The narrative has been steered by the cultural representation that is no longer in the hands of those whose capabilities allow them to participate. As a result, a narrative of unilateral denigration is pervasive, whereby “the life of the afflicted [is] around a single deterministic narrative and around expectations of a gloomy future which has always already begun.”²¹ In response to injustices like these, scholars seek ways to recognize the humanity, creativity and personality of those with advanced dementia. In so doing, they and those affected by the illness they empower resist the pervading sense that human qualities are beyond repair, even permanently erased in those with advanced dementia.

¹⁸ Tom Shakespeare, Hannah Zeilig and Peter Mittler, “Rights in Mind: Thinking Differently about Dementia and Disability,” *Dementia*, 18, 3 (2017), 1075–88, 1076.

¹⁹ “Stigma often results in a special kind of downward mobility. Part of the power of stigmatization lies in the realization that people who are stigmatized or acquire a stigma lose their place in the social hierarchy. Consequently, most people want to ensure that they are counted in the nonstigmatized majority. This of course leads to more stigmatization.” Lerita M. Coleman, “Stigma: An Enigma Demystified,” in Lennard J. Davis, ed., *Disability Studies Reader*, 4th edn (New York and London: Routledge), 147–60, 149.

²⁰ Rüdiger Kunow, “Forgetting Memory: Poetry and Alzheimer’s disease,” in Kornelia Freitag, ed., *Recovery and Transgression: Memory in American Poetry* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 281–97, 281.

²¹ *Ibid.*

This elevates the role of networks around the individual, especially carers. By recognizing the extant individual personalities of those with Alzheimer's disease and exposing the myth that we are all self-reliant and intact, scholarship continues to challenge the cultural hegemony of treating this disease. As Tom Shakespeare *et al.* argue, the ideology of ableism in dementia care "promotes the liberal individualist fiction, rather than the complex, messy, interdependent reality of life."²²

How disability intersects with literature is an archive of misrepresentation, omission, prejudice and stereotype organized by a nondisabled majority to alienate and discredit those with disabilities. The disabled figure in literature is "informed more by received attitudes than by people's actual experience of disability," Rosemarie Garland-Thomson notes. This is most clearly the case with representations of physical disability as a visible bodily divergence from an able-bodied norm. Critique of such figures with impairments tends to emphasize the moralizing role their example plays in a narrative and to articulate how these figures express deeply held fears. These are, in part, fears about wayward physical differences in the human body and partly about how moral codes based on corporeal homogeneity rely on stable ideals that do not match the natural instability of the human body. The threat therefore posed by disability is always to the androcentric cultural order through acts of bodily and neurological divergence. Garland-Thomson describes how the disabled body

stands for the self gone out of control, individualism run rampant: it mocks the notion of the body as compliant instrument of the limitless will and appears in the cultural imagination as ungovernable, recalcitrant, flaunting its difference as if to refute the fantasy of sameness implicit in the notion of equality.²³

The ideology of the normal and the same has been established as a hegemonic part of contemporary life, mainly felt in the stigmatization experienced by those who fail to conform. "Nearly everyone at some point in life will experience stigma either temporarily or permanently," writes Zola on the intersectionality of stigma and disability. "Why do we persist in this denial?"

How the reader of the last of Oppen's volumes incorporates the symptoms of Oppen's disease – on language, memory, personality and other faculties – into his poetics is of interest. Either the work is like the older work, resisting interpretation in a meaningful way, or it is in a new mode, impenetrable for its irregularity and evident loss of authorial control, as it careers off on an

²² Shakespeare, Zeilig and Mittler, 1084.

²³ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 43.

irredeemable trajectory. At what point do we accept that the poet's command of their medium has been laid low by their loss of faculties and that they are no longer up to the job? How do we respond without stigmatizing? Because of preconceived ideas of deficiency and retreat as one measure of ageing, there is a risk that a narrative of regression takes root, disabling through stigma. It is in the intersection of these aesthetic considerations and broader cultural perceptions of old-age-related illness.

Edward Said's 2006 book *On Late Style* proposes a series of ideas about what effect the artist's imminent death has on the works they produce. The book describes this as a trope across periods, modes and media as a programme for reading the works made just before death in light of the artist's career and the changing formal considerations of their medium. "Everyone has their last works," Said says, but some last works are more poignant than others, and these tend to buck convention. There is, in late style, a renewed maverick spirit and the "vigilant refusal to settle down to be of the same mind with the dominant view."²⁴ A work in late style, as it does for Beethoven, must come at

a moment when the artist who is entirely in command of his medium nevertheless abandons communication with the established social order of which he is a part and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with it. His late works constitute a form of exile from his milieu.²⁵

This exile relies on a phenomenology of old age as being out of time and paradoxically embedded within it, even urgently preoccupied with time's passing: "lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction," writes Said.²⁶ What is harder to grasp is that this exilic quality relies on the contemporariness of the artist's lateness with the reckless abandon of pushing themselves to the edge of their faculties. They must cede responsibility to greater power with a near aleatory relation to their previous work, often resembling genius in Said's theory (he is concerned in the volume only with figures closely aligned to post-Romantic ideals of creative outpouring). The emblematic retreat from the body of work they have produced thus far, and from the culture which has cultivated it, necessarily exists on the limits of the author's control over their material and is mirrored, so Said implies, by the retreat of the body's normal functioning into irreparable decay. The period of weakening and eventual cessation of creativity is met head-on by a creative deluge, which Gordon McMullan notes is expressed as surprise: "A new style emerges, described in a range of ways both extraordinary

²⁴ Edward Said, *On Late Style* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

and unexpected, one aspect of which is the role of late work as a return to something earlier, even to something frankly primitive.”²⁷

Intellectual, spiritual and political exile from the pervading norm is something the Oppens seemed to court all their lives. With the final work’s title, we seemingly have an invitation to read this work through a lens of late style.²⁸ We are indebted to Peter Nicholls for describing the contexts of Hegel, Heidegger, Maritain, Simone Weil, Blake and others in which Oppen’s volumes can be situated and which realigned his *oeuvre* away from the post-Poundian Objectivists. Oppen, in Nicholls’s mind, considers the writing of a poem “not a matter of articulating a thought already had, but rather of deploying the resource of writing to disclose the texture of thinking as it takes shape.”²⁹ With this, Nicholls furnishes readers with tools to better understand how the objectification of the poem, as Oppen understood it, is not “just the displacement of the subject, but a definition of thinking as a process inevitably missing its object as it sought disclosure rather than knowledge.”³⁰ Disclosure is Heidegger’s vocabulary, and the emphasis is here placed on the *thinking* that the poem evidences rather than the thought. This allows us to picture the poet working in a rich field of different discourses, finding out the significance they may hold without preconception and, in a sense, engaged in the process of trial and error. It is the groundwork for the emphasis on process over product in Oppen’s critical reception. “I discover the thing by writing it as if I were swept on some current around a bend,” Oppen writes in his notes. “I do not mean to prescribe an opinion or an idea, but to record the experience of thinking it.”³¹ Making art is always a limit-experience of one’s own beliefs for Oppen, encountered in what he called the “small nouns” as readily as the snatches of ontology and the unstable but ultimately concrete world of objects. Nicholls gives depth to what is otherwise a near-mystical process of working adjacent to philosophy. “The self is no mystery, the mystery is / That there is something for us to stand on,” Oppen writes in “World, World –” from 1965’s *This in Which*: “We want to be here. / The act of being, the act of being more than oneself.”³² Thus the ethics of thinking at the limit of one’s powers of self-perception in a kind of radical negativity is an act of interpersonal ethics.

²⁷ Gordon McMullan, “The Strangeness of George Oppen,” in Sam Smiles and Gordon McMullan, ed., *Late Style and Its Discontents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 31–48, 37.

²⁸ Whether running from their monied families, flunking university, sailing to Europe in the 1920s, or living in Mexico on the run from the FBI in the 1950s, he has always positioned, or positioned himself, at odds with the world around him.

²⁹ Peter Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 98–99. ³⁰ *Ibid.* ³¹ *Ibid.*, 72. ³² *NCP*, 159.

The notion of the disabled body as a self “out of control,” threatening the natural order of things, converges with Oppen’s ambitions to push his understanding and control over his material to its limits. We must consider how Oppen might have anticipated that his last work would be received in a late style. If, as scholars have argued, late style is a mode which authors can adopt, not just a critical framework, it is here that Oppen retains authorial direction.

Nicholls’s intellectual justifications of Oppen’s work give him legitimacy as a poet of an uncertain “process,” not a finished product. However, if we are not careful, this process can also justify a problematic reading of late work founded on a reading of disability that obfuscates the individual’s lived experience. In any case, Said’s notion of the artist as a pariah to their conventional mode, but still ultimately in control of their material, is not so smoothly applied when thinking of Oppen. Can Oppen be said to fit this category if his ambition was to move beyond a position of authorial certainty over their material all along? And, if he is no longer in “command of the material” to satisfy Said’s criteria of the late stylist, who is? And what of Oppen’s anticipation of this mode being applied to his work and the more complicated questions of his illness?

Linda and Michael Hutcheon recognize inequalities in Said’s generalized assumptions about old age, claiming that they have “led not only to falsifications, to elisions of distinctions and differences, but also to explicit or implicit denigrations of later-life creativity that are, in fact, ageist.” They make the critical distinction between the lived experience of old age of an artist and the accretion of lateness which may form critically about an artist’s work, typically posthumously. Late style, in their estimation, is “always a critical construct with its own aesthetic and ideological agenda and, most importantly, its own view of both ageing and creativity.”³³ Vagaries around the general flavour of lateness are the machinations of ideology, not the mechanics of a workable theory. Truisms around creativity in old age, normally pivoting from “ascending to sublimity or descending to senility,” cannot detect any particularity or individuality of the ageing experience, which “has led only to falsifications.”³⁴

In a different context, Joseph N. Strauss posits “disability style” as the driver beneath euphemisms of late style. Using composers as an example, Strauss claims that those “who write in what is recognized as a late style often have shared experiences of bodily or mental function, of disability, or of

³³ Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, “Historicizing Late Style,” in Gordon McMullan and Sam Smiles, eds., *Late Style and Its Discontents: Essays in Art, Literature, and Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 51–68, 54.

³⁴ Ibid.

it. Oppen's melancholic thumbing through his memories – of France, a traumatic car accident of his youth, his soldiering – are easily found. Even if this poem lacks the “surprise” we might expect of late style, we can claim that Oppen steers us toward reading with critical self-awareness, partly because it is a measure of what has come before. Gordon McMullan, commenting on the same phenomenon, recognizes that “[l]ate work celebrates and summarizes ... what precedes it, providing a glimpse of a future that is always paradoxically also a past.” These poems are given to a form of temporal collapse that closely follows this description of late style.

In “Semite,” Oppen collapses his Jewishness – “my distances neither Roman / nor barbarian” – into the imagery of passing “through the narrow end of the funnel,” an image haunted, perhaps, by figures from the Holocaust: “betrayed / demeaned thrown away shamed / degraded // stripped naked Think // think also of the children / the guards laughing.”³⁹ Death preoccupies Oppen, which is generally characteristic of the morbid direction of late work. “The funnel” is read as a preoccupation with exilic “survival” by Nicholls, who charts the poems as a series of compressed responses to “the materiality of truth” in the fable of Job speaking to God, as Oppen depicts it in *Myth of the Blaze*.⁴⁰ The profundity of the biblical images of Job talking to God in “The Book of Job and a Draft of a Poem to Praise the Paths of the Living”⁴¹ contrasted with the “confusion, forgetfulness, disorientation, [that are] constant features of Oppen’s world after the illness took hold; combined with feelings of guilt and of artistic failure, they could not but affect the construction of the late poems.”⁴² Nicholls offers Oppen’s Day Books from this period as evidence of his “estranged” relationship to materials he was given to use: “The words piled on each other, leaning against each other into vertigo,” which Nicholls considers an “anxious fascination with his own mortality [that] will make this world seem increasingly ‘strange’.”⁴³ These readings pull Oppen’s work in two directions: toward transcendence, sublimity and eschatology, and toward a basic distrust of language to communicate this transcendence. Add to this the “misery of ageing” and credibility is given to much Oppen scholarship that is frequently euphemistic about the cognitive impairments of the ageing body, but readily accepts the premise of Oppen’s late mode: that he is locked into his hermetic spiral, unless a critical narrative of ageing is told to explain his work.

The correlation between weakening faith in the referentiality of language and devaluing the author’s subjectivity needs to be met with a critical

³⁹ *NCP*, 251.

⁴⁰ George Oppen, *The Collected Poems of George Oppen* (New York: New Directions Press, 1975).

⁴¹ *NCP*, 240.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 141.

⁴³ UCSD 16, 27, 23.

apparatus that looks beyond these limitations. By borrowing expanded notions of subjectivity that rely on others to preserve independence, we can argue that Oppen was not the passive witness to his own demise, nor was his illness only fuel for a critical theory of his work. Moreover, he could not comprehend and was engaged in working with his disease as material, the burden he shared with his wife, Mary.

Applied to the work of an artist in old age, metaphors of survival and exile shroud in mystique the routine experience of ageing. Commentators have noted that the three characteristics of dementia most closely aligned with ageing – chronic, degenerative, and incurable – persist in the cultural narrative of Alzheimer’s disease, suffered by invalids worthy of pity.⁴⁴

Turning to the contexts in which Oppen was writing, I will review recent scholarship focussed on frameworks of care and inequalities anchored there, especially in the unseen work within the nuclear family. Lynn May Rivas shows how much is at stake when acts of dependence rely on figures of caregiver and receiver:

Independence is perhaps the most fundamental of cultural myths; it supports the organization of our society and justifies the distribution of goods, real and ideal. The labels independent and dependent, rather than reflecting empirical reality, are myths used to justify inequality.⁴⁵

“Physically incapacitated individuals” rely on a caregiver who supports the receiver and consumer of care in maintaining something nevertheless described as independence. The labour of social care relies on a systematic transfer of authority to another human being, which is perceived as enabling the receiver’s ongoing independent life. What Rivas calls the “authorship” of this care then returns to the care receiver. They can, in effect, author their independence through a human vessel. For the caregiver, sovereignty melts away. This process is a contractual relationship in late capitalist society: “Invisibility, and the transfer of authorship of one’s efforts to another person, requires the desire, or at very least the consent, of the caregiver not to be seen. Caregivers hand over authorship of their caring work.”⁴⁶ She adds, “The transfer of authorship of tasks is ubiquitous in American society.”⁴⁷ This backdrop is a convincing narrative of authoring via the body and actions of another. The inequalities under scrutiny here – the caregiver’s needs are denied, their

⁴⁴ For analysis see Martina Zimmermann, “Alzheimer’s Disease Metaphors as Mirror and Lens to the Stigma of Dementia,” *Literature and Medicine*, 35, 1 (Spring, 2017), 71–97; Zimmermann, *The Diseased Brain and the Failing Mind: Dementia in Science, Medicine and Literature of the Long Twentieth Century* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 3–4.

⁴⁵ Lynn May Rivas, *At the Heart of Work and Family* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 189.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 189.

services exploited – illustrate how the ideology is based on scenarios of transferring authorship.

I have tried to articulate a new critical intervention into the established narrative of the Oppens' life and work. I have addressed where notions of illness and disability are associated with ageing and indicated where those intersect with those of style and literary form. The late-style paradigm does not serve Oppen well unless revealed as a disability-style paradigm, where critical readings are built on unsupportive notions of limited capacity and mental enfeeblement.

In the next section, I will look at *Primitive* and indicate where I believe the Oppens arguably work together on the book's completion. I will illustrate where the poem's themes hint at the same. If we consider the literary work without framing it as a single author's intention, or whatever stands for authorial intent, a case can be made for a sociopoetics of plural literary actors. I argue that an alternative poetics is possible for Oppen studies, both intrinsically in the poetry's interpretability and extrinsically in expanded poetic roles and responsibilities. Mary's presence is crucial to these readings. Oppen transfers authorship to her when his mind and body can no longer sustain the distinction of a single authorship, in a manner common to caregiving relationships. As a kind of surrogate, because her editorial role remains hidden until after George's death, Mary submits to a regime of single authorship that doesn't easily accommodate collaborative work. This is wrapped up, I suggest, in the ideologies of self-reliance and able-bodiedness that are everywhere evident in the culture the couple inhabited in the late 1970s. Since then, critical work in the sociology of disability and the study of Alzheimer's, as detailed in this article, has allowed for progressive counternarratives to be written. We should modify a late-stylistics reading of Oppen's work to incorporate a progressive view of disability and ageing and acknowledge a model for collaborative interdependence already established in the example between George and Mary Oppen. In the next section, I shall first identify the pervasive trends in critical readers of *Primitive*, followed by several close readings that point to overlooked poetics at odds with the pattern these readers establish in the critical literature.

PRIMITIVE

In *Primitive*, the balance between language's structuration and its semantics seems finally to have given way. The repetition and enjambment are such that the running of lines almost detracts from sense rather than opening it out to interpretation. Still, there is bold formal and sonic unity within the frame of a single poem, especially in the "O" sounds of "The Tongues," whose title hints that our emphasis should be on the signifier, not the

signified: “loss” “lost” “forces” “unchosen” “surround,” even “journey,” “words.”⁴⁸ These words are united more by their intonation, that they are spoken, than by any proposition they make. Tongues in the plural, speaking over one another. This reminds us that a poem must also anticipate its future, a moment of reading or recital in which it will mean something entirely contingent on its contexts, in the way Middleton helps us see at work in modern cultural production. The tension between the graphic and the sonic also preoccupies this poem on a more grammarian level. John Taggart writes how the gaps in Oppen’s syntax “provide us with temporary pauses, which make a counterpoint of silence against the opacity of words ... the gaps are gifts in silence in which we may go down, may go into the unspeakable foundations.”⁴⁹ DuPlessis, too, writing to Mary Oppen, claims that *Primitive* “is awe-inspiring. It leaves me vibrating between its immense spaces and its intensity. It seems [to be] one sequence, spokes around a center.”⁵⁰

“The Tongues”
of appearance
speak in the unchosen
journey
immense
journey there is loss in denying
that force the moments the years
even of death lost
in denying
that force the words
out of that whirlwind his
and not his strange
words surround him

The “strange words surround him,” as if amid a whirlwind, words which are “his and not his”; this is a poem about the uncanniness of the poetic object in the subjective speech act, signalled by the title defamiliarizing that which is most personal and close to us. What’s more, it displaces the intentions of a poet auteur, surrounds and smothers the self-identical with strangeness and difference. Equally, the poem ruminates on the “the unchosen / journey / immense journey” as an allegory of what it means to live a lifetime of moments that are “lost” when the poetic subject – the “him” of the poem, not its I – tries to put them down in a poem. This is not a self-assured poetic speaker but the poet’s doubtful relation to the instability of the self.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 275.

⁴⁹ John Taggart, *Songs of Degrees: Essays on Contemporary Poets and Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 9.

⁵⁰ Rachel Blau DuPlessis to Mary Oppen, 2 June 1978, UCSD, 16, 2, 49.

Because this poem must exemplify what it wants to describe, an arch difficulty in responding to the world in language, it is haunted by an abstract “force” too great to identify: “If It All Went Up in Smoke” tells us on the opposing page, “the poem begins neither in word / nor meaning but the small / selves haunting // us in the stones ...” What’s more, “The Tongues” hints at a troubling realization: our memories – “the moments the years” – are made too of language and, for that reason, become less reliable the more pressure is put on them, and the longer “journey” they must travel to us. All these readings indicate that as readers we need to be attentive to the world the poem cannot describe and can only register in its negative. It could easily be read as a poem of speech failure. I don’t doubt this, but I don’t think this throws out dialogic possibilities entirely; it is an opportunity for discourse with something radically other.⁵¹

Looking closely at “Strange Are the Products” reveals a similar insular mode and hints at the interpretation I am putting forward of a collaborative way of being in the poem’s inception and delivery. The poem opens,

of draftsmanship zero
that perfect
circle
of distances terrible
path
thru the airs small very
small alien
on the sidewalks thru the long
time of deaths⁵²

Questions of authorship persist. How much “distance terrible” does Oppen feel from the activity of writing and, by extension, sense making in general? Has the simple lettering on the page, “zero / that perfect / circle,” grown alien to him in his old age?

The poem imagines a future moment when its speaker’s subjectivity, no longer reliably voiced by making a speech act, will be replaced by the objectivity of being no more. This fact, one of the poem’s only certainties, is incorporated into the time of the poem’s inscription, dated, as it is “Polk St., Halloween, October 31st 1976,” a festival of the dead in which we jape as if death was undone. It is, in one sense, a rare thing for Oppen, an occasional poem. There are haunting images of costumed trick-or-treaters, “small alien // on the sidewalks thru the long / time of deaths,” as it were, calling to and recalling the “skull bones’ joy in the small / huge dark the // glory of joy in the small /

⁵¹ George Oppen, *Selected Prose, Daybooks and Papers*, ed. Stephen Cope (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

⁵² *NCP*, 282.

huge dark.” The redoubling of this image of negation that is both “small” and “huge” differs dramatically from the discrete segments of “Of Being Numerous”; here, Oppen favours overlapping descriptors. This channels different temporalities to the poet’s present and registers how the poem’s utterance, for Oppen, had become a layering and reworking of material otherwise lost to time. That this is achieved syntactically marks the volume’s radical character.

It is tempting to read this poem as Oppen confronting his own mortality with morbid curiosity. In this, it appears to be squarely within the frame of what can be described as his late style and broader practice of measuring the end of one’s days with a sense of liberation, risk, novelty and radicalism. Perhaps. But more interesting is how Oppen qualifies this mood beyond the narrow band of one person’s experience as a witness and the introspection provoked by what they witness.

Oppen presents us with an image of love and friendship amidst the chaos by introducing another festival: “you cannot // know all // my love of you o my dear / friend unafraid // in saturnalia.” The enjambment of ideas running into one another, characteristic of late Oppen, is here an exercise in the inseparability of the two festivals as the speaker addresses them: the Roman festival vying for relevance in the poem’s workings with the exact moment of the poem’s inscription. This observation of the spiritual within the secular, the profane within the sacred, rhymes with the Roman festival of Saturnalia on 17 December, held in the days before the winter solstice, whereby moral and social conventions are inverted. Bright costumes are worn, gambling is permitted, slaves are served by their masters at the feast, and life is lived in its mirror image. The ceremonial upturning of normality thereby enforces normality, continuity and the quotidian throughout the poem, the persistence of the speaker’s “friend” and “love” as a presence of companionship. The role of reversal, therefore, inverts the classic orphic lyric mode of loss at turning or turning back to the loved one lost in Hades. Festivals reinforce cultural norms by allowing them to be broken only in play and within defined parameters. Still, they also broaden engagement with the near-sacred act of recital. “The recitation of poetry is a festival: a communion; the image, to mystical utterance; participation, to magical alchemy and religious communion. Everything leads us to insert the poetic act into the realm of the sacred,” writes Octavio Paz.⁵³ The festival, therefore, is an opportunity for Oppen to expand participation in the poem, to gather in multiple voices and articulate different roles. It is a way of including that which otherwise cannot be addressed by allowing for provisionality and reflexivity.

⁵³ Octavio Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre: The Poem, the Poetic Revelation, Poetry and History*, trans. Ruth L. C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1957), 214.

The presence of Mary in *Primitive* is strong in its negative: she is not fully there in the poem because she is there always. The poetic subject has become the spaces and context that are not represented in the poem and which the poetic thinking that Oppen sustains treats with reverence. Oppen will write, “Being with Mary: It has been almost too wonderful it is hard to believe.”⁵⁴ I argue below that Mary and George Oppen should more appropriately be seen as co-producers of *Primitive*, completed six years before his death. The critical understanding of the last volume as a reflective, final poet’s move in a late style is not the whole picture. Within these poems, we should strive to recognize that the spaces and silences in Oppen’s writing are there to be filled, in a sense, by Mary, a kind of dialogic invitation for another subject to occupy.

Sometimes the poems written in this period recognize and acknowledge her directly. Most direct is “Mary,” an unpublished poem:

her long quiet hands
sometimes it seems

almost strange it seems

sometimes the almost fifty years
has been a dream I hear sometimes those other
voices voices
of my childhood
and fear I’ll wake⁵⁵

This rumination on a life spent together is at the limit of language’s capacity for expression, seemingly from sleep and dreams. Oppen’s reliance on the care of another and the medium of language to convey this is to be felt in the work that leaves this theme more implicit. Rob Halpern has critically examined the normatively gendered worldview of Oppen’s poems: men that act, inhabit and even penetrate the historical world, and women that stay home to offer comfort and continuity to these activities. This gendering has profound ontological implications for Halpern: “to write about this world, for Oppen, is always also to write about a world he failed to make, the other world that haunts this one.”⁵⁶ The world of writing, no matter what objectivism means, is always in the shadow of the real. Halpern doesn’t recognize a fluid, intersectional space even in the heteronormative husband-and-wife roles that the Oppens adopt, which is about the continuity of consistent making, sustaining,

⁵⁴ *NCP*, 282.

⁵⁵ *NCP*, 350.

⁵⁶ Rob Halpern, “Becoming a Patient of History: George Oppen’s Domesticity and the Relocation of Politics,” *Chicago Review*, 58, 1 (Summer, 2013), 50–74, 60.

dependence and reliance. If we listen closely, we can hear Oppen asking questions about self-reliance and interdependence.

In poems such as “Neighbors,” quoted below, the poem’s direction again seems to escape the author; however, there is a continuity with the notion of “waking” that I want to trace:

thru our kitchen window I see the house
next door a frame house under the asphalt shingles
the woodenframing and I don't know what I am doing
here the neighbor the actual neighbour we are even
friendly
in a way and I don't know what I am doing
here there is more
to wake to
than these old boards these many
boards and the voice of the poem a wandering
foreigner more strange
and brilliant
than the moon's light the true
native opening
the nooks and the corners and the great
spaces clear
fields of her hands we
not poets only
waking all
are in her hands
...
shall we
say more
that this I can
say more there it
is I can
say more we have hardly begun
to speak walk the round
earth for dark
truths and blazing
truths are the same
move waver almost
stand in my
mind continually
in our dreams like the shadows
of water
moving if
in time we see
the words fail this
we know this
we walk in and is all
we know we will speak

to each
other we
will speak⁵⁷

Again, as there was in “The Tongues,” there is the splitting of the poem’s voice from its speaker; “the voice of the poem a wandering / foreigner.” But there is also a sense of revision, elision, and ellipsis. Michael Davidson has demonstrated Oppen’s “ghostly demarcations” that disrupt the distinction between the finished autonomous text and the would-be working notes, in which the author confesses that he “doesn’t know what he is doing.”⁵⁸ This confession of a self at a loss, when confronted with the sight of the neighbour framed by the kitchen window, is mirrored by the desire to engage them. It is also read as a moment of confusion brought on by Oppen’s illness. The poem’s textuality, therefore, almost seems to be in a state of partial completion or abandonment. The ellipsis at the caesura shifts from one descriptive trajectory in the first section to a seemingly collapsing authenticity in the second, marking a moment of rupture as if the speaker were conversing with a confidant in the proximity of the domestic scene: “shall we / say more / than this I can / say more there it / is I can / say more ...” The poem ends with an appeal to be understood, for dialogue to break through the barriers of non-speech.

This remarkable poem is slippery, but we can just discern a motive for the speaker’s rumination on ‘the neighbour’. Apostrophe escapes this poem and is replaced instead with ellipsis in the poem’s volta. This rends the poem in two, allowing a “waking” to occur: “... here there is more to wake to / than these old boards these many / boards and the voice of the poem a wandering / foreigner more strange ...” The speaker seems to check themselves from a desire, perhaps relating to the world beyond the window promised in the figure of the neighbour, a desire upon another body which will go unsatisfied. In this sense, the poem’s confessional plea to be better understood is in keeping with the suspended form of address common to prayer and poem, as Jahan Ramazani writes:

As speech acts directed to another, yet another more veiled than a human interlocutor, poetry and prayer function simultaneously as acts of address, albeit partly suspended (hence modulating into apostrophe), and as forms of meta-address, or images of voicing, because the decontextualization of address from normal lines of human communication.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ *NCP*, 284–85.

⁵⁸ Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁵⁹ Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 129.

The waking in the poem, and the apostrophizing appeal to an abstracted, distant other, recall the point I made at the top of the poem that anticipates and defers to a reader to come. Unlike prayer, a poem often appeals to an abstract other, even a reader. If, in some sense, Oppen's appeal to the act of waking is allegorical to reading, this allegory develops its significance as a motif throughout his work:

"Waking Who Knows"

the great open

doors of the tall
buildings and the grid

of the streets the seed

is a place the stone
is a place mind

will burn the world down alone
and transparent

will burn the world down tho the starlight is
part of ourselves⁶⁰

This poem is blunt and hard to parse, beyond noting how it repeats Oppen's close-knit refrains in his limited vocabulary (building, place, mind, stone, and so on). The characteristic insistence that the small and close, what he calls elsewhere "the open / Miracle // Of place," can be a starting place.⁶¹ The word "transparent" recalls its previous occurrence in "Of Being Numerous": "Clarity in the sense of *transparence*, / I don't mean that much can be explained. // Clarity in the sense of silence."⁶² However, this use is tempered with a catastrophist's allusion to "burning the world down," seemingly in the solipsism of the mind alone or its oneiric phantoms. The waking of this poem remains untouched by a speaking subject, beyond the reason in its objective otherness and the final shared subject, "ourselves."

The stone imagery reappears in the "stony waters" of "Till Other Voices Wake Us," taking its title from Eliot's *Prufrock*. The speaker, ostensibly self-identical with the historical Oppen, describes the encounter of a non-determined statue in France, fearing he will drown in its "stony waters":

⁶⁰ *NCP*, 273.

⁶¹ *NCP*, 156.

⁶² *NCP*, 175.

“Till Other Voices Wake Us”

the generations
and the solace
of flight memory

of adolescence with my father
in France we stared in monuments as tho we treaded
water stony

waters of the monuments and so turned
then hurriedly

on our course
before we might grow tired
and so drown and writing
thru the night (a young man,
Brooklyn, 1929) I name the book

series empirical
series
all force
in events the myriad

lights have entered
us it is a music more powerful

than music

till other voices wake
us or we drown⁶³

The reader is “treading water” in the poet’s literary history, recalling and remembering it with the speaker, not letting it slide into irrelevance. This shared act of remembering is closely aligned to the responsibility of reading as waking, even as sleep and waking that can longer be kept distinct for Oppen, who lists this way and that between them.

In one unpublished poem, or poem fragment, “Semantic,” Oppen concisely describes a plural subjectivity:

There is that one word
Which one must
Define for oneself, the
Us.⁶⁴

⁶³ *NCP*, 286.

⁶⁴ *NCP*, 336.

The unity of the “Us,” the pronoun that always obfuscates and provokes indeterminacy, is defined by oneself, one individual’s take on the semantics of language. The last lines of Oppen’s published material, the “Us,” “till other voices wake / us or we drown,” are summons for being awoken from a slumber that threatens to drown us. Thinking that the plural of the “Us” is necessarily a singular act of one individual, Oppen seems to be saying, one author. This realization ultimately threatens and undermines the social, where it is not a political reality that one person must speak for others. The “one / one / oneself / Us” pushes the poem to a space where the uncertain authority of the reader to come will be given a shared and mutual relevance. In this context, the subjectivity of the reader and Mary, who is both one with George as an “Us,” but equally, is found in the negative spaces the poem can only point to without making positivist claims, which is where we need to pay close attention.

‘NOW WE’RE GOING TO DO IT’: MARY OPPEN AND SELF-RELIANCE

These last three poems, with the connections between sleep, the movement of generations, ageing and finally waking, point towards an apparent preoccupation with the chief traits of late style as I have described them. The modification to this reading that I want to put forward is based on the interactions between Mary and George that the poems can only estimate and not directly address. In this section, I chart how extrinsic aspects of poetry, including maintaining the poet’s public persona, are just as relevant to how we should respond to these late works and might help us see our critical and ethical responses more clearly.

As George’s health declines, Mary takes on more editorial and publication responsibilities and manages his public image with careful interest. However, despite the interest in the Oppens’ biography, understanding Mary’s role in George’s life has been simplistic. “Mary Oppen’s presence in George’s life has empowered him, a gift given and gratefully returned,” writes one of the only contemporary reviewers of Mary’s autobiography, *Meaning: A Life*.⁶⁵ The book focusses on their shared life together, especially the earliest years and life in France and the stifling families they both escaped. Mary wants their life to be viewed as a model refusal of self-serving American individualism. More cynically, George’s project subsumes Mary’s energies as a writer and painter. Mary describes their close dependency as they move from bohemian France in their youth to claustrophobic bourgeois roles in Mexico. Facing

⁶⁵ Mary Oppen, *Meaning: A Life* (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1978), 200.

an uncertain return to a hostile McCarthyite California, where the FBI had harassed them, Mary needed more: “My need was for a psychiatrist, [but] I felt guilty and feared that my life with George would be threatened by this exposure.”⁶⁶ She then identifies the frustrated ambitions: “I thought about identities within which I had lived and about the frustration of being only wife and mother. So many years!”⁶⁷ This was a long way from how they remember their equitable beginnings as young artists: “We were in search of an esthetic [*sic*] within which to live ... our discoveries themselves became an esthetic and a disclosure.”⁶⁸ This shared sense of discovery is lost to Oppen’s vastly elevated public profile after 1969’s Pulitzer.

The last years in the Oppens’ life coincide with Mary’s increased literary activity, as she expands her role as editor of Oppen’s last work, *Primitive*, published in the same year as *Meaning: A Life*. The dynamics of their communal life deserve greater scrutiny, given the number of questions that reflect the *oeuvre* of Oppen’s published work and new interdisciplinary studies of literature, ageing and disability.

Mary gave an interview with Dennis Young in 1988. Although often an active participant in the couple’s discussions with the literary press, this one is the first following George’s death four years earlier. In the previous decade, Mary had taken responsibility for the Oppen estate, published a book, and continued correspondence with little magazines and feminist praxis journals, where she published excerpts from *Meaning: A Life*. This must be seen in the context of the second-wave feminist movement in which Mary found sustained political acumen. Nevertheless, the interviewer clarifies that Mary’s value lies in being a widow: the topic is always George. Young asks, “When George stopped writing in 1980 or thereabouts, did he write anything his last four years?” Mary responds in a way that underscores her role in assembling the last volume, as well as guiding how it was to be received:

Well, *Primitive* was the last. And he couldn’t get that ready for the publishers. And he finally said, “if you can do this, please do it.” He said, “I can’t do it.” So I had to put them together and get the typescripts presentable, and probably lots of things he’d have done differently. He felt that he had done it. He didn’t feel there was anything more.⁶⁹

Even as she steers the conversation toward her role in literary production, she describes how George retains autonomy. “He felt that he had done it” hints at the transfer of authorship during caregiving that I outlined above, whereby one

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁶⁹ Mary Oppen and Dennis Young, “conversation with Mary Oppen,” *Iowa Review*, 18, 3 (Fall 1988), 18–47, 41.

person cedes authority of independence to another but retains the apparatus of their freedom. In Mary's answer, there is a shift in authorial relations again, which preserves the visibility of individual authorship, even as it undoes that authority after the fact. "I think that George would not have consented to any of this," she admits, detailing how she made the bequest of George's papers to the University of California, San Diego: "he didn't give his papers, but he didn't destroy his papers. So, the decisions were left to me and Linda [their daughter]." Mary's justifications for decisively preserving the archive's fate are unapologetic, claiming, "It's important and George's poetry thus will be read more."⁷⁰ Mary acknowledges how this kind of organizational activity has typically been gendered:

as far as I remember, I was the one who said, "now we're going to do it." And it's often the woman's role, I've noticed it around at other relationships. We were in agreement, but I said, "Now we're going to do it." In a sense it was my decision, but it really wasn't, because we agreed.⁷¹

To paraphrase Mary's book, the interdependence of these two figures and collaborative meaning-makers of life is how she depicts their relationship. The mutual decision that is the carer's work follows an established dynamic in caregiving. It also distances and recasts the independence of a single author, the cult of individualism that Rivas found in American society. This individualism is in uneasy tension with Mary's acts of literary self-consciousness or awareness raising. I agree with Jeffrey Yang that we should read Mary's interviews as part of literary self-consciousness.⁷² "There's a sense of an ending in that book." Young continues,

You can get the feeling that this is it, not writing anymore. This is "my final statement." But he's also ... I'm puzzled by a few lines where he says, "help me" you feel like he's falling apart ... like a boat that's got holes.

Like a boat with holes in it, the interviewer ascribes Oppen's last writing to pathos and the helplessness of the incapacitated, the shipwrecked sailor in need of rescue. The interviewer's question is steeped in the male-centred narratives of mastery and its loss. It is worth mentioning the critics of late style's shortcomings, the Hutcheons, whose critique addresses the androcentrism of late style: "the discourse of lateness has typically been a male-gendered one," they write; "it becomes clearer that women artists' possibly very different later careers and creativity have been elided by the generalizing impulse

⁷⁰ Ibid., 44.

⁷¹ Ibid., 43.

⁷² For more analysis see Jeffrey Yang, "Mary Oppen, Meaning: a Life," *Poetry Magazine*, 31 Jan. 2020, at www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/152087/mary-oppen-meaning-a-life (accessed 26 Nov. 2021).

behind late-style theory.”⁷³ Mary, meanwhile, returns the interview to practicalities of composition. Even if the origin of George’s debilitating disease was at first obscure to them both, by the time it came to compile the volume in 1978, they saw its course together:

Alzheimer’s is a very insidious disease, and we didn’t know what was wrong with him. By the time I knew what was wrong with him he was no longer able to be really mentally competent. It really would have done no good anyway. It’s a very insidious disease, and who knows when it really started ... who knows when things really began. But certainly, it runs quite a long course.⁷⁴

The interdependence they experienced, the shared give-and-take, was not framed as the authorship of one at the expense of the other. It is given meaning and a name after the fact, a new protractive authorship of Mary’s narrative of the self. Nevertheless, the gendered role of caregiver is stressed by Mary. On the poetry, having said it all before, she will not be much drawn: “The later poetry really is a lot different. There are gaps, and the line-breaks,” prompts Young, to which Mary responds,

Well, he just gave up finally on it. I thought the repetitions were good. I thought it worked ... But he’d ask me at times, he said, “Am I losing my mind?” And I’d say, “Well, but it’s Alzheimer’s disease, and we don’t know very much about it.” He was very distressed.⁷⁵

Mary’s emergence as a collaborator, even coauthor, both in how this story gets relayed to the public and apparently during the composition process, is striking. This is coextensive with the care work she performs for George and the cessation of his single authority over the writing and subsequently omitted by the force of critical predisposition to late style, which is partly an ideology of ageing. Her editorial work is related to her emergence as a savvy stakeholder securing the legacy of their shared estate. In addition, she acknowledges that the disability put George at the limit of his decision-making capacity. Mary’s clear-sighted contributions, alongside her publication of *Meaning: A Life*, show a woman seeking literary self-consciousness in a way that Laura Marcus argues is often true of people on the margins, who “have used autobiographical writings as a way of writing histories that would otherwise be omitted from the records.”⁷⁶ Autobiography always confirms the author’s status within or without the norms of their social sphere, and this extends to Mary’s work of rewriting her position in her husband’s story. The “repetitions,” considered a phenomenon of late style, are more properly seen as a tic of impairment and,

⁷³ Hutcheon and Hutcheon, “Historicizing Late Style,” 67.

⁷⁴ Oppen and Young, 41.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Laura Marcus, *Auto/Biographical Discourses* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 269.

finally, are authorized and encouraged by the work's invisible second author, Mary, who is only able to reveal this small but significant fact in interviews after George's death. She was required to conceal her role. Young hints at this: "What is it that made the relationship 'two'? I mean 'two' in every way. You were with him. As he says, your words are 'inextricably entangled among my own.'"⁷⁷

She is mindful of the transgressions she makes. Oppen was sceptical, especially in his correspondence (which Blau DuPlessis rightly recognizes as the chief contribution in prose that Oppen makes), of women's artistic range beyond what he saw as a tendency for subjectivism and self-indulgence. This relatively rigid androcentric worldview has been justly critiqued.⁷⁸ Now, after the disabling stigma of George's illness has been lifted, she returns to the writing she had given up in her twenties, publishing in feminist magazines excerpts of the biography and leaving behind an extensive literary correspondence and a store of visual artworks, translations, and drafts.⁷⁹

CONCLUSION

Marcus understands women's autobiography as a practice beyond conventional literary outputs, both in the forms autobiography takes and the needs it satisfies. An interview with a female writer can be "continuous with their other writings, reinforcing their professional status, or they may be used to construct an image of the self in the private sphere."⁸⁰ Mary's interviews come under this category, and the expanded field of women's memoir and the broader argument that twentieth-century women's autobiography is a battle between marginalization and self-identification. In this light, I have suggested that Mary's editorial roles overlap with the discourse of feminine literary emergence, even emancipation from stigma and restrictive gender roles.

The social sciences of ageing and disability studies have long argued for disability as a conceptual category with a large, mutable range, both within and without what constitutes an individual. On the other hand, the late style in the literary humanities tends toward coopting disability with its fatalistic narratives of failure or dysfunction, concealed under a cloak of individual

⁷⁷ Oppen and Young, 41. Young is referring to the preface in *The Collected Poems of George Oppen* (New York: New Directions Press, 1975).

⁷⁸ Andrea Brady concludes that his "'objectification' is not limited only to poetry, but also to his perceptions of women." Andrea Brady, "Object Lessons Review: George Oppen *NCP*," *Poetry Review*, 94, 1 (Spring 2004), 64–70, available at <http://poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/recordb526.html?id=13584> (accessed 3 May 2022).

⁷⁹ Mary Oppen, "Breath of Life," *Feminist Studies*, 4, 2 (1978), 15–17.

⁸⁰ Marcus, 268.

exceptionalism. Interlocking characteristics of disability and ageing and their corresponding marginalization and stigmatization are often disguised and shadowy, hidden behind overwhelming cultural pressures to conform or pass as able-bodied.

Studies of disability in the humanities must teach us how to respond to projects such as the Oppens without eliding the conditions of their composition or the concepts that contribute to a cultural function of disabling. I have tried to cast new light onto the last chapter of the Oppens' lives and consider the relational patterns and critical infrastructures that have facilitated and steered how the poetry was received. When seen anew, the coauthored construction of *Primitive* is an instruction in the intersections of age, gender and disability, and the limitations and creative liberations of our last years.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dr John O'Meara Dunn completed his PhD at Queen Mary University of London in 2019, where he researched twentieth-century poetry and poetics of the United States. His thesis focussed on the history, theories and practices of the "antilyrical." He currently works as a specialist tutor, supporting neurodivergent and dyslexic students in higher education. Originally from London, he now lives in Santiago, Chile.