The Mind's Own Place — George Oppen (1)

Published in *Kulchur* 3, no. 10 (Summer 1963): 2–8; reprinted in *Montemora* 1 (Fall 1975): 132–37; also reprinted in *SP* 173–82. "The Mind's Own Place" is Oppen's most extensive essay on poetics. Originally written for *The Nation* in early 1962, the essay was rejected there, and subsequently sent for commentary to numerous correspondents, including June Oppen Degnan, Charles Humboldt, Steven Schneider, and, most significantly, Denise Levertov, "at [whose] latest poems," Oppen writes in 1962 letter to Oppen Degnan, "the thing is almost written" (*SL* 57–61). Although he received numerous suggestions, Oppen refused to revise the essay significantly. Before finding a place at *Kulchur,* Oppen considered sending it also to the *Massachusetts Review,* which had published poems of Levertov's to which Oppen had unfavorably reacted.

The title of the essay comes from Milton's *Paradise Lost* 1.250–55:

> Hail horrors, hail
> Infernal world, and thou, profoundest Hell,
> Receive thy new possessor: one who brings
> A mind not to be changed by place or time.
> The mind is its own place, and in itself
> Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.

Oppen wrote to Degnan about the title: "Milton put it in the mouth of Beelzebub, so to the Puritan Milton it is the devil's doctrine" (*SL* 380, n. 8). Oppen revisits this passage in section 7 of "A Narrative," citing as well his own essay's title:

> Serpent, Ouroboros
> Whose tail is in his mouth: he is the root
> Of evil,
> This ring worm, the devil's
> Doctrine the blind man
> Knew. His mind
> Is its own place;
> He has no story . . . (*NCP* 153; *SP* 75)

+ + +

Sargent is reported to have said to Renoir that he painted "cads in the park." And Sargent was of course quite right.[1] The passion of the Im-

pressionists to see, and to see more clearly was a desire to see past the subject matter and the art attitudes of the academy. It is true that the artist is not dependent on his subject in the sense that he can be judged by its intrinsic interest, or that the discussion of his work can become a discussion of its subject. But the emotion which creates art is the emotion that seeks to know and to disclose. The cocoon of "Beauty" as the word is often used, the beauty of background music and of soft lights, though it might be an art, is an art of the masseur and the perfumist.

Modern American poetry begins with the determination to find the image, the thing encountered, the thing seen each day whose meaning has become the meaning and the color of our lives. Verse, which had become a rhetoric of exaggeration, of inflation, was to the modernists a skill of accuracy, of precision, a test of truth. Such an art has always to be defended against a furious and bitter Bohemia whose passion it is to assist, in the highest of high spirits, at the razing of that art which is the last intrusion on an onanism which they believe to be artistic. In these circles is elaborated a mock-admiration of the artist as a sort of super-annuated infant, and it is the nightmare of the poet or the artist to find himself wandering between the grim gray lines of the Philistines and the ramshackle emplacements of Bohemia. If he ceases to believe in the validity of his insights—the truth of what he is saying—he becomes the casualty, the only possible casualty, of that engagement. Philistia and Bohemia, never endangered by the contest, remain precisely what they were. This is the Bohemia that churns and worries the idea of the poet-not-of-this-world, the dissociated poet, the ghostly bard. If the poet is an island, this is the sea which most lovingly and intimately grinds him to sand.

There comes a time in any such discussion as this when the effort to avoid the word *reality* becomes too great a tax on the writer's agility. The word of course has long since ceased to mean anything recognizably "real" at all, but English does seem to be stuck with it. We cannot assert the poet's relation to reality, nor exhort him to face reality, nor do any of these desirable things, nor be sure that we are not insisting merely that he discuss only those things we are accustomed to talk about, unless we somehow manage to restore a meaning to the word. Bertrand Russell wrote "If I were to describe reality as I found it, I would have to include my arm."[2] In the shock of that sentence—out of context—perhaps the meaning of the word may be restored, or in the fragment of Heraclitus: "If it all went up in smoke" that smoke would remain.[3] It is the arbitrary fact, and not any quality of wisdom literature, which creates the impact of the poets. The "shock of recognition," when it is anything, is that. If we can hold the word to its meaning, or if we can import a word from elsewhere—a collective, not an abstract noun, to mean "the things that exist"—then we will not have on the one hand the demand that the poet circumstantially describe everything that we already know, and declare every belief that we already hold, nor on the other hand the ideal of the poet without any senses at all. Dante's "sweet new style" presaged a new content, a new attitude: and it was a new vision, an act of vision that ushered modern art into France, as it was an extension of awareness that forced the development of a modern poetry in this country.[4] The early moderns among painters of the United States found themselves promptly identified as the Ash Can school, and it happens that Lindsay, Sandburg, Kreymborg, Williams—the poets of the little magazine *Others* which came off a hand press in a garage somewhere in New Jersey about 1918—were almost a populist movement.[5] Though it is hard to register now, the subjects of Sandburg's poems, the stockyards and the railroad sidings, gave them their impact. Of the major poets it is only William Carlos Williams, with his insistence on "the American idiom," on the image derived from day-to-day experience, on form as "nothing more than an extension of content," who shows a derivation from populism.[6] But it is the fidelity, the clarity, including the visual clarity and their freedom from the art subject which is the distinction also of Pound and Eliot and the force behind their creation of a new form and a new prosody; the "speech rhythms" of Pound, the "prose quality" of Eliot. Their intelligence rejected the romanticism, the mere sentimental "going on" of such men as Sandburg and Kreymborg, but for them too art moves forward only when some man, or some men, get their heads above—or below—the terrible thin scratching of the art world. It is possible to find a metaphor for anything, an analogue: but the image is encountered, not found; it is an account of the poet's perception, the act of perception; it is a test of sincerity, a test of conviction, the

rare poetic quality of truthfulness.[7] They meant to replace by the data of experience the accepted poetry of their time, a display by the poets of right thinking and right sentiment, a dreary waste of lies. That data was and is the core of what "modernism" restored to poetry, the sense of the poet's self among things. So much depends upon the red wheelbarrow. The distinction between a poem that shows confidence in itself and in its materials, and on the other hand a performance, a speech by the poet, is the distinction between poetry and histrionics. It is a part of the function of poetry to serve as a test of truth. It is possible to say anything in abstract prose, but a great many things one believes or would like to believe or thinks he believes will not substantiate themselves in the concrete materials of the poem. It is not to say that the poet is immune to the "real" world to say that he is not likely to find the moment, the image, in which a political generalization or any other generalization will prove its truth. Denise Levertov begins a fine poem with the words: "The authentic!" and goes on to define

> the real, the new-laid
> egg whose speckled shell
> the poet fondles and must break
> if he will be nourished

in the events of a domestic morning: the steam rising in the radiators, herself "breaking the handle of my hairbrush," and the family breakfast, to the moment when, the children being sent to school,

> cold air
> comes in at the street door.[8]

These are, as poetry intends, clear pictures of the world in verse, which means only to be clear, to be honest, to produce the realization of reality and to construct a form out of no desire for the trick of gracefulness, but in order to make it possible to grasp, to hold the insight which is the content of the poem.

T. S. Eliot's immense reputation was already established by the end of the twenties: Pound's somewhat later. It is within the present decade

that Williams has achieved a comparable position. It was Eliot's influence, far more than Pound's, and Eliot's influence by way of Auden which formed the tone of the so-called Academic poets who dominated the field during the forties and early fifties, and whom the Beats assailed. It is quite possible that both Eliot and the Academic poets tend at this moment to be underrated: the Academics are perhaps suffering the difficulties of middle age. They are not Young Poets nor Old Masters, nor are they news in the exhilarating sense that they might bite a dog. But they too are not writing in complacent generalities, and the word *academic* can give a false concept of their content and form. The fact is, however, that the poets of the San Francisco school, the poets called Beat, took off not at all from Eliot, but from Pound and still more directly from Williams, and to varying degrees from Whitman, and the influence—perhaps indirect—of such men as Sandburg and Lindsay and even Kreymborg is, as a matter of fact, perfectly evident in their work. But it is to Williams that the young poets of this school acknowledge the greatest debt, and if the word *populism* applied to Williams may not be entirely justifiable, it is at any rate true that Williams is the most American of the American poets of his generation, and these young poets have been markedly and as a matter of course American.[9] I think it has been part of their strength, and in fact I fear the present pilgrimage to Japan and the exotic arms of Zen. I feel quite sure, to begin with, that Hemingway has expressed Zen to the West about as well as is likely to be done. The disciple asked: "What is Truth?" And the Master replied, "Do you smell the mountain laurel?" "Yes," said the disciple. The Master said, "There, I have kept nothing from you." What Master was that? "The archer aims not at the target but at himself."[10] Nor, as we have read, at the bull. If we are to talk of the act performed for its own sake, I think we will get more poetry out of the large fish of these waters—*even* out of the large fish in these waters—than from all the tea in Japan. But this may be because I belong to a generation that grew more American—literarily at least—as it approached adult estate: we grew up on English writing—and German fairy tales—as I think no American any longer does. Starting with Mother Goose—in the absence of "It Happened on Mulberry Street" or "Millions of Cats" or whatever has become current since my

daughter grew up—and proceeding to Kipling and Robert Louis Stevenson and the Rover Boys, perhaps the only American writing we saw was in the Oz books and in Mark Twain. I have not discussed this with other writers, and risk the statement, but I believe that many a young American writer-to-be was astonished on reaching adolescence to discover that he was not easily going to take his place as the young master, or even as a Thackerayan young man who manages, with whatever difficulty, to equip himself with fresh linen and varnished boots for his crucial morning call on the Duchess. We found ourselves below stairs, possibly: certainly among the minor characters. Which was a factor I believe in our need to make our own literature. Huck Finn, if this were a scholarly work, might be contrasted to Tom Brown, or even to Christopher Robin of Pooh Corners. Alice wandered from her governess; Dorothy of Oz ran too late for the storm cellar and was caught in a Kansas cyclone. Together and contrastingly they dawned on our infant minds, and may have contributed to the aesthetic, if not social sentiment, which went in search of the common, the common experience, the life of common man. Or it may be, more simply, that the more open society made possible the literary career of the obviously non-aristocratic spokesman who, once he tired of Invocation to Someone Else's Muse, *had* to make his own poetry. I myself was not the barefoot American boy. Having been born near New York, like many of these young poets, I was undoubtedly shod by the age of three months. But neither the barefoot boy nor Robert Frost is really the most American thing in the world, and there are facts to consider beyond the orthopedic. I am constantly amazed by the English response to the Angry Young Men,[11] whose news-value appears to be that they are not of the aristocracy and are bitterly concerned with that fact in all its ramifications, whereas I have not met an American writer who had ever wondered what Vanderbilts or Morgans or Astors felt about his accent, his vocabulary, or his neckwear. Or if he wondered, he would not *know,* as the English seem to know, and the setting of Henry James's novels is to us—and even to Henry James—a curiosity, a literary paradox. And the search of the Beats, the thing which they have in common with the Ash Can school of painting and the Chicago literary renaissance of the twenties is an authentic American phenomenon,

a search for the common experience, for the ground under their feet. I have strained matters considerably using the word *populist:* certainly no *more* specifically political word could be used. The poet means to trust his direct perceptions, and it is even possible that it might be useful for the country to listen, to hear evidence, to consider what indeed we have brought forth upon this continent.

The DAR is not a notably liberal organization.[12] I am aware that there must be descendents of Old Families in all possible political groupings, but a considerable portion of the population, and I think a considerable proportion of the most liberal population, is made up of the children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren of immigrants. Certainly the DAR is of that opinion. But I need not assume statistical facts which neither the DAR nor I know. The oldest families are of puritan background, and the American family histories of the descendents of later immigrants begin typically with men and women who found refuge in the tenements of these shores from political and financial shipwreck. There they developed a morality of crisis, an ethos of survival, a passionate philosophy of altruism and ambition. To a puritan morality—or I should say a puritanical morality—they added altruism in some cases, solidarity in others, and thereby completed a political morality. But neither ambition nor solidarity nor altruism is capable of establishing values. If the puritanical values proved themselves in material well-being, in the escape from danger of starvation, in TVs and radios, electric toasters and perhaps air-conditioners, electric razors and strawberry corer, and are now pushing the electric toothbrush, then altruism demands these things also for the other man. It cannot, of itself, get beyond that. We can do so only when, with whatever difficulty, with whatever sense of vertigo, we begin to speak for ourselves. Be-razored and be-toastered, and perhaps anarchist and irresponsible, the grandson of the immigrant and the descendent of the puritan better begin to speak for himself. If he is a poet he must. If he is not, perhaps he should listen. For mankind itself is an island: surely no man is a continent, and the definition of happiness must be his own.[13] The people on the Freedom Rides are both civilized and courageous; the people in the Peace Marches are the sane people of the country. But it is not a way of life, or should not be. It is a terrifying

necessity. Bertolt Brecht once wrote that there are times when it can be almost a crime to write of trees. I happen to think that the statement is valid as he meant it.[14] There are situations which cannot honorably be met by art, and surely no one need fiddle precisely at the moment that the house next door is burning. If one goes on to imagine a direct call for help, then surely to refuse it would be a kind of treason to one's neighbors. Or so I think. But the bad fiddling could hardly help, and similarly the question can only be whether one intends, at a given time, to write poetry or not.[15]

It happens, though, that Brecht's statement cannot be taken literally. There is no crisis in which political poets and orators may not speak of trees, though it is more common for them, in this symbolic usage, to speak of "flowers." "We want bread *and* roses": "Let a thousand flowers bloom" on the left: on the right, the photograph once famous in Germany of Handsome Adolph sniffing the rose.[16] Flowers stand for simple and undefined human happiness and are frequently mentioned in all political circles. The actually forbidden word Brecht, of course, could not write. It would be something like *aesthetic.* But the definition of the good life is necessarily an aesthetic definition, and the mere fact of democracy has not formulated it, nor, if it is achieved, will the mere fact of an extension of democracy, though I do not mean of course that restriction would do better. Suffering can be recognized; to argue its definition is an evasion, a contemptible thing. But the good life, the thing wanted for itself, the aesthetic, will be defined outside of anybody's politics, or defined wrongly. William Stafford ends a poem titled "Vocation" (he is speaking of the poet's vocation) with the line: "Your job is to find what the world is trying to be."[17] And though it may be presumptuous in a man elected to nothing at all, the poet does undertake just about that, certainly nothing less, and the younger poets' judgment of society is, in the words of Robert Duncan, "I mean, of course, that happiness itself is a forest in which we are bewildered, turn wild, or dwell like Robin Hood, outlawed and at home."[18]

It is possible that a world without art is simply and flatly uninhabitable, and the poet's business is not to use verse as an advanced form of rhetoric, nor to seek to give to political statements the aura of eternal truth. It should not really be the ambition even of the most well-

meaning of political and semipolitical gatherings to do so, and to use verse for the purpose, as everyone perfectly well knows, is merely excruciating. Therefore the poet, speaking as a poet, declares his political nonavailability as clearly as the classic pronouncement: "If nominated I will run: if elected I will hide" (I quote from memory).[19] Surely what we need is a "redemption of the will"—the phrase from a not-yet-produced young playwright whose work I have read—and indeed we will not last very long if we do not get it. But what we must have *now,* the political thing we must have, is a peace. And a peace is made by a peace treaty. And we have seen peace treaties before; we know what they are. This one will be, if we get it, if we survive, like those before it, a cynical and brutal division of the world between the great powers. Everyone knows what must be in that document: the language of both sides has been euphemistic but clear. A free hand in Eastern Europe to Russia: to the United States in Western Europe and in this continent and some other places. And the hope that China will not soon acquire a bomb. And where is the poet who will write that she opened her front door, having sent the children to school, and felt the fresh authentic air in her face and wanted—*that?*

PSALM

Veritas sequitur . . .

In the small beauty of the forest
The wild deer bedding down——
That they are there!

Their eyes
Effortless, the soft lips
Nuzzle and the alien small teeth
Tear at the grass

The roots of it
Dangle from their mouths
Scattering earth in the strange woods.
They who are there.

Their paths
Nibbled thru the fields, the leaves that shade them
Hang in the distances
Of sun

The small nouns
Crying faith
In this in which the wild deer
Startle, and stare out.

MONUMENT

Public silence indeed is nothing

So we confront the fact with stage craft
And the available poses

Of greatness,

One comes to the Norman chapel,
The Norman wall
Of the armed man
At the root of the thing,
Roughly armed,
The great sword, the great shield
And the helmet,
The horned helmet

On the mount
In the sea threatening
Its distances.

I was born to
A minor courage
And the harbor
We lived near, and the ungainliness
Of the merchants, my grandparents;

Of which I chose the harbor
And the sea

Which is a home and the homeless,
It is the sea,
Contrary of monuments
And illiberal.

POWER, THE ENCHANTED WORLD

1

Streets, in a poor district——

Crowded,
We mean the rooms

Crowded, they come to stand
In vacant streets

Streets vacant of power

Therefore the irrational roots

We are concerned with the given

2

. . . That come before the swallow dares. . .

The winds of March

Black winds, the gritty winds, mere squalls and rags

There is a force we disregarded and which disregarded us

I'd wanted friends
Who talked of a public justice

Very simple people
I forget what we said

3

Now we do most of the killing
Having found a logic

Which is control
Of the world, 'we'
And Russia

What does it mean to object
Since it will happen?
It is possible, therefore it will happen
And the dead, this time, dead

4

Power, which hides what it can

But within sight of the river

On a wall near a corner marked by the Marylyn Shoppe
And a branch bank

I saw scrawled in chalk the words, Put your hand on your heart

And elsewhere, in another hand,

Little Baby Ass

And it is those who find themselves in love with the world
Who suffer an anguish of mortality

5

Power ruptures at a thousand holes
Leaking the ancient air in,

The paraphernalia of a culture
On the gantries

And the grease of the engine itself
At the extremes of reality

Which was not what we wanted

The heart uselessly opens
To 3 words, which is too little

OF HOURS

‘ . . . as if a nail whose wide head
were time and space . . ’

at the nail’s point the hammer-blow
undiminished

Holes pitfalls open
In the cop’s accoutrement

Crevasse

The destitute metal

Jail metal

Impoverished Intimate
As a Father did you know that

Old friend old poet
Tho you’d walked

Familiar streets
And glittered with change the circle

Destroyed its content
Persists the common

Place image
The initial light Walk on the walls

The walls of the fortress the countryside
Broad in the night light the sap rises

Out of obscurities the sap rises
The sap not exhausted Movement
Of the stone Music
Of the tenement

Also is this lonely theme Earth
My sister

Lonely sister my sister but why did I weep
Meeting that poet again what was that rage

Before Leger's art poster
In war time Paris perhaps art

Is one's mother and father O rage
Of the exile Fought ice

Fought shifting stones
Beyond the battlement

Crevasse Fought

No man
But the fragments of metal
Tho there were men there were men Fought
No man but the fragments of metal
Burying my dogtag with H
For Hebrew in the rubble of Alsace

I must get out of here

Father he thinks *father*

Disgrace of dying

Old friend old poet
If you did not look

What is it you 'loved'
Twisting your voice your walk

Wet roads

Hot sun on the hills

He walks twig-strewn streets
Of the rain

Walks homeward

Unteachable

SONG, THE WINDS OF DOWNHILL

'out of poverty
to begin

again' impoverished

of tone of pose that common
wealth

of parlance Who
so poor the words

would with and take on substantial

meaning handholds footholds

to dig in one's heels sliding

hands and heels beyond the residential
lots the plots it is a poem

which may be sung
may well be sung

MYTH OF THE BLAZE

night—sky bird's world
to know to know in my life to know

what I have said to myself

the dark to escape in brilliant highways
of the night sky, finally
why had they not

killed me why did they fire that warning
wounding cannon only the one round I hold a
superstition

because of this lost to be lost Wyatt's
lyric and Rezi's
running thru my mind
in the destroyed (and guilty) Theatre
of the War I'd cried
and remembered
boyhood degradation other
degradations and this crime I will not recover
from that landscape it will be in my mind
it will fill my mind and this is horrible
death bed pavement the secret taste
of being lost

dead

clown in the birds'
world what names
(but my name)

and my love's name to speak

into the eyes
of the Tyger blaze

of changes . . . 'named

the animals' name

and name the vigorous dusty strong

animals gather
under the joists the boards older

than they giving
them darkness the gifted

dark tho names the names the 'little'

adventurous
words a mountain the cliff

a wave are taxonomy I believe

in the world

because it is
impossible the shack

on the coast

under the eaves
the rain barrel flooding

in the weather and no lights

across rough water illumined
as tho the narrow

end of the funnel what are the names
of the Tyger to speak
to the eyes

of the Tiger blaze
of the tiger who moves in the forest leaving

no scent

but the pine needles' his eyes blink

quick
in the shack
in the knife-cut
and the opaque

white

bread each side of the knife

THE LITTLE PIN: FRAGMENT

'The journey fortunately [said the traveller] is truly immense'

of this
all things
speak if they speak the estranged

unfamiliar sphere thin as air
of rescue huge

pin-point

cold little pin unresting
small pin of the wind and the rayne

in the fields the pines the spruces the sea and
the intricate

veins in the stones and the rock
of the mountains wandering

stars in the dark their one
moral in the breeze

of wherever it is history
goes the courses and breaking

High seas of history . . . . Stagecraft
Statecraft the cast is absurd the seas
break on the beaches

of labor multitudinous
beach and the long cost

of dishonest
music

Song?

astonishing

song? the world
sometime be

world the wind
be wind o western
wind to speak

of this