**George Oppen (1908-1984)**

George Oppen was an innovative poet associated with the Objectivist movement in American poetry. Early in his poetic career, he appeared in both the ‘Objectivist’ number of *Poetry* magazine (1931) and *An ‘Objectivists’ Anthology* (1932), both edited by Louis Zukofsky (1904-1978). After a twenty-five year period of silence, Oppen re-emerged in the early 1960s, producing new work that took up a challenging stance toward the American scene of the time. He became an important influence on a number of younger American poets, including members of the Beat and Black Mountain schools. His volume *Of Being Numerous* (1968) addressed the ongoing war in Vietnam and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969. Throughout his work, he sought to use poetry as a ‘test of truth,’ or at the very least a ‘test of sincerity,’ which he defined as follows: ‘there is a moment, an actual time, when you believe something to be true, and you construct a meaning from these moments of conviction’ (Dembo interview 174).

Oppen was born in New Rochelle, New York to a wealthy Jewish family (their name was originally Oppenheimer). The affluence of his childhood offered privilege while also imposing a burden, so that Oppen eventually found himself undertaking an ‘escape from wealth.’ In 1926, he began attending Oregon State Agricultural College, where he met Mary Colby (1908-1990). After the couple stayed out all night on their first date, Mary was expelled and George was suspended. The two left college together, hitchhiking across the country and embarking on a rather adventurous life, memorably documented in Mary Oppen’s autobiography. Arriving in New York City, they met Louis Zukofsky and Charles Reznikoff (1894-1976), thus commencing Oppen’s involvement with the poets of the Objectivist movement. After travelling to Europe, the Oppens established the small press To Publishers, which published work by Ezra Pound (1885-1972) and William Carlos Williams (1883-1963). Oppen was next involved with The Objectivist Press, a publishing collective that produced his first book of poetry, *Discrete Series*, in 1934.

The volume bore a preface by Pound and marked an auspicious beginning, but Oppen’s career as a writer was soon interrupted. In response to the plight of the unemployed during the Great Depression, he turned to leftist politics, joining the Communist Party. With the advent of World War II, Oppen felt compelled, as a Jew and an anti-fascist, to join the fight. He suffered severe wounds and was nearly killed during the Battle of the Bulge, an experience that profoundly marked his later life and poetry. By the early 1950s, the Oppens began to fear McCarthyite persecution for their earlier political activities, so they moved to Mexico.

Oppen ended his poetic silence with a return to writing in the late 1950s, and the couple re-established residence in the U.S. in 1961. Renewing his commitment to poetry as a test of truth, Oppen produced seven more books. In these volumes, he continued to grapple with a recurring set of themes and problems—including the failures and marvels of language, the ethical relation of the individual to society, and the nature of being itself—but his poetry and poetics also continued to evolve, and to pose new challenges for readers. In the 1970s, Oppen was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease; his final book, *Primitive* (1978), movingly registers his struggles while developing a remarkable poetics of remembering and forgetting.

**Poetry**

*Discrete Series* (1934)

*The Materials* (1962)

*This in Which* (1965)

*Of Being Numerous* (1968)

*Seascape: Needle’s Eye* (1972)

*The Collected Poems* (1975)

*Primitive* (1978)

**Further Reading**

Nicholls, Peter. *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Oppen, Mary. *Meaning A Life: An Autobiography*. Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1978.

Shoemaker, Steven. ed. *Thinking Poetics: Essays on George Oppen*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2009.

Swigg, Richard, ed. *Speaking with George Oppen: Interviews with the Poet and Mary Oppen, 1968-1987*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2012.