Textual Practice

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtpr20

Saying ‘we’: George Oppen’s and Kant’s lyrical ‘common sense’

Jacob McGuinn

To cite this article: Jacob McGuinn (2020) Saying ‘we’: George Oppen’s and Kant’s lyrical ‘common sense’, Textual Practice, 34:10, 1751-1768, DOI: 10.1080/0950236X.2019.1632924

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2019.1632924

Published online: 27 Jun 2019.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 148

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rtpr20

TEXTUAL PRACTICE
2020, VOL. 34, NO. 10, 1751–1768
https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2019.1632924

Saying 'we': George Oppen's and Kant's lyrical 'common sense'

Jacob McGuinn

Department of English, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK

ABSTRACT
Saying 'we', using the first-person plural, might speak for a community. But it also raises the problem of speaking *as* that community, determining it. In this paper, I address the poetics of this problem of indeterminacy through reading George Oppen. Oppen's negotiations with the social are focused on his increasing use of 'we' in place of a lyrical 'I-you' address. In reading this 'we' with Kant's 'common sense' – the aesthetic construction of consensus – I suggest that Oppen gives form to the indeterminacy of this common. In this, Oppen both re-imagines Kant's 'common sense' and troubles it. Kant's imagined community is shown to have limits in its own multiplicity. Reading Oppen's poetic use of 'we' against Kant's 'common sense', then, I explore the way each addresses a 'common' which exceeds their capacity to determine it. Finally, this leads me to consider the implications of these 'commons' for critical reading. If criticism is grounded on its own 'common sense', its form of sociability with its poetic object, then the inclusions and exclusions, the peculiar exterior-interiority of Oppen's and Kant's sociability, re-describe the limits of that critical reading, and should cause us to rethink its political implications.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 5 March 2018; Accepted 13 March 2019

KEYWORDS George Oppen; Kant; lyric; aesthetics; politics; reading

Saying 'we' is a problem to the extent that 'we' is indeterminate. And this problem is multiple. 'We' indexes a shared identity, and 'we' is the form of a shared capacity to identify. 'We' is a political identification: 'we' are a group who might speak in common. And 'we' describes a poetics of identification: this is the form in which we might speak in common. Thinking about what is common to these two 'wes' – the political and the poetic – means, in turn, developing a critical form by which they might be read in common. The problem I want to address here is this triangulation, and so this paper has three concerns: George Oppen's 'we', Kant's 'common sense', and critical reading. In what form are these three levels of commonality – political, poetic, and critical – to be thought in common?

CONTACT Jacob McGuinn j.mcguinn@qmul.ac.uk; j.mcguinn@gold.ac.uk

© 2019 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

For Oppen, in 1968's 'Of Being Numerous', 'We want to say | "Common sense" | And cannot'.[1] But although this recalls the 'common sense' by which Kant validates his aesthetic judgement, Oppen's lines diverge from this sense in significant ways. Firstly, Oppen's poem claims that it 'cannot' say 'common sense'. And secondly, it focuses on the 'we' who 'want to say' it. For Bonnie Costello, 'we' allows poets to hold to a provisional identity, keeping the plural from becoming too singular by providing space for its 'civil' negotiation.[2] This resistance to determination characterises political conceptions of 'we', too. Thinking about collectivity, where an activity or attitude encompasses more than individual or singular perspective, raises the problem of 'we-perspective' or 'we-intentionality', a problem of describing a mode of 'doing' or 'being' plurally.[3] Similarly, for Frederic Jameson, collectivity complicates the task of thinking politics collectively. Differentiating collectivity from 'communitarianism' means shifting from a 'historical moment in which individual personal identity has been unmasked as a decentred locus of multiple subject positions' to an 'analogous' conceptualisation on the level of 'collective identities'.[4] This means conceptualising the multiplicity of collectivity, not only that of subject positions – a transition from 'I' to 'we', from subject to terrain. And for Chantal Mouffe, this raises the problem of 'radical negativity', which

> implies recognizing not only that the people is multiple, but that it is also divided. Such a division cannot be overcome; it can only be institutionalized in different ways, some more egalitarian than others. According to this approach, radical politics consists in a diversity of moves in a multiplicity of institutional terrains […].[5]

For Mouffe, collectivity is both the collection and the division of people. Moving from the individual to the collective, from 'I' to 'we', means developing a form of address adequate to such divergence-in-common. Here, I want to pitch this through the 'I-you' of lyric address. I want to ask how we might address this 'radical negativity' – in what form it might be addressed, by what poetics – and how we might, in poetry, shift from 'subject' to the 'terrain', from 'I' to 'we'.

These points compress a very broad history,[6] but my intention here is to show how the form of this political question also animates poetics. Understanding the 'radical negativity' of 'multiplication' *and* 'division' means turning to the terrain and space where those transitions are constructed. I propose to think about this terrain in the way Oppen's poetry constructs the space of address. This can be understood through the 'exterior-interiority' of Kant's 'common sense'. And this triangulation of ideas is itself under question, and under formation and transformation, in the lyric. As Virginia Jackson argues, lyric is both a poetic *and* a critical activity, both an address and the addressee of critical reading.[7] I want to pitch this against the form

of address Jonathan Culler attributes to the lyric, apostrophe, a turn to a third (person),[8] in order both to disclose a 'common' form of critical reading and poetic writing and to trouble this common, this speaking together of critical and poetic 'common sense'. The commonality described by Oppen troubles this generic 'interiority'/'exteriority', the political 'inclusion'/'exclusion', which organises these critical debates. By reading Oppen through Kant, we can trace how lyric form constructs its own exterior-interior space of address. By describing the indeterminacies of spacing in Oppen's poetics, we can re-describe the indeterminacies of the critical terrain of 'common sense' by which they are read. To say 'we', I shall argue, is to claim an indeterminacy of address in which the terrain of 'radical negativity', multiplication and division, takes form.

i. 'Not encountering you' – I and you

Oppen's engagement with the more explicitly lyrical parameters of 'I-you' address, in his pre-war collection *Discrete Series*, indicates the movements of interiorisation-exteriorisation which will lead, in his later work, to this exterior-interior form of 'we'. There are already political implications to this movement, as Oliver Southall demonstrates with reference to the Great Depression.[9] I want to show how these implications take lyrical form in Oppen's address, in the way Oppen moves from intersubjective relations to a 'terrain'. This is the focus of 'From this distance'. After discussing this early poem, I will turn, in this section, to the interiorisations and exteriorisations of Kant's aesthetic, before turning to 'we' in the next section.

Many critics have noted the ways Oppen's poetry addresses social 'numerousness', and much criticism bears upon the indeterminacy of this point of contact. While critics have identified Oppen's politics themselves with either a Habermasian 'communicative' clarification of the public sphere,[10] or an obfuscation of politics by its aestheticisation – 'the poet keeps his distance',[11] or his 'silence',[12] or, in Oppen's own terms, his 'political non-availability'[13] – I want to show how this question of spacing is raised in Oppen's poetics, in order to consider its significance for interpretation of his politics.[14] Rob Halpern, for example, connects a post-war 'domestication' of Oppen's poetry with his avowed 'political non-availability' – a withdrawal from politics to the house which, in the 'privatization of the common', 'returns the domestic subject paradoxically to the embodied site of civic belonging'. And this relocation of the political to the domestic reflects a new terrain of the lyrical 'I':

> For Oppen, another genre of distance, masculine and undomesticated, would seemingly entitle certain I's to a primary encounter with the world. And yet, Oppen's poetry will converge with household and home where it contracts qualities typically gendered feminine, if only according to default binarisms —receptivity, vulnerability, penetrability — enacting a general condition I call *patiency*. So what subject would be entitled to occupy the position of such an 'I'?[15]

This, I think, reproduces the question raised by Jameson at the beginning of this essay. The I's 'domestication' does not simply transpose it but exposes it to a possible multiplicity: its 'penetration' by otherness. The domestication of public space is also its multiplication. Understanding this 'subject' means accounting for this multiplication of 'interiorisation' as concurrent with a political spacing, an 'exteriorisation'. Answering the question raised by Halpern, and others,[16] of how to conceive this interiorised 'I' means also accounting for the 'terrain' in which it is situated. In the pre-war 'From this distance', precisely this 'distancing' space is under question. And it is put under question by the multiplicity of 'you'.

The singularity of poetic voice raises both a poetic question (how to 'say' it) and a political question (how to conceive the space in which that saying becomes meaningful: 'you'). In 'From this distance', the I encounters an ambivalent, double, 'you', of, we might suppose, Mary, and 'non-encounters' another 'you', plural, anonymous. The poem becomes a site for playing out both the grounds of subjective identity (a singular capacity to speak) and the dispersal of that identity by what makes identification possible (speaking to the non-identical, anonymisation). 'Distance' marks this play of interiorisation and exteriorisation between I and you. This is the poem in full.

From this distance thinking toward you,
Time is recession

Movement of no import
Not encountering you

Save the pulse cumulates a past
And your pulse separate doubly.[17]

The poem is structured around a non-encounter. The poem relates to 'you' by 'Not encountering you'. This address implies a subject addressing, an 'I'; to which the poem does not, however, give voice. We have a kind of reverse lyric: a poem of address in which address displaces the addressor. 'You' are addressed but not encountered, not met. This non-encounter puts the poem into the time of seriality in which, failing to be present, 'you' becomes plural, 'doubling'. The poem begins from a present 'thinking toward you', but this anticipated presence of you is cancelled by the present non-encounter, so in the final couplet we have two 'pulses': 'the pulse cumulates a past | And your pulse'. 'You' are doubled. Multiplication is also division, separation. 'Time is recession': time continues facing backwards (cumulates a past), backing away (doubles), in reverse. The poem, the pulse (with both its bodily and metrical implications), proceeds by recession.

We might consider the ways, with Southall, that Oppen is 'interiorising' exterior politics in the space of the poem. 'Recession', in this poem from just after the Wall Street Crash, is both 'lyrical' and financial. The poetic crisis of

address – the incapacity to develop a poetic subject, and the subsequent multiplication of address – interiorises the social crisis of its material by making it 'lyrical'. It turns upon a question of how to encounter, how to address, you, in your recession. This plays out in the way the lack of poetic 'subject' turns into a question of where and when the poem is, its time and space, terrain. The poem's only person is 'you', and insistently so, echoing visually through the '*ou*' of 'doubly', and aurally in 'Movement', rhyming with itself in lines one and four, claiming a pulse as 'yours'. The poem keeps naming and half-naming 'you', not quite encountering its target. This insistence amounts to repetition, while also incorporating a distinction between general and particular, between 'your' particular and 'the' general pulse. The poem's voice might not encounter you, but that does not mean you are not pulsing, separately; in fact, this doubling relation (your impenetrability elsewhere and your un-encountered presence in the poem) is what constitutes the poem's movement. The syntactical subject, then, is perhaps not an 'I', but 'Time': the opening 'thinking toward you' becoming a sub-clause contextualising the main clause about time. Time is both 'in recession' (like an astral body, in space, *and* like an economy, in history) and this 'movement' of 'non-encounter'. In its recession, the poem works away from encounter, and at the same time doubles you, not encountered, into the poem's own local economy. This is a 'movement of no import', a movement where nothing is brought in, nothing 'imported' into the poem; a movement which the poem minimally registers as consequential, 'of import'.

The final 'doubling' of non-encounter is therefore doubly significant. The temporal 'recession' of history proliferates in the poem, just as 'you' does. The poem's receding time matches its receding object. The effect on the poem is effectively to dismantle it. Rather than integrating its object into its subject, the poem exacerbates its diminishment. The excess of present verbs in the final couplet – 'save', 'cumulates', 'separate' – do not resolve easily around any subject. Is it 'time', as I suggested above, or 'movement' which 'save'? Or is 'save' here a preposition, saying 'except'? The poem's location is also unreconciled with its content: this 'thinking' does not happen from any place, but from a *distance*, which is to say from the relation itself. The poem's place remains unspecified; the time doubles away from itself. *What*, or *who*, exactly, is 'thinking toward you' 'From this distance'? Any 'lyrical' construction of the subject here lies in the displacement of identity by the 'you' (plural) which the subject does not encounter. This construction is repetitive, and the 'you', doubling, proliferating, is plural, repetitive. In order to trace Oppen's constructions of subjective identity, then, we have to trace the way it is constructed in encountering plurality. And this allows us to think, in this gap of displacement of the poetic subject, of *plurality itself* constituting the terrain in which a subject might be constructed.

The 'non-encounter', the reflective gap where 'I' should be, constitutes a multiplication of possible subject positions according to the numerousness

of the ‘you’, not only the ‘I’. Instead of an ‘I’, then, ‘From this distance’ ‘addresses’ from the terrain of this non-encounter itself. Thinking about who, as Halpern asks, could ‘occupy the position of such an “I”’ means thinking about the kind of space under occupation. In ‘From this distance’ it seems to be distance itself, distancing, a terrain of recession which includes its object through not encountering it. This is precisely the situation and terrain – exterior-interiority – which Kant schematises, for aesthetic judgement, as ‘common sense’.

In his *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Kant seeks to validate judgements which are ‘merely reflective’. In order to do so, he develops the idea of ‘common sense’ as the imagined community of judgers who, in the same situation, should judge in the same way. This community results from the structure of the judgement itself. The judgement is both singular (interior to the subject) and claims universal validity.[18] This apparently contradictory character (how can something ‘singular’ at the same time be ‘universal’?) is sustained, by Kant, through the way such judgements do not determine an object exterior to the subject. Instead of referring to an object, the judgement refers to a subject’s feeling, and ‘taste’ is what makes our ‘feeling’ ‘*universally communicable* without the mediation of a concept’.[19] This reflecting judgement, even without the ‘mediation of a concept’, bears the same weight of truth as a determining judgement: it ‘demands’ assent.[20] Kant resolves this tension between a necessarily inward singularity and a simultaneously ‘universal’ communicability by referring it to ‘common sense’. ‘Common sense’ thus constitutes a shared space. But in this space, nothing is ‘communicated’ except ‘communicability’. This communicability is both felt and shared in the judgement.[21] It is the ‘form’ of sociability – ‘talking with others’.[22] Aesthetic judgement is prompted by a subject’s incapacity to determine an object. This indeterminacy leads the subject to reflect on her own cognitive powers. The agreement of these powers ratifies this indeterminacy, outlining the ‘demand’ for ‘common sense’ to approve it. The movement is therefore from exterior to interior to social exterior. But it is complicated. A *lack* of exterior determination prompts *interior* reflection. And in turn, this exterior is merely reflective – and merely ‘supposed’. The judgement plots a movement, then, from an object to subject to imagined intersubjectivity; from (a lacking) ‘you’ to an ‘I’ to (an imagined) ‘you’ (pl.). ‘Common sense’ is the triangulation of these movements.

This led Hannah Arendt to argue that the form of aesthetic reflection is directly communicated into political judgement.[23] But I think we can also consider the limitations Kant establishes here as describing a *form* of political ‘non-availability’,[24] and consider it as a form. Indeed, this idea of form – as the ‘domestication’ of ‘wild’ nature by the form of aesthetic judgement[25] – consists in an address to the judgement’s *indeterminacy*. ‘Common sense’ is this limitation to judgement. The form of ‘interiorised-non-exterior’ of the

judgement is then 'exteriorised' in common sense, which is hence an 'exterior-interiority'. The space of 'common sense', projecting an incapacity to determine an object, is in this way neutral.

When we consider Oppen's 'aestheticisation' of space, then, I think we need to reconsider of what this aesthetic space consists. In this Kantian sense, it is thoroughly neutral and indeterminate, and this seems to me to change the significance of Oppen's poetic spacing. Kant's 'common sense' is, like Oppen's 'world', 'impenetrable'[26] in that it marks the limit of determinate judgement. An aesthetic judgement arises, for Kant, at the point where an object ceases, in a sense, to be an object – or at the point where the subject ceases to be capable of determining it, penetrating it, and therefore where it ceases to function as an object for the subject. 'Common sense' is the exteriorisation of this previous interiorisation. That is to say, 'common sense' reflects the 'impenetrability' of the beautiful 'thing' (not-object) in the intersubjective space of sociability as limitation. It is noncommunicative. Yet this 'mere' sociability provides the form for communicative discussion. It forms a terrain for politics.

In Oppen's terrain of 'non-encounter', 'not encountering you' means registering the ways the poem *lacks* a you to address. Instead of consolidating this lack through constructing a subject, the poem outlines the time and space of its 'recession'. The poem 'addresses' this terrain. The poem thus marks a 'non-presence' which is also a multiplication. The question it raises, in common with Kant, is how to think of a future in this indeterminacy of presence: how to think about 'time' and 'space' without the presence of a subject.

This concern with temporality and spatiality perhaps explains some of Oppen's discomfort with modernist models of the avant-garde, as Peter Nicholls has noted. In his daybooks, Oppen writes: 'The avant-garde is not a matter of rushing ahead of everyone – – it is a matter of TURNING A CORNER'.[27] An avant-garde that conceptualises itself as ahead of history could not adequately think non-encounter. Imagining an art neither recuperative of a disappointed political opportunity, nor mimetic of a present incoherence, would mean instead marking the discontinuity which constitutes art's relation to the political, and to its political material. Otherwise, as Nicholls points out, art would be bound to replicate 'totalitarian structures',[28] which are those strict structures of equivalent temporality which 'From this distance' overturns, the poetic step in which each word identifies the presence of an encounter, in which every excess signification is accounted for in exchange with its aesthetic sign.

'From this distance' adopts an a-systematic poetic position on non-presence. And this position aligns with political parameters. In a letter to his sister from 1959, Oppen writes 'being democratic has got to be absolutely non-dogmatic, a-political, unsystematic […]. A poem has got to be written into the future. I don't mean something about the admiration of posterity

(from where I sit, posterity looks like a bunch of damn kids) but simply that it's something that is not past.'[29] To write democratically means to 'write into the future' as 'unsystematic'. The comment about 'kids' might seem flippant, until one takes into account that to be adult (according at least to Kant's sense of maturity as *Mündigkeit*, to have a mouth, to voice) means to develop past infancy, to be able to speak.[30] The capacity to speak is futural, and so is its political 'common sense' of sociability. Speech is both a condition of developed subjectivity and developed politics, reflectively both private and public, internal and external. Speaking is both individual and achieved socially.

In his essay 'The Mind's Own Place', Oppen asserts that art is a 'search for common experience, for ground under their feet'. Moreover, responding to Brecht's suggestion that there are times of political crisis in which to write, for example, of a 'tree' is a crime, forbidden, Oppen suggests that the word Brecht avoided is actually 'something like *aesthetic*'. For Oppen, the 'mere fact of an extension of democracy' would not sufficiently 'define' 'the good life': 'the good life, the thing wanted for itself, the aesthetic, will be defined outside of anybody's politics, or defined wrongly'.[31] Understanding sociability means recognising its exteriority to politics, and giving form to this exteriority in the space of the poem. And this sociability 'outside' itself (outside the subject) and 'outside' politics (without communication) finds its form in Kant's common sense. Being democratic means speaking democratically, which means speaking together, sociably. But this is the condition which, in Oppen's poem, seems to be impossible. The 'future' into which poems 'speak' is this democratic excess which the poem does not encounter. So we are left with a problem. How does the poem 'speak' to the non-encounter, the indeterminacy which is the condition of its address? How can the poem address the future's 'radical negativity', without claiming its place for the poem's present?

ii. 'We want to say | "Common sense"' – we and limitation

Reading such poetry does not just populate Kant's common sense. By this, I mean that poetry does not become a newly objective constituent of this space or field. What it has in common with that space is an incapacity precisely to make itself exterior, to make of itself an object, as well as to determine its own constituent objects of address, and its resulting neutral position between subject and object, vocalisation and non-vocalisation. The limitations operative in Kant's common sense also animate this poetics of address, the turn to 'we'.

To reiterate, Kant's aesthetic judgement is singular but universal. Prompted by an incapacity to determine an object, the subject interiorises that object's indeterminacy with reflection. For Kant, this mere 'form' is the transcendental limit of aesthetics. But it is also the point of negotiation with sociability which emerges in politics. Kant is wary of the danger posed to reason by opening it up to the indeterminacy of reflection. His aesthetic attempts to distinguish between mere reflective ravings, '*Schwärmerei*',

which are invalid, and judgements informed by reason, which are resolved in 'common sense'. In turn, this measures the difference between a free political arrangement of subjects in a community and mere anarchy. But what is shared in aesthetic judgement, and what is demanded, is posited negatively. 'You' cannot experience this, because it does not refer to any objective quality but only to a subjective form; but 'you' *must* experience *like* this, even if this means your displacement from the experience. 'You' are both posited by and excluded from the aesthetic experience. And the aesthetic question has political outcomes: not only does it offer a reflective 'outline' of political relations, but also gives form to the kind of 'you' around which such a relation might be constructed. The ratifications of common sense might be negative, but they outline the basis for 'valid' negativity. This means that the political question also has poetic consequences. The political question about how to 'say' 'we', how to use or think in first-person plural, becomes, in Oppen, a poetic question when that 'we' is constructed out of the reflective displacement which constitutes the 'I-you' address.

My contention here is that lyric form itself constitutes a kind of 'common'. Moreover, this 'common' is worked through internally to what we think of as lyric form. That is to say, the grounds, terrain, 'common sense' of critical reading are themselves constituted in the kinds of 'turn' or 'address', through the shared singularity, which that reading finds in the lyric. Oppen's poetry makes legible the grounds for its criticism in a way which is itself legible when considered through the neutralisations and negotiations of Kantian common sense. The *poetic* reflection of 'common sense' constructs *critical* legibility of poetic reading. Sociability is subject to many transitions, shifts, and reflections – from the political to the poetic, from the poetic to the critical, private to public, interior to exterior – contained in the shift from 'I' to 'we', and these are reflected in critical reading. The question of how we 'address' the otherness of political space without determining the object of address is repeated in criticism's requirement for a 'form' of reading that can accommodate this negativity of poetic space, aesthetic as well as political. Reading is an address which takes on the lyrical characteristics of the negotiation and transition of address.

I suggest above that we can see the construction of the I in Oppen as an indeterminate negotiation, with itself as with politics. This is characterised by its adjustments not simply to a singular otherness or the encounter with otherness, but to a 'numerousness' *internal* to the I – an 'I' which is already a 'we' in the sense that it finds its form in an exterior multiplicity. It is not a matter, then, of pitting a poetic singularity *against* a plural, social common – this is not necessarily an antagonistic relation. Rather, it is the agonistic negotiation, in Mouffe's sense, between singularity and plurality which is itself *in common* to singularity. The reflections which constitute 'common sense' become poetic questions when they are channelled through

forms of address. This re-adjustment lets us not only read Oppen's poetry as more openly engaged with the politics of arranging what the common is, but also lets us see the lyric as less stringently antagonistic to its political exterior. If the lyric is itself *already a negotiation* between the I and what the I is related to (apostrophic), then the lyric is in this sense itself *already a common*. In this way, the lyric constitutes a site of the common: a space where the political negotiations between singularity and plural sociability – as between the poem's singular voice and its numerous critical readings – is both plotted and staged in reading as well as writing. The form of the lyric is already the common space in which its critical reading takes place.

Focusing on Oppen's 'we' focuses this relation, but also troubles it. When Oppen writes, in *Of Being Numerous*, 'We want to say || "Common sense" | And cannot',[32] he redeploys terms of that Kantian 'common sense' not to reproduce its effects, but to re-describe that 'we' who wants to 'say' it but 'cannot'. We can see this transition to saying 'we' in Oppen's second collection, from 1962, *The Materials*, where the 'non-encounter' explored above becomes a 'non-reconciliation'.

The noise of increase to which we owe
What we possess. We cannot reconcile ourselves.
No one is reconciled, tho we spring
From the ground together—[33]

Emerging 'together' is not 'reconciliation'. The 'ground' or 'terrain' – 'the ground beneath their feet' – is both a point of origin and a point of differentiation. There is a significant pronominal change here from addressing an ambiguously singular/plural 'you', which is nonetheless differentiated from the poem's voice, to an internalisation of that relation into the voice itself as 'we'. The lyric voice addresses itself. The irony of claiming 'we' (speaking together) while at the same time claiming the voice's (our) impossible separation from itself (unreconciled) is staged by the negative, recessionary process of the sentence: 'We cannot reconcile ourselves.' The subject 'we' negates *itself* as an object, 'ourselves'. In order to speak of 'ourselves' we have to be in some sense split off, separate; in the terms of the previous poem, 'doubled'. The poem internalises this doubling of dialogue. To speak numerously is to speak increasingly. But, like the voice in 'From this distance', this one speaks in lyrical recession: both backing spatially away from location and proceeding temporally in a diminishment, a decline. 'No one is reconciled'; indeed, no 'one' could be reconciled because it is singular. Reconciliation implies a prior separation. But the condition for singularity, we have seen, is a capacity to address something else. So to be singular means to affirm singularity against others, to be 'one' unreconciled, even if that 'one' is to 'spring | From the ground together' with the numerousness from which it is separated.

To say 'we' is here to mark the gap of objectivity where a common could be located. To modify Oppen, we 'want' to say '*we*', in fact, and 'cannot'. 'We' might be able to speak together, towards a Kantian 'common sense', but in the poem's present 'we' cannot. In this way, 'we' is tensed between its own presence and the missing object of 'common sense' to which it relates. In saying 'we' in place of 'I', Oppen's poetics negotiate between singularity and plurality, between a singular voice and a plural, common voice with which it is not continuous. The claim I want to advance here is that Oppen's 'we' consists of an 'exterior-interior' much like Kant's common sense. But by vocalising that relation, Oppen gives form to the ways this is the 'unreconciled' terrain of division/sharing, both interior and exterior, which legitimises critical reading.

In *Of Being Numerous*, written at the height of global anti-war protest and social agitation in 1968, this poetic 'we' – this mark of sociability *and* of displaced singularity – works on the limits and limitations of sociability and politics as through a 'terrain' or 'space': a 'locality'.

> We are not coeval
> With a locality
> But we imagine others are,
>
> We encounter them. Actually,
> A populace flows
> Thru the city.[34]

Here is 'encounter' with others; but crucially, unlike in *Discrete Series*, in 'Of Being Numerous' this encounter is something *we* do. And equally significantly, location or space is included in that address – 'locality', 'city'. The 'I' which, in absence, marked non-encounter there, here does encounter (imagines) 'them', plural. And:

> We want to defend
> Limitation
> And do not know how.[35]

How do we understand the 'we' here, the 'we' which undoes itself through its predicate: 'we are not coeval', not together; or 'we imagine others', we think towards numerous others? How do we account for a 'populace' and not individual others, a 'common'?

This limitation is both negative (we 'do not know how') and reflective. 'Of Being Numerous' opens with reflection: 'There are things | We live among "and to know them | Is to know ourselves".'[36] 'Living among' things establishes a loop of reflective confirmation. But I have just suggested that this is not the confirmation of reconciliation. The city is 'A city of corporations || Glassed | In dreams | And images'.[37] This 'glassing' is 'impenetrable' *as images*. While John Wilkinson, convincingly takes issue with this 'glass',

I think we can re-describe its 'image' in Kant's terms in order to understand differently the constitution of such 'impenetrability' of the world in the terms of its aesthetic spacing, and the limitations of that. 'Imagining' others means putting them into that relation of indeterminate address where, precisely, 'they' are not penetrated by determination, but in which 'their' indeterminacy is constitutive. Precisely because the 'other' does not become an object, it becomes an object of reflection in Kant's ambiguous sense. So, addressing 'my daughter', the poet asks 'what can I say | Of living? || I cannot judge it. || We seem caught | In reality together'.[38] Judgement of 'living' fails, and this provokes the poetic 'we' in parallel to the Kantian 'common sense', also provoked by a failure of judgement to determine its object. But here Oppen plots this failure into a different avowal: the address shifts across the lines into a different voice, marking the transition of the poetic 'I' to the (image) 'we', and this transition emerges *both* in encountering an 'image' and in encountering a 'multiplicity', 'living'. Living together emerges from this indeterminacy of address, and from its unsustainability.

The poem is structured around a series – now an 'infinite series'[39] rather than a 'discrete' one – of such shifts in voice mediated through non-encounters with 'numerousness' as an image, imagined, nonpresent. 'We are pressed, pressed on each other'. [40] 'I' am one of those who 'have made poetry', though 'I know I can enter no other place' than the place of 'Them, the people'.[41] The condition of being a poetic 'I' is explicitly located in the political space of 'them', in which the I transforms into the persistent 'we' of the poem: not we speaking for or with 'them', but in their place, within it, from it. This 'we', then, is neither simply the affirmation of a plurality external to and incompatible with subjective singularity, nor the withdrawal to interiority which might defend against such incompatibility by reinforcing the limitations of the subject as singular. Instead, it is the mark of an indeterminate (infinite) dialogue of shifts of voice in an exterior-interior which constitutes the space of such limitation, its boundary. It is an address which does not constitute or *determine* its addressee.

The poem might 'want' this sharing, but it 'cannot' say it. Indeed, it is precise 'we' who 'cannot' 'say || "Common sense"'. There is a failure here to speak in common. The desire is followed by its negation. We 'want' to speak in common, 'and cannot'. Kant's hope for sharing indeterminacy is negated precisely at the point of being 'said'. The problem, then, is perhaps not a 'feeling' or even a 'knowledge' of common sense, but rather its communication. That is to say, it is a *poetic* problem. It is the problem of how to 'say' 'we', how to speak in a common voice. The poem works out this problem where Kantian philosophy leaves off. How does one 'speak' indeterminacy, make it communicable, and therefore shareable? This is a problem because 'saying' and 'communicability' are the indeterminacies at stake. And in a way, the poem works out this problem where politics leaves off, too. The constitution of a political

'we' leaves the problem of such plurality displacing singularity. The poem constitutes a space in which such 'common sense' of communication is both described and addressed. The problem of speaking is not merely a problem of communicability. 'It is not easy to speak || A ferocious mumbling, in public | Of rootless speech'.[42] A common speech is merely 'mumbling', a murmuring which does not resolve into determinacy, Kant's feared 'babbling', perhaps, of *Schwärmerei*: unlawful reflection.

iii. 'And cannot' – legibility and the limits of the lyric

Kant could not account for the multiplicity of artistic forms without at the same time legitimising a multiplicity of political forms. His 'common sense' has to think up to the limit of the political, and indeed makes that limit transcendental for aesthetics, because otherwise he would validate the politics of babbling along with its poetics. If Oppen writes his 'we' into the same terrain as Kant's common sense, it also disarranges that terrain by including that 'babbling' of form in political form, the 'imagining' of others, illegitimate transitions from exterior to interior, inclusions. I want now finally to consider the consequences of this inclusion for criticism.

Oppen recasts I-you relations as we-relations. We can read this 'we' through what Culler describes as lyric triangulation.[43] And this structure stratifies what we understand as criticism. The incorporation of the 'reading' voice into the poetic voice – 'saying' we, not just writing it, saying it to someone – enjoins us to a relation. The poet as 'reader' of the city substantiates the sociability of the city's social terrain. Just so, the reader substantiates the sociability of the poetic terrain, making the poem 'talk' under her critical eye. Critical reading in this sense reproduces the lyrical activity which animates the poem itself: it forms an address, the possibility of which depends upon shared sociability between reader and poem, a capacity to talk which the poem both inscribes and neutralises. As Kant shows, this sociability *depends* upon its neutrality. In this triangulation of triangulation, then, reading must neutralise its own activity if it is to share in its object's sociability. Criticism, critical reading, functions because it can assume the kind of neutrality imagined in 'common sense': it can constitute a position of distance from which it might address its literary object, might communicate with it, without thereby identifying it, communicating it. Oppen's disruption of this model – or refusal of it (we 'cannot' say it) – should constitute a challenge to critical reading, as much as to forms of the lyric or the political surface in which that disruption is posed.

That is to say, accounts of lyric 'triangulation' stratify our understanding of critical form itself. This might lead to what Jackson calls 'lyricisation', in which the way criticism establishes the 'the abstract temporality and figurative referentiality of the lyric' makes poems 'about modern lyric reading'.[44] The problem Oppen discloses – of 'we' determining the targets it would imagine

– is here repeated in criticism. A critical 'we' would mean that the form of critical reading is radically included in its object. But this inclusion is the basis for a poetic common sense, even if that disarranges the aesthetic common sense. Such criticism is not *external* to its poetic object but instead constitutes a reflective 'common' with it by the way the poem internalises its operations and mandate. I think this can be clarified in reference to Werner Hamacher's *95 Theses for Philology*. Hamacher conceives of a critical philology in the kind of 'voiced' common relation I have been drawing through Oppen. For Hamacher, 'The idea of philology lies in a sheer speaking to and for [*Zusprechen*] without anything spoken of or addressed, without anything intended or communicated.'[45] Just so, for Oppen the poem constitutes a 'speaking to' which does not 'encounter' its object, just as, for Kant, aesthetic judgement communicates an intentionless communicability, mere reflection.

> If language speaks for a meaning, it must also be able to speak in the absence of meaning. If it speaks for an addressee, then it must also be able to speak in the absence of an addressee. If it speaks *for* something, it must also be a 'for' without a 'something' and without the particular 'for' that would be predetermined for it. Only one half of language is an ontological process; philology must, therefore, also concern itself with the other half.[46]

This 'other half' would, in the terms of this paper, be the non-ontological construction of community out of mere reflection, which is precisely not an object but a point of reflective limitation, and the way poetry absorbs that reflection in its own construction of an apparently lyrical subject. Language here speaks in the 'absence of an addressee' – surely, this is a lyrical gesture, the apostrophic invocation of the other who remains futurally nonpresent in the invocation, the address. The poem which speaks to 'common sense' 'cannot' speak. That is to say, it cannot make 'common' that presence of speech. To speak in common – to say we – is to invoke or provoke this futural space of absence into which community might be formed. That seems plausible enough. One speaks to others in hope or promise of their presence (as Hamacher writes, poetry speaks as *euche*, promise). But for Oppen, at least, this also means in a sense negating the possibility of this presence, too. The 'other half' of language invokes the 'other'. If there is community, we might suggest with Oppen, it is to the extent that it 'cannot' be said, spoken, made common.

This perhaps helps us to understand something about Kant. If there is 'common sense' invoked or shaped or validated in aesthetic judgement, it is only to the extent that it is not determined by that judgement. If there is a 'common sense', it is through the *in*determination of others, and not through their determination, as common. To speak to this, or for this, means to accept a double enjoinment: both to speak (as a person, to sound)

and not to speak (as a first-person plural, the plural common voice); both to say 'we', and not to say 'we' – only in which double enjoinment would the possibility of common sense survive its saying.

And finally, this translation or redeployment of political contestation into poetic negotiation marks a further transition. If critical reading is possible, it is through saying 'we', speaking to or for or as, or at the least with, at least in common with, its poetic object. Reading is dialogic when it becomes critical writing. And this capacity for dialogic speech must have its own conditions of possibility. In this sense, to ask how poetically to say we means also to ask how critically to say we – to speak with criticism's object. The 'lyric' is, in Jackson's reading, generically displaced, or a genre of the displacement of genre. But if we start to think about it in the terms of Kantian reflection, then it ceases to be a critical *concept* and instead becomes *dialogic*. The poem writes into its displacement by the critical reader. And this is an eminently 'lyrical' move, where the lyricist writes in the place of an absence of a 'you' to address. The lyric address, the 'apostrophe', inscribes the terms of an impossible legibility: since 'you' cannot answer 'me', 'I' will write your silence into the asymmetrical address of the lyric. If there is space for 'you' in the poem, it is through the spacing constructed negatively by the 'I'. Here 'I' write to displace myself, such that the 'I' marks both the lyricist's identity and her dissipation in reaching for an addressed 'you'. Oppen's 'we' refers us to this 'radical negativity', the multiplicity/division of this relation. What is political here is not only the apparently political content of a poem but also a certain *legibility* of this displacement of identity and identification afforded by poetic form.

This decompression of the 'we' takes place in Oppen's last collection, *Primitive*. In 'Neighbors' Oppen asks, 'shall we | say more' – and then does, repeating 'we' six times in the poem's final nine lines, avowing finally that 'to each | other we | will speak'.[47] Again, not 'do', but 'will': a deferred speech. And elsewhere in *Primitive*, in 'Disasters', we return to this preceding pronoun: not 'I' but the displacement of 'I' by 'another': 'my life | narrows my life | is another'.[48] The poem provides a space for 'my life' to be there, even if it is only to be there for another. It is 'my life' but not mine, not for me, 'another'. 'My' life is an image, an object lost to 'me', my interior now exterior, a pseudo-object. In Oppen's poem measuring the inward extent of subjectivity means supposing a common voice or identity – even when that common displaces and exposes that identity to its multiple terrains. We 'cannot' say common sense, then, to the extent that saying it means saying the displacement of an identity that could say it. This is the poetics Oppen makes available: the possibility of writing to another who remains unknown and nonpresent to that writing, mere sociability without communication, the legibility without communicative determination imagined by Kant.

Notes

1. Oppen, George, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Davidson (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003), p. 178.
2. Bonnie Costello, *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017). Although her study focuses on Auden, she points out that Oppen would also have been an appropriate subject (211).
3. See Katja Crone, 'Collective Attitudes and the Sense of Us: Feeling of Commitment and Limits of Plural Self-Awareness', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 49.1 (2018), pp. 76–90.
4. Frederic Jameson, 'Globalization and Political Strategy', *New Left Review*, second series 4 (July–August 2000), pp. 49–68, 68.
5. Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics* (London and New York: Verso, 2015), p. 7.
6. Not least Mouffe's own, since Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Verso, 2001). Also consider the global 'common' imagined by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, CA: Harvard University Press, 2009), which reconceptualises territory as plural in ways cognate to my own reading of lyric 'terrain'.
7. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, *The Lyric Theory Reader* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 14: 'various historical verse genres gradually became "lyric" as reading practices shifted over the nineteenth century and were consolidated in the twentieth century'.
8. Most recently in Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
9. See Oliver Southall, 'Thus / Hides The': *Discrete Series* and the Spectre of Oppen's 1930s', *Textual Practice*, 29.6 (2015), pp. 1077–98.
10. Tim Woods, 'George Oppen and the Public Sphere', *Journal of American Studies*, 45.3 (2011), pp. 443–62.
11. Marjorie Perloff, 'The Shipwreck of the Singular: George Oppen's "Of Being Numerous"', revised ed., www.marjorieperloff.com/essays/oppen-numerous (2008) [orig. ed. *Ironwood* 26 (1985)]. For Perloff Oppen aestheticises politics by emptying its content in the space of the poem.
12. Oren Izenberg, *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 106. Izenberg reads Oppen's 'antiphenomenal' silences as an aesthetic spacing of the poem. Similarly, John Wilkinson describes Oppen's poetics in these emptying/obscuring terms: 'the glass through which the world is beheld becomes the world itself, an autonomous sphere of language lifted out of the social and categorically noncreative': 'The Glass Enclosure: Transparency and Glitter in the Poetry of George Oppen', *Critical Inquiry*, 36.2 (2010), pp. 218–38, 232.
13. George Oppen, 'The Mind's Own Place', in *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*, ed. by Stephen Cope (Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2007).
14. See David Herd, '"That They Are There": George Oppen, Alain Badiou, and the Politics of Number', *Comparative American Studies*, 8.1 (2013), pp. 57–76 for a politics of 'numbering' rather than 'counting' in *Of Being Numerous* through the 'numerate word' (66).
15. Rob Halpern, 'Becoming a Patient of History: George Oppen's Domesticity and the Relocation of Politics', *Chicago Review* 58.1 (2013), pp. 50–74, 53, 55.

16. In this way we can understand what Peter Middleton calls the 'open' 'opacity' of Oppen's material as a form of exterior-interior ['Open Oppen: Linguistic Fragmentation and the Poetic Proposition', in *Textual Practice*, 24.4 (2010), pp. 623–48]. Libbie Rifkin describes this 'domestic' 'process of feminization' which 'embodies the political': '"That We Can Somehow Add Each to Each Other?": George Oppen Between Denise Levertov and Rachel Blau DuPlessis', *Contemporary Literature*, 51.4 (2010), pp. 703–35, 707. Similarly, John Lowney, in *History, Memory, and the Literary Left* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), suggests that 'Of Being Numerous' 'moves increasingly from an abstract national public [...] to the interior social spaces of more intimate social relations' (200–201).
17. Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, p. 24.
18. As Ross Wilson demonstrates, it is both subjective and universal, *Subjective Universality in Kant's Aesthetics* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009). See also Eli Friedlander, *Expressions of Judgment: An Essay on Kant's Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), who argues that Kant establishes his aesthetic in the kind of 'neutral' position I am putting forward here for the lyric, encompassing both particular and universal while occupying neither position.
19. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 175/5: 295.
20. Ibid., 98/5: 212.
21. Ibid., 104/5: 219.
22. Immanuel Kant, 'Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View', in Günter Zöller and Robert B. Louden (eds.), *Immanuel Kant: Anthropology, History, and Education*, trans. Robert B. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 344, 343/7: 240.
23. For Arendt, the 'feeling' of pleasure which 'as a feeling seems so utterly private and noncommunicative is actually rooted in this community sense and is therefore open to communication', *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. by Ronald Beiner (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 72. Arendt turns Kantian aesthetic 'interiority' into political 'exteriority'.
24. For the implications of the limitation of cognition on Kant's politics, see Susan Meld Shell, *Kant and the Limits of Autonomy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
25. Rodolphe Gasché, *The Idea of Form* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). See also Béatrice Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge*, trans. by Charles T. Wolfe (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), for 'mereness' in judgement, and Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA, London: MIT Press, 1996), for the turn to art.
26. Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, p. 164.
27. Quoted in Peter Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 40.
28. Ibid., p. 42.
29. Rachel Blau DuPlessis (ed.), *The Selected Letters of George Oppen* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 22.
30. Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?', ed. by Mary J. Gregor, *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 11–21. Kant distinguishes between 'maturity', *Mündigkeit*, and 'immaturity, *Unmündigkeit*, according to a capacity to speak — in the German meaning to have a mouth, to speak (which relates to English 'infancy', from the Latin 'in+fant', not speaking) – as the condition for both private and public reason.

31. George Oppen, *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*, ed. Stephen Cope (Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2007), p. 36.
32. Oppen, *New Collected Poems,* p. 178.
33. Ibid., p. 47.
34. Ibid., p. 164.
35. Ibid., p. 177.
36. Ibid., p. 163.
37. Ibid., pp. 165–6.
38. Ibid., p. 181.
39. Ibid., p. 163.
40. Ibid., p. 165.
41. Ibid., p. 167.
42. Ibid., p. 173.
43. Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 186–7.
44. Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 75, 92.
45. Werner Hamacher, *Minima Philologica*, trans. Catherine Diehl and Jason Groves (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 7.
46. Hamacher, *Minima Philologica*, p. 52.
47. Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, pp. 284–5.
48. Ibid., p. 268.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.