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Poetry and Thought’s Revealing

by

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ABSTRACT

Thinking has long been a topic of interest in both philosophy and poetry but the experience of it, the phenomenological reality of thinking, has remained understudied. Utilizing Martin Heidegger’s writings on thinking and poetry, as well as various literary scholars, this thesis argues that poetry may be read as revealing the phenomenality of thought, the what-is-it-like of thinking. Through an application of Heidegger’s concept of a thinker’s “fundamental experience” and close readings of the poetry and prose writings of George Oppen, Wallace Stevens, and John Ashbery, I argue that each poet uses different lenses in his work to reveal different aspects of thinking and its phenomenality. For Oppen, the lens is clarity; for Stevens, the imagination; and for Ashbery, it is experience. I argue that although each poet illuminates different aspects of the mystery of thought, ultimately the purpose of such work is not thinking itself, but the exploration of these different concepts and how they bear upon and reveal what the process of thinking is like.
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Introduction: Poetry and Thinking

Philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) focused intensely on the act of thinking throughout his career. The books that most forcefully deal with the subject of thinking are *Introduction to Philosophy—Thinking and Poetizing*, *What Is Called Thinking?*, and the *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*. For Heidegger, thinking was a fundamental concern of both philosophy and poetry. He writes in *Introduction to Philosophy—Thinking and Poetizing* that “philosophy is the thinking of thinkers” (Heidegger, *Introduction* 11). He expands on that idea by noting that poetizing and thinking are intertwined in the best thinkers, referring specifically to Nietzsche and Hölderlin (13). Heidegger’s understanding of thinking focuses on the phenomenon as it is broadly experienced. His explication does not precisely describe the phenomenality in its particular instantiations, but instead he attempts to broadly describe what thinking consists in.¹ Heidegger is not concerned with attempting to establish a theory of the mechanism of thought, but rather with how thought may be observed and experienced through the work of another. This makes his approach to thinking particularly apt when examining how poets try and get at what thinking is. Heidegger’s focus is not on the subjective interior phenomenon of thinking, but on the outward of expression of that phenomenon. Accordingly, Heidegger’s examination is especially attuned to textual analysis, and his methodology in this respect is useful for reading the work of poets for insights into how poetry may be read to illuminate thinking.

Using Heidegger as a steppingstone, the perspective on thinking I develop here will be broadly phenomenological. A phenomenological approach to thinking means that the being of

¹ This strategy for understanding thinking bears a resemblance to his own strategy for his work on being, which is similarly concerned with its subject at a broad level.
thinking, its very essence, is the subject pursued and clarified. The being of thinking is something that has long been murky within philosophy. Although thinking has long been a topic of interest to philosophers, it has rarely been pursued as an end of study within itself. In those philosophers who came closest, such as Descartes, Kant, or Hegel, the actual subject under analysis has been consciousness, reason, or some attendant feature of mind. Thought itself has been neglected in such analyses. Heidegger, however, was one of the first philosophers to work on thought itself. This makes his analysis particularly useful for he did not treat thinking merely as a component of consciousness, reason, or another facet of mind. Similarly, Heidegger worked on understanding poetry in its very essence, and he found poetry and thinking to be quite closely related. As he writes in *Introduction to Philosophy—Thinking and Poetizing*, “thinking and poetizing exist exclusively in the realm of language. Their works and only theirs are of a linguistic ‘nature’” (44). That thinking and poetry are united by language means, for Heidegger, they both reside close to the very essence of what it means to be human. Thus, I treat Heidegger’s analysis as a baseline for approaching an understanding of thinking through poetry because he already saw the two as deeply and necessarily linked.

Heidegger writes with some degree of opacity about thinking through his three works I will be dealing with here, in my introductory discussion, but some fundamental insights about thinking can be gleaned from them. In *Introduction to Philosophy—Thinking and Poetizing* he writes, “every thinking rests on a fundamental-experience” (15). This fundamental-experience, as he refers to it, acts as the kind of base upon which the thinking of a thinker rests. For Heidegger, each thinker has one fundamental thought, a basic insight toward which all their thinking can be understood to move. Identifying this thought is the first step in coming to understand the thinker
and in appreciating how all their work attempts to extend and define that thought. This insight into the nature of a thinker’s work is particularly useful for studying the poetry of twentieth-century American writers George Oppen, Wallace Stevens, and John Ashbery. Each poet produced non-poetic writing that often explored, or demonstrated, a particular focus on exploring a concept or a thought. Those poetics essays, when read through a phenomenological lens supplied by Heidegger, help deepen our understanding of how thinking manifests in, and even as the essence of, their poetry. For Oppen, his concern was with clarity and was expressed primarily through his daybooks and prose. For Stevens, the focus was on the imagination which he explored in several late-career essays and lectures he collected in the book *The Necessary Angel* (1951). Ashbery directed his focus on attention and most clearly articulated that concern in his early and mid-career art writings, which were collected in the book *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles 1957-1987* (1989).

The great variety of these poets’ prose writings on the subjects that interest them, and the ways in which their poetry further works out these interests, bears a resemblance to Heidegger’s writings about thought. Heidegger was clear in his analysis of thought that it is not the case the thinker has to express something positive or propositional about the fundamental-experience, merely that a thinker constantly circles around this one thought, this one insight. Thus, he believed that their work ought to be read as in constant dialogue with that insight. For instance, Heidegger posits that the one thought Nietzsche is constantly returning to and elaborating upon is his concept of the eternal return; all of Nietzsche’s written work is in some way an elaboration upon this insight into fundamental-experience (*Introduction* 13). Considering the thinker and the nature of thought in this manner explains why an additional lens is useful for approaching the
work of a thinker of any kind, especially the work of a poet. Poetry is able to explore ideas and
how we grapple with them in an open-ended and exploratory fashion. It is not dependent upon
the sorts of logical rules and argumentative models found in such other areas of inquiry as
philosophy or history. Additionally, the poet is able to use the very formal properties of poetry,
such as line, meter, metaphor, and the like to further their exploration and readers’ engagement
with them. None of these poets had thinking as their primary subject; rather, they were each
attuned to the movement of thought and the way poetry could be used to explore thinking, but
each used this awareness to explore other concepts more critical to his own poetic project.

My intention is not to ignore Heidegger’s distinction between poets and thinkers. He
clearly differentiates between thinkers and poets, and he appears to hold that thinkers and poets
help to illuminate two different aspects of being through their respective uses of language.
However, Heidegger also makes allowances for “poetizing thinkers” like Nietzsche and
“thoughtful poets” like Hölderlin (Introduction 54). Even such modifications connecting the one
to the other implies a distinction. That difference is useful especially for approaching the work of
poets as possible illuminators of thought because it recognizes they do not need to be held to the
same standards as philosophers. For Heidegger, thinking takes place in philosophy, which has its
own history and expectations as a genre (Introduction 41). But I find that the same is true for
poetry, albeit with its own history and expectations. The poet who thinks and the thinker who
poetizes reveal the connection between these two facets of being.

That a thinker moves from out of a fundamental experience is a basic principle for
Heidegger in understanding the work of thinkers. Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal return is
essential for understanding all his writings, and especially his poetry that Heidegger sees as
critical. However, he also understands Nietzsche’s fundamental experience to be a concept, an idea, that all his predecessor’s writings work towards elucidating and elaborating. Grasping this central concept, for Heidegger, would allow one to grasp Nietzsche’s thought as a whole.

This is not the case for poets, though. A poet does not work in concepts in the same way a thinker does. Heidegger’s formulation of the fundamental experience is formulated specifically in relation to thinkers; but given the close relationship between thinkers and poets, a corollary may exist in the work of poets. Heidegger often uses Hölderlin and other poets to illustrate concepts in other philosophers or to exemplify his own ideas about the nature of thinking. For example, he cites a late hymn of Hölderlin as illustrative of the ability for thought to think into the abyss (Bremen 107.) For Heidegger, poetry is able to state the actuality of a thing through the pureness of language, and it is not weighed down in the technicalities of philosophy and philosophical argumentation. Thinking of poets as having a kind of fundamental-experience like what he associates with philosophers’ oeuvres, or some equivalent to such a concept, then, is to suggest that a poet has an experience of something that is more experiential than conceptual. It also suggests that such a fundamental-experience is an animating factor in their work. Nietzsche’s fundamental-experience of the eternal return is heavily conceptual; although there may be experiential aspects to the eternal return, it is largely a conceptual principle that Nietzsche, in Heidegger’s reading of him, sees as a structuring aspect of reality. For Heidegger’s Nietzsche, everything he writes is illuminative of the conceptual ramifications of the eternal return. For a poet, though, the fundamental-experience is more precisely just that: a basic happening the poet works through and expresses in their work. While a fundamental experience for the thinker is more conceptual with experiential possibilities, a poet’s fundamental-
experience is more experiential with conceptual possibilities. This notion of the fundamental-
experience is also helpful in approaching a poet’s work as it provides a kind of extra lens for
interpreting it.

An additional lens is important for reading the work of a poet as thought because of the
ways poetry is distinguished from ordinary language. Unlike daily propositional language, poetry
includes such distinguishing features as rhythm, rhyme, metaphor, alliteration, syntax, and the
like, all of which contribute to poetry being a method of communication that is more opaque and
diffusive than ordinarily expressive language. Regarding this feature of poetry, Peter Boxall and
Peter Nicholls write that it is “not just that poetry provides a medium in which to articulate ideas
but that its particular formal features—rhythm, metre, syntax, musicality, image, and so forth—
offer a singular potentiality for ways of thinking that lie outside or in opposition to those
determined by ‘ordinary’ propositional language” (Boxall and Nicholls 1).

The ability for poetry to work outside the usual structures of propositional language is
one of the primary motivations for my approaching poetry as thought. Other critics have made
similar arguments. For instance, Angus Fletcher, in his book *Colors of the Mind*, makes the
argument that imaginative literature is an avenue for the exploration of thought, an avenue that is
at least as good as philosophy. He takes it as routinely accepted that philosophy is often regarded,
and often regards itself, as the best place “to handle or to present the serious consequentiality of
thought proper” (Fletcher 5). A space outside of philosophy allows us to regard the “mystery of thought, the wonder of it” in a capacity that figures this mystery and wonder as essential to the act of thinking itself (5). Accordingly, regarding imaginative works as objects of thought allows for us to break free of the “logocentric model” so that we may treat imaginative literature as works that “can do things that a logically ordered treatise can never do” (5). By approaching imaginative literature, including poetry, my exclusive focus, as such objects of thought that can teach what thinking is as much as a work of philosophy, we are better able to understand what thinking is at a basic, phenomenological level. Pushing the mystery of thought to the center of the analysis, which is a benefit of reading poetry as illuminative of the experience of thinking, arrives at a central difficulty of thought, which is providing a stable definition of what thinking is.

Heidegger skirts the problem of defining thought by situating it within its phenomenality. He states that “we come to know what it means to think when we ourselves try to think” (WICT 3). Such an understanding of thinking finds its definition in the act of thinking itself, viewing thinking as in some way irreducible to any other linguistic framing. A helpful figure in approaching this problem is Angus Fletcher. Although his work is not founded in a phenomenological approach like Heidegger’s, Fletcher’s argument is useful because it specifically illuminates the way thinking is captured and presented in literature. He notes that

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2 Fletcher specifically ties this attitude of philosophy back to Descartes, while also noting that J.L. Austin regarded the imagination as “parasitic” and that Gottlob Frege was concerned with restricting thoughts to “propositions or propositional elements which are virtually those of mathematics, and those alone” (5). It is also worth noting that even though Heidegger has great regard for the power of imaginative literature to expand the horizons of what thinking is, there are moments when he also sees philosophy as the primary place for thinking. For instance, he writes in What Is Called Thinking? that “thinking properly takes place in philosophy” (5).
attempting to define the word ‘thinking’ is in some way unhelpfully reductive. A difficulty that appears in trying to establish a linguistic framework for thinking is that this results in the term being “embodied, defined, and complicated by the forms and functions of natural language” (Fletcher 10). Thus, the reality of thought can be missed in favor of the reality of the linguistic terms we are using to understand it. Fletcher refers to this fallacy as the “linguistic bias” (10). Against this bias he wants to establish a way of reading he refers to as “noetics,” which would be a strategy for reading focusing on the “process [sic] of thinking as an aspect of literary (or other) discourse” (9). This notion of the noetic is helpful for reading poetry as representative of thinking. Extending Fletcher’s ideas in my own studies of Stevens, Oppen, and Ashbery, focusing on the process of thought will mean focusing on the various ways a poem’s formal elements enable a reading of poetry that illuminates thinking as a dynamic phenomenon. Establishing that poetry in its formal structures and concerns is illuminative of the process of thinking will enhance our sense of what thinking is, and such a critical endeavor will aid in revealing some of the phenomenality of thought, that aspect of thinking that makes it difficult to explain or define except in any but a cursory fashion.

With a preliminary notion of thought thus established, a preliminary poetics will be useful for establishing what lyric poetry is and how it functions. What poetry is and how it functions is far from obvious, not something that can be taken for granted. All three poets who will be examined produced shorter lyric works, even though they all engaged with long forms at times; at their core, each of them is a lyric poet. Accordingly, establishing a theory of the lyric, and how its conventions and formulas may aid, or hinder, the process of thought is useful. A place to start could be Heidegger’s thinking about poetry. Although he wrote extensively on
poetry and connected it to thought, a difficulty with Heidegger’s understanding of poetry is that
it is deeply interwoven with his ideas about being and language. As the current project does not
venture into those areas but is instead focused on how poetry can enact a kind of thinking on the
page, a poetics more attuned to the performative aspects of poetry is necessary. This is because
the lyric is a more subject oriented type of poetry, and the various ways in which the lyric may be
understood as enacting a voice, that requires an understanding of the performative.

Jonathan Culler’s *Theory of the Lyric* provides one such account of a performative
poetics. He identifies four primary parameters for distinguishing what the lyric poem is and how
it functions. The first is that a lyric possesses an enunciative quality, which is seen in the way
that the lyric is constantly linked with aural qualities and a speaker expressing the words of the
poem (Culler 34). Although this characteristic is undeniable in the lyric tradition and the critical
tradition about the form, Culler cites several lyric poets who do not explicitly encourage a reader
to consider the poem as delivered by a speaker in any traditional sense. Instead, these poems
“create *effects* of voicing, of aurality” (35, emphasis added). The distinction between creating the
effects of voicing rather than simply presenting a voice is important for understanding how not
only the lyric poem functions, but also how the poem may be understood as engaging in an
illumination of thinking. In the same way that a lyric poem may be understood to create the
effect of speaking, something about the way thought works often has a similar quality. In
thought, one often feels oneself to be voicing words internally. In reading a lyric poem as
effectively voiced, even if not actually voiced, the reader can experience a kind of verisimilitude
with how thinking subjectively feels. Kendall Walton identifies this quality of poetry as a
particularly strong reason why it so readily approaches the status of thought. Since poetry is
composed of “phrases, sentences, paragraphs, verses which readers can, if they wish, use themselves,” the poem can come to reside within the reader and be used to articulate and assert their own thoughts (Walton 462). Lyric has this ability because of its capacity to mimic aspects of speech and voicing.

This, it should be noted, is a departure from Heidegger’s understanding of thought. For Heidegger, thought is a much less subject-focused phenomenon. Although individuals take part in thinking, he also understands thinking as a broader phenomenon not restricted to a certain subjectivity. Heidegger writes in his essay “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking” that “metaphysics thinks beings as beings in the manner of a representational thinking that gives grounds” (Basic Writings 432). Thinking is not an activity locked within the mind of a singular subjectivity but is something that metaphysics itself takes part in. Elsewhere Heidegger speaks of philosophy as thinking and of thinking itself as engaging in thinking. This conception of thinking differs dramatically from the usual meaning of the term, where thinking is understood as a phenomenon that takes place within an individual’s own mind. Instead, Heidegger understands thinking as a more objective mode that many different kinds of things can take part in, such as not merely subject individuals, but even an abstract concept like metaphysics.

Returning to Walton, he suggests that one of the strengths of reading poetry as what he terms “thoughtwriting” is that it allows readers to expand their perspectives and take on new ideas, while still remaining rooted in their own unique subjectivity (Walton 468). I am suggesting

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3 Walton focuses on this to work out his notion of a thoughtwriter, someone who composes thoughts in a way a speechwriter composes speeches. This idea has certain resemblances to how Heidegger understands thinkers like Nietzsche and Holderlin to function insofar as they both work to express thoughts that can be used to reveal aspects of being, but this idea, although interesting, is not fully germane to the work of this present paper.
that a strength of reading these poets as engaged in the enacting of thought is that it helps reveal our own subjective ways of thinking to us. Each of the poets under discussion enacts thinking in different ways and focusing on this helps illuminate our own thinking as a subjective experience. A difficulty with Heidegger’s understanding is that he abstracts thinking to a point where it no longer resembles our ordinary experience of thinking. Here, however, I am focused on reading poetry as helping to demonstrate some of the phenomenon of thought in its subjective form. Culler’s focus on the enunciative aspects of lyric poetry, because it foregrounds the voice-like quality of lyric poetry, is helpful for approaching it as a kind of thoughtwriting.

Culler’s second parameter for lyric poetry is that it attempts “to be itself an event rather than the representation of an event” (Culler 35). He identifies this aspect of lyric poetry as going somewhat against the grain of Western notions of understanding literature as mimesis, or the work of art’s representation of something actual in the external world. In his understanding of it as event, the lyric is not simply reporting on an event or relating something has happened. Rather the telling of the events in the poem are overtaken by the “present of lyric enunciation” (36). The lyric is not merely relating a past event but is itself enacting in an eternal present through the lyric voicing.

The third parameter for the lyric is that it engages in the ritualistic, which Culler identifies as encountered in several ways through a lyric. It can be a ritualistic context, such as in love poems; the forms of pattern in rhythm and rhyme can invoke the ritualistic; or “generally everything that recalls song or lacks a mimetic or representational function” helps ground the lyric in the realm of the ritualistic (37). Culler notes that a peculiarity of lyric’s ritualistic nature is that it often seems to require the reader to be engaged in the ritual, and that this engagement
takes place through reading the poem. He writes that many lyrics seem to want the reader to be more than just an audience or spectator of the poem, but that they actually require that the reader is a “performer of the lines” (37). The reader then is an active participant in the ritual the lyric embodies and so, in some sense, is critical for the ritual to take place. Furthermore, the participation of the reader in the lyric ritual bears resemblances to the participation of the reader in Walton’s thoughtwriting. In some sense, it seems that considering the lyric as a vehicle for the expression of thought, and the role the ritualistic plays in this, means considering the lyric as a ritualistic representation of thought. That is, the lyric is a stylized and ritualized enactment of thought; it is not thought performed or engaged in the way one would do so just thinking to oneself, with all its attendant messiness and chaotic turns, but is instead pruned and molded into the ritualized expression it finds in the lyric. Moving forward, this will be an important insight into the nature of the lyric as thought, as it helps to identify some of the utility in pushing thought into what could be seen as the unnatural forms of the lyric poem. The ritualized, interactive aspect of lyric poetry can be read as a way of distilling thought into a more approachable form. This understanding of the lyric is certainly removed from that of Heidegger, who sees it as something close to pure language and thus being. However, it is worth noting that Heidegger understands thinking to have both a historical component and a metaphysical component, and insofar as that is the case, thinking has a social component. Given this [NOUN], utilizing a

\[\text{\textsuperscript{4}}\] The historical aspect of thinking is given a detailed exploration in Heidegger’s Freiburg lectures of 1957, which were published in the book *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures: Insight into That Which Is and Basic Principles of Thinking* (2012). In particular, Lecture II (pp. 92-107) focuses on the historical aspect of thinking.
poetics that explicitly draws in the social aspects of poetry as a socially conceived and enacted form enables a more fruitful elucidation of poetry and thinking.

The fourth parameter Culler identifies for lyric poetry is that it is often explicitly hyperbolic (37). It is a commonplace that the lyric poem engages in some degree of hyperbole, and Culler sees this aspect of the lyric as endowing the world with additional meaning. He writes that “lyrics hyperbolically risk animating the world, investing mundane objects or occurrence with meaning” (38). This use of hyperbole gives a “spiritual dimension to matter” (37). Culler comments that this aspect of the lyric should not be neglected as it is often one of the qualities readers respond to most forcefully when engaging with a poem, and insofar as the lyric poem is a model for understanding thought this aspect can be seen as underscoring another nuance of thinking. It seems that the lyric’s hyperbolic quality resembles thought’s own hyperbolic quality, or thought’s ability to invest things with additional reason. The lyric poem’s ability to mimic the overwrought way of communicating thought can be prone to is in some way most indicative of the way the lyric acts as thought itself because the lyric poem, like thought generally, is not the hyperrational act some may want it to be.

In what follows, I explore the poetry of Oppen, Stevens, and Ashbery and demonstrate how their poetry may be profitably read as enacting thought and revealing some of the mystery of thought’s phenomenality. As ought to be clear by this point, even discussing thought is a difficult and fraught topic, and the difficulty only increases when attempting to describe what thinking is like. Through a careful reading of Oppen’s poetry, I will demonstrate how his concern with achieving clarity in his poetry, and the attendant ethical implications Oppen felt, resulted from this focus. With Stevens, I will show how his engagement with the idea of imagination
displays the possibilities and limitations of thinking as his poetry effectively dramatizes a
struggle between the imagination and reality. Finally, Ashbery’s attempt to capture the
“experience of experience” leads him to craft a poetry of generalized experience, something that
anyone can fit into and follow as a kind of template for thinking about experience broadly.
Ultimately my concern with approaching thinking and poetry in this fashion is to arrive at a place
where the way thought is manifested in poetry is understood as the beginning of a poetics of
thought, but not the end.
Chapter One: George Oppen—Thinking and Clarity

In a late entry in one of his daybooks, George Oppen (1908–1984) writes that “art can provide almost anything from wisdom to waltzes. But what art means to do is not to communicate experiences, but to communicate the ‘realness’ of experience” (Oppen 173). Art communicates, yes, but it does not communicate in a naive way. Rather, art communicates the very experience of its object itself. If Oppen’s poetry is read as engaging in thought itself, which is a common way of critically reading it, then it may be the case that his work can be read as conveying the very experience of thinking. His art is a poetry that, in sometimes subtle and other times explicit ways, is about thought and thinking.

Oppen’s poetry evinces a longstanding concern with thinking and mentation, as well as with articulating a poetics attuned to the nature and movement of thought. Indeed, the word ‘mind’ occurs frequently within his poetry, daybooks, and papers. The primary prose work often read as a statement of his poetics is entitled “The Mind’s Own Place” (1963). As even the short essay’s title suggests, Oppen was intimately aware of the importance of mind and thinking in poetic practice. In that essay, he writes that a metaphor 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” (Selected Prose 31). This list of qualities are all qualities and functions of mind,

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5 One of the best works on this method of reading Oppen is Thinking Poetics: Essays on George Oppen, edited by Steven Shoemaker. Most of the essays in this volume approach Oppen from this perspective.
and they link up with his ethical concerns that I will explore later in this essay. This awareness means that it is not difficult to find instances in his poetry that explicitly feature mind, which makes establishing a poetics around the concept amenable to him. Likewise, his working papers are replete with analysis of mind and thinking. He is, simply put, ideal for this kind of reading.

His well-known insistence on clarity is partly a motivating factor for my choice of him as a subject. This insistence manifests itself in an assiduous attention to the poem’s object and a lack of concern with traditional features of poetry. Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas reads Oppen’s concern with a lack of rhetorical contrivance to be evidence of his concern with ethics. “Oppen’s spare language must avoid the more obvious poetic or rhetorical effects in order to maximize the sense of ethical seriousness and urgency” (Twitchell-Waas 328). The ethical dimension of Oppen’s concern for language is clear, but the poet’s interest in ethics can also be read as manifesting a concern for thought. He is not trying to force his ethical views on the reader, but is instead concerned with presenting the poem as clearly as possible because of an ethical compulsion. Indeed, he is presenting the insight behind the ethics, in many cases.

This concern for an ethics of clarity, as it were, is linked to a stated distrust of language. This distrust can be understood as a kind of ethical need to be true to thought. Thus, there is an ethical need for the thinker to be true to what they are saying, and Oppen viewed words suspiciously because of their ability to obfuscate the thing the thinker is trying to express. He writes in his daybook “words are a constant enemy: the thing seems to exist because the word does” (Oppen 53). This sentiment surfaces regularly in Oppen’s writings and is evidence for not only how closely he thought about language, which is a necessity for a poet, but also of how much he was concerned with the possibility of abusing language. Just as frequently as he writes
about distrusting language, he also writes about thought. In his daybook he writes, “I can’t tell people what I [sic] think” (65). Because this line appears in a daybook, a personal document meant to help organize thoughts, record reflections, and function generally like a combination of a diary and a notebook, it is possible to read Oppen as claiming he had a thought he was literally unwilling to share with others. However, given the context of where the line occurs in his writing, it is more likely that he is commenting on how difficult it is to convey a thought to others, whether it be in his poetry or in his private daybooks. This difficulty of attempting to convey a thought to others is part of its mystery. Simply telling others what thought is is difficult. In a sense, one of the motivations for Oppen’s writing of poetry is to try and break through the mystery of thought and convey some of the phenomenality of thinking in his spare, mindful poems.

Earlier in his daybook he writes that “those who do not attempt to write, who have not written anything down, like those we do only mental arithmetic have not carried the processes very far” (59). Writing and expression are deeply linked to thought. The act of writing, it seems, is part of how the thought is developed. At least for Oppen, this is the case. Perhaps generally writing may be understood as a way of concretizing the idea. In so doing, the idea is elaborated. This is telling as far as Oppen’s habit of keeping daybooks is concerned, but the need to write to elaborate a thought also provides a lens for approaching his poetry. Although the case that daybooks are private documents and work for the person writing as both author and reader, and poetry is a more public phenomenon where one is writing for others, both forms of writing emphasize thinking. In the daybooks, the author is thinking privately, working things out. In poetry, the author is presenting a more complete thought that is made available for both the poet
and the reader. Given the thought he is trying to express, given the necessity of writing to express the thought and that this act of expression itself is necessary for the very process of thinking, it is only natural to read his poetry as attuned to the nature and structure of thought because of how he is aware of the obscurity of thought.

Such a concern with thought and mind comes through in Oppen’s reading. He was a deep and committed reader of European philosophy and was particularly committed to reading the work of Martin Heidegger. In an essay detailing the poet’s appreciation of this philosopher, Peter Nicholls notes that Oppen’s engagement with Heidegger’s thought was “sustained and surprisingly systematic” (Nicholls, Thinking Poetics 94). Oppen “seems to have kept up” with English translations and publications of Heidegger about as soon as they appeared (94). It is unsurprising that Heidegger was of interest to Oppen. The two shared many concerns, not the least of which was a reflective insistence on thinking as an activity. As noted above in my introduction, Heidegger insisted on poetry and thinking as related activities in the exploration of being. Oppen’s poetry may be read as responding to these concerns.

Nicholls, for example, notes that Heidegger proposed there are two primary ways of thinking, “‘calculative’ and ‘meditative’ thinking” (95). In the former, the world is evaluated and exploited like a commodity to be used, whereas in the latter the goal is not to capture the world but to fundamentally alter one’s thinking and thus one’s being, to achieve a greater alignment of the two (95). Nicholls notes that Oppen carefully read Heidegger’s works elaborating these ideas, and thus he implies Oppen was in some way furthering Heidegger’s project by reflecting specifically on truth and its value, in a way consistent with Heidegger’s thinking. Nicholls’ close reading of Oppen’s poetry foregrounds several themes from Heidegger’s philosophy, such as
being and place. Being was, of course, Heidegger’s primary concern throughout the entirety of his thinking, and it is the concept where he found poetry to be particularly important as it reveals key aspects of being because of its status as a kind of pure language. Nicholls’ reading of Oppen posits that his poems reveal being and the world as deeply intertwined, which is also a key theme of Heidegger’s (102). This way of reading Oppen is certainly logical and well-founded; the ways he assimilated the thinking of Heidegger make it only natural to read the two together. But it is not the only way of reading Oppen with Heidegger.

Nicholls’ reading foregrounds a specific kind of thinking that is predicated around thinking itself. This suggests that the poem is, in some sense, only ever about thought. Heidegger elaborates this point by writing that “poetry wells up only from devoted thought thinking back, recollecting” (Heidegger, What is Called 11). Poetry arises, almost necessarily it seems, from this kind of “thinking back.” This does not mean that poetry is necessarily concerned with the historical or with historicizing the object of poetry. Instead, following Heidegger’s point stated above, poetry is generated out of a kind of reflection that Heidegger associates with a backward gaze, a “thinking back” (11).

As Heidegger notes above, that act of looking back is performed in the poem and that performance is the poem itself. Thus, the poem enacts thought. It is the very shape of thought, its line breaks mimicking the movement of thought. Thinking has a strongly linguistic component, which philosopher Troy Jollimore claims is one of the key strengths of poetic thought. He writes that “a linguistic instrument that is capable of capturing the flow and play of ideas” would be very powerful in attempting to understand the world (Jollimore 6). The power of poetry, then, lies in its ability “of getting at some truths, or even at an overall depiction of ‘the truth’” (6).
Poetry is able to gesture towards truth through its ability to capture the movement of thought. The thought is formed in words and, taking a cue from Oppen, we might say it is part of the very process of thinking that it be put down in words for others. Poetry is this communicating of thought to the world. The poem can, therefore, be fruitfully read as a kind of direct transcription of thought into words. This transcription fulfills a dual role: it is both for the reader the poet is thinking with, and it also is a way for the poet to put their thoughts into action through the poem’s form.

Writing about the poem’s action, Heidegger writes that “in the poem’s speaking the poetic imagination gives itself utterance” (Poetry, Language, Thought 197). The poem gives form to what he here calls the “poetic imagination.” Heidegger also identifies a key aspect of language as its essentially communicative nature. He writes, simply enough, “language speaks” (Poetry, Language, Thought 190). The speaking of language, the act of thinking in the poetic imagination, these are all intricately bound into the creative act of poetry. This thinking act of poetry is congruent with Oppen’s approach not only to poetry but also to thinking in general. Michael Heller notes that Oppen’s position towards poetry is one of “contemplation and re-contemplation rather than consumption” (Heller 148). Oppen thought over the same themes and issues repeatedly, engaging in a creative act that was itself on repeat. This repetition may be read as a way of clarifying the thought, a way of working toward a clear exposition of what Oppen is trying to express in the poem.

Contemplation, of course, is a kind of thought-activity, and in Oppen’s poetry contemplation and thinking are united. The thinking back remarked upon above also bears elements of contemplation. Oppen’s book Of Being Numerous (1968) contains two long poems,
both deeply concerned with engaging the social. Nicholls writes in *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* that the poems in *Of Being Numerous* are marked by a sustained occupation with “the political pressures of the time” (83). Although Oppen’s poetry had always been marked by a level of involvement with societal and political concerns, and Marxist thought was a well-known key component in his poetry, the poems in *Of Being Numerous* mark a particular kind of engagement with the social. While the title poem may be read as a meditation on the struggle between singularity and plurality within both an individual and a society, the other long poem in the collection, “Route,” is a clear recollection of Oppen’s wartime service. This subject matter is itself an engagement with the social, insofar as the poem’s speaker is positioned in a meditative mode. Indeed, the poem begins with the speaker reflecting in the third stanza: “I have seen too many young people become adults, young friends become old people, all that is not ours” (Oppen, *New Collected Poems* 192). In this expanding outward from the speaker to reflect on youth, aging, and presumably the trials that can make “young friends become old people,” a social world of many is established and thought through. Yet beyond the acknowledgement of the social world is also a thinking back that animates the poem’s sections where the speaker struggles with his wartime service.

In “Route,” Oppen engages in a sustained kind of thinking back, quite literally, in its plainly autobiographical reflections drawn from his wartime service. The poem is made up of fourteen numbered sections, featuring fragmentary reflections on contemporary life with its “Cars on highways filled with speech.” These fragments are combined quickly and jarringly with lines that seem to reflect Oppen’s wartime service, such as “Imagine a man in the ditch, / The wheels of the overturned wreck / Still spinning—” (Oppen, *New Collected Poems* 198). This
incorporative movement all occurs within the brief space of the same section of the long poem. In this section alone, we can see how Oppen moves between recollection and contemplation, diverting immediately from these divergent observations to a concluding two lines that are almost an *ars poetica*: “I don’t mean he despairs, I mean if he does not / He sees in the manner of poetry” (198). This section, in particular, demonstrates an enactment of thought. Each line is composed as if it is a discrete thought formulated after a cognitive process has taken place. For instance, the statement “Cars on the highway filled with speech” seems to occur after the speaker has observed cars on a highway and is imagining them filled with language. But the speaker realizes that language cannot exist without people, and a new thought arises: “People talk, they talk to each other” (198). The speaker moves from imagining the frame of the car merely filled with words to knowing that words cannot be divorced from the people speaking them. It would be impossible for the cars to be filled with speech if there was no one in them speaking, and so the speaker fills in their thinking with the acknowledgment that people are speaking to one another in the cars. The line repeats the assertion that the people are talking to each other, as if the speaker has trouble initially grasping the fact of the people speaking.\(^6\) The line of thought is not broken, however; the line of the poem is uninterrupted except for the comma (“People talk, they talk…”). The comma here is like a stutter in the thinking of the line. As the speaker struggles to change their thinking to acknowledge the role played by people talking, the comma is the grammatical enactment of the stutter in that thought taking place.

A stanza break then occurs, and we are confronted with an entirely new situation: “Imagine a man in the ditch” (198). The stanza break itself is telling, as it indicates a kind of gap

\(^6\) This itself echoing Heller’s observation of the importance of re-contemplating to Oppen.
in thought. This is not just another thought occurring after that about cars and speech, but rather a new imagining altogether. Indeed, it functions as an imperative to the audience to imagine, whether that audience is someone else or Oppen himself. For some reason, the speaker now “imagine[s] a man in the ditch.” This as if the speaker’s reflections on “People talk[ing]” has made the speaker imagine a catastrophe. It is not clear here if the speaker is remembering an event or instead willing an event to be created in the mind. At this stage, all we see is the man in the ditch. The speaker’s attention then shifts, with the next line revealing “The wheels of the overturned wreck” (198). Now the speaker is focusing on the fact of the car’s overturned wheels, unnaturally orientated away from the ground, “Still spinning—” (198). An image of the wreckage has filled the speaker’s mind, with each line focusing on a distinct impression of the wreckage. The cognitive aspect of this whole event is grounded in the imperative beginning the stanza: “imagine.” The poem is either a creative act or the recollection of something that happened in the past, witnessed by the speaker. Regardless of whichever possibility explains this instance, Heidegger reminds us that the poem is always an “invention” always a creative imagining, even when it seems to be simply descriptive (Poetry, Language, Thought 197).

Another stanza break occurs as the speaker comes to another series of reflections. Now, Oppen’s speaker seems to remark upon a subject by saying, “I don’t mean he despairs, I mean if he does not / He sees in the manner of poetry” (New Collected 198). Who is the subject here? Given the context, it seems to be the man in the ditch mentioned in the last stanza. Why does the man in the ditch not despair? It would be a perfectly normal feeling to have, considering he appears to be at the scene of an accident, perhaps of his own vehicle or not. But the speaker makes a point here of saying that he is not describing the man as necessarily despairing. Instead,
the speaker proposes that if the man does not despair, then he is now seeing “in the manner of poetry.” This invocation of poetry acts like a kind of *ars poetica*, commenting on the nature and art—the manner—of poetry.

However, the line does not offer any easy analysis as to what the manner of poetry is. Based on the importance attached to the man not being in despair, one can assume that seeing in the manner of poetry entails seeing without despair. But that is all. Certainly, the poem itself is absent any sense of despair or dramatization of the scene. The poem presents the thought as it is, absent any attendant emotion. Ultimately, the poem does not offer an easy analysis of what the manner of poetry is, thus leaving the reader to try and assemble the meaning for the gnomic phrase from the poem itself. If the poem is approached as the enactment of thought, as I have been showing, it may be that the manner of poetry is itself aligned with the activity of thinking and the enactment of thought. The poem demonstrates thought through its line breaks and stanzas. Each line can be read as a single, contained thought. The very way the words are written in the lines is indicative of thought and, therefore, of mind.

Indeed, two sections later in the same sequence, Oppen explicitly invokes mind. He wrote frequently in his daybooks about mind, and his philosophical reading in Heidegger and Thomas Aquinas included works on mind. Given his interest in the subject, and given the obvious relationship between mind and thought, it is worth considering some of the ways Oppen invokes mind in this poem. In section eleven, the first line demands: “Tell the life of the mind, the mind creates the finite” (*Selected Prose* 199). Tellingly and uncharacteristically for Oppen, this first line ends in a period, an end stop fully signifying the thought the line is enacting. This line reads as if it is a command, demanding the speaker to give voice to the “life of the mind.” Here, the
comma that immediately follows reads again like a stutter or hesitation in the thinking. The first half of the line begins with invoking the life of the mind and, accordingly, the vaulted consideration that brings to bear. The second half coming after the hesitation marked by the comma acts as a kind of rethinking of the initial statement of the line. The speaker begins by feeling obligated to speak of the life of the mind, and then elaborates on that by saying that “the mind creates the finite.” The notion that the mind is the creator of the finite, although not necessarily opposed to the life of the mind, immediately places a limit on mind. If mind creates the finite, then its own boundaries must be larger, at least in some sense. Yet mind itself is not infinite, or, at least, Oppen nowhere manifests a belief in mind as infinite. Thus, mind is the maker of the limited. This importantly suggests that, for Oppen, poetry can be understood as a way of telling the life of mind. Accepting, then, that poetry is the enacting of thought, we may understand the imperative to tell of the life of the mind as an imperative to enact the life of the mind, to give form to the activity of thinking.

The notion of limit that comes up in that line has a reference in an earlier section of this same poem, where the speaker says “Clarity, clarity, surely clarity is the most beautiful thing in the world, / A limited, limiting clarity” (New Collected Poems 193). This pairing of clarity with limitation is grounded by the mind. If mind is the creator of the finite, then the mind is the creator of the limit. The limit is merely the boundary of the finite, its termination and endpoint. If the question of the finite mentioned in section eleven of the poem is murky, insofar as there is a real question of how it can be the case that mind makes something finite, there may be an answer in the form of the “limited, limiting clarity.” The idea seems to be that we can only be clear about what we know, and to know something clearly requires that it be limited. We are unable to know
something infinite. Even something like the series of natural numbers, which is effectively infinite, is only known to us in a particular instantiation. We know the number one, the number twenty-five, and not a number that is beyond our capacity to name (ignoring here the problem of what it means to know a number). Thus, to know something clearly is to know something limited.7

This is where clarity comes in. As the speaker of the poem claims, “I have not and never did have any motive of poetry / But to achieve clarity” (193). The purpose of the poem is to achieve clarity, a clarity of mind revealed through its knowledge of a limit. Oppen’s daybooks bolster my reading insofar as he was evidently aware of the importance of knowledge and belief to the poem. He writes in a daybook that “when it becomes conviction it becomes poetic—and nothing but conviction is poetry” (Selected Prose 126). The “it” here must refer to a belief, beliefs which are properly understood as an integral component of knowledge. A belief, then, must be more than just something lightly held for it to be poetic. The belief must alter, or at least the way in which the believer believes the belief must alter, so that the belief becomes a conviction. What the precise difference between the two are Oppen does not say, but understanding conviction in the normal commonsense way as just a deeply held belief seems apt. The belief that becomes conviction then also becomes poetic. There is a certain logic to this thinking that becomes clearer under inspection. A minor belief is not something that is going to warrant the writing of a poem. The belief that it is raining is not going to provide the impetus for

7 Indeed, this point about mathematical numbers was one Oppen was clearly familiar with. “Route” is a serial poem, and serial poems are a frequent form in Oppen’s oeuvre. In fact, his first book, Discrete Series (1934), is itself a serial poem and uses a mathematical principle for the title and compositional strategy.
composing a poem, but a conviction about the rain may. Oppen does not say that the conviction generates poetry, but merely that the conviction is itself poetic. This section demonstrates the importance of conviction with its repeated insistence on the value of clarity. Indeed, the poem enacts conviction with its repetition of the word “clarity.” As if the speaker is stuck on the importance of clarity, possessed by a conviction of the value of clarity, the speaker says twice “Clarity, clarity” (New Collected Poems 193). The speaker then elaborates on the importance of clarity by claiming that “clarity is the most beautiful thing in the world” (193). The poem perfectly captures the importance of clarity in the enactment of the thought striving towards clarity. The reader is made aware of clarity’s importance through the repetition of the word and in the diction of the lines which contain no modifying words that distract from the essential declarative sentiment they express.

The fifth section of “Route” embodies a notion of limit in its structure. Here, the act of recollection, central to the creation of poetry according to Heidegger, is presented. This is the well-known section where Oppen writes evidently autobiographically of a part of his wartime service. This section is in prose, a decision that in itself suggests a kind of limit. It is as if Oppen is suggesting that poetry cannot convey everything, that some things need to be written down in plain prose. Yet, the section is clearly a work of recollection, the generative act for poetry. However, the recollective act was not powerful enough, perhaps, to generate poetry here. Jasmine Kitses, in her analysis of Oppen’s use of the colon, reads “Route” as embodying a kind of breakdown of language. She writes that “in a normal scenario, language is a set of self-contained receptacles” that adheres to a certain level of understandability (Kitses 285). However, in “Route” what Oppen is doing is “the complete disorientation and defamiliarization of
language” (285). In Kitses’ reading, the poems in “Route” struggle against comprehensibility, and the fifth section, especially, since it breaks with poetry, demonstrates a certain breakdown of language. Kitses sees in this the problem of war, the ethics of killing and the trauma of surviving. She argues that “there is no logical way to ‘present the circumstances’ when the circumstances themselves cannot be rationalized and when the options of a dilemma are not really options” (285). Oppen is overwhelmed by the war, and he is overwhelmed by recollecting the war.

Perhaps this is a fair reading. Consider that in “The Mind’s Own Place” Oppen acknowledges there is a limit to what can be put into poetry. He writes that “it is possible to say anything in abstract prose, but a great many things one believes will not substantiate themselves in the concrete materials of the poem” (Selected Prose 32). Here belief comes up again, with the plain statement that many things we believe cannot be put into poetry. We can then try reading the fifth section of “Route” as showing the limits of mind and thought. Although it is the case that Oppen knows he served in the war, that he survived it, his belief about the war itself is unsettled. It has not passed into a conviction yet, and thus resists the poetic. Insofar as it resists the poetic, it resists the possibility of thought and thinking. It is also clear that Oppen was deeply affected by his wartime service. Kristin Prevallet recounts how he was a truck driver and gunner during the war, and at one point was severely wounded in an artillery attack (Prevallet 132). Forced to watch the men he was with die, he felt guilty for the rest of his life because he did not even try to move the wounded soldiers to safety, although “to do so would have been unjustifiably risky” (133). The fifth section of “Route,” then, is mired in a different kind of recollection. It is not thought reflecting candidly upon itself, but instead is thought reflecting on the traumatic. For Oppen, then, a poetics of mind stops at the traumatic. Even the power of
recollecting cannot fully bring in the traumatic. Clarity in the case of the traumatic demands a prose rendition, demonstrating the final limit of poetry.

The prose portion of “Route” does not seem to be intentional, however. As if the act of recollection in this specific instance breaks with the form of poetry, Oppen is forced to confront the memory in prose. Oppen freely uses his wartime service and reflects on it with his characteristic assiduity of thought. He states as much in section nine of his poem “Of Being Numerous” (1968). “Yet I am one of those who from nothing but man’s way of thought and one of his dialects and what has happened to me / Have made poetry” (New Collected Prose 167). Poetry is then born from a way of thinking, the specific language Oppen uses, and the events of his past. Here, he acknowledges that he utilizes a kind of thinking back in generating a poem, as well as the peculiarity of thought inherent in people. Poetry is created out of the events of the past and the processing capabilities of thought, and it is given shape in language. The long line listing all the components reads almost like a stream of consciousness listing what it takes for him to write poetry enacts the thought itself. The speaker, and here it is clearly Oppen himself, is reflecting on what it takes for him to write poetry and with the force of sudden knowing all the necessary materials for writing poetry tumbles out. The object of all this thought is then brought up quickly with the remarkably short line “Have made poetry” (167). Coming after the long line immediately before it, the short line has the effect of stopping the reflection immediately. Here is what all those items are for, the making of poetry.

Thus, thinking back is involved in making poetry. But whereas the thinking back in the prose section of “Route” revealed a memory that resists poetry, in “Of Being Numerous” there are instances of memory consistent with poetry. In section fourteen, Oppen again reflects on his
service. We read “I cannot even now / Altogether disengage myself / From those men” (171). In articulating how it is that he remains influenced by “those men,” Oppen claims an inability to be removed from their influence. The poem, however, enacts the struggle to be free from them with the short lines mimicking the struggle to escape. Unable to do so, as he was already aware from the first would be the case, he continues remembering them. He recalls how he “stood in emplacements, in mess tens, / In hospitals and sheds and hid in the gullies / Of blasted roads in a ruined country” (171). Now the poem enacts the pull of memory, with the short lines of the first stanza giving way to the longer lines containing detailed memories. Two stanzas of memories and reflections later, he asks “How forget that?” as if acknowledging the total impossibility of forgetting “those men” he served with. The poem gives shape to this act of remembrance. Given the context, it is also clearly the case that this act of remembrance is the generative force behind the poem.

There is of course more happening in the collection Of Being Numerous than Oppen’s reflection on his wartime service. Although that was a source of his thinking and a theme for his poetry, the collection as a whole and the eponymous long poem, in particular, have much more abstract themes. Paul Kenneth Naylor reads the collection as engaging in serious and sustained thinking about being, seeing, and knowing. For him, “Oppen’s words” in this collection force us to ask “how [sic] things are, not just what [sic] they are” (Naylor 100, original emphases). Oppen’s prominent use of “being” and “seeing” is intentional, to make the reader reconsider these innocuous words. That Oppen had serious philosophical interests has been noted above, and many critics have commented on Oppen’s philosophical style, especially in regard to seeing. Besides Naylor, Forrest Gander emphasizes Oppen’s reading in phenomenology and how this
impacted his poetic presentations of the phenomenal world. Gander writes that Oppen’s phenomenological approach in *Of Being Numerous* emphasizes “intersubjectivity, with its query into how it might be possible to come to terms with existence among others, human and inhuman, in a place awash with preconceptions and logocentrism” (Gander 121). Oppen is therefore trying to show how it is possible to be among a plurality of objects and events. Jollimore similarly stresses the ability of poetry to navigate plurality. He writes that because poetry is capable of capturing the flow of consciousness, it is uniquely positioned to represent the “world that might contain and be composed of elements that cannot all be brought together to fit smoothly into a single comprehensive representation or conceptual scheme” (Jollimore 6). Poetry can handle a truly pluralistic world because it is not the expectation that any single poem account for everything in the world. Plurality is certainly a key concern in “Of Being Numerous” and the notion that poetry is uniquely positioned to contend with and represent plurality may capture some of what Oppen was trying to achieve in the collection. In addition to this, I would suggest, is Oppen’s concern with presenting the very act of thinking about plurality.

John Taggart is sensitive to the thinking act manifested in Oppen’s poetry. He suggests that “in Oppen there is an attempt to use language without subversion of statement and to know the world even as the persistent and perhaps irrevocable difficulties of either are readily acknowledged” (Taggart 173). Oppen is attempting to preserve language, while still trying to gain knowledge of the world, understanding that doing both creates intense difficulties. This, in essence, is the act of trying to formulate a new way of thinking. In Taggart’s analysis, that is precisely Oppen’s goal: he wants nothing less than to produce an entirely new way of thinking about the world, and the relationship between language and world. If this is the case, then mind
must be an integral component of such a radical rethinking. Taggart suggests that Oppen is working towards a new way of thinking, yet he reads Oppen as engaged in more than just an investigation of thought. In a reading of one of Oppen’s poems, Taggart writes that “the mind, not simply the coordinator of the eyes’ information, apparently does do something” (174). Taggart’s difficulty with the mind stems from the project he reads Oppen as engaging in. He writes “the question is just what sort of life does the mind have? What value, within the larger life of the natural world?” (174) For him, Oppen is not trying to demonstrate the full complexity of mind, at least not primarily, but is instead trying to achieve a full integration of language and world.

This assertion is difficult to sustain, though, given the status of poetry. Poetry is a linguistic medium, one in which language itself can never be fully passed over or made transparent. Oppen is aware of as much. In section twenty-two of “Of Being Numerous,” he returns to his constant theme of clarity. The poem begins with a plain invocation of clarity, simply repeating the word “Clarity” (Oppen, New Collected Poems 175). A stanza break occurs, as if gathering thoughts, and then the initial outburst of thought is amplified: “In the sense of transparence [sic] / I don’t mean that much can be explained // Clarity in the sense of silence” (175, original emphasis). Both stanza breaks in this poem act like the gathering of thoughts, leading to an amplification of the main theme. The mind breaks off its thinking, and then, when the thoughts have solidified and the intention is apt, another line comes carrying the initial thought further.

The two lines in the second stanza, however, complicate a reading of what Oppen means here by clarity. The first (“In the sense of transparence [sic]”) can initially be read as stating that
clarity is a sense of transparence. In this reading, the goal of clarity is to articulate the words of
the poem in such a sense to not impede any view of the object of the poem, thereby suggesting
that the object of the poem cannot be explained. The poet, then, is not responsible for explaining
the world, but merely for presenting it, ideally in the most transparent way possible. Achieving
this would then result in a “Clarity in the sense of silence” (New Collected Poems 175).

It is, however, possible to read the lines as instead indicating the futility of the goal of
clarity. If clarity is understood as mere transparency, then not “much can be explained” and the
role of the poet is unclear. Then the true purpose of clarity would silence; a self-defeating silence
as the very act of writing a poem is to engage in a kind of speaking that breaks the silence.

Charles Bernstein is aware of this ambiguity in the project of achieving clarity. He writes that
“Oppen uses clarity as a tactic” (Bernstein 199). This tactic is a “self-justifying means of
achieving resolution through scenic motifs, statement, or parable in poems that might, given his
compositional techniques, outstrip such controlling impulses” (199). I take Bernstein to suggest
that Oppen’s thinking about clarity itself is not wholly consistent, that it is sometimes done in the
name of justifying the inclusion of standard poetic fare. In a late entry in one of his daybooks,
Oppen remarks that “clarity means, among other things, to know how the words come to
meaning” (Oppen, New Selected 235). Key in this passage is Oppen’s specification that clarity
has a plurality of meanings. His emphasis on the possibility of different and competing meanings
of “clarity” demonstrates the importance of a poetics of mind attuned to these many meanings.
Thus, although Bernstein’s specific claim that “clarity” is a “tactic” might not be fair to Oppen,
he does capture a facet of Oppen’s thinking about clarity, and presentation of clarity, that is key
for a poetics of thought.
Here we come up against a difficulty in Oppen’s concern for clarity. That difficulty lays in how deeply he is invested in a poetics of thought. As has been shown above, it is quite in keeping with his poetry to read it as representing thinking in both how the poem enacts thought on the page and brings the reader along in thinking through the poem. Yet an aspect of thought in its subjective form is the degree of ambiguity present in it. Thinking is ultimately an opaque process, one that is puzzling to describe in its phenomenological reality. Clarity in thinking is, at best, a difficult goal to achieve. When this goal is combined with the aesthetic concerns that motivate writing poetry, the ability to achieve clarity in thought further recedes because of the additional goals that come into play. In this instance, the multiplicity of meanings in ‘clarity’ is itself an indication of the toils one has to struggle against in trying to gain clarity in writing. However, it is also a strength of Oppen’s poetry as exemplifying thought that it is attuned to the multiplicity of meanings and does not eliminate any of them. This concern for thought is everywhere in his poetry. In regard to Oppen’s style, Nicholls writes that his poetic syntax is ambiguous because it refuses “to let this difficult thought degenerate into platitude” (George Oppen 104). As mentioned above, part of Oppen’s desire for clarity is an ethical concern to do right, at a basic level. That means, frequently, presenting thought in all its complexity, and doing so in a way that is attentive to thinking and what it requires. In articulating poetry that is alive to the needs of clarity, Oppen is attempting to formulate a poetry able to handle the complexities of morality and thought.
Wallace Stevens—Thinking and Imagination

Throughout his poetic career, Wallace Stevens’ (1879-1955) was focused on the mind, thinking, imagination, and how these forces interact with reality. For Stevens, the poem was an enactment of imagination. He writes in the introduction to his essay collection *The Necessary Angel* (1951) that he had “the most ardent ambitions” to study poetics and the theory of poetry (639). However, his concern was not to write “one more *Ars Poetica* [sic]” about poetic techniques and history. Instead, he was concerned with exploring “poetry itself, the naked poem, the imagination manifesting itself in its domination of words” (639).

It is this concern with the poem as a manifestation of the imagination and Stevens’ lifelong concern with articulating a poetics attuned to the imagination’s powers that make him an essential poet to consider when working through thought’s relationship to poetry. His interest in the imagination took him beyond it, specifically, to the mind, generally, and by extension into the realm of thought. Although frequently writing in a philosophical mode, his poetry stays focused on the formal elements of poetry that distinguish it: images, metaphors, and aural qualities that emphasize the aesthetic. Indeed, Stevens’ poetry is always attentive to the aesthetic. Such awareness, which causes his poems always to remain grounded in the materials of poetry, is also helpful for working towards an understanding of the ways poetry can communicate aspects of thought not normally conveyed. His aesthetic emphasis helps demonstrate what poetry can communicate as imaginative literature. Following Angus Fletcher’s work mentioned in my previous chapter, it is worth remembering that imaginative work is capable of revealing aspects of thought that strictly logico-rational literature like philosophical treatises and psychological
monographs cannot (Fletcher 5). Imaginative literature--and in the case of this essay, poetry, specifically--relies on powers of language that help to advance the thinking conveyed in the poem. For a poet like Stevens, attending to these characteristics is especially helpful in coming to understand how he works on mapping the mystery of thought. However, to begin to understand Stevens’ poetics of thinking, his meditations on the imagination have to be considered. The imagination acts as the lens through which we may better apprehend the ways his poetry works to reveal some quality of the phenomenality of thought. In what follows, I will offer a brief account of his conception of the imagination and attempt to indicate how Stevens positions the imagination in relation to reality.

In addition to poems such as “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction” (1942) and “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (1950), important works where Stevens discusses the imagination are his essays in The Necessary Angel, subtitled “Essays on Reality and the Imagination.” In particular, the first essay in the collection, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” offers an account of the relationship between imagination and reality, and how the work of art has to straddle these two areas and mediate their relationship. In the second volume of her two-volume biography of Stevens, Joan Richardson notes that Stevens wrote “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” during a particularly productive period in his life. The essay was written as a lecture in 1942, the same year Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction was published (Richardson 87). She also notes that Stevens grew to be unhappy with the essay, feeling that it, like his other essays, “rambled on for an hour’s length [but had] around only ten minutes’ worth of substance” (289). Stevens’ judgment of his own work is overly harsh, though, as his essays
For Stevens, the imagination is a faculty of mind that has a direct relationship with reality. In “The Noble Rider” he describes how an artwork is a balancing between reality and the imagination (Stevens 647). About Don Quixote Stevens writes that Cervantes “sought to set right the balance between imagination and reality” (647). An artwork must be a mixture of the imagination and reality. It must have an equal proportion of both, which means that it is possible for it to be too full of one or the other. An artwork too full of imagination becomes a product of mere fancy. When discussing Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s theorizing about the distinction between fancy and the imagination, Stevens notes that fancy “is an exercise of selection from among objects already supplied by association, a selection made for purposes which are not then and therein being shaped but have been already fixed” (648). A work of fancy associates objects together in ways that the objects already possess and therefore adds nothing to it. The imagination must be constrained to some degree and made to work in harmony with reality. In the Adagia, a posthumously published collection of aphorisms Stevens wrote throughout his life in his notebooks, Stevens writes, “imagination applied to the whole world is vapid in comparison to imagination applied to a detail” (913). The imagination must be made in service to a particular detail. Elsewhere in the Adagia Stevens writes that “eventually an imaginary world is entirely without interest” (912).

Just as there can be too much imagination in an artwork, there also can be artwork too full of reality. In such cases, art becomes merely a reproduction of reality, like news reportage. Stevens refers to the presence of too much reality in an artwork as “the pressure of reality”
“By the pressure of reality, I mean the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation” (654). Interestingly, Stevens’ discussion of the pressure of reality occurs in tandem with a discussion of World War Two and the difficulty of navigating that reality. Yet what exactly “pressure” is remains unclear.

“[P]ressure is incalculable and eludes the historian,” but is instead a kind of atmosphere of knowing that impacts the writers and artists in such a way that what they produce is compressed too much under the pressure of reality (655). Interestingly enough, the pressure of reality appears to result from a hyperawareness of the world and its events. That is, it derives from attending too much to the world. Stevens writes that “the Napoleonic era is regarded as having had little or no effect on the poets and the novelists who lived in it. But Coleridge and Wordsworth and Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen did not have to put up with Napoleon and Marx and Europe, Asia and Africa all at one time” (655). Stevens is diagnosing an overabundance of knowledge about the events of the day as being a producer of the pressures of reality. It is the gaze focused exclusively on the exterior world that inculcates the pressures of reality. It follows, then, that when the imagination ceases and the fancy takes over, what occurs is the gaze focused too much on the interior. The fancy does not reveal anything new or interesting about the world or the mind, but instead only reproduces an unrevealing interiority. In both cases, the presence of too much reality or imagination renders either force transformed into something entirely different. As Stevens writes, “there can be works, and this includes poems, in which neither the imagination nor reality is present” (648).

An artwork must balance reality and the imagination, which means that it must have aspects of both in it. As Simon Critchley writes in his analysis of Stevens as a philosophical
thinker, *Things Merely Are*, “For Stevens, as for Kant, *reality is really real for a real audience of real people*, but it is wholly shot through with conceptual content whose ultimate source is the imagination” (37, original emphasis). Elsewhere Critchley writes that for Stevens, “poetry is an ennobling of things through words” (47). Poetry, and this may be extended to be any artwork for Stevens, is an elaboration that reveals elements and aspects of not just reality, what is, but also of imagination and the mind. A problem with fancy is that it relies on associations between objects and things that are already present in the objects and therefore reveals nothing new about reality. The emphasis must be on the revelatory aspects of art. In the *Adagia*, Stevens writes that “imagination does not add to reality” (919). The imagination does not add, but shows; it demonstrates connections that may not have been apparent but are present in reality. Stevens’ poetics ultimately relies on facts already in reality.

What does this focus on the imagination reveal about thinking, though? As noted above, Stevens was a poet of the mind. His poetry repeatedly attempts to articulate a phenomenal interiority of mind, and enduring themes throughout his writing career were mind and thought. About these continually returning themes, Fletcher writes that “so fully does the nature of mind preoccupy him [i.e., Stevens] that after a certain point in his career (and this occurs perhaps as early as 1921 with ‘The Snow Man’ and certainly from the late 1930s until his death), he seems unable to write poetry without adverting to the theme” (Fletcher 268). Stevens’ poetry is

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8 This is a longstanding manner of reading Stevens, going back at least to Joseph N. Riddel’s *The Clairvoyant Eye* and Frank Doggett’s *Stevens’ Poetry of Thought*. There are important variations on the theme of Stevens as a poet of the mind, such as Helen Vendler’s argument in *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire* that Stevens is a poet of desire. But even there, desire is a function of the mind.
certainly replete with instances of the word *mind* in both titles and poems’ content, and his emphasis on the imagination further entrenches him within that interior space.

I review this well-known preoccupation of Stevens to emphasize that his concern with the interior space of mind is illuminative of thinking itself. What his concern with the imagination and the interrelationship with reality shows us is that thinking cannot be an activity divorced from the world and reality. A thinking that turns only upon itself is not merely a vapid kind of mental activity, but it also does not offer anything new. This insight is important because it helps to further emphasize the role that the external plays in shaping the internal. That is, thought is not merely a disinterested thinker turned completely inward; thought must be an engagement with the external world, with reality, and this engagement is essential for revealing more about reality. For Stevens, the works of the imagination reveal not just reality but also ourselves, and so engagement with them is essential for learning. Stevens writes repeatedly about the link between the internal and the external, about the world as given in reality and the life as given in the imagination. In the *Adagia*, Stevens writes, “life is not people and scene but thought and feeling,” and, more explicitly, “thought is life” (909, 911).

But where all of this is most explicitly worked out in Stevens’ oeuvre is in the poems. There are many pieces where the themes of imagination, reality, thinking, and the poem come together, but I will focus particularly on the collection *The Auroras of Autumn*. Published in 1950, five years before his death, the poems in this collection are firmly within the period of his career commonly referred to as “late Stevens.” *The Auroras of Autumn* include several important late poems, such as the title poem, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” and “Things of August.” In particular, the title poem is routinely ranked as one of
his best and is clearly very strong. However, I will not be turning to it here because I believe the readings of thought in action in his poems are best achieved through his shorter, more intense lyrics. It also seems quite possible that given the multivalence and polysemic quality of Stevens’ best lyrics, which tend to be long, concentrating on more “minor” poems may enable a more complete way of comprehending how Stevens’ poems and poetics of imagining help reveal thinking.⁹

Among the many poems in *The Auroras of Autumn* suggestive of thought and imagination is “World Without Peculiarity.”¹⁰ This poem is a short lyric centered on the speaker’s remembrances of his mother and father and observations of the land around them. The speaker remembers that “his father was strong, that lies now / In the poverty of dirt” and that “what his mother was returns and cries on his breast” (Stevens 388). The speaker seems to cycle through a series of memories or observations that derive from these initial lines about his parents. The ultimate conclusion of this poem is a kind of imagining where “difference disappears” and the “poverty of dirt” that his father is buried in merges with him, the speaker, and his mother, “the

⁹ There are also elements about “The Auroras of Autumn” that fall outside the parameters of this essay, with elements like narrative, symbolism, and others requiring elaboration that would detract from the overall efforts of this essay. Although I believe they can be incorporated into the analysis of poetry as revealing thought, at present doing so would be well beyond the scope of this initial attempt. Similarly, the poem that ends the collection, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” is similarly strong but its length and complexity make a treatment of it beyond the scope of this essay.

¹⁰ Harold Bloom, in his book *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, includes a chapter on the short lyrics *The Auroras of Autumn*. His reading is interesting and illuminative, but he understands the shorter lyrics to be commenting on themes better expressed in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” That reading seems a bit reductionist to me, understanding “An Ordinary Evening” as being the primary point of the collection (itself a controversial take), but the chapter is helpful for trying to make sense of *The Auroras of Autumn*’s scope and range as a unified collection.
thing upon his breast” as all becomes a “single being, sure and true” (388). The poem then engages in a specific act of imagining as it enunciates a world in which all these disparate entities are a single being. This may not be an extreme act of imagining, and in a certain sense this poem succumbs to what Stevens himself would have believed to be the problem of a poem containing too much reality for it to succeed at balancing the twin pressures of imagining and reality to achieve the perfect balance he understood as necessary. The pressure of the speaker’s strong father who now is “In the poverty of dirt” is almost too real, too understandable, and approaches a place where reality almost overwhelms the text.

A poem that more fully engages with the themes I have been discussing is “What We See Is What We Think.” From its very title, the focus on a philosophical mode of inquiry is front-loaded. The poem’s title begins the experience by emphasizing the relationship between seeing and thinking. Here it is worth noting another of Stevens’ apothegms in the *Adagia*: “the reading of a poem should be an experience” (909). This poem is explicitly concerned with experiential linkage between seeing and knowing, and Stevens attempts to capture and map out that experience in the poem itself. It begins by noting a beginning: “At twelve, the disintegration of the afternoon / Began” (Stevens 392). The speaker notes a time, twelve or noon, and that this point in time which should mark the beginning of the afternoon in fact augurs the beginning of its disintegration. The afternoon begins to dissolve just as soon as it is reached, and this brings in “the return to phantomerei, if not / To phantoms.” The word *phantomerei* stands out here. For

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11 Although not discussed here, Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the link between seeing and thinking in her *The Life of the Mind* is especially helpful for considering the linkage between these two modes. The first two sections of the “Appearances” and “Mental Activities in a World of Appearance” explicitly explore this link.
this invented word, Eleanor Cook gives an etymological derivation in her *A Reader’s Guide to Wallace Stevens*. She speculates that the word derives from *phantom* and the German *-erei* suffix, and she parses *phantomerei* to mean “things concerning or brought about by phantoms” (Cook 256). Stevens’ use of this neologism is especially interesting given that it is just that: invented. Encountering the word, the reader is forced into a state of confusion as they try to grasp the word’s meaning. *Phantomerei*, then, has the effect of causing the reader to think more closely with the poem. If the meaning Cook has offered holds, then the distinction between *phantomerei* and *phantoms* points to two different kinds of phantoms at work here: things of or caused by phantoms, and phantoms themselves as separate entities.

Prior to the dissolution of afternoon noted in the first line, “it had been the other way” (Stevens 392). The speaker elaborates that the other way involved “imagined…violet trees” although the “trees stood green, / At twelve, as green as they would ever be” (392). The imagined trees are not actually violet but green, and there is something about the way in which the advent of afternoon brings about the recognition that the trees are truly green. Perhaps this is because violet is a color sometimes associated with phantoms and shadows, and that the coming afternoon brings with it actual shadows that will tinge the truly green trees violet with shadows. The knowledge that the green trees will be augmented with violet shadows pushes the speaker to consider again the trees’ green, particularly their greenness “At twelve, as green as they ever would be.” The speaker’s thoughts are pushed back to the trees’ color because the reality will match the imagined violet trees, and this causes the speaker to return to the trees’ greenness now. In a sense, the speaker’s recognition of the coming end to the afternoon causes the speaker to return to a consideration of the present moment.
Thus, the speaker sees anew the trees as green, and “The sky [as] blue beyond the vaultiest phrase” (Stevens 392). *Vaultiest* is again another invented word, though its derivation is much clearer, a superlative form of *vault* and so meaning *the most vaulted*. Here the speaker’s imagination may be read as moving briefly in a different direction. Having understood that the trees at noon were as green as they would be, the speaker’s color-focused thoughts move from the trees to the sky; and in another instance of sensing the paucity of imagination, the speaker concludes that the sky’s blue cannot be captured in a phrase. Yet this turn to the sky brings the speaker’s thoughts back to time and the noon hour. The speaker considers noon and its import at more length in the third stanza with a series of statements about what twelve means. Twelve means “the end of normal time, / Straight up, an élan without harrowing, / The imprescriptible zenith, free of harangue” (Stevens 393). Recognizing the time, the speaker considers its importance and understands it as indicating a change. Most interesting out of these statements about what twelve means is that it means “the imprescriptible zenith” as the word *imprescriptible* is another one that stands out in the poem, like *vaultiest* and *phantomerei* before it. This time, however, the word is not an invention but simply rare and most usually found in legal contexts. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as something that cannot be “legally taken away or abandoned” (“Imprescriptible”). Thus, twelve means the zenith that cannot be legally taken away, and that it is “free of harangue” (Stevens 393). In all this, the emphasis is on noon as a place of calm, “straight up,” and possessing a zenith that cannot be taken from it.

Yet, as the fourth stanza begins the speaker’s thoughts move again. They are a further elaboration of the set of things twelve means. But now the speaker’s earlier thought, that noon brings the beginning of the disintegration of the afternoon, returns and the speaker considers
“Twelve and the first gray second after,” thereby immediately turning again to dissolution. This thought acts as an elaboration on the poem’s first line, that the speaker sees “at twelve, the disintegration of afternoon” and now time has elapsed and the true beginning of the disintegration of afternoon has begun. This thought links up with the first stanza again, invoking “a kind / Of violet gray, a green violet” and now pulling the speaker’s first thoughts together with these thoughts. A certain obsessiveness is present, mimicking to a degree the obsessiveness of thought as it continuously turns through its material, attempting to arrive a conclusion and a point of stasis. So, the disintegration of afternoon, that “first grey second after” the zenith, brings back the violet color, but it is now a violet mingled with the green of the trees “as green as ever they would be” at twelve. Both colors combine to create “a thread / To weave a shadow’s leg or sleeve” and in this works to give shape to the *phantomerei*. From this movement to the shadows and phantoms, the speaker’s thoughts continue to move outward from the initial point until what noon means is “a scrawl // On the pedestal, an ambitious page dog-eared / At the upper right” (393). Noon has now expanded to a place where it is itself a kind of creation, linked somehow with a scrawl on a pedestal and a book page.

The speaker continues still, now expanding what noon meant to “a pyramid with one side / Like a spectral cut in its perception” by explicitly invoking a specter. Noteworthy amongst the series of statements about noon that have been coming from the speaker is that they move from a place of pure abstraction (“the end of normal time, / Straight up, an élan without harrowing”) to more particular images (“a scrawl // On the pedestal, an ambitious page dog-eared”). In the middle, the elaborations on what noon meant move through a transitional phase of color (“the first grey second after, a kind / Of violet gray, a green violet”). This movement of thought is
ended by the penultimate line, which acts like a subtle commentary on the list preceding it—
“Another thought, the paramount ado…” and then the final conclusion, “Since what we think is
never what we see” (393, original ellipsis). That final line acts as a cautionary note on the whole
exercise dramatized by the poem. Although the poem presents many instances of thought
seemingly influencing what the speaker is seeing in the form of the influence of shadows--a blue
sky more blue than the “vaultiest phrase,” and a “pyramid with one side / Like a spectral cut in
its perception”--it remains the case that the sights the speaker has described are plainly not there.
They are merely the movements of the speaker’s mind as they begin from one point and follow
one thought after another. These objects are seen, but they are seen but internally, in the way an
image held in the mind may be understood as a kind of internal sight.

Yet, this imaging is indeterminate: the speaker of the poem cannot convey a replica of
their imaginings. Writing about Stevens in *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study*, Edward S.
Casey discusses the ways indeterminacy in an imagining is key to its phenomenological
characters (Casey 122). Such indeterminacy means the specific content of an imagining is not
determinable, but instead will vary from imaginer to imaginer. Stevens’ imagined violet trees are
different from any other reader’s imagined violet trees. Following this characteristic of
imagining, Casey identifies the “mutually facilitating” additional characteristic of “pure
possibility” (122). These two characteristics are mutually facilitating because the character of
both enables them to exist. Pure possibility is the unconstrained nature of imagining. Casey gives
the example of remembering. When recalling something, we may be inclined to say, “I seem to
recall a tree over there”; or, in the case of perceiving, we might say, “I may see shadows there”
(122). In imagining, though, such an opportunity for identifying the possible existence of an
empirical referent does not exist. One does not say one possibly imagines, but instead that one is imagining.

Returning to Stevens, Casey writes that “The purely possible fosters free mental movements—engendering unhindered ‘motions of the mind’ in Wallace Stevens’ phrase—within a milieu of indeterminacy” (123). His phrase “free mental movements” is particularly telling as it speaks to the unconstrained nature of thought. In “What We See Is What We Think,” the speaker moves from noticing the ending of afternoon, to seeing lengthening shadows, to ending with an almost hyperbolic expression of what the day is like. The language becomes increasingly fraught as the poem progresses, as do the images that the speaker is describing. What begins with trees and shadows ends with a pyramid cut in its perception. This movement replicates thought’s movement insofar its ability to freely move from thought to thought. Indeed, as the poem goes on, a profusion of commas occurs, and the jump between images becomes more fraught. Casey identifies such freedom of thought as key to understanding the imagination. He writes that “indeterminacy and pure possibility conjoin in imaginative experience and facilitate each other’s appearance to consciousness” (123). These three things help to make bring imagining to the fore of the conscious mind and make it apprehensible.

This is not to say that this is precisely what this poem is doing, or that Stevens would necessarily agree with that understanding of imagining. Stevens’ concern about imagining tipping into fancy has been noted above, and a possible way of understanding Casey’s view of indeterminacy, pure possibility, and their enabling “free mental movements” is that wholly unconstrained movements of the mind are an apt description of what fancy is. Given this understanding, it also seems easy to describe this poem as falling into fancy. The language is
oddly baroque in parts, with “phantomerei,” “blue beyond the vaultiest phrase,” and “imprescriptible zenith” being difficult to parse. Moreover, as noted above, the poem seems to raise in pitch, higher in intensity, until we come to a pyramid with a “spectral cut in its perception” and its “tawny caricature and tawny life” (Stevens 393). By the time we come to the pyramid, we have come far from where we began. We have left a musing about the ending of the afternoon and gone to a statement that “what we think is never what we see.” It is, then, not the case that this poem is a perfect representation of Stevens’ understanding of imagining, but rather that this poem gives full view to what Stevens held the overall imaginative function of thought to be, with the possibility of failure included within it. That possibility of failure, however, helps understand the ways the imagination is a lens for revealing the full range of thought’s mystery.

To return to Heidegger, it is not the case that a poet’s fundamental-experience means that each of their works has to go towards supporting their ideal case. Or, to put it another way, Stevens’ point about imagining is not that every work of art must be a perfect synthesis of reality and imagination, but that attending to imagination is paramount to life. Charles Altieri, in his *Wallace Stevens and the Demands of Modernity*, understands Stevens to be articulating a way in which poets can “develop the imaginative possibilities” for how we might engage with the facts and structures of daily life (Altieri 3). Ellwood Johnson perhaps puts it clearest when he writes, “Imagination, for Stevens, then, is a very large term used to designate the transforming activities of the mind without which we could not experience reality except as a meaningless chaos of sense impressions” (Johnson 30). Although this seems too grand a philosophical claim for what Stevens understands the imagination to be doing, I think he correctly emphasizes that Stevens views the imagination as of central importance for our engagement with the world. It is the
blending of fancy and reality, and the two poems I have discussed from *The Auroras of Autumn* helpfully demonstrate those opposite poles. Attending to both poles is essential for understanding the role imagination plays in thinking, as thinking does not distinguish between either.

The imagination reveals aspects of thought, movements of the mind that themselves reveal facts, and something about the true nature of reality. This, I believe, is one of the key benefits in reading Stevens as a poet of thought. Even though his emphasis was on mind and imagination more generally, his work was always attuned to the movement of thought and the ways mind interacts with the external world. It is not just the case that the external world is received and that the task of a poet is to clarify it, or enable it to be more truthful, in some sense, but instead that the poet helps show the true nature of reality through the imagination. Key for Stevens is understanding that the world (broadly understood as reality) and the mind (broadly understood as imagination) are linked together in a mutually reinforcing compact. Understood in this way, the imagination through thought reveals the world. Thinking is not cordoned off into a purely subjective phenomenon like the Cartesian ego but instead is intrinsically linked with external reality. This understanding of thinking is much more in keeping with Heidegger’s understanding that viewing thinking from a subjective oriented position closes thinking off from its true relationship with the world (Heidegger, *Bremen 95*). Thinking must be understood as deeply engaged with the world, and through his poetics of imagination Stevens helps show how vital that connection can be in not just revealing the world, but also in revealing thought.
John Ashbery—Thinking and Experience

In a 1981 interview with Alfred Poulin, John Ashbery (1927-2017) said that “most of my poems are about the experience of experience. As I said before, the particular occasion is of lesser interest to me than the way a happening or experience filters through to me” (Ashbery, *Michigan* 245). The idea of “the experience of experience” pushes the concept of experience and our perceptions of it to a second-order level; in an Ashbery poem, he is not merely writing about what he is experiencing, but instead about how he is experiencing it. However, as anyone who has read Ashbery’s poetry knows quite well, regarding it as simply autobiographical reportage would be wrong. His poems are well-known for their opacity, shifting pronouns, jumps in register, and surprising juxtapositions. In that same interview, he says that “I’m trying to set down a generalized transcript of what’s really going on in our minds all day long” (*Michigan* 245). This is a deceptively clear statement from a poet who often regarded clear statements about his work with suspicion, and indeed frequently engaged in mild misdirection after realizing he had spoken too directly about his work.\(^{12}\) However, it is important to keep the surface clarity of the quote from obscuring some of the genuine strangeness behind it. What does it mean to create a “generalized transcript” of our minds? And how does Ashbery expect to be able to do it for all of us, whoever we are? This collective us is unnamed and not in any way identified, but it is interesting that Ashbery thought of his project in this surprisingly public fashion. It has always been clear to a variety of critics and scholars that his poetry is intensely focused on mind and

\(^{12}\) Note, for instance, Ashbery’s disavowal of the original jacket copy for *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), the story of which is told in David Kermani’s *John Ashbery: A Comprehensive Bibliography* and is also available on The Flow Chart Foundation’s Ashbery Resource Center online catalog.
consciousness, and the ways in which poetry can be used to open those categories and reveal a more accurate picture of the mind. What is surprising about this quality, given the above quote, is that Ashbery was not trying to work through his mind, but was rather setting himself up in a semi-public way and attempting to work through our minds.

In keeping with my previous discussions of Oppen and Stevens, in this chapter I will apply a lens to Ashbery’s poetry to facilitate considerations of it as revealing the mystery of thought. But whereas Oppen and Stevens both wrote fairly straightforward prose works about the lenses I applied to them, Ashbery rarely made such statements, even in passing, and he never wrote any extended treatments on the subject of thinking or, for that matter, experience. But it is worth noting the link between thinking and experience, and that thinking itself can be understood as a kind of experiential action. I will demonstrate later in this essay how reading Ashbery’s “At North Farm” can be treated as a guide for thinking.

Instead of writing essays addressing his own poetics or what he thought poetry, in general, while employed for the greater part of his career as a staff critic for ArtNews, Art in America, and The New York Herald Tribune, he wrote art criticism or, to use his preferred term, art writings. These paratexts can be read as revealing his own preoccupations and concerns with his own poetry. A selection of such writings has been collected in Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles 1957-1987. This tactic of using his art writings to uncover some clues as to how he thought about poetics is not uncommon in Ashbery scholarship. He himself implicitly endorsed this move when he noted that “[p]oets when they write about other artists tend to write about themselves” (Reported 106). Many of Ashbery’s art writings are themselves reflections on his experience of encountering a certain artwork or attending an art show. Untrained as a critic, he had the
amateur’s passion for visual art and received his first assignment by accepting a friend’s offer to become the art critic for the Paris Herald Tribune (Bergman in Ashbery, Reported xi). David Bergman, in his introduction to Reported Sightings, wrote that, for Ashbery, “The art writing [was] a halfway point between the visual and the linguistic and often a place to explore ideas that [made] their way into the poems” (xii). While a great many of his art writings are journalism meant to fulfill an assignment and earn a living, they often contain statements surprisingly relevant to Ashbery’s own work and can helpfully illuminate aspects of his poetic goals that may otherwise be opaque. These comments were utilitarian and usually the result of being asked to contribute something, and as such they are not as revealing as the art writings. Furthermore, because they were usually written to fulfill an obligation, they do not have the same ranging quality as the art writings. Given their purpose, I view most of these writings less as poetics statements and more as functional occasional prose. An additional area of insight into his thinking about poetry, and for this essay experience, are his interviews. Although he was a frequent subject of interviews, he was not always completely forthright when answering questions. Nonetheless, on several key occasions he made fairly concrete statements about what he thought his poetry was doing and how the notion of experience entered into it.

Ironically, one critical feature of Ashbery’s address of experience is that he does not explicitly define it anywhere. He never writes what, precisely, he understands experience to mean. Ashbery is not a philosopher, of course, and to expect him to deal in concrete ideas would be very much against his particular mode of writing. But like a philosopher, he does seem to

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13 In addition to his art writings, Ashbery also wrote introductions and sporadic comments on poetry, usually when asked to, which have been collected into his Selected Prose.
understand experience in a technical or, at the very least, nonstandard sense. It is also clear that he understands poetry to play a role in developing this idea of experience. In the above-mentioned interview with Poulin, Ashbery defends his poetry against critics’ charges that he is attempting to destroy poetry. “I think poetry is very important and that if you demolish it you demolish it you’re going to have to come up with something else that will replace poetry for all of us...What I want to do, really, is to stretch poetry rather than to level it, to make it more inclusive and different. I think poetry has to be a new experience” (Michigan 250). Poetry does not merely record experience, or elaborate on it, but is itself a new kind of experience.

In an interview with David Remnick published in the Bennington Review in 1980, Ashbery makes a rare allusion to Heidegger. When asked about how his work engages with the autobiographical and his own life, he replies, “Rather than deal with experiences from my past which are already familiar to me, the excitement of writing poetry for me is to explore places that I have not already found. Heidegger says that to write a poem is to make a voyage of discovery” (Ashbery, Bennington Review). Ashbery’s focus is not on experience in any kind of “naive” sense; instead, he focuses on experience in a broader sense, something approaching a general happening of events and the way those events happen to subjects. It is not, however, a subject sense reduced to an individual or self or person. In the Michigan Quarterly Review interview, Ashbery says “I don’t write very much of my experiences except in a way of afterthoughts,” and he goes on to claim that he avoids such poetic self-disclosures because he does not “feel terribly interested by [his] own experiences and feelings” (Michigan 250). He does not write about the specific experiences that he himself has gone through. “What I am trying to get at,” Ashbery goes
on to say, “is a general, all-purpose experience—like those stretch socks that fit all sizes. Something which a reader could dip into and maybe get something out of without knowing anything about me, my history, or sex life, or whatever” (251). Experience, then, is generalized to a point that anyone could enter it.

Such use of a generalized experience is a first step in understanding Ashbery as a poet of thought who helps us discover and reveal the mystery of what thinking is and what it is like. Generalized experience, and this is a term I will return to, is, as it were, the frame Ashbery erects his poems upon. Much like a house frame, this poetic frame allows a reader to enter into Ashbery’s poems and experience those generalized experiences in any way they will happen to. What results is not prescribed, but rather open-ended. This, too, is in keeping with Ashbery’s stated desire to create a kind of “open form” in poetry that anyone could use for experience (Michigan 252). Ashbery’s use of the phrase “open form” bears some resemblance to how Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and others of the Black Mountain School understood that idea. But for Ashbery, open form derives from the experiments with abstraction that modern painters were then exploring. He also explicitly frames his understanding of open form as used to articulate a kind of poetry opposed to saying something particular about “some particular thing” (252). Rather than serve as a statement about something or some experience, the goal of his poetry is to be an open form experience that anyone could use, enter into, and rely upon to help guide their thoughts towards an experience of experience.

14 Explications of the Black Mountain School understanding of “open form” includes Olson’s highly influential essay, “Projective Verse” and published in his Selected Prose, and Duncan’s “Ideas of the Meaning of Form” found in Duncan’s A Selected Prose.
This concept of open form is only one factor in understanding Ashbery’s conception of experience. The art writings point toward additional nuances that inflect his understanding of poetry. Although none of the art writings focus on experience as such, many refer to the ways the artist in question utilizes experience or draws upon it as a concept. Writing about Joseph Cornell’s constructions, Ashbery notes that “the genius of Cornell is that he sees and enables us to see with the eyes of childhood, before our vision got clouded by experience” (Reported 15). Here experience is understood as something accumulative: experience accrues over a lifetime from childhood and will eventually occlude our sight, thus rendering our experience of objects indistinct and less illuminated. Art helps to enliven or rejuvenate experience, to revive it in some sense. Ashbery writes that in Cornell’s constructions, each one creates its own “autonomous visual experience, with its own natural laws” (16). The artwork creates its own experience, and with an artist as particularly original and strange as Cornell, the art created makes its own rules and inaugurates a new kind of experience for the viewer. What Cornell’s constructions further do is show “the thing in its thingness; revealed, not commented on; and with its ambience intact” (16). The emphasis on “thingness” is also important because objects appear in his poems with great regularity and also because of the various ways Ashbery’s poems can be understood as engaging with language as a kind of material. He concludes his piece on Cornell by noting that the assemblagist presents objects in all their own strangeness “thrust at the viewer, here, now, inescapable” (17). The visual artist’s work seems to function much in the same way an Ashbery poem insists upon itself and its own inescapable strangeness.

That objects are important for Ashbery’s poetic working through of experience is perhaps
attributable to his concern for a new kind of realism. The world is populated by things, objects, and a new realism would have to account for these objects in a way different from old kinds of realism. Ashbery wrote about attempting to create a new kind of realism for *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962). There he says, “I attempt to use words abstractly, as an abstract painter would use paint…words are inseparable from their meaning and cannot be said to exist apart from it. My aim is to give the meaning free lay and the fullest possible range. As with the abstract painters, my abstraction is an attempt to get a greater, more complete kind of realism.” His desire to articulate a new realism is linked with an art movement active in mid-twentieth century. In his review of an exhibition catalog from a show of the New Realists in 1962, Ashbery wrote that proponents of the New Realism made use of the “qualities of manufactured objects” in a way that emphasized their importance in daily life (*Reported* 82). He understood this return to manufactured objects as part of a struggle to “determine the real nature of reality” and as a way of coming to terms “with the emptiness of industrialized modern life” (82). Ashbery focused on the materiality of the objects these artists were engaging with. He wrote that the artists were emphasizing simply “part of our experience, our lives—created by us and creating us” (82). The objects we experience are a common ground, “a neutral language understood by everybody, and therefore the ideal materials with which to create experiences which transcend the objects” (82). By focusing on objects, Ashbery understood the New Realists as articulating a new way of engaging with experience and, through it, reality.

Ashbery’s concern for objects may be understood as furthering his comment, noted at the beginning of this section, that he was trying to record a generalized transcript of our thoughts.
This interest positions him as occupying an unusual role between the public and the private, the individual and the group. Objects as represented in visual art or poetry work in a kind of transitional space, operating both privately and publicly. Any object can be understood in this sense: a paintbrush, for instance, may work in a poem as both a representation of a specific paintbrush and a kind of generalized paintbrush, one that each reader engages with in their own way. Thus, the inclusion of objects in his poems may be understood as a strategy to articulate a sense of generalized experience.

Often when Ashbery speaks about objects, or what he sometimes just calls things, he returns to the idea experience. About Elizabeth Bishop, for instance, he writes that her concern for different kinds of objects offers her readers a way of understanding how “we as subjects feel about the objects, living or inert, that encircle us” (Selected 121). This feeling about objects reveals a “conflict between inner and outer reality” because objects and our feelings about them demonstrates our “divided singleness of experience” (121). Objects populate our experience of daily life. They are one of the key aspects of our experience, and so including them in an artwork makes sense if the goal is to get at a “greater, more complete kind of realism.” Returning to the New Realists review, Ashbery writes that one of the key aspects of objects, as far as experience is concerned, is that they “accumulate the electrodes of my feelings on a number of subjects” (Reported 82). As we are confronted with the many feelings that an object can engender in us, “the unmanageable vastness of our experience, the regrettable unpredictability of our aims and tastes” becomes apparent (82). A new kind of realism, one that seeks to capture more perfectly the experience of daily life, must have objects and must treat them, in some fashion, as
revelatory. The artwork creates a new experience, and so an artwork that has an object in it creates a new experience of that object.

A final factor in considering Ashbery’s poetics of experience and its relation to thought is a bit difficult to define precisely, but it could be summarized as a combination of process and attention. Process, here, means the artistic process, or the way an artist goes about creating the artwork. But process is closely linked to the concept of attention. In attention, the artist attends to whatever it is that becomes the artwork. For Ashbery, that includes everything from attending to the objects surrounding him to attending his thoughts as he is writing. Because of such attention paid to them, objects enter his poetry in generative ways. Ashbery was himself a committed collector of objects, gathering everything from toys to tiny shoes, and artwork, of course. Many of these items appear in his poetry in one form or another.

This linked concept of process and attention is perhaps best expressed in an essay on the painter Jane Freilicher, where he discusses a painting of hers he particularly admired and owned, hung in his living room in Manhattan. The Painting Table (1954), like all Freilicher’s work, was key to developing his poetics of experience, which held that all things were important and necessary in an artwork and that nothing was to be dismissed. The Painting Table is a representation of just that: the ordinary workstation of a painter. A can holds brushes, as does a glass jar. There are tubes of paint laid out in a corner, along with paint thinner and miscellaneous objects. Writing about it, Ashbery noted the presence of ordinary objects, and that the painting did not depict a well-groomed painter’s table; instead, it held everything we would expect to see on a working painter’s table (Reported 243). It is not enough that the painter merely reproduces

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15 Ashbery wrote about his owning this painting in the essay quoted above.
Freilicher’s workstation, but that the painter paints that precise place. About the pigments reproduced on the canvas, Ashbery writes that “there are places where she [i.e., Freilicher] paints the image of pigments” and that this lends a greater realism to the painting (243). She is not merely squeezing out pigment onto the canvas to represent her workstation, but instead is recreating it in a painterly fashion.

In this painting, the emphasis is not so much on Freilicher merely reproducing what she sees, what is there and around her, but the process of painting that the work itself reveals. Ashbery’s noticing that the pigment from the paint tubes is not just squeezed directly onto the canvas but instead is painted on emphasizes the role that painting as a creative process had in the creation of The Painter’s Table. Similarly, his noticing of the cans holding the paintbrushes is not just indicative of his concern for objects but is itself indicative of the kind of attention Ashbery seemed to feel was necessary for articulating an experience of experience. I say “seemed to” here because Ashbery nowhere clearly states that attention is a key component of his poetics. However, it appears clear enough that it is, in fact, crucial.

Other scholars have taken note of Ashbery’s concern with attention. Andrew Dubois’s Ashbery’s Forms of Attention is a noteworthy example. DuBois sees Ashbery’s success as an artist as deriving explicitly from his concern for attention as both an artistically generative force and an indication of how Ashbery focuses readers’ attention in his poems (DuBois 9). DuBois understands Ashbery to be using attention in the formal structures of the poems themselves (10). DuBois’s focus on attention is distinct from mine, though. He understands attention as a primary lens, as it were, for understanding Ashbery’s poetry, whereas I take attention as incorporated
generally into the larger concept of experience. There are other ways scholars understand attention to work in Ashbery. For instance, Jess Cotton has written that Ashbery may be profitably read as articulating a new kind of attention to the natural world, and her understanding of Ashbery’s poetry as creating a model of attention that is “restless, light-footed, and unconfined to a particular scholarly location” is helpful (Cotton 2065). However, I think it may be more apt to suggest that Ashbery subsumed attention into his poetics of experience. It is worth noting, though, that Ashbery’s poetry, and by extension his perspective, rarely stayed focused on any one thing. Indeed, Ryan Ruby, in his review of the posthumous collection Parallel Movement of the Hands (2021), suggests that Ashbery’s poetry navigates a realm between being and becoming, but that the “flow” of experience is nevertheless ‘charted’ in recorded thought” of which the poem is an example (Ruby).

It would seem natural to discuss Ashbery’s poetics of experience in the context of his seminal long poem “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.” That poem is plainly concerned with recording the impressions and thoughts of the speaker viewing the same painting by Parmigianino. But it lacks the generalized experience that Ashbery attempts to get in his best poems. Rather, it is quite plainly an essayistic digression on Parmigianino’s painting of the same name, and it recounts the speaker’s experience of thinking about that painting. The poem is also unusually autobiographical, with references to Ashbery’s partner at the time, Pierre Martory, and how they saw the painting in Vienna. Rather than a poem about generalized experience, it is focused on the experience of a single, perceiving individual and specified to his own moment in time. So instead, I will focus on a few shorter selections from Ashbery’s 1984 collection A Wave.
This collection bears several resemblances with other of his collections. It contains at least one long poem, and otherwise is comprised of short lyric poems, including a series of haiku and haibun. The collection has also been lauded as one of Ashbery’s best by several critics and poets alike.

John Shoptaw, in his study *On the Outside Looking Out*, reads “At North Farm,” the first poem of *A Wave*, as a prime example of what he calls Ashbery’s “misrepresentations” (Shoptaw 9). He further describes the poem as “lucid but indeterminate,” and he demonstrates that indeterminacy by noting a range of questions the poem raises but does not resolve (10). I agree with Shoptaw that “At North Farm” is a poem asking more questions than answering, but I see such asking of questions is key to understanding Ashbery’s poetics of generalized experience. “At North Farm” could be about many things and cannot be said to have any “single plot or subject” (10). The poem begins with the simple, declarative line, “Somewhere someone is traveling furiously towards you” (Ashbery, *Collected* 733). Thus, Ashbery immediately places the reader into a generalized place, from which any number of paths can be taken. “At North Farm” can be profitably read as about a religious experience, a kind of love poem, or the approach of death. The poem’s generalized language continues throughout, with the last line of the first stanza asking if the “someone” invoked in the poem’s first line will “Give you the thing he has for you?” (733).

The poem is not all vague generalities, however. There is instead a mix of generalized words with more specific ones. Consider that the person traveling toward “you” (that “you” also never filled in with any more specific information, which means it could be the reader, the
speaker, or someone else entirely), this person is described as “traveling furiously… / At incredible speed, traveling day and night, / Through blizzards and desert heat, across torrents, through narrow passes” (733). This generic individual is described as possessing a specific kind of urgency and also as moving through specific areas. There is a mix, then, of the generic with the specific. That mix continues through the rest of the poem. Consider the beginning of the second stanza, “Hardly anything grows here, / Yet the granaries are bursting with meal, / The sacks of meal piled to the rafters” (733). There is again a deft movement between the almost meaninglessly generic (“Hardly anything grows here”) and the extremely specific (“The sacks of meal piled to the rafters”). The poem seems to delight in mixing these two registers, and that makes it an ideal text to consider when thinking about Ashbery’s poetics and how he uses generalized experience to allow anyone to enter his poetry. And from there, to get at something like the “experience of experience.”

Beyond the aspect of generalized experience in this poem, it is also noteworthy that several of its specific images relate directly to objects. The second stanza populates the generic “here” with “granaries…bursting with meal,” and those sacks of meal “piled to the rafters” of the granaries (733). Indeed, the land is further occupied with “streams run[ning] with sweetness, fattening fish” and “birds [that] darken the sky” (733). The specific examples populating the setting are objects, and those objects arguably lend the poem a greater kind of realism, one that furthers the mystery of the poem, while also helping bring it into sharper relief. The presence of so many objects adds greater detail to the poem, populating it with metaphysical richness, as it were, and providing the reader with more instances where the reader’s imagination can be used.
“At North Farm” is also significant as an entry point into Ashbery as a poet of thought because of how perplexing the poem is. As in the work of George Oppen and Wallace Stevens, discussed earlier, one of the ways Ashbery’s poetry can be understood to reveal thought is that we, the reader, must think along with each of his poems. The poem enacts that thinking on the page, but we must fill it in with our own thoughts and move with it in its enactment. What that means for the reader, then, is that the poem encourages a kind of reading that is open, questioning, and repetitive. To understand “At North Farm” requires a willingness to return to it and to think with it again and again. The poem, then, functions as a guide for thought.

Consider the first line with its use of the word “furiously.” That word itself invites several readings. That “someone somewhere is traveling furiously towards you” could be read to mean that someone is angrily traveling, in which case the poem takes on a darker tone. If the person traveling is doing so angrily, then that invites further questions. Why are they angry? Are they angry at the “you” the poem invokes? Or are they angry about something else entirely? If the person is taken to be angry, then the move into the somewhat pastoral scene in the second stanza is also transformed. But the word “furiously” could be less ominous, instead meaning something more like traveling with great urgency and energy. That the poem offers no easy interpretations is key to the multifold meanings within it.

Furthermore, the poem can reveal aspects of our own thoughts when we return to it. Consider that the reader who encounters “At North Farm” and understands the poem as a kind of religious parable is most likely going to be operating out of a different set of personal experiences and circumstances than the reader that reads the poem as a love lyric. Both interpretations are
plausible, and they both exist within the poem as a guide to different ways to understanding it. The poem is a generalized experience, a frame on which any reader can erect their own subjective experiences. David Lehman identifies this open-ended nature of Ashbery’s poems as one of his strategies in engaging with irony. He writes that Ashbery's poetry “communicates the syntax rather than the content of an argument or story; meaning inheres between the words, not in them” (Lehman 108). The reader is required to discern meaning and arrive at a conclusion as an “active participant” who helps complete the poem (108).

The open qualities of Ashbery's poetry are a subject of frequent concern for critics and scholars, and that such openness has achieved such an importance in critical understandings of his work suggests that his goal of creating a kind of open form has largely been successful. Besides David Lehman, Bonnie Costello has written that one of the “absorbing, if frustrating qualities of Ashbery's meditative poetry is the uncertainty of its representations” (Costello 70). Costello understands this uncertainty to be a part of the nature of Ashbery’s use of representation itself. Ashbery does not provide much in the way of “extratextual” references (70). Unlike poets such as T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound, Ashbery rarely explicitly invokes or quotes texts outside his poems. And, when he does, his references tend to be oblique or generative rather than investigative or discursive.16 For instance, Ashbery’s poem “Civilization and Its Discontents,” from Rivers and Mountains (1966), takes its title from the book by Sigmund Freud, but the poem

16 In the above-mentioned interview with David Remnick, the interviewer asks Ashbery about why he does not use literary quotations or allusions in the way Eliot and Pound do. Ashbery remarks that he does not think his poetry is “very bound to a literary tradition. But it is, somewhat more so than some critics maintain” (Ashbery, Bennington).
can only be understood in a very general sense as being of a piece with Freud’s psychoanalytic theory.

Similarly, one could turn to “Never Seek to Tell Thy Love,” another poem from *A Wave*, that takes its title from a line by William Blake. Knowing the factoid about the title’s origin does not aid in understanding the poem, though. Indeed, the first lines demonstrate that it is still operating in Ashbery’s peculiar method of open form: “Many colors will take you to themselves / But now I want someone to tell me how to get home” (Ashbery, *Collected 778*). Where home is remains unidentified, it is described only as back along a way that is “streaked and stippled, / A shaded place” (778). The poet is clearly unconcerned with giving a specific description of place, but instead conjures a generic kind of place. Indeed, the whole poem may be read as manifesting a generalized sense of homesickness. The speaker says that this “shaded place” “belongs to where it is going / / Not where it is” (778). Knowing the Blake poem does not aid in understanding Ashbery’s, with its flowers that “don’t talk to Idea now” because “They speak only the language of flowers.” Yet in typical Ashberyean fashion, the speaker eventually switches registers and begins speaking to an unidentified “you”: “But you, / You seem so formal, so serious. You can’t read poetry, / Not the way they taught you back in school” (778). That metaliterary move to discussing poetry in a poem is itself typical for Ashbery, and it recalls his concern for process noted above.

The invocation of the art of poetry in a poem, and the sly allusion to the difficulty of reading his particular type of poetry, resemble Ashbery’s comments on Freilicher’s painting, discussed above. Freilicher’s painting was illuminative of painting’s process of being created because she
painted the very pigments that were on her painter’s table. In “Never Seek to Tell Thy Love,” the speaker’s invocation of poetry helps foreground that all the “action” of the poem is taking place in a poem itself, where certain conventions and expectations hold. Yet the poem swerves away from that meta-poetic commentary to return to the poem’s substance, “Returning to the point was always the main thing, then” (778). And as the poem continues, moving from “dazzled insects skimming the bright airs” to “intelligent and clear spaces,” the poem’s subject (if it can be said to have one, in any conventional sense) moves in and out of focus. But it is never completely clear and ultimately the poem helps “Each of us advance into [our] own labyrinth” (779). Ashbery’s frame of reference does not help us understand his poem, but instead is instructive of how he uses material in his creative process of creating a generalized experience that anyone can fill in with their own thoughts.

Writing about Ashbery’s poetry generally in the literary journal *Conjunctions*, Graham Foust said that something it accomplishes is giving us a different relationship with the self. Ashbery’s poetry “lets us feel as if we’ve been oddly and warmly acknowledged, a feeling during which our minds flow simultaneously toward and away from the self” (Foust 355). This is an excellent description of what it is like to read an Ashbery poem, and especially one in the style of “At North Farm.” The poem acknowledges us by being open to so many different kinds of readings, and in the reading and rereading of it, the readers mind is altered by its encounter with the self and the poem. This sense that we feel ourselves within the poem, within the scaffolding of experience, is what I think is most helpful to consider when approaching Ashbery as a poet of thought.
Bibliography


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