

# Consequences of a Conjunction

JAMES LONGENBACH

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“TILL HUMAN VOICES wake us,” wrote T. S. Eliot in the final line of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “and we drown.” What if Eliot had written

till other voices wake  
us or we drown.

George Oppen did write these lines: they are the final lines of the last poem in his last book. We do not necessarily feel doomed by our actions to drown; but neither do we feel that our actions have the power to save us from drowning. Does Oppen mean to suggest that we must choose between the act of waking to other voices and the act of drowning or does he mean that these two actions are in some way interchangeable, that either action will to some degree substitute for the other?

In Latin, which has several different words for *or*, the word *aut* was used to express an ultimatum: either X or Y. The words *sive* or *vel* were used to express a more equivocal set of alternatives: either X or Y but possibly both. Oppen specialized in the latter kind of *or*, an *or* that presents a choice without necessarily forcing us to make it, an *or* that leaves us suspended between alternatives whose juxtaposition seems neither dismissible nor completely satisfactory. “What is or is true as/Happiness,” says Oppen in “A Theological Definition,” asking us to consider the ambiguous relationship of being and truth; the *or* blurs distinctions while at the same time asking us to consider what it would mean to make the alternatives more clearly distinct.

Oppen was not the only specialist in suspending possibilities, of course.

To be, or not to be—that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
 And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep  
 No more, and by a sleep to say we end  
 The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks  
 That flesh is heir to.

In the first clause, Hamlet makes a distinction between being and not being, joins the two alternatives with an *or*, and entertains the possibility of choosing between them. In the second clause the *or* reappears, suggesting that the alternatives of the second clause run parallel to those of the first clause: being is to suffering slings and arrows as not being is to taking arms against them. But the parallels seem provocative: in what way is choosing not to exist like taking arms? No *or* appears in the next clause (“To die, to sleep”) but we wonder if one is implied: is the sense of this clause “to die *or* to sleep,” suggesting that not being, taking arms, and dying are in some way equivalent (as opposed to being, suffering slings and arrows, and sleeping)? Or does the clause mean to say that dying and sleeping are equivalent to each other (“to die *is* to sleep”)?

Hamlet’s *or* perpetuates rather than closes down the discussion. In contrast, when Cleopatra says “He’ll have every day a several greeting / Or I’ll unpeople Egypt,” we feel the weight of the Latin *aut*: this *or* makes a distinction that demands to be observed. Likewise, when W. H. Auden says “We must love one another or die,” we do not feel that we are being asked to think about the intricate relationship of loving and dying; after the line was altered to “We must love one another and die,” the tension between the alternatives was lost. In what is not coincidentally the most famous rumination in English poetry, Hamlet’s *or* makes distinctions only to make the choices between alternatives seem simultaneously more urgent and more difficult to make. The sound of this kind of *or* is the sound of thinking in poetry—not the sound of finished thought but the sound of a mind alive in the syntactical process of discovering what it might be thinking. “It must be visible or invisible, / Invisible or visible or both,” said Wallace Stevens of the supreme fiction.

Jump forward to the twenty-first century.

As when the flesh is shown  
to be remarkable  
most, for once, because

markless:  
where the bruise  
was, that we called

a bell, maybe, or  
—tipped,  
stemless—

a wineglass, or just  
the wine spilling  
out,

or a lesser lake viewed  
from a great height  
of air,

instead the surprise that  
is blunder when it  
has lifted, leaving

the skin to resemble  
something like clear  
tundra neither foot nor

wing finds,  
—or shadow of.

In this, the first sentence of Carl Phillips's "Stagger," we are given a series of alternatives: four metaphors for the shape of a bruise (bell, wineglass, wine, lake) are connected by three *ors*; two metaphors for the skin after the bruise has healed (untouched tundra, unshadowed tundra) are connected by a single *or*; and one of the metaphors for healed skin contains an additional *nor* (untouched by neither foot nor wing). These alternatives make the poem seem at once directed and confused. We do not feel called upon to make a choice between the multiple metaphors, but we experience the process of deliberation

between alternatives at once distant (bell and wineglass) and contiguous (wineglass and wine). We are lured into the poem's texture of partially overlapping choices, its stagger, and our satisfaction lies not in making a decision but in the equivocal process of understanding what the choices might be.

Phillips's poems are littered with *ors*. Syntactically, *or* is his means of keeping the poem moving forward. In "The Pinnacle" he recalls playing a game in his head "called *Cross the Meadow / or Don't Cross It*" in order to push himself forward on a long walk: the poems do the same thing, deferring predication so that we will be drawn to the end of the poem. Thematically, *or* is the source of all spiritual possibility. Not to know choice is not to be human, to have no syntax. But to have made a choice is no longer to be fully alive, to come to the end of syntax. "Have I chosen / already," he asks in "The Clearing," "or is choice a thing / hovering yet?" Phillips's wish is to hover in the process of thought without a clear sense of teleology, and this wish feels rich because he questions its viability.

For like Hamlet, Phillips needs to worry that his finely developed taste for equivocation might become merely strategic, a way of holding the world at bay. But if there can be a romance to the infinite deferral of choosing, a romance of freedom, Phillips's *or* is not in service of the will. It is not a summoning of alternatives where none had existed; it is a recognition that because we exist in time, things become different from themselves. A turning face becomes a turned face. A bruise may seem at once like a bell or a wineglass or the spilled wine because it is difficult to account for the way in which the mark of injury passes, leaving us with no evidence that we were ever harmed. More damaging than the strategic deferral of choice is the romance of conviction—the assumption that we are free to be single-minded.

Single-mindedness depends on subordinating rather than coordinating conjunctions. We want to be able to say "I experience the because," says Ludwig Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*. We want, that is, to feel certain that one experience follows another for a reason, and we want to feel in charge of that forward motion.

But how exactly do we know, asks Wittgenstein, that we may say “Now I can go on”? What makes one experience feel like it has a relationship to one preceding or following it? What makes us feel, for instance, that there is a relationship between the act of reading a word on the page and the act of uttering the word out loud? To say that one feels a causal connection between these two actions, a *because*, would imply that we “as it were feel the movement of the lever which connects seeing the letters with speaking.” But having offered this metaphor of the lever, Wittgenstein immediately insists that he might have used other words to describe the connection. “I might say that the written word *intimates* the sound to me—Or again, that when one reads, letter and sound form a *unity*—as it were an alloy.” A lever or an alloy: one metaphor might easily be replaced by another. “Let us consider the experience of being guided,” says Wittgenstein, and in doing so he offers a variety of metaphors for the experience, each of them connected to another with the coordinating conjunction *or*.

You are in a playing field with your eyes bandaged, and someone leads you by the hand, sometimes left, sometimes right; you have constantly to be ready for the tug of his hand, and must also take care not to stumble when he gives an unexpected tug.

Or again: someone leads you by the hand where you are unwilling to go, by force.

Or: you are guided by a partner in a dance; you make yourself as receptive as possible, in order to guess his intention and obey the slightest pressure.

Or: someone takes you for a walk; you are having a conversation, you go wherever he does.

Or: you walk along a field-track, simply following it.

Like Phillips’s metaphors for the bruise, these metaphors are all meant to point to the same thing, the experience of being guided. At the same time, while the metaphors feel different from each other, it is difficult to say exactly how they are different. Is following a path through a field like following a dance partner in the same way that

having a conversation is like being led by the hand, by force? Rather than providing an answer to this question, Wittgenstein makes us feel that moving forward in time is like negotiating a sequence of *ors*. There is no clear sense of causality linking these metaphors, no *because*, and neither would the coordinating conjunction *and* embody our sense that these metaphors are similar enough to point to one experience but also different enough to make us wonder what that experience could possibly be like. The forward motion of this discussion of forward motion is itself instructively wayward, equivocal, self-questioning.

Wittgenstein relies on *or* because he wants to emphasize this mental action. In a list of things connected by *and*, in contrast, our attention is directed more to the accumulation of things than to the act of accumulation.

And the wind is still for a little  
 And the dusk rolled  
                   to one side a little  
 And he was twelve at the time, Sigismundo,  
 And no dues had been paid for three years,  
 And his elder brother gone pious;  
 And that year they fought in the streets,  
 And that year he got out to Cesena  
                   And brought back the levies,  
 And that year he crossed by night over Foglia, and. . .

In these final lines from canto 8, Ezra Pound catalogues events from the life of the fifteenth-century condottiere Sigismundo Malatesta, leaving us to imagine a string of *ands* extending infinitely. Time is on Pound's mind, but we are not meant to wonder whether the year Malatesta crossed the Foglia to defeat a rival army came before or after the year he was attacked by a band of peasants in the streets of Rimini. The relentlessly paratactic syntax, highlighted by Pound's lineation, suppresses the passage of time, and we are left with the feeling that these events happen simultaneously—the sense, as Pound once put it, that all ages are contemporaneous. Without the

subordinating conjunctions on which narrative movement depends, there is little sense of one event causing or producing or correcting another. Without the coordinating conjunction *or*, there is little sense of a mind moving forward through the events, arranging them, wondering about them. If Pound had said "Or that year they fought in the streets, / Or that year he got out to Cesena," we would not necessarily know anything about the chronological shape of history, but we would have a stronger sense of a mind alive in the temporal process of giving history a shape.

The word *or* is the sign of a mind more interested in displaying a multiplicity of possible interpretations than in discerning something we could comfortably call the facts. At the same time, this mind is more palpably conscious of the pressure to call something a fact—to weigh one alternative against another before adding it to the available stockpile of information. Rather than feeling that all of history is contemporaneous, such a mind is possessed by a visceral awareness of the contemporary moment slipping forever away. Second by second, the incremental passage of time alters the sense of every second preceding us, leaving this mind with a menu of more-or-less useful accounts. In addition, this mind is itself in motion, aware that one moment's version of events will not necessarily satisfy as time moves forward. Most importantly, this mind is not frustrated but nurtured by a constantly shifting sense of alternatives. "We remembered, we anticipated a peacock," says Proust of the continual process of surprise that constitutes our coming to know another human being, "and we find a peony."

The peony does not necessarily replace the peacock, canceling the earlier impression, but neither does it sit comfortably beside it. In a crucial passage in *Within a Budding Grove*, the second volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, Proust remembers seeing three trees at the entry to a covered driveway. Like the moment when he tastes the madeleine or feels the uneven paving stones beneath his feet, this moment instantly becomes overdetermined by associations he could never have predicted. Unlike those other moments, however, this glimpse of trees seems both powerfully meaningful and painfully

obscure, and as Proust struggles to elucidate its claim on his attention, he explores the processes by which the madeleine or the paving stones come to feel so significant. The trees seem uncannily familiar; his mind wavers between past and present; the present loses its immediacy and shimmers with a sense of make-believe. Why? Had a similar vision lodged in his mind so long ago that he no longer remembered its origin? Or had he glimpsed the trees many years ago in a dream? One possibility generates another.

Or were they merely an image freshly extracted from a dream of the night before, but already so worn, so faded that it seemed to me to come from somewhere far distant?

And another.

Or had I indeed never seen them before, and did they conceal beneath their surface, like certain trees on tufts of grass that I had seen beside the Guermites way, a meaning as obscure, as hard to grasp, as is a distant past, so that, whereas they were inviting me to probe a new thought, I imagined that I had to identify an old memory?

And another.

Or again, were they concealing no hidden thought, and was it simply visual fatigue that made me see them double in time as one sometimes sees double in space?

The significance of the three trees might be due to a repressed memory or a distant dream or a recent dream or the essential mysteriousness of the trees themselves or the fatigue of the young man who glimpses them. "I could not tell," says Proust, who is left without the sudden memory of Venice provoked by the uneven paving stones or the childhood vistas conjured by the taste of the madeleine. Instead, he is left with the precarious mechanism on which those moments of recovery depend: the mind moving through a string of possibilities connected by *or*.



This process of recovery is itself the reward of Proust's search, and he wants us to feel the slippage of time passing as much as Pound wants to suppress it. For Pound, the "factive personality" (as he called it) of Sigismundo Malatesta is made palpable through the accumulation of incidents connected by *and*; we build our sense of the personality by allowing those events to hover as it were simultaneously. For Proust, our sense of any human being is equally overdetermined, but he revels in the mind's capacity to grasp no more than a single impression at one time: he presents the mind's movement through alternatives rather than a stable concatenation of alternatives. As the young Marcel comes to know Albertine, for instance, he finds that she is many different people at different times, and, like Hamlet, he discovers in himself an equal variety of people. "I developed the habit," he remembers, "of becoming myself a different person, according to the particular Albertine to whom my thoughts had turned; a jealous, an indifferent, a voluptuous, a melancholy, a frenzied person." Considered abstractly, as a range of possibilities, these multiple selves exist contemporaneously, connected by *and*; experienced directly, as the visceral knowledge of a particular moment in time, these selves can be connected only by *or*. One may be a peacock or a peony, an indifferent or a frenzied person, but not at the same second.

Proust's syntax is designed to embody this temporal movement. Among the sentences I have quoted from *Within a Budding Grove*, the most startling is the simplest—"I could not tell"—but only because this sentence is preceded by a long sequence of sentences in which predication is strategically delayed by apposition and subordination, forcing us to negotiate the plenitude of possibilities that make the simple sentence feel so resonant. Similarly, the most startling phrase in Carl Phillips's poem "Golden" is "two bodies, / fucking." But consider what happens next.

two bodies

fucking. It is difficult  
to see, but that much—

from the way, with great  
 then greater  
 effort, their mouths  
 seem half to recall or  
 want to

a song even older,  
 holier than the one they  
 fill with—I can  
 guess.

These lines dramatize the process of a mind discovering that what it sees is the product of what it thinks. And thought, for Phillips as for Proust, is syntax. In the sentence I have just quoted, the subject of the second independent clause is delayed until the tenth line: “that much. . .I can/guess.” In between, there is time for a thousand choices: “from the way. . .their mouths. . .recall. . .a song.” What kind of song? A song “even older. . .than the one they/fill with.” Older in what sense? “Older,/holier.” How do they recall the song? They recall it “with great. . .effort.” Is their effort consistent? No, they recall “with great / then greater / effort.” Is the effort successful? Perhaps—they “recall or / want to.” Can we be even certain that their physical gesture represents the mental act of recollection? No, “their mouths / seem half to recall.” Emerging from this syntactical thicket, one sentence stretched over eleven lines, Phillips can “guess” with some certainty at what is otherwise difficult to see: “two bodies, / fucking.” Phillips is not discouraged but enthralled by this state of perpetually suspended rediscovery. He wants the world to be difficult to see because our understanding leaps too quickly from the *choice* to the *chosen*, from what is *findable* to what is *found*.

Still, the leap is made every second: we act as if we experience the word *because*. And if a wide variety of twentieth-century writers stitched their world together with the word *and*, interrogating our sense that causality governs the way one thing follows another, we nevertheless tend to make sense of their world by inferring a sense of causality where it has been elided. As a result, a world connected

only by *and* may seem simultaneously liberating and disconcerting, the reassertion of a hierarchy of values by apparently neutral means. If Pound's *Cantos* began with the line "Or then went down to the ship" (rather than "And then went down to the ship"), we would be encouraged to imagine a more fruitfully troubled relationship between the many parts of the poem that follow. If "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" ended with George Oppen's revision of its final line ("till other voices wake / us or we drown"), we would be encouraged to imagine a future for thought.

Like Pound's and Eliot's, Oppen's most ambitious poems are built from an arrangement of fragments whose relationship remains to one degree or another implicit; but by persuading us to think of the parts as connected by *or* rather than *and*, Oppen emphasizes the ways in which the parts turn against each other and the whole, interrogating one another. He acknowledges not only the accumulated heap of things but the more threateningly haphazard possibility of their loss. Not coincidentally, Oppen's great subject is the relationship of parts to the whole—the relationship of individuals to the communities that both constitute them and threaten to obliterate them, erasing their strangeness.

In the seventh section of his masterpiece, "Of Being Numerous," Oppen introduces the poem's most important metaphors: the shipwreck, usually associated with Robinson Crusoe, the individual bereft of community.

Obsessed, bewildered

By the shipwreck  
Of the singular

We have chosen the meaning  
Of being numerous.

Here, Oppen emphasizes the ways in which the community threatens to neutralize idiosyncratic behavior; it is more difficult to stand alone, shipwrecked. By saying that Crusoe was "rescued," Oppen

points out, we eradicate the productive tension between the part and the whole, having implicitly chosen to privilege the numerous over “the bright light of shipwreck.”

Jump from the seventh to the thirty-fifth section of the poem, which begins with the word *or*:

...or define  
 Man beyond rescue  
 of the impoverished, solve  
 whole cities  
  
 before we can face  
 again  
 forests and prairies . . .

Oppen doesn't think that it is possible to live outside of the agreed-upon structures of the community; we must solve the city before we can think about entering the apparently open spaces of forests and prairies. Nor does he think that poems can divorce themselves from the larger structure of the language that gives their words meaning. But while the poem must be called “Of Being Numerous,” Oppen insists throughout it that the maker of poems “must somehow see the one thing.” There are other levels of experience, says Oppen, “but there is no other level of art.” We see only by the bright light of shipwreck.

Or do we? The word *or* does not appear in “Of Being Numerous” with the obsessive frequency with which the word *and* occurs throughout the *Cantos*, but it is everywhere implicit. Oppen returns to the shipwreck metaphor in the nineteenth section of the poem, offering an alternative reading of it.

Now in the helicopters the casual will  
 Is atrocious  
  
 Insanity in high places,  
 If it is true we must do these things  
 We must cut our throats

The fly in the bottle  
 Insane, the insane fly  
 Which, over the city  
 Is the bright light of shipwreck

Oppen is thinking about Lyndon Johnson's escalation of the Vietnam War, specifically the dropping of napalm from helicopters, whose translucent cockpits he likens to a bottle, the pilot trapped inside to a fly. The trapped fly is in turn associated with the poem's governing metaphor for the individual: the bright light of shipwreck. Here, a metaphor linked to the saving vision of the artist is now associated with the dropping of liquid fire on children.

Or is it? Oppen borrowed the metaphor of the trapped fly from the *Philosophical Investigations*: "What is your aim in philosophy," Wittgenstein asks himself, and the answer is, "To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle." Oppen wants similarly to release the part from the whole, but like Wittgenstein he recognizes that we may do so only by erecting more elaborate poems, more elaborate communities—more bottles from which we might release more flies. As a result, the whole of "Of Being Numerous" turns on Oppen's willingness not only to interrogate his own convictions but to suffer their collapse. "The isolated man is dead," says Oppen, turning against his vision of the artist who must see only one thing. "The isolated man is dead, his world around him exhausted/And he fails! He fails, that meditative man! And indeed they cannot 'bear' it." Oppen wants to bear failure, bear it willingly, openly. For the poet who lives by the light of shipwreck may also find himself trapped in the fly bottle.

The relationship between these two metaphors is everything: how exactly should they be linked? To say that one were a peacock *and* a peony would, in Proust's world, distract our attention from the temporal process of transformation, the visceral process of thought. To say that one were a visionary poet *and* an insane pilot would recuse us from the obligation of asking more questions. For as much as the poet's vision and the pilot's vision might resemble each other, they are not exactly the same thing, just as the act of following a path

through a field is not exactly the same as following a dance partner or being led by the hand. We know how to move forward depending on the syntax we employ, and if the word *because* puts one foot purposefully in front of the other, if the word *and* permits us to wander, the word *or* forces us to stagger, doubling backward, falling down. *Or* is our means of defending ourselves against our own strength.

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