This is a recurrent element in the argument of the lyric: "Alack, what poverty my Muse brings forth . . ."; "Those lines that I before have writ do lie . . ."; "For we / Have eyes to wonder but lack tongues to praise. . . ."[3]

In the gap between what one wants to say (or what one perceives there is to say) and what one can say (what is sayable), words provide for a collaboration and a desertion. We delight in our sensuous involvement with the materials of language, we long to join words to the world—to close the gap between ourselves and things—and we suffer from doubt and anxiety because of our inability to do so.

Yet the incapacity of language to match the world permits us to distinguish our ideas and ourselves from the world and things in it from each other. The undifferentiated is one mass, the differentiated is multiple. The (unimaginable) complete text, the text that contains everything, would in fact be a closed text. It would be insufferable.

A central activity of poetic language is formal. In being formal, in making form distinct, it opens—makes variousness and multiplicity and possibility articulate and clear. While failing in the attempt to match the world, we discover structure, distinction, the integrity and separateness of things. As Bob Perelman writes:

At the sound of my voice
I spoke and, egged on
By the discrepancy, wrote
The rest out as poetry.[4]

1983

3. Lines excised from Shakespeare's Sonnets, nos. 102, 115, and 106.
4. Bob Perelman, "My One Voice," in *Primer* (Berkeley: This Press, 1981), 11.

LOUISE GLÜCK
(B. 1943)

Born in New York City, Louise Elisabeth Glück (pronounced "Glick") grew up on Long Island. Her father was a successful businessman who had unfulfilled dreams of being a writer. In "Education of the Poet," Glück observes, "Both my parents admired intellectual accomplishment; my mother, in particular, revered creative gifts." As to her own literary development, Glück remarks, "I read early, and wanted, from a very early age, to speak in return. When, as a child, I read Shakespeare's songs, or later, Blake and Yeats and Keats and Eliot, I did not feel exiled, marginal. I felt, rather, that this was the tradition of my language: *my* tradition, as English was my language. My inheritance. My wealth." In the same autobiographical essay, Glück notes the impact of psychoanalysis on her thinking.

After beginning her undergraduate education at Sarah Lawrence College, Glück transferred to Columbia University. There she eventually studied with Stanley Kunitz, to whom she would dedicate her first collection of poems, *Firstborn* (1968). She has since taught at Goddard College, the University of California at Los Angeles, Harvard, Brandeis, and since 1984 at Williams College in Massachusetts. Among the many awards her work has received are the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Her early collections include *The House on the Marshland* (1975); *Descending Figure* (1980), which she called her favorite among the early books; *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985); and *Ararat* (1990).

Glück's early work flirts with surrealism and occasionally employs grotesque imagery but already displays the austere and deliberate manner for which her poetry is now known. She slowly but unmistakably perfected a deeply expressive lyric style in which emotion seems simultaneously repressed and evoked. Though autobiography—in subjects like divorce and family life—enters her poems, Glück is characteristically concerned with universalizing from personal experience. She often pursues a problem she has set in terms of grammar or subject matter, or images derived from mythological archetypes. She has also quite frequently adopted personae, from the voice of a figure in a painting to that of a wildflower. Critics have noted the plainness of her diction while praising her subtle uses of sound echoes

and off-rhymes. They have called her "direct" in her intimacy, yet have also noted a mysterious and philosophical quality in her work, a kind of distance, probing and provocative.

In Glück's later books like *The Wild Iris* (1992), *Meadowlands* (1996), *Vita Nova* (1999), and *The Seven Ages* (2001), a kind of metaphysical yearning emerges. Her introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1993* begins: "The world is complete without us. Intolerable fact. To which the poet responds by rebelling, wanting to prove otherwise." A collection of Glück's essays, *Proofs and Theories,* appeared in 1994. "I wrote these essays as I would poems," she states in the volume's "Author's Note." Like her poetry, her critical prose is concise, compressed, and evocative and her approach skeptical and fierce.

DISRUPTION, HESITATION, SILENCE

In my generation, most of the poets I admire are interested in length: they want to write long lines, long stanzas, long poems, poems which cover an extended sequence of events. To all this I feel an instant objection, whose sources I'm not confident I know. Some of the sources may lie in character, in my tendency to reject all ideas I didn't think of first, which habit creates a highly charged adversarial relationship with the new. What is positive in this process is that it creates an obligation to articulate an argument.

What I share with my friends is ambition; what I dispute is its definition. I do not think that more information always makes a richer poem. I am attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to eloquent, deliberate silence. The unsaid, for me, exerts great power: often I wish an entire poem could be made in this vocabulary. It is analogous to the unseen; for example, to the power of ruins, to works of art either damaged or incomplete. Such works inevitably allude to larger contexts; they haunt because they are not whole, though wholeness is implied: another time, a world in which they were whole, or were to have been whole, is implied. There is no moment in which their first home is felt to be the museum. A few years ago, I saw a show of Holbein drawings; most astonishing were those still in progress. Parts were entirely finished. And parts were sketched, a fluent line indicating arm or hand or hair, but the forms were not filled in. Holbein had made notes to himself: this sleeve blue, hair, auburn. The terms were other—not the color in the world, but the color in paint or chalk. What these unfinished drawings generated was a vivid sense of Holbein at work, at the sitting; to see them was to have a sense of being back in time, back in the middle of something. Certain works of art become artifacts. By works of art, I mean works in any medium. And certain works of art do not. It seems to me that what is wanted, in art, is to harness the power of the unfinished. All earthly experience is partial. Not simply because it is subjective, but because that which we do not know, of the universe, of mortality, is so much more vast than that which we do know. What is unfinished or has been destroyed participates in these mysteries. The problem is to make a whole that does not forfeit this power.

From *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry* (New York: Ecco Press, 1994) 74–85.

The argument for completion, for thoroughness, for exhaustive detail, is that it makes an art more potent because more exact—a closer recreation of the real. But the cult of exhaustive detail, of data, needs scrutiny. News stories are detailed. But they don't seem, at least to me, at all real. Their thoroughness is a reprimand to imagination; and yet they don't say this is what it was to be here.

I belong, so it appears, to a generation suspicious of the lyric, of brevity, of the deception of stopped time. And impatient with beauty, which is felt to be an inducement to stupor. Certainly there is stupor everywhere; it is an obvious byproduct of anxiety. But narrative poetry, or poetry packed with information, is not the single escape from the perceived constrictions of the lyric. A number of quite different writers practice in various ways another method.

No one seems particularly to want to define the lyric. Donald Hall provides a definition which he immediately repudiates as being too general to be useful. Louis Simpson says the lyric poem is any poem expressing personal emotion rather than describing events. The opposite, in other words, of the news story. The expression of personal emotions depends, obviously, on the existence of a voice, a source of emotion. The lyric is, traditionally, intense, traditionally, also, "a moment's thought." Though it is foolish to attempt a close reading of a poem in a language one doesn't know, I want, briefly, to talk about Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo" in that it is a magnificent example of lyric poetry and, as well, structurally remarkable: its last line anticipates the technique I mean to talk about.

Anticipates only because to shift terms at the end explodes a boundary but does not create, within the poem, that space which is potentially an alternative to information.

"We cannot know," Rilke says of the torso of Apollo. The unknowable is the poem's first referent, the context. And it is interesting to try to imagine the poem's arising out of another, a whole, statue. Something is lost; the poem turns a little corny, a little trite. For something whole, the act of giving directions is simple bossiness, nor is any virtuosity involved in the act of hearing such directions. What wholeness gives up is the dynamic: the mind need not rush in to fill a void. And Rilke loved his voids. In the broken thing, moreover, human agency is oddly implied: breakage, whatever its cause, is the dark complement to the act of making; the one implies the other. The thing that is broken has particular authority over the act of change.

Rilke's poem begins with the unknowable, a void located in the past. And ends with the unknown: a new, a different, life; a void projected into the future. But the impression the poem gives is no more symmetrical than is the statue: the force of the imperative is abrupt, like breakage; the swerving assaults us, implicates, challenges.

Rilke's greatness, for me, is in the making of poems which marry lyric intensity to irregularity of form. Neither Berryman nor Oppen nor Eliot seems to me much like Rilke. Yet each is, in some way, a master of not saying.

Which seems a very odd way to think of Berryman, with his high excitability and multiple personalities. A colleague of mine at Williams, Anita Sokolsky, used the word *distractedness* to describe a primary attribute of *The Dream Songs.* I like the way the word calls up a sense of bewilderedness, of childishness: in his behaviors, if not in the breadth of his suffering, Henry Pussycat is very much the precocious child, the child with the short attention span, the child keenly aware of audience.

Implicit in the idea of the lyric is the single voice: Berryman's primary disruption of the lyric is the fracturing of voice. From poem to poem, the paradigm varies: minstrel show, schizophrenia, psychoanalysis. But always one persona taking over for another, taking the stage: these are noisy poems—shattered, voluble, fragmented, desperate, dramatic, futile. The intense purpose characteristic of the lyric becomes, in Berryman, intense cross-purposes. In other words, paralysis.

The first Dream Song is as good an example as any. The poem begins with two lines of report: our speaker is someone who knows Henry from the outside ("huffy" being descriptive of behavior) and from the inside ("unappeasable"). Reasonable, then, to presume that the central figure—with a curious detachment that contains the internalized perpetual reproach of a parent—here describes himself. And reasonable, too, to anticipate consistency, if not of tone, certainly of perspective. But reason is not the long suit of dreams. If Henry, in lines one and two, is the speaker, the guiding or prevailing intelligence, then who is the "I" of line three? Friendly to the cause, adult, capable of entertaining several ideas at once ("his point" suggests the many other angles already considered). A reader encountering the first person tends to identify that pronoun with a poem's central intelligence. But the problem in *The Dream Songs,* the drama of the poems, is the absence of a firm self. The proliferating selves dramatize, they do not disguise, this absence. It is interesting, on this point, to think of Hopkins, who is in so many ways Berryman's antecedent. The sound of Berryman is like the sound of Hopkins; both poets are animated by self-disgust. But self, in Hopkins, is a miserable fixity, a pole remote from God. God is other, distant, visible in flashes, abidingly present in the world. In Berryman, there is no such sense of abiding presence. What in Hopkins are two separated halves, agonized self and remote God, are in Berryman conflated. This would seem an advantage, but is not. Hopkins was permitted reverence. The very remoteness of God, the felt division between God and self, which could become a metaphor for the division between pure good and pure evil, allowed for, perpetuated belief in, good. This separation encouraged those beliefs which support life: belief in virtue, belief in the world's essential beauty and order, belief in God's superior and embracing wisdom. There is no such reliable other in Berryman. There is no you because there is no I; no fundamental self. The stable, if anguished, relation between man and God in Hopkins has no parallel in Berryman, at least in *The Dream Songs.*

Meanwhile, in the poem, an "I" has made its debut. The ruminative tone of the third line suggests that its commentary may go on. In fact, it doesn't: the "I" is immediately absorbed into the intimate, childish rancors of lines four and five. "Do it" means *do to:* it is all things done to Henry against Henry's unknown, unknowable best interests. The very idea, which is actually Henry's, that others have such power is enough to send Henry into violent hiding. The power is vague because its agents are hazy. What exists is a sense of victimization, of jeopardy, but it is never particularly explicit. In fact, so well does Henry hide himself that, ultimately, he can't find where he is either. And the self that's hidden wakes occasionally, as in number 29, trying to account for its condition: "But never did Henry, as he thought he did, / end anyone and hack her body up / and hide the pieces, where they may be found." He looks for a crime to account for feelings: he behaves like a criminal, like someone in flight. Guilt explains flight. But so, too, does an ancient wish to protect a very fragile self.

The endless compensatory coming out and talking of *The Dream Songs* cannot change the character so formed. The last line of the first stanza is the line of fate: he should have. He didn't. Spoken by the mother, her head shaking sadly.

In terms of method, the next stanzas go on in much the same way. But there's a surprising turn in stanza three, surprising and heartbreaking. Who says "Once in a sycamore I was glad / all at the top, and I sang"? This is an "I" different from the "I" of stanza one, who sees, or the "I" of stanza two, who doesn't see. This is engagement, not commentary. This is a whole being, in behavior spontaneous, Henry-like, but in tone, calm. *The Dream Songs* search for such wholeness. But Berryman's genius, unlike Rilke's, is not expressed as longing.

The Dream Songs are quilts, collages. One way to read them is to insist on coherence, to elaborate the associative process, to pay too little attention to the gaps, the juxtapositions. We can supply what's missing, but the electricity of the poetry derives from Berryman's refusal to narrate these transformations.

Berryman at his worst, raves. No poet seems farther from that act than George Oppen. And for all the brilliant sleight of hand, for all the wit and bravura, for all the savage intelligence, the undernote of Berryman is pathos ranging to grief. The background is the abyss; the poems venture as close to the edge as possible. To some extent, this was inescapable, to some extent cultivated. In his magnificent essay on Anne Frank, Berryman writes, "We have been tracing a psychological and moral development to which, if I am right, no close parallel can be found. It took place under very special circumstances, which—let us now conclude, as she concluded—though superficially unfavorable, [were] in fact highly favorable to it; she was forced to mature, in order to survive; the hardest challenge, let's say, that a person can face without defeat is the best for him." This is noble justification as well as stunning analysis, brilliant and lucid like all the essays. Berryman, in any case, admired extreme states; control interested him very little.

It is valuable, though nearly impossible, to try to read Oppen and Berryman side by side. Nothing in Oppen feels involuntary. And yet nothing feels rigid. One impression genius fosters is that there is, beside it, no comparable mastery: no other way to sound, to think, to be. I admire both Berryman and Oppen to this degree; I regret not knowing what these two thought of each other. Berryman's meticulous need to offend everyone, to be certain that in no mind was he even briefly associated with anything even slightly conservative, mannerly, acceptable, his poignant but extremely wily egotism sometimes seems childish and limited beside Oppen. And sometimes, next to Berryman's feverish wildness, Oppen seems too lofty, too hermetic, too secure. Temperamentally, they seem to cancel one another out. And yet, like Berryman, Oppen is a master of juxtaposition. Interruption seems the wrong term; there is nothing of distractedness or disorientation in this work. Berryman's *Dream Songs* project shatteredness; Oppen's poetry, to my mind, demonstrates its opposite: a profound integrity, a self so well established, so whole, as to be invisible.

Surprisingly, Oppen's clean, austere, dynamic poetry has very few active verbs. No one uses the verb of being better—in these poems, it gives observation the aura and resonance of truth. What moves these poems is silence; in structural terms, Oppen's pauses correspond to Berryman's distractions. "Street" begins with a sighed demonstrative. There is no surprise, no histrionic excitement:

STREET

Ah these are the poor,
These are the poor—

Bergen street.

Humiliation,
Hardship . . .

Nor are they very good to each other;
It is not that. I want

An end of poverty
As much as anyone

For the sake of intelligence,
'The conquest of existence'—

It has been said, and is true

And this is real pain,
Moreover. It is terrible to see the children,

The righteous little girls;
So good, they expect to be so good. . . .

One is obliged, here, to acquiesce to what is factually present: morality, for Oppen, begins in clarity, and it is the latter which can be cultivated. Repetition prolongs the moment and threatens, briefly, to create its own, and false, order. But the dash propels the poem. A period, grammatically, would have done. But a period doesn't force motion, and part of Oppen's genius is a reluctance to conclude. His poems need this reluctance, need his suspicion of closure, in that their manner of expression is absolute.

Only one line in this poem has the force of the double stop: no enjambment, no propulsive punctuation: / "Bergen street." A recall to the specific which, in its terseness, takes on the finality of diagnosis. So final does the line seem as to make it difficult, for me, in any case, to see how the poem was even resumed. The silence that measures intervals is, in Oppen, the time it takes for information to be absorbed: there is almost never an analogous process in Berryman, as there is nothing in Oppen which resembles Berryman's aggressive parrying. Bergen street. Silence. Then the available generalizations. But these are so arranged as to construct a parallel: they follow in a vertical line after the named place so that they become, in a sense, synonyms for Bergen Street. And after the generalizations, the ruminative ellipsis. The ensuing pause contains a suppressed assertion: the poem actively resumes with a denial. This is a characteristic move in Oppen, the idea implied in being dismissed. And now, in the poem, personal response is volunteered, but the feelings of the "I" are the feelings of anyone: personal distinction is not claimed. Nor is conventional feeling held in bland contempt: reasonable, the poem suggests, to despise poverty.

One of the interesting things about this poem is the fact that, to this point, very little of the language is vivid. The poem exists in timing, in the way ideas are held in suspension, so that, by the end, what is charged becomes indisputable in context of such plainness. This is a poetry of mind, of mind processing information—not a mind incapable of response but a mind wary of premature response; a mind, that is, not hungering after sensation. I find, in Oppen, a sanity so profound as to be mysterious: this is a sound that has, for the most part, disappeared from poetry, possibly from thought.

The poem moves as a unit from the semi-colon in line six to the dash in line eleven; typical of the absorbing mind is "it has been said, and is true." But the true is not a resting place, not an epiphany. Or: this truth is not. It is incidental: the maxim is passive, the street relentless. Oppen has, in the most literal sense, an open mind, a mind resistant to closure. What is so rare in him is not that, but the simultaneous austerity and distaste for blather.

The poem refuses to project its informing intelligence. The figures beheld remain themselves, and apart. This is not insufficiency of feeling, but absence of vanity. Pain belongs, here, properly to the children, not the speaker. It may be terrible to see the children, but it is far more terrible to be the children. The speaker's detachment is his, and our, particular burden. Like someone watching *Agamemnon,* he knows what will happen. Oppen brings to what he sees integrity of two kinds: personal wholeness and probity of intent. His poem is not a campaign; he does not propose himself as the missing advocate or champion of the little girls. Whatever he does, in life, on their behalf, is not alluded to in the poem. The poem honors a boundary: the boundary of Bergen Street, the difference between the circumstances of its natives and the circumstances of the visitor. The boundary, in absolute terms, between one being and another. Bad enough for those little girls: at least let the poem not appropriate their experience.

The resources of the poem are given over to characterization of the observed: in a work so nearly devoid of modifiers, "righteous" is galvanizing. What follows is, in its repetition, parallel to the poem's first lines: a translation, a refinement, a correction. And the poem itself becomes an act of wrenching sympathy.

Oppen regularly defines things by saying what they are not. This method of creation through eradication is, for me, congenial. And I find it helpful, in trying to analyze his poetry, to say what it isn't, or what it does not do. Conspicuously, it does not impose. As the speaker's relation to the children is devoid of proprietary impulses, so that the poem seems, ultimately, to dignify the little girls, to pay homage, similarly, in relation to the reader, the poem is neither didactic nor overbearing. It is rare, almost, in my experience, peculiar to Oppen, to find such tact in combination with such intensity.

In most writing, talk is energy and stillness its opposite. But Oppen's pauses are dense with argument: they actively further the poem. When poems are difficult, it is often because their silences are complicated, hard to follow. For me, the answer to such moments is not more language.

What I am advocating is, of course, the opposite of Keats's dream of filling rifts with ore. The dream of abundance does not need another defense. The danger of that aesthetic is its tendency to produce, in lesser hands, work that is all detail and no shape. Meanwhile, economy is not admired. Economy depends on systematic withholding of the gratuitous; dispute is bound to arise over definitions of "gratuitous," but the very action of withholding is currently suspect. It is associated with rigidity, miserliness, insufficiencies; with faculties either atrophied or

checked. It is a habit not admired in personal interaction, in which realm it is associated with ideas of manipulation, slyness, coldness; it is considered uniformly dangerous in governments, and so on.

The art of George Oppen is bold, severe, mysterious, intense, serene and fiercely economical. The advantage of the last, in my view, is that it promotes depth. Each turn is distilled, each movement essential. What would take the more expansive poet ten lines, Oppen does in two. That fact alone forces him to go on. Whereas the expansive poet is prone to premature linguistic satiation, by which I mean that the sense of something's having been made comes into existence too readily. The ratio of words to meaning favors words. The poem exists in its adornments. But no poem of Oppen's can be further reduced than it has already been by its maker. This means that the time it takes, as thought, is the time it requires, not the time the writer requires.

The ambitions of economy are deeply bound to the idea of form. And form, in this connection, usually appears as a chaste thing. Eliot writes:

> Words, after speech, reach
> Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern
> Can words or music reach
> The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
> Moves perpetually in its stillness.

This is late Eliot, but the dominant themes are present from the very first.

When, in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Prufrock asks, "Is it perfume from a dress / That makes me so digress?" the question is, itself, a kind of ruse. "Digress" suggests that some purposeful journey has been interrupted. "To stray," says the dictionary, "from the main subject." The word introduces an idea that has not, it seems, been actually present to the poem: the idea of a main subject.

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is a poem of pathological delay. The action of the poem is inaction, stalling. "Let us go, then, you and I, / When the evening is spread out against the sky." But Prufrock puts off starting: the second line suggests that the time proper to going, though imminent, hasn't arrived. The verbs of the poem describe an arc; they approximate an action. Let us go; there will be; I have known; how should I; would it have been—and then, dramatically, the present tense: I grow old, followed by the alternating future and past perfect. But nothing, in fact, occurs; nothing is even begun. Prufrock fears action; the poem specifically dramatizes, in its formidable hesitations, a fear of beginnings.

The poem, it is true, puts forth explanations: the casual, contemptuous dismissal of the lady, for example. But these seem screens, constructed to account for a preexisting terror. The future is impossible, the past lost. And the present a vacuum: non-action. Simply, I grow old. The refusal to take action, the permanent hesitation of standing still, has not, unfortunately, the desired effect: time does not stop.

Time is Prufrock's enemy, and Eliot's recurring subject. Time is that which mocks the idea of eternity, the stillness of the Chinese jar, a state of positive, dynamic non-change. In time, nothing achieves this stillness; nothing is incapable of being reversed. To another nature, this very fact would be an inducement to action, but long-meditated action wants to leave a mark. Indeed, it hardly matters, as Prufrock irately notes, to ask, of the overwhelming question: what is it? In a universe in which everything is in flux, nothing is final, and, to Prufrock, the authority of "overwhelming" depends on finality. Why suffer for anything less?

To begin, here, is to presume. The words recur and finally merge as the poem's agony intensifies. "Presume" is Prufrock's motif, with its suggestion of social error, of brute, clumsy will imposing itself. To venture, to dare, to take liberties. And, as well, to take on faith. To begin, you must believe in a future; motion enacts that belief. Prufrock stands to one side, out of the way of savage time, but changed anyway. The poem is all wringing of hands, its rhymes regularly sealing off options. Prufrock, in being motionless, does his best imitation of being inert: ". . . that which is only living / Can only die."

Eliot has written the masterpiece of avoidance. At the poem's center is the unsaid, the overwhelming question, the moment forced to its crisis. But Prufrock is not Lazarus; he does not tell all.

This is a dramatic poem. And the pathos of Prufrock is a subject separate from the greatness of this achievement. The poem is satire not in that Prufrock is mistaken, but in that he is inadequate to the discipline of contemplation: we can hear, almost, the very young poet cautioning himself. As a dramatic poem, the whole would dissolve were the overwhelming question elaborated. "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" This bursts from Prufrock, at a moment of frustration. But the underlying tension recurs throughout the oeuvre.

A danger of the expansive poem is that this tension is lost. Not all the poets I've talked about write specifically of this struggle. Certainly, no such strain shows in Oppen. And yet in each case some element of conquest remains, a sense of the importance of exact language, a sense of being in the presence of the crucial. There are poets I love whose work suggests infinite ease, but even in such poets, the best poems often turn on or evolve out of a misperception, something too easily seen or too readily said. Not every temperament inclines to elaboration. What I've said has been meant not to eliminate a method but to speak for the virtues of a style which inclines to the suggested over the amplified.

1994