

Our Life In Six Lyrical Poems—George Oppen

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7:00 p.m.

The Philoctetes Center

Levy: Francis Levy

Gluck: Louise Gluck

Braziller: Michael Braziller

Levy: Mike Braziller is the president of Persea Books, which is a very prominent publisher of books of a literary nature, and especially books about poetry and books of poetry. I'm very proud to introduce Mike tonight. Mike will introduce our guest.

Braziller: Louise Gluck is the author of numerous books of poetry, most recently *Averno*, a finalist for the 2006 National Book Award in Poetry. Her other works include *The Seven Ages*, *Vita Nova*, *Meadowlands*, *The Wild Iris*, *Ararat*, and *The Triumph of Achilles*. She is a Pulitzer Prize winner and recipient of the Poetry Society of America's William Carlos Williams Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, among many others. She is a writer-in-residence at Yale, and I'm very proud and very glad that she's here with us tonight, and I know you are.

Tonight, I'm going to begin with a few biographical facts about Oppen, and then Louise is going to read a very brief essay—a very important essay—and then we will, as we always do, go through the poems. George Oppenheimer was born in 1908 in New Rochelle. His family was affluent, but his childhood was scarred by tragedy and family displacement. His mother shot and killed herself when Oppen was four. The family moved to San Francisco, but he didn't get along with his stepmother. As a teenager, he attended a military academy and was driving a car, had an accident, somebody was killed, and he wound up leaving the school. There were just two little things here: traveling would certainly loom large in his life—this is just one of these interesting facts—and there was nothing that I know of or could find about poetry in his early upbringing. He met Mary Colby at Oregon State University in 1926. They spent a night together, and I think that's referred to in "The Forms of Love," the final poem we'll be looking at. We have to read that poem.

Gluck: You say that about everything, and we'll be here until 11:00 and we won't eat dinner.

Braziller: We'll read very quickly. He got caught, and she was expelled. He got suspended and then the two started hitchhiking around. They got married when they were both 19. They were born the same year—the exact same age. They searched, and this is a quote: "to escape from trappings of class." He was very, very affluent, and very political—he became increasingly political. They met Charles Reznikoff and Louis Zukofsky in New York City. They drove to the city at 19 or 20. Apparently he was developing an interest in literature. He began his first book, called *Discreet Series*, at that time. From an inheritance he began a press called the Objectivist Press which eventually published his first book.

The two, during the Depression, became increasingly aware of the increased disparity between the haves and the have-nots. In 1935, he organized for and joined the Communist Party in

Brooklyn. They had a child, Linda. She has been in touch with me over this event, and was very pleased to hear about it.

Then he stopped writing for 25 years. The family moved to Detroit. He was very resourceful. He was a craftsman, he was a mechanic, he was a carpenter, and an organizer. He then joined the Army and fought in the war. He received a purple heart. Returning, he moved out to the West Coast and built houses. And all this time he's not writing. He wrote one book in his teens, practically. He worked on Henry Wallace's presidential campaign in 1948. And then he moved to Mexico for ten years during the McCarthy era and the House Committee of Un-American Activities. I think he was going to be forced either to give names and turn people over or just to leave the country or go to jail. He chose to go to Mexico for 10 years. He began to soften, I think, somewhat. His daughter attended Sarah Lawrence College, and he had some sort of a dream in which—he's close to 50 now—in which he would get rid of rust. He and his wife were in therapy in Mexico and he had a dream and this dream was interpreted that he should get back to his writing, and he did. They came back to the United States, lived on Henry Street in Brooklyn, which I believe is near Bergen Street—and we're going to talk about that. That is the first poem we'll talk about.

Over the next 10 or 15 years, he wrote *The Materials*, *This In Which*, *Of Being Numerous*, and won a Pulitzer Prize and became a very important and very prolific poet. Eventually, in '75, New Directions published his collected poems. He received many awards: the Pulitzer, the American Academy, Institute of Arts and Letters, NEA and PEN. He died in 1984. Now, just a final point: Robert Creeley, in his introduction, said that the life somehow doesn't tell us what the poems do, and we are going to try to turn to the poems to find out more about him.

Gluck: There's an essay on George Oppen from a book called *Proofs and Theories*. If you see it on a bookshelf it won't look like this—this is the English edition:

“Within the discipline of criticism, nothing is more difficult than praise. To speak of what you love, not admire, not know to be good, not find reasonably interesting, not feel briefly moved by or charmed by—to speak of such work is difficult because the natural correlatives of awe and reverence are not verbal. I have been for some time trying to speak on paper of the work of George Oppen with this overwhelming impediment. But tribute seems necessary: a way of affirming certain values.

“As a reader, consequently as a writer, I am partial to most forms of voluntary silence. I love what is implicit or present in outline, that which summons as opposed to imposes thought. I love white space, love the telling omission, love lacunae, and find oddly depressing that which seems to have left nothing out. Such poetry seems to love completion too much, and like a thoroughly cleaned room, it paralyzes activity. Or to use another figure, it lacks magnetism, the power to seem simultaneously whole and not final, the power to generate not annul energy.

“George Oppen is a master of white space, of restraint, juxtaposition, nuance. His art, though exquisite in detail and scrupulously precise, attains to scope and grandeur through what seems, in some ways, a mastery of perspective.”

And then there's a quote: "Ah, these are the poor, these are the poor, Bergen Street.' There is something Oriental in this. What is, to my limited understanding, less Oriental is the momentum of the poems. Oppen has not got Williams's scampering vitality, but he seems Williams's celestial counterpart. A difference, it seems to me, is that Oppen's mind more craves abstraction—the gift for context, for perspective being an example of this. Williams, at his least good, is stubbornly trivial. Oppen, at his least good, relentlessly lofty. He risks the tedium of the unrelievedly exalted.

"The self, in Oppen as in Williams, is a source of information. The individual life, frail, awkward, imperfect, is at every moment the vessel which contains the soul or mind, and it is about the mind, in particular, that Oppen speaks with greatest ardor, infusing mind with radiant spiritual properties. 'The virtue of the mind is that emotion which causes to see.' Very odd, that sentence, 'that causes to see'. There seems a deleted noun or pronoun in the absence of which, 'to see' explodes as the object of 'causes'. The individual self is a location, its presence implicit. Only in a specific self can 'the virtue of mind' produce a concrete result. Immediately, the poem moves on. What would be, in another poet, solemn conclusion, becomes, in Oppen, a development.

"There is a powerful sense in this poetry of that which is precious. What is precious to Oppen is usually singular, common and small. Thus the concern not for language, so much as words. 'Possible to use words, provided one treats them as enemies.' Possible, that is, if one 'captures them one by one, proceeding carefully, they will restore, I hope, to meaning and to sense.' How beautiful that last word. How typically direct and practical. This is Oppen's definition of substance and integrity. This particular ideal of service to language carries with it a high evaluation of communication, very different from the service done, say, by Stevens, with his taste for rarities, his autoerotic sensuousness. Words restored, according to Oppen's criteria, to natural health and soundness, make a language available for common use, not a hermetic patois. If meaning and sense seem insufficiently charged for poetry, so much the better. They remind us that precision is not the opposite of mystery.

"These are Olympian sentiments for all the prizing of simplicities, but the lines themselves are neither condescending nor didactic. The "I" here is the author of a prayer that seems remarkably poignant, as hope seems fragile among such solid nouns. There is nothing in Oppen of romantic swagger, of the diva, the 'I, David, will do this with my little slingshot.' Moral passion usually manifests itself in decisiveness, which becomes a compulsion to take sides. But a mind either intensely religious or unusually open may invest such passion in acts of speculation. These poems speak a moral language, a language of salvation and contempt. They have the force of true passion, but none of the smarmy definitiveness, none of the self-righteousness. Their beauty has always seemed to me the beauty of logic, the 'virtue of the mind' whose end is vision."

And then a quote: "We walked to where it would have wet our feet had it been water." That's so beautiful. You have that poem. You have many of these poems.

Braziller: Yes. She quoted from the first one that we're going to read now, and the last one. Would you like to read this?

Gluck: Sure. You know, I'll read it from my book. Where are my little yellow marks? We're going to do "Street" first. Do you all have it?

Gluck reads:

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 . . .

Gluck: Do you want me to start speaking?

Braziller: If you'd like to.

Gluck: "If you'd like to." That's like my mother used to say, "Darling, would you like to set the table?" I would say, "No." She would modify it to, "Set the table." I think it would be interesting just to walk through the poem. One of the things that is so remarkable in this poetry—and I don't really know a poet who achieves this so regularly, or has this exact ambition—Oppen has a way of replicating, on the page, the impression of a mind engaged in debate with itself. And the white space: it's a visual white space, but it's also a disjunction, stanza to stanza, sometimes line to line—juxtapositions that don't seem orderly or narrative. One of the ways you learn to read these poems is to narrate for yourself that which has been left out. And the poems represent a kind of—it seems to me like what you do in analysis is to listen for what isn't there. The tones here, the manner in which a line is spoken—I'm not a great reader of this work—but you can hear it on the page; it's unmistakable.

Braziller: Yes, I agree strongly with the very first thing you say. I think coming to it for the first time, the non-inflated quality of the diction is one of the most noticeable things. There's a word I kept writing and thinking about: "wanders." Now, you said it follows the thinking of the mind. It's very spare. There are no, necessarily, internal explanations of why it moves from one to the other, and it does convey a struggle, too.

Gluck: And dispute. An inward debate, a kind of self-querying goes on throughout the poem, it seems to me. It begins, "Ah these are the poor/These are the poor—" They're something being pointed to: "these." Not "us," "these." So distance is established between the one who beholds and that which he beholds, and they're a kind of spectacle, a scientific example, an object of scrutiny, but not quite human. They're a group, they're a kind: "These are the poor/These are the poor—" And then white, and then "Bergen Street," like an appositive, a label. "These are the poor/These are the poor," as though the words "Bergen Street"—the name of the street—contained all the information we already had. You say "Bergen Street," you know everything, like a code for a whole way of life. And then that life is elaborated: "Humiliation/Hardship..." Ellipses, as though the list goes on—it could go on indefinitely. "Nor are they very good to each other/It is not that."

Braziller: Well, there's an example of what you're talking about.

Gluck: The tone changes.

Braziller: After the word "hardship," he begins, "Nor are they very," so there was something in between there. He's almost arguing with himself, or he had a thought and he's responding to that.

Gluck: Yes.

Braziller: He doesn't tell us—

Gluck: So the "nor" is the negation of something that is affirmed in the white space. "Ah," the platitude, "Ah, the," and yet there may be other readings of this, but one way to read it is, "But look at how they have such social connectedness, one to the other—a sense of bond, a sense of community." And the poem said, "No, no, no, no." And then a kind of rehearsal of a certain position: "I want/An end of poverty/As much as anyone." "Don't mistake me, don't think that what I say, I say out of a kind of disdain for or insensitivity to their dilemma. I want an end of poverty." "An end of poverty/As much as anyone/For the sake of intelligence/'The conquest of existence'—/It has been said, and is true—" So that these large, rhetorical ideas that attach to the end of poverty, these claims that are made in rotund language are all—it is also true, these things that are so oracular. They are true. One wants an end to such things. And here is where the poem, it seems to me—for all the marvelousness of what has gone before—here is where the poem is made, in these last two stanzas: "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..." And you see a version of what you see at the beginning of the poem, the way, in the beginning of the poem, you're sort of narrowing down on a particular place. "These are the poor/These are the poor—" this exhibit—this human exhibit. But at the end their humanity is given back to them through the

instrument of the little girls. The “righteous”—where did righteousness come from? That quality that, in an adult, would be moralizing and sententious is, in these little children, heartbreaking. “So good, they expect to be so good...” And the reader, of course, knows that this is the argument against this place; this is why the place should rouse us to something beyond civic shock. It’s that they—they will not be allowed to be good.

I would like to make the corollary point that those of you who watch, on television, *The Wire*—does anyone here watch *The Wire*? It’s very great, and it does exactly this last line: it shows you over and over and over—I mean, the poem does it in almost no words at all—the impossibility of rising out of certain circumstance. I mean, we have this convenient American platitude of, “Oh, your birth does not freeze you, make you. You can change. You can, through labor and diligence.” But to some extent that’s foolishness.

Braziller: You’re reminding me of how politically or socially aware he is. I mean, the two things—listening to and looking at the poem again and again—we see this spare, very complex thinking on a scene or evoking something. But there always seems to be a strong social awareness and a moral kind of a concern for our condition. Would you agree with that?

Gluck: Yeah.

Braziller: Without being didactic. I don’t mean he has a political shtick. I just think he views, at times, the lyrical and the political the same.

Gluck: That’s what’s so striking: he’s the most literary, sophisticated, demanding writer. I mean, for all that he uses very small words—quotations, sometimes—but words you don’t have to look up. The syntax is complex and the movement through these lacunae is complicated. He’s a hard, hard, hard poet, despite the simplicity of the word choice. He’s so much the opposite of the slovenly. Well, I use the word “precise”—I mean impeccable quality to these lines. When I think of political writing, it has, in general, a kind of strenuous, sloppy, “We don’t have time to be perfect,” as though that were part of the ambience of the writing.

Braziller: But I think in all these poems, at least in one place, there’s a take on social conditions, on poverty. I don’t mean it in that didactic, rhetorical way. I mean it in a genuinely deeply felt kind of a way.

Why don’t we move on to a poem that I think also has a touch of politics in it, too. I’m going to read this one, okay? The next one we’ll do is called “Niece.” Did you say that he’s both precise and puzzling? Isn’t that the case, or am I hearing that? It’s both very spare and clear and crisp.

Gluck: I didn’t say that, but I said words to that effect because I think that. He’s demanding.

Braziller: He’s demanding. Again, listen to the way the mind wanders here from thing to thing. It’s done authentically, it’s done beautifully, and not necessarily explained. It just works.

Braziller reads:

The streets of San Francisco,
She said of herself, were my

Father and mother, speaking to the quiet guests
In the living room looking down the hills

To the bay. And we imagined her
Walking in the wooden past
Of the western city . . . her mother

Was not that city
But my elder sister. I remembered

The watchman at the beach
Telling us the war had ended—

That was the first world war
Half a century ago—my sister
Had a ribbon in her hair.

Braziller: I'm wary of biographical things, and I'm very curious what you have to say, but I do want to mention that this was written in the 1960s, about the time of the death of Oppen's sister.

Gluck: That I hadn't known. But you feel in the last stanza that kind of indelible, evanescent past—unforgettable. But what's interesting in the poem to me, among other things, is the use of the first person. What is the role of this "I"? The poem is intimate and direct. The niece at the party or social gathering says, "The streets of San Francisco/. . . were my mother and father." And the speaker is the person in whom—the first person is the location in which everything convenes. He is both present on the occasion of this remark, and he's the one capable of correcting it. And this is a poem of, it seems to me, reprimand, among other things. But this "I" is the—he's the person who remembers the whole story of the real mother, not those streets, you fabricating bitch. "My sister, my sister, my sister—"

Braziller: Is it a self-centered remark? Is he antagonistic toward the niece? In other words, she said, "The streets were my—I learned it on the streets." Or is there some notion of her criticizing her parents and then him ruminating on this and saying—

Gluck: Well, I think that there's a kind of sternness in the manner in which he moves away from her remark. There may be other readings, but that's what I hear: a correction. "Reprimand" may be too strong, I don't know. But that's how I hear this. And then "I remember. I am the person in this room who can say, with authority," though he doesn't say it, he only writes it. So there's a kind of atmosphere of tact and discretion in the poem. This is not a poem of making a scene at a party over a remark. This is a poem of rumination born out of a kind of fastidiousness: "No, that is not true. Your mother was my sister." And then this memory that he's probably the only one in the room who knows of this event. And then you have a sense that when he disappears, when this first person disappears, that whole moment disappears; it vanishes, except insofar as the poem

gives it a longer life. But what the poem is talking about is the fragility of that convening of the past and the present and the chance remark, the associations that it prompts.

Braziller: I would see elements or suggestions of a parallel between his disturbance over his niece and the way he moves into the personal memory of his sister. But I would also add that there are elements of class within this, or that he's playing with elements of class: "the quiet guests in the living room," referring to his sister as an "elder sister." She "Had a ribbon in her hair." "By a watchman"—when I opened I talked about his concern with the trappings of class and how throughout his life he tried to escape them, or tried to make contact with other classes. He did this throughout his life and in many different ways, and I just see a sort of consciousness of class, and also in these references to the world to the parallel between this personal grief over his sister and at least two world wars.

Audience: Can we ask questions?

Braziller: Yes, please do.

Audience: Who we have imagined "Walking in the wooden past/Of the western city." Is that the mother?

Gluck: No, no, it's the niece.

Audience: Who is "her"?

Gluck: It's the response to what she's just said. "The streets of San Francisco/She said of herself, were my/Father and mother." And the guests, hearing this—the collective "we"—"imagined her/ Walking in the wooden past/Of the western city." The niece, yes: the woman who has just spoken.

Braziller: But interesting—what frames the poem? We're talking about him being the one who remembers and embodies and looks back, but what frames the whole poem are two world wars. Go ahead.

Audience: Something else really frames it. In the first line, the reference to the "streets of San Francisco"—there was, in the '60s, this supposed war going on between the World War II generation coming of age and the post-World War II generation coming of age. Especially after you both illuminated some of the biography, I have a feeling it could be even a funeral gathering or a memorial or something, where the quiet guests are. And the niece, the daughter of the departed, says, "I remember these streets as my father and mother," which is kind of a hippie thing to say.

Gluck: I think that's a kind of dangerous application of biography to text, because there's really nothing in the poem that tells you that. Moreover, it seems to me that had she done so, that would have been an outrageous thing to do at a funeral for your mother—to say "She wasn't my mother."

Audience: Things happen like that.

Gluck: Yes, I know, but I think the poet's tone would have been different. I think that there's a kind of relaxation in those opening lines.

Braziller: But you used the word "hippie." I can't remember why now, but I agree with that. It is the '60s, and she was out on the streets, and maybe she went in that direction. I think that's slightly in the poem, and I think that's important. At least I think that's there. I don't know why, but it's definitely suggested that she was living on the streets, as many of us or many people we knew were at that time. It was a highly political era, and that might have been the route that she took and hence was not from a strong family—didn't have an attachment to her mother, clearly.

Audience: There's something else in here: "And we imagined her/Walking in the wooden past/Of the western city..." It sounds like San Francisco before the earthquake—that's the gold rush.

Braziller: "Wooden"—it certainly has that for me, and I'll let you answer that. But I would say that the word "wooden" has lingered with me, and I raise this to you: he breaks through a wooden thing in this, and the poem becomes almost an elegy to his sister. Doesn't the word "wooden" stand, there, for something that he totally shifts away from?

Gluck: Could you paraphrase what you just said? I'm not quite following.

Braziller: She was talking about "wooden past" being the gold rush—the early San Francisco era. But on another level, I always had the thought reading the poem that "wooden" was—the poem begins in sort of a non-feeling state or a state of harshness toward his niece, and then turns into a very moving elegy toward his sister. And the word "wooden" is a kind of—

Gluck: Frozen, stiff.

Braziller: Yeah, cold.

Gluck: Yes. I read it that way, too.

Audience: There's also a very interesting thing going on here with time, because even though it starts with "She said of herself," and we're in the past, there's something about the progressive that brings me into the present. And then there are all these times coming together and it really stops me when he says, "I remembered" instead of, "I remember." I'm kind of expecting, "I remember now in the moment of writing," and yet he takes us back to another remembering. I find that really interesting.

Braziller: It is really interesting. Again, he's always dealing with the workings of the mind, and the mind has these weird inexplicable shifts all over the place.

Gluck: There is, "She said of herself," "we imagined" and "I remembered." You're responding to a kind of ambience in the poem that I think—a strangeness in that "I remembered" moment.

Audience: It's almost a simultaneity of all of these moments—a privileging of memory in which it all falls together.

Braziller: One more quick question, because we have four other poems to look at.

Audience: I'm just piggy-backing.

Braziller: Go ahead. You can piggy-back.

Audience: I think the word “privileging” is great there, because it seems to me the beginning of the poem and the kind of distance you sense is the poet or the speaker characterizing the niece's speculation regarding her mother—the niece's version. So it's interesting because you can read, “And we imagined her/Walking in the wooden past/Of the western city” two ways: as if maybe just for a nanosecond he is willing to entertain his niece's version of her mother. But then as you said, “wooden” almost can be a wordplay—that it's frozen, as you said. And so then we go down from the mother being recalled as a mother—you know, someone who is socialized, is married, maybe a woman of privilege and status—to the little girl with a ribbon in her hair who was once vulnerable at the end of the war. Suddenly the memory at the end is the memory of that frail—not frail, but weak—just vulnerable child. And of course the niece can never really know her mother as a child. So I just see it as that.

Braziller: He said somewhere, “Cadence is everything.” I agree. I think it's very helpful what you said, but I think the only way to decipher these lines sometimes is to hear the music in them, because they're very puzzling and very ambivalent or contradictory.

Okay, now who reads this one? Do you want to read it?

Gluck: I will read it if you want.

Braziller: Okay, thank you.

Audience: Which one?

Braziller: Oh, sorry, “Philai Te Kou Philai.”

Gluck: You do the Greek, though.

Braziller: What?

Gluck: You do the Greek because I don't have my—

Braziller: I just did it: “Philai Te Kou Philai.”

Gluck: No, in English. You do the—

Braziller: Oh, we believe that means “Loved and Not Loved” or “Loved and Hated.”

Audience: What language?

Gluck: It’s Greek.

Audience: To me.

Braziller: We believe it means something like “Loved and Hated” or “Loved and Not Loved,” which is repeated.

Gluck: I did once know this, but knowledge has fled.

Gluck reads:

There is a portrait by Eakins
Of the Intellectual, a man
Who might be a school teacher
Shown with the utmost seriousness, a masculine drama
In the hardness of his black shoes, in the glitter
Of his eyeglasses and his firm stance—
How have we altered! As Charles said
Rowing on the lake
In the woods, ‘if this were the country,
The nation, if these were the routes through it—’

How firm the man is
In that picture
Tho pedagogic.
This was his world. Grass
Grows to the water’s edge
In these woods, the brown earth
Shows through the thinned grass
At the little landing places of vacation

Like deserted stations,
Small embarkation points: We are
Lost in the childish
Here, and we address
Only each other
In the flat bottomed lake boat
Of boards. It is a lake
In a bend of the parkway, the breeze
Moves among the primitive toys
Of vacation, the circle of the visible

The animal looked across
And saw my eyes . . . Vacation's interlude?
When the animal ran? What entered the mind
When dawn lit the iron locomotives,
The iron bridges at the edge of the city,

Underpinnings, bare structure,
The animal's bare eyes

In the woods . . .
'The relation of the sun and the earth

Is not nothing! The sea in the morning'
And the hills brightening, Loved

And not loved, unbearable impact
Of conviction and the beds of the defeated,

Children waking in the beds of the defeated
As the day breaks on the million

Windows and the grimed sills
Of a ruined ethic

Bursting with ourselves, and the myths
Have been murderous,

Most murderous, stake
And faggot. Where can it end? Loved, Loved

And Hated,
Rococo boulevards

Backed by the Roman
Whose fluted pillars

Blossoming antique acanthus

Stand on other coasts
Lifting their tremendous cornices.

Gluck: A hard poem to talk about. You feel it. You feel a sense of world, a sense of polarities,
but to talk about it—

Braziller: Let me make one observation and let's throw it open, absolutely. This is a much
longer poem, and maybe not successful every place, incredibly beautiful in other places. But

when you compare it to “Niece,” there’s a similar thing, which is the wandering of the mind. And it either works for you or it doesn’t. I think it’s brilliant because if you think about it many different strands of thought are taking place at the same time, and you can feel very differently about the same thing as you think about it. To get back to your opening remark about there always being a struggle within the mind for love or for hate. Do we love reality or do we hate it for its unfairness, for its shitty politics. It’s weighing these things.

Gluck: Like, why start with the portrait? Why does the portrait dominate these opening stanzas—this “firm Tho pedagogic”?

Audience: It represents something that’s sort of certain.

Gluck: Yeah, it’s finished, it’s realized, it’s an artifact. It’s an image. It’s also the past. I mean, in both of those senses I certainly think that that’s exact. And what is in opposition to it? How is uncertainty located?

Audience: In us.

Gluck: Yeah.

Audience: In reality.

Gluck: What’s the animal? I mean, there’s the “us” in the conduit on the boat, moving, moving, transient. And the unalterable portrait is sort of doubly firm; the portrait is not going to change and the figure himself is—

Braziller: Louise, how would you characterize the picture? How would you characterize his feeling toward this portrait?

Gluck: I want to know what the animal is doing. But how would I—

Braziller: Because he says in the first stanza, “How we have altered!”

Audience: “How have we altered!”

Braziller: “How have we altered!”

Audience: Which is interesting. Because both of you changed it to “How we have altered!” What does that mean?

Gluck: It says a lot about us, but not about the poem. Well, it’s the exclamation point that I think accounts for that inversion. “How have we altered!” seems a kind of intensification. The exclamation seems a—“How can this have happened?” And so I think that there’s a way in which that punctuation presses you toward an inversion within the sentence. And given the kind of poet Oppen is, I assume all of this is to a purpose, though he can’t have anticipated every wrong reading.

Braziller: The “pedagogic.” He begins—they’re on a boat together bobbing around in the wind, and it begins on an association he’s having while this is taking place. Something has made him think of this Eakins portrait of a—a kind of hard portrait, or conventionally masculine, hence capitalistic. But I honestly don’t know.

Gluck: All those things I would say, but the intellectual in the second line—I think we can assume that these figures in their boat are also representations of the intellectual. And their fluidity in dispute is opposed to the portrait’s high polish and decisiveness: this is a man who, once he forms an opinion, is not likely to change his mind. But I think that the attitude toward this figure is not the sort of simple contemptuousness that you would suppose. I think that there’s a kind of nostalgia, a kind of tenderness for this image. The idea of a world in which such firmness was possible, such confidence was possible, and a kind of regret—well, not a yearning to go back, but a kind of sorrow that that no longer really exists.

Audience: And then you can contrast that next page with the children of the defeated. I mean, the contrast between the period of time that there was stability and there were portraits being made of people of some consequence—I mean, a school teacher. And then you’ve got the terrible lines where it’s “Children waking in the beds of the defeated,” and then “Of a ruined ethic.” What is the ruined ethic? The ruined ethic is the tremendous poverty in the country, the shifting of the country, the changing from the sort of stabilities that there were in the 19th century as against the 20th. “And the myths/Have been murderous/Most murderous”—myths that if you’re poor you can become anything, which he says in one of the other poems. I don’t think you can separate the man’s political convictions, which were part of the man himself. They weren’t political in that sense; they were part of his real feelings against the country or separate classes. You could be of the middle class and get things and be comfortable, and the dreadful poverty and what that does to people—

Braziller: I agree strongly, but I think important things within the poem lead up and reinforce what you’re saying. In the end, I think you’re right that there is a tenderness and sympathy for the Eakins figure. I think that’s very important. And then he’s maybe saying that something has happened in the interim. I think there may be a little more contempt—and I don’t mean to simplify it—for the “primitive toys/Of vacation,” because that’s the next movement within the poem.

Gluck: I agree, and there’s a kind of effortful-ness in that—in all the accoutrements of vacation: “Now we ceremoniously stage our vacation.” It’s as though the portrait represents the last outpost of something, some simplicity of mind. You’re shaking your head.

Audience: No, I was responding.

Braziller: Continue, please.

Gluck: Well, just that I agree with you that contempt—well, it’s interesting because these “primitive toys/Of vacation,” you would assume, include the boat that they’re on. So he’s talking, also, about the rituals in which he cooperates and their necessity—what are they

seeking? Is this truly the only way that such interruption of labor is to be secured? I mean, the poem is not posing those particular questions, but there's an attitude of a kind of taint about the ceremony of vacation. But it's what he seems to be doing himself.

Audience: I think it has to do with our whole relation with nature—the natural world and how we've lost it. In the day of the school marms this was—the nation and the country and the lake was the route through it. People lived on boats and that was the substance of their lives. Now it's become trivialized. It's like your toy for the weekend. Your real life is in the city and the locomotive, but something terrible has been lost.

Braziller: Yes, something happened. Something has happened.

Audience: Ground is lost—our connection. I don't know.

Gluck: So the plight of the animal represents, almost, the natural world's protest.

Audience: When you spoke about a certain sympathy, I think I'm hearing the portrait and this privileged picture of this pair punting on a lake as Oppen's having a certain sympathy for himself and his place in this received wisdom, the Western culture that the portrait embodies. Yet he has this earnest emotional response to the poor, to the children in the beds of the defeated. And his trying to reconcile those in himself, I think, is the sense of sympathy that I hear in this, too. He's part of it. The cornice is this cultural heritage that we couldn't do without, and that he doesn't want to turn his back on, but yet what does it have to do with these—

Gluck: The only word I would dispute in what you say is the word “reconcile,” because it's this that makes Oppen so great: he wants the questions, the dilemma to grow more complex, the questions to multiply. I think a simpler, more sententious poet would seek to reconcile apparent opposites, and would insistently do so. I think that he wants to understand what's at issue. I think always the poems want to understand what's at issue, what's at stake, to see clearly. They move by a series of assertions and perceptions, followed by “And yet,” “On the other hand.” And I think that that never stops; the poems are open-ended.

Braziller: I don't know anybody else who so naturally captures our political—political is not the right word—our awareness of our social condition. He's got an eye for how the world is altered, what man has done to it, how it pisses him off and annoys him, how he looks for some pleasure. It's a very real thing. This is how the mind works. This is what we do when we get out. The poem moves to seeing this animal's eyes amidst these industrial, ugly structures. Some of the other poems we look at are going to have “Vacation's interludes.” Is he making some real contact here, or is there some sort of transcendence in the awareness of the reality of this animal amidst all of this phony, all these structures, all these industrial structures?

Gluck: I'm not sure. I think that the poem, in places, is a little opaque. You tend to carry over ideas of the natural from other poems and let them inform this. I mean, the animal—there's nothing to be said against the animal. It seems to represent things that Oppen would praise: candor, directness, a kind of—

Braziller: He would praise being aware of the animal. He would praise being conscious of it.

Gluck: He would.

Braziller: And trying to be more conscious of it.

Audience: Who is Charles?

Gluck: Fellow on the boat.

Braziller: The fellow on the boat. You know, Charles!

Gluck: Well there's effect to that.

Audience: It seems to me that there's a relation to nature. There's a single quotation mark: "The relation of the sun and the earth is not nothing! The sea in the morning/And the hills brightened, Loved/And not loved." It seems to me that there's a whole question of a problematical relationship to nature that's also brought up in the whole question of—we are "Lost in the childish/Here," on the lake, on our vacation. So he's doing the absolute opposite of sentimentalizing or romanticizing it. He's really looking at the human inability—I don't know what. But the animals, their eyes are part of it. It's opaque, finally, to us. We love it and we don't love it. It's other. I think there's a strong sense of otherness there.

Gluck: Well, look at the modifiers, too: "little landing places," "Small embarkation points"—everything is miniaturized, as you say.

Audience: And how firm the man is in that picture. "We are/Lost and childish"—the child issue. And then it goes back, in the end, to the "Roman/Whose fluted pillars/Stand on other coasts/Lifting their tremendous cornices." This is another, in a way, totally strong, durable, vertical image, like in the picture.

Gluck: Yes.

Audience: But what do they put on it? Blossoms.

Audience: Right after "stake/And faggot," blossoms.

Audience: The blossom is part of the design, part of the—what is it, Corinthian?

Audience: I was struck by the kind of vertical and horizontal—a very complex weave—the idea that he's an artist and he's talking about the creation of humans, whether it's the art of Eakins in the painting, or what humans can do, on one hand, whether it's the construction of the column with the horizontal cornice and the pushing up of some force, whether it's the process of age or the progress of age, or of generations, or civilizations, and the idea of what I thought was a reference to the witches—burning witches at the stake—the sort of faggots at the bottom are horizontal and the stake sort of almost in parallel to the Corinthian columns. He talks so much

about vision and eyes, and the eyeglasses of the man—the human construction—the aid to vision that is contrasted with the naked eyes, the bare eyes of the animal startling him in the middle of this childish vacation—an attempt to somehow be outside of time, outside of his circle of vision. The childish here is opposed to the vertical sort of history. We’re part of both good and bad: horrible, murderous and wonderful—the attempt by the Romans to take from the Greek and make copies and do better. So I just thought that there was a resolution. There was a kind of a sense of an enormous complexity. Humans are capable of so much, good and bad.

Gluck: I don’t know. Yes.

Audience: I also see something about the consequences of human arrogance. We are “Bursting with ourselves,” so that the centrality of the human takes over everything in nature and allows this steaming beast of a locomotive to come and rend its horrible stuff all over our precious earth. We have a “ruined ethic” which once, perhaps, existed in an earlier time, in the time of—I don’t know, maybe it was the time of Eakins or Romans. But “Bursting with ourselves”—there is a consequence that we pay for that.

Braziller: We’ve talked about his incredible political sensitivity and that being inseparable from his eye and his lyrical rendering.

Audience: I love how you don’t know whose mind this is when he says, “What entered the mind.”

Braziller: He does that all over the place. That’s what I was talking about with “Boy’s Room”: the pronouns are very confusing.

Audience: Normally it would be a restoring thing to be in nature, let alone to be on a vacation. But it makes him feel so puny and wrong to be there. The boat is—you know, he points to his artifice at every moment. It’s not a pleasurable, secure thing. And the animal—he’s not really seeing the animal so much as the animal is beholding him, in a funny way. So that mind—“What entered the mind”—his mind? Our mind when we built those things? The animal’s mind? What it sees? All this technology pushed through into the natural world, and I think that the poem just continues to struggle with loved and hated all the way through all of it.

Braziller: I think he struggled with it, in my opinion, in many of these poems. That’s how Louise opened.

Audience: Goodness or beauty in nature—

Braziller: What makes him impossible to reduce into a political system always is this sense of the mystery of what’s out there, the difficulty in realizing reality. This is repeated, that his strongest moments, his most intense moment seem to be when he perceives an other or a thing or something out there, and that’s not a political concern at all; that’s more of a philosophical one

Audience: I sort of find this—at the risk of failing the course—

Braziller: It won't be the first time, Frank.

Audience: It happened to me at McAllister also. It's like a metaphysical poem to me. It seems like these leitmotifs and conceits, and the movements—the historical, the natural, the urban, and then the mannerist—it's like a great change of being. The poem is, in a way, different and more fulsome and more a panorama than the other poems. And it runs contrary to the whole essence, in a way, of Oppen's work in its completeness and definitiveness. It's very readable as a narrative.

Audience: Do we know when this was written?

Braziller: They were all written in the '60s, I think. They're all from one book called *This In Which*. That will be in one of the poems—that line. *This In Which* is the title of this book, all written in the 1960s. Maybe we should move on.

Gluck: Just one last, and then we'll move on.

Audience: My recollection of Eakins is the portraits of these beautiful young men wading in a river or rowing on the river. That's why I'm wondering whether there is actually a criticism of the intellectual, almost like, "Look what we have become. Natural man, look what we have become." I can't put these two paintings together. I think the masculine drama is the drama of this ugly world we've created, all the way from the Greeks to the—

Braziller: Well, the myth of masculinity, the stereotype of masculinity—

Audience: I think there is a very famous portrait by Eakins of a scientific doctor sitting in an anteroom.

Audience: "Gross Clinic."

Audience: It might be this.

Braziller: I don't know if this is the one or not, but I'll pass this around. This is one of—

Audience: There are also a number of single portraits of a single male of this type. There was a big Eakins retrospective fairly recently, and there was a lot of that stuff. The gravitas was exactly there.

Braziller: Moving right along.

Audience: Any thought on the Greek title? Why in Greek? Did he do this a lot?

Gluck: He has a wide range of knowledge, and the poems are filled with quotations from Greek literature, from much Latin, quotes from Virgil.

Audience: But doesn't it also relate to this 19th century pedagogue and the image of the column in the end?

Gluck: It goes to it.

Braziller: One more question.

Audience: It seems to me like the end part is like the world totally falling apart. I was curious about the structure, where it goes from a lot of density in its stanzas, and then all of a sudden it's just very—two-line thoughts, a whole series of them. I feel like the world has kind of come apart.

Gluck: Well, it seems to be to be moving into a kind of lyric rapture, a kind of associative, lyric meditation. The lyric form overtakes the more—what would be a word for those longer stanzas, the rhetorical movements of the beginning?

Audience: What's the next poem?

Braziller: The next poem will be "Psalm."

Gluck: Well, okay.

Braziller: We have two short poems, right? No, three.

Gluck: We may not get to all three if you want me to do something also.

Braziller: How about we do "Psalm" and then "The Forms of Love."

Gluck: I'd rather do "Boy's Room." Can we do "Boy's Room"? Let's each of us choose. That's what I would choose.

Braziller: I tell you what, let's get as far as we get. Let's go to "Psalm" and get as far as "Psalm."

Braziller reads:

Veritas sequitur . . .

In the small beauty of the forest
The wild deer bedding down—
That they are there!

 Their eyes
Effortless, the soft lips
Nuzzle and the alien small teeth
Tear at the grass

 The roots of it

Dangle from their mouths
Scattering earth in the strange woods.
They who are there.

 Their paths
Nibbled thru the fields, the leaves that shade them
Hang in the distances
Of sun

 The small nouns
Crying faith
In this in which the wild deer
Startle, and stare out.

Gluck: Well, it's a poem about, it seems to me—it enacts mystery and wonder; it conflates them. And then somehow moves from the natural to the tiniest building block of language: the small nouns—well, it's not the tiniest. It's sort of, "where do you put your belief? To what do you cling?" And "In this in which the wild deer/Startle, and stare out." It's a very different stare from the stare in the last poem. The deer are the representatives of this world, and the "roots," the "alien small teeth"—everything is small. Small beauty, small teeth, small nouns. It's a word he uses a great deal, in fact. But it doesn't insult the word it modifies. It seems to affirm the seeable, the known, the un-grandiose. "The small nouns/Crying faith"—it's as though the language itself were saying, "Take heart. Take heart, in the mouths of the deer. Hang in there." This is not a poem I know how to do much with. It seems to me an exquisite, exquisite thing, but resistant, at least, to my particular capacities.

Braziller: The "small nouns"—is he talking about the poem? It's called "Psalm." Is the poem itself in a way the most intense or the most spiritual or the deepest realization of these small beauties?

Gluck: Well, I don't know that he would say the most, but it is an artifact that seeks to align itself—it is a made thing that seeks to resemble the forms of nature, as though it were somehow always here.

Audience: The word "Psalm" has the word "small" in it.

Gluck: It's missing an "L."

Audience: What was his religious background?

Braziller: He was born Jewish, but I don't think he was religious at all.

Audience: Well, that's typically Jewish.

Braziller: He was very Jewish.

Audience: “*Veritas sequitur*”—what does that mean?

Braziller: We think that it means—

Audience: Truth and order?

Braziller: Truth follows order, or—

Gluck: It’s not an infinitive. I think that’s right.

Audience: It’s part of a quote from St. Thomas Aquinas. The whole thing is “*Veritas sequitur esse rerum.*”

Audience: What does it mean?

Audience: It means truth follows from the existence of things.

Braziller: From the existence of things. That is it is always here. It is in realizing the reality of this tender and living thing that something good happens—truth follows upon the existence of things.

Audience: Are any of the editions annotated?

Audience: The new ones.

Braziller: Which, the *Selected*?

Audience: That explains what the Latin means and what the Greek means, where it came from.

Audience: I think a reading of this is about experience and the distance between describing and language. So maybe it’s an *ars poetica*. You have this beginning, all this praise and this simple thing-ness, all these things that are in the world, and all we can do is have small nouns that cry faith, have faith in this. It’s sad, in a way, but it’s the best we can do. I mean, that’s what I hear him saying. “That’s the best we can do.”

Braziller: Well, it’s quite a bit, if you think about it, to cherish life, or to make oneself conscious of the existence of something else. It is a very good thing to do.

Gluck: I don’t think he’s saying that’s the best we can do, with a kind of resigned hopelessness. I think he’s saying, “This is an immensity.” It’s an immensity. It is a thing to be sought. It is a thing to be desired. It is the thing to be faithful to, this impulse. So I think that there’s a sense of high purpose, high moral and aesthetic purpose attached to this narrowing of the gaze.

Audience: It’s almost a hymn of praise.

Gluck: Yes.

Audience: It looks like a picture of awe—the experience of awe.

Braziller: Right. We've all had it.

Audience: To him the deer is thrilling.

Audience: There's also a great sense of otherness, again. There's a tremendous otherness of nature: "the alien small teeth," you know? That's where I get the "Crying faith/In this in which the wild deer/Startle, and stare out." I mean, they're just so other that that's the only reaction.

Audience: Three things: first, at the start of the poem, for what it's worth, it's sort of abstracted a bit, with the wild deer bedding down. "That they are there!" It's sort of a report—news of the deer in the forest. But by the end, it seems to get more and more specific until we're on a path. Not only do we see the deer, the deer looks back. You know that incredible moment when maybe an animal looks back at you and you make eye contact for a split second before they run? It seems kind of amazing, that tentative moment at the end. It might be kind of almost divine. The other thing was just that starting with "*Veritas sequitor*"—it seems to echo what he did in the poem before. There's a certain juxtaposition and contrast between the planks of rational thought—neo-classical education and these wild moments.

Braziller: They're two different concerns. Okay, I'm going to read "The Forms of Love," which is a wonderful love poem. We are going to move on because Louise has a wonderful poem of her own, which she is going to read.

Gluck: And we don't even know what it is, but it's bound to be wonderful.

Braziller: Do you want to pick one that isn't so wonderful?

Gluck: "Boy's Room."

Audience: What are you doing? "Boy's Room?"

Gluck: We're going to talk about this one a little bit and then read "Forms of Love."

Braziller: Because we have to end on a love poem.

Gluck: And then that will allow—we had said that I would read a poem.

Gluck reads "Boy's Room":

A friend saw the rooms
Of Keats and Shelley
At the lake, and saw 'they were just
Boys' rooms' and was moved

By that. And indeed a poet's room
Is a boy's room
And I suppose that women know it.

Perhaps the unbeautiful banker
Is exciting to a woman, a man
Not a boy gasping
For breath over a girl's body.

Gluck: This poem is so amazing I hardly know where to begin. I mean, it begins in a kind of leisured way, with that same sense of internal dialog. A very simple first stanza: “A friend saw the rooms”—these rooms of the famous poets, dead early. Keats dead—and this is crucial—drowned, gasping, and the other of TB, gasping. So the “gasping/For breath” in the last line has manifold readings. It's the poet's kind of habit of awe, the poet's habit of turning the immediate occasion into a kind of occasion for art, removing himself, making of the beloved a muse. So it's that kind of gasping for breath. And it's also the boy—the boy dying. But “gasping/For breath”—I mean, there's these poets who do anything for language, and the women who are, perhaps, the poem says, impatient with this—one could understand if they were. And I think that one of the things that you see over and over in Oppen's work is this breadth of sympathy, so that the figures that seem set up as the sort of bad guys—they turn out to be human, sympathetic, understandable. I mean, Oppen's wish isn't to make a system of oppositions that are arranged hierarchically. He doesn't want to be the big guy on the top. The poems aren't written to that ambition. So, “A friend saw the rooms/Of Keats and Shelley/At the lake, and saw ‘they were just/Boys' rooms’ and was moved/By that.” And indeed, that sense of language that you had in “Street”—corroboration: “Yes, we can say this is so.” “And indeed a poet's room/Is a boy's room”—something frozen, something immature, something self-absorbed. In the cases of the poets named, they never got beyond boyhood, so in the most literal sense, indeed in every sense, these rooms are boys' rooms. “And I suppose that women know it.” Women have this second sense; they get the aroma of this self-intoxicated boy, and would choose, perhaps, over this romantic figure, the “unbeautiful banker.” And the poet here removes himself: “Perhaps this is what women need.” But it's not a kind of, “Fools!” It's, “One could understand were it so.” Perhaps even this furthest removed from erotic intoxication, the “unbeautiful banker,” is to be preferred.

But there are so many counterweights: the solidity, stolidity of that banker figure is like the opposite of exciting. But then, too, you think of people like Stevens, who was in his own way an unbeautiful insurance mogul. But I don't think that the poet is doing anything like that. He's saying, “Go as far from this as you can,” and you can see the poet's removal—his sense, always, of where the next poem is coming from. Here, I hear the kind of thing that I heard around the word “vacation” in the poem that we read. He's talking about himself, and he's cautioning himself against, I think, tendencies of his own that take him away from human life at the level that the deer would have us live. Something like that. But this is just the beginning of what can be said about this poem.

Audience: Can I just ask how you would read, in that last stanza, “Is exciting to a woman”—the end of that line, how do you wrap that into the next? I’d just be curious because I sort of get stuck.

Gluck: Okay, “Perhaps the unbeautiful banker/Is exciting to a woman.” Who is he? A man: the “unbeautiful banker/...a man/Not a boy gasping/for breath over a girl...” Not a boy removed by awe from the occasion of the body. The stolid, “unbeautiful banker”—he’s a man; the poet is the boy. And Keats and Shelley were only boys, so he’s playing with facts here, never charming them out of their actuality. But he’s saying, “What are the opposites of a boy? A man. What would represent a man? What’s the least romantic version of a man? The banker.” And yet, perhaps, to a woman, preferable because less remote. And these poets are also remote because they look marked by death.

Audience: There’s an echo of “Philai Te Kou Philai” there, too. “How firm the man is/In that picture/...We are/Lost in the childish/Here.”

Gluck: Yes.

Audience: When you said “counterweights,” that was perfect. Part of the problem I had reading those last few lines was that when I read it the first time, I thought he was moving “the unbeautiful banker/...a man/Not a boy” back into the boy’s position, saying even that “unbeautiful banker” can be gasping for breath over a girl’s body, because he doesn’t punctuate. It’s not “A man, not a boy who would be gasping.”

Braziller: We talked about grammar on the way up here. I think her reading is right, but I think it’s ambiguous.

Audience: It is, yes.

Braziller: It opens with a problem.

Audience: Right, which is so astounding, because, as you said, you don’t know where to begin. Also the Keats and Shelley—I didn’t think about that until we paused at “And I suppose that women know it.” You know, there was a very specific woman left by Shelley’s drowning, gasping for breath. And I guess Keats—I don’t know whether Keats left a woman or if he was left by one.

Gluck: No.

Audience: He didn’t have the chance.

Audience: Death, of course, always leaves someone. In that sense, Keats left Fanny, his wife. I don’t know if that’s what you’re talking about.

Audience: I thought it said something, also, about how the poet always is something of the boy, who retains their creativity, the fluidity of youth. The banker is stolid, has lost the creativity. But

with that creativity comes a kind of immaturity, impetuosity, the foolishness, the volatility of youth.

Audience: And the self-absorption.

Audience: I don't know what to make of this, but I think that when the woman gets with the banker, she becomes appealing.

Audience: She becomes what?

Audience: I'm saying the boy is a man when he's a banker, and the woman becomes a girl when she gets with the banker.

Audience: I get a much more romantic reading of it, where it's the man gasping for breath over the girl's body.

Audience: The banker or the boy?

Audience: The banker. And it is his moment of poetry.

Gluck: I think these boys—Keats and Shelley—were boys and they gasped, literally. They died of gasping. The poem starts with them. I think in the end this is not a boy gasping. It's one line. "Not a boy gasping." You can't take "gasping" away from "boy," and it seems to me that that's in opposition to the banker.

Audience: I just wanted to say that a central mystery here, which we wouldn't have in a Romance language, is whether the friend is a man or a woman.

Braziller: I always assumed the friend—

Gluck: But we don't know.

Braziller: Because "I suppose that women know it" kind of, to me, echoed—

Audience: Goes back to the friend?

Braziller: Goes back to "a friend." And that he opens that she's a friend to me suggested that that's part of his own sensibility that he doesn't label her or see her as female/male, but just that he's more sophisticated or more mature.

Audience: So you're saying that you think it's a woman?

Braziller: I assumed. I could be wrong. I assumed that it was a woman, when he says, "...that women know it," that it was a woman friend who made this observation and she was very moved to see that.

Braziller: I would read “The Forms of Love.” I’d like to say a couple of words and then you can read your poem, is that all right?

Gluck: Sure.

Braziller: The only thing I’d say about—we really don’t have time and I want her to read her poem, and I’m sure you do, too. “The Forms of Love” is the one we won’t get to, but it has, as I tried to say in the opening, some autobiographical elements. Firstly, I think it’s one of his rare and, I think, completely wonderful love poems. It’s a poem of an early love. This was a key moment when he met his wife, and they did get expelled from school, and they were out all night. I believe I’ve read that this is a poem about that experience, but it’s also a poem about a kind of forbidden love. They’re parked out in the car. They shouldn’t be out in the field. They shouldn’t be out all night. What’s going on? It’s a poem filled with, I think, sexuality and sexual love, and I love the poem.

Gluck: It’s gorgeous.

Braziller: It’s a gorgeous poem and I want you to read it.

Gluck: I think I’ll read a poem from this book *Averno*.

Audience: What is the name of the book?

Gluck: *Averno*. It’s in six sections. Do I have time for a six section poem?

Braziller: Yes.

Gluck: It’s called “October.” I think you’ll hear, in the fifth section, how deep an effect Oppen had on me.

Gluck reads:

I.
Is it winter again, is it cold again,
didn’t Frank just slip on the ice,
didn’t he heal, eeren’t the spring seeds planted

didn’t the night end,
didn’t the melting ice
flood the narrow gutters

wasn’t my body
rescued, wasn’t it safe

didn’t the scar form, invisible
above the injury

terror and cold,
didn't they just end, wasn't the back garden
harrowed and planted—

I remember how the earth felt, red and dense
in stiff rows, weren't the seeds planted
didn't vines climb the south wall

I can't hear your voice
for the wind's cries, whistling over the bare ground

I no longer care
what sound it makes

when was I silenced, when did it first seem
pointless to describe that sound

what it sounds like can't change what it is—
didn't the night end, wasn't the earth
safe when it was planted

didn't we plant the seeds,
weren't we necessary to the earth,

the vines, were they harvested?

2.
Summer after summer has ended,
balm after violence:
it does me no good
to be good to me now;
violence has changed me.

Daybreak. The low hills shine
ochre and fire, even the fields shine.
I know what I see; sun that could be
the August sun, returning
everything that was taken away—

You hear this voice? This is my mind's voice;
you can't touch my body now.
It has changed once, it has hardened,
don't ask it to respond again.

A day like a day in summer.

Exceptionally still. The long shadows of the maples
nearly mauve on the gravel paths.
And in the evening, warmth. Night like a night in summer.

It does me no good; violence has changed me.
My body has grown cold like the stripped fields;
now there is only my mind, cautious and wary,
with the sense it is being tested.

Once more, the sun rises as it rose in summer;
bounty, balm after violence.
Balm after the leaves have changed, after the fields
have been harvested and turned.

Tell me this is the future,
I won't believe you.
Tell me I'm living,
I won't believe you.

3.
Snow had fallen. I remember
music from an open window.

Come to me, said the world.
This is not to say
it spoke in exact sentences
but that I perceived beauty in this manner.

Sunrise. A film of moisture
on each living thing. Pools of cold light
formed in the gutters.

I stood
at the doorway,
ridiculous as it now seems.

What others found in art,
I found in nature. What others found
in human love, I found in nature.
Very simple, but there was no voice there.

Winter was over. In the thawed dirt,
bits of green were showing.

Come to me, said the world. I was standing
in my wool coat at a kind of bright portal—

I can finally say
long ago; It gives me considerable pleasure. Beauty
the healer, the teacher—

death cannot harm me
more than you have harmed me,
my beloved life.

4.
The light has changed;
middle C is tuned darker now.
And the songs of mourning sound over-rehearsed.

This is the light of autumn, not the light of spring.
The light of autumn: *you will not be spared*.

The songs have changed; the unspeakable
has entered them.

This is the light of autumn, not the light that says
I am reborn.

Not the spring dawn: *I strained, I suffered, I was delivered*.
This is the present, an allegory of waste.

So much has changed. And still, you are fortunate:
the ideal burns in you like a fever.
Or not like a fever, like a second heart.

The songs have changed, but really they are still quite beautiful.
They have been concentrated in a smaller space, the space of the mind.
They are dark, now, with desolation and anguish.

And yet the notes recur. They hover oddly
in anticipation of silence.
The ear gets used to them.
The eye gets used to disappearances.

You will not be spared, nor will what you love be spared.
A wind has come and gone, taking apart the mind;
it has left in its wake a strange lucidity.

How privileged you are, to be still passionately
clinging to what you love;
the forfeit of hope has not destroyed you.

Maestoso doloroso:

This is the light of autumn; it has turned on us.
Surely it is a privilege to approach the end
still believing in something.

5.
It is true there is not enough beauty in the world.
It is also true that I am not competent to restore it.
Neither is there candor, and here I may be of some use.

I am
at work, though I am silent.

The bland
misery of the world
bounds us on either side, an alley

lined with trees; we are
companions here, not speaking
each with his own thoughts;

behind the trees, iron
gates of the private houses,
the shuttered rooms

somehow deserted, abandoned,
as though it were the artist's
duty to create
hope, but out of what? what?

the word itself
false, a device to refute
perception—At the intersection,

ornamental lights of the season.

I was young here. Riding
the subway with my small book
as though to defend myself against

this same world:

you are not alone,
the poem said,
in the dark tunnel.

6.
The brightness of the day becomes
the brightness of the night;
the fire becomes the mirror.

My friend the earth is bitter; I think
sunlight has failed her.
Bitter or weary, it is hard to say.

Between herself and the sun,
something has ended.
She wants, now, to be left alone;
I think we must give up
turning to her for affirmation.

Above the fields,
above the roofs of the village houses,
the brilliance that made all life possible
becomes the cold stars.

Lie still and watch:
they give nothing but ask nothing.

From within the earth's
bitter disgrace, coldness and barrenness

my friend the moon rises:
she is beautiful tonight, but when is she not beautiful?

Gluck: Thank you