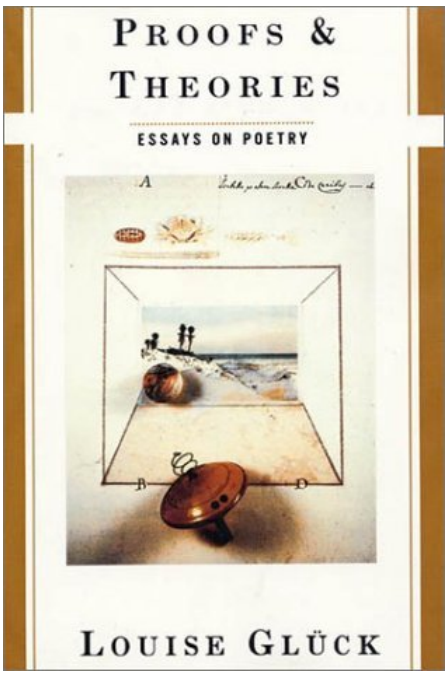


# Proofs & Theories: Essays on Poetry

*Louise Glück*

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**Proofs & Theories: Essays on Poetry** Louise Glück
Winner of the 1993 PEN/Martha Albrand Award for First Non-Fiction, *Proofs and Theories* is an illuminating collection of essays by Louise Glück, whose most recent book of poems, *The Wild Iris*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Glück brings to her prose the same precision of language, the same incisiveness and insight that distinguish her poetry. The force of her thought is evident everywhere in these essays, from her explorations of other poets' work to her skeptical contemplation of current literary critical notions such as "sincerety" and "courage." Here also are Glück's revealing reflections on her own education and life as a poet, and a tribute to her teacher and mentor, Stanley Kunitz. *Proofs and Theories* is the testament of a major poet.

## Proofs & Theories: Essays on Poetry Details

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| ISBN | : | 9780880014427 |
| Author | : | Louise Glück |
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# From Reader Review Proofs & Theories: Essays on Poetry for online ebook

### Abeer Abdullah says

Proofs and Theories is a collection of essays on poetry written by one of the most celebrated living american poets: Louise Gluck. I first came across her work in my high school textbook and it felt like something that had a power so personal it overwhelmed me, i felt the way i generally feel when i come across some bizarre and uncomfortable realisation, or when Im faced with my own helplessness, or when I am reminded by the cold, detached nature of life. I felt like i had been pushed into a body of water, and the water had seeped into my skull, behind my eyeballs.
These essays were clearly written by the same person who wrote those poems, what I mean by this is that Gluck doesn't seem to have a distinctly academic style in her criticism, they are both deeply personal accounts of a reader of poetry and a writer of poetry. One of my absolute favourite essays of hers is 'Invitation and Exclusion' an essay which tries to analyse a poems attitude towards a reader, if it invited, excludes, or exists in a totally different dimension.
Overall this is such a wonderful book.

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### Antonio Delgado says

An hones book on poetry but also on creativity. This books is not only about writing poetry but on reading it. Louise Glück generosity is encouraging to poetry makers and poetry readers.

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### Jeremy Allan says

I've been working on this book of essays intermittently for months. There have been moments of revelation, and moments of frustration too. Glück is not gifted in exposition, or in prose, for that matter; she admits as much, several times throughout this collection. In addition, she shares a number of views about poetry and art that I simply find unbearable. All the same, there are some essays in this book that I would consider essential, at least for makers of a certain disposition. And even where her idiosyncrasies as a writer reveal themselves too clearly for the words to be treated as any kind of maxim (there are enough writerly maxims out there, if you ask me), these moments are particularly instructive when you turn back to Glück's work itself; we start to see how she got there. Not to mention, these peculiarities of the poet herself act as wonderful springboards from which to head in new directions. Or maybe the same directions, but with new verve: away from and towards privation.

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### Monica says

"To learn through experience. Or, more accurately, to affirm a lost perception - what I had felt writing, and in psychoanalysis. That whatever the truth is, to speak it is a great adventure." So closes Louise Glück's essay (remembering) about Stanley Kunitz, an essay I particularly liked. This essay also highlights why I ultimately gave this work 4 and not 3 or 5 stars. If one reads this hoping for academic insights into poetry, I

find Glück lacking an argument and/or salient point in each essay. She glosses over major assertions as if they are fact, and she explains very little. If, however, one reads this work as memoir - Glück the accomplished poet reflecting upon her process and life, her teachers, and her inspirations - it is a 5 star work. Glück, incredibly intelligent, leads the reader through a series of impressions and moments that culminate in her addressing and explaining the role of poetry in her life, other poets' lives, and "our" lives. I was entranced and was sad when the book ended. Glück is a maverick whom I admire greatly. "And as the poet's imagination becomes increasingly unique, its creations increasingly liberated from their sources, so the reader is reminded of the poet's self-sufficiency."

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### Steven says

As I was with her poetry, Louise Glück's prose put me in a place of awe. This woman's mind is a labyrinth of intelligence, insight and fierce passion for the craft and study of poetry. To read these essays is to sit in the presence of a teacher who has learned to impart knowledge in a succinct and permeating way. They blend a perfect mix of personal experience, theory and academic discourse on both the writing and reading of poetry, while also leaving enough room for the reader to easily apply their numerous lessons to one's own craft and career as a writer, as well as help readers of poetry come to a deeper understanding of this art form.

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### Leanna says

Hmm. I'm going to make notes on this as I read, to help me digest:

EDUCATION OF THE POET: I thought this would be more general, but it's very specific to Gluck's life. I had no idea she was anorexic as a teenager or that she credited her seven years in psychoanalysis as necessary to her critical/emotional/poetic thinking skills. Ever since she was a child Gluck had the opinion that "there was no point to speech if speech did not precisely articulate perception." Good description of Gluck's aesthetic.

THE IDEA OF COURAGE: Not sure I get her argument. As far as I can tell: Poets should be aware of the idea of "courage" as they produce poems. "Courage" means that their poetic materials are somehow "personal." But, really, poets are not courageous in writing--writing involves ecstasy, exhilaration, no courage required. And poets are not really courageous in that a poem can never truly risk shame--the reader and poet are too far apart, or the poet is too far apart from the poem (i.e. once she's done creating, she's detached.)

So what's her point? She says poets should pay attention to the notion of courage, but then she discusses all the way that writing poetry doesn't really require courage. I am confused.

Also, I disagree with her opinion that writing requires no courage--I know that overcoming writerly anxiety is often one of my biggest hurdles to working on a poem.

AGAINST SINCERITY: Will again try to reconstruct the argument. She starts by defining "actuality" (the world of event), "truth" (the illumination or enduring discovery which is the ideal of art), and "honesty/sincerity" ('telling the truth'). She says, "the artist's task involves the transformation of the actual to the true." (I find this a helpful distinction. Following you so far, Louise.) Another helpful summary: "the

source of art is experience, the end product truth, and the artist, surveying the actual, constantly intervenes and manages, lies and deletes, all in the service of truth." Ok, so Gluck has captured one of the paradoxes of art: to "reflect" life, the artist constantly chooses what to leave in and what to leave out, what to highlight and what to minimize--in other words, the artist "lies" to get at truth.

Gluck then goes on to discuss a number of poets: Whitman, Rilke, Keats, Milton, and Berryman. Here's where I get lost, as I'm not too sure what her point is on any of them. She seems to designate all except Milton as poets of "sincerity"--but since she seems so laudatory, I think I might be missing something. Maybe she is saying that although they use the materials of personal experience, they manipulate enough so as to achieve "truth" and not "sincerity"?

She ends by arguing that the best poets work like Keats--they cultivate an absence of bias; the reader will feel that the poems are like experiments, the poet was not wed to any one outcome. In opposition to this are poets that "claustrophobically oversee or bully or dictate response." Well, this seems true enough, I like the idea of poems as experiments.

Her final note is that "the true, in poetry, is felt as insight. It is very rare, but beside it, other poems seem merely intelligent comment."

I think I agree with Gluck's distinctions between "actuality," "truth," and "sincerity," but I don't know what she's trying to say about the poets. And does this essay contradict "the idea of courage" (if that essay was, in fact, promoting the notion of the personal in poetry)? I'd be interested to know if Gluck thinks courage produces truth, honesty, or both (to use her terms).

THE FORBIDDEN: The basic argument is that the "forbidden" is a topic ripe for good poetry, but that treating taboo subjects, etc., can fail if the poetry is too rigid in its sensibility (Linda McCarriston) or too limited in its scope or objective (Sharon Olds). Gluck praises other poets (Martha Rhodes and Frank Bidart) for successfully making danger a real, experiential presence and for treating the self with ambivalence (rather than soley as brave survivor). Essentially Gluck thinks that "constriction" of any kind is what makes treatment of the forbidden (and any poem, really) fail.

It doesn't seem fair that she excerpts from Rhodes and Bidart but not the poets she pooh-poohs. Also, she makes a pronouncement at the end that McCarriston and Olds are operating from "the felt obligation of the woman writer to give encouraging voice to the life force". Offers no proof for this pronouncement. I was also amused at the similiarities between Rhodes and Gluck's poetry.

Overall, though, an interesting discussion on how to evaluate "confessional" poetry. I'm glad Gluck is brave enough to scorn some of this "personal trauma" poetry, and not treat it with white gloves because of its subject matter and its autobiographical nature. I like how she uses reader response as a litmus test: "the test for emotional authority is emotional impact." Well said.

DISRUPTION, HESITATION, SILENCE: This is a pretty straightforward essay. Gluck makes an argument that she has sort of made elsewhere in the book--she vetoes an aesthetic of thoroughness and exhaustive detail because this does not really capture the essence of how an experience feels. So, in other words, very narrative poems don't really do it for her--piling upon the detail does not convey the immediacy and pulp of the event. Fair enough, I agree.

Gluck describes Berryman as the master of "not saying," which perhaps seems ironic because of the profusion of voices. But the multiple voices make it impossible to locate any stable self. Agreed.

She talks about Oppen, whom I have never read, so I skipped that section. Also touches on Eliot's "Prufrock."

She concludes by arguing that "a danger of an expansive poems is that tension is lost." Hmm, I don't think that's necessarily true. She summarizes by stating that she wants to "speak for the virtues of a style which inclines to the suggested over the amplified." Well, I like both styles, but I could see how Louise, who loves concision, would favor suggestion. Although her poems are often quite declarative. But I guess declarative is different from both suggested and amplified--sort of in between the two.

DISINTEREDNESS: This is a weird little essay. Her argument pertains to how one should read, opposed to how one should write. She says that a reader ought to totally disengage while reading a piece of literature--he ought to "become" the work as much as possible, and not insert his own ego, which will highlight, exaggerate, minimize--in other words, which will distort.

On the one hand, yes, the idea of "becoming" any piece of writing is appealing--there's this notion of full absorption and comprehension if the reader isn't "fighting against" the piece. But in practical terms, forcing yourself to disengage is easier said than done. And I think that "conversing" with a work by questioning it, etc., is one of the best ways to get to know a work. Maybe I think (at least with poem reading) that one ought to suspend judgement (I think that's really what Gluck is talking about) on the first few reads, and become more critical after that.

THE BEST AMERICAN POETRY 1993: INTRODUCTION: Rather a wandering (though very articulate) essay. She basically talks about what makes poetic voice indelible, and then talks more specifically about her work selecting the best American poems. My favorite quotes in the essay: "Indelible voice, though it has no impact on the non-human universe, profoundly alters human experience of that universe." "The poem, no matter how charged its content, will not survive on content but through voice." The latter especially--yes, agreed! It's voice that will make the poem truly leave its mark.

THE DREAMER AND THE WATCHER:(By the way, I love Gluck's titles for her essays in this book--she sets up helpful distinctions in the essay to come while preserving her concise poetic voice).

She essentially analyzes her poem "Night Song" in this essay, and also talks about how she generates material. Gluck says all her poems "begin in some fragment of motivating language--the task of writing the poem is the search for context." She says her challenge is to "trace [the poems:] back to some source in the world," contrasted to other poets who start in the world, with concrete experience. I think I am sometimes a poet of the latter (experience) but not always--sometimes I write from Gluck's origin (language), and very often from a different origin (image). It makes me ponder what other places poets start from.

Her close reading of her own work was very enjoyable--added more to the poem for me.

She ends talking about other ways to generate. "It was clear to me long ago that any hope I had of writing real poetry depended on my living through common experiences." But she states that she was "wary of drama, disaster too deliberately courted." This has stuck with me--the balance between living a life, and courting real experience, but not putting oneself in extreme or unhealthy situations for the purpose of generating art.

ON STANLEY KUNITZ: I haven't read Kunitz's poetry, but that wasn't really relevant to the essay. She talks about how valuable his "truth-telling" was to her, highlighting a common theme in the book--how important the pursuit of truth is to Gluck.

INVITATION AND EXCLUSION: She contrasts poets of invitation (like Eliot and Dickinson) with poets of exclusion (like Stevens and Plath). I buy her arguments in this essay, for the most part. Eliot, in his questioning and yearning, does invite a reader in, and Dickinson, though she can be opaque, nevertheless wants the reader to figure out her "code." I don't really get what Gluck is saying about Plath. But I agree that Stevens seems like he's permitting himself to be overheard, he's not helping the reader out in any way in terms of comprehension.

Gluck says that she can admire both types of poets, but only the poets of invitation actually encourage and inspire her to write. She argues that a reader can fully "occupy" one of these poems and therefore spiral off from it, move on. However, an exclusive poem, because it is impenetrable, will only evoke weak and frusterated imitation. The idea of occupation seems a bit abstract to me, but I could see how this could be true for someone.

The distinction between types of poets is interesting. But I wonder, are there more types of poets than just the inviting ones and the excluding ones? I'm sure there are poems that do both in the same poem, for example. What other attitudes could a poet have towards the reader? Lots, inviting and exclusive are just two, but I think they are two basic and important ones.

ON IMPOVERISHMENT: Gluck's graduation-day speech to Williams' undergrads in 1993. Basically, she talks about how despair, depression, and periods of ennui can be necessary to personal and creative development (cheerful!) She has this good paragraph:

"Despair in our culture tends to produce wild activity: change the job, change the partner, replace the faltering ambition instantly. We fear passivity and prize action, meaning the action we initiate. But the self cannot be willed back. And flight from despair forfeits whatever benefit may arise in the encounter with despair."

I really like that line about how the self cannot be forced back. I think it's very true.

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### Cheri says

This is very dense reading, but what do you expect from someone who is better known for writing poetry? Every word is chosen with precision and every sentence, every phrase is packed with meaning. While it was slow reading, I did really appreciate this style. However, I didn't always agree with *what* Gluck had to say. Case in point - Gluck's unkind analysis of Sharon Old's poetry. To me, it seemed there was more underlying her harsh words than just an honest opinion of the poetry. I understand the arguments - 'Who better to pass judgment on poetry than another well-respected poet?' and 'Worthwhile critique is going to include some negative statements.' But it just didn't settle very well with me - both because I happen to really like the poetry of Olds and because I don't care for artists, who are each other's contemporaries, deriding one another's work in such an indirect and public way. To me, it would be like one contemporary famous actor negatively critiquing another contemporary famous actor's work in an interview - a little gauche. I'm afraid that I won't be able to read her poetry, which I do genuinely like, without experiencing a bad taste in my mouth now.

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## Catherine Moore says

Proofs and Theories by Louise Glück
The Ecco Press, 1994
ISBN: 0880013699
Perfect bound, 134 pp., $13.95
Review by Catherine Moore

One way of understanding great craft is to delve into the thoughts and aesthetic choices of a great writer. This is the approach I took with Louise Glück, a poet I much admire. In the briefest of bios, Glück is a former U.S. Poet Laureate and a Pulitzer Prize winning poet. She is worth the study and her collection of essays in Proofs and Theories offers that education.

Proofs and Theories opens with a lecture once given at the Guggenheim in New York, which I thought would be more general but it is very specific to Glück's life and her formative years. On my second read of the book, it seems each following essay continues this pattern of the personal intertwined with the artist in development. A good description of Glück's overarching aesthetic can be found in this opening essay:

"The poet is supposed to be the person who can't get enough of words like "incarnadine." This was not my experience. From the time, at four or five or six, I first started reading poems, first thought of the poets I read as my companions, my predecessors – from the beginning I preferred the simplest vocabulary. What fascinated me were the possibilities of context. What I responded to, on the page, was the way a poem could liberate, by means of a word's setting, through subtleties of timing, of pacing, that word's full and surprising range of meaning. It seemed to me that simple language best suited this enterprise; such language, in being generic, is likely to contain the greatest and most dramatic variety of meaning within individual words. I liked scale, but I liked it invisible. I loved those poems that seemed so small on the page but that swelled in the mind; I didn't like the windy, dwindling kind." (p.4)

The collection contains small praise-essays on poets who, like her mentor Stanley Kunitz, write in a restrained style that Glück admires in precise art— "On Hugh Seidman," "On George Oppen," and "On Stanley Kunitz." Beyond pointing out her favorite poets, they are revealing in Glück's own love of the unspoken, the coaxed, and implied instead of the explicit. I found all the poem selections within her literary criticisms divulge something about Glück's own approach to writing poetry; in what she says about Eliot, Dickinson, Stevens and Plath.

Glück is a fan of "less" rather than "more." She is attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to the eloquence of deliberate silence. Glück states that she wants to "speak for the virtues of a style which inclines to the suggested over the amplified" (p.84). The craft behind the poets who achieve more with using less is explored in essays such as "Disruption, Hesitation, Silence" and "Disinterestedness."

For myself, "Against Sincerity" is one of the most important essays in the book. It discusses the distinctions of the Actuality, the Truth, and Sincerity (honesty), through the works of a number of poets: Whitman, Rilke, Keats, Milton, and Berryman. "The source of art is experience, the end product truth, and the artist, surveying the actual, constantly intervenes and manages, lies and deletes, all in the service of truth" (p.34). Here, Glück captures one of the paradoxes of art: in order to reflect life, the artist constantly chooses what to leave in and what to leave out, what to highlight and what to minimize--in other words, the artist lies to get at truth.

In “The Best American Poetry 1993: Introduction” Glück gives insight to the chore in selecting the poetry offerings of the year, such as describing the “indelible voice”— “the poem, no matter how charged its content, will not survive on content but through voice” (p. 91). I agree, it is voice that will make the poem truly leave its mark.

Despite the simple austere style that Glück uses in her poetry, make no mistake, she is an intellectual and her book reflects the high-level of discourse she is at home with. Plan on reading passages more than once. Also, though, anticipate the literary gems you’ll receive from your efforts.

?#PoetryReview “Proofs and Theories” by Louise Glück
@ECCOBOOKS

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### Sara Sams says

Brilliant. "So rarely can a poet speak eloquently about their craft."

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### H says

from The Idea of Courage:
"For poets, speech and fluency seem less an act of courage than a state of grace. The intervals of silence, however, require a stoicism very like courage; of these, no reader is aware."

from Against Sincerity:
"There is, unfortunately, no test for truth. That is, in part, why artists suffer. The love of truth is felt as chronic aspiration and chronic unease. . . . It is relatively easy to say that truth is the aim and heart of poetry, but harder to say how it is recognized or made. We know it first, as readers, by its result, by the sudden rush of wonder and awe and terror."
"We incline, in our anxiety for formulas, to be literal: we scan Frost's face compulsively for hidden kindness, having found the poems to be, by all reports, so much better than the man. This assumes our poems are our fingerprints, which they are not. And the process by which experience is changed--heightened, distilled, made memorable--have nothing to do with sincerity. The truth, on the page, need not have been lived. It is, instead, all that can be envisioned."
"The true, in poetry, is felt as insight. it is very rare, but beside it other poems seem merely intelligent comment."

from Disruption, Hesitation, Silence:
"When [Oppen's?] 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 withholdings of the gratuitous . . ."

from The Best AMerican Poetry 1993: Introduction:
"By voice I mean t he style of thought, for which a style of speech--the clever grafts and borrowings, the habitual gestures scattered like clues in the lines--never convincingly substitutes. We fall back on that term, voice, for all its insufficiencies; it suggests, at least, the sound of an authentic being. Although such sound may draw on the poet's actual manner of speech, it is not, on the page, transcription. The voice is at liberty to excerpt, to exaggerate, to bypass what it chooses, to issue from conditions the real world will never exactly reproduce; unlike speech, it bears no immediate social pressure, since the other to whom it strives to make itself clear may not yet exist. The poem means to create that person, first in the poet, then in the reader."
". . . an intuition that poems must be autobiography (since they are not description) unnerves the reader for whom the actual and the true are synonyms. // Poems *are* autobiography, but divested of the trappings of chronology and comment, the metronomic alternation of anecdote and response. Moreover, a body of work may change and develop less in reacation to the lived life than in reaction to the poet's prior discoveries, or the discoveries of others. if a poem remains so selectively amplified, so casual with fact, as to seem elusive, we must remember its agenda: not simply to record the actual but to continuously create the sensation of immersion in the actual. And if, in its striving to be free of the imprisoning self, the poet's gaze trains itself outward, it rests nevertheless on what compels or arrests it. Such choices constitute a portrait. Where the gaze is held, voice, or repsonse, begins. Always in what follows the poet is alert, resistant, resisting dogma and fashion, resisting the greater danger of personal conviction, which must be held in suspicion, given its resemblance to dogma."
"Art is not a sevice. Or, rather, it does not reliably serve all people in a standardized way. Its service is to the spirit, from which it removes the misery of inertia. It does this by refocusing an existing image of the world; in this sense, it is less mirror than microscope--where the flat white of the page was, a field of energy emerges. Nevertheless, the absence of social function or social usefulness sometimes combines in the poet with a desire to seve, to do good: this absence and this pressure direct the poet toward the didactic. . . . But to make vital art, the poet must foreswear this alliance, however desperately it is sought, since what it produces is reiteration. Which is to say, not perception but he sensation of perception's endurance. And what is inevitably missing from such echoes is the sense of speech issuing in the moment from a specific, identifiable voice; what is missing is the sense of immediacy, volatility, which gives these voices their paradoxical durability. Whatever the nature of these voices, . . . insight, as they speak it, feels like shocking event: wholly absent and then inevitable."
"Hierarchy dissolves passionate fellowship into bitter watchfulness--those who aren't vulnerable to this are usually those who are regularly honored. What is essential is that we sustain our readiness to learn from each other, a readiness which, by definition, requires from each of us the best work possible. We must, I think, fear whatever erodes the generosity on which exacting criticism depends."

from The Dreamer and the Watcher:
"Among the residual gifts of love is a composure, an openness to all experience, so profound it amounts to an acceptance of death. Or, more accurately, the future is no longer necessary. One is not rash, neither is one paralyzed by conservation or hope. Simply, the sense of having lived, of having known one's fate, is very strong."
"Major experiences vary in form--what reader and writer learn to do is recognize analogies."

from On Stanley Kunitz:
"The poems were spread across his desk. I was standing in the doorway, from which distance they seemed quite impressive, unquestionably numerous, definitely printed with actual words. What Kunitz said was, 'Of course, they're awful.' And then, 'But you know that.' . . .
"The turn was this: Kunitz remarked, quite casually, that this didn't matter, hat I was a poet. What he meant, I think was something more precise, conservative and liberating, a concept wholly new to me. Not that the poems were of any worth, but that they did not constitute, despite their number, a prophecy.

". . . He had done two things: paid me the compliment of speaking the truth, and afforded me the opportunity to follow suit. To learn through experience. Or, more accurately, to affirm a lost perception--what I had felt writing, and in psychoanalysis. That whatever the truth is, to speak it is a great adventure."

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### Cyrus says

Gluck's keen, incisive prose is all of a piece with her stunning poetry. I come back to these essays again and again for their penetrating insights into the genre.

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### Richard says

This book is a keeper.

Gluck's reading shows the delicacy of her art, presenting the poets--Oppen, Williams, Berryman, Eliot, Plath, Milosz, and others (an index might be helpful here)--and their poetry as her experience of their work allows. The pleasure of such genuine criticism, what Gluck suggests as her part of the conversation with the poem, stands against the wrenching domination of the New Critic (among whom I include Barthes) in the usurpation of the poet's role and voice.

The introduction to THE BEST AMERICAN POETRY 1993 (pp. [91]-97) offers a quick introduction to her bases of response; elsewhere, a discussion of Wallace Stevens and what she finds as his exclusionary intelligence leads to a comparison to Sylvia Plath and a comment on Emily Dickinson seen as "a poet of private anguish. Unlike Plath, she sometimes writes in code; some of the poems are completely hermetic, impenetrable. But not (<--ital.) exclusive, in the sense I mean. Selective, rather; these poems are like messages in bottles; they are designed to be discovered. And, though profoundly self-protective, meant to be understood. It is hard to think of a body of work that so manages, without renouncing personal authority, to so invest in the single reader" (p. 121: "Invitation and Exclusion"). Later, Gluck writes that "the poems from which I feel excluded are not poems from which I can learn" (p. 123).

With essays titled "The Idea of Courage," "Against Sincerity," "The Forbidden," "Disinterestedness," "Death and Absence," one's interest is piqued again and again.

"I think great poets work this way. . . ."
"At the heart of [the] work will be a question, a problem. And we will feel, as we read, a sense that the poet was not wed to any one outcome. The poems themselves are like experiments, which the reader is freely invited to recreate in his own mind. Those poets who claustrophobically oversee or bully or dictate response prematurely advertise the deficiencies of the chosen particulars, as though without strenuous guidance the reader might not reach the intended conclusion. . . . The only illuminations are like Psyche's, who did not know what she'd find.
". . .
"The true, in poetry, is felt as insight. It is very rare, but beside it other poems seem merely intelligent comment" (p. 45: "Against Sincerity").

Devoting four essay to specific poets--Eliot, Oppen, Seidman, and Kunitz, she applies her delicate and astute touch effectively. Kunitz had been her mentor, Seidman one of his first choices for The Yale Young Poets

Series, Oppen someone who has stubbornly resisted my efforts to engage; "George Oppen is a master of white space; of restraint, juxtaposition, nuance. His art, though exquisite in detail and scrupulously pre-[29]cise, attains to scope and grandeur through what seems, in some ways, a mastery of perspective:

'Ah these are the poor,
These are the poor--

Bergen street.'

"There is something Oriental in this. . ." (pp. [29]-30: "On George Oppen"). Always good at responding to hints, I found this a means to grasp what in Oppen's COLLECTED POEMS had eluded me.

The opening essay, "Education of the Poet" (pp. [3]-18), might make a good start (along with an essay explaining what brought the student to this point) for a course in attempting to write poems and what might unfold in that endeavor as does the whole of PROOFS & THEORIES.

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### Lucy Hester says

Challenging and brilliant.

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### SA says

Quite simply the best volume I read this year.

I had a love affair with Gluck and her works in 2012, slowly reading through her canon and being struck again and again by the sheer breadth and talent of her work. At some point I realized that Proofs and Theories was the collected book of her essays and lectures, and fell over myself to secure a copy.

It is a profound treatise on writing, and poetry, and being a poet. I learned so much, and bought it for myself anticipating the re-read, when I will learn all over again. I am very grateful to have discovered Gluck, because there is no other living poet who has so thoroughly resonated with me in my life.

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### Ming says

Gluck was right in the introduction of this book - the essays in this volume are conceived like poems, each with a certain set of preoccupations which aren't engaged with via "arguments, step by step" (115). This makes for some very beautiful writing but also some sloppiness in the analysis, I feel, particularly in the essay The Idea of Courage. I don't know why but some of the essay's conclusions rings very falsely to my ears. I agree with Gluck then there is a separation between the writing self (or, more precisely, the written work) and the present self, but I can't see how this leads her to the conclusion that "no personal confession, no subtle or explicit exposure [...] can, through the mediation of the reader, transform the poem into an occasion which truly risks shame" and that "for the artist, no contact occurs. And there is no confession, no possibility of shame, in the absence of contact" (26). The distance that Gluck observes between the writing

and present self seems irrelevant to me. More importantly, the notion that shame cannot exist in private isolation, i.e. "in the absence of contact" is patently false (at least if you understand contact in the narrow way that Gluck is using the word in this context). Shame does not require active contact to exist - it requires only the existence of judgements and those exist within the writer himself during the very act of writing. Gluck concedes this to some extent, but then says: "true, the act of writing posits a listener, [...] but an idealized listener differs from any actual listener in that the actual listener cannot be controlled: only the latter is a legitimate threat." But so what if the idealised listener can be controlled? If the writer were to choose to forfeit this right, isn't he still leaving himself at risk to shame? I also don't understand how controlling the idealised listener erases the shame felt by the exposed self - surely the very act of trying to control the posited listener or force the listener into particular principled confines seem to indicate that the exposed self is already writhing uncomfortably under the heat of shame and is trying to insulate itself from danger through application of its intelligence? In any case, this argument isn't too fatal to Gluck's overall point in the essay, i.e. notion of bravery on the part of the writer is a self-indulgent one and quite likely overstated. Fair enough.

Other than that essay and some other minor smidgens here and there, many of these essays are thoughtfully written. Gluck is at her strongest when she is doing a close-reading of particular poems as well as discussing literary prejudices about poetry, especially given her sensitivity to what is left unsaid, e.g. expectations. It's strange that Gluck chose the title "Proofs and Theories" for this volume of essays (was it done ironically? I'm not sure) given that most of the essays are conceived in a non-systematic manner; perhaps that refers to the general nature of literary criticism regarding poetry.

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