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The Paradigm of the Void: Louise Glück's Post-Confessional Deadlock

DOI: 10.7311/PJAS.15/1/2021.05

Abstract: Awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, Louise Glück emerges as one of the major and most important American poets of the late 20th and early 21st century. What does this centrality tell us about the trajectory that the American poetry has traced since modernism? I attempt to offer a critical evaluation of Glück's post-confessional stylistic, developed between the debut *Firstborn* (1968) and *Averno* (2006), by setting it in contexts that are historical and, later in the paper, psycho-theological. First, I treat her formula as a double response—to the modernist legacy of T. S. Eliot and to the challenges of postmodernity. Faithful to Eliot's urge to transcend the biographical by connecting it with the transcendental, Glück resists the skeptical thesis of the demise of grand narratives, and writes in defiance of the postmodernist poetics of such poets as John Ashbery. Not undermining the biographical foundation of the lyric—the way Ashbery has done in his linguistic excess—she strives to make it paradigmatic. However, in this heroic search for a paradigm, Glück proposes a deeply ambiguous modification of Eliot that I characterize in psycho-theological terms. Following Agata Bielik-Robson's research, I characterize Glück's metaphysics as a form of Thanatic Lacanian Gnosticism. At this level we confront the costs of Glück's post-confessionalism: a serious impairment of all those aspects of the self that make it an embodied and gendered human being.

Keywords: Louise Glück, post-confessional lyric, psychoanalysis and poetry, post-secular studies, John Ashbery, Agata Bielik-Robson, psycho-theology, Gnosticism and poetry

One way to place a poet's work is to check other poets' ideas and apply their measuring devices. Delivering his Harvard series of Charles Eliot Norton Harvard lectures, John Ashbery resorted to a concept created by one of his own masters, W. H. Auden, who distinguished between major and minor authors. Both categories contain poets capable of producing works of brilliance, the significant difference between them regarding not the quality of single pieces but overall prolificacy (a major poet must write a lot), combination of thematic range and originality ("his poems must show a wide range of subject matter and treatment") originality of vision, and, finally, a consistency with which her poetic vision developed (Ashbery 7). Is Louise Glück a major poet?

Deflecting Ashbery's (and Auden's) template at this stage, let us start with a more modest notion and talk, instead, of the latest literary Nobel winner's importance. Here the answer is clearer—Louise Glück is an important poet; it is hard to think of a Nobel Prize winner in literature who would *not* be an important writer. However, as literary scholars we should be able to account for this importance beyond the poet's record of literary honors and awards—literary awards help but do not tell the whole story. For example, what light does Glück's prominent position throw on the main development lines of the post-WWII American poetry? What place does she occupy within the larger historical mapping of American poetry, since modernism till nowadays?

I see Glück's contribution as a staunch siding with one intellectual-aesthetic line with which American poetry responded to its central 20th century legacy—modernism. It is a legacy in the form of a task and ongoing question. Without going into a complex terrain related to the question of what kind of modernism a critic or historian has in mind, I would like to narrow things down to one basic problem that has fueled the originality of American poetry since the modernist aesthetic revolution: the place of the biographical subject in relation to the metaphysical order recognized or implicated in the position assumed by the subject emerging from poetry. It is on this terrain that Glück may be seen as one of the major and important voices, with her output presenting a distinctive and consistent development of a vision that presents a strong position—an argument comprising aesthetics, metaphysics and a theory of the subject—in the debate over the consequences of modernism.

In what follows, I will attempt to characterize this position through a critical discussion of Glück's post-confessional formula, developed within her creative trajectory, from the debut volume *Firstborn* (1968) to *Averno* (2006). I will first couch this formula within a historical context in which American poetry after High Modernism grappled with the questions of the biographical subject, its coherence, voice, and its metaphysics. As an artistic response to those fundamental questions—the possibility of relying on the biographical, representing subjecthood in language, the place of the subject in relation to the grand narratives ordering experience—Glück's creative output offers an austere statement. Hers is a deeply Eliotesque position of humbleness in the face of the unifying orders, modified so as to include a channel of communication with one's biographical past. Ingenuous as the formula is, it exacts heavy costs. Glück's poetry contains a psycho-theological element that greatly diminishes those spheres of the subject that make it a finite and embodied being: her austere recentering of the subject, combined with a prophetic elevation of voice, rely on a suppression of the bodily and affective dimensions responsible for gender difference.

The Historical Context: Siding with Eliot Against the End of Grand Narratives

According to David Orr, who offers an ambitious genealogy of the post-confessional 20th century lyric, finding its roots in Romanticism, the tendency to look to the personal, even the “confessional,” constitutes the main line of the American lyric. Its strongest practitioners follow the “moral imperative of authenticity” (651) and, in its pursuit, do not hesitate to reach toward “the personal lyric centered in urgent autobiography” (651). From this point of view, the High Modernist preoccupation with depersonalized technique appears as a deviation, “in fact, an aberration from the American theme” (651-2).

Orr's approach is controversial and it clashes with that of another camp which we might call anti-confessional. Here we find sustained, prolific and powerfully argued insistence on the High Modernist indispensable influence on later American poetries. Such critics as Marjorie Perloff, Charles Altieri, or Charles Bernstein have seen American post-war and late 20th century poetry thriving and blooming under the combined influence of Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot (at least in his

earlier period), particularly in the way those modernists paved the way to exploring diverse departures from the centrality of (auto)biography as poetic fuel. According to this postmodernist standpoint—rather continuous with modernism than forming an opposition to it—it is the poem's intertextual and linguistic event that displaces the coherent biographical subject, opening poetry to psychological flexibility and modulating the epistemological functions of the subject toward intersubjectivity and exchanges with variously postulated externality. In this model, the strictly autobiographical simply ceases to function as a source of (major) inspiration to the poet.¹

What is more, even though Orr's thesis on the centrality of autobiography and the aberration of modernism is formulated in a piece praising the achievement of the post-confessional poets, some of them—and Louise Glück is certainly the case in point—would strongly object to the idea of High Modernism, particularly Eliot's unwillingness to seek authenticity in the autobiographical, being an "aberration." Leaving aside the problematic profiling of what is and is not "American" in poetry, Glück, although definitely an autobiographical poet, is nothing if not a disciple of Eliot's in the way she approaches autobiography as theme. For her, just as for her confessional predecessors, notably Lowell, Eliot remains a tremendous influence. Although his injunctions against the biographical—his argument from "Traditional and Individual Talent" about poetry being a depersonalized and humble dialectic and negotiation with tradition—stood as a barrier to what those poets wanted to do, their way to biography passes through Eliot's indispensable lesson in acquiring a formal and aesthetic distance to one's own lore of painful personal experience.

It is this very legacy that makes the term "confessional" so problematic in the critical approaches to Lowell, Plath, and Bishop. Proposed by M. L. Rosenthal in his discussion of Lowell's *Life Studies*, the term "confession," used in an appreciative argument, came loaded with a number of highly problematic formulations. Where Rosenthal speaks of *Life Studies* being "a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal" (117) he strikes a risky note. The problem resides in losing control over one's emotional distance, and thus precisely in sacrificing the technical and the aesthetic for the sake of emotional exhibitionism. The fact that later commentators of the confessional mode appreciated the problem and tried to clear the middle-generation poets of, indeed, the very term "confession," is owed to Eliot's continuing influence over their control of form. Adam Kirsch, to

1 Some of the most characteristic arguments within this camp, put forward by such critics as Marjorie Perloff, Michael Davidson, or Charles Bernstein, contain the explorations of the poetics of indeterminacy, opacity of the medium, and linguistic innovation. Here, the idiom of subjectively centered transparency is undermined for the sake of the greater engagement with the diversity of styles and sources. According to Bernstein, it is this innovation—in which convention is replaced by continuous inquiry into the forms of writing, a "poetics of poetics" (78)—that constitutes American originality, the Cavellian project of the Americas as "a process not yet complete" (72). Added to those linguistic approaches, I would also mention Charles Altieri's phenomenology of poetic value, derived from his analyses on how the decentering of the subject helps to reconceptualize subjectivity into a diverse network of stances where value is inseparable from the affective sphere, a position that Altieri developed writing on John Ashbery and Wallace Stevens.

give one example, has illustrated at length how the achievement of Lowell, Bishop, Berryman and Plath rests on their carefully crafted aesthetic distance to personal experience, their scornful rejection of “poetry as some kind of therapeutic public purge or excretion” (Sylvia Plath qtd. in Kirsch x). An additional disadvantage of the idea of confession is its entanglement with what Frank Bidart, praising Glück, banishes as “the circumstantial,” meaning simply, material that is too closely related to the narrowly rendered existential situation of the poet (19).

The conundrums related to the poetic treatments of the personal are at the very heart of Louise Glück’s poetic project. While she is relentlessly personal in her prolonged dwelling on the family story, she attempts to approach this layer through a whole series of aesthetic and intellectual gestures that are meant to distance her from the formula of “sincerity.” Glück has been outspoken in her avoidance of “the sincere,” and she has praised such poets as Milton or Keats precisely for acquiring the kind of aesthetic distance to personal anguish that she clearly learned from Eliot. When Glück speaks, in an essay tellingly titled “Against Sincerity,” for the “artist task... involve[ing] the transformation of the actual to the true,” and the whole operation relying on “distinguishing truth from honesty or sincerity,” she is sounding the unmistakable note of instruction she accepts from Eliot. This lesson becomes apparent when Glück claims that the exquisite skills of “inward listening” that she finds in Keats indeed allow the poet a much needed relief from the personal: “that it was his hardly concerned him. It was a life and therefore likely... to stand as a *paradigm*” (*Proofs and Theories* 35-36, emphasis mine). It is this search for the paradigmatic that shows her a follower of Eliot’s central program of submitting the self to large organizing orders in their diverse formulas—mythological, psychological, religious or (post)-metaphysical.

Eliot’s heritage can be variously interpreted. Some American poets and critics have sided with Pound and Eliot discovering in them the message on the technically informed dismantling of the self with a view to observing its dependence on language and discourse, thus subscribing to the general post-modern argument of the end of the grand narratives. While the representatives of this branch of the literary evolution are many, John Ashbery’s name would certainly be among the central examples. Louise Glück’s post-confessional formula becomes clearer to us once we spot her difference with Ashbery and the post-modernist camp precisely on the point of how she wants to read Eliot in relation to the fate of the grand narratives. On the view that she represents, whatever fragmentation of self or language the 20th century poet registers, she remains bound by Eliot as a moral teacher whose overall lesson has been aptly summarized by Charles Altieri in the following way: “the world of broken images has to be seen in relation to the symbolic and the transcendental orders that they represent, and that they violate” (“T. S. Eliot” 552). In Glück, not only do those orders *not* disappear—as the proponents of the end of the grand narratives would like to see the situation—but are reinforced by becoming the very structure of psychological life, which can now be extrapolated from the individual to the universal caught in a perspective that I am going to call psycho-theological.²

2 In employing this term, I am drawing on the post-secular research of Agata Bielik-Robson who defines this term as “a form of thinking that combines psychoanalysis and religion” (*Finitude* 150).

We can now understand why Glück was right in sensing that one of her deepest quarrels is with John Ashbery's gargantuan linguistic aesthetic in which the energies of intertextually unleashed and painterly correlated poetics of excess dismantles the biographical basis of utterance, while at the same time undertaking a monumental task of confronting the vacuum left after the demise of variously understood grand narratives. In her camouflaged polemic against Ashbery, poignantly titled "Ersatz Thought," Glück speaks of the techniques of avoiding continuous syntactic logic, one of them being "non-sequitur," which she (indirectly) identifies with Ashbery's poetics. As part of Ashbery's metaphysics—a way of engaging "the void" or "the infinite"—this technique is deemed by her to be aesthetically and intellectually ineffective. "Though the void is great, the effect of it being evoked is narrow," Glück says, also complaining that the poems of this stylistic simply implode under their size and tedium: "the problem for the reader is that the experience of reading a stanza is not different from the experience of reading forty stanzas" (*Originality* 30), giving us very little to "explore here" (*Originality* 25). But an even more serious criticism that Glück levels against Ashbery is that his variety of non-sequitur, which a critic like Marjorie Perloff would call "the poetics of indeterminacy," is an attempt of dealing with the self that is simply disingenuous. Ashbery's refusal to deal with the biographical or coherently discursive material directly is compared to a code, a strategy of avoidance of the self, in which a poem is "a diagram of systematic evasion" (*Originality* 27). The disingenuousness of the maneuver consists in the fact that the self is, indeed, not only not avoided, but placed in the very center of attention: "Certainly the art of incompleteness makes the self startlingly present... in these homages to the void, the void's majesty is reflected in the resourcefulness and intensity with which the poet is overwhelmed." In short Glück argues that Ashbery's acclaimed indeterminacies are technical gimmicks masking the poet's narcissism which, however, never fails to surface, and it does so in the stylistic excess itself: "style of saying hardly leaves behind the self" (*Originality* 30).

Let us note what this polemic reveals about Glück's own standpoint: the poet's love of the self is inescapable. Which entails the unavoidability of the biographical. Rather than trying to avoid it then, the poet refuses to shrink from a more painful but honest, intellectually deeper, aesthetically more complex and satisfying, psychologically more revealing task of confronting the drama of the self, while also showing it to be paradigmatic. Siding with the later Eliot, Glück steers clear of constructs which highlighted the linguistic mediation of central narratives—cultural or metaphysical—holding those stable in view as indispensable for poetry as a culturally serious project. Glück's answer to this challenge is her entire trajectory of volumes in which the persistence with which the personal biographical drama is visited is matched with the coolness of the gesture—afforded by the affinity of poetry with certain facets of psychoanalysis—with which the personal is shown to be an instance of some overarching mechanisms that can be understood in psycho-theological terms. Her merger of poetics and psychoanalysis allows her to reinstate metaphysics in the center of the psychological life, not only not giving up on the idea of grand narratives regulating the life of the individual, but making them more intransigent than it was the case with Eliot's submission to Christianity.

The Post-Confessional Formula: Classical and Biblical Analogies in the Psychoanalytic Setting

Robert von Hallberg, quite rightly juxtaposing Glück's stylistics with Plath's, states the following: "There is fierceness here, as in Plath, but there is no way of attributing her ferocity to excessive emotionality: she is an insistent analytical writer who regards emotionality as a trap" (143). Hallberg's account links this elimination of the affective first to Glück's stylistic preference for the ascetic ("taciturn" or "bare style") associated mostly with W. S. Merwin (140), and speculates about its sources being the poet's overall intellectual conservatism (144), her "mordant humor" (143), but most crucially her austere "variety of authenticity" (144). This demanding brand of emotional/stylistic discipline is the poet's attempt to "stay true" to her metaphysical insights regarding the human condition, by staying faithful to her "unwillingness to take any consolation for granted" (145). This difficult stance of moral, emotional, and aesthetic balance is especially noteworthy in a poet whose nearly sole theme is painful autobiography. The stylistic and psychological aspects are here a part of a larger apparatus in which the painfully personal can be confronted openly, bluntly, and persistently, while the poet avoids the trap of cheap emotionality and exhibitionism. But Glück's ascetic style is much more than her subscribing to a fashionable 70's style. It is also one of the means of modulating her "confessions" by couching them within a combination of psychology and metaphysics. The non-emotional ascetic style fits two other distancing devices: analogies to the mythological or biblical patterns and affinities between the poetic speech and the mnemonic utterance activated by psychoanalysis.

In what is perhaps her functioning within the general purview of Eliot's influence, Glück has returned to mythologies—both Greek and Roman—in order to find in them stabilizing and universal patterns within which to speak of personal history. Early on, the dominance of the mother is compared to the grim presiding of a Fate (one of the Moirai) over the life of her daughter. "There is always something to be made of pain. / Your mother knits" – we read in "Love Poem," one of the numerous early lyrics devoted to the poet's mother (*First Four* 90). In the same volume we find the early attempts to approach the theme of marriage through the myth of Persephone (the poem "Pomegranate"). It will be extended and more fully developed in *Averno* (2006), where Persephone's subjection to the will of her mother and husband will be correlated, as a myth related to barrenness, to the psychological condition of the subject. In *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985) the eponymous hero and his lot serve as a universalizing take: finding the essential human condition in the recognition of loss and incompleteness. *Meadowlands* (1996) contains an ample treatment of the theme of the decay of marriage through analogies to Penelope, Odysseus, Telemachus and Circe. Further examples include the myth of Dido, who represents generalized feminine suffering under the oppressive historical mechanisms, or, again, the Fates (the poem "The Queen of Carthage" in *Vita Nova* (1999)). These rich classical allusions are complemented with biblical ones. Glück's religious quarrel is with the cruel "Jewish God / who doesn't hesitate to take / a son from a mother" (*Poems* 213) as she puts it in *Ararat* (1990). A set of biblical allusions become the central structural device in *Wild Iris* (1992), a volume that functions as one cycle of poems based on the trope

of Eden, in which plants, humans, and the Christian God exchange reflections and confessions in indirect dialogues. In all of those volumes the personal story remains at the center, but the mythology or religion based parables always provide a safe cushion of universality to even the most painful confidence shared with the reader.

It is important to note that neither Christianity nor classical mythology is acknowledged as any ultimate metaphysics in its own right. They serve as props, stage devices, that the poet uses in a process of delving deeper, beyond the personal reaction to pain and misfortune. We do obtain a project that, if not metaphysical, can be called psycho-theological. In it, however, the classical mythology and Christianity merge with a modulation of voice owed to psychoanalysis, as the entire formula tends toward a version of Gnosticism, or Gnosticism recalled by psychoanalysis. I will discuss the Lacanian psychoanalytic and its Gnostic underpinning below, however at this point let us simply note the general affinities with psychoanalysis as another set of distancing devices.

Glück's explicit interest in general patterns and motifs offered by Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis is first noted in *Descending Figure* (1980), but a more dispersed presence of psychoanalysis is felt in other volumes of the entire early period. A psychoanalytic predilection can only be natural for a poet whose strong instinctual theme is the Freudian "family romance"—a complex system of emotional bonds involving subjects grappling with their psychological roles as parents, spouses, children, and siblings. Numerous poems of the early period refer to the highly charged daughter-mother relations and to the resulting mechanisms of self-aggression (including anorexia), occurring in the developing female subject. These mechanisms had been a focal point within the Freudian model.³

Self-imposed "hunger" is one of the more frequent tropes of the early phase in Glück, and it belongs to a larger process in which her subject strives to regulate the affective sphere, related first of all to the mother (although the relation to the father will gradually gain in importance in the later stages). The process contains elements of aggression and self-aggression, hatred and reconciliation, as strategies of dealing with a sense of loss or lack of autonomy. Images of imposed overeating or overfeeding abound early on, in the debut *Firstborn* (1968), as parts of an oppressive order—both cultural and psychological. The dominant mother who controls the life of the entire family, breast feeding or refusal thereof—are other frequent motifs at this stage. Mother and daughter are captured within a nexus of binds and transferences which make them actors in perniciously cold, psychologically founded rituals of domination, submission and aggression, the onset of which is related to the moment of birth, treated psychoanalytically as a cataclysmic separation from the prelinguistic fulness and immediacy related to the mother's body. "It was better when we were / together in the body," says the subject in "For My Mother," marking the beginning of mourning

3 They have been described in detail by Melanie Klein who explored the forming of the female subject within the bounds of the Freudian model. Working with this model, Janet Sayers has shown how a complex system of aggression directed by the infant daughter toward her mother and then, through guilt, to herself, may result, among others, in eating disorders, when the developing female engages in a "destructive phantasy... unconsciously expressed in... shame, guilt, and self-starvation" (31).

over this lost sense of fullness and union, “then spring / came and withdrew from me / the absolute / knowledge of the unborn” (*First Four* 64). From then on, mother and daughter are caught in a mechanical and ritualistic system of competing over emotional dominance, the snapshots of which we visit in numerous poems throughout the early period. The same cruel, predatory, tight network of emotional competition determines the relation between Glück’s autobiographical subject and her sister, as another aspect of the badly played-out “family romance,” most closely covered in the volume *Ararat* (1990), probably the most “confessional” collection.

The development of the child under the aegis of mourning the loss of the prelinguistic unity with the body of the mother—a clearly Lacanian motif—culminates in the volume *Descending Figure* (1980), in which the further process of the female subject formation—much troubled, comprising various self-excising gestures—is correlated with what Lacan called the mirror stage. An entire section titled “The Mirror” pushes these processes from infancy to early adulthood, when the female is first subjected to marital rituals, depriving her of any control of her self and her body (“Epithalamium”), to which she then reacts self-aggressively in a poem “The Mirror,” which describes what in fact is a moment of de-investing oneself of one’s gender difference. The subject scrutinizes here mirror reflection, “scrapes the flesh away,” and declares: “I see you correctly, / as a man bleeding” (*First Four* 121). The cycle crests in the tellingly titled “Dedication to Hunger” where the earlier struggles with anorexia coalesce into a symbol: here “hunger” becomes a generalized state of wanting which is no longer opposed as the subject enters a transformation consisting in the rejection of her own body, desire, the entire sexual sphere sacrificed to the composite symbolic order one of whose elements is poetry itself. Although she loses vitality, she gains self-control and power the external materialization of which is poetic initiation. Completing the cycle of alienation from the bodily—performed not as a gesture of gender politics but a spiritual reaction within a certain recognition of metaphysical nature—and making of the bodily and the sexual an offering, the subject declares “I felt / what I feel now, aligning these words.” In a strictly classical gesture, poetry—formal poetry, in which, as in Eliot, the individual livelihood is submerged and submitted to large universal mechanisms—is the only bulwark against forces that preside over and effectively annul the modern individual’s false claims to autonomy. Composing this kind of verse “is the same need to perfect, of which death is the mere byproduct” (*First Four* 133).

Reena Sastri remarks how the convention of confession, when understood accurately, remains in accord with Eliot’s aesthetics of the modulation of voice adhering to any matter, the personal included. It is those modulations, “from symbolic, to discursive, prosy to oracular” that inform the “evocations of the otherness of self and of poetic voice,” found in Plath (1008). Joining Glück into this lineage, Sastri observes: “Drawing from myth, psychoanalysis can point not only toward the personal but equally away” (1018). Sastri has in mind Glück’s predilection toward the paradigmatic, the “encounters with the elemental” (Glück qtd. in Sastri 1018), all of those converging on the issue of the “origins of the poetic voice” (1018). Stated differently, psychoanalysis allows the poet to put distance between herself, her speaker in the poem and the poem’s thematic contents. Thus, Glück gets away with relentless

thematizing of the personal because she emulates what psychoanalysts call “the talking cure”—the analyzed subject’s speech as erratic effort of reaching back to trauma and verbalizing it, which is also the subject’s attempt of coming to terms with one’s own incompleteness and dependence on all sorts of instabilities inscribed in language.⁴ Such subject cannot be trusted and we obtain the final defense against “sincerity.” The strategy is thematized in a piece called “The Untrustworthy Speaker.” Here the poet returns to one of her most persistent, and most Eliotesque motifs—the symbolic “wound,” a general incapacitation of the vitalist energies—and notes: “a wound to the heart / is also a wound to the mind.” Glück heaps one dissimulation over another; her blunt personal confidences come with a safety switch always on: “Don’t listen to me... / I don’t see anything objectively” (*Poems* 216).

The Psycho-Theological Insight: Confronting the Thanatic Order

And yet, the further they get from being sincere, the closer these voices are supposed to get to the truth understood as visionary power. Helen Vendler has characterized this stylistic as one of “spiritual prophecy,” maintained in language of “high assertion... as from the Delphic tripod” (16). Glück’s speakers often signal this power of vision which affords them a variety of knowledge or insight. “I know”—is one of the phrases that controls this utterance, and, despite all the speakers’ dissimulations, the power of this poetry rests on the idea of the subject indeed obtaining insight into something more than personal crisis. Activating one’s memory, as in psychoanalysis, combined with mythological or biblical patterns, shows the particulars of the personal story to be part of larger mechanisms, metaphysical, religious or post-secular, orders whose significance amounts to nothing short of a complete vision of cosmological or psycho-theological nature.⁵ The task of reading this poetry is not one of assessing the sincerity of confession (it remains an open question if the distancing devices really work), but of identifying the predominant stance Glück’s subjects take toward the exigencies of being.

At the level of the “spiritual prophecy,” the controlling formula is one of the Eliotesque “wound.” Glück, as Eliot before her, is a poet who recognizes a crisis, enquires into its non-personal sources, and then looks for a positioning toward it. The state of “being wounded,” as a recognition of a larger malady, dominates right from the start. The debut volume *Firstborn* (1968) abounds in blurred images of oppression and a general existential discomfort. At first, since a lot of those scenes belong on the plain of marital life, the reader might be justified in identifying the source of the

4 Bruce Fink brings up the idea of the “talking cure” when he discusses how the analysand’s effort is one of verbalizing trauma, or “the real”—the content that so far escaped symbolization. Talking “transforms the earlier unspoken... incompletely conceptualized experiences” (25). It is clear, however, in this Lacanian discourse, that the entire process is prolonged and it gives us a subject that is unstable, in search of oneself, ridden with lack, incompleteness and self-deception. The Lacanian subject, seeking itself in language—that is, amidst language’s own constitutive lack and slippage of the signifier—is a “split subject,” internally divided between the false ego and the unattainable unconscious (Fink 45).

5 Robert von Hallberg has noted that Glück’s poems, at various stages, were “more cosmological than human or earthly” (144).

crisis along the lines of the feminist critique of patriarchal social order. And although this line is not entirely misleading, patriarchy remaining a culprit in the early and middle period volumes, it is increasingly shown to be a mere facet of something much deeper and pernicious than a historical, contingent cultural order. In Glück, culture and history pale in front of metaphysics. The author of *Wild Iris* proposes a modification of Eliot's patterns: whereas he unveils a historical crisis affecting individual psychology and then searches for remedies in variously identified transcendental orders—from mythological foundations that allow us to discern the modern malaise to the later rediscovery of Christianity—hers is a devastating discovery of the *malaise* at the very heart of the cure. Increasingly, in this poetry, the condition of “being wounded” will be associated not with a specific political regime, where, as in Sylvia Plath or Adrienne Rich, female suffering has its cause in the cultural control of biological and gender roles, but with a flaw encoded deep in the very occurrence of human life within a barren universe. Unlike in Eliot, here the very concept of barrenness belongs on the plain of metaphysics.

The tensions, shortcomings and disappointments of the family life, touched upon in the first volume, are transposed to a different context right with the next one. In *The House on Marshland* (1975), the familial discontents are shown from increasingly generalized perspective—afforded by cultural patterns negotiating trauma (well-known legends) or through one's own memories of childhood always compromised by trauma, veiled, approached with the indirection of the lyric convention – and they are accompanied by poems depicting generally barren landscapes. This revisited wasteland confronts us in the opening lyric, “All Hallows,” one of Glück's numerous ascetic landscape poems, in which the “assembling landscape” will never afford solace, since nature is tainted with sterility, and life forces are too closely intertwined with the forces of death: “This is the barrenness / of harvest or pestilence” (*First Four* 61). Harvest, blooming trees, budding sexual functions – these tropes place us immediately with the Eliotesque thematic of fertility and Plath's thematic of gender and biology. But here “harvest” is equalized with “pestilence,” and this merger constitutes the central and controlling trope in Glück's *oeuvre*.

The early volumes trace the sickening factor which paralyzes the psyche and blocks the life of the erotic affective sphere, confining it to a fallibility and perniciousness associated with the very forces of nature, including human biology and reproduction. Birth, pregnancy, just as spring, or any other instance of nature's vitality, are always pictured as traps, they are “routine message[s] of survival,” and they will mark the female as victim, instilling in her mechanisms that will increasingly be read as alien and cruel. The body will be “inscribed” with the “fruits” as with “unravelling dark stains in heavier winds” (*First Four* 70)—a shockingly devastating metaphor for pregnancy, rivaling Plath's “fat gold watch” from “Morning Song.” But the problem is not, as in Plath, the patriarchal control of biology and gender roles, but the total and devastating submission of the Eros to Thanatos. Fertility is not to be trusted, as a tainted trap and harbinger of destruction, and this correlation continues well into much later volumes. “Surely spring has been returned to me, this time / not as a lover but a messenger of death” (*Poems* 363), we read in the title lyric of *Vita Nova* (2009), and the only thing that surprises in this passage is the phrase “this time.” In Glück,

the female affective sphere related to the erotic and the bodily are part and parcel of “harvest-as-pestilence,” and should be treated as an element within the larger waste-stricken landscape. Hence images such as the one from “Aphrodite” where “A woman exposed as rock / has this advantage: / she controls the harbor” (*First Four* 141). On the surface, this can be a metaphor of a psychological defense against patriarchal oppression; but read in the context of the entire metaphysical system of this poetry, it is an image of the female subject divesting herself of sexuality which is seen as barren and “wounded,” always-already possessed by the big Other, which is death itself. All nature in Glück’s early/middle period is so possessed. In fact, it isn’t merely the female sexuality that is so treacherous or devastated: the Eros in general, both male and female, is a system of subterfuge, presumption and naivety, damaging the subject with false hopes, shallowness or outright stupidity. When, in the often quoted “Mock Orange” the female subject confesses “I hate sex,” this is indeed a rebellion against male domination (“the man’s mouth / sealing my mouth”). However, such scenes in Glück always reveal a deeper foundation of the badly poised gender relations. The Eros in Glück is blind, weak and intoxicating the human with mechanized responses and “tired antagonisms.” The female subject shares this knowledge with her dominant partner: “Do you see? We were made fools of” (*First Four* 155). This kind of insight is attained in close vicinity of natural abundance, stimulated, as in this poem, by the nauseating flower fragrance (“the scent of mock orange / drifts through the window”). Gardens—a recurring setting—are in fact chilling areas of imprisonment, a trope that is fully employed in the volume-long painful confrontation with the vegetative vitalism—a cruel subterfuge in the order of creation—in *Wild Iris* (1992).

From early on, nature in Glück is a theatrical stage on which the liveliness of organisms is an illusion, merely an overture to revealing a bigger master, a principle stronger than life. In the early poem “Messengers” animals are carriers of death, their organic movability only a temporary indicator of fate, as they are “slowly drift[ing] into the open / through bronze panels of sunlight” (*First Four* 68). The movement “into the open” is a self-expository gesture of submission; the animals’ only agency is in accepting their vulnerability to a destructiveness already at work in their bodies: “They are almost motionless, until their cages rust” (68). Or there is no agency at all—the animals are a mechanical or reversed *trompe l’oil*, living organisms tuned into a ceremonious convention, sealed in the artifice of light coming not from nature but from the supernatural order of death. The animals move into view effortlessly, fulfilling their roles of life-mocking decoration. In a related poem of this period (“Thanksgiving”), we see them as “prey,” of which not even forgiveness is expected, as “they can afford to die. / They have their place in the dying order” (*First Four* 116).

The bronze pale light of “Messengers” later floods the spectacular volume *Wild Iris*, but it is the spectacle of suffering pervading and tormenting all that lives. The garden in this volume is in fact a prison within malevolent creation: flowers whisper of suffering and surprise at the cruelty of perishing, while the human female subject, herself cognizant of the pain of being, is taking the most difficult middle ground between them and a presiding deity, a Christian-like God, as impatient with flowers and humans as Jehovah was with Job. The garden is beautiful, its illuminations strongly reminiscent of various medieval and renaissance traditions in which the

clarity of light echoes Platonic ideations; but Glück makes this beauty walk hand in hand with cruelty: life is a ridiculous vegetative occurrence, a sad parade of organisms-as-victims, and the role of the human is to be rent apart in painful (and rigid) awareness of this affliction. All actors of the spectacle try in vain to communicate their terrible condition—fear, loneliness, vulnerability to time, perishability, affective desolation—but are in fact caught in an ontology based on division and separation. This rigidly divided realm bespeaks a primordial falling apart, a Gnostic catastrophe that makes all creation a deeply flawed “perennial struggle with matter” (Zazula 257). The idea of having consciousness integrated with matter is a malicious ploy, earlier identified by Gnostics, and a statement offered by the eponymous *Wild Iris* at the start of this volume could serve as a motto to the entire early/middle period: “It is terrible to survive / as consciousness” (*Poems* 245).

The post-confessional formula that receives its shape between *Firstborn* and *Ararat* (1990) and is imaginatively consolidated in *Wild Iris* (1992) carries a metaphysical (or psycho-theological) insight that shows the modern wasteland not to be redeemed by a return to organizing orders, as in Eliot. Rather, the orders themselves are encountered, confronted and acknowledged in their inexorable Thanatic destructivity. To be sure, the dominance of Thanatos is not a thesis arrived at through any openly metaphysical inquiry; rather, Glück’s metaphysics emerges as a translation of the entire panoply of psychological mechanisms, the central motif of which is the female subject repudiating her erotic/affective sphere in a defensive and sacrificial strategy. Life rituals of the early and middle volumes (eating, or overeating, feeding, preparing for births, preparing for funerals) continue to be dominated by “mothers,” whose psychotherapeutically revisited dominance makes them into the Fates. As dominated by the Thanatic element, these aspects of living are to be opposed, and to achieve the opposition the female subject will seek radical elimination of the entire erotic affectivity. The various self-excisions inflict the bodily and take it out from the realm of authentic livelihood. What is gained is a higher level of authenticity and consciousness—strongly formalized, rendered in almost ceremonial and high-aesthetic, indeed hieratic style—that we find in the resultant verse, the formal poetry becoming a sort of sublimating crust of the excruciating psychical processes: “It is a form / of suffering” (*First Four* 76). However, whatever oppositional potential these psychical gestures possess, they soon morph into a form of rigidified acquiescence. Hence the poems in which the subject turns into stone, assuming the rock-stable controlling position (as in the already discussed “Aphrodite”), or banishing the victim part of herself—the only part that would in fact have had a chance for a “destiny”—while enhancing the predatory aspects, even at the cost of affective suppression. The subject remains stranded in the (self)-aggressive position of “the hunter,” even though “that part is paralyzed” (*First Four* 172), and on its way, as we will see, to merging with the controlling Thanatic order.

The Psycho-Theological Trajectory: Paying Tribute to the Thanatic Order

When she takes those high and costly grounds, the subject comes face to face with the powers that govern the “mothers” of the Earth—the powers that psychoanalysis

and mythology unanimously subsume under the name of Thanatos. To be human is to be wounded by death, the iron principle of necessity that in the Greek pantheon is presided over both by Fates and Ananke, and which in the reality of the modern philosophy and psychology spells out the all-pervasive presence of death, death as the ultimate and only reality, foundation of all being. This is the central message of the early/middle period, elaborated and illustrated in the sequence of volumes from *The House on Marshland* (1975) to *Ararat* (1990). Bypassing *The Wild Iris* (1992) and *Meadowlands* (1996)—artistically most satisfying collections which, however, do not develop the psychological formula—the Thanatic transformation of the subject is revisited with belated (and doomed) attempts at recuperation from this position, which we observe in the later *Averno* (2006).

The key arch of this formative sequence is found in the elegiac and funeral poems in *Descending Figure*, *The Triumph of Achilles*, and *Ararat*. They reveal the true master force standing behind and informing the desolations of the “family romance.” Death in the family, first the death of the baby sister, then the death of the father, gradually emerges as the only force regulating the psychical and spiritual life, and the funeral scenes, attending to graves, being “at the grave” (*Poems* 131), is the primary location (the title of the volume *Ararat* is the name of the poet’s family cemetery). The eponymous cycle in *Descending Figure* is an elegiac sequence devoted to the death of the baby sister. Death is a mute force, the Lacanian Real, a nucleus of all anxiety that defines the tone of memories; not speaking, the dead are more alive than the living. If the death of the sister signifies loss, it will be registered by the subject through the affective posture of the mother. The early lines give us a recognition of some sort of larger abandonment—“If I could write to you / about this emptiness.” There is a blurry transference of life and death between the sisters, the subject already undergoing an internal split—“Often I would let my name glide past me” (*First Four* 113)—in a self-effacing move compensating for the death of the sister, performed to appease the mournful mother. This is why all memories connected with the mother contain the element of unfulfilled longing. The mother is a remote priestess whose life is filled with unceasing *exequiae*, a psychical portrayal of the parent which takes its final shape in the funeral *Ararat*: “My mother’s an expert in one thing: / sending people she loves into the other world” (*Poems* 212), a statement that is more a declaration of a necessity than complaint. It is, again, the sister’s death that regulates these behaviors, according to the principle that the dead are more alive than the living: “My sister spent a whole life in the earth” (*Poems* 211). Death supplants life, making births into automatic harbingers of dying: “my mother planned for the child that died” (*Poems* 210). Thus, the mother (and the father with her) are removed to the level of cold functionaries of death. Emotionally barren, their scarce warmth is a good that both the surviving sisters must fight for, another conspicuous theme in *Ararat*.

It is this environment that determines the psychical trajectory of the subject. How does the subject cope with such pressures? I have already illustrated the process which dominates Glück’s major phase: the sacrificial excisions of the affective. These purely psychological moves, however, are indicative of another move on the psycho-theological plain—that is the plain in which the defensive modulations of the psychological subject connect her with the transcendental order. In Glück, this trajectory

is from a passive victim wounded by the Thanatic orders to their self-appointed ally. The forming of the alliance is depicted in the cycle of poems devoted to the father: portrayed first as a living but coldly remote parent, then on his deathbed. The poems of the death of the father, visited twice—in *The Triumph of Achilles* and five years later in *Ararat*—define the position the subject takes in relation to the foundational psycho-theological order of reality. First, we have the decisive transformation of the subject in the poem “Metamorphosis.” The daughter is leaning over the dying father, and the following substitution takes place:

then he looked at me
 as a blind man stares
 straight into the sun, since
 whatever it could do to him
 is done already. (*First Four* 157)

The sun is always an ambiguous deity in Glück. The “contract” the father is turning away from—or falling away from as a no longer needed functionary—is the law that has bound him throughout his life: the Lacanian law of the father, which in Glück is one and the same thing as the law of the Other, that is, ultimately, death. The father’s face—flushed with fever, disease and dying—is illuminated with a “light” that is *not* the Christian/Platonic light of grace and eternal life, not the light of the Platonic Eros, but the light of what the Polish scholar Agata Bielick-Robson has called the “acephalic Neoplatonism.” This form of belated Platonism, always hostile to embodied finitude, reoccurring in modernity, and vainly seeking a recentering of life in a metaphysical fullness, always ends up shedding the “dark entropic sun of Thanatos” (*Finitude* x).⁶ The light-as-contract which illuminates the father’s face is a mortifying light of dying or being dead during the lifetime, and it is somehow already present as X-ray in the previous section of “Metamorphosis” where we learn of “the spot on the lung / [which] was always there” (*Poems* 148). This light is a variety of the bronze panels of sunlight we have seen earlier flooding the animals in “Messengers,” turning the animals into a sculpted relief devoted to death, and the merciless light that burns or freezes the flowers in *Wild Iris*. In Glück, light, especially the sunlight, radiates destruction, not love. It is a Thanatic “entropic” glow presiding over creation recognized by Gnostics as a malevolent error.

Glück’s proper element is theology filtered through 20th century psychoanalysis and her Gnostic traits are a surface derivation of a more subterranean thought that can be traced to Jacques Lacan’s post-secular variety of Gnosticism. While some critics have offered discussions of single volumes by Glück in the light of Julia Kristeva’s research on melancholy, where the poet displays “passionate strictness” in restraining affective and linguistic pleasures (Selinger), I claim that her psychoanalytic modulations of voice govern all volumes of the early/middle period and send us to one of the greatest influences on Kristeva’s work, Jacques Lacan. Agata-Bielick-Robson has investigated in detail Lacan’s crypto-theological, gnostic identification of death as the

6 Bielick-Robson comments: “Within this religious complex, death becomes the model of the Absolute, as well as the mystical foundation of all authority: virginally pure, ideal, ultimate, unflinching legality that knows no exception, no extenuating circumstances” (*Finitude* 122).

ultimate “master”—the ultimate reality that governs the evolution of the subject toward authenticity. Bielik-Robson reads beyond the Freudian layer of Lacanian discourse and traces in it the Gnostic intrusions where this highest form of consciousness is found with the vision of Eros crushed by Thanatos, and life as an anomaly in the midst of the cold universe. According to Bielik-Robson, Lacan’s teaching urges an authenticity of some more “lordly” human subjects who fully recognize their non-negotiable and non-dialectical subjection to nothingness and “rediscover [themselves] in the universe of death” (175), thus becoming “free of the sheeplike superstitions of Eros” and merging with a voice that says “I have come to life only in order to die... I hail death by returning to it right now,” thus heeding the Gnostic tradition’s “call of the distant God” (*Saving Lie* 176).

Tending toward this area is the prevailing psychological and spiritual movement in Glück’s development. Piotr Zazula has rightly read *Wild Iris*, finding in it the human “sense of inner spiritual split” that should be traced to Gnostic “struggle between spirit and matter” and the idea of God as a faulty creator (257). But in this poet the pure Gnosticism—a description of reality belonging, after all, to an ancient moment in the history of the religious culture—is replaced with a psycho-theological move that, as Bielik-Robson has shown, has been a means by which certain thinkers of modernity grappled with the demise of the traditional Christian Absolute. Here, the Lacanian preference for the death drive, tinged with Gnostic epiphanies, far from informing any single volume, is the major spiritual position dominating the majority of the poet’s development, all the way to the late collection *Averno*. The arrival at the place of the Lacanian Thanatic insight is tantamount to the female subject renouncing all traces of desire, the bodily as a site of somatic subjectivity, sexuality and gender difference. The process culminates in the moment we have just observed in “Metamorphosis.” It is the female subject, now fully integrated with the contractual light of the Thanatic order—the contract extended by what Bielik-Robson names death-as-the-only-master in her reading of Lacan—that is found right in the position of source of the ghastly Thanatic glow. From there, she is a transformed priestess of death, who is beyond the idea of compassion, pain, emotional hurt. We encounter this new self in the next section of the poem which offers one of the most chilling moments in Glück’s entire *oeuvre*. Here, the daughter now surpasses her mother in performing the *exequiae* over her dead father’s body:

I run my hand over your face
lightly, like a dustcloth.
What can shock me now? I feel
no coldness that can’t be explained.
Against your cheek, my hand is warm
and full of tenderness. (*First Four* 158)

The fragment is a great display of Glück’s mastery at extreme emotional dissimulation. Every assertion is in fact pointing toward its opposite. “I feel”—there no feeling here, as the subject is bereft of this human layer, and coldness is in fact all she “feels,” since “my hand is warm” but *only* in comparison with the corpse’s coldness. The “tenderness” in the last line is completely unconvincing; there is a coldness of ritual here, an entirely

impersonal and ceremonial shrouding of the body (“my hand... like dustcloth”). It is the hand of the human subject who in the previous section fully headed the Lacanian-Thanatic “call of the distant god.”

No longer roaming those altitudes, it returns to a ghastly existence, having been altered, however, reintegrated with the father’s image, and, thus, the patriarchal order. This full identification with the patriarchal presence is visited again, as a more sober aftermath of the gnostic epiphany of “Metamorphosis,” in a series of poems in the funeral and elegiac *Ararat*. The central piece of this revisiting is “Terminal Resemblance,” which is a more “secular,” even wordy or conversational version of the same moment we saw in “Metamorphosis.” Here the dying father and the daughter actually do share a normal conversation, awkward as it is, its underlying theme being the daughter now fully mimicking the father’s inability of showing emotion. The process is complete in the last line where the daughter becomes the father’s mirror reflection: “Like him, [I] waned to disguise my hand’s trembling” (*Poems* 235). Here is a brilliant figure, to be rivaled only by John Ashbery’s “shield of a greeting”—a formulaic movement of the hand as a double-edged gesture, not so much a communication as a blockade of emotion, a distancing from the other, a repression of the affect, performed in the close imitation of the father’s life-long chilling repressions. Some critics have read such moments *Ararat* in the light of Julia Kristeva’s exploration of lament as a form of love, as instances of a love that is, as in the Biblical Song of Songs, “fierce as death.” On such readings, the moments of strongest emotional restraints in Glück are attempts to “unlock a love like that, a fierce erotic drive to hold life together” (Selinger).

It is extremely difficult to see the attempt ever successful, not only in *Ararat*, but in all the volumes discussed here. Exercised for too long, emotional restraint ceases to bespeak intensity and simply morphs into spiritual desolation. “Terminal Resemblance” is surrounded by poems in which the father-daughter relationship consists in the daughter integrating herself with the gaze of the father, “learning / to absorb its emptiness” (*Poems* 233), and then the father’s death-bound existence fully continued by the daughter, a faithful follower of the “call of the distant god”: “Tonight I saw myself in the dark window as / the image of my father, whose life / was spent like this, / thinking of death, to the exclusion of other / of other sensual matters” (*Poems* 237). There is no place for Eros in this psychic organization.

The female subject renouncing the gender difference, taking up her place in the patriarchal order that can be interpreted as the form of the Lacanian search for authenticity in the psycho-theology of submission to death—this position, worked out between the poems devoted to the father in *The Triumph of Achilles* and in *Ararat* is the defining structure of the female subject in Louise Glück poetry, reaching well into the late 1990s and 2000’s. It must be noted that the later volumes, especially *Averno* (2006), contain poems which are an attempt to recuperate from the earlier strict renunciation of the finite. A discussion of how difficult a task it is should be reserved for another article. We can only note here that the utterance in many of these poems is offered by a subject who can at best realize its self-inflicted desolation, as in “October,” one of the key lyrical sequences of the volume: “It does me no good / to be good to me now; / violence has changed me” (*Poems* 493-94) and “My body has

grown cold like the stripped fields” (494). In another poem, “Telescope,” this subject gazes for a while at vast, interstellar emptiness, and then tries to transfer her attention, finally, to earth. The result is poignantly ambiguous. After dismantling the cosmos-scanning device and turning her looks to the landscape around her, she sees “how far away / each thing is from every other thing” (*Poems* 550). Having been adhered to for so long, the bleak emptiness of the empty universe is hard to eliminate, and the “dark entropic sun of Thanatos” persists.

Concluding Remarks

With relentless consistence of vision, Glück definitely passes the major poet test created by Auden and recalled by Ashbery in his Harvard lectures. The Nobel prize makes her also one of the central and most important poets of the Western world now. What does this centrality tell us about how poetry in general, and American poetry more precisely, has dealt with the modernist legacy?

Glück's high aesthetic ground of the psychic authenticity is obtained at a great cost. Impervious to the various 20th century skepticisms regarding the subject's independence from the excessive linguistic proliferations, she reaches for one of the lyric's most traditional topics—the personal history—believing that her distancing techniques will fend off the risk of excessive narcissism, and that she will be able to objectify the poetic subject by connecting it to paradigmatic orders. In doing this, she underlines her difference from the post-moderns. Glück has criticized Ashbery for never really avoiding excessive narcissism, arguing that his linguistic bravados fail to mask the underlying poetic preoccupation with the self and eventually end up as a sort of flat and tedious “homages to the void.” But betting on a more authentic dealing with the residual poetic narcissism—by trying to raise the personal to the paradigmatic—she runs her own poetics into a severe subjective predicament.

Where Ashbery—a “postmodernist” operating beyond one of Enlightenment's grand narratives, that of the centralized subject and its singular and authentic experience—is willing to freely explore chance encounters of desire with non-personal linguistic excess, Glück clings on to the idea of the deep subject—a subject that is in fact itself quite narcissistically obsessed with its own story⁷, but which is striving to transform the biographical obsession and push the contingency of the personal story toward the paradigmatic. And indeed, it is a poetry of a paradigm—the psychoanalytically constructed paradigm that brings the subject into confrontation with a post-religious vacuity in which the Platonic ideas of the source of life that once nourished normative Christianity undergo a modification into their opposite: the ultimate nothingness of death as essential reality.

Catastrophically, this level of metaphysical insight paralyzes all those aspects of the self that belong to its earthly, existential, embodied, sexual and gendered being. Unlike one of her predecessors, Sylvia Plath, who used classical analogies to stir up

7 It is a debatable point in fact if Glück's distancing strategies work. Some critics are not convinced and point to the fact that the biographical is Glück's one and only topic whose constant reoccurrence in each next volume, all classical allusions notwithstanding, “demonstrates a disconcerting inability to find her way out of the cul-de-sac of subjectivity” (Henry).

the emotional, affective and gendered sphere of her speakers, the prophetic voices in Glück choose to “express but what we feel, and to feel very little... to play dead” (von Hallberg 142). This paradigmatic insight thwarts the idea—rather important to internationally founded community of poets who take their cue from the modernist experiment—of the poetic re-inhabitation of the earth. It is an old Whitmanian dream, modulated by numerous American modernist and contemporary poets, of form as channel which the psyche, confronting the demise of the traditional religious systems, could use to negotiate its finite and embodied post-metaphysical condition.

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