

**FROM *ARARAT* TO *AVERNO*: AN ANALYSIS OF PLOT  
IN LOUISE GLÜCK'S POETRY**

BY CYRIL WONG YIT MUN

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PART FULFILMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS (ENGLISH LITERATURE),  
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE  
2008

“This dissertation represents my own work and due acknowledgement is given whenever information is derived from other sources. No part of this dissertation has been or is being concurrently submitted for any other qualification at any other university.



Signed .....

## **Acknowledgements**

*My heartfelt appreciation to John Whalen-Bridge for his infinite patience.*

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2: A Love of Endings</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Chapter 3: The Speaking Garden</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Chapter 4: The Problem with Marriage</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Life and the Afterlife</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>Works Cited</b>	<b>92</b>

## Summary

For my thesis, I will focus on Louise Glück's last six books of poetry to analyse how each collection is held together by a plot in which the poet negotiates with a world without certainty. In these six collections, namely *Ararat* (1990), *The Wild Iris* (1992), *Meadowlands* (1996), *Vita Nova* (1999), *The Seven Ages* (2001), and *Averno* (2006), there is a sustained negotiation between aspects of the lyric and the verse novel. Critics thus far have only discussed the poet's themes, as well as her spartan, lyric style and the detached, oracular tone in her poems. No critic has ever analysed the collections as plotted narratives or verse novels. Glück's books are more than just collections of stand-alone, lyric poems. Not only is each collection bound by a plot that conveys a phase in the poet's life, all six collections are coherently linked by a sustained, individual journey about survival, emotional healing, and self-renewal, in which Glück is attempting to find meaning and beauty in an existence without the comfort of absolute truths. It is also a poetic journey that serves as a symbolic mirror for the reader's own parallel, personal experiences, such that readers might also draw from the poet's hard-earned lessons, relate them back to their own lives, and possibly even heal their own emotional wounds.

The poet speaks first in a confessional voice in *Ararat*. Then multiple dialogic voices can be heard in *The Wild Iris*, as well as mythological ones in both *Meadowlands* and *Vita Nova*. Eventually, the speaker in the poems becomes more and more allegorical in *The Seven Ages* and *Averno*, even as all of the voices are born out of the poet's autobiographical journey of spiritual and existential self-discovery. The poet's detached and oracular tone, the poems' apostrophic mode, and the various mythic and allegorical voices all work in the collections to go beyond giving an account of an individual journey to engage the reader in relating subjectively with the events and epiphanies in the poet's life.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Louise Glück is the author of eleven poetry collections and a former Poet Laureate of the United States from 2003-2004. Her poetry is known for its intimate explorations of family relationships and the self, and also for how the poet juxtaposes the reconstructed lives of archetypal subjects from classic myths alongside personal revelations. She won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *The Wild Iris* (1992), which is among the last six books in her oeuvre that are the focus of this thesis. Glück had not consciously started writing book-length sequences before *Ararat* (1990), the first of the six collections discussed here. My thesis title, *From Ararat to Averno*, indicates a move from the peak of a biblical mountain (highlighted in the first book, *Ararat*) to the bottom of a volcano crater in Italy rumoured to be the entrance to the underworld (featured in the last book, *Averno*). In the first of Glück's books featured here, *Ararat* is the name of the Jewish cemetery where the poet's parents and sister are buried, and it is also a site of memory where Glück recalls and learns to accept the traumatic events of her family past. Also, *Ararat* is the name of the place where Noah's ark rested, the symbol of a new beginning after tremendous loss. All the way to the last book, *Averno*, Glück moves from the troubled events of her childhood, to philosophising about God, surviving a difficult divorce, and finally to contemplating death. Throughout this journey, the poet demonstrates how poetry helps her to heal emotional wounds, and to redeem her life. The poet's last six books chart the stages of one's woman journey from childhood and all the existential and spiritual lessons learnt along the way until the poet approaches the end of her life--a personal and ambitiously overarching plot about an individual desire for self-discovery and emotional recovery. By the end of this journey, the poet eventually learns how to enjoy an existence without recourse to absolute notions of God, beauty or life's intrinsic meaningfulness. It is a poetic narrative that also serves as a symbolic mirror for the reader's own parallel, personal experiences, so trust and empathy are forged between the poet and the reader, who may apply the poet's hard-earned lessons to their own lives.

Mainstream poetry that deals with the private self has occasionally suffered a critical

beating in the last two decades. Harold Bloom has pointed to “the involuntary near solipsism that always marks a central poetic imagination in America.”<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Forché, a widely-read and influential political poet, popularised a form of poetry that dealt with social and historical injustices in an anthology that she edited, *Against Forgetting*<sup>2</sup>, which was praised by Nelson Mandela for “bear(ing) witness to brutality...to the evil we would prefer to forget.”<sup>3</sup> Forché herself warned against any celebration of personal poetry as a form of “myopia” (*American Poetry Review* 17). In an interview with *The Guardian*, another influential poet, Adrienne Rich, in preferring a historically-conscious and socially-engaged poetry, has insisted that “Poetry is not a healing lotion...there is no universal Poetry.”<sup>4</sup> I will argue that the idea of poetic healing is important to the poet and to the way her work should be read; Glück actually demonstrates that a form of healing *is* possible through her poetry, not just for herself (the self depicted as the main persona in her poems), but also for readers of her books who follow the narrative journey that holds their poems together. Glück uses the “mythical method” (a term coined by T. S. Eliot in his 1923 review of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*) in later collections, applying a Modernist and aesthetic strategy that juxtaposes the prosaic with the mythic. Although Modernist literature is known for its “art for art’s sake”<sup>5</sup> ideology, or its “aesthetic ideology of artistic purism, common to the literary Modernism of the early Eliot and his ilk” (Shapiro 116), Glück applies such strategies not just for purely aesthetic reasons, as they serve a larger purpose of discovering lessons about the broken self in order to heal emotional wounds. One major way in which Glück demonstrates the mythical method is through the tone of her poetic voice, a tone of “high assertion, assertion as from the Delphic tripod” (*Soul Says* 16), according to Helen Vendler, which distinguishes Glück’s poetry from the works of other lyric poets like Sexton or Plath. Such a detached and high-sounding voice facilitates the

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<sup>1</sup> Extracted from a blurb for Mark Strand on the book jacket of his 1992 collection, *Reasons for Moving, Darker & The Sargentville Notebook*.

<sup>2</sup> *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Accessed on 6 Jun 2008 from publisher’s website:  
<<http://wwnorton.com/catalog/backlist/030976.htm>>

<sup>4</sup> Rich, Adrienne. “Legislators of the World.” *The Guardian*. 18 Nov. 2006.  
<<http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,1950448,00.html>>

<sup>5</sup> A phrase coined in the nineteenth century by French philosopher Victor Cousin; the concept plays a key role in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

way the poet juxtaposes mythic references with personal stories in her poems, as it allows the poet to speak about the mythic and the private in a manner that aligns both worlds to a more even playing field: the mythic can be made to seem ordinary whilst the private is elevated to the mythic realm.

Critics of Glück's poetry have tended to focus on the voice of the poet and not on the narrative structures of the books. In the introduction to a book of essays by various critics, *On Louise Glück*, Joanne Feit Diehl has written that "Glück writes poems that bear witness to intimate occasions--subtle, psychological moments captured by the austerity of diction" (1). Glück's poetic persona is often "oracular," as described by Daniel McGuinness, and is reminiscent of the haunting way "a god speaks through a chanter and the chanting rids the singer of personality" ( *Holding Patterns*  55). The oracular tone allows for the poet to make universal individual and idiosyncratic ideas and concerns that are important to the poet; the departure of the poet's personality from the poem encourages the reader to bring in her or his own thoughts and experiences and align them with those expressed in the poetry. Stories in Glück's poems are often transformed into "cryptic narratives (that) invite our participation: we must...fill out the story, substitute ourselves for the fictive personages...[and] decode the import, 'solve' the allegory" (*Part of Nature, Part of Us*  311). Vendler's point about "cryptic" and allegorical narratives suggests that the poems are held together by narrative structures. I will argue that these narrative structures are concerned with healing and self-discovery, narratives that open up a symbolic space for readers to not just "'solve'" the allegorical narrative of the poems for themselves, but also to relate intimately and empathically with such narratives, such that they too might draw their own subjective lessons from the poet's revelations about her own life.

Another poet, a few of whose books should be read as whole collections, is Robert Penn Warren. In writing about his later poetry collections, Randolph Paul Runyon has argued that each of Warren's books is a unified construction arranged to be read sequentially. He has written that "each poem in these collections...alludes to something in the poem before by repeating it--a word, quite often; a turn of phrase; an image; a situation " (*The Braided Dream*



6). Runyon was really arguing for a kind of integrated but plot-less narrative--what Earl Miner describes as a “sequential continuousness”, one that is “prior to plot in narrative” (*Poems in their Place* 39-40)--buried within Warren’s collections, manifested through transitional links and thematic echoes and progressions that hold the poems together in each book. Miner was referring to such collections as George Herbert’s *The Temple*, which are governed by principles of “progression, recurrence and varying relation between the units of a collection” (40). Although Glück’s last six books contain echoes and repetitions of ideas and images that might suggest that each collection demands to be read as a whole, their recurrence in fact serves, a larger, continual narrative that binds the poems in each book into a cohesive and revelatory whole. Throughout the six books, these dominant concerns undergo changes as the poet’s perspective evolves from one book to another in a sustained, individual search for meaning and beauty that extends throughout all the collections.

In contrast to her last six books, Glück’s previous collections have not exhibited overarching narratives that would cohere across all the poems. Her first five volumes--*Firstborn* (1968) , *The House on Marshland* (1975), *The Garden* (1976), *Descending Figure* (1980), *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985)--contain, in fact, only smaller narratives that last only for a few poems at a time. In *The Triumph of Achilles*, for example, the beginning of the biblical story about Moses--long before he sets his people free from Egypt--is re-imagined through the poem, “Day Without Night.” It consists of short scenes described in the poet’s usual, oracular tone; Moses is portrayed as a child who is asked by his step-father, the Pharaoh, to choose symbolically between a tray of rubies and a tray of burning embers (Moses chooses the embers, meaning that he has chosen the path of God and suffering). The last section (8) is both a depiction of a general scene and a concluding statement about the story’s implications:

The context  
of truth is darkness: it sweeps  
the deserts of Israel.

Are you taken in  
by lights, by illusions?

Here is your path to god,  
who has no name, whose hand  
is invisible: a trick  
of moonlight on the dark water.

This is an earlier example of a poetic search for spiritual meaning that Glück explores in a more sustained way in later collections. The scene in this poem is a night in Israel, the Promised Land, which the poet reduces to a place of deserts and a dark body of water. The possessive modifier “your” does not refer to Moses alone, but to readers too; readers are drawn into the poem to participate subjectively and intimately in its concerns with spirituality. Concepts of truth and religious vocation are connected here to darkness, pain and difficulty, instead of transcendental joy. The common association of light with divinity is subverted here when light is tied to “illusions.” The story of Moses’ self-discovery is transformed into a parable about the lifelong suffering entailed in abiding by the demands of an invisible God.

Glück’s poems are often powerfully concise. Unless the poem consists of many parts, none of her poems ever stretch beyond a page. It was only from her sixth collection--*Ararat* (1990)--onwards that Glück began to link together every poem in the book, including both individual poems *and* poetic sequences, using just single plotlines that extend throughout the entire book, holding the poems together as a coherent whole. In the chapters to follow, I will be analysing these later six poetry collections by Louise Glück--namely *Ararat* (1990), *The Wild Iris* (1992), *Meadowlands* (1996), *Vita Nova* (1999), *The Seven Ages* (2001), and *Averno* (2006). More than just collections of poems orbiting around a specific set of themes, Glück’s later books combine aspects of the lyric as well as the verse novel. In order to better understand and appreciate each poetry collection as a whole, readers should see the poems in the books as more than autonomous lyric works; they are poems held together by implicit plots about survival, a quest for meaning, and the dissolution or mending of human

relationships. Mythological and allegorical figures also begin to appear in the later books to clarify issues or mirror anxieties in the poet's life, as well as to serve as mirrors through which readers can envision their own lives. What is at stake in these lyric poems is the possibility of reconciliation or self-recovery after an encounter with loss and a questioning of existence. As these mythological figures appear, the poet also begins to use more references that evoke a present-day, socio-cultural reality (such as when she associates the mythic figure Persephone with "modern girls" and depicts her as a drug-taking, rape-victim in *Averno*, or when she inserts everyday, plainspoken dialogue in her poems). This form of reality resonates with an immediate sense of contemporaneity borrowed from the cultural currency of reality talk-shows. Such shows have, since the 1980s, according to Tara Jenkins, "demanded a belief in the authenticity of lived experience as a social truth" (*Hop on Pop* 129). In the talk-show's production of realism in which participants engage in "(p)opularised psychoanalytic notions of trauma, working-through and recovery are embedded in the presentation of these programmes" (Biressi and Nunn 111), which add to their impression of authenticity and legitimacy. The poet's evocation of this kind of accessible, present-day reality grounds the transcendental and mythical aspects of her poems in the affect of a deeper universality, allowing readers to better connect with the plight of these characters and to even share in the speaker's experience of catharsis and self-revelation.

The lyric mode allows these different voices in the poems to speak from a position *outside* of time. In the fourth essay in *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye describes the lyric as "pre-eminently the utterance that is overheard" (249); the lyric poet appears to be talking to herself/himself or to someone else. Frye elaborates on this aspect of being overheard when he writes that "(i)n the lyric, we turn away from our ordinary continuous experience in space or time, or rather from a verbal mimesis of it" (31). Something happens to time in the lyric that allows us to overhear the utterances of the speaker in the poem. Writing in the lyric mode, Glück is in fact turning away from a straightforward linearity of time by allowing readers to overhear figures from different time-frames, as if they were speaking in a timeless present. This aspect of poetry has been linked to the apostrophic nature of the lyric mode by literary

theorist Jonathan Culler, who wrote that “the lyric is characteristically the triumph of the apostrophic” (*The Pursuit of Signs* 165), meaning that in the lyric, the poet turns away from the reader to address someone else; an abstract persona or object of nature. Like Frye, Culler points to something extraordinary that is happening in the lyric poem, particularly in its capacity to step out of time. On one hand, Glück’s poems are apostrophic in the way they are addressed, as many lyric poems are, to a conceptual or fictional person, or one who is dead, and in the way the poems play with time. But apostrophic poems also evoke an atemporalised space where time collapses, such that the present and the future may exist meaningfully together without incongruity in a poem. In this atemporalised space, a poet like Glück can, for example, replay the past in the present and shape a new perspective on it, so that she might come to terms with a traumatic memory or glean new meaning from the past; by collapsing time in the poem, the poet relives a memory in the present with new relevance and lifelong lessons for her future.

If the conventional plots of novels consist of logical and temporal sequences of events, the poem’s atemporality adds an added dimension to development of the narrative. The apostrophic nature of her poems in fact lends a new dimension to their plot structures. An example of what I mean may be found in “Persephone The Wanderer” (*Averno* 76), the last poem in a collection that traces the plot about Persephone being carried away into the underworld. The poet refers to Persephone in the third person as if she were already dead to the world, but at the end the poem, she speaks unexpectedly in the first person, as if the poem has suddenly entered a future time frame when Persephone has just been brought back from Hades and is trying to remember her death (“I think I can remember / being dead”). As shown in this case, it is possible to conflate the present and the future within “the special temporality of apostrophic lyrics” (Culler 2001; 170) so that Persephone speaks as if *she has always been speaking* in a timeless present. However, although Glück’s poems play with temporality, this does not affect the plot that unifies the poems in each book. In *Averno* again, the account of Persephone’s being forced to live in the underworld and to confront her dual life form the basis of the main plot that runs through the entire collection, but the apostrophic nature of the

poems slows the plot down and freezes moments of it so that its main characters might address the reader from an atemporal moment out of time, where the usual demarcations of past, present and future no longer apply. In *Averno*, the tension between atemporality and the linearity of narrative suggests that Glück is playing with time in order to slow it down, to even stop it for a paradoxical moment in her poems, so that she might be able to make sense of time at an existential level; the poet makes Persephone speak outside of time so as to voice her own concerns about mortality—the ephemerality of life and its apparent lack of divine direction. Glück manipulates temporality in order to answer private and difficult questions about the meaning of life’s brevity; it is perhaps a desperate gesture in the poems towards a timeless, transcendental truth that might still, in the end, remain absolutely and poignantly out of reach.

To clarify “plot,” I have turned to The Oxford English Dictionary, which makes a distinction between narrative and plot, although I would like to show that plot is, in fact, a logic of narrative. According to the Dictionary, narrative is “an account of a series of events, facts, etc., given in order and with the establishing of connections between them” and plot refers to the “the main events in a play, novel etc.”<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Culler has also broken down the narrative into aspects of story and discourse: “a sequence of actions or events” versus “the discursive presentation or narration of events” (*The Pursuit of Signs* 189). Culler was following the Russian Formalists, who defined narratives as constituting both the *fabula* and the *sjuzet*, the former defined as the sequence of events referred to in the narrative and the latter as the framework to which the diegetic content of the story is subjected. For example, Glück’s collection, *Meadowlands*, the story or *fabula* is a familiar one, as it draws from the last part of the famous story of Odysseus, in which Odysseus returns home to family in Ithaca and reunites with his wife. But Glück presents the story mainly through the perspectives of other characters other than Odysseus, through poetic monologues that form the *sjuzet* of the narrative, providing alternative and emotionally critical perspectives on the famous hero’s welcome. Any discussion of plot must surely combine both aspects of *fabula* and *sjuzet*.

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<sup>6</sup> Accessed on 6 Jun 2008 from Oxford English Dictionary site: <<http://www.oed.com>>

Peter Brooks defines plot most productively as a logic of narrative that cuts across the *fabula/sjuzet* distinction. Effective plots encourage a desire or a sense of anticipation in the reader to learn what comes next when following the trajectory of a plot. Plots are “intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward-moving,” as well as “the dynamic shaping force of the narrative discourse” (12-13). In *Vita Nova*, for example, there is a key plot running through the poems about a poet’s artistic and spiritual journey after a divorce. Instead of an accompanying cast of ordinary characters (such as family members or friends) to help the poet recover her sense of self in the aftermath of separation, the poet dreams up mythological figures with whom she may play out her internal arguments about the nature of love and desire. What is at stake in all of Glück’s plotlines is a final sense of psychological recovery and happiness, a goal that she moves towards through surrealistic dialogue (with even her dog on one occasion), so as to stimulate a search for more fulfilling ways of looking at her past and the ways it has shaped her present. The poems in *Vita Nova* present scenes from the past, internal monologues and imagined conversations, during which the poet learns one life-lesson after another before she moves on in the end to Cambridge, the site of a newfound future without regret or remorse, a future “ending in flowers” (14), following a period in which her world had been shattered.

Glück’s collections contain all the usual ingredients of a dramatic plot. For Aristotle, causality was the essence of plot and any plot was only coherent if it had a “beginning, middle, and end.”<sup>7</sup> German dramatist Gustav Freytag has enumerated key aspects of plot, using Shakespeare’s plays as examples, such as the climax (the point of greatest emotional intensity) or catastrophe (the concluding action in a play and normally reserved for tragedies), which are also terms that critics and writers have used to conceive of plot. There is also conflict, which may take place between different characters or occur internally in the mind of a single protagonist. Other known components of plot include elements such as the crisis (a crucial turning point) and the denouement (a form of resolution and explanation). In Glück’s

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Hogan, Patrick Colm. “Classical Greece, the Arab World, and South Asia.” *Philosophical Approaches to the Study of Literature*. Florida: University Press of Florida, 2000. 21.

books, a personal crisis is usually established and the plot of her collections consists of the poet working through the emotional and philosophical implications of this crisis.

No critic thus far has even described Glück's collections as verse novels, but I will argue that it is the presence of plot in Glück's book-length poem sequences that allows her collections to be read like verse novels. Glück's poems mark out a plotted trajectory that evinces these narrative aspects of crisis, conflict and resolution. The poet also plays with temporality in the poems, which aims to slow down the plot, or to arrest it altogether in moments that yield new revelations for concerns that are central to the plot and to the poet. If what is at stake in a piece of detective fiction is the identity of the murderer (who is, for a large portion of the fiction's plot, unknown), what is at stake in the plots of Glück's collections is an eventual epiphany that is earned by their varied speakers, whose lives or experiences have been traced out through the book.

The verse novel is not a widely popular form. When poet Michael Symmons Roberts listed in the *Guardian Unlimited* his top ten verse novels of all time, he also commented upon how the verse novel is "a publisher's nightmare: too long and prosaic for poetry fans, but too concerned with its own form and music for readers to dip into on the train. The verse novel (like the rock opera or the sound sculpture) is the awkward child of successful parents, destined to disappoint both of them."<sup>8</sup> Aside from being caught up in its poetry, the organisation of the verse novel consists of short sections, commonly with changing perspectives and scenes. As a novel, it is also different from the epic poem, as the latter is, in Bakhtin's definition, a completed and antiquated genre incapable of criticising itself; the novel is continually in development and is always "uncompleted" ("Epic and Novel" 3). Dino Felluga has written that the verse novel is difficult to define and "it was not until the 1850s and 1860s that the 'verse novel' really came into its own as a distinct hybrid between two arch-generic forms that had, until this point, been considered as irreconcilable and even antagonistic" (172). Bakhtin has also made a general point about poems for when they

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<sup>8</sup> Accessed on 6 Jun 2008: "Michael Symmons Roberts: Top 10 Verse Novels". *Guardian Unlimited*. Mar. 2006. <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/top10s/top10/0,,1735282,00.html>>

become novelised: “They become...dialogised, permeated with laughter, irony, humour, elements of self-parody and finally...the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)” (*Dialogic* 6-7). The dialogic work enters a continual dialogue with other works of literature and other authors to create a polyphony of individual voices and contexts, so as to oppose “forces that serve to unify and centralise the verbal-ideological world” (Bakhtin 270). Glück’s books work like verse novels, as they are dialogical in the way they engage with past narratives (so as to parody them, or to gain new insights into them) or involve multiple speakers that react to each other meaningfully across different places and times. How the poet conveys this kind of dialogue or polyphony in the books is often funny and ironic, but also argumentative and philosophical. Glück’s poetic sequences also contain a sense of novelistic openendedness by allowing the reader--situated in her or his own subjective and unique, ever-shifting, contemporary reality---to relate to the poems by deciphering subjective, non-absolute meanings and conclusions for themselves.

Patrick Murphy has put forward the idea that, contrary to Bakhtin’s emphasis on dialogicity in the novel form, this dialogicity can actually be applied to contemporary poetic forms, just as much as it does to prose, in that “the advancement of the poetic fiction’s plot often occurs through dramatic action--dialogue, soliloquies, and character behaviour--rather than through traditional narrative discourse” (61). Before, in traditional epic poetry, the author would assume “a complete single-personed hegemony” (Bakhtin 297) or a single consciousness with the reader, in terms of a shared identity or set of cultural values, whereas, as Murphy suggests, “The author of the modern American long poem...tends to be aware of the readers as others and must anticipate their possible responses to the uttered poem” (59). Murphy stresses that “the modern poem becomes a reinforcer of multiple viewpoints, none of which gain unassailed hegemony or absolute authority” (61), pointing out that aside from simply having an underlying plot, “the modern verse novel has...a series of speech events that advance and/or comment on that plot’s characters, actions, and themes” (66). There is already



a growing tradition of verse novels being published in the last decade which contain such speech events, such as works by Anne Carson and Amos Oz, although such “novels” might not be extremely popular or even well known. Speech events by both a solo lyric voice and a polyphony of voices occur in Glück’s poems as well. An example of the solitary speaker can also be found in Carson’s verse novel, *The Beauty of the Husband* (2002)<sup>9</sup>, while an example of polyphony can be found in *The Same Sea* (2001) by Oz.

The plot of Oz’s verse novel is made up of sections that function as chapters, introducing scenes and various characters who find their reasons for living on after one of them dies of cancer. The plot of Carson’s verse novel is about the breakdown of a love affair as seen through the eyes of an emotionally tortured and ambivalent wife. However, there are many ways in which these verse novels work against novelistic conventions of temporal linearity. In *The Same Sea*, the author inserts himself into a conversation with the polyphonic characters in his novel. The characters talk back to him in their various voices, offering the author advice on how to live meaningfully. In doing this, these characters step out of their context in time as framed by the novel’s plot, in order to talk to the author, as if in a timeless present. After these protagonists of *The Same Sea* stop talking to the author, they return to a central, temporal plotline about self-recovery and move on with their individual lives, as though the atemporal moment never took place. It is clear that Glück’s poetry is not *sui generis* in the way she plays with time in her narratives and gives free reign to disparate voices in the poems.

Carson’s novel deliberately makes leaps between past and present from one poem to the next without establishing a clear order of events. By the end of the book, the author even casts doubt on the identity of the narrator, suggesting that perhaps it is the husband, and not the wife, who has been narrating the troubled love story the whole time. Although it is not

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<sup>9</sup> Carson in fact does not identify her own work as a verse novel; on the front cover of her book, Carson writes that *The Beauty of the Husband* is in fact “a fictional essay in 29 tangos,” a tongue-in-cheek take on the conventions of genre description. Although both Patrick Murphy and Dino Felluga use Bakhtin’s dialogic openendedness to describe the verse novel, Murphy’s notion of a contemporary novelisation of poetry is liberating because it potentially allows us to categorise works like Carson’s beyond older designations of “epic,” “romance,” and even “novel,” which can limit both writers and readers. The verse novel remains a genre lacking final rules or conventions.

unusual to find unreliable narrators in novels, Carson's plot differs most from the plots of conventional novels, as well as Glück's plots, when Carson's main protagonist speaks in fragmented and ambiguously situated moments of time, which cannot be easily relegated to a past, present or future. But the use of an unreliable narrator does go against the "single-personed hegemony" (Bakhtin 297) typical of traditional epic poetry, in which the poet usually assumes an unambiguous identity for the reader. Similarly, Glück's narrators are often unreliable as well, although this unreliability encourages readers to relate with the narrator's vulnerable subjectivity. Just like Carson's and Oz's books, Glück's collections are held together by plotted narratives.

Oz and Carson, whose books are widely acknowledged to be verse novels, simultaneously defy the conventional aspects of novelistic structures by destabilising notions of narrative time and the identities of their narrators. But as verse novels, their plots are, arguably, still clear. In Oz's *The Same Sea*, for example, after several conflicts or life-changing events, the surviving members of the family in the novel find their individual peace through newfound love or religious epiphany. In the case of Glück's collections, although there are clear plots connecting all the poems in each, the poems blur distinctions in time, problematising any claim that she is simply writing verse novels with straightforward narratives; it might be more accurate to describe them as avant-garde, Modernist novels because of the tension between a linearity of plot and the poems' atemporality. In Glück's lyric mode, time appears to stop or collapse. Although this happens in conventional novels too, as when novels present situations in which the plot-time appears to slow down or pause so that readers may linger on a scene in the narrative, Glück's readers are presented with a protagonist--usually the speaker of the poems--whose struggles with her own identity and difficult negotiations with her past are framed and amplified by the lyrical, atemporal characteristics of the poetic text.

This play at temporality, enabled by the apostrophic nature of the lyric mode, and combined with the poet's detached, lofty tone, render the interior worlds of her characters in a way that encourages readers to enter an intimately subjective relationship with them--we as

readers are encouraged by the poems to see ourselves *as* the characters in the book. David Baker in his essay, “I’m Nobody: Lyric Poetry and the Problem of People,” has written that “lyric poetry is never merely about a self but is always a social performance,” in that “the more the self is identified... the more connective and sympathetic is its relationship to others. Interiority is--the ultimate paradox--one of our most conjoining gestures” (*Virginia Quarterly Review* 203). Readers of Glück are not only able to unravel the events and characterisations in the poems in the way we would commonly relate to these aspects of a novel’s conventional prose narrative, but her poems also enable readers to take on the lessons or the revelations of the different personae in a far more subjective, personal, or conjoining way.

In the following chapters, I will analyse how Glück’s books engage the reader in such an intimate and subjective way through a sustained negotiation between aspects of the lyric and the verse novel. Glück has written that each of her books began in a “conscious diagnostic act, a swearing off” (*Proofs and Theories* 17) of the work preceding it, suggesting an ongoing, self-renewing argument and exploration of concerns that is developed from book to book. In my next chapter, I will focus on *Ararat* (1990). Told through a series of lyric poems that express the author’s perspectives on her family, the book traces the poet’s “voyage amid destruction” (Breslin 110) in the aftermath of her sister’s and father’s deaths. Living in the shadow of these deaths, the poet forces herself to look back on her childhood in order to understand herself in the present. Scenes play out in the poems: the day of her father’s funeral, an afternoon when she watched her father sleeping on the couch, or a card game played by the women in the family. What unfolds through the commentary in the poems and the scenes evoked is the journey a poet undertakes to grapple with her psychological wounds, manifested in her state of emotional numbness and detachment, so that she may better love her present life and her new family. The lyric poems in *Ararat* work like frozen moments in time, and the poet herself ironically suggests the reasons why the story of her family drama must be told this way when she writes in “Novel”: “No one could write a novel about this family: / too many similar characters. / Besides, they’re all women; / there was only one hero,” the hero being the father who has died. In the same poem, the poet goes on to tell us,

“there’s no plot without a hero. / In this house, when you say *plot*, what you mean is *love story*” (18). But the poetic speaker becomes the true hero of *Ararat* as she forges her own plot through her memories, one of emotional survival and redemption. Her own plot becomes an alternative form of novelisation that is contrary to the original, male-centred and oppressive narrative structure previously imposed by the poet’s family.

The story of her family would be too dull as a novel as it is preoccupied with the same kind of women who were too busy languishing in self-pity to love each other meaningfully. All the women in the poet’s life lived for a romantic ideal (in which men were the heroes and women loved them unconditionally) and without a central man in their lives, they lost their sense of purpose. But the poet constructs a different plot in linking up moments of the past, one not about an idealistic love story, or the lack thereof, but one of self-recovery and reconciliation with women from the past. This choice to write about building a more sensitive and reflective sense of individual selfhood and bonding amongst women suggests a possible difference in male-female perspectives in language, in that a lyric sense of solitary inwardness and negotiation with memory is preferred by a female poet like Glück’s over what Susan Leonardi has described as a male-oriented literary tradition that is inclined towards asserting authority and making hierarchical assumptions. Leonardi was analysing the gendered sentence in terms of its language components in relation to Virginia Woolf’s writing; she writes that Woolf wanted to reject the male sentence, which she defines as “the hierarchical sentence of the literary tradition [Woolf] inherited, a sentence which, with its high degree of subordination, makes so clear the judgement about what is more important and what is less” (Leonardi 1986; 151).

Glück, in *Ararat*, avoids writing with this “high degree of subordination,” choosing reflection and self-doubt instead of a patriarchal asserting of authority over events in the past, when she examines her own feelings and ideas in the poems about the traumatic events of her family upbringing. By doing so, the poet hopes to re-enter the present with a renewed hope and sense of forgiveness for the family who had affected her negatively for a long time. *Ararat* concludes with a scene in which the poet sits by the road with a friend to talk about

God. Here the poet finally comes to terms with her “aversion to reality” (*Ararat* 66) caused by her troubled childhood. In the end, there is a greater acceptance of uncertainties in life and a generous willingness to become open to spiritual fulfilment, when before the poet was hard-hearted and cynical from being unable to move on from her difficult family past.

From meditating on the past and a troubled family life, the poet turns eventually to God; having forgiven her deceased parents for their inability to love her, the poet turns this time to a divine parent to chastise Him for neglecting to provide sufficient beauty and purposefulness in the world. From the last poem of *Ararat*, where Glück meditated briefly on the subject of God, the poet leads on to *The Wild Iris* (1992), the next collection of poems in which an argument is played out through the poems between God and his creation about the significance of existence. There are multiple speakers in this collection and they include the Creator, the poet and the flowers in the poet’s garden; the flowers take on ethereal, human-like voices in addressing both the gardener/poet and God. Although all the different poetic personae seem to speak in an endless present, a plot reveals itself in the way readers realise through the poetry that although all the voices ultimately belong in the mind of the poet, God too had been present among these voices, providing revelatory answers to the poet’s existential questions. The central plot of *The Wild Iris*, as described by Linda Gregerson, is about how “(t)he poet plants herself in a garden and dares the Creator to join her” (28). The poet speaks through the personified voices of her flowers in order to confront God about the meaning of her existence. God responds through the poet’s imagination through poems that portray the Creator as cold and distant. But gradually, the poet discovers a mysterious ambiguity in her ventriloquising arguments, as she begins to understand that the Creator--a strict, cold and demanding Father--might in fact be answering her after all through each of her own imagined voices. The poems in this book become open-ended in the way the different voices in the poems seem to mimic our own universal questions about God and what it means for us to exist meaningfully, when we are not always able to feel or recognise the Creator’s presence in our lives.

In *The Wild Iris*, all the philosophical and existential questioning is eventually tied back to the mind of the poet, who is trying to find meaning in the world and justification for her own vocation as an artist, both in the garden and on the page. Also, in this second volume, the poet slowly introduces a part of her difficult marriage to a male character, even in the midst of questioning the Creator and speaking through her flowers. From reclaiming childhood memories to justifying the importance of the creative process for herself, the poet now turns her creative eye to the breakdown of her marriage. It is a stage in the poet's life that is dealt with over two books. Although the poet continues here to seek new meaning in events that have had a negative impact on her life, so as to redeem them through her poetic vision, Glück has become more poetically ambitious now by incorporating Greek myths in her poems, this time as part of her continual desire to make renewed sense of her troubled life.

*Meadowlands* (1996), the book published after *The Wild Iris* that I will analyse in the next chapter--together with *Vita Nova* (1999)--involves an already famous narrative--Homer's *Odyssey*. Parts of this narrative provide sub-plots for Glück's book, which is about how Penelope and Telemachus, the wife and son of Odysseus respectively, react when Odysseus leaves and how they learn to live with his absence. We also get to hear the sorceress, Circe, lament when Odysseus leaves her and goes back home to his family in Ithaca. Scenes featuring these mythological figures accumulate to reveal the ambivalent truths about Odysseus' true nature and about the tragic fallibility of intimate relationships. These sub-plots are contrasted with the book's main plot about a relationship that breaks down beyond repair. Verbal wars between husband and wife play out unreservedly on the page *sans* the lyric poet's own meta-commentary; this emphasises the intractability of their differences and inability to compromise. Whether through these dramatised conversations or the lone poet's often accusatory addresses to her ex-husband, standing in a park looking at swans or sitting with her ex-husband in her backyard, the poet searches for ways to survive the end of love, a search that finds its echoes in the story threads of Penelope, Telemachus and Circe. This "mythical method" (Eliot 177) forms juxtapositions between the contemporary world and an

ancient world that would “make the modern world possible for art.”<sup>10</sup> The poet speaks through these characters in order to feel affirmed in her doubts or to gain new insights into her own un-mythical life.

*Vita Nova* (1999) moves on from the previous collection as the poet centres now on how she might recover from her emotional divorce. This process of survival and healing is enacted through the creative process of speaking to and through imagined, allegorical figures, so as to find the courage and strength to embrace the future and carry on with her life. As she moves into the next poetry collection, the poet enters another stage in her life where her mortality has begun to take on a heightened significance, given the onset of old age. Glück’s last two books, *The Seven Ages* (2001) and *Averno* (2006), also feature a shift from just speaking through a few Greek mythological characters to speaking through unidentified, allegorical figures. The poet has become more confidently able to merge an individual account of personal discovery into a broader, ahistorical, and atemporal narrative which links what is private to what is universal. There is a move in the collections in general from a concrete and personal kind of poetic account to a more allegorical and transcendental form of representation.

*The Seven Ages* has as its implicit plot the allegorical account of a spirit—a “winged obsessive” (*The Seven Ages* 23)—who demands to be human, and whose wish is granted (by no specified source). The spirit could be the poet’s own imagined soul, but it could also stand for a common human spirit, a pre-physical being with a consciousness of its own as it enters life for the first time. This spirit only realises, through the fact of living, that both the mortal and the spiritual world are alike in that there is “no peace” (68) to be found in either. This spiritual protagonist learns that any kind of transcendence is untenable, as to be conscious at all (to enjoy this transcendence) is to already be mired in doubt and uncertainty. There is a constant drive in the plots of Glück’s collections to discover a spiritual reality which, paradoxically, is always certain to disappoint. In *Seven Ages*, the now aged poet looks back

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted from Marc Manganaro’s “Joyce and His Critics.” *Culture, 1922: The Emergence of a Concept*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002. 109.

on her childhood, particularly memories concerning her sister, and also turns her lyric gaze to nature, in order to confront her mortality, “given the closeness of death” (67). The journey of the spirit ends in the same poem where the poet herself accepts and treasures “the ordinary... joy and sorrow of human existence” (67) and in the last poem, it is the spirit that concludes the plot by returning nostalgically back to its beginning; the spirit recalls what it was like when it saw the earth for the first time--the moment it hesitated before it fell into a mortal existence.

*Averno* (2006)--Glück’s most recent book--reveals similar concerns about mortality. In *Averno*, however, the emphasis shifts from the meaningfulness of existence to a renewed perspective on death. Although the publisher’s editorial blurb about the book claims that *Averno* has “no plot,”<sup>11</sup> I will argue that there is a plot as evinced by the poems: Persephone is raped by Hades and forced to live in two worlds at different times of the year, one on earth and one in Hades’ underworld, and she struggles to live with her situation. The rape is allegorical in that its violence suggests--rather melodramatically--a similar sense of trauma that we endure when we realise we too are all forced to endure our own limited mortality. Persephone’s story is echoed in other, less dramatic ways within the poet’s own recorded memories, as in one about being an insomniac girl who lives with her parents in a mountain valley where--like Persephone--the poet discovered “a peace of a kind / (she) never knew again” (29). Instead of balancing a saddened and disillusioned view of her existence with a hard-earned measure of optimism and courage, which she achieves in *The Seven Ages*, the poet here uses a mythic plot as a springboard for a clear-eyed dissection of the nature of death and Persephone’s dual existence, but Glück also moves away from speaking directly about or through the characters of Persephone and Hades to create an allegorical figure which does not necessarily correspond to any of these protagonists as a readily recognisable character in her plot; instead, when the poet speaks through this anonymous figure, its form of representation

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<sup>11</sup> The editorial blurb can be found on the publisher’s site (accessed on 6 Jun 2008): <http://www.holtzbrinckpublishers.com/FSG/search/SearchBookDisplay.asp?BookKey=2202070>



becomes ambiguous enough for this figure to be read as a symbol for a general, human perspective on the inescapable proximity of death and a future confrontation with the afterlife.

From *Ararat* to this latest collection, each volume has been put together by a plot which might not always be immediately obvious. Nicholas Christopher in *The New York Times* has written that *Averno* is “a unified collection...one in which each part never fails to speak for the whole.” More than just a unified collection, *Averno* is held together by the retold story of Persephone, as well as related narrative threads about allegorical figures which express both the poet’s own private anxieties as well as universal concerns. No critic or writer to date has ever described Glück’s books as verse novels. Many of her poems from these volumes have been published individually in various journals, magazines and publications. However, there can be more to the poems as a collection than simply a series of autonomous lyrics. In *The Wild Iris*, for example, the poems are really “not separable,” according to Gregerson again, who writes that “the book is a single meditation that far exceeds its individual parts” (29). In the same way, Glück’s later six collections work like verse novels in evincing a discernible plot that binds the poems together.

I hope that more of Glück’s readers will appreciate how her poems fit together in her later six collections and how these collections work as a continuous narrative about the poet’s overarching quest for certainty and meaning, beginning first from refiguring childhood reminiscences in *Ararat* to contemplating the afterlife in *Averno*. Even though the poet has finally arrived near the end of her life, the poet is not complacent in her latest collection, and remains dissatisfied with the answers that she has found throughout this sustained, autobiographical account of existential questioning and continual self-doubt through her books. Readers would have a deeper understanding of Glück’s poetry if they recognised the full extent of this poet’s uncompromising, individual journey of constant re-examination and reflection on the value of a life; a journey that actually extends across six volumes of poetry, playing out in stages with increasing ambition and analogical scope from one collection to another; a journey that finds its resonances in the borrowed lives of famous, mythical characters, as well as in self-constructed, allegorical figures. It is both a private and

allegorical journey that is not without its hard-earned epiphanies and moments of profound beauty, which readers following the narrative arc of the collections may relate to; both poet and reader are able to exist together in the same “conjoining” (Baker 203) symbolic space in the poems such that the reader may arrive at similar conclusions as the poet about the ability to heal and move on from past grievances and to discover the meaning and beauty of existence.

## Chapter 2: A Love of Endings

*Ararat* (1990) is the first of Glück's books to contain a plot. In this chapter, I will be taking a look at selected poems in the collection to show how this plot is presented, its central psychological crisis is portrayed, and how the poet struggles to resolve the crisis by turning to memory. In *Ararat*, the poet has started an overarching plot about emotional recovery and self-renewal by looking to her distant childhood past. Unlike in Glück's later collections, the poet does not use multiple voices to amplify private, psychological concerns in *Ararat*. There are no mythological and allegorical personae here, only the introspective confessional voice of the poet. Paul Breslin has written that Glück's *Ararat* is one of the "most unabashedly autobiographical of her books" (110). Told in a sequence of lyric utterances, the apostrophic mode gives each poem a sense of being like a moment slowed down almost to a still. As one poem leads to the next, the book's main plot becomes decipherable, a plot that is "goal-oriented and forward-moving" (Brooks 12-13). The plot of *Ararat*'s introspective, as well as retrospective, journey is reminiscent of the groundbreaking 1962 black-and-white, short film, *La Jetée*, by Chris Marker, a story about time-travel told entirely through still photos and a sole narrator's voice--akin to Glück's own poetic voice--which provides insight into what is seen in each stilled moment in time. The book shows the account of an inner life shaped by family relationships, an introspective journey in which the poet reconciles with the past and reaches new conclusions about her family and herself.

Glück's poetry here brings to mind the work of Anne Sexton, a poet well-known for her confessional poetry who once confessed in an interview, "I am an actress in my own autobiographical play" (*No Evil Star* 109). Glück is also performing in her own autobiographical play; Mount Ararat is the name of the cemetery where her sister was buried and the poems are born out of distilled memories of a past marked by death. But more than just a biographical account of a past family life, Glück is in fact--in *Ararat* but more so in the books that follow--writing poetic autobiography, a genre defined by William Spengemann as one which transforms the reader, such that "the reader comes to share the autobiographer's

achieved state of being and view of the world” (“Poetic Autobiography” 113). In spite of the consistently intense and personal introspection in *Ararat*, the poems in this book manage to allow for readers’ participation in this way; as the poet arrives at revelations about her own past, readers can also share and relate to these revelations.

*Ararat* starts with “*Parados*,” a poem in which the poet introduces herself as the teller of her own autobiographical drama. Here the poet also reveals the bare bones of her internal conflict, one which she painfully hopes to resolve: “Long ago, I was wounded. / I learned to exist, in reaction, / out of touch / with the world...” (15). In later poems, the reader gets to see the origins of this wound and her unshakeable sense of detachment from the world. But first in “*Parados*,” Glück romanticises her detachment, her denial of her own emotional damage, by telling herself, as a desperate justification, that as a poet, she has been “born to a vocation: / to bear witness / to the great mysteries...birth and death.” But this turns out to be an illusion (the poet actually learns this over the course of the book) when the speaker later discovers that birth and death are really “proofs, not / mysteries” (15), proofs of the preciousness of her mortality, and that without them, no event in life would seem significant.

The poems that follow reveal the problematic nature of the relationships that have traumatised the poet into a state of emotional detachment. The book’s second poem, “*Fantasy*,” evokes “the cemetery...the sickroom and the hospital” (16), the final places associated with the poet’s father. In the poem’s apostrophic mode, the poet also brings into an arrested, poetic frame the image of her mother: “The widow sits on the couch, very stately, / so people line up to approach her, / sometimes take her hand, sometimes embrace her. / She finds something to say to everybody, / thanks them, / thanks them for coming” (16). The image of the mother becomes a universal image of grieving. The repetition of “sometimes” and “thanks them” seem to slow the moment down, emphasising the sameness of the mother’s predicament; the moment feels as if it is going on forever and the widow really cannot wait for the funeral to end. This poem actually starts with the line “I’ll tell you something: every day / people are dying” (16). Already, before the image of the accommodating widow occurs, the poet has invited the reader to relate to the poem in universalising the event of her father’s

death, even as this rhetorical gesture might not end up comforting the poet alone, but the reader who has endured loss too.

In the poem a more distant past is hinted at, one further back than the memory of the poet's mother going through the rituals of mourning, when the poet writes, "it's her only hope, / the wish to move backward. And just a little, / not so far as the marriage, the first kiss" (17). Sitting in her chair, welcoming visitors, the widow tries to remember the past, but she chooses to only recall recent events, such as the moments in the cemetery or the sickroom; remembering too much can also be dangerous, as the mother dare not get nostalgic enough to recall that first kiss from her husband. Such a distant recollection might open the flood gates of memory completely and crush her with the full weight of all that the widow has lost.

The apostrophic effect of the poem is just like the mental replaying of a happier--and carefully chosen--memory in the mind so that for a moment, one is living gladly in the recent past, oblivious to the devastating present, which eventually catches up with everyone. But these attempts to suspend time are ultimately fragile. I want to suggest that "Fantasy" points to a possible, analogous link between the attempt at staving off despair by holding on to an ideal memory, and an apostrophic freezing or slowing down of time within a poem. The tragedy is that we cannot stop time. Even if we live in a past, it is not for long; and even as we remember, we cannot afford to remember everything, for the full weight of the past could destroy our minds and prevent us from living in the present. Holding still these events in the apostrophic moments of her poems is part of the poet's overarching purpose to enact a process of psychological healing, as slowing the past down in this way helps the poet to revision her old perspective on her own memories.

As the book progresses, the poems reveal that dwelling on a fixed and hurtful perspective on the past--its losses and its emotional injuries--is what causes the long-term wounds of detachment and the absence of love in the poet's family. What becomes more heroic is the poet's willingness to excavate the past so as to change her present state of mind, so as to live more happily in the future. But before this can happen, the poet uses memories of moments in the past that have made their damaging impact upon her soul. In "A Novel," for

example, Glück writes about how the women in her family have always centred their lives around the only man in the family--her father, the “hero” (18) of her family’s story. After he died, the women became mere “echoes” (18), characters in a plot that goes anywhere: “there’s no action, no development of character” (18). Here the poet appears to signal two kinds of plot--the plot of a conventional novel about marriage and the plot of the poet’s self-development as it is evinced through the poems. Glück refers to such novels by Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë that Joseph Boone has described as demonstrating “the recurring obsession with the nature of romantic relationship and its possible outcomes” (5). Such novels tended to support--explicitly or implicitly--a “restrictive sexual-marital ideology” (Boone 10) which cemented the notion that a woman’s happiness was predicated on the presence of men, or on entering a happy marriage, a union that tended to empower men and not women. Glück points out in “A Novel” that the women in her family are dependent on men for their happiness, and since the man of the house is gone, no such novels as those by Austen or Brontë can be written about them. The poet reveals how with “(e)ach heart pierced through with a sword” (19), the women keep busy, disappearing into housework, leading static lives while mourning the past. The only “development” in the women of this family happens in the poet’s mind as she attempts to move on from the loss of the father, a “development” that is also an inward journey into the self that the poet has chosen to explore through lyric verse instead of the novel form; the novel is perhaps associated too readily for the poet with conventional thinking about the dependency of women on men.

In the next poem, “Lover of Flowers,” the poet tells us what love has meant to the women in her once patriarchal family. She observes of her sister, “She was my father’s daughter: / the face of love, to her, / is the face turning away” (22). It is ambiguous whether love--in the eyes of her sister--meant that it would disappear upon death, or whether the father was always never emotionally present for his family from the start. In any case, the women in Glück’s family continued to hunger for his love. The emotional absence of the father or husband, followed by his physical absence, is a fact experienced by most of the women in the family. This is hinted at in the poem “Widows”, where the mother and aunts play a card game

in which “the one who has nothing wins” (24). Such a victory is symbolic of how the women in the family have always demonstrated their stoicism to each other in the face of constant loss. The poet hints here that the aunt has also lost a child when she writes, “My aunt’s been at it longer; maybe that’s why she’s playing better” (24), resulting in a harsh, mutual coldness, which the poet terms a form of “respect” (24). In “Confession”, the poet writes about how “all happiness / attracts the Fates’ anger” (25) and she has learnt since childhood to be careful of her dreams, as dreams could be taken from her, in the same way that her father and her feelings of being loved had been taken from her. By now through these scenes of her family, the poet has introduced us to the women in her life as cold and deliberately indifferent to each other after having to deal with death, or the loss of the men in their lives.

In “Appearances” the poet finally reveals to the reader how this coldness has impacted on her sister and her as children; in reaction to the coldness of their elders, the children end up fighting to be loved. A rift has formed between the sisters, as represented symbolically by their separate portraits on the wall, which nonetheless face each other in their mother’s eyes. The painter has--in a bizarre and misguided attempt to create a sense of visual cheeriness--hung cherries over their ears in the pictures. This image contrasts comically with the poet’s poetic description of how she is attempting to seem immovable and lifeless to her mother, so as to please and “distract her from the child that died” (32), for “(a)nyone can love a dead child, love an absence” (32). The death of the first sister as an infant keeps the mother from loving her surviving children wholeheartedly. To the artist, the poet as a child seems “so controlled, so withdrawn” (32), because the poet is really trying to replace the dead child for her mother in the most literal way--by being cold and detached. Also, the reader is shown the origin of the rift between the sisters caused by their competition for a mother’s love: “We were like the portraits, always together: you had to shut out one child to see the other” (33). In fact, they are also competing with the dead sister, whose hold on the mother is permanent and unshakeable. The poet has always felt that the mother was only capable of loving one child at a time. But even when the mother expressed her concern, it was manifested in a detached and unfeeling way. As such, the mother was never able to love them properly and the daughters

would take turns to be completely alienated or suffocated (and still alienated) by their possessive mother's attention, which was the only way she knew to love--not with warmth, but with cold and calculated attention.

With the same calculated attention, the poet embarks on a poetic self-reflection (with the imagined reader's help) in "The Untrustworthy Speaker", a sudden address to the reader that reveals the poet's self-doubt in her ability to narrate her story, a problem the poet hopes to eventually solve via the narrative arc of the book in treating the psychological wound at the core of her untrustworthiness. With a similar kind of austerity (we are made aware by now from whom the poet inherited this coldness and pained sense of detachment), she writes, "when a living thing is hurt like that...all function is altered. // That's why I'm not to be trusted. / Because a wound to the heart / is also a wound to the mind" (35). The poet here is what Wayne C. Booth would have termed an unreliable narrator, one who does not possess the "artificial authority" (Booth 4) of objective omniscience over her or his narrative. After revealing to the reader so much about the women in her family through scenes and reflections in the poems preceding this one, the poet here has done a sudden *volte-face* to show us that her account so far cannot be trusted: the poet is wounded, hence she is prejudiced and even irrational in the telling of her own story. But it is also a strategic, self-reflexive move, because the reader ends up trusting the poet more for being honest about her own limited subjectivity.

Interestingly enough, although Bakhtin has emphasised that traditional poetry tends to possess a "single-personed hegemony" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 297) over the meanings generated in the poem, this poem by Glück goes against any sense of hegemony when we are instructed by the poem not to trust the poet. Although the poet has shown the reader why she can never write as the detached and calculated observer she has been trying to be, this self-knowledge can actually make readers believe in her even more, and when the poet writes that how all living things, including her, are altered after they have been "hurt like that," we as readers are persuaded to acknowledge our own lack of objectivity that is a result of our past, emotional wounds.



From “The Untrustworthy Speaker” onwards, Glück begins to gain increasingly optimistic insights about the past, when before she had focused on how her family had wounded her. In “Fable,” the poem following “The Untrustworthy Speaker,” the poet recalls the biblical story of the two mothers who demonstrate their love for a child before King Solomon: one chooses to try and tear the child away from the other woman, while the latter chooses to let go for fear of injuring the child; the poet writes, “one / renounced her share: this was / the sign, the lesson” (36). The poet replaces the child with her mother and the two mothers in the story with her sister and herself. In transforming the story, the poet learns a new lesson: the “rightful child” is “the one who couldn’t bear / to divide the mother” (37). This is the first time Glück has written about the virtue of letting go, instead of how she used to fight with her sister as a child--in a passive aggressive way--for her mother’s love.

The next poem, “New World” shows us the mother again but this time we see her taking trips and visiting museums after her father’s death. The poet also tells us that her father was dead long before he physically died: “What he wanted / was to lie on the couch...so that death, when it came, / wouldn’t seem a significant change” (38). The novelistic development of the poems shifts from the period when the father was alive to when the father has died, so that readers might compare the mother’s reactions in each case. In “Birthday” (41), the mother sits as if in an endless present by her husband’s grave:

She’s showing him she understands,  
 that she accepts his silence.  
 He hates deception: she doesn’t want him making  
 signs of affection when he can’t feel.

Both in life and death, the father seemed to have made no signs of affection that he could genuinely feel either for his wife or daughters. These are the first few times that the poet introduces us to her emotionally-unavailable father. We know little else about him, other than that he was emotionally unavailable. In knowing little, it is as if we are sharing the poet’s own frustration and incomprehension about her father’s distance. In contrast, we know far more about the poet’s mother, and being a mother herself now, the poet realises how alike they are,

particularly with regards to their children. As readers pass the halfway point in the book, they have already been presented with psychological portraits of both the poet's father and mother, and in the following poem, "Brown Circle," we learn how such figures have come to impact on the poet's own life as a mother in the present time. We discover that the poet is a mother now who realises that she loves her son the way her own mother had first tried to love her:

What I am  
 is the scientist,  
 who comes to the flower  
 with a magnifying glass  
 and doesn't leave, though  
 the sun burns a brown  
 circle of grass around  
 the flower... (42)

Helpless to spare her own son from the kind of suffocating attention she received from her mother, the poet finds herself unable to give her son the warmth and freedom she never experienced as a child. In the poem after this, "Children Coming Home From School," the poet writes:

My son accuses me  
 of his unhappiness, not  
 in words, but in the way...  
 he greets the cat,  
 to show he's capable  
 of open affection. (44-45)

Now the reader gets to see the repetition of which the poet has become guilty. Her mother's way of loving her--coldly and austere--has become her way now of loving her son, and she sees how her son has become as resentful as her past self, but with a difference: her son, unlike the poet, can display his emotions openly. The poet never could, as a child. But the poet sees both of them as "experts in silence" (45), suggesting that she can see how her son

has learnt passive-aggression by playing wordless, emotional games with her. Her father used to do the same, the poet points out: “My father used / the dog in the same way” (45), meaning that the poet’s family has long been used to an environment in which such games were preferred to expressing emotions in an open, passionate way. But this passing on of the burden of emotional repression from parent to child has to stop (as part of the poet’s plotted process in her poems of moving on from the past and releasing its stranglehold on the present) and the poet, unlike perhaps her own parents, has at least realised that she has been wrong to be like her mother.

If games were a way of distancing oneself from another, so were acts of punishment in the eyes of the poet, as the next poem, “Animals,” reveals. In a flashback, Glück remembers fighting physically with her sister to gain the attention of their parents, who, instead of physically punishing them, would hold “tribunals: the child / most in the wrong / could choose / her own punishment” (48). Here the poet arrives at another revelation: her parents were never angry when they fought because “they couldn’t bring themselves / to inflict pain,” as “you should only hurt something you can give / your whole heart to” (48). Because her parents seemed so detached, to the poet it meant that they must not have devoted themselves enough to their children. As such, her sister and her were like “animals / trying to share a dry pasture” (48) of their parents’ love. But the poet does not assign blame to their parents, since she only describes them together as “one tree” (48) that could not possibly have enough nourishment to feed two animals. The tone here is not of anger, but one that sounds like resignation, accompanied by the possibility of forgiveness, even though it too is not entirely free of the poet’s ironic sense of self-doubt. In any case, a major consequence of their parents’ actions was that the sisters never got along, since they would always be competing for love. In a subsequent poem, “Yellow Dahlia,” Glück writes again about her sister. She used to see her sister as a yellow dahlia and confesses, “I made an enemy of a flower: / now, I’m ashamed” (51). Here again, the poet reaches a new insight into her past by realising that as children, they had always thought that one of them had to be better than the other. This insight comes to her because she now observes her sister’s daughter--“a child so

like her” (51)--and is ashamed when she realises she should not have antagonised a person so “full of spirit” (51). In looking at the children in the present, the poet is able to cast a more enlightened eye on the past. Earlier in the book, Glück had learnt from being a mother herself that her own mother had been helpless in the way she had tried to love her children. This time, from observing her niece, the poet acknowledges her shame in misunderstanding her sister before and treating her so badly as a child.

In relating present to past relationships, the poet cannot help but return again to the figure of her father with the same reconciliatory desire to change her perception of him. In “Snow,” the poet holds a memory in an apostrophic moment, in which her father is carrying her on his shoulders and both are staring into the “emptiness, / the heavy snow” whirling around them; it is as if they are staring timelessly into the incomprehensible void at the heart of the poet’s father. In a following poem, “Terminal Resemblance,” this emptiness is expanded further when Glück recalls another moment when they are talking to each other: “He’d say a few words. I’d say a few back. / That was about it” (59). Their relationship is frequently emptied of any emotion, but on the day when the poet confesses to seeing him for the last time, her father tells her that he is not feeling any pain. Then the poet recalls standing at the door as they waved at each other for one last time: “Like him, waved to disguise my hand’s trembling” (60). This is the last time they see each other. The poet chooses to remember the moment as one full of emotion, even a suggestion of deep forgiveness and regret, between them. In the next poem, “Lament,” we are back at the same funeral as in “A Fantasy,” but this time the poet chooses optimistically to see that “the sun’s amazingly bright, / though it’s late afternoon,” while “the evening breeze ruffles the women’s shawls” (61). She remembers the words “a fortunate life,” a phrase often repeated by friends about her father’s life during the ceremony, and she discovers what this means for herself--“to exist in the present” (62)--which she now reminds herself to do since living in a family that has never quite moved out of the shadow of a death-stricken past.

Nearing the end of Glück’s narrative journey of coming to terms with her past in order to find a new perspective for the future, the poet demonstrates this move from the past

more conclusively in the next two poems, “Amazons” and “Celestial Music,” which appear before the book’s closing poem. In “Amazons,” she sees the end of summer: “the spruces put out a few green shoots” (65)--signs of rebirth--and acknowledges that “My sister and I, we’re the end of something” (65), the lifting of the deadweight of a past heavy with grief and mourning is lifted as the sisters move on into the future; the family that had once held firmly onto the past is becoming like the amazons--soon extinct, “a tribe without a future” (65). The sisters and the children represent a new kind of family, one full of hope and commitment to the present and the future. Here the poet also achieves a balanced view of the world that we have not noticed before when she manages to see in the natural world, in addition to the fresh spruces, “(a) kind of symmetry between what’s dying, what’s just coming bloom” (65). This is in contrast to her parents, and to her earlier self, when they had only been used to focusing on the negative. In “Celestial Music”<sup>12</sup> the poet encounters “a friend who still believes in heaven” (66), who chides the poet for shutting her eyes to the existence of God and for the poet’s “aversion to reality” (66), an aversion--a permanent personality trait of emotional detachment--whose causes we have become familiar with from the earlier poems. Here, for the first time, the poet defends this aversion and worries that perhaps her friend might be wrong: “I’m afraid for her; I see her / caught in a net deliberately cast over the earth” (67), a net of delusion that prevents her friend from seeing that God might not exist and that it might also be possible to live authentically without Him. In an act of beauty that mirrors the poet’s own way of reclaiming beauty and meaning from the past through poetry, her friend draws a chalk-circle around a dead caterpillar, and both arrive at a sense of stillness that they appreciate in their individual ways: the friend sees a completion to the circle of life as destined by God, while the poet garners a more secular, universal and all-encompassing revelation: “The love of form is a love of endings” (67). The aphoristic tone and decisive

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<sup>12</sup> About this poem, critic Daniel Morris has only pointed out the poet’s “desire to return to a lost connection with God” (178-179) without revealing how it is also importantly an episode that nearly concludes the collection’s novelistic plot, a moment which signals the poet’s momentous arrival at a renewed way of looking at her past and her own existence.

assertion of the statement suggests that its message should not resonate meaningfully for the poet alone, but for the reader as well.

Previously in this collection the poet had stressed her need to be different from others like her parents, only to discover in time through the narrative development of the poems that she has in fact inherited their traits of detachment and coldness; now the poet is able to fully see a common thread that binds them all together. It is an epiphany that has taken the poet a whole series of poems to realise. By the end of *Ararat*, the poet has arrived at an acceptance of a fundamental human desire to attain stillness in one's life. This stillness is akin to what Paul Breslin has described, in his reading of *Ararat*, as Freud's death instinct, "*an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things* which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces" (Breslin 110). Even as the poet's parents have chosen to remain in the stillness of memory due to such "disturbing forces" as a death in the family, resulting in their avoidance of the possibilities of the present, the poet too has been guilty of the same. But unlike her parents, the poet also learns that to dwell on forms of memory is to not allow for fresh beginnings in the future. There is a kind of ambivalence to the last line ("The love of form is a love of endings") of "Celestial Music," which perhaps points to the poet's maturity in being willing to live--and not quite comfortably--with two opposing ideas at once: the love of endings can be interpreted by readers as both a good or bad thing.

As readers who have been following the narrative progression of *Ararat* thus far, we might also be encouraged to relate to the poet's questions and direct them at ourselves: If we are ever to move on, must not something necessarily end? Also, when we choose to exist completely in the past (which can cause more harm than good), or when we choose to enter a state of newfound optimism, a state of mind that the poet gradually occupies in the course of the poems, do we not occupy such moments as if each moment were an ending in itself, regardless of what happens in the future? The love of form could very well be the love of art or poetry: any concept of time moving vanishes when we are completely immersed in its appreciation. The love of form could also be tied to the way the poems come together in this

collection to reveal a journey of self-discovery and forgiveness; the poet has written and put together poems to chart a way out of an earlier position of dissatisfaction with her past.

After the poet's newfound sense of a Keatsian Negative Capability, in which the poet is willing to see both sides of an idea without the need to resolve their differences, the next poem ends the book in a far simpler revelation that is also an effective end to the poet's introspective journey. The last poem is ironically titled, "First Memory," as it refers possibly to a first memory of the poet's sense of being wounded; from the start, the poet felt that her father had not loved her, and she had tried thereafter to avenge herself against him. Now in this renewed look at this first memory of not being loved, the poet reaches a new conclusion regarding her past feelings of resentment and loss: "It meant I loved" (68). It is a fitting end to the book's central plot about a soul's healing and reconciliation with the past that began with the book's first line, "Long ago, I was wounded" (15). The "I" included the reader as well as the poet, and as readers, we have been able to empathise and draw our own lessons from the poet's poetic journey. This journey is only evident when we read the poems of *Ararat* sequentially so as to glean the narrative implied through their order. Like chapters in a novel, the poems chart phases in the poet's emotional and psychological life affected by familial relationships. It is through these poems and their narrative arc that readers can see how the poet works through her memories, in order to arrive at her final, newfound capacity to rethink and redeem her past. In *Ararat*, the poet worked through her memories in poems that enabled the poet to progressively glean new truths and revelations about her past and about herself. The plot in *Ararat* was a process of forgiveness and self-discovery which is only the start of a larger narrative arc that will show how the poet moves on from painful recollections of her childhood upbringing to reconcile herself with new challenges in the subsequent chapters of her life.

### Chapter 3: The Speaking Garden

After *Ararat* Glück published *The Wild Iris* (1992) which won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature. David Morris has written about how *Ararat* anticipates *The Wild Iris* “by attaching nature to the spirit world through metaphor” (178). In “Celestial Music,” the penultimate poem of *Ararat*, the poet hinted at a desire to break away from her own “aversion to reality” (*Ararat* 66) and “return to a lost connection with God” (Morris 178-179). God becomes the central figure that Glück grapples with in *The Wild Iris*; she is taking her friend’s chiding in “Celestial Music” seriously by reconsidering His relevance to her life, and whether reconciling with God will allow her to enter a more meaningful and joyous existence. There is also the poet’s obsession with the patriarchal figure of the father that connects the two volumes. If the life and death of her father played a central role in the poet’s reimaginings of her past and herself in *Ararat*, in *Iris* it is God, present or absent from the poet’s life, that takes over the role of the biographical parent in shaping the way the poet envisions her existence as a poet.

But in trying to find satisfactory answers to her questions about God (since God Himself will not come down to address them personally), the poet feels the need to imagine alternative voices (one of which is her own biased version of God, whose figure eventually becomes ambiguous when the possibility of God actually speaking through the poet increases) with whom she may start a sustained argument or dialogue between conflicting perspectives about the meaning of life. These alternating voices express perspectives to challenge the poet’s original position on life and God, so that she might be able to reconsider certain personal prejudices or generate new beliefs. Lee Upton has written about how Glück’s use of diverse speakers in her collection “fulfilled psychic needs, as if she had long yearned to write as a disembodied voice, freed of fleshly confines” (140). Upton seems to suggest that the poet is centrally concerned in *Iris* with being artistically free to ventriloquise or speak in ways that seem untethered to the poet’s own individual voice. But I would like to argue that in *Iris*, all the different speakers actually retain the poet’s familiarly oracular tone; a general



detachment in the tone of the voices does not vary even though their perspectives might be at odds with each other. This implies that the voices are still very much bound within the singular mind of the poet, which also points to how the poems can be read as being about Glück's individual and psychological passage of spiritual and creative rejuvenation. However, the poet deliberately does not resolve a tension between two possible interpretations of the plot as implied through the poems. One interpretation of the plot is, as I have mentioned, that the poet is talking to herself so as to gain fresh perspective. The second is that the poems in fact set up a kind of séance to invite an external, preternatural or spiritual presence to enter the poems and speak through the poet, uttering spiritual truths about the meaning of existence.

*The Wild Iris* introduces the perspectives of God the Creator, the poet herself, and the personified flowers of her garden. Set up as a collection of apostrophic, lyric utterances, a plot becomes discernible from the sustained dialogue that is played out through the poems. Linda Gregerson has tried to sum up the poems like this: "The poet plants herself in a garden and dares its other Creator to join her" (28). What is at stake in the implicit plot of the poems is a desire to find relevance in a distant, almighty Creator, with the hope of restoring purpose and meaning to the poet's otherwise aimless and unspiritual life. The poet complains and laments that God has deserted his children ever since their exile from Eden, leaving them without a divine plan or purpose. She also gives voice to the flowers in her garden to create alternative perspectives to oppose her own; she even takes on the voice of God, so as to portray Him as an arrogant and uncaring Father, which goes against an accepted, New-Testament notion of God as loving and kind. But in the end, the poet understands that through these poetic acts of ventriloquism, the Creator was not at all distant--He was really speaking to her after all through *her* own voice in the poems. The subjective voices of the flowers and the poet in this collection mimic our own common questions about God and the meaning of Creation. Readers can relate to these questions and empathise with the anxieties of both the poet and her personified flora.

*The Wild Iris* begins and ends with poetic utterances by personified flowers of the poet's garden, and all the poems in between fall into a repeated pattern whereby the poet and

the flowers would speak first, then answered by one or more poems in God's own voice before the poet and flowers speak again. It is reminiscent of a church service in which there is often a call to prayer and a response by the congregation, which happens harmoniously back and forth during the Mass, except in this case the responses are usually in conflict with each other like disagreeable characters quarrelling in a play. This war of voices forms a narrative structure through the poems in which the poet works to find clarity in her thoughts about God. In the opening, titular poem, "The Wild Iris," the themes of rebirth and of recovering a voice are introduced; these are themes that will recur throughout the collection. The wild iris addresses the poet:

You who do not remember  
 passage from the other world  
 I tell you I could speak again: whatever  
 returns from oblivion returns to find a voice...

The flower also sounds like it is addressing the reader. Its oracular tone resounds with a symbolic, universalising quality. The wild iris is claiming that all things in nature recur in a cycle of life and death, and when they do recur, they seek expression of some kind, in a way similar to how a poet finds expression through poetry. However, the idea of recurrence does not really extend to human beings, and God will set the record straight later in the book.

When a human being dies, God has ensured that the soul--when the body dies--will not return to earth, whereas flowers return after death to become themselves again and again. In the search for a purpose for human existence, the poet seems to have arrived between two belief systems regarding eternity--an imagined flower's idea of eternity as one of constant rebirth and repetition, versus the traditional, Judeo-Christian assertion that humans only live once and it is just the spirit that is eternal (the spirit returns to God after death). In the case of the flower, however, the "voice" that it recovers in existence is not the same as the "voice" of a living human being; the flower's "voice" really refers to an ecstatic and selfless surrendering to being a part of the living world, while the human "voice" is constantly and consciously

negotiating *with* the world and only rarely collapses the distance between world and self. We learn about this sense of the isolated, human “voice” in the next two poems.

These two poems are each called “Matins.” Many of the poems in this book have “Matins” or “Vespers” as titles to signal how they are akin to formal prayers, since they are addressed to God; the “Matins” in this collection involve the poet complaining to nature or God, while the “Vespers,” which appear later, reveal how the poet slowly reaches a peaceful reconciliation. In the first “Matins,” the poet-as-gardener introduces her context to us, in the first person, by telling the reader something her friend Noah has said, while both of them were standing by her mailbox one morning: “depressives hate the spring” (2). Here, the poet reveals that she is depressed (we are never really told why exactly, only that it is connected largely to her broad questions about the point of living in God’s universe), and in being so, she imagines her body curled up in a split trunk. Noah chides her for this one-sided identification with nature:

...this is  
 an error of depressives, identifying  
 with a tree, whereas the happy heart  
 wanders the garden like a falling leaf, a figure for  
 the part, not the whole.

Here we already have an echo of one of the repeated revelations that the poet ultimately accepts from the flowers later in the book: the act of focusing too much on the idea of a unique selfhood causes sadness, since to be a distinctive part of the world is, in a paradoxical sense, to consciously be apart from it. Depressives like the poet identify with the tree for its uncompromising solitariness, Noah is suggesting, so why not lose oneself to the fullness of the natural world like the carefree leaf that succumbs to falling and being carried by the winds of time? Another possible reading would be how having the consciousness of the tree is akin to possessing the mind of God, who possesses the burden of knowing everything. There is also a little self-mocking humour here in the way the poet juxtaposes such clinical diction as “error of depressives” with a hackneyed phrase like “happy heart,” as if the poet is implicitly

trivialising the idea that one *can* be like a falling leaf in surrendering happily to the beauty of the natural world. The humour speaks of a clear ambivalence in the poet's attitude towards the possibility of ever giving up her feelings of depression.

In a more outright, defensive tone, the depressed poet addresses God accusingly in the second "Matins" poem: "Unreachable father, when we were first / exiled from heaven, you made / a replica" (3). This replica is the world--an imperfect garden--in which we exist now, while heaven in this case refers to the Eden from which Adam and Eve were driven out. In this second-rate paradise of a post-Eden world, which the poet associates analogously with her own garden, "we took turns / working the garden, the first tears / filling our eyes as earth / misted with petals, some / dark red, some flesh coloured..." (3). This "we" could refer to either the poet with her companions in the garden or to the entire human race, in that "we" have been working hopelessly to restore the perfection of that first garden; the fact that "we" never attain perfection wounds us (suggested by the colours "dark red" and "flesh coloured"), as it reminds us of how we are left behind by God to drift in a world without beauty or purpose. It is a perspective that the poet will keep expressing throughout the book.

The attribution of human emotions to nature is nothing new in poetry. But in the poems that follow the "Matins"--"Trillium," "Lamium," and "Snowdrops"--the poet is not simply projecting personality into the world, she is turning flowers into distinct characters in her private, existential drama. "Trillium," for example, echoes the poet's own certainty that to speak about life is really to speak necessarily with despair--"my sentences / like cries strung together" (4)--a despair arising from the perspective that life is brief and without any God-given design that we can know; the need to speak already speaks of the pain of an unfulfilled hunger to be heard, understood and loved. The poet repeats this theme in "The Red Poppy," a poem that appears much later in the book, in which the flower's last line is "I speak / because I am shattered" (29). She repeats it again in "Ipomoea," in which the morning glory cries out in sorrow that in its lifetime of being wound up with the hawthorn, it is "not to be / permitted to ascend ever again" (48), a clear analogy for the fall of men from the standards set by God's Eden. The poet is using such poems to reveal a tension that is played out throughout the

collection (and in her mind) between a need to see one's life in a state of traumatic separation from an idealised state (Eden, heaven, or just God) and a different desire to discard such feelings in order to discover beauty in the present through the natural world. What is at stake for both the poet as well as the reader of *The Wild Iris* is the resolution of this tension in finding a meaningful connection with God that would restore a sense of purpose to the poet's existence.

The optimistic perspective is offered in such contrasting poems as "Lamium". The personified lamium suggests to the poet that since living things "don't all require / light...Some of us / make our own light," such as the light from "a silver leaf / like a path no one can use" (5). The lamium is implicitly accusing the poet for dwelling unnecessarily on notions of beauty derived from an abstracted God, when a different light of beauty can already be found within the poet's own existence, even if this beauty may not be what one expects; one might even have to create this beauty for oneself. In "Snowdrops," this titular flower similarly celebrates the sheer act of will required for any plant to survive in the natural landscape, pushing up against the "damp earth" (6), then risking "joy / in the raw wind of the new world" (6). The act of survival is beauty enough, says the flower, but the gardener does not answer. Instead, it is God that takes over in the next three poems, "Clear Morning," "Spring Snow," and "End of Winter." In "Clear Morning," God begins in condescension, establishing his own position of power, "I can speak to you any way I like--I've submitted to your preferences...speaking // through vehicles only, in / details of earth, as you prefer" (7).

At first, the poet plants voices into the throats of flowers; then she also imagines the voice of God, even though it is equally possible that God is really the one *allowing* Himself to be imagined through her, which He has implied in "Clear Morning." But God is still just one of the characters in the book's unfolding drama of opposition and conflict between different voices through which the poet is trying to find a redemptive meaning for her existence. What is at stake for the poet in the plot of this book is for her voices to reach an agreement, yet God seems to speak with the greatest finality. In the poem "Spring Snow," for example, God tells the poet that ultimately, all she wants is "not belief, but capitulation / to authority" (9),

suggesting that she wants a beauty *not* of her own creation but from a higher authority; she needs to believe in something other than herself, before she can believe in the possibilities of beauty in her own existence. The poet has been reprimanded by a God whom she thought she had only imagined at first. In “End of Winter,” God tells the poet (but the poem also sounds like it is directed at all of nature, and at all of us):

You wanted to be born; I let you be born.

When has my grief ever gotten

in the way of your pleasure...

never thinking

this would cost you anything,

never imagining the sound of my voice

as anything but part of it...

the one continuous line

that binds us to each other. (10-11)

Here God shares the fact that he is in grief over the poet’s inability to appreciate fully the world in which he has put her, a world in which everything is tied to God’s own existence. In this poem, the poet has arrived at the revelation that regardless of what she feels about the meaningfulness of what God has created, there is still a chance for beauty to manifest itself in the way that she has imagined these voices in her poems; these voices take on lives of their own, which turn instructive, showing her that perhaps God is not so distant after all after the fall from paradise. In the span of three poems, “Clear Morning,” “Spring Snow,” and “End of Winter,” God shifts from being just a caricature in the poet’s mind of a detached, arrogant father, to a grieving, lamenting parent. In “End of Winter,” it is as if God has finally come through for the poet and through her own words. In fact, God is just as present even when she was accusing him of being distant; her voice is as much His as it is her own. Another unusual insight here is also that it was creation that asked to be born; God only opened the door for

creation to appear. This is in contrast to the second “Matins” poem in the book, where the poet accused God of exiling his children from paradise, sending them to fend for themselves in “a replica, a place...different from heaven, being / designed to teach a lesson” (3), a lesson that is also a form of punishment, as life to the poet is a punishment if it is without clear divine intervention or purpose.

Not satisfied with His answers thus far, the poet continues to accuse the Creator in the following couple of “Matins” poems, when she argues with God about how “it is useless to us, this silence that promotes belief / you must be all things...we are left to think / you couldn’t possibly exist” (12). The poet is insisting on distance again; she has been hurt too long by it to forgive her Creator this easily. She emphasises that His silence is still a fault, in spite of his omnipresence. The poet also writes, “I see it is with you as with the birches: / I am not to speak to you / in the personal way” (13); God here is as impersonal and cold as the deciduous trees. But then, subsequently, a new flower speaks to chide the poet. It is the “Scilla,” this time, that speaks: “why / do you treasure your voice / when to be one thing / to be next to nothing” (14)? The poet’s constant desire to be heard is put into question. She is being asked to be like the waves of scilla, to relinquish the unique identity of a voice marked by yearning and to let herself be subsumed into the natural world, which is already infinite. God then responds again in “Retreating Wind,” but this time, with a sense of pity, as he tells the poet (and also to all of us again):

Whatever you hoped,  
you will not find you find yourselves in the garden,  
among the growing plants.

Your lives are not circular like theirs...(15)

The poems in *The Wild Iris* have consistently set up the implicit plotline of a three-way drama between flora, poet and, finally, a reconciliatory God. This three-way conversation or argument is itself, in a way, circular, and a sense of *new* rebirth happens when the poet is able to discover a different, epiphanic truth for herself with each subsequent cycle of poetic arguments in the book. In the above poem, God tells the poet again that there is no rebirth for

her, unlike the flora, and that this knowledge should have allowed her to transcend the tragedy of a limited life, to see beauty and joy made possible by the fact that mortality is brief. God is clearly angry here, in reaction to how the poet keeps standing in her garden and accusing God, while God scolds back, both parties accusing each other of not seeing the truth, before both finally reach a gradually increasing sense of understanding. On the sidelines of their argument, the flowers encourage the poet to see beauty as eternal recurrence. They tell her that the individual soul is overrated. The implication present throughout the book is that it is more beautiful to see one's own life as less individualistic, less soul-ful, but more flower-like, such that we may find joy in the present knowing we are part of something larger--the infinitely regenerative, natural world.

The three-way, poetic exchange carries on and "Matins" eventually turn to "Vespers" in the book, which means that the poet has been standing in her garden from morning till evening, an analogy for the way a reader too might have waited in frustration for a lifetime to discover answers to the questions posed in this book. As this poetic conversation goes on, however, the poems start to sound increasingly reconciliatory, more at peace at last; the poet is changing her mind. Her new perspective on God and nature is slowly being reborn as the cyclical drama in her head winds to a close and the poet begins to achieve a sense of peace with the world. Before the last cycle of "Vespers" begins, there is an unusual poem, "Heaven and Earth," in which the poet may be speaking, but the poem is not at all a prayer. It is the only poem when the poet describes something just by herself, without the need for alternative voices or personalities. In the poem, she is watching her husband, John, rake the garden. He is behaving as if his life would not end, holding his rake grandly and standing framed by the summer sun that "truly does stall" (32), the light freezing as if time has stopped, a brightness "contained by / the burning maples" (32) to glow like a halo around him. In this domestic scene, she longs to disabuse her husband of the illusion of this magnificent stillness in time, to let him know that its beauty comes at a terrible price--the certainty of the moment's death. A similar domestic situation is presented in a later "Vespers" poem, in which she envies the peace with which John works the garden, a peace that comes because John does not think



about the meaning of life or nature. Instead, he disappears into the work of growing plants and the cyclical rebirth of nature. She is amazed by how “all this time, / peace never leaves him” (42). It is a peace that is not passed on to her. Instead it rushes through her “like bright light through the bare tree” (42). In this and the “Vespers” poems to follow, the poet seems to also appreciate this sense of peace slightly more and more with each “Vespers” poem, whereas she was previously uncompromising in her sense of umbrage and sorrow.

A key moment in the plot of the book when the poet starts to gain a more optimistic and reconciliatory perspective about God is when God Himself seems to change His tune in her poems, “Retreating Light,” “Sunset,” and “Lullaby.” In the first of these poems, the poet imagines God as telling all His human offspring:

You were like very young children,  
always waiting for a story.  
So I gave you the pencil and paper...  
I told you, write your own story. (51)

As the poem progresses, there is even a sense of pride in the Creator’s voice:

You will never know how deeply  
it pleases me to see you sitting there...  
holding the pencils I gave you...

Creation has brought you  
great excitement, as I knew it would...  
you have no need of me anymore. (51)

Without any trace of aloofness or contempt, God praises the poet for at least discovering beauty through poetry, or, perhaps more specifically, through the creation of different voices that work to discover the lessons of the natural world--its capacity for rebirth, the ability of the frailest flowers to survive in spite of antagonistic conditions. Through poetry, the poet, according to God, has become able to teach herself to see beauty in existence. On one hand, a reader could argue that since God too is another voice that the gardener is performing through

her poems, the poet is in fact only praising herself for this newfound insight into the redemptive aspects of her own writing. But another interpretation is also possible (that is, if one reads the poems in a spiritual way), in that it is really God that is speaking through the poet now, the God without whom any form of artistic or natural creation would have been impossible; it is a form of spiritual rebirth that is also the recognition of a union--God and the poet are really one. The poet is finally acknowledging that she can be a conduit for God's own voice if she is willing, and knowing this, the poet finds peace with herself and with her life.

This idea of poet-as-conduit becomes clearer in "Sunset" when God tells the poet, "My tenderness / should be apparent to you...in the words that become / your own response" (57). The poet discovers that God has never been unreachable; distance was an illusion that the poet had sadly allowed herself to subscribe to. The Creator was with her all along through the words she used to proclaim her earlier despair, and then to arrive at last at this epiphany. The poet also learns--when God speaks to her through one of the final poems in the book, "Lullaby"--that "human beings must be taught to love / silence and darkness" (58). After reconciling with God, the poet finally understands that the beauty of existence *includes* the experience of grief and the knowledge that one will ultimately lose everything in death, since without them, there would be nothing extraordinary about the poet's very act of survival and of writing. On one hand, one could say that the plot of *The Wild Iris* consists of a poet talking herself into changing her own mind about God and the world, but on the other hand, the book is like a cathartic séance conducted within the imagination of the poet, her writing like the magical incantation required to solicit the supernatural; a literary séance where flowers get possessed by the multiple voices of mankind and God himself enters the poet's mind, speaking to as well as through her. Although the ambiguous tension between these plotlines is left unresolved, I would like to suggest that the ambiguity is itself a result of the poet's implied journey of spiritual rebirth through the poems that has enabled her to grow into a more accepting and joyous state of mind; the poet is able to accept the possibility that God might not have been absent from her life after all, and that He has been speaking through and

to her all this time. This sort of rebirth is not so different from the moment of reconciliation and forgiveness that comes by the end of *Ararat*, in which the poet had engaged in a private confrontation with her own memories so as to change the way she saw the past, her family, as well as herself. In *The Wild Iris*, this rebirth has become a more spiritual one, in which the poet admits that it is possible that God exists through her, and that God has enabled her ability to see beauty in the world. Furthermore, if the poet has discovered God through the writing of her poetry, then in a parallel way, readers too may arrive at their own sense of rebirth through the reading of the poet's work, as they discover their own voices being reflected back to them through the poems, and possibly even agree with and accept the poet's conclusions.

No critic has yet written about the spiritual aspect of the poet's journey in her work in a sustained and comprehensive way. Joanne Feit Diehl has described a typical poem by Glück as a "stark, lyric cry" ("From One World to Another" 151) and *The Wild Iris* would seem at one level to only be a collection of stark, lyric cries hung up on the purposelessness but potential beauty of the creation of the world, cries that stem from "a moving array of subjectivities, mostly nonhuman, that add not only perspective but height and depth to human life in its struggle with metaphysical questions" (Costello 48). What Bonnie Costello has described as "subjectivities" reminds me of what Patrick Murphy has written regarding the dialogical and novelistic possibilities of contemporary poetry, in that the advancement of a poetic fiction's plot can occur through "dialogue, soliloquies, and character behaviour--rather than through traditional narrative discourse" (61). Glück's book has a plot that clearly advances in this way. Each poem is like a monologue that responds dialogically to another poem before or after it. Although it sounds schizophrenic, the poems perform their different subjectivities in order for an overarching, mental and spiritual journey to take place.

The poet ends the book on a reflective note with the voice of a flower in "The White Lilies." The eponymous flower sees the poet and her husband in their garden once again (this is the last time we will see them in the book), addressing the poet as "beloved":

As a man and woman make  
a garden between them like

a bed of stars...it  
could all end...

Hush, beloved. It doesn't matter to me  
how many summers I live to return:  
this one summer we have entered eternity.  
I felt your two hands  
bury me to release its splendour. (63)

The domestic scene is as idyllic as an idealised Eden. The man and woman exist in an eternal present and they could be any man or woman in time. This sense of eternity is threatened by the knowledge that the moment *will* end. But in the second stanza, the lilies suggest to the poet that the present moment in all its fragility and limitation is eternity enough for now. We must enjoy the moment as if it *were* eternal, especially since the moment must end, so that we may truly appreciate its splendour. In not ending the book with a poem from the poet's perspective, she is perhaps reborn after leaving her previous self behind, one marked by bitterness, longing and grief; a darker self that now no longer exists, hence its absence by the end of the book. In the poem too there is both a physical and spiritual sense of reconciliation in the way the poet is actually holding a piece of nature in her hands, whereas before she was merely giving it a voice. In ending the book by anthropomorphically giving voice to a flower, the poet demonstrates that she is not just capable of being one with God now, she is also capable of being one with nature too. An intimate connection with the earth recalls the flowers' repeated advice to stop harping on the isolated self and to surrender wholeheartedly to the splendour of the natural world (a world that calls her "beloved" like a lover), to subscribe to nature's infinity without desire for anything more--whether to be heard or given a direction from a higher power.

This surrendering to nature does not in any way clash with God's plans, as before He had happily confided, "Creation has brought you / great excitement, as I knew it would" (51). In the same way, the creation of poems has clarified the poet's mind about God; she is no

longer suffering deeply from the imagined trauma of separation from a previous, Edenic state, and is more engaged with the joy of God's creation. By way of this sustained three-way argument between nature, the poet and God, the poet has been able to perform different subjectivities in order to enact an implied, individual journey of religious awakening. Glück has restored some beauty and meaning to her existence after all. She has grounded the present (as the lilies do) in a sense of the infinity; infinity is no longer just associated with being in heaven, as by revising one's own perspective on the world, which the poet has done, one can experience a bit of heaven on earth too. But an attachment to the sense of the infinity in the natural world is fleeting at best (the joy gained from this spiritual awakening is short-lived too, as the poet is subsequently forced to face new pain from the breakdown of her marriage as portrayed in the books to come). It will only be much later--in her last two collections, *The Seven Ages* and *Averno*, to be exact--that the poet will grow into the capacity to accept, and even enjoy, a world without certainty, without recourse to such absolutes as the concepts of infinity, heaven or God.

#### Chapter 4: The Problem with Marriage

After speaking through God and nature in *The Wild Iris*, Glück goes further in her next two books by borrowing the voices of familiar characters from Greek mythology to ventriloquise conflicting thoughts and emotions. I have mentioned in the introduction how from *Ararat*, to *Averno*, the poet embarks on a plot of emotional renewal and discovery that begins from the eponymous peak of a mountain (the site of a Jewish cemetery where her family members were buried and the starting point of her negotiations with her past) and moves steadily downwards until she confronts death and the underworld in *Averno*, which is also the mouth of a volcano reputed to be a doorway to hell. The books resemble interconnected, autobiographical verse novels charting phases in the poet's life. After settling personal issues with God, the poet has now moved from dealing with spirituality in *The Wild Iris* to come back down to a more painful and private reality by exploring the breakdown of her marriage and how the poet might recover and move on from it.

In *Meadowlands* (1996) and *Vita Nova* (1999), Glück applies what Eliot has described the "mythical method" (Eliot 177), by which her personal life is rendered as comparable to the transcendental, mythic lives of Homeric characters. For Eliot, this juxtaposition (in the context of *Ulysses*) rescues the contemporary world from mundanity by turning it into myth, making it "possible for art" (177). For Glück, such juxtaposition projects her concrete, private world into the mythic, universal realm, amplifying individual concerns and feelings with a timeless significance. In incorporating mythic discourses and multiple voices, both *Meadowlands* and *Vita Nova* work like novels in the Bakhtinian sense by being heterogeneous. Such multiplicity allows the novel to no longer possess a "unitary linguistic medium for containing ideological thought" (Bakhtin 267); the poet pits her lyric exploration of the self with external voices borrowed from myth so as to clarify or to confront herself in the poems; by speaking through these different characters, she also exposes and undermines implicit ideologies in the mythic discourses that she uses. The poet's oracular tone helps in elevating her personal journey to the level of myth, as the different voices in the poems are

able to sound as if they were being uttered on an ancient Greek stage. The mythical method, in its Modernist context, was not likely to be connected with the possibility of affecting groundbreaking psychological change through literature in either the writer or the reader. As Lee Oser describes it, “Modernist art is aesthetic art” (7), and Modernist literature was often fascinated with the “world-constructing faculties of mind” (7); it was focused on seeking originality by creating “novelty out of...old themes” (Smith 16), such as those borrowed from myths.

Famous Modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce focused on playing with aesthetic representations; their works were populated by masks, such as the way in which Joyce made his characters in *Ulysses* resemble--or wear the masks of--Greek archetypes, while Oser points out that Woolf was concerned with “salvaging art from the depredations of time” (10) in her seminal novel, *To the Lighthouse*, in which she describes “the bright mask-like look of faces seen by candlelight” (Woolf 98). Glück uses this Modernist strategy of speaking through the masks of mythical figures to elevate the merely personal and autobiographical, and she also combines it with suggestive references to a brand of popular, present-day reality (evoked by the way the poems refer to such topics as rape, divorce and even drug taking in a contemporary context). This allowed readers to better connect not just with the mythological characters but also with the poet’s individual exploration as played out through the lives of these figures, allowing them to possibly share the same process of self-renewal through the poems.

In *The Wild Iris*, Glück grounded sacred notions of spirituality by framing them within domestic situations involving her husband and the act of gardening. Now in *Meadowlands* and *Vita Nova*, the poet has framed the troubled, domestic story of her own marriage within the mythic realm of classical heroes, juxtaposing her private life with the confessions of idealised figures (the poet also puts aside her private, lyric voice to ventriloquise these different voices in the same way as she did in *The Wild Iris*); what is personal soon becomes universal and this capacity to transcend the personal also helps the poet to forgive, as well as move on from, the past. *Meadowlands* and *Vita Nova* are two parts

of a single plot which begins from the crisis of a failing marriage; the plot ends with an ambivalent conclusion in which the poet moves away from her husband and enters a new and unknowable life without him. In *Meadowlands*, the familiar personae--mainly Penelope, Telemachus and Circe--come straight out of the *Odyssey*. Unlike the *Odyssey*, however, as Elisabeth Frost points out, in Glück's book, "it's divorce, not reunion, that ends the story" (*The Women's Review of Books* 24). Then in *Vita Nova*, the poet undergoes a journey of emotional recovery, during which readers will meet the likes of Euridice and Orfeo, as well as Dido and Aeneas. More than just poetry collections that are "pervasively structured by mythical analogues" (Breslin 103), the two volumes discussed here are really structured by a central plot about a poet's attempt to grapple with the dissolution of love. Aside from dramatised conversations between the husband and herself, self-invented parables, as well as cutting arguments with herself, the poet--cast as herself, once more, in her own autobiographical drama--also speaks through these different mythical characters in order to gain new insights into her marital failure. The linking story of these books about how one woman survives the break-up of her marriage contrasts with what Joseph Boone has written about "the novel's recurring obsession with the nature of romantic relationship and its possible outcomes" (5) from Austen all the way to Wharton in the early twentieth century. Novels by such authors, as Boone points out, tended to implicitly support the idea that a woman's happiness was tied to finding a man in marriage, a "restrictive sexual-marital ideology" (10) that encouraged a prevalent, social hierarchy empowering the male partner; the successful bond of wedlock was tied to the ideal notion of a tight-knit social order. Glück's plot, in which the speaker moves on from marriage, can be described, in Boone's terms, as a "counter-traditional text"<sup>13</sup> (330) in which the protagonist is able to survive the loss of love (for or from a man) and is able to find happiness outside of marriage.

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<sup>13</sup> One of Boone's prominent examples in *Tradition, Counter, Tradition* of a counter-traditional text which went against the conventional marriage plot is Ellen Glasgow's novel, *Barren Ground*, in which the protagonist, Dorinda Oakley, returns to her hometown in rural Virginia after a failed marriage to start a successful dairy farm on her own and finds contentment.



As an introductory parallel to the story of her failed marriage, the poet starts by invoking another wife. The first poem, “Penelope’s Song,” in *Meadowlands* presents Penelope as she is waiting for Odysseus to return to Ithaca. She imagines her deep-seated longing (suppressed by other feelings of resentment and bitterness) as a “Little soul” that is climbing a spruce tree to look out for her philandering husband like a sentry. The poem is humorous in its sudden evocation of contemporary life when Glück writes: “he will return...suntanned from his time away, wanting / his grilled chicken” (3). The abrupt introduction of humdrum phrases like “suntanned from his time away” and “grilled chicken” contrasts with more lyrical diction elsewhere in the poem to create a dark, comic effect that hints at how the speaker might be on the brink of breaking down. As more and more poems increasingly reveal, the emotional difficulty that the speaker (whether Penelope or the poet as herself) encounters in her marriage can prove so intractable that she has to resort to humour to mitigate overwhelming feelings of helplessness and uncontrollable anguish.<sup>14</sup> In “Penelope’s Song,” Penelope is really the poet imagining herself as another--more famous--wife whose husband has forsaken her. But Penelope warns her soul not to shake the boughs of the spruce tree; she warns it to sit “carefully, carefully, lest / his beautiful face be marred / by too many falling needles” (3). The warning is a little sarcastic but the speaker also reveals her private acknowledgement that her feelings of love would have altered by the time he comes back. Having been left behind for so long by Odysseus, Penelope’s patient devotion is already mixed with some anger and resentment; she wants Odysseus to be hurt by the experience of going away, even if only a little, even if only by needles falling from a spruce tree.

The need to be remembered by the departing husband at any cost is then presented within the actual context of the poet’s own life in the next poem, “Quiet Evening,” where we see the poet herself holding her own husband’s hand in an apostrophic, atemporalised moment (time has stood still). In spite of knowing that this moment will not stay this way, since there will be a parting, the poet prolongs this moment as a pleasant, quiet evening in

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<sup>14</sup> In an interview with Grace Cavalieri, Glück has this to say about this moment of marital dissolution in her life: “My life was giving me materials that were desolating, and what I felt as an artist was an imperative to do comedy.”

summer: “the sky still light at this hour” (5). But he will leave her. In the same atemporal space, she likens her own departing husband to Odysseus, whose hand is taken by Penelope-- “not to hold him back but to impress / this peace on his memory” (5). Penelope and the poet are constantly paralleled, as in the later poem, “Midnight”, in which the poet imagines her own “aching heart” (26) as a person in her garage throwing out the garbage. This is reminiscent of how Glück’s Penelope had previously called out to her own little heart at the book’s beginning. The personified “heart” is really the poet herself, of course, but for a moment, the poet imagines that the two are separate. The poet mocks this aspect of herself, in the same way Penelope has mocked her own little soul: “where / is your sporting side, your famous / ironic detachment?” (26) The heart is aching and there is nothing the poet can do about it. The poet is mocking herself in helpless despair, but she is also giving her own heart a serious warning, “After fifteen years, / his voice could be getting tired; some night / if you don’t answer, someone else will answer” (26). The voice that answers fifteen years from now could be bereft of all sense of forgiveness or hope, whereas the fact that the “aching heart” is still grieving is a good sign the poet is not completely embittered yet. In contrast to “Penelope’s Song,” “Midnight” reveals a greater willingness to eschew the long-term effects of heartbreak; the poet is actually hoping to forgive her husband for leaving her and to even retain a sense of affection for him in the future, while Penelope is not quite as ready to forgive, which might also mean that perhaps the poet still has feelings for her husband that cannot be extinguished. The use of the mythical method here places Penelope and the poet on the same level of importance. If God could be made to seem like a petty, human father in *The Wild Iris*, here Penelope is rendered as merely human, just a wife who has been hurt by her husband (whom she still longs for) and who even pettily wishes her husband some degree of harm. On the other hand, the poet’s emotional injury is, in contrast, rendered as transcending the merely private to become the stuff of mythic allegory; the poet’s use of the mythical method to connect to a greater universality suggests that it is way of resolving emotional quandaries, as it allows the poet to draw inspiration and hope of emotional healing by drawing imagined parallels and potential lessons from established narratives.

Alongside these poetic parallels between the poet and mythic characters (after Penelope, other characters from the *Odyssey* will appear later on), Glück has inserted conversation-poems throughout the book, which shift from the formal, oracular quality of the character monologues or the poet's self-reflections to operate like stark, no-holds-barred glimpses into the everyday life of the poet's marriage. These conversation-poems reveal to the reader scenes that show us how love had soured between the poet and her husband, John,<sup>15</sup> leading to the dissolution of their marriage. Love had become possessive and mutually-destructive, and this destructiveness is portrayed through dialogue that is both disturbing yet funny at the same time:

One thing I've always hated  
about you. I hate that you refuse  
to have people at the house. Flaubert  
had more friends and Flaubert  
was a recluse.

Flaubert was crazy: he lived  
with his mother. (6)

The poet's own response is in the indented stanzas of such poems that are made up of arguments which "mark temporary victories or gains in an endless battle with no real victors" (Costello 55). The humour is enhanced by line breaks that serve to augment the sharp honesty of their insults ("Flaubert / had more friends...he lived / with his mother") and the surface bitchiness or the speakers' apparent need to trivially undermine each other's statements end up showing up a deeper undercurrent of mutual hurt and resentment. But this is what marriage has reduced this couple in the poem to—they have become like spiteful children. As it was in "Penelope's Song," humour is utilised as a means of repressing or managing true emotions

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<sup>15</sup> John was, in fact, already introduced in *The Wild Iris*, and in this earlier collection, the reader is already aware that the poet and John have had differences in their relationship to partly cause her depression. But as *The Wild Iris* focused on the understanding of the purpose of creation, the problems of their marriage were barely hinted at. *Meadowlands* and *Vita Nova* seem to have picked up where *The Wild Iris* left off.

that threaten to overwhelm, emotions that inevitably become even *more* exposed and revealing as a result of this layer of repression. In the case of these conversation-poems, the poet always has her last say, since this is *her* account of the marriage, even as getting the last word does not mean that her marriage problems are at all resolved (resolution will come in later poems.) What comes across most from these conversational fragments is the poet's rigidity. In the same poem, a snippet of conversation has the husband accusing the poet, "Living with you is like living / at boarding school: chicken Monday, fish Tuesday" (6). In a later poem, "Rainy Morning", the poet, in a moment of self-reflection and self-accusation, tells herself that her staying dry while her husband is running in the rain "is like the cat's pathetic / preference for hunting dead birds: completely // consistent with (her) tame spiritual themes, / autumn, loss, darkness, etc." (16).

Unlike the husband, the poet is afraid to take risks, even to walk in rain; it is a sense of inflexibility and cowardice that is most likely a cause for her husband's departure. It is perhaps a familiar element of clichéd marriage plots in which one partner becomes too staid, cold or unspontaneous, and so the other partner yearns for excitement elsewhere, such as by finding another lover. It is a cliché that is nonetheless true in the poet's case, but she is not afraid to blame herself for being a cause for the divorce. In "Void" (49), for example, the poet accuses herself of not being naturally "gregarious". In "Rainy Morning", the poet also attacks herself as a poet--a poet who writes about safe themes. A brave, physically-adventurous husband married to a frightened, rigid, reclusive, self-repressed poet--this is why, the poet suggests, the marriage is not working out. But here the poet also tells herself, "You should show people / more of yourself" (16). Perhaps this is why the poet is doing so through this book, *Meadowlands*. The poet is trying to change, even if it is already too late for such a change to save her marriage.

Readers listening to such matter-of-fact, prosaic lines as "I hate that you refuse / to have people in the house," "You should show people / more of yourself," or how the poet described Odysseus earlier as wanting his "grilled chicken," can perhaps associate this with a familiar form of present-day reality made popular by reality talk-shows like *The Oprah*

*Winfrey Show*. In such shows, self-disclosures of participants in the programme become, as bell hooks has described, “a way to engage in active self-transformation” (*Talking Back* 12), so that marginalised groups of people might empower themselves by being heard. Such matter-of-fact, plainspoken disclosures on these shows often aim to combat “the public’s complacency, hate, ignorance...inattention” (Priest 123). But unlike Oprah, the poet engages with the lives of mythical, allegorical characters. The poet, in mixing the mythic with prosaic, talk-show reality (in the form of confessional, matter-of-fact speech), is able to solicit a potentially empathetic response from her readers as well. This is similar to the way viewers of these talk-shows might achieve this sense of empathy from watching participants in television shows say things that we as the viewers would not normally talk about ourselves. Having someone else express our difficult thoughts can prove to be cathartic. As Richard Harris points out, “Hearing someone else do it (on television) partially fulfils our need to do so” (*A Cognitive Psychology of Mass Communication* 46). Confessional poetry can be said to work in the same way. Hearing the poet speak in this way can similarly be cathartic for the reader, as it may be for viewers of a reality talk-show. It becomes a part of the way in which Glück’s poetry has always been soliciting the reader’s subjective and empathetic response to the lessons that the poet learns through her own writing.

In daring to show more of herself, the poet paradoxically speaks from behind the masks of mythic characters in order to reveal and magnify aspects of her husband and herself in the disintegrating world of her marriage. Penelope was the patient and long-suffering wife in the myth, while Odysseus was the fearless traveller and adventurer. Such a parallel is obvious, but by speaking through Penelope, the poet also revealed that she was angry enough to want—even if only a little—to hurt her husband. Telemachus,<sup>16</sup> Odysseus’ and Penelope’s son, provides another perspective to the situation as a third eye to *both* his mythic parents’ and the poet’s marriages. In “Telemachus’ Kindness,” for example, the boy watches his mother working at her loom at stave off her suitors, as in the original story of Odysseus,

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<sup>16</sup> There has been no information, whether offered by critics or the poet herself, on whether the figure of Telemachus is based autobiographically on the Glück’s own real-life son.

“hypothesizing / her husband’s erotic life” (24). We see not just Penelope here but the jealous poet who is bitterly imagining what her husband must be up to away from her. But Telemachus, in his detachment, also comes to this revelation:

.....what  
 a life my mother had, without  
 compassion for my father’s  
 suffering...nor had my father  
 any sense of her courage, subtly  
 expressed as inaction, being  
 himself prone to dramatizing,  
 to acting out... (24)

Telemachus is pinpointing the key flaws in not just his parents, but also in the poet and her husband: the poet does not sufficiently appreciate that perhaps her husband had suffered (although the fact that the poet is expressing this through Telemachus suggests that the poetic process is, in fact, helping the poet to appreciate her husband’s pain after all) while staying in the marriage, while the husband failed to see that the poet’s sense of rigidity and inaction could possibly be a form of courage, and not an aversion to adventure or to living one’s life fully. Telemachus is perhaps also suggesting his father’s ocean adventure was really a form of “acting out” that meant little since it only meant that his father was incapable of keeping still and his act of leaving Penelope was not necessarily an example of daring. This sounds like a simultaneous, implicit indictment of the poet’s husband; he was not courageous enough to make the best of his marriage and he had to flee as a result of his fears of commitment.

Donning the dramatic persona of Circe, the poet imagines herself as a heartbroken, but wise and sensible sorceress:

...every sorceress is  
 a pragmatist at heart; nobody  
 sees essence who can’t  
 face limitation. If I wanted only to hold you

I could hold you prisoner. (38)

Circe is speaking to Odysseus, who is about to leave her in the same way he left Penelope after enjoying a liaison with her. First Penelope, now another mythical female, Circe, has appeared in the book to share her own tragedy of separation. These diverse examples of separation--portrayed at the level of myth and in the poet's personal life--emphasise how this sundering has affected the poet so deeply that she has to produce different voices in order to make sense of her existence in the aftermath of love's dissolution. This time in "Circe's Power," however, the male lover, Odysseus, is leaving the woman, Circe, out of guilt for betraying his wife, and not for wanting to explore the world. The sorceress is a pragmatist, and the condensed philosophical statement about "essence" and "limitation" hints at the poet's own desire to see her own break-up with as cold and practical an eye; if the sorceress, with all her power, can accept the "essence" of her lover's limited desire for her and let him go without using her magic to stop him, the poet probably believes that she too should be able to let John go in a similar way. By speaking through these different mythic personae and invoking their individual stories, she is not just able to distance herself from the immediate pain of her own marriage, but she is able to compare these lives to her own in the hope of learning from them.

It is particularly in the final few conversation-poems that we get the clearest sense of reconciliation and recovery in the poet's life. These conversational intermissions have so far been providing a stark contrast to the formal poeticism of other moments in the book by offering a sharper and more private reality of the mutual hurt and emotional abuse the poet and the husband have suffered with each other. In an earlier conversation-poem, "The Butterfly," John asks the poet to make a wish on a butterfly, and although the poet says in typically cold and over-analytical fashion, "You don't wish on butterflies" (44), she makes a wish. But after she does so, John's curt and cruel reply comes, "It doesn't count" (44). It is a moment of near tenderness ruined by the husband's pettiness and resentment, negative feelings that disappear in a later conversation-poem, "The Wish." In the latter poem, the

husband confesses, “The time I lied to you / about the butterfly. I always wondered / what you wished for” (58). At this point, the marriage is clearly over as the husband asks if the poet had wished secretly for him to come back into her life, that they would “somehow be together in the end” (58). But the poet has clearly become wiser and more mature now when she simply replies, “I wished for another poem” (58). This wish becomes symbolic of the need to keep on writing or reading (the line does not specify which) so that one might attain rewarding revelations about ourselves. It is a signal to us readers too, encouraging us to remember that literature can potentially save us from grief and loss, as poetry is shown here to give the poet the resilience to move on from a broken heart.

The last poem of the book is a conversation-poem again and this time the poet is talking to John about throwing a party (suggesting that she is accommodating his wish for her to be more social) in which “no one’s / going to be hurt again. / For one night, affection / will triumph over passion. The passion / will all be in the music” (61). The poet’s desire to move on from her grievances is manifested more clearly here than anywhere else in the book, especially since it is the last poem of the book, but in this closing scene, the poet tells John that this happy party would happen “for one night” (61) only; optimism would only be brief. There is a sense of uncertainty here, in that although the poet clearly wants to triumph over the passionate forces of her grief and loss, it is possible that she might not necessarily win in the end, and that bitterness and rage might take over again. As *Meadowlands* ends, the poet’s progressive discovery of a new position on love, life and poetry finds its continuation in *Vita Nova*. If Dante’s *La Vita Nuova* centred on the celebration and spiritual elevation of courtly love, Glück’s collection--titled in pre-Dantean Latin--speaks of love’s aftermath, focusing on what James Longenbach has called “the death of love and the rebirth of vocation” (137). As Longenbach also points out, T. S. Eliot has described Dante’s work as “a record of experience reshaped into a particular form” (Eliot 97), which is similarly applicable to what Glück is hoping to achieve in *Vita Nova*, in which the poet is attempting to reorder her experience of the past through poetic form in order to enter the future with a renewed perspective. Dialogue in *Vita Nova* takes place between different mythic personae, who are often opposed to each



other. Glück seems to deliberately juxtapose these “overlapping, eccentric positions” (Longenbach 142) as part of her exploration of different ways of looking at love and her poetic life. The poet also argues dramatically with herself--in poems interspersed throughout *Vita Nova* in a way similar to the conversation-poems in *Meadowlands*--in order to gain fresh insight into herself.

The first title poem, “Vita Nova,” starts off with a declaration directed to her husband, in passionately longer lines, which hints at a potentially newfound capacity for happiness without the usual self-conscious and self-abusive irony, “You saved me, you should remember me” (1). Then the poem launches into the past:

Laughter, because the air is full of apple blossoms.

When I woke up, I realised I was capable of the same feeling.

I remember sounds like that from my childhood,  
laughter for no cause, simply because the world is beautiful,  
something like that. (1)

The poet is waking up one day to realise that she is capable of feeling the same kind of innocent joy that she used to feel as a child, a moment that disintegrates when the poet interjects as a casual afterthought in the present, “something like that.” Fresh from the separation in *Meadowlands*, the poet discovers that time has perhaps a part to play in her emotional healing. As if by sheer coincidence, she suddenly remembers that at this stage in her life, she could be “hungry for life, utterly confident” (2) once again. It is an innocence that she writes about in the second poem, “Aubade,” where she writes that the world for her growing up felt “whole always, not / a chip of something, with / the self at the center” (3). It is a nostalgic feeling of completeness that the poet hopes to feel again in order to experience joy again, even as she knows that it is impossible to feel this way for very long ever again. Having established her desire for joy, which is more positive a gesture than indulging in the memory of loss and emotional suffering, the poet feels ready to test her heart against the blade

of the past by imagining herself as the Dido (speaking royally in the third person) in “The Queen of Carthage,” talking to her ladies in waiting:

Aeneas...

I asked the Fates

to permit him to return my passion...

What difference

between that and a lifetime: in truth, in such moments,

they are the same, they are both eternity....

Now the Queen of Carthage

will accept suffering as she accepted favour:

to be noticed by the Fates

is some distinction after all... (5)

Here the poet accepts that the time spent in a meaningful relationship is eternity enough, even if, paradoxically, it does not last; to live in the moment of love is to already live as if the moment *is* eternal, as we are blind to time for that duration of passion and contentment. To suffer for love is also refigured here as something heroic. Even though love might not last, it can still be proof that one has lived life to the fullest; every moment given to passion is also a moment when one may experience a sense of eternity. This is again contrary to the conventional marriage plot that Joseph Boone has criticised for suggesting that women are nothing without a permanent partnership of love. The poet is suggesting here that to have loved once is of “some distinction after all,” and in *Vita Nova* she demonstrates that it is also possible to move on from love, having experienced it and learnt its lessons, without being lost or the lesser for it.

The poet is more inclined to philosophise in *Vita Nova* than in *Meadowlands*, where she was more likely to accuse and express her tortured emotions about her failed love-life. Her desire to accept--in a more detached way *sans* the same degree of emotionality as in *Meadowlands*--that love does not last, is played out in *Vita Nova* in this first of many self-

argumentative poems, “The Burning Heart,” where the poet writes (with certain statements repeated dramatically to produce different answers):

Ask her if the fire hurts.

I remember

we were together...

we were not together but profoundly separate.

Ask her if the fire hurts.

You expect to live forever with your husband

in fire more durable than the world.

I suppose this wish was granted,

where we are now being both

fire and eternity. (9)

The repeated instruction is like a constant question for which there is no conclusive response, as demonstrated by the poet’s internal voice, which responds differently each time it is confronted by the statement, “Ask her if the fire hurts.” Here the poet seems to dig deep into her own mind in order to arrive at the new knowledge that even when both the husband and the poet were still together, they had already been apart by turning into different people (“fire” can also hint at the hell that the poet’s marriage became, resulting in its denouement). When the instruction by the poet to ask her own self about the fire is given again, it is as if this revelation has lost its power (since the fire of her hunger for love is not by any means lessened by it), and the poet is forced to come up with a new response. This time, the response about “fire and eternity” is more satisfactory, since it chimes in with what is already assumed by the instruction (and its implicit, rhetorical question), which is that the fire endures (“eternity”), regardless of whether one is alone or not--the longing for love is never extinguished.

As examples of figures for whom the longing for love is a source of constant heartache, the poet speaks through more mythological characters who are painfully in love. These figures sound like public confessors on a present-day reality show and they resonate with an authenticity that allows readers to live vicariously through these characters as they reflect on their own parallel, subjective experiences. In “Orfeo,” the poet turns herself into a tragic hero declaring melodramatically, and with ironic bitterness: “I have lost my Eurydice, / I have lost my lovers...and it seems to me I have never been in better voice” (18). Here the poet learns that her personal grief has made her poetry richer, as she writes in Orfeo’s own voice later in the poem, “(T)here is no music like this / without real grief” (18). This is exactly what the poet has been doing through these poems all the way from *Meadowlands* till now, using poetry and creating different voices to elevate the tragic circumstances of her failed relationship into art and a source of poetic revelations about the meaning of love and existence. Without suffering, she would have had nothing to write about; there would be no artistic achievement. As Eurydice, the poet, in “Descent to the Valley,” imagines the future as a kind of afterlife in the netherworld, where, unexpectedly, “the valley itself (is) not mist-covered / but fertile and tranquil” (19). On the one hand, a future after one has lost one’s love could be seen as a form of emotional hell, but the poet turns this possibility on its head by suggesting that, like the underworld, the future is to be positively anticipated for its promises of peace and happiness.

This is again a new example of the poet’s need to revise a previous perspective, in order to live again in the world with a sense of hope and joy. From *Meadowlands* to *Vita Nova*, the poet has moved from a place of emotional detachment, repressing bitterness and grief, to a gradual, but imperfect, sense of optimism and openness to the possibility of making peace with the past. She is even a little humorous without any bitter irony, as in “Condo,” when she describes a dream:

...it was  
 my apartment in Plainfield, twenty years ago,  
 except I’d added a commercial stove.

Deep-rooted

passion for the second floor! Just because  
the past is longer than the future  
doesn't mean there is no future.

The dream is also a reminder to the poet that she was hopeful once, such as when she used to live alone before the marriage in her new, second-floor apartment. The poet is also reminding herself here that the future is still ever present, even when she might not know it from being stuck in the remembering the difficult past. The newfound lightness in the poet's tone suggests that time has finally allowed the poet to outlive her negative emotions, and it is time that the poet turns to in order to experience life anew in the present, by drawing strength from a point in the past beyond recent, painful memories.

The poet's growing light-heartedness continues in "Immortal Love," a poem which echoes the first poem of *Meadowlands*, "Penelope's Song." The poet was not explicit in the earlier poem about what "soul" meant, but in "Immortal Love," the title gives it away. With regards to "Penelope's Song", I suggested that "soul" referred to Penelope's secret longing for Odysseus, in spite of her growing resentment over him leaving her in the first place. In "Immortal Love," the "soul" looks out of the body (not just the poet's body, but a metaphor that refers to all our bodies in a universal way), and ventures out in hunger. "Immortal Love" is really a desire shared by all of us to be loved and desired. But unlike "Penelope's Song," there is no repressed desire to harm a lover who has left the poet. Instead, the poet is thinking abstractly about God, in a way reminiscent of *The Wild Iris*, the collection before *Meadowlands*, and how when the "soul" leaves the body to meet another person's "soul" in mutual desire, the "soul" is in a sense homeless and lost to God:

How will god find you  
if you are never in one place  
long enough, never  
in the home he gave you?

Or do you believe  
 you have no home, since god  
 never meant to contain you? (23)

Love, longing and desire, in the context of these poems, all seem to mean the same thing, in the sense that they are types of an undeniable hunger that takes the poet out of herself, beyond the body, beyond rationality, and there is nothing the poet can do to control it. In the next poem, “Earthly Love,” the poet comes to another conclusion about this hunger and our inability to protect ourselves from it:

We are all human—  
 we protect ourselves  
 as well as we can  
 even to the point of denying  
 clarity...

And yet, within this deception,  
 true happiness occurred...  
 Nor does it seem to me  
 crucial to know  
 whether or not such happiness  
 is built on illusion:  
 it has its own reality.

And in either case, it will end. (25)

The poet realises in this poem that her marriage was founded on a deception--that it was voluntary and that it would last. If “Immortal Love” spoke of an ideal situation when the soul can be given up completely to another, “Earthly Love” speaks of the idea of giving up one’s life to another in a love-union as a form of delusion. Although both the poet and her husband had felt “alive” (24) during their marriage, it was only much later in her life that the poet

began to “think otherwise” (24), since the marriage eventually became a prison that both parties wanted to escape from; the feeling of a free and life-elevating love was a lie. Regardless of this possibly painful revelation, the poet is calmly able to accept now that it is not important to dwell on whether she has been deceived, since the experience had given her happiness, and also because that experience of love--real or false--did not last. This chimes in with an earlier poem, “Unwritten Law,” where the poet tells us that her husband had taught her the meaninglessness of the term, “absolutely,” in the context of giving one’s heart completely to another. Love, for the poet, has become an irresolvable paradox, both a deception and a reality, and it does not matter what love is, since it will, in any case, come to an end.

Not entirely satisfied with this conclusion, the poet interrogates herself in “Mutable Earth,” asking such questions as “Are you healed or do you only think you’re healed?” (29) In this poem, the poet also admits within her own mind, “Like a costume, my numbness / was taken away. Then / hunger was added” (30); the poet, traumatised into a state of numbness by the marriage, feels the desire to love again. It marks a big change in the poet now, one of optimism and a willingness to look at the future (to play a part in it like a character in a play) without fear of being hurt again. This optimism swells in the poem “Nest,” a poem akin to the parable poems of *Meadowlands*, where the poet observes nature to gain insight into her life. In “Nest,” however, the observation takes place in a dream, and in the dream, a bird is making its nest under the poet’s watchful eye. This time the poet is determined to watch as “a witness, not a theorist” (37). If before the poet had been rigidly, over-analytical (a suggested factor in the failure of her marriage in *Meadowlands*), she is willing to change now, to simply observe the world without guard or preconceived prejudices. The bird, in making its home, “took what there was: the / available material. Spirit wasn’t enough. // And then it wove like the first Penelope / but toward a different end” (37). This is another link to *Meadowlands*, where the poet realises that she is no longer the hurt and dejected Penelope but that--like the bird--it might be possible for the poet to weave a new future for herself, unlike Penelope, who was weaving symbolic strands of her past to protect herself from a possible future without

Odysseus. “Nest” continues to demonstrate the poet’s newly positive perspective, after watching the bird in the dream:

First I was at peace.  
 Then I was contented, satisfied.  
 And then flashes of joy.  
 And the season changed—for all of us,  
 of course. (39)

The poet is no longer her own island of sadness and even feels ready to enter (“of course”) the world and its possibilities of happiness (“flashes of joy”) once again. In another moment of intense self-questioning, the poet in “Inferno” insists on framing and re-framing this movement away from negativity in more rigorously philosophical terms:

The world changed. I walked out of the fire  
 into a different world—maybe  
 the world of the dead, for all I know.  
 Not the end of need but need  
 raised to the highest power. (43)

The fire of her earlier life, the pain of her difficult marriage, was really a result of a need (or hunger, as I have earlier characterised this need for love) that she repressed after the marriage was over; now that the poet is ready to face the world again, she admits that this need will take over her life again, a need that might or not be satisfied. She is entering the future not knowing if she will be hurt again. But she is also entering the future with a renewed purpose to live life again, and to answer the call within her that she later succinctly phrases at the end of “The Mystery” as “*Who are you and what is your purpose?*” Readers who have been following and relating subjectively with the poet’s journey of emotional healing are encouraged to answer this fundamental, existential question in relation to their own lives. It is the same, central question the poet asked in *The Wild Iris*, where she argued with God about the purpose of creation and her existence, then ends up being spiritually reborn as a poet connected to God. In *Ararat* too, the poet asked at its start, “Why should I tire myself,



debating, arguing?" ("Parados" 15) and learns that, through a poetic questioning of the past, she is able to envision it anew. Since *Ararat* the poet--through her poems and from one book to another--has been on an implied journey of self-discovery and questioning. Through each book, a sustained plot reveals itself to show how the poet is trying to rethink the traumatic events in her life so as to rediscover her capacity for happiness. Now in *Vita Nova*, the poet has been trying to survive another crisis and is entering a new phase of self-renewal.

With a mix of humour and a remnant of ironic bitterness, the plot of the poet's emotional and poetic development in *Vita Nova* ends with the title poem, in which the poet explains her divorce to Blizzard, her dog (but soon to be her ex-husband's dog), as if it were the child of her ex-husband and herself:

Daddy needs you; Daddy's heart is empty,  
not because he's leaving Mommy but because  
the kind of love he wants Mommy  
doesn't have, Mommy's  
too ironic--Mommy wouldn't do  
the rhumba in the driveway. (50)

The reason for the marriage failing is summed up in a few lines, and given, funnily enough, to a dog. But also the poet is addressing herself indirectly, turning her own life into a bland, slightly tragic, soap-opera plot, as a kind of self-deprecating joke, which also means that since she can implicitly laugh at herself, there is great chance that she is strong enough to enter a new life without hanging on to memories of her past relationship. Addressing the dog again, the poet suggests that Blizzard might "grow up into a poet" (51) one day, perhaps so that, in a surreal way, the dog would learn to order its world through poetry, as the poet herself has done in gleaning insights about her marriage and about her own self. "Life is very weird", the poet writes near the end, "no matter how it ends, / very filled with dreams" (51). Delusion or reality, life is made of dreams, even till the every end, suggests the poet. The tone is casual, conversational, and carefree. But it is contrasted straightaway with these lines that close the book:

*I thought my life was over and my heart was broken.*

*Then I moved to Cambridge. (51)*

Italicised, the sentences resound like final pronouncements. The first line carries a cliché about the broken heart and the self-pitying lover (which accurately describes the poet when she was coping with the loss of love) who cannot believe she or he can carry on living. But the last, deflationary line comes unexpectedly and ironically, mimicking the brusqueness of life as it forces us to move on from our sorrows, whether we wish to or not. It is a moment of ironic humour that suggests that since the poet can laugh, albeit a little bitterly, about it at this point, she is surely also resilient enough to carry on surviving with her broken heart into the future. By the end of *Vita Nova*, it is with some achievement that the poet seems resolute and strong enough to live with the uncertainty of her future, although she has yet to learn how to enjoy--without any repressed bitterness--her existence more fully (this is something she will learn in the later two poetry collections to come.)

## Chapter 5: Life and the Afterlife

Since *Ararat* the poet has embarked on an overarching journey to find beauty and joy in a world without certainty, a journey that started with a positive re-visioning of the past to a search for spiritual truth, followed by the survival of a broken marriage; each collection marked a point of rebirth, of self-discovery and renewal. Now in *The Seven Ages* (2001) and *Averno* (2006), the poet has arrived at a late stage in her life and she has chosen to enter the realm of allegory while confronting her own mortality; compared to the earlier books, Glück is most ambitious in these two collections in attempting to go beyond just using mythical characters to create anonymously allegorical figures to universalise her personal grievances about mortality, such that readers may participate in her poems more than ever before.

Joanne Feit Diehl has written that *The Seven Ages* “has leapt to a new, unexpected cave or eyrie on some cliff wall from which the poet can overlook the spectacle of human life” (24). Although the poet still captures moments from her own life in lyric poems that pin them down to a timeless present, they are framed within a larger plot about an allegorical figure that chooses to be human and the universal lessons of mortality it is forced to confront. The title is taken from Jacques’ monologue in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* about the seven stages of man’s life from “infant” to “second childishness” (Act II, Scene VII, lines 139-166). The reference to rebirth in Jacques’ monologue helps to thematise the notion of rebirth that has been central to Glück’s poetic journey. But in this case, this rebirth of “second childishness” is ironised, as Glück regards her entry into old age as anything but childish in her tenth collection of poetry; old-age for her is an occasion for deeper and profound questioning about the meaning and purpose of existence. The number of ages is also not important, as the book’s emphasis is really on an all-encompassing vision of a lifelong, universal struggle to find meaning and beauty in order to live, after which *Averno* comes as the afterlife of *The Seven Ages*. In the poet’s last book, readers will hear the voice of Persephone, another mythical figure, speaking out of time (past and present are conflated during her confessions about death) to the reader; her narration makes sense as a result of an

implied, background plot about Persephone's rape by Hades and how she has been forced to move between two worlds, one on earth and one in the underworld. This is not taken into account by the misleading editorial synopsis provided by the publisher of *Averno*, which describes the collection as "an extended lamentation" that is "no less spellbinding for being without plot or hope." Without the plot about Persephone, which forms the backbone of the poems, readers would lose a vital context which holds the whole collection together.

The first title poem, "The Seven Ages," introduces the poet's imagined spirit that remembers its first dream of the living world before entering it:

In my first dream the world appeared  
 the sweet, the forbidden  
 but there was no garden, only  
 raw elements...  
 the salt, the bitter, the demanding, the preemptive...

Earth was given to me in a dream

In a dream I possessed it (3-4)

The "I" here is clearly no longer the poet's autobiographical "I," nor does it solely belong to a mythical figure; it is, in a sense, a more universal and allegorical "I" that the poet has introduced in order to discuss the price of our existence. Already, in this first poem, we have a fleeting summary of a life; the spirit in the poem learns that the world is made up of "raw elements" with which it had to create its own beauty. Although none of us can imagine a time before time when we actually *made* the choice to live on earth, the poet here gives us the illusion of this remembered choice, so as to emphasise afresh a common sense of disappointment at learning that the world is not always beautiful; the poet suggests that this disappointment is a result of the earth's betrayal of our expectations. A world made up of "the salt, the bitter, the demanding, the preemptive" is the harsh reality confronted by the spirit. Even though the world might be a disappointment, a dream which, nonetheless, the spirit

recognises as one that will not last in any case; life becomes a dream too that will end upon waking, when the spirit returns to its original spirit form again after death.

By introducing this anonymous spirit, the poet is encouraging readers to create the allegorical “I” for themselves through the figure of this spirit, as it goes on to encounter lessons and revelations about its existence in Glück’s poetic world. In the next poem, “The Sensual World,” the spirit is no longer dreaming but calling out to other spirits this time like a knowing guide, those spirits who have not yet appeared on earth to be human: “I call to you across a mountain river or chasm / to caution you, to prepare you” (6). The first spirit is speaking to the others from experience, as the former is presumably living on earth now--in the form of the poet herself. The story of the spirit is symbolic but also simultaneously autobiographical, as the poet remembers her grandmother in a moment of childhood when the latter was stewing plums and apricots for her grandchild, a time when the world was full of promise and quiet: “deep privacy of the sensual life, // the self disappearing into it...somehow suspended, floating” (6). But time is ever moving ahead and the spirit warns its kind, “Your body will age, you will continue to need. // You will want the earth, then more of the earth...it will feed you, it will ravish you, / it will not keep you alive” (7). The spirit is possibly reminding us that to be mortal is to suffer permanent discontentment; we will be left to die with none of our desires fully satisfied.

To further connect with the reader, “I” soon turns to the all-inclusive “we” in a poem like “Fable,” one of three poems in the book with the same title, in which we are told that “(w)e had, each of us, a set of wishes” (9) that were never answered completely, resulting in “disasters and catastrophes” (9). The poet here also writes about how even though all our “wishes” (our hopes and desires for meaning in the world) were different, a common wish binds us all--“the wish to go back” (9) to an original state before life, the imagined, Edenic realm which the poet imagined as the first home of the spirit before descending to earth. But for us (the poet, the reader, and analogously all of humankind), while we are alive, this wish is “never granted” (9) by our bodies, even as we crave for a state of absolute peace, since our desires (physical and spiritual) can never be absolutely fulfilled.

After “Fable,” the spirit turns back into the poet in “Youth” to show what lessons were learnt when it was human, starting from a moment in childhood. In the poem, the speaker remembers reading with her sister in front of the television, recalling her childhood melancholy: “Sad sounds of our growing up— / twilight of cellos” (13). It is a memory of growing up under a “terrifying familiar will” (13) that insisted upon them not questioning their lives. But then the poem jumps in the end to the present and the poet imagines the world now as a world that “no longer exists. / It has become the present: unending and without form” (14). In the wake of an oppressive and monotonous childhood, the poet suggests that the present seems as free and unknowable as the afterlife.

It is from this point in the book, as well as in the poet’s career, that Glück begins to speak with the greatest sense of optimism, an unambiguous optimism garnered from having to confront her diminishing mortality. In a subsequent poem, “Birthday,” the poet remembers herself as a young, depressive girl at her own birthday party, filled with the “terror and hopelessness of a soul expecting annihilation” (20). She was a girl who was full of “spiritual rigidity” and the “insistent / unmasking of the ordinary to reveal the tragic” (20). Now in her present age, the poet realises in hindsight that this immature form of cynicism was really a kind of “innocence of the world” (20); her younger self had been unable to accept “the partial, the shifting, the mutable--all that the absolute excludes” (21)--nature of the world (a fact she learns perhaps more tragically during the time of her divorce, as portrayed in Glück’s earlier two collections.) The poet also remembers how after the party, her heart would “leap up exultant” but also “collapse / in desolate anguish” (21) just as quickly while thinking about time: how much time had passed, how much she had grown, and how much time she has left in the future. As a younger self, the poet focused only on the anguish, never taking into account, until now, that during such moments in the past, she had encountered joy too: “The leaping up—the half I didn’t count— / that was happiness; that is what the word meant” (21).

Soon after “Birthday,” the poet becomes less of her individual poet-self and more of the allegorical, thoughtful spirit again, but with a sense of despair and resentment, as if the act of remembering before had been painful: “I asked for the earth; I received earth, like so much

/ mud in the face” (22). The spirit also prays to angels for meaning in sentences that it would make “better and clearer, as though one might elude forever all misconstruction” (23), and begins to understand that the angels were not listening at all. It began to find a masochistic joy in repeatedly writing and refining these prayers (in the same way the poet repeatedly produces poems not in praise or entreaty to a distant, divine force, but *because* of the absence of such a force): “how charged and meaningful the nights’ continuous silence and opacity” (23). By the end of this poem, the spirit and the poet slip back into one voice and poetry is self-consciously recognised as a rewarding way of managing a void of meaning at the centre of the speaker’s existence. Another way that the spirit/poet grappled with the void was by falling in love, even as love turned ultimately into a disaster (as shown in two collections before this one)--the fact is that at least the spirit/poet had experienced it.

The lessons of love are summarised in “From a Journal” (a private diary), the poem after “Birthday”:

I loved once, I loved twice,  
and even though in our case  
things never got off the ground...

And I feel, sometimes, part of something  
very great, wholly profound and sweeping. (26)

Time has certainly granted the speaker here the ability to find joy in even painful memories now. After despairing over the loss of love, she now sees herself as part of a greater, universal story about human desire of which she was at least a heroic, passionate part.

If love was the painful subject of *Meadowlands* and *Vita Nova*, the speaker remembers her childhood in a way reminiscent of the retrospective reflections of *Ararat* in a few poems after “From a Journal,” in which the speaker recollects an earlier and futile longing for absolutes--“I sat with my legs arranged to resemble...what I believed was my true self” (“Summer at the Beach” 34), or how her sister and she struggled to apprehend a world that “could never be mastered” (“Civilization” 37). Then in another “Fable” poem, the reader

is reminded of the experience of reading *The Wild Iris* next, when the speaker turns to nature again, as she has done before, to project her existential anxiety:

The weather grew mild, the snow melted—  
 spring overtook it.  
 And then summer. And time stopped  
 because we stopped waiting.

And summer lasted. It lasted  
 because we were happy. (49)

This is also reminiscent of the last poem of *The Wild Iris*, in which the flower reveals to the poet that to live in the present is to experience eternity--a form of perfection--after all. The poet is finally learning to enjoy her existence, and giving up her wait for absolute meanings. The spirit/poet has succinctly created a poetic retrospective of all her central concerns from the earlier books to demonstrate how much she had to go through and learn from in order to achieve her state of contentment now.

But even at this point in *The Seven Ages*, she is still not one to trust her own position of happy certainty for too long. In the penultimate poem, "Summer Night," for example, she writes:

Desire, loneliness, wind in the flowering almond—  
 surely these are the great, the inexhaustible subjects  
 to which my predecessors apprenticed themselves.  
 I hear them echo in my own heart, disguised as convention...  
 what be dearer than this, given the closeness of death? (67)

These "inexhaustible subjects" are also the subjects that have gripped all her poems so far; the spirit/poet is recognising that to keep discussing these topics is to also fall into a trap of complacency, such that the discussion becomes meaninglessly repetitive (a "convention"). She is refusing to be complacent, so that she may not leave her sense of despair completely behind even when she is now full of joy. Joy, for the poet, is persistently shadowed by the



reality of death, and by a requisite melancholy, particularly in her present age. The spirit/poet writes about desire and loneliness now, as her predecessors did before her, because such topics *should* continue to remain central to her life; both sorrow and joy require an equal status in her mind.

The last poem with the title, “Fable,” is also the closing poem of the book:

Then I looked down and saw  
 the world I was entering, that would be my home.  
 And I turned to my companion, and I said *Where are we?*  
 And he replied *Nirvana*.  
 And I said again *But the light will give us no peace.* (68)

Glück plays with time again and loops it back to the beginning. Speaking purely in the voice of the allegorical figure one last time, the moment captured here at the end of the book is the same as at the start when the spirit was about to be human. The transition is captured here as a kind of falling, which is similar to Martin Heidegger’s notion of falling as “a definite existential characteristic of Dasein” (Heidegger 220), whereby Dasein is a largely involuntary state of being engaged in the world. The poem speaks as much about the fact that we did not choose to be born, as it does about how being born into existence would “*give us no peace*” or sense of closure, in terms of discovering a fundamental purpose for our being. The reference to “*Nirvana*” also spells the speaker’s mocking rejection of the Buddhist concept of enlightenment and emancipation from desire. The speaker here seems to suggest that as long as one is conscious and alive, one will never be free from desire--to be alive is to never experience nirvana; any experience of nirvana will only be a brief illusion.

Glück is clearly not eager to seek easy solace by subscribing to a religious, meta-narrative ordering all our lives. The repetition of the title “Fable” also emphasises how the allegorical journey that the spirit has taken in *The Seven Ages* is itself an edifying fable about the human condition. Fables are often told through anthropomorphised, non-human characters and in this case, the plot of this fable centres on the journey of a bodiless spirit as it is born, then as it takes on the form of the poet, through whom it learns the harsh lessons of a life

without absolutes. Ending the book this way shows again that the poet is never satisfied with the *idée fixe*; she is not about to remain complacent in her position of acceptance and calm. To be alive is to have “no peace,” after all, and to enjoy no closure to the large, existential questions made clear by life and art, a point she has adamantly made known in this and previous collections, and it is a point she has chosen to end the book with now. If life brings no peace, death too brings its own troubles, as when Glück takes on the afterlife in her subsequent volume.

As *Vita Nova* was the aftermath of *Meadowlands*, *Averno* is the afterlife of *The Seven Ages*. The presence of the poetic speaker in *Averno* shades into allegory and the poet’s focus is no longer on mortality and death, but on what comes after death. There is a more complex ambiguity in *Averno* with regards to who is speaking within the poems, even though the book is held together by a central plot about Persephone who is forced to live in the underworld. The poet’s individual personality often becomes more hidden in order for the internal life of Persephone or other figures in the book to gain greater prominence within the poems. One possible reason for this might be that since the poet’s private struggle with the meaning of existence has been resolved (with her newfound capacity to balance despair with an equal measure of joy and acceptance of the world) in *The Seven Ages*, the poet can now afford to play more in the realm of symbols and allegory, without having to draw too much from the poet’s memory.

*Averno* starts with “The Night Migrations,” which serves as a brief, philosophical prologue to the drama that is to unfold. In this first poem, Glück writes about how the dead will not be able to enjoy looking at “the red berries” or “the birds’ night migrations” (1), but the poet also writes at the end that maybe the soul might have no more need for such pleasures: “maybe just not being is simply enough, / hard as that is to imagine” (1). The poet is preparing us for a re-imagining of death that is not something we should dread. It is difficult to imagine, but in *Averno*, the poet will prove that it is not impossible. The second poem, “October,” expresses the extent of this difficulty. Death is barely disguised in the

metaphor of winter, as an unnamed speaker (which could also very well be just the poet speaking *as* herself) laments the coming of winter's "terror and cold":

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

wasn't my body  
 rescued, wasn't it safe...

terror and cold,  
 didn't they just end, wasn't the back garden  
 harrowed and planted— (5)

Written in an apostrophic present, the speaker is addressing an unknowable speaker that could very well be her own terrified self (in the attempt to comfort herself against the fear of what is to come). Before the poems in *Averno*, readers would have been able to know who was speaking at any time, and even if the speaker was a little ambiguous, there would only be one or two options as to who the speaker was. In *The Wild Iris*, for example, readers were meant to guess that the flowers were simply different aspects of the poet's mind, as well as symbolic figures for universal human questions regarding the meaning of creation. In *Meadowlands*, it is always clear which Homeric character is speaking at any time, even as the figure can stand for both the poet herself or for a universal figure of emotional suffering. Here in *Averno*, the speaker in a poem like "October" can turn out to be any number of possible characters: Demeter, Persephone, Glück herself, or any anonymous man or woman recovering from personal loss and being forced to face a depressing change in climate. A long night of winter of winter is about to begin again and it could very well be the end of life, but this is a recurring winter ("winter again...cold again"), for which the speaker is not prepared to face again, for being traumatised by the previous winter. If it is Persephone speaking at this point, the winter for her could represent the enforced sojourn of hell--"terror and cold"--that awaits

her as a result of the deal between Demeter and Hades. If the speaker is Demeter, it is Persephone's mother dreading the winter because she knows she will lose her child again.

Winter becomes associated with a violent separation, but also with violence in part 2 of "October":

Summer after summer has ended,  
 balm after violence:  
 it does me no good  
 to be good to me now;  
 violence has changed me...  
 you can't touch my body now  
 It has changed once, it has hardened,  
 don't ask it to respond again. (7)

As seen in the above extract, even the balm of summer can bring the speaker no peace; the speaker's body responds no longer to the relief that another season brings, given that winter is traumatic (and that winter will recur); trauma has become a part of the speaker's mind. The mind's voice, expressed here through the atemporalised space of the lyric, is the voice of shock that is possibly talking to itself as a desperate process of recovery, futile as such a process might be in the end. The ambiguity of the speaker also allows for the possibility that anyone who has been through such harrowing events as rape could be speaking here; it is a universal voice of terror here of someone uncertain of whether she would ever move on again from her traumatic experience. Time has stopped for the poem's victim of trauma, as dramatised by the apostrophic sense of lines like "Summer after summer...it does me no good" and "You hear this voice? This is my mind's voice," where the present tense evokes a painfully extended present without end, which is an accurate way of describing how a part of the trauma-victim's mind is living in an atemporal mode that does not allow the victim to move on completely from the difficult past; this past will always haunt her memory in the present. Regardless of who is speaking in the poem, the speaker is one who has endured trauma, so much so that even when winter is over, and "bits of green" are showing again

through the ice on the ground, the speaker cannot help but realise that death is not so bad after all. It was being alive that had wounded the speaker in the first place, a fact realised in part 3, when the speaker laments, “death cannot harm me / more than you have harmed me, / my beloved life” (10).

If “October” was ambiguous with regards to the speaker’s identity, Glück takes one of these possible identities and introduces us to her story in the next poem, “Persephone the Wanderer.” Here the plot about Persephone is introduced, and the poet also philosophises about what the story means, establishing it as the key plot that frames the book:

...did she cooperate in her rape,  
 or was she drugged, violated against her will,  
 as happens so often now to modern girls...

you do not choose  
 the way you live. You do not live;  
 you are not allowed to die. (17-18)

This sense of Persephone’s lifelong imprisonment is universalised when the poet seems to even address the reader here: “*You* do not choose / the way *you* live” (my emphasis).

Existence is like a form of rape, Glück seems to suggest, in which we are unwitting puppets controlled by desires not of our choosing, and by the relationships that shape our lives. Like Persephone, none of us is really free. In accordance with Glück’s mythical method, the poet draws a connection from the prosaic to the mythic when she refers to “modern girls,” which is a shorthand way of referring to a form of contemporary reality portrayed popularly by television talk shows, in which such reality is evoked through the discussion of such issues as rape, divorce, and love affairs, allowing disenfranchised groups in society to speak out on topics that are otherwise considered too explicit or taboo. This popular brand of television self-disclosure works to creating a more popular, down-to-earth form of reality--one could use bell hooks’ notion of “counter hegemonic discourse” (“Marginality as Site of Resistance” 341) to describe this reality, a cathartic form of “talking back” against a social environment

that discourages such moot confessions--for followers of such programmes. Both viewers and participants in the show can undergo catharsis, part of a process of healing, as a result of being heard and empathised with. Glück also undergoes, and simultaneously solicits from her reader, an individual process of catharsis and healing, when she elevates prosaic reality to the mythic, transcendental and universalising realm, a reality she successfully evokes when she refers to “modern girls,” or when she engages with such popular, talk-show topics as rape, drugs (Persephone is portrayed as taking drugs in order to cope with depression in a later poem “Averno”) divorce, or family dysfunction (she explored the latter two topics in her earlier collections).

More so than in any of Glück’s previous collections, any reader is now able to associate herself with her central characters in a new, extensive, and potentially more cathartic way. When Persephone herself seems to speak--but not unambiguously--in the following poem, “Landscape,” she has already been wandering the earth, a spectral observer behaving as if she were in the transition of moving from life to death. Glück opens a symbolic space in this poem through which readers can interpret the figure of Persephone, as well as the man or woman she is observing, symbolically--any of them could stand for any of us who is approaching the end of a life. In the poem, the man’s dog has gone before him to see the path ahead, the unknowable road that leads metaphorically into oblivion, as the man calls out to his dog to see if it is safe to keep walking:

Over and over he calls out among the dark chestnut trees.

Until the animal responds...

as though this thing we fear were not terrible.

Twilight: the stranger has untied his horse.

The sound of the sea—

just memory now. (41)

With great detachment, both Persephone and the man approach the end with mixed feelings of fear (“*as though* this thing...were not terrible”) with a contradictory sense of acceptance and calm. However, if one were to read this solely from Persephone’s point of view, which we can, the sense of terror would be much stronger (since she knows far more than the man about what to expect in death and what is to come is indeed, for her, “terrible”) than if we were to read this from another person’s perspective. In any case, readers can commiserate with Persephone too, for whom death can also be seen as both a release, as well as a source of terror.

In part “5,” the speaker becomes increasingly symbolic (the poet is using her strategy to further disembodify her poetic voice, even to the point that its identity is a complete mystery, in order to find new perspective for herself):

...we rode quickly, in the hope of finding  
shelter before darkness...

Then the snow was thick, the path vanished...

And I thought: if I am asked  
to return here, I would like to come back  
as a human being, and my horse

to remain himself. Otherwise

I would not know how to begin again. (48-49)

This speaker has become an allegorical figure. Unlike the allegorical, Christian traveller in John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, this traveller is not heading to Zion to receive the rewards of heaven after suffering God’s earthly lessons; the only remotely spiritual lesson here at the end of this figurative journey is that life provides no meaningful direction (“the path vanished”)--existence is distilled here to the basic fact of survival. Even the horse is a “he” and not an “it”, which means that the horse and mankind are not so different, and the

poem quietly celebrates the very capacity of the human spirit to simply survive; the traveller can trust that if his soul were to return (the poem does not even ascertain that reincarnation is a certainty), the traveller would still want to come back as himself. The poem contains the possibility that it might be Persephone speaking here too; she could simply be expressing a wish to be human here, so that she would be able “to begin again” (49), suggesting--in an implicitly celebratory way--that humans possess the courage to face death. From *The Seven Ages to Averno*, Glück’s poetic self has become increasingly invisible, with the speaker in her poems becoming more and more transcendental and inclusive of all possible voices. Before I mentioned that Glück seems to undergo a journey of rebirth and self-renewal with each collection. In *The Seven Ages*, the poet arrived at a new acceptance of uncertainty and ambivalence with regards to the meaningfulness of existence given the proximity of death. In *Averno*, a different renewal takes place--the poet is transfiguring herself to represent everyone in the same existential plight as she. Although this results in uncertainty as to who is speaking at any given time, the fact that the speaker can be anyone allows for a freer interpretation of the poems, even as familiar signs of the poet’s lifelong concerns about the traumatic effects of a world without absolute certainties--explored in previous volumes--remain present in the poems here.

It is only in the role of a narrator (for the story about Persephone) that the poet’s voice is most unambiguous. In “A Myth of Innocence,” for example, the poet explains how Persephone achieves sudden clarity:

She stands by the pool saying, from time to time,  
*I was abducted*, but it sounds  
 wrong to her, nothing like what she felt.  
 Then she says, *I was not abducted*.  
 Then she says, *I offered myself. I wanted  
 to escape my body.* (51)

In this scene, Persephone has discovered her own loss of innocence. She talks about it in a matter-of-fact, conversational style here that is once again reminiscent of public confessors on



*The Tyra Banks Show*. The poem resonates with a sense of candour and heartfelt authenticity for contemporary readers, who could possibly relate better with Persephone's predicament when she is portrayed as just an ordinary, rape-victim who has begun perversely to enjoy sex with her rapist. She has become used to the abuse, the loss of her freedom, even to enjoy it in a masochistic way. It is a dark development in the plot of Persephone's life, as an adolescent girl robbed of her innocence has turned into a woman under the most disturbing of circumstances. Told in the present tense, this instant of adolescent corruption is eerily framed in a timeless present, amplifying the pathos and tragedy of Persephone's fate, which also speaks allegorically for the human condition in which we too could be said to have learned masochistically to enjoy our fate in being helplessly ruled by our desires to be loved.

Then the poet introduces Hades in "A Myth of Devotion" to portray his unique take on Persephone's disturbing fate:

When Hades decided he loved this girl  
 he built for her a duplicate of earth ...  
 ...he decides to name it  
*Persephone's Girlhood...*  
 He wants to say *I love you, nothing can harm you*  
  
 but he thinks  
 this is a lie, so he says in the end  
*you're dead, nothing can hurt you*  
 which seems to him  
 a more promising beginning, more true. (59)

But this is not true, since Persephone does come back from the dead, and even if she might recall little from the experience (since death, in this story, deprives you of all of your senses), she will still remember being taken away against her will; she will still recall being raped. However, as the previous poem revealed, Persephone is beginning to feel differently about the matter; she no longer believes that what is happening to her is necessarily a bad thing. This is

truly a match made in hell, since Hades also expresses his love for her, and his calling their rape-nest *Persephone's Girlhood* testifies to the callousness and cruelty--intentional or not--of his desire for the girl. The poem runs counter to the poet's own wish to see death as something tender and positive, a wish she expressed at the start of *Averno* in "The Night Migrations", "hard as that is to imagine" (1). Through Hades, the poet seems to suggest that she might never be able to do so; death might never be anything more than a state of non-suffering, and have nothing at all to do with love. Once again, the poet is unwilling to settle complacently into certain optimism, even though she was trying to be hopeful about death in "The Night Migrations."

After the poet has finished narrating Hades' side of the story about Persephone, she begins to speak more revealingly again as herself in "Averno," the book's title poem, as she did before in the poem "October," fusing Persephone's voice with her own. However, the speaker in "Averno" is also ambiguous enough to serve as a prosaic and contemporary version of Persephone too (as implied by the reference to "drugs for depression"); Persephone becomes more "real" as a character that readers will be able to connect with. In any case, the speaker here--as both Persephone and the depressive poet--is struggling to accept that she must eventually say goodbye to her life:

...I wake up thinking

*you have to prepare.*

Soon the spirit will give up...

I know what they say when I'm out of the room.

Should I be seeing someone, should I be taking

one of the new drugs for depression...

They're living in a dream, and I'm preparing

to be a ghost...

It's like some new life:  
 you have no stake in the outcome;  
 you know the outcome...

To raise the veil.

To see what you're saying goodbye to. (60-61)

Just like "Persephone the Wanderer" at the start of the book, the poet seems to address the reader here too from the moment she writes, "you have no stake..." to imply a greater universality for her plight. Here, we also get a hint of other people's reactions to the speaker's position on her own life. The poet sounds hopeful here, but without being overtly optimistic; she wants to disabuse her loved ones of the illusion that life is anything more than a transient dream. By the end of *Averno*, the poet has been able to lift the veil on the finitude of her own life; she is ready to accept that it will finally come to an end; she is ready to say goodbye.

The book ends with a last poem about Persephone (titled "Persephone the Wanderer" again). This time, the narrative emphasis is no longer on Persephone, but on her mother's perspective. Demeter is a grieving goddess mourning her daughter, who is dead to her mother whenever the daughter is forced into the underworld. In the same poem, Demeter also likens her own inability to nourish the earth (the cause of winter), whenever her daughter is gone, to a form of death:

I think I can remember  
 being dead. Many times, in winter,  
 I approached Zeus, Tell me, I would ask him,  
 how can I endure the earth?

And he would say,  
 in a short time you will be here again.

And in the time between

you will forget everything:  
 those fields of ice will be  
 the meadows of Elysium. (76)

By the end of the book, perhaps Demeter does experience a kind of death too whenever her daughter is taken from her and winter consumes the earth (since she is the goddess of the earth's fertility and of the harvest), by way of an emotional numbness and frozen immobility. But the sudden introduction of "I" in the poem (before Demeter was described in the third person) hints at the possibility that it is also Persephone speaking at this point, her daughter speaking from the dead in a timeless present made possible by the poem's lyric mode. Simultaneously, it could also be the poet speaking, or anyone who has ever asked her or his god of any religion, "How can I endure the earth?" or "How can I endure a loss of certainty and purpose in the world?" which would be the more precise question that Glück has been trying to answer since *Ararat*, and managed to answer in *The Seven Ages. Averno*, however, seems to end with no absolute relief for either the characters in the book or the reader, as Zeus only tells the ambiguous "you" in this final poem that death, at the very least, can be a form of release from the heartache and the disappointment; there must be *some* comfort for us to be found in knowing this. But for the poet, who has found the capacity to enjoy her existence in *The Seven Ages*, she has decided to stay on course with an individual perspective on uncertainty; by the end of *The Seven Ages* and into *Averno*, Glück is determined not to arrive at happiness or certainty as a final destination, or an absolute philosophical position, but to bravely endure and keep on a continual, personal voyage of rigorous, poetic questioning and doubt.

## Conclusion

Glück's last six collections, from *Ararat* to *Averno*, are bound by a plot in which the poet negotiates with traumatic, personal events in her life, seeking to accept an existence without the comfort of absolute truths, and manages to do so by her last book, although not without emotional difficulty. The poet moved from just revisioning personal memories to expanding the private self and projecting it onto the realm of allegory, achieving the affect of an increasingly greater universality. The poet has been consistently writing what Spengemann has defined as poetic autobiography, in which "the words of the text are the cause and adequate symbol of the writer's...evolution," such that they also become "correlative objects of an analogous development in the reader's soul" (113). The oracular detachment, the apostrophic stops in time, as well as the multiple, allegorical and mythical voices, all work in the collections to go beyond giving an account of an individual journey to actively engage the reader in relating intimately and subjectively with the events and epiphanies of the poet's life. As the poet repairs her emotional wounds or restores her potential for happiness, readers are able to step into her shoes or the shoes of transcendental figures and reflect on their own parallel experiences, with the possibility of arriving at similar lessons about healing the self.

Although many of the poems in Glück's collections have been published elsewhere on their own, readers would better appreciate the books by reading the collections like verse novels, since there is a discernible plot that holds the poems together. The plot exists because of something at stake in the poet's personal life. In *Ararat*, what was at stake was the poet's need to reconcile with the past and to reshape her own memories of a family life haunted by the death of a sister and a father, so that she might be able to forgive everyone, including herself, for the emotional and mental damage everyone had inflicted on each other; readers following this process of forgiveness can be inspired to discover what is at stake in their own lives with regards to the need to forgive. Then *The Wild Iris* showed the poet moving from writing about family to writing about an intense, spiritual crisis in the wake of a distant God, or at least this is what the poet believes for a large part of the book, while imagining voices of

existential despair and terror for her garden of flowers, before realising that God has been speaking through her all the time. *Meadowlands* and *Vita Nova* plotted the continuous arc from the breakdown of the poet's marriage to finding the mental courage and wisdom to carry on with life without bitterness or regret. *The Seven Ages* centred on the poet's desire--expressed through the metaphorical journey of a spirit as it descends to earth to be human--to come to terms with the lack of absolute certainty in her life, given the proximity of the end of her life. In *Averno*, the poet used the story of Persephone in order to come to grips with the repetitiveness of mortal desire and with death's finality.

Although lyric poems are akin to stilled moments in time, the experience of reading Glück's books must take into account that a plot becomes discernible in the poems, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapters. Without taking into account how the poems chart a sustained, introspective journey towards a sense of reconciliation with the self or the world, readers would not be able to fully appreciate or empathise with the poet's revelations, which were born out of a difficult process of constant argumentation and grievous recollection.

There is a general trend in the criticism Glück's work to avoid associating her with the genre of Confessional poetry that has gained a negative reputation in the later part of the twentieth century. Harold Bloom's own praise of Mark Strand's poetry is revealing of this growing aversion to this style of self-expression in poetry in criticism: "these poems instantly touch a universal anguish as no confessional poems can, for Strand has the fortune of writing...out of the involuntary near-solipsism that always marks a central poetic imagination in America."<sup>17</sup> These days, to draw from one's own life in the writing of poetry (still a popular mode in contemporary American poetry today, in spite of critics like Bloom, who is well known for his magisterial and bullying assertions about which poets should and should not be considered canonical) is to court the likely criticism that one is being solipsistic and insular.

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<sup>17</sup> Extracted from a blurb for Mark Strand on the book jacket of his 1992 collection, *Reasons for Moving, Darker & The Sargentville Notebook*.

Glück's poetry draws centrally from her personal life and charts her development of healing and self-discovery through an overarching plot connecting her poems. It is through such a plot that the poet's self may be identified, and, as David Baker has described, "the more the self is identified... the more connective and sympathetic is its relationship to others" (*Virginia Quarterly Review* 203). Using the mythical method, Glück elevates the private self by wearing the masks of mythological figures, linking the prosaic to the transcendental. Although this was more commonly an aesthetically-driven, Modernist strategy, the poet uses this method further to promote a private process of healing and finding new meaning for her existence, an analogical process that readers may also participate in while following the plot in each collection. Reading for the plot ties in with a fundamental human need for narratives, whereby we enjoy following a plot that is--as Peter Brooks has pointed out--"goal-oriented and forward-moving" (12-13), a plot in which the search for meaning in one's existence is at stake; important questions or problems are grappled with until the narrative reaches a final resolution at the end; a narrative which can serve as a mirror to the reader's own individual life. Without recognising the plot about emotional recovery or a search for meaning and happiness in Glück's collections, readers would not be moved enough by the poems to relate to the sustained, interior struggle that finds its sense of purpose and development, as well as resolution, through all the poetry collections; readers would not properly appreciate what is truly at stake in the poems.

In 2008, Glück published new poems from her yet-to-be-published new collection in *The New Yorker*, and in these poems readers will realise that after *Averno*, in which the poet revealed her resolve to accept an existence without certainty, her latest works are testament to her dedication to this continual questioning of certainty. In "Before The Storm,"<sup>18</sup> the poet writes:

Rain tomorrow, but tonight the sky is clear, the stars shine...

Tomorrow the dawn won't come.

The sky won't go back to being the sky of day; it will go on as night...

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<sup>18</sup> Glück, Louise. "Before The Storm." *The New Yorker*. 4 Aug 2008. <<http://www.newyorker.com>>

The night is an open book.

But the world beyond the night remains a mystery.

Depicting the anticipation of an impending tempest, Glück, in her terrible certainty that a bad storm *will* come, ends the poem with the unknowability of the future; there is no certainty if the world beyond the protracted night of this storm--the “mystery” in the poem--will merely bring more storms, or if it may bring another moment of calm. Now after *Averno* the poet still seems determined to not settle on a final knowledge of either pessimism or contentment; it is the mystery of the future and the unpredictability and ambiguities of existence that may continue to hold her attention for many of her poems to come.



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