

Half in love with easeful Death': The Mythopoetics of Louise Glück's AVERNO"

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Abstract

This paper examines the poetry collection entitled *Averno* (2006) by the contemporary American poet Louise Glück (1943) from different perspectives. Highlighting her contribution to American women's poetry, the study focuses on her feminist, post-confessional poetry which manifests itself in her revisionist interpretation of the myth of Persephone, Demeter and Hades. By opting for the traditional myth of the abduction of Persephone by Pluto/Hades and the heroine's divided existence between two worlds; namely the earth and the underworld, Glück achieves many goals. On the one hand, she subverts the female-as-object paradigm, by giving voice to the traditionally helpless victim. Thus, the female writer challenges the patriarchal, interpretational framework of traditional myth. On the other hand, the poet reflects on her own disappointment with love by using the mask of myth, thus avoiding direct confessionalism. Furthermore, Glück's infatuation with death attracts her to *Averno*, the gateway to the underworld. She keeps oscillating between this troubled life on earth, and a possibly blissful oblivion in death. This causes her to move back and forth, hesitating, contemplating both realms, conflating past and present, and myth with contemporary reality. Consequently, her poetry collection, characterized by simple yet bitter, terse, occasionally violent language, is best read as a whole. Its individual poems present the reader with puzzling, contradictory scenarios, open to various interpretations. Herein lies the originality and complexity of *Averno* by Louise Glück.

Keywords: poetry - Louise Glück - *Averno* – feminism – revisionist mythmaking – myth - Persephone

Introduction

Louise Glück (1943) is a prominent American poet whose oeuvre comprises twelve books of poetry. For *Firstborn* (1980) she received the Academy of American Poets Prize. Besides, she won the National Book Critics Circle Award for *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985). Moreover, she got the Library of Congress Prize for Poetry for *Ararat* (1990), and the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for her volume entitled *The Wild Iris* (1993). Glück's collection of essays, *Proofs and Theories* (1994) won the PEN Award for First Nonfiction. In addition, she was awarded The New Yorker's Book Award in Poetry for *Vita Nova* (1999). In 2001 she won the Bolingen Prize in Poetry and became US Poet Laureate (2003-2004). Glück also won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize (2012) and the National Book Award for *Faithful and Virtuous Night* (2014), among other

prizes and awards. Among her other great collections are *Meadowlands* (1996), *Averno* (2006) and *A Village Life* (2009). Daniel Morris (2006) traces Glück's wide range of poems

from the persona poem to blunt confessionalism to dialogue to a kind of mock epic that, like Joyce's *Ulysses*, regards the author's life however ironized through a Homeric template. Because she composes her poetry from a mosaic of multicultural resources, Glück has appealed to critics representing diverse, often diametrically opposed communities of interpretation. (1)

Besides, Morris lauds Glück as one of "America's foremost contemporary lyric poets" who wrote in "a variety of rhetorical styles other than the traditional lyric poem, which remains her forte". Morris rightly notes that her poems are best read within her verse collections, as they are "spoken by competing voices in an open, dialogic relationship, or in a sequence that offers them a narrative dimension". Therefore, several poems from *Averno* are examined in this study.

This paper examines the mythopoetical features of *Averno* (2006) as represented in the collection through a variety of perspectives. The first is the post-confessionalist interpretation of the myth of Persephone and Demeter. This feature is read in view of her troubled relationships with her mother, her husband and patriarchal society. Another feature can be discerned in the poems of *Averno* that reveal the poet's subversion of the original myth in several intriguing ways. Another feature is manifested in the use of the mask of Persephone's predicament, thus allowing the modern woman, poet, lover and daughter to assert her identity, at times through bitter, sardonic utterances, and at others by opting for silence. The fourth feature, however, is evident in the persona's oscillation between hope and despair, life and death, spring and winter, seductive earth and the enigma of the underworld.

The Myth of Persephone in Classical Mythology

A brief consideration of the myth of Persephone would suggest that the original source of the myth is Hesiod's *Theogen*, (Melanie Daifotis 2017). Aidoneus abducted Persephone from her mother (Demeter, goddess of the grain), and Zeus (her father) gave her to him. (1) Among the earliest accounts of the myth are Homer's "Hymn to Demeter" (7th century B.C.) and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book V) six centuries later. Madeline Miller (2011) summarizes the myth as follows: Persephone (Proserpina in Latin) was abducted by Pluto while picking flowers. He burst from *Averno* in a golden carriage, and carried her to his palace in the Underworld. (n.p.) It is interesting that Pluto, the god of the Underworld, was earlier known as Hades, a name which refers to the underworld itself. (Daifotis 1) Thus, the husband becomes equivalent to death. However, as Persephone eats a pomegranate seed in the underworld, she is destined to spend six months in the world of the dead, and allowed to return to

the earth for six months. Her mother's anger and sorrow amount to depriving the earth of vegetation during her daughter's absence. And thus, winter was born.

Daifotis states that the reason for the numerous translations, interpretations and reinterpretations of this myth throughout the ages, up till this day, is the fact that it has "continued to be a rich literary inspiration", since its recurrent themes include "body ownership, family personal relationships, love and desire, consent, and wrongness". (1) It is important to keep in mind that narrators vary in their styles and emphasis on different layers of meaning in the myth of Persephone. (3) For example, in Homer's Hymn, Zeus gives his daughter away against her will and without Demeter's consent. He agrees to allow Persephone to return only when her mother threatens to deny the land any harvest until she saw her daughter. (4) Thus, the mother is strong-willed and takes control of the situation. (6) On the other hand, Pluto's role varies in different renderings of the myth. In Homer's account, he forces Persephone to eat the seed to ensure her return to Hades; whereas in Ovid, she accidentally eats it. (7) However, as Miller remarks, most modern retellings of the myth of Persephone depict Pluto /Hades as demonic though in ancient myths, he does not cause human death but simply carries souls to the underworld. In Homer's version, Zeus is the dominant, patriarchal power, as he believes that Pluto loves Persephone, and therefore, must marry her, even though she has no say in the matter. (8) On the other hand, Ovid portrays Venus as having the upper hand, as she orders her son, Cupid, to hit Pluto with his arrow, thus causing him to fall in love with Persephone involuntarily. In an equivocal cycle of relationships, Ovid's *Metamorphosis* depicts Persephone not just as an object in the hands of a controlling mother, but also as exercising control on Demeter. The latter's grief at losing her to a husband drives her mad to the extent that she relinquishes her godly responsibility of being "the harbinger of fertility to the earth". (9) It is strange that in Ovid's version, Demeter "is ready to accept Persephone's rape as long as Persephone can return to her possession". (10) However, one thing in common between the two ancient accounts of the myth; namely, the condemnation of Persephone's rape.

Averno: A Post-confessional Sequence?

Jeffrey NcDaniel (2007) points out the difficulty of distinguishing confessional from post-confessional poetry. He regards confessional poems as those which, "if not drenched in, then at least tinged with experience", having a "born-out-of-necessity feel". They have "something at stake emotionally". However, these poems must have artistic merit that "pushes the poem beyond a mere transcription of experience". On the other hand, a post-confessional writer is characterized by "a mixture of heat and coolness; the surfaces of his [or her] poems are smooth and cool to the touch, but between each line we feel the smoldering emotional core". As the "most emotionally raw" situations "simply resist being cast into language", the writer has to "step out of it for a moment

mentally”, and begin to imagine it as a poem”, only to “jump back into the moment, with suddenly ulterior motives”. Moreover, post-confessional poems “enter into a place of fracture, often involving family, and elaborate or develop techniques used by the confessional poets”. But they depart from confessional poems in “approaching family or psychic trauma from an original angle or perspective”. (Poemhunter n.p.)

This is precisely what Glück attempts to achieve, shifting from the mythic to the modern, from tradition to subversion, and from distance to violent anger. There is no doubt that Glück’s personal bitterness towards marital failure has had an impact on her interpretation. Her own failed love relationships may have resulted in perplexing expressions of infatuation, dependency, desire, resistance, and above all, an equation between love and death. Unlike Persephone’s total, albeit unwilling submission to her abductor in Homer and Ovid’s versions (Daifotis 18), the poet gives the traditionally subdued heroine a distinct, defiant voice. In “October”, the speaker, who could be Persephone or Glück herself, protests,

it does me no good
to be good to me now;
violence has changed

(Averno 12)

Indeed, in “Persephone the Wanderer”, Glück raises questions concerning the ramifications of physical love:

She is lying in the bed of Hades.
What is in her mind?
Is she afraid? Has something
blotted out the idea
of mind?

(Averno 24)

Glück’s Persephone asks several rhetorical questions, oscillating from one stance to another, and one wonders with Daifotis whether the “victim” shares the hatred felt by everyone for Pluto. Indeed, in “A Myth of Devotion”, Glück portrays Pluto as “a dedicated lover of Persephone. – he is thoughtful and strives to be honest.” (33) Pluto’s apparent devotion comes as a surprise. He has been watching the girl for many years, and tries to create a pleasant “home” for her; a “replica of the Earth” in the Underworld, but with the significant addition of a bed:

When Hades decided he loved this girl
he built her a duplicate of earth,
everything the same, down to the meadow,
but with a bed added.

Here the terse, cynical phrase "but with a bed added" is highly indicative of a drastic loss of innocence. Pluto's apparent concern for his bride's psychological state is equivocally expressed in the lines:

Gradually, he thought, he'd introduce the night,
first as the shadows of fluttering leaves.

Then moon, then stars. Then no moon, no stars.
Let Persephone get used to it slowly.

In the end, he thought, she'd find it comforting.

One wonders if these preparations are a part of the scheme of seduction of the innocent Persephone. It is significant that this desire to please the beloved is a "myth" of love, concealing the sombre truth of death, despite the tender love scene depicted in the lines:

... He takes her in his arms.

He wants to say I love you, nothing can hurt 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.

(Averno 72-74)

The question arises whether this 'apparent' love is enough to protect Persephone from being hurt, despite the seeming honesty and consideration he shows towards her. Besides, one wonders whether the poet herself is equating death with security. Though Glück sways between denying a confessional strain in her poems, and admitting that there is no harm in exposing individual experience, the fact remains that she intentionally puzzles her reader with her multi-faceted interpretation. As Daifotis points out, "No author explicitly dictates any morals to be abided by. Instead, the reader can construct his or her own idea of the myth, its characters, and their engagements, and take from it his or her own understanding". (42) It could be argued that the poet achieves two goals here, whether intentionally or unconsciously. On the one hand, she could be commenting on the deceitful promise of bliss at the start of each unhappy love affair. On the other hand, Glück herself could be expressing regret at falling into the abyss of destructive love which has entailed loss of freedom, independence, mind and identity.

Louise Glück's interpretation of the myth of Persephone is extremely puzzling. It is certainly part of contemporary women poets' "serious, engaged, and formally satisfactory encounter with classical myth which, in Lillian Feder's view, has been at the very heart of modernism. Metamorphosis has "shaped and defined Modernist texts from *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses* to *The Tower* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. The past is revealed as a constant presence which the poet must

both escape and confront". (Laughing with Medusa 381) One function of interpreting myth by modern poets, is "to comprehend history, understand violence and question traditions". (382)

Averno undoubtedly "emphasizes the wrongness of Persephone's abduction and rape and their negative and unalterable effects on her". (Daifotis 17). In "A Myth of Innocence", the narrator laments Persephone's loss of innocence after the abduction:

The girl who disappears from the pool
will never return. A woman will return,
looking for the girl she was.

(Averno 63)

However, Glück suddenly subverts the myth, contradicting the narrative of abduction:

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. Even sometimes,
I willed this.

Therefore, in "Persephone the Wanderer", the poet raises the question whether the "victim" could have willingly participated in her own "abduction":

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

(Averno 22,23)

Equating Persephone's loss of innocence to modern victims, Glück writes, "Persephone/ returns home/ stained with red juice like/ a character in Hawthorne". Besides, in "A Myth of Innocence", death is embraced, personified as Hades/ Pluto, the desired beloved: "Then death appears, like the answer to a prayer". Declaring Persephone's infatuation with death, the narrator says:

No one understands anymore
how beautiful he was.

...

She also remembers, less clearly,
the chilling insight that from this moment
she couldn't live without him again.

(Averno 51)

Thus, Glück's interpretation of Persephone's abduction carries echoes of the poet's own divorce and unhappy love relationships. David Yezzi (2012) remarks that the poet herself characterized her eleven books as "a highly specific portrait of an individual mind". (106) In this context, the importance of myth for the

poet could lie in her ability to re-imagine the characters of myth "in ways which encourage self-identification without overt autobiographical or confessional reference." (Laughing with Medusa 384) Rewriting aspects of the myth, as Daniel Morris explains, helps Glück achieve "self-expression and self-deflection, an irreverent attitude toward the canons of literature, scripture and myth, an attitude through which she at once expresses herself and deflects her autobiographical impulse". (2) The poet thus uses the "masks of legendary characters" to offer "an expanded notion of what constitutes an experimental writing strategy that troubles the border between what we think of as biographically inflected literature and what we think of as commentary and interpretation. (31) Her versions of any myth act as "a compendium of references that enable her...to shift the stage upon which her personal, even autobiographical, expressions can take place as a series of masked performances". Thus, "Allusiveness enables her to be elusive; to at once reveal and hide the speaker's vulnerabilities through the distance afforded by referring to myths and sources". Hence, the poet operates within literary traditions with established cultural values, but in her rendering of the myth, she recasts those values to remain true to her own ordeals of the present. (33) In addition, Glück's fascination with Persephone, as well as Jesus and Odysseus is due to "her reading of them as narratives of descent from sacred, mysterious, or nonhuman spaces back into the realm of the human, the quotidian and the earthly. The more human-sounding, less mystical version of Glück...remains indebted to a modern aesthetics of impersonality". (30) Summarizing the use of the myth as a disguise, Daniel Morris writes that Glück embraces

the fact of distance (between representation and lived reality) as a way to make her experience available to readers as art, but also as a way to write her autobiography that would not otherwise have been possible through the confessional mode. It is as if Glück could not recall her experience as meaningful, and therefore as available for representation, without placing elements of her life story into a remote language through a variety of myths and masks. (252)

Therefore, Morris concludes that Glück's self-representation "is in fact autobiographical but, stylistically, we are persuaded to understand that her alter ego, the lyric persona that speaks many of her poems, is designed to be read as a construct..." (22) In Bonnie Costello's view, her poems, though involving the self, are impersonal, "negatively capable, or at least able to inhabit more than one perspective, to dramatize questions rather than project views". (qtd. 22) Resorting to myth, then, is not an attempt to escape from experience but, rather, it allows the poet to give shape to the facts of her life or what she called "a proof that suffering can be made somehow to yield meaning". (23) Calling Glück a "post-confessional autobiographer", Morris states that she strives to transfer the events of her life into "a narrative of general consequence"; traditional "mythic

structures that merge (or sometimes contrast) familial conflicts with the narrative canon". (23)

In fact, the poet herself admits that "Poems are autobiography but divested of the trappings of chronology and comment, the metronomic alteration of anecdote and response". In addition, Glück asks in her poem entitled "Summer Night" from *The Seven Ages*, "Why not? Why not? Why should my poems not imitate my life?" (qtd. 24)

On the other hand, in Glück's account of the myth of Persephone, the heroine is not just captivated by her husband. In "Persephone the Wanderer", the daughter bitterly contemplates what could be an echo of the troubled relationship between the poet and her mother: "She does know the earth / is run by mothers, this much is certain... Regarding / incarceration, she believes / she has been a prisoner since she has been a daughter. (Averno 25)

Moreover, instead of rejoicing at the moment of reunion with her mother, Glück portrays it as a burden which Persephone has to endure: "The terrible reunions in store for her/ will take up the rest of her life. Torn between life and death, mother and husband, Glück writes:

You drift between earth and death
which seem, finally,
strangely alike. Scholars tell us

that there is no point in knowing what you want
when the forces contending over you
could kill you.

Here, it is evident that Glück equates marriage with loss of identity, will-power and intellect. The alternative of staying under her mother's control seems no more consoling. She therefore feels torn between two evils. Consequently, life (the earth) and death (Hades) seem "strangely alike".

In the second "Persephone the Wanderer", Glück makes a sarcastic comment on Demeter's possessiveness and mad rage at losing control of her daughter. The speaker wonders: The mother is asking her daughter, "what are you doing outside my body"?

Regretting her dependence on her mother who cannot see her but as a child; a projection of her own self, the persona sarcastically and metaphorically describes the daughter as a branch that cannot depart from the tree (the mother):

the daughter's body
doesn't exist, except
as a branch of the mother's body
that needs to be reattached at any cost.

(Averno 92, 93)

Indeed, Isobel Hurst mentions Glück's adolescent desire to set "clear boundaries" and express ownership of her body amounted to refusal of food,

anorexia and extensive psychotherapy. (184) Therefore, the poet subverts the reader's original impression of Demeter as a victimized mother whose innocent daughter is taken from her arms against her will. On the other hand, the pressure on contemporary women to marry is embedded in another subversion of the myth which presents Demeter as frantically opposed to her daughter's "abduction". In Part 8 of "Prism", the speaker cynically comments on the institution of marriage:

The implication was, it was necessary to abandon
childhood. The word "marry" was a signal.

Equating marriage with a silencing of the mind, Glück writes:

It was also a road sign, a warning.
You could take the part of you that thought.
"Marry" meant you should keep that part quiet.

(Averno 23, 24)

Moreover, in "Prism", Glück alludes to love as an "assignment". She writes:

The assignment was to fall in love.
The author was female.

...

The action took place in the body

...

The beloved was identified
with the self in a narcissistic projection.

It is significant these short, sharp statements reveal the poet's rebelliousness in the face of the mother's commands to relinquish mind and self and surrender to the institution of marriage: "The mind was a subplot...The self ended and the world began". (Averno 33, 34)

Averno and Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking

On examining Louise Glück's reworking of the myth of Persephone and Demeter, it is relevant to view it in the context of women poets' general interest in Graeco-Roman myth and the problems those myths pose for them. Isobel Hurst (2012) draws attention to the fact that entering the classical tradition means the inevitability of confronting "the difficulty of reconciling the symbolic power of Graeco-Roman myth with its roots in an overtly patriarchal envisioning of society". (176) Though Hurst quotes Rachel Blau Du Pleiss's description of old myths as "invalid and crippling for women", she asserts that "mythic patterns continue to fascinate contemporary women poets". In Luce Irigaray's words, "myth fossilizes existing hierarchies. The way forward for feminists...is to dismantle the system by focusing on the contradictions which uphold it". (Laughing with Medusa 4) Besides, Hurst refers to Susan Gubar's view that a woman poet's task is "to write about the discrepancy between how she experiences herself and how she has been defined by her culture". (qtd 176)

Indeed, the relevance of myth to Cixous lies in the fact that “women are so circumscribed by their histories that myth becomes essential for imagining a different future”. (Laughing with Medusa 5) In addition, she significantly quotes Lillian Doherty’s opinion that the attraction of myths lies in the fact that they are “stories that combine an imaginative fluidity with an authoritative force”. Thus, they offer elements of culture that are “open to revision even when they already exist in written versions”. Hence, the attraction of myth for women writers lies in “the malleability” of the story dealing with the relationships of husband and wife, mother and daughter and, above all, life and death.

In this context, Alicia Ostriker (1986) states that myths are “the sanctuaries of language where our meanings for “male” and “female” are stored; to rewrite them from a female point of view is to discover new possibilities for meaning”. (11) Besides, Morris observes that Glück’s poems frequently represent a female voice “who struggles to fashion an identity through words in the face of a tradition in which her voice and vision have been effaced or ignored, usually through the will of paternalistic male characters ranging from father, to Yahuven, to ex-lovers and ex-husbands who wished to inscribe the meaning of her life on her behalf,...through their imagination of a silence and silenced other”. (35) What Glück tries to achieve in *Averno* is embodied in Katie Fleming’s analysis that in any “politicized appropriation of classical mythology, feminism invests in a selective recovery of its heroine”. (Laughing with Medusa qtd 11)

Indeed, loss of identity, and the tragic silencing of the mind demanded by the narcissistic lover are among the most recurrent themes in women’s writing. As Sadoff (2001) remarks, Glück finds that “the seductive ‘mocking’ promise of transcendence through sensual pleasure leads not to the sublime but to irreparable ego damage: the promise of union is realized as silence and oppression”. Consequently, in Glück’s interpretation of the myth of Persephone, her anger externalizes her bifurcated feelings about sex and love”. (86) Thus, one has to agree with Ostriker’s statement that

the old stories are changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy or as the pillars of sustaining phallogocentric ‘high’ culture. Instead, they are ... retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; in some cases they are instructions for survival. (215)

In other words, it could be argued that a woman poet’s interpretation of a myth could be a means for giving a voice to the silenced female/ marginalized poet. It is an attempt “to retrieve from our myth of the dominating abstract father god [Zeus] ... the female creatrix”. (219) Besides, women poets do not resort to myth out of a modernist nostalgia for “a golden age of past culture”. (213) Instead, “their mythmaking grows at least as much from a subterranean tradition

of female self-projection and self-exploration..." Referring to May Sarton (1912-1995), Daifotis holds that her poem "The Muse as Medusa" constitutes a turning point in women poets' attitude to myth through their partial identification with Medusa. Sarton addresses Medusa as follows:

I turn your face around! It is my face.

That frozen rage is what I must explore.

(qtd 215)

Further describing the empowering effect of approaching Medusa, Sarton utters a pledge of daring resistance and self-assertion, which could very well apply to Glück and most women poets:

The fish [woman poet] escaped to many a magic reef

The fish explored many a dangerous sea.

... You chose to abdicate by total lack of motion

But did it work? For nothing really froze.

It is all fluid still, that world of feeling,

Where thoughts, those fishes, silent feed and rove.

Glück's interpretation of the myth of Persephone could be thus viewed as a covert attempt to "write her self". In fact, Hélène Cixous (1976) urges every woman writer to "put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement". (875) Women writers should enrich culture with their primordial experience. Celebrating their "return", Cixous writes: "Now women return from afar, from always: from 'without' [to within], from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond culture". (877) Arguing that in a male-dominated culture woman never gets the chance to speak, Cixous emphasizes that "writing is precisely the very possibility of change, ...a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures". (879) She adds that writing "has been one with the phallogocentric tradition". Thus, it could be argued that Glück allows Persephone to "break out of the snare of silence". (881) Moreover, her complex rendering of Persephone's story seems to rescue the heroine from being locked between two myths, in Cixous' words; "the Medusa and the abyss". Moreover, stating that feminine texts are subversive and "volcanic" by nature, Cixous, echoes Sarton's above-mentioned poem when she writes "But look, our seas are what we make of them ...; and we are ourselves sea, sand, coral, seaweed, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves... We know how to speak them all". (889) Hence, Glück becomes what Cixous calls "the true 'mistress' of the signifier." Indeed, if women have traditionally been associated with death, Glück has subverted this by generally equating male figures to death, not just Hades in the myth. In "A Myth of Innocence", she writes: "All the different nouns - /she says them in rotation. / Death, husband, god, stranger". (Averno 63) Emphasizing women writers' role, Cixous predicts, "Before long your efficacy will be seen at work when your speech is no longer

suppressed...but written out over against the other". (886) Playing on the double meaning of "voler"; namely flying and stealing, Cixous believes that it is women's duty to "steal" and manipulate the hitherto exclusively male discourse. Furthermore, they should refrain from writing "within" male discourse. Instead, every female writer should "explode" and "dislocate" this "within", in an attempt to make the signifier hers, "containing it, taking it in her own mouth". In fact, Glück's *Averno* enables her to subvert the myth of Persephone by providing different scenarios of its events, inviting the reader to arrive at his/her own conclusions.

"To be or not to be": The luring attraction of the Underworld

In *Averno*, the poet's obsession with death and her oscillation between the disappointment with earthly life and the fear of the Other, are a reflection of her troubled existence. Morris perceives *Averno* as "a radical disconnection from the body". (10) Besides, he views the "laconic tone" of *Averno* as a manifestation of the poet's alienation from everyday human experience. Besides, Adam Plunkett (2013) calls Glück "a walking dysphemism", a poet who confesses to be "so intent on 'unmasking ...the ordinary to reveal the tragic', 'turning water into blood' and releasing 'venom' through her bitterness. Plunkett adds that she is "a blade without a handle", concerned with "the world of existence...fleeting, vague, without sharp boundaries". (n.p.) He adds that all her poems are "preoccupied by negative emotions – irony, sarcasm, disillusionment, self-loathing, dread, regret, abject despair". Indeed, in Part 4 of "Landscape", the speaker says, "In the silence of consciousness I asked myself: / why did I reject my life? / And I answer... the earth defeats me." (*Averno* 58)

On the other hand, in her poem entitled "Echoes", Glück writes:

Once I could imagine my soul
I could imagine my death.
When I imagined my death
my soul died. This
I remember clearly.

My body persisted.
Not thrived, but persisted.
Why I do not know.

(*Averno* 38)

In this desperate existence which lacks shape, the relative perfection of her art, though entailing "a form of suffering", seems to provide her with a somewhat fixed and definite shape. In *Averno*, the poet seems "more acquainted with the cosmic silence of death than with the singing of birds, harmonious winds, and human chatter characteristic of earthly life". (Morris 11) Hence, Glück's preoccupation with Persephone's double life, torn between the earth and the

Underworld. In Part 3 of the poem entitled "Averno", the poet continues musing about death:

On one side, the soul wanders.
On the other, human beings living in fear.
In between, the pit of disappearance.

(Averno 80)

On the other hand, "October" is a poem full of images of disillusionment and mutability. In poem 5 of "October", the speaker writes:

It is true there is not enough beauty in the world.

It is also true that I am not competent to restore it.

Expressing her lack of human communication and preference for silence, the speaker writes: "I am / at work, though I am silent. /The bland / misery of the world bounds us on either side, / we are / companions here, not speaking, each with his own thoughts" (Averno 18)

In "Averno", the poet expresses her Weltschmerz or weariness with having no choice whether to live or die:

You die when your spirit dies.
Otherwise, you live.
You may not do a good job of it, but you go on –
Something you have no choice about.

Stressing her loneliness, she complains:

It is terrible to be alone.
I don't mean to live alone –
to be alone, where no one hears you.

(Averno 75)

Yearning for death, the speaker declares, "I'm preparing / to be a ghost. I want to shout out /...the mist has cleared - /". ((Averno 76)

In the first "Persephone the Wanderer", the poet identifies with the heroine's failure to belong anywhere. She wonders:

...is earth
"home" to Persephone? Is she at home, conceivably,
in the bed of the god? Is she
at home nowhere? Is she
a born wanderer...?

(Averno 23)

Echoing the notion of winter/death as a safe haven of forgetfulness for the inhabitants of Eliot's Waste Land, the speaker justifies her infatuation with death in the image of "White of forgetfulness, / white of safety". Like Persephone, who finds it hard to return to earth, Glück writes:

They say
there is a rift in the human soul
which was not constructed to belong

entirely to life.

(Averno 25)

Concluding “Persephone the Wanderer” with the agony of dividedness between life and death, she writes that her soul is “shattered with the strain / of trying to belong to earth-” and wonders how she might deal with death when her time comes: “What will you do, / when it is your turn in the field with the god”? (Averno 26)

Style in Averno

It is evident that Glück’s language in Averno is generally morbid. Morris rightly notes that it is “uniformly bleak, even apocalyptic, symbolically reflecting the state of the speaker’s severe depression. Nature is either depicted in its wintry state with ice and snow, or else has been charred and scorched by a catastrophic fire”. (12) In that sense, her poetry becomes “a form of revision, a commentary on an incomplete text”. (14) In addition, Morris compares the poet’s “plaintive, evasive, revelatory language” to Lowell’s shift from “metaphorically armored early poems”. Glück seems to opt for “acceptance of the plain speech of the psychological imperative” that has helped her give vent to her fear of madness and death. (22)

Indeed, Glück’s Averno reveals the poet’s contemplative, fixated gaze on that gateway to death as an escape from the opposing forces that shatter her existence. Like Persephone, the poet herself seems to be torn between the earth and the underworld, with both seeming to her “strangely alike”. Estella Ramirez (2014) argues that Glück’s volume makes the reader “wade in what it means to die metaphorically, physically, spiritually”. (n.p.) The poems in Averno range from long sequences portraying the morose reality of mutability, aging and death, to shorter poems which constitute “confessional retellings of the myth of Persephone and Hades”, both sequences being “woven masterfully”. In Averno, Glück raises questions that are far from reassuring or “pleasant to contemplate”. Unlike her previous volumes, here she asks the reader to ponder about “change in such a way that one feels dead to the world”. Death is portrayed as an eminent danger “that comes cyclically, as seasons do”. Regarding death and silence as a refuge, the poet “channels her thoughts into a written voice”. “October” is about change, sickness, loss and death. It is therefore “heavy with urgent rhythms and rhymes”. Indeed, in Poem 4 of “October” all sights and sounds are morose, yet beautiful:

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

(Averno 16)

Here, the masterful synaesthesia of replacing the sights of autumn by a more melancholic tune is remarkable as the poet seems weary with the auditory image of “over-rehearsed”, too perfect morning songs. With autumn come despair,

aging and a foreshadowing of death, as hope (the songs of morning) seem out of place now. Throughout the poem, there seems to be a never-ending basso ostinato, announcing imminent destruction, and searching for an elusive hope. Calling the present "an allegory of waste", the poet repeats:

The songs have changed, but they are still quite beautiful.

They have been concentrated in a smaller space, the space of the mind.

They are dark, now, with desolation and anguish.

Here we are confronted with a prophecy of annihilation, silence and, perhaps madness:

You will not be spared, nor will what you love be spared.

A wind has come and gone, taking apart the mind;

it has left in its wake a strange lucidity.

(Averno 16, 17)

It is interesting to note that in the lines where the poet expresses her fearful infatuation with autumn as a foreshadowing of death, her lines are longer, calmer and smoother, highlighting the effect of the declining landscape on her own tired mind.

On the other hand, Ramirez points out that the speaker in "October" uses death to show the frightening uneasiness of change. In this, she resembles a modern Persephone. Retelling the myth, Glück uses the same metaphors, implying that "life changes are metaphorical deaths". And with death comes a welcome silence. In fact, Morris quotes a telling statement by the poet herself from her essay entitled "Proofs and Theories":

As a reader, consequently as a writer, I am partial to most forms of voluntary silence. I love what is implicit or present in outline, that which summons (as opposed to imposes) thought. I love white space, love the telling omission, love lacunae, and find oddly depressing that which seems to have left out nothing. (qtd 38)

Therefore, Helen Vendler states that "Glück's narratives invite our participation: we must fill out the story, substitute ourselves for the fictive personages; invent a scenario from which the speaker can utter her lines, decode the import, 'solve' the allegory". (Qtd in "Glück's "Biography" n.p.)

Glück continues to confuse the reader when the speaker ends "October" on a brighter note. Though approaching the end, she asserts that she still holds on to her belief in "something":

How privileged you are, to be still passionately

clinging to what you love;

the forfeit of hope has not destroyed you.

With a dignified agony, the music of autumn seems to announce the cadence of earthly life:

Maestoso, doloroso:

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

(Averno 16, 17)

Conversely, in the second “Persephone the Wanderer”, Glück typically puzzles the reader by doubting the hope that after winter spring will return, and after death there is resurrection:

if Zeus will get her back,
winter will end.

...

Spring will return, a dream
based on a falsehood:
that the dead return.

In Averno, Glück’s preoccupation with death, which lures her imagination towards Averno, results in a blurring with Persephone, who is confusedly torn between two worlds. They both seem “half in love” with Death. Plunkett views Persephone’s relationship with Hades as “a tragedy or a moral failure, a willful descent into darkness”, though the poet portrays “silver linings in a life lived half in the underworld of the imagination”. One wonders whether Glück is contemplating her past mistakes of willingly negating herself through disastrous love relationships or marriages. Likewise, the question re-emerges whether Persephone is a victim or an accomplice. Sadoff sees her persona in a constant state of fluctuation “from the fragile victim to the grandiose goddess whose love bears tragic consequences”. (82) Thus, mythology is “an attempt to stabilize and universalize the temporal, but also to deflect and reinforce the ‘fated’ stasis. The use of myth thus serves both to diminish choice and responsibility and to provide justification for grandiosity”. One wonders whether Glück is using Persephone to express self-hate. David Wheatley (2007) holds that “Glück’s Persephone contributes a strikingly original figure to contemporary poetic myth: the Narcissus of self-hate”. (85) In the first poem of “October”, the speaker’s loss of trust is evident: “Tell me this is the future, / I won’t believe you. / Tell me I’m living, / I won’t believe you”. (Averno 13) In these statements one can’t help noticing the defiant, hysterical tone as she is torn between life and death; memory and oblivion.

In “Persephone the Wanderer”, Glück thus “secures her escape by identifying with Persephone’s death and the liberating oblivion promised by Zeus: ‘you will forget everything’”. In this sense, “It is as if Glück is both surgeon and patient at once administering her own anaesthetic and then expecting to operate on herself”.

Ann Keniston (2008) refers to the “paradoxes of Averno”. (177) She states that Glück’s speakers are living in a realm that gives them access to both past and future:

Glück's speakers are mostly posthumous; ... they inhabit a ghostly realm that enables them to comment on and recall both life and death ... looking both backward and forward, they anticipate what has already occurred.

By recounting Persephone's predicament, Glück inhabits "a kind of afterlife" while adopting a disguise, a fiction, a way of speaking that is dangerously indirect, dangerously poetic". (183) Denying the permanence of death in "Persephone the Wanderer", she asserts Persephone's return to the earth. The speaker "turns back to the paradoxical capacity to be both dead and sentient". (182)

In her narration, the poet "observes at times coldly the suffering of a range of characters, in the process exposing what it is to be not injured but merely 'changed' ... by 'violence". (177, 178) This is certainly reflected in the novelty of form in *Averno*. Indeed, the reader is baffled by the poet's "impulse to repeat, revise, and recombine". Thematically coherent, the book "meditates almost obsessively on the relations of soul to body, life to death, maternal to erotic love, and memory to forgetting". Juxtaposing and linking mythic and personal narratives of loss and survival, the poems abound with repetition of similar elements that partake in different relations to one another. Hence, different scenarios whose characters and themes reappear, where "a mixture of indirection and stubborn assertion" occur. (179) A clear example of this are the speaker's contradictory responses in "October". First she declares that violence has changed her, then she speaks of "balm after violence". Later she objects that the "delusion of restoration... does me no good" and therefore repeats "violence has changed me". In a masterful blend between violence and balm, Glück blends the "sensuous solace of the sun", and the memory of violence" in such a way that "the balms themselves enable the violation to be both cast off and remembered". In addition, Kenniston refers to the paradox of healing and wounding which "intensifies the confusion of now with then, 'I' with 'it'". (180) She quotes Blanchot's view that disaster is at once "inescapable and inaccessible". It occupies a space ... outside the ordinary, chronological, mapable world". The two alternatives of traumatization and rescue "coexist in the negative, disembodied voice of the poem". In addition, the two versions of "Persephone the Wanderer" "turn away from sympathy and personality, insisting that the story is wholly allegorical": Addressing the reader, Glück writes:

You are allowed to like
no one, you know. The characters
are not people.

They are aspects of a dilemma or conflict.

(Averno 23)

Indeed, the poet's own conflict lies in her longing for death and her fear of it. In the second "Persephone the Wanderer", the speaker declares, "I think I can

remember being dead.” Yearning for a wintry rest, she asks Zeus, “Tell me... / how can I endure the earth?” Promising her oblivion and rest, Zeus reassures her, “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”. (Averno 94)

An alternative path out of harm’s way is analyzed by Kenniston as mitigation by interpretation of the myth. “To talk about loss ... is to defer it, undermine it, connect it to all the other stuff of the world”. (185) Thus, by interpreting the myth, the poet tries to give meaning to the injury. Injury becomes art and lyric becomes an alternative to disaster. So does the interpretation of a dream, which enables the poet to write in “Fugue”, that in a dream the wound is made and sealed.

David Yezzi interestingly links Glück’s dark visions and disillusionment to her admiration of T.S. Eliot. He states that she had “an ear for the music of T.S. Eliot, a visionary connection to the figures and themes of myth and classical literature, and a genius for linguistic and emotional violence”. (104) Yezzi quotes the poet’s praise of Eliot in “Proofs and Theories” (1994): “Among the great figures of the time ... Eliot was, in the work, the least materialistic, the least consoled by the physical world. Because what he wanted was either to see through the material to the eternal ... or to experience a closing of the gap between two worlds”. (105) Yezzi holds that , “In the way one suffering soul recognizes a fellow sufferer, Glück finds in Eliot’s poetry a ‘taste of outcry’”. Losing hope in taking any solace from the possibility of the union of the two realms of life and eternity, Glück’s poetry “remained bitterly unconsolated”. (106) Consequently, her poems are characterized by a language that is “terse, slightly cool, though coiled and humming like a high tension wire”. (108, 109) In fact, her preference for intensity through the simplest vocabulary, is evident in the lines quoted by Yezzi from “Memoir”, one of the poems of “The Seven Ages” where she explains: “And when I wrote I used only a few words / ...A few words were all I needed: / Nourish, sustain, attack”. Moreover, Yezzi points to the “unnerving clarity” with which she views herself and others, creating “an intimacy and immediacy...that her simple language only serves to amplify”. Her “ferocity” lies in the “abruptness” of “a predator that lulls, then lashes out”. (110) Indeed, this is evident in her description of Persephone as “just meat”. (Averno 25) On the other hand, the poet perplexes the reader in “The Untrustworthy Speaker” from Ararat, by writing:” That’s why I’m not to be trusted / Because a wound to the heart / is also a wound to the mind”. (qtd 112) At the beginning of Averno, in “The Night Migrations”, she wonders:

What will the soul do for solace then?
I tell myself maybe it won’t need
these pleasures anymore;
maybe just not being is simply enough,

hard as that is to imagine.

(Averno 8)

Conversely, Glück decides to procrastinate death. In "Blue Rotunda", the light reminds the poet of her incarceration on this earth, saying, "you can see out / but you can't go out". (Averno 71) In "Thrush", thinking back about her past life, Glück writes:

But for me – I think the guilt I feel must mean
I haven't lived very well.

Echoing Hamlet's musings about death, the speaker says, "I think you sleep awhile, / then you descend into the terror of the next life / except / the soul is in some different form" (Averno 89).

Conclusion

Louise Glück's Averno is a multi-faceted masterpiece. The poet reverses the woman-as-object paradigm. The heroine becomes "a quintessential woman-as-subject, engaged in a quest for wholeness at once spiritual, psychological, and social". (Ostriker 224) In Adrienne Rich's words, "Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival". (qtd 235) Though Glück's work may manifest traits of her personal life, she blurs the line between personal and public with great skill. Besides, equating past and present, for Glück, the woman poet, "the past is not then but now". (236) On the other hand, revisionism has to entail new form, disorientation and drawing attention to "the discrepancies between traditional concepts and the conscious mental and emotional activity of female re-vision". In addition, violent, straightforward, sometimes shocking language "not only modernizes what is ancient, [but also] makes us see the contemporary relevance of the past". Reducing the "verbal glow" of mythic language, women poets tend to look at or into, but not up to sacred things, thus guiding the reader to "unlearn submission". Finally, Glück's visionary struggle with her shattered self; at once rational and passionate, surgeon and patient, and her acknowledgment of this conflict, have resulted in a highly intriguing portrayal of a modern, fluid and original Persephone.

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