

Death Speaks

The Relationship Between Sound, Silence, and Death in Louise Glück's "Aboriginal Landscape" and "Visitors from Abroad"

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Abstract: Death and silence are often connected themes in literature, with silence being used as a metaphor or herald for death. Although Louise Glück's poetry also contains such associations, silence is given a different role in "Aboriginal Landscape" and "Visitors from Abroad." Glück gives death a voice in these two poems, which she then enhances with different types of silence, thus giving it the illusion of aural volume and otherworldliness. The paper first aims to clarify what is meant by a "voice of death" in the context of the poems, then proceeds to demonstrate three types of silences: the silence of white space, implicit silence, and explicit silence. Finally, it is concluded that Glück's use of silence not only gives the "voice of death" the illusion of aural volume and otherworldliness but also gives the two poems an additional dimension of interpretation.

As Sabbar S. Sultan writes in "Silence and Its Discontents in Literature," from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to Beckett's trilogy, silence in literature is often associated with death (685–690). American contemporary writer Louise Glück similarly employs this trope in poems such as "Averno," where being heard is associated with being alive, or "The Drowned Children," where being quiet means death has come. However, in some of her other works she assigns silence a different role. In her poems "Aboriginal Landscape" and "Visitors from Abroad," Glück not only gives death a voice, but she also uses different types of silence to enhance it, thus creating an illusion of aural volume and otherworldliness. She achieves this effect in three

ways: she uses explicit silence as both a connector and divider between the living and the dead; she employs implicit silence as a backdrop to the “voice of death,” thus elevating it from its surroundings; and she also engages with the silence of the blank spaces around the text, using it to frame death’s voice typographically, thus furthering its separateness and enhancing its effect.

For the sake of understanding the variety of silences occurring in “Aboriginal Landscape” and “Visitors from Abroad,” it is important to clarify what is meant by the “voice of death” in this paper. “Voice of death,” in the context of these poems, refers not only to the personification of death, but also to the voice—or sometimes sound—representing, evoking, or symbolising death. The two poems share the underlying theme of grief, specifically grief for the speaker’s parents. Of the two parents, it is the mother that is given the most presence and voice; she is the one who takes on the role of the “voice of death” in both poems. In *The Poetry of Louise Glück: A Thematic Introduction*, Daniel Morris explains how Glück tends to associate silence and emotional unavailability with her father in her poetry (7)—a tendency which also appears in these two texts.

In “Aboriginal Landscape,” the first line is spoken by the mother addressing the speaker: “You’re stepping on your father” (Glück, *Faithful and Virtuous Night* 24), a sentence which is later repeated by her with an increase in volume. Afterwards, the speaker informs the reader that the mother is dead, thus confirming that the lyrical self is either hallucinating the voice, hearing a memory or interacting with a spirit. However, the mother’s voice is not the only aural element representing death in the poem. Once her presence dissipates and the cemetery that the speaker imagines becomes silent, “very faintly, sounds of weeping several rows away, / and beyond that, a dog wailing” (24) can be heard in the distance. The “weeping” and “wailing” evoke images and emotions of grieving, taking over the role of the “voice of death” from the mother.

In “Visitors from Abroad,” the first sound representing death is the ringing of the phone. The speaker herself associates it with death when she says, “[the ringing] had / my mother’s persistence and my father’s / pained embarrassment” (Glück, *Faithful and Virtuous Night* 22). The second aural association is once again the mother’s voice, who appears in front of the speaker with the father and infant sister in the second section. The father and sister are notably silent throughout the scene. In her essay “Death and Absence,” Glück writes: “The dead sister died before I was born. ... I saw myself as her substitute, which produced in me a profound obligation

toward my mother, and a frantic desire to remedy her every distress" (*Proofs & Theories* 127). This feeling of substitution is indeed echoed in "Visitors from Abroad" by none other than the mother when she says, "you have your sister's soul" (Glück, *Faithful and Virtuous Night* 23). Preceding this statement are the words: "Hardly a mention of us anymore, hardly a mention of your sister. /... But for us, she said, you wouldn't exist" (22–23). In reply, the speaker insists, "I write about you all the time" (23), which implies that the mother's words resonate with the speaker's own worries and insecurities. By having these emotions expressed by the mother instead of the speaker, Glück grants these lines a layer of guilt and, due to the words being spoken by the dead, a stronger sense of judgment and truth than they would otherwise convey. Ultimately, in both poems, the "voice of death" shifts between spoken words and abrupt sounds, with their connection to death clearly recognisable and their aural presence vivid. In "Death and Absence," Glück states: "Poems do not endure as objects but as presences. When you read anything worth remembering, you liberate a human voice; you release into the world again a companion spirit" (*Proofs & Theories* 128). Perhaps, in these two poems, this sentiment was taken to a more literal level.

Although the first type of silence, to be referred to as "explicit silence," is the most discernable, it still holds significance through its contrasting role to the "voice of death." Explicit silence (as opposed to implied silence) is silence which the author openly calls attention to, but such silence might still possess implications beyond what is made immediately apparent. In "Visitors from Abroad," the speaker, after picking up the phone, states that "the line was dead" (Glück, *Faithful and Virtuous Night* 22). This is immediately followed by, "Or was the phone working and the caller dead?" (22), establishing a strong connection between the absence of a voice through the receiver and the presence of the dead. (While it is established later that the receiver still emitted sound for a while, assumedly the beeping that accompanies a "dead line," the absence of a voice can be, and in this paper is, considered a form of silence.) In the following section, the appearance of the parents and of the mother speaking reinforces the idea of a connection with the dead. However, unlike in section two, the speaker and the dead are still separated by the medium of the phone in section one.

Likewise, in "Aboriginal Landscape," when the speaker states that "The cemetery was silent" (Glück, *Faithful and Virtuous Night* 24), it is not simply a confirmation

of the stillness of the speaker's surroundings. Instead, the statement aims to highlight and add weight to the lines that follow it:

... Wind blew through the trees;
 I could hear, very faintly, sounds of weeping several rows away,
 and beyond that, a dog wailing. (24)

The explicit silence in this case acts as a contrasting device to the sounds heard in the distance, thus enhancing the “voices of death,” while also establishing the speaker as being in a separate space from them, giving the sounds an otherworldly quality.

In “Visitors from Abroad,” the line “Outside the street was silent” (Glück, *Faithful and Virtuous Night* 23) has a similar purpose. The preceding section ends with the speaker breaking the silence—“I write about you all the time, I said aloud” (23)—in an attempt to communicate with the dead. However, the beginning of section four reestablishes the same silence, thus once again distancing the speaker from the voices of the dead. This is further supported by the speaker’s observation that the receiver’s “peevish throbbing has ceased” (23), which means that the possibility of communication with the speaker’s parents has ended. As Noah Hickman observes, “[f]or Glück’s speakers, silence operates as that marker; silence indicates that something has ended, that some speech (or event) concludes, and in its wake the now-finished thing leaves a lacuna of noise” (93). Like in “Aboriginal Landscape,” this distance between the speaker’s space of silence and the “voice of death,” present in their noted absence in section four, gives the impression that the sounds are “not of this world.” Ultimately, while explicitly stated silence might initially appear straightforward, it acts in these poems as a means to create distance between the speaker and the “voice of death,” placing the latter in a space separate from the speaker.

The second type of silence appearing in both works is “implied silence”: a silence not explicitly stated but interrupted by a voice or sound representing death, and which thus amplifies the aural volume of that voice or sound. Isaac Cates observes that “[Glück’s] nine books of poetry have mastered certain subtle techniques of voice that make an art of implied silences” (463). Commenting on her interest in silence as it appears in writing, Glück herself has remarked in “On George Oppen”: “As a reader, consequently as a writer, I am partial to most forms of voluntary

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silence. I love what is implicit or present in outline, that which summons (as opposed to imposes) thought” (*Proofs & Theories* 29). Certainly, the implied silences used in the two poems can be characterised as subtexts which invite the reader’s thoughts. Cates concludes that Glück’s works “depend on their own silences, and on the engagement of their reader during these silences” (476).

In “Aboriginal Landscape,” there are two instances of implied silence, both pertaining to the mother’s voice. The first is the silence of the speaker’s father, whose silence only becomes truly notable when the speaker listens to the mother’s voice and steps off of her father’s supposed grave, “to where / my father ended and my mother began” (Glück, *Faithful and Virtuous Night* 24). The line could be interpreted in a way that the speaker has moved off her father’s grave only to step on her mother’s, in which case, after the mother’s insistence that the speaker move, the father’s silence becomes conspicuous. As previously mentioned, Glück associates silence and emotional unavailability with her father (Morris 7)—an association which is demonstrated implicitly in this case. The second instance of implied silence is the silence which occurs between the two occasions the mother speaks: the silence of the speaker. The mother asks her daughter to step off her father (Glück, *Faithful and Virtuous Night* 24) and then repeats the same words but louder. The implication here, especially with the repetition being increased in volume, is that the speaker did not respond to the mother’s demand but remained silent instead. The mother, in reply, raises her voice, and the speaker’s silence emphasises this loudness in a way a simple repetition would not be able to do.

Implied silence in “Visitors from Abroad” also appears twice, the first appearance being the same as that of “Aboriginal Landscape”: the silence of the father, which is implied in section two of the poem. Only, in this case, the silence of the infant sister joins that of the father, thus further elevating the mother’s voice, both in terms of volume and significance, making her truly “[triumph] over the silence of death” (Hickman 98). The second way silence is implied is through the night. Nighttime in general is often associated with quiet and calm. In “Visitors from Abroad,” the time of the day is first mentioned in relation to the phone ringing:

... in the middle of the night
the phone rang. It rang and rang
as though the world needed me,
though really it was the reverse.

I lay in bed, trying to analyze
the ring. ... (Glück, *Faithful and Virtuous Night* 22)

The fact that the speaker specifies that the phone is ringing “in the middle of the night” confirms that the sound is disturbing what would otherwise be a period of quiet. When the phone cuts off, the silence might be regained but the night remains disturbed, as “[t]he conspicuous cessation of noise from the phone receiver impregnates the stillness of the scene with the threat of its former noise” (Hickman 96). Like the speaker’s silence in “Aboriginal Landscape,” the silence of the night lends power to the ringing of the phone, enhancing its presence so that, even once the sound has ceased, the presence remains. Thus, the implied silence in both works provides the voice and sounds representative of death with a backdrop of silence from which it can abruptly appear, with a loudness that would otherwise be unachievable.

The third type of silence that can be identified in the poems is what is often referred to as the silence of the blank space (also known as white space, not to be confused with the sociological concept of “white space” pertaining to racism)—a silence meant to enhance the “voice of death” in “Aboriginal Landscape” and “Visitors from Abroad” by framing it. Writing about the collection of poems in which both of these works appeared, Hickman remarks: “in none of her collections does the concept of silence factor more explicitly than in ... *Faithful and Virtuous Night*” (90). Glück herself has professed a love for “white space” (*Proofs & Theories* 29) and “deliberate silence” (73). The blank spaces this paper examines are those which can be found before and after a stanza. As Cates explains: “The silences between lines, and especially between stanzas, become Glück’s equivalent for that slippery semicolon in ‘In a Station of the Metro’: spaces in which the listener the poem craves can bind one statement to another and make the poem (or the book) whole” (476).

The beginning of “Aboriginal Landscape” already utilises, for the purposes of silence, the blank space between the title and the first stanza, from which the voice of the mother—“You’re stepping on your father” (Glück, *Faithful and Virtuous Night* 24)—unexpectedly emerges. While the reader might not yet be aware of the mother’s circumstances, the sudden appearance of her voice from the blank space attracts notice regardless, creating a sense of anticipation and, as Cates aptly writes, “[t]he poet’s mind working ahead of us ... reveals itself in the interstices between the anticipated and the eventual” (463). There seems to be a deliberateness in how the blank space is interrupted by a voice, and indeed, the second stanza

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utilises the same routine: a blank space followed by an abrupt voice, this time louder, repeating the same words once again. The repetition of not only the voice but of the blank space itself furthers the illusion of an increase in volume. It is only after the second time that the reader is informed of the mother's deceased state, which creates, in retrospect, the image of a voice from "the great beyond" addressing the speaker, attempting to catch her attention. Hickman arrives at a similar conclusion: "[The poem] opens with the speaker's dead mother speaking, having triumphed over the silence of death now with a locution reserved for some beyond-state; whether such comes as literal speech or an imagined speech on the part of the speaker, the dead speaks, nevertheless" (98).

In "Visitors from Abroad," death (specifically the dead mother) again speaks. In the second section, the appearance of the speaker's family, and consequently the mother's speech, is preceded and followed by blank spaces. Or, to be more exact, the mother's words are first framed by implied silence, which is then framed by the blank space. That is to say, unlike in "Aboriginal Landscape," the blank space is followed by an implied silence, wherein the speaker describes the family standing "in the cold / on the front steps" (Glück, *Faithful and Virtuous Night* 22). What is particularly emphasised here is the mother's silence, singled out with the words: "My mother stared at me" (22). It is only after the staring is noted and analysed that the mother begins speaking. Thus, the words "you never think of us" (22), like her first words in "Aboriginal Landscape," have an air of judgment and truth, born from the certainty that it is the dead that the reader seemingly hears speaking, with an aural quality to the words amplified by the silence surrounding it. After having said her part, the mother—and the rest of the family—"vanished like Mormon missionaries" (23), with the word "vanished" and the blank space following it once again lending an illusion of silence to the scene. To conclude, both "Aboriginal Landscape" and "Visitors from Abroad" have the mother's voice framed by blank space, which lends itself to a silence that enhances her voice and the impression that it comes from "the great beyond."

There is another instance of blank space in section two of "Visitors from Abroad" which bears mentioning: the space between the first and second stanza of the section. The mother's words—"You never think of us, she said," and "We read your books when they reach heaven" (Glück, *Faithful and Virtuous Night* 22)—are notably interrupted by a blank space, whose placement could be meant as a representation of the speaker's silence. This could, technically, be also construed as a form of implied

silence; however, its dependence on the blank space leaves it open for interpretation and justifies its inclusion here. As Afrah Mahdi Alwash remarks in “The Trauma of Death in Louise Glück’s Selected Poems: A Psychoanalytic Study,” “Glück writes about these traumatised subjects with a vision that comes from personal understanding” (993). In “Education of the Poet,” Glück touches upon her family’s relationship with speech and silence, the latter of which she used in response to her desire to speak being “regularly frustrated” (*Proofs & Theories* 5). There is a similarity that could be drawn between that childhood response and the silence interrupting the mother’s speech if one interprets the silence as the silence of the speaker.

In both “Aboriginal Landscape” and “Visitors from Abroad,” silence plays a critical role, amplifying the illusion of aural volume and the otherworldliness of the “voice of death.” Glück’s use of explicit silence in the poems allows her to create distance between death and the living, while retaining a connection between the two, such as the case of the phone in “Visitors from Abroad.” She uses implied silence in a way that enhances death’s voice, as an aural background from which the latter can emerge—an example being the father’s silence in both “Visitors from Abroad” and “Aboriginal Landscape.” Finally, her deliberate use of blank spaces allows her to further separate and enhance the “voice of death” by framing it, for instance, like she does with the mother’s voice in “Aboriginal Landscape.” Talking of Glück’s preference for silence and space, Morris remarks: “Her poetic manner thus conveys a desire to have a lyric voice that is somehow not constrained by a physical manifestation on the page” (38). Indeed, Glück’s use of silences has given her works a layer that proves to be as auditory in nature as a written work can be, thus granting these works—and their readers—an additional dimension of interpretation.

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