

“We Have Entered Eternity”

An Analysis of *The Wild Iris* and *Averno*

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Abstract: This paper analyses two volumes by American poet Louise Glück: The Wild Iris and Averno. Averno deals with the theme of trauma. The crater lake Averno is the setting, which is the gateway to Hades. The poetry collection shows our vulnerability and how we face loss. Averno presents a fragmented world, conveyed through Glück's formal fragmentation and sombre imagery. In contrast, The Wild Iris presents a reconstruction of the world, set in a mystical garden where different flowers tell their own narratives. The book explores themes of life and death, rebirth, cyclicity, and the quest for transcendence.

Before entering into an analysis of two of Louise Glück's collections of poetry (*Averno* and *The Wild Iris*), it seems useful to make three brief comments in the introduction to this essay on the literary style, the characteristic themes, and the poetic technique of Glück. Glück's poems are characterised by psychological depth. Bollobás describes Glück as a “late modernist poet of authentic presence, with self-expressive lyrical poems exploring the personal's connections with the universal, the natural, and the mythological” (Bollobás, “Louise Glück” 46). Daniel Morris's book on Louise Glück is the most comprehensive work on Glück's poetry. Morris does not proceed in a chronological manner; instead, he approaches Glück's work through a series of interrelated themes, the most significant of which are: “autobiography, hunger, Jewishness, trauma, nature, and grief” (7). Glück employs a variety of poetic techniques, including free verse, fragmentation, and repetition. Her poetic language is frequently dense and suggestive, demanding close attention from

the reader. The poems are often open-ended and ambiguous, which allows for multiple interpretations.

Averno (2006) contains a total of 18 poems. In this book, Louise Glück examines a range of personal and universal themes, including trauma, pain, memory, forgetting, grief, and death. She shifts the focus from the importance of life to a new understanding of death. The poems in the volume exhibit a range of forms, from brief lyrical compositions to longer narrative pieces. They collectively create a pervading atmosphere of apprehension, depression, and melancholy, congruent with the prevailing themes.

In her poetry, Louise Glück has eliminated the lyric speaker as both the subject and object of attention. In *Averno*, for instance, Glück employs Greek and Roman myths as a means of achieving this effect: Louise Glück “employs a lyric persona that is projected into impersonal realms and cold dramas” (Warren 98). In *Averno*, the voices in the poems “are similar in nature to ghosts speaking from another realm, where they observe the afterlife of an unnamed event. The majority of the poems present an uncertain and unpredictable situation, as well as a fragmented world that evokes despair in the lyric self” (Keniston 183).

Averno is also based on Greek mythology. The poem “Averno” recounts the tale of the ancient Greek goddess Persephone, who was abducted by Hades, the god of the Underworld. The title of the collection refers to the Italian crater lake of Averno, which was traditionally regarded as the gate to Hades’ realm, the Underworld. In the volume, Lake Averno is identified as the underworld: a dark, cold, windy, and dry realm. The Earth is described as “an island of metaphysical solitude” (Bartczak 2). Glück turns her attention to the myth of Persephone but does not follow the conventional narrative. What distinguishes *Averno* is that it presents four distinct versions of the Persephone narrative. In “Persephone the Wanderer 1,” Hades abducts and rapes Persephone, a young girl representing innocence and youth. However, Persephone not only survives death but also undergoes a transformation, becoming not merely a young girl but the queen of the underworld. “The Myth of Innocence” is told from Persephone’s perspective. It commences with a young girl’s usual visit to a pool, where she observes her reflection and perceives the presence of an unidentified male figure. She states that “death” has appeared and that a dark god is forcibly removing her from her mortal form. This is a traumatic experience for Persephone, who describes the events as “terrifying” and expresses a desire to be freed from her body, in a manner similar to that expressed

by trauma victims. Julia Kristeva asserts that the experience of pain and trauma has the potential to significantly influence an individual's personality and character: these "borderline experiences" transform the personality (*New Maladies of the Soul* 242). In Kristeva's view, the consequence of borderline experiences is a fractured sense of time. In my view, this mode of being is also evident in Glück's poetry. The temporality of the poems is fragmented, and the lyric speaker is situated at a distance, both proximate and remote, as seen, for instance, in "Persephone the Wanderer 1": "My soul / shattered with the strain / of trying to belong to earth" (Glück 514).

In another poem, "Persephone the Wanderer 2," the reader is presented with Demeter's account of the traumatic abduction. The figure of Demeter is originally a nurturing earth-mother-goddess, who is a grieving mother in this poem. In recalling the abduction of her daughter, Demeter expresses profound grief. During this period of mourning, the world is transformed, becoming reminiscent of a snowy landscape and the icy fields of Elysium. After the return of her daughter, Demeter initiates the cycle of the seasons, and the cycle of life and death (Olkowski 18), thereby establishing a cyclical temporal framework. In "Women's Time," Kristeva argues that the cyclical view of time is a primary characteristic of women, as they tend to be more attuned to natural cycles, biological rhythms, and eternity (13–35). By reinterpreting the Persephone myth, Glück offers a unique perspective by providing a narrative and a voice for all three characters. Hades is also given a voice and can tell his own version of the same story. Hades' narrative is entitled "The Myth of Devotion." He asserts that he fell in love with Persephone and attempted to create a new garden for her, as well as to care for her. However, Glück notes that the type of love Hades represents is more like a powerful, possessive, and aggressive form of affection.

The emptiness and bleakness of the underworld of Hades is associated with winter in Glück's poetry. In "Landscape,"

Winter emptied the trees, filled them again with snow.
Because I couldn't feel, snow fell, the lake froze over.
Because I was afraid, I didn't move;
my breath was white. (533)

The function of snow in this context is not one of purification or renewal, but rather of burial and concealment. The thick layer of snow that accumulates

during the winter months effectively buries life, concealing what once flourished: it banishes the past to the realm of oblivion. As Margaret Ann Gordon observes, Glück’s figures are often immersed in a traumatic psychic landscape that is “characterised by a disorientation in space and time” (300).

The theme of time loss is a pervasive motif in Glück’s poetic *oeuvre*. As postulated by Kristeva, our relationship with time becomes suspended in melancholy, in borderline situations, and in instances of traumatic victimisation (*New Maladies of the Soul* 81–90). In *Averno*, Glück portrays the aftermath of traumatic shock, depicting the subsequent period of stillness, paralysis, and numbness:

I am at work, though I am silent.
The bland misery of the world
bounds us on either side, an alley
lined with trees; we are
companions here, not speaking. (508)

Glück also plays with time in her verse: her frequent use of enjambment creates a present tense in the poem. Glück also likes ellipses; the spaces and pauses created by punctuation in *Averno* also emphasise the unspoken. What is new in *Averno*, compared to Glück’s earlier poetry, is the form of the poems—the echo, the fragment, the fugue, the prism: these terms (all of them poem titles as well as poem forms) indicate Glück’s tendency to capture reflection, fragmentation, distance, and emptiness.

Glück has said of her poetry: “From the beginning I preferred the simplest vocabulary. I am attracted to ellipses, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to eloquent deliberate silence... because they are not whole, though wholeness is implied: another time, a world in which they were whole or were to have been whole is implied” (Glück, “Proofs and Theories” 73–77). As the quote suggests, Glück’s art is also deliberately self-limiting. Since there is no rhyme or metre in Glück’s poetry, syntax is most important to her. However, her poems can also be said to break away from traditional verse metre and rhyme schemes, reflecting the emotional freedom of the speaker and the rhythms of nature.

In Glück’s second volume, *The Wild Iris*, her lyrical selves are driven towards transcendence by a quest to uncover the hidden truths of nature. This collection contains poems that are less dreary than the ones in *Averno*, and is about the need to discover joy and beauty. There is clarity and light in *The Wild Iris*, and the poems

explore themes of healing, personal growth, and the balance between light and shadow. The flowers—whether wild iris, lilies, or others—represent the rebirth of the self after suffering. This book of verses is about the emergence of flowers into the light, which symbolises the awakening of the soul from a time of darkness.

The Wild Iris is set in a flower garden through which the speaker, a gardener in constant prayer, walks. In this mystical garden, the speaker-gardener, addressing God, searches for the meaning of life amidst the pain of trauma and loss. This collection of poems, thus, offers a mystical series of prayers in which the passing of the seasons provides the temporal framework for the “narrative” (Zazula 255). What is new in *The Wild Iris* is that, instead of one speaker, there are several voices. Daniel Morris describes the poems in this volume as an unusual “polyphonic lieder-cycle” (191). Glück’s chorus is divided into three distinct voices. God speaks in the “voice of nature”, the wife prays in the voice of the religious gardener, and the third voice is the various songs of the eighteen flowers. Consequently, Helen Vendler describes the work as a “song cycle” (36).

According to Grace Cavalieri’s interview with the poet, the garden of *The Wild Iris* was inspired by Glück’s own backyard in Vermont. The poems depict one year of that flower garden. Glück’s garden might remind the reader of a monastery garden and what Imre Vörös calls “the stoic garden of tranquillity” (6). Glück’s gardener searches for God and meaning in her life while working in the garden, as seen in the poem “Vespers 5”: “I need you, you appear to me, not / often, however. I live essentially / in darkness” (Glück 294). In Glück’s stoic garden, the flowers carry the transcendent knowledge of the world.

There are 54 poems in this volume and 18 of them have anthropomorphised talking flowers. The flowers symbolise fragility, growth, beauty, vulnerability, death, and rebirth. The following flowers appear as speaking characters: Iris, Trillium, Lamium, Snowdrops, Scilla, Hawthorn, Violet, Witchgrass, Jacob’s ladder, Buttercups, Poppy, Clover, Daisy, White Rose, Ipomoea, White Lily, Golden Lily, and Silver Lily. They speak as if, in a dramatic monologue, they were recounting secret experiences of the cycle of life and death, of their own death (withering) and rebirth (flowering). The talking flowers contemplate the beauty and transience of the world; they explore spiritual themes and transcendent questions—see, for instance, “The Silver Lily”: “We have come too far together toward the end now / to fear the end. These nights, I am no longer even certain / I know what the end means” (Glück 310). The poems with flowers tend to be dark and melancholy,

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dealing with themes such as death, grief, and the difficulty of finding meaning in life. According to Daniel Morris, the language of flowers is an imperfect language of grief and traumatic memory (178). The sentences of the flowers are elliptical; for example, in “Snowdrops”:

remembering
after so long how to open again
in the cold light/ of earliest spring—
afraid, yes, but among you again
crying yes, risking joy
in the raw wind of the new world. (Glück 259)

Here, the snowdrop speaks of the painful but essential process of reopening after a long winter: the talking flower remembers how to reopen, so it has the power to renew and to be reborn.

There are 22 poems in the volume, where the lyric subject is the speaker, who is identified as the gardener. She is the wife, who on occasion addresses her husband, John, or the absent God in prayers that she refers to as “Matins” or “Vespers.” The aforementioned titles, “Matins” and “Vespers,” refer to the canonical hours of the Catholic Church, specifically “Matutinum” and “Vespera.” That is why the religious speaker is presented in this work in two distinct hours: the early morning Matins and the early evening Vespers. Helen Vendler observes that the book is, in fact, one long poem, or one liturgical ritual, given that the “Matins” poems appear in the first half—i.e. the morning—and the “Vespers” poems in the second half—i.e. the evening (16–22). The female voice in the liturgical ritual (the gardener) struggles to reconcile her faith in God with the suffering she observes in the world. She frequently contemplates the transience of life and the nature of existence beyond death (Bidart 23–25). The relationship between the gardener-wife and the flowers is characterised by tenderness and intimacy; she nourishes and waters her plants, caring for them as a creative mother.

In the remaining 14 poems of the work, God, who oversees the cycle of life and death, is presented. His creative and destructive powers are both significant, as evidenced by the following quote from “September Twilight”:

I gathered you together;
 I can erase you
 as though you were a draft to be thrown away,
 an exercise because I've finished you ... (Glück 311)

In *The Wild Iris*, this divine figure—sometimes referred to by the gardener as “Father” but mostly as the familiar “You”—assumes 14 different natural forms. As the titles of the poems indicate, God speaks in the voice of weather phenomena and the seasons of the day and year: “Clear Morning,” “Spring Snow,” “End of Winter,” “Retreating Wind,” “April,” “End of Summer,” “Early Darkness,” “Retreating Light,” “Sunset,” and “September Twilight.”

In this collection, God is not presented as an anthropomorphic being, as is commonly depicted in the Bible, but rather as the divine power and light of creation. The concept of divine light is exemplified in the poems “Retreating Light” and “Sunset.” However, the symbol of God’s light also features prominently in “Matins 7,” a poem characterised by the radiance of dawn. The speaker is stunned by the beauty and power of the sunrise, which he describes as “white fire” and “earth’s radiance” (Glück 282). Furthermore, light serves as a symbol of divine presence in “End of Summer”:

If you would open your eyes
 you would see me, you would see
 ... white light
 no longer disguised as matter. (Glück 292)

Writing *The Wild Iris* was a slow process. For an extended period, Glück merely wrote a single line, which subsequently became the inaugural line of the poem’s opening, as attested by the poem “The Wild Iris”: “At the end of my suffering there was a door” (Glück 253). In this context, the door guides us into a domain where mysticism is an inherent aspect of everyday life. It compels us to reflect on the essence of the world, the nature of being outside or inside, the state of suffering, and the subsequent state after suffering, as well as the characteristics of openness and closure. The lines written by Glück are enigmatic. If there is indeed a “door” at the end of suffering, then suffering can be regarded as a dark corridor. However, an examination of the title poem reveals that the door metaphor refers to the speaker’s belief

in transformation and positive change after experiencing suffering. The door is presumably a portal to another dimension of existence.

In “The Wild Iris,” the speaker indicates that he has experienced death. Glück employs a combination of enjambment and caesura to convey the tension between the forces of nature (such as growth and decay) and life and death. The poem ends with the image of a “great fountain, deep blue / shadows on the azure seawater” (Glück 253), which symbolises the rebirth of the speaker’s soul from death. When the iris blossoms like a “great fountain,” there is a sense of triumph and climax at the same time: the last stanza that follows consists of shorter lines, suggesting that the iris is withering and dying again—and being reborn once more.

The majority of the poems in the volume investigate themes pertaining to mortality, the transient nature of life, and the potential for an afterlife. Glück prompts the reader to contemplate their own existence. This is exemplified in the concluding poem: in “The White Lilies,” the flower represents an optimistic symbol despite its own burial, as the soul is believed to have no death and, therefore, enters eternal life with joy. Despite the transience of existence, the lily finds meaning in the present moment, transcending time and becoming eternal through its experience of summer: “this one summer we have entered eternity” (Glück 314).

In conclusion, *Averno* is an exceptionally powerful anthology of poems that endeavours to address the subject of trauma. The collection demonstrates our vulnerability and how we confront losses. *Averno* presents a fragmented world, a precarious mode of existence, conveyed through Glück’s formal fractured lines and sombre imagery. In contrast, *The Wild Iris* presents a reconstruction of the world: the book addresses themes of life and death, rebirth, cyclicity, and the aspiration for transcendence. It offers a reminder that even in the most challenging circumstances, there is potential for growth, understanding, and renewal.

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