

Postconfessionalist Breakthrough in Glück's Poetics

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Abstract: One of the purposes of confession in confessional poetry, as stated by Diane Wood Middlebrook, is breaking through via the breaking of taboos. This act implies a deliberately bare language of honesty, where poetic complexity is entrusted to the intricacy of emotions, encompassing issues of attachment, social alienation, or mortality. Often touching on family relations, Louise Glück's poetry too is deceptively uncomplicated. Resembling the cadence of ordinary speech, her poems create the sense that the speaker is a real person, a homogenous entity with a body and a birth certificate. There is a tension, however, between content and form in her lyric, in that it is specifically the reliability of the voice that the content interrogates. She reflects on this manifestly in "The Untrustworthy Speaker," namely the (un)reliability of the poetic persona as a conveyor of its life events. Doing so, she breaks away from the confessionalist mode of autobiography, in which the confessional "I" lays bare the contents of the poet's life in a gesture of protest against polite society, as an attempt to reveal the real "I," or as an act of cleansing. Pinpointing the break achieved by Glück, Gregory Orr classifies her as postconfessional, simultaneously demarcating a stream of contemporary American poetry that complicates the notion of self found in the confessionals. It is easier to see what Glück is breaking away from in terms of confession, but much more enigmatic, what the relationship of her poetry is to breaking through. In this paper, I will attempt to grasp Glück's postconfessionality by studying the possibility of breakthrough in her poetics, illustrating it with lines from "The Chicago Train," "The Night Migrations," "The Untrustworthy Speaker," "Dead End," "The Wild Iris," "Snowdrops," and "Dedication to Hunger."

Poetry refuses to provide easy answers to difficult questions. It routinely abstracts, gives nuance, or even confuses through language. Louise Glück's poems are

a paradox of the literary form. The deception of her poetic voice is that it is reduced to bare bones, resembling the cadence of ordinary speech, while dealing with unsolvable equations, such as problematic family relations, the complexity of selfhood, and the inevitability of death. When looking at her body of work through the lens of healing, one can pinpoint the unillusioned nature of her poetry that speaks of ordeal as an interlocked piece of the human condition. Despite her unwavering stoicism, she does depict breakthroughs—moments of spiritual and/or physical revelation that move the poetic subject out of impasse, and into a deeper understanding of themselves and their surroundings. This paper aims to investigate the nature of these breakthroughs and examine their interaction with the lyrical traditions she draws from.

In one of her essays, Glück reflects on a contemporary wave that she calls *The Culture of Healing*, and the tendency of certain works to culminate in “the soul’s ... declaration of wholeness” (*American Originality* 67). The emerging genre Glück describes has a common theme of overcoming, where the survivor speaking to us gives the impression of a *real* person, a homogenous “I” with a body and birth certificate.

Take for instance these lines from Ocean Vuong’s poem “Skinny Dipping” as an illustration of Glück’s argument. In the poem, Vuong parallels undressing for a jump off a cliff with leaving behind warped self-images, and portrays the jump itself as the moment of transformation:

my people my people
I thought
the fall would
kill me
but it only
made me real. (10)

The triumphant tone distinct to Vuong’s poetics celebrates resilience and transformation, declaring a variant of wholeness: being real. On the cover of the volume, *Time Is a Mother*, there is a message tucked in: “How else do we return to ourselves but to fold / The page so it points to the good part.” The act of reading here is paralleled with that of healing with a direction given towards the “good part,” the state of wellbeing that follows mended ordeal. Poetry poses as a utility for psychological leverage and terrain where the act of breaking through can be realised.

To illustrate an opposing trend, which deals more cautiously with intimacy, Glück gives Ross Macdonald's quote as an example: "[Macdonald] had to be interposed, like protective lead, between [himself] and the radioactive material" (*American Originality* 68). The radioactive material in Glück's argument is the overly intimate personal matter, the portrayed working through or "coming to terms," which lacks the craft of distancing. One would speculate that, after the catalysing experience of trauma, there is another step for the writer that has to do with the "quarantine" of careful self-reflection. The author is tasked with burying the *real* material under the "safe ground" of reflective fiction.

On the spectrum of extreme revelation (confessional poetry) and impersonalist withholding (modernist and/or avant-garde language poetry), Glück is on ambiguous terrain. While she rejects the "culture of healing," there is a space for elation in her poetry. And, although the confessions she puts on paper are not "hers," there are clear references to her "real" life. Moreover, she writes in the spirit of the confessionalists, who saw value in shedding light on difficult truths and laying them bare on the table.

Bartczak argues that Glück finds a middle ground (77) between High Modernist impersonalism and intensely personal lyric poetry. Similarly, Gregory Orr classifies Glück as postconfessional, which he deems a partial continuation of confessional poetry (654). After the modernists rejected Romanticism, in favor of more encompassing narratives, Orr argues, the confessionals, in turn, rejected impersonalism, injecting an "enormous intensity of self" into American poetry (651). Glück achieves a bridge between the two traditions, wherein lies the source of Glück's postconfessional poetics: combining the autobiographical with a range of outward-looking speakers that find emotional truth in the pressing spaces of interpersonal relations as well as the vastness of mythological worlds and alluring floricultural symbols.

In *Modern Confessional Writing*, Jo Gill gives a comprehensive overview of the purposes and characteristics of confessional poetry, among them "scriptotherapy" (7). Similarly, Rita Horváth asserts that the confessional mode erupted out of an urge to work through life-altering trauma in favor of a self-cure project (16). Anne Sexton, deemed unfit to raise her daughter, began writing at the counsel of her psychiatrist. John Berryman's father committed suicide when he was twelve. This resulted in a life-long struggle with alcoholism and depression. For many of these poets, poetry provided an outlet to speak frankly about the dirt swept under their rug.

Still, the question persists whether, even in the case of highly revealing confessional authors like Anne Sexton or Robert Lowell, the poetic subject “exists.” Writing and reading are processes of mutual meaning-making, where the two parties are co-authors. Suppose one does see the subject as an extension of the real person: what are the epistemological grounds for pairing up the flesh, bone, and mind person with the ink and paper persona? Certainly, there are overlaps between the biographical data and the sentences uttered by the voice one hears in the moment of reading. However, which are the meanings and images that get conjured in our minds when reading? Do they coincide with the person’s next to us? Do they coincide with the real intent and identity of the author? In short, the nature of autobiographical identity is a question with many possible answers. What is certain is that this haziness makes for an inviting terrain for experimentation.

Naturally, one cannot speak of a uniform writing style when discussing the confessional mode. Berryman, for instance, is highly experimental regarding poetic voices, thus breaking the first-person autobiography mode. In his famed *Dream Songs*, a fragmentation of the speaker occurs where Henry relates his life events shifting between first, second, and third persons, as a friend referred to as Mr. Bones pops in and out of the conversation (Horváth 25). Berryman blurs the boundaries of the inner and outer self, placing Henry’s troubles into a wider space of intersubjectivity where the idea of identification itself is obfuscated. Hence, the complication of selfhood appears already in earlier confessional poets, before Glück, with Berryman being one example in the company of countless others, such as Bainard or Plath (Fitch 21; Sanazaro 64).

At the root of the criticism against “showy” autobiographical confessional poetry is solipsism, or self-centredness that invites, according to Mary McCabe, “unhealthy curiosity” in the reader (qtd. in Gill 8). The intensely personal trudging into the self-indulgent does seem to play a part in what Glück describes a *culture of healing*. But what is new in the healing genre, in contrast to confessional poetry, is what Fitch calls a “self-aggrandising” quality (34), which has the danger of turning poems into vehicles of validation for one speaker’s perspective or narrative. Furthermore, emphasis may fall on aura, uniqueness, and personality, as the reader may feel compelled to keep looking and scratch the itch of curiosity, despite the intrusiveness of the sight.

The confessional movement’s invasive intimacy was criticised at its conception in the 1950s and 1960s and has given way to extensive reflection and a reimagined

approach to autobiographical poetry in the current century.¹ The reimagining is bringing an extra layer of reflection to the writing table. The expansion of identity, in this sense, in Berryman and Glück, or later in contemporaries, such as Richard Siken or Jorie Graham, points towards a rhizomatic conceptualisation of identities rather than a homogenous one. Perception itself is questioned, and the boundaries of (un)knowability are stretched out through devices, such as paradox, the contrasting of form and content, and the allegorical journeys of life and death, as discussed below.

Deleuze and Guattari describe the rhizome as an “acentred non-hierarchical, non-signifying system without a General and without an organising memory or central automation, defined solely by a circulation of states” (21). They speak of entities and their relations to each other as ever connected and interchangeable, and encourage viewing a thing not in, and of, itself with a definitive origin and vanishing point, but rather in terms of relation. In the same vein, Derek Parfit speaks of identity as “all-or-nothing,” claiming that “most of the relations which matter in survival are, in fact, relations of degree” (11). He illustrates that if two people are fused, the resulting person will preserve qualities from both original people. Hence, survival is not “all-or-nothing” (Parfit 19) but a matter of degree that expresses a certain level of psychological continuity. Describing a diagram reminiscent of tree bark, Parfit writes: “each person has their tree, and this tree overlaps with many others” (23). In the webs of future and past selves, what comes to the forefront is not identity, but degrees of psychological continuity and connectedness. Thus, Parfit proposes to “give up the language of identity” (8). Deleuze foregrounding connectedness over hierarchy and origin, and Parfit arguing against the primacy of identity, together emphasise a cosmic infinitude of relatability over uniqueness.

Looking at the confessionalist mode, one can ask whether it is solely the enormity of the self that it injects into writing. Diane Wood Middlebrook attributes a larger cultural edge to confessional poetry. She considers the poetic strand of the 50s and 60s a “movement,” whose purpose was to “expose the poverty of the ideology of the family in postwar culture, and to draw poetic truth from the actual pain given and taken in the context of family life” (648). According to Middlebrook, the “decorum, or the breaking of taboos” (646) that confessional poetry practiced was a reaction to the political pressures of the Cold War. The trauma, Middlebrook argues, was experienced in the institution of the family, which had a role to play in the engineering of consent in an ethically contentious time of US history. The themes of loss

1 See *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays* (2006), edited by Jo Gill.

and mental turmoil, in this context, operated under the flag of “resistance by means of illness” (642). Hence, her argument suggests a systemic edge to confessional poetry along with the personal.

Glück, having published her first volume *Firstborn* in 1968, after the peak of the confessional movement, bears many similarities to the poets of this time. The extent to which she draws from the tradition of painful truth-telling, the inclination to shock, and portrayal of personal anguish through themes of promiscuity, mortality, and sibling rivalry, varies throughout her *oeuvre* (Orr 662–663), with her first volumes, *Firstborn* (1968) and *The House On Marshland* (1975), bearing the most resemblance to the poetry of Robert Lowell or Anne Sexton. Dominated by themes of struggle for personal autonomy and emotionally barren relationships, the style of *Firstborn* is described by a major Glück scholar as “pyrotechnical, at times over the top” (Morris 4). The suggestion here is that there is an immature urge behind the poetic persona to overawe, overwhelm, and direct the readers’ gaze with a flare gun. The opening poem, “The Chicago Train” warns us of what the reader can expect in the volume, setting the scene for a train ride, where a baby’s head lies between her mother’s legs: “I saw her pulsing crotch ... the lice rooted in that baby’s hair” (Glück, *Firstborn* 5). The desire to shock is evident in this early poem, where the combination of gore and Freudian allure make for a heavy read. Instead of overcoming, the poet is preoccupied with giving form to a taboo memory of a traumatised perspective.

Firstborn builds on autobiographical elements, but the identity of the poetic voice appears to change throughout the collection, suggesting a break from a traditional confessionalist autobiography already in the first volume. The question of autobiographical tendency is of interest in this paper’s inquiry into Glück’s breakthrough aesthetics, as it prescribes the nature of the revelation that can arise. For strictly autobiographical confessional poetry, the possibility of breakthrough lies in the “absolution” after confession (Morrison 205), in the relief after the purging of traumatic residue, or on a wider plane the gratification given by the resistance to coercive structures.

In Glück’s case, the plot thickens. In “The Untrustworthy Speaker,” she goes as far as to question the reliability of a poetic voice in conveying their life events: “Don’t listen to me; my hearts been broken / I don’t see anything objectively” (Glück, *Ararat* 34). The poet reflects on the willingness of a lyric subject to seduce, despite only being able to offer a personalised fraction or at times warped view

of what is *real*. A fundamental paradox arises in the poem: the speaker asserts they are least to be trusted when they speak, and the reader is asked to trust that the speaker is untrustworthy. What the reader is supposed to trust is muddled. Belief in a single perspective and the emphasis on authenticity are weakened. Space is allowed for interaction between speaker and reader, and the prospect of *mutual* meaning-making takes the forefront.

Glück further complicates poetic subjectivity in her later collections by enmeshing voices, referencing Greek and Christian myths, and weaving in floriculture. The possibility of breakthrough happens on a wide, at times cosmic, plane reminiscent of the High Modernist tradition. Bartczak calls this revelatory aspect of Glück “psycho-theological” (72), thus attributing a quality of mysticism to her poetry, which for him derives from the inclination to the metaphysical, the pondering on life after death, and the preoccupations with grand schemes. Although Bartczak locates one of the backbones of Glück’s poetry in mysticism, his emphasis on these being separate from confessional poetry may disregard some practitioners and/or works of confessional poetry. For instance, looking at Plath’s “Lady Lazarus,” one can see a combination of all the abovementioned endeavours.

The metaphysical inquiries in Glück, as in Plath, do not lead to any promise of solace. In “The Night Migrations,” the speaker grieves for the dead who will not see the birds in the night sky. “What will the soul do for solace then?” (Glück, *Averno* 1), asks the speaker. “Maybe it won’t need these pleasures anymore. / Maybe not being is simply enough. / Hard as that is to imagine” (1). Glück does not take “any consolation for granted” (Hallberg 143–145) but rather studies the nature of human experience astutely. Her speaker leans stoically towards the sufficiency of not being and surrenders itself to not knowing.

The temperature of Glück’s poems is cold and emotionally detached, reminding the reader of a voice that values independence over all else—be it from the suffocation of broken-down family relationships portrayed in *Ararat* or romantic disillusionments represented, for instance, in “Dead End”: “I said ‘Listen, angel, wean me from this bit.’ / I said, ‘Divorce me from this crap, this steady diet / of abuse ...’” (Glück, “Dead End” 33). The temperament stems from the meticulous approach to carrying out uncompromised psychological assertions that break through the limiting conditions of social code, a confessional attitude if there ever was one. In accord with Orr’s argument, the relationship between confessional and postconfessional is not solely contrasting but complementary. Both use “unarticulated manifestations

of disorder,” which they “order” and “restore to human meaning” (Orr 654). The term “postconfessionalism” pinpoints a greater tendency in the experimental approach to autobiography and epiphanic transcendence.

Despite their stark tone, Glück’s poems hold a possibility for transcendence. She “amplifies, complicates, and destabilises the lyric form” (Morris 201) by alternating human speakers with other entities. The internal winters brought about by the emotional barrenness of the speaker extend into external winters in “Snowdrops,” where a flower speaks to the reader:

You know what despair is; then
winter should have meaning for you.
I did not expect to survive,
earth suppressing me. (Glück, *The Wild Iris* 6)

In the tension between the speaker and the earth, the choice of the Freudian word “suppression” inadvertently guides the reader toward a psychological reading of the poem. Emotional barrenness suppresses the speaker, but despite the death and despair of winter, it talks of survival. Survival, as in “The Wild Iris,” comes in the form of sound; a “cry” that fertilises the barren winter scene and elevates the speaker’s tone into a triumph uncharacteristic of Glück: “afraid, yes, but among you again, crying yes risk joy / in the raw wind of the new world” (Glück, *The Wild Iris* 6). In the final line, the raw wind of spring arrives and carries the voice like a seed, reflected in content and metre, as we see an *ionicus a minore* (light-light-heavy-heavy) being used, a metrical unit deriving from ancient Greek and Latin poetry in passages meant to be sung (Halporn et al. 23). Using enjambment, Glück mirrors the flow of continuity, rebirth, and resilience. “The mutability of embodied life” is transcended (Morris 201), as a breakthrough is realised on a wider plane, and the cycles of anguish and overcoming are paralleled with the seasonal cycles of barrenness and fertility.

William Doreski describes Glück’s language, among others, as “revelatory” (150). Similarly to “Snowdrops,” one can see this aspect crystallise in both the volume *The Wild Iris* and the eponymous poem, where “the speaker wrestles with issues of ultimate meaning” (Morris 207):

At the end of my suffering
there was a door.
Hear me out: that which you call death
I remember. ... (Glück, *The Wild Iris* 1)

Turning to the reader, the speaker declares:

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:
from the center of my life came
a great fountain, deep blue
shadows on azure seawater. (Glück, *The Wild Iris* 1)

The poem grows from the seed of difficulty. At the closure of the difficulty the speaker talks of a door that allows for “passage from the other world.” The passage, analogous to death, is portrayed as an opening that allows for two-way traffic, and consequently, for return. The “whatever” before “returns” in lines 15–16 suggests the return not of persons, but of fragments of entities that have found their way back from “oblivion,” as they found their sonic and linguistic form. In the closing lines, there is a hint of pastoral glow in the illuminated country life. The culmination is brought by pure water; the boundaries of the personal are, again, transcended. A breakthrough into an “other world” is portrayed in the form of an eruption of “a great fountain” in lines 18–20.

The tensions between the conditional world (*body*) and lyric longing (*mind*) in Glück are realised through speakers of various entities (daughter, flower, a version of God, etc.) (Morris 37). In *Descending Figure* (1980), intimate themes are approached again through an autobiographical lens. In “Dedication to Hunger,” where the reader gets a window into *anorexia nervosa* (Orr 663), Glück further complicates the question of selfhood or the lack thereof. Speaking of hunger her speaker asserts:

... That is the premise
of renunciation: the child, the model of

restraint
 having no self to speak of
 comes to life in denial— (Glück, *Descending Figure* 29)

The brusque tone of measured restraint denies the speaker freedom of sentiment. Instead of an outward pouring voice, the reader is confronted with a patient and controlled lyrical precision, where self-control becomes mimetic of the speaker's and poet's "dedication to hunger" (Morris 36–60).

Inadvertently, the argumentation circles back to the paradox of the Glückian literary form. Although engaging with the literary tradition by interacting with religious canonical texts, Glück unwaveringly drives into oblivion. The lines, so economical and polished, hold much more than they initially let on. The oracular cadence and bare-bone lyric, become analogous to the "real life" and metaphorical *anorexia*. As Morris asserts, "anorexia becomes a traumatic symptom, 'written' onto the body (as if the author's physical being were a manifestation of the textual self)" (57). The textual self manifests as an inward assertion of control in poems such as "Dedication to Hunger." Inward control is broken through in later poems, as shown beforehand in "The Wild Iris" and "Snowdrops," where a cyclical rebirth and a transcending of traumatic "suppression" is depicted.

Hence in Glück, the aesthetics of healing differ from a strictly autobiographical approach, where a triumph of overcoming is depicted through the voice of a homogenous "I." As shown in her earlier and later works, traumatic residue forms an interlocked piece of the human condition, which she places into a larger cultural and aesthetic channel of High Modernism, confessional poetry, pastoral poetry, and stoicism, using classical literature, religious mythology, and botany as its sources of inspiration. The "soul's declaration of wholeness" is postponed or, at times, placed into natural cycles of bereavement and overcoming, as shown above in "The Wild Iris" and "Snowdrops."

Her elements of distancing and complications of selfhood, achieved through effects such as speaking through flowers, make for a postconfessional poetics. While she carries forward the confessional focuses of intimacy, family trauma, and illness, she also breaks through the traumatic residue with a revelatory tone, flowing into philosophical inquiries of life, death, and the afterlife as shown through "The Night Migrations." Doing so, she distances herself from what she calls a "culture of healing"

(Glück, *American Originality* 66–68) and opts for a lyric in which notions of self and overcoming are placed into larger cultural, existential, and botanical contexts.

Glück's poetics hold a paradox of content and form, manifested through cutting and revelatory statements (*content*) spoken with the cadence of ordinary speech (*form*). With this paradox, Glück parallels the tensions between content and form, body and mind. The depictions of intimate illnesses, such as *anorexia nervosa*, and complicated family relations, such as sibling rivalry, make for a measured and lyrically precise poetics of intimacy that flow into larger questions of the human condition. This makes Glück a distinctive postconfessional poet, who adheres to comprehensibility and emotional immediacy while building bridges between selfhood and universality.

The aesthetic of breakthrough in Glück's lyric happens in a wide vacuum of interchanging speakers. The confessional mode of autobiography, where breaking through happens, on the large, via the breaking of taboos, is stretched out into more encompassing narratives. At times, Glück's speakers are navigating the claustrophobia of problematic family relations, and at times, they transcend the physical embodied world to roam like vessels on lyric odysseys. In the end, the journey, although intimate and emotionally intense, is not solely personal, but the journey of a wider culture that spans millennia.

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