ABSTRACT

"If to speak meant to repeat myself": Repetition in the Later Poetry of Louise Glück

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Louise Glück's poetry is known for its affinity for change; each of Glück's eleven poetic collections intentionally departs from her previous work, and Glück herself has written of her desire not to "repeat" herself. I will argue that in Glück's later collections, she paradoxically relies on structures of repetition—titles, themes, forms, and syntax—to develop her meaning. By repeating the titles of "Matins" and "Vespers" throughout *The Wild Iris* (1992), Glück creates a "prayer sequence" of poems that—through its invocation of Divine Office—speaks to the tension between belief and unbelief. In *Averno* (2006) Glück re-tells the myth of Persephone, commenting on the ethics and goals of re-telling a "known" myth. Finally, in *A Village Life* (2009), Glück repeats and revises her poetic forms, signifying changes in her philosophies. Repetition, then, becomes essential to our understanding of Glück's poetry—it is the foundation from which she enacts change.

"If to speak meant to repeat myself": Repetition in the Later Poetry of Louise Glück

by

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A Thesis

Approved by the Department of English

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Dianna M. Vitanza, Ph.D., Chairperson

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of

Master of Arts

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December 2013

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Page bearing signatures is kept on file in the Graduate School.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for Dr. Emily Setina whose insight and direction shaped the entirety of this project; her understanding of the writing process, as well as her sense of humor, made her an excellent guide. Dr. Kevin Gardner helped me discern how to write about traditional religion in the context of postmodern poems. I am also especially thankful for Dr. Laurie Lamon, the professor and poet at Whitworth University who first introduced me to Louise Glück's work, and for Dr. Jerry Sittser and Dr. William Gloer whose knowledge of Divine Office informed my reading of *The Wild Iris*.

I am deeply thankful for Elizabeth Fredericks' and Joseph Ptomey's thoughtful discussions of the poems, James Watson's unfailing insight into the craft of writing, Sarah Gross' navigation in formatting, and Ingrid Pierce's quiet, steadfast support throughout the writing process. To my family, who was a constant source of encouragement—thank you.

Finally, for her lovely poems, I am indebted to Louise Glück. I find her work challenging in the best way: in years of reading her poems, I continue to find new ways of thinking about change, as well as repetition. Both, to me, seem essential to poetry and to life.

for Nathaniel

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Over the course of four decades of critical attention, Louise Glück's poetry has repeatedly (and paradoxically) been associated with "change." James Longenbach has gone so far as to declare that "change is the highest value" in her poetry (184). The marked differences—in theme, structure, syntax, and style—that cut across Glück's eleven collections of poetry demonstrate the truth of Longenbach's analysis. Frank Bidart further explains that the changes in Glück's collections should affect the way readers approach her work: "one of the greatest experiences in contemporary literature…[is] over the course of two weeks [to] read Louise Glück's…books of poetry, in the order in which she published them" (25). Reading Glück's books chronologically, according to Bidart, allows the reader to experience the profound ways in which she "balance[s] and fundamentally alters" her ideas and techniques from collection to collection—by avoiding the creation of a lasting style, she is able to provide "astonishing variety and invention" with each new book she writes (24). Part of the distinct power of Glück's poetry, then, is its affinity for "making it new"[1] with each collection. Joanne Feit Diehl further names this "refusal to stand pat" as one of her most distinguishing virtues. It comes as no surprise, then, that the publication of *Poems 1962-2012* (Glück's first

[1] Ezra Pound coined what has been termed "modernism's most enduring rally cry" with his insistence that art should "make it new" (Bradshaw 2). I use the phrase to show Glück's reliance on modernist ideals in a broad sense as she continually seeks innovation in her poetry. Glück differs significantly from modernist philosophy, however, in that her sense of "newness" extends mainly to new forms of individual or psychological expression. Glück's poetry does not contain the sense of "historical rupture" that Pound sought, nor does Glück's poetry see a "new context" as a means for "making it new" as Stein's work suggests (Bradshaw 2, 575).

edition of collected poems) has prompted even more discussion about the changes Glück has made in each new book that she has written.

In her essays, Glück has explained this affinity for constantly changing her poetry as inherent to the craft, arguing that learning how to write poetry "depends on seeing a difference between that appetite for change and the process of anxious duplication" (*Proofs and Theories* 123). She classifies "anxious duplication" as mere "imitation," suggesting that if a poet repeats parts of an existing poem—whether one's own poem or another poet's work—there is no room for true growth to occur. According to Glück, repeating what has already been written involves "always facing the same monument…or the [same] obstacle" so that the poems become "the dead products of fear and inhibition, [poems] that have no author at all" (123). In this light, change becomes significant in that it breathes life into poems; it allows poems to triumph in new ways, to face new "monuments" and "obstacles" that offer authentic insight. The fact that Glück classifies imitative poetry as "hav[ing] no author at all" suggests that change and the poet's ability to "make it new" lie at the center of poetic art.

Given Glück's tendency towards change, it comes as little surprise that she intentionally reinvents her artistic style in each new book that she writes—each new book is distinctly different from her previous collections. In "Education of the Poet," an essay written in 1989, Glück explains that each book she writes "has culminated in a conscious diagnostic act, a swearing off" (*Proofs and Theories* 17). By this Glück means that each book is purposely different from the previous ones[2]; she is interested in changing her techniques in order to explore new terrain, not in composing poetry with characteristic

[2] For an example of the specific ways that Glück chose to change her techniques and styles in writing her second, third, and fourth collections, see Glück's note at the beginning of *The First Four Books of Poems* (1995).

themes or styles. Instead of writing "signature" poetry, Glück alters the forms, allusions, viewpoints, focuses, tones, line breaks, and vocabularies throughout her collections. Glück further explains that the changes she makes from book to book are highly intentional; for example, in writing about the differences between her first two poetic collections, Glück explains that

> This difference was intended, at least hoped for. What you learn organizing a book, making of a pile of poems an arc, a shaped utterance, is both exhilarating and depressing: as you discern the book's themes, its fundamental preoccupations, you see as well the poems' habitual gestures, those habits of syntax and vocabulary, the rhythmic signatures which, ideally, give the volume at hand its character but which it would be dangerous to repeat. (*Proofs and Theories* 17)

In this way, we see both the positive and negative dynamics at play in the writing of a collection with distinctive traits: while a book with "fundamental preoccupations" and "habitual gestures" becomes distinctly interesting—and has the potential to be an effective book of poetry—these "preoccupations" and "gestures" can only be effective once. To Glück, reusing previous ideas or techniques defeats the entire point of writing poetry: "the dream of art is not to assert what is already known but to illuminate what has been hidden" (7). By this criterion, repetition in poetry becomes "dangerous" since it necessarily depends on the "known" as opposed to exploring the new.

Setting aside the aesthetic position that Glück grants "change," her strategy of continually molding her poetic techniques and developing her ideas in each new book has allowed her to construct a rich poetic legacy. By constantly departing from even her own work, Glück has avoided what Helen Vendler identifies as a key characteristic of "forgettable writers": contemporary writers that are not remembered "do not experiment…in any coherent or strenuous way, [but instead]…adopt the generic style of

their era and repeat themselves in it" (*The Breaking of Style* 7). Though Glück does not repeat even successful techniques as she writes new collections of poetry, the prominent variations within her poetic canon make her a more memorable poet.

By departing so sharply with each new volume from her previous work, however, Glück has become a difficult poet for critics to classify or interpret. Daniel Morris, in his book length study of Glück's work, comments specifically on the obstacles critics have encountered in tying Glück's work to any one genre or any one reading. Morris maintains that because Glück draws from "a mosaic of multicultural resources" readings of her work "often come to differing conclusions about how in her poetics, she addresses fundamental issues such as feminism, patriarchy, maternity, psychoanalysis, nature, and most of all, language" (1, 2). Because "fundamental issues" are addressed in such disparate manners in Glück's books, critics have often concentrated on the changes Glück makes from collection to collection rather than focusing on the meaning of individual books. Thus, Glück's poems need to be interpreted in the context of the volumes they comprise; Glück's poetry loses much of its weight if it is read as individual or isolated poems. As Stephen Burt writes, Glück's "drive to repudiate, revise, and draw new conclusions from the old operates not only within her poems, but from one book to the next," and, thus, her critics have "concentrated on the ways Glück varies from book to book, rather than on her range from poem to poem"[3] ("The Dark Garage with the Garbage" 77). In this way, change has become characteristic of Glück—because change is one of the few constants in her poetic canon, it has become a way of identifying and

[3] Burt also attributes this focus on volume to volume criticism to the nature of the book reviews written on Glück's collections as they have come out and on Glück's prose.

defining her poetic style.[4] Glück paradoxically avoids the "danger" of repeating herself through habitually changing each collection she writes.

This insistence on change has not, however, been an easy route for Glück to take. Though she has indeed included drastic departures in each new book she has written, deciding just what to change and finding new ways to create "habitual gestures" and "fundamental preoccupations" has become increasingly difficult. In his close reading of *Vita Nova* (1999), Longenbach explains that "if change is what [Glück] most craves, it is also what she most resists, what is most difficult for her, most hard-won" (184). Furthermore, Glück identifies her "compulsion to change" in her writing as "a compulsion, perhaps, not actually chosen" (*PT* 18).[5] Within change, then, Glück finds resistance.

In part, this resistance stems from the very nature of writing poetry. Some twentieth century critics argue that poetry, by definition, utilizes recurrence—that the repetition Glück seemingly avoids is essential to writing poems. In "The Linear Fallacy," Marjorie Perloff explores the differences between prose and poetry, a question which, given contemporary poetry's extensive use of both free verse and the prose poem, becomes all the more relevant. Ultimately, Perloff concludes that it is not the subject, nor the tone, nor even the lineation—the breaking of words into lines—that defines poetry. Instead, Perloff argues that "some form of regular recurrence" differentiates poetry from prose: "when prose foregrounds marked patterns of recurrence (whether phonic, syntactic, or verbal), calling attention to itself as language art…we have poetry" (859,

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[4] On a related note, the second major section in Wallace Steven's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is entitled "It Must Change" (Stevens 336).

[5] For a further analysis of how Glück views the poetic writing process see "The Idea of Courage," "The Dreamer and the Watcher," and "On Impoverishment" in *Proofs and Theories*.

867). Northrop Frye also explains in his seminal *The Well-Tempered Critic* that "[l]iterature includes a great deal, which is written in some form of regular recurrence, whether meter, accent, vowel quality, rhyme, alliteration, parallelism, or any combination of these, and which we may call verse" (24). According to both Perloff and Frye, then, repetition—of words, parts of words, or structures and syntax that contain words—is elemental to poetry.

In *The Body of Poetry,* Annie Finch's analysis of repetition in poetry suggests that not only is repetition essential to writing poems but that this repetition provides poetry with merits beyond the literal words. Finch defines poetry by the way it repeats: in "Poetics: A Taxonomy" she writes that a poem is "a text structured by the repetition of any language element or element" (47). She divides these elements into three broad categories: aural, visual, and conceptual elements[6]; these elements—from one, two, or even all three categories—comprise and create poetry, contributing directly to the meaning it conveys. And while these repeated elements provide poetry with surface level merits, such as forcing modern readers to slow down their "impatient contemporary eye[s] with wasted seconds" or allowing a "childish," Pre-Romantic viewpoint to bleed through, repetition also provides poems with less obvious, though more important merits (49). According to Finch, repetition in poetry often allows readers to see the writing process in the form of the poem itself: repetition in poetry "is unself-conscious, enacting the process of composition and revealing a poem's procedural roots, its self-hypnotic

[6] Examples of aural elements include numbers of beat/accents, sounds within words, and groups of words; examples of visual elements include line-breaks, numbers or words, and visible shape of language; examples of conceptual elements include operation with extratextual system, pun and riddle, and intertexual operations (47-48). Finch also provides classifications of the poetry that uses each of these elements of repetition. See "Poetics: A Taxonomy" for further examples and explanations.

underpinnings" (49).[7] As a device, then, repetition can afford a poem a method for illustrating how it was written, for showing the thought process of the writer during the construction of the poem. Perhaps even more importantly, repetition provides poetry with what Finch terms "the unspoken physical quality of repeated presence"—because readers have seen an element before, they recognize it when it is repeated, and the repeated elements bears a greater weight (50). Repetition becomes "paradoxically, a technique that is free of words," for it is implicit within the telling of the poem—the poem constantly advances, and the repeating elements bear a greater weight with each repetition.

Given Glück's affinity for change in her poems, her chosen vocation betrays a deep irony: the poetry that is meant to reinvent itself with each collection implicitly relies—at least according to these critics—on repetition. And by writing poetry for over forty-five years, Glück has continually risked repeating herself. In fact, Glück has rather flirted with this risk in the construction of her collections: her later book-length sequences, actually *rely* on repetition for their thematic development. Not only do we see visual, aural, and conceptual elements of repetition within individual poems, but we also see these elements repeat throughout the entirety of these collections.

Glück began writing what critics have termed "book length sequences" with *Ararat* in 1990.[8] Unlike many collections of poetry that order their poems by theme or even bring disparate individual poems together into a random collage of poems, Glück's

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[7] Finch refers primarily to verbal poetry in "Repetition, Repetition," the essay referenced here; however, many of the elements also apply to written poetry.

[8] Morris identifies Glück's collections as "book length sequences" beginning with *Ararat* in 1990 (5); many critics, including Diehl, Bidart, and Cates, all use the same, or similar, terminology in describing Glück's narrative structures.

collections are arranged and structured highly intentionally. In fact, Glück's later "book length sequences" form narratives[9]: the poems are ordered in order to tell a story, a story that is often highly complex and utilizes multiple viewpoints. As Daniel Morris explains, Glück's "individual poems are best read in the context of a book-length collection of lyrics, spoken by competing voices in an open dialogic relationship, or in a sequence that offers them a narrative dimension" (1). Some of the meaning and complexity within a Glück poem becomes lost if the poem is read in isolation. For this reason, Frank Bidart explains that Glück's collections "are meant to be read in a single sitting"—her collections must be read as cohesive books. Glück's collections in the 1990s—*Ararat* (1990), *The Wild Iris* (1992), and *Meadowlands* (1999)—are particularly famous for their cohesive, book-length narrative structures; however, every collection since *Ararat* (1990) has relied on structures of repeated voices, repeated themes, and repeated syntactical strategies (Morris 14). This is not to say that Glück's book-length sequences are simple narratives or that they contain the narrative arcs found in traditional prose pieces—the collections are polyphonic[10] sequences of lyric poems that often subvert the traditional unities of time, place, and teller. Isaac Cates explains that in Glück's collections each poem "ambiguously…builds on the preceding ones…once we find our bearing within a book, we receive clues from the poems" (464). However, because each book-length sequence conveys a narrative, the voices that speak Glück's poems often repeat, allowing readers to connect them—and their various elements—with other poems within the collection.

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[9] By utilizing narrative in these "book length sequences," Glück departs from modernist ideals of fragmentation and collage in her poetic collections.

[10] "Polyvocal" could also be used to describe Glück's collections that utilize multiple voices in the telling of narrative; I use "polyphonic" in accordance with chapter 1 of Morris' review of Glück's work.

Despite swearing off imitation, then, Glück has come to rely on structures of repetition in the composition of her later book-length sequences. Further, without these structures of repetition—repetition in theme, voice, syntax, and in the ordering of the poems—Glück's individual collections would lack the "fundamental preoccupations" and "habitual gestures" that make them distinct collections in the first place (*Proofs and Theories* 17). Though structures of repetition appear throughout all of Glück's later books, I will focus on *The Wild Iris* (1996), *Averno* (2001), and Glück's most recent collection, *A Village Life* (2009): in these three collections, repetition functions in several essential ways, becoming in the end not the "anxious duplication" that Glück so fears, but paradoxically the path to authentic change—an essential means of accomplishing the "dream of art" and "illuminat[ing] what has been hidden" (*Proofs and Theories* 123, 7).

My first chapter focuses on Glück's most overt use of repetition, found in her Pulitzer Prize winning collection, *The Wild Iris* (1992). Glück uses repeating cycles as the framework for the entire collection: the poems focus on the seasonal cycles from spring, summer, and fall; the repeated binary of day and night; and on the lifecycles of both flowers and humans. Throughout *The Wild Iris* a "trialogue" of voices also repeat: two main voices—the voice of the poet-protagonist[11] and the voice of the divine—debate the possibility of human "resurrection" after death, and the watching perennial flowers add their opinions. Amidst all of these repeating cycles and elements, Glück adds the framework of daily prayer: all of the poems spoken by the poet-protagonist—poems that often display doubt and question the character of the divine—are entitled either "Matins"

[11] I borrow the term the term "poet-protagonist" from W. V. Davis; in his article Davis explains that *The Wild Iris* is structured to be a "debate" between the poet-protagonist/ antagonist and the divine (48). By adding the voices of the watching flowers to this debate, Gluck forms the narrative structure that has become associated with her "book-length sequences" (Morris 5).

or "Vespers." These titles, which are repeated seventeen times throughout the collection, allude to the traditional practice of morning and evening prayer in the Divine Office; together these poems form a "prayer sequence" throughout *The Wild Iris*.

I will argue that the repetition of these titles offers *The Wild Iris* its essential structure: by repeating the titles of "Matins" and "Vespers" throughout the collection Glück creates a narrative account of the poet protagonist's struggle with belief and unbelief as the seasons change and the days turn to night. Because the prayer-sequence repeatedly invokes the religious orthodoxy of Divine Office, Glück is able to maintain the tension between belief and unbelief in the poems—by contrasting the historical practices of Divine Office with the practices of the poet-protagonist in the modern prayer poems, we are able to specifically see the ways that the poems—as prayers—fail to offer lasting faith. Ultimately, within the collection, the ritual of Divine Office in the prayer-poems comes to be replaced by daily, quotidian rituals—repeated acts of daily life that by contrast take on a religious significance.

Another form of repetition that Glück has used in several of her collection is the re-telling of Greek myth.[12] After the publication of Glück's *Descending Figure* (1983), Elizabeth Dodd coined the term that has most been associated with these re-tellings of myth. Because Glück often inserts autobiographical elements into the voices of the characters her poetry becomes, in a sense, confessional; however, Dodd explains that because Glück relies on archetype in her-retellings, her use of Greek myth makes her a "postconfessional" poet—her speakers both confess and reclaim the mythic narratives

[12] The introduction to chapter 3 contains a list of Glück's various collections that find their plot in mythic narratives.

they tell.[13] One collection that utilizes a "postconfessional" voice is Glück's *Averno* (2001). In this collection, Glück re-tells the myth of Persephone's abduction to the underworld by Hades; the poems are structured around the traditional Greek myth of Persephone, but also include personal, and even psychoanalytical elements. And while re-telling a Greek myth in this fashion is not new for Glück, the poems of *Averno* explicitly comment on the process of repeating an ancient myth in modern poetry—in re-telling the myth of Persephone, the poems of *Averno* explore the potential value, as well as the potential detriments, of repeating such a well-known myth.

My second chapter explores how a close reading of the two "Persephone the Wanderer" poems—poems that Glück classifies as "versions" of the myth of Persephone—inform our understanding of Glück's methodology as she repeats ancient myths in her poetic collections. The first half of the chapter focuses on the "ethics" of repeating a myth with an ending that readers already know, a re-visitation that seems at odds with Glück's concern with illuminating the unknown ("Education of the Poet" 7). Throughout the first "Persephone the Wanderer" poem the speaker comments on the process of re-telling a myth, utilizing techniques that proliferate in many of Glück's mythic poems: the speaker continually asks questions and challenges authority, the poem invokes the second person, and its shifting point of view disorients and involves the reader. My chapter concludes by examining the value—both individual and collective—that Glück finds in fusing ancient myth with modern, autobiographical poetry. A close reading of the second "Persephone the Wanderer" poem demonstrates the distinct complexity and meaning that Glück culls by combining personal narrative with that of

[13] I explore the term "postconfessional" at more length in chapter 2. For a further explanation of the term, also see Dodd; Glück critics often refer to Dodd in their classifications of Glück's style and genre.

Greek myth. Because Glück repeats myth throughout so many of her collections and because it is clearly a lasting concern throughout her poetic canon, her understanding of the re-telling of ancient narrative becomes important both to understanding *Averno* and to understanding the process of writing poems for Glück, their balance between making and remaking, shared and new.

Chapter three examines Glück's repetition in theme and structure in her most recent collection of poetry, *A Village Life* (2009). While Glück's collections are known for lamenting temporal life—and they continually seek the eternal—this recent collection allows her speakers to accept the daily for itself; they partake in temporary life freely for the first time within Glück's poetic canon. I argue that we see Glück's philosophic change in thinking about the daily, or the temporary, most strongly in her changed use of repetition throughout this recent collection. Because this chapter focuses on a philosophic change for Glück—a shift from continually seeking the eternal to accepting the temporal in the present moment—I compare *A Village Life* with what has been identified as the "climax" of Glück's pursuit of the eternal, *The Wild Iris* (1992)[14]. By comparing these two collections, we see that Glück's concerns with repetition and reinvention have always been in some way about the struggles between daily or time-bound existence and the eternal—these two collections develop distinctly different means of dealing with the disparity between daily and eternal time.

Thematically, Glück alters her speakers' approaches to daily, repeated actions between these two collections: instead of imbuing the daily with eternal significance as she does for the poet-protagonist in *The Wild Iris*, speakers of poems such as "A Village

[14] See W. V. Davis' "Talked to by silence': Apocalyptic Yearnings in Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris*" for a further explanation of *The Wild Iris* as the climax of Glück's long-lasting orientation towards the eternal.

Life," "Fatigue," and "Walking at Night," come to accept daily life—with its inevitable repetition—for itself. Glück also makes several structural changes that facilitate acceptance of the daily: firstly, by repeating titles Glück encourages readers to consider less dramatic understandings of death and instead to focus on the present. This is seen both in sequences spoken in the voices of non-humans—these voices speak from beyond life—and also in her repetition of titles from *The Wild Iris*. By repeating titles from a previous collection but altering their content, Glück signifies both continuing concerns and her shifts in thinking. Glück also alters one of her "signature" traits in this new collection: instead of utilizing short pithy lines throughout her poems, she writes in long, dreamlike lines in *A Village Life*. This new style repeats throughout the collection, suggesting that this change in form is part of the change in philosophy: as the poems repeatedly use this new structure—and show a sharp deviation in Glück's signature lineation—they continually affirm her changed acceptance of the temporary. By altering her use of repetition both thematically and structurally in *A Village Life*, Glück allows repetition itself to bring about change.

The structures of repetition within these later collections help distinguish Glück from other twentieth century poets; few recent poets possess collections as distinct and disparate as those included in Glück's collection edition, *Poems: 1962-2012*. In forty years of writing poetry, Glück does inevitably repeat herself throughout her poetry; however it is purposeful and developed repetition: repetition that allows for change. If change is indeed "the highest value" in Glück's poetry—and it is—then such change is supported and accomplished specifically through structures of repetition in Glück's poetic collections. Through looking at the differing uses of repetition in these three

collections, I hope to draw attention to the distinct ways that Glück's poetry has continually relied on recurrence—a reliance that is inherent to the craft of writing poetry for Glück. By studying the repetitive elements of Glück's poetry alongside the elements that she purposely alters and reinvents, we are allowed deeper insight into both her writing process and her understanding of poetry. While poetry necessarily craves change and explores new avenues of expression for Glück, it also inherently relies on repetition as an essential part of the process of creating meaning.

CHAPTER TWO

Rituals in Nature, Rituals in Prayer: Divine Office in *The Wild Iris*

In *The Poetics of the Everyday* (2010), Siobhan Philips explains the prominent presence of daily, quotidian actions in twentieth century poetry—in short, Philips explains that such actions become significant when they are repeated. Because a daily action is performed each morning, Phillips explains, it becomes a ritual: "to accept the debilitations of dailiness is also to claim its regular, even ceremonial renewal" (2). And in transforming mundane, daily tasks to rituals—established procedures that gain significance through repetition—many twentieth century poets are able to imbue daily, quotidian events with an almost religious significance. In twentieth century poetry, this transformation of the daily often becomes a way of addressing the failures of religious rituals: these poets "replace the consoling but impossible sanctity of religious faith with the sober but available sanction of everyday regimen (2). While Phillip's study includes the work of Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, and James Merrill, she suggests that this transformation of daily, quotidian events should be considered characteristic of twentieth century poetry and applies to the work of other twentieth century poets,[1] poets such as Louise Glück.

The Wild Iris, Glück's 1992 Pulitzer Prize winner, relies on the concept of ritual on several levels, placing a distinct importance on repetition. Most obviously, the poems are grounded within the natural rituals of seasonal change and the turning of days. The volume begins with the advent of spring and records the season's slow transformation to

[1] Other poets that Philips considers briefly include Marianne Moore, John Ashberry, Robert Hass, Kay Ryan, and Frank Bidart (199-221).

summer and then to autumn. However, the poems continually speak of the changing seasons in terms of the daily; they repeatedly point to the fresh beginnings of the mornings and the inevitable endings of the nights, as if each day enacts its own distinct ritual. Glück also creates a "ritual of conversation" throughout the volume: three disparate voices—the voice of the divine, the voice of the poet-protagonist, and the voices of the watching flowers—all speak their poems in a specific order as they vigorously discuss the human condition. The pattern of their voices forms a "ritual of conversation" that is carried out as each poem is spoken. The flowers' annual life cycles also become a ritual: as the flowers "die" with the cold of the winter and "come back to life" in the spring, their voices seemingly arise from the dead. The voices of these resurrected flowers remind the poet-protagonist of the cycle of her own existence, as she continually questions "the impossibility of the possibility of any resurrection beyond the human, earthly realm" (Davis 48).

All of these repeated rituals—within the seasons, within the days, within the "trialogue" of voices, and within the fleeting life cycles of the flowers and humans—occur alongside the daily, quotidian actions of the poet-protagonist. She works the garden on a daily basis, planting rows of vegetation, weeding the soil, and walking in the garden each day. However, in the daily life of the poet-protagonist, the act of speaking poems also becomes a distinct, repeated ritual. Glück titles the poems in the voice of the poet-protagonist as either "Matins" or "Vespers," which invokes the traditional, liturgical practice of Divine Office, or the Liturgy of the Hours. By titling seven poems "Matins," or morning prayer, in the first half of the volume and ten poems "Vespers," or evening prayer, in the latter half, Glück allows us to read these poems as prayer-poems; they often

appeal to the divine and are spoken repeatedly, like a traditional religious ritual. As these titles head over a third of the poems in the volume, the ritual of Divine Office, amidst all of Glück's other rituals, seems not incidental but essential to the overall meaning of the volume.

Glück's invocation of Divine Office offers *The Wild Iris* structure: by repeating the titles of "Matins" and "Vespers" throughout the collection Glück creates a narrative account of the poet-protagonist's struggle with belief and unbelief as the seasons change and the days turn to nights. Because the prayer-sequence repeatedly invokes the religious orthodoxy of Divine Office, Glück is able to maintain the tension between belief and unbelief in the poems—by contrasting the historical practices of Divine Office with the practices of the poet-protagonist in the prayer-poems, we are able to specifically see the ways that the poems—as prayers—fail to offer lasting faith. Ultimately, within the collection, the ritual of Divine Office in the prayer-poems comes to be replaced by daily, quotidian rituals—repeated acts of daily life that by contrast take on a religious significance.

"Matins," "Vespers," and the Liturgical Prayer Poem

Daniel Morris, in his introduction to themes in Glück's work, notes that Catholicism is only one of several ideologies in the "eclectic bag of multicultural resources" that appears in *The Wild Iris;* amidst the ideologies of Judaism, Romanticism, Greek myth, Protestant Christianity, and Catholicism, a postmodern mosaic of ideologies is collected (199). Morris further explains that Glück operates like a "postmodern pastiche artist" drawing from "diametrically opposing or clashing cultural, aesthetic, and religious traditions" (199). However, Glück's allusion to Divine Office, a highly

traditional and orthodox practice of Christianity, provides the poetry with the "dangerous risks" that Helen Vendler suggests make it stand out in twentieth century poetry ("Flower Power" 36). This is not to say that *The Wild Iris* should be read through a theological lens,[2] as if the poems themselves explicate or extend theological claims. However, Glück's use of religious structuring should not be flippantly dismissed either, and because Divine Office is referenced so frequently, it can hardly be ignored—in fact, it is precisely because Glück uses orthodox religious practices in her poetic structures that she is able to question the nature of orthodox belief. An understanding of the history and weight of Divine Office, then, seems fundamentally important to understanding Glück's use of this traditional practice within her poetry.

Divine Office, or the Liturgy of the Hours, remains one of the oldest, most established practices in the Christian Church. In his study of the origins of Divine Office, Robert Taft finds its roots within the Jewish practice of prayer at fixed times throughout the day, suggesting that, from the dawn of Christianity, Divine Office has been practiced (11). And because Divine Office has essentially matured with Christianity and endured many centuries of change, Divine Office is considered a highly traditional, orthodox practice in the Christian faith. Glück's titles of "Matins" and "Vespers" throughout her volume, then, are not mildly religious, but place her poems within the context of rituals consistently practiced over the past two thousand years of orthodox Christianity.

Divine Office's continued presence in modern Christianity is also significant to reading *The Wild Iris*. For instead of drawing from ancient Greek myths as Glück does in

[2] Allen Hoey writes further about the lack of sincerity in Glück's poems, suggesting that her poems need not be read as theological but as her attempts "to know the world [and] to get closer to the mystery" (47). Hoey reads Glück's use of religion as a mechanism for exploring aesthetic questions.

so many of her other collections,[3] Glück here speaks to a tradition that is alive and thriving. As recently as 1970, the Council of Vatican II declared that "the pattern of the Office is designed to fit the patterns of people's daily lives" and designated morning and evening prayer as "the most important 'hours' of the day for believers" (*Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium* 89). Arthur Boers further explains that Divine Office "continues to inform, inspire, and hearten many Christians…it's not an exaggeration to say that through most of Christian history, this form of prayer has been vitally important—and indeed still is for many Christians today" (xix; 5). In this way, Glück's titles of "Matins" and "Vespers" evoke a tradition that is both ancient and modern, a tradition that has continually affirmed long-held, orthodox belief through the daily ritual of praying.

To understand Glück's use of "Matins" and "Vespers" as titles, we must look back to the height of the historical practice of Divine Office. In fifth-century Benedictine monasteries, Divine Office formed the backbone of daily life. Because Benedict is widely lauded as the father of Western monasticism and his *Rule* was followed for six hundred years following his life, Benedictine monasticism is an appropriate forum for studying the historical practice of Divine Office (Knowles 37). Benedictine monks prayed the Hours at eight fixed times throughout the day: "Lauds" came at two in the morning, which was followed by "Matins" at daybreak; "Prime," "Terce," "Sext" and "None" were placed at three hour intervals throughout the day; "Vespers" came at sunset;

[3] Examples of Glück's use of Greek myth include *Descending Figure* (1980), which draws from various Greek and Roman sagas; *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985) which focuses on the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus; *Meadowlands* (1997) which finds its basis in *The Odyssey*; and *Averno* (2006) which tells the story of Persephone's return from the underworld. Aside from *The Wild Iris* (1992), only *Ararat* (1990) is based on a religious saga, using the biblical account of Noah's Ark as its basis.

and, finally, "Compline" was prayed at night (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2280).[4] The monks spoke these liturgical prayers together as a communal way of continually living in light of the divine. And while Glück invokes these traditional practices in her titles throughout the entirety of the volume, a closer look at the prayer-sequence of poems reveals them to be a forum for conflicted questioning, rather than enactments of affirming rituals.

In Glück's prayer-sequence, perhaps the most notable way that the poet-protagonist deviates from the traditional practice of Divine Office is her despairing attitude while speaking these prayers. Traditionally, "Matins" and "Vespers" cultivated obedience and humility in those who prayed (Sittser 110). In praying the Hours, monks learned to be subservient to the divine as well as to the authority of Scripture, and in *The Rule* Benedict went so far as to specifically outline twelve steps to help monks grow in humility.[5] The poet-protagonist, even from the beginning of the "Matins" sequence, tends to stray from these virtues in her prayers; the idea of obedience fades as the poet-protagonist becomes increasingly frustrated with the possible character of the divine, and humility seems lost amidst her accusations. Throughout the prayer-sequence the poet-protagonist's attitude towards the divine changes; however, neither obedience nor humility appear within her various attitudes.

The first time the poet-protagonist addresses the divine, in the second "Matins" poem, she refers to it as her "unreachable father" (1). As her "father," the divine is given

[4] Many early records indicate that in the history of Divine Office, the names of the morning prayers have changed. While "Lauds" is sometimes cited at daybreak and "Matins" is sometimes not listed in early manuscripts, "Matins" is widely regarded as synonymous with morning prayer. For further information, see Stewart.

[5] For a listing of these twelve steps, see chapter seven of *The Rule*. For a contemporary commentary on this chapter, see Chittister 61-75.

a position of authority as well as a familial closeness to the poet-protagonist, but it is also "unreachable," which places it at a great distance from her. In the third "Matins" poem, the poet-protagonist mimics a language of Catholic confession with her "Forgive me"; however, the line quickly changes direction with the words that follow: "Forgive me if I say I love you" (1). And while the poet-protagonist later characterizes the divine as "powerful" in the poem, she indicates this power is distinctly negative and oppressive. She, as one of the "weak," must lie because she is "driven by panic" and the divine "disclose(s) virtually nothing" to assure her (1-5). The poet-protagonist here speaks, as Carol Muske has noted in her review of *The Wild Iris*, out of "wrenching" emotion, "as if a wound…could speak" (82). Even in these early prayer-poems, the poet-protagonist displays the temperament of a slighted victim, instead of responding with quiet humility and obedience.

When the poet-protagonist hears no response from the divine, she openly expresses her feelings; her opinions of the divine undergo constant change instead of following the set liturgy implied by the titles of "Matins" and "Vespers"—daily prayer in Divine Office followed a strict pattern of speech regardless of circumstance. In the sixth "Matins" poem, for example, she compares the divine to "a plantsman/ testing a new species" and then begs the divine, as an "agent of [her] solitude," to "practice/ on something else," as if he is willfully inflicting pain on her personally (3-4). The divine appears to be no better than a mad-scientist gone wrong, a biologist who knows the demise of his creations but pursues his experiment despite the pain it will inevitable inflict. Accordingly, the poet-protagonist's tone is one of fearful begging that borders on accusation. In the seventh "Matins" poem, however, the tone appears to have softened,

and the poet-protagonist here addresses the divine as her "Dear friend,/ dear trembling partner" (16-17). She paints the divine with human qualities even though in the fourth "Matins" poem she has already concluded that "ask[ing] [it] to be human" is inappropriate (17-18). In this seventh prayer-poem, she claims to be ashamed of her previous misconceptions of his "distan[ce]" and further suggests a shared sympathy and understanding exists between them (12). However, as this affectionate attitude is not maintained throughout the rest of the volume, her words seem inconsistent and her sympathies fickle. The prayer-poems do not steadily show "the utmost humility and sincerest devotion" characteristic of the prayers of Divine Office but instead seem to vacillate with the emotions of the poet-protagonist as she questions both the existence and character of the divine (Chittister 110). The "unabashedly human" tone of the poems that Linda Gregerson notes throughout this prayer sequences contrasts with the concept of established, liturgical prayers, which remain unaltered despite even drastic changes in the contexts in which they are spoken (3).

As the collection concludes and the prayer-poems seemingly fail, the poet-protagonist becomes increasingly denunciatory towards the divine: in essence, she accuses the divine not only of desertion but manipulation. In the sixth "Vespers" poem, for example, the poet-protagonist chronicles several of her own immoral actions, all of which she has done in the name of belief: "we inhabited/ a lie to appease you…we denied/ memory to console you" (2-3; 7-8). And in the seventh "Vespers" poem, the poet-protagonist explains that the actions on the part of the divine are not accidental but intentional. In teaching her to "love the world," the divine is shown to purposefully make it "impossible" for her to "turn away completely," distorting the poet-protagonist's

natural, fervent love for the world around her (2,3,4). The next two "Vespers" poems speak with a tone of clipped finality, as if the poet-protagonist has absolutely decided the divine does not exist: "What a nothing you were," she says in the eighth "Vespers" poem. This is followed by her assertion that "it is clear I have no access to you; I do not exist for you," in the ninth "Vespers" poem. In these two poems we see no traces of humility or obedience left in addressing the divine; though the poems are still titled as prayers, these titles stand as ironic reminders of the reverential relationship that is supposed to exist.

While the prayer-poems do not rely on a set liturgy in their telling, they do display continuity with the liturgy of Divine Office in one major way: the poems' second person questions throughout the poems resemble the language of Divine Office. Daniel Morris evaluates the prayer-sequence from a Bloomian standpoint, invoking what Bloom refers to as *The Book of J*[6] in order to demonstrate how the poet-protagonist essentially "put[s] Yahweh on trial" in language similar to the Psalms of Lament. For example, the poet-protagonist's sense of loneliness, coupled with her use of second person, reads remarkably like Psalm 42:9 in which the psalmist asks "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning?" (*New International Version*). Given the facts that the Psalms make up a large portion of the liturgy used in Divine Office and that Benedictine monks recited the entire Psalter as a community once a week during daily prayer,[7] these similarities become striking. The final question in the "Vespers" sequence is the most

[6] Morris further explains that *The Book of J* that Bloom refers to is "portions of the Old Testament authored by the 'J' writer who refers to God as Yahweh" (192). For a further discussion of Bloomian interpretation of *The Wild Iris*, see Hoey. The work by Bloom that I am referring to is *Ruin the Sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present* (1989).

[7] Major components of the prayers used in Divine Office include the invitation to prayer, hymn, psalmody, scripture reading, silence, response, Gospel canticles, the intercessions, the Lord's Prayer, concluding prayer, and the blessing (Brooks 25-29). Additionally, Benedictine monasteries recited the Psalter once a week, and this was later reduced to once every four weeks, which remains the contemporary practice in Benedictine monasteries.

pointed. In watching the produce begin to grow in autumn with full knowledge of its inevitable death in winter, the poet-protagonist asks the divine

> are you saying I can
> flourish, having
> no hope
> of enduring? (19-22)

Though phrased as a question, these lines put incriminating words in the mouth of the divine. The language follows the form of the Psalmist, reminds readers of the traditional prayers of Divine Office even as the speaker expresses doubt in the divine's character—by repeating the language of traditional prayer, Glück is able to maintain the tension between belief and unbelief even in the last words of the poet-protagonist.

Throughout the prayer-sequence, the poet-protagonist also deplores what has been traditionally celebrated throughout the practice of Divine Office: silence. In early Benedictine monasteries, silence existed as a part of daily life and of prayer; silence was not optional but mandated. Ambrose Wathen, OSB, a scholar of *The Rule*, notes three reasons for silence in these communities: "to avoid sin, for the sake of silence [itself]…and to listen" (26). And in his *Introduction to Divine Office,* John Brook further suggests that liturgical prayer ought to be viewed as a conversation with the divine in which silence allows "the word of God to germinate" in believers (22). However, the poet-protagonist in *The Wild Iris* repeatedly views silence in an entirely negative light throughout the poems, never perceiving that her words are part of a larger conversation; she cannot hear the words of the divine, and, thus, she continually struggles to believe.

Instead of listening to a silent presence, as is the belief associated with prayer in Benedictine monasteries, the poet-protagonist hears only absence. In the third "Matins" poem she deplores the overwhelming silence, explaining that it is fruitless despite the role

it is supposed to play: "You must see/ it is useless to us/ this silence that promotes belief" (9-11). And, in terms of a volume that explores the existence and nature of the divine, this silence becomes a central problem. As Jennifer Carol Cook explains, silence, or at least perceived silence, exists as "the primary obstacle" in *The Wild Iris*; the poet-protagonist cannot know the divine "with any intimacy" if she interprets His silence as "absolute indifference" (140). Because the poet-protagonist never perceives the divine as answering any of her prayers, silence seems to overtake the volume as it points out the root of her struggle with belief. Further, Isaac Cates explains that, aside from the poems' thematization of silence, the poems repeatedly use structures of silence: silence appears in the white of the stanza breaks and in the drastic line breaks that come in the middle of phrases. And within the poetic lines themselves, silence also "arises from the poems' rhythm, in punctuation and enjambment within and between sentences" (Cates 468). Through both the words of the poems and the structures of the poems on the page, then, Glück repeats silence throughout the volume, all the while painting it in a negative light.

Glück's placement of the poems also contributes to the pervading silence throughout the volume; instead of a naturally flowing conversation between the speakers, the conversation appears disjointed and fragmented. Glück groups the poems in clumps by speaker: the flowers speak two to three poems, then the poet-protagonist follows with a couple, and the divine voice also offers up three poems in a row.[8] This grouping suggests gaps in their trialogue. For example, in placing the second "Matins" poems directly after the first "Matins" poem, Glück implies silence for a full twenty-four hours;

[8] The one exception to this structuring appears in the case of "Matins (7)," which appears between "Clover" (a poem grouped with the voices of the flowers) and "Heaven and Earth" (a poem spoken by the poet-protagonist). Though "Heaven and Earth" is not designated as a part of the prayer-sequence of poems in its title, the speaker does not change. Thus, Glück's placement of the poems consistently shows a lack of response among the speakers and a long silence between poems.

the poet-protagonist offers up a morning prayer, and no words are spoken until she speaks another "Matins" the following morning. Instead of communicating with the divine, the speaker is reduced to repeating her own thoughts and questions aloud, despite the lingering questions left unanswered in her initial prayer. And instead of a fruitful conversation, the speakers all seem to be having fragmented monologues; essentially they speak to themselves. As Cook explains, these speakers "usually do not hear and never truly understand or respond directly to one another" (142).

By repeatedly invoking Divine Office through the titles of the poet-protagonist's prayer sequence, Glück continually reminds readers of the ways that the poet-protagonist deviates from these traditional daily practices. The morning "Matins" and evening "Vespers" are not flickers of doubt but indicators of a long process of struggle—the tension between belief and unbelief is extended throughout the volume. While the use of second person in these prayer-poems shows continuity with the traditional liturgy of the Prayer of the Hours, the attitude of the poet-protagonist—in her words and in her view of silence—repeatedly deviates from such traditional practices. Though the poet-protagonist seems to continually strive to believe in the existence and character of the divine—she attempts to trust the divine—through speaking the prayers, the prayer-poems ultimately become forums of the tension between belief and unbelief throughout the entirety of the collection.

Labor and the Rhythm of Prayer

One practice of Divine Office historically, a practice that is also referenced throughout the prayer-poems, is that of daily, repeated acts of labor. In Benedictine monasteries, manual labor was placed at regular intervals throughout the day, which

created a regular rhythm between labor and the hourly prayers of Divine Office. Such work not only allowed monks to avoid idleness, a sin declared in *The Rule* to be "the enemy of the soul," but was also seen as a source of refreshment from contemplative thinking (Chittister 132). Simple actions, such as garden work, gathering the harvest, and cutting wood, enabled monks to work with their hands, performing daily tasks with the same steadfast devotion as was given to daily prayer (Schroll 132). Labor, in this fashion, is a fundamental part of Divine Office, for, as Gerald Sittster explains, this rhythm between labor and prayer formed what Benedictine monks believed was "the basic purpose for which humans were created" (110). Accordingly, labor is also a major theme in *The Wild Iris*: the plotline is set within a garden where daily, manual labor is necessary in order for any of the plants to reach fruition. However, throughout the prayer-poems, the poet-protagonist continually struggles to complete her tasks. Because the prayer-poems are repeated daily, they disrupt the poet-protagonist's ability to work: labor and prayer do not form a rhythm but instead frustrate each other.

Labor is first mentioned in the second "Matins" poem, and even at this early place in the prayer-sequence, we see a disconnection between labor and ritualistic prayer; there is no rhythm between them. Drawing from the biblical narrative of the Garden of Eden, the poet-protagonist describes working in the garden as working in a "replica" of Heaven (3). However, unlike Heaven, the garden is "designed to teach a lesson," and the poet-protagonist laments the fact that, in the absence of the divine, "we didn't know what was the lesson" (4, 9). Because of this absence, the poet-protagonist turns to labor, as if it is her only alternative:

> …Left alone,
> we exhausted each other. Years,

of darkness followed; we took turns
working the garden… (8-11)

Because the poet-protagonist feels no connection with the divine, she is "left alone," and her labor becomes exhausting; her prayers have not provided her with endurance or strength but instead have been draining. Early on in the prayer sequence, then, the failure of the ritual of Divine Office to bring the poet-protagonist peace results in a failure in her labor.

The rhythm between prayer and labor, however, is not absent from the volume in its entirety. In the fourth "Vespers" poem, we see an example of this rhythm in John, one of the only other named characters throughout the volume. As the poet-protagonist watches him working in the garden, she notes that his work follows a basic rhythmic pattern: fifteen minutes of intense effort,/ fifteen minutes of intense contemplation" (4-5). Read in the context of a sequence of "Vespers" poems, John's actions seem to model that of monastic life: a specified period of labor is followed by a specified period of contemplative prayers, and the two actions are seen to work in conjunction with each together in a fruitful, ritualistic rhythm. However, the poet-protagonist's statement, instead of being celebratory or even explanatory, is more of an accusation. The poet-protagonist disappointedly watches this rhythm without being able to participate in it herself.

As the poems ends and "twilight makes/ lamps of the first lilies," the poet-protagonist comes to define herself apart from John and his practices; though she speaks in the context of a prayer-poem, it is unable to provide her with the peace necessary for fruitful labor. Though "peace" remains constantly with John in both his garden work and contemplative ecstasy, the poet-protagonist describes her own experience of peace as

fleeting or ephemeral: it "rushes through me,/ not as sustenance the flower holds,/ but like the bright light through the bare tree" (10-12). And instead of growing out of a lasting peace that comes daily, as light brings life to flowers through photosynthesis with the sun, the poet-protagonist is reduced to watching John's peace, a peace that she does not feel in her own prayers or in her gardening. Though the poem itself provides a context of prayer through its "Vespers" title, the poem itself fails to bring the poet-protagonist peace, and, thus, she cannot work.

The fifth "Matins" poem exposes the effects of the failure of the rhythm between work and prayer; because the prayer-poems do not bring the poet-protagonist peace, she becomes preoccupied with them, and her worries seem to overtake all of her attention. Instead of praying her "Matins" in the morning and then moving on to the daily task of weeding, the poet's contemplative, philosophic musings stand at the center of the poem. On the outside, the poet notes that she appears to be working: "I walk the front lawn, pretending/ to be weeding" (2-3). However, the words that follow suggest that, not only is she not weeding, but also that she is allowing her spiritual and emotional insecurities to bleed onto this daily task:

> …You ought to know
> I'm never weeding, on my knees, pulling
> clumps of clover from the flower bed: in fact
> I'm looking for courage, for some evidence
> my life will change… (3-7)

And, as she begins to check "each clump for the symbolic/ leaf" we see folklore and superstition entering a site that it prescribed to be one of trustful assurance in the divine by its "Matins" title. In looking at the clover, the speaker looks for a cheapened "good

luck" to cling to, and the act of weeding the garden becomes, instead of a part of a ritual of belief, a display of the poet-protagonist's spiritual unrest.

This spiritual unrest stands in sharp contrast with the monastic ideal of labor. While labor in monastic settings primarily provided for the physical needs of the community, it was also seen as a place of rest and renewal: "the life described was an austere life, but it was also a healthy life and one full of physical activity; it was not a life that would impose severe psychological strains or lead to introversion or neurosis" (Knowles 217). In this way, the poet-protagonist's stance in her labor seems to be the antithesis of labor in the context of Divine Office: instead of providing rest and freedom from the complexities of contemplation, it becomes a place of further anxiety.

The height of the poet-protagonist's unrest is seen in the conclusion of the fifth "Matins" poem because throughout its entirety she remains unable to work. While the poet-protagonist is certainly in a position to accomplish simple, though fruitful tasks with her hands—in this case to weed—she becomes so obsessed and worried with her unanswered questions that she is unable to accomplish anything: "You want to see my hands?/ As empty now as at the first note" (15-16). Morris notes that the gardener is only "going through the motions" in her tasks; just as ritual of Divine Office has lost its deeper meaning of peace, so have the poet-protagonist's attempts at working the garden. Though the poet-protagonist continues to pray, she is merely saying the words at the proper time; morning arrives and "Matins" are said, but the prayer-poems themselves fail to bring the poet-protagonist any form of peace. And instead of viewing this as a problem that will change, the poet-protagonist comes to view this as an ongoing struggle that will indeed continue. She bemoans that fact that "looking for courage" will take

"forever," even though the summer is ending as is seen in the "brilliant yellow" of the dying trees (6, 7, 13). The "sick trees" are dying, but the poet-protagonist notes that they are "*always*…going first," which indicates that even as they continue to die, the poet-protagonist will continue to look for peace that she is unable to achieve; this process will be ongoing (11-12, my emphasis). In the context of Divine Office, her prayer-poems seem less like meaningful rituals and more like unwanted habits, words that must pour from the poet-protagonist's unrest. Her inability to weed stands as the emblem of spiritual unrest taking over her physical actions.

In "April" the divine, somewhat ruthlessly, critiques the inability of humans to work fruitfully. As labor plays such an integral role in the rhythm of Divine Office, we can also read this as a critique of the humans' inabilities to pray. Instead of acknowledging labor as an action that requires effort and hard work, the divine terms the couple's acts of labor "the tiresome outward signs" that result from "despair" (4, 1). The divine suggests that their despair, instead of being justified, is a symptom of their own selfishness. Instead of understanding that "grief is distributed/ between you, among all your kind" and coping with disappointment together, each character carries his or her own grief alone (15-16). The divine quotes the humans, which is indicated by Glück's use of italics, in saying "*No one's despair is like my despair,*" in effect dismissing their despair as selfish and insular (1, emphasis original). Their despair—which is unjustified in the eyes of the divine—is primarily displayed in their acts, or non-acts, of labor: "the man "pointedly weed[s] an entire forest" in his frustration while the woman only "limp[s], refusing to change clothes/ or wash her hair" (5, 6-7). With this critique from

the divine voice, we see the failure of the humans, not only to work, but also to see beyond their own despair and to pray.

Because the rhythm between prayer and labor was a defining feature in Benedictine monasteries, the poet-protagonist's inability to work as a result of her inability to prayer is significant. The very rhythm that historically allowed monasteries to become "one of the most stable features of the European landscape" through establishing "stability during a period of cultural crisis" is unable to sustain the poet-protagonist throughout the prayer-sequence of poems (106). With the repeated disruption of labor in the poems, we see the failure of the prayer-poems on a daily basis: not only do they fail to provide lasting faith and peace each day they are spoken, but their failures play out in practical, quotidian ways that repeat each day as well.

Community

One other major deviation from the historical practice of Divine Office in Glück's prayer-poems, exists within the voice which speaks them. While Divine Office, from its origins, has included the voices of entire community that speak together as a single, practicing body of believers, the poet-protagonist appears to repeatedly speak her prayer-poems entirely by herself. Because the communal aspects of speaking the Hours are a significant part of practicing them, it becomes important that throughout the entire collection, the poet-protagonist prays alone.

Within the context of practicing Divine Office, whether in sixth-century Benedictine monasteries or in a congregation of modern Catholic believers, community is essential in reciting the liturgical prayers. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines Divine Office as "the prayer of the whole people of God," going on to suggest that people

are to participate according to their "place in the Church and in the circumstances in their lives" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* II.1.2). In reciting liturgical prayers together as a community, believers are placed in relation with each other as they collectively look to the divine. This is not to say that individuals cannot offer up morning or evening prayers alone at times. However, even in praying alone, their prayers are still seen as part of a distinctly communal action because, in the eyes of orthodox belief, faith can transcend physical limits. As Boers explains, "the communion of the saints operates not only beyond the limits of geography and space, but also beyond the boundaries of time. It connects Christians everywhere who have ever lived" (69). Praying the Hours, then, involves saints throughout Christian history, a community that is believed to be startlingly present for fellow believers.

Glück's continual use of Divine Office throughout her prayer sequences would seem to invoke an entire community of believers, a community that could potentially transcend both time and earthly death. Because the poet-protagonist worries throughout the entirety of the collection—she continually obsesses over the inevitable ending she sees to her own life, a life which "begins and ends/…*begins and ends*" as she explains—we expect solace to arrive from the community of saints invoked in the titles of her prayer-poems ("Retreating Wind" 20, 21 emphasis original). If death does indeed "[lie] at the center of *The Wild Iris*" as Carol Muske has suggested, then the poet-protagonist certainly seems in need of such a community. However, the poet-protagonist does not include other humans as she worries aloud in her prayer; instead, she appears acutely and pointedly alone. By placing the solitary words of the poet-protagonist within the context of communal prayers, Glück emphasizes their failures as affirming rituals. There is no

communal aspect to the poet-protagonist's prayer-poems because, for her, there is no community to speak of.

In many cases, the "Matins" or "Vespers" prayer-poems are highly individualistic. The poet-protagonist often uses the first person singular, and her pointed questions to the divine are presented as an argument between two individuals: "I see it is with you as with the birches/ I am not to speak to you/ in the personal way" or "You want to know how I spend my time?/ I walk the front lawn, pretending/ to be weeding" (fourth "Matins" 1-3; fifth "Matins" 1-3). In these prayer-poems, the poet-protagonist refers to personal experiences that seem to apply to her situation specifically and not to an entire community of people. The prayer-poems themselves appear as creative pieces; they do not follow a set liturgy like the rituals of Divine Office but instead pour out of the emotions of a single moment. In contrast, Boers describes the importance of liturgical prayer not as "self-directed," "disconnected," or "subjective" but as following an established, set pattern (4). Because the liturgy of Divine Office follows previously determined words, it avoids relying on the self's "initiative and invention" and can be seen as a discipline, a return to a predetermined way of thinking (4). The prayer-poems are spoken in the heat of the emotions and chiefly explore the poet-protagonist's own concerns. Her obsession with herself and her own uniqueness in the prayer-poems pervades the prayers, which is evidenced by how often she speaks of herself.

The poet-protagonist's self-obsession, however, is a theme repeatedly critiqued by both the divine and the watching flowers. "Scilla," for example, opens with a devastating criticism of the way the poet-protagonist sets herself apart from the others: "Not I, you idiot, not self, but we, we" (1). The poem goes on to explain that "You are all the same

to us,/ solitary, standing above us, planning/ your silly lives" (9-11). The divine voices also mocks the poet-protagonist, saying at the beginning of "April," "*No one's despair is like my despair*" (1). In italicizing this first line, Glück shows that the divine is quoting the poet-protagonist; he not only mocks her pain but the fact that she thinks her pain is unique. Her prayer-poems, then, appear self-absorbed to the point that they no longer seem true. And this is further supported by the fact that no other humans are allowed to speak in the volume.[9]

According to critics such as Linda Gregerson or Spiegelmen, the community of the conversation between the poet-protagonist, the divine, and the flowers, is also virtually non-existent. Many critics suggest that there are not three authentic speakers in *The Wild Iris* but a division of the "lyric self" (Morris 191). Gregerson explains this lyric self as a human: the poet-protagonist, the divine, and the flowers all "speak with the voice of the human [because] the human writer has no other voice to give them" (117). Citing as evidence the consistent punctuation and diction throughout poems in the voices of supposedly different speakers,[10] these critics conclude that *The Wild Iris* should be read as an essentially solipsistic volume. And while these readings provide convincing evidence, the final poems in the volume seem to offer a different conclusion.

Conclusion

The prayer-sequence of poems ends six poems before the end of the volume. The poet-protagonist has ceased speaking her daily prayer-poems; she is eerily quiet while the

[9] Though Glück mentions both Noah and John by name, she seems consistently at odds with them. The first "Matins" poem, which characterizes Noah as disagreeing with the poet-protagonist at a very vulnerable time in her own life sets the tone for the entire volume. John is also repeatedly brought up, only for the poet-protagonist to compare herself to him, ultimately denouncing him in an attempt to preserve her own integrity, as occurs in the fourth "Vespers" poem.

[10] For more specific examples of consistent diction and punctuation within the poems, see Spiegelman.

other two voices continue to speak without her. The lack of a "Matins" or "Vespers" poem within the last six poems strongly emphasizes the failure of daily, liturgical prayer as a ritual, at least in the eyes of the poet-protagonist. Given the overwhelmingly negative tone in the last three "Vespers," poems, which appear one after the other, her silence hardly comes as a surprise. In the ninth "Vespers" poem in particular, the poet-protagonist speaks with pointed finality:

> Now, everywhere I am talked to by silence
>
> so, it is clear I have no access to you;
> I do not exist for you, you have drawn
> a line through my name. (7-10)

Here, the poet-protagonist speaks in clipped phrases, as if within the daily torment of so repeatedly trying, again and again, to pray the Hours and attain some sort of peace, she has finally come to a conclusion. Instead of declaring that the divine does not exist as she has so often hypothesized throughout the prayer sequence, she explains her own inexistence as the problem: though the divine may exist, it refuses to acknowledge her and that lack of acknowledgement is all that matters. In saying the divine "draw[s]/ a line through [her] name," the poet-protagonist implies that he cuts her off from the litany and the communion of saints.[11] If the volume, or the prayer-sequence, ended here, the poet-protagonist would seem in control of the situation in that she could effectively remove herself and end the prayer-sequence she has begun.

The tenth and final "Vespers" poem, then, comes as a disappointment because it undercuts the finality she tried to achieve in the previous prayer-poem. Just as the poet protagonist shows frustration over the garden plants which "have the nerve to be getting

[11] The "name" that the poet-protagonist mentions probably refers to the names found in the Book of Life, which is mentioned in Revelation 20:15: "And whosoever's name was not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the Lake of Fire" (*King James Version*).

started" in the heat of August, she shows frustration over her own inability to cease in praying (4). Like the garden plants that will die with the coming cold of winter, the poet-protagonist knows her own life will inevitably and imminently end; but, much to her chagrin, the words keep pouring fourth. This continuance mimics the rituals included throughout the volume—the rituals of the seasons, the days, and the life cycles of the flowers—because all of them continue despite the poet-protagonist's continual fears of the end of her own life. Her ritual of praying continues almost against her will in the tenth "Vespers" poem, which is evidenced by the questions she asks throughout the poem: "but why/ start anything/ so close to the end?" (8-10) and

> are you saying I can
> flourish, having
> no hope
> of enduring? (19-23)

After this final question, a question that seems spoken almost against the poet-protagonist's will, the prayer-poems cease; "Matins" and "Vespers" are not among the titles of the final poems. This lack of prayer—especially because it is daily prayer—should be seen as an act of willpower on the part of the poet-protagonist; she knows the daily, worried prayer-poems she has so frequently spoken are neither helpful nor effective, and so she has decided not to speak.

The very last poem, "The White Lilies," offers a surprising conclusion to the collection: though the sequence of "Matins" and "Vespers" poems have ended, critics agree that this final poem is spoken, at least in part, by human voices.[12] "The White Lilies" is split into two stanzas, and the dash at the end of the first stanza indicates a

[12] Examples of critics who affirm this reading include Davis, Cook, and Muske, among others.

change in speaker: the white lilies comment on the situation of the humans and then overhear the two of them in conversation. The first stanza spells out the destruction possible in the act of creating a garden: "it/ could all end, it is capable/ of devastation" (6-8). The enormity of this destruction is further explained: "All, all/ can be lost" (8-9). Glück's use of "can" also brings the poem abruptly to the present; for, instead of using the subjunctive verb "could," which implies an abstract possibility at an unspecified time, Glück's use of "can" brings us to a real possibility in the present. The stanza continues to describe the scenery of the moving flowers, until interrupted by the voices of the humans.

The "Hush, beloved," which opens the stanza, places the humans in fruitful conversation with each other for the first time in the entire volume: one speaker assures the other, offering comfort from these ongoing worries for perhaps the first time (13). The lack of human contact throughout the rest of the volume only emphasizes the power of this simple comfort; the two have enjoyed "this one summer" together and, thus, "entered eternity" (15). Because this poem is not a part of the prayer-sequence and no traditional, liturgical ritual is used to frame the poem, we see the absence of the prayer-frame as part of the possible solution. Instead of a prayer written and spoken as a community and as a traditional ritual, this poem offers human love in the face of inevitable destruction. The community, or human love, that offers comfort, then, must be enjoyed not in light of the divine or in relation to it but solely in the present moment. In this way, the daily practice of ritualistic prayer is replaced by the ritual of the days that keep coming, days meant to be enjoyed for the present and the present only. According to the speaker, the ritual of the present, which includes the memory of the past, is all that the speaker has.

In the context of a volume that repeatedly invokes the traditional practice of Divine Office, this final stanza seems particularly important. Ultimately, value lies not in the liturgical, traditional practices of religion but in the daily repetition of the days, in the present summer. The repetition of "Matins" and "Vespers" throughout the collection has maintained the tension between belief and unbelief instead of bringing lasting—or even temporary—peace. Instead of speaking liturgical prayers every morning, praying before and after working in the garden, and pointing the entire community to look together towards the divine, the poet-protagonist is told in this last stanza to embrace the present moment, which is shared, not with the divine, but with another human. "Hush, beloved" is still a command, as she has been receiving throughout the volume, but this time it is spoken softly and not with indifference but love.

CHAPTER THREE

"What was repeated had weight": the Re-telling of Myth in *Averno*

Louise Glück's prolific use of mythology in her work comes as no surprise to twentieth century poetry. In *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986), Alicia Ostriker identifies Glück as one in over a dozen female American poets who have used mythological narratives as a major part of their work since the 1960s (215).[1] Ostriker explains this surge of women writing myth in terms of what she calls "revisionist mythmaking": works that find their focus in canonical myth narratives assume a "high literary status," but, because their plots are so well known to Western audiences, these myths also offer the opportunity for their plots to be subverted, changed. By revising small parts of the myths—gender roles, traits of specific characters, or even plot points—these writers can "re-evaluate…[the] cultural values previously enshrined [in myths]" (215). In this way, these poets revise old cultural standards in order to make new statements, an idea that is often very appealing to feminist writers.

In terms of her use of mythological themes, Glück can be considered a "revisionist mythmaker," at least on some level, because her poetry does change, or "revise," many of the mythic narratives she writes about. In over forty years of

[1] In the "Notes" section of her book, Ostriker lists both poets and their specific works that use mythic themes. Most notably among them are Lucille Clifton, Sandra Gilbert, H.D., Denise Levertov, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Muriel Rukeyser, May Sarton, and Anne Sexton. As background, Ostriker also lists women poets before the 1960s that use myth (though not in revisionist terms), including Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Helen Hunt Jackson, Edith Wharton, Amy Lowell, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Louise Bogan.

publishing poems,[2] Glück has written poems (or even entire collections of poems) that find their substance in Aphrodite's status as a goddess *(Descending Figure,* 1980), the friendship between Patroclus and Achilles (*The Triumph of Achilles,* 1985*),* the myths surrounding the biblical accounts of Noah's Ark and Garden of Eden (*Ararat,* 1990; *The Wild Iris,* 1992), the epic of *The Odyssey* (*Meadowlands,* 1996), the relationship between Orpheus and Eurydice (*Vita Nova,* 1999), the myth of the burning of Joan of Arc (*The Seven Ages*, 2001*)*, and, finally, the mythic narrative of Persephone's abduction to the underworld (*Averno,* 2009). Glück often makes changes from the canonical versions of these myths. In an essay entitled "The Education of the Poet," Glück explains the early impetus for her "revisions" of the myths: her father often changed parts of the plotlines when he told her the stories when she was a child (*Proofs and Theories* 7).[3] However, Glück's revisions of these mythic narratives have grown in complexity, and her use of mythic narrative has become one of her most prominent characteristics as a twentieth century poet (Morris 23).

In Glück's work, the "revision" of mythic narrative is often deeply personal. Instead of revising the narratives in specifically feminist terms,[4] Glück uses mythic

[2] Glück's first collection of poetry, *Firstborn*, came out in 1968; however, she began publishing poems in 1962. In 2013, all twelve of Glück's collections appeared in a one-volume edition entitled *Poems 1962-2012*.

[3] In "Education of the Poet," Glück further explains that "before [she] was three, [she] was well grounded in the Greek myths, and the figures of those stories, together with certain images from the illustrations, became "fundamental referents" in her poetry. Her father, however, would also make up stories or "revise" the endings in their telling, such as deleting the final burning from the story of St. Joan (*Proofs and Theories* 7).

[4] Ostriker writes about "revisionist mythmaking" purely in the context of feminist criticism; however other critics, such as Elizabeth Dodd, have applied the term to other types of revision as well. Because my essay focuses on Glück's use of canonical Greek myth as it relates to modern society in general, I will explore "revisions" that apply to readers in general and not just feminist interpretations. For readings of the feminist aspects of Glück's writing, especially the language she uses regarding the female

narrative as a context for a wide variety of personal thoughts—thoughts that often find their basis in autobiographical details of her life.[5] In an early interview, Glück explained that her "tendency—as is obvious—is to very promptly build mythic structures, to see the resemblance of the present moment to the archetypal configuration. So that almost immediately the archetypal configuration is superimposed" ("An Interview" 123). In this way, Glück's poetry departs from feminist twentieth century writers who use mythic elements in their writing; instead of expressing mainly gendered concerns and using myth as a platform for projecting feminist interpretations onto the stories, Glück weaves her personal story into the mythic narrative in order to create what has been identified as an entirely new genre of writing: postconfessional poetry.[6]

This new genre, identified in Elizabeth Dodd's seminal "The Ardent Understatement of Postconfessional Classicism" (1992), names Glück a "post-confessional poet" as opposed to a "confessional poet" (149).[7] Dodd explains that though Glück incorporates autobiographical detail into her poetry and uses poetic techniques that are similar to those employed by famously confessional poets, such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, her work finds its difference specifically through her use of myth: Glück's

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self, see Helen Farish, Lisa Sewell, Maggie Gordon, Lynn Keller, and especially Lee Upton's chapter on Glück in *The Muse of Abandonment*.

[5] Glück writes further about her fascination with context in regards to writing poetry in "Education of the Poet," the first essay in *Proofs and Theories* (1994). From early on in her career, Glück used "the simplest vocabulary," and instead focused on finding the perfect context for placing the meaning she was trying to convey.

[6] In the first chapter in his book length discussion of major themes in Glück's work, Daniel Morris explains that critics disagree about which genres and categories should include Glück's mythic poetry (21-24). Overall, Morris concludes that though Glück has not been anthologized in one consistent poetic genre, she is undoubtedly an important voice that will continue to shape American poetry (2).

[7] Dodd acknowledges the difficulty of using a simple definition of "confessional poetry" and refers to R.H. Rosenthal's definition, as it appeared when he first used the term in his 1959 review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*.

work "represents a kind of postconfessional personal classicism—one in which the voice of the self is muted by the amplified sense of the mythic, the archetypal…, without losing the compelling presence of an individual, contemporary 'I," a personal voice addressing the reader" (149). Thus, instead of writing purely third person mythic poems, or poems that are overtly confessional, Glück combines these two genres of poetry. Her poems are often not strictly first or third person, but shift between the two, especially in her book length sequences which frequently incorporate a polyphony of voices. While critics have been categorizing and commenting on Glück's use of mythic elements since her early collections were published, Glück herself does not often address her poetic techniques. A closer look at *Averno,* Glück's eleventh collection of poetry, however, reveals her to do precisely that—in this later collection, Glück captures the writing process involved in re-telling the myth of Persephone.

Thus far, critics have mainly written about the psychoanalytic elements of the writing of *Averno*. Ann Keniston explains *Averno* in light of Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of Disaster*, reading the poems in the context of trauma theory. She ultimately argues that Glück's speakers find their mode of speech and form like those who have undergone severe trauma: disaster has "disrupt[ed] their chronology" and the poems appear in long, fragmented forms because they voice the viewpoints of both survivor and witness within the myth of Persephone (177). Uta Gosmann argues that psychoanalysis, "both as a theory of memory as well as a model of speaking and writing," informs *Averno* as a whole (179). Gosmann's essay goes on to show how the writer of the poems—who is often a direct speaker—performs psychoanalytic analysis on the character of Persephone throughout the fragmented poems, utilizing elements from Freud and Jung,

among other psychoanalytic theorists. While Gosmann and Keniston astutely observe the predominant roles of psychoanalysis and of trauma theory within the writing of *Averno*, little has yet been said about how Glück's use of Greek myth within the poems affects the writing process.

Because Glück re-tells ancient Greek myth so often in her modern poetry, her understanding of the fusion between the modern and the mythic—and the process involved in creating such a fusion—becomes important in terms of understanding the meaning of her poetry. In *Averno,* many of the poems explicitly comment on the process involved in the re-telling—the repetition of Greek myth in modern poetry becomes a major theme. My reading of Glück's use of mythology in *Averno* is framed by the two "Persephone the Wanderer" poems that appear towards the beginning and then at the very end of the collection; in these two poems Glück explores first the ethics of narrating a "known" story and then the value—both personally and collectively—that can result from such a re-telling. By examining *Averno* in light of Glück's re-telling of mythic narrative, we are better able to understand the way Glück's poetry implicitly relies on repetition: in repeating, or re-telling, the myth of Persephone, Glück is able to create the intimate complexity for which her poetry has become known.

The Poet Behind the Narrative: Ethical Concerns Behind the Re-telling of Mythic Narrative

In "The Forbidden," an essay included in *Proofs and Theories* (1994), Glück explains the potential problems modern writers encounter in incorporating mythic narratives into their writings. She begins by acknowledging the distinct power that is available to writers who draw from mythic themes: because the re-telling of myth is often

"tragic" in its portrayal of permanent suffering,[8] mythic narratives have the ability "to turn a good poet into a great poet" (53). The failure or success achieved in re-telling these mythic narratives, according to Glück, depends on the authority that the writer claims. Writers who claim ultimate authority undoubtedly express "genuine suffering" in their stories—they step into the position of the characters and speak in their voices (54). However, in expressing the devastating pain of mythic characters, these writers often simultaneously simplify the narrative, forcing readers to implicitly agree with them in what Glück identifies as "an excess of will" (54, 63). For example, in speaking as a first person mythic character in a poem, a writer conveys the "rage and contamination and shame" that character feels, but the writer often also simultaneously "demand[s]…admiration for unprecedented bravery, as the speaker looks back and speaks the truth" (55). Writers inevitably take on the mindset of a survivor in writing mythic narrative because the conclusion of the narrative is known, and they have no "ambivalence" towards the characters. Thus, re-tellings of myth that fail to be compelling stories fail because they forfeit the element of the unknown.

By contrast, Glück's own approach in writing myth—an approach that is explicitly shown in the two "Persephone the Wanderer" poems in *Averno*—relies on the "scar" that tragedy leaves on the teller (54). In inserting her own authorial voice into the poems, Glück is still able to maintain the required "ambivalence to the self" that makes the narrative worth listening to. Glück contends that writers need to be purposeful in terms of considering their readers' interests: poems should not make readers ask "why are we involved at all; what response is solicited when the documenting voice requires that

[8] Glück further explains the term "tragic" in terms of understanding that once an event has occurred, especially an event that is devastating, "there is no going back." She understands "tragedy" itself in terms of being permanent (*Proofs and Theories* 53).

we note, at all moments, its survival (even, in many cases, its survival as a soul improved with by this encounter with evil)?" (54). Instead, poems with mythic elements should be structured and spoken in ways that complicate our understanding of the myth and challenge the readers' assumptions.

The "Persephone the Wanderer" poems both begin by questioning the nature of re-telling mythic narrative. Instead of starting at a specific plot point or providing introductory background information, both poems begin by establishing themselves as re-tellings of a known fiction—their first stanzas acknowledge they are based on a canonical myth. The first "Persephone" poem begins with the phrase "In the first version," and the second "Persephone" poem begins with the phrase "In the second version." From these similar beginnings, however, the two poems go on to describe what happens to Persephone in very disparate manners. In this way, we understand that, though the titles are exactly the same, the poems themselves are different re-tellings of the same well-known story.[9] By using different versions of the same narrative in her poems, Glück suggests that the speaker is seeking more than a single, authentic telling; questions inevitably arise with her use of two versions. In her analysis of the two "Persephone the Wanderer" poems, Gosmann explains that Glück does not refer to historical versions in these poems; instead, as Glück explained in an interview, she wrote the poems entirely from her memory of the narrative, revising the myth as she saw fit.[10] In using a structure of multiple "versions," the "Persephone the Wanderer" poems display an ambivalence

[9] Glück has often repeated titles within single collections for specific purposes. In *The Wild Iris*, Glück repeats "Matins" ten times and "Vespers" seven times in order to signify the daily ritual of praying through the narrative. In *A Village Life*, Glück's most recent collection, she repeats only voices that speak in a non-human register in order to signify those "beyond death" speaking into the daily lives of villagers.

[10] Glück also noted that the "source most vivid in her memory" was *D'Aulaires Book of Greek Myths* that was written and illustrated for children (Gosmann 209).

towards the "authenticity" of the canonical story; they prompt readers towards questions from their very beginnings.

Within these versions, the "facts" of the narrative quickly become the focus. The speakers judge the mythic narrative for authenticity even as they begin to tell the plot: in the first "Persephone" poem Persephone has been taken from Demeter, who then "punishes" the earth, and in the second "Persephone" poem Persephone has died. The speakers of the poems—the tellers of the narrative—both immediately comment on the "facts" they have just spoken: "this is consistent with what we know of human nature," says the first poem, and "problems of sexuality need not bother us here," concludes the second. By establishing and corroborating facts from the onset of the poems, these speakers encourage readers to question the supposed "facts" they know, for in pointing out the facts, the speakers also point out the potential for these "facts" to be untrue. In this way, the speakers encourage readers to question the assumptions that are often taken for granted in the re-telling of even accepted, canonical myth.

In the first "Persephone" poem, Glück uses literal questions to approach the re-telling of the myth of Persephone, and uncertainty comes to play the most important role in the writing process. The initial speaker of the first "Persephone" poem can be read as the writer of the poem, the one who is analyzing Persephone's traumatic experience in telling Persephone's story. The identity of the speaker becomes explicit in the eighth stanza: after stating that Persephone "returns home" in the seventh stanza, the speaker comments, "I'm not sure I will/ keep this word: is earth/ 'home' to Persephone" (24-26). The speaker here questions her word choice in an obvious way for a reason: she is explaining the very process of writing the poem, including her decisions regarding word

choice. The questions that follow, regarding the meaning and the implications of the phrase "home," show the complex assumptions underlying the commonly told narrative:

> […] 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, in other words
> an existential
> replica of her mother, less
> hamstrung by ideas of causality? (25-32)

We see here that instead of being certain—of imposing biographical details onto a story or using a methodology calculated to achieve a feeling of "tragedy"—the poet asks questions as a part of telling the story and regards even a "canonical" story as one of uncertainty, revision, and confusion.

These questions appear in contrast to the "experts" that Glück invokes throughout the poem, experts who should know the "truth" of such an accepted, canonical story. The scholars, who "continue to…[paw] over" Persephone's "initial sojourn/ in hell," cannot come to a consensus but instead "dispute the sensations of the virgin" in their analysis of her traumatic event—they seem, like the poet, to ask questions. However, their questions—"did she cooperate in her rape?/ or was she drugged, violated against her will/ as happens so often now to modern girls"—are attacking and tawdry. Unlike the poet's questions, which imply a sympathetic understanding of human nature, the scholar's questions look for someone to blame. And the scholar's questions later lapse into judgment: "Scholars tell us//there is no point in knowing what you want/ when the forces contending over you/ could kill you" (71-74). In this way, we see an aversion to supposed answers on the part of the poet: logically there is perhaps "no point in knowing

what [one] want[s]" if one is powerless and could die, but that is hardly a human or a sympathetic statement.

When the scholars do not have answers, despite their status as experts, the poet turns to other possible authorities. The first forum she turns to is that of common knowledge: "As is well known, the return of the beloved/ does not correct/ the loss of the beloved" (18-20). However, this statement is not one of finality, for there is no solution listed. Persephone, the "beloved," is returned for six months out of the year, but—as is explained through many of the psychoanalytic fragments throughout *Averno*—the trauma of being abducted has changed her. Common knowledge, in this instance, does not provide a final answer to the questions involved in re-telling the mythic story. The speaker then invokes the knowledge of the literary canon by comparing Persephone with Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's classic: like the Puritan who committed adultery, Persephone "…returns home/ stained with red juice" (21-22). However, the poet's inclusion of such a lauded American novel with *The Scarlet Letter* does not provide authority for re-telling the myth of Persephone; it instead leads to further questions regarding the word "home" and what it means. In this way, the speaker establishes her inability to know, with certainty, even the basic facts of this well-known myth.

Both "Persephone" poems also include multiple viewpoints, a technique that allows for the "truth" of the re-telling to be further disputed. The "Persephone" poems both begin in the voice of the poet-writer, but the poems also include the voices of Persephone, Demeter, the "cold wind," and Zeus. None of the speakers (including the poet-speaker) have the "final authority," and stanzas often shift between speakers without warning; it is as if the poet-writer is remembering what the other speakers said, but their

voices are as realistic—and hold as much authority—as the poet-writer herself. In "The Forbidden" Glück applauds Martha Rhodes' ability to "cleave to no fixed perspective" but instead to "mimic the dilemma" of the narrative she tells (57). By including the viewpoints of various mythic characters, as well as speaking in the first person, Glück "mimics the dilemma" critics have identified as central to *Averno*: the poem itself sifts through Persephone's memory and allows other voices to speak into what she remembers of her traumatic experience (Burt 85).[11] By including multiple voices in a single poem, then, Glück is able to show that the poem is a construction in the same way that memory is a construction—both are made up of a several voices without an ultimate authority. Thus, the initial poet-writer abdicates the authorial authority often used in confessional poetry—other voices speak into the poems, allowing the re-telling of Persephone's story to avoid the "excess of will" Glück deplores in other twentieth century re-tellings of mythic narratives (*Proofs and Theories* 63).

Glück also involves the reader directly in the poems. The first "Persephone" poem frequently speaks in the first person plural: all the uses of "we" and "us" throughout the lines involve the readers directly in the re-telling of the story. Statements, such as "Unlike the rest of us, she doesn't know/ what winter is, only that/ she is what causes it" or "Earth asks us/ to deny this rift, a threat/ disguised as suggestion," not only imply that the reader is a part of the narrative itself, but also explain the narrative in terms of "us" (48-50; 80-82). Rather than presenting the narrative as a removed story, Glück's frequent uses of inclusive, first person plural pronouns suggest that this narrative is significant to readers.

[11] Burt further notes in his review of *Averno* that the poems are "best understood as a sequence of feints, provocations, actings out, rages and resignations" (85).

At times the poems also use second person: the poems directly involve the reader at key places in re-telling the mythic narrative. Some of the second person statements in the first "Persephone" poem stand in command form, as if the speaker is talking to herself as she writes: "You are allowed to like no one, you know," the speaker says. This statement is immediately followed by the reason: "the characters/ are not people/ they are aspects of a dilemma or conflict" (33-36). Although the poet-writer potentially speaks only to herself in these lines, the use of second person involves the reader as well. And these uses of second person allow the reader to see the logic behind the writing of the poem.

The poem ends, however, by asking a question directly of the reader: the poet (or Persephone herself) asks, "What will you do/ when it is your turn in the field with the god?" (100-101). Instead of claiming ultimate authority in the resolution of the poem, Glück's speaker leaves such a process up to the reader. The autobiographic details or the "confessional" words of Persephone—she explains previously that "[m]y soul/ shattered with the strain/ of trying to belong to earth"—do not leave give her final authority in speaking about her experience. Glück's use of the second person is a technique she has long admired in poetry; she was first drawn to T.S. Eliot specifically because of his use of second person. Unlike Wallace Stevens' exclusive tone, which made Glück question if she would ever write poetry, Eliot's poetry attracted Glück to poetry because it "request[ed] or crave[d] a listener" (*Proofs and Theories* 113; 9). Glück was particularly drawn to Eliot's monologues, which require a "communion" between writer and reader (21). By bringing such a structure to a mythic poem, Glück intimates her ability to fuse

the mythic and the personal, a process that she explains throughout the first "Persephone the Wanderer" poem.

Overall, the first "Persephone the Wanderer" poem reflects what Morris has written about Glück's use of the mythic. Using the well-known myth of Persephone allows Glück "the necessary emotional distance to approach intimate, upsetting materials in away that remains, for her, safely under control" (23). However, Glück's use of mythic elements also allows her to "transfor[m] liminal or trying episodes of her life" into material that is relatable to readers (23). In this way, the personal and mythical elements of Glück's poetry work together to involve the reader; her combination of personal and mythical elements prompts readers to ask questions even in hearing a story they have heard repeated over and over.

At times Glück mimics the uncertainty she claims in the "Persephone" poems in other, seemingly more confessional poems. Though she "knows" the full narrative of each poem as she as she writes it—and indeed is the author crafting the main argument of the poem—she explicitly relies on asking questioning and uncertainty to convey her meaning. In "October," the second poem in *Averno*, for example, the speaker tries to locate herself in time and in space throughout the entirety of the poem, asking questions as she goes. As Suzanne England explains, "Although the speaker identifies herself by the pronouns 'I' and 'my,' we sense neither time or place…there is violence, but we never learn the details" (89). In essence, "October" is a poem that remains purposely mysterious—Glück chooses to allow the poem itself to continue asking questions.

The entire first section is one long sentence, and the lack of punctuation shows it to be a "stream of consciousness" section. Some lines ask questions about time's

passing: “Is it winter again, is it cold again,/ didn’t Frank just slip on the ice,/ didn’t he heal, weren’t the spring seeds planted” (1-3). Other lines, however, allow memories to slip through: “I remember how the earth felt, red and dense,/ in stiff rows” (14-15). Even the speaker of this personal poem that seemingly does not involve mythic narrative deplores ultimate authority in its structure and wording. The section ends with more poignant questions: “didn’t we plant the seeds,/ weren’t we necessary to the earth,//the vines, were they harvested?” This final question—“the vines, were they harvested?”—is the only question out of the twenty-one questions in the poem that does not use a negative contraction. Glück change her syntactical pattern here to how that it is a different kind of question; it is one that the speaker does not know the answer to. In this way, we see that though Glück avoids claiming “ultimate authority” in the re-telling of myth, it is also a technique she uses in other, seemingly confessional poems. In order for poems to tell a compelling narrative at all, they must maintain an “ambivalence to the self,” asking questions and involving the reader in their telling.

Postconfessional: Merging Greek Myth with Modern Story

Because *Averno* is based so strongly in both the myth of Persephone and in autobiographical narrative—and because Glück explores the process of writing poems within the poems themselves—*Averno* achieves a strange complexity: it is structured to be intimate even in re-telling such a well-known story. Not every poem addresses Persephone’s story directly: some poems are spoken entirely in the voice of a modern poet, and some poems tell what Stephen Burt has identified as “the story of a modern girl, an anti-Persephone of sort, who—through carelessness or arson—burns a wheat field to ash” (1). However, the different speakers and voices that make up *Averno* are not always

easily distinguishable from each other. For example, a poem telling of the "Myth of Innocence" in Persephone's adolescence lapses into a statement about a modern girl and also includes an image from Glück's own life growing up. The voices in the poems often overlap and inform each other, and the polyphony of voices throughout the collection creates a cohesive book-length sequence.[12]

This overlap, and oftentimes fusion, of modern and mythic voices allows Glück to create meaning on at least three planes in the re-telling of the myth of Persephone: firstly, Glück achieves meaning on an autobiographical level, and myth becomes a context for the understanding of her own personal memories. Secondly, *Averno* engages other collections of Glück's poetry: in re-telling of the myth of Persephone, the poems include phrases and images from Glück's other work, creating a complex connection to other narratives Glück has previously told. Lastly, in re-telling the myth of Persephone, Glück engages meaning on a much broader scale: she speaks to an entire "community" of readers who are familiar with Persephone's narrative as a story that has been passed down through generations of Western readers. While twentieth century poets frequently engage one, or even two, of these planes in their writing, Glück is able to engage all three within one collection because of the rich way that she writes the myth of Persephone into the voice creating her poems.

Averno has been called "the most autobiographical collection" of Glück's poems and for good reason: many of the poems include specific details from her own life that Glück has written about in other forums (Chiasson 184). Some of the poems read like

[12] Glück is known for her book-length sequences; in an interview with the Library of Congress, Glücks described her books as "wholes," designating them as literature intended to be read in a single sitting (Cavalieri 5). *Ararat* (1990) marks the beginning of her use of polyphonic voices that together create a book.

oblique memories from Glück's childhood. The second stanza of "Echoes," for example, reads:

> When I was still very young
> my parents moved to a small valley
> surrounded by mountains
> in what was called the lake country.
> From our kitchen garden
> you could see the mountains,
> snow covered, even in summer. (9-15)

The lines here tell the simple narrative of a child, and the poem goes on further to explain the speaker's decision "to become an artist" later in life to "give voice to [her impressions" (19-20). However, because the poem is set in the midst of a collection of poems surrounding the myth of Persephone, the mention of "lake country" and of mountains that are "snow covered, even in summer" becomes significant. The epigraph at the beginning of the collection explains that "Averno" means "a small crater lake," which was "regarded by the ancient Romans as the entrance to the underworld." And snow imagery throughout the rest of the book symbolizes Persephone's time in the underworld—snow, winter, and death become synonymous. In this way, even poems that seem purely autobiographical, like this simple narrative of a young girl, achieve great significance through Glück's use of myth throughout the volume: the modern poet and Persephone herself often become conflated, speaking to and informing each other.

Other poems that specifically re-tell Persephone's story, such as the two "Persephone the Wanderer" poems, also contain autobiographical images. The beginning of the second "Persephone the Wanderer" poem speaks to what Stephen Burt has termed "the tenacious, frightening bonds between mothers and daughters," a theme that Glück has written about in her essays (1). The imagery about Demeter and Persephone's

conflicted relationship in *Averno* draws, at times, from the relationship that Glück had with her own mother. For example, in the second "Persephone" poem, Demeter looks at Persephone and thinks that she can "*remember when [her daughter] didn't exist*," a thought that is met with bitterness by Persephone. Persephone views her mother as secondary in the telling of her own story: her mother is "like a figure at a bus stop,/ an audience for the bus's arrival," or she is "the bus, a temporary/ home or convenience" (19-20, 21-22). Because Persephone views herself as the protagonist in her own story, her mother's efforts to claim authority through being Persephone's "source of life" or her "creat[or]" are dismissed (40, 44).

Like Persephone, Glück came to devalue her mother's opinion in writing her poems—and by extension telling her own story—during adolescence. In "The Education of the Poet," Glück explains that her mother was "the judge" of her early work and that it was her mother's "approval that [she] lived on" (*Proofs and Theories* 6). Her mother's tendency to give Glück her full opinion—responding to "the letter, not the spirit" of the poetry—and the tendency of her entire family to fill silence with speech caused Glück to draw further into herself and to write poems independently of her family when she became more serious about her craft (6-7; 11-13). In this way, Glück's own aversion to telling her poems alongside her mother become a part of her re-telling of Persephone's adolescence: the myth is a context for her own autobiographical experiences. And just as Persephone undergoes psychoanalysis throughout *Averno* as she tells her own story, Glück also underwent psychoanalysis while learning to write poems.[13]

[13] In "Education of the Poet" Glück explains that instead of going to college, she underwent psychoanalytic theory while studying under Leonie Adams at the school of General Studies at Columbia. In this essay, Glück explicitly talks about the process of writing poems while undergoing psychoanalysis.

In order to achieve the distance from her experiences that Glück believes is necessary in writing good poetry, Glück incorporates myth into her modern poems. In an essay entitled "Against Sincerity," Glück explains that poets must enact surgery on their own "blazingly personal" experiences, "perform[ing] autopsies on their own living tissue" (*Proofs and Theories* 35). For Glück, incorporating mythic contexts becomes one way of "performing autopsy" on her own memories: placing mythic narratives within her own stories allows her to evaluate her own effectiveness in writing with more objectivity.

Unlike confessional poets, Glück does not rely on autobiographical detail as the "ultimate authority" in *Averno*: the voices of her speakers throughout the collection challenge the assumptions within the myth, but they are meant to prompt thinking and questioning on the part of readers, not to silence readers. Before *Averno* was published, Daniel Morris explained Glück's postconfessional use of myth as her most important contribution to American poetry since the 1970s: by using myth in her work, Glück is able to

> negotiate a kind of middle ground between the ambitious but often forbidding strains of High Modernism (which attempted to tell what Pound called the 'tale of the tribe' by regarding culture as a whole), on the one hand, and sensitivity to the distinctiveness of individual experience that was characteristic of the confessionals, on the other. (23)

In the case of *Averno* poems, Glück is able to reveal autobiographical details about herself and make use of her own experiences while engaging mythic narratives that Western culture has passed down through the ages. As Gosmann further explains, the relationship between the mythic and the personal is symbiotic for Glück: "associations on the myth elicit personal poems, and poems evolving from personal memory illuminate

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From the beginning of her poetic career, then, Glück has associated psychoanalysis and writing poems with each other; they are intertwined and work together.

neglected aspects of the myth…Glück lets the personal lead her to the mythical, and she uses the mythical to penetrate more deeply into the personal" (205). By incorporating autobiography into myth and myth into autobiography, Glück is able to maintain her unique "postconfessional" style throughout *Averno*.

Longtime readers of Glück will also observe that the poems of *Averno* interact with Glück's previous collections—the story of Persephone is complicated by other stories that Glück has previously told. Many of Glück's poetic collections that invoke myth display similar elements/themes: they often include cyclical time (changing seasons, the idea of death and rebirth, etc.), complex familial relationships, themes of deprivation, and strong instances of paradox. In *Averno* Glück draws from many of these themes and connects this later collection to several of her previous volumes[14]; however, there is a very close connection with her 1993 Pulitzer Prize Winner, *The Wild Iris*.

While Carol Muske has astutely observed that "death lies at the center" of all of Glück's collections of poetry, *The Wild Iris* finds its central theme in the fears surrounding "the impossibility of resurrection" after death (52). The collection is structured as a "trialogue" between the poet-protagonist, the divine, and the watching flowers and plays with themes from the biblical myth of the Garden of Eden. The poet protagonist continually worries about her own inevitable death, which is symbolized by the coming of winter, even as she watches the annual flowers "resurrect" in the spring and blossom. The poet-protagonist's anxiety regarding death pervades ten of the poems

[14] There are several other instances that poems in *Averno* connect to poems in Glück's other collections. One example is the use of chair imagery that appears in "Eros" in *The Seven Ages* (2001) and the chair that appears in the title poem of *Averno*. In both instances sitting in a chair becomes a way of reflecting on a painful situation; however, in the former collection the speaker realizes her separation from her husband is final while in the latter the speaker realizes that she is very alone in her old age.

specifically, which have been categorized as "prayer-poems": the "Matins" and "Vespers" poems repeatedly express the poet-protagonist's fear of dying.

By contrast, *Averno* speaks from a "posthumous" voice—it reads as an answer to the fear of death.[15] The main character of the collection, Persephone, has already "died" at the beginning of the collection and speaks as an "expert" on death (Gosmann 149). The poems of *Averno* answer those of *The Wild Iris* in that death, the foremost concern in the earlier volume, has arrived: the "summer after summer's ending" and the "balm after violence" brought up in *Averno*'s "October" are the setting for the entire collection.[16] Glück shows this connection in the seasons explored in the two collections as well: while the poems of *The Wild Iris* span from early spring to the coming of fall,[17] *Averno* is set from early fall to the beginning of spring.[18] In this way, *The Wild Iris* symbolizes a season of growth, while the winter imagery throughout the *Averno* poems symbolizes a setting of death. Read in conjunction with each other, the two collections comprise the seasonal cycles within a complete calendar year. Given Glück's focus on cycles within nature, such a structural overlap can hardly be considered incidental. And by reading *Averno* in light of *The Wild Iris*, we are able to move beyond the question of "what

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[15] We see his posthumous voice in "Night Migrations," the first poem of *Averno*, which stands as a prologue to the entire collection.

[16] Keniston frames her reading of "October" as a post-911 reading of trauma (178).

[17] Throughout *The Wild Iris*, many of the poems detail the changing of seasons and the shift from spring to summer and then, inevitably, to fall. The voices of annual flowers that are born anew in early spring begin the volume, "April" describes the gardeners' inabilities to work their planted fields in mid-spring, "Midsummer" records the "still air of high summer" in an open field, "End of Summer" laments the "emptiness of heaven" as it is mirrored in "the fields, vacant again, lifeless," and the last "Vespers" poem wonders why "some things have the nerve to be getting started…//so close to the end."

[18] Gosmann also refers to the timeline of *Averno* as a "half cycle" in that is makes up half of a yearly cycle (182). Through the poems are not arranged in seasonally chronological order, the winter imagery that proliferates many of the poems in *Averno* designates the setting.

happens when winter—or death—comes?" to the questions brought by dealing with the aftermath of a dreaded event, by severe trauma and its telling.

Aside from the seasonal cycles and positions of the speakers in respect to death, similar images and specific phrases within the poems also connect the two collections. For example, in the third section of *Averno's* "October," the doorway mentioned reminds the reader of "The Doorway" in *The Wild Iris*. The first two sections of "October" locate the speaker temporally in a time after trauma has occurred: the first stanza ends with "violence has changed me," and the second stanza confirms that the speaker's body "has changed once…has hardened" (33,41). By the end of the second section the speaker has resigned herself to speaking from her mind, as a way of dealing with this trauma. The third section, the section that mentions "the doorway," becomes a memory to which the speaker is returning: "Snow had fallen. I remember/ music from an open window" (59-60). The section goes on to describe the way the speaker perceives beauty, finding "what others found in art" or "what other found/ in human love" in nature (71, 7-74). The third stanza, which reads "I stood/ at the doorway/ ridiculous as it now seems," captures the speaker on the cusp of experiencing the highly exalted beauty that she finds in nature (68-70).

If we look back to "The Doorway" in *The Wild Iris*, we find that the speaker is experiencing a similar feeling—we may see the moment that the *Averno* speaker is remembering. In "The Doorway," the poet-protagonist feels like "a child hovering in the doorway"; as she explains, this is "the moment before/ the first flower forms, the moment/ nothing is as yet past" (10, 3-5). This moment of transcendence in which the poet-protagonist hovers in the doorway both physically and figuratively, wanting to be

"still as the world is never still," enables us to understand the contrast between the "doorways" in each poetic collection. By using the same image in both poems and terming this "moment prior to flowering" "ridiculous" in the latter, we see a sharp change in perspective. Though the speaker in *The Wild Iris* longs for time to stop—to hold onto the moment before change or death arrive—the speaker in *Averno* has experienced change and now terms this desire "ridiculous." The last stanza of "October" explains that the life and "the appearance of the gift," the "possession" that the speaker so ardently hoped for in *The Wild Iris*, has proven disappointing: "death cannot harm me/ more than you have harmed me,/ my beloved life" ("The Doorway" 19-20; "October" 82-84). In this way, the repeated image of a doorway, used in both *Averno* and *The Wild Iris*, demonstrates a shift in regards to the question "what happens after death comes?" Because Glück uses this repeated image between the two collections, readers are able to experience both poems more deeply. We learn from such images that the speaker of *Averno* is beyond the realm of fearing endings, that innocence, at least in some senses, has already been lost.

While all of the poems in *Averno*, even those that do not explicitly mention Persephone, contribute to the re-telling of the myth of Persephone, the poems that explicitly include her as a character also contain images that relate to poems in *The Wild Iris*. In this way, Glück weaves her other collections into the myth she is re-telling, connecting stories within her poetry and showing how they relate to one another. In the first "Persephone the Wanderer" poem, daisies are mentioned, and "Daisies" is also the title of a poem in *The Wild Iris*. "Daisies," spoken in the voices of the flowers themselves in *The Wild Iris*, explains the human tendency of valuing machines over plats,

to avoid "the sound the wind makes/ stirring a meadow of daisies" in an attempt to "resist/ nostalgia" (7-8; 5-6). Ira Sadoff explains "Daisies" as part of "The Last Stage of Romanticism" that Glück comes to embrace in *The Wild Iris*—"nature speaks as if it could still resolve the human dilemma" (83). However, when the daisies reappear in *Averno*, they are hardly symbols of embracing the natural world, a world that in *The Wild Iris* seeks to find "the real world" (2). When Persephone first encounters death in *Averno*, it is significant that "she has never seen the meadow without the daisies" (88-89). Because daisies—or an embrace of the natural world—define the way Persephone looks at the meadows, we see the extent of her innocence; through the juxtaposition of the daisies in both collections, we know she has not yet been corrupted by "the real world," or the world of machines. And her encounter with "death" in the meadow becomes all the more severe: the more innocent and pure Persephone is, the more impacting the "rift" and the "break," mentioned later in the stanza, become (94). In bringing imagery used in *The Wild Iris* into Persephone's story, Glück connects her collections of poetry to each other. In terms of re-telling stories, this allows Glück's poetic canon with all of its instances of myth to take on a distinct complexity. The stories in Glück's poetic collections, both mythical and autobiographical, interact with each other in their tellings or re-tellings, operating on a literarily significant plane.

Perhaps the most significant plane that Glück's poetry operates on, however, is that of the Greek myth, the narrative passed down from generation to generation. The myth of Persephone is so well known, in fact, that David Wheatley comments in his review of *Averno* "there can scarcely be a more popular myth for poets than the luckless underground bride." In drawing from such a celebrated narrative, Glück enables a great

number of readers to connect with her poetry—readers that might not identity with her life experiences in the twentieth (or twenty-first) century. In "The Dreamer and the Watcher," Glück explains that the value of writing poems comes from being able to identify with a wide variety of people: "What had to be cultivated, beyond a necessary neutrality, was the willingness to be identified with the other. Not with the single other, the elect, but with a human community" (*Proofs and Theories* 105-6). And while many modern poets—Glück included—often "identif[y] with the other" through writing about common human experiences, re-telling a well-known cultural narrative is another, perhaps more pragmatic, method of relating to readers. Aside from attracting more readers, Glück's use of Greek myth allows her to create meaning through revisions of the known story—in the final stanzas of the collection, Glück comments on the potential power of revising such a canonical narrative.

In the conclusion of the generally known myth,[19] Persephone is sentenced to cycling between earth and the underworld; because she has eaten seven pomegranate seeds, she cannot remain in either realm permanently. Glück's version of this part of the story is not contradictory: Persephone is still sentenced to cycling between the two realms at the end of the collection of poetry, and thus, the ending is still tragic. However, in Glück's version, Persephone's thoughts regarding her situation are changed due to psychoanalysis—a fact that speaks, for Glück, to the power of poetic imagination. By revising the end to such a well-known myth, Glück speaks to the importance of poetic imagination not just in her own personal life but also in terms of the entire community of readers.

[19] As a point of comparison, I use a translation of Ovid's version in the *Metamorphosis* because of its canonical status.

The very end of the second "Persephone the Wanderer" poem concludes with Persephone's return to earth from the underworld. Demeter has pleaded with Zeus, and readers are told that if Persephone returns, it will be for

> one of two reasons:
>
> either she was not dead or
> she is being used to
> support a fiction. (85-88)

On a surface level, neither of these two reasons seems redemptive in light of the tragic myth. If the first reason—that Persephone never really died—is true, then the dramatic trauma she has been speaking of throughout all of the poems seems overstated: Persephone has been abducted, but her time in the underworld is not as devastating as she has been claiming in implying her "death."

The second reason—that Persephone "is being used to support a fiction"—initially reads like a conspiracy theory. The conspiracy in this case would be that Persephone's death is not the central problem, that her "death" is only a cover story or is part of a larger plot. However the long dash that appears after "fiction" indicates that the stanzas following are the "fiction" being spoken of:

> I think I can remember
> being dead. Many times, in winter,
> I approached Zeus. Tell me, I would ask him,
> how can I endure the earth?
>
> And he would say,
> in a short time you will be here again.
> And in the time between
>
> you will forget everything;
> those fields of ice will be
> the meadows of Elysium. (89-98)

In this way, we see that if Persephone has died, she will only be able to return to the earth through changing how she thinks about her situation—through writing her own "fiction" to live by. Like the speaker throughout Glück's *Vita Nova* (1999) who views memory as "a kind of forgetting" as she imagines "a future beyond death," Persephone must forget the pain she has lived through in her cyclical rotation between life and death (Longenbach 148). It is as if Persephone alone has the ability to transform the situation—and transformation comes from the act of re-telling her own story, through undergoing psychoanalysis while writing the poems themselves.

This transformation is congruent with Glück's own understanding of the power of creating art. In "The Idea of Courage," an early essay about the writing of poetry, Glück explains that "personal circumstances may prompt art, but the actual making of art is a revenge on circumstance…No process I can name so completely defeats the authority of event" (*Proofs and Theories* 25). Through the act of re-telling the myth throughout the collection, Persephone herself creates her own "revenge on circumstances": she undergoes psychoanalysis while "writing" the poems, and, thus, can imagine a different ending after her own "death." As Gosmann explains, because Persephone is able to acknowledge the violence of her mother that she has repressed, she can "take [the] blissful peace she has discovered in the underworld with her to life" (209). Through speaking with Zeus—approaching him "many times" with her concerns and telling him her story even in asking "how can I endure the earth?"—Persephone is able to make peace with her situation. It only through the repetition of telling her story, and the repetition within the writing of her poems, that Persephone is able to come to a place of final, though tragic, peace. The events of Persephone's past have not changed, but, by re-

telling her own "fiction," Persephone is able to transform her time in the dark underworld into "the meadows of Elysium" (98).

Persephone's peaceful ending is also significant in terms of Glück's understanding of the potential of incorporating myth into modern poetry. In her essay on memory as it applies to *Averno*, Gosman differentiates between "personal" and "collective" memory, an idea that she derives from Karl Jung: while an individual has her own stories and her own autobiography, society at large also has memories that are either acknowledged, celebrated, or repressed (205). "Collective" memory includes the narratives that cultures implicitly live by, the stories that are passed down from generation to generation. By revising such a well known myth in *Averno*, then, Glück appeals to the "collective" memory of her readers more than their own "personal" memories: she relies on Persephone's tragic narrative being "common knowledge" to her readers. In revising Persephone's narrative and bringing "personal peace" to Persephone as she retells her story, Glück allows for readers to find "collective peace" as well. In Persephone's transformation and acceptance of her own story, readers that have long heard her narrative can also be transformed. Readers have the ability to hear and to "re-tell" Persephone's story in light of their own lives, to question the assumptions underlying her story as it applies to each of them specifically. Poetic imagination, and the creation of art, then, has the ability to affect readers as well as writers, listeners as well as tellers. By merging the modern story with the mythic narrative in her "postconfessional" style, Glück speaks not only to contemporary people, but also to the stories that have formed and defined contemporary people as they have been retold throughout the ages.

CHAPTER FOUR

From the Eternal to the Temporal, a Repeated Concern

Throughout Louise Glück's prolific career, her poetry has continually addressed the concept of the eternal. In an early interview Glück explained that "my orientation is always toward the eternal […] It has a powerful hold over me […] the absolute, the eternal, the immutable—that condition which does not exist in the physical world" ("Descending Figure: An Interview"). And in an essay entitled "Education of the Poet," Glück further explains that she has always seen the "aim" of her work as "spiritual insight" (*Proofs and Theories* 15).[1] While this fascination with the eternal may seem strange in light of Glück's book-length sequences that often find their narratives in Greek myth, biblical stories, or in personal, familial drama,[2] Glück's poetry, like the poetry of T.S. Eliot, consistently displays a "craving for the path, the continuum, the unbroken line" (21). In essence, Glück's poems often become a quest for the permanent.

In seeking the eternal, however, Glück often portrays temporal settings—Glück writes about the failings of material, temporary existence. As she understands it, the

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[1] Glück further suggests that this "aim" for "spiritual insight" explains the lack of continual fluency in her writing. While the poet who desires to sketch scenes or write snapshots of life can always find subjects to describe, Glück explains that as a spiritual writer, her times of fruitful writing come in seasons. Many of her essays explain the need for "impoverishment" or "deprivation" before being able to write with much fluency. These ideas are discussed most fully in Glück's essays entitled "Disruption, Hesitation, Silence" and "On Impoverishment," both of which appear in *Proofs and Theories* (1994).

[2] Chapter 3 discusses Glück's use of mythic narratives in her poetry: her collections that center Greek myth include *Descending Figure* (1980); *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985); *Meadowlands* (1997); *Vita Nova* (1999); *The Seven Ages* (2001); and *Averno* (2006). Two of Glück's books also draw from biblical narratives: *Ararat* (1990) is based on the story of Noah's Ark (found in Genesis), and *The Wild Iris* (1992) draws loosely from the Garden of Eden narrative. Within all of these collections, Glück also tells stories about family and/or relationships, often weaving Greek/ biblical characters into modern settings: she writes of the death of her father, the destruction of a marriage, the relationship between sisters, etc. See Dodd for an explanation of her "postconfessional" method of weaving ancient myth into modern narrative.

eternal "cannot sustain itself on matter and natural process" (21). This is precisely why many critics describe Glück's poetry as depressing or even devastating. Nicholas Christopher's *New York Times* review, for example, explains that Glück values being realistic over offering comfort to readers: "Glück's [poetry] isn't one to flinch in the face of suffering; if it's glib talk or easy irony you want, or a soothing metaphysical cocktail that promises redemption without pain, hers is not the poetry for you" (3). And in his review of *Poems: 1962-2012*, William Logan describes Glück as "our great poet of annihilation and disgust, our demigod of depression." Like Robinson Jeffers, whom Glück admires for his commitment to "clarity over solace," Glück often laments the devastation of being an impermanent being.

Glück acknowledges that her negative portrayal of temporary life is not typical of twentieth century poetry. Glück explains that "the impulse of our century has been to substitute earth for god as an object of reverence"; however, in her own poetry, Glück has continually fought such urges (21). Images of nature, and especially images of earthly cycles, indeed pervade Glück's poetry; however, as Ira Sadoff explains, Glück's poems do not affirm nature as "the solut[ion] to the human dilemma" (83). In his recent analysis of Glück's poetry, David Yezzi suggests that Glück's poetry is often "marked by violent disappointment" in terms of how it conceives of the eternal—Glück's speakers suffer throughout her poetry specifically because of their temporal shortcomings (105). Because Glück's speakers are destined to live only temporary lives and lack the ability to participate in the eternal in a significant way, they continually struggle with rejoicing in the tasks of ordinary life. Earth is not substituted for god in Glück's poetry, but lamented.

However, David Yezzi also argues that in Glück's most recent book of poetry, *A Village Life* (2009), such a "violent disappointment" with the temporal has dissipated into "a measure of solace": in this new volume, Glück's speakers forge a "truce…with the ordinary" (105). Yezzi supports this argument with an interview printed in Joanne Diehl's *On Louise Glück: Change What You See* in which Glück discusses her growing pleasure in "ordinary life" as she grows older: "My yearning toward perfection, an ideal of receptivity as much as anything else, has been, periodically, less punishing; in its place, a somewhat greater capacity for contentment and gratitude. Daily life seems to me a miracle" (187-188). In *A Village Life* Glück's speakers are able to enjoy the daily, ordinary aspects of life because they do not focus inconsolably on the inevitable endings of their lives—the temporal and the material are accepted *because* they do not have (or need) eternal significance. I will argue, then, that we see Glück's changed acceptance of the temporal most strongly in the new ways that she uses repetition in *A Village Life*. More specifically, by comparing thematic and structural repetition in *A Village Life* with that in *The Wild Iris* (1992) we are able to see Glück's later acceptance of the temporal. No longer does a "quest for the permanent" dominate the poems; such a visionary yearning is replaced by a focus on present, daily life.

The Wild Iris, it has been argued, displays the "climax" of Glück's obsession with seeking the eternal; the collection is set up as a debate between the poet-protagonist and the divine regarding the existence of the eternal and the "impossibility of any resurrection beyond the human, earthly realm" (Davis 48). And within *The Wild Iris*, repetition—repetition in terms of the themes and in terms of the form of Glück's writing—becomes central to the meaning of the collection. By comparing Glück's dual portrayals of daily,

repeated actions in *The Wild Iris* and in *A Village Life*, as well as the collections' varied structures of repetition, I hope to demonstrate how Glück's changed philosophic convictions bleed onto the substance and form of her poetry—we see changes in Glück's use of repetition between the two collections because her philosophic concerns regarding the eternal have shifted.

In *The Wild Iris*, daily, quotidian actions, especially those that are repeated, are of great significance. Throughout the collection of poetry, the poet-protagonist is constantly completing everyday tasks: aside from speaking prayer-poems, entitled "Matins" and "Vespers," every morning and evening, the poet-protagonist maintains her garden regularly. The poems record tasks such as planting seeds, weeding the garden, pruning the plants, and harvesting the crops as the seasons shift, and the repetition of such tasks become a sort of ritual for the poet-protagonist.[3] As she sees the summer ending, the poet-protagonist thinks of the ending of her own life, and, as a result, the repeated non-events in her daily life become important: she clings to them as a way of clinging to fleeting, temporal existence. For example, when the poet-protagonist is weeding, a recurrent task, she explains that she is merely "pretending" to weed; in fact, she is

> …looking for courage, for some evidence
> my life will change, though
> it takes forever, checking
> each clump for the symbolic
> leaf… (6-10)

The physical, temporal act of weeding the garden becomes a method for the poet-protagonist to address the eternal. She gazes at each cloverleaf in an attempt to believe that her own life will not end, and the gap between her own temporal life and that of the

[3] For a further explanation of the poet-protagonists's daily rituals in terms her "Matins" and "Vespers" prayer-sequence of poems, see chapter 1.

eternal entirely overtakes her attention. Weeding the garden becomes highly symbolic to the poet-protagonist: it is not a task she completes simply to maintain the garden but instead emblematizes her struggle not to worry about the ending of her life. And in describing weeding—a self regenerating task—in this context, Glück exposes the pervading presence of the poet-protagonist's concerns: the weeds will inevitably continue to grow, and the poet-protagonist will continue to tend her garden, but she will never finish such a project. As *The Wild Iris* has been called Glück's "most flagrantly symbolic" collection, many daily tasks—like weeding—take on a philosophic importance throughout the poems (Longenbach 187).

However, in *A Village Life*, the speakers often seem to accept the daily for itself. Everyday, quotidian actions can be a source of enjoyment, as well as a source of fatigue and mundane boredom. Their repetition, instead of leading to heightened tensions regarding philosophic concerns, speaks mainly about the repetitive nature of human life on earth—temporal repetition. In enacting daily, quotidian actions, these speakers let go of their fears about the ending of life, and, instead, simply live. This is not to say that these later speakers view their experiences more shallowly than Glück's previous speakers; indeed all of Glück's speakers reflect on their lives in meaningful ways. In his *New York Times* review of Glück's collected edition, *Poems: 1962-2012*, David Orr writes that speakers throughout Glück's poetry "produc[e] great effects with delicate shifts in tone, like an oceangoing bird that travels a hundred miles between wing flaps" (3). Speakers in *A Village Life*, however, approach daily tasks without the tinge of existential worry that her previous speakers often carry with them, which potentially gives the impression that they are less feeling than earlier speakers. However, living to

these later speakers means experiencing daily actions for themselves—quotidian actions are still meaningful in that they involve enjoyment, cause frustration, or even evoke memories, but they lack the significance that comes from constantly being considered in light of the eternal.

In many of the poems in *A Village Life*, the sensory, physical qualities of daily actions become a point of focus—the daily is written about for itself. For example, in "Walking at Night," the subject, a woman, walks through a city that is described chiefly in sensory terms:

> Moonlight reflects off the stone walls;
> on the pavement, you can hear the nervous sounds
> of the men rushing home to their wives and mothers; this late
> the doors are locked, the windows darkened. (7-10)

We know that this is a recurrent, daily action for the woman at this point in her life because the poem goes on to explain that "when she's tired of the streets, in good weather she walks/ in the fields where the town ends" (27). This daily action for her is simply walking, looking at the city and the fields with all the memories she had as a child. Instead of making this daily task a way of addressing the eternal—and by extension worrying about the inevitable ending of her own life—the woman reflects on the life she has had, enjoying the present moment for what it is. The repetition of her nightly walks is not a way for Glück to maintain the tension of the narrative but instead a method for displaying the continual presence of daily actions throughout a lengthy life: her woman walks across the fields now just as she did in childhood.

Similarly, the neighbor woman in "A Warm Day" participates in the ritual of washing her clothes; however, this repeated action has become a source of renewal to her. The poem discusses how she "wash[es] her nightdresses in the river […] / beaming, as

though her life has just been/ lengthened a decade," simply because she loves "cleanliness" (2, 3-4, 4). Instead of contemplating how washing the nightdresses each week brings her closer and closer to the end of her life, this woman lives within the present, feeling refreshed, as if her life has been extended through the daily. In this way, an enjoyment of daily rituals, whether this enjoyment is in walking outside or in doing laundry, pervades the village life described throughout the poems. Such points in the poems lead critics, such as David Orr, to describe *A Village Life* as being more hopeful than some of Glück's other collections: in his book review Orr explains that the poems have "the sad hopefulness of the seasons: death, birth, death, rebirth."[4] In comparison with *The Wild Iris*—which finds its substance in the poet-protagonist's constant worry regarding the inevitable ending of life—*A Village Life* is hopeful because it embraces temporary life. William Logan also explains *A Village Life* as a "subversive departure" from Glück's previous work. Instead of continual existential worries filling the poems as they do in *The Wild Iris*—worries which are heightened each day as the poet-protagonist debates the existence of the divine aloud—we have poems that describe small town life in Glück's "imagined" village, a village that Logan speculates is set somewhere in Italy or Greece (6). The scope of this later collection is purposely smaller; existential, philosophic worries do not lie at the center of the poems as much as daily actions pervade them.

[4] This is not to say that *A Village Life* is consistently described as "hopeful"; only critics who compare *A Village Life* with earlier collections of Glück's describe it this way. By contrast, Zach Savich writes "escape, for the most part, was abandoned long ago" in *A Village Life*, a mindset that which results in a very tragic collection: speakers do not mourn being trapped because they have given up. My study, which focuses on the speakers' collective view of the eternal, explains *A Village Life* as being more hopeful than speakers in other collections because these later speakers do not constantly worry about the endings of their lives—they live more in the present than speakers in Glück's other collections.

Within this hopefulness in *A Village Life*, however, there is also room for the speakers and characters of the poems to find the repetition of the daily difficult as well. The speaker of "Via Delle Ombre," for example notes "how dirty [her house] is, how grim" every single morning (5). We know this is recurrent problem for her because she is "never late for work": her ritual of leaving the house in the darkness of night makes her situation more palatable to her (6). Because the speaker seems trapped in her situation, finding comfort only in the bartender's conversation each evening, we are able see her discontentment within the context of her broader life: instead of clinging to daily actions as a way of avoiding the inevitable ending of her life and making a highly symbolic ritual of them, the speaker dislikes the daily actions themselves. Her daily treks to work and then to the bar at night are not rituals that she clings to, but instead parts of a routine that she would rather avoid. In this way, we see that Glück's methods of grasping at existential concerns—of infusing the daily with eternal significance—have altered.

Many of the speakers throughout the poems also grow tired of daily, quotidian actions. Their enervation, which is displayed time and time again throughout *A Village Life*, becomes significant because it displays a changed view of the repetition within life. Instead of clinging to the ritual of the daily as a way of trying to participate in the eternal as the poet-protagonist does in her prayer-poems, these speakers grow tired of life on earth—the repetitive nature of temporal life enables the speakers to let go of their concerns about the gap between the temporal and the eternal. This fatigue is seen in many of Glück's speakers that are elderly. In "Tributaries," the mothers "are tired constantly" because "the children are always fighting, / the husbands at work or angry" (29, 30). The young couples the mothers see around them are happily consumed by their

relationships; however, they are depicted as "an image of some faraway time, an echo coming / very faint from the mountains" (31-32). In this way, the speakers show their ability to grow tired of the daily non-events that make up their lives—these everyday occurrences lose their novelty in their repetition.

The poem "Fatigue" also illustrates the ability of daily labor to weigh on a worker, lessening his hope through its repetitive nature. The man feels "a great hopefulness" that binds him and the earth together. However, working all day in the soil, first like an "animal" and "then / like a machine with no feeling" quickly becomes tiresome to him (14-15). Because the earth does not change despite his repeated attempts to cultivate it, he ultimately concludes that "Nothing remains of love, / only estrangement and hate" (22-23). The repetition of daily labor is not a means of maintaining tension regarding the gap between the temporal and the eternal, but a means of demonstrating the banal repetition and failure of repeated labor. And this sort of attitude applies to how some of the speakers conceive of the eternal as well. The very beginning of "In the Café" compares the repetitive, mundane nature of life on earth with that of the eternal:

> It's natural to be tired of earth,
> When you've been dead this long, you'll probably be tired of heaven.
> You do what you can do in a place
> but after a while you exhaust that place,
> so you long for rescue. (1-5)

In this way, the idea of permanence and of the eternal are not endlessly glorified as they are in *The Wild Iris*. In thinking of "heaven" and the idea of eternal life, the speaker of "In the Café" knows he would grow tired the same way he does on earth. Though he often feels "he is on the verge of a new life," this life has no eternal significance: he enters the lives of the women he knows as one "enter[s] a dream,/ however long it lasts,"

but "in the morning, [he] remembers[s] / nothing of the dream at all, nothing at all" (62-63; 63-64). Instead of imbuing his relationships with these women—and the daily tasks of knowing them—with eternal significance, he explains that his enjoyment and boredom with them is only temporary. Yezzi's conception of the "truce with the ordinary," then, can be seen both in the speakers' abilities to enjoy daily life or to find it mundane—however, it is these actions, in and of themselves, that are spoken of—the temporal is not a gateway to the eternal but a time to be enjoyed in and of itself.

Nowhere is this "truce with the ordinary" seen more fully than in the title poem of the volume, a poem in which Glück replaces religious rituals with daily rituals—her speaker, in this case, literally lets go of her concerns regarding the eternal in order to live more fully in the present. "A Village Life" is comprised of daily, repeated actions: the entire poem catalogues the Sunday morning routine of the speaker as she walks her neighbor's dog. We know this Sunday morning routine has become an established one because the seasons are depicted as changing: "Summer and winter, / we walk the same road, early morning, at the base of the escarpment" (8-9). Within the act of walking the dog, the speaker explains her temporary ability to hold her fear of the ending of life at bay:

> so for a while it seems possible
> not to think of the hold of the body weakening, the ratio
> of the body to the void shifting,
>
> and the prayers becoming prayers for the dead. (18-21)

The physical act of walking the dog and keeping "images" of the plants growing nearby and the dog "chasing mice" enables the speaker to stave off her concerns about the temporary nature of her own life. She distracts herself by living fully in the present.

Then, when her concerns about death return to haunt her—concerns that are compared with her neighbor's more traditional faith and conception of the ending of life—the speaker turns to ordinary, daily actions. Unlike her neighbor who "believes in the Virgin" and spends her Sunday mornings at church, the speaker simply says "I make my soup, I pour my glass of wine" (32). In this way, we see that the speaker's view of the ordinary has changed; it is no longer a symbolic approaching of the eternal (and the ending of life) as it is in *The Wild Iris*, but a way of living in the present.

This is not to say that the speaker is no longer concerned about the inevitable ending of life—if anything, she is more aware that her own life will end, which is seen in her awareness of the approaching evening. The speaker understands her position in regards to the eternal: she is still "tense, like a child approaching adolescence" who has "no say whatsoever" in what happens after death (33, 37). And, in the same way that a child inevitably grows up, the night comes—by extension death arrives. However, unlike she has feared, the speaker continues to speak. She continues participating in daily life in a repetitive fashion. Even if the worst is true—the human soul is not eternal but instead "meaningless but full of messages" and, in fact, "dead" as it has "always been dead"—the speaker decides life is still worth living (52, 53).

The final stanza of "A Village Life," and of the entire collection of poetry for that matter, shows the speaker going about her daily tasks, tasks that are going to be repeated throughout her life, "as though it were natural to [her], / as though [she] were already a factor in [them]" (58-59). In the final line of the poem, the speaker sets forth in her life, even if this life is not eternal: "On market day, I go to the market with my lettuces," she explains, as if enacting daily, quotidian events is important—important not in terms of

eternal significance but in terms of the present because, after all, the speaker's present, daily life is all that the speaker is certain about.

This turn to the present in "A Village Life"—to the ordinary aspects of daily life—resonates with another famous poem regarding ordinary experience, Wallace Stevens' "Sunday Morning." Both poems address the concept of faith in the eternal and are spoken by speakers who have chosen to remain at home rather than to attend church. David La Guardia explains that Stevens' speaker, like the speaker of "A Village Life," is challenged to "avoid abstraction, insufficiency, fixed principles, and closed systems, and turn toward concreteness and fact"—a substance that is found by understanding the daily in itself (46). We see the speaker's consideration of physical, temporal aspects of the daily most strongly in a question asked in the second part of "Sunday Morning":

> What is divinity if it can come
> Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
> Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
> In pungent fruit and bright, green, wings, or else
> In any balm or beauty of the earth,
> Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven? (14-19)

The final stanza of "Sunday Morning" answers this question; after thinking through the failings of the Christological myth, the speaker turns her thoughts to material, physical facts: "deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail/ Whistle about us their spontaneous cries; Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness" (114-116). Both poems end with the ordinary—temporal, material facts replace existential worries about the future.

The endings of "Sunday Morning" and of "A Village Life," however, also offer slightly different conclusions to the speakers of the poems. The speaker of "Sunday Morning" comes to find "a world holier than the one proposed in the Christian myth" by learning to value her "own perception" as the key to understanding the natural world (La

Guardia 48). This value of the speaker's own perception—of subjective thinking—exemplifies Stevens' "supreme fiction" that so many of his poems address. In coming to value temporal, material existence, Stevens' speakers frequently choose to believe in the power of their own imaginative perceptions.

Glück's speaker in "A Village Life," does not turn to her own imaginative perceptions at the end of the poem; she is not creating her own "supreme fiction," but enjoying the natural world for what it is—temporal existence. Though she often feels that her soul, like the moon, "could actually make something grow on earth," she knows it cannot because "it's dead, it's always been dead" (56, 53). Her decision to "go to market" in the last line of the poem is not a holy action that acts as a replacement for her lost faith in the eternal; she "go[es]" to market" simply because it is "market day" (61). In this way, Glück's "truce with the ordinary" is more realistic than Stevens': the temporal moment is not made significant through the speaker's imagination, but instead accepted as a temporal moment. Instead of worrying about the inevitable ending of her own life, the speaker enjoys the physical, material act of taking her lettuces to the market.

In terms of Glück's wider poetic canon, such a change in focus—from the eternal to the temporal—can hardly be overstated. Glück's acceptance of the temporary, material parts of life, then, affects not only the substance of her poems—the daily actions that her speakers participate in—but also the form of the poetry. More specifically, in this recent book, Glück abandons a poetic form that she has repeated throughout all of her collections thus far: short lines within her poems. In letting go of her traditional way of thinking, Glück also lets go of her traditional form of writing. And this change in syntax

pervades every poem in *A Village Life;* so pervasive is her change in thinking that it affects even the craft of the poems.

Since the beginning of her poetic career, Glück has been wildly renowned for her mastery of the short line, and, in his essay on Glück's technical skills, Isaac Cates maintains that the "white space" between Glück's lines—the "silence" as Cates describes it—holds the crux of Glück's poetic style (462). For example, the last two stanzas of the title poem of *The Wild Iris* read:

> 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. (16-23)

These short lines end abruptly, utilizing enjambment as a key part of their meaning: the line breaks, like those between lines 16-17 and lines 19-20, introduce unexpected images. In this way, Glück often uses short lines to bring complexity to her poetry and to suggest uncertainty. Many, many short lines often make up a single, sprawling sentence, and the line breaks also, as in the break between line 17 and 18, take the place of punctuation. Though Glück does use some longer lines throughout the first ten volumes of her poetry, her most usual form—and the form that sets her apart from other twentieth century poets—is her use of short lines with very purposeful breaks.

In the past, Glück has also commented specifically on her chosen use of short lines. In an early essay entitled "Disruption, Hesitation, Silence," Glück writes of feeling an "instant objection" to the "long lines, long stanzas, long poems" that are admired in

her generation (*Proofs and Theories* 73). To say more words is not to mean more to Glück; she instead finds meaning within silence and deprivation. The bulk of her poetic career also demonstrates her preference for "the suggested over the amplified," specifically through her use of short lines (85). Glück has never wanted to tell the entirety of the story, but instead to hint at the larger meaning. In his book review, Nicholas Christopher explains that small components that comprise Glück's poetry—such as her short lines—are central to the careful method she uses to evoke meaning: "each part never fails to speak for the whole." Her short lines come to symbolize her way of thinking about the world and her methodology in crafting poems.

In *A Village Life*, however, poetic lines stretch all the way across the page—for the first time in over forty years of writing poems, Glück consistently uses long lines to tell her narrative. The penultimate stanza of "Before the Storm" stands as an example of such a form:

> No sound. Only cats scuffling in the doorways.
> They smell the wind: time to make more cats.
> Later, they prowl the streets, but the smell of the wind stalks them.
> It's the same in the fields, confused by the smell of blood,
> though for now only the wind rises; stars turn the field silver. (31-35)

The line breaks in this stanza, as in many of the other poems throughout *A Village Life* do not bring unexpected turns to the poems. Instead, they tell a logical story, in smooth phrases that end with the end of a line. The lines, though longer, become easier to read, and the breaks do not drastically affect the meaning of the poem. This shift in form—from the short enjambed lines to the long, lilting lines that have been termed "valedictory music" in *A Village Life*—can hardly be considered incidental (Yezzi 115). Instead of

startling line breaks and endings, we see closure and an evenly told narrative, lines that do not worry over their own inevitable endings.

Not all of Glück's critics have been impressed by this change in form; in fact, many speak disparagingly about her shift to using long lines. William Logan, writing in *The New York Times*, describes the form of *A Village Life* as an act of carelessness on Glück's part: "the lines are long, the poems sputtering on, sometimes for pages, until they finally run out of gas, as if they were the first drafts of a torpid afternoon" (3). This review concludes by claiming that because "the lines are slack, the fictions drowsy and the moments of heighted attention like oases in a broad desert…[Glück] turns out to have an imagination almost as conventional as anyone else's" (13). Such a denigrating review, however, discounts Glück's intentional turn to new rhythms and the attention with which she orchestrates the volume's "drowsy" pace. As opposed to *Descending Figure* or *The Wild Iris,* which were both written in a matter of weeks, Glück explains that *A Village Life* took over a year and a half to compose and revise (Green). The severe change in form, then, was intentional rather than incidental or thoughtless. By letting go of her long-held poetic form, Glück demonstrates her ability to let go of her focus on the eternal in her poems, and she repeats this changed viewpoint in each line she writes throughout the volume, demonstrating the pervasive nature of such a shift in thinking.

And such a shift in thinking—and in form—is particularly significant given Glück's precise attention to the detail of her poetry. As Frank Bidart explained while introducing Glück at a poetry reading in the early nineties, shifts in form are essential to understanding Glück's poetic work: "she has a master's sense of form, and often meditates what necessities lie beneath shifts in form. She has a constantly fresh and

unexpected way of stationing the self, the soul, vertically in relation to the world above or below it, to its past or impending future" (24). Years later, Bidart has gone on to suggest that "one of the best experiences in reading contemporary literature" can be found in reading the nine [now eleven] volumes of Glück's poetry in the chronological order that she published them. Shifts in form within Glück's poetry indicate shifts in thinking, and because these shifts in form are repeated throughout a volume of poetry, they appear all the more pervasive.

While Glück lengthens her poetic lines throughout *A Village Life* in order to signify a departure from previous collections, her continued method of repeating poem titles within a collection allows her to maintain the structural control she had in previous volumes. In the first half of *The Wild Iris*, Glück repeats the title "Matins," or morning prayer, seven times, and, in the second half of *The Wild Iris* ten poems are entitled "Vespers," or evening prayer. By repeating titles in *The Wild Iris*, then, Glück creates a prayer-sequence of poems—poems that through their titles are understood to be prayers offered up by the poet-protagonist. This structure allows Glück to maintain the tension between belief and unbelief throughout the collection—the poet-protagonist is continually worrying about the existence of the divine and about the ending of her life in each "prayer-poem." Glück's use of repeated titles in *The Wild Iris*, then, becomes a primary way for Glück to express her "violent disappointment" in the disparity between the temporal, or material, and the eternal—the tension is maintained specifically in these poems that continue, disappointedly, to repeat without answers (Yezzi 105).

Titles also repeat across *A Village Life*; however, in this case, their repetition is used to dispel the tension between the temporal and eternal. In essence, the poems with

repeated titles demonstrate the need for speakers to accept daily life without regard for the eternal, temporary and insignificant though daily life may be. Instead of a progressive narrative, as is seen in the increasingly worried prayers of the poet-protagonist in *The Wild Iris*, *A Village Life* utilizes poems almost like snapshots: the poems are not arranged in, even roughly, chronological order, but instead provide scattered viewpoints of life. In an interview, Glück described the viewpoint as "voices coming from a particular cusp. On the edge of something, in a single life…For me the feeling of the book is as though it were a single life enacted by multiple actors" (49). Some poems, such as "Figs" and "Walking at Night," speak from the viewpoint of middle-aged to older women, while others, such as "Noon" and "At the River," capture the viewpoint of a child amidst the pressures of adolescence. Because an obvious central speaker does not lie behind the narrative and speakers of the poems do not repeat in a traditional way, the structure of the volume does not lend itself to dramatic despair over the inevitable ending of life as a progressive and continuing concern. Instead, the reader sees *A Village Life* as a narrative of "a life," one life among many captured in verse.

The titles that Glück does repeat in *A Village Life,* then, are significant in that they allow a few of the speakers to voice their opinions beyond the boundaries of a single "snapshot" poem; in a sense, these are the only voices that Glück allows to repeat themselves. Only three poem titles are repeated throughout *A Village Life*: "Earthworms" and "Bats" are repeated twice, and "Burning Leaves" is repeated three times. Interestingly, none of these three voices are typical in terms of the other poems. These poems do not reflect on events within life or comment on daily actions so much as they address the limitations of death—they explain the pointlessness of worrying about the

inevitable ending of life, encouraging an acceptance of the temporary, or the material, for what it is.

Two of the three repeated titles are spoken from the voice of the non-human. Not only is this distinction significant within a collection of poems that depict village life from various perspectives but also in terms of the other non-human speakers Glück includes in other collections. In *The Wild Iris*, Glück invokes non-human voices: aside from the poet-protagonist's prayer sequence of poems, the divine speaks regularly, as do the watching flowers in the garden. However, in *A Village Life*, there is no divine voice to contend with (not even a mocking voice), and the non-human voices are not beautiful, resurrected flowers, but small, seemingly insignificant creatures of the earth. Bats and earthworms essentially live in darkness, and, in contrast to the flowers, both are a dusty, dull color. They are not revered creatures, but those associated with darkness, dirt, and a lack of perception: bats lack the inability to see, and earthworms lack eyes or ears, having only the most basic perceptive abilities. However, in repeating the titles of these poems—and by extension allowing these few speakers to speak in more than one poem—Glück draws attention to the poems that they speak. Perhaps even more significantly, all three of these repeating voices suggest the dichotomy between material, temporal being and eternal existence—all of them address the seeming limitations of death, demonstrating Glück's changed philosophic understanding of the eternal in this collection.

The "Earthworm" poems, addressed to "mortals" with their temporal lives, advocate not for a position that is "eternal," in a traditional sense, but one that is "wholly physical" (the second "Earthworm"). The speaker is not concerned with consciousness

after death in a traditional way. In the first "Earthworm" poem, the speaker explains that "once you enter the earth, you will not fear the earth," and that death will "come to seem like a web of channels or tunnels like / a sponge's or honeycomb's" (15, 17-18). By comparing the setting of death to their own habitat (channels within the earth), the earthworms explain death with an unexpected authority. Death is later likened to "travels" in which the dead can find "a wholeness that eluded you" because, being humans, "you were never free/ to register in your body whatever left a mark on your spirit" (23-25). Because earthworms are known for having very undeveloped mental faculties[5] and for being unfeeling, Glück bases the "earthworm" poems ironically: the earthworms, as "unfeeling" creatures, have a strange authority in this case, as if they understand the realm after death far more objectively. The speaker of the second "Earthworms" poem also encourages humans to think about death with less anxiety: it makes the argument that "one's/ position determines one's feelings" and suggests that, in humans, "the mind disdains what it can't control" (5-6, 7). The mind here, seems less important than the physical, for the mind make the human biased against death. In a collection that offers many voices that speak to human experience, Glück's repetition of "Earthworm" seems significant: the poems' perspectives speak seemingly from beyond death but do not offer the comfort of a continued mental, or at least a continued human, consciousness. As recyclers of decayed matter and even carrion, the earthworms sustain temporary, earthly life as they create fertile soil.[6] However, as "creators" of temporary

[5] Naturalist Jim Conrad explains that earthworms have "simple brains" that allow earthworms "to respond to light but not much else."

[6] In the conclusion of Charles Darwin's *The Formation of Vegetable Mold Through the Action of Worms with Observations on their Habits*, Darwin writes that "it may be doubted whether there are many other animals which have played so important a part in the history of the world, as have these lowly organized creatures."

life and witnesses of human death, earthworms, as a species, have the authority to speak to human life and death.

The two "Bats" poems have a similar effect as those of the "Earthworm": they suggest that humans lack the ability to "see" death objectively. However, they advocate for thinking "beyond" the physical, as opposed to the "wholly physical" thinking that the "Earthworm" poems bring up. The crux of the "Bats" poems lies in the two ways that seeing is depicted:

> There are two kinds of vision:
> the seeing of things, which belongs
> to the science of optics, versus
> the seeing beyond things, which
> results from deprivation […] (1-5)

Seeing, in terms of understanding the unknown eternal, is not scientific or provable, but instead based on seeing "beyond" the physical realm, by paradoxically letting go of belief based on sight. The "Bats" poems bring up several examples of this paradox: *via negativ*a theology, which involves shutting one's eyes in order to see light; the authority silence has the ability to maintain; and the distraction that sensory information can hold. The view of the eternal in "Bats," then, transforms a fear of the unknown, into the practice of letting go, which paradoxically results in acceptance. Glück writes of the "paradox" of deprivation in *Proofs and Theories* further; in terms of her writing, Glück always prefers the "suggested over the amplified" (85). She lets go of explaining the whole with all the details and instead chooses to share only a part, which paradoxically allows for great vision. The "Bats" poems, which are repeated for emphasis, advocate for "seeing" beyond death by letting go of clinging to existential anxiety. Amidst a canon of poems that often dread painfully inevitable endings, the "Bats" poems become oddly

comforting; though bats are not often considered comforting, in these poems they encourage Glück's speakers to think of that which they cannot see.

"Burning Leaves," the only title that Glück repeats three times throughout the volume, offers the broadest view of the eternal in the volume: instead of approaching death in terms of a single human life ending, these poems speak to the ending of vegetative life, as well as the ending of the life of the earth. The first two "Burning Leaves" poems describe the "life" of a fire as it burns dead leaves in autumn, concluding with the notion that in burning the leaves literally become nothing: "where the fire was, there's only bare dirt in a circle of rocks. / Nothing between the earth and the dark." In the first two "Burning Leaves" poems, however, the subject is the fire and its ability to "live," not the leaves that will, in fact, die. However the third "Burning Leaves" poem describes the absence after the leaves have finished burning: "The sky is cold, blue; under the fire, there's grey earth" (4-5). This last poem concludes by questioning the burning of earth as a whole and its ultimate ending—though a boy watches the leaves burning, human life is not the subject: the ending of earth and the way "it will ignite" someday is the speaker's concern. In repeating this viewpoint in the "Burning Leaves" poems—a questioning of the earth's death and not simply of the human's—Glück broadens the scope of the volume beyond that of usual human concerns.

I do not suggest here the words of "Earthworms," "Bats," or "Burning Leaves" should be taken as absolute truth for Glück's speakers regarding the eternal, but that their positions—seen especially as less than typical viewpoints about death—are significant in terms of how the volume as a whole approaches the concepts of life and death. Glück herself called these voices "coy" or "fey" in an interview. However, Glück also

maintains that they are essential to *A Village Life*, for without them, the volume becomes too much like *The Spoon River Anthology*—as Logan explains it, Glück writes without "moralizing" the way Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology* does, though both works write with "the same steady knowledge that our destination is the grave" (Glück 50; Logan 4). These voices enable Glück's speakers to regard the eternal through a more objective, if not inhuman, lens, to let go of existential concerns in a way that her speakers do not in previous volumes.

Another way that Glück shows her changing view of the eternal as it relates to the temporal is through repeating titles she has used in previous volumes—by doing so, Glück shows a "revision" in her thinking. "Harvest," "Sunset," and "Midsummer" all appear as titles in *The Wild Iris* and in *A Village Life*. In all three cases, the viewpoint shifts from that of the divine (in *The Wild Iris*) to that of a human speaker, and, when the poems are placed side-by-side, the shift in Glück's focus on the eternal—from her initial pursuit of the eternal to her later acceptance of the temporary—becomes more apparent. Both versions of "Harvest," for example, speak directly to the fear of the ending of life; however, they have entirely different responses to this fear, each corresponding to a different conception of the eternal. In *The Wild Iris*, the divine voice describes watching a human worry about what happens after death: "how unsubtle you are:/ it is at once the gift and the torment" (5-6). And the only assurance offered is that of humanity's ultimate insignificance. The divine suggests that the human's present life is "punishment" enough, brashly stating "with one gesture I established you/ in time and in paradise" (13-14). The eternal, conveyed in the divine speaker of this first "Harvest" poem, then, is separate from the present, an inaccessible realm that the speaker has not way to commune

with: the present is a "punishment," and the poet-protagonist's worried prayers throughout the volume are dismissed with the inevitable ending of life. The effect of this dismissal is to make the poem seem all the more tragic—the human's only life will end, and the divine coldly does not care.

In the second "Harvest" poem, the ending of life is still a central concern to the speaker; however, in this case, the response is softened into an acceptance of the ordinary and a letting go of the need to exist eternally. The poem begins with imagery of crops that are beginning to decay. While the tomatoes are still "beautiful…on the outside," "Inside, they're gone. Black, moldy—/ you can't take a bite without anxiety" (6-7). This imagery signifies the inevitable coming of death, especially as the poem goes on to hope that "the farmers would see to it / that things went back to normal / the vines would go back to bearing new peas" (16-18). When death arrives, however, the speaker frames it in a soothing light: winter is not described as attacking the vitality of the plants but as a creator of a strange beauty: because the earth is "white now" with snow, "the fields shine when the moon rises" (34). And because the watching speaker, at the very conclusion of the poem, describes the earth as a "mirror," the reader knows how the speaker feels watching this inevitable ending: "calm meeting calm, detachment meeting detachment" (36, 37). The extensive worries of the poet-protagonist about the ending of human life in *The Wild Iris* prayer sequence yield to a calm acceptance of the inevitable ending of life. From the shelter of the window, the speaker can calmly state that "what dies, dies without struggle" in this second "Harvest" poem (39).

By titling two poems "Harvest," each of which questions the ending of human life in two separate collections, Glück signals a shift in her viewpoint: she uses repetition of

her previous work in order to demonstrate philosophic change that has occurred. Repetition here, then, also provides an occasion for change and revision/ reconsideration. It is not that Glück now believes in the eternal—the viewpoint on the possibility of human resurrection does not shift between the two volumes. But in *A Village Life*, the speakers respond with calmness as opposed to the anxiety they feel in *The Wild Iris*; there are no more distraught prayer-poems but only the coming of another day. The last two lines of the entire collection read simply, "Tranquil and still, the day dawns. / On market day, I go to the market with my lettuces" ("A Village Life" 60-61). In this way—and especially through Glück's repetition of the word "market"—we see that daily life is accepted; when the it is "market" day, the speaker simply "goes to market," rather than asking probing questions about the ultimate fate of such an action—the speaker lives in the present rather than in light of an unclear future.

Louise Glück once wrote in an essay that "as a child, [she] was unwilling to speak if to speak meant to repeat [herself]" (*Proofs and Theories* 18). However, throughout her poetic career, from the very first poem in *Firstborn* to the final poem in *A Village Life*, Glück has been, in a sense, repeating her concerns regarding the gap between the temporal and the eternal. This is precisely why Frank Bidart recommends reading her collections of poetry in the order in which they were published (25). Her collections, instead of being detached volumes, are meant to be read side-by-side, for it is only through this reading that we will be able to see the development of Glück's long-held ideas and forms. In *A Village Life* Glück's speakers finally accept the temporal, and it is through Glück's changed structures of repetition that we primarily see this changed

philosophy. We see here—through the structures of repetition throughout the collection—precisely what Joanne Feit Diehl describes in Glück's poetry overall:

> Glück's poems keep circling around the fundamental, existential issues that absorb each of us, but they do so in a way that transforms them into something other, into poetry that keeps repeating itself and therefore transcending the limitations of the real in order to create art. (22)

Repetition, in this sense, remains far from the "anxious duplication" or the stagnation that Glück fears in art; instead of stemming from imitation, Glück's repetition finds its roots in meditation as she ponders and reconsiders ideas over time (*Proofs and Theories* 123). Ideas and structures are repeated, as well as changed and revised, in order to create art that continually "illuminate[s] what has been hidden," the ultimate "dream of art" for Glück (7).

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

The Wild Iris, Averno, and *A Village Life* epitomize the paradoxical relationship between change and repetition in Glück's later work. Each of these collections departs sharply from Glück's previous work as she purposely invokes change and explores new avenues of expression; however, structures of repetition—repeated titles, narratives, forms, styles—imbue each collection with the "fundamental preoccupations" and "habitual gestures" that make it compelling as a collection (*Proofs and Theories* 17). By using both change and repetition in these collections, then, Glück achieves what she considers the ultimate "dream of art," which is to "illuminate what has been hidden" (7). Most obviously, Glück's tendency toward drastic change allows her to uncover new contexts, ideas, and challenges in each book she composes; she cannot help but "illuminate what has been hidden" because she is constantly exploring new terrain and purposely finding innovative methods of expression. More subtly, because of Glück's understanding of the writing process, the structures of repetition in Glück's later work also hold an essential role in accomplishing the purpose of art.

Writing poetry—as Glück explains in several essays in *Proofs and Theories*—is not a series of single spontaneous acts, but instead a long process. In the "whole lifetime" of the poet, according to Glück, "years are spent waiting to be claimed by an idea…it is a life dignified…by yearning, not made serene by sensations of achievement" (3). In this way, Glück's poetic collections are not instantaneous records of events or spontaneous verses; each poem she writes is part of a slow, subtle process that takes its

time in coming to pass. The poems in Glück's collections ruminate, repeating structures and ideas even as they are written—their repetitive structures mirror the thought process involved in the writing of the poems themselves. Repetition, in these later collections, becomes a means of meditation and an avenue of deeper exploration, as opposed to the imitation or stagnation that Glück so fears (17). The act of writing a poem becomes a journey in itself; as Glück explains, "whatever the truth is, to speak it is a great adventure…the poem may embody perception so luminous it seems truth, but what keeps it alive is not fixed discovery but the means to discovery" (111, 93). Glück values the process of writing poetry—a process that seeks change but also repeats itself in the telling—as well as the finished poems themselves.

This is precisely why, in a review of Glück's poetic canon—a canon with marked differences between volumes and a tendency to change even "characteristic" poetic techniques—David Yezzi explains that "despite changes…from book to book, Glück is working out one long poem, one portrait of inner life" (106). Glück's work—all eleven collections—must be read in light of the ways that it repeats itself, as well as the ways in which it changes and alters. Poetry to Glück, not unlike a human life, relies on both repetition and change in that they are both parts of a long process; poems build on each other within collections just as moments and memories build on each other within lifetimes. Through studying the development and changes of Glück's poetry in each collection, as well as the repetition that such change is built on, we are able to see the process behind her realization in the "dream of art": the writing process itself "illuminate[s] what has been hidden" as the poems are composed *(Proofs and Theories* 7). And instead of a single, weighty poem that speaks to a fundamentally unchanging

truth, we have forty years of writing that record the constant pursuit of truth, a process which repeats itself in order to discern its own meaning.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for Dr. Emily Setina whose insight and direction shaped the entirety of this project; her understanding of the writing process, as well as her sense of humor, made her an excellent guide. Dr. Kevin Gardner helped me discern how to write about traditional religion in the context of postmodern poems. I am also especially thankful for Dr. Laurie Lamon, the professor and poet at Whitworth University who first introduced me to Louise Glück's work, and for Dr. Jerry Sittser and Dr. William Gloer whose knowledge of Divine Office informed my reading of *The Wild Iris*.

I am deeply thankful for Elizabeth Fredericks' and Joseph Ptomey's thoughtful discussions of the poems, James Watson's unfailing insight into the craft of writing, Sarah Gross' navigation in formatting, and Ingrid Pierce's quiet, steadfast support throughout the writing process. To my family, who was a constant source of encouragement—thank you.

Finally, for her lovely poems, I am indebted to Louise Glück. I find her work challenging in the best way: in years of reading her poems, I continue to find new ways of thinking about change, as well as repetition. Both, to me, seem essential to poetry and to life.

for Nathaniel

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Over the course of four decades of critical attention, Louise Glück's poetry has repeatedly (and paradoxically) been associated with "change." James Longenbach has gone so far as to declare that "change is the highest value" in her poetry (184). The marked differences—in theme, structure, syntax, and style—that cut across Glück's eleven collections of poetry demonstrate the truth of Longenbach's analysis. Frank Bidart further explains that the changes in Glück's collections should affect the way readers approach her work: "one of the greatest experiences in contemporary literature…[is] over the course of two weeks [to] read Louise Glück's…books of poetry, in the order in which she published them" (25). Reading Glück's books chronologically, according to Bidart, allows the reader to experience the profound ways in which she "balance[s] and fundamentally alters" her ideas and techniques from collection to collection—by avoiding the creation of a lasting style, she is able to provide "astonishing variety and invention" with each new book she writes (24). Part of the distinct power of Glück's poetry, then, is its affinity for "making it new"[1] with each collection. Joanne Feit Diehl further names this "refusal to stand pat" as one of her most distinguishing virtues. It comes as no surprise, then, that the publication of *Poems 1962-2012* (Glück's first

[1] Ezra Pound coined what has been termed "modernism's most enduring rally cry" with his insistence that art should "make it new" (Bradshaw 2). I use the phrase to show Glück's reliance on modernist ideals in a broad sense as she continually seeks innovation in her poetry. Glück differs significantly from modernist philosophy, however, in that her sense of "newness" extends mainly to new forms of individual or psychological expression. Glück's poetry does not contain the sense of "historical rupture" that Pound sought, nor does Glück's poetry see a "new context" as a means for "making it new" as Stein's work suggests (Bradshaw 2, 575).

edition of collected poems) has prompted even more discussion about the changes Glück has made in each new book that she has written.

In her essays, Glück has explained this affinity for constantly changing her poetry as inherent to the craft, arguing that learning how to write poetry "depends on seeing a difference between that appetite for change and the process of anxious duplication" (*Proofs and Theories* 123). She classifies "anxious duplication" as mere "imitation," suggesting that if a poet repeats parts of an existing poem—whether one's own poem or another poet's work—there is no room for true growth to occur. According to Glück, repeating what has already been written involves "always facing the same monument…or the [same] obstacle" so that the poems become "the dead products of fear and inhibition, [poems] that have no author at all" (123). In this light, change becomes significant in that it breathes life into poems; it allows poems to triumph in new ways, to face new "monuments" and "obstacles" that offer authentic insight. The fact that Glück classifies imitative poetry as "hav[ing] no author at all" suggests that change and the poet's ability to "make it new" lie at the center of poetic art.

Given Glück's tendency towards change, it comes as little surprise that she intentionally reinvents her artistic style in each new book that she writes—each new book is distinctly different from her previous collections. In "Education of the Poet," an essay written in 1989, Glück explains that each book she writes "has culminated in a conscious diagnostic act, a swearing off" (*Proofs and Theories* 17). By this Glück means that each book is purposely different from the previous ones[2]; she is interested in changing her techniques in order to explore new terrain, not in composing poetry with characteristic

[2] For an example of the specific ways that Glück chose to change her techniques and styles in writing her second, third, and fourth collections, see Glück's note at the beginning of *The First Four Books of Poems* (1995).

themes or styles. Instead of writing "signature" poetry, Glück alters the forms, allusions, viewpoints, focuses, tones, line breaks, and vocabularies throughout her collections. Glück further explains that the changes she makes from book to book are highly intentional; for example, in writing about the differences between her first two poetic collections, Glück explains that

> This difference was intended, at least hoped for. What you learn organizing a book, making of a pile of poems an arc, a shaped utterance, is both exhilarating and depressing: as you discern the book's themes, its fundamental preoccupations, you see as well the poems' habitual gestures, those habits of syntax and vocabulary, the rhythmic signatures which, ideally, give the volume at hand its character but which it would be dangerous to repeat. (*Proofs and Theories* 17)

In this way, we see both the positive and negative dynamics at play in the writing of a collection with distinctive traits: while a book with "fundamental preoccupations" and "habitual gestures" becomes distinctly interesting—and has the potential to be an effective book of poetry—these "preoccupations" and "gestures" can only be effective once. To Glück, reusing previous ideas or techniques defeats the entire point of writing poetry: "the dream of art is not to assert what is already known but to illuminate what has been hidden" (7). By this criterion, repetition in poetry becomes "dangerous" since it necessarily depends on the "known" as opposed to exploring the new.

Setting aside the aesthetic position that Glück grants "change," her strategy of continually molding her poetic techniques and developing her ideas in each new book has allowed her to construct a rich poetic legacy. By constantly departing from even her own work, Glück has avoided what Helen Vendler identifies as a key characteristic of "forgettable writers": contemporary writers that are not remembered "do not experiment…in any coherent or strenuous way, [but instead]…adopt the generic style of

their era and repeat themselves in it" (*The Breaking of Style* 7). Though Glück does not repeat even successful techniques as she writes new collections of poetry, the prominent variations within her poetic canon make her a more memorable poet.

By departing so sharply with each new volume from her previous work, however, Glück has become a difficult poet for critics to classify or interpret. Daniel Morris, in his book length study of Glück's work, comments specifically on the obstacles critics have encountered in tying Glück's work to any one genre or any one reading. Morris maintains that because Glück draws from "a mosaic of multicultural resources" readings of her work "often come to differing conclusions about how in her poetics, she addresses fundamental issues such as feminism, patriarchy, maternity, psychoanalysis, nature, and most of all, language" (1, 2). Because "fundamental issues" are addressed in such disparate manners in Glück's books, critics have often concentrated on the changes Glück makes from collection to collection rather than focusing on the meaning of individual books. Thus, Glück's poems need to be interpreted in the context of the volumes they comprise; Glück's poetry loses much of its weight if it is read as individual or isolated poems. As Stephen Burt writes, Glück's "drive to repudiate, revise, and draw new conclusions from the old operates not only within her poems, but from one book to the next," and, thus, her critics have "concentrated on the ways Glück varies from book to book, rather than on her range from poem to poem"[3] ("The Dark Garage with the Garbage" 77). In this way, change has become characteristic of Glück—because change is one of the few constants in her poetic canon, it has become a way of identifying and

[3] Burt also attributes this focus on volume to volume criticism to the nature of the book reviews written on Glück's collections as they have come out and on Glück's prose.

defining her poetic style.[4] Glück paradoxically avoids the "danger" of repeating herself through habitually changing each collection she writes.

This insistence on change has not, however, been an easy route for Glück to take. Though she has indeed included drastic departures in each new book she has written, deciding just what to change and finding new ways to create "habitual gestures" and "fundamental preoccupations" has become increasingly difficult. In his close reading of *Vita Nova* (1999), Longenbach explains that "if change is what [Glück] most craves, it is also what she most resists, what is most difficult for her, most hard-won" (184). Furthermore, Glück identifies her "compulsion to change" in her writing as "a compulsion, perhaps, not actually chosen" (*PT* 18).[5] Within change, then, Glück finds resistance.

In part, this resistance stems from the very nature of writing poetry. Some twentieth century critics argue that poetry, by definition, utilizes recurrence—that the repetition Glück seemingly avoids is essential to writing poems. In "The Linear Fallacy," Marjorie Perloff explores the differences between prose and poetry, a question which, given contemporary poetry's extensive use of both free verse and the prose poem, becomes all the more relevant. Ultimately, Perloff concludes that it is not the subject, nor the tone, nor even the lineation—the breaking of words into lines—that defines poetry. Instead, Perloff argues that "some form of regular recurrence" differentiates poetry from prose: "when prose foregrounds marked patterns of recurrence (whether phonic, syntactic, or verbal), calling attention to itself as language art…we have poetry" (859,

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[4] On a related note, the second major section in Wallace Steven's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is entitled "It Must Change" (Stevens 336).

[5] For a further analysis of how Glück views the poetic writing process see "The Idea of Courage," "The Dreamer and the Watcher," and "On Impoverishment" in *Proofs and Theories*.

867). Northrop Frye also explains in his seminal *The Well-Tempered Critic* that "[l]iterature includes a great deal, which is written in some form of regular recurrence, whether meter, accent, vowel quality, rhyme, alliteration, parallelism, or any combination of these, and which we may call verse" (24). According to both Perloff and Frye, then, repetition—of words, parts of words, or structures and syntax that contain words—is elemental to poetry.

In *The Body of Poetry,* Annie Finch's analysis of repetition in poetry suggests that not only is repetition essential to writing poems but that this repetition provides poetry with merits beyond the literal words. Finch defines poetry by the way it repeats: in "Poetics: A Taxonomy" she writes that a poem is "a text structured by the repetition of any language element or element" (47). She divides these elements into three broad categories: aural, visual, and conceptual elements[6]; these elements—from one, two, or even all three categories—comprise and create poetry, contributing directly to the meaning it conveys. And while these repeated elements provide poetry with surface level merits, such as forcing modern readers to slow down their "impatient contemporary eye[s] with wasted seconds" or allowing a "childish," Pre-Romantic viewpoint to bleed through, repetition also provides poems with less obvious, though more important merits (49). According to Finch, repetition in poetry often allows readers to see the writing process in the form of the poem itself: repetition in poetry "is unself-conscious, enacting the process of composition and revealing a poem's procedural roots, its self-hypnotic

[6] Examples of aural elements include numbers of beat/accents, sounds within words, and groups of words; examples of visual elements include line-breaks, numbers or words, and visible shape of language; examples of conceptual elements include operation with extratextual system, pun and riddle, and intertexual operations (47-48). Finch also provides classifications of the poetry that uses each of these elements of repetition. See "Poetics: A Taxonomy" for further examples and explanations.

underpinnings" (49).[7] As a device, then, repetition can afford a poem a method for illustrating how it was written, for showing the thought process of the writer during the construction of the poem. Perhaps even more importantly, repetition provides poetry with what Finch terms "the unspoken physical quality of repeated presence"—because readers have seen an element before, they recognize it when it is repeated, and the repeated elements bears a greater weight (50). Repetition becomes "paradoxically, a technique that is free of words," for it is implicit within the telling of the poem—the poem constantly advances, and the repeating elements bear a greater weight with each repetition.

Given Glück's affinity for change in her poems, her chosen vocation betrays a deep irony: the poetry that is meant to reinvent itself with each collection implicitly relies—at least according to these critics—on repetition. And by writing poetry for over forty-five years, Glück has continually risked repeating herself. In fact, Glück has rather flirted with this risk in the construction of her collections: her later book-length sequences, actually *rely* on repetition for their thematic development. Not only do we see visual, aural, and conceptual elements of repetition within individual poems, but we also see these elements repeat throughout the entirety of these collections.

Glück began writing what critics have termed "book length sequences" with *Ararat* in 1990.[8] Unlike many collections of poetry that order their poems by theme or even bring disparate individual poems together into a random collage of poems, Glück's

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[7] Finch refers primarily to verbal poetry in "Repetition, Repetition," the essay referenced here; however, many of the elements also apply to written poetry.

[8] Morris identifies Glück's collections as "book length sequences" beginning with *Ararat* in 1990 (5); many critics, including Diehl, Bidart, and Cates, all use the same, or similar, terminology in describing Glück's narrative structures.

collections are arranged and structured highly intentionally. In fact, Glück's later "book length sequences" form narratives[9]: the poems are ordered in order to tell a story, a story that is often highly complex and utilizes multiple viewpoints. As Daniel Morris explains, Glück's "individual poems are best read in the context of a book-length collection of lyrics, spoken by competing voices in an open dialogic relationship, or in a sequence that offers them a narrative dimension" (1). Some of the meaning and complexity within a Glück poem becomes lost if the poem is read in isolation. For this reason, Frank Bidart explains that Glück's collections "are meant to be read in a single sitting"—her collections must be read as cohesive books. Glück's collections in the 1990s—*Ararat* (1990), *The Wild Iris* (1992), and *Meadowlands* (1999)—are particularly famous for their cohesive, book-length narrative structures; however, every collection since *Ararat* (1990) has relied on structures of repeated voices, repeated themes, and repeated syntactical strategies (Morris 14). This is not to say that Glück's book-length sequences are simple narratives or that they contain the narrative arcs found in traditional prose pieces—the collections are polyphonic[10] sequences of lyric poems that often subvert the traditional unities of time, place, and teller. Isaac Cates explains that in Glück's collections each poem "ambiguously…builds on the preceding ones…once we find our bearing within a book, we receive clues from the poems" (464). However, because each book-length sequence conveys a narrative, the voices that speak Glück's poems often repeat, allowing readers to connect them—and their various elements—with other poems within the collection.

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[9] By utilizing narrative in these "book length sequences," Glück departs from modernist ideals of fragmentation and collage in her poetic collections.

[10] "Polyvocal" could also be used to describe Glück's collections that utilize multiple voices in the telling of narrative; I use "polyphonic" in accordance with chapter 1 of Morris' review of Glück's work.

Despite swearing off imitation, then, Glück has come to rely on structures of repetition in the composition of her later book-length sequences. Further, without these structures of repetition—repetition in theme, voice, syntax, and in the ordering of the poems—Glück's individual collections would lack the "fundamental preoccupations" and "habitual gestures" that make them distinct collections in the first place (*Proofs and Theories* 17). Though structures of repetition appear throughout all of Glück's later books, I will focus on *The Wild Iris* (1996), *Averno* (2001), and Glück's most recent collection, *A Village Life* (2009): in these three collections, repetition functions in several essential ways, becoming in the end not the "anxious duplication" that Glück so fears, but paradoxically the path to authentic change—an essential means of accomplishing the "dream of art" and "illuminat[ing] what has been hidden" (*Proofs and Theories* 123, 7).

My first chapter focuses on Glück's most overt use of repetition, found in her Pulitzer Prize winning collection, *The Wild Iris* (1992). Glück uses repeating cycles as the framework for the entire collection: the poems focus on the seasonal cycles from spring, summer, and fall; the repeated binary of day and night; and on the lifecycles of both flowers and humans. Throughout *The Wild Iris* a "trialogue" of voices also repeat: two main voices—the voice of the poet-protagonist[11] and the voice of the divine—debate the possibility of human "resurrection" after death, and the watching perennial flowers add their opinions. Amidst all of these repeating cycles and elements, Glück adds the framework of daily prayer: all of the poems spoken by the poet-protagonist—poems that often display doubt and question the character of the divine—are entitled either "Matins"

[11] I borrow the term the term "poet-protagonist" from W. V. Davis; in his article Davis explains that *The Wild Iris* is structured to be a "debate" between the poet-protagonist/ antagonist and the divine (48). By adding the voices of the watching flowers to this debate, Gluck forms the narrative structure that has become associated with her "book-length sequences" (Morris 5).

or "Vespers." These titles, which are repeated seventeen times throughout the collection, allude to the traditional practice of morning and evening prayer in the Divine Office; together these poems form a "prayer sequence" throughout *The Wild Iris*.

I will argue that the repetition of these titles offers *The Wild Iris* its essential structure: by repeating the titles of "Matins" and "Vespers" throughout the collection Glück creates a narrative account of the poet protagonist's struggle with belief and unbelief as the seasons change and the days turn to night. Because the prayer-sequence repeatedly invokes the religious orthodoxy of Divine Office, Glück is able to maintain the tension between belief and unbelief in the poems—by contrasting the historical practices of Divine Office with the practices of the poet-protagonist in the modern prayer poems, we are able to specifically see the ways that the poems—as prayers—fail to offer lasting faith. Ultimately, within the collection, the ritual of Divine Office in the prayer-poems comes to be replaced by daily, quotidian rituals—repeated acts of daily life that by contrast take on a religious significance.

Another form of repetition that Glück has used in several of her collection is the re-telling of Greek myth.[12] After the publication of Glück's *Descending Figure* (1983), Elizabeth Dodd coined the term that has most been associated with these re-tellings of myth. Because Glück often inserts autobiographical elements into the voices of the characters her poetry becomes, in a sense, confessional; however, Dodd explains that because Glück relies on archetype in her-retellings, her use of Greek myth makes her a "postconfessional" poet—her speakers both confess and reclaim the mythic narratives

[12] The introduction to chapter 3 contains a list of Glück's various collections that find their plot in mythic narratives.

they tell.[13] One collection that utilizes a "postconfessional" voice is Glück's *Averno* (2001). In this collection, Glück re-tells the myth of Persephone's abduction to the underworld by Hades; the poems are structured around the traditional Greek myth of Persephone, but also include personal, and even psychoanalytical elements. And while re-telling a Greek myth in this fashion is not new for Glück, the poems of *Averno* explicitly comment on the process of repeating an ancient myth in modern poetry—in re-telling the myth of Persephone, the poems of *Averno* explore the potential value, as well as the potential detriments, of repeating such a well-known myth.

My second chapter explores how a close reading of the two "Persephone the Wanderer" poems—poems that Glück classifies as "versions" of the myth of Persephone—inform our understanding of Glück's methodology as she repeats ancient myths in her poetic collections. The first half of the chapter focuses on the "ethics" of repeating a myth with an ending that readers already know, a re-visitation that seems at odds with Glück's concern with illuminating the unknown ("Education of the Poet" 7). Throughout the first "Persephone the Wanderer" poem the speaker comments on the process of re-telling a myth, utilizing techniques that proliferate in many of Glück's mythic poems: the speaker continually asks questions and challenges authority, the poem invokes the second person, and its shifting point of view disorients and involves the reader. My chapter concludes by examining the value—both individual and collective—that Glück finds in fusing ancient myth with modern, autobiographical poetry. A close reading of the second "Persephone the Wanderer" poem demonstrates the distinct complexity and meaning that Glück culls by combining personal narrative with that of

[13] I explore the term "postconfessional" at more length in chapter 2. For a further explanation of the term, also see Dodd; Glück critics often refer to Dodd in their classifications of Glück's style and genre.

Greek myth. Because Glück repeats myth throughout so many of her collections and because it is clearly a lasting concern throughout her poetic canon, her understanding of the re-telling of ancient narrative becomes important both to understanding *Averno* and to understanding the process of writing poems for Glück, their balance between making and remaking, shared and new.

Chapter three examines Glück's repetition in theme and structure in her most recent collection of poetry, *A Village Life* (2009). While Glück's collections are known for lamenting temporal life—and they continually seek the eternal—this recent collection allows her speakers to accept the daily for itself; they partake in temporary life freely for the first time within Glück's poetic canon. I argue that we see Glück's philosophic change in thinking about the daily, or the temporary, most strongly in her changed use of repetition throughout this recent collection. Because this chapter focuses on a philosophic change for Glück—a shift from continually seeking the eternal to accepting the temporal in the present moment—I compare *A Village Life* with what has been identified as the "climax" of Glück's pursuit of the eternal, *The Wild Iris* (1992)[14]. By comparing these two collections, we see that Glück's concerns with repetition and reinvention have always been in some way about the struggles between daily or time-bound existence and the eternal—these two collections develop distinctly different means of dealing with the disparity between daily and eternal time.

Thematically, Glück alters her speakers' approaches to daily, repeated actions between these two collections: instead of imbuing the daily with eternal significance as she does for the poet-protagonist in *The Wild Iris*, speakers of poems such as "A Village

[14] See W. V. Davis' "Talked to by silence': Apocalyptic Yearnings in Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris*" for a further explanation of *The Wild Iris* as the climax of Glück's long-lasting orientation towards the eternal.

Life," "Fatigue," and "Walking at Night," come to accept daily life—with its inevitable repetition—for itself. Glück also makes several structural changes that facilitate acceptance of the daily: firstly, by repeating titles Glück encourages readers to consider less dramatic understandings of death and instead to focus on the present. This is seen both in sequences spoken in the voices of non-humans—these voices speak from beyond life—and also in her repetition of titles from *The Wild Iris*. By repeating titles from a previous collection but altering their content, Glück signifies both continuing concerns and her shifts in thinking. Glück also alters one of her "signature" traits in this new collection: instead of utilizing short pithy lines throughout her poems, she writes in long, dreamlike lines in *A Village Life*. This new style repeats throughout the collection, suggesting that this change in form is part of the change in philosophy: as the poems repeatedly use this new structure—and show a sharp deviation in Glück's signature lineation—they continually affirm her changed acceptance of the temporary. By altering her use of repetition both thematically and structurally in *A Village Life*, Glück allows repetition itself to bring about change.

The structures of repetition within these later collections help distinguish Glück from other twentieth century poets; few recent poets possess collections as distinct and disparate as those included in Glück's collection edition, *Poems: 1962-2012*. In forty years of writing poetry, Glück does inevitably repeat herself throughout her poetry; however it is purposeful and developed repetition: repetition that allows for change. If change is indeed "the highest value" in Glück's poetry—and it is—then such change is supported and accomplished specifically through structures of repetition in Glück's poetic collections. Through looking at the differing uses of repetition in these three

collections, I hope to draw attention to the distinct ways that Glück's poetry has continually relied on recurrence—a reliance that is inherent to the craft of writing poetry for Glück. By studying the repetitive elements of Glück's poetry alongside the elements that she purposely alters and reinvents, we are allowed deeper insight into both her writing process and her understanding of poetry. While poetry necessarily craves change and explores new avenues of expression for Glück, it also inherently relies on repetition as an essential part of the process of creating meaning.

CHAPTER TWO

Rituals in Nature, Rituals in Prayer: Divine Office in *The Wild Iris*

In *The Poetics of the Everyday* (2010), Siobhan Philips explains the prominent presence of daily, quotidian actions in twentieth century poetry—in short, Philips explains that such actions become significant when they are repeated. Because a daily action is performed each morning, Phillips explains, it becomes a ritual: "to accept the debilitations of dailiness is also to claim its regular, even ceremonial renewal" (2). And in transforming mundane, daily tasks to rituals—established procedures that gain significance through repetition—many twentieth century poets are able to imbue daily, quotidian events with an almost religious significance. In twentieth century poetry, this transformation of the daily often becomes a way of addressing the failures of religious rituals: these poets "replace the consoling but impossible sanctity of religious faith with the sober but available sanction of everyday regimen (2). While Phillip's study includes the work of Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, and James Merrill, she suggests that this transformation of daily, quotidian events should be considered characteristic of twentieth century poetry and applies to the work of other twentieth century poets,[1] poets such as Louise Glück.

The Wild Iris, Glück's 1992 Pulitzer Prize winner, relies on the concept of ritual on several levels, placing a distinct importance on repetition. Most obviously, the poems are grounded within the natural rituals of seasonal change and the turning of days. The volume begins with the advent of spring and records the season's slow transformation to

[1] Other poets that Philips considers briefly include Marianne Moore, John Ashberry, Robert Hass, Kay Ryan, and Frank Bidart (199-221).

summer and then to autumn. However, the poems continually speak of the changing seasons in terms of the daily; they repeatedly point to the fresh beginnings of the mornings and the inevitable endings of the nights, as if each day enacts its own distinct ritual. Glück also creates a "ritual of conversation" throughout the volume: three disparate voices—the voice of the divine, the voice of the poet-protagonist, and the voices of the watching flowers—all speak their poems in a specific order as they vigorously discuss the human condition. The pattern of their voices forms a "ritual of conversation" that is carried out as each poem is spoken. The flowers' annual life cycles also become a ritual: as the flowers "die" with the cold of the winter and "come back to life" in the spring, their voices seemingly arise from the dead. The voices of these resurrected flowers remind the poet-protagonist of the cycle of her own existence, as she continually questions "the impossibility of the possibility of any resurrection beyond the human, earthly realm" (Davis 48).

All of these repeated rituals—within the seasons, within the days, within the "trialogue" of voices, and within the fleeting life cycles of the flowers and humans—occur alongside the daily, quotidian actions of the poet-protagonist. She works the garden on a daily basis, planting rows of vegetation, weeding the soil, and walking in the garden each day. However, in the daily life of the poet-protagonist, the act of speaking poems also becomes a distinct, repeated ritual. Glück titles the poems in the voice of the poet-protagonist as either "Matins" or "Vespers," which invokes the traditional, liturgical practice of Divine Office, or the Liturgy of the Hours. By titling seven poems "Matins," or morning prayer, in the first half of the volume and ten poems "Vespers," or evening prayer, in the latter half, Glück allows us to read these poems as prayer-poems; they often

appeal to the divine and are spoken repeatedly, like a traditional religious ritual. As these titles head over a third of the poems in the volume, the ritual of Divine Office, amidst all of Glück's other rituals, seems not incidental but essential to the overall meaning of the volume.

Glück's invocation of Divine Office offers *The Wild Iris* structure: by repeating the titles of "Matins" and "Vespers" throughout the collection Glück creates a narrative account of the poet-protagonist's struggle with belief and unbelief as the seasons change and the days turn to nights. Because the prayer-sequence repeatedly invokes the religious orthodoxy of Divine Office, Glück is able to maintain the tension between belief and unbelief in the poems—by contrasting the historical practices of Divine Office with the practices of the poet-protagonist in the prayer-poems, we are able to specifically see the ways that the poems—as prayers—fail to offer lasting faith. Ultimately, within the collection, the ritual of Divine Office in the prayer-poems comes to be replaced by daily, quotidian rituals—repeated acts of daily life that by contrast take on a religious significance.

"Matins," "Vespers," and the Liturgical Prayer Poem

Daniel Morris, in his introduction to themes in Glück's work, notes that Catholicism is only one of several ideologies in the "eclectic bag of multicultural resources" that appears in *The Wild Iris;* amidst the ideologies of Judaism, Romanticism, Greek myth, Protestant Christianity, and Catholicism, a postmodern mosaic of ideologies is collected (199). Morris further explains that Glück operates like a "postmodern pastiche artist" drawing from "diametrically opposing or clashing cultural, aesthetic, and religious traditions" (199). However, Glück's allusion to Divine Office, a highly

traditional and orthodox practice of Christianity, provides the poetry with the "dangerous risks" that Helen Vendler suggests make it stand out in twentieth century poetry ("Flower Power" 36). This is not to say that *The Wild Iris* should be read through a theological lens,[2] as if the poems themselves explicate or extend theological claims. However, Glück's use of religious structuring should not be flippantly dismissed either, and because Divine Office is referenced so frequently, it can hardly be ignored—in fact, it is precisely because Glück uses orthodox religious practices in her poetic structures that she is able to question the nature of orthodox belief. An understanding of the history and weight of Divine Office, then, seems fundamentally important to understanding Glück's use of this traditional practice within her poetry.

Divine Office, or the Liturgy of the Hours, remains one of the oldest, most established practices in the Christian Church. In his study of the origins of Divine Office, Robert Taft finds its roots within the Jewish practice of prayer at fixed times throughout the day, suggesting that, from the dawn of Christianity, Divine Office has been practiced (11). And because Divine Office has essentially matured with Christianity and endured many centuries of change, Divine Office is considered a highly traditional, orthodox practice in the Christian faith. Glück's titles of "Matins" and "Vespers" throughout her volume, then, are not mildly religious, but place her poems within the context of rituals consistently practiced over the past two thousand years of orthodox Christianity.

Divine Office's continued presence in modern Christianity is also significant to reading *The Wild Iris*. For instead of drawing from ancient Greek myths as Glück does in

[2] Allen Hoey writes further about the lack of sincerity in Glück's poems, suggesting that her poems need not be read as theological but as her attempts "to know the world [and] to get closer to the mystery" (47). Hoey reads Glück's use of religion as a mechanism for exploring aesthetic questions.

so many of her other collections,[3] Glück here speaks to a tradition that is alive and thriving. As recently as 1970, the Council of Vatican II declared that "the pattern of the Office is designed to fit the patterns of people's daily lives" and designated morning and evening prayer as "the most important 'hours' of the day for believers" (*Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium* 89). Arthur Boers further explains that Divine Office "continues to inform, inspire, and hearten many Christians…it's not an exaggeration to say that through most of Christian history, this form of prayer has been vitally important—and indeed still is for many Christians today" (xix; 5). In this way, Glück's titles of "Matins" and "Vespers" evoke a tradition that is both ancient and modern, a tradition that has continually affirmed long-held, orthodox belief through the daily ritual of praying.

To understand Glück's use of "Matins" and "Vespers" as titles, we must look back to the height of the historical practice of Divine Office. In fifth-century Benedictine monasteries, Divine Office formed the backbone of daily life. Because Benedict is widely lauded as the father of Western monasticism and his *Rule* was followed for six hundred years following his life, Benedictine monasticism is an appropriate forum for studying the historical practice of Divine Office (Knowles 37). Benedictine monks prayed the Hours at eight fixed times throughout the day: "Lauds" came at two in the morning, which was followed by "Matins" at daybreak; "Prime," "Terce," "Sext" and "None" were placed at three hour intervals throughout the day; "Vespers" came at sunset;

[3] Examples of Glück's use of Greek myth include *Descending Figure* (1980), which draws from various Greek and Roman sagas; *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985) which focuses on the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus; *Meadowlands* (1997) which finds its basis in *The Odyssey*; and *Averno* (2006) which tells the story of Persephone's return from the underworld. Aside from *The Wild Iris* (1992), only *Ararat* (1990) is based on a religious saga, using the biblical account of Noah's Ark as its basis.

and, finally, "Compline" was prayed at night (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2280).[4] The monks spoke these liturgical prayers together as a communal way of continually living in light of the divine. And while Glück invokes these traditional practices in her titles throughout the entirety of the volume, a closer look at the prayer-sequence of poems reveals them to be a forum for conflicted questioning, rather than enactments of affirming rituals.

In Glück's prayer-sequence, perhaps the most notable way that the poet-protagonist deviates from the traditional practice of Divine Office is her despairing attitude while speaking these prayers. Traditionally, "Matins" and "Vespers" cultivated obedience and humility in those who prayed (Sittser 110). In praying the Hours, monks learned to be subservient to the divine as well as to the authority of Scripture, and in *The Rule* Benedict went so far as to specifically outline twelve steps to help monks grow in humility.[5] The poet-protagonist, even from the beginning of the "Matins" sequence, tends to stray from these virtues in her prayers; the idea of obedience fades as the poet-protagonist becomes increasingly frustrated with the possible character of the divine, and humility seems lost amidst her accusations. Throughout the prayer-sequence the poet-protagonist's attitude towards the divine changes; however, neither obedience nor humility appear within her various attitudes.

The first time the poet-protagonist addresses the divine, in the second "Matins" poem, she refers to it as her "unreachable father" (1). As her "father," the divine is given

[4] Many early records indicate that in the history of Divine Office, the names of the morning prayers have changed. While "Lauds" is sometimes cited at daybreak and "Matins" is sometimes not listed in early manuscripts, "Matins" is widely regarded as synonymous with morning prayer. For further information, see Stewart.

[5] For a listing of these twelve steps, see chapter seven of *The Rule*. For a contemporary commentary on this chapter, see Chittister 61-75.

a position of authority as well as a familial closeness to the poet-protagonist, but it is also "unreachable," which places it at a great distance from her. In the third "Matins" poem, the poet-protagonist mimics a language of Catholic confession with her "Forgive me"; however, the line quickly changes direction with the words that follow: "Forgive me if I say I love you" (1). And while the poet-protagonist later characterizes the divine as "powerful" in the poem, she indicates this power is distinctly negative and oppressive. She, as one of the "weak," must lie because she is "driven by panic" and the divine "disclose(s) virtually nothing" to assure her (1-5). The poet-protagonist here speaks, as Carol Muske has noted in her review of *The Wild Iris*, out of "wrenching" emotion, "as if a wound…could speak" (82). Even in these early prayer-poems, the poet-protagonist displays the temperament of a slighted victim, instead of responding with quiet humility and obedience.

When the poet-protagonist hears no response from the divine, she openly expresses her feelings; her opinions of the divine undergo constant change instead of following the set liturgy implied by the titles of "Matins" and "Vespers"—daily prayer in Divine Office followed a strict pattern of speech regardless of circumstance. In the sixth "Matins" poem, for example, she compares the divine to "a plantsman/ testing a new species" and then begs the divine, as an "agent of [her] solitude," to "practice/ on something else," as if he is willfully inflicting pain on her personally (3-4). The divine appears to be no better than a mad-scientist gone wrong, a biologist who knows the demise of his creations but pursues his experiment despite the pain it will inevitable inflict. Accordingly, the poet-protagonist's tone is one of fearful begging that borders on accusation. In the seventh "Matins" poem, however, the tone appears to have softened,

and the poet-protagonist here addresses the divine as her "Dear friend,/ dear trembling partner" (16-17). She paints the divine with human qualities even though in the fourth "Matins" poem she has already concluded that "ask[ing] [it] to be human" is inappropriate (17-18). In this seventh prayer-poem, she claims to be ashamed of her previous misconceptions of his "distan[ce]" and further suggests a shared sympathy and understanding exists between them (12). However, as this affectionate attitude is not maintained throughout the rest of the volume, her words seem inconsistent and her sympathies fickle. The prayer-poems do not steadily show "the utmost humility and sincerest devotion" characteristic of the prayers of Divine Office but instead seem to vacillate with the emotions of the poet-protagonist as she questions both the existence and character of the divine (Chittister 110). The "unabashedly human" tone of the poems that Linda Gregerson notes throughout this prayer sequences contrasts with the concept of established, liturgical prayers, which remain unaltered despite even drastic changes in the contexts in which they are spoken (3).

As the collection concludes and the prayer-poems seemingly fail, the poet-protagonist becomes increasingly denunciatory towards the divine: in essence, she accuses the divine not only of desertion but manipulation. In the sixth "Vespers" poem, for example, the poet-protagonist chronicles several of her own immoral actions, all of which she has done in the name of belief: "we inhabited/ a lie to appease you…we denied/ memory to console you" (2-3; 7-8). And in the seventh "Vespers" poem, the poet-protagonist explains that the actions on the part of the divine are not accidental but intentional. In teaching her to "love the world," the divine is shown to purposefully make it "impossible" for her to "turn away completely," distorting the poet-protagonist's

natural, fervent love for the world around her (2,3,4). The next two "Vespers" poems speak with a tone of clipped finality, as if the poet-protagonist has absolutely decided the divine does not exist: "What a nothing you were," she says in the eighth "Vespers" poem. This is followed by her assertion that "it is clear I have no access to you; I do not exist for you," in the ninth "Vespers" poem. In these two poems we see no traces of humility or obedience left in addressing the divine; though the poems are still titled as prayers, these titles stand as ironic reminders of the reverential relationship that is supposed to exist.

While the prayer-poems do not rely on a set liturgy in their telling, they do display continuity with the liturgy of Divine Office in one major way: the poems' second person questions throughout the poems resemble the language of Divine Office. Daniel Morris evaluates the prayer-sequence from a Bloomian standpoint, invoking what Bloom refers to as *The Book of J*[6] in order to demonstrate how the poet-protagonist essentially "put[s] Yahweh on trial" in language similar to the Psalms of Lament. For example, the poet-protagonist's sense of loneliness, coupled with her use of second person, reads remarkably like Psalm 42:9 in which the psalmist asks "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning?" (*New International Version*). Given the facts that the Psalms make up a large portion of the liturgy used in Divine Office and that Benedictine monks recited the entire Psalter as a community once a week during daily prayer,[7] these similarities become striking. The final question in the "Vespers" sequence is the most

[6] Morris further explains that *The Book of J* that Bloom refers to is "portions of the Old Testament authored by the 'J' writer who refers to God as Yahweh" (192). For a further discussion of Bloomian interpretation of *The Wild Iris*, see Hoey. The work by Bloom that I am referring to is *Ruin the Sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present* (1989).

[7] Major components of the prayers used in Divine Office include the invitation to prayer, hymn, psalmody, scripture reading, silence, response, Gospel canticles, the intercessions, the Lord's Prayer, concluding prayer, and the blessing (Brooks 25-29). Additionally, Benedictine monasteries recited the Psalter once a week, and this was later reduced to once every four weeks, which remains the contemporary practice in Benedictine monasteries.

pointed. In watching the produce begin to grow in autumn with full knowledge of its inevitable death in winter, the poet-protagonist asks the divine

> are you saying I can
> flourish, having
> no hope
> of enduring? (19-22)

Though phrased as a question, these lines put incriminating words in the mouth of the divine. The language follows the form of the Psalmist, reminds readers of the traditional prayers of Divine Office even as the speaker expresses doubt in the divine's character—by repeating the language of traditional prayer, Glück is able to maintain the tension between belief and unbelief even in the last words of the poet-protagonist.

Throughout the prayer-sequence, the poet-protagonist also deplores what has been traditionally celebrated throughout the practice of Divine Office: silence. In early Benedictine monasteries, silence existed as a part of daily life and of prayer; silence was not optional but mandated. Ambrose Wathen, OSB, a scholar of *The Rule*, notes three reasons for silence in these communities: "to avoid sin, for the sake of silence [itself]…and to listen" (26). And in his *Introduction to Divine Office,* John Brook further suggests that liturgical prayer ought to be viewed as a conversation with the divine in which silence allows "the word of God to germinate" in believers (22). However, the poet-protagonist in *The Wild Iris* repeatedly views silence in an entirely negative light throughout the poems, never perceiving that her words are part of a larger conversation; she cannot hear the words of the divine, and, thus, she continually struggles to believe.

Instead of listening to a silent presence, as is the belief associated with prayer in Benedictine monasteries, the poet-protagonist hears only absence. In the third "Matins" poem she deplores the overwhelming silence, explaining that it is fruitless despite the role

it is supposed to play: "You must see/ it is useless to us/ this silence that promotes belief" (9-11). And, in terms of a volume that explores the existence and nature of the divine, this silence becomes a central problem. As Jennifer Carol Cook explains, silence, or at least perceived silence, exists as "the primary obstacle" in *The Wild Iris*; the poet-protagonist cannot know the divine "with any intimacy" if she interprets His silence as "absolute indifference" (140). Because the poet-protagonist never perceives the divine as answering any of her prayers, silence seems to overtake the volume as it points out the root of her struggle with belief. Further, Isaac Cates explains that, aside from the poems' thematization of silence, the poems repeatedly use structures of silence: silence appears in the white of the stanza breaks and in the drastic line breaks that come in the middle of phrases. And within the poetic lines themselves, silence also "arises from the poems' rhythm, in punctuation and enjambment within and between sentences" (Cates 468). Through both the words of the poems and the structures of the poems on the page, then, Glück repeats silence throughout the volume, all the while painting it in a negative light.

Glück's placement of the poems also contributes to the pervading silence throughout the volume; instead of a naturally flowing conversation between the speakers, the conversation appears disjointed and fragmented. Glück groups the poems in clumps by speaker: the flowers speak two to three poems, then the poet-protagonist follows with a couple, and the divine voice also offers up three poems in a row.[8] This grouping suggests gaps in their trialogue. For example, in placing the second "Matins" poems directly after the first "Matins" poem, Glück implies silence for a full twenty-four hours;

[8] The one exception to this structuring appears in the case of "Matins (7)," which appears between "Clover" (a poem grouped with the voices of the flowers) and "Heaven and Earth" (a poem spoken by the poet-protagonist). Though "Heaven and Earth" is not designated as a part of the prayer-sequence of poems in its title, the speaker does not change. Thus, Glück's placement of the poems consistently shows a lack of response among the speakers and a long silence between poems.

the poet-protagonist offers up a morning prayer, and no words are spoken until she speaks another "Matins" the following morning. Instead of communicating with the divine, the speaker is reduced to repeating her own thoughts and questions aloud, despite the lingering questions left unanswered in her initial prayer. And instead of a fruitful conversation, the speakers all seem to be having fragmented monologues; essentially they speak to themselves. As Cook explains, these speakers "usually do not hear and never truly understand or respond directly to one another" (142).

By repeatedly invoking Divine Office through the titles of the poet-protagonist's prayer sequence, Glück continually reminds readers of the ways that the poet-protagonist deviates from these traditional daily practices. The morning "Matins" and evening "Vespers" are not flickers of doubt but indicators of a long process of struggle—the tension between belief and unbelief is extended throughout the volume. While the use of second person in these prayer-poems shows continuity with the traditional liturgy of the Prayer of the Hours, the attitude of the poet-protagonist—in her words and in her view of silence—repeatedly deviates from such traditional practices. Though the poet-protagonist seems to continually strive to believe in the existence and character of the divine—she attempts to trust the divine—through speaking the prayers, the prayer-poems ultimately become forums of the tension between belief and unbelief throughout the entirety of the collection.

Labor and the Rhythm of Prayer

One practice of Divine Office historically, a practice that is also referenced throughout the prayer-poems, is that of daily, repeated acts of labor. In Benedictine monasteries, manual labor was placed at regular intervals throughout the day, which

created a regular rhythm between labor and the hourly prayers of Divine Office. Such work not only allowed monks to avoid idleness, a sin declared in *The Rule* to be "the enemy of the soul," but was also seen as a source of refreshment from contemplative thinking (Chittister 132). Simple actions, such as garden work, gathering the harvest, and cutting wood, enabled monks to work with their hands, performing daily tasks with the same steadfast devotion as was given to daily prayer (Schroll 132). Labor, in this fashion, is a fundamental part of Divine Office, for, as Gerald Sittster explains, this rhythm between labor and prayer formed what Benedictine monks believed was "the basic purpose for which humans were created" (110). Accordingly, labor is also a major theme in *The Wild Iris*: the plotline is set within a garden where daily, manual labor is necessary in order for any of the plants to reach fruition. However, throughout the prayer-poems, the poet-protagonist continually struggles to complete her tasks. Because the prayer-poems are repeated daily, they disrupt the poet-protagonist's ability to work: labor and prayer do not form a rhythm but instead frustrate each other.

Labor is first mentioned in the second "Matins" poem, and even at this early place in the prayer-sequence, we see a disconnection between labor and ritualistic prayer; there is no rhythm between them. Drawing from the biblical narrative of the Garden of Eden, the poet-protagonist describes working in the garden as working in a "replica" of Heaven (3). However, unlike Heaven, the garden is "designed to teach a lesson," and the poet-protagonist laments the fact that, in the absence of the divine, "we didn't know what was the lesson" (4, 9). Because of this absence, the poet-protagonist turns to labor, as if it is her only alternative:

> …Left alone,
> we exhausted each other. Years,

of darkness followed; we took turns
working the garden… (8-11)

Because the poet-protagonist feels no connection with the divine, she is "left alone," and her labor becomes exhausting; her prayers have not provided her with endurance or strength but instead have been draining. Early on in the prayer sequence, then, the failure of the ritual of Divine Office to bring the poet-protagonist peace results in a failure in her labor.

The rhythm between prayer and labor, however, is not absent from the volume in its entirety. In the fourth "Vespers" poem, we see an example of this rhythm in John, one of the only other named characters throughout the volume. As the poet-protagonist watches him working in the garden, she notes that his work follows a basic rhythmic pattern: fifteen minutes of intense effort,/ fifteen minutes of intense contemplation" (4-5). Read in the context of a sequence of "Vespers" poems, John's actions seem to model that of monastic life: a specified period of labor is followed by a specified period of contemplative prayers, and the two actions are seen to work in conjunction with each together in a fruitful, ritualistic rhythm. However, the poet-protagonist's statement, instead of being celebratory or even explanatory, is more of an accusation. The poet-protagonist disappointedly watches this rhythm without being able to participate in it herself.

As the poems ends and "twilight makes/ lamps of the first lilies," the poet-protagonist comes to define herself apart from John and his practices; though she speaks in the context of a prayer-poem, it is unable to provide her with the peace necessary for fruitful labor. Though "peace" remains constantly with John in both his garden work and contemplative ecstasy, the poet-protagonist describes her own experience of peace as

fleeting or ephemeral: it "rushes through me,/ not as sustenance the flower holds,/ but like the bright light through the bare tree" (10-12). And instead of growing out of a lasting peace that comes daily, as light brings life to flowers through photosynthesis with the sun, the poet-protagonist is reduced to watching John's peace, a peace that she does not feel in her own prayers or in her gardening. Though the poem itself provides a context of prayer through its "Vespers" title, the poem itself fails to bring the poet-protagonist peace, and, thus, she cannot work.

The fifth "Matins" poem exposes the effects of the failure of the rhythm between work and prayer; because the prayer-poems do not bring the poet-protagonist peace, she becomes preoccupied with them, and her worries seem to overtake all of her attention. Instead of praying her "Matins" in the morning and then moving on to the daily task of weeding, the poet's contemplative, philosophic musings stand at the center of the poem. On the outside, the poet notes that she appears to be working: "I walk the front lawn, pretending/ to be weeding" (2-3). However, the words that follow suggest that, not only is she not weeding, but also that she is allowing her spiritual and emotional insecurities to bleed onto this daily task:

> …You ought to know
> I'm never weeding, on my knees, pulling
> clumps of clover from the flower bed: in fact
> I'm looking for courage, for some evidence
> my life will change… (3-7)

And, as she begins to check "each clump for the symbolic/ leaf" we see folklore and superstition entering a site that it prescribed to be one of trustful assurance in the divine by its "Matins" title. In looking at the clover, the speaker looks for a cheapened "good

luck" to cling to, and the act of weeding the garden becomes, instead of a part of a ritual of belief, a display of the poet-protagonist's spiritual unrest.

This spiritual unrest stands in sharp contrast with the monastic ideal of labor. While labor in monastic settings primarily provided for the physical needs of the community, it was also seen as a place of rest and renewal: "the life described was an austere life, but it was also a healthy life and one full of physical activity; it was not a life that would impose severe psychological strains or lead to introversion or neurosis" (Knowles 217). In this way, the poet-protagonist's stance in her labor seems to be the antithesis of labor in the context of Divine Office: instead of providing rest and freedom from the complexities of contemplation, it becomes a place of further anxiety.

The height of the poet-protagonist's unrest is seen in the conclusion of the fifth "Matins" poem because throughout its entirety she remains unable to work. While the poet-protagonist is certainly in a position to accomplish simple, though fruitful tasks with her hands—in this case to weed—she becomes so obsessed and worried with her unanswered questions that she is unable to accomplish anything: "You want to see my hands?/ As empty now as at the first note" (15-16). Morris notes that the gardener is only "going through the motions" in her tasks; just as ritual of Divine Office has lost its deeper meaning of peace, so have the poet-protagonist's attempts at working the garden. Though the poet-protagonist continues to pray, she is merely saying the words at the proper time; morning arrives and "Matins" are said, but the prayer-poems themselves fail to bring the poet-protagonist any form of peace. And instead of viewing this as a problem that will change, the poet-protagonist comes to view this as an ongoing struggle that will indeed continue. She bemoans that fact that "looking for courage" will take

"forever," even though the summer is ending as is seen in the "brilliant yellow" of the dying trees (6, 7, 13). The "sick trees" are dying, but the poet-protagonist notes that they are "*always*…going first," which indicates that even as they continue to die, the poet-protagonist will continue to look for peace that she is unable to achieve; this process will be ongoing (11-12, my emphasis). In the context of Divine Office, her prayer-poems seem less like meaningful rituals and more like unwanted habits, words that must pour from the poet-protagonist's unrest. Her inability to weed stands as the emblem of spiritual unrest taking over her physical actions.

In "April" the divine, somewhat ruthlessly, critiques the inability of humans to work fruitfully. As labor plays such an integral role in the rhythm of Divine Office, we can also read this as a critique of the humans' inabilities to pray. Instead of acknowledging labor as an action that requires effort and hard work, the divine terms the couple's acts of labor "the tiresome outward signs" that result from "despair" (4, 1). The divine suggests that their despair, instead of being justified, is a symptom of their own selfishness. Instead of understanding that "grief is distributed/ between you, among all your kind" and coping with disappointment together, each character carries his or her own grief alone (15-16). The divine quotes the humans, which is indicated by Glück's use of italics, in saying "*No one's despair is like my despair,*" in effect dismissing their despair as selfish and insular (1, emphasis original). Their despair—which is unjustified in the eyes of the divine—is primarily displayed in their acts, or non-acts, of labor: "the man "pointedly weed[s] an entire forest" in his frustration while the woman only "limp[s], refusing to change clothes/ or wash her hair" (5, 6-7). With this critique from

the divine voice, we see the failure of the humans, not only to work, but also to see beyond their own despair and to pray.

Because the rhythm between prayer and labor was a defining feature in Benedictine monasteries, the poet-protagonist's inability to work as a result of her inability to prayer is significant. The very rhythm that historically allowed monasteries to become "one of the most stable features of the European landscape" through establishing "stability during a period of cultural crisis" is unable to sustain the poet-protagonist throughout the prayer-sequence of poems (106). With the repeated disruption of labor in the poems, we see the failure of the prayer-poems on a daily basis: not only do they fail to provide lasting faith and peace each day they are spoken, but their failures play out in practical, quotidian ways that repeat each day as well.

Community

One other major deviation from the historical practice of Divine Office in Glück's prayer-poems, exists within the voice which speaks them. While Divine Office, from its origins, has included the voices of entire community that speak together as a single, practicing body of believers, the poet-protagonist appears to repeatedly speak her prayer-poems entirely by herself. Because the communal aspects of speaking the Hours are a significant part of practicing them, it becomes important that throughout the entire collection, the poet-protagonist prays alone.

Within the context of practicing Divine Office, whether in sixth-century Benedictine monasteries or in a congregation of modern Catholic believers, community is essential in reciting the liturgical prayers. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines Divine Office as "the prayer of the whole people of God," going on to suggest that people

are to participate according to their "place in the Church and in the circumstances in their lives" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* II.1.2). In reciting liturgical prayers together as a community, believers are placed in relation with each other as they collectively look to the divine. This is not to say that individuals cannot offer up morning or evening prayers alone at times. However, even in praying alone, their prayers are still seen as part of a distinctly communal action because, in the eyes of orthodox belief, faith can transcend physical limits. As Boers explains, "the communion of the saints operates not only beyond the limits of geography and space, but also beyond the boundaries of time. It connects Christians everywhere who have ever lived" (69). Praying the Hours, then, involves saints throughout Christian history, a community that is believed to be startlingly present for fellow believers.

Glück's continual use of Divine Office throughout her prayer sequences would seem to invoke an entire community of believers, a community that could potentially transcend both time and earthly death. Because the poet-protagonist worries throughout the entirety of the collection—she continually obsesses over the inevitable ending she sees to her own life, a life which "begins and ends/…*begins and ends*" as she explains—we expect solace to arrive from the community of saints invoked in the titles of her prayer-poems ("Retreating Wind" 20, 21 emphasis original). If death does indeed "[lie] at the center of *The Wild Iris*" as Carol Muske has suggested, then the poet-protagonist certainly seems in need of such a community. However, the poet-protagonist does not include other humans as she worries aloud in her prayer; instead, she appears acutely and pointedly alone. By placing the solitary words of the poet-protagonist within the context of communal prayers, Glück emphasizes their failures as affirming rituals. There is no

communal aspect to the poet-protagonist's prayer-poems because, for her, there is no community to speak of.

In many cases, the "Matins" or "Vespers" prayer-poems are highly individualistic. The poet-protagonist often uses the first person singular, and her pointed questions to the divine are presented as an argument between two individuals: "I see it is with you as with the birches/ I am not to speak to you/ in the personal way" or "You want to know how I spend my time?/ I walk the front lawn, pretending/ to be weeding" (fourth "Matins" 1-3; fifth "Matins" 1-3). In these prayer-poems, the poet-protagonist refers to personal experiences that seem to apply to her situation specifically and not to an entire community of people. The prayer-poems themselves appear as creative pieces; they do not follow a set liturgy like the rituals of Divine Office but instead pour out of the emotions of a single moment. In contrast, Boers describes the importance of liturgical prayer not as "self-directed," "disconnected," or "subjective" but as following an established, set pattern (4). Because the liturgy of Divine Office follows previously determined words, it avoids relying on the self's "initiative and invention" and can be seen as a discipline, a return to a predetermined way of thinking (4). The prayer-poems are spoken in the heat of the emotions and chiefly explore the poet-protagonist's own concerns. Her obsession with herself and her own uniqueness in the prayer-poems pervades the prayers, which is evidenced by how often she speaks of herself.

The poet-protagonist's self-obsession, however, is a theme repeatedly critiqued by both the divine and the watching flowers. "Scilla," for example, opens with a devastating criticism of the way the poet-protagonist sets herself apart from the others: "Not I, you idiot, not self, but we, we" (1). The poem goes on to explain that "You are all the same

to us,/ solitary, standing above us, planning/ your silly lives" (9-11). The divine voices also mocks the poet-protagonist, saying at the beginning of "April," "*No one's despair is like my despair*" (1). In italicizing this first line, Glück shows that the divine is quoting the poet-protagonist; he not only mocks her pain but the fact that she thinks her pain is unique. Her prayer-poems, then, appear self-absorbed to the point that they no longer seem true. And this is further supported by the fact that no other humans are allowed to speak in the volume.[9]

According to critics such as Linda Gregerson or Spiegelmen, the community of the conversation between the poet-protagonist, the divine, and the flowers, is also virtually non-existent. Many critics suggest that there are not three authentic speakers in *The Wild Iris* but a division of the "lyric self" (Morris 191). Gregerson explains this lyric self as a human: the poet-protagonist, the divine, and the flowers all "speak with the voice of the human [because] the human writer has no other voice to give them" (117). Citing as evidence the consistent punctuation and diction throughout poems in the voices of supposedly different speakers,[10] these critics conclude that *The Wild Iris* should be read as an essentially solipsistic volume. And while these readings provide convincing evidence, the final poems in the volume seem to offer a different conclusion.

Conclusion

The prayer-sequence of poems ends six poems before the end of the volume. The poet-protagonist has ceased speaking her daily prayer-poems; she is eerily quiet while the

[9] Though Glück mentions both Noah and John by name, she seems consistently at odds with them. The first "Matins" poem, which characterizes Noah as disagreeing with the poet-protagonist at a very vulnerable time in her own life sets the tone for the entire volume. John is also repeatedly brought up, only for the poet-protagonist to compare herself to him, ultimately denouncing him in an attempt to preserve her own integrity, as occurs in the fourth "Vespers" poem.

[10] For more specific examples of consistent diction and punctuation within the poems, see Spiegelman.

other two voices continue to speak without her. The lack of a "Matins" or "Vespers" poem within the last six poems strongly emphasizes the failure of daily, liturgical prayer as a ritual, at least in the eyes of the poet-protagonist. Given the overwhelmingly negative tone in the last three "Vespers," poems, which appear one after the other, her silence hardly comes as a surprise. In the ninth "Vespers" poem in particular, the poet-protagonist speaks with pointed finality:

> Now, everywhere I am talked to by silence
>
> so, it is clear I have no access to you;
> I do not exist for you, you have drawn
> a line through my name. (7-10)

Here, the poet-protagonist speaks in clipped phrases, as if within the daily torment of so repeatedly trying, again and again, to pray the Hours and attain some sort of peace, she has finally come to a conclusion. Instead of declaring that the divine does not exist as she has so often hypothesized throughout the prayer sequence, she explains her own inexistence as the problem: though the divine may exist, it refuses to acknowledge her and that lack of acknowledgement is all that matters. In saying the divine "draw[s]/ a line through [her] name," the poet-protagonist implies that he cuts her off from the litany and the communion of saints.[11] If the volume, or the prayer-sequence, ended here, the poet-protagonist would seem in control of the situation in that she could effectively remove herself and end the prayer-sequence she has begun.

The tenth and final "Vespers" poem, then, comes as a disappointment because it undercuts the finality she tried to achieve in the previous prayer-poem. Just as the poet protagonist shows frustration over the garden plants which "have the nerve to be getting

[11] The "name" that the poet-protagonist mentions probably refers to the names found in the Book of Life, which is mentioned in Revelation 20:15: "And whosoever's name was not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the Lake of Fire" (*King James Version*).

started" in the heat of August, she shows frustration over her own inability to cease in praying (4). Like the garden plants that will die with the coming cold of winter, the poet-protagonist knows her own life will inevitably and imminently end; but, much to her chagrin, the words keep pouring fourth. This continuance mimics the rituals included throughout the volume—the rituals of the seasons, the days, and the life cycles of the flowers—because all of them continue despite the poet-protagonist's continual fears of the end of her own life. Her ritual of praying continues almost against her will in the tenth "Vespers" poem, which is evidenced by the questions she asks throughout the poem: "but why/ start anything/ so close to the end?" (8-10) and

> are you saying I can
> flourish, having
> no hope
> of enduring? (19-23)

After this final question, a question that seems spoken almost against the poet-protagonist's will, the prayer-poems cease; "Matins" and "Vespers" are not among the titles of the final poems. This lack of prayer—especially because it is daily prayer—should be seen as an act of willpower on the part of the poet-protagonist; she knows the daily, worried prayer-poems she has so frequently spoken are neither helpful nor effective, and so she has decided not to speak.

The very last poem, "The White Lilies," offers a surprising conclusion to the collection: though the sequence of "Matins" and "Vespers" poems have ended, critics agree that this final poem is spoken, at least in part, by human voices.[12] "The White Lilies" is split into two stanzas, and the dash at the end of the first stanza indicates a

[12] Examples of critics who affirm this reading include Davis, Cook, and Muske, among others.

change in speaker: the white lilies comment on the situation of the humans and then overhear the two of them in conversation. The first stanza spells out the destruction possible in the act of creating a garden: "it/ could all end, it is capable/ of devastation" (6-8). The enormity of this destruction is further explained: "All, all/ can be lost" (8-9). Glück's use of "can" also brings the poem abruptly to the present; for, instead of using the subjunctive verb "could," which implies an abstract possibility at an unspecified time, Glück's use of "can" brings us to a real possibility in the present. The stanza continues to describe the scenery of the moving flowers, until interrupted by the voices of the humans.

The "Hush, beloved," which opens the stanza, places the humans in fruitful conversation with each other for the first time in the entire volume: one speaker assures the other, offering comfort from these ongoing worries for perhaps the first time (13). The lack of human contact throughout the rest of the volume only emphasizes the power of this simple comfort; the two have enjoyed "this one summer" together and, thus, "entered eternity" (15). Because this poem is not a part of the prayer-sequence and no traditional, liturgical ritual is used to frame the poem, we see the absence of the prayer-frame as part of the possible solution. Instead of a prayer written and spoken as a community and as a traditional ritual, this poem offers human love in the face of inevitable destruction. The community, or human love, that offers comfort, then, must be enjoyed not in light of the divine or in relation to it but solely in the present moment. In this way, the daily practice of ritualistic prayer is replaced by the ritual of the days that keep coming, days meant to be enjoyed for the present and the present only. According to the speaker, the ritual of the present, which includes the memory of the past, is all that the speaker has.

In the context of a volume that repeatedly invokes the traditional practice of Divine Office, this final stanza seems particularly important. Ultimately, value lies not in the liturgical, traditional practices of religion but in the daily repetition of the days, in the present summer. The repetition of "Matins" and "Vespers" throughout the collection has maintained the tension between belief and unbelief instead of bringing lasting—or even temporary—peace. Instead of speaking liturgical prayers every morning, praying before and after working in the garden, and pointing the entire community to look together towards the divine, the poet-protagonist is told in this last stanza to embrace the present moment, which is shared, not with the divine, but with another human. "Hush, beloved" is still a command, as she has been receiving throughout the volume, but this time it is spoken softly and not with indifference but love.

CHAPTER THREE

"What was repeated had weight": the Re-telling of Myth in *Averno*

Louise Glück's prolific use of mythology in her work comes as no surprise to twentieth century poetry. In *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986), Alicia Ostriker identifies Glück as one in over a dozen female American poets who have used mythological narratives as a major part of their work since the 1960s (215).[1] Ostriker explains this surge of women writing myth in terms of what she calls "revisionist mythmaking": works that find their focus in canonical myth narratives assume a "high literary status," but, because their plots are so well known to Western audiences, these myths also offer the opportunity for their plots to be subverted, changed. By revising small parts of the myths—gender roles, traits of specific characters, or even plot points—these writers can "re-evaluate…[the] cultural values previously enshrined [in myths]" (215). In this way, these poets revise old cultural standards in order to make new statements, an idea that is often very appealing to feminist writers.

In terms of her use of mythological themes, Glück can be considered a "revisionist mythmaker," at least on some level, because her poetry does change, or "revise," many of the mythic narratives she writes about. In over forty years of

[1] In the "Notes" section of her book, Ostriker lists both poets and their specific works that use mythic themes. Most notably among them are Lucille Clifton, Sandra Gilbert, H.D., Denise Levertov, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Muriel Rukeyser, May Sarton, and Anne Sexton. As background, Ostriker also lists women poets before the 1960s that use myth (though not in revisionist terms), including Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Helen Hunt Jackson, Edith Wharton, Amy Lowell, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Louise Bogan.

publishing poems,[2] Glück has written poems (or even entire collections of poems) that find their substance in Aphrodite's status as a goddess *(Descending Figure,* 1980), the friendship between Patroclus and Achilles (*The Triumph of Achilles,* 1985*),* the myths surrounding the biblical accounts of Noah's Ark and Garden of Eden (*Ararat,* 1990; *The Wild Iris,* 1992), the epic of *The Odyssey* (*Meadowlands,* 1996), the relationship between Orpheus and Eurydice (*Vita Nova,* 1999), the myth of the burning of Joan of Arc (*The Seven Ages*, 2001*)*, and, finally, the mythic narrative of Persephone's abduction to the underworld (*Averno,* 2009). Glück often makes changes from the canonical versions of these myths. In an essay entitled "The Education of the Poet," Glück explains the early impetus for her "revisions" of the myths: her father often changed parts of the plotlines when he told her the stories when she was a child (*Proofs and Theories* 7).[3] However, Glück's revisions of these mythic narratives have grown in complexity, and her use of mythic narrative has become one of her most prominent characteristics as a twentieth century poet (Morris 23).

In Glück's work, the "revision" of mythic narrative is often deeply personal. Instead of revising the narratives in specifically feminist terms,[4] Glück uses mythic

[2] Glück's first collection of poetry, *Firstborn*, came out in 1968; however, she began publishing poems in 1962. In 2013, all twelve of Glück's collections appeared in a one-volume edition entitled *Poems 1962-2012*.

[3] In "Education of the Poet," Glück further explains that "before [she] was three, [she] was well grounded in the Greek myths, and the figures of those stories, together with certain images from the illustrations, became "fundamental referents" in her poetry. Her father, however, would also make up stories or "revise" the endings in their telling, such as deleting the final burning from the story of St. Joan (*Proofs and Theories* 7).

[4] Ostriker writes about "revisionist mythmaking" purely in the context of feminist criticism; however other critics, such as Elizabeth Dodd, have applied the term to other types of revision as well. Because my essay focuses on Glück's use of canonical Greek myth as it relates to modern society in general, I will explore "revisions" that apply to readers in general and not just feminist interpretations. For readings of the feminist aspects of Glück's writing, especially the language she uses regarding the female

narrative as a context for a wide variety of personal thoughts—thoughts that often find their basis in autobiographical details of her life.[5] In an early interview, Glück explained that her "tendency—as is obvious—is to very promptly build mythic structures, to see the resemblance of the present moment to the archetypal configuration. So that almost immediately the archetypal configuration is superimposed" ("An Interview" 123). In this way, Glück's poetry departs from feminist twentieth century writers who use mythic elements in their writing; instead of expressing mainly gendered concerns and using myth as a platform for projecting feminist interpretations onto the stories, Glück weaves her personal story into the mythic narrative in order to create what has been identified as an entirely new genre of writing: postconfessional poetry.[6]

This new genre, identified in Elizabeth Dodd's seminal "The Ardent Understatement of Postconfessional Classicism" (1992), names Glück a "post-confessional poet" as opposed to a "confessional poet" (149).[7] Dodd explains that though Glück incorporates autobiographical detail into her poetry and uses poetic techniques that are similar to those employed by famously confessional poets, such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, her work finds its difference specifically through her use of myth: Glück's

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self, see Helen Farish, Lisa Sewell, Maggie Gordon, Lynn Keller, and especially Lee Upton's chapter on Glück in *The Muse of Abandonment*.

[5] Glück writes further about her fascination with context in regards to writing poetry in "Education of the Poet," the first essay in *Proofs and Theories* (1994). From early on in her career, Glück used "the simplest vocabulary," and instead focused on finding the perfect context for placing the meaning she was trying to convey.

[6] In the first chapter in his book length discussion of major themes in Glück's work, Daniel Morris explains that critics disagree about which genres and categories should include Glück's mythic poetry (21-24). Overall, Morris concludes that though Glück has not been anthologized in one consistent poetic genre, she is undoubtedly an important voice that will continue to shape American poetry (2).

[7] Dodd acknowledges the difficulty of using a simple definition of "confessional poetry" and refers to R.H. Rosenthal's definition, as it appeared when he first used the term in his 1959 review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*.

work "represents a kind of postconfessional personal classicism—one in which the voice of the self is muted by the amplified sense of the mythic, the archetypal…, without losing the compelling presence of an individual, contemporary 'I," a personal voice addressing the reader" (149). Thus, instead of writing purely third person mythic poems, or poems that are overtly confessional, Glück combines these two genres of poetry. Her poems are often not strictly first or third person, but shift between the two, especially in her book length sequences which frequently incorporate a polyphony of voices. While critics have been categorizing and commenting on Glück's use of mythic elements since her early collections were published, Glück herself does not often address her poetic techniques. A closer look at *Averno,* Glück's eleventh collection of poetry, however, reveals her to do precisely that—in this later collection, Glück captures the writing process involved in re-telling the myth of Persephone.

Thus far, critics have mainly written about the psychoanalytic elements of the writing of *Averno*. Ann Keniston explains *Averno* in light of Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of Disaster*, reading the poems in the context of trauma theory. She ultimately argues that Glück's speakers find their mode of speech and form like those who have undergone severe trauma: disaster has "disrupt[ed] their chronology" and the poems appear in long, fragmented forms because they voice the viewpoints of both survivor and witness within the myth of Persephone (177). Uta Gosmann argues that psychoanalysis, "both as a theory of memory as well as a model of speaking and writing," informs *Averno* as a whole (179). Gosmann's essay goes on to show how the writer of the poems—who is often a direct speaker—performs psychoanalytic analysis on the character of Persephone throughout the fragmented poems, utilizing elements from Freud and Jung,

among other psychoanalytic theorists. While Gosmann and Keniston astutely observe the predominant roles of psychoanalysis and of trauma theory within the writing of *Averno*, little has yet been said about how Glück's use of Greek myth within the poems affects the writing process.

Because Glück re-tells ancient Greek myth so often in her modern poetry, her understanding of the fusion between the modern and the mythic—and the process involved in creating such a fusion—becomes important in terms of understanding the meaning of her poetry. In *Averno,* many of the poems explicitly comment on the process involved in the re-telling—the repetition of Greek myth in modern poetry becomes a major theme. My reading of Glück's use of mythology in *Averno* is framed by the two "Persephone the Wanderer" poems that appear towards the beginning and then at the very end of the collection; in these two poems Glück explores first the ethics of narrating a "known" story and then the value—both personally and collectively—that can result from such a re-telling. By examining *Averno* in light of Glück's re-telling of mythic narrative, we are better able to understand the way Glück's poetry implicitly relies on repetition: in repeating, or re-telling, the myth of Persephone, Glück is able to create the intimate complexity for which her poetry has become known.

The Poet Behind the Narrative: Ethical Concerns Behind the Re-telling of Mythic Narrative

In "The Forbidden," an essay included in *Proofs and Theories* (1994), Glück explains the potential problems modern writers encounter in incorporating mythic narratives into their writings. She begins by acknowledging the distinct power that is available to writers who draw from mythic themes: because the re-telling of myth is often

"tragic" in its portrayal of permanent suffering,[8] mythic narratives have the ability "to turn a good poet into a great poet" (53). The failure or success achieved in re-telling these mythic narratives, according to Glück, depends on the authority that the writer claims. Writers who claim ultimate authority undoubtedly express "genuine suffering" in their stories—they step into the position of the characters and speak in their voices (54). However, in expressing the devastating pain of mythic characters, these writers often simultaneously simplify the narrative, forcing readers to implicitly agree with them in what Glück identifies as "an excess of will" (54, 63). For example, in speaking as a first person mythic character in a poem, a writer conveys the "rage and contamination and shame" that character feels, but the writer often also simultaneously "demand[s]…admiration for unprecedented bravery, as the speaker looks back and speaks the truth" (55). Writers inevitably take on the mindset of a survivor in writing mythic narrative because the conclusion of the narrative is known, and they have no "ambivalence" towards the characters. Thus, re-tellings of myth that fail to be compelling stories fail because they forfeit the element of the unknown.

By contrast, Glück's own approach in writing myth—an approach that is explicitly shown in the two "Persephone the Wanderer" poems in *Averno*—relies on the "scar" that tragedy leaves on the teller (54). In inserting her own authorial voice into the poems, Glück is still able to maintain the required "ambivalence to the self" that makes the narrative worth listening to. Glück contends that writers need to be purposeful in terms of considering their readers' interests: poems should not make readers ask "why are we involved at all; what response is solicited when the documenting voice requires that

[8] Glück further explains the term "tragic" in terms of understanding that once an event has occurred, especially an event that is devastating, "there is no going back." She understands "tragedy" itself in terms of being permanent (*Proofs and Theories* 53).

we note, at all moments, its survival (even, in many cases, its survival as a soul improved with by this encounter with evil)?" (54). Instead, poems with mythic elements should be structured and spoken in ways that complicate our understanding of the myth and challenge the readers' assumptions.

The "Persephone the Wanderer" poems both begin by questioning the nature of re-telling mythic narrative. Instead of starting at a specific plot point or providing introductory background information, both poems begin by establishing themselves as re-tellings of a known fiction—their first stanzas acknowledge they are based on a canonical myth. The first "Persephone" poem begins with the phrase "In the first version," and the second "Persephone" poem begins with the phrase "In the second version." From these similar beginnings, however, the two poems go on to describe what happens to Persephone in very disparate manners. In this way, we understand that, though the titles are exactly the same, the poems themselves are different re-tellings of the same well-known story.[9] By using different versions of the same narrative in her poems, Glück suggests that the speaker is seeking more than a single, authentic telling; questions inevitably arise with her use of two versions. In her analysis of the two "Persephone the Wanderer" poems, Gosmann explains that Glück does not refer to historical versions in these poems; instead, as Glück explained in an interview, she wrote the poems entirely from her memory of the narrative, revising the myth as she saw fit.[10] In using a structure of multiple "versions," the "Persephone the Wanderer" poems display an ambivalence

[9] Glück has often repeated titles within single collections for specific purposes. In *The Wild Iris*, Glück repeats "Matins" ten times and "Vespers" seven times in order to signify the daily ritual of praying through the narrative. In *A Village Life*, Glück's most recent collection, she repeats only voices that speak in a non-human register in order to signify those "beyond death" speaking into the daily lives of villagers.

[10] Glück also noted that the "source most vivid in her memory" was *D'Aulaires Book of Greek Myths* that was written and illustrated for children (Gosmann 209).

towards the "authenticity" of the canonical story; they prompt readers towards questions from their very beginnings.

Within these versions, the "facts" of the narrative quickly become the focus. The speakers judge the mythic narrative for authenticity even as they begin to tell the plot: in the first "Persephone" poem Persephone has been taken from Demeter, who then "punishes" the earth, and in the second "Persephone" poem Persephone has died. The speakers of the poems—the tellers of the narrative—both immediately comment on the "facts" they have just spoken: "this is consistent with what we know of human nature," says the first poem, and "problems of sexuality need not bother us here," concludes the second. By establishing and corroborating facts from the onset of the poems, these speakers encourage readers to question the supposed "facts" they know, for in pointing out the facts, the speakers also point out the potential for these "facts" to be untrue. In this way, the speakers encourage readers to question the assumptions that are often taken for granted in the re-telling of even accepted, canonical myth.

In the first "Persephone" poem, Glück uses literal questions to approach the re-telling of the myth of Persephone, and uncertainty comes to play the most important role in the writing process. The initial speaker of the first "Persephone" poem can be read as the writer of the poem, the one who is analyzing Persephone's traumatic experience in telling Persephone's story. The identity of the speaker becomes explicit in the eighth stanza: after stating that Persephone "returns home" in the seventh stanza, the speaker comments, "I'm not sure I will/ keep this word: is earth/ 'home' to Persephone" (24-26). The speaker here questions her word choice in an obvious way for a reason: she is explaining the very process of writing the poem, including her decisions regarding word

choice. The questions that follow, regarding the meaning and the implications of the phrase "home," show the complex assumptions underlying the commonly told narrative:

> […] 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, in other words
> an existential
> replica of her mother, less
> hamstrung by ideas of causality? (25-32)

We see here that instead of being certain—of imposing biographical details onto a story or using a methodology calculated to achieve a feeling of "tragedy"—the poet asks questions as a part of telling the story and regards even a "canonical" story as one of uncertainty, revision, and confusion.

These questions appear in contrast to the "experts" that Glück invokes throughout the poem, experts who should know the "truth" of such an accepted, canonical story. The scholars, who "continue to…[paw] over" Persephone's "initial sojourn/ in hell," cannot come to a consensus but instead "dispute the sensations of the virgin" in their analysis of her traumatic event—they seem, like the poet, to ask questions. However, their questions—"did she cooperate in her rape?/ or was she drugged, violated against her will/ as happens so often now to modern girls"—are attacking and tawdry. Unlike the poet's questions, which imply a sympathetic understanding of human nature, the scholar's questions look for someone to blame. And the scholar's questions later lapse into judgment: "Scholars tell us//there is no point in knowing what you want/ when the forces contending over you/ could kill you" (71-74). In this way, we see an aversion to supposed answers on the part of the poet: logically there is perhaps "no point in knowing

what [one] want[s]" if one is powerless and could die, but that is hardly a human or a sympathetic statement.

When the scholars do not have answers, despite their status as experts, the poet turns to other possible authorities. The first forum she turns to is that of common knowledge: "As is well known, the return of the beloved/ does not correct/ the loss of the beloved" (18-20). However, this statement is not one of finality, for there is no solution listed. Persephone, the "beloved," is returned for six months out of the year, but—as is explained through many of the psychoanalytic fragments throughout *Averno*—the trauma of being abducted has changed her. Common knowledge, in this instance, does not provide a final answer to the questions involved in re-telling the mythic story. The speaker then invokes the knowledge of the literary canon by comparing Persephone with Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's classic: like the Puritan who committed adultery, Persephone "…returns home/ stained with red juice" (21-22). However, the poet's inclusion of such a lauded American novel with *The Scarlet Letter* does not provide authority for re-telling the myth of Persephone; it instead leads to further questions regarding the word "home" and what it means. In this way, the speaker establishes her inability to know, with certainty, even the basic facts of this well-known myth.

Both "Persephone" poems also include multiple viewpoints, a technique that allows for the "truth" of the re-telling to be further disputed. The "Persephone" poems both begin in the voice of the poet-writer, but the poems also include the voices of Persephone, Demeter, the "cold wind," and Zeus. None of the speakers (including the poet-speaker) have the "final authority," and stanzas often shift between speakers without warning; it is as if the poet-writer is remembering what the other speakers said, but their

voices are as realistic—and hold as much authority—as the poet-writer herself. In "The Forbidden" Glück applauds Martha Rhodes' ability to "cleave to no fixed perspective" but instead to "mimic the dilemma" of the narrative she tells (57). By including the viewpoints of various mythic characters, as well as speaking in the first person, Glück "mimics the dilemma" critics have identified as central to *Averno*: the poem itself sifts through Persephone's memory and allows other voices to speak into what she remembers of her traumatic experience (Burt 85).[11] By including multiple voices in a single poem, then, Glück is able to show that the poem is a construction in the same way that memory is a construction—both are made up of a several voices without an ultimate authority. Thus, the initial poet-writer abdicates the authorial authority often used in confessional poetry—other voices speak into the poems, allowing the re-telling of Persephone's story to avoid the "excess of will" Glück deplores in other twentieth century re-tellings of mythic narratives (*Proofs and Theories* 63).

Glück also involves the reader directly in the poems. The first "Persephone" poem frequently speaks in the first person plural: all the uses of "we" and "us" throughout the lines involve the readers directly in the re-telling of the story. Statements, such as "Unlike the rest of us, she doesn't know/ what winter is, only that/ she is what causes it" or "Earth asks us/ to deny this rift, a threat/ disguised as suggestion," not only imply that the reader is a part of the narrative itself, but also explain the narrative in terms of "us" (48-50; 80-82). Rather than presenting the narrative as a removed story, Glück's frequent uses of inclusive, first person plural pronouns suggest that this narrative is significant to readers.

[11] Burt further notes in his review of *Averno* that the poems are "best understood as a sequence of feints, provocations, actings out, rages and resignations" (85).

At times the poems also use second person: the poems directly involve the reader at key places in re-telling the mythic narrative. Some of the second person statements in the first "Persephone" poem stand in command form, as if the speaker is talking to herself as she writes: "You are allowed to like no one, you know," the speaker says. This statement is immediately followed by the reason: "the characters/ are not people/ they are aspects of a dilemma or conflict" (33-36). Although the poet-writer potentially speaks only to herself in these lines, the use of second person involves the reader as well. And these uses of second person allow the reader to see the logic behind the writing of the poem.

The poem ends, however, by asking a question directly of the reader: the poet (or Persephone herself) asks, "What will you do/ when it is your turn in the field with the god?" (100-101). Instead of claiming ultimate authority in the resolution of the poem, Glück's speaker leaves such a process up to the reader. The autobiographic details or the "confessional" words of Persephone—she explains previously that "[m]y soul/ shattered with the strain/ of trying to belong to earth"—do not leave give her final authority in speaking about her experience. Glück's use of the second person is a technique she has long admired in poetry; she was first drawn to T.S. Eliot specifically because of his use of second person. Unlike Wallace Stevens' exclusive tone, which made Glück question if she would ever write poetry, Eliot's poetry attracted Glück to poetry because it "request[ed] or crave[d] a listener" (*Proofs and Theories* 113; 9). Glück was particularly drawn to Eliot's monologues, which require a "communion" between writer and reader (21). By bringing such a structure to a mythic poem, Glück intimates her ability to fuse

the mythic and the personal, a process that she explains throughout the first "Persephone the Wanderer" poem.

Overall, the first "Persephone the Wanderer" poem reflects what Morris has written about Glück's use of the mythic. Using the well-known myth of Persephone allows Glück "the necessary emotional distance to approach intimate, upsetting materials in away that remains, for her, safely under control" (23). However, Glück's use of mythic elements also allows her to "transfor[m] liminal or trying episodes of her life" into material that is relatable to readers (23). In this way, the personal and mythical elements of Glück's poetry work together to involve the reader; her combination of personal and mythical elements prompts readers to ask questions even in hearing a story they have heard repeated over and over.

At times Glück mimics the uncertainty she claims in the "Persephone" poems in other, seemingly more confessional poems. Though she "knows" the full narrative of each poem as she as she writes it—and indeed is the author crafting the main argument of the poem—she explicitly relies on asking questioning and uncertainty to convey her meaning. In "October," the second poem in *Averno*, for example, the speaker tries to locate herself in time and in space throughout the entirety of the poem, asking questions as she goes. As Suzanne England explains, "Although the speaker identifies herself by the pronouns 'I' and 'my,' we sense neither time or place…there is violence, but we never learn the details" (89). In essence, "October" is a poem that remains purposely mysterious—Glück chooses to allow the poem itself to continue asking questions.

The entire first section is one long sentence, and the lack of punctuation shows it to be a "stream of consciousness" section. Some lines ask questions about time's

passing: “Is it winter again, is it cold again,/ didn’t Frank just slip on the ice,/ didn’t he heal, weren’t the spring seeds planted” (1-3). Other lines, however, allow memories to slip through: “I remember how the earth felt, red and dense,/ in stiff rows” (14-15). Even the speaker of this personal poem that seemingly does not involve mythic narrative deplores ultimate authority in its structure and wording. The section ends with more poignant questions: “didn’t we plant the seeds,/ weren’t we necessary to the earth,//the vines, were they harvested?” This final question—“the vines, were they harvested?”—is the only question out of the twenty-one questions in the poem that does not use a negative contraction. Glück change her syntactical pattern here to how that it is a different kind of question; it is one that the speaker does not know the answer to. In this way, we see that though Glück avoids claiming “ultimate authority” in the re-telling of myth, it is also a technique she uses in other, seemingly confessional poems. In order for poems to tell a compelling narrative at all, they must maintain an “ambivalence to the self,” asking questions and involving the reader in their telling.

Postconfessional: Merging Greek Myth with Modern Story

Because *Averno* is based so strongly in both the myth of Persephone and in autobiographical narrative—and because Glück explores the process of writing poems within the poems themselves—*Averno* achieves a strange complexity: it is structured to be intimate even in re-telling such a well-known story. Not every poem addresses Persephone’s story directly: some poems are spoken entirely in the voice of a modern poet, and some poems tell what Stephen Burt has identified as “the story of a modern girl, an anti-Persephone of sort, who—through carelessness or arson—burns a wheat field to ash” (1). However, the different speakers and voices that make up *Averno* are not always

easily distinguishable from each other. For example, a poem telling of the "Myth of Innocence" in Persephone's adolescence lapses into a statement about a modern girl and also includes an image from Glück's own life growing up. The voices in the poems often overlap and inform each other, and the polyphony of voices throughout the collection creates a cohesive book-length sequence.[12]

This overlap, and oftentimes fusion, of modern and mythic voices allows Glück to create meaning on at least three planes in the re-telling of the myth of Persephone: firstly, Glück achieves meaning on an autobiographical level, and myth becomes a context for the understanding of her own personal memories. Secondly, *Averno* engages other collections of Glück's poetry: in re-telling of the myth of Persephone, the poems include phrases and images from Glück's other work, creating a complex connection to other narratives Glück has previously told. Lastly, in re-telling the myth of Persephone, Glück engages meaning on a much broader scale: she speaks to an entire "community" of readers who are familiar with Persephone's narrative as a story that has been passed down through generations of Western readers. While twentieth century poets frequently engage one, or even two, of these planes in their writing, Glück is able to engage all three within one collection because of the rich way that she writes the myth of Persephone into the voice creating her poems.

Averno has been called "the most autobiographical collection" of Glück's poems and for good reason: many of the poems include specific details from her own life that Glück has written about in other forums (Chiasson 184). Some of the poems read like

[12] Glück is known for her book-length sequences; in an interview with the Library of Congress, Glücks described her books as "wholes," designating them as literature intended to be read in a single sitting (Cavalieri 5). *Ararat* (1990) marks the beginning of her use of polyphonic voices that together create a book.

oblique memories from Glück's childhood. The second stanza of "Echoes," for example, reads:

> When I was still very young
> my parents moved to a small valley
> surrounded by mountains
> in what was called the lake country.
> From our kitchen garden
> you could see the mountains,
> snow covered, even in summer. (9-15)

The lines here tell the simple narrative of a child, and the poem goes on further to explain the speaker's decision "to become an artist" later in life to "give voice to [her impressions" (19-20). However, because the poem is set in the midst of a collection of poems surrounding the myth of Persephone, the mention of "lake country" and of mountains that are "snow covered, even in summer" becomes significant. The epigraph at the beginning of the collection explains that "Averno" means "a small crater lake," which was "regarded by the ancient Romans as the entrance to the underworld." And snow imagery throughout the rest of the book symbolizes Persephone's time in the underworld—snow, winter, and death become synonymous. In this way, even poems that seem purely autobiographical, like this simple narrative of a young girl, achieve great significance through Glück's use of myth throughout the volume: the modern poet and Persephone herself often become conflated, speaking to and informing each other.

Other poems that specifically re-tell Persephone's story, such as the two "Persephone the Wanderer" poems, also contain autobiographical images. The beginning of the second "Persephone the Wanderer" poem speaks to what Stephen Burt has termed "the tenacious, frightening bonds between mothers and daughters," a theme that Glück has written about in her essays (1). The imagery about Demeter and Persephone's

conflicted relationship in *Averno* draws, at times, from the relationship that Glück had with her own mother. For example, in the second "Persephone" poem, Demeter looks at Persephone and thinks that she can "*remember when [her daughter] didn't exist*," a thought that is met with bitterness by Persephone. Persephone views her mother as secondary in the telling of her own story: her mother is "like a figure at a bus stop,/ an audience for the bus's arrival," or she is "the bus, a temporary/ home or convenience" (19-20, 21-22). Because Persephone views herself as the protagonist in her own story, her mother's efforts to claim authority through being Persephone's "source of life" or her "creat[or]" are dismissed (40, 44).

Like Persephone, Glück came to devalue her mother's opinion in writing her poems—and by extension telling her own story—during adolescence. In "The Education of the Poet," Glück explains that her mother was "the judge" of her early work and that it was her mother's "approval that [she] lived on" (*Proofs and Theories* 6). Her mother's tendency to give Glück her full opinion—responding to "the letter, not the spirit" of the poetry—and the tendency of her entire family to fill silence with speech caused Glück to draw further into herself and to write poems independently of her family when she became more serious about her craft (6-7; 11-13). In this way, Glück's own aversion to telling her poems alongside her mother become a part of her re-telling of Persephone's adolescence: the myth is a context for her own autobiographical experiences. And just as Persephone undergoes psychoanalysis throughout *Averno* as she tells her own story, Glück also underwent psychoanalysis while learning to write poems.[13]

[13] In "Education of the Poet" Glück explains that instead of going to college, she underwent psychoanalytic theory while studying under Leonie Adams at the school of General Studies at Columbia. In this essay, Glück explicitly talks about the process of writing poems while undergoing psychoanalysis.

In order to achieve the distance from her experiences that Glück believes is necessary in writing good poetry, Glück incorporates myth into her modern poems. In an essay entitled "Against Sincerity," Glück explains that poets must enact surgery on their own "blazingly personal" experiences, "perform[ing] autopsies on their own living tissue" (*Proofs and Theories* 35). For Glück, incorporating mythic contexts becomes one way of "performing autopsy" on her own memories: placing mythic narratives within her own stories allows her to evaluate her own effectiveness in writing with more objectivity.

Unlike confessional poets, Glück does not rely on autobiographical detail as the "ultimate authority" in *Averno*: the voices of her speakers throughout the collection challenge the assumptions within the myth, but they are meant to prompt thinking and questioning on the part of readers, not to silence readers. Before *Averno* was published, Daniel Morris explained Glück's postconfessional use of myth as her most important contribution to American poetry since the 1970s: by using myth in her work, Glück is able to

> negotiate a kind of middle ground between the ambitious but often forbidding strains of High Modernism (which attempted to tell what Pound called the 'tale of the tribe' by regarding culture as a whole), on the one hand, and sensitivity to the distinctiveness of individual experience that was characteristic of the confessionals, on the other. (23)

In the case of *Averno* poems, Glück is able to reveal autobiographical details about herself and make use of her own experiences while engaging mythic narratives that Western culture has passed down through the ages. As Gosmann further explains, the relationship between the mythic and the personal is symbiotic for Glück: "associations on the myth elicit personal poems, and poems evolving from personal memory illuminate

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From the beginning of her poetic career, then, Glück has associated psychoanalysis and writing poems with each other; they are intertwined and work together.

neglected aspects of the myth…Glück lets the personal lead her to the mythical, and she uses the mythical to penetrate more deeply into the personal" (205). By incorporating autobiography into myth and myth into autobiography, Glück is able to maintain her unique "postconfessional" style throughout *Averno*.

Longtime readers of Glück will also observe that the poems of *Averno* interact with Glück's previous collections—the story of Persephone is complicated by other stories that Glück has previously told. Many of Glück's poetic collections that invoke myth display similar elements/themes: they often include cyclical time (changing seasons, the idea of death and rebirth, etc.), complex familial relationships, themes of deprivation, and strong instances of paradox. In *Averno* Glück draws from many of these themes and connects this later collection to several of her previous volumes[14]; however, there is a very close connection with her 1993 Pulitzer Prize Winner, *The Wild Iris*.

While Carol Muske has astutely observed that "death lies at the center" of all of Glück's collections of poetry, *The Wild Iris* finds its central theme in the fears surrounding "the impossibility of resurrection" after death (52). The collection is structured as a "trialogue" between the poet-protagonist, the divine, and the watching flowers and plays with themes from the biblical myth of the Garden of Eden. The poet protagonist continually worries about her own inevitable death, which is symbolized by the coming of winter, even as she watches the annual flowers "resurrect" in the spring and blossom. The poet-protagonist's anxiety regarding death pervades ten of the poems

[14] There are several other instances that poems in *Averno* connect to poems in Glück's other collections. One example is the use of chair imagery that appears in "Eros" in *The Seven Ages* (2001) and the chair that appears in the title poem of *Averno*. In both instances sitting in a chair becomes a way of reflecting on a painful situation; however, in the former collection the speaker realizes her separation from her husband is final while in the latter the speaker realizes that she is very alone in her old age.

specifically, which have been categorized as "prayer-poems": the "Matins" and "Vespers" poems repeatedly express the poet-protagonist's fear of dying.

By contrast, *Averno* speaks from a "posthumous" voice—it reads as an answer to the fear of death.[15] The main character of the collection, Persephone, has already "died" at the beginning of the collection and speaks as an "expert" on death (Gosmann 149). The poems of *Averno* answer those of *The Wild Iris* in that death, the foremost concern in the earlier volume, has arrived: the "summer after summer's ending" and the "balm after violence" brought up in *Averno*'s "October" are the setting for the entire collection.[16] Glück shows this connection in the seasons explored in the two collections as well: while the poems of *The Wild Iris* span from early spring to the coming of fall,[17] *Averno* is set from early fall to the beginning of spring.[18] In this way, *The Wild Iris* symbolizes a season of growth, while the winter imagery throughout the *Averno* poems symbolizes a setting of death. Read in conjunction with each other, the two collections comprise the seasonal cycles within a complete calendar year. Given Glück's focus on cycles within nature, such a structural overlap can hardly be considered incidental. And by reading *Averno* in light of *The Wild Iris*, we are able to move beyond the question of "what

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[15] We see his posthumous voice in "Night Migrations," the first poem of *Averno*, which stands as a prologue to the entire collection.

[16] Keniston frames her reading of "October" as a post-911 reading of trauma (178).

[17] Throughout *The Wild Iris*, many of the poems detail the changing of seasons and the shift from spring to summer and then, inevitably, to fall. The voices of annual flowers that are born anew in early spring begin the volume, "April" describes the gardeners' inabilities to work their planted fields in mid-spring, "Midsummer" records the "still air of high summer" in an open field, "End of Summer" laments the "emptiness of heaven" as it is mirrored in "the fields, vacant again, lifeless," and the last "Vespers" poem wonders why "some things have the nerve to be getting started…//so close to the end."

[18] Gosmann also refers to the timeline of *Averno* as a "half cycle" in that is makes up half of a yearly cycle (182). Through the poems are not arranged in seasonally chronological order, the winter imagery that proliferates many of the poems in *Averno* designates the setting.

happens when winter—or death—comes?" to the questions brought by dealing with the aftermath of a dreaded event, by severe trauma and its telling.

Aside from the seasonal cycles and positions of the speakers in respect to death, similar images and specific phrases within the poems also connect the two collections. For example, in the third section of *Averno's* "October," the doorway mentioned reminds the reader of "The Doorway" in *The Wild Iris*. The first two sections of "October" locate the speaker temporally in a time after trauma has occurred: the first stanza ends with "violence has changed me," and the second stanza confirms that the speaker's body "has changed once…has hardened" (33,41). By the end of the second section the speaker has resigned herself to speaking from her mind, as a way of dealing with this trauma. The third section, the section that mentions "the doorway," becomes a memory to which the speaker is returning: "Snow had fallen. I remember/ music from an open window" (59-60). The section goes on to describe the way the speaker perceives beauty, finding "what others found in art" or "what other found/ in human love" in nature (71, 7-74). The third stanza, which reads "I stood/ at the doorway/ ridiculous as it now seems," captures the speaker on the cusp of experiencing the highly exalted beauty that she finds in nature (68-70).

If we look back to "The Doorway" in *The Wild Iris*, we find that the speaker is experiencing a similar feeling—we may see the moment that the *Averno* speaker is remembering. In "The Doorway," the poet-protagonist feels like "a child hovering in the doorway"; as she explains, this is "the moment before/ the first flower forms, the moment/ nothing is as yet past" (10, 3-5). This moment of transcendence in which the poet-protagonist hovers in the doorway both physically and figuratively, wanting to be

"still as the world is never still," enables us to understand the contrast between the "doorways" in each poetic collection. By using the same image in both poems and terming this "moment prior to flowering" "ridiculous" in the latter, we see a sharp change in perspective. Though the speaker in *The Wild Iris* longs for time to stop—to hold onto the moment before change or death arrive—the speaker in *Averno* has experienced change and now terms this desire "ridiculous." The last stanza of "October" explains that the life and "the appearance of the gift," the "possession" that the speaker so ardently hoped for in *The Wild Iris*, has proven disappointing: "death cannot harm me/ more than you have harmed me,/ my beloved life" ("The Doorway" 19-20; "October" 82-84). In this way, the repeated image of a doorway, used in both *Averno* and *The Wild Iris*, demonstrates a shift in regards to the question "what happens after death comes?" Because Glück uses this repeated image between the two collections, readers are able to experience both poems more deeply. We learn from such images that the speaker of *Averno* is beyond the realm of fearing endings, that innocence, at least in some senses, has already been lost.

While all of the poems in *Averno*, even those that do not explicitly mention Persephone, contribute to the re-telling of the myth of Persephone, the poems that explicitly include her as a character also contain images that relate to poems in *The Wild Iris*. In this way, Glück weaves her other collections into the myth she is re-telling, connecting stories within her poetry and showing how they relate to one another. In the first "Persephone the Wanderer" poem, daisies are mentioned, and "Daisies" is also the title of a poem in *The Wild Iris*. "Daisies," spoken in the voices of the flowers themselves in *The Wild Iris*, explains the human tendency of valuing machines over plats,

to avoid "the sound the wind makes/ stirring a meadow of daisies" in an attempt to "resist/ nostalgia" (7-8; 5-6). Ira Sadoff explains "Daisies" as part of "The Last Stage of Romanticism" that Glück comes to embrace in *The Wild Iris*—"nature speaks as if it could still resolve the human dilemma" (83). However, when the daisies reappear in *Averno*, they are hardly symbols of embracing the natural world, a world that in *The Wild Iris* seeks to find "the real world" (2). When Persephone first encounters death in *Averno*, it is significant that "she has never seen the meadow without the daisies" (88-89). Because daisies—or an embrace of the natural world—define the way Persephone looks at the meadows, we see the extent of her innocence; through the juxtaposition of the daisies in both collections, we know she has not yet been corrupted by "the real world," or the world of machines. And her encounter with "death" in the meadow becomes all the more severe: the more innocent and pure Persephone is, the more impacting the "rift" and the "break," mentioned later in the stanza, become (94). In bringing imagery used in *The Wild Iris* into Persephone's story, Glück connects her collections of poetry to each other. In terms of re-telling stories, this allows Glück's poetic canon with all of its instances of myth to take on a distinct complexity. The stories in Glück's poetic collections, both mythical and autobiographical, interact with each other in their tellings or re-tellings, operating on a literarily significant plane.

Perhaps the most significant plane that Glück's poetry operates on, however, is that of the Greek myth, the narrative passed down from generation to generation. The myth of Persephone is so well known, in fact, that David Wheatley comments in his review of *Averno* "there can scarcely be a more popular myth for poets than the luckless underground bride." In drawing from such a celebrated narrative, Glück enables a great

number of readers to connect with her poetry—readers that might not identity with her life experiences in the twentieth (or twenty-first) century. In "The Dreamer and the Watcher," Glück explains that the value of writing poems comes from being able to identify with a wide variety of people: "What had to be cultivated, beyond a necessary neutrality, was the willingness to be identified with the other. Not with the single other, the elect, but with a human community" (*Proofs and Theories* 105-6). And while many modern poets—Glück included—often "identif[y] with the other" through writing about common human experiences, re-telling a well-known cultural narrative is another, perhaps more pragmatic, method of relating to readers. Aside from attracting more readers, Glück's use of Greek myth allows her to create meaning through revisions of the known story—in the final stanzas of the collection, Glück comments on the potential power of revising such a canonical narrative.

In the conclusion of the generally known myth,[19] Persephone is sentenced to cycling between earth and the underworld; because she has eaten seven pomegranate seeds, she cannot remain in either realm permanently. Glück's version of this part of the story is not contradictory: Persephone is still sentenced to cycling between the two realms at the end of the collection of poetry, and thus, the ending is still tragic. However, in Glück's version, Persephone's thoughts regarding her situation are changed due to psychoanalysis—a fact that speaks, for Glück, to the power of poetic imagination. By revising the end to such a well-known myth, Glück speaks to the importance of poetic imagination not just in her own personal life but also in terms of the entire community of readers.

[19] As a point of comparison, I use a translation of Ovid's version in the *Metamorphosis* because of its canonical status.

The very end of the second "Persephone the Wanderer" poem concludes with Persephone's return to earth from the underworld. Demeter has pleaded with Zeus, and readers are told that if Persephone returns, it will be for

> one of two reasons:
>
> either she was not dead or
> she is being used to
> support a fiction. (85-88)

On a surface level, neither of these two reasons seems redemptive in light of the tragic myth. If the first reason—that Persephone never really died—is true, then the dramatic trauma she has been speaking of throughout all of the poems seems overstated: Persephone has been abducted, but her time in the underworld is not as devastating as she has been claiming in implying her "death."

The second reason—that Persephone "is being used to support a fiction"—initially reads like a conspiracy theory. The conspiracy in this case would be that Persephone's death is not the central problem, that her "death" is only a cover story or is part of a larger plot. However the long dash that appears after "fiction" indicates that the stanzas following are the "fiction" being spoken of:

> I think I can remember
> being dead. Many times, in winter,
> I approached Zeus. Tell me, I would ask him,
> how can I endure the earth?
>
> And he would say,
> in a short time you will be here again.
> And in the time between
>
> you will forget everything;
> those fields of ice will be
> the meadows of Elysium. (89-98)

In this way, we see that if Persephone has died, she will only be able to return to the earth through changing how she thinks about her situation—through writing her own "fiction" to live by. Like the speaker throughout Glück's *Vita Nova* (1999) who views memory as "a kind of forgetting" as she imagines "a future beyond death," Persephone must forget the pain she has lived through in her cyclical rotation between life and death (Longenbach 148). It is as if Persephone alone has the ability to transform the situation—and transformation comes from the act of re-telling her own story, through undergoing psychoanalysis while writing the poems themselves.

This transformation is congruent with Glück's own understanding of the power of creating art. In "The Idea of Courage," an early essay about the writing of poetry, Glück explains that "personal circumstances may prompt art, but the actual making of art is a revenge on circumstance…No process I can name so completely defeats the authority of event" (*Proofs and Theories* 25). Through the act of re-telling the myth throughout the collection, Persephone herself creates her own "revenge on circumstances": she undergoes psychoanalysis while "writing" the poems, and, thus, can imagine a different ending after her own "death." As Gosmann explains, because Persephone is able to acknowledge the violence of her mother that she has repressed, she can "take [the] blissful peace she has discovered in the underworld with her to life" (209). Through speaking with Zeus—approaching him "many times" with her concerns and telling him her story even in asking "how can I endure the earth?"—Persephone is able to make peace with her situation. It only through the repetition of telling her story, and the repetition within the writing of her poems, that Persephone is able to come to a place of final, though tragic, peace. The events of Persephone's past have not changed, but, by re-

telling her own "fiction," Persephone is able to transform her time in the dark underworld into "the meadows of Elysium" (98).

Persephone's peaceful ending is also significant in terms of Glück's understanding of the potential of incorporating myth into modern poetry. In her essay on memory as it applies to *Averno*, Gosman differentiates between "personal" and "collective" memory, an idea that she derives from Karl Jung: while an individual has her own stories and her own autobiography, society at large also has memories that are either acknowledged, celebrated, or repressed (205). "Collective" memory includes the narratives that cultures implicitly live by, the stories that are passed down from generation to generation. By revising such a well known myth in *Averno*, then, Glück appeals to the "collective" memory of her readers more than their own "personal" memories: she relies on Persephone's tragic narrative being "common knowledge" to her readers. In revising Persephone's narrative and bringing "personal peace" to Persephone as she retells her story, Glück allows for readers to find "collective peace" as well. In Persephone's transformation and acceptance of her own story, readers that have long heard her narrative can also be transformed. Readers have the ability to hear and to "re-tell" Persephone's story in light of their own lives, to question the assumptions underlying her story as it applies to each of them specifically. Poetic imagination, and the creation of art, then, has the ability to affect readers as well as writers, listeners as well as tellers. By merging the modern story with the mythic narrative in her "postconfessional" style, Glück speaks not only to contemporary people, but also to the stories that have formed and defined contemporary people as they have been retold throughout the ages.

CHAPTER FOUR

From the Eternal to the Temporal, a Repeated Concern

Throughout Louise Glück's prolific career, her poetry has continually addressed the concept of the eternal. In an early interview Glück explained that "my orientation is always toward the eternal […] It has a powerful hold over me […] the absolute, the eternal, the immutable—that condition which does not exist in the physical world" ("Descending Figure: An Interview"). And in an essay entitled "Education of the Poet," Glück further explains that she has always seen the "aim" of her work as "spiritual insight" (*Proofs and Theories* 15).[1] While this fascination with the eternal may seem strange in light of Glück's book-length sequences that often find their narratives in Greek myth, biblical stories, or in personal, familial drama,[2] Glück's poetry, like the poetry of T.S. Eliot, consistently displays a "craving for the path, the continuum, the unbroken line" (21). In essence, Glück's poems often become a quest for the permanent.

In seeking the eternal, however, Glück often portrays temporal settings—Glück writes about the failings of material, temporary existence. As she understands it, the

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[1] Glück further suggests that this "aim" for "spiritual insight" explains the lack of continual fluency in her writing. While the poet who desires to sketch scenes or write snapshots of life can always find subjects to describe, Glück explains that as a spiritual writer, her times of fruitful writing come in seasons. Many of her essays explain the need for "impoverishment" or "deprivation" before being able to write with much fluency. These ideas are discussed most fully in Glück's essays entitled "Disruption, Hesitation, Silence" and "On Impoverishment," both of which appear in *Proofs and Theories* (1994).

[2] Chapter 3 discusses Glück's use of mythic narratives in her poetry: her collections that center Greek myth include *Descending Figure* (1980); *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985); *Meadowlands* (1997); *Vita Nova* (1999); *The Seven Ages* (2001); and *Averno* (2006). Two of Glück's books also draw from biblical narratives: *Ararat* (1990) is based on the story of Noah's Ark (found in Genesis), and *The Wild Iris* (1992) draws loosely from the Garden of Eden narrative. Within all of these collections, Glück also tells stories about family and/or relationships, often weaving Greek/ biblical characters into modern settings: she writes of the death of her father, the destruction of a marriage, the relationship between sisters, etc. See Dodd for an explanation of her "postconfessional" method of weaving ancient myth into modern narrative.

eternal "cannot sustain itself on matter and natural process" (21). This is precisely why many critics describe Glück's poetry as depressing or even devastating. Nicholas Christopher's *New York Times* review, for example, explains that Glück values being realistic over offering comfort to readers: "Glück's [poetry] isn't one to flinch in the face of suffering; if it's glib talk or easy irony you want, or a soothing metaphysical cocktail that promises redemption without pain, hers is not the poetry for you" (3). And in his review of *Poems: 1962-2012*, William Logan describes Glück as "our great poet of annihilation and disgust, our demigod of depression." Like Robinson Jeffers, whom Glück admires for his commitment to "clarity over solace," Glück often laments the devastation of being an impermanent being.

Glück acknowledges that her negative portrayal of temporary life is not typical of twentieth century poetry. Glück explains that "the impulse of our century has been to substitute earth for god as an object of reverence"; however, in her own poetry, Glück has continually fought such urges (21). Images of nature, and especially images of earthly cycles, indeed pervade Glück's poetry; however, as Ira Sadoff explains, Glück's poems do not affirm nature as "the solut[ion] to the human dilemma" (83). In his recent analysis of Glück's poetry, David Yezzi suggests that Glück's poetry is often "marked by violent disappointment" in terms of how it conceives of the eternal—Glück's speakers suffer throughout her poetry specifically because of their temporal shortcomings (105). Because Glück's speakers are destined to live only temporary lives and lack the ability to participate in the eternal in a significant way, they continually struggle with rejoicing in the tasks of ordinary life. Earth is not substituted for god in Glück's poetry, but lamented.

However, David Yezzi also argues that in Glück's most recent book of poetry, *A Village Life* (2009), such a "violent disappointment" with the temporal has dissipated into "a measure of solace": in this new volume, Glück's speakers forge a "truce…with the ordinary" (105). Yezzi supports this argument with an interview printed in Joanne Diehl's *On Louise Glück: Change What You See* in which Glück discusses her growing pleasure in "ordinary life" as she grows older: "My yearning toward perfection, an ideal of receptivity as much as anything else, has been, periodically, less punishing; in its place, a somewhat greater capacity for contentment and gratitude. Daily life seems to me a miracle" (187-188). In *A Village Life* Glück's speakers are able to enjoy the daily, ordinary aspects of life because they do not focus inconsolably on the inevitable endings of their lives—the temporal and the material are accepted *because* they do not have (or need) eternal significance. I will argue, then, that we see Glück's changed acceptance of the temporal most strongly in the new ways that she uses repetition in *A Village Life*. More specifically, by comparing thematic and structural repetition in *A Village Life* with that in *The Wild Iris* (1992) we are able to see Glück's later acceptance of the temporal. No longer does a "quest for the permanent" dominate the poems; such a visionary yearning is replaced by a focus on present, daily life.

The Wild Iris, it has been argued, displays the "climax" of Glück's obsession with seeking the eternal; the collection is set up as a debate between the poet-protagonist and the divine regarding the existence of the eternal and the "impossibility of any resurrection beyond the human, earthly realm" (Davis 48). And within *The Wild Iris*, repetition—repetition in terms of the themes and in terms of the form of Glück's writing—becomes central to the meaning of the collection. By comparing Glück's dual portrayals of daily,

repeated actions in *The Wild Iris* and in *A Village Life*, as well as the collections' varied structures of repetition, I hope to demonstrate how Glück's changed philosophic convictions bleed onto the substance and form of her poetry—we see changes in Glück's use of repetition between the two collections because her philosophic concerns regarding the eternal have shifted.

In *The Wild Iris*, daily, quotidian actions, especially those that are repeated, are of great significance. Throughout the collection of poetry, the poet-protagonist is constantly completing everyday tasks: aside from speaking prayer-poems, entitled "Matins" and "Vespers," every morning and evening, the poet-protagonist maintains her garden regularly. The poems record tasks such as planting seeds, weeding the garden, pruning the plants, and harvesting the crops as the seasons shift, and the repetition of such tasks become a sort of ritual for the poet-protagonist.[3] As she sees the summer ending, the poet-protagonist thinks of the ending of her own life, and, as a result, the repeated non-events in her daily life become important: she clings to them as a way of clinging to fleeting, temporal existence. For example, when the poet-protagonist is weeding, a recurrent task, she explains that she is merely "pretending" to weed; in fact, she is

> …looking for courage, for some evidence
> my life will change, though
> it takes forever, checking
> each clump for the symbolic
> leaf… (6-10)

The physical, temporal act of weeding the garden becomes a method for the poet-protagonist to address the eternal. She gazes at each cloverleaf in an attempt to believe that her own life will not end, and the gap between her own temporal life and that of the

[3] For a further explanation of the poet-protagonists's daily rituals in terms her "Matins" and "Vespers" prayer-sequence of poems, see chapter 1.

eternal entirely overtakes her attention. Weeding the garden becomes highly symbolic to the poet-protagonist: it is not a task she completes simply to maintain the garden but instead emblematizes her struggle not to worry about the ending of her life. And in describing weeding—a self regenerating task—in this context, Glück exposes the pervading presence of the poet-protagonist's concerns: the weeds will inevitably continue to grow, and the poet-protagonist will continue to tend her garden, but she will never finish such a project. As *The Wild Iris* has been called Glück's "most flagrantly symbolic" collection, many daily tasks—like weeding—take on a philosophic importance throughout the poems (Longenbach 187).

However, in *A Village Life*, the speakers often seem to accept the daily for itself. Everyday, quotidian actions can be a source of enjoyment, as well as a source of fatigue and mundane boredom. Their repetition, instead of leading to heightened tensions regarding philosophic concerns, speaks mainly about the repetitive nature of human life on earth—temporal repetition. In enacting daily, quotidian actions, these speakers let go of their fears about the ending of life, and, instead, simply live. This is not to say that these later speakers view their experiences more shallowly than Glück's previous speakers; indeed all of Glück's speakers reflect on their lives in meaningful ways. In his *New York Times* review of Glück's collected edition, *Poems: 1962-2012*, David Orr writes that speakers throughout Glück's poetry "produc[e] great effects with delicate shifts in tone, like an oceangoing bird that travels a hundred miles between wing flaps" (3). Speakers in *A Village Life*, however, approach daily tasks without the tinge of existential worry that her previous speakers often carry with them, which potentially gives the impression that they are less feeling than earlier speakers. However, living to

these later speakers means experiencing daily actions for themselves—quotidian actions are still meaningful in that they involve enjoyment, cause frustration, or even evoke memories, but they lack the significance that comes from constantly being considered in light of the eternal.

In many of the poems in *A Village Life*, the sensory, physical qualities of daily actions become a point of focus—the daily is written about for itself. For example, in "Walking at Night," the subject, a woman, walks through a city that is described chiefly in sensory terms:

> Moonlight reflects off the stone walls;
> on the pavement, you can hear the nervous sounds
> of the men rushing home to their wives and mothers; this late
> the doors are locked, the windows darkened. (7-10)

We know that this is a recurrent, daily action for the woman at this point in her life because the poem goes on to explain that "when she's tired of the streets, in good weather she walks/ in the fields where the town ends" (27). This daily action for her is simply walking, looking at the city and the fields with all the memories she had as a child. Instead of making this daily task a way of addressing the eternal—and by extension worrying about the inevitable ending of her own life—the woman reflects on the life she has had, enjoying the present moment for what it is. The repetition of her nightly walks is not a way for Glück to maintain the tension of the narrative but instead a method for displaying the continual presence of daily actions throughout a lengthy life: her woman walks across the fields now just as she did in childhood.

Similarly, the neighbor woman in "A Warm Day" participates in the ritual of washing her clothes; however, this repeated action has become a source of renewal to her. The poem discusses how she "wash[es] her nightdresses in the river […] / beaming, as

though her life has just been/ lengthened a decade," simply because she loves "cleanliness" (2, 3-4, 4). Instead of contemplating how washing the nightdresses each week brings her closer and closer to the end of her life, this woman lives within the present, feeling refreshed, as if her life has been extended through the daily. In this way, an enjoyment of daily rituals, whether this enjoyment is in walking outside or in doing laundry, pervades the village life described throughout the poems. Such points in the poems lead critics, such as David Orr, to describe *A Village Life* as being more hopeful than some of Glück's other collections: in his book review Orr explains that the poems have "the sad hopefulness of the seasons: death, birth, death, rebirth."[4] In comparison with *The Wild Iris*—which finds its substance in the poet-protagonist's constant worry regarding the inevitable ending of life—*A Village Life* is hopeful because it embraces temporary life. William Logan also explains *A Village Life* as a "subversive departure" from Glück's previous work. Instead of continual existential worries filling the poems as they do in *The Wild Iris*—worries which are heightened each day as the poet-protagonist debates the existence of the divine aloud—we have poems that describe small town life in Glück's "imagined" village, a village that Logan speculates is set somewhere in Italy or Greece (6). The scope of this later collection is purposely smaller; existential, philosophic worries do not lie at the center of the poems as much as daily actions pervade them.

[4] This is not to say that *A Village Life* is consistently described as "hopeful"; only critics who compare *A Village Life* with earlier collections of Glück's describe it this way. By contrast, Zach Savich writes "escape, for the most part, was abandoned long ago" in *A Village Life*, a mindset that which results in a very tragic collection: speakers do not mourn being trapped because they have given up. My study, which focuses on the speakers' collective view of the eternal, explains *A Village Life* as being more hopeful than speakers in other collections because these later speakers do not constantly worry about the endings of their lives—they live more in the present than speakers in Glück's other collections.

Within this hopefulness in *A Village Life*, however, there is also room for the speakers and characters of the poems to find the repetition of the daily difficult as well. The speaker of "Via Delle Ombre," for example notes "how dirty [her house] is, how grim" every single morning (5). We know this is recurrent problem for her because she is "never late for work": her ritual of leaving the house in the darkness of night makes her situation more palatable to her (6). Because the speaker seems trapped in her situation, finding comfort only in the bartender's conversation each evening, we are able see her discontentment within the context of her broader life: instead of clinging to daily actions as a way of avoiding the inevitable ending of her life and making a highly symbolic ritual of them, the speaker dislikes the daily actions themselves. Her daily treks to work and then to the bar at night are not rituals that she clings to, but instead parts of a routine that she would rather avoid. In this way, we see that Glück's methods of grasping at existential concerns—of infusing the daily with eternal significance—have altered.

Many of the speakers throughout the poems also grow tired of daily, quotidian actions. Their enervation, which is displayed time and time again throughout *A Village Life*, becomes significant because it displays a changed view of the repetition within life. Instead of clinging to the ritual of the daily as a way of trying to participate in the eternal as the poet-protagonist does in her prayer-poems, these speakers grow tired of life on earth—the repetitive nature of temporal life enables the speakers to let go of their concerns about the gap between the temporal and the eternal. This fatigue is seen in many of Glück's speakers that are elderly. In "Tributaries," the mothers "are tired constantly" because "the children are always fighting, / the husbands at work or angry" (29, 30). The young couples the mothers see around them are happily consumed by their

relationships; however, they are depicted as "an image of some faraway time, an echo coming / very faint from the mountains" (31-32). In this way, the speakers show their ability to grow tired of the daily non-events that make up their lives—these everyday occurrences lose their novelty in their repetition.

The poem "Fatigue" also illustrates the ability of daily labor to weigh on a worker, lessening his hope through its repetitive nature. The man feels "a great hopefulness" that binds him and the earth together. However, working all day in the soil, first like an "animal" and "then / like a machine with no feeling" quickly becomes tiresome to him (14-15). Because the earth does not change despite his repeated attempts to cultivate it, he ultimately concludes that "Nothing remains of love, / only estrangement and hate" (22-23). The repetition of daily labor is not a means of maintaining tension regarding the gap between the temporal and the eternal, but a means of demonstrating the banal repetition and failure of repeated labor. And this sort of attitude applies to how some of the speakers conceive of the eternal as well. The very beginning of "In the Café" compares the repetitive, mundane nature of life on earth with that of the eternal:

> It's natural to be tired of earth,
> When you've been dead this long, you'll probably be tired of heaven.
> You do what you can do in a place
> but after a while you exhaust that place,
> so you long for rescue. (1-5)

In this way, the idea of permanence and of the eternal are not endlessly glorified as they are in *The Wild Iris*. In thinking of "heaven" and the idea of eternal life, the speaker of "In the Café" knows he would grow tired the same way he does on earth. Though he often feels "he is on the verge of a new life," this life has no eternal significance: he enters the lives of the women he knows as one "enter[s] a dream,/ however long it lasts,"

but "in the morning, [he] remembers[s] / nothing of the dream at all, nothing at all" (62-63; 63-64). Instead of imbuing his relationships with these women—and the daily tasks of knowing them—with eternal significance, he explains that his enjoyment and boredom with them is only temporary. Yezzi's conception of the "truce with the ordinary," then, can be seen both in the speakers' abilities to enjoy daily life or to find it mundane—however, it is these actions, in and of themselves, that are spoken of—the temporal is not a gateway to the eternal but a time to be enjoyed in and of itself.

Nowhere is this "truce with the ordinary" seen more fully than in the title poem of the volume, a poem in which Glück replaces religious rituals with daily rituals—her speaker, in this case, literally lets go of her concerns regarding the eternal in order to live more fully in the present. "A Village Life" is comprised of daily, repeated actions: the entire poem catalogues the Sunday morning routine of the speaker as she walks her neighbor's dog. We know this Sunday morning routine has become an established one because the seasons are depicted as changing: "Summer and winter, / we walk the same road, early morning, at the base of the escarpment" (8-9). Within the act of walking the dog, the speaker explains her temporary ability to hold her fear of the ending of life at bay:

> so for a while it seems possible
> not to think of the hold of the body weakening, the ratio
> of the body to the void shifting,
>
> and the prayers becoming prayers for the dead. (18-21)

The physical act of walking the dog and keeping "images" of the plants growing nearby and the dog "chasing mice" enables the speaker to stave off her concerns about the temporary nature of her own life. She distracts herself by living fully in the present.

Then, when her concerns about death return to haunt her—concerns that are compared with her neighbor's more traditional faith and conception of the ending of life—the speaker turns to ordinary, daily actions. Unlike her neighbor who "believes in the Virgin" and spends her Sunday mornings at church, the speaker simply says "I make my soup, I pour my glass of wine" (32). In this way, we see that the speaker's view of the ordinary has changed; it is no longer a symbolic approaching of the eternal (and the ending of life) as it is in *The Wild Iris*, but a way of living in the present.

This is not to say that the speaker is no longer concerned about the inevitable ending of life—if anything, she is more aware that her own life will end, which is seen in her awareness of the approaching evening. The speaker understands her position in regards to the eternal: she is still "tense, like a child approaching adolescence" who has "no say whatsoever" in what happens after death (33, 37). And, in the same way that a child inevitably grows up, the night comes—by extension death arrives. However, unlike she has feared, the speaker continues to speak. She continues participating in daily life in a repetitive fashion. Even if the worst is true—the human soul is not eternal but instead "meaningless but full of messages" and, in fact, "dead" as it has "always been dead"—the speaker decides life is still worth living (52, 53).

The final stanza of "A Village Life," and of the entire collection of poetry for that matter, shows the speaker going about her daily tasks, tasks that are going to be repeated throughout her life, "as though it were natural to [her], / as though [she] were already a factor in [them]" (58-59). In the final line of the poem, the speaker sets forth in her life, even if this life is not eternal: "On market day, I go to the market with my lettuces," she explains, as if enacting daily, quotidian events is important—important not in terms of

eternal significance but in terms of the present because, after all, the speaker's present, daily life is all that the speaker is certain about.

This turn to the present in "A Village Life"—to the ordinary aspects of daily life—resonates with another famous poem regarding ordinary experience, Wallace Stevens' "Sunday Morning." Both poems address the concept of faith in the eternal and are spoken by speakers who have chosen to remain at home rather than to attend church. David La Guardia explains that Stevens' speaker, like the speaker of "A Village Life," is challenged to "avoid abstraction, insufficiency, fixed principles, and closed systems, and turn toward concreteness and fact"—a substance that is found by understanding the daily in itself (46). We see the speaker's consideration of physical, temporal aspects of the daily most strongly in a question asked in the second part of "Sunday Morning":

> What is divinity if it can come
> Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
> Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
> In pungent fruit and bright, green, wings, or else
> In any balm or beauty of the earth,
> Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven? (14-19)

The final stanza of "Sunday Morning" answers this question; after thinking through the failings of the Christological myth, the speaker turns her thoughts to material, physical facts: "deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail/ Whistle about us their spontaneous cries; Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness" (114-116). Both poems end with the ordinary—temporal, material facts replace existential worries about the future.

The endings of "Sunday Morning" and of "A Village Life," however, also offer slightly different conclusions to the speakers of the poems. The speaker of "Sunday Morning" comes to find "a world holier than the one proposed in the Christian myth" by learning to value her "own perception" as the key to understanding the natural world (La

Guardia 48). This value of the speaker's own perception—of subjective thinking—exemplifies Stevens' "supreme fiction" that so many of his poems address. In coming to value temporal, material existence, Stevens' speakers frequently choose to believe in the power of their own imaginative perceptions.

Glück's speaker in "A Village Life," does not turn to her own imaginative perceptions at the end of the poem; she is not creating her own "supreme fiction," but enjoying the natural world for what it is—temporal existence. Though she often feels that her soul, like the moon, "could actually make something grow on earth," she knows it cannot because "it's dead, it's always been dead" (56, 53). Her decision to "go to market" in the last line of the poem is not a holy action that acts as a replacement for her lost faith in the eternal; she "go[es]" to market" simply because it is "market day" (61). In this way, Glück's "truce with the ordinary" is more realistic than Stevens': the temporal moment is not made significant through the speaker's imagination, but instead accepted as a temporal moment. Instead of worrying about the inevitable ending of her own life, the speaker enjoys the physical, material act of taking her lettuces to the market.

In terms of Glück's wider poetic canon, such a change in focus—from the eternal to the temporal—can hardly be overstated. Glück's acceptance of the temporary, material parts of life, then, affects not only the substance of her poems—the daily actions that her speakers participate in—but also the form of the poetry. More specifically, in this recent book, Glück abandons a poetic form that she has repeated throughout all of her collections thus far: short lines within her poems. In letting go of her traditional way of thinking, Glück also lets go of her traditional form of writing. And this change in syntax

pervades every poem in *A Village Life;* so pervasive is her change in thinking that it affects even the craft of the poems.

Since the beginning of her poetic career, Glück has been wildly renowned for her mastery of the short line, and, in his essay on Glück's technical skills, Isaac Cates maintains that the "white space" between Glück's lines—the "silence" as Cates describes it—holds the crux of Glück's poetic style (462). For example, the last two stanzas of the title poem of *The Wild Iris* read:

> 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. (16-23)

These short lines end abruptly, utilizing enjambment as a key part of their meaning: the line breaks, like those between lines 16-17 and lines 19-20, introduce unexpected images. In this way, Glück often uses short lines to bring complexity to her poetry and to suggest uncertainty. Many, many short lines often make up a single, sprawling sentence, and the line breaks also, as in the break between line 17 and 18, take the place of punctuation. Though Glück does use some longer lines throughout the first ten volumes of her poetry, her most usual form—and the form that sets her apart from other twentieth century poets—is her use of short lines with very purposeful breaks.

In the past, Glück has also commented specifically on her chosen use of short lines. In an early essay entitled "Disruption, Hesitation, Silence," Glück writes of feeling an "instant objection" to the "long lines, long stanzas, long poems" that are admired in

her generation (*Proofs and Theories* 73). To say more words is not to mean more to Glück; she instead finds meaning within silence and deprivation. The bulk of her poetic career also demonstrates her preference for "the suggested over the amplified," specifically through her use of short lines (85). Glück has never wanted to tell the entirety of the story, but instead to hint at the larger meaning. In his book review, Nicholas Christopher explains that small components that comprise Glück's poetry—such as her short lines—are central to the careful method she uses to evoke meaning: "each part never fails to speak for the whole." Her short lines come to symbolize her way of thinking about the world and her methodology in crafting poems.

In *A Village Life*, however, poetic lines stretch all the way across the page—for the first time in over forty years of writing poems, Glück consistently uses long lines to tell her narrative. The penultimate stanza of "Before the Storm" stands as an example of such a form:

> No sound. Only cats scuffling in the doorways.
> They smell the wind: time to make more cats.
> Later, they prowl the streets, but the smell of the wind stalks them.
> It's the same in the fields, confused by the smell of blood,
> though for now only the wind rises; stars turn the field silver. (31-35)

The line breaks in this stanza, as in many of the other poems throughout *A Village Life* do not bring unexpected turns to the poems. Instead, they tell a logical story, in smooth phrases that end with the end of a line. The lines, though longer, become easier to read, and the breaks do not drastically affect the meaning of the poem. This shift in form—from the short enjambed lines to the long, lilting lines that have been termed "valedictory music" in *A Village Life*—can hardly be considered incidental (Yezzi 115). Instead of

startling line breaks and endings, we see closure and an evenly told narrative, lines that do not worry over their own inevitable endings.

Not all of Glück's critics have been impressed by this change in form; in fact, many speak disparagingly about her shift to using long lines. William Logan, writing in *The New York Times*, describes the form of *A Village Life* as an act of carelessness on Glück's part: "the lines are long, the poems sputtering on, sometimes for pages, until they finally run out of gas, as if they were the first drafts of a torpid afternoon" (3). This review concludes by claiming that because "the lines are slack, the fictions drowsy and the moments of heighted attention like oases in a broad desert…[Glück] turns out to have an imagination almost as conventional as anyone else's" (13). Such a denigrating review, however, discounts Glück's intentional turn to new rhythms and the attention with which she orchestrates the volume's "drowsy" pace. As opposed to *Descending Figure* or *The Wild Iris,* which were both written in a matter of weeks, Glück explains that *A Village Life* took over a year and a half to compose and revise (Green). The severe change in form, then, was intentional rather than incidental or thoughtless. By letting go of her long-held poetic form, Glück demonstrates her ability to let go of her focus on the eternal in her poems, and she repeats this changed viewpoint in each line she writes throughout the volume, demonstrating the pervasive nature of such a shift in thinking.

And such a shift in thinking—and in form—is particularly significant given Glück's precise attention to the detail of her poetry. As Frank Bidart explained while introducing Glück at a poetry reading in the early nineties, shifts in form are essential to understanding Glück's poetic work: "she has a master's sense of form, and often meditates what necessities lie beneath shifts in form. She has a constantly fresh and

unexpected way of stationing the self, the soul, vertically in relation to the world above or below it, to its past or impending future" (24). Years later, Bidart has gone on to suggest that "one of the best experiences in reading contemporary literature" can be found in reading the nine [now eleven] volumes of Glück's poetry in the chronological order that she published them. Shifts in form within Glück's poetry indicate shifts in thinking, and because these shifts in form are repeated throughout a volume of poetry, they appear all the more pervasive.

While Glück lengthens her poetic lines throughout *A Village Life* in order to signify a departure from previous collections, her continued method of repeating poem titles within a collection allows her to maintain the structural control she had in previous volumes. In the first half of *The Wild Iris*, Glück repeats the title "Matins," or morning prayer, seven times, and, in the second half of *The Wild Iris* ten poems are entitled "Vespers," or evening prayer. By repeating titles in *The Wild Iris*, then, Glück creates a prayer-sequence of poems—poems that through their titles are understood to be prayers offered up by the poet-protagonist. This structure allows Glück to maintain the tension between belief and unbelief throughout the collection—the poet-protagonist is continually worrying about the existence of the divine and about the ending of her life in each "prayer-poem." Glück's use of repeated titles in *The Wild Iris*, then, becomes a primary way for Glück to express her "violent disappointment" in the disparity between the temporal, or material, and the eternal—the tension is maintained specifically in these poems that continue, disappointedly, to repeat without answers (Yezzi 105).

Titles also repeat across *A Village Life*; however, in this case, their repetition is used to dispel the tension between the temporal and eternal. In essence, the poems with

repeated titles demonstrate the need for speakers to accept daily life without regard for the eternal, temporary and insignificant though daily life may be. Instead of a progressive narrative, as is seen in the increasingly worried prayers of the poet-protagonist in *The Wild Iris*, *A Village Life* utilizes poems almost like snapshots: the poems are not arranged in, even roughly, chronological order, but instead provide scattered viewpoints of life. In an interview, Glück described the viewpoint as "voices coming from a particular cusp. On the edge of something, in a single life…For me the feeling of the book is as though it were a single life enacted by multiple actors" (49). Some poems, such as "Figs" and "Walking at Night," speak from the viewpoint of middle-aged to older women, while others, such as "Noon" and "At the River," capture the viewpoint of a child amidst the pressures of adolescence. Because an obvious central speaker does not lie behind the narrative and speakers of the poems do not repeat in a traditional way, the structure of the volume does not lend itself to dramatic despair over the inevitable ending of life as a progressive and continuing concern. Instead, the reader sees *A Village Life* as a narrative of "a life," one life among many captured in verse.

The titles that Glück does repeat in *A Village Life,* then, are significant in that they allow a few of the speakers to voice their opinions beyond the boundaries of a single "snapshot" poem; in a sense, these are the only voices that Glück allows to repeat themselves. Only three poem titles are repeated throughout *A Village Life*: "Earthworms" and "Bats" are repeated twice, and "Burning Leaves" is repeated three times. Interestingly, none of these three voices are typical in terms of the other poems. These poems do not reflect on events within life or comment on daily actions so much as they address the limitations of death—they explain the pointlessness of worrying about the

inevitable ending of life, encouraging an acceptance of the temporary, or the material, for what it is.

Two of the three repeated titles are spoken from the voice of the non-human. Not only is this distinction significant within a collection of poems that depict village life from various perspectives but also in terms of the other non-human speakers Glück includes in other collections. In *The Wild Iris*, Glück invokes non-human voices: aside from the poet-protagonist's prayer sequence of poems, the divine speaks regularly, as do the watching flowers in the garden. However, in *A Village Life*, there is no divine voice to contend with (not even a mocking voice), and the non-human voices are not beautiful, resurrected flowers, but small, seemingly insignificant creatures of the earth. Bats and earthworms essentially live in darkness, and, in contrast to the flowers, both are a dusty, dull color. They are not revered creatures, but those associated with darkness, dirt, and a lack of perception: bats lack the inability to see, and earthworms lack eyes or ears, having only the most basic perceptive abilities. However, in repeating the titles of these poems—and by extension allowing these few speakers to speak in more than one poem—Glück draws attention to the poems that they speak. Perhaps even more significantly, all three of these repeating voices suggest the dichotomy between material, temporal being and eternal existence—all of them address the seeming limitations of death, demonstrating Glück's changed philosophic understanding of the eternal in this collection.

The "Earthworm" poems, addressed to "mortals" with their temporal lives, advocate not for a position that is "eternal," in a traditional sense, but one that is "wholly physical" (the second "Earthworm"). The speaker is not concerned with consciousness

after death in a traditional way. In the first "Earthworm" poem, the speaker explains that "once you enter the earth, you will not fear the earth," and that death will "come to seem like a web of channels or tunnels like / a sponge's or honeycomb's" (15, 17-18). By comparing the setting of death to their own habitat (channels within the earth), the earthworms explain death with an unexpected authority. Death is later likened to "travels" in which the dead can find "a wholeness that eluded you" because, being humans, "you were never free/ to register in your body whatever left a mark on your spirit" (23-25). Because earthworms are known for having very undeveloped mental faculties[5] and for being unfeeling, Glück bases the "earthworm" poems ironically: the earthworms, as "unfeeling" creatures, have a strange authority in this case, as if they understand the realm after death far more objectively. The speaker of the second "Earthworms" poem also encourages humans to think about death with less anxiety: it makes the argument that "one's/ position determines one's feelings" and suggests that, in humans, "the mind disdains what it can't control" (5-6, 7). The mind here, seems less important than the physical, for the mind make the human biased against death. In a collection that offers many voices that speak to human experience, Glück's repetition of "Earthworm" seems significant: the poems' perspectives speak seemingly from beyond death but do not offer the comfort of a continued mental, or at least a continued human, consciousness. As recyclers of decayed matter and even carrion, the earthworms sustain temporary, earthly life as they create fertile soil.[6] However, as "creators" of temporary

[5] Naturalist Jim Conrad explains that earthworms have "simple brains" that allow earthworms "to respond to light but not much else."

[6] In the conclusion of Charles Darwin's *The Formation of Vegetable Mold Through the Action of Worms with Observations on their Habits*, Darwin writes that "it may be doubted whether there are many other animals which have played so important a part in the history of the world, as have these lowly organized creatures."

life and witnesses of human death, earthworms, as a species, have the authority to speak to human life and death.

The two "Bats" poems have a similar effect as those of the "Earthworm": they suggest that humans lack the ability to "see" death objectively. However, they advocate for thinking "beyond" the physical, as opposed to the "wholly physical" thinking that the "Earthworm" poems bring up. The crux of the "Bats" poems lies in the two ways that seeing is depicted:

> There are two kinds of vision:
> the seeing of things, which belongs
> to the science of optics, versus
> the seeing beyond things, which
> results from deprivation […] (1-5)

Seeing, in terms of understanding the unknown eternal, is not scientific or provable, but instead based on seeing "beyond" the physical realm, by paradoxically letting go of belief based on sight. The "Bats" poems bring up several examples of this paradox: *via negativ*a theology, which involves shutting one's eyes in order to see light; the authority silence has the ability to maintain; and the distraction that sensory information can hold. The view of the eternal in "Bats," then, transforms a fear of the unknown, into the practice of letting go, which paradoxically results in acceptance. Glück writes of the "paradox" of deprivation in *Proofs and Theories* further; in terms of her writing, Glück always prefers the "suggested over the amplified" (85). She lets go of explaining the whole with all the details and instead chooses to share only a part, which paradoxically allows for great vision. The "Bats" poems, which are repeated for emphasis, advocate for "seeing" beyond death by letting go of clinging to existential anxiety. Amidst a canon of poems that often dread painfully inevitable endings, the "Bats" poems become oddly

comforting; though bats are not often considered comforting, in these poems they encourage Glück's speakers to think of that which they cannot see.

"Burning Leaves," the only title that Glück repeats three times throughout the volume, offers the broadest view of the eternal in the volume: instead of approaching death in terms of a single human life ending, these poems speak to the ending of vegetative life, as well as the ending of the life of the earth. The first two "Burning Leaves" poems describe the "life" of a fire as it burns dead leaves in autumn, concluding with the notion that in burning the leaves literally become nothing: "where the fire was, there's only bare dirt in a circle of rocks. / Nothing between the earth and the dark." In the first two "Burning Leaves" poems, however, the subject is the fire and its ability to "live," not the leaves that will, in fact, die. However the third "Burning Leaves" poem describes the absence after the leaves have finished burning: "The sky is cold, blue; under the fire, there's grey earth" (4-5). This last poem concludes by questioning the burning of earth as a whole and its ultimate ending—though a boy watches the leaves burning, human life is not the subject: the ending of earth and the way "it will ignite" someday is the speaker's concern. In repeating this viewpoint in the "Burning Leaves" poems—a questioning of the earth's death and not simply of the human's—Glück broadens the scope of the volume beyond that of usual human concerns.

I do not suggest here the words of "Earthworms," "Bats," or "Burning Leaves" should be taken as absolute truth for Glück's speakers regarding the eternal, but that their positions—seen especially as less than typical viewpoints about death—are significant in terms of how the volume as a whole approaches the concepts of life and death. Glück herself called these voices "coy" or "fey" in an interview. However, Glück also

maintains that they are essential to *A Village Life*, for without them, the volume becomes too much like *The Spoon River Anthology*—as Logan explains it, Glück writes without "moralizing" the way Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology* does, though both works write with "the same steady knowledge that our destination is the grave" (Glück 50; Logan 4). These voices enable Glück's speakers to regard the eternal through a more objective, if not inhuman, lens, to let go of existential concerns in a way that her speakers do not in previous volumes.

Another way that Glück shows her changing view of the eternal as it relates to the temporal is through repeating titles she has used in previous volumes—by doing so, Glück shows a "revision" in her thinking. "Harvest," "Sunset," and "Midsummer" all appear as titles in *The Wild Iris* and in *A Village Life*. In all three cases, the viewpoint shifts from that of the divine (in *The Wild Iris*) to that of a human speaker, and, when the poems are placed side-by-side, the shift in Glück's focus on the eternal—from her initial pursuit of the eternal to her later acceptance of the temporary—becomes more apparent. Both versions of "Harvest," for example, speak directly to the fear of the ending of life; however, they have entirely different responses to this fear, each corresponding to a different conception of the eternal. In *The Wild Iris*, the divine voice describes watching a human worry about what happens after death: "how unsubtle you are:/ it is at once the gift and the torment" (5-6). And the only assurance offered is that of humanity's ultimate insignificance. The divine suggests that the human's present life is "punishment" enough, brashly stating "with one gesture I established you/ in time and in paradise" (13-14). The eternal, conveyed in the divine speaker of this first "Harvest" poem, then, is separate from the present, an inaccessible realm that the speaker has not way to commune

with: the present is a "punishment," and the poet-protagonist's worried prayers throughout the volume are dismissed with the inevitable ending of life. The effect of this dismissal is to make the poem seem all the more tragic—the human's only life will end, and the divine coldly does not care.

In the second "Harvest" poem, the ending of life is still a central concern to the speaker; however, in this case, the response is softened into an acceptance of the ordinary and a letting go of the need to exist eternally. The poem begins with imagery of crops that are beginning to decay. While the tomatoes are still "beautiful…on the outside," "Inside, they're gone. Black, moldy—/ you can't take a bite without anxiety" (6-7). This imagery signifies the inevitable coming of death, especially as the poem goes on to hope that "the farmers would see to it / that things went back to normal / the vines would go back to bearing new peas" (16-18). When death arrives, however, the speaker frames it in a soothing light: winter is not described as attacking the vitality of the plants but as a creator of a strange beauty: because the earth is "white now" with snow, "the fields shine when the moon rises" (34). And because the watching speaker, at the very conclusion of the poem, describes the earth as a "mirror," the reader knows how the speaker feels watching this inevitable ending: "calm meeting calm, detachment meeting detachment" (36, 37). The extensive worries of the poet-protagonist about the ending of human life in *The Wild Iris* prayer sequence yield to a calm acceptance of the inevitable ending of life. From the shelter of the window, the speaker can calmly state that "what dies, dies without struggle" in this second "Harvest" poem (39).

By titling two poems "Harvest," each of which questions the ending of human life in two separate collections, Glück signals a shift in her viewpoint: she uses repetition of

her previous work in order to demonstrate philosophic change that has occurred. Repetition here, then, also provides an occasion for change and revision/ reconsideration. It is not that Glück now believes in the eternal—the viewpoint on the possibility of human resurrection does not shift between the two volumes. But in *A Village Life*, the speakers respond with calmness as opposed to the anxiety they feel in *The Wild Iris*; there are no more distraught prayer-poems but only the coming of another day. The last two lines of the entire collection read simply, "Tranquil and still, the day dawns. / On market day, I go to the market with my lettuces" ("A Village Life" 60-61). In this way—and especially through Glück's repetition of the word "market"—we see that daily life is accepted; when the it is "market" day, the speaker simply "goes to market," rather than asking probing questions about the ultimate fate of such an action—the speaker lives in the present rather than in light of an unclear future.

Louise Glück once wrote in an essay that "as a child, [she] was unwilling to speak if to speak meant to repeat [herself]" (*Proofs and Theories* 18). However, throughout her poetic career, from the very first poem in *Firstborn* to the final poem in *A Village Life*, Glück has been, in a sense, repeating her concerns regarding the gap between the temporal and the eternal. This is precisely why Frank Bidart recommends reading her collections of poetry in the order in which they were published (25). Her collections, instead of being detached volumes, are meant to be read side-by-side, for it is only through this reading that we will be able to see the development of Glück's long-held ideas and forms. In *A Village Life* Glück's speakers finally accept the temporal, and it is through Glück's changed structures of repetition that we primarily see this changed

philosophy. We see here—through the structures of repetition throughout the collection—precisely what Joanne Feit Diehl describes in Glück's poetry overall:

> Glück's poems keep circling around the fundamental, existential issues that absorb each of us, but they do so in a way that transforms them into something other, into poetry that keeps repeating itself and therefore transcending the limitations of the real in order to create art. (22)

Repetition, in this sense, remains far from the "anxious duplication" or the stagnation that Glück fears in art; instead of stemming from imitation, Glück's repetition finds its roots in meditation as she ponders and reconsiders ideas over time (*Proofs and Theories* 123). Ideas and structures are repeated, as well as changed and revised, in order to create art that continually "illuminate[s] what has been hidden," the ultimate "dream of art" for Glück (7).

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

The Wild Iris, Averno, and *A Village Life* epitomize the paradoxical relationship between change and repetition in Glück's later work. Each of these collections departs sharply from Glück's previous work as she purposely invokes change and explores new avenues of expression; however, structures of repetition—repeated titles, narratives, forms, styles—imbue each collection with the "fundamental preoccupations" and "habitual gestures" that make it compelling as a collection (*Proofs and Theories* 17). By using both change and repetition in these collections, then, Glück achieves what she considers the ultimate "dream of art," which is to "illuminate what has been hidden" (7). Most obviously, Glück's tendency toward drastic change allows her to uncover new contexts, ideas, and challenges in each book she composes; she cannot help but "illuminate what has been hidden" because she is constantly exploring new terrain and purposely finding innovative methods of expression. More subtly, because of Glück's understanding of the writing process, the structures of repetition in Glück's later work also hold an essential role in accomplishing the purpose of art.

Writing poetry—as Glück explains in several essays in *Proofs and Theories*—is not a series of single spontaneous acts, but instead a long process. In the "whole lifetime" of the poet, according to Glück, "years are spent waiting to be claimed by an idea…it is a life dignified…by yearning, not made serene by sensations of achievement" (3). In this way, Glück's poetic collections are not instantaneous records of events or spontaneous verses; each poem she writes is part of a slow, subtle process that takes its

time in coming to pass. The poems in Glück's collections ruminate, repeating structures and ideas even as they are written—their repetitive structures mirror the thought process involved in the writing of the poems themselves. Repetition, in these later collections, becomes a means of meditation and an avenue of deeper exploration, as opposed to the imitation or stagnation that Glück so fears (17). The act of writing a poem becomes a journey in itself; as Glück explains, "whatever the truth is, to speak it is a great adventure…the poem may embody perception so luminous it seems truth, but what keeps it alive is not fixed discovery but the means to discovery" (111, 93). Glück values the process of writing poetry—a process that seeks change but also repeats itself in the telling—as well as the finished poems themselves.

This is precisely why, in a review of Glück's poetic canon—a canon with marked differences between volumes and a tendency to change even "characteristic" poetic techniques—David Yezzi explains that "despite changes…from book to book, Glück is working out one long poem, one portrait of inner life" (106). Glück's work—all eleven collections—must be read in light of the ways that it repeats itself, as well as the ways in which it changes and alters. Poetry to Glück, not unlike a human life, relies on both repetition and change in that they are both parts of a long process; poems build on each other within collections just as moments and memories build on each other within lifetimes. Through studying the development and changes of Glück's poetry in each collection, as well as the repetition that such change is built on, we are able to see the process behind her realization in the "dream of art": the writing process itself "illuminate[s] what has been hidden" as the poems are composed *(Proofs and Theories* 7). And instead of a single, weighty poem that speaks to a fundamentally unchanging

truth, we have forty years of writing that record the constant pursuit of truth, a process which repeats itself in order to discern its own meaning.

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