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The Concentration and Sublimation of Time as Memory in Louise Glück's Poetry

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Abstract

The preoccupation with the mythical time of humanity, and of each individual's life constitutes one of the most powerful poetic tools in Louise Glück's poems. From evoking the foundational times of the Garden of Eden, or the 'immutable' hard nut represented by Greek mythology, the poet concentrates whatever may suggest an evolution in time in those initial 'moments.' Her reading of the history of the human soul seems to suggest that everything stopped with the first page, or the first words. This study argues that Glück's use of memory or anamnesis (ἀνάμνησις) as the only path to understanding humanity is present in many of her poems; such vision is more than just mythological literary reference, it supports the idea that childhood memories, relationships, poetic quests, and spiritual journeys are nothing but an expression of such vision. The poems chosen for this paper are not in a chronological order in terms of their time of publication. Nevertheless, we have tried to put them in a chronological order in terms of how they illustrate the idea of time as a sequence of memories accompanying the poet throughout her literary career. We will also argue that this way of treating memory and time, together with the references to mythology, to a decayed Garden, to the precarious condition of man, and to the role of the poet can support the idea that Louise Glück has a Romantic–Classical profile.

Keywords: mythical time, memory, poetic function, Greek mythology, foundational stories

Louise Glück was born in New York City, in 1943, and started her career as a teacher of literature soon after graduating from Columbia University. Ever since that time she has shown real talent in writing poetry, which sounded very fresh, new, and startlingly colloquial, even though the themes and obsessions she followed mostly came from ancient Greek mythology. As a child, her parents would tell her mythological stories,

instead of the ones normally told to children that age, and such early instruction influenced her very much. She interprets everything—biographical instances, love stories, stories of time and loss, of horror and tragedy, of natural and man-made beauty—through a lens that is based on ancient philosophy and myth. In a way, most of her poetry is about the Fall from the Garden of Eden, but the ones who are responsible for the Garden are the Greek gods, besides the Judeo-Christian God. In a kind of revival of classical poetry—somehow reminding the reader of John Keats' embracing classical forms towards the end of Romanticism—Glück sings the song of nature, as a permanent comparing element to man's life: nature is cyclical, what perishes today will be revived tomorrow in the ever-moving seasonal circle. The human being just lives through the seasons, getting closer to the end with each day passing.

Her first volumes of poetry were published as early as 1973, but she started making a mark in American literature with *The House on Marchland* (1975), and with *The Garden* (1976). Some of her most well-known volumes came very soon after: *Descending Figures* (1980), and *Triumph of Achilles* (1985). Most of her volumes, though, were published in the 90's: *Ararat* (1990), *The Wild Iris* (1992), *Meadowlands* (1996), and *Vita Nova* (1999). She received many prizes (the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1985, and the Pulitzer Prize in 1993 among them). Since the 2000s, she has continued her career both as a poet and critic, and as a creative writing professor at Yale and at Boston University. Some of her volumes published in this period comprise: *The Seven Ages* (2001), *Averno* (2006), *Faithful and Virtuous Night* (2017), etc. In 2012 she published the volume *Poems 1962–2012* consisting of poems from many of the previous volumes. These poems she wrote in a period of 50 years, and therefore they are illustrative for her entire work, especially as she chose them herself in this representative volume. In 2020 Louise Glück received the Nobel Prize for literature, for her contribution to world poetry. The present study is mainly based on these fifty years of poetry, i.e. on the volume published in 2012.

Glück sees *life as a kind of suspended moment in time* even from the beginning. Birth, childhood, memories of teenage and youth, family relationships, love, or cultural and spiritual journeys, are just part of a chronology of memories. She writes about the *running time* that the human being *runs out of* very soon, contained between the moment of birth and that of death. The beginning, though, is nothing but the rupture of the living cells from their state of immortality. The poetic conscience can go back to this initial moment and can capture time only as memory. This travel in time may reveal *some* truth, *some* knowledge. This is the Platonic process of *anamnesis* (ἀνάμνησις), of finding knowledge by taking the path of memory. In order to find truth about the world,

about oneself, to get knowledge, one has to just go deeper and deeper in one's conscience and sub-conscious world. Here they will find not only their own memories, but those of mankind. The relationship between memory and time is, in fact, a kind of journey that draws an arch from birth to death. This virtual arch makes time meaningful and gives memory the status of a time-travel-machine that can make life and death somehow bearable and meaningful. This is the unbearable human condition, which urges us to find meaning in life, while we are destined to die. To give life meaning under such predicament is something that the poet tries to do in her identifying time as memory. She proposes an intensification of memory, which can give time meaning.

The most important moments that make up this chronology of memory are present in many poems present in the collection mentioned. We will refer in this study to just a few, which we consider representative: "A Fantasy," "Retreating Wind," "Vespers," "The Golden Lily," "A Myth of Devotion," "Hyacinth," "A Summer Garden," "An Adventure," "Nostos," "October," "Odysseus' Decision," "The Silver Lily," and "The White Lilies." These poems reflect how memory preserved the most important coordinates of life: birth, childhood, womanhood, motherhood, and death. They are placed on a road that takes us from birth to death, which is life, and which needs to be given some meaning. Glück tries to go back to mythology, to Homeric stories, to the tradition of literature to find her own poetic voice, and also to define the role of the poet as she sees it. The constant references to a garden also come from her long-lasting love for gardening; it is by watching her flowers and trees that she understands the close correlation between the passing of the seasons and the quick passing of time.

Childhood is a time of bliss, discovered in memories, in dreams, in photographs; it is always present. The childhood of the poet, herself, was marked by the fear of loss of her twin sister, then her father, and then by the presence of a weak–powerful mother. The mother in the family photograph seems so powerful, as if she has tamed time, as if she does remember everything and can explain the meaning of everything. At the same time, she is frozen in time, the knowledge is only virtual because she, herself, has become only memory. In "A Summer Garden," girlhood is seen by the subjective poetic voice as the time before acknowledgment of suffering and death. Photographs of dead loved ones bring forth a kind of stillness, a feeling that time is *sleeping*:

> Several weeks ago I discovered a photograph of my mother
> sitting in the sun, her face flushed as with achievement or triumph.
> The sun was shining. The dogs
> were sleeping at her feet where time was also sleeping
> calm and unmoving as in all photographs. (Glück)

Death is contained in life, even in the most fragile and merely born form of life. Dust on memories—on a photograph, for instance—sometimes covers the shadows, preserves the past in a sort of immortal moment. Once removed, though, the image of an idyllic past also reveals all the signs of time passing, and the imminence of death:

> I wiped the dust from my mother's face.
> Indeed, dust covered everything; it seemed to me the persistent
> haze of nostalgia that protects all relics of childhood.
> In the background, an assortment of park furniture, trees and shrubbery.
>
> The sun moved lower in the sky, the shadows lengthened and darkened.
> The more dust I removed, the more these shadows grew. (Glück)

Thus, the image of the mother is both powerful—as if she knows everything, as many children perceive their mothers—and fragile and weak, surrounded by the shadows of which she does not seem to be aware.

The young mother is another episode in this chronology. Intensification of feeling can sometimes lead to a *suspension of time*. In "A Summer Garden," many of Glück's visions on the passing of time are present: the young woman in a park, watching over her two children, happy that the war is over and enjoying a lovely summer day, represents that sublimation, that suspension of time, which can be brought about by a shower of intense feelings:

> The children held hands leaning
> to smell the roses.
> They were five and seven.
>
> Infinite, infinite, —that
> was her perception of time." (Glück)

Roses in her verse, though, signify death most of the time. So do shadows, which somehow precede the loss of innocence and the realization of mortality: "The sky was pink and orange, older because the day was over./ There was no wind. The summer day/ cast oak shaped shadows on the green grass"; and then "Summer arrived. The children/ leaned over the rose border, their shadows/ merging with the shadows of the roses" (Glück). Such imagery comes to balance the sheer happiness of a young mother in a summer day. It does not come to annihilate the feeling itself, though. The intense feeling of happiness, of profound joy, of fulfilled maternity are not false, are not instances

of a willful denial of death and the passing of time. They are just moments that are so intense that they give meaning to whatever would happen afterwards—loss of innocence, loss of youth, decay, the changing of seasons, death...

The widow, trying to understand death is a powerful image in "A Fantasy." The woman who comes from the cemetery where she buried her husband, surrounded by people who try to give her comfort, is overwhelmed by memories. She cannot face the moment:

> In her heart, she wants them to go away.
> She wants to be back in the cemetery,
> back in the sickroom, the hospital. She knows
> it isn't possible. But it's her only hope
> the wish to move backwards. And just a little,
> not so far as the marriage, the first kiss. (Glück)

Most of what memory concentrates on is related to the beginning, when time just began, when there was *enough time*. She is petrified by the realization that she did not grasp the moment when things started to change.

There are several perspectives on life and time: God's perspective, Hades' perspective (or the perspective of a personalized death), and a natural perspective (relative to nature). Written from *God's perspective*, "Retreating Wind" gives another dimension to time: time that is taken back from people because they did not know how to use it properly. Humans allowed their souls to become "small talking things." In the beginning everything was perfect, the garden had fresh air, a "bed of earth, blanket of blue air," and what is more, "time you didn't know how to use." The consequence of man's greed to have the one thing he could not handle "the one gift/ reserved for another creation" is mortality. Man is denied the gift of a "circular" life, like that of plants in the garden. On the contrary, he is destined to live a short life like a bird's flight:

> your lives are the bird's flight
> which begins and ends in stillness—
> which begins and ends, in form echoing
> this arc from the white birch
> to the apple tree. (Glück)

The conversation with God is permanent: He made the Garden, we plant the seeds, but growing them, making them live and ripe is very difficult. In "Vespers," the poetic "I" reproaches God the harshness of the conditions for growing:

> I think I should not be encouraged to grow
> tomatoes. Or, if I am, you should withhold
> the heavy rains, the cold nights that come
> so often [...] (Glück)

Another reproach refers to the imminence of death, which makes any crops, any effort rather absurd: time is too short, we live under permanent "foreshadowing":

> you who do not discriminate
> between the dead and the living, who are [...]
> immune to foreshadowing, you may not know
> how much terror we bear [...]
> [...] I am responsible
> for these vines. (Glück)

Glück uses the image of the garden very often as she is a gardener, herself. There are many dialogues between the lyrical voice and God, between nature and God, like the flower in "The Gold Lily." The symbol of the garden, though, refers to God's creation, but also to the creation of chaos (Hades), of man (misunderstanding the meaning of their lives), the main problem being that if the Garden was a timeless project, its decay is mostly suffered by the human soul.

Hades' perspective comes from mythology, and is present in many of her poems. Hades and Persephone are the main characters in poems about life and death, about innocence and the passing of time. In "A Myth of Devotion," the God of death, of the under-world, built a "replica of earth" for Persephone, an earth of mortality, of which she had no previous knowledge. But he could see how she approached the moment of loss of innocence, how she started to feel the immortality of death in comparison to the mortality of life: "He waited many years,/ building a world, watching,/ Persephone in the meadow" (Glück). From Hades' perspective, death comes to rescue Persephone from pain, terror, guilt, from everything she is supposed to experience in The Garden he has created for her—a copy of the *real* Garden. Everything in this garden is subjected to decay and withering. Death is not the end of time, in his understanding of life, but the beginning; he considers that the only thing she needs to hear him say is "you're dead, nothing can hurt you/ which seems to him/ a more promising beginning, more true" (Glück).

The shadows of the underworld are present in the garden, be they just merely felt by the girl. As Hades builds the Garden-replica for Persephone, he little by little instills a feeling of mortality, he *introduces death* to her by getting the garden darker and darker through the shadows: "Gradually, he thought, he'd introduce the night,/ first as the shadows of fluttering leaves" (Glück).

Antiquity is present in Glück's poems in the most unexpected forms: sometimes ancient gods are just humans in disguise—like Circe—sometimes they are witnesses of life on earth. The source of life and beauty—embodied by Apollo—is balanced by withering and death at the end, represented and sourced by Hades. But there is a kind, empathic attitude that Hades has, allowing Persephone to enjoy life, creating a garden for her, where she can think she is immortal. And in "Hyacinth," Apollo's song, though, is impregnated with sadness, because he knows life and beauty are based on sorrow:

> There were no flowers in antiquity
> but boy's bodies, pale, perfectly imagined
> [...]
> In the field, in the willow grove,
> Apollo sent the courtiers away
>
> (3)
> And from the blood of the wound
> a flower sprang, lilylike, more brilliant
> than the purples of Tyre.
> Then the god wept: his vital grief
> flooded the earth. (Glück)

Such creational vital grief is, in fact, the foundational story that life on earth is based on. *Nature's perspective*—or a more natural understanding of the passing of time—is mostly related with seasonal changes in gardens and parks, in the natural world generally. Thus, time that passes is perceived through the changing of seasons, through the incomprehensible haste in which nature comes out of winter, blossoms, matures and then withers. It is the hauling sound of the wind that both deafens and silences the human voice as the mind cannot understand this rushed travel in time. As in "October," life is but the quick changing of seasons, we try to put seeds in the ground, to grow the vines, and then all ends with a series of questions:

> I can't hear your voice
> for the wind's cries, whistling over the bare ground

[...]
when was I silenced, when did it first seem
pointless to describe that sound
[...]
didn't the night end, wasn't the earth
safe when it was planted

didn't we plant the seeds,
weren't we necessary to the earth,

the vines were they harvested? (Glück)

The poet's experience with gardening is imbued in this vision on nature and how nature is subject to the cycles of life. Besides the biographical coordinates of each human being, which are subject to and are part of the passing of time, Louise Glück also meditates on other general themes like life, love, and the role of the poet.

Life is seen as a pathway measuring an infinite road, which starts from grandparents and parents and takes the traveler in the world of endless silence, populated with those on the other side. Moreover, this road can lead to a sudden precipice, for which we are completely un-prepared. The only momentary escape is *love*, which somehow suspends both the travel on the infinite path, and the fall into the precipice. In "An Adventure," the imagined "kingdom of death" is defined as a place of remembrance, where "the heart was still":

I was, you will understand, entering the kingdom of death,
[...] Here, too, the days were very long
while the years were very short. The sun sank over the far mountain.
The stars shone, the moon waxed and waned. Soon
faces from the past appeared to me:
my mother and father, my infant sister; they had not, it seemed,
finished what they had to say, though now
I could hear them because my heart was still. (Glück)

Past and present are intertwined not in a cyclical manner, though, but in a continuum that cannot be fathomed. It is dependent on very concrete and real landmarks, on a natural scenery, on the human presence, and on a cosmic order.

Love itself is all the time accompanied by the feeling that it is seasonal; it begins in great promise, it grows and blooms, but only for one season. After that, there is only autumn and winter and a long journey towards inexorable death. In "The Silver Lily," for instance,

[...] We're
alone now; we have no reason for silence.

Can you see, over the garden—the full moon rises.
I won't see the next full moon.

In spring, when the moon rose, it meant
time was endless. [...] (Glück)

Sometimes, the one summer that the lovers are allowed to live together is enough. It is the most they can ask for. God created a Garden representing the powerful creative urge; Hades created a copy of the garden to trick man into believing he is free to enjoy eternity while death awaits around the corner. The same happens in "The White Lilies" with the two lovers, since they create a garden, their own lives, but they can only enjoy it for one summer, one suspended moment in time.

As a man and woman make
a garden between them like
a bed of stars, here
they linger in the summer evening
and the evening turns
cold with their terror [...]
[...]
Hush, beloved. It doesn't matter to me
how many summers I live to return:
this one summer we have entered eternity.
I felt your two hands
bury me to release its splendor. (Glück)

The role of the poet is to try and understand the meaning of birth(days), of the relationship between earth, seasons, and life. Nevertheless, the only true and non-perverted look the poet can take is the first look, the fresh, uncompromised childish look. As in "Nostos," "The rest is memory" (Glück). When it comes to time, all notions of *before and after* are related to the ineffable moment when we are born, and it is impossible to pinpoint that moment, to link it with the meaning of life, as the earth is relentless and there is only a short image that we have to substitute for that relentlessness:

Substitution of the image
for relentless earth. What
do I know of this place,
the role of the tree for decades
taken by a bonsai, voices
rising from the tennis courts—
Fields. Smell of the tall grass, new cut.
As one expects of a lyric poet.
We look at the world once, in childhood.
The rest is memory. (Glück)

The role of the poet is also to re-tell the story of life and to give meaning to this story. When the story starts, time also starts to unfold. The state of grace is before everything is related and relatable—and this is the story of "Odysseus' Decision." Once he decides to leave Circe and her island—where time was suspended as there was no adventure, no story to tell—time begins again:

[...] Time
begins now, in which he hears again
that pulse which is the narrative
sea, at dawn, when its pull is strongest. (Glück)

The "narrative sea," his life-story, is like any life story; embarked on a ship that is sailing the seas, deciding both the direction and the speed of the journey, since "what has brought us here/ will lead us away; our ship/ sways in the tinted harbor water" (Glück). Nevertheless, the journey now cannot stop, cannot get suspended, cannot go in any other direction but forward in time, away from the moments of grace, and towards the expected end. The price Odysseus pays for getting his life back is death; he 're-gains' his mortality as he is carried away by the sea "that can only move forward" (Glück). Odysseus is also the voice of the poet's husband, harsh and challenging her capacity to see and appreciate the beauty of the world. Or, if she does see, the words she chooses are not penetrating enough. But it is the empire of time, still, that does not allow her to go into too much detail, to get completely lost in the world around and then crawl out of it victoriously, with the most appropriate images and words. Penelope—the poet—tries to defend her inability by showing that language itself is not complex enough, not evocative enough, overused and incapable of retaining such detail.

> ...given the very nature of poetic language, the task is difficult. [...] Glück is tired of reading the world as if it were an emblematic tapestry, yet she finds it difficult to be sustained by natural things alone. (Longebach, 2005, p. 140)

In a way, the poet suggests that she is not allowed the luxury of telling the story, which might have given her the right to live on. She is not the Ancient Mariner, nor is she Ishmael whose lives were saved only to be able to tell the story. She is not a mythological figure, either, like Oedipus, who is a blind witness to the story, but still allowed the propriety of his words. The status of the poet in this time-related memory track is as stable and trustworthy as her words. Words, though, are not enough, they do not satisfy her need to pinpoint her images in time. Words escape her.

The above mentioned themes that are present in her volumes are rooted in mythology, in the depth of human suffering, in the quest for meaning, or in the quest for family happiness. Such deep and philosophical themes, though, are rendered by Glück in a language that seems to be rather un-pretentious, straightforward, suggesting that the 'subject matter' is not very important.

> The directness of Glück's language suggests a kind of 'self-centeredness,' the authorial persona is as much a composition as are the monologues of Circe and Penelope in *Meadowlands*. However intimate, the lyric speaker remains detached from her desire to refrain from thinking. (Morris, 2006, p. 30)

In fact, it is clear from many of the poems that the poet tries to intertwine subtle literary and religious references with a vision on nature and the human nature, which is then pigmented with and oriented towards understanding the turns and turmoil of her own biography, compared to the biographies of those before her. The lyrical self both concentrates the feelings she has regarding her husband, her mother and father, her sibling, her son, with her experience of a gardener, in a permanent conversation with her own thought and with the oldest stories of humanity. She tries to re-write, in a sense, a natural philosophy, coming from the most important ancient and modern texts, but denies it at the same time, as if such philosophy is of no consequence, of no real importance—it rests between flower-beds, birch-trees, and shrubbery. Her critics and commentators point out this melting together of myth, sacred images, secular interests, and natural reflections. As Morris points out, though, such learned references very often do nothing but disguise the poet's vulnerability:

> [her language enables] her [...] to shift the stage upon which her personal, even autobiographical, expressions can take place as a series of masked performances.

> Allusiveness enables her to be elusive; to at once reveal and hide the speaker's vulnerabilities through the distance afforded by referring to myths and sources. (2006, p. 31)

Her references, though, sometimes interfere with the confessional tone that might be expected with such themes. Biography and loss, refuge and self-loathing, a hunger mixed with horror to live and the overwhelming terror that everything is finite and apparently meaningless, could (or even should, as some might consider) be transmitted by using a more personal tone. Glück was sometimes accused of being rather unfeeling (Greg Kuzma, qtd. by Laurie George, 1990), or of being too detached from her own themes, of treating them with a less-than-enforcing tone. The only victory the poetic voice has is represented by this very control she can master. A control that allows her not to shout out her despair, her feeling of loneliness and her fear of loss:

> Pressured by nearly overwhelming fears and longings, the poet as metaphorical anorexic triumphs by controlling the urge to cry out, by forcing herself to speak calmly: 'You see, they have no judgment./ So it is natural that they should drown.' (*Descending 3*) (Keller, 1990, p. 125)

In a study referring to Sylvia Plath, Louise Glück and Tracy Thompson, authors Suzanne England, Carol Ganzer, and Carol Tosone argue that all three poets were seriously inclined towards anxiety and depression, and that influenced their poetic voice very much. From this perspective, the women who suffer from depression use poetic self-expression to try to formulate their thinking in a coherent manner, to communicate at least in this way what seems to be impossible to communicate. They fight isolation with imagination as if to address the complexity of feeling by putting together a complexity of imagery, and to identify around them those elements that can come together in their poems and reflect at least part of their inner turmoil.

> This sense of incommunicability—that others cannot understand what one is experiencing—fosters feelings of profound isolation and compounds the suffering. In attempting to explain to herself the causes of the suffering and to find relief, the woman with serious depression grasps desperately for some way to think coherently about the experience—to make sense of it all in order to plan an escape from the pain. (2008, p. 83)

Later on in the same study, the authors consider that Glück's use of natural imagery is placing her 'narratives' in a timeless, placeless realm, and that the sense of loss is doubled by a sense of hope.

All these critical views are supported by Glück's poems. The language is strange and non-canonical, but rich with canonical references. There appears to be an ongoing conversation with God, with herself, with nature, with family members and this is the preferred manner in which she asks all the questions. She is obsessed by myth, and re-creates the story of the couple using the matrix of Odysseus and Penelope. Moreover, she obviously has the tormented soul of a very intelligent and perceptive woman, a Jew living in the aftermath of the Holocaust, depressed by her incapacity to adapt.

Nevertheless, we think that Glück's poetry is mostly a mirror that she holds up to a humanity that is trying to make sense of all its endeavors, while confronted with finitude, with the approaching implacable end, and with the incomprehensible urge to live a life that is governed by the irrepressible passing of time. Time governs, time is senseless, time limits all effort and makes any hope and any kind of wish to communicate futile and meaningless. The poet's destiny is not only to mirror such decay, but also to challenge the human response to this reality and give humans a vision of their own role on earth. The role of Persephone is not only that of the innocent being who is followed, watched and tricked by Hades, but that of giving meaning to Hades' garden-replica. Without her, neither life, nor death has meaning. We are here to justify the very existence of a garden. We are unique, irreplaceable, and capable to sing our own mortality. What is more, we are able to appreciate beauty and create beauty: the poet refers to many such instances of man-created beauty, as well as to natural beauty.

With such references to mythology, with an acute sense of nature (both man-made and natural), and with her inclination to poetic maieutics, we think that Glück is a Romantic–Classical poet, in a sense. She seems to be walking into the footsteps of John Keats, trying to find in antiquity answers for the tormented soul who is faced with postmodernity. By describing this arch that goes back to ancient times, to the times of creation, and comes to the seasonal reality of the natural world, the poet reveals the value of humanity as the 'excuse' for creation, as the witness of creation, and the victim of its finitude. The only weapon that modern sensitivity has is memory, the going back in our own lives, in the life of those around us, as well as in the collective memory of mankind. Such memory is capable of defeating time in a way, of sublimating and concentrating it, keeping it 'at bay', and making sense of the passage.

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