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A Gnostic in the Garden: Myth and Religion in Louise Glück's Poems

Abstract

Louise Glück repeatedly refers to the Bible and classical mythology, even when writing about poignantly personal issues. Far from being mere high-brow literary embellishments, these cultural quotes and intertextual analogs testify to Glück's consistent attempt to transcend the traditionally personalist scope of lyric poetry. Such a resolutely transpersonal perspective is particularly discernible in her poems dealing with broadly-conceived religious themes, especially that of cultivating the postlapsarian, modern analog of the Biblical Garden of Eden. In *A Village Life* (2009), for example, the ontological possibility of transcendence is alternately hinted at and questioned, with the poet inhabiting a transition zone between doubt and faith as a questioning believer, so to speak. In the much-earlier *The Wild Iris* (1992), the axiological status of God is explored in highly unorthodox ways, the poems' speakers undermining many established images of God in Christian and Jewish traditions. Arguably, what the two volumes share is their Gnostic imagery, purposely veiled in *A Village Life* and more explicit in *The Wild Iris*. Already present in *Firstborn* (1968), Gnostic undertones can also be found in other volumes, e.g. *The House on Marshland* (1975) and *Descending Figure* (1980). Iconoclastic and transgressive, Glück's poems often expose a destructive facet of transcendence or feature some kind of charge against God, explicit or implicit. The Creator for the most part remains irritatingly silent, with the poet constantly bringing this up—sometimes in a tongue-in-cheek, sometimes in a deadly serious manner. A virtuoso of register shifts, Louise Glück plays cat and mouse with the reader, evading any closures. Her personal creed remains a riddle.

Keywords: Bible, Louise Glück, Gnosticism, intertextuality, loss, motherhood, myth, nostalgia, poetry, transpersonal perspective

1. Introduction

Daniel Morris describes Louise Glück as “a mystic poet” who displays “an ambivalent attitude to religious discourse that verges on Gnosticism as well as one that is in line with the ancient rabbinic tradition of reading scripture known as midrash” (Morris 2006: 3). Glück repeatedly refers to the Bible, even when

writing about poignantly personal issues. Through cultural quotes and intertextual analogues she tries to expand the traditionally personalist scope of lyric poetry. Glück's perspective is often transpersonal. This is particularly visible in the poems dealing with spiritual themes. One prominent example of such a theme is that of cultivating the postlapsarian, modern analogue of the Biblical Garden of Eden.

In *The Wild Iris* (1992) Glück explores the axiological status of God in highly unorthodox ways, undermining many established images of God in Christian and Jewish traditions. Glück never openly admits it, but the dominant imagery of *The Wild Iris* is essentially Gnostic. Thus, from the perspective of Christian or Jewish orthodoxy, her poems are iconoclastic and transgressive—Gnosticism is, after all, a heresy. Glück's poems often expose a destructive facet of transcendence or feature some kind of charge against God, explicit or implicit. A virtuoso of register shifts, Louise Glück plays cat and mouse with the reader, evading any closures. Her personal creed remains a riddle.

At this point it should be explained what is meant by Gnosticism in the context of contemporary American poetry. The term is certainly not meant here as a reference to any particular Gnostic church, school or movement—whether historical or contemporary. I believe it would be presumptuous to “nail” a consistently evasive poet such as Louise Glück with a single religious label. Gnosticism in the context of this paper should be therefore understood as a specific spiritual attitude to the human condition. This attitude stresses the imperfect, flawed character of God's creation and a sense of discomfort that it brings to human beings (see Thomassen 2008). In this sense, it is possible to speak of an essentially Gnostic perspective in the work of otherwise very diverse thinkers, writers, or poets. Stephan Hoeller, for example, convincingly argues that Gnosticism served as a source of paradigmatic inspiration for Voltaire, Blake, Yeats, Hesse, Melville, and Jung (see Hoeller 2002). Needless to say, a “Gnostic” poet thus conceived need not be aware of his/her Gnostic spiritual affinities. William Blake is a good example. Given the status of Urizen in his mythopoeia, Blake may well be considered a Valentinian Gnostic. In all likelihood, of course, he never viewed himself as one.

Narrowing down the term's meaning is crucial if it is to work as a reference point for Louise Glück's spiritual stance. Otherwise, “Gnosticism” becomes a mere buzzword—as it has indeed already become in other contexts. At this point Ioan Culianu's much-quoted tongue-in-cheek comment may be in place:

Once I believed that Gnosticism was a well-defined phenomenon belonging to the religious history of Late Antiquity. Of course, I was ready to accept the idea of different prolongations of ancient Gnosis, and even that of spontaneous generation of views of the world in which, at different times, the distinctive features of Gnosticism occur again.

I was soon to learn however, that I was a naïf indeed. Not only Gnosis was gnostic, but the Catholic authors were gnostic, the Neoplatonic too, Reformation was gnostic, Communism was gnostic, Nazism was gnostic, liberalism, existentialism and psychoanalysis were gnostic too, modern biology was gnostic, Blake, Yeats, Kafka were gnostic. [...] I learned further that science is gnostic and superstition is gnostic [...] Hegel is gnostic and Marx is gnostic; all things and their opposite are equally gnostic. (Culianu 1984: 290)

In a similar vein, Charles Coulombe argued: “In reality, ‘Gnosticism’, like ‘Protestantism’, is a word that has lost most of its meaning. Just as we would need to know whether a ‘Protestant’ writer is Calvinist, Lutheran, Anabaptist, or whatever in order to evaluate him properly, so too the ‘Gnostic’ must be identified” (Coulombe 1991: 28).

Both conceptual extremes—defining Gnosticism strictly in historical terms as a 2nd-century Christian heresy (of Valentinus, Basilides, et al.) or as a broadly-conceived ideological paradigm

manifesting itself in literature, philosophy, and even politics (cf. Eric Voegelin)—are of little use for close-reading literary analysis of modern poetry, the former being too narrow, the latter too broad. Arguably, what makes so many of Glück's poems unmistakably Gnostic in tone is their imagery featuring man's sense of inner spiritual split, one that translates itself into images of the human body as a site of conflicting, mutually-exclusive drives, of the world as a site of perennial struggle between spirit and matter, and, finally, of time and space as inherently hostile forces to human longings for transcendence. The tenor of all such images is the idea that the world is a corrupt place, a result of some cosmic catastrophe rather than the best of possible creations. This concept, of course, is not unique to Gnosticism. What makes it different from the Christian concept of the Original Sin, though, is the disturbing idea that the fault is not man's but God's. It is at this point that Glück's Gnostic affinities emerge most clearly. With this in mind, the most useful definitions of Gnosticism when analyzing selected poetic images viewed as constituting a modern poet's mythopoeia seem to be those focused on the Gnostic mythos. A uniquely concise definition was offered more than half a century ago by Clark Emery. Here is the list of twelve beliefs shared, Emery argues, by most Gnostics:

- The Gnostics posited an original spiritual unity that came to be split into a plurality.
- As a result of the precosmic division the universe was created. This was done by a leader possessing inferior spiritual powers and who often resembled the Old Testament Jehovah.
- A female emanation of God was involved in the cosmic creation (albeit in a much more positive role than the leader).
- In the cosmos, space and time have a malevolent character and may be personified as demonic beings separating man from God.
- For man, the universe is a vast prison. He is enslaved both by the physical laws of nature and by such moral laws as the Mosaic code.
- Mankind may be personified as Adam, who lies in the deep sleep of ignorance, his powers of spiritual self-awareness stupefied by materiality.
- Within each natural man is an "inner man," a fallen spark of the divine substance. Since this exists in each man, we have the possibility of awakening from our stupefaction.
- What effects the awakening is not obedience, faith, or good works, but knowledge.
- Before the awakening, men undergo troubled dreams.
- Man does not attain the knowledge that awakens him from these dreams by cognition but through revelatory experience, and this knowledge is not information but a modification of the sensate being.
- The awakening (i.e., the salvation) of any individual is a cosmic event.
- Since the effort is to restore the wholeness and unity of the Godhead, active rebellion against the moral law of the Old Testament is enjoined upon every man. (Emery 1966: 13–14)

It should be emphasized that not all of the above-mentioned tenets are clearly present in Glück's poetry and some feature more prominently than others. Crucial, however, is the pervasive presence of the motif of primordial unity destructively subdivided into individual beings whose cognitive potential is vastly inferior to that of their unified source. The image of the divine spark trapped in organic matter raises the question of God's ontological status. Interestingly enough, the poet's Godhead seems neither pantheist nor purely transcendent. Anthropologists and religion scholars offer us another term which

seems more applicable to Glück's perspective on God. The term, popularized by Matthew Fox and used extensively by Leonard M. Scigaj in his discussion of Wendell Berry's ecological poetry (cf. Fox 1988, Scigaj 2002), is panentheism. As Scigaj explains:

Fox calls this mystic perception of God's animating energy suffusing all creation panentheism. Fox prefers panentheism to pantheism, because pantheism, heretical to Christians, robs God of transcendence by equating his essence with his material creation—hence “everything is God and God is everything.” Adding the Greek *en* results in the acceptable assertion that “God is in everything and everything is in God.” (Scigaj: 2002: 120–21)

2. Misanthropic revulsion and Gnostic nostalgia

A good poem to illustrate such an attitude would be “The Chicago Train,” the opening lyric of *Firstborn* (published 1968). This short poem might be termed Gnostic in perspective because of a peculiar kind of revulsion it expresses. It is a misanthropic revulsion at the sight of a nuclear family, or, more precisely, at their corruptible carnality. Here is the text in its entirety:

Across from me the whole ride
Hardly stirred: just Mister with his barren
Skull across the arm-rest while the kid
Got his head between his mama's legs and slept. The poison
That replaces air took over.
And they sat—as though paralysis preceding death
Had nailed them there. The track bent south.
I saw her pulsing crotch ... the lice rooted in that baby's hair.
(Glück 1995: 5)

The poem's speaker questions—indirectly, of course, and through subtly-handled poetic means—the very fundamentals of the human condition: familial bonds, maternal love, and even the workings of the human body itself. She does it by manipulating the imagery in such a way as to unfold a chain of negative connotations with the objects under scrutiny. The details are ostensibly realistic, but their handling—unobtrusively symbolic.

Take the description of the husband's bald head, for example. First of all, Glück refers to him as “Mister” rather than “husband,” thus immediately offering a clue as to the family's social status. The conventional “Mister” and its feminine counterpart “Missus” or “Mrs” are traditional “folksy” ways the spouses may refer to each other. So, the poet indicates that this is a typical, conventional—and thus, presumably, patriarchal—family, be it American or immigrant. The man's head is described as “barren,” not bald—and this is the first instance of defamiliarization in the poem. The estrangement effect is strengthened by the openly arbitrary enjambement. By creating a contrived, unnatural pause after the word “barren” Glück emphasizes the symbolic import of this otherwise perfectly quotidian fact.

The other details are also realistic, but handled symbolically. The family is napping, motionsless, as if paralyzed. This, of course, connotes some kind of stupor, some kind of mindlessness. They are both asleep and traveling—an extended metaphor of life, perhaps? (An unreflexive life, of course.) The child's head is between his mother's legs. Again, this is a perfectly realistic situation on a train. But one cannot

miss the symbolism of the scene. The child's head is now almost back to where it originally came from—back to the source of life. And this source is tainted, so to speak—and repulsive. Life as a project is not seen in a favorable light here.

To begin with, the act of birth itself is seen as a loss. Consider the poem “For My Mother” from *The House on Marshland* (1975):

It was better when we were
together in one body.
Thirty years. Screened
through the green glass
of your eye, moonlight
filtered into my bones
as we lay
in the big bed, in the dark,
waiting for my father.
Thirty years. He closed
your eyelids with
two kisses. And then spring
came and withdrew from me
the absolute
knowledge of the unborn,
leaving the brick stoop
where you stand, shading
your eyes, but it is
night, the moon
is stationed in the beech tree,
round and white among
the small tin markers of the stars:
Thirty years. A marsh
grows up around the house.
Schools of spores circulate
behind the shades, drift through
gauze flutterings of vegetation.
(Glück 1995: 64)

Described in the poem in terms of an unspecified cognitive loss, the speaker's birth deprived her of some kind of precious prenatal insight. Ironically enough, the disastrous birth apparently took place in the spring, the season usually evoking positive associations with vitality, rebirth, etc. In Glück's poem, though, the beginning is the end. The arbitrary enjambement (“*the absolute / knowledge of the unborn*”) strengthens the ambiguity of the event. The pause after the adjective “*absolute*,” however short, not only provides an additional emphasis on the “*absolute*” character of the “*knowledge*” lost, but also invests the word with temporary ambiguity—it now could be, if only for a fraction of a second, a noun or an adjective. The reader cannot escape the impression that this absolute knowledge was, among other things, the knowledge of the Absolute.

The mother's body is also described in ambiguous terms. On the one hand, throughout the poem there is a strong sense of intimacy and sublime rapport between the mother's body and the unborn baby. On the other hand, the "green glass" of the mother's eye is a mechanistic metaphor with an emotionally ambiguous tenor. In a similarly mechanistic metaphor, the stars are described as "small tin markers," as if some kind of sublime—but at the same time mechanical—connection between the mother's body and the cosmos was suggested.

Actually, the entire poem seems to rest on the opposition between mechanistic and organicist imagery. The cosmos and the mother's body are rendered in mechanistic terms: the moonlight is being "filtered," the moon is "stationed" in the beech tree, and the distant stars are like "small tin markers." All this is contrasted with the organic world surrounding the house, which is full of agency, living a life of its own—a marsh "grows up," spores "circulate" and "drift." This organic life, however, is rendered as precarious and contingent, even if omnipresent. The words "drift" and "flutter," after all, usually connote aimless, haphazard movement and fragility, respectively.

At this point a question pops up: If Life manifesting itself in Creation is no good, what about the Creator? The poem "The Apple Trees" (also from *The House on Marshland*) stands out in the volume with its manifold interpretive ambiguity. Here is the full text:

Your son presses against me
his small intelligent body.

I stand beside his crib
as in another dream
you stood among trees hung
with bitten apples
holding out your arms.
I did not move
but saw the air dividing
into panes of color—at the very last
I raised him to the window saying
See what you have made
and counted out the whittled ribs,
the heart on its blue stalk
as from among the trees
the darkness issued:

In the dark room your son sleeps.
The walls are green, the walls
are spruce and silence.
I wait to see how he will leave me.
Already on his hand the map appears
as though you carved it there,
the dead fields, women rooted to the river.

(Glück 1995: 99)

The poem's imagery is consistently archetypal in its indefiniteness. The poet refuses to ground the lyric's "plot" and "setting" in almost any type of verisimilitude. (The only references to the "real" world out there that help the reader frame the poem in time and space somehow are "crib," "window," "room," "walls," and of course the oneiric "trees" full of "bitten apples.") Thus the events described could have taken place almost anytime and anywhere. This kind of ambiguity could be regarded as a form of defamiliarization or what Richard Howard, though in an altogether different context, calls "*familiar strangeness*" (1976: 376).

The second, longest part is particularly cryptic, including the speaker's account of her dream in which her husband/partner is standing alone in (their?) garden (or orchard?), among bitten apples, while she, standing by the window inside (their?) house, raises the baby to the window to show it to its father. The scene, though dreamlike enough, does contain some realistic elements. The baby-showing scene could have taken place either in a maternity ward or at the speaker's home, soon after childbirth. (In this reading, raising the newborn baby to the window to show it to its father waiting out front is realistic enough for both scenarios.) The indefiniteness of the poem's setting helps us to see the speaker, her partner/husband, and the baby in archetypal terms, that is as an Adamic nuclear family re-enacting certain primordial roles. It is only through the shift in tenses from the Present Simple to the Past Simple that we can locate the boundary between life and dream in this text. Life from the poet's perspective is like a dream within a dream.

Like in many other poems by Glück, the generic sense of belonging to a larger natural order does not seem to bring any comfort to the speaker. Instead, it invests the scene with a fatalistic aura of resigned acceptance. This fatalism, in turn, creates an emotional distance between the woman and the world around her, which now seems unreal to her, or—to repeat—dreamlike. The situation is doubly poignant and ironic if we consider that what triggers the association with a dream is her standing beside the crib and holding the baby. What should have felt like a quintessentially intimate (and thus ultimately authentic) experience feels like yet another dream.

The whole emotional order in the poem is eerily topsy-turvy, the poet consistently undermining pre-established, traditional hierarchies. Thus the lyric about motherhood is titled "The Apple Trees," with the natural world—not the baby or the mother-child relationship—in the foreground. The surreal image of the trees hung with bitten apples is, potentially at least, a symbolic allusion to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In the Book of Genesis it takes only one bite on a single apple to bring sin and corruption to the world. Interestingly, in the poem the bitten apples are everywhere in the garden. There are at least two possible interpretations here. In the first one the numerous symbolically "corrupted" apples could mean that the original act of Eve's spiritual transgression (with Adam following suit, of course) has been repeated countless times by the poem's speaker and her husband. This, incidentally, would be in line with the Christian dogma: living in a postlapsarian world, burdened with the Original Sin, entails sinning on a daily basis. The second interpretation does not preclude the first, but shifts the emphasis. In that reading the fact that *all* the garden has been infested with sin comes to the foreground. In other words, there are no pockets of innocence in Glück's world. Both interpretations contextualize the poem's motif of parenthood in rather sinister ways. Glück seems to be saying that being a parent in a postlapsarian world is not exactly a source of bliss. In the ambiguous dream, the man holds out his arms to the woman, but she does not move, as if some insurmountable emotional barrier separated the husband and wife for good. Instead, she tells him to see what he has "*made*," the admonition being also emotionally ambivalent—it could be an expression of shared parental pride or a veiled reproach.

The natural world is invested with conspicuous agency. This shift of agency from human beings to natural forces puts nature in the poem on a par with humankind. This, in turn, strengthens the effect of the whole scene taking place *in illo tempore*. That is probably why the poet chooses to defamiliarize the quotidian act of the darkness falling as the evening approaches. In her wording, it did not simply get dark at the end of the day, but the darkness “*issued from among the trees*” (Glück 1995: 99).

In the poem’s subsequent section—and the very next line—the room in which the woman’s baby boy sleeps is also described as “*dark*”, and the room’s walls are “*spruce and silence*.” Such a smooth transition from the darkness outside to the dark room, and from the natural landscape out there to the room’s interior, underscores the organic link between the humans inside the house and the trees outside. So, emphasizing the intrinsic emotional barrier between individual human beings, Glück simultaneously downplays the boundary between humans and the wilderness. In an altogether different context this could be good news for mankind. (In fact, human isolation from nature has been a staple source of concern in Western poetry, beginning at least with the Romantics.) In Glück’s universe, however, Creation—like life itself—is an ambiguous gift from an ambiguous Creator. The natural bond between people and nature may just as well signify some sort of supernatural bondage. In other words, for Glück the archetypal connections are there, but their ultimate meaning is not what the Western reader of (especially Romantic) poetry may have been accustomed to.

The final image of women and the river is a good example of how the same archetypal image can be interpreted in contrastingly different ways, depending on the viewer’s paradigmatic preconceptions about the value of life itself. In a different context, the image of “*women rooted to the river*” could stand for some sort of empowerment. In many pagan mythologies, for example, the aquatic Goddess is pictured as a crone, the Great Mother, the Creatrix of the Universe (cf. Campbell 1991, Eisler 1988, Gimbutas 2001, Stone 1978). Thus she evokes fundamentally positive associations. However, in Louise Glück’s mythopoeia human life is an axiologically ambivalent gift. Mother Nature, if personified at all, seems closer, say, to Kali than to Virgin Mary, individual human beings being treated instrumentally as mere transitory carriers of perennial life. In this context, women “*rooted to the river*,” who are part of the fatalistic “*map*” featuring “*dead fields*,” do not represent any form of mythic empowerment but, rather, symbolize “*feminine*” inertia and submissiveness as conceived of in patriarchal cultures and uranian (sky-oriented) religions.

3. Mixing religious paradigms in *Descending Figure* (1980)

The tendency to speak through archetypal characters becomes more pronounced in *Descending Figure* (1980). Here the act of divine creation itself, accompanied by an unprecedented sense of the moment’s uniqueness, of beginning *ab ovo* or of creating something *ex nihilo*, becomes a natural, as it were, source of poetic defamiliarization. (Admittedly, if estrangement is the key poetic effect, what can be more poetic than the very act of creation, when everything happens for the first time?) The image and conceptual metaphor of the world as a garden brings to mind the Book of Genesis, of course. Yet, the reader accustomed to Biblical imagery may be confused sometimes by what happens in Glück’s creation poems. In the Old Testament, Yahwe’s act of creation presupposes God’s transcendence, the Creator’s separateness from his Creation. This, of course, emphasizes both God’s grandeur and his totally different ontological status from the universe he created. Human-like as Yahwe sometimes may seem in his, say, outbursts of anger or

in referring to himself as a “jealous god,” Judaism has always been viewed as antithetical to pagan Greeks’ anthropomorphic renditions of the sacred realm. In *Descending Figure*, however, it seems sometimes as if the Biblical Yahwe has just landed in the middle of a Greek myth. Glück, though never guilty of a mixed metaphor, does seem to mix religious paradigms. Consider “The Garden,” the second poem in a series of five short lyrics titled “The Garden” as well:

The garden admires you.
For your sake it smears itself with green pigment,
the ecstatic reds of the roses,
so that you will come to it with your lovers.

And the willows –
see how it has shaped these green
tents of silence. Yet
there is still something you need,
your body so soft, so alive, among the stone animals.

Admit that it is terrible to be like them,
beyond harm.
(Glück 1995: 107)

4. Shifting agency in “The Wild Iris”

Glück’s perspective on nature brings to mind some poems on animals written by James Dickey, W. S. Merwin, or Gary Snyder. As Robert Bly once brilliantly put it, “As a Dickey poem begins, we see a man sleeping in the suburbs dreaming he is a deer; it is possible this sleeper may be a deer dreaming it is a man” (1991: 164). Such radical shifts of perspective, often accompanied by a shift of agency from the human to the non-human, are also characteristic of Glück’s verse.

Perhaps the best example of such transpersonal shifts of agency and perspective is *The Wild Iris* (published in 1992). This collection is quite explicit when it comes to Glück’s stand on God. And, unlike in many other volumes, the very existence of a personal God as well as “spiritualized” Nature that “speaks” through personified plants is taken for granted in *The Wild Iris*. For example, the speaker of the opening poem “The Wild Iris” is the eponymous flower, just like in the subsequent “Trillium,” “Lamium,” or “Snowdrops.” Throughout the poem one comes across lyrics whose speakers are diverse flowers, trees, bushes or grasses, ranging from common ones to those familiar only to gardening aficionados (e.g. “Scilla,” “The Hawthorn Tree,” “Violets,” “Witchgrass,” “The Jacob’s Ladder,” “Clover,” “Ipomea”).

It is hard to find one unifying principle for all these lyrics. Contrary to standard expectations, not all of the floral speakers offer reassuring pantheistic truths about the perennial cycle of life, though some of them do. The iris, for instance, tells us that it remembers its own death followed by reincarnation to a new life, the trillium admits that after waking up in the forest for the first time, it “knew nothing” and “could do nothing but see” (Glück 1992: 4). The shadow-dwelling lamium explains that “*Living things don’t all require / light in the same degree. Some of us / make our own light*” (Glück 1992: 5). Through such cryptic

statements Glück not only attempts to render a mode of existence completely different from human but also seems to imply that mankind could learn a lot from the world of plants, especially as regards one's understanding of the role of the individual self in the planetary life processes and the acceptance of one's own inevitable demise. The undulating waves of scilla flowers are very straightforward about that:

Not I, you idiot, not self, but we, we—waves
of sky blue like
a critique of heaven: why
do you treasure your voice
when to be one thing
is to be next to nothing?
(Glück 1992: 14)

The plants are “*blue*” in both senses of the word. In this brilliant poetic figure, combining a pun, a metaphor and a simile, one hears, again, a distant echo of Gnosticism, the Creation silently blaming the Creator.

It is not, of course, the only justified interpretation. The “*critique of heaven*” might just as well stand for the critique of excessive orthodox religiosity or exclusively sky-oriented (i.e. “*uranian*” in anthropological jargon) metaphysical longings. The blue waves of scilla are as beautiful as the distant and inaccessible sky, so why look for transcendence up in the clouds? “The mundane is sublime; the natural is supernatural,” the scilla flowers seem to be saying.

Not all the book's floral speakers offer a viewpoint radically different from ours. Some of them have amazingly human problems. In “The Jacob's Ladder” the eponymous plant explains:

Trapped in the earth
wouldn't you want to go
to heaven? I live
in a lady's garden. Forgive me, lady;
longing has taken my grace. I am
not what you wanted. But
as men and women seem
to desire each other, I too desire
knowledge of paradise—and now
your grief, a naked stem
reaching the porch window.
And at the end, what? A small blue flower
like a star. Never
to leave the world! Is this
not what your tears mean?
(Glück 1992: 24)

Small wonder that the flower crowned with a star-shaped corona has been given a Biblical name. Now let us consider the symbolism here. The flower is tied to the soil by the roots that both feed the stem and immobilize it. At the same time the flower's starry head is filled with inarticulate longings for transcendence. Thus Jacob's Ladder remains hopelessly split between heaven and earth.

God as such is also a speaker in several poems. Their titles are, at first sight, spiritually non-committal. But they reveal their metaphorical potential after one has read the whole poem. Here are the

titles: "Clear Morning," "Spring Snow," "End of Winter," "Retreating Wind," "April," "Midsummer," "End of Summer," "Early Darkness," "Harvest," "Retreating Light," "Sunset," "Lullaby," "September Twilight." The speaker/God in most of these poems voices his impatience with the restless, intellectually-limited and at the same time smugly arrogant mankind. The Creator is apparently disappointed with his creation.

In "Clear Morning" the speaker is tired of communicating with people in the only language they can understand—the language of signs. Too busy with naming material objects as they appear before them, human beings are unable to embrace God's metaphysical indifference to the physical details of the world. God has counted on man's evolution in this respect, but to no avail. He is running out of patience:

And all this time
I indulged your limitation, thinking

you would cast it aside yourselves sooner or later,
thinking matter could not absorb your gaze forever –

obstacle of the clematis painting
blue flowers on the porch window –

I cannot go on
restricting myself to images
(Glück 1992: 7–8)

According to God one of the obstacles to man's spiritual growth is the distracting beauty of the clematis. This detail acquires additional significance in the context of the book's numerous lyrics whose speakers are plants. Perhaps a more conventionally-minded reader might expect some kind of spiritual symbiosis, complementariness or fusion between God's and the plants' perspective. That would mean some kind of esoteric rapport between Creator and Creation, inaccessible to mankind only. God, however, remains indifferent to the allure of His creation. What is more, He treats nature in an instrumental manner, like in "Spring Snow":

Look at the night sky:
I have two selves, two kinds of power.

I am here with you, at the window,
watching you react. Yesterday
the moon rose over moist earth in the lower garden.
Now the earth glitters like the moon,
like dead matter crusted with light.
(Glück 1992: 9)

Through the weather anomaly God was trying to communicate something. Glittering in the sun, the snow-covered Spring garden is a message to the poet-gardener. The flowers alive only yesterday are now dead, "crusted with light." The choice of metaphor leaves no room for doubt. Light can be life-giving or deadly, depending on the whim of an inscrutable, unpredictable Demiurge. Sky-oriented transcendence is, indeed, unearthly.

Of God's several monologues in the volume, two ("End of Winter" and "Retreating Wind") are particularly poignant. They dismiss the two religious concepts that have been fundamental to many a school of mysticism, namely reincarnation and God's immanent presence in human nature. In "End of Winter" the deity declares to mankind:

You wanted to be born; I let you be born.
When has my grief ever gotten
in the way of your pleasure?

Plunging ahead
into the dark and light at the same time
eager for sensation

as though you were some new thing, wanting
to express yourselves

all brilliance, all vivacity

never thinking
this would cost you anything,
never imagining the sound of my voice
as anything but part of you –

you won't hear it in the other world,
not clearly again,
not in birdcall or human cry,

not the clear sound, only
persistent echoing
in all sound that means good-bye, good-bye –

the one continuous line
that binds us to each other.

(Glück 1992: 10–11)

In fact, everything in the poem seems clear except for the line "*You wanted to be born; I let you be born.*" How could people have wanted to be born before they existed? If prior to the act of creation only God had been "out" there, human desire to exist in the form of individual selves must have been born within God. To repeat—both in the pantheistic and panentheistic vision God creates the world, with its plethora of organic forms, in order to experience more extensively His own power which would have otherwise remained potential only. Thus, the Creator gets to know Himself better, as it were, through His creation. The poem's subsequent lines modify that theosophical implication. It turns out that—even if there had existed some original ontological bond between God and man—it was irredeemably severed once man had inhabited an epistemological world of his own with all its cognitive confines. This is how one could

interpret the metaphor of plunging simultaneously into darkness and light. Isolating mankind from the original godhead (one, in this case, vaguely reminiscent of what the Valentinian Gnostics called the Pleroma) resulted in the first cosmic dichotomy (light and darkness) which generated, in turn, all the others, more or less as in the Biblical version of creation. On a more remote associative plane, “plunging” into the depths of the human condition may connote a leap into the “physical,” “materialized” light or into the dark of ignorance.

From the lyric “Retreating Wind” we learn that creating mankind was an experiment that failed. Humans have failed to make the most of their God-given potential:

I gave you every gift,
blue of the spring morning,
time you didn't know how to use –
you wanted more, the one gift
reserved for another creation.

Whatever you hoped,
you will not find yourselves in the garden,
among the growing plants.
Your lives are not circular like theirs:

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 1992: 15)

The poem, thirteenth in the volume, substantially modifies the reader's expectations generated by “Wild Iris,” the lyric opening the collection, in which the eponymous floral speaker claims to have survived its own death. The iris refers to its own demise as “*that which you fear, being / a soul and unable / to speak*” (Glück 1992: 1). The flower's diagnosis, apparently, is that man's inherent split into body and soul lies at the root of his spiritual ordeal, including man's inability to “*remember / passage from the other world*” (Glück 1992: 1). The poem seems to suggest, then, that all life is cyclical. Fourteen pages further into the volume, however, we are told that reincarnation is the plants' privilege; “*Your lives are not circular like theirs*” (Glück 1992: 15), God tells people. In this context, the seemingly matter-of-fact statement “*you will not find yourselves in the garden*” (Glück 1992: 15) becomes a pun whose meanings can be either that humans will fail to reach the garden or that they will not be able to “*find themselves*” there, i.e. discover their true natural potential.

The garden—both the Biblical Eden and the one where the poet works alongside her husband (John is mentioned several times in the volume) constitutes the book's central metaphor. Glück makes the most of the symbolic potential of realistic details. The poet and her husband appear as modern embodiments of the archetypal couple. (More precisely, Glück revives the Biblical triangle of Adam, Eve and Yahwe.) It is, in Rosanna Warren's terms, a “classifying gesture” (Warren 2008: 103).

It is somewhere in-between the two limits of human knowledge, i.e. God's and plants' perspectives, that the volume's "prayers" belong—a group of poems with the recurrent titles of "Matins" and "Vespers" (seven and ten lyrics, respectively). The deceptively pious and familiar titles herald poems that, in fact, have little in common with a traditionally understood prayer, though some of them do address God directly.

Almost all the lyrics in this group feature some kind of charge against God, explicit or implicit. The Creator remains irritatingly silent, with the poet constantly bringing it up—sometimes in a tongue-in-cheek, sometimes in a deadly serious manner. "Matins" and "Vespers" function as ironic counterpoints to the lyrics whose speaker is God. Both parties have their grievances. From the human perspective, the distant deity appears to be emotionally changeable and volatile (and thus not exactly perfect)—an unpredictable Demiurge who has apparently created the world to appease his own unfathomable passions and longings. Glück's Demiurge no longer has the fundamental attribute of the fatherly God, namely permanence. This, incidentally, may be the interpretive key to all of Louise Glück's poetry—she evolves with the Creator.

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