

Louise Glück's "October": 'An Allegory of Waste'

"Time does not Pass, it Accumulates..."—Ian Baucom¹

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Abstract

Though Louise Glück's name has shot into popularity after her reception of the Nobel Prize in 2020, in the literary field she is not an unknown name. Born as Louise Elisabeth Glück on April 22, 1943, Glück was praised by the Nobel Committee for "her unmistakable poetic voice that with austere beauty makes individual existence universal". One of the difficulties that a reader would face in approaching the poetic world of Louise Glück is that her poems are very different from one another and they often defy any theoretical modelling. The catastrophic 9/11 terrorist attacks in America left deep scars on human minds and literary authors recognised the tragedy by means of their literary productions. Louise Glück's "October" from *Averno* (2006) is one of the dozens of books published within a decade of the terrorist attacks that are concentrated upon the psychological impact the sights of widespread destruction had upon the victims and their associated people as also upon the witnesses of the scenario. While most of such works derive their force from direct portrayal or indirect reference to the catastrophe, Glück, by avoiding any such reference or mention and resorting to a complex mythical framework, achieves a distinction in this field. The present article explores the distinctive theme and technique of "October".

Keywords: Disaster, Destruction, Myth, Autobiography, Sorrow.

Introduction

The Shelleyan dictum, "Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought" may have become hackneyed due to overuse, but that does not lessen its validity a dint. Poetry has a profound relation with sorrow and it is borne out time and again in English literature. Louise Glück also falls in the category of writers in whom the mind suffers to create. The personal tragic experiences of separation from her mother, her father and later, her husband, caused unspeakable gloom in her and her response came out not in words, but through silence. Silence gave her scope to meditate that yielded the rich treasure of poetry. Her poetry is poetry in and out of suffering, as most of the great poetry is.

Aim of the Study

The present paper targets to find out the distinctive features of Glück's poetry from a postmodern perspective. It would explore the way in which the poet has been able to successfully shaped a modern experience into a Greek mythological mould. In addition, Glück has added her own sad experience of personal life to that and the whole thing has become a complex affair. There is stanza wise unravelling of the poem while keeping in view three levels of significance—the mythical, the collective and the deeply personal.

Review of Literature

A number of works has tried to explore different aspects of Louise Glück's poetry. In particular, Daniel Morris' *The Poetry of Louise Glück* (University of Missouri Press, Columbia and London, 2006) is a most impressive work. Mary Kate Azcuy's "Persona, Trauma and Survival in Louise Glück's Postmodern, Mythic, Twenty-First-Century 'October'" in *Crisis and Contemporary Poetry* (ed. Anne Karhio, Seán Crosson and Charles I. Armstrong, Palgrave Macmillan, NY, 2011) is an in depth study of the poem "October". Other works include Laura DiPrete's "Foreign Bodies" in *Trauma, Corporeality, and Textuality in Contemporary American*

Culture (New York, London: Routledge, 2006), Elizabeth Caroline Dodd's *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet: H.D., Louise Bogan, Elizabeth Bishop, Century*, (Profile Books, London 2019) and Jesse Zuba's *The First Book: Twentieth-Century Poetic Careers in America*, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2016).

Main Article

One of the difficulties that a reader would face in approaching the poetic world of Louise Glück is that her poems are very different from one another and they use competing voices in an open, dialogic relationship. These are highly eclectic and derived from various cultural resources, mythology being a most frequented field among these. Therefore, Glück's poetry defies any theoretical modelling. But the presence of subjective elements is unmistakably Glück's forte and it is "her unmistakable poetic voice that with austere beauty makes individual existence universal", as was put by the Nobel Committee², that brought her the 2020 Nobel Prize for Literature. In fact, her personal sufferings are transmuted into literary blossoms when expressed through the veil of legendary characters. As Daniel Morris has stated, Glück's persistent themes are desire, hunger, trauma, survival, commentary, autobiography, nature and spiritual witnessing³, and such obsessions have placed her in the forefront among the major authors in world literature.

Belonging to a postmodern age, Louise Glück is not a poet who is interested in portraying the beauties of life, but rather feels comfortable with themes that Virgil personified in *The Aeneid* and placed in gatherings before the Avernus: Grief, Disease, Age, Dread and Discord. From this engagement of hers has originated the poetic collection *Averno* and this gives the book its classical association. In her "severity and unwillingness to accept simple tenets of faith", the chair of the Nobel Prize committee, Anders Olsson, has found her similarity with Emily Dickinson.⁴ In her adherence to stern reality she is outstanding, as "[i]n her poems, the self listens for what is left of its dreams and delusions, and nobody can be harder than she in confronting the illusions of the self."⁵ Though often she resorts to autobiographical details, she has well crossed the bindings of a confessional poet, and has made language both mean something and hold everything, as her contemporary poet Claudia Rankine has observed⁶. She is a poet completely dedicated to social causes and the same she puts in the following language:

"When I was young I led the life I thought writers were supposed to lead, in which you repudiate the world, ostentatiously consecrating all of your energies to the task of making art. I just sat in Provincetown at a desk and it was ghastly – the more I sat there not writing the more I thought that I just hadn't given up the world enough. After two years of that, I came to the conclusion that I wasn't going to be a writer. So I took a teaching job in Vermont, though I had spent my life till that point thinking that real poets

and Louise Glück (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1992), John Burnside's *The Music of Time: Poetry in the Twentieth* don't teach. But I took this job, and the minute I started teaching – the minute I had obligations in the world – I started to write again."⁷

Although she avoids direct involvement with political matters and polemical statements, in her can be traced an individual human being alive in the world and in the language.

The catastrophic 9/11 terrorist attacks in America left deep scars on human minds and literary authors recognised the tragedy by means of their literary productions. Dozens of books were published within a decade of the terrorist attacks that were in some way or the other related to those unprecedented events. A large portion of those publications concentrated upon the psychological impact the sights of widespread destruction had upon the victims and their associated people as also upon the witnesses of the scenario. But these works basically derive their force from direct portrayal or indirect reference to the catastrophe. Though the authors had striven sincerely to sympathise with the victims, many had faced the challenge of finding a proper mode of narrative to faithfully sketch the aftermath. Louise Glück's "October" from *Averno* (2006) is a major success from this aspect.

Written in 2002 and published in Glück's 2006 collection *Averno*, "October" uses the inception of the dying year to express the realities of violence and destruction caused by misanthropic terrorism and war. But most interesting fact about the poem is that any reference, direct or indirect whatsoever, to the 9/11 event is carefully avoided and, instead, the poet delves deep into Greek myths to find associative expression for the trauma. The impression is that such a horrible event cannot be named, but at the same time its catastrophic effect cannot be forgotten even. It is a situation that was put by Jean-François Lyotard in the following words: "The Forgotten is not to be remembered for what it has been and what it is because it has not been anything and is nothing, but must be remembered as something that never ceased to be forgotten."⁸ In fact, trauma theory insists upon the witnesses' inability to render the fearful experience properly through language. Moreover, such a trauma cannot be expressed within the span of a lyric poem. Accordingly, Glück never makes any reference to the disastrous event, and holds up its aftermath through signs and symbols in a large and complex metonymic structure. But this absence of mention makes the catastrophe all the more present.

The poem is set in a post-violence and post-destruction world where the poet ponders upon the possibility of the continuation of existence as an existential writer. This is a postmodern wasteland where one is bound to face a dilemma in choosing between an apocalyptic end and an effort to recreate the lost world.⁹ It is a void into which the whole existence seems to have immersed, and the only option left to the poet is to resort to a mythic narrative to speak of historical facts. In "October", Glück has

interwoven two textures—historical and mythological—as the poet’s concern is how to express historical facts through the vehicle of a mythological narrative. While going through the poem, a reader shuttles between the two levels of reality and the transition is abrupt and the two are overlapped. The polyphonic voices make the transitions possible and work like a thread to unite the whole structure.

On the mythical level, the poem draws upon the story of Demeter and Persephone as found in Homer’s “Hymn to Demeter”. The sad tale narrates how Demeter was separated from her daughter Korê who was abducted by her uncle, Demeter’s own brother Hades, when she was playing near Avernus, the opening of hell, and taken into the underworld. Korê became a victim of the lust of her uncle—was raped, killed and transformed into his death-mate Persephone. In Greek mythology Demeter is the goddess of fertility and her anger turned the earth into a barren land. To save the earth, Zeus had to intervene and it was under his instruction that Persephone got release from Hades’ captivity and returned to her mother. But Hades tricked upon her by making her eat three pomegranate seeds before going away, and consequently she had to return to him to spend one third of every year. Separation from daughter makes Demeter traumatised and she in turn renders the earth barren and wild. The season of winter thereby has come to symbolise barrenness, as also death, as Persephone has to return to death and the underworld with its onset.

Glück’s use of myth is at once a commendable and complex affair, as she mixes her autobiographical elements in the mythic framework. Thereby she creates, as also destroys, the myths by connecting her biography to classical and biblical sources via her commentary, notes Morris. The historical background forms the chief interest of the poem. The collapse of the twin towers of World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001 in terrorist attacks took the lives of about three thousand people and left an unspeakably deep psychological impact. Among thousands of psychological victims of the catastrophic event, Glück was one, and her poetic sensibility has united the absolute vacuum of the Ground Zero with the barren earth caused by Persephone’s disappearance. But the union has received greater significance as it is mixed with Glück’s personal grief from her being deserted by her husband. It is the time setting of the poem that works as the chief link between these three levels of reality—the mythical, the contemporary and the autobiographical.

October is the month that indicates the arrival of the season of separation and barrenness and therefore forms a perfect title and setting for Glück’s poem. Throughout the poem, the centre of concern remains the issue of harvesting—whether the seeds have been planted. The first part of the poem shows how with the onset of the winter memories throng in the speaker’s mind and overlapping speeches come out in the form of half-uttered sentences. The opening lines directly take the reader into a series of speculations, all related to winter:

“Is it winter again, is it cold again,
didn’t Frank just slip on the ice,
didn’t he heal...”

Then comes the question—“weren’t the spring seeds planted”—that pops up intermittently. The concern with the issue of vegetation and harvesting forms a major role both in the ancient myth of Persephone and Demeter and in the contemporary world. The different voices coalesce to bring the past and the present, the remote and the near, the myth and the real, the fiction and the fact, the objective and the subjective into uneasy proximity.

The hardening impact of violence upon the poet forms the basic theme of the second section of the poem; “violence has changed me now” comes like a refrain. The image of summer is ever alive in the mental field, though it fails to provide a permanent solace to the poet. Even being true to oneself does no good in this colossal existential crisis. In the absence of the August sun that could return “everything that was taken away”, the only solace comes from inside reality, the “mind’s voice”, that may supply some meaning in this meaningless universe. Violence has brought in a breach between the body and the mind and the body has been left bare like “the stripped field”, the Ground Zero of devastation. The mind has turned “cautious and wary”, and though the sunrise brings some consolation, “bounty, balm after violence”, any lasting solution to this ceremony of violence is still far away as life is beyond reach in the universe of futility:

“Tell me this is the future,
I won’t believe you
Tell me I’m living,
I won’t believe you.”

In the next section, there is a progression from the snowy winter to a sunny spring. But that brings little change for the poet, now immersed completely in the persona of Demeter, who ignores the call of the world: “Come to me, said the world. I was standing / in my wool coat at a kind of bright portal.” Penetrating the “film of moisture / on each living thing”, the sunrise supplies some vital warmth to nature. There is heard a preference of nature over art and human world, but there also the unbroken silence pervades though the winter is over. Life in nature asserts its continuation through “bits of green” in the “thawed dirt” and gives “considerable pleasure”. But the speaker, disappointed over the treacherous nature of life, unifies both Demeter, suffering the consequences of betrayal from her own brother, and the poet, labouring to come into terms with life after her shocking separation from her husband:

“death cannot harm me
more than you have harmed me,
my beloved life.”

Section 4 of the poem concentrates on the difference between autumn and spring. But unlike Keats’ invocation of autumn which seeks to find consolation in this “Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness”—

“Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they?

Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—

Glück is unable to find anything positive in this season of death. Nihilism seems to engulf the speaker as she remembers the Orphic dirge in the fourth of Virgil's *Georgics*.¹⁰ There is no escape from the curse of Orpheus: "you will not be spared." Autumn lacks the rejuvenation and revitalizing power of spring: "This is the light of autumn, not the light that says / I am reborn." The climactic redemption after suffering is absent in autumn: "Not the spring dawn: I strained, I suffered, I was reborn." Like life itself, the season is heavy with "desolation and anguish" and the present is merely "an allegory of waste." The recurring notes sing a preamble to silence, and the absence of sound and meaning makes one feel accustomed with silence and disappearances with the full awareness that on one will be spared from the curse. The only privileged ones are those who can cling to the ideals, to their loves and to their beliefs even while heading towards absolute reality of death, to which everyone has to come in terms.

The next section registers a change of perception in the female speaker(s) as she moves from emptiness to strength. Here comes the role of an artist in bringing back the sense of beauty to this ugly present, though this belief is expressed too feebly to form any note of assertion:

"as though it were the artist's
duty to create
hope, but out of what? what?"

The companions gathered in front of Averno are unable to speak from under the burden of their thoughts. They are bound behind the "iron gates" in "shuttered rooms" in deserted, abandoned conditions. It is a place where speech refutes perception and at the intersection of the two modes of perception gleams sweet memories: "I was young here." In the dark tunnel of life, poetry becomes the only companion capable of speech:

"you are not alone,
the poem said,
in the dark tunnel."

Such lines give an assertion from the women to tear up the veil of trauma and face life with renewed energy.

Unmixed positivism, however, is not the poem's target of projection. So the positive note in the fifth part comes under a shadow of uncertainty as there is found a breach between the earth and the sun that causes bitterness and weariness in the earth. Here the earth becomes at once the betrayed and bereaved mother Demeter and the exploited and alienated wife, that is, the poet herself. Out of her depression, Demeter has turned bitter and pays no heed to the pleas of the sun. The brilliance of life is now become a distant and lifeless thing like "cold stars." The only consolation for the bereaved women lies in lying still and watching the stars as they are quite indifferent to the give-and-take business of this world. From the lifeless earth rises the moon, whose beauty seems immune from the toils of the earth, and hence incapable of sharing the melancholy of the suffering hearts. Here the moon comes to represent also Zeus, who ignored the cries of his sister/wife Demeter by condoning the abduction, rape and

murder of her daughter Persephone by Demeter's own brother Hades. Zeus' callousness leads to the perpetual sufferings of Demeter. In the line "they give nothing but ask nothing", speaks out the oppressed and/or repressed voice of the poet who gave everything to her husband and in return received nothing, somewhat like the speaker in Kamala Das' "The Looking Glass":

"Oh yes, getting
A man to love is easy, but living
Without him afterwards may have to be
Faced. A living without life when you move
Around, meeting strangers, with your eyes
that
Gave up their search, with ears that hear
only
His last voice calling out your name and your
Body which once under his touch had
gleamed
Like burnished brass, now drab and
destitute."

The lonely mother waits at the opening of Averno to hear the voice of her daughter, just as the lonely poet waits to hear from her deserter mother and husband, or as the women do to hear from their lost beloveds from among the debris of the 9/11 attack, but in all vain. In the line "I can't hear your voice" all the griefs unite to form an inexpressible sense of loss and pain.

Conclusion

Therefore, "October" works on three levels of narration simultaneously—the mythological level on which the aggrieved mother Demeter speaks; the objective level in which the chorus of the victimised women of the 9/11 catastrophe speaks; the personal level in which the poet, lacerated by her separation from her mother and other personal tragedies, speaks—and all suffer due to traumatic experiences of betrayal and separation. Daniel Morris is right in pointing out the role of traumatic experiences in Glück's life in her composition of poetry: "Trauma theory illuminates Glück's writings about the hard facts of mortal life and the conflicted experiences of family life."¹¹ The mythological story of Demeter and Persephone becomes a vehicle for Glück to tell her own tale of suffering that is buried so deep in her unconscious that it cannot be related directly.¹² From her suffering has come her poetic power as the speaker in "October" takes relief from the fact that after the bereavement of winter comes the spring when Persephone would return to reunite with her mother, the earth will be full of life again and the poet will get some sort of consolation to carry on her lonely life further. Though in death Michel Foucault found absolute nothing—"Death's annihilation is no longer anything because it was already everything [...] the nothingness of [...] it is experienced from within as the continuous and constant form of existence"¹³—the speaker in the poem strives to cling to hope by looking forward to the annual return of Persephone or life to the earth. This is the only way of continuing life in this Beckettian wasteland.

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