Louise Glück

LIKE ALL the Greek myths that remain current, the story of Persephone is valuable for its Rorschach quality, its ability to interpret its interpreters. So it proves in "Pomegranate," a poem from Louise Glück's second collection, *The House on Marshland*. For the young poet, Persephone was significant not as a cosmological emblem or as a victim of predatory masculinity, but as the archetypal rebellious daughter. In Glück's telling, she does not need to be kidnapped to be taken from Demeter, only seduced away from her mother's emotional tyranny:

> When he looked up at last
> it was to say My dear
> you are your own
> woman, finally, but examine
> this grief your mother
> parades over our heads
> remembering
> that she is one to whom
> these depths were not offered.

What makes this poem so characteristic of Glück is not just its use of myth or its dramatically narrow column of free verse, though these would continue to shape her poetry. Above all,

what "Pomegranate" reveals about Glück is her fierce identification with the heroine of a family romance. Demeter may be a goddess, but by comparison with Persephone, she is shallow and passionless, a bit player in someone else's myth. Access to perilous, sexualized "depths" is the preserve of the daughter-poet, who is willing to descend to Hell in exchange for the insight, and the glamour, such an ordeal provides. That this glamour never ceased to hold Glück in thrall is suggested by the title of her tenth book, *Averno*, which refers to the crater the Romans believed was the entrance to the underworld—Persephone's departure gate.

The boast of deeper knowledge gained through deeper suffering is one of Glück's favorite rhetorical devices. She is forever flaunting this superiority before the reader: "And you who watch him/looking down in the face of death, what do you know/of commitment?" she demands in "Brooding Likeness," from *The Triumph of Achilles*. "Hear me out: that which you call death/I remember," she declaims at the beginning of *The Wild Iris*. "You, in your innocence, what do you know of this world?" she asks in *The Seven Ages*. And in the title poem of *Averno*, Glück continues to warn, berate, brag: "And I want to scream out/*you're all of you living in a dream.*"

Passages like these, and there are many in Glück's work, suggest a poet who is very concerned with proving her claim to authority, and who believes that the true basis of authority is authenticity. But Glück's brand of authenticity is not, she has been at pains to insist, merely biographical. This is an important distinction for a poet who started writing in the late 1960s, when the wave of confessional poetry was beginning to crest. The polemical thrust of Glück's intelligent, serious book of essays, *Proofs & Theories*, is to discredit confessional "honesty" and "courage" as poetic values. "The truth, on the page, need

not have been lived. It is, instead, all that can be envisioned," she writes in the bluntly titled "Against Sincerity."

Glück does not write confessionally about madness, suicide, and incest, as though these extreme experiences were a poet's only access to reality. But she also does not reject the ideal of extremity; she merely denies that it has to be lived in order to be written about. She insists that it is not the content of experience which allows it to rise to the grandeur of myth, but the intensity the artist brings to it. If Glück is "against sincerity," she is completely enthralled by authenticity, in just the sense that Lionel Trilling intended: an "extreme . . . exercise of personal will." Her work is a tour de force of this kind of will. Every facet of her poetry is designed to heighten its rhetorical force, to leave the reader awed and dazzled by the poet's capacity for genuine, difficult experience. Her aesthetic ideal is not delight but "candor," as she writes in "October," from *Averno*: "It is true there is not enough beauty in the world./It is also true that I am not competent to restore it./Neither is there candor, and here I may be of some use."

Candor, however, is an ambiguous concept in poetry. To be candid is to speak unpremeditatedly, thinking only of the matter, not at all of the form; but this is just the kind of speech that poetry, if it is really poetry, cannot admit. The artist is always conscious, from the beginning, of the impression her writing is going to make. Some poets convince themselves they can abjure that consideration, in the name of accurate witness or purgative confession. But Glück is too dedicated to art, in a strict modernist sense, to place any goal above the goal of writing well. One of the most appealing things about her is her commitment to poetry as a calling, an ideal she has described as "severe, strenuous, passionate—the giddiness of great discipline and great ambition." Glück is too much of a poet not to

recognize that candor, in poetry, means the impression, or perhaps the illusion, of candor.

Even so, there are different kinds of illusion, different inflections the poet can choose to give to the appearance of honesty. Usually, a poet strikes us as honest when he allows us to see his weakness and confusion, since these are the experiences we are most assiduous to conceal in ordinary life. Thus Herbert's lyrics of spiritual submission, or Larkin's lyrics of worldly failure, seem remarkably honest, and we have the feeling that we know their authors intimately. But there is also another kind of poetic honesty, whose ideal is not self-exposure but truth-telling, the fierce honesty of the prophets. This kind of honesty grows not out of weakness but out of power, a self-assurance so great that it scorns our usual shifts and evasions.

In modern poetry, the most seductive example of this tone, and the one that has been most influential on Glück, is T. S. Eliot. Eliot's name is associated with many kinds of authority, critical and cultural. But Glück, in her essay "On T. S. Eliot," recognizes that his first and most enduring source of authority is his poetry—in particular, the poetic voice that seems to create "a desperate intimacy" with the reader, "as powerful as can be imagined." This is the desperation of Tiresias in *The Waste Land*, who, because he has been both man and woman, knows more than any man or woman could possibly know: "And I Tiresias have foresuffered all/Enacted on this same divan or bed;/I who have sat by Thebes below the wall/And walked among the lowest of the dead."

Glück is at her most Eliotic when she essays this Tiresian voice. And like Eliot, she finds it easiest to assume when speaking as a figure out of Greek myth. Myth is a ready storehouse of the properties a prophet needs, and which a modern, secular, democratic American finds difficult to claim: universal rel-

evance, divine sanction, unchallengeable prestige. Over the course of her career, Glück has tried on very many costumes from the wardrobe of myth: Joan of Arc, Abishag, Circe, Penelope, Persephone. But the voice that issues from behind all these masks is recognizably the same, the voice of a poet entranced by her own dark resonance:

> Now the Queen of Carthage
> will accept suffering as she accepted favor:
> to be noticed by the Fates
> is some distinction after all.

This is Dido, from *Vita Nova*, but it might as well be Penelope, from *Meadowlands*:

> call out to him over the open water, over the bright water
> with your dark song, with your grasping,
> unnatural song—passionate,
> like Maria Callas. Who
> wouldn't want you? Whose most demonic appetite
> could you possibly fail to answer?

Or, indeed, Glück herself, speaking *in propria persona* in *Ararat*: "I was born to a vocation: / to bear witness / to the great mysteries."

Glück has never been abashed in her intercourse with the great mysteries. "The true," she writes in "Against Sincerity," "has about it an air of mystery or inexplicability. This mystery is an attribute of the elemental." In striving after this kind of mysterious, elemental truth, Glück employs a vocabulary of Romantic grandeur, making free with big, auratic, imprecise words: "the formless / grief of the body, whose language / is hunger"; "You have betrayed me, Eros. / You have sent me / my true love"; "Tell me / how you live in hell, / what is required in hell, / for I would send / my beloved there." The starkness of Glück's verse—short lines, with frequent line and stanza breaks, and generous white space—is the natural expression of her belief that, as she writes in the essay "Invitation and Exclusion," "we don't follow poems as arguments, step by step. We grasp them entire, and what we first grasp is tone." But Glück's poetry also suggests that a poet who wagers everything on tone—whose poems cannot function unless they are read as urgent, reverent, hypnotic monologues—ends up losing most of the qualities that make poetic language memorable. It is as though her lines are flattened by the gravitational pull of a "mystery" so intense that it crushes adjective and metaphor.

The actual subject of Glück's poems, however, the lasting and distinctive impression they make on the reader, is not of a mind curious about mystery, but of a mind that enjoys regarding itself in proximity to mystery. Glück's sovereign egotism was already evident in her first book, *Firstborn*, which gives the style and properties of early Robert Lowell a characteristic twist, as in "Phenomenal Survivals of Death in Nantucket":

> Here in Nantucket does the tiny soul
> Confront water. Yet this element is not foreign soil;
> I see the water as extension of my mind,
> The troubled part, and waves the waves of mind. . . .

Where Lowell respected the Atlantic Ocean as a malign cosmic force, "the mast-lashed master of Leviathans," Glück swiftly reduces it to an emblem of her own interior state. It is "my mind," not "this element," that fascinates her. And this sense that the most interesting theater is the theater of the mind, where the self is always heroine, has been the most consistent feature

of her poetry. The design of her books has evolved in keeping with this priority. Since *Ararat*, each of Glück's collections has been structured around a life change—the death of a father (*Ararat*), divorce (*Meadowlands*), setting up house in a new city (*Vita Nova*), the passage to age and illness (*Averno*). Each volume is a monodrama, the lyrics working together, as in Tennyson's *Maud*, to map the protagonist's state of mind.

As this list shows, the dramas of Glück's life and poetry do not fall into the realm of abnormal psychology. In another poet, their very ordinariness might evoke a language of understated compassion—the poet suffering what we all suffer, but more articulately. But Glück's self-dramatizing impulse means that what her experience lacks in rarity she must supply in the form of rhetorical intensity. This is where the Greek myths come in. Divorce itself was grievous enough to inspire tremendously moving sequences by George Meredith and Robert Lowell, but Glück's sequence about her divorce casts the principals as Odysseus, Penelope, and Circe. Likewise, old age was a humanizing subject for Yeats, for whom it seemed to require the discarding of the "circus animals" of myth. But for Glück, in *Averno,* it can be experienced only in terms of Persephone's descent to the underworld: "What will you do,/when it is your turn in the field with the god?"

The problem with this use of Greek myth, as many contemporary poets have unwittingly shown, is that today those myths have no cultic power. They exist for us only as literature. (This is true even of biblical figures, which had a genuine mythical force in our culture far more recently than the Greek gods.) But to compare oneself to a figure out of literature is to cede to already existing literature an ontological superiority, to cast oneself as the instantiation of a law that others have already discovered. Instead of approaching literature from a position of

strength, as its heir and necessary sequel, the myth-besotted poet approaches it as a supplicant—even when, as with Glück, the intoxication of myth seems to give her a factitious strength.

The one exception is when the modern writer approaches ancient myth in the spirit of satire or deconstruction. This, too, is something Eliot knew. What Tiresias sees, in *The Waste Land*, is the tawdry seduction of the typist by the "young man carbuncular," and it is the shocking juxtaposition of these registers that creates the poetic effect. It makes sense, then, that the most moving and surprising passages in Glück's work are those in which the mythological framework is violated by a disabused, merely human voice.

In *Meadowlands*, this is the role reserved for Telemachus, who serves Glück as a cool observer of the operatic passions of his parents: "My own taste dictates/accuracy without/garrulousness," she writes in "Telemachus' Dilemma." Even better, in that book, are the moments when we suddenly hear what are plainly the voices of Glück and her husband, engaged in the sort of sordid domestic quarrel that makes Odysseus and Penelope fall off their stilts: "I said you could snuggle. That doesn't mean/your cold feet all over my dick"; or, still closer to home, "You should take one of those chemicals,/maybe you'd write more./Maybe you have some kind of void syndrome."

This is the revenge of the actual on the mythical, and Glück's willingness to admit it into her poetry suggests the strong influence confessional poetry has had on her. More generally, the habits of psychoanalysis have been deeply bred in Glück. Its paradoxical encouragement of realism and narcissism at once has seldom been better demonstrated than in her poetry. She has written that psychoanalysis was her version of higher education: for seven years after graduating high school, she remembers in "The Education of the Poet," "analysis was what I

did with my time and with my mind." The brutally close interrogation of family life that she performs in *Meadowlands* and *Ararat*, her best books, clearly betrays a Freudian belief that family, not character, is destiny. One of Glück's favorite subjects is her rivalry with her younger sister, which she presents as a formative influence on her life:

> Suppose
> you saw your mother
> torn between two daughters:
> what could you do
> to save her but be
> willing to destroy
> yourself—she would know
> who was the rightful child,
> the one who couldn't bear
> to divide the mother.

This passage, from *Ararat*, is not particularly eloquent, but it is convincing, and therefore humanly moving. Indeed, it seems especially moving when encountered in the context of Glück's work, where the biographical is so often inflated out of recognition. Yet it is clear that this inflating impulse, the tendency to mythologize her own experience, is equally a product of Glück's psychoanalytic orientation. Who but Freud, after all, taught us to name our parents after Greek myths, and to regard self-dramatization as a form of self-cure?

Glück suggests this paradox in "The Untrustworthy Speaker" when she writes, "I know myself; I've learned to hear like a psychiatrist./When I speak passionately,/that's when I'm least to be trusted." The psychiatrist is the imaginary auditor who is supposed to be able to detect exaggeration, but whose very

presence also encourages it. Which tendency prevails depends on the character of the poet and on her conception of what poetry is supposed to be. For Lowell, psychoanalysis was a means of disenchantment, as in the savagely disillusioned portraits of his parents in "Life Studies." For Glück, it more often seems a spur to narcissism.

The enemy of narcissism is irony, for irony involves seeing one's self as if it were not oneself. And irony is the quality signally missing from Glück's poetry. Surely a saving dose of ironic detachment would have allowed her to avoid *bêtises* like the memorable anticlimax of the last poem in *Vita Nova*:

> Life is very weird, no matter how it ends,
> very filled with dreams. Never
> will I forget your face, your frantic human eyes
> swollen with tears.
> *I thought my life was over and my heart was broken.*
> *Then I moved to Cambridge.*

Ironic self-awareness would have been even more useful in *The Wild Iris*, a book admirable in its ambition and seriousness. Three voices speak in the closet drama of *The Wild Iris*: the poet, who implores God to reveal himself; God, who responds with scolding adjurations to modesty; and the flowers underfoot, which look on with detached scorn at human folly. But Glück's version of the Book of Job founders, first, on the threadbareness of her metaphysics and theodicy: her God says things like "How can you understand me/when you cannot understand yourselves?" More distasteful is the titanic arrogance of the human speaker, which cannot be dismissed as simply a commentary on the egotism of our species, since it so closely resembles Glück's voice as we know it in her other work:

If there is justice in some other world, those
like myself, whom nature forces
into lives of abstinence, should get
the lion's share of all things, all
objects of hunger, greed being
praise of you. And no one praises
more intensely than I, with more
painfully checked desire, or more deserves
to sit at your right hand, if it exists. . . .

Only our own time, perhaps, could produce a religious poem so completely lacking in humility.

As *Averno* shows, death is no more able than God to shatter Glück's accustomed sense of dramatic centrality. The poet is now in her sixties, and has evidently undergone some physical ordeal:

It does me no good; violence has changed me.
My body has grown cold like the stripped fields;
now there is only my mind, cautious and wary,
with the sense it is being tested.

But as these lines show, the chastening of the body has not diminished Glück's pride in her mind, which has always been the real seat of her ambitions. Her encounter with death, like her encounters with love and sex and divorce and God, have only confirmed her consciousness of superior insight, deeper sensitivity, darker knowledge. "Someone like me doesn't escape," she writes in "Thrush," as though death were not the leveler but a doorman at an exclusive club. Thus *Averno*, despite the change of scene and subject, marks no real evolution in the

actual substance of Glück's poetry, as is clear in these lines from "Prism":

The self ended and the world began.
They were of equal size,
commensurate,
one mirrored the other.

They may mirror one another, but for Glück, it has always been the self that comes first.