

Chronicling Human Existence in “Faithful and Virtuous Night” by Louise Glück

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Table of Contents

<i>Introduction: The Nobel Prize in Literature and Louise Glück</i>	1
<i>Innovations: Glück’s Work and Writing Style</i>	6
<i>“Faithful and Virtuous Night” Close Reading: Formal Dimensions & Poetic Messages</i> 13	
The Beginning: The Habits of Long Ago	15
The Middle: When Something Continuous Stops	18
The End: As a Compromise	21
<i>Conclusion</i>	24
<i>Appendix</i>	26
<i>Works Cited</i>	33

Abstract

In 2020, Canadian poet Louise Glück was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for her “unmistakable poetic voice that with austere beauty makes individual existence universal.” This thesis aims to take the Nobel committee’s motivation as a leading premise in an exploration of Glück’s poetic work, particularly her 2014 poem “Faithful and Virtuous Night.” The research question of the thesis, “how does Louise Glück’s poetry make individual existence universal?” is therefore meant to analyse the fairness of the Nobel committee’s assessment. By examining scholarly material concerning the innovations of Glück’s her earlier work, the reader is familiarized with the quintessence of her poetry. Through close reading, an analysis of the aforementioned poem can be constructed to sustain the claim of the Nobel committee. This paper is meant to highlight how Glück approaches several issues of the human existence, which she also provides relief for.

“I believe people are reading more poetry because we distrust the diatribe, the easy answer, the argument that holds only one note. Poetry makes its music from specificity and empathy. It speaks to the whole complex notion of what it means to be human.” (Limón 2018)

Chronicling Human Existence in “Faithful and Virtuous Night” by Louise Glück

Introduction: The Nobel Prize in Literature and Louise Glück

In the beginning, there was the longing for connection, and then there was the poet who put it into words. Language is limitless and fluid, as it bids a name for everything we know or are yet to discover. The veritable and capable wordsmiths recognise this central element of the human existence, transposing it into words for people to feel understood. One such wordsmith is Canadian poet Louise Glück.

In 2020, the Nobel committee awarded Louise Glück the prestigious and much controversial¹ Nobel Prize in Literature. The reasoning was owed to Glück’s “unmistakable poetic voice that with austere beauty makes individual existence universal.”² Those who are familiar with the poet’s extended work will most likely consider the committee’s assessment fair and well-deserved. Another category of the public would argue that the committee had merely set out on making the safest choice by selecting Glück after the uproar surrounding the institution in the past few years. Though not opposed to the win, one such critic is Nikolai Duffy, who does not regard Glück as a polarising poet, but who nonetheless affirms the committee’s motivation. Duffy suggests that the continuous impact of Glück’s poetry lies in her “quiet insistence” that everything in the private sphere is touched and shaped by the public one, therefore transforming people into “the products of the world around [them]” (Duffy 2020). The focus of this thesis is Glück’s poem “Faithful and Virtuous

¹ Most recently, musician Bob Dylan’s win in 2016 or in 2018 due to political reasons, i.e. Peter Handke and his views on the Bosnian genocide.

² According to The Nobel Prize in Literature 2020 website.

Night,” which highlights the way people are influenced by the world around them and, essentially, how they always gravitate towards feeling understood. My analysis of this particular poem will aim to support the motivation of the Nobel committee: is its assessment fair, and if so, how does Louise Glück’s poetry make individual existence universal?

Various articles have been written on Glück’s recent reception of the prize, which all seem to share the Nobel committee’s reasoning. However, the public’s initial response to the news was one of sheer surprise, as “[Glück] is not particularly topical, nor internationally influential” (Burt 2020). Nevertheless, in due time, readers have delved into her work, finding a hidden treasure of simplicity and comforting truths.³ However, there is more to this characteristic simplicity of Glück’s writing style that meets the eye. In response to Duffy’s article, Lisa Ampleman notes that Glück’s work is not as apolitical as it may seem: writing about women’s experience within family and romantic relationships was a drastic move for the 1960s (Ampleman 2020). Additionally, as an extension to Duffy’s recognition of Glück as a comprehensive poet, Ampleman admires her ability to portray family conflict in a way that is “somehow both personal and universal” (Ampleman 2020). It can thus be argued that it is the simplicity of the style that Glück employs in her poetry which makes her a chronicler of human experience. She documents distressing feelings such as loneliness and yearning, as well as fleeting moments of happiness and long-lasting instances of sadness in a fashion that is rather raw but innovative nonetheless.

³ Glück’s preference for simple vocabulary, as stated in *Proofs & Theories* (Glück 4) facilitates the communication of these truths. For example, one such truth is that we can always start anew despite the adversities that we are faced with. This can be observed in “Faithful and Virtuous Night.”

This determines the reader to come face to face with uncomfortable experiences, but also with the knowledge that distress, like everything else, is temporary. Glück's predilection for these topics makes her a pioneer of contemporary confessional poetry.

It is important to establish Glück's place in American literature in order to observe how she distinguishes herself as a poet. Several critics, such as Waltraud Migutsch and Beverly Bie Brahic ascertain that Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, Margaret Atwood, Sylvia Plath, Anne Carson, along with Glück, are the voices of twentieth century female confessional poetry.⁴ They are poets whose work is heavily based upon honesty, conveying messages through modest images and words.⁵ It is precisely this plain talk that engulfs the reader, who finds himself identifying with the simplicity, the day-to-day familiar environment that Glück depicts in her poetry. Moreover, Glück is especially well known for her refraining from politics, making no straightforward social or political commitment in her work, which is why her poetry might appeal to a wider range of people. For instance, Waltraud Migutsch's analysis of Anne Sexton and Louise Glück yields the conclusion that both of their poetry is focused on a female consciousness, rather than a feminist one (Migutsch 131). Where Sexton is more evidently confessional, Glück is subtler. Where Sexton finds the necessary strength in her inner self to survive the trials of life, Glück feels

⁴ Associating Glück's name with poets such as Plath or Sexton is indicative of straightforwardly placing her in a very specific category of literature. The critique around these female poets, according to Waltraud Migutsch, is based on a certain extent of sadism that they all express in their poetry, as reflected in their "self-defeating, self-destructive attitude, their courting of death, their self-deprecation" (Migutsch 132). I believe it is fair placing Glück's work in this category, as her notoriously morose early volumes of poetry possess this key element of her poetic quintessence: expressing ideas in a collected, yet sombre way.

⁵ Beverly Bie Brahic compares Glück to poets such as Sylvia Plath or Emily Dickinson, "known for their pregnant silences, plain talk and portrayals of places with short summers and long winters" (Brahic 2020).

assaulted by them (Migutsch 131), therefore portraying human existence as thoroughly fragile within the cosmos of her poetry. This is why she is constantly trying to warn against wasting life on too much contemplation, which becomes more obvious in her latest work. However, as Migutsch observes, this contemplation leads to revolution or transformation, something specific for Glück's poetry. For Glück, every revolution is apocalyptic, but it is always followed by rebirth (Migutsch 132). Rebirth is understood here in a general sense: by surveying Glück's earlier poetry, albeit the intentional lack of politics, it is evident that she or her poetic persona subconsciously long for a radical change.⁶ Thus, she uses language as an act of rebellion against ancient patriarchal norms, a silent, yet impactful insurgence that comes from within herself.⁷ Migutsch highlights the tendency of the female poets belonging to this category to expose their oppression, signalling a build-up of resentment that is about to burst at any moment. Once it bursts and the transformation is complete, a new beginning arises. Thus, with her poetry, Glück comforts the reader by suggesting that life can be lived even after inner tempests, after radical changes; that one can generally always start over, but the willingness to do so most come from within.⁸ Glück's messages have remained relevant over the years, but they are even

⁶ This could well be owed to the fact that Glück belongs to a younger and angrier generation, Migutsch notes, one that rejects woman's roles in society, of mother, lover and daughter (Migutsch 132-133).

⁷ In her book of essays, *Proofs & Theories* (1994), Glück writes: "I was born into an environment in which the right of any family member to complete the sentence of another was assumed. Like most of the people in that family, I had a strong desire to speak, but that desire was regularly frustrated: my sentences were, in being cut off, radically changed—transformed, not paraphrased. [...] in my family, all discussion was carried on in that single cooperative voice." (Glück 5)

⁸ In the poem "Faithful and Virtuous Night," the speaker is trying to come to terms with a new reality after the shocking experience of losing his parents. This struggle unfolds all throughout the poem, evolving from hopelessness to acceptance.

more important nowadays, when people need all the reassurance they can get, in a post-pandemic world or in the face of looming crises such as climate change.

Innovations: Glück's Work and Writing Style

Louise Glück is a poet of consistent reinvention. Each of her volumes of poetry represents phases of her life, her poetic voice ranging from assuming a youthfully insurgent tone to a maturely composed one. However, it is the quintessence of her work which makes people resonate with her poetry. In her book of essays *Proofs & Theories*, Glück expresses a preference for poetry that “requests or craves a listener” (Glück 9). It can be argued that the best listener is the one who identifies himself with the stories he hears. Glück is aware of this, as her poetry encompasses pieces of universal feelings and experiences. She separates “the shallow from the deep” (Glück 13) and creates a familiar and recognisable universe for the reader by using some particular techniques. “Personal circumstance may prompt art, but the actual making of art is a revenge on circumstance” Glück writes in the essay “The Idea of Courage” (Glück 25). The revenge on circumstance may lie in the poet's ability to change the outcome of an unfortunate experience. Thus, by altering the course of events or the outcome itself, the poet may provide a certain relief for the reader. If circumstance is unique to all humans, poets are able to relate it in their art in whichever way they choose to do. For instance, an outcome where human connection is attained might therefore be a manipulation of the truth, presented as a gift to the reader. Art is meant to be given from the artist to the world, which means that the work, once out of the artist's hands, becomes everyone else's. Interpretations are endless and unique, yet at times there is art that seems to be evoking a similar message to everyone. That is when it becomes a source of comfort, as people long to feel understood and validated. They want to be surrounded by what helps them

make sense of themselves and the world around them. I argue that according to the Nobel committee's motivation, Glück is one of the agents involved in this process.

In her reinvention, Glück provides continuations of her previous texts, defying repetition nonetheless. James Longenbach's review of Glück's *Vita Nova* (1999) recognises the logic behind the sequence that Glück has created in her books, whether conscious or not. Each of her published books is then part of an integral story. In this volume, the speakers of her monologues, usually mythological figures, Longenbach notes, no longer seem to be caught in the heat of the moment; instead they seem reserved, as they "know everything [...] since everything has already happened" (Longenbach 186). Glück seems to adopt this stance all throughout her poems, she is omniscient, relating back to the impatient reader. Although this article was written fifteen years before the publication of *Faithful and Virtuous Night*, it is extraordinarily fitting to this latest body of work. Glück might have used different personae in her poetry to express her messages to the world, yet never has she used the identity of a male, human individual before *Faithful and Virtuous Night*. That is not to say that Glück's poetic voice is straightforwardly feminine or masculine – it is neutral, it is genderless, and so are the feelings and experiences of the human beings that the poetic voice describes.

In his article, David Yezzi, similar to other scholars, discusses Glück's poetic personae. Employing personae is something characteristic of Glück, as she identifies parts of herself in mythological characters, for example.⁹ Extending on that, she builds

⁹ As remarked in Uta Gossman's chapter "Psychoanalyzing Persephone: Louise Glück's *Averno*" in the book *Poetic Memory: The Forgotten Self in Plath, Howe, Hinsey, and Glück*, where Gossman identifies parallels between Glück and the goddess Persephone.

her own personae to convey the messages that she as her own self might find difficult to express, which makes for a proper technique of reinvention. Yezzi's observations and comparison of Glück to the mythological character Cassandra are concerned with the theme of death as well as with speaking truths no one wants to hear. Death is one of Glück's most used topics in her poetry, along with the sharing of experience. Yezzi's apt analysis reveals that Glück's work often begins on a biographical note, "but her own life story is not finally the point" (Yezzi 110). Moreover, Glück claims that truth "need not have been lived [...] It is, instead, all that can be envisioned" (Yezzi 110). I contend that this is what occurs in her latest book, where she constructs and uses the persona of an elderly English painter to showcase hard facts of human existence. It is exactly this playful, unreliable narrator who "begins in the personal but quickly assumes the authority of the representative" (Yezzi 113) that makes Glück a veritable pioneer of contemporary confessional poetry.¹⁰ In other words, Glück gives back to the reader as she realises that some experiences are shared, such as childhood, death and the human longing for connection that happens in-between the two. We have the capacity to remember our childhoods, we look and yearn for connection in our lives, and we all acknowledge the inevitability of death. How does Glück then appeal to the sentiments of human beings passing through the webs of life?

Henri Cole's review of Glück's poem "Messengers" from *The House on Marshland* (1975) points towards the impression that Glück makes her work "[feel] intimate" to the reader (Cole 98). Deeply concerned with the symbolic dimension of the

¹⁰ This demonstrates that by using any persona, Glück is able to transmit universal truths - to lay out undeniable experiences of the human existence. According to Uta Gossman, "[b]y remembering a self larger than the conscious ego" (Gossman 146), Glück practices poetic memory, finding human truths in the stories of mythological creatures.

poem, Cole closely observes the communication between the poet and the reader. Glück builds a sturdy bridge between her work and her readers, a bridge leading towards the fulfilment of that connection which humans aspire to achieve. The topics that are prevalent in her earlier work, as Cole remarks, usually revolve around family life, relationships and childhood. Glück therefore shows great interest in the formative years of a person and the lessons that come with childhood. Moreover, Cole's review highlights Glück's tendency to use the second-person point of view, which "gives the feeling of experience [...] being commented on from a distance [...] as if it is occurring in a myth where we get the haunted [...] commemoration of experience" (Cole 97). In the poem "Messengers," this blurs the line between the poet, the poetic subject and the listener, all becoming spectators of a story that seems to belong to a different party. Thus, the poem lacks a first-person confessional narrator, relying on a "matter-of-fact, disembodied, but strangely triumphant" tone (Cole 97). In the end, the poet and the reader are brought together into a spectacle of remembering a certain experience. The ultimate satisfaction for the reader, Cole adds, is the ability to recognise the feelings and the experience of the poem through language. Additionally and most relevantly, Cole highlights "three simple realities" of life, reflected in Glück's poetry: "nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect" (Cole 98).

Notwithstanding her ongoing allusions to death, Glück speaks mostly of what happens between birth and death. This 'middle' point in life is what she crafts best in her art; for instance, this can be observed in the questions that she often passes on to the poetic voice: "Why do I suffer? Why am I ignorant? / [...] what am I for?"¹¹ Glück does

¹¹ Lines 19 and 22 from "Mother and Child" from *The Seven Ages* by Louise Glück, 2001.

nothing more than ask the questions we all raise at some point in our lives: what is the meaning of life? What is our purpose on Earth? Conversely, no answer is given. Thus, the core of Glück's poetic work is made up of existential questions, which she leaves for the reader to be further preoccupied by. Perhaps we expect answers from poetry, but Glück offers something more important than a definite answer: the consolation that we could not all unanimously agree on an answer to any of these questions. We are born, we live, we question, we speculate and then we are no more. Through her writing, Glück attempts to make the living, the questioning and the speculating more comforting in anticipation of what follows – this is how she connects with the reader.

Additionally, it is also worth looking at *Ararat* (1990) as it is more revealing than any of Glück's earlier volumes of poetry. Centred around turbulent relationships within family, this body of work could offer relevant clues when examining Glück's latest poetic work, *Faithful and Virtuous Night*, which I will discuss in the next section of this thesis. In his review of *Ararat*, Bruce Bond identifies one key idea: the return to the past, to family life. The narrative is sectioned into fragments, "often jagged and self-contradictory," (Bond 216) meant to merge different selves together within a familial landscape. According to Bond, reconciling members of a family is Glück's main goal in this volume of poetry. Generally, an attempt of reconciliation within the family is important because it gives people the sense of connection with their relatives, the primordial tie that we come to know and need in life. If such a bond is broken prematurely, in childhood that is, it can be consequential when it comes to how we perceive the world as adults. Moreover, we need to have that primordial connection with our families solidified, should all the others fail. This is an innate, subconscious aspect

that we require in life, but our response to it can sometimes be of defiance. Bond identifies this counter-impulse in Glück's poetry: "the desire for individuation, to be distanced from the world, even though such distance implies pain and longing" (Bond 217) occurs because there is a disjuncture between people, which does not allow the human longing for connection to be satisfied. This may well be one of the natural steps in becoming mature and enlightened about the matter: on the one hand, one must connect and be content with himself if he is to live more or less comfortably in society. On the other hand, to expand on Bond's affirmation, at some point one must also distance himself from his own person, to experience a "self-sacrificing negation," (Bond 217) in order to find the pathway to connection with the world around him. In *Ararat*, Glück uses this process of alienation, of distancing one from oneself, to highlight a process of maturity which occurs in the absence of other humans.

Lastly, the quintessence of Glück's poetry lies in the apparent simplicity which aims to express complex messages. Her reserved tone, her predilection for silence and for certain recurring themes such as loss, childhood or death are some of the definitory characteristics of her work. The reader, any reader who has lived important phases of life, will identify himself with Glück's poetry as she portrays irrefutable phases of the human existence. For instance, we are all born with an inherent gaze of innocence and therefore we see the world through this very lens in our formative years. Children are ever curious and they admire the grown-ups of their lives. Moreover, they long to be connected: to other people, to nature, to anything belonging to the world around them. I will be arguing that the poem "Faithful and Virtuous Night" expresses this innate longing that humans possess: the wish to be understood, to feel connected to anything

at all. The aim of this analysis will be affirming the Nobel committee's statement:
Glück's poetry makes individual existence universal.

“Faithful and Virtuous Night” Close Reading: Formal Dimensions & Poetic Messages

Glück makes the following remark in her book of essays: “Even before they’ve been lived through, a child can sense the great human subjects: time which breeds loss, desire, the world’s beauty,” (Glück 7) which subtly foreshadows her 2014 poem “Faithful and Virtuous Night” belonging to the eponymous volume of poetry. It is a body of work that follows the fictional story of a foreign painter as he navigates through the memories of his life. The poem joins together the aforementioned themes described from the perspective of the painter as a child. Left waiting for his inevitable demise, the speaker in the poem reflects on the past and the inexorability of death. There is a lot of emphasis on the idea of return in the text: a return to elements that are associated with comfort, such as family, childhood, nature and art, which make up the main premises of the poem. The levelness of the storyline is ensured by the alternation of the lyric with the prose, which is why the book reads like a story, although a story engulfed by death. Night, as one of the motifs, is crucial in the analysis of this whole body of work. The night facilitates the evocation of the dream state, where everything is possible but also distorted: a lot can happen in such a short span of time. Glück constructs a world that feels so real but whose reliability can still be contested. Unlike in her other volumes of poetry, with *Faithful and Virtuous Night*, Glück distances herself from the persona that she employs, although keeping several similarities to herself.¹² She is no longer Persephone, or the poet talking to God, or the daughter of her parents, or a mother. She is experimenting with the persona of a male figure, albeit still an artist, to evoke a dim

¹² In *Proofs & Theories*, Glück discloses to having experimented with painting as a teenager.

reality, resembling a dream-like world. The poem “Faithful and Virtuous Night” follows a clear-cut structure: the beginning, the middle, and the end of life. The beginning straightforwardly introduces the subjects of the poem, the middle is related through memory and contemplation, and the end through anticipation. Glück also ascertains her preference for open-ended poems in *Proofs & Theories*, thus also applying it to this text. The narrative is designed to take the reader through different phases of life, although the timespan is only several days. In this poem, childhood, generally a period of curiosity and innocence, is recounted through nostalgia¹³ which sets the tone for the majority of the text, as the speaker’s transformative experience occurs in his boyhood.

Peter Champion identifies a similarity between the themes of *Faithful and Virtuous Night* and Glück’s 1992 Pulitzer Prize volume, *The Wild Iris*. In this earlier volume, he remarks the following line: “I tell you I could speak again”¹⁴ which is echoed in the first line of the 2014 poem: “I could speak and I was happy” (1). The similarity is therefore evident: in Glück’s poetry, there is a contrast between being silent and finding a voice. However, Champion is more concerned with the differences between these two books. If in “The Wild Iris” the poetic subject is rather verbose, in “Faithful and Virtuous Night,” it becomes overwhelmed by silence. The atmosphere of the latter poetic work “offers a departure,” (Champion 2014) both in terms of tone and persona. The clarity of the 2014 poems differs from the uncertainty of other volumes, the questions of the poetic subject being significantly reduced. Assuming the persona of a male artist in a process of “authorial shape-shifting,” Glück points towards “a central obsession:” we are all

¹³ “On my bed, sheets printed with colored sailboats / conveying, simultaneously, visions of adventure (in the form of / exploration) / and sensations of gentle rocking, as of a cradle.” (6-9)

¹⁴ Line 18 of “The Wild Iris” by Louise Glück, 1992.

aware that life will end. We must carry on living despite having the burden of this piece of knowledge, which is an artistic problem as much as it is an existential one (Campion 2014). Wordsmiths document this problem for various reasons. As Glück has specified her preference for poetry that needs a listener, her purpose for writing might be a way of bringing comfort to the reader. She is suggesting that although death is inescapable, we must go on living and minimise thinking about the end. This will become clearer in the sections to come, which are divided according to a natural progression mirrored in the poem. The beginning follows some of the fond memories of the lyrical I, the middle constitutes a turning point in his childhood when he becomes silent, and the end entails a return to speaking, a gathering of realisations made whilst being quiet and contemplative.

The Beginning: The Habits of Long Ago

The poem belongs to a set of texts called “the painter poems” in the 2014 volume. Glück experiments with the creation of a fictional story about an orphaned English painter raised by his aunt in the English countryside. In the first part of the poem, the speaker introduces the reader to his childhood memories, most of them centred around visual images and sounds. He is recalling a time when he was “happy, thus speaking,” (3) when life was all adventure and curiosity, and when he lived with his brother and their mother’s sister. Initially, the poem seems led by a peaceful sense of comfort and innocence: the child is aware of his surroundings, he recalls the breeze of spring and his brother reading in the room that they shared.¹⁵ He merges together the images and the

¹⁵ “Spring, and the curtains flutter. / Breezes enter the room bringing the first insects.” (10-11)

sounds of his childhood, drawing a contrast with the brooding that he becomes immersed in later on. “The habits of long ago” (24) are therefore what divides childhood from growing up. Habits are elements of comfort and consistency, which make him feel safe and secure despite the haunting knowledge that his parents are not alive anymore. This first part of the poem merely contextualises the story of the now elderly painter, encompassing personal and specific elements of his life which will gain significance throughout the poem. These elements often times resemble Glück’s personal life – for instance, being a silent child¹⁶ or having an April birthday. Silence is one of the dominant themes in this volume and it is also very prominent in this particular poem.¹⁷ It indicates an omen of cathartic transformation, the shift from childhood to maturity: “And so time passed: I became / a boy like my brother, later / a man” (227-229).

The title of the poem derives from a misunderstanding belonging to the obscure memories of childhood: the little brother mistakes the word “knight” for “night,” as his sibling was reading a book about King Arthur.¹⁸ I believe this is one of the main aspects that make this first section so familiar to the reader: such small confusions often occur in a child’s first years, as life seems to be full of grand and complicated words at first. This image that the misunderstanding conjures will follow the poetic subject on his contemplative journey towards maturity. Growing up, his ‘soul’ shall be transformed in darkness and silence. Glück’s play with the night leitmotif here indicates that she

“The habits of long ago: my brother on his side of the bed, / subdued but voluntarily so, / his bright head bent over his hands, his face obscured—” (24-26).

¹⁶ As disclosed in the essay “Education of the Poet” in *Proofs & Theories*, see footnote 7.

¹⁷ “Silence was everywhere.” (129)

“How quiet you are, my aunt said.” (136)

¹⁸ “my brother was reading a book he called / the faithful and virtuous night.” (28-29)

observes its shift in meaning: the “lake of darkness” (31) on the ceiling of his childhood room reminds the speaker of what he cannot see, his parents, as opposed to the moment in the second section when this changes to: “I found the darkness comforting. / I could see, dimly, the blue and yellow / sailboats on the pillowcase” (165-167). For children, the night has a frightening connotation, as it is associated with fear of the dark. For an adult, its meaning becomes centred around sorrow or death. This poem outlines an interchange between these two meanings, highlighting something universal: despair.

Glück unearths mundane elements from memories associated with childhood, focusing on images and sounds concerning nature or family. Recounting this story does not seem difficult for the speaker, as he seems to have made peace with the hardships of his childhood. His tone is calm, collected and descriptive: “Well, what could I do? I wasn’t / a baby anymore” (163-164). There is, however, plenty of preparation for diving into more complex subjects, as he meditates upon his “parents sitting on the white clouds in their white travel outfits” (40). In order to feel closer to his parents, he claims that he had been travelling as well, from one day to the next, perhaps to cross off one more day of being far apart from his mother and father. The picture suddenly cuts to a “harmless day,” (47) his birthday, when he receives gifts from his aunt and brother. As a poet, Glück delves deeply into overlooked or seldomly discussed feelings. For instance, she catches the lyrical I in a confrontation with one of the loneliest, most bitter-sweet moments of human existence: the anticipation of suddenly being left alone after having received unusual amounts of attention on a birthday. Life does not seem real on one’s birthday, what should be a “harmless day” almost overwhelmingly feels like a farce. The care that was once briefly there suddenly disappears.

Lastly, Walt Hunter's identifies in Glück's latest work her "human compulsion to retell stories and reimagine scenes; in the face of grief, sadness, and destruction" by asking "how can belief in new beginnings possibly still persist?" (Hunter 2020). This is an underlying question that the poem seems to pose.¹⁹ The speaker strives to answer it by travelling deep onto himself and returning with a new lease of life: "Perhaps I slept. When I woke / the sky had changed. A light rain was falling, / making everything very fresh and new—" (108-110). Ultimately, this is what Glück's poetry does: it takes the reader to darker dimensions so he will not have to go on his own. She is teaching him hard lessons with austerity and beauty: "But what really is the point of the lighthouse? / This is north, it says. / Not: I am your safe harbor" (18-20).

The Middle: When Something Continuous Stops

The second section of the poem meets all of the central themes of the text together, placing them under the radical transformation of growth. It can be argued that the changes from childhood to maturity are generally among the most drastic in life. The lessons we learn in our childhood are likely to be applied as we grow up, views to take shape, and the consequences of it all to be felt in our maturity. We begin to think about the meaning of life, we brood upon disease and death, we worry about our limited time on Earth. Thus, it can be suggested that at the core of this poem stands the idea of learning life's lessons through radical changes. It is about watching comfort slide away

¹⁹ "Are you waiting for the day to end [...]" (68)

and noticing one's own universe altering with time.²⁰ This can often lead to various questions about the meaning of life or the inevitability of death.

Once left in solitude after his birthday, the speaker's thoughts begin to wander. He listens to the sounds around his house, but they do not distract him from falling deeper into thought: "Perhaps the occupation of a very young child / is to observe and listen:" (59-60). Although everything around him is familiar, somehow all is changed. The "schism" (70) between him and his deceased parents has become more pressing, which is why he seeks to make sense of the world around him more than ever, to make life seem as normal as possible. As he cannot yet read the words of *My First Reader*, one of the presents he received from his aunt, he analyses its images: children playing fetch with their dog, a mundane and senseless activity, which awakens in him the realisation of lacking. The images convey one crucial aspect: those children must have a family with two parents, and he does not. This is why the implications of these images determine the child to think about the "far backward reaches of time" (99) when his family was whole. This return to past memories caused by the images in the book introduces him to "philosophy and religion," (107) driving him into the realm of unanswerable questions. Having fallen asleep and woken up shortly after, the world suddenly seems new. This is when the child starts to form realisations about the world around him: "You have no idea how shocking it is / to a small child when / something continuous stops" (124-26). Glück is questioned on these lines by Claire Luchette: "Why just to a small child?," Luchette asks, and Glück answers by affirming that the speaker is trying to talk from the experience of the small child, because generalization

²⁰ "I heard my brother's voice / calling to say he was home. / How old he seemed, older than this morning." (117-119)

would not make it authentic. This is a key moment in the poem, as it signifies acknowledging the necessity of moving past the trauma brought by sudden change, when something appears “where there had been nothing” (146). Furthermore, the darkness becomes a source of comfort for the child now, it brings him clarity and a sense of intimacy.²¹ This is when Glück, through the persona, attempts to draw attention to the existence of a silver lining. The shift to maturity has occurred, but it is not entirely hopeless. Having accepted the changes that come with maturity, one can and one should always go on in life, is the poet’s ultimate suggestion.

Another important moment in the poem is when the following discovery is made by the speaker: “It had occurred to me that all human beings are divided / into those who wish to move forward / and those who wish to go back” (131-33). This is a turning point in the poem, as the lyrical I realises that remaining quiet implies a setback. Questioning death, one’s own or the one of your loved ones is fruitless – there is no answer to the question of why it happens. In other words, life was made to be lived, not to be squandered on preparations for our departure. It is our duty not to dwell on such dangerous, unproductive thoughts. Glück delivers an excellent response to those lines in her interview with Luchette: she narrows it down to two categories of people, those who favour the “absolute” and those unimpressed by it (Luchette 2014). According to Glück, the former is concerned with meaning-seeking and establishing a clear-cut definition for truth. The latter category condemns truth, as it hosts believers of evidence and fluidity of opinion. Such observations on human nature, although ambivalent, are strongly tied to the idea of individual existence becoming universal. If it is a matter of

²¹ “I was alone with my brother; / we lay in the dark, breathing together, / the deepest intimacy.” (168-170)

either/or, one is bound to recognise themselves in one of the two categories. However, Glück admits that this division is reductive, which is why she suggests that they both share a common trait: “in either case certain experiences, certain perceptions, will be missed” (Luchette 2014). Moreover, she contends that it is the truth seeker who creates these categories, “but a truth seeker who mistrusts his habitual tendencies” (Luchette 2014). What category does the painter assume then? Perhaps none, perhaps he creates his own category, one to represent the imperfect existence of us all.

The End: As a Compromise

This poem intentionally lacks a concrete ending: “It has come to seem / there is no perfect ending” (230-31). Glück does not seem to wish to put an end to the painter’s story just yet, which is why it carries on throughout the book. Both the poet and the painter “leave” the reader “here,” (230) urging him to figure it all out by himself. This last section of the poem culminates with the painter being able to speak again, after having brooded upon life and death, and realising that there are no clear answers: “The next day, I could speak again” (188). Speaking again is hence the painter’s way of moving forward despite not having any answers to the biggest questions in life. The clever metaphor around the pencils²² represents, once again, the line between childhood and maturity. It also symbolises the continuation of life despite its traumas and adversities. After exhausting the “darker colors,” (195) the child can finally explore the brighter ones. However, the darker colours are not completely discarded, as they

²² “I was content with my brooding. / I spent my days with the colored pencils / (I soon used up the darker colors) / though what I saw, as I told my aunt, / was less a factual account of the world / than a vision of its transformation / subsequent to a passage through the void of myself.” (193-199)

represent the realisations he has garnered during the cathartic transformation. Once having been faced with contemplation, it follows us all throughout life: “Having finally begun, how does one stop?” (182). It is important to dismiss it at times, should we wish to remain sane, is what Glück is trying to insinuate.

Furthermore, the soul returns “empty-handed,” (209) meaning it has failed to find a way to defy death. It has not found any answers regarding its inexorability despite venturing close to it, within deep places of sorrow. Neither the poet nor the speaker can enlighten the reader about what awaits after death, but that, in a way, is a comforting outcome. Perhaps we do not need to know, there might not be any use in knowing. The only solution is to keep going, otherwise we would be wasting our life wondering and worrying.²³

Although fairly brief, this last section of the poem encapsulates a lot of elements pertaining to the quintessence of Glück’s writing. It is interesting to examine why the sudden retreat of the soul is of more importance than its return. The poetic subject admits to using the word “soul” as “a compromise” (219) to justify all the physical sensations that he feels. The soul is also a muddy, uncertain concept – we all use it as a compromise, to describe a sort of spiritual essence. How can the retreat of something we do not see leave a void in ourselves? Glück has been praised by many critics for her ability to take the reader close to sensations of loss, trauma and death. I argue that Glück’s painter calls on to a higher unit, the soul, to explore the darkest parts of existence, to come close to death and to return unharmed, but carrying an important lesson. Sending the mind into

²³ As Hunter remarks, Glück’s poetry seems to ask: “Why make a life together if it might only come apart?” (Hunter 2020). The answer lies in the strategy: using optimism to combat the knowledge of an imminent sadness. Thus, “Glück’s poems testify to “the wanting to be surprised” that somehow continues even when the ending is already known” (Hunter 2020).

those depths would be too dangerous, therefore we make the compromise of sending something we are not sure exists. This kind of comfort is something we all require as humans. Coming close to death or witnessing it results in a trauma that is too incomprehensible for the mind. Moreover, this might well be Glück's means of venturing as close as possible to the darker dimensions of life: by employing a persona to do it. The retreat of the soul is a transformative experience, possibly a premature one for the speaker in "Faithful and Virtuous Night." The extents that the soul travels to are unsustainable, as it can only explore them for minutes at a time.²⁴ Therefore, no substantial knowledge can be drawn from this experience.

The realisations gathered from this occurrence are simple. There is no perfect ending, but it is not the ending that should concern us; we must make the most of the in-between. Similar to everything else in life, we must not have high expectations for what happens in the end, else we are bound to end up disappointed – that is, if we do end up feeling something after we are no more. As Louise Glück is entering her eight decade, it is only natural of her to think about the passage of time and how humans treat it. However, what she seems to imply in this volume of poetry is that we must accept the fact that we do not have any confirmation about what truly happens in the end, and we must make the most of the here and now.

²⁴ "Perhaps it is like a diver / with only enough air in his tank / to explore the depths for a few minutes or so— / then the lungs send him back." (213-216)

Conclusion

In her essay “Against Sincerity,” Glück states that “the source of art is experience, the end product truth, and the artist, surveying the actual, constantly intervenes and manages, lies and deletes, all in the service of truth” (Glück 34). Experience is the frame of the artistic product, and experience is made up of certain universal trials, such as childhood, witnessing change, and growing up. Moreover, truth is a feeble concept, as there are only so many unanimously agreed upon facts in the world. We know for a fact that childhood, change and growing up happen to all of us. If truth is the end product, it is meant to express something that cannot be contested: “once one begins, / there are only endings” (233-34). For instance, being born means approaching death with each passing day. Finally, according to Glück’s perception of the artist, he or she paradoxically manipulates “the actual” in order to help the truth reach the surface. No human experience is identical, yet death is inevitable for everyone. Making connections, in many different ways, is also attainable for all of us, we merely have to know where to look. We also have to accept that there is more to life than human connection. By drawing attention to these truths and ideas, the poet makes sure the reader is listening.

There are many more dimensions to Glück’s poetry to be explored. This thesis has merely touched upon seemingly simple human experiences, which are in fact complex and tough at times. As a child, Glück found companions in the poets that she admired.²⁵ I believe that with her poetry, Glück has taken on the same mission, of being

²⁵ *Proofs & Theories*: “From the time, at four or five or six, I first started reading poems, first thought of the poets I read as my companions, my predecessors—from the beginning I preferred the simplest vocabulary.” (Glück 4)

a companion to her readers in navigating the rough patches of life. In her latest volume, she explores the transformations that occur to human beings, meditating upon loss and grief, albeit urging the reader not to dwell on them. The simplicity of her writing style is also a technique of bringing relief for the seemingly hopeless circumstances that she mentions in her poems. The scholarly publications written on Glück all seem to agree on this. Moreover, although this technique is used in all her books, Glück somehow manages to remain a poetic innovator. Following the natural progression of her own life, she communicates new thoughts and lessons in the simplest way to an anxious world, where thinking is becoming increasingly overcomplicated.

In conclusion, Louise Glück makes individual existence universal with her poetic work by outlining the transformations in the key trials of life: the innocent childhood or the beginning, the pensive in-between or the middle, and the inevitable end, all machinated by the passage of time. Although not preventing death, Glück does provide a sense of stalling: look around, use the tools you already own to make an enjoyable in-between, because connection can be attained in so many ways; and human connection is not the only fulfilling bind in life. Once we accept this, we become freer than we think.

Appendix

“Faithful and Virtuous Night” by Louise Gluck

My story begins very simply: I could speak and I was happy.

Or: I could speak, thus I was happy.

Or: I was happy, thus speaking.

I was like a bright light passing through a dark room.

If it is so difficult to begin, imagine what it will be to end—

On my bed, sheets printed with colored sailboats
conveying, simultaneously, visions of adventure (in the form of
exploration)

and sensations of gentle rocking, as of a cradle.

Spring, and the curtains flutter.

Breezes enter the room, bringing the first insects.

A sound of buzzing like the sound of prayers.

Constituent

memories of a large memory.

Points of clarity in a mist, intermittently visible,

like a lighthouse whose one task

is to emit a signal.

But what really is the point of the lighthouse?

This is north, it says.

Not: I am your safe harbor.

Much to his annoyance, I shared this room with my older brother.

To punish me for existing, he kept me awake, reading
adventure stories by the yellow nightlight.

The habits of long ago: my brother on his side of the bed,
subdued but voluntarily so,

his bright head bent over his hands, his face obscured—

At the time of which I'm speaking,
my brother was reading a book he called
the faithful and virtuous night.

Was this the night in which he read, in which I lay awake?

No—it was a night long ago, a lake of darkness in which
a stone appeared, and on the stone
a sword growing.

Impressions came and went in my head,
a faint buzz, like the insects.
When not observing my brother,
I lay in the small bed we shared staring at the ceiling—never
my favorite part of the room. It reminded me
of what I couldn't see, the sky obviously, but more painfully
my parents sitting on the white clouds in their white travel outfits.

And yet I too was traveling,
in this case imperceptibly
from that night to the next morning,
and I too had a special outfit:
striped pyjamas.

Picture if you will a day in spring.
A harmless day: my birthday.
Downstairs, three gifts on the breakfast table.
In one box, pressed handkerchiefs with a monogram.
In the second box, colored pencils arranged
in three rows, like a school photograph.
In the last box, a book called *My First Reader*.

My aunt folded the printed wrapping paper;
the ribbons were rolled into neat balls.
(We were raised by my mother's sister.)
My brother handed me a bar of chocolate
wrapped in silver paper.

Then, suddenly, I was alone.

Perhaps the occupation of a very young child
is to observe and listen:

In that sense, everyone was occupied—
I listened to the various sounds of the birds we fed,
the tribes of insects hatching, the small ones
creeping along the window sill, and overhead
my aunt's sewing machine drilling
holes in a pile of dresses—

Restless, are you restless?
Are you waiting for day to end, for your brother to return to his book?
For night to return, faithful, virtuous,
repairing, briefly, the schism between
you and your parents?

This did not, of course, happen immediately.
Meanwhile, there was my birthday;
somehow the luminous outset became
the interminable middle.

Mild for late April. Puffy
clouds overhead, floating among the apple trees.
I picked up *My First Reader*, which appeared to be
a story about two children—I could not read the words.

On page three, a dog appeared.
On page five, there was a ball—one of the children
threw it higher than seemed possible, whereupon
the dog floated into the sky to join the ball.
That seemed to be the story.

I turned the pages. When I was finished
I resumed turning, so the story took on a circular shape,
like the zodiac. It made me dizzy. The yellow ball

seemed promiscuous, equally
at home in the child's hand and the dog's mouth—

Hands underneath me, lifting me.
They could have been anyone's hands,
a man's, a woman's.
Tears falling on my exposed skin. Whose tears?
Or were we out in the rain, waiting for the car to come?

The day had become unstable.
Fissures appeared in the broad blue, or,
more precisely, sudden black clouds
imposed themselves on the azure background.

Somewhere, in the far backward reaches of time,
my mother and father
were embarking on their last journey,
my mother fondly kissing the new baby, my father
throwing my brother into the air.

I sat by the window, alternating
my first lesson in reading with
watching time pass, my introduction to
philosophy and religion.

Perhaps I slept. When I woke
the sky had changed. A light rain was falling,
making everything very fresh and new—

I continued staring
at the dog's frantic reunions
with the yellow ball, an object

soon to be replaced
by another object, perhaps a soft toy—

And then suddenly evening had come.
I heard my brother's voice
calling to say he was home.

How old he seemed, older than this morning.
He set his books beside the umbrella stand
and went to wash his face.
The legs of his school uniform
dangled below his knees.

You have no idea how shocking it is
to a small child when
something continuous stops.

The sounds, in this case, of the sewing room,
like a drill, but very far away—

Vanished. Silence was everywhere.
And then, in the silence, footsteps.
And then we were all together, my aunt and my brother.

Then tea was set out.
At my place, a slice of gingercake
and at the center of the slice,
one candle, to be lit later.
How quiet you are, my aunt said.

It was true—
sounds weren't coming out of my mouth. And yet
they were in my head, expressed, possibly,
as something less exact, thought perhaps,
though at the time they still seemed like sounds to me.

Something was there where there had been nothing.
Or should I say, nothing was there
but it had been defiled by questions—

Questions circled my head; they had a quality
of being organized in some way, like planets—

Outside, night was falling. Was this
that lost night, star covered, moonlight spattered,
like some chemical preserving
everything immersed in it?

My aunt had lit the candle.

Darkness overswept the land
and on the sea the night floated
strapped to a slab of wood—

If I could speak, what would I have said?
I think I would have said
goodbye, because in some sense
it *was* goodbye—

Well, what could I do? I wasn't
a baby anymore.

I found the darkness comforting.
I could see, dimly, the blue and yellow
sailboats on the pillowcase.

I was alone with my brother;
we lay in the dark, breathing together,
the deepest intimacy.

It had occurred to me that all human beings are divided
into those who wish to move forward
and those who wish to go back.
Or you could say, those who wish to keep moving
and those who want to be stopped in their tracks
as by the blazing sword.

My brother took my hand.
Soon it too would be floating away
though perhaps, in my brother's mind,
it would survive by becoming imaginary—

Having finally begun, how does one stop?
 I suppose I can simply wait to be interrupted
 as in my parents' case by a large tree—
 the barge, so to speak, will have passed
 for the last time between the mountains.
 Something, they say, like falling asleep,
 which I proceeded to do.

The next day, I could speak again.
 My aunt was overjoyed -
 it seemed my happiness had been
 passed on to her, but then
 she needed it more, she had two children to raise.

I was content with my brooding.
 I spent my days with the colored pencils
 (I soon used up the darker colors)
 though what I saw, as I told my aunt,
 was less a factual account of the world
 than a vision of its transformation
 subsequent to passage through the void of myself.

Something, I said, like the world in spring.

When not preoccupied with the world
 I drew pictures of my mother
 for which my aunt posed,
 holding, at my request,
 a twig from a sycamore.

As to the mystery of my silence:
 I remained puzzled
 less by my soul's retreat than
 by its return, since it returned empty-handed—

How deep it goes, this soul,
 like a child in a department store, seeking its mother—

Perhaps it is like a diver
 with only enough air in his tank
 to explore the depths for a few minutes or so—
 then the lungs send him back.

But something, I was sure, opposed the lungs,
 possibly a deathwish—
 (I use the word soul as a compromise.)

Of course, in a certain sense I was not empty handed:
I had my colored pencils.
In another sense, that is my point:
I had accepted substitutes.

It was challenging to use the bright colors,
the ones left, though my aunt preferred them of course—
she thought all children should be light-hearted.

And so time passed: I became
a boy like my brother, later
a man.

I think here I will leave you. It has come to seem there is no perfect ending.
Indeed, there are infinite endings.
Or perhaps, once one begins,
there are only endings.

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