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Exodus or Exile: The Trope of “more life” in Louise Glück’s Poetry

Abstract: What is life in poetry? One concept that is trying to answer this questions is a psycho-theological, messianic and vitalist category of “more life,” elaborated by the Polish scholar Agata Bielik-Robson on the basis of Harold Bloom’s theory of poetic incarnation. Bloom’s writings constitute a link between the Jewish messianic vitalism and the vitalist line of American poetry, in which I place Glück. An antithetical position of subjectivity against the orders of experience governed by law and necessity (nature and death), “more life” positions the poetic psyche in a precarious position as an excessive entity in-between them. The article examines a trajectory of the positions that Glück’s poetic subjects take in relation to those orders in the context of the messianic promise of “more life.”

Keywords: Louise Glück, Agata Bielik-Robson, Harold Bloom, vitalism in American poetry

Introduction: Louise Glück
as a Psycho-theological Post-confessional Poet

Louise Glück is a poet looking to by-pass the personal by recourse to universal orders. Although the personal experience – the troubled relations with her parents and her sister, a history of depressive disorders, repressiveness of the marriage institution – remain her sole thematic area, the poet has worked out a formula of distancing devices which allow her to treat the personal as merely an overture to the paradigmatic. The personal is here an instant of the incessant activity of trans-historical patterns and forces which the Western culture has fathomed through mythology and the Judeo-Christian religious tradition.

There are two seemingly opposite literary stimuli that provided the context for Louise Glück’s early poetic development. One is the inclination of some poets in the 1960s and 1970s to look inward, against high modernism and in search of greater authenticity. Robert von Hallberg describes this tendency as arising in reaction to the crisis of the political and cultural communication, the “cynical

duplicity of the mass media” and the “government’s conspicuous mendacity.”¹ Within this confessional and post-confessional thrust, Glück can be discussed as a follower of Lowell and Plath. The other immediately recognizable stimulus, often discussed by Glück in her essays, is Eliot’s high modernist injunction against the emotional expression of the personal and his accompanying instruction of the humble listening to the orders regulating experience.² It is the increased awareness of tradition as a dominant force, advocated by Eliot, that regulates Glück’s revisiting her personal past, and in her case this means a return to the deepest, most foundational layers of the western mindset.

In this task, her post-confessional poetics is helped by the mode of self-analysis that poetry borrows from psychoanalysis. The analytic look serves to achieve “lyric intensity” by encounters with the elemental as rendered by the mythological and biblical traditions.³ It is at this layer that, as I am going to claim, Glück’s principal theme and main poetic precursor emerge. Here, the psychoanalytic modulation of the personal yields not a “confession” – a report of guilt coming from a badly composed relations with the closest of kin – but a prolonged confrontation with the shaping, ordering, and impinging forces always threatening to smother the life of the psychological subject. Glück takes the confessional tradition to a paradigmatic region where poetry is a scene of psychical struggle that a budding subjectivity, almost smothered by the very fact of the poetic calling, undertakes for the sake of its livelihood against various external orders.

This is a poetics in which the cultural pattern – mythological and biblical references – gives way to psycho-theology: I read Glück as a psycho-theological poet, a particular illustration of a struggle for what Harold Bloom and the Polish scholar Agata Bielik-Robson have called the blessing of “more life.” Although the term belongs to the tradition of Judaic messianic vitalism, I will consider Glück as a poet who remains in dialogue with the American vitalist Emersonian tradition, and whose central poetic predecessor is Wallace Stevens. “More life” is a construct that belongs as much to the problematic of poetic subjectivity – a central issue in the Emersonian poetic vitalism – as it does to the area of Jewish messianic psycho-theology. It is Bloom’s life-long commentary on Emerson, Dickinson, Whitman, Stevens, and Crane that allowed him to elaborate the thought of the blessing of “more life” as a psychical modulation, not to be distinguished from the achievement of a poet who struggles for the livelihood of her creative powers.

1. Robert von Hallberg, “Authenticity,” in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 124, 140.

2. See Charles Altieri, “T. S. Eliot,” in *The Cambridge History of American Poetry*, ed. Alfred Bendixen and Stephen Burt (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 552.

3. Reena Sastri, “Psychoanalytic Poetics,” in *The Cambridge History of American Poetry*, ed. Alfred Bendixen and Stephen Burt (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1018.

In what follows, I am first going to provide an outline of Bielik-Robson's elaboration on Bloom's term "more life." Next, against this background, I will present three major positions that Glück's poetry takes on the issue of the livelihood of the poetic psyche. Here, I will argue that Glück's poetry travels a trajectory within which it manages to escape the initial option of treating the negativity of death as the ultimate truth of being, but, clearly depleted by this "near-death" experience, it is incapable of entering the mode of "more-life," also failing to negotiate a more active position against the vitalism found in Wallace Stevens's poetic precedence. In her post-Thanatic phase, Glück is a poet of a failed exodus, an exile in the wasteland where the poetic life and subjectivity wither away amidst the barrenness of the post-symbolic earth.

The Vitalism of "more life"

A take on the spiritual life of subjectivity, the trope of "more life" emerges through several conjoined narratives developed in alternative languages of literary theory, psycho-theology, psychoanalysis, and late modernist philosophy. From the literary theory point of view, "more life" is a successful outcome of the poet's life-long cycle of agonistic individuation against the overpowering forces of the poet's predecessor, a subjectivity-forming process outlined by Bloom in his *Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and developed in *A Map of Misreading* (1975) and *Agon* (1982). In this model, the poetic incarnation commences with the voice of the prior poet reaching the beginner in an event that is marked by both the promise of the initiation and the danger of extinction: while calling the follower to poetic life, the voice of the predecessor is too powerful and threatens the germinating poetic instinct with overall flooding.

The reception of the voice of the poetic predecessor finds its theological counterpart in responding to the call of God, a highly traumatic event. Both – the contact with the poetic voice and the reception of the divine call for emerging from oneness with nature – are too powerful surges that can only be received indirectly, through a long and complex series of evasions. The poetic influx, the religiously understood entry into being alive, the psychoanalytically understood initial anarchic burst of energies – these are all precarious beginnings in which promise is accompanied by the danger of premature extinction or dispersal and dissolution. Bielik-Robson sums it up by saying that "the touch of Yahweh is traumatic, as it brings the intensity of life that can prove lethal to ordinary mortals," even though, as psychoanalysis teaches us, this is a necessary beginning – an "enabling trauma."⁴

4. Agata Bielik-Robson, *Na pustyni: kryptoteologie późnej nowoczesności* (Kraków: Universitas, 2008), 330 (translation mine).

The ambiguity of the affair is represented in the story of Jacob's duel with God, or God's deadly aspect, the Angel of Death, in the desert. Jacob survives the encounter and receives the blessing of a new name, but is hobbled in the outcome. Limping in the desert and waiting for the arrival of his brother, Esau, who represents the order of the natural, he is the theological patron of the trope of "more life."

Jacob the lame one, a "limping hero who managed to detach himself from the lethal embrace with the vital order,"⁵ refuses to succumb to the orders of nature and of death, and instead chooses to seek his chance against fate. He continues on the path of the most uncertain and *erratic* endeavor in the hope of turning the *exile* in the desert into the *exodus* of "more life." As such a figure, he represents a willed swerving away from the necessary and the normative, an excess of energy that, although it avoids the sort of metaphysical flight of the mythological Eros and is bound to the material desert of this world, refuses to be identified with its nothingness. As such a self-trusting energetic surplus, hobbled but stubborn, he rewrites the Erotic into the *Errotic*; he represents the excessivity of human life as a non-normative, "out of joint" entity, investing in itself as an anomaly and willed error: "[he] begins to *err*: crosses the limits of the functional system of *physis* and wanders out from the Egypt of nature into the desert of the open possibilities."⁶ From the psychoanalytic point of view, this eccentricity is the necessary condition of seeking a later reconnection with the initial anarchy of the drives. On the plane of the poetic, the "error" is the capacity of the poem to divert from the given and the literal by entering the rhetorically excessive mode which Wallace Stevens – a poet who is central to Bloom's theory of poetic subjectivity – has called "the accent of deviation in the living thing / that is its life perverted."⁷

One of the key characteristics of "more life" emerges in the capacity of the *Errotic* to stave off premature release of tension, thus maintaining its status of an indeterminate and intermediary energetic being, cultivating a meta-stability between kinds of transcendence and orders. First, the exile from Egypt, represents a discovery of our unbelonging to the order of nature, the "naturalistic norm of *kata phusein*,"⁸ which Agata Bielik-Robson describes by pointing out the parallels between Freudian theory of the drives – their initial "unnatural" and anarchic energy – and the anthropology of Johann Gottfried Herder, where the human is an awkward anomaly in the natural world, a "natural 'monstrosity' or an 'error,'

5. Agata Bielik-Robson, *The Saving Lie: Harold Bloom and Deconstruction* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 278.

6. Bielik-Robson, *The Saving Lie*, 278.

7. Wallace Stevens, "A Discovery of Thought," in *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 459.

8. Agata Bielik-Robson, *Another Finitude: Messianic Vitalism and Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), xiv.

initially unable to live and survive” on its own, in dire need of the symbolic, language and culture.⁹ This Herderian lack in the center of the human “unnaturalness” is the indeterminacy of the libidinal energies thematized by Freud, a chance for human energy-bundle to realize, later on, its independence from reproductive cyclicality – the biomorphic and “survivalist imperative of *kata phusein*.”¹⁰

The second order from which the subject of “more life” seeks independence is the Thanatic one. From the philosophical standpoint, Bielik-Robson’s vitalism finds its most staunch opposition in the deconstruction of the subject offered by the Lacanian model of authenticity found in acknowledging death as the ultimate reality. Lacan, on this argument, is the major representative of the “death party,” a group of late modernist crypto-theological thinkers who reinstall death in the central place earlier occupied by the Platonic and Neo-Platonic absolute and *logos*. Here, the order of death is never to be engaged on negotiable terms, but is treated as the ultimate reality and truth – the truth of being, traditionally sought by philosophy – the uncompromising submission to which is the one and only gesture of authenticity, indeed, a sublime gesture. Bielik-Robson writes: “[F]or Lacan, subject is constituted by his total subjection to the absolute master, which is Death. In front of death, we are all but slaves.”¹¹ While Bloom “has to invest [...] in the idea of autonomous self-constitution,” for Lacan this is a false investment in the phantasm of the imaginary,¹² an error that Lacan shows always to be crushed by the highest reality of death as the “purity of Non-Being.”¹³ On this reading, Lacanian psychoanalysis masks a deeply Gnostic element, reinstalling the nothingness of death at the very center of the universe; the philosophical obsession with the truth of being and the religious search for the highest spiritual reality come together in Lacan’s narrative, heeding the gnostic “call of the distant God.”¹⁴ Here, the human life recognizes itself as an error and anomaly in the purity of emptiness, an error to be corrected, not invested in. Thus, the Lacanian Gnostic psychoanalysis exits the *nomos* of nature by relegating everything that is biological in man to the realm of untruth. Leaving nature behind, is a new *nomos*, a new transcendence, a new religion rising, one of nothingness, with death occupying the center left by the former Platonic or Neoplatonic essences. In *Another Finitude*, Bielik-Robson argues that this line of philosophers, including Lacan and Heidegger, represents late modernity’s inability to think along the line

9. Bielik-Robson, *Another Finitude*, xix–xx.

10. Bielik-Robson, *Another Finitude*, 17.

11. Bielik-Robson, *The Saving Lie*, 171.

12. Bielik-Robson, *The Saving Lie*, 181.

13. Bielik-Robson, *The Saving Lie*, 176.

14. Bielik-Robson, *The Saving Lie*, 176.

of creaturely finitude, and instead continues the thought of an absolute, a beheaded one, with death and nothingness at the center – an “*acephalic* Neoplatonism.”¹⁵

There is no reality attached to the natural and the creaturely whatsoever in late modernity’s headless variety of Platonism; the natural is utterly petrified. The modern ontotheology, always valuating that which seems to exist against the passage of time, finds its counterpart in the archaic religions which worshipped the rock of the world. The ontological search for that which exists most strongly derives from those religions’ obsession with the rock, the stone, the hard inorganic defiance of the creaturely and finite, transient, human (and animal) life. The rock in those religions, just as death in the Lacanian Gnostic variety of psychoanalysis, is truly stronger than life, precisely because of its alienness to it and its (at least apparent) immunity to the passage of time.¹⁶ The realm of nature is split here: while its geological section is raised to the altars of nothingness, the biological/organic is degraded; the Eros is a slave to Thanatos in this option, and, according to Bielik-Robson, Lacan has “nothing but contempt for its ‘sheeplike conglomerations.’”¹⁷

Without remaining bound to the cycles of nature, the poetic subjectivity of “more life” also avoids the Lacanian Thanatic extremum, and thus exceeds the simple Eros vs. Thanatos opposition. It signifies a difficult middle position, an equilibristic investment in the middle ground, between the Eros of nature and the Thanatos of death/nothingness, a steadily maintained condition of ongoing tension, where death is not denied but engaged and negotiated, where nature is differentiated from the human, without, however, denigrating its creaturely finite or bodily aspect. “More life’s” most desired fruition, if it comes to that at all, will be the psyche’s successful arriving at its own reality, a reaffirmation of its love for life, with the full awareness of its finitude.

Glück’s Stalled Exodus

In the remainder of this essay, I am going to discuss three approaches to the chances of the poetic psyche’s life found in Glück’s poetry. These stances can be roughly aligned with the chronology of the poet’s creative development, although the division is not sharp and various tendencies will overlap within the given periods. Glück’s early and middle volumes struggle with the “wound” of mortality in the absence of the traditionally religious explanations. At this stage, the dominant position is one of “*acephalic* Neoplatonism,” which will also mean a serious denigration of the entire biological dimension of being, including sexuality

15. Bielik-Robson, *Another Finitude*, x.

16. Bielik-Robson, *Na pustyni*, 16–20.

17. Bielik-Robson, *The Saving Lie*, 165.

and gender difference. An intermediary stage can next be identified, with Glück's poems testing a middle ground on which the death-suffused order of creation can be negotiated with. While there are individual poems of this tendency dispersed in the early volumes, the main collection here is *The Wild Iris* (1992). Finally, Glück's later volumes contain a prolonged attempt at rejecting the stance of total submission to the Thanatic orders and returning to the life on earth as an area of human finitude, the acceptance of which is necessary for entering the mode of "more life." Here, the most characteristic phase is the volume *Averno* (2006). The late phase is marked with the tropes of the dissipation of desire and subjective will, the distinguishing feature of a stalling of subjective energies, a truncated, unfinished exodus, a failing to enter the area of "more life." Although Glück published volumes after *Averno*, this collection volume marks a limit of her poetics. From the early Thanatic stance, through the "middle ground" of *The Wild Iris*, to the stage of dissipation in *Averno*, Glück travelled a full trajectory of a "failed exodus."

The Thanatic Priestess

The initial phases of Glück's poetic route contain her search for a formula in which to render the unhappy personal experience: confrontation with the dominant mother, being raised by emotionally distant parents, relation with a cold and distant father, competing for the parents' scarce emotional reserves against the sister. These childhood experiences, whose impact continues well into adult life, are soon accompanied by negotiating the gender and sexual roles and marriage. While all of those pieces of the personal story could be discussed in the contexts of cultural politics and feminist critique of the patriarchal control of female subjectivity and affectivity, Glück steers her poetic styles toward loftier regions, where the governing context seeks to avoid the personal, and, as Frank Bidart noticed, the "circumstantial,"¹⁸ and shifts the argument toward the plane of the archetypal. Here, the early phase is a gradual and painful recognition of the human being defined by the "wound," that is the limitation of mortality.

Nature in this phase is smothered under the punishing touch of mortality: the biogenic nature, the organic realm of plants, animals and the human body lose claims to any ontological authenticity under a condemning rule of its opposite force. Glück's early poetry treats organic life in a highly stylized, deliberately conventional way, with animals and plants often represented in a ceremonial manner. There is a stiffness of the *trompe l'oeil* to them, frequently bathed in light that brings out the supernatural, as if in religious painting, rather than natural

18. Frank Bidart, "Louise Glück," *The Threepenny Review*, no. 90 (Summer, 2002), 19.

connotations. A good example of this intentionally stifling stylistic is a poem “Messengers,” a landscape piece with a group of deer: “Slowly they drift into the open / through bronze panels of sunlight.” The bronze illumination takes these creatures out of the natural and lifts them onto a canvas of the poem’s artifice in a gesture the main purpose of which is to deny the animistic. There is a gradual separation from the body, which is first seen as an illusion – “as though their bodies did not impede them” – soon to be revealed as a site of decay: “until they come before you / like dead things, saddled with flesh, / and you above them, wounded and dominant.”¹⁹

This reduction of the animistic translates into the excision of the sexual. Throughout the early period, human sexuality is presented as a fallacy, a mechanistic automatism and trap. Such treatment is stabilized, with the help of Lacanian tropes, in the volume *Descending Figure*, which gravitates toward declarations of sacrificing the bodily and the sexual. A lyric called “The Mirror,” a sort of a belated “mirror stage,” features an expunging of the female gender and sexuality, identification with the masculine, in a clearly auto-aggressive turn of phrases: “[...] shaving / like a blind man. I think you let me stare / so you can turn against yourself.”²⁰ The self-aggression, limiting the budding sexuality, functions as entry into the poetic activity itself. In “The Deviation,” part of a cycle called “Dedication to Hunger,” the female speaker examines her body, touching her breasts, and declaring “a sacrifice” meant to “free” the body of “blossom and subterfuge”; importantly, the gesture’s formality is reflected in the formality of the poem: the poetic utterance itself is a form of ceremonial sacrifice of the erotic, and poetry is equaled to the lofty denial of the erotic “subterfuge.” Poetry, language, the symbolic – all alienate the self from touch with its pre-linguistic and erotic fullness of *jouissance*, and gender difference, or its obliteration, are fully contained within the patriarchal system. As a result, the woman in this early phase takes on the strategy of willful self-petrification, as is the case in the poem “Aphrodite”: “A woman exposed as rock / has this advantage: / she controls the harbor.”²¹ The rock, as we have seen, signifies the archaic religious sacrum, a kind of proto-deity, that Bielik-Robson sees as a forerunner to modern *acephalic* Platonism.

The key episodes of this phase feature Glück’s feminine speakers identifying with the law-giving paternal symbolic order, and presiding over it as a depersonalized priestess, a seer, responsible for the poems’ dominant tone being one

19. Louise Glück, *The First Four Books of Poetry* (Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press, 1995), 68.

20. Glück, *The First Four Books of Poetry*, 121.

21. Glück, *The First Four Books of Poetry*, 141.

of “spiritual prophecy.”²² This motif belongs to a long-developed theme, distributed in a number of volumes, of the relationship to parents. While the mother figure may be often too-dominant, it is the father and his position whom the mother, and other women in the early volumes, serve. “There is always something to be made of pain. / Your mother knits”²³ – we read in an early poem: the knitting mother, clearly one of the Moirai, accepts the pain-inflicting order of death, and functions as a guardian of its earthly patriarchal representation, a sort of a perennial caretaker of graves. Between this early poem and the later *Ararat* (1990), the world of this poetry is absolutely dominated by death. Death is all-present – expected, mourned, with all women-performed household activities revolving around its presence. In *Ararat*, which returns to the death of the father after an earlier confrontation with it, the household itself becomes a tomb. At the head of this familial sepulcher is the father who seems to rule negatively: he ordains reality by being its vacant center, a vacated head of the household, already dead during his lifetime. A recollection of the father reads: “what he wanted / was to lie on the couch / with the Times /over his face, / so that death, when it came, / wouldn’t seem a significant change.”²⁴

In fact, father’s death is the central event of the entire phase, its negative radiance connecting *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985) and *Ararat* (1990). The poems in the two volumes are two attempts of approaching the trauma. The first treatment displays the negative Lacanian sublimity of merging with the paternal-Thanatic, and it occurs in a poem “Metamorphosis.” We witness a daughter united with her father, not in the act of father-daughter reconciliation, but in the daughter renouncing her femininity and becoming a priestess performing the *exequiae* over her dead father’s body:

I run my hand over your face
lightly, like a dustcloth.
What can shock me now? I feel
no coldness that can’t be explained.
Against your cheek, my hand is warm
and full of tenderness.²⁵

“I feel” – this phrase is ironic; there is no feeling here, as the subject is bereft of this human layer, and coldness is in fact all she “feels,” since “[her] hand is warm”

22. Helen Vendler, *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 16.

23. Glück, *The First Four Books of Poetry*, 90.

24. Louise Glück, *Poems 1962–2012* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 219.

25. Glück, *The First Four Books of Poetry*, 158.

but *only* in comparison with the corpse's coldness. The "tenderness" in the last line is completely unconvincing; there is a coldness of ritual here, an entirely impersonal and ceremonial shrouding of the body ("my hand [...] like dustcloth"). The stroking hand belongs not so much to a daughter as to a functionary of death, and indeed this is the hand of a subject who had been transformed in the previous section of the poem. Back there, the daughter, leaning over the dying father, takes the position of the source of a strange light, a dark and yet blinding star illuminating the scene:

then he looked at me
as a blind man stares
straight into the sun, since
whatever it could do to him
is done already.²⁶

The sun, always ambiguous in Glück, either too hot or too cold, more a death-than life-giver, is here not a force of Platonic fullness, but its opposite – the entropic, and yet dominant, deathly light that Bielik-Robson has identified as the "dark entropic sun of Thanatos."²⁷ We will notice, however, that in the scene it is the female speaker's face and head that are aligned perfectly with the source of the ghastly illumination. The poem marks the culmination of the first phase in Glück's trajectory of psycho-theological wandering in the modern desert: her total submission to the Lacanian mastery of death. Robert von Hallberg, describing the "family ethos" inherited by typical Glück's speakers, writes that it relied on the idea "to express but what we feel, and to feel very little." In the end, "to cultivate this species of authenticity is to play dead."²⁸ On the reading I am proposing, this strategy reaches far deeper than familial temperament, and represents the thanaticism that dominates the first stage in the development of Glück's psycho-theology.

The Middle Ground – Recuperating from the Thanatic Dominance

Glück's middle period contains poems that might be read as at least an attempt to undermine the *nomos* of death or the stony anteriority of gnostic creation as such. Traces of this tendency appear earlier, especially in the poems, such as the already discussed "Messengers" in which the poetic subject is split into two positions:

26. Glück, *The First Four Books of Poetry*, 157.

27. Bielik-Robson, *Another Finitude*, x.

28. von Hallberg, "Authenticity," 142.

one of the dominant representative of the order of death, frequently a hunter, and the other of the victim, who, although weaker, carries a spark of the human life found in admitting vulnerability. Another great example of this split is the return to the scene of the father's death in *Averno*.²⁹ Here, I am going to concentrate on *The Wild Iris* (1992) as the most representative case.

A highly acclaimed volume that won the poet a Pulitzer Prize, *The Wild Iris* contains her most extended attempt to give voice to the condemned organic side of creation – vegetation, here endowed with eloquent sentience for the argument's sake, and the human embodied consciousness – as they try to engage the creator and negotiate the very condition of being a part of his work. The volume is in fact a unified prolonged dialogue, almost a script for a theatrical play, with the assigned parts and characters representing a highly hierarchical ontology of the created world. At the lowest layer are plants, flowers, reporting the pain of being called to life in conditions always jeopardizing their very survival. From above, the not so happy organic members of creation are addressed by God. The poems often bear titles signifying prayers – there are matins and vespers here – and the collection becomes a theological discussion over life on earth being a gift or punishment. If it is the former – it is a very cruel gift indeed. “It is terrible to survive / as consciousness,”³⁰ we hear the eponymous wild iris declaring in the opening poem, a controlled complaint that is definitely shared, or at least fully understood, by the human speaker of other poems.

The flowers speak from positions of hard limitation. They are immobile witnesses to the fact of being called to organic life and consciousness, which, as in Eliot's *Wasteland*, is a painful condition. Although they often affirm the beauty of creation, their reports are always tinged with the painful and fearful awareness of its transience. The above-mentioned wild iris ends its monologue with praise to a “fountain of life,” which, however, already carries “deep blue / shadows” in its midst.³¹ Theirs is a hard affirmation, in which beauty signals danger and death. Light may both dazzle and kill, being “a fire / burning through the cool firs,” as a trillium reports, adding: “Then it wasn't possible any longer to stare at heaven and not be

29. In “Terminal Resemblance,” the central poem of *Ararat*, the scene of the father's death returns and Glück attempts to approach it at an angle which gives more affective freedom to her poetic subject. Eric Selinger has discussed the entire volume in the light of Kristeva's research on lament as a form of love. Here, the emotional restraint serves to “unlock a love [...] a fierce erotic drive to hold life together.” See, Eric Selinger, “It Meant I Loved?: Louise Glück's *Ararat*.” *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 3, no. 3, May 1993, posted online 25 September 2013, <http://www.pomo-culture.org/2013/09/25/it-meant-i-loved-louise-glücks-ararat> (15.05.2021).

30. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 245.

31. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 245.

destroyed.”³² Flowers’ speech ensues from their condition of being always already on the brink of death – “I speak because I am shattered,” a red poppy says.³³ This position of the flowers parallels the relation of the human speaker to God. The human and the divine remain in a tense, distrustful, even bitter relation, with the human finding itself a “disposable animal,”³⁴ and the divinity complaining of the surprising pettiness and smallness of the human soul: “Your souls should have been immense by now, / not what they are, / small talking things –.”³⁵ But it is of course this tension that opens a rift that is necessary for the antithetical position of “more life” that *The Wild Iris* approximates.

Robert von Hallberg recognized that while the earlier volumes’ metaphysics was “more cosmological than earthly and human,” the poems in *The Wild Iris* relocate the discussion to whereabouts that are “seen explicitly from the earth.”³⁶ Reena Sastri saw in the collection an attempt to rewrite Plath’s poem “Elm” and Eliot’s *The Waste Land*.³⁷ Piotr Zazula has turned our attention to the theology behind these literary continuations and has argued for the strong Gnostic element, in which the discussions with the whimsical creator, clearly a demiurgical entity, bespeak the Gnostic motif of creation being a deeply flawed catastrophic event marked with the “perennial struggle with matter.”³⁸ Most importantly, however, the volume represents at least a glimmer of the antithetical position toward the dominant nomological order of creation. This element has been noticed by Daniel Morris, who discusses *The Wild Iris* in Bloomian perspective.

From this vantage point, as Daniel Morris has pointed out, the “critical dialog with God at once critiques and affirms the influence of what Bloom calls *The Book of J...* by putting Yahweh on trial.”³⁹ Morris is right in recognizing the treatment of Yahweh as Bloom’s Gnostic “Covering Cherub,” a limiting force, Bloom’s source of ambiguous traumatic call to life, “a paternalistic and yet creative force.”⁴⁰ In a sense, the volume provides a poetic commentary to Bloom’s focus on Jacob, with one of the poems called “Jacob’s Ladder,” a good rendering of the human being’s middle position, where we are “trapped in the earth.”⁴¹ For Morris, the poem,

32. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 248.

33. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 271.

34. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 273.

35. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 258.

36. von Hallberg, “Authenticity,” 144.

37. Reena Sastri, “Psychoanalytic Poetics,” 1020.

38. Piotr Zazula, “A Gnostic in the Garden: Myth and Religion in Louise Glück’s Poems,” *Academic Journal of Modern Philology*, vol. 10 (2020), 257.

39. Daniel Morris, *The Poetry of Louise Glück: A Thematic Introduction* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 38.

40. Morris, *The Poetry of Louise Glück*, 192.

41. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 266.

in which paradise proves to be a mere erotic illusion, is an illustration of “how freely Glück mixes immanent and transcendent conceptions of divinity.”⁴² Thus, *The Wild Iris* stands out as the most active thrust against the trauma of the existence in the desert of the earth, and the more open recognition of the human meta-stable, intermediary position of a painful stretch between onto-theological orders. “The extremes are easy. Only / the middle is a puzzle” – we read in “Heaven and Earth,”⁴³ and the difficult puzzle of “the middle” is of course the human. The human parallels some of the apprehensive reports of the flowers, as it sees itself bitter and failing. On the other hand, the human in the volume is daring enough to question God and test his work, finding itself only a part and parcel “of the perishable.”⁴⁴ The tone in which God is challenged is of hushed up and painful irony (“Once I believed in you; I planted a fig tree”⁴⁵), and it is this irony that lays ground for questioning divinity and transcendence. Moreover, and centrally, it is the very condition of being wounded – tainted by the proximity of death – that serves as entry to the condition of “more life,” the necessary. As Agata Bielik-Robson stresses throughout her argument, Jacob’s antithetical stance rests on the occurrence of the traumatic blow – the necessary “enabling trauma” I have already mentioned above – received from the overarching orders.

But pointing out the precariousness of this condition is where Glück’s antithetical move stops, and the way of negotiating the wound veers not toward “more life,” but signals the dissipation through submission toward a strange mixture of the Platonic with the Thanatic. As we have seen, the condition of “more life” requires a further reacceptance of the finitude and a more active renouncing of transcendence. God the limiting Cherub and his work are for once openly engaged, which in the psycho-theological terms of the narrative of “more life” means the challenge to the *nomos* of Thanatic ultimate truth and order. And yet, for a fuller inauguration of “more life,” a poet would need to attend more fully to the realm of finitude. Meanwhile, Glück bathes the middle-ground of the human existence in the kind of light – in full accord with the highly conventionalized lyrical tradition – in which the thought of transcendence is never questioned. There is an otherworldly splendor and ceremony in many poems here still exercising its power over the psyche, thus screening it from a fuller acceptance of its earthy character. At the end of the already quoted “Heaven and Earth,” the scene is flooded in a fantastic display of light: “the fire of the summer sun / truly does

42. Morris, *The Poetry of Louise Glück*, 195.

43. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 274.

44. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 278.

45. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 278.

stall / being entirely contained by / the burning maples / at the garden's border."⁴⁶ All the props of the traditional lyric Platonic theater are here: a dazzling light, liminality, loftiness of style and language. It is not clear whether this light is a return of Platonic transcendence and a shaking free of the ghastly pallor of the more entropic *acephalic* Thanaticism.

The central difficulty of Glück's poetry is re-inhabitation of finite earth. In the end, *The Wild Iris* turns away from this task. In the final poem of the volume the present life in its difference from the orders of the given is acknowledged, which did not happen in earlier volumes, but it is acknowledgement through reinvesting the now with transcendence: "this one summer we have entered eternity / I felt your hands / bury me to release its splendor."⁴⁷ The final highly ambiguous image rings with strong echoes of the former subservience to death: some kind of excessive energy can be received but only when the self is "buried," perhaps in the sexual act, which, as we have seen, is associated in Glück with the slumber of the spirit – not with rebellion. The tension of "more life" is still "released" in "eternal splendor"; a tranquilizing transcendent radiance rules on.

Stranded in the Middle-ground – Permanent Exile, No Exodus

Glück's early phase represents a rejection of the natural and the erotic and a total submission to the order of death. There is a sublimity in this gesture, with the speaking subject frequently occupying the high ground critics have recognized in the voice of "spiritual prophecy" often heard at this stage. In a number of volumes of the middle period, we find poems in which the lower, weaker self – thus endowed with a more antithetical potential – begins to recognize its reality. There is a hopeful recognition of the difficult middle ground, a holding on to which is a necessary condition of entering the exodus of "more life." This is precisely the region of Jacob's hobbling, of which ABR asks: "Can exile metamorphose into exodus? Is there a hope... [for] the inhabitants of the confused middle-world?"⁴⁸

Glück's volumes after *The Wild Iris* indeed speak from this middle earthly region, but they renounce the stance of investing in antithetical energy. Rather, these are the poems of a late phase in the Gnostic narrative of renouncing desire, a position in which the subject divests itself of all energetic surplus claim to spiritual excess and is overcome by the post-mythological absoluteness of earth which is now seen in its post-symbolic and post-dramatic version, as a region of pure

46. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 274.

47. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 304.

48. Bielik-Robson, *The Saving Lie*, 21.

matter and dry stone. This is the phase that, according to Bielik-Robson, is marked by the jargon of Heideggerian *Gelassenheit*, which, variously used by Lacan and Agamben, signifies the end of desire (Lacan) or the desire for nothingness (Agamben). The Polish scholar points out how in the Lacanian story of the subject's recognition of its being dominated by the Thanatic negativity, there comes a moment of respite, when the subject "knows it is already dead," followed by a release (one of the translations of Heidegger's *Gelassenheit*) of all tension.⁴⁹ It is also a phase in the Gnostic narrative of the final separation of the material and spiritual realms, a post-symbolic stage where the earth is divested of its former mythopoetic value, and the human consciousness is entirely reconciled with its condition of barren materiality, as the subject "withers away in its destitution amidst post-symbolic rocks [...] It's Eliot's *Waste Land*."⁵⁰ The subject, like Jacob, is a survivor of the encounter with death, but this is not a Bloomian antithetical surviving but one of overwhelmed quietist (*gelassen*) passivity.⁵¹

Such are precisely the affective stances that dominate in Glück's volume *Averno* (2006), her most characteristic collection of this later phase. The three main long poems in the volume, "October," "Persephone the Wanderer," and "Landscape," are prolonged meditations on the condition of the self's destitution and its late stages of renouncing the antithetical positions, all of them revolving around the trope of "the earth," which sends us simultaneously to Stevens and to Heidegger. The common feature of these long poems is the accumulation of the declarations of exhaustion, sterility, lateness, stasis and the vacuity or barrenness of the natural world. "It does me no good / to be good to me now; / violence has changed me," and "My body has grown cold like the stripped fields" we read in "October."⁵² The second fragment ends with the following declaration: "Tell me I'm living, / I won't believe you."⁵³ In "Prism," one of the shorter poems, sex is, again, a purely mechanical, stupor inducing activity, and a sexual act concludes with the following elegy to desire: "Longing, what is that? Desire, what is that?"⁵⁴ These frequent declarations of spiritual and emotional destitution are set in the context of the earth as a place of barrenness. The changing times of the year all culminate in the sterility of winter, which brings to mind Stevens's winter poems "of reality" (opposite to his summer poems of imaginative lushness), and the prevailing light of this volume is of fading sterility, which signals the ultimate evacuation

49. Bielik-Robson, *Na pustyni*, 252–253, 407–411.

50. Bielik-Robson, *Na pustyni*, 254.

51. Bielik-Robson, *The Saving Lie*, 21.

52. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 494.

53. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 495.

54. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 507.

of transcendence, even the former negative, but sublime, transcendence of death: “The world / was bleached, like a negative; the light passed / directly through it.”⁵⁵

The major poems of the volume may all be read as variations, or prolonged discussions, with Stevens’s attempt to rally the poetic faculty for the sake of re-inhabitation of the earth revealed in its post-religious and post-transcendental solitude. Stevens has been often discussed as a poet of the Earth or the poet of reality.⁵⁶ A permanent theme in his poetry is a confrontation with the Nietzschean diagnosis of the absence of divinity. The theme is ubiquitous in Stevens, but a poem that seems to concentrate on it, at least in the poet’s earlier period, is definitely the post-religious meditation on seeing the world no longer protected, or founded, by metaphysics, delivered by the female speaker of “Sunday Morning.” A different well-known poem of Stevens’s early phase, “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” contains the following poetic treatment of “the earth”: “The earth is not earth but a stone, / Not the mother that held men as they fell // But stone... // An oppressor that grudges them their death / As it grudges the living that they live.”⁵⁷ This, one of the scenes in Stevens’s ongoing opposition between reality and imagination, is precisely the rendering of earth that is worked against in the vision achieved toward the end of “Sunday Morning.” Here, the realization of freedom from metaphysical backing – “We live in an old chaos of the sun [...] Or island solitude, unsponsored, free”⁵⁸ – leads to a liberating imaginative boost, which endows the natural with a sense of uncanny radiance, as if its presence is accurately seen for the first time. The ensuing picture is of nature on earth as life, an introduction to a recuperation of the creaturely and the finite that we have seen as the final achievement in Bielik-Robson’s narrative of “more life”: “Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail / Whistle about us their spontaneous cries.”⁵⁹ There is a chance to see life for once in separation from the need for final justification, a relief in the rejection of the ontology and theology of final causes that Harold Bloom has commented on in the following way: “If we are isolated, so is the sky, in a cosmos where all power is ‘spontaneous’ and ‘casual.’ There are no causes, only temporal effect.”⁶⁰ Bloom is careful to note that, after all, the vision in “Sunday Morning” ends in darkness, with “the casual flocks of pigeons” sinking into twilight, which in the end gives us an “appropriate” rendering

55. Louise Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 526.

56. See, for example: J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality*; Harold Bloom, *Poems of our Climate*.

57. Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 142.

58. Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 56.

59. Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 56.

60. Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 35.

of a world where “no spirits linger.”⁶¹ But the vitalist vision of earth and nature freed from the yoke of the *nomos* of causes, clearly an entry to Stevens’s later, more affirmative approaches to the world of pure contingency, is not diminished in its power by the ending of the poem. B. J. Leggett has discussed the poem in the light of Nietzsche’s philosophy of becoming and has noted how the earth, freed from the “sponsorship” of divinities is returned to an assertion of its “beauty, spontaneity, transiency” found in the innocence of becoming.⁶² And yet, this is clearly not a naturalist poem; given Stevens’s later development, the treatment of nature here is clearly an overture to the acknowledgment of the creaturely, an entry to “more life.”

The earth in Glück’s *Averno* is also an island of metaphysical solitude, a region from which the earlier intensity of the battle with kinds of transcendence has been evacuated, but it is precisely the kind of life-endowing and life-enabling treatment of this post-religious contingency that speakers in *Averno* deny themselves. Where Stevens installs the imaginative play of the mind, Glück reduces even this sphere, and her following of the changing light of the year (also a strongly Stevensian trope), gives us the mental/poetic play as another space of destitution: “[the songs] have been concentrated in a smaller space, the space of the mind. / They are dark, now, with desolation and anguish.”⁶³ Not even the poetic is a cure to the late condition of exile. Here, the vision is closer to Stevens’s declarations from “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” with the earth being a grudging mother, a blockage of barrenness. This is perhaps especially visible in “Persephone the Wanderer,” a poem in which Glück returns to her long-established topic of the relation with the mother, and, in this sense, reenters a clearly confessional mode. Here, the classical mythos of winter being the result of Persephone’s dwelling in hell for half a year is revised and the earth seems to be the place of perennial winter. There is a permanence of deathness which translates into the stance of the living-death: “You do not live; / you are not allowed to die. // You drift between earth and death / which seem, finally, / strangely alike.”⁶⁴ This is precisely the world of the withering away of any vitality of the subject, the Lacanian version of *Gelassenheit* described by Bielik-Robson (and related by her to Lacan’s reading of *The Waste Land*, another poem-predecessor of *Averno*). The trope of earth, the Heideggerian “Erde,” here

61. Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 56.

62. B. J. Leggett, *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 117.

63. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 497.

64. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 503.

amounts to another blocking cherub in the volume: “why did I reject my life? And I answer / *Die Erde überwältigt mich*: / the earth defeats me.”⁶⁵

There are, of course, other moments in *Averno*, moments in which the subject acknowledges the transient beauty of the earth. But it seems that the subject withering away amidst the earth as barren rock is the prevailing position. In a sense, what happens in the volume is a return of the distant echo of the earlier, the more tense and sublime Thanatic phase. In a short poem called “Telescope,” the speaker declares that she has lived for too long “in the silence of the night sky,” and she decides to collapse her far-space viewing device and aim her gaze back in the direction of the surrounding earth; but to return to finitude and locality like that proves a difficult task. Looking around her, the subject “sees again how far away / each thing is from every other thing.”⁶⁶ The entropic cosmic night – the night of nothingness that presided over Glück’s early phase as the “entropic glow of *acephalic* Neo-Platonism,” returns here, contaminating and quenching any chance for “more life.” The subject is stranded permanently in the desert; the progress toward the exodus of “more life” is blocked.

Concluding Remarks

It is possible to summarize the trajectory that Glück’s poetic subjectivities travel by saying that this poetry chooses a Thanatic reading of Eliot against the vitalist reading of Stevens. In the end, Glück’s ascesis dominates all other psycho-theological affects found in her poems. The barrenness of the modernist waste land translates fully into a certain incapacitation of the poetic livelihood itself, as if poetry were acquiesced in its role of being no more than a report from spiritual wastage. Where Stevens invests frequently in the reality of the poem’s ability to stand against the nomotropic precedence of orders, thus discovering a certain impotence of nothingness, Glück’s poetry never crosses this threshold. Here the poetic fades into the dry soil, isolated not just from transcendence, but, more importantly, from the idea of life affirming the power of its finitude.

65. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 529. Clearly, this treatment of Heidegger’s rich concept of *die Erde*, found in an American poet struggling with her Thanatic preoccupations, requires much further discussion. It would require a further delving into Agata Bielik-Robson finding Heidegger to fail, in his later phase, to appreciate and hold on to the idea of human finitude, the argument that she develops in *Another Finitude*, and it exceeds the bounds of this article.

66. Glück, *Poems 1962–2012*, 550.

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