

Received: May 2023 Accepted: June 2023  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58262/ks.v11i02.073>

## Myth and Recreation in Louise Glück's "October"

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### Abstract

*Louise Glück's "October" is the first poem in her poetry collection Averno (2006). The poem can be read in terms of Persephone's myth and it directly places the reader in the context of some major event that is taking place. It often alludes to a world that has been abruptly altered, both personally and societally, by violence. The speaker in the poem constantly refers to traumatic effects that recur and prevent her from recuperation. The physical pain she feels is hindering even her ability to create poetry. Glück indirectly suggests, through Persephone's myth, the existence of a continuous traumatic episodes in the postmodern society. Just as the myth explains the cycle of life and death in nature, Glück shows that recreation is possible as a means of survival.*

**Keywords:** Louise Glück, Averno, Persephone, myth, trauma, modern poetry.

### Introduction

In *Averno* by Louise Glück, death and loss are experiences that the reader can explore metaphorically, learning about their consequence and realizing that the outcome must be a new beginning. The title of the book alludes to an Italian crater lake that was once thought to be the entrance to the underworld. Some of the poems in this book are retellings of the Persephone and Hades myths in connection with modern settings and trauma. "October," the first poem in the book, tells the story through the eyes of a speaker who experiences illness, loss, and death while expressing an ephemeral dread of disappearing. In her investigation of the urge to recount and reimagine events, Glück poses the question of how belief in fresh starts can possibly endure in the face of loss, sorrow, and devastation. Even though she rarely uses political allusions or formal names to identify the present, her poems still strike a chord in a postmodern context through which imagining renewal can be challenging. In Glück's poetry, there is a constant transport to a state that could lead to survival or some sort of certainty. She realizes that one way to begin again is to reimagine the disastrous situation and come to terms with it. (Holtzen et al., 2022)

### 1.1. Background and the Scope of the Study

Writing about a catastrophe can hardly be in the form of an objective report of some facts. The poet is giving a testimony of her own suffering which "involves a problem of temporal undecidability" as Daniel Morris (2006:101) states. This means that the pain of the experience cannot be fully realized the moment it occurs, it is temporal and it is not consciously recorded. The poet in this case may have a recourse in memory, the recollections of the painful moments as if they are pressing their agony in the present, or perhaps channel it through a story or a myth. This study investigates the myth-narrative in Glück's

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“October” as a means of expressing the pain of some experience that the speaker does not directly mention. It analyzes the poet’s attempt to reimagine the situation before the crisis and the recreation she seeks after coming to terms with it. Such motif occasionally appears in Glück’s poetry, which may be interpreted as an attempt of showing how pain and loss can be formative experiences in life. In the light of Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theory these occasions are called “borderline experiences” through which the subjectivity of the persona is presented as being in a process of transformation (Gordon, 2000; Hamelink & Mahmoud, 2022)

### **Major Questions of the Research:**

Glück constantly returns to the start of things, even when it comes to mourning and pain, she attempts to situate it in the broader scope of the human condition. By analyzing Glück’s “October,” the research intends to answer the following questions: how can the human urge to tell stories (myths) in the face of crucial phases of one’s life, like suffering or grief, help in reconciling with the experience? To what extent the speaker of “October” can recreate a new beginning through poetry and nature? Is it possible to perceive the experience narrated by the persona in “October” as a “borderline experience” in Kristeva’s terms?

### **The Persephone Myth and the Persona**

Glück lays the groundwork for a new vision of death—one that we shouldn’t fear, although it’s hard to conceive, she will reveal that it’s not impossible. “October” is a poem that portrays the extent to which this new vision of death and suffering is difficult, yet not impossible. In this poem, Glück speaks about a temporal survival, the pain is recurring, and the speaker is trying to recount something of the past, yet it is difficult to remember exactly how things happened,

Is it winter again, is it cold again  
 didn’t Frank just slip on the ice,  
 didn’t he heal, weren’t the spring seeds planted (l. 1-3)

The question about the coming again of winter signifies anticipation and the recurrence of suffering. In the next lines, the speaker mentions something about scars and injury, about physical wounds,

wasn’t my body  
 rescued, wasn’t it safe  
 didn’t the scar form, invisible  
 above the injury. (l.7- 10)

Glück’s poems are based on her personal experience, yet they are presented impersonally and sometimes they are generic, as if written by someone detached from the experience but still strongly related to its outcome or craves to resolve its pain (Chiasson, 2007; Dehqan & Genç, 2022) The process of recovery is not bringing things into their normal course again, the speaker is still perplexed. Mary Kate Azcuy (2011) refers to this poem as an allegory which means that there is an implied story within the context of the surface story. The poem begins in winter (Is it winter again) while mentioning a glimpse of the spring’s end (weren’t the spring’s seeds planted), and then it mentions that many summers have come and ended (Summer after summer have ended), then autumn arrives in the end (This is the light of autumn). The cycle of seasons, life and death in nature is reminiscent of the Persephone myth. The mother-daughter myth is overtly employed by Glück in many of her poems to demonstrate the continuity of trauma and to show the confusion that comes in the aftermath of the painful experience.

In the Persephone myth, the mother Demeter is traumatized by the loss of her daughter who has been

kidnapped by Hades, the king of the Underworld and taken through the opening of Averno into the underworld. The daughter, Kore, was also traumatized by her father's betrayal (Zeus) and her uncle's (Hades) killing and raping her to make her his wife and the queen of the Underworld. After Zeus' intervention to let Kore get back to her mother, she was given three pomegranate seeds to eat them. Consequently, she would return to the Underworld for three months, during which her mother Demeter takes away life from all earthly things (winter) because of her sadness over her daughter (Azcuy, 2011; Nguyen, 2023). In Glück's poem, the speaker's confusion with the passing of time and the beginning of winter indicates that trauma is temporal, and it continues to happen just as winter comes every year which, in mythology, is attached to grief over Demeter's loss of her daughter.

In an interview, Glück states that she employs myths to answer her craving for the absolute, "I realize I have a craving for that which is immutable. The physical world is mutable. So, you cast about for those situations, or myths, that will answer the craving" (Douglas 1981), for Glück those myths represent what is related to the spirit more than to the flesh. Voicing her pain and experience through a mythical reference helps create a context through which it could be understood as part of life cycle. Danielle Mortimer (2011) argues that, in literature, trauma is resolved by returning to its origin. It is more like an encounter with one's own fears from what first originates the trauma. However, the trauma in postmodernist literature loses this capability of going back to its origin, it is not resolved but rather endlessly reproduced to the point that it becomes part of one's identity. Here there are two orders of time in the trauma experience, there is the time that can be identified with a point in history, and there is the psychic time of trauma, where the experience is still pressing and repeating (Rose, 1992). In part 4 of the poem, the speaker declares,

And yet the notes recur. They hover oddly.

In anticipation of silence.

The ear gets used to them.

The eye gets used to them.

The eye gets used to the disappearances. (l.102- 106)

Pain has left the speaker unable to communicate, not only with nature, but even with her own self, "I can't hear your voice/ for the wind's cried, whistling over the bare ground," in many occasions she states that "violence has changed me," and the tone of some lines suggest that she is asking for some kind of assertion,

Tell me this is the future,

I won't believe you.

Tell me I'm living,

I won't believe you (l. 55- 58)

Anne Keniston (2008) observes that, in terms of viewpoint, the speakers in Glück's *Averno* possess a paradoxical nature. They look as they are ghosts or spirits speaking from another realm where they can look at the aftermath of an unnamed event. This position allows them to look back and forth, to the events of the past and to the future, in this way, "Glück avoids the outcries both of the survivor and the witness." (p.177) Willard Spiegelman (2005) argues that another important feature in Glück's poetry is having or identifying a listener. This notion can be perceived in the style and language of the poem, Glück often employs straightforward, concise, and simple sentences, even the metaphors are clear and easily located. This feature as Spiegelman observes is to create an essence in these poems that is related to voice, to make the reader listen or to create a dramatic scenario in which there is a presumed listener alongside the speaker. The speaker's role in Glück's poems is to observe, listen, and recall; he/she is constantly present but also appears to live passively. In "October," there is no reference to an identifiable

situation or a speaker, so the speaker could be a number of possible characters. It can be thought as Demeter speaking about the temporary loss of her daughter, or it could be Persephone revealing the pain of the trauma caused by kidnapping her, or it might be Glück herself or any other person who is trying to recover from some tragic incident in their life (Mun, 2008).

## Recreation Through Poetry and Nature

The only possible way to realize the aesthetics behind the disaster is to have a recourse in poetry, something the speaker (here Glück herself) used to have as a power before the pain of experience evades her,

I was young here. Riding  
the subway with my small book.  
as though to defend myself against  
this same world  
you are not *alone*,  
the poem said,  
in the dark tunnel (l. 139- 145)

Instead of silence, which has pervaded the speaker's self in the wake of the destruction, she chooses to transfer it into words, to come to terms with pain through the companionship of poetry. The act of creation keeps the soul alive, and instead of residing on trauma like the women in the Persephone myth, the speaker chooses to survive. However, this survival seems to come only by making trauma part of the speaker's mind. As long as it inevitably recurs, this winter which represents trauma and pain can be seen as part of life's cycle. The speaker declares, "You hear this voice? This is my mind's voice;" the speech with the self is an attempt to lead the soul to its recovery from the trauma. (Mun, 2008:79)

It is noted that in Glück's poetry, there is this assertion on the cyclic nature of life. To come to terms with the pain of any experience, one must realize that what takes place is a process of becoming, just like what happens in nature, seasons come and go, death and the change that is normally associated with it is metaphoric rather than real. The most striking aspect of Glück's literary voice is her constant awareness of death, she frequently uses natural imagery to show how ends serve as beginnings and vice versa (Cho, 2020), "the ultimate point, in Glück, is not despair or resignation, but the abandonment of a "wish to return," whether to a first garden, a first view of the earth, an origin story, or an undamaged relation to the world." (Hunter, 2020)

Glück observes the human compulsion to face grief and pain through retelling and reimagining, in the hope that looking objectively at these experiences could renovate the belief in new beginnings. The speaker sometimes speaks with a bright tone, revealing that it is good that faith is still there, although she is not talking about the persistence of her own belief, using the second person (you) might be understood as an invitation to the reader to participate or to view the situation from their stance,

This is the light of autumn; it has turned on us.  
Surely it is a privilege to approach the end.  
Still believing in something (l.114 – 116)

In the middle of her confusion and requests for assertions, the speaker declares that the world is inviting her: "*Come to me*, said the world." and that she understands these invitations as her way of perceiving beauty in the world. After all, there is an attempt to restore and to communicate. It seems that survival is not one eternal event, it is a repetitive act that comes after several episodes of trauma and violence. The speaker at some point wonders if any restoration is possible through art,

as though it were the artists.  
duty to create.  
hope, but out of what? what? (l. 132- 134)

Glück resembles the modernist poet Eliot in that she is a spiritual poet longing for a transcendence beyond the physical and materialistic world. She constantly expresses in her poetry her vision of the disparity between the spiritual and the physical. Only through closing the gap between these two worlds or through a possible union that the experience could come to a closure. Unlike the confessional poet Sylvia Plath, Glück does not come out of the experience willing to die, she rather discovers in herself a will to live (Yezzi, 2012), she would point to these moments in which she recognizes life's persistence, "Winter was over. In the thawed dirt, /bits of green were showing" (l. 75-76). The recreation she seeks is not only through poetry (art), but nature also can be a healer,

What others found in art,  
I found in nature. What others found  
in human love, I found in nature.  
Very simple. But there was no voice there. (l. 71 – 74)

Glück's representation of nature creates a unique connection between man and nature, one that makes what is felt in nature the same as what is felt in the body or thought in the mind. In the beginning of "October," she speaks about an injury in her body and wonders whether its pain is over then directly shifts into an image in nature saying, "didn't they just end, /wasn't the back garden/ harrowed and planted" (l. 12-13). The healing of the injury is just like the harrowing of the ground to prepare it for new planting, that is a new beginning. She would declare that her body has grown cold just like it is cold in the stripped fields. There is a correspondence between nature and the body that the persona, although being always in the present, keeps remembering moments in nature with cherishment and a sense of appreciation for what their beauty stands for. Nature in the poems of *Averno* is never in a fixed state, it is always in a state of becoming and transforming, so is man's life, filled with experiences and moments that lead to new emergences and beginnings (Zhou, 2020). Glück writes towards the end of "October,"

Above the fields,  
above the roofs of the village houses,  
the brilliance that made all life possible  
becomes the cold star. (l.157- 160)

The tone in these lines suggests that the process of becoming and transformation is complete. It is a state of reconciliation, and the persona understands that change is inevitable, it is part of the natural process in life, just like birth is. The pain of the experience might not come to an end, yet her mind and soul are able now to transcend that truth and realize that the constant alteration between trauma and healing is like seasonal change.

#### 4.Conclusion

The experience of reading Glück's poetry reveals that she is a poet whose spiritual transcendence is achieved gradually throughout all her poetry collections. In "October," the first poem in her collection *Averno*, she does not directly indicate the persona nor the cause of the trauma they are experiencing, yet her narratives are prominent for their reliance on allegory and myth as means to communicate personal experience. She invites the readers to participate in the experience by letting them attempt to fill out the story and understand not only the persona's trauma but what it may reflect of their own experiences as well. Glück's ultimate purpose is not to express despair or frustration, the persona does not reach to a

point of collapse, they never wish to lose all hope. There is always a wish to return to the beginning of things, to restart and recreate one's relation with the world. In "October," the speaker seems to reach to a certain balance in the end, she says that the vivid elements of the natural landscape around her changes into cold stars, then in a statement that seems to be addressed to the reader she says, "Lie still and watch:/ they give nothing but ask nothing," even nature is not a place where the speaker escapes to in the traditional sense of the romantic poetry, it is rather a place that reconnects the speaker with memories of the past. Glück's representation of nature is related to the seasonal changes and how they can reflect the human condition. The story that the speaker in the poem narrates blends with the natural elements, just like the myth of Persephone abduction that is intended to explain the change in seasons. Both worlds of nature and human beings can permeate each other.

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