

THE USE OF VOICE IN LOUISE GLUCK'S POETRY

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Most of the poems in *The Wild Iris*, *Meadowlands* and *Vita Nova*, are addressed directly either to a listener or to the reader and for this reason I think it is illuminating to look at the highly individual way in which Louise Gluck uses voice in these three book-length sequences. In the main the characters she presents are not fleshed-out like those in a verse novel or a poem which is a dramatic monologue. Rather they are mouthpieces for viewpoints which are often shown in opposition to each other. The speakers address each other and/or the reader in an intimate way often about the small matter of everyday but strong emotions, complex thoughts and abstract ideas run through their talk and with this technique Gluck achieves depth without making the writing dense. Immediate context is given to the person speaking but the situation and narrative behind them are not filled in. The reader is left to do this for her/himself.

The sequences do not proceed in a simple chronology. Gluck juxtaposes poems to amplify, illuminate or contrast the different strands of her subject matter or argument. Although there are some similarities in the way the sequences have been conceived each has its own character and in each she employs different ways of using voice. I therefore want to examine the three books separately.

The Wild Iris is a meditation about the relationship between God and humans, humans and nature. In particular it explores how plants view themselves and their relationship with humans, how humans struggle with their feelings and beliefs about God, and God's attitudes to human beings. The poems are set in a garden and there is a time progression through spring to late summer. The garden of paradise, which is sometimes referred to directly, is a metaphor which underlies the book. There are three groups of voices: those of plants, a human voice which is sometimes specifically the poet and sometimes an archetype human, and the voice of God. The speaker in the plant poems is indicated by the title. In the others the context identifies who is talking. Several of the poems are titled *Matins* or *Vespers*. These, not surprisingly, are always in a human voice.

In the plant poems the perceptions, questions and feelings are integral to the nature of the speaker. There is no extended description. What is beautiful or moving arises directly out of what is being said. The Red Poppy, in the poem of the same title, addresses humans as brothers and sisters, spelling out its closeness with them and the transience of life. The emotional charge lies in the connections made between the plant's and the human's experience. In the book's title poem Gluck imagines the consciousness of the iris:

'It is terrible to survive
as consciousness
buried in the dark earth.

Then it was over: that which you fear, being
a soul and unable
to speak, ending abruptly, the stiff earth
bending a little. And what I took to be
birds darting in low shrubs.

You who do not remember
passage from the other world
I tell you I could speak again: whatever
returns from oblivion returns
to find a voice:

from the center of my life
came a great fountain, deep blue
shadows on azure seawater.'

The plants and God often address humans directly. Most of the poems in a human voice are addressed to God in an intimate tone which gives them an extraordinary immediacy and emotional quality. The thoughts and feelings are often unexpected and they jolt the reader into seeing God in a new light. Of course other poets and prose writers question the nature, purpose or existence of God but this approach in which the questioning human addresses God so directly in a tone that is sometimes plaintive, sometimes doubtful, sometimes angry, sometimes humble and apologetic is very original. It also underlines the closeness and importance of the relationship:

'Not the sun merely but the earth
itself shines, white fire
leaping from the showy mountains
and the flat road
shimmering in early morning: is this
for us only, to induce
response, or are you
stirred also, helpless
to control yourself
in earth's presence – I am ashamed
at what I thought you were,
distant from us, regarding us
as an experiment: it is
a bitter thing to be
the disposable animal,
a bitter thing.' (*Matins*, page 31)

God, of course, has made a number of appearances as a character in literature. One has only to think of the mediaeval Mystery plays or Milton's 'Paradise Lost' in which he is a lofty personage who holds forth about free will and mankind's abuse of it, his intention to offer humans mercy, Satan and his followers none. Most of the tenets of Gluck's God are in line with the Bible's and Milton's but he is presented as a contemporary personage with complex thoughts and feelings and his perceptions bring a new dimension to the

debate in this book. Although he cares deeply for the humans he has created he also finds them annoying and difficult:

'How can you say
earth should give me joy? Each thing
born is my burden; I cannot succeed
with all of you.

And you would like to dictate to me,
you would like to tell me
who among you is most valuable,
who most resembles me....

How can you understand me
when you cannot understand yourselves?' (*Early Darkness*)

The last poems in the book presage approaching winter and death. In *September Twilight* God expresses strong disillusion with human beings: 'I'm tired of you, chaos/of the living world,' which also seems to me a comment on, even a warning to the world today. In the final poem, *The White Lilies*, the flowers' anxious voices carry a more overt warning though the final beautiful verse returns to the idea of burial underground as the route to rebirth, a theme which is pursued in *Vita Nova*. These poems together with woman's voice lamenting the lost past, lost love, also carry a premonition of the death of a marriage, the subject matter of the next two sequences. *The White Iris* is remarkable for its ambition and originality.

In *Meadowlands* dialogues and monologues from a contemporary marriage which is about to break up are juxtaposed with poems which draw on the Greek legend about Odysseus and Penelope. By bringing in these mythical figures Gluck takes a wider look at the marital relationship and makes insightful comparisons between the two sets of people. The poems in this book also fall into three groups: those in which a contemporary husband and wife speak, poems which feature characters in the Greek legend and parables.

The contemporary couple's poems include a number of dialogues. The shift from one speaker to the other is indicated by inseting the pieces spoken by the wife. The pair never see eye to eye. They bicker about day to day matters making sarcastic digs, deliberately misinterpret one another and they each go off into non-sequiturs. There is often a bleak, ironic humour. Details about friends, animals, habits which annoy and topics which cause friction such as cooking and furniture are brought up. In *Meadowlands* the husband says: 'I wish we went on walks/like Steven and Kathy; then/we'd be happy. You can even see it/ in the dog.' The wife snipes that they don't have a dog but a hostile cat, and the sparring, a way of not facing and discussing much deeper angers, continues. When there is reference to a deep-seated problem it is not discussed openly and bitter feelings seep through. The wife queries why they can't 'ever be two adults' and she's told:

'You know why they're happy? They take the children. And you know why they can go on walks with children? Because they *have* children.'

Questions and complaints made by one of the couple are sometimes returned to further on in the same poem or a later one. Because each is only identified in precise areas that Glück wants to pinpoint them these poems are not personal writing in the usual sense. Some of the subject matter may well be from her own life but it is not presented as such and I read it as a collage of the voices of couples whose marriages are falling apart. The last three dialogue poems have something of a different note in that they express regret for the lost relationship, even a desire to hold onto it but the marriage is viewed as in the past.

The husband's monologues are in the main accusing and often biting. *Void* takes up issues about the wife's attitude to food and furniture which were raised in earlier poems. *Purple Bathing Suit* also expresses angry and ambivalent feelings:

'I like watching you in the garden
with your back to me in your purple bathing suit:
your back is my favorite part of you,
the part furthest away from your mouth.'

The wife's poems have a number of focuses. Two of them look at memories from her earlier life. In *Midnight* she dialogues with herself and beneath the mundane details and ironic humour, is an expression of considerable grief and some recognition of the state the marriage is in.

'Speak to me aching heart: what
ridiculous errand are you inventing for yourself
weeping in the dark garage
with your sack of garbage: it is not your job
to take out the garbage, it is your job
to empty the dishwasher...
...A little moonlight hits
the broken window, a little summer moonlight, tender
murmurs from the earth with its ready sweetnesss –
is this the way you communicate
with your husband, not answering
when he calls, or is this the way the heart
behaves when it grieves: it wants to be
alone with the garbage? If I were you,
I'd think ahead. After fifteen years,
his voice could be getting tired; some night
if you don't answer, someone else will answer.'

The speaker in *The Rock* relates herself to all women as she speaks to a snake, asking it how it approached Eve with its addictive information. She also

expresses with a touch of humour strong, ambivalent feelings about her husband. In *Quiet Evening* the wife echoes something of the sense of departure and loss Penelope experienced in the book's opening poem and after referring to Penelope she ends bitterly: 'from this point on, the silence through which you move/is my voice pursuing you.'

The poems from the Greek legend are in the voices of Telemachus, Circe and Penelope. There are two poems about Odysseus which are written as narratives. Glück throws new light on these characters by making them think and talk in a contemporary manner. The occasional modern reference, Penelope mentioning Maria Callas in *Penelope's Song* for example, fits in very naturally. The device enables her to overlap the present day and mythical situations. Indeed, one or two poems like *Moonless Night* in the voice of the contemporary wife and *Departure* in the voice of Penelope apply equally to both.

Telemachus (the son of Odysseus and Penelope) and Circe bring in a new dimension as they offer views and feelings which are not those of the married characters. Telemachus's poems are particularly interesting because he analyses his parents' marriage with considerable perception of their shortcomings:

'.....what
a life my mother had, without
compassion for my father's
suffering, for a soul
ardent by nature, thus
ravaged by choice, nor had my father
any sense of her courage, subtly
expressed as inaction, being
himself prone to dramatizing...' (*Telemachus' Kindness*)

He expresses sympathy for both of them and he also examines his own situation as the child of parents who have ceased to communicate and separate. In *Telemachus' Confession* he talks about each parent wanting 'something different from me', and says he has 'to fabricate the being/each required in any/ given moment' and that it was some while after his father left he realized he himself was 'actually a person.' Telemachus not only reveals Odysseus and Penelope in a new light he speaks for the child of today's broken marriages.

Circe is presented first, in *Circe's Power*, as a sorceress who has wit and subtlety: 'I never turned anyone into a pig./Some people are pigs; I make them/look like pigs.' She is also 'the other woman' and one with strong and genuine emotions.

Glück makes an explicit link with Circe in the only poem in the voice of the other woman among the contemporary poems by calling it 'Siren.' Both these women express obsessive and bitter feelings.

Penelope's poems express longing, a determination to hold on. They are lyrical and moving:

'The beloved doesn't
need to live. The beloved
lives in the head. The loom
is for the suitors, strung up
like a harp with white shroud-thread.

He was two people,
He was the body and voice, the easy
magnetism of a living man, and then
the unfolding dream or image
shaped by the woman working the loom...' (*Ithaca*)

Several of the poems are parables: stories told in the voice of one of the protagonists. They are mostly about birds and animals and they extend the references to domestic animals made in the contemporary couple's dialogues. The parables offer further oblique and sometimes ironic reflections on what is happening in the world of human relationships.

In *Vita Nova* the speaker can in the main be identified as the poet but the use of voice is again very distinctive. This sequence follows on from *Meadowlands* and focuses on the aftermath of a marriage. It tracks the painful death of an old life and the journey through the underworld of hell to reach another. Intense feeling is expressed and it is the most personal of the three books but as in *Meadowlands* the narrative and emotional context are not filled out and because there is much self-questioning the book has a very different feel from the work of poets like Sylvia Plath or Sharon Olds. There is a greater pursuit of abstract ideas in *Vita Nova* than in the other two books but the sense of lament, the bitterness of loss, the feelings of hope, uncertainty and anxiety, the moments of joy are always immediate.

As she journeys beyond marriage Gluck harks back to her earlier single life and her childhood. She uses the device of dialoguing with the self which she employed in *Midnight* in *Meadowlands* in order to investigate her feelings. In *Timor Mortis* she looks at her fear that love will be taken away. Her mind asks her if she remembers her childhood. She avoids answering but question is repeated with increasing frequency until finally she addresses it:

'Do you remember your childhood?'

I lay in the forest.
Still, more still than any living creature.
Watching the sun rise.

And I remember once my mother turning away from me
in great anger. Or perhaps it was grief.
Because for all she had given me,

for all her love, I had failed to show gratitude.
And I made no sign of understanding.

For which I was never forgiven.'

The uncovering of this incident and the long-term punishment it led to explain the poet's fear. We understand too that she shied away from answering the question because it was too painful to consider.

In *Immortal Love* the soul asks itself a series of searching questions which relate it to Eve, the archetype woman. The garden reference continues the metaphor which runs through all three books. In *Mutable Earth*, Gluck puts interrogates herself and the answers, some of which play on the word 'nothing', reveal her need and vulnerability but like other poems in the late part of the book, it also suggests a coming through.

As in *Meadowlands* there is reference to mythical figures, in particular to the Orpheus and Eurydice legend although it plays a different role from the Odyssey legend in the previous book. Gluck links herself obliquely to Eurydice in writing about the loss of love and the descent into hell in *The Burning Heart* and in *The Relic* she writes in the voice of Eurydice. There are occasional references to writing poetry in the earlier books but in *Vita Nova* Gluck brings in the centrality of writing in the poet's life. One of the ways she does this is to identify with Orpheus as an artist who has lost his beloved and who finds survival through art. Here is the whole of *Lute Song*:

'No one wants to be the muse;
In the end, everyone wants to be Orpheus.

Valiantly reconstructed
(out of terror and pain)
and then overwhelmingly beautiful;

restoring, ultimately,
not Eurydice, the lamented one,
but the ardent
spirit of Orpheus, made present

not as a human being, rather
as pure soul rendered
detached, immortal,
through deflected narcissism.

I made a harp of disaster
to perpetuate the beauty of my last love.
Yet my anguish, such as it is,
remains the struggle for form

and my dreams, if I speak openly,
less the wish to be remembered

than the wish to survive,
which is, I believe, the deepest human wish.'

Dreams feature often in this book and by blending the real and the surreal the poet extends further the way she uses voice. Sometimes longings are fulfilled and then destroyed as the poet comes back to reality or a reality from the past enters a dream and offers a hope for the future. *Inferno* includes a memory of trying to save things from a house once lived in that was on fire. Glück also tells of building a funeral pyre in the dream and a progression through 'fire/into a different world'. *Nest*, is in a similar mode to the parables in *Meadowlands*. The bird in the dream, which builds a nest with few materials, parallels what the poet is doing. These poems indicate that Glück is beginning to emerge in a new life and *Vita Nova*, the poem which ends the book, continues this idea. The everyday talk, which features in a number of the *Meadowlands* poems, is fused with the fluidity and logic of dream. In this the dog, Blizzard (with its suggestive name), takes on more than one role. After he's been described as a pet he is addressed in a parody of the way a parent might address a child when partners are splitting up, then Glück changes tack:

'.....Supposing
I'm the dog, as in
my child-self, unconsolable because
completely pre-verbal? With
anorexia! O Blizzard,
be a brave dog - this is
all material; you'll wake up
in a different world,
you will eat again, you will grow up into a poet!'

The changes in tone, the shifts from mundane to abstract matter, from sharp humour to brief but poignant expressions of emotion, from real to surreal, are key to Glück's writing. The title and opening poem of *The Wild Iris* begins: 'At the end of my suffering/there was a door.' The journey to that door, with its recurrent themes and references, progresses through the three books I've been considering. It is significant too that returning to find a voice, the culmination of *The Wild Iris* poem, is the point the poet is reaching at the end of *Vita Nova*.

Many of the poems would stand on their own but they are more meaningful, more layered in the context of their book, and they take on new connotations in the context of the three books. Key to the extraordinary character of this poetry is Louise Glück's subtle and daringly inventive use of voice.