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Significant Insights and Analysis of Philosophical and Autobiographical Undertones in the Select Poems of Louise Gluck

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ABSTRACT:

The 2020 Nobel Prize in Literature was given to American poet Louise Gluck in recognition of her "unmistakable poetic voice that, with austere beauty, makes individual existence universal." This thesis explores Gluck's poetic work, particularly her 2014 poem "Faithful and Virtuous Night," using the motivation of the Nobel committee as a guiding premise. Thus, the purpose of the research paper poses certain research question—"How does Louise Gluck's poetry make individual existence universal?—is to evaluate the fairness of the Nobel committee's evaluation. The reader becomes familiar with the essence of Gluck's poetry by reading scholarly articles about the innovations in her earlier work. An analysis of the aforementioned poem that supports the Nobel committee's claim can be built through careful reading. Some of her best-known works include *Ararat* (1990), *The Wild Iris* (1992), *Meadowlands* (1996), *Vita Nova* (1999), *The Seven Ages* (2001), and *Averno* (2006), in which elements of the lyric and the verse novel are consistently negotiated. The poet's themes, sparse, lyric style, and detached, oracular tone have all been the only things mentioned by critics so far. The collections have never been examined by critics as plotted narratives or verse novels. Books by Gluck contain more than just groups of standalone, lyric poems. The six collections are cohesively linked by a sustained, personal journey about survival, emotional healing, and self-renewal in which Gluck is looking for beauty and meaning in a life without the consolation of absolute truths. Each collection is also bound by a plot that depicts a particular period in the poet's life. Additionally, it is a poetic journey that acts as a metaphorical mirror for the reader's own parallel, personal experiences. As a result, readers may be able to learn from the poet's hard-learned lessons, apply them to their own situations, and perhaps even find emotional healing. This essay aims to demonstrate Gluck's methods for dealing with various human concerns while also offering solutions.

Keywords: Philosophical and autobiographical undertones, oracular tone, Louise Gluck, emotional healing

Introduction:

Louise Gluck was the American Poet Laureate from 2003 to 2004 and the author of eleven collections of poetry. Her poetry is renowned for its in-depth examinations of family dynamics and the self, as well as for how the poet juxtaposes personal revelations with the reconstructed lives of archetypal figures from ancient myths. She received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1992 for *The Wild Iris*, one of the last six books in her catalog on which this thesis focuses. Before *Ararat* (1990), the first of the six collections discussed here, Gluck had not consciously begun writing book-length sequences. My thesis's title, *From Ararat to Averno*, alludes to a journey from the top of a biblical mountain—*Ararat*—to the bottom of an Italian volcano crater that is purported to be the underworld's entrance (featured in the last book, *Averno*). *Ararat* is the name of the Jewish cemetery where Gluck's parents and sister are interred in the first of her books featured here. It also serves as a place of memory where Gluck remembers and comes to terms with the traumatic events in her family's past. *Ararat* is also the name of the location where Noah's ark rested, serving as a metaphor for a fresh start following terrible loss. In her final book, *Averno*, Gluck transitions from the traumatic events of her youth to her reflections on God, her struggle to get through a difficult divorce, and finally her thoughts on death. The poet shows how poetry aids in her emotional healing and life redemption throughout this journey. The poet's last six books trace the stages of a woman's journey from childhood and all the existential and spiritual lessons learned along the way until the poet approaches the end of her life. Each book has a distinct and

ambitiously overarching plot that centers on a person's desire for self-discovery and emotional healing. By the end of this journey, the poet discovers how to enjoy life without relying on rigid ideas about God, beauty, or the intrinsic value of life. It is a poetic story that also acts as a metaphorical mirror for the reader's own parallel, personal experiences. As a result, the reader and the poet develop trust and empathy, and the reader is able to apply the poet's hard-learned lessons to their own lives. The poet's voice has often received more attention from Gluck's poetry detractors than the books' narrative structures. Joanne Feit Diehl stated that Gluck writes poems that "bear witness to intimate occasions—subtle, psychological moments captured by the austerity of diction" in the introduction to a collection of essays by various critics titled *On Louise Gluck* (1). According to Daniel McGuiness, Gluck's poetic persona is frequently "oracular" and evocative of the melancholy way "a god speaks through a chanter and the chanting rids the singer of personality" (*Holding Patterns* 55). Because the poet's personality is absent from the poem, the reader is encouraged to bring in their own thoughts and experiences and compare them to those that are expressed in the poetry. The oracular tone allows the poet to make personal and distinctive ideas and concerns universal. The poems by Gluck frequently transform narratives into "cryptic narratives (that) invite our participation: we must...fill out the story, substitute ourselves for the fictive personages... Decode the meaning; "solve" the allegory, etc. (Page 311, *Part of Nature, Part of Us*) According to Vendler, the allegorical and "cryptic" narratives in the poems are what bind them together. I'll contend that these narrative structures, which deal with self-healing and self-discovery, create a symbolic space for readers to draw their own personal conclusions from the poet's revelations about her own life rather than simply "solving" the allegorical narrative of the poems.

The atemporality of the poem adds another dimension to the development of the narrative, in contrast to the traditional plots of novels, which consist of logical and chronological sequences of events. In fact, the apostrophic structure of her poems adds a new layer to their narrative structures. "Persephone the Wanderer" (*Averno* 76), the final poem in a collection that traces the plot about Persephone being carried away into the underworld, serves as an illustration of what I mean. As if the poem had suddenly shifted into a future time frame where Persephone had just been brought back from Hades and was trying to remember her death ("I think I can remember / being dead"), the poet suddenly refers to Persephone in the first person as if she were already dead to the world. This example demonstrates how it is possible to confound the present and the future within "the special temporality of apostrophic lyrics" (Culler 2001; 170) so that Persephone appears to be speaking in an eternal present. Although Gluck plays with time in his poems, the overall story that connects the poems in each book is unaffected. Again, the central theme of *Averno's* collection is Persephone being forced to live in the underworld and confront her dual existence. However, the apostrophic nature of the poems slows the plot and freezes certain parts of it so that the collection's protagonists can speak to the reader from an atemporal moment out of time where the traditional distinctions between past, present, and future no longer hold true. The conflict between a temporality and linearity in *Averno* suggests that Gluck is manipulating time in her poems in order to slow it down or even stop it for a paradoxical moment so she can understand time on an existential level. The poet makes Persephone speak outside of time in order to express her own concerns about mortality—the ephemerality of life and its apparent lack of divine direction. In her poems, Gluck manipulates time to address personal and challenging questions about the meaning of life's brevity; it may be a last-ditch attempt to reach a timeless, transcendental truth that will ultimately remain painfully and completely out of reach. All the typical components of a dramatic plot can be found in Gluck's collections. According to Aristotle, a plot only had a "beginning, middle, and end" and causality was the fundamental component of all plots. Using Shakespeare's plays as examples, German dramatist Gustav Freytag listed important plot elements, such as the climax (the moment of greatest emotional intensity) and catastrophe (the play's concluding action, typically reserved for tragedies), which are also terms that critics and writers have used to conceptualize plot. Additionally, there is conflict, which can happen between various characters or internally within the mind of a single protagonist. Other well-known plot elements include the crisis (a significant turning point) and the denouement (a form of resolution and explanation). A personal crisis is typically established in Gluck's books, and the protagonist of her collections must deal with the emotional and philosophical fallout of this crisis. Although Gluck's collections haven't even been called verse novels by critics, I'll argue that this is only possible because of the plot that exists in her book-length poem sequences. The plotted trajectory in Gluck's poems illustrates these narrative elements of crisis, conflict, and resolution. In the poems, the poet also experiments with temporality, slowing down or even stopping the storyline in order to reveal new information about issues that are important to both the story and the poet. If the identity of the murderer is what is at stake in a detective story (who is, for a large portion of the story's plot, unknown), what is at stake in Gluck's collections are the stories' various speakers' eventual epiphanies, whose lives or experiences have been traced out through the book.

The most recent book by Gluck, *Averno* (2006), reveals similar worries about mortality. However, in *Averno*, the focus is shifted from the importance of life to a fresh understanding of death. *Averno* has "no plot," according to the publisher's editorial blurb about the book, but I'll contend that the poems reveal a plot: Persephone battles to cope with her situation after being raped by Hades and made to live in two worlds at various times of the year—one on earth and one in Hades' underworld. The rape is symbolic in that its brutality alludes, rather melodramatically,

to a similar sense of trauma that we all experience when we come to terms with our shared, finite mortality. The poet's own memories of her life as a young girl who lives with her parents in a mountain valley where, like Persephone, she discovered "a peace of a kind / (she) never knew again" are similar to Persephone's story in other, less dramatic ways. The poet here uses a mythic plot as a springboard for a clear-eyed dissection of death and Persephone's dual existence, but Gluck also moves away from speaking directly about or through the characters of Persephone and Hades to create an allegorical figure which does not necessarily correspond to a specific person. This is in contrast to how she achieves this in *The Seven Ages*, where she balances a saddened and disillusioned view of her existence with a hard.

A Love of Endings:

The first of Gluck's books with a plot is *Ararat* (1990). To demonstrate how this plot is presented, its central psychological crisis is portrayed, and how the poet tries to resolve the crisis by turning to memory, I will be analyzing a few poems from the collection in this chapter. By focusing on her distant childhood past, the poet has begun an overarching plot about emotional healing and self-renewal in *Ararat*. In contrast to his later collections, Gluck does not employ multiple voices in *Ararat* to emphasize his personal, psychological issues. There aren't any mythological or allegorical characters in this piece; only the poet's introspective confessional voice. According to Paul Breslin, Gluck's *Ararat* is one of her books that is "most unapologetically autobiographical." The apostrophic mode gives each poem a sense of being like a moment that has been almost completely stopped when it is told in a series of lyric utterances. As one poem follows another, the book's main plot, which is "goal oriented and forward-moving," becomes understandable (Brooks 12-13). The storyline of *Ararat*'s introspective and retrospective journey is reminiscent of Chris Marker's groundbreaking 1962 black-and-white short film *La Jetée*, a time-travel story told entirely through still photos and a lone narrator's voice—similar to Gluck's own poetic voice—which provides insight into what is seen in each stilled moment in time. A journey of introspection during which the poet makes peace with the past and learns new things about her family and herself is depicted in the book as an account of an inner life shaped by family relationships. Gluck's poetry here is reminiscent of the confessional poetry of Anne Sexton, who once admitted in an interview, "I am an actress in my own autobiographical play" (*No Evil Star* 109). In addition to performing in her own autobiographical play, Gluck also writes poems. The poems are distilled memories of a past marked by death, and Mount Ararat is the name of the cemetery where Gluck's sister is interred. Gluck is actually writing poetic autobiography, which William Spengemann describes as a genre as one that transforms the reader so that "the reader comes to share the autobiographers' achieved state of being and view of the world" (*Poetic Autobiography* 113). This is more than just a biographical account of a past family life. The poems in *Ararat* manage to engage readers in this way despite the book's constant deep introspection; as the poet discovers revelations about her own past, readers can also share and relate to these revelations.

The Speaking Garden:

Following the release of *The Wild Iris*, which was awarded the 1992 Pulitzer Prize for Literature, by Ararat Gluck? According to David Morris, *Ararat* foreshadows *The Wild Iris* "by metaphorically connecting nature to the spirit world" (178). The poet alluded to a desire to escape her own "aversion to reality" (*Ararat* 66) and "return to a lost connection with God" in "Celestial Music," the penultimate poem of *Ararat* (Morris 178-179). God becomes the central figure that Gluck wrestles with in *The Wild Iris*; she is considering His relevance to her life and whether making peace with Him will enable her to enter a more meaningful and joyful existence in response to her friend's chiding in "Celestial Music." The two volumes are linked together by the poet's obsession with the patriarchal father figure. In *Iris*, God, present or absent in the poet's life, assumes the role of the biographical parent in influencing how the poet imagines her existence as a poet. In *Ararat*, the poet's reimagining's of her past and herself were heavily influenced by her father's life and death. However, the poet feels the need to imagine alternate voices (one of which is her own biased version of God, whose figure eventually becomes ambiguous as the possibility of God actually speaking through the poet increases) with whom she may begin a sustained argument or dialogue between opposing perspectives about the meaning of life (since God Himself will not come down to address them personally). These contrasting voices present viewpoints that contradict the poet's initial beliefs about life and God in the hopes that she will be able to reevaluate some of her personal prejudices or develop new beliefs. The use of different speakers by Gluck in her collection "fulfilled psychic needs, as if she had long yearned to write as a disembodied voice, freed from fleshly confines," according to Lee Upton (140). Upton seems to imply that the poet's primary artistic concern in *Iris* is the freedom to speak or ventriloquize in ways that don't seem to be connected to the poet's unique voice. However, I would like to counter that all the various speakers in *Iris* actually maintain the poet's well-known oracular tone; a general detachment in the tone of the voices does not change even though their perspectives might be at odds with one

another. This suggests that the voices are still tightly bound within the poet's own mind, which also suggests that the poems can be interpreted as being about Gluck's personal and psychological journey toward spiritual and artistic renewal. But the poet purposefully leaves open a conflict between two plausible readings of the story that is suggested by the poems. As I've already mentioned, one interpretation of the plot is that the poet is speaking to herself in order to gain a new perspective. The second theory holds that the poems actually set up a sort of séance to invite an outside, supernatural, or spiritual presence to enter them and speak through the poet, revealing spiritual truths about the purpose of life.

All of the poems in *The Wild Iris* follow the same pattern: the poet and the flowers speak first, followed by one or more poems in God's own voice, before the poet and flowers speak again. The poem *The Wild Iris* begins and ends with poetic utterances by personified flowers of the poet's garden. It is similar to a church service where there is frequently a call to prayer and a congregational response, which flow harmoniously back and forth throughout the Mass, except that in this instance the responses are typically at odds with one another like antagonistic characters arguing in a play. Through the poems, this conflict of voices creates a narrative structure in which the poet seeks to make sense of her ideas about God. The themes of rebirth and finding one's voice are introduced in the opening poem, "The Wild Iris," and they will recur throughout the collection. The untamed iris speaks to the poet:

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...

The flower also seems to be speaking directly to the reader. Its prophetic tone reverberates with a symbolic, unifying quality. The wild iris is asserting that everything in nature repeats itself in a cycle of life and death, and when this happens, it seeks some form of expression, much like a poet does when they write poetry. However, God will clarify later in the book that the concept of repetition does not really apply to people. God has made sure that when a person passes away, their soul will not return to earth, in contrast to flowers, which come back to life after death and continue to be who they were originally. The poet appears to have come to terms with the conflict between two competing views of eternity while searching for the meaning of human existence: the traditional Judeo-Christian view that claims that humans only have one life and that only the spirit is eternal, and the imagined flower's view of eternity as one of constant rebirth and repetition (the spirit returns to God after death). The "voice" that the flower recovers in existence, however, is different from the "voice" of a living human being; rather, the "voice" of the flower is an ecstatic and selfless surrender to being a part of the living world, whereas the "voice" of a human being is constantly and consciously negotiating with the world and only occasionally collapses the distance between world and self.

The Problem with Marriage:

In her subsequent two novels, Gluck expands on the way she communicated in *The Wild Iris* by using the voices of well-known figures from Greek mythology to ventriloquize conflicting ideas and feelings. The poet sets out on a journey of emotional renewal and discovery from Ararat to Averno, starting at the mountain's named peak (the location of a Jewish cemetery where her family members were interred and the beginning of her negotiations with her past), and moving steadily downward until she confronts death and the underworld in Averno, which is the city that bears the same name. The books resemble linked autobiographical verse novels that follow different stages in the poet's life. *The Wild Iris* dealt with spirituality, but now the poet has returned to a more painful and private reality by examining the breakdown of a relationship with God. In *The Wild Iris*, Gluck framed religious and spiritual concepts within domestic contexts involving her husband and gardening. What is personal quickly becomes universal, and this capacity to transcend the personal also aids the poet in forgiving, as she did in *The Wild Iris*. The poet juxtaposes her private life with the confessions of idealized figures in *Meadowlands* and *Vita Nova*. What is personal quickly becomes universal and this capacity to transcend the personal also aids the poet in forgiving, as she did in that poem. The plot of *Meadowlands* and *Vita Nova* is one story that starts with the crisis of a failing marriage and ends with an ambiguous resolution in which the poet leaves her husband and begins a new, unknowable life on her own. The well-known characters in *Meadowlands*, primarily Penelope, Telemachus, and Circe, are straight out of the *Odyssey*. But unlike the *Odyssey*, Gluck's book "its divorce, not reunion, that ends the story," as Elisabeth Frost notes (*The Women's Review of Books* 24). The poet then embarks on a journey of emotional recovery in *Vita Nova*, where readers will encounter characters like Euridice and Orfeo as well as Dido and Aeneas. The two volumes under discussion are actually structured by a central plot about a poet's attempt to grapple with the dissolution of love, rather than simply being poetry collections that are "pervasively structured by mythical analogues" (Breslin 103). The poet, who is once again cast as herself in her own autobiographical drama, uses dramatized conversations with her husband, self-invented parables, and cutting arguments with herself in addition to other techniques to gain new understanding of her failed marriage. According to

Joseph Boone, "the novel's recurring obsession with the nature of romantic relationship and its possible outcomes" from Austen all the way up to Wharton in the early 20th century contrasts with the connecting story of these books about how one woman survives the break-up of her marriage. The successful bond of wedlock was linked to the ideal notion of a close-knit social order, as Boone points out, and novels by such authors tended to implicitly support the notion that a woman's happiness was tied to finding a man in marriage, a "restrictive sexual-marital ideology" that encouraged a prevalent, social hierarchy empowering the male partner. In accordance with Boone's definition of a "counter-traditional text," Gluck's story, in which the protagonist leaves her marriage and finds happiness elsewhere, can be thought of as a "counter-traditional text."

Along with these poetic allusions to the poet's relationship with mythical figures (after Penelope, other Odyssey characters will appear later in the book), Gluck has woven conversation-poems throughout the book that depart from the formal, oracular quality of the character monologues or the poet's self-reflections to function as frank, unvarnished glimpses into the poet's marriage's daily routine. These conversational poems share with the reader scenes that demonstrate how the poet's and her husband John's love had soured, resulting in the breakdown of their marriage. Love had devolved into a possessive, destructive relationship, and this destructiveness is depicted through disturbingly funny dialogue:

One thing I've always hated
About you. I hate that you
Refuse to have people at the house. Flaubert
Had more friends and Flaubert
Was a recluse

In her poetry, Gluck frequently draws on her own experience, and the overarching story that unites her poems charts her progress toward healing and self-discovery. The poet's self can be revealed through such a plot and as David Baker put it, "the more the self is identified, the more connective and sympathetic is its relationship to others" (Virginia Quarterly Review 203). By dressing as mythological characters and elevating the private self in this way, Gluck connects the mundane with the transcendent. The poet employs this technique further to support a personal process of healing and discovering new meaning for her existence, a process that readers may also engage in while following the plot in each collection even though this was more typically an aesthetically-driven, Modernist strategy.

Conclusion:

By describing the changes in the three major trials of life—the innocent childhood or the beginning, the reflective in-between or the middle, and the unavoidable end—Louise Gluck makes individual existence universal through her poetic work. Although it cannot stop death, Gluck does offer a sense of stalling. It encourages you to look around and make the most of the resources you already have in order to create a pleasant interlude because there are many different ways to connect and human connection is not the only satisfying tie in life. We are actually more liberated once we accept this. These opportunities for revision could only be discovered by reading his translations in manuscript extremely carefully. Certain changes, some of which may be due to the language's available expressions and are therefore not the translator's fault, can lessen the poetry's richness or change the speaker's point of view. There is nothing more challenging than translating a master poet, and this challenge goes far beyond simply matching rhyme, meter, and traditional meaning. This is a difficult task due to the complexity of Gluck's voice and imagery, which are expressed in language that ranges from the idiomatic and cliché to the startlingly original and surreal.

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