

Zazula, Piotr

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PIOTR ZAZULA

“TO LOVE SILENCE AND DARKNESS:”¹ UNEASY TRANSCENDENCE IN LOUISE GLÜCK’S POEMS

Abstract

Focusing on imagery and its symbolic implications, the article offers a close-reading analysis of selected poems from two volumes by Louise Glück: *The Wild Iris* (1992) and *A Village Life* (2009). Compared to her earlier work, the 2009 collection seems markedly different in its treatment of spiritual matters. Whereas in *The Wild Iris* transcendence is taken for granted, religious belief is conspicuously absent from *A Village Life*. Both collections, however, are (in Bakhtinian terms) dialogic in their final spiritual import. In *A Village Life* the ontological possibility of transcendence is alternately hinted at and questioned. In *The Wild Iris* the axiological status of God is explored in highly unorthodox ways, the poet undermining many established images of God in Christian and Jewish traditions. What the two volumes seem to share is the essentially Gnostic imagery, more veiled in *A Village Life*, more explicit in *The Wild Iris*.

Key words

American poetry; religious imagery; transpersonal perspective; transcendence; Gnosticism; Louise Glück

1. Introduction

Arguably, what constitutes Louise Glück’s poetic trademark is her recurrent pre-occupation with transcendence coupled with a frequent recourse to a transpersonal perspective. Though not a religious poet in a traditional sense, Glück has been for decades consistently addressing broadly-conceived spiritual matters with a recurrent theme of the individual’s abortive attempts to establish contact with a detached and inaccessible deity. Given his axiological ambiguity, Glück’s

God brings to mind the Gnostic Demiurge, but the poet makes sure to evade any theological closures, let alone clear religious declarations. Neither radically mythopoeic like Blake or Yeats nor conventionally orthodox by most religions' standards, she remains a questioning "believer" of sorts, probing the uncharted domains of the numinous as it manifests itself in the quotidian. In this limited sense Louise Glück – ever the New Englander – continues the long tradition of "qualified mystics" in American women's poetry, going all the way back to Emily Dickinson.

2. *A Village Life* (2009)

Her latest volume, *A Village Life*, published in 2009, is in this respect representative of the earlier work. In addition, the new collection offers an existential retrospect of sorts, reverberating as it is with the motifs of recapitulating one's life, of looking back on one's personal past in search of perennial clues, and of wisdom that comes with age and manifests itself in an emotional detachment from one's ego and immediate social environment. The poet in her sixties re-enacts as it were the archetypal role of a wise crone, at peace with the inexorable passage of time, though not always accepting the cosmic order or the spiritual "lining" of the material world. Compared to the more openly metaphysical earlier volumes – especially *The Wild Iris* published in 1992 which I intend to use as a comparative point of reference here – religious themes are not foregrounded in Glück's latest book. *A Village Life* is ostensibly a loosely-bound assortment of vignettes, of observations made by a keen but emotionally-detached spectator. Transcendental matters are implicitly rather than explicitly present there.

The poem "Tributaries" is a case in point. The ostensibly realistic, even banal, setting generates an implicitly metaphysical reflection. Making the most of the rich reservoir of archetypal associations with the mythical Fountain of Youth, the poet places contemporary residents of an indefinite cozy (presumably Mediterranean or, maybe, Californian) village in an archetypal context. The villagers become unwitting re-enactors of the primordial roles inherent in the human condition. The mundane setting acquires symbolic meanings, the fountain located in the central plaza gradually turning into a multilayered symbol rather than emblem.

The poem's "tributaries" stand for metaphorically perceived roads that lead to the fountain – presumably the sole tourist attraction and center of social life in the village. The central plaza with its fountain is a popular meeting place for couples and a hangout for mothers with children. Here are the first four stanzas:

All the roads in the village unite at the fountain.
 Avenue of Liberty, Avenue of the Acacia Trees –
 The fountain rises at the center of the plaza;
 On sunny days, rainbows in the piss of the cherub.

In summer, couples sit at the pool's edge.
 There's room in the pool for many reflections –
 the plaza's nearly empty, the acacia trees don't get this far.
 And the Avenue of Liberty is barren and austere; its image
 doesn't crowd the water.

Interspersed with the couples, mothers with their young children.
 Here's where they come to talk to one another, maybe
 meet a young man, see if there's anything left of their beauty.
 When they look down, it's a sad moment: the water isn't encouraging.

The husbands are off working, but by some miracle
 all the amorous young men are always free –
 they sit at the edge of the fountain, splashing their sweethearts
 with fountain water. (2009: 6)

Already at the beginning there are clues that the fountain is a metaphysical symbol. One of such hints is the pun in the second strophe: "There's room in the pool for many reflections." The water in the fountain pool acquires symbolic qualities, being a reservoir both of mirror images and of thoughts. (Thus it may connote the primordial ocean – source of all varieties of life and its manifestations, including mankind's optical and mental reflections.)

In many mythologies the aquatic Goddess is pictured as a crone, the Great Mother, the Creatrix of the Universe (cf. Campbell 1991, Eisler 1988, Gimbutas 2001, Stone 1978). Thus she evokes fundamentally positive associations. However, in Louise Glück's mythopoeia human life is an axiologically ambivalent gift. Mother Nature seems often closer, say, to Kali than to Virgin Mary, individual human beings being treated instrumentally as mere transitory carriers of perennial life. In this context the last line of the third strophe can also be interpreted on two planes – a literal and a metaphysical one. "The water isn't encouraging;" their reflections in the fountain pool make it clear to the mothers that their youthful looks are gone. This otherwise mundane observation has been made inconspicuously metaphysical by the speaker's ingenious use of a dead metaphor. Thus Glück does not say that "the reflections are not encouraging" or that "what the women see in the pool is not encouraging" – she makes the water the subject of the sentence. This subtle shift of agency provides the fountain water with an autonomous status and increased significance. It may now connote some aquatic deity or, in a broader sense, the primordial natural order. In this rather ruthless scheme a single human being is, to repeat, but a temporary embodiment of timeless life energy. The fountain water (i.e. Nature) does not give the romance-starved mothers any comfort because it has already ticked them off, so to speak. The women have done their job by giving birth to new life. By the same token, they have used up their personal share of romance, the privilege of young and nubile bodies, ready for impregnation. The show must go on, but

with a new cast. It is now the unmarried couples who feel most comfortable at the fountain. “To the couples, it’s clear who’s on the outskirts of life, who’s at the center” (Glück 2009: 6).

Transcendence is not only implied in the poem by means of veiled symbolism and subtly metaphorical language. In two places Glück applies elliptical syntax to achieve a similar effect. In the first strophe we read about “rainbows in the piss of the cherub” (Glück 2009: 6), in the third – about mothers with small children, “interspersed with the couples” (Glück 2009: 6). In both cases the omission of the verb not only shortens the line, thus preserving the accentual rhythm, but, first and foremost, implies a mental shortcut – a suggestion that both scenes look so familiar as to make a full description redundant. In short, their commonness makes them archetypal. What is more, the omission of verbs makes the two scenes more static or picture-like, which – on a remote connotative plane – also brings to mind something perennial, iconic, archetypal. The irony in these lines has two sources. The first, more obvious one, is lexical. The appearance of “rainbows in the piss of the [fountain’s] cherub” on sunny days demonstrates how mundane the sources of a potentially sublime experience can be (the import of this contrast is essentially Gnostic). Similarly, the poet’s choice of the participle “interspersed” to describe the spatial relations between the young couples and the mothers with children near the fountain is potentially ironic. (The word’s passive and mechanistic connotations may also imply that the mothers, acting on impulse and driven by instinctual forces beyond their control, are mere pawns in the invisible hands of some Demiurge or cogs in the cosmic machinery devised by a ruthless deity.)

The poem’s speaker keeps an ostensibly low profile – everything is told by an omniscient, impersonal, emotionally detached narrator. The reader familiar with Glück’s biography will have no trouble identifying the narrative voice with the poet. More or less halfway through the poem, in stanzas five and six, she introduces more actors of this ongoing quotidian theater – the elderly people, who instinctively choose seats farther away from the fountain:

Around the fountain, there are clusters of metal tables.
This is where you sit when you’re old,
beyond the intensities of the fountain.
The fountain is for the young, who still want to look at themselves.
Or for the mothers, who need to keep their children diverted.

In good weather, a few old people linger at the tables.
Life is simple now: one day cognac, one day coffee and a cigarette.
To the couples, it’s clear who’s on the outskirts of life, who’s at the center.
(2009: 6)

Two stanzas further the reader encounters the first clear clue that the speaker’s dispassionate, occasionally ironic tone comes with her age. Looking at the romance-starved, frustrated mothers whose husbands are off at work, the poet writes:

They are alone at the fountain, in a dark well.
 They've been exiled by the world of hope,
 which is the world of action,
 but the world of thought hasn't as yet opened to them.
 When it does, everything will change. (2009: 7)

The speaker's certitude that, firstly, it is just a matter of time before "the world of thought" becomes accessible to the confused women, and, secondly, that when it happens "everything will change" must result from her own inner transformation of a similar kind.

The above-mentioned clue follows another – one where the speaker openly suggests that the behavior she describes has archetypal roots: "The couples are like an image from some faraway time, an echo coming / very faint from the mountains" (2009: 7). In the end, with the coming of autumn, when leaves begin to litter the fountain, "The roads don't gather here anymore; / the fountain sends them away, back into the hills they came from" (Glück 2009: 7). And thus Avenue of Liberty, like the other local avenues, "ends in stone, / not at the field's edge but at the foot of the mountain" (Glück 2009: 7). The ultimate dead-end of all the village's avenues, the distant mountain recurs in the book, functioning as a metaphysical symbol, a transcendental point of reference. Glück seems to suggest that, similarly to the way the mountain dominates the local landscape, her own mindscape is marked by its own spiritual "mountain," a focus of the poet's metaphysical experiences and insights. Incidentally, Glück accomplishes through the mountain symbol an interesting metonymic shift of focus. In Judeo-Christian iconographic folklore mountains have always functioned as emblems of transcendence. Unlike in many telluric pagan religions, they were not, however, objects of religious worship as such – neither Judaism nor Christianity (nor Islam for that matter) recognize the existence of (literally) sacred groves, rivers, trees or mountaintops. In the religions of the Book man was simply believed to be "closer" to God while on top of a mountain. In Glück's poem, though, there is no personal deity, no God as such. There is only an impressive mountain, its top shrouded in mist.

The motifs of emotional withdrawal accompanied by an unassuming contemplative bent, both attendant on old age, recur in the book. The experiences of growing old and passing away constitute Glück's major objects of contemplation. The individual's inability to accept or even embrace old age is viewed by Glück as a symptom of spiritual immaturity. The poem "In the Café" can be read as a complementary sequel to "Tributaries," even though the two lyrics are not printed one after the other in the volume. "In the Café" tells about the poet's long-term platonic friendship with a man who, unlike the speaker, is unable or unwilling to get old emotionally, to mature. We never get to know his name, Glück consistently referring to him as "my friend." Already in the first stanza the reader is given a hint that the text is going to be about something more than just a prolonged friendship with a *puer aeternus* who, despite his increasingly

advanced years, cannot settle down and keeps starting new erotic relationships. Here are the first three stanzas:

It's natural to be tired of earth.
 When you've been dead this long, you'll probably be tired of heaven.
 You do what you can do in a place
 But after a while you exhaust that place,
 So you long for rescue.

My friend falls in love a little too easily.
 Every year or so a new girl –
 If they have children he doesn't mind;
 he can fall in love with children also.

So the rest of us get sour and he stays the same,
 full of adventure, always making new discoveries.
 But he hates moving, so the women have to come from here, or near here.
 (2009: 13)

The poem exposes a different, destructive facet of transcendence. Taken out of context, the opening line might just as well have been the beginning of a Gnostic treatise on spirit trapped in matter. In this context the notorious womanizer acquires some indefinite metaphysical qualities, his emotional immaturity connoting spiritual restlessness rooted in quasi-religious longings. The initial effect is strengthened by the fact that the man seems attracted not only to his women's bodies. In a sense, the poet's friend is like an all-too-human parody of a panentheistic God – one that has created the world so that, by sharing some aspects of his Self with a number of ontologically diverse selves, he could have a direct experience of otherwise inaccessible states of being, and thus – get to know himself better (whatever that means when applied to the allegedly omniscient deity). Unlike in the pantheistic vision, where the Creator and the Creation are one, God in panentheism is both immanent and transcendent, both present in and surpassing the material universe.² In a similar manner, the incorrigible flirt in Glück's poem explores, as it were, the latent potential of his own personality by identifying, however temporarily, with the numerous objects of his romantic infatuation. Ironically enough, this seems to make him more attractive to his female partners; living with him is almost “like living with another woman, but without the spite, the envy, / and with a man's strength, a man's clarity of mind” (Glück 2009: 14).

He sees everything with their eyes
 He becomes not what they are but what they could be
 if they weren't trapped in their characters.
 For him, this new self of his is liberating because it's invented –

he absorbs the fundamental needs in which their souls are rooted,
 he experiences as his own the rituals and preferences these give rise to –
 but as he lives with each woman, he inhabits each version of himself
 fully, because he isn't compromised by the normal shame and anxiety.

(2009: 13)

At the end of the poem we learn that the elderly Don Juan – ever amorous, amorphous and amoral – has fallen in love again. Brimming with fresh enthusiasm, he tells the speaker about his new lover. Far from condemning her friend, who, unlike in his love affairs, remains loyal and considerate in friendship, the speaker draws an ambiguous conclusion:

He's himself in these moments, not pieces of the women
 he's slept with. He enters their lives as you enter a dream,
 without volition, and he lives there as you live in a dream,
 however long it lasts. And in the morning, you remember
 nothing of the dream at all, nothing at all.

(2009: 15)

Avoiding the pitfalls of strained religious interpretations of an overtly secular lyric, one could argue that the poem's imagery does connote – on an admittedly remote associative plane – an essentially panentheistic vision of God. It is a God that, through entering the lives of other beings, not only does not cease to remain “himself” but, in addition, experiences his own multifarious being more intensely.

The veiled manner in which transcendence features in Glück's latest book makes it markedly different from her previous collections, especially from the explicitly religious *The Wild Iris*. Avoiding any direct religious declarations in *A Village Life*, the poet does not argue with God. Instead she repeatedly voices her doubts whether there actually is any transcendent being that would justify our absurdly fragile existence. Viewed in this context, it is significant that the same title (“Burning Leaves”) has been given to three poems, placed more or less at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the book. In all the three lyrics the speaker is watching a farm worker burn a pile of dead leaves. Each time the potential symbolism of this annual chore/“ritual” is of a slightly different spiritual order. Glück's decision to present three variants of the same experience casts additional light on the possible spiritual message of the book as a whole.

In the first version one can hardly speak of any transcendence at all. Turning leaves into ashes denotes something final, not transitional. Faced with annihilation, the leaves – or, in symbolic terms, the inert mass of transient organic matter – put up “instinctive” resistance:

They don't disappear voluntarily;
 you have to prod them along
 as the farm worker prods the leaf pile every year
 until it releases a smell of smoke into the air.

And then, for an hour or so, it's really animated,
Blazing away like something alive. (2009: 26)

The fire does not embody here some primordial life principle, as it does for Heraclitus. Set ablaze, the dead leaves merely look “like something alive.” The pile is “really animated” only “for an hour or so,” while burning. The line between what really exists and what only seems to exist has been drawn clearly. Later in the poem the speaker concludes that, like each year, death has made “room for life” (2009: 26). Silence and stasis follow: “Then the air is still. / Where the fire was, there's only bare dirt in a circle of rocks. / Nothing between the earth and the dark” (Glück 2009: 26). The ellipsis in the last line produces an effect similar to that in “Tributaries”; the omission of a verb makes the line somewhat more “static” (and thus, by implication, “timeless”), emphasizing the latent symbolism of the image it features and by the same token implying that its message touches upon some timeless, transcendental truth. This ultimate truth brings anything but comfort. Bereft of its organic superfluities, a deceptive facade which makes us believe that there is something “between the earth and the dark,” the scorched ground makes it all-too-clear that there is no transcendent realm shielding the organic world from the cosmic void. *Tertium non datur*, Glück seems to be saying.

In the second version of “Burning Leaves” the opening stanzas evoke a completely different set of connotations:

The fire burns up into the clear sky,
eager and furious, like an animal trying to get free,
to run wild as nature intended –

When it burns like this,
leaves aren't enough – it's
acquisitive, rapacious,

refusing to be contained, to accept limits – (2009: 35)

Here the fire is presented in Heraclitean terms, as the primordial source of all life. What is more important, already in the first stanza the poem's central conceit appears – the metaphor of going beyond the confines of matter, of escaping from the shackles of mundane existence into an altogether different realm. Burning up into the sky, the crackling flames look as if they were trying to get there. From the perspective of, say, Valentinian Gnosticism, it is significant that the fire has been compared to “an animal trying to get free, / to run wild as nature intended.” A refusal to be contained by “natural” limits, is, according to Glück, an intrinsic part of the natural order. The fundamental concept of Valentinian Gnosticism is the metaphor of “divine light” or “divine sparks” trapped in organic matter (cf. Thomassen 2008). That light, according to Valentinus, is part and parcel of the

primordial transcendent Light from which it has been separated by the evil Demiurge and to which it “instinctively” longs to return. (In the traditional interpretation of mainstream Christian churches the Demiurge is replaced by Lucifer, the “light carrier,” while the Gnostic doctrine of creation as a cosmic catastrophe – by the Christian concept of the original sin which tainted the otherwise perfect natural order.)

Any doubts the reader may have as to the spiritual affinities of the above imagery should be dispelled by the literal appearance of sparks in the poem's second half:

Concentric rings of stones and gray earth
circle a few sparks;
the farmer stomps on these with his boots.

It's impossible to believe this will work –
not with a fire like this, those last sparks
still resisting, unfinished
believing they will get everything in the end

since it is obvious they are not defeated,
merely dormant or resting, though no one knows
whether they represent life or death.

(2009: 35)

In the last stanza the metaphor acquires an explicitly Gnostic tenor; the sparks trapped in matter will continue to seek escape. However, what for a Valentinian mystic or a Hassidic Jew would make an apt illustration of a fundamental dogma, for Glück remains a metaphorical image whose ultimate spiritual message is ambiguous. The poem with a Gnostic imagery ends on an agnostic note.

As if to counterbalance these Gnostic connotations the third version of the leaves-burning scene contains no religious allusions whatsoever. Already in the opening line the leaves are referred to as simply “dead”:

The dead leaves catch fire quickly.
And they burn quickly; in no time at all,
they change from something to nothing.

(2009: 61)

The leaves not only do not resist but burn fast. The lyrical focus has been shifted from the leaves to the emptiness left after their burning:

Midday. The sky is cold, blue;
under the fire, there's gray earth.

How fast it all goes, how fast the smoke clears.
And where the pile of leaves was,
An emptiness that suddenly seems vast.

(2009: 61)

The agnostic perspective gradually turns into a nihilistic one. The acutely felt lack of any transcendent legitimization of life does not seem debatable to the poet now.

The nihilistic finale of the “Burning Leaves” series is not Glück’s final word on spiritual matters. In the poem “A Village Life” one comes across the poet’s single explicitly religious declaration. Its appearance in the book’s last poem, one bearing the same title as the entire volume, seems to imply that the concluding lyric is, at least at this point in Glück’s spiritual journey, her final pronouncement on the question of transcendence. Here is a revealing excerpt, beginning, exactly as one of the stanzas of the final version of “Burning Leaves,” with the word “midday”:

Midday, the church bells finished. Light in excess:
still, fog blankets the meadow, so you can’t see
the mountain in the distance, covered with snow and ice.

When it appears again, my neighbor thinks
her prayers are answered. So much light she can’t control her happiness –
it has to burst out in language. *Hello*, she yells, as though
that is her best translation.

She believes in the Virgin the way I believe in the mountain,
though in one case the fog never lifts.
But each person stores his hope in a different place. (2009: 69–70)

Thus Glück clarifies her hitherto somewhat cryptic references to the mountain perpetually looming on the book’s spiritual horizon. Apparently there is something out there in the natural world that through its inherent majesty inclines the poet to believe in the existence of some indefinite transcendent being. The poem’s speaker compares her private “mountainous” faith to the religious zeal of her Catholic neighbor believing in Virgin Mary. She qualifies the juxtaposition with a comment that could be either ironic or self-ironic, the fog referring either to the poet’s or the neighbor’s cognitive limitations.

Then again the expository style gives way to veiled symbolism. At dusk, alone in her country house, the speaker, with a glass of wine in hand, contemplates the fireplace’s dying embers:

Later, the sun sets, the shadows gather,
rustling the low bushes like animals just awake for the night.
Inside, there’s only firelight. It fades slowly;
now only the heaviest wood’s still
flickering across the shelves of instruments.
I hear music coming from them sometimes,
even locked in their cases.

When I was a bird, I believed I would be a man.
 That's the flute. And the horn answers,
 when I was a man, I cried out to be a bird.
 Then the music vanishes. And the secret it confides in me
 vanishes also. (2009: 70)

The instruments' lament is presumably an expression of some indefinite existential anxiety and longing inherent, according to Glück, in the very existence of selfhood. This, again, brings to mind the teachings of Gnostic and Jewish mystics. The solution, from the religious viewpoint, would be a return to the primordial unity with God, one that existed prior to the creation of the world with its countless individual beings. That solution, however, is not mentioned in the poem. When the music is over, the attendant epiphany is also gone. Glück, with subtle self-irony, hints at the solipsistic and therefore transient character of such revelations. The fleeting insights do not add up to form a coherent spiritual vision because they have been generated not by some external transcendent power (like, say, the "voices" that Joan of Arc once "heard") but, rather, by the restless imagination of the poet "hearing" music played by instruments locked in their cases.

In the subsequent stanzas the poem changes course again. As if to undermine any potential spiritual connotations of the preceding lines the speaker shifts back to an expository style and a nihilistic message:

In the window, the moon is hanging over the earth,
 meaningless but full of messages.

It's dead, it's always been dead,
 but it pretends to be something else,
 burning like a star, and convincingly, so that you feel sometimes
 it could actually make something grow on earth.

If there's an image of the soul, I think that's what it is.

I move through the dark as though it were natural to me,
 as though I were already a factor in it.

Tranquil and still, the day dawns.

On market day, I go to the market with my lettuces. (2009: 70–71)

The final lines epitomize the elliptic (self-)irony and axiological ambiguity marking the entire collection. A virtuoso of register shifts, Glück plays cat and mouse with the reader, evading any expository closures. Her personal creed remains a riddle. To recapitulate: if the moon is dead, then any spiritual epiphanies or religious "knowledge" as such are mere fantasies the anguished human mind projects onto the indifferent universe. In this scheme there is no place for transcendence, and hence no soul. Since a dead thing cannot "pretend" anything, the

moon's "behavior" can be interpreted as the poet's roundabout way of referring to our all-too-human inclination toward pathetic fallacy. In this case the fallacy would extend to ascribing transcendental legitimacy to the axiologically neutral universe. The obvious problem with such a reductionist reading, of course, is that the moon, even if dead, does exist while the existence of the soul is a matter of religious belief. Glück's point, then, is much more sophisticated: what we usually call "soul" does exist but in a different ontological mode than what the followers of the world's major religions imagine. (Perhaps this is a distant echo of William Blake's idea that what we refer to as our body is, in fact, the material aspect of the soul, that is the only image of the soul accessible to our senses.) In the concluding lines the speaker says that she moves through the dark with ease, as if darkness was her natural environment. The phrase "as if" increases the ambiguity of the lines. The poem's conclusion could be thus interpreted as yet another illusion or self-conscious projection, the speaker merely pretending that she belongs in the primordial night, presumably the one that existed prior to Creation. But if the dark is not really her element then the light would seem a natural alternative. However, the existence of any transcendent light has been questioned in the book. And thus the reader's inquiries are back to where they started from.

3. *The Wild Iris* (1992)

In comparison to the consistently dialogic character of *A Village Life*, in which the existence of transcendence is alternately hinted at and questioned, *The Wild Iris*, published seventeen years earlier, is ostensibly less equivocal in its spiritual presuppositions. The existence of a personal God as well as "spiritualized" Nature that "speaks" through personified plants is taken for granted there.³ Daniel Morris rightly describes Glück as "a mystic poet" who consistently displays "an ambivalent attitude to religious discourse that verges on Gnosticism as well as one that is in line with the ancient rabbinic tradition of reading scripture known as midrash" (2006: 3). What recurs in the volume is the transpersonal perspective.⁴ For example, the speaker of the opening poem "The Wild Iris" is the eponymous flower, just like in the subsequent "Trillium," "Lamium," or "Snowdrops." Throughout the book one comes across lyrics whose speakers are diverse flowers, trees, bushes or grasses, ranging from common ones to those familiar only to gardening aficionados (e.g. "Scilla," "The Hawthorn Tree," "Violets," "Witchgrass," "The Jacob's Ladder," "Clover," "Ipomea").

It is hard to find one unifying principle for all these lyrics. Contrary to standard expectations, not all of the floral speakers offer reassuring pantheistic truths about the perennial cycle of life, though some of them do. The iris, for instance, tells us that it remembers its own death followed by reincarnation to a new life, the trillium admits that after waking up in the forest for the first time, it "knew nothing" and "could do nothing but see" (1992: 4). The shadow-dwelling lamium explains that "Living things don't all require / light in the same degree.

Some of us / make our own light” (1992: 5). Through such cryptic statements Glück not only attempts to render a mode of existence completely different from human but also seems to imply that mankind could learn a lot from the world of plants, especially as regards one’s understanding of the role of the individual self in the planetary life processes and the acceptance of one’s own inevitable demise. The undulating waves of scilla flowers are very straightforward about that:

Not I, you idiot, not self, but we, we – waves
of sky blue like
a critique of heaven: why
do you treasure your voice
when to be one thing
is to be next to nothing? (1992: 14)

The plants are “blue” in both senses of the word. In this brilliant poetic figure, combining a pun, a metaphor and a simile, one hears, again, a distant echo of Gnosticism, the Creation silently blaming the Creator.

It is not, of course, the only legitimate interpretation. The “critique of heaven” might just as well stand for the critique of excessive orthodox religiosity or exclusively sky-oriented metaphysical longings. The blue waves of scilla are as beautiful as the distant and inaccessible sky, so why look for transcendence up in the clouds? “Mundane is sublime; natural is supernatural,” the scilla flowers seem to be saying.

Not all the book’s floral speakers offer a viewpoint radically different from ours. Some of them have amazingly human problems. In “The Jacob’s Ladder” the eponymous plant explains:

Trapped in the earth
wouldn’t you want to go
to heaven? I live
in a lady’s garden. Forgive me, lady;
longing has taken my grace. I am
not what you wanted. But
as men and women seem
to desire each other, I too desire
knowledge of paradise – and now
your grief, a naked stem
reaching the porch window.
And at the end, what? A small blue flower
like a star. Never
to leave the world! Is this
not what your tears mean? (1992: 24)

Small wonder that the flower crowned with a star-shaped corona has been given a Biblical name. Tied to the soil by the roots that both feed the stem and immobilize it, with its starry head filled with instinctive, inarticulate longings for transcendence, the poem's Jacob's Ladder remains hopelessly split between heaven and earth. (In this respect, one could argue, it resembles modern Western man split between earth- and sky-oriented spiritualities.)

God as such is also a speaker in several poems. Their titles, at first sight spiritually non-committal, reveal their metaphorical potential after one has read the whole poem: "Clear Morning," "Spring Snow," "End of Winter," "Retreating Wind," "April," "Midsummer," "End of Summer," "Early Darkness," "Harvest," "Retreating Light," "Sunset," "Lullaby," "September Twilight." The speaker in most of these poems voices his impatience with the restless, intellectually-limited and at the same time smugly arrogant mankind. The Creator is apparently disappointed with his creation. In "Clear Morning" the speaker is tired of communicating with people in the only language they can understand – the one of signs. Too busy with naming material objects as they appear before them, human beings are unable to embrace God's metaphysical indifference to the physical details of the world. God has counted on man's evolution in this respect, but to no avail. He is running out of patience:

And all this time
I indulged your limitation, thinking

you would cast it aside yourselves sooner or later,
thinking matter could not absorb your gaze forever –

obstacle of the clematis painting
blue flowers on the porch window –

I cannot go on
restricting myself to images

(1992: 7–8)

Curiously enough, according to God one of the obstacles to man's spiritual growth is the distracting beauty of the clematis. This detail acquires additional weight in the context of the book's numerous lyrics whose speakers are plants. Multiplying spiritual perspectives, Glück evidently complicates the volume's ultimate message. Given the plants' formidable epistemological status in the volume, a conventionally-minded reader might expect some kind of spiritual symbiosis, complementariness or fusion between God's and the plants' perspective. There would be then some kind of esoteric rapport between Creator and Creation, inaccessible to man only. God, however, remains indifferent to the allure of his creation. What is more, He treats nature in an instrumental manner, like in "Spring Snow":

Look at the night sky:
I have two selves, two kinds of power.

I am here with you, at the window,
watching you react. Yesterday
the moon rose over moist earth in the lower garden.
Now the earth glitters like the moon,
like dead matter crusted with light.

(1992: 9)

Through the weather anomaly God was trying to communicate something to a human being. Glittering in the sun, the snow-covered Spring garden is a message to the poet-gardener. The flowers alive only yesterday are now dead, “crusted with light.” The choice of metaphor leaves no room for doubt. Light can be life-giving or deadly, depending on the whim of an inscrutable, unpredictable Demiurge. Sky-oriented transcendence is, indeed, unearthly.

Of God’s several monologs in the volume, two (“End of Winter” and “Retreating Wind”) are particularly poignant because they explicitly dismiss the two religious concepts that have been fundamental to many a school of mysticism, namely reincarnation and God’s immanent presence in human nature. In “End of Winter” the deity declares to mankind:

You wanted to be born; I let you be born.
When has my grief ever gotten
in the way of your pleasure?

Plunging ahead
into the dark and light at the same time
eager for sensation

as though you were some new thing, wanting
to express yourselves

all brilliance, all vivacity

never thinking
this would cost you anything,
never imagining the sound of my voice
as anything but part of you –

you won’t hear it in the other world,
not clearly again,
not in birdcall or human cry,

not the clear sound, only
 persistent echoing
 in all sound that means good-bye, good-bye –

the one continuous line
 that binds us to each other.

(1992: 10–11)

In fact, everything in the poem seems clear except for the line “You wanted to be born; I let you be born.” How could people have wanted to be born before they existed? If prior to the act of creation only God had been “out” there, human desire to exist in the form of individual selves must have been born within God. To repeat – both in the pantheistic and panentheistic vision God creates the world, with its plethora of organic forms, in order to experience more extensively his own power which would have otherwise remained potential only. Thus, the Creator gets to know himself better, as it were, through his creation. The poem’s subsequent lines modify that theosophical implication. It turns out that – even if there had existed some original ontological bond between God and man – it was irredeemably severed once man had inhabited an epistemological world of his own with all its cognitive confines. This is how one could interpret the metaphor of plunging simultaneously into darkness and light. Isolating mankind from the original godhead (one, in this case, vaguely reminiscent of what the Valentinian Gnostics called the Pleroma⁵) resulted in the first cosmic dichotomy (light and darkness) which generated, in turn, all the others, more or less as in the Biblical version of creation. On a more remote associative plane, “plunging” into the depths of the human condition may connote a leap into the “physical,” “materialized” light or into the dark of ignorance.

From the lyric “Retreating Wind” we learn that creating mankind was an experiment that failed. Humans have failed to make the most of their God-given potential:

I gave you every gift,
 blue of the spring morning,
 time you didn’t know how to use –
 you wanted more, the one gift
 reserved for another creation.

Whatever you hoped,
 you will not find yourselves in the garden,
 among the growing plants.
 Your lives are not circular like theirs:

your lives are the bird’s flight
 which begins and ends in stillness –

which *begins* and *ends*, in form echoing
 this arc from the white birch
 to the apple tree.

(1992: 15)

The poem, thirteenth in the volume, substantially modifies the reader's expectations generated by "Wild Iris," the lyric opening the collection, in which the eponymous floral speaker claims to have survived its own death. The iris refers to its own demise as "that which you fear, being / a soul and unable / to speak" (1992: 1). The flower's diagnosis, apparently, is that man's inherent split into body and soul lies at the root of his spiritual ordeal, including man's inability to "remember / passage from the other world" (1992: 1). The poem seems to suggest, then, that all life is cyclical. Fourteen pages further into the volume, however, we are told that reincarnation is the plants' privilege; "Your lives are not circular like theirs" (1992: 15), God tells people. In this context, the seemingly matter-of-fact statement becomes a pun whose meanings can be either that humans will fail to reach the garden or that they will not be able to "find themselves" there, that is discover their true natural potential.

The garden – both the Biblical Eden and the one where the poet works alongside her husband (John is mentioned several times in the volume) constitutes the book's central metaphor. Glück makes the most of the symbolic potential of realistic details. The poet and her husband appear as modern embodiments of the archetypal couple. (More precisely, Glück revives the Biblical triangle of Adam, Eve and Yahwe.) It is, in Rosanna Warren's terms, a "classicizing gesture" (Warren 2008: 103).

It is somewhere in-between the two limits of human knowledge, that is God's and plants' perspectives, that the volume's "prayers" belong – a group of poems with the recurrent titles of "Matins" and "Vespers" (seven and ten lyrics, respectively). The deceptively pious and familiar titles herald poems that, in fact, have little in common with a traditionally understood prayer, though some of them do address God directly. (The associations with the morning or evening prayers in some Christian churches are only helpful in determining the time of day when the speaker expresses herself.)

Almost all the lyrics in this group feature some kind of charge against God, explicit or implicit. The Creator remains irritatingly silent, with the poet constantly bringing it up – sometimes in a tongue-in-cheek, sometimes in a deadly serious manner. "Matins" and "Vespers" function as ironic counterpoints to the lyrics whose speaker is God. Both parties have their grievances. From the human perspective, the distant deity appears to be emotionally changeable and volatile (and thus not exactly perfect) – an unpredictable Demiurge who has apparently created the world to appease his own unfathomable passions and longings. Glück's Demiurge no longer has the fundamental attribute of a fatherly God, namely permanence. This, incidentally, may be the interpretive key to all of Louise Glück's poetry – she evolves with the Creator.

4. Conclusion

The dynamics of spiritual growth may thus be the only “explanatory” metaphor a Louise Glück critic can come up with by way of accounting for the inconclusiveness of the poet’s spiritual stance. When it comes to Glück’s personal religion one can only say with a tolerable degree of certitude what it is *not*. Despite the recurrent Biblical imagery, it is not, then, any immediately identifiable Christian or Jewish denomination. If one were to look for parallels with pre-existing religious systems, the best candidate seems to be the aforementioned Valentinian Gnosticism. This claim, however, can only be substantiated through selective emphasis on *some* of the religious references in her poetry.

All things considered, it remains an open question which tradition of broadly-conceived Gnosis Glück’s poems allude to, and whether it is a single Gnostic school or the poet’s private religious syncretism. Some fundamental concepts, for instance the act of creation as a cosmic catastrophe (“the shattering of vessels” in the Kabbala), are common to both Gnostic and Jewish traditions. The metaphor of “freeing the sparks” through good deeds and acts of charity recurs in the teachings of the Polish Hassidim from Galicia. One might argue that, because of her Jewish origins, Glück draws her inspiration from Hassidic mysticism, what with her family coming from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. That, however, would be an arbitrary assumption, based more on the poet’s biography than on her poems, which – to repeat – feature only veiled references to selected Gnostic ideas.

Notes

- 1 In the poem “Lullaby” the mysterious speaker (possibly God) declares: “You must be taught to love me. Human beings must be taught to love / silence and darkness” (Glück 1992: 58).
- 2 The term panentheism is applied, for example, by Leonard M. Scigaj to his discussion of Wendell Berry’s ecological poetry (cf. Fox 1988, Scigaj 2002). Scigaj explains: “[Matthew] Fox calls this mystic perception of God’s animating energy suffusing all creation *panentheism*. Fox prefers *panentheism* to *pantheism*, because pantheism, heretical to Christians, robs God of transcendence by equating his essence with his material creation – hence ‘everything is God and God is everything.’ Adding the Greek *en* results in the acceptable assertion that ‘God is in everything and everything is in God’” (Scigaj 2002: 120–21).
- 3 Richard Howard’s phrase “familiar strangeness” (1971: 376), though applied by the critic in a different context and to a different poet, comes to mind when reading Louise Glück’s transpersonal lyrics.
- 4 Such texts bring to mind some poems on animals written by James Dickey, W. S. Merwin, or Gary Snyder. In Robert Bly’s words, “As a Dickey poem begins, we see a man sleeping in the suburbs dreaming he is a deer; it is possible this sleeper may be a deer dreaming it is a man” (1991: 164). Such shifts of perspective, often accompanied by a shift of agency from the human to the non-human, are also a trademark of Glück’s verse.
- 5 This, of course, is a far cry from the original doctrine of Valentinus. His Pleroma consisted of some thirty eons (the rough equivalents of the Hebrew *sefirot* in the Kabbala) whereas man was created by the lower angelic beings, not by the demiurge or, let alone, the Pleroma.

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PIOTR ZAZULA is a literary scholar, poet, and translator currently employed as Senior Lecturer at Vitelon Vocational College in Legnica, Poland. The author of two poetry volumes in Polish and numerous academic articles in English (published in Poland, Czech Republic, Germany and Austria), he obtained his Ph.D. in American literature from the University of Wrocław in 1997. In the years 1993-94 he was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. His academic interests include contemporary American poetry (especially ecopoetry), Translation Studies, and the cultures of the American Southwest. He is currently working on a bilingual (Polish and English) volume of verse and a book on Louise Glück's poetry.

Address: Dr Piotr Zazula, ul. Czajkowskiego 65/2, 51-171 Wrocław, Poland. [email: piotr.zazula@op.pl]

