

A Psychoanalytic Approach to Louise Glück's Blended Receptions of the Myths of Narcissus and Persephone in *Averno*

Un enfoque psicoanalítico de las recepciones combinadas de Louise Glück de los mitos de Narciso y Perséfone en *Averno*

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Abstract: In recent years, mythological retellings have garnered increasing acclaim. One such example is Louise Glück's book of poetry *Averno* (2006), in which she blends the myths of Narcissus and Persephone. In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, a narcissus serves as bait when Hades abducts Persephone. However, in Glück's contemporary rewriting, Persephone seeks to escape her authoritarian mother by embracing Hades, whose perspective is given in "A Myth of Devotion," but the ultimate outcome is that Persephone is controlled by both her mother and her husband. In the present paper, I shall first address the reception of the myths of Persephone and Narcissus in Glück's "A Myth of Innocence." Then, I shall analyse sexuality, trauma and marriage in "A Myth of Innocence" and "A Myth of Devotion" from a psychoanalytic perspective, while also exploring the motifs that occur in Glück's appropriation of the two myths in question.

Keywords: Louise Glück; *Averno*; Persephone; Narcissus; psychoanalysis.

Summary: Introduction. Classical Receptions. Psychoanalysis: Sexuality, Incest and Trauma. "A Myth of Innocence" and the Myths of Persephone and Narcissus. Incest and Trauma. Marriage as Metaphorical Death. Conclusions.

Resumen: En los últimos años, los relatos mitológicos han obtenido una aclamación cada vez mayor. Un ejemplo de ello es el poemario *Averno* (2006) de Louise Glück, en el que combina los mitos de Narciso y Perséfone. En el *Himno Homérico a Deméter*, un narciso sirve de cebo cuando Hades secuestra a Perséfone. Sin embargo, en la reescritura contemporánea de Glück, Perséfone busca escapar de su madre autoritaria abrazando a Hades, cuya perspectiva se da en “A Myth of Devotion,” pero el resultado final es que Perséfone está controlada tanto por su madre y como por su esposo. En el presente artículo, abordaré primero la recepción de los mitos de Perséfone y Narciso en “A Myth of Innocence” de Glück. Luego, analizaré la sexualidad, el trauma y el matrimonio en “A Myth of Innocence” y “A Myth of Devotion” desde una perspectiva psicoanalítica, explorando al mismo tiempo los temas en la apropiación de Glück de los dos mitos en cuestión.

Palabras clave: Louise Glück; *Averno*; Perséfone; Narciso; psicoanálisis.

Sumario: Introducción. Recepciones clásicas. Psicoanálisis: sexualidad, incesto y trauma. “A Myth of Innocence” y los mitos de Perséfone y Narciso. Incesto y trauma. El matrimonio como muerte metafórica. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed the rise of mythological retellings, with many authors addressing myths in their work. One such author is Louise Glück (1943–), an outstanding American poet who has written thirteen books of poetry, two of criticism, and one novel. This prominent author has received many awards, including the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1985, the Pulitzer Prize in 1993, the Bollingen Prize in 2001 and the National Book Award in 2014. She was Poet Laureate of the United States from 2003 to 2004 and received the 2020 Nobel Prize for poetry. In her work, she typically draws on several different literary traditions, such as theology (from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament), Greek mythology and fairy tales. Among her books of poetry containing vivid retellings of mythology are *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985), focusing on Achilles; *Meadowlands* (1996), dealing with the *Odyssey*; and *Vita Nova* (1999), addressing Orpheus. In addition, Glück’s poetry book *Averno* (2006) considers the Demeter and Persephone myth. As Isobel Hurst has explained, the poems in *Averno* “evaluate and interrogate the significance of love and death with a decided inclination towards the peace of the afterlife” (75).

Regarding Glück’s writing, Tanzina Halim, Rizwana Wahid and Shanjida Halim have aptly remarked that “the end of human life is one of the central themes of Glück’s poetry” (436). Meanwhile, Henri Cole has highlighted the plainness of Glück’s poetry, observing that she “is not a poet of elliptical fragmentation—she goes deeper. With her simple

vocabulary, dramatic juxtapositions, and subtle pacing, the poems seem to be more in conversation with Blake, Yeats, and Eliot" (98). Similarly, Glück appears strongly influenced by Sylvia Plath and the confessional style (MacGowan 159). As Robert Baker has contended, "Louise Glück is surely a confessional poet in some basic sense. She returns time and again to a series of wounding predicaments in her intimate life" (131), combining this with psychology and metaphysics (Bartczak 74). Indeed, autobiographical experiences form a constant theme in Glück's writing. From an early age, she felt controlled by her mother and constantly longed for her approval (Glück, *Proofs* 6). As a way of breaking free from this, she stopped eating to gain control over her body, although she notes that this enterprise was ultimately unsuccessful:

what I had thought of as an act of will, an act I was perfectly capable of controlling, of terminating, was not that; I realized that I had no control over this behavior at all . . . I understood that at some point I was going to die . . . I didn't want to die. Even then, dying seemed a pathetic metaphor for establishing a separation between myself and my mother. (Glück, *Proofs* 11)

I consider this quote imperative for an understanding of Persephone in "A Myth of Innocence," which appears in *Averno*.¹ Contrary to Glück, Persephone's strategy to free herself of her mother's control is to embrace Hades, the god of the dead. Glück states that "poems are autobiography, but divested of the trappings of chronology and comment, the metronomic alternation of anecdote and response" (Glück, *Proofs* 92). There is no doubt that Glück reflects her personal experience in her poetry in general and in this poem in particular.²

Previous studies of Glück's work have examined the myth of Demeter and Persephone in *Averno* in isolation (Spann; Azcuy, "Louise Glück's Twenty-First Century," "Persona, Trauma and Survival," "Louise Glück's Irenic Poems"; Hurst, "Love and Blackmail," "An Autumnal Underworld"; Frankel; Zhou) and in combination with the book's autobiographical dimension (Keniston, "Balm after Violence"; Brown;

¹ Glück's poem "Pomegranate," included in *The House on Marshland* (1975), was her first rewriting of the myth of Demeter and Persephone, but she returned to the same theme later, in four separate poems in *Averno* (2006): "Persephone the Wanderer," "A Myth of Innocence," "A Myth of Devotion" and "Persephone the Wanderer."

² See Morris 29–30; and Pereira 142–59 for Glück's poetical motifs. For the sake of brevity, my analysis will focus on "A Myth of Innocence" and "A Myth of Devotion."

El Bakary), or have explored the reception of the myth of Demeter in combination with psychoanalytic themes (Wong; Gosmann; Yezzi; Cooke), inviting a consideration of narcissism and trauma in Glück's writing (Morris; Keniston, "Balm after Violence"; Sastri; Bartczak). Other studies have concentrated solely on autobiography without considering the myth of Demeter and Persephone (Chiasson), while still others have focused on a particular poem, namely "October," in reference to the 9/11 attacks (Keniston, "Balm after Violence," "Not Needed"; Kočan Šalamon). None, however, have analysed the myth of Narcissus in association with "A Myth of Innocence," encouraging me to fill this gap.

Unlike previous studies, my research suggests that the myths of Narcissus and Persephone are pivotal in Glück's rewriting. By depicting Demeter as an authoritarian mother and Persephone as wanting to escape from her control, Glück successfully blends the myths of Persephone and Narcissus.³ It is thanks to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* that these two myths dovetail so neatly because it is there that the tale first appears of the narcissus flower used as bait to lure Persephone to marry Hades,⁴ and now in Glück's appropriation of the myth the abduction is deployed as a metaphor for marriage. In this case, Narcissus' story is embedded in Glück's retelling of the myth of Persephone.⁵ Therefore, in this study, I shall explore how the myths of Persephone and Narcissus are blended in Glück's "A Myth of Innocence." In addition, I shall analyse sexuality, trauma and marriage from a psychoanalytic standpoint in both "A Myth of Innocence" and "A Myth of Devotion." Finally, I shall conclude by

³ On Narcissus, see Favre 1071–75; and Grafton et al. 620. On Persephone, see Doudoumis 1539–46; and Grafton et al. 254–55.

⁴ Glück's *The Wild Iris* (1992) lends a voice to various kinds of flowers, demonstrating her extensive knowledge of these. Glück constantly refers to the idea of a doppelgänger, e.g., Narcissus and his reflection in the pool, or the Demeter-Persephone duality (see Powel 253). The myths of Narcissus and Persephone are two independent stories, but Glück justifies this connection through Narcissus, who metamorphoses into the narcissus flower.

⁵ Glück has not written about the myth of Narcissus in her poetry, but in *American Originality* (2017) she addressed the mythical story and correlated it to psychoanalysis and literature; see Glück, *American* 8–22. Moreover, the contemporary psychoanalytic concept of narcissism is present throughout Glück's poetry. This interest in psychoanalysis started with her anorexia nervosa (Glück, *Proofs* 10–12). On the anorexic experience in Glück's poetry, see Vembar.

discussing how Glück revisits the classical tradition in her portrayal of these mythological characters in both poems.

1. CLASSICAL RECEPTIONS

Reception studies explore “on the two-way relationship between the source text or culture and the new work and receiving culture” (Hardwick 4). Anastasia Bakogianni has observed that “Classical reception focuses on the way in which the classical world is received in subsequent centuries and in particular on those aspects of the classical sources that are altered, marginalized, or neglected” (97). Recently, reception studies related to Greek and Roman texts have aroused increasing research interest, raising the profile of classical receptions (Hardwick and Stray 33–34).

Reception studies encompass a variety of disciplines (Brockliss 11) and form part of the classical tradition which has “studied the transmission and dissemination of classical culture through the ages, usually with the emphasis on the influence of classical writers, artists and thinkers on subsequent intellectual movements and individual works” (Hardwick 2). In fact, according to Maarten De Pourcq, classicists use the classical tradition as a shield to protect their study of the ancient sources (222).

As for the reception of the myth of Demeter and Persephone, Glück seems to draw on various sources. The first is the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, which tells the story of Persephone (Foley 28–64), who was abducted by Hades while gathering flowers in a meadow (*HDem.* 1–21). Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, cannot find her daughter and in despair, stops plants from growing.⁶ Zeus then sends Hermes to the underworld to bring Persephone back (*HDem.* 30–341). Once in the world of the dead, Hermes explains the situation to Hades, who agrees to let Persephone go, but before she leaves, he informs her of the honours she will acquire as his wife and puts a pomegranate seed into her mouth (*HDem.* 342–74). Persephone and Demeter are reunited, and the goddess of the harvest restores the vegetation. However, because of the pomegranate seed, Zeus decides Persephone will spend one-third of the year with Hades and two-thirds with her mother and the other Olympian gods and goddesses (*HDem.* 384–452). In the two Ovidian versions⁷ and

⁶ See Brunel and Karakostas 515–20.

⁷ Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (5.341–641) and Ovid's *Fasti* (4.393–614).

D'Aulaires' *Book of Greek Myths* (1962),⁸ Persephone reaches for the pomegranate, from which she eats a few seeds and thus dooms herself to spend part of the year in the underworld and the other part with her mother.

In Glück's *Averno*, "Persephone the Wanderer" (I) follows the ancient sources, encapsulating Demeter's reaction to the loss of her daughter—stopping all vegetation from growing—as "the goddess of the earth / punishes the earth" (2–4) and "It is snowing on earth" (46), where winter echoes Demeter's coldness and pain while Persephone "is lying in the bed of Hades" (51). Persephone's marriage to Hades transforms her from a maiden—Koré—to the goddess of the underworld—Persephone. Thus, in "A Myth of Innocence," "The girl who disappears from the pool / will never return. A woman will return, / looking for the girl she was." (23–25), while in "A Myth of Devotion," Hades tells Persephone, "*you're dead, nothing can hurt you*" (46), summarising Persephone's situation as goddess of the underworld. This is further explained in "Persephone the Wanderer" (II), where "Persephone / is dead. She dies, her mother grieves—" (1–2), but "if Zeus will get her back, / winter will end" (73–74). However, Zeus commands Persephone to spend one-third of the year with Hades and two-thirds with her mother.

2. PSYCHOANALYSIS: SEXUALITY, INCEST AND TRAUMA

The discipline of psychoanalytic studies emerged in the nineteenth century. Among the central concepts in psychoanalysis are sexuality, incest and trauma. Sexuality is indeed very present not only in our everyday life but also in literature; as Jeffrey Weeks has soberly remarked, "sexuality is not a given, it is a product of negotiation, struggle and human agency" (19). In this paper, sexuality will be regarded as a natural impulse regulated by social convention when exploring "concepts such as repression, sexual drives and the libido" (Jackson and Scott 5). However, certain sexual practices encourage trauma, which as Caroline Garland has explained:

is a kind of wound. When we call an event traumatic, we are borrowing the word from the Greek where it refers to a piercing of the skin, a breaking of the bodily envelope. In physical medicine it denotes damage to tissue. Freud

⁸ In an interview, Glück explicitly cites D'Aulaires' *Book of Greek Myths* (1967) as her source of information about the Demeter and Persephone myth (Gosmann 220).

(*A General Introduction*) used the word metaphorically to emphasise how the mind too can be pierced and wounded by events . . . (25)

Although there are many possible traumatic events, not all traumas are the same: some are more devastating than others (Garland 26). Such is the case of incest, which entails major trauma (Jacobs 104). Incest, therefore, is one of the most traumatic sexual practices, and it generates what is known as incest trauma. This conceptualisation resonates with Freud's understanding of primary narcissism. As Freud explained, "a human being has originally two sexual objects—himself and the woman who nurses him—and in doing so we are postulating a primary narcissism in everyone, which may in some cases manifest itself [*sic*] in a dominating fashion in his object-choice" ("On Narcissism" 88). Primary narcissism seems to be the starting point of sexual attraction, leading to Freud's understanding of the Oedipal complex, which is also related to trauma and may lead to incest (Jung et al. 73). Moreover, Freud developed the Oedipal trauma theory, opening "the door to serious consideration of incest as a problem for psychoanalytic investigation and treatment" (Klett and Rachman 46).

Furthermore, by uniting mythology and psychoanalysis, this theory endowed Oedipus with a new psychoanalytic association (Bowlby 806). However, it also generated the dilemma of whether the child is to blame for the incestuous sexual act. As Susan Klett and Arnold William Rachman have noted:

Influenced by the Oedipal complex, analysts, parents, authorities, and social institutions suggested that *the child's sexuality seduced the adult. In actuality, it is the adult's sexuality that is at issue* . . . the child partner is extremely vulnerable, in a position of unequal power, status, and control, the adult seducer does not have to cope with the difficulties of an adult relationship. He/she literally seduces an innocent. (129)

Thus, sexuality, primary narcissism, incest and trauma are interrelated. All of them can be applied to Persephone because she encounters them all simultaneously when gazing at herself in Glück's pool, where Hades seizes her.

3. “A MYTH OF INNOCENCE” AND THE MYTHS OF PERSEPHONE AND NARCISSUS

Persephone “was the daughter of Demeter, goddess of the harvest, and her mother loved her so dearly she could not bear to have her out of her sight. When Demeter sat on her golden throne, her daughter was always on her lap; when she went down to earth to look after her trees and fields, she took Persephone” (D’Aulaire and D’Aulaire 58). When Persephone was first abducted in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, “she still hoped / to see her dear mother” (*HDem.* 35–36, Foley 4). Yet, as Valerie Estelle Frankel has remarked, in contrast to the original myth, “A Myth of Innocence,” “sees Persephone seeking an escape from life so close to her mother that she has no identity of her own” (43). Hence, Persephone is no longer presented as someone emotionally attached to her mother, but rather as a child suffocated by her mother’s control:

One summer she goes into the field as usual
stopping for a bit at the pool where she often
looks at herself, to see
if she detects any changes. She sees
the same person, the horrible mantle
of daughterliness still clinging to her. (1–6)

Glück is playing here with different allusions. Firstly, it is summer, which indicates that Persephone is under her mother’s care because summer falls within the part of the year when Persephone is on earth. This allusion may have been taken from D’Aulaires’ *Book of Greek Myths*, where only winter represents the time she is away from her mother (D’Aulaire & D’Aulaire 62). Secondly, the pool where Persephone is gazing at herself represents the first allusion to Narcissus.

Much more implicitly, “A Myth of Innocence” depicts the moment in the myth of Narcissus when Echo falls in love with him, but he rejects her love as he had done before with the many others that had become enamoured of him. Therefore, condemned to love his own image, Narcissus dies after falling in the pool when trying to reach his reflection (*Met.* 3.339–510). Nevertheless, in D’Aulaires’ *Book of Greek Myths*,

unaware that he had fallen in love with his own reflection,⁹ Narcissus “sat smiling at himself, forgetting to eat, forgetting to drink, until he wasted away and died” (D’Aulaire and D’Aulaire 92). Narcissus gazes at his reflection in the pool¹⁰ in the same way that Persephone does in “A Myth of Innocence” when she stops “for a bit at the pool where she often / looks at herself” (2–3). However, Persephone sees “the horrible mantle / of daughterliness still clinging to her” (5–6), whereas Narcissus becomes besotted with his mesmerising reflection. Meanwhile, in the *Metamorphoses*, once Narcissus realises that the image he has fallen in love with is his own, he understands the enormity of his curse and prays to escape from his body (*Met.* 3.437–473), as Persephone does in “A Myth of Innocence” (30–31), both thus longing for death. Another aspect that unites Persephone and Narcissus is the fact that both undergo change. The former becomes the goddess of the underworld and the latter a narcissus flower.

Glück’s allusion to Narcissus is more than justified as “Ovid’s Narcissus appears to be the psychoanalytical subject par excellence—split into two, desiring in vain, impelled by a desire born of lack, captivated by an image he can never possess. What is more, he knows how it works. He has been demystified” (Vallury 82). The moment Narcissus becomes besotted with his own image, he is doomed to failure as he will never attain his love object. However, as Victoria Graham-Fuller and Robinson Hazel have observed, the myth of Narcissus represents much more than that because the “interaction of Narcissus and Echo is set during adolescence, during which a young person begins to emerge from childhood dependence, through defiance, curiosity and experimentation, towards a relatively established adult identity” (10).

I suggest that to leave childhood behind is exactly what Persephone seeks. Moreover, the fact that Persephone wants to see “if she detects any changes” (4) indicates that she is impatient for change, longing to leave her body and become a woman who is no longer attached to her mother; however, she only sees “the same person” (5), a child who is still under her mother’s care. The mantle that clings to her is a reminder of Demeter, who tears her veil in grief at her daughter’s loss (*HDem.* 40, Foley 4). Nonetheless, in Glück’s rewriting of the myth, rather than being proof of

⁹ See also Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 421, on how Narcissus falls in love with his reflection which for him is the “other.”

¹⁰ See Ballesteros González 50.

healthy mother love, the mantle is suffocating because it recalls Demeter's control over Persephone, as demonstrated by the use of the adjective "horrible" to define "mantle" (5). Persephone finds her condition as a daughter dreadful, and at this point, everything surrounding Persephone is an expression of Demeter's authority:

The sun seems, in the water, very close.
That's my uncle spying again, she thinks—
everything in nature is in some way her relative.
I am never alone, she thinks,
turning the thought into a prayer.
Then death appears, like the answer to a prayer. (7–12)

First, Persephone feels constantly watched by everything in nature: even the sun, Helios, is spying on her. This is consistent with the Homeric version, as Helios was the only eyewitness to Persephone's abduction. Thus, the narrator focuses our attention on Persephone's desire to escape her mother's control. She feels suffocated by her mother's authority and everything around her reminds her of her mother—the mother goddess and the goddess of the harvest and vegetation. There is nowhere she can go without feeling observed. The emphasis on the way Persephone feels is seen in her address to the reader, which is in italics. Willing to try anything to escape her current life, she places all her hopes in a prayer.

Persephone experiences the total opposite of what Freud calls "primary narcissism."¹¹ She despises her reflection in the pool, whereas Narcissus directs the libido towards his own body. Narcissus attains death because he is blinded by his own beauty, but Persephone seeks a transformation that will allow her to escape her condition as a daughter. Whether as a trap, as in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Katz 223 in Foley), or as a representation of untimely death, the narcissus flower is repeatedly associated with Persephone and her abduction. Persephone's prayer at the pool implies death, albeit not a physical one but rather marriage with the god of the dead:

No one understands anymore
how beautiful he was. But Persephone remembers.
Also that he embraced her, right there,

¹¹ See Fonagy et al. 20; Solan 8.

with her uncle watching. She remembers
sunlight flashing on his bare arms.

This is the last moment she remembers clearly.
Then the dark god bore her away.

She also remembers, less clearly,
the chilling insight that from this moment
she couldn't live without him again. (13–22)

On seeing the result of her prayer, Persephone is struck by the beauty of the god of the dead, and while Helios continues to watch, Hades embraces her before carrying her away. The fact that she remembers these events indicates that she was initially satisfied with the outcome of her prayer. However, from this point on, her memory of the events is less clear. Dependency has been newly established, and Persephone can no longer live without Hades. Here, she is taken by the god of the dead because of the hate she feels towards her reflection in the pool.

In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Persephone was trapped by a narcissus, a beautiful flower which the Earth had grown as a bait on Zeus' command (*HDem.* 8–9, Foley 2) and her action in bending to pluck the narcissus hints at her readiness to mature (Suter 22), as she “reaches to pick it on an impulse of her own nature” (Suter 11). In the ancient sources, Persephone displays many characteristics, as Holly Virginia Blackford has noted:

She is of ambiguous age but young and human enough to cry as much over her spilt flowers as over her abduction (in Ovid's re-working of the *Hymn*); innocent and curious enough to reach for a lovely narcissus without realizing the consequences of that action; vulnerable and scared enough to cry out for her mother as she exchanges her life as a maiden for the awesome powers of underworld queen. (21)

Blackford adds that Persephone “is a powerful evocation of child development, which makes her a crucial figure for the scholar of girls' literature to pursue” (21). Moreover, “the myth specifies that the perpetuation of natural and cultural orders depends upon this girl's development from the world of mother to a world beyond maternal authority” (Blackford 21), which implies a transition from childhood to

adulthood, as “the girl who disappears from the pool / will never return. A woman will return, / looking for the girl she was” (23–25). Her search for the girl she once was demonstrates her regret. As Iman El Bakary has observed, the speaker is lamenting the loss of innocence (131), and according to Cyril Wong Yit Mun, “Persephone has discovered her own loss of innocence” (83). Once she has become goddess of the underworld, she begins to question herself and wonders if this was what she really wanted. Demeter’s emotional neediness impels her to encroach on her daughter’s freedom. As a result, Persephone wants to die because she feels drained by the impossibility of feeling whole, and the emptiness that she carries with her initially makes her see death as a relief. Thus, unable to make a sound judgement, Persephone reaches for the god of the dead, but following her disappointment on finding the same lack of freedom with Hades as she had experienced with her mother, she questions her choice and wonders whether she was abducted or not. At this point, Persephone feels a void because of her mother and her husband’s control.

4. INCEST AND TRAUMA

Regarding Glück’s appropriation of the myth of Demeter and Persephone from a contemporary point of view, Persephone’s implicit sexual¹² encounter with Hades is something that Freud would categorise as a traumatic event. Persephone realises that she wishes to escape her mother but is unaware of what this implies. It was when Persephone desired a change that Hades appeared, reflecting a dynamic that Giovanna Ambrosio has described as follows:

from the psychoanalytic standpoint it is sometimes difficult to establish the limits between active and passive, abuser and victim, seducer and seduced, since the bond that ties them together is an entangled web of projective and introjective identifications, in which an infinite series of mirror reflections is far too complex to be differentiated. (56)

Moreover, “we need to emphasize that it is precisely this entangled web that the incestuous genitor weaves, using a kind of hypnotic power to immobilize the child in the snares of the abuse” (Ambrosio 56). On the one hand, Persephone is presented as active in that she attempts to escape her

¹² See Person et al. 136–37 on the association of incest and narcissism.

body in order to break free of her mother's authority, and on the other, as passive, because she is oblivious to her abduction. Notwithstanding, there is a fine line between wanting to die and being seized by the god of the dead. In Persephone's case, sexual contact with her uncle transforms her from maiden to goddess of the underworld. In Glück's rewriting of the myth, by spiriting Persephone away, Hades not only prevents her from dying but also from sharing Narcissus' fate by forcing her to live on earth and in the underworld, unable to die. The fact that Persephone is presented as unaware of what has happened to her and blind to the truth indicates that Hades has manipulated her so successfully that she is unable to determine if this was truly what she really wanted:

She stands by the pool saying, from time to time,
I was abducted, but it sounds
 wrong to her, nothing like what she felt.
 Then she says, *I was not abducted*.
 Then she says, *I offered myself, I wanted*
to escape my body. Even, sometimes,
I willed this. (26–32)

Persephone initially states that she was abducted, indicating that she did not want to go with Hades, but she subsequently corrects herself and asserts that she was not abducted, implying that she had acted of her own volition, in order to escape her mother. Deeply baffled, she cannot discern reality from fantasy. In this context, Hades could be associated with a perverse seducer.

In ancient mythologies—Greek, Egyptian and Sumerian—all relations are incestuous since all beings proceed from one and the same god. It is thus a mistake to interpret myths naturalistically. However, Glück's appropriation of the myth of Demeter and Persephone is a contemporary book of poetry. Hence, viewing *Averno* through a contemporary lens, Hades' incestuous relationship with his niece can be explained by the Electra complex,¹³ where the daughter is in love with her father and rejects her mother; in fact, "when the girl turns away from her mother, she also makes over to her father her introduction into sexual life"

¹³ See Jung et al. 72–73 on the Electra complex.

(Freud, “Female Sexuality” 238).¹⁴ Another indication of Persephone’s trauma is her confusion over whether or not she has been abducted, which echoes Klett’s and Rachman’s view that emotional and intellectual confusion is one of the mechanisms which enable a child to cope with incest trauma (89–90). Moreover, in “the obnoxious type of incest, the more vulnerable participant, whose consent has at most been minimal, experiences the pleasant effects of seduction together with subsequent confusion” (Ambrosio 107). This explains Persephone’s bewilderment.

All the different nouns—
 she says them in rotation.
Death, husband, god, stranger.
 Everything sounds so simple, so conventional.
 I must have been, she thinks, a simple girl.

She can’t remember herself as that person
 but she keeps thinking the pool will remember
 and explain to her the meaning of her prayer
 so she can understand
 whether it was answered or not. (35–44)

The nouns Persephone utters in rotation summarise all that has happened to her: the “death” she desired, the “husband” she obtained instead when Hades carried her away, and the “god” of the underworld who, although related, was a “stranger” to her. According to Reena Sastri, these nouns represent all Persephone’s traumas (553). When Hades abducts Persephone in “A Myth of Devotion,” he appears to distance himself from his abusive act by justifying his actions and assuming that everyone desires love:

Gradually, he thought, he’d introduce the night,
 first as the shadows of fluttering leaves.
 Then moon, then stars. Then no moon, no stars.
 Let Persephone get used to it slowly.
 In the end, he thought, she’d find it comforting.

¹⁴ See Jacobs 51 on the image of the father as a sexual seducer, although I consider that Hades is here the one taking Zeus’ place.

A replica of earth
except there was love here.
Doesn't everyone want love? (8–15)

By introducing change gradually, Hades manipulates Persephone to prevent her from immediately perceiving the truth, fooling her with his acts of gaslighting. Furthermore, as Klett and Rachman have observed, perpetrators also feel confusion as they use “denial and dissociation to distance themselves from the abusive act” (89–90). Thus, in justifying his actions, Hades only considers his own desires, rendering him incapable of empathy. Persephone, meanwhile, is trapped in a vicious circle, as explained by Klett and Rachman:

An individual will have internal objects and split-off parts of the self that exist as pathologically motivational systems in which the original trauma is repeatedly re-enacted and replayed . . . Freud's ego psychology did emphasize the attempt to achieve mastery over the earlier trauma by repeating it, but missed the need to remain attached to earlier abusive objects, despite conscious aversion to those objects. (94)

In parallel, Zeus decrees that she must spend part of the year with Demeter and the remaining part with Hades, with the result that Persephone is forced to return each year to the original abusive object.

5. MARRIAGE AND METAPHORIC DEATH

The title of the poem “A Myth of Devotion” suggests that devotion is a myth, and indeed its opening lines portray a calculating Hades who “decided” to love Persephone:

When Hades decided he loved this girl
he built for her a duplicate of earth,
everything the same, down to the meadow,
but with a bed added. (1–4)

His addition of a bed to this “duplicate of earth” reveals not only the true purpose of the abduction, but also Louise Glück's distinctive perception of marriage. Each of her books of poetry depicts marriage as a death of the self, as is further demonstrated in “A Myth of Innocence,” where Persephone cedes part of herself to Hades. Persephone sees death as an

escape and wants to share the same fate as Narcissus, but Hades reminds her of her immortality. In my opinion, she is doomed to relinquish part of who she is—the earlier version of herself—for the sake of who is now her husband. The girl must become a woman. In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, the narcissus is described as a “lovely toy” (Foley 2), which Ann Suter has contended is a reminder “of the toys that brides dedicate to Artemis on the eve of their weddings. Here, Persephone is giving up her childhood, her narcissus, her toy. *Athurma* is a rare word, occurring only six times in archaic epic” (56).

In “A Myth of Devotion,” Hades selfishly makes Persephone his wife, but he fails to consider all that becoming his wife entails:

That’s what he felt, the lord of darkness,
 looking at the world he had
 constructed for Persephone. It never crossed his mind
 that there’d be no more smelling here,
 certainly no more eating.

Guilt? Terror? The fear of love?
 These things he couldn’t imagine;
 no lover ever imagines them. (29–36)

Hades neither cares about Persephone nor considers her feelings because she is only the desired object, nothing more. He refuses to contemplate either his own guilt or the guilt that Persephone will feel because she believes herself to be responsible for her abduction. Similarly, he ignores both the terror that she will feel at being with the lord of darkness and her fear of love, since her route to marriage was abduction, which will always render “love” terrifying to her. Stalking, abducting and manipulating Persephone is how Hades makes her his wife. Love, here, seems to be a lie:

A soft light rising above the level meadow,
 behind the bed. He takes her in his arms.
 He wants to say *I love you, nothing can hurt you*

but he thinks
 this is a lie, so he says in the end
you're dead, nothing can hurt you
 which seems to him
 a more promising beginning, more true. (41–48)

Hades almost comes close to feeling guilty about lying to Persephone, which is ironic as his abduction of her had been carefully calculated from the moment he carried her away. Therefore, pretending to care about Persephone is only further proof of Hades' self-exonerating discourse, and is the reason why Persephone subsequently questions her perception of events. However, Hades forces Persephone to rely on him to determine what happened and what did not, and his manipulation works, as is best illustrated when Persephone returns to the pool where she was abducted in an attempt to find answers. There, after a moment of confusion, she realises that she was the one responsible for what had happened to her.¹⁵ Here, marriage seems to represent the death of the self and Persephone's path towards resignation and trauma (Morris 102), trauma she will never be able to overcome, as she is doomed to repeat the same cycle.

It seems to me that this poem could be a metaphorical representation of marriage. First, Persephone wants to escape her home and her mother's authority. Then, just as in the original myth, she is lured by Hades, and as soon as she is distracted, he carries her away, making her his wife. Persephone desired a change, but her new circumstances are nothing like what she had expected. She is trapped and has no way of escaping her new situation. As Freud remarks, "Marriage brings fresh sexual traumas. It is surprising that the wedding night does not have pathogenic effects more frequently, since unfortunately what it involves is so often not an erotic seduction but a violation" (*Studies on Hysteria* 141). Freud's understanding sheds light on the traumatic side of Persephone's marriage. Manipulating someone into intimacy encourages the awakening of new traumas, confusing the victims and leading them to wonder if this was truly

¹⁵ See Jordan 62 for further understanding of self-attributed blame.

what they wanted. This alludes strongly to sexual assault, which furthers Persephone's trauma.

CONCLUSIONS

Louise Glück finds a way to merge the myths of Narcissus and Persephone by establishing a correlation between both tales. The first hint of this association is the new locus Glück gives to the story of Persephone. Unlike the ancient myth, she has Persephone observing herself in a pool as Narcissus did. Both maiden and adolescent see an image in the pool that draws their attention. The former is horrified by her condition as a daughter because it reminds her of Demeter's authoritarian approach to motherhood, while the latter is spellbound by what he sees. As a result, Persephone feels compelled to escape her body in order to throw off the shackles of her mother's control, and Narcissus wishes for the same thing, to free himself from the curse of having fallen in love with his own image.

In Glück's contemporary appropriation, Hades is portrayed as a stalker who spies on Persephone, waiting for the right moment to carry her off. Taking advantage of Persephone's prayer, Hades appears and takes her away, leaving her confused and making her wonder whether death was what she really wanted. I contend that the confusion she experiences indicates the degree of trauma she undergoes. She is traumatised both by her mother's control and by her marriage to Hades. Ultimately, she is possessed for part of the year by Demeter and for the remaining part by Hades, which results in her emotional devastation. When Persephone wonders whether or not her prayer was answered, we perceive her sense of deception as she discovers that marriage is nothing but a trap. Persephone is stuck in a state somewhere between physical life and mental death, unable to overcome her limitations as she will never be able to develop a strong sense of self because of the power Demeter and Hades hold over her.

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