

 Contemporary
Literary Criticism

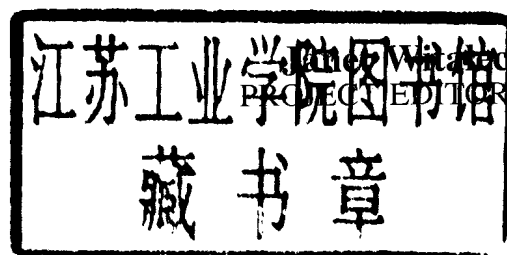
CLC

160

Volume 160

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by the Gale Group, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967), 211-51; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 223-26.

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Louise Glück

1943-

(Full name Louise Elizabeth Glück) American poet and essayist.

The following entry presents an overview of Glück's career through 2001. For further information on her life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 7, 22, 44, and 81.

INTRODUCTION

Glück is an award-winning poet whose verse utilizes brevity and sparseness, often incorporating archetypes and mythical characters into contemporary situations. Her poetry frequently employs elements from ancient myths as a tool to comment on and inform modern dilemmas. Though the use of myth dominates her later poetry, Glück is a versatile poet who consistently challenges her own forms and the genre of poetry as well. Glück was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1993 for her collection *Wild Iris* (1992).

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Glück was born in New York City on April 22, 1943, to a Wellesley-educated mother and a father who was a first-generation American businessman of Hungarian descent. As a teenager, Glück struggled with the eating disorder anorexia nervosa, an experience that would later be reflected in her work. Due to the disorder, Glück's formal education was interrupted in her last year of high school when she began a seven-year course of psychoanalysis. She enrolled at Sarah Lawrence College in 1962, and later attended Columbia University from 1963 to 1968. At Columbia, she participated in a two-year poetry workshop with Dr. Léonie Adams. Glück went on to study for four years with renowned poet Stanley Kunitz, who became a long-term mentor and who had a profound influence on her work. She has taught at several universities including Columbia University at New York, the University of Iowa, University of California at Berkeley, and Brandeis University. In addition to her Pulitzer Prize, Glück has won a number of awards, including the Academy of American Poets Prize in 1967, the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry in 1985 for *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985), and the 1995 PEN/Martha Albrand Award for First Nonfiction for *Proofs and Theories* (1994).

MAJOR WORKS

Glück's first poetry collection, *Firstborn*, was published in 1968, when she was twenty-five years old. The poems, which stylistically build on the works of the first confes-



sional poets, explore the role of women in society, at times expressing negativity and even hostility toward women and womanhood in general. The structure of the poems—lines with few stresses and blatant declarations—parallels this sense of anger. *The House on Marshland* (1975) saw Glück distancing herself from the confessional mode and developing a more distinct poetic voice. This voice achieves a wider range in *Descending Figure* (1980), a collection that examines a variety of issues including anorexia and the desire to create poetry. This work continues to feature Glück's examination of common human themes through a deceptively simple language, but her use of extended poem sequences rather than individual lyrics allows her to sustain more complex emotional and intellectual engagement with her topics. For example, in *Descending Figure*'s poem sequence "The Garden," Glück painstakingly parallels her own individual experience with the Garden of Eden story from the Book of Genesis. *The Triumph of Achilles*, a collection of eight poetry sequences, reflects the more mature poetic sensibility that Glück developed in *Descending Figure*. She again employs clas-

sical myths and the Bible as thematic material, using them to provide the metaphorical basis of the poems rather than relying heavily on imagery to convey meaning. *Achilles* also demonstrates an expansion of Glück's poetic line; the resulting language is similar to common speech, but also reflects meticulous attention to such poetic concerns as rhythm, alliteration, repetition, off-rhyme, and lineation. The sparse verbiage of the collection combined with the sentence-like structure of her lines marks a stylistic break from her earlier works. In *Ararat* (1990), her first attempt at a book-length sequence, Glück addresses the death of her father and the implications that his death held for the other members of the family, including her mother and sister. These poems are set in Long Island, New York, and utilize a chant-like rhythm as they examine the subject of familial romance. The Pulitzer Prize-winning *Wild Iris*—a collection that was strongly influenced by poet Simone Weil—represents a turning point in Glück's career. With subtle references to the high modernists, *Wild Iris* boldly combines a dialogic poetic form with anthropomorphism. These poems, set among a lush garden, establish a range of individual voices for flowers, which alternate with the poet-gardener's voice and with the voice of a gardener-god. These elements combine to address the landscape of the poet-gardener's marriage and other issues related to her existence, using symbolism, multivocality, and dramatic personae to convey their themes. *Proofs and Theories* is a collection of essays that explores Glück's personal life, including her creative process and her writing methods. In addition, she also examines other poets including John Keats, John Milton, Wallace Stevens, and George Oppen. Glück returns to her focus on the mythological in *Meadowlands* (1996), where she rewrites the Odyssey myth by humanizing Odysseus and Penelope, paralleling their relationship with that of an ordinary contemporary couple. The poems appropriate archetypes in order to illuminate the collapse of a marriage. Using humor and irony, the collection proffers a grim view of romantic love's sustainability. With *Vita Nova* (1999), Glück constructs a mythic narrative about everlasting fidelity by rewriting the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Written after Glück's years as a wife and mother, the poems seek to reinterpret the Orpheus myth and, at the same time, make sense of Glück's newfound sense of solitude. The poems in *Vita Nova*, often compared with those in *Meadowlands*, focus on a single speaker who vocalizes different perspectives and explores human faithlessness. *The Seven Ages* (2001) addresses themes such as memory, ideas of loss, and aging. The poems display a detached tone and dark humor that have become recurring elements in Glück's writing.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

From the publication of *Firstborn*, Glück has been recognized as a significant poetic voice, though her earlier poems have been criticized for being derivative of the confessional poets Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton. It was not until the publication of *The House on*

Marshland and subsequent volumes that her unique abilities with the lyric form were more widely acknowledged and praised. Frequently, commentators have lauded Glück's use of mythic material, especially the unique way in which she retraces the patterns of these archetypal stories through an individual consciousness. Likewise, her sparse writing style and emotionally removed tone have received considerable attention. Critics such as Elizabeth Dodd have asserted that using "clever metrics" enables Glück to create sonnet-like poems and ballad-like stanzas and to mirror and comment on the themes in her work. Glück has drawn the attention of many feminist critics who have been interested in her treatment of gender roles and the identities and actions of the women in her poems. Some have criticized her negative portrayals of female experience while others have argued that Glück's work considers artistic expression and female sexuality to be opposing forces. Other critics, in contrast, have viewed her work as a direct and necessary feminist response to male-dominated culture. Glück's evolving style has also become the subject of much critical commentary. While some observers have disapproved of Glück's trend toward longer and more involved poem sequences, most reviewers have praised her efforts in this direction, especially the book-length works *Ararat*, *The Wild Iris*, and *Meadowlands*. The latter two, particularly, have been viewed as significant, not only for their interrelated poems, but for their departures from the poet's perceived style—*The Wild Iris* for employing the conceit of speaking flowers and *Meadowlands* for displaying ironic humor in place of the grim tone Glück typically used in other works.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Firstborn (poetry) 1968
The House on Marshland (poetry) 1975
Descending Figure (poetry) 1980
The Triumph of Achilles (poetry) 1985
Ararat (poetry) 1990
The Wild Iris (poetry) 1992
Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry (essays) 1994
Meadowlands (poetry) 1996
Vita Nova (poetry) 1999
The Seven Ages (poetry) 2001

CRITICISM

Burton Raffel (review date spring 1988)

SOURCE: Raffel, Burton. "The Poetry of Louise Glück." *Literary Review* 31, no. 3 (spring 1988): 261–73.

[In the following review, Raffel discusses the poetry in *Firstborn*, *The House on Marshland*, *Descending Figure*, and *The Triumph of Achilles*, focusing on technique and structure.]

Born in 1943, Louise Glück has published four volumes of poetry: *Firstborn* (1968), *The House on Marshland* (1975), *Descending Figure* (1980), and *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985). She has won prizes and awards; she is reasonably well-known. But the kind of acclaim I believe she deserves has not come to her. She is not yet quite the poet she is capable of being. In particular, her last book represents a severe falling off (though the Poetry Society of America gave it the 1985 Melville Cane Award and The National Book Critics Circle gave it its 1986 poetry prize: I do not pretend to infallibility). But the toughness, complexity and, at its best, quite incredible insight and hard, tested truth of her poetry, as well as its masterfully lyric sweep, make her, at the least, one of the most interesting poets working today. Her work needs to be much more fully and widely read, and thought about, and discussed.

Firstborn, obliquely dedicated to Stanley Kunitz, with whom Glück had been studying ("to my teacher"), is rich in promise. The poems are strong, well put-together, and, as might be expected from a poet in her early twenties, both faintly derivative and not yet fully individual. "Southward floated over / The vicious little houses, down / The land." One thinks immediately, and properly, of early Robert Lowell. But there is a clarity, and a complex lyricism, even in these early poems, which mark the young Louise Glück as a poet of more than casual promise. "We had codes / In our house. Like / Locks; they said / We never lock / Our door to you. / And never did." Like her early mentor, Kunitz, Glück is not prepared to sell out a poem for the sake of an effect (as Lowell alas often did). In poems like this she exhibits a conscientiousness, a concern for her craft, and a determined non-pretentiousness; stout bulwarks upon which to build.

And there are poems in *Firstborn* that, for all their indebtednesses, for all their youthful excesses, also transcend both influences and juvenilities and flow clear and strong to a wonderfully inexorable end:

"Memo from the Cave"

O love, you airtight bird,
My mouse-brown
Alibis hang upside-down
Above the pegboard
With its tangled pots
I don't have chickens for;
My lies are crawling on the floor
Like families but their larvae will not
Leave this nest. I've let
Despair bed
Down in your stead
And wet
Our quilted cover
So the rot-
scent of its pussy-foot-
ing fingers lingers, when it's over.

There is Lowell, here, and Anne Sexton. There is a superabundance of the tricks that all poets, but especially young poets, dearly love. The last eight lines fairly explode

with their own cleverness. And yet that cleverness does not obstruct or mask what is being said, which is both substantive and totally in key with what has come before. Let us not forget, either, that neither Anne Sexton nor Robert Lowell could do better than this at the same age. Indeed, the poems in Lowell's first book, *Land of Unlikeness*, have strength but far too much straining, featuring large gobs of clotted imagery, whole passages heavy with clumping, stumping over-passion, and in general frequently so over wrought (and overwrought) that one cannot give them credence—a point that Lowell himself proved by later rewriting or abandoning virtually everything in that first book. Glück at her early best is plainly far beyond that sort of thing.

Nor is "Memo from the Cave" the only fully achieved poem in *Firstborn*.

"Nurse's Song"

As though I'm fooled. That lacy body managed to forget
That I have eyes, ears; dares to spring her boyfriends
on the child.
This afternoon she told me, "Dress the baby in his
crochet
Dress," and smiled. Just that. Just smiled,
Going. She is never here. O innocence, your bathinet
Is clogged with gossip, she's a sinking ship.
Your mother. Wouldn't spoil her breasts.
I hear your deaf-numb papa fussing for his tea. Sleep,
sleep.
My angel, nestled with your orange bear.
Scream when her lover pats your hair.

Glück has commented, in a long and very helpful private letter: "I have little to say about *Firstborn*. For a long time I was ashamed of it (when I was writing the poems, of course, I felt quite otherwise). Then, as more years divided me from it, I came to feel toward it a sporadic tenderness. I didn't think it was good. I thought it was good for someone so young."

But "Nurse's Song" is not only very good, it also announces many of the subjects and attitudes of Glück's later and stronger poetry. The poet as social outsider; the strong but hopelessly ambivalent pull between child and surrounding, presumably nurturing adults; deft and deeply felt irony in the face of pretended rather than genuine truth ("I have known no happiness so based in truth," ends another poem in this first book); and a powerful longing for the peace and fulfillment that should have accompanied and embellished childhood but somehow, straitly and miserably, did not.

In the same private letter, Glück lays out a personal history that fully supports and to that extent helps to explain each and all of these themes. "From the first," she writes, "I belonged to my mother: I craved her absolute approval." And: "For about five years (at about age 18) I lived a strange, isolated life at home. In some ways, it was a quite wonderful time: a recreation of infancy. It went better the

second time." She indicates, too, severe illness, both physical (epilepsy) and psychological. And not too long after *Firstborn* appeared, she notes, "in my late twenties, (I) went through a very long silence. Long, and agonizing. I wrote nothing for something more than a year."

Not surprisingly, the technique of *Firstborn* is distinctly more conventional than any of her later poetry. There are metrical poems, and a good deal of rhyming. Glück's letter is explicit about her reasons for dropping this more traditional approach in the poems that were to follow those of *Firstborn*: "I think I turned away from rhyme because I stopped wanting to write a harmonious whole. Also, I disliked the sense of virtuosity rhymed poems tended to produce. I didn't want, as a reader, to come away impressed with the writer's bravura. I didn't want skill to be so obvious."

The House on Marshland (1975), a full seven years after her first book, announces from its very first lines a vastly more mature, more individual, and more powerful poet. But it is not the subject matter that has changed, or the thematic pathways. The Glück who appears in this second book is not a different poet, but simply a very much better one. Here is the first poem:

"All Hallows"

Even now this landscape is assembling.
The hills darken. The oxen
sleep in their blue yoke,
the fields having been
picked clean, the sheaves
bound evenly and piled at the roadside
among cinquefoil, as the toothed moon rises:

This is the barrenness
of harvest or pestilence.
And the wife leaning out the window
with her hand extended, as in payment,
and the seeds
distinct, gold, calling
Come here
Come here, little one

And the soul creeps out of the tree

The delicate ease with which Glück associates "harvest" and "pestilence" is typical both of her newfound authority and the stability in her attitudes and stances. Only the perpetual outsider could so casually link that which grows and nurtures to that which destroys. But only a truly mature poet could prepare the way for such a linkage with the patient portraiture of the first seven lines. Indeed, nothing in this poem is in any way labored. Nothing is obvious or calls attention to itself as lines and scenes in the earlier poems sometimes do. Glück wanted a non-virtuosic poetic, and—by age thirty-two—achieved it.

The intensely visualized scene of the first strophe is deeply realized: Glück is a poet who *sees* piercingly. But each item on which the poem's visual scan turns is given its

plain, fair exposition. There is no scamping for effect, no subordination other than the natural, inevitable movement of the eye. And yet the poem's eye is kept focused, apparently effortlessly, on the scene as a whole, on the organic rather than the isolated effect. The control, the mastery, is quite simply dazzling.

Glück has learned, too, how to make leaping transitions, transitions she fashions so expertly that they do not seem to be hurdling the huge chasms that in truth they cross. Note, in the second half of the following poem, how time is crossed and re-crossed. We are first given the fact of pregnancy, then are taken back to the moment of conception ("waiting for my father"), then forward to the moment of birth ("spring . . . withdrew from me the absolute knowledge of the unborn"), then sharply forward to the mother, perhaps in a photograph, as seen by the child thirty years later ("the brick stoop where you stand, shading your eyes"), and then finally to an indefinite timelessness that is also the source of the book's title ("A marsh grows up around the house . . .").

"For My Mother"

It was better when we were
together in one body.
Thirty years. Screened
through the green glass
of your eye, moonlight
filtered into my bones
as we lay
in the big bed, in the dark,
waiting for my father.
Thirty years. He closed
your eyelids with
two kisses. And then spring
came and withdrew from me
the absolute
knowledge of the unborn,
leaving the brick stoop
where you stand, shading
your eyes, but it is
night, the moon
is stationed in the beech tree,
round and white among
the small tin markers of the stars:
Thirty years. A marsh
grows up around the house.
Schools of spores circulate
behind the shades, drift through
gauze flutterings of vegetation.

When Glück uses the chiming of internal rhyme, now, it is as unobtrusive as it possibly can be: "the small tin *markers* of the *stars*." Even the poem's powerful refrain, "thirty years," is not signalled to us as a refrain. And not only is the refrain not set off by formal spacing, but each iteration is significantly separated, and by variable distances, in order not to call undue attention to what is a large part of the glue that holds the poem together. The visualization is vivid and intense: "moonlight / filtered into my bones," the then-fetus tells us, "as we lay / in the big bed, in the dark . . ."

Nor is the visualization simply aimless, merely what an eye happens to see. It is, like everything in this powerful book, tightly controlled. There is no notable amount of darkness in the poems of *Firstborn*. But *The House on Marshland* employs a pretty consistently nocturnal landscape. In “**All Hallows**,” the book’s first poem, “the hills darken.” The second poem opens with the word “night.” The third poem, and one of my own favorites (I have anthologized it, as well as others of Glück’s), “**Gretel in Darkness**,” opens with “moonlight” and ends with “nights” and a “black forest.” The fourth poem is “**For My Mother**,” just reproduced, in which “we lay . . . in the dark.” The fifth poem gives us “immense sunlight,” but immediately frames it as “a relief.” The sixth poem, “**The Magi**,” another favorite, ends with a “barn blazing in darkness.” Shadows and mists, darkness and dusk, predominate in *The House on Marshland*—not oppressively, not pretentiously, but almost always there.

The sometimes savage stance of the first book, too (“**The Chicago Train**,” for example, ends: “I saw her pulsing crotch . . . the lice rooted in the baby’s hair”), has now become a much more relaxed, even genial humor. The mordancy remains, and is indeed more effective. But it is not so far removed from us. “Summer approaches,” ends “**To Autumn**,” “and the long / decaying days of autumn when I shall begin / the great poems of my middle period.” “Do not think I am not grateful for your small / kindness to me,” begins “**Gratitude**.” “I like small kindnesses.” There is a cutting edge to this apparent gentleness that the first book (and most young poets) cannot achieve. In “**The School Children**” we are shown how “all morning” the childrens’ “mothers have labored / to gather the late apples, red and gold, / like words of another language,” and then we are immediately shown “those who wait behind great desks / to receive these offerings.” One thinks of Sir Walter Scott facing up, manfully and accurately, to the superiorities of Jane Austen’s work: “The Big Bow-wow strain I can do myself . . . but the exquisite touch which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and sentiment is denied to me” (emphasis added). I think Glück would welcome exactly that praise, and clearly she deserves it.

Glück has also learned to look both inward and out, with equal facility and insight. Nor does she need vast quantities of words in order to encapsulate full, complete poetic statements.

“Departure”

My father is standing on a railroad platform.
Tears pool in his eyes, as though the face
glimmering in the window were the face of someone
he was once. But the other has forgotten;
as my father watches, he turns away,
drawing the shade over his face,
goes back to his reading.

And already in its deep groove
the train is waiting with its breath of ashes.

“Love Poem”

There is always something to be made of pain.
Your mother knits.
She turns out scarves in every shade of red.
They were for Christmas, and they kept you warm
while she married over and over, taking you
along. How could it work,
when all those years she stored her widowed heart
as though the dead come back.
No wonder you are the way you are,
afraid of blood, your women
like one brick wall after another.

The rhythmic progression in these two poems also requires some notice. “**Departure**” opens with an end-stopped first line, then swings easily in to the kind of loping smoothness that is typical of this entire book, and typical too of Glück at her best. But “**Love Poem**” has a different theme, a different subject, and so has a different rhythm as well. The first three lines are rigidly end-stopped. Even when enjambement begins, in line 4, the poem does not take on a deep, sweeping movement until the next two sentences, each three heavily enjambed lines long, the second sentence ending the poem. Again, these are the furthest thing from obvious, underlined uses of poetic craft. But they are the mark of a master craftsman.

The wryly powerful lyricism of *Descending Figure* (1980), Glück’s third book, is once more announced in the opening lines of the first poem, “**The Drowned Children**”: “You see, they have no judgment. / So it is natural that they should drown, / first the ice taking them in / and then, all winter, their wool scarves / floating behind them as they sink / until at last they are quiet.” It is hard to forget those “wool scarves,” though the poet is scrupulous about not fussing over or sentimentalizing or even dramatizing them. The intrinsic truth of the lines takes care of all that for her. Glück is open about her debt to both T. S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams. They “are hugely important to me,” she says in the letter already referred to. But at the end of “**The Drowned Children**,” when the lamentations rise and float over the frozen water, the sparse drama is entirely her own: “*What are you waiting for / come home, come home, lost / in the waters, blue and permanent.*” Not many poets know how to use echoic repetitions like “come home, come home.” The unfortunate tendency usually is to simply echo away all through a poem, as if the fact of echoing was itself significant. Not only does Glück prepare the way for such quasi-refrains, but she has absorbed and made her own Williams’s large tact, his determinedly non-melodramatic discretion.

The influence of Eliot, which begins to manifest itself quite openly in *Descending Figure* (and becomes too obvious in her most recent book), is not so beneficent. Nor is it unconnected to a tendency to over elaborate descriptions, to landscapes in which some of the pigmentation suddenly strikes the reader as applied, laid on, rather than intrinsic. The second poem in a five-poem sequence, “**The Garden**”—and I shall say something more of Glück’s growing fondness for such sequences in a moment—opens with

a passage that is all too like many passages in *Four Quartets*, especially *Burnt Norton*. "The garden admires you. / For your sake it smears itself with green pigment, / the ecstatic red of the roses, / so that you will come to it with your lovers." Glück notes, in the same letter already referred to, that "'Four Quartets' I've liked least and read least." But the echoes seem both unmistakable and unfortunate—doubly so, because what is being said begins to become less important than the manner of saying it. "Admit that it is terrible to be like them," the second part of "**The Garden**" concludes, "beyond harm." That says, frankly, a great deal less than the poet appears to think it does. If it says anything, to be perfectly blunt, what it says is slight, even sentimental, and not worth saying—certainly not worth the skill and attention of a poet like Louise Glück.

The unevennesses of *Descending Figure*, though disturbing and quite marked, do not deeply disfigure the book. In the first part of "**The Garden**," for example, Glück manages in three short, end-stopped lines to create a lyrical flow, as well as to analyze a profoundly true insight in utterly masterful style: "And then the losses, / one after another, / all supportable." This is brave as well as useful, cogent as well as quietly packed with strength. There are still further explorations of the "other," notably the male other—an exploration begun in the second book. In "**Palais des Arts**" a woman watches a small boy throwing "bits of bread into the water." The boy is apparently her son. The poem ends: "She can't touch his arm in innocence again. / They have to give that up and begin / as male and female, thrust and ache." In "**Aphrodite**" we are told that "A woman exposed as rock / has this advantage: / she controls the harbor . . . / her thighs cemented shut, barring / the fault in the rock." (The poem seems to me unbelievably bitter, but Glück has assured me that it "was intended to be funny," adding that "some women find it so. Though not all. Some women take it for an earnest, fierce political statement. No men find it funny.") Glück's stance is not always sympathetic to women, by the way. In "**Portland, 1968**" she writes: "And the sea triumphs, / like all that is false / all that is fluent and womanly."

There is also a fine set of poems that begin to explore the endless cycles of human existence—a natural development in a maturing poet. As before, Glück can distill into a single line an entire philosophy, beautifully expressed. "What doesn't move, the snow will cover," she writes in "**Thanksgiving**." It is a poem quite as comfortable with the subtle, shifting interrelationships of external physical world and internalized human idea and emotion as anything in Wallace Stevens. So too "**Porcelain Bowl**," where the references to (but not echoes of) Stevens are more pronounced still. "In a lawn chair, the analogous / body of a woman is arranged, / and in this light / I cannot see what time has done to her." The governing phrase, "in this light," seems peculiarly, uniquely her own. In "**Happiness**," which opens with a "man and a woman" lying "on a white bed," the ending is a triumphant, transcendent embodiment of the title's assertion. They are asleep, it is

morning. "Almost over this room / the sun is gliding. / Look at your face, you say, / holding your own close to me / to make a mirror. / How calm you are. And the burning wheel / passes gently over us." Perhaps the most powerful poem in the book is "**The Gift**," again a favorite and one I have anthologized.

"The Gift"

Lord, You may not recognize me
speaking for someone else.
I have a son. He is
so little, so ignorant.
He likes to stand
at the screen door, calling
oggie, oogie, entering
language, and sometimes
a dog will stop and come up
the walk, perhaps
accidentally. May he believe
this is not an accident?
At the screen
welcoming each beast
in love's name, Your emissary.

I know of no other poet now writing who could have written this poem. To use a pianistic metaphor, the "touch" is both utterly sure and absolutely individual.

But there are the strained, straining poems. And there are the poem sequences, six of them. In a book of only forty-eight pages, that constitutes a significant presence. There are only two poem sequences in *Firstborn*, which is both a longer and more closely printed book. There is one two-part poem, and no true poem sequence at all, in *The House on Marshland*, which seems to me the most fully consistent of her collections to date. And since I find only two of *Descending Figure*'s poem sequences entirely convincing, and since *The Triumph of Achilles* (it has sixty pages), about which I have serious doubts, features no fewer than eight poem sequences, some of them quite long, I think some emphasis needs to be placed on these facts. And some explanation, no matter how tentative (and quite possibly how wrong), needs to be ventured for so errant and probably misguided a direction.

It should be said unequivocally that there is nothing intrinsically flawed about a desire to write longer poems, including longer poems composed out of shorter poems, some of those smaller poems having been initially published separately. Many superb poets, T. S. Eliot among them, have followed this practice with obvious success. The problem is not in the idea but in the fact that "Between the idea / And the reality . . . Falls the Shadow." I have alluded to the straining in the sequence, "**The Garden**." If there is a unifying theme, it is overly intellectualized, insufficiently embodied. The next sequence, "**Descending Figure**," is shorter (only three component poems) and structurally more fully, more tightly realized: it is one of the two sequences that seem really to work, in her third book. Built around the stark fact that Glück's parents lost their first child, also a daughter, seven days after the child's

birth, “**Descending Figure**” moves carefully across a limited and sharply controlled poetic terrain. The same should be said of “**Illuminations**,” again composed of only three parts and again built around the growth of the poet’s son. (Oddly, the poet says that she no longer likes this sequence. It seems to me finely done, ending with the child at “the kitchen window / with his cup of apple juice. / Each tree forms where he left it, / leafless, trapped in his breath.”)

But “**Tango**,” in four parts, tries, I suspect, to do too much with the relationship between sisters—tries, that is, to find and assert truths that are only doubtfully true. Or, to put it differently, the sequence attempts to do more than the material will allow. Why are some sisters chosen by “the light”? “How they tremble,” we are told, “as soon as the moon mounts them, brutal and sisterly . . .” If this is no more than a reference to physical maturation (i.e., menstruation), it is vastly overblown. If it is a reference to something else, the poem does not reveal what that something else might be. Nor do the succeeding lines help much: “I used to watch them, / all night absorbed in the moon’s neutral silver / until they were finally blurred, disfigured . . .” So too the relationship between the sisters seems over-dramatized: “You were the gold sun on the horizon. / I was the judgement, my shadow / preceded me, not wavering . . .” This is not convincing, nor is it illuminating. The poem continues: “Your bare feet / became a woman’s feet, always / saying two things at once.” This is either obvious or pretentious; in either case, it does not make for good poetry.

“**Dedication to Hunger**,” which has five parts, seems to strike poses rather than directly deal with its subject, the relationship between daughters (and mothers) and their fathers. The grandfather’s “kiss would have been / clearly tender,” the second poem ends. “Of course, of course. Except / it might as well have been / his hand over her mouth.” Not only is there nothing in the poem, or the sequence, to justify this final line, there is about it a strong sense of overstatement, an unpleasant flavor of far too easily achieved drama—that is, melodrama. “**Lamentations**,” the final sequence in *Descending Figure*, similarly mythologizes—but abstractly, unconvincingly—a basic human context, namely Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The very language glitters too artificially. “But god was watching. / They felt his gold eye / projecting flowers on the landscape.” This is ingenious, it is felicitously phrased. But it is also terribly intellectualized; it works far too hard at saying something that does not require anything like so much effort—and which, once said, does not have anything like the import, the weight, that the poet seems to think it has. “Against the black sky,” we read in the third of the sequence’s four poems, “they saw the massive argument of light.” This too is strained and straining, trying to be and to say more than it either is or can possibly be.

With only two or three exceptions, *The Triumph of Achilles* seems to me to suffer from the same deficiencies, not only in its many and very long sequences, but in most of

its shorter poems as well. Glück is too fine a poet, and I have much too much respect for her work, to belabor the point—or the book. Here is “**The Reproach**.” Let me say in advance that I find it an embarrassingly bad performance, full of tritenesses, unfortunate echoes of H. D., and about as totally unconvincing as might be.

“The Reproach”

You have betrayed me, Eros.
You have sent me
my true love.

On a high hill you made
his clear gaze;
my heart was not
so hard as your arrow.

What is a poet
without dreams?
I lie awake; I feel
actual flesh upon me,
meaning to silence me—
Outside, in the blackness,
over the olive trees,
a few stars.

I think this is a bitter insult:
that I prefer to walk
the coiled paths of the garden,
to walk beside the river
glittering with drops
of mercury. I like to lie
in the wet grass beside the river,
running away, Eros,
not openly, with other men,
but discreetly, coldly—

All my life
I have worshipped the wrong gods.
When I watch the trees
on the other side,
the arrow in my heart
is like one of them,
swaying and quivering.

This is perhaps the single worst poem in the book, and easily the worst by Louise Glück that I have ever seen. But the eight sequences in the book are almost as slack. “**Marathon**,” a nine-part sequence that occupies eleven printed pages, is a curious mixture of occasionally brilliant lines, flooded and ultimately drowned in a veritable sea of words—and many of them derivative words. “Finally, this is what we craved, / this lying in the bright light without distinction— / we who would leave behind / exact records.” The echoes of T. S. Eliot, at such moments, are deafeningly loud. There are others. Even when she creates a viable image, Glück seems unable to leave it alone. “In the river, things were going by— / a few leaves, a child’s boat painted red and white.” This would be a lovely pair of lines—if they were all Glück had written. But she goes on, the period after “white” being in fact a comma: “its sail stained by the water.” This may seem a small matter; to a nonpoet it may seem even niggling. But it is neither