

Healing from trauma in Louise Gluck's poems

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Louise Gluck's contemporary, American poetry includes the mythic, nature, and her personal struggles that she openly shares with her readers. Due to the loss of a sibling, mother alienation, survivor guilt, and subsequent anorexia, she attended psychoanalysis for many years. Gluck turned to writing as therapy to come to terms with the truth. She has warned readers not to find her speakers purely autobiographical, yet looking at her essays, *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry*, one cannot help but find her life's story reflected in her poems.

These stories include the traumas that Louise Gluck suffers that stem from the initial trauma to her mother, whose child died; Gluck refers to herself as the "replacement child," a role where she suffers as the survivor, her mother's next child. There exists generational trauma and subsequent generational family drama caused by this initial stressor. With the mother's disassociation from Gluck, arrives Gluck's own disassociation in body dysmorphic disorder, anorexia nervosa, and struggles with intimacy. Gluck's work reflects these lifelong struggles: from her first collection in 1968 to the present, where her latest book *Averno* finds her in solitude and quiet contemplation after being re-traumatized by the events of September 11, 2001.

Gluck's childhood traumas and loss tie into Jennifer J. Freyd's idea of betrayal trauma. According to Freyd, betrayal trauma involves "betrayal by someone on whom you depend for survival (as a child to a parent) [which] may produce consequences similar to those from more obviously life-threatening traumas" (qtd. in Baldwin). The survivor of betrayal trauma, here a child, needs to find ways to survive under such circumstances since a complete break might produce less care and threaten the child's survival, therefore, creating disassociation but not amnesia to survive the oxymoronic neglectful care. Freyd's research student Anne Pujol Prince detects and predicts the significance of Post-Traumatic-Stress Disorder within this range of betrayal trauma. Her research *Trauma and Post-traumatic Response* discusses coping after such trauma, the outcomes, and subsequent responses. For Gluck, anorexia, self-starvation, becomes a way to control suffering as well as to gain mother's attention as the next dying child. Gluck's solution to trauma comes via writing poetry and sharing her struggles with the reader to heal in observations of nature and mechanisms of the mythic.

By creating parallels between landscape and self, Gluck finds a safe forum for self-exploration. Self-discovery occurs in precise observation and honest writing. Although scholars agree that Gluck defines a post-confessional poetry, her work evolves from the infamous Confessionals Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Gluck credits confessional poets' scientific inquiry and details in understanding traumatic events and self (*Proofs* 35). Confessional exploration aids Gluck's inner-dialogues and supports her

willingness in disclosing her life-story and traumas via images in nature, sharing these traumas with the reader, and healing in the process, aided by the cyclical union with her reader.

Landscape connects the writer and the reader in the poetic-organism's cyclical nature: in summary of Harold Bloom, the poet reads; the poet writes; the poem is written; the reader reads, and the poet finds satisfaction and recreation in poetic re-experience and unification (Bloom 25). Gluck discusses poetry in terms of readership, bridging poet, poem, and reader, and in creating an organic whole, where the poet makes a cyclical and symbiotic relationship live and starts the unification of self (*Proofs* 92). The poet does not want to enter the reader, but rather just share the experience in vision (92). Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, finds that the reader and writer develop a novice-mentor relationship, and the reader vicariously acts as poet in recreating a new vision in re-experience (xxvi, xxx).

Sections of three poems represent struggles that Gluck survives: sibling loss, mother-loss, difficulties with intimacy, and anorexia. In her poetry these issues are reflected onto landscape to aid in protective distance without disassociation, where it feels safer for the writer to access and to re-experience the traumatic situations while recovering and healing via the relationship with the reader, nature, and oftentimes myth.

Sibling loss becomes the locus in Gluck's collection *Descending Figure* that continues reflecting Gluck's life-long struggle with loss. The title poem "Descending Figure" contains questions regarding mortality, specifically death of children, which generates an endless flow of questions that the reader must answer. This poem addresses the initiating stressor upon her family, mother, and self.

From her personal essay "Death and Absence" from her collection *Proofs & Theories*, Gluck discusses the tragic effects of her sibling's death, the initial traumatic event:

I have always been, in one way or another, obsessed with sisters, the dead and the living both. The dead sister died before I was born. Her death was not my experience, but her absence was. Her death let me be born. I saw myself as her substitute, which produced in me a profound obligation toward my mother, and a frantic desire to remedy her every distress. I took it all personally: every shadow that crossed her face proved my insufficiency; the birth of my younger sister proved this yet more concretely. At the same time, I took on the guilty responsibility of the survivor. (127)

Part I of "Descending Figure," "The Wanderer," finds Gluck the child playing in the street, understanding mother's alienation to her children and her own role, as the replacement for the dead sibling: "I was playing in the dark street with my other sister, / whom death had made so lonely" (*First Four* 113).

In this survivorship and inheritance of a lost life comes the burden of living a life for the dead and as cure for the living. Her mother's lack of healing moves onto Gluck, which in turn creates and agitates Gluck's own obsessive-compulsive disorder, primarily surrounding her mother.

Part II "The Sick Child" shows Gluck's PTSD and subsequent hypervigilance regarding her own child. A mother watches her child sleep, unable to rest, waiting for the healthy child to die: "And the child / Relaxes in her mother's arms. / The mother does not sleep; / She stares" (114). Gluck does not understand how to deal with the possible loss of a child, considering the repercussions to herself and her mother from a similar loss. Here the mother watches the child and questions the logic of attachment, the same attachment disorder her mother suffered.

By spring the child will die.
Then it is wrong, wrong
To hold her –
Let her be alone,
Without memory, as the others wake. (114)

Gluck explains the conflict and trauma of loss that was agitated and remembered after Gluck gave birth:

... at thirty, I had a child myself. The wild, protective, terrified love I felt for my son – that

maternal love which, in being obsessed with protection, is obsessed with harm – transformed itself, over three years, into an analogous act of mourning... [the poem] means, also, to study maternal love, which continued to seem to me appalling, though I felt it. (*Proofs* 127)

In Part III, “For My Sister,” the narrative discloses Gluck’s sister’s death as a haunting reality for the living. The child’s death-image retrieves Gluck’s shadow self, in Jungian terms, and parallels inner compassion for the dead:

Far away my sister is moving in her crib.
The dead ones are like that,
always the last to quiet.
Because, however long they lie in the earth,
they will not learn to speak
but remain uncertainly pressing against the wooden bars,
so small the leaves hold them down.
Now, if she had a voice,
the cries of thunder would be beginning.
I should go to her;
perhaps if I sang very softly,
her skin so white,
her head covered with black feather (*First Four* 115)

The dead child is eternally trapped, imprisoned, and safe as earth’s infant within a mythic mother – voiceless – undeveloped, not Zeus’ powerful hidden cries, instead the muted. Gluck, a feminist, often portrays the voiceless female trapped in a patriarchal earth-image that kills instead of nurtures. Here, the infant Gluck will become Gluck’s adult Persephone who she continues to write about, now half with mother, and half in Hell, still embraced by PTSD, half in light and half, dormant in darkness.

Here, Gluck perceives the dead child as restless, disobedient, and tossing. This fight to free oneself from mother earth parallels Gluck’s conflicting struggle in attachment disorder to free herself from mother, who she wants, and to free herself from her sister’s death to find self-identity. This also depicts Gluck’s mother’s struggle to attach to the living-child Louise. The dead baby’s useless struggle in death and Gluck’s own inability for survival in life show her inability to free herself from literal survivorship, guilt for surviving, as caretaker of her mother, and suffering in her own worry as a mother looking back on someone’s lost child.

Acceptance and understanding ease the journey. Writing and having the words “to speak” become the tools that save and free Gluck: “Now, if she had a voice, / the cries of hunger would be beginning” (115). If the dead sister developed beyond infancy, words would give her freedom, as life would have freed the mother and Gluck from trauma, alienation, and suffering. Gluck yearns for freedom from death, depth, and shadow. The disturbing images of lost innocence, the downy-haired infant held down by leaves, haunting the poet’s inner being, a dark place she obsesses about. She sees this inner and outer haunting in landscape and the life cycle. Gluck says the poem “is saturated with a mother’s grief and fearfulness and a haunted child’s compulsive compensation” (*Proofs* 127).

This initial stressor ties to suffering, betrayal trauma, and survivor guilt that Gluck felt regarding her sibling’s early death and her guilt and subsequent attachment disorder to her mother. Mother-loss haunts images in Gluck’s poetry.

Gluck’s very powerful mother-daughter poem “My Life Before Dawn” gives graphic, physical images of birth and explains how mother-love creates her suffering: “Sometimes at night I think of how we did / It, me nailed in her like steel...” (*First Four* 28). The enwombed child becomes a threatening, aggressive invasion. Gluck acknowledges her mother’s pain and trauma in life from losing the child before Gluck, so this reactionary child seems shamed and enraged, failing to resurrect the dead, erase loss, or satisfy. Gluck quickly understands self in that recovery: “... I told her Sorry baby you have had / Your share. (I found her stain had dried into my hair.)” (28).

Physical connection to mother and womb relieves Gluck's shame in remembering a safety she now fears:

She cried. Which still does not explain my nightmares:
How she surges like her yeast dough through the door –
way shrieking It is I, love, back in living color
After all these years. (28)

The return to the painful longing for mother seems a nightmare to the maturing Gluck. Elizabeth Dodd's analysis, *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet*, understands the poem as an aggressive sexual encounter (157-158) and many of Gluck's poems disclose her difficulties with intimacy and sometimes offensive sexual interactions with male lovers that replicate this mother/daughter struggle in alienation, shame, and disconnection. Following Dodd's thesis, the male narrator cites the "jilted lover," (157), even with this alternate interpretation, I see that the mother returns like a "jilted lover," (157) demanding more from a stranger with whom she has spent the night, the stranger child. Or, lover and mother enveloped onto each other, both equal of betrayal to Gluck. Whichever situation, she sees the need to separate from mother, forgive, and heal in order to move forward.

Her healing journey, self-explanation, and analysis discovered honest writing as her cure. Gluck feared the cure would kill the artist, a fear shared by the great poet Anne Sexton who worried that thorezin, used to treat her borderline personality disorder, modified her creativity. Gluck claims that searching for self in "the world mirrors the self" and is courageous and painful, when personal experience becomes confessional, poetic fodder (*Proofs* 23). She warns that "The poet, writing, is simultaneously so caked in his materials and unconstrained by them: personal circumstance may prompt art, but the actual making of art is a revenge on circumstance" (25), and writing "past" poetry, encourages a sense of accomplishment, "the victory of courage over dark matter" (25).

Gluck's multiple years of analysis were not isolated to breaking from mother, mother's betrayal, and her own survivor guilt, but from the detachment she created to mimic death, the dying-child, searching for mother's attention, causing her to detach from self via anorexia nervosa. Gluck left high school to recover from anorexia. For seven years she uncovered and learned about her real desire, separation: "... dying seemed a pathetic metaphor for establishing a separation between myself and my mother" (11).

In "Cottonmouth Country" (1963) the landscape brings forth questions about suffering and death. Gluck says that she received praise for her brave disclosure "as though... writing put an end to years of evasion... Bravery was never an issue; I tried regularly to make poems out of these situations since I recognize the possibilities" (126). Possibilities include recovery.

In this poem the cottonmouth, Satan, is evil in the garden, which shares the mythic landscape and parallels insight the poet finds. I am interested in the subject of death that remains a constant topic and early solution to suffering, PTSD, an escape from the trauma Gluck suffers to detach from:

Fish bones walked the waves off Hatteras.
And there were other signs
That Death wooed us, by water, wooed us
By land: among the pines
An uncurled cottonmouth that rolled on moss
reared in the polluted air.
Birth, not death, is the hard loss.
I know. I also left a skin there. (*First Four* 43)

Gluck's reflection onto landscape parallels the suffering she experiences in life. Her peeling, loosening of skin, parallels her literal anorexic body, the mother and life she wants to be free of, the dead child (self and sibling) that she finds, and the writing process in self-examination and topics, specifically death. Gluck sheds shame like the old skin of the surviving snake and understands dying's ease and life's difficulties.

In this long quote from her essay “Education of the Poet” from *Proofs & Theories*, she discloses the difficulty of her trauma and illness:

the way I saw to separate myself, to establish a self with clear boundaries, was to oppose myself to the declared desire of others, utilizing their wills to give shape to my own. The conflict played itself out most fiercely with my mother. Insofar as I could tell, my mother only wavered when I began to refuse food, when I claimed, through implicit threat, ownership of my body, which was her great accomplishment. The tragedy of anorexia... is not self-destructive; though its outcome often is. Its intent is to construct... a plausible self... a disdain for need, for hunger, designed to appear entirely free of all forms of dependency, to appear complete, self-contained. (11)

In the difficult dilemma of betrayal trauma, even the adult, reflective Gluck grapples to understand the conflict of needing to attach and detach for survival. She claims to “survive her life” (22) but does not claim she will live it.

The survivor Gluck acknowledges using confession as a guide to healing from this betrayal trauma and subsequent anorexia. Her disease metaphorically and literally means self-starvation. As an anorexic, she literally starved her body and created vast suffering. Life has given her suffering, yet she heals in art.

Gluck theorizes that in poetry she heals from trauma; the basis for much of her writing is to overcome shame due to trauma. In poetry the poet can find healing without shame because the confrontation with difficult material does not cause the poet to re-experience trauma “for the artist no contact occurs” (*Proofs* 26). Yet, the reader re-experiences it from a safe distance, and the writer re-discovers and reforms the experience. Poetry represents, presents traumatic material to self in safety mode (58). The writing process helps the writer to mend.

2006 does not find Gluck free from PTSD. She has found detachment and not disassociation, yet she was re-traumatized by: divorce, a fire that destroyed her home, her father’s death, and the events of 9/11 to her native New York. Gluck has moved into a place of quiet, solitude, and seclusion, Persephone. In her latest collection she says she refuses the medication her family whispers she should take not to suffer, yet she reacts that she wants to feel what is happening to the world and self. She does not use silence as a passive disassociation like the betrayed child she was but as a place to continue to heal, writing about her life, nature, and a spiritual place she found beyond trauma.

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