The “harsher figure” of Descending Figure: Louise Glück’s “Dive into the Wreck”

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In “Being Nobody Together: Duplicity, Identity and Women’s Poetry,” Alicia Ostriker surveys the body of poetic emblems commonly used by American women poets to reflect the self-fragmentation the female suffers in her struggle to break free of culturally bound sex roles. One “force[ful] figure,” Ostriker argues, that women poets since Emily Dickinson have used to express the denial of female identity within patriarchal civilization is invisibility. But another, an even “harsher figure” for this portrayal, is muteness:

Among women poets, the inability to speak signals ... a state of passivity, marginality, self hate. ... A collection of poems on these themes — muted women in love, muted women at the dinner table — would fill a volume. We do not speak, the poems insist, because they do not listen, they laugh at us, they wish us to be listeners. They are powerful, and we need their approval.¹

Ostriker refers to the poetry of Adrienne Rich to support her claims concerning harsh poetic figures, evidence most readers probably accept, considering that in the past thirty years, and in nearly half as many volumes of poetry, Rich has focused upon the female’s struggles to “speak signals” within a patriarchal society that silences her. Some

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readers, however, might find troublesome Ostriker’s claim that Rich has overemphasized discordant themes in her poetic canon. In *Writing Like a Woman*, Ostriker describes her dismay at Rich for becoming, as it were, too harsh a poetic figure — too separatist, too filled with despair, too forgetful of memories about even childhood wholeness. Ostriker laments the lack of “desireable fantasies” in Rich’s poetry, just as she criticizes the images depicting both patriarchal institutions and individual men as enemies. “To journey with Rich,” she writes, “is to travel painfully in the wilderness.”

Readers might find more disturbing Ostriker’s aligning this radical lesbian feminist with Louis Glück, a lesser known, younger American poet conventionally seen as apolitical and apolemical — certainly no feminist. Yet I accept readily Ostriker’s pairing of the two poets when listing contemporary figures whose work focuses on female silence. As in Rich’s canon, images of mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters muted by patriarchal institutions or by men themselves become increasingly noticeable and disturbing in the pages of Glück’s first two books, *Firstborn* (1968) and *The House on Marshland* (1975). With their publication, as with the publication of Rich’s earliest work, Glück presented herself as a poet whose skeptical vision never allows her to be, as one reviewer recently put it, “content to stop at the surface of things.”

With the publication of *Descending Figure* (1980), Glück seems to me to have established herself as no less harsh a figure than Rich in contemporary American poetry. More than in Glück’s first two books, this volume accentuates a fundamental similarity between the two poets, affirming their shared perception of the contemporary woman poet as a figure willing to dive deeply to perform a joyless, painful, but nonetheless necessary critique of the wreck of western civilization. More than in Glück’s first two books, this is the volume she fills with harsh figures, using them to berate the androcentric bias in language because of her apparent conviction that traditional dualities of western philosophy silence women and debilitate men. More than in Glück’s first two books, then, this is the volume that requires a critical exploration to convince skeptical readers that something radically feminist underlies the conventional surface of Louise Glück’s poetry.

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The basis for any reading of *Descending Figure*, including an apocalyp-
tic one, is in properly deciphering its title, no easy task since Glück’s poems have often rightly been described as cryptic. Still, as Helen Vender notes, Glück invites us to “decode the import” of her work, though such practice result in multiple critical interpretation. Thus Calvin Bedient finds the title suggestive of “moving sculpture”; Linda W. Wagner reads it as “a dying or already dead sister”; J.D. McClatchy interprets it as “figures of speech” that descend to explore the ordinary’s buried life”; while Alan Williamson finds dual meaning, “both the descent to the dead and the descent from Eden or a Platonic pre-existence.”

Other titular meanings, though similar to the above assessments in addressing the book’s general theme of loss, could be described as deconstructionist, or feminist in the sense that Elaine Marks uses the term, as work by “women who are exploring the connection between women and language.” The first two of these, the descending figure representing both a degenerating, logocentric culture and its language, whose configurations create division rather than union between its speakers, become clear when the title is related to the book’s opening 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.
And the pond lifts them in its manifold dark arms. . .
And yet they hear the names they used
like lures slipping over the pond:
What are you waiting for
come home, come home, lost
in the waters, blue and permanent.

If “drowned children” can be interpreted not literally, as does Greg Kuzma in his attack on Glück as childhater, but figuratively, as a doomed culture, then a feminist reading in Marks’s sense of the word takes shape, for Glück here establishes a link between a dying culture and its language that perverts sensibility (“they have no judgment”), a connection that leads its people in their preyful sport of one another (“they hear the names they used / like lures slipping over the pond”) to their deaths.

The specific links between women and language and logocentric
culture become increasingly noticeable throughout the book’s first section, *The Garden*, because of Glück’s ironical allusions to Biblical parables and Judeo-Christian traditions. Specifically, she deconstructs this mythology as a whole by rewriting it in ways that disallow whatever false sense of complacency and security it affords believers. In the title poem “The Garden,” for example, which apparently represents the Biblical Eden, Glück focuses upon the negative effects of faith in Original Sin, which she shows breeding fear (three of the poem’s five sections are subtitled “The Fear of Birth,” “The Fear of Love,” and “The Fear of Burial”), separateness, and silence in and between the sexes: “That body lying beside me like obedient stone — / once its eyes seemed to be opening, / we could have spoken.” Yet, Glück implies (with her frequent use of the subjunctive mood and disruptive dash) the two remain silent, unable to give each other solace to spite the loneliness of human existence, because of their obedience to the religious ideologies of sin and guilt. That such faith and suffering is futile, even harmful, Glück shows by desecrating, deranking, “descending” the figure of the Supreme Being from God to “gods”: “How long did we lie there / as, arm in arm in their cloaks of feathers, / the gods walked down / from the mountain we built for them?” Too long, is Glück’s implied answer, further indicating that a selfless faith is one that anesthetizes (“As though, in a garden crowded with flowers, / a voice had said / *How dull they are, these golds, / so sonorous, so repetitious* / until you closed your eyes, / lying among them . . .”), one that silences (“And the willows — / see how it has shaped these green / tents of silence. / Yet . . . your body so soft, so alive, among the stone animals. / Admit that it is terrible to be like them, / beyond harm”).

Glück overturns convention in “Pieta,” too, when instead of merely rendering the Biblical Mary’s mourning over the body of Christ, she retells the myth of Christ’s birth from the point of view of the mother, who intuits the tragic fate of her son: “Under the strained / fabric of her skin, his heart / stirred. She listened, / because he had no father. / So she knew / he wanted to stay / in her body, apart / from the world / with its cries, its / roughhousing, / but already the men / gather . . .” (emphasis mine). Glück’s point here seems to be that the environment of the mother’s body is much more safe than that of the outer patriarchal world, particularly because the men in that world would give the bastard boy not just any father, but God the Father. They would make him their savior, then their scapegoat — someone to blame for
their futile and frustrated attempts to light what Glück calls the "dark context" of an essentially chaotic universe that they refuse to acknowledge.

A closely related theme that the poet develops in "Pieta" is the possibility of an alternative, non-phallic discourse. For instance, her rendering of the silent communion between mother and son in the poem supports Julia Kristeva's theory of a preverbal language, what K.K. Ruthven interprets as a "rhythmic babble" that exists between mother and boy child before the latter's initiation into the father's symbolic language. In fact, the very narrowness of the poem itself (the narrowest poem in Descending Figure, most lines including only three to four words; the longest, six) plus the choppiness of its lines relate also to Kristeva's notion that preverbal language is symbolized in writing by breaks in the syntactic structure of the text. Yet whereas Kristeva does not privilege this preverbal language over the symbolic, the patriarchal linguistic order, Glück clearly does in this poem, indicating that the silent communion between mother and child is much more precise and tender than the noisy "cries" of "crowd[ing]" men, whose babble we are to interpret as brutal.

However, in "Palais Des Arts" Glück shows that an alternative language, a silent communion, between mother and son is eventually destroyed. Here again Glück criticizes absolute faith in traditional mythology, which she portrays metaphorically as an art museum that preserves "large expected gods / caged really," who gaze down silently and possessively upon a woman and boy, creating an atmosphere so restrained that the two are eventually transformed, as the subjects of the art works were once themselves transformed, from subjects into objects, the final result being that "She can't touch his arm in innocence again. / They must give that up and begin / as male and female, thrust and ache." Thus Glück re-emphasizes that androcentric culture dehumanizes human beings, by indicating that the boy's loss of innocence, his move into the symbolic order, strips both him and the woman of their human identities, locking them into mere oppositional forces of "male" and "female."

In "Descending Figure," the title and penultimate poem in the book's first section, Glück realigns herself with Kristeva (and certain other French feminists who are wary of the idea of a separate women's language) by indicating that the key to unlocking man and woman from antagonistic roles is not in creating for woman a distinctive
language, since that would make her marginal, but rather in teaching her in childhood to learn to use the official language, with the conscious intent of subverting it. In the poem, those women who are unable to authorize themselves by carefully learning to use patriarchal language are portrayed by the speaker’s “other,” dead sister, who haunts “the dark street,” imprisoned from crib to coffin because she never acquired a voice, never “learn[ed] to speak, / but remain[ed] uncertainly pressing against the wooden bars,” her silent “cries of hunger” heard by none but the speaker. At the other extreme, those women who learned the language passively without intending to subvert it, who unconsciously accepted their subjugated positions, are represented just as negatively in the speaker’s mother and younger sister. The former, holding the little girl, stands still at the edge of a lawn lit by the “gold magnetic light” of a screened porch, the same kind of anesthetizing light that Gluck associates with the gods in the earlier poem “The Garden.” The mother’s lighted and marginal position suggests that she has accepted passively her secondary status in exchange for the light, however artificial, that secures her temporarily from confronting the darkness, human destiny. The only positive figure is the speaker, who inhabited as a child a “twilight” world, who heard but refused to heed the language that in different ways made marginal both her sisters and their mother (“Often I would let my own name glide past me / though I craved its protection”), and who thereby acquired the ability to “write to you / about this emptiness —” to describe for us the emptiness of a culture that silences and subjugates women. In short, Gluck writes metaphorically in this poem of having learned to appropriate male discourse to disrupt it, to decenter its logocentric base, reversing values such that she ascended to an ostensibly sacred position of authority traditionally reserved for males. Simultaneously, she proves what she states outright in the book’s second section: “I stood apart in that achievement, / in that power to expose / the underlying body, like a god / for whose deed / there is no parallel in the natural world” (“Dedication to Hunger”).

Perhaps basing her claim on the section’s final poem, “Thanksgiving,” the darkest of those poems in which Gluck ironically twists religious myth to reveal the spiritual emptiness of contemporary life, Helen Vendler writes that after reading a certain number of Gluck’s poems, “we no longer care who are the prey and who are the predators.”1 Yet the poems in the second and third sections, *The Mirror* and
Lamentations, disprove Vendler’s contention. In them, as the section titles suggest, Glück maintains her privileged stance to expose and lament the “underlying bod[ies]” that imprison humanity in general, but women in particular. In them she shows what Ruthven believes a feminist linguistics must show, “that language, in addition to being a prison in [a] general [Saussurean] sense, is specifically a women’s prison, and that linguistically speaking, women are doubly disadvantaged in being (as it were) prisoners of the male prisoners in the prison-house of [androcentric] language.”

Early in the book’s second section, in “Illuminations,” Glück stresses that language is indeed a prison for all humankind in the sense that it provides only an arbitrary referential system people can use to make comprehensible an inherently mysterious world. In the poem, the speaker’s infant son learns to use language to break “the white steady silence” of nature, creating for himself the wonderful and powerful illusion that in speaking the sign, the word, he can in fact conjure up the natural object, the thing itself. At the point of making this discovery, he stands gripping the bars of his crib, calling “light / light / that one syllable, in / demand or recognition” until his orders seem to be recognized, “the walls appeared.” Later, as he sits by the window and populates his world by naming its objects, Glück emphasizes his growing confidence in his more relaxed pose and with the forceful verbs that she uses to describe his speech: “Each tree forms where he left it, / leafless, trapped in his breath.” Yet the poem’s ironic ending — “the sun rises / cold and single over the map of language” — undercuts that confidential tone by emphasizing structurally (the sun rising over the child and his language) and imagistically (the “cold” and “single” sun) that it is the child himself who is ultimately victimized by language, particularly by the delusion of power that it gives him, since he, like any other person, can only vaguely comprehend but never control the independent processes of nature.

Glück makes a similar but more telling point later in section three, in the poem “The Gift.” The characters here again are the speaker and her infant son, but also God, whom the speaker simultaneously interrogates and repudiates for giving her son, “Your emissary,” a perverse faith in the power of language: “He is / so little, so ignorant. / He likes to stand / at the screen door, calling / oggi, oggi, entering / language, and sometimes / a dog will stop and come up / the walk, perhaps /
accidentally. May he believe / this is not an accident?” The question is rhetorical, it seems, the boy’s present ignorance and future smugness in feeling himself God’s agent all but ensure his steadfast faith in his power. And power is the problem, particularly since it is denied the female speaker, who talks hesitantly because she is only indirectly recognized by her audience (“Lord, You may not recognize me / speaking for someone else”) and who seems to fear that the powerful interests her son would advance as God’s emissary will benefit his sex at the expense of hers, though he perform all, ironically, “in love’s name.”

Such fears are borne out in “The Return,” where the female speaker calls to a boy, no longer an infant but still apparently her son, whose “clear and grieving” eyes cause her mistakenly to believe that they still speak the same language, still share a sympathy and the ability to comfort one another. Yet his menacing silence and his hands, “so gently making their murderous claim — ” cause her to realize that he is now almost fully initiated into phallogocentric language and that he has renounced her since she, in Lacanian theory, represents the pre-Oedipal, primordial Other, the one who speaks the “discourse of hidden truths,” those that explain “the loss of the ‘truth’ of being.” He once understood then, as did the unborn son in “Pieta,” but now having ascended into a higher linguistic order, he would escape them since they remind him of his loss. Thus the speaker finally realizes that she is now just as alien to him (her presence reminding him of absence, loss) as he was once to all but her. They are repositioned as were the woman and boy in “Palais Des Arts,” as “male and female, thrust and ache.”

This violent sexual metaphor correlates well with the not-so-gentle and sometimes ever-so-murderous hands that the repressed boy develops when he becomes the misogynist man. In “World Breaking Apart,” for instance, a man’s apparently affectionate gesture, his “reaching for his wife’s hand / across a slatted table,” is exposed as political, “as though his will enclosed it in that gesture.” Or in “The Mirror,” when the speaker’s mirrored gaze causes her lover to deliberately shave his face “like a blind man,” Glück reveals his wanting to do so not to hurt himself, but her, his “needing to show [her] how [he] scrape[s] the flesh away / scornfully and without hesitation” so that she will see him “correctly, / as a man bleeding, not / the reflection [she] desire[s].” Masculine hands further symbolize false gestures of
love in “Epithalamium” and “Swans,” particularly in the latter, where the lover raises his hand in false testament of fidelity to the wife he will abandon. Yet male hands also signal disinclination to feign affection, as in “Dedication to Hunger,” where in part one the father “never touches” his love-starved daughter even though “he could touch her / if he wanted to.” Part two of the same poem reveals as coarse a young husband’s apparently tender kiss, which would have been “clearly tender — / Of course, of course. Except / it might as well have been his hand over her mouth.” This in turn relates to part three, in which the male’s primordial desire for unity temporarily swells, urging him to return to the beings he learned to fear most, “to go to women / and be taken back / into the pierced flesh,” the same flesh that the “hun[gly]” male hand violates in “Aubade.” In whatever pose, the image of the male hand in all these poems expresses precisely, and most often in a way his articulated expressions could not convey, his unconscious enmity toward the female.

Even in those poems in which males speak, they do so only briefly, one reason being perhaps that what they say is always a lie, and short lies, easier to tell than longer ones, tend more often to convince. Yet another reason might be that these men wish to control the women to whom they speak. This, according to Jack Sattel, is easily and commonly accomplished by the male’s withholding self-disclosure, by “revealing only strategic proportions of [him]self.”

Thus in “Epithalamium,” the meaning of the title turns ironic at the poem’s ending when the groom finally speaks, pledging his menacing troth (“Here is my hand, he said. . . . Here is my hand that will not harm you.”) because the words indicate ever so succinctly his underlying, silent wish to do just the opposite. Similarly, in the stillness of a dream, the speaker of “Swans” envisions her lover peering down into his wife’s face, “simplified by passion,” before saying merely, “These [hands] are yours to keep.” thereby capturing easily her already gullible trust. So, too, does the man attempt quietly but slyly to recreate and hence control the sleeping speaker in “Happiness” by first “turn[ing] to her / as though to speak her name / but silently, deep in her mouth —” then mounting her, and finally commanding her to “Look at your face” while “holding” his “own close[ly]” above hers to “make a mirror.” Unlike those women who have trusted implicitly the spoken word that designated them to their secondary passive order, the speaker here obviously has learned to detect the falsity of spoken language and to revalue the written
word. Since she uses it to make political what the other women left personal, she can escape in certain essential ways her entrapment.

Apparently perceiving the conventional female child as most victimized by a phallocracy, Glück represents her silence as most pathetic: viewed as an infant in the second section of “Tango,” she is “actively starving,” her “small mouth circling / the ancient repetitions” that as a conventional female child she can never master, leaving her “trash[ing]” within the crib bars that she, unlike her male counterpart in “Illuminations,” cannot escape; as a young girl in parts one and three of “Dedication to Hunger,” she blurts out only a “stark laugh,” being too naive to know what other ancient, “[un]proven,” but nevertheless traditional “bond[s]” keep her untouched and unloved by her father, yet too inarticulate and “desperate” to express her dismay directly; apparently growing even more timid and dishonest, she appears in the fourth section of “Tango” as outright duplicitous and mute, her dancing feet, her only means of expression, “saying two things at once”; and by adolescence, her mind now able to comprehend the ruling cultural mythology that divides “the man, the woman, and the woman’s body” (“Lamentations”), she realizes that the same system designates her body “a grave” (“Dedication to Hunger”), a receptacle into which the hungry and hateful male can empty himself, leaving her with child and a one-word vocabulary:

the word
is bear: you give and give, you empty yourself
into a child. And you survive
the automatic loss. Against inhuman landscape,
the tree remains a figure for grief; its form
is forced accommodation. At the grave,
it is the woman, isn’t it, who bends,
the spear useless beside her.

(“Autumnal”)

Thus throughout Descending Figure Glück shows that for a girl ascending to conventional womanhood in an androcentric society, “an inhuman landscape,” paradoxically means descending (“bend[ing]”) into a “figure” of “forced accommodation” whose fate within the system is mere survival for her self and certain death for her offspring.

Yet Glück’s is not a completely nihilistic vision; a few poems, though nightmarish when read individually, reveal slight hope when themes and viewpoints are juxtaposed. For instance, the adult speaker
of “Dedication to Hunger” tells of her ability to transform gradually her adolescent commitment to starvation (her anorexic attempt to rid her body of “blossom,” of fleshy “subterfuge,” that designates it a repository for male desire, a “grave”) into a more mature dedication to written language (“I felt / what I feel now, aligning these words . . . the same need to perfect / of which death is the mere byproduct”), indicating the female child’s potential for gaining insight and authority through language. So, too, does “Portrait” portray artistic hope when the mother draws the heart against the daughter’s empty “outline of a body,” symbolizing both her refusal to teach the girl the ancient myth expressed in “Lamentations,” that woman is divided from her body, and her commitment to rejoining body and spirit so as to create “life [that had been] missing.” Also defiant is the female speaker of “Rosy” who, unlike the hesitant woman in “The Gift,” commands the attention of her audience, an apparently delinquent lover expecting forgiveness, by likening him to an errant dog and flatly declaring that neither means anything to her. The speakers of “Tango” and “Descending Figure” (who descend from light into dark to record the “blur[ring]” and “disfigur[ing]” of symbolically masculine sunlight with feminine moonlight), further emphasize that conventional men and women might learn to use language differently, not in a futile attempt to manipulate the universe with what Glück pejoratively calls in “Illuminations” a “map of language,” but with the aim to explore relations between traditional, dualistic division — male or female, reason or emotion, even life or death. Eyes readjusted, people might discover a twilight medium through which the world could be reperceived. Then, unlike the male figure in “Nightpiece,” we would no longer rely so desperately and exclusively on rationality, our “nightlight,” to “camouflage” ourselves from “the darkness [of death]” that we “cannot control.”16 Nor, then, would the female symbolize for the male dreadful darkness, man’s antagonist, thereby allowing the perverted ideal of sexual love (represented more as sexual violence in “Aphrodite,” as an objectified, mutilated woman whose “thighs cemented shut” bar male intruders) to be redefined truly as sexual intercourse, an exchange of love instead of hate.17

It would be comforting to conclude that with the publication of her
fourth book, *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985), Louise Glück had shaped her slim hope for a common language into a full-fledged dream. But in fact Glück’s basic message sounds similar to one of Rich’s recent declarations: “I have a nightmare to tell.” Glück’s opening poem, “Mock Orange,” featuring a woman who can rage only indirectly against “the man’s mouth / sealing my mouth,” and the closing, “Horse,” in which a tyrannical husband rebukes his silent, barren wife, frame another body of harshly figured poems. In almost a third of these, Glück continues to explore the connection between the muted female and an androcentric society that stubbornly resists mutation, as if to make way for Rich’s *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986), where her “pen plows deeper” to record “how the women say / in more than one language *You have struck a rock* — . . . but something’s breaking open here / there were certain extremes we had to know / before we could continue” (“One Kind of Terror: A Love Poem”).

It appears that something definitely is breaking open in the tradition of American women poets when two figures, so drastically different in many respects, can be found to share a fundamental goal. Like Adrienne Rich, Louise Glück has persisted in her journey to reveal disturbing depths of human despair in a western culture perverted by patriarchy. Perhaps only by hitting rock bottom — by using art to reflect precisely how traditional western thought has reduced us to playing inhuman roles of thrust and ache — does Glück feel that she can make us know our possible degenerate extremes. Perhaps only that way can she hope to halt our descent. And perhaps only then can she afford to fill future volumes with less harsh figures, transforming the nightmare into the dream and, finally, the reality of a common language.

Notes

4. Louise Glück, *Descending Figure* (New York: The Ecco Press, 1980). Further references will be cited within the text by poem title.


10. See Marks, particularly pp. 837-8.


15. In contrast to my reading of this poem, Calvin Bedient describes the male lover as "corroborative" (169), an exception to the male "woundgivers" in other poems.

16. By contrasting the female's intrepidity with the male's terror in these poems, Glück helps to support Jeanne Kammer's theory concerning the use of silence in contemporary women's poetry: "The use of silence in male artists is often characterized as an acknowledgement of the void, a falling back in the face of chaos, nothingness; for women, there appears more often a determination to enter that darkness, to use it, to illuminate it with the individual human presence; see Kammer's "The Art of Silence and the Forms of Women's Poetry" in _Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets_, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 158.
