

An autumnal underworld: Louise Glück's *Averno*

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In *Averno* (2006), Louise Glück contemplates death from a classical perspective. The title alludes to a significant location from Book 6 of Virgil's *Aeneid*: Avernus, a volcanic crater near Naples identified by the Romans as the entrance to the underworld. The poems in this volume evaluate and interrogate the significance of love and death with a decided inclination towards the peace of the afterlife. In «Crater Lake», the speaker considers the possibility that death is misunderstood because the body has wrongly been labelled «good», which makes death «evil»: when this assumption is challenged, death may be welcome.¹ The overarching myth in *Averno* is that of Persephone and her mother Demeter, in which a girl is abruptly seized by the god of death and taken to the underworld as his bride. Her mother cannot be consoled and in her grief she neglects her responsibility to nurture others. So far the story reflects human life, in which death or marriage might abruptly separate mother from daughter. In the myth, the mother's grief is so powerful that a reunion must be arranged, but Persephone cannot fully return to the earth because she is already committed to Hades (Death). She is permitted to return to her mother, but only for part of the year: this creates an annual cycle in which Persephone's descent to the underworld is the beginning of winter and she returns joyfully in the spring.²

Glück had previously reworked classical mythology in lyric sequences in *Meadowlands* (1996) and *Vita Nova* (1999). In each of these volumes, some poems suggest parallels between ancient heroes and contemporary figures, while other poems in the same volume address related themes in heterogeneous contexts. *Meadowlands* juxtaposes speakers who comment on the prosaic details of a failing marriage in a modern American setting with the characters in Homer's *Odyssey*. Penelope, Odysseus, Telemachus and Circe are found in both strands of the narrative, particularly in dramatic monologues which build up to a disjointed form of dialogue.³ In *Vita Nova*, Glück moves from Greek to Roman poetry, reworking elements of Dido and Aeneas from Virgil's *Aeneid* and Orpheus and Eurydice from the *Georgics*. The speakers are anticipating separation or already divided, befitting a volume in which the obliquely expressed narrative is concerned with a new life after divorce. Orpheus fails to keep his promise not to look back at Eurydice, and she must return to the underworld. Although «Transition / is difficult» and she grieves for the earth's beauty, death protects her from «human faithlessness».⁴ The preoccupations of *Vita Nova* anticipate those of *Averno*, using classical mythology to explore the transition between life and death, a preference for

¹ LOUISE GLÜCK, *Averno*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 28.

² A vegetation myth marking the beginning of seasonal cycles requiring the corresponding development of agriculture, the story of Persephone's disappearance into the underworld symbolises the burying of seeds in the ground, and the reunion with her mother the growth of crops. The rites of the Eleusinian Mysteries were performed in September, and the seed corn planted in October: Sue Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 41.

³ ISOBEL HURST, *Monologue and Dialogue: The Odyssey in Contemporary Women's Poetry*. In: FIONA COX AND ELENA THEODORAKOPOULOS, eds. *Homer's Daughters*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 177-92. See also SHEILA MURNAGHAN AND DEBORAH H. ROBERTS, *Penelope's Song: The Lyric Odysseys of Linda Pastan and Louise Glück*, «Classical and Modern Literature», 22, 2002, pp. 1-33.

⁴ LOUISE GLÜCK, *Poems 1962-2012*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012, p. 388.

the calm of the afterlife, and the idea that the return of spring, however invigorating to the young, has become for the speaker «a messenger of death».⁵

In addition to the yearly cycle of the seasons, there are elements of repetition in the roles of Demeter and Persephone, who can be interpreted as two aspects of the same female deity, mother (mētēr) and maiden (korē): the mother gives birth to a maiden who grows up and becomes a mother. While women poets such as Rita Dove (*Mother Love*, 1995) and Eavan Boland («The Pomegranate», 1994) enter the myth as Persephone and as Demeter at different stages of their lives, in an earlier poem about the myth Glück focused on the daughter's experience.⁶ Glück's «Pomegranate» (1975) is spoken by Persephone. This poem begins with Hades offering his «heart» in the form of a pomegranate, and Persephone frames her initial refusal as a learned response: «I preferred / to starve, bearing / out my training.»⁷ The implied criticism of Demeter is reinforced by Hades' observation of the effects that Demeter's anger has on nature and humanity, while he promotes hell as a vibrant and sensual environment. Here the mother is clearly set up as an antagonist, a controlling, vengeful woman. Yet although the voice is ostensibly Persephone's, for more than half of the poem she is reporting Hades' condemnation of Demeter. Her own observation confirms that the earth lacks «color & odor», but at the end of the poem she has not given her own opinion of Demeter nor eaten the pomegranate seed. Hades claims that Persephone has become «your own / woman, finally», yet he has the last word, acrimoniously belittling Demeter.

1. Personal classicism

Glück's use of ancient myth to accentuate or counterbalance the analysis of emotional states in modern characters is a notable characteristic of her work. Critics have addressed the relationship between her lyric voice and the dominance of the confessional mode in American poetry. For Robert Baker, 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».⁸ Elizabeth Dodd's influential formulation «personal classicism» describes a poetic mode in which the representation of «sexual and familial love, often based on the writer's own experience» is distanced by the use of personae or allusions.⁹ Dodd argues that Glück's juxtaposition of elements inspired by Homer's *Odyssey* with reflection on her own marriage in *Meadowlands* creates «a kind of postconfessional personal classicism».¹⁰ Similarly, Daniel Morris classifies Glück as a «postconfessional autobiographer» who uses myth to distance herself so that she can «approach intimate, upsetting materials in a way that remains, for her, safely under control».¹¹

The issue of control in Glück's poetry has frequently been interpreted in terms of her experience of anorexia as an adolescent. In the poem «Dedication to Hunger» (1980), she represents anorexia as a phenomenon in which the fear of death takes the form of refusing

⁵ Ibid., p. 364.

⁶ ISOBEL HURST, «Love and blackmail»: *Demeter and Persephone*, «Classical Receptions Journal», 4, 2012, pp. 176–189.

⁷ GLÜCK, *Poems*, p. 82.

⁸ ROBERT BAKER, *Versions of Asceticism in Louise Glück's Poetry*, «Cambridge Quarterly», 47, 2018, pp. 131–54.

⁹ ELIZABETH DODD, *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet: H.D., Louise Bogan, Elizabeth Bishop, and Louise Glück*, Columbia, MI: University of Missouri Press, 1992, p. 6.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 149.

¹¹ DANIEL MORRIS, *The Poetry of Louise Glück: A Thematic Introduction*, Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006, p. 23.

food, and is also associated with creativity. Lynn Keller observes that the speaker in that poem develops a rigorously restrained and «fleshless» poetic voice to evade the silencing imposed on women.¹² The scrupulous exclusion of much conventional poetic ornament is a notable feature of Glück's style. Her commentary on this period of her life explores themes which illuminate the significance of Persephone as a persona: appetite; sexuality; death; resistance to maternal control; being heard. The autobiographical essay «Education of the Poet» explains the onset of anorexia in terms of her desperation to establish a sense of self and to reject her mother's control over and pride in her daughter's body. Her response to the realisation that what began as an act of will was endangering her life was to begin psychoanalysis; she describes this as a crucial part of her education, which taught her to think, and which remains a significant element in her poems.¹³ Lee Upton remarks on the self-division of Glück's speakers, «one half of her the suffering woman caught in language, the other half the analyst of such language».¹⁴ The reader also takes on the role of the analyst, as Uta Gosmann argues, and must look for telling «associations, hesitations, and interruptions».¹⁵

Glück's commentary on her poems in essays and interviews connects her work with specific incidents in her life as well as with recurring themes such as family relationships and conflicts, friendship, sex and love, education and reading. Discussing the composition of poems from *Averno*, she relates the story of an injury sustained in a car accident and a lengthy period of physical pain, associating this bodily torment with the loss of her poetic voice.¹⁶ This experience is not directly articulated in the poems but there are references to accident, injury, scar tissue and recuperation in «October», a poem in six sections, first published in the *New Yorker* in October 2002. The poem repeatedly invokes a world which has been irrevocably changed by the abrupt intrusion of violence on a personal and societal level. Recalling the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Glück speaks of having been terrified and unable to get home, «trapped» in California, «apart from the coast I was born on, where these events were occurring».¹⁷ This experience of being powerless to return home recalls Persephone's life in the underworld after Hades has abducted her. Mary-Kate Azcuy argues that in *Averno* Demeter and Persephone experience the repetition of a traumatic event every autumn, suffering post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) along with the survivors of 9/11.¹⁸

«October» begins with disbelief that the seasons have passed so quickly, and with detached scrutiny of human suffering, healing and growth.¹⁹ Physical recuperation is accompanied by reclaiming a poetic voice, following a period of silence when using language to describe an experience appeared to be futile. Every utterance is measured and distrustful.

¹² LYNN KELLER, «Free of Blossom and Subterfuge»: *Louise Glück and the Language of Renunciation*. In LEONARD M. TRAWICK (ed.), *World, Self, Poem*, Kent, OH, Kent State University Press, 1990, p. 123.

¹³ LOUISE GLÜCK, *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry*, Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1994, pp. 10-12.

¹⁴ LEE UPTON, *Defensive Measures: The Poetry of Niedecker, Bishop, Glück, and Carson*, Cranbury, NJ, Bucknell University Press, 2005, p. 81.

¹⁵ UTA GOSMANN, *Psychoanalyzing Persephone: Louise Glück's Averno*, «Modern Psychoanalysis», 35, 2010, pp. 220-21.

¹⁶ *Louise Glück with James Longenbach, 16 February 2005*, «Lannan Podcasts», online at <<https://lannan.org/events/louise-gluck-with-james-longenbach>>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ MARY-KATE AZCUY, «Persona, Trauma and Survival in Louise Glück's Postmodern, Mythic, Twenty-First-Century 'October'», p. 34.

¹⁹ GLÜCK, *Poems*, pp. 493-500.

In the second section, the speaker's mind and body are dissociated as a consequence of «violence», the body is cold and unresponsive, the mind «cautious and wary / with the sense that it is being tested.» This could be a voice speaking after death: Ann Keniston suggests that the speakers in this volume «inhabit a ghostly realm that enables them to comment on and recall both life and death.»²⁰ Such a vantage point offers the analytical mind an opportunity to make a critical assessment of her own life and of the stories others have told about her. In Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* (2005), Penelope declares «*Now that I'm dead, I know everything*»; she takes an active interest in challenging the versions of her story that have accumulated over the course of history.²¹ Glück's Persephone rarely questions her own story: in *Averno*, the self-conscious, metaliterary investigation of myth belongs to an anonymous speaker who is both fascinated and irritated by the multiplicity of interpretations.

2. Poetry and scholarship

Averno frames spring as a coercive return to life, autumn as a period of growth and transition, and winter as seductive. The academic year, in which autumn marks a new beginning, may help to account for Glück's distinctive perspective on the myth. Entering the underworld and beginning a new phase of adult life in the autumn and winter, Persephone goes «home» and regresses to unwelcome dependence on her mother during the spring and summer months. In *Proofs and Theories* (1994), Glück describes a pattern in which her year, like Persephone's, is structured by the seasons:

I live half the year among academics. More accurately, I live that half year with academics, Williams College, where I teach, being unmanageably far from where I otherwise live. For more than a decade, I have boarded each fall with Meredith Hoppin and David Langston, a classicist and a professor of English. Gifts of the fates: a personal classicist, a personal general resource library.²²

For a poet who reworks themes and characters from ancient myth and classical literature, access to a «personal classicist» can offer a level of expertise in language and scholarly interpretation which would otherwise require years of classical learning. The relationship may be a collaboration based around a specific project, perhaps developing into a long partnership which facilitates creative and scholarly innovation. For example, Christopher Logue, who could not read Greek, worked on sections of Homer's *Iliad* with Donald Carne-Ross, who provided him with a word-by-word translation of relevant lines in the early part of the project which became Logue's *War Music*. Henry Power has shown how Carne-Ross (as a classics professor at the University of Texas, Austin) and his colleagues went on to promote and support not only Logue's texts, but also creative translation as a practice and scholarship on literary translation.²³

Glück's attitude to academia is characteristically distanced. She did not attend college as a full-time student but enrolled in Leonie Adams' poetry workshop at Columbia at eighteen, before studying with Stanley Kunitz for some years. Having taught at the college

²⁰ ANN KENISTON, «*Balm after Violence*»: Louise Glück's *Averno*, «The Kenyon Review», 30, 2008, p. 177.

²¹ MARGARET ATWOOD, *The Penelopiad*, Edinburgh, Canongate, 2005, p. 1.

²² GLÜCK, *Proofs and Theories*, p. xi.

²³ HENRY POWER, *Christopher Logue, Alexander Pope, and the Making of War Music*, «The Review of English Studies», 69, 2018, p. 748.

level for 40 years (after her initial resistance to teaching poetry in the early 1980s was overcome by the discovery that it stimulated her own writing), she engages with scholars but emphasises that the academic world is not her home.²⁴ She challenges what she describes as a «commonplace» contrast between the turbulent life of the creative writer and the academic's «zeal for detail compensating for lack of creative intensity», declaring that she has «learned something of the passions that inform scholarly pursuits». Yet she insists that her methods and the work she produces remain separate from those of her scholarly colleagues: «I wrote these essays as I would poems; I wrote from what I know, trying to undermine the known with intelligent questions. Like poems, they have been my education.»²⁵

Her description of the writing of *Meadowlands* highlights a crucial contribution by a scholar. She had composed a «double narrative» in which «a series of petulant, comic conversations, and private bickerings, alternates with, is threaded through, with the story of Odysseus and Penelope», but did not feel that the volume was finished. When she consulted a classicist to determine what was missing, the answer was Telemachus. Glück claims the advice «saved the book».²⁶ Telemachus' contributions to the volume – a bemused yet trenchant interpretation of his parents' fundamentally incompatible personalities and the influence of their different ways of being absent on his own development – offer comic and perceptive reflections on living in an unhappy family and on the distorting effects of fame. The ease with which Glück was able to find Telemachus' gently disparaging voice is noteworthy: as in *Averno's* Persephone poems, she is drawn to the position of resentment directed against a parent.

3. Persephone

While many versions of the myth of Demeter and Persephone have been recorded in antiquity and after, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and Book 5 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are the most influential. In the *Homeric Hymn*, it is clear that Hades' abduction of Persephone was done with the consent and encouragement of her father Zeus, while her mother was innocent of any involvement. Persephone is seen gathering flowers along with a group of nymphs until she unwittingly grasps the narcissus which Gaia (Earth) has produced to ensnare the maiden. Hades emerges in his golden chariot to seize Persephone and carry her away to the underworld. There is no suggestion in this version of the myth that Persephone chose her own fate: «She was being taken, against her will, at the behest of Zeus, / by her father's brother».²⁷ Elizabeth T. Hayes observes that the hymn highlights «the women's valuing of relationship, of unity, of conjunction over the separation and hierarchical ordering valued by the male gods.»²⁸ Unrecognisable in her distress, Demeter shuns the gods and roams the earth. Later she withdraws into her temple and mourns Persephone for a year, during which time she does not allow any seeds to grow. In this year-long winter not only do mortals starve, they cannot

²⁴ Glück taught at Goddard College in Vermont before 1983, then at Williams before taking up a position at Yale in 2004.

²⁵ GLÜCK, *Proofs and Theories*, pp. xi-xii.

²⁶ GRACE CAVALIERI, *Louise Glück: The Poet and the Poem at the Library of Congress*, 2000, online at <<http://www.gracecavalieri.com/poetLaureates/louiseGluck.html>>.

²⁷ *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, trans. GREGORY NAGY, online at <<https://chs.harvard.edu/primary-source/homeric-hymn-to-demeter-sb/>>.

²⁸ ELIZABETH T. HAYES, *Images of Persephone: Feminist Readings in Western Literature*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1994, p. 4.

make their customary sacrifices to the gods, and Demeter refuses to make the earth fruitful until she is reunited with Persephone.

The anonymous narrator makes it clear that Hades conceals the significance of a pomegranate seed he stealthily gives Persephone to eat, which binds her to the underworld. Is Persephone forced or seduced into an act she does not fully understand, or does she choose to eat the pomegranate seed? When Persephone relates her version of the story in the *Homeric Hymn*, she declares that Hades forced her, but Ann Suter observes that Persephone's version of the story is intended to mollify Demeter. Perhaps she «downplay[s] to her mother the fact that she was ready to grow up, that she wanted to leave childhood – and her previous relationship to her mother – behind.»²⁹ If eating the pomegranate seed represents sexual consummation, the question of consent is left for the reader to determine, to weigh up the narrator's version against Persephone's and to fill in the silences in both versions.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* the Muse Calliope sings about Ceres, the goddess of the harvest, and her daughter Proserpina.³⁰ Offended by Proserpina's determination to be a virgin goddess and concerned that her authority as the goddess of love is under threat, Venus instructs Cupid to strike Dis with an arrow. When Dis sees Proserpina picking flowers, he seizes her and violently opens up a new entrance to the underworld. He is angered by the intervention of the nymph Cyane, who declares that Proserpina deserves to be persuaded to accept Dis, rather than terrified into compliance. This is a striking example of female solidarity in the *Metamorphoses*, an onlooker challenging a powerful male deity in a poem which repeatedly shows gods intent on raping nymphs, goddesses or mortal women. Meanwhile Ceres wanders the earth, then wreaks vengeance on the Sicilian landscape from which her daughter disappeared.³¹ This is not the golden age in which crops grow spontaneously but rather the era of agriculture, so when Ceres breaks the ploughs and makes the land infertile she is actively harming humans. Ceres appeals to Jupiter for the return of her daughter, and he agrees on condition that Proserpina has eaten nothing in the underworld. In this story she has eaten seven seeds from a pomegranate she saw in a garden, without any force or persuasion from Dis. Jupiter decides that Proserpina must spend half her year with Ceres and the other half with Dis, a resolution so visibly welcome to Proserpina that even Dis can see her happiness.

4. *Averno*

Seeking to «undermine the known with intelligent questions» (Glück's description of her essays) epitomises the incisive approach to myth in *Averno*. Her take on the myth eschews the pathos of the mother's grief, and is closer to the Ovidian version in which Ceres is a vengeful destroyer, the instigator of widespread devastation, whose weaknesses are only too familiar:

²⁹ ANN SUTER, *The Narcissus and the Pomegranate: An Archaeology of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 2002, pp. 40-41.

³⁰ Ovid uses the Latin names for the deities: Ceres – Demeter; Proserpina – Persephone; Jupiter – Zeus; Dis – Hades.

³¹ Ovid identifies the place from which Proserpina is snatched as Enna, a few miles from Lake Pergusa in Sicily. The lake periodically turns red, in summers when the sulphur content reaches a high level: the redness has been associated with women's rites relating to blood, menstruation and the loss of virginity. MARGUERITE RIGOGLIOSO, *Persephone's Sacred Lake and the Ancient Female Mystery Religion in the Womb of Sicily*, «Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion», 21, 2005, 5-29.

In the first version, Persephone
is taken from her mother
and the goddess of the earth
punishes the earth—this is
consistent with what we know of human behavior [...] ³²

Demeter's «satisfaction in doing harm» is a deliberate betrayal of her role as the goddess of the harvest. Another agricultural catastrophe is associated with Persephone, emphasising her resemblance to her mother in her darkest mood. A young girl sets fire to a dry autumn field of wheat with a single match in «Landscape». Her devastating action creates a kind of underworld above ground, a black and empty place which baffles the senses and renders nature alien:

Afterward there was nothing left.
You walk through it, you see nothing.

There's nothing to pick up, to smell.
The horses don't understand it—

Where is the field, they seem to say. ³³

The field had been productive and beautiful, but became vulnerable and predisposed to burning: «parched, dry— / the deadness in place already / so to speak.» The latent deadness of the field fits with Glück's Persephone figures, who seem to belong more to death than to life even before the story begins. Later in the volume, there is speculation that the girl began life again in a more congenial home: she «moved to some other country / one where they don't have fields.» ³⁴

In the first of two poems titled «Persephone the Wanderer», the speaker acts as an advocate for a girl who has no control over her fate: there is only «an argument between the mother and the lover— / the daughter is just meat.» ³⁵ Spending part of each year with an expert in ancient mythology and engaging with young women's writing as a teacher of poetry may help to explain Glück's return to the Persephone myth three decades after «Pomegranate» and her fascination with the girl who is divided between her mother and lover. Yet despite Glück's continued hostility towards the mother figure, there is little empathy for the daughter. She challenges the story of the rape of Persephone with what Robert Hahn has called an «undercurrent of aggressive flippancy.» ³⁶ The speaker sneers that the myth has been «pawed over by scholars who dispute / the sensations of the virgin» in their eagerness to establish

did she cooperate in her rape,
or was she drugged, violated against her will,

³² GLÜCK, *Averno*, p. 16.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁶ ROBERT HAHN, *Transporting the Wine of Tone: Louise Glück in Italian*, «Michigan Quarterly Review», 43, 2004, pp. 422-26.

as happens so often now to modern girls.³⁷

The poem does not attempt to answer the scholars' question – whether Persephone was «violated against her will» or is content with her relationship with Hades – except to say that «Persephone is having sex in hell». Underlying the dismissive phrase «as happens so often now» are campus debates about consent and sexual assault, and perhaps about reading Ovid's depiction of the rape of Proserpina in class.³⁸ The speaker tries out interpretations of the myth, some of which are informed by an education in psychoanalysis. The characters, she argues, are not people but «aspects of a dilemma or conflict»: «ego, superego, id», correlated with the tripartite structure of heaven, earth and hell. The sexualised conflict between the mother and the lover turns out to be a distraction. Demeter stands for the earth and life, Hades for death, and Persephone inclines towards death: «They say / there is a rift in the human soul / which was not constructed to belong / entirely to life.» The speaker confesses that «trying to belong to earth» has been a soul-shattering experience for her too, and confronts the reader with the choice between life and death: «What will you do, / when it is your turn in the field with the god?»

In the second part of the volume, Glück reinterprets the myth in three more poems – «A Myth of Innocence», «A Myth of Devotion» and a second poem entitled «Persephone the Wanderer». The duplication of this last title recalls a poet Glück has frequently cited, William Blake, who repeats titles to accentuate contrasting perspectives on the same figure («The Chimney Sweeper») or scene («Holy Thursday») in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794).³⁹ Blake also pairs poems with related titles, like Glück's «A Myth of Innocence» and «A Myth of Devotion», which relate the «conflict or dilemma» according to Persephone and Hades, respectively. Although the title «A Myth of Innocence» recalls the child speakers of Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, this poem belonging to the second half of *Averno* seems closer to the knowing and disillusioned voices of *Songs of Experience*. She longs to shed the «horrible mantle / of daughterliness still clinging to her» and speaks the words «*I am never alone*» like a prayer, which is answered by the appearance of the beautiful «dark god» Hades.⁴⁰ The only undesirable aspect of her experience is her «uncle», the sun god, spying on her: since «everything in nature is in some way her relative», to be alive is to be constantly under observation by her mother. Persephone experiments with retelling her story in different ways, rejecting the accusation of abduction but not entirely sure that the simple girl she had been could have offered herself, or «willed» an experience of which she was «ignorant». At the end of the poem she remains unsure whether her prayer was truly answered.

«A Myth of Devotion» (the shortest poem of the four) is concerned with Hades falling in love with Persephone and spending years making painstaking attempts to build «a replica of earth» in which she could be gradually habituated to the underworld.⁴¹ The speaker notes that he fails to anticipate that Persephone's earthly appetites will not be satisfied by his creation, but suggests that this is a typical delusion for a lover and does not condemn his schemes. In the end, all that he can offer is death itself, the absence of pain.

³⁷ GLÜCK, *Averno*, pp. 16-19.

³⁸ ELIZABETH GLOYN, *Reading Rape in Ovid's «Metamorphoses»: A Test-Case Lesson*, «Classical World», 106, 2013, p. 678.

³⁹ WILLIAM BLAKE, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience: Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul, 1789-94*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977.

⁴⁰ GLÜCK, *Averno*, pp. 50-51.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-9.

Although the vexed relationship of mother and daughter remains central to Glück's reading of Demeter and Persephone, *Averno* steps back from that conflict to question (like Margaret Atwood in the *Penelopiad*) who has the power to create and control narratives and how they may be distorted by previous interpretations. The second version of «Persephone the Wanderer», the final poem in *Averno*, begins by asserting that Persephone is dead, and «problems of sexuality need not / trouble us here».⁴² Demeter's compulsive grief is the focus, and her obsession with her one child is seen as perverse behaviour in a deity who could have had countless children. Her selfishness is interpreted as a symbol of the earth's «deep violence» and hostility to life. Yet although the poem rehearses the daughter's anger as her mother «hauls her out again», it is acknowledged that Persephone must return because Zeus decrees it. Spring is a «fiction» of his creation, and it is he who controls access to the desired ending to the story, a death with no more returning to earthly existence. In this reading, life is not a source of joy but a miserable imposition. The speaker repeatedly attempts to persuade Zeus to allow her to stay dead, to escape the unendurable return to the earth. In this reworking of the Persephone myth the power of nature is reinforced even as the conventional understanding of the yearly cycle is questioned and undermined, and poetic platitudes about the spring negated: the icy Elysian fields of winter offer a respite, but eventually the unwelcome spring must return.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 73-6.