

Life Death: Crossing the Threshold in Louise Glück's *Vita Nova* and *Averno*

Mirella Vallone

Università degli Studi di Perugia

Abstract Drawing on the seminar by Jacques Derrida titled *Life Death* (1975), in which the philosopher, discussing Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, analyzes the inseparable relationship – not of opposition but of mutual implication – between life and death, this paper aims to explore this dynamic as it emerges in the poetry collections *Vita Nova* (1999) and *Averno* (2006) by Louise Glück. She offers readers a particularly poignant depiction of what may be termed 'still life': a life shaped by the subconscious drive toward self-destruction and dissolution yet also marked by sudden rebirths and renewals. Extending the reflection begun in *The Wild Iris* (1992), Glück, in the collections under consideration, continues to explore the theme of time by staging voices – often posthumous – that lucidly confront various forms of loss and interpret life, following Derrida, as survival. The paper examines the poetic devices that enable Glück to achieve a unique convergence of psychoanalytic inquiry and mythic detachment, arguing for a revision of the elegiac mode and for a poetic articulation of autothanatography.

Keywords Death. Psychoanalysis. Myth. Elegy. Autothanatography. Derrida.

Summary 1 Beyond the Pleasure Principle: The Co-Implication of Life and Death. – 2 "They Say There is a Rift in the Human Soul... Not Constructed to Belong Entirely to Life".



Peer review

Submitted 2026-05-05
Accepted 2026-06-17
Published 2026-10-12



Open access

© 2026 Vallone | 4.0

In the poem "Retreating Wind" from *The Wild Iris* (1992), the divinity, addressing the man and woman who inhabit and cultivate the garden of life, admonishes them that, whatever they hoped, they will not find themselves "among the growing plants" because, he reminds them, "Your lives are not circular like theirs: / your lives are the bird's flight which begins and ends in stillness - // which *begins* and *ends*, in form echoing / this arc from the white birch / to the apple tree" (Glück 1992, 15).

The woman gardener - one of the three voices in the collection, alongside the deity and the flowers - struggles to come to terms with human finitude. Much like the young poet who, during a walk through a summer landscape in full bloom with Sigmund Freud, is troubled by the awareness that such beauty is inevitably destined to fade - as Freud recounts in "On Transience" (1915) - the gardener repeatedly articulates a form of psychic resistance to the work of mourning.

The theme of time, together with those of desire, trauma, and language, recurs throughout Glück's work. They provide the basis for a reflection that is always in progress insofar as it is in dialogue with life, and therefore never completely resolved or pacified. Within Glück's poetics, death emerges as a persistent presence or spectral figure - at times a persecutory force, at others a source of consolation - and invariably as an object of imaginative reworking and transformation.

Sarantis Thanopoulos suggests that death can be understood in three distinct forms - physical death; the temporary, enduring or reversible loss of objects to which desire is intensely attached, including the physical death of loved ones; and psychic death, namely the drastic contraction of psychic space through a defensive withdrawal from the world. If we accept these three forms of death, we may argue that Glück engages with each of them in her collections *Vita Nova* and *Averno*.

Her mature work frequently stages posthumous voices (those of survivors) capable of articulating what it means to die and survive, to die and be reborn. An early indication of this appears in the prosopopoeic "Wild Iris", which addresses the man and the woman in the garden, telling them: "Hear me out: that which you call death / I remember" (Glück 1992, 1). Such threshold experiences, together with motifs of death and life, become increasingly central in the later collections *Vita Nova* (1999) and *Averno* (2006). These two sequences are united by a sustained exploration of this thematic field, reworked in a manner that is both conceptually rigorous and formally original. The poems also signal - indeed, reveal - the poet's affinity with a psychoanalytic framework, expressed through a distinctive poetics that combines lucid, anti-emotive inquiry with moments of intense insight.

1 **Beyond the Pleasure Principle: The Co-Implication of Life and Death**

In 1920, at the age of sixty-four, Freud published “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, further advancing the exploration of the psyche and its underlying dynamics in novel directions. As Ernest Jones has noted, this work introduced innovations so radical that they profoundly disrupted both psychoanalytic theory and practice (Jones 1977). In this text, Freud outlines a dualistic and antagonistic conception of the fundamental drives that animate human life: alongside the life drives, already present in his earlier theory, he posits the existence of a death drive.

From his clinical observations of war veterans, whose dreams repeatedly re-enacted traumatic experiences – thereby challenging his earlier theory of dreams as wish fulfilments – to the *Fort/Da* game, the well-known spool game of his grandson, Freud identifies the repetition of traumatic events in the form of a compulsion to repeat, which does not conform to the pleasure principle. This leads him to a series of theoretical speculations. He posits a ‘beyond’ of the pleasure principle, which he ultimately identifies with the death drive, whose horizon is the return of the subject to an originary state that precedes existence itself. Life, by contrast, is characterized by perpetual tension and physical, affective, and relational turbulence. The death drive, instead, tends toward a form of definitive homeostasis, the annulment of tensions, and the attainment of a state of equilibrium devoid of impulses or aspirations.

Interestingly, the concluding chapters of “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” faithfully reproduce the original and authentic trajectory of Freudian reflection in the construction of his hypotheses. They present us with Freud’s thought grappling with the most difficult of problems: the mystery of death. At the beginning of the fourth chapter, he states: “What follows is speculation, often far-fetched speculation, which the reader will consider or dismiss according to his individual predilection” (Freud 1955, 24).

The life drive and the death drive cannot be considered independently of one another, but only as a perpetual articulation in which the two drives are interwoven and operate in mutual confrontation. From this perspective, life must be conceived as a diversion from the return of the inorganic to itself, a parenthesis (as Derrida would later put it, a *detour* on the path toward death), a deferral whose aim appears to be the subject’s desire to die in its own particular way:

If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for *internal* reasons – becomes inorganic once again – then we shall be compelled to say that ‘*the aim of*

all life is death' and, looking backwards, that '*inanimate things existed before living ones*' [...] Seen in this light, the theoretical importance of the instincts of self-preservation, of self-assertion and of mastery greatly diminishes. They are component instincts whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, and to ward off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself. We have no longer to reckon with the organism's puzzling determination (so hard to fit into any context) to maintain its own existence in the face of every obstacle. What we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion. (Freud 1955, 38-9).

Andrea Baldassarro (2023) clarifies in this regard, commenting on the Freudian text and the ambiguous nature of pleasure – which corresponds to both the increase and the decrease of tensions and which tends to extinguish itself at the very moment of its exercise – that the subject discovers that, at the very core of the self, in its innermost depths, there dwells a void, a place of non-existence, devoid of all the troubles that life entails, to which the individual ultimately desires only to return. Beyond the pleasure principle, then, lies pleasure itself: an always unfulfilled and enigmatic void.

In 1975, Jacques Derrida delivered a seminar at the *École Normale Supérieure* entitled "Life Death", which offers a meticulous analysis of Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle".¹ As the title itself suggests – presenting the two terms without conjunction or punctuation – the philosopher emphasizes their non-oppositional relation, their absence of conflict, and, ultimately, their mutual co-implication: "Life Death are the Same in itself different, which entails the permanent flow and commutation of one into the other, in a dizzying and constant exchange" (Resta 2024, 23).

The differential dynamic of *life death* constitutes the irreducible condition of the living. The life drive does not stand in opposition to the death drive; rather, they are the same drive insofar as it differs from itself – deviating, deferring, and delaying its own operation (Facioni, Regazzoni, Vitale 2012). For this reason, Derrida argues that

¹ As Pascale-Anne Brault and Peggy Kamuf, editors of Jacques Derrida's *Life Death* – the English translation of the 1975 seminar based on the first complete French edition published in 2019 by Éditions du Seuil – explain, Derrida's teaching activity unfolded in parallel with numerous publication projects and public presentations. He frequently selected passages originally composed for his seminars for subsequent publications; this was the case with the *Life Death* seminar, which provided material for both *Otobiographies* and *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. The long essay in the second part of the latter, titled "To Speculate – On Freud" borrows and develops from the final four sessions of the seminar.

it is possible to discern the law of the proper as the Law governing the most general economy of the drives:

The drive of the proper would be stronger than life *and* than death. We must, then, unfold the implications of such a statement [...] The movement of reappropriation is the most driven drive [...] Beyond all oppositions, without any possible identification or synthesis, it is indeed a question of an *economy* of death, of a law of the proper (*oikos*, *oikonomia*) which governs the detour and indefatigably seeks the proper event, its own, proper propriation (*Ereignis*) rather than life *and* death, life *or* death. The prolongation or abbreviation of the detour would be in the service of this properly economic or ecological law of oneself as proper, of the auto-mobile, auto-affection of the *fort:da*". (Derrida 1987, 356, 359)

However, if, through the drives, the living organism tends toward self-appropriation, this implies that the living being is always already expropriated from itself; that, for the organism, to appropriate itself is to assume as its own the very condition of a fundamental expropriation. For Derrida, this expropriative structure is "irreducible and undecomposable" and invariably prevents appropriation from closing on itself, from achieving itself in a circle (Derrida 1987, 362).

Following this line of reasoning, Derrida posits survival as a structural and rigorously originary dimension of existence: "We are structurally survivors, marked by this structure of the trace and of the testament" (Derrida 2007, 51). He further contends that learning to live ought to entail learning to die (Derrida 1994).

2 **"They Say There is a Rift in the Human Soul... Not Constructed to Belong Entirely to Life"**

The co-implication of life and death, their continuous flux and mutual transmutation, together with a conception of life as survival, characterize the poetic sequences *Vita Nova* and *Averno*, in which Glück explores the intricate relations between life, death, time, otherness, memory, and writing. In these works, the poet mobilizes a range of poetic strategies to inhabit the liminal space between life and death (or to recall having once inhabited it), thereby working through anguish without succumbing to it: temporal distancing, myth, and an internal dialogism informed by psychoanalysis.

That psychoanalysis constituted a formative element of her education and lay at the origin of her writing practice is explicitly acknowledged by Glück herself in "Education of the Poet," where she recounts having suffered from anorexia nervosa during

adolescence. Consequently, she withdrew from high school and began psychoanalytic treatment:

For the next seven years, analysis was what I did with my time and with my mind; it would be impossible for me to speak of education without speaking of this process [...] Analysis taught me to think [...] It gave me an intellectual task capable of transforming paralysis – which is the extreme form of self-doubt – into insight [...] I was learning, I believe, how to write, as well: not to have a self which, in writing, is projected into images. And not, simply, to permit the production of images, a production unencumbered by mind, but to use the mind to explore the resonances of such images, to separate the shallow from the deep, and to choose the deep. (Glück 2022, 16-17).

While the last poems in *The Wild Iris* linger on the threshold of autumn, marked by an anticipation of loss, *Vita Nova* open, in a manner reminiscent of Eliot, onto a “cruel” spring that fails to bring about the renewal of life – unlike the springs of childhood, either dreamt of (“When I woke up, I realized I was capable of the same / feeling”) or recalled (“as far as I remember [...] the moment / vivid, intact”). Instead, spring appears as an emissary of death: “Surely spring has been returned to me, this time / not as a lover but a messenger of death, yet / it is still spring, it is still meant tenderly” (Glück 1999, 2).

The opening of the collection operates as a reversal of the incipit of Dante’s *Vita Nova*: not the blossoming of love (“D’allora in poi dico che Amore segnoreggiò la mia anima”), nor an opening onto life, but rather an encounter with death in the form of a drastic contraction of psychic space, leading to a defensive withdrawal from the world.

The renewal that defines the collection thus emerges as a renewal of both memory and suffering, as the epigraph to “The Burning Heart” drawn from Canto V of Dante’s *Inferno* – “Nessun maggior dolore che ricordarsi del tempo felice ne la miseria” – itself echoing Virgil’s “Infandum, regina, iubes renovare dolorem” (with Dido among the personae of the collection) suggests. Loss is reactivated not only in recollection but also in lived experience, transforming both external and internal landscapes and persisting, for the poetic voices of *Vita Nova*, as the same *vulnus* with which the woman gardener struggles in *The Wild Iris*.

In the poem “Lament”, the speaker, in a form of identification with Orpheus – who has endured the loss of Eurydice more than once (both figures are explicitly present in other poems in *Vita Nova* and *Averno*) – states:

My love is dying; my love
not only a person, but an idea, a life.

What will I live for?
Where will I find him again
if not in grief, dark wood
from which the lute is made.
Once is enough. Once is enough
to say goodbye on earth.
And to grieve, that too, of course.
Once is enough to say goodbye forever. (Glück 1999, 48)

Here we are plunged into the process of mourning, in response to a loss that exceeds that of a lover, and brings about an unwanted transformation, engendering the fear of losing the very capacity to love. As Judith Butler compellingly argues in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, written in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks:

Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. There is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned [...] Something takes hold of you: where does it come from? What sense does it make? What claims us at such moments, such that we are not the masters of ourselves? To what are we tied? And by what are we seized? Freud reminded us that when we lose someone, we do not always know what it is *in* that person that has been lost. So when one loses, one is also faced with something enigmatic: something is hiding in the loss, something is lost within the recesses of loss. (Butler 2004, 21-2)

Butler describes the sense of dispossession as a consequence of loss, together with the feeling of being seized and carried away. Glück articulates this same sense in several poems from *Vita Nova*, which anticipate the abduction of Persephone by Hades, object of poetic reworking in *Averno*. We read in "The Mystery": "My life took me many places, / many of them very dark. / It took me without my volition, / pushing me from behind, / from one world to another, like / the fishlike baby. / And it was all entirely arbitrary, / without discernible form" (Glück 1999, 46).

The drastic, unwanted, and uncontrollable transformation brought about by loss is lucidly described as an experience of death-in-life. The ambivalence inherent in mourning – oscillating between the desire to continue living while enduring the pain of loss and the desire to become one with one's internalized dead objects – leans towards the latter in most of the poems. This is the case of "Aubade",

in which the lovers' parting at dawn is rewritten as the speaker's farewell to the world:

The world was very large. Then
the world was very small. O
very small, small enough
to fit a brain.
It had no color, it was all
interior space: nothing
got in or out. But time
seeped in anyway, that
was the tragic dimension. [...]
//
Out of the stasis, facts, objects
blurred or knitted together: somewhere
time stirring, time
crying to be touched, to be
palpable [...] (Glück 1999, 3-4)

The defensive desire to annul the world and to disappear from it is never fully realized or brought to rest, for time and the awareness of it are vital, and here anthropomorphized, elements that insinuate themselves into "the boundary, the wall / around the self" (Glück 1999, 30) and erode them. In doing so, they cause the speakers to inhabit liminal conditions that offer neither life nor death, as in "Mutable Earth":

I told myself
from nothing
nothing could be taken away.
//
I told myself
if I had nothing
the world couldn't touch me.
//
I was never safe, even when I was most hidden.
Even then I was waiting.
//
[...]
If I was waiting I had been
invaded by time. (Glück 1999, 29-30)

The wound that, in *Averno*, becomes a given – that "rift in the human soul / which was not constructed to belong / entirely to life" – is here, as it were, contemplated for the first time: "The world / was whole because / it shattered. When it shattered, / then we knew what it was"

(Glück 1999, 13). What is to be done with these fragments and pain is taught by Orpheus in the previously cited "Lament" and in "Lute Song": a lute wrought from grief, a harp fashioned from "disaster / to perpetuate the beauty of my last love" (Glück 1999, 17). Glück's position with regard to the relationship between wound and art, trauma and writing, is clearly articulated in the essay "The Culture of Healing," in which the poet reflects precisely on the healing power of art. These reflections help us to understand the poetics expressed in the collections under consideration.

Glück begins from the observation that we live in a society that seeks to suppress, deny, or truncate suffering, and this effort manifests itself in two extremes: the cult of perfect health (both physical and psychological) and what she terms the "pornography of scars", the seemingly endless stream of memoirs, poems, and novels predicated on the assumption that the display of suffering must yield authentic and powerful art: "But if suffering is so hard, why should its expression be easy? Trauma and loss are not, in themselves, art" (Glück 2017, 58).

The types of works the poet has in mind strike her as too readily inclined to inhabit the most dramatic extremes and "to deny loss as continuity, as immutable fact" (59). Instead, they propose a narrative of personal triumph, full of signals such as growth, healing, and self-realization that culminate in a declaration of the soul's wholeness, "as though loss were merely a catalyst for self-improvement" (59). Glück does not identify with this view of art as reparation or *restitutio ad integrum*. In her view, "the artist, like the analyst, cultivates a disciplined refusal of self-deception, which is less a moral position than a pragmatic act, since the only possible advantage of suffering is that it may afford insight" (59). Writing poetry does not heal or repair the trauma suffered, but it is still "a revenge on loss, which has been forced to yield to a new form, a thing that hadn't existed in the world before" (59). From this perspective, the absolute nature of loss becomes ambiguous: "the mutilator, the benefactor" (59).

In light of these reflections, we understand that the meaning of the collection's title, *Vita Nova*, goes beyond the rich intertextuality that permeates it. In effect, it lies in the fact that poetry – the collection itself – has transformed a specific loss (the end of a marriage culminating in divorce), along with all the others it has reactivated, into something else, converting grief into knowledge. The reference, therefore, is to the renewal enacted by poetry rather than to a sense of rebirth, which nonetheless seems to emerge toward the sequence's conclusion. The final poem, entitled "Vita Nova", like the first one, recounts an anguished and painful dream of separation in which a dog is contested rather than children. The last two lines move beyond the narration of suffering, and in italics, the speaker, now in possession of its "I", and with an apparently ironic tone, states: "I

thought my life was over and my heart was broken. / Then I moved to Cambridge" (Glück 1999, 51).

That this rebirth constitutes only a phase within the continuous process linking life to death – in which the two are inextricably intertwined – is made evident in *Averno* (2006), where Glück appears to recognize mourning as an ordinary condition of life and life itself as nothing other than survival.

In this collection, the poet delves even more deeply into the theme of loss, descending with Persephone into the underworld and thereby amplifying the number of posthumous voices that populate her poems. In Persephone, compelled to wander ceaselessly between the earth and the underworld, never fully belonging to either realm, Glück finds a powerful image of the co-implication of life and death.

Wandering, understood above all as an expression of an inner, psychic errancy, marks the collection as a whole, whose prologue is significantly constituted by the poem "Night Migrations". In the mythology and folklore of many cultures, the nocturnal flight of birds is associated with the journey of the souls of the deceased, their passage to the afterlife, or their temporary return among the living. The speaker of the poem, processing grief for those who are no longer alive, simultaneously seeks to identify with them; however, she must necessarily come to a halt in the face of mystery. As Vladimir Jankélévitch, among others, has observed, there is nothing to be known about death. In fact, whatever we may say or think invariably remains on this side of it: it still belongs to life. Death opposes all our logical efforts with an ineradicable enigma, leaving us to contemplate a shocking void:

This is the moment when you see again
the red berries of the mountain ash
and in the dark sky
the bird's night migrations.
It grieves me to think
the dead won't see them –
these things we depend on,
they disappear.
What will the soul do for solace then?
I tell myself maybe it won't need
these pleasures anymore;
maybe just not being is simply enough,
hard as that is to imagine.

In *Averno*, life and death are brought into such proximity that each assumes the features of the other – "Tell me this is the future, / I won't believe you. / Tell me I'm living, / I won't believe you" (Glück 2021, 7), prompting the poetic voice in "October" to declare: "death

cannot harm me / more than you have harmed me, / my beloved life" (Glück 2021, 9).

Modern Persephone, the speakers in the collection "do not live" and are "not allowed to die" (Glück 2021, 17); they drift "between earth and death / which seem, finally / strangely alike" (18). Like the narrators in Dickinson's poems who suffer "Those Evenings of the Brain - / When not a Moon disclose a sign - / Or Star - come out - within - " or can describe "'Tis Dying - I am doing", the speakers of *Averno* feel "a Night in [their] head[s]" (47), inhabit a winter landscape of "suspended action" (42), and devoid of any emotion: "Because I couldn't feel, snow fell, the lake froze over" (42). They tell of having been "somewhere else, in the silence of the night sky" (71) and remembering "being dead" (76).

The narration of these posthumous voices assumes the form of an autothanatography² – namely, an account of the experience of death – already present in *Vita Nova* and, as in that earlier collection, one that ultimately returns to life. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the working-through of grief, unfolding through narrative and the numerous dreams that permeate both collections, persistently reconstitutes life both beyond and within the texts themselves.

These speakers appear to have become aware, in a Derridean sense, of the manner in which death operates at the very core of life, and of the fact that there is no form of life that is not, from the outset, a mode of survival of a death already inscribed at its origin, at the very heart of life itself: "They say / there is a rift in the human soul / which was not constructed to belong / entirely to life [...] Where / the rift is, the break is" (Glück 2021, 19). For Derrida, indeed, survival constitutes a structural and rigorously originary dimension of the human. As he affirms in what would prove to be his final interview:

I have always been interested in this theme of survival, the meaning of which is *not to be added on* to living and dying. It is originary: life *is* living on, life *is* survival [*la vie est survie*]. To survive in the usual sense of the term means to continue to live, but also to live *after* death. [...] All the concepts that have helped me in my work, and notably that of the trace or the spectral, were related to this 'surviving' as a structural and rigorously originary dimension. It is not derived from either living or dying. No more than what I call 'originary mourning', that is, a mourning that does not wait for the so-called 'actual' death. (Derrida 2007, 26)

2 For a critical discussion of autothanatography and literature's evolving ways with death and its representations, cf. Callus 2020.

This dimension of originary mourning, which the poetic voices of *Vita Nova* and *Averno* seem to assume, and which constitutes the dominant note of both collections, allows us to read these poems as contemporary elegies.

Criticism has registered a renewed interest in elegy in the twenty-first century, insofar as it proves capable of addressing ideas otherwise difficult to articulate and explore, while also noting a shift from elegy understood as a poetic form to an *elegiac mode of discourse* that traverses diverse genres and expressive practices (Bardazzi, Binetti, and Culler 2023). Considering that “loss may, in fact, be inextricable from our general experience” (2), David Kennedy identifies an “overwhelmingly elegiac mood” (8) in contemporary poetry, which assumes the key responsibility of giving voice to grief. As Karen Weisman observes, elegy, more than other genres, pushes our expressive resources to their limits at the moment in which we confront our own mortality; that is, it foregrounds the inadequacy of language precisely when we are most in need of it.

While Glück's poems appropriate those anti-consolatory, anti-redemptive, and unconventional features that Jahan Ramazani identifies as characteristic of the modern elegy, they do not register the inadequacy of language in giving voice to grief or in confronting the mystery of death, nor do they stage a struggle with it (like the one we find in Eliot's poems). I would suggest that the confidence emerging in Glück's poems that words can articulate even the most painful and enigmatic experiences is a legacy of psychoanalysis.

To achieve this, in *Vita Nova* and *Averno*, Glück employs poetic strategies of both approach and distancing, enabling her to delve deeply into the themes of loss and mourning in a lucid, anti-emotive manner, thereby positioning her as a post-confessional poet.

The first strategy is the use of an internal dialogism within individual poems. It is well known that Glück's poetry is inhabited by a strong illocutionary impulse – one need only think of the cry of the wild iris that opens the collection of the same name. However, whereas in *The Wild Iris* the pleas for attention voiced by the gardener, the flowers, and the divinity fall into emptiness and fail to generate any genuine dialogism, in *Vita Nova* and *Averno* Glück frequently articulates questions and answers within individual poems. Whether these dialogues are read as an internal debate or as a re-enactment of analytic sessions – given the recurrent narration of dreams and explicit references to the analytic setting (“It's coming back to me – lying on the couch / has refreshed my memory”, Glück, 2021, 31) –, the aim is to gradually delve deeper into darkness searching for and creating meaning out of it.

The other strategy by which she both approaches and distances herself from the “radioactive material” (Glück 2017, 59) of often traumatic personal experience is her recourse to mythology. Critics

have extensively addressed this aspect;³ in the present context, it is sufficient to emphasize that Glück's sustained engagement with the past, as mediated through mythological figures, departs both from modernist poets – for whom the past operates as a repository of truth – and from the revisionist and anti-authoritarian appropriations characteristic of much twentieth-century women's poetry.⁴

In the collections under consideration, we observe that the appropriation and contemporization of myth enables the poet to avoid lapsing into forms of narcissism that, as noted, she explicitly critiques in "The Culture of Healing" when she speaks of the "pornography of scars". At the same time, myth provides her with a means of escape from isolation, enabling her to lift her gaze from the personal to the universal.

Jonathan Culler argues in *Theory of the Lyric* that the fundamental characteristic of lyric lies not in the description or interpretation of a past event, but rather in "the iterative and iterable performance of an event in the lyric present, in the special 'now' of lyric articulation [...] Lyric... places us in the continuing present of apostrophic address, the 'now' in which, for readers, a poetic event can repeatedly occur" (Culler 2015, 226). He further emphasizes that "If one major effect of lyric address is the replacement of a narrative temporality with the temporality of the poetic event, this contributes to what is perhaps its most important effect, the evocation of poetic power" (229).

If one considers *Vita Nova* and *Averno*, together with Glück's sustained deployment of apostrophe therein, it becomes apparent that – even where loss is constituted as the primary object of reflection, and even as she comes to acknowledge, both within and beyond the text, that the work of mourning is constitutive of life, and that "all work in general works *at mourning*" (Derrida 2001, 142) – she nonetheless remains aware of leaving behind a trace of life, whose force resides in the iterative and iterable character of poetry.

3 For an overview of the various critical readings of Glück's blending of mythic and autobiographical narratives, see Hurst 2022.

4 On twentieth-century women poets' use of mythology see Ostriker's comprehensive essay (1982).

Bibliography

- Alighieri, D. (1996). *Vita Nova*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Baldassarro, A. (2023). "La vita la morte. Al di là del principio di piacere". Petra, L. (ed.), *Still life. Ai confini tra il vivere e il morire*. Milano: Mimesis, 49-61.
- Bardazzi A.; Binetti R.; Culler J. (2023). "Contemporary Entangled Elegy". *Journal of World Literature*, 8, 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1163/24056480-00801001>
- Butler J. (2004). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.
- Callus I. (2020). "Autotanatography and Contemporary Poetry". Jernigan D.K.; Murphy N.; Wang W.N. (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Death and Literature*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003107040-33>.
- Culler, J. (2015). *Theory of the Lyric*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674425781>.
- Derrida J. (1987). *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226807867.001.0001>.
- Derrida J. (1994). *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. London: Routledge.
- Derrida J. (2001). *The Work of Mourning*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida J. (2007). *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview*. New York: Palgrave.
- Derrida J. (2020). *Life Death*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Facioni, S.; Regazzoni S.; Vitale F. (2012). *Derridario. Dizionario della decostruzione*. Genova: Il Melangolo.
- Freud S. [1915] (1957). "On Transience". *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIV. London: The Hogarth Press, 305-7.
- Freud S. [1920] (1955). "Beyond the Pleasure Principle". *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVIII. London: The Hogarth Press, 7-64.
- Glück L. (1992). *The Wild Iris*. New York: Ecco Press.
- Glück L. (1999). *Vita Nova*. New York: Ecco Press.
- Glück L. (2017). *American Originality: Essays on Poetry*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Glück L. (2022). *Proofs and Theories. Essays on Poetry*. New York: Ecco Press.
- Glück L. [2006] (2021). *Averno*. London: Penguin.
- Hurst I. (2022). "An autumnal underworld: Louise Glück's *Averno*". *Letteratura e Letterature*, 16, 75-85.
- Jankélévitch V. (1995). *Pensare la morte?* Milano: Cortina.
- Jones, E. (1977). *Vita e opere di S. Freud*. Milano: Garzanti.
- Kennedy D. (2007). *Elegy*. New York: Routledge.
- Ostriker A. (1982). "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking". *Signs*, 8(1), 68-90. <https://doi.org/10.1086/493943>.
- Ramazani J. (1994). *The Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Resta, C. (2024). "Life Death: Jacques Derrida's bio-thanato-politics". *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 29(1), 20-31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725x.2024.2322254>.
- Thanopoulos, S. (2023). "L'incrocio tra la vita e la morte". Petra, L. (ed.), *Still life. Ai confini tra il vivere e il morire*. Milano: Mimesis, 21-28.
- Weisman K. (2010). *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199228133.001.0001>.