

## About Suffering

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### Introduction

In Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, Ludovico Settembrini is asked to write an encyclopaedia of suffering in literature. He quickly realises that it is 'a very complex task . . . demanding much prudence and vast reading', for suffering, he solemnly concedes, is a phenomenon that 'literature has regularly chosen . . . as its topic'.<sup>1</sup> This little book before you works in an opposite way to an encyclopaedia. It focuses on just one writer's use of suffering, and mostly on just one collection. This writer is the North American poet Louise Glück, and even though several of her poems and other writings are examined, the discussion is geared towards her 1992 book, *The Wild Iris*.

The aim may be unencyclopaedic, but the scope isn't. Glück's poems are, like all poems are, in conversation with texts and images and ideas that stretch far beyond any one period, geography, or language. And so the book imagines and establishes exchanges between Glück and the 'great dead', with whom she said her poetry was always in dialogue, and with the living.<sup>2</sup> It keeps circling back to a small set of poets and artists – T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden and Pieter Bruegel, and, more than anyone else, Rainer Maria Rilke – but various other and very different voices enter the discussion, ranging from St. Paul to Paul Tran; Fra Angelico to Ada Limón; Matthias Grünewald to Martha Rhodes. By bringing these voices together, this small book searches for Glück's attitude towards suffering and for what her poetry might tell us about poetry's larger relationship to it.

### 1 The Kindest Suffering

The suffering Glück wrote about is in some ways (often cruel ways) the kindest: suffering that arises out of love, loss, and loneliness. Suffering in Glück is an inescapable feeling and position. Very often, it is the price we pay for love, whether it is accepted in grace, as it is by heartbroken Dido in 'The Queen of Carthage', from *Vita Nova*, who sees it as 'favor' for having lived as Aeneas's love, or with resignation, when we realise (in *The Wild Iris*) that 'it wasn't human nature to love / only what returns love'.<sup>3</sup> 'Why love what you will lose?' Glück asked in the earlier collection, *The Triumph of Achilles*. Because, she replied, 'There is nothing else to love.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. John E. Woods (New York: Knopf, 1995), p. 223.

<sup>2</sup> Louise Glück, 'Education of the Poet', in *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), pp. 3–18, p. 4: 'for those of us attempting dialogue with the great dead, it isn't a matter of waiting: the judgment we wait for is made by the unborn; we can never, in our lifetimes, know it.'

<sup>3</sup> Louise Glück, 'The Queen of Carthage', *Vita Nova*, in *Poems 1962–2020* (London: Penguin, 2021), p. 367; 'Matins', *The Wild Iris*, in *Poems*, p. 247.

<sup>4</sup> Louise Glück, 'From the Japanese', *Triumph of Achilles*, in *Poems*, pp. 192–95, p. 195.

In Ovid's *Heroides*, Oenone writes a letter to her former husband, Paris, who abandoned her for Helen, telling him that 'Whatever one deserves to suffer should be borne lightly' but that 'what comes undeservedly, comes as bitter punishment'.<sup>5</sup> Glück's poetry refuses the distinction. It is marked by cutting melancholy and searing uncertainty, and always by a tragic if quiet recognition that suffering is an unavoidable part of our lives, whether it is deserved or undeserved. Glück finds this insight not just in myth but everywhere she looks, which is very often at trees and flowers, rivers and lakes, or, as in that beautiful sequence in *The Triumph of Achilles*, the moon:

Alone, watching the moon rise:  
 tonight, a full circle,  
 like a woman's eye passing over abundance.

This is the most it will ever be.  
 Above the blank street, the imperfections  
 solved by night—

Like our hearts: darkness  
 showed us their capacity.  
 Our full hearts—at the time, they seemed so impressive.

Cries, moans, our important suffering.  
 A hand at the small of the back  
 or on the breast—<sup>6</sup>

The moon is never full enough to eliminate the suffering of our 'full hearts', but it does provide, as nature often does, perspective and relief in Glück's poetry, lurching 'like searchlights' in her early poem 'Bridal Piece' or looking 'as round as aspirin' in 'The Game'.<sup>7</sup> In 'Messengers', from her second collection, it emerges 'wrenched out of earth and rising / full in its circle of arrows', and in 'October', from the 2006 *Averno*, it appears 'From within the earth's / bitter disgrace, coldness and barrenness' looking 'beautiful tonight, but when is she not beautiful?'<sup>8</sup>

It is, of course, some privilege to 'care about the moon', as the Palestinian-American poet Noor Hindi puts it in her poem 'Fuck Your Lecture on Craft, My People Are Dying'. She too would have liked to write about the moon and flowers and death as metaphor, Hindi says, but she hasn't the luxury.<sup>9</sup> In Glück's

<sup>5</sup> Ovid, *Heroides* V, trans. A. S. Kline: [www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Heroides1-7.php](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Heroides1-7.php).

<sup>6</sup> Glück, 'From the Japanese', *Triumph of Achilles*, in *Poems*, p. 194.

<sup>7</sup> Louise Glück, 'Bridal Piece' and 'The Game', both in *Firstborn*, in *Poems*, pp. 24 and 38.

<sup>8</sup> Louise Glück, 'Messengers', *The House on Marshland*, in *Poems*, p. 66; 'October', *Averno*, in *Poems*, pp. 493–500, p. 500.

<sup>9</sup> Noor Hindi, 'Fuck Your Lecture on Craft, My People Are Dying', *Poetry* (December 2020): [www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/154658/fuck-your-lecture-on-craft-my-people-are-dying](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/154658/fuck-your-lecture-on-craft-my-people-are-dying)

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poetry, we hardly see any material suffering, nor any discussion about how suffering overlaps with social, racial, or economic injustice. Her poetry, both Marjorie Perloff and Ron Silliman complained, is politically too quiet.<sup>10</sup> She herself was aware of that. What we call ‘political art’, she claimed, ‘seems bold, important, serious, whereas the lyric preoccupations with abiding and insoluble dilemmas seem evasive and frivolous’ and, moreover, ‘a parlor art: specialized, over-refined, the amusement of privilege’.<sup>11</sup>

Everyone, wrote Mahmoud Darwish in one of his most memorable poems, has ‘the right to love the last days of autumn’ – even Palestinian poets like Darwish who are expected to focus on the suffering around them. Glück was far more interested in the ‘autumn that blights its leaves with gold’, as Darwish has it in this poem, and in ‘neglected meadow plants’ that watch ‘the seasons change’, than she was in injustice.<sup>12</sup> She did, as we’ll see when we eventually turn to *The Wild Iris*, probe into the theological mystery of suffering’s origins and existence, the problem of its maldistribution and God’s supposed omnipotence, and suffering’s impact on our lives and the responses to it available to us, but the suffering she was most interested in was the suffering that affects everyone, which may be suffering in some senses of the word only, but which will be known well by everyone familiar with life – and with poetry.

## 2 Poets like Orpheus

Poetry, especially lyrical poetry like Glück’s, has long courted suffering, thinking that, in James Longenbach’s words, ‘we become lyrical when we suffer’.<sup>13</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer and Søren Kierkegaard made much of this idea. It is not just that we turn to poetry when we suffer, they argued, or that suffering creates potent art, but that true, beautiful, poetry cannot happen without it. For Schopenhauer, ‘almost every genuine enlightener of mankind, almost every

<sup>10</sup> Marjorie Perloff called Glück ‘a quintessential “School of Quietude” poet’ in ‘La Grande Permission’, *TAB* 1.2, pp. 13–29, p. 28. Ron Silliman explained that the ‘defining’ feature of this so-called school is that its practice is unmarked by race, social class, and gender positions. See his blog, Wednesday 7 July 2010: [www.writing.upenn.edu/epc/mirrors/ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2010/07/allen-ginsberg-basil-bunting-circa-1965.html](http://www.writing.upenn.edu/epc/mirrors/ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2010/07/allen-ginsberg-basil-bunting-circa-1965.html).

<sup>11</sup> See her Introduction to Fady Joudah’s *The Earth in the Attic*, in *American Originality: Essays on Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Staus and Giroux, 2017), pp. 117–27, p. 117. Glück described herself as ‘a white American lyric poet who doesn’t write political poems’ in her interview with Sam Huber in *The Nation*, 18 January 2022: [www.thenation.com/article/culture/louise-gluck-qa/](http://www.thenation.com/article/culture/louise-gluck-qa/).

<sup>12</sup> Mahmoud Darwish, ‘We Have the Right to Love Autumn’, *Unfortunately It Was Paradise: Selected Poems*, trans. and eds. Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché, with Sinan Antoon and Alnira El-Zein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> James Longenbach, ‘Lyric Poetry: Ideas of Order in Poetry’, *Poetry* 5 February 2016: [www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70307/lyric-knowledge](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70307/lyric-knowledge).

great master of every art' must endure 'martyrdom'.<sup>14</sup> For Kierkegaard (who fancied himself a poet rather than a philosopher), the essential qualities of a poet are great capacity and willingness for suffering.<sup>15</sup> 'The poetic life in the personality', he wrote in his journal in 1840, 'is the unconscious sacrifice'.<sup>16</sup>

In that same journal, Kierkegaard quoted the words of the eighteenth-century Danish hymn-writer Hans Adolph Brorson: 'When the heart is most oppressed / Then the harp of joy is tuned.' Brorson's words, Kierkegaard added, were 'a motto for all poetic experience, which necessarily must be unhappy'.<sup>17</sup> He looked back to this idea a few years later in his book *Either/Or*, there claiming the poet as 'An unhappy person who conceals profound anguish in his heart but whose lips are so formed that as sighs and cries pass over them they sound like beautiful music'.<sup>18</sup> That was to conceive of the poet like Orpheus, whom Ovid described in Book 10 of *Metamorphoses* (in the lush eighteenth-century edition) as a bard 'Inflam'd by love'. This bard, 'urg'd by deep Despair' at losing Eurydice, Ovid tells us, 'melodiously complains'.<sup>19</sup> Earlier in *The Georgics*, Virgil (in David Ferry's enduring translation) had him 'Sat underneath a towering cliff', weeping and singing; his lament, Virgil imagined, 'fills the listening air' like a nightingale's song, entrancing beasts and trees.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, 'On the Suffering of the World', in *Essays and Aphorisms*, selected and translated by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1976), pp. 131–32.

<sup>15</sup> See Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. ix, where Mackey claims that 'Kierkegaard is not, in the usual acceptation of these words, a philosopher or a theologian, but a poet'. Kierkegaard wrote in his journal in 1851: 'I am a poet'. See his *Journals and Papers*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 7 Vols (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1967–78), vol. 6, p. 371 [X 3 A 789]. On the role assigned to suffering by Kierkegaard, see George Pattison, 'Art in an Age of Reflection', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, eds. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 76–100, p. 80: 'it is suffering that generates aesthetic creativity and the poet, albeit unconsciously, sacrifices the achievement of wholeness in life for the sake of an ideal, poetic wholeness'.

<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 1, p. 450 [III A 62]. <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 369 [III A 12].

<sup>18</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 1, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> See Samuel Garth's adaptation of Book 10 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, trans. John Dryden, Joseph Addison, Samuel Garth, et al. reprinted (New York: Garland, 1976), originally published in 1717, and in a lavish edition with plates in 1732, pp. 327–27. David Raeburn's 2004 translation of *Metamorphoses* (London: Penguin, 2004) is closer to the original but less fun. Where Garth wrote that Orpheus 'melodiously complains', for example, Raeburn has him 'enhancing his words with his music' (p. 384). C. Luke Soucy's new translation (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023) has him simply 'sing' (p. 257).

<sup>20</sup> *The Georgics of Virgil*, trans. David Ferry (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. 181. Virgil's term for this lamentation is *miserabile carmen*. Ferry reprints his translation of this part of *The Georgics* in *Bewilderment: New Poems and Translations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 91.

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It's a delicious idea, the poet as sufferer, singer, ultimately as saint: someone capable and willing to bear up a great amount of pain for poetry.<sup>21</sup> But it's also a heavy one. If a poet is a martyr from whose suffering we reap rich profits, where does that position us in the relationship? Are we turned into sadistic voyeurs? And if poets are tasked with singing their suffering, then what does that do to them? And what about those around them? When Glück retold the story of Orpheus in her collection *Vita Nova* in 1999, she had him protest that 'I am completely alone now' and ask what job Eurydice (and the readers) had 'wanting human comfort' when it's known that 'there is no music like this / without real grief'.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, *Vita Nova* called attention to Eurydice's own position. 'No one wants to be the muse', Glück wrote in the poem called 'Lute Song'; instead, 'everyone wants to be Orpheus'. More crucial, it was 'not Eurydice, the lamented one', that Orpheus's song restored 'but the ardent / spirit of Orpheus'. As she did with other poets elsewhere in her work, in *Vita Nova* Glück accused the suffering poet of 'deflected narcissism'.<sup>23</sup>

Delicious was exactly how Rainer Maria Rilke saw suffering. 'Long must you suffer, knowing not what', he wrote in Paris in an uncollected poem of March 1913, 'until suddenly, out of spitefully chewed fruit / your suffering's taste comes forth in you'. And 'Then you will love almost instantly what's tasted', so much so that 'No one / will ever talk you out of it'.<sup>24</sup> Suffering for Rilke was not just delicious but addictive too. Further – and Rilke always likes to go further – suffering for him was desirable, and what marks us as human. In this poem, Rilke was following Kierkegaard, for whom suffering was 'the negative form of the highest' and as such evidence of spiritual maturity, as well as in the tracks of Schopenhauer, who saw suffering as positive.<sup>25</sup> Behind

<sup>21</sup> Terry Eagleton argued in *Radical Sacrifice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018) that the idea of the author as martyr has persisted in modern literature. Because 'he immolates his own existence for the sake of his art', Eagleton maintained, the modern author 'is priest and victim in one body, and is in this sense akin to the martyr' (p. 20).

<sup>22</sup> Louise Glück, 'Orfeo', *Vita Nova*, in *Poems*, p. 380. Cf. 'Lute Song', in the same collection: 'I made a harp of disaster' (p. 379).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Uncollected Poems*, trans. Edward Snow (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. 51. See also Rilke's advice to the young poet Kappus, in *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Modern Library, 2001), p. 41: 'love your solitude and try to sing out with the pain it causes you'.

<sup>25</sup> See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 162. As Klaus-M. Kodalle has explained, while Kierkegaard claimed that suffering is the negative form of the highest, he was also clear that suffering in itself brings no assurance of the authenticity of the God-relationship. See Kodalle, 'The Utilitarian Self and the "Useless" Passion of Faith', *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, pp. 397–410, p. 409. On Kierkegaard's view of suffering, see also his journal entry from late 1852, cited in English translation by Bruce H. Kirmmse in his Introduction to Kierkegaard's *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air: Three Godly Discourses*, trans. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. vii–xxxv, in which Kierkegaard claims that the Christian God's 'paradoxical majesty' is one 'recognizable by suffering' (p. xxiv). On

Rilke's poem we can also hear Nietzsche (say 'yes' to suffering), while he also anticipated Franz Kafka, who would write a few years after Rilke (in his *Blue Octavo Notebooks*, written 1917–19) that suffering was 'the only link between this world and the positive' and something we should embrace even in the knowledge that there might be no recompense for it: 'We . . . must suffer all the suffering around us.'<sup>26</sup>

Rilke's ninth Duino elegy, part of the *Duino Elegies* he began in 1912 and finally published in 1923, drew a link between the condition of being human, of 'being at one with the earth', and the experiencing of suffering (Rilke's German word is *Schmerz*).<sup>27</sup> The poem, in Stephen Mitchell's 1982 translation, opens with a question: 'why then / have to be human—and, escaping from fate, / keep longing for fate?' Schopenhauer had argued that happiness is a distraction; that, being the negation of a desire upon satisfaction, happiness is negative and ephemeral.<sup>28</sup> Rilke agreed, describing happiness in the elegy as 'that too-hasty profit snatched from approaching loss'. What we are on this earth for, what we learn from, or what we take with us forward is not happiness but suffering:

[. . .] Not the art of looking,  
 which is learned so slowly, and nothing that happened here. Nothing.  
 The sufferings, then. And, above all, the heaviness,  
 and the long experience of love,—just what is wholly  
 unsayable [. . .]<sup>29</sup>

Schopenhauer's view of suffering as positive, see his 'On the Suffering of the World', *Essays and Aphorisms*, p. 132. As he argued there, happiness is among those negative things that refer to 'the mere abolition of a desire and extinction of pain' (p. 4).

<sup>26</sup> According to Stein A. Hevrøy, 'if one is to follow the Nietzschean ethics . . . one must say yes to both the ontologically necessary suffering (as sickness, aging and death) and the suffering of the past that has been generated by resentment'. See 'The Ethical Fruitfulness of Nietzsche's View on Suffering', *Making Sense of Suffering: Theory, Practice, Representation*, eds. Bev Hogue and Anna Sugiyama (Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, 2011), p. 14, where Hevrøy links saying 'yes' to suffering to accepting what Nietzsche called *amor fati*. Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* states: '*Amor fati*: let that be my love from now on! I do not want to wage war against ugliness. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse the accusers. Let *looking away* be my only negation! And, all in all and on the whole: some day I want only to be a Yes-sayer.' See *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 157. On Kafka's views on suffering, see his *Blue Octavo Notebooks*, ed. M. Brod, trans. Ernst Kaise and Eithne Wilkins (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1991), p. 105. See also Sara Teresa Shafer, 'Bound and Undetermined: Kafka, Abraham and the Meaning of Suffering', *Making Sense of Suffering*, pp. 215–221, especially p. 217.

<sup>27</sup> Rilke gives this word in the plural: *die Schmerzen*.

<sup>28</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, trans. and eds. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 345: 'All satisfaction, or what is generally called happiness, is actually and essentially only ever *negative* and absolutely never positive. It is not something primordial that comes to us from out of itself, it must always be the satisfaction of some desire.'

<sup>29</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 2009), p. 55.

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The elegy's opening question answers itself: we suffer because we exist. Let's embrace suffering and 'heaviness', which is 'the long experience of love', and let's not dismay that such feelings might be 'unsayable'. And let's not let our sufferings go to waste. This is what Rilke's tenth Duino elegy prompts us to do, cautioning us not to be wasteful of pain (*Vergeuder der Schmerzen*). The poem, in Mitchell's translation, calls our attention to

[...] How we squander our hours of pain.  
 How we gaze beyond them into the bitter duration  
 to see if they have an end. Though they are really  
 our winter-enduring foliage, our dark evergreen,  
*one* season in our inner year—, not only a season  
 in time—, but are place and settlement, foundation and soil and home.<sup>30</sup>

A. Poulin Jr's 1975 English translation of this moment in the elegy is sharper:

[...] We waste our sufferings.  
 We stare into that boring endurance beyond them  
 looking for their end. But they're nothing more  
 than our winter trees, our dark evergreen, one  
 of the seasons in our secret years—not just a season,  
 but a place, a settlement, a camp, soil, a home.<sup>31</sup>

It's an arresting – jarring, paradoxical, and hopeful – idea, that of suffering as (both translations agree) 'our dark evergreen'. We find a similar metaphor of suffering as forest in the fourth of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1922), a poem that duly advises us (in Mitchell's translation) to embrace suffering: 'Don't be afraid to suffer', but instead 'return / that heaviness to the earth's own weight'.<sup>32</sup> In his adaptation of this sonnet in 2006, Don Paterson translated Rilke's words as 'Don't fear your suffering. Give up your burden: / the Earth will barely notice its return.'<sup>33</sup> Paterson is on point because, beyond the standard reading of Rilke as encouraging us to embrace suffering, he also stresses that the earth can handle our suffering because it simply doesn't much notice. How to fall – 'how to rest patiently in gravity' – and what we can learn were two questions that concerned Rilke in his earlier collection, *The Book of Hours* (1905), too, where he associated falling with having faith in the divine.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>31</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. A. Poulin, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), p. 69.

<sup>32</sup> Rilke, *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. Mitchell, p. 89.

<sup>33</sup> Don Paterson, 'The Spaces', in *Orpheus: A Version of Rilke's Die Sonette an Orpheus* (London: Faber, 2006), p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Book of Hours*, trans. Edward Snow (New York: Norton, 2024), p. 191.