

Book Review

Faithful and Virtuous Night¹

Louise Glück, 71 pp. Farrar, Straus and Giroux

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The English Romantic poet, John Keats once said “Heard melodies are sweet/ but those unheard are sweeter”. However, when one reads 2020 Noble Prize winning American poet Louise Glück, one is compelled to replace ‘unheard’ by ‘unsaid’ as it, according to her, ‘exerts great power’. Glück, who started off her poetic career with an effort to prove existence, reached ‘beyond existence’ with her 2014 National Book Award winning collection of poetry “Faithful and Virtuous”.

This volume of poetry containing 24 poems gets its title from the book that a character reads in one of her poems. Illusion of certainty and the constant conflict between clarity and doubt rules this volume. The book not only comprehends the paradoxes of real and surreal but also shapes them in a credible way. According to some critics, this collection is a novel in short vignettes with lines instead of paragraphs. Though Glück does not revolutionize the form, she does try certain techniques that her earlier work does not show. Especially, her use of multipage sequences of numbered parts with different stanza shapes, poems of many unbroken pages and fables is noticeable.

William Gibaldi (2014) remarked that “[t]he facts of any life are impotent and ineffectual until literature intercedes, until it takes hold of those facts and twists them into the light, casting a refraction that allows us to glimpse them anew”. This would be a befitting remark for this collection. Glück, with her artistic genius and a poet’s sensibility, breathes a new life into those facts and brings a new

experience to her readers. In one of her interviews Glück mentioned that her bemoaning the loss of words was the actual wealth of material for her poetry. It was an unexplored territory for her. What surprises a reader is the authorial shape shifting. Though these poems portray the solitary self, they do not become autobiographical verse diaries, as the poet persona is an aging male painter.

The book reads like the recollection of the childhood memory from the old age vantage point. In the title poem, the “knight” appears to be ‘Night’ as it refers to the brother reading about King Arthur. It succeeds in evoking the ambience and mystery of childhood. On the surface, narrative of Faithful and Virtuous Night is the story of a painter with an older brother. The painter’s parents died when he was a child. An aunt raises them in an English town where the painter now lives after suffering a breakdown. He has come back to the town to remember the sad life and awaits death. What lies beneath this overtly simple narrative is the writer’s troubled swinging between the past and the present with the overarching acknowledgment of death’s omnipresence. It is neither the surrender resistance (like Dylan Thomas’s ‘Do not go gentle into that good night’ that marks this journey). It is Glück’s daring ability to confront death as an adventure that strikes you as you move from page to page.

Glück’s deployment of the medieval literary genre, namely, the dream vision shapes Faithful and Virtuous Night. The conundrum that issues from the ‘daylight’, rather than getting resolved, is played out as symbols and allegory at ‘night’. One can experience the book shuttling between the thinking and dreaming. Though rising from the visceral facts of personal life of the author, the book leans towards the dream side. Moreover, the dreamlike quality hints at the inaccessible ‘befores’ and ‘afters’. The following lines in the title poem aptly present the dreamlike experience:

The day had become unstable.
 Fissures appeared in the broad blue...
 [...] sudden black clouds
 imposed [...]
 Somewhere, in the far backward reaches of time,
 my mother and father

were embarking on their last journey,
 my mother fondly kissing the new baby, my father
 throwing my brother into the air.

The otherwise inaccessible “time” and “space” is reached out through language. The play between the ‘day’ and ‘night’ is a constant oscillation between the ‘past’ and the ‘present’ and the outer world and the inner world. Though the collection revolves around time, it is the spatiality that shapes it. Time becomes a field where the oldest merges in the latest, thus blurring the line between the past and the present as well as the ‘real’ and the ‘invented’.

Much like the Yeatsian style, the aging orphaned woman in Glück creates the second childhood in the form of a young, orphaned boy. To tell her own story, Glück devises a story of two brothers growing up under the care of an aunt. The night becomes ‘knight’ and an occasion for verbal magic as the poet experiences her heart “protested its future, like a small child being deprived of a favorite toy”.

Glück’ is certainly not the first poet to conceive old age as the second childhood; however, the archetypal and fanciful language with which she develops this idea, elevates it to the level of eccentricity and pathos. The poems speak of deepest secrets of time in a child’s vocabulary. The frequent appearance of images such as “mother”, “father”, “winter”, “book”, “night”, “adventure”, and “stars” is almost rhythmic.

Glück’s language succeeds in articulating the craving for the darkness as it enables the sense impressions of the childhood to surface with remarkable intensity as these impressions filter through the characters and remembered through time. The following lines in the title poem capture this sense:

I listened to the various sounds of birds we fed,
 the tribes of insects hatching...
 ---- my aunt’s sewing machine drilling
 Hole in a pile of dresses-

Another interesting aspect of Glück's experiments with language is that her poems have a deceptive incompleteness. For example, in "A summer garden" Glück writes, "Mother died last night, Mother who never dies." Structurally this may sound incomplete and out of synch; however, within the context of the series, it makes sense.

As T.S. Eliot (1984) remarked in his essay "No poet, no artist of any art, has his [her] complete meaning alone. His [Her] significance, his [her] appreciation is the appreciation of his [her] relation to the dead poets and artists" (37). Glück brings to our mind the wisdom that the American poet Robert Frost expressed in his poetry. Especially Frost's "Stopping by the woods on a snowy evening" or "Road not taken" talk about the choice between 'moving forward' and 'wish to go back'. Both poets offer us a clarification of life like many other poets; however, Glück does not do it at the expense of 'doubt'. For her nothing is final and certainty is an illusion. With her ecstatic blankness Glück leaves us 'lost' and with 'uncertainty'.

Like her earlier work, *Faithful and Virtuous Night* continues Glück's reputation as truth teller without sentimentality. Melancholy and skepticism sets the tone of her poetry. While Glück's poetry does not escape from the traumas and pains of childhood and the familial past, Glück weaves them into myths and narrative. Thus, she transforms her personal experiences into a voice that tells the painful truth of one kind of human experience. For Glück it is language, and not religion that must serve as moral mirror. Moreover, truth for Glück is not out there and it does not strike you from behind and in the dark as the American Naturalist, poet and philosopher Henry Thoreau believed. It comes from the oscillations of desire and disquietude.

One is quick to notice the beauty of the organization of the poems in this collection. The reader is at a loss if one chooses to pick up any poem to read. Though the book tells you a single story, the individual poems are mutable. Each poem becomes an island in itself. Glück ferries you from poem to poem, some long, for instance "Faithful and Virtuous Night", some short one-paragraph prose bursts like "Theory of Memory", miniature parables like "Utopia", constantly bringing you back to stillness and night which forms the basis for human existence.

What compels you to stick to the book is not the optimism or a transcendental promise, but the assertions that mere survival in the face of void and chaos that lies between life and death is an incredible wonder. The poems in this collection deliver it with conviction.

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