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"Persephone Longs for Hades: Embodiment, Vulnerability, Suicide, and Failed Resilience in Louise Glück's *Averno*"

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Abstract: Suicide is a persistent theme in literature. A compelling example of a suicide attempt in contemporary poetry is that of Persephone in Louise Glück's *Averno* (2006). In this book of poetry, Glück revisits the ancient myth of Persephone, who pervades contemporary literature representing different social and feminine roles. In Glück's poetical appropriation, Persephone goes from being Demeter's daughter to becoming Hades' wife, always tying her existence to someone else's. Thus, the aim of my proposal is to, firstly, determine the reception of the myth of Demeter and Persephone in Glück's appropriation. Secondly, I aim to analyze the concept of vulnerability associated with embodiment and resilience. Thirdly, I address the role of embodiment in Glück's poetry. After that, I scrutinize the reasons that drive Persephone to consider suicide as a way of resistance and as a way to express agency by showing the results of Persephone's inability to escape her body because of her condition as a goddess, and the way she fails to reach resilience. Then, I conclude with an overview of the factors that determine Persephone's potential agency focusing on her body as the locus which articulates her vulnerability.

Keywords: Suicide, Corporeal Vulnerability, Persephone, Louise Glück, Resilience.

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Persephone Longs for Hades: Embodiment, Vulnerability, Suicide, and Failed Resilience in Louise Glück's *Averno*

0. Introduction

In recent years mythical retellings have been booming, and such is the case of the myth of Demeter and Persephone, which has been present in the writings of prominent names for years (Radford; Louis; Blackford; Norton; Bijelic). One such author would be Louise Glück, who on two occasions writes about the myth of Demeter and Persephone in her poetry, the first time being in *The House On Marshland* (1975), more specifically in the poem "Pomegranate", and then all throughout *Averno* (2006). She has been a celebrated writer for the past years and has received various prestigious awards, among which we find the most recent one, the Nobel Prize for Poetry in 2020. Her writing combines simple syntactic structures and long sentences merged with mixed diction. Authors like Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Robert Lowell, William Blake, William Shakespeare, W. B. Yeats, Sylvia Plath, John Keats, and T. S. Eliot, among many others, play a preeminent role in Glück's writing (Glück 1994; Yezzi; Glück 2017; Brahic). Her thirteen books of poetry, two of criticism, and her most recent first novel *Marigold and Rose: A Fiction* (2022) are characterized by psychoanalytic, theological, mythological, and autobiographical themes. Indeed, what defines Louise Glück's writings is her use of confessionalism. As such, Glück's poetry reflects a series of predicaments in her own life, which are, to borrow the words of Robert Baker:

> the sorrows of family (the family of her childhood as well as the family of her adulthood), the costs of a longing for independence lived primarily as a stance of opposition, or the tension between a longing for independence and a longing for relationship, and an intuition that the core of human experience is loss, grief, and death. (131)

Interestingly, as Ann Keniston asserts when addressing *Averno*, "Glück's speakers are mostly posthumous; or more precisely they inhabit a ghostly realm that enables them to comment on and recall both life and death" (177). As Isobel Hurst explains, referring to *Averno*,

> 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. ("An Autumnal Underworld: Louise Glück's Averno" 75)

In point of fact, Glück's poetry is many things, for starters, borrowing Baker's words, "an art of disillusion" (135). Furthermore, as Sarah Wyman puts it, "whereas Glück explores gendered

power dynamics throughout her poetry, she generally eschews overt political engagement with intersectional topics" (142). Moreover, as David Yezzi notes, "beginning with *Firstborn*, Glück has gazed unblinkingly and distastefully on the corporeal" (107). I am inclined to propose that the continuous presence of the corporeal in Glück's poetry goes hand in hand with her personal experience with anorexia nervosa (Sewell; Vembar). As Hurst puts it, "the issue of control in Glück's poetry has frequently been interpreted in terms of her experience of anorexia as an adolescent" (2022: 76), and indeed, after being constantly controlled by her mother, Glück decided to stop feeding herself to gain control over her body, yet this eating disorder got out of hand (*Proofs & Theories: Essays on Poetry* 10-11). Also, Walt Hunter makes a very interesting point by stating that "one of the most striking qualities about the poetry of Louise Glück (...) is the way it returns again and again to the start of things—a story, a myth, a day, a marriage, a childhood" (2020).

The myth of Demeter and Persephone appears to be ideal to explore autobiographical, mythological, and psychoanalytic topics. Indeed, Glück's appropriation of this myth has attracted the attention of multiple researchers who examine Persephone's psychological landscape in *Averno* (Keniston, Gosmann) addressing, one way or another, the authority to which Persephone is subjected. As Kacper Bartczak remarks, in *Averno* we will find how "Persephone's subjection to the will of her mother and husband will be correlated, as a myth related to barrenness, to the psychical condition of the subject" (74). After Morris introduces the theme of trauma related to Glück's poetry (98-148), other researchers point out trauma in *Averno* concentrating on, for instance, Demeter's trauma rather than Persephone's (Azcuy 2013). Also, others relate Glück's personal experiences with her reception of the Persephone myth (El Bakary) and others, although acknowledging the importance of Persephone's experience, concentrate on Demeter's sense of identity (Cooke). The present essay attempts to shed light and fill a gap on the way Glück explores themes like corporeal vulnerability, suicide, and failed resilience in her appropriation of the ancient myth of Demeter and Persephone focusing on Persephone's fragility as a maiden attempting to escape her body to evade her reality. Persephone's dependency, first as a daughter and then as a wife, is part of what makes her vulnerable and results in her resistance to this dependency, trying to commit suicide in a desperate act of agency that seems to be the one giving her a fake sense of control over her vulnerability.

My proposal revolves around the understanding that in Glück's poetical reimagining of Persephone's myth, suicide becomes an ironically tragic attempt to escape life since she is a goddess. At the same time, I submit that suicide is represented as a way to gain control over her own body, symbolizing Persephone's rejection of her vulnerability as well as her interpretation of freedom by getting rid of the body her mother controls. Nevertheless, this failed attempt to regain a sense of control enhances her role as a victim of both Demeter and Hades, as suicide becomes a metaphor alluding to marriage in this book of poetry. The former inspires her decision to escape her body, while the latter represents the reason she will be forever trapped in a cycle of control. Hence, one will have control over her body on earth and the other in the underworld.

Emotions also play a major role in Persephone's predicament as there is a connection between shame, grief, and fear with vulnerability (Brown 2006; Brown 2012). As such, in the

remaining part of this paper, I will start addressing the dialogue between the ancient myth and Glück's contemporary appropriation. Then, I will analyze the concepts of embodiment and resilience attached to vulnerability. After that, I aim to introduce the conception of "the body" in Glück's poetry, in general, to better understand the vulnerability present in *Averno,* where Persephone wants to escape her body as a means to resist her mother's authority. In sum, this article will try to offer a new understanding of how Persephone sees suicide as a way to empower herself over her vulnerability. From my standpoint, in Persephone's eyes, suicide represents a means of resistance since it appears to give her a sense of power and agency. Notwithstanding, the reason she wants to escape her body is that she does not accept her vulnerability. Indeed, the concept of agency (Cole) will be addressed to establish the extent of control Persephone has over her own life when it is the rejection of her dependency the one that drives her to attempt to drown herself. With these aims in mind, this article will use Reception Studies and Vulnerability Studies as the main theoretical framework to explore the bond between the ancient myth and Glück's contemporary rewriting by contemplating corporeal vulnerability and resilience (Wainwright and Turner; Turner; Butler; Fineman 2019).

1. Classical Receptions

Classical Reception Studies, which were shaped around the second half of the twentieth century, scrutinize the relationship between the ancient classical, *i.e.* Greco-Roman, sources and the contemporary ones (Hardwick). These studies were originally developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer, and then by Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss (Leonard). In Maarten De Pourcq's eyes, "from the viewpoint of reception studies, works of art are no longer perceived as possessing an immanent value, but are time and again 'received', 'appropriated' and 'reproduced' by new cultural communities and individuals" (220). This field of Classical Reception Studies includes "a variety of departments and disciplines, each with its own canons, practices, and shared working assumptions" (Brockliss 11). As such, these studies are inextricably linked to the classical tradition, which, as De Pourcq (222) rightly observes, shields the classicists' study of ancient sources. Maarten De Pourcq, Nathalie de Haan, and David Rijser point out that this field is mostly addressed as classical reception studies "because it consists of various sorts of attempts to think or to engage with classical reception from the perspective of different fields of study" (1). As Anastasia Bakogianni remarks:

> Reception theory rejects the existence of the one, original, objective and fixed text that has to be examined as a pure art form as new criticism and many postmodern theorists would argue. In reception we speak rather in terms of text's', plural because each time a text is read it is being received and interpreted in a new way. (97)

This statement makes clear the impossibility that lies behind the choice of one *truthful* source over another. As per the most ancient written version of the myth of Demeter and Persephone, this is the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, which tells the story of how Koré becomes Persephone (Doudoumis 1539-1546), the goddess of the underworld after she is abducted by Hades (Foley 28-64). The maiden cries for help in hopes to be rescued, while Hades carries her away (*HDem*

ll. 1-21). Meanwhile Demeter, Persephone's mother and the goddess of the harvest (Brunel and Karakostas 515–20), looks for her, roaming the Earth and subsequently stopping vegetation from growing until Zeus decides to reunite her with her daughter (*HDem* ll. 30-389). Yet, Persephone is bound to return to Hades once a year as a result of her eating in the underworld (*HDem* ll. 445-447). Differently from the ancient myth, Glück's contemporary appropriation of this story shows us another outlook. This time Glück presents not only an acutely vulnerable Persephone, who shares many similarities with the ancient goddess, but also focuses on her living a contrasting experience, namely her willingness to embrace the god of death. Interestingly, instead of being kidnapped, Glück's Persephone longs for Hades because of the control of her authoritarian mother:

> She sees
> the same person, the horrible mantle
> of daughterliness still clinging to her.
> (...)
> everything in nature is in some way her relative.
> *I am never alone*, she thinks,
> turning the thought into a prayer.
> Then death appears, like the answer to a prayer. ("A Myth of Innocence," ll. 4-6; 9-12)

As I will subsequently explain, in Glück's retelling of the story, Persephone's vulnerability is introduced when she attempts to evade her body and therefore rejects her vulnerable side. However, instead of finding herself free of control she realizes that choosing death is inconceivable for her as a goddess. Therefore, the closest she can get to death is through marriage by becoming Hades' wife, the god of the dead. Nonetheless, being Hades' wife is not what she expected.

Aside from mythology, Glück's writing also traces echoes of psychoanalysis, theology, and autobiography, which I consider are very present throughout her whole poetry (Morris; Wyman; Bartczak). Also, as Allison Cooke aptly puts it:

> Glück's poems explore and illustrate the truth of the perilous journey a young woman takes as she grows up and becomes a woman of and beyond her body and mind. This difficult and traumatic journey places her in a deep identity crisis which threatens the loss of herself by being forced into a new identity. (35)

To my mind, Glück's reappropriation of the myth of Demeter and Persephone reflects how Persephone undergoes a journey towards adulthood while questioning her identity. Glück's reworking of this mythical story not only gives another perspective of the mother-daughter bond between Demeter and Persephone, but also shows the impact that Demeter and Hades have on Persephone's identity while assimilating both her mother and her husband in terms of control, as seen in "Persephone the Wanderer" (I):

in the tale of Persephone
which should be read

as an argument between the mother and the lover—
the daughter is just meat. (ll. 84-87)

This is proof of Glück's thorough choice of diction, as Persephone ends up being equated and reduced to a piece of meat, caught between her mother's and her husband's control. Moreover, as it happened in the original myth, in "Persephone the Wanderer" (II), Demeter roams the earth in search of her daughter:

Compulsively, in grief, Demeter
circles the earth. We don't expect to know
what Persephone is doing.
She is dead, the dead are mysteries. (ll. 5-8)

In Glück's revision of the ancient mythology, even if Persephone cannot die because of her condition as a goddess she is said to be dead, which implies the death of her condition as a maiden (Koré) and her metamorphic transformation into Persephone, the goddess of the underworld. In the ancient myth, we could empathize with Demeter as a mother. Contrastingly, here Glück drives us to relate to Persephone whom she depicts as the one victimized by both her mother and her husband. Whereas Demeter holds a prominent role in both the ancient myth and Glück's rewriting of this story, Hades only appears in the ancient myth when he abducts Persephone and when he tells her:

Go, Persephone, to the side of your dark-robed mother,
keeping the spirit and temper in your breast benign.
Do not be so sad and angry beyond the rest;
in no way among immortals will I be an unsuitable spouse,
myself a brother of father Zeus. And when you are there,
you will have power over all that lives and moves,
and you will possess the greatest honors among the gods.
There will be punishment forevermore for those wrongdoers
who fail to appease your power with sacrifices,
performing proper rites and making due offerings. (*HDem* ll. 360-369)

Differently from the Homeric hymn, Glück devotes a whole poem to Hades and his version of the events in "A Myth of Devotion." This poem seems to be much more influenced by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where Dis/Pluto/Hades preys on Proserpina/Persephone (*Met*. 5.395), and his desire towards her goes beyond his will as he is only a puppet in Venus'/Aphrodite's hands when she persuades Cupid to hit Pluto with his arrows (*Met*. 5.363-384). In Glück's "A Myth

of Devotion," Persephone's helplessness and vulnerable psychological state is corroborated as we learn about the calculation behind her abduction and Hades' lack of remorse.

2. Embodiment, vulnerability, and resilience

Vulnerability Studies have been shaped the last forty decades deliberating different matters such as resistance, agency, dependency, embodiment, victimhood, emotional vulnerability, or resilience, among other subjects. There is a wide variety of opinions when it comes to these studies. Some authors explore the understanding of a universal vulnerability (Fineman 2008) and shared vulnerability (Fineman 2017), by claiming that it cannot be reduced to a specific gender (Butler et al.), while others restrict it to a reduced group of people (Herring), or even to certain groups of women (Kellezi and Reicher). Also, Martha Fineman explores the inevitable dependency which stems from our embodiment, and emotional care ("Vulnerability and Social Justice" 360). As such, Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds aptly observe:

> By virtue of our embodiment, human beings have bodily and material needs; are exposed to physical illness, injury, disability, and death; and depend on the care of others for extended periods during our lives. As social and affective beings we are emotionally and psychologically vulnerable to others in myriad ways: to loss and grief; to neglect, abuse, and lack of care; to rejection, ostracism, and humiliation. (Mackenzie 1)

Indeed, embodiment is one of the main factors that conditions vulnerability (Wainwright and Turner; Turner; Butler). Thus, Judith Butler (33-34) remarks, "as something that, by definition, yields to social crafting and force, the body is vulnerable. (...), but that is not to say that the body's vulnerability is reducible to its injurability."[1] Similarly, Fineman also holds that "understanding vulnerability as inevitably arising from our embodiment and inescapably necessitating the creation of social institutions should make it clear that there is no position of either invulnerability or independence" (Fineman, "Vulnerability and Social Justice" 362). As a result, while facing vulnerability, subjects can either embrace it or resist it. One way to cope with vulnerability is through agency:

> Victims do not lack agency in all circumstances – they can resist, rebel and retaliate – but they are not the primary actors in the context of their victimization. With the notable exception of self-inflicted injuries (what some criminologists term "victimless crimes"), victimization refers to being acted upon. (Cole 271)

[1] I would like to draw the reader's attention to this quote by Butler. I find this quote particularly compelling as it allows me to justify the focus on vulnerability beyond the idea of trauma in Glück's poetry, which has already been tackled by Morris 2006: 98-148.

Alyson Cole's statement addresses the twofold reality of victimhood. On the one hand, being subjected to someone's victimization and therefore being a victim. On the other hand, being subjected to self-harm makes the subject unable to be categorized as a victim. However, what unites these two realities related to victimhood is vulnerability. In fact, as stated by Butler, "we are first vulnerable and then overcome that vulnerability, at least provisionally, through acts of resistance" (Butler et al. 12). Differently from resistance, resilience seems the way to come to terms with vulnerable situations. However, resilience does not occur naturally as it is rather "a product of social relationships and institutions. Human beings are not born resilient" (Fineman, "Vulnerability and Social Justice" 362). Since we are not naturally resilient, this implies that individuals will more likely try to resist or rebel against situations that make them vulnerable instead of trying to reach resilience. Indeed, resilience allows vulnerable subjects to overcome difficulties.

Resilience can be applied at physical and emotional levels. I am particularly interested in exploring the implications of shame resilience theory (SRT). According to Brené Brown, "SRT describes the main concerns of women experiencing shame and identifies the strategies and processes women find effective in developing shame resilience" ("Shame Resilience Theory: A Grounded Theory Study on Women and Shame" 45). Based on her research, Brown determines that shame is "an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging" (2006: 45). Shame, therefore, becomes a concept tied to vulnerability. Thus, shame resilience implies, among other things, the recognition and acceptance of vulnerability (Brown, "Shame Resilience Theory: A Grounded Theory Study on Women and Shame" 47). As I will further explore in this paper, in Glück's dealing with Persephone's emotions, shame will be given paramount importance.

3. Glück's poetical imagery of embodiment

Glück addresses embodiment pervasively throughout her books of poetry. Notwithstanding, in her writings this corporeal imagery displays a wide range of meanings. For instance, earlier in her poetry, Glück had already established that losing the body implied dying and indeed, as Tanzina Halim, Rizwana Wahid, and Shanjida Halim aptly observe, "the end of human life is one of the central themes of Gluck's poetry. Her rather dark and sinister writing style lends itself to the discussion of such a terminal fate. However, the discussion of death comes in different shapes" (436). The first account of what losing the body represents is found in the poem "The Racer's Widow," from *Firstborn* (1968), where death signifies not being able to

maintain the body.[2] This idea is further present in writings such as *Descending Figure* (1980),[3] *The Wild Iris* (1992),[4] *Vita Nova* (1999),[5] *The Seven Ages* (2001),[6] or *A Village Life* (2009).[7]

Another conspicuous role of the body in Glück's poetry is being the very embodiment of the soul, as can be found in *The House on Marshland* (1975), where the poetic voice states, "There is a soul in me / It is asking / to be given its body" ("Gemini," ll. 1-3). Moreover, still in the same book of poetry, in "The Fortress," the body is also where love takes place: "Love / forms in the human body" (ll. 13-14). The same happens in *Vita Nova* (1999), in "Timor Mortis,":

> I dreamed I was kidnapped. That means
> I knew what love was,
> how it places the soul in jeopardy.
> I knew. I substituted my body (ll. 12-15).

Then, in "The Apple Trees" the body demonstrates life: "Your son presses against me / his small intelligent body" (ll. 1-2). This same concept is present in *Faithful and Virtuous Night* (2014),[8] and in *Descending Figure* (1980), in "The Garden,"[9] where having a body alludes to the fact of being alive. Then, in "Pietà," also pertaining to this same book of poetry, the body belongs to another body, in this case, to the mother's, where the child feels safe:

> So she knew
> he wanted to stay
> in her body, apart

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[2] "In my sleep. And watching him, I feel my legs like snow / That let him finally let him go / As he lies draining there. And see / How even he did not get to keep that lovely body" (ll. 9-12).

[3] See e.g. "It begins quietly / in certain female children: / the fear of death, taking as its form / dedication to hunger, / because a woman's body / is a grave; it will accept / anything. I remember / lying in bed at night / touching the soft, digressive breasts, / touching, at fifteen, / the interfering flesh / that I would sacrifice / until the limbs were free / of blossom and subterfuge: I felt / what I feel now, aligning these words– / it is the same need to be perfect, / of which death is the mere byproduct ("Dedication to Hunger," ll. 52-68).

[4] See e.g. "Do you know what I was, how I lived? You know / what despair is; then / winter should have meaning for you. // I did not expect to survive, / earth suppressing me. I didn't expect / to waken again, to feel / in damp earth my body / able to respond again, remembering / after so long how to open again / in the cold light / of earliest spring—" ("Snowdrops," ll. 1-11).

[5] See e.g. "I thought this was the end of my body: fire / seemed the right end for hunger; / they were the same thing. // And yet you didn't die?" ("Inferno," ll.16-19).

[6] See e.g. "So much fear. / So much terror of the physical world. / The mind frantic / guarding the body from / the passing, the temporary, / the body straining against it —" ("Ripe Peach," ll. 20-25).

[7] See e.g. "My body, now that we will not be traveling together much longer / I begin to feel a new tenderness toward you, very raw and unfamiliar, / like what I remember of love when I was young—" ("Crossroads," ll. 1-3).

[8] See e.g. "First divesting ourselves of worldly goods, as St. Francis teaches, / in order that our souls not be distracted / by gain and loss, and in order also / that our bodies be free to move / easily at the mountain passes, we had then to discuss / whither or where we might travel, with the second question being / should we have a purpose, against which / many of us argued fiercely that such purpose" ("Parable," ll. 1-8).

[9] See "I *The Fear of Birth* // One Sound. Then the hiss and whir / of houses gliding into their places. / And the wind / leafs through the bodies of animals— // But my body that could not content itself / with health — why should it be sprung back / into the chord of sunlight ?" (ll. 1-8).

from the world (ll. 5-8)

Furthermore, the body is where sexual desire takes place, as perceived, once more, in *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985),[10] or *Meadowlands* (1996).[11] Then, in *Winter Recipes from the Collective* (2021) the body is a burden:

I must say
I was very tired walking along the road,
very tired— I put my hat on a snowbank.

Even then I was not light enough,
my body a burden to me.

A long path, there were
things that had died along the way— ("Winter Journey," ll. 43-49)

At times, there is no clear establishment of what "the body" specifically implies precisely because it entails different implications. Losing the body is losing life and that is what the present research will concentrate on. Apart from "A Myth of Innocence" in *Averno*, there is only one other poem that strongly assimilates itself to the desire of escaping the body and that is "Abishag" in *The House On Marshland* (1975):

I tell you if it is my own will
binding me I cannot be saved.
And yet in the dream, in the half-light
of the stone house, they looked
so much alike. Sometimes I think
the voices were themselves
identical, and that I raised my hand
chiefly in weariness. I hear my father saying
Choose, choose. But they were not alike
and to select death, O yes I can
believe that of my body. (ll. 39-49)

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[10] See e.g. "You came to the side of the bed / and sat staring at me. / Then you kissed me—I felt / hot wax on my forehead. / I wanted it to leave a mark: / that's how I knew I loved you. / Because I wanted to be burned, stamped, / to have something in the end— / I drew the gown over my head; / a red flush covered my face and shoulders. / It will run its course, the course of fire, / setting a cold coin on the forehead, between the eyes. / You lay beside me; your hand moved over my face / as though you had felt it also— / you must have known, then, how I wanted you. / We will always know that, you and I. / The proof will be my body" ("Marathon," ll. 35-51).

[11] See e.g. "My heart was a stone wall / you broke through anyway. // My heart was an island garden / about to be trampled by you. // You didn't want my heart; / you were on your way to my body. // None of it was my fault. / You were everything to me, / not just beauty and money. / When we made love / the cat went to another bedroom. // Then you forgot me" ("Marina," ll. 1-12).

Glück's narrative as a whole seems to ponder over many existential questions and therefore the continuous allusions to embodiment and what it entails. Interestingly, *Averno* (2006) encapsulates through Persephone, Demeter, and Hades all the above mentioned roles of the body. For starters, Persephone wants to reach death by leaving her body behind. Indeed, her body is a burden because of the mother-daughter bond she shares with Demeter, who sees her as part of herself because she came out of her body.[12] Nevertheless, instead of embracing death, Persephone becomes Hades' wife, and her body is once more under someone else's control. Here, death and marriage become one. Turning into the goddess of the underworld introduces Persephone to another suffocating bond, namely, the one resulting from a controlling love and sexual desire coming from the god of the underworld.

4. Persephone's corporeal vulnerability, embodiment, suicide, and failed resilience

As per Glück's poetical appropriation of the ancient goddess, I posit that Persephone's vulnerability emanates from different factors. To begin with, the control of her mother's dependency is originated from embodiment and emotional care, following Fineman's (2019) understanding of the term. As such, in *Averno*, Demeter does not allow Persephone to be independent. More specifically, in "A Myth of Innocence" we learn of the way Persephone is constantly observed and controlled. She feels her mother's presence wherever she goes (ll. 4-6), and she also knows that her uncle (Helios) is spying on her, as "The sun seems, in the water, very close. / That's my uncle spying again, she thinks—" (ll. 7-8). In hopes of finding a change (l. 4), Persephone goes to a pool and looks at her reflection but all she can perceive is "the horrible mantle / of daughterliness still clinging to her" (ll. 5-6) which reflects her unwanted condition of being a daughter when using the shocking adjective "horrible." She thinks "*I am never alone*" (l. 10), vividly expressing her hopelessness. After the realization of being constantly controlled, Glück's Persephone turns her thought into a prayer: "then death appears, like the answer to a prayer" (l. 12). As Iman El Bakary states, "death is embraced, personified as Hades/ Pluto, the desired beloved" (131). Also, following Cole's perception (2016), Persephone's willingness to embrace death represents her agency. In fact, it can be established that Persephone, as a victim of her mother's control, aims to rebel against her authority and therefore seeks death. The moment she longs for death she becomes victimless as she wants to end her life on earth by getting rid of the body her mother controls. Nevertheless, she fails to escape control becoming once more a victim, but this time she is victimized by Hades, after "the dark god bore her away" (l. 19).

Moreover, I also understand Persephone's suicide attempt as a declaration of how much she really wished to live.[13] She aimed for a life where she would no longer be victimized by her mother but, instead, she got a life of codependency on both earth and underworld:

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[12] "the daughter's body / doesn't exist, except / as a branch of the the mother's body / that needs to be / reattached at any cost" ("Persephone the Wanderer" (II), ll. 64-68).

[13] As I will further explain in this paper, I understand Persephone's longing for Hades as a multilayered metaphor involving not only suicide but a sort of death to maidenhood and daughterhood. Ever since the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* the rape of Persephone by the god of death implies not only the death of Koré, who as a goddess cannot literally die, but her marriage, more specifically marriage by abduction.

“She also remembers, less clearly, / the chilling insight that from this moment / she couldn’t live without him again” (ll. 20-23). With the epithet “chilling,” Glück succeeded in encapsulating the coldness of the underworld and of death. From now on Persephone will no longer live in a reality separated from death. Indeed, death seems in her eyes the only way to escape the control that her mother has over her body yet her perception changes as she realizes that Hades will also own her body. As Halina Brunning clearly explains, “only through our relationships with one another are we confronted both with the fact of our vulnerability and our needs and with possibilities for exercising power over our environment” (6). This is precisely what Persephone realizes as she is trying to struggle with the nature of her relationship with her mother and her husband. The fact that Persephone feels observed and controlled by her mother gives us a hint of Demeter’s overprotectiveness as a mother:

> Overprotectiveness is thought to operate on vulnerability because the parent is so intrusive that a genuine caring relationship cannot be established with the child. Children who have experienced high levels of overprotectiveness thus do not develop the skills necessary to negotiate successful relationships. (Ingram et al. 103)

In my view, this accurately explains part of the challenges that becoming Hades’ wife implies. Demeter’s overprotectiveness does not allow Persephone to develop independence. Persephone views death as a way to resist her mother’s control. Indeed, I concur with Valerie Frankel who remarks that, in “A Myth of Innocence,” Persephone finds herself “seeking an escape from a life so close to her mother that she has no identity of her own. As such, she finds herself lost in love for the dark god, one who promises her a refuge out of sight of her family” (43). Yet, instead of finding in Hades an escape from her mother, she finds herself split between two worlds. Initially, the agency that lays behind attempting to reach death gives her a fake sense of power over her life and, thus, her body. This control over her own life is what Demeter and Hades are taking from her with their authority.

Suicide seems to Persephone the only way to call attention upon a problem, control suffocates her and therefore she finds in her attempt to escape her body a way to reject the vulnerability that she is subjected to through her victimhood role. However, we should wonder about the extent of control that is implied in suicide when it is someone else’s abuse the one that drives Persephone to long for death. What Persephone is doing is attempting to avoid her vulnerability by trying to take her own life. As it becomes evident, one of the factors that determines Persephone’s vulnerability is her lack of freedom and free will. She is unable to move her body without feeling her mother’s presence in everything surrounding her, as “everything in nature is in some way her relative” (l. 9). Following Brown’s (*Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* 36) understanding, Persephone’s vulnerability stems from her emotional exposure. Even if she sees in death an escape from her mother’s control, taking her own life gives her, from her perspective as deduced from “A Myth of Innocence,” a sense of pluckiness.

Just as it happened in the Homeric version, in Glück’s appropriation of this myth she introduces Persephone’s transaction from a child to a woman. Her marriage with Hades makes her become a woman: “The girl who disappears from the pool / will never return. A woman

will return, / looking for the girl she was" (ll. 23-25). Persephone's marriage with the god of the dead shows the death of the child she once was. As a child, her vulnerability was caused by her mother's overprotection and control over her body, and now that she is married, her vulnerability derives from her husband's control, which is demonstrated in the way he makes her a woman in a world she has nobody but him. Glück seems to perceive a sort of death in marriage. Indeed, as El Bakary points out, "it is evident that Glück equates marriage with loss of identity" (133). Therefore, the correlation between suicide and marriage, as both represent the death of the child Persephone once was. Initially, Hades seems to be a sort of hope, yet instead of saving her from control she finds herself once more codependent. Although Persephone's initial reaction to overcome her difficulties as Demeter's daughter is seeking death through drowning herself in the pool, she ends up wondering to what extent did she long for Hades:

> She stands by the pool saying, from time to time,
> *I was abducted*, but it sounds
> wrong to her, nothing like what she felt.
> Then she says, *I was not abducted.*
> Then she says, *I offered myself, I wanted*
> *to escape my body*. Even, sometimes,
> *I willed this*. But ignorance
>
> cannot will knowledge. Ignorance
> wills something imagined, which it believes exists. (ll. 26-34)

Persephone is confused and finds herself considering whether she was or not abducted. I agree with Cyril Wong Yit Mun when stating that "in this scene, Persephone has discovered her own loss of innocence" (83). The confusion that she experiences emanates from her desire to escape her mother's control, yet as she understands that her body is once more owned by someone else, she questions whether this was what she really wanted. What causes her vulnerability once she becomes Hades' wife seems to be reflected in the nouns she says in rotation "*Death, husband, god, stranger*" (l. 37). Related to the asyndetic juxtaposition of these names, Reena Sastri has well explained that "the rifts opened by the traumas Persephone names mortality, sexuality, the spiritual, confrontation with others – turn out, Glück suggests, to be the spaces of poetry" (69), which fits this author's persistent interest in death, life, love, divinity, and what is attached to all these subjects, *i.e.,* the psychological and psychoanalytic worlds. Persephone's psychological vulnerability is perceived as she tries to remember what truly happened:

> She can't remember herself as that person
> but she keeps thinking the pool will remember
> and explain to her the meaning of her prayer
> so she can understand
> whether it was answered or not. (ll. 40-44)

To my mind, the fact that she relies on a lifeless pool to determine what happened to her implies that she is incapable of trusting her own recollection of the events. The same way that Persephone in "A Myth of Innocence" is confused and does not know if she was abducted or not, in "Persephone the Wanderer" (I) we perceive how scholars are also confused as they wonder whether she was raped or not. From Melanie Daifotis' perspective:

> Persephone was indeed violated against her will, so the condemnation of rape in this case is emphasized by the disturbance that abuse of this kind continues to affect girls. Finally, the narrator becomes more accepting of her abduction as the book progresses and even second-guesses her lack of consent. (17)

In much the same vein, it is plausible to assume that Glück starts by introducing the understanding that the Homeric Persephone was taken against her will and that many other versions and rewritings of this myth address rape and violation. Nevertheless, her appropriation of the ancient myth shows us a different reality. Glück focusses on the way Persephone wants to escape her mother by escaping the body her mother controls yet ends up being trapped by Hades. This marriage by abduction is initially an act of agency but as soon as she realizes that, after becoming a wife, her husband will also own her body, she understands that she can no longer escape control. It is only then that Persephone understands that this was not what she wanted and that her body is once more tied to another authoritarian and controlling figure. When Persephone goes back to her mother, she comprehends that the situation has worsened as now guilt and shame are in the picture. In fact, Persephone's shame is presented as a result of her mother's resentment towards her after her marriage:

> As is well known, the return of the beloved
> does not correct
> the loss of the beloved: Persephone
>
> returns home
> stained with red juice like
> a character in Hawthorne— (ll. 18-23)

With her marriage, Persephone has betrayed her mother. The fact that she wants to escape her mother's control is the one that lets her mother understand that she is to blame. Demeter does not consider Persephone as a child anymore as she knows her body has changed. She realizes she has had a sexual relationship and therefore she has lost her innocence. Persephone is stained and that makes her feel a sort of vulnerability that fits Brown's (2012) and Thorgeirsdottir Sigridur's perceptions of shame associated with vulnerability. Persephone lacks the ingredients to reach shame resilience mainly because she, as Brown understands it (2006; 2012), does not present self-awareness and acceptance of her emotions. In fact, this shame enhances Persephone's vulnerability.

Persephone wants to be liberated from her mother's overprotectiveness who exhausts her with her control. Her mother drains her to the point where Persephone desperately awaits for a change. At first that hopeful change seems to be Hades. Nevertheless, she seems deceived once she is with him, finding herself split between two worlds:

> I am not certain I will
> keep this word: is earth
> "home" to Persephone? Is she at home, conceivably,
> in the bed of the god? Is she
> at home nowhere? Is she
> a born wanderer (ll. 24-29)

Now more than ever, she comprehends that there is no place for her. She knows that her mother is abusing her with her control and once she is with Hades she understands that she has changed abuse for abuse. Proof of this is the self-doubt and the ambiguity lying behind her abduction. Persephone prefers to embrace death as opposed to remaining with her mother. Taking advantage of Persephone's distraction and vulnerability, Hades awaits for the best moment to take Persephone away "from bright light to utter darkness" (7) in "A Myth of Devotion." Ironically, the name that Hades first considers giving to the place he created for Persephone is "*The New Hell*" (l. 38) which portrays Persephone's reality as she first experiences a sort of hell with her mother because of her authority and now, once more, with Hades who takes advantage of her vulnerability to reach his objective of making Persephone his wife. This is also clearly expressed in "Persephone the Wanderer" (I): "You drift between earth and death / which seem, finally, / strangely alike" (ll. 69-71).

In my view, Hades considers that making Persephone his wife will make her overcome her vulnerability in a sort of way as he tells her, in "A Myth of Devotion", "*you're dead, nothing can hurt you*" (l. 46). Hades considers that death is the one protecting Persephone, and in a sense, it is, because whenever she is in the world of the dead, she is not with her mother. Indeed, as Hurst asserts, "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" ("An Autumnal Underworld: Louise Glück's Averno" 82). This corroborates Persephone's suicide wish as she seeks death to escape abuse and the vulnerability attached to it. Yet, being in the underworld does not make her immune to Hades' control. The fact that being in the underworld separates Persephone from her mother is reflected in "Persephone the Wanderer" (II), where Demeter does not know where her daughter is:

> In the second version, Persephone
> is dead. She dies, her mother grieves–
> problems of sexuality need not
> trouble us here.
>
> Compulsively, in grief, Demeter

circles the earth. We don't expect to know
what Persephone is doing.
She is dead, the dead are mysteries. (ll. 1-8)[14]

Being out of reach shields Persephone from her mother. Yet, since what she is doing in the underworld are mysteries, Demeter is reduced to, borrowing Hurst's words, "a jealous woman" (2012: 185), who grows resentful towards her daughter. Unlike the Homeric version,[15] Glück's Persephone, "protected, / stares out of the window of the chariot" (ll. 22-23), as the chariot represents the only time she is neither with Demeter nor with Hades and therefore the only moment she can catch her breath. Indeed, Persephone's life is "going to be / a short life. She's going to know, really, / only two adults: death and her mother" (ll. 27-29). Glück emphasizes the fact that Persephone is victimized by a controlling and violent mother who is an example of taking overprotection and care to the extreme as she represents "the deep violence of the earth" (l. 37) when "in grief, after the daughter dies" (l. 45). Even once Persephone is with Hades, she cannot free herself from her mother as "her mother hauls her out again" (l. 83). In "Persephone the Wanderer" (I), Persephone shows a very clear understating of her position as Demeter's daughter:

She does know the earth
is run by mothers, this much
is certain. She also knows
she is not what is called
a girl any longer. Regarding
incarceration, she believes

she has been a prisoner since she has been a daughter. (ll. 56-62)

These verses encapsulate Persephone's situation. With her mother she is psychologically and emotionally vulnerable as she feels owned. When she is with Hades she experiences a similar sense of vulnerability, but this time it originates in a calculated abduction. In this context, Demeter and Hades are equated, as Frankel has well explained, "Demeter has been just as powerful a force in Persephone's life as Hades now is, smothering her with the overwhelming identity of mother and life force" (45). In "Persephone the Wanderer" (I), we know "she is lying in the bed of Hades" (l. 51). Unavoidably, Persephone is caught in the midst of a dispute between her mother and her husband:

in the tale of Persephone

[14] We may perceive Glück's reference to the Eleusinian Mysteries in the above mentioned lines. However compelling, this reference lies beyond the specific pursuits of this paper. For the Eleusinian Mysteries and the goddesses Demeter and Persephone, see Richardson 12-30; Foley 65-75.

[15] The image of the chariot undoubtedly refers to the Homeric version. Conspicuously, the first time that the chariot appears in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Koré is suffering Hades' violent abduction (ll. 16-21).

which should be read

as an argument between the mother and the lover—
the daughter is just meat. (ll. 84-87)

This dispute aims to gain power over Persephone's body. Indeed, Azcuy accurately points out that "Averno equals a place of conflict" ("Louise Glück's Twenty-First Century Persephone the Wanderer: Redefinig Earth's Dominion" 124). As such, Persephone's vulnerability derives from the unchosen dependency that links her to her mother and subsequently to her husband. Glück's Persephone wants to escape that bond that has been created by each of them, but to no avail because there is nowhere she can escape from her mother and her husband at the same time aside from the carriage that carries her back and forth from Demeter to Hades and vice versa.[16] Hence, Persephone becomes incapable of reaching resilience as she is caught in an eternal cycle of control.

5. Conclusion

All in all, this article demonstrates the compelling reception of Glück's Persephone, who longs for Hades to escape her mother's control. As I have shown, Glück differs from the classical tradition regarding the mother-daughter bond. Emphasizing the daughter's suffocation when coping with her mother's control, Glück presents a Persephone who is no longer a victim of violent abduction but rather an agent character in her own story. In her transition from maidenhood to adulthood, Glück's Persephone will realize that her marriage with the god of the dead creates just another form of codependency. I consider that Persephone's vulnerability arises from different aspects in Glück's poetical rewriting. For starters, the dependency that she had with her mother on earth is mimicked in the underworld by Hades. Following Fineman's (2019) understanding, I submit that this dependency is poetically conveyed by Glück through Persephone's embodiment, which is what forces the young goddess to think that leaving her body will make her escape her mother's abuse. Nevertheless, she fails because of Hades' marriage trap as she comprehends that she will now be tied to someone else aside from her mother.

Another factor that I have emphasized throughout this paper related to Persephone's vulnerability is her condition as a gullible and immature girl before becoming Hades' wife. Instead of accepting her vulnerability, Persephone attempts to escape it by drowning her body. Yet she finds herself split between two worlds. This eternal cycle of abuse is the one that prevents her from reaching resilience. In my view, the moment she thought suicide would allow her to escape her mother's control was the moment she gave up any kind of resilience. Also, not accepting her shame prevents her from reaching shame resilience, as understood by Brown (2006; 2012). Interestingly, the fact that she does not have control over her life pushes

[16] In the Homeric version of this myth, on which Glück seems to be relying in her poetical rewriting, Hermes is the one in charge of carrying Persephone back to Demeter (ll. 377-385).

her to seek control over her death. However, suicide represents here a false sense of agency as she chose to escape her body because of the control of someone else and after seeking death her body is controlled by the god of the underworld because of marriage. In Glück's poetical reception of the ancient myth, suicide ends up being a desperate attempt to escape Persephone's vulnerability.

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