

THE GARDEN THE WORLD



Justin Quinn

LOUISE GLÜCK, *The First Five Books of Poems*, Carcanet Press, £9.95 stg
The Wild Iris, Carcanet Press, £8.95 stg

Sometime in the 1830s, Ralph Waldo Emerson went for a walk in the country and wrote of it thus:

Crossing a bare common, in snow-puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration.... Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.

This is one of the central expressions of American thought: the individual abroad in nature, with his bizarre mixture of humility and rodomontade ("I am nothing; I see all"); his eyes surveying the landscape in radial sweeps, colonizing, controlling, demarcating; the wonderful combination of everyday event with exalted emotion. It presages much of Whitman, and thus much of American poetry to the present day. It is the first overture to the many "Songs of Myself" that American poets have written, each time proposing to clear the old metres and mythologies away and start afresh. Or, as Wallace Stevens proclaimed: "Let's see the very thing and nothing else./ Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight./ Burn everything not part of it to ash".

But as Stevens's words indicate, it entails destruction also. In recent years, this Emersonian individualism has come under sharp attack: its rhetoric, some critics hold, was hitched to commercial interests in order to validate the appropriations of the continent from Native Americans, and keep down African Americans. And even in the writings of Emerson himself, it is not clear whether slaves and others might, like Caucasian Transcendentalists, also be able to have their heads "bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space" etc.

Louise Glück, then, is expressing something of wider moment and not just writing a sweet poem about a flower when she takes the voice of the scilla in *The Wild Iris*:

Not I, you idiot, not self, but we—waves
of sky blue like
a critique of heaven: why
do you treasure your voice
when to be one thing
is to be next to nothing?

Emerson stands abashed, and more generally, a whole American culture that is focused on the satisfaction of the individual's needs, desires and consumer-hankerings. Glück is at her best in this collection, where poems which appear straightforward take on a multitude of valencies: they are at once political, spiritual, psychological, botanical, eschatological—and yet all the while they continue to be about the poet and her husband doing the gardening, occasionally helped by their son, Noah. She acquired the tone and technique for the poems of this book over long years and five collections, nearly all of which are concerned with one theme—family. Some poets shift from one locale to another in successive collections, from the crises of love to those of the state, and back again, but for Glück development means above all the development of style. It is in such terms that she discusses her career in the short introduction to *The First Five Books of Poems*: “After *Firstborn*, I set myself the task of making poems as single sentences, having found myself trapped in fragments. After *The House on Marshland*, I tried to wean myself from conspicuous syntactical quirks and a recurring vocabulary”, and so on.

She might well have said that after *Firstborn* she tried to free herself from the influence of James Wright, more particularly of the technique he employed in “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota”. The prolix title is like most of the poem, which meanders through the landscape, describing this and that in a detached tone, until, out of nowhere, the last line: “I have wasted my life”. The pedigree of this *volta* goes back to Rilke’s Greek torso who instructed the viewer: “You must change your life”. In many of the poems in the book, Glück employs this template of meandering commentary concluded with a direct statement. It’s impressive and shocking at the beginning, but loses impact with repetition. In “Firstborn”, Glück recounts the post-natal period in a lacklustre way: “The weeks go by. I shelve them,/ They are all the same, like peeled soup cans...”, and then concludes:

We are eating well.
Today my meatman turns his trained knife
On veal, your favorite. I pay with my life.

None of the other punchlines is quite as blatant about its provenance as this, but each is curt and aggressive in contrast to the drifting descriptions that precede it. After her first collection the template is discarded for good.

Rhyme is another omnipresent feature of *Firstborn* which was subsequently jettisoned. In the above example neither syntax nor lineation is strained to accommodate the rhyme (although the pairing, knife/life, is unoriginal), but elsewhere on many occasions Glück resorts to hyphenating words at linebreaks merely in order to get her rhyme (e.g., “that blessing. Though I knew how it is sickness/...”). Usually, such frequent clumsiness makes the reader think that perhaps the poet is not up to the tasks she has set herself, but there is something else at work in these poems that counters that impression. It has something to do with the austere pace and phrasing of each individual line, the way one feels that Glück, as she writes, is trying to marshal large forces; that things are kept under control only by a considerable effort of will. Although in these poems she employs a line of variable length, there is no sense of arbitrariness about the breaks (as there often is in such verse), even, amazingly, when she lops words in two at line-ends. She exhibits that rarest of things, an instinctive sense of free-verse lineation.

What is also striking is the way that as she developed she abandoned nearly all references to contemporary life in the United States: in later books there is no sense whatsoever of the panoramas of politics and US society in general. The family dramas which the poems relate are played out in a space that appears sealed off from history. John Redmond, reviewing *The Wild Iris*, complained of the absence of “everything produced, and probably everything thought, by Gutenberg, Edison and the Wright brothers”, continuing: “What remains is a serene little oasis, rather like an English Garden Centre or Tom Bombadil’s enchanted forest in *The Lord of the Rings*, where it would be less surprising to see one of the High Elves than someone sporting an Oasis T-shirt”. It wasn’t always like this. The first poem in *Firstborn* is entitled, “The Chicago Train”, and is firmly fixed in the America of the 1960s. It is a vignette of a black family on a train going south which refuses moralizing, preferring to concentrate on photographic accuracy. This is how it ends:

And they sat—as though paralysis preceding death
Had nailed them there. The track bent south.
I saw her pulsing crotch... the lice rooted in that baby’s hair.

But over the years Glück worked consistently to erase this kind of reference from her poetry so that by the time she wrote her most autobiographical work, *Ararat*, about her parents and sister, set for the most part around their Long Island home, the data of US suburbia seem cleansed of their connotations of the country and era in general.

Why would a poet follow such a path? One reason might be that once cut off from the contemporary world the figures of the Glück family begin to loom large in the imagination, much larger than they would if they had remained a typical middle-class Long Island family, who have to pay taxes, vote, buy a computer, etc. They take on mythological resonance, which is most obvious in *The Triumph of Achilles*, where she employs Greek and Biblical myths to help narrate the travails of the family and lovers. Even in *Ararat*, the griefs of the family, by virtue of the collection's title, are placed against an eschatological backdrop, and reading the poems one constantly wonders how to connect these two levels. The creation of this space is consonant also with the poetic voice she has striven to perfect: austere, direct, lucid; limited in its range of vocabulary and employing sentences with straightforward syntax. There isn't much of the "shuffle and break-down" of contemporary speech here. The gravitas of this voice accords with the Bergman-esque family interiors of the poems. With their assured rhythms and turns of thought the poems try to convince the reader of the priority of this mythological space over that of the contingent mess of contemporary reality. This, the voice tacitly asserts, is the real human drama, not the race for the presidency, not the latest talkshow and not Oasis or their like.

Her longing for a sphere cut off from contemporary reality could seem like that of Rilke, who yearned to escape facticity into a sublime aviary of angels, but it's not that simple. In recent essay Glück argues that "Rilke's vocation for mourning (as a tonal gesture rather than as immediate human response) instinctively maps out a spiritual terrain never before visible or audible", going on to say that "his genius was tone". It is a tone which Glück's strongly resembles; she also shares Rilke's tendency toward elegy. But Rilke in mourning was at his most exultant (for instance, in the first of *The Sonnets to Orpheus*): he relishes extinction as it means an escape into purity, a sloughing off of sub-lunar annoyances and restraints. Glück has no such impulse. Her elegies will not let us escape the cycles of birth and death. "Palais des Arts" is a meditation on pictures of the gods and the dramas they act out. As the short poem progresses it constantly threatens to edge off into transcendence but instead brings us back from the gods to humanity, back from the dreams of art, to the pains and pleasures of the human body. Glück tells us what's going through the female viewer's mind while she looks at the figure of a boy in the painting:

She can't touch his arm in innocence again.
They have to give that up and begin
as male and female, thrust and ache.

In the second of *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, Rilke with satisfaction lets the figure of Vera Knoop vanish from the human drama, never to return to experience things like the ache which Glück reports here. Glück is more interested in elegies for people caught in the meshes of family relationships and in physical experience, things that were never of much poetic interest, or otherwise, to Rilke.

So in one respect she is cut off from the world and in another is right in the middle of it. At its best, in *The Wild Iris*, such an approach has marvellous yields. At its worst, it is monotonous, occasionally resulting in poems of flimsy substance, with Glück hoping to wing it by with this gravitas of tone. There is the danger that, however convincing in their depictions of the family, the poems will come to seem only *part* of a world. After all, family relationships, while important, are not our only ones in life. Like it or not we are part of political systems and consumer statistics; we relate to contemporary culture in general through film, books, magazines and television. These things affect the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the way we spend our evenings. Glück's erasure of such objects and events etiolates the poetry, and depending on the poem the result is flaming candour or bland transparency.

But there are other ways to connect with larger cultural movements without flooding the poetry with state-of-the art consumer junk and cinema stubs. As I mentioned already, the poem which takes the voice of the scilla flower exhibits an awareness of the tradition of American thought. In "Firstborn", quoted from above, Glück's acerbic tone ("I pay with my life") owes much to the feminist movement which was just gaining momentum in 1968. Perhaps it's fair to say that the theme and technique of "Mock Orange", from *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985), and one of her anthology pieces, was at that stage beginning to look fairly hackneyed; but in general Glück's expressions of feminist anger and indignity are very much of their time. What is also of interest is the way Glück expresses these thoughts without feeling that she must stake her career on them, as Adrienne Rich has done. Glück, like many poets, stands in Rich's debt for her pioneering work, but there are thoughts and emotions that can find expression only if the poet steps beyond the bounds of feminist typology.

Wallace Stevens said that the ivory tower would be intolerable "except for the fact that one has, from the top, such an exceptional view of the public dump and the advertising signs of Snider's Catsup, Ivory Soap and Chevrolet Cars"; the poet "is the hermit who dwells alone with the sun

and moon, but insists on taking a rotten newspaper". When Glück's flowers speak in *The Wild Iris*, they don't tell you about Snider's Catsup, etc., or the headlines in the rotten newspaper, but it's obvious that they know all about them. Take, for example, "Witchgrass". The weed invading the garden speaks:

If you hate me so much
don't bother to give me
a name: do you need
one more slur
in your language, another
way to blame
one tribe for everything—
.....

I'm not the enemy.
Only a ruse to ignore
what you see happening
right here in this bed,
a little paradigm
of failure. One of your precious flowers
dies here almost every day
and you can't rest until
you attack the cause, meaning
whatever is left, whatever
happens to be sturdier
than your personal passion—

On the first level the poem dramatizes the goings-on in a flower bed, but on another it is cathected by the cultural debates in the US of the present moment. Place the poem side by side with an article on sociology which tries to find the causes of America's ills, or recounts the rise of ethnic minorities and changes in the status of women, and you have a real case of intertextuality. So many of the arguments about identity politics in the US have revolved around the names for things and social groupings, about finding the "slurs" hidden in everyday speech, and here Glück is feeding off these social and cultural issues and diverting them through the speech of flowers.

That the poem is mainly about Native Americans becomes clear as "Witchgrass" reaches its conclusion:

I don't need your praise

to survive. I was here first,
before you were here, before
you ever planted a garden.
And I'll be here when only the sun and moon
are left, and the sea, and the wide field.

I will constitute the field.

That final sentence leaves the poem shimmering between its two meanings: the witchgrass will either constitute, that is, make up the field; or, indigenous Americans will constitute a new nation in the same way that the Founding Fathers did at the end of the eighteenth century. This kind of punning is everywhere in *The Wild Iris*. It's worth remarking, however, that this is not to say that "Witchgrass" is at all reducible to these public discourses. That it knows of them, that on occasion it employs their tone and diction, and that it negotiates certain turns of thought in imitation of them, doesn't take away from the fact that the poem is an imaginative configuration very different in type from them. The lyric as Glück uses it here is a zone not so much cut off from the energies and emotions of political discourse as a place where that discourse can be rearranged and reconsidered; through the poem, the reader can look again at the forces and movements that play through her or his life.

But not all of the poems are political allegory. Many others are paeans to the sun and moon, arguments with God, complaints about the spiritual dereliction of winter, all of which resonate in the mythological space I discussed above. As the titles of many of the poems indicate (many are called "Vespers" or "Matins"), the book is also a set of spiritual exercises in the Christian tradition. It follows the trajectory of a spiritual journey, much like those journeys embarked upon by the Puritan poets of New England in the seventeenth century. The usual demand made of the literature of religion is that it voices doubt; Glück does this through the ambiguous voicing of the poems: who you think is speaking largely depends on what you believe.

That ambiguous voicing enables other ambiguities. Glück and her husband John are simultaneously a couple in Vermont and Adam and Eve (if not Founding Fathers, then Founding Parents). Like Adam and Eve they address God and question the world he has created, and on certain rare occasions, God even addresses them (if he isn't addressing them all the time through the flowers). Put like this, it sounds precious. What makes the collection dramatic is the way it is difficult to identify who is speaking when—is it God, Glück or a flower? Together with this, the voices and locations Glück employs in the poems can accommodate different mean-

ings (as in “Witchgrass”) and the reader is often uncertain just what significance to give to the simple sentences. He or she is sent floating through different circles, all concentric: first there is the garden of the Glücks; then there is the garden of the New World of America; then there is the Garden of Eden. That Glück is able to move so lithely from contemporary politics to matters of the spirit to her family life is the central marvel of *The Wild Iris*; and all the while providing lines of great lyric beauty. White lilies bid us farewell in the final poem of the book:

Hush, beloved. It doesn't matter to me
how many summers I live to return:
this one summer we have entered eternity.
I felt your two hands
bury me to release its splendor.